

BIOLOGICAL 391

Chapter 391: The Weight of Suspicion (3)

A determined expression appeared on Vanessa's face as she gave a nod. She flashed a signal in the direction of two of the men, and they came forward with their spears prepared.

"You heard him," she said, her tone authoritative. "Let's go."

As Erik was being led out of the hall, he cast a final glance toward Amos. The elderly man sat there in complete silence, his eyes never moving from Erik's back.

Erik could not read his expression, but he could see that he had thoughts racing through his head.

He clung to the belief that the villagers would recognize the value of his suggestion and that they would provide him with the opportunity to demonstrate his worth to them. For the time being, all he could do was wait and wish for the best possible outcome.

Vanessa showed everyone the way out of the building and eventually led them to a rope staircase that would bring them several meters up into the trees.

After that, Erik was led by his guide through the complex network of wooden bridges that linked the treetop dwellings together.

The gloomy twilight cast long shadows over the intricate maze-like structure, illuminating the village with a warm glow.

The echo amplified the ominous feeling already present in the room as his steps reverberated on the planks below.

He couldn't help but be amazed at the intricacy and apparent sturdiness of these people's community buildings among the trees.

The villagers looked at him suspiciously while watching him from their huts as the light faded.

Their expressions reflected a mixture of curiosity and mistrust. As Erik was being led toward his upcoming confinement, he could feel their gazes upon him. He maintained a confident demeanor and responded to their looks with a resolve that baffled them.

After some time, Erik and his captors made it to a shack located on the edge of the village, which was relatively secluded.

The young man's expression changed from concern to amusement as soon as he caught a glimpse of the detention facility. His brow furrowed in surprise. It was an old and run-down building, which stood in stark contrast to the relatively well-kept homes that were found in the village.

The building was little more than a crude shack made of wood that hung precariously among the branches of the surrounding trees. It was tenuously connected to the other structures in the area employing swaying rope bridges.

The clearly once vibrant color of the wood had been dulled to a grayish-brown as it appeared to have been weathered by the sun and the elements as it had been exposed to them for years.

The wooden planks were held together with crude nails, and patches of green moss and lichen were tenaciously clinging to them. These organisms thrived in the damp conditions of the surrounding environment.

Since the wood had deteriorated over the years, certain sections of the building gave the impression that they were only just about to hold together; the years of neglect were evident in the worn and splintered boards too.

The fact that the shack's door, which was equipped with rusty iron hinges, hung crooked was evidence of the countless times it had been used to imprison people who had broken the village's rules, and that attempted to escape the place.

A simple lock that was more of a symbol than a functional component served as its security. It was evident that the effectiveness of the prison depended more on the vigilant guards than on the physical construct of the prison.

The eerie stillness that pervaded the area was a somber reminder of the function that was supposed to be served by it. Despite how pitiful it appeared, there was an understated gravity, a solemnity born of its function and history.

With all of its quaint simplicity, the prison appeared to be less of a product of deliberate design and more of a reflection of the need to survive than anything else.

It was an undeniable illustration of the hardships the villagers had to endure and a testament to the peace the community had worked so hard to achieve despite its precarious situation. They probably didn't need to use that place often, so it wasn't as well-kept as the other buildings.

It was only when Erik looked at it for the first time that he was hit with the harsh reality of the situation he was in.

This was not a place of comfort but rather of confinement and exclusion, but it served neither purpose well.

Vanessa invited him to come in with just a few simple hand movements. Behind him, two stern-faced villagers took their places in front of the door, armed with crude weapons, and their eyes never leaving him.

As the door to the building closed behind the young man, Vanessa, the leader of what Erik could only assume was a hunting team or a patrol, remained standing in front of it. She watched as the door closed behind him.

Erik was left with nothing but the low hum of the wilderness and the distant murmur of village life once the wooden door closed behind him with a low creak.

When Erik turned to observe the confines of the prison, a pall of gloom descended upon him, providing a striking contrast to the dwindling lights that could be seen outside. An eerie stillness in the air could be felt, along with a damp chill that went all the way to the bones.

The minuscule windows, which had been roughly carved, did little to alleviate the suffocating darkness. Instead, they only permitted a few stray light strands to seep through the cracks.

Any remaining light was swallowed up by the weathered and aged wood, which resulted in a spooky maze of shadows that extended to every nook and cranny.

Above, the vaulted roof disappeared into a void of unpenetrable darkness, swallowing any semblance of light or warmth. This location was not designed to be comfortable, nor intended to alert its inhabitants to the passage of time. In this location, day and night became indistinguishable from one another, and the oppressive, claustrophobic atmosphere never changed.

The interior was so quiet that even the slightest sounds, such as the rustling of leaves outside, appeared amplified. The prison was a hidden enclave that was always dark; it was a completely different world from the rest of the village.

There was a pervasive sense of unease and misery, which served as a palpable reminder of its purpose, which was to confine, isolate, and punish. This location was not only dark in appearance but also emotionally draining, with an atmosphere that was as harsh and unwelcoming as the absence of light it emitted.

Erik maintained an incredibly calm demeanor despite the dire circumstances. He was aware of the desperation buried deep within the marrow of the villagers. He knew that they were on the precipice of extinction, teetering on the edge of a ravenous hunger that gnawed away at their willpower.

Yes, he understood their plight and was aware that they would not take his offer of food lightly, regardless of how suspicious they were of his arrival and the reasons for his presence among them. The villagers were in need of sustenance, and he had offered them a workable solution to their problem.

Settling down on the cold, wooden floor, Erik began to channel mana, a gentle, unseen current flowing through his body. His mind began to tread the familiar path of training, honing his neural links, the intricate web that connected his brain crystal and his brain.

There was no room for hopelessness or frustration because every second was a valuable commodity that he could not afford to throw away. He was determined to achieve his goal, and he wouldn't let his circumstances stop him.

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Despite his confinement, he experienced a sense of safety for some unexplainable reason.

The rickety wooden shack, the wary eyes of the guards, and the makeshift village nestled high among the trees all provided a barrier against the terrifying thaids that lurked outside. Still, it was a tenuous barrier at best.

The beastly nightmares that roamed the woods appeared to be a great distance away from him at that moment since they were kept at bay by the watchful eyes of the villagers.

This feeling only amplified as the night drew close, enveloping the village in a curtain of darkness. Even despite his rough surroundings, his dangerous situation, and the uncertainty that lay ahead.

Most of that was due to the fact that, for just one night, at least, he knew he was going to sleep soundly for once, as here, in the heart of the village, surrounded by watchful eyes and tall, sturdy trees, he was shielded from the dangers of the wilderness. For now, at least, he was safe.

As the day crawled by in languid strides, Erik did not attempt to escape his wooden confines. He knew the villagers were walking on thin ice; their nerves were frayed due to hunger and the dangers posed by the surrounding wilderness.

Any unexpected action on his part would set off a blaze of rage and fear among them, much like a spark would set dry tinder ablaze.

They would undoubtedly get furious if he managed to escape from the prison. Not to mention, Erik knew that once loose, he'd inevitably become the focus of a relentless manhunt. The frantic chase through the forest would pit him against an array of hostile faces, adding to the Thaid's ones. This would, in no way, help his cause; besides, there were some things he was curious about.

Furthermore, his belongings were not within his immediate grasp. Upon his arrival, the villagers took his backpack and weapon away and hid away in a location that was only known to those living there.

It would be a challenging endeavor, if not an impossible one, to retrieve them covertly while avoiding detection while doing so.

He understood that in order to prove to these individuals that he was not a threat but rather a possible ally, he would need to play the long game.

His mission was to survive, and if that meant abiding by their rules, even under constraint, so be it. Erik came to the conclusion that a day spent in captivity was a relatively minor sacrifice to make in light of the bigger picture.

However, in the solitude of his confinement, Erik immediately set his mind to move. The dark, quiet shack became a backdrop to a cerebral symphony as he initiated the intricate dance of channeling mana through the Parallel Will's neural links. He didn't merely endure the night; he turned it into an opportunity, plunging into a state of deep focus and dedication, his spirit immovable.

The method that the Biological Supercomputer developed was put to use so that he could increase the number of neural links that he already possessed and become stronger.

As the night drew on, Erik could feel the subtle but profound changes that rippled through his consciousness. He channeled his mana to increase his Force Manipulation power's neural links, every ounce of effort fueling the ability. The feeling was akin to stretching a muscle in that it was slightly uncomfortable but indicated growth.

In the midst of this mental exertion he was putting himself through, he was successful in making progress. He formed two neural links, one for Nathaniel's power and the other for the Parallel Will brain crystal power itself despite him using it to speed his training up. This was the final note that finished the symphony, and it rang through the halls of his mind like a bell.

However, he didn't spend the whole night training since he managed to increase his neural links relatively early in the night; since he was already close to a breakthrough in the past days, he went to sleep after the task was done, and he slept peacefully for once.

With the early morning light pouring through the cracks of the wooden walls, Vanessa entered the shack. The wooden door creaking jolted Erik from his sleep, drawing him back into the physical world.

"Wake up!" Vanessa yelled, her voice carrying an undercurrent of skepticism in its delivery.

Erik found himself shivering because a gust of cold wind had gotten into the shack through one of the holes in the wall. Unfortunately, the young man had to flee from the city right when summer ended and winter was coming.

He shook off the stiffness by stretching out his muscles, and his heart was beating in a rhythm that reflected the pulsating mana flowing through his body.

Even though he had a productive night of training, the rude awakening brought him back to the current situation he found himself in.

Erik responded, "Yes, yes, there is no need to shout," while his mind vibrated with the remnants of his nightly training session.

Jolted from his deep sleep, Erik blinked. His muscles groaned in protest after spending the previous night on the rough wooden floor. He slowly sat up. It was early in the morning, and the sunlight cast a silhouette around Vanessa, so his gaze couldn't meet the woman's cold eyes.

"We discussed your offer," she started, crossing her arms over her chest.

Her eyes were stern without being cruel, and she exuded an air of authority all around her.

"Regarding the matter of your...help. We are giving it some thought. However, we require evidence. Evidence that the power you claim to possess actually exists."

Erik could comprehend their demand, as the skepticism in her gaze reflected the desperate need for sustenance that the villagers had. He then said, "I see," and continued, "You want me to show you my ability to grow plants faster?"

"Exactly," Vanessa replied, "You show us, you help us, and perhaps we can reach a... mutually beneficial arrangement." Her words carried the weight of the villagers' hope and expectation, a silent plea wrapped in a veneer of hardened practicality.

"Alright," Erik said as he began pulling himself up from the shack floor, "I can show you. Lead the way."

A swift nod from Vanessa was all that was required to satisfy his need for confirmation. As Erik emerged from the dingy confines of the wooden shack, Vanessa and four other village residents accompanied him outside with their thin but not frail bodies.

They went through the canopy of intertwined branches and falling autumn leaves and crossed the network of wooden bridges that linked the treetop dwellings as they made their way through the forest.

People were climbing out of their homes and getting their hands busy with the work that needed to be done for the day as the village began to wake up.

Chapter 393: A Solution (1)

Erik could feel the eyes of dozens of people on him as he walked through the village; they were providing a silent audience to the stranger in their midst.

Their gazes were wary, cautious, and filled with unspoken questions. His presence was a disruption in their lives, an anomaly they were yet to comprehend.

A solemn stillness pervaded the atmosphere as the group descended from the tree line and moved closer to the farming fields.

Erik, who had been led there by Vanessa, found himself in the middle of an area lined with rows of tilled soil and where the villagers attempted to cultivate crops.

The plants and young trees struggling to survive in the neat rows were beginning to wither.

There were scattered groups of small vegetables growing here and there; their leafy heads bowed as if they were bearing the weight of something that couldn't be seen.

Even though it was obvious that the field had been carefully tended to, the harvest did not look promising at all, and there was no way it could be enough to support an entire community.

Erik cast his eyes around the area and noticed that the faces of the villagers working in the field were marked with desperation, but there was a tint of hope in them as they tried to make the field bear fruits.

Their faces betrayed the signs of weathered hardship, and their eyes held a lingering, weary sadness overall.

"Not enough," Erik murmured to himself. "Let's get to work," the young man added.

Erik took a few steps forward and approached a lone apple tree struggling to survive.

The tree's yellow leaves were trembling feebly. Its branches were too weak to hold any apples, and its roots did not have the vital energy necessary to thrive.

As Erik observed it, he saw a reflection of the villagers, who were resilient despite their lack of resources and able to survive despite being on the verge of death.

After taking a few deep breaths, he closed his eyes and lightly placed his palm on the tree's rough bark.

He focused his attention on the faint hum of the tree's life force as it responded to his touch. A gentle glow emanated from his hand, and the hazy emerald light seeped into the tree's bark, eventually merging with it to form a single entity—the process started due to Erik's gentle mana.

The mana around the tree began to buzz, and the ground beneath the young man's feet gave off the impression that it was beating to the same beat as life itself.

The village people stood still as they observed, in silence, the small yellowing tree trembling and its bark cracking as it began to expand.

The tree increased in height while simultaneously broadening its profile and thickening its branches, which reached upward toward the heavens.

The changes continued after that point. The leaves, previously a sickly yellow, underwent a transformation and almost immediately became a vibrant green despite the autumnal temperature.

A sign of life that had been missing from this field for a long time could be detected in the air: it smelled like freshly cut grass. The apples were the next item.

Little buds began to appear along the branches, and in a matter of seconds, they grew and blossomed into beautiful apple flowers.

After that, these flowers transformed into little green fruits that, with each passing second, grew bigger and more crimson in color.

The once-almost-dead tree was covered with ripe, juicy apples in a matter of seconds, and their intoxicating fragrance filled the area while simultaneously conjuring up images of an abundant harvest.

The villagers stood and watched in stunned silence, their expressions combining disbelief and amazement. The field, which had previously served as evidence of their suffering, was now witnessing a miracle.

The scene had a surreal beauty to it, with the recently revitalized apple tree standing tall and lush, its bountiful fruits serving as a promise of survival and a beacon of hope amidst the struggles they were experiencing.

Erik withdrew his hand, opened both eyes and turned his body to face the woman who had brought him there.

Her silence conveyed a range of emotions, including shock, disbelief, and a glimmer of hope; it was a silent acknowledgment of the miracle she and the others had just seen.

Vanessa turned to Erik, her voice barely above a whisper. "Can you... can you do this to the entire field?" She gestured towards the vast stretch of infertile land, her gaze moving from the flourishing apple tree back to Erik. A glimmer of optimism flickered in her eyes, and the weight of an unuttered prayer seemed to hang heavily in the air around her.

Erik nodded, his gaze steady on Vanessa's. "Yes, I can," he confirmed, his voice unwavering. "But it will take time. My brain crystal power relies on my mana, which is not infinite. I need to rest and recharge between uses." His tone was measured, matter-of-fact, as if he was discussing a mere logistic issue, not the potential salvation of an entire village.

"If you are ok with it we can work on the situation..."

In the utter silence of the field, his words appeared to reverberate. The villagers exchanged looks with one another as the scope of Erik's power began to dawn on them one by one.

The thought of being able to provide for the needs of their entire community and having an abundance of food was almost too much for them to take in.

Erik's ability to harness the power of his brain crystal was nothing short of a miracle for a group of people who had fought tooth and nail for every single meal.

After being stunned by Erik's display of power and contemplating his words, Vanessa gave a tentative nod and paused momentarily before gathering her wits and responding. "I get it," was the phrase that she uttered in the end.

When she looked directly at the young man, her eyes were hard and determined. "I will talk to Amos to see what he says about the matter. If he agrees, we will wait. And... we will help in any way we can. Planting more trees, tending to the vegetables, whatever you need us to do, we will do it."

Erik merely nodded, a very slight smile tugging at the edges of his lips as he did so. Instead of the skepticism and possibly even hostility he had anticipated, he found acceptance, understanding, and a sense of shared hope.

Vanessa signaled for Erik to follow her with a firm nod that conveyed her comprehension of the situation.

"Let's go. The sooner Amos knows about this, the better... He has the final say in everything that happens in the village, and I don't want to waste any more time."

And so, they set off once more. Vanessa led Erik back through the ground this time, the stilted homes above casting long shadows in the dappled sunlight. The usually lively village was quiet, its inhabitants probably trying to find something to eat, hunt or work.

When they approached the main building, Erik couldn't help but be impressed again by its splendor. The only building in the village firmly established on the forest floor was this massive wooden structure, which towered over the rest of the village.

He observed the reverence with which the community's people held their leader, reflected in Amos' meeting hall's careful construction and upkeep.

Chapter 394: A Solution (2)

The structure was constructed entirely out of weathered timber, and its weathered planks whispered tales of the passage of time.

This structure embraced the landscape with a sprawling elegance that belied its clearly long history and stood in stark contrast to the vertical houses that were scattered on top of the giant trees.

Its low-slung roof mirrored the surrounding terrain's undulating contours, which helped blend the man-made with the natural environment effortlessly.

The building's unremarkable rectangular shape gave off an air of understated authority. It served as a testament to the hidden power that could be found inside in the form of a man, Amos.

The heavy wooden door at the entrance stood as a testament to craftsmanship and heritage—something surprising in such a small community. Intricate carvings adorned its surface, weaving a tapestry of symbols whose meanings whispered secrets only the villagers could comprehend.

This structure served as the community's focal point as not only did it function as a physical gathering place, but it also served as a symbol of the community's shared history and ability to persevere.

As they stepped inside, the heavy wooden door squeaked open, releasing a musty aroma of thick wood and dusty books that washed over Erik. Despite the reverberating hush, Vanessa continued to guide him further inside, her steps determined.

They were going to run into Amos again, and Erik couldn't help but speculate about how this meeting would alter not only his future but also the village's future.

The silence that had been enshrouding the grand hall was finally broken when Vanessa's voice resounded throughout the space. "Amos, the young man's power is real. We've seen it with our own eyes. He could be the solution to our food shortage problem."

Even to Erik, who was not from the village, the problem was evident; however, hearing the woman talk about it openly was reassuring in a sense, as it meant that he held value within the community.

The elderly gentleman, Amos, sat back in his chair and intertwined his fingers while resting them on his stomach. He was examining Erik with a degree of scrutiny that had not been present before, and his eyes narrowed as he did so.

His gaze was so heavy that it was almost oppressive to be in its presence. Erik, however, saw a glimmer of something that could be described as hope within those depths.

After what seemed like an eternity, Amos finally nodded, and his lips curled into a small smile of contentment as he did so.

"Very well. We will welcome the self-proclaimed awakener's help." He declared with a voice as commanding as the ocean's tide.

Erik's expression changed to relief, but it was also tinged with a sense of curiosity because it was obvious that these people were concealing something. He was going to aid them for many different reasons.

On the one hand, it was the right thing to do. Erik had killed people and resented many, he even had a problem controlling his blood-lust sometimes, but he was not indifferent to people suffering, especially if they weren't from Frant.

Besides, he saw potential in building a relationship with people who survived in a Thaid-infested forest.

On the other hand, there were some prerequisites, which weren't particularly onerous but were still something he couldn't do without.

The young man squared his shoulders and looked directly into Amos's eyes with self-assurance. As the young man cleared his throat and got ready to present his terms, the tension in the room increased to a point where it was difficult to breathe.

Erik began by saying, "I am willing to lend my assistance," his voice resounded throughout the grand hall despite the absence of conversation.

"But in exchange, I ask that you return my belongings and that you treat me not as a prisoner but rather as a guest," the man said.

His words lingered in the atmosphere, posing a covert challenge in the guise of a straightforward question.

Even though he was an outsider living among them, the community's dire circumstances could be alleviated with the help of the talents he possessed.

It was a delicate balance, a negotiation of power, and both sides needed to proceed with caution in order to maintain it.

Amos looked at Erik for a brief period of time with his seasoned and penetrating gaze, during which the two of them shared an awkward silence that stretched between them like an unbroken thread.

As the other villagers awaited their leader's response, they held their breath in anticipation.

Erik was not attempting to command respect through his strength but rather through his goodwill. He was throwing them a lifeline in their hour of need by providing them with the opportunity for prosperity. In exchange, he only asked to be treated with respect and dignity.

It seemed to Erik like a reasonable exchange as well as a crucial step in laying the groundwork for the kind of relationship he wanted to have with these people.

His eyes, filled with determination, never wavered from Amos's as he spoke, silently conveying his sincerity and determination.

The older man leaned back in his chair, a wry smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "Oh? What makes you think you are in a position to ask us something?" he questioned, his voice layered with intrigue.

The room was filled with murmuring, and the villagers were shifting around in an uncomfortable manner. They were clearly taken aback by Amos's reply to the kid's gesture of goodwill. But Erik did nothing more than look back at the village leader with eyes that were unmoving and unblinking.

The fake awakener replied with an unruffled and unwavering voice, cutting through the murmuring that was going on all around them. "I don't believe I'm in any sort of position," he said.

"I don't believe I'm in any sort of position," Erik responded, his voice calm and steady, cutting through the whispers around them. "But from how you've treated me since my arrival, despite your suspicions... it tells me something about you. You didn't harm me. You didn't kill me outright, even though you thought I was a soldier from Frant, and it is clear you have problems with them."

He paused, letting his words sink in. The room fell silent once again as Erik continued, "That tells me that you're good people, or at least people willing to listen. I'm just hoping I've read you correctly."

His statements seemed to linger in the atmosphere, which resulted in the building of tension that could be felt throughout the room. Erik's eyes remained fixed on Amos as he remained completely silent while he awaited the leader's response.

After that, there was a reflective pause. The villagers hung onto the tense thread of uncertainty as Erik's words reverberated around the large hall where they were gathered. Amos's eyes became like deep wells of aged wisdom that reflected a lifetime of caution as he fixed them with his gaze.

Amos eventually broke the silence when he said, "The fact that you claim not to be a soldier from Frant does not necessarily make it true," his voice resounded throughout the silence.

"The fact that you claim not to be a soldier from Frant does not necessarily make it true," Amos eventually broke the silence, his voice resonating in the quiet. "You could still be deceiving us. However," he paused, glancing at the villagers around him before locking his gaze back on Erik.

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Erik was holding his breath as he waited for the older man to announce his decision, and the atmosphere in the hall became thick with anticipation.

Amos finally exhaled a sigh that seemed to break the tense atmosphere in the room after what seemed like an eternity had passed.

"However," Amos repeated, this time using a more subdued tone of voice. "I think we've reached a point where we must be willing to take some chances for the sake of the bigger picture. If you can truly assist us, as you have shown with the tree, then it would be not very smart of us not to accept your assistance. No, it would be foolish.

His gaze lingered on Erik, unwavering. "We accept your conditions. You will have all of your belongings returned to you, with the exception of your weapon, and from this point forward, you will be treated as a guest. In exchange, we anticipate full cooperation from you as well as transparency."

Erik gave a satisfied nod as a wave of relief washed over him. The choice made by Amos represented a significant step in the right direction, which hopefully turned out to be beneficial for everyone involved.

"Vanessa," Amos commanded in a voice that was commanding without being oppressive, "take him back to the fields. Let him begin his work. And see to it that his belongings are given back to him." Vanessa indicated her comprehension with a swift nod.

The focus of Amos's gaze then shifted to another individual, a hulking figure that was standing to the side. He yelled out, "Theron," and in response, the man's head shot up in a jerking motion.

Erik twisted his head to look at the other person, and as his eyes landed on him, he noticed the man's stocky build and broad shoulders. Erik was a few centimeters taller than Theron, and he could only speculate that the years of hard labor and struggle that Theron had endured in the harsh wilderness had made his frame more robust.

His skin was darkly tanned and covered in a variety of scars that told the stories of the many battles he had fought and suffered through.

Even though he kept his dark hair cut short—possibly for reasons of practicality—the appearance of silver in his hair revealed his true age. His jaw was covered by a scruffy beard that was not kept in good shape, giving him a more rugged appearance. His eyes were a dark, earthy brown color that held an intensity that was difficult to ignore, and they were the feature that stood out the most.

Erik noticed that Theron moved in a very deliberate manner, even though his clothes were homemade and simple, like those of the others. Each movement was performed with purposeful strength and unadulterated, unrefined power.

The mere sight of him commanded respect; his presence in this harsh environment silently spoke of his ability to survive and thrive despite the challenges it presented.

"There is a vacant house in the western sector of the property. Make sure everything is ready for our visitor before he arrives."

A grunt of acknowledgment came from Theron, and his dark eyes met Erik's for a split second before he turned away to carry out Amos's instructions. The initial hostility was gradually replaced with reluctant acceptance and, to some extent, curiosity as the atmosphere underwent an almost palpable shift.

This arrangement came as a surprise for everyone; however, if this agreement were to prove beneficial to the community, then all of them would be willing to take a chance on it, just as Amos had decided to do. This was also an opportunity for Erik, and he intended to make the most of it in any way he could.

At that moment, Vanessa said, "Come on, then," while pointing Erik toward the exit. As the woman and Erik made their way out of the vast hall, they were followed by the scrutinizing eyes of Amos and the other people while Theron left the building to prepare the house for the young man.

The sun was positioned very high in the sky, but the wintery clouds approaching from the north shielded the forest from it. The day's oppressive heat was lessening, giving way to colder and lower temperatures.

The once-hushed conversations of the villagers eventually petered out into silence. Erik observed that some of them watched with a glimmer of hope in their eyes, perhaps believing that their protracted struggles would eventually come to an end and that they would be given a break from their survival struggle.

Their voices were silenced, and in their place came the chirping of the elusive winter forest birds and the rustling of the wind as it wove its way through the autumn leaves above them.

They traveled along the road that ran beneath the wooden walkways used to connect the various homes in the treetop village. Erik cast a quick glance in all directions, noticing with his sharp eyes the skilled labor that had been put in to construct a village such as this one.

It was remarkable, especially considering the limited resources these individuals had available to them.

Perhaps they had a healthier economy many years ago, but it was abundantly clear that they lacked in many other areas. Vanessa, the leader of the team that "captured" him, walked ahead of him purposefully, her stature and demeanor revealing a great deal about the role that she played among her people.

As they made their way away from the elevated homes and closer to the edge of the village, they noticed that the surrounding forest was beginning to thin out, revealing areas of cleared land.

A feeble attempt at agriculture was made amidst the all-encompassing natural environment by randomly dividing up small plots of land.

The sight of struggling crops interspersed with patches of hardened, infertile soil was disheartening. It was a testament that was all too real to these people's challenges.

When they had, at last, arrived at the fields, Vanessa made a broad gesture in the direction of the vast expanse of vegetation that appeared to be malnourished.

Erik slowed down for a second, pausing so that he could survey the painstakingly tilled soil and the wilted plants that were reaching for the sun.

He could feel the pressure of their hopelessness pressing down on him, and the silent plea Vanessa was making with her eyes became more apparent.

The journey had ended, and he was now just moments away from beginning his real job.

With an imperious wave of her hand, Vanessa gestured towards the field. "Now, Erik," she commanded, her tone brooked no argument. "Do your thing."

Despite the apparent order, a pleading look could be seen in her eyes. Her tone of voice carried a sense of utter desperation that was easily discernible. Erik took in her stony face and the expectant looks on the faces of the others who had gathered to watch.

There was absolutely no room for error. This was critical to their survival, and Erik had assured them he had a solution. Now it was time for him to make good use of his power.

The young man positioned himself in a crouching position and extended his hand in order to take a soil sample from the depleted area.

When he ran his fingertips through it, it had a dry and almost lifeless sensation, which was a stark contrast to the rich and fertile earth he had become accustomed to feeling while working on the farm in New Alexandria for so many years.

When Erik looked closely at the coarse, nutrient-depleted granules, he was able to recognize the subtle signs of an environment that was out of whack, thanks to his expertise.

The soil did not have the robust quality or dark color characteristic of a flourishing terrain. Instead, it had a paler hue and was devoid of the essential nutrients that are necessary for the growth of plant life.

Chapter 396: A Solution (4)

The problem wasn't a simple lack of water or sunlight. It was something much more predatory. Something was stripping the earth of its vitality, turning it into a lifeless wasteland that was unable to support any form of living thing.

His thoughts went straight to a terrible conclusion the moment he saw the state of the terrain. He turned behind to look at the woman who brought him here, Vanessa. When their eyes met, he noticed a change in her expression from one of eager expectation to one that suggested apprehension. She was smart; she must have noticed his expressions when he analyzed the soil.

When he finally spoke, his tone was as parched as the dirt he held in his hand.

"Before doing what I came here for, another matter must be addressed..." Erik said.

"And what would that be?" Vanessa replied.

"I can grow the plants and everything else, yet, this won't solve the problem while I'm gone," the young man said.

The woman regarded him with a touch of mistrust, but at the same time, she was aware that they had to rely on this child for the foreseeable future. However, Amos might also decide to kill him if he believes the man will be a danger to the village, or even worse, if he believes the young man is a soldier.

But why was he sharing this information with her? Wouldn't it make more sense to conceal information of this nature and make oneself indispensable to the situation? Would it not be possible for him to stop them from killing him this way?

"Why are you telling me this?" Vanessa asked. That didn't make sense, especially if he was a Frantian soldier.

"Just to show you my goodwill..." Erik replied, leaving the woman flabbergasted.

"So? What would solve the situation once and for all?" she then asked as soon as she recovered from the slight shock.

Erik kept a close eye on the woman in front of him. After that, he brought the dirt to Vanessa and let her look at it.

"The soil here... it's lacking critical nutrients. Minerals like nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, and others." Erik's voice was steady, his agricultural knowledge surging to the forefront.

"Without them, most plants struggle to grow. They need these minerals to build proteins and DNA and to help with photosynthesis."

He stood up, wiped his hand on the front of his pants, and turned to meet Vanessa's worried gaze as she stood there watching him. Erik reoriented himself to face the woman and met her worried gaze with a serious one of his own.

"The root of the problem," he began, choosing his words carefully, "is the Thornroot Vortex," he said. "This is a particularly aggressive plant species born after the Sinister Cold appeared. Scientists think it spread because humans and thaids learned how to harness mana, and those changes in mana led to plant mutations, among which this one."

He took a fragment of the withered vine in his hand and held it up for her to examine.

Although it appeared to be harmless, the plant was actually dangerous in every sense of the word. "Not only does the Thornroot Vortex spread rapidly, but it also removes nutrients from the soil at an alarming rate. Other plants are deprived of nutrients, making it difficult for them to grow."

He crossed his arms over his chest and looked out over the desolate field as he threw the vine back onto the ground. He continued while keeping his voice low, saying, "It's like a silent, insidious plague." If we do not get rid of it, nothing that we plant here will be able to grow correctly. Because of the Thornroot Vortex, the soil is in such a precarious condition right now.

However, I must also tell you this: the Thornroot Vortex is not a plant that should be here."

Vanessa quickly caught what Erik was trying to say. "Are you implying someone put this here on purpose?" she asked.

"That is exactly what I'm telling you..."

An expression of rage fueled by comprehension spread across Vanessa's face as her eyes widened. They were now able to put a name to their unknown adversary, and the gravity of their situation seemed to lessen a bit, but what Erik said for last was even more problematic than the lack of food, which brought the difficulty of the situation into sharper focus.

Erik let go of the handful of earth in his grasp, and its grains fell back onto the barren ground from which they had originated.

Then Erik went back to the previous topic. "This Thornroot Vortex," he said, "it's like a greedy beast. It devours everything, leaving nothing for other plants. It's why the crops you planted... they couldn't compete."

A pause that was pregnant with the weight of the importance of his revelation. The mission had become substantially more complex, and the burden of carrying it out was now heavily distributed across their shoulders.

"But," Erik added, a glimmer of resolve lighting his eyes, "it's not impossible. Difficult, yes. But not impossible. I will tell you where to find it after you return my stuff. In the meantime, let me do what I came here for. I promise you that tonight there will be a feast."

After Erik had finished explaining something, he paused momentarily and closed his eyes. Vanessa watched with a curious expression on her face as he gradually assumed a calm expression.

The mana that was all around him started to stir at that point. It wasn't an abnormally large amount, but the way it pulsed produced an odd sensation for those close to him.

It was a soft whisper that the plants around him could only pick up on, but it was a kind and encouraging call.

At first, the change was so subtle that it was almost impossible to notice. Small shoots struggling to emerge all around Erik's feet started to react. They shook, twitched, and then started stretching upward toward the sky as if an unseen hand was pulling them up.

As the seconds passed, the effect grew, eventually reaching a radius of fifty meters around Erik and spreading outward. It resembled an undetectable ripple moving further and becoming more intense as each second passed.

The wilted leaves began to unfurl, revealing a profusion of new shades of vibrant green that were previously absent. As the stems bore the weight of their lost strength, they straightened.

The nutrients in the soil encouraged the roots to grow deeper, strengthening their hold on the ground. The once-decaying farm was suddenly resurrected all around Erik, and it was teeming with vitality and a force of life that hadn't been there just a few seconds earlier.

The result was truly amazing to look at. A verdant area that was once nearly barren has been replaced by one that is verdant and flourishing.

It demonstrated Erik's formidable power—the kind of power that infused the essence of the natural world around him with vitality and life.

As she took in the scene, Vanessa watched with astonishment as her eyes widened.

In the meantime, more fresh buds began to form, and flowers that had previously appeared to be withering began to blossom once more with a rekindled vitality.

The shift was so profound that Vanessa initially had trouble comprehending what she was seeing. Standing right in front of her was a young man who possessed a power that had the potential to breathe new life into their withering farm and prevent her community from perishing from hunger.

"We will need to repeat this..." Erik said to the woman once he finished.

Chapter 397: Samuel (1)

A buzz of excitement rippled through the group of farmers, watching the spectacle of the verdant landscape unfurling around Erik. Their expressions conveyed awe, surprise, and a sense of profound relief all at the same time.

They had been looking at a desolate landscape just a few moments earlier, but now, all thanks to Erik, they were in the middle of a verdant oasis, alive and active. What they just saw defied explanation and could only be described as a miracle.

The farmers approached Erik in large groups, much like a swarm of bees drawn to sweet nectar.

The promise of a fruitful harvest changed their expressions, which were previously sterner due to their struggles.

They swarmed around the young man, their weathered faces glistening with the fresh hope they had just found.

"Who are you?" one of them called out, breaking the silence.

"Where do you come from?" asked another, their eyes reflecting genuine curiosity.

"Is this your brain crystal power? It's amazing!" a third chimed in, motioning to the thriving field around them with a sweep of their hand.

"Are you here to stay?" another hopeful voice cut through the clamor.

Erik was deluged with questions like he was in the middle of an unexpected summer storm. He stood there, surrounded on all sides by the lively conversation, with each voice vying for attention and competing to be heard by him.

The onslaught of questions left him with little room to respond, and as a result of that, he felt a wave of chaotic and overburdened stupor wash over him.

Erik, however, maintained silence throughout all of the mayhem. He swept his gaze over the eager faces of the crowd, each one hanging in anticipation of his response. He could make out a glimmer of hope in their eyes and a desperate yearning for a guiding light to transform their lives.

This moment, he realized, was much bigger than him. It was about a community on the brink of despair, seeing a glimmer of hope for the first time in a long time. It was overwhelming, yes, but it also brought a sense of purpose he hadn't felt before.

Then, a man detached himself from the crowd and moved towards Erik. His name, Erik would later learn, was Samuel Thornfield.

At first glance, Samuel appeared to be a man who stubbornly refused to conform to the norms of the passing of time. His body looked more like that of a man in the prime of his life, even though he had a dusting of silver in both his hair and beard.

His body showed the hard-earned signs of a life spent toiling under the sun, including being lean and striated with muscle. He was living proof of the adage that one's age is nothing more than a number.

His face, weather-beaten and etched with lines of experience, held deep-set hazel eyes flecked with green.

They shone with a kind of sageness that could only come from years of laboring the land, which Erik found extremely impressive. The tenacity and fire of determination that could be seen in those eyes drew the young man closer.

Samuel's hair, which had previously been a deep chestnut brown color, was now tinged with gray, a distinguishing sign of his advanced age. Despite the receding hairline, the rest of his hair was well-groomed and framed his face nicely, lending an air of rugged charm to his overall appearance.

His hands, which were tough and calloused, bore the markings of countless hours spent working among the soil. These marks demonstrated the strength of a man who was dedicated to his work.

For someone of his age, he surprised people with his surprising agility and endurance. His wiry strength was evident in his frame, hinting at surprising agility and endurance.

His muscles bore the mark of a man whose life was in sync with the rhythms of nature and were subtly defined. His life was rhythmic.

Samuel epitomized the stereotypical image of a hardworking farmer with his weathered overalls made of faded denim and his faded checkered shirt, which Erik was curious to know where he did find. Even though they showed signs of wear and tear from years of use, his clothes seemed well cared for, indicating a practical yet meticulous man.

His travels through the fields were marked by a pair of muddy boots that had since dried out and become dusty. His ensemble was finished with a straw hat with a broad brim, which protected his face from the sun's intense glare.

The fact that his sweat and dirt ruined the fabric showed that he labored in the open air for a significant amount of time.

Erik noted the vitality that seemed to exude from the man. Despite his advanced years, Samuel Thornfield carried an air of youthful vitality.

His remarkably toned physique conveyed that this was a man whose connection with the earth extended far beyond the scope of his occupation as a farmer.

Erik could not help but respect him due to the strength that he possessed as well as the resiliency of his spirit.

The young man was suddenly confronted with an obtrusive screen that displayed stark red lettering that flashed urgently.

[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.]

<What the hell?>

Erik's brows furrowed in bewilderment as he looked back and forth between the system warning and the figure of Samuel Thornfield. The man, who just a few moments earlier appeared to be nothing more than an aged yet weirdly youthful and exceptionally fit farmer, was abruptly redefined in Erik's mind. This was not your typical farmer at all.

This was a man who was identified by his biological supercomputer as a potential threat.

And the questions that spun in his mind were perplexing. How could this isolated village house two individuals with such heightened abilities when New Alexandria, a bustling city of millions, had only one? It was an anomaly that gnawed at his understanding.

How could a place so seemingly primitive produce beings of such advanced abilities? The puzzle was far from clear, and for now, Erik could only ponder over these unsettling mysteries.

However, he didn't have the time to do so now as the man quickly ended up in front of him since the other farmers made way for him.

Samuel's brown eyes sparkled with eagerness to learn. The man exuded an air of quiet assurance, a quiet fortitude born of years spent laboring under the sun and rain, an unwavering strength carved by the winds of adversity, and it was clear that he had come a long way from his younger days. Yet, they also had a tiny spark that indicated his happiness and maybe curiosity.

"Well done, young man," Samuel began, his voice carrying the gravelly timbre of age but laced with a warmth that immediately put Erik at ease. "You've turned a wasteland into an Eden. And in the process, you've given our people something we desperately needed - hope."

Erik felt a flush of embarrassment and rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. Despite everything he went through, how he behaved with his friends, how he used to take command under challenging situations, how he fought thaid and faced enemies, the young man had trouble in these situations.

He was not used to such praise, especially from strangers, and his social skills didn't develop that much just in these short months he met Amber and the others.

Chapter 398: Samuel (2)

In an effort to downplay the significance of his contribution, he managed to say, "I... I just did what I could, sir," trying not to result arrogant in front of this man.

Samuel let out a chuckle, a quiet sound that reflected the experience and maturity that came with his years. "In this day and age, humility is a quality that is hard to find, especially in people with similar talents. You have every right to be praised and be proud."

Despite the compliment, all Erik could do was shrug, and his eyes quickly shifted to the verdant landscape that was now completely encircling them and that starkly contrasted the autumn colors around them. It wasn't false modesty.

He genuinely believed that he had merely done what was necessary for his survival and what, of course, was the right thing to do. After all, with his power, all of this was a simple matter to him.

"What I'm wondering," Samuel said, his tone shifting slightly, "is how you learned so much about plants and soil. It's not something one typically picks up without experience or education, especially considering you come from the city..."

This made Erik pause. Did this man know what was outside of the village? Did he come from New Alexandria?

Aside from those questions, answering him was easy, and he didn't have to lie. "I worked on a farm for some years," he explained, his voice steady. "My employer, Mister Fox, taught me everything he knew about plants and soil. And I... well, I just never stopped learning, I guess."

Samuel gave a satisfied nod, indicating his happiness with the answer. After that, there was a silence that was relaxed and based on mutual comprehension.

The older farmer turned his attention back to the young man after he turned to look at his surroundings once again, and a subtle shift in his expression indicated that the younger man had earned at least some measure of respect from him.

It was a moment of connection that bridged the gap between them, two individuals, both forged by the land they cherished and shaped by their hardships.

They went through very different lives, but at that moment, they were just two souls sharing the same sky, connected by the shared language that farming represented. This was true despite the vast differences in their experiences.

Silence lingered for a couple of seconds, but it was a pleasant quiet filled with the harmonious sounds of nature all around them.

In this moment of shared comprehension, everything seemed to come together in perfect harmony, from the leaves rustling to the birds chirping.

After what seemed like an eternity, Samuel broke the silence, his voice carrying a note of earnest appeal. "Erik," he started, "would you consider coming to the fields daily and teaching us what you know? Knowledge like yours can change the lives of everyone in this village."

Erik remained silent for a while, his attention fixed on the individual standing before him. The request was reasonable, and he lacked any valid justification for rejecting it. In fact, the young man experienced a growing sense of purpose in his life.

This presented an opportunity to do something more than just survive; it was a chance to make a contribution that mattered in some way. It was true: he killed, and he robbed people of their powers; damn, he even considered killing people just to steal their powers when he first got the system.

Yet, as his power grew and he experienced the world and the love Amber gave him, as he saw their friends' sacrifices for him, something else sparked in his mind, aside from his hatred before his life took this turn.

He extended a hand towards the older man, a symbolic gesture of agreement and commitment. "You have my word. I will come and share what I know with you and the other farmers."

Samuel broke into a broad grin as he extended his hand to Erik and gave his friend a hearty shake. It was a straightforward conversation, but the significance of what they had agreed to was profound.

For Erik, it was a fresh start, an opportunity to assist, learn, and be a part of something bigger than himself.

While the young man was standing in the middle of the group of grateful farmers, his attention was drawn to a figure that was coming up behind him from the side.

It was Vanessa, her face flushed with excitement and her eyes glinting with an enthusiasm that reflected the lively atmosphere of the occasion.

She moved with purpose as she navigated her way through the chaotic crowd in order to reach Erik.

"Erik," she called out, her voice commanding urgency. "There are more sections of the field that need your attention." The young man turned his attention to her and nodded in response to her statement.

The day was far from over, and work was still to be done. With a final glance at Samuel and the others, Erik prepared to take his leave, ready to bring life to the remaining fields.

Samuel, however, called out to him before he could take a step away from him. The older farmer's eyes sparkled with an inner joy that spread warmth throughout the gathering as it spread through the older man's body.

The open field was filled with the reverberation of his voice, which had become rough with age and experience but still carried with it the vitality of the moment.

"Hey, kid!" Samuel began, his tone infused with gratitude. "We're planning a feast tonight. Thanks to your help, the land has given us enough to feed the whole village."

His words caused a wave of excitement to spread throughout the assembled crowd, filling the air with hushed conversations and the sound of shared laughter. The anticipation of a meal, which would be a celebration of the abundance of the land, brought smiles to many people's faces, which had been severe and anxious just a few hours earlier.

Erik took a moment to collect himself after being startled by the unexpected invitation. He was unfamiliar with the concept of a feast held in the village. He was used to spending his time alone, and his interactions with others were typically limited to necessary ones.

He usually ate with his friends for the few months he spent time with them, but that lasted four or five months at best. It couldn't be said he did it a lot. Nevertheless, the idea of a party for the whole community piqued his interest.

Samuel continued, his voice earnest, "It would be an honor to have you come with us."

Following a brief pause during which he observed Samuel, Erik broke into an earnest smile.

The invitation extended by the more experienced man moved him, and he nodded his head in acknowledgment. In addition, the young man was concerned about how Amos would perceive him if he gave a poor first impression.

After that was resolved, he turned his attention back to Vanessa, eager to continue the work they had planned for the day.

As Erik moved towards the remaining fields with the woman, the joyous chatter and laughter behind them reminded them of the celebration that awaited them in the evening. The promise of a shared meal, lively discussions, and the simple joy of community interaction filled the air with anticipation Erik had never experienced.

Samuel grinned to himself in contentment as he watched them walk away after their conversation. He couldn't help but feel an overwhelming sense of fulfillment as the crowd dispersed to start preparing for the feast that would take place that evening.

Their town was not only being given a second chance at life but also welcoming a new person into their tight-knit community at the same time.

And Samuel was sure, thanks to the wisdom and experience that comes from having a lot of experience under his belt, that this was just the beginning of better days to come.

Chapter 399: A Joyous occasion

The sun was just beginning to dip below the horizon when, all of a sudden, the atmosphere in the village changed from one of calm to one of palpable excitement.

The residents of the quaint little community had finished their work for the day and were now concentrating on getting ready for the big party that would take place that night.

The women, who were dressed in colorful ensembles, and the men, who wore the least amount of clothing possible that was still spotless, worked together to prepare the environment for the upcoming celebration.

The village square, which served as the community's beating heart, was exquisitely redesigned into a joyous haven.

The villagers' eager expressions were illuminated by the soft light emanating from the lanterns, crafted from indigenous materials and hung from one corner to the next.

The scene was dominated by expansive wooden tables laden with a feast comprised of delicacies derived directly from the bounty of Mother Nature.

Children ran around with contagious laughter and boundless energy, dodging and weaving between the adults talking between them.

The village elders, whose faces were marked with deep lines of wisdom, shared sentimental tales about the past while their eyes twinkled with joyous memories of those times.

A blazing bonfire was started in the middle of the town square as the peaceful evening cloak was being drawn over the entire community.

The glow of its raging fire cast moving shadows over the landscape, creating a cozy and welcoming atmosphere throughout the village. A group of musicians began to play simple, homemade instruments in the bonfire's glow.

They strummed, drummed, and hummed as they wove a lively rhythm that breathed new life into the celebration.

The air was filled with the enticing scent of freshly prepared food. Dishes that were fragrant and contained turmeric were distributed around the table in bowls and platters filled to the brim with colorful fruits and vegetables of every imaginable shape and size.

Even though the feast was simple regarding the food served, it was a celebration of their labor and the bountiful harvests that their cherished land had provided.

While the villagers enjoyed their feast, there was much merriment and camaraderie in the air.

Laughter could be heard, and tales were told to one another. The elders enjoyed their food with contented sighs and nods of approval, while the families' younger members savored juicy fruits and vegetables, leaving their faces smeared with the remnants of their meal.

When Erik and Vanessa walked into the middle of the group, everyone's attention immediately shifted to where they were entering. As the villagers turned to look at the newcomer who had joined them, the joyful conversation and lively music faded into momentary silence.

Erik's eyes swept over the multitude of interested faces, their irises reflecting the firelight and revealing a range of feelings in each person's expression as they looked on. The silence, however, did not last for very long.

The crowd let out an unexpected cheer, which reverberated off the huts in the area and filled the crisp evening air with its sound. "For Erik!" someone yelled, their expression of gratitude audible in their tone of voice.

The words spread quickly through the crowd, which chanted his name in unison. This caused them to reverberate all around the village square.

The cheering villagers, with broad smiles plastered across their faces, clapped their hands to create a rhythm that was in sync with the upbeat tempo of the village musicians.

Erik experienced a sensation that was both strange and comforting; it was a warmth that spread across his chest.

The villagers expressed their gratitude for his assistance and hard work on the farm, and the joy that this brought them was overwhelming. It was a form of acceptance that he had not encountered and a feeling of community that he had not realized he yearned for until now.

Villagers came up to him one by one as time went on. They showed their appreciation by shaking his hand and patting him on the back, and the expressions on their faces reflected their sincerity.

The first person to approach Erik was a stocky man with hands that were calloused and hardened due to years spent working the land. "Erik," he said, as he was already familiar with the young man's name since it spread through the village like wildfire; his tone was rough but friendly.

"You've done more for us in a day than we could've managed in months. My crops... they're looking healthier than they have in years. I owe you a great debt."

Following him was a young woman, her freckled face shining with gratitude. She extended her hand to Erik. "I saw how you worked with those sickly plants," she began, her voice sincere. "You brought them back to life. It was... it was nothing short of a miracle.

Thank you. Thank you from the bottom of my heart," she said.

Then came an elderly man, his face a weathered map of wrinkles but his eyes twinkling with joy. He clasped Erik's hand in both of his own. "I've been farming these fields longer than most here have been alive," he stated, a grin spreading across his face. "And let me tell you, boy, I've not seen such a thing before. You have a gift, Erik. And you used it to help us.

Bless you, son."

A middle-aged woman stepped forward next, her smile soft and warm. "Erik, you've brought a spark of hope to our village," she stated. "The children have been asking me if they could learn from you. You've inspired them, us. Thank you."

Everyone in the village who approached Erik, whether they were a child or an elderly person, expressed the same sentiment. After all, they survived with almost nothing for months, and what Erik did basically saved them from certain death.

Their expressions of gratitude were heartfelt; their expressions of appreciation were genuine and lingered in the air long after they had finished speaking.

Although they were straightforward, Erik understood the depth of their significance, even though they were just a few words.

The joy growing inside him was only heightened by each word and action. He could sense their approval and appreciation, which gave him a sense of fulfillment since he had accomplished something worthwhile.

It was a shared bond of hard work and dedication, and it filled him with a sense of fulfillment that was richer than anything else he'd ever experienced.

As the evening progressed, Erik became more engrossed in the festivities, noticing that his heart was getting lighter with each passing moment; he enjoyed the company of the other villagers, participated in their stories, and understood the value of having a place to call his own.

Everything was better than it had ever been, from the flavor of the food to the sound of the music to the appearance of the night sky.

Villagers of all ages, including children, began to gather in the open space to dance as the night wore on. As they moved to the beat of the music, their bodies swayed and spun in response to the melodic tunes.

Their feet kicked up clouds of dust as they did so. The festive scene, illuminated by the bonfire and filled with joyful laughter, served as a testament to the unity of the village and the shared sense of celebration they possessed.

Even though Erik was not one of them, he could feel better simply by observing their joy. He had never experienced anything like that before.

Even after the fire had been reduced to smoldering embers and the villagers had returned to their homes, the echoes of laughter, the shared stories, and the sense of unity that had been present

throughout the night remained, etched into their hearts and minds, serving as a testament to the unyielding spirit of the village.

Chapter 400: The Spread of the infection (1)

Fischer and Professor Derr were in their usual lab, but the normally bustling energy that day had been replaced by a hushed, tense silence as soon as Major Fischer hung up the phone.

He cast a gloomy glance toward his friend and work colleague, the oddball but brilliant Professor Derr Xilion, and a grim expression was etched into his face.

"Any news?" Professor Derr inquired, his erudite demeanor belying the fact that he was following the developing situation outside with intense interest.

Fischer responded with a resounding "Yes," his tone heavy with a mixture of apprehension and concern.

"It would appear that the infected people we confined are more resilient than anticipated. They have escaped prison and can now be found roaming the streets.

Professor Derr's brow furrowed, "The military has to do something!"

Fischer gave a little shake of the head and said, "Unfortunately, we don't have enough people to go around. Most of our troops are currently preparing for the impending assault on the parasite's nest.

In addition, after the defeat of the first army and the number of casualties caused by the parasite attack, we do not have many people stationed here. In contrast, the horde is enormous, and their numbers are much greater than ours. Should they join forces, our soldiers may be overpowered."

"What about the people living here?" Derr prodded. "Are they attempting to be of assistance? After all, they can fight!"

Once more, Fischer was the one to deliver the unpalatable truth, this time stating, "The mutations induced by the parasite significantly increased the infected strengths." Most citizens cannot do much; at best, they should try to avoid becoming infected by the parasite."

"Are we doomed then?" Derr inquired while his face turned white out of fear.

"No," Fischer said, attempting to instill some measure of optimism. "The army is rerouting some men back to the city. They should be enough to manage the situation and help the citizens exterminate the mutants. But it will take two weeks for them to arrive. We just need to hold out until then..."

At this, Professor Derr slammed his fist onto the table, his exasperation bubbling over. "This is preposterous! Why would they leave the city almost defenseless, knowing the impending threat?! We've warned them time and again! We told them we couldn't produce the serum for everyone and that the parasite would spread inside the city! Wasn't it at this point better to execute the infected?

Why leave them alive?!"

Fischer nodded. "You are right. In my opinion, Becker and his men were too worried about keeping their power. They didn't kill the infected to keep up the facade. They could heal them and took most of the soldiers away to destroy the Heniate's nest and gain consensus. That's what I think, at least."

He paused for a second. "However, we have to be honest, too; both you and I underestimated how significantly the parasite would improve the capabilities of those infected. Though, I heard that the citizens are doing the best they can, and the police and the soldiers that are still left in the city are cooperating and trying to manage the situation.

Still, it is not easy to find those who are infected. "

"If the citizens are pitching in to help, why is the parasite continuing to spread? Shouldn't they be making containing it their top priority?

"Are you under the impression this is simple? On the battlefield, anything can happen at any time. Damn, even some students are fighting!"

Derr was caught off guard by this information. He made an impression of a curious dog by cocking his head. "Who? When?"

The exhausted Major relaxed his shoulders and leaned back, his expression revealing a fleeting trace of admiration. The scuffle broke out right in front of the town hall. Students from the Red Palace were successful in putting an end to approximately 1,000 mutants. But the real surprise is that Amber Joyce, acting alone, was responsible for eliminating more than 450 of them."

Derr gave a miserable expression and asked, "Caiden Joyce's daughter? I was told she was still in her first year at the Red Palace."

"Yes, but she had shown an uncanny talent for fighting and managed to go up to the squire rank before the first year ended," Fischer responded, his tone becoming slightly warmer.

"If even students are so good as to kill them, why is the situation worsening?" Derr's eyes widened as he asked.

Fischer gave a condescending shake of the head and explained, "Because the students attacked low-ranking creatures."

During the assault on the city, the parasite had not only infected children but also their parents, members of the military, and medical personnel as they fought in front of the city walls or while they entered the city. The ones parasitized outside then returned and parasitized their children. There are very dangerous infected individuals present within the city at present."

The expression on Professor Derr's face was one of mounting exasperation and bewilderment. He questioned his companion, "Tell me the truth, James, are we fucked?"

"It's impossible for the parasites to spread if the people are careful. In that case, we should be able to kill them; the problem is coordination. Kids, the elderly, and people with disabilities are getting infected left and right. We need coordination more than anything, but no one inside the city can do something like this at present.

As I said, between the war, the attack on the parasite's nest... We are short on men."

"You've got to be kidding me! I've never seen a country that was so haphazardly run!" Derr yelled while slamming his fist again on the table and shaking the scattered documents. His temper flared, manifesting in his explosive outburst.

"I can't deny it..." Fischer started to respond, but then he heard an odd noise that immediately diverted his attention. He paused, putting pressure on his ears. He asked, his brows knitted together in an expression of intense concentration, "Did you hear that?"