

BIOLOGICAL 511

Chapter 511: The Waiting Room

Erik was treated to an aerial view of the bustling metropolis as the flying car soared over the sprawling cityscape. High-rises of gleaming metal and glass pierced the sky, haphazardly arranged to speak of unplanned, rapid growth.

A network of winding streets spread like a spiderweb between these architectural behemoths, teeming with people of all shapes and sizes.

The city was alive and pulsing with energy, a symphony of sights and sounds that was both thrilling and overwhelming.

Despite this flurry of activity, a massive structure dominated the skyline, attracting Erik's attention like a magnet. It was the Arena, with its towering facade dwarfing the surrounding structures.

The Arena's design was as elegant as it was efficient, with its sleek lines and towering walls encapsulating brutal functionality. Large screens on its exterior walls flashed vibrant colors, playing promotional videos of previous tests, and thrilling battles ensued within its walls.

Each time the background was different, but it was clear from the videos that they weren't digitally made or holograms; they were actual buildings the guild built inside the Arena.

<That's an excellent way to generate more revenues...> Erik thought.

When the driver noticed Erik's fixation, he nodded knowingly. "It's impressive, isn't it?" he said, his gaze never leaving the control panel. "Not just for the grandeur, but for what it represents. Hope, determination, and the relentless pursuit of excellence. This is where the mercenaries are tempered, and legends are born."

His words echoed in Erik's mind as he stared at the massive structure. The Arena was more than just a testing ground; it symbolized the mercenary guild, a beacon that embodied the guild's and its mercenaries' spirit.

Erik was dropped off at the foot of the monolithic Arena by the flying car. The vehicle's hum faded as it vanished, leaving him alone in the vast paved space.

The Arena loomed ahead of him, intimidating and silent, symbolizing the challenges that awaited him within its walls.

"Go to the examinees' gate; they will process your arrival and tell you when to start the test." Erik walked toward the gate after the two parted ways.

As he approached the Arena, his gaze was drawn again to the massive screens displaying past feats of strength and cunning, each frame telling a story of struggle, perseverance, and eventual triumph.

When he arrived at the examinees' gate, he was met by a few stern-looking men.

Erik strode confidently toward the examination clerks, his hood and mask still on. The clerk was in his forties, his face lined with experience and the sternness that comes with such an important job.

"My name is Erik Kay, and I've come to take the practical test," Erik stated calmly but firmly.

"We need an ID," said the man. Erik then displayed it, and when he was finished, the clerk looked up, briefly looking at Erik's masked face before returning his attention to the computer in front of him.

The rhythmic tapping of the holographic keyboard filled the otherwise silent space as he typed quickly. "Erik Kay," he mumbled, his gaze scanning the data on the screen.

After a brief moment, the clerk returned his gaze to Erik. "Your test is scheduled to begin in an hour," he said professionally and matter-of-factly. "In the meantime, you can wait inside. There's a waiting room for the examinees."

Erik acknowledged this with a nod, a thin veil of anticipation covering his features. He thanked the clerk and proceeded to the waiting room. The enormity of the test began to dawn on him as he moved deeper into the Arena. But instead of being anxious, he was filled with excitement.

The young man entered the waiting room to the soothing hum of advanced technology interspersed with the comfortable simplicity of a traditional setup. The room was large, stretching out with enough seats for dozens of people, but it was empty except for Erik.

The room's walls were made of a sleek metallic material that radiated a soft radiance and gave off a subtle, soothing glow.

Holographic screens were Embedded in these walls that were constantly updated with information on various ongoing and upcoming tests and general mercenary guild news. His test was, of course, displayed on the screen as scheduled, and the time it was going to be aired was on its right.

A large, circular seating arrangement stretched out in the center of the room. The seats were ergonomic, padded with memory foam, and covered with a material that changed temperature based on the occupant's body heat to keep him or her cool or to provide warmth.

A small, touch-sensitive table was available between each seat, complete with a futuristic panel that allowed users to access various services such as food, drink, and entertainment while waiting.

A row of refreshment dispensers hummed quietly to one side, offering various nutritionally dense and comfort food options. A wall-mounted screen across from them played calming ambient sounds, adding to the overall peaceful atmosphere of the room.

<And now we wait...> Erik thought.

After half an hour, the door to the room opened. A woman of medium height entered the room, her uniform crisp and authoritative. Her sharp gaze was drawn to Erik, a flash of recognition flashing across her features before she returned a curt nod of greeting.

"I don't have much time, so I'll get straight to the point," she declared, her voice echoing slightly in the otherwise quiet room.

"Your test will involve rescuing a 'kidnapped' individual. This individual is, in fact, an actor who is playing a role for the purposes of the test, so don't worry about that."

"He-" Erik attempted to speak but was immediately cut off.

Her brisk, no-nonsense tone filled the room as she delved into the details. "In order to fully simulate the reality of a mercenary mission, we will not provide you with the location of the 'hostage.' You are responsible for finding them using the clues and resources at your disposal."

Erik listened intently, his attention drawn to the woman's every word. This test was more difficult than he had anticipated, but it was still an intriguing challenge.

He appreciated the extra layer of strategy and problem-solving that the requirement to track down the hostage's location added, but he wasn't planning on wasting too much time with this charade.

After ten minutes, the woman finished her briefing and gave Erik one last look. "Remember, everything you do during this test will be under scrutiny. It's not just about achieving the objective; it's also about how you do it. Keep this in mind. Good luck." She stepped back, leaving Erik in the waiting room's calm silence, his mind racing.

"Well. For sure, that was intense."

Chapter 512: The Arena

It took only a short time before Erik's turn to take the test arrived. His footsteps echoed off the corridor's bare metal walls, adding rhythm to his anticipation.

The odor of lubricant and the faint electric hum emanating from the walls hinted at the high level of technology housed within the structure.

His heart skipped a beat as he approached the massive steel-grated door. The Arena stretched before him through the ancient-styled steel grate, starkly contrasting the sterile metallic corridor he had just passed. It was like peering into another world.

The Arena was a microcosm of rural life, with a collection of two- and three-story buildings built in an antique style, roofs topped with quaint tiles, and walls painted in faded pastel colors. It was as if a piece of a rural town had been transplanted into this futuristic arena. The level of detail and realism took Erik aback.

Robotic figures moved through the streets, their humanoid forms dressed casually. Within the surreal environment, it created an eerily regular sight. They walked, talked, and did their daily activities as if they were real people.

The high-tech illusion of this rustic town piqued Erik's interest. He knew the actor he was supposed to save was somewhere in this make-believe world.

The task's complexity enthralled him; it was a game of wit, strategy, and skill. The corners of his mouth twitched with a smile. This was going to be a fascinating test.

The grating sound of the metallic door opening distracted Erik from his thoughts. A gust of artificial wind whooshed in as it slowly rose, carrying the strange scent of this phony rural setting.

He braced himself, drawing a deep breath as he crossed the threshold and entered the Arena. The door slammed shut behind him, sealing off the outside world.

All that remained was the task at hand. Erik began his quest amidst the simulated rustling of leaves and the hum of the robotic populace, his gaze fixed and his resolve stronger than ever.

Erik's movements were broadcast live to thousands of eager spectators as he cautiously navigated the Arena. An announcer began his introduction in a separate broadcast booth, his voice booming through countless speakers.

"Ladies and gentlemen, get ready for a show!" he exclaimed, his excitement palpable. "Introducing Erik Kay, the prodigious talent who has stormed the Guild with his exceptional performance, achieving maximum points in all tests to get to the Pupil rank!"

Erik appeared on the screen after the announcement, his face hidden by a mask and a hood. As the spectators registered the concealment, an almost tangible wave of disappointment reverberated through the viewing platforms. Dissatisfied murmurs filled the air.

"Why is he wearing a mask?" exclaimed one viewer, their frustration palpable.

"We've been waiting to see Erik Kay, but all we get is a masked man," another grumbled.

Despite their initial disappointment, their attention was drawn to the screens, their curiosity piqued, and they were eager to see what the elusive Erik Kay had in store for them.

<System, hack the robots, and find the hostage's location,> Erik ordered.

[UNDERSTOOD. COMMENCING PROCEDURE. HACKING INTO THE ROBOTS' SERVER. SEARCHING FOR THE LOCATION. LOCATION FOUND. INJECTION STARTED.]

Erik had a clear idea of where he needed to go by the end of the process. It was a big building on the other side of the arena, guarded by a swarm of 'incognito' robots outside and many others inside. However, more than simply knowing where he needed to go was required.

Unfortunately, with every one of his movements being recorded, he needed a way to explain how he knew where the hostage was being held.

<I should probably find one of the examiners. The humans inside the arena will know where I should go.>

That was correct—an examinee needed prior knowledge to know what and where to look. In the real world, he would at least know what he was looking for: a gang, a criminal organization, a club, or a hotel. But there was no such thing in this case, so the Guild placed humans among the robots to give them clues for their search.

Examiners for the Novil to Pupil exam were typically at the Seeker rank within the mercenary guild, which meant they were also around the o (omicron) rank on the Idor scale. In contrast, Novices and Pupils began at the π rank. That was done to ensure that beating the human 'actors' was challenging but possible.

Erik marveled at the fabricated cityscape's complexity as he moved through it.

The design of the artificial city reflected the architectural grandeur and cultural depth of a bygone era. The urban fabric comprised majestic towers, dome-shaped structures, and maze-like pathways. The designs were beautiful, with the vibrant hues of the skyscrapers glistening in the artificial daylight, presenting an image of a city crafted from a riot of colors.

Every detail, from the shape of the buildings to their placement, resembled cities from olden tales—cities rich in history and steeped in tradition. The cityscape's complexity and beauty provided a vibrant backdrop for Erik's quest, transporting him to a different era, if only briefly.

The narrow, winding streets branched out, revealing bustling markets and hidden courtyards populated by traditional-dressed robots. The mock marketplace was filled with stalls selling various colorful goods, from spices and textiles to intricately crafted fake jewelry. Still, it was all part of the show.

The exteriors of buildings were adorned with intricate mosaics depicting heroes and legends. Weathered stone structures exuded authenticity; if one didn't know better, one could almost smell the history of the aged stones. Palm trees swayed gently in the artificial wind, adding a touch of natural beauty to the city's artificial marvels.

Erik couldn't believe he was in an arena instead of a historical city frozen in time as he navigated the alleys and main streets. The creators had gone to great lengths to capture the essence of the ancient world, blending it seamlessly with the test's objectives, and for a brief moment, he was nothing more than a time traveler looking for answers within the city's secrets.

Chapter 513: Turmoil in the arena

Erik kept meandering around in the fake city without any particular destination, keenly aware of his surroundings. As he made his way through the winding alleys of the labyrinth, he became aware of a peculiar commotion occurring among a group of robots disguised as guards.

He began following them covertly and craftily while maintaining a safe distance to avoid being discovered.

The mechanized guards led him through the complex maze of streets to an imposing structure that towered over the other buildings in the area due to its architectural prowess.

As he approached the building, he was startled by an abrupt uproar, immediately followed by an utterly disorganized scene.

Around forty robots, some clad in civilian clothes and others in guard uniforms were fighting in a horde. They fought each other with makeshift weapons, exchanging blows. At the same time, their electronic voices filled the air with a cacophony of insulting words and taunts intended to provoke the fake opponent.

<What the...? Who the hell created this... place?>

Erik kept his cool in the face of the sudden turbulence, stationing himself behind a nearby structure and using it as a makeshift shield to watch the scene unfold.

The intermittent tirades and accusations between the brawling robots made it clear to him that the scenario resembled civil unrest.

The city, which had once been serene and silent, was now filled with the clamor of strife and discord.

As he pieced together the situation, his mind began to race. Was this meant to be a distraction, a ruse to divert his attention away from the true goal? Or was this designed to give him a chance to find clues about the fake hostage location? He knew the fake hostage wasn't here, so he wondered what was happening.

The skirmish sounds intensified in the background, the cacophony punctuating the otherwise silent air of the fictitious city.

Erik's sharp gaze swept over the motley crowd, looking for anomalies. Two figures amid the chaos caught his attention.

One was a towering guard robot, its exterior shell polished to a metallic shine that reflected the artificial sunlight, giving it a fiery halo. It stood out from the crowd with broad shoulders, an armored chest plate, and eyes glowed with a fierce, menacing red light.

The other was a robot dressed as a commoner, draped in earthy tones and riddled with fake wear and tear patches. It walked with a peculiar gait, a slight limp that distinguished it from the rest of its smooth-running peers, and a way of articulating words uncannily similar to human speech.

However, as Erik observed this last robot, his attention was soon drawn to a conspicuous anomaly amidst the 'rebels.' Within the crowd was a figure that he assumed belonged to a male dressed in a cloak with a hood drawn over his head. At first glance, he appeared to be one of the robotic rebels.

Still, Erik's trained eyes noticed something different—a subtle stretch of skin visible at his wrist that revealed he was not a robot.

Erik's pulse quickened as he realized what was going on. This was a hint to locate people. This meant that such events would be commonplace within the fictitious city.

Erik fixed his gaze on the man like a hawk circling its prey. He knew he needed a plausible reason to engage with him without standing out.

The surrounding chaos served as an excellent smokescreen. Still, he knew the robot guards' programming would label him a rebel if they saw him fighting. The solution required a subtle approach—a sort of infiltration.

Erik's attention was drawn to nearby robotic guards.

The closest group stood a few hundred meters away, their partially covered metallic bodies gleaming in the artificial sunlight, impassively observing the staged civil unrest. He needed their uniforms to blend in and pass for one of them.

Erik began navigating the crowd with a newfound sense of determination. He moved subtly and silently, like a snake in the grass, his gaze never straying from his robotic targets.

He lured the unsuspecting robots into a narrow alleyway using his skills and the cover of the staged commotion. Despite their design complexity, the robots were vulnerable when caught off guard.

Erik decapitated them with a single punch moving in such a way that many people at home had problems seeing.

The echo of their metallic bodies clattered onto the stone floor, lost in the chaotic symphony of the ongoing disturbance. His clothes were spotless, a testament to his accuracy and efficiency. Erik was a ghost in the city—fast, silent, and lethal.

In the relative peace and seclusion of the alley, Erik moved swiftly to strip the fallen guards of their uniforms.

The material making up their bodies was brittle and metallic, containing wires and circuits throughout its composition.

He successfully concealed his identity by quickly donning the guard's uniform over top of his own, providing an additional layer of fabric.

However, he didn't strip off his clothes because he didn't want the people watching his test stream to see his body. The fit was unfamiliar, and it chafed against his skin, but Erik ignored the discomfort. The priority was to blend in, to become an unremarkable part of the robotic law enforcement.

As he emerged from the alley, he approached the crowd while keeping his true identity entirely hidden by his disguise. For the first time since the beginning of the test, Erik experienced a glimmer of excitement.

As soon as he got out of the alley, the robots in the crowd made their way to let him pass, meaning they mistook him for a guard; at the same time, the other robotic guards believed him to be one of their own and quickly joined him in his march toward the fake revolt.

He was a phantom that moved around in plain sight; he was an intruder masked behind the law's face. He was confident that he would be able to free the hostage if he had this advantage. The competition had started in earnest.

Chapter 514: The hooded man (1)

Erik found himself amid the chaos, right in front of the grand building, at the epicenter of the simulated revolt. His gaze was fixed on the figure hidden beneath the cloak and hood, the only genuine human in this robotic tableau.

Was he aware of Erik's presence? Did his gaze light up in recognition, or did he pretend not to notice him because of his role? Erik pondered the question as he stood amid the chaos, a metallic guard amid a sea of rebellious robots.

The man in question acted as an agitator, his energy fueling the robotic revolt. While he did so, Erik's convincing performance kept him concealed. However, Erik knew better than to underestimate his opponent.

The young man moved in the sun's harsh light amidst the whirl of colors and the hum of rebellion. He inched through the chaos, cloaked in his stolen disguise, his gaze fixed on the man hidden beneath the cloak and hood. Unbeknownst to him, he had become the focal point of Erik's mission.

The metallic guards launched their assault on the agitators as the fake revolt escalated into a more violent altercation. Erik spotted an opportunity among the din. He hurtled himself towards the cloaked man like a falcon, taking advantage of the chaos around him.

The battle was a choreographed dance of chaos and rebellion. Robots disguised as city guards moved with mechanical precision in an attempt to put down the phony uprising.

Their hard, metallic bodies collided with the agitated swarm of robot agitators. The air quickly filled with a constant hum of artificial voices, punctuated by the sharp crack of plastic on metal as the guards lashed out.

The protestors, a swarm of robots dressed in commoner garb, met the onslaught with the zeal of human defiance. Their robotic screams echoed in the stone arena's streets, adding to the mounting tension.

Robotic guards moved forward in unison as if guided by a single mind. They wielded batons and shields, the latter reflecting a harsh glare from the sunlight. Protesters stood firm against them, forming a ragged line that wavered but never broke.

The location had been transformed into a battleground, a stage for this fabricated civil unrest. Erik maneuvered, a single player in this orchestrated commotion, ready to carry out his rescue mission.

The young man was composed and focused. He didn't use his brain crystal power because he knew the man, his target, was significantly weaker because of how the test was thought to function. So far, he'd relied on his physical prowess and quick thinking, and he was confident it would be enough.

The distance between them rapidly diminished, and soon, Erik was within striking distance. The man remained engrossed in his role, stirring the crowd and seemingly unaware of the impending threat. Erik prepared to strike at that critical moment and fight against the man.

The hooded man was steeped in the throes of agitation, his arms whipping the air as he roused the robotic mob. It wasn't until the last second, the sliver of a heartbeat before impact, that he sensed Erik's approach. His eyes widened beneath the hood's shadow, and he handled his axe, which was sharp enough to cleave bones. He swung it, but Erik easily avoided it.

The man was too slow for him; there was no need to analyze him because he was most likely at the 0 level.

<Noob,> Erik thought about the opponent.

Erik stood before the man, his posture relaxed, as if he was a bystander rather than a participant in this tense scene. The man's grip on the handle of his axe tightened as he growled low in his throat. His arm muscles tightened as he swung his weapon with all his might.

As the blade arced through the air, glinting ominously in the light, the world seemed to slow down. The razor-sharp edge sped towards Erik, threatening to rip flesh and shatter bone. On the other hand, he remained unfazed, his calm demeanor a disturbing contrast to the impending violence.

Erik moved as the axe whistled through the air, a whisper of death. His agility and reflexes outmatched the speed of the descending opponent's weapon, and he avoided the lethal strike with a simple sidestep. His movements were smooth, fluid, and precise, almost like a ballet dancer in a rehearsal.

The axe bit into the empty air where Erik had been standing just a moment before, its promise of carnage unfulfilled. The hooded man's swing continued on its path, guided by momentum, but encountered no resistance or impact. However, the man maintained his balance and pursued Erik to attack.

<I need to be careful not to give away the fact I'm much stronger than him,> Erik thought.

His movements were fluid, punctuated by his natural sense of timing and the grace of a seasoned warrior. With an almost detached sense of calm, he observed the man's feeble attempts to strike him; his gaze laser-focused on the trajectory of each attack.

He danced away from a vicious arc aimed at his midsection, his footwork precise and agile. Still, he tried not to overdo it because he didn't want to draw even more attention to himself. He was stronger than the man, but he still had to make it seem like he was not THAT MUCH strong.

In frustration, the hooded man swung again, a horizontal strike aimed at Erik's neck. The young man ducked beneath the blade with deceptive ease, his movements fluid and unhurried as he regained his full height.

The man, who appeared to be a desperate predator, unleashed another barrage of wild attacks, each one more chaotic and uncontrollable than the last.

Erik weaved through them all, his body moving rhythmically to the fight's dance, every step calculated. The entire scene unfolded like an intricate dance, with Erik as the assured leader guiding his hesitant partner.

<Is this guy really at the o level?> Erik wondered. He was trying not to brag, but even the robots outperformed him. It was probably because they didn't feel emotions or hesitated. All this made fighting him a piece of cake but made it much harder not to show a too big gap with the man.

Erik allowed the man to slowly bring him in front of a wall, faking being trapped between the man and the wall, all to give the impression he still had much to learn. Then, the man lunged, his axe aimed at Erik's chest, with a savage grin. Erik, however, dodged at the last second, the sharp blade grazing his clothes and scraping the wall instead.

His hooded opponent stumbled forward, dazed by his missed attack.

<I'm showing off too much...>

Erik then circled his opponent, staying just out of reach. The man pursued him, his movements becoming more desperate and frantic by the second. Erik, however, was always one step ahead, no matter how fast or aggressive he became.

<How should I deal with him, knocking him unconscious? Disarming him?>

In the meantime, frustration flashed across the man's face as he failed to land yet another blow on Erik. His attacks became more erratic and uncontrollable.

On the other hand, Erik avoided them all, moving through the chaos with a dancer's grace and a warrior's precision. Each swing, each lunge was met with a quick sidestep, a duck, or a subtle shift in stance that kept him safe.

The fight raged on, with the man unleashing a barrage of attacks while Erik moved like water around them. And all the while, the audience watched, their excitement growing with each avoided blow, each narrowly averted strike.

They watched as Erik effortlessly navigated the fight, a calm in the storm of the man's desperation. They saw him as a predator teasing its prey, patiently waiting for the right moment to strike. Erik's agility and prowess were fully displayed, reminding everyone why he was the Mercenary Guild's new sensation, an enigma called Erik Kay.

Chapter 515: The hooded man (2)

As Erik effortlessly evaded the man's frantic attacks, the bitter taste of defeat began to seep into the man's mouth. Each time, his axe encountered nothing but the empty air, a startling lack of resistance that jarred his mind and reverberated through his desperate soul.

Despite the adrenaline coursing through his veins and the ringing shouts of the surrounding robots, a cold, creeping fear crept into the man's heart. Erik moved as if he were a ghost, unhurried and fearless, mocking the man's anxiety.

As he realized Erik was an unbeatable foe for him, his movements became more desperate. The young man did not retaliate or strike back, however. As a result of his lack of aggression, the cloaked man's resolve wavered. His spirit wilted like a flower in the scorching summer sun, and his strength drained with each futile swing.

Erik's eyes remained calm and impassive through the eyeholes in his mask. At that moment, the man saw a reflection of his defeat in them. He realized he had no chance against this masked man and had to decide whether to keep fighting or flee.

A storm of emotions raged within him, and then the man made a choice. He mustered all his remaining strength and charged, not towards Erik, but towards the alleyway adjacent to them. With one last glance at Erik, he turned and fled, his eyes filled with fear, resentment, and resignation.

He had been hired by the guild to pose as a challenge for this Novice, yet, he toyed with him and humiliated him in front of the general public.

His departure caused a ripple in the crowd watching the fight from home, followed by a brief pause and a collective gasp. The eerie echo of the man's footsteps as he disappeared into the narrow alleyway stunned the viewers.

Erik stood amid the chaos, unaffected by the man's flight. His expression remained unchanged under his mask, as did his gaze. He made no pursuit or movement attempts. His figure became a symbol of unwavering calm amidst the chaos.

<I hope my performance wasn't too shitty. I wouldn't like for the viewers to notice I was holding back a lot.>

Erik stopped as he observed the man disappear into the maze of alleyways. Not long before, he felt a familiar feeling inside him; the thrill of the chase beckoned him to catch his prey. Erik followed him with a swift, determined stride, leaving chaos in his wake.

The complex labyrinth of winding and convoluted alleyways could easily disorient a newcomer. Erik, on the other hand, navigated them effortlessly. His senses were keen, and his mind was concentrated. He wasn't simply evading; he was actively hunting.

On the other hand, the man wearing a hood was fleeing. Every frantic turn and hasty step betrayed desperation. His breathing was irregular and rapid, and his movements were jerky. Every second felt like an eternity to him as he ran down the cobblestone street, his heart beating in time with the rhythm of his feet.

Erik's pursuit was methodical rather than hasty. The man's labored breathing, the faint rustling of his cloak, and his soft footfalls were audible to the viewers at home as drones and cameras showed the chase.

He moved as smoothly and swiftly as a shadow, with only the dim artificial lights of the surrounding buildings illuminating his path.

He took a shortcut by effortlessly leaping over a low wall, his robotic guards' clothing barely rustling. A quick look in his rearview mirror revealed that the distance between them was shrinking. The hunt was coming to an end.

As Erik turned into a different alley, he observed the man. He was hunched over with his hands on his knees and was breathing heavily. Fear filled his eyes when he saw the Novice arrive. He attempted a shaky run, but his legs did not cooperate. He stumbled and fell to the ground in a humiliating display of cowardice.

The people at home, in the bars, at the guild, and in every place displaying this sorry display started to mock him.

In the meantime, Erik cautiously approached the fallen man. He never took his eyes off him. As he looked up at Erik, the masked man sighed in defeat. He never attempted to flee again. The pursuit had ended. Erik completed his first task for this test in under five minutes.

Thousands of people watched the live feed from their homes, guild halls, and local pubs. There were mentions of Erik Kay in chatrooms, forums, and conversations. The man's identity behind the mask was unknown, but his performance had left an indelible mark.

"I've never seen a Novice handle themselves so well in all my years."

The intensity of the pursuit, Erik's effortless movement through the artificial city, and his calculated efficiency in capturing his prey were breathtaking. They had previously observed numerous Novices take the exam, but none with such skill and command.

"He must be at a higher level than the Omicron one," a spectator muttered, unable to tear his gaze from the screen.

"Did you see how effortlessly he avoided those attacks? And that chase...it's like he knew the city like the back of his hand," added another.

"His tactical approach is commendable," a man dressed in official mercenary guild attire commented, his eyes scanning the feed keenly. "He's displaying excellent resourcefulness, planning, and execution. I'd kill to have him on my team."

Each voice continued, filled with amazement, admiration, and a trace of envy. Erik's performance captivated thousands of people, who could not contain their admiration for the young man. As they observed him from the screens, they speculated about his rank, past, and future.

The mercenary guild played its cards close to the vest, never disclosing the test-takers ranks. It was part of their policy, designed to protect the mercenaries and avoid unnecessary speculations.

Yet, Erik's performance stirred curiosity like never before, causing a gale to brew in the city. The viewers yearned to know more about him, to unravel the mystery of this masked Novice who'd taken the guild by storm. But for now, they could only watch and marvel at Erik Kay's prowess.

Chapter 516: The hooded man (3)

Erik stood before the masked man, his chest going through a consistent rise and fall as he did so. On the other hand, the man was huffing and puffing heavily while he was leaning against a wall. Sweat ran down his forehead and soaked into the material of his cloak as it made its way down. He cautiously looked over at Erik; his eyes widened in surprise and disbelief as he did so.

"Was all of this really necessary?" Erik began, his voice steady but stern, "You just made me waste a lot of time."

"Now, tell me..." he then added. "Where is the hostage?"

The hooded man shook his head, a crazed smile playing on his lips as he couldn't believe what just happened. "You fucking freak of nature. Shouldn't you be around the π rank? You are a damn novice! Your power... It's just not normal."

"I've told the clerks time and again that I've received private training," he replied, a note of irritation creeping into his voice. "But they just wouldn't listen."

The man stuttered, "But...but..." as he attempted to find the appropriate words to express his confusion. He appeared utterly perplexed as if the knowledge of Erik's power was slowly dawning on him. "Private training or not, it's simply impossible for you to be stronger than me. I am an Omicron rank, for heaven's sake. Your defeat was so effortless; you must at least be at the v level."

He stopped for a second and took a long, deep breath as he gathered his thoughts before continuing. When he did finally speak, there was an undercurrent of surprise that was difficult to ignore in the tone of his voice, which carried through the empty alley as he continued, "And to top it all off, you're only seventeen!" he exclaimed, his voice echoing in the quiet alley.

The hooded man's comment quickly became widespread throughout the livestream.

"He's only seventeen?"

The viewers couldn't believe what they were seeing and hearing and couldn't tear their gaze away from the screen as they saw the young mercenary who had displayed such astounding prowess.

"Such strength... and only at seventeen. He's truly a genius!" Someone commented to their friends. The man's words instantly sparked a heated discussion amongst the viewers.

"He must have been training since he was a kid," someone else suggested, awestruck by Erik's abilities.

The age he was said to be began to be a topic of speculation, which in turn fueled discussions about his past, his training routine, and the potential future that might lie ahead for him. The audience was mesmerized by Erik's ability, and the fact that he was still a teenager added a further layer of mystery to his character. Guilds wanted him more and more.

"To be so strong at such a young age, it's unheard of!" Many people expressed their amazement and marveled at Erik's strength and skill, which were far beyond his years.

The discussion thread was replete with conjectures and expressions of awe, with new comments piling up with each passing second. A good number of them referred to Erik as a prodigy due to his young age and the exceptional skill he demonstrated, which caused a wave of excitement.

The commentators continued to talk about Erik, and the sheer disbelief that could be heard in their voices was evidence of the imprint that he had made.

The fact that his age was brought up seemed to increase the sense of awe that was already present among the viewers, further solidifying the belief that Erik Kay was not merely a name to keep an eye out for but rather a genuine prodigy in the making that they had to get their hands on.

Erik had been cursing quietly to himself the whole time. He knew their conversation would be broadcast live to many viewers at their homes. His age became a topic of conversation among those on the platform at that point. However, he abruptly redirected the attention to the individual wearing the hood, a frown forming on his brow.

"Are you even qualified to do this job?" Erik snapped, criticizing him for the slip-up. "You should have known better than to disclose personal information during a live event."

The hooded man huffed, irritation flaring in his eyes. "That's hardly the point," he retorted, raising his voice over the lingering commotion of the arena. "You cheated during the fighting assessment. You can't overpower me so easily if you aren't at a much higher level than me!"

This means you held back during the assessment, which means the whole examination is pointless since everyone will be weaker than you. The test was meant to do exactly that: test you! Can you tell me what is the point if all of this will be a breeze for you?"

Erik scoffed at the accusation, crossing his arms defensively. "I didn't cheat," he countered, his voice steady and unwavering. "And those robots performed far better than you, honestly."

The individual wearing the hood appeared furious, as evidenced by a momentary widening of his eyes. Erik continued, paying close attention to the words he chose. "The problem isn't with my strength. It's with your predictability. You were too obvious with your attacks.

I could see them from miles away; you should return to training and learn the basics again because it's not me who is too strong; you are too damn weak!"

Erik's words caused the man in the hood to bristle, and you could see a wave of anger pass over his features. He spewed the words in a heated tone, "How dare you?!" Erik kept his cool in the face of his explosive outburst, showing no sign of flinching.

"What is Fair is fair," Erik said, his voice laced with a hint of challenge. "You disclosed my age. I'm merely offering my assessment of your fighting skills in return."

The man in the hood fell silent at that, his gaze remaining fixed on Erik. The young mercenary did not flinch in the face of his scrutiny and maintained eye contact with him. They were no longer in a fictitious city or the middle of a staged conflict. That was personal and as real as the sun.

"Enough of this nonsense, now," Erik said, his tone light, almost playful. "Just tell me where the hostage is, and let's end this charade."

The man's posture conveyed a sense of reluctance, reflected in the frown on his lips. He exhaled deeply while casting his eyes upwards for a moment, and then he turned his attention back to Erik.

His initial reluctance now gave way to a more accepting attitude. "Fine," he said, his tone communicating his acceptance of the situation. He took a deep breath before reciting the memorized line, his words carrying a certain rhythm, "I don't really know much; I only know that the person you're looking for was last seen at the place they call the 'Jasmine House' on the eastern outskirts of the city.

It's a building full of exotic flowers for sale. Now stop wasting time and go do your job."

Erik's grin was permanently fixed on his masked face, but his eyes narrowed as he focused on the words the man spoke in the hood.

During this time, the hooded man watched from a distance as the tension between them eased with each passing second. He had carried out his duties in this rehearsed performance by providing Erik with the information he was required to give him. It was up to Erik to locate the hostage at this point.

Chapter 517: The Jasmine house (1)

Erik emerged from the alley, his figure a blur against the exquisitely painted backdrop of the fictitious city.

The energy in the arena was high, with the bustling ambiance of the city adding to the authenticity of the experience. The low hum of robotic chatter filled the air, punctuated by the artificial echoes of city life.

He moved through the crowd of robots, his eyes scanning the area for the 'Jasmine House,' where the hostage was said to have been last spotted. The white sun was now directly overhead, illuminating the city and raising the temperature by several degrees.

Despite the arena being a closed space, with many buildings inside, there was enough space so that a strong wind went through the alleys carrying a light scent of motor oil and a floral undertone with it.

Erik walked until he arrived at what he considered to be the main street. A robot in a simple tunic stood off to the side, its metallic face expressionless.

"Excuse me," Erik said as he approached the figure, attempting to treat the robot as he would a person.

"Do you know where the Jasmine House is?" he inquired.

When the robot received the question, he responded in a synthetic voice, "Sorry, I don't know where this place is." Its monotonous tone stood in stark contrast to the vibrant cityscape around them.

<Oh, god, c'mon...> Erik thought in frustration.

"Thanks anyway," Erik said as he exited the building.

The young man persisted in his pursuit, eventually stopping another robot after some time. He received the same response, "I don't know." He was getting more and more frustrated. The clock was ticking, and every second he wasted could affect his final score.

Erik pushed on, a determined glint in his eyes despite the next two robots' disheartening responses. While searching for clues, he stopped at a fruit vendor stall. The robotic clerk was having a

transaction with another of these fake citizens. The robot handed a bag with some pears inside, and as soon as it was free, Erik approached it and asked his question.

"The Jasmine House?" The fruit seller's mechanical head tilted slightly, its voice mimicking thoughtfulness once it heard Erik's question.

"Yes, indeed. The Jasmine House, a shop selling exotic flowers, where is it?" Erik added.

"If I'm not mistaken, it should be to the city's south. Try seeing there..." The robot replied.

Erik's face was flushed with relief. He thanked the robot and immediately departed. Erik already knew where the hostage was thanks to the biological supercomputer, but he had to pretend he didn't and look for clues that would bring him there.

Of course, as soon as he got a good enough hint, he'd pretend to have a lucky break and head to the right place, or so was the plan. Everything hinged on what kind of clue he was going to get.

Erik turned south, his pace quickening as he embarked on the next leg of his mission. The city buzzed around him, oblivious to the fake drama taking place in its midst. His next destination was now clear: the Jasmine House.

The young man discovered the Jasmine House in the heart of the city's southern part, nestled among the twisted labyrinth of narrow streets and multi-story buildings. The shop was a charming two-story building with a stone facade bathed in the warm hues of the sun.

The shop's name was hand-painted on a wooden sign above the entrance, its letters golden written on top of a cobalt blue backdrop.

The shop windows were adorned with an array of brightly colored flowers, their vibrant hues complementing the rustic charm of the setting. There were also flower paints on the glass, giving the place a charming look.

Butterflies floated among the blooms, their wings gleaming in the simulated sunlight, and bees could be seen buzzing here and there to collect pollen.

The entrance was a cascade of purple and white wisterias, their petals dusted with a layer of faux dew and glistening like tiny crystals.

<So... this is the Jasmine House,> the young man thought as he stood before the structure.

He paused for a moment, standing at the Jasmine House's threshold. A wave of floral scent washed over him as he pushed the ornate door open.

The rustling of leaves and petals from the plants filling to the brim of the shop's surroundings drowned out the wooden door's creaking as Erik opened it. As he stepped in, his boots echoed on the tile floor.

Under his mask, he looked around the interior, his gaze sharp and analytical. The shop had high ceilings on which rows and rows of plant pots were hanging above.

The floor was a complex mosaic of tiles worn and chipped over a long time. At least, this was what Erik thought was the goal of whoever made this setting by making the tiles look that way.

More sturdy shelves lined the walls, filled with flower pots of various sizes, creating an inviting atmosphere. The goal was to lure customers to get in.

The robotic florists, tending to the plants and rushing in and out of the shop as they were moving and watering plants, turned to look at Erik as he moved deeper inside. Their metallic bodies gleamed in the light, and the bulbs of their eyes shone with a soft, neutral light as they cared for their charges.

A winding staircase shrouded in artificial ivy beckoned at the room's far end. The second floor couldn't be seen. Erik didn't have the need, but he bet more plants were there. The young man's gaze lingered briefly on the staircase before returning to the rest of the shop.

His gaze was drawn to a figure who seemed out of place among the mechanized residents of the Jasmine House. She was hunched over a workbench in the shop's corner while arranging flowers and pots.

Her chestnut hair was pulled back into a messy bun, and she appeared in her mid-twenties. Her pale skin was lightly freckled, and her high cheekbones gave her an air of sophistication.

Her outfit was simple: a floral print dress that flowed down her ankles. A smudge of soil on her cheek gave her an earthy appearance.

Her hands moved with the fluidity, gracefulness, and precision of a seasoned florist. It was like she had done that job for many years.

Erik observed her as she delicately handled each stem and trimmed what needed removal.

She appeared oblivious to Erik's presence, engrossed in her task despite the noise Erik made while he entered the building. He realized he'd found the person to give him the next lead.

Chapter 518: The Jasmine house (2)

"Excuse me!" Erik said.

The woman froze mid-motion the second he spoke to get her attention. She took a sharp turn and put on an evidently well-practiced look of surprise. If Erik didn't already know she was an actress, he would have thought everything was normal; that was her skill level. The woman looked at his guard uniform, her eyes widening as she didn't expect Erik to dress as a guard. That was a good move.

"My name is Officer Guld," he introduced himself with a fake surname, his voice firm and authoritative. "I'm a member of the city guard, and I'm here to ask you some questions."

"Good morning, officer," said the woman. Of course, she knew it was all a ruse, but she appreciated Erik's approach to the quest; it was good because it demonstrated his determination to go to any length to achieve his goal.

Erik quickly continued, "We are currently investigating a missing case. According to our sources, the event took place here. Would you mind recounting exactly what happened?"

"Sure, officer," she affirmed, her voice steady. "To be honest, I already explained this to the other guards, but I will do anything I can to help you catch those brutes," she said, fitting perfectly in her role. "I guess you want to confirm things, am I right?"

Erik nodded, appreciating the woman's willingness to assist. She was playing a part in the scenario, but her sincerity was convincing.

<I should really take some acting lessons, this is more useful than I thought,> he said to himself.

"I came here after my colleagues to ensure we didn't miss anything," Erik replied to the woman's words. The last thing he wanted to do was annoy her. The problem was that, in the setting the guild prepared, there weren't cameras available because they were in an ancient city, so the Novices taking the test had to rely on statements.

Of course, if the circumstances had been different, Erik would have said something different or found a different excuse, and in real life, he would have simply hacked a camera.

She gave a quick blink. However, the woman quickly regained her composure, nodding slowly as she set down the flowers she was arranging.

"All right, let me start from the beginning," she said, her voice tinged with gloom. "It was around midday, and the shop was quite crowded. Lucy, the Mayor's daughter, was present. She's a regular as she is someone who enjoys flowers and plants, and as much as she told me, she also has a private garden she tends at her home."

Her face fell as she recounted what happened next. "Five masked men burst in; I'd never seen anything like that before. They entered without even looking around; they knew who they were searching for and knew what they had to do to get her as fast and efficiently as possible."

She described their rough voices, harsh commands, and the terrifying moment when they grabbed the Mayor's daughter and dragged her out the back door with fear in her eyes.

"Lucy tried to run, and she did, but they caught her easily," she continued, her eyes welling up with tears. "How could they? She's only a young girl!"

She related the events that transpired in great detail; her performance was great, as Erik would have believed her if he didn't know she was an actress. Her eyes were clearly filled with dread and anxiety, which added a layer of credibility to her performance.

Erik listened attentively, trying to get some clue from her story. He never took his eyes off of her, carefully monitoring every muscle twitch and facial expression shift, listening to every single word.

"They didn't take anything else," she said, swallowing the lump in her throat. "Aside from Lucy's guards, nobody was harmed. They simply took Lucy and fled. Everything happened in the blink of an eye."

She paused, her eyes filled with desperate hope as she looked at Erik. "Please, you must find her. She's a kind little girl, and she doesn't deserve this."

"We will do what we can. However, I need more information. Is there something you noticed that was out of the ordinary? Anything you found weird?"

"I couldn't see their faces because they were hidden beneath their hoods," the woman explained. "But one thing I remember was this strange pin they wore on their sleeves," she said.

"It was weird because it is clear a pin would hint at their identity."

She then held up her hand, her fingers drawing a picture in the air. "The symbol was circular, like a snail's shell, but it wasn't symmetrical. There were three lines that protruded outwards from the right side, like sun rays."

Her eyes narrowed in concentration as she tried to provide as much detail as she could. "The lines were irregularly spaced. The top line was slightly curved upwards, the middle line was straight, and the bottom line was curved downward. Each line ended with a small circle."

She sighed. "That's the best way I can put it." It was unlike anything I'd ever seen before. It was very strange."

"Thank you," Erik said, nodding gratefully. He was already aware of what he had to do, find the guys with the pins, and he already had an idea where to find them. Truth be told, Erik noticed the brooch on some of the robots' rebels where he fought against the previous actor.

He didn't pay any mind to it then because the pin meant nothing, but given what he learned now, everything started to make sense.

Erik assumed that if the actor played the part of an agitator belonging to a group, but he didn't have the brooch, it meant there was another group doing the same thing, at least in the fake story the guild came up with.

"Do you remember anything else about them?" He continued, his tone gentle but firm. "Their stature, build, or the tone of their voices. Every detail could be critical."

The woman fell silent, her gaze fixed on a spot on the ground as she tried to remember more. She began to speak after a few moments, her voice slightly trembling as she delved into the terrifying memory. "They were tall...and wore dark robes," she said softly, her gaze distant. "Their voices were low and husky, and they spoke in a foreign language."

Obviously, the robot Erik saw with the pin, among the ones clashing with the guards, did not dress like this, but the brooch was present. It was most likely used to inform the other parties that a member of this fictitious organization was agitating the crowd.

Then the woman clenched her so tightly that her knuckles turned white. "They moved with precision as if they had meticulously planned it," she continued, her voice growing stronger. "There was also a distinct scent...like burnt wood and...and metal. That's all I can recall."

<Well, this doesn't help me much, but I guess that in this fake setting, this would mean that this is a highly trained group,> the young man thought.

Erik nodded at his own deduction, carefully storing all of the information the woman gave him in his mind. Each detail she provided could help him get closer to his goal. He thanked the woman once more, assuring her that the authorities would do everything in their power to find and prosecute the perpetrators.

After saying a few words of comfort to her, he left the Jasmine House, determined to save the hostage and complete his mission stronger than ever.

Chapter 519: The Robot

"The brooch, uh...?" Erik said out loud in a contemplative manner.

His mind raced with thoughts as he navigated the artificial city's streets. He thought again at the brooch-wielding robot he had seen during the battle in front of the grand building. The brooch was the same as the one the woman at the Jasmine House described; there was no doubt about it.

If he was in real life and not on a quest made by the guild, everything meant he was dealing with an organized group. Not that this was a problem.

He remembered the robot's actions during the fight. It had remained out of the brawl, almost out of place, despite the chaos. Despite occasionally beating some of the guards, its eyes had remained calm and collected, devoid of the chaotic energy that engulfed the square and the other artificial creatures.

However, despite this, it didn't stay idle, as it often shouted something and incited the crowd to be more violent.

Erik's mind raced as he retraced his steps back to the riot scene. The brooch was unobtrusive, and he would have missed it if it hadn't been for Hais's brain crystal power and all the intelligence points it provided.

Erik was rushing back to the scene of the riot; luckily, it was still going on, as testified by the loud noises he heard from a distance. However, if the robot was still, there was another matter, and he could learn about it only when he reached the place. The rest was up to chance.

As Erik got closer to the site of the revolt, the air became denser and denser, a palpable sense of unease clouding the otherwise peaceful day.

The sound of the fight became louder, and he started hearing the symphony of agitated robotic voices, metal clanging against metal, and the distinct thud of robotic bodies hitting the cobblestones in the distance. The city's calm quickly faded, replaced by a resonating hum of impending chaos.

The robotic citizens around him mirrored the uneasy atmosphere. Their routine movements had become erratic, with tension visible in their postures and rapid pacing. Some glanced toward the fight's direction as they, too, heard the sounds. Some Simply ran away.

The clamor grew louder as he approached the scene of the revolt. The distant unrest had become a full-blown revolt. Erik's feet seemed to vibrate subtly to the sound traveling through the space, mirroring the fight's beat as it resonated through the city.

Even though Erik was no stranger to conflict and upheaval, he was taken aback by the scene that unfolded as he returned to the city's heart, mainly because this was a fake situation created by the guild.

<Jeez... these guys in Etrium don't make half-assed things. This is a fucking movie!>

What had previously been a minor skirmish had erupted into a full-fledged revolt, and the entire city appeared to be on the verge of chaos.

The scale of the riot had significantly increased, now involving a massive crowd of robotic citizens. The unrest had spread from the square to the surrounding streets and avenues like wildfire through a parched forest.

Robotic figures in simple tunics clashed with metallic figures dressed as guards. Shouts, clangs, and crashes filled the air as metallic fists clashed. Bots were thrown through shop windows, and crude barricades made of furniture and debris were quickly erected.

Despite being outnumbered, the guards fought valiantly, their movements swift and precise. Nonetheless, the number of assailants seemed limitless, with robotic citizens pouring in like a metallic tide from side streets and alleyways. It was clear the agitators made their job splendidly, or at least that was what the guild wanted to show.

Erik stood still amid the chaos, his sharp eyes scanning the crowd. Finding a single robot amid this riot was like looking for a needle in a haystack. He didn't, however, have the time or the option to give up.

<Damn... I wouldn't need to do all of this in real life. I simply needed to hack some servers and some cameras, and I would find any hostage I was searching for...>

Erik started looking around since there was nothing he could do about the situation. His gaze darted across the scene, searching for the one-of-a-kind brooch among the sea of agitated robots.

He knew that even a fleeting glimpse of that symbol could lead him to his next clue. Even that seemed daunting amid the chaos and destruction. On the other hand, Erik knew better than to back down from a challenge.

Erik finally spotted his target after what seemed like an eternity of wading through the torrent of artificial unrest.

One figure stood out among the sea of unyielding metal and flailing mechanical limbs.

It was a medium-sized robot with a physical appearance that was indistinguishable from hundreds of others in the crowd.

It moved with a calculated calmness that contrasted sharply with the fierce robots surrounding it, dressed in a faded burgundy tunic. Its metallic skin was dented and scuffed, indicating that it had been involved in the ongoing conflict despite its attempt at staying out of it as much as possible.

Erik initially noticed it due to this bizarrely calm behavior in the midst of the confusion, his trained eyes immediately focusing on the anomaly.

However, it was the glint on the robot's chest that made him understand he found his target. A brooch that bore an uncanny resemblance to the symbol described by the woman at Jasmine House was nestled on top of the robot's tunic, almost lost in the folds of the fabric.

Erik felt a rush of adrenaline when he saw the brooch. He knew he was on the right track, and this was a critical piece of information in his quest.

<I hope this guy would simply lead me to where the hostage is being kept...> Erik sighed. It was frustrating knowing where the target was but being unable to go there directly for fear of being discovered by the viewers.

Even in the midst of the riot, Erik managed to keep his gaze fixed on the robot. He knew that losing sight of it in this chaos could mean the difference between his mission's success and failure.

Chapter 520: A small chase

The situation outside the arena was in turmoil. People from homes, bars, and establishments watched the events unfold on their devices with bated breath. They didn't know if Erik found the robot; the stream didn't show everything.

Glued to the live feed, one viewer at the guild exclaimed as soon as he saw Erik make his move, "The kid is onto something!"

"It's the one with the brooch!" Exclaimed one, noticing what Erik was looking at.

"It's leaving the scene!" exclaimed another, pointing to the holographic screen.

"Yes, and Erik is following him," a third voice said. "Let's see how this will unfold; maybe the kid can find where the hostage is. But he must stay low and keep a safe distance, which is a wise move."

All eyes were fixed on Erik, the mysterious novice; the ever-growing number of followers saw him as a strategic and combative mastermind based on what they had seen until now, and he was now being lauded as a genius.

That was because he was able to stay calm throughout the uprising, find a specific robot from a sea of others, and at the same time stay hidden from the robot, all of which were examples of the exceptional abilities he partially showcased during the other tests.

Since it was clear, the robot ended his job and left the place. The other robots' enthusiasm reached a fever pitch as it made its way down the tiny side street away from the disturbance. In the meantime, Erik followed the robot while maintaining his distance, avoiding the other robots and killing some as they tried to attack him.

"Damn, this is getting interesting," a spectator murmured, leaning forward in anticipation. "Will he catch up to that robot?"

Every heartbeat echoed the chase's suspense. The whispers became louder, filling the rooms where the live stream was being shown and flooding the chat boxes with comments. Their hearts raced along with Erik's, and their breaths held as he navigated the treacherous undercurrents of the fictitious city.

Erik found himself following the robot through a maze of winding alleyways. The artificial creature was unaware it had been followed and kept moving with stealth, making Erik's task all the more difficult. Nonetheless, while impressive, the robot's attempts to blend in with the other robot characters did not catch Erik off guard.

"Whoever designed this simulation," Erik reflected, his gaze never leaving the robot before him, "really knew what they were doing; this is fucking incredible."

Erik marveled at the level of detail put into all of this. The city, the robots, and their actions had an almost surreal sense of life and believability. The cries of the vendors, laughter from a nearby inn, and even the scent of freshly baked bread wafting through the air from a fake baker's stand added to the realism.

The young man darted from one shadow to the next, mirroring the robot's pace and direction while keeping a safe distance.

He carefully observed the robot, noting its demeanor, pace, and nervous glances over its shoulder. The AI appeared to have been programmed to mimic human anxiety and fear. Erik was astounded by the detail that had gone into these simulations.

But while the robot replicated nervousness, he was calm and collected, as he knew the robot was going into the heart of the city, the heart of his quest, toward the location where, according to what he discovered thanks to the Biological Supercomputer, the hostage was being held.

<So, this is it, isn't it?> Erik mused silently, his gaze fixed on the robot's back. <It is leading me right to the hostage. Isn't this happening too fast?>

Erik knew where the hostage was, and finding a robot guiding him to the location was a stroke of luck. Erik's assessment of the situation was this: he would arrive at the building, and he had to see if the hostage was there. From the average person's point of view, the place could be just one of many; they wouldn't know where the hostage was or if it was there.

Maybe the place was not that heavily guarded to misguide the test taker, or it could have been the opposite, trying to discourage the test taker from approaching the place.

Everything was possible. Erik experienced an adrenaline rush as he maneuvered through the bustling fake city's streets. The thought of what could be in the building heightened his awareness and prompted a quickening of his pace. The steady beat of his heart that he could feel against his ribs was in sync with the pattern of his thoughts.

He became even more sensitive to his environment, and the cacophony of sounds around him began to be amplified. He didn't let anything get past his ears or eyes.

<Damn robot, how long must I wait before you get to that damn building?!> Erik also didn't want to lose the robot because it brought him to the correct location. If he lost it, he would be forced to search for more leads, wasting more time. At a certain point, the robot turned behind to see if it had been followed, and Erik was forced to duck behind a stall as the robot did so.

<So, I'm assuming that the robots acting as agitators represent a group that wants to depose the mayor. They instigated a revolt and kidnapped his daughter to accomplish this. If that didn't work, they'd try to assassinate the mayor.>

Erik kept trying to explain the situation. For sure, all of this had to have a background. He doubted the guild didn't go into this much detail about things after what it had done with the location itself.

This made Erik feel awe and reverence for the people who designed the test, which permeated his consciousness.

Erik maintained a safe distance from the robot but was getting impatient and wanted to smash it to pieces. Erik's heart pounded in his chest as the robot turned one final corner. And then, they finally arrived at their destination.