

## **BIOLOGICAL 1311**

### Chapter 1311: The Vermillion Lake (1)

Two weeks passed as the group traveled eastward toward the lake. The journey had been easier than they all expected, thanks to Mickey's bugs scouting ahead and Aaron's slimes patrolling their flanks and rear, allowing them to avoid most encounters.

Still, that didn't mean the journey had been simple. In fact, Erik counted nearly a thousand thaids killed. That helped him to get experience points, and he leveled up once, but most importantly, the weaker ones served as training experience for the group.

Aside from that, during their travel, each member of the group, including Erik, focused on their training.

It was only possible for two reasons: the first was thanks to Erik's Hydra's heads, which allowed him to train and keep alert at the same time, and the second was the clones.

They acted as mounts but also as bodyguards, so they paid attention to the surroundings whenever Aaron and Mickey trained.

Each member of the group got the fifteen neural links Erik told them to get for their new powers, which meant that Amber, Emily, and Mira got around the five hundred strength point mark, with Emily and Mira getting more dexterity since they focused on that.

Of course, they got 15 neural links in total, which wasn't hard with Erik's technique.

Erik learned many years ago that someone's preferences and lifestyle, or fighting style, influenced their attributes whenever they got new neural links. That explained why Mira and Emily got dexterity. They needed it to use their ranged weapons.

Amber, instead, got more strength than dexterity, since she was used to melee fighting, but hers was a more balanced distribution than the other two girls.

As for the others, their attributes went around three hundred strength points. It was not enough for solo survival on Mur, but a significant improvement nonetheless.

The scenery changed as they traveled. The forest gave way to more open terrain, which was a sign they were getting closer to water. At some point, they got close enough to the lake to see it in the far distance.

"Look!" Erik pointed ahead, to the large body of water in the middle of the forest. "That's the Vermillion Lake."

<System, why is it called Vermillion Lake?> Erik asked. The lake was rather normal, and there was nothing resembling the color red, as the name suggested.

[I can't tell, but if I have to make an assumption, I would say because of the color at sunset.]

<Or because the lake was bathed in blood once.>

Maybe it had to do with some kind of component inside the water that made it look like it was red during certain hours, or maybe it was a name given by the blackguards to warn their members about what the water would be painted off if they were so stupid as to approach it.

If that was the case, it meant the blackguards didn't visit this lab, since they wouldn't have been able to enter the water or even approach them.

Regardless, it wasn't important, since Erik and his group had to go search around that lake in either case.

The group paused at a clearing about two kilometers from the shore, far enough to avoid any kind of creature living in those cursed waters or stopping there to drink, but close enough for them to observe the lake and scout it.

"We'll make camp here," Erik said, dismounting from his clone. The others followed suit. They were worn out and stiff from the long journey, but the clones were the most tired of them all. They needed to rest.

Maintaining a high level of awareness over such a long distance was an exhausting affair. Even if Aaron's slimes and Mickey's bugs helped with scouting, everyone still had to be ready for battle at any moment.

Furthermore, the intensive neural link training sessions they didn't shy away from during their journey had sapped their mental as well as physical stamina.

From the continuous Mana consumption needed to keep their forms, even Erik's clones—which had carried them for most of the trip—showed symptoms of fatigue.

Erik looked around. The spot looked perfect for setting up camp—it was on higher ground. They could see in all directions, and there was a stream nearby for fresh water. He looked at Martha, agreeing that was the right place.

"I'll handle the main structure; you focus on defenses."

Martha was tired, as much as Erik was, at least, but she didn't shy away from the task.

She gave him a smile and flexed her fingers. At least that was a way to release a bit of stress. "I've been practicing. You'll see something special."

Erik channeled mana. The ground trembled as roots spread beneath their feet. He grew his usual giant tree-tower.

Meanwhile, Martha walked around the edges of their soon-to-be camp. She stopped every few steps to touch the ground, making new trees grow into a protective wall.

She guided the branches to weave together, creating a fence-like barrier made entirely of the forest's natural colossal trees intertwined among themselves. They were tall, but not as much as Erik's giant tree.

"This barrier won't keep out the most powerful thaids," Martha said as she wiped dirt from her hands, "but it will keep away most creatures and warn us if anything tries to break in."

The shelter was completed not long after. Erik made sure to make as many rooms as possible but to leave the tree's walls as thick as he could. He had separate sleeping areas, storage spaces for supplies, and a central gathering space. Even if he was not going to use this place for long, soon someone else would.

Either the clones or Becker's troops. It was clear they were going to come here once things settled on Mannard. With all these breakthroughs in power, things were going to change.

People with multiple brain crystal powers were bound to have survived. And what would happen if these people had kids? For now, there was no news, but in a hundred years?

Reclaiming Mur might not be such an impossible task in the future. While Erik wanted nothing to do with humans anymore, that didn't mean he had to be a prick. The more of these safe havens there were in this cursed place, the better it would be.

The group later assembled in this sort of common area.

"We've made good progress," Erik said, "but the real problems will start tomorrow. The Silverline corporation's facility should be somewhere along the lake shore, but its exact location is a mystery."

The problem was that he saw nothing in the distance, but the lab might have been hiding in the surrounding forest, just outside view.

Chapter 1312: The Vermillion Lake (2)

Erik turned to Mickey and Aaron.

"You guys need to scout the place. I know you want to rest, but if we do this today, we will be able to focus on other things tomorrow. It's useless to move without knowing how the surroundings are, so please bear with me."

"There is no problem, Erik."

Erik nodded. "Aaron, I want you to scout the immediate surroundings with the slimes." Once Aaron made them, he didn't need to inject mana into them anymore. The problem was that ego injection required a lot of mana. Aaron had to slowly build his army, which was exactly what he was doing.

"If the slimes find something, they will probably attack it. This will help us understand what's around us and will also serve as our first line of defense in case we get attacked."

Aaron nodded. Erik then turned to Mickey. "As for you, I want you to scout the lake and find out how the area is. Even better if you find it. I won't be so optimistic as to say we will find the lab today, but it's certainly a possibility."

Mickey nodded. "My bugs can cover most of the shoreline in a couple of hours."

Gwen leaned forward, her brows furrowed. Erik gave her a waiting look. Gwen was staring at Erik, making it clear she had some questions on her mind and was debating whether to ask.

"What do we do once we find it? We also need to know how you plan on entering it. That place might be infested with thaids."

<Typical of Gwen.> Though he expected Mira to ask that kind of question, it looked like Gwen beat her to it.

"It depends on the situation," Erik said. "We need information before committing to any action. For all we know, the facility could be abandoned or overrun. In the second case, we will need to carve our way in. We can't leave the thaids there, but if there are blackguards, we might think about stealth."

Aaron made a handful of slime that divided into several smaller creatures. "With them, we will know if there are any thaids nearby. Don't expect the slimes to last for long, though."

It was true that those creatures didn't have organs and that their flesh, or better, the slime that made up their bodies, was corrosive, but a well-placed blow could scatter the whole lump of slime. If that happened, their ego would cease to be, and the slime would just turn into regular slime.

Erik turned to the others. "You start resting, especially the clones."

They had been carrying the group for two weeks straight, marching through difficult terrain and harsh weather. Keeping alert for thaids when Mickey and Aaron slept or trained, and even defending them when Erik couldn't.

While the Chimaeric Demons never voiced a complaint about the strain, their bodies were reaching their limits. Erik didn't want and couldn't allow the clones to be tired or out of shape, as it was dangerous.

The Chimaeric Demons's faces showed signs of fatigue, despite their stoic demeanor. However, it was clear they appreciated Erik's words.

They stood up and made their way to the stairs leading to the upper level of their shelter.

Erik placed the sleeping quarters on the floor above. It was close enough to the ground for quick action if needed, yet high enough to provide time if something entered the shelter.

There were separate spaces for each team member. The clones' room was the largest, furnished with simple cots arranged in neat rows. Despite the spartan conditions, it was clear that Erik had put a lot of care into the shelter's creation.

Verdant Architect was truly a great power.

One by one, they lay down on their cots, and within minutes, they fell asleep. The situation below was similar. The group rested, each in their own way. Ben was checking his power, and, thanks to the new neural links, it now covered more of his body, and the mana consumption decreased.

"How long should we expect to stay here?" Mira asked.

"It depends on what we find," Erik said. "If the facility has the information we need, we'll head northwest immediately. If not, we'll need to bring people here to extract any remaining data before we can move on."

"Again?"

"It's not like I have an alternative... If we don't find the data, we will be forced to go search for the blackguards around and ask any captor about their base, but this will make us lose a lot of time because it would be like searching for a needle in a haystack with the number of clones I have."

Martha distributed food—a mixture of plants she had grown and meat the clones hunted. "I think we must do something about that," she said.

"We can't rely on the hope we find working equipment or paper documents that somehow survived centuries of wear. You need to get powers that will allow you to scout around."

[She is right,] the system said. [The clones are a powerful force, but their maturing time is a handicap. We can't rely on them for scouting unless we have the time to make them. You should work on something that allows you to make creatures like Aaron and Mickey so that you can scout a vast area in a relatively short time. If we do this, we wouldn't need to rely on the labs to get the information we need.]

<Dad said that the lab where he found the biological supercomputer still had electricity. Maybe it's just the one we found in the underground city that was without it.>

[It can be possible, but I still wouldn't rely on this assumption.]

<Ok, then what do you suggest?>

[Do you remember where we found the Mirror centipede that was the basis of your clone-making ability?]

<Yes, it was...>

[Yes, near a lake. We can't modify the clones without spending large amounts of DNA points, given how powerful the ability is and how many powers we gave them. We would need to weaken them to increase the maturing speed. However, finding another mirror centipede could change the situation.]

The biological supercomputer paused. [We might get the power again, merge it with something useful, and modify it so that you would be able to make clones in a shorter amount of time. We don't need the creatures to be strong, only for them to have abilities suited for scouting and for them to be able to report to us.]

<It might work. While we send these to scout the Lorogia Region, we could keep training to prepare for the fight or search more labs.>

[Exactly.]

"I have something in mind about that," Erik said to the others. "I will go search for something tomorrow. If I'm lucky, I will be able to get a solution to our problem in a relatively short time. We would have nothing to do while Aaron and Mickey search for the lab, so I might as well do this."

"Just make sure you know what you're doing," Gwen said.

The group went to sleep. It wasn't just the clones who were tired. All of them were. Aaron and Mickey kept searching around. The slimes wouldn't need active control or mana from Aaron, so he went to sleep. Since Mickey found nothing and night came, he did the same a couple of hours later.

Erik remained in the central space talking to the biological supercomputer, debating about what power they could merge with the Mirror Centipede's power in case they found it.

Night fell over the forest. Behind Martha's branch wall, thaids were hunting in the darkness. Moonlight brightened the lake, where ripples hinted at something large dwelling beneath its surface.

### Chapter 1313: The Vermillion Lake (3)

Erik woke up at dawn. Most of the group was still sleeping, exhausted from their journey, but Mickey and Aaron had already left to start their search of the lab.

"June," Erik called his clone. "Get five Chimaeric Demons ready. We are going to search for the Mirror Centipede."

The clone did as he was asked and came back to the ground floor, followed by his much more powerful brothers.

"Did you rest well?"

"Yes, master."

Erik nodded. "Good. I called you here because I need your help to search for a Mirror Centipede."

Erik didn't tell them about his plans the previous day, given how tired they were. I knew that if he told the clones what he was planning, they would have offered themselves to go search in the middle of the night, which wasn't what Erik needed.

"According to the Blackguards data we got at the Law Gate, there should be some mirror centipedes nearby. I want to make a new power out of it, one that would allow me to scout without you having to rely on you guys."



The clones nodded.

"What should we do if we find one?"

"Kill it immediately and collect both the blood and brain crystal," Erik said.

"The original will be nearby its clones. Be thorough but discreet and avoid fighting other thaids. They might scare the Mirror Centipede. They are not strong; they just have a good brain crystal power. "

The clones nodded. However, since it was critical for Erik to get this power, they were not going to immediately attack.

The clones would do everything they could to stop the thaid from fleeing, especially since thaids, including the Mirror Centipedes, on the Mur continent, were far stronger than their Mannard counterparts.

"Tell the others we'll be back tonight, or earlier, if we find the creature," Erik told one of the clones staying behind.

"Be careful, master. The thaids near water are strong."

Erik nodded and led his group into the forest. They traveled northeast along the lakeshore, keeping the water visible through the trees on their right.

Morning mist clung to the tall vegetation, which made the group a soaked mess.

<Master,> June telepathically said, after an hour of searching. <I've spotted something.>

Erik told the group to stop and hide. <What?>

<It's another damn bear thaids. It looks like they are the predominant species in this forest.>

<I wouldn't say that. This is still a lake. They probably come here to drink.> He sighed. <We need to circle around. Unless you have better suggestions.>

<Can't we simply wait for it to go away?> June asked.

<We will lose a lot of time,> Erik said.

The clones obeyed, altering their path to keep a safe distance from the beast. Despite the detour having cost them time, it was still less than them having to wait for the monster to get out of the area.

The sun kept climbing the sky. The humidity thickened while they neared a marshy area, where the lake's edge dissolved into a maze of reeds and shallow pools.

<I think I've found some tracks,> a clone said.

<Do they look like those of a Mirror Centipede?>

<I don't know,> the clone said. <They are long and look like that of a worm, though. The problem is that Mirror Centipede shouldn't be THAT close to the water, nor that big. They stay in areas where it's present but still hide among bushes, plants, and trees. We are too far from them right now.>

<Follow the tracks. Maybe it was one of the clones scouting around.>

The group followed the tracks deeper into the marsh. The uneven terrain slowed their progress, but the trees and bushes grew in number, thickness, and size, which was consistent with the area the Mirror Centipede usually lived in.

<There!> One of the clones said. Erik quickly went there to check what the clone had found.

There was a creature about two meters long, with a segmented green body, coiling around a Florathyst Vine.

"Let me see if it's an original or a clone."

Erik used Instability to check its thoughts. Erik only saw one thought: Search for food.

"This is a clone. Don't kill it, or its creator might run away."

[The original must be in the area.]

Erik nodded. <Spread out and find the creature. It must be around here.>

The clones nodded, scattering to search the area. Erik kept in contact with all of them, coordinating their movements to narrow the search area.

The tracks here were far more numerous, but were also much more confusing. The Mirror Centipede must have made a lot of clones. Besides, it was twice as long as the Mirror Centipede on Mannard, which could mean several problematic things.

The Mirror Centipede didn't have eyes and was weaker than most other thaids, but its ability to make clones meant it was a one-monster army. It wouldn't behave like the queen's bugs or the Xeridon Anteris. The Mirror Centipede wouldn't swarm its prey, regardless of how many there were.

It was a cautious hunter, one that would silently ambush its target as if it were a wolf. When there were enough of its clones, they would attack in unison.

The creature had a retractable mandible in its lower anterior section, and it also produced a powerful biological neurotoxin, which it secreted through its skin.

All of that made up for its lack of speed and strength.

The reason Erik took the creature's power back then was that it could create permanent copies of itself. There weren't many cloning abilities to begin with, but the ability to make permanent copies was held only by this particular species. All other kinds of clones were all dependent on mana; they weren't permanent.

They just needed to use some of their mana at some point, and then they would make a clone. It was exactly how Erik's Chimaeric Demons brain crystal power worked.

Erik wanted to create a similar ability. He didn't know if he could make something as powerful as the Chimaeric Demons, but for sure, he needed something that would be useful from the get-go.

What Erik needed was to scout around, not fight, so even if they were weak, he would make sure they had powers suitable for that kind of task.

In truth, he had an idea in mind that, if it worked, would make even those things, if they were weak, able to fight, but before he could do that, he needed to know if he could make the power to begin with.

#### Chapter 1314: The Vermillion Lake (4)

Erik and the clones searched for a while. The fact they had found the area where the creature likely was didn't mean it was easy to find it.

Erik was using Instability to track the creature, but maybe the creature had left already, as they hadn't found it yet.

"Oh god... I hate this..."

Hours passed, with the group searching every hollow log, every patch of reeds, and every crevice between rocks.

The sun climbed higher. The group even paused to eat at some point. The heat and the humidity were making the group sweat, but what was worse was that Erik couldn't even refresh himself in the waters since thaids lived there.

<This is taking longer than expected, and we are exposed here.>

[Yeah, you have been lucky there are no flying thaids around.]

However, at that point, one of the clones gestured to Erik. There was a trail of disturbed vegetation ahead. Erik joined him, crouching to look at the tracks.

They were fresh, or so it seemed.

"They are big," he said. It made sense. The creature's clone's size suggested that the Mirror Centipede here was twice as long as the one Erik killed on Mannard. "We're getting closer."

The group adjusted their search pattern, following the new trail deeper into a particularly dense section of the marsh where trees had fallen, creating a labyrinth of rotting logs and stagnant pools.

The air was particularly bad there, not that it was better in the other areas.

<Master,> a clone telepathically said. <I saw something. It's roughly twenty meters from my position.>

Erik issued the orders, and in moments, he and the clones had the place surrounded.

He monitored each clone's position until they had formed a complete circle around the suspected hiding place.

<It's the perfect place for the creature to hide.>

The fallen trunk was enormous, a dead giant straggling across the forest floor. Its girth was such that a small car could have been hidden within the crook of its bark, and its length stretched beyond the immediate line of sight.

The impact of its fall had gouged the earth, creating hollows and a chaotic mess of upturned soil and shattered branches—natural blinds and pockets of shadow where something large could lie unnoticed.

The bark, a mosaic of grays, browns, and greens from years of weathering and clinging moss, offered camouflage so effective the beast could be just centimeters away and remain indistinguishable from the ancient wood.

Erik used instability to see if the creature inside was the Mirror Centipede. He got some thoughts from the creature, primal, but nothing that hinted at the creature's race.

<On my signal,> Erik said. <Three... two... one... now.>

The clones blocked all escape routes. One of them launched a starlight fireball at the log, setting it on fire. The Mirror Centipede really was inside and burst from one of the openings to escape the flames.

The clones reacted as soon as they perceived movement. Having surrounded the log, it was easy for them to stop the creature from escaping. One of them severed the beast's head from its body.

The creature's legs continued to twitch for several seconds before going still, green ichor seeping into the marsh water.

"Excellent," Erik said. "That was the original—it didn't have weird thoughts."

"Good, Master."

"Collect the blood and brain crystal," Erik said. "I have to eat them already. At least don't make me get dirtier than I already am," he said with a sigh.

"Yes, Master."

One of the clones knelt beside the creature's corpse and extracted the brain crystal. Next, he collected a vial of the creature's blood.

"I'm done, Master," he said, giving the items to Erik.

"Thank you," Erik said.

They headed to the shelter.

[It won't be simple to find something suitable to merge with this based on what you want to do,] the system said. [And you need to use a lot of DNA points just to get rid of the maturity and hatching time.]

<Yeah, I expected that,> Erik said. <But it's not like we can do something about it.>

[But are you sure you want to give them a mind-controlling power?]

<Yes, why?>

[Because there are much better options, I mean, the Chimaeric Demons can control dead thaids already.]

<Yes, but for the undead to use their brain crystal powers, the Chimaeric Demons need to spend a lot of mana. If we give the new clones the ability to mind control Thaids or to parasitize them, the Thaids would still be alive, meaning the clones will spend less mana.>

[That's just in theory, though.] The system mentally sighed.

<Look, I don't need these clones to fight. They need to be easy to produce for scouting and monitoring purposes. The mind-controlling ability is just a precaution that would allow them to fight if they get attacked.>

[Yeah, I know. Your idea isn't bad. A single power will make our modifications cheaper to make, so it's not a poor suggestion.]

They reached the tree shelter by mid-afternoon. Erik nodded to the clone standing guard, who opened a part of the barrier to allow them to enter.

The others had woken up at that point. Gwen and Amber were talking, with Gwen recounting her war tales. Ben practiced controlling his exoskeleton in a corner. Mickey and Aaron were absent—likely still checking the surroundings to find the Silverline Corporation's lab.

"You're back earlier than expected," Mira said. "Did things go well?"

Erik held up the container with the brain crystal. "Better than expected."

"That's great," Mira said, setting aside her bow. "Any trouble with other thaids?"

"Nothing we couldn't deal with," Erik said. "The area is crawling with thaids, though, so we need to be careful when we find the lab."

The others gathered around as Erik placed the container on the table. Martha wrinkled her nose at the sight of the blood vials.

"What exactly are you going to do with those?" she asked.

"Watch," Erik said. The others knew how Erik got a new power, but Allan was new to it.

Without ceremony, he opened the containers and swallowed both the brain crystal and the blood.

"What the fuck?" Allan couldn't help but gag.

"Get used to it, Allan," Floyd said.

"That keeps being revolting even if I already know about it," Ben said.

Erik wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

[Mirror Centipede's DNA gained. Starting the analysis.]

[Analysis complete.]

[100 DNA points required for extraction. 250 DNA points needed for painless absorption, 500 DNA points needed for instant and painless absorption.]

Erik already told the system what to do.

[500 DNA points used for painless instant absorption. Procedure complete.]

[Mirror Centipede's brain crystal gained. Starting the analysis...]

[Analysis complete.]



[100 DNA points required for extraction. 250 DNA points needed for painless absorption, 500 DNA points needed for instant and painless absorption.]

[500 DNA points used for painless instant absorption. Procedure complete.]

Erik opened his status interface.

<Worm slaves, uh?> He then turned to the others.

"I need to concentrate now," Erik said. "There is much to do on this power, after all..."

"How long will it take?" Amber asked.

"I can only do part of what I want with the power, but a few hours at least," Erik said. "I'll let you know when I'm done."

He turned and headed for the stairs leading to the upper level of their shelter.

"Don't disturb me unless it's an emergency," he said before going upstairs.

Chapter 1315: The Vermillion Lake (5)

Erik sat in his room before a large wooden table. On it, there were hundreds of glass vials. Each contained the blood of a thaïd, which Rick and the other clones had collected up to that point. Beside them were hundreds of brain crystals, covered in cloth squares.

The clones had categorized and labeled everything. Though they didn't have the biological supercomputer, they documented what they knew about the thaïds they'd killed, giving each one a name and describing its powers. Some even included sketches of the creatures.

<This is an impressive organization,> Erik said, running his fingers along the labels. <The clones really outdid themselves.>

[They understand how important this collection is,] the system said. [Proper classification maximizes our ability to use the powers well and not waste time.]

Erik picked up a small brain crystal that the label said had a mist-creating power. However, for what he had to do, he wasn't interested in that.

<So, where do we start?> Erik asked, placing the crystal back in its position.

[First, we need to figure out what skills our new scouts will need. The Mirror Centipede's ability—Worm Slaves—gives us a foundation, but it needs significant modifications, and the creatures will need fit powers to survive.]

<Right. The original power creates worms, which means they cannot travel far in a short amount of time. That won't work for what we need.>

<Our priority is creating scouts that can travel far, gather intelligence, and report back. They need to be quick to produce, unlike the Chimaeric Demons, and it does not matter how strong they are, but just that they can survive and do their job.>

[I see. And you mentioned wanting to give them mind control capabilities for defense?]

<Yes. If they run into threats, I want them to be able to take control of thaid's rather than engaging directly and use them to fight if the need arises. It would allow them to continue their mission even when found out, and it would make up for their lower power without us having to go out of our way to make them stronger.>

The system was silent for a bit, processing this request and searching for the best way to do it.

[We have several candidates that could contribute to such an ability. This brain crystal has some elements of mental domination, though it's focused on turning the target into a vegetable.]

Erik looked at the crystal's label.

<Too aggressive,> he said. <The power will consume the victim. We need something subtler that leaves the host functional.>

[We can modify it for that, don't worry. Besides that, what about combining it with the Verandor's Target Lock ability?] The clones found several even here on Mur, but they were stronger than their counterparts on Mannard. [That would allow the scouts to establish and maintain a connection with specific targets.]

Erik nodded, picking up another crystal labeled "Verandor."

<It might work. If we merge these, we could make it so the power doesn't stop if the clone gets out of controlling range.>

[We should also consider this,] the system said, pointing at another brain crystal. [Based on what Rick said, this creature could draw energy from the moon. If we work on it a little, we might be able to use it to decrease the mana consumption.]

<Do we have the necessary powers to make a mana brain crystal?>

Without it, the clones could only get biological abilities and nothing related to mana.

[We have Shadow Rend. I know enough on how to make a mana brain crystal to change the power as I did with the Astral Wolf.]

<Interesting. So we're looking at a combination of Target Lock for connection, a modified version of this power called... Mindbane? For dominance without destruction, and this thing's power for sustaining the link?>

Mindbane was a brain crystal power the clones collected in the past weeks. It came from a monster who could somehow dominates other thaids to attack, regardless of their species or powers.

[Yes,] the system said. [Plus Shadow Rend to make their brain crystal.]

<Is there something else we can use?>

The two discussed a lot about the powers to use. There were many, so it was not a simple choice. They needed to use the best-suited powers if they wanted to decrease the DNA consumption.

After some time, they decided on what they needed to use to get the mind-controlling power.

Erik arranged the samples in a formation, visualizing how their powers might merge.

[There's another consideration,] the system said. [The base Worm Slaves' power creates clones that are hybrids between you and the Mirror Centipede. This form may not be optimal for our scouting purposes. Do you remember how big Noah and the first clones were?]

<You're right.>

Erik needed something that could travel fast, that was hard to see, and that could easily look around.

[I think you should give them Beastwalker, Erik. It would make up for any deficit they have.]

Erik sighed.

<I never seem to keep shapeshifting powers for long.>

[If you prefer, we could give them Phantom Veil. That would give them invisibility and illusion capabilities instead of physical transformation.]

Erik considered the alternative for a moment, then shook his head.

<No, Beastwalker is the better choice here. Along with that, I want to add Eclipse Field as well.>

[Eclipse field would surely make them harder to see and even make it possible for them to flee in case they get directly attacked.]

Erik nodded, moving the three additional samples closer to his working area.

<They'll need to defend themselves, and sometimes the best defense is a good offense. Besides, Eclipse Field could provide cover for retreat if needed.>

The power could blind and slow the opponents, after all. It was a great power, given what the clones had to do.

His gaze then fell on a crystal set apart from the others. Its label read "Hive Mind" with a question mark beside it.

<What about this?>

[According to Rick's notes, this came from a creature able to share information with members of its colony. It used it during combat to coordinate, but he didn't say much else. The clones marked it because they weren't sure of its exact abilities.]

Erik picked up the crystal.

<This could be useful for our purposes. If our scouts could share information among themselves, we'd have a network rather than individual agents. Maybe they could also share it with us without the need to do much.>

[Possibly, but without absorbing and analyzing the power, we can't be certain of its exact function. It might simply allow communication within a species rather than information sharing. Or it could be something entirely different that is able to give that effect.]

<True. But the potential makes it still worth considering.>

Erik placed the Hive Mind crystal with the others he had selected.

<Let's map this out step by step. First, we need to modify Worm Slaves to create clones that mature quickly and can operate independently at greater distances.>

[That will require a lot of DNA points just for the base modifications.]

<I expected as much.>

Erik ran his fingers through his hair. <Next, we merge it with Beastwalker to give them shapeshifting abilities.>

[That won't require a lot of DNA points, luckily.]

Chapter 1316: This is not like brewing coffee (The Vermillion Lake (6))

<Agreed. Let's discuss the mind control aspect now. What if we combine these?> Erik pointed at a series of brain crystals. <What's do you think?>

The system paused, calculating the interaction between the powers.

[This is more challenging. We should get the intended result, but...]

<But what?>

[The cost in terms of DNA points will be very high,] the system said. [While the power will grant mind control abilities, its base form will only let the wielder influence other creatures. This means the mind control will be more subtle and take longer to establish, unless the clones use more mana.]

Erik winced.

<We need something reliable. These scouts will often operate in hostile territory with no backup. If control fails at a critical moment, we lose both the scout and intelligence.>

[Then we should use more DNA points to modify the power and make sure it will have the intended effect.]

<I have a lot of DNA points, it never was a problem.>

[Are you sure? We are not talking about 2 or 3 DNA points but billions.]

Erik gave the system a firm nod.

<It's not like I will use them all up or waste them. Besides, I will need to use the points sooner or later, no? I need an army. The Chimaeric Demons take too much time to hatch and mature, but are strong. Now I need something weaker that can be used whenever I want.>

[Yeah. Demons, but the Chimaeric Demons we have no way to properly search the continent. We might end up searching for months somewhere, only to find out after months that the blackguards were in the opposite direction.]

Erik nodded. <Exactly, it's a risk I don't want to take.> He paused. <Then let's proceed with the full package, including the Hive Mind. If it works as we hope, the scouts will be able to create a shared intelligence network that will give us a lot of situational awareness.>

[Very well. We should begin with the base modification to Worm Slaves, then integrate each additional power. The mind control aspect should come last, as it's the most complex and will need to interact with all other components.]

Erik began arranging the selected samples in the order they would be processed. Then Erik swallowed the brain crystals and blood vials. As usual, he got the notifications, saying he got the DNA and the brain crystal from the creature. One by one, the powers got listed on his status interface.

<Now, let's get started on the modifications.>

They proceeded. The parts of Worm Slave that needed to be gone were gotten rid of. Those that had to stay remained, and those that weren't present, were created on-the-spot thanks to the modifications.

When everything was done, Worm Slave only allowed Erik to create creatures with half his attributes, but they would hatch and mature five minutes after having been created. Then the system modified Shadow Rend so that instead of getting a mana tail, the clones would get a mana brain crystal, like in the Chimaeric's Demons case.

Just doing that consumed 80% of the DNA points they needed to use.

<Ok, now the other powers.>

First, Erik merged Beastwalker, Hive Mind, and Eclipse Field with the new clones. The remaining part was for them to merge a series of powers after careful modification so that they would get the mind-controlling ability.

<How should we structure the mind control ability?>

The system then explained what it had in mind.

<That makes sense. This way, the victim should appear normal in all respects, just operating under the clones' direction. This will require fine-tuning the suppression mechanism to leave enough of the original personality intact to maintain believable behavior.>

[Yes. As for Thaid, we don't even need to do much since they do not have a deep level of mental complexity.]

Erik considered this for a moment.

<What about resistance? Higher-level thaid and humans will certainly put up a lot of resistance if they notice someone trying to use mana on them.>

[Yes, that's unavoidable. I think this can be avoided by the clones using a progressive approach to mental control. Initially, the clones influence subtle actions that don't contradict the target's natural behavior. As the connection strengthens over time, control can extend to more significant actions. This approach is less likely to trigger resistance since it involves lower quantities of mana, unless they can flood them with large amounts that the targets can't resist against.]

<Clever. And it means even if full control isn't achieved, the scouts can still manipulate targets in useful ways. What about duration?>

[With the energy we got from that brain crystal power, they should theoretically be able to keep the link indefinitely as long as the clone does not splurge mana.]

Erik nodded. Then they modified and merged the powers. In the end, they got what they wanted. More or less, at least.

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[Host's Powers]



Chimaeric Demon: Xα3X-RANKED (Creates perfect copies of the user. These clones have the same abilities and stats as the user at the time of creation. Each clone has multiple brain crystals, which grow more powerful as they learn to use their powers. They start at rank E and can grow infinitely, but the neural link formation is 100 times slower than humans. Creating clones requires mana. The clones develop inside eggs that take 2 weeks to hatch and then need 1.5 months to fully mature. When created, the clones have all the user's memories up to that point.)

Instability: Xθ3B-RANKED (Allows to mess with the emotions of the surrounding target and to read their minds.)

Phantom Veil: Xε3A-RANKED (Enables invisibility with projected illusions, creates up to 20 realistic environmental illusions, adapts camouflage dynamically with misleading cues, and allows ripple-free movement for perfect environmental blending.)

Telekinesis: Xo2A-RANKED (The user can lift objects into the air, using them for both attack and defense purposes. The mana consumption increases with the object's weight and the speed at which it's moved.)

Will of the Hydra: Xo2X-RANKED (Splits consciousness into multiple independent minds that function in parallel. Each division increases mental capabilities and perception, but too many splits risk losing unified identity. Mental power scales with the number of minds.)

Verdant Architect: Xo2X-RANKED (Verdant Architect enhances Plant Master's control over flora, allowing plant manipulation and growth with reinforced properties like metal-like strength or flexibility. Plants can be transformed into other elements like fire or water, and their molecular structure can be altered based on the user's will. Creates durable plant-based defenses and weapons with versatile applications. User-dependent limits.)

Rejuvenating Touch: Xo2A-RANKED (Improved Version of Healing Touch, powered up to reach the same abilities of Self-Healing. It doesn't depend on blood, but its mana consumption is less than Self-Healing. It allows limbs to regrow and can heal most wounds. The target can also be healed passively using fixed amounts of mana, but the healing done depends on the mana used. Direct healing is suggested.)

Elemental Lord: Xo2X-RANKED (Elemental Mastery: The user can control fire, wind, earth, water, and lightning elements, either separately or in combination, and generate them. Constructs: The user can create solid constructs and weapons from a blend of the elements (i.e., wind blades, ice lances, fire swords.). Temperature Control: The user can manipulate the temperature to create areas of intense heat or cold, making it possible to create ice or lava.)

Absolute Wall: Xo2A-RANKED (The user is able to create barriers. These are durable depending on the amount of mana used, but mana is amplified, making it so the power is significantly stronger than any other defensive power out there. The barriers are highly durable, but not indestructible, and a mana-powered attack can destroy them. The user can create barriers of various sizes. The size depends on the mana used. This power is mana-hungry.)

Absolute Castle: Xμ3X-RANKED (Enhanced version of Absolute Wall through double merging. Creates adaptive body armor that changes form and material to counter threats. Uses Force energy for both offense and defense. Defensive capabilities exceed Tower Bastion and Aegis Morph combined at equal mana cost. Features: Integrated Force Armor providing physical and force field protection, Shockwave Armor for repelling attacks, Dynamic Shielding that adapts to threats (stronger than Barrier Master), and Enhanced Strength and Agility.)

Strength Enhancer: Xv1B-RANKED (Increases physical power, allowing for greater feats of strength. The increases are based on the amount of mana used. The power has been edited to be more efficient. Grants a minimum increase of 40% of the base strength. The amount can increase, but the mana expenditures increase exponentially.)

Dark Shapes: Xσ1A-RANKED (The Dark Shapes are a variant of the Worm slaves. They hatch in less than a minute and are fully mature in five. The clones are permanent. However, they permanently get 50% of the original's attributes. They are given the same mana brain crystal the Chimaeric Demons got and are able to get stronger and have brain crystal powers. Available Powers: Hive Mind, Beastwalker, Eclipse Field, Mind Control.)

Chapter 1317: The Vermillion Lake (7)

Erik created the Dark Shapes that same night. The creatures sprouted to life from drops of blood that coalesced in eggs that grew before the naked eye.

Unlike the Chimaeric Demons, they matured in minutes rather than months. Within hours, he produced nearly five thousand of these new kinds of clones.

The Dark Shapes were humanoids no larger than a human, but with the same worm-like features Noah and the others had.

They had a human-like body, pale gray skin, and no distinct head—instead, their head connected directly to a long, worm-like neck with vaguely humanoid features.

Erik didn't care about their appearance, though. With his vast mana reserves, he could create enough Dark Shapes that they would never lack companionship.

Besides, now that the world knew about his power, their appearance hardly mattered. The clones were stronger than most humans anyway—if anyone dared criticize them, they would face the consequences.

Erik gave them a simple mission: scout the Lorogia Region, find Blackguard bases, and report their findings. Doing that through the hive mind, brain crystal power, was going to make things easier.

"Go," Erik said, and the creatures left their shelter in the middle of the night, some transforming into bats or nocturnal birds, others becoming rats, snakes, or bugs.

<That should give us eyes across the entire region within weeks,> Erik thought.

[Assuming they survive the journey,] the system said. [The Lorogia Region is far, and they'll encounter many Thaidis along the way.]

<They won't engage unless necessary. I specifically told them that. Their priority is stealth and information gathering, and if they really have to fight, they can take control of monsters during the journey and use them to fight.>

With the Dark Shapes sent away, Erik retreated to his quarters. The creation process had drained his mana, and since the following day's search demanded his full attention, he didn't waste time and went to sleep.

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The next morning, Erik joined the others for breakfast. Aaron and Mickey mentioned having found nothing during their previous day's search.

"The shore has been thoroughly searched," Mickey said. "My bugs covered most of the eastern side but found no structures or material that would have been a sign of the Silverline corporation."

Aaron nodded. "The slimes explored the area on the southern side, but they found nothing."

"We need to search the western and northern sides, then," Erik said. "Today, we'll go there after having searched around the banks again."

The group spent the day searching. Erik and the Chimaeric Demons killed any threatening thaids they encountered, and then the clones used the corpses as puppets to search. The undead scouts made it easier for them to search around. The problem was that they found no signs of the laboratory.

Days passed with similar results. The group explored caves, inlets, and rock formations around the lake.

Erik grew more and more frustrated as the week progressed. Each night, they returned to their shelter empty-handed.

At that point, they searched vast parts of the lake in all cardinal directions. Even the west and north held nothing important.

On the seventh night, the group gathered in the central area of their tree fortress. Martha made a meal from plants she grew and game the clones hunted, but the mood was grim.

"This makes little sense," Erik said, pacing the room. "The information we found in the cave lab undoubtedly mentioned a facility at Vermillion Lake. It can't just have vanished."

"Maybe it was destroyed," Ben said. "Or crumbled spontaneously after centuries of abandonment."

"No," Erik shook his head. "The Silverline Corporation built things to last. Their technology was centuries ahead of its time. I found two facilities myself, and they were still standing even if thaids made nests within them."

Gwen thought about the Lake area. "We've covered every inch of the shoreline and found nothing. Either the information was incorrect, or—"

"What if it's underwater?" Emily said, looking up from her meal and interrupting Gwen. There was a weird look in her eyes, as if she remembered something or connected some dots.

The group fell silent, all eyes turning toward her.

"I mean," she said, slightly uncomfortable with the attention, "what if the lab isn't near the lake or on the shore, but actually inside it? Beneath the surface?"

Erik stopped pacing. "That... could be possible. Thaid's weren't alive back then, so they wouldn't have problems making something down there. The question is whether they had the technology to do something like that. Making underwater buildings is not easy, even with our level of technology."

Erik inwardly turned to the biological supercomputer.

<Do you think they could have made it back then?>

[I think yes,] the system said, this time with uncertainty. [The corporation prepared structures that should have kept their experiments trapped inside, even before they began experimenting with mana and all its implications. If they did that, I think they could have made an underground lab.]

<Why didn't we consider this earlier?>

[The technology seems improbable for that time. Also, most of their facilities were built on land, so there was no reason to assume this one would be different.] Erik then turned to the others.

"The system confirms it's possible," Erik said.

"That would explain why we have found nothing on land," Aaron said. "And why the blackguards never located it."

Floyd leaned forward. "If it's underwater, it would need some kind of entrance point or docking facility, something that would allow people to come and go without flooding the place. Maybe we missed something along the shore: an underwater tunnel or passage."

Emily's idea was making more sense as they thought about it.

"I think it simply got filled with dirt and sand," Gwen said. "The lab had to be safe since it was underwater, and monsters were kept there, but the docks, or the tunnels, or whatever entrance they made didn't necessarily have to be that resistant. Maybe a leak flooded it. After centuries, it's possible."

Erik nodded. "Tomorrow we'll search again."

"Ok, but if Gwen is right, how do we plan to reach a facility that's underwater?" Mira asked. "Even if we find the entrance, the lake is filled with thaids. I've seen them breaching the surface at night—there aren't just a few of them."

The group fell silent again.

"She's right," Martha said.

"I know she is right," Erik said.

"Not to mention that some of us can't breathe underwater," Ben said.

"Thanks for having made that obvious." Erik gave Ben an annoyed look. He sighed and turned to the window, looking out at the moonlight mirroring off the lake's surface. The water was deceptively peaceful from a distance, but it wasn't.

"We need to find the entrance first," Erik said. "Once we locate it, we can make a plan to deal with the thaids and the underwater environment. Worst-case scenario, we kill them all, and then I and Martha will create another entrance."

"Wouldn't it be faster to just do this?" Gwen said.

"I'm the one who is going to fight. Cut me some slack!"

Everyone agreed with the plan, but they were still worried. They knew that finding the lab was just the beginning—getting inside it would be harder, and searching the place for the information they needed was even worse. It might be impossible altogether.

Before going to bed, Erik looked out at the lake one more time. Their answers were down there in the dark water.

<If the lab is underwater, the information inside must be valuable,> Erik thought. <The Silverline Corporation wouldn't have gone to such lengths unless they were hiding something important.>

[Or something dangerous,] the system said. [Either way, we need to find it.]

Erik nodded, watching as ripples disturbed the lake's surface.

#### Chapter 1318: The Vermillion Lake (8)

The following day, the group went back to the lake. The morning sun cast rich lights across the water, but these peaceful visions masked a more dangerous reality. Erik and his comrades stared at the dark surface with serious expressions.

"Are we really sure it can only be there?" Ben asked. The idea of having to go into these waters didn't sit well with him.

"It must be," Erik said, eyes fixed on the ripples disrupting the surface. Emily looked worried, something that Erik noticed.

"Is there a problem?"

Erik's sudden question surprised her. "Ye—No. It's just that I think I've already seen this place. I didn't recognize it at first, but I think I saw it in one of my visions."

"A vision?" Amber asked. "What happened in this vision?"

Erik paused. "A man, a woman, and some monsters were battling a powerful thaid. Their battle was so mighty they reshaped the area."

Mickey gave her a pensive look. "Can you tell us more?"

"Yes. My time with Erik made me realize he was the one fighting the monster; he had the same powers as the man. The woman was presumably me since she used a rifle, and the monsters were the Chimaeric Demons shapeshifted into something else."

Gwen frowned. "Why didn't you share this vision with us before?"

"Because I wasn't sure before..."

Silence ensued.

One of the clones turned to Emily. "Even if they weren't there, nothing says they were dead. They might have gone inside the waters or could have simply hid."

Emily wasn't convinced.

"I hate to say it," Floyd forced a smile that didn't reach his eyes, "but if Emily saw you fighting a powerful thaid in that vision, it probably means there's one down there right now, just waiting for something to plunge into the waters. We can't go in."

Inside the still waters, ripples appeared at regular intervals, showing movement beneath the murky depths. These weren't subtle disturbances—something large moved under the surface, displacing considerable volumes of water.

The group had always known there were thaids in the lake, but thaids were everywhere; it wasn't shocking for them to be inside the lake.

The problem was the monster Emily saw. The monster appeared to be powerful enough to reshape the area during its battle with Erik, forcing Gwen's group to avoid the lake.

The group stood at the shore, watching the dark water with apprehension. None of them spoke for several minutes.

"What do we do?" Amber asked. "If the lab is underwater, we need to search," she said. "The problem is that this place is massive."



Erik paused. Knowing there was something even he would have trouble dealing with meant the others needed to get the hell out of here.

Of course, Mur was full of such creatures, so it wasn't like it made a difference.

Erik stepped closer to the water's edge. "I can use Elemental Lord to control the water, create a breathing space, and move through the lake."

"You want to go alone?"

"Those ripples suggest there is not just one thaid in those waters," Ben said.

Erik watched as a shadow passed beneath the surface—something large enough to make everyone tense.

"I need to find the lab. I didn't come here just to stop now." Erik said. "It's clearly not on land."

Gwen studied the water before them. "You'll waste time searching alone. The lake covers too much area for one person. We knew already there were thaids in it, but if what Emily said is true, then the lake is hiding something far more insidious than two or three thaids."

"What do you suggest?" Erik asked.

"Make more clones," she said. "Didn't you say your new ones mature in minutes after creation? Let them search while we stand guard."

Erik considered her words. The Dark Shapes were indeed perfect for reconnaissance—adaptable, quick to mature, and connected to him through the Hive Mind.

"She's right," Mickey said. "You could search around more quickly and easily, and you won't encounter any danger, granted you avoid stirring up trouble."

"The entire lake can be the hornet's nest."

The Chimaeric Demons knew Erik would never do something like use the clones, his children, as bait or as expendables. That turned into a reality when Erik grimaced.

"I will make the clones," Erik said. "But I will still go into the waters. If something really is there, then I will grab its attention. The clones should be able to search more quickly."

The others wanted to stop him, but they knew they had no power over Erik. Even his lovers didn't.

Erik stepped away from the group and channeled mana. He pricked his finger and made 50 drops of blood fall on the ground. They quickly enlarged until they took the shape of eggs, which broke in half a minute, and from which small humanoid creatures came forth.

They weren't human, since they had wormlike features. Then the creatures spread, and as they got farther from Erik, they got larger and larger. Within minutes, fifty new clones stood before him, attending instruction.

"I need you to search the lake," Erik said. "Look for structures, entrances, anything artificial. Transform into aquatic creatures and remain undetected. Report through the Hive Mind."

The clones already knew what they had to do, but still waited for Erik to give them orders.

The Dark Shapes weren't like the Chimaeric Demons. The traits that the Mirror Centipede's brain crystal powers had were still there, not muddled or erased by new powers or the system's intervention, as in the Chimaeric Demons' case.

The orders Erik gave were absolute for both kinds of clones, but the Chimaeric Demons had Erik's best interest in mind, so when they thought he was doing something wrong, they would act in defiance of the orders. Theirs was more absolute loyalty than absolute obedience.

The Dark Shapes were the opposite. The Mirror Centipede's clones only had to do what their creator ordered.

The stricter the order was, the more rigid their behavior would be. Even the Dark Shapes followed that same behavior when Erik gave them an order.

However, if he said to scout around, they would have enough freedom to avoid death if necessary, but if Erik ordered them to do something and die in the process, they would.

Their bodies shifted once Erik gave the order—limbs fused into tails, heads flattened, and gills formed along their necks. Within seconds, they mirrored various lake-dwelling fish. One by one, they slipped into the water.

"What do we do while they search?" Emily asked.

"Stay alert," Erik said. "If something happens, I might need your help."

The group spread along the shoreline, weapons ready. Erik then plunged into the waters.

Chapter 1319: The Vermillion Lake (9)

Erik plunged into the murky and cold waters and dove. The surface light grew distant, smaller, and feebler as he went deeper into the lake.

His clones already spread through the watery area and started searching, but ten Dark Shapes swam around Erik. They were there to observe his immediate surroundings and ensure nothing dangerous was there.

Visibility inside the water was scarce, and whatever thaids used to hunt in these waters could come without Erik even realizing.

There was a limit to how much the biological supercomputer and Erik's Instability could detect. The lake was large, and the thaids there were swift enough to reach him in a matter of seconds. That meant that Erik might not detect them in time, and the system itself could be fooled.

Erik channeled mana into his Elemental Lord brain crystal power's neural links to manipulate water. He created a pocket of air around his head, allowing him to breathe normally despite being submerged. The bubble remained stable as he swam downward, pushing against the increasing pressure.

Even with the air bubble, Erik struggled to see more than a few meters ahead. The water grew darker with each meter of descent, and particles of sediment floated like snow in the murky depths, making it impossible for him to see farther than three meters.

<Well, I'm here to lure the thaids after all,> Erik thought, adjusting his eyes to the darkness.

Through the Hive Mind, his clones fed information back to Erik—water temperature changes, terrain features, and potential threats. It was like having ten additional sets of eyes searching.

<Any sign of structures?> Erik asked through the mental link.

<No artificial structures detected yet, but many of us spotted movement throughout the lake.>

Multiple Thaids patrolled these waters, some small and easy to avoid, others large enough to warrant caution.

Erik swam deeper, following a gradual slope toward the center of the lake. His scouts reported a drop-off ahead—a steep underwater cliff that plunged into darker depths.

The Hive Mind then flared. Three Dark Shapes at the front had detected something rapidly approaching.

<Be careful, master.>

Erik couldn't see it yet himself, but the mental image projected through the Hive Mind showed a creature with elongated fins and rows of needle-like teeth.

<Incoming threat, twenty meters ahead, moving fast.>

Erik focused, drawing more mana into Elemental Lord. The water around his right arm swirled, compressed, and then extended outward, taking the shape of a blade.

As the creature shot past his scouts, ignoring them in favor of the larger prey, Erik prepared to kill it. The issue was that the creature's blood would attract more Thaids to his location.

Though he came there for that very reason. As soon as Erik saw the creature, he asked the system to analyze it.

—[Analysis]—

Race: Nyxab

Physical Description: An aquatic predator approximately 2 meters. Its body is covered in scales for ease of movement in the water. The creature has multiple rows of needle-like teeth and specialized fins that allow for rapid acceleration in water.

Brain Crystal Power: Liquid Beam (Bα3B): The Nyxab can shoot concentrated beams of pressurized water.

{Attributes}

STRENGTH: 330

INTELLIGENCE: 2

DEXTERITY: 154

ENERGY: 493

{Others}

Power Level: 782

Estimated experience by killing it: 24,487,177.67

—[End]—

Erik released the compressed water blade before the creature could attack. It cut through without resistance, slicing clean through the Thaid's body.

The creature jerked once before going limp, dark blood clouding the water. Erik pushed it away, watching as it drifted toward the lake floor.

[Hostile creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

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

[Mana successfully absorbed, starting converting procedure.]

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

[Mana successfully absorbed into experience. 24487177.69 experience points awarded to the host.]

<Now we wait.>

He mentally turned to the clones close to him.

<Be careful, the party is going to start soon.>

The scouts resumed their search, spreading out in a wider formation this time, since they were expecting the thaids to smell the blood and drown the area.

Erik continued his descent, approaching the underwater cliff his scouts had found. Standing at its edge, he looked down into the abyss below, considering Emily's vision.

She had seen the lake. It was not the serene abyss beneath her she had seen, but the surrounding area. The waters were filled with Thaid; he got there less than two minutes earlier, and yet he already killed one. They were weaker than he assumed, but they were fast.

He might have been unlucky, but he was inclined to think the waters were just filled with Thaid. It only made sense there was something dangerous inside the waters.

<Maybe the monster isn't here yet,> Erik said to himself. <Or maybe it's sleeping somewhere below.>

Either way, he was going to fight it, regardless. The lab had to be secured, so the beast had to die, and so did all the other thaids. But while he could take care of the weaker thaid by simply electrifying the waters, he doubted a beast as strong as Emily claimed would just be killed by such an attack.

<Any news?>

The Dark Shapes shared their findings. None had noticed anything resembling a facility yet, though several noted curious forms in the lakebed they were currently investigating.

<Continue searching,> Erik said. <Focus on areas where the bottom topography seems unnatural. Look for straight lines, perfect angles, anything that wouldn't form naturally.>

As his scouts spread out further, Erik descended the underwater cliff. The water grew significantly colder here, and the pressure increased. He adjusted his air bubble, reinforcing it to resist the crushing force.

Then something caught his eye—a glint of white against the dark lake floor. Erik got closer.

<Maybe it's a piece of equipment. If it is, I can be sure the lab is here.>

When Erik reached for the item and brushed away the layers of silt with his hand, he froze in place. Upon closer inspection, what he hoped was research equipment turned out to be something else.

<Well, not that I didn't expect it. Besides, that proved even more that the lab was there.>

Erik just found a human skull.

Chapter 1320: The Vermillion Lake (10)

Erik picked it up, turning it over in his hands. The bone was old, yellowed with age, and ruined by the water. No ordinary drowning victim would end up this deep. This person died down here, far from shore.

<I Found something,> Erik said to the clones. <There are human remains in this area.>

The skull provided the first evidence that humans had indeed been there, deep under the Vermillion Lake. If people had gone this far down, there must have been a reason—like accessing an underwater facility or escaping from it. The lake was deep, and the lake bottom had the conformation to hide a facility.

Erik gave a better look at the skull. There were no obvious fractures or trauma, though one side was slightly discolored. He set it back down on the lakebed. It might provide clues later, but nothing he needed to figure out now.

<Keep searching,> Erik said. <The lab must be in this area. Focus your search here.>

He swam forward, following the base of the cliff. The terrain flattened out into what appeared to be a large basin, surrounded by rock formations. Erik noticed how unusually level the bottom appeared here.

His clones reported similar observations from their positions. The basin floor was made of sediment that had settled over a hard, flat surface. In places, the current had worn away this sediment, revealing glimpses of what might be metallic plating beneath.

<I think we've found it,> Erik said. <The entire basin might be the roof of the facility, buried under silt and growth over the centuries.>

As Erik swam closer to investigate, his scouts continued mapping the perimeter to search for an entrance.

Through the Hive Mind, he received the clone's estimates of the entire area's size. It was roughly rectangular, around two hundred meters long by eighty meters wide.

Erik directed his palm light at the lakebed, brushing away sediment with controlled water currents. Beneath the layer of silt, something solid and smooth emerged—not rock, but an artificial surface. He scraped away more sediment, revealing what appeared to be a seam—a straight line running across the basin floor.

<Found something,> Erik said to his clones. <I think this is it. The lab is buried beneath us.>

All the clones converged on his position to help clear more of the sediment. Something approached Erik, unbeknownst to him.



Then one of his clones' link to the hive mind went blank. Then another vanished, and another.

Before he could react, three more Dark Shapes went silent. Through the fragmenting Hive Mind, Erik caught glimpses of movement—dark shapes cutting through water with frightening speed. They weren't his clones, though.

<Fall back! We're not alone,> Erik said to the remaining scouts. <Defensive formation around me, now!>

The surviving Dark Shapes left their search and converged on Erik's position. They put themselves in a protective circle.

Something moved in the murky distance. Through the sediment-clouded water, Erik saw multiple shapes approaching.

Not just one thaid, but many. More than many.

The first attacker burst through the defensive line—a fishlike creature with grotesque arms that seemed oddly mismatched with its body. A clone intercepted it, only to be ripped apart by the creature's unexpected strength.

<These things are stronger than you. We need to get out of here.>

More appeared, and they were all large, yet darting through the water with lightning speed.

<Shit. They're everywhere.> Erik drew more mana into Elemental Lord and formed blades of compressed water on both arms. He started releasing them.

[Hostile creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

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

[Mana successfully absorbed, starting converting procedure.]

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

[Mana successfully absorbed into experience. 734,615,330.12 experience points awarded to the host.]

[Hostile creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Hostile creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Hostile creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Hostile creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

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Then the Thaid's struck again, overwhelming two more Dark Shapes. The larger ones held back, circling the perimeter.

Something wasn't right. The attacks were too coordinated, too strategic for typical thaid behavior.

<I'm getting tired of this fucking continent.> Thaid's were too smart there.

A thought struck Erik's mind. The lab's proximity and the Thaid's unnaturally coordinated behavior were connected.

<Could it be...>

Erik realized this wasn't a coincidence. If the Thanatocoleoptera queen was created, was intelligent, and could control Thaid's, maybe there was something in the lake that could do the same, and the reason was that the beast was most likely another of the Silverline Corporation's proto-Thaid's.

<It makes sense.>

Erik created a barrier around him and the clones. The barrier blocked an attack. Erik traced the attack back to its source, and it was at that moment he saw it.

Through the chaos of combat and swirling sediment, a massive creature emerged from the shadows of the underwater cliff.

Partially obscured, its size dwarfed the other Thaid's. Deep blue scales covered its back, while its belly was a light yellow. It had an alligator-like head sitting atop a neck that stretched at least ten meters.

The creature was observing the battle. That was proof enough of the fact that the smaller Thaid's weren't acting independently. They were extensions of the larger creature's will, soldiers following the commands of their general.

<There is another proto thaid here,> Erik said.

[The log said that at both the facilities their specimen escaped. It must be it.]

<Why do they live so long? And why do they all control other thaid's?>

The massive Thaid advanced closer; four enormous clawed paws propelled it forward. Its fifteen-meter spiked tail swept behind it, creating currents that further disturbed the already murky water.

Erik and the remaining clones were still behind the barrier.

<We need to get out of here,> Erik said. He needed to know what he was going to fight. There were two ways: one was to ask Emily, and one was to analyze the monster.

<System, do your thing.>