

## **BIOLOGICAL 181**

### Chapter 181: Death VS Rook

After a couple of seconds, Master Rook and the others reached a place where five men were seen toying with eight of the nine students; Amber had been left alone since she didn't actively participate in the fight, as she had basically exhausted all her mana and was having trouble even standing.

There was no point for the assassins to attack her since she could do nothing essentially, and even if she could, she was no real threat to them.

Some of the students had been severely wounded, and all of them were on the ground. The teachers didn't know if they were dead or had simply lost consciousness, but their rage started boiling as they saw the five figures mistreating the kids. Master Rook and the other teachers rushed over to protect the students, but the five people immediately saw them.

"WE HAVE COMPANY, GUYS!" Death shouted.

The others turned to look at him, and at that moment, the ten teachers came out from behind the trees. Immediately, Laser, Zachary, Slice, and Greg turned to look in their direction.

"HOW DARE YOU DO THIS TO RED PALACE MEMBERS?!" Master Rook shouted; his rage was evident in his eyes. His veins bulged on his neck as he pointed an accusing finger toward the group of thugs.

"I WILL KILL YOU ALL!" Rook shouted. "COME ON, GUYS!" He then said this to the other teachers, who shared the exact sentiment of anger and frustration. What these guys did was an insult to the Red Palace, which could ruin its reputation and tarnish the institution's good name. The Crystal Cross Gang had always been bold in its actions but had never crossed the Red Palace before.

This time, however, they went so far as to target their students, some of whom were even the sons and daughters of influential individuals, and a shitstorm would ensue when the parents discovered what had happened to their children. It was true that the Red Palace had deep roots inside the government, but it also depended on private donations and the goodwill of its patrons to sustain itself.

As soon as Death saw the approaching mob of angry teachers, he tried to think about how to best escape this mess without failing the mission. He immediately recognized some of the teachers, especially Master Rook. He was one of the strongest Red Palace masters, and his reputation preceded him. He knew that the only one who could fight him was him, but the enemy numbers were too high.

It would be hard for him to win in a two-versus-one match, but he still had some chances if they fought alone.

The problem was that the others would surely die since the masters were probably stronger than them. He could use his comrades to gain a little time while fleeing. However, he could either kidnap Erik or run without him. In the first case, he could shadow-hop beside the kid, grab him, and run away.

Unfortunately, he couldn't bring living things, besides himself, into the shadows, so he had to run away on foot. In that case, he was sure the teacher would follow him, which would be stupid.

On the contrary, if he ran away without Erik, it could still be possible that the teachers chased after him, but if the others remained behind, the teachers would focus on them, and he could escape unencumbered. There was a third alternative: fight with his comrades and try to complete the mission, and in case things went sour, he could simply shadow-hop away.

After a couple of seconds of thinking and weighing his options, the man decided to take the third alternative; he would fight with his comrades and attempt to complete the mission since he could still run away without problems thanks to his brain crystal power.

After all the time he wasted on this quest, not even trying was stupid; besides, if they were successful, he would earn a ton of money since this was a high-profile mission.

"Zachary, if we want to complete this mission, we must kill them. They won't leave us alone if we take one of the kids, and we can't certainly go back to the hideout with them on our tails. We must kill them here!" Death said.

"Ok..." Zachary trusted the master assassin and steeled himself against the grim task before them.

"I will take care of the burly guy. You all try to stay alive..."

At that moment, the teachers reached the assassins, who unsheathed their weapons and ran toward them without hesitation. This would be a hard fight, but they still had a chance to do it. Death was running toward Mister Rook at the same time. Both fighters were quick and raced toward one another at an incredible speed. Death unsheathed his daggers at once and prepared himself to fight.

The two daggers were made of Eshalt, an ore with high mana conductivity but unsuited against people like the Red Palace's master. The hilt was wrapped in a piece of red cloth; the grip was carved from wood that had been polished until it shone like greased metal; its ends curled up to form what looked, for all intents and purposes, like wings or bat-like ears.

The blades themselves glowed with an inner light as he held them aloft before him, and when he slashed, a sharp hiss issued forth along their length, which shimmered black.

Death slashed at Master Rook, but he was a well-respected martial artist, so he blocked Death's attack and launched him to the ground. However, before touching the ground, Death hopped into Master Rook's shadow, appeared behind him with his daggers in hand, and tried to cut the Red Palace teacher's neck Master Rook, but he was no fool.

The Red Palace's teacher used his brain's crystal power at that moment. He was gifted with incredible powers of perception, something most people could only dream of. His power allowed him to sense everything within several feet of himself through vibrations. When he sensed something, he focused on it and created a mental image.

That way, he always knew exactly where someone was, no matter how far away he was. And he did just that now, focusing on the assassin and seeing him clearly. With this ability, he knew when the assassin came out from the shadows and could react quickly to the attacks.

The man turned around quickly enough and stopped Death's attacks by making a roundhouse kick that hit the assassin in his arms and stopped him from doing anything. The man was thrown out of balance, and the teacher took the opportunity to punch Death, sending him flying for several meters and slamming into a tree, which broke under the impact.

When the assassin stood again, he saw the teacher standing almost over him with his arm raised in a punching motion and aiming at his head. Death shadow-hopped again, far away from Master Rook, but at that moment, the other teacher, Master Callahan, with his sword drawn, attacked the master assassin.

Death barely parried the sword attack with his daggers, and then he jumped backward, using his own shadow to teleport and avoid getting a nasty wound that would have ended his life or likely disabled him from being able to fight.

Master Callahan didn't let him go that far. As soon as he landed, he lunged forward and slashed at the assassin, but he bent backward and avoided the blow while also kicking the teacher's knee, causing him to fall to the ground. Then, he threw some flying daggers at the master swordsman's chest, but the blades bounced off the man's blade as he managed to parry them with lightning speed.

At that moment, Master Rook rushed at the assassin, who didn't leave him much time. Death slashed again, this time making a nasty cut on Master Rook's arm. It wasn't deep, but blood started flowing out.

The fight continued, with the two teachers attacking the assassin repeatedly while he jumped into the shadows to avoid being hit. Finally, both teachers managed to land blows on him. First, Master Rook hit the assassin with a fist strike that sent him crashing to the ground again. Then, at shoulder height, Master Callahan slashed at him, crippling him severely.

"Fuck... This can't go on..." The man turned to look at his comrades and observed that the situation wasn't going well. They were all fighting against two opponents each, which meant that either they had to run away if they wanted to survive, as sustaining the fight was evidently hard for them, or they had to try taking the kid.

They wouldn't get any reward money if they fled, which didn't stick well with him. He wanted the money, and he also wanted to impress the boss and whoever was behind him.

Chapter 182: Failure...?

Zachary was having a ton of problems. Not only had he wasted a lot of time trying to kidnap Erik, but now he even had to face the teachers. These guys didn't joke around; they were as powerful as they were, at least in terms of neural links, but the problem was that they were highly trained.

They knew a lot of fighting techniques, including how to use different kinds of weapons, how to fight against other types of weapons efficiently, and many more, but Zachary did not.

He was a thief. He had a lot of neural links, but technique-wise, he wasn't that skilled, as his main job wasn't to fight but to steal. He knew some tricks, sure, but fewer than the more experienced fighters.

On the other hand, there was no denying that these men were war machines. Their bodies looked like they could take any kind of punishment, whether from bullets, blades, or anything else. He was now fighting two teachers, Zahra Flynn, and Kaiden Rodgers.

The first was a woman in her forties with long, black raven hair tied up in a ponytail while she wore the Red Palace's uniform. She was wielding an ax in both hands, which made her look very intimidating indeed. The second teacher was a male, older than the previous one by at least ten years, balding, and wearing glasses that glinted in the low light.

He had a sword and wore the same uniform as a woman, but it was made for men.

Clearly, Zachary didn't know them, and aside from the woman who summoned both her axes, he didn't know what the man's brain crystal power was since he had yet to use it.

Zachary deflected a sword strike aimed at his neck and attempted to strike the man with his panabas. His opponent easily blocked the blow, so he changed his strategy and moved forward until he reached the woman's side. He then used his weight and strength to slam into her right shoulder, taking advantage of the fact that she was smaller and weaker.

Zachary hoped that the sheer force of his attack would knock her off balance and give him the edge. It worked perfectly well since she lost balance, fell on the ground, and twisted her ankle slightly in the process.

Zachary was going to plunge his blade into the woman's stomach when Kaiden attacked Zachary again, forcing the man to step back from the woman. Then Kaiden swung down with all his might, aiming at Zachary's chest this time, but he missed because the man managed to dodge the attack just in time.

However, before the thief could do anything else, the woman kicked him hard between the legs, causing the man to fall flat on the floor. As soon as he did, Kaiden rushed toward the fallen thief, greatly scaring him and making him realize the gravity of his situation.

Zachary used his power shadow bind to pin Kaiden to the ground, and as he did, he took the chance to stand back up again. However, he had to deal with Zahra again pretty quickly. This time, she approached him, swinging her axes wildly, aiming to hit him in his openings. Unfortunately for her, he evaded every single attack by jumping backward several times and shadow-binding her to the ground.

Since the effect of his power on Kaiden was almost ending, Zachary decided to attack the male teacher. He attacked him several times, but the man's ability with the sword was superb, and he couldn't land a single hit on him.

\*\*\*

At the same time, Slice was facing Ismail Flores and Syed Cotton. The first was a lean guy who mostly used his brain and had great intelligence. He was blonde with blue eyes and used a spear to fight. The other one was taller than the other teacher, probably close to 1.8 meters, with short brown hair and hazel eyes; like most people, he wielded a sword in his hand.

Slice avoided a slash coming from the blond, then countered with a stab at the latter's torso, which caused the man to block it with his weapon. After that, the two teachers circled the assassin, waiting for the next move. Meanwhile, Slice focused on controlling his breathing, making sure not to panic or rush things out.

Slice knew that if he could manage to maintain a calm state of mind, he had a chance at beating his opponents. He kept his gaze fixed on the enemies, looking for signs of openings. To avoid getting cut, he moved slowly backward, keeping his distance from the men and creating space between them to avoid getting hit.

Slice had a sword conjuring brain crystal power and was skilled in wielding it; he was an assassin, so he knew a lot about killing. The man usually brought his daggers, but to face people head-on or to kill thaid, having a sword was always a safe thing to do.

He was also a master at timing and spatial awareness, knowing how to maneuver and move swiftly, always keeping one eye on the opponent's actions, and ensuring that he could properly evade and counter-attack them if the opportunity arose.

Slice had fewer troubles than Zachary for all these reasons, but to be honest, he was still having trouble against two strong opponents, such as the two teachers, despite having high skills and a lot of training. The battle continued, and although Slice could keep the two away from him, they circled around him constantly, trying to get past his defenses.

Both teachers' abilities were similar to his, but fighting against two opponents really tilted the scales in favor of the Red Palace's workers.

\*\*\*

While the others fought, Laser kept two other teachers, Christine Carr, and Melissa Harding, occupied. He almost killed one of them by using his power to cause pain at the right time, but the other teacher came to help her and stopped him from hurting her.

Laser immediately realized he was in a good situation because the two appeared vulnerable to his power. So, he attacked them with everything he had, using his power at the right time to make openings they couldn't close and to do as much damage as possible.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAH" The assassin maniacally laughed every time his daggers clashed with the two teachers' weapons. "I WILL KILL YOU! BUT FIRST, I'M GOING TO MAKE YOU SUFFER!" Laser added.

But despite his efforts, he couldn't finish either of them yet, nor even cause any significant damage to their bodies. Despite his heated threats, he could not make either of them suffer or inflict significant damage, which greatly frustrated him. They blocked his attacks and answered them with their own so that he couldn't get a significant advantage.

Laser was growing significantly frustrated at that fact, but as the fight progressed and as the woman bled, his excitement grew along with his frustration.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA BLEED! BLEED FOR ME!" Laser said.

"This guy is giving me the creep!" Christine said to her colleague. The woman felt a chill run down her spine as Laser spoke the words.

Melissa looked like she wanted to say something but refrained from speaking. However, as the fight continued, the two teachers began to amass wound after wound. This wasn't surprising in light of Laser's formidable abilities and the destructive nature of his power.

At that moment, though, a scream broke the silence; it belonged to Greg. One of the teachers, Brian Fowler, managed to injure the man, who wasn't that skilled at fighting and was the weakest of the bunch of Crystal Cross Gang members present there. The thief ended up with a sword firmly implanted on his right shoulder, deep inside his body.

Greg could barely stand in one place, and the pain was evident in his eyes.

"GREG!" Zachary shouted.

Greg screamed again as blood poured out from where the blade was lodged in his flesh. As if this wasn't enough, the sword went deeper, causing more bleeding.

"Kill him, Brian!" yelled Master Petersen. At that moment, Master Brian pulled the sword out, and with a quick movement, he decapitated Greg.

"SHIT!" Zachary shouted. Death saw the scene and immediately understood that the mission was a failure. The only way for them to kidnap the young awakener was if they managed to kill the teachers. Since one of them had now died, they were in a disadvantaged situation, and with two more teachers free to help the others, the situation was going to turn worse quickly.

Greg's death had sealed their fate; he had just made it so that their mission was doomed to fail.

Death tried to think of a solution but couldn't find any. He was still stuck with Master Rook and Master Callahavan, and he could not help the others.

"YOU SHOULD FOCUS ON YOUR FIGHT!" Master Rook spoke to Death, leaving a small wound on his arm.

<Fuck...> Death thought. <I'm out of here...> With that, he hopped into the shadows and disappeared. Zachary saw Death running away and understood that there was no way he could safely kidnap Erik.

"RETREAT!" The man shouted.

#### Chapter 183: Zachary's Escape

As Zachary shouted the order, Slice and Laser started running away with lightning speed, avoiding all obstacles in their path. They could do nothing to get Erik, and the mission had failed despite their best efforts.

They wasted too much time fighting the thaid, but getting the kid without killing the monsters was almost impossible, and the mission was not worth jeopardizing the lives of their entire team. Another thing that slowed them down was that damned fog that obscured their vision and prevented them from navigating quickly through the forest.

Lastly, Erik's friends would never have allowed him to be kidnapped, and the fight against them made them waste the last precious moments they had to abduct the child. Zachary looked at Erik with hatred, as he was sure all this was his fault. He avoided being abducted by wasting time, using the fog and explosion, spending time near the thaid, and finally calling the teachers.

If only he had run away when the thaid came, they would have completed the mission without a hitch, and none of this would have happened.

Since there was nothing more to do, Zachary and the others started running away; however, Master Rook didn't intend to leave them alone. They had to pay for having attacked Red Palace's students.

"Jack, Zahra, Kaiden, Ismail, and Syed. You come with me; we will kill these bastards. The others must stay here and take care of the kids. Is everything clear?" Master Rook had authority over the other teachers since his rank inside the institution was higher than theirs, and his order was quickly accepted.

The other teacher did as he said, and immediately the six started chasing Laser, Slice, and Zachary. Too bad he couldn't kill the assassin he fought against, Death, as he escaped; he was a powerful guy and probably a vital member of the Crystal Cross Gang. Killing him would have been good for the people living around the city since there would have been one less criminal roaming around.

\*\*\*

The first three ran as fast as possible toward the northwest, where the secret sewer passage was located. They sped through the forest incredibly fast, trying to escape their pursuers and gain enough distance to ensure their safety.

"What do we do, Zachary?" Laser asked with visible worry in his voice. "We can't return to the base with them on our tails!" he added.

"I know that!" Zachary replied with a hint of desperation in his voice. He sighed deeply. This wasn't how things were supposed to go, and by the way, where the hell was Death? It seemed like fate made it so difficult for him to complete his task, and he even lost a friend in the process.

"STOP! YOU MOTHER FUCKERS!" Master Rook shouted from a distance. It was becoming increasingly more difficult for them to follow them. They were criminals; after all, they were used to running away and escaping encirclements. Laser and Slice had done it so many times before that they didn't think they wouldn't be able to escape, but Zachary had his doubts.

Master Rook wasn't stupid; he knew these guys had some tricks up their sleeves. The man contacted the military to receive assistance; they couldn't possibly refuse his request.

"Here is Master Rook from the Red Palace; we need your assistance. Some guys attacked a group of students inside the forest and are now heading northwest. I will send you the coordinates; please send a patrol to stop them!" Master Rook said.

There was no reply for ten seconds before someone finally answered: "Roger, Master Rook." A moment later, one of the soldiers sent a message containing the GPS location of the enemy.

"Thanks," the master replied. With that, the six continued chasing the three men, who reached a clearing a few minutes later. The place was perfect for an ambush; the Crystal Cross Gang members knew it.

"Fuck..." Laser said as he saw something moving between the trees. Soon after, a group of 10 soldiers rushed out from the trees in front of them while the teachers were still behind them. Zachary's worst thought just came true.

"Shit. They found us!" Slice yelled, still confident they could do it. The patrol's members dashed toward the assassins and then started channeling mana through their neural links and using their powers. Five people with ranged abilities began to attack the three gangsters while the other five ran toward them to engage in melee combat.

"Zachary, what should we do?" Laser asked again. His eyes still showed unlimited confidence. However, being in that situation was weird for him since he used to be on the other side, being the one that scared other people.

"WE MUST FIGHT!" Zachary answered.

"ARE YOU SURE?!" Slice asked.

"Listen. The only thing we can do is try to break through them, or we will die here. At my signal, aim at the two in the middle. I will go on their backs and kill them; after that, it will be easy to get past them. We must be fast, though, or the others will catch us. Is everything clear?"

Slice and Laser nodded in understanding. Zachary was the smartest of the bunch and the most capable in terms of formulating plans and running away from authorities. It was his job, after all, since he was a master thief.

"All right, we will do as you say," Laser replied.

The three then accelerated and approached the armed soldiers. Slice unsheathed his sword, and Laser grabbed his daggers; the three were at max concentration.

CLANG

SHWIIING

The soldiers started attacking. In a split second, the three companions quickly retaliated. Slice and Laser thought they could have killed them easily and run away, but unfortunately, the two soldiers weren't as weak as they assumed.

Laser turned to his right, where Zachary stood, but he was missing from his spot and was several meters in front of them. Zachary released some shadow binds that trapped the other three soldiers on the ground, and a hundred meters away, the assassins saw Zachary fleeing.

"YOU MOTHER FUCKER!"

He had played them. Zachary formulated his plan as soon as Death ran away. The plan was to use Laser and Slice to attract the teachers' attention and then flee when the opportunity arose. He wasn't sure that the soldiers would have attacked them, but he suspected it. In the end, it didn't really make a difference.

He sped through the forest with the ranged soldiers unleashing a myriad of attacks on him, but he evaded them all.

At the same time, the teachers arrived where Laser and Slice were. The two assassins had problems fighting against five soldiers, but these quickly became sixteen.

Slice did his best to parry all the attacks that came toward him, but a soldier aimed a spear at him, and Slice felt its tip piercing through his skin. He tried to block it, but the impact broke his arm and

forced him to drop his weapon. Another one stabbed into his stomach, forcing him to double over. Then a sword's slash cut his neck, detaching the head from the body.

Laser kept dodging the soldiers' attacks and was almost able to run away from the encirclement by inducing pain in the teachers and soldiers. Still, Master Rook channeled mana through his body, minimizing the effect of Laser's power, and he grabbed him by the neck and crushed it with both his hands, ending his life.

"Two of them did escape..." Master Rook said.

"Don't worry, sir, we will immediately chase the one who went away..." a soldier said.

"All right, then, I will wait for news..." Master Rook said.

"Yes, sir."

\*\*\*

Zachary ran until he reached a small clearing in the woods, and then he stopped to catch his breath. As soon as he did, he looked around, noticing three things. First, the area appeared to be safe. Second, if anyone came close to this place, they wouldn't notice him at all because the surrounding plants provided excellent hiding places.

And third, the fact that none of his enemies were on him meant he wasn't being tracked anymore. He successfully escaped them and felt an immense sense of relief as he made his way to the safe spot.

These were all good signs, especially considering how difficult it was for anyone to track another in the wilderness without using technology. Zachary felt absolutely no remorse for using them as a diversion to escape. After all, it was an act of self-preservation.

"I'm not sure if they are still following me, but it won't matter now, even if they find out about my escape route. I'm too close to the sewer now..." Zachary said to himself.

His voice echoed throughout the trees, but his voice had been immediately drowned out by the sound of birds chirping and thuids roaring and screeching among themselves. The noise helped hide Zachary's presence, which was precisely what he needed.

"Now, I just need to make it to the sewers before someone notices my presence..." Zachary said to himself again.

Chapter 184: Is it right to lie?

Erik woke up some hours later, but exactly like the last time he had been at the hospital, he was initially confused, as he couldn't immediately understand where he was. It was natural since the last thing he remembered was being inside the forest and fighting against one of the five men that attacked him.

His final thoughts before passing out were that he had been unable to escape the men and that they would eventually take him. However, two notifications informed him otherwise.

[EMERGENCY QUEST COMPLETED. STORED ENERGY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. REWARD ISSUED.]

[LEVEL UP!]

<What the hell happened?> the young man thought.

Apparently, he managed to complete the quest and escape from the guys, and he even gained another level; judging by the quest rewards, he also got five more strength points.

He realized he was in a hospital-like structure and that medical equipment was all around him as his vision started to clear. As he looked around to see where he was, he noticed several beds on his left and right. His friends were lying on a bed.

They all appeared to have recovered thanks to the hospital staff, especially Martha, who had the most severe injury of them all. Amber, on the other side of the room, stood up from her chair and walked toward him.

"Erik..." she said.

The young man observed her for a moment and then asked, "Amber... Are you ok?" His voice sounded very concerned.

"Yes, I am; what about you? How do you feel?" the woman asked.

"I'm fine. It looks like I have been healed," the young man said.

"Indeed, but your wounds weren't that serious. On the other hand, Martha had a deep gash across her chest. You could see her bones..." Amber said.

"How is she now?" Erik asked. He didn't want this to happen, but he couldn't control what the other people did. However, now that the problem was apparent, people knew that his father had given him something he was not supposed to have; maybe he stole it from the Crystal Cross Gang or some influential person, which was why they attacked him.

The problem was that Erik did not have enough power to defend himself and was honestly afraid of the Crystal Cross Gang.

He didn't know the extent of the organization's information; however, there was one thing he was sure about: if they attacked him now, under the Red Palace's protection, there was no way they wouldn't do it again if he ever stepped out from the safety of the palace.

"She has been healed, but it will take a little bit more time before she wakes up..." Amber replied.

"And what about the others?"

"They should wake up at any moment; the Red Palace alerted our parents. They are coming here right now," Amber said.

"Ok..." Erik planned on leaving the room before the parents came. He didn't want to hear people say it was his fault that all of this had happened or blame him for things he had no control over in case some of his friends said something they shouldn't have.

"What about the teachers? What did happen? Were they the ones who saved us?" Erik asked. He had many unanswered questions that needed a reply.

"Yeah, it was them," Amber said while looking Erik in the eyes. She was visibly tired, and the amount of fear she felt today was evident.

"They came soon after you all fell unconscious. Initially, those guys tried to fight back," the young woman said while recalling the events of that morning.

"Then, the teachers managed to kill one of them during the confrontation. It seems he was a wanted man going by the name of Greg Oslov; the police suspected he had ties with the Crystal Cross Gang already, but until today they couldn't prove anything," she explained.

"After he died, one of the other men fled and left the other three to fend for themselves. This guy's nickname is Death; he is a master assassin. What a creepy nickname..." Amber said, shuddering. Erik was perplexed as to how she knew who the man was.

"We were pretty lucky to have survived. This guy is one of the most wanted men in New Alexandria..." Then he understood how. Erik decided to research New Alexandria's wanted men and hack into the police server to see who they were investigating, trying to find out who the police believed was tied to the Crystal Cross Gang.

"Ah... but what about the other men? What happened?" Erik asked. Amber looked at her unconscious friends before replying. She then turned to look at Erik again.

"The three remaining fled but were intercepted by a military patrol. One of them used the other two as bait, and he fled through the forest. However, the military lost him. They don't know where he went, but presumably, he is inside the city. Wherever the Crystal Cross Gang members hide..."

Erik didn't know what to say. He felt a little uneasy as he thought about the fact that the members of the Crystal Cross Gang were out there somewhere, possibly hiding in plain sight, and that they were targeting him. He also knew that all of this happened because of him.

It wasn't his fault, as it wasn't like he had to stop living because other people targeted him; however, he understood that there was no place to hide inside the city but that he would be safe, at least in the Red Palace. He had no idea if that was true at the military school, which accepted many more people and teachers than the Red Palace.

Besides, everyone knew his face because the newspaper told him he was an awakener, the military probably kept an eye on him, and the Crystal Cross gang was targeting him. The future looked grim for Erik at that moment.

Then the young man recalled something important: Red Palace's competition. Whoever won had to receive a brain or body-stimulating serum, and at the point, he was still conscious, his team was first.

"What happened to the competition? Who won in the end?" Erik asked.

"Nathaniel..." Amber said. When Erik heard that name, his face darkened. <Nathaniel, that mother fucker. It is always him...> Erik thought about it but said nothing to Amber. Because of him, an entire horde of monsters attacked them, almost killing him.

Yes, it was true that if he hadn't sent the thaidis toward him, the members of the Crystal Cross Gang would have kidnapped him, but this didn't excuse him from the fact that he tried to kill him and Anderson.

Erik didn't care about Robyn, Elena, and Judith at that point, since after everything he had done for them, they decided to run away and leave him alone when the five men reached the students. He could not blame them—if he had been in the same situation, he would have done the same.

Besides, they didn't really know each other, and a couple of hours spent hunting together wasn't enough to establish a sense of camaraderie between them. However, thinking about them pissed him off.

"What's the matter?" Amber asked. "Nothing..." The young woman then thought for a few seconds before gaining the courage to ask Erik a fundamental question.

"Erik, you must tell me what happened. Why were those guys trying to kidnap you?" The young man knew his friends would ask him this question soon enough, but he was not ready to answer. However, they almost died to help him, and he owed them at least an explanation.

"I am not sure how to answer that..."

"Erik..." Amber said while looking the young man in the eyes. "You can trust me..."

"I know..." The young man had proof that Amber and the others cared about him, but the thought of telling them about the system and everything else scared him. He didn't want to lie to her, but he knew that he had to do it if he wanted to be safe.

The problem was that he would be in serious trouble if anyone else knew about the biological supercomputer. For a moment, he considered telling the truth to Amber, but the fact that he couldn't predict her reaction, despite her being his closest friend, prevented him from doing so. What if she got a sudden surge of greed for power and wanted to acquire the system?

It was essential to say something believable and to avoid telling her about the biological supercomputer. So he decided to omit some parts of the story and tell what he could.

"Alright, alright... Well, you see..." Erik began explaining. "At the beginning of the last month, my father, Lucius Romano, came back home after two years..." That was the truth; he wasn't lying about that. The young woman looked at Erik with a surprised look. Something serious happened if someone as legendary as Erik's father returned home, and there wasn't even a parade for him.

"He didn't actually tell me what happened, where he had been, or anything like that for all that matter. He..." The young man stopped talking; he had to make it look like his following statement would be true, even though he would lie. He looked around the room with emphasis and faked to check for hidden cameras and microphones.

Erik felt a little guilty lying to her, but there was no alternative. There was no way he would talk about the system or what his father brought him home.

For purely theatrical purposes, the young man jumped off the bed and walked toward Amber; he hugged her tightly, making the young woman blush as she misunderstood him.

He then whispered something into her ears. "He brought something home, something he claimed was related to the identity of the real leader of the Crystal Cross Gang..." At that moment, Amber's face changed, and it started showing a look of pure shock. If what Erik or his father claimed was true, what happened during this hunt could be easily explained.

No one knew who controlled the Crystal Cross Gang. Their members would have said it was boss Howell, but this was far from the truth. The bullshits that Erik just spouted were scarily close to the truth.

Chapter 185: Meeting Caiden

"Are you telling the truth right now?" Amber asked.

"Yes, he gave me a USB key," he whispered into her ears. "I don't know what it contained or if my father was telling the truth, but I know he looked at me with a certain intensity that unmistakably signified his seriousness. I was slightly curious initially but refrained from checking its content for fear that it might contain something I would rather not know or that would put me in danger.

Besides, I didn't even have time to check said content since... an... accident... occurred and the USB key got... destroyed," Erik said.

The young woman turned to look at Erik while he was still hugging her. She was pissed he destroyed something important, but what was already done couldn't be changed.

"So, do you think the people who came to the forest wanted to know the whereabouts of the key? Do they think you know who their leader is?" she asked.

"That's what I think... at least. But would they have believed me if I told them I didn't? And what would they have done to me once I became useless?" the young man stated.

Amber understood but didn't say anything since it was apparent what her friend's destiny was bound to be if that occurred.

"Ahem..."

Erik and Amber turned to look at the source of the voice. It belonged to Floyd, who had just woken up to find the two huggings each other. Amber and Erik were embarrassed, especially Amber, who was tomato red. She and Erik tried to escape each other as soon as possible.

"Hey, sorry for having interrupted you guys..." Floyd apologized sheepishly before looking back at his friends. "I just wanted to ask where we are."

"At the Red Palace's infirmary..." Amber replied.

Floyd asked the two what happened once he lost consciousness, and they told him. After twenty minutes, Gwen woke up too, but everyone's parents started turning up in the hospital room.

"AMBER!" His father, Caiden, shouted. Her mother was behind him, tears running down her face. The last time she saw her daughter, she didn't know she would end up in such a situation. When the Red Palace told the parents what they were planning to do, they assured them everything would be safe. Instead, things went differently, and both she and her husband were seething with anger.

They had never seen their child like this.

"Dad! Mom!" Amber exclaimed when she realized they had finally arrived. She ran towards them and embraced both of her parents tightly. She didn't cry; after all, she was a tough girl.

"Are you injured?!" Caiden asked.

"No, I'm okay! I came here only for the others..." Amber said.

"What happened?! Why are you and your friends here?" Luna, her mother, asked.

The young woman told her parents what had happened but omitted the part about the five men trying to take Erik. Caiden took what his daughter said very seriously, but he was no fool and immediately understood that this was related to Erik. Besides, he had many contacts inside the Red Palace, and the other kids had already said the unknown men had come for him.

Furthermore, it was easy to do  $2 + 2$ ; after all, his daughter had asked him to find out who might have robbed Erik's house, and everything pointed to the Crystal Cross Gang. Clearly, they were searching for something, and they believed Erik had it.

Two things happened then. The first was that Caiden grew incredibly angry at Erik and blamed him for what his daughter had to risk. However, the second thing was that he grew curious about what the Crystal Cross Gang could want from this young man.

"Can I talk to you, Erik?" Caiden asked with a solemn look.

"Me?" the awakener asked.

"Yes, you. Is there anybody else called Erik in this room?"

"No, sir..." Erik said. He figured out Caiden was pissed and tried to avoid angering him even more. The middle-aged man went out of the room, and Erik followed suit. Amber observed the two going out, and to be honest, she grew anxious, as she believed his father wanted Erik to stay away from her.

As Erik and Caiden were alone outside the room, Caiden's tone changed.

"Now, Erik, I want you to tell me the truth... What happened out there?"

"What do you mean, sir?" Erik asked, faking ignorance.

"Don't play games with me! I'm not stupid enough to believe you know nothing about what happened today!" Caiden said.

He then put his hand on Erik's shoulder, and the young man felt uncomfortable because the older man was much stronger than him, and his grip was tight. "Listen to me, boy: you will answer my questions honestly or suffer the consequences. Do you understand?"

"Y-yes, sir..." Erik stuttered nervously. Caiden was powerful, strong, and had many connections. He couldn't anger him.

"Good. Now, what did happen out there?" Caiden asked again.

If Caiden wasn't stupid, neither was Erik. He knew that if he revealed anything about the biological supercomputer or the sinister cold, Caiden would tell Richard, who would then tell General Becker.

If that happened, his life as a free man would be over. He had to find an excuse, a plausible lie that was hard to refute or that at least gave him enough time until he went to military school, where he would be safe for the time being.

However, he couldn't say what he told Amber. The young woman had to believe that what he said was true and that she had to keep the secret. If he told Caiden what he said to his daughter, it would be clear that he was hiding something.

Likewise, he could not tell Caiden the same thing he told her, as doing so would expose him.

"Well, my team and I were hunting thaids as the Red Palace had requested. We were actually first ranked..." Erik said.

"I don't care about this; go on, young man; don't test my patience." Since Caiden was Amber's father, Erik managed to maintain his composure even though he was starting to get upset with his attitude. Erik sighed and then proceeded to speak.

"These five unknown men suddenly attacked us, but simultaneously, a huge horde of monsters attacked us. The five men shielded us from them, and I had the time to call for Amber and the others..."

"Ok, but who are they? Why were they there?" Amber didn't tell Caiden they were searching for Erik. He knew about it because of the other students. This was further supported by the investigation he was still conducting about the burglary at Erik's house, according to Amber's request. "Don't lie to me, Erik..."

"To be honest, I'm not really sure myself, sir. All I know is that they started targeting me after my father came home from his two-year-long trip..." Erik said, leaving Caiden extremely curious since his father was involved. "I'm only assuming things here, but I guess that my father stepped on someone's toes, maybe stealing something or getting information about someone. I don't know what he did."

As already stated, Erik couldn't say what he told Amber since this would mean that his secret wasn't really that important. However, even in this case, he needed to give a believable explanation. Since Caiden was clearly aware that the Crystal Cross Gang was searching for something from him, he said something similar to what he told Amber but without saying anything specific.

However, he was also growing anxious, so he started talking to the biological supercomputer.

<I need you to release that calming substance as you did the first time we "met,"> Erik told the system.

[UNDERSTOOD. RELEASE CALMING SUBSTANCE INTO THE BRAIN IN 3...2...1]

The young man relaxed as the substance was released, increasing his credibility. All of that lasted a couple of seconds, and after a slight pause, he resumed his talk.

"However, they must have thought he really told me something or gave me some information and were probably there to find out if that was true, and in case what he said... I swear I know nothing else. My father only came to see how I was!" Erik lied, but in a very believable way.

"The only one who could have more information would be my father. But after that time last month, I have not seen him again." That was colossal bullshit, but the way Erik said it was perfect.

"So, your father didn't really bring or tell you something?"

"No, sir, he only visited me, as I've already said. I don't know what happened then, and I certainly don't know now. However, I strongly believe he only wanted to see me, his son."

Caiden was still suspicious of the young man, but there was nothing else he could do. If the young man lied, then that was it.

Soon after, Amber came out and took her father back into the room. She previously told Erik that she wouldn't say anything to her parents but told him that he had to explain what happened to the others, as it was the right thing to do.

Erik agreed but decided to go back to his room. He was inside the Red Palace so that nothing could happen to him. That was the safest place in the world. Amber returned to the room as the other students woke up, and their parents came.

While Erik went away, he thought about Nathaniel. What he did this time was over the limit. He could understand what he had done during their fight at the school's tournament since he was the first to do it to others.

However, sending a bunch of thuids to his team was borderline crazy. No, not even borderline, just crazy. He almost died because of him; if it weren't for the five men's presence, he would have died.

Nathaniel had to pay for what he did and had the perfect plan. He planned on making him angry, ashaming him, making him feel inferior, and then humiliating him. However, that would be a lot of work.

## Chapter 186: Howell, Death, and Zachary

"What?! You failed?" Boss Howell asked Zachary. The man was in front of him, trembling, and he was furious because of his and Greg's last failure.

The thief just came to the Crystal Cross Gang base to report the situation. Death was already there, but he didn't say anything to Howell or Zachary. There were many things the thief wanted to say to the assassin, but it was clear that if he did, he would pay.

"I'm sorry, boss..." Howell turned away from him angrily as soon as he heard these words. The thief slowly stepped back, out of reach of Howell's anger.

After some time had passed, Howell spoke again: "I gave you only one mission; take a stupid child... How the fuck could you fail this way? You even lost three team members!" Zachary shrugged helplessly and answered honestly.

"The kid played it smart, boss! He created problem after problem. He called the teachers; damn, he even called his friends. He even knew we were targeting him and asked questions about his employer's death. Death can testify!" Zachary said.

"Is it true?" Howell asked the master assassin. "Indeed, the kid showed remarkable intelligence. He is indeed very clever," Death calmly replied.

"Boss, I had no choice but to escape and accept our defeat. I could do nothing in that situation," Zachary bowed down on the ground before the man. His eyes looked at the floor while begging for forgiveness.

"You are so pathetic," Howell snorted coldly before continuing. "I essentially made a foolproof plan; all you had to do was follow it, and everything would have been easy! Do you know how all of this humiliates me? Do you know how much money I had to spend and how many favors I had to ask for to give you that opportunity?!"

"Sorry, sir!" Zachary apologized immediately. He couldn't bear to hear Howell's rage any longer.

"Sir! It's not my fault, I swear! It was the kid!" Zachary added. In all of this, Howell said nothing to Death, making the thief angry; he was with him, knew what happened, and was at fault too. Why didn't he say anything to him?

"This wasn't your first failure, am I right?" Howell asked. "No, sir..." Zachary nodded quickly and answered truthfully once more. However, his boss still needed to be finished.

He then said, "I am going to give you another chance. This time, do not fail me!"

"Yes, sir! I won't!"

"Good. I will let you know when your last opportunity comes. Now get out of here." After saying those words, the leader of the Crystal Cross Gang kicked Zachary out of the room.

After that, Zachary left without looking back. However, he was enraged not only because he had failed but also because of Death and Erik. Mainly due to the latter; all of this happened because of him.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" The thief screamed when he got outside. He ran into the Crystal Cross Gang bar, cursing himself repeatedly. Once inside, he sat on the chair near the door, where nobody else was sitting.

"Hey! Hey! What's wrong, Zachary?!" The waiter asked. "Nothing! Nothing! I just had a bad day!" Zachary paused and asked, "Can I have a glass of rum?" The man, shortly after, brought him what he asked for, and he started drinking.

\*\*\*

"Now, tell me what really happened," Howell said to Death.

"Well... what Zachary said was essentially true. The kid was very resourceful; he threw giant trees at us, and after a short while, a huge group of thaidis arrived. To be honest, they had been led there by another kid. I think you might know him..." Death said.

Howell sighed. Nathaniel McConnel was the only kid he knew who went to the Red Palace. He had heard stories about the young boy from his father, who seemed to have a knack for getting himself into trouble and didn't have an outstanding personality.

He had been described as being erratic, very prone to violence, and having a nasty temper, always looking for someone to pick on and never able to show restraint. In this regard, he was very similar

to his father, another colossal prick. However, Howell was the leader of the Crystal Cross Gang, and the mambas, the gang Matthew McConnel led, were under his command.

"It was the son of Matthew McConnel, right? The leader of the Mambas..."

"Indeed..." Death replied. "What a coincidence... So he has connections with the kid... Interesting," Howell mumbled.

"However, the kid cost us greatly. The man who requested this kidnapping is a very important one, and we made a bad impression," Howell added.

"I'm aware, but there was nothing we could have done. I couldn't shadow-hop with the kid so that I could do nothing about it," Death said.

"All right. So, what happened next?" the boss asked.

"We killed most of the Thads; Zachary even let some of them go past him and attack the kid, but somehow he and his friends killed them all. They fled through the woods, and we lost track of them shortly. Afterward, we found them, but the teachers came. Matthew Rook was among them..."

"Ah... that mother fucker..." Howell said. It was clear he was aware of who the teacher was. Master Rook was a well-known man in the city due to his exploits in the military and the fame he gained as a teacher at the Red Palace.

"Yes, sir. We tried to fight our way out, but they outnumbered us. One of their men killed Greg, and then everything went south. It was impossible to complete the mission at that point..." Death, lastly said.

"Ok... I need to report this whole incident to the client. He did expect the kid to be taken today..." Howell said.

"All right. All right," Death said. "In the meantime, what should I do?" he asked.

Howell thought about it for a couple of moments and then said, "Nothing for now; there is nothing more we can find out about the kid, and our organization can't get the kid inside the Red Palace. However, stay alert since there could be an opportunity soon."

The master assassin nodded silently. "All right, sir," Death agreed. He then left the room, and Boss Howell stood up and walked toward the desk, where he picked up his phone. He dialed a number, and the phone started ringing after a couple of moments. Soon after, Shade picked up the phone, but he already knew that, for whatever reason, Howell called; it wasn't anything good.

"What happened?" Shade said. "I'm sorry, sir, but the quest failed..." Boss Howell said.

"Ah... Fuck... Frank, this was a very important mission..."

"I'm sorry, sir, but the kid was trouble. He was totally different from what we knew. He was stronger than expected; even what we knew about his power was wrong." Shade grunted quietly. He didn't say anything and waited patiently for Howell to continue speaking.

The man explained what Death and Zachary told him, and Shade nodded. "Ok... I understand," he said.

"If things are like this, there is nothing that can be done... The client is a patient type, so I don't think there will be problems... But I will tell you this: I won't accept another failure," Shade said.

"Yes, sir..." Howell said. "So, how many casualties?" Shade then asked.

"Just three: two assassins named Slice and Laser and a high-ranking thief called Greg," Howell reported.

"It's a shame ..." Shade said. He paused and said, "Frank, I want you to investigate everything related to the boy again. Find out how powerful he actually is, and if possible, do it in a week. If you succeed, I will pay double your salary and also reward you handsomely," the boss ordered.

"Understood, sir!" Frank responded immediately. He was always loyal to Shade, and it was a shame he disappointed him as he did today. The two finished the conversation, and Howell hung up his phone.

His face was pale, and he looked exhausted, which wasn't surprising considering the situation. He leaned against the wall behind his chair and exhaled loudly before sitting down on the edge of the desk. A few seconds later, he felt something cold touch his back.

He turned around slowly and saw his assistant standing beside him, her eyes staring intently into Howell's. She wore a white robe over black leggings and boots. Her hair was long enough to reach her shoulders, and she held herself straight.

There were no other details visible apart from the fact that the woman had blue eyes. "You look tired," the young woman commented. "Yeah... well, that damn kid caused a lot of trouble," Howell said. His assistant nodded slightly, and the two sat silent until Howell spoke again. "Anyway, why did you come here?"

"Yeah... that... the fact is that there is a problem, sir..." the woman said. "Oh, fuck... Now what?" Howell asked.

Chapter 187: It's to late to say the truth...

After Erik left the room and the parents started coming to where Erik's friends rested, Amber gestured to her friends to stay silent about Erik's involvement. They understood what the woman said and refrained from saying anything regarding the fact that the five men went there to kidnap Erik.

The parents were angry, but it was clear they had no intention of withdrawing their children from the Red Palace. If they did, they would jeopardize their future, and since they were obligated to join the military, it would have been counterproductive to do so, as it would have made life difficult for the children in the future.

After the parents left, Amber, Floyd, Gwen, Anderson, Aaron, Mikey, Martha, and Benedict started talking. Amber explained the general situation to them and what happened after they went K.O.

"So, in the end, Nathaniel won?" Anderson asked. It was clear that he was disappointed. He was going to win a brain-stimulating serum not even five hours ago, and now he lost this opportunity because of some random mob. He was pissed. Even the other teams ended up with lower scores, but it was clear that helping their friend came before anything else, so they weren't sad in the end.

Amber nodded at him. "Yep." She sighed as she looked around. The place was dark, meaning the sun was already down, and the stars slowly appeared in the night sky. There were only the lights hanging from the ceiling over the room to illuminate it.

"By the way, any news about Erik? Why isn't he here?" Gwen asked.

"He went to his room," Amber said. "I talked to him earlier."

"Did he say something?" Aaron asked.

"He did tell me something... but I want him to tell you in person since this is not something I can freely talk about..."

This surprised the others; what was so important that Amber couldn't even talk about it? And why wasn't Erik present for them to ask questions themselves instead of asking her if she knew anything? What did he say to her that made Amber keep quiet like this?

"Let him come here," Anderson said.

"Yes," Amber replied. The girl then quickly sent a text message to him. The young man was currently in his room, away from their friends, since he didn't want to meet their parents in case they accused him of being the reason why all of this happened if they said something they shouldn't have.

Erik was reaching a boiling point. It was not only because of what happened that day but also because of his general situation. He wanted to grow stronger quickly so that he could finally escape this shithole called New Alexandria and start a new life elsewhere.

The text message said he had to come to the infirmary since their parents had left, and the others wanted to know what had happened. Erik replied to the message, telling them to meet outside the Red Palace and go to the garden in front of the building.

Since it was evident that Erik would say something nobody else could hear and that someone was probably listening to their conversation, the students complied.

Erik walked out of his room and into the hallway, looking for the door leading to the courtyard. After finding it, he opened the door and stepped inside the garden. Not much later, the other eight students finally arrived, and once they saw him, they became quiet.

The young man looked around, searching for hidden cameras and microphones. Apparently, there was no trace of them, but Erik took a safe approach and went deeper into the garden. The area had a cozy atmosphere thanks to the various lamps and lanterns hanging from trees or placed by the side of the road, giving off a soft and calming light.

One bench near an old tree sat right next to the fountain in the middle of the park. Erik decided to sit down and wait until the others arrived. As soon as they reached the bench, the first thing Erik did was apologize to them.

"Sorry guys, really. I didn't want any of you to go through all of this. Especially you guys, Benedict, Martha..." It was obvious. These two only recently became Erik's friends, while the rest of them were already close enough to him before coming to the Red Palace.

Benedict shook his head. "Don't worry about it!"

Martha turned to face him and said, "Yeah..."

Aaron nodded. "Yeah, don't sweat it. However, you owe us an explanation..." Erik frowned. He knew it was true.

"Let's start with: what the hell happened?" Aaron added. Erik looked at the others; they had serious looks on their faces.

"Okay," Erik began. "It started when we were at the clearing and you found us. I casually turned around and saw the five men running toward us," he lied, as he had been alerted by the biological supercomputer.

"After that, I alerted the others, and while they kept the thajids we were killing at bay, I took care of them by throwing some trees at them."

"Trees?" Gwen asked.

"Yes. It was hella scary, to be honest," Anderson chimed in. "It shocked me to know that Erik could do that with his original power..." he added. He then explained what Erik did, leaving them clearly surprised and impressed. This was especially true for the students who went to Thornton High School. After all, Erik was pretty famous for having a trashy power.

Erik then resumed his explanation: "After that, the thajids came, and we battled them. Later on, you came, and the rest is history," he said.

"Ok, but what did those guys want? Why did they attack you?" Gwen chimed in, clearly impatient. She understood Erik was beating around the bush, unaware it was all acting.

Erik gestured for the others to come close to him, replicating the theatrical moves he used with Amber, and they approached him. He looked around again, trying to ensure no one else was there, then started whispering.

"Before I awakened, my father came back home..."

This left them surprised. Lucius Romano was a famous figure inside the city, after all. Only Amber looked unaffected, since she was already aware of this fact.

"The problem is that he didn't come empty-handed..."

"Did he come with the milk?" Floyd suddenly chimed in. His joking attitude was ever-present.

"Shut up, Floyd," Gwen said. Erik eyed his friend. He approached the others even closer and said, "As I've already told Amber," he whispered, then looked around again.

"He brought a USB key, which he claimed had information about the real leader of the Crystal Cross Gang..."

"What?!" Floyd almost shouted.

"FLOYD!" Erik's friend immediately shut up. However, they immediately understood the seriousness of the situation and started to understand why those people attacked him.

"Are you serious?" Anderson said. The young man was not only directly involved in the matter since he was with Erik from the beginning, but he also profoundly admired Erik's father, who was a hero in the fight against the Thaidis, but he wondered why he was investigating the Crystal Cross Gang since his main task was to kill the Thaidis.

However, with him being a military member, it was still possible that he received a mission from them. However, there was a fault in Anderson's thought process. If that was true, why go to Erik? Why not go to the military? It could be true that his father was aware that someone inside the military was double-crossing them; was this why he went to Erik? Who knew?

"Yes... that's what he told me, at least..." Erik replied.

"That's cool!" Benedict said. Prompting the others to give him the stink eye.

"And where is this USB key now? Did you see what it contained?" Mikey then asked.

Part of Erik's plan had already been achieved. Again, he felt guilty for deceiving his friends, but his safety came before anything or anyone else. Here Erik knew that he had to give the same explanation he gave Amber, so he decided again to tell them that the USB key had been destroyed, but there was no way he could justify destroying something so precious.

Erik felt like an idiot for breaking the glass containing the biological supercomputer. Still, he also considered himself a fortunate idiot because he had gained access to the powerful machine that could give him the power he so desperately sought.

"That... it fell to the ground by accident, and I stepped on it. It got completely destroyed..." Erik said.

"WHAT?!" Amber then shouted. She knew he had destroyed it, but she had no idea it had happened in this manner. Stepping on something so precious was beyond idiotic. What Erik was saying was partially true, as he really destroyed the glass containing the biological supercomputer, but what he told her and the others was a lie.

Regardless, he had to now bear the stigma of being an idiot for the sake of his safety.

"Yeah..." he said to Amber. It was an accident! I swear!"

"WHAT THE FUCK, ERIK?!" Aaron said, unaware of what was currently going on inside Erik's mind. "I believe someone was following my father, and I believe it was the Crystal Cross Gang. That's why they attacked me. They must know something about all of this and are trying to get the USB's location from me."

Chapter 188: Zak Ricketts (1)

A week had passed since the incident outside the barrier. After the event and the revelation about the reason why the Crystal Cross Gang was searching for Erik, it was clear that his friends were a little

bit scared that something like that could happen again but tried to stay positive and focus on their training.

Despite everything, the kids were generally chill toward the young man since they knew it wasn't Erik's fault and they were safe inside the Red Palace.

However, all of that made Erik realize many things, which made him change his approach to events. After he was attacked by the five Crystal Cross Gang members and nearly killed because of Nathaniel, the awakener decided he had enough and concluded that all of this happened because he was still weak and needed to train more if he wanted to protect himself and his friends.

His hatred for the Frantians only grew due to the incident. Aside from his friends and the people who directly showed affection or care, Erik basically despised everyone else, especially Nathaniel.

Since the day his thaids attacked him, he has increased the intensity and length of his training regimen several times. Erik gained another neural link in the sharpening power, finally becoming an officially RHO1-ranked individual and several stat points as a result. He also saw significant improvements in his swordsmanship and hand-to-hand combat skills.

Aside from that, he started setting his plan in motion and spreading nasty rumors about Nathaniel. It was petty but effective since most people stayed away from him, almost wholly isolating him. Not that it was hard, given his personality, yet things sped up because of this.

Now Erik was only waiting for the right opportunity to connect to his phone, computer, and whatnot and release whatever nasty thing was on that.

However, there were other things he was currently doing. The young man spent the entire week challenging people in much higher ranks than him to improve his position, and the young man jumped to rank 943 in the peasant field. That was the fastest inner-rank ascension in the history of the Red Palace institution; even master Rook had to reconsider Erik after he proved he was a good fighter.

Erik almost reached even Amber and Anderson, who, instead, took a more relaxed approach to the inner-ranking climbing. However, what he did was possible only due to his stats, which were now superior to his friends.

He wasn't as skilled as them since they were martial monsters, but thanks to his dexterity, he could keep up with their moves and, thanks to his strength, could overpower them if the right opportunity arose.

Obviously, all of this would happen if they didn't use their powers; if that happened, it was clear that Erik wouldn't have it easy with his sharpening power alone since this, to be really effective, needed a fast and strong warrior. Though they weren't his targets, it was Nathaniel who, in the meantime, went from rank 500 to 370.

If Erik defeated two opponents approximately 150–200 ranks above him, he would be able to challenge the motherfucker and take his position if he won.

However, climbing the inner ranks had not been easy at all, and Erik had even lost several times; besides, he could fight people who were at most 200 ranks above him, meaning that, in that short week, he fought and defeated 14 people—fighting two people every day to achieve that goal.

The fights lasted only a short time, usually around ten minutes each, but Erik had to fight without resting if he wanted to optimize his training time. After that, it was training, training, and training.

It was now Saturday, and Erik was with his sword teacher, Master Nieminen, training with the sword. They went past the basics, and she was now trying to instill in the young man some battle instincts. She wanted him to understand how to strike, what was the best attack he could make in certain circumstances, and stuff like that.

"I want you to imagine your blade is an extension of yourself," said the woman as her eyes narrowed.

"You must know where its limits are." She attacked Erik with her wooden sword, hitting him on the right shoulder.

"You see? You would not have been able to use your arm anymore if that was a real attack."

"Yeah... but it is not like I can replicate what you did in just a week... Most people I know learned all of this after several years..." Erik said.

"That's true. I myself had to spend a lot of time, but you are in an advantageous situation since you are very talented with this weapon. The choice the other masters made by assigning you to me was very good. You are a natural-born talent regarding this weapon." Master Nieminen stated.

He was surprised by her praise and accepted his words humbly, but to be honest, Erik disagreed, as he didn't believe in talent. Only in efforts, patience, and focus; what Erik was pouring in during his training.

"So, you have another match today, right?" Master Niemine asked.

"Yes, with a guy named Zak Ricketts." Erik only had to fight against this guy and another to gain enough rank to challenge Nathaniel.

"Don't disappoint me, all right?" Master Nieminen said.

"I'll try, master..."

Like that, the training continued, and Erik went to the other classes once he finished. He did weightlifting, obstacle courses, hand-to-hand combat, and other activities. Things were going smoothly, but Erik was a little nervous; if he failed, things would become complicated.

In all of this, Erik had another, but a not less important, goal. He could obtain a brain-stimulating serum if he advanced to the squire rank. He wanted to do this before the military school started since that would give him a considerable advantage.

However, things wouldn't be that simple since most people in the highest inner ranks of the peasant grade were around the RHO3 level, which was around Amber's and Anderson's levels.

After finishing his daily lessons, Erik headed to the Blue Palace, where the fight was going to be held. He took one of the many buses provided by the institution and quickly arrived there. After he stepped inside the Blue Palace, a notification arrived on his phone.

---

ERIK ROMANO (RANK 943, FIRST YEAR) VERSUS ZAK RICKETTS (RANK 790, SECOND YEAR).

7TH FLOOR, ROOM 783

HEALER: DACRE HOLLAND

---

<It looks like I got the same healer as when I fought Alissa Kerr...> Erik thought. He then observed his surroundings again; the place was like the last time he had been there.

A vast hall was divided into several distinct sections by doors that could be entered at various points along the room, with benches along the wall and sofas positioned in various locations in the middle of the hall.

There were even some vending machines at the entrance that sold a variety of food and beverages. The young man bought some fruit juice and a snack he planned to eat after his match. Today, though, Erik planned on fighting only this guy since the young man was tough. He wasn't stronger than him in terms of stats, but his technique was very good, and that was a problem.

He had observed him train and fight over the past few days, so he knew he was not a simple individual. Besides, he needed to rest since his current training regime was rigorous and demanding.

The young man went toward the elevator, and once he reached the seventh floor, he headed to room 783. Zak and the healer, Holland, looked at him when he walked in.

"You took your time, uh?" Once he saw him enter, the healer said.

"Sorry about that. But classes just ended..." Erik replied.

Zak was already here since he was pretty nervous about the fight. Once Erik challenged him, he spent time researching his opponent and was clearly frightened by him. He was an RHO1-ranked individual, but being an awakener, he was unusually strong. His technique was still average, but knowing that he had recently awakened and started training not even two months before—put a lot of pressure on him.

The young man in front of him was basically a monster in terms of talent, but despite the pressure, he was confident enough in his abilities to think he could win.

"Ok, you should know the rules already, but let me refresh your memory: No deadly moves are allowed; you can use your powers and weapons. You can even make specific rules to win this competition, such as limiting combat to only martial arts or weapons, and so on. Yell out that you surrender or tap the ground five times if you want to give up and conclude the match."

Once everyone was settled, Erik looked at his opponent. He was indeed a tall, muscular guy a year older than him. He had black hair and brown eyes. He wore the usual Red Palace uniform and seemed quite intimidating.

He also sported a pair of white gloves with the same design as the uniform. In addition, he was carrying a katana that was sheathed at his side.

"Alright! Let's get this show started!" A voice came from the speakers above them as the healer entered the usual room to watch the match. "Begin!"

#### Chapter 189: Zak Ricketts (2)

Before the match started, Erik analyzed Zak's status. He was an RHO2, and his stats were pretty average, to be honest. However, Erik was not going to underestimate him and resolved to put in his best effort.

-----  
- Name: Zak Ricketts.

- Brain crystal power: Sword Conjuring (Common)

-Race: Human.

-Physical characteristics: He shows signs of balding, but he otherwise has short, somewhat wavy hair of a dark black color. He has thin eyebrows, thick lips, and huge ears, in addition to his brown eyes. He is approximately 1.80 centimeters tall. Very muscular. Estimated weight of 95 kilograms.

-Personality and traits: There is no information available about his personality. Looks intimidated by the host.

-Power Level: 56

-Approximate Strength: 19

-Approximate Intelligence: 10

-Approximate Dexterity: 16

-Approximate Energy: 223

...

...

...

-----

Erik's opponent was significantly weaker than Nathaniel but was in line with most people inside the Red Palace, as his power was ranked C on the Ferebits scale. This was also shown by the amount of energy the kid had since it was very high. However, the rest of his stats were inferior to Erik's, who had more dexterity, strength, and intelligence.

Everything changed for the young man when he raised this last stat. He was able to remember things easily, think far ahead compared to his opponents, and think about things he would have never thought of otherwise.

As soon as the match started, Erik unsheathed his sword and ran toward Zak. He was now proficient enough to use the weapon against other people, and that knowledge gave him confidence. He did this many times during the past week and learned much about swords and sword fighting, thanks to Master Nieminen.

Erik swung with precision and power at Zak, but it was clear that things wouldn't be simple since the man was a skilled sword fighter. The man put his sword in a particular position and easily

stopped Erik's move, controlling where his sword ended and forcing him to take an awkward stance to avoid a subsequent attack.

However, it was clear that Erik wasn't a pushover either, as he quickly changed his grip and stance to defend himself better. As soon as he saw that the sword was going to hit come at him again, he quickly jumped back and gained distance from Zak.

This made it clear that Erik was not just an amateur swordsman; he was also willing to make quick and accurate decisions in order to keep himself prepared to counterattack. He was right in his judgment and did the right thing by moving back since his opponent shifted the sword in an unnatural way and a weird position and slashed at the empty air, exactly where Erik stood a couple of seconds ago.

SWOOSH

Even though Zak was confident, he felt intimidated by the young man after seeing his skill in previous fights. It was clear that the awakener was fast, and his attacks seemed heavy. However, he was confident in his sword ability and thought he could win. If he could get Erik to make a mistake, that would be enough to gain the upper hand.

The sword conjurer followed Erik and swung his sword again; he did it by jumping in the air and spinning on himself with all his might. Erik parried with his flyssa, and sparks appeared as both weapons clashed. Zak attempted to push Erik, but he was unable to do so because the man was stronger than him.

At that moment, the young man's opponent understood that he would lose if he fought by trying to win with his sheer strength alone.

Technique was the only thing that could save him, so he started attacking quickly with a very acrobatic sword style that required him to jump, spin, and feint to attack from different angles.

He knew that his sword style's erratic movements would at least confuse Erik and that he was bound to gain a couple of hits here and there.

However, thanks to Erik's higher dexterity, he was able to keep track of Zak's attacks easily. In response to these offensive maneuvers, the awakener easily blocked every slash. It didn't matter how hard Zak attacked because he always avoided being hit in some way, whether by parrying,

deflecting, or simply dodging and evading the attacks. The longer this went on, the more frustrated Zak became.

"You're good..." said Erik. "But you don't stand a chance against me..." Erik was extremely focused; what happened inside the forest the previous week was a huge alarm bell for him. He needed to change if he really wanted to improve.

There was no more pity, no more mercy. His current goal was to defeat his opponent and take his rank so that he could challenge Nathaniel in the following days.

"We will see that," Zak replied. As he spoke, his eyes were fixed on Erik, trying to find an opening for his defense. His trained eyes spotted several, but as soon as he attacked, the awakener parried, blocked, or deflected. It was frustrating because he was having trouble taking advantage of Erik's clear lack of experience with the sword.

At the same time, Erik noticed how Zak was able to fight evenly against him only, thanks to technique. The man was making it hard for him to do anything, even when he was in range. The difference between technique and strength was visible during this fight since Zak was able to even the playing field. All of that made Erik think how desperately he needed to train and improve.

The fight went on for at least ten minutes, and it seemed to never end. The two were in a stalemate.

However, the awakener was unaware of what was going on inside his opponent's mind. Zak started getting tired, as the fight had started at least twenty minutes earlier, and he had no time to rest. That was the real strength of Erik's approach. His stamina made it so he could win by simply exhausting his opponents. Besides, Erik's slashes were very heavy, and Zak had a lot of trouble resisting them.

After a while, Zak began to feel the effects of Erik's relentless attack, and he started slowly losing his footing.

Everything became apparent to Erik when Zak started becoming weary, and his ability to follow Erik's attacks decreased.

"You can't keep this up for long," Erik said. "Mind surrendering so we can stop wasting time?" he added.

"Not a chance...!" Zak replied. The sword conjurer was angry; not only was Erik behaving arrogantly, but he was clearly inferior to him in many ways, and it didn't sit well with him that he was losing.

He spent hours a day training and refining his sword techniques; he would have won against anyone in a range of 100 positions within his rank, but now this guy, several positions below him, was beating him because of his cheat status.

Being an awakener was really something else. However, Zak knew what Erik said was true; he was running out of stamina and having difficulty keeping up with his opponent, and he couldn't gain any significant advantage.

Erik decided he had had enough and that Zak was tired enough to finally close the match. His flyssa was a very sharp and fast sword; every time he swung it, a hiss was produced. However, it was very sturdy and could withstand the weight that Erik planned to put inside his moves.

He didn't try to find openings in his opponent since he still couldn't see many of them during a fight, especially against better-trained people, so he decided to fully use his overwhelming strength to win.

He swung the sword, and Zak parried it with his own weapon. Erik simply put more weight into the swing, and Zak staggered backward, barely able to counter the sheer force of the blow. He repeated the move, pushing a lot of weight into the sword strike, and Zak parried again, but soon his arms began to shake from the strain.

Erik almost broke his opponent's stance this time since he had yet to recover from the previous attack.

Erik swung his sword one last time, and once his opponent barely parried, he was able to break his stance by pushing even more weight into the strike.

At that moment, Erik kicked Zak in the sternum and made him fall to the ground. The young man's opponent was having trouble breathing, and in the time he spent trying to recover his breath, Erik went on him and pointed his sword at Zak's neck.

"See? I won..."

At that point, the healer's voice reverberated throughout the room.

"Indeed, Zak, you lost," he said.

"Fuck! This is not right! I'm clearly better than you! This is cheating!" Zak said in frustration.

"You may be right; this is certainly unfair, but you still lost nonetheless..." Erik said. He was tired of losing, suffering, and trying to be better than the people who had abused him for years.

Chapter 190: The Hekratinl(1)

"Why the river? Why don't we use another place?" Captain Lain asked. "There sure are other alternatives, no?"

Captain Lain and many other soldiers had been sent to be part of a very important mission. Among the monsters inside the horde, one had to be killed before it reached the barrier. It was one of the many targets the military was aiming to kill, but it was especially dangerous.

It was an Hekratinl, a giant hybrid between a bear and a lion, with brain crystal power that allowed it to change its mass, dramatically changing its speed and strength.

It was basically a cheat. If that thing clashed against the eastern gate, it would destroy it quickly. It wasn't the only thaid that could threaten the gate, but it was the only one able to do it alone.

A team had been previously sent to separate the Hekratinl from the horde, and they had been successful. After keeping it distracted and at bay for several days, they were planning to kill it.

Sergeant Raveena Greene shook her head. "No. The beast has been lastly spotted near the river, but it never dared to cross it. It is a strategic location, and we must capitalize on it. Besides, the place has many advantages over other locations." The woman said this while discussing her battle plan with the captains of the various teams that joined her in this ordeal.

"First, it's safe since the river is deep enough to give us an advantage against the creature. Second, we are closer to the base and have access to a shelter in case things go south. Third, just a few thaids have been spotted there, probably due to the river monsters. So we should expect no sudden attacks by other monsters."

"Yeah, the river thaids are the ones I'm concerned about, and that's why I don't think it's a good place," Captain Lain said. "Look, I have never been there, but the thaids there are notoriously nasty," she added.

"I know, I talked to some people specializing in thaids' ecology, and they said the same thing. However, I think we can use them well," Sergeant Greene said.

"Are you perhaps thinking about making the bear and the river monsters clash?" Lain asked.

"Indeed," Sergeant Greene said, nodding. "The only issue is that we need someone to entice the bear to the river, which is where..."

"Where I come in play, am I right?" Captain Lain interjected.

"Yes. You are the fastest in the whole company; you should be able to escape from the creature. It is too fast for any of us to hope to escape its maw. You, on the contrary, run much faster than us..."

Captain Lain didn't want to end up as a snack for the bear, and being the bait didn't make her happy at all. Still, she understood that she had more chances than others.

"All right then," Captain Lain said.

"Thank you! Now let's get ready!" Sergeant Greene exclaimed. She returned to her room to prepare; everyone else did the same. They would leave soon after.

"Are you confident enough to escape?" Emma asked. Captain Lain turned around and looked at her friend and subordinate.

"I think I am..." Captain Lain answered. However, there was uncertainty in her eyes. The plan was risky, as she would face the beast alone.

Emma had a grim look, but she knew that her captain was the only one fast enough to pull this off. "Just try to be safe, ok? We can't do anything without you. Especially after John's death."

The man was Captain Lain's team member, but during a previous mission, he had been bitten by a Leylarhad, and when they returned to the base, he was taken away and never appeared again. Lain didn't know what exactly happened; she was only told he had died due to complications, but the truth was that he had been executed.

"Yeah, don't worry, Emma..." Lain replied.

They continued talking until Sergeant Greene returned and the other soldiers finished arming themselves. Many people joined this expedition. All members of Lain's team but John were there.

Nico Montgomery and his Delta team were also there, but he wasn't chatting with anyone. He just kept looking at Sergeant Greene with a weird look.

"Alright, guys, let's go," Sergeant Greene said. Everyone followed her, heading towards the river. The group walked inside the forest, moving through the bushes and the trees. It still took them quite some time to reach their destination, the river.

The canal was wide and deep, filled with fish-like creatures swimming in it. The water was clear, but algae were growing on the bottom, giving the whole area a greenish tint. In the middle of the river was a small streak of land, surrounded by rocks and stones, forming a wall against the current.

There was no bridge connecting the two banks of the river. People couldn't cross without using boats. The army prepared one for this operation, and the company used it to get across. When they finally arrived, Sergeant Greene pointed at the water.

"Now, remember, stay away from the water," Sergeant Greene said. The soldiers agreed when they saw some ferocious-looking fish jump out of the water. They looked like anglerfish but were even scarier, look-wise.

This type of thaid had a long mouth lined with sharp teeth, which were used for catching prey. Its body was very flat, with four pairs of fins placed around 6 centimeters apart, the first pair being larger than the previous.

These fins allowed the creature to move quickly through the water. The monster was fast and agile inside the water, but it obviously couldn't escape it. The beast's most notable feature was their ability to lure their victims to the river, where they jumped out of the water and brought the creature inside of it like alligators.

When the prey was inside the water, these thaidis bit them en mass like piranhas while releasing toxic liquids into the water thanks to their brain crystal powers. The victim coming into contact with these gases would die within minutes.

"Nico, what news from the scouts?" Sergeant Greene asked the man.

"The bear is here already, but it is coming slowly." According to them, the monster had just eaten some small animals and wasn't hungry."

"That's a problem," Sergeant Greene said. She then turned to look at Captain Lain.

"It's your turn now. Make the beast come here, and we will do the rest..."

"All right..."

Emma then approached her captain; worry was in her eyes. "Good luck, captain..."

"Thank you, I will need it." Captain Lain replied. She went forward with a dejected look, but orders were orders, and she had to do as she was told.

Dylan and Larry, the remaining two members of her team, approached Captain Lain. "Be sure not to get eaten," Dylan said. "Yeah, it would be a shame," Larry added.

"Yes, don't worry," Captain Lain responded. "I'm a tough cookie..."

"We should move away from the water," Sergeant Greene announced.

Everyone got on their feet and started walking again, leaving the river behind. They stopped, but Captain Lain didn't; she was approaching the bear.

After half an hour of walking down the river, she finally crossed it by using the boat, and after a bit of walking, she reached a clearing with many trees and grass. She was close to Sergeant Greene's and the others' location but on the opposite side of the river.

From the other side, Sergeant Greene was looking at her with a solemn look. The mission basically weighed on Lain's shoulders.

Before she started heading to the beast, she waited as per orders. After a while, she and the rest of the company received a call from the scouts. They were quickly approaching her position. Once they arrived, they started addressing the situation. The captain didn't want to waste time and asked the scouts if they had found the beast.

"Yes. Follow us," the two men said.

They arrived at the beast's location after ten minutes of walking. The bear was lying down under an oak tree. Its belly was full after eating several monsters. It was enormous and incredibly strong, judging by its look.

Its appearance wasn't particularly striking, and it wasn't a very weird thaid, but it was simply a giant bear; though, Captain Lain recognized a lion-like mane around its thick neck.

<Let's see... this beast has a size-changing brain crystal power," the young woman thought. <That could be a problem...> She turned to look at the two scouts.

"Okay, stand back..." Captain Lain whispered to them.

When the scout group heard the order, they backed off and waited near a tree.

Captain Lain stepped forward and summoned her sword. <I really am crazy,> the young woman thought.

"YOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO" the young woman released a war cry, to get the thaid's attention but primarily to gather the courage necessary to do this crazy stunt. The Hekratinl roared when it saw the tiny human standing close to it.

"Come get me!" Captain Lain shouted mockingly as if the beast could understand her. The truth was that the captain was scared shitless of the monster.

The monster got up and charged toward Captain Lain. The woman immediately turned to flee. As she did, she turned to look behind her, only to see a mountain of muscles and a giant pair of maws chasing her. It was scary.

The beast chased Captain Lain through the forest. She ran past the trees, avoiding vines and other obstacles alike, as the monstrous creature bellowed and roared behind her. With every step, the beast seemed to draw closer and closer.

Captain Lain ran and ran; the beast was closer and closer with each step it made. She kept speeding past the trees, dodging branches and bushes, jumping over rocks, and hurdling fallen trees as she made her way through the forest, avoiding falling to the ground. Then the creature suddenly stopped; that was a problem.