

BIOLOGICAL 1221

Chapter 1221: Journey to Mur (9)

Erik's wind blades were the fastest attacks he could use.

He had considered using telekinesis to grab debris or objects to throw at the monsters, but in the open sky there was nothing solid he could manipulate as a weapon.

He had briefly considered pulling up rocks from the ocean floor, but even the closest seabed was well beyond his range. The crushing depths meant any useful debris was hundreds of meters down—far too distant for him to even know it was there.

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Instability was already pumped up, and he was using it to give orders to his clones and understand when a monster was attacking him from his blind spots.

Using his Beastwalker ability, Erik shapeshifted his body to grow four large, feathered wings—two primary wings near his shoulders and two others below them.

He had no choice but to waste mana like this because his mount had been killed during the initial clash.

Through phantom veil, Erik created illusionary copies of himself and used them as decoys to confuse and misdirect the thaids.

Absolute castle was pumped to the limit, making Erik look like an armored bird. He was also pumping Essence flow, the power he was going to give to the Chimaeric Demons if he survived this ordeal, and was increasing the clones' mana and stamina regeneration so that they could last longer during the fight.

"Fuck my life," Erik muttered under his breath. "I'm such an idiot. Should have prepared better. But no, I had to rush in like a complete moron."

Erik was cursing the day he decided to go to Mur with the army he had. Sure, he couldn't wait too long, given the blackguards might become too powerful or do another crazy research, but even having some more clones would have been better.

Unfortunately, if he took too many from Hin, the place would remain without protection, with no one being able to keep the Hinians at bay.

<If only the clones could be made faster. I could have given them the Essence Flow brain crystal power. I would have had an army of beings that could each increase the mana and stamina regeneration. I would have basically had infinite mana with so many people pumping up my mana regen, and the same could have been for all the others.>

[Your decision to go wasn't a bad one. Besides, even with more clones, the three-headed void ravagers' draining field would have affected them all the same. You would have found yourself in the same situation.]

Erik sighed and focused on the battle again.

His blades were almost powered by rage, since he didn't have a lot of mana given the situation. These things were too resistant, and he was having trouble killing them. Besides, the draining field had grown so strong that his arms shook with each attack.

He didn't have a strength-boosting power anymore, like the Xeridon Anteris one, meaning he couldn't make up for the lack of strength like the clones did.

The only way he found to fix this problem was by using telekinesis on his body, like Uncle Benjamin did.

Even his flying speed was boosted up by telekinesis while using his wings for quick turns, sudden stops, and aerial maneuvers in combat.

The interface continued flashing level-up notifications, but the power gains meant nothing aside from the fact that his clones were dying.

Moreover, he ended the mana he gained soon after, putting him in the same bad spot he was in at the beginning.

Then something caught Erik's attention.

A massive void ravager burst through the formation, its three heads weaving on serpentine necks. The beast's wingspan stretched wider than three Chimaeric Demons placed end to end.

Its central head unleashed a stream of acidic breath that caught four clones mid-flight. Their flesh dissolved on contact, muscle and bone melting away as they roared in pain. What remained of their bodies splashed into the ocean below, leaving only dissolving fragments and clouds of red mist that the sea thajids rushed to feast on.

The creature's tail caught another clone across its spine. The impact was so violent it split the clone nearly in half. Bone shards and internal organs sprayed outward as the clone's body crumpled like paper.

The void ravager's other heads snapped and snarled, their jaws large enough to swallow a man whole, so they were able to make grievous wounds on their prey, despite the size.

The monster's movements carried the savage brutality of a nightmarish apex predator, its necks terrifyingly graceful as they mercilessly tore through the clones and brought them a painful death.

<Mother fucker.>

[You need to be careful. This beast is not like the others. It's one of the strongest void ravagers in the area. If you don't find a way to escape, you'll die.]

"I can't just escape," Erik said. "This thing is going to wipe the army out alone..."

[Do as you want, but be careful. If you die, I follow the same destiny.]

The clone army tried to kill the thing together, but the monsters attacked them from everywhere, preventing them from doing anything useful. That was also because the number of Chimaeric Demons reduced, both because of their death and also because of the clones who left.

Meanwhile, the sea below became red with blood and gore as fallen clones and fragments of Chimaeric Demons splashed into the churning waters.

Erik fought with all his strength to save his remaining clones, but they kept dying no matter what he did.

The mental link between Erik and his clones transmitted every sensation directly to his mind—he experienced firsthand the terror and agony as each one died, making the situation worse.

Then the massive void ravager broke from the pack. It flew towards Erik.

"Shit..."

Erik scattered his illusions to make it harder for the monster to locate him, but that didn't work.

"It found out..."

The system warned him, but he chose to stay. Yet Erik didn't know what was going to happen. He wasn't confident about the battle.

Without his physical strength, with so many thaids around of much greater might than him, he didn't have many ways to survive.

The monster used its void breath. Erik barely avoided it, but that cost him a lot of mana.

<I swear, if I survive this, I will train as a madman...>

Wind blades flashed from his hands, enhanced by telekinesis for extra speed. They struck the creature's hide, carving deep gashes that oozed blood.

Yet the monster's right head lunged at him, teeth gleaming, while its left head curved around to cut off Erik's escape route.

Erik's instability brain crystal power made him understand what the monster was going to do. He tried to twist his body out of harm's way, but wasn't fast enough. Only his mana-armor prevented a fatal blow.

<Thank god at least my mana works as it should!>

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

That wasn't the only problem, because each time the creature got closer to attack, Erik's physical strength decreased because of the weakening draining field.

Erik did his best to stay away from the creature to prevent his strength from reverting to that of a one-year-old. Yet this proved difficult, since he had become trapped within the draining field of another three-headed void ravager.

He launched another barrage of wind blades. The thaid evaded the blades, while its middle head spat void breath, forcing Erik to dive. The energy passed so close he felt its corrupting touch even through his Absolute Castle armor.

The attack swept through multiple clones and thaids, killing them but making Erik earn experience.

[Ally creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Ally creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Ally creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Hostile creature killed: Mana absorbing process starting.]

[Hostile creature killed: Mana absorbing process starting.]

[Hostile creature killed: Mana absorbing process starting.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

Erik never stopped hurtling wind blades. Here and there, he also conjured lightning, but he had to be careful about using it, because each creature worked as a chain point, making his own power not only to end up killing the three-headed void ravagers but even his clones.

The difference was that while the thaids could resist the attacks, the clone couldn't. The thaids more often than not survived, while the clones died.

Luckily, one of his wind blades found a weak point—the joint where one neck met the creature's body. Erik ended up cutting one of the heads off.

The monster let out an ear-splitting scream of pain from the two remaining heads, and they moved to attack. However, the monster suddenly wavered, and Erik could swear he saw it grinning.

Yet it was just a beast—not intelligent enough or physically capable of making such an expression.

Yet that was enough for Erik to activate his Instability brain crystal power again, and from it, he felt the thoughts of a creature behind. It was going to attack.

"Shit! I can't avoid it!" He was too close to the ravagers to be able to avoid the attack.

The thaid attacked.

"MASTER!"

The monster's triple jaws seized him—catching his left wing, right arm, and back. The armor buckled under the immense force.

Corrosive breath penetrated his defenses while his consciousness faded with Erik unable to fuel the armor with mana because of the pain.

His last conscious thought was of his clones still dying in the surrounding sky, their screams following him into oblivion as everything went black.

Chapter 1222: Barely alive

Erik's consciousness returned slowly. The first thing he saw was the crystal-clear blue sky above him, unmarred by the chaos and death that had filled it earlier. His mind felt fuzzy, struggling to piece together what had happened. Pain ravaged him, but it was in truth just a ghost.

As his awareness grew, pain flooded back into his consciousness like a tidal wave—every cut, every torn muscle, every broken bone screamed for attention at once. The agony was so intense it nearly made him black out again.

Then he turned to study his surroundings, and he saw a concerned face intently studying him. It was one of the Chimaeric Demons, its features tight with worry.

The clone had kept its human form rather than the wyvern shape. Then Erik glanced around, noting the absence of the massive provision boxes each clone had to bring to Mur.

Those containers were so large they required the Wyvern form to transport—each Chimaeric Demon in that shape being the size of a small house.

The missing boxes showed the clone must have left them behind. This made sense—without the large containers, they would be harder for enemies to spot from the sky.

But of course, it might have also been that he lost during the battle against the three-headed void ravagers.

"Master! Thank the gods you're awake!"

The clone spoke with a mix of joy and worry while tears formed and fell from his face.

"Are you alright? Can you move?"

Erik tried to sit up, wincing at the stiffness in his muscles. His body ached, but it was a familiar pain—similar to what he'd felt after other brutal battles.

He still felt pain where the three-headed void ravager that sneak attacked him hit, yet he was alive.

<Absolute castle must have saved my life.>

"I'm alright," Erik assured the clone, giving him a wan smile. "There's some pain, but nothing I haven't dealt with before."

He paused.

"Where are we?"

"A small island between Hin and Mur, Master. It was the only safe place I could find to tend to your wounds." The clone's eyes darted nervously to the horizon.

Erik's mind raced. "What happened to the army? Why is it just you and me here?"

The clone's face fell. Deep grief etched its features, but beneath that simmered a burning rage—the kind born from an overwhelming desire for vengeance.

"They're gone, Master. All of them. The void ravagers... they didn't leave anyone alive, and whatever was there didn't even leave the corpses."

Thanks to Instability, Erik felt the clone's anguish. Seeing his brothers dying had left deep scars. The clone's voice cracked as it described how the void ravagers had torn through their ranks, leaving nothing but destruction in their wake.

"When they struck you down, when they tore into you... it changed something in all of us. Nothing else mattered but getting you to safety."

Erik watched the clone's hands tremble. "Your injuries were severe, Master. They... they ripped off your right arm and left leg. Your chest was torn open, and they shredded the wings you'd created

through your shapeshifting powers. The void breath had eaten through your armor, or what remained of it."

The clone's voice grew quieter. "Some of us formed defensive lines to shield you while providing first aid. Others... others sacrificed themselves to keep the ravagers at bay long enough for us to escape. I carried you to safety through their sacrifice. That first day here, I could only focus on keeping you alive—stopping the bleeding and stabilizing your critical wounds. But with injuries as severe as yours, basic healing wasn't enough. I hadn't developed my healing powers. My neural links are few, and my mana pool is low."

Erik's connection with the clone showed him exactly what he was thinking, which was essentially what happened. He saw the desperate rush to stop the bleeding, the continuous channeling of healing energy that left the clone drained and shaking, and the long hours spent monitoring Erik's fading life force.

The clone worked tirelessly through the night of the first day, using all its strength to keep Erik alive. It focused on keeping his heart beating and making sure his body kept working properly.

"The second day," the clone said, "I regrew your limbs, but it wasn't easy, and I had to rest many times because of my poor mana pool. Yet I wasn't sure you'd wake up even with my treatment. You were almost dead, master."

The clone stopped talking and stared intently at where Erik's new arm connected to his body. The skin there was still pink and tender, showing where the fresh limb had grown from the stump. Erik could sense how vividly the clone remembered the ragged, bloody wound that had been there before—muscle and bone torn apart and bones visible.

"So, we have been here for two days?" Continue reading at [My Virtual Library Empire](#)

"Yes, Master." The clone's voice was apologetic.

Two days unconscious meant anything could have happened to the others.

"Are you sure?"

The clone nodded. "Yes, Master. The sun has risen and set two times since we escaped."

"What about Amber? Emily? Mira and June? The ten thousand clones that left with them?"

The clone shook its head and shrugged. "I don't know, Master. We lost contact with them during the battle. I... I have no way of knowing if they reached Mur, and those who might have known died."

Erik's mind raced through countless dark scenarios. He imagined the three-headed void ravagers swooping down upon Amber's group.

He imagined their razor-sharp claws and fangs tearing through the clone army, just as they had destroyed his own forces.

The thought of his friends being attacked by these terrible monsters filled him with fear. He could almost hear their cries of pain echoing through the empty sky.

Other creatures from Mur might have done the same with equal ease, and even if they had been lucky and avoided all monsters, Mur was still home to all kinds of terrifying thaids, on par with the three-headed void ravagers.

If even 50 thousand Chimaeric Demons stood no chance against a small flock of flying thaids, what could a group of ten thousand do?

Erik fought back his growing anxiety.

"Did you try to contact them?"

"Yes, master, but... Until now, no one replied. I don't know what to do anymore."

This didn't necessarily mean they had died. They might have reached Mur safely, but their communication systems could simply be out of range. Without Erik present, the clones could only communicate through technology—meaning they were either dead, their devices were destroyed, or they had lost their way.

Besides, they were also out of Erik's range. While Instability allowed him to establish a mind link with everything Erik wanted, this ability had clear limits.

His power to connect mentally with others had limits—he couldn't reach minds that were tens of thousands of kilometers away. The distance was just too great.

Erik then noticed how much the clone's hands trembled, how its shoulders sagged with exhaustion. Through Instability, Erik felt the clone's bone-deep weariness—he had spent every ounce of energy keeping him alive these past three days, and since there were no provisions, it was likely the clone hadn't eaten at all.

Turning to look at the island, Erik's heart sank. He didn't turn behind and thought they were just on the edges of whatever this place was. However, as he turned, he saw the sea again.

That explained why the clone had left him exposed to the sky, rather than hiding within a jungle.

The island was barely more than a sandy outcrop, perhaps twenty meters across at its widest point. Nothing but bare rocks and sand stretched from one edge to the other, with not a blade of grass breaking through the barren ground.

"You have eaten nothing, have you?" Erik asked, though he already knew the answer. He reached for the pouch at his side, fingers closing around the seeds he'd brought with him.

Kneeling, Erik pressed several seeds into the sandy soil. He poured his mana into them, and within moments, green shoots burst from the ground. The plants grew at an impossible rate—vegetables swelling to ripeness, fruit trees sprouting and bearing fruit in minutes rather than seasons.

The clone's expression transformed from desperate hunger to excitement. It lunged at the nearest fruit tree, devouring ripe peaches ravenously.

Juice trickled down its chin as it consumed one piece after another, its famished body finally receiving nourishment after days without food.

"Thank you," Erik said, watching his clone eat. "For saving my life. For everything. Now rest and eat. Once you've recovered your strength, we'll leave this place."

The clone kept eating hungrily, nodding as it grabbed more grapes. Erik felt its feelings through their mental link—deep thankfulness and relief that needed no words to express. As the clone finally got the food it desperately needed, its tense shoulders relaxed.

Erik looked at the sea.

<We had been lucky.>

[Indeed, we were...]

Chapter 1223: A way to safety (1)

Erik watched as the clone finished the last pieces of fruit, its hunger finally sated. Color had returned to his face, and his hands no longer trembled.

"Better now?"

"Yes, Master. Thank you." The clone wiped juice from its chin. "The food... I didn't realize how much I needed it."

He still needed some time to rest. Being on this small patch of land, he didn't sleep to keep an eye on the sky.

The clone briefly looked at the waters surrounding them, then back to his master. Stay tuned with My Virtual Library Empire

"What do you suggest we do?" the clone asked. "The void ravagers might still be hunting around here."

Erik gazed out over the ocean. "We need something small and fast. The wyvern forms were a mistake—too obvious, too tempting as prey."

Erik could hardly believe what he was saying—wyverns as tempting prey? Though the idea seemed absurd, he knew the logic from Mannard wouldn't work here on Mur. Everything was different here.

"We could try water-based forms," the clone said. "Something that can dive if we spot trouble."

Erik shook his head. "That might work, but the sea thaid's are the problem. I don't know how many are in the waters, but the deeper we dive, the more dangerous it will be for us. Flying close to the water surface will have the same result for flying thaid's that usually hunt those in the water."

Erik paused.

"The flying ones will see us as if we were flying, while the sea one diving below will notice our silhouette." He patted the pouch of seeds at his side and then looked at the sun.

Whatever they did, they still were in a shitty situation.

"What about seabirds?" The clone's eyes lit up with the idea. "They are small enough to avoid notice but still capable of long-distance flight. And they naturally rest on the water's surface."

Erik considered this. "That could work. We might be left alone for several reasons, one of them being that we would not be considered a successful snack for many thaid's, but keep in mind that smaller forms mean smaller thaid's attacking us. Maybe they won't be that strong, but many attacks would still be annoying."

There was no alternative. Bug forms would make the journey too long since their wings couldn't carry them far. Larger forms, while faster and able to shorten the journey, would make them easier to spot—the last thing Erik needed now that the Chimaeric Demons had been decimated.

[What do you think?] Erik asked for the biological computer.

[The seabird thaid form makes sense,] the system said. [Not only are they naturally present in this environment, but their behavior patterns would help us blend in. Seabirds frequently travel in small groups, so we won't stand out like a lone creature would.]

Erik nodded. [There are other advantages too,] the system said. [Seabirds have excellent vision adapted for spotting both aerial and aquatic threats. Their wings are designed for efficient gliding, which will help conserve our energy during long flights.]

"Are you sure there isn't something better? I would actually stick to bugs, but they would make the journey harder, but better ask and have confirmation rather than doing things blindly."

[Most alternatives present greater risks, in the same way you predicted. Better stick to something small, but not so small as to make the journey difficult. The seabird thaid form gives us flexibility. We can rest on the water's surface when needed, take flight quickly if threatened, and even dive briefly to avoid immediate danger. It's the best balance of capabilities for our situation.]

It made perfect sense—bigger predators wouldn't bother hunting such small birds, and by acting like other seabirds, they could travel without drawing attention.

Besides, Erik was also going to use Phantom Veil to turn invisible.

"The system agrees with us."

"Then it's settled, master."

Erik nodded.

"Alright. We'll wait until nightfall, then head out. We will take turns shapeshifting. The one in charge at that moment will carry the other, who will rest in the meantime."

"Let me start then, master. You need to rest; your wounds were grievous, and if you rest more, it will be for the better."

Erik appreciated the gesture but also cursed at the clones' spirit of sacrifice every time he was involved. The clone was a mess; it had to rest both now and during nightfall, or it would collapse during the journey.

"No," Erik said. "After all you've been through, I should take the first shift. I'll rest until nightfall, and you'll do the same—but you'll get more rest during the night while I'm in charge. You will take my place during the day while I rest."

The clone's expression darkened. Not being able to serve his creator was a tremendous blow to his pride, and he and his dead brothers had already failed to bring him safely to Mur and gave him a great pain given by the loss of so many of his children.

However, something else seemed to have stirred in the clone's mind as he accepted his master's orders, and then a troubled look crossed the clone's face. "Do you think they made it, Master? I mean, the others..."

Erik sighed.

"They had to," Erik said, but uncertainty crept into his voice; not even he was sure of his own words, but tried to believe them. "For now, let's focus on something we have control of, albeit low: survival. One problem at a time."

The clone nodded.

He then lay on the ground and rested under the shade of the trees that Erik grew, shielding both of them from the flying thaids that might spot them.

Erik looked out at the ocean that surrounded their small safe spot. Aside from that small stretch of land they were on, no place was safe. Not the waters churning below, nor the sky clouding above. Honestly, even the land itself wasn't safe, but at least there was a tree hiding him from the sky and some sand beneath him hiding him from the waters.

He sighed. Erik had already lost most of his army trying to cross these waters and didn't know if the remaining one was still alive. He was forced to think back at the battle.

Originally, he thought the best thing would have been to send a small contingency of clones to stall the flock of three-headed monsters, but they had shown that with the clone's capabilities, that would have been futile.

However, now he was reconsidering his choices.

<Maybe I should have sent them to stall them...> The thought of sending the clones to certain death made him shudder, yet by avoiding that choice, the only result he got was that everyone died.

In truth, sending away a fifth of his army to save Amber, Mira, June, and Emily was akin to sending four-fifths of it to lure the thaids. It indeed worked to stall for enough time to make the three women escape, but it only worked because there were enough clones to stall the three-headed void ravagers.

<At least I saved them...>

The clones could be recreated, but Mira, June, Emily, and Amber were irreplaceable. He had paid a heavy price, but it was necessary to ensure their survival, and despite feeling bad for their death, he would still take the same choice if put in the situation again.

That made him feel even worse. He turned to look at the sleeping clone.

Being just the two of them meant fighting wasn't an option—it would get them killed, at least here on the sea. Their only chance was to stay hidden, though even that wouldn't be easy.

Erik sat down and rested his back against one of the fruit trees. Next to him, he could hear the clone breathing as it fell into a deep sleep. Sometimes he snored.

Erik looked at the darkening sky, thinking about how bad things were. Now that he had lost his army, he and his clone would have to sneak around like small animals trying not to get caught.

It felt weird being almost alone. He used to have many clones around him, but now he only had one left. He knew that one wrong move could get them killed.

He thought about their plan to turn into seabirds. It made sense, but he knew that even good plans could go wrong.

His fingers absently traced patterns in the sand as he thought. The void ravagers had proven that even he and his army were wholly unprepared to fight Mur's apex predators, and that made him wonder how he could get to the blackguards if he couldn't even cross the jungle.

"Phantom Veil should work against most of them. They hunt by sight primarily. If they can't see us..." He paused, considering that even phantom veil would have limitations depending on the type of thaid he found himself having to fight.

Some thaids could sense heat. Here on the sea, some might detect movement in the water through pressure changes; others in caves could be able to use forms of echolocation. A

"Maintaining invisibility for extended periods will also drain my mana quickly."

He couldn't use it for that long, meaning that he had to get stronger quickly if he wanted to survive on Mur.

All this consideration made Erik reaffirm the thought that fighting would be a fatal mistake. If not even 40 thousand Chimaeric Demons had been enough, there was no way that 2 people could do anything meaningful.

"Shit..." Erik sighed. "I just hope things would not be so bad on land."

The sea and the sky were the breeding and hunting grounds of the most powerful thaids. Hopefully, those on land would be weaker than those in the sky and sea, exactly as it was for the thaids on Mannard.

Chapter 1224: A way to safety (2)

The stars emerged across the darkening sky as Erik stood at the edge of the tiny island on which the duo spent the last few days.

The last hints of sunset faded over the horizon, leaving only starlight to illuminate the ocean before them, and that was exactly what Erik wanted and waited for.

"Ready?" Erik asked, glancing at the clone who had saved his life.

The clone nodded but was clearly scared.

The clone had witnessed the devastating power of Mur's creatures firsthand. He had seen how the three-headed void ravagers had torn through their army, ripping off Erik's arm and leg, shredding his wings, and leaving no survivors.

The memory of his brothers sacrificing themselves to allow their escape still haunted him. Even the weakest creatures on Mur were as powerful as elite predators from Mannard and knowing they would have to navigate these waters with just the two of them filled him with dread, but he wasn't the only one.

Erik, too, was agitated after what had happened on the first day of their journey.

[How's the weather looking?] Erik asked the biological computer, studying the star-filled sky above them.

[There will be clear conditions for the foreseeable future,] the system said. [No cloud cover expected. The stars and moonlight will provide excellent visibility.]

The system paused. [Unfortunately, that same visibility works against us. The clear sky means we'll be more easily spotted. The moon will make our silhouette visible from the waters and will make your bodies even more visible from above.]

Erik grimaced at this news.

[We could wait for cloudier conditions,] the system said, [but there's no guarantee when that might happen. And staying here much longer increases our risk of being found by the thaids.]

Erik looked out over the dark waters. The stars reflected off the waves, creating a beautiful but treacherous scene. Somewhere out there, creatures were hunting, and they might stumble upon them.

The clone shifted uncomfortably beside him, likely having the same thoughts. They had barely survived Mur's predators—neither of them wanted to face another.

Then, saying nothing, they both shapeshifted. Erik's body became smaller as feathers grew from his skin. Soon, he had turned into a small black-feathered seagull, which made him hard to be spotted in the dark.

The clone's transformation was even more dramatic. Its human form shrank until only a tiny bug remained, barely larger than a grain of sand.

With quick movements, it scurried between Erik's feathers, finding a safe position where it could rest without risk of falling and where Erik's feathers would keep him hidden.

<Are you done?> Erik asked through their mental link.

<Yes, Master. I'm ready.>

With a nod, Erik focused his mana, channeling it through his Phantom Veil brain crystal power. His form shimmered for a moment before fading from view, not leaving even a shadow to mark his presence.

The invisibility extended to the clone hidden within his feathers, not because he turned invisible, but because the feathers shielded him from everything. Even if it didn't, the clone was too small to be seen by the naked eye, and Erik was going to fly at fast speed, meaning that, even if it was visible, nothing would have the time to see him.

Being invisible helped, but it wasn't a perfect solution. The thaids could still find them through smell, brain crystal powers, or by feeling the movement of air around them.

<Damn, the dumbest thing would be for us to be found by chance!>

Still, not being seen was an enormous advantage, and they needed every bit of help they could get.

<I'm moving now,> Erik said.

Those words made the clone's heart race faster. Leaving their sanctuary, the tiny island that had sheltered them these past days, meant venturing into unknown dangers.

The island had been their safe haven, where they hid and recovered. But now it was time to leave this shelter behind and face the dangerous open waters and sky ahead. The clone kept his worries to himself, though—he didn't want to add to Erik's stress.

Erik opened his wings and caught the night air. With a powerful thrust, he launched himself skyward, leaving behind the small grove of fruit trees that had sustained them.

As Erik flew higher, he looked back at the island, getting smaller below him. It was disappearing into the darkness. It quickly became just another dark spot on the ocean.

Through their mental connection, he felt the clone's anxiety increase as they went farther from it, but he said nothing. However, the clone's feeling reached a melting pot, and he voiced his heaviest worry.

<If we reach Mur... what... What do we do then?>

Erik's mental voice softened, taking on a gentle, almost paternal tone. He tried to send reassuring and calming thoughts to the clone, trying to make him stop thinking too much. He understood the clone's fears—they were his own as well—but they needed to be stronger, and apparently, he was the one who had to start being as such.

<First, we need a shelter. Somewhere hidden, defensible. A place where we can fully recover and plan our next moves. It doesn't need to be big, at least not for us two.>

<Will you make more of us, Master?> The clone said, hoping Erik would make a new army.

<Some,> Erik said. <But not as many as before. We don't have the luxury of time—the blackguards have already had too much of it. Whatever they're searching for in the Lorogia Region, or whatever they are doing inside their labs, we need to stop them before they complete their goal.>

That disappointed the clone. Not making many clones, in his opinion, was going to be a mistake. More clones meant more eyes to watch their surroundings and more people during a fight.

However, he also knew that to have more clones meant they would have to wait for a while before they would hatch, and some more until they matured, and if they remained idle for who knew how much time, nothing would ensure the blackguards wouldn't have a technological breakthrough that would make this whole expedition a failure. They had to strike fast and as soon as possible.

The problem was that being on Mur, hoping to survive with just the two of them, was akin to suicide. The clone still hoped Erik would change his mind.

<But Master, just the two of us... against all of them? That is even without considering the Thaid's that would be on our way.>

<A small force might work better than a large army,> Erik said. <Yes, it would make it harder to find the blackguards, but we actually do not need to kill them all right now. What we need to do is to stop whatever the blackguards are doing. Destroy their laboratories; lure Thaid's to their position. There are many ways to take care of them with just the two of us, and this is just the worst-case scenario. Once we are certain we have time, we can make more clones. >

Erik paused. <Everything will depend on what we find on Mur. If conditions are favorable, we might be able to create more clones. However, understand that this would mean you'd need to stay behind to protect and nurture them until they mature while I search for the blackguards alone. Your choice.>

The clone remained silent. The endless ocean spread out beneath them. From time to time, something moved in the waters below, making both Erik and the clone shiver. Hidden safely in Erik's feathers, the clone made small adjustments to stay comfortable, or better, hidden.

<What about Amber and the others? Shouldn't we search for them and my brothers who went with them?>

Erik's flight pattern remained perfectly steady as his companions were mentioned, his wings cutting through the air without hesitation.

In his mind, though, thoughts of concern mixed with a strong sense of resolve, and the clone sensed them. He knew exactly what needed to be done, even as worry for his friends gnawed at him.

<Once we have a secure base, finding them becomes our priority before leaving. If they made it to Mur...> He left the thought unfinished, not wanting to consider the alternative.

<They might have made it,> the clone said. <I think we gave them enough time to flee, and we weren't even that far from Mur. Considering they were still in Wyvern form, it shouldn't have taken them much time, given how big their wingspan was.>

<Yes, and June was with them. He's resourceful, and they had ten thousand of your brothers for protection. But I'd be naïve to claim they survived for certain. This is Mur—the Thaid's here are far more dangerous than on Mannard, as you've seen yourself.>

Unease spread.

"We'll find them," the clone said through their mental link, trying to project confidence despite the uncertainty in his thoughts. His tiny form shifted slightly among Erik's feathers as he spoke.

"First, we need to survive this flight," Erik said, his wings cutting through the cold night air. "Then we will see what Mur has in store for us..."

Chapter 1225: Mur's Shores (1)

Two days of tense flight finally brought Erik and the clone within sight of Mur's coastline. Their small bodies made the journey painfully slow, but their modest size had proven more than crucial for survival.

The journey had been a constant nightmare. Countless times, they'd nearly been found by the terrors that patrolled these waters, both in the sky and in the churning sea below.

The sea thaids breached the surface below them, while flying thaids soared overhead, leaving no safe place in any part of this cursed sea.

No matter which direction Erik or the clone looked, danger was present, and if it wasn't, there were great chances it could come at a moment's notice.

The only positive thing was that, knowing that even a moment's distraction could prove fatal, both of them kept vigilant and started to understand the thaids' hunting patterns and flying paths, which were becoming more predictable, but that made them no less lethal.

The problem was that Erik and the clone had no idea of how the thaids in this area behaved, because no human survived encountering them, meaning there were no information about them.

Yet Erik was strong enough to survive and to learn.

As the sun set on another treacherous day, the darkening waters seemed to come alive with even more dangerous creatures.

The nocturnal hunters emerged, but just so enough that their shapes were barely visible in the growing gloom.

Erik didn't know why the sea thaids came out during the night and hid during the day, but it must have been because of the sun.

After all, the glowing orb of fire in the sky made it easier for the predators in the depths to spot those staying closer to the surface.

Yet, knowing this meant that Erik and his clone knew they would need to find a safer place before full darkness descended.

<Jeez. If they weren't stupid beasts, I would have thought they were searching for us,> Erik said to the clone.

<Don't make me think about it, master.>

In truth, most of the times Erik's encounters were just a weird combination of events, especially those that involved thaids hunting in some area and the two being too close to the monsters' prey.

For that reason, Erik decided he needed something more drastic to make things safe. He had been far-sighted enough to bring with him some of the rocks from the tiny island on which the clone had saved his life and made holes in it.

Both the clones entered the holes, and Erik moved it across the water using telekinesis. A rock was small enough to float, and whenever a thaid got too close to them for comfort, they hid inside of it so that they would be left alone.

A rock was a rock, after all, and seeing it made the thaids too stupid to understand the ruse. Just get away from it.

Though there was always the risk, the sea thaids thought they were shelled creatures, so Erik remained inside of it just as long as the Thaids to leave the area.

Of course, that was made only by the not-so-rare occurrences in which Thaids could feel the flow of mana. Shapeshifting didn't use much, but Phantom Veil did, so he had to turn it off.

As if all that wasn't enough, not every thaid could be fooled by sight alone. When scent-hunting thaids drew near, Erik and his passenger would plunge beneath the waves, holding position until the danger passed.

Yet the water held its own dangers—more than once they'd had to burst from the surface as massive jaws rose from the depths to devour them.

They survived through cunning as much as caution. When larger thaids fought over territory or prey, Erik would guide them close enough to use the chaos as cover but not so near as to draw attention.

Every natural event became a survival opportunity. They used fighting thaids as cover, hid behind rock formations during hunts, and took advantage of water currents to mask their movements.

When predators gathered to feed, Erik and the clone would slip by unnoticed in the opposite direction. They even timed their movements with the changing tides to conserve energy while traveling.

The problem was that Erik hadn't been able to bring water or food. The lack of nourishment had taken its toll.

Even in their smaller bodies, two days without food left them weak, especially considering how much distance the two had to travel.

Now, as the dark mass of Mur's coastline finally emerged from the horizon, both Erik and his clone felt a mixture of relief and apprehension.

They had survived the crossing, but the continent before them promised dangers that would make their ocean journey seem tame by comparison.

<We made it, Master,> the clone said.

Erik stayed quiet, carefully watching the shore ahead of them. He looked from side to side, checking every part of the coastline for any signs of danger. Next to him, the clone also remained silent.

The shoreline of Mur stretched before them, but rather than resembling the familiar coast of Mannard, it presented a different sight.

Dense jungle pressed right up to the water's edge, massive trees with twisted trunks creating a wall of vegetation. Their branches intertwined so thickly that the forest floor remained hidden in perpetual shadow, even in daylight.

It wasn't that there weren't forests on Mannard; quite the contrary, and since nature was untamed, it was very close to the continent's shores. The difference was that the vegetation was massive.

The trees were enormous—bigger than anything Erik had ever seen growing naturally before. Next to these giants, even the oldest trees back in Mannard looked tiny.

Their trunks were so wide Erik could fit an entire house inside them, and even more. The bark was rough and covered in deep scratches, showing signs of where enormous creatures had attacked them, or where they sharpened their claws, and it wasn't hard to see this even from a distance, both for the trees' size and also for the size of the claw marks and bites left by the creatures who used them to mark their territory, or as a result of a fight.

Erik felt uneasy looking at these trees, because if they had grown this big, it must have been because they needed to protect themselves from the dangerous creatures that lived here.

<That, and the fact that most likely Mur has much more mana than Mannard.>

<It makes sense, master,> the clone said. <As much as we have seen, the creatures around here are bigger than those in our home. Abundance of mana is the only explanation. >

They could also feel the energy flowing around them. There was much more of it in the air here than Erik had ever felt back in Mannard.

He could feel it saturating everything around them, like a thick fog that remained invisible. This abundance of energy could explain the trees' impossible size—they were literally gorging themselves on the ambient mana.

<I'm pretty sure these things house a lot of flying thaids, and if not them, there are still many variants that can use them to nest.>

Erik studied the canopy's movement, noting how entire sections swayed without wind—clear signs of large creatures moving through the upper branches.

<They could work well even for us, Master. The best thing will always be to stay away from the shores, and I won't change my opinion on that.>

The clone said while looking at the stretch of sand in front of them.

<Neither I.>

The beach itself was narrow, barely a strip of sand between ocean and jungle.

Here and there, massive rock formations jutted from the tree line like nature's watchtowers. These weathered stones, some easily as tall as buildings, showed deep gouges and claw marks.

Massive bones jutted from the sand in every direction, bleached white by sun and sea.

These were bigger than anything Erik had ever seen before. Giant rib bones curved up from the beach like arches, and there were other bones he didn't recognize half-buried in the sand.

Erik couldn't tell whether these bones belonged to a single type of thaid or to different species.

<What really worries me is what the hell killed those things...> Erik said. <Whatever it was, it could have probably been bigger than the one who died.>

If they had been killed, the thing who did it could likely be around these parts too.

<Yeah, but they could have also died naturally...>

<Here? In Mur? I doubt so.>

What the clone said made sense.

<Better think positively... Now,> Erik said. <We should find a suitable place to make camp.> The clone nodded. Safety here would mean finding a place the thaids avoided, or at least where they didn't go often. Of course, if such locations existed on this hostile continent.

Erik looked along the beach, trying to find any traces that his companions had been there.

A group of transformed Chimaeric Demons would have needed somewhere to make landfall, somewhere to establish an initial foothold.

But the shoreline showed no obvious signs of disturbance—either they landed elsewhere, or all traces of their arrival had been erased by time and tides. Hopefully not thaids.

<If they made it, they would have headed inland immediately,> Erik thought. <Staying near the coast would have made them too exposed.>

He looked for safe paths through the jungle that would protect them as they traveled deeper into Mur.

Then they finally reached the shore. From there, they could see the jungle better.

He saw several open areas along the edge of the forest, but Erik was too smart to go there. He knew these clearings were dangerous—predators often used them to catch their prey.

Instead, they would need to look for narrow paths and hidden routes through the trees, ones that even the huge thaids might not notice and that hopefully humans used.

Chapter 1226: Mur's Shores (2)

Erik and his clone moved along the beach. They kept their small forms as they walked. They stopped often to look around, checking the sky above them, the water behind, and the forest ahead. They wanted to make sure no Thaids could see them and that no dangerous creatures were following them.

The enormous trees grew closer as they moved forward.

<Keep your eyes on the trees,> Erik said through Instability's mind link. <Those massive trunks might be covering some thaids.>

<Yes, master,> the clone said, its tiny form shifting nervously among Erik's feathers, but his eyes never leaving the trees around and often going from one to another.

<Do you think we will be safe here, Master?>

<We won't know until we get deeper into the forest,> Erik said. <We have been in similar situations countless times. Even if we really risk our lives, it won't be different from the hundreds of times we did on Mur when we were weaker.>

Erik spoke in plural because although he alone had experienced these events, the clone shared his memories as if they were its own. The clone felt like it had lived through those harrowing experiences exactly like Erik, which was why the man used inclusive language—he didn't want the clone to feel left out. Building the clone's confidence was crucial, as any hesitation could make their dangerous situation on Mur even more precarious.

Chimaeric Demons typically kept his same cold demeanor. Yet since the attack from the three-headed void ravagers, the clone had become uncharacteristically fearful.

Erik had already seen the memories from the clone thanks to Instability, but not having lived them in person since he was unconscious made everything feel as if it was fake. Yet, for the clone, those moments must have been dreadful.

<I wonder if I would have behaved the same if I had been awake during the battle...> Erik tried not to think about that, as it wouldn't help for what was to come.

The duo moved forward quietly. Erik, in his small bird form, flew so lightly that his claws barely left marks in the sand when he landed.

He avoided landing on rocks or other elevated spots, even if it would give him the height advantage, and that was because he didn't know what was hiding beneath the rocks and among the vegetation sparsely growing close to the sand, and he wasn't keen to know.

His clone nestled motionless in his feathers as they moved together, but aside from looking around, it did nothing. They stopped every few steps to check for any strange noises that didn't match the sounds of the beach.

With each step, they got closer to the immense trees and farther from the shores. The trees were so big that Erik could easily see the deep lines and patterns in their bark, which would make perfect hiding spots when they got there.

The problem was that they had to make sure that there were no tenants among the trees before they could claim them as their own. Yet Erik was immediately jolted out of his thoughts when he felt the mana prickling at his skin.

<The mana concentration is incredible,> the clone said, voicing exactly what Erik was thinking.
<I've felt nothing like it, even in the densest forests back home.>

<That's what worries me. Strong mana means strong thaids.>

It wasn't all bad. All that mana meant that brain crystal powers were easier to use, and were more effective, and that the regeneration rate of the ethereal substance was higher. <But it also means my Verdant Architect power will be more effective. We can use that.>

<To build a shelter?>

<More than a shelter. With this much ambient mana, we might be able to create something that could actually keep us safe. These trees have grown resistant to Mur's dangers—we can use that to our advantage.>

Erik studied the gigantic claw marks etched into the trees. From their angle and depth, the beast must have struck with tremendous force during combat, yet missed whatever it was attacking.

That meant that not all thaids were strong enough to destroy these massive trees. The deep claw marks showed some creatures had tried and failed to break through the thick bark, suggesting that the trees were strong and resistant enough to stand against even the powerful predators of Mur.

This gave Erik hope—if these ancient trees could withstand attacks from most thaids, they would make excellent material for their shelter, and Verdant Architect would make it even better than they were supposed to be considering only the wood from the colossal trees.

<I'm not saying they will be impregnable fortresses.> Erik said, <But at least it will be better than nothing.>

The clone nodded. <All right then, master. Do as you see fit.>

<Let's move - we're too exposed out here.>

Finally reaching the tree line, Erik channeled his mana into Verdant Architect. The power flowed from him into the nearest massive tree, connecting with its roots. These were as thick as city walls, stretching deep into the mana-rich soil of Mur.

Erik used his mind to explore the tree roots underground and the branches above.

<This tree is clear,> Erik said. <There are no thaids...>

The clone kept looking at their surroundings. Based on what he saw, there was nothing around at least 100 meters.

<We should check better, Master.> Erik nodded, and he did exactly that. He went from tree to tree and did the same, making sure nothing dangerous was hiding inside, above, or below each of the trees.

<Thaids might come here later,> the clone said. It meant that even if they were safe for now, they wouldn't be forever.

<Yes, but we will have our shelter by that time, and with it fortified positions and traps.>

Erik then went to a group of large trees that looked promising to build a hideout. Using his powers, he made the roots of several of them bend and grow together. The roots formed walls and a ceiling while moving the dirt away to create a large room underground.

Then he created separate chambers for sleeping, storage, and living quarters. The wood hardened as it grew, becoming as solid as stone while maintaining its connection to the trees above.

Erik thought about changing the material, making the walls, but that would have meant losing the trees' endurance.

Besides, it would quickly kill the tree and would be pointless for many reasons, especially because those trees were very strong and sturdy, and they kept the place well insulated. He created hidden ventilation shafts, disguising them as natural hollows in the tree's structure.

<This way, if anyone searches the area, they'll only sense a living tree,> Erik said to his clone through their link. <The mana signature will be completely natural.>

<Let's just hope there aren't tree-eating thaids.>

<Let's hope,> Erik said.

Layer by layer, the underground base took shape. Erik reinforced the walls with multiple layers of root wood, ensuring they could withstand even the weight of massive thaids walking overhead.

The clone stared as Erik built their hideout from the tree roots. From the outside, nothing could be seen. Erik also created the entrance into one of the trees. There was a door, but one small enough that thaids would not notice that and neither destroy it.

<We are done,> Erik said. <Let's go in; we need to rest.>

<Yes, master.>

Erik and his clone walked to the small door in the tree. It was well-hidden among the natural patterns of the bark, barely visible unless you knew where to look. They slipped inside, finding themselves in a narrow passage that spiraled down into the earth thanks to a staircase.

The walls of the passage were smooth and well illuminated. Erik sensed there were some glowing fungi underground and living in some of the largest spaces inside the tree, so he spread them after having made sure they were not toxic.

The underground lights provided constant illumination while remaining dim enough to allow comfortable sleep.

At the bottom of the spiral staircase, they entered their underground base. The main room opened up before them, spacious despite being completely hidden beneath the forest floor.

Erik had also furnished the space, though minimally. Bed frames grew from the floor in one chamber. The clone went to one of them and laid down, not seeming to mind the lack of mattress or bedding.

<This thing is surprisingly comfortable,> the clone said, settling into the frame. <And warm too.>

<The living wood keeps heat well, apparently. I would need to study them some more to see what they can do. Still, we should look for materials to make proper bedding soon.>

The clone remained silent for a while.

<What now, Master?>

The silence went on for some seconds.

<I will go searching for the others,> Erik said. <I'm the only one with invisibility, and I need you to keep an eye on the base.>

The clone gulped. <Are you sure, master? This place is dangerous. What if you die? I could go.>

<No.> Erik's eyes were firm.

<I need to understand how powerful the thaids here are. You don't have analysis and would be useless from this point of view. The sooner I understand how the danger level here is, the better it will be.>

Chapter 1227: Looking around (1)

Erik left the underground shelter and turned invisible.

The last thing he needed was for the monsters to know where the base was located—revealing its position would compromise not only his safety but also endanger any future operations he planned to conduct from there.

His mission was to find and analyze some thaids. He had two crucial reasons: first, to determine if he could survive in this environment, and second, to assess whether Amber and the others could have survived here as well.

If the thaids were too strong, he and the others would just die in a direct confrontation. The only way for Erik to survive would be to stay holed up in the underground base, train, and make Chimaeric Demons. It would force Erik to completely change the tactics he and the clone would need to use to fight the monsters.

<Damn... This is not going to end well...>

[You're worried more about their research than them searching for my blueprints,] the system said. [Pretty insensitive.]

<Well, I doubt they will be able to find your blueprints. On the other hand, making real progress with their research has immediate and tangible results. Think about it—they're already getting stronger at an alarming rate.>

If that happened, Erik would just have problems piling up, and he would end up unable to destroy the blackguards before it was too late.

His chances of success depended on how much he could move on Mur, and that depended on the Thaid's inhabiting these lands.

[Don't be so pessimistic,] the system said. [Even if they're making progress, you just need to hunt here for some time to become much stronger than you currently are. And let's not forget—you have me.]

<Glad to have your annoying voice in my head,> Erik said, chuckling, <but you are missing the other point. You are assuming I CAN hunt here, but the real question is if this is true.>

[Only one way to know.] That was to go analyze some thaid's and find some suitable ones to hunt. Erik turned to the Chimaeric Demon, who was waiting for him at the door.

<Don't get out of here before I return,> he told the clone through Instability. <If anything approaches the shelter, contact me immediately, and I will head back. Is it clear?>

<Yes, Master.>

With those words, Erik left.

Erik moved silently through the thick vegetation. He turned invisible to avoid being spotted, but if that was going to prevent all thaid's from attacking him was an unknown.

<What do you think we'll find here?> Erik asked. <In terms of monster strength, I mean.>

[Hard to say with certainty,] the system said. [But based on what we know of Mur's evolutionary pressures, we should expect powerful creatures.]

<Yeah, thanks for having stated the obvious.> Erik sighed. <What I actually wanted to know is the strength and energy range of the creatures here. I need a benchmark.>

Erik's stomach churned at the memory of the three-headed void ravagers. That was the bar of strength he hoped the average monster didn't reach.

In theory, it shouldn't. Flying thaids were usually stronger than land ones, but that was only true on Mannard.

There was no way to say it was true also on Mur. He managed to kill some of the three-headed void ravagers, yes, but only under specific conditions and with considerable risk.

[I doubt all creatures here will be that powerful,] the system said, reading Erik's thoughts. [Strong, certainly, but not necessarily beyond our ability to engage in close combat. Even if they are that strong, you could theoretically take them down from a distance. Like you did on the sea.]

<Yeah, but...> Erik paused, scanning the area ahead. <Back then, I had an army of clones protecting me. I had backup. Here?>

[Here you're more exposed,] the system agreed. [Though don't forget you are not in the sky anymore. Besides, we got some experience since then.]

<Experience won't help much if one of these things catches me off guard.>

[Then we make sure that doesn't happen,] the system said. [We are going to be careful. We will observe and analyze the thaids before engaging, and we will pick our battles only if we are certain we can win. No need to engage everything we see.]

Erik nodded, though no one could see the gesture. The system was right—they needed information before making any moves, and that was why he left the safety of his underground shelter. Still, he couldn't shake the nagging worry that even careful planning might not be enough here.

Moving silently through the undergrowth, he searched around.

"Let's see..." he said to himself. "I need to find tracks, like footprints or claw marks. Droppings would tell me about their diet. Broken branches could show their size and path. Territorial markings, feeding grounds, nesting areas... And most importantly, signs of recent kills to understand their hunting patterns."

Little was known about the Thaid's on Mur. Most knowledge had been lost when Solomon Judd perished in these lands. What remained was a grim warning: the Thaid's here were overwhelmingly powerful, and only vast numbers could ensure survival. This was both his father's warning and his own firsthand experience.

He also knew that the sea thaid's in this region were more dangerous than the flying ones, which in turn were more dangerous than the land-dwelling ones. This hierarchy matched Mannard's, but the difference in power here was at least tenfold greater. Of course, Erik knew too little to be sure that this hierarchy was still followed.

The forest floor was a maze of massive roots and fallen leaves, but among them, he spotted the first signs of thaid activity. Deep claw marks scored the ground, each groove wide enough to fit his body.

"Well, that's... comforting?" Erik said with sarcasm to himself. "I'm following the tracks of something that could swallow me whole, and what's worse is that maybe these are just the babies."

Following the tracks, Erik noticed disturbing patterns. The marks weren't random—they showed signs of intelligent hunting behavior.

Some tracks, made from other thaid's, vanished mid-stride, suggesting they belonged to creatures that could either fly or worse. It wasn't weird considering the trees here were so big that one could build a house in between them. The monsters had plenty of space to land and do whatever they wanted.

<Maybe one of them has a sort of teleportation power. Getting my hands on that would be great...>

Other tracks showed evidence of coordinated group movement, hinting at pack hunters, who were even more troubling than lone predators, despite generally being weaker.

<Well, at least on a preliminary glance, things don't look so different from Mannard... except these things probably bench press mountains for warm-ups and have PhDs in advanced killing techniques. I bet they attend seminars on 'How to Make Your Prey's Last Moments Extra Terrifying' and vie for 'Most Creative Ways to Use Terrifying Powers.' At least on Mannard, the scariest thing was a thaid that could breathe fire. Here, they probably breathe nuclear explosions while solving quantum physics equations powers.>

[Ah yes, the eternal optimist strikes again. Should I get you a black umbrella to go with that sunny disposition?]

Erik followed these traces, maintaining his invisibility while moving from cover to cover. The good thing was that with all that mana, his replenishing rate was also faster. The bad thing was that was going to be true for everyone else.

His path led him to a clearing where several tracks converged, but Erik was unsure if they belonged to the same creature, or more than that.

<One thing is sure: if this belongs to multiple thaid species, there is going to be a battle somewhere. Either that already ended, or one that is still going. Maybe I can find something about the thaids here by observing them fighting.>

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In the end, he found no ongoing battles. However, the tracks belonged to multiple species, as evidence showed a fierce fight had taken place here.

The ground was torn up. Massive trees had been uprooted, their trunks splintered like twigs. Whatever had done this had strength far beyond anything he'd encountered on Mannard, and even its opponent wasn't weaker.

Then a terrifying screech cut through the air, and Erik felt his heart stop for a moment. The sound was strange and scary—it sounded like metal scraping mixed with a howling wind, but there was something behind it that made it even more frightening. The sound was so loud it made the gigantic trees shake.

Erik didn't move a muscle, grateful that he had a power allowing him to turn invisible. He knew the screech came from somewhere to his left, but the forest made it hard to tell where. He wasn't sure if the creature was calling to hunt or marking its territory, but one thing was clear: in this place, he was far from being the strongest creature around.

Through a gap in the canopy, Erik spotted movement. A creature emerged from the treeline - a predator roughly the size of a house, with multiple limbs ending in curved claws. Its hide seemed to shift colors as it moved, blending with its surroundings. But what caught Erik's attention was the not-so-smaller creature in its maws.

<If this is an average predator here, the apex predators must be truly terrifying.>

Chapter 1228: Looking around (2)

Erik remained motionless, keeping the beast at an ideal distance—far enough for safety but close enough for analysis to work.

Clearly, he didn't turn off invisibility even for a second. Not only that, but he also shapeshifted so that his smell was reduced to the maximum.

The beast moved until it found a comfortable place where it could eat its prey.

<System, analyze that thing...>

The biological supercomputer didn't wait.

—[Analysis]—

Name: Chromatic Stalker Physical Description: Quadrupedal predator is around 3 meters tall at the shoulder and 5 meters in length. Body covered in chromatophore-rich scales, allowing active camouflage. Six limbs ending in retractable claws; each limb is heavy-muscled and showing clear signs of adaptations for both climbing and sprinting. The head features multiple sensory organs.

Brain Crystal Powers: Chromatic Shift (A54C): Advanced camouflage ability that adapts to both visual and mana signatures of surroundings. Effectiveness increases with continued exposure to the environment. It needs biological adaptations to work. Sensory Enhancement (A49C): Improves all

natural senses and adds mana detection capabilities. Can track prey through multiple spectrum ranges.

{Attributes} STRENGTH: 525 INTELLIGENCE: 15 DEXTERITY: 387 ENERGY: 1102

{Others} Power Level: 1027 Estimated Experience per kill: 1,670,194,096.50

—[END]—

Erik studied the numbers.

The creature was strong—its strength alone surpassed what most humans could achieve, even by focusing on their neural link development. The average blackguard was much weaker than this, and only the Vindicators had a similar power, even if a weaker one. Yet compared to the void ravagers that had decimated his army, they were nothing.

<Well, at least this is manageable,> Erik thought. But that wasn't the only thing. Erik was disappointed in what he had in front of him, though.

<The powers are worse than I expected.> Erik thought that all creatures on Mur had deadly powers, such as the Leviathan Serpent, the Cerulean Bird, or the Three-headed Void Ravagers; instead, the creature in front of him had rather normal brain crystal powers.

<Both abilities are C-ranked, though the neural links it has have boosted its attributes a lot.>[Indeed. It has more than 500 strength points; it is not a weak beast.]

<Yes, but it is still around 500 strength points. The beast is far weaker than me.>

[Look, I don't want to spoil your mood,] the system said. [But the combination of those sensory and camouflage abilities makes it dangerous even for you. I think you should be able to kill it, but do not rush things because your analysis might be a misreading.]

The system sighed. It knew there was nothing worse than a sense of confidence that Erik couldn't afford here on Mur. However, it was clear even for the AI that maybe survival in Mur was possible.

<What do you think?> Erik watched as the creature dismembered its prey. Its chromatophore scales shifted colors, matching the changing patterns of the sunlight coming from the sky above.

[The chromatophore integration is fascinating,] the system said. [Most creatures with camouflage abilities rely on either purely biological or purely brain crystal-based mechanisms. This one seems to have both working in perfect synchronization.]

<So these color-changing scales work?> Erik watched as the creature's skin changed colors to match every tiny shift in the surrounding lighting.

[Yes. The brain crystal is what makes the mana, but it is the chromatophores that do the rest. It's the same with the Luminous Leviathan. This creature's brain crystal power wouldn't work if you or the clones didn't shapeshift into it, at least partially.]

The biological supercomputer kept observing the creature in fascination. Of course, Erik felt the fascination but saw nothing. The system was nothing more than a voice in his head, after all.

[It's actually quite elegant, and it makes it nearly undetectable to most sensing methods.]

<Explains how it gets close enough to catch prey that size,> Erik said, watching as the beast's powerful jaws tore through muscle and bone with disturbing efficiency.

<Is it better than invisibility?> Erik was considering the idea of getting that power, although he would also have to shapeshift to take advantage of it.

[Yes and no,] the system said. [Its ability works like a chameleon's—the creature is hard to spot but not completely invisible. It works better than invisibility because it doesn't create mana ripples, keeping away creatures that use those for tracking. It also reduces heat dispersion, making the camouflage more effective. Invisibility, while making you completely unseen, only works against sight. Heat and mana can still be detected.]

Erik nodded. <Though with those stats, it doesn't need to be stealthy to win fights.>

[Don't underestimate the value of stealth,] the system said. [Even apex predators benefit from the element of surprise. Look at how it's eating—quick, efficient, always scanning its surroundings. It's used to competing for its meals despite its size and strength.]

<But those sensory powers... it should be able to detect threats coming, right? Maybe we are too close.>

[Enhanced senses are as much about avoiding danger as finding prey,] the system said. [The fact that it evolved both stealth and detection abilities suggests it's not at the top of the food chain. Think about it—why would something this powerful need to hide?]

Erik felt a chill run down his spine as he considered the implications. <Point taken. Maybe we should reconsider my earlier assessment about Mur's creatures.>

Despite his concerns, Erik felt relieved. The analysis showed that he could defeat this creature. This was a welcome change from his past encounters on this damned continent and its surrounding area. Until now, he had only faced monsters that would wipe the floor with him.

Yet, even with his invisibility active, Erik kept his distance. Those sensory brain crystal powers could detect him through means beyond simple sight, and he wasn't willing to kill the creature so close to the shelter. It would attract other thaids, and if the body attracted bug-like thaids, not even his shelter would be safe, because there wouldn't be enough of him to kill them all.

Moreover, the bodies would attract more thaids, creating a vicious circle.

Yet Erik stopped caring about all this stuff when the surprise and the curiosity faded away. <Do you think there are stronger predators around?>

[On Mur? Almost certainly.]

<No, I literally meant here.>

[Ah. I don't know. My sensors are not picking up anything else for now, but... Well, you know...]

<I expected Mur to have only thaids as powerful as the three-headed void ravagers, but maybe they were the exception.>

The creatures in Mur posed a serious threat, especially to those outside the blackguards, like Becker and his soldiers, but Erik and the blackguards themselves could handle them. Erik alone, and the blackguards in teams.

<Those motherfuckers certainly thought even the weakest of thaids here was on par with a wyvern back then, and it explains why they had to go through Mur with hundreds of thousands of people, like Dad said.>

Unfortunately, based on what Erik saw until now, things changed. The blackguards became much more powerful, and surviving here wasn't a problem anymore for their organization.

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<After all this time on Mur, the blackguards must have developed specialized strategies to operate here. Their normal tactics wouldn't work against creatures like this. While these beasts aren't much of a threat to me or the Chimaeric Demons, they're still dangerous for the blackguards since they're stronger than a Vindicator.>

Erik had analyzed many blackguards by now. The average member of their organization possessed around 300 strength points—making them weaker than this creature, which had stats comparable to a Vindicator. However, their superior intelligence meant that a large hunting party of dozens or hundreds could take down such a creature without suffering casualties.

On the contrary, an even bigger concern was that the blackguards were growing stronger each day. Their progression from helplessness to being capable of taking down such beasts showed a massive growth rate.

The only problem was that Amber and the others wouldn't have this ability, of course, if they were alive.

Besides, even if this particular creature here was not as strong as expected, but not even that weak, there was no way to say this creature represented the average, and it didn't mean Amber and the others would be able to survive here on Mur, which was Erik's main worry.

The average was important because it represented how strong the creatures they faced more often were, how great the chances were of finding something that would kill them, or to find things they could face.

Erik sighed. <I need to collect more data if I want to see things more clearly.> For a second, he thought about killing the creature. The battle wouldn't be simple but not even life threatening, at least until no creature joined the fight. Killing this thing would give Erik a ton of experience points, not enough to make him level up, but it was still much more than a single creature on Mannard had ever given him.

Yet he was still unsure.

The creature finished its meal and began a careful grooming ritual, using its claws to clean its scales. While it did so, Erik kept thinking.

Chapter 1229: Broken wings and broken spirits

[FOUR DAYS EARLIER]

"No, Erik!"

Mira shouted. He just gave the order to the Chimaeric Demons to bring her and the others away from the three-headed void ravagers.

In her opinion, Erik's plan was simply the fastest way to reach the afterlife, a stupid way to get himself and the others killed.

Mira didn't know if staying would have been enough to repel the monsters or if it would have made any kind of difference, but separating would just make things worse because it would weaken the Chimaeric Demons' army.

Yet Erik gave the order, and as their commander, and even more than their creator, his word was absolute—the Chimaeric Demons had no choice but to follow his command, even if they disagreed. Their military discipline and the chain of command left no room for discussion or debate.

Of course, the clones didn't disagree at all. Sure, they weren't taking the fact that Erik was going to stay behind well, but his wish came first to everything else, and besides, they had faith that their master would survive this ordeal, because that was what he had always done.

Besides, they wanted to bring Mira, Amber, Emily, and June to safety, exactly like Erik.

Mira shapeshifted. She wanted to take flight and reach Erik. She wanted to defy the stupid orders that would prevent her from helping the man she loved.

Yet someone stopped her. For a second, Mira cursed the Chimaeric Demons for always blindly trusting their creator, but when Mira turned to look at who was pinning her down, she saw Amber, and she didn't expect that.

"What are you doing?!"

Amber said nothing. She only looked at Mira. Tears were streaming down Amber's face as she shook her head. Amber understood Mira's desperation—Erik's decision felt wrong to her, too. She wanted to help; she wanted to fight. Everyone did. Yet she understood why Erik made that choice, even though it hurt.

Fighting those monsters would only put them in danger—they weren't strong enough to help. None of them could survive in these waters if something went wrong, but Erik could.

At least by leaving, they had a chance to find a better way to help and would actually get out of the way, leaving Erik without worry and able to focus on fighting rather than protecting them.

She held Mira back, feeling terrible about having to stop her friend. As painful as it was, Amber knew Erik was making the right choice by sending them away.

Looking around, Mira could see the same helpless expression on everyone else's faces. They all wanted to stay and fight alongside Erik, but they were bound by his command.

Like that, the ten thousand Chimaeric Demons spread their wings and took to the skies in formation, their massive numbers darkening the clouds above as they reluctantly flew away from the battle. The clones maintained tight defensive formations as they retreated, while keeping an eye on the three girls to avoid them doing some stupid thing.

...

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The flight across the ocean became a desperate affair. The Chimaeric Demons had to claw every meter they flew through.

The first attack came within hours after they escaped from the three-headed void ravagers. A massive eel-like creature, nearly fifty meters long with pale gray scales and rows of razor-sharp teeth, burst through the water's surface.

Its jaws snapped shut with devastating force, claiming thirty-seven Chimaeric Demons in a single bite. The attack happened so quickly that the formation had no time to scatter or mount any defense.

It wasn't a leviathan serpent, but it was pretty similar, not in size but at least in strength. The main difference between the two was that this one didn't make a heat so strong as to turn the ocean into scorching vapor clouds, but it didn't matter because it still was a deadly monster.

The survivors scattered into groups of twenty to thirty, maintaining their wyvern forms with their leathery wings spread wide.

Each smaller formation flew in tight patterns—some higher, some lower, but all constantly shifting positions to become more hard targets for the predators below.

The scattered groups maintained visual contact with each other through designated lookouts, ensuring they wouldn't lose track of their allies during the flight.

"Keep moving!" June said, leading one of the formations. "We can't stop!"

Not much later, the group was attacked by some other flying thaids, and without Erik, they had no way to identify or learn about their weaknesses.

They came from above, despite the clones' formations flying as high as they could, and were as relentless as the three-headed void ravagers were.

The group repelled the monsters, not without losses, and not without just a few of them. The clones even turned some of them into undead. The problem was that when these went scouting; they found more and more of such thaids in the vicinity, and that forced the Chimaeric Demons to fly lower.

But the sea held its own terrors—and each one of them had a ravenous hunger that they unleashed on the clones.

Amber, Emily, and Mira flew in the middle of the large formation, protected by rings of shapeshifted clones, but the more they remained amidst the group, the more they saw it shrink and decrease. One by one, the clones were dying, and that was happening in the span of hours.

Their wyvern forms provided speed and strength, but against the horrors of these waters and of their surrounding skies, they were inadequate. The problem was that they didn't even know if there was a better solution to their problem. Maybe shapeshifting into something small would have helped them, but that would have meant leaving Amber and Emily exposed.

June and Mira could shapeshift, but the other two couldn't. Amber could warp, but she couldn't warp that far. She couldn't reach Mur, while Emily could slow time down, but she couldn't do it long enough for her to reach Mur. She couldn't even fly, so she would have to slow time down for at least a Chimaeric Demon, and that demanded mana she didn't have.

By nightfall, their numbers had been cut in half. A single day had been enough to kill 5000 Chimaeric Demons, the most powerful troops the Mannard continent had ever seen.

When darkness fell, it brought new terrors—creatures that hunted using sound and heat were just some of the predators that attacked.

The Chimaeric Demons started feeling the weight of tiredness and lack of mana. Their formation suffered from that, and they started flying in a messy pattern, especially as their fear increased.

That quickly led to the Chimaeric Demons making dangerous choices they would have never done if they had been lucid enough—flying either too low near the water or too high in the sky during battles. This made them easy prey for the monsters waiting above and below.

June tried to keep everyone together by shouting orders. Despite being the weakest member of the group, he was the eldest of the clones there, so his orders were only second to Erik's.

The problem was that even his voice started getting weaker, and he was struggling with the loss of so many of his brothers.

Emily kept looking over her shoulder, terrified that more monsters would attack them. She silently hoped nothing was following them.

Next to her, Amber and Mira were barely holding themselves together. The situation was bad as it was, but it turned worse every few minutes, since the screams of the dying clones signaled their death, making the journey harder by the second.

The clones sacrificed themselves willingly, drawing attackers away from the main group, buying precious minutes with their lives.

When they finally spotted Mur's coastline, barely five hundred Chimaeric Demons remained of the original ten thousand.

It was a sorry sight for those who knew how many left Hin, but it was also a number greater than they could have ever assumed.

They landed in a small cove, the remaining clones forming a protective perimeter despite their exhaustion. Many bore injuries, evidence of near misses with death. But it was their eyes that told the true story—the shared trauma of watching thousands of their brothers die.

There was the weight of having and wanting to protect Erik's lovers and the knowledge that, even when they reached the land, their job wouldn't end.

"We made it," June said, but there was no triumph in his voice. Only a hollow acknowledgment of their survival and the terrible cost it required.

The surviving clones gathered close to each other, sharing their sadness. Though they had survived, they would never forget what happened during their escape—watching helplessly as monsters killed their brothers, fighting for their lives, and running from endless attacks.

"What now?"

"We need to make a shelter," Mira said. "God knows what the hell we will find on this damned continent, and while a shelter won't ensure us protection, at least it would hide us from this place's predators and will give us the chance to rest."

She then turned to the Chimaeric Demons. "Do whatever you can, but pay attention, and do not lure thaids to our position."

Every clone was cursing at their inability to control plants like Erik did, but despite that, they started working.

Chapter 1230: Another Giant Tree (1)

Erik walked back to the shelter, his feet instinctively finding silent paths between the carpet of the fallen leaves. The forest floor was damp from recent rain, and the temperature was very low, albeit higher than on Mannard.

Although this part of the continent was not very south and was very close to Hin, the difference in temperature was a lot. It might have been because of some thaid, or because of some natural phenomenon, but Erik had no way to know.

Even though Erik knew he could beat the Thaid, he decided not to fight it. It was a smart choice—they had only just arrived in Mur, and starting a fight now would be pointless.

Erik needed to focus on more pressing matters—finding his friends, securing food and water. The Thaid could wait; their survival needs came first. Besides, unnecessary combat would only drain his energy and draw unwanted attention from other creatures lurking in the forest.

The journey back didn't take much. Erik walked down the hidden downward stairs and entered the building. Inside the shelter, Erik found his clone lying on one of the wooden beds, breathing heavily.

Both of them were completely worn out. The endless need to stay alert, the scary environment of Mur, the dreadful journey through the ocean, and the worry about their missing friends had left them exhausted. Erik could see his own tiredness reflected in his clone's state, yet he wasn't going to rest.

The clone desperately needed rest. While Erik had been unconscious during his healing, the clone hadn't slept for days. Despite Erik's attempts to make him rest during their journey, the clone had barely gotten any meaningful sleep.

Erik sat on another bed frame. There were many thoughts racing through his mind, yet few of them were reassuring. He was trying to understand how many were the chances that Amber and the others landed, and based on their approximate position before the split, where they could have done so.

Logic suggested his friends must have landed relatively close by, assuming they had stayed on their planned course before getting separated. Of course, that also depended on the fact they survived.

Sure, the clone brought him to a small patch of earth in the middle of nowhere, but it must not have been that far from their original path. Not given the state in which the clone was in when Erik woke up.

Erik turned to the system. <What lies west and east of our position?>

[Based on data extracted from Maynard Island's records, the western territories have many ancient cities lost to forest growth. The region also has extensive cave networks and notable geological formations. To the east, we find similar ruins, but aside from forests and beaches, there is not much, at least until we stay in the south.]

<Where would they most likely have landed?> Erik was hoping the system had already calculated where the most likely place was. Luckily, it didn't disappoint him.

[My analysis suggests the western region.] Yet the system's answer had a touch of caution within.

[However, if they survived and found shelter in one of the caves, as they should have, finding them will be much more challenging.]

"Shit..." However, Erik was more interested in the chances of them having survived, and what were the chances of them surviving on land if they did on the sea already?

<What about their survival chances? Could you estimate them if they reached the caves?>

[The cave networks provide excellent protection from Thaidis and other threats, though they also offer plenty of hiding spots and escape routes.]

The system paused, analyzing the data. [Assuming they avoided serious injuries during landing, their survival probability is over 70% if they made shelter there.]

Erik sighed in relief.

<And the chances they actually reached that area?>

[Given our flight trajectory before getting separated, the wind patterns based on what the clone told us, and the three-headed void ravager's attack vector, I think they should have had a 63% probability they veered westward. The attack's impact would have pushed them in that direction rather than east, but that is still assuming they didn't get steered by anything else.]

Erik's fingers unconsciously tapped against his knee. The Blackguards had much information about Mur and its dangers. For some reason, they refrained from deleting them, only destroying whatever was linked to them, but the rest was on the servers they left behind. This also meant that Erik could get a vague idea of the creatures that could be there, but not an exhaustive one.

The blackguards most likely wrote about what they found, but they couldn't have possibly matched whatever had been made on Mannard during the centuries in which scientists had studied the fauna on Mannard.

They could, and most likely did, miss many of the creatures, meaning that Erik would be in a lot of trouble if he ended up facing one that no human had ever seen.

[What about the Thaidis in that area? Any particularly dangerous species we should watch for?]

[The western territories host several high-threat specimens. Based on the records, the most dangerous creatures would be Frost Behemoths in the higher elevations and Stone Wyrms, but we should be unlucky to find them. Really. If we are careful, we should be able to avoid them. The other thaidis are not particularly problematic.]

The system showed Erik the data.

Frost Behemoths were massive beasts standing fifteen feet tall, with blue-white fur and ice-like crystals along their spine. They had two pairs of tusks and glowing blue eyes.

Stone Wyrms were twenty-foot serpentine creatures with granite-like plating. They moved swiftly through caves and forests and had multiple eyes and expandable jaws for swallowing prey.

Both creatures dominated their territories but rarely strayed from them.

[Keep in mind that most caves are filled with bug-like thaids.]

Erik nodded. <So we're looking at a search area dominated by ruins and cave networks, with multiple apex predators to consider. The caves offer protection but make tracking nearly impossible.>

[Correct.]

<Then we better make something to allow them to find our base in case I fail to find them, or if they are lucky.>

He started thinking.

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"We need a signal," Erik said to himself. "Something they can't miss." He already had several ideas about how to mark his position for the others.

Erik's words must have woken up the Chimaeric Demon, because it soon gave a suggestion. "The White Desert's tree?"

Erik nodded. "Yeah, I was thinking about that, but thanks for confirming my idea was viable," Erik thanked the clone. However, that wasn't the only problem at hand.

<We also need food, master.>

Erik didn't have the time to do that yet. He first wanted to make sure the immediate area was safe. Besides stocking and preparing for Amber and those who survived from the army,.

Sure, they could hunt, but in a place such as Mur, hunting would not be a trifling matter, and most importantly, the smell of blood could attract stronger thaids.

Erik needed to make crops, but these might get destroyed by the passing thaids.

<I should make a barricade or something like that...>

The problem was that without a barrier master among them, traditional defensive structures would offer very limited protection against thaids, especially if they were from Mur.

They had been useless for centuries, and that against Mannard's thaids. What could a wall of stone and wood do against the powerful creatures of this cursed land?

Yet Erik didn't really need defenses. What he needed was a way to conceal the crops. <A barrier would still work well. The only problem is that if a thaid stumbles at the crops, I will have to make everything again.>

Yet that wasn't a problem. Food was the easiest thing Erik could make thanks to his powers.

<I will also need to make water collectors, and for sure, Chimaeric Demons. They will all have barrier masters' brain crystal powers, and when they mature, I should be able to make a real foothold into this monster infested place.>

He paused.

"I'm going to make the tree," Erik said to the clone. "It should help the others find us."

The clone nodded, and Erik arose from the bed and climbed back to the surface.

Erik looked at the gigantic trees around their shelter. These trees were enormous—their trunks stretched up over 200 feet high, with thick brown bark full of grooves.

The first branches didn't appear until about 50 feet up, where they spread out into thick leafy tops that made the ground below dark and shady.

These trees were much bigger than anything Erik had seen back home in Mannard, where trees usually only grew to about 100 feet tall.

<Well, I don't think it should be hard to make these things even bigger...>

Erik placed his hand against the largest trunk, feeling the pulse of mana flowing through its living wood.

The mana concentration on Mur far exceeded anything he'd seen on Mannard—this was true not just for the environment but for the vegetation as well. He closed his eyes and channeled his mana through the Verdant Architect's neural links.

The tree reacted right away. Its trunk grew bigger and wider. New branches shot up into the air. Erik made sure to control its growth carefully, even though there were plenty of manas available.