

BIOLOGICAL 241

Chapter 241: Demise

In the meantime, the battle at the Red Palace was going on, and all the workers were aiding Principal Van Dyke in killing the Blirdoth, but they were having a hard time. This was because most of them were old and didn't have the strength to keep up with the monster. Working at the Red Palace was something, but fighting was completely different.

They were still alive only because of the two with the barrier powers.

Principal Van Dyke was leading the attack, and he was acting as the primary damage dealer. He was the only one with enough power to damage the beast, but he was only one person and not powerful enough to kill the beast once and for all. The situation was dire, and the people there were on their last straws.

"Have all the students left the place?" Van Dyke asked.

"It does seem so," one of the workers replied. The man had an exhausted look on his face, he wasn't by any means strong enough to battle such a terrific beast, but he gave it all to protect the students and his colleagues.

This man, named Luke Yera, was the one with the barrier generating brain crystal power, and many knew him since he worked at the Yellow Palace cafeteria. He was very liked by the students due to his cheerful personality and gentle character, and sometimes he gave some snacks to the students for free.

However, there was not an ounce of his old demeanor at this moment since he became a living shield when he was in a fight—only focusing on helping his allies.

The Blirdoth dashed, leaving behind him a trail of poisonous mist that threatened to kill anyone unlucky enough to step inside of it.

The beast had to pay close attention to Van Dyke, the Red Palace's principal, as he was the most significant threat of them all. The Blirdoth, though, was not scared by the man, given that its fur was resistant to withstand the low temperatures unleashed by him, and his strength and miasma could destroy any ice he created.

However, the thaïd did not expect him to be that strong, and he was having tons of problems fighting against him and the others.

Though the creature was smart, as the Heniate controlled it, and it immediately understood that Van Dyke's last attack was one-time use only, the beast could feel that the man's mana reserves were starting almost to deplete.

Principal Van Dyke, seeing the Blirboth's dash aimed at him, propelled himself, with his incredible strength, onto its left side. With a swift motion, he avoided the creature's attack while, at the same time, swinging his sword to its side. The creature then spun on himself, stopping by burying his hind legs' claws inside the ground.

Van Dyke noticed this, but he could not perform the same inhuman feats the beast did and was helpless in front of that situation. The Blirboth had the man under it, and with a swift motion, it swung his front paws at the man, hitting him with great force and sending him crashing against a tree that broke under the pressure of the impact.

The man did not die, as Yera protected him at the last moment. But the shield had only been enough to save the man's life; it didn't shield him from the impact against the tree, and he fell unconscious. That wasn't all; as the man landed on the ground, the Blirboth started looking at him.

The creature had a strange look on its face; people who saw it could swear that it had a smug smile. The thaïd started calmly walking toward the unconscious man, unfazed by the weak attacks the other workers were unleashing on it.

When the beast was a couple of meters from the man, ready to claw him to death, it felt a stinging pain on its back.

The beast turned, and what it saw was the figure of a red-haired woman sporting a massive grin on her face.

"Today it's a big game," the fierce Lioness was magnificent in her pose; she had her arm crossed, her sword on her left, and looked at her prey with an amused smile.

She saw what the beast was capable of, but it was clear from her confident look that she didn't think much about it; after all, who was she? She was the damn strongest mercenary of Etrium's nation and had a crazy power: she could turn into a dragon.

Once she transformed, she was unstoppable; not only were her size, strength, speed, and sensitivity to mana increased by her brain crystal power, but she was also able to breathe fire. She could also transform partially, maintaining her human appearance to a degree.

To many, that didn't look like a strong power; however, the sheer increase in physical stats, coupled with the crazy amount she already had, made them worse than a thaid—a living nightmare.

All of this meant that she was versatile in ranged attacks. As much as she was in close quarters, there was virtually nothing that she could not hunt.

The fierce Lioness dashed toward the creature; she had to partially turn to fight the beast, so she transformed into her Dragonoid form. This significantly increased her strength and speed and allowed her to breathe fire, and since she was armed with a sword, she instantly became a death-dispensing machine.

The beast, sensing the impending danger, dived on its left; it was not fast enough, though, as the fierce Lioness directly chopped its legs off.

The beast screamed in pain, and blood gushed outside the wound. The woman was carefully avoiding any remnants of blood, as she had been previously briefed about the fact that these creatures contained a sort of parasite inside them.

She didn't want to take any risks, and for this reason, she avoided the blood like the plague.

In the meantime, the Heniate roared in anger while watching the fight going on and trying to find a solution to save its avatar. The creature was having difficulties making the Blirdoth walk, but its pride kept it from running away. After all, the beast killed countless humans and subjugated an entire forest; what could this human female do to it?

The Blirdoth then released its poisonous miasma, but a vast fire coming out of the Fierce Lioness's throat burned it all away, setting the creature on fire. Yera placed a protective shield in front of the others to shield them from the flames, and it was at that moment the beast remembered there were at least another ten humans alongside the fearsome female.

The fierce Lioness looked amusingly at the creature; she was already tired of this disappointing encounter. She hoped the beast could entertain her but was greatly mistaken; she was too strong.

The mercenary leader then started to channel mana in crazy amounts. It was something the others had never seen before; not even the principal was able to wield so much mana. She prepared another fire breath as she wanted to destroy the creature and all the parasites it contained and avoid them affecting someone else.

Then the fire breath came out of her mouth, but it was much bigger than the one she had made earlier, which was still burning at the creature, and it was for sure deadlier.

Every person in that garden scrambled; they were scared shitless because of the attack that increased the surrounding temperature by at least 30 degrees and incinerated the surroundings.

Something of that caliber was enough to destroy not only the garden but possibly also the shelters. Luckily, they were far enough from them to leave them unaffected.

The fire traveled incredibly fast toward the crippled beast, who could do nothing to avoid it, having its hind legs cut off and already on fire.

The attack directly hit the thaid, which roared in pain, unable to do anything to stop the flames. Then the breath started burning the Blirdoth to ash, beginning from the fur and ending to the bones. Nothing remained of the beast once the mercenary was done with it.

As soon as the fierce Lioness saw that nothing but ash remained of the Blirdoth, she stopped the attack and relaxed.

"Phew... All done," she said with a huge smile on her face. "Now it's time to head to the main battlefield."

The fierce Lioness then, not caring about the incredulous looks of the others, went on a flying car with a single jump, ascending for more than thirty meters, and then went away.

"Tom!" a worker shouted. She immediately administered first aid to the poor principal, who was still unconscious. The woman was a healer, too old to join the battlefield but too young and with a lot of life in her to simply stay home rotting.

Needless to say, her mana was almost depleted, as she had to save dozens of students from dying due to their wounds and heal her colleagues while fighting the Blirldoth.

Fortunately for everyone, she was a very skilled healer and a seasoned doctor, so she only treated the life-threatening wounds to get the best results with the amount of mana she had available.

This essentially saved Van Dyke by a hairsbreadth; if she had been a little slower or had less mana, he would have died.

Chapter 242: The shelter

Erik's heart was pounding in his chest as he ran through New Alexandria's empty streets. He was overjoyed as he killed Nathaniel and obtained his power, but the fact that someone else was implicated in his assassination attempt was disturbing.

Who the hell was this Achim? Why did he help Nathaniel? He knew the two frequently met in the last period, as Erik saw some conversations between them in the past, but they rarely talked through messages and probably only did so in person. He had to find out who this guy was, which was problematic since the Crystal Cross Gang was still searching for him.

Aside from this, there was a more concerning problem at hand: Erik had to reach the shelter before a monster he couldn't face found him.

As he ran, Erik kept his eyes peeled for any sign of danger. He knew the thaids were still lurking nearby, searching for prey and waiting for their chance to strike.

The city was quiet but otherwise fine. The buildings stood tall and proud, but the streets were deserted. Everyone had gone to fight the monsters outside, many with their sons and daughters in tow, as the war effort was requested of everyone. Erik hid in the shadows cast by the sun, which was still up in the sky, projecting a warm glow over the empty streets.

He dodged around parked cars and leaped over low walls, his body moving with a fluid grace honed by his training and inhuman strength. He moved quickly but silently, not wanting to draw attention to himself.

As he ran, Erik spotted two thaids ahead. They were prowling around a parked car, snarling and snapping their jaws. Erik's heart skipped a beat, but he remained calm. These were beasts he could kill without problems, and he was forced to do so since the shelter was in that direction.

Erik slowed down, moving with the quiet, deliberate steps of a predator. He crept up behind the monsters, his breath shallow and steady. He could hear their growls and snarls, but he remained focused.

Suddenly, one of the monsters turned and caught sight of Erik. Its eyes widened in surprise, and it let out a loud roar. The other monster turned to face Erik, their jaws gaping wide.

These were Snorps, medium-sized, furry thaids, around the size of a dog, with bright green fur and four eyes. Their bodies were round and bulbous, and they had six legs that ended in sharp claws. Their most notable feature was their mouth, which took up almost their entire face and was filled with rows of razor-sharp teeth.

These creatures usually lived in dark, damp caves, where they could hide and ambush their prey. They fed on large rodents and insect-like thaids, but they had been known to attack even larger creatures when desperate for food. Occasionally, they also got out of their caves to hunt for monsters. The two thaids were easy prey, according to Erik's analysis power.

The awakener didn't hesitate. He lunged forward, his body a blur of motion. He struck the monsters with a swift, precise blow, taking them out individually.

Within moments, the monsters lay lifeless on the ground, their bodies twitching and spasming. The thaids didn't stand a chance against Erik's fighting skills. He had trained a lot, and his stats made him deadly; everything could be seen in the ease with which he defeated them. Erik breathed a sigh of relief as he didn't alert any thaid.

[MULTIPLE HOSTILE SNORPS KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[0%...1%...5%...30%...70%...100%]

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING CONVERTING PROCEDURE.]

[3...2...1...0]

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. 16 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

"Seriously?" Erik said. He only got 16 experience points from the beasts. As he was done with the kills, the young man continued heading towards the shelter. He was relatively calm, but he was still alert since the shelter was still a few hundred meters away, and he needed to be cautious of any other dangers that may come his way.

As he walked, he kept his eyes and ears open for any sign of movement or unusual sounds in his surroundings.

He darted down empty streets, turning corners and weaving his way through the deserted city. The silence was oppressive, broken only by the sound of his boots on the pavement and the occasional thaid's snarling, growling, or howling in the distance.

As he ran, Erik couldn't help but think about Nathaniel and how much things changed after he got the system. Initially, Nathaniel was someone he couldn't hope to reach; he had money, power, status, and everything one desired, and he had it.

However, things slowly changed to the point that they developed a bitter rivalry that led to this final, deadly confrontation. However, despite having been mistreated by him, he didn't feel the same way he felt when he killed Logan.

Erik had mixed emotions about the situation and was relieved that he didn't harbor the same level of hatred towards Nathaniel as he did towards Logan. He realized that such intense feelings of hatred could become addictive and consuming, leading to a never-ending cycle of revenge and violence that would only put him in danger.

The young man kept moving cautiously through the empty streets, his senses on high alert, but as he rounded a corner, he spotted a group of monsters up ahead again, huddled around a kid's body; they were eating him.

The young man wondered what this guy was doing around here, outside of the shelter, but whatever the reason, it was clearly a bad choice. The monsters were currently ripping off his arms while others were ripping off his legs. His guts were out in the open, and his stomach's content went out of a wound made by the monsters' fangs.

Erik ducked behind a nearby building and peered around the corner, trying to get a better look. The monsters were not that strong, but he wanted to avoid confrontation if possible.

He scanned the area for another way around and spotted a small alleyway parallel to the street. It was narrow and cramped, but it looked like it would lead him past the monsters without drawing their attention.

Erik moved quickly and quietly, his footsteps soft on the pavement. He slipped into the alleyway and began to make his way along its length, hoping not to be heard by the thaid group.

He could hear the monsters growling and snarling as he moved, but he remained focused. He knew he had to stay calm and avoid any to step onto something or make things fall down as that might give him away.

Finally, Erik emerged from the alleyway, glad the monsters didn't notice him; fighting them would have only been a bother.

He continued on his way, moving through the deserted city. As he went on, he recognized some of the buildings and quickly understood that he was getting closer to the shelter.

"Finally," he said.

The shelter up ahead was massive. He slowed down and approached it cautiously, scanning the area for any signs of danger.

He approached the building with a mix of curiosity and trepidation. As he drew nearer, he could see that the walls were thick, made of reinforced concrete and steel and that multiple defenses had been put in place to deter potential attacks.

The entrance to the bunker was guarded by a pair of massive steel doors that were opened by a device that only humans could access. Erik approached the controls, and after having pressed some buttons, the doors opened, and he went inside. Once there, Erik was greeted by a maze of hallways and rooms, all designed to provide maximum protection and safety to their inhabitants.

The air was cool and filtered, and the lighting was dim but sufficient.

There were blast doors, airlocks, and escape routes throughout the facility, and heavily armed laser turrets guarded each section. The walls were lined with surveillance cameras and motion sensors. A state-of-the-art communication system allowed for a direct line between the different areas of the shelter and the military.

The place was not as luxurious as the Yellow Palace's shelter, and it definitely had fewer defenses, but he didn't know which one was better at that point since the air system malfunction almost killed him.

Despite the intimidating appearance of the place and its multiple defenses, Erik felt a sense of relief and safety wash over him as he settled into his quarters; he was finally safe.

The bunker was well-equipped, with comfortable sleeping quarters, a well-stocked pantry, ample fresh water supplies, and medical equipment. Erik could finally rest easy, knowing he was protected from the dangers of the outside world.

However, much to Erik's joy, the shelter was empty; there wasn't a single person there. Erik expected to find other survivors inside, but there were none, and the only sound was the soft hum of the air filtration system. Erik went to one of the rooms and sat on a bench. Now, he only had to wait for the attack to end, hoping that the outcome would turn in favor of the humans.

As he sat there, Erik couldn't help but think about his friends as he sat there. He prayed that they were safe and that they had made it to a shelter without incident, particularly Aaron, who was outside of the city.

Chapter 243: Rescue

A man, followed by five people, was walking down a narrow aisle in tunnels under the outside walls. It was General Armand Becker and his underlings. The man had a look of utter focus in his mind—all the errors that had brought the situation to be the one they were facing.

He was very disappointed by how his men and women managed the situation and was furious. The General then started addressing his followers and asked, "How's the situation?"

"We managed to secure the outer wall thanks to the mercenary's intervention; it is only a matter of time before we repel the monsters below," the man replied, trembling.

General Becker was a man of power; he was a skilled warrior, the strongest inside the nation. His body naturally released a powerful mana aura, similar to that of the thaids', which made everyone shudder at his presence.

"Good, at least these filthy mercenaries from Etrium can do their job properly." The commanding officer had a repulsion for the mercenaries; he thought they were the most unreliable and greedy bunch of people out there, and this was because they moved only if money was involved, not caring how many people were dying or suffering. The fact that they came from Etrium was even worse.

The six people left the narrow aisle and directly faced the empty space between the walls and the stretch of land surrounding the city's barrier. They quickly went to the top of the defensive building and looked down below to see how the situation was unfolding.

After settling things on the walls, Camille and Ramon directly descended the tall construction and started killing beast after beast; they were unstoppable and proved very effective on the battlefield.

General Becker looked at them with a strange glint in his eyes; the pure hatred he had for this profession was evident.

"Keep attacking the monsters below. Use everything we have. I don't want any more surprises."

"Yes, sir."

The man then started walking along the walls; explosions, gunshots, grunts, and any kind of sound could be heard from there. The people were still fighting harshly against the creatures, but this time most of the soldiers went below as the thaids were now in a manageable number.

"Any news from within the city?" the General asked.

Yes, sir, it looks like the number of civilian victims is around ten thousand people," one of his followers replied. He was sweating from head to toe as he knew the man in front of him wouldn't take this answer positively.

The General did grind its teeth. "What are the police saying?"

"Well, it looks like most of the people were able to go inside the shelters on time, except for shelter 767. A lot of kids and old people were left out because a huge number of monsters attacked them during the process," the soldier said.

"How was the situation there?" the General asked.

"It looks like at least four thousand people of the total who died tried to enter that shelter. The police intervention was futile, but they did their best." The General knew that there wasn't anything that the police could do due to their low numbers.

The problem was that despite everything they did to prevent the attack, reduce the number of monsters, and set up defenses, the army's attempts were futile. They couldn't even understand where the parasite found more than twenty Yegyavits and used them to attack the eastern gate simultaneously; these creatures usually roamed alone.

Never before had a group of these monsters attacked at the same time.

"Has the situation been cleared?"

"Yes, according to the chief of police, Luca Grimes, the mercenaries arrived at the location and killed all the monsters."

"Good. Is there anything else?"

"Yes, sir." The general started trembling as the bad news didn't end there. How could the situation have turned out so bad? "The Blirboth was last seen at the Red Palace."

The General's ears perked up, but he was rageful. The only ones who remained at the Red Palace were promising kids who didn't have enough experience to fight on the front lines. They were basically sitting ducks with little to no experience.

When he asked for the citizens' intervention, the kids, especially the ones from the Red Palace, were put in relatively safe places behind the army lines; he made it so that the nation's future wasn't destroyed but allowed them to contribute to the cause. However, it was different for the ones who were left behind.

Then he recalled something important: a kid he was keeping an eye on; the only awakener inside the nation, Erik Romano, was there. He hoped he was safe inside a shelter.

"Did something happen?" the General asked with a solemn tone.

"It looks like some students went out of the shelters."

"What?!" the General shouted. "What were the students doing outside?"

"We don't know exactly; someone reported that there was a malfunction in a shelter's ventilation system, and the Blirldoth's poisonous miasma entered the building," the soldier said.

The General was having problems holding his anger at that point. <Faulty shelters? Has all the money spent on those buildings been useless?> Becker thought.

"What is the shelter in question, and what about the students?" the General asked.

"As for the shelter, it was the Yellow Palace's. As for the students, more than half died."

"WHAT?!" the General shouted. Everyone turned to look at him, trembling.

"I'M SORRY, SIR!" The soldier said as the mana levels visibly increased around the General.

Then the follower to which the General was talking to added, "However, we got a report that the Fierce Lioness successfully killed the creature."

"Ugh... That damn wench..." He was grateful for her intervention, but his hatred for the mercenaries resurfaced at that moment.

Among the people from Etrium whom the General hated, the first spot was taken by Amanda, indeed. She was an insensitive prick who only cared for money and power. She did not care for anyone besides her mercenary company's well-being—not about her men and women, but about the guild itself; the General doubted she even cared for her daughter.

"At least it is good news..." The General said. "I want you to check where a kid is," he then added.

"Who?" the soldier said.

"Erik Romano, from the Red Palace. I want a report in half an hour. Oh... and keep me informed of what happens below the walls. Dismissed."

The soldier saluted, and the General then went away with heavy steps. Becker went off the wall, opened the door leading to the aisle from which he came, and disappeared into the underground tunnel's darkness.

[LATER THAT DAY.]

As the battle ended, Aaron was still hiding inside the building where he fought the beetle-like creatures with his father; he was currently inside a wardrobe in a fetal position.

He couldn't leave the place for multiple reasons: he feared for his life, didn't want to leave his father's body, and believed that seeing the monsters, the police would have come to save him. He knew staying there was dangerous, but luckily nothing happened to the building, and it didn't collapse.

He was crying and shaking all over; this was the worst experience he had had in his life. The fear of death still lingered in his mind. It was different from when he was outside the city, as there were less monsters in a controlled environment with many powerful people killing the most dangerous thaids. But here, now, there were no such things.

He thought about many things during his time alone inside the wardrobe, but what he did think about the most was one person, Luca Grimes, Allan's father.

"It was all his fault, his fault... Uh? What is that sound?"

The boy stood up, his eyes bloodshot due to crying, and he kept hearing something. Then he went outside the wardrobe. He could hear the noise increase; it looked like a person was speaking.

The young man then went to a window with careful steps; he hoped that no beast could hear him, but he was not so sure that there weren't any thaids nearby, and the last thing he needed was another battle to take place.

When he was at the window, he finally saw multiple police cars giving orders to the citizens.

"For all the people who could not reach the shelters, do not get outside your hiding places; I repeat, DO NOT GET OUT OF YOUR HIDING PLACES."

"What the hell?! Are they stupid? Who in a right state of mind would leave his hiding place?" Aaron then went back inside the wardrobe he hid in and waited until someone went to save him.

A couple of hours passed, and a group of policemen, followed by some mercenaries, approached the smashed building entrance. If their reasoning was correct, some beasts were attracted to someone hiding inside the building. There was no logical explanation for why the building's door would have been destroyed otherwise.

The group entered with cautious steps, and then, one by one, they went up the stairs. However, the place was a mess; there were thaid bodies everywhere, meaning that whoever did this was powerful enough to stand his ground. If they were alive, though, that was another matter.

On the second floor, the situation was a mess; basically, the third floor collapsed onto the second, leaving debris and dead bodies everywhere.

"What the hell happened here?" an officer said out loud.

"I don't know," another replied, "but keep your eyes open."

Once they arrived on the third floor, they saw the hole created by Aaron's and his father's powers but quickly noticed a huge puddle of blood that cascaded from the stairs. It looked like someone had really been here.

The police officers drew their weapons from their holsters, and the mercenaries did the same. Going with the group of policemen were two mercenaries.

Weapons in hand, they carefully inspected all the floors, and when they arrived at the fifth one, they saw two smashed apartment doors. They immediately went inside one of the apartments. Once they carefully inspected it, and after having shouted to see if people or creatures were inside the rooms, they found Aaron's father's body with a gaping hole in his chest.

"Poor man..." one of the mercenaries muttered.

"Maybe he is the one who killed all these monsters..." a police officer said.

"Let's go to the other apartment; if the man is in the wardrobe, it means that someone did put him in there."

For this reason, the group then went toward the other apartment. They didn't know what to expect; maybe the man was killed by someone and not by a beast; they couldn't tell the difference, and for this reason, they took careful steps inside the apartment.

"Is anybody there?!"

"Uh?" Aaron heard the voice shouting inside the apartment, so he stood up and went outside the wardrobe.

He could do nothing but shout, "HELP ME! HELP ME!"

Soon, the officers and the mercenaries in tow went to the room in which Aaron shouted, and then they saw him.

"PLEASE! HELP ME!"

"Call a healer! Fast!" a police officer said. Immediately, his colleague did as instructed and requested assistance.

The officers helped Aaron stand, saying, "It's ok, kid, you are safe now."

Chapter 244: Plans

The rhythmic sound of footsteps on the metallic floor could be heard. A man was walking down the aisle of a military building when a high-ranking officer summoned him to make a report; he was Major Fischer.

He had already recovered from the Blirboth assault thanks to a healer's intervention, but he was mentally tired as he didn't have time to rest properly; after all, only a day had passed since the attack on the city.

Everything went well after the mercenaries' intervention, especially once the fierce lioness joined the fight outside the barrier. She quickly killed the most dangerous creatures, and once the thaids ended up being in inferior numbers after seeing the woman's fury, they quickly retreated.

However, they were too organized; if what happened previously didn't give Frant enough reason to think an Heniate was behind this, now they were sure.

Major Fischer had been summoned to talk to General Becker, as he was one of the few that battled the Blirboth; coupled with the fact that he was the officer tasked to investigate the parasite case, it was clear that there would have been people that wanted to talk to him. After all, this was strictly linked to the attack on the city.

The Major finally arrived in front of the office door he was summoned to and politely knocked on the door. He heard a deep voice from inside, commanding him to enter.

"You can enter," the person inside the room said. The Major took a deep breath and opened the door, ready to face whatever questions were thrown his way.

Major Fischer then opened the door and went toward the chair in front of the room's desk.

The table was full of paper, books, pens, and stamps. It was weird to see paper documents at that time and age. Still, aside from those things, there were even holographic computers, a tablet, and many documents scattered on the desk.

Major Fischer put himself in front of the chair and saluted the man in front of him, General Armand Becker.

"You can rest," the general said.

Then the man gestured to Major Fischer to sit on the chair before the desk, and Fischer complied. He felt a bit uneasy as he walked towards the chair; the man in front of him wasn't a simple one, and he couldn't help but notice the severe expression on General Becker's face.

"I called you here because I wanted more information about the Blirboth; it seems you directly fought the beast, right?"

Fischer kept a serious and concentrated look on his face, and with conviction, he replied: "Yes, sir, but I had to retreat at a certain point. I could not fight it alone, and my intervention was basically useless." Becker nodded; he had seen how powerful that beast was.

"Don't worry about that. Many reports told me it was almost impossible to win against that thaid. I'm not here to blame you. However, the reports say that you were also the person tasked with investigating the beasts' behavior. Tell me, what were your conclusions about the matter?" The general asked with an intrigued look. Maybe the man could enlighten him about the reasons for this beast's attack.

He was certain that an Heniate was behind the attack, but he wanted to understand why.

"Well, as we already reported, we found traces of parasitic contamination inside the beast bodies we brought back before the attack on the city. These parasites have also been found inside all the creatures that attacked us. For this reason, we concluded that a sentient parasite monster named Heniate was behind this," Fischer said with a professional tone fitting for a military man.

"Because of the Blirboth, we haven't been able to find out where the beast lives, but it's in the east, near the borders of Etrium, probably," Major Fischer said.

The man kept looking at Becker, saying, "It was clear from the beginning that its threat level was high, but it only increased after the horde started to march toward New Alexandria. Moreover, it seems that the parasite monster is not only a threat to our city but also to neighboring regions, but I wonder why it didn't attack Etrium."

Fischer was still sitting in front of the man. He had to say many things, but there wasn't probably enough time to say them all, so he tried to be concise.

"As for the parasitized monsters, as we already reported, their saliva and blood are full of parasite eggs. We have discovered that human contamination is possible and leads to insanity and mutations."

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The discussion went on for a quarter-hour, during which Major Fischer briefed the general about what he and Professor Derr Xillion found out thanks to their studies on Ranger Lakwosky.

It was clear that General Becker had put the parasite responsible for the monster invasion at the top of his to-exterminate list. Major Fischer also emphasized the importance of finding a way to prevent the parasite from spreading toward other important cities, such as Fasard, as it could pose a significant threat to national security.

The general nodded in agreement and promised to allocate more resources towards this endeavor.

"Major, I want you to keep studying the beast. Find out as much as you can; I will give you full authority regarding this matter," the general said.

"I will also give you the authority to perform a screening inside the population; if what you are saying is true, we could potentially face another calamity due to the people affected by the parasite. We can't possibly leave potentially dangerous people in the city. If, as you said, removing the parasite is possible, then I want you to start immediately treating the citizens," Becker said.

"Professor Xillion is almost done with the cure. We just need some time, and it will be done, sir."

"Good, you are dismissed." The urgency of the situation demands prompt action, and you both must do everything in your power to ensure the safety of our citizens. Keep me updated on the progress."

The Major saluted and then went outside the office with a resolute look. He had a lot of things to do, starting with finding all the people bitten by the creatures and healing them all with the aid of Professor Xillion. Then organize a task force to find this damn parasite and end it as soon as possible.

"Aaron!"

"Mom!"

The two ran toward each other and embraced. Amelia looked at her son; he was full of dust and dirt, and even blood was on his shirt.

"What happened to you?!" Aaron's mother shouted, looking at her son, who had a ghastly look on his face.

"It's a long story," Aaron replied.

"A story that you better start telling me!"

Aaron took a quarter-hour to tell his mother what did happen to him in the hours the city was under attack, a time during which his mother cried several times as she had to listen to how Aaron had to see people die and how he almost kicked the bucket a couple of times.

However, when she learned how her husband had died, trying to protect his only son, she started wailing in an unconsolable way, and the healers had to give her some sedatives.

It was only due to sheer luck that Aaron survived—clearly, it was also thanks to the fact that he was a member of the Red Palace and was among the best ones at that. If things had been slightly different, he would have already been transformed into monster poop.

"The only important thing now is that you are safe," Aaron's mother replied with a gentle but sad look. She embraced her son again, tightening her grip on him this time. After a couple of seconds in each other's embrace, Aaron asked his mother a question.

"Mom, what will we do now?"

Reluctance could be seen in Amelia; she didn't know. She was still processing Eddie's death, and talking about the future wasn't easy for her. Amelia obviously understood that Aaron was worried, but she didn't have any suggestions available. They had to go on regardless.

"We will find a way, don't worry," she replied, clenching her fist. Aaron nodded, grateful for his mother's reassurance but still uncertain about what the future held for them. He knew they had to keep moving forward, but the weight of Eddie's absence made it feel like an impossible task.

"Ok..."

After a while, a healer came to check on Aaron. Luckily, he was unharmed physically, but emotionally, he was a mess.

"Hello!"

"Hello..."

The doctor immediately went to Aaron and looked at him.

"It looks like you are overall fine." The healer then turned to his mother, Amelia. "We had to keep him here due to what he saw," he added.

"I know, thank you," the woman replied.

"Ok, let me check again if you have some problems; it won't take much."

The healer then made Aaron take off his shirt and lie on the bed. He then started scanning his body with some weird devices that allowed him to see bones, organs, and the like. It was precise and very clear. Luckily, even after this double-check, the young man was mostly fine.

The healer then proceeded to ask him a few questions about the accident and his emotional state and then recommended that he see a therapist to help him work through any trauma he may be experiencing.

"All right, everything is done. You are ok, but I suggest you take your time to rest. Unfortunately, we need to treat many people, so I will dismiss you from the hospital, as we need some space. You can go to the reception to sign the papers," the doctor said to Aaron and his mother.

He then left the room while Aaron dressed and left the building with his mother.

Chapter 245: Peace?

After Blirdoth's death at the hands of the fierce Lioness, the thaids' horde had been thrown into disarray as the Heniate controlled the monsters through it.

The soldiers took advantage of this and launched a counterattack, fighting back against the creatures that had threatened their city.

The battle was intense and brutal, with both sides sustaining heavy losses. But the soldiers were determined to protect their home and their people, and they fought with all their might. Many people died in the battle, leaving behind families and loved ones who mourned their loss.

The attack ended once the Fierce Lioness came to the battlefield and made the horde retreat. Five days have passed since that battle.

As the city began to recover from the attack, the people who had fought on the front lines were hailed as heroes—basically, the whole city. General Becker threw a grand celebration to honor the deceased, with parades and feasts in the streets.

But the celebrations were bittersweet. The ones who joined the fight had lost friends and comrades in the battle, even family members. Besides, the army knew that the war against the thaids was far from over, especially considering that the Heniate's problem was far from over. Many dark points about the situation weighed heavily on their minds. Why did it decide to attack Frant? Why New Alexandria?

Was there someone behind it?

Despite being exhausted and traumatized by the horrors they had witnessed, the soldiers kept doing their job and patrolled the city.

Over the next few days, New Alexandria was on high alert. The military stationed troops around the city and throughout the forest, and they set up lookout posts to watch for any sign of the thaids' return. The horde dispersed, and with that, Frant started hunting the lone monsters wandering the forest.

In the meantime, life in the city began to return to normal. Shops and businesses reopened, and people went about their daily routines. But there was a sense of unease that hung over the city, a feeling that they were not yet safe. Rumors and speculation spread throughout the city about

General Becker, as he was deemed incompetent to stop the horde, and the consensus he gained through the years fell.

Some people even believed that he had somehow allowed the attack to happen, while others thought that he was simply incompetent. The criticism did not, however, deter General Becker. He knew he had done what he could, and now there was something else to do: find the Heniate.

However, another problem was on the horizon: many people had been bitten by the parasitized thaids, meaning the injured ones would probably mutate. Luckily, most monsters killed their opponents before they could infect them, but some were not so lucky.

After Erik reached the shelter, he waited for the situation to calm down, but he left the building only after the authorities told everyone it was safe and the monsters inside the city had all been killed.

Luckily, the city managed to do that in a single day, as the monsters that entered New Alexandria were not that many compared to the human population.

After that, Erik quickly went to the Red Palace, where he found his friends. Luckily, they were all unharmed, as they were in the Red Palace shelter; of course, Erik told them what happened to the Yellow Palace, how a weird Blirdoth almost killed him, and how the Principal saved him.

Of course, they were glad he managed to escape that situation. They even explained how they heard the fight from the Red Palace's shelter, despite not being very close to the battlefield. Clearly, everyone then contacted their families; Mikey's and Anderson's parents, brothers, and sisters went to fight, but they luckily came out of the fight unscathed.

However, they didn't have any news about Aaron. It was only until the day after that they learned what had happened. Anderson called his friend on the phone, and he told him he was at the hospital, that his father had died, and that her mother had returned from the battlefield alive. He said he would return to the Red Palace only after his father's funeral and after he rested a bit.

The following day, August 7, the funeral was held, and all of Aaron's friends attended it. Even Luca Grimes and his son Allan went; however, that enraged Eddie's son, as he thought it was Luca's, the chief of police, fault for that situation happening.

After the funeral, tensions rose between Aaron and Luca. Eddie's son blamed the chief of police for not being able to protect his father and for having prevented them from reaching the shelter. Luca explained that they did everything possible to protect the city and its citizens, but Aaron wouldn't listen.

The following day, Aaron returned to the Red Palace, but he was no longer the same person. He was quieter and more reserved than before. His friends tried to comfort him, but they didn't know what to say. They could only imagine what he had been through.

On the ninth, everything returned to normal at the Red Palace. With lessons going on, now more than ever, Frant needed soldiers. The authorities made sure that the city was safe from any further monster attacks. However, the incident left a deep scar in everyone's hearts. They would never forget what had happened and how it had affected their lives.

Despite the tragedy, Erik and his friends found solace in each other's company. They had been through a lot together, and they knew they could rely on each other no matter what. That day, Erik was training with Master Nieminen again.

"So, some friends told me you fought the Blirdoth with the Principal. How was it? I heard it was a tough beast..."

Erik nodded, his expression serious as he recalled the battle. "It was definitely tough. The Blirdoth was incredibly fast and strong, and despite the Principal's intervention, we could only run away. But he was amazing. He was so skilled and fearless, and he kept us all safe. I don't think we would have survived without him."

Master Nieminen nodded in understanding. "The principal is a truly remarkable man," she said. "I do not doubt that he saved many lives that day. And you, Erik, showed great courage and skill. I'm proud of you. However, I'm also sorry you had to face that monster; not everyone would have had the courage to fight."

What you and the other survivors did was remarkable."

Erik smiled at the compliment. "Thanks, Master. I couldn't have done it without your training." Master Nieminen chuckled. "Well, now, we should go back to our training."

"Yes, Master."

Erik then stepped onto the training mat, taking a deep breath to steady his nerves. Master Nieminen stood across from him, her flyssa at the ready.

"Remember, Erik, that being quick and accurate is the best way to use the flyssa and my fighting style. Do not make too wide movements, and aim for the vital spots," she said, her voice calm but firm. "Don't waste any movements, and always keep your guard up."

Erik nodded, his grip tightening on his own weapon. He then lunged forward, his blade flashing in the air as he aimed for his master's throat. But the woman was too quick for him, dodging out of the way and countering with a swift strike to Erik's thigh.

"Good try, but you need to be faster," she said, a hint of a smile on her lips. "Keep your strikes sharp and direct, and don't telegraph your moves that way. I could tell what you wanted to do way before you started moving."

Erik gritted his teeth, determined to do better. He circled around his master, watching her every move. She was like a predator, poised and ready to strike at any moment.

He lunged forward again, this time aiming for her midsection. But once again, she dodged his attack easily, spinning around and delivering a sharp blow to his arm.

"Again," she said, her voice encouraging. "You're getting there."

Erik nodded, feeling the sting of the blow but refusing to let it slow him down. He took a deep breath and launched himself into another attack, this time with more speed and focus than before.

Master Nieminen parried his blow easily again, but she didn't strike back this time. Instead, she stepped back and motioned for Erik to do the same.

"Good job, Erik," she said, her voice softening. "You're making progress."

She walked over to him, her flyssa still at the ready. "However, you are holding your flyssa wrong. You need to angle it better if you want to get the most out of the weapon. Here, let me show you," she said, taking his blade and demonstrating a series of intricate moves.

"See the angle? Now, I will make the same move again, but by making the same mistake you did." She then repeated the move, but the result was much slower than before; even Erik could understand what she would do, and all of that was only because she wielded the sword differently.

"Can you see how precise my blade's movements became? That's what you need to do, too."

Erik watched in awe as his master wielded the weapon; she looked like an immovable mountain. He knew he had a long way to go before he could match her level of expertise, but he was determined to keep practicing until he got there.

"Thank you, Master," he said, taking back his blade. "I'll keep working on it."

Master Nieminen nodded, a small smile playing at the corners of her lips. "I have no doubt you will, Erik."

Chapter 246: Matthew

Nathaniel's father, Matthew, stood in his living room, staring blankly at the wall. His wife, Marie, was crying on the sofa, but he couldn't bring himself to join her. He felt numb as if his body had shut down to protect him from the pain that was threatening to overwhelm him.

He had just received the news that his son Nathaniel had probably died. He had disappeared during the attack on the city, and they couldn't find any information about him, despite having sent many men to search for him. The likely outcome was that he was dead and had trouble restraining himself and avoiding crying in front of his men.

The details were sparse, but his goons believed that the thaids had killed him during the attack on the city. Matthew never feared for his son's safety, and he never thought this could happen, as his son was a skilled fighter and had always been cautious. How could he have been caught off guard by those monsters? He refused to believe he was dead, but the situation had all led to this outcome.

As the news of his son's death started to sink in, Matthew started to feel many different things. He was angry at the thought that his son had probably been taken away from him, furious that the thaids dared to kill one of his own. He was also consumed with guilt; he had always been very demanding of his son and didn't spend much time with him.

Tears began to stream down Matthew's face as he thought about the last time he had seen his son and as they argued about something small. Matthew's emotions were overwhelming, and he couldn't help but wonder if things would have been different if he had been a better father. He knew that he could never make up for the lost time.

Matthew's grief was consuming, and he couldn't bear the thought of facing the world without his son. He felt lost like a part of him had been ripped away. Nathaniel had been his only child and had always been the center of Matthew's world, as he planned on making him the next leader of his organization.

Matthew had dedicated his life to ensuring Nathaniel had everything he needed to succeed, but now it seemed like all that effort had been for nothing.

Now, the world had come crashing down, leaving him with nothing but pain and sorrow. As the hours turned into days, Matthew found himself consumed by grief. He couldn't eat or sleep and spent most of his time staring out the window, lost in thought. He missed his son terribly and wished he could turn back time and change the outcome of that fateful day, maybe forcing his son to go to a shelter.

In the end, and after several days, as he finally accepted that Nathaniel was dead, Matthew realized he would never fully recover from the loss of his son; the kid had been his pride and joy, and his absence had left a hole in his heart that could never be filled, but he acknowledged he had to move on. However, he hoped that his son had found peace in the afterlife.

Matthew sat alone in his study, his eyes red and puffy from crying. He had been trying to gather his thoughts and keep working. But every time he tried to focus, his mind drifted back to Nathaniel, and the pain would hit him all over again.

Lost in thought, he heard a knock on the door as he was there. He wiped his eyes and tried to compose himself as one of his men entered the room. The man had a somber expression on his face as he was about to deliver some sad news.

"Sir," the man said, his voice hesitant. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but we found something we thought you should know about."

Matthew looked up at him, wondering what could possibly be more important than his son's death.

"What is it?" he asked. The man then handed him a broken phone, and Matthew felt his heart sink as he recognized it as Nathaniel's.

"We found this near where we found Nathaniel's body," the man said. "It looks like it was destroyed, but the state of the phone suggests that it was broken on purpose. It was probably a human's doing."

Matthew's mind raced as he tried to make sense of it all. Despite his astounding talent, he had always known that his son had many rivals and enemies, but he couldn't imagine who would want to hurt him so much as to kill him in the middle of a thaid invasion. Then the man spoke again, and his worst fears were confirmed.

"We also did some digging, and it seems that Nathaniel had some problems with some people from school. Apparently, he was also kicked out by the Red Palace," the man said.

"WHAT?!"

Matthew felt rage building inside him as he listened to the man's words. If what he said was true, there was a high chance that he had been killed. But aside from this, why didn't his son tell him the Red Palace expelled him? How could they humiliate him this way? He was Matthew McConnel, the Mambas' leader.

"Did you find out why he was kicked out?" The man asked.

"Not yet; the Red Palace is keeping this under wraps, but we think the other students may know about this, and we are searching for the right opportunity to investigate the matter," the man said.

"Good..."

As Matthew held Nathaniel's broken phone in his hands, he felt a sense of anger and determination rising up in him. The man kept explaining what he and his team members had found out, and as he did, it appeared clear that all of this was a ploy concocted by someone to get rid of his son. He vowed to find out who was responsible for his son's death and make them pay.

But even as he made this vow, Matthew knew it would never bring Nathaniel back. He would always carry the pain of his son's loss with him, and nothing could ever change that. All he could do now was honor Nathaniel's memory and ensure his legacy lived on.

Matthew then left the building. He needed to take a breath of fresh air; besides, he needed to do something that day. He reached his garage and entered a limousine, and then he told the man

driving to bring him to the town hall, where he was required to attend a banquet since the mayor was going to make an announcement.

The driver started the car, and Matthew, in the meantime, grabbed the phone; he had to make a call. The phone rang a few times, and a man replied from the other side.

"Here Is Simone speaking. Good morning boss."

"Simone, there is work for you to do," Matthew said.

Simone was the leader of a powerful team inside the Mambas, the black toads; they were the ones he asked to take the most important jobs: kidnapping, killing, investigating, etc.

"How can I help you?" Simone asked in a respectful voice that had a hint of fear.

"I'm afraid I have some terrible news. My son was killed last week, and some of my men told me this was probably man-made."

"Oh, sir, I'm so sorry to hear that. Do you want me to investigate the matter?"

"Indeed. I understand that you and your team, the Black Toads, are the best in the business when it comes to investigating these kinds of things. I would like you to find out what happened to my son parallel to the other teams doing the same."

Simone's face expressed a mix of sorrow and shock. He knew how important Matthew's son was to him, and he felt the pressure of the task that was being assigned to him.

"Of course, sir. We will do everything we can to discover what happened to Nathaniel." Matthew nodded slowly, his face grave and sad.

"I appreciate your dedication and expertise in this matter, Simone. Keep me updated on any progress you make." Matthew's voice was heavy with emotion as he spoke, clearly struggling to maintain his composure. However, as the boss of the Mambas, he couldn't let his subordinates hear him crying.

However, Simone could sense the sadness in Matthew's voice, and he knew that this was a difficult time for him.

"Don't worry, sir; we will work closely with the other teams and share any information we find to ensure a comprehensive investigation. You have my word that we will not rest until we have answers for you." He offered his condolences once more before ending the call.

As the call ended, both men had heavy feelings in their hearts. Simone knew that this was a task that needed to be handled with the utmost care and attention, and he was determined to do his best to bring closure to Matthew and his wife and make a good impression on his boss.

Matthew then told the driver to go faster, and with that, he reached the town hall.

Chapter 247: The announcement

At the town hall, a nervous mayor could be seen wiping the sweat off his forehead. After much talking and thinking, General Becker and his group decided to set up a mercenary system in the country. He even made a deal with Etrium. The materials the mercenaries would get would be sold with priority to them, and in exchange, Etrium would send some of their master artisans to teach the art in Frant.

The mayor was concerned about the possible consequences of this decision on the town's safety and economy, and he wondered if there were any alternative solutions to the problem. Before making such a significant change, he hoped General Becker had carefully considered all the risks and benefits.

It was clear that after this whole ordeal with the attack on the city, there was a need for more people to take care of the thaids. So that the soldiers could be deployed on Hinian's battlefield, hoping to conquer the nation.

This would also give the people a false sense of freedom, while the truth was that they would do precisely what Becker wanted: take care of the thaids, and have more soldiers at his disposal. Frantians didn't need to train that much since they had been in the military for at least ten years before being discharged and changing professions.

The mayor was briefed about this and was now at the town hall to speak to the reporters. He was sweating due to nervousness, as he didn't really like to speak to huge crowds; besides, many influential people from all over the nation were there.

The man was waiting for the press conference to start in a room where only a table full of food could be seen. The city was going to offer a buffet for the guests that were going to attend. He took a deep breath and tried calming himself down by grabbing a cup of coffee, hoping the caffeine would help him stay alert during the conference.

Among the personalities that were going to participate were people representing the city's council, people like Matthew McConnel, as he was one of the wealthiest men in the city and had many businesses around New Alexandria, and many other people from the upper classes.

The press was going to attend this event too, and this was what worried Calvert the most. He knew that they could be ruthless, and he didn't want to say anything that could be taken out of context or misinterpreted.

It was true that Becker actually governed the city, but because the mayor's figure was still present, most of the blame would fall on him if what he was about to say was unpopular. But he reminded himself how important this announcement was for the country's future. Then he took a deep breath and turned to face the crowd.

As the first people started to come, the man went to greet them. "Welcome, welcome!" he said to each of them as if he were the house host. He maintained a friendly and approachable demeanor, hoping to put the attendees at ease. As they settled in, the mayor couldn't help but feel a sense of responsibility and pressure weighing down on him.

He knew that how well this announcement went would significantly affect the nation's future, so he was determined to make it with confidence and clarity. The mayor took a deep breath and scanned the room, making eye contact with as many people as possible. He began by thanking everyone for coming.

After everyone arrived, including the press, some of the mayor's staff gave a brief presentation of the event. After their speech ended, the mayor walked up to the podium and went behind the microphone, and it was then that he started his speech.

"As you know, New Alexandria was recently subject to a beast tide." The people in the room started murmuring; after all, they were there when the city was attacked, and they could hardly forget the horrors they saw that day.

"Many sacrifices were made that day; we lost a lot of people, be they proud soldiers defending the citizens or us being part of the powerful economy that New Alexandria has shown, and of which I'm

very proud," the mayor said with emphasis. He was proud of what he and his staff achieved during their service in terms of military might and economic power.

"Unfortunately, the lives that we lost that day taught us a lesson; we will never be safe against the beast lurking in the shadows. We will never be safe from the thaids." At that point, the people attending the press conference were looking at the mayor with teary eyes.

The mayor's speech went on for five minutes, five very long minutes, during which the crowd of people listened to what he said with rapt attention.

<It's going well...> The mayor thought.

He knew that he was obtaining the best possible result. Now, the best part was coming, and he hoped that people would positively take this information.

"For this reason, we have decided to allow mercenary teams and guilds to be established. Everyone, after military service, can join this career path. If we all join the effort, we can clear Frant of the thaids presence. We will enter a new era and conquer the world!"

Cheers of applause could be heard through the town hall; some people already knew of this, like Nathaniel's or Amber's fathers, but many did not.

The press had the strongest reaction; they recorded the event and wrote things in their notebooks, jotting down any useful information. They took photos of the mayor and the other people attending the conference, and it was clear to them that the government had already told these people everything they had to know.

A man asked, "Isn't this a blatant attempt to keep us fighting even after military service?"

"Joining a mercenary team is not mandatory, contrary to military service, and many profitable opportunities can be taken from this job. Look at the Band of Giants. They are filthy rich, and their members are extremely powerful!"

Then, the people began to talk and murmur. Many people had intrigued looks on their faces, and some others had indifferent ones.

"What does Mr. McConnel think about the matter?" a woman asked.

Matthew then told what he thought about it: "As you all know, we have been facing numerous threats from the monsters that roam the lands around us. These threats not only pose a danger to our citizens but also hinder our progress and development as a city.

However, with the help of well-trained and organized mercenary teams and guilds, we can effectively reduce the number of monsters and ensure the safety of our people," Matthew said. He turned to look at the press, which was recording him speaking.

"Moreover, by establishing such teams and guilds, we can create employment opportunities for our citizens, as these groups will require skilled individuals who can handle combat and strategic planning.

This will not only help us in our efforts to reduce the monster population but also contribute to the growth of our economy." Matthew grabbed an olive from a nearby table and swallowed it.

"Furthermore, these teams and guilds can also help us in our quest for valuable resources that can be found in the wild. They can venture into uncharted territories and bring back valuable goods that can benefit our city's development.

In conclusion, establishing mercenary teams and guilds can bring numerous benefits to our city, including reducing the monster population, earning money, and securing our city's surroundings. I urge you all to support this initiative and help us make our city a safer and more prosperous place to live in."

<Nice assists,> the mayor thought. He also nodded in agreement, impressed with Matthew's glib tongue.

"We will allow this starting from the next week," the mayor added. "If you are interested or know someone who would like to join the thaid exterminating effort, feel free to share the news with as many people as you can!"

The press went on for half an hour, and the mayor spent the rest of the time trying to sugarcoat the situation for the people present. It was clear that countless articles were going to be published the following day, and the mayor was hoping that the coverage in the news would get enough people interested in the initiative for them to form teams and support the government decision.

However, the man wanted this for purely egoistical reasons; he wanted to keep his position and wealth.

After the banquet ended, the mayor and his secretary left the room, and then Mayor Calvert said, "It went better than I anticipated after all." The woman nodded energetically, aware that the mayor's message had been well-received by the attendees and that there was a good chance that many of them would take action to join guilds and mercenary teams or spread the word to others who might be interested.

Chapter 248: Massive improvements

Erik stepped out of the Yellow Palace's training room. The training had been harsh, but despite this and the fatigue he had accumulated, he felt exhilarated and happy for his gains. He knew he needed something to replenish his energy and spotted a vending machine on the ground floor. As he walked towards it, he dug into his pocket to retrieve some coins.

As he was about to make his selection, he heard a familiar voice behind him. "Hey, Erik!" Amber called out. He turned around to greet her, a smile spreading across his face. "Hey, Amber, did you just finish your training?" he asked, happy to see her.

"Yeah, I did. It was tough, but I feel like I made some progress today," Amber replied, a hint of satisfaction in her voice. "What about you? How was your training?"

"It was intense, but I feel like I'm making progress, too," Erik said, nodding.

Amber looked at Erik as if he were a monster. "You improved quite a bit in the past few months. Shouldn't you rest a bit?" she said. Erik smiled and replied, "I appreciate your concern, but I don't want to lose the momentum. I have set a goal for myself and want to achieve it as soon as possible. Besides, there is still much to do..."

Erik then looked at the coin he had in his hands and then at the vending machine. "I'm about to grab a drink from the vending machine. Do you want anything?"

Amber thought for a moment before shaking her head. "No, I'm good. But thanks for offering." Erik selected a water bottle at the end and inserted the coins into the machine. As he waited for the bottle to drop, he glanced over at Amber. He didn't know why, but lately, she had been different, not only in how she behaved but even in how she dressed.

Despite being in an institution where the only thing that mattered was training, the young girl had time to put on makeup or make her hair look nicer. It was weird for him, to be honest, since he didn't think she had that kind of interest. Of course, Amber did that to get his attention, but he overlooked it due to their friendship and his strong attraction to Emily.

"Ah, have you heard about Nathaniel?" she asked, her voice tense.

"No, why?" Erik said, feigning ignorance. However, his smile faded, and he felt a cold sensation in his gut.

"Apparently, he went missing during the attack on the city, but his body was found yesterday. He died, but they don't know how."

"Really?" Erik said.

"Yeah, apparently his body was half eaten by a monster, and his head was detached from his body and was split open but otherwise fine." Erik looked at her and noticed a strange look on her face.

"That's terrible," he said, shaking his head in disbelief. "Do they have any suspects?"

Amber shrugged. "Not that I know of. But the police are investigating." She looked at him, her expression grave. Erik felt a chill run down his spine.

"Ah, I get it... However, can we please change the topic? I don't really want to talk about Nathaniel after he tried to kill me during the inner-ranking fight," he finally blurted out. Amber could see where Erik was coming from. He never liked Nathaniel that much; hell, not many did, so she could understand his reluctance to talk about him, especially after what he did to him.

"Sure, don't worry..."

Erik thought for a moment. "I was going to the Red Palace. Do you want to come with me?"

"Where were you going, precisely?" she asked.

"To my room, but since you are here, we could go eat something." Amber brightened up.

"Sure!"

Then, they left the building and took the bus. The two kept talking through the journey there, especially about Aaron, who was still in a bad mental condition. After a while, they reached the Red Palace. "Hey, it's been a while since we last sparred. Do you want to have a shot?" Amber asked.

"Weren't we going to eat?"

"We can do that later if you want," Amber replied.

Erik blinked, thinking about what to do. "Are you sure? I'm a lot stronger than before," he said.

Amber grinned. "Sure, why not? I'm curious to see this big improvement you are talking about."

"All right, but don't blame me if you lose," he said while grinning.

Amber clapped her hands. "Yay! I knew you'd be up for it."

The two then headed to the gym instead of the cafeteria, and they quickly reached the ring on the side of the room. Luckily, it was empty since many people had just ended their lessons and were too tired to train. The two began to warm up. Erik felt his muscles start to loosen and his heart rate increase.

A lot of time had passed since they last sparred, and he was also curious to see how he had improved compared to his friend, whom he had seen as an insurmountable mountain in the past.

"Are you ready?" Erik asked.

"When you want!" Amber replied.

Erik squared his shoulders and flexed his fingers as Amber took her fighting stance. They had sparred countless times before, but there was something different about her today. It was like she wanted to prove something. As usual, even when she put herself in a fighting stance, her movements were smooth and elegant.

Despite accepting the woman's challenge, Erik knew he was now much stronger and faster than her, but he didn't want to overexpose his strength. She taught him many things in the past, sparred a lot, and supported him. But things were changing now; he was not the same person as before.

It was true that the Red Palace was indeed a good institution for raising fighters, as Erik's improvements during his stay here were massive.

They circled each other, eyes locked, waiting for the other to make the first move. It was then that Erik started the fight, feinting a jab, and Amber darted to the side, her leg sweeping out in a low kick that took Erik by surprise. He lost his balance but quickly got it back and threw a punch of his own.

He grew too confident in himself, thinking that he could easily win against her now, but it was clear that wasn't true.

Amber dodged it effortlessly, her foot coming up to connect with Erik's midsection. He grunted in pain but kept moving, his eyes narrowing as he tried to figure out her strategy.

They hit each other quickly, dodging and parrying as they looked for an opening. Erik noticed that Amber's footwork was impeccable, and her strikes were always perfectly timed. She was more skilled than he had ever given her credit for, but that was because he couldn't actually see how good she was due to his inexperience. Now, however, he could, and he was impressed.

As they continued to spar, Amber began to notice that Erik was holding back. She could sense the strength in his blows and that he wasn't using such strength to its full potential. It was almost as if he was trying to match her level to make the fight more even.

This surprised her but, at the same time, upset her as it was true that her friend had become much stronger, surpassing her and probably even Anderson. It was easy to see how he could win against Nathaniel and take his place.

He feinted a kick, and as Amber stepped back to avoid it, he lunged forward with a punch that would have knocked her out cold if he had used his full strength. But he held back just enough, and Amber saw the opening, using her momentum to deliver a swift strike to Erik's jaw.

He stumbled backward, rubbing his jaw and grinning in admiration. "You're better than I remember," he said, panting slightly.

Amber shrugged, a small smile on her lips. "I've been practicing too," she said simply.

They circled each other again, sweat glistening on their skin, muscles tense and ready. Erik knew that the fight was far from over and that Amber would never give up; this was one of her traits.

He also knew that he needed to step up his game if he wanted to win. He charged forward, his fists flying, but Amber was ready for him.

She dodged his punches with ease, countering with her own strikes. They moved around the ring, each trying to gain the upper hand.

Erik used a psychological trick that led Amber to the position he wanted her to be in and made a low kick that sent her stumbling and losing her balance. Erik saw his chance and lunged forward, delivering a powerful blow to her stomach.

Amber gasped; the wind had been knocked out of her, and she fell to the ground. Erik immediately regretted his action. He hadn't meant to hit her that hard but failed to hold back.

He rushed over to her, kneeling down beside her.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his voice filled with concern.

Amber coughed, trying to catch her breath. "Yeah," she managed to say between gasps. "I'm fine."

Erik helped her to her feet, apologizing profusely. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"It's okay," Amber said with a small smile on her face. "I knew what I was getting into when we started this fight." Erik nodded, relieved that she wasn't angry with him.

They stood there momentarily, catching their breath, before Amber spoke again. "You know," she said, "you really improved a lot; this is the first time you won against me."

Erik smiled at her, a sense of pride swelling in his chest. He knew he had a long way to go but was determined to get there. "Thanks," he said. "It means a lot to me..." They both knew the fight wasn't about who won or lost.

Chapter 249: Invitation

Erik walked out of the gym with Amber in tow, feeling rather tired since he had been training since this morning and had just ended his sparring session with Amber. She had always been a great training partner, and he admired her dedication to martial arts.

As they walked towards their rooms, the two arrived at a part of the building where they had to split, but Amber started mentioning something before going.

"Hey, Erik..." the young woman said, "I just wanted to tell you that my parents are throwing a party next weekend, and I wanted to invite you. There will be many important people there, so you should attend; it is an occasion to get to know the higher-ups..." she added.

"Why should I? It's not like I want to meet them... But I appreciate the invite," the young man replied.

"I know, I would also avoid this if I could, but unfortunately, I know that making connections is part of the job and that it is important for our future, so just come, OK?" Amber replied.

Erik was taken aback. He was grateful for the invitation, but he couldn't help feeling a bit annoyed. He had already been to one of Amber's parents' parties, which wasn't a pleasant experience for him.

It felt like he had been thrown into a cage full of tigers that wanted to eat him alive, and it wasn't an experience he wanted to replicate. He had always felt like he didn't quite fit in with the kind of society Amber was part of, which was more affluent and sophisticated than his own.

Amber must have sensed his apprehension because she quickly added, "Don't worry, if you don't feel like it, you are not forced to attend, but I would like you to come..."

Erik hesitated momentarily before nodding. "Alright, I'll come," he said, trying to put on a brave face. "But I'm doing this only because of you..." he added, making the young girl blush.

Amber smiled, relieved. "G-great! I p-promise you won't regret it," she said, stuttering before saying her goodbyes and walking toward her own room.

As Erik walked back to his own apartment, he quickly went to take a shower to wash away his fatigue, and after he was done, he quickly went to his room. He needed to search for information about this Achim guy, as he had postponed the search for many days; he actually also had to absorb Nathaniel's power since he hadn't had the time to do so in the past few days.

Erik sat down on his bed, determined to learn more about Achim. He knew that if he wanted to beat his enemy, he needed to learn as much as possible about him. However, he couldn't possibly do so from his smartphone, which would be easily traceable, so he asked the system to connect to the closest phone.

[ANSWER: THE CLOSEST PHONE IS ON THE SECOND FLOOR, 4 METERS ABOVE YOU. DO YOU WANT TO CONNECT?]

<Yes,> the young man thought.

[CONNECTION TO THE DEVICE: ERWIN CRAWFORD'S SMARTPHONE, COMPLETE.]

As he gained control of the device, he quickly started an anonymous search, typed Achim's phone number into the search bar, and hit enter.

As the results started pouring in, Erik didn't find much, but after a couple more searches, he was surprised to see the sheer amount of available information. He had never realized how much personal data was stored online and was actually curious to see what the internet said about him. However, he resisted the urge to check and continued his search.

He scrolled through the search results pages, clicking on every promising link. He found out that Achim was the son of a wealthy businessman and had grown up with every advantage. He had attended the best schools and was a pretty skilled fighter, not so much as to join the Red Palace, but he was indeed strong. He was now in military school but was in his last year, being an eighteen-year-old guy.

From the photos, it appeared that Achim was a reasonably young man who stood tall and proud with a lean, athletic build. His complexion was fair, with a hint of a sun-kissed tan on his exposed arms and neck. His thick, wavy brown hair, which was pulled back into a neat ponytail and fell just below his shoulder blades, was his most striking feature.

His eyes were a bright, piercing blue and seemed to sparkle with intelligence and curiosity. His nose was straight and just a little bit narrow, which gave his face a sharp and refined look. He wore elegant clothes in most of the photos, which were mostly taken in fancy places with wealthy and influential people.

Erik also learned that Achim was an accomplished athlete, having won several competitions in various sports; that was probably why he had that physique. He had a large circle of friends and was known for his charismatic personality and easy charm. However, Erik knew this wasn't all, as it was clear to him that this young man was affiliated with the Mambas in some way, maybe because of his father.

Erik realized that this was all valuable information, and he made a mental note to use it to his advantage, but there was nothing more about him on the internet. The young man then disconnected the phone.

There was nothing more he could do to get information about the older man, but he learned a valuable piece of information: Achim went to Thornton High School; he only needed to go to the archive and find his information to get his house address.

"That's already something," Erik said to himself. "I definitely need to pay the school a visit."

After a few minutes of resting, the young man heard the sound of his and Benedict's apartment opening. His roommate entered the dorm room, greeted Erik with a quick "hi," and headed straight for the shower. Erik watched as Benedict disappeared into the bathroom but kept resting.

Several minutes later, Benedict emerged from the bathroom, freshly showered and dressed in his spare Red Palace uniform. He flopped down on the common area's couch with a tired expression on his face.

"You look beat," Erik commented.

Benedict let out a heavy sigh. "Yeah, it's been a long day..." He paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts. "I'm going to head to the cafeteria to have dinner together and to keep an eye on Aaron. We thought it might be good to cheer him up a little bit. Wanna come?"

"How is it going?" Erik asked, referring to Aaron's situation, if it wasn't his duty to stay with him today.

Benedict nodded in agreement. "It's been rough; not even Anderson and Mikey have been able to cheer him up."

Erik nodded, feeling sad for his friend. Despite their own busy schedules and personal challenges, they were always looking out for each other.

"So, will you come?" Benedict asked.

"Sure," Erik said finally.

"All right, let's go..." Benedict said.

Erik and the others met at the cafeteria and ordered their dinner. All of them got some meat dishes and some sides.

They were eagerly waiting for their dinner. The servers had placed platters of steaming food on the table. Benedict was starving and couldn't wait to dig in. As he took his first bite, he couldn't help but let out a satisfied moan. He then kept stuffing his face with food while the others ate.

Mikey, Anderson, and Amber were chatting, exchanging stories about their training gains. Floyd was munching on some corn on the cob while Gwen was delicately slicing her steak. Erik was taking it all in, enjoying the warm atmosphere his friends made.

Aaron was still in a sour mood, but the others did their best to make him feel better.

However, Benedict suddenly felt something catch in his throat as he chewed. He tried to cough it up, but it wouldn't budge. Benedict's face turned red as he struggled to breathe.

Erik, Martha, Aaron, Mikey, Anderson, Amber, Floyd, and Gwen were all discussing their own things at the table until they saw Benedict having trouble.

At first, they looked concerned, but as Benedict's struggles continued, his face turning redder by the second, they began to realize what was happening. And then it happened.

Benedict let out a loud, violent cough and spewed bits of pasta and sauce all over the table, including on himself. Everyone around him jumped back, dodging the flying food, but some were not so lucky.

"I'm sorry," he gasped, trying to clear his throat.

But then something strange happened. Aaron looked at the scene, and then he started laughing. It was contagious, as everyone else soon started doing the same. Even Gwen, who was normally the sternest and coldest person in the group, couldn't hold back her giggles.

Benedict looked mortified as he coughed and sputtered, trying to catch his breath. He felt embarrassed.

But the laughter around him only grew louder, with Erik and Martha leading the charge. The laughter died down slowly, and the group started cleaning up the mess. Benedict sat silently, picking at his plate, too embarrassed to speak.

But then, to his surprise, Aaron patted him on the back. "Don't worry about it, man," he said, grinning. "We've all been there..."

Benedict looked up, relieved, and slowly a smile spread across his face. He realized that even though he had made a fool of himself, his friends didn't care, and besides, he had made Aaron laugh.

Chapter 250: New BCP

Erik said goodbye to his friends as they parted ways after their pleasant dinner. He felt content and full but was also tired, so eating didn't help him that much. It had been a long day, and he had been looking forward to returning to his room since today. He would get Nathaniel's power during the night.

He felt ecstatic and giggled as he returned to his dorm room with Benedict in tow.

"What are you smiling for?" Benedict asked.

Erik noticed his blunder and said, "Sorry, it's just that I'm tired, and I can't wait to sleep."

"Man, you are this happy just because you are going to sleep?" He laughed.

"Yeah, make fun of me, but you are no better!" Erik smiled back. His response made Benedict laugh, and he replied, "Well, I guess it's the little things in life that bring us joy." They both chuckled and continued their conversation.

When he finally arrived at his apartment, he fished his keys out of his pocket and unlocked the door. The place was quiet, and he could hear the faint sound of music coming from one of his neighbors' rooms. He closed the door behind him and removed his shoes, feeling the soft carpet beneath his feet. He then went to his room, but not before saying goodbye to Benedict.

After he closed the door behind him, Erik went over to his bed and sat down, taking a moment to collect his thoughts and breathing deeply. He was exhausted after a long day at work and needed to unwind. As he sat there, he realized how much he missed the sound of silence and vowed to make more time for himself in the future.

But he felt grateful for his friends, who had made him feel loved and supported—something he had never felt before he got the System. He thought about how lucky he was to have such wonderful people in his life and that, despite everything, he was finally achieving happiness.

<System, is there a way for someone to find out I'm absorbing Nathaniel's power here?>

[ANSWER: DETECTING THE SYSTEM IS IMPOSSIBLE. THE USER CAN REST ASSURED NO ONE WILL BE ABLE TO FIND OUT WHAT HE IS DOING AND EVERYTHING RELATED TO THE SYSTEM UNLESS HE SAYS SOMETHING.]

<Good. Then start the DNA-extracting process; I want Nathaniel's power ASAP!>

[UNDERSTOOD: HIGH-LEVEL DNA FOUND. A HUNDRED DNA POINTS REQUIRED. DO YOU WANT TO PROCEED?]

<This is good... Uh, YES, go on!>

[SYSTEM READY. A HUNDRED DNA POINTS USED. COMMENCING EXTRACTION. HOST IS ADVISED TO LAY ON A BED.]

As the procedure started, Erik's body tensed. At first, he felt a surge of energy coursing through his veins, like a thousand tiny needles piercing his skin. It was as if his entire body was being infused with a scalding hot liquid, which was boiling through his veins and scorching his flesh.

The pain grew more intense with each passing moment as if he was being torn apart from the inside out. It was as if he were being slowly burned alive, with every nerve in his body aflame with agony.

Sweat dripped down his forehead, and his muscles strained against the convulsions wracking his body. He gasped for breath, his chest heaving as he fought to stay conscious. The pain was like nothing he had ever experienced before, a primal agony that seemed to seep into his very soul.

It felt like an eternity, but the pain eventually began to subside, leaving Erik panting and gasping for air. He felt as if he had been through a war, his body battered and bruised but somehow still intact.

As he lay there, feeling the last remnants of the pain slowly fade away, Erik knew that he had just taken the first step to getting one of the most powerful brain crystal powers he had ever seen. Still, he didn't know how effective it would be without all that mana Nathaniel could boast.

If he really wanted to be as powerful as Nathaniel, he needed to increase his energy, but he couldn't do so before going to military school.

[PROCEDURE COMPLETE. YOUR DNA IS NOW ABLE TO ACCOMMODATE NATHANIEL'S BRAIN CRYSTAL POWER.]

"Good, start the procedure," Erik said. Erik took a deep breath and closed his eyes, preparing himself for the procedure. He knew it would be a long and painful process, but he was determined to get Nathaniel's power.

[NATHANIEL'S BRAIN CRYSTAL HAS ALREADY BEEN ANALYZED.]

[SYSTEM READY. A HUNDRED DNA POINTS USED. COMMENCING EXTRACTION. SIX HOURS AND A HALF ARE REQUIRED TO COMPLETE THE EXTRACTION. HOST IS ADVISED TO LAY ON A BED.]

As Erik did start the procedure, everything started going as it had the last time he absorbed a new power. He felt a strange sensation coursing through his body. Initially, it was only a subtle tingle,

but it quickly intensified into a surge of power that seemed to flow through every centimeter of his being. He closed his eyes and tried to steady himself, but the energy was too much to contain.

As he stood there, he felt the mana flowing through him like a river. It passed through his limbs, chest, and gut, and he could feel it swirling around in his head. He was simultaneously overwhelmed and exhilarated by the experience. He was going to get Nathaniel's power!

Suddenly, he felt a mana surge in his brain and knew the neural link-establishing process had started. He tried to open his eyes but found he couldn't. His eyelids felt heavy as if they were made of lead.

The mana continued to flow through his body. It felt like an invasive force, probing and prodding at his neural links. He tried to move his limbs, but they were unresponsive.

Erik embraced the feeling, knowing that this was the normal occurrence when he absorbed a new power and started losing consciousness rapidly. His thoughts became muddled, and his body felt heavy and unresponsive. The mana continued to surge through him while dragging him down into darkness.

He felt like he was drowning, suffocating under the weight of the mana. His last conscious thought was the joyful thought of becoming unstoppable, and then everything went black.

The following day, Erik woke up in his room, feeling groggy and disoriented. However, he felt a sense of excitement he hadn't felt in a long time. He quickly sat up in bed and took a deep breath, savoring the moment. Today was the day he finally got Nathaniel's power.

For months, Erik had been undergoing a changing process, one that led him to change very much. Still, despite having absorbed many brain crystal powers during these months, he got nothing remotely similar to what Nathaniel wielded. Now everything was different; Erik finally got something that put him in Amber's and Anderson's same place.

He not only had higher stats than them now, but he also had a very strong power. Only his mana capacity tied him down, but he was going to solve that too.

As he got out of bed, Erik felt a surge of mana coursing through his veins, the after-effects of the procedure. He felt different, more alive as if a part of him that had been missing was now complete.

< System, show me my status.> Immediately, the usual window appeared in his peripheral vision.

[Host Information]

NAME: Erik Romano

AGE: 16

POWER LEVEL: 108

SYSTEM LEVEL: 23

EXPERIENCE: 1680.825/12100

DNA POINTS: 2400

HEALTH: 840/840

MANA: 770/770

{Attributes}

STRENGTH: 51

INTELLIGENCE: 26

DEXTERITY: 29

ENERGY: 37

Available Attributes points: 15

{Powers}

[Biological Supercomputer's Powers]

...

[Host's Powers]

...

...

...

Force Manipulation (ESIGMA1B-Ranked)

(Manipulate a mana-driven force to produce powerful shockwaves that can change in intensity, radius, speed, and power. It is also possible to use the power differently, such as to generate force shields.)

{Skills}

...

The young man observed his new power, "Force Manipulation," which was still at the E rank on the Ferebitz scale since his brain crystal was still relatively weak. Erik doubted he could use Nathaniel's power efficiently without all that mana the prick could use, as it probably consumed a lot.

However, he still had his sharpening power, which was very efficient from that point of view. Clearly, he only had the native neural link, so it was clear that he was still at the SIGMA1. Though the System was trying to develop a new way to increase the neural links, and knowing the biological supercomputer's capabilities, it was clear it would succeed.

He only needed to wait until the 24th to find out the results.

Erik then quickly glanced at his clock and noticed it was still early in the morning, but since he had to start his usual training, it was better to prepare for the day ahead immediately. He entered the bathroom and looked in the mirror, seeing his reflection staring back at him. He had gone very far during this month. He wondered what his mother and father would have thought about him.

Erik took a moment to savor the feeling of happiness before getting dressed and preparing for the day. He knew he had to be careful with his new power, which he couldn't use inside Frant, but he knew he had it at his disposal if needed. However, he needed to learn to control it before using it in battle. After he was ready, he quickly went out of his room.