

BIOLOGICAL 461

Chapter 461: The aftermath

"How many did we kill?" Harold's voice's weary and burdened sound reverberated across the bloody battlefield.

The bustling underground cavern had been reduced to a dreadful scene of destruction, with the ground covered in ichor that was oozing out and the shattered exoskeletons of Acidspitter Arthropods strewn about.

"Tens of thousands!" you exclaimed. John retorted, his tone conveying a sense of bewilderment and surprise.

The sight of the vast expanse of destruction sent a shiver down his spine, and he cast his eyes over the entire area. The event in question was not a battle but rather a slaughter.

The Acidspitters were lifeless and segmented as they lay in heaps, their bodies broken apart.

The colors of their exoskeletons, which had once been bright green and yellow, had become muted and washed out due to the proximity of death.

Their compound eyes, which had previously been bright and alive with the intent to prey, were now dulled, and their spark had been extinguished.

It was difficult to breathe because the air was thick with a putrid odor, a noxious miasma that smelled like a grotesque mixture of charred acid, shattered chitin, and death.

It permeated the cavern, seeping into their clothes and skin, a gloomy reminder of the toll the fight had taken on everyone involved.

Nevertheless, the Liberty Watch villagers held their ground even amid the wreckage. Forty people, including farmers, miners, and blacksmiths, stood amidst the destruction they had caused with the work they had just completed.

Their faces were lined with fatigue and grime, and their clothing was stained with the ichor of their defeated adversaries.

"When the hell will these monsters stop coming?" Emma's voice cut through the sounds of the battle. The raw frustration and exhaustion echoed in her voice, resonating with the sentiments of all present.

However, as she turned to address her fellow friends, she suddenly found that she could not speak.

Her eyes wandered over the battlefield, and the scene that met them was unanticipated. The swarm of Acidspitter Arthropods behind her, which seemed never to end, had significantly lessened thanks to Samuel's fury.

There were now only a few scattered handfuls of the creatures left where there had been a veritable sea of bright green and yellow bodies in the past.

"Look!" Emma's voice resounded, now tinged with surprise and a note of disbelief. She gestured in the direction of the shrinking group of Acidspitters. "Their numbers... there are not many of them anymore!"

The statement lingered in the air like an echoed glimmer of hope that gave the beaten-down ranks of the Liberty Watch villagers the strength to push and win.

When everyone in the group turned to look, they saw with their own eyes that what Emma had announced was accurate.

The decline in their numbers was plain to see and easily quantifiable. The attack had slowed down significantly.

Following the conflict's conclusion, the battlefield was left in complete silence, serving as a spooky memorial to the conflict that had taken place within the confines of the ancient city.

The once menacing forms of the Acidspitter Arthropods were now lifeless, and their bodies, which were a vibrant green and yellow color, were scattered across the ground.

The concrete walls and the ground bore the telltale scars of an intense and unrelenting battle caused by the acid.

Among the fallen arthropods were also the casualties from their side. The bodies of a few brave souls who had fallen in the face of the onslaught lay there, partially dissolved by the mana-powered acids.

Samuel was standing in the middle of the wreckage. His salt-and-pepper hair was dirt-covered, and his weathered face was tired.

The fire that burned in his hazel eyes was unquenchable despite his exhaustion. As he surveyed the destruction, he was filled with sorrow for those killed and relief that the conflict had ended.

"We've done it," Samuel said, carrying across the battlefield. His tone was steady and relentless as he spoke to the remaining members of Liberty Watch village.

The last sentence hung in the air, filled with the weight of their victory and the implication of their triumph.

The victory over the Acidspitter Arthropods was significant for more reasons than one. It was an essential step on the path to their village's continued existence and expansion.

"We've lost some, and their sacrifice won't be forgotten," Samuel continued, his voice tinged with sadness. "But today, we've secured a chance. A chance for Liberty Watch to thrive. This ancient city is ours now. It's a new beginning, a beacon of hope."

His words reverberated throughout the empty expanse of the ancient city, serving as a demonstration of the inhabitants' tenacity and resolve. Even though they had suffered losses and the conflict had been relentless, they had emerged victorious.

As Samuel stood amidst the wreckage of the battle, his mind wandered to the group sent out to recover the Auburn Pine. Samuel was concerned about their safety.

His gaze wandered across the expansive city, its ancient structures now stripped of the threat they had just eradicated.

He pictured the fertile fields that would soon bloom here, nourished by the unique properties of the Auburn Pine; it was a future brimming with promise and sustenance.

He was unsure if Erik could accomplish the task he was given, but he knew the young man selected to lead the expedition to find the Auburn Pine was a capable fellow.

He was tenacious and resourceful and possessed an unwavering determination that belied his age.

Samuel did not know the young man very well since he came to the village not long ago, but it was apparent he was driven by a strong aversion for the oppression they were forced to endure at the hands of Frant and New Alexandria.

Samuel respected that the young man had a personal reason for assisting the village, even though he didn't really have a reason to assist them.

Despite this, the older man could not escape the worry. The mission was extremely risky, full of unexpected challenges, and there was no assurance that it would succeed with its strengths alone.

The winter season presented an additional hazard, making their journey much more difficult to undertake.

However, he had faith in Erik and the rest of his team's ability to triumph despite the overwhelming odds.

Samuel heaved a sigh and turned his attention away from the deserted city. His tired eyes glowed with resolve, and his mind was occupied with visions of a prosperous future for their village.

A future that was dependent on Erik and the accomplishments of his team.

"May luck favor you, Erik," Samuel murmured to the silent city, his voice filled with hope and apprehension.

Chapter 462: The Lumisgrove's dangers

It had been a week since Erik had led his team out of the hidden camp, and time had flown by. Because the winter's chill had continued its relentless assault, every step through the snow-covered forests that made up Frant territory tested one's endurance.

Despite this, the group continued their efforts, buoyed by the realization that the mission they were working on was of the utmost importance.

They had been moving covertly, avoiding enemy encampments and patrols by utilizing the map they had taken from the fallen Frant soldiers. The nights were spent in wooden shelters that Erik had built using his one-of-a-kind brain crystal power.

Erik's command over the local flora gave them an invaluable advantage despite the difficult circumstances that allowed them to rest well and easily.

That made it so that the team developed an unusual sense of camaraderie amid their shared suffering, strengthening their determination to complete their mission, but also a dependency on Erik. The others knew that, without his Thaid-repelling plant, and the domes, this journey would have been a nightmare.

Between moving and stopping to rest, Erik would check their location by referring to landmarks and the sun's angle, aided by Garrett. This helped them navigate.

After making their way through the snowy landscape and dense forest network, they were getting closer and closer to their destination, the Lumisgrove.

It was said that this remote region contained the only known habitat of the Auburn Pine, which was the plant that held the key to the continued existence of their village.

Unease started spreading throughout the group as they got closer to the Lumisgrove. This was not your typical wooded area. Even though Erik had warned the others that they were going into a very dangerous location, the others did not realize how dangerous the location was.

The area surrounding the Lumisgrove, as well as the Lumisgrove itself, was a place riddled with mysteries and concealed perils. The already peculiar nature of the area defied conventional wisdom.

The vegetation in this area grew taller and more robust, with massive trunks and outspread branches that dwarfed the already massive flora in the surrounding area. Every other place on earth, probably, had a flora dwarfed by these enormous trees, which had velvety moss covering their bark and towering over them.

Not only the plant life developed, but other things had as well. Even the remaining flora and fauna appeared to have grown in size. The local thaids, who were already a formidable threat due to their size and strength, were even more powerful here.

Their muscles were more prominent, their movements were more swift, and their powers and mana pools better, echoing through the vast grove and sending a chill down the spines of the most experienced warriors.

Most importantly, however, their mana was significantly higher than usual, meaning their brain crystal power was more potent.

For instance, three days before, as they traveled toward the Lumisgrow, a pack of Leylarhads emerged from the thick underbrush, their imposing figures dwarfing the team.

These creatures were a terrifying sight to behold from the very beginning. They had two large tails that sprouted from their hindquarters and flowed and whipped with dangerous grace.

Additionally, they had two prominent tusks that protruded from their jaws and glinted menacingly in the sparse light filtering through the massive foliage.

However, these Leylarhads were monstrous parodies of the thaids that the group naturally saw elsewhere, their stature being three times larger than those commonly encountered, amplified the intimidation factor associated with their species.

As they paced restlessly, their menacing eyes shone with the luster of primal hunger, and their coarse, matted fur rippled to indicate the presence of muscles underneath.

The pack moved in uncanny harmony, their steps resembling a natural symphony, and they were poised to react quickly to even the slightest provocation.

Despite this, the group was able to eliminate them all, which contributed significantly to Erik's overall level of experience.

However, it was clear that, from then on, the group had to pay much more attention to their surroundings than they already did since the mutant version of an already powerful thaid would kill them all.

The closer they got to the Lumisgrove, the more the natural world around them appeared to warp and distort, with the flora taking on enormous proportions and the fauna exhibiting terrifying strength.

"What will we find in the Lumisgrove if things are this abnormal out here?" Ava was the one who, at long last, posed the question on their minds.

Erik's face held a serious expression in the dim light filtering through the colossal trees.

He quickly glanced toward his companions before saying, "I don't know, but based on the Thaid's we have faced during the past week, we better stay safe. The Lumisgrove is known to be a deadly place. Even Frant had to be careful when sending soldiers there."

The words of Erik struck a chord deep within them and served as a reminder of the obstacles that lay in wait for them.

As they processed his warning and struggled to come to terms with the gravity of their predicament, there was a palpable sense of tension in the air.

The way to Lumisgrove began taking on a more ominous air as it progressed.

The group could only speculate what might lie in store for them deep within the forest's core. The closer they got to their destination, the more the magnitude of their task appeared to grow, and the weight of the fact that it was already happening began to press heavily on their shoulders.

Alexia broke the silence, asking, "Should we expect soldiers there?" Despite the gravity of their situation, her tone never wavered in her calm and collected delivery.

When Alexia looked into the hazel eyes of Erik, he responded with a severe gaze by saying, "We should." His affirmation was solemn, thereby reinforcing the importance of being cautious and well-prepared.

Frantian soldiers were a formidable threat on their own, their presence in the hazardous Lumisgrove adding an extra layer of danger to their mission.

Yet, despite the imminent threats, the group was resolute. Each of them understood what was at stake. The Auburn Pine was the key to their village's survival. Failure was not an option, so fortified with resolve; they continued their journey toward the Lumisgrove.

Chapter 463: The Ursus Glacialis (1)

The usually light-hearted Garrett suddenly held his hand up, gesturing for silence. An expression of grave concentration replaced his usually carefree demeanor.

His eyes were fixed on something on the forest floor. After following his gaze, the group found something peculiar in the snow: a series of enormous paw prints, significantly larger than anything they had ever seen before.

These prints were notably distinctive; they were significantly deeper and broader and undeniably the sign of an enormous creature in size and mass.

The freshness of the imprints was indicated by their crisp edges, which provided further evidence that the creature was not too far away.

Erik got down on his knees next to one of them and put his hand in the crater there. The fact that the print was so much larger than his hand was a concerning indication of the kind of monster that left them.

There were a handful of them that came to his mind and that he knew lived around these parts of the forest.

"This is..."

Before Erik could say anything else, a loud sound spread in the surroundings and reverberated through the grove, directing their attention to the origin of the sound.

The noise was too distinct, too sudden to be mistaken – the snapping sound of a tree trunk. That was unsettling.

The thunderous crash that followed confirmed their fear. It wasn't something small approaching them, but it was far bigger and more dangerous.

The atmosphere around the group became increasingly tense as silence descended upon them. As they instinctively reached for their weapons and swept their gazes across the surrounding forest to identify the precise location of the beast, their chests tightened, and their breaths caught in their throats.

Everything that had been said before was utterly forgotten, and in its place was a palpable feeling of dread that hung in the air like a dense fog. The only sounds that could be heard were their rapid breaths and the creaking of trees in the distance, adding to the howling wind.

They were under a palpable threat that felt like it was pressing down on them like a weight they could almost touch. Nevertheless, there was a sense of determination, which coexisted with the present fear and uncertainty.

"What do we do?" Ava asked.

"We should run!" Erik replied.

A strong wind picked up at that precise instant, turning the snow around them into a whirling vortex and preventing them from fleeing.

The tall trees around them began to shake violently, and a low growl resonated through the forest. The sound was both eerily recognizable and wholly foreign at the same time.

The group froze as the growl intensified into a terrifying roar, their hearts pounding like war drums in their chests as the terrifying sound continued.

Suddenly, a massive form emerged through the dense wall of snow and wood protecting the area.

<Fuck!>

"IT'S AN URSUS GLACIALIS!" Erik yelled, his eyes revealing clear signs of apprehension.

<New Quest: The blue shadow.>

-Goal: Escape or Kill the Thaid.

-Penalty for failure: Certain Death.

-Rewards for completion: 5000 experience points, 1000 DNA points, 10 strength, 10 dexterity, and 10 intelligence stat points for surviving the encounter.

After emerging from the undergrowth, the Ursus Glacialis appeared in front of them in all its monstrous splendor. The tall and imposing figure of the beast was unlike anything they had ever seen before, and it dominated the environment.

The beast's muscular frame was covered in thick, sapphire-blue fur that shimmered against the stark white of the snow. The beauty of its fur contrasted dramatically with the beast's intimidating height of seven meters and its monstrous jaws. Its glowing blue eyes were fixed on the group with the intensity of a predator, and its long, lethal claws were displayed for all to see.

After taking a few steps back, Erik felt a shiver, unrelated to the chilly temperature outside, run down his back. During their journey to the Lumisgrove, they encountered several large Thaid, but nothing like this one.

The sheer magnitude of the beast, combined with the raw, primal power it exuded, was enough to make even the most seasoned warrior pause.

The Ursus Glacialis came crashing down on them like a storm, its size and sheer viciousness dwarfing anything else they had to contend with up to that point, and with it, a massive gust of cold wind came.

For a split second, Erik felt an overwhelming dread seizing a firm hold on his heart, but he quickly calmed himself and started formulating a plan.

When Garret saw the monstrous Thaid, he was taken aback by the terrifying scene before him, and he could barely catch his breath in his chest.

When he saw the Thaid, an ancient terror was reawakened within him. He wasn't the only one with that feeling. The others were wide eyes, fear clutching their hearts.

In the meantime, Erik tried to assess the situation. After a quick scan with his analysis power, Erik determined that the group could not kill the beast, but they were able to flee.

However, he was required to concentrate solely on restraining it and could not participate in the fight.

Erik's eyes widened as he noticed the frost forming around the monstrous Thaid, indicating its lethal brain crystal power.

A shiver ran down his spine. He had read about the Ursus Glacialis and even injected information about it.

However, reading about something and facing it in the flesh were two entirely different things.

The creature's enormous size and unbridled power were things that no book could ever hope to portray accurately, not even the effects such a creature could have on the human psyche.

"WHAT THE FUCK?!" Alexia broke the bone-chilling stillness that had descended upon the group. She stood there, her eyes wide open, her typically upbeat demeanor replaced by shock and fear.

"Don't stay idle!" Erik replied, his voice slightly louder than a whisper, "That is a fucking Ursus Glacialis! It's one of the most powerful Thaid's around these parts of the forest!" His gaze never left the charging beast, his grip tightening around his weapon.

Alexia gulped, her face paling even further. "And its brain crystal power...?"

"Cryomancy!" Erik shouted. "It has the ability to control ice and cold. And considering its dimensions, the magnitude of its power would be on an entirely different scale. We cannot afford to be careless."

The group watched in terror as the Ursus Glacialis barreled towards them just as he finished his sentence. The snow surrounding it began to freeze in mid-air. That was unsettling, as elemental

powers were uncommon and uncannily powerful. When Erik looked at his friends, he saw fear in their eyes, which was a problem.

"READY YOUR WEAPONS!"

The Ursus Glacialis roared again, producing a loud noise that reverberated throughout the woods, rattling the trees and causing a flurry of snow to cascade down from the branches.

"Ready yourselves!" Erik yelled out, but his words were difficult to make out over the howling of the Ursus Glacialis. Even though the situation was dangerous, he remained steady, believing in his Xeridon Anteris' power, which would allow him to escape if things got bad. He was prepared to do everything he could to ensure his friends would survive.

The temperature of the air around the beast dropped as it got closer. In its wake, ice crystals formed, adding to the surreal and lethal beauty of the scene.

For the time being, their destiny was in their own hands, and the upcoming battle with this enormous beast would prove to be the most challenging test they had faced up to this point.

Chapter 464: The Ursus Glacialis (2)

The Ursus Glacialis was a beast out of a nightmare; its power and ferocity were unparalleled to anything else the group had encountered up to that point.

It came at them with an alarming speed, seemingly concentrating solely on Alexia as it approached.

The mere sight of the enormous Thaid charging toward her was sufficient to stop her in her tracks, and fear immediately took hold of her heart.

The woman fired some mana arrows at the beast, but the thaid had built ice shields to protect itself.

Marcus was about to reach out and grab Alexia when a flash of blue light suddenly engulfed him.

He covered himself with his mana shield and pushed Alexia away to protect her. Alexia had been rescued just in time.

As the creature lunged at them, its massive paw colliding with the mana shield, the impact was strong enough to send Marcus flying.

The force of the blow threw him through the air like a rag doll and caused him to land 20 meters away in a spray of snow.

Marcus grunted in pain as he crashed into the snow, the wind knocked out of him as the shield wasn't completely enough to protect him, and that shattered as soon as the beast's paw made contact.

After that, there was complete silence, and the only sound that could be heard was the rapid intake of breath among the group as they watched Marcus's body slide across the snowy terrain.

Still within the beast's range, Alexia watched in horror as Marcus was thrown back.

Her breath caught in her throat as she felt a tightness in her chest from the pounding of her heart.

The Ursus Glacialis towered over her, its ice-blue eyes shining menacingly in the dim light as if it were enjoying a delicious meal.

The woman was immobile because she had become frozen solid.

"Move!" Fear had gripped the group to paralysis, but Garrett's voice cut through it like a knife.

It was a single, powerful command that snapped them back into action.

The members of the group found that their bodies were responding almost before their minds had finished processing the order, giving the impression that they had just woken up from a nightmare.

Erik responded immediately to Garrett's call by jumping into action. After a brief moment, the ground surface beneath the enormous Ursus Glacialis began to undulate, and soon after, an army of thick vines emerged from it.

They twisted and turned, snaking their way up towards the creature with a life of their own in a matter of seconds.

The thick vines wrapped themselves around the enormous Thaid, entangling its limbs and wrapping themselves around its body.

They squeezed together, digging into the creature's thick fur, which caused it to let out a piercing scream of surprise and rage.

The Ursus Glacialis fought valiantly against its chains, and its enormous strength shone through as it strained against the vines holding it captive.

"I can't keep it trapped for long!" Erik yelled over the growls and roars that the entrapped Ursus Glacialis was making.

His voice was cracking, an unmistakable indication of the enormous effort he was putting forth to keep the creature immobile.

As it struggled against the vines, the beast flailed wildly, and ice and snow flew around. The beast sent ice projectiles to the team, who avoided them as best as possible.

Every twitch and every growl sent a shiver of fear through the group. Even though it was bitterly cold all around them, Erik's face became covered in beads of sweat.

He did not have enough mana to keep the thaid trapped for long, and the neural links for the Plant Master brain crystal power did not significantly reduce the amount of mana required to use the power.

However, using Nathaniel's brain crystal power alone was akin to suicide.

Even though he had more neural links than before, they were not enough to allow him to compete on an even playing field with a beast with such strong brain crystal power and 800 energy points without using multiple powers simultaneously.

At the same time, he couldn't use his other powers in front of the group, or that would create an even more complex situation if they managed to survive, and he doubted that even if he did so, it would be enough.

The most effective method would be to increase his strength by utilizing the power of the Xeridon Anteris brain crystal; however, the more strength he gained and the more mana he would consume.

At best, he could fight the monster on equal ground in terms of strength; however, the beast possessed an elemental brain crystal power that enabled him to attack from a greater distance and fight melee against a beast already that strong, plus its power would be difficult.

His hands trembled slightly as he focused all his energy on maintaining his hold over the beast.

His eyes, usually full of life and determination, were filled with apprehension and intense concentration.

Holding the beast at bay, he felt his mana ebbing away, and each passing second seemed like an eternity.

On the other hand, he was aware that he could not fail. Not right now. He needed to buy the team time to give them a chance.

For the time being, his willpower was the only thing keeping them safe from the dangerous Ursus Glacialis.

As Erik kept the beast restrained, the others didn't hesitate. Ava rushed towards Marcus to see if he was still alive; Garrett, meanwhile, was at the beast's in an instant, attacking it in a vain attempt to redirect its focus on him and wounding it now that it was trapped.

He channeled mana through his neural links and coiled his blade in the sharp wind, increasing its attack power significantly.

Alexia sprang to her feet with lightning speed and focused on the enormous beast.

The atmosphere appeared still as she conjured a sharp arrow made of mana.

The energy throbbed along her arms and fed into the arrow, which now shone with a menacing and brilliant radiance.

She pulled the string back quickly and then let the arrow go, aiming it directly at the beast's eye as she did so.

On the other hand, the Ursus Glacialis, demonstrating its mastery over its cryomancy abilities, quickly conjured an ice shield to protect itself.

The arrow penetrated the shield, causing ice fragments to fly off in all directions. The beast struck back almost immediately after it was provoked.

A swift motion of its paw sent a volley of long shards that resembled icicles hurtling through the air, each one a lethal projectile directed at Alexia.

Chapter 465: The Ursus Glacialis (3)

She responded with speed and agility that belied the magnitude of her challenge.

As she dove to the side, her boots crunched against the snow as she came dangerously close to being hit by the deadly hail.

When the shards hit the ground, they scattered the snow into small sprays that flew into the air.

She rolled over onto her feet, her breath steaming and her eyes lighting up with adrenaline as she did so.

Even though the confrontation had not started yet, it was abundantly clear that the fight against the Ursus Glacialis could probably be her last.

Ava made her way over to Marcus just as the icy chaos erupted all around them.

The man was unconscious and strewn across the snowy ground, his breathing choppy and erratic.

The power of the beast's blow had catapulted him into the air like a ragdoll, sending him crashing into the frozen ground with such force that the impact could be heard all across the battlefield.

Ava knelt beside him in a hurry, her deft fingers moving quickly to examine the extent of his wounds.

His once bright eyes were clouded with pain, and a thin line of blood trickled from a gash on his forehead, staining his hair a jarring crimson color.

The harsh and irregular rise and fall of his chest indicated that he was struggling for every breath, and the grimace etched into his face spoke volumes about the amount of pain he was in.

Ava's hands continued to move with the same level of composure, even though the situation had become extremely urgent.

The wound on Marcus's head was quite severe, and the surrounding skin was already beginning to turn a vibrant shade of purple and blue on his otherwise white complexion. Marcus groaned as he attempted to sit up, and the sound came out of his mouth as he did so.

Ava quickly assisted, placing a hand under his armpit and helping him sit down. The sudden opening of his eyes was followed by a brief period of bewilderment, during which he failed to recognize her.

"Easy, Marcus," she said, her voice gentle yet firm. "You've taken quite a hit. We need to get you patched up."

She could see him struggling against the oncoming wave of disorientation, his brows furrowing as he attempted to concentrate on her face despite his difficulty.

However, the effort proved too much for him, and his body sagged to the ground, his eyes darting right and left, trying to assess where he was.

Ava perceived shortness of breath in her chest. They were smack dab in the middle of a battle, and their most powerful member had been taken out. The situation was extremely precarious, and the immediate threat was in no way eliminated.

"How is he?!" Erik asked with urgency in his voice. Without him, killing the monster was simply impossible.

"He has a wound on his head, Erik," Ava responded, her voice shaking. Her hands never stopped moving as she spoke, quickly working to clean the wound on Marcus's forehead with a damp cloth.

"The hit was hard. He's got a deep cut on his forehead, and he's likely concussed," she continued, her brow furrowed with concentration. "He will need some time to recover."

After hearing her words, Erik's chest tightened, and his gaze shifted from Ava to the form of Marcus, who was unconscious, and then to the Ursus Glacialis, which was rampaging.

Marcus regained his footing by leaning heavily on Ava. Even though his brain vehemently resisted the effort, Marcus regained his footing.

Even though the blood was trickling down from his wound, he still found the strength to stand up, despite his head spinning.

He mumbled, "I'm... fine," between labored breaths, a wan smile plastered on his face. His voice was frail and shaky, but a note of determination was in the background.

He tried to move forward, tightening his hold on Ava to use her to support his weight as he moved forward.

Nevertheless, everybody there was aware that he was not well. His complexion was pale, beads of sweat were scattered across his forehead, and his breath came out in ragged gasps.

Even though his mana shield had taken the brunt of the attack, it was clear that the force had affected him somehow; the shockwave was sufficient to cause significant damage.

As she fixed her gaze on Marcus, Ava couldn't help but frown and furrow her brows in concern. Her worry was shared by Erik and the others as well. It was unsettling to see Marcus in such a state.

"Erik," Marcus started, "We have a fight to focus on," he said firmly, straightening up with visible effort, his knuckles whitening as he clung to his trusty Axe. "Worry about that beast, not me."

Yet, it was clear that Marcus was nowhere near his usual strength. The beast before them was ferocious, and his current state would limit his abilities. Would they be able to overcome the Ursus Glacialis in their current condition?

The monstrous Ursus Glacialis then let out a roar, and the ground beneath them seemed to shake violently due to the force of its scream.

The waning sunlight was reflected in a plethora of colors by the ice shards that were scattered all around, giving the appearance of a crystalline mirage.

Their adversary was formidable, its sapphire fur glistening with fresh wounds and crimson color where Garrett's swift strikes and Alexia's precision shots had found their mark and caused them to bleed out.

However, it was not at all defeated, and despite being restrained, it used the power of his brain crystal to attack, which resulted in a significant reduction in the number of strikes that Alexia and Garret could land.

Erik struggled to resist the enormous force that the creature was exerting, so he was depleting mana at an incredible rate.

The physical manifestation of his dwindling strength was a sweat trickling down his forehead and staining his shirt.

His brows furrowed in concentration as he commanded the vines to maintain their hold on the beast, the flora shuddering and creaking under the strain of their duty to continue their hold.

Erik muttered under his breath, "Dammit," while he kept his gaze fixed on the ice beast the entire time. The creature's weight was causing the vines to snap; their color began to darken as they worked harder to hold the creature in check.

Erik was forced to create them back from scratch, further decreasing his mana reserves, but Erik knew that that advantage situation was bound to be short-lived.

Erik's labored breathing contrasted with the eerie stillness that had descended upon the battlefield.

He glanced over his shoulder at Ava and Marcus while his mind was going a million miles per hour.

His gaze hardened, decision flashing in his eyes. "Ava," he said, his voice rough but determined, "pick Marcus up and get out of here." His eyes flitted back to the trapped beast, its massive form struggling against the vines, "I'll keep this thing trapped as long as I can."

Chapter 466: The Ursus Glacialis (4)

Garrett's question naturally followed as Erik said what he wanted to do.

"What about you?! Are you planning to stay?!" He asked, the words echoing on the battleground.

Erik's body became rigid, and his attention did not wander from the monstrous beast thrashing within its thorny confinement.

The battlefield was laden with every sound, making it difficult for Erik's words to reach his companions.

His reply came out steady and unwavering, carried by the gusts of the cold wind, "No, I'm not planning to stay!"

His jaw tightened as he continued, his tone firm, "I can use my power from afar. We can still get away."

His words kindled a glimmer of hope, a flicker in the growing desperation surrounding them all. They still had a chance of escaping.

Erik's skills proved their only hope for survival during this potentially fatal encounter with the beast. If it weren't for the fact that he was keeping it at bay, they would already be dead. Avoiding the projectiles the *Ursus Glacialis* hurled at them was something, but also avoiding its massive body was impossible.

The journey to the Lumisgrove had presented them with an unexpected challenge, but they were not about to give up without a fight.

Erik looked at the beast, determination in his eyes. He would exert as much of his power as possible, his energy serving as their only defense against the wrath of the *Ursus Glacialis*.

The fact that he was so determined gave them some peace of mind even though their situation was precarious and fraught with risk.

His proposed plan was hazardous but was also their only chance of surviving.

Garrett's gaze met Erik's, and a silent understanding passed between them.

Despite their trepidation and uncertainty, they would trust Erik's skills and power.

Ava lifted Marcus, his large frame pressing firmly against her shoulders as she did so.

The environment around them appeared hostile and icy, with each gust of wind bringing a bone-chilling iciness that made its way into every crevice of their bodies.

Alexia and Garrett were the first to bolt away, the sound of their footfalls creating a discordant rhythm as they pounded against the frozen ground.

Erik's eyes were riveted on the monstrous *Ursus Glacialis*, and his face was a mask that no one could decipher.

When he started channeling an even more significant surge of mana through his neural links, he pushed himself to the absolute maximum.

<Let's show them what I can do!>

Every fiber in his body screamed in protest.

At the same time, the beast let out a low growl as it struggled against the thorny prison Erik had conjured up while at the same time hurling ice shards in the young man's direction. It thrashed and snarled as it fought against the prison.

But Erik didn't budge, and the signs of strain beginning to appear on his face were a glaring indication of the enormous amount of effort he was putting forth.

The group moved quickly into the woods, the sound of their footsteps creating a cacophony in an otherwise quiet environment.

Their breaths were coming out in ragged gasps, like hot clouds of air that quickly dispersed into the biting cold.

Every time their hearts beat, it felt like a countdown, and every moment felt like it brought them one step closer to their possible demise.

When they were far enough, Erik started moving with unshakable composure amid the mayhem and terror surrounding him.

His concentration was unbroken despite the rush of adrenaline going through his veins, and his focus never left the monstrous beast now behind him.

He maintained his grip on the beast by channeling his mana and moving his hands in deliberate, practiced motions.

This allowed him to do so even as he and the others fled from the terrifying beast.

Fear tore apart their very beings, triggering a primal response that compelled them to flee for their lives.

Their bodies moved as if on autopilot, and each step they took carried them further and further away from the monster.

Around them, the forest was a haze, and the towering trees were nothing more than shadows that flashed in and out of their field of vision.

They could not shake the idea that they needed to flee from their minds.

The fake awakener could sense the beast's rage as it struggled—the seething rage that surged with every thrash and roars it let out.

As they traveled further, the tension between them grew steadily worse.

Would the monster manage to get free? Would Erik's strength eventually fail him?

Each passing second was like a ticking time bomb, constantly reminding them how dangerous their current situation was.

As Erik took in the scenery around him, he slowed his sprint to a jog and felt his chest heave as he inhaled deeply.

They had already left the towering monstrosity behind in the dense thicket of the snowy forest. Still, its furious snarls and growls continued to echo, ricocheting off the trunks of the enormous trees and wriggling their way into his ears.

When he turned to look over his shoulder, he saw a blur of shadows and undergrowth, the Ursus Glacialis hidden behind a screen of trees.

Erik had gambled that the dense web of vines he had conjured would hold the creature at bay for a sufficient amount of time for them to escape, and it appeared that his bet had been successful; for the time being, at least.

On the other hand, Erik's ability to concentrate was starting to suffer.

He could feel the tenuous link to his conjured vines fraying with each passing second.

As they moved further away from the trapped Ursus Glacialis, he began to experience a peculiar feeling, like a gradual dulling of his senses.

He had pushed the boundaries of his powers, channeling his mana through complex of neural links in his body, and he could feel the toll it was taking on him.

The connection was severed right at that moment by a jolt that came out of nowhere and caused him to stumble.

The ethereal rope, which had become increasingly tenuous, suddenly snapped as a rubber band stretched beyond its breaking point.

It left a hollow echo in his mind, a sudden emptiness where there had once been the thrum of his power and the feel of living, writhing vines.

His control over the plants trapping the monster was officially over. The knowledge of this was a cold splash of reality that shook him out of his exhausted stupor.

The furious roars of the beast seemed to grow fainter, muffled by the rustling leaves and the distance that now separated them. Would the distance they gained be enough? He didn't know, and there was a heavy sense of uncertainty in the air.

Chapter 467: Tired but Alive

[QUEST COMPLETE.]

That was the notification the biological supercomputer gave the young man as the flight away from the Thaid, the bear-like Thaid, ended.

As Ava and Marcus made their way through the snow-covered landscape, the woman kept Marcus' drooping body close to hers and wrapped her arm securely around his waist.

She could proceed forward thanks to her brain crystal power, which enabled her to slide over any terrain as if it were an icy surface, which it was in this case, and her feet barely left a trace as she moved.

The wind, which ruffled their hair into a tangled mess and tore at the exposed areas of their skin, was a fierce and relentless force that assaulted them. Despite this, they continued onward, propelled forward by the adrenaline coursing through their veins and the awareness of what lay in wait for them.

Erik took the lead in the retreat, keeping his eyes fixed on the menacing shadows cast by the forest they had just escaped from behind them the entire time.

He took long and deliberate strides, and with each heavy step, the worn soles of his boots crunched into the deep layer of snow that covered the ground. His breath was choppy, and the sound of it reverberated eerily through the desolate winter landscape.

Occasionally, he would glance in the direction of Ava and Marcus, and his heart would pound in his chest as he watched them slide and stumble forward.

It was evident that Marcus was in poor condition. In contrast to the bright crimson of his blood soaking through the torn fabric of his clothes, his skin had a deathly white appearance.

As Ava concentrated on moving forward, she had a look on her face that conveyed both resolve and anxiety. Her lips were pursed into a thin line.

As they slogged through the snow, the minutes seemed like hours, and the hours seemed like an eternity.

They were now a safe distance from the beast, and the roars it let out were now nothing more than far-off echoes carried by the wind.

They had made it out, but not without paying a price. Marcus was in serious condition, and they had traveled significantly far from where they planned to go.

With an authoritative tone cutting through the crisp, cold air, Erik announced, "We can stop. We're safe now. The beast won't reach us here." His breath plumed in white, vaporous clouds, dissipating quickly into the winter air.

As soon as they heard his words, the group, on the verge of collapsing right there and then, slumped on the ground, their bodies trembling from the effects of the exhaustion and the cold.

Ava held up Marcus as he slid to the ground and winced upon making contact with the icy, brittle ground below him. Ava, too, gave in to the urge to collapse onto the snowy ground.

Garrett and Alexia were utterly spent but accepted the rest with gratitude. The time they spent running had left their muscles sore and on fire, and the rest provided them with the much-needed relief they required.

They were out of breath and had to lie in the snow to catch their breath.

Erik watched his friends while his heart was filled with worry and relief. The crushing exhaustion holding each of them captive had replaced the anxiety their pursuit had caused.

Although the *Ursus Glacialis* threat was far off, they still had a long way to go before arriving at their destination, and it was unclear what challenges they would encounter along the way.

Nevertheless, at that very instant, they were safe, and Erik let out a tad of relief before allowing himself to sigh. It had been a long and trying day, putting their willpower and physical capabilities to the test.

But the fact that they had made it through the ordeal together provided Erik with some measure of comfort. He lowered himself onto the icy snow and allowed himself to be overcome by exhaustion as he took a moment to rest alongside his companions.

Alexia moved slowly across the snow to get to Ava, her gaze eventually landing on Marcus as he lay unconscious. She inquired, "How is he?" while worry etched tiny lines into the normally calm appearance of her face.

Ava furrowed her brow and frowned as she ran her fingers lightly across Marcus's forehead. "He needs first aid and rest," she said.

Her usual vivacious energy was nowhere to be found in her voice; instead, it was subdued. After that, the two of them got to work tending to Marcus's wounds, and even though they were both exhausted, their movements were quick and effective.

In the meantime, Erik made his way over to Garrett while clenching the map they had obtained from the Frantian soldiers. Garrett was confused.

The two men were stooping over the parchment with their heads bowed as they attempted to trace their journey. Erik's brows furrowed as he contemplated the situation, and his fingers hovered over a specific location on the map.

"We're close," he murmured, looking up at Garrett, a glimmer of hope flickering in his tired eyes. "We're close to the Lumisgrove."

His words hung in the air as they pulled away from the map. Garrett gave a firm nod, the hint of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"Let's rest for tonight; we will see what to do tomorrow," he said, rising to his feet and gathering wood for a fire.

Erik, too, mustered the strength to push through his exhaustion and complete the task. To construct their home, he channeled his mana and once more called upon the resources of his Brain Crystal Power. A verdant dome composed of intertwined vines and leaves started to take shape.

After getting the dome ready and the fire going Ava and Alexia brought Marcus inside the makeshift wooden shelter they had constructed.

Despite the highly precarious circumstances, the group regained some sense of normalcy as the shelter took shape and the reassuring crackle of Garrett's fire filled the air.

They were exhausted and battered, but they maintained their resolve, and now that they could see their goal, they were prepared to face whatever challenges lay in store for them.

The atmosphere in the makeshift shelter was tense as Ava and Alexia busied themselves with tending to Marcus while he lay on the ground.

Their concern for the man hung heavily in the dome, and their hearts leaped to their throats every time he winced or stirred while unconscious.

Even the stoic Erik was worried because Marcus hadn't woken up yet. It was cause for concern because their travel would be delayed if it took too long. Besides, he wasn't even sure he would wake up.

In the fire's flickering light, Marcus's pale face appeared even more colorless than it already was. As Ava dressed his wound, she moved her hands with methodical precision, and her expression became increasingly strained.

Alexia sat by his side, her fingers tightening their grip on the bandages they applied to him. They all looked at each other with concern as their thoughts became consumed with unease regarding their injured companion.

Chapter 468: Pouring their hearts out

While Marcus lay unconscious beneath the safety of the dome, the other team members went about preparing something to eat. Because Erik could grow food whenever required, there was no danger of anyone in the group going hungry.

Ava and Garrett collaborated in the preparation of a straightforward meal. However, despite their best efforts to lighten the mood, the gloomy silence that had descended upon the room persisted.

Alexia was responsible for tending to the fire and providing it with the wood that Garrett had amassed.

The flames' orange glow danced against the shelter's walls, casting shadows and lending an almost surreal quality to the situation. After ensuring the dome maintained its structural soundness, Erik joined the other people gathered around the fire.

They sat in a semicircle, their bodies taking solace in the heat as a defense mechanism against the chilly air of the forest. The warm light lit up their faces.

The meal was eaten with minimal conversation because everyone was preoccupied with their thoughts. They ate, and then they rested, all the while anticipating their companion's awakening so they could start their journey again.

Ava stood there, her delicate features glimmering in the fire's orange glow as she quietly observed the blaze. Ever since they had set up camp, she had been unusually quiet; her gaze lost in the flickering flames of the campfire.

The sight of Marcus lying unconscious had shaken her, and a cloud of concern hung over her typically upbeat demeanor. At last, she turned her head to face Erik, the flames reflecting in her eyes as she stared him down.

Her expression conveyed a sincere interest, and when she finally spoke, she asked a question lingering in her mind for quite some time.

"Erik," she began, her voice soft yet clear, cutting through the quiet hum of the forest around them. "How was living in the city? How different is it from living in the village?"

Her words were carefully chosen, her tone brimming with genuine curiosity. Everyone turned their attention to Erik, waiting for him to respond, and there was a brief pause after that.

In that very instant, it became abundantly clear that Ava's question was about more than simply satiating her curiosity; instead, it was a lifeline to a sen

se of normalcy, a moment of calm amidst the storm in which they found themselves.

As Erik thought about Ava's question, he leaned back and stared into the fire. "Life in the city," he began, "is very different from life in the village. The city is a bustling metropolis teeming with life and energy. The tall buildings, the streets full of people and vehicles, the neon lights after sundown... it's almost intoxicating."

He paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts before continuing. "There's never a dull moment. There are always new things to see, new experiences to be had. The city offers many opportunities, from jobs to education to various forms of entertainment. It's a place where you can meet people from all walks of life, from all corners of the world," The young man said.

"Doesn't sound half bad, that city life," Garrett remarked, his gruff voice cutting through the crackle of the fire. The more experienced man was looking at Erik while leaning back against the polished inner wall of the plant dome.

His eyes were fixed on him. His hands were absentmindedly fidgeting with a stick, turning it over and over in their palms.

When Garrett continued, Erik saw a glimmer of amusement in his eyes as he said, "Sure beats running from man-eating ice bears and wrestling with two-tailed wolves." His words were delivered with a wry smile and a lighthearted air to put everyone in a better frame of mind.

The corner of Garrett's mouth turned up in a teasing smirk, but he did not take his eyes off Erik the whole time.

The remark was typical of Garrett, who was always ready to bring a dash of fun to the situation, no matter the circumstance.

It appeared that Garrett had found a way to make light of the difficult circumstances that had unfolded that day.

A faint laugh escaped Alexia's lips at Garrett's remark. She nodded in agreement, her eyes gleaming joyfully in the firelight. "He's got a point, Erik," she teased. "Can't deny the city sounds appealing, especially after today."

Shuffling closer to the fire, she crossed her arms over her knees, looking thoughtful. "I've heard about those things you call 'cars.' Never seen one, though. I can't imagine what it would be like, zipping around in one of those."

She sighed quietly as she continued to stare intently at the flickering flames. Her tone conveyed a sense of yearning that was very clear. The concept of such luxuries and contrasting approaches to life piqued her interest.

She couldn't help but ponder the world beyond the village, the urban landscape that Erik had experienced, and the ordinary marvels that she had not yet had the opportunity to witness for herself.

"It is certainly not a bad place to be in," the young man said, "But a city can also be overwhelming. The noise, the constant rush, the sheer amount of people...it can be exhausting. Feeling lost and like you're just another face in the crowd is easy. Besides, no matter how good a city may be, if the people living within it are shitty, then even the city itself will be shitty."

"The village, on the other hand," he said, his gaze softening, "is a place of tranquility. The pace of life is slower, and there's a sense of community that's hard to find in the city. Everyone knows everyone, and there's a sense of familiarity and comfort in that."

He sighed. "In the city, you're surrounded by people, but you can still feel alone. In the village, there's always someone looking out for you, always a friendly face to greet you. It's a different kind of warmth, a different kind of home."

Erik glanced at Ava, his expression thoughtful. "But each has its charm, its own set of challenges."

Chapter 469: Trouble at Liberty Watch

Away from the warmth of the campfire and the protective dome of Erik's creation, plunging instead into the icy chill of the winter forest. Amidst the labyrinth of skeletal trees and frozen terrain, a fierce battle raged under the silvery glow of the moon.

Vanessa, a tornado of lethal grace and unbridled, murdering rage, was the driving force behind it all. As she engaged a group of Frantian soldiers, her breath billowed in the biting air. Her Brain Crystal pumped mana out with unrelenting speed, manifesting a shimmering mana spear that she used to impale her and her comrades' enemies without mercy.

Every strike resulted from meticulous planning, and every defense and maneuver was executed with lethal grace.

She fought like a storm, her eyes becoming brittle with grim determination and every muscle in her body tensing up and getting ready to pounce.

Dark blood blotches had now marred the once-peaceful white canvas, and footprints covered the snow around her.

The icy terrain resounded with the sounds of clashing weapons and the agonized cries of those defeated.

But Vanessa never wavered in her resolve; she was a rock of stability standing firm amid the upheaval. Her heart was beating so fast in her chest that it was like a relentless drum against the stillness of the night.

She defied the odds and maintained her composure, her willpower as unyielding as the icy wilderness that encircled her.

While Vanessa continued to fight off her attackers, two men emerged from the ranks, their armor shining in the moonlight and their faces set in a ruthless determination to kill the woman. They encircled her like predators, coordinating their movements and focusing their menacing gaze on her the entire time.

One of them suddenly charged Vanessa while yelling a vicious battle cry. She was in the line of fire. Her spear collided head-on with his charge.

She drove the weapon into the man's chest with lightning speed and pinpoint accuracy.

As he hit the frozen ground, his body landed with a sickening thud, and he let out a scream that could only be described as guttural.

But Vanessa's victory didn't last very long at all. Almost immediately after the man was knocked to the ground, as the woman turned to face the other adversary, he brought his weapon crashing down on Vanessa's spear with a decisive and crushing swing.

The weapon was robust but not indestructible and was unable to withstand the overwhelming force of the blow and fractured in two as a result.

Vanessa was thrown off balance, and her eyes widened as she realized she was no longer armed. As the soldier readied himself for another attack, a devilish grin spread across his face.

She hardly had time to react to the situation. The world appeared to stop moving as the forest around them seemed to hold its breath in preparation for the blow that would end it all.

When the Frantian soldier, full of arrogant certainty, charged at Vanessa while she was disarmed, the moment hung in the air like a silent precipice of fate. Under the scared glare of his enemy, the grin plastered across the soldier's face was one of triumph, and his weapon gleamed evilly.

It appeared he was going to win, but Vanessa's fingers began twitching—a slight adjustment that went unnoticed by the soldier but a gesture with significant undertones.

Mana started to coil and surge inside her, flowing like a powerful tide through her neural links. A brilliant glow surrounded her hand as it began to transform into a mana spear.

Unprepared for the speed at which the woman made the weapon, the eyes of the Frantian soldier widened in shock and dread as he realized what had just happened. It was too late for him to respond or adjust his plan. Vanessa made a swift and decisive move forward with the mana spear, driving it through his chest as she did so.

The soldier heaved as the force of the blow caused him to stumble backward. His weapon fell to the ground with a clatter, and he reached out with his hands unsuccessfully to remove the glowing spear embedded in his chest. But it was too late; the fatal blow had already been delivered.

He took one final, excruciating breath, then collapsed to the ground, his final resting place being the icy and unforgiving winter earth.

Vanessa struggled to get to her feet even though the ground beneath her was covered in the bodies of allies and adversaries who had been killed.

The once pristine blanket of snow was now marred with blood and scattered with weapons; the groans of the dying and the clashing of steel punctuated the chilling silence of the winter night.

It was a scene that could have been taken straight from a nightmare painting, with blood splattering across the white canvas of snow and all signs of life being extinguished.

Her heart was beating so hard in her chest that it sounded like a battle drum, a rhythm of rage that echoed her determination. She could detect the sharp aftertaste of blood in the atmosphere and the acrid smell of death and desolation.

Every sense was heightened every nerve tingling with adrenaline. Around her, the battle raged on, a vicious dance of life and death.

Her comrades, men, and women from Liberty Watch Village fought with desperation borne from the necessity of survival. They were farmers, blacksmiths, and healers, not warriors. Yet they stood their ground against the formidable Frantian soldiers, their makeshift weapons clashing against the superior steel of the enemy.

Vanessa's eyes darted over the faces of her allies, which were a chaotic mixture of resolve and anxiety. Some of them were familiar to her, such as Joel, the son of the blacksmith, whose face was scrunched up in a grimace as he blocked a blow, and Lily, the healer, whose hands were glowing with mana as she attended to the injured.

Others were strangers; their identities were unknown, but their stances showed their bravery.

Despite this, more people got hurt as the chaos continued. The screams of the men and women whose lives she had known throughout her entire life pierced the silence of the night.

Each of Vanessa's slain friends added fuel to the fire of her rage, which erupted from within her like a volcano and set her nerves ablaze. She was exhausted, that was for sure, but she did not feel defeated. Not yet.

With the glow of her mana spear illuminating the horror around her, she raised her voice above the din of battle. "Let's send these pigs back where they came from!" she roared, her voice echoing through the stillness. It was a call to arms, a call to resist, a call to fight.

When she spoke, it was almost as if her words caused a surge of vitality to run through the beleaguered villagers. She saw a spark ignite in the eyes of those who turned their heads to look at her. The resolve of everyone in the line grew stronger, and they straightened out their backs.

Despite their losses, despite their fear, they stood their ground. They fought for their homes, their families, and for each other. The battle was filled with the sounds of resistance, a cacophony of courage that rang through the silent forest.

Amid the slaughter, Vanessa stood with her spear ablaze and her resolve unshaken. The conflict had only just begun, and its outcome remained in doubt.

Chapter 470: The Lumisgrove (1)

The group arrived at the Lumisgrove at long last, two days after their terrifying run-in with the Ursus Glacialis.

On the other hand, their trip had not been uneventful in any way, at least for Erik.

There were many Thaidis in the forest, and each one appeared more vicious and terrifying than the one before.

Nevertheless, every time, the group proved capable of meeting the challenge by engaging in combat using a combination of well-planned strategy and raw power.

Erik led them with grim determination, his and Garrett's eyes constantly scanning the area for any indications of impending danger.

Even when it was evident that he was exhausted, he never failed to guide them to their destination in the most secure manner, using his command over the plants.

Despite his injury, Marcus refused to sit out the rest of the game.

He fought, relying solely on his willpower to get him through the pain, his shield acting as a fortress against the unrelenting assault of the Thaidis.

Alexia's pinpoint aim and lethal accuracy with his arrows helped him kill many creatures. In contrast, Garrett's quick thinking and ability to adapt helped them get out of dangerous situations.

Despite how seemingly insignificant it may have been, every victory gave them more confidence and increased their mood.

They felt a wave of relief wash over them as they looked upon the tall trees and glowing flora of the Lumisgrove at this moment. They were exhausted, battered, and bruised but still alive.

They had made it to their destination, beating the dangers of the forest and the monsters within it and overcoming their physical limitations and fears. They had achieved their goal.

But this was not the end of their journey; it was only the beginning. The tricky part of the task was just about to start.

They were about to find out what was hidden deep within the Lumisgrove and the secrets it guarded.

Erik was struck by the sheer magnitude of the Lumisgrove's splendor as his gaze traveled across the sprawling landscape.

It was unlike anything they had ever seen, but they gradually became aware of the changes as they neared their destination. The change was gradual but very strong.

The dense canopy allowed sunlight to penetrate it, and the resulting rays cast a shimmering glow on the glowing vegetation.

From reading about it in school texts, Erik had only heard about the incredible phenomenon of intrinsic luminescence that the plants possessed inside the Lumisgrove.

The glow of the flora seemed to hum with life when it was bathed in the radiant sunlight; the overall effect was a sight that could only be described as enchanting.

They had never seen anything like the towering trees there; they were magnificent beyond compare.

Their hefty trunks reached for the clouds, and their expansive canopies formed a verdant ceiling above them as they spread out overhead.

This was a world in which nature displayed majesty on a scale that had never been seen before.

They noticed that each Thaid they saw in Lumisgrove was noticeably bigger than its counterpart in the rest of the world.

The Lumisgrove was the very definition of untamed vitality; it was a realm that throbbed with an energy that was at once awe-inspiring and intimidating.

It was like stepping into a realm of fantasy or dream, a world where the boundaries of reality were stretched and contorted into a grander, more vibrant canvas.

Erik felt his feelings stir up like a whirlpool as he observed the location.

Reading about it in books was an entirely different experience than going there and seeing it for himself.

Even though it was a foreign world, Erik experienced an unanticipated sense of connection, a resonance with the wild spirit of the Lumisgrove.

But underneath all this awe and wonder, dangers concealed in the shadows of the enormous trees were waiting just below the calm surface of the luminescent plants.

Garrett was the first to speak up, breaking the hush that had descended upon the group. He whispered to Marcus as he turned his head slightly toward Marcus and glanced back at him.

"This place... It's stunning."

Marcus, who had been looking around wide-eyed since they had entered the grove, nodded in agreement, his gaze still taking in the ethereal beauty around them.

His hand rose to shade his eyes from the sparkling radiance of the luminous plants, and he let out a soft, respectful sigh. "I've never seen anything like it. It's beautiful..."

Both men stood there in silence for a moment, their eyes moving around the breathtaking panorama.

Alexia cast a contemplative glance in all directions as she investigated the glowing vegetation around them.

As her eyes swept over the dense foliage that glistened in the sunlight, she finally asked, "How can these plants still look so alive and lush, even in winter?"

Erik turned to her, a contemplative expression on his face. "Mana," he replied, causing her brows to furrow. He chuckled lightly at her reaction before elaborating.

"This place has a much higher concentration of mana than other places. About five times as much, to be precise. It's the reason why everything here is so vibrant and lush."

The group contemplated the ramifications of his statements as they lingered in the air. Even the air they breathed was infused with mana, as were the plants, animals, and the air itself.

Alexia drew in a deep breath as if to determine whether or not Erik's statements were accurate. However, all she could smell was the earthy sweetness of the forest. There was nothing else.

"However," Erik's voice broke the stillness, his tone becoming suddenly solemn, "this excess mana can also be dangerous. It's what caused the creatures here to grow so large and powerful. And if we stay here too long, it could also affect us." His warning sent a chill down their spines.

"By the way, do not let this place's beauty distract you," Erik continued, his gaze scanning their surroundings warily. "We must stay focused since this place is teeming with Frantian soldiers. We're here to retrieve the Auburn Pine is crucial for our food production system. We can't afford to be distracted."

As his words continued to sink in, the group's initial reverence for the Lumisgrove gradually transformed into a newly discovered sense of caution.

Even though the Lumisgrove was breathtaking, they couldn't linger because they had a job to do. One on which their family, friends, their home depended.