

## BIOLOGICAL 521

### Chapter 521: Finding the right place

Unaware of its pursuer, the robot walked straight into the building, disappearing from Erik's sight.

<I'm finally here,> he thought, sighing relief. He only needed to get the hostage out now to finish the test. He still had to act as if he had no idea this place was holding the hostage he was tasked with rescuing.

The structure Erik found himself in front of possessed an understated but grand air about it. At first glance, there did not appear to be any significant differences between it and the other fake-aged architecture that made up the city. It was constructed from a stone with a sand-colored hue, and it sat there unobtrusively among its siblings.

It appeared to be attempting to blend in or hide in plain sight. It was a substantial building that reached a height of three stories and gave off the impression of solidity. There were hidden rooms and maze-like corridors on each floor, which were identifiable by rows of small rectangular windows.

The foundation of the building was sturdy and unremarkable, and the sole distinguishing feature was a sizable wooden door.

The stone seemed to have a life of its own thanks to the creeping growth of moss-green vines, which gave the impression that the building was much older than its actual age. However, a more sinister undercurrent that Erik could feel but couldn't place overshadowed the location's charming allure.

Erik knew this building was anything but what it appeared to be from every angle. Its seemingly unremarkable exterior served as a mask and a facade. The last piece of his mission was hidden in this building, which did not seem particularly noteworthy at first glance.

Standing at the threshold of the ordinary-looking building, Erik took a moment to survey his surroundings. His senses were on high alert; he analyzed every robot that passed by, every seemingly mundane activity.

An eerie sense of normalcy hung in the air, but Erik wasn't fooled by it. The ordinary pedestrians going about their day, the vendors hawking their wares, the laborers hauling their goods, all were too typical, too perfectly conforming to the city's rhythm.

Despite the near-flawless simulation of a busy day in a bustling city, Erik knew better. The exact moment he went inside the arena, he asked the Biological Supercomputer to find the hostage, and it not only did that but also told him the robots around the location all had the order to guard that place and to intervene in case they saw the test taker, Erik, go inside.

The robots, in their ancient-looking tunics and mannerisms mirroring human quirks, were excellently maintaining the illusion of a typical day. They interacted, argued, and laughed as if they were living out their lives in this simulated world. Any other mercenary would have been fooled, yet Erik knew these were all scripted interactions, an elaborate stage play.

<I swear, everything is starting to give me the creeps, he thought as his gaze fell on a pair of robots haggling over the price of a sack of grains.

One was a robust figure; the other was frail, bent with "age." Their conversation flowed naturally, and their body language perfectly aligned with their argument.

Again, Erik couldn't help but marvel at the level of detail and the perfect execution of human-like traits in the robots. However, as he examined them more, he noticed the brooches they wore—they had the same symbol he had seen on the robot he had trailed, meaning they were part of the group as well.

He wasn't dealing with regular robots anymore. He was amidst an artificial organization designed to test him to his limits.

Leaning casually against the sun-warmed stone of an adjacent building, Erik studied the three-story structure where the hostage was held. A logical part of him considered the straightforward approach of walking through the main entrance and killing everyone before freeing the hostage.

This bold plan was appealing; it would make for an exciting spectacle for those watching the livestream, and he could showcase his skills to the viewers outside.

While contemplating rushing in, his attention was drawn to the solid and beautifully crafted wooden doors at the front of the building. There was no question that they concealed additional, possibly more powerful guards who were ready to repel any surprise attack.

Even though it may have been exciting, a confrontation may quickly become a large-scale battle. As Erik deliberated over what to do, he quickly considered that the robots might "kill" the hostage. That would, for sure, make his mission fail. Since an indiscriminate battle might endanger her and, in turn, jeopardize his scores in the test.

He then looked at the array of windows dotting the building's facade. The second floor had several large windows for him to slip through.

His thoughts began formulating a strategy: he could scale the building's stone exterior, sneak inside, and avoid alerting the guards. This was the general outline of his plan. However, the instant the thought occurred, he immediately recognized a problem. Although the climb wouldn't be challenging, ascending would attract unwanted attention.

The stealthy approach would be rendered useless when one of the guards noticed him, resulting in the same situation as the direct assault.

Erik rubbed his chin, lost in thought. He realized that neither plan was foolproof. Each had its problems and risks. Yet he also understood that the test was designed to be so. It wasn't meant to be easy; it wasn't meant to have a clear, simple solution.

He was being tested not just on his strengths but also his strategies and ability to assess a situation and make the best decision considering all variables.

There was a third option, but Erik wanted to start thinking about it when he had exhausted all his other options.

He narrowed his eyes, and his brain began to search for a solution that would not only assist him in achieving his objective but also ensure the hostage's safety at the same time. He was looking for a way to accomplish both of these things simultaneously.

Erik quickly surveyed his immediate environment and determined that he needed a more comprehensive perspective of the area. As a result, he retreated a few alleys and began scaling the building. Additionally, this would prevent people from seeing him.

## Chapter 522: The Options

From his vantage point on a nearby building, Erik's eyes homed in on his target, the building where the hostage was held.

His eyes roved across the rooftop, taking in the sight of the weathered tiles and the twisted vines that lent an illusion of ancientness to the freshly erected edifice.

Amidst the tapestry of monotonous rhythms that adorned the rooftop, a miniature window beckoned to him. A potential point of entry, perhaps.

The place was positioned slightly askew, its window reflecting the gentle radiance of the sun. Erik peered into the hazy barrier, unable to determine what lay beyond. Yet he was sure of one thing: sentinels would be present.

He had seen enough similar situations to know that no sensible captor would leave a potential entrance unguarded. He was thinking about his approach, but he also knew he needed to act quickly to dispel any danger before an alarm could be sounded.

Even though Erik found himself in a complicated situation, he couldn't help but appreciate the careful plotting that had gone into crafting this elaborate scenario.

The building looked plain on the outside, but inside, robots were pretending to be people so well that it was almost creepy. It was clear that they were being very careful and thorough in their examination.

Erik readied himself, gazing upon the rooftop for a final inspection. His gaze absorbed the arrangement, the position of the window, and the swiftest route leading to it. At this moment, with every passing second, he held great significance.

He inhaled deeply, allowing oxygen to fill his lungs and give him the energy to do what he was tasked to do, before exhaling with a calm and measured flow.

Erik found himself moving over the city's roofs with the elegance and accuracy of a seasoned acrobat. He was wearing soft-soled boots, so there was very little noise made by his movement.

He observed the surroundings of the city. The buildings were crammed together in close proximity to one another and ranged in height but were not higher than four stories. The place was enormous since the arena itself was massive.

The sun had moved lower in the sky, producing shadows that moved and changed positions on the surfaces below him and partially concealed the young man.

However, he continued to direct his attention toward the goal that lay in front of him. To avoid tumbling off the rooftop, Erik made it a point to pay constant attention to the route before him as he proceeded.

When Erik arrived at the most remote part of his intended path, he stopped for a while. Because there was some activity up ahead, he tried to conceal his location as best he could.

Erik moved ahead after the robots were out of the way, shifting his focus to the roof of the target building. As soon as the opportunity presented itself, he sprung into action and began walking toward the intended destination.

Having carefully maneuvered his way across the rooftops, Erik finally arrived at his destination. He jumped over the parapet of the target's roof like a phantom. With catlike agility, he skulked towards the small window that beckoned him to enter the building.

Erik's probing attention was drawn to the inside of the window. From there, he could see a room through the dust-streaked glass. It had all the makings of a storage area—an attic packed with boxes and chests.

The only light source in the room was a solitary hanging lamp that cast twisted shadows across the sloping wooden walls.

Erik could make out two robotic forms in the room, their metal bodies shimmering in the artificial light.

Their rigid motions and exquisite stillness when idle revealed their non-human origins. They were stationed at a door on the far side of the room, their presence indicating that it was a very important location.

It was probably a place where the robots kept their gold and some valuable artifacts. Their metal hands rested on the sheathed sword handles kept at their sides, ready to draw and attack at the slightest sound.

The room was littered with open containers containing a unique collection of counterfeit goods.

These cases were strewn carelessly over the worn wooden floorboards. The containers were filled to the brim with gleaming gold coins packed so high that they spilled over the sides.

Fake gems of every shape and hue glinted at Erik from velvet-lined platters as the lantern light cast an artificial glow; the jewel tones of the fake jewels shone unnaturally brightly, and the robots did not care about the value the false jewels had in this staged environment.

The scenery was breathtaking. Once again, Erik was left utterly dumbfounded due to the degree of detail the guild placed into the phony mission.

The sight indicated the meticulous preparation that had set up this stage for his evaluation, but it was weird to see that it had been done so well.

Erik couldn't help but have respect for the guild after learning that they went to such lengths to make it seem as if the young guy wasn't participating in a mission they manufactured but rather a genuine one.

As he continued to stay out of sight and flattened himself against the roofs, the robots continued to be ignorant of his existence.

As Erik began plotting his next move, his thoughts started moving at breakneck speed. The existence of the robots was problematic since it raised the possibility that his mission might be compromised.

He had to care for them as soon as possible, even though the situation could have been more complex. It was vital for him to pay attention to how he completed the task and the amount of time he spent doing it.

Soon enough, his attention was drawn back to the window itself. That was the only way he could have entered.

Anxiety coursed through his veins as he began to arrange his assault, and his eyes darted between the robots, the valuables, the window, and the door that would bring him downstairs. His gaze was darting back and forth between the locations.

Chapter 523: The Only entrance

Erik crept discreetly atop the targeted structure, and the crowd riveted to the screens watched with rapt concentration. As the viewers waited for Erik's next move, hushed murmurs permeated the chatrooms and platforms.

"Seems tough," one spectator said as he tapped away at his computer. "Two guards are inside; they'll attack and alert the others if they notice anything. Wonder what he'll do?"

Another, on the other hand, was full of praise, saying, "Look at how he's analyzing the situation. The youngster is bright. He's just seventeen, yet he knows more about how to do this than many seasoned mercenaries. He is very brilliant."

The reaction was replicated throughout the internet: a combination of anxiety, excitement, and absolute astonishment at the young man's skill.

Erik was in a difficult position, and everyone was watching to see how he handled it.

They'd seen him outwit the hooded guy in the alley, travel the city, and even hunt down the kidnapper during a riot.

They were watching him skulk on a rooftop, preparing for a new assignment. They were fully aware of the situation's complexities, knowing that one wrong move may risk the hostage's safety.

"He's been cautious about not gaining attention, focusing on gathering information first," said a seasoned spectator with a profound grasp of such operations. His approach was methodical and exact. He isn't merely depending on his physical abilities."

Many others agreed, noting Erik's strategy of following the robot from the riot and utilizing it to bring him to the building as proof of his intellect and tactical understanding. They were filled with admiration and respect as they watched Erik's every action and choice.

Simultaneously, discussion raged over whether the captive was in the building or another place where he could get a hint out of the situation. "What if it's just another hint leading to the real location?" wondered someone.

Others speculated that the guarded entrance indicated something important. The conjecture added to the suspense and excitement as the crowd waited for Erik's next move.

Erik's awe for his deft moves, incredible physical capability, and, most of all, his strategic thinking grew with each passing instant. As the suspense increased, all eyes were locked on the live broadcast, and the whole city held its breath, waiting to see what the young mercenary would do next.

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Erik took a deep breath and focused his sight through the little rooftop window on the soldiers. He was crouched down on the rooftop, unseen for the time being, his mind occupied with calculations.

<Okay, two guards in the room,> he said, beginning his internal assessment. <It's a storage room, cluttered but spacious enough. I could make use of that.>

<Noise,> he acknowledged, knowing that one wrong step could set the coins clattering, alerting the guards before he could act. <I better avoid those,> he decided, marking a mental pathway around the hazards.

He observed the guards' positions and movements. <They're alert but focused on the door, not the window. I could use that,> he reasoned, seeing the guards' half-turned backs to the window.

<Quick and silent,> Erik reminded himself. <I need to get in there and take them down before they can raise an alarm.> He had the advantage of surprise, but that would last only a few precious seconds.

He stretched his fingers and rotated his shoulders to ease the stress. <Okay, Erik,> he told himself as he prepared to move.

<You've done worse in the past. Let's get started.> Erik braced himself for the struggle ahead by taking one last look at the chamber below. He knew what he needed to do; it was simply a matter of doing it.

He decided it was time to move, pushing aside his doubts and bracing himself for action. Erik softly unlatched the window on the rooftop. He raised it with studied tenderness, letting himself have a tiny opening.



He slithered through with care, his motions as fluid and quiet as a phantom in the darkness. He merged into the shadows as soon as his feet hit the littered floor of the storage room, his presence almost invisible to the untrained eye.

Erik proceeded with the precision of a seasoned infiltrator, navigating his way amid the strewn cases and other goods. His gaze was fixed on the two robotic guards, and his senses became alert to any shift in the robots' postures or concentration.

The robots did not flinch; their backs were still turned towards him. They were utterly unaware of Erik's presence, which would be a fatal error.

Erik drew closer, his footsteps barely audible against the stone floor. He sprung into action when he was finally within striking reach of the closest guard.

Erik stretched out, his hand clasp around the robot's neck in a fast, graceful gesture. He used his augmented strength to apply lethal pressure, tearing the robot's head from its body in one smooth motion.

Erik seized the falling corpse before it could strike the ground and alert the other guard. With the same breath, he flung the severed robotic head at the other guard.

When the robot heard the sound, it spun abruptly, its mechanical eyes settling on the projectile heading towards it. But Erik was already there when it turned.

Erik was on it before the second guard could comprehend what was happening. He killed it with the same brutal efficiency. His hand flew out, catching the robot's neck, and with a quick, lethal pull, the robot's head parted from its body.

The two guards fell to the ground silently. Erik loomed above them, a shadow in the weak light, his presence as subtle and lethal as a ghost in the night, even though the sun was still shining.

The only sound in the room was the faint hum of the false metropolis outside. Erik had entered the building unseen, eliminated the guards, and successfully penetrated inside without making a sound.

Erik switched his focus to the entrance that the guards had been guarding now that his initial hurdle had been overcome.

His task needed to be completed, and he knew the ultimate test awaited him. But for the time being, he took a deep breath before plunging farther into the unknown.

#### Chapter 524: The Last Floor

Erik found himself standing before the door that opened into the belly of the structure. He waited a while, listening intently for any sign of anything wrong.

Nothing except the bustle of the city outside reached his ears instead. The fact that the stillness persisted reassured him, so he slowly opened the door and peered inside the stairway beyond it.

After descending the stairs, Erik stood in front of a different door. He could see through the openings in the door and noticed that the materials used in the corridor inside had changed from those used on the outside and in the attic. They went to planks of highly light wood, which appeared to be mahogany.

The corridor was lit thanks to some torch sconces placed in strategic locations that illuminated the walls and the floor, plus the sunlight penetrated inside through the glass windows on either side of the structure.

A heavy atmosphere was in the air like a veil of suspense permeating every corner of the hall.

Robotic guards were stationed across the whole length of the corridor; each one of them had the emblem of the unknown organization on their upper chest.

They moved in a mechanical rhythmic pattern, and the clanking of their steel bodies added a distinct metal sound to the otherwise quiet place.

Dark robes have been covering them, and hoods have hidden their faces. The only identifying characteristic was the mysterious emblem pinned to each of their brooches.

They marched back and forth along the length of the corridor, their strides perfectly timed to an invisible beat, their mechanized eyes scouring the area for any indication of an intruder.

In contrast to the watchmen stationed in the attic, these were taller and seemed more menacing.

Erik observed what he could of their metallic bodies. They were made with a metallic alloy that shimmered, and their motions revealed deadly speed and agility. That, of course, wasn't enough to threaten him.

In addition to that, they were periodically inspecting each door as well as the area around them.

Erik crept back and concealed himself behind the door that was just slightly cracked open while he quickly pieced together a strategy in his head.

However, even though there were only two of them, they were far more dangerous than any previous robots he faced in this fake quest.

Aside from that, he was sure that there were further foes in the other rooms—robots that were fulfilling the role the check designers had assigned to them. Their attentive patrols and periodic door checks added layers of challenge to his mission.

The doors likely held rooms where the hostage was potentially held, and it was apparent he needed to navigate this maze without alerting the swarm of mechanized sentinels if he wanted to find the hostage without arousing suspicions.

After sweeping the corridor, he quickly withdrew into the dimly lit attic and quietly locked the door behind him.

This was the beginning of his infiltration, and Erik understood that he had a risky game of stealth and method ahead of him. Erik found himself grappling with the predicament.

From a tactical standpoint, the corridor was a challenging obstacle course. The robots' uniform patrol pattern and systematic door checks signified an impeccable level of security and vigilance. Each door was a potential jackpot, possibly sheltering the hostage he was tasked with saving.

Yet there was a twist. The biological supercomputer had already provided him with information on the specific location of the captive. He was chillingly aware of the fact that the mayor's daughter had been hidden behind one of the doors and that she had been hidden on the ground below. Despite this, he was required to put on a convincing act of ignorance for the benefit of the streaming audience.

He contemplated, his mind shifting through countless strategies and tactics. He could barge into each room impeccably, disposing of the robots with brute strength.

However, by employing that method, there was a possibility that the whole building would be alerted, which would put the hostage's safety in jeopardy and cause needless turmoil.

Aside from that, every room that he stormed into and found empty of the captive would lend credence to the notion that he lacked any experience.

Besides, each room he burst into and found devoid of the hostage would solidify his façade of ignorance. Yet an element of uncertainty hung over him. Could he surprise everyone by disabling the robots in each area without raising any suspicions? If a robot saw him looking inside, he had no choice but to destroy it if caught.

An alternate strategy darted across his mind. Disguise. If he could put on the uniforms of the security personnel, he could blend in with them and enter the rooms by pretending to conduct routine inspections. However, this scheme, like the others, was laden with dangers.

If all of the robots were assigned specific jobs and one of them did something that wasn't supposed to be done, it might quickly raise a red flag.

His mind wandered to the fallen guards above, still wearing their uniforms. He could easily dress up as one of them, but the overwhelming risk of being discovered dissuaded him from doing so.

The fake organization running this building was far too sophisticated for a simple trick like this. Any erratic behavior or irrational action might be recognized.

Ultimately, he concluded that the best action would be to adhere to stealth. Stealth turned out to be his best friend in this quest, and he would need to use every one of his skills to get past each floor successfully.

He would play the part of the phantom infiltrator, always toeing the line between visibility and obscurity. To free the captive while maintaining his clueless appearance, he must draw from the vast reservoir of patience he had built up over the years while waiting for the right opportunity to act and complete the quest.

After collecting his thoughts, he readjusted his hold on the door handle, cast a last peek over his shoulder at the guard robots, and then got ready to begin the difficult journey of stealth. The game was far from over, and Erik was all in.

Erik pressed his hand against the door, inhaling deeply as he steeled himself. At the same time, Erik drew a deep breath to harden himself; he put his palm against the door. After that, he slowly opened the door, entering the dimly lit hallway like a ghost.

His footsteps echoed on the stone surface, representing a carefully weighted gamble.

The dim light that emanated from the many wall sconces flickered and produced an irregular dance of shadows, which provided him with some degree of cover.

#### Chapter 525: Searching the rooms

Erik located his first target without skipping a beat: a robot guard standing a few meters away with his back to him. He closed the gap silently, his footsteps so light that the robot's excellent hearing missed the echoes in the wooden passage. His heart pounded like a hammer, each beat mirroring the countdown to his onslaught.

Erik surged forward when he was near enough. One arm slipped over the guard's waist while the other reached up to clamp a clamp over the steel lips to muffle any possible sound. Erik hardly had time to react before ripping the artificial head from the body and straining its neck.

The fragile wire within shattered with a muted crack. The corpse of the robot guard was carefully dropped onto the cold wooden floor.

Erik wasted no time getting to his feet and heading for his next victim. Another robot's metallic eyes were studying the space ahead, ignorant of its comrade's destiny.

He moved forward with the same quiet precision. The security robot turned around, but it was too late. The young man's hand sprang out, taking a vice-like hold on the robot's neck.

The robot's steel frame twitched in surprise, but Erik remained firm, using his other hand to deliver a quick, powerful punch to its abdomen. The hit generated a shockwave through the robot's body, causing its internal systems to short out quickly.

Erik looked around the passageway to make sure no one spotted him. His assault had been rapid and silent, leaving the other guards in the dark.

Every muscle in his body was hot due to the movement, ready to spring into action at any moment. In this game, he was a shadow, a menacing ghost, expertly traversing the dangerous maze. His objective was within his grasp. He just needed to remain quiet and unseen and continue.

Erik hurriedly carried the corpses upstairs. He then rapidly returned to the lower level down the tiny wooden staircase, his senses heightened, and his gaze concentrated on his surroundings, the dispatched guards out of sight.

He proceeded across the corridor, pausing at each door to inspect its contents. The captive was his aim, but he had to be cautious and watchful. The developers of this test had gone to great lengths to create a convincing atmosphere, even down to the minor details.

Erik noticed this again as he observed the rooms on the higher floor of the building. The first room was filled with haunting quiet, with nothing but bare wooden walls. Erik moved quickly, knowing that time was of the utmost importance.

The next door showed a sparsely furnished bedroom with a wooden bed, a rickety table, and a flickering oil light. Its simplicity seemed almost spooky compared to the intricacy of the task at hand.

There were no hostages or guards, and he checked the other rooms. Further down the path, Erik saw a slightly ajar door exposing a study. The area was dominated by a single desk filled with imitation parchments and quills.

It was a location for a character, a prop in this elaborate performance, but no hostage was kept there.

A storage facility followed, with its shelves piled high with weapons. Under the dark light, swords and spears of all sizes and forms glittered menacingly. A battlefield's worth of gear was kept inside the room.

Erik paused when he heard a whirring sound from one of the rooms, his pulse beating in his chest. Slowly, he peeked through the crack in the door and saw a swarm of robots.

Their mechanical figures remained still, stuck amid a work. They were, however, not his primary interest. Erik walked on, his thoughts racing through the alternatives after ensuring he wasn't discovered.

His movements were silent as he moved along the hallway, door by door, room after room. Each room housed a separate scenario, a piece of this fictitious universe: empty chambers, occupied rooms, storage areas, and dwelling quarters.

A multitude of settings, but no sign of the hostage. Erik stayed attentive throughout, his eyes bright and his actions quick.

He was a predator in an artificial jungle, on the search for a treasure concealed deep inside its bounds. His search was systematic, leaving no space untouched and no avenue unexplored.

Bypassing the last of the inspected rooms, Erik finally allowed himself a moment of reflection. <This was just a waste of time. I know where the hostage is. The fact I could not go there directly is annoying,> the young man thought.

<The entire task was meant to test my thoroughness and my patience.> His eyes flickered to the stairwell leading downward, a well of shadow looming in the dim corridor.

He strolled away from the now-silent rooms; each bore witness to his exhaustive search yet held only the echo of his irritation.

<Even if I knew the result and knew it was all for naught, I had to do it for the sake of this assessment and not to be found out by the spectators outside.> He mused, his thoughts whirling around like leaves caught in a gust of wind.

<They want to see me challenged; they want to see me struggle. That's the entire purpose of this practical test.>

Erik's face stiffened with purpose, and his eyes glowed unbreakable determination. He gave the forlorn upstairs hallway one more look, its doors wide like blank eyes, before turning his attention to the stairway.

His steps were light on the cold wooden floor as he descended, each carrying him further into the building's core. The air became cooler, and the atmosphere became thicker. There was a definite tension in the air, and he could feel the expectation rising. <This is it. This is the floor where the hostage is held.>

His attention was fixed on the way ahead, his senses alerting him to the danger. Despite the ominous atmosphere he plowed into, every muscle tensed in anticipation.

The lowest level of the structure was cloaked in foreboding stillness, the silence further heightening the severity of his task, although guards remained there. This time, considerably more than before, it would be difficult to rescue the captive without being detected.

<I just need to get rid of the guards here and rescue the hostage. Then, this test is finally going to end.>

#### Chapter 526: A silent attack

Erik pressed himself against the cold wooden wall, just out of sight from the main corridor.

Four guards, each one robotic and likely armed, stood vigil ahead. Their gaze was steady, and their strength was rigid and unyielding. The ill-lit and sparsely decorated narrow hallway left little room for an unseen attack. His usual approach of quickly dispatching them would draw attention this time.

<This time is different,> he thought, his eyes studying the guards carefully. The noise, the commotion—it would affect the exterior building. I need another way.>

His gaze darted around, seeking any advantage in the austere surroundings.

A sconce hung on the wall nearby, its flame casting long shadows along the corridor. His eyes lingered on it for a moment, an idea beginning to take form in his mind.

Then, his gaze flitted to the wood under his feet, noting the loose edges that could be used to his advantage. His mind was already racing, strategizing and calculating the best way to resolve the situation.

<Distraction. Misdirection. These are my weapons now.>

Erik mused, a faint smile ghosting his lips as he pieced together his plan. A strong excitement bubbled within him, a thrill he had not anticipated. He wasn't just the brute force anymore; he was a strategist and a player in this elaborate game.



Drawing in a deep, quiet breath, Erik braced himself for the imminent chaos. His muscles tensed, and his heart pounded in his chest like a war drum.

In the depths of the enemy stronghold, Erik found himself ready to take on an entirely new role, using his intellect as his primary weapon. For the first time, he was not just the beast; he was also the puppeteer.

Erik crouched low, focusing his gaze on a torch hanging precariously on the wall. With the precision of a trained marksman, he used a small object he had found and tossed it across the hallway, hitting the torch's base with just enough force to dislodge it.

The torch clattered noisily to the ground, extinguishing with a sharp hiss and plunging part of the corridor into shadow.

The sudden disruption immediately caused the four guards' attention to shift. Two broke off from their posts, hurrying toward the fallen torch to investigate the cause. The rustle of their robes and the clink of their armor filled the hall as they monetarily abandoned their positions.

Erik crawled out of his hiding location, slithered against the wall, and moved like a shadow in the direction of one of the doors that was now neglected as soon as he realized the possibility. His single action was meticulously planned and conducted in complete silence, and his training was as ethereal as the mutterings of the night.

The heavy wooden door loomed above, its intricate patterns dancing in the torchlight. With careful hands, he pushed it out just enough to slip inside, mindful of the creaking hinges and the echo that could give him away.

Once inside, Erik leaned against the wall, taking a moment to collect his thoughts and plan his next move.

The tension in the air was palpable and thick enough to be cut with a knife. But Erik felt an odd sense of calm beneath the adrenaline and the pulsating danger of the situation. He was in control, playing this game of stealth and strategy with a finesse he had not known he possessed.

Erik was quiet as he saw the remaining soldiers standing outside. He just had a few minutes to take action.

The space in which he was presently hiding was rather tight and empty; there were not many pieces of furniture in the room that might have provided him with an extra layer of concealment. But he was aware that the element of surprise was more important to him at this time than being concealed.

The gears of his mind turned rapidly as he assessed the situation. He had to act quickly before the guards came back to the door. With a spark of an idea, he moved. Swiftly but carefully, he turned a small wooden stool, the sharp echo of its fall echoing in the room and reaching the corridor outside.

The fake chatter of the guards interrupted them abruptly. The hushed whistling of orders and the shuffling of feet on wood informed Erik that his bait had been taken. The door creaked open, revealing the stained, suspicious eyes of the robot guards, their hands instinctively hovering over their weapons. As the door opened wider, Erik lunged.

He moved like lightning, his mother carrying him forward. He collided with the first guard, his powerful grip wrenching the robot's weapon from its grasp before its artificial brain could respond to the surprise attack.

With a swift, precise movement, Erik drove the blunted end of the weapon into the robot's chest, deactivating it instantly.

Erik was already on the scene before the second guard had a chance to respond, his movement as fluid and swift as a river. He pounded his fist into the face of the robot with the kind of power that can only come from being forced to act. There was a crack followed by a sparkly hiss, and then the second guard followed its partner in deactivating itself.

In the silence that followed, Erik let his breath out in a slow, controlled exhale. The building's thick wooden walls absorbed the dull echoes of his quick scuffling. He knew he had to move fast. The two guards he had left at the torch would soon come back.

With a final glance at the defeated robot guards, Erik dashed out of the room, closing the door behind him. He sprinted toward the door, his footfalls echoing against the wooden floor, no longer needing the cloak of silence. The heavy door where the guards had been stationed loomed overhead. With a final burst of energy, he reached it.

The destination he'd been striving for was on the other side. But as he paused for the barest moment before this final obstacle, he couldn't help but let a grim smile tug at the corner of his lips.

Chapter 527: The Hostage

The door groaned as Erik pushed it open, its rusty hinges shrieking under the sudden movement. Beyond it lay a room bathed in hazy darkness. The only light source was a single flickering chandelier hanging from the ceiling, casting long, ominous shadows on the walls.

As Erik's eyes adjusted to the low light, the room's single occupant came into view, stretched out on an austere metal bed. Lucy. The mayor's daughter Erik's 'hostage.' His endgame for this dangerous test was finally within sight.

The sight of the young woman, bound and vulnerable, sent a shockwave of relief through him.

Despite knowing this was all part of the elaborate testing, seeing a fellow human after all the robots was a welcome change, and her acting skills were superb, which made everything seem more real. He carefully approached her, his sharp eyes noting her condition.

Her wrists and ankles to the metal frame of the bed. Her clothes were disheveled, her dark hair spilled over the side of the mat, and her face was pale under the harsh orange light.

Her eyes, a striking emerald green, were wide and filled with fear and relief. It was a good act. She looked the part of the scared, kidnapped girl, playing her role in this constructed world convincingly.

Erik could make out his features more clearly as he approached her. She was young, probably in her early twenties, and her features betrayed a hint of innocent beauty. Her lips were pale but full, and her nose was small and straight.

She had high cheekbones, making her face look more angular under the sharp shadows of the room.

Despite her precarious situation, she had a precise determination in her eyes. Erik could tell she was part of the tasting team. She was another actor on this grand stage, a vital cog in the machinery of this simulated world. Yet, bound and awaiting release at that moment, she fully embodied her role.

Once more, he cast his eyes around the room to ensure they were the only people there. His heart pounded in his ears, not from fear but from the adrenaline of this final mission stretch. This was the end. He was present here.

He had found the hostage, or the person playing that part. It was time to wrap up the practical test.

As he approached Lucy, he paused momentarily to evaluate the constraints she was struggling with. He was well aware that even in the simulated environment of the guild's practical test, the goal was to locate the prisoner and rescue it securely.

That was the last challenge Erik would need to overcome in his practical exam, and he was well prepared to do so.

The room was saturated in silence, broken only by its two occupants' calm, rhythmic breaths. Lucy's eyes were still wide as they met Erik's gaze behind the mask. "Who are you?" she asked her voice barely a whisper, echoing off the barren walls of the dimly lit room.

Erik's gaze never wavered behind the mask as he responded, "I'm Erik, sent by the Mercenary Guild to assist you. I'm here to get you out. " His voice was steady, exuding a sense of assurance and control that seemed to calm Lucy's eyes.

There was a moment of stunned silence as she spoke. "The Mercenary Guild?" she asked. Erik nodded, noticing how her eyes flicked from his face to the room around them as if trying to understand how she had ended up in such a situation.

"We don't have much time," Erik continued, cutting off his thoughts. "The guards will be back soon. We need to move." His voice now had a sense of urgency, echoing the rapidly escalating situation.

Her eyes locked onto his mask again, a shared understanding passing between them. At that moment, they were no longer just part of the test; their characters fully embodied their roles.

<This is getting completely out of hand.> Erik was conscious of the fact that he was enjoying the test more than he ought to have.

Erik made a hasty approach to her as he worked quickly with his hands to loosen the straps that were holding her to the bed.

Lucy flexed her wrists and ankles as each one was removed, and the fact that she had a few lines of pain engraved into her face attests to the authenticity of the scenario.

After being let out, she gingerly got out of bed and checked how her legs felt. Erik observed her while she was performing the act, and he noticed that her legs were trembling ever so slightly. Nevertheless, there was no mistaking the fact that she was faking everything.

Erik gave her some time to gather her composure, the atmosphere in the room becoming increasingly tense as they had to escape. The flickering of the faint light coming from the single bulb created foreboding shadows across the two individuals.

The air was thick with the expectation of what would come, and the moments seemed to drag on forever as if the world outside their room had stopped moving.

After what seemed like an eternity, she finally stood up, her gaze returning repeatedly to Erik's mask. They had recommitted themselves in a way that only served to ratchet up the pressure they were already under.

They needed to act quickly. It was impossible to predict when the guards would find their missing comrades. Lucy followed closely behind Erik as he led the way, and she replied with a nod indicating that she understood what she had to do.

After making a small crack in the door, Erik peeked into the hallway, and his gaze was immediately drawn to the two remaining guards.

They were occupied with conducting an investigation into the disappearance of the other two robotic guards that had been stationed in front of the door previously.

The pounding of Erik's heart against his rib cage was a beat that matched the ticking clock that represented their limited window of chance. He took note of the guards' posture, the degree to which they had raised their attention and the thoroughness of their search. This was the most ideal time to strike them.

He looked back at Lucy. Her face was pale, her eyes wide, yet determined. She was ready. Her chest's rapid rise and fall mirrored his own, the tension of their predicament hanging heavy in the air.

#### Chapter 528: Escape (1)

Erik turned to Lucy, his gaze a tacit order for her to remain where she was. She nodded, realizing the gravity of the situation and the value of silence in such a dangerous situation. Erik sat back against the cool stone wall, bracing himself for what would happen.

Erik could see by the gap in the door that the guards' attention was intensely focused elsewhere. They were still looking at the torchlight's shadows and watching for any unexpected noises. Their stances were stiff as if they were expecting an attack.

Erik's chest thumped; each beat was a countdown to his impending attack. Adrenaline surged through his veins, raising his spine and concentrating his attention. He plotted his strategy, calculating the quickest and most efficient manner to dispatch the guards while not alarming the others.

Erik noticed his opportunity when one of the guards stepped away to examine the place further. He burst through the door in the faint light, a silent predator. He was on the first guard in the blink of an eye, a fast and lethal shadow. His hand flew out, his fingers latching around the metal neck of the guard.

Before the robot went limp in Erik's arms, there was a dazzling instant of struggle and a startled flicker in its robotic eyes.

The hushed whisps of the wind outside nearly drowned out the sound of the first guard's collapse. Almost. Erik ran at him, and the second guard turned barely in time. However, it was too late.

Erik instantly bridged the gap between them, his other hand gripping the second guard's neck. The shadow behind Erik's grip was sufficient to quiet any alert the guard might have sounded.

It hadn't been going well till now, the young man reflected.

Both guards were out of commission in less than a minute, their steel bodies frozen on the wooden floor. Erik stood amid them, his breath coming out in slow puffs in the warm air. He'd finished it.

Erik turned around and returned to the room where Lucy was waiting, casting one last glimpse at the fallen guards.

The corridor fell silent once more, and the tension was quickly dispelled. For now, at least, the threat had been neutralized. On the other hand, Erik knew better than to relax and that it was better to keep his vigilance high. They still had a long journey ahead of them.

Worried and on high alert, Erik motioned for Lucy to follow him. She did, striding after him as they moved silently into the eerily quiet corridor. His keen senses scanned the environment like a radar, alert to any slight movement or sound that could indicate danger.

The pair quickly ascended the winding staircase towards the familiar corridor where Erik had previously walked.

As they neared the corridor, the sound of a door creaking open echoed in the silence. As a robotic guard appeared from one of the chambers behind them, they paused, with Erik reflexively placing himself in front of Lucy.

The robot's metal eyes caught onto them, and it quickly began screaming that there was an intruder, prompting all the other robots in the adjacent rooms to rush out to take care of him. Erik could also hear some others beginning to ascend the stairs from the first floor, ready to meet them.

<Shit, everything was going well!> Erik thought.

Erik pushed Lucy towards the stairs he had previously come from, his gaze never leaving the robots. "Lucy," he said, "Go upstairs. There's a window in the storage area. Use it to get to the rooftop. Go, now!"

Lucy, trained as she was, instantly responded, her eyes widening in a perfect imitation of fear. "But..." she stammered, her voice trembling with feigned terror. Yet, despite her act, she began moving away, her footsteps echoing in the silence as she ascended the stairs.

Erik remained focused, his attention fixed on the robots charging at him. His muscles curled in anticipation of action. He knew the moment he'd dreaded had arrived. There was no sneaking around this time. The battle lines had been drawn. All he could hope for was that Lucy would safely make it to the rooftop.

<Destroying them will not be hard; I just need to give Lucy time to reach the rooftop.>

Erik unleashed a torrent of energy as he launched himself at the approaching robots. His fists swept through the air, blurring the barrier between human and superhuman. Each attack was fatal—a barrage of brute force that destroyed metal bodies and short-circuited synthetic brains.

Under his unrelenting assault, the wooden floor beneath him turned into a cemetery for the mechanical guards. Their shattered remains crunched like discarded toys as he continued his assault. He was a whirlwind of destruction, a solitary force that turned into a one-man army.

The fire of ferocious determination burned brightly in his eyes, indicating that he was in a predatory state.

From the corner of his eye, he could see more robots approaching him. At this moment, there were two of them, and both of them were heading in his direction like moths to a flame. As he bravely charged headfirst into their lines, he let out a rage-filled cry.

Any onlooker would have a hard time keeping up with his lightning-fast hands and pinpoint strikes. The entire hallway was engulfed in sparks, and the sound of metal shattering could be heard. Skeletal metal bodies were strewn across the floorboard, often hindering the other robots' movements.

It seemed like time was moving more slowly than usual as the seconds ticked away in a cacophony of destruction. But amidst the chaos, Erik never forgot his mission. Every second he fought was a second more that Lucy had to escape.

So, he engaged in combat. He battled with the ferocity of a man possessed, his body a channel for unbridled force. A dozen robots stood in his way, but he saw them all as nothing more than foes to be smashed beneath his iron will. He was the wave that would wash them away.

#### Chapter 529: Escape (2)

A symphony of keystrokes echoed across Testrovs's stage as thousands of spectators actively engaged in the live stream, their hearts thumping in rhythm with Erik's every punch and kick.

The atmosphere in the digital world was electric and buzzed with adrenaline-fueled anticipation as the teenage mercenary fiercely battled an army of robots.

Each move Erik made, every robot he took down, triggered a fresh wave of cheers and applause that reverberated through the cyber sphere.

The comments section on the streaming websites exploded with exclamations, emoticons, and wild speculations. Something was intoxicating about this scene—the raw energy, the power of a young man holding his ground against difficult odds.



"Who the fuck is this guy?" One common refrain, followed by several hashtags and funny emojis, read, "This is insane!"

Another spectator marveled, his voice echoing the sentiments of others. "He can't simply be a novice!"

"This doesn't make sense!" Another said.

The sheer tactical skill that Erik had demonstrated up to this point was the thing that stunned the audience the most.

Each step he took was a demonstration of unassailable tactical intelligence, from his first study of the facility and safe access to his rapid and effective elimination of the guards. From start to finish, his plan was flawless.

"His stealth is top-notch! How did he even get in without being detected? I wouldn't have been able to!" This was a common question, accompanied by a string of intriguing emojis.

"I didn't even see him move... and then boom, those robots went down!" Another person exclaimed, emphasizing the surprise and amazement Erik's actions had sparked.

There was unanimous admiration for his swift decision-making, ability to adapt to rapidly changing situations, and decisive and ruthless efficiency. The crowd watched in awe as Erik deftly navigated a potentially lethal situation.

His actions to ensure Lucy's safety were met with universal praise. "A star is born, my friends! Trust me!" someone posted, a string of heart emojis trailing their words.

"17 and already so strong. Amazing!" another spectator praised.

Still, the contrast between Erik's young age and his enormous strength captured the audience's attention. Few could believe that a teenager of only 17 could take on so many robots with such strength and power.

The contrast between his youthful appearance and massive strength aroused the audience's curiosity and adoration while fueling their enthusiasm.

As Erik's huge fists brought the final robot to its knees, the virtual environment erupted in a frenzy of exhilaration. Erik had won. Cheers echoed in every room, every forum, and across every platform, spreading the evening.

The onlookers were filled with joy as the moment's excitement caused their hearts to race, their fingers to type frantically, and their minds to buzz with activity. And in the midst of this cacophony of praise, respect, and wonder, one sensation was transmitted, resonating throughout the cyber universe: Erik was exceptional.

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Erik's heart matched the unrelenting pace of his boots as he walked the stone passageways.

"They're all taken care of," he murmured to himself, echoing his words through the communications for his spectators to hear. He moved with a light grace, his muscular form rapidly ascending the stairs where he told Lucy to go.

When he walked inside the room, the open window revealed a woman who was sitting on the roof, waiting for him.

He let out a sigh of relief, which was unmistakable proof that Lucy had managed to escape while he was holding off the robots. Despite this, the tension continued to pulsate, serving as a quiet reminder of the possible danger that may be hiding outside.

Erik jumped through the broken window and saw the fictitious city spread out before him. As his eyes quickly searched the rooftop for Lucy, the light emitted by the sun lit the surfaces of the buildings. There she was, standing on the rooftop's edge, her outline elongated and grotesque against the sun's light. She trembled with fright.

Her eyes widened in relief when she noticed him, and her words came out in quick bursts of anxiety. "I-I can't... I can't jump," she stammered, glancing nervously at the gaping expanse between the rooftops.

Erik advanced toward her without uttering a word. His strong arms wrapped themselves around her delicate frame, effortlessly lifting her off the ground. He held her close to his ample chest and cradled her as though she weighed no more than a feather.

When Erik jumped on the other building's rooftop, she cried out a little surprise, but the howling wind quickly obliterated it.

As Erik ran over the vast chasm between the buildings with Lucy in his arms, the world appeared to cease functioning for a split second, and the city around them began to distort.

Erik was sprinting at full speed while carrying Lucy with an ease that belied the anxious circumstances. His boots smacked on the rooftop with a dull thud as he landed, and then they were off again.

Below, others had observed that their airplane had passed. The robots, who had been programmed to impersonate covert members of the group that abducted the Mayor's daughter in this phony scenario, turned their heads in unison as they concentrated on the spectacle that was happening above them, revealing their actual nature as they did so.

Erik ignored them completely, focusing all his concentration on the two of them evading capture and using every muscle in his body to fight against the wind and propel them onward.

As Erik rushed across the roofs with Lucy in his arms, the crowd's anticipation reached a fever pitch. As this incredible young guy, barely seventeen years old, made his daring escape, everyone held their breath and tapped furiously on their keyboards.

Every one of those high jumps and blazing-fast times attests to his raw athletic ability, brilliant strategy, and steely determination.

The image of Erik sprinting against the city's backdrop with the Mayor's daughter in his arms was etched into the spectators' minds, an unforgettable snapshot of this thrilling chase.

### Chapter 530: Escape (3)

Erik strode with determination over the roofs, his footsteps rapid and producing a rhythmic echo with each step that he took. The carefree wind ruffled his clothing and caused Lucy's hair to twirl behind her, creating an effect that was evocative of a dark streak against the sky.

Getting around on the roofs was not a simple task. As Erik vaulted over gaps and sometimes swung his arm to assist him in vaulting over difficult hurdles, his dexterity and strength were put on full display for everyone to see.

Lucy, struggling to keep up with the speed, clung to him for dear life as they ran. Her eyes, which were widened with a combination of terror and exhilaration, were tightly closed against the whirlwind of their flight.

The robots below were pursuing the pair tenaciously because they had been pre-programmed to do so. However, the city's labyrinthine streets and lanes presented difficulties even for these technologically powerful robots to navigate.

Erik and Lucy were saved from harm by a vendor who was so focused on his work that he did not see the robots approaching and accidentally blocked their route with his cart of fresh vegetables. This unanticipated impediment led to a sequence of crashes, which provided the two people with a small period of reprieve from their predicament.

In yet another unexpected turn of events, robots that resembled regular people appeared from a back alley. The sound of their forced laughter reverberated all around, creating an almost unreal environment. They established a barrier without meaning to, further slowing down the robots who were chasing after them.

Erik was in a position to see all of these unanticipated occurrences, and he couldn't help but notice them. He couldn't hide the glee on his face at their good fortune, and a smile tugged at his lips. But his moment of mirth was cut short as he heard the distant cries of another set of robots. Were they also looking for him and Lucy, or had something else happened in the city?

Erik knew he didn't have time to pause and think things through just now.

"Do you know them?" Erik asked.

"No!" the woman replied.

"Then I will ignore them!"

There was a sizable chasm between the two buildings, the one Erik was on and the one he was trying to get to, that only a shaky wooden board could cross, posing a difficult challenge. Erik continued to go forward without breaking a beat, with Lucy continuing to grasp onto him even more tightly.

His sheer resolve and strength meant that they reached the other side just in time for the plank to fall as it gave way beneath their weight, which caused the plank to groan ominously.

They looked out over the vast metropolis, which spread out before them like a tapestry of roofs illuminated by the sun's golden rays. The sun, casting long and creeping shadows, made the gaps between the buildings appear larger and more daunting.

Erik quickly surveyed their surroundings after realizing that the next jump was hopeless, especially with Lucy in tow. He could feel the robots, which were out of sight, watching their every action. It was clear that the chase had not ended.

The clock was ticking. Sensing the urgency, Erik started his slow descent down the rickety exterior of the building. Lucy clung to him as he looked for secure footing and handholds, her face resting on his shoulder. Her breath was so warm it stood out against the icy, jagged rock they were climbing.

The distant chime of a bell or the muted sounds of the city streets would occasionally drift up to them, reminding them of the bustling life below.

Once they touched the ground, Erik gently released Lucy, taking a moment to catch his breath and assess their situation. The narrow alley provided minimal cover, leaving them vulnerable.

It was a boon and a bane that the city was so noisy all the time. They were effective at drowning out their pursuers, but they also made it difficult for Erik to identify individual sounds that could have meant trouble. They ducked into the doorway of a closed store in search of a momentary haven.

The faint sound of footsteps echoing from a distance gave them a brief moment of relief. Erik leaned in close to Lucy, whispering, "I think we've lost them for the moment, but we can't stay here." Lucy's eyes, filled with a blend of fear and resolve, met his as she nodded in agreement.

The sun hung high, bathing the city in a warm, golden light. To Erik and Lucy, however, it felt like an unrelenting spotlight. The city's daytime activity made it challenging to stay hidden, but it also provided an opportunity to blend in with the crowd.

Lucy's attire, though elegant yet mostly destroyed and ruined, made them stand out. Erik, realizing this, whispered, "We need to blend in better." Erik noticed a clothing stall piled high with different outfits as they entered a busy market plaza.

Seizing the moment, he threw an apple into a stack of metal objects in order to divert attention. Erik snatched up two hooded cloaks as the robot merchant turned to investigate the ruckus.

After passing one to Lucy, they quickly put the cloaks on and used the hoods to hide their faces. They blended in with the crowds of humans and machines now that they were disguised.

"We're close to the mercenary guild," Erik murmured, guiding Lucy through the city's intricate maze.

His senses never stopped being on high alert. They were surrounded by the cacophony of city life: the chatter of shopkeepers, the giggles of children, and the humming of automated machines. But Erik could pick up on the slightest deviation.

Before long, the majestic facade of the mercenary guild loomed ahead, its grand architecture a stark contrast to the neighboring buildings. Erik, with Lucy in tow, entered confidently. Though the guild had given him a straightforward task, real-life complexities made it anything but simple.

The bustle of the city outside was replaced by peace and quiet in the oasis-like courtyard of the guild. As Erik basked in the sun's rays that had broken through the trees, he felt proud of his accomplishment. He felt he had accomplished his goal and deserved some sort of reward for his trouble.