

BIOLOGICAL 1261

Chapter 1261: A wicked place (1)

Time passed slowly for Amber and the others in the underground shelter as December rolled forward. From the seventeenth to the last day of the month, Amber and the Chimaeric Demons started exploring the network of tunnels and caves under their base.

As the shelter became safer and construction work inside the base decreased, more clones joined the search efforts, since fewer of them were needed to complete the structure.

Their numbers allowed them to venture deeper into the underground cave's heart, explore more tunnels, and kill more bugs.

The various groups of clones found and took care of many nests. Most of the times they were the same Amber and the others faced, but there were also other species more aggressive than those they found at the entrance of the tunnels' system, which seemed unrelated to the first they fought at the entrance.

However, they were in tunnels not easy to access, as if they were hiding or were allowed to stay there by the other bugs. At least so it seemed, which was weird to say the least.

The Chimaeric Demons were stronger than the bugs, and not just a few times, but if they weren't careful, they could die, and if that happened, there was no way to refill their numbers.

Aside from this, the clones estimated the bugs strength points ranged from 100 to 200. It was tens of times higher than the same kind of bug on Mannard. Mur was truly a terrifying continent.

While individual creatures posed little threat, their massive swarms made them dangerous opponents.

Despite their thorough exploration, they had found no facility, just things made by the bugs. However, what they found so far suggested the Silver Line Corporation had used this place for their research; they just hadn't found it.

"We must be close," Emily said. "But I don't understand..."

Mira was sitting on the ground. The group had to stop to rest after a particularly complicated battle. The number of bugs there ranged in the hundreds. It wasn't hard for the group to kill them singularly; it was that there were many of them, which made the fight more complicated.

Besides, they couldn't even use many destructive powers. The clones used vibration bursts, but that at best could be used in the mid-range. Starlight Fireball had been off-limits since the fire would burn the oxygen in the cave, leaving them with nothing to breathe.

"The vision showed me this place. Yet I can't link it with anything."

She was referring to the cleared chamber, not the cave system. What Emily saw was not clear, but she recognized this place because of the many ancient equipment and items scattered everywhere.

Based on the ancient equipment and signs they found scattered around, Emily believed this chamber must be connected to the main facility. The worn metal panels, damaged computer terminals, and abandoned research equipment suggested this was an important staging area or checkpoint.

Mira nodded, examining the remnants of an old sign. The metal plate had been violently torn from the wall, leaving only mounting brackets and fragments of text.

Similar signs littered their path through the tunnels they went through to reach the chamber, but most had been ruined by the passage of time and whatever event took place in these caves, making it impossible to understand which passage they originally marked.

And that was the problem. The group needed to find out which of the many tunnels they had to take.

The human skeletons scattered across the floor were another sign they were on the right path but didn't give any kind of clue about the right path to their target.

The only thing they did was give them the creeps.

Some bodies were smashed against the walls and remained stuck there for who knew how long, while others were on the ground, seemingly giving their backs to some of the tunnels. The problem was that there were many of them.

However, it was clear they died while trying to run away from something. The bones were badly damaged—with broken ribs, arms and legs ripped apart, and deep cuts in the skulls.

"This place is giving me the creeps," Mira said.

"Yeah. Something scary happened here..."

It wasn't like the group wasn't used to death. Thaid's were normal for them, and people dying to their claws and maws was a daily occurrence. However, it was different for these people. They were helpless; they didn't know about thaid's and how scary they were.

The bodies were scattered everywhere, meaning that the people hadn't died fighting or hiding together in safe places. Instead, their bodies lay randomly across the tunnels and rooms, suggesting that something fast had killed them before they could realize.

"I don't even know if I should pity them or be mad at them," Amber said. These were the very same people who created thaid's, after all. Of course, if this was really one of the Silver Line Corporation's secret labs.

Everything suggested it was, but based on what they knew, this place could have been something else. Like a secret military base. Even in that case, there would be scientists and guards.

Amber and her group examined the skeletons. Some of them had lab coats, whose remnants were barely there; some others looked like security guards as they had the remnants of their uniforms still clinging to their bones, though their name badges were too rusted to read.

"It looks like they were running from something. Something fast enough to catch them before they could reach safety. I'm pretty sure it was a thaid that escaped containment."

"As I said, we should avoid making assumptions before we are absolutely certain of what we found," June said. "However, the signs confirm something's down here, or at least that it was. The point is, should we really risk it?"

The beast could have come from the outside and made a nest here. There was no proof this was an ancient thaid.

"If whatever is here is not an ancient thaid, a proto thaid, or whatever, maybe it's not that strong," Amber said.

"Or maybe it is much stronger than today's monsters," Mira countered. That was something they couldn't avoid taking into account. "Based on the level difference between the human abomination Erik found on Mannard and the thaids there, I would say that if this is really one of the Silver Line Corporation's labs, then whatever is lurking here is stronger than the average Mur's thaid."

"You make a good point," June said. "But even if an ancient thaid killed these people, there's no guarantee it's still here."

The Chimaeric Demons remained alert as they walked through the caves. They had to take a random tunnel since they didn't know what to take, and all those assumptions and questions made them edgy.

The tunnels were dangerous; that much was clear. There was no guarantee that whatever lived here wasn't stronger than them. The bugs weren't the only dwellers in this place, after all.

As they walked, the tunnel they took opened into an enormous cave. It stretched so far that their lights couldn't pierce the darkness at its edges. Blue-glowing mushrooms dotted the walls, illuminating a sight that left them speechless.

Below them lay an old underground city in ruins. Old buildings stuck out of the ground like ancient bones. Between the buildings were metal walkways, now all broken and bent. Huge pillars went from the floor all the way to the ceiling, covered in old writing that had faded over time.

"Now I understand how Erik felt when he found Liberty Watch," Amber said, her voice filled with awe. However, this place was much bigger compared to Liberty Watch.

The city bore signs of violence. Many structures had collapsed, their walls bearing massive claw marks and signs of powerful impacts. Others showed blast damage. Whoever lived or worked here must have put up some resistance.

"This must be where it started," June said, studying the ruins.

"The signs make sense now," Emily said. "They weren't just marking paths—they were directing people through a living, working city. This place must have housed hundreds, maybe thousands, of researchers and support staff."

"We should wait for backup before going down there," Mira said, scanning the ruins. "This place is too big to explore safely with just our group."

"Agreed," June nodded. "We've seen what the thaids can do in the tunnels. In a space this large, we could easily get surrounded and swarmed, and we don't even know what's down here."

"I'll send word back to the other search parties," Amber said. "They should be able to reach us within a few hours. We can use that time to plan our approach."

Emily studied the ruins. "We should map out the major structures first. That building in the center looks like it could have been this place's main facility. It's the most fortified and has the most defensive positions around it."

"Good point," Mira said. "Once we have enough numbers, we can secure a path to it. But we'll need to be careful—there are too many places for enemies to hide in a place this size."

The group found a vantage point overlooking the ruined city. The devastation below was clear—massive claw marks scarred the metal and stone walls, with buildings torn apart from within and scattered evidence of desperate last stands against the attackers.

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The group waited in silence for their reinforcements to arrive. To their disappointment, far fewer clones than expected had managed to free themselves and reach their location.

Only thirty Chimaeric demons came.

"Is this all?" Mira asked.

The clones nodded.

"The others will follow later," a clone said. "About fifty more are securing our path back to the shelter. Twenty encountered heavy resistance in tunnel B-7 and are clearing out a nest. Another

thirty are checking the tunnels for ambush points and keeping the tunnels clear in case we need to retreat. They should join us within the next hours, assuming they don't find any more thaids."

Mira sighed. "It'll have to do. Amber, we should start the search then. We have already been in this cave for weeks. I'm sick of the stale air and the creepy glow of these fungi."

"We need to have a better look at the situation, though," Amber said, and then she turned to Emily. "Can you use your scope? We need to know what we're walking into. I don't want to find myself in chokepoints and dead ends, and I would like to know how many bugs we should expect."

Emily raised her sniper rifle, peering through its advanced scope to check their surroundings. From their position, she couldn't see a lot. The buildings were many, but most importantly, they were tall. Like in Liberty Watch, they arrived at the cave ceiling, which was a hundred meters tall. However, she had a somewhat good view of some of the closest streets.

After several minutes, she lowered her weapon. Her expression was troubled, and she squinted a couple of times.

"What?"

Emily didn't reply; instead, she adjusted the scope's settings one last time and checked again to confirm what she had seen.

"We are not alone," Emily said in a flat tone, lowering her rifle. "There are clear signs of activity everywhere."

She paused.

"The place looks abandoned at first glance, but I checked again and found some signs." She adjusted her scope settings as she spoke.

"And?" Mira asked.

"I saw multiple bug-like thaids constructions, but it wasn't easy to see them because the bugs made them behind the first rows of buildings. However, some of them were too large for them to cover them."

"So, the structures are big, which means there aren't just a few thaids here."

"Big? Some of them must be larger than some of the buildings themselves based on what I've seen. It's just that they are out of immediate sight."

"So, we are certain there are bug-like thaids here," Mira said.

"Yes, and not a few, judging by the nests' size."

"How many?" Bug-like thaids were among the most troublesome monsters out there. She knew they were bound to meet them again, but she hoped that wasn't going to happen.

She shuddered at the memory of her encounters with similar creatures on the Mannard continent. In the first encounter, she had been cornered in an abandoned building in the middle of the forest and only survived by collapsing the building's support beams.

The second time, a swarm had ambushed her group, back in Etrium, forcing them to run without having scouted the retreat path.

The third and worst encounter happened during a cave hunt, where she spent three days hiding in a cave with her team while thousands of the creatures searched for them. She wanted to forget them all.

"Hundreds, maybe thousands of structures." Emily's gaze swept across the ruins again. They were large too, so the number of nests was just expected.

"I actually spotted a few thaids, but based on the number of nests, their size, and the city's layout, there must be thousands living down there. They haven't just built nests—they've converted the buildings into hives. That's why the first row of buildings hides in the other nests. They've integrated themselves into the structures and made entrances on the far side."

"These thaids are too smart," Amber said, frowning. "Even by Mur's standards, this level of organization is unusual."

Mira turned to look at Amber. "Yet she says there are still thousands of nests made by them." Then her gaze went back to Emily. "If we consider the human buildings also nests, then it means there might be tens of thousands of them. Here, intelligence is not the only issue. If we are found by even one thaïd, we will end up swarmed."

Silence fell over the group as they understood the implications. There was a single one, and that they would die. The Chimaeric Demons were too few to fight thousands, even tens of thousands of bug-like thaïds, even if they were stronger than them.

Things would have been different if they had different powers, more neural links, and more mana, but as things were now, the Chimaeric Demons' main trait was their physical prowess.

"What do you think we should do?" June asked, his hand resting on his weapon.

"Can't you use your corrosive fog?" Emily asked Amber. That seemed the best thing they could do.

"No," Mira said. "Don't do that, because if that thing destroys the buildings, whatever information we might find would be destroyed, and we would also lose the chance to claim this place."

"We can't claim it, anyway. If there are thousands of thaïds, it would literally be impossible."

The others' reactions varied. Some of the Chimaeric Demons exchanged worried glances. June's grip on his weapon tightened. Emily kept her composure as she listened.

"That's not true," Mira said. "Even if we can't use your corrosive fog, there are still many ways for us to kill the bugs. A simple lure will allow us to kill huge batches of monsters without endangering the structures. The problem is just that we can't fight, and we should keep the corrosive fog only in case we risk getting swarmed."

Amber nodded. "Yeah, you are right... It's just that the situation is frustrating."

"I know," Mira said. Then she turned to the Chimaeric Demons. As frustrating as the situation was, she wanted to have a clearer picture of the situation.

"Shapeshift into something small and scout the city. We need information about the thaïds, their positions, and numbers." She looked back at Emily. "Could you find a suitable sniping spot here?"

Emily shook her head. "It's too risky. The only place where I could snipe is from one of the buildings, which we already established, are most likely nests. Even if they weren't, these thaids can climb walls—I'd be cutting off my escape route. In a place like this, getting cornered means death, and I'm not sure I can avoid it even if I use my brain crystal powers."

Mira sighed.

"Then what can you do?"

"Fight with the rest of you," Emily said. "I'm strong enough to fight these things up close, and I won't be trapped if things go wrong."

In the meantime, the Chimaeric Demons shapeshifted; their bodies shrank and changed to better suit the kind of operation they were going to perform. Some took forms resembling small reptiles, while others mimicked the small bugs like they were so used to doing.

"We'll move in waves," Mira said. "The scouts go first, mapping safe routes through the ruins. The rest of us follow in small groups. We need to keep enough distance to avoid drawing attention, but stay close enough to help each other in case things go bad."

"What about the central building?" June asked, pointing to the massive structure dominating the city's heart. "That has to be where the main facility must have been located. What are we going to do there?"

"The clones will scout it first, and if the place is good to go, we will search it," Mira said.

"Seems good," June said.

The fact there were bugs here reassured the group, but nothing said that they were hiding to avoid the monster or that the monster itself was the bugs' progenitor.

"Emily, keep scanning for any unusual activity."

"Will do."

The clones then started moving, being as quiet as possible. The rest of the team watched them go.

"How long should we wait before following?" Emily asked, checking her equipment one last time.

"Give them twenty minutes," Mira said. "That should be enough time to spot any immediate threats and to find the most suitable path to reach the main building. Emily, can you keep contact with them at that distance?"

"Yes, but the interference is getting stronger. Something about this place distorts radio signals. Maybe it's the fungi. On the other side of the cave, they take up the entire wall."

"All right... Just do what you can."

Mira looked down at the ruins with worry, her eyes scanning the crumbling structures and dark alleyways that stretched out like a maze below them. The sheer size of the underground city made her stomach tighten with unease.

The group waited, each thinking about what dangers they might find in the old city below. The strange, glowing mushrooms on the walls made shadows dance across the streets, making everyone nervous.

Chapter 1263: A wicked place (3)

The Chimaeric Demon scouts returned from their reconnaissance. Turning into bugs made things easier, and by a wide margin.

They shapeshifted into their human form again and then gathered around Mira, Amber, Emily, and June.

"We found some paths to the central building," a clone said. "However, most areas are blocked by collapsed structures or bug nests. There basically are three viable routes."

"Yes." Another scout stepped forward. "But keep in mind that the situation behind the first row of buildings is not that simple. There are many workers and warriors patrolling the streets."

"Patrolling?"

"Indeed. I had my suspicions when we found them in the caves and tunnels," the clone said. "But patrolling their nest area means their intelligence is much greater than we assumed."

"Yeah," Mira said. "Patrolling is not exactly something that a Thaid would have done. I justified the fact they were in other tunnels and caves as them searching for food, but if they really are patrolling the area, it means these things are not completely mindless."

She leaned forward. "Anyway, did you only find workers and warriors?"

Depending on what was here, their plan would be different; they would have fewer or more problems. The bug-like thaids weren't a threat taken alone, but they could easily swarm them, and if that happened, they wouldn't have many chances.

Of course, if something like that happened, they would just flee, but that also depended on how coordinated the bugs would be.

"Yes, for now at least. The leaders must be inside of the various nests," the clone said.

"Tell me more about those patrols. Are you sure they were doing that and not something else like working or bringing food to their main nest or whatever?"

"Yes, we are sure," another clone said. "They moved in regular intervals, checking specific areas. They'd investigate any unusual sounds or movements; we tested this, and they seemed to have designated posts where they'd stop and observe the surroundings. Some would even climb structures to get better views."

"At one point, we saw them respond to something—probably a falling piece of debris. Three patrols converged on the area within moments, sweeping it before returning to their routes. It wasn't random wandering—they were following some kind of organized security pattern, hence why we assumed they were patrolling the area."

Mira's expression darkened. Her years as a mercenary had taught her to read creature behavior, and this wasn't normal. Bug-like thaids typically displayed basic group coordination, but nothing approaching this level of sophistication.

"So, not only are we under tons of earth and stone and surrounded by monsters, but now said monsters are even behaving like a human would. Fantastic."

"It's not so bad; if detected, the clones can shapeshift and fly away, while we can warp away."

However, alerting the bugs would make reaching the building more difficult in future attempts.

"What if there is something else in the main building, something that would make the clones unable to escape?" Emily asked.

"Should we just send the clones to scout the building?" Amber turned to Mira. She was more experienced than them, so leaning on her to take these decisions was the best thing they could all do.

"That would be the most ideal thing in normal circumstances, but if there is something else, then the best thing would be to stay close to you so that we can all warp," Mira said.

Neither Mira nor Amber wanted to risk losing the clones. Their numbers were already limited, and with Erik missing—possibly dead—they had no way to create more. Amber and the others came here with 10 clones, and thirty joined them later. It meant they might lose forty clones of the 500 they had available, and that meant losing a huge chunk of their manpower. They couldn't allow that.

"Warping in from here is not ideal either," Mira then said. "We don't know the building's layout, and we might warp right in the middle of a group of monsters. I think the best way would be for the clones to scout the building, but for us to go there so that we can get the hell out of here with your powers. How many warps would you be able to make if something goes bad?"

Amber stopped to think. "It depends on how many people I need to warp and how long the distance is. Assuming it's 40 Chimaeric demons, plus us four, I think I can do it only one, and I can't even go that far."

"Damn..." Mira thought for a little before deciding. "Well, it's still better than nothing."

That meant that secrecy was paramount.

She turned to the clones. "Continue monitoring the area, but keep your bug forms. If there are only three available paths to reach the target, we need to keep them available in case things go south. We also need to keep a couple of backup routes ready in case we need to change course."

Mira turned to Amber. "In case of problems, you'll need to either warp us away or to another route, depending on the situation. The clones will signal which path is clear of sentinels. Stay alert, and don't waste your mana."

Amber met Mira's gaze and nodded. "Then I'll keep in contact with the clones. As soon as they give word, I'll move us all to whichever path they say is the safest."

Mira's strategy made sense—with multiple planned routes and Amber's warping ability, they could quickly switch paths if detected, rather than retreating all the way back.

"Good," Mira said. "I've been in this kind of situation before. Rule number one is absolute silence—no unnecessary movements, no talking unless critical, and watch every step. Even a small sound like kicking a pebble or stepping on loose debris could alert the patrols. Keep your eyes on the ground and stay focused."

"Rule number two," Mira continued in a hushed voice, "stay within sight of each other at all times. We move as a unit. If someone spots trouble, they signal silently—no shouting, no sudden movements. We need a clear line of sight to Amber at all times in case we need an emergency warp."

"And rule number three is the most critical," Mira's voice grew even more serious. "If you see anything unusual—anything at all—that doesn't match what the scouts reported, we abort immediately. No heroics, no delays. These organized patrols are already far beyond normal behavior. If we spot something even stranger, it could mean we're walking into something way over our heads. Trust me, Amber, you don't want to know how messy things can get when an entire colony of bug-like monsters decides you're their next target."

Mira also shivered, her mind flashing back to a particularly nasty encounter during her mercenary days.

"I know what you mean," Amber said with a visible shudder, her skin crawling at the thought of the bug-like monsters.

She had been forced to fight them many times during these days—battling swarms in narrow tunnels, dodging their mandibles, and dealing with their acidic sprays that could eat through metal.

Well, not all of them could do so. Some had very classic strength-raising brain crystal powers; others had force pushes, heat generation, or the ability to emit paralyzing sonic waves. It was in truth a clusterfuck of powers. However, those three species were the only ones working together and presumably belonging to the same species. The workers were the ones who could spit acid.

Even after dozens of encounters, Amber still found these creatures deeply disgusting. Their exoskeletons and their six jointed legs were enough to give her the nightmares.

The clones nodded and prepared to return to their mission. Before they left, Mira grabbed one's arm. "Stay in communication range. If you spot anything unusual, we need to know immediately, and for god's sake, DON'T DIE! Without you clones, we are dead meat."

"It will be done."

Amber stood in deep thought. Her ability to warp the group to safety would be once again crucial, but she couldn't help feeling the weight of her responsibility.

Since her task was this crucial, this meant that she couldn't use her powers to fight at all.

<It would have been easier if I could have just used the corrosive fog.>

However, she couldn't use it inside these caves—not with hundreds of thousands of kilometers of tunnels to traverse, all buried under an immense mass of earth and rock, and with the risk of destroying whatever they came here to find.

Besides, both her powers were as powerful as high was their mana consumption.

<Damn...>

Hopefully, the clones would make sure that she wouldn't find herself in that situation.

<The problem is that, even if we switch paths when spotted, those bug-like freaks will swarm every tunnel and passage around here.>

She shuddered at the thought. <And with each route we're forced to abandon, we'll have fewer options left. Those things might be thaids, but they're not stupid. They'll figure out where we're headed eventually.>

Chapter 1264: A wicked place (4)

The central building was in front of them, still distant but also incredibly close, considering the road they had to walk through to reach this place.

However, despite having reached this place not having been easy, getting inside would be harder than everything they went through until now. Everyone knew that.

The reason was straightforward: If the group found patrols roaming around the city, then there would be more inside the building they assumed was their main nest.

Mira, in particular, worried that whatever was inside was even more dangerous than what was on the outside.

It wasn't just a matter of numbers, but also of their strength. Besides, there was still the risk that whatever killed the humans centuries before was still here, waiting for something stupid to enter its domain.

She turned to Amber, who was checking her equipment. She looked even more distressed than Mira; it was likely due to her role if things went wrong. Their safety hinged on her, after all.

"All right then. No sound. Stay close, and keep your eyes open."

Emily adjusted her rifle strap. "Are we sure we don't want to wait for the other clones before moving in?"

"No," Mira said. "A larger group means a bigger chance of detection, and that's the last thing we want. Besides, there are two other reasons: first, if things go south, Amber won't be able to warp all of us if more clones arrive; second, I've already instructed one of the clones to stay behind to tell the others to fortify our retreat positions."

The scouts dispersed into the ruins at that point, since their preparations were complete. They shapeshifted, of course, since that would decrease the chances of them being spotted and would allow them to fly over most of the obstacles. The rest of the group watched them go and kept observing the patrols below.

Amber, Mira, Emily, and June had to wait for the clones to scout the chosen paths before they could start moving toward the building.

The clones contacted the others periodically with updates, marking safe zones and patrol timings. Gradually, a clear picture emerged of their optimal routes forward among those they could take.

"The east path looks the most promising," a clone said. "The buildings there suffered heavy damage, and the many debris created a lot of hiding places. The patrols are lighter too. It looks like the bugs are having trouble navigating through the debris."

After some time, the clones reached the main building but didn't dare to enter without Amber there.

"Are there any news?" Mira asked. The clones told her they were in front of the building.

"There are some thaidis in the courtyard, but aside from that, there is nothing. The courtyard is circled by a huge concrete wall, so if you wait for us here, you won't be spotted at least, but only if you stay close to the walls. The bugs on the nearby building might be able to see you."

Mira, however, was more focused on finding entry points.

"Any signs of an entry point?"

"Several," the scout said. "We found a maintenance access on the north side that sees minimal activity. There are also various collapsed walls, and there is an enormous blast on the other side of the building. It might have been made by something."

This strengthened their theory that something had escaped from this facility and brought ruin to the underground city, and whatever was beyond it. The clones then came back. They talked about the three paths to reach the main building through their radio, but having some visual clues was better, so he headed back to sketch a map.

Once there, they focused on creating one. "Show me the alternate routes," Mira said, looking at the map.

"Yes, we have this and this..."

The scout told Mira about the two other paths. One went through a series of narrow alleys, another through a partially collapsed office complex. Each offered different advantages and risks, but all led to their target.

"We will take the ruined building's path then," Mira said. Amber nodded. There could be chances the building housed thaids, but the clones said they saw nothing. Trusting them, they decided that was the safest way to reach the place, since it would allow them to cut the journey a lot compared to the other routes and would also shield them from some of the patrols.

"Remember," Mira said, "if we're spotted, don't engage. Amber warps us to the nearest alternate route, and we keep moving. No fighting unless absolutely necessary."

Of course, the clones would not be with them, since they would be scouting. Mira and June would do the same, so Amber only had to shapeshift herself and Emily. However, she could slow time down, so even in that case it wasn't exactly required for Amber to warp them, since by slowing time, Emily could reach whatever place without being noticed.

Mira then checked her weapons one last time. "Once at the building, we wait outside while the clones scout inside. In case the situation is manageable, we find somewhere defensible inside and see what we can find. If the situation is too hot, we pull out and regroup. The facility's waited centuries—it can wait a few more days."

The group made last preparations as the scouts found positions, waiting for the others to start moving.

"Everyone ready?" she asked, receiving nods. "Move only when I signal. Stay in the shadows, watch your footing, and keep your eyes on the sentinels."

They moved down into the ruins, going from one hiding spot to the next. The team kept low, staying below windows and hiding in shadows.

Scouts spread out—some 200 meters ahead and others 100 meters behind—creating a safety zone that would give the main group time to react if the thaids got too close.

The ruined city surrounded them—abandoned buildings marking a lost civilization. Shattered windows, collapsed walls, and rubble-strewn streets extended everywhere. Damaged structures revealed exposed concrete frames and twisted metal. Dust covered everything, with strange fungi growing on walls and through ground fissures.

Looking up, the group could barely see the top of the cave. The cave was enormous, and the skyscrapers were the same.

As they went deeper into the ruins, the air became heavier and smelled old and rotten.

Evidence of the destruction brought upon this place through the centuries was present. There were claw marks all around. Some looked recent and made by the bugs that the group faced until now, but some were completely different and much larger.

"This wasn't the bugs," Mira said.

She crouched behind a pillar, giving a better look at the deep gouges in the metal. "These marks suggest something massive moved through here, but that doesn't necessarily mean it was strong by our standards."

"Yeah, you are right," Emily said, keeping her rifle in her hands. "But it's still true that the larger the thaid, the greater their strength."

"Yes, but the largest thaids on Mannard are not the strongest on Mur. At best, they are in the middle, so this means something else must be at play regarding strength."

Yet that wasn't something the ancient humans had to worry about, simply because even the weakest thaids humanity faced today would have been unstoppable to the humans who lived in the past. Their weapons would be useless. After all, humanity's modern weapons were able to injure the thaids only recently.

Near them was also a vast crater.

"The bugs definitely came later. Either they simply moved here later or were created later."

"You are giving me the creeps, Amber."

Talking about giant bugs was certainly not the most pleasant discussion; the idea that whatever destroyed this place was also the bugs' creator was even more unsettling.

The bugs had built their nests around the existing damage, and there were no remnants of previous nests, meaning that the bugs had simply moved in afterward, opportunistically inhabiting the destruction left by something far more powerful.

"It's not like we didn't face scarier things," June said.

"Yes, but most were furred thaid. They are more pleasant to the eyes to see and do not look nearly as scary, even if they are weaker."

"You are being too harsh; besides, bugs' meat is very juicy."

The three women made a disgusted face. They didn't know this, but since June had been born in the white desert, when Erik didn't have many of his current abilities, he got used to eating raw meat, especially that of bug-like thaid.

Regardless, the surrounding ruins seemed to tell them about a catastrophe, but the clues, they couldn't comprehend them all.

Whatever had happened here, it had been swift, brutal, and beyond the control of the people who once called this place home.

Mira signaled them to move forward as a scout gave the all-clear. "Whatever it was that destroyed this place, it turned this place into a tomb. Let's hope we only find records of it inside, not the thing itself."

The others nodded.

Chapter 1265: A wicked place (5)

At some point, Emily raised her fist, signaling the others to stop.

<There is a group of thaids in front of us,> she said.

The group had been moving around the destroyed city for some time. Getting to the building without using their powers hadn't been easy at all, mostly because of the many obstacles that would expose the group members to the various sentinels scattered all over the place.

Since these thaids could easily climb any surface, they frequently scaled walls and clung to higher floors of buildings, keeping sentinel positions that allowed them to keep everything happening on the ground below in sight, or whatever they used to communicate.

This was why the Chimaeric Demon had become essential to their survival. The clones kept watch on the sentinels' movements and told the others it was safe to move.

More than once, the group had waited uncomfortably in cramped hiding spots while bug patrols swept the area and the sentinels looked around.

Mira had established a system of coded signals with the clones a long time ago so they could communicate rather easily.

Mira peered around the crumbled wall, watching the bug patrol with narrowed eyes. She ducked back and slid down next to Emily and Amber; all three women huddled behind the ancient concrete.

"I'm getting real tired of these things," Mira said, with a barely audible voice. She plucked at her bowstring in frustration. "Did you ever think we'd spend our time here playing hide and seek with overgrown cockroaches?"

"It's a nice vacation," Amber said, smiling.

Emily barely suppressed a laugh. "Vacation? Is that what this is? I must have missed the brochure for 'Lovely Underground Bug Kingdom: All-Inclusive Nightmare Package.'"

"Oh, it was quite clear. Five nights in luxury bug accommodations. Complimentary panic attacks included. No refunds."

The three women pressed deeper into the shadows as a sentinel bug skittered across the ceiling above them.

"Every time I see those legs move, my skin crawls," Emily said once it passed. "Did you notice how they twitch even after you kill them? Like they refuse to accept, their performance review was negative. I hate it."

"For me, it's the way they look at us," Amber said. "Those eyes are creepy to begin with, and I feel like I'm being sized up for an outfit. An outfit made of me."

"Bug Fashion Week. 'This season we're wearing... humans!'" Mira said. "But you better get used to it. All bugs look at you this way."

"If we ever make it out of here," Emily said, "I'm never complaining about regular thaids again. I'll welcome them with open arms."

"Deal," Amber agreed. "I'd take a pack of those bear monsters over these things any day. At least bears don't have the bugs... bugginess."

"Such eloquence," Mira teased. "You should write greeting cards."

"Sorry, today was rough."

A clone signaled from across the passage, showing another patrol was approaching from the right.

"Perfect," Mira breathed. "Just what we needed. More of them."

The group pressed near a collapsed wall as a bug patrol rounded the corner.

Six bug-like workers marched in a line. Their hard, shell-covered legs made tapping sounds on the broken ground.

"Don't move," Mira said. Her hand gripped her weapon, though she prayed she wouldn't need it.

The patrol stopped at a crossroads, which was awfully close to their position. One of the thaid's climbed up a wall to look around, while the rest of the group remained on the ground.

June accidentally moved, making some rocks fall. Everyone stopped moving when the bug guards turned their feelers toward the noise. Nobody moved or breathed for what felt like forever.

The leader of the bug patrol made some clicking sounds, then led the group away down another street.

Amber allowed herself a deep breath. "That was close."

"Too close," Emily said. "They looked more alert than the ones we saw earlier."

"Could it be because we are getting closer to the building?" Mira asked, referring to what they assumed was the Silver Line Corporation's lab. "Maybe that is their main nest, or something like that."

"I hope not," Amber said. "Many of the buildings around are suited for that. Why would they need to go there when they have these many options?"

"Agree, but it looks like it's like this..."

"If it is, getting in and out will be even harder than we thought."

They waited until the sound of clicking faded. Mira activated her radio, connecting with one of the Chimaeric Demons.

"Are they gone?" Mira couldn't see them anymore from their position.

"They are. You should move now."

"Understood. Are there any other patrols we should know about?"

"There are two more groups in your sector, but they're heading away from your position. You should have a clear run to the next checkpoint."

"Understood. Keep us posted." Mira turned to the others. "We move in thirty seconds. Emily, take point. June, watch our backs."

They gathered themselves, ready to resume their advance.

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The group went through the ruins, hiding from bug patrols along the way. Above them, the glowing fungi lit up the area, making the bugs' shells shine when they were not inside the buildings.

"Do you think bugs have hobbies?" Emily asked. "Like, is this one bug thinking, 'I could be home playing bug chess right now, but no, I have to patrol for humans.'"

"Bug chess," Amber said. "With little human-shaped pieces?"

"Now you're getting it," Emily grinned.

After an hour of travel, they finally reached the outer walls of the Silver Line Corporation facility.

"Finally," Mira breathed, examining the facility's exterior. "We've been trudging through this bug-infested hellscape for too long."

"It's not over yet," Amber said. "Let's stay focused, especially now that we are almost in position."

They were dwarfed by the building's imposing exterior—a ten-story behemoth of gray concrete and steel. It was larger than it was taller, but it didn't make a difference since it was still ten stories high.

The walls had large cracks all over, so big that they were the size of a clone's hands, and they were large for a human. There were also the remnants of some old explosion. The group could see the marks left all over the surface of the exterior walls.

That wasn't all. Even if there was none now, water must have arrived here at some point, since there were the clear signs of accumulated water damage, which was accompanied by organic growth and dark brown and green stains. They didn't spare even the windows, which were now completely darkened.

Surrounding the building was a very tall perimeter wall made of concrete. However, despite the reinforcements Mira and the others could see inside of it, there were many damaged sections, plus one that had completely been blasted off by something that came from the building, judging by the position of the debris.

This created some hazardous and irregular openings in the barrier, which were going to allow the group to enter without much trouble.

The courtyard between the wall and the building was a mess. Broken concrete, bent metal beams, overturned vehicles, and piles of trash were everywhere. Some trash piles reached six feet high, making it hard to move around.

"We've gone from fighting apocalyptic horrors to playing 'don't step on the bug' in the world's worst game of hopscotch."

She gestured at the debris-filled yard with a wry smile.

The Chimaeric Demons, meanwhile, went through the holes in the wall.

Amber and the others waited for several minutes. Then one of the clones came back and changed to his human form to give a report.

"The courtyard's mostly clear," the clone said, "but there are two worker bugs near the main door. They're not moving much—looks like permanent guards."

"What about the other entry points?" Mira asked.

"All the ground-floor windows have bug nests built around them. The side entrance is blocked by debris, but what should have been the maintenance door we spotted earlier is still accessible."

Emily looked at the building's upper floors through her scope. "There are some even above... they're everywhere. The bugs didn't just move in—they've fortified the place."

"Like they're protecting something," June said in a grim voice.

Amber became more uneasy than she already was. "If they're guarding the outside this heavily, the inside must be worse. I think we are really walking right into their main nest."

That was exactly what she... No, everyone feared.

Mira nodded as she watched a sentinel walking on top of the wall.

"This facility was built by the Silver Line Corporation to lock up something dangerous," she said. That much was obvious. Of course, there were simply too many signs about the true purpose of this building.

"Now these bugs have taken it over as their nest. Makes sense—a containment facility is perfect for them; it's made to be harder to exit than enter, but this doesn't mean getting in is easy. But here's what is worrying me: what exactly was this place built to contain?"

"Why are you asking?" Mira said.

"Because I wouldn't like for it to be something related to these bugs..."

Everyone felt uneasy as they thought about what this meant.

Chapter 1266: Rescue trip (14)

"Damn this muck,"

Erik pulled his leg from the sticky mud filling the entire area. He couldn't stop swearing. Not only was walking harder, but now his clothes were all dirty and wet, and he couldn't even fly since there were flying thaidis everywhere.

The funny thing was that the mud was there because of him. Erik had to fight some particularly troublesome pack thais, and he used water powers to do so since the beasts were really fast. This way, he could slow them down.

Mixed with the water and earth was also the blood of the slain creatures, which made the already sticky substance even more sticky.

"Fantastic," Erik muttered, looking down at his mud-caked boots. "The most powerful man alive, and I still end up looking like I fell in a pigpen."

[You know, with your telekinesis abilities, you could just lift yourself above the mud... but then again, that would be like using a sledgehammer to crack a nut! System laugh But seriously, you might want to invest in some better boots. These constant mud-wrestling matches are not doing wonders for your dignity.]

<Very funny,> Erik thought dryly. <Maybe next time you could materialize some stepping stones while you're at it. Even better if they are made with your face. So I can give you a proper stomp.>

It wasn't like Erik didn't think about using levitation, but there was no point for multiple reasons. The first and most important was that he would just waste mana he needed to keep for future fights. Every drop of mana counted.

The second reason was that the mud didn't significantly slow his movement speed—it was just an inconvenience rather than a true impediment.

The third reason was simply timing: he had already gotten muddy during the heat of battle, so staying clean was no longer an option.

Besides, the muddy area only extended for about fifty meters in each direction, making it faster to trudge through than to spend energy to avoid it. It was better to keep his mana for when he truly needed it.

He paused, looking at the body of one of the creatures he just killed.

<Should I get its brain crystal power? Would it be worth it?>

[Hmm... I wouldn't recommend it. It was nothing much to begin with, and for sure it did nothing you aren't already able to do.]

<And the alpha?>

[That one... well, it had some interesting abilities, but again, nothing worthwhile.]

The beast not only had the ability to generate a sort of mana armor like the rest of its kin, but it could also create something similar to what the Leylarhads could do, a sort of mana construct, which instead of being a giant wolfish head, was a long scythed tail.

The two powers would be sure useful, but not for Erik, who had plenty of ways to attack and two very strong defensive abilities, plus telekinesis, through which he could use the debris to create a shield to protect himself from physical attacks like Uncle Benjamin did.

Getting them would only be a waste of DNA points, even if he gave the power to the Chimaeric Demons, considering he gave them the power of a barrier master.

He sighed.

<All right then. Show me my status. I want to check how the situation is.> Erik thought, catching his breath after the fight.

—[Erik's Status]—

[Host Information]

NAME: Erik Romano

AGE: 22

POWER LEVEL: 1,853

SYSTEM LEVEL: 470

EXPERIENCE: 60,630,925,330/119,787,791,441

DNA POINTS: 23,349,440,123.66

HEALTH: 68,410/68,410

MANA: 68,340/68,340

{Attributes}

STRENGTH: 652

INTELLIGENCE: 584

DEXTERITY: 632

ENERGY: 2277

Available attribute points: 10

{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: Xα3X-RANKED, Instability: X03B-RANKED, Phantom Veil: Xε3A-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: Xμ3X-RANKED, Eclipse Field: Xσ1B-RANKED, Shadow Rend: Xσ1B-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)

—[END]—

[Your status is looking good.]

<Yeah... Too bad it's not enough.>

Erik had fought many thaids, but they were the equivalent of the low and middle leveled thaids on Mannard. He was nowhere close enough to kill the highest-ranking monsters here, like he did on the human-controlled continent.

However, he was still underestimating himself in the biological supercomputer's opinion.

[What do you mean it's not enough?] The system was shocked. [We thought we wouldn't be able to hold a candle to any of the thaids here; instead, we learned that while the thaids here are indeed much stronger than on Mannard; you are strong enough to take care of a rather large pool of them.]

<Not all of them, though. There are still things I can't defeat, like flying thaids.>

Erik had the mana to kill one or two if he focused on them, but without an army protecting him, he was just a sitting duck. The flying thaids were not only filled with mana, but they also had attributes much greater than Erik, which made them insanely fast, to the point that he couldn't even see them flying.

Of course, these kinds of monsters did not always fly at full speed; they often cruised the area. So, in a normal situation, he would be able to at least spot them and hide, but in the other cases, during battles, Erik wouldn't be so lucky without the clones.

[You couldn't do that on Mannard for a long time. Why now is it different from back then? You just need time.]

Erik sighed. There were many reasons for that indeed.

<First, because I have things to do. Second, because every second I spend not hunting the blackguards is a second more they will use to get stronger.>

[Erik... I know it's frustrating. But you've come so far already. Remember when you first started? You couldn't even handle a single thaïd without breaking into a sweat. Now look at you—taking down whole groups from Mur!] The system's tone was unusually gentle, giving Erik the mental equivalent of a comforting embrace. [This is something that most people would only dream about on Mannard and something that no one before you accomplished.]

<The blackguards did.>

[Based on what your father said, the blackguards had to fight single groups of thaïds with hundreds of thousands of people. They don't count, and even if they are stronger now, it is only thanks to their insane experiments and the technique I made for you.]

Erik took a moment to reflect on what the system said and about his progress. His power and system level grew a lot, yet he knew there was still room for improvement. His attributes—especially his energy—had come a long way from his early days.

<The numbers are good when I look at them like this,> he thought, reviewing his status. <But I need to push harder.>

[Your progress has been remarkable, not just good,] the system chimed in. [You should use them.]

The system was referring to its own powers, those that allowed him to modify his already existing abilities.

<To what end? I don't really have an idea on what to change and how to change them.>

[You could have asked me.]

<Right, so what do you suggest I do?>

[Looking at your powers, I can see several flaws we could address through editing. For example, your Chimaeric Demon's neural link complexity is a limitation. We could use DNA editing to make them better, but this will require further analysis in order to find the best way to change them all. We might also try to decrease their maturity time.]

<Go on.>

[We might also make Phantom Veil better. Through editing, we can make the illusions more stable with lower mana used. We could improve Elemental Lord's mana consumption. You name it.]

<What about the defensive powers?>

[Absolute Castle's main weakness is its high mana cost. Through careful editing, we could improve its mana efficiency while maintaining its defensive capabilities. We could also address Eclipse Field's range limitations.]

Erik nodded. These were just ideas, but most of them revolved around improving the mana consumption of his powers. Aside from Chimaeric Demon, few things had to be changed.

<These modifications would require a lot of DNA points, wouldn't they?>

[Yes, but you have over 23 billion DNA points. That's more than enough to make these improvements.]

<I'll think about it, then. I want some more time to think about what we really need to change.>

[All right then... One thing though—you might want to get out of here soon. All that blood is going to attract scavengers, and on this continent, even the scavengers are deadly.]

<Good point,> Erik thought, already checking for a safe path out of the muddy clearing. The last thing he needed was to be caught in this terrain when something bigger and hungrier arrived.

Chapter 1267: Rescue trip (15)

Erik came out of the jungle onto the windswept beach, his boots sinking into the soft sand and leaving mud prints on it.

He sighed.

<At least the ocean is still here. I was starting to worry it might have disappeared too.>

[Wow, someone's feeling extra dramatic today! Want me to check if the sky is still up there too?] the system said.

<Your sense of humor needs calibration,> Erik said.

The ocean lay in front of him. The waves hit the beach over and over. He had spent days walking along the coast and searching inside the forest, looking for any clues about where his friends had landed.

<I hope they are ok.>

[I bet they are...]

Something then caught his eye in the distance.

<Is that...?>

In front of Erik were what looked like large depressions in the sand. They were too regular to be natural.

<System, those marks... do they look like landing sites to you?>

The system paused a little to examine the impressions.

[Yes, definitely wyvern tracks. And not just one or two—there are multiple landing zones spread across the beach.]

Erik quickened his pace, moving closer to investigate. The marks became clearer as he approached—massive claw prints and wing impressions pressed deep into the sand, preserved by the salty air.

However, the wind wasn't helping and was slowly moving the sand away, erasing any trace of the creatures that made them.

Yet the tracks were enough to fill Erik's heart. Maybe, just maybe, he finally found what he came searching for. His worried face relaxed, and for the first time in days, he managed a genuine smile.

The wrinkles on his forehead smoothed out, and his eyes lit up with fresh hope. For the first time on this coastline, Erik's burden lightened.

<How many would you estimate landed here?> He asked as he observed the tracks.

[Based on the distribution pattern and density of tracks... I'd say around 500 creatures. I assume they are the Chimaeric Demons since there is no way for a group of wyverns this large to exist. Wyverns are solitary creatures, after all.]

The system paused. [The impressions cover around 3 kilometers of beach, and the patterns suggest they arrived in waves.]

Relief flooded through Erik. Five hundred clones meant significant fighting power, enough to establish a defensive position and protect the others. His shoulders relaxed slightly, the second good news he'd had since arriving on Mur.

He examined the tracks carefully, moving his gaze from left to right across the beach. The marks were most visible near the waterline but far enough so that the water didn't erase them.

Following the trail, he noticed a clear pattern change. The wyvern claw marks morphed into smaller human footprints as they neared the trees, confirming that multiple people had changed from flying creatures to walking humans.

The human footprints confirmed these were definitely the Chimaeric Demons, removing any doubt Erik or the system might have had about the tracks' origin.

[They probably changed back to human shape to save their strength and to move without being noticed.]

Following the tracks with his eyes, Erik saw they led into the forest, exactly as expected. However, looking at the sand, he couldn't pick out Amber's, Mira's, or Emily's footprints among the hundreds of others. Too many people had walked this way.

<I can't confirm if they actually made it,> he thought. The tracks showed his clones survived the crossing but gave no evidence of his women.

[The clones would have protected them during the crossing,] the system said, sensing his concern. [And the footprints suggest organized movement, not panic or combat. That's a good sign.]

Erik nodded, but the worry remained. The tracks led away from the beach, heading into the forest that loomed beyond the sand.

It was a logical choice—one he made himself when he arrived. The open beach left them exposed to flying thaids, and if they were as deadly as the Three-headed Void Ravagers. Erik would have no way to survive.

The forest hid them from flying thaids and formed a natural barrier against anything hunting from above.

A high-pitched shriek cut through the air from somewhere in the clouds, reminding Erik he needed to leave the area quickly.

<Better get the hell out of it.> Erik didn't waste time—he broke into a run, following the tracks into the treeline.

Though the ground was harder here, the recent rain made it muddy enough to see footprints. Erik could clearly see where many people had walked through, crushing plants and making an obvious path into the forest.

[They were smart to move inland quickly,] the system said. [The beach is basically a killing field for flying thaids.]

<Tell me something I don't know, for example, when did they come here?>

[Based on these tracks, I can tell they came through about four days ago. You can see it in how deep the footprints are and how rain and wind have worn them down.]

Erik checked around for threats as he advanced. The jungle here was nothing like Mannard's familiar forests.

The trees were massive, protected by thick, hardened bark that was able to withstand a lot of thaids attacks, aside from their weight.

Even the undergrowth was dangerous, but that was something that was also present on Mannard.

<Any sign of combat along their route?> Erik asked, noting how some branches had been broken, most likely when they passed from here.

[Nothing showing major battles,] the system said after analyzing the trails. The two moved deep into the forest at that point.

[I see signs of them resting occasionally. There were the remnants of some fires, most likely made not long after they landed to rest a little before going deeper into the forest. But no. There is no blood, no signs of fighting at all. They moved through carefully but weren't actively engaged.]

The situation looked promising. Erik picked up his pace to close the gap with the group, now four days ahead.

The trees grew denser, blocking more and more of the sun. At some point, mushrooms started growing. However, they were massive, as cartwheels sprouted from dead tree trunks.

[Be careful of those purple flowers,] the system said. [They release pollen that can paralyze you.]

Chapter 1268: Rescue trip (16)

Erik nodded and stayed away from the dangerous plants. He focused on the tracks again.

<It looks like the clones moved inland in a straight line toward higher ground,> he said.

[It's a good idea. An elevated ground would provide better visibility.]

The system paused.

[The tracks suggest they were headed for that small hill there. It's the highest place around, and it would offer the best visibility. However, it might also have put them in danger, depending on how the situation there is.]

<System, you mentioned caves in this region before.> Erik thought, pushing aside a low-hanging branch.

<If they had reached that hill, they might have spotted them.>

[It's possible,] the system said. [If they went on the hill, the rocky formations would have been visible. The problem is that I don't know if they spotted the caves. Seeing them is not so straightforward.]

<So you think they might have seen them?>

Erik's eyes narrowed as he studied the path ahead.

[There's only one way to find out—we need to get to that hill ourselves and see what's visible from up there. The clones would have done the same thing.]

<Let's hope you're right,> Erik said, ducking under a low branch.

Erik felt hopeful. Finally, finding the tracks of the clones meant he was not going to be alone anymore. He could finally start moving toward the Lorogia Mountain range and start his search for the blackguards.

Hopefully, they found a suitable spot to set up camp. If Mira and the others were alive, that would help keep them safe until he arrived. He wasn't exactly sure camping in a cave was the best of the ideas, but it was for sure better than staying in the open.

The trail continued through the deepening forest, and Erik followed.

A roar echoed through the forest, followed by the sound of cracking branches. Erik hid behind a large tree trunk, listening to the sound.

<It looks distant.>That meant that whatever made the roar was not an immediate threat. However, it could quickly be.

[We should move faster,] the system said. [The trail is clear enough that we can increase speed without losing it, and I don't think taking our time is a good idea here.]

<Agreed.>

Erik kept jogging around. The slope grew steeper as the hill emerged from the forest's shadows, its peak promising answers—or at least a better view of where those answers might lie.

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After having reached the hill's base, Erik began searching for signs of his companions. He circled the slope, looking for trampled vegetation or other marks of recent human activity.

Even from this elevation, the trees completely blocked the view.

<This doesn't look promising,> he said.

[We still have a lot of road to cover before we reach the summit. There we might scale a tree and see what we find.]

Erik nodded and kept climbing up the hill. The path got steeper as he went higher. Along the way, he found signs that people had been there recently. He saw broken twigs, flattened plants, and footprints on the ground.

In some muddy spots, the footprints overlapped. Some footprints were deeper than others, showing that some people were carrying heavy things.

Avoiding obstacles and sticking to stable ground, Erik made his way up until finally he reached the summit.

There, his heart almost shot out of his chest. A large clearing spread before him, still covered by the trees but with wider spaces between them.

Here, the signs of human activity were much more; they were everywhere. Multiple fire pits contained fresh ashes that rain hadn't yet washed away. The ground had been packed hard by countless footsteps, and distinct depressions marked where people had slept.

<They camped here.> Erik thought, examining the remains of a fire pit.

The camp's size made Erik hopeful—his clones had definitely been here with the others. Looking around, he could see they had set up good lookout spots and organized different areas for sleeping, cooking, and defending.

Based on the stone arrangement around the fire pits and the ash accumulation inside them, Erik estimated they had camped here for one to two days.

[The clones followed their standard camping protocol here.]

The fire pits were placed in such a way to minimize visibility while maximizing warmth, with stone circles arranged to keep as much heat as possible.

The sleeping areas followed a defensive layout, set away from fires to prevent silhouetting. Clear paths connected different sections for quick movement during emergencies.

At the clearing's edges, Erik spotted lookout positions marked by ground depressions where sentries had likely kept watch. Even waste disposal had been properly established downwind from living areas.

<Good, but I'm more worried about what they did after they left.>

Erik couldn't see much of the forest from where he stood—it was just a vast stretch of green trees in every direction. He knew they needed to see farther to find his companions.

He noticed a very tall tree nearby at the edge of the clearing. <Should I get up there?>

[Remember to be quick, though; thaids might spot you.]

Erik nodded and climbed the tree. From there, he saw huge rocky cliffs by the ocean.

<System, those formations. Were you saying the caves are there?>

[Yes.] These were closer to the coast than their current position.

Erik looked at the rocks in the distance. He knew his clones must have seen these rocks from here, too.

The caves would be perfect for their needs—they were easy to defend, had natural protection from the stone walls, and could shelter many people safely.

The only problem was the thaids. Their presence inside the caves was almost certain.

Everything made sense now. The camp's layout and timeframe showed they'd clearly used this hill as a base while checking the surrounding area. After seeing the caves, they would have immediately moved everyone there for safety.

[The timing fits too,] the system said.

Erik smiled. All he needed to do now was to get there.

From his position, Erik could see the best way through the forest to reach the rocky cliffs. The path wouldn't be easy, but he spotted some natural trails that would help him avoid the thickest parts of the forest.

A sudden screech from a flying thaid cut through the air.

"Ah, shit."

Chapter 1269: A wicked place (6)

"Remember," Mira said. "They spot us once, and we'll have the entire hive on us. This means we have to strike the guards without letting them even utter a sound or a pheromone in case they use this to communicate."

The others nodded in agreement. Then each of them checked their equipment one last time. Emily tightened the straps on her sniper rifle. Amber tested the edge of her blades, and Mira checked the string of her bow.

She then signaled to the Chimaeric Demons. As soon as she did, they spread out along the perimeter wall. Two transformed into small lizards and went toward the guard bugs near the nest's main entrance.

The others went into some other strategic points around the courtyard. They had to intercept any patrol or guard that might stumble on them, so their role was pretty critical.

The group moved through the debris like ghosts, using the twisted metal and broken concrete as cover. June took point while Emily covered their rear.

Mira wanted to ask the others if they were done with their preparations. Unfortunately, she couldn't utter a sound, or the creatures would hear them. They were too close.

When they reached halfway across the courtyard, one of the guard bugs whirled, and its antennae twitched. It must have seen or sensed something.

However, before it could react, a clone struck it from behind. It shapeshifted fast enough to make claws and increase its size enough for him to one-hit kill the creature but prevent anything else from noticing him.

Not getting too large also helped him find the weak spot between the creature's armored plates. The bug dropped without a sound, and the clone shapeshifted again into something small.

A second guard turned. Mira moved and knocked an arrow, which flew and then slid between the bug's mandibles and up into its brain. Its legs twitched once, then it died.

The clones quickly dragged the bodies behind a large and half-collapsed wall, hiding them from view, while the other clones took care of the remaining bugs and then did the same once everything was ready.

"Is everything done?" Mira asked.

"Yes," a clone said. "I can't be certain, but I doubt they noticed us."

Another clone nodded. "Yeah, we would have been swarmed otherwise."

That was reassuring, but since the real mission had just started, they couldn't lower their guard.

Emily checked the entrance, not before having given a look at it through her scope.

The others gathered to talk.

"The building's main entrance is sealed," June said. It was made of two rather large steel doors, but it wasn't sealed because of time or human intervention; rather, the bugs sealed it. "We could break through, but the noise would alert every bug in the building."

Indeed, it wasn't hard for any of them to bust open the entrance.

"That means they're using the maintenance entrance we saw earlier to get inside," Amber said. "No other way they could move in and out otherwise."

All other entrances had been sealed off over time—either deliberately blocked or collapsed from structural damage. The few gaps that remained were far too small for anything larger than insects to pass through.

The side entrance was different, though. The western wall must have been completely destroyed, leaving a hole in the building through which the bugs and everything else could enter, at least based on what the group was seeing.

However, the bugs had rebuilt it using their nest-building materials, creating a new wall that mimicked the original's strength and maybe even surpassed it. The wall also had some kind of tunnel-like entrances. Since the bugs were rather large, a human could fit easily.

Mira turned to the nearest clone. "This means we can only use the side entrance," she said, not without reluctance. "As per plan, I say you go in and check the place out. Can you do it?"

"We agreed the first time; there is no reason for us not to do it anymore. We'll shapeshift and check inside," the clone said. "Small, flying forms should let us move undetected, and we will turn invisible if necessary. We can map out the safest route and come back with a full report. Of course, if that's possible to begin with."

The main goal was, of course, to see if they could find some valuable information inside.

"Do it," Mira agreed. "But try to stay in contact." The problem was that in such a situation, without Erik, doing so was hard, if not impossible. In all other circumstances, the clones partially shapeshifted their features to human-like so that they could talk, but here, shapeshifting into something small didn't allow them to bring the radio. This meant they had to find an alternative way to communicate.

"If something goes wrong, we need to know immediately."

"We'll see what we can do."

The clones' shapeshifted, turning into small flying bugs. With near-silent wingbeats, they slipped through the tunnel-like entrances the bugs made and vanished inside into the building's darkness.

They stuck to the shadows, making seeing them even harder than it would have otherwise been. It was completely dark inside, except for some glowing mushrooms that grew in some wet spots. It looked like even the bugs couldn't stop water from seeping inside the building.

Being transformed into insects gave them the ability to move rather easily in the darkness since their senses didn't overly rely on sight, and even if they did, the eyes were specialized to see in the darkness, or to make up for it. However, they also mashed up some different features from many species to get near-perfect visibility.

Aside from dark, the inside was old and falling apart. This forced the bugs to personally act. Whenever something looked on the verge of collapsing or breaking apart, they reinforced it with the weird material they used to make the rest of their nest.

It was an organic, waxy, paper-like material that easily clung to walls and ceilings. The creatures used this substance to create the tunnels and chambers throughout the building's interior.

However, they didn't fix everything. Some rusty metal walkways were still there, broken and hanging loose. Water was leaking from broken pipes and some other places, making puddles on the floor. The bugs didn't seem to mind.

The bugs had built something that looked like a giant insect nest inside the building. This turned all the hallways into a confusing maze.

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They saw how the bugs had integrated broken walls and collapsed ceilings as foundations for their hive.

Old equipment was buried under the nest material that the bugs were amassing all over the place. Some old warning signs were still visible through holes in the covering or part where the bugs didn't use the nesting material on.

Despite how much the bugs had changed the building, the clones could still see what it used to look like. The old security doors were still there, though they were rusty and stuck open. The bugs had used their nest material to attach these doors to the walls.

These small and big things suggested the facility was designed to sustain wars, or at least deal with high-powered stuff, thaids and ancient animals included. Based on the information they had about Silver Line Corporation, whatever was contained here must have been some form of proto-thaid.

Now those same security measures served the bugs' purposes, turning the facility into a fortress. Their fortress.

The clones spotted movement—several worker thaids scuttling through the corridors, carrying materials for nest maintenance, or so it seemed. Instinctively, the clones pressed themselves against the ceiling.

The bugs went past them, moving their feelers to check for anything unusual. The clones kept still—they knowing that if they moved their wings even a bit, the bugs would sense the movement.

After some time waiting for the bugs that lingered around, the last of the workers disappeared around a corner and moved deeper into the hive.

"Phew..."

"Damn, I thought they were going to camp here!"

"Let's move," one of them said. "Those fuckers made us lose a lot of time already."

The clones went deeper inside the building. Navigating the facility's maze-like corridors and darting through the gaps in the organic covering separating some of the rooms.

Some passages opened into large chambers where worker thaids completed their tasks, some others went into rooms where the warriors rested, and others where the leaders ate.

"This place is weird," one clone said with its tiny fly-modified mouth. "The thaids' modifications to the structure seem too... purposeful."

"Why?"

"I don't know... It's just a feeling. The way they're layering the organic material, how they're placing their reinforcements. It's more calculated than what we typically see in nests of this type."

"I have the same feeling," another said.

The clones didn't like feeling that way, and they liked even less how organized the thaids looked. Besides, the monsters were seemingly reinforcing the nest more and more.

"Do you think it's because of us?"

"It can be," another clone said. However, it was entirely possible these were normal maintenance routines. That, or something bigger and deadly, was threatening the nest.

"They're focusing on load-bearing points," one of the clones said, studying some fresh nesting material being applied to a wall.

"You mean they understand structural engineering?"

"Why not?" the second clone said. "They are very good at sensing weakness in structures. Like how termites know where to build support columns."

"The real question is," another clone said, "Are they preparing because of us? These reinforcements look defensive to me."

"You think they're expecting an attack?"

"I do," the clone said. "But it might not be because of us. Something worse than our group can be in these tunnels. While coming here, I saw they were sealing off the deeper sections."

"So, whatever's down there, they want to keep it safe."

"Maybe it's their eggs. They must be able to reproduce somehow."

The clones paused their discussion as a warrior, or guards, as they called them, marched past. Once it moved on, the first clone spoke again.

The guard's eyes changed color from green to amber as it looked around. The clones stayed still and flat against the ceiling, not moving their wings until the guard left.

"We should follow the reinforcement pattern. It might lead us to what they're trying to protect—or hide."

The others agreed, and they resumed their exploration, watching the workers with more and more interest as the bug-like thaids continued the preparations.

Soon, they found themselves inside a lab. It lay behind a half-collapsed doorway. There was ancient equipment lining the walls, covered in layers of dust and nest material. It looked like there were some huge glass tanks, but most of them were broken, while others had been covered with the nest material.

There were also smaller glass holders containing what the clones assumed were ancient animals being preserved in formaldehyde. Some of them had broken long ago, and their content was long gone.

"There is a security checkpoint ahead," one clone said. They approached a heavy steel door hanging off its hinges.

Weapon racks lined the walls. Most were empty, though a few still held rusted rifles.

One clone landed on a rusted rifle barrel. "RS-115 Pulse Rifles. These were pretty powerful weapons centuries ago."

Another clone moved to inspect a different weapon rack. "The Silver Line Corporation manufactured these." Their logo was on every single piece of equipment.

"Didn't these cost more than a soldier's yearly wages back then? Or am I misremembering?"

"No, you are right. I remember it too."

A third clone examined the ammunition storage units embedded in the walls. "This technology matches the era when thaids first emerged."

The clones pondered in silence, imagining the terror and desperation of the humans who once wielded these weapons had to feel when they learned they didn't work against thaids, at least not all of them.

Despite their advanced technology, they had failed. The thaids proved too strong, too many, and too adaptable.

Besides, humanity learned about the natural mana barrier thaids had much later. At the beginning, they only saw them resisting their most powerful weapons.

"There was basically nothing the soldiers in these caves could have done to save themselves."

"I know Silver Line Corporation was powerful and operated in legal gray areas, but isn't it odd that they had weapons here?" a clone said.

"These weren't standard military issue. Only special response teams carried them."

"Not that weird if you think about it. This is a military-grade base."

"Ok, but even if it was, if they had to deal with humans, the weapons they used could have been less powerful and, for sure, less costly. It looks like they expected to have to deal with something those weapons wouldn't work against."

The clones moved along the racks, noting the distinctive designs of each weapon. One stopped at a large rifle. "This model... it was specifically designed to pierce the tank's armor. They knew what they were fighting, more or less."

"Or what they created," another clone said. "But if this is the case, wouldn't it have been better for them to have something to stun or tranquilize the monster? They would lose millions if they killed the whatever creature they were breeding here."

"Yeah," another said. "Besides, the bugs could have built their nest anywhere. Why here? Something must be here."

A worker thaid shuffled past the doorway. The clones pressed themselves against the darkest corners until it passed.

"Master Erik needs to know about this," one clone said. "I think we will be able to find out a lot here."

Nest material was tightly woven through what remained of the security gate, forming a solid barrier that glowed with a blue light.

"They use the fungi..."

