

## BIOLOGICAL 48

Chapter 48: Outside the barrier (3)

Erik's ruthless slash left a deep, gaping wound in Conal's throat. He collapsed to the ground, pressing his hands against the wound in a vain attempt to stem the flow of blood.

With a knowing glance, he looked at the masked man, recognizing him as Erik.

With a look of disbelief and fear, his eyes opened wide. Although unexpected, he comprehended Erik's actions and their rationale.

The things he and the others did to him were cruel, and they lasted for years.

The blood gushed from his neck unrestrained, like water from a burst pipe, draining the color from his face until it was as pale as a sheet of paper.

At that moment, the only sounds were the melancholy whistling of the wind through the leaves and Conal's guttural, desperate sounds. His feeble groans were accompanied by his finger pointing at the masked man.

Erik nodded, as to tell Conal he indeed got it right. He was the masked man. A single tear came out of the dying kid, and then he stopped moving.

As Conal's life slipped away, a deep silence enveloped the immediate vicinity around him, a stark contrast to the chaotic sounds of battle nearby. This silence felt almost tangible, heavy with the significance of the grim scene.

A short distance away, Logan and Orson were locked in a fierce struggle with the Lomalins. Amidst the cacophony of their conflict—the clashing, snarling, and frenzied movements—they could only cast a brief, horrified look at Conal. Through the turmoil, the sight of the masked figure loomed like a specter of death.

Over the din of the battle, Erik's cold, sinister laughter cut through an eerie soundtrack to the unfolding tragedy.

[HOSTILE INDIVIDUAL 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. 909 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]1

[LEVEL UP!]

[LEVEL UP!]

Erik found himself awash in a surge of experience points, a reward far greater than expected. He speculated this bounty was because of Conal's superior overall statistics and higher energy level, which meant a substantial amount of mana was absorbed.

The realization left him surprised, yet it also stirred a conflict of emotions within him. On one hand, the level-ups and the ten stat points he gained as a result were a cause for satisfaction. On the other, that he had taken Conal's life weighed on him.

He felt a pang of remorse, not for Conal, but more for the act of killing itself, recognizing it as wrong. This bothered him, as he couldn't comprehend how he could feel these things after he just killed one of his tormentors.

Erik's resolve, however, remained firm as he recalled the torment he had endured at the hands of Conal, Logan, and Orson.

He reminded himself of his decision to embark on this path, aware of its implications. Although part of him regretted the situation, he did not harbor personal guilt towards Conal.

In truth, Erik hadn't processed his actions. To justify his course, he had somewhat detached himself from the reality of the situation, a necessary step to prevent his moral compass from thwarting his plans.

Meanwhile, Orson and Logan, engrossed in their battle with the Lomalins, abandoned the fight. The man, whoever he was, instilled a primal sense of fear in them. They retreated from the masked figure, their focus on escape.

Had Conal been alive, he might have revealed Erik's identity. But with the kid gone, both Orson and Logan, too worried and concentrated on the Lomalins, failed to recognize the nature of the masked man's power and infer his identity.

Engrossed in fending off the Lomalins' attack, they hadn't realized the gravity of Conal's situation until it was too late. Now, with Conal lifeless on the grass, they were powerless to change what had happened.

As Logan and Orson fled, the Lomalins, along with Erik, took up pursuit. The boys ran, their flight marked by desperation rather than direction.

They weaved through the forest, avoiding trees, bushes, and rocks. Each step was cautious, as a misstep over a stone or tree root could spell their doom.

"What do we do, Logan?" Orson's voice, laden with terror and anxiety, quivered as he said. "We can't run forever!"

Glancing back, Orson saw the figure of their pursuer gaining ground, its pace unrelenting.

His heart raced faster as he noticed three Lomalins trailing behind Erik. While not as swift as their human counterparts, their pursuit added to the sense of impending doom. If the masked man didn't catch them, the Lomalins would.

"I don't know!" Logan said in response. His mind was a whirlwind of fear, impeding any coherent thought or strategy.

Realizing Logan needed time to regain his composure, Orson focused on calming himself first.

He inhaled, his eyes fixed on the advancing Lomalins and the masked figure.

After several moments of controlled breathing, Orson found a semblance of calm.

With a steadier mind, he spoke again, trying to plan something to get them out of that situation.

"Logan," the young man said, his breath coming in hard pants, "We have to do something."

From his position, Erik could see the fear and uncertainty etched on the young boys' faces. It was clear how terrified they were.

Logan, in a state of heightened alert, kept glancing back at their pursuer, his mind racing to find a solution to the predicament.

"Let's head back to the train station; he can't do anything to us there!" Logan decided.

"All right!" Orson said, his voice loud in agreement.

With a new destination in mind, they increased their pace, pushing themselves to run faster and harder toward the perceived safety of the train station, where they knew police officers would be present.

Their hearts pounded like drums in their chests, their legs moved with frantic energy, and sweat drenched their bodies. Each breath they took was laborious, and time seemed to stretch, every second feeling like an eternity.

They sprinted, weaving through the forest with fear stricken agility. Their path was a maze of natural obstacles: they sidestepped trees, hurdled bushes, leaped over rocks and roots, vaulted fallen logs and branches, and skirted dense thickets of shrubs and brambles. They crossed streams and rivers, all while being pursued by the relentless man and the three thaids.

A golden wheat field came into view, but they were struggling to breathe. The area was devoid of life; no birds sang, no insects buzzed. An encompassing silence prevailed, undisturbed even by the wind, under a sky that was clear and unblemished.

"You see that?"

"YES!" Logan responded, a spark of hope igniting within him. Survival seemed possible if they could navigate through the wheat field.

Glancing back, Logan saw the masked man close, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

As the wheat field loomed larger and closer. Upon their arrival, they crashed against something. They understood what it was.

"It's the barrier!" Logan cried out in despair, turning to see the masked man standing a short distance away, imagining a triumphant smirk beneath his mask. The Lomalins appeared behind him.

"I FUCKING TOLD YOU WE WERE OUTSIDE OF THE BARRIER!"

Orson's eyes widened in a mix of rage and terror.

The thaids and the barrier itself were undeniable evidence that they were no longer within the city.

Logan had clung to the belief that exiting the barrier without passing military outposts was impossible, but now the harsh reality confronted him.

Could there be a breach in the city's defenses? Was it possible that the masked man had lured them here with lethal intent from the start?

Logan struggled to accept that a teenager like him could orchestrate such a situation, yet the evidence was overwhelming and impossible to ignore.

<This has to be it,> Logan concluded in his mind.

Without hesitation, he ran along the perimeter of the barrier, searching for any opening that might have allowed their passage into the forest. The collision with the barrier, however, had taken its toll, slowing their pace. This delay allowed Erik to close in on them.

<I want to save Logan for last so bad...> Inside, Erik was a whirlwind of emotions.

<But those darts...>

However, he realized he had ten points to allocate. If he found himself unable to avoid the attacks, he would use them to pump the strength and dexterity stats. This way, he would gain the speed and the reflexes to do the deed, or so he hoped.

<Analysis, > he thought, readying himself to gather more information for his next move.

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- Name: Orson Smyth.

- Brain crystal power: Bone manipulation.

-Physical Characteristics: Stands at an estimated height of one meter and eighty centimeters. Possesses a muscular build. Weighs around eighty-nine kilograms. He belongs to the human race.

-Personality and Traits: Known associate of Logan Reid and Conal Price. Exhibits a tendency to intimidate individuals perceived as weaker alongside his friends. Routinely aligns his actions with Logan's decisions. While he may be the least intelligent among his peers, he compensates with superior physical strength.

-Power Level: 32

-Approximate Strength: 9

-Approximate Intelligence: 8

-Approximate Dexterity: 10

-Approximate Energy: 24

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<I need to end this fast. My mana won't last that long...> Erik thought.

His approach towards Orson was predatory, his sharpened tree branch wielded like a deadly sword.

Orson's eyes widened in terror as the masked figure advanced, the distance between them closing.

Orson's instinctive reaction was to project bones from his body as a defense, but Erik's weapon had a longer reach.

Once within striking distance, Erik unleashed a barrage of attacks.

"AAAAGH!" Orson's cries echoed through the area as he sustained injury after injury.

His lack of combat training, having spent more time engaging in petty theft against his fellow students and playing around with Conal and Logan than honing any fighting skills, was clear.

His bone protrusions offered some resistance to Erik's slashes, yet Orson had not enough mana to make as many spikes to protect himself from every slash. The wounds took their toll on Orson's body.

"LOGAN!" he screamed, desperation creeping into his voice as he tried to counterattack and defend at the same time.

He lashed out with his bony spikes to retaliate, but Erik, nimbler than him and trained by Professor McAllister, evaded them, even if with some difficulties.

"LOGAN! AGH..." But Logan was already running away. He was too scared to consider the idea of helping his friend. He was a bully against the weak, but a coward in front of the strong.

Orson's final outcry was cut short as Erik's last slash targeted his throat, silencing him.

The young man's attempts at defense crumbled, and he fell to the ground, his lifeblood seeping into the earth.

Erik stood, panting after having taken another life. This was his second kill in a brief span, and a sense of grim satisfaction washed over him.

Despite how evil his actions were, Erik couldn't deny the empowering feeling that came with it.