

## **BIOLOGICAL 171**

### Chapter 171: First Official hunt (12)

"UGH!"

Death was currently fighting against the Crombo, the giant lizard-like creature that naturally preyed on the Lomalins. The beast was terrifying; it was easily taller than seven meters and had the weight of a tank.

The scales were pure black but had a purplish tint that glistened every time the beast moved. A long tail extended behind its back, and the beast swung it several times to kill its opponent.

The thaid moved around on its long-clawed paws, attempting to rip Death in half, and he would be successful if the man wasn't quick enough to avoid its attacks.

The beast was odd, ugly, and intimidating. It seemed more intelligent than other monsters, even though there was no way to prove such a thing. Still, Death could swear that the beast tried to ambush him into attacking certain spots several times, only for him to almost die under the beast's gigantic maws and razor-sharp teeth.

It knew how to fight and used all its natural weapons to give a hard time to the master assassin. The young man just dove to avoid the beast's tail, which spun on itself, creating a monster tornado and moving a lot of air in the process, almost making Death lose his balance and fall to the ground.

"Fuck..."

However, Death was a skilled assassin and a veteran warrior. Despite facing a mighty beast, he knew his job was to keep it at bay while his teammates killed the other thaids and kidnapped the awakener kid. He was also aware that the beast wasn't using his brain crystal power at all.

The Crombo mainly preyed on the Lomalins.

The beast needed to eat many of them to sustain itself, so it developed a brain crystal power that allowed it to do so. It could create a slime with the property to harden, and it would use it to trap the fleeing Lomalins while it devoured the other ones alive.

Death slashed at the creature with his two daggers several times; however, the thaid's hard scales prevented him from doing any damage whatsoever. He could only create shallow cuts that did nothing to stop the creature and could, at best, avoid its attacks.

The Crombo swung its right arm to attack the assassin, but he rolled forward and counterattacked with his knives, hitting the creature's calves. The beast tried to use its tail to swipe him away and hopefully eat him, but the man jumped and acrobatically avoided the attack, landing a couple of meters behind the monster.

The thaid turned around and swiped again, but Death was ready. Jumping backward, he gained distance from the beast. The thaid roared angrily as it missed its target, then charged towards him once again.

Despite its massive size and the beast's habit of walking on its hind legs, the Crombo was fast. The assassin had little time to avoid the move, so he dove inside the shadows.

The Crombo looked at the spot where the man disappeared and was left confused for a moment. However, the beast didn't have much time to think about what had happened because Death appeared behind it and slashed again at it.

The creature felt the knives scratch its scales and reacted quickly by turning around; however, not giving the beast the time to do anything, Death ran past the beast and made another small wound on the beast's body.

The Crombo growled furiously. It then raised both arms above its head and brought them down sharply. The claws of each hand pierced the ground like spears, digging deep into the soil and making the ground tremble.

The tremor was felt even by Erik's team and, for sure, by Death's four comrades.

"Would you mind paying a little bit of attention?" Zachary shouted as he struggled to keep his balance.

However, the master assassin didn't reply. He was usually cheerful when off duty, but his mind became razor-sharp once he was in combat. He wholly concentrated on the beast and kept drawing the beast's attention. At times, the Crombo was distracted by Greg, Zachary, or Slice and tried to run toward them several times. Death prevented the beast from doing any damage.

<Why are those fuckin' beasts only targeting us? Why don't they kill each other?> the master assassin asked himself.

"Hey!" he said to his teammates. "How much time until you kill all these fuckers?"

"5 minutes at best," Laser said.

That was the amount of time they needed to kill the thaids, grab Erik, and run to the city. If he could get this job done, he would earn a considerable amount of money. The only thing that Death loved was money; he was a greedy person who killed people for jobs because he got paid well.

That way, he always stayed rich no matter how bad things were going for him. He never cared if someone was innocent or guilty. His main goal was to kill, earn money, and occasionally buy sex. With a loud roar, the Crombo charged toward Death and attacked him.

The master assassin dodged the charge and moved to the creature's back by leaping inside the shadows. While avoiding the beast's attacks, he started looking for some weaknesses, but he didn't find any. His knives weren't enough to pierce the thaid's scales, he needed a different kind of weapons to truly do it damage.

Death had a room that was solely dedicated to storing weapons, and if he had known that he would have had to fight a Crombo, he would have brought his sword; however, he thought he would have had to, at best, impair Erik, so he didn't bring anything too lethal.

As the fight continued, Erik's time was almost at an end. If Death's four comrades killed all the thaids, he was bound to be kidnapped. The young man knew that if his friends and teachers didn't arrive on time, that was his destiny.

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In the forest, Amber and the others ran toward Erik's location; the young woman called everyone to help her friends.

"How much before we reach them?" Benedict asked.

Amber replied without even looking at the man, as her sole goal was to reach Erik in the shortest amount of time possible.

"2 minutes!" the woman replied.

Benedict cursed under his breath and kept running forward. He knew someone had attacked his roommate and found it really weird. Who the hell would target a Red Palace student?

Furthermore, he was the only awakener within the country, and the military were most likely keeping an eye on him.

He couldn't believe how such idiotic people could exist. However, the young man was a bit worried since they had to be skilled to get out there without them noticing.

The students didn't know that a small, thousand-strong horde of thaids was currently attacking Erik's group, and they were bound to find a huge surprise once they got there.

"Who do you think attacked them?" Floyd asked.

"Someone with a death wish," Gwen replied.

"No, really... This doesn't make sense!" the young man added.

"It does if you consider that someone completely wrecked his house... Whoever did it was probably searching for something, and if they attacked him, they must think he has it or know where it is..." Amber said.

"So you think they didn't go into his apartment just to rob him?" Floyd asked.

"No, otherwise they wouldn't have attacked him..."

"What if they are too strong for us?" Gwen asked.

"Erik should have called the teachers by now. They shouldn't be that far, so we must keep them at bay until they come!" Amber replied.

"And what if they are already dead, or Erik has been kidnapped already?" Benedict added.

"Let's just pray this is not the case..."

#### Chapter 172: First Official hunt (13)

Erik and his group had just finished killing the creature. Still, the situation could have been better: without Robyn and Elena, the three remaining students, Anderson, Erik, and Judith, had to expend much energy; even Anderson was tired.

He still hadn't used his power, but he couldn't use it unless his friends ran away; if they did, he would be overwhelmed by the thaids, so they were stuck between a rock and a hard place.

It wasn't like they didn't think about him using it, but he immediately explained the problem. If he had been stronger, he would have tried doing it, but since he was still a kid, he didn't feel confident or strong enough to do it. Even Anderson had his fears.

"I'm sorry," Elena said. She apologized for having rested after seeing how much time his teammates needed to finish off one monster. "I've rested enough to fight..."

"Good," Erik replied, "because seven monsters are coming our way!" he added.

Judith looked at Erik with a sad look; she was the most tired one among the three, and she was depleting her mana. Robyn was still out of combat due to the Ma-cof attacks, but he was almost done recuperating.

Elena returned to where she was right away, and so did Judith, who decided to give her hounds less mana, making them weaker and smaller and decreasing the amount of mana used per second.

The two boys and Elena started moving toward their enemies while Judith followed behind. They reached the monsters soon after, and Erik and Anderson killed one, each leaving five alive.

The duo immediately went to fight two others, while Judith fought against two and Elena against the remaining one.

Erik and Anderson quickly eliminated the two monsters again, Judith took a little bit more time, and Elena, who was still not in top shape, killed the remaining one after ten more seconds.

That could have been a relatively small amount of time in other circumstances, but in a battle between life and death with monsters that could unleash multiple chained attacks faster than a cobra, it was an absurdly high amount of time.

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In the meantime, Death was still battling the Crombo; the beast decided to finally deal with the little pest represented by the master assassin and used its power to trap Death.

The man almost shat himself once he ended up in the slimy substance, and it started hardening; however, he quickly hopped inside a shadow and appeared far away from the slime.

However, the Crombo liked that even less and roared in anger before charging with all its might at Death, who appeared several meters behind the slimy substance strewn across the ground.

The sight of the creatures charging was terrifying; anyone would have been scared if monsters weighing several tons and standing several meters tall charged at them.

As the beast moved, the earth trembled, and the other thaids lost their balance and fell to the ground, only to be promptly killed by Laser or Slice.

Death was no ordinary person, as he stood there calmly waiting for the attack. To not give the monster space and time to retaliate, he waited for the Crombo to come close enough, and only then did he dodge the attack and inflict a couple more wounds on the creature.

ROAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR

Death looked at the enraged monster with a smile. It was true that his current equipment didn't allow him to kill it; however, it was also true that the feeling of winning against such a strong opponent gave one a lot of confidence.

He and the Crombo were more or less at the same level; the beast had slightly higher strength but wasn't as smart as him, and by using this to his advantage, the man could stay alive and keep the beast occupied. He would have even been able to kill it if he had different weapons.

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While all that was happening, Greg, Zachary, Laser, and Slice were killing monster after monster. Slice killed the Wiangrine, the strongest beast among the thaids present there, aside from the Crombo; it wasn't that difficult for him due to his training.

The four men killed almost half the thaids, and a bloodbath was presented in front of them. Many creatures had been decapitated; some were bisected into two parts or cut into multiple pieces; others had missing limbs, and many had holes in one or two parts of their bodies.

However, the four men immediately understood that something strange was happening. The term "thaids" was used to represent animals that evolved and developed brain crystal powers; however, despite being classified as "thaids," they belonged to different races that often antagonized each other.

Though now wasn't the case, it was bizarre, to say the least.

"What do you think is happening here, Zach?" Greg asked his friend.

"I don't know, but this behavior is anything but good... I've never seen a Thu-n and a Ner fighting together in my life. It's like they know we are their enemies," Zachary replied.

"Do you think a sentient being could be behind this?" Greg asked. Sentients were thaids who reached human-like intelligence, and once they did, they usually conquered the other thaids and often used them to kill more significant threats.

Wyverns were usually sentient, but even other species could attain that status. If a sentient was present, the Thaids might have cooperated, but things wouldn't be like they are today since scuffles among monsters could happen. Now, the monsters collaborated; they even attacked together and used primitive tactics.

"It could be, but I can't say with certainty," Zachary replied.

Then Slice interjected, "If a sentient is nearby, things will start getting heated back in the city. I'm already imagining Frant's higher-ups shitting their pants," he said, laughing out loud.

Laser nodded, "A friend of mine in the military told me that a horde is headed here. Can you believe it? A fucking horde?!"

"Really? I knew nothing about it," Slice said.

"Yeah, they are keeping this wrapped up so as not to spread panic," Laser replied.

"Do you think they will be able to stop it?" Greg asked. "I mean, if the militaries are already aware of it, they are doing something about it, right?"

"I don't know, man, it looks like they are trying to halt their advance but are having problems doing that," Laser said. "My friend said it is a million-strong horde, something never seen in the last forty years..."

What he said worried Zachary and Greg, while Slice wasn't that bothered. If the monsters managed to enter the city, he would have the opportunity to distress a little bit, which meant killing.

The five men kept killing monster after monster until they realized more than half the thaids had been killed; however, there were still a lot of them, and they had to kill them all before they could get Erik.

The smell around them was terrible as the guts and intestines of the monsters ripped open and stained the ground with feces and blood.

They moved carefully to avoid stepping on the dead beasts' remains and losing their balance, avoiding the charging monsters and the occasional brain crystal power attacks hurled toward them.

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"Fast! We are almost there!" Amber shouted; they almost arrived where Erik and the others were waiting.



"I heard something!" Floyd shouted. "It was..."

"It was a thaid..." Gwen added.

"Didn't Erik say that people attacked them?" Benedict asked.

"Yeah, but apparently even thaids are involved," Amber added.

"They must be desperate," Floyd said, thinking how Erik and Anderson were battling the thaids and the humans simultaneously.

Once they arrived, they saw a terrific scene: monsters that should have been farther than five kilometers away were rushing in droves against five men, with one of them fighting against a giant beast they had never seen. There weren't that many creatures left alive compared to the number of bodies on the ground, but their numbers were still large.

The situation suddenly became much more complicated than they expected.

#### Chapter 173: Reuniting

Amber and her friends took a little time before spotting Erik and his team. They were currently battling a group of thaids. Amber had seen the beasts before since she and her team had battled against them, but there were two of them.

Only two of them gave her team a lot of trouble, so she wondered how they were still alive while battling four. As soon as she saw Erik and Anderson, she and her friends rushed to help them.

"Flank it!" Erik shouted.

"I can't; the other keeps barring my way!" Judith responded.

"Fuck!" Erik said.

"Stay calm, guys!" Anderson said. In the meantime, Robyn was still sitting on the ground, unable to move his body efficiently.

"Robyn, how are you?" Elena asked.

"I'm better, but I can't still move my arms!" he shouted.

Erik briefly glanced to his left and saw Amber and the other 29 students rushing toward them. It was like a heavy boulder was immediately lifted off his shoulders.

"They came!" Erik shouted, and the others glanced in the same direction, spotting the others running toward them.

After ten more seconds, the first student, Benedict, finally arrived at them, and with a quick motion, he chopped the head of one of the monsters off its body while it was concentrating on Elena. He glanced at her and winked, saying, "You will thank me later!"

He then turned to look at Erik and said, "Did you miss me?"

"Stop goofing around and help Robyn! He is injured!"

"Aye, captain!" Benedict replied. Then the others finally arrived, and it didn't take much time before the monsters were quickly killed.

"Are you alright?" Amber inquired, her face tense.

"I'm fine, not even a scratch on me..." the young man replied.

The young woman was relieved he was okay. She looked at him for a second, noticing that there wasn't any blood anywhere on his clothes. It felt weird to see so many bodies around him and not a single injury on his body. Judging by the situation around him and his team, the fights must have been brutal. Erik was improving by leaps and bounds under Master Nieminen's tutelage.

At the same time, Aaron and Mickey went to Anderson.

"Are you ok, bro?" Aaron asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Anderson replied.

Amber stared at Erik for a couple of seconds until the young man asked her if there was a problem. "What's the matter?" he said.

The woman blushed but then looked elsewhere and said, "Nothing..."

For a couple of seconds, no beast came toward them, and once it did, they were weak enough to be killed by the others effortlessly, with Erik still getting the experience since they died within the system absorption range.

Erik ignored Amber's weird antics and immediately turned serious.

"Listen, I don't know what these guys want, but they are probably targeting me," Erik said.

"Yeah, I figured out..." Amber replied, and Erik looked at her with a surprised look. However, his mind suddenly went into overdrive, trying to find a solution to his predicament. If he ran, his friends and the rest of the students would be killed by the thaids, the same as before.

If he didn't, the five men would try to kidnap him and leave the other students to the Crombo once they had killed enough thaids. Erik wanted to avoid letting his friends die, but he also knew that asking them to run away was idiotic, and besides, he doubted they would have done that.

Sure, they could have all fled, but if they did, the five men would have probably given Erik a couple of minutes of advantage and then would have chased him. Thanks to their stats, it wouldn't have even taken thirty seconds for them to reach him, but at that point, he wouldn't have thaids shielding him anymore.

It would have also been idiotic to ask the other students besides his friends to go away since that would mean that he had fewer chances of getting out of there alive, while with thirty people, they at least had one.

However, Erik also knew that most of the students had weapon-conjuring brain crystal power but that, given their stats, asking them to fight the five men once the horde was killed was stupid, as they would only kill themselves.

"Amber..."

"What?" the young woman asked.

Erik didn't talk for a few seconds; he didn't know if what he would ask the young woman to do was enough to give them at least a little bit more time; however, they had to try.

The young man then turned to look at Anderson. "Hey, I have a favor to ask you... Come here, please..."

Erik then proceeded to explain the plan to both students. He didn't know if they would agree, but Erik thought that was the best possible shot at running away.

"Is everything clear?" Erik asked.

"Yes..."

"Can you do it?" he asked Anderson.

"I can try, but it is very risky..." the young man said.

"I know, but you are the only person who can pull this off. If you do it, we will be able to stall for a little bit of time since they will lose our tracks..." Erik felt guilty having to give this dangerous role to Anderson, but there was no other way.

"Thank you, Anderson, I appreciate it..."

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"Look, Zach; the kid's got company..." Greg said.

"Yeah, I've noticed..." the man replied.

"Hahahaha, maybe I will have a little fun after all," Slice said.

"Hey, don't steal all the girls; I want to have some fun too..." Laser interjected.

"I would never do it."

Slice laughed at the comment. "I doubt so, bro! A lot of nasty rumors go around you!"

Zach watched the two men stop talking nonsense and focus on the mission. The four of them had almost killed all the thaids, and once they did, they would take the boy and let Death disengage from the Crombo. However, Zachary was a little bit worried; there were thirty students with the kid, and he doubted that, with their training at the Red Palace, they wouldn't pose a problem to them.

"Guys, listen to me. As soon as a couple of beasts remain, we will rush to the kid and take him... There is no need to kill all the thaids; just let the students take care of them. Even better, if they die under the Crombo's rage, we will have less evidence against us..." Zachary said.

"AAAAAH, that would be no fun. Why do you always have to spoil everything? It doesn't happen every day that so many preys fall into our laps. Let us have our fun!"

"No. We will complete the mission and go back to the base. Is everything clear?"

"Yes."

"Ok..."

The four men kept killing the thaids; no more beasts went past them anymore since they could manage them all now that they were a few. However, contrary to their expectations, Erik stayed put. Either he was stupid or had something planned, and they bet it was the second case.

Zachary then turned to look at Erik. Not enough thaids had been killed yet, and since Erik didn't move from the spot, they could do nothing but keep fighting.

"Damn, kid... You are smart..."

However, as Zachary looked at him, Erik understood that time was up. The thugs were probably going to attack soon, so they had to move out.

"All right, guys, let's move according to the plan!" Erik said. Every student pressed the button on their safety device, alerting more than ten teachers of their predicament. They all received the distress signal and started heading toward their positions. At the same time, the thirty students started leaving the place at full speed.

"Hey, they are leaving!" Slice shouted. "Yeah, I've noticed. Let's give them a minute; we'll be able to lose the thaids and get to them quickly. This way, we'll give the kid enough time to get away from the monsters," Zachary said, unaware that he was acting exactly as Erik predicted.

Chapter 174: Anderson's power

"RUN! We must get as much distance as we can from them!" Erik shouted. These pivotal moments in his life would determine whether or not he died miserably.

He had to move fast and keep making distance between himself and the five men, but he couldn't just run blindly into danger without knowing what was ahead of him.

He first asked Judith to send the hounds ahead, and she complied immediately. He then looked around for any clues that would help in determining how best to proceed from there on out; however, all he saw was a large expanse of forest, and without having the possibility to check his surroundings properly, his only way to know if thaids were ahead were Judith's hounds.

His heart raced while he ran, hoping the five men wouldn't catch up with him before the teachers came.

"Ok, Anderson, we have come far enough... It's your time to shine! After you are done, remember that we are going to go west, toward the barrier's eastern entrance, ok?"

"Yes, don't worry..." Anderson replied. He then suddenly stopped running, but the others kept going forward. He now only had to wait thirty seconds. That was enough to let the others run far enough for them to be unaffected by his power.

That was Erik's plan; he wanted to erase their tracks by destroying the surroundings with Anderson's power.

Nothing that complicated, but it was the best thing he could do in that situation; he only needed to run, after all.

However, by making this plan, Erik left Anderson in a very dangerous situation since he would be alone facing the forest's thaidis, or worse, the five men.

"3...2...1..." At that moment, Anderson channeled at least half his mana into his body through his neural links and started gaining energy; after ten seconds, he started producing light.

He looked like a giant lantern, illuminating everything around him. The lights soon became brighter than the sun itself, so bright that even someone hundreds of meters away could see them among the trees.

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"What the fuck is that?" Slice said, pointing at the forest.

"I don't know, but..." A giant explosion cut off Zachary.

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The explosion had at least produced a hundred-meter blast, but the shockwaves, heat, and debris affected at least a one-kilometer radius.

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Erik and the others heard the explosion, and since they were still close to Anderson's position, the young man knew he had to do something.

"FLOYD, SHIELD US FROM THE EXPLOSION!" Erik ordered.

The shockwaves rapidly traveled toward the students and the five men from the other side, and the heat was doing the same. Floyd went quickly behind the fleeing students and deployed the sturdiest shield he could produce. A couple of moments later, the shockwave hit it with full force.

"FUCK!" Floyd shouted. That amount of energy was scarily high, and he was consuming mass amounts of mana just to shield them from it—and that wasn't even the blast's power.

"How the fuck can a single man be this powerful?" He shouted in anger.

"Focus, Floyd!" Amber reprimanded him. At the same time, the shockwaves reached the five men.

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"TAKE COVER!" Zachary shouted. The five, including Death, ran toward nearby trees and took cover. The Crombo was blasted away several meters by the shockwaves and fell to the ground. As soon as it stood on its two feet again, the beast started running away with all its might; that thing could have killed him.

"What the fuck was that?!" Greg asked.

"I don't know!" Zachary replied. He then decided it was time to get Erik and complete this mission once and for all, especially now that the thaids were retreating, scared by the blast.

"Let's go get the awakener!" Zachary shouted.

"FINALLY!" Laser said.

Like that, the five men started running toward Erik's position.

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Meanwhile, Anderson was panting on the ground; around him, the land was scorched, a vast crater had been produced, and trees were broken and scattered everywhere.

That was not only because of the blast but even because of the shockwaves. Even though these didn't kill anyone, they did cause severe damage to the surrounding area. Anderson knew he couldn't control the explosions, and judging by the destruction he caused, he understood that using this power was too dangerous.



He observed his surroundings and saw the devastation that his power brought. However, the young man knew he couldn't waste any more time, and after having caught his breath for ten seconds, he started running away from the blast site.

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At the same time, Erik and the others finally started running again. They were safe thanks to the shield created by Floyd, who was now exhausted but otherwise fine.

"I will make that motherfucker pay!" Floyd said, visibly distraught because of Anderson's power. The blast was powerful; aside from that, even trees, rocks, and many other things flew toward them. Floyd had to stop many things simultaneously, and he quickly exhausted his mana; damn, he was even mentally tired.

"Once we get back to the city, you will have my full support," Benedict said.

"Glad you are a man of culture and can understand my struggle..." Floyd said.

"Stop complaining, Floyd!" Gwen shouted.

Amber shook her head in disappointment. "He stayed behind to save our asses; stop being a prick! We must focus on running away now, so keep running!" She then turned to look at Erik, knowing it was almost her turn.

"Erik, is it my turn?" Amber asked.

"Not yet! The blast had mostly erased the traces, but if we use the fog now, we will only help those guys find them..." Erik replied.

"So, what do we do?"

"We will keep marching for a couple of hundred meters, and then you will have to spread the gas!" He said this while running.

That was part of Erik's plan. Since he knew that Anderson's blast would only erase part of the tracks, he knew that the men were bound to find the ones who were still there, but if he had used the fog, he would have basically told the five where to find them.

Since it was inevitable that they would find the tracks, the best thing to do would be to use the fog from a certain point to cover them since the fog would naturally prevent the men from seeing them clearly by even stopping them from walking around them.

However, the corrosive fog needed to be in its optimal state. It needed to be strong enough to stop the men from entering it or at least make them waste mana. Erik wasn't so naive as to think they wouldn't circulate mana inside their bodies to offset the gas effects.

They would probably do this regardless, but at least it would force them to use more mana and hinder their ability to see.

Besides, if Amber had used the fog before the explosion, the shockwave would have dissipated it, making Amber waste mana.

The 29 students kept running toward the eastern door, west of their location, and once Erik felt it was enough, he told Amber to use her corrosive gasses.

"Do it now!" he shouted.

"Yes!" Then the young woman started channeling mana throughout her body, and once she was ready, she went to the back of the formation and started releasing the most corrosive gas she had ever produced.

This immediately started affecting her surroundings, causing leaves, trees, and even rocks to melt into liquid form. Soon, the entire forest was covered with a thick, acidic substance made from the vegetation, and trees started catching fire and falling to the ground, further covering the student's tracks.

However, the students had to pay attention not to fall behind Amber, or they would die a horrible death.

Chapter 175: Chasing

In the meantime, the five men were running through the forest, following the students' trails. They also quickly passed through the area where Erik and the others fought and were impressed by the fact that people so young, who didn't even attend military school, were already this strong.

"Pretty impressive for a bunch of kids..." Death said.

"Hell yeah, man! This makes me want to cut them even more!" Slice replied.

"I know how you feel, old sport, but unfortunately, the boss here doesn't want us to have fun," Laser said.

"Will you shut the fuck up?!" Zachary then said so in outrage. It was clear that the 'boss' they were referring to was him. Zachary was already annoyed that they had to kill a swarm of thaids for several minutes instead of simply taking the child, and now this clown was mocking him.

All of this is in the middle of a fucking forest, surrounded by soldiers, Red Palace's teachers, and man-eating monsters. His and Greg's previous failures complicated matters even more, and if he failed this task, he could even lose his standing inside the Crystal Cross Gang if he failed the mission.

This was a harsh punishment, but the Crystal Cross Gang only used it for specific missions and only to scare low-level members into taking quests they were sure to fail, which would expose the Crystal Cross Gang and its ties.

Zachary was feeling the immense pressure of being in charge, and he was wondering if he had what it took to handle the situation. He was agitated, as he knew he had to let the kid run away a little since the thaids would have rushed to him the moment the five men stopped fighting; however, the previous explosion deeply worried the man.

It was clear that Erik Romano, the awakener, wasn't a simple kid who could be taken lightly. Once or twice, Zachary purposefully left thaids to get past him, only to see what the kid would do, and he didn't disappoint.

He led his team precisely, and although he was no more than sixteen, his bravery and intuition far surpassed anything Zachary had ever seen before in a person his age, giving the proper orders at the right moment.

He showed excellent knowledge about thaidis and their weaknesses and prepared his team members against their brain crystal powers so they could adequately defend themselves and come out victorious.

He wasn't the strongest team member, as that role was taken by the tall guy they called Anderson; however, he wasn't a bad fighter either, and his strategy kept the team alive.

After a short while of walking, they finally arrived at the site of the explosion.

The land was charred and scorched; trees within a hundred-meter radius were on the ground, burning; the trees that were still standing were on fire, which propagated to the nearby trees, and many plants had huge holes left by flying rocks and debris thrown into the air by the blast. The team cautiously proceeded and surveyed the area.

"Is this the work of a brain crystal power or a bomb?" Laser asked.

"How can you be a high-rank assassin?" Zachary said to him. He was almost going to insult the man for his stupidity but refrained from doing so since Laser was stronger than him and could kill him without much effort.

"It's simple; I'm good at killing people..." He replied.

"Yeah, I figured it out..." Zachary said.

"Ah, ok... So, do you think this was the work of a bomb?" the man asked again.

This time, Zachary replied. "No, they are not soldiers. They couldn't receive bombs from the military. This is the work of a brain crystal power."

"Ahhh... it makes sense," Laser said.

Zachary facepalmed, but then, looking at the ground, he found out that the traces the students had left had disappeared. However, the man didn't need to use the tracks since he had the device the Crystal Cross Gang informant gave them before starting the mission.

The device had the exact location of their target, and with a few presses of a button, they would be able to locate the direction they needed to head to.

After checking the device, he informed his team members that they were heading west. "Let's go then..." Death said.

They walked around the explosion and went in the young students' direction; after a while, they even started to see the tracks they had left behind and that the blast didn't destroy.

"Hey, I was wondering..." Death said. Making Zachary pay immediate attention to him. After the prowess he showed against the Crombo, he didn't dare offend him. In a confrontation, if he could manage Slice or Laser, he had no chance against Death. Knowing this, Zachary could only bow his head in acknowledgment of Death's power.

"Why are we kidnapping this kid?" Death asked.

Zachary's heart sank. He wasn't supposed to talk about this to anyone, per his boss's order; however, he couldn't avoid replying to the assassin, lest he got angry and outright killed him on the spot.

"You know, I'm not supposed to talk about this..." Zachary said.

"Oh, come on, man! We are all fellow gang members, and I won't say anything to anyone. I swear on my honor..."

Zachary guessed what a cutthroat's honor would be. Not that he wasn't in a better situation; after all, he was a thief. However, he couldn't say what he thought of him. Finally, Zachary reluctantly agreed to reveal what he knew.

"Some time ago, we were sent to search for something at the kid's house. A very important person has reason to believe he has some precious information, but he didn't say exactly what the kid had, probably because even he didn't know what it was. However, he told us to search for information, USB keys, and memory storage devices," Zachary said while running.

"We went to his house but found nothing, so we stole his computer but found nothing even there. We could only see the young man's browser history. Aside from some war-related stuff, the kid was clean. There was nothing out of the ordinary. We even asked people to search for hidden codes and weird languages, but again, we found nothing." Death nodded.

"So, the boss sent us here to get the kid to learn where he hid whatever he got, or at least tell us what it talked about."

"Ah... I get it..." Death said. "I wonder what the kid is hiding. It must be something big for the boss of the crystal cross gang himself to issue this quest," Death added.

"Yes, but even more surprising is how important the person who made the request is. Even we high-ranking members don't know who they are, but judging by what the boss said, it must be someone extremely important..."

At that moment, the five men arrived in front of a weird landscape. The forest around them decayed and rotted away. Large trees started bubbling and sizzling, and an oppressive atmosphere was all around them, together with a fire burning everything around, despite the one near the blast not having reached this part of the forest.

A dense and weird fog obstructed the view ahead, leaving their sight unclear.

"What the hell happened here?" Death exclaimed. The group stopped to take a look at the area.

"I think this is the work of another brain crystal power..." Death said.

"Indeed," Zachary added. He did some research about Erik's friend, and judging by the fog; this must have been Amber Joyce's work.

"This must be the work of a girl of the Joyce family; her name is Amber, and she can make a corrosive fog exactly like thi-

Slice placed his end inside the floaty substance, and his hand started sizzling immediately. Zachary was astonished by the assassin's foolishness.

SS

"AAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

The man took his hand back, but Zachary yelled. "Are you fucking stupid?!" He had to say it this time.

"I wanted to see if we could get through it..." Slice said.

"What haven't you understood about this being the work of Amber fucking Joyce?" Zachary said. Even Greg face-palmed.

"Do you think we can go through here?" Death asked with a serious look.

"We can possibly try our luck by spreading our mana on our bodies, but as far as I know, the girl had pretty high amounts of mana. I don't know if this will be feasible," Zachary said.

"Yes, but she is not a high ranker; I doubt she could sustain this power for long. I think we can try our luck going through the fog," Death said.

The problem was that going around the fog would for sure make them waste time, and if Erik arrived at the main gate before they could get him, that would be a huge problem.

Going through the fog was fast but very dangerous. The man thought about it for a bit and decided to go through it. If he failed the mission, he didn't know what would happen to him and losing everything he had achieved after many years of sacrifice didn't sit well with him. So he agreed.

"All right, we will do as you say. Let's go through the fog."

Chapter 176: Seconds...

"Do you think what we did was enough?" Benedict asked Erik.

"Probably not. If they could find us the first time, it means they can do it even now..." Erik said.

"Then why send Anderson and make Amber release her gas?" Floyd asked.

Erik kept looking at his surroundings, hoping not to spot any thaid on their way to the main gate, and then replied.

"First of all, we don't know how they can track us. It could be because of the footprints, smell, or even a tracking device. In the last case, there is nothing we could do, but in the other two, we could have at least made it hard for them to find us. The explosion took care of the smell and the footprints, while the gas at least covered the latter.

Besides, the gas will either make them take a roundabout way to reach us, wasting their time, or injure them a bit," the young man added.

"I get it," Floyd said.

Erik's role here was challenging since he had to navigate the others through the forest while avoiding Lomalins and other creatures. He was also expected to keep a watchful eye out for any suspicious activity from the pursuing men, all while paying attention to the safety and well-being of his companions.

It was not like the 29 students could be easily killed by any thaid around, but they would lose time, and the five men would catch up to them if that happened. The group moved forward cautiously; they were currently headed toward a clearance. Aaron's group previously went there, so he approached Erik.

"Erik, I think we should avoid the clearance before us," Aaron said.

"Why?" The young man asked.

"Because my group and I previously went there, and we killed some thaids, I think that many more of them rushed there to eat what remained of our kills..." Aaron explained. The young man was aghast at Aaron's words. Judith was beside him, constantly telling him what the hound had seen.

"Fuck..." Erik exclaimed. "Judith, is there something ahead?" he asked.

"Indeed, my hounds just came there. There are three thaids I don't know eating the corpses..." Judith said.

Erik spent a couple of seconds thinking. Was it better to confront the three thaids with the thirty students, or change the route? What would waste as little time as possible?



"Describe the thaids to me, Judith..." Erik said.

"Well, they are insect-like creatures, very similar to mantises. They have two short antennae and two compound eyes that take up most of their head's space. They have some mandibles that open on the side of the head and some horrific teeth. It has two front paws and two back ones, but its butt is similar to that of a wasp..." Judith said.

"Do you happen to see if it has some white stripes on the back?" Erik asked.

"Yes, they have them..."

"So, we are dealing with Tedeas..."

"Are they dangerous?" Aaron asked.

"Not with our group, but fighting them will slow us down..." Erik said.

"How much time will we lose if we avoid them?" Amber asked.

Erik thought about it and then replied. "If we circle the clearance, we should lose thirty seconds. If we fight the creatures, we should lose around 20–40 seconds, depending on the thaid's strength and unforeseen events, but we will also risk getting injured..." he explained.

"Should we risk it or not?" Gwen asked, pressuring Erik to take a decision. The young man deliberated for a moment and then made his decision. In the end, he was sure that the best thing to do was not to risk it and avoid the clearance altogether.

"No, let's avoid the place," Erik said. Gwen accepted his answer and breathed a sigh of relief.

"All right..."

"Ah, fuck. This will make us lose a lot of time..." Some may think that 20–40 seconds are not that much, but with people that could run kilometers in the span of minutes, this was a lot of time. Erik then turned to look at the others. "We must avoid the next area; follow me!" and then he and the other students steered to the left, circling the clearance to avoid the thaids.

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Zachary and the other four men quickly entered the fog, and their skin started sizzling and burning immediately.

"Fuck, this is worse than I thought it would be..." Zachary said.

"Circle your mana around your skin; you shouldn't have problems." Death said.

Death's advice was heeded by the others, who began to slowly and methodically circle their mana around their skin, forming a protective layer over themselves, which greatly helped the five endure the corrosive fog. However, even though they weren't burning anymore, the feeling was like being stuck between two hot plates.

"This is really uncomfortable," Laser said.

Death looked at his surroundings. He couldn't see anything except the mist rising up from the ground and blanketing the area with a dense fog. Everywhere he looked was an eerie shade of gray, and the atmosphere was so still that it felt like time had frozen in its tracks.

Zachary was more or less able to understand where they were but relied on the device to find the way toward the students. Instead, the master assassin could navigate through the thick fog easily by relying on his acute senses and the various scents of the forest to guide him outside of the fog.

"This way..." Death said, and the others followed suit.

The scenery in front of them was grotesque since the fog melted everything in their surroundings. Even the bare earth was not left untouched.

Everything quickly became a gooey substance that almost made them slip several times and caused the group to walk cautiously and carefully; most of the vegetation caught fire due to the intensity of the heat, and it was hard to know if they were walking in a sea of fog or a sea of flames. The trees fell under their own weight and then started burning, setting the surroundings ablaze.

Remains of thaids and small animals littered the ground here and there; some of them were still alive and twitching in pain due to the corrosive substance.

Greg actually observed a small squirrel with the right side of the head completely gone. The creature was basically waiting for death with a defeated look, and after a couple of seconds, life abandoned it once the corrosive gas started eating its brain.

The ground was strewn with the bodies of small birds, rodents, and other creatures that had been exposed to the gas, and the more Greg observed, the clearer it became that none of the few still alive would make it. The fog was that terrifying.

"Poor little fella..." Greg said.

"What, that squirrel?" Slice asked. "Bro, you killed hundreds of thaids not even five minutes ago. How can a squirrel's death make you sad?" he then asked.

"I have a soft spot for cute animals..." Greg replied.

Laser laughed. "That's because you're an idiot..."

"Look, we need to keep going forward, so let's move on before the fog eats our brains too," Zachary suggested, attempting to defuse the situation.

They kept walking and saw the desolation brought by the fog, and after a couple of minutes of running at full speed, the group finally got out of it. Creating all that gas was not simple for Amber, who almost exhausted her mana supplies.

The path was clear for the five men from there on out; due to their physical statistics, it didn't take long for them to reach the clearing where Erik and the others had gone close to.

Once they got there, they quickly found the three mantis-like thaids eating off the other creatures' bodies; however, contrary to Erik's group, they didn't take even 3 seconds to kill them and quickly passed their corpses without even looking at them.

"They are four hundred meters away from us," Zachary said while checking his device.

"FANTASTIC! I can't wait to have some fun," Slice said. Due to how much time the students made them lose, this time, Zachary didn't oppose the assassin.

Death was starting to concentrate on the task ahead; the others couldn't see it due to the mask he was wearing, but he had a look of pure focus. It seemed like the man wanted nothing else but to get the kid and head home to get his money.

Slice and Laser, instead, couldn't wait for the carnage to ensue. In contrast, Greg and Zachary were very nervous since the kid proved to be a real pain in the ass. Zachary was sure that the awakener had at least another trick up his sleeves.

After two minutes, they finally started seeing the kids running. They were obviously slower than them since their stats were significantly lower. Zachary actually spotted Erik in front of the group of students leading the way to the city.

"I can see them!" Laser said. Even he became more serious now that the real job was about to begin.

"Remember, get the kid and get the fuck out of here, ok?" Zachary said.

"Yes."

"Ok."

"Don't worry."

## Chapter 177: Questions

As Erik and the others passed the clearance, they started seeing the city's barrier from afar.

"We are almost there, guys!" Erik shouted.

The group was in a small clearing where several trees had been cleared away since some underground defenses had been placed to protect the city from potential attacks. However, in Erik's and the other students' cases, it wasn't much more than an open field with some rocks scattered around. It would do fine as a resting spot for the time being, but nothing more than that.

The only problem was that this area lacked cover or anything else to hide behind; however, their current situation didn't require them to have such things for protection, as that would be utterly useless since the five men could destroy any tree they stumbled upon.

Now, the best thing the students could do was to stay together. If anyone got separated, then it could be bad news. Thankfully, none of the group got split up, thanks to Erik's instructions. Even Anderson came back to the team a couple of seconds ago.

Erik looked ahead and saw the eastern gate's building and recognized that they were close to their destination now, as they would arrive there in less than two minutes of running at full speed. The teachers didn't arrive yet, even though not even 10 minutes had passed since he got attacked by the five men and the thaids, but it was just a matter of moments before they would arrive.

He also noticed that no monsters appeared near the eastern gate due to the many patrols around the area, which probably kept most creatures away from the place, and it was a comforting sight for Erik. However, he knew that the thaids were behaving strangely lately, so he didn't exclude the possibility of monsters hiding around the barrier and kept his vigilance up, just in case.

"Alright, everybody! We must make just a final sprint to the gate," Erik said while pointing at the eastern gate. "Let's hurry up!"

Everyone nodded and rushed toward the gate; however, he received a notification again, basically telling him that his plan didn't work in the end.

[MULTIPLE HOSTILE PRESENCES HAVE BEEN DETECTED.]

The five men arrived. Running away at that moment was futile since they were faster than him and could simply capture him; they had to fight and hope that the teachers would arrive here before anything bad happened.

Zachary made a massive sigh of relief once he saw the young man turning around to face them. He believed that this foolish ordeal would soon come to an end and that he would soon capture the young man and successfully complete his mission.

As the students turned to look at the five men, Erik knew he had to prevent two things: the first was clearly avoiding being abducted, and the second was that the guys said something about why they

were there that the other students didn't have to hear, particularly about the biological supercomputer.

"So, you finally came..." Erik said while trying to stall for time.

"Indeed, and I suggest you peacefully surrender and come with us..." Zachary replied.

Amber, Floyd, Anderson, Aaron, Mikey, Benedict, Martha, Gwen, and the other students looked at Erik, who knew why these guys were there, and that was these men's target. Clearly, the students had no reason to fight for Erik; the young man knew it. Killing thaids was something, but fighting against people who were much more powerful than they were was another thing altogether.

"Why should I?" Erik said.

"Because if you do not comply, we will kill all the people here in front of your eyes," Death suddenly chimed in with an icy tone.

The students knew how strong these people were and got immediately scared at the thought of the ultimatum they had been given. For them, it wasn't a matter of if; it was a matter of how.

"Who will assure me that you won't harm them?" Erik asked. Aside from his friends, he didn't care about the others and was even willing to use them as meat shields; however, the risk of injuring people like Benedict or Amber irritated him greatly. Death gave him a cold stare. He didn't like when his prey talked to him like that.

"I know what you are thinking," Slice added. "You think you can get away, that with your friends here, you can at least give us a hard time... I will tell you this, kid: This won't work. We killed many people stronger than you, and they all perished despite their best efforts."

Hearing this, the students got frightened even more and knew that there was no point in attempting to fight the formidable men who stood before them. They didn't want to die for another person's problem, especially if they didn't even know him.

"You heard him, guys... Do you really want to risk your life because of that guy?"

Some of them looked at each other uneasily, as if trying to come to a consensus; then they looked at Erik; and, lastly, at the five men, ready to make them face the consequences of their choice. It was clear from their equipment, strength, and demeanor that these guys were the real deal.

"I'm sorry, Erik, but I didn't agree to help you deal with whatever shit you did..." a guy said.

"Yeah, me too..." a girl added.

"I'm leaving," another said.

Erik frowned as the group of students turned their backs on him, even Judith, Robyn, and Elena. He knew that he would have a chance to get out of there only if the other students remained, but now that they were going away one by one, his situation suddenly worsened.

The only people that didn't leave him were his eight friends, who had stayed loyal to him in spite of the other students' desertion; it was a pleasure to see that even Martha and Benedict didn't go away, despite having known each other for less than a month.

Even though his situation seemed increasingly hopeless, Erik found solace in the unwavering support of his eight friends. He felt warm inside when he thought about how much he appreciated their presence and loyalty, especially during such a hard time.

He would make it up to them all if they survived. However, Anderson had just barely half his mana, while Amber was basically without an ounce of it since she had used it all to slow down the five assassins previously.

Besides, it wasn't like they were useful in a confrontation with the five men. However, they remained, so he turned to look at his friends and said, "Thank you, guys..." Whatever happened, he could at least say that he finally had the opportunity to see what human kindness was like.

The young man then turned to look at the five men; he needed to know something before anything happened and asked, "Are you the ones responsible for Mister Fox's death?"

Zachary knew that Erik was done, so he said, "Indeed..."

"So, you are a member of the Crystal Cross Gang. I guess..." the young man added. Zachary didn't answer, but it was clear that he and the others were part of this group. "If you don't mind, I have a question myself," Death said.

"Let's hear it then." Erik was still trying to stall for time; these guys knew that, but were confident enough that they would complete their mission that they didn't even bother. After all, there was nothing Erik and the others could do against them.

"What the hell are they searching for from you?" Death asked. He was too curious to know what the hell was happening.

This question piqued the other person's interest right away. Why were some members of the Crystal Cross gang after him? And what did this have to do with Erik's late employer's death?

"Does it make any difference?" Erik asked.

"You are making it difficult, uh?" Death said.

"Well, not that it makes that much of a difference; after all, you will have your means to let me say whatever you want... no?" Erik sounded fearful.

"Indeed, we can and we will, young man. I guess talking to you more will lead us to nothing..."

However, now Erik's friend wanted to know what was happening.

"Guys, it is clear that the young man is trying to stall for time. He probably asked for help long ago, and I think we don't have much time. Let's get the boy and get the hell out of here. I don't want to face Red Palace's masters..." Death said.

"Agree, he will talk regardless..." Zachary added.

Erik and the others immediately went into a fighting stance, but surviving that encounter was wishful thinking.



"Do you really want to risk your friends' deaths?" Zachary finally asked the young man. Erik felt obviously guilty about this whole situation, and if they escaped somehow, he knew he owed his friends at least some explanation.

"No, but if they stayed, it is clear they want to fight..." Erik replied.

"All right then, this was your last chance..."

#### Chapter 178: Free Cruelty

"Let's go get him..." Zachary said. Immediately, he, Slice, Laser, and Greg rushed in. Death waited, as he wanted to see if the young man had any tricks up his sleeves, and besides, there wasn't a need for him to intervene; he was there only as a form of insurance for the mission to succeed.

Anderson and Mikey went toward Greg, while Martha and Benedict confronted Laser. Erik and Floyd fought against Slice, and Gwen and Aaron dashed toward Zachary. In the meantime, Amber remained behind to catch her breath. She was exhausted and barely able to move.

The disparity in strength between the students and the five members of the Crystal Cross gang was abysmal. They had at least 40 points of strength more than the students, meaning they could kill them quickly if the students didn't find a way to take advantage of their superior numbers.

Greg rushed toward Anderson and Mikey. The first had the ability to erase all sound around him, which was useful for a thief but completely useless in a direct confrontation like this. Anderson used half his mana before trying to erase the others' tracks but was otherwise fine, while Mikey used his power to conjure a giant swarm of flesh-eating bugs.

The swarm flew over Greg; he knew the bugs were trouble and immediately retreated as soon as he saw them. At the same time, Anderson and Mikey charged at him while the bugs chased after him.

They knew they had to try and incapacitate the man before Mikey depleted his mana reserves, so they attacked with vigor, trying to quickly take him down before he had a chance to retaliate. This was wishful thinking since their attacks were bound to be too slow for Greg, a seasoned warrior who knew how to take advantage of his opponent's weaknesses.

Anderson and Mikey's attacks would not affect him in any way whatsoever.

Greg jumped left and right to avoid the insect; Anderson and Mikey tried to circle him. The man noticed the two students' intentions and kept his distance from them, as the bugs were troublesome to avoid due to their large numbers.

The bugs lashed at Greg, who jumped several meters back and avoided the strike. Doing so, he gave a couple of seconds to Mikey and Anderson to reach him, and he found himself needing to avoid two attacks, one made by Anderson's claymore and the other by Mikey's kukri.

Greg defended himself with his sword from Anderson's attack; he had no trouble doing so since his strength was much higher than Anderson's, but he had to tilt to the side to avoid Mikey's attack, all while constantly moving to avoid Mikey's bugs.

"Stop this nonsense! I do not want to kill two kids!" Greg said. Despite having killed many people, he never took pleasure in it. Simply put, he did what he was told to do, but if he could, the man wanted to avoid unnecessary deaths. He was a thief, not an assassin, so even if it was part of his job, Greg had difficulty reconciling taking lives with his personal ethics.

He got no pleasure in taking another person's life, especially when such a person was so young and had a bright future ahead of him.

"You should stop going after Erik if you want us not to resist!" Mikey shouted. He was clearly enraged by the attack. Definitely, the Cristal Cross gang wanted something from Erik, but going to these lengths and sending assassins to him was overkill, in his opinion.

However, he knew that these people had no scruples. They tortured, killed, robbed, sold drugs, and dealt with prostitution, kidnapping, and organ selling. They didn't even spare children; on the contrary, they were their favorite targets since they were easy to capture.

Greg avoided the last slash; however, the flesh-eating bugs were still on his tail. He jumped back a couple of times, avoiding two other attacks. Though he understood that there was nothing to do here and that fighting the kids was inevitable, the man sighed and then said, "Then you leave me no choice..."

The thief then started zigzagging through the bugs, avoiding multiple attacks that appeared in slow motion for him, until he eventually made his way to the kids. He quickly approached Mikey, who was the most annoying one because of the bugs.

Greg didn't even need to do anything in particular; he simply went behind Mikey and hit him with force on the back of the head. The young man immediately lost consciousness and fell to the floor; the mana bugs started evaporating like water until the wave of flesh-eating creatures disappeared like a lie, and all that was left was the thief and Mikey, unconscious on the ground.

"MIKEY!" Anderson shouted. He didn't know what had happened to him since he had trouble seeing the man move and thought his friend was dead.

"I told you to surrender!" Greg said.

He then went in front of Anderson and punched him; however, the young man was able to react just in time, avoiding the move and greatly surprising the older man.

"You are not half bad," Greg said, but then he went on Anderson's back and hit him in the head. Exactly as he did with Mikey, making him lose consciousness.

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As the fight between Greg, Anderson, and Mikey started, Laser dashed toward Benedict and Martha. While Martha tried to restrain the assassin with her thorned vines, the young man summoned his halberd. These looked like snakes chasing their prey, dancing in a way that could only end in death.

"Martha, get him!" Benedict yelled.

As the assassin avoided the vines with incredible agility and choreographic moves, he laughed like a maniac. "HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH" The assassin was having fun.

"MORE! MORE! MORE! LET ME SEE MORE! LET ME SEE YOU STRUGGLE!" Laser said. He was a sadistic man who loved to torture his prey and see them struggle during their last moments.

Benedict rushed toward the assassin and, using his halberd, tried to attack him before he could land. His weapon was glowing and emitting a bright light that irritated the assassin's eyes. But the man was skilled and trained and didn't leave any room for the inexperienced kid.

As Laser avoided Benedict's last attack and landed on the ground, the assassin regained his balance and attacked the kid with his dagger. However, Benedict parried at the last moment with his halberd, which was big enough to shield much of his body. However, due to Laser's immense power, the attack sent Benedict flying several meters.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHA, CAN YOU FEEL THE PAIN?!" Laser shouted. He then ran toward Benedict with the knife in his hand.

However, Martha created some vines and stopped the man from injuring her friend. It was at that moment that the assassin remembered the young woman.

As he did, he turned to look at her and glared with a murderous glint. He started running toward her while she called up vine after vine to stop him. However, she had too few neural links compared to her opponent, so her ability to channel mana through her brain crystal was slower than what Laser could do, and she couldn't keep up with his speed.

The young woman started retreating and channeling more mana, but she could do nothing to escape the assassin, who, after a couple of seconds, was already in front of her and ready to deal the killing blow.

The woman created a wall made of thorny vines, hoping to stop the assassin's attack, but when he slashed, he cut the thick vines as if they were made of butter and even created a big gash on Martha's chest. She screamed in pain and fell to the ground. Laser stepped back and looked at the young woman with a cold gaze, but then the corners of his mouth slightly curved.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

"MARTHA!" Benedict shouted. He then dashed toward Laser, but as soon as he was a couple of meters in front of him, the assassin used his power and started inflicting pain on the young man. Benedict fell to the ground and started screaming; his pain was unbearable. Martha could see the anguish Benedict was experiencing but could do nothing to help him.

"BENEDICT!" The woman shouted. Tears went down her cheeks like a fountain.

"THAT'S IT! THAT'S WHAT I WANT TO HEAR. LET ME HEAR YOU SCREAM AND DESPAIR!" Laser said. At that moment, Laser walked toward the girl, who was trying to run away from the assassin while she tried to stop her blood from oozing out of the wound the assassin had just inflicted.

The assassin smiled wickedly as she saw that, but then he noticed that the young woman was glancing at Benedict, who was still on the ground under the effects of Laser's power. Benedict tried circling mana through his body, but the amount of mana that the assassin injected into his body was too large for the young man, and he couldn't stop the pain and exhaustion that it was causing him.

"Ah, you care about him, right?" Laser said to Martha. "Then I guess you will entertain me a little bit while watching him suffer..." With a crazy smile, Laser said.

"NO, PLEASE!"

Laser went toward Martha, firmly placed his foot on her chest, and started applying force to her wound and body, causing her to be immobile and in pain. However, he didn't end things there, as he started sending more mana into Benedict, who started screaming in pain.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH! STOP IT! AAAAAAAH!"

"BENEDICT!"

Chapter 179: Dire situation

While Benedict was being tortured, Erik and Floyd were in a tough fight against Slice. Luckily, the man didn't have a weird brain crystal power; he only conjured a sword. However, he was a master swordsman; he made bizarre and unpredictable movements, and only thanks to Floyd's power were the two able to, more or less, fight against him.

Floyd had very low amounts of mana since he had to protect that ungrateful bunch of cowardly morons who fled. However, he had enough to impair their opponent, Slice, severely.

Floyd targeted the assassin's legs, making it so that his running speed was slower. However, the truth was that Slice let the young man target him on purpose. The man was, like Laser, a freak, a crazy guy; in his case, however, he liked the feeling of superiority he had when he fought others.

He liked the moment when his enemies understood they couldn't win against him and the despair they felt when they found that out. And what better way to do this than by giving himself a handicap and showing his superiority? That would ensure he killed every thought the two young men could have regarding their abilities and power; that move would have made them feel inferior to him.

"STOP HIM, FLOYD!" Erik said.

"I'M TRYING!" The young man replied.

Erik and Slice were fighting with their swords, but it was clear that the assassin was far more skilled with a sword than the awakener. It was like a child fighting against an older man.

In fact, even if Slice was far ahead of Erik, the young man wasn't going down without trying to put up as much resistance as possible, as even though the assassin was clearly stronger, he knew that he would be kidnapped if he didn't stall for more time.

<Where the hell are the teachers?> Erik asked himself. Almost ten minutes had passed since this whole situation began, and there was still no trace of them.

"Hahahahaha! Surrender, kid. You are a shitty swordsman!" Slice said.

"SHUT UP, OLD MAN!" Erik replied.

As the awakener and Slice fought back and forth with their swords, Floyd tried to stab the assassin from where he couldn't see him. However, Slice evaded each attack; it was almost like he had eyes on the back of his head.

Erik slashed horizontally at the assassin, but he parried the move with his sword. Another problem arose during the fight. To avoid his sword getting cut in two, Erik had to channel a lot of mana into the sword while using his power, allowing him to resist the man's blows barely.

This meant that Erik was rapidly depleting his mana; here, the young man truly understood the difference between ranks and how important it was to increase the number of neural links.

Floyd thrust his spear again, but Slice jumped three meters in the air and cut Floyd's spear in two with a swing. He then channeled a little bit of mana through his body, preventing Floyd's power from affecting him.

His speed suddenly increased twofold, and the man went behind Floyd. By parrying a slash from Slice with his own sword, Erik just barely made it in time to save his friend. Floyd's head would have been detached from his body if he had failed.

However, the blow was very powerful, and both Erik and Floyd were sent flying several meters back, crashing into a tree. Floyd immediately lost consciousness as he hit his head, while Erik lost his sight for a few seconds.

Erik found Slice before him as soon as he opened his eyes, and he raised his sword just at the right time to parry an attack. It was clear that Slice was still enjoying humiliating the young man. The assassin almost felt physical pleasure whenever he saw the young man despair or when he showed pain at each clash of their blades.

The strength that Slice showed was extraordinary. Even though the young man was doing everything he could to survive, the assassin seemed unstoppable. The young man blocked another strike coming from the assassin.

He managed to get closer to him, but Slice easily dodged the young man's blade and hit him with his own sword. It hurt, but not too badly; however, it was obvious that Slice wouldn't stop until he felt satisfied.

After all, he enjoyed tormenting his prey before ruthlessly killing them. He was insane and seemingly reveled in the control he held over his victims. Slice swung his sword again, aiming at a random place. Erik barely parried the attack, and his hands felt numb due to the required effort. The young man then tried hitting Slice with his sword.

Still, he easily deflected Erik's amateurish attack with a laugh and wielded his sword so precisely that Erik could not even find an opening.

After a couple more moments, Slice decided he had had enough, so he went behind Erik and slashed at his back.

"GAH!"

The young man screamed in pain, and a couple of tears came to his eyes. Blood trickled down his back, and he collapsed to the ground in agony. Slice looked upon his opponent with a mixture of contempt and satisfaction, and a second later, he kicked Erik's head, making him lose consciousness.

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As the other fights took place, Zachary was fighting against Gwen, but the fight wasn't going at all as they had hoped. Aaron released his slimy, corrosive substance on the ground around Zachary, who, circling his mana, stopped the corrosive effect on his body.

He only had trouble moving around because of the slime, but this was a minor obstacle since he was very high-leveled and had enough strength to move through the slimy terrain. Gwen was basically protecting Aaron by tanking Zachary's attack. The man was pretty tired of the students and decided to put an end to them once and for all.

However, Gwen was a formidable opponent; she had a lot of mana, and her armor was very strong, even able to resist his blows. Aaron's persistent attacks were also slowing him down, and the pair started irritating him more.

Aaron tried attacking Zachary's legs with his sword, but he simply moved away from the strike. He was still strong and fast enough to avoid Aaron's attacks effortlessly. At that moment, Gwen chimed in and tried to land a hit on their opponent; she punched him with her right arm, but Zachary avoided the blow.

"You're a good fighter, I'll give you that," Zachary commented calmly after avoiding the punch thrown at his face. "But you don't have much stamina. You are still a greenhorn, young woman."

Gwen didn't reply. Instead, she attacked again with her fists, this time aiming at his chest. She knew that if she missed, there would be no way for her to dodge his next attack, so she used her entire strength in her attack and channeled an insanely high amount of mana into her armor.

As expected, Zachary reacted quickly and blocked the fist with his left hand. Then he threw one of his punches at Gwen, striking her in the face. It hurt a lot, but the young woman was able to mitigate most of the damage. However, she broke her nose and started bleeding profusely since she did not have enough mana to negate the attack completely.

"Damn..." Gwen said.

Seeing that the young woman didn't go down, Zachary decided enough was enough. He and the others had already wasted enough time, and it was only a matter of time before the teachers arrived.



The first thing that he did was use his brain crystal power, shadow bind, to lock Gwen in place. After that, he dashed toward Aaron.

The young man was skilled in combat, but he was an easy opponent without armor like the girl. He approached Aaron and punched him in the head, which rendered the young man unconscious. Gwen frowned when she saw the move because she knew she would suffer the same fate if she received it despite her armor.

She was not wrong, as Zachary immediately returned to her and started punching her several times in the head. The young woman withstood ten blows without taking significant damage due to her mana armor until Zachary, exasperated with Gwen's resilience, landed a powerful blow to her head that depleted her mana reserves and caused her to collapse to the ground. She lost consciousness soon after.

At that moment, Slice had just sent Erik K.O. Laser was deep in his torture, and Greg dealt with Anderson.

"SLICE! GRAB THE KID. I'M SICK AND TIRED OF THIS SHIT!"

"Aaaah, I didn't kill anyone yet!" Slice said.

"I don't care; you had your opportunity. Why did you waste it by playing with the kids?" Zachary replied.

Slice then looked at Laser, who was still using his brain crystal power on Benedict, who was still screaming in pain. Envy was in his eyes as he watched Laser have fun with the kids.

Chapter 180: Master Rook

\*\*\*TEN MINUTES EARLIER\*\*\*

Master Rook received a distress signal from some students. Initially, he was slightly annoyed since they were first-year students who didn't even go farther than 5 kilometers from the barrier, but then, after seeing who made the call, he was confused.

To ask for assistance was the first-ranked team, with thousands of kills on their backs, so he found it strange that such an efficient team could have such problems against monsters way weaker than them.

For this reason, he sped up toward the team, but he was several kilometers away, so he knew that it would have taken a while to reach them, and he only hoped that the kids could survive until his arrival. The man walked through the forest for a while, but after five minutes, he started getting multiple distress signals from the same place.

BIP BIP BIP BIP BIP BIP BIP BIP

"What the...?"

More than thirty people were asking for help now, and Master Rook's mind went blank at the sight of all those distressed messages coming through simultaneously. He had no idea what was happening. Naturally, he assumed it was a thaid's attack, since they were outside the city and there were multiple military patrolling the surroundings.

Still, if so many people were having trouble against some thaids, this meant that either they were a lot or that a high-level thaid approached the barrier, and that would have been very weird since the higher the level, the higher the intelligence. Thaids would have naturally stayed away from the barrier because they could see how dangerous it was.

However, it seemed unlikely that an intelligent thaid would have been able to pass the many patrols that roamed around or went unnoticed by the city's technology. This left him with more questions than answers, and it was up to him to figure out what had happened. Although Master Rook couldn't explain the situation, it didn't even cross his mind that to attack the kids was a team of people.

Not even two minutes after he received the multiple distress signals, a group of nine teachers walked up to him. He knew them all since they were his colleagues at the Red Palace, and he had been working with them for some time now.

"Jack!" Master Rook said. One of the teachers, Jack Callahan, another sword master, received the distress signal and joined eight other Red Palace masters to rescue the students. The teachers knew where the other masters were, so they decided to join Master Rook, the most powerful of them, in order to be sure not to let anything happen.

"Matthew!" Master Callahan replied.

"What the hell is happening?" Rook asked his friend.

"I have no idea, really. We received the distress signals a couple of minutes ago, and since you were nearby, we decided to come to you first..."

"Yeah, I was already coming here because of another distress signal sent almost ten minutes ago from team 765," Rook explained. "I'm going there right now."

"Ok, lead the way..." Callahan said.

The masters kept running until they arrived, where Erik, his team, and the five kidnappers fought against the thaids. From a distance, the teachers could see the situation. There were thousands of thaids' bodies on the ground.

There were even some thaids that were eating the bodies of their fallen comrades to satiate their hunger. Some monsters had been bisected, some had been decapitated, and others had simply had their brains pierced; others had missing limbs, and many merely had holes in one or two areas of their bodies.

As the creatures' stomachs and intestines were ripped apart, the surrounding area was filled with a putrid odor as blood and viscera spilled out onto the ground, and the ground was coated with blood and excrement that came out of the monster's innards.

There were many thaids who had been killed in the fight, and despite the fact that it was a horrible sight, it also served as a testament to the strength of those who remained alive. It was a massacre. It was weird; there shouldn't have been anybody around these parts, where the low-level students roamed, able to do something like this.

"What the hell is this?" Master Carr, one of the teachers, said.

Master Rook replied, "It appears as though thaids had attacked them."

"Indeed, but these monsters are too powerful for first-year students. It would be possible for them to kill one or two individuals, but not thousands." Callahan said.

"You are right," Master Rook said. "Something is fishy here," he added while they kept running.

"Is that a Crombo's slime?" Master Rodgers said.

"It seems so..." Callahan replied.

The teachers became immediately worried about the presence of a Crombos around the barrier.

"If a Crombo was here, it means that someone strong enough to fight it must have been here too... It is impossible for a group of students to survive such an encounter." Master Carr said.

Master Flores then looked around carefully and saw that there was no corpse around. This meant that the students were able to escape. However, he also noticed that most of the bodies were concentrated around a small area, and that further behind that, there were fewer than thirty thaid's bodies scattered on the ground.

"I think there was really someone here. They probably protected the students, but a couple of thaid's went past them, and the students killed them."

"It could be, but we won't be sure until we reach them and have them confirm the story..." Master Rook said.

"Let's go," Callahan added.

The masters kept running until they arrived at the place where Anderson used his power.

The land was charred and scorched as a result of Anderson's attack, with what remained standing barely recognizable; trees within a one-hundred-meter radius were burning on the ground and had been blasted in many parts, and the few still standing were either going to fall to the ground or had been broken into two or more parts.

"This must have been Anderson Worthington's power," Master Rook said. He could clearly see that there had been an explosion, and since Anderson was a member of the team that had sent the distress signal, he was able to safely assume that this was all his doing. "I knew the kid had a powerful brain crystal power, but I didn't imagine it was this powerful," he added.

"You like this kid?" Callahan asked his friend.

"He is a promising student..." Master Rook said, leaving Jack in disbelief.

"Why do you think he used such a devastating power?" Callahan asked Master Flores, the smartest of the bunch.

"It must be because something followed him. I noticed the students had left some tracks before reaching this place, but now they had disappeared. So, either they did this to erase their tracks, hoping that whoever chased them would lose track of them, or he used the power to kill the thaids."

"But why didn't he use this power earlier? We saw how much damage it caused. If he had done that, he could have killed most of the thaids. The battle wouldn't have lasted longer than twenty seconds," Master Callahan pointed out.

"He can't control this power that well; I think he did it to avoid harming his friends. However, it is also true that if he had been left alone by the others, he would surely have died. So, this makes me think that he did this only because he could.

The students probably took advantage of the people killing the thaids to run away, but these must not have been friendly, since otherwise he wouldn't have used his power. I think whoever came up with the plan tried to cover their tracks..." Master Flores suggested.

"That makes sense..." Master Rook said.

They then went on, and after a while, they reached Amber's gasses. Master Rook pointed out that it was her power, and Master Flores expressed his thoughts once more. However, his suspicions were confirmed this time.

The only reason the students went this far by using these powers in seemingly random places must have been because someone followed them, and those must have been humans, since thaids would have left a mess due to their numbers. The teachers would have noticed if that was the case.

At that moment, after the fog and everything else, the masters started hearing the sounds of a battle from a distance.

"Someone is fighting!" Master Rook exclaimed.

"It must be the students..." Master Flores agreed.

"We have to be quick!" Master Callahan said.

And so they ran towards the sound of the fight. At first, they heard just screams, but as they approached closer, the voices became clearer.

"Stop! You will kill him!" Martha said to Laser, who was still torturing Benedict.

"SLICE! GRAB THE KID. I AM SICK AND TIRED OF THIS SHIT!"

"Aaaaah, I didn't kill anyone yet!" Slice said.

"I don't care; you had your opportunity. Why did you waste it by playing with the kids?" Zachary replied.

Slice then looked at Laser, who was still using his brain crystal power on Benedict, who was still screaming in pain. There was envy in his eyes.

At that moment, Master Rook understood who they were dealing with—the Crystal Cross gang.