

## BIOLOGICAL 1301

### Chapter 1301: The bugs (27)

Like a wounded titan from ancient myths, the queen staggered back, ichor pouring from a dozen wounds across her massive body.

Despite devastating wounds across her exoskeleton and multiple broken limbs, she refused to yield. She must have had a powerful maternal instinct, which drove her forward as she fought to protect the thousands of eggs and larvae deep within her hive.

Erik hovered above, using the free hydra's heads to analyze the queen's weakened state.

"She's running out of options."

[Her carapace integrity is below 40%. The thorax wound must be your primary target.]

The queen launched another acid spray like a pressurized fire hose. She didn't hold back, not that she could.

The problem for her was that the attack lacked its previous precision and strength. Erik easily redirected it with a gust of wind, albeit a powerful one, sending the corrosive liquid splashing against some of the bugs below.

[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.]

...

...

...

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

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

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

"It's time to end this."

The queen's seemingly invincible strength had faded into fragile vulnerability—she had wasted enough mana for Erik's attacks to be much more impactful.

He gathered mana and then used both telekinesis and Verdant Architect to restrict the queen's movements.

Each time the queen moved, she destroyed Erik's tendrils like a scythe through wheat, but it didn't matter, and Erik knew it.

[This is not going to last for long. She's still strong enough to break free.]

Erik tried doing this earlier, but it didn't work. The only way for this tactic to work was for Erik to weaken the queen, which he did.

Erik compressed a huge amount of electricity and used the tendrils to drive them toward the queen.

She shrieked in agony like a wounded dragon as the concentrated lightning energy tore through her body, her massive form convulsing violently from the electrical current that coursed through her nervous system, making her limbs dance like a puppet on electric strings.

The energy ripped through her already compromised armor. The smell of something burning started filling the area more than it already did when the clones burned the bugs.

The queen's shriek shook the entire cavern, loose rocks falling from the ceiling as her pain reverberated through the hive mind. The remaining bugs froze momentarily. Their connection to the queen disrupted them, and Erik's clones weren't going to let the opportunity go to waste.

"Kill them!"

[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.]

...

...

...

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

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

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

...

...

...

Even after taking such a powerful attack, the queen was an iron fortress with crumbling walls but a solid foundation. Though they were not unbreakable, and they were slowly coming undone, as Erik attacked and attacked.

Ichor dripped from her wounds and formed puddles on the ground below, dark pools spreading like spilled oil. She looked at Erik with eyes full of hatred, or at least that was how Erik saw those eyes looking at him.

"She's still alive." Erik couldn't believe his own eyes.

Though wounded, the queen broke free. She charged at Erik, but she was now crawling and clumsy, compared to before.

Erik floated out of her way using telekinesis and fired a succession of fire-based attacks. The projectiles streaked toward the queen, striking her body from multiple angles. The temperature quickly rose.

<Her mana shouldn't be endless. Then why does it feel that way?>

Seeing an opening, Erik activated Verdant Architect to create multiple vines beneath the queen. The vines went through gaps in her armor and seeped into her flesh.

The queen thrashed and struggled, but this time, she wasn't able to break free or escape.

"Just a little more," Erik said, sweat beading on his forehead.

The vines burrowed through the bug queen's flesh and internal organs, spreading like a parasite.

Dark crimson fluids flowed with deceptive grace from the wounds while the vines found their way to her heart. They wrapped around the thunderously silent organ and squeezed harder with each pulse of her heart.

The queen shuddered and collapsed, her limbs twitching once before going still. The light in her eyes faded as the centuries-old ruler of the thanatocoleoptera hive died.

[Thanatocoleoptera killed: mana-absorbing process starting.]

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

[Mana successfully absorbed, starting conversion procedure.]

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

[Mana successfully absorbed into experience. 53,615,726.60 experience points and 536,157.27 DNA points awarded to the host.]

The queen gave Erik a lot of mana, but not enough to level up.

<Too bad...>

[The other bugs are still there.]

"Did it work?" Amber asked through the radio, noticing something weird with the bugs.

Erik flew to the ground, his legs barely supporting him as he touched the floor. He spent a lot of mana and had to mentally keep up with a creature many times faster than him.

It wasn't easy, and it felt as if he tried to move mountains with his bare hands.

Amber reached him first, but only on the radio since the bugs were still fighting, now in a frenzied state since the queen died.

"You did it," she said. "You actually killed her."

"You did it again, Master," June was ecstatic.

Erik nodded, too exhausted for words. Around them, the underground city grew restless. Without their queen's guidance, the hive collapsed, reducing the thanatocoleopteras to not-so-smart bugs.

"You need to keep killing the others," Erik said, wiping sweat from his brow. "Give me five minutes to recover some strength, then I'll join the fight again. My mana reserves are almost depleted, and my stamina isn't faring better."

The cave was still crawling with thousands of thanatocoleoptera.

Though the bugs had lost their queen's control, there were still too many of them to ignore. Erik knew that defeating each one would give him more power and experience—something he didn't want to miss out on.

For the next hour, the group hunted down and eliminated the thanatocoleoptera. Without their queen's guidance, the bugs were easier targets. Every kill added to Erik's growing pool of experience and DNA points.

However, it wasn't easy for the group to hunt them without Erik's help.

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

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

[Mana successfully absorbed, starting conversion procedure.]

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

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

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

[Mana successfully absorbed, starting conversion procedure.]

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

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

...

...

...

Yet, they kept doing it until he got enough experience points to level up and join the fight.

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

Chapter 1302: New Clues (1)

Erik woke to the sound of metal scraping against concrete. The battle with the thanatocoleoptera queen ended during the night of the previous day. The problem was that defeating the queen was just the first step, and the work was far from over.

He stretched. His muscles were still sore after the fight against the queen, but his mana and stamina got replenished.

...

...

...

Erik stepped outside, checking the underground cavern. The clones worked throughout the area, clearing debris and removing bug carcasses.

The sheer number of dead thanatocoleoptera was a problem—they needed to be moved before decomposition made the air unbreathable. But the bodies were many, and the number of clones was not so high, so it was going to be a logistical nightmare.

"Master," a clone said, wiping sweat from his brow. "We've made a perimeter and secured the main Silver Line Corporation building. We also checked the place. There was just minimal damage during the battle, so everything should be ok."

"Good work. What about the others?"

"Miss Amber and Miss Mira are helping with the cleanup in the eastern sector. Miss Emily is helping us search the main laboratory. Elder brother June is coordinating the security teams."

With the clones stripping away the bugs' additions, the underground facility had a changed appearance.

<An entire Silver Line Corporation facility, preserved inside the cave for centuries.>

[Yeah, it doesn't look real.]

<Are you nervous?> This was the company that actually created the biological supercomputer, so maybe it felt nervous to learn more about its own origins. That's if they actually found something there.



More clones came from the forest base to help. With more workers, the cleanup went faster. The teams were clearing walkways and making sure buildings were safe, but they focused mainly on the Silverline Corporation building.

During the morning, Erik helped clean the area surrounding the building. Then, after having given the clones more time to search the place, he headed toward the main building.

The clones were removing the nest material the bugs had built over the years. The problem was they had to be careful about not taking off the parts that helped the building keep its structural integrity.

A lot of time passed since the place was built, and time affected everything. The bugs had to reinforce the parts that were prone to collapse after so much time. But it wasn't all, because the building itself had been damaged when the thanatocoleoptera queen escaped centuries earlier, and that made the rest of the building rather fragile.

"How's it going?" Erik asked the clone in charge of cleaning the server room.

The clone straightened. "We've removed the largest chunks of nesting material and dried out the room, but there's still significant work ahead. The bugs used a kind of resin to cover the walls. They applied it everywhere, including on the servers themselves, making removal hard without damaging the equipment beneath."

"Do you think the servers can be saved?"

We're still unsure, Master. Everything needs to be powered up, but equally important is a complete cleaning to eliminate the possibility of residual materials causing problems. However, we have found several undamaged backup storage devices. They were inside some cabinets, which the bugs covered with their resin. They were essentially locked inside the cabinets until now.

Erik examined the room. Remnants of ancient technology peeked out from beneath years of bug infestation. The Silver Line corporation invested heavily in computational power. It was weird. Most of today's technology was better than that of the past, yet back then they were able to make something as absurd as the biological supercomputer, which was impossible to make by today's scientists.

"Make this a priority," Erik said. "I want those servers operational as soon as possible. Be careful with the hardware—if anything looks irreplaceable, consult with me before proceeding."

"Yes, Master."

Erik left the clones to their work and went to the courtyard, moving past broken pieces of ceiling and dead bugs on the ground.

<At least the cleaning started.>

It was going slowly, but at least it was progressing.

[Yeah, last night you couldn't even walk here.]

Erik saw Amber sitting with her legs crossed on top of a broken wall delimiting the building's courtyard. Something was bothering her.

He cleared his throat, and she turned.

"Hey..." She said, then went back to watching the cleanup work below.

"Something wrong?"

Amber sighed. "I'm just tired."

"We all are. That was a hell of a fight."

"That's not what I mean." Her voice carried an edge. "I'm tired of being weak."

Erik raised an eyebrow. "Weak? You fought through an entire hive of thanatocoleoptera. I wouldn't call that weak. Besides, killing them wouldn't have been that easy without your powers."

During cleanup, Amber's gas manipulation was what made killing the bugs a fast affair. She took care of the largest groups. Without the queen, preserving the buildings' integrity became possible since they just needed to lure the thaids away from the city. That was what they did.

"Compared to you? Compared to the queen? I'm still weak." She shook her head. "I couldn't do anything meaningful until after you killed her."

Amber got much stronger than she was in the past, and her powers weren't weak either. But Erik could see this coming.

"You're being too hard on yourself," Erik said. "Your abilities saved us hours, maybe days, of work."

"That's not the point." Amber turned to face him. "When it mattered most, during the queen fight, I couldn't help."

"That's not because you are weak; rather, it was because we needed you in case things went bad."

"I know," Amber said, "But I can't keep acting only when you need me to escape. That was not nice."

"We didn't have a choice, Amber."

"I know, and that's what is bothering me. I'm not saying I had to use my powers, but I could have done something else if I were stronger."

She paused.

"I want you to give me a new power," she said. "I need more neural links. Not just for another ability, but to get physically stronger, too. I can't keep running away when we see stronger thaids. The clones are powerful, but I can't lean on them all the time."

"I've been thinking about it," he said. "For all of you, in truth. But I'm still working out which powers would best complement your existing abilities."

"I don't care what it is," Amber insisted. "But if it's something that would help me replenish my mana, it would be good. I need to be able to teleport everyone away while still being able to fight."

"You should make more neural links. Finding a power like that is not easy."

"It's not simple, Erik. You know this better than anyone here."

A clone approached, interrupting their conversation. "Master, we've found something in one of the laboratories. You might want to see this."

Chapter 1303: New Clues (2)

Erik nodded, then turned back to Amber. "We'll continue this later. I promise I'm going to take your request seriously."

Amber nodded, though her expression remained as sad as it was before Erik arrived.

Erik followed the clone through the debris-strewn corridor. The place was worse than he assumed. The damage the bugs made was a lot, and there were still traces of their resinous nesting material covering the walls. But the clones cleared enough to reveal a hidden door.

"We found this sealed room," the clone said, pointing to a heavy metal door that had been obstructed by fallen ceiling panels the clones removed.

The room was too small for anything worthwhile. At best, it was used as a storage area. The clones called Erik as soon as they found it, since what they found inside of it had been untouched since the facility was abandoned.

"Where is the room's content?"

"We're cataloging it, master. There were a lot of safes there. Emily is currently giving a look at it."

Erik nodded.

"I'll go there, then," Erik said. "Maybe we will find the information we need."

The clones nodded.

Erik returned to the main corridor, where Emily was cataloging the items retrieved from the room.

"Have you found anything useful?"

Emily looked up from her tablet. "Possibly. Most paper documents deteriorated beyond recovery, but we've found data storage devices in protective cases. If they still work, they might have something useful."

"Damn... Everything relied on electricity. Didn't they have something made out of plastic? I just need a map!"

He sighed. There wasn't anything he could do anyway, and complaining about the situation wasn't going to help. "So, we know they made the queen here, but is there a hint of what else they did here?"

"Nothing concrete yet, but based on the laboratory equipment, I suspect they only made biological research."

Erik frowned.

"Keep searching. Anything that mentions their bases must be flagged immediately. Ignore the rest."

"Of course." Emily said. "There's something else. We found some devices in good condition. Based on what we found, it looks like this wasn't just a research station—people lived in this underground city. The scientists even brought their families."

"Families?"

It made sense, given there was an underground city within this cave, but bringing families here seemed unwise. What kind of life could children have, confined inside a cave?

Emily nodded. "We found what looks like a residential section of the building, personal belongings, even children's toys."

"I'll check on the residential area then," Erik said. "Where is it?"

"Western side. The clones started clearing it an hour ago."

Erik went through the building, passing teams of clones hauling debris and bug parts. Without the clones, searching around the facility would take months.

Erik got to the residential part of the building. The area was different from the research sections. It looked more like a regular home than a laboratory.

Despite centuries of bug infestation, signs of human habitation remained visible.

There were faded paint colors on the walls, broken furniture, and some belongings that had been kept safe inside sealed boxes.

A clone approached, holding a small metallic object. "Master, we found this in the safe. It survived intact."

It was a small device, a datapad, old by current standards but sophisticated for its time. The power switch yielded no response, but the hardware looked undamaged.

<Can you do something?>

[I can help you use elemental lord to charge the device. You would destroy it otherwise, you are not used to finesse.]

<Can't we do it for all the stuff here?>

[We can, but there are many things to consider. If there are damaged parts of the electronics, sending electricity in might put a strain on everything and burn the devices. The best thing is to wait before the clones check and clean everything; then we can try restoring them. As for this thing here, there is no need. We just need to charge it.]

<Let's do it then.>

The biological supercomputer guided Erik through the process of using Elemental Lord to power the datapad.

[Focus, and remember to limit your output to the bare minimum. You need a controlled current, barely enough to activate the circuits without damaging them.]

Erik nodded and channeled his mana with a huge restraint. He placed a fingertip on the power port, generating a small electrical current. The device vibrated in his palm.

[Increase voltage gradually... There. Keep it at this level.]

The screen flickered, then illuminated with a dim blue glow. An ancient boot sequence scrolled across the display as long-dormant systems struggled back to life.

[Let me take care of it.]

Erik kept focusing on charging the device while the biological supercomputer interfaced with it. Lines of code flashed across his mind as the system bypassed security protocols and authentication requirements.

[I'm done.]

<What did you find?>

[Personal logs, research notes, facility maps. This belonged to Dr. Matthias Krane, Lead Geneticist.]

Erik scrolled through the files, opening the most recent entries first.

—

PERSONAL LOG: DR. MATTHIAS KRANE DATE: [CORRUPTED]

The board continues to push me to increase the development speed, despite my objections. The thanatocoleoptera's growth rate is exceeding all projections. I think it's just a matter of time before we lose control of her, though. She is too smart. I've recommended termination of the project, but the higher-ups overruled me. —

Erik opened another file, this one marked as restricted.

—

CLASSIFIED: SPECIMEN MONITORING REPORT CLEARANCE LEVEL: DIRECTOR ONLY

"Sir, we have a situation. There's been a containment breach at both the Western Outpost and Lake Facility. Some test subjects escaped and are spreading into the surrounding wilderness. We're tracking them through their implants, but they're moving faster than we can chase."

"My team recommends the deployment of containment units with full termination authority."

"Dr. Krane, I should warn you—the Series X specimens are showing concerning traits. Their adaptation rate went beyond our models, and their survival capabilities are higher than we expected. If your specimen is showing the same results, I suggest you put it down. If these things spread further, we will have a problem."

(...)

"Update from the board, sir—they're... they're delaying our response. They want to assess the military applications first. Security teams are ready, but we're on hold." —

"Shit," Erik said. "It's then that it happened. These were the first thaids to escape. They are the progenitors of all the motherfuckers out there!"

[Knowing about the event is one thing, but reading these firsthand accounts makes it feel as if it happened hours ago. It no longer seems like ancient history.]

Erik scrolled through more entries, each more damning than the last. Detailed notes on genetic modifications, mana integration procedures, and behavior control systems were just some of the things the doctor wrote on his logs.

"The locations from where they escaped—Site W-3 and Site L-7. Do you know about them? They also talked about a lake facility."



[I think the naming convention suggests geographic coordinates. W likely stands for West, L for Lake. The numerical designations show specific facilities.]

"Do you know where these places are?" Erik asked, staring at the screen.

[I might have an idea. Site W-3 was likely in the Lorogia mountain range. This explains what the blackguards were searching for.]

They knew the blackguards went there to find a lab, but knowing with certainty it was there was something else.

"What about the lake site?"

[Site L-7 was situated beside Lake Vermillion on the eastern coast, roughly 1200 kilometers southeast. There are no other lakes big enough to be used for whatever they were doing. There is another problem, though: the lake was connected to the sea through a large river, so it's likely the lake is full of thaids.]

But it wasn't just that.

"Great, one escape resulted in the land thaids, this resulted in the sea thaids."

[It's possible.]

Erik stood, tucking the datapad into his pocket. "We need to search these places."

[We don't have enough clones. We would need to delay our expedition to the west, and if we want to have a clear picture of the lab's locations, we still need to fix everything here. We can't do this alone. We need Becker. They have the materials, the skills, and the numbers to pull this off quickly.]

Chapter 1304: An unexpected reunion (1)

Erik pocketed the datapad, walking back through the cleared corridors of the facility.

[We need to contact Becker as soon as possible. The intelligence we've gathered here is valuable, and what we can get from the rest of the computers might even be more valuable to simply sit on it.]

<Remember that I only want to know where the blackguards are. I don't care about how the thaids came to be and all the technicalities behind it. Maybe Becker would like to know so that we can finally have someone to blame for this whole shithole the world turned into. But, you know, we have no way of contacting Becker as of now. >

Erik and the clones that remained had some radios, but they were short-ranged ones, surely not able to reach Becker on Mannard.

[The radio won't work; we need to send messengers. A small group of clones could make the journey back to Mannard and deliver the information directly.]

At the moment, it was the only way for them to get in contact with the clones on Mannard or Becker.

<You're suggesting we send them all the way across the continent and then over the sea?>

[Yes. They could use the same method you and Rick used to get back on Mannard and avoid confrontation when possible. Hopefully, all the time.]

Erik paused by a shattered window, looking out over the underground cavern where his clones continued their cleanup efforts. The thought of sending some of them on such a journey again troubled him. Besides, the system was being too hopeful.

<No confrontation? In your dreams!>

[I can't dream. I never sleep!]

Erik gave the biological supercomputer a mentally annoyed look. <On land, it's possible to avoid thaids by staying under the tree canopy, but sea travel is another matter entirely. There is no place to hide.>

[The risk is manageable with proper planning.]

<Manageable, my ass!> With all of Erik's powers, even he couldn't completely avoid fights or meet Thaid's, at the very least, and those thaid's were utterly deadly. Erik was strong, strong enough to kill most of what had barred his way. Thaid's on Mur were strong, but the really powerful titans were few compared to the rest of the monster population.

The real problem on Mur was the insane number of thaid's, all of which were stronger than the monsters on Mannard—except for Wyverns, which Erik still couldn't understand why they lived on Mannard instead of Mur.

Having to face thousands of monsters twice as strong as a Hevadrin was no small feat. Sure, Erik could do it thanks to his mana, but then he would have to fight similar monsters again, and again, and again.

If he didn't level up, even he would end without mana, and there was a limit to what melee fighting could achieve.

He sighed.

<Not without appropriate brain crystal powers and mana levels,> Erik said. <Sea thaid's are nearly impossible to avoid without specialized abilities, and flying thaid's are even worse. Did you forget I had to shapeshift, create illusions, make turns with Rick, and use invisibility? Rick didn't have enough mana to make a 24/h journey. Even if the clones take turns, they only have invisibility and shapeshifting.>

[You are not giving the clones the credit they deserve. They have your combat training and tactical knowledge; they are even smarter than you thanks to Hais brain crystal power.]

<Intelligence has nothing to do here. It's opportunities, it's luck... Even with my knowledge, their mana reserves are limited. >

The biological supercomputer fell silent for a moment. Erik was right, but there was no other way to do this.

[The information we've discovered here is groundbreaking. We've uncovered the origin of the thaid outbreak and identified potential locations of other Silver Line Corporation's facilities. The risk is

worth taking if we can get more information, and if we need to get the data about the other facilities, we might need to restore more servers and data disks.]

It paused. [We have been lucky for the datapad having been in good condition and even more to have the information we sought, at least partially. The problem is that even if we head to these facilities, it's likely we won't be this lucky.]

Erik considered the situation. He knew the supercomputer made valid points, but sending the clones into such danger went against his basic instincts.

<Maybe we could—>

"Sir! Sir! We have a problem!"

Erik spun around as a clone rushed toward him, his face full of urgency.

"What is it?" Erik straightened.

The clone stopped to catch his breath. "One of my brothers just arrived from the forest shelter where Rick is staying. He said, Gwen, Floyd, and the others are on Mur!"

"What?!" Erik's eyes widened. "That's impossible. Why would they come here? How did they even make the crossing?"

"A plane, based on what Gwen said. The messenger said they had arrived some time ago at the shelter. Rick is escorting them here now. They should arrive within hours."

This was an unexpected development. "They don't have the combat abilities to survive here. The thaid population in Mur is far more dangerous than anything in Mannard."

[Actually, this might be good news.]

<Good news? They've put themselves in extreme danger for no reason.>

[Not for no reason. They may have a way to communicate with Becker. This could solve our problem.]

The clone shifted uncomfortably, clearly unsure if he should remain or return to his duties, knowing that Erik was likely talking to the biological supercomputer, since he remained silent the whole time.

"Thank you for the information," Erik said. "Tell the perimeter teams to expect Rick's group and to bring them to me when they arrive. I want double security along their approach path."

"Yes, sir." The clone saluted and left.

Erik resumed walking.

<You really think they might have equipment able of reaching Mannard?>

[It's certainly possible. Becker has resources we don't, and right now he has people. They might have provided Gwen's team with long-range communication devices for keeping contact across continents. It wouldn't make sense for Becker to send them here without a way to know if they needed help.]

<Or they could have just been reckless,> Erik said. <Floyd has never been known for caution.>

[True, but even Floyd wouldn't risk crossing to Mur without a reason. Something prompted this expedition.]

Erik entered the central operations room they'd established, where June coordinated the facility's security and exploration efforts.

"June," Erik said. "We need to prepare for visitors. Rick is bringing Gwen and the others from Mannard."

June looked up, surprised. "From Mannard? How did they—"

"I don't know yet, but they'll be here soon. Make sure we have accommodations ready and a secure briefing area. I want to hear what prompted this journey and if they have a way to make me talk to Becker."

"Yes, Master." June turned to issue orders.

Erik moved to a quieter corner of the room, continuing his internal dialogue with the biological supercomputer.

<What do you think they want?>

[Hard to say without more information. Perhaps they found something in Mannard that relates to our findings here. Or Becker sent them with important intelligence. Or maybe...]

<What?>

[Maybe it's because we lost contact with them. Maybe this is a rescue mission.]

<Rescue? They are strong based on the old standards but amount to nothing with the new ones, especially not on Mur.>

[We should keep judgment to ourselves until we hear their explanation.]

Erik spent the next few hours overseeing the continued cleanup of the facility while checking for updates on Rick's approaching group.

By afternoon, a clone reported movement at the cave entrance. Erik ordered a security detail to escort the newcomers through the still-dangerous cavern.

Chapter 1305: An unexpected reunion (2)

Thirty minutes later, Rick led a tired but unharmed group of humans into the still-under-construction operation center. Gwen, Floyd, Martha, Aaron, Mickey, Ben, and Allan looked dirty and exhausted, but otherwise fine.

"Erik!" Ben's face lit up. "You won't believe how strong things are here! I can't wait to fight them!"

Floyd dropped his pack with a groan. "First, please tell me you have food and somewhere to sleep. The forest trek was brutal, and I don't have the energy to deal with Ben's battle nonsense."

"We do," Erik said. He gave a look at June, and he brought something to eat. The group ate in silence. They were too hungry to even speak, and it was understandable.

Floyd and Ben ate like starving animals, while Martha and Gwen were more composed. Aaron, Mickey, and Allan wolfed down their portions without pause, but not without manners like Floyd and Ben.

"June, show them to the quarters we prepared."

As June led the others away, Erik pulled Rick aside. "How did they get to Mur? And why take such a risk and bring them here? What about the eggs at the base?"

Rick's expression turned serious. "The eggs are safe. The clones you sent arrived some time ago. I offered to come here because I had been alone for too long and needed a change of scenery. I'm you, after all, master. I like to walk exactly like you do."

Rick paused. "As for the rest, apparently Becker and the others got worried that something happened to you and sent their strongest soldiers to find you. Coincidentally, their strongest soldiers are also your friends."

Erik frowned. "This was a stupid idea! If I might have even died here, what made them think they could survive alone? The chances you were alive, or that they found you before a thaid found them, were basically non-existent."

"They landed close to the tree," Rick said. "Making it had been a good idea. It tells our allies where we are, and it was a giveaway of your condition. If you were in no shape to make a tree so huge, you wouldn't have made it. Just growing one told the others you were alive."

[It makes sense. For once you did something good without me having to tell you.]

<Shut up.>

Erik nodded. "Did they tell you how they came here? Even with Becker's resources, the sea route is extremely dangerous without a plane."

"They took one," Rick smiled. "Becker's found one to make the journey. They crossed practically undetected."

[This means Becker can send someone else. If we keep in contact with him, he might bring more clones here or send someone to help with the servers.]

<You are awfully sure Becker is willing to send people, aren't you? Besides, what if they refuse even if Becker orders them?>

[Then there is nothing we can do, but at least we tried.]

"There's one more thing," Rick said, lowering his voice. "The others are in no way able to survive here alone, master. You need to give them powers."

"I know. I was discussing the same thing with Amber and was thinking about what I could give her and the others. Adding some more people will not make a difference."

Rick nodded. "You should." The clone sighed. "I don't know what happened here, but based on what my brothers told me once they got to the first shelter, things are not so simple here." He turned around. "Since we are in the underground city, I guess you already killed whatever thaid was infesting it, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, then you know how things are. Thaid's here are difficult for us to deal with; for them, they are impossible. I didn't come here alone. Some of my brothers came with me, and we were the main attack force. The others helped. Floyd and Martha were particularly useful, but they didn't go far from just being useful. In a direct fight, they are doomed."

Erik knew things would be like this if someone from Mannard came here, and that was why he was adamant about going with his clones only. Amber and the others were just a plus; he couldn't prevent them from coming.



"I don't have powers to give them at the moment."

That was the crux of the problem.

"Don't worry, master, I've covered that up already. I and the others came across some interesting abilities on our way here," Rick said. "And since we were thinking about the matter during the journey, we collected their blood and brain crystal."

[Why is it your clones have more wisdom than you?]

<They are smarter; did you forget?> Erik said in annoyance.

[Wisdom has nothing to do with intelligence,] the system said. [Intelligence is about processing information and solving problems, while wisdom comes from experience and good judgment. You could be the smartest person in the world and still make unwise decisions.]

<Weren't you the one saying I should be careful about the powers I give? Didn't you say too many neural links in a short time period might lead to mutations?>

[This can be managed with proper caution. You could have explained the situation to the others and prevented them from forming too many neural links too quickly.]

<Define short time.>

[A month.]

<That's exactly the problem...>

Rick then left to rest, and Erik went back to the server room to help the clones clean the area.

...

...

...

Two hours later, Erik gathered with the others in the cleared conference room. Gwen had her usual stern gaze, but Erik noticed it softened a little when she looked at Allan.

<They got together, uh?>

[Try being happy for her.]

<I am. It's just that Gwen should learn to relax a little.>

"So, tell me—how exactly did you plan to survive here if we were dead?" Amber asked, shooting Gwen a disapproving look.

Gwen straightened in her chair and turned to her.

"We have a way to contact the base. We would have just needed to hide and wait. If you were alive, the clones would have helped."

"We are not going to leave Mur in the foreseeable future," Mira said. "We are very close to finding the blackguards and to finally having a full picture of why the thaids spread."

Chapter 1306: An unexpected reunion (3)

"We're not leaving Mur until we destroy the blackguards," Erik said, which made Gwen just frown more.

"Are you confident you can make it? The blackguards have more resources than us."

Erik's expression darkened. "I would be if my clones weren't mostly dead. Now I'm having problems given the lack of human help."

He paused. "I'm doing what I can, preparing new batches, but that's not something that can be done quickly. However, the new clones will have an ability that allows them to increase the stamina and mana regeneration of those around them. Since all of them have the power, the effect is likely going to stack. This means that when they mature, they will be able to fight for as long as one wants, since we would have infinite mana. It's just that I need time for them to hatch and mature."

"Yo, bro, what the fuck?!" Ben couldn't believe Erik's words.

"The first batches of eggs have already hatched, master," Rick said.

After Erik edited his power, the hatching and maturing period decreased. It took two weeks for the eggs to hatch and a month and a half to mature.

So, in a month, Erik was going to have a stronger army. If that would be enough to defeat the blackguards, no one knew. Most depended on their situation and how strong they became following whatever experiment they performed.

He nodded. "They will still take around a month and a half for them to mature. This is the main issue right now."

He moved to the center of the room, grabbing everyone's attention.

"It is not my ability to win, in theory," Erik said. "It's time. If the blackguards have more time, they'll grow even stronger than me. Every day they're expanding their research, making their soldiers stronger, and studying thaid biology."

The group exchanged concerned glances.

"We'll support you however we can," Gwen said. Though her voice remained steady, it was clear she was worried. "The only problem is that we are not strong enough to give you direct help."

"I will accept any help you give me, regardless of how effective it might or might not be," Erik said. "Besides, did Becker tell you about my new ability?"

"He did." Floyd stepped forward. "We discussed this on our way here, and none of us wants to seem opportunistic, but you should consider granting us new powers. That way, we could offer you more meaningful support."

"I wouldn't consider you opportunists for asking this. After all, it costs me nothing," Erik said.

"Anyway, Rick already got some powers he thinks would be well suited for you. However, there is something else you might help me with that should give a tangible effect in a short time."

"What?" Gwen asked.

"This building we're in," he said, "is an old Silverline Corporation laboratory. One of those that created the thaids."

Martha gasped while Allan's expression hardened. "Are you sure of this?"

"Absolutely," Erik said. "We've found documentation, research logs, and even a proto-thaid. All the thaids that the clones are currently clearing from the building were created here."

Over the next hour, Erik shared everything he had discovered during his time on the Mur continent. He told them about the Silverline Corporation's extensive genetic experimentation, the catastrophic containment breaches, and the direct connection to the thaid outbreak that nearly destroyed humanity.

The group had already learned some details from Becker after Erik shared his intelligence following the defeat of the second division commander at the Law Gate.

Yet hearing the events described aloud, putting faces and voices to the historical events, struck them with the same impact as when they first learned about thaids when they were little.

He explained how the corporation's abandoned facilities contained information about how the thaids were made and where, which might lead to where the blackguards were hiding.

And he told them about the problems: most of the documents had been destroyed, and whatever equipment they had here needed to be restored if they wanted to find out where the blackguards were hiding, which was what Erik wanted to find.

Mickey leaned forward. "I get it, but why are the blackguards hunting for this information? What would be the point in learning how the thaids had been created?"

"They are not searching for that. They are searching for a way to make the biological supercomputer again. That was their ultimate way to gain power." Erik said.

"I don't know if what the second division commander said is true, about humanity going extinct if we didn't get stronger or find a way to control mana, but they for sure believe it."

Erik went over to a table where they had collected several old storage devices. He picked up a small metal cube that could fit in his hand. It had the old Silverline company logo carved into it.

"We've found data storage devices and server rooms throughout the facility. What we need is to restore them to access the data." He set the cube down.

"That's where Becker might come in. He needs to send as many specialists as possible here to restore them. Once I find where the labs are, I'm going to check them one by one."

"What are we going to do with all this information after we get it?" Floyd asked. "It seems risky to keep such dangerous data around."

"I'm going to give it all to Becker. I only need to know where Silverline's other facilities are, since that's what the Blackguards are looking for. Becker can handle all the data we find here and in the other places we clear out. I don't care what happens to them."

[A surprisingly pragmatic approach.]

<I'm not interested in controlling humanity's future. I just want to stop the blackguards.>

"So, what's our immediate plan?" Gwen asked, bringing Erik back to the discussion.

"After we found this information," Erik said. "I will simply go search for them and kill them all. There is no fancy plan. At best, we will prepare some battle tactics once we have more information about the place they are hiding in. If we don't find what we are searching for, I will simply go search for more, hoping to find a solid lead. Right now, I have two other bases' locations, and it is there I will go search for more information. However, I know something else: that the Blackguards are likely in the Lorogia Region. The problem is, I don't exactly know where, and given I have little time, I need to narrow down the search area before heading there."

Ben slammed his fist into his palm, grinning eagerly. "What are we waiting for, then?"

Erik didn't return the enthusiasm.

[The First Division Commander will for sure join the fight once we are there.]

<That's what I'm hoping.>

Martha was already contacting Becker. Her communication device chimed, drawing everyone's attention.

"Becker wants to speak with you. I took notes of what you were saying and already sent a preliminary report."

Erik nodded. "Set it up." However, he turned to the others. "Get some rest. We'll need to leave soon."

[Are we going to the bases the logs mentioned?]

<Yes. It makes no sense to wait. We might be able to find the information we need there. In the meantime, Becker and the clones will fix the data storage. They are bound to have something useful.>

Erik went to Martha. Her communication device's main display flickered before Becker's face appeared.

"Erik," Becker nodded in greeting. "I understand congratulations are in order for eliminating the thanatocoleoptera queen. You made humanity a huge service."

"Save the pleasantries," Erik said. "What do you think?"

Becker's lips twitched in something approximating a smile. "Direct as always. Very well. I'll see what I can do. I can for sure send around 100 people to you right now, but the others will need to come later, always in batches of 100 people."

"Didn't you say we didn't have personnel?" Gwen asked.

"Soldiers, not engineers. I still need to find someone willing to come here, though."

"We can ask the Chimaeric Demons from Mannard to come. There must be some of them available. We can just tell them about the situation. I bet their wish for vengeance is as strong as Erik's."

"I told the clones to not come here, and for a good reason. They are keeping in check the situation on Mannard. They are basically the only reason no other countries waged war on you. If I didn't send them, you wouldn't have just faced Hin and Etrium."

"You still need to compromise. If we don't get more people, we won't have that much of a chance."

Chapter 1307: An unexpected reunion (4)

Becker's image flickered. The connection wasn't the best, as the distance between the two was vast. Honestly, it was a miracle that the device worked this far.

"I understand your worries about Mannard's security," Becker said. "And I thank you for what you did and what you are still doing for us all."

"Don't mind it."

There was a brief silence between the two.

"Anyway, before sending personnel there, I need additional information about the current situation in Mur. Those I'm going to send aren't soldiers—they're technicians, engineers, and data analysts. People who've never faced thaids directly, or that have very minimal experience. Even if I sent soldiers, I doubt they could face even the weakest thaid on Mur."

Erik nodded. "And you are right. Thaids here are at least twice as strong as a Hevadrin." Silence fell.

"Help me understand the full picture," Becker said. "What kind of environment would my people be walking into? How often do thaids approach your base? Even if I wanted to send people there, they need a safe place to stay. They need protection. They're not like you or Gwen's team."

Erik moved closer to the display, his expression serious. "I've made three bases in the area. The first is here, inside this cave complex, where we're currently stationed, and where I want your people to

come. It's the most secure base since it's many meters below ground, surrounded by tons of dirt and stone."

"Martha said you killed the Thanatocoleoptera, but are you sure all of them are dead?"

"Yes, I'm sure." Erik said. "We killed the queen and eradicated the entire hive. The cave is now secured, starting from the entrance and ending at this facility, and even if more of them remain in the side tunnels, I'm going to seal them all."

Erik paused. "Your people will be escorted and protected everywhere they go. The clones will stay with them."

"That's reassuring." Becker made a note on something off-screen. "What about the other bases?"

"The outposts in the forest," Erik said. "They are essentially giant trees I created using my powers. I shaped them in such a way they would serve as watchtowers and shelters."

He paused. "I didn't think I would find something related to the Silverline Corporation this early, and for sure, I didn't think I would have to keep them with only 500 clones, but here we are. Anyway, they're placed at around 20 kilometers from each other, going from east to west. The second one has been built on top of a hill, so it gives us a lot of visibility of the surrounding area."

"How large are these trees?"

"Over a hundred meters tall, more or less," Erik said. "The upper levels provide a view of the surrounding forest. The middle sections have living quarters and supplies."

Gwen stepped into frame beside Erik. "I've seen them, Becker. They're very effective; the visibility is great."

Becker nodded. For sure, all of this gave him hope that if something happened to the cave, they at least had somewhere to retreat. "And transportation between these positions?"

"I cleared most of the surrounding area. But thaids are nasty here; they won't keep away from the place for long unless the clones take care of them."



Becker leaned back, steepling his fingers as he considered the situation. "All right then, I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks. How long before the first of your people come?"

"A week minimum," Becker said. "Possibly longer, depending on the situation. Frant isn't exactly in a good situation despite your clones' help. I also need to see if there are people willing to come. I doubt those I have in mind will say no, but it's better to be upfront about this rather than say yes, but disappoint you later."

"Yeah."

"I will send data recovery experts, system engineers, and support personnel. If their assessment confirms the security of your position, I'll send the rest in phases."

"That's acceptable," Erik nodded.

"They'll bring additional equipment to set up a power generation and improve our communication capabilities," Becker said. "And portable defensive systems as a precaution."

"I don't think it would be enough to kill anything here, but if that makes your people feel safer, then be my guest. Just remember, we are inside a cave."

The older man's expression remained neutral, but he gave a slight nod of acknowledgment.

"Remember, Erik, these people aren't expendable assets. Their safety is non-negotiable."

"Understood."

The communication ended, and Erik turned to face the others. Gwen looked skeptical, while Floyd seemed relieved that reinforcements were coming.

"A hundred specialists is a good start," Martha said. "With their help, we might be able to recover the data much faster than doing it alone."

Ben looked disappointed. "I was hoping for soldiers, not computer geeks."

"The information is what matters," Erik said. "Not more bodies to throw at the blackguards."

"Speaking of something else," Amber said from the doorway, "have you thought about our situation? There's no more time to waste, Erik. If we're facing the blackguards and Mur's thaid, we all need more strength; it's not just me."

[She is right. We have to act now. Even though we just started setting things up here, Gwen and the team need more power to survive. An extra one each won't cut it—they'll need at least two.]

<The risk of mutations is high. They will have to train a lot during this time just to get to half the level Amber and the others are.>

[Is outweighed by the risk of fighting against something here and being devoured alive.]

Erik sighed. <You're right, but this doesn't mean they can be reckless in making neural links.>

[When did I say they should?]

Erik met Amber's gaze. "We do it tonight."

Amber's eyes widened. "Tonight? All of us? Do you already have powers you can give us?"

At those words, all the others turned to look at Erik. When Becker told them about this peculiar ability of his, they all hoped he would share something with them. Now it looked like the time had come.

"The clones took care of that. In any case, I have a task to attend to. I'll see you later."

Erik then left.

...

...

...

[Are you sure about giving Becker complete access to the Silverline corporation's data?]

<We need his resources, and I'm not interested in having this information. I just want to stop the blackguards. Besides, once all the fighting is over, I'll probably go into seclusion. I've had enough of thaids... I've had enough of people.>

[I understand how you feel, but you must consider this information will grant Becker a lot of power. He has more resources than the Silverline corporation, and they have technology those guys could only dream about. They might create something worse than the thaids. Today's ally could become tomorrow's enemy.]

Erik had no response to this uncomfortable truth. Their goals aligned with Becker's for now, but what came after would depend on choices yet unmade and battles yet unfought.

Chapter 1308: An unexpected reunion (5)

That same night, Erik gave new powers to his friends. He gathered the group in the main room, the one the clones cleaned the most from the monsters' remains, and proceeded.

Erik had spent the entire day planning the distribution of powers with the clones and the biological supercomputer, but of course, he also asked for input from the others. In truth, they didn't have that many requests or wishes; they just wanted to get stronger, something Erik took literally in some cases.

Rick and the clones had collected various powers from the thaids around the area, so he had a good pool to choose from. However, they still came from the relatively weak thaids the clones could kill with their actual strength.

They discussed the powers in detail, analyzing each one, studying their potential in combat and the compatibility with his friends' existing abilities, but in many cases Erik had to modify them, and that needed many DNA points.

There was also another problem. It became clear that to survive on Mur; the others needed three powers, so he had to give two to everyone but Amber, Mira, and Emily, who just needed one. This simplified some aspects while complicating others.

In general, Erik decided to give the group members powers that increased their survival chances in a broader sense.

Enhanced strength and healing or regenerative powers were the most obvious choices. There were many melee fighters in the group, so it was the best choice, anyway.

Later, Erik gave them the powers.

Gwen got enhanced strength and regenerative healing. As the team's main fighter, she needed both offensive capability and durability. The combination allowed her to strike with greater force while recovering quickly from injuries sustained in battle and would complement well with her birth brain crystal power.

Ben was given similar power choices but with different implementations. He received Armored Exoskeleton and regenerative healing. The exoskeleton would give him the defenses Gwen had, lowering his chances of being injured. Combined with regenerative healing, this made him an ideal front-line combatant and, for sure, would make him harder to kill.

Allan received powers that complemented his existing combat style. Since he had a brain crystal power that allowed him to create a mana spear and to imbue it with lightning, Erik gave him the only power the clones got, and that was related to it. Based on what the clone said, they found it inside a river nearby, which was filled with eel-like thaids.

Even this power needed some modifications, but Erik paid the price. What Allan got was the power to generate an aura, which surrounded him with a field of electricity that shocked anything that came into contact with him.

This created a perfect defense for close-quarters fighting while, at the same time, dealing damage. His second ability, instead, allowed him to create bone spikes.

The ability allowed Allan to increase his skeletal density, making his bones stronger and more resistant to impacts and fractures during fights. This would help him handle the recoil from his attacks and make him more durable in close combat.

While not the most powerful ability, the bone spikes gave Allan two advantages: better defense in close combat and more ways to attack enemies.

However, while it was true that the clones chose it because they found nothing more suitable, Allan saw its potential.

The spikes could injure opponents when they least expected it, while the electric aura made fighting him in close quarters nearly impossible due to the pain, spasms, and damage it inflicted.

Martha received powers that enhanced her birth crystal power, which allowed her to control and strengthen plants.

The problem with her birth brain crystal power was that she couldn't create them, so Erik gave her the ability to at least grow the surrounding vegetation faster, exactly like he could do many years before.

It was a power very similar to the one he had, his birth brain crystal power, but with a simple difference: Erik edited it to make it stronger than what he had back then.

In truth, its original ability to grow plants was even better than what he had now, Verdant Architect, because it required far less mana to grow them at the same speed. Of course, it couldn't control the plants.

Thanks to this and her birth brain crystal power, Martha could fight virtually everywhere. Rapid growth allowed her to speed up the development of plants, which she could use to create barriers, weapons, or cover during battle.

He also gave her the ability to create poison, editing it so that she could infuse such poison into her plants.

As for Floyd, he gained abilities suited for melee combat. This time, it was entirely under his requests, but they made sense.

Floyd was essentially a melee fighter, with a power that was originally better suited for defense. He had nothing that would help him fight or move.

Since the clones got the brain crystal from a weird monkey-like thaid with a whipped tail, he asked them to give him that.

The power was rather simple; it allowed him to create a mana tail ending up in a metal-like whip, which would be useful for fighting, but the clones were sure he wanted it because he could use it to dangle around trees.

Erik gave him a poison-creating power too, which was called Poisonous Touch, that he kept as it was so that it could work with Floyd's limbs.

Amber instead asked Erik for something straightforward and practical. And she got a very common strength enhancement brain crystal power, which was abundant in this part of the forest due to the prevalence of strength-based, or insect-like thaids.

This way, she would be stronger in melee and would be better at running. Actually, Erik also got one of these powers for himself and edited as much as he could to at least offset the difference in strength between him and the thaids.

As for Mira, Erik had to work a lot on some of the powers he had available. There was a creature that could create mana claws, which Erik edited to turn them into mana arrows. That way, Mira could have infinite arrows, and she wouldn't even need to bring a bow with her, since she could simply throw them.

Erik did his best to increase the penetration power of the arrows and to calibrate this with mana efficiency, but everything ultimately depended on how much mana she used.

He couldn't increase mana regeneration until the clones matured, unless he found appropriate powers to modify and combine for that purpose.

As for Emily, she asked Erik to give her something that would increase her sniping abilities. Erik agreed but gave her something that would actually also increase her survivability, and he got the right brain crystal power for that, thanks to the clones.

Emily got an enhanced camouflage power. Though not true invisibility, Erik modified it to be more effective than the original version the clones harvested from the thaid it came from.

The power allowed her to blend almost perfectly with her surroundings if she didn't move, which was essentially what she was going to do when sniping. Erik also made it so that the power was more effective the more she remained still.

## Chapter 1309: An unexpected reunion (6)

However, it was Mickey and Aaron who received the weirdest of the abilities, and they were also the ones Erik put more effort into making.

Mickey got powers related to his flesh-eating mana bugs. The first was Swarm Sense, which created a connection to the insects he made, giving him the ability to perceive what they saw, heard, and felt.

This made him an exceptional scout, able to extend his awareness across vast areas through the bugs. It also worked on normal bugs, but Mickey couldn't control them. The strong point of this ability was that it allowed Mickey to fight from a distance, even if he couldn't see the bugs, which had been his main problem all along.

The second ability he got was one that allowed him to create armor for the bugs themselves, making them more resilient in both combat and reconnaissance.

Aaron, instead, received the most unique upgrade with his Ego Infusion brain crystal power. Erik created this ability by modifying a power a thaid used to mentally influence its prey. It required a lot of editing and even more DNA points, but the result was worth it.

The power allowed Aaron to infuse his slime with limited consciousness and autonomy. That meant that Aaron was able to create slime monsters.

They weren't smart, and he couldn't share his sense with them like Mickey now could with the bugs, but they could move autonomously, attack, and even serve as scouts to a certain extent.

The slimes kept the acidic and corrosive properties of Aaron's original slime—similar to Amber's corrosive gas—but were far more dangerous than before, since they could move and fight independently without Aaron's direct control.

The slimes weren't very smart, but they could understand and follow simple orders like "protect," "attack," or "look around." While Aaron couldn't see through his slimes or talk to them, they would automatically fight any enemies they found. His second power was Enhanced Strength, like the others got, which made him much more likely to survive on Mur since he would get faster and not just stronger.

The power transfer process consumed a substantial amount of Erik's DNA points, but he still had a lot of points.

Erik could have made better powers for them, but he didn't have enough brain crystals to do that, and besides, the group needed the neural links. Besides, Erik questioned the human classification system for powers.

Many highly ranked powers worked well independently, as if they were more suited to be standalone, but failed to synergize with other abilities.

Erik believed it was better to get lower-ranked powers that synergized well with everyone's existing abilities, rather than choosing one or two powerful but standalone abilities that would require extensive training to master.

At least this way, everyone already knew what they had to do and how to use their powers. Well, aside from some exceptions.

While the powers Erik gave everyone weren't the highest-ranked ones, they worked well together and matched with what everyone could already do. Aside from those that increased strength. That was a survival power.

The team spent the rest of the night exploring their new abilities. Gwen tested her enhanced strength by shattering rocks with her bare hands.

Ben created the exoskeleton and tried to make complicated movements with it. Allan created electrical discharges of varying intensities, learning to control the flow and direction of the current.

In truth, it was weird for him having to give this power to Allan, since he didn't know him well. However, Gwen advocated for him, and if she asked, he complied.

Martha grew small gardens, transforming seeds into mature plants within seconds. Erik knew how she was feeling better than anyone else. With this power, she would never starve and could even create shelters if she became proficient enough.

Floyd adapted quickly to his new tail, incorporating it into his movement patterns and striking techniques. Of course, like the clones assumed, he used it to dangle around.



The group sighed at his behavior. But then again, this was Floyd—they'd grown accustomed to his playful antics.

Mickey used his new powers to see what the bugs in the surroundings saw. He tested the power, creating a sort of mental map of the surrounding area.

Aaron, instead, made some slime monsters and tested their responsiveness to commands and their ability to operate independently.

Throughout this initial testing phase, Erik monitored everyone for signs of genetic instability and warned everyone to not rush things when making neural links, explaining to them what could happen.

It was a handicap, not being able to make a lot of neural links in a short time, but there was nothing they could do about it.

He told them to pay attention to some of the symptoms the system warned him to pay attention to, which were signs that their DNA was changing too fast for the rest of the body to get used to the changes—headaches, muscle twitches, and brief disorientation.

As dawn approached, the group gathered again to discuss strategy and training plans so that they could fight more cohesively if needed.

While their new powers made them stronger, everyone needed to learn how to use them. To help with this, Erik created a training plan and assigned clones to work with each team member. The problem was that this training regimen was going to be made on the go.

Erik couldn't waste more time than he already did. He needed to find the blackguards. He knew they were in the Lorogia region, near the mountain range, but didn't know where. For that reason, he needed to get to the labs he knew the location of already, hoping to find clues about the blackguards' location.

Erik worried if they would have enough time. They needed to get to the Silverline facilities.

Looking at his friends with their new powers, Erik felt both hopeful and concerned. While they were much stronger now, they were still on Mur, and without enough neural links, they were at a severe disadvantage.

[The power distribution went well.]

<Better than expected, but will it be enough?>

[We've maximized their potential with what we had available. Sometimes the right tool matters more than raw power.]

<True. It's now up to them now.>

#### Chapter 1310: An unexpected reunion (7)

The following morning, Erik woke up early and gathered everyone at the cave entrance. The blackguards wouldn't wait, so they had to hurry.

Sunlight snoopd through the cave entrance as the group gathered. Gwen and the others were nervous, but it was expected since they weren't used to Mur's odd climate and weren't as strong as Amber and the others.

"We leave today," Erik said. "I've postponed this long enough. If you want to stay, you need to let me know now."

Everyone nodded in understanding. Erik turned and gestured to the eleven clones waiting nearby. He had already briefed them the night before on their duties.

The clones would shapeshift and act as mounts for the group members while also acting as bodyguards against threats.

The others checked their gear one last time.

"What do we do with the food?" Martha asked while adjusting her backpack. "I can grow plants, but we'll need more than that for the journey," she said.

Erik nodded. "You and I will handle it, but we will also eat the thaid's we hunt. I hope you don't mind."

Amber bit her lip, her eyes flipping through her friends with thinly hidden concern. She grew up with these people, but they lacked the strength and skills Mira, Emily, and she had. Her stomach turned over, thinking of them fighting Mur's threats. She hesitated, debating whether she had to say something. Then at last gathered the courage.

"Maybe some of you should stay here? We could coordinate with Becker's men if some of you stay."

"No," Gwen said. "We are going with you. We already agreed to it." Amber looked at the ground, knowing she couldn't ask them to stay after coming here on Mur.

"Where exactly are we heading, Erik?" Allan asked. "You haven't shared the details yet."

Erik pulled out a crude map and spread it on a flat boulder. He created the map using the reference points provided by the system, focusing on the important landmarks. The others gathered around him.

"There are two Silverline Corporation labs I know about," Erik said, pointing to locations marked on the map. "We need to check both of them for information about the other labs. The blackguards are in one of them."

His finger traced a path eastward. "First, we head east to Vermillion Lake. There's a facility hidden there." He moved his finger northwest. "Then we'll travel to the outskirts of the Lorogia Region, where another lab exists. Between those two locations, we should find what we need. The blackguards are likely inside the Lorogia Region Mountain Range, so we need to find information about the labs there."

Mickey leaned closer to check the map. "That's a long journey. Weeks, maybe months, of travel with all the dangers of this godforsaken continent."

"Which is why I asked the clone to come," Erik said. "When they shapeshift, they get stronger and faster. We can't fly because of the flying thaid's, but they still provide us a faster way to travel than with human legs." Erik said.

"What kind of resistance should we expect at these labs?" It didn't look strange for Mickey to ask that question.

Mickey knew that wherever they went in Mur, monsters were a constant worry. Every place, no matter how seemingly harmless, could hide threats.

"I don't know," Erik said. "The labs are likely to be abandoned, but we can't exclude the Blackguards or the thaids having occupied them."

Aaron formed a small slime in his palm, watching it wiggle between his fingers. "I think the slimes can help us scout for dangers."

Erik nodded.

"That was why I wanted you to come with us, instead of staying here like Amber suggested," Erik said. "You and Mickey will be an enormous help to ensure our safety."

That way, Erik could prevent the clones from risking their lives while scouting. The clones could focus on protecting the group and acting as mounts. This was important, considering Gwen and the others still didn't have enough neural links to survive here without worry.

"Good," Aaron and Mickey said. They didn't come here to be burdens, and while they were still not ready to fight on their own, it didn't mean they were going to be useless.

The group fell silent for a moment; in front of them was coming a tremendous ordeal: a journey that even legendary people failed to realize.

"How will we cross the terrain? Even with the clones as mounts, some areas might be challenging to go through," Mira said.

"We'll follow game trails where possible," Erik said. That meant they would have to follow the thaids, risking more fights than they wanted.

"The blackguards have mapped several paths that avoid the worst of the terrain, though, and I got those maps." That happened when Erik got the data from the Law Gate and Maynard Island.

"When necessary, we can use mine and Martha's powers to make bridges or clear obstacles. Otherwise, I can simply move you around using my telekinesis."

That was, of course, a risk since Erik would need to use mana he could use during fights.

Floyd stretched his new tail behind him, curling it around a nearby rock and lifting it with apparent ease.

"Hey, cheer up, everyone!" Floyd said with a grin, his tail still holding the rock. "At least if we run into trouble, I can always throw rocks at the monsters. Though I guess that makes me the official 'tail gunner' of the group!" He chuckled at his joke, earning a mix of groans and reluctant smiles from the others.

"The thaids will be stronger once deeper in the forest," Erik said. "They will be much stronger than what you ran into up until this point. That's why I gave you all powers focused on survival. But don't engage unless absolutely necessary. So, be careful."

Ben nodded. "Avoid battle. Got it." He didn't like it that much, though.

"How many neural links should we aim for before reaching the first lab?"

"As many as you can safely develop," Erik said. "But remember—don't rush it. Genetic instability is dangerous. I think fifteen neural links should be safe. You can choose to make 7 and 8 for both or 15 for one. Regardless, one neural link every few days is the maximum your bodies can safely handle."

"It won't be enough," Gwen said.

The group resumed their preparations. Mickey released a few mana bugs, watching them hover near his head. "I'm going to send the bugs."

"Good," Erik nodded.

The clones prepared and shapeshifted. The group mounted them one by one. Erik took the lead, with Mira, Emily, June, and Amber close behind. The others arranged themselves in formation, with Gwen and Ben at the rear.

Erik looked back at the cave that had sheltered them. The remaining clones stood at attention, awaiting their last orders.

"Protect the eggs; they will be the key to winning this damn war."

The clones saluted and went back to their duties. They needed to collect enough food for the newest batches to mature. Luckily, the first ones Erik made were on their way to adulthood already.

"Let's go," Erik said, and the group set out from the cave entrance.