

BIOLOGICAL 401

Chapter 401: The Spread of the infection (2)

"Hear what?" Derr replied while maintaining a perplexed expression on his face.

"I'm not entirely certain... There's a peculiar sound." Fischer's voice trailed off as he swiveled towards the window overlooking the containment area for the captured infected, Ranger Lakwosky. The creature was producing an unsettling gurgling sound with an uncanny rhythm.

"What on earth could it possibly be doing?" Fischer muttered, glancing at Derr. It was only natural to seek his advice, seeing as he is the most knowledgeable person in the city about mutants.

Derr frowned, his eyes narrowing. "Could he be... communicating?" The question hung in the air ominously.

The bizarre crooning of the infected suddenly became a deafening din as the volume increased.

A chill ran down Derr's spine, and with a growing sense of dread, he reached for the laser pistol in his desk drawer. "This is bad..." he started, but his warning was cut short by an explosion.

Fischer didn't waste any time and immediately went to the monitors. A horrifying scene was captured by the cameras installed inside the research facility, which showed a swarm of mutants making their way into the building.

The sudden assault prevented the guards from reacting correctly, and they lay there as victims.

"Stay close!" Fischer yelled at Derr, swiftly weaving together threads of mana. Derr promptly took position behind him, clutching his weapon. The lab door shuddered and then gave way to a torrent of mutants.

Fischer channeled mana, and two icy figures materialized from the mana manipulated by the Major through his brain crystal. They had a rhomboid torso and a triangular head, which gave them an abstract, geometric appearance.

Despite their bizarre appearance, the strength they possessed was genuine. An icy radiance emanated from their bodies, which slowed the movement of their opponents as they advanced. They could stop the influx of mutants by positioning themselves in front of the shattered door.

Fischer raised his flail to fight against the mutants, as the elementals were already engaged in combat with the intruders.

After that, he gave his elementals orders, telling them to construct an ice shield in front of Professor Derr, and they carried out his instructions to perfection, making a sturdy ice wall that prevented any monster from reaching the professor and making the temperature in the room drop.

"What on god's green earth are you doing?" Derr exclaimed, his eyes widening in surprise as the ice wall materialized before him.

"Do you want to die, Xilion?" Fischer shot back, his tone authoritative as he spoke.

"Of course not, but..." was the response. The sound of Derr's voice faded away.

"Just don't move; I'll take care of everything!" The command came from Fischer.

Fischer did not waste a single second more and dove headfirst into the fray. He made a swift motion with his hand and then dashed toward the horde of mutants, smashing their skulls with his flail and bringing many down by swinging it to the left and right. Despite this, they appeared to be neverending.

The ice elementals swung their arms around in lethal arcs, dealing fatal blows to the mutants closing in on them. The monsters' movements were significantly slowed due to the icy aura emanating from them. Several of the mutants began to freeze.

The frozen infected shattered into icy fragments with each hit that was dealt to them. Fischer managed to limit the number of creatures that rushed into the laboratory simultaneously, thanks to the limited space provided by the laboratory's narrow access tunnels.

Despite this advantage, he was uncertain if he could hold the line and prevent an overwhelming surge of monstrous creatures inside the room.

Fischer issued repeated commands to the elementals, telling them to conjure ice walls to block the entranceway. However, each time they did so, the walls were shattered by the unrelenting fury of the humanoid monsters who were probably under the Heniate's control.

They weren't particularly powerful on their own, at least not when compared to the Major and his elementals, but when they worked together, they were an extremely formidable foe.

Tragically, some of the mutants managed to get through Fischer's defenses and dash toward the window where Lakwosky was trapped. They started beating furiously against it with their fists.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

The reinforced glass broke apart under the constant assault, resulting in shards falling to the ground as the mutants entered. They began to gnaw at the restraints placed on mutant Lakwosky, and his disfigured face broke out into a chilling grin.

"What?!" Fischer yelled, a shivering feeling of dread crawling up his spine. The grotesque grin Lakwosky had on his face made him shudder.

While the mutants were working on his restraints, some were electrocuted to death by the room's defenses, while others were burned to death by the other traps already in place.

Ultimately, they successfully freed Lakwosky, who reacted by letting out a loud scream that made the Major's skin crawl. At long last, he had his freedom.

The transformed ranger sprang off the bed, now no longer a prisoner but a terrifying horror.

He proceeded toward Fischer, still engaged in combat with the dwindling number of mutants. Fischer's ice elementals could maintain their standing as the number of opponents decreased.

At that precise instant, the Major made eye contact with the monster that had once been Ranger Lakwosky.

When their eyes connected, Lakwosky surprised him by starting to speak. "Did you seriously believe you could keep me incarcerated here for the rest of my life?" His voice became harsh and raspy as he glared at Fischer, and every syllable he spoke was laced with contempt.

Fischer was taken aback, his eyes wide. "You...you can talk?" he stammered, barely believing what he heard.

"I can do so much more than just talk!" Lakwosky fired back at him.

"When did you regain your sanity?" Fischer inquired while covertly directing mana through his neural links to bolster the power of his elementals.

A dismissive "That's irrelevant" was the response that Lakwosky gave. "The only thing that matters is that both of you are going to die today!"

Chapter 402: The following month

A month had passed quickly since Erik had first arrived in the community. After initially greeting him with wariness and suspicion, Erik now found himself met with acceptance, which he found to be both humbling and rewarding.

It was a gradual, steady process that required patience and effort on his part and turned him from an outsider into a member of the community. His transition was anything but sudden, but it happened.

People who had previously regarded him with suspicion started to form new opinions about him as time passed.

They were persuaded not only by his extensive knowledge of advanced farming techniques and his unyielding work ethic but also by the fact that, after he arrived, the village began to improve, which was likely due to his presence.

He instructed them in the most efficient methods of crop cultivation, introduced them to innovative approaches to irrigation, and even revealed the key to enhancing the fertility of their soil.

However, he did not cease his efforts there. Erik derived a great deal of fulfillment from toiling in the fields alongside the other villagers and sharing in the harvest they had worked so hard to produce.

However, his knowledge was not the only factor that earned him the villagers' respect. The Thornroot Vortex problem could be regarded as the defining moment for the change.

This plant had been the bane of the village for some time, as it voraciously drew all of the nutrients from the soil, leaving the farms desolate and lifeless. They had reached the end of their rope after seeing their means of subsistence disintegrate in front of their very eyes. At that point, Erik came into the picture.

Erik initially led a team to find this plant; once he did, it was easy for the rest of the village to take care of it. Erik drew upon his flora and fauna expertise to lead this team, which no longer needed his help.

Erik was no longer the mysterious outsider; he had become a community member and an integral part of their village.

That was unexpected, especially in light of the way they had initially dealt with him. On the other hand, the young man quickly realized that these individuals had more to give than they took from him.

Erik's schedule was packed throughout the entirety of that month. He committed his time and energy to training, specifically emphasizing forming neural links.

The village offered a peaceful environment that seemed ideal for his endeavors, and the more time he spent training, the more he sensed that his abilities were expanding and becoming stronger.

Erik managed to create two additional links with Nathaniel's power, bringing him to RHO3, meaning that his power over the force increased significantly.

The mana moved and shaped itself following his mental orders, responding to his thoughts precisely as he wanted.

On the other hand, Hais's power was an entirely different matter. Erik also managed to increase its number of neural links and reached the RHO3 level. However, his intelligence increased due to the passive bonus; he could split his mind more easily and simultaneously operate on multiple thoughts and tasks.

This ability became easier to use over time. Despite Erik having a significantly lower number of neural links than Hais, the former's intelligence level was rapidly approaching that of the latter.

He could improve his strategic thinking during battle and keep a keen awareness of his surroundings even when he was deeply engaged in other tasks.

This ability to adapt one's thinking to new circumstances provided a strategic advantage in a variety of contexts.

Erik also dedicated considerable time to the Strength Enhancer, the power he got from the Xeridon Anteris. Two new neural links further amplified his physical power, making it possible to increase his strength more with less mana. The additional strength would be helpful for various tasks; he only needed to put this to use.

Lastly, he got two more neural links in his Plant Master, which he got by merging his birth brain crystal power and the Shadowthorn Dahlia's.

Because of the new neural links, he could accomplish the same thing with less mana. He also found that the process of growing plants was sped up, and it was simpler to keep them under control.

He was exercising control over the flora and communicating with it, and comprehending the rhythms and patterns they followed.

He could turn a parched land into a fertile one or make a thorny bush shed its thorns. This symbiotic relationship with nature added another layer of complexity to the scope of his powers.

By the end of the month, Erik had experienced a positive shift in his mood and a sense of increased strength. Even though he had made significant headway in his training, he knew this was only the beginning of his journey.

Even though there was more for him to learn and more for him to master, he was ready for future challenges.

Erik, Samuel, and the rest of the farmers worked hard under the grey blanket that covered the sky.

Their figures were silhouetted against the few golden rays that the sun cast and went past the cloudy blanket above them—the vast expanse of the verdant field spread around them, contrasting the surrounding wintery vegetation.

The scent of the earth, ripe fruits, and green leaves combined to produce an intoxicating fragrance permeating the atmosphere; it was the essence of nature in all of its vivaciousness.

Samuel and Erik worked side by side, a custom they had developed this past month; their hands were toughened by countless hours of labor as they deftly navigated the stems of the plants and expertly plucked the ripe fruits with practiced ease.

They had put in a lot of effort, as evidenced by their faces being covered in sweat and dust and expressions of intense concentration.

A reassuring soundtrack was created by the rustling of leaves and the rhythmic crunch of their footsteps on the soil. The farmers' animated conversation and hearty laughter were occasional punctuation points in the soundtrack.

Chapter 403: Visitors

Erik and Samuel were hard at work when they heard a voice coming from the vicinity. When the young man turned around, he saw Vanessa calling out to the elderly man, who immediately stopped what he was doing and ran over to her.

Perplexed by the situation, Erik turned to Ethan, a seventeen-year-old man who was gradually becoming a regular companion, almost a friend.

Because of his towering stature of 1.8 meters, Ethan Thornwood made quite an impression on those around him.

His years of dedication to working in the field, something he began doing very early in his life, was reflected in the leanness and definition of his physique.

The young man was nothing short of a beacon of youthful charm and vitality with his unruly mane of chestnut hair, expressive hazel eyes that often twinkled with mischief, and a face punctuated by a strong jawline and a smattering of freckles across his nose.

He was dressed in his typical work attire, consisting of sturdy pants and worn boots caked with dirt from the fields they were tending. His easygoing personality, keen intellect, and a hearty sense of

humor made him an excellent companion, and his humor frequently brightened their otherwise difficult days.

As Erik watched as Samuel and Vanessa disappeared from their view, he turned to Ethan and asked, "What's all the urgency about?"

Ethan took a momentary break from his work, pushed his hair behind his ear, and turned to look at Erik with his thoughtful hazel eyes. After a brief silence, he finally said, "I guess I could tell you now..."

"What?" the young man asked.

Ethan started by saying, with a calm tone, despite the weight of the subject matter he was going to discuss, "You see, there was a reason why Vanessa and the others suspected you were a soldier." He paused momentarily, looking over at Erik with expressive hazel eyes that now bore a gloomy glint in them.

"Frant has a habit of sending his soldiers to us periodically for something... something I can't really talk about it at the moment," he said. A grave seriousness replaced his typically lighthearted demeanor as he explained the troubled history of the village.

"Of course, every time they come, they demand something from us, and since we do not comply, they usually make us pay in some way. They poisoned our water supplies in an effort to bring us to our knees.

We would have been left without water supplies if it weren't for one of our own, a villager with the ability to control and create water." His words were laced with bitterness that conveyed the harsh reality they had to deal with.

Ethan continued, his determination strengthened by the injustices done to his village: "The soldiers didn't stop at that. They frequently bothered our hunters, making it difficult for us to access game, making their hunts impossibly hard."

"And the animals—the Thaidis and others nearby—were probably slaughtered to starve us out," he added. The corners of his mouth turned down in a grimace as he said this. "They knew we were struggling to cultivate our lands and took advantage of that."

The revelations made by Ethan painted a picture of a village that was constantly under attack, with their grit being put to the test on multiple occasions. The echoes of past injustices hung heavy in the air as Erik digested the gravity of what he'd been told. The tranquil field around them seemed almost mocking in its serenity, starkly contrasting the unfolding grim history.

As Erik took in what Ethan said, his brow furrowed in concentration. He mumbled, "That explains a lot..." as he thought about it.

Ethan tilted his head to the side, looking off into the distance with eyes that sparkled with curiosity. He inquired with a "What?"

Erik began his explanation with a sigh before proceeding. "The Thornroot Vortex is not something that is normally found around this part of the forest. Its presence in this location was... weird. I couldn't help but have the sneaking suspicion that someone had intentionally planted it. It was just not compatible with the ecosystem."

His eyes wandered over the once barren land that had been transformed into a verdant landscape, a striking contrast to what he had seen before. "It is now clear who could have been responsible for it and why," he finished.

Erik's curiosity grew as he reflected further on the situation and the strategies that the soldiers Frant had sent utilized. He understood the 'how' of their actions, but the 'why' remained elusive. Starving a village, poisoning their water, disrupting their ecosystem - all malicious, all cruel.

However, for what goal? What possible benefit could Frant get from them going to these lengths? It was clear that everything was connected to the subject that Ethan could not discuss, but he had no intention of pressuring him to do so.

Despite this, he would find out about it sooner or later. Naturally, he had his suspicions, but ever since he got Hais's power, it was much simpler for him to think critically and gather evidence.

However, unlike Hais, Erik didn't want to leave everything to speculation. He wanted confirmation that what he thought was true. An abrupt ringing sound came from afar as Erik and Ethan stood there in contemplative silence.

It broke the moment. Erik stiffened as he recognized the warning of impending danger signaled by the village bell.

His body buzzed with an unexpected adrenaline surge, but confusion also began to set in. The bell toll signified danger, but the nature of the threat remained unknown to him.

"Come on!" Ethan shouted, already on the move. Erik kept his senses sharp and followed his friend.

They made their way towards the village's hall by winding their way through the verdant fields. As they arrived, they started hearing the concerned mutterings emanating from an assembled group of villagers that was heading toward the hall and that began to form a crowd.

As they moved forward, the view of the tilled earth and crop-laden fields gradually gave way to the village's bustling core, which was comprised of a complex web of tree-bound dwellings, trading posts suspended in the air, and public spaces carved out in the gnarled trunks of ancient trees.

The rustic allure of the farm went hand in hand with the ethereal quality of the forest surrounding the village.

The inhabitants began streaming down from their dwellings in the trees, taking with them unfinished chores and meals in varying stages of preparation.

The previously peaceful passages were all of a sudden teeming with people and activity, in stark contrast to the generally free spirit that was enjoyed in the village. Mothers sheltered their children close, their protective arms a stark contrast to the free-roaming spirit usually enjoyed in the village.

The air was pregnant with hushed whispers and concerned murmurs, their volume amplifying as Erik and Ethan ventured deeper into the settlement.

The village was reunited around the village's hall, which was a sprawling edifice made of wood and served as a representation of the community's beating heart.

The hall, a testament to countless community gatherings, celebrations, and council meetings, stood ominously open for some uninvited guests from New Alexandria.

Chapter 404: Demands

The number of people gathered around the hall increased dramatically, and the unease felt by the group was almost palpable in the cool air of the forest. The customarily empty hall in the center of the tree-top village changed into a turbulent sea of anxious faces when the hall's doors opened.

As they got closer, Erik caught a glimpse of a group of men who stood out due to their formal attire, which was a striking contrast to the rustic simplicity of the village. The recognizable uniform eliminated any possibility of confusion. They were members of the New Alexandria military garrison.

The persistent tolling of the alarm bell echoed their silent queries - what was the purpose of these soldiers' sudden visit, and what implications would it bear on their tranquil tree-bound village?

Ethan and Erik exchanged a look, and Ethan gave the impression that he was not as surprised as the awakener was by the circumstances.

As they approached the hall, the hum of concern became louder, and fear and confusion could be heard woven into the villagers' hushed conversations. It was obvious that the arrival of the soldiers had caught everyone off guard, and this was not a pleasant surprise for anyone.

Erik observed Amos, Samuel, and Vanessa standing in unwavering solidarity before the grand hall. They were unafraid to confront the soldiers from New Alexandria. They refused to show any sign of deference to the uninvited military presence, and their expressions reflected extraordinary determination.

The stoic front they presented was just as unshakeable as the age-old tree that served as the beating heart of their village.

Amos was the one who was directly addressed by the commanding officer of the New Alexandria soldiers, a stern figure with cold eyes. "Did you think about our proposal?" He queried, his voice as hard as the steel that clad him.

Amos, the village's oldest resident and a man of great experience and insight, answered the question without skipping a beat. His voice resounded throughout the courtyard, brimming with unwavering determination.

"No, I did not," he admitted while making no apologies for his admission. "I never felt the need to contemplate what New Alexandria considers its claims over our lands and people."

His words reverberated throughout the assembled crowd, evoking a collective sense of defiance against the unjustified demands of the opposing military force. As they waited for the soldier's response, the atmosphere was tense.

Their quiet resistance served as a challenge to the authority of the invaders from New Alexandria.

The leader of the soldiers responded, "I had always perceived you as a man of reason, Amos," with his voice carrying a thinly veiled undertone of frustration. The assembled villagers watched him, a single eyebrow arched on Amos's old face signifying his continued defiance.

The soldier started restating his point while maintaining a calm and patient demeanor as if speaking to children. "You see, the issue at hand is quite straightforward. You and your villagers are occupying territory that rightfully belongs to Frant," he said, making broad gestures to encompass the encompassing forests and their village.

"You may not see it as such, but by virtue of your residence, you are all citizens of Frant. Thus, you must relocate to New Alexandria."

Before continuing, the soldier paused momentarily to allow the implications of what he had just said to sink in for the attentive audience.

"This is an opportunity, not a punishment. Think of your children, Amos. In New Alexandria, they will have the knowledge and skills to protect themselves from a young age. They won't have to go to bed with empty stomachs or wake up fearing for their lives. This... this will be their safety net."

There was an element of persuasion in the soldier's voice, a genuine effort to make the villagers see the so-called 'benefits' of their proposal, and it was audible.

<Bullshit...> Erik thought but refrained from saying.

The soldier's eyes scanned the crowd, meeting the stubborn gazes of the villagers. It was a narrative that the people of New Alexandria had spun convincingly – a life free from fear and starvation and a chance for their children to grow and learn safely.

However, as the man focused his attention on the features of the villagers' faces, he noticed a discernible shift in the expressions on their faces.

The expressions of utter desperation and starvation that had been etched into their faces a month earlier were noticeably absent from their faces now. At this moment, a glimmer of resiliency could be seen in their eyes, and their upright postures exuded an unfamiliar air of strength and determination.

This unexpected change, while subtle, was noticeable enough to set off alarm bells in the soldier's mind. He was well-versed in survival strategies and could recognize the signs of a community on the brink of starvation. And yet, in a month, the villagers had somehow defied his expectations.

This unexpected change, while subtle, was noticeable enough to set off alarm bells in the soldier's mind.

He was well-versed in survival tactics and could identify the indicators that a community was on the verge of starvation. Despite this, the villagers had managed, against all odds, to confound him in just a month's time.

A gnawing suspicion began to form in the soldier's mind. From his years of service and experience, he knew that such a transformation was far from ordinary. The question was how and why this drastic change had occurred.

As the soldier's words reverberated throughout the crowd, the villagers did nothing more than tighten their grip on the makeshift weapons they were holding, their expressions remaining unmoved. They were familiar with these assurances and aware of the price tag attached to such 'safety' and 'opportunities.'

They were wise enough not to put any stock in the flattering words of an invading military from another nation whose true intention was to uproot them from their homes and impose their own rule over them. This was their home, and they weren't about to give it up without a fight if they could help it.

Despite the soldier's persuasive oration, the atmosphere of the gathered villagers remained resolute. They did not waver and were well prepared to defend their land and independence. They were prepared to fight and resist if that was what it took to defend their land, their homes, and their children.

The tension continued to mount between Amos and the soldiers. The leader, a man named Lieutenant Hassler, was well-known around these parts. A stern man with steely eyes, his demeanor

screamed military through and through. But his rigorous training and years of service hadn't prepared him for the defiant stance of this small village.

"Aren't you tired of living on the fringes?" Hassler questioned while looking around the hall and at the gathered villagers. "Always living on the edge, never knowing if you will have enough food for your children or if your elderly people will survive the next day?"

Amos, steadfast in his resolve, returned the Lieutenant's stare evenly. He was an elder statesman among the villagers, and the weary lines on his face told stories of battles fought and hardships endured. "We have known hardships, Lieutenant. But we have also known freedom. A freedom that your city, with all its might, cannot provide."

Chapter 405: A Sudden Question (1)

Murmurs of approval swept through the villagers, their resolve strengthening with Amos' words. Hassler watched this exchange, his suspicion growing. But he kept his doubts at bay, focusing instead on his mission.

"This isn't a negotiation, Amos," Hassler retorted, his voice taking on an authoritarian tone. "You are living on Frant's land. And you will abide by Frant's laws."

"We are free people, Hassler. We abide by the laws of nature and live in harmony with the land that shelters us. We don't claim it or see it as something to be owned. Your laws mean nothing to us."

The expression on Hassler's face hardened, and his grip on his weapon became more apparent. "You are challenging the authority of Frant, Amos. This won't end well for you." the village leader smiled casually in response to the threat made by Hassler.

"We're not challenging anyone, Lieutenant. We merely choose to live freely, just as we always have." The crowd went silent as the tension between the two leaders reached its highest point.

The argument, which had previously consisted of a verbal back-and-forth, could now develop into a physical confrontation. And even though the villagers were prepared to defend their home, they were also aware of the potential costs associated with standing up to the might of New Alexandria.

However, because Amos was leading them, they experienced a glimmer of optimism and the belief that maybe, just maybe, they could continue living the life that they had grown to adore.

"Whatever," Hassler spat out, his face a rigid mask of irritation. With a quick gesture, he signaled his men to fall back.

The abrupt dismissal given by Hassler lingered heavily in the atmosphere, signaling the conclusion of the conflict that had the village in its grip.

Every village resident who was there at the time felt as though they had been slapped in the face when the word "whatever" was spoken with such disdain.

His face, which had been an open canvas for negotiation and diplomacy in the past, had changed into a stony, adamant appearance, reflecting his resentment. Hassler, who had his back turned to the villagers, made a swift and pointed gesture to his men.

His gloved hand cut through the air with an authority that his men immediately obeyed. The soldiers, each dressed in the unique uniform of New Alexandria's armed forces, marched in step behind their commander. This synchronized march demonstrated the soldiers' discipline.

The ground beneath them seemed to shudder under the weight of their armored boots, each echoing step a resonating reminder of their unwanted presence in this peaceful village. The sun glinted off their armor, creating a harsh contrast to the warm glow that bathed the village.

The line of soldiers disappeared slowly from sight, their retreat a slow puncture to the tension that had inflated the village square. Yet, their departure did little to dispel the unease that their visit had planted.

Erik turned to Ethan as the soldiers walked away, leaving behind an ominous sound in the stillness of the village caused by their armored boots. "Has Amos met this Hassler before?" Erik asked, his gaze never leaving the fleeing soldiers for a moment.

Ethan nodded, his eyes moving in the same direction as his head. "Yeah, he's the one that they typically dispatch here. He is more knowledgeable than the majority of people about our traditions."

Erik was about to probe further when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned around to see Vanessa, her gaze serious. "Amos would like a word with you, Erik."

The young man was forced to interrupt his conversation with Ethan to give Vanessa a polite nod before following her into the great hall. As they made their way toward the elder statesman, he couldn't help but be filled with a sense of anticipation. He couldn't help but wonder what Amos might want to talk about.

Erik was greeted by the stoic faces of Amos and Samuel when he entered the hall after he had arrived. The majestic appearance of the building was even more impressive than usual. Still, the young man was clearly distracted by Samuel's and Amos's faces, which were serious and grim, showing that, whatever the two wanted to talk about, it was nothing simple or easy.

The midday sun cast a golden glow across the exterior of the building, creating long shadows that moved gracefully in time with the swaying of the leaves on the trees surrounding the building.

Through the stained glass windows, the play of wintery lights and shadows painted the room in a vibrant display, turning the hall's interior into a kaleidoscope of colors. The pair were already deep in conversation, their brows furrowed in serious contemplation.

Their presence filled the room, two pillars of the community whose steadfast dedication had guided the village through countless challenges.

As Erik approached, their eyes lifted to meet his. There was a sense of expectation in their gaze, a silent acknowledgment of the importance of his presence. The room fell silent, save for the faint rustling of leaves outside, the steady heartbeat of the village providing a fitting backdrop for the discussion about to unfold.

Erik entered the space, and the sound of his boots making contact with the worn wooden floorboards could be heard. "Amos, Samuel," he said with a nod of greeting, his eyes moving back and forth between the two individuals.

The atmosphere was heavy with a sense of imminence, which caused Erik to experience a tingling sensation of anticipation that ran down his spine. "Hello, Erik. We wanted to talk about the cave you stumbled upon when you first came to our village," Amos began, his voice as calm as a placid sea, betraying none of his inner thoughts.

Samuel, who intently watched Erik's facial expressions while remaining silent, confirmed this with a nod.

Erik's brow furrowed in concentration as he tried to make sense of the sudden interest in the cave, and his mind worked quickly to do so. Amos sat back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest, assuming a relaxed posture. His stare was fixed and penetrating, and it never once left Erik's face.

Amos leaned back in his chair, folding his arms across his chest. His gaze, steady and piercing, never left Erik's face. "Erik," he began, the deep rumble of his voice filling the room. "Could you tell us more about the condition of the cave? The structures inside, do you think they're still usable?"

Erik halted momentarily, reflecting on the moment he first entered the village. His recollection of the event was crystal clear, right down to the cold, wet stones that had been underfoot and the empty buildings that had echoed with the silence of abandonment.

"The buildings inside...they're still standing. Not in pristine condition, but not completely worn either. With some repairs, they could be livable," Erik replied.

Amos nodded, mulling over the information. Samuel, who had been silent till then, leaned forward. "And the thaid, Erik?" he asked. "You've had close encounters with them. What's the situation like? Are they a threat to consider?"

Chapter 406: A Sudden Question (2)

Erik contemplated Samuel's question. His interactions with the thaid were anything but pleasant, but he had no choice but to accept them as part and parcel of life in that region.

"The thaid are a concern," he admitted. "I don't think the beast living there should be a problem for one of you; the problem is that there is an Acidspitter Arthropods' nest. Eradicating them all won't be simple."

Amos and Samuel exchanged a glance. There was still much to discuss and consider, but Erik's insights were invaluable, especially on the farming side. Their resolve solidified further - the villagers' future may be uncertain, but they were not without hope or options.

"Is it your intention to relocate there?" the young man inquired, his eyes flicking between the two leaders. The question hung in the air, a silent echo that resonated in the quiet room.

Amos did not move as he steadily looked Erik in the eyes and returned his gaze. His response was a simple "Yes," but that one word conveyed the meaning of a thousand different ideas. Even the simple act of confirming it caused a wave of a surprise to run through Erik. Even though it was an ambitious plan, Erik couldn't help but feel a surge of hope on behalf of the villagers.

"The problem is that there's more to the underground city than just the Acidspitter Arthropods and the unknown thaid," Erik began, his voice low and sober. He recalled his journey through the

labyrinthine network of tunnels, the chiseled path of a leviathan presence not meant to be taken lightly.

"When I reached the underground city, I found numerous tunnels, clearly carved out by some colossal creature. A giant thaid, if I had to guess. It was as though the very earth had been remodeled at the will of this behemoth. If you were to relocate, you would inevitably come face to face with this creature. I don't need to tell you that battling such a monster won't be a straightforward task."

Samuel shifted uncomfortably in his seat, a look of concern crossing his wrinkled face. On the other hand, Amos was able to keep his cool despite the upheaval caused by Erik's revelation.

The young man went on by saying, "And then there's the food issue. In the past, the settlers used hydroponics, but now all the facilities are destroyed or are not working. In a location as inhospitable as that one, putting together a functioning agricultural system will be an extremely difficult task. It's improbable that anything could grow there, given the conditions, in my opinion.

It would be foolish to uproot your lives and move there, putting everything on the line on such precarious ground."

Everyone in the room seemed preoccupied with their thoughts, so there was complete silence for a few tense moments.

The scope of the problem was gradually becoming more apparent to them, and along with it came the stark reality of the options available to them. It was obvious that whatever course they chose next would be fraught with peril and ambiguity, with the outcome of their journey hanging precariously in the balance.

Nevertheless, there was a glimmer of determination and a shared resolve to fight for their home, people, and future, even amidst the worry and fear they were experiencing.

"Since our ancestors first set foot on this land, it's been our home. For countless centuries, we've coexisted peacefully alongside Frant," Amos began, his voice bearing the heavy weight of history. "That all changed, however, just half a year ago."

A trace of distress crossed his face as he continued, "One of our hunters was found in an awful state, barely clinging to life by Frant's soldiers. They nursed and healed him and brought him back to us. As grateful as we were, something was amiss in his behavior."

His eyes hardened into a piercing gaze that seemed to see right through Erik. His gaze became more resolute. "You see, from Frantian soldiers' point of view, the boy had an unnatural number of neural links, but he was too young.

He had way more than a person his age should have, in their opinion at least." The seriousness in Amos's tone emphasized the gravity of the situation, and Erik felt a twinge of unease.

Of course, he was aware that the villagers had some secret technique that allowed them to make more neural links than the technique Frant developed. If he found that out, it was impossible Frant didn't.

Amos remained silent momentarily, allowing Erik to process the information before continuing. The wrinkles on the elder's forehead and the serious expression on his face provided a clue as to the severity of the issue. Making neural links was a challenging endeavor.

To increase one's numbers over time, one had to practice with diligence and perseverance. It was highly unusual for a young villager to have as many as the young hunter had. It was a peculiarity that suggested the existence of something significantly more intriguing.

That was also the conclusion Erik reached based on the villagers' conversations and what Vanessa said when he arrived at the location.

"Erik, do you know what I'm trying to say here?" Amos's question finally broke the tense silence that had descended upon them after they had been talking for so long. His words lingered thickly in the air, silently witnessing the difficulties yet to come.

As Erik took in Amos's revelations, his thoughts raced, and he began to put together the pieces. The unexpected interest shown by Frant in their village and the mysteriously strong hunter all provided clues that pointed to a plot that was significantly more complex than a simple territorial dispute.

Erik's gaze met Amos's. The elder's gaze was unwavering and steadfast, which was a clear indication of the seriousness of the situation. Erik began his statement by saying, "I had my suspicions, but now I think I understand," with his voice carrying an undercurrent of worry.

"Frant believes that Liberty Watch has a technique, doesn't it? Something that allows villagers here to acquire neural links at a faster rate."

After what seemed like an eternity, there was finally a lull in the conversation as the echo of his words spread throughout the room. Given the circumstances, the hypothesized explanation seemed plausible and even likely.

All of the evidence, including the abnormally powerful people, Frant's persistent incursions, and what Vanessa said to him when he arrived, pointed in the same direction, leading him to this conclusion.

Erik's suspicions were confirmed after noticing that Amos was nodding slowly in agreement.

The seriousness of the situation that they were in became even more apparent. They were dealing with more than just a disagreement over territory. They were up against a nation bent on acquiring a new method to fast-track power acquisition.

"But do you really possess such a technique?" Erik asked, breaking the awkward silence that had ensued. Despite the gravity of the inquiry, he couldn't help but sense a glimmer of optimism in the situation. If they had access to such a tool, maybe it would allow them to shift the scales of power in their favor.

However, he was also aware that this was the very reason why they were in the situation that they were in.

Chapter 407: A Sudden Question (3)

A deep look of weariness etched itself across Amos's face as he let out a sigh. "There is no point in lying, especially given the circumstances. And your question, Erik, deserves an answer." Once more, his eyes locked with Erik's as he readied himself to reveal one of the village's deepest and darkest mysteries.

"Yes, we do possess such a technique," Amos conceded, his tone gentle but unwavering in his conviction. As Erik processed this information, the room fell into a profound hush. Erik was beginning to comprehend why Frant was so adamant about claiming Liberty Watch and its villagers.

As Amos continued, his gaze became increasingly distant as he delved deeper into the village's past. "This technique has been passed down from generation to generation among our villagers," Amos stated.

"Yes, it enables us to form neural links significantly faster than what is normally possible."

Erik, who had been relatively still until now, nodded to indicate that he understood. It was a significant advantage, without a doubt; however, it was the kind of advantage that those in power desperately wanted.

Considering Frant's situation, with the attack on the city, the search for the Heniate, the war, and the competitive advantage Etrium was gaining due to the Thaid armor and weapons, it was understandable why they were so bent on getting this technique.

Amos's voice took on a solemn quality as he said, "But let me be clear, Erik," which brought the young man's attention back to him.

His gaze hardened as he said, "It's not something we'll ever give up to Frant or anyone else for that matter. Not for any price." His resolute declaration echoed in the room, underscoring the villagers' determination to protect their secret, people, and way of life.

When Erik reflected on it, he realized how dire their situation was and how important it was for them to consider moving. It wasn't just about keeping their lives but also protecting their legacy.

With Frant closing in, they had no choice but to take the necessary measures, no matter how drastic.

As he learned more about the difficulties the villagers had been experiencing, his admiration for them and his confidence in their ability to overcome them grew, and he became more determined than ever to assist them in overcoming their situation.

Amos broke the awkward silence that had descended upon the room by saying, "Now you see why we must relocate."

"Now you see why we need to move," Amos said, breaking the heavy silence that had settled in the room. "Frant will not back down. And we cannot afford to lose our people, heritage, or secret to them."

Samuel, who had been largely silent throughout the discussion, gave a solemn nod in response. "We require a location that can protect us from harm, conceal us, and provide for our needs. Despite the risks involved, your description of the underground city appears to be our best option."

Erik was surprised to find that he shared their viewpoint. The cave system, though inhabited by threats, did provide natural defenses and a level of concealment that was desperately needed. On the other hand, one ought not to trivialize the difficulties that it presented.

"And we'll need your help to do it, Erik," Amos added, his eyes meeting Erik's. "You've been inside. You have defended yourself against the threats that were hiding within. We need your knowledge, strength, and skills to help us relocate safely."

Erik could see the desperation in Amos' gaze. He knew the stakes were high, and he found himself torn. He had never intended to get involved in such a complicated situation.

Yet, he couldn't ignore the villagers' pleas, people who had welcomed him, accepted him and treated him as one of their own. He could see now that their survival was intertwined with his own, and he could not turn away from their plight.

As Erik pondered, his gaze became more distant and thoughtful, and everyone in the room held their breath. While Amos and Samuel waited for his decision, the tension in the air was palpable as their worried expressions etched deeper lines into their faces. After explaining their predicament to him, all that was left for them to do was wait for him to respond.

Erik's eyes, which were blazing with determination, met the elders of the village. His choice was unmistakable. "I will help you," he said. The hall resounded with his voice, serving as a reminder of his commitment.

It dawned on him that from the moment he realized the predicament the villagers were in, he had already made up his mind to assist them in some way.

These people had extended their arms to a stranger to make him feel at home. Because they had placed their faith in him, he would make it his top priority to help them in any way he could.

Amos and Samuel exchanged looks as they both appeared to feel a wave of relief wash over them. As their anxious facial expressions transformed into grateful smiles, the tension in the room began to abate.

"Thank you, Erik," Samuel said, his voice laced with sincere gratitude. "We appreciate your willingness to help."

Erik nodded, his determination unwavering. He was well aware that the road ahead would be littered with obstacles.

However, after looking into the eyes of Amos and Samuel, who carried the responsibility of the lives of their fellow villagers on their backs, he realized that he could not walk away from the situation.

"To tell you the truth," Erik continued, "I've come to care about this village and its people. I'll do my best to ensure Liberty Watch thrives, even in the face of adversity."

The weight of Erik's statement lingered thickly in the air, causing the two more experienced men to nod their heads thoughtfully but in appreciation. The gratitude they felt was a lot, but they were also aware they were asking a lot of the young man, who came to this village only a month prior, and that, despite how the villagers treated him, was still an outsider.

Besides, this wouldn't be a simple relocation, to begin with. The very nature of their destination brought many challenges that needed to be addressed for this endeavor to be successful.

Erik began by saying, "The unknown Humanoid thaid and the Acidspitter Arthropods pose the immediate danger," Erik began, his gaze shifting between Amos and Samuel. "We'll need to devise an effective plan to deal with them. Also, there's the matter of the mysterious giant Thaid, whose presence we cannot ignore."

Amos indicated his agreement with a nod. "Aye, we'll need a way to protect ourselves, and ideally, one that won't cause a great deal of disruption," said the farmer. "We don't want to risk luring more monsters into our brand-new home."

From where Samuel stopped, Erik continued, "As I've already said, we must also consider the food topic," which raises another concern. "There is a meager chance that the cave system will be suitable for conventional farming. Either we need to devise new methods of obtaining food or find a solution to the farming problem.

Additionally, we should consider the best ways to guarantee a constant and reliable water supply."

Samuel scratched his chin as he racked his brain for an idea. "Indeed, both of those are critical points. Maybe we should look into the hydroponics you talked about before? Maybe one of the other methods of indoor farming. We can also begin collecting and storing seeds to preserve them for when we have established ourselves in the new location."

"According to what I've seen," Erik chimed in, "The ancient people who lived in the underground city had hydroponics, but as I said, I don't think they're still functional today, and even if they are, I have no idea how to operate them. If they are not functioning correctly, we must find someone who can fix them."

This would not be an easy task, and they would need every ounce of wisdom and resourcefulness they could muster. But despite the difficulties ahead, he felt an inkling of hope beginning to stir within him.

Chapter 408: An Ambush (1)

A week passed since Erik had pledged his assistance to the villagers of Liberty Watch. Vanessa found herself leading a small hunting team through the dense undergrowth of the forest, her senses heightened as she sought signs of Thaidis. Erik solved the food problem, that was true, but the village still needed precious proteins that the awakener couldn't provide.

For this reason, Vanessa and a group of four other people went searching for beasts to kill.

The forest was bustling with activity, including the chirps of birds in the distance, the rustle of leaves underfoot, and the rumble of a nearby stream in the background. Vanessa's sharp eyes combed the landscape, following the Thaidis' shaky footprints as they moved across it.

She was an unspoken authority over her team, a leader who was firm but kind and who earned the respect of her coworkers and superiors.

The other members of her group trailed behind in complete silence, weapons at the ready, eyes focused intently on the environment.

When she turned around to look at her companions, the expressions on their faces hardened with resolve. They had come to accept the reality of the village situation and were prepared to face it head-on.

As they proceeded deeper into the forest, the raw scent of nature, the moist earth underfoot, and the canopy of leaves overhead combined to create a natural fortress that encased them like a cocoon.

Their nerves were on edge at the slightest sound, whether it was the snap of a branch or the flutter of a bird's wing. But Vanessa, unwavering in her determination to lead them, kept her hand steady on the handle of her spear as she checked the surroundings.

Her thoughts, however, couldn't help but drift back to what Amos said. It had been a shock for her to learn that he planned to relocate the entire village inside the cave where the ancient underground city was located.

She did not consider that fair and was not sure that moving there would be possible; however, nothing could be done to change the situation and Amos's decision.

The prospect of relocation was annoying, but if there was a chance to ensure the safety and future of their people, Vanessa knew they had to take it.

The woman turned to one of her men, a guy named Abel; she yelled out, "Abel, any signs of Thaid tracks?"

Abel, a wiry individual with a hawk's gaze, scanned the area around them. He had a keen eye for detail, a trait that made him an invaluable member of her hunting team, and that was why she always brought him with her during hunts. His sharp, hazel eyes were now squinted in concentration as he surveyed their surroundings.

"Nothing, Vanessa," he called back, shaking his head. His voice was filled with a mix of frustration and disappointment.

A bitter curse slipped from Vanessa's lips. The hunting expedition was proving more difficult than she had anticipated. She tightened her grip on the spear, and the whites of her knuckles began to show.

The fact that there were no Thaid tracks was a worrying omen. It gave the impression that the monsters had traveled further away from their typical hunting grounds or, even worse, that they were being driven away by something.

Either scenario was not an encouraging sign of the state of their already precarious situation.

In the stillness of their tense search, Vanessa felt a chill run down her spine as a sudden, bone-chilling war cry erupted around them. When a group of soldiers with weapons in their hands broke through the thick underbrush, she hardly had time to react to the situation.

One of them, a man dressed in full military garb and wielding a spear with a bluish sheen that indicated it was charged with mana, charged toward her. Hunter's instincts began to surface in Vanessa. She evaded his thrust, and her spear collided with his in a flurry of opposing forces as she continued to fight.

The force of his raw strength sent a reverberating shock through her arm, but she remained steadfast and gritted her teeth to fight through the pain.

Their weapons disengaged with a shrill screech of metal against metal. The soldier struck back with rapid jabs, each more vicious than the one that came before it.

The woman was forced to retreat, barely managing to deflect his relentless attacks. Her heart pounded in her chest as she circled her opponent, trying to find an opening after she gained distance.

Their spears would come into contact with one another, creating a cacophonous sound that reverberated in the otherwise peaceful environment of the forest. Vanessa couldn't help but be impressed by the level of skill displayed by her adversary.

His movements were fluid, and his strikes were calculated and precise. However, he was overly aggressive, and as a result, his attacks left him open to counterattacks, which Vanessa did not hesitate to take advantage of.

During their vicious dance, words were hurled with the same level of force as their weapons. "You can't be serious!" Vanessa spat, ducking under a savage thrust. "Attacking innocent people? Is this how Frant's soldiers show their honor?"

The soldier retorted, his voice filled with icy disdain. "You're the ones who brought this upon yourselves," he hissed, narrowly missing her shoulder with his mana-infused spear. His eyes, hard and unyielding, bore into hers. "We gave you clear orders, yet you chose defiance."

Her muscles were aching from the strain of their never-ending conflict, which caused her chest to heave as she fought to maintain a steady breathing pattern. "You can't tell us how or where to live our lives!"

"We have every right," the soldier snarled, a sudden increase in the intensity of his attacks causing Vanessa to stumble back. "You live on Frant's territory. You're Frantian citizens whether you admit it or not."

Anger bubbled within Vanessa at this man's audacity. "We are citizens of Liberty Watch," she declared, standing her ground despite the onslaught. "We will not bend to your threats!"

The response from the soldier was a sarcastic and acrid laugh. "Then you leave us no choice." After making that chilling announcement, he continued his assault with a newfound ferocity that left no room for more words. Their fight became increasingly heated, and it could be heard throughout the thicket where they were fighting.

With a quick feint, Vanessa deflected his spear to the side, allowing her to expose more of the man's defenses. Vanessa made a lunge forward, aiming for the side of him that was exposed.

However, the soldier was considerably quicker than she had anticipated. He sidestepped her blow by contorting his body to the opposite side, and then he struck back with a swift kick that sent the woman tumbling to the forest's ground in retaliation.

Even though the impact knocked the wind out of her lungs, Vanessa refused to give up the fight. She let out a low growl as she struggled to pull herself back up onto her feet, her grip on the spear tightening as she did so.

Her eyes met her adversary's, and a solemn promise was exchanged between them.

Chapter 409: An Ambush (2)+ Urgent News! (1)

As Vanessa engaged her opponent, a shrill cry sliced through the air. As she cast a fleeting glance in the direction the sound was coming from, the woman's heart pounded painfully against her rib cage.

The sight that greeted her as she opened them was a jarring reminder of the truth of the situation they were in.

Declan, a stocky and experienced hunter who was a member of her team, had become incapacitated and fallen to his knees.

As he looked down at the sword sticking out of his abdomen, his eyes grew wide with shock, and his chest heaved violently. Declan collapsed to the ground as a Frantian soldier yanked the weapon away from him while smiling savagely.

As Vanessa watched the life leave Declan's face, time seemed to slow down for her. The man's once-animated eyes had become glassy and blind to everything around them.

She gritted her teeth to fight off the wave of grief washing over her, her heart heavy from the burden of their losses. However, there was no time for lamenting the loss. Not yet.

Vanessa was thrust back into the lethal rhythm of their duel when her opponent lunged forward, bringing her face-to-face with her current situation, a deadly fight.

However, the images of Declan's death continued to burn in her mind, which fueled her determination and gave her strength in the face of her relentless adversaries.

A voice could be heard cutting through the din of metal on metal and the cries of fallen comrades as it made its way through the mayhem. "Vanessa, you must flee!"

It was Abel, and the normally calm expression on his normally stony face was a mask of urgency and fear as he struggled against two Frantian soldiers, his muscles straining with every parry and counterattack.

"I can't leave you behind!" Vanessa yelled in response as she deflected a powerful thrust from her opponent.

"You have to!" Abel retorted while deftly defending himself from an especially ferocious assault, and he did so with a grimace of pain etched on his face. "We can't hold them off. You need to warn the others!"

The argument raged between them, each word carrying the desperation of their situation.

Even though the thought of abandoning Abel and the others caused Vanessa's chest to tighten, she understood that he was in the right. They couldn't live through this, and their only chance of survival was to alert the rest of the village.

The woman twisted her body and delivered a powerful kick to her adversary's knee as she took a slow, steady breath before the attack. He fell backward, which provided the opportunity she needed to take advantage of the situation.

Abel disengaged himself from the conflict and, with a loud war cry, charged toward the person who was attacking Vanessa in a single fluid motion. The bright spark of steel on steel illuminated the gloomy scene as Abel's spear and his opponent's came into contact with one another.

Abel gave Vanessa one last desperate look. "Run, Vanessa," he rasped, his eyes filled with a solemn resignation that twisted the woman's heart.

Then he pushed the Frantian soldier, who could not reach the woman due to Abel's massive frame blocking out the rest of the scene in the process. The woman turned her back on the ensuing battle, and each step she took felt like the tolling of her personal death knell.

As she raced towards the village, her lungs burned with each rapid breath as she tried to keep up with her pursuers. The sounds of combat gradually receded into the background. The thought of her comrades' deaths weighed heavily on her heart.

As Erik, Samuel, and Amos leaned over the intricately sketched map that was laid out in front of them. This was not a mere charting of lands and borders but the representation of their village's potential future home: the ancient city nestled deep within the cavernous maw of the cave from which Erik came out.

The young man ran his fingers over the expansive layout as he scanned his eyes back and forth between the buildings that were sketched in such minute detail.

These were not the humble wooden houses that the villagers were used to; instead, they were enormous stone and concrete structures built in a manner comparable to that of the contemporary buildings inside New Alexandria.

The underground skyscrapers acted as pillars supporting the cave ceiling, hinting at a once-thriving civilization.

"The city is designed like a natural fortress," Erik explained, his voice echoing in the tense silence of the room. "These colossal structures not only provide shelter but also function as load-bearing pillars, maintaining the integrity of the cave," he said while pointing at them on the map he found in the ancient city.

The speaker pointed out the dots that indicated the presence of Aclatrium ore. The unusual mineral had a peculiar property: it gave off a soft, ethereal glow, illuminating the cavern in a light that seemed to come from another world. It was possible that it would transform the landscape of their underground existence into one that was always in the dark.

He then moved his hand and pointed at the scattered dots marking the presence of Aclatrium ore. The unique mineral had a peculiar property - it emitted a glow, bathing the cave in an otherworldly light. It had the potential to turn their subterranean existence into a landscape of perpetual twilight.

"We won't have to worry about light," Erik continued, his gaze fixed on the glowing representation of the Aclatrium ore. "The Aclatrium embedded in the cave walls will provide constant illumination. It's not sunlight, but it will be enough for you."

Erik's explanation hung in the air as Samuel and Amos absorbed his words. It was a terrifying prospect to think that they would have to relocate their community into the dark and treacherous cavern. It was a step into the unknown, a world that was highly different from the one they were accustomed to, full of sun and vegetation.

However, the danger posed by the Frantian soldiers was always hanging over their heads like the sword of Damocles. They couldn't stay there, and they couldn't share their secret with Frant. They had to move.

The silence was broken by the entrance of a breathless messenger who carried information that would shake the stale air of the hall with a new wave of urgency.

The messenger rushed into the hall with a flurry of frantic energy, but he skidded to a stop in front of the three people, his chest heaving as he struggled to breathe. "Urgent News! Urgent News!" he yelled, his wide eyes gleaming with the solemn urgency of the message he was trying to convey.

Amos, Samuel, and Erik exchanged quick, concerned glances before Amos rose to his feet, his stoic facade barely masking the worry etched into his face. If the man came here so alarmed, something big must have happened. "What's the matter?!" he demanded, his stern gaze fixed on the trembling messenger.

The messenger sucked in a shaky breath, bracing himself against the weight of the News he carried. "It's Vanessa's group," he stammered, his voice laced with trepidation. "They've been attacked!"

The words hung in the air like a palpable shroud of dread, their weight heavy and their meaning ominous and threatening. As everyone began to comprehend the seriousness of the situation, there was a brief moment of silence.

The village's most formidable group, led by Vanessa and consisting of her hunting party, had been attacked. This was not merely a threat but an overt act of aggression and a declaration of war against Liberty Watch Village.

Chapter 410: Urgent News! (2)

The plan to relocate, which had previously been nothing more than a possibility, was suddenly given immediate relevance.

It was time to take action because the village's safety could no longer be guaranteed. In the face of an impending threat, Frant, the idea of making their new home within the ancient city no longer represented a simple hope for a more secure future; instead, it had evolved into an urgent requirement.

Samuel was the first to speak up after the uneasy pause, and he did so with a worry line etched into his forehead. "Are there survivors?" he questioned, his voice tight.

The messenger took a few chomps and looked glum as he did so. "Only Vanessa survived," he admitted, barely raising the volume of his voice above a whisper.

After hearing this, Amos, Samuel, and Erik did not waste any time and got to work right away. The group of three dashed through the twisting paths of the village as quickly as they could, their hearts thumping in time with the sense of urgency that drove them onward.

The sight greeted them with a bittersweet relief - Vanessa, their steadfast huntress, was alive.

Amos exhaled a sigh of relief once he finally reached her. Although it was apparent the woman had been through a brutal fight, she had only suffered minor injuries.

Her skin was covered in a fine layer of dust, and several holes and rips could be seen in her clothing, which revealed abrasions and scratches. Despite this, she was standing tall, her stance defiant, and a ferocious fire blazing in her eyes.

Amos stepped closer, a smirk of dry humor pulling at the corners of his mouth. "Well, you've looked better," he said, attempting to lighten the tense atmosphere. Vanessa rolled her eyes, but the faint twitch of her lips indicated that she appreciated the effort.

After that, Amos' expression darkened, and he stared intently into Vanessa's eyes. He questioned, "What happened?" The expression on Vanessa's face hardened, and she began clenching her fists at her sides.

Vanessa's gaze hardened, her fists clenching at her sides. "Frantian soldiers attacked," she said, her voice cold and hard as steel. Then came the understanding; the threat they had been fearing was now a harsh and imminent reality.

Vanessa was leaning against the trunk of a massive tree, her chest heaving to catch her breath as the men gathered around her.

The rush of adrenaline that had kept her going had worn off, and it was now replaced by a dull ache that spread throughout her body. The dreadful truth of what had taken place began to dawn on her, and the expression on her face began to crease into a frown.

She looked up, meeting the eyes of the men in front of her. There was a palpable silence as they waited for her to recount the events. Drawing in a deep breath, Vanessa began her narrative.

"We were hunting, scanning the area for Thaid tracks, when they attacked us - Frant's soldiers. They ambushed us. I suspect they kept us under observation and waited for us to be far away from the village before attacking." Her voice was steady, but there was a glint of anger in her eyes.

She continued, painting a vivid picture of their attackers, the suddenness of the assault, and the chaos that ensued. "We didn't stand a chance... they... they didn't even give us a chance to surrender," she admitted, her voice hardening with each word.

"Abel... he told me to run," she confessed, her gaze dropping to the ground as the memory of her fallen comrade consumed her. "I didn't want to... but he insisted. He... he bought me the time to escape."

There was a long pause as Vanessa allowed the gravity of what she had just said to register in Samuel's, Amos's, and Erik's minds. She took a deep breath and raised her gaze to meet theirs as she did so. "They didn't just attack us - they also made it clear they have no qualms about killing us, and from their words, I assume this is just the beginning."

Frant's soldiers were no longer merely a risk; instead, they had evolved into an imminent and potentially fatal hazard. And it was abundantly clear to everyone there that they had just entered a dangerous new phase of their fight for survival.

"Seriously..." Samuel uttered the words as he looked off into the forest that encircled their community with a severe expression on his face. "They're attacking us openly now. No pretense, no shame." His voice was edged with a chilling bitterness.

The once-cloaked threats had now been unsheathed, bearing down upon them with relentless force. The Frantian soldiers had cast aside their veils of deceit, making their violent intentions abundantly clear.

If the situation wasn't already bad for the village, now they were engaged in a struggle for survival against humans too. Frantians' never-ending desire for wealth and power had shattered the tranquil existence they had previously known.

Samuel's statement painted a grim picture, etching a harsh truth into their consciousness - their enemies were no longer lurking in the shadows; they were here, ready to strike without remorse or hesitation.

Amos, his weathered face etched with resolve, turned to Erik, his gaze intense. "Could you help us eliminate the creatures in the cave?" He asked, his voice steady, echoing the determination in his eyes.

He inquired with a calm and collected tone that mirrored the resolute look in his eyes. His inquiry carried not only hopes but also the apprehensions of their whole community.

Erik gave a solemn expression and nodded his head in agreement. "Yes," he responded with conviction in his tone, "but I will only be able to assist with the Acidspitter Arthropods."

Before continuing, he paused momentarily and cast his gaze toward the stony expressions on Amos and Samuel's faces. "For the other Thaid... the humanoid one... I will need either your help or Samuel's." His gaze held steady, acknowledging their task's danger yet accepting its necessity.

Their goal was crystal clear: they needed to claim the cave to ensure their people's future. Prosperous or not, a future was undoubtedly better than certain death or, worse, imprisonment. The

path ahead was fraught with danger and uncertainty, but their resolve was unyielding. This was their fight, their chance to defend their home and way of life.

Amos turned his attention to Samuel, whom he regarded with a thoughtful expression. With the gravity of the situation reverberating in his words, he asked, "Can you handle the humanoid Thaid?" Samuel, unmoved as always, gave a confident nod in agreement. His unspoken assurance provided all the necessary responses.

With decisions made, Amos swung his attention back to Erik. "Everything has been settled then," he announced, his tone ringing with an undeniable finality.

"We need to empty the cave as soon as possible. I will assemble a hunting team for this task. Samuel will lead them." The seasoned leader's eyes held Erik's gaze. A new sense of urgency underpinned his following words, "Erik, you will serve as the guide."

The instructions were given, and their course of action was set. Amos's gaze flickered around the room, taking in the determination etched onto the faces of the men around him. Each knew their role, the part they had to play in this daring gambit.