

BIOLOGICAL 1291

Chapter 1291: The bugs (17)

However, the explosion was as loud as it was deadly, and every single bug in the surroundings noticed the commotion. Erik and the others rushing inside just made it worse.

It was one thing to leave the area of the nest to chase a lure; it was another one to allow humans to enter their nest. They couldn't allow the second.

Their hunting instincts were triggered. They abandoned their scavenging and swarmed toward the group.

Hundreds of chitinous bodies scuttled across the battlefield, mandibles clicking in alarm since something was headed for the tunnels.

Erik glanced over his shoulder, seeing the wave of creatures chasing them.

"Keep moving!" he said, never slowing his pace.

They reached the cave entrance just as the first wave of bugs drew near. Erik turned around, planting his feet on the ground. He channeled mana again. This time, instead of fire, he conjured earth and stone.

The ground beneath them trembled, then rose. Rock and soil were pulled upward, forming a solid dome that sealed the cave entrance behind them.

The barrier hardened within seconds, sealing off the pursuing swarm and—partially—the flow of outside oxygen.

Erik could hear what looked like the frustrated clicks and scrapes of mandibles against stone as the creatures tried to break through.

"That won't hold them forever," Erik said, "but it will give us time." He turned to face the inside of the cave entrance.

The tunnel stretched before them, illuminated by the bioluminescent glow of the fungi growing on the walls.

The air was thin and hot, still recovering from the oxygen-consuming fireball. As Erik had predicted, the inside of the cave was indeed filled with bug-like thaids, but they were in distress.

The larger Guard bugs stumbled drunkenly, while the worker bugs lay on their backs, legs twitching helplessly.

Even the toughest thaids were having trouble staying awake since there was little air to breathe.

However, with the earth dome not completely airtight, fresh air was slowly flowing back into the cave.

The bugs closer to the entrance were already recovering. They couldn't allow that.

"Kill them before they recover," Erik said, drawing his weapon to preserve his mana. "Start with the leaders."

They were the most problematic of the bunch, since they could coordinate the others; that meant they were their main target.

The team got to work. The Chimaeric Demons led the attack, mainly using weapons to fight the bugs and using Vibration Burst whenever they needed mana. They smashed through the bugs' hard shells and pulled them apart.

It was a scene out of a slasher movie.

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

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

Meanwhile, Mira found a suitable spot on a rock to shoot from. Emily did the same. Both of them hit the bugs in their weak spots, like their joints and eyes.

For Emily, it was relatively simple since she was much more skilled than Mira in long range, but thanks to her brain crystal power, the latter didn't have particular problems killing the bugs, either.

As for Emily, since she had much more mana than Mira, her shots were particularly nasty. The mana bullets were powerful enough to break through the bugs' hard shells, leaving burning holes behind and going forward until enough bugs' bodies dissipated the mana composing the bullets.

June partially shapeshifted and prevented the bugs, who had already regained consciousness from approaching the two women. However, he had to be careful since he wasn't that strong.

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

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

Amber fought with her daggers but avoided using her fire dagger's power to preserve the cave's limited oxygen supply.

She remained close to the sealed entrance, where the air was fresher. Conserving her mana for later, she relied on pure blade work.

Erik, instead, was the one making the most damage, using his Flyssa to kill swaths of bugs with a few shots.

Erik fought using the Crypt of the Desert style Master Nieminen taught him. His movements were as precise as a scorpion's strike.

Like a stone pillar in a sandstorm, he remained in one spot, clearly in the middle of the monster-infested cave. The others barely saw his upper body move while attacking.

A huge warrior bug-like thaid attacked him, but it was too weak. Erik mercilessly swung his blade horizontally, bisecting the creature and killing it instantly. Then he sent a hail to the clones' position and killed even more bugs.

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

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

[mana successfully absorbed, starting the conversion procedure.]

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

[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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The battle was short but intense. Within minutes, the cave floor was littered with the bugs' bodies; the bugs' blood equivalent seeped into the stones' depressions.

The few survivors retreated deeper into the various tunnels on the sides of the cave, presumably to warn the queen of the intrusion.

"Form up," Erik said once the immediate threat was neutralized. "We need to go deeper before reinforcements arrive."

The group gathered around him, checking weapons and taking stock of their condition. Aside from minor scratches and the expected fatigue, everyone was unharmed.

"The queen will know we're here soon," Erik said. "It means we must get the hell out of this cave, since it's too small to fight."

He paused.

"Which way do we go?" Erik asked, gesturing to the three tunnels branching off from the chamber they were in.

"Right tunnel," Mira said.

All but Erik knew the way. Mira turned to the Chimaeric Demons. "Guys, scout ahead, but don't go far. We need to know if the path is clear. If it isn't, come back and tell us," Mira said.

"I will block the tunnels from where they are coming if you let me know in advance," Erik said.

The Chimaeric Demons nodded and transformed into small, bat-like creatures. They darted down the tunnels.

While they waited, Erik reinforced the earth dome at the entrance. He added layers of stone and compacted the structure, making it more difficult for the bugs outside to break through.

Even so, they could hear the constant scratching and clicking as hundreds of creatures worked to get past the barrier.

The clones returned moments later. "The tunnels seem to be clear."

"Then let's go. We have no time to waste."

Chapter 1292: The bugs (18)

June returned moments later. "The path is clear," June said. "At least for the first hundred meters."

Erik nodded, and the group moved.

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The group navigated through the tunnels and caves for some time. Each time they came across an intersection, Erik blocked the paths Amber and the others told him were not those bringing him to the underground city.

By blocking all side routes, he would prevent the bugs from ambushing them or cutting off their path.

This meant relying on a single escape route, which carried its own risks. If the bugs destroyed Erik's blockages, they would be forced to confront them in the narrow tunnels if the group had to retreat.

The confined space would limit their movement and force them into close-quarters combat, making it harder to use their abilities and face huge numbers of bugs at the same time.

There was only a path, after all, and it would bring the monsters stumbling into the tunnel directly to them.

While Erik and the clones could break through the walls he had created, a lot depended on their location. The bugs could be anywhere—right in front of a sealed tunnel entrance or far from them.

"There's a large chamber beyond that, filled with thaid. There are at least a hundred warriors and around two hundred workers."

"It looks like the queen is trying to stop us from reaching her, but why?" Erik asked.

The queen was strong, so the reason it felt the need to stop Erik and the others was weird. Could it be she wasn't confident about winning?

"Maybe she is weakened for some reason," Mira said. "It's not uncommon for bugs' queens to have less energy if they made a lot of eggs. Given how many of her troops she lost, she might have felt the need to increase their numbers, and this might have left her weakened."

"It can be," June said. "Anyway, I didn't have time to check it thoroughly, but the left path seems to be clear."

"Are you sure it's the right path?" Erik asked.

"I am. The last time we went through it, there were around two dozen thaids."

The task itself wasn't complex, but they had been lucky—if any thaids had escaped to alert their underground city, the group would have faced an overwhelming swarm much earlier, and they would have never found the city.

This was the problem with exploring an unfamiliar place. If they had known about the massive bug nest, they would have been more cautious in their search.

"What do we do, master?" June asked. If they wanted to proceed, they would need to fight a large group of thaids, and Erik didn't know if they would be able to prevent even one of them from leaving and alerting the nest.

"We need to block their escape," he said. He turned to the other clones. "Shapeshift, go behind them, and block their path of retreat. I will kill them."

"Yes, master."

The clones shapeshifted and then did as Erik instructed.

"Are you sure you will have enough mana, then?" Mira asked. "There are not few thaids, and they are all as strong as the blackguard foot soldiers."

"I shouldn't have problems."

"If you are sure..."

The clones turned into humans again as soon as they got behind the thaids, blocking their access to the tunnel behind them.

What happened next was simply a massacre. Erik didn't use wind blades to kill the thaids, but created stone spikes, making them jut from the ground. This way, he would be sure the Chimaeric Demons wouldn't be injured.

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

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

[mana successfully absorbed, starting the conversion procedure.]

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

[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.]

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

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

Sharp stone spikes burst from the ground one after another, killing all the bugs.

The guard bugs' hard outer shells broke apart as the spikes pierced them. The worker bugs died even more easily since their shells were softer.

The guard bugs tried to escape, but Erik's attacks were too quick and covered too much ground for them to escape. The stone spikes struck each bug multiple times, stabbing through their bodies and cutting off their legs, all in a brief span of time.

The dying bugs made horrible crunching sounds as their shells broke apart.

A few bugs survived the first attack and ran toward the tunnels to escape, but the Chimaeric demons blocked all the exits.

One large guard bug tried to ram through the clones, but they were many times stronger than the creature and killed it easily.

[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.]

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

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

In seconds, the chamber was filled with stone spikes. The dead bugs were stuck on them, bodies limping and fluids flowing.

Not long after, silence came inside the cave.

"Are we done?"

"Yes, master."

"Good. Check the tunnels and let me know how the situation is."

"It will be done, master."

The clones confirmed the following part of the path was relatively clear, and the group started moving again.

The tunnels gradually expanded to twice their original width as the group went deeper underground.

The walls had been worn smooth from countless bugs passing through over many years. Regular grooves and scratches marked the surfaces where the bugs' shells had scraped against the stone during their travels.

The bioluminescent fungi was still there, though, and it grew more abundant.

<At least there is some illumination, thanks to the fungi.> Erik didn't want to think about how it would be to navigate here with just torches. They would attract a lot of attention. Of course, Erik also sealed all the side tunnels, leaving just one path to retreat.

After twenty minutes, the tunnel opened into a cavern. Unlike the natural formations they'd gone through so far, this place showed signs of human construction.

"We are here," Amber said.

They reached the entrance of the underground city.

Chapter 1293: The bugs (19)

"This is it," Erik breathed, taking in the ruins of the underground city. "We are finally there."

The remnants of the ancient human civilization living on Mur were in front of them. It wasn't different from what Erik found on the Mannard continent, in the place where Liberty Watch city now stood.

However, contrary to the Acidspitter Arthropods he fought there, the thaids here nested right inside the city, instead of in the branch tunnels.

The difference was clear. These creatures were direct creations of the bug queen, engineered to serve her hive's needs. Instead, the Acidspitter Arthropods avoided the human abomination that had taken residence in the Silver Line corporation's headquarters back in Liberty Watch. They were enemies, but the bugs weren't.

Erik saw chitinous structures that the bugs had built clinging to the ancient buildings' walls, along with egg sacs hanging from broken arches.

"These weren't here the last time," Mira said, referring to the egg sacs. The view gave them the chills because there were many of these things dangling around.

"The queen must be really stressed if she is going this far in making new eggs."

"These are definitely worker eggs," Erik said, studying the sacs. He hadn't seen others before, but based on logic, it made little sense to keep the leaders and warriors this unprotected. There was something else, though.

"Notice the small size. These can't be warriors' and leaders' eggs."

June nodded. "The queen must be mass-producing cannon fodder. Workers are simple to create, I guess." June based his reasoning on the massive amount of eggs around. "They must need less energy to make and fewer resources to grow and make them mature. Maybe they even mature faster."

"We can't be sure of that," Mira said. However, the real problem remained.

"Then where are the warrior and leader eggs?" Emily went into the crux of the matter, keeping her rifle trained on the bugs scuttling in the distance.

Erik pointed toward the deeper tunnels. "The warrior and leader eggs must be kept in the safer chambers, deeper underground, probably near the queen's main chamber. The queen is too smart to leave her most valuable offspring exposed like this. She knows we're a threat, and she'll protect those elite eggs at all costs, keeping them behind multiple layers of worker defenses."

He gestured at the hanging sacs. "The workers must be expendable, so she must be keeping the most valuable eggs close to her and using the rest of the space to rebuild the workers' numbers quickly."

Amber frowned. "Isn't she prioritizing quantity over quality this way? That doesn't seem like a winning strategy."

"She lost half her hive," Erik said. "What did you expect? The battle at the cave entrance must have depleted her forces more than we realized. She needs bodies to maintain territory control, even if they're weaker ones. Besides, we don't know how many warrior and leader eggs she made."

Erik paused.

"The queen is powerful, but not exceptional by Mur's standards. Though she's strong compared to us, I've seen many stronger thaids in the forest. She ranks in the upper range of middle-tier creatures here on Mur—at least among those I've encountered."

"So that's why she compensates for her relative weakness with sheer numbers," Mira said, looking at the countless egg sacs. "She knows she can't match other thaids in raw power, so she focuses on overwhelming her enemies with masses instead."

"Yeah. What it lacks in individual strength, it makes up for in coordination and reproduction speed, and the more bugs she has, the stronger the hive is. It's a kind of horde tactic. The queen probably knows that another major battle like the one at the entrance would put the hive in a bad situation."

Erik moved to the edge of the city, keeping low behind a broken concrete pillar while scanning the darkened structures ahead of them for any movement.

<System, can you tell me when the eggs should hatch?>

[On it.]

It took the system less than ten seconds to scan the closest eggs.

[It looks like the queen is buying time. These workers will hatch within days, giving her a buffer force.]

<I need more information. When did the queen make the eggs? What is the spawn time?>

[Based on the egg development I'm seeing, the queen likely began laying these eggs immediately after the battle at the entrance. Worker eggs appear to have approximately a two-week maturation period, which explains their current state.]

<What about the warrior and leader eggs?>

[I can't get data on those. They're being kept deeper within the nest. You were right about that; they are outside my current sensory range. They likely need more resources and time to develop, but I cannot confirm their exact maturation timeline. We need to find them first.]

"Smart," he said. "I hate that it's smart."

"What?" Amber asked.

"Ah, sorry, I was thinking out loud while talking to the biological supercomputer."

"Oh, right, shared thoughts, right?"

"Yeah," he sighed.

"What did the system say?" June asked.

June had never heard the system talk normally, but he remembered its behavior from before Erik made him.

"It says the worker eggs were laid right after the battle at the entrance. They'll hatch within days—queen's most likely creating a buffer force to bolster her numbers quickly."

"And the other eggs?"

Erik shook his head. "They're deeper in the nest, as we assumed, outside the system's scanning range, though. They probably need more resources and time to develop, even in the system's opinion."

"So we're on a timer," June said.

"Yeah. We need to move before things take an ugly turn."

"Intelligence is relative with thaid, and she does not lack it," Erik said. "But survival instinct is universal. The queen knows its hive is threatened, and I bet she will join the fray quickly as soon as she spots us." He paused, surveying the buildings ahead.

"We need to kill her. Once these eggs hatch, we'll be dealing with hundreds more bugs in these tunnels."

Chapter 1294: The bugs (20)

The bugs had repurposed the human ruins, integrating them into their hive. But despite this, the cavern appeared mostly unoccupied.

A few worker bugs scuttled around, maintaining the nests, but the warrior presence was minimal. They must have suffered the most casualties, or simply, they were the ones more affected because of their huge numbers, but they were also the ones who would recover from the battle quicker.

"So what's the plan?" Mira asked. "How do we approach killing the queen?"

Erik halted, turning to face the group.

"I'll engage the queen," Erik said. "Alone."

"Alone?" Amber's eyes widened. "That's suicide."

Erik shook his head. "I'm the only one with enough raw power to take her on. The rest of you need to focus on keeping the other bugs off my back."

June nodded, but he didn't like the proposal. "You want us to create a perimeter?"

"More or less," Erik said. "For starters, I don't think I will be on the ground often, but the bugs have ranged attacks, so it doesn't make a difference given the cave's height. The queen will summon every available defender when she feels threatened. If you can intercept them before they target me, I can focus entirely on her."

Emily checked her rifle. She did it hundreds of times already, but she did it to ease her worries. "What about the eggs?"

"Destroy any you find, and if you can," Erik said. "But the priority is keeping the active defenders occupied. If the queen coordinates her forces against us all at once, I don't know if I will be able to fight without blowing the cave."

Mira studied Erik's face, noting the tension in his jaw. "You're worried about this fight."

Erik didn't deny it. "At the Law Gate, I faced the second division commander and his troops. I handled them." He paused as the memories of that battle flashed behind his eyes.

"But the situation here is different. For starters, I need to pay attention not to destroy the surroundings. Second, the queen is physically stronger than the second division commander, and not by a few points. Besides, she must have some strong powers if she was able to survive for centuries. Plus, she won't hesitate or monologue since she is a thaid. She'll just kill."

"Can you beat her?" June asked bluntly.

"Yes," Erik said without hesitation, though the hard set of his shoulders told a different story. "But not if I'm distracted by her minions, not if I have to blow this place up. I need to use specific powers, in specific ways, while leading the queen to make specific attacks and avoid staying too close to specific places, or the cave will collapse."

"So we trash her nursery and keep the babysitters busy while you handle mommy dearest?"

"Put simply, yes." Erik smiled.

"But how? What if she is faster than you?" Mira asked.

"Well, even if I don't have Uncle Benjamin's same number of neural links, I have enough mana to use his power in a similar way. I will simply fly and use the surrounding debris to keep me from being trashed by whatever she throws at me."

"The only question is if your defenses are going to hold," Amber said.

"There shouldn't be problems... If that doesn't work, I have other powers as a second and third line of defense."

"What about attack?" June was starting to get extremely worried, and so did the Chimaeric demons. "I have enough mana to make my attacks strong enough to injure her. Again, not a lot of neural links, but I'm an X-ranked fighter."

"X-ranked? Since when?"

"Since the battle against the three-headed void ravagers. I got enough experience points to pump my energy stat to 2000 points."

Erik explained how the system worked and told them how it ranked people based on the amount of attribute points, especially energy. So they knew where they stood based on energy points. Erik having this much was monstrous and never heard of in all humanity.

Emily gestured toward the hanging egg sacs. "With these close to hatching, we need to move. I don't want them to hatch early because the queen is in danger. I don't know if that's possible, but it can be."

"The clones will help you," Erik said. "Split them between your teams—five with each of you. That should give you enough firepower to hold the line."

Mira nocked an arrow, her fingers tightening around the bow. "How will we know where to find you if things go wrong?"

"You won't have to care. Just regroup and use Amber to get the hell out of here. However, if you manage the other bugs, you can try helping me. Aside from Amber, you can all attack from a distance. Amber will keep you safe, though," Erik said. He looked at the woman. "But only use your warping as a last resort."

Amber nodded. "I'll do my best."

Erik gave a look at his companions, these people who had followed him into the depths of this nightmare called Mur continent.

"You said the queen is in that building?" Erik asked, pointing at the building where the clones found the queen the first time they came here.

"She is, or at least she was, the last time we had been here," a clone said. "Good, then at least I know where to go."

"When do we move?"

"Now," Erik said, his voice hardening with resolve.

The group checked their weapons one last time. Emily made sure her rifle was fully charged with mana. Mira counted her arrows.

Amber checked her daggers. June turned into an amalgamation of thaids. He wasn't going to fight the warriors, but the workers could be managed.

Erik looked at each of them in turn. "Be careful. Once the alarm is raised, you'll have swarms converging on your position from every direction."

At least there weren't as many thaids as there were when they got here the first time. That was the only reason this entire plan was possible.

"We've faced worse."

"Maybe," Erik acknowledged.

The Chimaeric Demons formed up, dividing themselves among the four companions, as Erik had instructed.

The group split. Erik moved deeper into the ruins, heading toward the center of the underground city where the queen likely lived. The others fanned out, targeting the vulnerable egg clusters that hung throughout the cavern.

The battle for the underground city was going to begin, and with it, perhaps the answers Erik had sought for so long were within reach—if they survived.

Chapter 1295: The bugs (21)

Erik hid behind a fallen pillar, watching the Silver Line Corporation's building in front of him. Once a monument to human ingenuity, the building was now no more a testament to what humanity had lost.

He pressed a button on his radio. "I'm in position; status report."

"We are in position, too. Southeast corner secured. I count at least three hundred bug movements along our side of the perimeter. We will kill them as soon as you give the order."

"Emily?"

"In position," she said. "The situation is similar here, on the northeast side. My rifle's charged and ready."

"Mira?"

"We are ready," her voice came through.

Erik nodded to himself and took a deep breath. The plan wasn't complicated. They would create enough chaos to force the queen bug to come out and face them. Then, while his teams would fight off the swarms of smaller bugs, Erik would focus on taking down the queen.

"Remember the goal," Erik said into his radio. "Once I engage the queen, your priority is containment. Don't let any warriors or leaders flank or target me. The workers aren't the primary threat, but their acid spits could distract me long enough for the queen to land a dangerous blow, so be thorough in your culling."

A chorus of acknowledgments came through the radio.

"On my mark," Erik said, rising from his position. "Three, two, one..."

Erik walked out into the courtyard, not even trying to hide his presence. The area was going to serve as the perfect killing ground. Open space, minimal cover, and direct line of sight for his companions' ranged attacks.

Of course, that meant the bugs would have the same advantage.

He channeled mana, sending the energy rippling across the ground—it was something that no thaids could miss.

The worker bugs scattered. Some fled toward the building while others charged at Erik, mandibles clicking frantically.

"Contact initiated," Erik said. "The first wave is approaching. It's relatively small. Take care of them."

The team killed them with minimal effort. Now that they had the space to use their Starlight Fireball brain crystal power, the clones were having a lot of advantages. However, they could use it just because they knew Erik was here and that he would take care of most of the thaids if things turned bad.

[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.]

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

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

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

"Some of the workers have reached the building," Mira said. "I count at least a dozen entering."

Erik nodded. "Good. Stand by for the main force."

Almost immediately, the doors the bugs had made exploded open, and bugs swarmed into the courtyard.

The Guards came out first, followed by the leaders.

"They are here," Erik said. "Engage at will."

Projectiles filled the air as Emily fired. Her mana bullets pierced the guards' carapaces, exploding inside and downing multiple targets at once.

Mira's arrows did the same, but she was forced to aim at the creature's weak spots, rather than aiming at whatever part of their bodies like Emily did. The difference in firepower was simply too great.

The clones attacked using fire to do the same. They had enough mana, and the creatures were weak enough for them to set them on fire instantly, as if they had thrown oil on them. It took some time for the creatures to die, but the fire spread, getting onto other bugs with the clones not even trying to harm them.

"Keep going!" Erik said. He was doing nothing but waiting for the queen to come. He couldn't waste mana, nor stamina, if he wanted to win.

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

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

[Dux thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Dux thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

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

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

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

[Dux thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

The bugs kept coming from the building like a torrent of water. Their numbers were endless, but the clones had been able to keep them in check.

Erik took his chance to analyze both kinds of newcomers.

—[Analysis]—

-Name: Bellator Thanatocoleoptera

Physical Description: Combat-focused insectoid thaids with armored exoskeletons and sharp protrusions. They have thicker plating than workers, with weak points at limb joints and neck. Their mandibles are strong enough to cut through metal and concrete. Enhanced musculature gives them the ability to make rapid speed bursts. Their internal organs have some protective sacs, vulnerable to prolonged freezing/burning. They hunt in groups and serve as the hive's main defense. Can execute basic tactics if separated from the leaders.

-Brain Crystal Powers: Acid Spray (B45C): Releases corrosive acid from specialized glands that can melt through organic matter and weaken structural materials.

{Attributes}

-STRENGTH: 245

-INTELLIGENCE: 10

-DEXTERITY: 150

-ENERGY: 467

{Others}

-Power Level: 693

-Estimated Experience per kill: 13,430,310.63

—[End]—

—[Analysis]—

Name: Dux Thanatocoleoptera

Physical Description: Dux Thanatocoleoptera have reinforced exoskeletons that serve as armor. They have some specialized appendages for communication. Overlapping plates protect vulnerable areas, though weak points exist at the thorax base. They have higher cognitive functions.

Brain Crystal Powers: Domination (B45A): Creates a telepathic network allowing simultaneous coordination of multiple units and enhances the intelligence of the creatures under the telepathic network. When a Dux is killed, the subordinates briefly become disoriented before reverting to instinct or falling under another Dux's control.

{Attributes}

-STRENGTH: 194

-INTELLIGENCE: 61

-DEXTERITY: 150

-ENERGY: 467

{Others}

-Power Level: 667

-Estimated Experience per kill: 12,935,832.17

—[End]—

<So, the guards are physically stronger than the workers and the leaders. It's not like Amber and the others said.>

[I wonder why they assumed it was the opposite,] the system said. [Anyway, the guards are just specialized workers. They have the same powers; the only difference is that they have better attributes.]

<Yeah, while the leaders are smarter and have a brain crystal power that helps with coordination and increases intelligence.>

[There is no point in getting this power. The clones are smart already, and normal humans are smart enough to follow basic orders.]

<Most of the times...>

[Yeah, not always.]

The warriors tried to break through the perimeter established by Erik's companions but couldn't as the others kept killing them, and Erik kept amassing experience points.

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

Chapter 1296: The bugs (22)

"They're trying to flank us on the left side!"

Chaos unfolded. Erik kept waiting.

<Where the hell is the queen?>

The battle was escalating beyond what the clones could handle, but it still wasn't enough for the hive to not tolerate.

[The queen isn't going to come out. You need to do something...]

<Damn... I didn't want to... It's a colossal risk.>

[Do you prefer the clones dying? Or worse, the girls?]

<Shit...>

It was at that moment that Erik released a large number of wind blades. Decimating the monsters.

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

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

[Dux thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Dux thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

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

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

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

[Dux thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[There are movements,] the system said. [Something big.]

It looked like it worked. The queen wasn't going to come out unless she felt the hive was threatened, and since too few bugs died under the clones' and the girls' attacks, she didn't think they were an actual threat. But things were different if many bugs died at the same time. That would mean there was something big out for them, and the queen couldn't stay idle.

The swarm split open, and a colossal figure appeared.

"She is here!" Erik said. "Keep the perimeter and the swarm occupied!"

"Copy that," Mira said. "We've got your back."

The queen looked at the battlefield but didn't like what she saw.

Silently, she triggered an immediate response in the swarm.

"She is mad," Emily said. It couldn't be otherwise after seeing so many of her children slaughtered on the ground.

"Let's hope she is not too mad," Erik said, knowing he would be the one who would face her. Another volley of arrows rained down on the creatures. There were many of them at that point.

The number of bugs increased as time passed, but now that the queen was there, it looked like the entire hive came out to aid her in battle. Erik created some defense for the others. They were far from his position, but with so many bugs, they needed an elevated position to fight.

Erik stood his ground as the queen came closer. Each step she took shook the ground.

"Here you are..."

He saw the Silverline corporation's logo on the queen.

<I wonder what the hell they did to you...>

The queen stopped thirty meters from Erik. Her mandibles clacked together. She was communicating with her troops.

"Remember to focus on the swarm," Erik said. "The queen is mine."

Erik's hand glowed as he channeled mana through his body. The surrounding air shimmered because of the massive amounts of energy both he and the queen released.

She was massive and clearly powerful, but size also made her less agile. He would use that to his advantage.

<What can you tell me about her?> Erik asked to the system, keeping his eye contact with the massive bug.

—[Analysis]—

-Name: Thanatocoleoptera

Physical Description: The Queen Thanatocoleoptera is a massive bug-like thaid with a reinforced exoskeleton and horn-like protrusions. Her carapace exceeds the bellator's thickness, with weak points at limb bases and the thorax underside. Her intelligence is many times greater than that of the Duces. Her vital organs are protected by armored sacs, resistant to physical trauma but vulnerable to extreme temperatures. She controls thousands of lesser bugs through pheromones as the hive's central intelligence.

-Brain Crystal Powers: Acid Spray (B50C): 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.

Domination (B150A): Creates a telepathic network allowing simultaneous coordination of multiple units and enhances the intelligence of the creatures under the telepathic network.

{Attributes}

-STRENGTH: 800

-INTELLIGENCE: 350

-DEXTERITY: 650

-ENERGY: 1267

{Others}

-Power Level: 2279

-Estimated Experience per kill: 53,615,726.60

—[End]—

"Shit!"

Erik couldn't say anything else. The queen was powerful. She was hella smart and had a clear advantage over his strength attribute. However, she was weaker than him in terms of mana.

"Maybe I can work with that."

[If you keep your distance, you should be able to kill her.]

Erik nodded.

"What's the problem?" Amber asked through the radio.

"I read her status."

"Is it bad?"

"Better not talk about it," Erik said.

The queen attacked, not leaving Erik time to think further.

She charged forward like a bullet train, cutting through the air.

Erik used telekinesis to lift himself in the air and avoid her attacks; meanwhile, he shot multiple wind blades.

But most blades bounced off her armor-like shell without effect. Only a few found weak spots, cutting her and making her bleed a strange fluid onto the ground.

The queen let out a loud screech that echoed throughout the area, but the inevitable truth was that the wounds were shallow, and the queen was enraged because of the insult the blades represented, not because of the damage.

"She liked that even less than when we arrived," a clone said through the radio.

"Keep killing the other bugs," Erik said as he landed on a building, keeping himself higher than the queen.

The fighting got worse all around them.

The swarm's numbers seemed endless. The ground itself appeared to move as waves of thanatocoleoptera surged forward, their mandibles clicking in a horrifying chorus.

The air grew filled with the smell of their pheromones and that of multiple types of materials getting dissolved by the workers' acids, and the sound of thousands of chitinous legs scratching against concrete quickly became deafening.

They poured through every gap, crawled over their fallen brethren, and formed living walls that advanced toward the humans' positions.

Emily fired her rifle faster, with blue flashes of mana lighting up the area. Mira kept shooting arrows down on the enemies.

The queen stared at Erik in hatred, or so Erik assumed. She tested Erik's attack power, and it was likely she wasn't going to let him attack again. Erik would have died if it wasn't for telekinesis. Having something powered by mana that allowed him to move his body at the speed he wanted was what avoided him being dissolved by the acids the queen released.

<She's about to release something big!>

[Brace yourselves!]

The queen's thoracic sac contracted, and a yellowish green liquid came out of her mouth. Erik created a barrier. However, the acid was powerful, much more powerful than anything he had ever seen her make until that point, and burned through his barrier. He was already out of the way.

The queen charged again.

"SHIT! IT WAS A DISTRACTION!"

She was incredibly fast. Erik narrowly dodged one of her massive foreleg spikes as it stabbed where he had stood a moment before. Without all his mana, Erik would lose. Without telekinesis, he would have been dead. Erik could be there. He could've reached that point only because of the sum of all the powers he got to that point.

The courtyard became a chaotic battlefield. The smaller bugs swarmed in every direction, some falling to the coordinated attacks of Erik's companions, others charging forward in suicidal rushes. However, even if it wasn't on purpose, Erik and the queen's attacks killed many.

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

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

[Dux thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Dux thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

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

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

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

[Dux thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

Chapter 1297: The bugs (23)

The queen charged at Erik with unbridled rage. Despite her size, she moved impressively fast, but it wasn't weird considering how high her strength attribute was. While she was strong, though, she was also heavy, since each step she took made the ground below her crack.

Erik used his Will of the Hydra. There were three of them, so Erik had up to four brains through which he could think and divide tasks. One focused on defense, another on offense, and the third on analyzing the queen's movements and coordinating his overall strategy, while he himself kept an eye on his friends and clones.

"She's faster than I expected," Erik said through the radio as he avoided the bug queen's attacks using telekinesis.

He lifted him out of harm's way, as there was no way he could keep up with her pace with his strength alone. He also understood why telekinesis was so powerful and how Uncle Benjamin had been able to reach the Blackguards' highest ranks.

The queen's mandibles crashed together below him, where he had stood some moments before.

"Shit..."

Erik barely avoided it. Since the queen had presented herself on a silver plate, though, Erik sent a barrage of lightning bolts towards her. The discharge from his elemental Lord brain crystal power struck her carapace, creating a flash of light that illuminated the entire cave.

The queen screeched as the current danced across her armored shell. Most of the bolts dissipated on it, but some seeped into her flesh and electrocuted her.

However, it wasn't enough. The queen's natural mana armor dissipated the rest, severely reducing the effects of Erik's power. Yet she staggered momentarily.

Erik landed on a broken pillar. The queen recovered fast, turning toward him and locking her eyes on the human.

"Standard elemental attacks aren't working."

"What's your plan?" Mira asked as she continued firing arrows into the swarm of lesser bugs.

"I need to find a weakness in her defenses." He paused. "How are things going for you?"

Mira knocked another arrow and killed another bug.

"The number of enemies is increasing, but we are managing. The problem is that things keep going like this. We are going to be overwhelmed."

Erik had no time to reply because the queen reared back, her thorax contracting. Erik was using instability to see what the queen wanted to do since the battle had started and found himself in need of activating Absolute Wall.

A barrier materialized before him just as the queen sprayed corrosive acid in his direction.

The acid struck the barrier, sizzling against the mana surface. The barrier held, but Erik could sense its integrity weakening at a fast pace.

"What the fuck is this?"

Erik got another look at the queen's thoughts. Unlike humans, the queen's alien thinking patterns were hard to interpret, but they were undoubtedly complex. Somehow, he picked up what she planned to do.

"She wants to flank me," Erik said. "She's surely smarter than she looks."

As if to confirm his words, the queen changed direction mid-charge. Instead of going directly into Erik's position, she circled around his barrier.

Erik used telekinesis to propel himself away from the pillar just as the queen got past the barrier and launched herself toward him.

"Oh, shit!" Erik saw what she was thinking.

The queen spit her acid once again. Erik didn't have the time to create another barrier, not that it would have lasted, anyway. Luckily, Erik had his armor on, and he created some barriers right in front of him at the start of the battle.

The spray collided with them and fell to the ground, but some splashes ended up hitting him. The armor held, but a little of the acid reached his shoulder.

"AH! DAMN!"

His control over telekinesis didn't waver since he had the hydra's heads taking care of it, but he found himself in a tough spot.

[Your upper left shoulder is injured. The acid penetrated approximately 2.8 centimeters. No major arteries affected.]

<How the hell do I fight something that fast?>

[Start attacking instead of staying on the defensive.]

<Do you think it's easy?>

Erik gritted his teeth, fighting through the pain.

"Erik!" Amber's concerned voice came through the radio. "Are you ok?"

"She got me, but it's nothing critical. Focus on your task. I'm fine."

Erik used Rejuvenating Touch to heal his wound. He didn't even have to use a lot of mana. However, Absolute Castle required quite a bit to stop the acid from melting Erik's entire arm.

The queen was chasing the human like the beast she was, her mandibles clicking in what seemed like satisfaction at drawing blood.

Erik kept flying. The battle now moved away from the Silver Line Corporation's building. Partly because Erik did it on purpose and partly because of circumstances.

If he was outside, he would have killed the queen rather easily, provided no flying thaids saw him. There was a limit to what her body could do, and with all the mana he had, he could have made his attacks faster and more devastating. The queen would also have had problems moving.

She was taking advantage of the cave and the structure to fight a 3D battle. She didn't just move forward or backward, but also up, scaling the building and running on the cave walls. In open space, she would not have been able to do it.

At the same time, inside the underground city, Erik couldn't fly as much as he needed and had to actually tone down his powers to avoid precious hints about the corporation being destroyed.

<Is there a chance I might be able to lure her away?>

[No. She is too smart to fall for it; she knows she has an advantage inside the cave.]

<Fuck!>

A group of warrior bugs broke away from the main swarm, climbing the walls of surrounding structures to reach Erik's height. Soon they started spitting acid at Erik, who was forced to avoid a rain of matter-dissolving liquids.

Erik divided his consciousness further, using Will of the Hydra to split his focus four ways now. He coordinated his defenses, attacks, and analysis and monitored the approaching warriors.

"Guys!" He said amidst evasion moves. "Stop those fuckers!"

"Sorry!"

<Damn... I need to take control of this battlefield.>

[What were you thinking?]

<As if you don't know it already.>

He channeled mana into Verdant Architect's neural links. If the queen was too fast, he only needed to restrain her.

Mana surged through the ground beneath the queen, causing massive vines to erupt from the cracks in the ancient courtyard.

The plants grew at an unnatural rate, thickening and hardening. They wrapped around the queen's legs.

"Gotcha, bitch!"

However, the vines lasted just for a couple of seconds. The queen's raw physical power tore them apart.

"What the...?"

The Hydra's heads kept thinking as Erik's main consciousness got flabbergasted.

He used the momentary advantage to launch a concentrated attack. Fire and lightning merged in his hands.

"Take this, you bastard!"

The superheated plasma struck, the combined elements bypassing her defenses and burning through sections of her carapace.

The queen shrieked, a sound so piercing that several windows in the surrounding buildings shattered. Her struggle against the vines intensified, fueled by pain and rage.

"I think I found a way," Erik said.

Erik kept attacking the queen, switching between extreme heat and cold on the same spots of her body. This sudden change in temperature made cracks form in her outer shell.

However, the warrior bugs reached Erik's height, launching themselves toward him from various angles, while others, at the same time, kept spitting acid on him.

Erik redirected some of his focus, creating wind blades that sliced through the attackers. Their bodies fell to the courtyard below, adding to the growing pile of bug corpses.

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

Chapter 1298: The bugs (24)

"Guys! Didn't I tell you to ke—"

However, when Erik turned to look at what the others were doing, he stopped in his tracks. The group was swarmed by the thaids.

The clones had been forced to fight melee. The only thing keeping them alive was the pillar Erik created to give them the high ground. They forced the bugs to climb, and the group used that to kill as many as they could.

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

Erik couldn't leave them like that.

Drawing on his mana reserves, he created a massive wall of water 20 feet high that crashed down onto the swarm like a tidal wave. The surging flood scattered thousands of thaids, sending their bodies tumbling across the ground.

Before the water could drain away, Erik followed up by channeling an intense electrical current through the liquid. Blue-white arcs of electricity danced across the water's surface, electrocuting every thaid touched by even a drop of the conductive liquid.

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

...

...

...

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

However, that did cost Erik some mana, even if the attack itself didn't last more than two seconds. Then he focused again on the queen. She broke free from the last of the vines. It took her no longer than three seconds to tear through all of them.

She leapt upward. Her trajectory carried her toward Erik.

Erik barely had time to react, given her speed. He reinforced Absolute Castle, channeling additional mana into the armor around his torso and head.

The queen struck him with crushing force, like being hit by a speeding truck. Her serrated claws, each as long as a human finger, scraped against his mana armor with an ear-piercing screech. The impact alone made Erik's bones rattle.

Each time she moved her body, her claws shattered sections of his mana armor like breaking glass, forcing Erik to channel more mana to repair the damage.

The queen's attacks were relentless, and at some point, her foot-long nails sliced through his defenses and carved deep into his flesh.

"AAAAGH!"

Deep gashes and puncture wounds accumulated on Erik's body as the queen's attacks connected. Though he healed himself with Rejuvenating Touch, each application of the healing ability drained significant amounts of his mana reserves.

In the meantime, notifications kept piling up as Erik's team members killed more and more bugs.

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

The queen's combination of strength and lightning-fast strikes made the situation dire.

Not only did she do a lot of damage, but she did it often. The speed at which Erik got wounded only ramped up.

The queen didn't notice Erik healing and hit him with enough strength that telekinesis lost its grip on his body, sending him flying to the ground.

The impact sent Erik crashing into the wall of a nearby building. Concrete cracked and crumbled, and he struggled to maintain consciousness.

His armor had prevented fatal damage, but the sheer force of the blow had rattled his brain inside his skull.

[Erik, heal yourself! You have multiple contusions and a minor concussion!]

But despite the hydra's heads, he was having trouble understanding what the system was saying.

"Erik!" Multiple voices said through the radio.

Erik shook his head, trying to clear his vision. The queen landed on the broken wall near him.

"Don't—" Erik coughed, tasting blood. "Don't break formation. Maintain the perimeter; keep killing the bugs."

The queen attacked again, her mandibles snapping as they aimed for Erik's head. He raised a barrier, channeling a massive amount of mana into the protective shield.

It materialized just inches from his face. This time, the shield blocked the queen's strike, but keeping such a powerful barrier was draining Erik's mana reserves.

The queen's attack was incredibly powerful. Despite Erik continuously channeling mana into it, the barrier shook and trembled under her assault.

[The barrier's integrity is decreasing.]

Erik's world spun. His thoughts moved sluggishly, disconnected. Each heartbeat sent pain throbbing through his skull, making focus nearly impossible.

"Have to... heal," he said. Pain was a powerful motivator.

Through the haze of his concussion, Erik used Rejuvenating Touch again and healed himself. The fog lifted as the brain injury subsided.

The pain receded, and Erik was able to think straight again. He blinked hard, trying to refocus on the immediate threat as the queen was there to rip his barrier.

[IT'S COLLAPSING!]

With his consciousness still split through Will of the Hydra, he focused on the queen.

Using telekinesis, he pulled massive chunks of concrete and steel from the surrounding buildings. The debris orbited him briefly before launching toward the queen from multiple angles.

The queen reacted. She had too much dexterity to not notice the attack. She focused on defending against the incoming projectiles.

She batted away some with her limbs while dodging others, but several struck her with considerable force, chipping her already damaged carapace. However, it still wasn't enough to make a fatal wound.

Erik shot away from the wall, creating space between himself and the queen. He gulped air in sharp breaths while quickly rethinking his approach.

"Your tactic is working," Emily said on the radio. "The smaller bugs are becoming disorganized. I think your attacks on the queen are disrupting her control."

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

Erik nodded, though no one could see the gesture. The lesser bugs were still attacking but with less coordination, which made it easier for the clones to kill them, and Erik kept getting experience points.

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

<Yes!>

The system alerts flooded his field of vision while his team kept killing the swarm. Each level-up restored his stamina and mana to full capacity.

Chapter 1299: The bugs (25)

The queen did her best to recover from the barrage, but Erik didn't allow her. However, she released another spray of acid, this time aiming at a wider area to dissolve the next batch of weaponized debris Erik was using.

Erik used Elemental Lord to create a wind current strong enough to redirect the acid back toward the queen.

He didn't stop it all, but most of it fell to the ground below, liquefying the queen's own children and sending her into a frenzy.

Some of the corrosive liquid splashed across her already damaged exoskeleton. Unfortunately, it did nothing for her. It was her corrosive acid, after all. If she wasn't immune to it, there would be no point in having it.

However, that barrage gave Erik an advantage. He had no intention of letting go.

"Take this!"

He used Elemental Lord to create a concentrated beam of fire. While the queen was distracted by the onslaught, Erik targeted the largest crack in her carapace. The flame burned enough to melt through the weakened biological armor, penetrating to the softer tissue beneath.

Since her defenses weren't powered by mana, there wasn't much the queen could do against Erik's fire.

Ichor sprayed from the wound, sizzling as it hit the ground.

"Gotcha!"

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

More and more of her bugs got killed by Amber and the others, but even the battle between the queen and Erik made victims. The sheer size of their clash was affecting the cave in every corner, and many of the buildings where the bugs nested got destroyed by either him or her.

The queen's movements slowed, filled with agony due to her wounds.

"She's weaker," Erik said. "But still dangerous."

The queen proved his point immediately. Taken by a rage-fueled frenzy, she had a sudden burst of speed. She charged at Erik once more, and as soon as she gained enough speed, she jumped.

The queen looked like a giant boulder having been thrown by a giant. This time, her approach wasn't direct but involved a complex series of leaps from surface-to-surface, making her trajectory unpredictable for everyone. Erik was able to keep up with her thanks to his powers, but his dexterity wasn't high enough.

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

If the queen attacked, Erik would know, but reacting to such attacks was all but assured. He pumped more mana into his absolute castle and made a sturdy barrier using absolute wall.

The queen crashed through the barrier; the mana construct shattered under her immense strength and weight.

"Shit!"

She came in front of Erik less than a millisecond after. Erik's eyes enlarged because of the shock.

The queen then did the equivalent of a punch. It was just that she was filled with spiky protrusions all over.

One of her spikes pierced through Erik's Absolute Castle, driving into his side. The strength behind the blow also sent him flying through the cavern. In a second, he was on the other side.

Searing pain shot through him as the spike left his body, leaving both his side and internal organs throbbing in agony.

Blood poured from the wound.

[You have a wound on the right side of the abdomen. There is organ damage! Do something.]

The system never stopped checking on Erik and telling him when and what to heal. This had been by far the hardest battle Erik went through.

Sure, he often got wounded. Against the Hevadrin, he lost consciousness, but it was the first battle against a high-leveled thaid of this caliber. Besides, the difference in strength and speed was too great. If Erik didn't pay attention, the queen would kill him instantly.

Erik had to take advantage of his mana, and of his powers, like all humans did against thaids.

However, it wasn't easy to focus on such a situation. Even his Hydra's heads were having trouble. Blood soaked through his clothing.

"Erik's hit!" Mira shouted through the radio. "We need to help him!"

"No!" Erik managed through gritted teeth. "Keep killing... the bugs..."

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

Erik activated Rejuvenating Touch, focusing the healing energy into the gaping wound on his side.

With his internal organs reduced to little more than shredded tissue, he had to spend quite an amount of mana to reconstruct them piece by piece - first rebuilding the damaged liver and intestines, then repairing torn blood vessels and muscle tissue.

The process was not simple and required great control to properly regrow each organ to its original state.

But the queen didn't leave him be. She was on him already, seemingly aware of her advantage. Her mandibles clicked together in what Erik interpreted as a triumphant smirk.

Erik gathered his mana and channeled it into telekinesis. The queen would kill him if he didn't pay attention, but he blocked her.

The problem was that controlling something so big and strong wasn't easy at all and was burning at his mana reserves like a wildfire through dry grass.

One of the hydra heads created a highly compressed wind blade.

"Let's see if you can resist this!"

The energy swirled, forming a literal blade made of wind, with enough power to cut a mountain in half. Yet, he was still unsure if it would work against the bug queen.

"Die, bitch!"

He released the blade at the queen's damaged thorax. The queen sensed something was wrong and increased the circulation of her mana into her natural mana armor.

The two energies clashed, but the queen could do little against the strength behind Erik's attack. She stopped the blade to cut through her, but it sent her crashing into multiple buildings.

"Fuck! This didn't work too!"

[You must use fire or water. It's the only way to kill her. Drown her or burn her, you choose!]

The explosion caused by the clash of mana sent both Erik and the queen flying in opposite directions. Erik crashed into a pile of debris, his Absolute Castle armor shattering from the impact.

The queen was already getting on her legs, but she was much weaker than before the battle started.

"The swarm is breaking apart, Erik," Emily said. "Whatever you are doing, keep it up! Without the queen's full control, they're reverting to basic instincts. We are killing more of them by the second."

Erik knew that because the stream of notifications never stopped arriving.

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

Chapter 1300: The bugs (26)

Inside the entire underground city, the remaining bugs, the thousands remaining, fought in disarray.

Often ending up under the clone's fire. In truth, the situation looked like a massacre; the more they fought, the more the creatures died. However, there were too many of them, and the clones were having too much trouble.

There was a limit to what they could do, and if it weren't for Erik and the queen inadvertently killing the bugs, they would have been swarmed by now.

But that didn't mean they weren't still risking it. They had to constantly keep on the move to avoid being swarmed, but with how many the bugs were, it was hard to find a suitable spot that wouldn't be filled with monsters a second later.

The rocky growths Erik made to keep his clones safe had long been destroyed. Mira shapeshifted and moved from building to building. That gave her a lot of time before the bugs reached her. Emily did the same, slowing time down and bringing Amber with her since she couldn't even use her powers, given the situation.

"How is your mana?" Amber spoke to the clones on their radio.

"I used almost all of it for all my powers. I only got some into the healing one."

"I'm in the same situation," another one said.

The situation looked grim for the clones, but thankfully, Erik helped them from time to time. It wasn't just that, but the fight between him and the queen was reaping more lives than the three girls and the clones combined.

The remaining bugs were no longer a cohesive unit. Those that survived the onslaught of Erik and the queen's battle started mindlessly continuing their attacks.

The notifications of killed thanatocoleoptera kept flooding Erik's vision as the mana absorption process kept piling up experience points.

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

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

[Dux thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

...

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...

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

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

[Dux thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

The notifications continued piling up, though Erik barely registered them through his pain-induced haze.

At the same time, the battle between Erik and the queen was reaching its climax. The queen ramped up its attack speed.

She was severely slower than before, meaning Erik was having an easier time, and his mana consumption decreased since he had to avoid her attacks less frequently.

The wound Erik made in her thorax earlier leaked a copious amount of ichor, or blood, or whatever it was, staining the ground beneath her.

It leaked every time she moved, and she didn't move just a few times.

Fatigue showed in her eyes, though it was difficult for a human to detect that subtle change in such alien features.

Erik could read her mind. That was how he knew the queen wasn't in a favorable situation. He then turned to look at his companions. They weren't faring better than the queen.

[The clones will be swarmed again. You must do something.]

<I know...>

[There is a denser cluster there,] the system said, showing Erik a mental image of the place it was seeing. It was the equivalent of pointing its fingers at the place, but it was many times better.

<I do.>

[Kill them all.]

<I will consume a lot of mana if I do so. The queen will take advantage of that.>

She kept attacking Erik and sending acidic sprays in his direction. Despite her grievous injuries, the queen remained focused on eliminating the threat to her hive.

[Just do as I say.]

The biological supercomputer almost never failed or was incorrect. So, he decided to comply.

<Shit...>

Erik channeled more mana. He combined water and lightning. A tremendous surge of water swept a large bulk of thaids.

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

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

[Dux thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

...

...

...

[Bellator thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

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

[Dux thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

That killed many of the bugs. Most were crushed by the raging currents that flooded the underground cave, others got drowned, and those who didn't die got electrocuted. The lightning also affected those who were wet.

[LEVEL UP.]

The system told Erik to target a part of the cluster that was far from the clones. So they were unscathed.

Erik gave a quick glimpse at the battle. The burden on the clones lessened, and not just by a few degrees. Mira, Amber, June, and Emily were safe and wreaking havoc below.

Many bugs like thaids were trying to reach them on top of the giant buildings, but it looked like they could manage it.

<You knew I would level up.>

Erik didn't have an opportunity to check his experience points, so he didn't know.

[Of course.]

What the system did was to give more mana to Erik, more attributes, and, most importantly, save his clones.

Erik didn't kill all the bugs, but many of them died. In the meantime, the notifications kept piling up.

The queen saw what Erik did, and her fury erupted like a volcano, turning her compound eyes into burning coals of rage.

<She didn't like that at all.>

[It doesn't matter. You weakened her a lot. Killing her is just a matter of time now.]

She ramped up her speed, lunging forward with a speed so frightening as to scare even Erik. Yet he was too far.

He kept at least 200 meters away from her, so even if she was fast, it would take some seconds before she reached him.

The distance also helped Erik to see what she did. If he got too close, he wouldn't have been able to even register what she was doing.

He channeled mana into his Absolute Wall brain crystal power's neural links, creating a new barrier. This time, the queen's strength was much lower, while Erik just got a new wave of mana. Her next attack was unable to pierce through his barrier.

<She must have reached the bottom of her mana.>

[It's good for us at least.]

Erik deflected another spray of acid while launching a bolt of lightning through the shield. The electricity crackled and sparked against her carapace, drawing an inhuman shriek.

This time, she was having trouble resisting the attack, but not enough for Erik to be able to kill her.

[Keep depleting her mana reserves.]

Erik somersaulted midair to avoid a retaliating strike. He followed up with a combination of ice shards and flame bursts, targeting the many wounds on her thorax.

The queen countered with a sweeping attack of her blade-like appendages, forcing Erik to fly at least three hundred meters away from her.

There was a limit to her range, but she moved fast, and the second after she attacked, she made at least a hundred more.

Erik formed ice spears that shot toward her injuries. The queen blocked most with her armor, but two found their mark, embedding in some of her limbs.

"Do you like it?"

The queen shrieked in anger, and the other bugs did the same.