

BIOLOGICAL 191

Chapter 191: The Hekratinl (2)

The Hekratinl growled loudly. <What the fuck is it doing?!> Captain Lain thought.

Then the thaid stood still for several seconds, looking at Lain like a hungry beast, before charging again.

<What the fuck...?> Lain resumed her running, but compared to before, the bear came after her with more speed than ever. The Hekratinl didn't care about trees, rocks, or bushes; its size simply allowed it to bulldoze through them as if they were nothing without hindering its stride in the slightest.

At the same time, Lain jumped over fallen trees, leaped onto boulders, and ran through the dense woods while running away from the beast. She was struggling to keep her footing and keep up with the bear, but even as she dodged and ran for her life, she knew that she couldn't fail this mission, and quickly a look of determination appeared on her face.

The beast had to stay on her tail at all costs. Captain Lain realized that the beast was closer than ever as she could feel the ground tremble increasingly with each step it took. Even if she kept running with all her might and tried to hinder the beast by making it run into trees, it wouldn't take long before it would catch up to her.

As the woman ran toward the river, the beast gained ground until it became close enough to try to devour her.

SNAP!

The jaws of the beast closed, biting the empty air. Captain Lain didn't know how lucky she was that she was fast enough to escape those maws.

"FUCK!" Lain kept running without looking back and trying to escape the bear's mouth; however, she suddenly felt something hit her shoulder. The bear hit a rock with its paw while running, and the stone hurtled toward Lain, making them gasp in pain.

The woman didn't know what hit her, but she began believing that the Hekratnl was just behind her and became terrified. She went through seconds of pure terror that nearly made Lain shit her pants. Then, due to a distraction, she stumbled.

"UGH!"

However, as the soldier fell, she was lucky enough to be near a small slope, and she started rolling on the ground. When she stopped, she stood not even a hundred meters from the river.

The Hekratnl quickly reached her, but as the beast was going to swing its paws at the captain, a volley of bullets, rockets, and laser attacks arrived, hitting the Hekratnl.

Its fur was thick, dense, and strangely resistant, and the skin underneath was tough. The attack didn't seem to have much effect on it, but some rockets damaged it slightly, as they were strong enough to get past the beast's natural mana defense and create shallow wounds.

Captain Lain used the moment of distraction to start running again. The Hekratnl looked at the woman going away and started giving chase again, but the attacks returned, giving the captain enough time to flee.

The beast was now at the river, exactly where Sergeant Greene wanted it to be. Captain Lain was almost to the river bank when the boat's engine started throttling. The young woman jumped on the water vehicle, and soon the boat started traveling across the river.

The bear was running toward the water; its size was enough to make it easily traverse the river, but it had to fight against the monster inhabiting the stream.

"SOLDIERS, SHOOT!" Sergeant Greene shouted.

At that point, the brain crystal powers of the ranged soldiers were turned on, and they used them to attack the Hekratnl. As they hit the beast, a small sizzling sound reverberated. Most of the attacks were physical, but there were some members of the Zamora Clan whose power was related to fire.

The attacks were enough to burn a little bit of its fur.

"IT WORKS! SOLDIERS KEEP FIRING."

A few seconds later, another barrage of attacks went after the Hekratinl. They all landed and did the same damage as before, with some burning away a little bit of the fur; a patch of exposed skin was on the beast's back.

However, this time, the creature decided to run into the water to kill the assailants. It jumped in and started swimming at unprecedented speed. The river monsters, though, looking at this massive piece of meat swimming in front of them, started attacking.

The monster fishes, swimming within this vast river, released toxic gas clouds into the water. The strategy was not very effective since the bear had its head out of the water. Besides, this kind of thing mainly worked against other fish that breathed underwater.

However, the toxic substance was irritating the beast's skin, reddening it and making it roar in pain. Sergeant Greene took advantage of these moments to make the soldiers send more attacks at the creature.

They aimed at the unprotected area, going for the spots that impacted the beast the most. People were specifically aiming at the eyes and the patch of reddened exposed skin visible to the soldiers from that vantage point.

The creature was, though, almost on the other side of the river since it kept going forward with fury. More toxic fumes were coming from the water, causing the animal even greater discomfort. But instead of fleeing, the beast kept going forward.

As the creature approached the bank, more brain crystal power attacks began falling on it. Some fell short, but the others landed direct hits. Nico actually managed to pierce through the exposed skin with a stone bullet, and the beast roared in pain.

Then it arrived at the shore, where the humans were waiting. It slowly got out of the water and shook it off its fur. "ATTACK!" Sergeant Greene shouted. The warriors dashed at the beast. It was humongous; its head was big enough to swallow a person whole, and it was at least four times taller than a person, resembling an elephant due to its size.

Unfortunately, the exposed skin patch over its back couldn't be attacked from that position, but the soldiers kept aiming at its eyes, hoping to kill the beast that way. The thaid frequently closed its eyes and moved its head to avoid death.

The creature was hard to hit at those points; it wasn't stupid and protected its vulnerable spots effectively. But the poison from the river monsters had effects: the creature's skin was compromised and corroded. It was also bleeding in different spots because of the attacks, and the poisonous gases seeped inside the wound left by the soldier's attacks while it was inside the water.

If the beast took in enough poison, it would probably die in a couple of minutes, but the group was unsure about it.

More and more projectiles got stuck in the creature's skin, but because of its size, they didn't hurt it severely. The melee soldiers arrived at the creature's feet; they tried to keep the monster in place, stopping it from going toward the ranged ones.

They used their swords to cut left and right, spears to stab, and any other weapon they could conjure to try to get under the thaid's hide and hit its vital organs.

Unfortunately, the Hekratinl had no weakness to exploit. Its claws could tear apart the flesh of a human being as if they were made of butter, and its teeth could rip open the chest or throat of a warrior easily. Then the creature turned around and roared at the humans. Suddenly increasing its side three times.

The beast became gigantic, but simultaneously, aiming at its weak spot became easier. A hundred melee soldiers stood in front of the monster. They all slashed wildly and tried to cut the monster's ligaments to cripple it. The beast didn't stay idle, though; it swung its paw, sending fifteen people flying.

Another group of ten soldiers rushed toward the hind legs. Another ran up to its head while others surrounded it on all sides. There were too many attackers for the beast to defend itself properly, so it used its now gigantic size to escape the encirclement.

It charged toward Captain Lain, who was attacking with the rest of the company and jumped to the side, avoiding being killed at the last second. Some people weren't so lucky, though. At least twenty people died, trampled by the creature.

"F**K!" Sergeant Greene shouted.

"What do we do?" Dylan asked Captain Lain. "This beast doesn't want to get down. "We're powerless to stop it!"

She looked at her teammates, seeing the same fear in their eyes that she was feeling. No matter how much they trained, this situation was beyond them. Their only chance was to make the creature bleed enough and hope the monster would slowly die if the poison didn't take effect. "We have to make it bleed more!" Lain replied, and everyone heard her.

Sergeant Greene nodded in agreement, and she ordered the soldiers to move forward again and try to climb the monster. She hoped that by attacking the beast's weakened spot, they would be able to kill it.

The creature kept running and trying to trample on people. Still, now it couldn't move as fast as before due to the poison and the countless wounds it had accumulated on its body. The river thaids' substance had to be strong if it could weaken a creature so tough and so massive.

"Keep trying," Sergeant Greene ordered.

One by one, more and more soldiers started climbing on the thaid, and after having reached its back, they started whacking, slashing, and stabbing its exposed skin. The soldiers did so relentlessly until the beast had to stop. After ten minutes of that, it looked like the tactic started to be effective.

It was panting heavily; the anglerfish-like thaid's poison had weakened it, and the blood loss had almost killed it. But the creature left a trail of destruction; more than eighty people were killed by it, and there was nothing Sergeant Greene could have done to prevent it. Seeing all those bodies strewn across the ground was a depressing sight.

Chapter 192: The Hekratinl (3)

The fact that Captain Lain was helpless to stop the creature because her power was insufficient devastated her. Many people died, and she was powerless to intervene.

She knew it wasn't her fault, but maybe, if she had been stronger, at least she could have saved someone. Despite her training and strength, she felt helpless against the gigantic creature, and once she thought again about the horde of monsters marching toward the city, she felt depressed.

There was basically no way to stop the horde from marching toward New Alexandria, and it was less than a week away. The beast was still alive but now too weak to escape death. If the thaid tried to escape instead of attempting to kill the humans, they wouldn't be in this situation by now.

The beast was still trying to fight at that point, but it was clear that there would only be one outcome for it due to its blood loss. A few seconds later, the warriors surrounded the animal and attacked it mercilessly.

But the beast was still fighting. It had lost a lot of blood but refused to die. It was bleeding badly, and its movements were slow, but it wouldn't fall easily. The wounds accumulated on its body; the poison was ravaging its insides.

All of that was a lot, despite its strength. The beast kept killing more soldiers, bringing the total number of people down to one hundred and fifty, who continued attacking the beast. The monster killed another person, a woman whose name Captain Lain didn't know.

She looked at her lying lifelessly on the ground, and resolve arose in her eyes. "You motherfucker!" she shouted. Lain had her sword up and was slashing and stabbing the creature, but its wet fur made it impossible to create wounds on its body; it was too durable, almost as hard as steel.

A soldier from the Zamora Clan shot a bunch of fireballs at the beast, which burned it in some places. He was powerful, and after expending a considerable amount of mana, he caught the beast's attention. The thaid turned to look at him; it was angry and decided to kill the pesky man once and for all.

It came at him full speed, drooling from its mouth and showing off its sharp claws and teeth. Every time it moved a paw, it made a loud noise that echoed throughout the vast forest.

"F**K!" Captain Lain shouted; she needed to help the man. Luckily, due to the beast's wounds, it was slower than before, giving the woman time to help the man escape.

"HEY!" Lain shouted; she slashed at the beast again, drawing its attention.

SWOSH

Sergeant Greene placed herself on the side of the chasing beast and fired at its snout, making the beast roar in pain. The thaid didn't know what to do anymore; it was partially blind, had lost a lot of blood, and felt weak because of the poison.

Then it did the only logical thing it could do in that situation: it started running away in a desperate attempt to survive. However, everyone knew that the monster couldn't go that far due to its injuries,

so Sergeant Greene and the others continued to fire at it, determined to bring it down; however, she also ordered to chase it.

"Bring me its head!" Sergeant Greene shouted.

The soldiers kept attacking the beast from behind, and the few remaining melee soldiers, including Captain Lain, gave chase. But the monster was still too fast, as it had a gigantic stride, and no matter how hard they ran, the soldiers were still too slow to catch it. Soon the beast disappeared between the forest's trees.

"F**K!" Dylan said. "We were so close!" he added.

"I don't think the beast will survive," Nico chimed in. It had too many wounds, and the bleeding was too intense, so let's try following the trails..." he said.

"Good idea," Sergeant Greene replied. "Did you hear him?" she then shouted. "Let's go..."

The group started marching; around one hundred and fifty people were left, as almost half of the company had been wiped out during the battle, but some stayed behind to collect the remains of the ones who died and to bury them properly.

They didn't want to leave the corpses in the open and wait for the Thaidis to eat them, so as a sign of respect for their lost companions, they collected the corpses.

However, they had to be careful since they probably ended up with Heniate's parasites inside their bodies, and the group had to make sure that none of them got infected, as the last thing they wanted was for the parasites to spread.

Sergeant Greene and the others kept following the blood trails the Hekratinl left until they went deep into the beast's territory and arrived in front of a gigantic cave.

"It entered here," Dylan said. "Yeah," Lain replied.

She had a look of resolve inside her eyes as her sense of duty arose sharply from within her. She clenched her teeth and tightened the grip on her sword as she steeled herself for what was about to

come. She turned to look at Sergeant Greene, and then she said, "I'm going to see if it is still alive." And then she walked forward.

As she approached the entrance, she noticed a bloody paw print on the rock wall, and her stomach churned at the thought of what might be hiding within. There was no doubt about it: the beast was inside. She paused for a moment, gathering her courage and steadying her nerves, then took a deep breath before stepping into the cave's darkness.

Inside the cave was a mess; thaid's skulls littered the ground, and some were from puppies. Several dead bodies were scattered around the chamber; all of them had been ripped apart, and most had been eaten. Lain approached a body and carefully examined it to determine what had happened, but it was clear this was the work of the Hekratinl.

That must have been its cave before he got infected by the Heniate, and it probably came back here as it used to do before being infected.

The young woman kept walking; the cave was empty, and no other was beside her. The only sound that reached the captain as she walked alone through the dark passages was the creaking of the stones she unintentionally kicked.

There was no wind in this place, not even a breeze. It was dark, but the young woman could see in the darkness thanks to her night goggles. The air was moist, and a faint rotting odor permeated it. After a little bit of searching, she finally saw the Hekratinl.

Under the beast, there was a pool of blood under the beast, and the woman could swear she saw wriggling things inside the red liquid, probably the Heniate's parasites. The beast exhaled its last breath, and the woman sighed in relief as the Hekratinl died in front of her.

Now it lay dead beneath the sun filtering through gaps between the rocks, giving the beast an imposing appearance. It took a couple of minutes until Lain finally found the exit from the cave. She looked around, seeing that all the other soldiers were looking at her. However, since she was out unharmed, what had happened to the beast was clear.

"It's dead," Lain said to the people present. Cheers erupted; everyone clapped their hands. Their mission was done, and now that the most dangerous beast to the gate's integrity had been killed, they had to rejoin the army to kill more thaid's. Lain thought deeply; he missed her family and had had enough of the horde.

She had been fighting, fighting, and fighting since all of this started. As much as she enjoyed the company of his fellow soldiers, she longed to be home.

"Hey, you alright?" A voice called out to her as she was daydreaming in front of the cave while the other soldiers brought gasoline to burn the bear's body. A hand grabbed her shoulder and turned her around. When Lain faced the person, she realized who it was. Emma.

"I'm fine," Lain replied.

"You look tired," she commented.

"I am. Of all this... I think I need a little bit of rest after this hunt..."

"Let's have a walk..." Emma said.

They went with some other people back to where they had just fought the bear; they still had work to do and needed to help the others collect the bodies. From a distance, Sergeant Greene was looking at them, as she knew what she had asked Captain Lain was a lot.

As Emma and Lain walked, the duo didn't talk. They only drank a little bit of water and cooled down. After a while, they returned to the fighting zone and started collecting the dead men's and women's bodies.

After they were done, the remaining people crossed the river and took their vehicles to go back to the army.

"Hey, captain," Emma said. "Do you think the city will be ok?"

Lain shrugged, "I don't really know," she said. "This is the biggest crisis New Alexandria has ever faced. The horde is too big..."

Chapter 193: Less than a week

General Becker was handling reports sent to him by the administrative bureau and written by people like Captain Lain, Sergeant Greene, and many others. It detailed their hunts, findings, and many others, from the multiple thaid's close to the city to the monsters in the horde and the most dangerous ones of the lot.

His face was grave since most of the patrols, soldiers, and people estimated that the monster horde would arrive in the city in less than a week.

"What do you think about this, Colonel?" General Becker asked Tiwana.

The Colonel directly reported to the General since he was the one who gave him the task of managing the horde situation, and they often met to talk about the progress of their effort to cull down its population.

"About that, sir, with our current number of people, it will be hard. Destroying the barrier will be impossible for the horde, but the gate is a weak spot in our defenses; there are several Yevyagât among the horde, and we are having trouble killing them." Tiwana solemnly replied.

The General sighed. Tiwana was a dear friend and comrade in the army, so he didn't bother acting high and mighty in front of him. "Fuck..."

"Yeah... The situation is a mess, and we also got reports that the Blirldoth that one of our teams spotted had joined the horde. It looks like a coordinated attack to me, to be honest. I talked to Professor Derr Xilion about this, and he said that probably the Blirldoth is the Heniate's main avatar. As for the horde itself, it is clear that our containment measures are not working.

We killed many of the monsters and managed to prevent several monsters from joining it, but it is not enough." Tiwana replied.

"Do you think we should ask the civilians for help?" The General asked, "I don't honestly think our forces are enough to do everything alone; we need the whole city's help," he added.

"That could be viable. After all, most adults have been in the army in their younger days, so we shouldn't have problems. However, I wonder what will happen to the internal order if so many people escape the barrier to fight the thaid... The local gangs will probably take action..." Tiwana said.

"We will keep a certain number of guards in key areas and ask for all the people under the age of 60 and higher than 16 to join," Becker said after having thought about it for a bit.

"That's a good idea... but we need Minister Rose's help to make all these preparations. After all, she is in charge of the city's defenses..." Tiwana replied.

The more the two thought about the situation, the grimmer their mood became. After that, the two kept studying more and more strategic plans that the various people under Becker's command had brought him. There were ones in case the city got breached, others in case that didn't happen, and many different scenarios.

All in all, they believed they could do it. However, a problem remained: what to do with the Heniate in the east? They couldn't send men to kill it, and they hadn't even found it yet. Besides, what if hidden enemies had created the beast? The case would be concerning if all of this was Etrium's doing.

"What about the parasite?" Tiwana asked.

General Becker replied earnestly while looking Armand in the eyes: "After this ordeal ends, we will prepare an extensive search of the beast. We won't leave even a single tree unchecked. After that, once we find it, we will try to kill it with all we have..." Then Becker explained how he thought about asking Etrium's mercenaries' help to search for and kill the monster.

However, Tiwana wasn't convinced. "What if we can't find it or the band of giants fails?" Colonel Tiwana asked. Heniates were not simple thaid. The more creatures they had, the stronger they became.

"In that case, I already asked for Volkov's help... He will go search for the monster..."

"Volkov? Do you mean Sinisa Volkov, Fasard's mayor? That Volkov? Wasn't he your rival before you took control of the nation?" Tiwana asked.

"Indeed, it's him," General Becker replied with a grave look.

Tiwana stopped to think for a minute. It was true that Volkov was strong, but there weren't many good words that his men inside the city of Fasard said about its mayor. According to rumors, Sinisa Volkov was a corrupt man with a strange obsession for children, and many believed that a pedophile lurked behind his noble demeanor.

Weirder rumors then revolved around Fasard itself. The people that Becker and Tiwana sent to keep an eye on the General's rival reported the look in the citizens' eyes while looking at their mayor. They seemed taken by a sort of religious frenzy, almost like they were under a spell.

"Sir, I don't want to seem disrespectful, but why did you ask for help from a man like Volkov? Don't you know what our reports say about him?" Tiwana asked.

"Yes, I know them, but it wasn't my idea; it was Zayan's, General Becker replied.

"The mayor? What does he know about war? Armand, with all due respect, this is not a good idea. We live in a precarious moment with the war and everything else." Colonel Tiwana paused for a couple of seconds.

"I believe Volkov will take advantage of the situation to seize control of the nation," he continued. "If you ask for his help, the citizens will see this as a sign of weakness, and the gangs will take advantage of it," Tiwana said, distraught.

"The dice have already been cast..." General Becker replied. "But let's think about this if the situation arises. What do you think about the general plan?"

"The plan seems feasible. Etrium's mercenaries are known to be strong, but they won't be cheap. Besides, what if Etrium is really behind the thaid's appearance? Lastly, do you already have an idea of who to send for such a dangerous task?" Tiwana asked.

"What about the fierce lioness?" General Becker said.

"Her? Are you sure, sir? She is not a very stable person..."

"Yes, but she is plenty capable for such a task... I think at least..." General Becker replied.

"I know that, but I don't trust mercenaries..." he paused momentarily. "Especially Etrium's, especially the Band of Giants," Tiwana responded.

He had the right to think so, especially about Amanda Ravithier, the fierce lioness. Her deeds were truly extraordinary. The tales sung about her slaying a Jolmine were legendary on the continent.

Even the blackguards wanted her, as did many members of her mercenary guild. She had the respect of every warrior and soldier out there, but her personality wasn't the best.

She was greedy, ruthless, and didn't give a damn about military hierarchy. She frequently had fits of rage; if this wasn't enough, she was brutal to anyone who went against her. She openly defied orders several times and even fought with her superiors many times. She was, in a word, volatile.

"Yeah, but it's not like we have an alternative," Becker said.

"Well, to be honest, some other mercenary guilds are at the Band of Giants' same level..."

"What guilds?" Becker wasn't that knowledgeable about Etrium's mercenary guilds.

"Splitflayers, Hellaws, and Black Foxes," Colonel Tiwana replied.

The duo stopped talking momentarily; the General recalled the situation with the parasitized people and started inquiring about it.

"What about the infected? What is the situation?" General Becker asked, then stood from his chair and started maniacally walking around the room.

"Well, we had to execute all the people who got infected. This includes soldiers and even people who had contact with them, like spouses and children. This wasn't the best and also reduced the number of people available. Professor Derr Xilion is currently working on a cure, but it is not that simple according to what Fischer told me..." Tiwana replied.

The General stopped walking. He looked at Colonel Tiwana with a severe look. He passed his hands between his hair and pushed them to the back of his head, "Why so?" he asked.

"Because according to the professor, Heniates have a special brain crystal power that operates at a particular mana frequency that is different for each Heniate. The professor said it is necessary to locate this frequency before he can do anything about the parasites."

"Does he need more people?" General Becker asked.

"Yes, he does," Tiwana said while holding his hands to his face to support his head. The Colonel sighed; he freed his face from his own hands, and while looking at the General, he said, "Fischer asked several times for more people, but there has been no decision yet. He told me to ask you to do something about it."

General Becker sighed. He knew that what Xilion and Fischer were doing wasn't popular and that if shit happened, it would be his head to roll.

"I will make a call later to try and salvage the situation, but if things don't go as intended with the vaccine, we will keep killing the infected as Professor Derr suggested. We can't risk an outbreak inside the city."

"All right, I will tell him," Tiwana stated. The urgency in his tone was apparent to General Becker. He was the nation's ruler but didn't know every aspect of it. He only hoped the soldiers and citizens didn't learn about the executions. That would create a huge mess.

"Ok... Don't worry, Armand..."

"You can go now. I hope you will bring me good news the next time we see each other. Take care, Mirko..."

"Bye, Armand..."

Colonel Tiwana left General Becker's office with heavy steps. He still had a lot to do.

Chapter 194: Julia Armstrong (1)

Some days passed, and Erik only missed one fight before being eligible to have a go against Nathaniel, who was still ranked 370 in the peasant rank. Today he was going to fight a girl named Julia Armstrong, who was at rank 571 in the peasant rank.

As far as Erik knew, the young woman was at the RHO3 level, which is pretty high for her age but in line with what most people at the Red Palace have at that rank.

Erik felt confident about this fight because he had been training hard for the past few days and felt ready to face off against Julia. Besides, if he won, it would only be a matter of days before he could fight Nathaniel.

During these days, he kept circulating rumors about his target. He actually managed to connect not only to his phone but also to Natasha's and Karl's phones during lunch at the cafeteria. He found many conversations where the three talked about other people, even people on the Squire rank, and obviously, they didn't say anything good about them.

Erik knew he had to take advantage of this information and use it to his advantage, so he clearly released everything.

He spread the rumors far and wide, causing many problems for the young man and ensuring that Nathaniel would be far from his best mental state. This also resulted in him and his friends having some minor scuffles with these people. Since Erik made it so that these conversations were sent by either Natasha, Karl, or Nathaniel, the friendship between the three started to crack.

Erik also got proof that the rumors about Nathaniel and Natasha were true and that they had a sexual relationship. They also sent private photos to each other, which he shared with basically everyone, further making the two think that the other shared this content. This worsened the situation and caused a massive rift between the two, as they were all embarrassed and hurt by Erik's covert actions.

They stopped talking to each other, and Nathaniel ended up alone.

Erik was now waiting in the Blue Palace's lobby. It wasn't the appointed time yet, but Erik didn't want to be late. Amber was actually with him, chatting about this and that while they waited. She seemed confident enough for Erik to win today, while he was pretty sure.

The reason was that his next opponent had a weapon conjuring power—a hammer, to be precise—with which she could manipulate the shape, the density, the weight, and so on.

Weapon-conjuring powers were common but were also the easiest to fight for Erik since the individual's battle prowess mainly depended on their physical stats. It didn't matter that the weapon they wielded was insanely powerful and could cut steel easily if the person who wielded it was as slow as a turtle.

Since Erik had higher stats than the girl, so he firmly believed he could win against her, as she was at Zak's level. "So, I didn't ask before, but can you tell me why you are trying to climb the ranks so fast?" Amber asked.

Erik couldn't possibly tell that he wanted to humiliate Nathaniel because that would mean she would ask why, and then he would have to tell her that he sent the thaids. This would lead to other questions when Erik's next part of the plan occurred.

"I'm just really motivated," he answered. Amber nodded and smiled, but she wasn't convinced.

The lobby became crowded soon after the appointed hour arrived; more fights must have been set to take place that day too. When the time came, Erik received the usual notification on his phone.

ERIK ROMANO (RANK 790, FIRST YEAR) VERSUS JULIA ARMSTRONG (RANK 571, SECOND YEAR)

ROOM 286, SECOND FLOOR.

HEALER: WALTER BROWN

"Ok, it's my turn now... Wish me good luck," Erik said.

"Good luck, Erik!" Amber cheered.

As the young man went to the elevator, a woman quickly approached and asked Erik to stop it. The girl quickly entered it, and Erik recognized her; it was his opponent, Julia Armstrong. The young girl probably recognized him, too, since he was sure she had come to see a couple of his fights.

However, despite the situation, she looked very calm and cheerful as she took out an apple from her backpack and bit into it. She wore a black leather jacket over a white tank top and blue gym pants. Her long, straight blond hair fell to her shoulders, giving her a lovely, feminine look.

However, despite having asked him to stop the elevator, she didn't say anything else to Erik. She only smiled at him, although he was her opponent. Erik thought she was confident in winning the match; otherwise, that behavior was weird.

The elevator moved slowly toward the second floor when the doors closed behind the girl. Later, the doors opened, and the two entered the usual long corridor containing the many fighting rooms. As always, the hallways were filled with students heading to their respective rooms.

After walking for ten minutes, they reached Room 286; both fighters went inside. They saw their designated healer, Walter Brown, already waiting inside the safe room as they entered. His short brown hair framed his face well, giving him a somewhat youthful appearance. He had a muscular body covered in light gray clothes.

Then Walter Brown began speaking to them through the intercom. "I don't need to remember the rules, am I right?"

"No sir," both contestants replied.

"Good then. Are we ready?" he asked. Erik and Julia replied affirmatively.

"All right then. You may begin whenever you wish." And with those words, the healer closed all communications. Erik and Julia nodded in agreement and began preparing for the task ahead. At the same time, the young man didn't waste time and immediately checked the young woman's stats. He had to know how strong she was to understand how to fight her.

- Name: Julia Armstrong.

- Brain crystal power: weapon conjuring (common); hammer variant (slightly uncommon).

-Race: Human.

-Physical characteristics: She has blond hair and blue eyes and is tall, lean, and athletic. Her estimated height is 1.7 meters, while her weight has been estimated to be 65 kilograms.

-Personality and traits: There is no information about her personality. She looks cheerful and polite. No hostility was detected.

-Power Level: 63.

-Approximate Strength: 22.

-Approximate Intelligence: 13.

-Approximate Dexterity: 19.

-Approximate Energy: 189.

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Erik could see from the screen that she was stronger than Zak, but her stats were still lower than his. The young man was surprised when he saw them. It was true that she was many ranks higher than Zak, but usually, there wasn't much difference in terms of physical characteristics.

<So far, this doesn't seem like a bad matchup,> Erik thought.

However, fighting against a hammer with a flyssa wasn't easy either. The weapon was much heavier, and Erik could risk having his weapon destroyed if he didn't pay attention. Julia was clearly aware of this as she started moving towards Erik confidently.

Julia rushed forward, employing the same tactic that most hammer users employed during these encounters with sword users: go first, hit hard and quickly, and do not give your opponent any time. She seemed to think Erik would try not to block her attacks and instead try to dodge and strike at the right time.

The woman charged at Erik, who stood his ground waiting for her, and swung her hammer with great force. He managed to avoid the strike, which ended up hitting the ground but didn't cause environmental damage due to how strong and durable the room was. Erik then used the opportunity to counterattack, striking with his sword and putting Julia on the defensive.

However, Julia was prepared; she pushed all her weight on the hammer and tried to kick the young man in the face with a sort of flying kick. But, thanks to his training, Erik easily avoided the move and even attempted to land a blow himself.

But Julia pulled down the hammer and easily blocked the dangerous cut with the weapon's long handle, which she had lengthened for defense. When attacking, she didn't need to exert much strength since the hammer was heavy and very big, and its weight alone was enough. She also had to avoid fatal moves so she didn't attack too hard.

Besides, the hammer offered easy protection against the young man's attacks thanks to the tough handle.

Though there was a moment in which Julia was unable to move due to the weapon's weight, Erik decided to take advantage of the momentary break in momentum to kick the young woman in the stomach.

The kick's sheer force sent Julia flying a few meters after it connected. Erik jumped backward after kicking and got distance from his opponent. A warrior on the ground was often much more dangerous than one who stood on their feet since they could grab him easily and apply suppressing moves in which she was clearly trained like everyone else.

Clearly, the young woman took advantage of the situation and regained her footing quickly, raising the hammer once again. She started running toward Erik with the weapon in hand and swung it again, aiming for the young man's head.

Chapter 195: Julia Armstrong (2)

Erik dodged the strike and decided to counterattack. He launched a series of slashes before him by using his master's fighting style and hoping to catch Julia off guard. Unfortunately for him, the young woman reacted faster than Erik anticipated and avoided each of his strikes by using the hammer as a focal point and moving around it with incredible agility.

She was fast and moved like water; her flow was impressive, and Erik immediately understood why she was at that rank. Her training was vastly superior to Zak's or the others he faced. Erik realized that defeating Julia would not be easy and that he needed to revise his approach.

Julia kept avoiding each strike, moving without losing speed or momentum; she could be anywhere on her opponent's body at any given moment but always kept him within the range of her weapon so that when he did strike back, all his attacks could be deflected away from her.

Once again, Erik knew that the difference between him and her was all about technique and experience. He knew he could only keep up with her weird movements thanks to his inflated stats and was aware that relying solely on his stats wouldn't guarantee him victory. He needed to strategize and find a weakness in Julia's fighting style to defeat her.

However, he was also training a lot, and with each day that passed, he became better and better, so it wasn't like he was a total noob compared to her.

It was also clear that if he won against Zak, he was bound to win against her, too, even if she was better trained overall. He still felt confident enough to win this match. Although he knew he should not underestimate her abilities, even the slightest mistake could cost him the match. He needed to remain focused and disciplined during the fight to ensure victory.

Erik observed the young woman, and a few moments later, he realized that he had to do something about the hammer if he wanted to win. The problem was figuring out how to get past the weapon's defenses. He took a deep breath and assessed his options, knowing that any hasty decision could result in failure.

Erik knew that he had to rely on his strength and speed if he wanted to have any chance of winning, so he decided to try to close the gap between himself and his opponent quickly by trying to confuse the woman with fast and unpredictable movements while trying to find the right opportunity to strike.

As the fight continued, he remained focused and disciplined, watching for any opening to try and disarm his opponent.

He didn't want to win by exhausting her, as had happened in previous fights. That was a little bit lame and frankly shameful. He wanted to win in a way that would impress his peers and prove himself a worthy fighter.

But Julia saw a weakness in Erik's stance right away and took advantage of it with such finesse and skill that even the healer was impressed. It was clear that he was still a greenhorn with the sword,

while she had many years to learn how to fight with a hammer properly since her brain crystal power was related to it.

However, she clearly saw that, despite his not-perfect stance, he knew how to move around with the weapon. She was aware that Erik had just recently started to train, as he appeared in the newspaper quite often due to his awakener status, and the results he achieved left her flabbergasted.

The woman raised her hammer and swung it with force at Erik as she had the most extended reach. She aimed at Erik's chest, but the young man dove and avoided the strike. She attacked, despite knowing this was a risky move that had the potential to kill Erik.

Although he clearly lacked a lot of experience and didn't know many techniques, she had been forced by the situation to make that attack as she had a hard time fighting against the young man due to his speed. She started to fear losing her rank.

Due to the rumors about Erik quickly rising through the ranks, she was intrigued, so she went to see one of his matches. Julia noticed how strong and fast he was, but she fought many people with similar characteristics and didn't think much about it; she never doubted her skills and was confident enough to win. However, things proved to be more complex than expected.

Erik was in a position in which he couldn't avoid the strike, and the only thing he could do was block. He used both the sword and his arms, both coated in mana, to parry the attack. The result was a devastating blow that almost broke Erik's arms and made Julia win.

Erik had to consume much of his mana reserves to resist the blow, more than he expected before the fight. His power was efficient despite everything. It allowed him to use relatively low amounts of mana compared to other powers of the same rank since he only had to sharpen things, and it wasn't necessary to sharpen the flyssa a lot.

Erik flew a couple of meters behind and felt a lot of pain run through his arms. Despite his situation, he quickly realized he had been lucky, as things could have been worse if he hadn't taken action immediately.

Erik stood on his feet, but Julia started charging at him while he did so.

"Fuck..." Erik said.

"Surrender before you make a fool of yourself..." Julia said, swinging her hammer but missing her intended target.

She sounded very arrogant at that moment because she had a clear advantage against someone who could rise through the ranks quickly. However, it was also true that Erik had underestimated his opponent, as she was more skilled than he initially assumed, and the gap in their stats was enough only to put them at the same level of strength.

"Why are you acting out of character all of a sudden?" Erik asked, clearly referring to the meeting they had inside the elevator.

The woman swung her hammer again, but Erik dodged. This time, he avoided making wide movements to prevent being hit again.

"Can you stop talking and focus on the fight?"

Julia attacked again, but this time, Erik counterattacked. He didn't have the same amount of mana as before but he could still fight. He observed the young girl as she kept repeatedly attacking until he saw an opportunity. His training with Master Nieminen was slowly affecting his battle prowess. The girl swung her hammer again, and Erik dodged and slashed at her leg.

He missed a first swing but was fast enough to pull a second out and make a nasty cut on her leg.

His blade cut deep into the skin, and blood flowed from the wound. The young man smiled at that. "You're bleeding..."

Immediately, Julia felt stupid for having told Erik to surrender. He still had many surprises in reserve. It was at that moment that the girl started having problems standing up. Her mobility significantly decreased, but her opponent wasn't better off.

He was having trouble exerting strength due to his sustained injury and had to use a little bit more mana to make up for the lack of strength.

The fight between the two continued, with Erik making significantly weaker attacks and Julia having trouble moving. This resulted in the woman slowly accumulating wounds since she couldn't move as before, but these were not as nasty as the first one Erik made. Julia bled profusely now, and after taking another slash from Erik, she collapsed on the ground.

She was in a dangerous state but didn't want to surrender.

In the meantime, Erik's constant use of his arm worsened the pain, rendering it more difficult for him to fight. He would soon be unable to continue fighting in the match. The healer started pondering who was going to win at that point when suddenly something happened.

"Surrender!" Erik said.

"No, you surrender!"

"There's no way... I will..."

They looked at each other; neither one wanted to give up, and the two kept fighting. Julia tried to use the previous moves revolving around circling the hammer, but she was too slow now, and Erik quickly became able to keep up with her movements.

They circled back and forth several times around the hammer until Erik finally managed to get close to the woman and struck her once. He made a severe gash on her chest, partially exposing her bones. Then he kicked her in the wound, and Julia collapsed on the ground in agony.

However, Erik could barely lift his sword by that time. He only managed to point the flyssa at her throat and say, "I'm the winner..." heavily panting and trembling from fatigue.

Julia was in pain and couldn't even reply to the young man. The healer came out of the room and immediately declared Erik, the winner.

"Erik Romano won!" The healer said, but his attention quickly turned to Julia, whose wounds required urgent attention, prompting him to treat her without delay.

He then rushed to heal Julia, who was bleeding profusely, and as he started to do his job, she could not refrain from swearing.

"Fuck..." Julia said. She lost two hundred ranks in a single day. That was a devastating blow to her ego.

Chapter 196: The Club (1)

Nathaniel was walking down the Red Palace's corridors, heading to the cafeteria. After spending his morning practicing and following classes, he usually met with his friends, Natasha and Karl, to have lunch at the cafeteria.

However, this was no longer true since a couple of days ago, screenshots of their conversations and hot pictures about Nathaniel and Natasha started circulating among the peasant-ranked students, and the three drifted apart. The rumors and gossip had caused a rift in their friendship, and Nathaniel now felt alone and excluded.

He couldn't help but wonder who was behind the leak and what they hoped to gain from it, but he had a hunch that Erik was behind it.

Even though he was wealthy and believed everyone to be beneath him, he decided to eat where everyone else did. He didn't go into some high-class restaurant to be served like the king he believed he was; that was weird.

After lunch, Nathaniel followed the afternoon classes, but even this time, he was alone. Usually, he and his group would go together and then head to the private training rooms they rented from the Red Palace. This was one of the privileges that rich people like him could enjoy and that Erik could only dream of.

Also, Amber, Floyd, and Gwen could rent these rooms, but they preferred to stay with their friends since such rooms could house three people at a time.

All the other people went to train at the gym, which was usually congested with students, often forcing people to wait for their turns. Instead, Nathaniel headed to the private training room alone, feeling better than the others because of the exclusive privileges that came with his wealth.

The group usually ended their day by going to a club owned by his father inside the city to eat and get wasted. They would go to a private room again, as Nathaniel didn't want people to disturb him and wanted to be served individually. After that, a limo usually picked them up and returned them to the Red Palace.

They all enjoyed the luxury of having their own private space and personalized service, which made the club experience even more exclusive and enjoyable. Matthew, Nathaniel's father, allowed all of this luxury.

As soon as he finished training, the young man left the room. The door opened, and he came out exhausted. However, aside from an exhausted look on his face, there was anger too. He couldn't stop thinking about the leaks during the past few days, which caused him to perform poorly today since he couldn't focus on the task at hand.

He knew the best thing to do would be to talk to his supervisors to address the issue and prevent any future mishaps, but his pride and the need to make the person pay were too strong, and he refrained from doing so.

"I just need to find out who did that..." He then emitted a short, almost imperceptible laugh. "Yeah... and then make them pay... Yes..." He thought about it for a couple of seconds and then said to himself, "Yeah... I could also ask for dad's help..." Asking for his father's help would be the best thing to do if he wanted to teach this person a lesson.

He also needed to find out who did this, so asking his father for skilled people's help to uncover the truth was necessary. However, he was still conflicted since he wanted to deal personally with whoever did it.

Nathaniel suspected Erik was behind everything, but he had no proof and no idea how Erik could pull something like this off. He didn't care about his friends, but he cared about the lack of respect his father pretended he asked for.

After all, he was the son of a criminal, and he raised him, making him believe he was superior to the others due to his wealth and status, but most importantly, his power.

"Ah... I need a drink..." Nathaniel said. Given that Karl and Natasha stopped going out with him, he planned to go to his father's club with a couple of bootlickers he always ignored. He wanted someone to keep him company; he actually called them and told them to meet him there. The three agreed and headed there immediately to not make Nathaniel angry.

As the private training room door closed, Nathaniel started heading outside while walking through the Red Palace's labyrinthine aisle until he reached the elevator and went to the ground floor.

After walking, he finally reached the entrance and stepped inside the vast garden in front of the building.

Given that the garden was filled with countless flowers arranged in groups by color, anyone else would have found this place mesmerizing. The person who designed the place wanted to create an

image that could only be seen from the air or the Red Palace's higher floors, so the floors were arranged so that if one flew over the garden, one would see some symbols.

The garden also had a lot of water fountains and ponds where fishes lived, and many benches and trees were installed here and there to provide a resting place for tired students.

However, Nathaniel didn't care about that. He didn't even glance twice at his surroundings and stepped on many flowers, ruining the flower beds.

He then sat on one of the benches near one of the numerous water fountains and made a phone call; he asked for a limousine to come and pick him up at the Red Palace's entrance.

The sun was setting when the limousine arrived and picked him up. Of course, the car was the most luxurious one could buy, with many amenities that no average person could even dream about. There were even some weapons stashed in the trunk for emergencies.

A radio tuned into an electronic music station; there was an intercom system for private conversations, and air conditioning so powerful it made his hair stand on end as soon as he got inside.

He settled back against soft leather seats and watched the city pass by through tinted windows while sipping champagne from crystal glasses. The driver took him out toward the inner city while taking a panoramic course around New Alexandria's major landmarks.

After a medium-long trip, he arrived in front of his father's club, where he found the three bootlickers waiting. They were a guy named Glenn, a short guy with curly black hair and big ears. Another guy called Achim was always wearing sunglasses, no matter how dark it got, and had long brown hair tied in a ponytail. Lastly, there was this tall, thin guy named Peter.

He had short blonde hair and blue eyes; he looked like an actor from some TV show.

The three guys were the sons of some of Nathaniel's father's men and went there to gain favor from the young man. As the three saw him, they started their bootlicking by bowing to him. Nathaniel always treated them like worms, and they didn't really like him.

Still, since the young man would become powerful and probably inherit his father's position, they tried to stay on his good side whenever possible.

"Welcome, young master!" the three said in unison as soon as they saw him.

Nathaniel looked at them as if they were maggots and said: "I'm thirsty; I need a drink..."

The three immediately made way for him to enter the club, but as soon as they walked through the main entrance, they found themselves surrounded by people. The place was packed, as this was basically the Mambas' main quarter and, simultaneously, a very profitable establishment.

People were dancing in front of the entrance, as many people were present. Most of them had drinks in their hands, and some even ate expensive dishes from tables placed all over the room.

It looked like this was an extravagant party where everyone was having fun without paying too much attention to those around them. Many half-naked people were dancing and rubbing themselves against each other. Many people were making out with each other while still being watched by numerous guests who seemed more interested in watching than joining the action.

It was not only couples doing that either; single men or women could be seen going up to other people and trying to join them. One thing about the whole scene was clear, though—it wasn't just sex you could find here but also drugs and alcohol, which went hand in hand when one wanted to get drunk enough before participating in something kinky.

"This way," Glenn said. He, Peter, and Achim circled Nathaniel and escorted him to a VIP room, where he finally lay on a couch. However, he had a sour mood and an angry expression.

"Would you like for me to call the waitress?" Achim asked.

"Yes, let her come here..." The young man's voice was thick with anger as his eyes narrowed at them all. "I also want a woman; call someone..."

Peter, Glen, and Achim exchanged glances before nodding their heads. They were used to this sort of thing from Nathaniel, and since he hated it when people didn't do as he said, they quickly went their separate ways to accommodate his wishes.

Chapter 197: The Club (2)

(AN: Ok, guys; I went out of my comfort zone here. Let me know if you liked how I managed the situation.)

"AHH! AHH!"

Nathaniel was currently riding the girl that Glenn, Peter, and Achim had brought him. He would have had sex with Natasha usually, but since she wasn't there, he asked for a girl, hoping to feel a little bit better after the deal was done. The girl writhed beneath him, giving him a sense of power and control.

"AHH!" The girl moaned as Nathaniel slammed her against his body repeatedly while pounding into her from behind.

The three looked at Nathaniel with a neutral look but were actually very displeased. It wasn't like they didn't ever do something like that; they were still the sons of very important people inside the Mambas, who were strictly tied to the Crystal Cross Gang, and those were everyday occurrences, but they were 18, and Nathaniel was only 16.

They couldn't exactly say no, though, or Nathaniel could throw a fit that could put their families in danger.

After ten minutes of going like this, Nathaniel actually had enough. The girl's moans started to fade as Nathaniel thrust harder and harder until he finally released himself. He felt a brief moment of satisfaction but was soon overwhelmed by his usual anger.

He yelled, "Get the hell out of here!" as he pushed the naked woman away. She fell to the ground, grabbed her clothes, and hurried out of the room.

"Bring me more champagne!" Nathaniel shouted.

After five minutes, another good-looking girl brought in a small cart with buckets of ice containing four thousand New Dollar champagne bottles.

Then, a young-looking man brought in a food trolley full of glasses and snacks and put it next to the table in front of Nathaniel and the three men.

The girl then opened the champagne bottle, took an empty glass, and started pouring its contents inside. "Stop wasting my fucking time! Hurry up!" She hurriedly gave the glass to Nathaniel and then served the other three men.

"Fuck off!" Nathaniel said it was clear to anyone that he was in a bad mood. The woman quickly apologized and scurried away, sensing Nathaniel's anger. The three men exchanged uncomfortable glances and felt embarrassed; the woman murmured an apology and swiftly left the room.

Nathaniel sighed irritably and downed the drink in one gulp, hoping to numb his fraying nerves. The air turned tense and hostile as soon as the words left his mouth. His outburst was met with silence. The men were unsure of how to react. Sensing the discomfort, he forced a strained smile and gestured for them to continue.

After the two waiters left and the four men were alone, they started chatting.

"Hey, I was wondering..." Peter said. "How is it to join the Red Palace?" he asked Nathaniel. "It's nothing much," Nathaniel replied. "It is still full of losers and spineless guys... My father even gave me a present when I joined since he was told it was a prestigious place, but we were both disappointed..."

"Yeah, you are too strong for the pricks there..." Achim said.

"Yeah, they definitely amount to nothing compared to you!" Glenn added.

"Shut up now... I don't want to listen to this bullshit..." Nathaniel spoke, and the others remained silent. The young man observed the three older men, who were still in military school in their last year. He then had a strange fit of curiosity and asked them a question.

"I'm curious to know. What are you all going to do once the military ends?" Nathaniel knew that rich people could pay the military a certain amount of money to avoid military conscription. The three men in front of him had enough money to do so, and like most people in their positions, they didn't want to waste time inside the militaries; Nathaniel included.

The three didn't like Nathaniel's tone or words, but they swallowed their anger and replied immediately.

"My dad wants me to open some companies to money launder..." Achim said.

"Ah, you will keep working with us then..." Nathaniel said. "What about you?" Nathaniel asked Glenn, who replied, "My dad wants me to make a mercenary team in Etrium and establish some links with the local gangs. Besides, since Etrium's economy heavily revolves around thaids' body parts, we could earn much money there."

"What about you, Nathaniel?" Peter asked the young man.

Nathaniel didn't even have to think about it and immediately replied. "I will take my dad's place, obviously. I already have some ideas to expand the family business and would like to collaborate more with the Crystal Cross Gang..."

"It looks like we will have a promising new leader then! Haha!" Peter interjected.

"Indeed, with Nathaniel's promising future strength, I doubt there will be problems once he takes over the Mambas!" Glenn added.

Peter let out a chuckle before stating his opinion. "It's good to have a strong successor in place to carry on the legacy." Glenn nodded in agreement, "Nathaniel has all the qualities needed to lead the Mambas to even greater success." After Peter made a witty comment, he turned serious. "I have complete faith in Nathaniel's leadership abilities."

Glenn nodded and said, "He has already shown great potential, and I'm excited to see what he can achieve as the head of the Mambas." Peter laughed before saying, "It's going to be tough to top our success, but I think Nathaniel is up for the challenge."

Glenn agreed, "He has a bright future ahead of him, and I have no doubt he'll take the Mambas to new heights." As the conversation shifted to Nathaniel's potential, Peter said, "He'll put us all to shame with his leadership skills!" Glenn chuckled.

"Enough..." Nathaniel said, slightly annoyed by the three men's bootlicking.

"What about you?" Nathaniel then asked Peter.

"I will enlist in the army," he replied.

"Why?" Nathaniel asked, as his reply greatly surprised him.

"Dad has some friends inside the military; they can ensure me a commanding position, and having more men close to that mother fucker, General Becker, will be good to keep them all in check."

"Ok... I'm tired of this conversation; let's change topics," Nathaniel interjected, and the other three men immediately shut up. Nathaniel thought about his problems for a couple of seconds, and he thought that maybe the three older men could give him some insight into the matter.

"Say... What would you do if someone almost killed you by throwing a thaid horde at you?"

The three were immediately left dumbfounded. The truth was that the attack on Erik and his friends was already circulating inside the city since one of the students that joined Erik's large group talked to the media. They knew that whatever Nathaniel was asking was related to that incident.

"Are you referring to what happened to Red Palace's last outing?" Glenn asked.

"Yes," Nathaniel said in annoyance.

"Well, if it were me, I would try to get revenge as soon as possible," Peter said. "Yeah, I agree..." Achim added. "Especially if I knew who it was, I would try to make him pay..."

This wasn't something hard to understand; even Nathaniel would have done something like that, and having confirmation of this only made him suspect Erik more.

"Hey, I have a totally unrelated question for you lot. Is it possible to hack devices and make it appear like the device itself sent some messages and the like?"

"Why do you ask?" Glenn said.

"Mind your own business..." Nathaniel replied with a nasty tone.

Peter swallowed his anger and promptly replied: "Well, it is possible, but you should have a certain level of skill to do something like that. Some conditions must also be met..." he said.

"How do you know all this stuff?" Achim asked.

"I had fun with some friends of mine. We actually hacked a girl named Scarlet's phone and stole all her naked pictures. We asked her to pay if she wanted to prevent us from sharing them online. We got a lot of money from that..." If Nathaniel had paid attention, he would have immediately understood that he was referring to Scarlet Calvert, New Alexandria's mayor's daughter.

This wasn't something new for the mambas; they often did things like that to extort money, which was why Peter knew these people. He simply asked his father, and the young man quickly became friends with the hackers.

"How hard do you think it is to find and hire someone with such skills?" Nathaniel asked.

"Pretty easy for people who work in our field..." Peter replied.

"And for normal people?"

"Hard, but not impossible."

All the information Peter was giving him gave Nathaniel more reason to think that Erik was behind all that was happening to him. He was sure the awakener saw him lure the monsters there, and that alone could be a reason for him to hire a hacker to humiliate him.

The problem was that he had no idea how he could do that. Hiring hackers to mess up his, Karl's, and Natasha's phones were not cheap. Amber could have given him the money, but even this was just speculation.

The three men weren't sure what Nathaniel was asking as he was thinking this. However, being the sons of extremely cunning and ruthless people, they immediately understood that this wasn't coincidental. Probably Nathaniel had something to do with the thaid attack, and the people to whom he did this were probably retaliating.

However, they didn't ask him anything since they didn't want to risk making him feel humiliated. The topic fell soon after, and the four guys spent the rest of the time partying.

They drank and ate, ending up being tipsy. They had to get up early the following day, so they decided they had enough, and it was time to go home.

The four men left the private room they spent the evening in and headed to the entrance while passing through a dance hall that still had the music blasting from the speakers.

It was hard to reach the entrance due to the sheer number of people drinking cocktails and dancing in the building. After a while, they finally reached the entrance and left the club. They stopped outside the club to light cigarettes, and Nathaniel called his limousine.

"The limo will be here in five minutes," Nathaniel said.

Chapter 198: Preparations

"How is the situation, Mirko?" General Becker asked his friend Colonel Tiwana. The situation was dire since the horde was three days from the city, and Frant's army couldn't thin their numbers enough for the militaries to ensure nothing terrible would happen.

Becker and his men and women were discouraged. They employed massive amounts of resources, and people did decrease the thaids' numbers, but with each step they took, another thaid joined the massive horde. It was scary.

Tiwana shrugged helplessly as he stared into a cup of tea. "We are doing our best with what we have, but the thaids are almost in the city," he said in answer to the army general's question. He glanced at his men, sitting on benches or standing guard outside the tent; all looked exhausted but determined despite it being late afternoon.

The general nodded grimly, understanding the gravity of the situation.

"We already called the Fierce Lioness and the Band of Giants; they are currently heading here with their vehicles. Aside from that, we started stationing mechas around the barrier, and we are concentrating our forces at the east gate." His voice trailed off as he thought about something else. We also dispatched a scout team to gather more information about our enemy's movements.

However, we must consider the possibility that they may be able to breach the eastern gate. Despite our efforts, we cannot guarantee its security."

"There isn't much more we can do right now," Tiwana said. "If we do not station as many people as possible at the gate, the monsters will surely breach the gate. If they break in, we can only ask for the Fierce Lioness's help."

"Why can't things go well just one time...?" Becker said with evident frustration. "What about Volkov?" he then asked.

"He said that as soon as the situation is under control, he and some people will come here to give us a hand in finding the Heniate, but they won't make it in time for the attack..." Tiwana replied. Becker was sure Volkov would be able to find the Heniate, but his absence from the battlefield was a huge problem, and he couldn't go into battle as he needed to coordinate the troops.

He was an important figure in the command center. The only problem was that it would lead to many casualties.

The general sighed heavily before speaking again. "Are the troops still trying to hinder the monsters?"

"Yes, sir!" Tiwana answered. "But they aren't getting anywhere because there are simply too many thaidas..."

"Ok, then make all active personnel head back to the city starting tomorrow and get some rest before the battle. We need fresh troops, not exhausted people..."

"Of course! When should we tell them?" Tiwana asked.

"Give the order now; let them leave before 20:00 o'clock."

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, and..." Becker considered things carefully. "Ensure you send the message to the civilians that every person who can't fight must head to the shelters. I also want the police to manage public order." Becker said.

"Understood. Anything else?"

"Yes, how are things progressing regarding the extraordinary conscription?" Becker was referring to the fact that they would force adults to join the city's defense. This idea had been discussed a few days earlier when the thaids were still relatively far away. However, after seeing the number of monsters approaching, everyone involved quickly approved this proposal.

"It seems like everything has gone smoothly, even though this is unprecedented. Everyone seemed motivated by your speech," Tiwana stated.

"Good. How many people are going to join?" Becker asked.

"Around ten million. If we add the two million available soldiers, we would be around three or four million away from the thaids' horde. It's like all the monsters in the east banded together to destroy the city..."

"That's not too bad... Considering the circumstances, we have a chance of survival with the number of people we have available. However, we must still prepare ourselves as best we can in the remaining days. While our numbers may not be ideal, we can still build a strong defense with the proper tactics and weapons."

The major problem in a world like theirs was that getting troops from other cities was not straightforward due to the thaids around. Besides, the soldiers had to defend the cities' borders constantly, so getting troops from another place was really complicated.

"Is there anything else?" Becker asked.

"No, sir, that's all."

"Ok, you are dismissed."

"Yes, sir."

After talking with the general, Mirko headed towards his office at the east gate, where the command post for this operation was located. As he got closer to the area, he saw several big cars surrounded by guards and police officers talking to each other. Some were obviously worried, while others appeared confident.

Mirko knew this would be a complex operation, but the sight of those confident officers reassured him.

All around the place, the vehicles were unloading the mechs one by one while their pilots got on them and started moving outside the barrier. All of them looked strong and sturdy. Their design wasn't new; however, most had the latest technologies mounted on them. In addition, some were modified to make them better suited to combat inside the forest.

The only problem with mecha was that their weapons were as effective against thaids as all the others the military could employ, meaning that they could only kill low-ranked monsters. However, the term low-ranked monsters indicated many kinds of monsters. The army had an internal way of classifying monsters, but it wasn't that common outside of the army.

This led to confusion among civilians who believed mechas were the ultimate solution to the monster problem. In reality, those mechas were a valuable asset but not a definitive solution to the varied and ever-evolving challenges presented by thaids since only brain crystal powers were beneficial up to a certain point.

As Tiwana got closer, he noticed that many soldiers were moving around with various pieces of equipment on their backs. Each of them carried a personal weapon and was armed with laser rifles, grenades, and the like. Countless vehicles were walking through the east gate, and many other soldiers started mounting cannons and every kind of artillery over the eastern gate's buildings.

Tiwana observed as another vehicle arrived. It was an enormous truck that was loaded with numerous weapons. Soldiers immediately moved out of it carrying heavy machine guns, anti-thaids missiles, and every sort of cannon imaginable. They started assembling them onto platforms above the building next to the barrier, ready to fire upon any monster coming close enough.

Some were even mounted inside the barrier in case thaids managed to break in. Besides, since the forest in front of the barrier had been cleared, inside the ground, there were countless hidden artillery weapons that could come out of it in case of necessity, and there was even a three-meter tall reinforced wall that could do the same.

At the moment, the army was taking the wall out, waiting to place defenses on it as soon as the process finished.

Mirko couldn't help but sigh. He knew what was happening was a major threat to the city's safety; they were preparing to shoot down as many monsters as possible.

Mirko entered the east gate and went to his office, where he would meet with Sergeants Greene and Sergeant Sinclair. Both sergeants came to his office as soon as he arrived. The two were currently employed on the front lines, trying to kill as many thaids as possible and coordinating different groups for specific missions.

Greene actually managed to kill an Hekratinl some days prior, the biggest threat to the eastern gate's safety.

On the other hand, Sergeant Sinclair coordinated some other teams to kill various dangerous thaids that were spotted inside the horde.

Both women sat in front of Colonel Tiwana, patiently waiting for him to settle. Once the Colonel was seated, both sergeants reported what had happened in the past hours.

"So, did you find out anything new?" Tiwana asked.

"Yes, sir. Unfortunately, it appears that the weird Blirdoth that team Delta had previously spotted has joined the thaid's horde..." Sergeant Sinclair said. "However, we have already sent a company to deal with it."

"Fuck..." Tiwana sighed; he knew that if a beast like that arrived at the gate while joining the monsters' army, things would become much more complicated. Besides, judging by what team Delta said, this creature was really powerful, and it would be easy to kill it even with an entire company.

"We've already sent word to the rest of the units, asking them to keep their eyes open," Sinclair continued. "However, considering the horde's size, I don't think we'll see any more reports about strange creatures joining the horde anytime soon."

"I agree," Greene added. "There is a limit to how many monsters can join the horde right now. The number of available thaids roaming the place should have reached an all-time low."

She wasn't wrong. It was true that the Heniate probably managed to get a hold of most of the thaid's population in the east, but it was also true that for several months Frant observed thaids' mass migrations heading westward. So, it was clear that many thaids were still alive somewhere.

"Let's just hope that the situation has stabilized for the moment," Tiwana concluded.

Then, a soldier barged into the office without asking for permission. He was sweating, had a pallid look, and seemed very worried. Tiwana observed him carefully before speaking up.

"What is it?" he demanded.

The man hesitated before speaking. When he finally spoke, his voice trembled.

"Sir! The second brigade has been completely wiped out! They're dead, sir. Every last one of them... We lost contact with the second brigade after the thaids' began attacking. We decided to send reinforcements, but they found only bodies!"

Tiwana stared at the young officer. His face turned pale as he realized things would be more complicated than expected.

Chapter 199: Demise (1)

THREE HOURS EARLIER

"MOTHERFUCKING THAIDS! I WOULD STILL BE ON VACATION IF IT WEREN'T FOR THEM!" Jacob said to his teammate Andrea. They were currently joining the second brigade in a very dangerous mission.

The higher-ups reported the presence of a dangerous beast inside the horde, a deviant Blirdoth. Since a company had been enough to kill an Hekratinl, they thought that by employing a brigade, they would have been able to kill this creature. Despite its strength, they hoped the extra manpower would be enough to take it down.

They chose some of the most promising soldiers inside the army to deal with it, and they were now going out of the city to search for it and hopefully separate it from the horde. "Yeah, I know, but we can do nothing about it..."

The soldiers knew the wilderness was full of dangers, but they were ready to face them head-on. They had been trained to handle the most challenging assignments, and this was no exception. In the meantime, their team captain, Francis Bisk, was talking to the other two members, explaining to them what they would do during this mission. "Is everything clear?" asked the team captain.

"Yes, sir," the two replied in unison.

"Good. We will probably be out of the city for a long time; have you said goodbye to your loved ones? That could have been the last time you saw them..." Bisk asked.

"Yes, sir." "Good, let's go now..."

Then, the team captain, Francis Bisk, told his people to move. They left the army barracks and got into an SUV. They didn't have a lot of provisions, as the brigade's logistics team would take care of everything.

However, they were trained to hunt and gather stuff in case something terrible happened. Like many teams joining this brigade, this particular one was specialized; they were all highly trained to fight thaids in the wilderness and would be part of the main company that would later fight against the Blirdoth's variant.

The team comprised five soldiers, three of whom were ranged soldiers, while the remaining two were melee ones.

They were captain Francis Bisk, with an arrow conjuring brain crystal power; Jacob Rodriguez, with a spear conjuring brain crystal power and an adept spearman; Andrea Costa, who had the ability to summon hyenas; a swordsman named Azelia Black; and Lastly, a woman with a water bending brain crystal power, Miranda Morin, Emma's sister.

The group drove the SUV inside the city and then reached the east gate, where they joined the other brigade. The usual scenery in front of the eastern gate was profoundly changed. There were mechas, vehicles, cannons, and various artillery types waiting for the horde to come.

This high number of people and weapons impressed not only the five but even the other soldiers that were going out to hunt the thaid. At that moment, Bisk's team was called by the brigadier general tasked with commanding the team.

"Bisk," he said. "I want you to scout ahead; once we reach the horde or encounter stray thaids, tell me immediately."

"Yes, sir," Bisk replied. He then went to his team members and told them about their new job. The team members nodded in agreement and prepared themselves for the task ahead.

The group then sped toward the forest at great speed. At the moment, Azelia was driving while the others kept their attention on the surroundings.

"Where was the horde last spotted?" asked Azelia to the captain.

"Go toward the east; you will see once we get there..." In the previous months, the city had been frequently attacked by thaids. The scientists assumed that the initial assaults, like the densophs' one during the past month, happened because the monsters were fleeing the Heniate's parasites.

However, attacks persisted, and it appeared that parasitized monsters were responsible for most of the attacks. While they were speeding outside the barriers, in front of the vast clear space surrounding them, the group looked at the consequences of the various monsters' invasions.

The ground was littered with holes and pits due to the soldiers' attacks and the artillery weapon, and countless beast remains could be seen scattered on the ground.

There were even some thaids eating the flesh of the creatures, and some were even using the hollow skulls for nesting. The number of beasts amassed at the hundred-thousand mark; this spoke volumes about the incoming horde.

If such a large number of monsters had already attacked the city, Bisk didn't want to imagine how big the horde was. Bisk led the group forward, keeping a watchful eye for any signs of danger. As Bisk moved ahead, he carefully scanned the area for any signs of the horde or stray thaids. After a while, he noticed some tracks in the distance and signaled to the rest of the team.

The team members quickly followed Bisk toward the tracks, aware that danger could be lurking around every corner.

The group sped forward and started traveling; they did so for several hundred kilometers until they arrived near the horde. They actually went behind them, keeping their distance and avoiding being spotted.

As soon as they arrived behind the horde, around the place where the Blirdoth was last seen, they followed some tracks to reach that place. Still, once they arrived, they saw a chilling scene: the creatures joining the horde had left footprints everywhere, but the number of tracks was much higher than what they had previously found.

There were literally millions of prints on the ground, which was completely ruined and devastated. Countless trees were on the ground, and some of them had withered. Bisk continued to lead the group forward, keeping a watchful eye for any signs of danger. Despite the tension in the air, the team remained focused and ready for anything that might come their way.

"The Blirdoth..." Andrea, the summoner, said. "Indeed." Captain Bisk replied. The group knew what the Blirdoth was capable of, and they knew it was due to them that the Flora died.

"I didn't expect something like this..." Jacob replied with a look of disbelief.

The group was essentially looking at a massive corridor inside the forest, created by the horde, with countless withered trees on the ground.

"The Blirdoth was probably the last to follow..." "Right," Bisk said. The group then spent the rest of the time searching for the creature.

The rest of the brigade was a couple of kilometers behind but close enough to join the fight as soon as Bisk's team found the creature. Soon, they arrived in a huge round zone with nothing but fallen trees. The captain then started to talk.

"According to the HQ, this is where the beasts have last been spotted. The group was left speechless, as the size of the devastation around here was dreadful. There wasn't anything alive in sight. The group stopped in the middle of the place and got off the SUV.

Captain Bisk then started looking at the ground. He grabbed a handful of dirt and started smelling it. Bisk was an expert hunter who frequently killed normal Blirdoths; he could distinguish their smell from the other thaids.

Then the captain pressed his hands on the ground and released mana; so many small wriggling creatures came out of the earth. They were the Heniate's parasites. Immediately, the team members

became scared; they didn't want to risk being infected by them and ending up part of the horde.
"Don't worry.

Unless you eat them, they will not be able to infect you," Bisk said. The other man nodded and heaved a sigh of relief.

"Let's inspect the place... there must be some trace who can tell us where the monster is..." the captain said, looking at the ground. Soon, every person present did his job, using devices and inspecting the ground to search for clues that could lead them to the Blirboth. They searched everywhere.

"Captain, there is something I do not get," Jacob said, "Why are we looking at this place instead of going directly to the horde? Isn't it likely the Blirboth is there?" he asked. Bisk looked at him with a severe face, and then he said, "The Heniate is directly controlling the Blirboth; it looks like it is its avatar. We are essentially searching for a sentient beast..."

"The avatar?" Jacob asked.

"Indeed. The Heniate does control the monsters under its command, which is true, but not directly. It can directly control only some of the monsters it subjugates, and we believe that the Blirboth is one of them..."

The team kept searching, and soon they gathered to talk about what they found, but what Andrea found gave them hope.

"I found Blirboth's tracks," he said. The group rushed to inspect the beast's tracks where Andrea found them.

Bisk agreed with his assessment—it really was the Blirboth's tracks. "You are right; these are its tracks..." he said. "Contact the brigadier general.

Chapter 200: Demise (2)

"Protect the flank!" a soldier shouted.

"It's impossible; they are too many!" Another replied.

When they discovered the Blirboth, Bisk and his team called the Brigade for support. However, the situation didn't go as planned. The Brigade tried to separate the creature from the horde, but the truth was that the thaid was aware that humans were around, and it sent a part of the horde to kill them all. It was an ambush. The attack had caught the Brigade entirely off guard.

The problem was that not only did the Brigade have to fight against this particularly powerful creature, but they also had to face the thousands of parasitized monsters that the Heniate sent them. Bisk's team joined the fight, but their situation wasn't the best. They were currently fighting off a group of thaids that had managed to flank them but were struggling to keep their ground.

They were surrounded, outnumbered, and outmatched. The thaids were fast and relentless, attacking them from all directions. The sound of lasers firing, bombs exploding, powers being unleashed, and screams filled the air as the brigade and Bisk team fought for their lives. Despite their best efforts, the thaids were relentlessly closing in on them.

The situation was becoming direr and direr, and they knew they needed to devise a plan fast if they had any hope of survival.

Suddenly, a loud roar echoed across the battlefield. It was the Blirboth. The creature had emerged from behind some trees, towering over everything around it. It was now clear that the Brigade and Bisk's team had underestimated the power of this thaid. It was unlike anything they had ever seen before.

The Blirboth charged toward the Brigade, swatting away soldiers with ease. Its massive claws and sharp teeth could tear through metal and flesh alike. The soldiers tried to shoot it down, but their weapons did not affect the creature at all, and even their powers seemed to be ineffective. They were too weak. As the Blirboth charged toward the soldiers, the ground shook violently.

Panic spread through the ranks as they scrambled to form a defensive line against the massive beast. Bisk knew this battle would be one of the toughest they'd ever faced.

The Blirboth's eyes glinted menacingly as it let out another deafening roar. The sound was so loud that Bisk could feel it vibrating through his body. He knew that their only hope was to take down the creature before it could do any more damage.

The Brigade quickly sprang into action, launching a full-scale attack on the Blirboth. But despite their best efforts, the thaid seemed invincible, shrugging off blows that would have felled any other beast. Bisk realized they would need more than brute force to defeat this monster.

He and his team had to act fast. They knew that they couldn't take down the Blirdoth with firepower alone. In the meantime, the creature and its minions kept killing soldier after soldier, men or women alike, regardless of their rank or power.

Azelia was going to kill some thaids attacking Andrea when strange bipedal lizards jumped out of the surrounding grass and pounced at her. The girl's pupil shrank and focused on the creature; the young woman almost instinctively gripped her sword and released a horizontal slash with her mana-imbued sword, bisecting the creature in two.

Still, the beast's body opened in the air, throwing all its guts and blood all over the young woman, who futilely tried to avoid it. At the same time, multiple lizards came out of the surrounding bushes with their fangs bared. The creature was lizard-like; they walked on two bulky hind legs with razor-sharp talons with which the beasts usually ripped their prey's throats.

"Jisokans!" Bisk shouted. These were ferocious and highly territorial creatures that lived in forests and hunted by ambushing.

"The Heniate managed to subdue them!" Bisk said while stabbing a lizard in the head.

Andrea's hyenas kept at least ten Jisokans at bay; the hyenas were significantly bigger than them since they were almost as big as a truck due to the amount of mana that the soldier poured into them. Still, the nimble Jisokans were slick and high in number and were not small at all.

Thirty or so of the creatures were attacking Bisk's group. The captain wondered how such powerful and intelligent thaids would end up being controlled by the parasite. It was weird since Bisk didn't know about Jisokans in the east, and he started suspecting that there really was someone behind the Heniate, as some of the soldiers believed.

Bisk focused on the present, calling out orders to his team to defend themselves against the beasts.

Azelia and Jacob had already killed a couple, but there were at least six on each person. In the meantime, the other members of the Brigade were trying to kill the Blirdoth, but it wasn't easy with all the other thaids around them trying to kill them. Bisk knew they couldn't afford to lose focus, for they were outnumbered, and the situation could get worse.

A soldier from the Montgomery clan assisted the team in battle and channeled mana to protect Andrea and Miranda from the assault of some thaids.

Immediately, an earthen dome large enough to shield the two started spreading from the ground and surrounding the duo. At the same time, Miranda channeled her mana into creating a powerful water jet that would kill many thaids simultaneously, but she had to do so before the dome closed on them.

After she was done, a water jet shot from Miranda's fingertips. She didn't have a single target in mind; she moved the water jet horizontally, slaying at least a hundred beasts in moments.

Four more Jisokan jumped on Miranda while she was helpless, but the earth dome closed just in time to stop the creatures from viciously killing her. The other soldiers did the rest, swiftly moving inside the battlefield and killing the creatures by smashing their heads open like watermelons.

At the same time, Andrea's hyenas finished dealing with the creatures, as did Bisk, Jacob, and Azelia. Bisk looked at his companions and asked, "Are you all ok?!"

"Yes." Miranda, Jacob, Azelia, and Andrea replied.

At the same time, the man from the Montgomery clan got killed, and the mana provided to his earth dome ceased to make it crumble into dust. Bisk breathed a sigh of relief and continued leading the group forward; however, the team briefly mourned for the fallen man before resuming their mission.

Miranda's attack affected the environment; in fact, most of the grass surrounding the group ended up being cut, allowing the soldiers beside them to see what was behind the sea of grass.

Jacob turned to see if all the creatures died, but once he did, he saw the Blirdoth looking at them from afar. Around it was a sea of soldiers' bodies; the creature had slaughtered them without mercy.

The creature looked at them; its eyes glowed red, and the thing seemed to be thinking. Suddenly, the Blirdoth rose from the ground, showing off its long teeth and fangs, and started charging at them.

Bisk's heart sank; it was clear from this display of intellect that the beast was sentient, confirming what the higher-ups suspected. The need to kill it before it could do further damage suddenly increased tenfold, but judging by the situation, this would not happen today.

"MOVE!" Bisk shouted. But the thaid was too fast and quickly arrived in front of Azelia. Before anyone else could react, the Blirdoth bit down on Azelia's head, causing the young woman to die immediately.

"AZELIA!" Andrea shouted.

It all happened quickly, even for Azelia, who was highly skilled, especially in melee fights; however, the situation was dire because the monster still charged towards Andrea, ready to bite at him.

However, as it charged, the beast started using its brain crystal power, releasing a toxic cloud that quickly spread throughout the surroundings.

Bisk tried to stop the creature by shooting it with mana arrows, but the creature's thick layer of mana protected it from any damage.

"HELP ME!" Andrea screamed.

In response, Miranda sent a flood of water jets powered by mana at the Blirdoth, but even that didn't work. The other brigade soldiers tried to kill the creature, but it was ineffective. As the beast charged, more and more soldiers died due to its massive weight.

The Blirdoth finally arrived in front of Andrea. His hyenas tried to stop the Blirdoth, and the soldier channeled all his mana into the two summons, but even then, it was futile as the thaid bit at Andrea's head, killing him on the spot.

"GAH!" Andrea and Azelia died like that. As soon as he felt rage coming on, Jacob charged the beast with his spear. But the Blirdoth's cloud enshrouded him, and in the end, all that was left of him was just a puddle of goo.

"RUN, MIRANDA!" At that point, the Brigade could do nothing. Most of the soldiers died; the thaids were already eating them. Some were still alive during the whole process.

Miranda and Bisk felt horrible watching everyone die one after another, but she knew there wasn't anything else she could do. The woman turned on her heels and started running away; the other

soldiers did the same, Bisk included. They tried to reach their vehicles but were followed by the thaid's.

The Blirtoth observed the scene with satisfaction. The humans were dying one by one like flies.