

BIOLOGICAL 1281

Chapter 1281: The bugs (7)

Erik ran in haste. He had to find the clones before something else found them first, but they were not that close.

The group had moved with haste, despite Amber being in a sorrowful state, and went a lot farther compared to where Erik was.

<She is light; I doubt the Chimaeric Demons would have had problems carrying her.>

[Let's just hope they aren't too far. We need to regroup if we want to survive this.]

Erik nodded, <Keep your senses up; I want nothing sneaking on me like the last time.>

The young man was referring to the snake in the ruins. The thing that escaped even the biological supercomputer's sense and his Instability brain crystal power.

Hopefully, that was a rare exception, a unique individual. He didn't think something like that would appear again, or it would be a nightmare.

Erik followed the signs left behind by his group's passage, and it didn't take much for him to find them, given his speed.

Amber, Mira, Emily, and June were resting, waiting for Erik with five Chimaeric Demons in human form. The rest of his clones had shapeshifted into insects and small creatures, blending in with the vegetation to eventually ambush anything that got too foolish and tried to attack them.

"Is everyone alright?" Erik scanned the group. His eyes lingered on Amber, who was still suffering from mana exhaustion.

Her face had regained some of its natural color, though signs of exhaustion still lingered.

"We're fine," Amber said, her voice stronger than before. She sat propped against a tree trunk as the clone who carried her stood beside her.

Emily nodded while checking her rifle, and Mira looked around, her bow in hand. That was the weapon she was more comfortable with, and since coming to Mur, she even slept with it.

"The clones got us out fast enough."

"Good to hear."

The conversation was then overshadowed by the not-so-distant sounds of combat. They reached them even if they were already a couple of kilometers from the battle.

Screeches, roars, and the wet sounds of tearing flesh. A loud crash suggested another large predator had joined the fray.

In truth, the whole situation was rather problematic for many reasons, despite being one where Thaid's ripped themselves to shreds.

It was true, whatever happened there that day, the queen's forces were bound to receive a huge blow, and so would the local thaid population.

The problem was that they could still hear the battle sounds, which meant that either more thaid's were joining the fray and that the battle was growing larger, or that it was moving.

In both cases, it was dangerous, and Erik had no intention of staying close to it.

"Master," one of the Chimaeric Demons in human form stepped forward, "What are we going to do? The fight is drawing more thaid's."

Erik listened to the sounds. It looked like its intensity increased drastically in the span of a few seconds.

The feeding frenzy had escalated as he wanted; it was just that it went much farther than he intended.

"We need to hide," Erik said. "There are too many thaids gathering back there. Even the Three-headed Void Ravagers would think twice before engaging that many thaids at once, and this should make you understand what I think about personal involvement."

Erik knew that if the Three-headed Void Ravagers—the same species that had decimated his army—would hesitate to join a battle with such powerful thaids, even though they were fewer than his wyvern-transformed clones, then he certainly had no intention of getting involved.

The situation was far too dangerous to even consider staying in the area to gain experience points. Any thaid could spot him, and once one engaged him in combat, others would surely follow. No, the wisest course of action was to get as far away as possible from the feeding frenzy.

"The new shelter," another clone said. "We could head to the site where you said you wanted to make one and do it now. With your powers, it wouldn't take much, and it would be safer than staying here. Thaids wouldn't think humans are hidden within it."

The group murmured in agreement. June nodded with particular emphasis.

"Alright." Erik turned to address all his clones, including those hiding around.

The feeding frenzy kept drawing more thaids to the area, making their journey to the hill increasingly dangerous.

The hill wasn't close either, and they would need to head there expecting thaids heading toward the battle.

A single encounter could spell disaster, not just from the immediate threat but from the chain reaction it might trigger—other thaids would be drawn to any sounds of conflict, and blood would attract more, this time closer to his soon-to-be shelter.

"I need you to find a safe path," he said to the clones. "We can't just roam blindly, or we will risk getting ourselves into a fight. There are too many thaids. Stay within range of my Instability brain crystal power so we can keep in touch and avoid the monsters. If you spot any thaids approaching, tell me right away."

"What if they spot us instead?"

"Avoid combat at all costs," Erik said. "Blood will draw them straight to us. We can't risk a single kill alerting the others, not even if they are the ones dying."

The clones knew that, but they were too diligent to not ask Erik that question.

They all nodded, at least those who could. The others had serious expressions, but they knew they could trust Erik, or at least the biological supercomputer's plans.

They began moving, following the path that would lead them to the hill where Amber's group had camped before reaching the cave.

The hill they were heading to offered decent visibility of the surrounding forest and allowed them to see what was happening near the cave entrance.

The forest grew denser as they went upward. The trees hid them from the flying thaids rushing toward the site of the battle in a frenzy, but could do nothing for the land thaids heading there for the same reason.

Chapter 1282: The bugs (8)

Amber regained her mana and felt progressively better, but the clones never left her side. She felt better, but she was far from being in top shape.

[She can use her brain crystal power at least.]

<Yeah, the thought of her warping away is a great reassurance.>

The group then crossed a shallow stream, one Erik hadn't crossed before, and that he couldn't see back then given his position and how small it was.

The burble of the stream masked the sounds of their footsteps against the wet stones and soil, giving them some cover for their movement.

However, this same rushing water made it difficult for them to distinguish or hear other noises in the forest, forcing them to rely on their sight. But there was a limit to how much they could see there.

Luckily, Erik's clones were scouting the surroundings in a wide perimeter—some moving ahead to scout the path, others watching their flanks, and a few keeping guard behind the group.

With this, Erik felt confident they weren't being stalked and that the path ahead was clear.

Yet Emily kept her rifle in her hands, looking around with her scope. Mira was doing the same. An arrow was knocked on her bow, which rested in her hand.

June brought up the rear of the cluster of women while shapeshifted into a small bird. Even if he couldn't go that high because of the flying thaids, he could at least see what was happening under the trees' shade.

<Master!>

<Wha—>

A not-so-distant roar made them freeze. Something massive was passing near them to join the massive feast Erik prepared. The sound was strong enough to make the group make assumptions about the thaid's size, and it had to be rather large.

"Keep moving," Erik said. "Stay quiet and watch where you step."

He mentally turned to the biological supercomputer.

<What do you think?>

[Based on that roar, we're looking at something that could give even the flying thaids pause.]

<Do you think the big one will make things worse?>

[Oh, absolutely. A thaid that size won't politely wait its turn at the buffet. It'll charge right in, probably crushing half the bug swarm under its paws before even feeding, and if that isn't enough to satisfy its hunger, or if another thaid tries to stop it, it will devour even them.]

<You sound awfully sure of someone who hadn't even seen the beast.>

[Yes, I didn't see it, but its mana levels are off the chart, and its size shows it is also physically powerful. I'm sure about what I'm saying. Size isn't just about bulk—it's a direct multiplier of strength. The larger the thaid, the more devastating its physical power.]

<Ok, but the flying thaids are still there. It won't be easy.>

[Even if the flying thaids are weaker, at best they'll either retreat to the sky to mount an attack. Don't forget that flying thaids strong points are their ability to attack outside of most creatures' range, not their power itself. My money's on a fight.]

Erik sighed, wondering if the size difference will be enough to kill as many bugs and flying thaids as possible. The beast would remain, but fewer monsters would roam the area, and the queen's army was going to be weakened.

The chaos he made was about to become even more violent, and he didn't want to be out there when that happened.

The group pressed on, passing through a section of forest where vines draped between trees like massive cobwebs.

The vegetation helped them, making it harder for flying thaids to spot them from above, but it also slowed their progress.

A clone landed on a branch near Erik's head. It made a soft chirping sound that Erik recognized as a warning signal. He raised his hand, bringing the group to a halt.

<Shit... What is it now?>

The others knew the chirp meant danger.

"What is it?" Emily asked before the clone could explain it to Erik.

<Three separate groups of thaids are moving through the area. Not headed directly for us, but they're going to stumble upon us if we don't go around them. The battle agitated them.>

Erik told the others what the clone said.

"How far are we from the hill?" Amber recovered, but trekking around wasn't making her feel better.

"Two kilometers, maybe less," Erik said. "But we need to circle around these groups. If these are packs, we are in trouble."

They altered course, moving parallel to their original path. The forest grew younger here, with more space between trees but also less cover. They moved from shadow to shadow, from tree to tree, freezing at any suspicious sound.

A clone in bird form swooped down with another warning. Erik grabbed Amber's arm, pulling her behind a massive fallen tree. The others followed instantly, pressing themselves into the shadows of the trunk.

Something large moved ahead of them. It was another flying thaid joining the fray.

<Another?>

<We are with the master. What did you expect with that luck of his?>

Erik didn't reply. If there was something he learned, it was that the goddess of luck really hated him. The creature didn't approach them, but its presence forced them to remain hidden.

Minutes stretched by as they waited. Erik kept his hand on Amber's arm, feeling her pulse gradually slow as the immediate fear passed. June pressed himself flat against the ground, barely breathing.

When the wing beats faded away, they emerged from their hiding spot. The forest had fallen silent—at least in their immediate surroundings. The sounds of the distant battle, though, grew louder. In the distance, explosions lit up the sky, and they could feel powerful surges of mana even from their position.

"Let's resume our march," Erik said.

The group quickened their pace, though the forest made walking as fast as they should an impossible ordeal.

The hill rose before them now, its slope gentle but long. Reaching the top would leave them exposed for a brief time, but they needed the space it would provide while Erik created the shelter, which would then work as a protective measure against thaids' eyes.

Cracking sounds filled the forest at that point, close to their position. Trees snapped under heavy weight, and several large creatures moved nearby, attracted by the fighting, which had now blown out of proportion.

There weren't any more, just sparse thaids in the area, but larger and larger clusters of them. They had come looking for food, but soon they would start hunting for living creatures instead.

In the end, the group reached the hill's top, where Erik almost got caught by the flying thaids when searching for the group. He didn't waste time and started channeling mana.

Chapter 1283: The bugs (9)

Erik wasted no time once they reached the hilltop. Mana flowed through his neural links as he began reshaping the environment.

First came the trees—hundreds of them sprouting from the earth, filling the area.

The trees formed a thick cover that kept them hidden from anything flying above or watching from the ground.

At the hill's center, Erik channeled his mana to create something more ambitious. Another one of his customary massive trees.

It burst from the ground, its trunk wider than a house and stretching hundreds of meters into the sky. The tree would not only be a signal for Rick to know Erik was okay but also a landmark visible for kilometers to guide the group around the area, a lookout tower that would help whoever was standing guard to see if there was danger, and most importantly, their new base of operation on Mur, at least for the time being.

Erik hollowed out sections of the trunk, creating chambers. Stairs spiraled up through the wood, connecting multiple levels of rooms, which he furnished with beds, tables, chairs, and whatever they needed, formed directly from the wood.

He made windows at strategic points, draping them with thick curtains of vines to hide them and provide shade during warmer periods.

However, the lower sections of the tree remained free of branches. There was no sense in making them, even if they could help during fights or allow a better scouting position. They would just be used by thaids to make their nests, and Erik wanted to avoid that.

The shelter took shape quickly, and so did Erik's personal farm. Around the tree's base, he grew smaller fruit trees—apple, pear, and other varieties that would provide food for a group so large as this one—but he also grew carrots, potatoes, and other similar vegetables.

There were 500 Chimaeric demons, after all, plus him, Emily, Mira, Amber, and June. Of course, he was going to provide other vegetables, but that would have to wait.

After their harrowing journey through Mur, the only thing Erik wanted was to rest. The food would give that extra to really make them relax a little and would give everyone the nutrients they needed.

Erik wasn't sure how well the others had been eating. They didn't look starved, but they also weren't as healthy as they had been before leaving Mannard. Giving them a proper meal was bound to lift their spirits.

The group settled into their new shelter as afternoon light started fading. It actually took some time for Erik to grow the plants, but there was nothing they could do about it.

Everyone enjoyed eating something sweet for a while, instead of just meat and whatever wild vegetable they found.

The food helped them forget the day's horrors—the swarms of bug-like thaids that chased them, the terrifying queen, the result of the experiments of the Silver Line Corporation, and the flying thaids that had attacked after Erik's stunt.

But at least that stunt saved their lives.

With full stomachs and a safe place to rest, everyone felt better—even the clones relaxed despite being focused on protecting Erik now that they found him.

As the night approached, Erik found Amber sitting near one of the western windows, watching the last rays of the sun come down.

Her color had returned to her face, and her mana levels were at their full capacity again. She looked worlds better than the pale, exhausted figure he'd found that morning.

Erik hesitated as he approached her. What should he say? What should he do? His steps were uncertain. They hadn't seen each other since he sent her and the others away on the sea, and that whole situation was basically his fault.

Seeing her alive and well stirred a lot of emotions—relief, a deep longing that caught in his throat.

He wanted to reach out, to hug her and confirm she was really there. He wanted to know she was not just another illusion born of hope and exhaustion.

He just wanted to kiss her, Mira, Emily. He just didn't know if that was the right moment.

And he held back, his hands clenching briefly at his sides before relaxing.

After all, the group went through something horrific for weeks. The clones were few and not strong enough to protect them against the horrors this continent hid. The day's horrors and what he knew they had to do in the following days.

He didn't know if approaching them would be seen as inappropriate. So, he stopped.

"I thought you were dead," Erik said, sitting beside her, keeping his distance.

Amber turned to him, a mix of emotions crossing her face, but happiness was the most predominant one.

"We thought the same about you. When you sent us away..." She glanced at the Chimaeric Demons moving through the shelter. "We didn't know if they would stay alive if something happened to you. We still don't."

Erik understood her concern.

"Well, it's not like we can test this."

The Chimaeric Demons were his creations, born from his brain crystal powers. Though they had independent thought and weren't mere temporary creatures born purely out of mana, their connection to him was unclear. His death might have meant their end as well, but at the same time, it could have not.

He paused for a second.

"So, what happened after I sent you away?" Erik asked. "When you reached Mur?"

Amber's fingers traced patterns on the wooden windowsill. "It was... hard. We landed on a nearby beach. Luckily, nothing spotted us there, but it took some time to rest enough for us to be able to leave."

"I know. I was able to find you because I spotted the traces you left on the sand."

However, there was something in Amber's expression that told him whatever happened after they left the beach wasn't pleasant.

"You have been attacked, haven't you?"

"Of course. How could it be any different?" There was a look of resignation mixed with fear in those words.

"How did you survive?" That was Erik's most pressing question. Of course, it must have been because they fought, but he wanted to know more.

Erik's question wasn't just born from concern or curiosity. He needed to understand what they'd encountered, how they'd survived, what tactics worked, and which didn't, in case they met it again.

Every detail could be important for their survival. Besides, understanding how the clones had performed here and what the groups' limits against Mur's thaids were, would help him come up new strategies and refine the ones he already made.

Chapter 1284: The bugs (10)

"The clones did most of the job. Without them..." She shook her head. It was clear what she was implying. Without the clones, they would have all died, but that was expected.

Amber and the others had incredible powers but were still not strong enough to fight on Mur without such a mana usage that they would be rendered useless in the following fight.

Erik was in a somewhat better position, mainly due to his vast mana reserves and versatile powers that served him well in various situations. The group lacked these advantages—something Erik was going to address.

"We faced things that would have killed us in seconds otherwise." She was referring to herself, Mira, Emily, and June.

"Massive bear-like creatures with brain crystals that could destroy entire areas. Thaids that hunted in groups. Some thaids could even change their size at will."

"Useful."

"Yeah, for the creature, it certainly was."

Erik listened as Amber gave more and more details. He had found and fought similarly strong monsters, but contrary to the Chimaeric Demons, he didn't need numbers to face them.

However, based on what Rick said, albeit he and the other clones were plenty strong for the average thaid here, their lack of mana forced them to target smaller and weaker ones and to use tactics if they wanted to take care of those on a similar level of strength.

"Emily helped a lot, too. With her scope, she spotted thaids in the distance and even killed them when her mana allowed it," Amber said.

"Mira's arrows worked well too, but she was mostly taken care of on the tactical side." She paused. "I think she is regretting a little not having taken a more unique power. She can shapeshift, which means she can scout and fight melee well, which was something she lacked, but her birth brain crystal power was not that strong to begin with, and this means she is now weaker at a distance."

Of course, on Mannard, this problem would be non-existent given how much weaker thaids were compared to Mur.

Instead, here her mana was not enough to give her attacks an edge. If she needed to kill the stronger thaids but they could see or perceive her arrows, and she wasn't physically strong enough to fight melee.

"But some of them..." She shuddered. "Some were simply too powerful to fight."

"Yeah..."

"We didn't start with just 500 clones. We had around 800. After losing 300 of them, we were forced to hide more often than we would have liked."

Erik's hands clenched. He had pushed himself to reach them as quickly as possible, but hearing about their struggles made him wish he'd moved even faster.

"The worst part was not knowing," Amber said. "Not knowing if you were alive, if you'd make it here, if we'd ever see you again. "

She turned to face him. "When we saw you today, when you appeared in that cave..." Her voice trailed off.

"I'm sorry..." That was all he could say.

A heavy silence filled the room. Erik noticed the tears in Amber's eyes. Neither of them spoke—there was too much to say after being apart for weeks in this untamed and dangerous land, but nearly not the time.

Besides, Erik was filled with guilt. The clones died trying to protect him and the others, just because he told them to.

Their death was bad enough, but he also felt guilty about what Amber and the others went through—spending weeks scared and fighting to stay alive, not knowing if he would ever come to help them. He promised to keep them safe, but even though he tried his best, they still suffered while he wasn't there.

However, he also knew there was something else they had to address. Something quite important that might give them clues about the thaids, the Silver Line Corporation, and, of course, the Blackguards.

"I know that it's exactly not right to ask you this, but I need to know what you found in that cave."

Amber's expression grew serious. She knew Erik was going to ask that question. She would have asked the same if the roles were reversed.

"At first, we found remnants of the old world—human remains scattered here and there among some ancient technology. Rifles that would be considered antiques now, protective gear made of kevlar." She shook her head. "It's weird to think our ancestors considered such tools enough during a war."

"Well, it's not like we can blame them. Thaids didn't exist back then, and those things worked against each other..."

"Yeah, you are right." She paused. "We also found the underground city."

The clones already told something to Erik, but it was Amber and the others who went searching around the most, so they were the ones with the most information.

"An underground city... Like Liberty Watch?"

"Exactly. The deeper we went, the more we understood how large that place was. It is. Large, I mean."

She paused. "Can you believe it? An entire underground city, preserved from the time before the thaids came. It is so big that even Liberty Watch can't compare. The layout, the equipment we found. It was both a military installation and a research place like Liberty Watch."

"The clones said you reported about many Silver Line Corporation's logos," Erik said. "Based on what the clones said, I guess they used the place to make their experiments."

Amber nodded. "Those bug-like thaids weren't natural, if we could say that. Well, thaids aren't, but it was clear that the queen was one of the Silverline corporation's creations."

Amber could do nothing but shiver at the memory. The clones told Erik that too, but Amber went on giving him more details and described the place as best as she could, the creatures living there, and the nests.

...

...

...

"We think she might be one of the first thaids ever created, maybe even a prototype. The corporation's experiments gave birth to something they couldn't control, and that led to their death," she said at some point.

"And now she's breeding an army down there."

"The problem is for how long that went on. In theory, it should have been centuries, but do we know how long that thing lives?" That meant she could go on making an army for a long time.

"Do we know when it got the ability to spawn other thaids?" From that depended when she started and how many thaids she birthed.

"Well, I actually don't care if I have to be honest," Erik said. "What matters is finding information."

"The facility's documents are most likely destroyed," Amber said. "I wouldn't have my hopes up if I were you."

"I don't." Erik gave her a resolute look.

He stared out the window, watching shadows lengthen across the forest and wondering if the battle at the rocky outcrop was still going on.

The sounds decreased, to the point Erik couldn't hear anything anymore from this distance, but something might still be going on there. "We'll need to go back there."

"I knew you'd say that." Amber's voice held no surprise, only resignation. However, she knew that with Erik there, their chances of surviving that place increased a lot.

"The queen will be a problem, though."

"I don't doubt that."

Erik knew. The underground city held secrets about the Silver Line Corporation's early experiments with thaids. Understanding those origins was not important.

Erik didn't care about thaids, they were pests he couldn't get rid of even if he wanted to, at least until he got stronger.

He was more interested in the labs themselves because he was certain the blackguards were searching those places and most likely camped there.

Amber rose, stretching muscles stiff from their earlier flight. "We should get some proper rest. Tomorrow, we can start planning our return to the cave."

Erik agreed. They had all pushed themselves to their limits that day. The queen and her swarm could wait.

"Ok, I'll leave then," Erik said.

"No. You will keep me company tonight."

Chapter 1285: The bugs (11)

Gwen pressed the radio button on her collar. "General, we can see Mur from up here."

The continent was in front of them, below, to be precise. Its massive landmass was partially obscured by clouds. The plane kept its altitude outside the atmosphere, where no thaid could reach them, but that didn't make the group feel safer.

Becker's voice came through the radio. "Remember your goal. Find Erik and provide help. If he needs extraction, set up the signal repeater in a suitable location and send the signal. Erik and his Chimaeric Demons can fly—you'll board the plane mid-flight, but you will have a short amount of time before the flying thaids spot you, and I wish that won't happen."

"Understood, sir." Gwen turned to her companions and the 100 Chimaeric Demons that volunteered to join the mission. They all sat strapped in their seats, equipment checked and double-checked.

"Is everyone ready?"

The interior of the plane hummed with the sound of the engine pumping and burning fuel. Their gear lay secured around them—parachutes, oxygen tanks, and their weapons of choosing, plus some other things Becker's team prepared. The pod with their supplies waited in the cargo hold, programmed to follow their descent path.

"Ready as we'll ever be," Floyd said, adjusting his oxygen mask. His usual grin peeked through the mask.

Martha nodded, her eyes set on the continent below. Ben, Mikey, and the Chimaeric Demons checked one last time their parachutes, while Allan checked their communication devices. Aron remained silent. It was clear he wasn't sure this was a good idea. However, despite him feeling scared, he still wanted to help his friends.

But it wasn't just that. Saying that it wasn't because Erik might give everyone new brain crystal powers would be a lie.

Everyone wanted to get stronger, and in their war against the blackguards and their minions, they saw how having multiple brain crystal powers helped them survive in a battle.

Sure, they were heading to the most dangerous place on the planet to do that, but since there were many goals to achieve, among which was to help Erik, it was worth it.

"Remember," Gwen said, "We deploy the chutes only when close to the ground. Opening them too early makes us targets for flying thaids, and it's not like we are like the ancient humans. Our bodies can take some punishment. Keep your oxygen flowing until we hit breathable atmosphere. The pods will track our position and land near us. Questions?"

The team remained silent, having practiced this procedure countless times in simulations. The plane's red light flashed. Time to jump.

Gwen stood first, moving to the rear hatch. The others followed, forming a line. The hatch opened, revealing the curve of the planet below.

At this height, the air was as thin as it was brutally cold. Ice crystals floated around them, refracting the sunlight into dozens of rainbow halos that surrounded the team as they fell.

One by one, they jumped, embracing the void. Their suits protected them from the extreme cold, but there was nothing they could do against flying thaids, so they needed to get their asses below the trees as fast as possible.

The Mur grew larger as they got down, its land becoming clearer—vast forests, mountain ranges, and bodies of water were there in all their magnificent and harrowing grandeur.

The group kept close to each other as they fell through the sky. Behind them, the supply pod followed their path down.

As they pierced through the upper atmosphere, the air grew thicker. Their suits automatically adjusted to the changing pressure. The ground rushed up to meet them, details sharpening with each passing second.

"Look at that," Floyd's voice came through their radios, pointing at something below.

A massive tree rose from in the middle of the forest, not too far from the shores, a couple of kilometers at best. Its trunk was wider than any building in New Alexandria and much larger than any tree in this cursed land, which weren't small to begin with.

That thing looked like a giant umbrella.

"Erik's work," Gwen said. "Amber mentioned his knack for creating giant trees. She said he used them as landmarks and shelters."

That was a pretty clear hint about Erik and his situation. "If he even made a shelter," Aaron said, "he shouldn't be in a difficult situation."

"Depends on how you define a difficult situation. He might be alive, but with no clones, he might have trouble hunting the monster and might be trapped inside the tree... We need to check."

"Let's hope things are not like we think..."

As they got closer to the land, they couldn't stop thinking. It was hard to believe they were the first humans to reach this place after centuries.

"Well, besides the blackguards, of course," a clone said.

"They don't count," Floyd said. "Those scum are about as human as my grandmother's pet rock—and trust me, that rock had more personality."

"Focus," Gwen said. "We are approaching the ground. Prepare for chute deployment."

The forest got closer and closer. At Gwen's signal, everyone deployed their parachutes. The sudden deceleration jerked them upward; their descent got slowed down a lot, and that was in itself dangerous.

Since they knew nothing about the thaids in the area, how strong they were, what powers they had, and their anxiety spiked.

In the end, they landed in a small clearing near the massive tree, a couple of hundred meters from it. The pods landed some moments later. The group quickly gathered their equipment, scanning the surroundings for threats.

Just by landing, they could already say the air here was different from Mannard. It had something wild and fresh in it, much more than in any forest on the human-controlled continent.

They could hear noises coming from deep in the forest, and no one wanted to stay long enough to find out what made them.

However, at least the tree covered them from Flying thaids, at least partially.

"We need to move," Gwen said. "We need to find somewhere less exposed and investigate the tree."

The team picked up their supplies from the pod and started moving, walking along the huge tree roots, which made natural paths through the forest.

The surrounding forest was like nothing they'd ever seen before. Strange metal-like plants made soft ringing sounds in the wind, and some flowers gave off glowing lights.

"This place has massive amounts of mana." Allan would have never thought to reach this place of legends during his life.

"Don't chitchat," Gwen said. "Do I need to remind you even Solomon Judd died here?"

That made them shut up and focus on their tasks.

They found a safe spot between several big tree roots where they could hide. It was a good place—they could see danger coming and had several ways to escape if needed.

Chapter 1286: The bugs (12)

Gwen checked if there were thaids around, and when she saw there weren't, she signaled the group to spread around the massive tree.

Gwen observed the massive trunk. They had to know if this was made by Erik or if it was just some natural tree that the thaids used as a nest or something like that.

In the first case, it would mean they would have already completed the first part of their mission, of course, if Erik was there, and that they could eventually head back if Erik wished so. In the second case, it would mean they were fucked.

"Look for any signs of human activity. Footprints, broken branches, anything that can tell if this tree is safe or not."

Floyd searched the perimeter. Though they kept their distance from the massive tree, many roots sprawled across the ground. If any human had made this place their home, traces of their presence would still be visible.

"I found nothing," Floyd said. He then went examining one of the sprouting roots. "Besides, the surface of this thing is weird, but that could mean anything."

Martha was in the same situation. "Yeah, there are no clear signs of human activity that I can see. We'll need to search more."

The group continued their search, moving in a circular pattern around the tree but keeping their distance from it, hiding between bushes and plants.

"The vegetation h—"

Before Ben could say anything, a thaïd made itself known, making an ear-piercing roar, which was followed by shouts in the distance. The sound echoed through the forest, sending birds scattering from the trees.

"That came from the northeast," Gwen said, already moving in that direction. "Could be Erik."

For all they knew, Erik might have been ambushed by a Thaïd—it wouldn't be surprising here on Mur.

Though they had faith in his abilities and might, they had just arrived and weren't sure if he had already proven strong enough to defeat the local thaïds, or how these creatures' strength compared to his.

No one from Mannard had been here and survived to tell the tale, at least not officially. They knew the blackguards had been able to survive in this hellish place, but they were the blackguards, and their presence here was basically a secret. Besides, they were too strong to count, based on what the group knew.

Erik had been able to fight and win against them, but the organization could still be hiding monsters in their ranks, and they most certainly did.

The group rushed through the forest, keeping their formation tight. They moved without stopping but knew that depending on the situation, they might not join the fight. Besides, they knew that any noise could attract unwanted attention, so they had to avoid luring more thaids to the scene of the battle.

"Keep your eyes open."

The sounds of combat grew louder. Through gaps in the foliage, they saw movement, but it was hard to see them clearly, given how fast these were.

Once there, the scene that greeted them stopped them in their tracks.

A colossal bear-like creature was currently fighting against someone who could only be Erik. The thaid—towering over some of the trees on its hind legs—swung at its opponent while ice spears materialized around its enormous paws.

Erik moved incredibly fast. He avoided all the creature's attacks and hit back with strikes that made the ground shake. Even though the thaid was stronger than any enemy they had seen before, Erik was still winning the fight.

Ben's jaw dropped. For once, Floyd lost his joking demeanor, while Martha gasped, her hands flying to her mouth. Even Allan, usually unflappable, watched with wide-eyed wonder.

They all remembered how Erik was 5 years earlier, how the teachers at the Red Palace berated him for not being as strong as they expected an awakener to be. Of course, it was a lie. Erik had never been an awakener because he was more than that.

Among the group, Allan had seen the least of Erik's fighting ability. Though he had seen Erik's clones in battle and knew how utterly lethal they could be, his only direct observation of Erik was during their time at the Red Palace—and even then, Allan had paid little attention to him.

Besides, a lot of time passed since those days, and Erik's feats and fame grew more and more in this period.

Sure, he faked his death for some time, but once it had been known he was alive, rumors about his life in Etrium spread, and people saw his rise in fame, strength, and status in the mercenaries' country.

Yet, nothing was comparable to what he saw that day. Allan had joined many fights since Frant was taken by Volkov, even more when Becker returned and a fight to reclaim the country started. So, he was skilled enough to say how strong the bear in front of Gwen's friend was.

"Incredible," Floyd said. "He's actually beating that thing."

Gwen sized up the battle. Though the Thaid's speed and strength were much greater than anything she had seen, Erik seemed to have the upper hand. Gwen knew Erik didn't need it, but helping him wrap up the fight quickly was still better than waiting.

"Martha, trap it. Floyd, slow it down. Aaron, use your corrosive slime to make its movements even slower, but most importantly, painful. Mickey, send your bugs to impair its vision and devour it."

It was true. The beast was stronger than them, but they were in a group. Humanity's strength had never been their body, but their use of their brain crystal powers and their numbers, their tactics.

The beast was strong, but each one of the group members had at least a B-ranked brain crystal, meaning they had a lot of energy, and since they got Erik's training technique, their mana consumption decreased as the number of neural links increased.

The group sprang into action. Martha's powers activated, roots bursting from the ground to entangle the thaid's legs.

The roots she controlled here were different from the ones back home on Mannard. The local trees had much more powerful roots—they were tougher, thicker, and bigger. Martha's abilities had also grown stronger at 54 neural links, letting her make any plants she controlled stronger.

As Floyd's ability took effect, he affected the creature's momentum, slowing it down.

Aaron's corrosive slime splashed against the thaid's fur, eating through its protective coat. Mickey's flesh-eating bugs swarmed around its head, forcing it to close its eyes.

Rick glanced at the newcomers as they joined the fray, recognizing the others.

<It looks like they got stronger, uh?>

Their coordinated attack impressed even a Chimaeric Demon. <They must have gone through a lot, but why are they here?>

Chapter 1287: The bugs (13)

"Good timing," Rick said between strikes, seeing how Martha's root control and Floyd's manipulation of the beast's momentum turned a very strong beast into something less than an Erendu.

The clone couldn't help but smile. He had never met the group but had Erik's memories, so, for him, it was the same as Erik being the one seeing them. There was genuine happiness at seeing them so strong. The problem was, they weren't strong enough.

Luckily, they brought some clones with them. The problem was, they weren't among the last batches Erik had made, so they were weaker than him.

Their attacks threw off the thaid's movements. The creature let out a roar as ice spread across the ground, its massive form straining against Martha's roots.

Ben and Allan rushed forward, joining Rick in combat.

"Hey Erik! Care if we share the spotlights?" He said, swinging his mana halberd at the Thaid's exposed flank.

<Ah... I get it...>

"I'm not Erik," he said, ducking under a swipe from the thaid. "I'm Rick, one of his clones. But your help's appreciated."

Rick turned to look at them. Being Erik's clone, they were identical. He also glanced at Allan. He knew he and Gwen were a couple, but didn't expect him to come here. Though, if Gwen decided to come, it made sense for him to be here.

He had likely come to protect her, though the notion was absurd—Gwen hardly needed protection, and Allan's ability to help was questionable at best.

What Rick said disappointed the group, though. While they didn't think less of the Chimaeric Demons, being stronger than them and as smart as Erik, it was still not the real deal.

Besides, they had problems not considering the clones just the manifestation of Erik's power. In a sense, they were no more than mana turned flesh.

They kept fighting. The thaid struggled against their assault, its movements growing more desperate.

Rick struck the beast, which was now easier to deal with, and the other clones did the same. He was targeting points where Aaron's slime weakened the creature's defenses. The thaid's attacks grew wilder, less coordinated, as Mickey's insects continued their harassment.

"Be careful, thaids here are problematic," Rick said, evading an ice-covered paw.

"You don't say?" Floyd could see it firsthand. Though his power was strong, it wasn't affecting this creature as easily as it usually did with other beings.

While he wasn't struggling to contain it—especially with everyone's help—the thaid's raw power was clear in how much resistance it put against his abilities.

The fight continued, but the outcome became clear as time went on. The Thaid's superior strength counted for little against this many brain crystal powers and this many clones.

Rick's combat experience showed in every movement, every counter. Allan and Ben helped a great deal, especially Allan, who electrocuted the beast with each attack, and the Chimaeric Demons were the Chimaeric Demons.

Martha's roots tightened their grip as Floyd's power further reduced the creature's speed. At some point, he tried to stop the beast's heart from beating, but affecting something inside a body, especially with all that mana surrounding it, wasn't easy, especially considering the beast did its best to contrast Floyd's power.

The thaid thrashed, its movements becoming sluggish also because of the blood loss. However, there was no pool of blood nearby, as it got either dissolved by Aaron's corrosive slime or frozen by the beast's own power.

"I'm finishing it!" Rick said, launching himself at the Thaid's exposed throat.

His attack hit the monster's throat with crushing power. The beast let out one last cry before falling to the ground. A last sheet of ice spread over the forest floor, then melted away.

Everything went quiet.

"Good fight," Rick said, approaching them. "You improved a lot..."

"You're really one of Erik's clones?" Floyd asked, studying Rick's face. They were identical. The group had never seen the Chimaeric Demons without a mask. The other clones could shapeshift, so they all took slightly different features from Erik.

Rick didn't reply.

"This thing was strong!" Ben said, moving the attention from the clone to the creature.

"Yes. They all are, but that thing wasn't among the strongest we've killed. It wasn't even close, actually. But it got too close to the shelter, and the master ordered me to take care of it if that happened."

Gwen stepped forward. "Not the strongest? It moved faster than anything we've seen, and Erik told you to kill it alone?"

"We are stronger than them. If it weren't for some flying thaids, there would be more of us here, instead of just me."

"Just you?" one of the clones asked. "Where are the others? Where is the master?"

The clone then explained what happened on their journey to Mur. Starting from their departure from Hin to their meeting with the Three-headed Void Ravagers. The clone's story made them shiver in fear.

They had been lucky nothing had approached them before the clone found them.

"Is the tree your shelter?" Aaron asked.

"Yes. The master created it. We also have trees and vegetables." Rick started walking back toward the massive trunk. "Come. It's not safe to stay here." Rick stopped.

"Ah, Aaron, can you dissolve the beast's carcass? I don't want to attract more thaids here."

Aaron nodded and did as instructed.

The clone's casual handling of such a powerful thaid spoke volumes about Erik's own capabilities.

"You said Amber and the others got separated from the master," a clone said.

"Is there any news about them?"

"I don't know," Rick said. "The master left the camp to go search for them. I don't know if they are alive. The only thing I'm certain of is that the master is well, since he made another tree."

Rick pointed at another giant tree in the distance. It was very far, but it was still visible on the horizon.

He led the way. Until they got near the shelter's entrance. The massive tree was reassuring. It looked sturdy and with walls big enough to protect them from anything.

"Erik will be pleased to see you," Rick said, giving a furtive glance to the other clones. "But he might also question your decision to come here. Mur isn't kind to visitors."

That and the fact he told the clones he left here not to come.

"We came prepared," Gwen said. She missed the glances she gave to the clones, so she didn't know Rick was mainly referring to them. "And after what we just saw, it's clear we made the right choice."

Rick smiled—an expression identical to Erik's. "Perhaps. But remember, that thaid was relatively weak by Mur's standards. There are creatures here that would view it as prey."

The group fell silent as they realized what Rick meant. They had just fought what they thought was an incredibly powerful monster.

But here in Mur, it was considered weak. They couldn't help but wonder what kind of terrifying creatures lived in the deeper parts of this continent.

Rick led them inside, into the house Erik had created within the massive trunk. The interior amazed them—rooms carved from living wood, stairs spiraling upward and downward, and windows covered by thick curtains of vines.

"Welcome to our temporary home," Rick said. "I don't know when the master will return, but your help will be appreciated around here."

Chapter 1288: The bugs (14)

Erik was in front of the shelter's entrance, checking his equipment. He adjusted the straps of his backpack after having checked if he had enough rations to last for some days underground.

On his hip, his Flyssa was there, but he wasn't going to use it since it was too weak for it to resist the thaids' natural defenses.

He was going to make one with his powers anyway if needed, so that, if it broke, he would have nothing to cry about.

Amber slung her own backpack over her shoulders. The daggers Erik gifted her were strapped on her hips, too.

June carried less, knowing he would need to act as a scout and avoid fights. He still kept a small backpack filled with essential items, and a combat knife was strapped to his leg.

Emily checked her rifle one last time, making sure that the scope's settings matched the lighting conditions. Luckily, the rifle didn't need bullets, just her mana, or she would need to bring much more than just what she put into it.

Mira's bow was already strung and ready. Her quiver held different types of arrows, from standard broadhead to specialized variants designed for various threats that Erik made for her and that he learned to create. This way, Mira would have no trouble with her ammunition.

Though the battle she was going to face would require more than the arrows she had available. So, it was sure she would have to switch melee at some point.

Erik was preparing for another expedition into the cave. Twenty of his Chimaeric Demons would accompany him, along with Amber, June, Emily, and Mira.

They knew the underground city was there and knew how to reach it, but the tunnels were filled with unknown dangers since their last visit, and the queen was likely on high alert given Amber's and June's. Emily's and Mira's last intrusion.

Besides, the battle that raged at the cave entrance changed everything. Thaid's fought among themselves, transforming the landscape into a killing ground. But the aftermath left most likely the queen's army weakened, and not a little.

The bug queen survived, as she didn't join the fight; maybe she feared the monsters that decimated her children, or maybe she simply didn't care. She likely retreated deeper into her domain.

That meant she had some time to strengthen her defenses, breed more of her chitinous soldiers, or reshape the tunnels themselves, and the abundance of corpses was going to help her in that endeavor.

The team had a simple goal—to explore the caves, kill the bug-like thaids, and search the underground city.

They were looking for important documents left behind by the Silver Line Corporation, hoping that would help them find the research centers where Erik believed the blackguards were.

Besides, these papers could tell them more about what the corporation was doing in their early research stages. He already had a picture based on what the second division commander told him during their battle at the Law Gate.

If Erik had to believe his words, mana and powers had spread throughout the world far earlier than their official appearance.

There were people able to see the future in the past, and these told humanity the end was approaching.

Apparently, that was the reason behind the Silver Line Corporation starting their search to control mana.

Erik turned to one of the clones. "We are leaving," he said.

"You have your orders. Rick needs those reinforcements."

"Yes, Master. We'll reach him before sunset tomorrow." The clone stood straight, his posture reflecting years of training and battle Erik went through.

"Remember to follow the path I cleared for you. It runs through the forest, heading southeast." Erik pointed the way.

"The flying thaids won't see anything below the canopy. So, don't rise above the trees. Stay down and do anything necessary to avoid being spotted. Once at the shelter, make as many neural links as you can. The more mana you have for your abilities, the better it will be."

The clone nodded. "We'll take bird forms suited for quick, low flight."

"Good. Those eggs are our future army. Without them, we won't stand a chance on this continent, not as we head toward the Lorogia Region." Erik crossed his arms.

Since the Blackguards had shown interest in the Lorogia Region when his father visited Mur, they likely remained there.

The problem was that to reach the area, Erik had to cross a mountain range, and God only knew what he was going to find in a mountain range on Mur.

"Since I told Rick to focus on protecting the eggs and making neural links, it is likely the number of thaids around the shelter increased. I don't know how much, but regardless, the sooner you reach him, the better."

"What about you, master? For how long are you going to stay in the caves?"

"For as long as it is necessary, but we will come out of the caves to restock and rest."

"You know the queen won't let you enter without a fight, especially not after what we did, right? Besides, some of the thaids might have gone inside the caves. Maybe they are there resting and feasting on the bugs."

"That's why we're taking a smaller group. Twenty of your brothers, plus the girls and me." Erik glanced at Amber, who checked her gear nearby.

"This is the best time to strike. I think the queen needs new troops, so this is the time their numbers will be at the lowest."

The clone's expression darkened. "The queen won't leave her nest unprotected. Even if there are less thaids, they are likely enough to flood the tunnels with patrols."

"I know," Erik said with a grim smile. His expression hardened as he considered the clone's warning. He was right.

Though the queen lacked human intelligence, Erik knew better than to underestimate her. Despite Amber's negative reports about her capabilities, the queen had shown tactical awareness during the battle outside the cave.

Her army learned and adapted during the fight. When they lost soldiers, they changed how they fought to avoid more losses.

The queen had probably changed how she defended her territory too—sending out bigger groups of soldiers and placing guards throughout all the tunnels.

"But I've faced worse odds before, and this time we're better prepared. We need to strike before she builds up her forces again." Erik placed a hand on the clone's shoulder.

"Go now. Keep Rick and the eggs safe."

Chapter 1289: The bugs (15)

The clone bowed and turned to his group. Fifty Chimaeric Demons gathered to leave. They activated their power and shapeshifted into various small birds—sparrows, finches, and creatures that once belonged in these forests.

They took flight, staying below the trees, and disappeared into the winter morning mist.

Erik watched them leave and then turned to his companions.

"Do the remaining troops know their duties?" Amber asked.

"Yes. They'll fortify the shelter and clear any threats from the surrounding area. I already talked to them." Erik adjusted his own gear after having checked it.

The fruit trees and vegetables were going to need protection, and so did the meat they collected until that point.

Erik made a sort of cellar deeper into the shelter's basement, which meant the meat would stay fresh for as long as they put it there. He also made huge blocks of ice in order to freeze the meat.

"Are we going?" Emily lowered her rifle.

"Yes," Erik said. "There is no more time to lose. Is everyone ready? We have a long week ahead."

Looking at their faces, Erik could tell his companions didn't really want to take part in this, but knew they had.

Though none voiced their concerns out loud, their expressions betrayed their unease at having to fight the queen, but that was it. Even the clones seemed more alert than usual, their postures tense with anticipation.

"I've got enough arrows," Mira patted her quiver. "Besides, I have a living arrow-making company as my boyfriend. What could go wrong?"

"I'm ready too," Emily said. "The rifle is in good condition."

June shapeshifted his face into that of a human to talk. It was weird for a now small bird to have a human face, but it wasn't like he had another way to speak to everyone at the same time.

"I'll scout ahead once we're moving. The morning fog will give us good cover."

"Just stay within sight," Erik said. He was the weakest of them all, but his experience made up for it.

"We don't want to get separated before we even reach the caves."

Amber gave them all a look. "Let's go then. Standing here won't make the journey any shorter."

The group left the shelter and moved through the forest. Ten clones walked in front of Erik and the others, while another ten followed behind them. Erik and his friends stayed in the middle of the group.

Emily and Mira kept monitoring their surroundings. June was flying above the trees to check if there were thaids close to their position. Amber kept ready to warp everyone if needed.

There were some small thaids around. Them being there meant no large predators lurked nearby, or at least nothing that could hunt them, too. They were weak compared to the clones, but that didn't mean they were weak in absolute terms, though; they kept away from the group.

"The forest is strangely empty," Amber said after an hour of walking.

"Yeah, the battle must have brought many of the thaids in the area to death. If even flying thaids died, I bet that stopped other thaids from reaching the area."

However, thaids were thaids. They were beasts obsessed with devouring. They didn't, only when they were sure they would get killed.

"There are still signs of the large creatures that passed through here to reach the cave," Erik said.

Broken branches and deep tracks marked their passage. Some tracks belonged to creatures larger than anything they'd seen on land before.

"The queen's not the only one who'll want to keep a hold of those caves," Erik said.

"Underground spaces large enough to accommodate such sizes are rare. Every large predator in the area will try to make it their den."

"Perfect." Emily's voice dripped sarcasm. "We get to fight our way through them first."

"Better than facing the full bug swarm," June said, landing on a branch. Predictably, that's exactly what happened.

However, this time, Erik would keep the queen in check so that they could focus on cleaning the nest from the bugs.

The battle outside the cave greatly reduced their numbers, so fighting would not be as dangerous as it was when they first arrived.

Plus, Erik was going with them. Just one of his attacks would wipe out thousands of bugs.

"The path ahead's clear for now. But I spotted fresh bear-like thaids' tracks. Big ones."

This reminded Erik of the Ursus Glacialis and Luminac claws that had given the Chimaeric Demons their starlight fireballs, as well as the Metalfur Bears, with their steel-transforming coats. Similar thaids roamed this area. Strangely enough, most of the thaids here were bear-like species.

"Keep moving," Erik said. "We need to reach the cave entrance by noon." They pressed on through the forest.

Everyone moved in silence and had to watch their steps on the leaf-littered ground. Even June did his best to keep as silent as possible, despite him flying.

A clone raised his fist—the signal to stop. The group froze as something massive moved through the trees ahead.

Heavy footfalls shook drops of dew from the leaves. Erik saw large shapes through the foliage but couldn't make out the details, and the vegetation didn't help.

Whatever it was, it paused, testing the air. There was a strange shimmer as it moved, like light catching on metal.

<Be careful,> Erik said through a mind link. <Whatever this thing is, it might have power similar to the metal fur bear.>

Yet the size was at least thrice that of that creature, which wasn't small at all. It couldn't possibly be a Metalfur bear, though.

<We'll circle around,> Erik said. <We can't waste time and energy fighting it.>

The group backtracked, taking a wider path through to avoid the monster. The creature's presence, though, confirmed Erik's theory.

The thaids in the area had been attracted by the bloodbath he instigated, but they remained in the area to nest within the cave or to take advantage of the bodies that were still outside the nest.

It was impossible for the queen and her underlings to have cleared the battlefield already.

They were surely working on dismembering the corpses of the thaids who died there to feed their young and troops, but the battle was too big for the monsters to have managed that in so little time.

The queen's territory would face other things, not just Erik's group, but that meant they would, too. As the sun climbed higher, the forest thinned. They approached the rocky ground that marked the cave's entrance.

The battle transformed the area. Broken trees and deep gouges scarred the earth. Blood stained the rocks, and corpses littered the ground. There were still bugs in the area, but also many other thaids scavenging the corpses.

"The bug swarm didn't retreat underground," June said from his perch.

"That was expected."

Erik studied the entrance. There were many workers standing in the area, protecting it.

He turned to the group. "Is everyone ready?"

The others nodded. The clones checked their weapons one last time. Emily started charging her rifle with mana. Mira nocked an arrow.

"Stay close," Erik said. "We will need to break through if we want to enter, and once inside, there's no quick escape."

Chapter 1290: The bugs (16)

Erik studied the cave entrance. There were around a hundred worker bugs standing guard, two dozen warriors, and ten leaders at the mouth of the cave.

Their mandibles clicked as they communicated with each other, but Erik knew that was surely not their only means of communication, as pheromones must have been involved somehow, given the high level of coordination and threat response these things showed.

Besides, what Amber and the others told him about their intelligence wouldn't make sense. It wasn't just about what he saw.

<The more I know about Mur, the worse this place looks...>

The real problem was in the surrounding area. There were more than five thousand bug-like thaids swarming across the battlefield, scavenging the corpses of the dead creatures.

Possibly even more. The sheer number of creatures made any attempt at stealth impossible.

"There are too many," Erik said, keeping his voice low. "As soon as they spot us, every single one will converge on our position."

It wasn't like they couldn't kill them. Erik alone was enough, but they would need to spend mana, and that would mean they would have to make their way through the cavern to reach the queen. That would make them waste more mana and more time, and the queen might even run away.

June crouched beside Erik. "Maybe we can lure them away."

"I don't think they will leave the entrance. They are too smart. Besides, there are too many corpses to feast on and to bring to the queen, and they need to keep the competition away. They won't leave," Erik said.

He sighed.

"We need to clear a path." He turned to face the group. There wasn't much he could do aside from entering himself.

"I'm going to blast the guards at the entrance. Once they're down, we run straight inside."

The plan was as good as it was bad. Blasting the entrance, Erik would still alert the other bugs, but at least he would avoid facing those outside.

<Well, at least I would kill quite a few of them.>

Amber frowned. "Wait. Wouldn't it be better if I just warped us all inside? We could avoid the fight entirely."

"That would be ideal," Erik said, "but we have no idea what the situation is inside. The bug queen might have concentrated her forces at the entrance, but even if she didn't, I'm pretty sure there will be a lot of the fuckers inside. If we warp in and find ourselves surrounded by thousands more, we'd be trapped. I would have problems using my powers there, since I might end up killing us all with the bugs."

"I can get us out," Amber said. "My warping brain—"

"Could save our lives," Erik interrupted her, "which is exactly why I want to keep it as our last resort." He placed a hand on her shoulder. "If things go bad in there, you're the only one who can extract everyone, including the clones."

Amber crossed her arms. "I can handle it."

"Can you? Can you bring everyone in and eventually out again if needed?" Erik asked. "Do you have enough mana reserves to warp so many people twice?"

Amber opened her mouth to respond, then closed it. Her shoulders slumped slightly. As much as she wanted, she couldn't do it.

Her mana was simply not enough. The only way for Amber to do that was if she increased the number of neural links more, but she didn't even have the time to train since coming to Mur.

At best, she could warp the entire group once—either in or out, but not both.

"I thought so," Erik said. "We need your ability as our escape plan. If we're overwhelmed inside, you'll need every drop of mana to get us all out safely, or use your corrosive fog."

Amber remained silent. Then Erik turned to face the others. "Is everyone ready?"

Emily nodded. Mira tightened her grip on her bow while June shapeshifted into a bug. The Chimaeric Demons simply went into a running stance.

"Good," Erik said. He moved to a position with a clear view of the cave entrance and began channeling his mana.

The air around his hands shimmered with heat as he concentrated. His plan was straightforward—create a massive fireball that would not only eliminate the guards but also consume the oxygen at the entrance.

Any surviving creatures would be weakened, gasping for air, making them easier targets once they were inside.

Sweat beaded on Erik's forehead as the fireball grew and the temperature rose. It started as a small orange sphere hovering above his palm, then expanded rapidly.

The fire spun around and turned from orange to blue, getting hotter and hotter. The fireball grew as big as a large boulder, and it was so hot that everyone had to back away from it.

"Stand ready," Erik said. Small tendrils of flame licked out of the sphere as if eager to be released.

Erik thrust his arms forward, sending the fireball hurtling toward the cave entrance. It streaked through the air like a miniature sun, leaving a trail of super-heated air in its wake.

The bugs at the entrance had only a moment to feel the heat before it became too scorching. Their antennae twitched before the fireball crashed into them, but only for a fraction of a second.

The explosion was deafening. A tremendous wall of flame erupted, engulfing the entire entrance. The blast wave rippled outward, burning and flattening the vegetation and sending smaller thais tumbling through the air. The heat was so intense that rocks cracked and the nearest trees ignited instantly.

The bugs caught in the direct path of the fireball disintegrated; their bodies got reduced to ash in fractions of a second.

Those at the edges fared a little better—their exoskeletons blackened and cracked, internal organs burned within their shells.

The flames rushed into the cave mouth, consuming every molecule of oxygen in their path. The fire roared with hunger, leaving behind a vacuum that pulled more air inward to feed its insatiable appetite.

When the initial blast subsided, the entrance stood clear but scorched. Charred bug corpses littered the ground, some still twitching as their brains failed. Black smoke billowed upward, forming a dark column against the sky.

"Let's go!" Erik said, already running toward the entrance. The others followed.