

## BIOLOGICAL 1231

### Chapter 1231: Another Giant Tree (2)

The tree grew taller and taller, rising above all the others. It became like a lookout tower, and it was tall enough to see far in all directions.

Erik shaped the branches so that they would not be too resistant to Thaid's weight. He didn't want to replicate the situation in the white desert, with flying thaid's using the tree as a nesting place, which he had to then free, especially considering he wasn't strong enough to fight the beasts on equal ground.

To kill any kind of flying thaid here on Mur, Erik would need to kill them on the first strike, because if they spotted him, especially considering he didn't have clones, they would kill him.

He then created many hollow chambers within the gigantic trunk, connecting them to their underground shelter through hidden passages and stairs, and making the tree a natural tower.

These spaces would later be used as additional storage or living quarters, and given he would need help in dealing with the blackguards, he knew he would need to make the base big enough for the Chimaeric Demons to stay.

Erik built an enormous tree that reached all the way up to the clouds. It was so tall that anyone from his group could spot it from miles away. This would help his friends find their way to him if they were still alive. Since Erik had built a similar tree in the white desert before, his friends would instantly recognize this as his work.

The only problem was that with Erik's powers, and the blackguards knowing them, the tree might be a sign the blackguards might use to find him.

However, based on what he learned, they should have been far from his position. They were in the Lorogia Region, at kilometers from there.

<Hmmm...The blackguards shouldn't venture this far from Lorogia.> Erik stepped back to examine his work.

[Yeah. You have nothing to fear; don't worry.]

<The blackguards would likely stick to their known territories, their supply lines. It should be ok... Let's just hope Amber and the others are not too far, and that they will be able to see it.>

Erik then did the rest. He created a wooden barrier with the upper part uncovered to let the sun fall down, then he created different sections. He planted trees and vegetables of all kinds and made sure to collect the new seeds so that he would have them on him at all times.

Then he went back inside the shelter.

When Erik went inside the shelter, he saw his clone walking back and forth nervously.

He wondered if one tree would be enough, even a very tall one. Their friends could be anywhere in this dangerous place—they might be hurt or lost. And even if they saw the tree, getting here would be risky. In these woods, danger could be hiding behind every tree and bush.

He glanced at Erik, seeing his own concerns mirrored in his creator's face.

"Will they see it?" he asked.

"If they're alive, they'll see it," Erik said. "The question is whether they can reach it."

Erik had the clone's same worries. "We don't know what's between them and us, and I don't even know where they are. If I had known, I could have cleared the way for them a little."

The clone nodded in agreement. The Chromatic Stalker was just one of many dangerous creatures living in these lands. Their friends would have had to face these same kinds of threats on their way here—if they had survived.

"We need to prepare," Erik said.

"What were you thinking about, Master?"

Erik hesitated. The Chimaeric Demons were made for war and were not pushovers, yet Erik didn't know if they could survive Mur given their limited powers.

What Erik wanted to ask the Chimaeric Demon was to help him clear the paths around their base. If their friends were coming from either the northeastern or southwestern areas, having those cleared of thaids would make their journey much safer.

Yet Erik hesitated to make this request—sending his clone out alone into Mur's dangerous wilderness was an enormous risk, and the clone was not just one of the creatures he made, which he felt akin to his children, but also the same one who saved his life.

Still, they needed to help Amber and the others. After a moment's consideration, Erik made his decision. Find adventures on My Virtual Library Empire

"I was thinking of clearing the surrounding area of Thaids," Erik said. "I thought about taking care of the southwestern side while you could go to the northeastern, without straying too much from the beach."

The clone stood up straight, suddenly looking energetic despite being tired. "I'm ready to help, Master. Just point me in the right direction and tell me what to fight."

"It's not as easy as that," Erik said. "The thaids I found in the area are powerful. They are not on the clones' level, but they are much stronger than Amber and the others. Their survival chances depend on how many clones survived."

Erik was worried because the thaid he found earlier might have been among the weakest. That was also important for the clone. If he died, Erik would be alone and managing the base, hunting, and securing the area. Everything would be harder.

"Besides, if we clear the two areas, we will need to go our separate ways. You don't have that much mana..."

The clone paused.

"I know it's dangerous, Master," the clone said. "But don't worry—I won't try to fight anything I can't handle."

"You should follow the same rules, Master," the clone said. "Your safety is just as important as mine," though he kept to himself that Erik's safety was actually more important, knowing such a statement would only anger his master.

The clone's eyes followed Erik. "You plan to hunt alone as well, and while you have more brain crystal powers and mana than I do, Mur's dangers don't discriminate. Even with your abilities, a single mistake could be the last."

"You're right," Erik said with a sigh. "I can't be hypocritical here." The clone was sure that Erik would try to bite off more than he could chew in order to make the journey here safer for Emily and the others.

Erik sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Listen, never engage unless you're certain you can handle it. Your priority between hunts is making neural links. Don't forget that until we find the others, it's still just us two. Your death would endanger not just me but also the others—something we absolutely cannot risk."

"Of course, Master." The clone bowed.

"Your strength puts you above most blackguards, if not almost all of them," Erik said. "But that means nothing if you encounter the wrong creature. Study everything before engaging. The moment something feels beyond your capabilities, you retreat, as you said. No heroics."

The clone straightened. "I'll be careful. I won't waste the neural links we could gain by being reckless."

"I also need to know immediately if something goes wrong."

"Understood. Should I begin my hunt at dawn?"

Erik shook his head. "Rest first. We'll need our full strength, and we arrived here this morning. When you go out, stick to the coastline area, but make sure to clear the most you can. Never jump inside the water."

The clone settled back onto its wooden bed frame. "I wonder if making neural links here will be easier. The new technique you made us use is good, but it's still not enough to reach the effectiveness of the one you are currently using, master."

"That's exactly why we need to be cautious and why you need to focus on making neural links. With that said, don't train today; start tomorrow, and focus on resting."

"Yes, Master. "

Erik nodded. Tomorrow they would begin testing themselves against Mur's terrors, but tonight they needed rest.

Erik sank onto the wooden bed, his muscles protesting every movement. The rough surface pressed against his back as his mind wandered to their precarious situation.

<I'm sick of all this,> Erik said. <I'm sick of all this constant danger and uncertainty.> Erik could only feel exhausted. However, it was clear that was a situation he created. He could have always decided to wait before heading to Mur.

The system wanted to tell him that, but he knew why Erik did all of this. He was right; the blackguards had to be stopped, but there could have been different ways to deal with the matter. Despite knowing this, the biological supercomputer tried to reassure him.

[I know... Stay focused. Your frustration is understandable, but we need to maintain a clear head to survive.]

His eyes grew heavy as exhaustion finally overcame his racing thoughts. As consciousness faded, Erik's last thoughts drifted to his missing friends.

He hoped they were alive, taking shelter in the abandoned ruins or in the caves that dotted the western landscape.

Sleep tugged at his consciousness. Erik's last thoughts focused on tomorrow's hunt. The clone was right—one mistake could prove fatal.

Exhaustion finally claimed him, and Erik fell asleep.

## Chapter 1232: The Clearing of Beasts (1)

Both Erik and the clone had a poor night. Not only were their beds not exactly comfortable, but also the fear of being attacked during their sleep and the thought of what could have happened to the others gnawed at them both in the same way. Erik did his best to make the shelter as inconspicuous

and sturdy as possible, yet being on Mur, nothing ensured that had been achieved. The two prepared to hunt monsters for meat and return to the shelter to make neural links. With luck, they would grow strong enough to survive in this hellish place. It was also their chance to get accustomed to the place, explore the surroundings, set some traps, and rest as much as they could. "We should set a meeting time," Erik said, adjusting his belt. The clone nodded. "What about noon? It would give us enough time to scout and engage if necessary, leaving a lot of daylight to head back if we go too far from the shelter." "Seems fine to me. I don't know when you will end up outside of my Instability brain crystal power's range, so make sure to mark the direction in which you go. Also, keep in mind anything about the thaids. Their territories, behavior patterns, everything. We will review them once you are here; we will do the same about what I find out." "Yes, Master. " They both left the shelter and went out into the cool morning air. The massive tree Erik had grown towered above them. Erik's gaze swept across the forest, taking in his towering creation that stood like a giant among mere mortals. The countless other trees stretched into the sky like nature's skyscrapers, and though smaller than his own, they still soared like ancient pillars fifty meters or more into the air. Their massive trunks were enough to make everyone uneasy, especially because their canopy hung overhead like a ceiling that blotted out the sun and created an oppressive atmosphere that pressed down on him like a heavy blanket. Every shadow between the massive trunks could hide a thaid. Every rustle in the branches above might signal one of those insectoid thaids that made their nests in the treetops. That and the sheer scale of everything made Erik feel impossibly small, vulnerable in a way that stirred something primal in his gut. The towering trees with their massive girth reminded him of his encounter with the Leviathan Serpent—the same feeling of hopelessness and fear left his mouth bone-dry. Erik couldn't shake the sensation of being trapped, as if the forest itself was slowly constricting around him. Erik thought as he realized Amber, Mira, Emily, and June might feel the same as him. Without further words, Erik and the clone separated—the clone heading northeast while Erik turned southwest. Erik kept close to the beach, exactly like the clone was supposed to do, but remained within the forest's cover. That meant he could keep an eye on the beach for landing signs while still being covered from the thaids' sight. Flying thaids were a problem on Mur as much as they were on Mannard. It was just that, here they were all as powerful as weak wyverns, while on Mannard they were no more than kittens, at least for Erik. The coastline offered the highest chance of finding Amber and the others. Given how recently he arrived in Mur and how long he and the clone spent on the sea, it was likely they didn't stray too much from their path, meaning they must have been close. Thaids were the problem, because if the group saw the trees, there were very few chances they could get there fast. That was why Erik was hell-bent on clearing the way for them. Mur was not much different from Mannard. The forest floor told its own story—deep gouges in the earth, broken branches thick as tree trunks, strange markings that spoke of territorial disputes between massive creatures—and all those signs could be used by Erik to navigate his way around or to avoid what looked too dangerous to fight. The situation was similar to when he left New Alexandria and then went to Mur. Back then, the situation was much simpler since the thaids weren't as powerful as those here. What was instead the same was the difference in strength between him and the monsters. However, it was also true that Erik now had many powers, and a lot of these gave him utility, and not only raw power. He could turn invisible, could read minds and perceive emotions, he could fly, and he could shapeshift to hide. All in all, while the situation wasn't as simple as before, it was also not as problematic as it had been years before. The problem was that here there would be no one helping him in case he messed up, because there was no person alive that would actually be able to help him. Erik moved through the forest, studying each track and broken branch. He kept his invisibility active while following the signs, maintaining

a low crouch and checking his surroundings every few steps. But it made sense. Some of the thaids on Mur were also present on Mannard, but the majority was a species that only the blackguards knew, and there were many they didn't even know about. Erik followed the path of destruction and prints, which led him to a clearing. It was very large, and he couldn't expect less, given where he was. However, seeing the creatures grazing in the clearing, he couldn't stop wondering if the clearing was made by the creatures. Erik could do nothing but freeze at the sight. The beasts were enormous, with black scales catching the morning light. However, despite what Erik assumed before arriving here, there were few of the creatures, albeit the herd was larger than he would have expected from a creature this large. It made sense. Mur had large vegetation, but if there were too many thaids of this size, not even a continent 10 times as large as Mur would have been enough to sustain them. The creatures had bull-like heads with massive, spiraling horns—some of them broken—but they had lizard-like bodies and moved more like predators than cattle. Their bodies suggested that was the case, while their heads, and most importantly, their behavior, said the opposite. Erik pressed against a tree trunk. [Sure.] —[Analysis]— Name: Kraevyx Physical Description: The Kraevyx is a quadrupedal creature that resembles a fusion of a bull and a lizard. Its body is covered in black scales, and its head bears large, twisted horns. The beast has a muscular, heavy frame supported by powerful lion-like legs that end in paws with three sharp claws. A long tail extends behind it, while jagged spikes run along its entire back. Brain Crystal Powers: Eclipse Field (A50B): Kraevyx generates an aura of oppressive darkness that blinds opponents and slows their movements. This field also disrupts sensory perception, creating a disorienting effect. The closer the enemy, the more intense the field's impact, making escape nearly impossible. Shadow Rend (A25B): Kraevyx lashes out with its spiked tail, imbued with dark energy. The attack releases waves of shadowy force, capable of cleaving through multiple enemies at once. The spikes along its spine also radiate bursts of energy during the attack, amplifying the destruction. {Attributes} STRENGTH: 545 INTELLIGENCE: 10 DEXTERITY: 120 ENERGY: 1362 {Others} Power Level: 1472 Estimated Experience per Kill: 2,206,953,223.84 —[End]— Erik had greater stats than the creatures, and their intelligence wasn't even that much. Yet the creatures would give him a lot of experience per kill, and in this clearing, there were almost 50 of them. A battle against those things was going to be problematic, at least if Erik kept it at the physical level. Erik asked the biological supercomputer. [You should definitely avoid a physical confrontation.] The system paused. [These are not Lomalins, and they are much more powerful than a division commander on the strength side. You can only deal with them with ranged abilities and tactics, but not knowing how these things use their power is a problem.] [I know what the powers do, but their actual usage depends on the thaids themselves. We have no information about them beyond what I can observe with my powers. The good news is that they aren't very intelligent, so they likely use their powers crudely—at a primitive level.] Their Eclipse Field could make it hard for him to fight melee and to attack from a distance since he wouldn't even know where to aim, while Shadow Rend would make attacks in close quarters dangerous.

## Chapter 1233: The Clearing of Beasts (2)

Erik crouched behind a tree trunk, watching the herd of Kraevyx graze while thinking about the situation. Before engaging with the creatures, Erik needed to be certain he could handle them. — [Erik's Status]— [Host Information] NAME: Erik Romano AGE: 22 POWER LEVEL: 1,648 SYSTEM LEVEL: 464 EXPERIENCE: 5,244,251,007 89,387,484,151 DNA POINTS: 17,856,500,412.35 HEALTH: 51,010 / 51,010 MANA: 50,940 / 50,940 {Attributes} STRENGTH: 622 INTELLIGENCE: 554 DEXTERITY: 602 ENERGY: 1697 Available attribute points: 560

{Powers} [Biological Supercomputer Powers] Brain Crystal Manipulation Brain Crystal Power Extraction Brain Crystal power merging Brain Crystal Power Analysis Brain Crystal Power Editing Brain Crystal Power Strengthening Brain Crystal Power Sharing DNA Manipulation -DNA Extraction -DNA Merging -DNA Analysis -DNA Editing -DNA Strengthening -DNA Sharing Analysis Brain Information Injector Device Manipulation [Host's Powers] Chimaeric Demon: Aα3X-RANKED Instability: Aθ3B-RANKED Phantom Veil: Aε3A-RANKED Beastwalker: Aθ1B-RANKED Telekinesis: Ao2A-RANKED Will of the Hydra: Ao2X-RANKED Verdant Architect: Ao2X-RANKED Rejuvenating Touch: Ao2A-RANKED Elemental Lord: Ao2X-RANKED Absolute Wall: Aσ1A-RANKED (This power allows the user to create barriers whose durability scales with mana input. The mana amplification effect makes these barriers far more powerful than other defensive abilities. While highly durable, the barriers can be destroyed by mana-based attacks. The user can create barriers of different sizes based on mana investment, though the power consumes significant mana reserves.) Absolute Castle: Aσ1X-RANKED (This power generates adaptive armor that reacts to threats and creates force fields with similar dynamics. Its defensive capabilities surpass comparable powers while consuming the same amount of mana. The armor enhances the user's physical abilities, and its defensive power exceeds that of a Barrier Master.) Essence Flow: Aσ1A-RANKED (It increases the regeneration of mana and stamina. The more mana is used, the more the regeneration increases. This power cannot be used on the caster.) {Skills} Kyokar hand-to-hand style (MASTER) Etrium's sword style (ADVANCED) Crypt of the Desert Style (MASTER) Alchemy (Intermediate) Architecture (Beginner) Thaid Expertise Proficiency (Advanced) Flora Expertise (Master) Tactical Expertise (Advanced) Management Proficiency (Intermediate) Stealth Proficiency (Intermediate) —[END]— Erik observed his status carefully. His strength still hovered around 600 points—high for humans, but not that big here on Mur, where the equivalent of an Erendu had 545 strength points. However, his recent battles and escapes gave him so many level-ups that not only did Erik get a lot of energy points, which were 1697, but he still had 560 attribute points to allocate. Erik didn't use them yet for many reasons. The first was that he had been knocked out for three days, meaning he couldn't even use them if he wanted. The second was that since he didn't know how the situation on the monster-filled continent was going to be, he wanted to keep the points at the ready. Yet before leaving, Erik kept just a few attribute points. They would have never been enough to stop the three-headed void ravagers, especially considering most of them came from the level-ups he got when he killed the creatures. Besides, Erik didn't really know what to do with them. The most logical and best thing to do would have been to use them on energy so that he would have more mana, and his attacks would have been stronger. But at the same time, putting them into strength would have made him fast and physically overpowering enough so that even the high-leveled thaids would have problems killing him. As for all the other ones, he would have just needed to conjure a mana sword, and with his speed, he would have been able to kill almost everything. Of course, there might have been monsters much stronger than the level he would have reached if he put all his points into strength, and he didn't even know how strong the strongest monster on the continent was. The problem was that strength alone wouldn't solve everything. Energy, on the other hand, would enhance not just one aspect of his overall might but all of them, since it would power up all his brain crystal powers. [Don't be too harsh with yourself,] the system said. [Even if you had those attribute points invested into energy, you would not have been enough to destroy alone the flock of three-headed void ravagers. That was simply impossible. The same can be said for strength. They would have just drained you until you would have been useless, like all the clones.] Erik sighed. In the end, Erik still thought that, while the points might have helped, he still did the right thing in waiting to use them, especially considering that now he got so



many points that he could bring his brain crystal to the next level. Erik faced a crucial decision. This choice would affect not just his immediate battle with the Kraevyx but all his future challenges on Mur. The creatures had around 545 strength points each. It was not insurmountable, but enough to make close combat dangerous, and there were a lot of these creatures in the clearing. However, Erik saw the creatures for what they were, an estimation of the strongest creatures' powers. They were his benchmark, and while there were creatures with less power than them, he couldn't know what was the exception and what wasn't. Besides, now the Three-headed void ravagers weren't here anymore, so Erik had to choose. Should he pump his attribute points into strength, widening that gap not only with the Kraevyx but with basically most of the creatures on Mur, and reach the same strength of the Leviathan Serpent? Or should he pump energy? [The first has more demerits than merits,] the system said. [While investing in strength would significantly boost your speed—allowing you to dodge incoming attacks more effectively and throw off monsters that try to grab you—and would increase your raw physical power for melee combat, this choice would mean missing out on the utility that comes with stronger brain crystal powers. Your powers would remain at their current level instead of becoming more powerful.] Higher energy meant more mana, which made his attacks more powerful. In a scenario where Erik had only 30 minutes' worth of mana to defeat an opponent, his enhanced attacks would pack a much greater punch within that same time window. [There's another advantage to investing in energy,] the system said. [It enhances your ability to penetrate enemy defenses. While increased strength would improve your mobility and evasion capabilities, higher energy levels allow your attacks to break through virtually any defensive measure—whether it's natural armor, protective equipment, or even defenses generated by brain crystal powers.] Erik's healing powers would get better; his barriers would be able to sustain much more damage. Erik said. The Kraevyx before him had less than a 100-point strength difference from him. So, not only did he not have an overwhelming advantage, but the thaids were also many. Erik said. [It really isn't.] [Making me stronger means nothing if you die, but anyway, I told you what I think the optimal path is. Energy is still the way to go. ] the system said. [Moreover, neural links naturally enhance your physical attributes over time. While more training could have increased your strength, you didn't have the same time as Mira and the others. Consider your current situation temporary—energy should remain your focus, since attribute points are the only way to expand your mana pool. It's true that increasing strength would make it much harder for the thaids here to kill you, but you still have many ways to get out of harm's way. You might simply fly to face thaids that can't, but not so much as to get spotted by flying thaids; you can use invisibility and sneak attack; you can do a lot of things you wouldn't have been otherwise able to without energy.] The more the system talked, the more Erik convinced himself that it was right. He nodded. The system was right, especially considering that Erik shouldn't have problems killing this herd if he attacked from a distance with his Elemental Lord brain crystal power. Erik said, sighing. [Keep in mind that crossing the 1900 attribute point threshold will trigger a qualitative change in your brain crystal. Your brain crystal will end up on the X-rank. Are you sure you want to do it now? I never had a host, and I don't know what will happen.] Erik's pulse quickened. [Processing attribute allocation...]

### Chapter 1234: The Clearing of Beasts (3)

The surge of power hit Erik like a tidal wave breaking through a glass wall. His body trembled as raw energy coursed through his veins, not like the usual warm flow of mana, but like liquid lightning seeking new channels to flood. The sheer amount of attribute points Erik got was huge, after all. It felt exhilarating, like diving into a pool of water that rejuvenated every cell in his body.

Every time he breathed, he felt stronger, and his mind turned clearer by the second. Slowly, the feeling calmed down. The energy that had felt overwhelming now flowed easily through his body, finding its natural path. His breathing became steady, his heartbeat normal. Getting the attribute points, Erik finally broke through the threshold between an A-ranked creature and an X-ranked one. That was why the feelings he had were different from what he usually felt when he got new attributes. Of course, Erik had already broken through ranks many times, but nothing was like what he felt that day. Erik sighed, his breath carrying a hint of the immense power now flowing through him. The sensation was still overwhelming, even if manageable. Erik asked. [You have reached 2257 energy points,] the biological supercomputer said. [Going from an A-ranked brain crystal to an X-ranked one made some qualitative changes to your brain crystal, which now has a significantly altered interaction capability with mana.] Erik stared ahead in puzzlement. The system paused. [The upgrade has changed how your brain crystal works,] the biological supercomputer said. [Brain crystals are like filtration tanks that mana flows through, getting purified and refined before reaching your body through the neural links. ] Erik had a pensive look as he heard the system explain. [This time, however, not only has the cup transformed into a large pot, but its ability to convert surrounding mana into your own has increased manifold. The mana now resonates with your brain crystal, enhancing the conversion rate from ambient to personal mana. This means your mana regeneration is much faster.] Erik tested the changes to his brain crystal power. It was true, Erik could feel mana flowing much more easily than it did five minutes earlier, as if a lid had been taken off a pot, and now vapor could be released much faster, instead of just from a small slit above. Erik looked at the grazing herd. [With your current mana reserves, Elemental Lord should be enough. In truth, it was enough already even before using the attribute points, but you would be left without that much mana, and something like that... In a forest on Mur... Let's just say it wouldn't have been very smart.] Erik nodded. [Just be careful not to miss. These things are still strong enough to resist powerful attacks given how much mana they have, and you can't risk emptying your reserves. There's no need for you to start a physical fight. Even with your higher attributes, facing so many strength-buffed creatures would be impossible.] Erik nodded again and then turned to look at the thaids. The Kraevyx continued their grazing, oblivious to the attack that was going to be unleashed. Erik studied the massive creatures before him. The Kraevyx were armored beasts with overlapping scales, powerful bodies close to the ground, and necks that bobbed as they grazed. Sharp teeth and arm-length horns marked them as predators, yet they moved with surprising grace. Despite his newfound strength, Erik remained wary of these creatures. They had evolved into perfect killing machines, perfectly adapted to Mur's harsh environment. Though his power had grown, Erik understood that on this lethal continent, he was still the intruder. About fifty creatures stood scattered across the clearing. As they grazed on the grass, they moved their long necks up and down. Now and then, they would look around for danger with their three eyes. Erik couldn't bring a lot of meat with him. There were just two of them at the base, meaning that too much would just spoil. Besides, all that meat would attract predators, and that was the main thing Erik wanted to avoid. But for sure needed some meat to stash it away in case something bad happened. Besides, he hadn't eaten meat for a while and started craving it. Erik also wanted to use some of the creatures to fertilize the ground where his crops were growing so that whatever grew would get the nutrients needed to grow well without Erik having to inject mana. The wind swirled at his command, gathering into visible streams of air that twisted and condensed. The mana infused the currents, transforming them from gentle breezes into deadly weapons. Each stream sharpened into a more and more visible and tangible blade, ready to slice through anything in its path. Dozens of these wind blades now floated around Erik, their edges as sharp as the finest steel. But he needed more, at

least one per creature, so that he could end the fight quickly and collect the brain crystals and blood from the creature. Erik was going to keep two, so that he could get the creature's powers for both him and the Chimaeric Demons. [Be careful, Erik. If those things spot you, and you fail your attack, you will have a lot of problems.] "I'm trying," he said as he created more wind blades. The amount he could now generate, while maintaining such high power, was incredible. Erik thought. The Chimaeric Demons could handle these creatures if their numbers were sufficient, but Erik was unsure how many had survived—or if any had survived at all. Of course, all of Erik's preparations might be pointless if he and his clone were the only ones who had made it to Mur. Yet he didn't want to think about it. [Yeah, it would just make it harder for you to focus on the battle.] That was, of course, without thinking about the psychological implications of having sent his three lovers to die. Erik began planning his attack, thanks to the Hydra's head. The Kraevyx's poor dexterity rating gave him a mobility advantage. Their low intelligence suggested they'd be susceptible to tactical manipulation, but their strength made them fast and lethal. Of course, all of this was just relative. Low dexterity was compared to Erik's; otherwise, it wasn't low at all. The creature kept grazing the ground while Erik prepared more wind blades. The creatures walked around in a loose group, but they weren't working together. After all, they were eating. Yet they often glanced around, looking at the edge of the forest, probably searching for better food or watching out for enemies that might enter their area. They weren't wrong, since Erik was there to kill them. It was just that he had too many powers and was too smart for them to notice. [Remember to burn any unused bodies, as the scent of death will attract creatures from the area—something we absolutely want to avoid.] Erik nodded. Yet that made him think about something. [I don't honestly know,] the system said. [It worked even on wyverns, but only to make them aggressive and bloodthirsty. Did you forget how that wyvern almost roasted you?] Just the thought of that time made Erik shiver. Not as much as when he faced the Leviathan Serpent, but a lot nonetheless. [Good. You're strong enough to survive that now, but if the Luminara Serpentis gets the thaids riled up, it could backfire. You might not only get a bunch of thaids but also some powerful ones into the fray, all at the same time.] [Yes, and even in that case nothing will tell us there are no thaids that will react badly to their smell, or whatever it is that irritates them so much.] The largest Kraevyx suddenly raised its horned head, nostrils flaring. Erik remained still, despite being invisible. The beast's eyes swept across his position without pausing, but its spined tail lashed with increased agitation. The creature didn't feel the surge of mana in Erik's body since it resulted from the biological supercomputer's power, but now that Erik was channeling it, the creature felt it. Erik did his best to stay hidden despite him being invisible.

#### Chapter 1235: The Clearing of Beasts (4)

The open area offered little cover besides some fallen trees that could shield him from their shadow-based attacks. Their ability to create darkness worried him most—if he got trapped in it, escape would be nearly impossible. The clearing's size also meant that if any creature survived his initial attack, they could surround him. And with their enhanced strength, even a glancing blow could prove fatal. The lack of trees also meant he had no high ground advantage, forcing him to rely solely on his ranged attacks. If his mana reserves depleted before eliminating all threats, he would be left exposed in the middle of the clearing with nowhere to retreat. Sure, Erik could fly, but not knowing exactly what those guys could do with their brain crystal powers was still problematic. Then he made enough wind blades to attack. The monsters could feel something was wrong. They moved their heads around nervously as they sensed Erik's wind blades through the mana in the air. The powerful energy spread out like ripples in water, and the creatures could feel it from far away.

The Kraevyx's eyes widened in alarm as their instincts screamed of imminent death. Despite their bulk, the herd scattered with surprising speed, smashing through the vegetation in a desperate bid for survival. The creatures stampeded, making the ground quake—the tremors got worse due to their sheer numbers. "Well," Erik said with a grin, "I guess you could say this is going to be a massacre!" He winced at his own joke. "Though I suppose dark humor isn't everyone's slice of life." [That was a terrible pun, Erik. Your sense of humor is as sharp as a... well, never mind. Let's focus on the task at hand.] The Kraevyxs maintained their tight herd formation even in panic. Their aggressive nature showed as some turned to face the threat, while the main group charged toward the treeline with the thundering force of their combined mass. Erik released his hold on the gathered power, and dozens of wind blades sliced through the air like invisible scythes, each one locked onto its target. The first wind blade struck a fleeing Kraevyx in the neck, cleanly severing it from its body. The enormous creature stumbled a few steps forward and fell dead to the ground. As its body slid through the grass, it left a trail of blood behind. It died instantly, without even seeing what killed it. [Hostile creature killed: Mana absorbing process starting.] [0%...1%...5%...30%...70%...100%] [Mana successfully absorbed, starting converting procedure.] [3...2...1...0] [Mana successfully absorbed into experience. 2,206,953,223.84 experience points awarded to the host.] More blades found their marks. One Kraevyx reared up as a blade carved through its chest, dark blood spraying in an arc. Another blade split a beast from snout to tail, its halves falling apart as it collapsed. The herd erupted into chaos. Roars of pain and confusion filled the clearing as more wind blades found their marks. Scales and blood scattered through the air as the monsters crashed to the ground in succession, their dying growls mixing with the screeches the wind blades made as they cut through the air. [Mana successfully absorbed into experience. 2,206,953,223.84 experience points awarded to the host.] [Mana successfully absorbed into experience. 2,206,953,223.84 experience points awarded to the host.] [Mana successfully absorbed into experience. 2,206,953,223.84 experience points awarded to the host.] Some creatures tried to defend themselves, using their powers to create a shroud that would make it impossible for the attacker to hit them. But Erik had the system and could also read the creature's panicked minds, meaning that even if he could not see them, he could still perceive them. His attacks didn't miss. Erik's blades pierced through the darkness as if it were mist. More monsters fell to the ground, which became slippery. A few of the faster Kraevyxes nearly reached the treeline before the blades caught them. They tumbled and skidded through the grass, leaving deep furrows in the earth. Erik unleashed a last volley of wind blades. Despite the creatures' shadows, he didn't miss a target. The remaining Kraevyx collapsed instantly, their bodies no match for his attack. [LEVEL UP.] Within seconds, the clearing looked like a butcher's chopping board after a busy day. Blood soaked the grass, and dead Kraevyx creatures lay everywhere, scattered like leftover cuts of meat. When everything went silent, Erik looked at what remained of the battle from his hiding spot. Fifty huge creature bodies were spread across the ground, their scales no longer shining. Thanks to his new amount of mana, his attacks had been too strong for the creatures to defend against. The clearing now looked horrible, with dead bodies everywhere in the morning light. This part of the forest would be safer now. Erik started burning the bodies he didn't want to keep, collected the blood and brain crystals, and seized a lot of meat. Erik surveyed the aftermath, noting which bodies would be useful for meat and which could serve as fertilizer. The metallic scent of blood hung heavy in the air, a dangerous beacon to other predators in the area. Erik thought, moving toward the nearest fallen Kraevyx. Time was precious—he had to harvest what he needed and dispose of the rest before the smell of death drew unwanted attention from Mur's countless dangers. Erik knelt beside the nearest Kraevyx corpse. He pulled a glass vial from his backpack, uncorked it with his

teeth, and pressed it against the gash in the creature's neck. The dark blood flowed slowly into the container, its viscous consistency making it drip like syrup. Erik watched as the vial filled to the brim with the metallic-smelling liquid. He then pressed the cork into place and secured the full vial in a padded section of his pack. Next came the brain crystal. Erik plunged his hand into the Kraevyx's skull, grimacing as his fingers closed around a shard the size of his fist. "Ugh, I hate this part," Erik said, suppressing a shudder. "Talk about getting inside someone's head. Though I suppose that's literally what I'm doing." He shook his hand, trying to rid himself of the unsettling feeling. "Next time, I should bring gloves. Or better yet, delegate this lovely task to one of my clones." Erik wiped the brain crystal clean and stored it alongside the others. He collected two of them. Meat came last. Erik carved strips of muscle from the haunches. He wrapped the meat in waxed cloth. The stench of blood grew thicker, clinging to his clothes and spreading in the surroundings. [Hey Erik, you need to move fast here. I'm picking up a lot of blood scent that's going to attract Thaid's any minute now. Don't forget to burn those bodies. I know it'll stink for a bit, but it's better than having a thaid crash your party.] A distant screech tore through the forest's uneasy quiet—a high-pitched, metallic sound that echoed between the trees and made the leaves tremble. The system remained quiet, its usual stream of calculations and commentary paused, as if processing the situation. Erik froze, a strip of meat halfway to his pack. Another screech answered, closer this time—guttural, hungry. The underbrush rustled as something heavy shifted beyond the tree line. Erik could do nothing but curse under his breath. Flames burst from his fingertips, engulfing the Kraevyx corpses. Though he incinerated most of the bodies, a few remained untouched. Too slow. The ground trembled as footsteps, or whatever they were, closed in. Erik abandoned the burning and dove behind a tree. He pressed his back against the wood, breath shallow, and peered through a crack in the bark. Three massive shapes emerged from the forest. The new creatures were huge—twice the size of the Kraevyx's. Their bodies were covered in layers of bone plates like armor. They looked like giant boars with long tusks and white eyes. Erik watched them and realized they were scavengers, drawn here by the smell of blood. One of these monsters walked over to a Kraevyx body that was still burning. It stepped on the dead creature's head, crushing it with a loud crack. Then it bent down and started eating the corpse. The other two monsters spread out, sniffing the ground where Erik had been standing just minutes ago. The lead scavenger froze in place, its muscles tensing beneath the bone plates. Its wide nostrils twitched, taking in deep sniffs of the air. The creature's head swiveled toward Erik's position, its clouded white eyes focusing on his exact location. "Shit." Erik got ready to fight, but then a loud roar came from the trees on the other side. The scavengers turned around as a new creature burst into the clearing. [Get the fuck out of here!] Erik didn't wait. He slipped from his hiding spot, backpack clutched tight, and melted into the forest shadows. He and the clone would eat well tonight. But the forest? It was still starving.

#### Chapter 1236: The Wyvern Mystery

Erik returned to the underground shelter as the sun reached its zenith. His clone was there already waiting for him. Despite the dangers it must have faced during its morning hunt, the clone's expression was bright. "Welcome back, Master." "Good to see you made it back safely," Erik said, noting the traces of dried blood on his clone's clothing. "How did it go?" "I killed a few creatures, Master, nothing much," the clone said. "There was nothing as powerful as a Chromatic Stalker. Even at my current level of strength, I could handle them without too many problems. But the area is vast and crawling with thaid's. I had to be selective about which ones to engage." The clone had many powers, including invisibility. In theory, it shouldn't have been hard to kill thaid's if they were

to his same level. The problem was the stronger ones, or if they were in huge numbers. "You killed some?" The clone nodded. "Three of them. They were the weakest ones I could find. They were still stronger than Mannard's thaids, though, but with a little bit of planning, they fell under my capabilities." Erik nodded. Being stronger than a thaid made killing them straightforward, and the number of thaids one could face at the same time increased as the difference in might did. The same was true, but reversed in the opposite case. Both Erik and the clone could face thaids at their same level, but at best they could 1v1 them or kill huge numbers using tactics. Erik's ranged powers and massive mana gave him fewer problems than the clones, who had to be careful what they did and used. That meant Erik was pleasantly surprised about the clone having killed three thaids. "Tell me what you saw on the other side of the forest." Erik wanted to know what was there that could threaten the shelter. "How do these thaids compare to Mannard's, in your opinion?" He added, and then sat down on one of the wooden beds as he waited for the clone's report. "They're terrifying, Master. It's not just because most of the thaids here have two or three brain crystal powers, or because they also have a ton of neural links, it's because they are also smart. Their threat level makes them twice to thrice as dangerous as a Hevadrin. Even the weak thaids I killed this morning would have been considered apex predators back there." Erik was not so pleased to hear that, but the clone still accomplished a very complicated task. "Yet you handled them." "Yes. I forced them to rely only on their physical strength, which was less than mine. That gave me the advantage I needed to win. Though the strategy was a bit complicated, it worked. I believe we can survive here, Master. And if enough clones made it through with Amber and the others, they might have survived as well." Those words made Erik feel well. However, Erik wanted to know more. "Did you find anything we should stay away from on the northeastern side?" The clone paused. "Indeed..." "Like the Chromatic Stalker I found the other day?" Erik asked. "Worse." The clone's eyes darkened. "It looks like wyverns roam the northeastern side. I'm actually not sure what they are. They looked like Wyverns but didn't look that big from the distance. I can't also tell if they were as powerful as those on Mannard." "Weird," Erik said. "Wyverns outside a mountain range is peculiar. Maybe they really are not wyverns." "Yeah..." Wyverns were some of the creatures humans had no information about since whoever met them usually got devoured. That meant humanity, Erik included, wasn't sure of the reasons that made wyverns stay near mountain ranges. "Maybe there is a reason they stay on mountains on the Mannard continent, and here they don't need it." "I'm worried something more powerful drove them away from their usual habitat... Or maybe the blackguards." This made sense. Stronger creatures often force weaker ones to leave their normal homes. Seeing these wyvern-like creatures in unexpected places could mean there were even more dangerous monsters in the area that had driven them away. The problem was that whatever was able to push wyverns away from their territories must not have been a weak being. "That's why we need to clear paths," Erik said. "As soon as the others find us, defending this place would be easier. Focus on what you can handle, avoid what you can't, and gradually secure the area." The clone straightened. "Then today we should continue hunting." "No. Didn't you forget what I told you? You need to focus on making neural links," Erik said. "Remember that you Chimaeric Demons get more mana as the number of neural links increases, and that each mana pool is dedicated to a brain crystal power. You MUST make new neural links. It will make survival here easier." "You should do the same, then, Master," the clone said. "Your powers would benefit a lot from additional neural links, just as ours do." "I will, don't worry. I have many new powers, and even the older ones still need to get past the 54 neural links mark, so I have plenty of stuff to do." Erik paused, and so did the clone. "What about you, master? Did you find anything you had to kill?" Erik nodded. "I did. I killed a herd of very large thaids." He paused. "They weren't much, but their strength level was almost on par with mine,

meaning I had to kill them from a distance. Luckily, they had lower dexterity and intelligence compared to me, and didn't even notice my attack until it was too late." "That's good to hear, Master. Were you able to absorb any brain crystal powers from these creatures? Given their strength level, they must have had some intriguing abilities." Erik smiled. "Yes. They are called Eclipse Field and Shadow Rend. Both B-ranked powers with interesting applications." He described the abilities - how Eclipse Field could create zones of darkness that confused, blinded and slowed enemies, while Shadow Rend manifested as a deadly energy tail capable of cleaving through multiple targets. Erik wasn't particularly interested in either power for himself. Shadow Rend required the user to partially transform into a thaid to manifest a tail and then coat it in this shadow energy or whatever it was. It was a mid-range attack, but Erik didn't need it since he had an elemental brain crystal power. Eclipse Field was an interesting ability, but not that needed since Erik could turn invisible, mess with others' emotions, and the like. These powers would be much more useful for his clones than for himself, since they had fewer abilities to work with. Erik decided he would give these powers to the Chimaeric Demons. Of course, since he got two brain crystals and blood samples, he would get them too. However, he would merge them into something useful as soon as he found something appropriate. "Are you thinking of giving them to the Chimaeric Demons?" "Already done," Erik said. "I gave them both powers." "What about Essence Flow?" the clone asked. "The power you got from that barrier master during the Law Gate battle? Since we are going to hunt alone, there is no point for you to keep it. Just give it to the clones. Tomorrow you can make a new batch, and as soon as they matured, with that ability we should be able to travel through Mur without problems." Erik liked this suggestion. Essence Flow was a special power that let users increase their mana and stamina regen with each other. If all the clones had this ability, what was great was that, in theory, the effects stacked. That meant that the clones could make stronger attacks without risking to end up without mana, and the same was for Erik, with the difference that he would be able to unleash a fuck ton more mana. This would be super helpful for staying alive in Mur, where they needed to carefully manage their mana and stamina. With Essence Flow, they could recover energy faster during fights, maintain their powers longer, and have enough reserves to escape if they couldn't handle the threat. "True," Erik said. "I will do it as soon as I can. Now go train; I will do the same..." The clone bowed. "I'll start immediately." The clone lay down on his bed. He knew it made sense—there was no point in Erik keeping the power to himself when sharing it with the clones would be more useful, especially since they were alone here, and making more clones was of paramount importance. He thought back to the Law Gate battle, where he'd gained Essence Flow from the dead barrier master Vindicator. Back then, it allowed Bill to last longer, and there was just one person using essence flow. It also increased the combat ability of all those blackguards. The increase in survivability and combat efficiency had been incredible. Erik couldn't even fathom what would happen if he had thousands of clones with the ability. Making new clones was going to take a long time. The eggs needed time to hatch, and then the clones needed some more time to grow up. [On my way...]

#### Chapter 1237: A Shelter or a Tomb?

"We've secured the cove, Mira," the Chimaeric Demon said. The clone was visibly tired, and its voice was weary. Most likely because of the constant fighting he had to go through with his brothers to clear the area. "We lost some brothers in the process, but the immediate surroundings are now safe." Mira nodded. "I'm sorry..." Every loss hurt—the Chimaeric Demons' numbers had already dwindled so drastically during the ocean crossing. "Don't be. We knew what we were getting into when the master asked us to come here." "Still, I wish we could have saved more of you," Mira said

softly, her eyes downcast. The clone's expression softened. "Each of us knows the value of sacrifice, Mira. The master taught us that. Our fallen brothers died protecting what matters most—the mission and all of you." "Your loyalty ki—" Mira started, but the clone cut her off. "Our loyalty gives us purpose and bonds..." Mira sighed. She wished there was something more she could do, but unless she got more neural links, there was not much she could really help with. Besides, her brain crystal was weak. It had very little mana, so Mira could not exert a lot of might. If she wanted to get past that, she needed neural links that not only would make her powers more efficient but also make her physically stronger. Without more neural links to match the thaids' strength, she was helpless. "So... What about the shelter? We didn't lose people just for us to have failed making it, right?" "The shelter is complete," the clone said. "We built it not too deep inside the alcove, but far enough that the thaids outside won't be able to reach or spot us. The rock walls provide good cover. We've also fortified the entrance and created multiple escape routes, but there's something you need to see." June stepped in. It followed the conversation between Mira and the clone since he more often than not had to help them with whatever they were doing. "What is it?" he asked. The clone paused, looking worried. Something was bothering him, and he didn't really know how to say his next words. His brothers standing nearby had the same concerned look on their faces. "The cove connects to a cave system. We have yet to start our search, but at first glance, we already found signs of previous human occupation." "Blackguards?" The clone shook his head. "We don't know," he said. "We are keen on thinking they aren't." Amber joined them, catching the last part of their conversation. "Is this recent?" The clone shook its head. "Not apparently. That's the point..." Amber was a little confused. There had been human presence, but not from the Blackguards. It wasn't a weird thing on Mur, which was once controlled by humans. Remnants of the ancient civilization living here could be found everywhere, based on the information they stole from the blackguards, so it made sense to find some skeleton or ancient artifact. But then why was the clone so worried? The lack of recent activity should have been welcomed with open arms. After losing so many brothers to the thaids during their brief stay on Mur, any positive news was clutched like a lifeline. That the signs of human habitation were old rather than fresh meant one less immediate threat to worry about. "Why the long face?" Amber asked. The clone sighed. "Because it looks like they were fleeing from something..." That didn't surprise Amber yet. "Of course they did; if they died in a cave, they were likely trying to escape from the thaids." Mira nodded, but the clone's next word made her freeze. "I would agree with you if they weren't fleeing from something inside the caves." That changed everything because it meant there might be something inside the caves, which were already infested with thaids. Ancient humans had no way to oppose the thaids. They had no brain crystal power, after all, but if Erik's experiences taught Amber and the others something, it was that things like this usually meant something scary was, or at least had been, in these caves. "That complicates things," Mira said. "But let's be honest. We can't allow this to be a setback. These caves are our only chance to survive. They provide better protection than staying outside, and going deeper will only make things better. There is no way we are going to leave our current position," she said. "I think we should explore the tunnels." Mira sighed. "If there are thaids living deeper inside, they'll eventually find us. It will be better to deal with them on our terms and before they can find our base or gang up on us." "I don't know. It's too risky," Amber said. "We've already lost so many clones. The caves could be massive, with countless branching tunnels. Each could hide thaids we're not equipped to handle, and since we are on Mur, it means the probability is high." It wasn't like Mira didn't take this into account, but based on experience, most of the time, it was just bug-like thaids that stayed in caves. They were weak compared to other thaids. Sure, they would be powerful compared to their counterparts on Mannard, but they would still be weak compared to the thaids on



Mur, which meant they were weak enough for them to be able to handle them. "That's exactly why we need to control it," Mira said. "Right now, we're still too exposed. Yes, we've fortified this position, but what happens when something bigger stumbles upon us? What happens if something comes here searching for shelter from an even worse threat? The caves give us options—multiple escape routes, defensive positions, maybe even supplies left by the previous occupants—and when Erik comes, a huge space to prepare for our journey through this damn continent. We need Chimaeric Demons if we want to bring the blackguards down, and space is needed." Amber shook her head. "They could be death traps. Think about it, Mira. If other humans used these caves before and still didn't survive, there might be something dangerous even for the clones here! We're exhausted; our numbers are depleted. We need to play this safe!" "Which is precisely why we can't stay here," Mira said. "We could end up trapping ourselves," Amber said. "If something follows us in there, we'd have nowhere to run." Mira placed a hand on Amber's shoulder. "We're already trapped on this continent. At least in the caves, we control the battlefield. We can set up choke points and establish fall-back positions. Out here, we're at the mercy of anything that attacks, and that is true even where we made our shelter. Trust me on this, Amber. I've done this job for years before meeting Erik. I know what I'm talking about." June and Emily approached the group, having overheard the heated discussion. Emily watched the exchange between Mira and Amber with visible concern, while June maintained a stoic demeanor. He didn't want to take part in the discussion, especially considering both women had good points. Yet what the clones said made him think. A cave system with human remains. It was like a situation Erik went through in the past, and the clones knew it. That made it so that all of Erik's clones, June included, were actually keen on exploring the place, rather than turtle up the position they already conquered. June cleared his throat. "There's another reason to explore those caves. Something more important than just finding shelter." His eyes met Amber's. "Think about why Erik came to Mur in the first place. If there are human bodies down there, and if they were running from something from within the cave, there might be structures down there; they might be connected to the Silver Line Corporation." Everyone fell silent after June's words. Mira had already considered this possibility, and while Amber had too, she remained hesitant about entering the caves. Still, June's reminder made them all think about the chance of finding a Silver Line corporation's lab here and what it would mean for Erik. The Chimaeric Demons exchanged meaningful glances with each other. If even their elder brother thought about this chance, it meant they were right. Amber turned to face the clone who'd reported about the caves. "You knew about this possibility, didn't you? Why didn't you mention it earlier?" Her voice wasn't accusatory, just questioning. The clone shifted uncomfortably. "It's just a theory, Amber. Given our current numbers and the dangers we've already faced..." He glanced at his remaining brothers. "We didn't want to push for such a risky expedition without everyone's input. If we're mistaken, we could lose more lives for nothing." "But if you're right," Mira said, "we might find exactly what Erik came here to find out." "Rushing in without proper preparation could be deadly," the clone insisted. "I didn't plan on hiding this from you, just to discuss the situation properly, before taking a decision."

#### Chapter 1238: The Silent Massacre

"Show us," Mira said. "Take us to where you found the human traces." The clone gave a quick nod. Within seconds, a group of Chimaeric Demons gathered around them—the ones who weren't busy joined the three girls. The clones led them through the shelter first, as it was the only way to access the cave system, which was deeper into the alcove in which they made the shelter. The clones used a mix of rock and wood to create several interconnected chambers. Makeshift beds lined the walls,

while storage areas held what little supplies they'd salvaged. Piles of wood were stacked around, sorted by size and type. The clones had been gathering wood from the surrounding forest, preparing materials for the expansions and reinforcements they were going to make. Like Erik, they spotted the signs of thaids marking the trees, or the remnants of some fights, and deduced that if these trees were strong enough to resist the thaids, they might use them. Of course, cutting them required a lot of time, but with the combined efforts of the clones, it became relatively quick. They had both new and old logs. The fresh ones were still wet with tree sap, while some older ones were dry and ready to use for building. The biggest logs would be used to hold up the shelter, medium-sized ones would compose the walls, and smaller branches were set aside for other tasks. Next to the wood, they kept their simple tools made from stone, bone, and wood itself. The clones were so good that they even created a crude ventilation system, ensuring fresh air circulation throughout the space. It was crafted from hollow bamboo-like reeds and found growing near some water source, with some sections bound using natural fiber ropes and sealed with clay. Defensive positions had been established at strategic points, with clear lines of sight to all potential approach routes. The shelter was crude and obviously rushed, and though basic, it showed ingenuity in its construction. They lit up the shelter using glowing mushrooms they found in the deep parts of the cave. The clones moved these mushrooms and placed them carefully around the shelter to provide light where needed. "Great job with this," June said, touching the smooth wooden wall. The clones had done impressive work, despite the situation. "Thanks, elder brother." The group went deeper into the caves, moving past their shelter. The tunnel got narrower, going from about ten feet wide to just under seven feet, so they had to walk in a single line. The cave walls were rough and had sharp, shiny rock formations sticking out. Water drops fell from above, making small pools on the bumpy ground. They walked behind the clones for about ten minutes through these twisting tunnels. The only sounds were their footsteps and breathing bouncing off the walls. Then they reached the place. "There," one of the clones said, pointing to a wider section of the tunnel. They found clear signs that humans had been here long ago. Scattered across the cave floor were the remains of what looked like to be research equipment. Rusted metal cases bore faded logos of who knew what institution or organization. Broken sample containers and corroded measuring devices were scattered everywhere. As the clones said, this was no recent human activity. The level of decay and corrosion on the equipment suggested this site was centuries old. Even the metal components were severely deteriorated, far beyond what a few years of exposure would cause. The most pressing question, though, was what happened here. If this place was really the remnant of the ancient human populations living on Mur before it fell, these people's sudden death was particularly mysterious. There were no bodies to be found, at least at a first glance, and the damaged equipment showed signs of a violent struggle. The metal equipment was covered in deep scratch marks that no normal human weapon could have made. Instead of clean cuts, the metal was bent and twisted, showing that whatever did this was strong, at least like a thaid. The marks looked like they came from enormous claws or talons—each scratch had three or four parallel lines, like when a beast claws through paper. The scary part was that these same claw marks appeared on everything in the cave. All the equipment—from storage boxes to metal beams to research tools—had been torn apart in the same way. Whatever did this had to be much stronger than any normal animal, since it could easily rip through military-grade metal. For thaids, that was nothing much, which meant a thaid, or a group of thaids, did this. The group searched around, but they found no notes or records that could explain what happened here. "No bodies," Amber said, kneeling to examine a torn metal case. "Not even bones." June nodded. Even he had not found bodies despite having searched. He then examined the equipment. "Look at all this," June said. "Lab coats, military gear, research tools—there must have been dozens of people

working here. These researchers weren't alone either. The military presence suggests they had protection. Researchers followed by the military is an unusual event. I think this was a Silver Line Corporation facility of the sort." "And yet they all vanished," Amber said, her voice grim. "Scientists, soldiers—an entire research team gone without leaving remains behind." Amber stood, brushing dust from her knees. "You and the clones are right. Everything points to the fact that this was a Silver Line Corporation facility and that something terrible happened here. No one just abandons a secure facility like this, leaving all their equipment behind, unless they had to face what for them was a literal monster. But what?" "Whatever attacked them," Mira said, studying the violent destruction around them, "it didn't just kill them—it made them disappear completely. They got likely devoured." "I think there are two possibilities here," June said, voicing what the clones were thinking. "Either this expedition got found out by the primordial Thaid that appeared around that time, and they were all killed... or there was another abomination here. Maybe even some early Thaid specimens that escaped and slaughtered everyone." The thought of the human abomination Erik found in Liberty Watch made everyone shiver. The silence that followed was heavy. Thaid were common, so they weren't a problem. The theory about their presence wasn't even far-fetched based on what they knew happened to Mur in ancient times. The timing of the scientists' and guards' deaths suggested their killer was active during the period of the Thaid emergence on Mur. The creature must have either hunted the team down or—more worryingly—escaped from a research facility hidden within these caves, which was exactly what they hoped to find. However, they were making too many assumptions and had already convinced themselves that a Silver Line Corporation facility existed here. The second theory—that of a thaid being created here before escaping and killing everyone—was far more troubling than simply the thaid following the group. The beast Erik found in Liberty Watch had proven stronger than any local thaid, suggesting a similar creature here would have likewise dominated the area. Given they were on Mur, this meant if such a creature existed, it would be far stronger than anything else in the surroundings. Mira knelt beside a particularly well-preserved piece of equipment. "This is standard research gear for that time." "How do you know?" Emily asked. "Because I studied that period. Mercenaries often found relics of the past while hunting, and they were paid better than the thaid's bodies most of the time. Many of my friends found abandoned houses deep in the forests during their hunts, and there are even entire cities on Mannard covered by vegetation. We had to learn what valuable items we might find, if only to avoid getting scammed when selling our findings." Amber approached what looked like the remains of some Kevlar vest. The protective gear had been torn apart by something clearly stronger than an untrained and crystal-ess human. The fabric was shredded. There were even some military-grade rifles, their barrels twisted by either time or something else. The weapons showed signs of having been fired, with spent shell casings scattered nearby. "Whatever happened here," June said, "they tried to fight back." "What's worse is that I think these people weren't running from something," Mira said, studying the equipment. The group kept studying the equipment more. "I think the clones are right," she said. "Look at how the equipment is scattered," she gestured at the debris field. "It's not in a pattern you'd expect from people fleeing. The heaviest equipment is deepest in the tunnel, and the defensive positions are facing inward, not outward." "And look at these sample containers," she added, lifting a corroded metal case. "They're clustered around specific points—as if they were the very things these people were trying to protect." "We need to search the cave," Mira said. "If there is a Silver Line Corporation's facility here, we struck gold. We might be able to use the place as a shelter, and one much better than the one we made at the cave entrance." At that point, even Amber had to nod, albeit she didn't like the situation a bit.

## Chapter 1239: Dark Tunnels, Darker Threats (1)

After some time, the tunnel they were in widened into a cavern; its floor was littered with the remains of thaids. They had been killed by the Chimaeric Demons, but there were not as many corpses as one would expect the Clones to have produced.

The reason was simple: thaids on Mur were too strong, and the clones struggled against these bug-like thaids when there were too many.

The group had to go through the area, avoiding the scattered bodies of the insectoid creatures as if they were on an obstacle course.

The scene gave them the creeps, but not because of the carnage, but because of the dead Thaids' bodies themselves.

Most of the fallen thaids resembled oversized beetles, with chitinous shells cracked and splintered from the clones' attacks.

Their iridescent wings lay scattered across the ground, though some of the luckier ones still had their wings attached to their dog-sized thoraxes.

Their mouths hung open, revealing rows of serrated teeth up to six centimeters long, clearly designed for tearing and shredding meat. The mandibles were reinforced with thick chitin, giving them enough bite force to crush bones.

Thaids' ones were resistant, meaning their monsters' bite force was high.

Mira paused to give a better look at a particularly well-preserved thaid's body. Its carapace bore patterns in deep purple and midnight blue, almost beautiful if not for the vicious-looking spikes protruding from its joints and all the other features the creatures had.

"They are not so different from the Thaids on Mannard," she said. Having been a mercenary, she killed many similar creatures, and more or less, they all resembled each other.

While it was true in appearance, it wasn't true in behavior or in strength.

"That's because you haven't fought them yet. While they looked similar to many of the things we all hunted in the past, they were at least ten times stronger, and their behavior was bizarre, to say the least," a clone said.

"Bizarre?"

The clone nodded. "These creatures showed signs of intelligence far beyond what we typically see in thaids. They used actual battle tactics, assigned different roles to different types of thaids, and kept formations during combat. While they weren't quite at human levels of intelligence, they came disturbingly close. We saw what we assumed were worker thaids supporting the warriors, scouts reporting back to the main group, and coordinated attacks that seemed almost planned."

Mira remained silent, knowing that the battle must have been horrific if the clone said that.

If it wasn't scary enough, the fact they were at least ten times stronger than the thaids on Mannard, the fact they were almost as smart as humans, and enough for them to coordinate for sure, turned these relatively small thaids into living nightmares. Their appearance got to a secondary level of importance at that point.

Insectoid Thaids weren't hated because of their strength, though, which they usually lacked compared to all the other thaids around, but because of their overwhelming reproductive capabilities.

The strong points of such creatures usually were their huge numbers, which made up for any lack of strength, while allowing the creatures, as an entity, to battle even groups of stronger Thaids.

When these thaids gathered in large numbers, they became nearly unstoppable. Now things were worse, because their superior numbers, combined with the intelligence the clones were talking about, immediately made their threat level jump up several folds.

They could already overwhelm even the strongest opponents through swarm attacks. Now, adding precise targeting of weak points and efficient use of their different specialized units to the fray, things were worse.

If their group encountered one of such a large swarm, even their combined fighting capabilities might not be enough to survive.

Amber sighed. "Not really my favorite type of opponent," she said, stepping over a broken mandible. "But at least they die like everything else."

"Yeah. Though I have to admit, the ones here make the bugs back home look like pets," Mira said.

"I prefer them at scope distance."

Emily kept herself as far from the corpses as possible. Her face twisted with disgust as she passed a particularly mangled body. "Much, much farther than this."

The group then kept examining the corpses and studying the cave.

Near the center lay clusters of smaller, wasp-like thaids. Despite the cave being better suited for earth-dwelling creatures, the abundant food supply had prompted these thaids to build their nest here.

"God... They can fly too..."

"Well, it's only expected," a Chimaeric Demon said.

The Chimaeric Demons burned it down already. They needed to do it if they wanted to secure the shelter. These things might come out from their entrance at any moment, and an attack during the night would be rather problematic.

"Surprisingly, taking them down was the easiest part of our attack," a Chimaeric Demon said. "Even though these flying ones were much stronger than their crawling counterparts."

They had rather elongated bodies that stretched nearly two meters, with translucent wings that sparkled in the light from the strange fungi covering the cavern walls.

Dagger-length stingers protruded from their abdomens, and judging by the weird liquid dripping from them, they were also poisonous.

Mira nodded, but the other two didn't understand why the clone said that.

"We just needed to unleash a rain of fire on them. You know, the Starlight Fireballs..." A clone said, noticing the two's confusion.

Mira then approached the walls. "Are the fungi safe?"

"We don't know," the Chimaeric Demon said. "Since they provide natural light, we decided to leave them intact. Fighting here is already difficult due to the environment—if we'd lost our light source too, I doubt we would have survived."

Some clones were stacking the dead creatures neatly along the sides of the pathways, organizing them by species and size.

Looking at the bodies, one could tell exactly how the Chimaeric Demons killed them. Many thaids had precise puncture wounds through their vulnerable neck joints or eye sockets. Others had torn-off limbs, carapaces crushed by brute force, or bodies split apart by strikes from different angles.

The group continued through the cavern, passing more varieties of dead insectoid thaids. Some resembled praying mantises; others looked like centipedes with armored plates running the length of their bodies.

The biggest monsters lay dead at the far end of the cave. These were strange mixes of different insects—some had both scorpion tails and moth wings, while others looked like spiders but with legs like grasshoppers.

"I'm going to be sick," Emily said, turning away from the hybrid monstrosities. "I've seen plenty of thaids before, but these... these are just wrong. Like someone took the worst parts of different bugs and mashed them together."

"And you have seen nothing yet," Mira said. "When they have multiple eyes, they are even worse."

At some point, they reached what was clearly the entrance of a system of tunnels. There were three passages gaping like hungry maws, but the fungi growing on their walls still illuminated everything.

Water dripped somewhere in the distance, but aside from the sound of what was falling, the tunnels were silent.

"Three tunnels," June said. "Each could stretch for kilometers inside the mountain."

Mira ran her fingers along the rough stone wall, studying the marks left by the insectoid thaids using the caves as their nests.

"With a proper expedition team, we could split up and search them all without wasting time." She gave a look at the clones. There were few of them available right at that moment.

"But we're not a proper expedition team," she sighed. "We barely have enough people to secure one tunnel and then to pass to the others."

She wanted, but couldn't ask, the clones to go with them. They had to finish the shelter and make patrols and guards. If they didn't, their condition would only worsen.

"How long do you think it would take to find out where this tunnel leads?" Amber asked, looking at one of the Chimaeric Demons.

"It's hard to say. Each tunnel could branch into dozens more. Without additional people, a thorough exploration of the entire system would take weeks or months. Even if we're lucky, we'd need days—but given how extensive this network seems to be, it's more likely to take more."

"We don't have weeks, let alone months," Mira said, voicing what they all knew.

Another clone approached. "Let's do what we can for now. After all, finding out if this place can be used as a base is also one of the reasons we are exploring it. The presence of a Silver Line Corporation facility is just an assumption."

"Yes," Emily said. "But the point is that we need to find Erik. What if he is alone here?"

"I doubt the Master would be in trouble," a clone said. "If he keeps a low profile, he can create more clones, which will make things easier. Besides, I'm certain the Master will find a way to make his presence known."

"You are forgetting how Erik is," Amber said. "He will never stay idle, knowing that the more he does, the stronger the Blackguards get."



"All the more reason to find an easily defensible place."

#### Chapter 1240: Dark Tunnels, Darker Threats (2)

"What do you think we'll find?" Emily asked as they went deeper into the tunnel. The problem was that based on what both Erik and those from Liberty Watch Village told them about the underground city left behind by the company; the city was a living nightmare before Erik led a group to free it. Not only the thaids were in the tens of thousands, if not more, but the human abomination was strong enough to be on par with the strongest villagers. Such a monster would now be a walk in the park based on how strong everyone got thanks to Erik's training technique, but back then, when he didn't share it, a monster like that was simply spawned from hell. It didn't help thinking that the creature was humanoid and most likely the result of whatever the Silver Line Corporation experimented with. "Knowing those bastards, probably something horrific," June said. While he hadn't been with Erik, having his memories, he remembered how his master barely escaped from the underground city, only to get out and be taken prisoner by Amos and the others. "My—The master's time in their facilities taught me they cared little for ethics. God only knows what we will find there if there really is one of their labs down there." Erik told everyone about what Bill revealed to them. At that point, the fact that the Silver Line Corporation was responsible for having made the Sinister Cold, and consequently Thaids and brain crystal powers, was known by all of them. Besides, the Blackguards were their successors, and if they were even a fraction as ruthless as the corporation, June couldn't fathom how truly terrible they must have been. However, while Mira, June, and the Chimaeric Demons were more worried about what kind of monster could be within these caves and tunnels, Emily and Amber were worried about more practical issues. For example, why did they create labs in places like this? "If the Silver Line Corporation really had a facility in these caves, they must have had a specific reason. The logistics alone would have been nightmarish," Emily said, voicing her thoughts. "Mountains often have high mana concentrations," June said. "Maybe they were studying mana itself." "In my opinion, they were simply afraid of the repercussion." Amber couldn't believe that was the only reason. Sure, the corporation was studying mana, and the unique patterns of it within mountains and closer to the planet's core might have helped, but if they really were those responsible for the creation of thaids, they kept their labs underground to avoid prying eyes stumbling upon them and to prevent whatever they created from escaping from the labs. "What you say makes sense," a clone said. "But all we saw makes me think that, if the corporation really had a base here, they were creating thaids. The only question is when and what wiped them out." "Either something they made or something that found them," June said. "Indeed." "Ok, but if the situation was created by a thaid that escaped from here, then why did this happen?" Emily was genuinely confused. The Silver Line Corporation was everything but stupid. They would not create a facility unable to hold whatever they were doing. Proof of that was Liberty Watch. The humanoid abomination had been trapped there for God only knew how long. With no chance to escape. "Something must have been strong enough to break through their security measures in at least one facility," a clone said. "Otherwise, thaids wouldn't have spread across the world. Still," the clone said, "I think the strength of thaids depends on the mana concentration in their environment. Since Mur has much higher mana levels than Mannard." "So, what you are saying is that the mountain's mana saturation could have affected their experiments. The ambient mana might have amplified their powers beyond control, and they escaped." "Yes, but that's assuming there really is a Silver Line Corporation facility here. It could simply be that some thaid

chased humans into these caves, or humans stumbled upon an existing thaid nest—with predictably dire consequences." "I guess it makes sense," Emily said. "So, thaids were a by-product of all of this research, and their spreading was a mistake. The specimens escaped, replicated, spread across the continent, and almost wiped out humanity." "Yeah, that's the gist of it," a clone said. He then ran his hand along the cave wall. "Anyway, the isolated location makes more sense if they were conducting dangerous experiments. No witnesses, natural containment, plenty of test subjects. This theory actually makes sense." Their voices echoed off the stone as they continued deeper, each step carrying them closer to whatever secrets the mountain held. How many other facilities like this one existed, harboring secrets beneath mountains and behind sealed doors? Maybe the blackguards knew. A heavy silence fell as they contemplated what horrors the Silver Line Corporation unleashed in their pursuit of power. If a research facility lay hidden in these tunnels, its abandoned halls might hold answers—or horrors—none of them were prepared to face. "Whatever we find," Amber said, breaking the silence, "we need to be prepared. If there really is something here, this could be one of their primary facilities." The tunnel gradually widened. "I think we are reaching another cave," a Chimaeric Demon said, hushing the others. Just as the clone predicted, a cave entrance loomed ahead of them. The opening was roughly circular, about three meters in diameter, and the walls were covered in patches of pale blue luminescent fungi. The light from the fungi provided just enough light to make out the basic features of the cavern entrance. The group halted at the entrance, flattening themselves against the walls. One of the clones shapeshifted and peered inside. "We have a problem," he whispered. More than two dozen creatures moved. The clone had to further shapeshift his eyes to see better. Some prowled along the ground while others clung to the ceiling. Some were carrying large chunks of bloody meat and bone and bringing them to some other tunnels. Several thaids were scraping at the rock with their claws, most likely to expand the nest. What was most disturbing was how organized they seemed. This was a structured society. Some larger thaids appeared to be directing the others, patrolling the perimeter of the nest, while smaller ones performed their various tasks. "Don't move," the clone said. "They haven't noticed us yet." Emily counted the creatures. If they were on Mannard, such numbers would have been nothing, but here it was too much. There were at least thirty of them. The thaids seemed to be guarding something. It was most likely the nest, but it was out of sight, likely further into the complex of caves and tunnels. Amber reached for her weapon, and so did the others. "I count thirty-seven," the clone said. "Eight large ones seemingly directing the others, twenty-two... let's say workers, and seven of what look like guards near what I assume is the nest entrance." June nodded, studying the thaids' movements. The larger ones were twice the size of their subordinates. Their carapaces were covered in deep grooves and ridges, with dark stripes running along their joints. They made clicking and chirping sounds to talk to each other, but the group was not sure they only communicated this way or if they used pheromones and stuff like that. Yet it was clearly proof they were smart. Their strength was clearly uncontested, at least compared to the insectoid thaids from the Mannard continent, but as for their intelligence, they had no way to know how good they were. "You killed them already," Emily said to the clones. "Do you have any suggestions?" The clones paused to think. "They are moving and behaving like the thaids we fought at the entrance," a clone said. "If it is like this, then I can already tell you the leaders will be the real problem. They are very smart too, abnormally. So pay attention." "Amber," June said, "Your corrosive gas could eliminate all of them quickly. They are strong, but not so strong we can't kill them." "I don't think we should use her power to kill them. If we do, we will just fill the cave with the gas." "Yeah," Amber said, shaking her head. "Besides, we don't know what's deeper in those tunnels. If there's a larger nest or stronger thaids further in, we'll need my power to escape. Once I use it, I'll need time to regenerate enough

mana. I don't think these things will die just like that." "You could warp us," a clone said. "I could, but it depends on how much mana I have left. I might not have enough to bring us all out, and we can't leave anyone behind now that Erik is not with us. We need to keep our energies in case something worse appears." Mira nodded, and that was enough to make the others do the same.