

BIOLOGICAL 1241

Chapter 1241: Dark Tunnels, Darker Threats (3)

"Emily," June turned to the woman with a serious expression. "Can you use your powers now? We need to know what might happen if we engage these thaidi, or what dangers could be further inside the nest. Even a glimpse would help us prepare better."

Emily's expression tightened. "I already tried. The moment we entered the cave, I started looking into the future. I tried again after you mentioned finding human signs in the cave. I wanted to confirm whether there was a Silver Line Corporation base here."

She rubbed her temples, a gesture all of them knew meant she was frustrated.

"But I can barely see anything useful. When I try to look into the future, all I get are fragmented images of the cave walls and the fungi growing on them. The visions are hazy and incomplete, like looking through murky water."

"Nothing at all? Not even a glimpse of a creature or a building?" Amber asked, her voice tense as she glanced back and forward between Emily and the tunnel ahead.

"Nothing concrete. It's like..." Emily paused, searching for the right words. "Like something's interfering with my vision. The deeper we go into these caves, the harder it becomes to see."

The feeling reminded Emily of when she had a few neural links, when her visions were fragmented and unclear. But this was worse than that time.

Back then, she could at least piece together some coherent images from the fragments she received, even if they were incomplete, and the visions were much clearer when they were forced on her. Here, it felt like something was blocking her, distorting everything she tried to see.

"Interfering with the visions?" Amber asked. She was the one who knew the most of it since she and Emily were childhood friends, so she understood what Emily meant.

In truth, Amber had a theory about why this was happening, but until she figured out her thoughts were not baseless, she refrained from speaking.

"Could be the mountain itself," a clone said. "All this ambient mana might be affecting your abilities."

That was exactly what Amber was thinking.

"Or whatever's deeper in the caves," Mira said.

"Since we don't know the effects of mana on brain crystal powers, we can't make bold assumptions, but anyway, the ambient mana might be the reason." The clone turned to Amber.

"I know that thinking about everything makes sure we regret nothing later, but have you seen a Thaid that could interfere with powers? More precisely, have you seen a thaid messing up with future sight? I bet you do, because there is no known thaid able to do this."

The others nodded. Losing Emily's foresight was another reason to be cautious, another unknown variable in an already dangerous situation.

"You would be right if we actually knew something about Mur's thaids, but we don't have any reliable information about them. These creatures could have evolved differently from regular thaids, developing abilities we've never seen before. Without proper documentation or prior encounters, we can't rule out the possibility that they might have such brain crystal powers."

The group retreated forty meters down the tunnel to a wider section, where they could discuss their strategy without risking being heard by the enemy.

The Chimaeric Demons formed a protective circle around June, Mira, Emily, and Amber. Their backs to the group, watching both directions of the tunnel for any threats.

"Here's what we know," a clone said. "The workers are individually weak but dangerous in large groups. Their main role appears to be gathering resources and maintaining the hive. The guards are stronger than them. Thick carapaces and powerful mandibles are just the last of our problems, yet they have limited intelligence. The most concerning are the eight leaders, who both have the guards' physical prowess but much more advanced problem-solving abilities and tactical coordination. These leaders can and will direct both workers and guards, making them our primary target."

"So, we need to take care of them first," Mira said.

"We need to isolate, or at least kill them first. If we can stop them from coordinating with the others, the group will fall into chaos."

Mira drew a rough map in the dirt using her fingers. "The cave has three main sections—the entrance where we are, the central chamber, and what appears to be the working area, which is connected to the other tunnels. What we must make sure won't happen is the thaids retreating and alerting the others."

She pointed at one of the tunnels, from which they saw creatures come and go from time to time.

"The Chimaeric Demons should take care of this task. If possible, you also have to lure the leaders and deal with them."

"Ok then," a clone said.

"Are we sure the tunnels lead to the nest?" Emily asked.

"No, but we can't rule the chance out. We must make sure no more thaids get here while we fight against the fuckers."

The others nodded.

"What about the workers and guards?"

Mira turned to Amber, who had asked the question. "We'll handle them while the Chimaeric Demons take out the leaders," June said. Mira had reached the same conclusion, but June voiced it first.

"We may not be as strong individually as most of Mur's thaids, but we sure are capable of killing bug thaids."

"It's worth a try," a Chimaeric Demon said. They had the power to do that.

"So we have a plan," June said. "Mira and I take the left flank, Amber and Emily the right," he turned to a Chimaeric Demon. "You focus on the leaders."

"Remember," he added, "if things go wrong, fall back immediately. Amber will need a few seconds to generate enough corrosive gas to cover our retreat or to warp us out."

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Hidden in the tunnel's shadows, the group waited. Each member of the team remained still, waiting for their chance to strike.

Mira's eyes never left the cave entrance, studying the movements of each thaid. Unfortunately, she couldn't use her rifle. The noise would be huge and would attract whatever creature was lurking in the cave or the tunnels.

June's grip tightened on his weapon while Mira and Amber held their positions, using hand signals to communicate silently.

Once they got ready, they acted.

The battle erupted with sudden ferocity.

The clones attacked first, their glowing magic swords shining in the light from the cave's fungi. The cave got filled with battle sounds—the cracking of insect shells being broken by mana weapons, the dying screams of the insect creatures, and the loud crashes of bodies slamming into each other.

"Strike on the left!"

June and Mira acted. Though June wasn't as physically strong, his role was to lure the thaids—which weren't powerful enough to pose a serious threat to him.

The first worker barely had time to register them coming before June's blade found a gap in its carapace. Mira followed through, her weapon piercing its thorax.

Two thaids, as big as large dogs, rushed at June and Mira. The insect-like creatures snapped their mandibles.

June pivoted, letting the creatures' momentum carry them past, avoiding the strike. Mira did the same, but she also severed one of the creatures' legs. The insects crashed into the wall, momentarily stunned.

"Damn! That was close!" June got incredibly close to being injured.

On the right flank, Amber and Emily moved. Emily's future sight brain crystal power might have been dampened, but her second one, time freeze, was still kicking.

Not that she needed to use it. Emily was a godly sniper, but she knew how to fight in close quarters since she trained in it for many years.

Her combat instincts were razor sharp from years of training, and while the thaids were dangerous creatures, they weren't nearly as lethal or well-equipped as the Vindicators she had faced at the Law Gate. Their movements were more predictable, their attacks less coordinated, their defenses not as sophisticated, and their powers much weaker.

She spotted a weakness in one of the guards' carapaces, calling it out to Amber, who exploited the opening, plunging her fire dagger into it, and killing the creature.

The chamber descended into controlled chaos. The Chimaeric Demons were dealing with the leaders, but they were a tougher nut to crack compared to their underlings. Yet the clones had been able to not only keep the leaders at bay but also to prevent the other bugs from retreating deeper into the tunnels.

"How many did you kill?" Amber asked the Chimaeric Demons. "Three!"

One of the leaders made some clicks, and suddenly the workers moved. It differed a lot from before, though.

"Watch out!" June said. "They're trying to flank us!" He saw the worker bugs moving in a half-circle around them, trying to block their way out and corner them in a dangerous spot.

The clones acted soon and killed the leader. Amber and the others moved to avoid being surrounded. She also warped June, since he was rather slow.

Three workers then converged on Emily. But it brought them where Amber wanted them. She spun through their attacks, each strike finding vulnerable joints in their armored bodies.

Chapter 1242: Dark Tunnels, Darker Threats (4)

Mira jumped over the fallen worker thaid and spotted her next target. Her arms changed shape as her brain crystal power activated. Her fingers turned into claws strong enough to cut through metal.

Though its feelers sensed her, it couldn't react fast enough. Mira's claws sliced through the soft spot between the bug's armored plates right at its neck. They cut into the soft flesh underneath, and Mira pushed deeper to make sure the creature died.

The dying bug shook violently on the ground. Its body hit the stone floor again and again, making the whole cave shake. Bits of rock and old dust fell from above, raining down on everyone fighting.

The worker twitched its last moments away and collapsed beside its already dead companions. Dark fluid seeped from the corpses into the stone below.

Emily activated her time-slowng brain crystal power, making the workers' movements look sluggish. Her daggers might not have been special like Amber's ones', but they were deadly in her hands, nonetheless. However, what really made her a menace was her brain crystal power. She moved between three workers, slashing at their joints where the armor was weakest.

Amber plunged the ice dagger into a worker's thorax, freezing its internal organs. Before the creature could fall, she spun and slashed another with her fire dagger; the blade igniting its organs.

The two workers attacking Amber died on the spot. Their momentum, though, made them both crash into each other. The frozen creature shattered on impact, while the other one fell on the ground and soon after turned into cinders.

Meanwhile, Mira attacked another worker. She didn't need more than her claws to do the job. She tore off the creature's arm and jumped over its head, landing behind it, killing it quickly.

Emily darted forward in her time-slowed world, her daggers finding gaps in two more workers' armor.

"Are you getting heated?" Amber called out to Emily with a smirk as she watched her friend kill the thaids with inhuman speed.

"Can you blame me? They are gross!"

Emily targeted the joints where their exoskeleton segments met, her blades finding the vulnerable connective tissue. The thaids collapsed, and she finished them with strikes through the gaps in their head plates.

Mira shapeshifted her arm into a barbed tentacle, wrapping it around a worker's thorax. She yanked the creature off, then drove her other hand's claws through its eye sockets.

Using the falling creature's weight, she jumped toward another worker and tore through its chest with her claws.

Amber froze a worker's legs to stop it from moving. Her fire dagger burned through another worker's mouth. She spun around and killed both creatures, stabbing them inside their eyes.

The battle shifted as the leaders grew desperate. Their clicking sounds became louder and faster as they tried—and failed—to command their soldiers.

Two of the largest leaders suddenly broke away from the main fight, charging toward what appeared to be the main tunnel entrance.

"Those cowards!" Mira cursed, seeing the leaders trying to escape.

"Don't let them through!"

The clones rushed to stop the leaders, swinging their mana swords. One clone hit the first leader across its body, while another cut off the second leader's legs. Both insect creatures fell to the ground, twitched a few times, and died.

The clones rushed forward to intercept the leaders. One clone lunged at the first leader. He swung his sword in a powerful arc and struck the creature across its armored torso.

The mana sword shattered the leader's shell into dozens of fragments. Dark fluid sprayed from the cracks as the creature staggered backward. The impact was so severe that fracture lines spread across its thorax and abdomen, causing pieces of its armor to fall away with each movement.

Another clone circled it, waiting for the time to strike. He swung his mana sword, severing another leader's legs. The creature flailed before crashing to the ground.

Both leaders writhed for a few last seconds as they succumbed to death. Their limbs twitched one last time before going still.

"Ha! Should've bugged out while you had the chance!" a clone said, watching the move.

The death of the bugs seemed to break something in the remaining thaids. The workers' movements became increasingly agitated, yet that wasn't enough to make them stop.

"We need to finish them!" June said. "Without their leaders, they're disorganized. Attack in pairs and don't let them regroup!"

The last phase of the battle was brutally efficient. Without their leaders' coordination, the remaining thaids fell to the group's tactics. The group eliminated the workers, while the guards remained in their positions with suicidal determination.

After the last thaid fell, silence filled the cave—broken only by the humans' heavy breathing and the rhythmic drop of blood dripping from their weapons onto the stone floor.

June checked on everyone after the battle. No one was badly hurt—the clones only had a few scratches, which they promptly healed, while Mira, Amber, and Emily were completely fine.

Mira was already examining the dead leaders, prodding their broken shells with her claws and studying the fluid that leaked from their wounds.

June moved between the corpses. "We can't celebrate yet. If these are anything like the bug thaids from Mannard, this is just the beginning."

"Yeah," Mira said. "Damn bug colonies. I always hated them. They are never small. These guys might just be scouts or an advance guard. On Mannard, when you find bug thaids, you either find none or thousands. There's rarely anything in between."

The group gathered their weapons and observed their surroundings. They didn't waste time and immediately went through the tunnel at the back of the cave. It didn't take much for the group to find themselves in front of another conundrum.

"Three tunnels again," Emily said.

Amber went and checked out the left tunnel. She found lots of signs that the insect creatures had been using it recently. There were deep claw marks on the walls, about three inches deep.

Broken shell pieces littered the floor, some tiny, others as big as her hand. Some pieces still looked shiny and fresh.

"Looks like they use this tunnel a lot," she said, touching the smooth walls.

"The smooth rock surface and deep scratch marks make it clear this is their main route."

The middle tunnel went down steeper than the other two and went deeper into the mountain. Based on how far down it went, there might be chances this was a place the Silver Line Corporation used to build their lab.

The right tunnel was huge—about thirty feet wide and twenty feet tall. Its walls were smooth and showed marks suggesting that something enormous moved through it regularly. The group chose not to go this way, thinking that whatever creature needed such a big tunnel would be much more dangerous than the bug-like thaids they had just defeated.

June looked at the three tunnels. The left one had many signs of thaids passing through it, which probably meant it led to their nest.

The middle tunnel went down deeper into the mountain, where they might find the research facility. The right tunnel was unusually wide, making everyone wonder what kind of large creatures might use it.

However, no one wanted to find out what kind of creature needed such an enormous tunnel.

It was at that point that the group remembered the massive tunnels they had found in Liberty Watch, and that the entire city studied. Those tunnels were as large as these and looked almost identical.

The smooth walls meant they couldn't have formed naturally. The massive body they found in Liberty Watch had proven this. It was made by thaids, and most likely, this tunnel had the same origin.

On Mannard, they had only found remains of giant thaids. No one had ever seen these titans alive, though the tunnels they left behind suggested massive strength.

"Damn..."

"At least we have seen no fresh marks," Amber said, examining the tunnel walls. "Whatever made this tunnel might not be active anymore."

"Or it's just somewhere else right now," one of the clones said.

"Let's take the middle tunnel," June said. "Any research facility would have been built deep inside the mountain for safety. We're most likely to find it there, and I don't want to meet any of these monsters, or something even worse," he said while glancing at the larger tunnel.

Mira gave it some looks.

"We should leave some markers along the way," she said. "That way, we won't get lost if we need to run back."

"Makes sense," June nodded. "The tunnels are complex, and we need a way to backtrack quickly if needed. Let's use chalk marks every fifty feet."

Everyone nodded. The clones lined up in position as everyone got ready to go deeper into the mountain. No one said it out loud, but they all shared the same worry—if they picked the wrong tunnel, they might end up walking straight into a monster, or worse, a nest.

Chapter 1243: Few Thaid's and not enough level ups

[Are you ready?] the biological supercomputer asked.

Crouched behind a bush, Erik watched as a pack of wolf-like thaid's prowled through the forest.

Erik had never seen them around these parts, and while he didn't come to Mur a lot of time ago, he was pretty sure they didn't belong to this area but were likely migrating.

It wasn't just because of how they were behaving: sniffing the area, checking their surroundings, marking trees with their scent, and howling to communicate with each other. Some were investigating potential den sites under fallen logs, while others prowled along game trails, clearly searching for signs of prey.

The pack stayed unusually close together, which was a sign of caution. Two of the larger thaid's were even testing different paths through the undergrowth, seemingly establishing new routes.

But even if Erik didn't know Thaid's' behavior, he still had the Instability brain crystal power. That was telling him everything he needed to know about the situation because he was reading their minds. Granted, these were still thaid's, the evolutionary next step of animals, and as such, they were not that smart. Erik wasn't reading coherent thoughts, but a bundle of feelings and primal urges.

Yet that was enough to make the situation clearer.

The problem was that with how many Thaid's Erik killed around these parts, these guys likely wanted to set their territory here.

<I knew I should have done something to prevent that.>Erik knew that something like that would happen when he started massacring the local fauna.

By eliminating the local thaid population, he'd created a power vacuum—and nature abhors a vacuum. The problem was that he didn't have the time, nor the resources, to do that.

His main goal at the moment was to kill everything on sight and turn strong enough to kill even the most dangerous beast among on this cursed continent. That and, of course, to clear the road for Amber and the others to find him.

"What a mess," Erik sighed, watching the pack explore what they thought would be their new territory. "At least I can deal with them, but this is getting tedious."

Unlike other creatures on the Mur continent, these wolf-like beings were not so monstrous. They had long legs, slim bodies with silver-gray fur, and sharp amber eyes that watched everything around them like hunters but didn't look like the amalgam of something spawned from hell.

They had bestial features but lacked the demonic appearance of other creatures. It was to the point that most of the thaids on Mannard were scarier than them. Of course, that didn't mean they were weaker or easier to fight.

What was worse was that they weren't the only thaids that decided to set their territory in the area. The wolf-like thaids were just one of the many groups or creatures doing just that.

Luckily, Erik didn't even have to deal with the thaids in this area more than before. His previous hunts had been so thorough that the local threats were minimal.

Instead, he found himself dealing more with newcomers like these - groups of thaids that wandered in from other regions, searching for unclaimed territory to call their own.

Besides, these different thaid groups often fought each other for territory and resources. Erik had seen several brutal clashes between packs, with the winners claiming the disputed areas and the losers either dying or fleeing. These conflicts thinned out the thaid population, making his job easier.

[Remember, even if they look less monstrous than the others, they're still Mur thaids,] the system said.

<Yeah, yeah. Thanks, Mom or Dad?>

[Your sarcasm is noted, but unnecessary,] the system said. [I'm just trying to make sure you keep proper caution.]

<I've killed hundreds of similarly strong thaids already. I think I know what I'm doing.>

[And yet you still complain about the few experience points they provide compared to your previous battles. Curious how you can find them beneath your notice and worth griping about.]

<Are you actually lecturing me right now based on what we know?>

The truth was that Erik was used to fighting much larger groups of thaids, or people, meaning that the lack of experience points provided per single kill was compensated by the huge number of creatures he killed.

Here things were different because fighting large groups was complicated, and even if the thaids here gave Erik a lot of mana per kill, their numbers weren't enough for him to get more mana than what he would have gained on Mannard.

The hunts were easier since dealing with fewer creatures was simpler than facing thousands, but the rewards still felt insufficient.

[I prefer to think of it as providing a valuable perspective. But if you'd rather learn these lessons the hard way, by all means, continue doing what you are.]

Erik rolled his eyes. <Fine, fine. I'll be careful. Happy now?>

[Ecstatic,] the system said. [Now, shall we proceed with killing these guys, or would you prefer to continue this delightful exchange?]

Erik nodded, gathering mana. The wind responded to his call, swirling around him in invisible currents that condensed into lethal blades.

The wolf-like creatures kept moving forward, unaware that death was a few steps from them. They were in hunting mode—walking with their heads down and sniffing the ground.

One of them lifted its head and sniffed the air, as if it could sense the mana building up nearby.

[NOW!]

Erik released his hold on the gathered power. Dozens of wind blades sliced through the air. The first blade caught the lead thaid across its throat, decapitating it before the creature could react.

[Hostile creature killed: Mana absorbing process starting.]

The pack erupted into chaos as more wind blades found their marks. Silver fur turned crimson as the invisible weapons carved through flesh and bone.

The thaids tried to scatter, but Erik's attack left no escape route. Their swift movements, so graceful moments before, became desperate and erratic.

[Hostile creature killed: Mana absorbing process starting.]

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

[Mana successfully absorbed, starting conversion procedure.]

[3...2...1...0] [Mana successfully absorbed into experience. 1,801,323,129.21experience points were awarded to the host.]

Within seconds, the clearing fell silent. Bodies lay scattered across the forest floor, their fur still rippling in the lingering breeze.

<Things are much easier now that I pumped my energy this much,> Erik said, looking at his hands.

[Indeed. Your control over battlefields has improved a lot.]

Erik remained motionless, counting the fallen creatures and ensuring none had escaped.

He counted twenty dead thaids. This was a rather large pack based on Mur's standards—enough to be dangerous if he had let them stay.

Erik left his hiding place and walked over to the dead thaids to gather their brain crystals.

<How many experience points have I gathered in total?> Erik asked while collecting the brain crystals.

[Not much,] the biological supercomputer said. [You just got 360,264,625.8 experience points from the bunch.]

<Damn...>

Erik knew these were not a few experience points. The problem was that they were not enough for him to level up, or at least to do so quickly.

Erik sighed, shaking his head in frustration. He remembered when killing even a single thaid would give him enough experience points to level up multiple times.

Even though each kill added to his total, it felt as small as adding a few drops of water to an ocean.

Frustrated, he kicked the ground.

[It's pretty normal, Erik. Your level is too high now,] the biological supercomputer said. [These thaids are much stronger than those on Mur but are still lower-leveled compared to you. It's pretty normal for you to not get that much mana, especially given there are few of them around.]

<But we are on Mur! This place was supposed to make me level multiple times every day! Instead, I'm only finding these half-assed creatures after I vanquished the Kraevyx packs!>

[Oh, so a pack of creatures as powerful as Hevadrins are 'half-assed' now?] The biological supercomputer's tone dripped with sarcasm. [I wasn't aware your standards had grown so high.]

<You know what I meant,> Erik shot back, continuing to harvest the brain crystals from the fallen thaids.

[You can't expect every monster on Mur to be at the highest tier of power, and you should be grateful for that,] the system said.

[Yes, creatures here are significantly stronger than on Mannard, but there's still a hierarchy. Even these 'weaker' ones are far stronger than their Mannard counterparts. The pack we just eliminated? They're the Mur equivalent of Leylarhads.]

The system paused, letting that sink in. [Think about it this way—imagine General Becker walking into the woods back on Mannard and encountering a pack of Leylarhads. What do you think would happen?]

Erik remained silent, understanding the point.

[Exactly. It would be a complete massacre, just like what we just did here. The same principle applies to you now. You've simply become too powerful for this level of beast, but that doesn't make them weak.] The system's tone grew more serious. [And remember—if Mur has equivalents to Leylarhads, it definitely has equivalents to Hevadrins too. Probably much worse.]

<You're right,> Erik said with a sigh. <I'm just frustrated with the slow progress. A week passed since I made the tree, and I'm still stuck near the beach. We are losing time here. But I know I shouldn't complain about having an easier time.>

[That's a better perspective,] the system said. [Instead of frustration, feel thankful. More importantly, you need to stay careful. We might be having a calm time in this area, but that won't always be the case. The deeper we go into Mur, the more dangerous it becomes.]

Chapter 1244: Dangerous Idea

Later, Erik trudged back to the underground shelter, his muscles aching from the morning's hunt.

<You're getting slower with your reports,> Erik said to the system as he collapsed onto his bed.

[Says the one who cleared the area twice as fast as yesterday,] the biological supercomputer said. [Though I noticed you relied more on wind attacks this time.]

<Easier that way. Less running around.>

[Laziness doesn't suit you, Erik.]

Erik snorted. <Not laziness. Strategy. Why waste energy chasing them down when I can hit them from afar?>

[Fair point. Though I remember when you used to enjoy eviscerating the enemy with your Flyssa.]

<Yeah. I miss the flyssa a lot, if I have to be honest, but it's not efficient based on how things are now. We're not here for fun.>

[No, we're not,] the system said. [Still, you should not be lazy just because the monsters in the area suck.]

Erik stretched on the bed. <You sound like a proud parent.>

[More like a concerned observer. One whose life depends on yours.]

<Didn't you say that when I die, you search for a new host, and I turn into... well... you?>

[Yes, and we will probably be stuck inside some thaïd for god knows how long... Without the chance to talk to anyone and the monster rushing from battle to battle, mating nonstop, and being ugly.]

<I don't remember you saying nothing when I 'mated'.> The system fell silent. Since it always was with Erik, it was clear that every time Erik was with one of the three girls, when he took a shower or a dump, the system was there.

Honestly speaking, when the system started talking like a human, Erik was a little freaked out. It was one thing for the biological supercomputer to be a cold, cynical machine; it was another if it reasoned like a human and was one before the Silver Line Corporation turned the unfortunate soul's brain into it.

Erik then stood up and went to eat some of the previous day's leftovers. The meat wasn't particularly tasty, but it provided the energy he needed.

<You don't understand what I would give for a bit of seasonings.>

[Grow them.]

<I wish. I didn't bring any seeds - they weren't as nutritious as other supplies, and I wouldn't know how to process them into seasonings, let alone have the time for it.>

Then the sound of footsteps drew Erik's and the biological supercomputer's attention. The clone went through the entrance, his clothes torn and stained with blood—some of it was likely his own, though Erik had no way to know since the clone's healing brain crystal power would have already sealed any wounds. Fatigue was deeply etched into the clone's every movement.

<I guess it must have been a rough morning.>

"You look exhausted, Rick," Erik said.

The clone gave Erik a tired smile and then sank onto his bed. "The hunts are not getting any easier, master."

Erik offered him some of the meat. "Tell me how it's going out there."

"Most of the weaker thaids are cleared out now. At least in the area surrounding the base," Rick said between bites.

"But there are some troublesome ones giving me problems, a pair of large thaids about three kilometers north. They hunt together and are unusually smart. They are all smart in this cursed place!"

The clone would have shouted if it wasn't for the risk of thaids hearing him.

"Calm down," Erik said. "Getting angry will bring you nothing but wasted energy and poor decisions, and it won't make you rest properly."

"Yeah, sorry, master. It's just that it is frustrating."

Though, it was weird. While it was true that thaids here were also smarter than those of Mannard, Erik didn't see that much of a difference.

<Can there be different kinds of thaids in the northeast? Maybe they are smarter but weaker.>

[It can be, but we can't say it for certain unless we go see by ourselves.]

<God, no. I already have my plate full just dealing with the west.>

The system mentally nodded.

"Anyway, what were you saying about the thaids?"

"Ah, yes, master. I'm trying to hunt this pair down, but I'm failing. Besides, their brain crystal powers seem complementary, and their intelligence is preventing me from dealing with them easily but safely. I would need to take them on directly, but based on how strong I am right now, taking them head-on would be suicide."

The Chimaeric Demon shifted on the wooden bed.

"All the more reason to make more neural links. Remember, they will increase your physical attributes too, aside from the mana pool available for each power. You clones have an advantage against humans; take advantage of it."

The clone sighed. "I know, master. But making neural links isn't as simple as it sounds, and with all the hunting and constant threats, finding the right mindset is not simple."

Erik patted the clone on the shoulder. "You'll get there, eventually." The clone nodded.

"So, I guess you didn't kill them."

"No, master." The clone nodded. "I killed many thaids during these days. But the two fuckers are beyond me. Since I can't fight them head-on, I had to resort to tactics."

Erik smiled.

"Small ambushes, hit-and-run tactics. I've injured them several times, but they won't simply die, and now they are more cautious than ever. They've started hunting in more open areas where it's harder to surprise them, but they can't heal like I can. Each encounter leaves them with new wounds. It's just a matter of time before they fall."

"That's good to hear then..." Erik remained silent for some time.

"What about the path northwest?" The clone asked. Since he had Erik's memories, he cherished June, Mira, Amber, and Emily as much as him. He was hoping his master found a clue about them and that the area Erik decided to clear was getting purged faster than what he was currently doing. "How is the mission going?"

"There is less activity than I expected, which worries me, but I'm doing well. I have killed most of the stronger thaids in the area and wiped out the weaker ones, but new ones constantly migrate into the area."

For a second, the clone envied Erik's mana reserves. If he had them too, hunting would be much easier. Yet, he was also happy and proud of his master.

"You should start peeing everywhere to mark your territory," the clone said, and both of them chuckled.

"No, but on a serious note, it's getting frustrating," Erik sighed. "I can't rest a single second, and the more thaids I kill, the more end up migrating here because of the power vacuum."

"I'm sorry, master."

"Don't worry. It's not like I didn't know it."

"Anyway," he said. "I was thinking maybe I should just focus on eliminating the most dangerous thaids and push further west to look for the others?" His voice carried a note of uncertainty. "But I'm not sure if that's the right call."

The clone got up and stretched. "If you go west, Master, you'll need to be careful," he said. "Don't fight every monster you see. Just look for clues that the others were there—like footprints, places where they fought, or any other signs that humans passed through."

"Agreed. It's impossible to kill everything, anyway."

The clone paused.

"I think it isn't such a bad idea," he added. "When were you thinking of leaving?"

"As I said, I'm uncertain about this. It depends on how the situation unfolds."

"Yes," the clone said. "But the fact they hadn't found the tree yet is worrying me. If they are alive, maybe they can't come here because of some thaid."

"That was what I was thinking."

"Do you want me to go with you?"

"No, it's better if you stay here. You're not as strong as I am yet, and I need you to keep working on clearing out the eastern area. I'll go alone—it'll be quicker that way. If I can't find them, I'll come back and help you deal with those tough monsters in the east."

"All right then," Rick said. There was something he wanted to say, but he hesitated. "Master... I know we already talked about this, but they might not have survived. Are you sure you are not just wasting time?"

Erik's expression hardened. "They survived. Amber would have warped the others away if push came to shove. Emily's future sight would have warned them of dangers, and Mira knows how to survive in hostile territory." His voice carried absolute conviction. "They're alive. We just need to find them."

"Of course," the clone said. "I shouldn't have suggested otherwise."

Erik softened. "No, it is good that you're thinking of all possibilities. We need to be realistic about the dangers here. But I know they're alive. I can feel it."

Of course, Erik had no certainty. He just wanted to believe that the others were alive; otherwise, he wouldn't have the strength to carry on his quest.

The shelter fell quiet except for the distant sounds of the forest. Erik pulled out some dried meat from their supplies, offering some to his clone. They ate in silence, each lost in their own thoughts.

Finally, the clone spoke again. "You should mark your path as you go. If you find signs of them, you'll need to be able to guide them back here quickly."

"Good thinking. I can use Verdant Architect to do so. I will also leave some for the others. Mira is smart and knows what to look for."

The conversation drifted into tactical planning—what supplies to carry, how to communicate, and what the clone had to do in the meantime.

Chapter 1245: Rescue trip (1)

Erik woke at dawn, his mind already clear despite the early hour. It had not been a particularly peaceful night for him. He spent most of the night debating if leaving to search for the others was the right thing to do, and in the end, he decided. Sleep didn't find him easily. He found Rick preparing their morning meal, using meat from the previous day's hunts.

"You're up early," Erik said to the clone, accepting a portion of the heated meat.

"The eggs needed checking," Rick said. "They started getting darker during the night."

If their color changed, it meant the eggs were growing well. Erik nodded, and the two sat at the table, eating in silence.

"I also went to check the crops," the clone said. "The mushrooms are growing nicely, and so are the vegetables," Rick said.

"That's good to hear. I would be confused if that didn't happen, given how much mana I poured into them."

Erik could grow them instantly, but there was no point, since there would be no one to eat all of that. The best thing was to make everything grow slowly and use mana just to give them nutrients

that would make everything bigger and more nutrient. The only thing Erik instantly grew were the fruit trees, but aside from sprouting some peaches, Erik didn't do much else.

Erik stopped talking and just stared at his plate while picking at his food. Rick could tell from Erik's face that he had made up his mind about what they had discussed yesterday.

Erik set down his plate.

"I've made my decision," Erik said.

"Let me guess. You are going to leave."

Erik was slightly surprised by the fact that the clone knew he had made up his mind. After all, he saw him sleeping the whole night, or so it seemed.

"I will. I'm going west today."

Rick nodded.

"Why aren't you surprised?"

"You were restless all night, master."

"Was it so obvious? I thought you were sleeping."

"Of course it was! Only an idiot wouldn't have understood. I'm certainly not an idiot, and I also am one of your clones." Rick said.

"Besides, after you told me you had the idea, I knew what was going on in your mind, because it would have been the same as it was going in mine. That meant you would make your decision in a night. The fact you stirred the entire night only gave me proof. You kept tossing and turning in your bed, mumbling in your sleep, and every time you woke up, you'd go to the door before heading back to bed and trying to sleep again. I'm surprised you got any rest at all."

"Yeah... It wasn't a peaceful night. Hopefully, it will be a better day."

Erik sighed.

"I guess I can't hide anything from you clones."

[It is not just the clones,] the system said. Erik could swear there was a mischievous smile on its non-existent face. Erik ignored it but didn't hide the annoyed look on his face at the clone. He knew the system talked, so he would only assume the system said something annoying to his master.

"Anyway," Erik said, "I need you to focus on different things while I'm gone." Erik paused to eat a bite. "The hunting should be secondary. Your main task is protecting the eggs and making neural links."

"And the thaids? They will reclaim the area if both you and I do not keep them in check. It would make all our past hunts pointless."

"That is true only for those on the east," Erik said. "As for those on the west, I will still be there hunting; it's just that I will go farther."

He paused. "Engage the thaids that get too close to the base for comfort, but avoid everything else if it is not to get meat. No more extended hunting trips or wearing down the stronger ones. We need you at full strength in case something goes wrong with the eggs or with Amber and the others. If they really are dead, then it's just you and me until we have the new clones ready, and since we have little time before the blackguards become unstoppable, we will need to focus on training, and so will the new batches of clones."

The clone considered this, then nodded. "I'll only kill what threatens our immediate security then; the rest can wait until you return." He gestured toward the chamber where their newest batch of clone eggs was developing. "I won't let anything happen to them."

"Good. And Rick?" Erik's voice softened. "Don't be a hero. If something too powerful shows up, get the hell out of whatever situation you are in."

"Yes, master. They won't be able to follow me with invisibility." However, while the clone was ready and wanted to fulfill Erik's wish and obey his orders, he was not entirely pleasant about one thing.

"But what about the pair of predators I've been wearing down? They're already wounded..."

The idea of letting those two fuckers live after all the time and effort he spent to bring them to that point irked the clone to no end.

"Leave them. If they don't approach the base, they're not worth the risk. Focus on your neural links—that's more valuable than any single kill right now. Besides, when you are strong enough, you will be able to kill them easily."

Rick didn't hide his disappointment, but at the same time, he knew that playing it safe was the right thing to do.

Hunting the thaids had become special to him, as it was the only thing he had to do that would not force him to sit for hours inside this place.

Being alone in this place was boring, but hunting gave him something to do. He felt proud whenever he killed one of them, and he enjoyed coming up with new ways to hunt them.

Rick spent his time making maps of where the predators lived and learning how they behaved. For him, hunting wasn't just about staying alive anymore.

It gave him a sense of purpose and achievement while he had to wait and watch over their shelter. Fighting helped him feel less stuck in their situation and gave him a way to measure his progress.

Yet hunting was done to clear the area and make it safer for when Amber, Emily, June, Mira, and the others returned.

If it wasn't for that, Erik would have never suggested hunting around.

But Erik was right—now that he was going to leave, he couldn't risk his life like that anymore. The safety of their base and the developing eggs had to come first.

Rick straightened. "I understand. Protection, neural links, and minimal engagement."

Erik gathered his supplies as they spoke—meat and water were the only things he took, since he could create everything with the Verdant Architect.

He only needed to change the plants' material composition to create pots, pans, and even toilets.

Erik chuckled, thinking about the blackguards, Amber, Emily, June, Mira, and the Chimaeric Demons stumbling upon toilets scattered throughout the forest.

He couldn't help but smile, imagining how funny it would be to see their shocked faces if they found modern toilets in the middle of the forest.

<That would be funny.>

[You and your stupid ideas...]

<Shut up.>

Rick noticed Erik's expression. "What's so funny?"

"Just thinking about what others would make if..." He realized he was going to say something embarrassing. It was already bad with the system reading his mind. He couldn't tell the clone this. "You know what? It doesn't matter."

Then Erik turned to leave. Climbing the wooden steps that led up through the massive tree's roots, he quickly reached the entrance.

Everything was silent around their base—there were no animal sounds or movements in the bushes, just the gentle sound of wind moving through the trees. The sun barely filtered through the canopy, which created a dark area around the base.

Thanks to all their hunting, this dangerous part of Mur's wilderness had become much safer.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," he said. "Hopefully not alone."

"Stay safe, Master," Rick said. "And bring them here—all of them."

Rick was both hopeful and worried. After spending time in Mur, they knew how dangerous this place could be, especially for their friends out there. Hopefully, they were not alone. Some Chimaeric Demons had to be alive; otherwise, they would not have gotten there at all.

Erik silently hoped his friends were still alive. He worried he might be too late to find them, and the thought of that filled him with dread. Still, he refused to give up hope. He knew Amber, Emily, June, Mira, and the Chimaeric Demons were tough—surely they had found a way to survive.

Erik nodded and started walking west through the forest. Above their camp, the enormous tree stretched its branches up into the morning sky. Rick stood at the entrance, watching until he couldn't see Erik anymore through the trees. Then he went back down into their safe underground home to start his guard duty.

Chapter 1246: Rescue trip (2)

"Beautiful," Erik said, taking in the alien landscape. The morning dew that clung to the leaves and branches made the vegetation shimmer under the few sun rays that got through the thick and giant canopy above, and the bark of the massive trees sparkled with crystalline water formations that formed during the night's cold. There was a lot to see.

The beauty made his time on Mur more bearable.

"It is different from Mannard. The colors, the shapes of the vegetation... The scale of it. Even the way light filters through these leaves is unlike anything back home."

This was because the trees on Mur were all colossal, towering hundreds of meters into the sky. Their massive trunks and dense canopies created patterns of light and shadow that Erik had never seen in the relatively smaller forests of Mannard.

The sunlight had to travel through multiple layers of enormous leaves, creating a filtered glow that painted everything below in soft hues, in a way that the trees on Mannard could hardly do.

[Indeed,] the biological computer said. [This place has an amazing variety of life. If it weren't for the dangers here, humans could have made this continent their home.]

"Yeah... Damn, thaids," Erik said. The computer's silence was agreement enough. Yet not even the otherworldly beauty of the Mur continent was enough to keep Erik from thinking about the others.

"Do you think we'll find them?"

Frankly speaking, too much time passed, and Erik started thinking there weren't many chances.

[Looking at the evidence,] the biological supercomputer said. [Since no one has spotted the tree yet, we have to consider two main possibilities. The first is that they didn't make it...]

The system paused, knowing the weight of those words. [Or they're in a location that prevents visual contact—perhaps a cave. There are ancient human settlements in the region as well, but from most of those, the tree should still be visible.]

The cave was the likely reason. Erik sighed. He didn't want to think about the first scenario, albeit he knew it was a possibility.

Every day, sometimes more than once, he asked the computer the same question about finding his friends.

The computer never got tired of answering, always carefully thinking through all the possibilities. Yet it didn't mean he would sugarcoat things too much.

On Mur, the most likely scenario was that Amber and the others had died—if they had even reached the continent.

Erik knew he kept asking the same thing over and over, but talking about it helped him deal with his worries.

He didn't really need new answers from the computer—he already knew all the possibilities; he wasn't stupid.

What he wanted was reassurance, someone telling him there was still hope. Each time they discussed it, Erik hoped to hear a new theory about how his friends might have found shelter in a hidden valley or perhaps found an abandoned settlement with workable defenses.

These daily talks gave him the focus he needed to keep searching, despite having no leads after several days.

Deep down, he understood this compulsive questioning was born from anxiety, from the gnawing fear of being truly alone on this hostile continent, and that his lovers were dead.

Then his mind wandered to the events that brought him here. The separation from his companions during the battle against the three-headed void ravagers.

Their attribute-draining powers had nearly spelled doom for his entire group. If not for his quick thinking, they might have all died that day.

[We should think about searching for them again,] the biological supercomputer said.

<What? Are you crazy?>

[Not crazy, just far-sighted. If we had that power, and we gave it to the clones, we would get the same ability as those monsters to decrease other creatures' attributes. That would mean that nothing will be able to defeat us.]

The system's reasoning made sense, but there was just one problem.

<Even if I found one, I wouldn't be able to kill it alone,> Erik said. <Without an army keeping the rest of its flock at bay, a single three-headed void ravager would tear me apart before I could do any real damage.>

[Actually, your chances of survival would be much higher now,] the system said. [Your mana has increased significantly since our previous encounters with them. The attribute drain would be less effective against you, and you'd be able to maintain your combat abilities for much longer.]

That was due to the fact that humans were able to fight foreign mana with their own. It was something Erik frequently had to deal with when he fought against humans in New Alexandria. One example was the venomous mana dart he got from Logan.

Whenever he hit something, the venomous mana could be fought. While Thaid's had a natural mana barrier that also made physical attacks less damaging, humans could at least fight foreign mana when invaded by it.

[That is, without considering that your attacks would deal a lot more damage now.]

<I haven't seen Three headed void ravagers around, though.>

[I think they live in the sea,] the system said.

<Why do you think so?>

[Well, think about it,] the system said. [The flocks of void ravagers are too large to sustain themselves on land. They would devastate entire regions if they lived here permanently. In my analysis, the only environment with prey large enough to feed such massive groups would be the ocean. The sea creatures are generally much larger than their land counterparts, making them suitable prey for void ravager flocks.]

<It makes sense,> Erik said. But the thought of fighting those things again scared him. The last time he had to give his clones the order to separate, and that decision only ended up with his army scattered across Mur's vast wilderness. Erik landed near the coast, while the others... he could only guess where they ended up, if they ended up somewhere.

The forest bore clear marks of his presence: countless thaid corpses reduced to bones picked clean by scavengers.

The local creatures had grown wary, learning to avoid his territory. Even the more aggressive ones—like the wolf-like thaid's he had hunted the previous day—now skirted around his patrol routes.

Yet there was no trace of the clones, despite all his efforts to make the journey to the tree possible.

Erik stopped at the top of a hill to look around. To the west, he saw the forest becoming much thicker, with bigger and older trees.

The computer stayed quiet, but Erik could tell it was carefully watching everything around them. They were reaching the edge of their safe zone—the area Erik had cleared of thaids. Beyond this point, things would get much more dangerous.

<Where should we start looking, in your opinion?>

[If they landed on Mur like we did,] the system said. [The beach would be our best starting point. But we need to stay within the forest's edge—close enough to keep an eye on the coastline, yet hidden enough to avoid flying thaids.]

Erik frowned. The problem was the size of these beaches. Some stretched for kilometers, and the distance between the shoreline and forest could be vast.

[You also have to consider that to search for clues, we might be forced to leave the forest, and crossing those open spaces would leave us exposed.]

Erik pondered for a moment. <What if I shapeshifted into something small? A bug, perhaps? Nothing would notice me.>

[That would be risky. Even the smallest predators on this continent are much stronger than the ones on Mannard. If you turned into a bug, they could easily catch and eat you if you weren't extremely careful. It is already hard to spot them as a human; imagine as a bug.]

<It's not like my strength diminishes when I shapeshift. On the contrary, it might increase depending on the situation.>

[That's true,] the system said, [but that is not the point. Surprise attacks are. Even if you were the strongest being in the world, a surprise attack would still kill you. The only way to avoid this would be to constantly channel your defensive powers, but that would drain mana, which you might need in more serious situations.]

<I wouldn't have this problem if I had more clones.>With the ability to increase mana and stamina regen, he would basically be godlike.

[Indeed,] the system said. [But this is not the only problem. Some creatures might be able to see through your shape-changing and know what you really are. Flocks of thaids like the Three-headed Void Ravagers might spot you. You basically have your plate full.]

This was something Erik hadn't thought about before. Back on Mannard, turning into a small bug was usually safe since the monsters there were not a threat to Erik.

But here on the Mur continent, things were different.

[But there's still a way shapeshifting can help us,] the system said. [You could transform into something that's good at seeing far away. It should be small enough to hide in the plants, but not so small that a thaid could eat you whole, at least not the smaller ones. That way, you could look for signs of your companions while staying safe. Hopefully, there will be no need for this.]

<That's a a fantastic idea,> Erik said. <Let's just hope things will be simpler.>

Chapter 1247: Rescue trip (3)

Erik stopped at the edge of the land he cleared from the presence of thaids, looking at where the unknown wilderness of Mur started.

It took him three days to reach that place.

<Damn...> I cleared more land than I expected.>

Erik had lost track of his exact location during his hunts, since most encounters turned into chases that led him far from his intended path. Aside from that, he also experimented with the Luminara Serpents, hoping to not only kill all the surrounding thaids but also to prevent others from reaching it.

Erik planted clusters of the Luminara Serpents at key locations about fifty meters apart. He wanted to know if the plant worked like most of the creatures on Mannard or if they would enrage them like it happened to the wyverns.

He set up temporary observation posts near the bulk of the cluster, using his shapeshifting ability to take the form of local thaids and his invisibility power to hide his presence.

The results were mixed, or better, it was like on Mannard, but much worse. Most of the thaids fled from the Luminara Serpents, but unfortunately, not only wyverns, which luckily didn't appear, ran from the plant.

A creature had torn through an entire patch and destroyed the area in a fit of rage. The plant's presence provoked the predator and many others when Erik regrew the plant and ended up drawing them out of their territories to destroy it.

What kept him safe on Mannard was actually dangerous here on Mur.

The plant's scent and biochemical signals stimulated the thaids' aggressive instincts far more than expected.

If Erik hadn't used his invisibility power and shapeshifting abilities, the enraged thaids would have torn him apart. These creatures, with their massive claws and enhanced strength, were too powerful for him to engage in combat.

[That complicates things,] the biological computer said as Erik watched another powerful thaid demolish a test patch. [We can't use the Luminara to create safe passages. It would be like laying out a welcome mat for every thaid in the area.]

The Luminara Serpensis plants lay destroyed, their luminescent sap seeping into the soil.

[We need another strategy,] the system said. [The Luminara attracts the kind of attention we're trying to avoid.]

Erik nodded, abandoning his plan to create a network of safe corridors for himself and the others. On Mur, it seemed, there could be no truly safe paths—only carefully chosen routes and constant vigilance.

<What do you suggest?>

[Well, it's not like we have choices. We can only hope something like the Luminara Serpensis exists here on Mur. A plant that evolved in the same way. After all, Mur's vegetation had to adapt to survive these predators exactly as plants did on Mannard.]

<Yes, but remember how we found the Luminara Serpensis?> Erik asked. <It was one single patch surviving in that abandoned cottage. If I hadn't cultivated and spread it across Mannard, it might have died out entirely. Finding another plant with similar properties is very unlikely, if it exists to begin with.>

Erik sighed, feeling disappointed by his own words. He just made a damn good point—they had been lucky to find the plant in the first place.

It had been nearly extinct before Erik started growing it everywhere, or so it looked like since he never found it in the wild again. Finding another plant that had similar effects seemed unlikely.

<I suppose there's no straightforward solution here,> Erik said, watching as the last traces of luminescent sap disappeared into the soil.

[We might just keep it simple,] the system said. [Being careful, staying hidden, and choosing safe paths. It may not be fancy, like using plants as protection, but these basic methods work too.]

<And that's exactly the problem. It is too complicated, while using the Luminara Serpensis made things easy.>

Erik moved deeper into the wilderness. The forest grew denser here, and the trees taller. It was absurd, given how tall the trees already were. Erik wondered about the reason, but aside from the technical hypothesis made by the system, he had no clear answer.

[Let's find higher ground,] the biological computer said. [We need a better view to plan a safe path through the terrain ahead.]

Erik climbed up a tree, feeling the bark under his hands. Looking down from above, he could see everything.

There was a wide, white, sandy beach in the distance, stretching as far as the eye could see and marking the continent's edge where it met the deep blue ocean. Behind the beach, a dense forest of towering trees extended inland, broken up by occasional rocky outcrops and small clearings where fallen trees had created natural gaps in the canopy.

It would have been impossible for Erik to see that far, but he changed his eyes through shapeshifting into suitable ones, making this kind of scouting possible.

"The beach keeps stretching southwest."

[Before that, you should climb down the tree. You are not very high, but are still much more exposed to flying thaids than on the ground.]

<I know that,> Erik said.

[Then why are you wasting time talking to me instead of climbing down?]

Erik rolled his eyes but knew the system was right. Being exposed in the treetops was a risk he didn't need to take, especially when flying thaids could spot him from a considerable distance.

Yet Erik felt annoyed and jumped down.

<I landed on the eastern shores,> Erik said. <The others likely did the same given the direction we were heading to, but they are likely to have landed much farther from my position.>

[Indeed,] the system paused. [Keep in mind that the others wouldn't have gone too far from the shore—it's their best reference point for navigation, and the closer the forest is to the beach, the weaker the thaids there are.]

In truth, it should have been the opposite. The stronger thaids should have been more fearless and approached the shores more frequently, but the truth was that the sea thaids, or the flying ones, were much stronger than land thaids, and the only ones deciding to stay near the shores were those who either were too small to be noticed or those who had powerful camouflaging brain crystal powers.

Most creatures avoided the coastal regions. Even the largest and most powerful land thaids, which could easily overpower other predators, stayed away from them.

This behavior wasn't due to fear but rather a sign of intelligence, at least compared to the thaids on Mannard. Fighting the powerful sea and flying thaids that dominated the coastline would waste energy and risk injury with no meaningful benefit.

Erik scanned the landscape, looking for any signs of human activity—clearings that seemed too regular, areas where the vegetation patterns changed abruptly, prints on the sand that resembled those of wyverns or humans, anything that might show his lover's presence.

"No smoke rising from anywhere," Erik scanned the area. "No temporary shelters, no disturbed vegetation patterns that would show recent camping, and no obvious signs that anyone has passed through here recently."

[Maybe we are too far from their landing point.] Yet Erik knew those were just words the system said to cheer him up. The others might have been dead.

Despite knowing this, the biological supercomputer's words made sense. Assuming they were still alive, it might have been that they landed much farther than here.

Besides, Mira and the Chimaeric Demons were experienced fighters and knew how to survive in the wilderness. No one would ever make basic mistakes, like starting fires or camping on exposed beaches.

They knew open flames would draw the attention of thaids, both from the air and land. Even the smallest fire could attract some thaids from kilometers away if they had a keen sense of smell.

If they survived the landing, they would be using natural shelters in the forest or caves in the rocky outcrops. At worst, they would keep moving and rely on their abilities to remain undetected.

Then Erik spotted movement in the forest. A large creature came out from behind the plants. Its body was scaly, but Erik couldn't see it well. It looked like a Shadowclaw, but this one was bigger.

[Stay still. We don't want to attract it with noise.]

So he did. The creature came close to his position, but to mask his scent, Erik hid behind some flowers. He grew some more to increase their numbers and make it so the creature wouldn't notice him. It worked, since the thaid went past his hiding place without looking back.

[We should get closer to the coast,] the system said, mentally sighing. Erik nodded. They weren't far from it, and they had to check for potential landing sites.

<The problem is that in this area there are a lot of creatures I can't fight without at least three days of planning and preparation to hunt it.>

[Yeah, you are unlucky.]

The biological computer then remained silent, but Erik knew it was watching for danger around them.

He listened for the sound of ocean waves to figure out which way to go. He stayed under the trees where it was safer. He hoped his friends were somewhere ahead, staying alive until he could find them.

Chapter 1248: Rescue trip (4)

After heading close to the shores, Erik had been on the move for days but was unable to cover vast distances or to rest properly.

<Damn thaids...> The constant running made his legs sore, the lack of sleep made his mind sleepy, and it didn't allow his muscles to recuperate.

The biological computer helped him navigate, choosing paths that minimized exposure to dangerous areas where thaids hunted, but even that hadn't been enough for him to rest.

The shelters weren't working anymore. The thaids in this area were too powerful—they could sense him even through tons of dirt and stone. The creatures here were far stronger than those near his landing spot and much stronger than those he fought until that point.

[You haven't slept properly in days,] the system said, worried about its host.

<I know, but what can I do? Every noise makes me jump. These monsters are just too strong, and without someone to keep guard I can only rely on myself.>

The problem was that the deeper he went inside the forest, the worse the situation was, and the stronger the thaids were. The same could be said if he went to the edges of the forest, near the shores, where flying thaids usually roamed. Well, they roamed everywhere, but the chances they might spot him increased a lot there.

There was basically a stretch of land inside the forest. Relatively far from the sea, but not so deep into the forest, in which thaids were weaker, but even in that case, they were much stronger than one might think.

Erik couldn't completely avoid the creatures in their territory, but his approach worked well enough for him to avoid ending up harrowing beasts.

He stayed hidden most of the time, using bushes and natural hiding spots whenever the biological supercomputer warned him of nearby threats.

By using Phantom Veil to turn invisible, shapeshifting to turn into something small, and occasionally send illusions to lure the thaids away, he managed to never be spotted in person.

When he had to fight, he made sure the monsters would be easily killable. The system also warned him when something too strong approached.

<Nothing yet?>

[Nothing...]

Then something caught Erik's eye. It was unusual in the jungle. It was a gray mass that stood out against the greens and browns of the forest.

Its color reminded him of cement or weathered concrete, and through the vegetation he could make out straight edges and flat surfaces, though the overall structure remained unclear from his current position.

He stepped closer to get a better look through the plants. Even then, he couldn't see it clearly because vines and leaves were in the way. His first thought was that they might be bones from a huge dead thaid.

[What could that be?] Erik asked the biological computer.

The system took a moment to analyze what they could see. [Based on the maps we got from the blackguards' data, there should be ruins of an ancient city in this area. What we are seeing is likely remnants of concrete structures, not bones.]

Erik pushed aside a thick vine, revealing more of the gray mass. Now that the system mentioned it, he could see the angular shapes that nature had tried to reclaim. These weren't the organic curves of bone, but the deliberate lines of human buildings.

<A city...> Erik said. <Do you think the others might have found this place?>

[It's possible,] the system said. [If they found these ruins, it would explain why they haven't seen the tree. The structures could be blocking their line of sight, especially if they're sheltering inside.]

Erik had no way to check this, because to do so, he would need to fly or to scale a building. In either case, it would be dangerous.

Yet he examined the ruins with fresh interest, scanning the crumbling walls and overgrown doorways for any signs of recent activity. Of course, the vegetation and the distance didn't make it simple.

His heart raced with hope as he thought about his lovers possibly hiding in these buildings. The old structures made sense as a shelter—they had strong walls that could keep them safe and plenty of spots where they could watch their surroundings without being seen.

<I hope they had my same thoughts, and saw the strategic in this place as much as I did.>

Of course, thaids hid here too, but if they were careful, they might have still used this place.

[Don't raise your hopes yet,] the system said, [Urban environments, even ruined ones, present different challenges than the forest, but they are no less. This is even a poor combo since those are ruins inside a forest. The spaces between buildings create natural corridors and choke points. If we find thaids there, our escape routes will be limited. The same is true for the others. If they really got here, they might have trapped themselves.]

<Fuck... This means we could get cornered easily.>

[Yeah. In the forest, you can move in any direction to avoid threats. Here, walls and debris will restrict your movement. Plus, ruins often attract certain species of thaids. Some use them as nesting sites. They are great for that purpose.]

The forest was easier to move through—he could slip between trees and use bushes to stay hidden. But in these ruins, he'd have no choice but to use the old streets and passages, which would make him an easier target to track.

<Still,> Erik said, <if there's even a small chance they found shelter in these ruins, we need to investigate. The risks are high, but finding them will be worth it. I can't leave without knowing for sure.>

[I expected you'd say that,] the system said. [Just remember—if we stumble upon something too powerful, retreat will be more complicated than in the forest. We won't have the luxury of choosing any direction to run.]

Erik nodded, studying what he could see of the ruins. After having moved closer to the structure and going past it, after having moved the vegetation a bit, he became able to see the structures ahead.

The trees were still mostly bigger than the buildings, which were usually four or five stories tall. Yet there were even bigger ones, and even if they had 10 or fifteen floors, the trees were still taller.

That was why Erik hadn't seen the ruins before. The trees were simply too big and tall for them to be seen. Of course, the best thing would be to directly check, but he couldn't do it. The best he could do was to infer about the situation.

The city appeared weathered by time, their surfaces pitted and cracked. Vines crawled up walls, and tree roots had burst through ancient pavements.

The trees here were enormous—much bigger than the ones in Nex Alexandria's park. Each tree trunk was as wide as a truck.

Nature had worked for centuries to reclaim this place, but enough remained to make it an obstacle course—or a deadly trap.

"Map out escape routes before we go too deep, mark our path so we don't get lost, and identify potential hiding spots in case we need to quickly take cover," Erik said. "We should also look for elevated positions that could serve as observation points and note any narrow passages that could become bottlenecks."

[I will also check signs for both friends and enemies,] the system added. [Don't worry. Since the same features that make this place attractive as a shelter also make it ideal for ambush predators, I'm not going to be careless.]

Erik stopped to catch his breath. He took a moment to calm down, trying to clear his worried mind. His body was tired after being on guard for days, and he could feel how worn out he was. He stretched his fingers and moved his neck from side to side, getting ready to explore the ruins ahead.

[If we find signs of them,] the system said. [Remember that any traces might not be recent. Don't let hope cloud your judgment.]

Erik nodded. The message was clear—they needed to be realists, not letting emotions override their judgment just because they might have found signs of his friends.

<Let me check my status before we go in.>

Then a bluish and semi-transparent screen appeared in front of him.

—[Erik's Status]—

[Host Information]

NAME: Erik Romano

AGE: 22

POWER LEVEL: 1,833

SYSTEM LEVEL: 468

EXPERIENCE: 90,519,647,281/108,651,054,277

DNA POINTS: 21,527,044,873.95

HEALTH: 68,410/68,410

MANA: 68,340/68,340

{Attributes}

STRENGTH: 642

INTELLIGENCE: 574

DEXTERITY: 622

ENERGY: 2277

Available attributes points: -

{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: X α 3X-RANKED

Instability: X03B-RANKED

Phantom Veil: X ϵ 3A-RANKED

Beastwalker: X01B-RANKED

Telekinesis: Xo2A-Ranked

Will of the Hydra: Xo2X-RANKED

Verdant Architect: Xo2X-RANKED

Rejuvenating Touch: Xo2A-RANKED

Elemental Lord: Xo2X-RANKED

Absolute Wall: Xo2A-Ranked

Absolute Castle: Xo2X-RANKED

Eclipse Field: Xo1B-RANKED

Shadow Rend: Xo1B-RANKED

{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)

Chapter 1249: Rescue trip (5)

Erik entered the ruin with careful steps and not a low dose of anxiety. He clung to the buildings, using the narrow passages between them as cover. The crumbling walls formed corridors that provided cover from any watching eyes.

Broken pieces of concrete and metal formed winding paths that Erik used for cover. The old ruins had become smoother over time, and now moss and small plants grew all over their surfaces.

Of course, that was a distant past. At best now there were the rest of those who failed to find a safe place and got trapped by the thaids that remained inside the city to search for prey. However, even that was highly unlikely, since no sane person would set foot on Mur.

The system began analyzing their surroundings, scanning the architecture, and cross-referencing each structural element against its extensive historical databases.

The process took only seconds as it processed the layout of streets, the composition of buildings, and the distinctive architectural features of this ancient city.

[Fascinating,] the biological computer said. [We have been in such places before, but not like this,] the system said.

<What do you mean?>

[Well, it resembles the crossroad city in Frant, Sentinel's Crossgate.]

It was the city that Erik and the others attacked while reaching Frant's shores when the country was still under Hin's partial control.

[The building style is very similar.]

<You say? They look different to me.>

[That's because you don't know what to look at,] the system said. [These structures predate the thaids. They are primarily made from steel and concrete. See those metal frames exposed where the

concrete has fallen away? They used steel reinforcement to create buildings taller than those before them could make.]

Of course, Erik saw some ruins during his journey to Etrium. Such things were present everywhere on both continents, and that was because humanity basically lost control of everything outside cities.

It started to change only recently, at least in Frant, thanks to the Chimaeric demons and the new technologies that were constantly streaming through the world. The brain crystal technology was an example of such things.

<It's not different from what they do today,> Erik said.

[That's true,] the system said. [But there are many differences between modern buildings. We use similar but different building styles. Today's buildings incorporate adaptive materials—substances that can change their properties based on environmental conditions. The concrete we use contains nanoscale sensors and self-repairing compounds. When micro-fractures form, the material automatically fills them in. Of course, if they are completely destroyed, then there is nothing we can do about it but to rebuild, but even in that case our steel, for example, isn't just reinforcement—it's a smart alloy that can adjust its structure to better distribute stress loads.]

The system paused.

[The biggest difference is in the foundations. Modern buildings use geo-anchoring systems—deep pylons that can actively shift to compensate for ground movement. These ancient structures were completely static. One good earthquake and they'd crumble. That's partly why so few survived. When thaids arrived, they created disasters on par with natural ones. I didn't actually expect to see a city so well conserved on Mur, though.]

<Interesting,> Erik said. <I never thought about that, and for a good reason. I don't care.>

Despite his claimed disinterest, Erik examined a nearby building with a collapsed wall section. His reasoning was practical—if thaids found him, he could use the buildings to eliminate them efficiently with minimal mana by collapsing them. In this city, his telekinetic abilities would prove especially valuable, based on the situation, of course.

<I guess this kind of stuff it's not so useless. Maybe I should look into it more.>

Behind the collapsed wall of the building, there were some rusted metal bones within the gray concrete.

Thick vines wound through the gaps as nature gradually tore the structure apart.

"How old are these ruins?"

[Based on the architectural style and building materials, approximately six hundred years. This was likely a major metropolitan area—a 'city center' or 'downtown district.']

Erik moved deeper into the ruins, stepping over fallen chunks of concrete and avoiding areas where the ancient pavement had buckled and split because of the massive tree roots wide as streets that had burst through the ground, lifting and cracking the pavement.

"What were these buildings used for?" It was a question made out of pure curiosity.

[Many purposes. The shorter structures were likely residential. The taller ones were centers of commerce and business. Those glass-fronted buildings? Offices.]

Erik tried to imagine it—these empty streets once filled with people, the broken windows gleaming intact in the sun, vehicles moving along roads now split and overgrown. It seemed impossible that so many humans had lived here, stacked in these towers that now served only as perches for flying predators.

Modern cities like New Alexandria were certainly populous, but looking back at ancient history made one question everything.

The human population back then was vastly larger, with dozens or even hundreds of cities surpassing New Alexandria's size.

While New Alexandria housed millions, that was mainly because it concentrated most of Frant's population in one place.

The cause of this situation was small, but it was fundamental.

What he found more weird, though, was that the roads were not meant for pedestrians but for cars and vehicles.

In every city he went to, the main means of transportation was flying cars, and land cars were used only outside, and that was because of flying thaids, and only in some situations.

In the past, though, they were all like this, meaning that traffic had to be a nightmare and that each city had to spend a lot of money on maintenance.

Then a massive structure caught his attention. It was perhaps fifteen stories tall, maybe more, but Erik couldn't say it with precision. It had a broad face that was still mostly intact, despite the centuries.

Vines draped its walls like curtains, and the windows were full of dirt and debris that clung to it like mold, but the building's strong lines remained visible.

"That looks promising," Erik said. "It is large enough to house many clones; it has solid walls for protection..."

Yet, being the building intact, at least from his side, he started being hopeful.

[The structural integrity seems sound,] the system said. [There are also multiple entry points for escape routes and elevated positions for surveillance. If the others were looking for shelter, a building like that would be ideal.]

"What was it originally?"

[Based on the architecture, likely a hotel. The floor plan would have included hundreds of individual rooms, common areas, and storage spaces.]

Erik studied the building more. Despite its age, most walls remained standing. Many windows still held fragments of glass, and the main entrance was partially protected by an overhanging concrete awning. Most importantly, it offered clear lines of sight in all directions while providing cover.

<The Chimaeric Demons would have recognized its value,> Erik said. <And Mira would have appreciated having multiple escape routes.>

[True. The building's height would also allow Emily to snipe. There would have been fewer obstacles to block her sight.]

They observed the hotel for several minutes, checking for potential entry points and hazards. Sections of the upper floors had collapsed, creating diagonal slopes of rubble that could serve as alternative routes up and down. The vegetation covering the walls could aid in climbing if needed.

[However,] the system said, [We should consider that this building would be attractive to both survivors and thaids. In the latter case, it would be a good place to build a nest, especially for some thaid's species.]

<Agreed. Should we go check it?> Erik moved closer, staying under the cover of the massive trees.

[We should.]

The biological computer continued sharing historical details as they approached.

They paused at the edge of what must have once been a grand plaza before the hotel. Broken fountains and decorative planters now hosted small forests of their own, their careful designs lost under centuries of uncontrolled growth. The hotel's main entrance gaped like a dark mouth.

[We should start from the ground floor and then secure each level before moving up. The building's size means we could miss important signs if we rush.]

Erik nodded, studying the various approaches to the entrance. The plaza offered too little cover—they would need to circle around, use the smaller structures and vegetation to hide until they could reach the hotel's base.

Erik thought about flying there, but that would mean being exposed to flying thaids or other kinds of monsters that would be looking at the sky. Instead, on the ground, he could still shapeshift into something small and hide between the vegetation.

Even if not tall, some of the bushes were still enough to hide things of the size of a human and smaller creatures.

"Let's go around to the side entrance," Erik said, hoping that if there were creatures inside, they would have entered from the large main entrance.

[Good thinking. And Erik?] The system's tone grew serious.

[Remember what I said about expectations. Even if we find signs they passed through here...]

"I know. They might be long gone. But we have to check."

The old hotel stood tall in front of them. Erik stared at its worn walls, hoping to find some clues about where his friends might be. He knew he might find good news or bad news inside—or maybe nothing at all. But he wouldn't know unless he looked.

Taking a deep breath, Erik headed toward the side of the building. There was a service entrance there that would be safer to use than the main door.

Chapter 1250: Rescue trip (6)

Erik crouched behind a fallen pillar, scanning the overgrown plaza for movement. Thick vines and clusters of ferns provided patchy cover between his position and the hotel's side entrance.

[I don't see movements at the windows,] the system said.

<Does this mean there is no one?>

[No, they can be hidden. You stay alert. Some thaids can mask their presence.]

Erik moved in haste between patches of vegetation, freezing whenever the wind stirred the leaves above.

He pressed himself against a crumbling wall as something rustled in the upper floors of a nearby building. Only after several tense moments did the biological computer confirm it was just debris settling.

[Erik, use Instability to check if anyone is nearby,] the system said. [It would give us a better idea about the situation inside.]

<I had the same thought.>

Erik channeled mana through his neural links and extended his consciousness outward, probing the area with his mana.

The power reached for any mind within range, but there were simply too many for him to be able to make something out of it. It was a jumbled mess of thoughts, urges, and primal desires.

Hunger, lust, and fear—primal emotions and instincts that clouded his mind and made him want to puke.

Yet Erik kept searching, sweeping the area meter by meter.

However, there was no whisper of coherent thought, no trace of self-aware consciousness.

<No one's here,> Erik said. <We're wasting our time. If they were in the area, I would have sensed them.>

[Not necessarily,] the system said. [They could be out hunting. Your friends need to eat, after all. The range of Instability is limited. They might be just beyond its reach. Or they might have already moved on. But that's not the point.]

Erik frowned. <So, what is the point? Waste time?>

[You idiot!] the system said. [We're not just looking for people—we're looking for signs they were here. If we find evidence your companions passed through this area, it means they survived. It means they're out there somewhere.]

Erik's eyes widened. Not because of what the system said—that was obvious enough. He had been too disappointed to see it without the biological supercomputer pointing it out. No, what moved him was the system's thoughtfulness.

True, the others might simply be outside of Instability's range, and Erik could have just waited outside for signs of activity rather than entering a dangerous building. But the system wanted Erik to check inside anyway—just to put his mind at ease, just to cross out the chance they had at least been there.

Erik's hand tightened on the crumbling wall. The system was right. Any proof his friends had been here would mean they made it off Mannard alive. It would have relieved him to no end to know they were safe.

[Even old traces would help,] the system said. [Abandoned camps, supply caches, defensive positions—anything that shows they came this way.]

<And if we find nothing?>

At that point, Erik just wanted to stop feeling disappointed.

[Then we keep searching. But right now, this hotel is our best lead.]

Erik nodded, pushing away from the wall. The system's logic was sound. Even if his friends weren't here now, any evidence of their passage would give him hope—and perhaps a direction to search next.

<You're right,> he said. <We should check inside. But stay alert. Just because I can't sense anyone doesn't mean this place is safe.>

[Of course. There could still be thaids that don't register to Instability. Mur is different from Mannard, so keep your senses sharp.]

Erik moved toward the entrance. Somewhere in this ruined hotel might be the clue he needed—proof that his friends were alive, that they were still fighting. He wouldn't leave until he found it or until he was certain there was nothing to find.

Finally, he arrived at the side entrance. It was a service door with a bent metal frame, but it was still working. Vines grew over it like a curtain, which made it a suitable spot to enter without being seen.

With one last check of his surroundings, Erik crossed the last stretch and eased the door open just enough to slide through. The rusted hinges remained mercifully silent as he entered the hotel's shadowy interior.

Erik sighed in relief. The last thing he wanted was to alert anything that might have been inside.

He then slipped inside, being careful not to walk on vines and ancient glass shards strewn across the floor.

After getting through a series of corridors and having checked an ungodly amount of rooms for living beings' presence, the hotel's ground level's largest room opened before him. It was a space that time had transformed into a museum of decay.

[The lobby,] the system said.

<Yeah, I guessed.>

Erik went forward, looking at his surroundings in fear. [See the remnants of the reception desk?] The system mentally pointed at them, and Erik turned to look. [Those scattered metal frames must have been the lounge furniture.]

<I don't think that's a relevant information.>

Sunlight came through holes in the ceiling, creating rays of light that Erik used to see his surroundings better and to navigate the room.

The first thing Erik did was to check if the ground was solid. There was marble on the ground, broken and worn out, but aside from that, it looked solid enough for him to move on it.

A huge staircase stood on the northern side of the room, and to its side was what the system assumed was the reception. The metal handrails were gone, leaving only dark stains on the walls where they used to be and a pile of debris on the ground below, but even after hundreds of years, the stairs still looked beautiful.

Then he noticed something.

<Check those marks on the floor,> Erik said, pointing to scratches in the marble.

[They look recent to me,] the system said.

<Any idea what they belong to?>

[No.]

<Do you think someone had been here?>

The system paused. [I can't really tell. Those marks might be from a thaid, but even from humans.] They were rather large and evenly distributed. [If they are from thaids it might have been a large thaid. If they are from humans, the pattern suggests defensive positions were established here and then moved.]

There was no debris on the ground, meaning that whatever was here had been brought away, if it was of human manufacture.

<Could they be my friends?>

[They could,] the system said, [but keep in mind the blackguards likely came here too, and at this point I would rather bet on them than on Amber and the others.]

Erik's shoulders slumped at those words. He had been clinging to the hope that these marks meant his friends were close, but the system's reminder felt like a cold splash of reality, to which he could only clench his fists.

Then he kept checking the area more.

Broken columns created natural cover points around the lobby's perimeter. Many still bore the weight of the floors above, while others had toppled, creating angular barriers made from the collapsed floors from above.

<It's a miracle this place is still standing.>

[Yes. A good tremor might be enough to make it collapse, and with the thaids in the vicinity, that is not an impossible situation.]

Aside from that, there was some water damage on the walls, which had left dark stains on them, and that spread mold and fungi.

These infestations weren't just unsightly; they could literally eat away at the building's integrity, breaking down materials at a microscopic level, which would further reduce their solidity.

The spores had likely penetrated deep into the walls, weakening the structural supports over centuries of unchecked growth.

The system showed Erik where the mold damage was worst, telling him to stay away from those areas since they were the least safe. Even a small explosion could have made entire sections of the weakened walls collapse.

[Based on the layout, there should be multiple escape routes,] the system said, sending Erik a mental image of where the exits should have been. [You better keep this in mind, since something might be here, or at least on the upper floors.]

Erik nodded. In truth, there were multiple things in this building, as he perceived thanks to the Instability brain crystal power, but based on what Erik felt, they were not that strong. The only challenge would be killing them without blowing up the building.

Of course, he would do nothing reckless, since there might still be thaids who could pose danger even without their brain crystal powers.

He then moved around a collapsed section of ceiling, noting how the rubble had been used to make chokepoints.

<At least we have proof someone had thought about defending this space.>

Whether it was his companions or the blackguards was unclear.

Yet the blackguards were the most likely ones to have made something like that. After all, they had been on Mur for years, and they checked every single place on this damned continent in search of the biological supercomputer.