

BIOLOGICAL 381

Chapter 381: The Underground Ghost City

"I should go take a look around..."

Erik stood at the mouth of the tunnel he had come from, his thoughts wandering back to those terrifying times. The Thaid's had appeared unexpectedly and with overwhelming force, catching humanity off guard as they tried to figure out how to use their abilities. People had sought refuge in the depths of the Earth, carving out sanctuaries like this one, unable to combat the formidable creatures.

Erik could almost hear the echoes of the past—hurried footsteps whispered prayers, and children's cries. The thought of the fear and despair that must have filled these caverns, the refugees' only hope of surviving the Thaid's onslaught, made him plenty of things to think about.

Despite the desolation and devastation, Erik saw a testament to human resilience. The ruins of these structures spoke of a people who had chosen to fight for their survival in the face of impossible odds. They had constructed shelters, cultivated inside the caverns, and discovered a way to live in the midst of the darkness.

The young man stood there for some time, letting the weight of history fall on him and taking the opportunity to study what was below. Erik surveyed the sprawling underground metropolis from his vantage point at the tunnel's mouth. The skeletal structures of dilapidated buildings and forgotten roads stretched across the landscape, bathed in the ethereal glow of Aclaitrium.

A crumbling stairway clung precariously to the cavern wall to his left. Despite their weathered appearance, the steps appeared sturdy enough to allow him to descend easily. Erik made his way to the stairs, his heart thudding as he began the steep descent. Each step echoed hauntingly in the vast space.

Erik set foot on the cold, earthen floor of the ruined underground city after several minutes of cautious descent. He was now in an open space, facing a massive tall structure among the ruins. Despite showing signs of age and disrepair, the structure retained an imposing aura that hinted at its former glory.

Erik's attention was drawn to the faint outline of a symbol as he approached. The weathered and partially eroded emblem was etched onto the rusted metallic facade of the building. Erik squinted, his gaze fixed on the symbol. The design was simple but evocative, with a stylized depiction of Earth encased within a solid circle, symbolizing unity.

Twelve sleek lines radiate outward from the central globe, each representing a place on Earth, reflecting a shared identity despite geographical divisions. The lines were intricately woven at their ends, forming a harmonious pattern that suggested cooperation and interdependence.

A rising sun was depicted above the globe, its rays reaching out toward the twelve lines. This imagery was a symbol of hope and renewal, representing humanity's unwavering desire for a brighter future, regardless of the challenges it faced.

A pair of hands were etched beneath this unified symbol of Earth, their fingers gently cradling the globe. The hands were a reminder of humanity's responsibility to protect and preserve their planet, a vow that cut across borders and generations.

This symbolic representation piqued Erik's interest, and the sense of community it evoked was powerful. Most buildings had the symbol painted on them, but there was one, the obvious command center of this place, that had a massive representation of it.

"I guess there will be maps of the place there; maybe I could find a way to get out of here. I don't think the hole I fell into was the main way to get in and out of this place..."

Erik took slow, deliberate steps toward the military building. The soft glow of Aclatrium ore illuminated the ruined city, casting long, dancing shadows across the deserted streets.

Erik moved slowly, his footsteps the only sound breaking the strange silence that hung heavy in the air. Each step echoed off the massive walls, reverberating throughout the ancient ruins.

Dilapidated buildings towered high to his left and right, their skeletal structures resembling massive pillars. Despite the ravages of time and inevitable decay, these structures stood firm, their formidable heights apparently serving as vital supports for the vast underground city's ceiling.

"Even the cave must be man-made if the buildings act as support for the ceiling..." Erik observed.

As the young man walked through the city, he could see the once-proud facades of the buildings, which were now worn and weathered.

Windowless apertures stared back at him like vacant eyes, holding stories from a bygone era. Some things, however, remained the same even these days. The military structure appeared simple and plain, similar to the shelters he was used to seeing around New Alexandria.

Erik felt awe and respect for those who had built this refuge as he walked beneath these towering giants. Despite the eerie atmosphere and isolation, this location had a certain beauty. The Aclatrium's ethereal illumination, the looming skyscrapers, and the silent streets all seemed to blend into a haunting symphony of solitude.

Erik's gaze remained fixed on the urban skeleton, taking in every detail. The distant murmur of the underground wind whistled through the city's empty corridors, the city's only living voice, a ghostly serenade to the lost civilization but also a signal that there was a way out of that cave; he just needed to find it.

After a long walk, the young man arrived in front of the imposing military structure, his gaze lingering on the tightly sealed entrance. The structure had been weathered by time, and the once-dominant titanium door was now an amalgam of rust and weathered metal. Despite the deterioration, the door stood firm, a sentinel guarding the secrets that lay within.

"Can I destroy it?"

He looked at the corroded metal suspiciously, an idea forming in his mind. Knowing Nathaniel's destructive potential fully, he realized he had a viable means of going inside by destroying the door. Because of the shelter's age, mana ores were most likely not used in its construction, lowering the chances of unexpected resistance.

"Should I do it?" the young man asked himself. He developed a strange habit due to his loneliness in the forest.

The reason why he asked himself if he should have was that he was afraid that destroying the door would bring thaides here. Erik didn't know if there were monsters here, but it was a likely possibility, especially if they were insect-like ones since they often lived underground.

However, there was another thought in his mind: What if the thing that created the massive tunnel was resting here, and he could attract it by making noise?

The young man thought about what to do for five solid minutes before deciding that, regardless of the situation, he had no choice but to try to enter since there was no other way to get inside the building.

This was the only place that probably held a map of the underground city, and if he didn't enter, it meant he wouldn't be able to figure out how to get out.

He felt the familiar tingle as his mana coursed through his neural links, merging with his brain and, later, his body. His mana responded as he focused, forming a powerful force gathering around his body. Erik ordered his mana to concentrate on his fist like a boxer wearing his gloves, its presence filling the air with pulsating energy.

With a determined expression, he punched the door with all his strength while releasing his mana to create a concussive force that would increase the power of his punch. The fist slamming into the rusted door shook the air, sending a shock wave out from the point of impact and creating sound waves that reverberated throughout the whole building and the city itself.

The rusted titanium couldn't stand a chance against his mana-infused blow. The once-sturdy door crumbled in the face of the attack, the corroded metal fragments falling away like autumn leaves in the wind.

The dust and debris gradually settled, revealing a gaping entrance into the military building's heart. The door had vanished. Erik prepared to step into the shadows of the building, his fire-fighting bucket in hand, as the echo of the impact faded.

A world of darkness greeted him. The vast interior was shrouded in an impenetrable veil of darkness because there was no light. He stood at the threshold, looking into the abyss with hope but also with anxiety and with his focus increasing twice fold.

Inside the military base, there was no light—no windows, no flickering lights—just an eerie void that swallowed all forms of visibility.

Erik strained his eyes as he stood at the threshold, hoping to catch a glimpse of his surroundings. But the darkness was implacable, clinging to the air like a suffocating cloak. The lack of visual cues left him disoriented, forcing him to rely solely on his other senses to navigate this lightless realm.

"I Should stop wasting time..." the young man said to himself, ready to enter, with the fickle light in his left hand and the Flyssa in the other.

Chapter 382: The military building

The light from Erik's bucket reflected off the walls as he entered the building. The interior was vast and open, but everything was rusted and dirty. The musty odor of time and decay filled Erik's nose with a scent that would be hard to forget even after many days.

The young man started walking inside the base, but as soon as he did, it appeared that something terrible happened there in the past. Erik saw the skeletal remains of soldiers everywhere, still dressed in their tattered uniforms. Their positions suggested a last-ditch effort to stave off the inevitable.

They were armed with weapons Erik had only seen in history books: old firearms and blades, which it was clear hadn't been enough to stop whatever they were trying to kill.

Erik moved reverently, each step leaving a haunting echo in the vast corridors before him. The light from his bucket cast long shadows on the skeletal figures, adding an eerie, solemn glow to the scene. He felt a shiver of fear, the tragic scene sending a shiver down his spine.

The skeletal remains were silent witnesses to a long-lost battle, their positions and weapons indicating the urgency and despair of their last stand.

The young man also observed the base layout. The metal-wrought architecture emphasized functionality over aesthetics. Solid steel beams, whose structures showed signs of aging but were remarkably sturdy, supported the high ceiling.

Control panels and broken machines were scattered around, their once-flashing lights and buzzing sounds now silent and dark.

As he moved deeper into the base, Erik felt a wave of profound sadness wash over him,

as the place was littered with things that made him understand what desperate times those were, a period in human history when survival was the only goal.

Learning about that in history books was something, but looking at their fear with his own eyes gave Erik a deeper understanding of his forefathers' struggles.

However, his thoughts were immediately cut short as the awakener's eyes spotted a distinct form on one of the ancient metal walls while navigating the dimly lit interior of the building. On closer inspection, the image on the wall appeared to be a collection of interconnected lines and symbols that had faded over time.

Curiosity drove him to approach the glowing bucket, its flames casting an eerie yet illuminating glow over the tarnished surface. The lines and symbols became more structured in the light, forming a recognizable pattern—a building layout map.

Erik felt a wave of realization wash over him as he realized the significance of the layout. This blueprint could lead him to the command center, where he hoped to find what he sought.

He cautiously approached the faded map; the fire-warmed bucket's heat starkly contrasted with the cold, metal surface.

He held the bucket close to his face, allowing the flickering light to illuminate the layout more clearly.

The design of the base was depicted in detail on the map, which was an intricate network of passageways, compartments, and larger common areas. Cryptic symbols and numeric codes denoted different sections.

Erik deduced from the design that there were living quarters, training areas, and armories inside the base, and everything was built around a central command room placed in the middle of the structure.

There was even a lab inside that base, which took a huge chunk of the building's space. The young man was curious to see what was there but refrained from investigating since finding a map was more important.

The map's layout featured a sizable, distinct rectangular shape in the center. It bore a distinct symbol, a universal indicator Erik recognized as a 'Command Center' sign. The layout's pathways led like veins to this central point, indicating its importance.

Erik walked lightly through the base's metal-lined corridors; his senses heightened in anticipation of potential danger. His bucket's flickering flame cast long, ominous shadows on the walls around him, and the muffled sound of his footsteps echoed in the silence. His eyes darted from one shadowy corner to the next, half expecting a creature to appear at any moment.

He finally arrived at the command center after navigating the maze-like structure for what seemed like an eternity. However, when he noticed the state of the room's entrance, a cold chill ran down his spine.

The sturdy metal door was broken and twisted, with a huge gap in the center. A deliberate, forceful breach caused the damage, probably the result of whatever killed the soldiers along the path. It was characterized by deep, curved gouges resembling those of a wild animal. On closer inspection, he realized they were claw marks—five slashes as clear as day.

<Five gashes? That is weird...> the young man thought.

The young man stopped for a moment. It was interesting to find out what attacked this place and whether there were more of these creatures today. He hoped that wasn't the case since it appeared this beast wasn't weak, judging from what it left behind.

As he approached the breached entrance, a low growl of apprehension rumbled in his throat, every sense on high alert. After all, the command center had not remained untouched; besides, no place was truly safe from Thaid. He prepared himself for what lay within by taking a deep breath.

"Whatever did this can't be alive now... Right?" he said in a form of self-assurance.

It had been centuries since this location had housed people, so ancient thaid could not have survived. That was the only thing that made Erik feel better. Because the main entrance door remained closed, any other thaid was unlikely to have entered the building, and he should have been safe.

A chilling draft swept past Erik as he pushed the fractured door open, the stale, musty air of the room carrying an eerie stillness. The young man's boots echoed hollowly off the metallic floor as he entered the room. His heart pounded in his chest, and his senses were alert for any indication of danger. But there was no movement or life in the room.

However, the first thing he noticed were skeletons. Even after all these years, they were still positioned as warriors in their last stand.

Their lifeless bodies were strewn about the room, their skeletal fingers still clutching at their weapons and their hollow eye sockets fixed on the entrance from which he had entered. It was a bleak scene, bearing the stark testimony of a battle fought and lost.

"What the hell happened here?"

Erik came to a halt, his gaze fixed on the fallen soldiers. He could almost hear the clamor of a battle fought within these walls, the men's shouts, and the terrifying screech of the Thaidis that killed them all.

The silence in the room starkly contrasted with the chaotic scene that had played out here years before, which in the young man's mind was louder than any sound he could hear. The soldiers' last stand told a story of desperation and bravery.

Despite the impending death, they stood firm, their resolve unwavering until their last breath. Erik felt a surge of admiration for these brave souls, their bravery evident even in their skeletal remains.

The young man shook off the gloomy thoughts with a deep breath. There was no time to mourn or reflect. There was still a lot to be done. His gaze shifted from the tragic scenes of the past to the present challenges.

His gaze was drawn to a table in the center of the room, cluttered with old paperwork and a faded map. Erik discovered it was a building layout after further inspection. His heart sank for a brief moment.

"Shit, this is not useful at all."

Though intriguing, it was not what he was looking for. He required a comprehensive map of the city.

The awakener focused his attention on the cabinets, a series of metal compartments layered against the room's walls. The once-shiny, well-polished surfaces had become tarnished with a layer of dust and grime, replacing their glossy sheen with time.

He started his search with determination. He approached the first cabinet, its door ajar, revealing the interior's long-forgotten contents. He pushed the door open, breaking the silence with the sound of rusty hinges.

The cabinet had numerous folders, their once crisp and neat files now discolored and frayed. Erik carefully picked up the first one, holding it close to the bucket's firelight. He flipped through the worn-out pages, sifting through the fading ink for helpful information.

He returned the folder to its original location and reached for the next one, finding nothing of immediate interest. He went about his business methodically, his gaze sharp and focused as he sifted through years of forgotten information.

His patience paid off when his fingers brushed against a thick sheet of parchment after rummaging through several cabinets and discovering pieces of lost technology, personal belongings, and even the soldiers' diaries. He took it out and held it up to the light of the fire. The map was old and faded, but the intricate lines and markings were still visible.

He carefully spread the map on the table after pulling it out, his eyes hungrily taking in the details. Erik immediately recognized the detailed renderings of the cityscape, roadways, and key building locations. His heart puffed up with relief.

It was a detailed map of the entire city. The details were visible despite the aged appearance and faded ink. The young man carefully unfolded the map, smoothing it on the table before him to see it better. His fingers traced the map's lines, mentally charting his course.

"System, memorize the map of the place; I don't want any surprises."

[UNDERSTOOD. SURROUNDINGS SCANNED. STARTING INJECTION PROCEDURE.
INJECTION COMPLETE.]

As the map entered his mind, the grim setting of the room seemed to fade into the background, replaced by a renewed sense of hope and purpose. Erik felt one step closer to navigating his way out of the labyrinthine underground city and continuing his journey.

Chapter 383: Chilling Screams

Erik returned his attention to the room now that the map was safely in his possession. The faint, flickering light from the fire-lit bucket danced across the worn walls, casting eerie shadows over the relics of a bygone era.

The skeletal figures remained silent, their postures implying a last stand, a futile fight against an overwhelming foe.

Erik proceeded to the remaining cabinets, their contents untouched and frozen in time. His gaze was drawn to a slew of forgotten mementos: old equipment manuals, worn-out uniforms, and several unopened ration packages.

Curiosity surged in him. That was a rare opportunity to see what the history books didn't say. He took one of the old documents and carefully unfolded the brittle paper.

Most of the words faded due to the passage of time, telling stories of strategic plans, defense protocols, and encrypted messages. The handwriting, though shaky, conveyed a steadfast determination. Erik couldn't help but be in awe of the people who once occupied this underground fortress, facing impossible odds with unwavering courage.

As he read on, he came across a few personal letters, the contents of which echoed the poignant emotions of those who had once lived and died within these walls. Some expressed homesickness and remembered their families and loved ones.

Others carried the weight of fear and despair, but each letter contained a glimmer of hope.

However, it wasn't until a few minutes later that he discovered something that piqued his interest much more than everything else he read. It was a document with a different symbol than the one he had seen on all the other documents, the symbol that was painted on the buildings outside, the United Earth symbol.

Instead, it was a silver-colored line intricately intertwined with a mortar and pestle. The curved and fluid silver line seemed in constant motion, symbolizing progress, innovation, and efficiency.

The symbol's design was sleek and modern, with clean lines and professional air. It conveyed a sense of trust and dependability and an entity to be respected and taken seriously. The blue and silver hues that dominated the design added depth to the pharmaceutical theme.

"What is this?" the young man wondered. Erik opened it carefully and began reading, but his brow furrowed as he considered the implications of what he found inside the document. His heart rate increased as he flipped through the pages, soaking in the wealth of information contained within and questions surging in his mind.

What he was reading was nothing out of the ordinary. It was something that everyone was familiar with these days, Thaid. However, the questions surged due to the date of this document.

This left the young man perplexed as it was from a period before the establishment of this base, a period when thaid were not yet present, they didn't appear yet, and humanity was simply dealing with the sinister cold.

An uneasy feeling gnawed at his stomach. Was it an error? Or was there some hidden truth that needed to be revealed?

The details about the thaid were startlingly accurate, almost as if the author had firsthand knowledge of them years before their first sighting. The report detailed some of the species' behavior, abilities, and weaknesses with a deftness that suggested a thorough understanding of these creatures. Erik was left wondering how much of this information was still relevant.

His gaze returned to the corporation's name, prominently displayed at the report's top.

"Silver Line Corporation?" He had never encountered that name before, yet it was linked to a detailed report on thaid. For sure, if there was someone who already knew about Thaid years before their first appearance, why didn't they say anything about them? Not that it would have mattered.

Erik was caught up in a whirlwind of questions, each more perplexing than the last. His mind raced as he tried to piece together the disjointed information. He was well aware that these revelations had far-reaching consequences. The only remaining question was, "What did it all mean?"

One thing was sure in this fog of uncertainty: the history was far more complex than he'd ever imagined. This document wasn't just a piece of history; it was a piece of a much more complicated puzzle.

However, a sound immediately drew Erik's attention, distracting him from the document. It sounded like a lament, a shout, or something very close to a human voice.

"What was that...?"

Erik quickly gathered his bearings as the eerie sound echoed in his ears. The Silver Line Corporation's intriguing mysteries would have to wait. The immediate priority was survival. With

the underground city map firmly in his mind, he clutched the bucket containing the fire, his only light source, and dashed towards the military building's exit.

Each footstep echoed ominously, adding to the tension in the air. The military building's surroundings felt alien and foreboding, with the darkness emphasizing the threat of the unknown.

KYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH

That shout echoed through the corridors of the building once more, but this time it was closer.

"FUCK! FUCK! FUCK! FUCK!"

Erik increased his speed and kept his senses alert, attuned to every sound and movement with renewed awareness. His mind raced as he navigated the maze of corridors, and adrenaline surged through his veins.

Every turn and every intersection brought him closer to the exit, but the unknown lurking in the darkness kept him on edge. The building's maze-like structure appeared more menacing in the dim light, and each corner he turned felt like stepping into unknown territory.

The scream rang out once more at that point.

KYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH

The wail broke the silence of the deserted military building, no, the entire ancient underground city. It rang out again, this time much closer, and the spine-chilling, inhuman scream echoed through the desolate corridors. Erik's nerves were jolted, his heart pounding against his ribcage like a war drum in the silence that followed.

Erik spun around quickly, his eyes straining to see through the shroud of darkness extending beyond his firelight's meager reach. The flickering orange glow danced and refracted off the rusted metallic surfaces, casting long, grotesque shadows that swayed with each flicker of the flame, amplifying the eerie atmosphere of the deserted building but not enough to allow him to see.

As the scream resounded, the air around him seemed to vibrate, heightening his fear. The sound lingered, hauntingly lingering in the stale, musty air.

Fear was almost overpowering the young man and tightening its icy grip around him, threatening to suffocate his resolve. The terrifying prospect of realizing he wasn't alone and that something lurked within the same darkness he stood in was terrifying.

It wasn't like he couldn't fight thaids; after all, he had done it many times, but the atmosphere, the mystery, the darkness, and the high chance that he couldn't battle against the thaid made him nervous. One thing was to fight against something he knew, another against something he didn't.

The realization of his circumstances was jarring, but he didn't let it deter him. He was no stranger to danger, but the stakes seemed higher this time. "I need to get out and fast," he declared, injecting his words with a newfound determination.

Erik reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of seeds with quick, calculated movements. Hardened with determination, his eyes never left the foreboding darkness before him. The seeds were scattered across the cold, hard floor of the abandoned building with a swift flick of his wrist. Then, concentrating his efforts, he began to channel his mana into them via his neural links.

The air hummed with raw energy as the seeds responded to his call. A burst of life force filled the desolate corridor as roots sprouted from the tiny seeds. It was as if time had been sped up, with the miracle of nature unfolding in front of his eyes in mere seconds.

Erik felt the ground vibrate beneath his feet as the roots dug in and anchored themselves. The stems shot up in a spectacular display of life, rapidly increasing in girth and height. Branches spiraled out; their formation was disorderly but perfect for creating an impenetrable blockade.

The empty corridor was quickly filled with a dense thicket of towering trees, their thick trunks and sprawling branches forming a living barrier.

The rustling of leaves broke the silence as they unfolded, forming a vibrant green canopy that seemed out of place among the rusted metal and cold stone. The trees groaned and creaked as they grew, their bark hardening and their roots strengthening.

The once-empty corridor had transformed into a dense forest in a matter of moments, with the trees standing tall and sturdy like sentinels in the darkness, blocking any access to the young man, covering his escape.

Erik exited the building after thirty seconds but could hear something crashing behind him. The thaid inside had clearly destroyed the barrier he had erected.

"Geez, this place is a nightmare," he muttered under his breath, his eyes darting across the darkness, ever vigilant for any signs of movement. "It feels like I've just stepped into some horror movie!"

The young man remembered the map; there was an exit half a kilometer from the military building that he needed to find if he wanted to get out of this cave.

Chapter 384: Bugs' army

The Aclaitrium ore's dim, ethereal glow washed over the abandoned city, casting long, intricate shadows and painting a picture of a world frozen in time. Erik moved through the ruins of a bygone era when the underground city was teeming with human life and activity.

Armories stood tall, strategically placed throughout the city, their solemn steel edifices a reminder of their critical role in humanity's survival struggle.

Their once bustling interiors had been replaced with an echoing emptiness, and they were now silent and vacant. However, traces of their past remained, visible in the weapons scattered around, quietly narrating stories of battles fought and heroes forged.

Erik dashed past them, his footsteps resonating ominously through the desolate city streets. He would pass by shooting ranges from time to time, their targets still bearing the marks of countless bullets.

The young man continued his desperate run through the intricate web of streets, each passing structure adding to the desolate atmosphere. As he raced on, his heart pounded in his chest, he had to get away from that place, or he wasn't sure if he could stay alive.

As he dashed through the desolate streets, the Aclaitrium-illuminated cityscape whirled past him in a spectral blur, his breaths coming out in labored rasps.

A piercing scream pierced the hollow silence, echoing off the crumbling buildings. The inhuman cry echoed through the underground city, raising dread inside the young man's mind.

<Stay calm, Erik, stay calm!>

The air around the awakener seemed to chill instantly as the scream subsided, a wave of icy terror sweeping through the city's desolate streets. However, another blood-curdling scream soon resonated throughout the city, this time much closer.

KYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH

"Shit!" Erik cursed under his breath, adrenaline flooding his being. The raw fear induced by the creature's scream was like a physical blow, a bone-chilling reminder of the terrifying enemy on his heels. Erik's breath hitched in his chest, the very sound seeming to curdle the blood in his veins.

"Keep it together, Erik," he muttered to himself, pushing his terror to the back of his mind. "Keep running. Don't look back."

The young man tightened his grip on his Flyssa as the monstrous scream's echoes faded again into the silence. He charged forward, his breaths coming out in measured pants.

At that moment, Erik noticed some thaids scurrying on top of the cave's walls in the distance. The shrill cry of the unknown monster probably had roused a swarm of eerie creatures from the depths of the ancient city.

Erik watched in horror as some bugs clambered out of the abandoned buildings' cracks and crevices, their massive, compound eyes reflecting the spectral glow of the Aclatrium ore illuminating the cave.

His heart pounded faster, and his eyes widened as he witnessed these dog-sized bugs navigating the vertical cave walls with uncanny ease.

"Oh, great," Erik muttered, his gaze darting between the thaids skittering towards him. "Just what I needed!"

Since injecting books about thaids into his brain precisely three months ago, Erik had learned about various creatures, including the ones he had in front of him, the Acidspitter Arthropods.

These creatures, the Acidspitter Arthropods, were aggressive predators with a nasty brain crystal power called Corrosive Discharge, allowing them to transform mana into a highly corrosive substance.

Their elongated mandibles housed specialized muscles capable of launching the substance substances produced by their brain crystals with disturbing accuracy by converting mana.

He watched as the Acidspitters coordinated their movements, releasing pheromones that allowed them to act as a unified force and rush out in droves toward the source of the noise or whoever was inside the ancient underground city. In this place, their nest was located.

Erik was aware of these actions, their hierarchical societies, and collective intelligence. He witnessed it for the first time, which was far from comforting.

The Acidspitter Arthropods taken singularly weren't that strong. However, they were usually in high numbers, and when they used their brain crystal powers in conjunction, everywhere they attacked became a wasteland.

Now, he was being pursued not only by an unknown thaid but also by a swarm of these beasts with ranged attacks. The underground city had become a death trap.

"Shit! Things just got much worse...!" he muttered to himself as he saw the creatures rushing out of the walls.

The Acidspitter Arthropods swarmed Erik without hesitation, their compound eyes gleaming with lethal intent. Their elongated mandibles twitched, indicating an impending onslaught of corrosive discharges.

The first Acidspitter flexed its mandibles and hissed a glob of caustic substance at Erik. He threw himself to the right with a burst of adrenaline, narrowly avoiding the killer spray.

The discharge landed on the ground where he had been standing only moments before, immediately consuming the stone and leaving a smoking, pitted crater.

Erik had barely regained his footing when another Acidspitter sprayed him with acid. Erik quickly drew on Nathaniel's power this time, augmenting his physical abilities to perform a quick backflip and evade the attack. As he touched down, he could hear the hiss of acid burning the ground where he had just been standing a few seconds ago.

A third Acidspitter took its turn, launching a corrosive liquid stream. Erik had already moved in anticipation of the attack, performing a side roll that kept him clear of the lethal trajectory.

Even as he evaded one attack, another appeared. The Acidspitters were unstoppable; their attacks were well-coordinated and precise.

Erik moved with the grace of a dancer; each step, twist, and turn was a calculated move in a deadly ballet. He jumped, ducked, and darted to avoid the rain of corrosive discharge that seemed to come from everywhere as more and more bugs approached his position.

The Acidspitter Arthropods collectively flexed their mandibles and hurled an overwhelming barrage of corrosive substance toward Erik, but with many more creatures in range, he quickly realized he couldn't avoid the attacks this time, even with his speed; the amount was simply too much.

The onslaught that followed was like a torrential downpour—a storm of searing liquid death.

Erik dashed towards the nearest structure. As the corrosive barrage closed in on him, his heart pounded in his chest. The lethal liquid stream sizzled through the air, leaving a trail of vaporized humidity behind it.

Erik rounded the corner of a sturdy, ancient structure just as the lethal rain was about to hit him. The structure bore the scars of many years, but it stood firm against the onslaught.

As the acid ate away at the building material, the Acidspitter's corrosive discharge splattered against the other side of the structure, creating an ear-splitting hiss and a rising cloud of smoke that, if inhaled, was as lethal as the liquid counterpart.

Erik pressed himself against the building's cold, hard surface, gasping for air. He was left out of breath due to all the movements he had to take to avoid the barrage of attacks and, at the same time, running away.

The screeches of the Acidspitter Arthropods echoed through the vast city, as did the constant sizzling of their acid on the opposite side of his cover. He was temporarily safe, protected from the bugs' lethal discharge. The problem was that he was being pursued by something else too, and hiding behind that building, avoiding the attacks, made him lose a lot of time.

Erik flooded his neural links with mana, his veins pulsing with light blue energy, drawing on Nathaniel's brain crystal power. The area around him swelled with energy. Each heartbeat was thundering in his ears, each breath a measured intake of focus and determination—it was as if time itself had slowed.

Erik propelled himself away from the building's protective shell without hesitation. His steps, which had previously been cautious and wary, now echoed with the power and assurance of a predator. Every fiber of his being was streamlined for speed, his body moving in a blur too fast to see by the Acidspitter Arthropods.

A large metallic door loomed ahead, its surface gleaming with faint blue hues that mirrored the luminescence of Aclaitrium ore.

"THE EXIT!" Erik yelled.

Erik's sharp eyes took in the details as he sprinted toward the massive metallic door. A heavy, rusted wheel protruded from the door's center, a circular vault lock that appeared to be the key to unlocking the barrier. His heart sank.

The wheel was clearly corroded, resulting from years of neglect and moisture seeping in from the surrounding environment.

He'd need extraordinary strength to pry it free, and he wasn't sure if his own physical abilities were sufficient. If he couldn't turn the wheel, he'd be trapped inside the cave, vulnerable to the oncoming swarm of Acidspitter Arthropods and the unknown monster.

The thought made his blood run cold; the grim reality of his situation was sinking in.

But he couldn't afford to be hesitant. He poured more mana into Nathaniel's brain crystal power, hoping to get to the door quickly enough to get out of that mess. As he approached the exit, he braced himself for the struggle that lay ahead.

Chapter 385: The rusted door

Erik channeled mana into his legs while simultaneously casting a quick glance over his shoulder in the direction of the approaching swarm of Acidspitter Arthropods.

His muscles, already aching from the exertion, reacted with a surge of speed that was so quick that it was almost impossible to see.

The sharp edges of his boots scraped against the uneven stones he was walking on, kicking up a cloud of pebbles behind him.

Every step he took was a gamble because the force of his legs propelling him forward gave him such momentum that he was constantly on the verge of losing control. But he didn't dare slow down. The acid-spitting swarm was relentless, and the sound of their serrated claws clicking menacingly as they advanced in waves was terrifying.

With one final push of his mana-enhanced speed, Erik then leaped toward the door. He put his hand out in front of him; fingers spread wide to reach for the icy-rusted metal of the massive door.

The final few meters leading up to the door seemed to drag on for an indefinite amount of time. Erik's heart was pounding in time with his frantic steps, and the adrenaline in his system gave him an intensely primal focus. Now he was so close to the door—the objective of his mad dash—that he could almost feel the door's cold metal against his skin; the exit was within arm's reach.

Erik skidded to a halt in front of the enormous door.

The passage of time seemed to slow down as he grasped the rusted wheel with both hands while the monstrous chorus of Acidspitter Arthropods echoed menacingly behind him. They were far, so there was still time to open the door and escape.

The corroded wheel loomed large in front of him, but despite Erik's efforts, it refused to budge. His eyes darted back and forth between the wheel and the swarm of Acidspitter Arthropods that were rapidly closing in on him. Their vibrant green and yellow exoskeletons shimmered menacingly in the pale glow that was emanated by the Aclaitrium ore so common inside this cave.

"Perfect," he muttered under his breath, the sarcasm almost lost in the adrenaline rush coursing through his veins. His words, however, carried no humor—only a grim acknowledgment of the dire situation he found himself in.

He threw his weight against the wheel, and his hands gripped the corroded metal as tightly as possible. But there was no slippage in the wheel. He desperately tried to turn the rusted wheel but met with resistance at every turn. This caused him to feel an overwhelming sense of panic.

He struggled against it, his muscles writhing in agony as the wheel stubbornly refused to budge in response to his efforts.

In the meantime, the Acidspitter Arthropods were getting closer to closing the gap, the rhythmic clicking of their serrated claws against the stone ground creating an eerie sound.

Their faceted eyes were intently focused on Erik, and their elongated mandibles trembled with anticipation as they prepared to expel their lethal corrosive substances.

Erik was able to hear their approach becoming increasingly audible, each reverberating click serving as a chilling reminder of the impending threat.

The acrid, sulfurous smell of their excrement was pervasive in the environment, and it forced its way into his nasal passages, causing him to grimace.

"Come on!" Erik growled, directing his frustration at the rusted wheel. His voice echoed eerily in the vast cavern, drowned out by the cacophony of the approaching swarm. He gritted his teeth, pouring every ounce of his strength and remaining mana into turning the wheel. The high stakes of his situation made each second feel like an eternity, with his fate hanging in the balance.

Erik's heart was beating so fast that it felt like a drum in his chest. As he struggled to get the door open, his knuckles turned white from the effort, and his hands became slick with sweat as they rubbed against the metal of the vault wheel.

His thoughts were racing, and every part of his body pleaded for that damned door to be opened.

Suddenly, a monstrous and bone-chilling scream filled the air, reverberating through the cavern and echoing off the towering buildings. It was a sound Erik was all too familiar with now—a horrifying symphony of raw, primal power and terrifying hunger.

Erik had heard it before. As he turned his head in the direction of the source of the sound, a chill ran through his body.

The military base's monster appeared as it rounded the corner of a nearby building and emerged into view. Because of its towering stature, the glow of the Aclatrium ore around the beast was obscured, and it cast a long, monstrous shadow that writhed and flickered across the abandoned city at the monster's feet.

Those left imprints on the ground that gave way under the monster's massive weight as it advanced toward the young man, and each step brought it that much closer to him.

"Oh, come on!" Erik shouted in a shaky attempt at gallows humor. His eyes flicked between the two monsters that now had him cornered. He was caught between a rock and a hard place, with nowhere to run. "Just what I needed. Two nightmares instead of one."

When viewed from afar, the figure appeared to be something truly horrifying. Erik was able to make out the menacing silhouette, which stood well over three meters in height and had a body that was an absurd exaggeration of muscularity.

Its skin was a dark, ominous purple that gave off an unnatural appearance. Still, the silhouette was unnaturally human and served as a horrifying reminder of what the sinister cold did to the human population. However, Erik didn't know of such effects that could lead to this kind of mutation.

The dim, ethereal light of the Aclaitrium ore cast eerie shadows over the creature, accentuating its monstrous transformation—tattered remnants of what could have been clothing clung to its hulking frame.

"What the hell...?" he yelled.

Each of its strides was powerful and weighty, and as it moved, the ground beneath its feet trembled with each step.

ROOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAR

The beast emitted a blood-curdling scream that sent a shiver down Erik's spine.

It exuded an aura of unchallenged dominance and asserted its position atop the acid-spitting swarm with ruthless efficiency, giving the impression that no one could challenge its authority.

The Acidspitter Arthropods, who had been pursuing Erik with such ruthlessness, appeared to be nothing more than ants in front of this terrifying giant.

They attacked, but the creature's tough hide was impervious to the corrosive discharges that their natural weapons produced. Their lethal acid made a hissing sound before evaporating completely, leaving the beast unharmed.

The insectoid thaids were crushed under the monstrous creature's feet as it walked over them and trampled on them with each step.

Their shells cracked and shattered; a sickening sound echoed through the cavern. But their demise didn't seem to affect the beast; it had a different target in mind. Its multifaceted eyes were locked onto Erik, a chilling, unblinking stare that promised nothing but violence.

When Erik met its gaze, he could feel the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. The realization that this creature was once human sent a shudder of dread through his body. Now it was only a monstrosity, a perverted parody of the human form, and it was headed in his direction.

The young man's hands remained planted firmly on the corroded wheel as they continued their fight against the stubborn door's handle. As he persisted in his efforts, the icy metal groaned and creaked under the strain.

His gaze shifted between the two menacing threats - the monstrous purple creature, the beast from the base casually trampling the Acidspitter Arthropods in its path, and the horde of smaller thaids unaffected by the humanoid Thaid's onslaught.

"This just keeps getting better," he quipped, a touch of sardonic humor in his voice. His determination did not waver, despite the growing proximity of the creatures. The danger was evident, but Erik, centered in the eye of the storm, remained focused, driven by the will to survive. He was aware of the dire circumstances, but he was not going to let fear overtake him. He had a door to open, after all.

The door groaned under Erik's efforts, eventually giving in to his determination just as the monstrous creatures were getting closer to the room. Erik was momentarily thrown off balance when there was a sudden release of tension, but he quickly recovered, and the adrenaline helped him move forward.

When the massive door opened, it revealed a pitch-black void that starkly contrasted the bright city that lay beyond it. Erik did not waste a single second and dashed through the entrance, his boots making a loud clattering sound against the metal threshold.

The horrifying sounds of his pursuers became increasingly loud as they closed in on him from behind. The pounding of their thunderous steps, the shrill cries of the Acidspitter Arthropods, and the monstrous roars all converge into one another to create a terrifying symphony that was at the same level as a horror film.

Erik forced himself to concentrate on the task at hand, which was shutting the door, despite the din that was going on around him. He whirled around and threw his weight against the large wheel as it turned. It resisted at first since it was locked in place by years of disuse. But Erik pushed harder, driven by sheer will and the primal instinct of survival.

His muscles tensed up in response to the effort, and veins began to protrude from his forearms. Sweat began to run down his forehead.

It appeared that time had slowed down, and each second seemed to last an eternity. The pounding of his heart in his chest was so loud that it drowned out the din of noise that was coming from behind the door.

The eerie light emanating from the Aclatrium ore beyond the door illuminated the horde, giving Erik a chance to see how much he had before being overrun. With each passing second, the shadows grew in size and became more menacing.

And then, just as the first monstrous figure reached the door, the wheel gave way. With a gut-wrenching creak, the door started closing. The last thing Erik saw was the enraged gaze of the monsters, their roars muffled by the thick metal door sliding into place.

Erik was left by himself in the abrupt silence as the door slammed shut with a resonating thud, immediately cutting off the sounds from the inside of the cave and leaving him alone in the silence that followed. He pressed his body up against the door that had just been shut as his heart pounded in his ears.

"That...was too close," he murmured, a shaky laugh escaping his lips as the reality of his narrow escape sank in.

Chapter 386: The exit

The silence did not last for very long, and Erik was startled by the loud bang reverberating through the solid metal door, which caused a jolt of shock to travel through his body. The enormous amount of force that generated the sound caused the door to tremble, and the sound of scraping metal filled the air.

After a few seconds, there was a second impact, and it was much stronger. The door buckled under the pressure, groaning under the assault of the monster behind it. The fear beginning to well up in Erik's stomach caused his eyes to widen as he took a step back.

A piece of the door suddenly gave way, accompanied by the screeching wail of protesting metal. The horrifying purple creature had punched a hole through the sturdy door, the size of the hole being just large enough to fit its horrifying face.

Erik froze, his eyes fixating on the sight of the monster's face poking through the hole in the wall.

The horrifying appearance of the purple creature's face was an amalgamation of human and beast, a horrifying visage that bore traces of its former humanity but was distorted by monstrous adaptations. It was a nightmarish visage.

Its skin was a dark, bruised purple that appeared to absorb the light in the surrounding environment, giving it a horrifying appearance. What appeared to be human features, such as the nose and cheekbones, had become twisted and enlarged, and the flesh had become gnarled and swollen. However, these features were still somewhat recognizable.

Its eyes, once the windows to a human soul, were now glowing orbs of intense yellow. They were devoid of any emotion that could be recognized, but they were burning with a pang of animalistic hunger. They were deeply embedded into its skull and sat beneath a thick, ridged brow, adding a menacing level of depth to its look.

However, the creature's most terrifying aspect was its saliva-dripping mouth. Instead of having human lips and teeth, it had a gaping maw that looked like it came straight out of a horror movie.

The inside of the mouth was lined with sharp, jagged teeth that glistened menacingly in the dim light. The teeth were set in a disturbing circular arrangement that could expand in a disturbingly non-human manner. It appeared as though the creature was anticipating a new meal by flexing and twitching its four appendages; it had four mandibles that framed its mouth.

Erik felt tremors of dread run through his body as a guttural growl rumbled from this monstrous mouth. The sight was the kind of thing that appears in nightmares.

The monster's features were contorted in an expression of savage rage, and its eyes glowed menacingly in the semi-darkness where they were located. Its hot, ragged breath caused the cold air

on Erik's side to become foggy, and it carried with it the putrid smell of decay, which made the young man gag.

The sight of the once-human creature had an unsettling impact on him, and he felt a cold chill of fear creeping up his spine. Despite this, he was unable to tear his gaze away. The beast had become a grotesque parody of its former self, making it a horrifying display for all to see.

In the face of the monstrosity, Erik's mind was a whirlwind of horrifying conjecture, racing with the various possibilities and questions that could arise in such situations.

He gave the beast a cursory examination, taking note of its grotesque features, including the glimmer of humanity that could be seen in its eyes and the perverted parody of a human smile that could be seen on its monstrous mouth.

Was this an example of a human thaid, an abomination spawned from the same dreadful process that birthed the creatures now stalking the planet? If so, what unimaginable torment must it have undergone during its transformation, as its body was warped and its mind likely lost to insatiable hunger and primal rage?

Nevertheless, another possibility came into view, and that was that perhaps this creature was the result of some inhumane experimentation. A gloomy relic from an era when science may have explored territory that it should have avoided in order to find a cure for the Sinister Cold?

Erik felt a chill run down his spine at the mere thought. No matter what the answer was, one thing was abundantly clear to Erik: the creature that stood in front of him was a chilling emblem of lost humanity, a nightmarish reflection of the thaid problem, and a testament to the effects of the Sinister Cold on earth.

As he watched the creature's nostrils flare and its gaze seemingly bore into him while it tried to get through the door's gap, the awakener's throat dried up. The creature appeared to be trying to get through the door.

As Erik scrutinized the monster before him, he activated his system's analysis feature, a sense of grim anticipation settling over him. However, he was met with a disappointing but not unexpected lack of information.

- Name: Unknown.

- Brain crystal power: Unknown.

-Race: Human-like thaid, no further information.

-Physical characteristics: Approximately 3 meters tall. Absurdly muscular. Estimated weight of 500 kilograms. It has purple skin and a mutated mouth. Its eyes are yellow with Feline slits for pupils, and it has long black human hair.

-Personality and traits: It has an aggressive behavior. No further information is known.

-Power Level: 349

-Approximate Strength: 180

-Approximate Intelligence: 2

-Approximate Dexterity: 134

-Approximate Energy: 684

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"This... This is completely insane... what the fuck is this thing doing here?!" Erik shouted, his voice coming out shaky. He could feel the icy tendrils of fear clutching at his heart.

Erik was terrified. Every single statistic and number that described the creature's capabilities hit him like a punch in the stomach.

Given its ridiculously high levels of strength, dexterity, and energy, it was impossible to fathom the creature's capacity for destruction. He was acutely aware of the rapid beating of his heart in his chest; each beat resonated with the growing anxiety he was experiencing.

His mouth and throat were parched, and it felt as though he had just ingested a handful of sand. With its dispassionate and systematic presentation of the facts, the screen appeared to be a warning of impending doom. Every new piece of information he took in served as a jarring reminder of the horrifying truth he was up against.

His thoughts raced, tumbling over one another in chaotic disarray, each one a sharp echo of a single terrifying reality: he was alone against a behemoth of incredible power that tried to destroy the door and kill him. The only thing that kept him alive was the Aclaitrium that made up that door.

His hand wavered in the air, hesitating before the data on the screen, fingers trembling slightly. The screen's bluish-white light flickered on his face, reflecting off his widened eyes, only intensifying his feeling of dread.

He had never encountered a creature this powerful before, with the exception of the mutant Blirdoth back in New Alexandria, whom only the fierce lioness was able to kill. Although the creature was significantly less powerful than it, it was still quite potent. This foe was not to be taken lightly at any point.

Erik gave some thought to the amount of manpower that would be necessary to bring such a beast to its knees.

"Even ten full squads might not be enough for this one... probably would need more. Maybe only the Fierce Lioness would be able to kill this thing," he mused aloud, his voice barely audible over the echoing growls of the beast outside. He glanced back at the creature, trying to tear the door down, and swallowed hard, knowing he had to leave this place quickly.

"I need to keep moving," he said, forcing himself to tear his gaze away from the nightmarish sight.

Erik turned around, and as he did so, his eyes fell upon a tunnel stretching into the menacing darkness that was behind him. He was holding the fire bucket tightly in his hands. It was a different way to go, another possibility to hold on to.

He was sure that his salvation and his way of evading the monstrous being that was pursuing him could be found hidden somewhere in the depths of the pitch-black pit.

He did not waste a single second and dashed through the tunnel, the sound of his footfalls reverberating off the stone walls. He was having trouble breathing, and his heart was pounding so hard against his ribs that it sounded like it was trying to escape the terror that was about to overtake him.

He ran as fast as he could along the winding path, the faint glow of the Aclatrium ore guiding him through the thick darkness.

Each meter he managed to travel through the seemingly endless tunnel felt like a victory because it represented another step away from death.

The screams of the monster that was behind him echoed throughout the tunnel, and he was able to hear them even after several kilometers had passed.

After what seemed like an eternity of running, his eyes finally caught sight of something a couple of meters ahead of him; it was the cold, metallic sheen of another Aclatrium door.

He moved closer to it while keeping his gaze fixed on the well-known handle of the vault wheel. He started to turn it, and his muscles tensed up in preparation for the effort.

The rusty wheel groaned in protest as the force was applied to it. As he continued his efforts, his fingers slipped once, then twice, on the cold metal, and sweat poured down his forehead as he did so.

After five long, nerve-wracking minutes, he finally managed to turn it entirely. The door creaked open, the sound echoing through the tunnel. He pushed the heavy door open with one last look over his shoulder.

As the heavy door creaked open, Erik found himself bathed in a soft, diffused light. His eyes quickly adjusted, and what he saw next took him aback.

"STAY WHERE YOU ARE!" a woman shouted.

Twenty people were standing before him, their eyes wide open and alert, and a mixture of fear and suspicion reflected on their faces.

Their attire was rudimentary, cobbled together from various fabrics that seemed to have been scavenged from the environment. The textures varied, some looked as soft as old cotton, while others had the coarse quality of burlap, yet they all shared the same signs of long-term wear and careful mending.

They were all armed with spears that had been improvised in some way. The shafts were constructed out of sturdy wood, and the pointed tips glinted with sharp, jagged pieces of metal or stone that had been expertly tied with thin leather strips. Erik realized they were not just tools of defense but symbols of survival.

As soon as the door had been opened, the points of these spears were directed at Erik, creating a barrier of bristly hair between him and the other people. The looks on their faces conveyed a message that was meant to remain unspoken.

"One wrong move, and you will end up with several holes in your body!" the woman shouted.

They held their weapons with confidence that only came from experience. Evidently, they had been through countless struggles, and their wary eyes made it clear. Here, in this forgotten corner of the world, Erik had stumbled upon a group of people; how many chances were there?

Chapter 387: An unwanted encounter

The woman at the forefront narrowed her eyes and focused on Erik with laser-like intensity. "Who are you?" she demanded.

Her taut posture, poised to spring into action, added an unspoken threat to her words. A palpable tension hung heavy in the open air outside the tunnel from which the young man came.

The tunnel's exit was teeming with grim-faced individuals, each armed with makeshift spears aimed directly at Erik.

The hostile gaze of the group felt almost tangible, a stark contrast to the peaceful surroundings but similar to the ominous atmosphere inside the underground ancient city. Erik's hand instinctively went to the hilt of his Flyssa, the familiar texture providing a small measure of comfort in this tense situation.

His eyes, as sharp as a hawk's, scanned his surroundings, taking in the number of potential adversaries and noting the escape routes.

He'd dealt with difficult situations before, but this one felt like walking a tightrope over a shark-infested pool. Erik looked at the woman at the front of the group, her demeanor and presence distinguishing her from the rest.

Her gaze was stern and unwavering, clearly hostile; her grip on her spear was firm but controlled; however, she was rather young, no more than thirty years old.

Her clearly once vibrant locks were now dull and lackluster, lacking the healthy shine that came from proper nourishment. Her face appeared gaunt and slightly sunken, as if she hadn't eaten in a long time or just ate poorly.

Her eyes were tired, and the effects of a lack of energy had dulled their bright luster. The freckles on her nose and cheeks stood out more against her pale skin.

The woman appeared emaciated, her clothing hanging loosely on her frame. The obvious lack of proper nourishment had taken its toll. Despite the signs of hunger etched on her features, the woman's gaze belied her physical state.

Her eyes, though tired, held a glimmer of determination and quiet strength. Her clothes, which were simple and worn, seemed to reflect her own state of deprivation. Earthy tones and faded fabrics clung to her frame, a testament to her tenacity and resourcefulness in the face of adversity.

She looked at Erik with an accusatory glare, as if she held him accountable for something. "If I were you," she said, her voice echoing around them, "I wouldn't be so quick to reach for that weapon."

Her words hung in the air, adding to the already thick tension. It was clear that this was a critical moment, one in which the wrong word or gesture could ignite the simmering tension into a blaze of violence.

However, Erik couldn't help but notice the state of the group in front of him. It wasn't just the woman in a bad state, but even the others. Their clothes were a jumble of different materials, crudely stitched together and frayed.

Their clothing was not just simple; it was rudimentary, a clear indication of their dire living conditions. But it wasn't just their clothes that painted a bleak picture. Their bodies told a similar story.

Due to a clear lack of adequate nutrition, each individual was lean, their bodies honed to sinewy wiriness. Their faces were drawn and gaunt, and their skin stretched thin over prominent cheekbones.

Their eyes, though fierce and determined, were deeply sunken and shadowed, a testament to their harsh existence. Despite their intimidating demeanor, Erik felt a pang of empathy. These people, it was clear, were constantly fighting for survival, their lives a daily battle against the odds.

Starvation was a cruel adversary, and Erik could see that it had already left its imprint on their lives. Erik used the biological supercomputer to analyze the people in front of him.

Except for the woman in front of him, they were all at the NI level. Not as strong as the others, but still powerful, as they were clearly young, yet they were all as strong as the average soldier in New Alexandria.

The young man could try to flee if he wanted, but doing so meant killing someone, and he didn't want to do that with people who were clearly starving, with torn clothes and shabby weapons. Moreover, even with Nathaniel's and the Xeridon Anteris's powers, he wasn't sure he could escape the encirclement.

However, there was a limit to how he would tolerate mistreatment. "My name is Erik," he said, trying to sound soothing. He made a conciliatory gesture with his hands, indicating that he had no intention of drawing his weapon.

"What are you doing here?" The woman's voice slashed through the tense silence like a knife. Erik could feel the others' gazes on him as well, their spears still pointing menacingly at his chest.

The awakener noticed the weapons: the spears' shafts were made of sturdy tree branches lashed together with strips of weathered leather and tightly wound twine. The rough-hewn construction spoke of necessity rather than craftsmanship, with each component chosen for its durability and availability.

A sharpened material jutted out from the tips of the spears, carefully fastened with vines and secured by tightly bound sinew; it looked like ore, but Erik knew there were thaids with sturdy bones as strong as metals out there.

Their jagged edges bore the scars of countless battles, evidence of their use in repelling threats and obtaining sustenance in the unforgiving wilderness. The overall length of the spears was impressive, reaching far beyond the average person's reach.

This gave them a significant advantage in their encounters, most likely allowing them to keep adversaries at a distance and strike with precision. He was aware that he needed to tread carefully and speak truthfully but cautiously.

He needed to assuage their fears without giving too much away. "I came from the city," Erik began, his voice steady despite the palpable tension in the air. "I was moving east and ended up inside that cave... I managed to get out, but it wasn't easy..."

His words hung in the air, an admission of guilt but also a plea for understanding. He watched as the woman, presumably their leader, considered his words, her sharp gaze unwavering.

"You were heading east, you said?" She finally asked, her voice a low, warning growl, revealing that she was far from convinced. Erik understood her skepticism; in their world, trust was probably a luxury few could afford to have.

"And you just happened to come across our territory, didn't you? Among all the places you came here, you just decided to take a stroll and awoke a monster that had been dormant for years?" Erik winced at her accusation.

"The monster?" Erik asked with a studying gaze. Then it clicked. "Ah, the humanoid Thaid, you mean?" he said.

"Exactly that," the woman replied with a stern and enraged look.

It wasn't his fault the young man ended there, yet it was clear he awoke to something he shouldn't have. "I didn't mean to. I had no idea what that was. I was just trying to get out, and then I... I must have disturbed it."

"Disturbed it?" The woman echoed, a cruel laugh punctuating her words. "You've done more than just disturb it, Erik. You jolted it awake. It will not sleep again until it has feasted. You've put all of us in danger, and something is telling me this was on purpose... Frantian..."

<Frantian...?> The young man thought, intrigued by her words. "I'm sorry," Erik said solemnly, meeting her piercing gaze. "I had no idea. I assumed that place was deserted. I wouldn't have taken the risk if I had known about the danger inside."

The woman's face hardened even more, the lines of her brow carving a stern mask. "So you're just a fool?" You just walked right into a monster's lair and had no idea?"

"I'm no fool. I fell into a hole and ended up in the underground city. I had no choice but to explore to get out of there. Waking the beast wasn't intentional." Erik began, but the woman cut him off again.

"Save your excuses," she snarled, her words as sharp as daggers. "Actually, I don't believe you came here by chance, as you claimed. I believe you're a soldier. How do you explain being able to get here by navigating through the forest at your age and being this strong while coming from the city? You must have received extensive training..."

<Uh? What does coming from the city have to do with being strong?> The young man reflected. It was obvious that there was more to this situation than he had previously assumed. Their obvious dislike for soldiers made no sense otherwise.

"I don't believe a word you said," the woman growled, her gaze hard and unyielding.

"You look like you came from the city and the military. You can't fool us with your stories." Erik instinctively tightened his grip on his Flyssa as she took a step closer, but she held up a hand. Her other hand, firmly gripping her spear, never wavered.

"We'll take you back to our village," she said, her voice echoing through the open space.

"The people there will decide what to do with you." Erik's heart pounded in his chest as she spoke. He was in a dangerous situation, trapped between a group of hostile people with abnormally high levels and the monster inside the underground city. He had no choice but to comply or be taken prisoner. His gaze never left the woman as he slowly nodded his agreement.

"Fine," he said, his voice barely a whisper. "I'll go with you."

<I should still be able to escape whatever shitty place you put me in...> the awakener thought.
<Besides, I'm curious about this village of yours...>

"It's not like you have a choice..." the woman replied with a cold glint while turning the other way and while the villagers approached him with their spears pointed at him. With that, under the watchful and wary eyes of the group, Erik was brought away from the cave exit toward an unknown fate in the hands of these hardened survivors. This situation intrigued him.

Chapter 388: Village Leader

Erik couldn't help but feel vulnerable after handing over his Flyssa and backpack. As an added precaution, he was led away from the cave entrance with his hands tightly bound. While suspicious and guarded, the group had not been overly rough, but they had also left no doubt about their ability to defend themselves.

The walk to the village had been an hour of hushed whispers and the crunch of leaves underfoot. Erik, closely flanked by two men with spears and surrounded by others, walked silently. His mind had raced with thoughts, looking for potential escape routes and considering his options, but curiosity surged within him as he thought about the words the woman said.

Was she hiding something? That was clear, but what could that be? Was it something related to their abnormally high strength? Occasionally, he glanced at the woman leading them, but she never met his gaze.

The forest they passed through was strangely quiet, save for the rustling of leaves in the breeze and the distant hooting of an owl. The trees appeared to tower over them, casting long, dancing shadows that only added to the tension.

Erik noticed the villagers walking through the forest, their eyes trained on any movement and eager for something to appear, their bodies coiled and ready to spring into action at a moment's notice.

<Weird...>

Erik noticed a strange lack of animals as they traveled through the forest. There were hints of them here and there, like a brief flutter of wings or a distant rustle in the undergrowth, but they were few and far between. The thaids, in particular, were scarce, which was unusual given their familiar presence in forests.

However, the creatures he did see were either too elusive or too fast to catch, even for the villagers. A pair of vibrant wings vanished into the autumn treeline, and a small, agile creature darted through the red foliage. Most of them were flying, their bright colors standing out against the new forest's colors.

Erik was perplexed by the strange lack of fauna. In his experience, forests were teeming with life. However, it appeared that the natural order had been disturbed here.

The scarcity of animals and thaids suggested a stressed ecosystem, starkly contrasting the situation in those parts of the forest he had previously visited. He pondered the implications of this, and his stomach churned as the village came into view.

The forest began to thin, replaced by something he didn't reasonably expect to see. A village appeared, hidden deep within the heart of the forest. The villagers felt relieved as they entered their safe haven, but Erik's anxiety grew. He was now in their territory, and it would be difficult to recover his seeds, weapon, and other belongings.

Yet, he was there by choice, as he was sure that reasoning with these people was possible. His gaze scanned the strange scene.

As they walked, Erik's eyes were drawn to a quaint, rustic hamlet suspended among the treetops that unfolded before his eyes like a painting. Houses made entirely of wood dotted the canopy, blending in with the natural aesthetics of the forest.

The weathered but sturdy wood bore the marks of meticulous craftsmanship.

These wooden houses varied in size and structure, each one distinct yet uniformly similar, reflecting the personalities and needs of their inhabitants.

Others were rectangular with flat roofs and were round and pod-like, resembling bird's nests. They all had one thing in common: they were all elevated, perched high on sturdy tree trunks.

A complex network of bridges wound its way through the treetop village, connecting the houses in a seamless tapestry of wood and rope. The narrow passageways suspended between the houses swayed in the autumn breeze, adding a dynamic element to the static structures.

The ground beneath the houses was nearly untouched, save for the natural path carved out by the villagers' steps while walking through the village. The forest floor continued its natural sprawl as if respecting the villagers' decision to live among the trees.

These people's adaptation to their surroundings, respect for nature, and ingenious means of survival were all reflected in the tree-bound architecture.

However, there was but a structure only on the ground. A large, ground-based structure at the village's heart stood out prominently among the aerial architecture. It was imposing, made entirely of seasoned wood, with darkened planks indicating its age and significance in the village. The structure stood in stark contrast to the elevated dwellings, physically and symbolically grounding the community.

The structure sprawled horizontally, echoing the natural forms of the surrounding landscape with its low-slung roof. Its simple, rectangular shape gave it a sense of humble authority. The heavy wooden door, ornately carved with symbols Erik didn't recognize, announced the presence of a wealth of tradition and history within.

The ground around the building was meticulously kept, a testament to the community's regard for the location. The beaten-earth paths that led to the structure were lined with wildflowers and small shrubs, their vibrant colors a welcome contrast to the rich, dark wood.

The group maneuvered Erik towards this structure, their spears still trained on him. The mood was tense, but there was an undeniable sense of anticipation among the villagers. The unusual presence of a stranger in their midst had shaken the otherwise tranquil village.

Erik was led toward the large structure, his hands bound and his belongings taken. Some villagers watched the group from their perches in the trees, their curious and wary eyes following their every move. Erik could only imagine what awaited him inside the large wooden structure as he approached it.

With a stern gaze, the woman leading the group addressed Erik. "Hey, you!" She said, "Keep your mouth shut once we're inside," she commanded in a firm tone. "Our people will decide what's to be done with you; one wrong word, and we execute you on the spot."

Her demeanor left no room for argument. Her steely gaze pierced Erik's, conveying the gravity of the situation. The villagers around them fell silent, the earlier excitement gradually giving way to palpable tension.

The building's heavy wooden doors groaned as they were pushed open, revealing the lit interior. Erik's nostrils were filled with the pungent smell of smoke and aged wood as he was led inside. The sharp click of the door closing behind him echoed throughout the room, signaling the start of a critical chapter in his unexpected journey.

Erik's gaze darted across the room as they entered the expansive structure. The hall was large and grand, with long wooden benches arranged in neat rows. A large red circle was painted in the center, standing out against the muted hues of the woodwork. The sight was striking, commanding attention and curiosity, but Erik's attention was drawn elsewhere.

A figure rose from a chair to the side, his silhouette stark against the interior. His movements were deliberate and slow, and his presence filled the room. The murmuring that had filled the hall moments before faded, replaced by a tense silence as the man approached them.

Erik could see him now—an older man, his face weathered by the years but bearing an unmistakable air of authority. His eyes were sharp, and he studied Erik with almost palpable intensity.

Erik felt as if the man's gaze pierced through him, as if his very soul had been exposed to this old man's scrutiny. Erik wasted no time analyzing the man in front of him, as it was clear that if all these people, all at the NI level, were so respectful of the man in front of them, it was clear that he was no ordinary person.

[WARNING. EXTREMELY DANGEROUS INDIVIDUAL SPOTTED. THE BIOLOGICAL SUPERCOMPUTER SUGGESTS THE HOST NOT TO USE ANY SYSTEM-RELATED POWER AS THE CHANCE THIS MAN CAN SENSE THE SUBTLE MANA FLUCTUATIONS THEY GENERATE IS VERY HIGH.]

Erik felt an immediate sense of dread as the urgent warning from the biological supercomputer echoed in his mind. His heart pounded like a war drum in his chest, the audible beat resonating throughout his body. His gaze was still fixed on the elderly man, but there was a tinge of anxiety in

the young man's eyes. The warning was clear: this man was not only dangerous but potentially catastrophic.

Erik's spine tingled when he heard the words "extremely dangerous" and was advised not to use any system-related power. He recognized the gravity of the situation. If Erik dared to use the system's powers, this man could probably detect even the tiniest mana ripple. The implication was clear: he would be discovered, his secret exposed, and his life probably lost.

This man was as formidable as, if not more so than, General Becker.

Erik shook his head, his heart pounding even faster as he took out of his mind the faintest idea of analyzing the man. He knew General Becker's might and understood the level of power the title of General carried with it, but seeing someone possibly more potent in this remote village was nearly incomprehensible.

Erik's instincts screamed caution, reminding him of the difficult situation he had suddenly found himself in. Letting these people capture him maybe wasn't his brightest idea. His normally steady hands were tense, the supercomputer's warning reverberating in his mind. Erik realized then that he was in the presence of a sleeping giant, and he couldn't afford to wake it.

As everyone waited for the man to speak, the hall became quieter. Despite his anxiety, Erik stood tall, meeting the man's gaze without flinching because he couldn't let him see how scared he was. He was in uncharted territory, unsure of what lay ahead, but he knew he had to remain calm. It was clear that his fate was in the hands of these people, at least for the time being.

Chapter 389: The Weight of Suspicion (1)

A sense of awe could be seen in the woman's gait as she made her way forward. It was evident that she was the group leader that had captured him, but when her eyes met the old man's, a mixture of fear and respect could be seen in them.

"Amos," she started, maintaining her composure despite the palpable tension that could be felt in the room.

She proceeded to describe how they had found Erik emerging from the woods without any weapons and appearing to be disoriented. She mentioned the beast that had been reawakened within the cave, alluding to Erik's unintentional part in the incident as she spoke about the creature.

As she continued her story, the atmosphere in the room became very quiet, and everyone's attention was drawn to the exchange that was taking place between her and the older man.

She didn't mince her words when she expressed the suspicions she had regarding Erik's background. She then turned her attention back to the young man for a brief second before saying, "We believe he may be a soldier from New Alexandria, Amos."

The mere fact that she had mentioned New Alexandria added another layer of complexity to the scenario. Her statement hung heavily in the air.

Amos maintained his silence for a few beats while he took in the information and studied Erik with an intensity that was on the verge of being unsettling. As the silence continued, the air in the room became thick with anticipation, to the point where it was difficult to breathe.

Erik held his breath as he became increasingly aware that the elderly man and the woman held a significant amount of responsibility for determining his future.

In his head, Erik started to assess the scenarios, working to take in all the information and formulate a plan for how to get out of the predicament he found himself in.

<New Alexandria... a soldier...what is exactly happening here?> He pondered, maintaining his outward calm despite the turmoil within. It was clear that they didn't have a reasonable opinion of the people from the city, meaning that something must have happened to them.

<Could they be the reason why they are so starved?> he asked himself. Despite his many questions, he understood the gravity of the situation: the wrong word or the wrong move could ignite a powder keg of suspicion.

He felt a chill creep up his spine as the realization dawned on him: he was entirely at their mercy. Erik was an outsider in a foreign land, surrounded by people who viewed him as a possible danger to themselves.

His eyes darted back and forth between the woman and Amos, and for a brief moment, a mute plea for comprehension flashed briefly within him and the older man.

Amos was given some space to think about the woman's words after she finished her story, and the woman took a few steps back as she did so. It was evident that she held a certain degree of respect for him—the kind of respect that comes from years of being led and guided.

As everyone in the room waited for the elderly gentleman to respond, the space remained calm and still, with anticipation filling the air. As Erik waited for the man's decision, he could do nothing but remain motionless, his heart thumping violently in his chest.

A lot was riding on the outcome, and the pressure was absolutely palpable. Every tick of the clock felt like an eon, and time itself seemed to drag on interminably. Indeed, he was sailing into uncharted territory at that point.

Amos, the elderly man, fixed Erik with a piercing gaze as he turned his silvery eyes, which shone with the wisdom of countless winters and the weariness of unspoken burdens.

The deep wrinkles etched into his face were a testament to the many challenges he overcame. Erik had the impression that he was looking at a fortress that was guarding its secrets with quiet resolve. Even though his stare was not outright hostile, it did hold an aloofness that was difficult to penetrate.

They were both looking at each other with intense concentration, the tension between them creating an intricate dance of uncertainty and inquiry. When his eyes locked on Erik, there was an almost palpable air of suspicion around him.

This man had clearly seen his fair share of combat; his very being exuded a sense of grit, and the look in his eyes conveyed tales of victories and defeats earned through arduous struggle.

There was something in his gaze, perhaps just a trace of interest, but a cautious reserve heavily masked it. Perhaps it was just a hint of curiosity. A glimmer of mystery floating in the middle of a sea of caution, like a solitary star amid a stormy night sky.

He appeared to be judging Erik, his glance like a breeze passing over an open book, reading the unsaid words and figuring out the untold stories.

Nevertheless, as Erik met his gaze, he discovered neither immediate acceptance nor a definite path toward trust. In this strange world, trust was a commodity that had to be earned and could not be taken for granted.

The awakener noticed the doubt in his eyes. He knew that was the right opportunity to get out of that mess.

Erik started by saying, "Excuse me..." but as soon as he opened his mouth to continue, Vanessa quickly cut him off, her tone being firm and unyielding throughout the exchange. "Silence! I warned you to keep your mouth shut!"

But before Erik could respond or swallow his words, a calm and firm voice echoed throughout the room, immediately commanding the attention of everyone in the room. It was Amos.

The old man issued the command, "Enough, Vanessa." His tone was authoritative without being raised or harsh, and it was not to be questioned in any way. After a moment of silence, Vanessa's hand on the spear she held relaxed ever-so-slightly, but her aggressive stance did not change.

Amos redirected his experienced gaze back to Erik, and this time there was a hint of interest shining in his eyes. "Let the boy speak," he proclaimed, retaining the barest trace of interest in his words.

There was a brief period of tense anticipation as everyone in the hall held their breath. The muscles in Vanessa's jaw tensed, but she refrained from raising any further objections. The only sound that could be heard in the room was the rustling of the wind outside the wooden structure as everyone waited for Erik's words.

The young man took a deep breath before starting his speech, keeping his composure despite the tingling sensation he was experiencing from the spears that were trained on him.

The young man spoke up and explained, "While I don't know what is happening, nor do I know what your problem is with the soldiers, I do understand a mistake is being made here today."

He then added some words with a look of sincerity: "I'm indeed from New Alexandria; there's no denying that. However, I'm not a member of the military. The city, in general, did not treat me very well," he said.

Amos responded to this with a raised eyebrow and a silent request for further explanation. Erik observed that there was a hush in the room, and even the wind seemed to be holding its breath in anticipation of his explanation.

"They tried to kill me," Erik admitted, looking straight into Amos's calculating eyes. "More times than I can count."

And with a resolute look, he said, "But they were unsuccessful..."

Chapter 390: The Weight of Suspicion (2)

The room was full of people looking suspiciously at each other. Erik could see out of the corner of his eye that some of the men's tense posture was beginning to relax slightly due to the young man's words.

Despite this, the spears did not lower their points; they continued to point in his direction menacingly.

"Why would they do that?" Amos inquired, his tone indicating nothing about what he was thinking in response to Erik's statement.

The awakener was the subject of the older man's gaze, which, while not entirely cruel, was nevertheless suspicious.

The manner in which he spoke to Erik exhibited some degree of deference, and it was clear that he recognized the power that the younger man possessed.

"For someone your age and coming from the city, you have an impressive amount of power. You would not have been able to make it here if it weren't for the fact that the thaids would have eaten you."

Erik gave a slight nod and swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat. The most challenging part was just around the corner.

He finally admitted it, raising his voice just a hair above a whisper, "Because of my brain crystal's power."

He could almost see the question form in Amos's head as the elderly man's eyes narrowed, and he searched Erik's face for any indication of dishonesty.

However, Erik was telling the truth in his statement here. His power, or, as he had come to think of it in the past, his curse, was the root cause of the initial misfortunes he experienced in New Alexandria.

Now all he could do was hold out hope that the residents of this peculiar village wouldn't turn against him as well.

"What do you think of that?" Amos spoke as if he had some comprehension of the young man's struggles.

Erik began his statement by saying, "I do not think this... I know for a certainty. My power... it's not suited to fight." Before returning to look directly into Amos' eyes, his attention was briefly drawn to the splintered surface of the wooden floor.

"I can... cause plants to grow faster." Once more, there was complete silence in the room. As she contemplated the new information, Vanessa's brows furrowed, and she formed a thin line with her lips by pressing them together.

Erik could read the questions forming in her mind as they were reflected in her eyes, but she refrained from asking. The expressions on the faces of the other villagers in the area were very similar to hers. They were full of questions.

On the other hand, Amos assumed a slightly forward, lean posture and kept his gaze fixed on Erik, almost as if he were trying to dissect Erik with his penetrating gaze.

His gaze revealed a curious mix of doubt and skepticism at the same time. He murmured, "That is indeed unique, but also not the most advantageous power for survival, especially in these times."

The dryness in Erik's throat caused him to swallow as he nodded his head. "I know. A man wouldn't be able to make it through a fight using that kind of power, at least not the kind you'd expect him to have. But it's all I've got, so I've had to learn to make the most of what I've got."

He neglected to mention that he could now actively manipulate the plants to do his bidding and even employ them as weapons. He decided to keep that information to himself because he was unsure how others would react to it. Maybe he could share it with them in the future; who knew?

Amos continued, his voice barely raised to the level of a whisper, "But you're here. You've made it this far with that power and this speaks volume about your skills," Amos said inquisitively.

"You should know that the world is not an easy place to be. You have likely come across Thaidis and beasts. How did you manage to keep yourself safe? Shouldn't the fact that you managed to do so with your power be a testament to your strength? How come they tried to kill you?" He lastly asked.

Erik took a moment to pause and think about his response. It was a question that made sense to ask.

"I understand your suspicions. You think that I'm lying and that my power is something else. But... You see, I'm an awakener... That is why I'm alive..." Erik remarked while maintaining a solemn demeanor.

It would explain how he made it here without being killed, but it would also mean that they would view him as a more significant threat. It was a complete failure in the tense environment.

He recalled his close calls with the Thaid's and the beasts as he reflected on those experiences. He recalled the rushes of adrenaline, the fearful anticipations, and the frantic struggles for survival he had experienced. However, he had improved; he had adapted.

Erik fell silent, meeting Amos's gaze steadily. He hoped they could see the truth in his words, the sincerity in his plea for understanding. He was not a soldier, not a threat. He was just a survivor, trying to make it through one day at a time in this cruel world he lived in.

After some time had passed, all that Amos could muster up to say was, "Interesting." On the other hand, his eyes told a very different tale.

Erik could spot the glimmer of curiosity flickering across the elderly man's face. Perhaps, just possibly, there was a possibility that they would acknowledge him, believe his story, and release him from his captivity.

Erik's eyes swept across the room, taking in the gaunt features of the villagers and taking in their emaciated and wiry bodies. He recalled Vanessa's slender hold on his arm and the hollows in the cheeks of the men who had pointed their spears at him.

He inhaled deeply and cast a quick glance in Amos' direction before continuing. He spoke into the room's silence, allowing his voice to reverberate throughout the space.

"There is something I can offer in exchange for my freedom, and I swear you won't see me again after this if you so desire," he said.

"I couldn't help but notice... but it appears as though you all could benefit from some nutritious meals. I... I might be able to assist you with that..."

A few of the villagers moved uncomfortably and exchanged glances with one another as they did so. Vanessa's grip on her spear became even more firm, and her lips thinner.

Despite this, Erik could make out a flicker of interest in their eyes—a glimmer of hope despite their mistrust. Amos relaxed his posture in his chair and curled his fingers into a steeple in front of him.

He gazed thoughtfully at Erik for a considerable amount of time, during which there was no conversation between them. Finally, with a rough tone in his voice, he inquired, "How?"

Erik elaborated, "My power," he said.

"With it, I can increase the rate at which I grow crops. In a very short amount of time, I can grow a seedling into a fully developed plant. I can contribute to the provision of food for your community."

He was met with a wave of people murmuring and staring at him with wide-eyed stares. While Vanessa retreated a few paces and Amos maintained his intent gaze on the young man, the woman's hold on her spear began to relax slightly.

He asked the question with a trace of wonder in his tone: "You can really do that?"

Erik nodded. "I can," he said. "But in order for that to happen, I need my stuff, and I need to be out in the fields with the dirt and the seeds," he added.

The room fell back into its customary state of utter stillness. The eyes of Amos, which were keen and analytical, remained fixed on Erik the entire time. Finally, he broke the silence after what seemed like an interminable amount of time.

His words carried the weight of authority as they reverberated through the room: "We need to think about this." that was all he could say at that moment. But he didn't stay silent for long.

"Vanessa," he said.

"Yes, sir?" the woman replied with a military demeanor.

"Vanessa, take him to the prison for the time being. I want at least two men guarding him at all times. Since he said himself he is an awakener, I want you to be among the guards..."