

BIOLOGICAL 441

Chapter 441: A night visit (2)

In the final part of her explanation, Vanessa focused on the more practical aspects of the technique, providing Erik with specific instructions on how to begin practicing it.

She emphasized the significance of being patient and making careful progress. She reminded him that developing neural links was not a race but a journey that would last a lifetime.

Erik experienced a growing sense of resolve as Vanessa's words echoed throughout the empty room. This was his opportunity to improve his strength and significantly contribute to protecting the village and accomplishing his upcoming mission.

He expressed his gratitude to Vanessa wholeheartedly and assured her he would practice diligently, giving his undivided attention to mastering the village's top-secret technique.

<System, what do you think?> Erik asked.

[THIS TECHNIQUE IS SIMILAR TO THE ONE I CREATED, BUT HOW THE MANA IS WEAVED IS DIFFERENT, ALTHOUGH THE PRINCIPLE IS STILL THE SAME. SOME PARTS OF THE TECHNIQUE ARE GOOD AND CAN BE IMPLEMENTED IN YOURS, BUT MANY OTHERS ARE VERY INEFFICIENT. I WILL USE THE CURRENT DATA TO TRY AND MODIFY THE TECHNIQUE YOU USE, BUT IT WOULD BE BETTER IF YOU START PRACTICING AND LET ME ANALYZE THE MANA FLOW.]

<Understood...>

"Do you think you can do it?" Vanessa asked.

"Yes, I would like to try now... If you don't mind giving me pointers."

"Sure... go ahead..."

Erik sat down in a lotus position with his eyes closed and his facial expression intent. He was utterly engrossed in the activity, and as he went deeper into himself and his inner world, his mind

became still. He pictured his neural links as pulsating strands of energy that entwined and connected with one another across the vast expanse of his mind.

In accordance with the instructions provided by Vanessa, he started to slowly and carefully direct the mana that was being channeled into his brain along these threads.

He felt the mana flow like a stream of liquid light down his neural links, illuminating his consciousness. It was unquestionably very different from the method taught in New Alexandria, and Erik immediately saw how much better it was. It was also similar to the technique made by the biological supercomputer, but there were also differences. It was just easier to do some of the things.

Erik would experience jolts of discomfort or the beginnings of a headache every once in a while. He would pause momentarily, readjust the mana flowing through him, and proceed with increased caution. This was a delicate process, and rushing it would only cause more problems than it would solve.

He noticed that he was getting better at the technique as he spent more and more time honing his skills through practice. The room he was in was completely silent, except for the faint sounds of nighttime life outside.

Vanessa, who had been keeping a close eye on Erik, occasionally provided some words of instruction. Her words were authoritative but full of encouragement, and the look in her eyes conveyed both approval and concern.

"Erik, remember, this technique is not just about forming new neural links," she began, her gaze focused on him. "It's also about maintaining and strengthening the ones you already have. Overworking your mind could lead to problems, a risk we cannot afford."

She paused, letting her words sink in before continuing. "You should also be aware that forming these neural links consumes a significant amount of mana. Make sure you're well-rested and properly nourished before each training session."

Vanessa then leaned back, her eyes scanning Erik's face for understanding. "And lastly, remember that this is not a race. It's a journey. It's about learning to understand your body and brain crystal more deeply. Don't rush, and don't push yourself too hard."

After Vanessa finished her remark, she stood up and walked away. Before leaving the room, she gave Erik one last look, a combination of stern caution and quiet reassurance. After that, she walked out the door. "Take care of yourself, Erik," she said, her voice softer now. "We're all counting on you."

Even though hours had passed, Erik continued to be unaware of the passage of time. The only things he was conscious of were the intricate dance of mana that was taking place inside of him, the birth of new neural links, and the growing sense of power and potential that came with it.

Eventually, he opened his eyes, breaking his concentration. The room around him seemed sharper, more vibrant, as if he saw the world with new eyes. He felt a wave of exhaustion wash over him, but it was coupled with a sense of accomplishment.

His first attempt to perfect the method was fruitful in all respects. He had previously been unaware of the potential of this method and the incredible opportunity it presented; however, now he was aware of both.

<System...>Erik thought, directing his query to the System within him, <Did you manage to get something out of that technique?>

[YES. I HAVE ANALYZED THE TECHNIQUE AND ACQUIRED A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF IT. I WILL IMMEDIATELY BEGIN TO IMPLEMENT THE IMPROVEMENTS IN THE EXISTING NEURAL LINK FORMATION TECHNIQUE.] The System's reply echoed in his mind, clear and assertive.

The young man, however, concluded that it was pointless for him to continue practicing the technique because the one that was made for him by the System was superior and enabled him to create more neural links simultaneously.

Erik resumed his training by switching techniques. His focus remained glued to the invisible pathways of his mind, mapping and tracing the intricate network as it expanded.

His focus was laser-sharp, yet a faint glimmer of exhaustion was in his eyes. The world outside seemed to fade away into a mere murmur. Nothing mattered but the technique, the links, and the precious mana they held.

After that, he experienced a peculiar sensation that was somewhat analogous to a switch being turned on inside his head. It was subtle but significant.

Two new neural links suddenly materialized from the ether, and their pulsating energy gently integrated with the one he already possessed.

When Erik finally realized what had happened, he felt a thumping sensation in his chest. The feeling of exhaustion gradually setting in felt more like a far-off concern at this point. Elation and eagerness in the face of whatever lay ahead immediately followed it.

He did nothing but remain motionless for a while as mana flowed through him and exhilarated him.

Even though he continued to experience fatigue and his body continued to ache as a result of the day's activities, the newly established neural links and the possibility of even further development served to fuel him.

After what seemed like an eternity, he finally took a break from his strenuous workout and leaned back, smiling contentedly to himself.

The accomplishment served as a validation of his hard work, and it instilled in him a revitalized sense of mission in life. The impending trip to Lumisgrove appeared less intimidating to him now because he was confident he was prepared enough to meet any challenges he might encounter on the way.

Chapter 442: Preparations

Erik pushed himself to his feet even though he was utterly exhausted. The scent of the vegetable stew he had prepared during his lunch break drifted into his nostrils, prompting him to reflect that he had chosen to ignore his hunger to concentrate on his workout. As a response, his stomach rumbled quite loudly, which caused him to chuckle to himself.

He moved over to the stone stove, the room floor feeling refreshingly cool under his bare feet as he did so.

He lit the fire to warm the leftovers, and soon the room was filled with the soft flicker of the firelight, which cast dancing shadows on the walls and illuminated his modest dwelling with a warm, inviting glow.

He poured himself a substantial bowl of stew. The aroma of fresh vegetables and herbs wafted up from the bowl and the steam from it.

As he sat at the simple dining table in his home, Erik savored each forkful of the piping hot stew, the myriad of flavors exploding in his mouth. He permitted himself to stop and appreciate the straightforward pleasure of savoring the simple comfort of a warm meal in the peaceful solitude of his home. There was an inherent peace to this, especially after a grueling day.

Erik's eyes darted around the cramped space, taking in everything from the neatly stacked pile of firewood near the stove to the spear propped up against a wall.

The straightforward nature of this place held a certain allure for him, one that he had come to appreciate throughout his time spent here, but the absence of technology wasn't simple to sustain, so he was a little bit bored.

As he finished his meal, the day's exertions finally caught up with him, and it showed in his eyes as they began to feel heavy.

He washed his bowl and spoon, put them back on the shelf, and then headed for the comfortable bed tucked away in the corner of the room.

While lying down, he kept looking up at the ceiling, and his mind kept returning to what had happened earlier in the day.

The recently acquired technique, the neural links, and the upcoming travel all constituted an adventure just waiting to take place. But for now, sleep was calling, and Erik was more than ready to respond to its beckoning.

Erik's week flew by in a whirlwind of intense workouts as he prepared for the upcoming mission. Every day was a new opportunity for him to understand better the new technique Vanessa had taught him and put it to use.

As the young man immersed himself in training, the hours turned into days as the fervent fire of determination that was burning in his heart continued to grow.

However, that wasn't clearly his primary training technique since the young man was studying it only for the sake of giving the biological supercomputer more data to implement in the technique it already developed.

However, the neural links connecting to his brain crystal powers gradually formed. He could feel two distinct connections, one for each of his brain crystal powers of force manipulation and parallel will. The sensation was uncanny, like invisible threads spun inside his mind, connecting different parts of his consciousness.

Training the force manipulation power, Erik could now exert more precise and controlled force with his mana. The mana was converted more efficiently, responding directly to his will. He could gently lift a feather or forcefully hurl a stone with equal ease. It was a testament to his progress, a clear sign that he was heading in the right direction.

Simultaneously, the parallel will brain crystal power, which allowed Erik to multitask efficiently, also strengthened. It was as if he had acquired an additional pair of hands that could not be seen but were fully functional.

He could focus on multiple tasks simultaneously without losing concentration, which could mean the difference between life and death in a fight.

Even though the days were challenging and the nights were brief, Erik did not give up. He remained alert because he knew that his departure was drawing nearer.

Every drop of effort and every bead of sweat he shed were necessary sacrifices to be made on the altar of his mission.

The days passed swiftly, but each brought a small victory in the shape of newfound strength. With the week drawing to a close, Erik was as ready as he could be with two new neural links in his set.

The day before, Vanessa paid Erik a visit with a message that she had received from Amos. She informed him that the members of the village council who would accompany him on the dangerous journey to Lumisgrove had finally been chosen. In addition, they were planning on leaving the next day, today.

Upon receiving the news, Erik's heart surged with a mixture of anticipation and anxiety. It was finally happening. The decision was made, the wheels were set in motion, and there was no turning back.

He started getting ready for the trip while he was home, where he could enjoy peace.

On the table before him, his backpack was open and ready to be stuffed with the required items. He started gathering what he would need after giving it some careful consideration.

This included food rations, a basic first aid kit, seeds, sturdy water bottles, and other necessities, such as the Thaid repelling plant.

His eyes moved over each item, mentally checking them off his list. Every object was a lifeline, a means to survive in the wild and unpredictable Lumisgrove.

He took the time to carefully pack his clothes, selecting items that would allow him to feel at ease and comfortable throughout the journey.

As winter had set in, the journey through the forest would undoubtedly be frigid. Erik was aware of this, so he paid particular attention to packing warm, heavy clothing. In his backpack, he stuffed a thick woolen coat, a knitted cap to protect his ears from the biting cold, and a pair of sturdy gloves.

He packed innerwear to layer beneath his clothes, ensuring he would retain his body heat while traversing the snow-laden terrain. Extra socks also found their way into his bag, as he knew well how crucial it was to keep his feet dry and warm.

Next to his backpack was a pair of snow boots that were resistant to the chilly dampness of the season and were ready to be worn.

In the end, he added a flask, thinking about how he could fill it with something warm, like hot soup or hot chocolate, to provide sustenance and a reassuring warmth from the inside.

He was aware that the cold could be a ruthless foe, just as formidable as any other physical adversary, and he intended to face it with the appropriate preparation.

Chapter 443: The Party (1)

Erik hoisted his backpack onto his shoulders even though it had significantly increased in size due to the winter gear. It was a burden, but it needed to be carried.

The weight symbolized his preparedness, determination, and commitment to the task at hand, which was to survive the harsh winter during the journey.

He cast a cursory glance around the room, his eyes lingering on the simple things he would soon be leaving behind: the warm bed, the humble kitchen, and the well-known scene outside his window.

However, he was prepared. He was as prepared as he could possibly be. Then, Erik's attention was drawn to the sun that was beginning to shine through his window, signaling the beginning of a new day and the beginning of his journey. He exhaled deeply and continued. It was time to leave.

He opened the door to the bright morning and stepped out into the fresh air, ready to start his journey.

After leaving the house, Erik navigated the stairs to the treetop house with a familiarity that he had developed over the course of several days.

Each of his steps reverberated throughout the peaceful morning as his boots made a soft thumping sound against the wooden planks. As he approached the base of the tree, a brisk breeze nipped at his cheeks, prompting him to be grateful that he had brought warm clothing with him and stored it in his backpack.

He turned around and glanced back at the house, feeling a twinge of something that could be described as nostalgia.

The slender dwelling that was strung up among the branches had developed into something of a sanctuary for him.

It wasn't really the house he grew up in, but since he'd left the city, it was the closest he'd come to resembling it since he'd been away. With a lingering gaze, he steeled himself, turning away and setting off towards the hall.

The village was gradually coming to life as the first rays of dawn painted a crisscross pattern across the sky and cast long shadows.

Erik pulled his coat around him even more tightly as he made his way through the deserted streets. The air was filled with the aroma of freshly baked bread, morning dew, and the muffled sounds of a village slowly coming to life, but there was also snow.

As Erik walked through the village, he marveled at its attractiveness and basked in the gentle light of the early winter morning.

Like a tranquil blanket, an ethereal atmosphere was laid over the settlement as the sun, which was still a pale and hesitant presence on the horizon, painted the world in shades of frosty blue and hushed lavender.

This created an ethereal atmosphere. On either side of the path was a row of tall and proud trees, the bare branches of which were decorated with a delicate frosting of snow. After what seemed like an eternity, the leaves finally gave up and fell to the ground, leaving behind bare tree silhouettes that reached toward the clear winter sky.

On the other hand, the evergreen pines maintained their foliage throughout the winter, creating a colorful contrast against the otherwise monochromatic landscape. Erik could see that there was a large crowd gathered as he got closer to the building.

From where he was standing, he could see the faces of villagers, some of whom he recognized and others he did not.

The atmosphere was tense but filled with a palpable sense of excitement, and each person's face was etched with a mixture of anticipation and apprehension.

A similar feeling surfaced within Erik in response to the sight: apprehension regarding the journey ahead of him, anticipation regarding what lay at the Lumisgrove and for the experience he would gain; it was an undeniable undercurrent of excitement due to the unknown.

As Erik approached the group, his boots made a crunching sound on the frosty grass, which caught the attention of the few people there.

Vanessa, who was covered in a thick cloak, turned to face him as she greeted him. Her usually piercing eyes showed a slight sign of relaxation.

Four other people were standing there with her, and it was clear that they were all ready for an arduous journey. Each individual was clad in bulky winter clothing lined with fur, and their breath was visible in the crisp morning air as it formed small clouds.

Erik assumed the packs on their backs contained provisions and equipment because of their purposefulness, which indicated the dangerous mission still in front of them.

Two of them were men, tall and imposing, with faces etched with the lines and wrinkles that come from years of struggle and conflict. Both were armed with dangerous-looking swords and axes that dangled from their belts.

One of them had a large axe whose blade glowed menacingly in the dim light, and the other had a long sword that appeared to be extremely dangerous.

The other two were female but carried themselves with the same ferocity and determination as their male counterparts. One was armed with a bow and arrows and had a quiver strapped across her back.

Her fingers were lightly resting on the bow. The other woman was armed with a pair of daggers that were worn on her belt.

The hilts of the daggers were intricately carved, and Erik wondered where she got them. The swift movement of Erik's eyes over them was a silent acknowledgment of the fact that they were prepared.

These individuals would accompany him on this trip to the Lumisgrove as his traveling companions. Their path would be difficult, and they would have to rely on one another to make it through it alive.

"Good morning, Vanessa," Erik said, shattering the momentary hush that had enveloped the group. "And a good morning to all," he continued, directing his attention to the four unknown individuals. A tacit recognition was exchanged as he made eye contact with each one.

A flicker of unease flitted across his stomach. Realizing he was setting off on a hazardous journey with strangers was unsettling. Erik observed the people again.

"Excuse me, but I didn't have the pleasure of meeting you before," Erik said, trying to dissipate the weird atmosphere. A small smile appeared on his face as he reached out to the nearest person - the burly man with a gleaming axe.

"May I know your names?" he added.

In response, the man firmly clasped Erik's hand. "The name's Marcus," he grumbled, his face etched with stern lines, yet his eyes hinted at a budding camaraderie.

"A pleasure, Marcus," Erik returned the sentiment, his attention moving to the redhead with a bow slung over her shoulder. She responded with a light smile, her fingers idly caressing the grip of her bow. "Call me Alexia," her voice had a musical lilt, starkly contrasting Marcus's gruffness.

"Alexia," Erik echoed, giving a nod of acknowledgment. His gaze then drifted to the woman wielding the ornate daggers. "And you are?"

"Ava," she stated briefly, her lips curving into a subtle smirk.

Finally, Erik's attention landed on the rugged man carrying a long sword. The man held his gaze, his expression unreadable. "You can call me Garrett," he said straightforwardly.

Chapter 444: The Party (2)

Nodding at each of them, Erik mentally etched their names into his memory. His fellow travelers: Marcus, Alexia, Ava, and Garrett. Now they were strangers, but as the journey was going to unfold, they would become his allies.

"Amos did mention you'd be our guide to this Lumisgrove," Alexia began, her tone careful yet laced with curiosity. "But I can't help noticing your youth. You must be rather competent for Amos to entrust such a task to you," she stated, her piercing green eyes scrutinizing Erik thoughtfully.

Erik replied with a faint smile on his lips, "I understand your concerns, Alexia. Indeed, I might be young, but I assure you my strength is enough for the journey ahead, and I've done my homework about the Lumisgrove."

The air between them grows crisp, the harsh winter morning asserting its presence. Erik noticed the uncertain glances among the team and quickly added, "I haven't been there myself, but I've had the chance to gather information from various sources. I've studied the descriptions, the dangers, and the paths in detail.

I can't guarantee a smooth journey, but I will do my utmost to guide us there safely."

His words lingered in the void that immediately followed, only to be ingested by the icy air surrounding them.

Marcus, the large, burly man carrying the enormous axe, finally broke the silence. "We trust Amos's judgment. If he thinks you're capable, that's enough for us."

Erik was thankful for the vote of confidence. A firm and unyielding sense of determination began to take hold inside him, much like the frozen ground they were standing on. Erik cast a reflective glance over his shoulder at the company.

"Before we embark on our journey, it would be beneficial for us to understand each other's strengths and capabilities. Can each of you tell me what your Brain Crystal Power is and what you specialize in?"

"I can create mana arrows with my Brain Crystal Power. As for my specialty, I'm an archer," Alexia said confidently, her green eyes sparkling.

The burly man, Marcus, followed. "My Brain Crystal Power allows me to create a mana shield I can slightly move around. I'm a warrior specializing in protection and close combat," he shared, his strong voice reverberating through the cold morning air.

Ava, the young woman with wavy blonde hair, chimed in with a playful grin, "I can slide across any surface, increasing my speed significantly. You'll see me wielding daggers - that's my specialty. Quick, agile, and silent."

Lastly, Garrett shared his abilities. His voice was quieter than the others but no less confident. "I have a Brain Crystal Power that allows me to coat my sword with wind, increasing its slicing power. As a tracker and hunter, I can also provide our team with navigation skills and wilderness knowledge."

Erik paid close attention to each of them, taking careful notes as he did so to commit their abilities to memory.

For him to effectively strategize, it was essential to be aware of the capabilities possessed by his team.

"In my case, I have two powers..." Erik replied, leaving the others surprised. "I can either control and grow plants, make traps and shelters, and fight from a distance with this power. However, I can also turn mana into a strange force that can be used to increase my speed and destructive power. I can also create some shields, but they require a lot of mana, so I would rather avoid using them."

Before Erik could even finish his sentence, everyone in the group was immediately rendered speechless by the shocking revelation.

They were all staring at Erik with wide-open eyes as the air around them became increasingly brisk, and the winter morning made their breath visible. It seemed for a moment as though the world's rotation had stopped. The declaration hung heavily in the air as the silence continued.

Alexia was the first to recover, her green eyes wide and incredulous. The only outward sign of her surprise was a twitch in her fingers as they wrapped around the grip of her bow. "You have two powers? But that means..." She trailed off, the implication hanging in the air.

The surprise in Alexia's eyes was also visible in Marcus's ones. As he worked through the information, the muscles in his jaw began to contract, causing him to tighten his hold on the axe.

The silence was finally broken when the clanking sound of his armor adjusting to his rigid stance was heard. Ava's playful demeanor changed to complete and utter bewilderment as her mouth opened wider.

The normally bubbly woman was strangely subdued at the moment, and her fingers drummed restlessly against her daggers.

The calm and collected hunter, Garrett, was the last one to respond. As he contemplated what Erik had to say, the furrows in his brow deepened, and the lines on his aged face became more pronounced. His grip on his sword tightened, a subtle sign of his surprise.

Finally, Marcus found his voice again. "So, you're an...awakener?" he asked, his voice gruff but filled with awe.

Awakeners were so exceptional that they were almost mythical. He nodded, confirming their suspicions. "Yes," he answered simply. "I am an awakener." That was, of course, not true, but he had to justify having two powers.

"Furthermore," Erik continued, holding their gaze, "Despite my youthful appearance and urban origins, I assure you, I'm no stranger to the hardships of the forest." His voice was steady. "I've traveled these woods for months on end. I can handle myself."

His gaze moved to his hands for a moment; palms turned upward in a gesture of revelation.

"Moreover, my ability to manipulate plants will serve us well on this journey." A wry smile graced his features. "You'd be surprised how useful a thicket of thorns can be or a quick vine to pull you up a steep incline."

His eyes met each of theirs in turn, a spark of determination shining within their depths. "In addition," he added, a hint of pride sneaking into his voice, "I've discovered a plant that can repel thaids. It means we can rest and sleep without the constant fear of an unexpected attack."

As soon as he finished speaking, he noticed a significant change in the group's mood. The tension was lessened due to his reassurances and the possibility of safer nights.

Erik had clearly managed to ease their initial concerns, as evidenced by a few nods and sighs of relief.

At first glance, the young man may have appeared out of place; however, his words painted an entirely different picture. Despite his age, Erik seemed more than capable of leading them through the Lumisgrove.

Chapter 445: The Party (3)

Vanessa broke the silence, stepping forward, her gaze encompassing the entire group.

"I had faith in Amos' judgment from the beginning when he decided to make this team," she began, her voice steady and full of sincerity. "It's clear why he suggested Erik now."

She looked at Erik, her gaze meeting his with approval. "He has not only survived the harsh wilderness of the forest, but he has also developed skills and knowledge that will undoubtedly be critical for your journey."

With a nod of her head, she indicated to him. Vanessa paused for a moment to let her words sink in. "Erik might be younger than you, and he might come from the city, but he's proven himself more than capable," she said, her gaze warm in the cold air.

"I believe you can rely on him to guide you through the forest safely." Her confirmation helped dispel any remaining doubts in the group. If the woman guaranteed for him, then they had nothing to fear. Vanessa's endorsement was significant because she was a respected village member.

The group's shared glances said it all: they were ready to embark on this journey with Erik leading the way. "All right then," Alexia finally said, breaking the brief silence that had descended on the group.

Erik's gaze was met by her eyes, which were filled with newfound respect. "If that's the case, I suppose we don't need to worry." She shifted her weight, adjusting the bow strap, gazing at the snowy landscape that stretched before them.

"Time is of the essence," she added, returning her gaze to the group. "We'd better get started." Her words signaled the end of the conversation; her tone was authoritative and firm.

There was no trace of the skepticism that had previously clouded her demeanor. The group's nods of agreement demonstrated their agreement.

They hoisted their backpacks as if on cue, tightening their grip on their weapons. Their adventure was about to begin. They found themselves on the outskirts of the village as the sun began to rise, casting a golden glow over the untouched snow.

Erik was the first to take a step forward, his boots crunching against the snow as he faced the group. His young face was lit up with a determined expression, and the soft hues of dawn reflected in his eyes.

"Let's go," Erik said, his voice clear and confident against the still morning air. With their packs secured and weapons safely strapped to their sides or backs, the group took a step forward, each step taking them further away from their familiar surroundings and closer to the unknown.

Marcus was the first to step before Erik, his towering stature creating an intimidating presence. His eyes darted across the forest ahead, his hand instinctively reaching for the axe strapped to his side. Alexia stood beside him, surveying their surroundings, her keen eyes catching everything.

Ava and Garrett remained silent, their eyes meeting before stepping behind Marcus and Alexia. Ava's daggers glinted ominously in the rising sun, her smirk promising both mischief and danger.

On the other hand, Garrett held his hand on the sword's hilt with a relaxed grip, his rugged features concealing his thoughts. The bright daylight reflected off the pristine white landscape as the group trekked through the newly snow-covered forest, glowing radiantly around them.

The crunching of snow underfoot echoed through the still forest, punctuated by the creaking of laden branches above.

The four travelers took advantage of the opportunity, bundled up against the chill, to ask Erik the questions that had been brewing in their minds. Erik was a mystery to them; he was someone from the city, so it was only natural for them to have questions.

"Erik," Alexia began, her breath forming a small cloud of fog in the freezing air, "as far as we've been told, you came from the city, New Alexandria, but once I learned someone from there was at the village, especially given everything that's going on, I began to wonder why you did leave it. What made you do that? City dwellers are not usually drawn to the wilderness."

Erik stopped, his gaze lingering on the path ahead, which had become a maze of snowy trails. The question was expected, but he felt an unexplainable vulnerability. He began his story by taking a deep, cold breath. Talking about his past was not something easy to do.

"Because my mother died when I was young, I grew up with my father. However, he was a soldier, as were most of the people there," he began, his voice barely above a whisper against the silence of the winter landscape.

"Because he was frequently out of town, I basically grew up alone, even though he sent me money every month to survive. But what was really difficult wasn't that," the young man said, his face sad. Recalling his past was not easy, nor did he willingly do it.

"When I finished developing my brain crystal, I discovered it had a flaw that prevented me from harnessing its full power," the young man lied.

"I could only make things grow faster, and not by much," he admitted, mixing some truths. The others looked at Erik with pitying looks, which Erik didn't like but knew was normal.

"I was bullied because my power was deemed useless by them. Frant is very fight oriented, and not being able to do that is a huge problem."

"Useless?" Alexia responded. "Everyone knows you saved our village! 'It's everything but useless!'" exclaimed the woman vehemently.

She couldn't believe what the young man had just said to her. "I was only able to do that because of my awakening. It appears to have repaired my brain crystal, and my mana reserves have significantly increased thanks to that. I couldn't have done all of that if it hadn't been for this event in my life. I often wondered if things would have gone differently if I hadn't awakened."

"How about..." Garret hesitantly elaborated. "How does it feel to have two powers?" He inquired, "How do you manage your mana to begin with?" Although having two powers was convenient, mana was limited, and using both was difficult.

"Well... Despite having less mana, I'm lucky that my powers are naturally strong. It is not easy, but it is possible to manage them."

Chapter 446: The start of the journey

His calm voice couldn't conceal the depth of emotion underlying his words. The painful reality of his father's departure hit him like a cold draft in the dead of winter, leaving an unwelcome chill.

The pain and hardships he had to face in the city ultimately drove him away from the crowded city streets and into the heart of nature. Erik found the strength to face his demons here, where the trees stood tall and unyielding against the harsh winter, and the snow fell unabated.

"I grew up in the city, surrounded by skyscrapers and bustling streets. That was my world, everything I knew." He stopped, his eyes reflecting the stark contrast between the dark trees and the white snow.

"But amid all that commotion, I felt...misplaced, like a seed trying to grow in concrete." I guess my background made me feel out of place in that setting. I thought that after my awakening, things would have gone better, yet, despite my awakening, problems did not leave me alone."

"Even amidst the comforts of city life, I felt an insatiable desire for something different," he continued, gazing at his fellow travelers, their faces attentive and their breath fogging in the frosty air. "I wanted to discover the world beyond the city limits. I wanted to get out of there and start a new life somewhere else.

I wanted to find a place to call home, one where I was not discriminated against, bullied, or taken advantage of."

Erik went on, his words carving a space for truth among the crystalline serenity of the snow.

"There's another reason I left the city," he admitted, looking out at the horizon where the bright sunlight met the ice-blue sky.

"It has almost been three years since my father left." The fours' expressions darkened suddenly.

The fours' expression suddenly turned grimmer. This kid didn't have a simple life. Yet it wasn't that bad considering what they endured in these past months, with the fear of starving always present, and now the situation only got worse due to the Frantian soldiers' activities.

Yet they understood that feeling out of place must not have been pleasant. Clearly, they weren't aware of the daily beatings Erik had taken since he joined high school. The snowy sunlight was reflected in their eyes as they observed the young man with a sad look.

He that and paused for a moment, the silence stretching between them like the endless expanse of white snow ahead, with a sweeping gesture towards their surroundings—the snow-dusted trees, the soft blanket of snow underfoot, the chill wind whispering through the branches.

His gaze was drawn to the pristine snow beneath his feet as he chose his following words. The snow crunched softly beneath his boots, starkly contrasting the vital message he was about to deliver.

"However, last year, I stopped receiving money from him," he admitted in hushed tones. The words hung heavy in the air, their meaning receding into the silence. "I then learned that he...he died on a mission."

That was Becker obviously lying said to him at the party at Amber's mansion. Of course, his father came back and gave him the biological supercomputer. However, he disappeared after that.

The revelation hung in the icy air, a painful truth among the snow and ice. Erik's companions now knew about his father's death, which he had faced alone. In the brilliant winter light, the weight of the news seemed to cast long shadows.

His breath fogged ahead, swirling into the cold air before dissipating. Each puff was a stark reminder of his isolation and the family he once had but had to abandon.

"With my then-shitty power, I tried to find a way to survive by working on a farm. However, some events caused me to lose even that, and as a result, I decided to leave the city," he said, mixing lies and truths.

He slowly raised his gaze to meet his companions, revealing the raw vulnerability in his eyes. The winter light reflected off the snow and illuminated his face, emphasizing his anguish. Yet, in his eyes, there was more than just grief; an unwavering resolve forged in the face of loss and adversity.

"Despite what others have said about the forest, this place has served as a refuge and a teacher for me. I've learned to adapt, survive, and find strength within myself. I've discovered the soothing effects of the whispering wind."

As they continued their journey, their footprints left a snow trail in their wake. The snow felt softer under their feet, and the path seemed clearer.

The chill of winter was softened by the warmth of their growing bond, fostered by shared stories and a common goal.

Navigating the winter wonderland was nothing like the fairy tales in books and films. The landscape, while beautiful in its icy splendor, presented the group with several challenges. The cold seeped into their boots, numbing their toes with each step.

The fresh snow slowed their progress significantly, turning what should have been a steady stride into a slow trudge. The freezing temperatures sapped their energy and slowed their movements, magnifying every effort.

Furthermore, the picturesque and never-ending snowfall hampered their visibility and reduced their field of vision.

This increased the possibility of being ambushed by unseen creatures lurking around. The snow also muffled sounds, making it even more challenging to detect any impending danger.

The harsh winter had stripped the barren trees of their leafy cover, providing little to no protection from the elements or predators. Because of the openness of the snowy landscape, they were vulnerable to attacks from above, particularly from flying Thaidis.

The natural defenses were ineffective, forcing them to remain constantly aware of their surroundings, particularly of the sky.

Then there were the less obvious but no less dangerous hazards. Under the snow, treacherous patches of ice threatened to trip them, as well as sudden dips in the terrain and hidden roots or rocks that could twist an ankle.

Finally, the harsh winter conditions severely restricted their access to food and clean water. Edible plants lay dormant beneath the snow, and hunting became much more difficult in the snow-covered landscape. Meanwhile, once-freely flowing streams and rivers had frozen solid, making obtaining drinking water difficult.

Chapter 447: The journey is usually the part that you remember anyway

The beauty of the snow-covered wilderness was undeniable, but its allure was deceptive. Underneath its serene exterior lay a slew of challenges and perils that made their journey far more complex and dangerous than they anticipated.

The group hadn't gotten very far away from the village because every step through the snow was an effort. With the ground covered in a thick layer of fresh snow, each footfall sank deep, laboriously slowing their progress.

Every sound was amplified in the silence that accompanied the snowfall, and every movement was a potential disturbance.

The silent rustle of leafless branches in the breeze, the whispers of snowflakes kissing the ground, and the distant hoot of an owl stood out against the white landscape's stillness.

The group would come to a halt every now and then. Alexia's sharp eyes would scan the sky, a mana arrow nocked and ready.

Marcus would tighten his grip on his axe, his gaze fixed on the path ahead. Ava would press her back against a tree trunk, daggers in hand, while Garrett listened to the forest's subtle sounds.

And Erik, palms to the ground, could feel the silent rustle of dormant life beneath the snow, ready to summon it if necessary.

This was their new reality: a journey through the cold and snow, always alert and prepared, drawing strength from one another as they ventured deeper into the unknown. But that didn't stop them from talking.

Every single one of them introduced themselves to the other, primarily to get Erik to know them. Garrett's gaze was fixed as he began his story. "Like Marcus, I was born and raised in the village."

"It's a place near and dear to my heart," he began, his voice as measured as his words. "I've seen many seasons change, people come and go, and children grow into warriors. I became a tracker and hunter not by choice but because it was necessary." He stopped, his gaze sweeping the white landscape around them.

"When you live in a forest village, you quickly learn to adapt and read the signs that nature leaves you. My father taught me how to hunt and track, and my mother taught me about medicinal plants. When my Brain Crystal Power manifested, it only solidified my path."

Ava scolded Garrett, her brows knitted together in a feigned scowl.

"Oh, Garrett, stop talking like you've got a stick in your ass," she'd chastised, her words losing their stern edge as she burst out laughing.

The twinkle in her eyes revealed her amusement, starkly contrasting the snow-covered landscape around them. She turned toward Erik amid their laughter, her expression a playful mix of curiosity and mischief.

"Hey, Erik, do you want to know how I met Marcus?" she asked, her lips curving upward into a grin. Erik blinked in surprise before responding, caught off guard by Ava's sudden inquiry. His breath fogged up in the cold winter air as he nodded and let out a light chuckle.

"Yes, I'd love to hear that story," he said, his tone reflecting his genuine curiosity. The trip through the snow-covered forest had suddenly become much more enjoyable. As she began her story, Ava's eyes twinkled with mischief.

"Well," she said, smiling broadly at Marcus, "our paths crossed in the most unforgettable way when we were just little kids." As she began her story, her gaze was drawn to the winter sky.

"It was the middle of summer. Marcus, always the daring one, had decided he could take on a beehive on his own," she began, softly chuckling at the memory.

"He'd armed himself with a stick and a silly little homemade shield, probably thinking he was the village's mightiest warrior." He thought the beehive, which was hanging low from a tree branch, would be an easy target.

Ava laughed and shook her head as she remembered. "As you might expect, things did not go as planned. Marcus whacks the hive, and the next thing he knows, he's fleeing for his life, pursued by a swarm of angry bees."

Her laughter was contagious, making everyone laugh, including Marcus, who was flushed crimson. He ran straight into a laundry line in haste, becoming engulfed in sheets and bloomers. He ran around like a ghost, still being chased by the bees.

"I was there, watching the scene play out." Ava was in tears by this point, her laughter echoing through the crisp winter air. Garrett, who always seemed to put on a stern face, had a smile tugging at his lips.

"That's how we met," Ava said, wiping her tears away. "I was the unfortunate girl who wore those bloomers." Marcus nodded, still red-faced but laughing. "That is correct. "I was a stupid kid," he admitted, shaking his head.

"At the very least, it resulted in a lifelong friendship." The group's laughter echoed around them like a beacon of warmth in the cold winter landscape.

Despite their serious mission, these moments reminded them of their shared histories and bonds. It made the challenges ahead appear less daunting.

The group continued until they could no longer ignore the increasing chill of the winter air as the sun began to dip below the horizon, painting the snowy landscape with pink and purple hues. They decided to camp for the night because the twilight cast long shadows across their path.

Marcus took the lead in collecting dry wood, his breath fogging in the cold air due to his bulky frame and muscular arms. Ava and Alexia trailed behind, their nimble hands picking up smaller twigs and branches, their faces lit up by the fading sunlight.

With his years of wilderness experience, Garrett quickly identified a suitable location for their camp that would provide them with some shelter from the bitter winds. Meanwhile, Erik was busy making small fire pits, his hands expertly molding the snowy ground.

Several fires soon began to crackle, casting dancing shadows across the snowy expanse around them.

The fire's heat gradually began to ward off the freezing temperatures, creating a cocoon of warmth for the group, which was only amplified by Erik erecting a dome around them to protect them from the winter frost.

The flickering flames illuminated their faces, casting an array of shadows that danced along with the crackling fire.

The people huddled around the fires, their breath visible in the frigid winter air. The heat seeped into their frozen bones as the flickering flames warmed their bodies.

The orange glow of the fires against the wooden backdrop created a picturesque scene—a small island of warmth in an icy wilderness.

Chapter 448: Trouble Ahead (1)

Erik and his companions had been journeying through the winter wilderness for two weeks.

With each passing day, the village that had once been their home got more and more distant, giving way to an endless expanse of frost-covered trees and ice-covered paths. The cold was a constant, but they were used to it; their bodies resisted the biting chill thanks to their clothes and the fires they started at night under the protection of Erik's wooden domes.

Thaid sightings became more common as they moved further away from the Frantian's military encampments. It was clear that the soldiers did something to the thaids around the village since there were almost none there. The beasts appeared to be drawn to the remote wilderness by primal instincts.

Despite the increased Thaid encounters, the group could hold their own. Erik's dual abilities and his companions' seasoned skills proved to be more than a match for these creatures.

Marcus absorbed the brunt of the attacks with his mana shield, his axe slicing through the creatures with brutal efficiency.

Alexia's mana arrows were unerringly accurate, while Ava's agility and dagger skills dealt significant damage. Garrett's wind-infused sword slashes were lethal, and his tracking abilities were invaluable in anticipating potential encounters.

Their confidence grew with each Thaid they defeated, solidifying their faith in themselves and each other. Unexpectedly, the experience brought them closer together, forging them into a team.

Even as the Thaid encounters became more frequent, the group's rest periods were surprisingly comfortable, providing a welcome respite. Erik's Plant Master brain crystal power enabled him to manipulate the surrounding flora to create protective shelters quickly.

Erik's deft control transformed the seemingly barren and snow-covered wilderness during the night. Strong pine trees would bend and twist at his command, their branches intertwining to form protective domes with a wave of his hand and a flicker of mana.

To provide insulation, moss would grow, and undergrowth would shift and rearrange to form a padded floor.

These plant-made sanctuaries not only provided a physical barrier against the snow and wind but also effectively hid them from view, as the domes themselves blended in with the surroundings.

This ensured the group's safety while they slept or rested, making them less vulnerable to surprise Thaid attacks, preventing them from becoming cold, and, most importantly, making them usable when they returned.

This ability was crucial in their journey, providing physical comfort and safety and providing the group with a brief respite from the constant vigilance that their journey required. The much-needed rest reenergized the team and gave them the energy to continue.

In the middle of this particularly harsh winter, the group discovered they had found themselves on the banks of a frozen river. Once, it must have been a serene cascade, carrying the mountain's bounty through the valley, providing nourishment for the verdant flora and myriad creatures that called this wilderness home.

But now the river was still and motionless, its flow having been stopped by the chill and transforming into a vast plain of shimmering ice.

The surface of the frozen river, which reflected the surrounding landscape like a mirror, was stunningly attractive. It grabbed the sunlight and scattered it into a kaleidoscope of glittering specks, which resulted in a radiant display that belied the bitter cold.

When Garrett looked up at the vast landscape before them, he wore an uncharacteristically intense frown that etched deep furrows into his normally unruffled face. His expression was gloomy. His pupils contracted as he concentrated on the heavy blanket of snow covering the ice and everything nearby.

A chilly wind blew across the landscape, picking up a few snowflakes here and there to create a spooky dance of white particles in front of the icy scene.

The barren trees that lined the riverbed were covered in snow, creating a striking contrast between the once-vibrant greenery of the trees and the stark black and white of the landscape. The strain on the branches caused them to creak, and their skeleton-like shapes swayed gently in the breeze, providing an eerie melody to an otherwise silent world.

Garrett cautiously moved along the riverbank, the snow muffling his footsteps and the chilly air clouding his breath.

He'd always been attuned to the wilderness, a silent observer who could read nature's subtle signs like an open book. But his instincts were screaming at him now, a dissonant alarm in the quiet stillness. Something was wrong.

The man stopped, raising a hand to signal the others to stay back. His gaze was fixed on the frozen river, his eyes flickering with a worried undercurrent. His boots crunched on the frost-kissed ground as he moved closer to the edge. His gloved hand reached out from the ice.

He stood for a moment, his silhouette stark against the white expanse, his figure shrinking in the face of the impending challenge. His mind was clouded by anxiety, with the unknown dangers of the icy passage weighing heavily on his mind.

Turning back towards the group, he finally broke his silence, his voice carrying an unusual edge. "We've got problems, guys," he began, his words heavy in the frosty air, bringing an onset of concern that seemed to chill the atmosphere even more.

Garrett's attention was drawn to a troubling detail against the stark backdrop of the frozen river. His gaze shifted from the icy river to the snow nearby, where minor disturbances marred the otherwise immaculate surface. There were footprints, almost invisible due to the wind and snowfall but unmistakable to the trained eye.

People had recently come here. It wasn't a promising discovery, being so far from any known village. That only left one possible conclusion: Frantian soldiers were nearby.

He ran his gloved fingers over the rough-sketched map, pausing over the illustration of the frozen river.

"I found signs of recent activity in the area," he continued, holding up a handful of snow.

"Footprints, almost completely covered by the falling snow. But they weren't left by animals or villagers; they're human."

Chapter 449: Trouble Ahead (2)

After that, there was a lengthy pause, during which his words began to sink in. Everyone in the group exchanged a collective glance, and an unspoken understanding was communicated.

The isolated location and the low probability that the individuals in question were either travelers or villagers all pointed toward the same unsettling conclusion.

"Most likely Frantian soldiers," Garrett stated, his words leaving a chill in the air, much like the gusts of wind sweeping across the frozen river in the vicinity.

The subsequent hush was thick with tense anticipation, and the only sounds that broke it were the ones made by the surrounding vegetation to the howls of the wind. They looked at each other in the firelight, their expressions ranging from shock to resolve as the reality of their situation became abundantly clear. Their eyes met.

The five individuals were all feeling a palpable sense of tension as a direct result of his discovery's implications. After a while, the buoyant mood prevalent earlier was replaced by one marked by caution and uncertainty.

Erik was the first to break what had become an awkward hush that had descended upon them.

"We should avoid them," he suggested, his tone reflecting his usual calm demeanor, unaffected by the realization that had just been revealed.

"There's no reason to put ourselves in harm's way. We can go in the opposite direction and take a detour," he added. His words were received with a variety of responses from those around him. Ava and Garret nodded in agreement, the expressions on their faces revealing that they were equally anxious.

They were fighters, to be sure, but the prospect of engaging in a conflict that wasn't necessary wasn't appealing to them.

On the other hand, Alexia maintained a contrary point of view. Her eyes glowed with fierce determination, and her posture was as stiff as a fighter getting ready for battle. She rebutted by asking, "Why not just take them out? It is an opportunity to deal a blow to the Frantians, even though it may be risky."

After giving it some thought, the woman turned to Garrett and asked, with a determined look in her eyes as she continued to stare at him, "How many people do you think we are dealing with based on your estimate?"

Garrett gave it some thought for a while, examining the footprints in the snow in his head.

"Four," he responded, his voice remaining unruffled despite the nature of their situation.

"At the very least, that's what the tracks seem to suggest." The moment there was silence after his words, it was as if the reality of their situation had dawned on them all at once.

Their words sparked a conversation between the three of them. Erik argued against starting a fight. He restated his position regarding the danger that was involved while emphasizing the significance of their primary objective.

After all, it was their responsibility to get to the Lumisgrove, and they should avoid getting into skirmishes that could put them in danger of getting hurt and make their journey more difficult.

On the other hand, Alexia was not one to give up easily. She argued her point while displaying intense resolve in her eyes. They were not merely adventurers; instead, they were warriors from their village.

There was value in seizing opportunities, removing potential dangers, and protecting their home, even though it was in the middle of territory controlled by the enemy.

The discussion continued, with each side presenting their unique point of view and ideology in turn.

Marcus sat there and listened intently, his eyes darting from one of his companions to the next as they debated a topic, his mind working to find the right balance between being cautious and taking action.

Both Ava and Garret chose to maintain their silence for the most part, participating in the discussion on occasion but limiting their interventions as much as possible to avoid further problems.

Even though Alexia was the group's leader, not everything was decided solely by her. The choice was made as the situation's intensity began to lessen, and the discussion began to wind down. Ultimately, the group followed Erik's recommendation, even though Alexia's argument was persuasive.

It was a tough sell, and Alexia didn't bother to hide her dissatisfaction; her blazing gaze made it clear that she was thinking something entirely different. Despite this, she did not challenge the decision in any way.

As they prepared to continue, the atmosphere was thick with words that were not spoken. Their journey was not even close to being half done, and with this newly discovered danger lurking nearby, the path they were taking had become more dangerous.

However, they were all in agreement with the choice that they had made, and as a result, they formed a cohesive unit that was ready to tackle any challenge that lay in wait for them. While their path would allow them to sidestep the soldiers for the time being, the chilly river served as a reminder of the threats beyond their village.

The group carefully maneuvered away from the icy river, with Garrett taking the initiative to lead the way to get out of the way of the danger that lay ahead.

It was a decision that was made with the knowledge that, given their quest, they were at a disadvantage against four potential Frantian soldiers, and it was determined that discretion would be the better part of valor in this particular situation.

As they proceeded further into the forest that had been blanketed in frost, the fresh blanket of snow served to muffle the sound of their steps.

Due to the canopy above, a labyrinth of intertwined branches and conifers crystallized in their snowy shroud; the forest was transformed into an intricate network of snow tunnels and open clearings. This protected them from the falling snow.

Following in their wake, the once lively river had been reduced to a distant memory, and the majestic stillness of a winter forest stood in its place. The journey was difficult because they had to walk on fresh snow, making a distinct path through the whiteout that anyone else could follow in their footsteps.

However, they did not change their pace, as the pressing nature of their predicament drove them forward.

As they continued to walk, the terrain gradually altered under their feet as they covered more kilometers. Large stretches of snow-covered meadows were now visible as the dense concentration of trees started to thin out and give way to the subdued light of a partly cloud-obscured sun.

A symphony of crunching snow under their boots and the soft whispers of the forest all around them accompanied each step that they took.

The monotony of the white plains was suddenly broken when the terrain began to ascend gradually—amid the open space stood out like a natural landmark. This rocky outcrop had been partially concealed by the persistent snowfall of the winter.

The craggy structure was adorned with complex formations of icicle-covered rocks, which had been molded over time by the tenacious elements. It looked like a jagged, ice-covered castle standing all by itself in the middle of the winter plain when viewed from a distance.

Garrett halted briefly to take in the startling difference in the surrounding environment. Despite the peril they were attempting to avoid, there was a glimmer of amazement in his eyes for a brief moment.

After that, they stopped to gather and continued on their way, circumnavigating the formidable natural structure with great care. They had to exert more effort as they rerouted their path to get around the stony formation because the snow in this area was deeper.

Chapter 450: Ambush (1)

Every step deeper into the winter plain took them further away from the trees but closer to their goal.

Despite this, the openness of the plain provided them with a clear, uninterrupted view of their surroundings, with the stark, monochrome landscape stretching out in all directions.

Their steps left a trail of powdery snow in their wake, a telltale sign of their journey through the frigid wilderness. Despite the bitter cold and the endless expanse of snow, their spirits remained high.

The group stopped in the middle of the snow-covered plains beneath the endless expanse of a winter-blue sky. Garrett straightened up, his body tense, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

Silence enveloped them like a heavy cloak, the stillness of the white desert amplifying the slightest sounds.

Even Erik, with his quiet demeanor and calm exterior, felt a chill that had nothing to do with the cold. He shifted uneasily, his gaze scanning the vast emptiness.

It wasn't just the lack of life but the stark, complete silence that pressed down on him. His hands instinctively closed around a twig in his pocket, ready to call on his plant-master abilities if necessary.

Ava turned to face the group, her eyebrows furrowed in confusion, seemingly oblivious to the sudden tension.

"What's wrong?" she asked, her gaze flitting between Erik and Garrett, who had visibly tensed.

Erik, who had been unusually quiet, his eyes narrowing in concentration, finally spoke up. "Something is wrong here," he said, barely above a whisper.

He returned his gaze to Ava, his expression solemn. "Why?" Ava inquired, her eyes wide with confusion.

She was not as in tune with nature as he and Garrett. After all, her power allowed her to make mana arrows, and while that made her indispensable in a fight, it didn't necessarily make her adept at sensing danger before it was on them.

Erik remained silent, his gaze fixed on the endless expanse of the snowy plain before them, his face a mask of contemplation.

It was as if he were listening to the silence, trying to decipher some hidden message. Meanwhile, Garrett had moved away from the group, his eyes scanning the ground for something.

His demeanor had changed; he was no longer alert and tense and on edge. His hands rested on his weapon, ready for an unavoidable attack.

His eyes widened as he noticed footprints in the snow. They weren't their own; the pattern was too erratic and scrambled. His blood turned to ice in his veins as he realized what was happening.

"We're not alone," he said solemnly, looking back at the group. With the gravity of their situation, his eyes were dark.

Their exposure in the snow-covered plain had made them easy to track, which they were now paying for. The air between them was as dense as the snow beneath their feet.

There were no words exchanged. Everyone was on guard, their senses heightened by the sudden dip into an eerie silence.

Marcus's eyes darted from side to side, his body as rigid as the ice crystals adorning the outcrop they'd passed. His usually warm gaze had turned icy, mirroring the frosty landscape around them.

Alexia's heart pounded against her ribcage like a war drum, each beat echoing the silent ticking of time in this frozen moment. Ava and Marcus were both tense, their posture rigid and their faces etched with worried lines.

This was unfamiliar territory for them, so different from the familiar forest paths they were used to. Every breath they took was frosty, swirling in the cold air like tiny specters before dissipating.

The absence of the usual winter sounds—the distant hoot of a snow owl, the rustling of frozen leaves in the breeze, or even the crunch of their boots against the packed snow—made the silence even more oppressive.

Without warning, a bolt of pure energy seared through the air, blazing and brilliant against the backdrop of the snow-covered plains.

Everyone instinctively hit the ground as it whistled past them and collided with a nearby tree, splitting it cleanly in two.

[HOSTILES DETECTED.]

<New Quest: Survive the Ambush.>

-Rewards for completion: 3000 experience points, 500 DNA points, 6 strength, 6 dexterity, and 6 intelligence stat points for surviving the encounter.

"Everyone get down!" Erik yelled as they scattered. The peaceful white landscape had been abruptly transformed into a battlefield. A man emerged from the attack's direction.

He had short brown hair and blue eyes that sparkled with cold precision. His hands held a metal cross-bolt and some residuals of mana that matched the bolt that had shattered the tree.

This guy had the ability to make mana bolts. He then shot through his cross-bolt.

A woman with auburn hair pulled into a tight ponytail appeared next, a scar on her cheek a testament to her previous battles.

She wore heavy armor and wielded a large shield and a Warhammer. Her brain crystal power was not apparent, but Erik assumed he was related to the fact that she could easily swing a giant Warhammer. Despite the heavy load, she moved with unwavering energy. Was it related to strength? Erik needed to see what she did to understand.

The two were not the only ones present on the battlefield. Among them was a blonde figure who moved quickly, almost blurringly fast, out of the corner of their vision. The man armed with a pair of daggers dashed toward the group. He was fast; since he wielded daggers, it was apparent speed was his specialty. But his brain crystal power was unknown.

The last one to join the fight was another woman with shoulder-length brown hair and a focused gaze.

Even from a distance, she exuded a powerful presence. Her brown hair whipped around her as she took in the scene with a keen eye. She carried a longsword at her side, but even in her case, her brain crystal power was unknown.

<Fuck... finding out their powers will not be easy,> the young man thought. Thanks to their weapons, he had a general idea of their fighting abilities, but if their brain crystal powers were nasty, he didn't know they would survive the encounter.