

BIOLOGICAL 351

Chapter 351: Matthew's fate

The members of Caiden's party ran through the city streets, leaving behind echoes as their feet pounded against the concrete pavement.

"How much farther is the kid?" Caiden inquired about one of his other soldiers.

"He should be around 500 meters from here," the soldier responded.

"Then, get ready for contact," he said further.

The urgent call had come in: Benedict was still being pursued by the thug that Simone sent to kill him, but they were able to track them down and find them both. However, given that the thug intended to kill the teenager, they could not afford to waste even a second.

Caiden, who was leading the search, yelled out commands to his team while the others followed him with determination written all over their faces.

As they rounded a corner, they saw Benedict in the distance, coming toward their position. Anxiety and fear were clearly written all over his face as he peered over his shoulder to see where his pursuer was.

The thug was gaining ground, fueled by anger, as the young man had; that already made him waste a lot of time that wasn't supposed to happen.

The beating of Amber's father's heart quickened as he realized that they needed to take action before it was too late.

"Spread yourselves out!" Caiden issued the directive with a commanding tone. The squad instantly dispersed in all directions, arranging themselves in such a way as to prevent the thug from advancing or escaping.

The team swiftly fanned out, strategically positioning themselves to cut off the thug's path. When Benedict looked up in front of him, he instantly recognized Caiden; after all, he was someone he had previously met at the party to which he had accompanied Amber and the other people.

The instant he recognized the man, a sigh of relief spread across his face. He also noticed a squad moving in on the gangster by placing themselves around him in the middle of the crowd and looking at him with their weapons drawn. Of course, panic spread as the people saw armed men.

Benedict quickened his steps and summoned every ounce of energy he had in order to maintain his advantage over the thug. The man let out a frustrated snarl as he came to the realization that he was losing his grip on his prey, but he was unaware that the soldiers were moving into position as the crowd was generating chaos.

One of the team members made a break for it as soon as he was in the appropriate position, and he moved quickly to get in the way of the thug's path. He leaped forward with a burst of agility, but the thug snatched his weapon and sliced at the man, and then a struggle broke out between the two of them. The thug was not to be underestimated.

In the meantime, Caiden and the others moved quickly to encircle the pair, making a defensive barrier to shield the people who were running away.

Their attention was riveted on the struggle, and they were getting ready to step in. Despair crept into the head of the thug as soon as he saw that he was encircled. Because he was trapped, it was evident that his life was over. He had enough experience to understand that these were trained men, and they were not weak to begin with.

The thug tried to break free from the encirclement, but many swords penetrated his abdomen, and he perished as a result. Desperation and the desire to escape drove his attempt to flee. Despite the state, this city was in—no, this nation—officially, there was no room for criminals, and it was perfectly OK to kill a couple if there was proof of their wrongdoings.

Caiden went up to Benedict once the situation had been settled and brought under his control, his voice carrying a note of anxiety.

He looked at Benedict and asked, "Are you OK, kid?" while extending a hand to reassure him. The young man gave a slight nod. His breathing was still becoming increasingly laborious, but an expression of appreciation could be seen in his eyes.

"Thank you, sir." I thought he would never stop chasing me," the young man replied.

Caiden gave a reassuring smile after noticing that the young boy was not that wounded. "Yeah, I'm aware of it. Everything is over now, and you can rest easy. Relax a bit; you deserve it," Caiden said.

"Thank you again, sir."

As the team regrouped and prepared to move on, Caiden glanced back at the dead thug. He knew their work was far from over, as some other kids were still missing, but at that moment, he couldn't help but feel a sense of victory.

A spooky scenario was taking place in the area surrounding the wreckage of the Red Lotus Lounge. The formerly thriving nightclub now lay in ruins, reduced to a heap of charred wreckage and ashes that were still burning. The fire had destroyed everything in its path, leaving behind the charred remains of what had once stood tall and proud.

As she took in the scene of total destruction, Mikey's mother stood there with her eyes welling up with tears and a concerned expression on her face.

Because she had to watch her child battle for his life here, the place was the stuff of her worst fears. The burned remnants of the building stood as a grim reminder of the horrors that had transpired.

She was scared for her son since she didn't even know where he was at the moment and was worried something would happen to him and his friends. However, she was told that Caiden Joyce, Richard Stone's right-hand man, had taken charge of rescuing the children, but she didn't know the outcome.

The eyes of Carl, Anderson's father, were filled with sorrow as he stood next to his son's lifeless body, his attention locked on the corpse. He was overcome with sadness and rage at the same time, and he clenched his hands tightly.

The flames were still flickering among the debris, casting an eerie glow across his face and warming his icy visage. He did his best to hold back the tears, his heart heavy with the burden of loss and the pain of realizing that his son, his pride and joy, was no longer with him.

Luisa's mother was in the same situation. Anguish was written all over her face as she stood by her daughter's side; she was going through Carl's same experience as her daughter died.

In an effort to get control over her feelings and calm herself down, she started walking back and forth. The fragments of broken glass and twisted metal crunched beneath her feet were a visual representation of the pieces of her own broken heart.

She ran a trembling hand through her hair, her fingers stained with soot, as she searched for any trace of solace amid the devastation in front of her and the many people assessing the situation. She wasn't alone there but felt like she was falling into a void.

At the same time, Adam's brother stood silently, his gaze fixed on the devastation before him. His little brother was gone. Loss and hopelessness hung heavily in the smoky air like a cloud. The flames came dangerously close to consuming his brother's body, but the clans were able to rescue him just in time to prevent this from happening.

His friends surrounded him since some of them came to rescue him once they learned he had been kidnapped. They were trying to make him feel better, sharing comforting words to soothe his sorrow. However, Frank temporarily closed his eyes, forcing himself to find the strength to hold back his tears and promising to honor his brother's memory.

Three other hostages were alive, but the majority of them had perished together with their children on that day. They stood in a circle, expressions of shock and dismay engraved deeply into their cheeks. They exchanged glances, their eyes filled with unspoken sorrow as their children died.

There was a tangible sense of tension in the air as the Zamora Clan, Silverbend Clan, and Montgomery Clan stood together around Matthew, who had been captured during the whole ordeal. His cries of rage could be heard across the neighborhood as he pleaded for his freedom, but no one paid attention to his cries of distress.

"You just hold on! When I get my freedom, you'll be sorry that you crossed me!" he shouted.

Maria, Carlos, and John, the three commanders of the clan's teams, approached the scene while maintaining strong and unyielding looks.

"Shut the fuck up, you motherfucker!" Carlos shouted back. It was clear from the tone he used that he was furious.

"I'll have my revenge! Every one of you will pay for this!" Matthew barked out like a caged dog.

"Yeah, yeah, keep dreaming, you psycho!" Maria responded by shouting back at the culprit behind this incident.

The presence of law enforcement officers brought a sense of authority to the situation. They approached Matthew with extreme caution since they had received extensive training to handle people with lethal brain crystal powers.

They took with them a unique restraint that was designed to counteract and prevent the use of such powers by making mana unable to flow through the neural links and rendering the apprehended helpless.

Maria, the Silverbend Clan's team leader, walked forward while maintaining a forceful but even tone. In a tone that carried the weight of authority, she declared, "We have apprehended the culprit."

"He is now under our custody," one of the police officers replied.

Carlos, who was there to represent the Zamora Clan, was standing next to Maria; his presence was imposing and steady.

"Don't let him escape," he said. It was widespread knowledge that many law enforcement officials were working together with criminals, which contributed to his lack of trust in the police.

The issue was that they were powerless to change the situation in any way. Caiden asked the clans to keep Matthew alive, as he had questions he wanted to ask the man.

John, the Montgomery clan's team captain, joined in the discussion, and his voice had a tone of resolute determination throughout the whole exchange. "We trust that you will handle the situation appropriately and ensure the public's safety."

"Don't worry about that," one of the police officers replied.

The police, skilled in dealing with situations involving people with brain crystal powers, acted quickly. By utilizing the sophisticated constraint, they were able to hold Matthew and prevent him from gaining access to his power.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?! STOP, I COMMAND YOU! I'M MATTHEW MCCONNEL, YOU USELESS PIECES OF SHIT. FILTHY MAGGOTS, RELEASE ME THIS INSTANT!"

As soon as the restraints were put on him, his power was taken away, and he was unable to cause any further damage or escape.

"Yeah, yeah, they all say this," one of the officers replied.

"You think these restraints can hold me? I'll break free in no time!"

The sight of Matthew, who had become quiet and was without the air that he usually exuded, came as a jarring reminder of the results that would come from his actions.

His yells of defiance were muffled, and he gave off an aura that suggested he was giving up and accepting defeat. The Zamora Clan, the Silverbend Clan, the Montgomery Clan, and the police all worked together, and with their united efforts, they successfully brought him to justice.

As soon as Matthew was handed over to the authorities, the clan team's captain stepped back, as their objective had been successfully fulfilled. They acknowledged each other by nodding their heads to each other, understanding the significance of their partnership.

With Matthew's apprehension, a sense of relief settled over the scene. The clans and the police had successfully neutralized a threat, ensuring the security of the remaining hostages and providing some measure of justice to those who had suffered because of Matthew's actions.

Chapter 352: The start of a journey

Erik made his way through the thick forest. He was worn out and tense at the same time. He was engulfed in the pitch-black night, which made it difficult for him to see more than a few meters ahead of him. In these sections of the forest, where the density of the vegetation was particularly high, the branches that formed the canopy above blocked out even the most insignificant trace of moonlight.

It was a maze of shadows, and every rustle of leaves and crack of twigs seemed to reverberate through the eerie stillness that pervaded the area.

As the awakener's thoughts turned to the nocturnal creatures that lived in the forest, the awakener's anxiety level increased. His awareness of these thaid's and the danger they posed fueled his unease about the situation.

Nightstalkers were among them. These felines, stealthy predators, had claws that were as sharp as razors and eyes that glowed so brightly that they could see through the darkness. They stalked their prey in complete silence, relying on their heightened senses to help them locate them.

Another dangerous beast was the Shadow Serpent, a thaïd that resembled a snake and had scales that appeared to absorb any light, making it almost impossible to see with the naked eye. It moved stealthily through the underbrush, ready to pounce on unsuspecting victims with its poisonous fangs, which were powered by the mana pumped by its brain crystal.

Erik was also familiar with the Nightshades, which were beings that were able to blend in perfectly with the shadows. They were equipped with a brain crystal that gave them the ability to rob their victims of their mana, leaving them helpless and confused as a result.

There were also monsters called Moonhowlers that lived in the forest. These were enormous wolves with glowing eyes and razor-sharp fangs. They were significantly more powerful than Leylarhads, but they were only active at night.

They moved in groups, their cries ripping through the darkness and striking fear into the hearts of even the most courageous individuals they encountered. They were comparable to the Leylarhads since they were a sort of wolf kind, but their brain crystal gave them the ability to absorb energy from the moonlight.

This gave them a significant advantage in combat and made them particularly dangerous after dark.

These were merely some of the examples of nocturnal thaïds that Erik was familiar with. Each creature posed its own one-of-a-kind risk, which, in combination with the treacherous plants that grew there, made the dark forest an environment fraught with peril.

The young man was well aware that his life depended on his ability to navigate this perilous realm without falling prey to the beasts that slumbered there, so he kept his wits about him at all times and did his best to avoid drawing their attention. His survival depended on it.

There was a strong odor in the air that was reminiscent of damp earth and rotting leaves. A faint crunch accompanied every step that Erik took, and the thick undergrowth brushed up against his legs, leaving behind a trail of sweat on his skin.

The night was filled with the calls of various nocturnal animals, which served as a constant reminder of the wild and untamed nature of the forest because of their distant nature.

The awakener's eyes were straining to make out any discernible shapes in the darkness, but he could hardly tell the silhouettes of towering trees apart from one another.

His senses were sharpened to the point that he could detect even the smallest sound or movement. The night was a symphony, and the occasional hoot of owl-like thaid or the scurrying of smaller ones contributed to the music. But Erik was on edge because he didn't know what was going on, and his mind kept conjuring up images of threats that were hiding just beyond his line of sight.

"System, can you confirm that this is the path that we should be taking?" Erik questioned the intelligence of the biological supercomputer.

[INDEED. YOU ARE CURRENTLY HEADING EAST BASED ON THE MAGNETIC FIELD. HOWEVER, I RECOMMEND YOU CAMP SOMEWHERE SINCE NAVIGATING THROUGH THIS DARKNESS IS NOT VIABLE. THE USER IS STILL FAR FROM ETRIUM AND RELATIVELY CLOSE TO NEW ALEXANDRIA, BUT HE SHOULD BE SAFE FOR THE TIME BEING.]

"Fuck... this is not a good situation at all," Erik said.

The young man was led by his biological supercomputer, which alerted him to potential dangers whenever it detected even the faintest of thaid. However, he also proceeded with extreme caution, relying on his senses to guide him around the dangers that he could not see that lay in his way.

A few times at regular intervals, he would come to a halt and strain his ears, looking for any indication of presence or movement in the darkness.

<I need to find a way to see in the dark. Should I make a torch? But I know nothing about how to start a fire. I planned to learn this at military school, as I didn't think I would leave the city now.>

Despite the fact that Erik couldn't see much, a fire of determination burned inside of him. He had no choice but to flee that hellhole known as New Alexandria. It broke his heart to not even have the chance to say goodbye to his friends, but he knew that if he remained in that place, he would never experience happiness in his life.

He was aware that he needed to keep moving forward in order to navigate his way through the forest and arrive at his destination. The difficulties that lay ahead served only to strengthen his resolve, just as the thaids that he was going to hunt served only to strengthen his physical prowess.

There was a rationale behind Erik's decision to wait until now to start a fire. The first reason was that he was located too close to the city, and there was a chance that the soldiers would figure out that he had fled the city. The second reason was due to the thaids, as they were capable of locating him even in the dark, and a significant number of them were not easily frightened by fire.

<I can't go forward; it's hard to see obstacles and thaids this way.>

The young man then made an effort to find a solution to the problem.

He could merely create torches, but the best thing for him to do would be to absorb the brain crystal power of some thaids that possessed the ability to see in the dark; the problem was that there weren't many around here, as most of the ones that could do that, could because of some biological reason, and not due to their brain crystal power.

The young man thought about the best thaids' brain crystal power to deal with this situation, and that was around these parts.

There were a few choices, but the one that would be the least difficult would be to kill a Shadow Owl. This creature stood only about 30 centimeters tall and had magnificent wings that were only slightly larger than their length. This was one of the few rare exceptions of reasonably strong flying-like thaid, as it wasn't that strong.

Its feathers were a gorgeous shade that looked like a cross between charcoal and dark gray, giving off an air of mystery and coyness.

According to the literature, the feathers of the owl had a velvety texture, much like the night sky. They were incredibly soft to the touch. Its wings, which gracefully extended from its body, were veined with delicate traces of silver, which cast an ethereal glow during the hours when the moon was out.

The most captivating aspect of the Shadow Owl was undoubtedly its large, mesmerizing eyes. They had previously sparkled with vibrant emerald hues, and they were powered by the presence of a specific brain crystal power that enabled the owl to see through the veils of darkness and provided it with the ability to see in the dark.

This being did not require an offensive brain crystal power to hunt properly. It was active at night, and its prey consisted of rodents; plus, it still was a flying-thaid, which meant they were strong in their own league.

Its wings were designed in such a way that it made almost no sound when it flew, and its talons were so sharp that it could kill its prey almost instantly. Its ability to see in the dark was its most potent weapon because it allowed it to locate prey in any environment. In contrast, other creatures would never be able to figure out where the thaid was hiding.

That would be a good alternative; however, the territories of the Shadow Owls were at least two kilometers away from where he was standing, and besides, he had no way to attack from a distance, so he could not hunt them. The most effective strategy would be to eliminate the monster during the day when its activity level was at its lowest point, but even that wasn't simple, even if he could.

But what actions should I take at this point? Erik asked himself.

Erik was startled when he heard something rustling in the bushes, which quickly brought the kid back to the present. He went on high alert as soon as he heard the crackling of leaves and the faint snapping of twigs, and he scanned his surroundings with his eyes, getting ready to confront whatever danger was hiding in the shadows.

As he climbed a tree at a breakneck speed, Erik's dexterous movements were obscured by the rustling of the leaves. Adrenaline was surging through his veins. He was able to get a good look at the forest floor below him thanks to his elevated vantage point. An eerie howl ripped through the air at that very moment, reverberating through the forest and sending shivers down Erik's spine.

In a matter of seconds, a pack of Moonhowlers materialized out of the darkness, their massive forms prowling with graceful deliberation. Their predatory gaze narrowed in on Erik, focusing on the child's scent as they fixed on him with glowing eyes that looked like orbs of lunar radiance.

Their ravenous appetite was made clear by the eerie glint of razor-sharp fangs that shone in the dim light of the moon.

"Shit, that was just what I needed..."

Erik managed to maintain his composure despite the precarious nature of the situation and clung to the branches. He knew that challenging these creatures in the darkness would be a battle that he could not win with his current power, so his instincts were telling him not to get down from the tree, where the beast couldn't reach him.

His anxiety began to tighten its grip on him, and his instincts also urged him not to get down from the tree. He continued to wait in the relative safety of the tree, where he was perched, with his body hidden among the dense foliage.

The Moonhowlers were circling the base of the tree as their menacing growls reverberated throughout the night like a symphonic performance of danger. Their most basic instincts were able to pick up on Erik's presence, but the fact that he was hiding in the tree made it impossible for them to overcome the obstacle.

He stood there helplessly as they sniffed the air, their eyes searching for any sign of their prey as they used their noses.

Even though Erik had been clinging to the tree for a significant amount of time, he did not become exhausted. On the contrary, he was able to rest because the branches were large enough to keep him comfortable. When the Moonhowlers realized there was no easy prey available, they eventually withdrew and disappeared into the darkness of the nighttime landscape.

After waiting a few more hours, Erik finally worked up the courage to descend the tree, feeling relieved that he had made it through the ordeal.

Erik's choice to remain hidden in the face of the all-encompassing gloom was the only way for him to maintain any chance of survival. As the moonlight washed over the forest, he steeled his resolve and made a pact with himself to become more powerful and hone his skills until he was capable of facing the Moonhowlers and other dangers head-on.

Chapter 353: The first day

Erik's tired eyes slowly opened as the sun began to rise, illuminating the entire forest with its warm glow.

The night had been dangerous, with the air permeated by the eerie howls of monsters that prowled around in the shadows.

Despite his best efforts to find solace in the large tree, he could not fall asleep or stay asleep for long, which resulted in him becoming worn out and injured. On top of that, he received a notification from the biological supercomputer the same morning.

[QUEST FAILED.]

"This should be the quest related to Matthew," the young man said to himself. Since he was outside the city, the penalty did not affect him, and his thoughts quickly wandered elsewhere.

Erik had been put through a grueling ordeal throughout the night. The thaids had been relentlessly prowling beneath the branches ever since they had been attracted to his presence by the blood staining his clothes and occasionally coming out of his injuries.

Their low, guttural growls and threatening snarls reverberated throughout the woods, giving him chills all the way down his spine. Every rustle of leaves or crackle of twigs brought his senses to a heightened state, reminding him of the imminent danger that was hiding below and preventing him from getting a good night's sleep as a result.

It wasn't an easy task because he was sleeping on the branches of a tree.

Erik had astutely utilized the tree, using his birth brain crystal power to make the tree and its branches grow. He had carefully caused them to spread further, creating a dense canopy in his surroundings.

This was done to ensure that he would remain hidden from other thaids and that the tree's scent would partially obscure his smell.

This screen of vegetation had become his refuge for the evening, protecting him from the watchful gaze of the creatures in the area.

Nevertheless, despite Erik's inventiveness, the night's ordeal took a physical toll on his body. Aside from the wounds he received in the city, his muscles hurt from the constant tension, and his limbs were covered in scratches and bruises from the frantic ascent that he had acquired during the process.

Erik's shoulders were drooping under the weight of the mental and physical exhaustion that he was experiencing. It had taken its toll on him, leaving him feeling exhausted and disoriented as a result of not getting enough sleep.

The moment he shut his eyes, vivid mental images of monstrous fangs and glowing eyes flooded his consciousness and continued to torment him throughout his restless dreams. That was not enough for the system to intervene, but it was hard nonetheless.

Erik had to force himself to take stock of his situation as the first rays of dawn began to make their way through the dense vegetation. He had to come up with a more long-term strategy for survival while also finding a way to recover from his wounds, regain his strength, and get back into fighting shape.

Because he had bandages, antibiotics, and other medical supplies that he had taken from Mr. Fox's farm, he did not run the risk of his wounds becoming infected. Instead, it was of the utmost importance to locate a safe place where he could have his wounds treated and rest appropriately for the time being.

Erik gathered the strength necessary to make the ascent back down the tree with incredible difficulty. A throbbing pain accompanied each step he took, serving as a jarring reminder of the dangers he had previously encountered. His shoulders were the most problematic, despite his arms being in relatively good shape.

Erik's stomach growled with hunger as he descended the tree, and the sun's warm embrace wrapped itself around the forest at that very moment.

He reached into his bag and pulled out a small piece of the dried meat he had acquired from Mr. Fox's farm. He chewed on it thoughtfully. He knew he had a long journey ahead of him, so he made sure to take some time to enjoy the meal and replenish his energy.

Erik was deep in thought as he ate, pondering his next move. He needed to keep moving deeper and deeper into the core of the forest. His final resting place would be in Etrium, located in the east.

"But what would I do after I arrive there? I should find a way to enter one of the cities, but if I use my current ID, Frant will learn about my survival and come there to search for me. I must assume they already know about my multiple powers, so that is a huge risk. Should I ask the mercenaries there? Hide in some vehicles? Talk to a smuggler?"

Erik started his hike again while deliberating over what course of action to take and set off with his backpack on his back. He took each step carefully, keeping in mind the injuries he had sustained, but he was propelled forward by a tenacious will that made him refuse to give up.

Even though the forest was ominous and full of perils that couldn't be seen, it was not enough to break his determination.

The chorus of birdsong that filled the air in the morning was a sign that life continued to exist despite the challenges that were presented to it. Erik was given a momentary sense of peace by the brilliant hues of sunlight cast down from the canopy above, which encouraged him to continue his journey.

Erik became more sensitive to every rustle and snapped in the undergrowth as he progressed inside the forest. His eyes traveled over the area, searching for any indications of impending danger or potential routes to escape. The system would tell him in advance, but heavily relying on the system wasn't good.

The forest had morphed into both an enemy and an ally for him; it was a vast labyrinth where the only way to survive was to learn to adapt to its environment and outsmart the beasts that lived within it.

As the sun continued to climb higher in the sky, it cast long shadows that danced around at his feet. He was well aware that the trip would be arduous and that the night would present its own unique challenges to overcome. But for the time being, he continued in the clear light of day, encouraged by the prospect of better things to come.

After a long day of walking through the thick forest, Erik saw a small stream glistening in the sunlight as he continued his journey through the woods. He was exhausted from his journey and the ordeal he had been through over the past few days and tired due to the physical exertion. He cautiously approached the water, keeping his senses alert for any signs of danger.

"System, do you sense living creatures in the surroundings?" Erik asked the system.

[NEGATIVE. THE STREAM IT'S SAFE, AND THERE ARE NO THAIDS IN A HUNDRED METER RADIUS,] the system replied.

"What about the water? Is it drinkable?" The young man asked with hope in his eyes.

[THE WATER SEEMS CLEAR ENOUGH. DIP YOUR FINGERS INTO THE WATER AND TASTE IT; THE BIOLOGICAL SUPERCOMPUTER WILL ANALYZE IT.]

Erik complied with the instructions, and as luck would have it, it appeared that the water in this stream originated from a spring, which meant that it was healthy enough to drink. Even though it had been exposed to some pollution from the surrounding environment, it was still safe to drink.

To fill his empty water bottles, Erik got down on his knees next to the stream and dipped them into the refreshing water that was very clear. A wave of relief washed over him as the liquid filled the containers. After pausing for a moment to slake his thirst, he cupped his hands and allowed the water to trickle down between his fingers, rehydrating his body and easing the pain of his chapped lips.

Erik's tired spirit was revived thanks to the revitalizing effect of the water's reviving flavor on him. He reveled in the uncomplicated joys that this natural haven offered him in the midst of a wild environment.

The soothing tune provided by the stream's gentle babbling served as a backdrop, helping to calm his mind and serving as a reminder that even in the midst of the chaos, there were times when he could find moments of tranquility.

That turned out to be a very fortunate discovery. After refilling his water bottles, Erik took a short break to relax next to the stream and take in the peaceful atmosphere of his surroundings.

The lush vegetation and the forest's aroma offered him a brief reprieve from the circumstances that required him to maintain a state of heightened awareness at all times. But he couldn't stay for long because there were thais in the area.

After a brief period of time had passed, Erik got to his feet, feeling grateful for the water that would help him make it through the difficult journey. He made sure he had a sufficient supply to endure the challenges that were still in front of him and secured the filled water bottles to his backpack.

"I reek of blood," Erik said to himself. He was sure the thais were attracted by the scent, as it was relatively fresh. He had a fresh pair of clothes he took from Mister Fox's farm, so he decided to wash the ones he had, as they were ripped and not that good to be worn.

"I will keep them in case I need to make a rope or start a fire."

He stopped for a moment to tend to his wounds to deter the monsters that prowled the woods from paying any unwelcome attention to him. Then he removed his tattered clothes, which were stained with dirt and blood.

He cautiously approached the stream that he had found, the water in the stream glistening and inviting him to wash his wounds away. He was careful as he lowered his hands into the stream's embrace, cupping his hands around the water and allowing it to cleanse him of the accumulated grime and filth.

Erik was very careful when cleaning his wounds, making sure no trace of blood could draw the attention of the monsters. Each cut and scrape received his careful attention as he endeavored to reduce the likelihood of infection and facilitate the wounds' speedy recovery.

With his wounds tended to, Erik turned his attention to his clothes. He took them and dipped them in the moving stream, agitating the fabric with his hands to remove the stains and other telltale signs of his ordeal, and then he wrung them out. The water washed away the dirt and grime left behind by his fights, giving the garments, which had been filthy before, the appearance of being clean.

After giving his wounds and clothes a thorough cleaning, Erik carefully tied them to his backpack while ensuring that the backpack would not become soaked by the wet items. He was well aware that, to avoid being discovered by the beasts that roamed the forest, it was essential to practice proper hygiene and eliminate any trace of a scent that could be associated with blood.

Erik bandaged up his wounds and prepared to continue his journey through the dangerous woods after he had finished cleaning them. After putting on his equipment and gaining a refreshed sense of preparedness and determination, he resumed his trek in an eastern direction.

Chapter 354: Resolve to hunt

That day Erik walked for a bit until it was noon. Walking through the forest wasn't all that difficult, but around noon, he started feeling the need to satisfy his hunger.

Erik tried to hold out, as he had no intention of eating through his rations in a short time, but he was powerless in the face of the hunger that tormented his stomach.

To begin, the rations he got from Mister Fox's farm were not very much, and he was well aware that he needed to locate a more reliable food supply.

While the seeds and plants he carried would provide some nourishment, if grown into trees, they couldn't fulfill his need for protein.

Potatoes were one of the other types of plants or turmeric that he could use. Still, if he learned how to hunt from the start, he wouldn't have to worry about problems in the future if he found himself in the same situation without anything to plant or if he was forced to leave things behind.

Aside from that, he would not be able to survive solely on the few items he had brought with him. Hunting appeared to be the most viable option to get around any difficulty.

<I can kill thaids; the problem is gutting and skinning them. Besides, I'm in no condition to hunt the easily findable thaids, so I must resort to the weaker but most cunning ones.>

After giving it some thought for a while, Erik made his decision. He muttered to himself, "Alright, Erik, time to put your survival skills to the test," while he was deep in thought.

Hunting would require careful planning, a lot of patience, and a good knowledge of the animals that lived in the forest. If he wanted to be successful and continue to live, he had to learn how to survive in this harsh environment.

He reviewed his knowledge of the forest's wildlife. Because of the biological supercomputer and the books he had injected into his brain, he possessed a considerable amount of information.

However, the creatures he was currently in a health condition to fight were agile, elusive, and had much more experience navigating the forest than he did. He was at a significant disadvantage.

He needed to devise a strategy to increase the likelihood of his goal coming to fruition.

"Stealth will be key," Erik mused aloud. He knew that approaching prey without alerting them would be challenging, but he had to try.

"But what to hunt?" the young man thought.

Erik contemplated his options for hunting amidst the dense undergrowth of the forest with an unyielding level of resolve. Despite his wounds and the fact that he was in a weakened state, he searched for prey that would satisfy his hunger without putting him in any unnecessary danger.

As Erik delved deeper into his memories, he thought of potential prey that would be appropriate for him to hunt in his current injured state. It was the Whisperwind Hare, a creature he had learned about and that was known for its dexterity and quick movements.

This thaid was exceptionally skilled at evading capture; with its slick, silver-gray fur and keen, watchful eyes, it was an expert at disguising itself and evading the attention of potential enemies.

The creature was skilled at swiftly navigating the terrain, and its lithe form appeared to glide through the underbrush easily.

The beast was extremely common and could be found just about anywhere in these parts of the forest. However, Erik wasn't just after its meat; he was also after its special brain crystal power.

This was called Elusive Shroud, which was why the Whisperwind Hare was so appealing to kill.

Erik discovered through the books he injected into the thaid's body that this thaid was able to manipulate its fur, subtly altering its colors, shape, length, and characteristics to blend in seamlessly with its surroundings.

This ability was made possible by the brain crystal. The hare was able to create the illusion of being partially invisible by using this type of camouflage in conjunction with its strategic positioning.

It was a remarkable adaptation, enabling the creature to elude predators and become even more challenging to spot and track. If that didn't work, the beast was fast enough to escape most of its usual predators.

However, a significant portion of the creature's ability to survive depended on its covertness, using its natural abilities to navigate the woods and sidestep potential threats successfully.

While Erik had a good understanding of the Whisperwind Hare's ability to avoid detection, he was also aware of its limitations.

The power of the elusive shroud was not without its limitations; one of those was that the creature had to keep still for it to continue to be effective.

Any sudden movement or action would cause the shroud to break, exposing the Whisperwind Hare to its surroundings once more. Nevertheless, that brain crystal was the answer to all of our problems.

<I doubt the effect of the power will stay if I fall asleep, but maybe with Hais's brain crystal power, I should be able to maintain the power active while I sleep. That's it; if the investigator's power works like a sort of secondary brain and can stay up while I sleep, I shouldn't have any problem...>

The concept was sound, but the problem was that Erik hadn't had the chance to take in the power yet. The day after he killed Hais, he was forced to go to the Red Lotus Lounge, and on the same day, he was made to spend the night in a thaid-infested forest. He didn't simply have the time to absorb it.

"Given my current condition, the Whisperwind Hare presents a lesser threat than larger Thaid's," Erik reasoned, reaffirming his decision. "Besides, it is similar to things I already ate. If I can, I would like to avoid cat or dog-like meat... And I certainly don't want to eat bugs," he added.

"The problem is that the hare's elusive nature, small size, and incredible speed would make the search really hard," he muttered. "Luckily, I'm human and know well what tracks to search for..."

The young man contemplated the locations in which he might come across the thaid. He thought about the potential hunting grounds within the forest and the areas where the hare was most likely to be found.

He recalled seeing a clearing a few miles to the north, which is the area where these of thaid's were usually the most active. It seemed like an excellent location to search into.

"Let's not fret," he said to himself. "Hunting requires stillness and an understanding of the target's habits. If I want to catch one, I will need to observe their patterns, learn their routines, and exploit their vulnerabilities. The problem will be finding them. I mostly know what to search for thanks to the biological supercomputer, but knowing and finding are two different things.

I should pay attention to footprints, droppings, and other signs that will guide me toward the beast's quarry."

The more Erik thought about his plan, the more determined he became to carry it out. Not only would he survive, but he would also learn how to hunt.

He would put the resources the forest provided to good use, striking a balance between growing the plants using his birth brain crystal power and searching for food. It was up to him to work and make the most of his abilities to benefit from the forest's resources.

Erik steeled himself for the pursuit with his newfound resolve and a firm grip on his reliable sword. He was well aware that timing and precision would be of the utmost importance in the pursuit of the Whisperwind Hare.

The forest whispered its secrets, its rustling leaves promising the potential of sustenance. He would become one with the forest, an interwoven thread in its tapestry of life. Hunting would become his way of survival, his connection to the primal instincts that had driven humanity for millennia.

"It's time to stop running from the hunt, Erik.

"Time to embrace the hunt, Erik. It's your chance to prove your resilience and adaptability," he declared, his voice resolute.

The forest echoed his determination as he ventured deeper, ready to embrace the challenges ahead and secure the sustenance he needed to thrive in this untamed realm.

The young man moved cautiously, remembering the injuries he had sustained and the necessity to conserve his energy. Since it was still early in the day, he had plenty of time to find something to eat before the evening began to cast its shadow.

The young man continued to make his way through the thick forest, keeping his ears and eyes open for any faint noises or movements that might be nearby. Ancient giant trees stood tall atop the landscape, their trunks extending upward toward the heavens and featuring gnarled bark and verdant foliage.

The trees in the forest formed a colorful tapestry with many different kinds of trees.

The forest's inhabitants consisted of thaids and other small animals that moved stealthily through the underbrush while attempting to avoid being discovered. Tiny creatures resembling insects and equipped with iridescent wings danced in the sun's light. Their delicate bodies shimmered with each step they took.

Erik was aware that these tiny creatures were dangerous to some degree despite not being his target. Because of this, he did not want to muck around with them because he did not want to put himself in a position where he would be unable to handle the situation.

He could take on more powerful thaids, but the insect-like ones, mainly when they were of small size, presented a challenge for him due to their numbers, which got worse when they also increased in size.

If they swarmed around a person and surrounded them, they would be able to kill easily since their numbers would prevent anyone from escaping unharmed.

The young man stopped to take in his surroundings as he made his way toward his destination. Along the way, he came across many different kinds of trees, all of which had their own unique appeal.

Birch trees in the area gently swayed back and forth in response to the wind, their papery bark revealing hidden information to the moving air. In the midst of them, stately willows draped their long, graceful branches over one another, producing a calm environment with their delicate leaves that gave the impression they were crying.

Erik came across a small bird-like thaid with shimmering feathers known as the Lumisparrow while he was in the lush and vibrant forest. It had a delicate frame decked out in a multicolored plumage that created a mesmerizing display when it reflected the sunlight.

It moved gracefully through the air, propelled by its wings' fluttering, giving it nimble agility. The creature's piercing eyes conveyed a sense of innocence and curiosity simultaneously, and its melodious chirping could be heard echoing through the trees.

Even though Erik admired its beauty, he was well aware that his ranged abilities were lacking, which meant he could not obtain its brain crystal power or blood. If he could transform into the beast, getting past the forest would be relatively easy by flying.

He was relieved that none of the thaids he had come across were man-eating monsters, and he found it interesting that some resembled animals rather than traditional monsters.

Erik's perseverance paid off, as he was rewarded with the sight of a small clearing that he found after what appeared to be a difficult journey. A warm glow was cast upon the verdant grasses that carpeted the open space by the sunlight that penetrated the canopy. The air smelled cleaner, like it carried the aroma of blossoming flowers and an earthy note.

Chapter 355: A lucky catch

As Erik stepped into the open expanse of the clearance, he knew he had to become a hunter of subtle signs, an observer of nature's subtle hints, if he wanted to catch this prey. He hid behind a clump of ferns with the utmost caution while his eyes searched the ground for any signs that a Whisperwind Hare had left behind.

His sharp eyes searched the surrounding area in minute detail for any telltale signs that might bring him closer to the object of his pursuit. He carefully examined the ground in search of paws etched in the bare earth. Recognizing them among the natural patterns of the forest floor required a sharp eye and careful attention to the minor details.

Suddenly, Erik's attention shifted to the vegetation around him. He began inspecting the grass and the foliage for any signs of disturbance, then noticed something.

Patches of nibbled grass blades, a subtle clue indicating that some creatures came to feed here. Carefully, he knelt and brushed aside the foliage, inspecting the area for signs of fresh grazing.

"Here, the grass blades are slightly bent and flattened; a thaid stopped to feed here, but I'm not sure it was the Whisperwind Hare."

The young man got to his feet and immediately began looking around for additional hints that might provide him with information regarding the beast's identity.

A little further on, he came across some scattered droppings, which were small pellets that the creature had left behind.

Judging by size and shape, those might have been his target's droppings. The scent lingered in the air and smelled like it had just been released.

Erik could make out some grass blades among the droppings, indicating that these were the remains of a herbivore. Erik examined the droppings, examining their size and texture, to determine what kind of creature had left them there in the first place.

He moved with quiet resolve as he followed a path of matted grass, indicating that a hare had recently traversed the area. As Erik crept forward invisibly, he followed the path of the flattened vegetation with his fingers, lightly brushing the tips of the blades as he was careful not to destroy the delicate pathway.

As he moved forward, he came to the base of a tree and discovered tufts of silver-gray fur clinging to the branches and thorny thickets there.

"Did I find it?" Erik asked himself. "It looks like the Whisperwind Hare's fur to me."

He carefully plucked a strand from the ground and examined its texture and color, unmistakable indications that the creature was present. The hare's fur was lustrous, but being gray when not influenced by the creature's brain crystal power, it was not that good to hide.

Erik stooped so that he could see the ground more clearly. His senses sharpened as he listened intently for any faint rustling that could indicate that the thaid was nearby. He knew that any piece of information, no matter how inconsequential, would bring him one step closer to his target.

Erik's sharp eyes spotted some faint footprints embedded in the soft earth, and he immediately recognized them as similar in size and shape to those left by his target.

"These tracks are fresh," Erik noticed.

The prints the hare left behind on the ground were hardly noticeable after disturbing the ground. They were small, with slender toes that left shallow impressions. The tracks appeared like a series of elongated ovals, which served as a visual representation of the hare's nimble and swift nature.

"Yep, these belong to the Whisperwind Hare," he muttered. "Better start chasing the guy."

With renewed determination, he decided to follow them, stepping into the unknown as he ventured deeper into the clearance.

The young man moved forward, and the scenery before him gradually became more visible. The ground beneath him became a jigsaw puzzle consisting of mossy ground and rocks strewn about.

Amid the sea of grass and wildflowers stood stony sentinels smoothed down by time and the elements. Erik skirted around them with great care.

The clearing stretched out in front of him, and the only obstacles he encountered were flower rocks and a few trees here and there. It was a vast area encircled by clusters of towering trees, and sunlight penetrated the canopy high above.

The golden rays of light dancing among the forest leaves cast a dappled glow on the ground below.

The air had a brisk, clean quality and carried the musty odor of rotting leaves and the faint aroma of blossoming flowers further in the distance.

The awakener continued to follow the hare's footprints, his eyes moving back and forth between the ground and the beautiful scenery surrounding him.

Erik continued to follow the hare's footprints, his gaze alternating between the ground and the surrounding scenery. The footprints led him deeper into the clearance and to the innards of the forest, guiding him through the intricate network of vegetation and hidden pathways. With every step, the forest beckoned him onward.

After approximately 300 meters of walking, the clearance began to revert into a place full of trees. The forest became more enclosed as the trees' branches intertwined and grew closer together. The sunlight was dappled and muted as it passed through the foliage, producing a soft glow on the ground below.

Following the footprints, he went deeper, navigating through tight trails and cross streams with babbling sounds. It was as if the forest had come to life around him, revealing its thriving ecosystem through moss-covered rocks, fallen tree trunks, and clusters of delicate wildflowers that dotted the forest floor.

At that precise moment, Erik's eyes caught sight of movement in the bushes and undergrowth nearby. The Whisperwind Hare, the target of his pursuit, was not too far from where he stood.

It was precisely the same as what he had observed in the photographs. It was moving around to eat the grass that was around it at that very moment, so it was not concealing itself at that time. When its power was deactivated, the beast's fur turned a silvery gray, making it relatively easy to spot.

He did not move an inch while his eyes were riveted on the hare's actions for a few seconds. It twitched its ears, alert to its surroundings, and then hopped a short distance before nipping at a patch of still young and tender grass.

Erik stealthily approached the thaid, paying careful attention to his every step as he approached. His movements were as fluid as a shadow, and his senses were attuned to the rhythm of the forest. Each step was like a carefully choreographed dance, with careful attention to avoid stepping on twigs and fallen leaves that could give his location away.

Erik concealed himself as he got closer by crouching behind ferns and using the vegetation as a shield. He could sneak up on the beast from this vantage point and observe it more intently without being discovered. However, to avoid the beast running, the young man stifled his breathing and watched as the thaid hopped several more times to consume something else.

The hare's senses were finely tuned to detect even the most minute change, and it never once lost its alertness.

Erik inched forward, careful to maintain his concealment, but started channeling mana through his neural links. The best thing to do would be to paralyze the creature with Logan's power since he didn't know how fast it was. He didn't want to risk for the beast to run away.

As Erik had amassed sufficient mana, he prepared himself to fire the dart by tensing his muscles and getting into a throwing position.

Erik's hand moved with practiced agility as he threw his dart toward the Whisperwind Hare. The mana-infused weapon appeared to be guided through the air by an unseen power as it went through the atmosphere until it made a direct and devastating strike on its intended target.

The hare froze, and the creature began to convulse as the poisoned mana made its way through its body. This resulted from the paralyzing and poisonous effects of the mana he had just manipulated.

Erik did not pause for a moment before racing towards the creature that was frozen in place. As he got closer, he removed the sheath from his Flyssa; the blade shone brightly in the sunlight as it prepared to deal the killing blow.

Erik raised the weapon above his head with a steady hand. It appeared as though the forest was clenching its teeth in preparation. When he brought the sword down with a swift and powerful strike, time seemed to stand still. This ensured that the hare would have a quick and merciful death.

The blade hit its target, slicing through the air with pinpoint accuracy and delivering a fatal blow. The thaid finally gave up its struggle, and with a gentle exhalation, its life force left its body. When Erik saw the culmination of the hunt, his breath caught in his throat, it was a bittersweet moment that carried the weight of the life cycle.

[WHISPERWIND HARE KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING CONVERTING PROCEDURE.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. 100 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

"I was lucky today..." Erik muttered to himself. Since the beast was eating and wasn't trying to hide, the awakener had a relatively easy time finding it and bringing it to its attention, but that wouldn't continue forever.

Erik kneeled next to the dead creature as the forest returned to its usual level of silence. He placed a gentle hand on the creature's lifeless body.

"Now, the hardest part..."

The young man needed to remove the creature's skin, collect its meat, and remove its organs and bones, but he had no idea how to do any of those things without ruining the skin. Moreover, he couldn't even risk getting blood on himself because he knew that would attract the attention of other thaid.

Erik started skinning the Whisperwind Hare by being extremely careful with his hands. He knew keeping the hide in good condition would be necessary for various uses, including crafting and insulation. However, his fatigue and injuries made it difficult to maintain his precision and dexterity.

The blade of his knife moved smoothly along the creature's body, cutting the fur away from the underlying tissue as it went. Despite his hard work, the cuts were not as clean as he had hoped.

His limbs felt the weight of the exhaustion, which caused his movements to be less graceful and accurate than they usually were.

Frustration tugged at Erik's emotions as he struggled to maintain his focus. He had grown accustomed to his high standards, and realizing that his work fell short of his usual level was disheartening.

"I really need to learn how to do this properly..." He knew that a poorly skinned hide would affect its usability and value.

Erik persisted even though his work was not that great. He centered himself by taking some deep breaths, reminding himself that the work could still have value regardless of its flaws. With renewed determination, he continued the task, adjusting his technique as best he could, given his current condition.

After Erik had finished the process in its entirety, he examined his work from an objective perspective. The fur had a few uneven patches, and the edges weren't as smooth as he would have liked. It was far from his best work, but it would still serve its purpose, albeit with some compromise in quality.

Erik acknowledged his limitations and accepted that this was a reflection of the challenges he had faced. He reminded himself that survival often meant making do with what one had and adapting to the circumstances.

Nevertheless, the most exciting part was still to come. After gathering the blood and brain crystal, Erik proceeded to swallow both.

[HOSTILE CREATURE'S DNA ACQUIRED. STARTING THE ANALYSIS.]

[ANALYSIS COMPLETE.]

[FIFTY DNA POINTS ARE REQUIRED TO EXTRACT THE DNA.]

[7010 DNA POINTS DETECTED. COMMENCING EXTRACTION?.]

Erik replied negatively to the system's question.

[HOSTILE CREATURE'S BRAIN CRYSTAL ACQUIRED. STARTING THE ANALYSIS.]

[ANALYSIS COMPLETE.]

[FIFTY DNA POINTS ARE REQUIRED TO EXTRACT THE POWER.]

[7010 DNA POINTS DETECTED. EXTRACTION IS NOT ADVISED; THE HOST HAS INCOMPATIBLE DNA.]

[EXTRACTION ABORTED]

[WHISPERWIND HARE'S DNA HAS BEEN FOUND COMPATIBLE WITH THE BRAIN CRYSTAL POWER "ANIMAL SHAPE SHIFTING" TO STRENGTHEN THE POWER, THE HOST IS REQUIRED TO DRINK AT LEAST 20 CC OF BLOOD.]

"Wow, that's a notification I haven't seen in quite some time," the user exclaimed. Since Erik could not hunt thaid in the forest, he could not collect any environmental samples. The young man did not squander any time and immediately drank the beast's blood.

Then, he heard the chime of another alert within his ears.

[BLOOD ABSORBED. DNA STORING PROCEDURE STARTED. PLEASE WAIT.]

[PROCEDURE COMPLETE.]

Erik gathered the imperfectly skinned hide with a sigh of exhaustion. He knew that to continue his mission, he would first need to attend to his wounds and get some rest.

And so, with the Whisperwind Hare's fur in his possession, Erik trekked onward, carrying the weight of his experiences and the reminder that even in his moments of weakness, there was still room for growth and improvement.

Chapter 356: More bugs...?

Erik went through the dense undergrowth of the forest as the sun began to set, his body and mind aching for a break from the exertion.

The day's events had left him exhausted, and the prospect of spending yet another restless night perched on a tree seemed intolerable to him at this point. He yearned for a quiet area where he could rest without getting disturbed by anything.

His eager eyes combed the area around him, looking for any indication that he could seek safety there. And then, off in the distance, he saw a cave concealed within a jumble of rocks.

As he got closer to it, he started to feel a glimmer of hope, and the thought of reaching a peaceful, safe place drove him to take each step.

As Erik got closer to the cave, he got a better look at it from a distance and evaluated its viability as a place to sleep.

The entrance appeared inviting, wide enough for him to slip through. The rocks surrounding it formed a natural barrier, offering protection against any lurking dangers. It seemed like the perfect haven to spend the night.

Erik approached the cave with extreme caution, his senses heightened, and tuned in to any potential dangers that might be hiding inside.

"There will probably be thais inside. I mean, it's possible." Erik said to himself. He observed the cave more. "C'mon, Erik, you have faced worse dangers before and come out alive."

He examined the cave's exterior and remarked on how beautiful the rocky facade was despite its rugged appearance. The entrance to the cave gaped open, urging him to venture deeper inside in search of some peace.

He stopped momentarily to survey the surroundings and ensure there were no monsters' signs nearby. The waning light cast eerie shadows around the cave's entrance, which contributed to the sense of mystique and anticipation the young man felt.

A light breeze caused the leaves to rustle as if they were revealing hidden information about the cave's recesses. Erik was tempted to seek refuge within the comforting embrace of the surrounding vegetation, which gave off the impression of leaning inward as if to guard the entrance.

His worn brain mulled over the options, assessing the likelihood of adverse outcomes compared to favorable outcomes.

"The risk of finding thaid's remains. I must assess the situation carefully if I want to enter. What are the chances of encountering something I can't possibly fight against? Can I fortify the cave entrance to secure my safety?"

His thoughts were jumbled, caught in a delicate dance between hope and hesitancy. He had to look for a solution to sleep because the memory of the nights he had spent perched on tree branches was torturing him.

A safe haven from the dangers of the surrounding forest, the cave offered him the opportunity to give his worn-out body a chance to relax and seek comfort in the shadows. Despite this, he did not rush forward.

His thoughts kept going back to the unknown perils that could be found inside the cave. Who knows what kinds of monsters might have made their home there? Would this place really provide the much-needed protection that he was looking for? His instincts and exhaustion urged him to proceed with caution, but his exhaustion won out.

"Shit, I can't stand another night on trees. One was enough already. I need a solid night's rest. The cave presents an opportunity for that—a chance to recharge energies."

During the process of making his choice, Erik's eyes, which were red from lack of sleep, and the hour of trekking into the forest, flashed with resolve.

Erik fortified himself by taking a deep breath and resolving, in his head, to approach the cave with extreme circumspection. He would examine the interior, strengthen the structure's entrance if the

place was a viable option, and fashion a private nook for himself to sleep in without being disturbed.

Before going inside, Erik searched outside and gathered several dead branches and twigs, then painstakingly fashioned them into a makeshift torch. After accomplishing his goal, he reached into his bag and pulled out a lighter. As he set fire to the leaves, sparks danced in the darkness as he coaxed the flames to come to life and set the branches ablaze.

He also took some additional twigs so that he could use his power to grow more of them inside the cave, thereby creating an endless supply of light there.

Erik entered the cavern with extreme caution, holding his torch aloft to illuminate the walls around him. The flickering light illuminated the rugged terrain, illuminating the stalactites and stalagmites rising from the floor of the cavern like ancient sentinels.

Inside the cave, the air was cool and damp, with a hint of an earthy scent. His eyes gradually adjusted to the dim lighting as he gazed across the cavern. An otherworldly atmosphere was created as the shadows moved and played along the room's walls.

With each step, he examined the cave floor's strength to determine whether it could support his body weight. The walls stood firm, and their uneven surfaces offered assurance of protection from the elements. The light from his torch, which was flickering, painted intricate patterns on the rocky formations, which revealed the passage of time etched into the surfaces of the rocks.

As the awakener moved further into the cavern, the sound of his footsteps reverberated softly throughout the space, and the shadows cast by his source of light danced along the uneven walls. He found himself climbing at some point; as the cave began to increase its slope.

He kept his senses on high alert, looking out for any signs of movement or potential dangers that might be hiding.

As he ascended, the darkness seemed to become denser, and the walls began to close in on him and enclose him. The flickering light from his torch illuminated only a small portion of the pathway, leaving a significant portion of the uncharted territory hidden in the darkness.

Erik made this observation as he looked around him into the shadowy void surrounding him and remarked, "This darkness is something else." He had the unsettling impression that the pitch darkness had come to possess its own life and was cloaking the cavern in a sinister cloak.

His perceptions sharpened, and he attempted to navigate the unknown using only the most inaudible sounds and the dim glow of his torch.

Erik continued his ascent with each cautious step, his determination fueling his movements and pushing him forward. A jolt of apprehension coursed through his veins at the mere notion that Thaid's he couldn't kill, might be hiding in the cave's recesses. He could not take the chance that the monsters would ambush him while he was sleeping.

The ascent became more difficult, and the landscape became more hazardous. Even though the effort was taxing on his muscles, Erik continued to move forward.

After what seemed like an eternity, Erik arrived at a plateau inside the cave with a sizable ceiling opening that allowed the setting sun to let light enter the structure's interior. He took a moment to stop, catch his breath, and take in his surroundings before continuing.

The tight corridor he was currently in eventually opened into a room at least a hundred meters in diameter. The floor of the room was covered with rocks, but those were not the only things to be found there.

When Erik entered the location, he confirmed his previous thoughts. This place was occupied by thaid's, which he discovered almost immediately. The location was infested with Xeridon Anteris, thaid's resembling ants.

Erik was disgusted by the creatures' sizes when he saw them inside the cave. These insectoid monsters, which resembled ants and numbered at least 500 in total, were as big as small dogs and stood firmly on six legs.

Their exoskeletons, which resembled a mixture of vibrant orange and deep brown hues, shimmered under the meager light coming from the hole in the ceiling, giving them a striking and menacing appearance.

The Xeridon Anteris had both compact and muscular bodies, giving off an air of power and agility. Their thoraxes were covered in fur, drawing attention to the fact that they were distinct individuals within the swarm.

Erik observed that their mandibles were vicious and menacing and that they were able to deliver a powerful bite. The perpetual movement and twitching of the creatures' antennae was a clear indication of their heightened sensory perception and alertness.

The Xeridon Anteris had enormous compound eyes, each of whose facets reflected light with an iridescent sheen. They had excellent vision thanks to these multifaceted eyes, which allowed them to navigate the dark recesses of the cave easily. Erik was able to follow their quick movements as they scurried around, which were perfectly coordinated and served a specific purpose.

There was an entrance to their nest behind the creatures. In essence, Erik entered the building without having a clear understanding of what exactly this location housed.

The nest was an intricate network of interconnecting passageways that had been painstakingly constructed with a mixture of dirt, pebbles, and organic material. The walls were even and tightly packed, a feature that directly resulted from the ants' skill as architects.

The different roles and functions of the colony required tunnels of varying sizes. Some of the passageways were wide, making it simple for the larger soldier ants to move through them, while others were more constrained, catering to the more agile and quick-footed individuals.

To get through some of the passages, Erik would have to get on his hands and knees and wriggle, and he found himself in awe of the ants' ability to move around so easily despite the restricted space.

The pheromones given off by the ants filled the air inside the nest with a distinct, earthy odor, and the environment was muggy.

Erik was able to feel the frantic activity going on all around him, including the constant movement and vibrations brought about by the ants going about their work. The air was filled with the subtle sounds of mandibles clicking, antennae brushing against the tunnel walls, and the occasional sounds of worker ants working with one another.

Erik's eyes strayed from afar and landed on a revolting scene that was taking place within the Xeridon Anteris nest.

The location where the larvae were kept for observation; in this particular instance, the nest was similar to the one that bees used, as it contained what appeared to be some kinds of pods that were

attached to the ceiling and served as nurseries for the wriggling offspring. It was a lively and active center of activity.

As they went about their maturation process, the creatures wriggled and writhed, their bodies contorted in various ways. It was an enthralling demonstration of the complex workings of nature—the circle of life being played out in front of his very eyes.

The Thaidis were responsible for the careful upkeep of the pods themselves, which had walls lined with a gelatinous substance that acted as both a shield and a source of nutrition for the developing larvae.

Erik was able to observe this because the larvae had not completely filled all of the pods. In another location, ants were seen caring for them by carefully positioning them where they belonged and ensuring they were healthy.

Chapter 357: Somehow I did expect this outcome...

Erik could not help but be impressed by the Xeridon Anteris's level of organization and productivity as he watched them from a safe distance.

The ants' movements were deliberate and well-coordinated, and their behavior appeared synchronized in response to an unseen command. While some ants hustled along delineated paths, transporting food and other resources in their mandibles, others worked diligently to maintain the nest's structure.

He watched as a colony of ants collaborated to build a complex labyrinth of tunnels and chambers in the ground. They carefully dug the dirt out of the ground and moved it into neat little piles as they removed it.

They worked together with great accuracy to carve out passageways, which they then fortified with a mixture of soil and saliva, ultimately producing a labyrinthine system beneath the surface.

In the surroundings, he found a group of worker ants attending to the colony's needs. Some of them cleaned the walls of the nest, carefully removing any debris and ensuring that everything was clean and sanitary. Others took care of the larvae, tending to their needs by meticulously feeding them and grooming their little bodies.

Erik watched as a line of ants formed, passing food from one to the next in an accurate and effective method. He also saw how easily the ants dragged their captured prey, which included larger insects and small rodents, through a secondary tunnel access.

The ants carried out their mission in concert, guiding the prey they were pursuing with resolute accuracy until it was lost in the nest's tunnels. It was a well-choreographed dance of cooperation and collaboration, and each ant played its part with undivided commitment.

Erik also noticed the occasional encounter between two ants, where they engaged in a brief bout of antennal contact. This occurred amidst all of their bustling activity. It appeared these interactions were conveying important information, possibly instructions or messages about the condition of the nest or the availability of resources.

"I've never seen Thaidas as smart as these; I wonder what their intelligence level is," Erik muttered. "Let's check this out." Erik looked at one of the thaidas and said, "Analysis."

After that, the window that Erik was accustomed to seeing appeared in front of him.

-Name: Xeridon Anteris

-Brain Crystal Power: Enhanced Strength

-Physical Characteristics: The Xeridon Anteris are formidable thaid creatures resembling giant ants. They are the size of small dogs and stand on their powerful six legs, each equipped with sharp, hooked claws for gripping and tearing.

Their exoskeletons are a blend of vibrant orange and deep brown hues, providing natural camouflage in some parts of the forest and helping them find each other inside caves. Sharp mandibles protrude from their heads, capable of delivering a crushing bite to their prey or enemies. They have multifaceted compound eyes, giving them excellent vision and heightened awareness of their surroundings.

-Ecology: Xeridon Anteris resides primarily in large underground colonies, constructing intricate tunnel networks within the forest. These colonies are organized under a hierarchical system, with a queen at the helm. They are highly efficient hunters, preying on smaller creatures and foraging for plant matter to sustain their colonies.

They have a well-developed communication system through pheromones, allowing them to coordinate their movements and actions effectively.

-Power Level: 58.

-Approximate Strength: 35.

-Approximate Intelligence: 4.

-Approximate Dexterity: 15.

-Approximate Energy: 80.

"4 intelligence points? It is almost as smart as a human!" Erik said in disbelief. "Assuming all the critters have this range of stats, it shouldn't be difficult to hunt them down," he said while looking at the creatures.

"The problem is that I can see at least 500 ants here, but I bet there are many more in the adjacent rooms and tunnels," he reasoned, scanning the entrance tunnels adjacent to the main chamber and watching ants flow in and out with purposeful intent.

<The best thing would be to get out of here; it is not worth killing them all just to sleep a single night,> he thought.

As Erik turned to flee, he found himself staring into the eyes of one of the Xeridon Anteris's compound eyes; he got found out. This caused his heart to sink. At that very moment, the ant let out a cloud of pheromones, which served as a signal of distress and were sure to get the attention of its fellow brothers and sisters.

When Erik realized the immediate threat he was facing, panic began to course through his veins.

Erik quickly drew his weapon, the Flyssa, and brought it down with a precise strike, thereby severing the ant's body from its head. He did this without wasting a single second.

[XERIDON ANTERIS KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING CONVERTING PROCEDURE.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. 5 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

"They only give this much?" The young man said it out loud. "Then there is no way I will stay here to fight them. But I will take the head; a brain crystal power that increases strength will surely be useful."

After saying that, Erik reached over and grabbed the dismembered creature's head, placed it in his backpack, and started running away. The other thaids were able to get closer to him due to the time he wasted picking up that item.

The pheromones the dead thaid released were now permeating the cave, which caused the thaids in the area to react in a frenzy.

The Xeridon Anteris came pouring out of every crack and crevice as if they had emerged from the depths of the earth itself, and their number increased exponentially with each passing second. As they approached Erik, their mandibles clicked together in a menacing chorus. They were motivated by an instinctual need to protect their colony, which drove them forward.

"Fuck! They are already here!"

Erik severed the head of a charging Xeridon Anteris with a swift swing of his sword, cleaving through the creature's exoskeleton and separating the head from the body again. The lifeless form of the creature crashed to the ground below.

Erik quickly concluded that trying to defend his position would be fruitless, so he retreated and began to run as fast as he could in an effort to get away from the ant horde that was attacking him. As the monstrous ants continued their relentless pursuit, his thoughts raced as he attempted to determine the most suitable way to get to safety.

Erik pushed himself beyond the boundaries of his endurance by using his muscles to move and his breath as a source of power. But the ants were relentless in their pursuit, and they swarmed with an unwavering determination to catch the young man regardless of how far he ran.

Their shapes moved across every available surface, creeping ever closer to him despite their distance. Once more, a thaid stood in his way, so Erik quickly swung his blade again and cut cleanly through the chitinous exoskeleton of the beast.

The creature didn't scream, but it was clear from the twitching movements that it was suffering before it collapsed to the ground in a lifeless state. Erik rapidly walked past the lifeless body while holding a makeshift torch in one hand and his sword in the other.

He quickly ran through his available courses of action. He needed to devise a strategy that would allow him to outwit his pursuers and throw them off his trail, if possible.

His gaze traveled over the landscape, scouring it for any advantage that could give him the upper hand in the conflict. Then, all of a sudden, he spotted it: a slight crack in the rocky terrain that was barely big enough for him to pass through.

Erik veered towards the crevice without hesitation, even though his body was aching from exhaustion and the weight of his previous wounds. He dove in headfirst, and as he made his way through the narrow opening, he felt the jagged edges of the passage scrape against his skin.

Because of their smaller size, the Xeridon Anteris were able to squeeze through the narrow opening with greater ease than Erik, which allowed them to gain ground in their pursuit.

After traveling another fifty meters, Erik arrived at the steep slope he had previously scaled. However, this time he descended with reckless abandon, hoping to create space between himself and the tenacious creatures.

Two Xeridon Anteris lunged at Erik with jaws wide open; he deftly sidestepped their attacks. With a swift swing of his blade, he dispatched them both, their lifeless bodies tumbling to the ground, and a notification rang inside Erik's ears.

After that, Erik found himself standing in front of a narrow crack. Getting around it would not be difficult for him, but it would be more challenging for the ants. The young man made a tremendous leap and went further than the five or six-meter mark.

Erik felt a sense of relief as he landed on the other side and watched as the ants huddled together in front of the crack, attempting to figure out how to get around that obstacle. For the time being, he had been successful in evading their capture, thereby buying himself a priceless pause in the action.

Erik wiped the sweat off his forehead and started running back toward the entrance while maintaining a focused look at the situation.

The Xeridon Anteris quickly formed a living bridge connecting their bodies across the crevice. This enabled them to continue their relentless pursuit unimpeded.

The vast majority of the ants, however, began to run along the ceiling, and they effortlessly navigated around the obstacle.

"Of course..."

Upon becoming aware of the gravity of the situation, Erik picked up the pace of his run, his footsteps reverberating throughout the cavern as he pushed himself to go even more quickly.

The young man maintained his composure and calmness despite the tense nature of the pursuit, and his thoughts were solely concentrated on the objective of surviving.

He needed to stay one step ahead of the creatures' probing mandibles. He knew he could not afford to make any mistakes or display any signs of weakness.

To escape from the cave, Erik exerted every ounce of his strength and willpower, taking his body to its absolute limit in the process.

He could make out the rustling sound made by their many legs as they moved closer and closer. He channeled an untapped source of vitality, enabling him to launch forward at a breakneck pace.

Chapter 358: Ant-pocalypse Now

As Erik got closer to the cave entrance, he felt a surge of adrenaline, and his heart started pounding in his chest.

Every single second that passed, he could make out the thumping footsteps of the pursuing Xeridon Anteris that were following him. As he raced toward the setting sun's light, his mind was intent on evading capture while determination powered his legs.

As he continued to move forward, his blade cut through the air with lethal accuracy, eliminating three additional Xeridon Anteris with the audacity to challenge him.

The swift and accurate movements of his sword left no room for hesitation or mercy, ensuring that the beasts met their demise in a decisive and immediate manner.

Their lifeless bodies fell to the ground, serving as a testament to Erik's superiority over the insectoid creatures. However, killing three was something, thousands another one. Though, the ant-like creatures pursued Erik without stopping.

Then he arrived at the cave's exit, and he broke through the entrance. Immediately, Erik experienced a wave of relief, and he took a moment to bask in the freedom of the open air.

As Erik emerged from the problematic cave, he could sense the warm embrace of dusk as it was settling over the landscape; the sun was much lower than when he entered the cave. An ethereal glow was cast over the surrounding landscape as the waning light painted the sky in various shades of orange and purple.

However, his reprieve did not last long, a couple of seconds at best, since, as he glanced over his shoulder, he saw the swarm of Xeridon Anteris chasing after him outside their nest cave. Their resolve was unyielding, and their numbers appeared to have no end in sight.

The problem was that if he fought against these thaid, he would only waste energy, which he couldn't afford to do in his current situation. Now that he was outside, he knew escaping was possible. As he ran, Erik quickly analyzed his surrounding environment to locate any potential advantages that he could exploit.

After spotting a large downed tree up ahead, he made a split-second decision and veered toward it, hoping to create a barrier between himself and the group of monsters pursuing him.

The awakener displayed a remarkable amount of dexterity as he jumped over fallen branches and sidestepped obstacles that were in his way. However, the Xeridon Anteris were unrelenting, their chittering mandibles drawing closer to their target with each passing moment.

When Erik arrived at the downed tree, he made a lightning-fast leap over it and continued running. The tree was not very effective in preventing them from moving forward, much to Erik's dismay, but at least it slowed them down.

The ant could only be stopped for a fraction of a second, but its followers could get around the log by using their fellow brothers and sisters as stepping stones.

"Oh, c'mon!"

Even after a kilometer from the cave, the bugs were still on Erik's tail. However, the young man noticed the path he was walking along was littered with large boulders.

With a burst of strength in his legs, he walked toward the massive rocks, hoping to create obstacles that would impede the ants' progress. However, much to his astonishment, the creatures navigated their way around the obstacles with astonishing dexterity, their determination remaining unshaken.

"I should have expected that..." Erik muttered.

Unfazed, the awakener continued to survey his environment, searching for additional obstacles to thwart their progress.

He saw more fallen trees and dense vegetation that could be manipulated to create barricades, and as he made his way around them, he used his birth power to make them grow as much as they could possibly grow.

Trees sprouted and stretched their branches, reaching for the darkening sky. The bushes and shrubs became denser, forming intricate mazes that turned and twisted with each step. The forest floor was covered in vines, which formed natural barriers as they wound their way across the forest floor.

Because of Erik's influence, the forest was transformed into an otherworldly maze. The canopy above became denser, and the ground beneath his feet gave off the appearance of rippling and shifting. It was almost as if Erik's presence caused the forest to come alive and adjust to accommodate him as if it were an extension of his appendages.

The dense, towering vegetation served as both a cover and an obstacle for him, allowing the young man to remain hidden from his pursuers while also making it more difficult to navigate.

The ants, though, were not deterred and continued to advance relentlessly. However, as a direct result of Erik's intervention, their numbers began to decrease.

The awakener concluded that attempting to slow them down any further would be fruitless, so he decided to teach the monsters a lesson instead. Even though he didn't want to, he went ahead and did it because he reasoned that if they didn't realize he was more powerful than them and that he was above their level, they wouldn't give up trying to catch him.

However, he did that also because their numbers severely decreased after the long chase.

Erik turned around and unsheathed his Flyssa, his other hand now metalized, in case some of the critters managed to chomp on him. With his mana swirling through his body, he observed the remaining creatures; from the thousands that were initially following him, only a hundred remained. That was viable.

The Xeridon Anteris, relentless in their pursuit, closed in on Erik, their mandibles clicking with anticipation. They charged at him in waves, their sheer numbers an intimidating sight. But Erik was prepared. His sword gleamed in the dwindling light as he deftly blocked their attacks, his movements a dance of precision and strength.

Erik pushed forward with unyielding resolve, his blade slicing through the ranks of the Xeridon Anteris that were still alive. Five more ravenous creatures succumbed to his lethal assault, their chitinous forms being no match for his unyielding determination to win the battle.

Each blow was well-placed and directed at weak points on their armored bodies, ensuring they would die quickly.

One by one, the Xeridon Anteris attacked, lunging at the young man with their razor-sharp mandibles in search of his flesh. However, he responded to each attack with a lightning-fast counterattack, expertly using his blade to cut through exoskeletons and chitin with lethal precision.

The sounds of metal on metal, chittering cries, and the occasional thud as another ant fell to the forest floor filled the air as the monsters continued to fight. The ground quickly transformed into a macabre scene consisting of strewn limbs and lifeless husks.

Erik's blows were instantaneous and decisive, and his movements were fluid and well thought out. He anticipated every move they would make and took advantage of any weaknesses in their defenses.

Every time he brought his sword down, another Xeridon Anteris met its end. As Erik's resolve and prowess began to turn the tide in his favor, the surrounding forest seemed to reverberate with the chaos of the conflict.

"Just give up, you stupid bugs!"

However, the Thaidis were not easily dissuaded from their mission. It seemed like there were an infinite number of them, and as soon as Erik eliminated one wave, another one appeared from the depths of the forest.

Erik transformed into a whirlwind of steel and rage, slaughtering every living creature he encountered. As a result of his assault, the ground beneath his feet was covered with an increasing number of severed ant limbs and an increasing number of dismembered ants.

Five thaidis launched a coordinated attack, and Erik's instincts kicked in. He swiftly sidestepped the first creature's lunging strike, its mandibles snapping mere centimeters from his face. In a fluid motion, he spun around, avoiding the second attacker's mandibles.

He spun around in a smooth motion, which allowed him to avoid the second assailant's attack.

Reacting with lightning speed, Erik parried the third creature's desperate pounce, his sword deflecting its frenzied attack with a resounding clash. Seizing the opportunity, he delivered a precise counterstrike, plunging his blade deep into its thorax.

A fourth Xeridon Anteris made a move in an attempt to flank Erik quickly, but he was ready for it. He sidestepped and then delivered a perfectly timed kick that sent the creature sprawling to the ground, its head shattered due to the brute force Erik applied.

As the awakener battled the lone remaining member of the group of thaid, his concentration grew stronger.

He had anticipated its charge and had ducked low in preparation for the creature's lunge overhead. He took advantage of the opening and performed a graceful somersault, which allowed him to avoid the attack by a hair's breadth.

As he was landing, he turned around and delivered a devastating blow, which was enough to end the creature's existence with a single blow.

[XERIDON Anteris KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING CONVERTING PROCEDURE.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. 250 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

Then, just as quickly as it had started, the forest returned to its previous state of silence.

The trembling of their antennae revealed that the remaining Xeridon Anteris were unsure of what to do. They had seen Erik deal death and destruction to their family members, and their hearts were filled with terror due to what they had seen.

Erik made the most of the opportunity and moved forward quickly in an effort to terrify the monsters even more. Still, they concluded that the young man was much more powerful than they were, and given that they were now two kilometers away from the nest, there was no point in continuing to fight the strange creature.

If they suffered more casualties, the colony would have a problem on its hands as a result.

The few surviving Xeridon Anteris dispersed, retreated into the darkness of the surrounding forest, and vanished before making their way back to their nests.

Their pursuit had ended, and the ferocity with which Erik had defended himself prevented them from enacting revenge. Erik stood amidst the defeated Xeridon Anteris, his chest heaving from the strain. The young man took several deep breaths.

"I killed over 50 critters, yet I only got less than 300 experience points. I knew killing these fuckers was just a waste of time."

While Erik was taking a moment to catch his breath, he reached into his backpack and pulled out the severed head of one of the Xeridon Anteris that had been defeated.

The brain crystal power of the creature was in the head, where it was waiting to be swallowed. A sense of satisfaction washed over him as he realized the significance of his accomplishment.

Because of the power contained within this brain crystal, he would undoubtedly see an improvement in his capabilities, giving him an advantage in upcoming fights.

He did so with a determined smile, knowing that the precious treasure would serve as a constant reminder of his victory over the formidable Xeridon Anteris. He stowed the crystal away with great care, knowing it would do so.

Chapter 359: Whispers in the woods

"Phew, that was one unnecessary battle," Erik muttered, wiping the sweat off his brow. "Those Xeridon Anteris were certainly nasty. I hope never to find them again..."

Erik stood motionless amid the bloody mayhem, which consisted of the lifeless bodies of the Xeridon Anteris strewn across the forest's ground. The scene served as a jarring instance of how dangerous the forest could be.

"Thank the gods. I managed to thin them a bit during the chase," he continued, his voice filled with relief. "Imagine if there were more of them or if they were stronger. It would have been a real bother."

The defeated ants were now motionless and cut down; their armored exoskeletons shone brightly in the diminishing light.

Erik's eyes moved quickly from one lifeless form to another, each of which stood for a life that had been lost in the struggle for survival. However, he could not allow himself to become complacent or take these victories for granted because he could not afford to do so.

He paused for a moment, reflecting on his success. "I guess I should count myself very lucky. Not every encounter will be as manageable as this one."

At that very moment, Erik experienced a profound sense of appreciation for the training he had received in the past. Standing among the dead, he realized that the conflicts he had engaged in and the obstacles he had overcome had transformed him into a more powerful and capable fighter.

Following the conflict with the Xeridon Anteris, Erik was aware that it was essential for him to put some distance between himself and the location of the bloodbath. The lingering odor of blood and death would undoubtedly attract the attention of other predators, which would put his safety in serious jeopardy.

He moved swiftly through the forest, exercising a balance of caution and urgency as he did so, leaving the dead bodies of the creatures he had encountered behind him.

After what seemed like an eternity of walking, Erik eventually made it to his destination, which was approximately 5 kilometers away.

He moved with purpose and caution, each stride taking him further away from the scene of the gruesome encounter. His footsteps were purposeful and deliberate. He maintained a keen awareness of his surroundings and remained on the lookout for any indications pointing to a potential risk.

The forest was a tapestry of tall, ancient trees that stood like silent sentinels, their branches reaching toward the sky. There were many of these trees all around him. The night was falling, bringing with it more dangers, and the forest floor was now only dimly lit.

As he progressed, though, Erik noticed the air was tinged with the earthy scent of decaying leaves and the subtle fragrance of blooming wildflowers. That was weird.

"Strange," Erik mused as he surveyed the sparse forest around him. "The number of thaids is unnaturally low... Could it be related to the Heniate's attack on New Alexandria?" he wondered

aloud, his voice tinged with curiosity. "The chaos caused by the invasion has probably disrupted the ecosystem's natural balance even at these distances."

Save for those creatures who usually hid inside nests or that could conceal themselves or even fly, the other thaids were almost non-existent. However, he shrugged this thought off, and his thoughts went back and forth through the events of the fight as he walked.

The intelligence and strategic prowess displayed by the Xeridon Anteris left him in awe, and he couldn't help but marvel at it. The fact that they could coordinate their attacks, albeit in a basic way, shocked the young man.

"Those Xeridon Anteris were surprising foes," he thought, his gaze fixed on the setting sun. "Their coordinated attacks and the way they anticipated my movements were as if they possessed collective intelligence. I knew the reports said they were intelligent, but I couldn't imagine to what point."

Erik recalled how the Xeridon Anteris had launched simultaneous attacks against him from various angles to flank him at one point in the battle. They responded to his every action with uncanny precision, giving the impression that they communicated easily during the battle. Was this the advantage of doing so through pheromones?

Erik couldn't help but acknowledge the lessons learned from this encounter. Being alone sucked.

"If I had Jacob's power, I guess they would have the same powers I possess. Well, this is what I've noticed, at least, but I can't be so sure since I didn't ask him. If this is true, I would probably be unstoppable during a fight, or better, I could simply send them to fight while I comfortably stay behind."

After what seemed like a long and arduous journey, Erik finally found a reasonably safe location to spend the night. It was a clearing nestled between towering trees that offered a sense of safety and solitude to those who found themselves there. With a practiced eye, he assessed the area for potential threats, ensuring there were no signs of lurking predators or hidden dangers.

Erik, whose body was exhausted from the long day of hiking, finally made himself comfortable in the refuge he had selected. He stopped for a moment to gather his composure, his pulse gradually returning to a more regular rhythm as he did so.

He was overcome with a profound sense of accomplishment as he leaned against a moss-covered tree and gave himself permission to take a brief break in the comforting embrace of the forest.

Erik's weariness, at last, overtook him as the night fell upon the land and darkness descended upon it. He chose one of the trees and climbed it. He then made the branches grow as much as possible so that he would have the most available surface area on which to sleep.

Finally, he made the tree's foliage grow so that nothing would see him while he was sleeping, or better, attempting to sleep on the tree.

After everything was finished, he lay on his makeshift bed and closed his eyes, his thoughts still racing from the recent event. He gave himself to the embrace of sleep, but he was careful not to fall into a deep sleep since that could be risky.

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Over the past week, Erik had been traversing the thick forest to advance his journey toward Etrium, which lay to the east. Along the way, he came across a variety of thaids and engaged in skirmishes with some of them, which put his fighting abilities to the test.

Though these encounters were not particularly noteworthy, as these were thaids, Erik frequently encountered them outside New Alexandria—mainly Leylarhads and Lomalins.

On the other hand, Erik was confronted with a different kind of trouble over the last three days. In this particular part of the forest, there were hardly any thaids to be found.

Erik could grow plants easily to sustain himself with the fruits of the trees; he could grow using his birth brain crystal power. The problem was that the lack of sufficient protein began to take its toll on his body.

He tried to comprehend why that section of the forest was so devoid of wildlife, but the answer came to him when he recalled the assault on the city. That there aren't any thaids in this area is probably because the Heniate parasitized them all, which explains why there aren't any.

On the other hand, it was strange that no other Thaids decided to make their homes here after the Blirldoth and its horde passed. Was there something that prevented them from coming closer?

On his way to Etrium, Erik continued to make his way deeper into the forest, and he couldn't help but notice an evident shift taking place in the landscape around him. That started many days prior, but it was clear now that it was more accentuated. The once vibrant and thriving woodland had given way to a sense of decay and desolation.

The atmosphere was made eerie by the presence of heavy dampness in the air, which clung to the undergrowth and gave the location an eerie feel.

It seemed as though a thick shroud of darkness had descended upon the forest canopy, which was formerly a verdant ceiling that diffused sunlight. Besides, the usual cacophony of chirping birds, rustling leaves, and buzzing insects had been silenced, and Erik felt a chill run down his spine as a result of the unsettling quietness that had taken its place.

Even the wind seemed reluctant to pass through the twisted branches as if it feared upsetting the unnatural calm that had descended upon the area.

As he ventured further into the thick of the forest, the decomposing vegetation that lay beneath his feet crunched audibly under his boots. The ground's surface appeared to be covered with dead leaves, rotting logs, and rocks covered in moss. A foul odor permeated the atmosphere due to the interaction between the smell of decay and the smell of damp earth.

There were brief moments when slivers of dappled light were able to make it through the dense but decaying canopy and illuminate certain areas of the forest floor. However, these specks served only to highlight the darkness around them, casting long shadows that were distorted in such a way that they appeared to move and wriggle in the peripheries of Erik's vision.

It was a frightening scene as if the very nature of the forest had been transformed into a place of gloom and unpredictability. Erik was uneasy because there was no sign of life, and the sounds of nature were muffled and distant, so he took each step cautiously and deliberated.

As Erik traveled further into the forest, he maintained a heightened level of attention until he noticed something unusual. It appeared as though strange, dark tendrils of roots were emerging from the ground and winding and curling themselves around the trunks of trees as well as rocks.

They appeared to be linked together, creating what looked like a complex network of pulsating black veins running throughout the forest.

As Erik got closer to one of the pulsating roots, he did so with a mixture of curiosity and caution.

A surge of mana was sucked from his fingertips as he reached out to touch the tendrils, attempting to trap his hand in the process. The root reacted to his presence by trembling and vibrating with life that had previously been dormant in its tendrils.

"What the...?"

It was almost as if the woods were coming to life in response to his touch. However, as he continued to do so, he noticed that some of the plants in the area began to gain a little bit of life, not just the dark roots. Erik had a thought in his mind.

The young man then continued along the path of the intertwined root system. Something strange was going on, but if his hunch was correct, a treasure had to be further into the forest than he had previously explored. One that would be difficult for him to collect but would still be a treasure in its own right.

Chapter 360: Hidden Bouquet

As Erik continued his journey deeper into the rotting forest, the air became thick with a putrid odor, assaulting Erik's nostrils with the smell of decay and rot. The once-dappled sunlight was entirely obscured by the oppressive darkness blanketing the place.

There was an unnaturally long silence that only was broken by the ominous echo of his footsteps, which hung in the air, and as he continued to make his way down, a gruesome sight met his gaze and greeted him. The skeletal remains of some thaids could be found strewn among the twisted plant's roots.

Their limbs and bodies had become entwined and trapped within the suffocating grasp of the shadowy tendrils, which Erik wasn't sure what they belonged to.

The bones were strewn about in a disorganized manner, each serving as a macabre reminder of the terrible end that had been visited upon the unfortunate creatures.

Their bleached white surfaces stood in stark contrast to the decay that was all around them and served as a reminder for Erik: that place wasn't safe.

As the young man observed the scene, he couldn't help but look around with anxiousness because it was as if the forest had turned into a cemetery, a place where life withered and died.

On the other hand, that was also encouraging because it indicated that what he was going to find ahead was unquestionably "that thing."

"This is probably a Shadowthorn Dahlia..." Erik said to himself, and then he reasoned. "These things usually require a lot of energy to survive, which was usually given by the surrounding thaids. Still, probably, due to the Heniate, there is no more prey around here, so it was forced to suck the mana and nutrients from the surrounding vegetation," Erik said to himself.

"That would explain why the forest is in this mess..."

Everything was exactly right; the Shadowthorn Dahlia was an extremely uncommon variety of thaid that resembled a plant.

Because of the power of its brain crystal, it was able to exert dominion over the vegetation that was all around it, turning it into a dangerous creature.

The Dahlia could control the growth and movement of plants with just a touch, molding them to satisfy its most basic urges. It flourished in the dark recesses of forests and enchanted groves, drawing its power from the creatures it captured with the help of the plants it commanded.

Its hypnotic allure lulled creatures into a false sense of security while simultaneously luring them closer to its deadly embrace.

Once its prey neared, the Dahlia unfurled its animated vines, ensnaring victims in a labyrinth of thorns and petals.

However, when the prey wasn't enough to sustain it, the creature maintained its existence by drawing energy from nearby vegetation.

Human eyes seldom glimpsed this creature due to its preference for the hidden recesses of its chosen habitat. When the environment was full of prey, the surrounding vegetation wasn't as decayed as it was now, making it impossible to find this plant-like thaid.

Erik probably managed to do so due to the Heniate's past activity, which took away most of the plant's prey and forced it to draw nutrients from nearby vegetation.

The awakener observed the dark roots belonging to the thaid and commented, "This thing grew unhindered for a long time. These roots span at least kilometers away from their source."

The roots themselves appeared to writhe and pulse, almost as if they were under the influence of an evil consciousness. They reached out with gnarled fingers, curling and twining around the skeletal remains, binding them to the forest floor in an eternal embrace.

The darkness seemed to thicken around the young man, a suffocating presence that threatened to consume him as he went further ahead. There was an eerie echo in the air, like the sound of barely audible whispers but packed with malice.

Erik's heart was filled with unease, but he persisted anyway, driven forward by a potent mixture of greed and fear.

If he successfully obtained the brain crystal power of this creature, he could merge it with the one he was born with, thereby producing something more, something better.

With each new step, he discovered that he was entangled in a labyrinth of twisted roots and that the gnarled fingers of the forest itself were blocking the path before him.

It appeared as though the skeletons of the thaids were following him, their empty eye sockets staring in an accusatory manner.

The deeper he went, the more suffocating the atmosphere became. The roots coiled around him, tightening their grip as if attempting to claim him as their own, but in a subtle manner. The very ground beneath him seemed to shift and writhe as if the forest itself sought to consume him.

"I need to pay attention not to step on the roots, or the thaid will attack me," Erik muttered, and so he did.

His eyes swept the ground as he took each step, and he was extremely careful to avoid the roots that snaked their way through the undergrowth.

He was well aware that if he disturbed them, he would be inviting a swift and lethal response from the predator that was hiding nearby.

He had seen the destructive capabilities of Dahlia's plant manipulation firsthand, and the number of dead thaids was astounding. The thought of ending like that sent a shiver down his spine because he had witnessed the capabilities of Dahlia's plant manipulation firsthand.

The young man moved with deliberate caution, avoiding the sprawling tendrils that reached out, hungry for food as he went. It was almost as if he could sense the anticipation emanating from the plant, as if it was aware of his presence and ready to pounce at the right moment.

Erik understood that venturing any deeper into the creature's territory carried an increased risk, the odds stacked against him, but his greed prevented him from turning around.

If he could control and grow plants, similarly to how Martha did with her thorny vines, he could solve many problems. If what he imagined he could do was true, he could create a natural shelter, make traps, or fight from a distance.

As Erik continued to delve deeper into the forest's center, he noticed a central point where the roots converged to form a magnificent display of interconnectedness.

This point was at the heart of that part of the forest. At the center stood a small figure, shrouded in dark colors and draped in dark foliage. It was the source of the pulsating roots, emanating an aura of power, the Shadowthorn Dahlia, and the roots were an extension of its very being, an intricate network through which it commanded the forest's flora.

The roots of the plant-like thaid were pulsating with otherworldly mana, and their dark tendrils undulated and writhed as if they were living entities. A faint glow suffused their twisted forms, a manifestation of the energy that coursed through them.

It appeared as if the roots were gaining a sinister sentience with each pulsation and were responding to the very will of the creature commanding them. They reached out with a macabre grace, seeking their next victim, their movement fluid and purposeful.

Erik's gaze was fixated on the plant-like thaid before him, contemplating the daunting task of bringing it down.

However, in that moment of assessment, a shiver ran down his spine as the Shadowthorn Dahlia's tendrils attacked, grazing his skin with him noticing at the last moment.

An icy dread came over him as if the creature could sense and feel his presence, and it promptly attacked as it noticed. This caused him to feel sick to his stomach.

With a sudden surge of power, the surrounding vegetation responded to thaid's command. Vines snaked their way toward Erik, their thorny ends poised to capture him.

"Holy...!"

In a split second, he leaped back, narrowly evading the clutches of the encroaching tendrils. The forest, which had previously been peaceful, was suddenly turned into a combat zone as the air crackled with the mana that the plant controlled.

Erik became aware of the seriousness of the situation, and his heartbeat quickened. Even though he had faced other dangerous creatures in the past, the Shadowthorn Dahlia was exceptionally difficult to fight due to the sheer number and the length of each tendril.

The knowledge that it could not only manipulate the surrounding vegetation but also perceive and react to his presence heightened his sense of vulnerability.

The creature's now fully animated tendrils launched another assault on Erik. The long, sinewy vines lashed out with lightning speed, aiming to wrap around his limbs and constrict his movement.

Erik, anticipating the attack, leaped high into the air, narrowly escaping the grasping tendrils as they crashed into the ground below, leaving deep gouges in the earth.

Undeterred, the thaid unleashed another wave of attacks. This time, the tendrils snaked through the air in a serpentine fashion, seeking to entangle Erik and pull him into the suffocating embrace.

Erik twisted and turned deftly, dodging and weaving as he attempted to avoid the slithering tendrils that appeared to have a mind of their own.

Even more impressive was that he managed to cut some of them, thereby severing their connection to the mother plant.

He felt a rush of air as the tendrils brushed against his skin, their touch cold and clammy, filled with an unnatural life force.

Erik had to pump Nathaniel's power to the utmost limit.

The creature was neither particularly powerful nor particularly quick. Still, there were an alarming number of tendrils, and in order to avoid being struck by them, he had to be quick.

As the battle intensified, the Shadowthorn Dahlia launched a more coordinated attack. Countless tendrils surged toward Erik, weaving a tangled web of thorns and foliage around him.

They attacked from every angle, like the tentacles of some monstrous sea creature. Erik fought back with an equal amount of ferocity, using his blade to hack and slash at the tendrils, eventually severing each one of them one by one.

However, for every tendril Erik cut, two more came to replace it—a relentless onslaught that pushed him to the edge of his capabilities.

The plant-like thaid kept up its assault with each passing second, commanding the surrounding vegetation to launch attacks against the awakener from all directions.

The ground beneath his feet began to shift with malicious intent; branches tore through the air, and rocks were transformed into razor-sharp projectiles.

The young man performed a deadly dance with agility and determination, employing evasive maneuvers to avoid the onslaught being leveled against him.

As the awakener studied the creature, his thoughts raced as he looked for a way to eliminate the thaid. He gave some thought to the source of its power, assessing its weaknesses and strengths.

He was well aware that relying solely on brute force would not be sufficient; instead, he needed a strategy, a game plan, to outwit the sentient plant.