

BIOLOGICAL 661

Chapter 661: First Hostile Encounter (3)

It was rhythmic, almost hypnotic, but filled with an ominous undertone that sent shivers down the spines of the guild members.

The sound of hooves—dozens, maybe hundreds—thundered through the forest, drawing closer with each passing second.

Faces paled, and hands gripped weapons tighter as the reality of the approaching threat sank in.

The drumming grew louder, now accompanied by the occasional guttural snarl that echoed through the trees, a haunting prelude to the violence about unfolding.

Kael's eyes darted nervously from the forest to his weapon controls, his fingers twitching in anticipation.

Mira clenched her jaw, her eyes narrowing as she tried to pierce through the forest's dense foliage as if willing the creatures to reveal themselves.

Aiden's knuckles were white as he gripped the handle of a mounted machine gun while Lila took deep, steadying breaths.

Her eyes closed for a moment as she centered herself.

Kael, his eyes still darting nervously between the forest trees, broke the silence.

"Judging by the distinct sound patterns, it's highly likely we're about to face a mob of Erendus."

Aiden, gripping the handle of the mounted machine gun with an unwavering hand, confirmed Kael's analysis.

His voice resonated with a strong sense of courage as he responded, "Sounds like you hit the nail on the head, Kael. That racket's got Erendus written all over it. Time to gear up and show 'em what we're made of."

Alina, her senses finely tuned to the Thaid's like a violinist to the subtle tones of their instrument, felt a knot in her stomach tighten as if it were a coil being wound up for release.

Her eyes, wide as saucers and shimmering with an intense determination, were locked onto the horizon. The focus in her gaze was absolute, a soldier poised for battle, as she strained to make out the dark shapes moving amidst the thick foliage.

The approaching Erendus were still mere blips in the distance, their forms distorted by the heat haze rising from the ground.

She squinted, her brows furrowing as she tried to gauge not just the distance, but also the numbers.

Amidst the rising tension and mounting fear, Erik stood as the eye of the storm—calm, composed, and unflinchingly focused.

His masked face revealed nothing, but his posture radiated a quiet confidence that, in any other situation, might have been reassuring to his guild members.

He activated the communication system once more. "Hold steady," he said, his voice a low, controlled rumble that cut through the cacophony of approaching hooves and snarls. "Wait for my signal."

The drumming was now deafening, a relentless sonic storm battering the shores of their senses, making it difficult to anchor thoughts and focus on anything but the looming tempest of the impending clash.

The ground beneath the vehicles vibrated, each thud resonating like a minor earthquake, shaking leaves from the trees and sending small animals scurrying for cover.

Erik's hand hovered over the firing control of his laser rifle, his eyes locked on the point where some trees crossed, where the unseen would become seen.

And then, in a moment stretched taut as a bowstring with tension and dread, the first of the Erendus erupted from the forest tree line.

Its bone-plated armor glinted in the dappled sunlight, like a knight's shield in an ancient battlefield, its eyes aflame with the predatory hunger of a lion on the prowl.

Erik's voice broke the spell, crisp and clear as a winter's morning. "Wait, there are still too many trees in front of us!"

The other guild members, including Mira, Kael, and Aiden, were visibly shaken.

Their faces were pale, their eyes wide with a fear that was as palpable as the tension in the air. Mira's hands were trembling slightly, her knuckles white as she gripped her bow.

Kael's normally jovial face was set in a grim line, his usual humor nowhere to be seen.

Aiden was instead a mask of focus, his eyes darting restlessly between the emerging Erendus.

But Lila was different. There was a gleam in her eyes, a spark of anticipation that was almost terrifying in its intensity.

She was not scared, far from it. Lila was itching for the fight, her body coiled like a spring.

The sight of the Erendus did not fill her with dread but with an exhilarating thrill.

Lila let out a whoop of excitement, her voice slicing through the tense silence like a blade.

"Come on, you bastards!"

The forest's edge seemed to come alive as more dark shapes materialized behind the trees.

The Erendus, their bone-plated armor barely visible through the foliage, were closer to the convoy. Erik's eyes remained locked on the emerging forms, his hand hovering over the firing control.

"Wait for my signal," Erik's voice cut through the communication system, as steady as a rock amidst a raging storm, but threaded with a pulse of urgency that was impossible to ignore. "Not Yet!"

All around them, the world seemed to hold its breath.

The drumming of their hearts was the only sound that dared to challenge the one coming from the hooves. Each beat a countdown to the inevitable.

The Erendus were getting closer. They moved with a terrifying grace, their bone-plated bodies weaving through the thick forest easily and destroying everything in their path.

Each one that emerged from the tree line was a dark specter of dread, their forms growing larger and more distinct with every passing second.

They passed the first line of oaks, their monstrous forms dwarfed by the towering trees.

Then they moved beyond the cluster of birches, their white barks standing out against the Erendus' dark armor.

But Erik's command still held them back, a thin thread of control amidst the chaos.

A guttural, haunting sound erupted from the depths of the forest—a chorus of loud moos that reverberated through the air, sending a chill down the spines of even the most seasoned fighters.

Their hooves pounded the earth, each step a miniature earthquake that sent ripples through the soil and into the hearts of the guild members.

"Fire!" Erik's voice shattered the tension, echoing through the communication system like a clarion call.

In an instant, the air was filled with the deafening roar of engines and the whirl of weapon systems coming to life.

Laser cannons fired in synchronized bursts, their beams cutting through the air with lethal precision.

Machine guns rattled off rounds in rapid succession, their muzzles flashing in the dim light.

Rocket launchers unleashed their fury, sending projectiles screaming toward the advancing horde.

A cloud of smoke and dust billowed into the air, obscuring vision but not dampening the ferocity of the attack.

Trees, caught in the crossfire, snapped like twigs and crashed to the ground, their trunks and branches falling onto the Erendus below.

But the fallen oaks seemed to have no effect; the creatures' armored plates shrugged off the impact as if it were nothing more than a nuisance.

Despite the overwhelming firepower, the Erendus continued their relentless advance, their bone-plated armor absorbing much of the onslaught, their moos now mixed with the snarls of battle-raged fury.

Erik, still calm and composed, assessed the situation. His guild members were fighting valiantly, their weapons systems operating at full capacity, but he knew this was just the beginning and not nearly enough to kill these Thaidis.

As the cloud of smoke and dust settled, and the outlines of the fallen and the still-advancing Erendus became visible, Erik gripped his weapon tighter.

"This is it," he thought, his eyes narrowing behind his mask. "The real fight starts now."

Mira's voice crackled through the communication system, tinged with a note of urgency.

"Erik, what's our next move? These things are getting too close!"

Erik's voice sliced through the tension, as steady and unyielding as a lighthouse beacon amidst a stormy sea.

"Ranged fighters, brace yourselves and prepare your mana-powered attacks. The moment the Thaidis enter your range, unleash hell."

His words were punctuated by a determination so fierce it was almost tangible. "Mira, you are one of them. Hold your fire until they're close enough for a sure hit. We can't afford to waste any shots."

The briefest pause, a moment of silence that seemed to stretch on forever. "I'll handle any that get too close," he said, his voice ringing with conviction that left no room for doubt.

"There's nothing to fear." His voice was a fortress, a bastion of courage amidst the fear.

Mira felt better as Erik said that, and her role was clear.

"Lila!"

"Yes, Boss?"

"Get on a laser turret and help keep the Thaidis at bay. Do not let them come any closer!"

"Yes, Sir!"

Her fingers dabbed the controls of her weapon system, ready to slow down anything that got too close and that she and the others couldn't kill.

She cast a glance over at the other guild members in their vehicles, their faces taut with tension but etched with a laser-sharp focus.

They were around the same age as Lila, yet their eyes reflected the rawness of their inexperience and a certain fragility that Lila seemed to lack.

Their strength was not comparable to hers, their bodies not as battle-hardened, their spirits not as unyielding.

Fear clung to them like a second skin, a stark contrast to the fiery excitement that coursed through Lila's veins.

Lila, catching their apprehensive glances, let out a hearty laugh, her voice ringing out clear and confident amidst the tension. "Why the long faces, guys?" she called out, her words laced with bravado. Though, even if she intended to give courage to her guild members, she only made it worse.

Their faces remained as they were - tight with fear, their eyes wide and alert.

Unfazed by their reaction, or lack thereof, Lila only shrugged and flashed them a grin that was all teeth and audacity.

"Well, more fun for me then."

As she glanced back at the advancing Erendus, Mira felt her mana surge within her.

Chapter 662: First Hostile Encounter (4)

The Erendus' hooves pounded the earth in a rhythmic cadence, their sound as steady as a metronome.

The beasts' hooves slammed into the earth, each impact like the crack of a whip.

Their rhythm was a relentless assault, a cacophony of chaos that shattered the stillness of the air.

There was no hesitation or uncertainty in their path, for they were like armored juggernauts, forging ahead with unshakeable determination.

The sound was not music, but a dissonant symphony of terror that reverberated through the ground, as if the earth itself was screaming in agony.

It was so intense that it felt like the earth itself was going to part under their weight.

The non-ranged fighters gripped the controls of the machine guns, laser turrets, and rocket launchers mounted on their vehicles, their knuckles white.

"Mana ranged fighters, now!" As Erik's command echoed across the battlefield, chaos erupted.

A flurry of arrows, darts and many other, glowing with infused mana, soared through the air.

The archers had aimed for the eyes, the only vulnerable spots on the creatures' heavily armored bodies.

As several Erendus were struck in their only weak spot, a cacophony of anguished roars erupted. The beasts stumbled and collapsed, trampled under the hooves of their brethren charging from behind.

At this sight, a wave of relief and exhilaration swept through the guild members.

Tears of joy welled up in their eyes, trickling down their dust-streaked faces as they celebrated their minor victory.

"I killed one!" A voice rang out, filled with disbelief and pride. Another chimed in, "Did you see that? I got one too!"

However, not all arrows found their mark. Some struck the bone plates that covered the beasts, ricocheting off with a disheartening clatter.

The non-ranged fighters unleashed a rain of devastation that destroyed the surroundings.

The air filled with the deafening roar of machine guns, the whirl of laser turrets, and the whoosh of rocket launchers.

Clouds of smoke and dust billowed into the air, obscuring vision but not dampening the guild members' resolve.

Alas, the weapons employed against the formidable Erendus proved futile, serving only to impede their progress or obscure their sight.

Nevertheless, the humans' valiant efforts were not in vain.

Many Erendus, in their frenzied rush, faltered and collided with the sturdy trees that dotted the landscape.

The impact sent shockwaves through their massive bodies, causing them to stumble and lose pace with their advancing brethren.

The forest echoed with the thuds of their hefty forms hitting the ground, a testament to the chaos of their hasty pursuit.

This fleeting respite granted the human side a moment of reprieve, a chance to kill the remaining beasts and thin their numbers.

Though, the remaining Erendus continued their advance, their bone plates absorbing most of the attacks.

Erik surveyed the battlefield, his eyes cold and calculating behind his mask.

"I really need to research a way to make weapons effective..." Erik said with a sigh.

His guild members were fighting, but he knew the Erendus were opponents his guild members couldn't fight on equal grounds.

Their bone-plated armor was a natural fortress, and only people with a lot of mana or higher numbers of neural links could damage them.

Yet Erik remained calm amidst the chaos.

His voice came through the comms again, unwavering.

"Keep firing! Aim for any weak spots you can find. I'll handle those that get too close. Do not fear, as they won't be able to do anything to you!"

Erik's reassurance sparked courage within the guild members, transforming their fear into determination.

Inspired by Erik's confidence and leadership, they felt less fear, their spirits buoyed and resolve strengthened.

"Show them no mercy! Kill them all!" said one member, his voice ringing out over the din of battle.

"Make them pay for daring to attack us!" said another, her words punctuated by the clash of her weapon against an enemy's.

A third member raised his voice above the others.

"Let's give them a taste of our strength!"

His call was met with a fervent cheer, further fueling their collective resolve.

As another wave of mana-infused arrows took to the air and more rockets screamed toward their targets, Erik readied himself for the next phase of the battle. The Erendus were getting close.

The tension among Erik's guild members was palpable as they took stock of the situation.

Despite their best efforts, the arrows and projectiles had only brought down a handful of the Erendus.

As the beasts got closer, the realization that they were facing a horde of at least a hundred of these dreadful creatures set in, and fear started surging again through the ranks.

Sensing the rising fear among his guild members, Erik gave another command.

His voice, steady and dominant, broke through the commotion.

"Those of you without mana-powered ranged attacks aim for the trees. Let's disrupt their charge!"

Taking Erik's command to heart, the non-ranged fighters shifted their focus.

The roar of machine guns filled the air, accompanied by the hum of laser turrets and the thunderous blasts of rocket launchers.

Their targets were no longer the Erendus but the towering trees that lined their path.

Wood splintered, leaves scattered, and massive trunks groaned under the onslaught before crashing down onto the earth with ground-shaking thuds.

As the trees fell, they became makeshift barricades, tripping up the advancing Erendus and causing them to stumble and collide with one another.

The forest turned into a chaotic maze of fallen timber and disoriented beasts.

Their once unified charge was now a disorganized scramble, their numbers working against them in the narrowed, cluttered terrain.

However, some members of the pack still avoided or destroyed the trees and went forward unimpeded.

The guild members seized this opportunity, their spirits lifted by this small but significant tactical victory.

"Fuck..." Erik said under his breath. His circumstances were unlike the others.

The responsibility for the lives of his comrades rested upon his shoulders, and for him, that wasn't a victory at all.

Another volley of mana-infused arrows took flight, finding their marks with greater ease among the disoriented Erendus.

More of the beasts fell, their moos of frustration and pain echoing through the forest, but the one that was left behind got back on track and started chasing again.

Even with these efforts, Erik knew they had only bought themselves a little time, and he was bound to jump in to action soon.

The Erendus were powerful creatures, but the real problem was that they were territorial and aggressive.

On their return journey, Erik resolved to steer the convoy clear of this treacherous part of the forest.

Even if it meant enduring the inconvenience of a longer route, the detour was a necessary sacrifice.

The forest, with its dense foliage, capricious landscape, and the lurking presence of Erendus, posed a risk Erik was no longer willing to take again.

The safety of his crew and the success of their mission outweighed any potential inconvenience.

Erik's eyes scanned the horizon. As he assessed the situation, someone shouted.

"We need to recharge!" The urgent plea cut through the chaos.

Erik felt the rhythmic thumping of his heart in his chest, a palpable echo of the tension that gripped him. He absorbed the request, his mind whirring as he weighed the implications.

With a deep breath, he gave his command, his voice a steady rock amidst the adrenaline-fueled storm raging within him.

"Units from A-1 to A-6. Cover for your comrades," he said, his eyes scanning the battlefield.

He then turned his attention to the others. "All units needing to reload, make haste and resume disrupting their charge!" His voice echoed with authority, his hand gesturing to underline the urgency of his command.

"We've slowed them down, but this is far from over."

His guild members nodded, their faces set in determined lines.

The air was pregnant with apprehension as the Erendus closed the remaining distance while the soldiers reloaded their weapons.

The Erendus' hooves thundered against the earth, resonating like the beat of war drums.

Erik's eyes met those of his guild members, a silent understanding passing between them.

"Fire at will!" he said, his voice cutting through the chaos.

Arrows, laser beams, and rockets erupted from the convoy again.

A few Erendus stumbled and fell, their eyes dimming as life eluded them.

But the majority pressed on, their armored bodies absorbing most of the impact.

"Keep on fighting! We killed several of them!" Erik said.

The guild's heavy artillery roared, sending rockets and laser blasts into the mass of approaching creatures.

Trees splintered and fell after the explosions, adding another layer of obstacles for the Erendus.

Despite the tumultuous surroundings, they plowed forward like unstoppable juggernauts, annihilating any impediment that dared to stand in their path.

Their unwavering gaze was locked onto the convoy, an obvious target amidst the pandemonium.

Their deep, resonant moos reverberated through the air, a bold proclamation of their indomitable spirit.

Erik's heart pounded in his chest as the Erendus broke through the last line of fallen trees.

"Fire!" he said again, gripping his weapon and firing the laser at the beasts.

The guild members did their best, their faces etched with a mixture of fear and determination.

Erik knew that was his moment to act.

Chapter 663: First Hostile Encounter (5)

The first of the Erendus breached the threshold of the convoy, its singular horn poised menacingly, ready to puncture and shred. Its eyes, a mirror of its savage soul, glowed with a terrifying resolve.

The lone Erendu, a monstrous silhouette against the dim light, seemed an ominous prelude to the legion of its kin yet to reach them.

Just as it lunged, Erik leaped from his vehicle, his weapon glowing with mana.

With a swift, calculated strike, he met the creature head-on, his weapon piercing through its armored skull.

The Erendus issued a harrowing roar, a sound filled with torment and despair, echoing through the desolate landscape.

Its massive form then succumbed to the inevitable, collapsing onto the rugged terrain with a resounding thud, its life force extinguished.

Erik's boots kissed the solid branch of the tree but for an instant, before he was once more in the embrace of the open air. He hurled himself towards another Erendu, dangerously near the convoy.

His weapon, glowing with the sunlight, found its mark, piercing through the creature's armored skull.

The Erendu bellowed a guttural lament before its body gave way, its momentum hurtling it forward a few paces more before it ground to a halt, defeated.

As Erik found footing on another tree, he spared but a heartbeat to survey the unfolding chaos around him.

His guild companions were standing their ground, their weapons flashing in the harsh sunlight as they fought off the monstrous Erendus.

Yet, the sheer volume of these beasts was testing their mettle to its limits. He knew he could ill afford a moment's respite.

With another leap, powerful as a thunderbolt, he launched himself towards a menacing cluster of Erendus that had encircled the convoy like a pack of wolves closing in on their prey.

His weapon moved in the air like a deadly waltz partner, a streak of gleaming light and lethal accuracy. One by one, the Erendus fell, their roars of aggression fading into the whimpering symphony of defeat.

As the guild members waged their grim battle, their eyes, in stolen moments, caught sight of a figure weaving through the forest canopy above them.

It was Erik, their guild master, dispatching Erendus with a ferocity that stirred a sense of awe within them, like a storm churning the calm sea into a tempest.

Each bound he made from one tree to another seemed to mock the very laws of nature, his weapon gleaming with an ethereal glow as it brought down one monstrous beast after another.

"Is that the boss?" The man's voice echoed over the tumult, a fleeting distraction from the bedlam surrounding them.

"It is! Look at him go!"

The woman's voice was laced with a cocktail of disbelief and admiration, her chest tightening as she watched their leader's unyielding display.

The atmosphere within the convoy shifted.

The pervasive sense of dread and terror that had once clung to them like a shroud gave way to a burgeoning sentiment of hope and a resurgence of spirit.

The guild members found themselves stirred, their spirits buoyed by Erik's awe-inspiring exhibition of prowess and might.

"Man, he's like a one-man army!"

The young guild member's eyes were wide with awe as he watched Erik dispatch another Erendu with a swift, decisive strike.

"I told you he was something else," Mira said, a hint of pride in her voice as she loosed another mana-powered arrow into the approaching horde.

"He's making it look easy!" Kael said, grinning despite the dire circumstances.

Even Aiden couldn't help but marvel at Erik's prowess.

Simultaneously, Erik's senses were sharpened to an almost supernatural degree, his silhouette moving in a fluid dance of survival and attack that seemed more instinct than conscious thought.

His eyes, glowing with a fierce determination, scanned the chaotic scene below. The cries and commands of his guild members punctuated the air, their faces masked with a mix of fear and resolve.

The vehicles, their engines roaring like metallic beasts, kicked up clouds of dust that hung heavily in the air.

Laser weapons discharged with blinding flashes of light, painting the scene in stark contrasts of light and shadow.

The heavy artillery, monstrous in their form, pounded the earth, sending tremors that rippled through the ground and shook the very trees around them.

Yet, over all the tumult, the incessant, thunderous pounding of Erendu hooves resonated, serving as a grim reminder akin to a relentless storm on the horizon, foretelling that the battle was far from reaching its last act.

He leaped again, this time aiming for a large Erendu that had set its sights on a vehicle lagging.

As he embarked on his downward journey, his weapon held aloft like a king's scepter, his gaze intertwined with the beast's in a silent duel.

Then, with a force as relentless as a winter storm, his weapon descended like a comet streaking through the night sky, and the Erendu was extinguished, snuffed out like a candle in a tempest.

Erik landed gracefully on another tree, his eyes already scanning for his next target.

Despite the adrenaline surging through his veins like a raging river, his expression remained as tranquil and undisturbed as a still pond under the moonlight.

Erik's keen eyes spotted a cluster of Erendus breaking away from the primary group, their charge aimed directly at the vulnerable convoy.

Realizing the imminent danger, he propelled himself off a tree branch, soaring through the air like a predatory bird.

As he embarked on his descent, he alighted with a dancer's grace on the back of one of the onrushing Erendus. His weapon, like a sliver of ice, caught the sun's rays, glinting with an ominous promise of death.

With a swift, fluid motion, he drove his weapon through the creature's armored skull, killing it instantly.

In mere fractions of seconds, akin to the fleeting flutter of a hummingbird's wing, he vaulted from the lifeless husk of one Erendu onto another. The deadly dance repeated itself, a rapid succession of lethal movements.

Each kill, executed with the precision of a master surgeon, unfolded in the blink of an eye, allowing no space for a misstep or miscalculation.

As Erik pursued his relentless dance of death in the air, an unforeseen spectacle unfolded.

The Erendus, creatures infamous for their savage and unyielding nature, wavered, their ferocity dimming like a dying flame in the face of a winter storm.

Their charge slowed, and for the first time, uncertainty flickered in their eyes.

It was as if they sensed the lethal force that was single-handedly decimating their ranks.

Erik didn't let up. He continued to leap from one Erendu to another, his weapon a blur of deadly efficiency.

Each time he struck, another beast fell, its life extinguished in an instant.

The ground transformed into a grotesque canvas of fallen Erendus. Their lifeless bodies lay strewn about, gruesome remnants of a devastating battle.

Blood seeped into the parched earth, staining it an ominous hue.

The once mighty beasts were now reduced to mere carcasses, their vacant eyes staring into nothingness. Each lifeless form stood as a grim testament to Erik's deadly prowess and unmatched skill.

Finally, the remaining Erendus broke formation, their charge dissolving into a disorganized retreat.

They were no longer driven by the predatory instinct to kill, but by the primal need to survive.

Erik found his footing back on the cold, metallic surface of the armored vehicle, his eyes tracking the vanishing figures of the creatures as they retreated into the shadowy embrace of the forest. His guild members stood in stunned silence, their faces a tableau of shock and awe.

They were like statues, frozen in time, their eyes wide and mouths agape, unable to fully comprehend the spectacle they had just witnessed.

The surrounding air was thick with a mixture of disbelief and reverence. They had never seen something like that in their whole life.

It took some time before the sound of the creatures' hoofs stopped, but after a while, it did.

For a moment, the forest was eerily silent, save for the heavy breathing of the guild members in the convoy and the sound of the cars' engines.

As if orchestrated by an unseen conductor, a cheer burst forth from the bowels of the vehicles, a jubilant cacophony that echoed through the desolate battlefield.

Erik, their savior, had achieved the impossible; he had shifted the course of a battle that seemed destined for disaster.

Their hearts brimmed with joy, not merely for the victory they had snatched from the jaws of defeat, but more so for the precious gift of life they still possessed.

Their faces, though marred by the grime and sweat of battle, were illuminated by the warm glow of survival, their eyes sparkling with the joyous realization of their continued existence.

Amid their jubilation, they found a renewed appreciation for life's simple pleasures - the comforting solidity of the ground beneath their feet, the sweet, crisp air filling their lungs, and above all, the comforting camaraderie of their comrades.

The specter of death had loomed over them, yet here they were, alive and victorious, their hearts pulsating with a fervor only those who have brushed with death could truly understand.

Chapter 664: The Echo of Victory

The air crackled with excitement within the convoy. Cheers and laughter burst forth from the vehicles, infusing the surroundings with a heady mix of triumph and relief.

The fledgling members of the guild, still unseasoned and vulnerable, joined their voices in a chorus of Erik's name, their cries echoing through the forest like a clarion call for victory.

"Erik!"

"Erik!"

"Erik!"

"Erik!"

The young man cast his gaze upon the faces of his guild members, their eyes shining with a heady mix of admiration and gratitude.

The weight of their expectations and the depth of their trust in him bore down upon him like an anvil, threatening to crush him beneath its weight.

Gathering his resolve, he climbed atop the car's front, raising his hand in a commanding gesture to signal for silence.

"Listen up, everyone," he began, his voice tinged with emotion while the wind blew on his face.

"This day, we confronted a peril that threatened to engulf us. Outnumbered and outmatched, it appeared as though our fate had been sealed. Yet look at us now! We held steadfast, unleashed our every ounce of strength, and emerged triumphant from the crucible of battle."

He halted, granting his words a moment to permeate the atmosphere before resuming. "Hear me well, my friends. Today was not a day for individuals but for our guild, our team. I am filled with pride as I bear witness to your valor, your indomitable spirit, and your unflinching determination to stand and fight. These are the qualities that proved decisive on this day. Be proud!"

Erik's eyes swept over the crowd, meeting the gazes of Mira, Kael, Lila, Aiden, and all the others who had fought so valiantly.

"If we can withstand the onslaught of the Erendus horde," Erik's voice rang out, strong. As he spoke, the crowd fell into a hushed silence, hanging onto his every word.

"Then no Thaid lurking within this forest shall impede our passage." His words echoed through the silence, and a ripple of determination swept through the crowd.

Some nodded, their faces hardening with resolve, while others clenched their fists. Their life wasn't easy, and only a strong and united guild could give them a chance to succeed in this profession.

"Etch this triumph into the depths of your being." Erik's voice arose.

The crowd responded in kind, their faces glowing with pride and resolve.

"YEAH!"

They stood taller, their shoulders squared and their eyes gleaming with newfound determination.

"For it shall serve as the fire that kindles your spirit in the face of future trials."

"YEAH!"

His words were met with a wave of cheers, the crowd's spirit ignited by his rallying call.

Their shouts of agreement filled the air, a testament to their shared resolve.

"This victory marks but a humble genesis," Erik's voice resonated through the crowd. A sense of anticipation filled the air as they waited for his next words.

"Heralding the journey that awaits us."

"Erik!"

"Erik!"

"Erik!"

"Erik!"

"THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING OF OUR TALE!" Erik's final proclamation was met with a roar from the crowd.

They erupted once more into cheers, their voices echoing his words back to him. Their faces were alight with excitement and determination, ready to embark on this new journey with him.

As his words subsided, another surge of jubilation erupted from the guild members, louder and more ebullient than the last. A smile graced Erik's features, his heart brimming with pride and appreciation for his comrades.

"Erik!"

"Erik!"

Their shouts echoed through the air, each repetition louder and more fervent than the last.

"Erik!"

"Erik!"

A few had taken to whistling and hooting, their high-pitched calls adding to the symphony of support. Several were stomping their feet, creating a rhythmic thumping that vibrated through the ground.

Everywhere he looked, people were shouting his name. The atmosphere was electric, charged with energy and anticipation, all eyes riveted on Erik, their guild master.

Upon settling into his vehicle's seat, Erik retrieved his phone and dialed Thorne's number.

The connection was established with swiftness, and Thorne's raspy voice resonated through the speaker.

"Thorne, it's Erik."

Erik's voice was grave, the seriousness of the situation clear in his tone.

"We've just had a skirmish with a substantial group of Erendus and repelled them."

A brief pause followed, as if he was visualizing the scene again in his mind.

"However," he said, the gravity in his voice deepening, "the fallen bodies could be worth a significant amount."

A soft rustle could be heard over the phone as Erik moved, perhaps adjusting his mask.

"I'm sending the coordinates to you now."

"Could you assess if it's feasible to retrieve them?"

If doing so was too hard, Erik didn't want Thorne and his team to risk their lives.

"But remember," he warned, "there are still some lurking around. So, be careful."

With swift fingers, Erik dispatched the location details through a secure channel, designed only for Thorne's eyes.

"Possible, yes." Thorne's voice was thoughtful as he scrutinized the coordinates on his map.

"But you know Erendus are lethal creatures, especially when they band together, right?" His question hung in the air, a reminder of the danger they were dealing with.

"I'm aware," Erik said, "which is why I'm asking you if it is possible and telling you to exercise caution. There are still many Erendus alive in the area. Make sure your teams are well-equipped and prepared for any confrontations."

Thorne let out a chuckle, a glint of confidence in his eyes. "Don't worry, Erik. We've been in this business long enough to handle ourselves. Even if it takes longer, we'll get those bodies and deliver them to Lysa for you."

Thorne's voice was comforting, and he spoke with pride and determination.

He stood tall, showing his confidence, and had a small smile on his face.

Erik's voice came through the phone, thick with relief. "Good," then he sighed audibly, the tension of the past hours seeming to dissipate.

"Those Erendus could be a goldmine for the guild. But remember, safety first. We can't afford any casualties."

Thorne's reply was immediate. "Don't you fret," he replied, his tone steady and confident. "You just concentrate on your quest. We've got this end sorted."

Erik's sigh of relief was audible even through the phone. "Alright," he agreed, a hint of a smile in his voice. "I'll leave it in your hands, then. Keep me updated and take care." His words echoed a bond of trust, resonating through the phone line.

Thorne's laughter echoed through the phone once more, this time imbued with a warmth that eased some of the burdens Erik had been shouldering.

"Kid, careful could as well be my middle name," he said, his jovial tone a balm to Erik's worries. "Just make sure you come back in one piece, alright?"

"Yeah."

With that, Erik ended the call, placing his phone back in its holder.

He felt a renewed sense of purpose as he looked out at the convoy, his guild members still buzzing with the adrenaline and excitement of their recent victory.

"All right, guys. Let's get back on track!"

The convoy resumed its journey, leaving behind the adrenaline-charged atmosphere that had enveloped them earlier.

The forest, resplendent in its October glory, unfolded before their eyes like a magnificent tapestry woven with threads of vibrant hues.

Trees stood tall, their branches adorned in fiery oranges, rich reds, and golden yellows, as if aflame with the spirit of autumn.

With each gentle breeze, the leaves descended in a graceful descent, creating a carpet of nature's artwork beneath the towering canopy.

Through the intricate latticework of branches and leaves, sunlight filtered, casting a warm and ethereal glow upon the forest floor.

The interplay of light and shadow orchestrated a mesmerizing dance, as if the very essence of nature was rejoicing in the season's arrival.

The crisp air carried a delicate fragrance, a whisper of fallen leaves, harmonizing with the symphony of senses that autumn unfurled.

As they drove deeper into the forest, the terrain changed subtly. The trees grew less dense, and the undergrowth gave way to open clearings.

Soon, they arrived at a babbling brook, its waters shimmering in the gentle autumn light as they meandered over the polished rocks and pebbles.

As the convoy approached the crossing, they slowed down; the vehicles splashing through the cool and shallow waters with a soothing melody.

The surrounding trees, ablaze with the colors of fall, provided a picturesque backdrop to the tranquil scene as if nature itself was welcoming their passage through this serene haven.

Along the way, they encountered several weaker Thaidi—small, scuttling creatures that posed a minor threat to the well-armed and prepared guild members.

These skirmishes served as excellent training opportunities for the newer members, who were able to practice their combat skills and coordination under relatively low-risk conditions.

Erik watched approvingly as they dispatched the creatures with increasing efficiency, their initial hesitancy for battling Thaidi they had never seen giving way to a newfound confidence.

The journey was an educational experience for everyone, not just in terms of combat but also in understanding the lay of the land and the kinds of challenges they might face in the wilderness.

Chapter 665: Rest (1)

Hours had passed as they forged their path through the dense forest, the convoy wrestling with minor skirmishes against the Thaidi.

The burden of their journey etched itself into their bones, a constant reminder of the trials they had endured and those yet to come.

At the forefront of their ranks stood Erik, the figurehead of their motley crew. His gaze roved over his guild members, each face a canvas painted with the weary lines of exhaustion.

His eyes held an understanding of their shared hardship, a silent acknowledgment of the toll their journey had taken on them.

The sky had darkened, and even the advanced lighting systems and AI navigation on their vehicles couldn't fully compensate for the challenges of nighttime travel in such unpredictable terrain. Erik opened a communication channel with Kael, who was managing the minor things for the convoy.

"Kael, we need to find a place to set up camp. What's the situation ahead?" Erik inquired.

Kael took a moment before responding, his eyes scanning the vehicle's mapping system. His fingers traced the digital outline of a nearby stream.

"According to the vehicle's mapping system," he began, his voice steady, "there's a stream up ahead." He paused, his gaze still fixed on the screen as he considered their options.

His hand fell away from the screen as he turned to face the others. "It should be free of water Thaidi," he said, his eyes meeting each of theirs in turn. "But it's a known gathering spot for land-based ones."

His voice held an undertone of concern, a subtle hint that their decision was not to be taken lightly.

He leaned back in his seat, his arms crossing over his chest as he contemplated their situation.

Erik fell silent, his gaze distant as he pondered over their options. His fingers drummed a slow, thoughtful rhythm on the armrest of his chair.

"We're heading into the White Desert," he finally said, his voice carrying an edge of determination.

He leaned forward, his hands clasping together. "It would be wise to have our water supplies at maximum capacity."

"Let's camp near the stream," he decided, straightening up and sweeping his gaze over his guild members.

His gaze softened slightly as he talked, "We can use the opportunity to wash up and refill our water reserves." The hint of a smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

Kael paused, a hint of uncertainty flickering across his face. "Are you sure?" he asked. The thought of the land Thaid's lurking nearby sent a shiver down his spine. "The presence of land Thaid's could pose a threat."

"I understand the concern," he said with a calm voice. His broad shoulders lifted slightly in a shrug. "But we've already proven our strength against the Erendus and many other Thaid's today."

"Besides," he said, a confident smile tugging at his lips, "it's not like in other areas of the forest there aren't Thaid's. We can set up a perimeter and keep watch."

"We need to be fully prepared for the desert ahead." There was a comforting certainty in Erik's voice that eased Kael's worries.

Taking a deep breath, Kael nodded. Trusting Erik's judgment, he turned to relay the message to the rest of the convoy.

"Alright." Kael picked up his communication system and opened the collective channel. "Everyone, we'll set up camp near a stream ahead. Prepare for a stop and get ready to secure the area."

The convoy moved cautiously through the forest; the darkness enveloping them like a thick shroud.

Despite the advanced lighting systems on their vehicles, the absence of natural light made the journey feel like a voyage into an abyss.

Trees loomed like silent sentinels, their shadows dancing eerily as the headlights pierced the gloom. The forest seemed to close in on them, each rustle of leaves or snap of a twig amplifying the tension that hung in the air.

Kael led the way. Not Physically, of course, that role befell Erik's shoulders. Kael's eyes squinted at the vehicle's mapping system, which showed they were nearing the stream.

The guild members were on high alert, their fingers close to triggers, and their senses heightened. Every so often, the convoy had to slow down to navigate around fallen trees or treacherous terrain, the engines' low growl the only sound breaking the silence.

As they neared the stream, the oppressive darkness seemed to recede slightly, like a curtain being drawn back to reveal a stage. The open expanse provided a modicum of visibility, a welcome relief amidst the surrounding obscurity.

However, the lack of natural illumination transformed the water into a sinister entity. It appeared as a black ribbon, winding its way through the terrain, much like a silent serpent stealthily slithering through the night. Its true character was shrouded in the mysterious cloak of shadows.

The end of their journey brought a much-needed respite, yet the encroaching darkness whispered silent threats. Far from the safety of their homes, they were but strangers in this hostile wilderness.

The vehicles came to a halt, forming a semi-circle akin to a fortress wall, a feeble barricade against the unknown threats of the night.

The guild members disembarked one by one, their faces etched with lines of fatigue.

Bathed in the silvery glow of the moonlight, the nearby stream shimmered like a jewel in the dark.

Its waters were inviting, promising refreshment and respite. But the serenity of the scene was tainted by an unspoken caution, a silent acknowledgment of the untamed wilderness that surrounded them.

Erik's voice crackled through the communication system, summoning Kael to his side. Within moments, Kael was there, standing beside him. "How long will the vehicle batteries last if we use them for lighting?"

Kael glanced at the vehicle's control panel, his eyes scanning the energy readout. "About twelve hours," he stated, his voice steady despite the gravity of their situation. He met Erik's gaze. "They'll recharge with solar energy once the sun comes up."

Erik let out a sigh that seemed to echo in the confined space of the vehicle. It was a sound that spoke of relief, but also of frustration. He ran a hand through his hair, his fingers gripping the strands tightly for a moment. "I should've spent more on the vehicles," he said to himself.

But then he seemed to shake off his regrets, his shoulders squaring as he refocused on the issue at hand. His voice was firmer when he spoke again. The decision was made. "Twelve hours should be enough for now."

Erik's voice cut through the air, his tone shifting to one of authority. "First order of business," he began, his eyes scanning the surrounding area, calculating and assessing. "Is to set up camp. I want as many fires started as possible. It'll not only keep us warm but also improve visibility."

Kael, standing at his side, nodded in understanding. His eyes were focused, taking in every word Erik said.

His mind was already whirring, mentally organizing tasks and assigning roles. "Understood," he said, his voice carrying a determined edge. "Anything else?"

Erik's gaze was still fixed on the landscape before them, his mind strategizing. "Yes," he confirmed, his voice steady and resolute. "Position the vehicles so that their headlights illuminate the surrounding area. We need to see as far as possible; it's our first line of defense."

Kael saluted, a gesture more of respect than formality. "Will do, Erik."

As Kael moved away to relay Erik's orders, the guild leader watched him go. Erik couldn't afford any mistakes; the lives of his guild members depended on it.

Kael's voice crackled over the communication system, passing on Erik's instructions. "All units, prepare to set up camp. Start as many fires as you can for warmth and visibility. Also, position your vehicles to maximize the lighting around the campsite."

The convoy sprang into action. Members disembarked from their vehicles, gathering firewood and setting up tents.

Others maneuvered their vehicles, the headlights casting elongated shafts of light that sliced through the darkness like a sword through a shadow. This created an illuminated boundary around the camp, akin to a protective barrier of light warding off the encroaching night.

As the fires crackled into life and bathed the area in a comforting glow, a wave of cautious relief permeated the guild members. It was as though a heavy weight had been partially lifted from their shoulders, their tense muscles gradually unwinding.

Their hearts, which had been clenched tight with anxiety, beat with a rhythm less frantic. The light seemed to chase away not just the darkness, but also the shadow of fear that had been looming over them. It wasn't complete assurance, but in those flickering flames, they found a small respite from their worries.

Erik surveyed the camp, satisfied but vigilant. The fires were burning brightly, and the vehicles' headlights filled the gaps, creating a well-lit circle amid the dark forest. For tonight, at least, they had light. And where there was light, there was hope.

Chapter 666: Rest (2)

Erik picked up his communication device again and called for Aiden. Within a few moments, the man appeared, his face illuminated by the flickering firelight and the glow of the vehicle headlights.

"Aiden, how are the guild members holding up?" Erik asked, his eyes scanning the tense faces around the camp. "This is the farthest we've ever been from Testrovsc's Rest. Have any of them voiced concerns about continuing the quest?"

Aiden nodded thoughtfully. "It's understandable that everyone is on edge. We're deep in uncharted and dangerous territory, facing threats none of us have encountered before. The members are anxious but so far committed to seeing the quest through."

He paused, considering his next words. "That being said, the attack by the Erendus shook many of them. It was their first real taste of how lethal things can get out here. They're putting on a brave face, but I know some are afraid."

Erik listened intently, his expression serious but empathetic. "Fear can undermine the spirit if left unchecked. Have any members spoken of wanting to turn back?"

"No, not outright," Aiden said. "I think your leadership gives them courage and purpose. You have their trust, Erik, as long as we continue to take every precaution."

Erik felt the weight of responsibility on his shoulders but stood tall beneath it. "We will proceed, but with utmost caution. I will see if Kael established the night shifts."

Aiden nodded. "Yeah, thank you. That will surely help."

Aiden then left, and Erik picked up his communication device again and called for Kael.

Within a few moments, the man appeared.

"You called for me, Erik?" he asked, his voice tinged with anticipation.

"Yes, Kael," Erik began, his eyes scanning the well-lit camp. "Were you able to establish the night guard shifts like I asked?"

Kael nodded. "Yes, I organized four guards per shift, two to patrol the perimeter and two on elevated lookout positions. All armed and with communication devices. I rotated experienced members with newer recruits to provide training every three hours."

"Excellent," Erik said, relief washing over him. "Aiden told me the younger guys are having some problems. With this, I hope there will be fewer problems and they will feel safe."

"Yeah, that was a good idea," Kael confirmed. "I briefed everyone thoroughly on their duties and the rotation schedule. No one will be caught off guard."

Erik clasped Kael on the shoulder firmly. "Excellent work. Hopefully, we can all rest a little easier tonight."

Kael made a smile. "I share the hope. The nights are long and dark out here."

"Yeah."

With Kael overseeing the night watch, he felt assured the camp would stay secure.

Grateful for the small sense of relief, Erik let his mind move on to the next preparations, knowing Kael had this critical task well in hand.

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Erik slowly walked through the camp, examining the guild members settled in for the night.

Exhausted men and women sat huddled around fires, seeking warmth and comfort after another grueling day in the untamed wilderness.

Some ate rations quietly, too tired for conversation. Others checked weapons and gear, stealing themselves for whatever the next day's march might bring.

Erik noted the fatigue and apprehension etched on their faces.

These people had placed their lives in his hands, and he bore that responsibility heavily.

As he completed his circuit around the camp's periphery, Erik took some slight relief at seeing the vigilance of the guards stationed at regular intervals.

At least for now, they had some warning if danger approached.

Erik was just about to do another pass when Mira's voice broke his focus. "Erik, come join us," she beckoned, gesturing toward a campfire where a small group had gathered.

Navigating his way towards a makeshift bench carved from a log, Erik lowered himself onto the seat. The welcoming heat from the nearby fire quickly wrapped him in its comforting embrace. Mira leaned towards him, her eyes reflecting the mesmerizing dance of the flames.

"Erik," she began, her voice a soft whisper against the crackle of the fire, "Allow me to introduce Alina Hayes. Today, it was her unique ability to detect the Erendus that saved us today."

Erik shifted his gaze to Alina, standing just a few feet away. He had known her since her interview at the guild, yet he had spent little time with her and didn't know what her personality was.

She was an unassuming figure, her jet-black hair cascading down her back like a waterfall of darkness.

Her eyes, a muted shade of green, were as ordinary as pebbles in a vast riverbed, holding no particular secrets.

Her skin was plain, unmarked by the charming scatter of freckles or the glow of youthful blush.

She was as unassuming as a daisy in a field of roses, her appearance devoid of any striking features that could draw a second glance.

She stood before him, a picture of discomfort, perhaps even intimidation, as if her very presence in his vicinity was a challenge she wasn't prepared for.

Yet, it was the aura that she exuded, an ethereal quality that seemed to envelop her like a cloak that seized Erik's attention.

In Erik's eyes, she was a puzzle, shrouded in shyness and reservation. His own past, a tapestry of rough patches and hard lessons, mirrored back at him from her demeanor, leading him to deduce that her journey hadn't been a bed of roses either.

During his childhood, Erik had often yearned for companionship. He'd harbored a quiet hope that someone might break through his wall of solitude, strike up a conversation, and perhaps even forge a friendship.

Yet, he'd remained an island, untouched by the warmth of camaraderie, as if he were invisible in a sea of faces.

Behind the mask, Erik's eyes found Alina across the dimly lit space. "Alina," he began, his tone carrying a warmth that was seldom heard, "It's a pleasure to meet you again."

He paused, the silence between them filled only by the distant echo of the night. His gloved hands rested idly on his lap, hidden from view.

"I've been meaning to express my gratitude," His voice was steady yet laced with profound sincerity.

A slight shift in his tone caught her attention. "Your ability to sense Thaid's, it's an extraordinary gift. Today, it was our shield."

His voice dropped lower, a hint of tension creeping into his otherwise calm demeanor.

"You shielded us from a grim fate. You saved lives today." Each word was wrapped in gratitude, his voice barely more than a whisper.

"And for that," he concluded, his tone softening, "I am indebted to you beyond words."

Even behind the mask, his gratitude was palpable, conveyed through the sincerity lacing each word he spoke. The people seated at the fire shared the same sentiment.

Alina's gaze met Erik's, her eyes lingering on the mask that obscured his features. "No need for thanks," she finally broke the silence, her voice as soft as the rustle of leaves in a gentle breeze.

Her words were measured, laced with an underlying caution that was as palpable as the tension in the air. It was clear she didn't enjoy talking that much.

Erik sensed an unease in her demeanor whenever gratitude or compliments were directed her way.

Recognizing this, he held his tongue, to not utter words that might add to her discomfort.

Instead, he let his silence speak for him, a tacit understanding that he respected her silent wishes.

"Have you eaten yet?" he asked.

Alina seemed to relax a bit when he changed the topic, her posture easing as she looked at the fire before them.

"Yeah, some meat."

Erik nodded, appreciating her modesty. "That is good to hear. Food is one of the few comforts we have out here."

Alina seemed to agree with him, her eyes still focused on the fire.

Erik, with an air of casual curiosity, asked, "Hey, if it's alright to ask, where'd you grow up? Your skills are pretty unique."

Alina glanced up, her eyes meeting his. "Kinda all over the place," she said, her voice holding a touch of alertness. "Didn't stick around in one spot for too long."

Erik sensed the vagueness in her answer but pressed on gently. "It mustn't have been an easy life."

She hesitated for a moment. "Better than living on the streets, I guess..."

Erik was about to ask another question when Mira intervened.

"Erik, maybe you should give Alina some space. It's clear she's not comfortable discussing her past."

He looked at Mira and then back at Alina, sensing the truth in Mira's words.

"Got it," Erik responded, his head bobbing in a nod. "Didn't mean to dig too deep or make things awkward."

In response, Alina offered a subtle nod, so slight it might have been missed. Yet, to Erik, it signaled her appreciation for his understanding.

Erik leaned back and grabbed a meat skewer from a plate beside him.

As he took a bite, he couldn't help but think about the mysterious young woman sitting across the fire.

Her ability had saved them today, yet, the few times he talked to her at the guild, she seemed ashamed of it.

Erik held a different perspective from the many who dismissed her abilities as insignificant.

He foresaw a potential that was yet to be fully realized. After all, she had the power to control Thaid's.

Sure, her current capacity might be limited, but Erik couldn't help but wonder.

What if she established 54 neural links? The possibilities were vast, and he was certain her prowess would far exceed anyone's expectations.

Erik was curious about this outcome, but since he couldn't ask her about her powers, he would respect her boundaries, grateful for her role in their survival.

He chewed thoughtfully, savoring the meat flavors as he looked around at his guild members, each lost in their world yet united by a common purpose.

It was a moment of peace, a brief respite, something Erik knew was bound to stop as soon as they got on the march the following day.

Chapter 667: The Ravine (1)

The night had unfolded peacefully, a welcome respite in a journey fraught with peril. Many Campfires flickered like beacons, their warm glow warding off the darkness that clung to the forest like a shroud.

The guards stood like statues, their eyes scanning the surroundings with the intensity of a hawk, laser rifles poised for action.

As the moon climbed higher in the sky, a few Thaidi had ventured close to the camp, lured by the scent of fresh water from the nearby stream. But they were weaker variants, nothing the recruits couldn't handle.

A few well-aimed shots had been enough to deter them, the sound of laser fire shattering the night's tranquility.

Erik had spent most of the night reviewing plans and maps, but even he had caught a few hours of sleep.

As the first rays of sunlight kissed the treetops, the camp stirred from its slumber. The fires were extinguished, tents disassembled, and supplies stowed away with a flurry of activity that signaled the start of a new day.

The air was filled with a sense of apprehension, but also a newfound confidence. The events of the previous day had tested the men and women joining Erik in this quest, but it had also forged them into a more cohesive unit.

Kael had coordinated the packing, ensuring that everything was stowed for the journey ahead.

Mira and Lila had taken stock of their ammunition and medical supplies, while Aiden had briefed the other members on what to expect as they ventured closer to the White Desert.

Alina kept to herself, though Erik noticed her casting her senses outward as if scanning for any signs of Thaidi.

Erik took one last look around the campsite, ensuring that no trace was left behind.

Satisfied, Erik settled into the passenger seat of the vehicle. The engine roared to life at the turn of the key, filling the air with a powerful symphony of mechanical prowess.

"Morning, sir. Everything is ready." The driver said, his hands steady on the wheel as he glanced at Erik.

Erik looked over at the driver, studying his facial features. Though the man's voice was even and his hands were steady, Erik could see the strain around his eyes and the tightness of his jaw. His smile was forced, not quite reaching his eyes.

Erik recognized the driver was putting on a brave facade, trying to appear confident and prepared for the journey ahead. But beneath the surface, Erik could sense the man's unease and apprehension.

Erik nodded, his gaze focused on the road ahead. "Morning."

Erik leaned back in his seat, his gaze still on the road. "I want to get to the White Desert as soon as possible." He turned to look at the driver. "Set the pace for the rest of the convoy."

"Understood, sir," the driver responded, his grip tightening on the steering wheel.

While the driver tried to maintain an air of calm competence, the telltale signs of worry and anxiety betrayed his true feelings. Erik understood all too well the fear and uncertainty his people must be feeling. But they looked to him for leadership and reassurance in the face of danger.

With a respectful nod, the driver waited for Erik's signal before pressing down on the accelerator, setting their journey into motion once more.

As the sun claimed the sky at its zenith, the convoy pressed onward, the harsh light painting the landscape in stark relief. Erik's communication device vibrated, breaking the monotonous hum of the engine.

Kael's name blinked on the screen. A call to attention. With a swift movement, Erik activated the device, and Kael's voice filled the cabin, laced with an undercurrent of urgency.

"Erik, the moment of decision is upon us. We must determine our course of action," Kael said, his voice carrying an undeniable weight that underscored his firm stance on the issue.

Kael's comment hinted at an impending choice that would shape the rest of their journey. Erik would have to decide between two routes.

The first option was a vast, open plain that would significantly shorten their travel time to the White Desert.

However, the lack of topographical features also meant there was little shelter or concealment. Any travelers would be exposed and visible for miles, easy prey for the flying Thaidi that patrolled this area.

Attempting to cross the plain on foot or by vehicle would leave one dangerously vulnerable, with no place to hide and little ability to fight back against aerial attacks.

The alternative was a narrow mountain pass known as Serpent's Ravine. Traversing the ravine would prolong their journey, but it offered the advantage of being too constricted for flying Thaidi to maneuver through. Taking the pass would provide more security, though, at the cost of greater time.

Erik pondered their options in silence for several moments, weighing the risks and rewards in his mind.

"We'll take the long route through Serpent's Ravine." A sense of calm washed over Erik as he spoke the words. It was the safer choice, though it pained him to think of all the extra time they would lose. Still, their lives were more important than haste.

There was a brief pause on the other end, and Erik could almost sense Kael's shoulders relaxing. "Wise decision," Kael said, a hint of relief in his voice.

Erik spoke calmly as he relayed the instructions. "Convey the change in route to the rest of the convoy. Make sure everyone is prepared for the additional time it will take to reach our destination," he said.

Kael nodded. "I'll inform the others at once," he said.

Erik switched off the communication device and leaned back in his seat. He looked out at the landscape rolling by.

The decision to take the longer route through the ravine was not an easy one. Erik's instincts told him the open plain would be quicker, but he knew the flying Thaid's would be too dangerous for the convoy.

Though part of him wished they could cross the plain, he pushed those thoughts aside.

His duty was clear. With a deep breath, he steeled his resolve. The ravine it would be. And though the decision stuck in his craw, he knew it was the right one.

As Kael relayed the change of plans, the convoy began preparing for the extended journey.

He had chosen the safer path and they would navigate it together, step by step, until they reached the other side.

Within minutes, the convoy changed direction, veering off the main path and toward the entrance of Serpent's Ravine.

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Several hours after the pivotal decision, the convoy arrived at the mouth of Serpent's Ravine.

While the ravine was safer than crossing the open plain, it still posed challenges of its own.

For one, its terrain would be harder to navigate. Though less vulnerable to aerial attacks, they would still be at risk of Thaid's attacks within the ravine itself.

The confined space would make fighting more difficult should they be attacked.

Traversing the ravine would not be easy. Its twisting path and rocky ground would slow their progress. Lurking Thaidi could ambush them from crevices or behind boulders.

As Erik's vehicle approached the ravine entrance, he stopped and gazed up at the towering rock walls that loomed on either side. Nature itself seemed to have carved this narrow passageway through the earth, cleaving the mountains in two. The walls rose hundreds of feet high, jagged, the layers of sedimentary rock visible.

Vegetation was sparse, with only a few scraggly bushes and stunted trees taking root in the cracks and crevices.

The ravine itself was barely wide enough for the vehicles to pass through a single file. The floor was littered with loose rocks and boulders, some as large as houses. A small stream meandered along one side, carving its groove through the stone over countless years.

The other vehicles in the convoy slowed to a crawl, their engines humming as they prepared to navigate the tight, winding space of the ravine. Erik could see the path ahead snaking between the steep walls, the stony terrain uneven and treacherous.

Climbing out of his vehicle, Erik walked to the edge and looked out over the ravine, his eyes scanning every detail. He searched for any signs of movement, any hint of an ambush hidden among the rocks. But for now, all seemed still.

The ravine's confines would offer protection from aerial attacks, but they would also make the convoy vulnerable if engaged on the ground. They would have to be watchful for threats lurking in crevices or around blind corners.

With a sigh, Erik turned back to his vehicle. The ravine's passage would be arduous, but they had no choice other than to press on.

Kael's voice crackled through the communication device, confirming that all vehicles were ready to proceed. Erik climbed aboard and, with a deep breath, gave the signal. One by one, the convoy's vehicles entered the pass, disappearing into the shadowy depths of Serpent's Ravine.

Chapter 668: The Ravine (2)

Mira's voice broke the silence, her question echoing through the communication devices in each vehicle.

"Is it going to be safe inside?" Her question hung in the air, laced with a hint of anxiety.

From his position in the vehicle, Erik reached for his communicator. His fingers traced the cool metal, a stark contrast to the warmth of the uncertainty that swirled within him.

"It's hard to say," was his honest reply, his voice steady despite the absence of any comforting pretense. "We're still in Thaid territory. We might steer clear of the airborne ones, but we can't rule out other risks."

Erik then adjusted his communicator to reach Alina. "Alina, we need your keen senses now more than ever. Any Thaid in the vicinity, especially the ones fond of surprise attacks, we need to know."

"Got it," Alina's voice echoed back, carrying that familiar undertone Erik recognized. "I'll do everything I can to give us a heads-up."

Despite her quiet and reserved nature, Alina was a mercenary with a courage that outshone many. Her words, though spoken, were filled with a determination that Erik respected. He knew that beneath her shy exterior was a brave heart, ready to face whatever danger they might encounter.

Satisfied, Erik switched back to the general channel. "Alright, everyone, we're moving forward. Keep your eyes open and your weapons ready. And remember, if you see something, do not freak out."

With that, he gave the signal for the convoy to proceed. One by one, the vehicles revved their engines and moved, entering the dark maw of Serpent's ravine.

Advancing at a slow pace, the convoy of vehicles entered the depths of Serpent's Ravine, with their engines humming, mindful of the ancient, towering walls that surrounded them.

The ravine, with its towering vertical cliffs, created a natural fortress that appeared to reach the sky.

With its walls made up of a combination of jagged rocks and scarce vegetation, this place offered many hiding spots for any creature that might live there.

The ravine, even in the scorching midday heat, was still illuminated by a surreal and enchanting half-light. With the sun positioned overhead, its rays faced a formidable challenge in reaching the

bottom of the deep crevice. The small fragment of the cerulean sky that was visible seemed like a distant recollection, serving as a sharp contradiction to the somber and obscure environment below it.

The sunlight, although feeble and fractured, still reached the depths of the ravine, creating an intricate tapestry of shadows on the rocky ground.

The sun's futile attempt to assert dominance was clear as each crevice and jagged rock adorned a cloak of darkness, which swayed and flickered.

Despite the harsh conditions, the vegetation that encompassed the ravine displayed remarkable tenacity as it clung to the rocky edges.

The roots of the plants, resembling the desperate fingers of a climber in need, grasped onto the cracks and crevices, searching for sustenance from the meager amount of soil available.

In a mesmerizing display, the leaves, resembling a vibrant tapestry of green, reached upwards as if in a silent plea, seeking the elusive sunlight.

With every fiber of their being, they contorted and twisted, bending at angles that seemed impossible, their outstretched hands grasping for even the slightest glimmer of light that ventured into the depths of the ravine.

Each leaf, reminiscent of a small-scale solar panel, possessed an innate longing to harness and keep the life-sustaining energy descending from the sky.

Despite this, within the confines of this specific chasm in the earth, it seemed as if the memory of that world had vanished. The ravine, with its dark and constricted passage, seemed like a universe of its own, as if it had been carved through the very heart of the earth.

The air, saturated with the moist and earthy fragrance, whispered a tale of the ravine's profound seclusion from the outside world.

The dense walls of the ravine acted as a barrier, muffling and swallowing the sounds that attempted to escape.

The road itself was wide enough for two vehicles to pass side by side, and the drivers navigated the twists and turns with extreme caution.

Every so often, the convoy would have to slow to a crawl to maneuver around a tight bend or a fallen boulder that had tumbled from the cliffs above.

Inside one of the vehicles, Jack, a seasoned mercenary, broke the heavy silence, his voice trembling with a touch of unease. "Man, this place... it gives me the creeps," he admitted, his words trailing off as he glanced nervously out of the window. His eyes darted from shadow to shadow, searching for any sign of danger.

Mark, who was sitting beside him, nodded in agreement. As he furrowed his brows, his face became etched with a blend of caution and determination.

"Yeah, don't mention it," Mark responded, his voice tinged with a hint of weariness. He shifted in his seat, adjusting the strap of his laser rifle across his chest.

Curiosity sparked in Jack's eyes as he turned towards Mark. "Why'd you choose to be a mercenary, then?"

A flicker of emotion passed through Mark's eyes, sadness. He took a deep breath, his gaze fixed on the road ahead before meeting Jack's gaze.

"I gotta take care of my two brothers," he revealed, his voice carrying a weight of responsibility. "Our parents kicked the bucket two years ago, and this was the best way for me to make a quick buck."

Sympathy welled up within Jack. He could sense the burden that rested upon Mark's shoulders, the sacrifices he had made for the sake of his family. It was a heavy load to bear, yet Mark carried it with an unwavering resolve and putting his life at risk.

"I can't imagine how tough that must be," Jack's voice was filled with empathy. "But I admire your dedication to your brothers. It takes a special strength to do what you do."

The corners of Mark's lips curled in a faint smile as a glimmer of pride flickered in his eyes.

"Yeah, it's not easy," Mark acknowledged, his voice carrying a mix of weariness and determination. "But when you have family counting on you, you push through. It's what keeps me going."

Across the communication channel, a voice broke the silence. "You ever hear the old tales about Serpent's Ravine?" the voice asked, its tone tinged with a hint of intrigue. "They say it's haunted, that spirits of ancient warriors roam these cliffs."

"Yeah, let's add some more worries to Mark and Jack!" Mira said through the communication device.

Aiden, his eyes scanning the towering walls, chimed in. "Haunted or not, I just hope we don't run into any Thaid's," he remarked, his voice laced with caution. His gaze shifted from one shadowy crevice to another, his body poised for any sign of danger.

Kael, his eyes never leaving the vehicle's side mirrors, added his own apprehensive thoughts. "I'd rather face a ghost than a Thaid in this tight space." His fingers tightened around the steering wheel, his knuckles turning white.

Mira sensed the growing unease among the group. "Either way, let's just get through this as quickly as possible."

She glanced around, her eyes scanning their surroundings, her hands steady on her bow.

The comments echoed the sentiments of everyone in the convoy. Each twist and turn of the ravine seemed to ratchet up the tension, and the mercenaries couldn't shake the feeling that they were not alone.

Despite the lack of any immediate threat, the oppressive atmosphere of Serpent's Ravine weighed on their minds, making them wish for a swift and uneventful passage.

Except for the occasional remark, there was no communication, as each individual was too absorbed in their immediate environment to take part in idle talk.

It was understandable, given the circumstances. Out of all the guild members, only the four leading the expedition stood out in terms of their strength.

As they moved deeper into the ravine, the walls seemed to close in around them, amplifying the sense of isolation and vulnerability. Yet, for all its foreboding atmosphere, Serpent's Ravine remained silent.

No Thaid's leaped from the hidden crevices in the walls, no ominous sounds echoed through the narrow passage. It was as if the ravine itself was holding its breath, watching and waiting for the intruders to make the first move.

After what felt like an eternity, Alina's voice pierced through the static-filled communication device, carrying a tangible undercurrent of apprehension.

"Guild Master," she began, her voice quivering with a mix of fear and urgency, "I sense something... Thaid's. They're ahead."

Erik's response was swift, his voice steady but laced with a sense of urgency. "Clarify, Alina. How many are we dealing with?"

Alina's reply came in a breathless whisper, her words barely audible over the crackling of the communication device.

"I can't say for certain." Her voice trembled with unease. "But the feeling... it's faint, yet overwhelming. There are many Thaid's, and they're close."

Erik's fingers remained steady around the hilt of his blade. "Everyone, stay alert."

A sense of reassurance was instilled within the team as his eyes, filled with a composed gaze, surveyed their surroundings and radiated a quiet confidence.

Being aware of the consequences, he comprehended the utmost significance of maintaining a calm and composed demeanor, as even the slightest hint of uncertainty on his part would trigger a wave of panic throughout the guild.

"Alina senses Thaid's up ahead. We don't know how many, but we need to be prepared for anything."

A murmur of concern spread through the convoy, the tension in each vehicle palpable. Weapons were checked, safety measures reviewed, and eyes scanned the looming walls of the ravine even more vigilant.

"Alina, keep focusing and update us if you sense any changes," Erik instructed.

"I will," she said, her voice still tinged with fear, but steadier now.

Moving at a slow pace, the convoy pressed on through the narrow and lit ravine, causing every single mercenary to be on high alert, their fingers ready to pull the triggers, and their eyes scanning the towering walls for any potential threats lurking in the dark crevices.

Chapter 669: The Ravine (3)

The beginning of an indistinct murmur could be detected, so faint that it was almost imperceptible, merging with the ambient sounds of the ravine.

It was only a small group of mercenaries who caught on at the beginning, their eyes meeting in a silent exchange of questions.

"Do you hear that?" someone asked, their voice laced with a hint of uncertainty. Their gaze flitted around the area as if trying to locate the source of the sound through sight.

"Yeah, what is that?" The man's tone echoed in the confusion. The murmur swelled in intensity, its distinct timbre permeating the space.

Erik's forehead creased into a frown as he listened. A wave of familiarity washed over him, leaving him with a sense of déjà vu. He recognized this sound, but from where? His mind spun, rifling through past confrontations, filtering through memories of various thaids he had encountered. Then, like a bolt of lightning, realization struck him.

Erik's voice sliced through the escalating tension as he lifted the communication device. "Pay attention, everyone. That sound we're hearing is a swarm of Xeridon Anteris."

A unified intake of breath echoed through the convoy. Erik said, "To those who don't know, these are ant-like Thaids, the size of small dogs. Taken individually, they're not powerful taken alone. However, they possess a brain crystal power that enables them to magnify their strength."

The hum from the nearing Xeridon Anteris amplified, now clear, echoing through the ravine like a spectral symphony.

Erik spoke up, "Their exoskeletons are a vivid mix of orange and deep brown, equipped with sharp mandibles. Despite the dim light, their large compound eyes afford them excellent vision contrary to ants. They're nimble, and their sheer numbers are their most potent weapon. But they're not invincible."

He paused, allowing his words to resonate. "Our weapons can eliminate them. The laser rifles, pistols, grenades—deploy everything at your disposal. Target their heads; it's the quickest way to exterminate them. And maintain composure. Panic will only exacerbate the situation."

The tension within the convoy was tangible, yet Erik's words seemed to instill a sense of steadiness among the group.

Weapons were double-checked, safeties flicked off, and eyes honed in with focused anticipation.

"Alina, continue to monitor their movements. Inform us if they alter their course or exhibit any unforeseen behavior," Erik said.

"I will," Alina's voice came through, steadier now but still tinged with apprehension.

Each mercenary was on heightened alert as the convoy maintained its wary progress through the craggy ravine.

The low, droning hum of the Xeridon Anteris amplified, an unnerving accompaniment to the suspense that held each vehicle in its grip.

However, Erik's words instilled a sense of resolve within the group. They were equipped, ready, and guided by someone who had fought these creatures before. This knowledge acted as a bulwark, staving off the encroaching wave of panic, at least for the time being.

The air within the convoy was dense with anticipation as the mercenaries maneuvered their way through the narrow rocky pathway of the ravine.

As they stood there, the walls seemed to encroach upon them, creating an overwhelming feeling. The landscape seemed to hold its breath, waiting for the ideal moment to exhale. In an instant, and with no notice, something happened.

The eerie murmur emanated from the stone walls, its spectral timbre neither akin to the whispering wind nor the babbling brook, but an enigmatic resonance that sent shivers down the spines of the mercenaries.

The mercenaries exchanged apprehensive glances, their eyes reflecting a mixture of trepidation and determination.

Fingers hovered near triggers, their twitching a testament to the mounting tension that gripped them.

The sound, like an invisible swarm of malevolent creatures, buzzed with an intensity that resonated in every fiber of their beings.

Then, the walls of the ravine seemed to come alive. Holes that had appeared to be mere indentations or natural formations burst open, revealing themselves as entrances to hidden tunnels.

And from these holes poured the Xeridon Anteris, their vibrant orange and deep brown exoskeletons shimmering like molten lava as they swarmed out in a horrifying spectacle.

The mercenaries stood frozen, their breath caught in their throats, as they witnessed the mesmerizing yet horrifying presence of the Xeridon Anteris.

With each click and snap of their mandibles, a mechanical undertone reverberated through the air, blending with their eerie chorus.

The sight that unfolded before them was a veritable nightmare, a living tapestry of horror that seemed to breathe and pulsate along the walls of the ravine.

The compound eyes of the Xeridon Anteris flickered, ensnaring the paltry light and transmuting it into a myriad of diminutive, radiant globules.

These glowing spheres embellished their shapes like ghostly lanterns, amplifying their chilling aura.

The swarm moved with formidable synchrony, their hexapod bodies scuttling down the walls and onto the road with a speed that contradicted their size.

The ravine seemed to have given birth to countless monstrous limbs, each one intent on trapping the mercenaries and pulling them into a bottomless pit of darkness.

At that moment, the hands of the clock were frozen in mid-air.

The mercenaries, trapped in the frozen scene, discovered themselves incapable of diverting their eyes, a mixture of awe and fear swirling inside them.

This was a moment destined to be engraved deep within their memories, an unforgettable reminder of the dangers that lurked within the very essence of the world they ventured through.

Once the Xeridon Anteris began flowing out of the fissures in the ravine walls, the atmosphere in the convoy transitioned from tense expectation to swift reaction.

The commanding voice of Erik echoed across the communication devices, overpowering the surrounding cacophony.

"BLAST THEM TO SMITHEREENS!"

The resounding roar was enough to spur the mercenaries into action, as they knew what it meant.

A thunderous symphony of firepower erupted as laser rifles, pistols, and machine guns came to life, unleashing a relentless hailstorm of deadly projectiles.

As the grenades were launched, explosions erupted, propelling Xeridon Anteris into the air and causing their exoskeletons to break apart.

The turrets mounted on the vehicles rotated and unleashed a barrage of rounds, causing the swarm to be torn apart with lethal accuracy.

Saturated air charged with the pungent scent of gunpowder and the crackling sound of laser beams filled the atmosphere.

These Thaid, despite their impressive numbers and formidable brain crystal power, were caught off guard by the intensity and ferocity of the counterattack.

Many monsters fell victim during the initial onslaught, their lifeless bodies forming a somber heap along the road and on the walls of the ravine. Yet, they pressed on, driven by their swarm of intelligence and their hunger.

Being someone who never stayed passive, Erik armed himself with a laser rifle. Despite not being very proficient in using it, he was willing to learn for the sake of his comrades.

Exhibiting exceptional accuracy and skill, he carefully aimed his weapon and executed each shot flawlessly, hitting his mark without fail.

Intending to give his team an advantage, he directed his attention towards a cluster that cleverly evaded the initial attack, fully aware that interrupting their rhythm could be the key.

"Don't give them an inch!" he said, his eyes flashing with fierce determination. "Aim for their heads! And keep your eyes peeled for any flanking maneuvers; we cannot let them surround us!"

With the drivers revving their engines, the air was filled with the sound of their roaring vehicles.

As Erik's eyes carefully surveyed the battlefield, they absorbed the overwhelming scene of chaos and destruction that enveloped their surroundings.

"Stay focused! We can do this!"

In response to the situation, the mercenaries complied with the request, and as they did so, their initial fear was overshadowed by a surge of determination, fueled by adrenaline.

Despite the endless swarm, the barrage persisted as each mercenary played their role in thinning the enemy forces.

Alina, being perceptive of changes in the swarm's movements, transmitted real-time updates. "They're encircling us! Keep it up, or we will die!" With a shout, she added her weapon to the symphony of destruction.

With each minute, it became more and more apparent that the situation was getting worse.

The swarm continued their unyielding attack, with no sign of their numbers ever depleting.

Even though the mercenaries fought bravely, the relentless surge of creatures from the ravine persisted, leaving the defenders overwhelmed and unable to withstand their sheer numbers.

With every fallen member of the swarm, it appeared there was always another ready to step in, resulting in an onslaught of chittering and clicking monstrosities that seemed to never end.

In the dim light, the weapons of the mercenaries flashed, unleashing strikes upon the creatures with a desperation that can only come from dire circumstances, but their struggles were in vain. There was no way of stopping the horde.

These monsters were starving. It was clear. The problem was that a starving colony of Xeridon Anteris meant that there was a potential danger looming ahead.

Chapter 670: The Ravine (4)

It seemed, if only for a brief period, that the amount of firepower available would be sufficient. The onslaught resulted in the incineration or blowing hundreds of ant-like thaids, causing their exoskeletons to shatter.

Visibility was limited because of the heavy air, which was filled with a dense fog of smoke and debris. The pungent smell, reminiscent of burnt hair, filled the air as the scent of burnt chitin mixed with the sharp and metallic aroma of gunpowder.

The overpowering sensation that stung their nostrils and caused their eyes to water couldn't deter them from forging ahead; they had no alternative but to keep going.

However, the relentless and vast swarm, resembling a sea of chittering monstrosities, continued unabated.

While Acting in unison, their legs and mandibles formed a cohesive unit, resembling a tidal wave that consumed the surrounding light.

The sheer magnitude of their numbers was astonishing, as they formed a living carpet that extended across the ground and scaled the walls of the ravine.

Even though there were casualties, it appeared their ranks remained unaffected, almost as if a new creature replaced every fallen one.

The blinking of their eyes in the smoky darkness was both unsettling and mesmerizing, as it added to the chaos and created a unique light show.

"We can't let these bugs overrun us! Aim for their eyes, their damn eyes!" Mira gave the example, her laser gun sizzling as it cut through the swarm.

As the Xeridon Anteris poured down, the once barren and lifeless rocky ravine walls appeared to ripple and shudder.

In the ravine, the mercenaries' weapons created a thunderous roar and their shouts resonated off the narrow walls.

The chaos that unfolded was akin to a symphony of destruction, a cacophonous concert in which only those who were willing to do everything they could to survive would prevail. The darkest angles were punctuated by bright flashes of light emanating from the muzzles of their guns.

With surgical precision, the laser beams sliced through the swarm, showcasing their brilliance and deadly nature.

As they cut through the air, the beams transformed into streaks of pure, searing light, leaving a trail of obliterated creatures in their wake.

The sight they witnessed could be described as almost beautiful, resembling a deadly ballet where light and death intertwined, creating a stark contrast to the harsh reality they were facing.

As each flash of light illuminated the surroundings, a distinct scent of burning chitin filled the air, followed by a momentary agonized screech as the creatures met their inevitable demise.

"Keep firing, don't let up!" said Kael through the communication devices, his voice tinged with both urgency and encouragement.

The rockets launched into the air with significant force, creating spectacular explosions filled with vibrant shades of orange and red.

Powerful shockwaves spread out from the center, causing the ant-like thaids to be torn apart in groups as they propagated.

Creatures' bodies were scattered in every direction, with fragments of their exoskeletons glimmering in the light as they flew.

Amidst the chaos, the machine guns rattled on, their harsh staccato rhythm creating a continuous backdrop.

As the bullets flew, they punctured the oncoming mass of creatures, creating holes in their ranks. The occurrence of each impact was accompanied by a brief spray of chitin fragments, which served as a stark reminder of the sheer lethality possessed by their weapons.

But the Xeridon Anteris seemed to be everywhere. With every casualty, there was a clear influx of two more combatants who pushed ahead, resulting in an accumulation of their fallen bodies forming mounds that lined the base of the ravine walls.

The sight before them was grim, a somber reminder of the overwhelming number of Thaids they faced - a towering mound of lifeless creatures.

The ravine's walls appeared to be teeming with creatures, almost as if they were being birthed from the very stones.

It was a sight that would chill anyone to their core - an endless sea of chitin and mandibles, their numbers so vast it was hard to comprehend.

The situation was dire, the tension palpable. Every second mattered in this desperate fight for survival.

"Come on, Nexthorn Vanguard, show these critters what we're made of!" Aiden tried to cheer his comrades, his machine gun chattering as it mowed down a line of advancing Xeridon Anteris.

Engaged in a relentless fight, the mercenaries wore expressions of intense concentration on their faces, coupled with a dawning understanding of the gravity of their situation.

In the heat of battle, sweat trickled down their foreheads, causing a burning sensation in their eyes and combining with the dirt and grime of the battlefield.

Despite the weight of their weapons, they continued to fire, their actions driven by both desperation and a mechanical instinct.

The individuals involved in the mission were aware that they were engaged in the task of eliminating a significant number of Xeridon Anteris, yet it seemed futile, akin to using a broom to sweep away an avalanche.

The creatures showed their relentless nature, refusing to break their swarm-like mentality even in the face of fallen comrades.

With each step that the creatures took towards us, their bodies pulsed with an increasing surge of mana. The activation of their brain crystal power was a sight that caused the mercenaries to feel a chill down their spines.

The air was filled with a buzzing energy, causing the hairs on their arms to stand on end as if a palpable wave of power was washing over them.

Out of nowhere, the creatures' movements underwent a sudden transformation, becoming easier and more synchronized.

With a dramatic increase in speed, they became a blur of chitin and mandibles, giving the illusion that they were present in many locations.

As each second passed, the situation was becoming desperate, and the tension in the air was so palpable that it felt almost suffocating.

With great intensity, the tension escalated to an extreme level as several Xeridon Anteris boldly leaped onto the moving vehicles, demonstrating their incredible agility and gripping the metal surfaces with unwavering tenacity.

In response to the creatures being so close, the mercenaries inside let out screams and were unable to move due to fear. As panic threatened to take over, a sudden blur of motion erupted from one of the lead vehicles.

It was Erik. In a display of extraordinary athleticism, he leaped into the air, his body bending in an arc that defied gravity, showcasing a level of agility that appeared almost otherworldly.

With the agility of a cat, he landed on one of the besieged vehicles, causing his boots to make a resounding thud against the metal roof.

As he faced the swarming thaids, his eyes became hard and focused, his intense gaze matched only by the sharpness of the blade he wielded.

With a single, fluid movement, he swung his Flyssa, and with deadly precision; the blade sliced through the air, severing the head of the nearest Xeridon Anteris without giving it the slightest opportunity to react.

With an eerie finality, the head of the creature came loose from the body, bouncing several times as if in a macabre dance, until it descended into the bottomless pit below.

Erik moved with such incredible speed that it was impossible to keep up with his actions; he was like a blur of motion.

With a silver streak, his blade was a symbol of impending death, and it moved with lethal grace. Within a few brief moments, he eliminated the unwelcome guests from the vehicle.

Right when the convoy's spirits were lifted, a piercing scream filled the air. The source that Erik's eyes shifted to was a woman who had been cornered by a Xeridon Anteris in one of the rear vehicles, with its menacing mandibles just inches away from her face. The moment Erik began assessing the situation, time appeared to decelerate, stretching out the experience.

There was no room for error; he had to act now.

Erik defied the limitations of an average human with an incredible burst of speed, propelling himself out of his vehicle and launching his body through the air like a missile.

As the gap between the two vehicles diminished, Erik landed with impeccable precision, coinciding with the moment the Xeridon Anteris made a sudden lunge toward the woman. With a fluid and deadly arc, his Flyssa swung, intercepting the creature just as it was mid-leap.

With astonishing ease, the blade cleaved through the exoskeleton of the creature as if it were nothing more than flimsy parchment, resulting in the severing of its head from its body.

Propelled by its momentum, the lifeless form of the creature sailed past the woman, causing her to stagger back in a mix of astonishment and relief.

Erik didn't savor the moment. With a quick and forceful kick, he propelled the carcass of the creature off the vehicle, which then disappeared into the shadows below.

He turned his gaze towards the woman, and for a moment, their eyes met. Silence was enough; there was no requirement for verbal communication.

"Stay alert," Erik said, his voice tinged with urgency as he vaulted back to his vehicle. "This isn't over."

With a newfound resolve, the woman nodded, clutching her weapon in her hands. Her rescue had not been a mere stroke of luck, but a testament to the leader's skill and bravery.

If Erik showed the bravery to face these horrors head-on, showing no fear, she could also gather the courage to hold her position and engage in the battle.

With remarkable ease and grace, Erik bounded back onto his vehicle, his agile movements showcasing his lethal precision.

The convoy experienced a surge of joy, which caused their jubilant cheers to reverberate through the narrow ravine and fill the air with a tangible feeling of triumph.

Erik's heroic deeds not only saved a life but also rekindled the passionate determination in every individual who was in attendance.

As the vehicles moved, the flickering light from the sun illuminated the mercenaries' faces, emphasizing the renewed determination that was visible in their features.

The effect of his actions on the convoy was immediate. Cheers erupted from the mercenaries.

"See that, Nexthorn Vanguard? That's how it's done!" Erik's voice crackled through the communication devices, his tone filled with fierce pride. "Now, let's finish this!"

Overwhelmed by a surge of newfound courage, the mercenaries made their way back to their weapons, their aim now even more resolute and their determination unwavering.

If Erik believed victory was within their grasp, they would follow him through the treacherous ravine, no matter the cost.