

BIOLOGICAL 501

Chapter 501: The tests (6)

Erik's attention was drawn to the far end of the room, where a holographic console flickered, casting dancing shadows on the figure seated behind it.

It was another examiner, a woman whose sharp eyes glinted with an unspoken challenge. The soft glow from the console illuminated her features, giving her an ethereal look with blue and purple hues.

"Erik Kay," she stated, more than asked, her voice carrying the ring of authority.

"Yes, that's me," he responded, stepping closer to her console.

Her features seemed to light up with amusement. "Well, Mr. Kay, I've heard a lot about your progress so far," she said, her tone detached but curious. "Let's see if you can keep up the momentum."

She sat up straight and expertly manipulated the holographic controls, explaining the rules. Erik absorbed every word she said, creating an expectant silence in the room.

"In this room," she started, her gaze never leaving Erik, "is a chest locked by a complex mechanism involving an array of buttons, levers, and symbols. Your task is to unlock the chest and retrieve the artifact it contains."

Erik stood there as a holographic image of the chest appeared before the examiner, revealing its intricate design. "Note," she continued, "there is a correct sequence of actions to unlock the chest. A wrong step could reset the mechanism or, worse, lock it permanently."

Erik's heart quickened with anticipation as the gravity of her words settled in the room. Nonetheless, he held the examiner's gaze, nodding confidently for her to proceed.

"To aid you in your task," she continued, "you'll find clues scattered around the room. These may come in different forms: inscriptions, paintings, objects, and even seemingly random items. It's your job to piece together these hints and deduce the correct sequence."

Her gaze was analyzing Erik's response. "Time is of the essence, but haste often leads to mistakes. Observe, analyze, experiment, and think critically. This is not a test of speed, but a test of your problem-solving skills."

She leaned back in her chair after finishing her explanation. "You may begin when you're ready, Mr. Kay, but keep in mind you have only one hour, Good luck."

As her words hung in the air, the room fell silent once more, leaving Erik alone with his thoughts and the impending challenge.

Erik redirected his gaze to the room with a quick nod, his eyes filled with determination. The conversation with the examiner had been brief, but it had sparked a fierce determination within him. He was prepared to take on the challenge and prove his worth.

Erik activated Hais' brain crystal power by channeling mana through his neural links. The change was subtle, with a hardly perceptible energy shift, but it altered his perception. Erik felt as if he had stepped outside of time into a realm of tranquility where every moment could be explored with surgical precision.

The examiner's blink seemed to last forever, and dust motes suspended in a shaft of light from the ceiling appeared frozen in mid-air.

The room remained unchanged for any observer, with the holographic chest softly flickering as before.

However, time had stopped for Erik, and he found himself in a calm, undisturbed sea devoid of currents or waves.

Time was no longer an unyielding river but a vast playground of possibilities where each moment could be dissected precisely.

A faint thrum pulsed through Erik, the echo of his quickened cognition. The brain crystal's power turned his mind into a supercomputer, processing information at staggering speeds. It was like seeing a previously blurry image in high definition, with Erik being the sole beneficiary of this enhanced perception.

Time was no longer a limitation but rather a valuable asset. Erik could solve the puzzle that lay before him thanks to Hais' brain crystal power.

The first step was to collect the clues scattered throughout the room, hidden within seemingly random symbols and texts.

Erik's cognitive faculties were heightened, and his eyes darted around the room, hyper-observant and ready to devour any detail that could help him unlock the chest.

Erik's gaze swept over the intricate chest design, honed to detect the smallest nuances.

It wasn't just any old container but a work of art. The surface glistened in the light, and the sturdy material from which it was made remained a mystery to Erik, reflecting an array of enticing blues and purples.

Despite its appearance as a traditional treasure chest, it was far from archaic. It had a distinct futuristic quality, almost alien in its elegance. The edges were smooth and seamless, as if the entire chest was made of a single piece of this iridescent metal.

The front of the chest was adorned with twenty buttons, each etched with a different symbol. These symbols depicted celestial bodies such as stars, moons, and planets and images of mythological creatures from ancient times.

They appeared to glow from within, bathed in a light that added to the mysterious aura of the chest.

Several levers flanked the buttons, each with its intricate symbol. The levers were seamlessly integrated into the design of the chest, their symbols as cryptic and incomprehensible as those on the buttons. Each lever, button, and symbol combined form a complex locking mechanism to protect the valuable artifact hidden within the chest.

Erik compared the chest to an unspoken language, with the symbols serving as words and the sequence of actions serving as sentences. He imagined himself as a linguist tasked with deciphering this cryptic language using the room's features as a dictionary.

Erik stepped away from the chest, his gaze shifting to the surroundings. The room appeared ordinary at first glance, but he knew better than to trust first impressions, especially under Hais' brain crystal power's effects.

Erik was determined to find all vital clues hidden in seemingly insignificant corners. His gaze scanned the room methodically, like a high-end scanner, leaving no nook or cranny unchecked.

He was well aware that unlocking the chest and revealing whatever was hidden within would necessitate speed, precision, insight, and astute problem-solving.

Chapter 502: The tests (7)

Erik's eyes traveled across the room, taking in everything, no matter how minute or insignificant it may have been. Hais's brain crystal power amplified his senses to an extraordinary degree; every rustle of air and flicker of light was height

ned, and each line and color in his surroundings was pronounced and distinct.

The room had the same sort of forward-looking aesthetic as the chest. A gentle, otherworldly glow was cast by the walls, which were monochromatic and sleek, thanks to the thin lines of light that were embedded in them. This glow was reflected off the polished floor.

Erik's attention was not focused on the structure as a whole. His attention was laser-focused on the particulars that, if solved, might unlock the chest.

The atmosphere gave off the impression of being a seamless synthesis of times gone by and those yet to come, thanks to the extraordinary display of cutting-edge technology that was concealed within the aesthetics of the past.

An enormous library took up most of one side of the room. However, its extensive book collection was not housed in traditional volumes but rather in a complex system of holographic books that covered the entire space.

The shelves emanated a soft iridescent glow as floating holographic screens displayed the contents of each book. The screens let the reader swipe their hand across the screen to turn the book's pages.

It felt exactly the same as being inside a real library filled with actual books, except that all of the books were holograms.

The walls on either side of the library were covered in holographic paintings, but these were not like other paintings in that they moved. An experience that was at once unsettling and enthralling was produced by the paintings' ability to come to life with dynamic movements.

The brush strokes gave the impression that they were coming to life, and the depicted scenes shifted and swirled with a fluidity that was ethereal and mirrored the fluidity of life itself.

As Erik made his way down the corridor, his eyes darted from one holographic book to the next as he passed them. His perception was beyond what was possible for humans due to the enhanced cognitive abilities bestowed upon him by Hais's brain crystal power. This ability allowed him to process enormous amounts of information in an astonishingly short amount of time.

The collection provided a wealth of information ranging from ancient mythology to physics, from stories of mythical creatures to treatises traveling between the stars. It was a veritable treasure trove. Erik was aware that any one of these holographic books might contain important information that could be used to unlock the mechanism of the chest.

His attention was eventually drawn to an especially ancient book, the title of which shone with a golden hue. Erik could identify the Phoenix inside the chest on the book cover; it probably contained information about it.

This new information might be the missing piece that solves the mystery. He opened the book with a straightforward hand gesture, revealing holographic pages brimming with the knowledge of past ages.

During Erik's exploration of the holographic pages of the tome, he came across an intriguing section that discussed the Phoenix. It was written in a beautiful, old script and was accompanied by an intricate illustration of the regal creature with its wings spread wide against a night sky filled with stars.

The passage read, "Among all celestial beings, the Phoenix alone soars above the heavens, dancing amidst the sun, moon, and stars. Born anew with the first light of dawn, it celebrates life beneath the twilight's embrace, rising from the ashes under the star's guidance."

The Phoenix, which was said to be reborn with the first light of dawn, was a symbol of the victory of life over death because it was said to rise from the ashes with the assistance of the stars.

Erik took a moment to pause and think about the deeper meaning of the symbolic language in the passage. Although it appeared that the references to the sun, moon, and stars had some significance, he sensed that there was another layer of complexity. There is a possibility that the references to dawn, twilight, and star guidance are all parts of a specific sequence that unlocks the chest.

Erik could commit the passage to memory and proceed with his search for additional hints, thanks to his enhanced memory. Soon after, he came across a holographic painting that caught his attention and piqued his curiosity.

The painting depicted a cosmological scene with a gleaming sun, a silvery moon, and a twinkling star, each of which was exquisitely detailed to emit its own distinct glow. The celestial bodies performed a slow, rhythmic dance as they moved through space, which captured the sunrise, twilight, and starlight cycles.

<Interesting...> The young man thought.

Erik noticed subtle patterns forming around the celestial bodies as he closely observed the painting's movements.

Their movements were not random but followed a structured dance: the sun rising, the moon setting, and the star twinkling brightly before the cycle began again.

With this realization, Erik had a realization; it was like lightning struck him in the head and made him understand. The sequence from the holographic painting may not only depict the celestial dance.

Still, it may also serve as a hint to open the chest. The sun rising, followed by the moon's glow, the star twinkling brightly, and finally, the Phoenix's symbolic rebirth all fit the description in the tome.

Erik approached the chest, his fingers hovering over the buttons and levers etched with symbols of celestial bodies and the Phoenix, eager to put his theory to the test.

Taking a deep breath, he pressed the sun symbol first, then the moon, and finally the star. Then, he yanked on the phoenix-emblazoned lever.

As the chest responded, Erik was filled with excitement. The buttons glowed to confirm the correct sequence, and the mechanism unlocked softly. The young man's heart skipped a beat as the chest revealed its long-awaited secrets.

Chapter 503: The tests (8)

<Was it really this easy? > Erik thought, <Or is this simply due to Hais's brain crystal power?>

But it was clear it was due to the latter. Hais's brain crystal power made it easy to understand things, and Erik managed to notice only what he needed.

Other people would have needed to read many books or search for clues for hours. However, he managed to do all the necessary steps in just 20 minutes.

As Erik carefully manipulated the final lever, bringing the mechanical hum to a halt, a soft, almost inaudible hum filled the room.

The chest recognized the correct sequence of inputs, and the once-glowy constellation symbols faded to a dim hue. The metallic lid of the chest slid open with a hiss of released air, revealing its contents in a soft glow.

The inside of the chest was surprisingly bare, save for a single slip of paper resting in the center. It was an odd contrast to the high-tech, futuristic design of the chest. The paper was an anachronism, a relic in the modern world.

Erik reached into the chest with caution, carefully pinching the corners of the paper and lifting it into the light. The ink was jet black and fresh, and the words were surprisingly neat and straight for being printed on such old-fashioned paper.

The note was brief, a simple message that starkly contrasted the complexity of the puzzle it needed to solve to open it. "You are not so stupid, after all." The words seemed to dance on the page as if mocking and congratulating Erik at the same time.

Erik blinked, stunned, and then burst out laughing. The tension he had been feeling, the anxiety that had been building since the start of the test, vanished instantly, replaced by a sense of lightness and accomplishment.

He looked at the paper before folding it neatly and tucking it into his pocket. Despite the message's mocking tone, Erik couldn't help but take it as a compliment. After all, he had solved the puzzle, and the chest held no further surprises.

As Erik approached the reception, the room hummed back to life, his footsteps glinting against the metallic flooring. The glow of various consoles, screens, and holographic interfaces bathed the space in a kaleidoscope of flickering, shifting colors, creating a surreal, ethereal atmosphere.

The reception area was a simple space with clean lines and a sleek design. The main point of contact for candidates was a long desk made of an opaque glass-like material. The examiner, a woman in the guild's standard uniform, was standing behind the desk, the soft glow of the information screens illuminating her face.

She looked up from her work as Erik approached, her eyes widening in surprise as she took in Erik's calm demeanor. Following the puzzle test, she must have expected him to be more agitated or exhausted.

As Erik approached, the examiner looked up from her terminal. She raised an eyebrow, surprised at how quickly the task was completed, but kept her calm.

"You made it?" She said, a note of skepticism in her voice. She gestured for Erik to hand her the slip of paper.

Erik reached into his pocket and handed her the paper without saying anything. He set it down on the desk; the mocking words became insignificant in front of the woman's shocked expression.

As she read the paper, a slow smile spread across the examiner's face. Erik watched as her eyes skimmed over the message, her brows arching in surprise before a small smile appeared on her lips.

She let out a soft laugh, the stern exterior melting away for a brief moment. "Well, I'll be damned," she said, amusement twinkling in her eyes, "I think this beat every record previously set. You only took 22 minutes."

Erik nodded, a glint of pride in his eyes. "Thank you," he said, remaining calm despite the compliment.

His fingers traced the mocking words as he ran his hand over the slip of paper.

Erik realized that the test was more than just solving a puzzle; it was also about how quickly he could adapt and apply his knowledge in a new context. And, based on the examiner's reaction, he had done exceptionally well.

The examiner walked over to her computer and entered the results into the system. Erik's progress would be updated in real-time at the guild headquarters. She then returned the paper to him. "I think you should keep it. It may serve as a reminder not to underestimate yourself."

Erik couldn't help but chuckle as she returned the paper. Instead of insulting, the inscription felt like a badge of honor and a validation of his abilities. He tucked the paper into his pocket, thanked the examiner, and exited the room, ready to face the day's next challenge.

The guild hall was filled with a low, excited hum as the test results were displayed. Officers, veteran adventurers, and rookies were scattered throughout the large chamber; all engrossed in the sizeable holographic board in the center of the room.

The hall fell silent momentarily when Erik Kay's name appeared on the screen; the usual chatter and clink of mugs were hushed. His perfect score on the puzzle test was displayed in bold, along with the astounding record time of 22 minutes. As the crowd processed the results, there was a collective gasp.

The silence was short-lived. Excited whispers circulated through the hall, eventually becoming murmurs and animated discussions. This was not only remarkable; it was unprecedented.

Never before had anyone, let alone a novice, solved the puzzle so quickly.

"Did you see that? Twenty-two minutes!" one veteran exclaimed, disbelief painting his weathered face.

"Kid's a genius, no doubt," another responded, stroking his grizzled beard thoughtfully.

The words 'hire him' echoed around the room, repeated like a mantra by various guild leaders. His abilities had not gone unnoticed.

Erik Kay was no longer just a name on a scoreboard. He was a prize, a potential asset to whichever guild persuaded him to join.

The air in the guild hall was thick with anticipation. Everyone knew a star was rising, and they couldn't wait to see where it would shine next.

Chapter 504: The tests (9)

After leaving room D8, Erik proceeded down the sprawling complex's metallic corridor toward his final challenge for the day - room F2. The puzzle test was behind him, his mind still pleasantly humming from the recent mental exertion.

The contrast between the building's icy, sleek steel and the gentle hum of energy fields gave the modern facility an uncanny blend of futuristic and impersonal qualities.

As he walked, his mind turned to the forthcoming test. It was unlike the previous ones in its nature. Not a battle against mechanical foes, not a test of his knowledge of ores or his ability to solve intricate puzzles. Instead, it was a battle of ideologies and values—an interview while he would be assessed for his alignment with the guild's ideals.

Erik felt this would be much more challenging than any other physical test. The guild was a very old organization, and its core principles had been ingrained in the history books for a long time.

The values of respect, integrity, cooperation, and courage were more than just buzzwords; they were the foundation upon which the organization was built. To successfully navigate this labyrinth of beliefs and principles would require more than just a display of strength or intelligence.

The examination room's (F2) door opened as he approached, and his examiner, a middle-aged man who exuded a commanding sense of authority, met him with an unwavering gaze.

He greeted him respectfully, aware that this was part of the test. Every word, every gesture, was a reflection of his character, and Erik knew he had to tread carefully.

Much like the guild building, the room was very simple and up-to-date in design. The only table in the center was illuminated by light coming from above. A couple of comfortable ergonomic chairs finished off the setup, giving the place the look of an interrogation room rather than a testing area. When the other person asked Erik to sit, he complied immediately.

"Name?" the examiner asked.

"My name's Erik Kay, sir," he said, looking at the man. The examiner turned to look at the young man.

"Erik Kay, you say? Your name has become somewhat of a buzzword in the guild today," the examiner replied, his tone amused. "Your previous test results have been nothing short of outstanding after all."

Erik shrugged nonchalantly, pretending to be unconcerned. "I wouldn't say that. I did what was necessary. Anyone could have done the same."

He said the words casually, but he was fuming inside. He was aware that his performances were noteworthy, but becoming a topic of discussion was not in his plans.

Attracting attention, no matter how positive, meant attracting scrutiny, which he couldn't afford.

Erik maintained a calm exterior despite the storm of thoughts brewing inside. He reminded himself of his goal: a good life in Etrium. He needed these high scores for that, even if it meant standing out a little more than he would have liked, but not to the point of people talking about him.

The guild was one thing, but Erik was more concerned about the outside world, particularly Frant.

However, the situation had a simple solution. As long as his face remained unseen here, he would be safe. He glanced at the man before him, a silent vow etched on his face.

Once this interview was over, he'd activate his Chameleon Veil brain crystal power and disappear. Like a ghost, he'd be there one moment, gone the next – invisible, unnoticed, untraceable; with the system's help, there wouldn't be problems too.

His extraordinary scores would be nothing more than whispers on the lips of those who had never seen him in person. He would become an enigma, a phantom candidate in the guild tests.

"Erm, excuse me, sir," Erik began hesitantly, shifting his gaze from the man's face to his hands clasped tightly on his lap.

"Yes, Mr. Kay?" The examiner responded, a hint of curiosity glimmering in his eyes.

"I was wondering," he paused, gathering his thoughts, "if it would be possible to...to keep my details confidential?"

His request hung in the air, a soft plea seeping into the room's calm atmosphere. Erik kept his gaze fixed on his hands, the intertwining of his fingers an unconsciously anxious dance.

Erik's features were slightly surprised as the examiner looked at him. "Confidential?" he asked, leaning back in his chair, his fingers intertwined in thought.

"Yes, sir," Erik said, finally raising his head to meet the examiner's gaze. "Regardless of the outcome of this interview, I'd like to keep my personal information private." I don't want to draw too much attention."

There was a brief silence as the examiner considered Erik's request. Erik's mind was racing with 'what ifs' for a brief moment. What if they say no? What if his unusual request drew even more attention to himself?

The only sounds that filled the space were the humming of the air conditioner and the soft whirring of the nearby computers. The overhead lights cast a harsh, sterile glow, making the atmosphere appear even more intimidating than it already was.

Finally, the examiner broke the silence with a gentle yet firm voice. "Erik, you've got some outstanding test results that have gotten you a lot of attention. Furthermore, this would be a massive opportunity for you, as the guilds will compete to get you to sign a contract. You could become wealthy quickly," the examiner said.

"I'm sorry, sir. I know what you're saying is true, but I already have my plans, and all this attention will only thwart them. Again, I insist that my personal information not be shared with the guild. I can live with the scores leaking, but not with the rest. Please."

"I understand your concerns, and I'll see what can be done about it," the man said with a pensive look.

The tension seemed to lift somewhat from Erik's shoulders. This was as good as he could hope for. For now, at least. His future in Etrium seemed a little more secure, and that was all he could ask for.

Chapter 505: The tests (10)

The atmosphere in Room F2 was the opposite of the environment Erik had encountered today.

The room was light and airy, with a gleaming obsidian-colored floor that reflected the light streaming down from the elongated panels on the ceiling.

The polished walls were adorned with high-tech, ethereal screens that scrolled continuously with lines of complex-looking code and diagrams.

The examiner sat in the center behind a solitary, sleek table made of translucent material.

The examiner was a middle-aged man dressed in the guild's formal attire. His hair was neatly combed back and flecked with gray. His sharp blue eyes glinted in the soft, white light, full of experience and wisdom.

He exuded calm authority, his demeanor as steady and unyielding as that of a seasoned warrior. A digital pad was in front of him, ready to record the interaction.

The chair was a marvel, automatically adjusting to his posture and providing maximum comfort. He had a calm, confident expression, ready to answer the questions.

The invisible barrier of judgment stood between them, a surreal expanse of clarity. The only sound in the room was the soft hum of technology, which accompanied their conversation.

The examiner began the interaction with a formal nod and a slight smile on his lips as he said, "Let's start then, shall we?"

"Yes," Erik confirmed.

"So, this is my first question. Assume you are leading a team on a mission, and one of your team members consistently disregards the team's decisions, causing discord and lowering the team's performance. How would you handle a situation like this?"

Erik paused for a few seconds before responding. He finally broke the silence. "In such a situation," he said confidently, "I would first assert my leadership position. The mission will undoubtedly become more dangerous if a group's leader cannot keep his men and women in check."

The gentleman nodded. "However, I would approach the offending member privately to discuss his behavior. It is critical to comprehend the motivations behind his actions. He could be dealing with personal issues or misunderstandings that we can work out. If that doesn't work, I'll consult with the team and decide on the members as a group.

Depending on the circumstances, he may be excluded from the team and sent home."

The examiner appeared satisfied with the answer as he nodded slightly before moving on to the next question. Erik was prepared, his face calm and composed as he considered the hypothetical scenario.

The examiner nodded appreciatively in response to Erik's response, but he seemed to have something else to say. "That's a commendable strategy, Erik, focused on the team's and mission's well-being. However, there is one detail that you may have overlooked," he remarked, steepling his fingers.

"In your response, you've certainly addressed the issue from a leader's perspective. But what about the guild's perspective? We're not just an organization but a community, and that means our concern goes beyond the immediate task at hand," he elaborated.

He leaned forward and locked his gaze on Erik. "If the individual feels undervalued or singled out due to the reduced role, it may breed resentment and, in the long run, escalate into a bigger problem. Remember that a guild thrives on camaraderie, mutual respect, order, and efficiency.

As a result, an additional step in your solution could be to create a communication platform where you, as the leader, can address these issues openly with the team. What are your thoughts?"

The examiner's tone was adamantly challenging. He wasn't just testing Erik's knowledge of the guild's values to the test but also his adaptability and ability to consider different perspectives and implications.

Erik sat in contemplative silence as he processed the examiner's words. His brow furrowed in thought, and he paused momentarily before responding. The holographic lights reflected off his

intense gaze, revealing a deep, thoughtful consideration that prompted the examiner to sit back in quiet anticipation.

"Your point is valid," Erik finally agreed, nodding. He respected the examiner's point of view and recognized its significance. However, he couldn't help but stick to his original stance. He looked directly into the examiner's eyes as he spoke. His tone was calm and clear, not challenging but confidently asserting his viewpoint.

"I see where you're coming from. However, in this case, the individual has not only disrespected the team's decisions but has also disrupted the team's harmony," Erik explained, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. His fingers were intertwined, indicating the gravity of his reaction. His body language conveyed his concern for the issue and his dedication to the guild's values.

"Of course, it's critical to foster camaraderie and mutual respect. That responsibility, however, falls not only on the leader's shoulders but on the shoulders of every single member of the team. If someone consistently undermines the team's decisions without engaging in constructive debate, that person is compromising the guild's values.

It is not only the leader's responsibility to make things right. It's about everyone understanding their roles and acting accordingly."

Erik leaned back in his chair, his words sinking in. The only sound in the room was the soft hum of the holographic lights and the occasional beep from the futuristic devices surrounding them. Erik's argument reverberated throughout the room, bouncing off the high-tech walls.

"Having said that, I agree that creating a communication platform could be beneficial. However, the person must be willing to participate constructively and respect the team's decisions. If not, then it's not just my failure as a leader but their failure as a guild member."

Erik's voice faded away, leaving a profound silence behind. His eyes were unwavering in their intensity, indicating his firm belief in his position.

Erik didn't mind holding people accountable for their actions, regardless of their position on the team.

His responses demonstrated his understanding of the guild's values, and his tenacity in upholding them even in difficult situations was admirable.

His ability to analyze, reason, and articulate his points of view was truly remarkable.

As the silence grew longer, the examiner gave Erik a thoughtful look, clearly taken aback by the depth and clarity of his argument. Erik met his gaze steadily, steadfast in his stance, ready to answer any additional questions thrown his way by the examiner.

Chapter 506: Getting out of the guild unnoticed

For the better part of an hour, the interview continued in much the same vein. The examiner, a seasoned veteran with years of experience under his belt, would throw out complex scenarios and ethical dilemmas, and Erik would respond thoughtfully, showing a deep understanding of the guild's values.

He spoke confidently, his responses often laced with pearls of unexpected wisdom for his age. He could pinpoint and dissect the core of each question, and his answers demonstrated his comprehensive understanding of the guild's principles of integrity, teamwork, and honor.

Despite the overall excellence of Erik's answers, the examiner maintained an unimpressed demeanor. His features remained motionless, and the lines on his face did not indicate the thoughts going through his head. A polite approval murmur was audible from time to time in addition to his acknowledging nod.

On the other hand, his eyes betrayed a critical distance and a tempered skepticism that allowed for doubt.

As a result of his lengthy tenure in the guild and the numerous interviews of this type that he had been responsible for conducting, he was an experienced professional in this field.

He had encountered a significant number of brilliant newcomers and had seen countless impressive performances. Even though Erik's responses were undeniably thoughtful and well-articulated, the examiner maintained their level of skepticism.

At the end of the day, words were nothing more than words. They were capable of being crafted and molded, selected with care, and arranged in such a way as to convey precisely what the listener desired to hear.

As a result, the examiner was impressed with Erik's eloquence and the scope and depth of his thinking, but he had to withhold judgment.

He persisted in interrogating Erik, asking progressively more difficult questions as he secretly monitored Erik's responses, considered what Erik said, and dissected the nuances in Erik's body language.

The examiner had not yet found the spark in Erik that would make him one in a million, despite the undeniable fact that he was an impressive young man.

The examiner leaned back in his chair and placed his hands on the desk, creating a heavy silence in the room. His eyes studied Erik's face as if trying to solve a complex equation.

Erik's responses had been heard, and while they were good, something about them bothered him.

Erik's responses appeared mechanical at times. They had a deliberate air as if each answer had been meticulously crafted rather than genuinely expressing his beliefs. Erik seemed to be giving the answers he thought the examiner wanted to hear rather than what he honestly thought.

Furthermore, darkness seeped into Erik's words at times. While adhering to the guild's values, his responses occasionally revealed a pessimistic view of the world.

While the guild recognized that life was full of harsh realities, it clung to the ideals of hope and solidarity.

The examiner knew that the guild comprised a diverse group of people, each with experiences and perspectives. Nonetheless, he couldn't help but be concerned by Erik's responses.

Despite the answers and Erik's previous test results, the examiner found himself unable to give the maximum score to him. His intuition, honed over years of experience, warned him something was wrong. The interview was over, but the man's assessment of Erik was far from conclusive. He finally broke the silence.

"Mr. Kay, the interview is over," he said firmly, his voice echoing slightly off the sleek, metallic walls. The only other sound in the room was the whirl of the air filtration system.

The young man appeared unfazed by the unexpected announcement. His face was serene and calm, with no visible disappointment or satisfaction. He simply nodded in response to the examiner's words.

"I must say, your responses were extremely insightful."

"Thank you, sir," Erik said. However, the Flyssa swordsman noticed that something was wrong with the examiner.

Erik rose from his chair, stretching his limbs to relieve stiffness. Curiosity glowed in his eyes as he turned his gaze to the examiner. "So, how did it go?" he inquired, his tone tinged with eagerness.

"The results will be available in an hour," the examiner said with a small, noncommittal smile.

"I need some time to think," he added. The undertone of mystery in his voice persuaded Erik that his performance was not as straightforward as he had thought. "

You're free to leave the guild for the time being," the examiner continued. "The final examination will take place in two days. We need to set up the stage."

Erik felt a wave of relief wash over him. This day had been long and full of nuances. He was eager to get away and find peace to process everything that had happened.

"Thank you," Erik said, nodding his head in agreement. As he made his way to the exit, he turned on his heels, his steps echoing throughout the room.

Erik stepped into the building's corridor, a sense of impending doom gnawing at him. The overhead lights gleamed, illuminating the walls around him.

He was aware of the attention he had drawn at the guild, and the thought bothered him. He needed to keep his face hidden from the others.

With a quick mental command, he then talked to the biological supercomputer. <Scan the place for cameras,> he ordered, his mind connecting seamlessly with the device.

[UNDERSTOOD. COMMENCE SCANNING. 3...2...1... SCAN COMPLETE. 15 CAMERAS HAD BEEN FOUND IN THE SURROUNDING 30 METERS; DO YOU WANT TO CONNECT TO THEM?]

The biological supercomputer asked while It relayed the locations and types of the cameras to him, the data flowing into his consciousness like a stream of coded information.

Erik processed the information swiftly; his cognitive speed accelerated thanks to the power of Hais's brain crystal. The world around him appeared to slow down, and simultaneously, he felt his senses were becoming sharper.

Erik thought about what to do for a second. <Send the cameras on a loop and delete any recording of me leaving the room. I don't want to be seen while leaving the building,> the young man ordered.

[UNDERSTOOD. COMMENCING OPERATION. 3...2...1. TASK COMPLETE.]

Chapter 507: Leaving the guild

With the biological supercomputer now looping the cameras, he had some assurance that his departure wouldn't be recorded. But he was still far from invisible, with people moving about who could witness his departure.

He then activated the Chameleon Veil brain crystal power, which made it possible for him to vanish from public view. His body began to shimmer, becoming as transparent as a glass panel. His outlines were difficult to make out against the steel walls that had been polished.

This did not completely hide him, but it was an effective form of camouflage because it allowed him to blend in with his surroundings.

Erik had a good understanding of the boundaries of his power. He could be discovered by sudden movements or direct contact with another individual.

In addition, anyone with heightened senses or the appropriate equipment could still detect him; as a result, Erik also wore a mask to conceal his identity.

He briefly thought about using the mask, but no one really did, as they craved attention.

Still, no one did so because they craved attention. If he only wore that, he was bound to gather more attention than he would get without wearing the mask.

His steps became soft, deliberate, and cautious. His heart pounded, echoing in his ears, but he forced himself to remain calm. Even the slightest mistake could give him away.

The corridor ahead led to the guild hall, a grand area where guild members and hopefuls gathered. From the distant chatter and shuffling of feet, he could tell many people were gathered there. He'd bet anything that most of them were there waiting for him to appear.

He didn't feel sorry about the fact he was going to disappoint them.

As Erik walked down the corridor and his Chameleon Veil blended him in with the metal wall behind him, the monotonous hum of the building's machinery was broken by the unexpected opening of a door further down the corridor.

His heart skipped a beat as he heard voices and the distinct sound of boots clacking against the hard, metallic floor.

Erik immediately flattened himself against the wall, his figure blending in with the surrounding infrastructure.

The voices became more audible, and soon a group of people, most likely examiners like him, emerged from one of the adjacent rooms, joking amongst themselves.

They were guild members, their rank badges gleaming in the dim light.

Erik held his breath, every instinct telling him to stay completely still. As the group approached his position, his heart pounded violently in his chest, the sound deafening in his ears.

Suddenly, he noticed one person breaking away from the group and walking directly toward him.

His footsteps echoed ominously in the quiet corridor, each step hammering into Erik's skull.

His figure was broad, and his uniform was immaculate; he was a high-ranking officer inside the guild, probably escorting these people out of the building.

His gaze was fixed ahead as if he were looking right through Erik.

The young man braced himself; his breath caught in his throat, and time seemed to slow. The officer was now just a few steps away.

Erik's body screamed at him to move, to run, but he forced himself to remain still. His Chameleon Veil was his only shield now, and he had to rely on its strength.

He remained pressed against the cool, metallic wall, unable to breathe. The officer continued his approach, striding towards Erik's hidden form, his rigid uniform denoting high rank.

Each step made Erik sweat in nervousness, the sound of his footsteps echoing through the corridor, accompanied by the laughter and chatter of the people walking there.

Just as Erik was bracing himself for the worst, the officer abruptly changed course, heading for a door a few meters to Erik's left.

He stepped through, the door swooshing shut behind him as he palmed the door control.

Erik released the breath he'd been holding, his muscles slowly relaxing from their tense grip.

The encounter made him appreciate the power of his Chameleon Veil even more.

Still, it also served as a stark reminder of the risk he was taking. He pushed himself off the wall and continued on his way, his heart still pounding from the adrenaline rush of the near-miss.

Erik followed the examiners, keeping a safe distance while remaining close enough to blend in with their group.

These people were in good spirits, chatting about the day's tests and their delight at their increased ranks.

Erik could see a crowd gathered in anticipation as they approached the corridor exit. He had a prickling feeling of unease because they were looking for 'Erik Kay,' the latest sensation.

As soon as he entered the main hall, he was able to make out the gradually increasing decibel level of the crowd's murmurings.

They were waiting for the group of people emerging from the corridor. Erik walked purposefully behind them in such a way that it would be difficult for anyone to notice him.

The Chameleon Veil brain crystal power hid him from anyone eager to pry into his identity, and the mask provided an additional layer of anonymity in case the first one failed him. He seized his opportunity and moved stealthily through the throng of people, expertly navigating his way through the mass of humanity.

As the crowd pushed forward toward the examiners, he went unnoticed and faded into the background as the chaos that was occurring around him served as the ideal cover.

He turned his head quickly in the direction of the examinees and saw a swarm of people surrounding them, all of whom were hoping to catch a glimpse of him.

He gave off the impression of having a wry smile on his lips. He had successfully avoided getting caught, which was already a win in and of itself. Now that he was living in Etrium, it was imperative that he conceal his identity. He picked up his pace and vanished into the bustling activity of the city.

Chapter 508: Unexpected meeting

Finally finding an isolated nook away from the prying eyes of the city, Erik cautiously peered around, ensuring he was truly alone.

Assured of his solitude, he slowly withdrew his Chameleon Veil brain crystal power and took off the mask as the thin layer of mana dissolved into nothingness.

He scratched his face, his skin warm to the touch after being under the mask for so long.

His sigh of relief could be heard faintly in the nook's otherwise peaceful atmosphere.

After enduring the day's challenges, he permitted himself to smile contentedly. He rested against the wall and savored the tranquility, which contrasted with the city's lively atmosphere and the busy guild hall.

"Well, that's finally over," he muttered to himself, relief evident in his voice. His words echoed around the silent room, starkly contrasting with the roaring crowd he had just escaped from.

But the thought of the impending final test cut short his victory. "Just one more to go," he said to himself, his words ringing with determination.

The peaceful moment was interrupted by a sudden low noise, which served as a reminder of more urgent matters. Erik realized that he was very hungry, no, he was starving, something his empty stomach was making clear. He hadn't realized how hungry he was until that moment since he had been too busy at the guild.

Erik pushed himself off the wall with a wry chuckle at his own neglect. The tricky part had, at the very least, come to an end for the time being.

After all, he had been through that day; he deserved a satisfying meal. He started walking away, the prospect of food invigorating his worn-out spirit as he did so.

After spending some time alone, he returned to the city and was immediately immersed in the bustle, din, and mayhem of the urban environment.

His destination was a small eatery he knew not too far from his current location, a place that served hearty meals that would satiate his ravenous hunger.

Erik's journey through the bustling city of Testrovsc's Rest was an adventure in and of itself. The city was alive with the energy of countless mercenaries coming and going from their various assignments. The city's layout was a complex maze of streets and alleys as if designed to confuse visitors.

Among the muscle and metal of the mercenary population, the city was a veritable treasure trove of blacksmith shops, armorers, and weapon dealers.

Each storefront was distinct in its own way, vying for attention with bright signs and the glittering allure of expertly forged weaponry and meticulously crafted armor.

The constant clanging of hammers on anvils, the hiss of cooling metal, and the shouts of merchants selling their wares filled the air.

Honestly, it was strange to see someone manually working on a sword, as this was not how it was done in Frant. Except for some parts of the craft, everything was left to machines. The blacksmith job didn't exist there, but it was as common here as the mercenary profession.

Jewelry-making, alchemy, and armorsmithing were among the professions that Frant prohibited ordinary people from practicing, reserving them exclusively for the military.

Erik moved purposefully through the narrow, winding streets, dodging mercenaries haggling over weapon prices or discussing recent bounties.

He passed by several stores, each proudly displaying their wares. The city was a mercenary's dream, with gleaming swords and shields, intricate armor, and the occasional exotic weapon.

A sizable statue of a well-known mercenary dominated the city's central square as he passed through it—a symbol of the city's rich history and the spirit of its people.

The square was bustling with locals and visitors, its cobblestones worn smooth by countless feet. Food stalls dotted the perimeter, filling the air with enticing aromas.

Erik continued his journey into a quieter part of the city, a district lined with quaint eateries and inns. The muffled chatter of customers and the sizzle of grills replaced the city's clamor here. The aroma of roasted meat and fresh bread filled the air.

He arrived at his destination, a small, unassuming eatery tucked away from the city's main thoroughfares. A faint smile crossed his lips as he pushed open the door, already anticipating the satisfying meal that awaited him inside. Despite the day's difficulties, this small pleasure was his to enjoy.

When Erik entered the inn, its hospitable warmth engulfed him. The inn's interior was a cozy mix of rustic and modern elements.

Soft lantern light illuminated the rough wooden tables and chairs, casting dancing shadows against the stone-filled walls; everything was built in such a way as to resemble a medieval tavern. The aroma of hearty stews and freshly baked bread filled the air, making his stomach grumble.

The young man did not appear to be surprised by the scene, as he had anticipated finding a location that was so rural in the middle of the city.

A bartender on the other side of the room was expertly pouring ale into mugs. His hands moved with the speed and precision that can only come from years of experience.

Before he could settle down, his eyes darted around the room in a flurry until they landed on someone he recognized. Mira, the woman he had met outside of the city, was secluded at a table in a quiet nook of the restaurant where she was eating by herself.

She carried herself in a calm and collected manner, belying the rowdy environment of the inn. Her tresses, which were long and dark, were neatly braided over her shoulder, and her outfit, which was forest green, matched her hairstyle perfectly.

Because of her dark hair, she looked a bit like an elf. Even though it had been a month since he had last seen her, the allure of her presence was just as strong as it had been before. The young man was compelled to approach her after seeing her lost in thought and giving off an air of peace while he observed her.

Chapter 509: Mira's offer

Erik moved effortlessly through the tables, never looking away from Mira. As he approached, he cleared his throat to announce his presence. "Long time no see," he said, his voice low but clear in the background noise.

Mira's head lifted as he spoke, her gaze meeting his. Her eyes briefly flashed in recognition and then in surprise. "Erik!" she exclaimed, her smile widening and lighting up her face.

"How are you?" she inquired, her voice filled with genuine interest.

Erik's mind flashed back to their first and last adventure together, a chaotic battle in the woods that had resulted in Aiden being knocked out cold. The situation back then was severe, but Erik couldn't help but slightly grin as he recalled how Aiden got knocked out cold.

"How's Aiden?" he inquired, his voice light with joy. "Still unconscious after that fight in the forest?"

Mira's laughter rang out, a bright, clear sound contrasting sharply with the inn's low, bustling noise.

She shook her head, her amber hair catching the warm light of the nearby lantern.

"No, that lazy oaf woke up a few hours after. Complained about a headache, though," she replied, rolling her eyes playfully.

The two chuckled together, their shared history lending an easy familiarity to their interaction.

The banter continued as Erik ordered his meal, their conversation weaving through stories of their recent adventures.

Mira's curiosity about Erik's time in the city was piqued. She listened intently as he spoke of all the training he had to do to take the Ranking tests, her eyes wide with interest.

However, the pleasant banter and relaxed conversation that filled the air around them seemed to vanish as Mira's demeanor changed.

Her bright eyes, usually sparkling with joy, bore into Erik's with a heavy seriousness that demanded attention.

"Erik," she said, her voice steady but filled with an uncharacteristic gravity. Her gaze held him captive, emphasizing the significance of her words: "The truth is, we've been looking for you during this month."

Erik was taken aback. His brows rose as he regarded Mira with newfound interest, and a ripple of intrigue crossed his face. "Oh? For what reason, if I may ask?"

The response was swift, direct, and unadorned. "We'd like to have you on our team." Mira's gaze never wavered, her declaration hanging between them like a request.

There was no room for error; this was not a casual proposition. They needed him.

Erik leaned back, thoughtful, his gaze fixed on the woman before him. He was still unfamiliar with the dynamics of mercenary life—the arduous tasks, high risks, and hefty rewards—so he wanted to at least listen to what she had to say.

The advantages of being in a group were undeniable, especially given the complex process of retrieving thaids' bodies. But his ambitions had been largely solitary until now, and he was curious if this unexpected proposal fit into his meticulously laid-out plans.

Mira's fingers twitched uneasily on the worn tabletop, her bright eyes reflecting an unusual intensity.

The usually upbeat woman had turned serious. She sighed softly as she tilted her head. She appeared to be weaving through an intricate web of thoughts before opening her mouth to address Erik.

"Erik," she began, her voice carrying a hint of apology and understanding, "we all know that you're... well, leagues ahead of us. In strength, skill, everything. We're not blind to that." Her lips twitched into a half-smile, more self-deprecation than amusement.

"Perhaps it's a little... arrogant or presumptuous of us to suggest this, but we wanted to try."

Erik sat across from her, his lean frame relaxed against the chair but his bright eyes alert, studying Mira's earnest expression.

He didn't seem offended. Instead, there was a glint of curiosity in his eyes. "I don't mind the attempt, Mira," he said calmly, "but I'd like to hear what you guys had in mind before accepting or rejecting the proposal."

Mira appeared relieved. During their brief interactions, she discovered Erik was pragmatic, appreciating clear facts and sound reasoning.

However, he at least showed interest in this partnership, meaning he was not arrogant. Since it was a delicate matter, Mira had to present it correctly.

After all, they were aware of the power imbalance and were prepared to compensate him for his superior strength and ability.

"You're right, Erik. We wouldn't ask you to join us unless we gave you something in return," she acknowledged, her hands resting gently on the table as she leaned forward. "We have something that you might be interested in."

Her eyes glowed with interest, indicating that their proposal did contain a significant component.

She and the others were experienced enough to recognize that his strengths and skills were far beyond their collective abilities, and due to that, it was clear he was bound to make a name for himself in the near future.

His potential addition would add enormous value to their team, tipping the scales in their favor in future encounters with thaids or other dangers.

"First and foremost," she began, her tone indicating the seriousness of her upcoming words. "We have many contacts in the area, ranging from merchants to crafters to wealthy individuals. We can supply you with missions consistently. This means you'll have constant opportunities to gain experience and improve your skills."

That was good, but Erik knew he'd get them all if he joined any of the guilds looking for him.

Mira paused to gauge Erik's reaction. His face was expressionless, and his mind was processing her words. She decided to go on.

"Secondly, we're willing to give you a larger share of our rewards. Given your skills and likely contributions, it's only fair that you get a larger share."

Finally, her gaze softened, and a gentle warmth crept into her voice. "Most importantly, Erik, we can provide you with something you won't find easily elsewhere: companionship. We've been through a lot together and appreciate each team member. You'll be a valuable asset and a valued friend."

Of course, she explained many other things they would offer him. They were a small group, and there was little they could offer him that other guilds couldn't.

After she finished, she let her words sink in, giving Erik time to consider their offer.

She recognized the significance of their proposal and its implications for Erik. But, in the end, it was his decision. They could only hope that he would see the potential benefits of their alliance.

"I appreciate the offer, Mira," he said after a brief silence. His tone was cautious, and his eyes reflected his inner turmoil. "I can't deny it's tempting. But I need some time to think about it. I had other plans, and to be honest, I'm new to this mercenary thing, so I need to do some research before agreeing or refusing."

Mira appeared to understand. Her lips curled into a reassuring smile, her eyes gleaming with unwavering determination. "Take all the time you need, Erik," she responded, her fingers idly circling the rim of her drink. "Just know that our offer stands regardless."

Chapter 510: The day of the final test

The two days following Erik's encounter with Mira flew by, but each moment was filled with anticipation and resolve. Erik knew that the final test awaited him at the Guild—a chasm that, if crossed, would change his life in Etrium. In the quiet solitude of these waiting days, Erik focused on training, honing his skills, and preparing for what lay ahead.

Erik's days were filled with meticulous planning, physical training, mental exercises, and strategic planning.

However, the most important aspect of his preparation was more than just physical. Erik concentrated on creating new neural links for the Chameleon Veil brain crystal power during this time.

Despite the difficulty, the process went surprisingly smoothly. Erik attributed this to the advanced neural link-development technique developed by the supercomputer, which made it very simple for him to make new ones.

During this intense training session, Erik completed two neural links for the Chameleon Veil. The newly formed links acted as bridges, allowing his brain to communicate with the brain crystal and increasing his control over its power and control mana.

Aside from the intense training, Erik had also been proactive in gathering intel about the nature of the upcoming test. The Guild held its secrets close, but the biological supercomputer was an entity beyond ordinary constraints.

Thanks to its sophisticated capabilities, Erik managed to gather some crucial information about what lay ahead.

According to what he had learned, the Guild devised a simulated quest, a trial that would test a Novice's skills, tactics, and grit. The setting was unusual; the Guild had previously built a specialized arena to test Mercenaries upgrading their ranks.

This arena was created to mimic real-world scenarios, with a variety of challenges that could put every aspect of a mercenary's abilities to the test.

Erik had been tasked with rescuing someone. A person was kidnapped in the fabricated story. His mission was to save this person, navigating the arena's numerous trials and fighting robots and flesh-and-blood mercenaries attempting to stop him.

The idea was simple: the Guild wanted to evaluate Erik's abilities in areas other than combat, such as strategic planning, decision-making, adaptability, and resilience. It was a test that would put Erik's physical prowess, mental acuity, and heart to the test, and it would ensure that what the young man had proven in the previous tests wasn't a fluke.

Knowing this, Erik's training became more focused. He mentally simulated different scenarios, weighing potential outcomes, strategizing, and honing his skills for this mission.

He felt a rush of adrenaline rush through him as the test approached. Everything had been building up to this point: the training, the planning, and the anticipation. The arena awaited him, as did his fate.

Erik stepped out of his hotel room into the early morning air as the test day arrived. He quickly summoned a taxi and directed it towards the Guild Hall, eager to face what lay ahead.

Fortunately, the Guild had kept their promise. Erik's identity, details, and video footage about his tests were kept private, and his arrival at the Guild Hall mainly went unnoticed.

Nonetheless, his reputation preceded him. Whispers of 'Erik Kay,' the enigmatic novice with impressive test scores, floated through the crowds, even as Erik himself slipped inside the guild unrecognized.

The area around the Guild Hall was alive with activity. Erik could feel dozens of pairs of eyes scanning the crowd as he made his way through the throng of people inside the guild hall, looking for fresh faces that could potentially belong to the famed Erik Kay.

As curious onlookers speculated about Erik's identity, they noted every new face that came into view and every conversation a Novice had with the clerks.

Erik Kay, the person they were looking for, moved among them unnoticed, his anonymity providing a cloak of invisibility that allowed him to navigate the crowd freely.

Erik made his way to the registration desk, his face hidden beneath the hood of his cloak. A young woman, engrossed in her computer, raised her head as he approached. "Can I assist you?" she asked, her voice full of practiced politeness.

Erik replied, "I came here to take the Novice's practical test."

"Name?"

Erik silently took out his phone and typed a message before handing it to her.

I'm Erik Kay; please don't say my name aloud; I prefer privacy.

The words on the screen glowed brightly. The woman's eyes widened slightly as she read the message. She nodded quickly, her hands flitting across her holographic keyboard as she pulled up his profile on the computer. "Mr.," she said quietly, her voice barely audible. "A driver will transport you to the Arena, where the test will take place."

She turned to face him, her gaze moving to his hidden face. "If you're going to take the test, you might want to mask your face," she suggested. "It will be broadcast."

Under his hood, Erik frowned. "Why would it be streamed?" he asked, his voice skeptical.

The woman gave a small smile, maintaining her professional demeanor.

"This is something we always do for the practical tests," she explained. "It assists test-takers in finding good parties or guilds to join. It allows them to demonstrate their abilities to the guilds."

Erik processed the information, comprehending its utility. Nonetheless, the thought of his face being broadcast for all to see sent a shiver down his spine. He thanked the woman and walked away, immediately donning a new mask he bought here in Testrovsc's Rest.

He still had the previous mask he used when he killed Logan, Conal, and Orson, but he couldn't use it for obvious reasons. Erik exited the building to await the man.

A few minutes after his conversation with the clerk, Erik noticed a man approaching. He was dressed in a plain driver's uniform and held a sign with the same symbol Erik had seen on his profile page on the woman's computer.

It was a guild symbol used to identify its members. "Erik Kay?" asked the man, his gaze sweeping over Erik. He smiled as he nodded in agreement, though his eyes remained professionally detached.

"I'm your chauffeur. "Are you ready to go?"

Erik nodded once more, pulling his cloak tighter around him. He followed the man to his car, keeping his head down to avoid drawing attention to himself.

The vehicle parked outside was unremarkable, much like the man driving it. The driver entered the front seat and started the engine as Erik settled into the back.

They walked away from the guild hall, leaving curious stares and whispers behind. Erik couldn't help but feel excitement as the familiar sights of the guild faded into the background. The final test was about to begin, and he was more than prepared.