

## BIOLOGICAL 38

### Chapter 38: Hole in the barrier (1)

The bush hedgehog scurried across the field, Erik in pursuit, wondering where on earth the creature was headed. It seemed to wander, its random path potentially leading anywhere. Erik decided to kill it for the experience points, but risked losing its tracks as the tall wheat concealed the beast.

Only its trail allowed Erik to stay on its heels, keeping it in view amidst the sparse undergrowth between them.

Soon the vegetation thickened, obscuring the Thaid more because of the dense grain. He saw it in open parts of the field, but the rest of the time he followed it thanks to the blood trail it left behind.

Then the wheat field ended, making Erik end up in a forest. Massive trees with gnarled branches and broad oak leaves stood packed, forming walls of green that enclosed the sheltering bower, filtering the sunlight from above.

Stepping into the forest, Erik realized how far civilization lay behind - no sound reached him but birdsong.

Then a faint rustling met his ears, intermittent, moving about in the woods.

<The creature must be near,> he thought,

Erik stood alert, senses straining for any hint of the hedgehog.

The rustling continued, the leaves stirred by an unseen presence. Somewhere amidst the trees and underbrush, his quarry lurked, but the forest concealed it well.

He would have to tread and be alert for any sudden movement. Step by step, he delved deeper; the rustling leading him onward. His eyes scanned the shadows, searching for a spike of quills or a flash of beady eyes.

Erik treaded amongst the towering forest giants, wary of dangers hidden in the concealing brush. Scanning the ground, he searched for the creature's blood trail. After a short hunt, he found it.

Grasping his sharpened wheat stalk, he followed the sporadic drops. They led him toward a bush, just as he suspected.

Erik approached with a stick, nudging back the foliage. There lay the Thaid, writhing in agony upon the bare earth. Its flanks heaved with each labored gasp, bulging eyes wide with primal terror. Blood oozed from the gash Erik made, matting the creature's quills. Desperately, it tried to drag itself away on its clawed feet, but spasms of pain wracked its body, preventing it from righting itself.

Erik hesitated, stick poised. The creature was already doomed, its blood leaking out to water the thirsty soil. To kill it now would be a mercy.

With each breath, the thing gave forth a low moan, and every time the monster turned over, it would whimper.

Erik gazed upon the prone Thaid, its spiked body heaving with each ragged breath. An unfamiliar sensation rose within him, one he had never known.

The urge to end its life swelled, sudden and overpowering. Gripping his weapon, he stepped forward, leaves crunching underfoot.<sup>1</sup>

The creature's beady eyes locked onto his, wide with primal fear. It tried in vain to drag itself away again, claws raking the bare earth.

Erik loomed above it now, his shadow falling over its matted fur. With a single swift motion, he brought the weapon down, feeling it slice through quills and flesh.

The hedgehog convulsed once, then lay still, its blood seeping into the soil. Erik's breaths came heavy as he stared at the small, lifeless body. The odd feeling ebbed, leaving him drained.

Crouching down, Erik angled the sharpened stick and drove it into the hedgehog's soft underbelly. He drew the weapon across in one smooth motion, splitting open its tender flesh. Adrenaline running, he showed no hesitation.

Dark blood welled up, spilling out in a steady crimson flow. Gritting his teeth to avoid gagging, Erik sliced again, carving a deep intersecting gash across its abdomen.

The fresh wound gaped open, a red river pouring forth. The hedgehog's struggles grew feeble, its ragged breaths coming slower.

Erik watched the growing pool of blood seep into the earth. Soon the creature would bleed out. The forest had gone silent once more, save for the steady drip of blood from his weapon. A few seconds later, the thaid died, but the blood kept pouring.

[QUEST COMPLETE.]

The notification rang hollow in Erik's mind, barely heard over his racing thoughts. He had never taken a life before, man or beast. Though the hedgehog, like most Thaid, preyed on other creatures, humans included. Despite everything, it was still a living creature.<sup>1</sup>

Some part of him knew he should feel something - pity, remorse, even just unease. Yet as he stared down at its lifeless body, he felt nothing. The act of killing was foreign to him. He expected it to stir some emotion within, but his heart remained still.

This unsettled him. What did it mean that he could end a creature's life with no more feeling than swatting a fly? The hedgehog was a threat, yes, but it was only following its nature. It did not deserve such cruelty.

Erik was too new to this life, too unfamiliar with the reality of kill or be killed. The indifference he felt toward the blood on his hands seemed somehow wrong. He resolved to be more wary of this impulse toward violence stirring within him. The powers he got were changing him, and he was not yet sure if it was for the better.

[HOSTILE CREATURE KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING CONVERTING PROCEDURE.]

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

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

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<Emergency quest: Survival. COMPLETE.>.

-Rewards for completion: A hundred and fifty experience points for killing the creature; eighty experience points for escaping the creature. Sixty DNA points in either case.

-Failure Penalty: Death.

(Kill or escape the bush hedgehog.)

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[LEVEL UP.]

[HOST IS ADVISED TO COLLECT THE CREATURE'S BRAIN CRYSTAL AND A SAMPLE OF BLOOD.]

Euphoria flooded through Erik as the notification chimed his level up. Mana surged within him, raw power simmering beneath his skin. The control he held over the creature left him intoxicated.

In the city, Erik had been meek, rarely voicing his thoughts. Anger simmered inside him, hidden away. Now only cold indifference filled him as he gazed upon the Thaid's corpse. A glint of excitement shone in his eyes.

Killing stirred something primal in him, unlocked by the hunt and the need for power. Having the chance to become powerful, Erik felt emboldened, capable of anything.

"Now that's a harvest," Erik said, his heart still racing from the thrill of the kill. He had felled a dangerous predator without injury.

Erik turned back toward the lifeless hedgehog, an eager glint in his eye. "Time to collect what I did this for."

His stomach turned at the thought of consuming the creature's blood. But he steeled himself, knowing the alternative meant remaining weak. How could he pass up gaining such a boon?

Resolved, Erik dipped his finger into the sanguine pool, drawing it out coated in crimson. He hesitated only a moment before putting it to his lips, tasting iron. The blood was still warm. He forced himself to swallow, feeling it slide down his throat.

Erik grimaced as the blood coated his tongue. "This is awful," he said, forcing himself to swallow the viscous fluid. A notification chimed in his mind even as revulsion twisted his stomach.

[BUSH HEDGEHOG'S BLOOD ACQUIRED. STARTING THE ANALYSIS.]

Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, Erik fought to keep the blood down. The aftertaste clung to his throat, metallic and cloying.

[ANALYSIS COMPLETE.]

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

[A HUNDRED AND TWENTY DNA POINTS DETECTED. STARTING EXTRACTION?]

Erik took a steadying breath, waiting for his roiling gut to settle. <The sacrifice was worth it,> he reminded himself. Strength meant survival. He could not afford to be picky about where that strength came from.

Stifling another wave of nausea, Erik strode onward. He would adjust in time. For now, the blood's power thrummed through his veins, urging him deeper into the wilderness.

He then found the strength to talk. "No. I need to get home first."

Erik knew he could not delay. Gripping the wheat stalk, he steadied himself and then drove the makeshift blade into the creature's skull. With grim purpose, he sawed back and forth, cutting through bone and membrane until the head split open.

The inside was revolting - the brain soaked in viscous green-yellow fluid, soft white matter oozing forth. Erik steeled himself against gagging and rolled up his sleeves. He had to retrieve the brain crystal.

Gritting his teeth, he reached into the soggy mass, fingers probing through the slick warmth. He rummaged around arteries and membranes until closing around something small and hard.

He took it out by grabbing it with his right hand. Erik then removed the blood and the last portion of the brain from the crystal using a white tissue from his backpack, then he swallowed the tiny crystal whole.

Another notification rang up inside his head.

[BUSH HEDGEHOG'S BRAIN CRYSTAL ACQUIRED. STARTING THE ANALYSIS.]

[ANALYSIS COMPLETE.]

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

[A HUNDRED AND TWENTY DNA POINTS DETECTED. EXTRACTION IS NOT ADVISED; THE HOST HAS INCOMPATIBLE DNA.]

[EXTRACTION ABORTED]

<This is the same notification I got the other time, when I got the unknown Thaid brain crystal.>

Taking stock of his surroundings, he realized this was no ordinary forest. He knew of no woods within the barrier aside from the ones in the park, and he was far from there. Yet here immense trees loomed, branches interwoven overhead.

Small creatures darted through the underbrush, seeming benign. Erik tread away from the hedgehog's corpse, retracing his steps.

The wheat field emerged into view as Erik walked. Relief washed over him at the familiar sight. But it was short-lived. Approaching the field's edge, Erik collided with an unseen surface.

"Ow!" He rubbed his throbbing nose, bewildered. Erik reached out, his hands meeting smooth resistance. The invisible barrier encircled the woods, or at least, it seemed.

"What the hell? What is this?"

Erik prodded with his hands, touching the invisible wall that stopped him from going to Mister Fox's farm.

"Fuck... Fuck!"

Disquiet bloomed within Erik. How had he come to this strange place? He recalled passing through no city gate, yet here he stood, cut off from civilization.

Pulse hammering, Erik felt along the perimeter, searching for any cracks or openings. But the barrier was uniform, hemming the wheat field in an inescapable cocoon.

As Erik explored the invisible wall, a startling realization dawned on him. <I'm outside the barrier!>

It explained this sudden shift in surroundings and the impassable force sealing him off from the world he knew.

Clenching his fists, Erik strove to remain calm. Panic would not serve him here. He had to keep a level head and search for the hole that led him outside.

Steeling himself, Erik began running his hands along the smooth facade, probing for any hidden hole. But the barrier remained solid under his touch.

Still, Erik persisted, crawling along the perimeter. He had to stay focused on the task at hand. For a second, he contemplated escaping. However, turning behind the forest made him change his mind.

What chance could he have against Thaid's? Having killed a bush hedgehog was already a lot for him.

What if he met more dangerous monsters?

No, he had to go back inside, at least until he was strong enough to flee from this shit hole called New Alexandria. With dogged determination, Erik continued his search, all senses strained for the slightest sign of hope. There had to be a way.

Erik's rising panic subsided as he spotted the bush hedgehog's blood trail on the ground. Its presence anchored him, giving a lifeline back to the familiar world.

As Erik felt along the invisible barrier, his hands passed through the empty air. He paused, daring to believe it. He reached forward again - no resistance. Here, somehow, was an opening back through the barrier!

"YES!"

He moved his hand left and right, fingertips tapping along the invisible wall. It was solid, impenetrable. Yet, just to the left, there was nothing.

"There is a hole here!" The young man said. It was obvious; how could he have gone outside the city without a hole inside the barrier?