

## **BIOLOGICAL 1271**

Chapter 1271: A wicked place (8)

The clones stopped moving and stared at the glowing barriers. They felt uneasy.

The thaids were following some kind of pattern, some purpose that went beyond mere survival.

Moving past the checkpoint, the clones entered what looked like a weapons testing range.

The bugs had repurposed this place and turned its anes into storage chambers for their larvae.

A sudden vibration caused dust to fall from the ceiling and made some old metal panels rattle. The clones froze in place as a leader thaid emerged from a side passage.

Within seconds, dozens of worker and warrior thaids streamed from nearby tunnels, responding immediately to their leader's signals.

The clones hid, waiting for the bug to get away. However, the leaders stopped briefly, maybe to see through its sensory organs if there was something inside the room.

The clones stayed motionless; their small size and dark coloring made them hard to spot, but they turned invisible anyway as a precaution.

The bug then left, and so did the clones. Soon after, they found the military command center. Banks of dead monitors covered a wall, and maps of the surrounding region hung in tatters, but it was still possible to see the marks left on them and the tactical annotations.

"The main server might still work," a clone said, landing on a dust-covered console. "These old systems were built to last, after all."

Another clone examined the power connections running along the floor. "Even if it does, power is the issue. Besides, there might be centuries of water damage and rust. So, even if we restore the electricity, we can't be sure the circuits will work."

"What about the storage drives?" a third clone asked. "Those might have survived."

The clone moved to a central terminal partially encased in nest material. "If we find the main storage unit, we could extract it. Take it back to Mannard and see, or ask for help from Becker like the last time."

"We can try, but it's still risky with the forces we have right now," another clone said. "Based on the maps we saw hung on the walls, we'd need to cut through the facility's center and reach the basement. The server room was there."

"Even if we get there," one clone said, "the data is most likely encrypted. The Silver Line Corporation guarded their secrets well."

"True, but any information about this facility would help us understand what we're dealing with. These bugs chose this place for a reason, and with the biological supercomputer, I don't think we will have problems. It decrypted much newer and more complicated stuff, after all."

A thaid worker moved into the room, carrying construction materials while sensing its surroundings with its antennae. The clones quickly took cover behind the broken monitors.

The bug went straight to work, applying new nest material across a wall and burying the facility's old equipment under thick, waxy layers.

"We should mark this location," a clone said. "And come back with the proper equipment."

The others agreed. They watched as the worker thaid continued its task, slowly erasing the last visible traces of the facility's original purpose.

Then they left and kept searching. They headed toward the basement, hoping to find the server room. However, navigating there was even harder than doing so above.

"Look at this," one clone said in front of a sign.

"Project M—Authorized Personnel Only."

"The name suggests nothing good."

"So, Project M. They could be really making something here that attracted these thaids," another added.

"The thaid that destroyed this place back then."

"Things are going to turn ugly," another clone said.

"More than ugly."

Moving deeper into the facility, they entered another laboratory. There were rows of examination tables, many still holding the remains of ancient equipment.

The bugs turned this space into a sort of central hub. There were many tunnels connecting it to the rest of the base, going out in all directions.

The next room held what appeared to be weapons again, but nothing the clones knew.

Some had partially disintegrated, but a few remained intact enough to hint at their original purpose.

"They were making new weapons."

"Maybe because they were scared that whatever their projects were bringing them to wouldn't be enough."

"Maybe..."

"Do you really think what the second division commander said is true?"

"About humanity's extinction?"

"Yes. Based on what the guy said, it wasn't related to thaids."

"I don't know," a clone said. "But the Silverline Corporation believed in it enough for them to create the thaids."

A sealed vault door stood before them, its scarred metal surface still unbreached by the bugs.

"The treasury room?"

"The treasury room."

"It doesn't make sense to have a treasury room. Wasn't this place a lab?"

"I have no idea, really."

Suddenly, a boom shook the corridors. The clones ducked into a crevice as three guard thaids rushed by, followed by their leader.

"Something's happening," a clone said. "The hive is moving."

They watched as more warriors and workers went through the corridors, responding to the leader's pheromone signals. Their movement suggested a response to a threat—or preparation for one.

"We should return. The others need to know what we've found."

"No... wait."

"What?"

"I think we should give a look at this room, at least. The vault cannot be opened by the bugs, but we are strong enough."

"Are you insane? We're already taking a tremendous risk just being here."

"Think about it. The bugs have been here for who knows how long, and they haven't breached that vault. Whatever's inside must be important enough that Silverline wanted it protected at all costs."

"Or dangerous enough," another clone said.

"Exactly why we should check. If there's something in there, we need to know before it becomes a problem. And if there's valuable data..."

"It doesn't make sense for them to place a living creature inside a treasury room."

"Let's just check."

The clones looked at each other. In the background, they could hear the bugs moving around the building.

"Fine," the cautious clone agreed. "But we do this quick and quiet. First sign of trouble, we bail."

The others nodded, and they moved toward the vault door.

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The clones gave a better look at the vault door's sides, particularly in the area where the metal met the surrounding concrete walls.

"The frame's reinforced," one clone said. "There is actually no way to blast this thing off without making noise."

"Yeah," another clone said. "...but the walls themselves can be worked with..."

The walls were made of reinforced concrete. This meant that while they might find problems destroying it because of the noise, they could actually drill a hole in it without making much of it.

"That's going to make some noise, but not as much as destroy the door or taking it off its hinges."

"Yeah." A clone moved along the wall. "The concrete's old here, weakened by moisture and time. We could drill through this point."

He went in front of the area he wanted to drill into.

A large patch of dark mold stained that part, spreading like a map across the damp surface. Its edges formed fractal patterns in shades of deep green and black.

The moisture had been at work here for decades, maybe centuries, weakening the concrete's structural integrity beneath the fungal growth. There were many of such patches on the wall, but this was the largest, and this wall section was presumably the weakest.

"Who wants to do the honors?" a clone asked.

"I'll take point on this," another clone volunteered, not because he liked it, and stepped forward. His body was already being shapeshifted and reshaped into the necessary biological tools, something the clone took from some weird thaids he saw on Mur during his stay.

It was similar to a diamond drill. The creature looked like a wasp, but instead of having normal limbs, it had two of these giant drills on its topmost legs.

The clone drilled through the concrete, carefully balancing between hard drilling—which would alert the bugs with noise—and soft drilling; which would waste their limited time.

However, soon after, all the clones started working. Some actually helped the clone make a hole in the wall, while others watched for any approaching bug.

In the end, they made a small hole, barely wider than their insect bodies. Some air whispered through the opening, carrying not-so-pleasant scents and sounds.

The stench hit them as soon as the other side of the wall got pierced. It was a nauseating mix of rotting organic matter, fungal growth, and something distinctly...shitty.

"By the master," one clone gagged, "it smells like someone left a protein shake in their locker for a century."

"More like a thousand gym socks had babies with a compost heap," another said.

"Focus on the mission, guys."

Even if the clone said that, everyone could see his disgust. "But yes, this might be the worst thing I've smelled since that time the master went into the sewers back in Frant."

He was talking about the sewers where the Hinian forces threw the citizens' bodies.

"At least we don't have human noses right now," a fourth clone said. "Small mercies."

However, not all the clones were in the mood to joke. "Something's weird in there," he said. "The air... it bad... but it's not stagnant as I expected."

They immediately understood what it meant. There was mold on that wall, meaning that the place was not ventilated enough and that it was rather humid.

However, the air coming from the hole was not humid at all. It was like the reason for the mold was because there was water on the other side, but the air said there was another opening on the other side of the room.

One by one, they squeezed through the hole. The chamber beyond stretched upward into darkness, its ceiling lost in shadows. But darkness didn't reign completely.

Patches of bioluminescent fungi clung to a massive tear in the far wall, casting a blue-green glow across the area.

The faint light revealed something that made them freeze.

A colossal insectoid body dominated the chamber. Its segmented body dwarfed even the largest guard thaids they'd seen, stretching nearly thirty feet in length.

The creature had many enormous eyes, each as big as a plate, that shined under the blue-green light. While its hard outer shell showed signs of many old fights, there was one clear mark that stood out from the rest—a burn mark that someone had made on its chest. It was human made; it was clear; it was obvious, because the clones immediately recognized that brand.

"The Silver Line Corporation logo," a clone said. "They marked it like livestock."

Yet it was likely just made just to make sure everyone eventually knew it was them who made it. It was rather idiotic, truth be told, but they must have had a reason to do something like that. After all, the Silver Line Corporation was not made by idiots.

Well, perhaps to create thaid, and lose control of them, one must have been rather moronic.

Yet they still achieved something like that through bioengineering and were also the reason humanity got brain crystal powers.

They were also responsible for the deaths of billions and losing an entire continent.

The creature's abdomen pulsed as it deposited eggs into carefully prepared chambers. Each egg sac was larger than a human torso, semi-transparent, and gleaming with an inner light.

"A queen," another clone said. "Not just any queen—this is what they were working on here. Project Synthesis..."

The pieces started falling into place. The military installations, the research labs, and the security measures—they all centered around this creature.

"It broke free," a clone said. "Killed everyone, took over the facility. And now..."

"Now it's building an army," another said. The insects were behaving differently here. They were already smart as they were, but here they were likely under the influence of this creature. It gave them purpose, it gave them focus, and it made them smarter.

However, that wasn't all. This thing was a thaid progenitor, without a doubt much stronger than the human abomination Erik found in Liberty Watch.

The main concern wasn't just that it was stronger than the creatures on Mannard—it was how much more powerful it was compared to those on Mur, especially given the vast difference between the human abomination and Mannard's creatures.



If it followed the same logic, it must have been at least twice as strong as the average thaid here.

Back then, Erik could do nothing about it, and the creature was many times stronger than all the other thaids in the area, despite not having a brain crystal.

This was a thaid—one of the bio-engineered creatures that triggered the development of brain crystals in humans through the Silver Line Corporation's experiments.

Given that this... queen... was clearly an advanced prototype created by Silver Line Corporation, it almost certainly possessed a brain crystal of its own, likely even more powerful than those found in humans or regular thaids.

The problem was that without the biological supercomputer; the clones had no way to know if and what the creature had or how powerful it really was.

The clones knew better than to assume this creature was weak just because it was one of the first thaids. On the contrary, its survival on Mur proved it possessed immense power.

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The queen suddenly stopped moving. She turned her huge head and looked around the room with her many eyes.

The clones flattened themselves as much as possible against the wall, but they realized something had changed—being tiny insects wasn't keeping them hidden anymore.

Each of the queen's eyes fixed on their exact positions. There was intelligence in that gaze—an awareness that no normal thaid had—and it sent chills down their spines.

"It knows we're here," a clone said.

"Fuck..."

"The earlier behaviors make sense now," another clone said. "The bugs weren't just getting smarter—they were being guided."

"What do we do?"

"We mus—"

The queen's mandibles shifted, producing a series of complex clicking sounds. Somewhere in the facility, the other bugs heard it and answered the call.

A giant bug warrior showed up at the main door. It moved differently from the others—more planned out, in a sense. Two more of them came right after. They spread out around the room, blocking all the exits.

The queen's attention remained on the clones' position. She then made a new series of clicks. It almost looked like a language. This thing used to order the other bugs around.

"We need to leave," a clone said. "Now. The others need to know what we've found."

"The hole!"

They darted toward their entry point. The problem was that the queen had noticed them while they were shapeshifted into bugs, so she likely knew about the hole they had drilled. She issued another order, and warrior thaids converged on their position.

"Fuck! They are chasing us!"

No matter how small, dark, or invisible they made themselves, the thaids tracked their every move—the queen somehow made sure that the other bugs never lost them.

The clones squeezed through the hole one after another, coming out on the other side. They could hear the creatures' legs skittering around and getting closer to their position.

"Split up," one clone said. "We meet outside. The others must be warned. We need to get the hell out of here."

The skittering intensified. Fighting hundreds of these creatures was something a couple of thousands was also manageable if they could go all out, but hundreds of thousands of them without using everything at their disposal? It was just suicide.

The clones went each their separate way. On their way out, they also saw the queen's influence over the bugs. The way they moved, the way they coordinated, the shocking efficiency of their actions—all of this changed.

Their findings were serious. The Silver Line Corporation created something far worse than just a powerful bug—they had made one that could create and control its own army. Besides, this queen bug could think, learn, and even teach other bugs to be smarter.

What was worse was that they started understanding why thaid spread. Most likely, they created many more creatures with the same ability, or at least they created pairs that reproduced.

The question was why. What was the point? To get more specimens? To see how their abilities would evolve?

Whatever the reason behind the Silver Line's actions, they had unleashed a catastrophe on humanity. By creating an intelligent thaid able to breed specialized variants of its own species and controlling armies of monsters, they had set in motion a chain of events that threatened human survival across multiple continents, and of which they were still paying the price of.

The clones came out from different points of the building almost at the same time. The facility's ancient walls loomed behind them.

They shapeshifted back into humans. The others saw them and noticed their alarmed expressions.

"What happened?"

"They found us!" a clone said. "The whole nest is—"

A loud cracking noise interrupted him, and then thousands of bugs came out from every door, window, and vent in the facility.

They poured out in waves and swarmed out like a tide. Clicking their mandibles as if making a war cry. It sounded like metal scraping against stone, and the more they poured out, the more deafening the noise became.

Emily raised her rifle, but her hands froze when the wall of the facility exploded outward. The queen came out through the debris, dwarfing her children.

Emily's face drained of color, and so did the faces of all those present. "Holy shit..."

"Amber, get ready to teleport us out!" Mira said, backing away slowly.

The queen's segmented body uncoiled to its full length. The Silver Line Corporation's brand stood out on her thorax. Everyone saw it; everyone understood.

She moved with impossible speed for something her size, crossing the distance between them in seconds.

"We won't make it," a clone said. He turned to his brothers. "We need to buy them time, or they will die."

They nodded, and then ten of them broke away from the group, charging toward the queen. Their bodies morphed as they ran, growing armor plates and weapons of all kinds, even multiple limbs, to get faster and stronger. They changed their muscle mass, their body weight, and their mass.

"No!" June said. "Don't—"

The queen struck with blinding speed—faster than any of them could have anticipated. Her foreleg tore through three clones as if their bodies were made of paper.

The remaining clones attacked from different angles, but the queen's movements were simply too fast for them.

She impaled two more with her spiked forelegs, crushed another under her bulk, and bisected three others with a single swipe of her bladed limbs.

The last clone struck her armor, barely scratching it, before she pinned him to the ground.

The rest of the group reached Amber, whose hands crackled with energy. The queen whirled toward them, mandibles spread wide.

"Now!" Mira screamed.

The queen almost caught them, but Amber's powers started working just in time. Everything around them blurred and twisted as they teleported. Before they disappeared, they saw the queen's eerie, intelligent eyes staring right at them.

In that moment, they all realized something terrifying—she would remember who they were and come looking for them.

They came out of the cave, but not too far. There were simply too many clones for Amber to bring them outside the cave system. She was gasping and shaking.

The clones were shaking more than Amber, whose trembling came from exhaustion. The sacrifice of their brothers weighed heavily on them.

"What the hell was that thing?" Emily asked, her voice trembling.

"The source," a clone said. "The reason those bugs exist. She's controlling them all. And she bears the Silver Line Corporation's mark. It's like the human abomination. It is what killed those people above centuries ago."

"We need to warn the others," June said. "If that thing moves against us, we are dead meat."

Chapter 1274: Rescue trip (18)

Erik scrambled down the tree, though the thaid must have seen him, because then the system gave him very bad news.

[Warning. Hostile Detected.]

<SHIT! Not now, for fuck's sake!> Erik thought, dropping the last few feet to the ground.

[What did you expect, you dumb fuck?! You're exposed on top of a tree, and the clearing offers no cover!]

<This doesn't fucking help!>

[What are you going to do?]

<I'm not fighting it. I don't know what this thing is, and we need to reach those caves.>

[Good choice, but if this is really what you want to do, I suggest you get the hell out of here.]

<Guide me to the caves, ok?>

[Noted.]

Erik sprinted across the abandoned campsite. The packed earth where his companions had slept gave him firm footing as he ran.

[Take the gap between those two large trees. There's a natural path that leads toward the rock formations.]

More screeches echoed around, closer now, followed by the sound of massive wings beating.

<A flying thaid... Shit...>

[What did you expect? You were on a tree!]

<Stop saying this! I know where I was!>

[Then you should have thought about it before going up!]

<I don't recall you telling me not to do it! Quite the opposite, it is you who said I would have had more visibility up there!>

[I can't see the future! How was I supposed to know there was a thaid if it was outside of my detection range?!]

<Then shut the fuck up!>

Erik channeled mana through his neural links and activated his brain crystal powers. He quickly turned into a steroid-enhanced fly—slightly larger than normal and with modified aerodynamics that allowed him to fly faster.

[Why are you so obsessed with flies?!]

<They are fast and hard to notice, plus they are pretty annoying!>

Then he did the same with Phantom Veil. Only this time, coupled with his small size, he was also invisible.

Yet that wasn't the only thing he did. Behind him, illusions sprouted from nothing—copies of himself running in different directions, each one perfectly detailed down to the way his hair moved in the wind.

He couldn't allow the flying thaid to understand who the real one was, the fly, and to avoid that, Erik poured a lot of mana into them.

[The tunnel system starts two kilometers east. Follow the ridgeline once you reach it.]

<Understood.>

The forest blurred past as Erik flew between ancient tree trunks. He darted through gaps in the vegetation that would have been impossible to navigate in human form.

That made everything easier and faster to do.

The canopy above him shook as something massive passed overhead, sending shadows dancing across the forest floor.

[It spotted one of your illusions. The decoy heading south has its attention.]

<Good.>

Erik kept up his breakneck pace—slowing down would have been madness. His wings brought him through the maze of vines and branches, while his illusions drew the monster in the wrong direction.

The phantom versions of himself ran, dodged, and weaved through the trees with grace, sometimes going right through them since it was impossible to go past them the normal way, drawing the predator further from his true position.

The sound of splintering wood cracked through the air as the flying thaid used its brain crystal power to attack one of the decoys, but the illusion remained unharmed, spurring the creature into greater fury.

[Warning! Hostile detected. Another flying thaid joining the hunt!]

The first one must have attracted the second.

<Do you have any idea if they are the same species?>

The system knew why Erik asked. Different species of thaids were more likely to fight each other, though even members of the same species could clash. The odds of conflict would be higher if they weren't related.

[No. They are outside of my analysis range. I can only detect the amount of mana they have, and it is a lot.]

Mana levels weren't a clear sign of how strong a creature was, but it surely played a huge part.

<How far to the caves?>



[One point five kilometers. The ridge rises ahead. Your illusions have them completely fooled, but more are coming.]

Erik knew because they were making a lot of noise.

More screeching filled the air as new flying thaids showed up, attracted by all the noise. Their huge wings blocked out the sunlight, making the forest flash between light and darkness.

[Five more hostiles detected,] the system said.

<Can you tell me now if they are from different species?>

[I can't tell again, but it looks like they aren't.]

The surrounding noises made it clear they weren't. It looked like a scuffle had already started.

[They're not friendly with each other.]

<Great news for once.>

The scuffle quickly turned into a battle and involved everything in the surroundings. From trees to bushes to land thaids.

The newcomers clashed with such violence that their aerial collisions sent shockwaves through the forest, splintering trees and unleashing bursts of mana.

A creature shot out purple light that burned through the tree leaves. Another one fired back with a powerful sound wave that broke tree branches and sent pieces of wood falling everywhere and killed anything unlucky enough to end up on the killing wave's path.

Erik was glad he'd chosen not to fight the flying thaid. He wasn't sure if he could defeat it, and engaging would have made it impossible to shake the beast's pursuit. Even worse, the combat would have drawn more creatures to the area, exactly like it was happening now. But at least the thaids weren't focused on him.

<This is getting out of hand,> Erik thought, zigzagging between falling branches.

[Keep moving. They're too focused on each other to notice you now.]

<Any idea why there are so many flying thaids in this area?>

[We're near the sea. These are probably thaids that hunt and eat fishlike thaids.]

The battle raged overhead. Claws raked against feathers and armored scales. There were a bunch of flying lizard-like creatures, but they weren't wyverns. The first two thaids fought back-to-back against the newcomers, but they were outnumbered.

A particularly violent explosion then rocked the forest. Through his eyes, Erik saw one of the combatants spiral downward, smoke trailing from its wings.

The creature crashed through the trees, hitting the ground only meters from his position.

Chapter 1275: The bugs (1)

Erik stopped moving. Right in front of him, the dead thaid was lying on the ground. It destroyed some of the trees in its fall, or at least the branches, creating a huge opening in the natural ceiling provided by the trees.

The creature looked like a crow, an ancient and extinct creature that roamed the planet before the thaids, and that Erik only saw through the textbooks at school, but it was easily the size of a small house.

Its feathers were pitch black, looking like polished obsidian. A curved beak, serrated like a saw, gaped open in death. Multiple eyes, now dim, lined its head like a crown.

[Don't stop,] the system said. [The battle's moving this way.]

As if to emphasize the point, another energy blast carved through the trees above, vaporizing everything in its path.

The fighting thaids wheeled overhead, lighting the sky with their powers. It looked like there was a firework display above Erik, one that he wanted to be as far away as possible.

Erik darted away from the fallen creature; he didn't wish to stay there to see those still alive.

<And here I was getting frustrated because I couldn't find anything good to kill.>

[Do you see now how dangerous Mur really is?]

<Yeah.>

The combat above grew more intense, with powers clashing and changing the forest, turning it into a war zone that grew larger by the second, not only being limited to the sky.

The sound of the battle followed him as he went toward the rocky outcrop. Everything below Erik trembled, but that wasn't a problem since he was flying. However, even the trees shook, and with them, everything else.

[One and a half kilometers to go,] the system said.

In the end, Erik reached the edge of the rocky outcrop.

Then he sensed them.

<Human thoughts!>

[It might be the clones!]

<Or the blackguards...>

Erik focused on the distant thoughts and flew closer to their source. He needed to identify who they belonged to.

<They're too far away to see clearly.>

As he drew near, the thoughts became distinct enough for him to recognize their origin.

<The Chimaeric Demons.>

It wasn't the blackguards there, but the clones.

<They survived,> Erik thought as a surge of exhilaration rushed through him. Their presence meant the others might have survived, too.

Amber, Emily, Mira, and June could be alive—but he couldn't be certain until he talked to the clones.

[Why are they here?] The system asked.

<They must have noticed the battle.>

Erik could sense their thoughts about safety plans and how they were getting ready for the monsters to get too close to their shelter. Erik then used his mental powers to reach out to them.

<It's me.>

A chorus of mental voices flooded back once they heard those words, that voice, in their minds. There was only one person who could do that, and the mental voice was unmistakable.

<Master?>

<You made it!>

<Are you alright?>

<We knew you'd find us!>

The feeling of happiness going through the clones affected even Erik. He, too, was thrilled to see his children.

<You found us!>

<Are you alone?>

<What else would you expect from the master? Of course he found us,> a clone said.

The clones had spread out between the rocks for protection, using hand signals to communicate with each other. Without Erik, they couldn't do so without the thaids hearing them.

Behind him, he could still hear the sounds of the battle, with powerful explosions going off repeatedly.

<The flying thaids,> Erik didn't reply to their questions. There were more pressing matters to attend to.

<They're here because of me. One spotted me while I was searching for you.>

The clones' then shifted to tactical mode. They didn't like those puny monsters chasing their master.

<Our shelter is safe,> a clone said. <Follow the cliff face south, master. There's a crack in the rock wall that looks too small for anything dangerous but large enough for humans and smaller beings to pass. It opens into our base.>

<Are the others there?> Erik asked, hope and fear mixing in his thoughts.

The clones' feelings soothed Erik, reassuring him.

<They are alive, master. All of them.>

[See? What did I tell you?]

<Yeah...>

Erik flew next to the cliff, keeping as close as possible to the rocks. Below him, waves hit the rocks and sent water spraying up. The salty wind made it difficult to fly, but he kept going.

Then he found the narrow crack in the rock the others had told him about.

<They really made their base into a cave.>

[It was the safest and most logical conclusion without you around.]

This was perfect for Erik, especially in his current form. The flying thaids could never follow him through it.

[The thaids might blow the entrance. So keep your mouth shut and get in fast.]

Erik nodded. He turned human again and then went in.

The passage twisted through the rock, opening occasionally into wider chambers before narrowing again. The stone walls pressed close, then suddenly fell away as they opened into a cavern.

The cave showed clear signs of people living there. The clones had set up sleeping areas, guard posts, and places to store their supplies. They had turned the cave into a safe, well-organized hideout. The problem was that the cave was still connected to tunnels going deeper into the earth, meaning they could still be attacked by thaids who came from other entrances.

Inside the cave, Erik found more clones. Some were standing guard and watching over different parts of their hideout.

The thick cave walls made it nearly impossible to hear the fight outside.

The first thing Erik did was use his powers to find out how many of his clones survived. There were around 200 here.

<Is this all?>

[I can't sense Amber and the others,] the biological supercomputer said. [Since the clones outside told you they are alive, they must be somewhere else if you can't find them. Most likely, they are inside the tunnels.]

The system mentally pointed at one of the entrances.

It was at that moment the clones who found Erik outside arrived.

#### Chapter 1276: The bugs (2)

The clones surrounded Erik. Relief and excitement were just two of the emotions the clones were showing as they saw Erik. Some were crying, some were hugging each other, while others stood at attention, trying to keep their composure despite the tears in their eyes.

Questions poured in rapid succession.

"When did you arrive on, Mur, Master?"

"How did you survive the void ravagers?"

"Have you fought many thaid's during your journey here?"

Erik wanted to answer those questions, but he hadn't seen Amber, Mira, Emily, or June anywhere and started to get worried. He raised his hand, silencing them.

"Where are Amber and the others?"

The clones exchanged glances, noting the worry in Erik's voice. "They're safe, Master, or better, as safe as one could be while hunting." He paused. "They went deeper into the tunnels with a group of clones."

"Why?" Erik's brow furrowed.

Erik trusted their combat abilities completely, but after spending weeks wondering if they had survived, the mere thought of them facing dangerous monsters in those tunnels made his heart pound with concern.

"We found some evidence..." a clone said.

"Evidence of what?"

"Evidence that the Silver Line Corporation had facilities in these caves."

Erik's blood ran cold. Memories of Liberty Watch flashed through his mind—the twisted experiments, the abomination that had forced him to flee. His hands clenched involuntarily.

If the group really found something the Silver Line Corporation made, then it was clear why they were scouting the place.

"Master?" A clone noticed his tension.

"You know well what the Silver Line Corporation left behind in Liberty Watch," Erik said. "Why did you let them go? If there's something in those caves, they might not be able to face it."

"They're not alone," a clone reassured him. Even if he already said this to Erik, it was clear his worry wasn't making him think straight. "We sent many of our brothers with them, and June is watching over them."

June wasn't the smartest or the strongest of Erik's clones, quite the opposite. Erik made him when he was still relatively weak compared to when he made the other clones. Yet he had a lot of experience. Not as much as Mira, but comparable to her.

"Besides, they have strict orders to retreat at the first sign of danger, and with Amber being able to teleport everyone out, there shouldn't be problems. We had no reason to keep them here, and it didn't even make sense, given the situation."

Erik nodded, forcing himself to relax but unable to think positively. Yet he knew the clones were right—Amber and the others were capable warriors, and with June and the other clones protecting them, they would be safe. Still, the sooner he found them, the better he would feel.



Sensing his mood shift, the clones resumed their earlier questions. More of them left their guard posts and gathered around, drawn to their creator.

"Tell us what happened after we separated," a clone asked. "How did you survive the void ravagers?" Others echoed the question. They all yearned to understand how their master had escaped what had seemed like certain death.

Erik leaned against a stone wall. He didn't want to remember that battle, but the clones were adamant, so he gave in.

"The battle was... brutal. Those creatures were unlike anything we'd faced before. They took me down—I was unconscious for three days."

Murmurs rippled through the gathered clones. One spoke up, "Three days?"

"Yes. Rick, the clone who saved my life, never slept or ate during those days to protect and heal me. When I regained consciousness, the first thing I did, aside from asking some questions, was make some trees so that he could eat something." Erik's voice trailed off, remembering the sacrifice of those who hadn't survived.

"How many made it?" a clone asked, dreading the answer that Erik was going to give them.

"Just Rick. The rest gave their lives protecting me." Erik's words brought a solemn silence to the cave. The clones understood sacrifice—it was built into their very nature when it involved their master.

Erik continued, describing their journey across the sea and their arrival on Mur.

"I made a base near the sea using Verdant Architect to grow a massive tree—something you could spot from anywhere in the region. I thought it would help you find me."

"A tree?" A clone frowned, looking puzzled. "We've been patrolling this area for weeks and have seen no unusual growth. The terrain here is mostly rocky, and our view is limited to the immediate surroundings, but if you made it as big as when you were in the White Desert, we should have seen it."

"The coastal cliffs rise nearly a hundred meters high from the cave's main entrance," another clone said. "They block our view of the eastern inland areas. Maybe this is the reason we haven't seen it. Besides, even if we spotted it..."

"What?"

"We couldn't leave, Master. Not after finding traces of the Silver Line Corporation's presence here. If there's a lab in these tunnels, we needed to know what it contained. The potential threat was too significant to ignore. Besides, there might have been information about the biological supercomputer or about the thaids."

Erik nodded. He didn't really like this, but it was true this was an opportunity too good to pass. "You made the right choice. If they left behind anything like what I found in Liberty Watch, it needs to be found and dealt with."

The clones shared looks of relief at his approval. One stepped forward, gesturing toward the tunnel entrance.

"The others have mapped out several areas that show signs of modification. However, this morning, Mira sent us a message saying they found an underground city inside a cave. We mobilized all the available groups of clones, and they must be exploring the area by now."

"Any abnormality?" Erik asked, remembering how Liberty Watch was filled with thaids.

"Nothing significant detected yet, aside from some bug-like thaids," a clone said. Though Erik knew that didn't mean safety. Bug-like thaids were problematic because of their numbers, and being on Mur, they must have been much stronger than those on Mannard.

"Good..."

"Yes, Master," a clone said. "But we've noticed something worrying. The thaids here are smarter than usual. We can tell because the cave walls are unusually smooth and well cared for, and they're better at building nests than any other thaid species we ever fought. Mira told us they've built nests throughout all the buildings in the underground city."

Chapter 1277: The bugs (3)

The clone went on an explanation about how the thaids were organized into castes: the workers, the warriors, also called guards, and the leaders. The workers were small but in great numbers, responsible for building and maintaining the nests.

The warriors were larger, faster, and more powerful and looked like the backbone of the bug army itself.

At the top of the hierarchy were the leaders, who coordinated the other two castes with disturbing levels of tactical thinking, making the groups under their control far deadlier.

Each caste was progressively stronger and smarter than the last, but the leaders were significantly less than the warriors, even less if compared to the workers.

"When was the last time you talked to the others?"

"Half an hour ago, master. Mira told us they were in the Silver Line Corporation's lab's courtyard, waiting for the clones to give them news. They went in to scout the place."

Erik pushed himself off the wall. He hadn't met these creatures yet, but what the clones told him unsettled him. Thaids were already difficult to deal with as they were; if they also got intelligence, which was the only quality humans had and that thaids didn't, they would become far harder to kill. Things would be multiplied ten times on Mur, considering the difference in strength between the thaids here and those on Mannard.

Bug-like thaids typically showed basic organizational skills like building simple nests and following a hierarchy, but they never went too far when it was about fighting. The best they could do was to swarm their enemy, which usually was enough to kill everything in their path. Here, things were different.

Simple tricks wouldn't be enough anymore since intelligent beings could learn from their mistakes and develop counters to human strategies. A strong but dumb monster might waste its strength, but an intelligent one would know exactly how to leverage its advantages. When those advantages included enhanced speed, strength, and natural weapons, including brain crystal powers, the combination became utterly lethal.

"Show me the maps of the tunnels. I want to know exactly where they went and what they've found so far."

The clones gave Erik the sketches they made to keep track of the tunnels, pointing out explored areas and sites of interest.

They showed Erik the fastest way to reach the area where Amber and the others were.

Erik also asked about the evidence that suggested a Silver Line Corporation lab existed within the tunnels.

"Here," a clone pointed to a section of tunnel on the map. "There are some parallel passages that look too regular. In our opinion, this was designed, not formed naturally."

The clones described more evidence of human construction in the tunnels. Most of them were about the fact that many sections of the tunnels had smooth walls and that a lot of the caves looked shaped in such a way to mirror each other.

However, the most convincing evidence came from old metal beams embedded in the rock, the concrete reinforcements along the walls, and the remnants of electrical wiring and ventilation shafts.

"We also found many ancient human bodies."

Somehow, Erik didn't doubt that. One of the clones then pointed at the map, pointing at a specific cave, the one the lines the clones made pointed to.

"That's the path the others took, and this is the cave where they said the underground city stands."

Erik straightened, his mind made up. "I'm going after them. If the place had really been made by the Silverline Corporation, then they could end up fighting something very nasty there."

"Shouldn't you rest first, master? You've traveled far and for a lot of time, and the battle with those flying thaids—"

"No," Erik cut him off. "I would have loved to do so if you didn't go into that damn city..." He paused. "There are a lot of chances something it would be better we stay away from is down there. I

don't know how the situation might turn for the others if they are not careful, so I'm going. Besides, I've spent enough time away from the girls already."

The clones weren't going to refuse one of their master's orders, even if they knew it wasn't the best of the decisions he might take, and began preparing immediately.

Some gathered supplies, while others updated him on the tunnel's dangers and the protocols they'd established for exploration.

Through it all, Erik's mind remained fixed on his companions. He had crossed a forest to find them, and now only a maze of tunnels stood between them.

In a brilliant flash, Amber materialized in the shelter's center with the others, swaying unsteadily as exhaustion overtook her.

June grabbed Amber before she could fall. She looked weak, most likely because of mana exhaustion. Emily, Mira, and many clones appeared with them, holding their weapons and looking too worried about Erik's taste.

"Everyone out! We need to leave this place now!"

The clones around Erik turned toward the source of the commotion. Amber and the others hadn't noticed him yet, blocked from view by the ring of his Chimaeric Demons.

"What happened?" one of the clones asked, rushing to support Amber's other side.

"The lab," Amber said, struggling to stay upright. "We found it. The experiments... they had been made, and... there is still something alive there. It had a mark from the Silver Line Corporation."

Mira stepped forward, her hands clenched tightly around her wooden bow, her knuckles white from the grip. She often turned to look at the tunnels behind her, as if she was expecting something to come.

"The bugs, the ones we've been fighting until now—they're not natural. The Silver Line Corporation created a queen here. And their queen spawned them..."

Erik pushed through the circle of clones. "How much time do we have?"

The group froze at his voice. Amber's eyes widened, Emily's hand flew to her mouth, and Mira's bow nearly slipped from her grasp. June even jumped in place.

"Erik?" Amber said. "You're alive?"

"MASTER!"

"You're here?" Emily said, taking a step toward him.

"Minutes," Mira snapped back to focus. "Maybe less. The queen moves faster than anything we've seen. And she's got hundreds of thousands of smaller bugs following her commands."

"The tunnels are crawling with them," June said. As much as he wanted to hug Erik, he had to focus on what mattered at that moment: survival. "They're organized, coordinated. The queen's controlling all of them."

"Amber can't warp again," Emily said. "She used too much mana getting us back here."

Erik's mind raced. He just survived flying thaids, only for him to find himself having to face thousands of thaids, plus whatever the Silverline Corporation spawned.

<Those damn fuckers...>

The skittering started being audible even from their location. The first scouts would reach them at any moment.

"How many exits does this place have?" Erik asked.

"Three," a clone said. "But two of them go deeper before leading out, and they are connected to the other tunnels. There is only one that directly leads outside."

A loud, piercing scream echoed through the cave, making the walls shake. Small rocks fell from the ceiling. They could hear the sound of thousands of insect-like creatures running through the tunnels, their hard shells scraping against the rock as they moved.

Something massive barreled toward them, so huge that its body scraped against the stone walls with an ear-splitting screech. The queen was coming.

Chapter 1278: The bugs (4)

Erik saw once again Amber's labored breathing and trembling limbs. Even if she recovered enough strength to teleport, she'd never be able to warp their entire group to safety.

The queen's screech echoed through the tunnels again, closer now. There was no time to wait.

"You," Erik said to the nearest clone. "Carry Amber. We need to move."

"Master, are we abandoning the shelter?" The clone scooped Amber into his arms, paying attention not to jostle her.

Erik nodded. "Staying here would be suicide. The tunnels will funnel them straight to us."

"But what about the Silver Line Corporation's facility?" Another clone stepped forward, in truth hoping Erik would have some kind of idea or plan to get through this situation. Indeed, the truth was that if not even the clones got a plan to get out of that situation without losing their camp, something they didn't, Erik had even fewer chances than them to find a suitable one.

"We know where it is now," Erik said. "We can return better prepared."

Erik checked everyone. Emily was helping Mira walk, and Mira was holding her bow so tightly her knuckles were white. June was standing guard. Based on his look, it wasn't going to take much for the thaids to get here.

The clones exchanged uncertain glances. One spoke up, "Master, the journey through Mur to reach this place again won't be simple."

They were right, but they were also overestimating Mur. During his journey here, Erik found many deadly and scary creatures, but there weren't only those. Weaker thaids also roamed the area, and

the clones were able to take care of them as much as Rick did. A little bit of planning was the only thing they needed.

Besides, Erik knew that the journey back to his shelter would be too long and would make the traveling too complicated, but he didn't need to get there.

"I'll build another shelter nearby," Erik said. "We can reach the cave from there. However, I need some of you to return to my first shelter—one of your brothers is there guarding the Chimaeric Demon eggs, and he needs backup."

The skittering grew louder, echoing from multiple tunnels now.

"Which exits are still clear?" Erik asked.

"The western tunnel might—" A clone's response cut off as a wave of smaller bugs poured from one of the eastern passages.

"Move!" Erik said. "Western tunnel, now!"

The clone carrying Amber led the charge, followed by Emily supporting Mira. June took up a defensive position at Erik's side while the remaining clones formed a protective ring around their group.

The smaller bugs surged forward in a chittering wave.

<System, show me their status!>

[On it!]

The biological supercomputer complied, but there were simply too many thaidas around, and seeing them one by one was impossible.

<Give me an average!>



—[Analysis]—

-Name: Operarius Thanatocoleoptera

-Physical Description: The Operarius Thanatocoleoptera are insectoid thoids protected by armored plates and exoskeletons. They have vulnerable spots at their joints and between plates. They work as part of a group under the command of leaders but become disorganized once their leadership is eliminated.

-Brain Crystal Powers: Acid Spray (B26C): Releases corrosive acid from specialized glands that can melt through organic matter and weaken structural materials. The acid becomes more potent when multiple creatures spray simultaneously. The acid is produced through mana.

{Attributes}

-STRENGTH: 134

-INTELLIGENCE: 10

-DEXTERITY: 90

-ENERGY: 467

{Others}

-Power Level: 556

-Estimated Experience per kill: 2,155,510.23

—[End]—

Erik struck, sending waves of wind blades that bisected everything in their path.

[Operarius Thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

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

[mana successfully absorbed, starting conversion procedure.]

[3...2...1...0]

[Operarius Thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

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

[Operarius Thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Operarius Thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Operarius Thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

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Dark fluid sprayed in arcs as the blades carved through the insectoid bodies, splitting their armored carapaces and exposing the pale, pulsing organs beneath.

Severed limbs and twitching thoraxes littered the tunnel floor. Dismembered mandibles clicked as the bisected thajids thrashed in their death throes.

But it wasn't enough to stop the massive wave of monsters coming out of the tunnels.

"RUN! I'LL GIVE YOU SOME MINUTES!"

"What are you going to do, Erik?"

Emily was worried, but she knew there was no point in asking Erik to not do anything dangerous when he resolved to make it already.

"Just a little barbecue!"

They needed to reach the surface before the monsters trapped them in the tunnels, so Emily and the others ran away.

Erik knew what the Silver Line Corporation was capable of creating. If the queen the clones talked about was truly their work, facing her in these confined spaces would be dangerous, as he couldn't even stay out of her range, and the walls could be used to reach him even if he flew.

Things might be better in the cave where the city was, since it was larger, but confined spaces were problematic for many reasons, and even if they were better than his current situation, it didn't change things one bit.

He had no intention of doing so, at least not now, with so many bugs around and with no preparation, but he also had to decrease the number of her pawns as much as he could if he wanted to have a chance at killing her on a future date.

Erik channeled mana into his neural links. The swarm was advancing. All his powers could kill these creatures, regardless of which he chose—but their sheer numbers were a problem.

<Do you think it will work?> Erik asked the biological supercomputer, who read his mind.

[It should; you will also kill a great batch of these monsters, maybe enough to reduce their numbers enough to have a chance against the queen.]

<Good to hear.>

His plan was simple: use fire to remove the oxygen from the tunnel, suffocating the swarm while simultaneously burning them to death. The flames would also create a barrier that no creature would dare cross, at least in theory.

Flames erupted from his hands, engulfing the tunnel in an inferno. The blaze roared through the passage, consuming everything in its path.

The bug-like thaids screeched as the fire caught them; their carapaces offered no protection against the intense heat.

The creatures' exoskeletons crackled and split, revealing soft flesh below that bubbled and charred. Their legs curled inward as they burned, antennae melting into shapeless masses.

Those at the front of the swarm tried to retreat, only to be pushed forward by the endless tide behind them. The fire turned them into a writhing mass of dying creatures.

Dark fluid leaked from their bodies, sizzling as it hit the super-heated stone. The smell of burning chitin filled the air, thick and acrid. The flames spread along the ceiling, creating a barrier of fire that blocked the entire tunnel.

The tactic worked—the oxygen levels plummeted. But Erik's lungs burned as he struggled to breathe. The heat pressed against his skin, warning him to leave before the fire consumed all the breathable air.

He turned and sprinted toward the exit, leaving the wall of flames to hold back the swarm, while notifications rang inside his ears.

[Operarius Thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Operarius Thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Operarius Thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Operarius Thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Operarius Thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Operarius Thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

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#### Chapter 1279: The bugs (5)

Erik sprinted through the tunnel. For now, the thaids weren't on his tail, but that wasn't going to last for long.

The heat from the inferno he created lingered behind him, making the air scorching. But it didn't matter since the thaids' behind him were still burning. The problem was there were other tunnels from which they could reach him and the clones.

His attack bought them time, but he knew the bug-like thaids would recover quickly given their huge numbers. It made them unstoppable.

Each step brought him farther from the roaring flames.

He caught up to the others in less than a minute. The group was still running, but their breath was ragged, at least the ones of those that went inside the underground city and just came out of it.

"Master!" A clone said between breaths. "Did it work?"

"Yes," Erik nodded. "But I got two minutes, three at best, so don't stop running."

Erik glanced behind. "The fire will slow them down, but they'll find another way around it."

Erik then looked at Mira, Amber, Emily, and June. They were all alive, but exhausted.

Amber was drained of energy. She had used up all her mana to warp her and the others away from the cave where the queen bug was, leaving her weak and barely awake.

She was so tired she couldn't move her arms or legs, and someone had to carry her. Her face was pale, and she was breathing lightly.

"Shit."

Erik noticed the skittering behind them was growing louder. There must have been thousands of legs scratching against stone, which meant the number of bugs was astronomical.

Then the queen's screech reached them like a banshee's wail through a megaphone.

"Fuck, it looks like the fire had nothing else to burn!" That meant oxygen quickly returned, and even the gargantuan body of the queen could go through the cave.

His fire was strong and large enough to burn anything, but the caves and tunnels were large, and air passed much faster than he wanted. Not as much as it would have been outside, but still faster than in any other cave.

However, the group was now at the exit. The outside lights were piercing the tunnel's darkness, and the clones were almost there to leave the cursed cave.

Then they did. The light blinded them, but they had not even a single second of time available to get accustomed to it. They emerged in the rocky outcrop between the forest and the beach, where the main entrance was, the same way Erik came through.

They were close enough to the ocean that they could hear its sounds and smell the salt in it. While that meant they were too close to sea thaids, and in the open for flying thaids, the smell wasn't so bad.

<At least the smell of charred flesh is no longer there...>

[Oh yes, because being chased by thousands of bloodthirsty bugs and flying thaids is such an improvement over a bit of barbecue smell. Truly, we're living the dream here.]

<Is it really the right time to be a jerk?>

[Oh my! It's always the right time!]

"The forest," Erik pointed. "We need cover."

They sprinted across the open ground, Amber still carried by one of the clones. The thunderous sound of the swarm grew closer, echoing from the cave mouth behind them.

A clone turned to Erik. He was clearly concerned; his face told it, and his voice reinforced the thought. "Master, the noise—it will draw other thaids."

Erik knew that.

<Fuck!>

He knew the noise would attract every thaid within a five-kilometer radius at least, from the smallest to the largest. The queen must have been really enraged because of the intrusion and was screeching like a hawk.

However, that was not the main problem. Erik glanced at the sky, sweeping from corner to corner, as if one could say the sky had corners. He was searching for the silhouettes of those abominations in the bright sky, the flying thaids.

He then looked at the forest. It wasn't close. Between the mouth of the cave and the safety of the forest stretched at least a kilometer of open ground.

They would cross it fast, despite the chasing monsters, but that would only happen if no beast attacked them.

Land thaids would take some time to reach the place, and even if they did, the trees would not make it easy for them to spot Erik and the clones, but flying thaids would see them easily.

Until they reached the forest, they were exposed to attacks.

"Shapeshift," Erik said to the clones. "Something inconspicuous. If thaids attack, protect Amber and the others. Use Starlight Fireball if we encounter only a few—we have the numbers to kill anything fast if we focus our fire on them, and if you change your appearance, we can ambush whatever tries to get us."

The clones did as instructed. Knowing that so many of them would surely attract more thaids.

June kept close to Erik. He could not do much with his power, and this trip to Mur made him realize there was no place for him on these battlefields. Yet he was here now, and he could at least help by keeping an eye on the sky.

Emily helped Mira walk. She wouldn't let go of her bow even though she could barely keep it in her hands; she drew it too many times.

Ahead of them, one of Erik's clones was carrying Amber while they ran for the trees. However, at that point, a mass of armored bodies poured from the cave's mouth.

"They are here!"

The bug-like thaids were finally there, but the queen was nowhere to be seen. At least not yet.

<At least some good news.>

Yet all those eyes and clicking mandibles made him shiver.

Erik spotted movement in his peripheral vision—dark shapes were approaching their position. <The fuckers made too much noise.>

The flying thaids had been attracted by the bug-like thaids and the queen's ungodly shrieks.

"Company above," Erik said, not breaking his stride. The forest's edge was still distant, and the flying thaids were getting closer and closer.

"WHAT DO WE DO, MASTER?!"



"You keep running. I will take care of the rest!"

The bugs advanced quickly across the rocky ground, their legs clicking against the stone in a horrifying symphony.

[What are you planning to do?] The biological supercomputer asked. There was concern in its weird voice.

Erik glanced at the sky again, tracking the movement of the flying thaids. They were less than 200 meters away now and were going to cross that distance in seconds.

<Just to give something easy to feast upon to those flying motherfuckers.

Chapter 1280: The bugs (6)

Erik spun around to face the pursuing swarm. His neural links were quickly being filled by the mana inside Erik's brain crystal.

The flying thaids circled overhead at that point, and Erik had to act fast if he wanted to save the others.

He knew the flying thaids' simple minds sought fresh meat, and that was exactly what he was going to give them, and in abundance.

Mana surged through his body as he formed hundreds of wind blades, each one sharp enough to slice through the thickest carapace.

He measured his power enough to make sure he would end up with enough mana for whatever happened later, but enough to kill most of the bug-like thaids he could during a short time frame. The blades took shape.

Erik then unleashed his attack. The wind blades shot forward. It was a barrage that cut through the air, making a sound akin to a blade tearing silk.

Then, the blades collided with the advancing swarm of bug-like thaids. The impact was devastating—thousands of creatures were sliced apart instantly, their bodies splitting into chunks as the wind

blades cut through their ranks. Limbs, heads, and thoraxes got scattered across the battlefield in a display of destruction and savage ruthlessness.

Armored bodies split apart in explosions of viscera. Dark ichor sprayed in thick arcs, painting the rocky ground in abstract patterns of gore.

The wind blades carved through joint and carapace alike, exposing organs and writhing innards to the open air.

Dismembered legs twitched and mandibles clicked one last time as body segments separated, spilling their contents across the stone and dirt.

Shredded thoraxes leaked steaming fluids while severed abdomens revealed pulsing organs.

Erik didn't know what was that flowed inside the creature's bodies, if blood or something else, yet the scent of it was so strong and pungent that it was revolting. At least for him. For the flying thaids, that scent must have been the scent of a buffet, telling them it was time for dinner.

<Good,> Erik thought. <The plan works exactly as wanted.>

Erik smiled as the aerial creatures descended. His plan worked—with so many prey laid before them, the flying thaids would focus on the easier meal rather than pursuing his group. At least in theory. One could never say what prompted thaids to take certain decisions. Sometimes they should have acted in one way but did another one, even if it was nonsensical.

The flying thaids landed among the carnage; their wingspans created powerful downdrafts that kicked up thick clouds of dust.

Their taloned feet crushed through scattered limbs and shell fragments as they touched down, their weight leaving deep impressions in the blood-soaked ground.

They tore into the fresh kills, but their feast didn't go unchallenged. The surviving bug-like thaids, hundreds of thousands of them, surged forward in waves.

While each individual bug was relatively weak, especially compared to the more imposing flying thaids, and posed little threat to them, their overwhelming numbers made them dangerous even for those titanic creatures. The bugs swarmed over the larger predators, snapping their mandibles.

The flying thaids screeched in rage as the puny creatures crawled over them. Thanks to Instability, Erik could clearly perceive the outrage they were feeling.

To them, the bug-like thaids were no better than humans. They were prey, and prey having this much audacity was something their primal minds could not tolerate.

They snapped their jaws and struck with their talons, each blow destroying dozens of bugs, but more kept coming.

The battle devolved into a chaotic mess of thrashing bodies and spraying fluids, with the flying thaids having a clear advantage, since they weren't even using their brain crystal powers, but with more and more bugs amassing around them.

The situation was turning complicated, even for them.

Erik watched the scuffle unfold, noting how even a single flying thaid could devastate scores of the bug-like thaids.

But he couldn't risk any of the flying thaids breaking away to pursue his group. With five hundred clones in their party, they would make a tempting target.

He gathered more mana, launching another volley of wind blades into the bugs' fray. The attacks carved through the swarm, making more carnage to keep the flying thaids occupied.

It looked like it was working. The severed bug bodies rained down as his blades struck, adding to the growing piles of meat and shell fragments littering the ground, which the flying thaids deeply appreciated.

The problem was that the scent of death grew stronger. Blood and ichor pooled between rocks, while torn flesh and exposed organs released their own pungent odors. The smell created a powerful lure that no thaid in the area could resist.

<It's too strong.>

[Yeah... It's going to attract all the thaids in the area...]

That was not what Erik intended to do. Every thaid within kilometers would soon reach this place, following the intoxicating scent of fresh meat.

The feeding frenzy Erik created to save his group would now draw newer threats.

[You didn't consider this, right?]

Erik remained silent. In truth, he considered it, in the sense that he knew such a possibility was real, but he didn't know how strong the smell would be. Inside the cave he burned the thaids, so the stench got quickly overwhelmed by that of charred meat. Regardless, it wasn't like he could afford to hold himself.

He turned toward the forest, relieved to see no sign of the clones. They disappeared among the trees. But the situation grew more dangerous by the second.

The sounds of approaching thaids intensified. It was the sound of snarls, heavy footsteps, and growls. Worse yet, these sounds came from the same direction the clones had taken.

Erik ran to the trees, escaping the battle he had started. As he left, the sounds of fighting and eating grew quieter, while the noises of the new predators got louder.

[The newcomers just arrived.] Erik was no longer inside that area and was indeed in the forest.

<Good, let them kill each other.>

The sound of rending flesh and shattering chitin increased as new fighters joined the fray. The bug swarm's numbers meant little now. The larger thaids would devastate their ranks while fighting over the bounty of dead and dying creatures.

That was, assuming the larger thaids didn't turn on each other—which was likely given their territorial and aggressive nature.

Thaids fought viciously over food sources, often ignoring smaller prey in favor of establishing dominance over their own kind.

<Let's hope things go as we want.>

Erik ran into the forest, keeping track of where his group had gone. His clones had been smart—they kept away from open paths and stuck to places where their shapeshifted bodies could easily hide. Amber and Emily were the only problem, since they were the only ones who could not shapeshift.