

BIOLOGICAL 451

Chapter 451: Ambush (2)

As the Frantian soldiers advanced, their powers combined to form a terrifyingly effective attack. Erik's group went on the defensive, with each member fighting against one of the attackers, but Erik provided support. Their tranquil journey through the winter landscape had been shattered, and the harsh reality of battle had replaced the serenity.

Marcus and the woman with the sword circled each other on the snow-covered field, their weapons gleaming in the weak winter sun. Marcus gripped his massive axe tightly.

The brown-haired swordsman, Lieutenant Emily, based on what her nameplate said, gripped her longsword. Both of them assessed each other, their weapons drawn and their bodies tense with anticipation.

Marcus was the first to charge, his axe raised, toward Emily. She easily dodged his attack, as it appeared that her brain crystal power allowed her enhanced senses allowing her to anticipate his next move. She aimed a blow at his side with her longsword. On the other hand, Marcus was quick to respond, using his mana shield to deflect her strike.

Emily leaped forward, her longsword slicing through the air in a quick arc toward Marcus. He avoided her attack with a quick weight shift, the cold air whipping past his face as her sword narrowly missed him. Marcus seized the opportunity and swung his axe at her, but she deflected his blow with her sword, their weapons clashing loudly.

Their battle became more intense with each attack and counterattack. Emily used her keen senses to find a weakness in Marcus' defense or in his mana shield. On the other hand, Marcus resisted her relentless assault with brute force and the protection of his brain crystal power.

Emily aimed a low swipe at Marcus's legs, but his shield protected him from the attack. His axe then fell in a vertical arc towards his opponent, but she raised her sword to meet his, their weapons locked together.

Marcus pushed her away with a burst of strength, breaking their deadlock for the moment. Emily, on the other hand, quickly regained her stance. She charged at Marcus, her longsword whipping through the air in a series of lightning-fast strikes. Marcus retaliated by attacking her with his axe, parrying each blow and then unleashing a mighty swing.

Their fight raged on, their weapons clashing repeatedly and sparks flying from the brutal collisions.

Another battle occurred at a distance from Marcus and Emily's close-quarters combat. Alexia, the red-haired archer, and Corporal Pierce, the agile Frantian soldier, were engaged in their own high-stakes dance. Armed with their preferred weapons, they took aim, released, and moved in a rhythm based on keen focus and survival instincts.

Alexia, bow drawn, fixed her piercing gaze on the Frantian soldier. She created a glowing mana arrow in her hands, the energy humming and vibrating on the arrow shaft. She aimed and let it fly. Lucas locked his compact crossbow on her with an equally sharp gaze. He fired a mana bolt, its trail glowing blue in the harsh winter light.

Their projectiles flew across the space between them at speeds too fast for the human eye to follow. But Alexia and Lucas were out of the ordinary. They both ducked as soon as they saw the projectiles arrive, their instincts leading them behind the cover of nearby trees, the bolts and arrows they had launched only moments before thudding into the trees where they had been standing.

After retrieving a new mana bolt from his crossbow, Lucas positioned himself behind the tree in order to take aim at Alexia. After she had already started moving, the archer drew another mana arrow and notched it onto her bowstring. At the exact same time that Lucas let his bolt go, she let it go as well. They continued to perform their dance around the projectiles, using the trees as shields.

Their movements were so swift that it was difficult to follow them in the stillness of the winter forest. When they fired a bolt or an arrow, they would immediately duck for cover, as their awareness of their surroundings was heightened, and every instinct was tuned to survival.

Their ranged battle was a tricky ballet of aim, release, dodging, and covering up. Each assault and counterattack was carried out with precision and intent, and the projectiles of both sides sliced through the icy winter air like butter.

The only things that could be heard breaking the intense silence of their lethal dance were the clanging sounds of mana bolts and arrows striking the trees or whistling through the air.

Meanwhile, Erik was solely reliant on his Plant Master power. He used his brain crystal power to command the vegetation beneath the snow to spring to life and attack the opponents. He avoided using his Flyssa to prevent getting recognized by the Frantian soldiers.

Vines snaked from the frozen ground towards the Frantian soldiers, while tree branches manipulated by Erik's will served as shields and impromptu weapons for his comrades. He was assisting Garrett and Ava, who had difficulty fighting the skilled Frantian soldiers.

The once pristine and tranquil snow-covered plain was now ruined by the intense combat that took place. Footprints could be seen pressed deeply into the snow, their erratic patterns bearing witness to the intense struggle that was taking place. The continuous back and forth between the two camps had left the once pristine white blanket smeared with evidence of the conflict, trampled, and churned.

On the skeleton trees, which had been silent observers until now, the wounds of the ongoing conflict were clearly visible. The bark was chipped and scarred by errant mana bolts and arrows, and some of the trees were set ablaze by the intensity of the mana, with smoke rising into the bleak winter sky from those that burned.

As Erik used his Plant Master brain crystal power, the leaves began to rustle violently, and the vegetation that was buried beneath the snow began to come to life in order to assist him in defending himself and his comrades.

Chapter 452: Ambush (3)

The confrontation between Ava and Private Sullivan was intense and marked by stark contrasts.

Ava's daggers glistened with a menacing promise in the winter sunlight as she deftly navigated the snowy terrain with her slender frame.

She was dressed in a functional leather vest and trousers, and as she moved across the snow-covered ground, she didn't even leave footprints since her power allowed her to slide across any surface, and for sure, the slippery ice only made her faster.

On the other hand, the Frantian soldier, armed with daggers, stood guard while wearing light armor. He held his weapons firmly in both hands, and the wind he created by moving caused his blonde hair to move in a swaying motion.

Their fight had begun with a flurry of blows being thrown at each other, with Ava sliding across the icy surface to close the gap between them as quickly as possible. The problem was that the man was

keeping up with her. He was slower than her in terms of absolute movements, but somehow he could predict or see where Ava was going to strike.

All of that led the woman to think that this man had some sort of enhanced reflexes.

She charged against Private Sullivan with her daggers; the blades cut through the icy winter air as they passed through it.

Private Sullivan parried the attack, the motion of his weapons blurring together and his enhanced reflexes allowing him to deflect her attacks with relative ease despite her speed.

However, Ava was relentless. She pressed on, her daggers flashing as she attacked from different angles. Private Sullivan matched her speed, at least from the upper body; his blades met hers with resounding clangs. The man struck back despite his defensive position, his daggers aiming for Ava's exposed areas.

During their vicious duel, Private Sullivan noticed a gap in her defenses. Ava momentarily exposed her vulnerable side while catching up in her last attack's momentum.

Sullivan took advantage of this fleeting opportunity with a swift movement so subtle that it was barely noticeable to the human eye. His dagger cut cleanly through the biting cold air as it arced out in front of him in a swift arc.

Ava made a futile attempt to correct her error when she realized it, but it was already too late. The blade's sharp edge pierced through her leather vest and cut into her flesh as it made its way toward her arm.

A severe pain suddenly struck Ava's arm, and as it did so, the warmth of her blood began to seep through the holes in her clothing and dye the snow beneath her feet a vivid shade of red. She retreated backward due to the cut and the stinging pain, her face becoming a scowl as she clutched her injured arm.

But the private persisted. He charged at her, swinging his weapons at the woman. Ava dodged backward just in time to avoid getting hit by his blows. She was incredibly agile and quick but had trouble breaking through his defenses despite this advantage.

His formidable combination of lightning-fast reflexes and agility gave him a significant advantage over her. He could outmaneuver her in almost every way, aside from the one that allowed her to move through space.

"Fuck... I need help here!" The woman shouted toward Erik.

"I'm a little bit busy here!" Erik shouted. He was currently helping Garret, who was in a difficult situation.

The woman then attempted a different strategy by moving around Private Sullivan in a large arc to find a weak spot, but incredibly, the man followed her with his eyes.

The blades of her daggers gleamed menacingly as they spun threateningly in her hands.

She moved unpredictably, and her footwork was erratic in the hopes of throwing him off her scent. Private Sullivan, on the other hand, was implacable. His icy blue eyes followed her every move, allowing him to anticipate her attacks and respond with ones of his own.

Once more, his lightning-fast reflexes came in handy as he dodged and parried each attack the woman made, his counterattacks being lightning-fast and pinpoint accurate. Ava launched another assault, this time whistling with her daggers.

The man avoided her attack while he moved his daggers in preparation for a counterattack. The chance didn't come late.

Ava twisted, escaping his counterattack before at the last moment. As a result of Private Sullivan's lightning-fast reactions and wise understanding of strategy, Ava was forced to spend the entire fight gaining distance from the man. He was like a closed door. There wasn't a chance to pass through.

Ava's thoughts were racing, and her rapid breathing became more labored with each passing second. She was well aware that she needed to turn the tide of the battle in her favor, or else she would soon be at the mercy of the Frantian soldier.

She had hoped her brain crystal power would give her the required advantage, but it did not.

Ava propelled herself forward with a surge of determination in the direction of Private Sullivan once more, gliding through the landscape at an incredible speed. She used the ice that covered the ground to gain even more momentum as she slid across it.

Her daggers were a blur as she slashed at him; her speed and agility were the only weapons she had against his superior reflexes. Their blows kept coming at each other nonstop, and the clash of metal on metal could be heard reverberating through the cold air.

Ava moved with frantic energy, her daggers flashing as she attempted to find a gap in Private Sullivan's defense. On the other hand, he was the picture of controlled precision, thanks to his lightning-fast reflexes and deft maneuvers.

Ava's face contorted into a grimace as she lunged forward again while enduring the pain in her arm, this time propelled by desperation. As she swung her dagger, her hair whipped around her face, and the other arm she used to defend herself hung limply by her side.

Sullivan, however, was prepared thanks to his dexterity with both daggers. The man sidestepped her assault with lightning-fast reflexes and then aimed a fatal blow at the vulnerable area of her throat as she turned away from the attack.

The gleaming blade slashed through the icy air, and its path indicated that its destination would be fatal. Nevertheless, an unexpected force stepped in just as the dagger was about a couple of centimeters away from Ava's neck.

An unnoticed wave of mana began to work through the frozen vegetation around them, bringing it to life. Erik's power caused the slender branches and sturdy roots to emerge from the snow-covered ground and move in a particular direction.

Sullivan was trapped by the rapidly expanding foliage, consisting of vines winding around his limbs and preventing him from continuing his attack mid-strike.

The momentum of his attack was hindered, and his lethal dagger came to a halt just a few centimeters from Ava's throat.

There was a brief lull in the action, and the atmosphere was heavy during that time. Ava's response came a couple of milliseconds after she realized what had taken place and how Erik had managed to save her.

She made the most of the opportunity by acting immediately after gaining this knowledge. She let out a primal scream as she used every ounce of her strength to force her dagger into the eye socket of the startled Sullivan.

As the remaining young soldier felt the icy steel pierce his eye, his remaining eye closed in shock. A primal scream came out of his throat.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Ava was left shocked by his tenacity. After a blow like that, he was still alive. For that reason, she screamed again and pushed the blade into his skull with all the strength she could muster.

"DIE!"

Private Sullivan lost his hold on his daggers as he let out a strangled gasp.

He fell, and the snowy ground rose to meet him. It was over for him; Ava had emerged victorious from the conflict. Nevertheless, there was still a long way to go in the battle.

She knew that Garret was having a hard time fighting against his opponent, and she understood that Erik was primarily assisting Garret for this reason.

She hastily examined her wound, and as soon as she determined she could fight, she made a beeline for Garret and Erik.

Chapter 453: Ambush (4)

[HOSTILE INDIVIDUAL KILLED BY AN ALLY: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING CONVERTING PROCEDURE.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. 523 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

As soon as Ava successfully eliminated her target, Erik gained some experience, and he was notified of this event.

Despite the apparent disparity in rank and the number of neural links, there wasn't a lot of evidence to suggest that he was on par with the deceased man regarding his physical strength.

If he fought melee, that would have made it obvious he was too strong, but by using his brain crystal power only, no one found out anything.

This was a benefit of having the system, but it also meant that Erik needed to engage in combat with more powerful beings to advance in levels more quickly.

When he turned to look at Ava, he saw she was running toward Garrett's opponent.

Ava was weak from exhaustion and pain, but she continued to fight anyway. She quickly made her way toward Erik and Garrett by sliding across the snow-covered field, using her ability to glide across any surface. She summoned her mana and moved as quickly as she could.

Garrett and Erik were engaged in combat with a woman with fiery red hair who was a stalwart and resolute soldier from Frant. From the nameplate on her chest, it was evident her name was Sergeant Amelia Reed.

Aside from the fact that she was keeping up with Garrett, who was by no means weak, it was clear that her power had to do with endurance and tenacity.

She fought with a large and heavy shield but held a large War Hammer on the other hand. She was strong, yes, like many at her level, but the fact she wasn't even breathing a sweat gave her away.

Erik noticed that because Garrett, despite the chilling cold, was full of sweat and was panting heavily.

Sergeant Reed made large, destructive swings that kept Erik's comrade at bay while her large shield stopped Erik's vine tendrils from emerging from the ground and attacking her.

Because Amelia's endurance was high, she could withstand the onslaught without becoming exhausted. She moved quickly, and her actions were honed and perfected.

Despite her equipment weighing her down, the woman dodged Erik's vines with surprising agility. Erik had manipulated the vines with the precision of a master, and they had shot out from the ground in an attempt to entangle her.

At the same time, she was able to keep Garrett at bay by using her War Hammer to deflect his sword blows and responding to his attacks with strikes of her own that were equally strong.

Despite this, she was simultaneously engaged in a battle on two fronts: one against Garrett and another against Erik's plants.

Ava picked up her pace as soon as she realized there was a gap in the defenses, and her body became a blur as she slid across the snow. She knew she needed to strike to make his comrades gain the upper hand in this fight.

Simultaneously, Amelia was adjusting her strategy to counter that of Erik and Garrett with every passing second, and she was starting to gain an advantage. Erik did train at the Red Palace but just for a short period.

If it weren't for the brain information injector he got from the Biological supercomputer, he would have never been able to stand against such fighters, who trained for years before enlisting and kept doing so even after.

For Garrett was the same, the gap in fighting skills was evident since he never received official training. His ability only relied on his brain crystal power and what he learned during the years at the village.

Ava needed to take action, and she needed to take action right away. They would only have a shot at beating the formidable French soldier if they did that.

Ava reached Amelia with a swift movement, her twin daggers shining brightly in the winter sunlight. She gave a ferocious war cry and then lunged at the Frantian soldier, aiming for the exposed side of her body.

However, Amelia was quick and responded to the new danger almost immediately. She swung her heavy War hammer, the reach of which was significantly greater than Ava's daggers, compelling the younger woman to retreat or risk being crushed by the lethal weapon.

Garrett sprang into action simultaneously as he saw the woman's distraction. As he thrust his sword in Amelia's direction, his weathered face assumed the expression of intense concentration.

Nevertheless, she blocked Garrett's strike with her shield. Despite Ava's unexpected intervention, he didn't manage to kill her since the woman brought her shield around swiftly and fluidly and blocked his attack.

The sound of the sword striking the shield echoed throughout the frozen battlefield and clearly indicated the force behind the attack.

It was at that point that Erik decided to act. The strain of using his power was evident in the beads of sweat that dotted his forehead as he struggled to contain Amelia using his Plant Master power.

Even though he only had a small amount of mana left, he had no choice but to try. He pointed his finger toward the snow-covered ground while expressing unwavering resolve.

The thick vines emerged beneath the white blanket and began to wind toward Amelia. Their tendrils were reaching for her in an attempt to bind her.

Amelia groaned as the vines entangled around her armored legs and torso and pulled her backward. She fell to the ground after being momentarily thrown off balance.

She let out a guttural, defiant roar, pushing her heightened endurance to its limits. She quickly freed herself, and as soon as she could, she struck back.

The woman aimed her War Hammer at Garrett, who had barely enough time to raise his sword to defend himself before she struck.

As the two weapons collided with a clatter that could be heard for kilometers, the atmosphere vibrated with the force of the swing. As Garrett struggled to cope with the aftereffects of her blow, he was thrown backward, and his boots slipped and skidded in the snow.

Ava kept circling to find the chance to strike, but Amelia was not stupid. Every one of her attacks was wide but weirdly fast, so she had problems approaching the Frantian soldier.

Her eyes were darting between Amelia, Garrett, and Erik.

However, it was a challenge. Amelia was like a raging storm, and her War Hammer and shield were like an impregnable fortress.

Her enhanced endurance meant that she never got tired and felt no pain, and even the wounds Garrett inflicted were superficial at best.

On the other hand, Erik's strength was visibly deteriorating due to the diminishing supply of mana, which was taking its toll on him.

Erik knew that If things continued in that direction, he would have no choice but to fight melee.

Ava's heart was pounding, and she couldn't take her eyes off the scene before her. She knew she needed to take action and locate a strategy to turn the tide of the conflict. The question that arose was how. They were engaged in combat with an adversary who was skilled and unyielding.

An opponent who had a brain crystal power that allowed her to fight in top shape until she had mana available while they were struggling. Besides, her training allowed her to keep up against three people simultaneously. It was not a good situation.

[HOSTILE INDIVIDUAL KILLED BY AN ALLY: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING CONVERTING PROCEDURE.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. 604 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

The young man smirked, and it was at that moment that an arrow soared through the crisp winter air.

The arrow cut a sleek path, moving with such speed it was nearly a blur. It emerged from the cover of skeletal trees, a testament to the archer's skill and precision. Time seemed to slow as the projectile made its approach, a deadly missile aimed with lethal intent toward Amelia.

The Sergeant was engaged in combat with Ava and Garrett, her War Hammer swinging in lethal arcs while her shield deflected the combined onslaught from both of them.

Her back turned to the incoming arrow and focused solely on her opponents. Even as the sharp whistle of the arrow sliced through the chilly air and rapidly closed the distance, she was oblivious to the danger, too focused on the fight before her.

Erik smirked as he followed the arrow's trajectory; it was clear what would happen. The world fell silent except for the beating of his heart and the chilling wind that carried the arrow toward its target.

The arrow struck true, its sharp tip penetrating Amelia's helmet and embedding itself in her skull. There was a moment of utter silence, the battlefield holding its breath as Amelia stood rigid, her Warhammer halfway in a swing, her eyes wide in shock.

Then, with a sickening sense of finality, she went down. The fallen Frantian soldier bled all over the snowy ground as she lay on the ground after collapsing. Her War Hammer fell to the ground with a dull thud after slipping from her grasp. Her life had ended, and the feathered mana tail on the arrow served as a solemn flag to mark the occasion. Her body lay motionless.

The sudden turn of events left Erik, Ava, and Garrett standing there with their mouths agape and their eyes widening in shock. The only things that broke the silence on the battlefield were the gentle whistling of the winter wind, which carried the final repercussion of the deadly arrow's flight, and Alexia's laugh.

[HOSTILE INDIVIDUAL KILLED BY AN ALLY: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING CONVERTING PROCEDURE.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. 559 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

"Did you miss me?" Alexia remarked as she looked at the three warriors, who were utterly dumbfounded.

Chapter 454: The end of the battle

The battle between Marcus and Lieutenant Emily Wilson was a showdown between two formidable opponents, each on par with the other in terms of both skill and resolve.

The agile and leaner form of Emily stood in stark contrast to the robust physique of Marcus.

Nevertheless, beneath the layers of physical disparity, they shared a mutual resolve that shone brightly in each other's eyes, lighting up the freezing battlefield.

Marcus wielded his Axe with the dexterity of a seasoned warrior, each swing deliberate and powerful in equal measure. Marcus' mana shield absorbed the majority of Emily's blows, and his Axe was constantly deflecting Emily's lightning-fast strikes.

Emily's attacks were relentless and well-trained, but his brain crystal power protected him by surrounding him with a shimmering mana shield.

This layer of defense allowed him to withstand Emily's attacks. Her heightened senses allowed her to make her movements even more fluid as she slashed her longsword swiftly through the cold winter air.

As she danced around Marcus, her long brown hair was blown in every direction. Emily used her heightened senses to anticipate Marcus' movements to find and exploit any vulnerabilities in his defense.

Their conflict was a violent ballet of attacks and counterattacks, resembling more a symphony of clashing metal than a dance.

However, the turning point came when Marcus used his mana shield to force an opening.

While Emily was attempting one of her lunges, he quickly expanded his shield, and the sudden force knocked her off balance.

Marcus took full advantage of her lapse in concentration, bringing his Axe crashing down with a mighty swing. Emily's heightened senses gave her a momentary window of opportunity to avoid the attack as she heard the Axe coming down, but by then, it was too late.

Marcus Axe bit into her side, knocking her over on the snowy ground. Emily tried to stand up but was in a lot of pain and could only do so while holding her side with one hand.

Marcus did not provide her with the opportunity. He ended the duel with a swift motion, burying his Axe deep into her skull and winning the fight.

It was abundantly clear that the man did not require any assistance, so there was no reason for the others to participate in the conflict.

Marcus stood victorious as Emily's lifeless body lay motionless on the ground, the biting winter wind carrying away the echoes of their struggle as it passed by.

But his eyes held no joy, only the solemn understanding of a duty fulfilled and a life taken.

"You took your time, huh?" As Alexia emerged from behind him, her voice rang out, and humor could be heard laced throughout her words.

As she watched Marcus, her bow was slung across her back, and her eyes shone with relief and amusement. Marcus let out a hearty laugh, the sound echoing around the now silent battlefield.

After the arduous battle, his eyes sparkled with joy as he looked at the archer. He understood the joke for what it was: a brief release from the tension building up.

Marcus wiped the sweat off his forehead before turning to take a look around at the battlefield.

When he saw Erik, whose forehead was sweaty due to the usage of his power, and Garrett, whose weathered face revealed the battle's hardship, his gaze softened.

Ava, on the other hand, was the one who captured his attention. The young woman was resting her head against a tree, her face as pale as the hair on her head, which was a vibrant shade of blonde.

Her right arm hung limply by her side, and the fabric of her attire bore a dark stain that marred its appearance.

His typically upbeat disposition turned for the worse when he noticed she had been hurt. Marcus said to Ava in a solemn tone, "Let me see your wound," as he gestured toward her.

The woman smiled weakly at Marcus, her eyes shining despite her obvious pain.

"It's just a scratch," she said, with a hint of the playful tone that is typically associated with her voice.

Her eyes betrayed a tenacity that reflected her dogged determination, a quality that had been instrumental in her success in overcoming many challenges in the past.

Despite the disdainful remark that Ava had just made, she dislodged herself from the tree that she had been leaning against and cautiously approached Marcus.

It was evident that she was attempting to limit the movement and alleviate the pain.

Once she was in front of Marcus, she carefully lifted her injured arm, revealing the wound by pulling back the fabric of her clothing to expose it. It was a deep cut, and the blood stood out vividly against her white skin.

Even though the blood had clotted around it, it was evident that if the wound did not receive the appropriate medical attention, it would take some time to heal, and there was a risk of becoming infected.

Marcus frowned as he inspected the injury with the keen eye of someone who had done this kind of thing multiple times, trying to determine the extent of the damage.

The wound on Ava's arm was a gruesome sight to behold in its severity. It was a deep gash that had sliced through the fabric of her clothes and the delicate skin beneath it, cutting diagonally across the lateral aspect of her forearm.

The wound's edges were neat and regular, indicating that a skilled hand had caused it.

The gash measured approximately four inches in length and was deep enough to expose the raw, ruddy tissue that lay beneath the skin; however, it had thankfully not yet reached the bone.

Fresh and dried blood surrounded the wound; it had seeped into the fabric of her clothes and stained her skin a dark crimson color.

Blood was also visible on her clothes. A few of the blood's components had already begun to coagulate, giving the area around the cut the appearance of dark, brittle patches.

Because of the force that had been used to deliver the blow, the skin around the gash on Ava's skin was already irritated and swollen, displaying a coloration that was an unhealthy mix of red and purple.

The area surrounding the wound was swollen and appeared throbbing with every beat of her heart.

Ava was doing a commendable job of concealing her discomfort, especially given the severity of the situation.

But the occasional wince, the light sheen of sweat on her forehead, and the pallor of her face were clear indicators of the pain she was bearing. If the wound was not properly cared for and treated, there was a significant chance that it would become infected, and the process of healing would be drawn out and could even be incapacitating.

It was abundantly clear that referring to the injury as "Just a scratch" was a gross oversimplification. However, even though he was not a doctor, he knew that Ava's wound was going to be fine until they stitched her up and cleaned the wound often.

"You call that a scratch?" Marcus retorted, raising an eyebrow. After that, he gave her a stern look that did invite her not to argue with him. "You need to take care of this, Ava. Let's not treat it like a joke, shall we?"

Chapter 455: A new Sword for Garrett

The once tranquil winter landscape was transformed into a chilly reminder of the horror and carnage that can result from violent conflict after prolonged fights.

The delicate sheen of frost that had once blanketed the ground was now marred and disrupted, and the violent dance of combat had churned it into a muddy mixture of slush and earth.

The recent footprints, a chaotic pattern of aimless imprints, silently witnessed the frantic movements during their fight.

The lifeless bodies of the four Frantian soldiers were scattered across the snowy landscape. Their once-vibrant lives had been extinguished in the unforgiving dance of survival that they were engaged in.

Each was a stark silhouette against the pure white of the snow, serving as a reminder of the quick and ruthless nature of the world.

Erik looked over the bodies of his four fellow citizens of Frant, all of whom were originally from the same city, New Alexandria. Still, he had decided to pledge their allegiance to the nation of Frant. However, even though he observed their lifeless forms lying in the snow, he did not experience any pang of sorrow nor any knot of regret in his stomach.

These were not the faces of people who had been dear friends or acquaintances since childhood. These soldiers were dedicated to a man he despised, serving a nation that he had grown to hate with all of his being.

They wore the emblem of Frant, which had come to represent oppression, deceit, and betrayal to him. They were his enemies.

Despite sharing the same birthplace, there was a chasm of difference between them that ran deeper than any river and wider than any ocean.

Erik had witnessed firsthand the atrocities committed in the name of strength, and he had seen what Frant and New Alexandria had done to those less fortunate.

The sounds and images and his recollections of what he had been forced to go through had etched a profound and seething hatred into his heart. Malice that obliterated any trace of shared beginnings or common roots.

When he looked at them, he noticed that their eyes were blank, and they were staring into the snowy expanse. This caused his jaw to tighten.

They were a representation of the country and the city that he once considered to be his home. A city that was not a symbol of safety and prosperity but rather one of corruption and cruelty.

A nation that had ceased acting as a protector and perhaps never did so in the first place.

They were victims of a cruel and unforgiving world, caught in a conflict that did nothing but feed Frant's appetite for more and more power and wealth.

Amid his hatred and resentment, though, Erik realized that they, too, were victims in their unique way. But he saved his compassion for his allies, those who stood with him, and those who had endured loss and pain comparable to his own.

As an adversary, he only had his resentment and determination to continue the fight. For Erik, they represented the nation that he despised so much, and the fact that they were destroyed was a victory for him.

Erik's eyes darted across the quiet battlefield as he surveyed the situation. The snow had lost its pure white color and became tainted with the dark red color of blood.

Before the battle, the trees had moved gracefully in the wind, but now they stood still, their branches bearing the scars of the intense conflict.

The wrath that had been let loose was harshly brought to mind by the shattered bark, broken branches, and spent mana arrows and bolts that littered the landscape.

The normally soothing sounds of nature were absent, replaced with an oppressive hush. The air itself appeared to be holding its breath.

It appeared as though time had stopped, as the passage of each second seemed to drag on forever as the group came together. Only the sound of their breaths could be heard in the eerie stillness as the rest of the world observed a respectful silence in memory of those who had passed away.

Despite the bleak circumstances, the group felt a strong sense of relief. They were alive and well. They had fought against well-trained soldiers but emerged victorious from the conflict.

Erik averted his eyes from the gruesome scene of his slain adversaries and focused on his allies instead. As she investigated her surroundings, Alexia was taken into the scene with sharp, alert green eyes.

He looked at her and politely nodded in her direction before continuing. "Seems we're safe for now," he announced, carrying the quiet authority they'd come to rely on.

The experienced tracker, Garrett, had already begun to make his way toward the lifeless form of Lieutenant Emily Wilson. The man knelt, his skilled hands deftly removing the longsword from the soldier's grip.

He looked closer at the blade, made of a silvery material that shone in the dim light.

The low, rumbling tone of Garrett's voice reverberated throughout the empty clearing as he held Emily's longsword in his hands. "This is good quality. It's made of a material that's highly conductive to mana," Erik declared, his experienced eyes studying the weapon with a mixture of admiration and a hint of envy.

In Liberty Watch Village, they had always been limited from obtaining the same resources available to Frant. Mana-conductive material was a luxury they could seldom afford, let alone craft weapons from it.

While Marcus was tending to her injury, Ava spoke up, and the tone of her voice had a lighthearted quality to it. As Marcus wrapped the bandage more tightly around her arm, she joked, "Lucky you, Garrett," while feigning a slight twinge of pain.

Her eyes sparkled with playful humor despite the pain that she was in. "At long last, a sophisticated weapon to match your ferocious fighting prowess!" she sarcastically said.

Her words sparked a brief moment of fun, which reminded them all that, despite the harsh reality they were facing, moments of camaraderie and lighthearted banter were essential for maintaining their morale.

Even when faced with the most trying circumstances, they had to keep their positive attitude and maintain a strong bond.

After her example, Erik and Alexia went through the soldiers' supplies in search of anything useful or valuable to take with them. In this cruel world, the spoils of their victories were not a luxury but a necessity for them to survive.

In the meantime, Marcus continued to care for Ava. The fearless adventurer put on a brave front and treated her injury like nothing but a scratch.

However, Marcus was not willing to take any chances. Even though he was such a large man, his large hands were surprisingly gentle as they cleaned and bandaged the wound.

Marcus was working on Ava's arm, and even though she insisted it was not that bad, she couldn't help but wince as he did so.

Chapter 456: The Enemy Camp (1)

Marcus reprimanded Ava kindly, saying, "Oh, hush, Ava, and let me do my job." Even though he was irritated, his voice had a note of concern.

Ava had been putting on a brave face ever since she had been hurt, and she continued to do so.

She brushed off the seriousness of her injury with a dismissive wave of her hand and a sardonic grin, claiming that it was nothing more than a superficial scratch. But Marcus was more discerning.

He could see the tightness around her eyes and the slight grimace she made whenever she moved her arm despite her calm demeanor.

She gave the impression that the wound, which consisted of a deep cut running the length of her forearm, was not as severe as it was.

While concentrating hard on the task, Marcus muttered, "I swear, you're more difficult than any enemy we face. You are worse than a child!" He then used a soothing herbal mixture to clean the wound, being careful not to move her arm around too much while he did so.

After that, he secured it with a fresh bandage, which he tied with the ease that comes with experience. He could sense her unwinding as the calming effect of the herbal concoction took over the throbbing pain she had been experiencing.

"Stop dismissing every wound you get from now on, Ava," he said, his tone turning serious. "Even the smallest cut can turn fatal if not treated properly. Remember that."

As a warrior, he was well aware of the significance of projecting an image of strength before the adversary.

But as a friend and fellow villager, he was more concerned about Ava's well-being than putting on a bravado. It was his top priority, and he always ensured she was aware of that fact.

"Garrett, Erik, did you find anything useful?" Alexia inquired as she shifted her focus from the group of exhausted fighters to the supplies left behind by the fallen soldiers.

As he rose to his feet after examining one of the Frantian soldiers' bodies, Garrett simply shrugged. "There is not much to them besides their weapons and a few throwables."

After cleaning the dust off his hands, Erik nodded in agreement. "Yeah... not much worth noting."

They could only hear the sound of the wind and the far-off calls of the various creatures as the silence descended once more upon them. Erik finally broke the silence while everyone else was deep in thought. "I wonder if finding these guys' camp would be beneficial?"

Ava perked up when she heard his suggestion. Her eyes shone with the indomitable spirit that she possessed, even though she had a bandage wrapped tightly around her injured arm, and her face was pale due to the blood she had lost.

She chimed in, surprising Erik with the force of her voice as she said, "That's not a bad idea." They may have more supplies or maybe even information."

"Yeah, that was what I was thinking about," the young man said. "However," Erik added, his gaze turning serious, "We need to make haste. This area is often crossed by flying thaids."

As soon as the creatures were mentioned, Alexia's eyes widened slightly. They did not want to come into contact with such Thaids because they were large, carnivorous beasts with acute senses that had a taste for uncooked meat.

"I thought they didn't appear a lot during winter," Marcus said, his tone of voice giving the impression he was skeptical.

However, without conscious thought, his hand moved to his Axe and rested against the weapon's hilt.

"They don't," Erik acknowledged, "But it's still a risk. The trees, bare due to winter, offer no shelter from prying eyes above. Flying Thaids or not, being exposed is never a good idea."

His words lingered thickly in the icy air like an unspoken reality they had all experienced and were too familiar with. Their prior involvement had exhausted them, and the altercation was likely to attract attention they would have preferred to avoid.

The members of the group indicated their concurrence with a head nod. It was very obvious that they needed to leave the area as soon as possible.

The ragtag group regained their composure and started searching for the enemy's base camp as soon as they were ready. Their breath became visible in the bitterly cold winter air, but it faded gradually as they proceeded further into the landscape covered in snow.

The afternoon sun cast long, stretching shadows across the unbroken swaths of snow; the winter scene's starkness instilled awe and trepidation in those who witnessed it.

Each step they took with their clunky boots left deep impressions in the fresh snow, and the crunching snow reverberated throughout the otherwise quiet winter air. In the dim light of winter, the bare branches of the trees looked hauntingly beautiful, despite their eerie appearance.

The winter-bare trees provided little shelter from the biting cold, and the branches, devoid of foliage, did little to shield them from the gusts of wind that occasionally blew down from the nearby

mountains. Despite this, their skeletal forms had a natural elegance, which stood defiant in winter's unrelenting grasp.

Erik led the way, and his eyes moved around the area with a purposeful gaze. His sense of direction was impeccable, his intuition almost uncanny, a trait honed over months of wilderness survival and information he injected into his brain.

Garrett plodded along behind him, his attention divided between the tracks they were following and the new weapon he had acquired. In the dim light of winter, the soldier's longsword, an exquisite piece of craftsmanship, glistened with a chilling gleam.

Ava continued to keep up her pace despite being in pain due to the wound. Her bright eyes darted around the landscape, her curiosity mixing with a healthy dose of caution. Marcus stayed in the back and brought up the rear. His powerful presence served as a source of reassurance for the other group members.

He'd look behind them every once in a while, his blue eyes scanning the path they'd just come from for any indications of pursuers or potential dangers. In the meantime, Alexia maintained her position close to the center of their formation.

She kept her keen archer's eyes fixed on the horizons in the distance, remaining vigilant for any sign of movement.

After what seemed like hours of trudging through the endless winter wilderness, they finally found signs of recent activity. It didn't take the group very long to find the soldiers' tracks in the snow, and once they did, it wasn't hard to tell that the soldiers had been there recently.

All of the signs pointed to a recent encampment, including a slight disturbance in the snow, a makeshift firepit that was barely covered, and the faint scent of woodsmoke that was lingering in the air. Their rivals had been in this area not long ago, either.

Chapter 457: The Enemy Camp (2)

Erik and Garrett took the lead as the group approached the campsite, using their experience to carefully search the surrounding area for any recent human or animal activity.

Only the gentle crunch of their boots on the snow and the muffled whispers of the wind were audible through the icy hush that had descended upon the area.

At first glance, it appeared the camp did not contain any obvious signs of a shelter being present. It was perplexing, but at the same time, Erik felt a jolt of recognition when he realized there were no tents or equipment, and all that was present was an old firepit.

The young man's brows furrowed in concentration as he contemplated something, his penetrating gaze moving methodically across the snow-covered ground.

He had a thorough understanding of the Frantian soldiers' strategies, discipline, and cunning. It was surprising, but not unexpected, that there were no tents present.

Erik had a hunch that they were just hidden, which was a common tactic utilized by the Frantian troops for the purposes of both security and stealth.

He knew they could not afford to take anything at face value because the Frantian soldiers were notorious for using guerrilla warfare techniques.

On the other hand, Garrett remained silent, his stoic features sculpted into a deep frown, he had been tracking for a long time but couldn't understand what was happening.

He held the longsword, its blade reflecting the soft glow of the dying daylight. His seasoned eyes took in the particulars of the environment, reading it in search of the most inconspicuous of hints that could direct them to the location of their goal.

When Garrett got down on one knee, he looked over the ground to see if there were any disturbances in the snow. As he traced the faint imprint of a boot in the snow, the moisture from his breath condensed into a cloud of white vapor in the chilly air.

Erik was standing in the middle of what appeared to be a desolate landscape, carefully observing his surroundings.

He finally broke the silence with, "I'm certain this is it," his voice remaining unwavering and confident throughout. His companions gazed at him with expressions that conveyed a mixture of expectation and confusion.

"Frantian soldiers have an ingenious method of setting up their camps," he began, his gaze still focused on the ground. "They employ devices that can construct shelters underground. They're almost impossible to spot unless you know what you're looking for."

His statement was met with raised eyebrows, especially from Ava, who tilted her head in intrigue. "Underground?" she queried, her voice barely more than a whisper in the chilled air.

Erik gave a short nod before finally turning his attention to her.

"Yes, it's a strategy that's not only smart but also useful. In addition to an outstanding capacity for concealment, it also affords protection from the elements."

"But how exactly do we find the entrance?" Marcus chimed in, his intense blue eyes scanning Erik for responses as he looked.

Erik straightened, meeting Marcus' gaze with determination. "That's the tricky part. The entrances are designed to blend seamlessly with the surroundings. But if we're thorough and patient, we should be able to find it."

The group gave a collective nod and then continued their thorough search with a rekindled determination to find what they were looking for.

Each speck of snow and a heap of dirt was examined with unyielding ferocity on the part of the investigator. After all, they weren't just trying to find a way in but also trying to understand their adversary's devious mind better.

During their investigation, they combed the surrounding area, looking at groups of rocks and the trunk bases of large deciduous trees.

They tried each possible location, but all turned out to be empty, which added to their frustration and strengthened their resolve. Every second that went by and every fruitless search further increased their annoyance.

The deliberate absence of tents was an ingenious ruse, a strategy that Erik was familiar with. Ava was the one who made the initial discovery regarding what they had been looking for.

Her finger followed the contour of a hidden panel skillfully concealed underneath a layer of snow. Marcus rushed over to her side as quickly as possible, his alert eyes scanning the surrounding area.

"Wait, Ava. Let me give a look first," he said, his tone of voice carrying a trace of worry as he spoke to her in a low tone.

Marcus turned on his mana shield without uttering a single word. A mystical shield that would protect him from any danger that might come his way manifested itself as a bluish-white glow that encircled him and his immediate surroundings.

The unpredictability of the circumstances made it necessary to take this precaution. After that, his muscular frame leaned forward and carefully lifted the concealed panel. As everyone waited for what would happen next, there was an instant of silence and a holding of breath.

But nothing transpired. There were neither ambushes nor traps; instead, there was merely an underground passage that led straight into the heart of the Frantian camp. An audible sigh of relief could be heard reverberating throughout the snowy landscape.

The group began their trek inside the tent, with Marcus taking the initiative to lead the way. The stuffiness of the underground shelter replaced the briskness of winter, and the dim light of the corridor replaced the light from the outside world.

As they progressed further into the enemy's lair, their eyes became accustomed to the darker environment, and curiosity and caution ensured that they remained vigilant at all times.

As they proceeded deeper into the underground tent, they found themselves in a cramped space that was sparsely decorated with nothing more than sleeping beds designed for soldiers.

Their eyes darted around the room, taking in everything they could see and making sure not to miss anything important despite its apparent lack of complexity.

Erik went in that direction when he saw a line of backpacks arranged in a row against a wall. The rucksacks were designed to be tough and functional, reflecting the soldiers' lifestyle.

He unzipped one of the bags and rifled through the things it contained, his deft fingers eventually resting on a piece of folded parchment.

He unfolded what appeared to be a map and laid it out on the ground in front of him.

The unfolding of Erik's map revealed impressive geographical accuracy and specificity. It was an intricate topographic layout of the surrounding region, and it was marked with a variety of symbols to differentiate between features.

The mountainous landscape, dense forests, and winding rivers were depicted on the parchment with varying tones of ink in the dots that covered the surface.

The terrain was crisscrossed by a network of clearly marked trails and pathways, which pointed out critical roads and possible ambush locations.

Additionally, critical strategic locations such as watchtowers, military settlements, and forts were depicted in great detail on the map.

Notably, a sizable area had a circle drawn around it to denote the location of Liberty Watch Village, which served as their place of residence.

Around the village, multiple paths were followed, and several points were marked, which may have indicated the Frantian soldiers' intended points of attack or places to conduct surveillance.

In the document's margins were a series of coded symbols and cryptic annotations. This was yet another peculiar feature. Erik, who was used to the lies told on the battlefield, realized that these could be ciphers or instructions written in code.

Although it was intimidating at first glance, the map provided a comprehensive understanding of the area from the perspective of the Frantian military. This realization was unsettling, but it was also one that had the potential to be extremely useful in upcoming conflicts.

Chapter 458: The Enemy Camp (3)

Erik held the map up for all to see. "Look at this," he said, finger tracing the intricate ink lines. "Every camp, patrol, and military position around here has been detailed."

Ava was the one who first spoke after the prolonged period of silence. The sight of her delicate arm being freshly bandaged caused Erik to feel a twinge of pain in his chest.

"So, they are planning something big against Liberty Watch," she stated after determining the meaning of the lines and symbols. It wasn't even a question because everybody could see it. The presence of the large circle that had been drawn around their village was unsettling.

Garrett peered intently at the map. He was still holding Emily's longsword, the polished metal reflecting the dim light of the underground shelter in which they were located.

His expression was grim, and his grip on the sword became even firmer. "Those bastards," he muttered.

Marcus moved closer to the group while casting a long shadow with his armored bulk.

"This doesn't mean they're going to attack. Maybe they were just keeping tabs, monitoring the situation," he suggested, his tone attempting to bring some optimism to the disheartening discovery.

Alexia was intensely focused on the map as Erik watched her. Her emerald eyes were as sharp as daggers, darting across the parchment as she deciphered the complicated lines and symbols. She did not speak a word; her lips were constrained into a thin line. He was aware that Alexia was thinking about all of the options available.

She was strategizing and thinking about the necessary things to do. Her lack of expression was unsettling.

At last, she said, "We need to warn the village." Even if they are not making preparations for an assault, we can't take that risk. And this," as she pointed to the map, "Provides us with beneficial information regarding their operations. Now that we know their plans, we can prepare accordingly."

Everyone stopped what they were doing to concentrate on what she had just said. They were aware of the gravity of the situation, but the discovery gave them a glimmer of hope that things might turn out okay.

The information the Frantian soldiers had gathered was now in their possession; they could use it to defend their home and possibly turn the tide of the battle.

As Erik watched, it became clear this was a huge opportunity. With this map, they were no longer bound to be defenders merely; instead, they had a chance to fight back.

Everyone understood this, yet the only way for this map to be really put to use was to head back to the village and give it to Amos.

Upon realizing the problem, Marcus turned around to face the others. His broad shoulders were highlighted by the dim light that could only make its way through the opening. He started by saying, in an even and unruffled tone, "Look, Alexia. It would be stupid to go back and tell the others about this situation."

He then turned his attention to the map that Erik was holding and said, "I am aware that this information is valuable, and it will most certainly be beneficial for the village. But remember our main task. We have been given the mission to locate the Auburn Pine. That is the top priority for us."

Garrett shared Marcus's perspective on the matter. "Marcus is right. If we go back, we will more likely draw attention to ourselves. We've been lucky so far, but luck runs out. And when it does, we want to be as far away from the aftermath as possible."

Garrett's gaze turned sharp, his voice grave, "This map can change the tide for us. That is true, but only if we can deliver it safely to Amos. If we are caught before, it's as good as lost. It's a risk we can't take."

In addition to being logical, their argument was persuasive. They wouldn't do their cause any favors by going back and delaying the acquisition of the Auburn Pine. They had a journey and a mission that needed to be finished. Besides, even with all this information, it was clear they would still be unable to face Frant. They were too many; they were too strong even for their weirdly powerful village.

Marcus and Garrett had a valid point. Erik nodded in agreement, his gaze still on the map. "You're right," he admitted, folding the parchment and tucking it away. "Our primary goal is to find the Auburn Pine. That hasn't changed."

He gave the underground room a cursory glance, taking in the bunk beds, the discarded backpacks, and the quiet hum of space.

In light of this unanticipated discovery, they had obtained significantly more than they had asked for, but their objective remained the same.

Erik was aware of the significance of the task they had to complete. The Auburn Pine was necessary for their community's continued existence and was what would allow the whole village to live inside the hidden underground city where they could live.

Because Frant would have an extremely difficult time locating the underground city, it would be the ideal place to take refuge.

"Let's pack what we need and move out," Erik said, his tone firm. "We've stayed here long enough, and now we have a map depicting every Frantian patrol. The journey will be relatively easy from now on."

The rest of his companions murmured their assent in a hushed tone. There was no debate; everyone agreed that they needed to move quickly, but not everyone was happy about the decision that was taken.

Ava and Alexia started packing the essential items from the backpacks left behind by the Frantian soldiers. After a moment, Erik turned to look at them. He reassured them, saying, "Don't worry, Amos will know what to do against Frant; he is not stupid." Erik saw nothing but upset on the women's faces, but there was nothing they could really do.

The newly acquired information was a double-edged sword, bringing fear and reassurance in equal measure.

Marcus was already at the entrance of the underground shelter, his body casting a massive silhouette against the sliver of winter light that was making its way in. His hand was resting comfortably on the hilt of his Axe, indicating that he was prepared to face any threat that might come their way.

He turned to look at the group again, this time with a determined expression. "Erik's right. Amos is smart, and we're not here to pick a fight with Frant. We've got a mission to complete."

When Erik looked at his friends, he saw that their determination was still there. They were not Frant soldiers; they were not murderers. They were guardians of Liberty Watch and were motivated by the desire to see their people live in a more secure future, and if that meant they had to go on with their mission, despite the map, then so be it.

After taking one last look around the deserted underground shelter, Erik followed Marcus out into the icy air.

The search for the Auburn Pine had not yet ended, and they still had a significant distance to travel. With renewed resoluteness, they dove back into the wintry wilderness, leaving the icy emptiness of the Frantian's hiding place behind them.

Chapter 459: Going forward

The group decided to make another trip through the ice-covered expanse of the winter forest. Thanks to the map, they could avoid being discovered by Frantian patrols and encampments, moving as stealthily as possible through the bone-chilling frost and snow.

Every step they took caused the snow to crunch beneath their feet, but the sound was muffled by the wind blowing through the bare branches higher up.

They moved deliberately and without any sense of urgency as if they were a natural component of the wilderness. The eerie stillness of their surroundings provided a striking contrast to the fierce battles they had fought only a few hours earlier.

Erik led the group with a steely determination in his eyes while holding the map firmly in both hands. He would signal for them to pause whenever they got close to a designated patrol route or camp, and while he did so, he would trace invisible paths on the map with his fingers.

They would then steer their course in a different direction, avoiding potential run-ins with the Frantian soldiers by communicating in hushed whispers and making pointed gestures.

Standing close by, Garrett kept his eyes fixed on the area around them, his keen sense of observation allowing him to pick up on the nuances of the natural environment.

He followed the changes in the wind's direction, listened for the soft rustle of animals in the undergrowth, and even listened for the faint whisper of snowflakes falling on the ground below the trees.

As they traversed the unforgiving landscape, Alexia frequently scouted from the tops of the surrounding trees. The fiery-haired archer had sharp eyes, allowing her to spot approaching patrols from a distance, giving her comrades plenty of time to hide or change course.

There was a spirit of brotherhood and cooperation among them all. They were more than just allies because they had a common goal and realized the significance of their mission.

This purpose and this understanding brought them closer together. Despite their challenges, they functioned as a cohesive unit and team throughout.

Even though it was harsh and unyielding, the winter forest had become their ally. Its snowy expanse had concealed their tracks, and its winds had carried away any sounds they had made. It appeared as though the forest was supporting them in their endeavor.

As the sun began to set, painting the sky in shades of flaming orange and smoky purple, the group became aware of the necessity of locating a secure location to take a break and rest.

After such a long journey, their muscles began to feel the effects of fatigue, and it seemed as though the chill would only become more intense as the night drew closer.

Erik broke the silence first, "We need to move a couple of kilometers away from here."

Ava turned her head, her green eyes reflecting the waning sunlight, "But Erik, we're all exhausted. Why can't we just rest here?"

He pointed to the detailed lines and markings on the map that he was holding, which showed the locations of enemy camps and the routes that enemy patrols took.

He explained where they were situated compared to the Frantian patrols near their current location. It was impossible to predict the soldiers' paths, but with the map in hand, they could make educated guesses.

"Look at this," he began, his voice steady despite his fatigue, "We are currently in an area heavily frequented by Frantian patrols. If we set up camp here, we're sitting ducks."

Marcus squinted at the map, his eyes tracing the marked routes. "He's right," he said, nodding at Erik. "It's a bother, but we have to get away from here."

Ava, nursing her wound, sighed heavily. "Alright," she said, "Let's move then. The faster we get out of this area, the better."

"Exactly," Erik added, folding the map back. "It's a few more kilometers of a hike, but once we reach the area up North, we'll be out of immediate danger. We can rest there for the night."

By the decision made by the group as a whole, they gathered their belongings. They resumed their journey, relying on Erik's dependable leadership and the critical map as an advantage as they traversed the perilous winter landscape.

In this dangerous environment, stealth and circumspection were their greatest assets and allies. They had traveled so far and were carrying out such an essential quest; it would be unwise to risk being found out at this point.

They overcame the fatigue weighing down their bodies and continued their journey while following the dwindling light of the setting sun as their guide.

They were surrounded by howling winds, which sent shivers down their spines and caused snowflakes to dance in the chilly air. Despite their exhaustion, they remained vigilant, all their senses tuned into their environment.

After moving a safe distance away from the patrol routes, they eventually arrived at a secluded area blanketed by a cluster of snow-capped pine trees, which protected them from the icy winds.

They concluded that there was no immediate threat in the area, so they started setting up their camp.

Erik started putting the finishing touches on their shelter for the night. While he was standing in the middle of the clearing, he concentrated his thoughts and drew upon the mana stored in his Brain Crystal.

As he channeled his energy and focused it on the snowy ground below him, an ethereal light emanated from his eyes, giving the appearance that they were lit from within.

Underneath the frozen ground, signs of life started to emerge more gradually. In response to Erik's command, teeny-tiny strands of green pushed through the frost and extended upward.

In a matter of seconds, the tendrils began to thicken and intertwine, eventually becoming the framework for a structure shaped like a dome.

The other group members observed the young man's deft manipulation of plant life as he skillfully wove a dense network of branches and leaves into a compact web to create a small, wooden sanctuary. Their observation was met with stunned silence.

Erik, despite his power, was considerate of their requirements. At the very apex of the dome, he painstakingly fashioned a slender aperture for access.

It was an essential component that would enable any smoke that resulted from their fire to escape, and the breeze would take care of dispersing it further. At the same time, the dense weave of the shelter walls prevented any light from escaping into the darkness around it.

They were warm, had a place to hide, and had the essential discretion required to avoid being discovered.

After finishing up the construction of the shelter, Erik took a few steps back to assess his handiwork. In contrast to the stark winter scenery, the dome presented a warm and welcoming appearance.

He had tamed the wild nature around them and shaped it to fit their requirements, which afforded them safety and solace in an otherwise hostile setting.

They were given a momentary reprieve from the arduous journey that they had been on by the peaceful hush that enveloped them as they lay down to rest in the forest.

The calm of the night was a striking contrast to the tense weeks that went by, and it provided a brief moment of peace amid an otherwise tense mission.

Chapter 460: Samuel's Task

Samuel maintained his stance, clenching his weapon, a brutal mace, which glistened menacingly in the dim light cast by the torches and the Aclaitrium ore that surrounded them.

The crackling flame revealed the ominous, insectoid figures of the Acidspitter Arthropods that were advancing toward them.

Their exoskeletons shone in vibrant hues of green and yellow, reflecting the uncanny light in myriad bizarre and unsettling ways.

"Ready up!" Samuel bellowed, his voice echoing through the ancient streets. The expedition members responded to his call even though their hearts were thumping in their chests as they prepared for the impending assault.

Their eyes, which were filled with a mixture of fear and determination, darted nervously between their formidable leader and the approaching swarm of acid-spitting creatures.

Samuel's seasoned gaze fell upon the young Thomas, who had barely entered his twenties at the time and was visibly trembling, with his grip around the hilt of his weapon beginning to falter.

Despite the pressing nature of the situation, Samuel found a moment to give the young man a supportive nod, the severity in his gaze being tempered by a hint of empathy.

"Stay focused, son," he instructed, his voice firm yet reassuring. In response, Thomas nodded and swallowed audibly while tightening his weapon's hold.

The sound of the swarm of insect-like Thaid's charging forward was amplified by the echo of their skittering claws against the stone floor. Samuel took the lead, charging headfirst into the crowd of monsters with a surprising level of speed and dexterity given his wiry frame.

His mace made wide arcs as it smashed through the creatures' exoskeletons, sending shards flying in all directions.

The ancient streets were filled with the sounds of metal crashing into each other, the shrill cries of insectoid enemies, and the hissing release of corrosive acid. His fellow villagers fought bravely all around him. Samuel was able to see John and Emma, two young villagers, working together to kill the arthropods.

Their strikes were well coordinated, and they were killing them left and right. The pungent odor of the corrosive acid filled the air, and the villagers took extra precautions to avoid the potentially lethal discharge.

Despite their best efforts, the fight was not even close to being won. The Acidspitter Arthropods continued their ruthless assault, appearing to have an infinite number of members in their horde.

Samuel was beginning to experience fatigue, which was starting to have an effect on his team as well; their movements became slower, and their attacks became less precise.

A voice yelled, "Right flank!" as the battle continued. It was Harold, the village blacksmith, who was famous for his sharp vision and deep, resonant voice.

His alarm was enough to redirect everyone's attention to a wave of Acidspitter Arthropods flooding the street from an unseen tunnel to their right. This was the focus of everyone's attention.

Samuel whirled around, his eyes narrowing in response to the sight. They were surrounded by a dense swarm of creatures that scuttled towards them, their multifaceted compound eyes reflecting the torchlight in a menacing glow.

Samuel's heart was thumping in his chest, but he maintained a firm hold on his weapon. He was no stranger to danger and always met it head-on, emerging unscathed to tell the tale.

"Formation shift!" Samuel barked, his eyes never leaving the oncoming horde as he focused on it. Even though they were worn out and exhausted, his crew was still eager to follow his lead.

They had faith in him, and at this point, that faith was the only thing they possessed. Following the command given by Samuel, the band of intrepid explorers changed their formation into that of a crescent.

Because of this, they were able to face the imminent danger while simultaneously keeping an eye on the arthropods that were left over from the previous swarm. As they readied themselves for the oncoming assault, his team released battle cries reverberating throughout the cavern.

Samuel's eyes darted over each of them as he felt a surge of admiration for their resiliency. Thomas, who had stopped shaking and was now standing tall; Emma and John, who both had their weapons ready; and Harold, who had broad shoulders and was steady.

"Stay strong," he murmured to himself, raising his mace high. "For our village, for our freedom, and my comrades!"

Samuel maintained his composure in the face of the onslaught of Acidspitter Arthropods crashing into the defensive line of the villagers from Liberty Watch.

Samuel's weapon was a sturdy mace that he had affectionately named "Reaper," and he met each oncoming beast with a firm, unyielding blow from it. Reaper sang a song of death as it swung, a pulsating whirl that slammed into exoskeleton after exoskeleton.

Each strike was accurate and fatal, the product of years spent honing one's skills and the ingrained instinct that came with them.

Samuel moved erratically as if possessed, and his arm became a blur of motion that spelled certain death for the creeping arthropods.

His rhythm was flawless, and his strikes never missed a beat. The exoskeletons broke apart under the unrelenting assault, and their brilliant colors became less vivid with each passing second.

As the Acidspitter Arthropods died many simultaneously, the cavernous city's ground resounded with a cacophony of alien screams. Each creature's corrosive discharge was a potential threat.

A direct hit could liquefy flesh, armor, and anything else it came into contact with. However, Samuel was an experienced fighter, and his movements evoked both a dancer's grace and a storm's ferocity, and he was never hit.

His aged frame moved with a surprising agility that belied his years, and he deftly sidestepped jets of acidic mana bile as they came at him.

Dead bodies surrounded Samuel, but he showed no signs of fatigue. He was the storm's center, a whirlwind of unrelenting force that tore through the horde of Acidspitters like a scythe would through a wheat field.

Each thud of his mace against chitin and the death rattle of each creature added another tally to his ever-increasing count.

The Acidspitters maintained their forward momentum, but each wave was stopped in its tracks by Samuel, who acted as a barrier. He stood there amid the destruction, Reaper playing its sinister tune, thousands of dead arthropods bearing witness to his unbreakable will.

Although exhausted, his determination did not waver at all, despite the aching in his arms. Samuel knew there was work to be done, and as long as he continued to breathe, he would see to it that the task was completed.

