

BIOLOGICAL 531

Chapter 531: Completing the test

After passing through the outstanding wooden door of the guild, one could see the warm glow of torches illuminating the hall of the mercenary guild.

This hall was filled to the brim with history—a fake one, of course; the stone floors bore the marks of innumerable fighters, and the walls were decked with banners and elaborate sculptures that glorified the guild's illustrious history.

"Did you have to go to such extremes with your performance?" Erik questioned Lucy.

Lucy responded with a teasing grin, "Of course. It's all about making the test feel genuine and lifelike and completely immersing you in the experience."

The hall was teeming with artificially created mercenaries, each bearing a striking likeness to humans in their physical and mental makeup. Others were carefully attending to the upkeep of their weapons while others engaged in intense conversation.

Archers perfected their skills against some targets the guild made available for all to use to the point of mechanical perfection, resulting in arrows that flew straight.

A rich tapestry of sound was generated due to the symphony of whispered chats, the odd clinking of armor, and the occasional thwack of an arrow.

As Erik entered, he got some unusual looks because he was wearing a hood and a mask over his face. Despite this, there was just a momentary flurry of interest. In such a setting, it was not uncommon to see people hiding their identities behind a mask.

As Erik approached the counter, he was met by a robotic employee who was eerily realistic in appearance. Behind it were elaborate boards that displayed the different accomplishments and missions completed by robotic guild members.

Erik lifted his hood slightly, revealing his mask. "I'm Erik Kay," he declared, a blend of pride and weariness in his voice. "I've completed the test, securing the hostage."

The robotic clerk studied Erik for a moment. "Verification is in process," it intoned emotionlessly. After a tense pause, it finally responded, "Verification complete. Congratulations, Erik Kay. Your accomplishment will be recorded."

The shrill sound of an alarm abruptly disturbed the peace, with its urgent cry reverberating throughout the imagined city. When the alarm went off, time stood still, and people across the city held their breath. After that, there was a startling void of sound.

The previously bustling streets, once home to automated sellers, children at play, and security officers on patrol, became disturbingly silent.

The bustling sounds that had presented a picture of a busy cityscape were now gone, and an almost eerie silence was in their place. Regardless of what it had been doing before, every robot immediately stopped.

A young robotic child was seized in the middle of a fit of laughter, and his expression of happiness stayed unchanged. A vendor had become a statue in the middle of his pitch. The once vigilant soldiers remained like motionless sentinels, their facial expressions immovable.

Erik halted momentarily as he took in the abrupt silence that had descended upon the room. The previously active guild hall, filled with activity and commotion only a few seconds earlier, now stood in eerie silence, with each robot stuck in the middle of its last action. It seemed as if time itself had been paused, catching every detail in a flawless moment that would never change.

The sky above seemed to shine a little brighter, maybe marking the conclusion of the intricate masquerade that had been going on. The entire scene demonstrated the extraordinary attention to detail and labor that had gone into producing such a lifelike test.

Lucy, who had portrayed the part of a terrified hostage just a few moments earlier, suddenly walked with an air of power. As she walked boldly past Erik, she briefly glanced at his concealed face. Her eyes were unexpectedly free of the anxiety that had been there before.

"Well done, Erik," she remarked, her voice firm yet kind. "You've completed the test."

Erik looked at her, slightly taken aback by her sudden transformation from a damsel in distress to a confident guide.

"Come with me," Lucy instructed, heading towards the rear of the guild hall.

Erik, who was still trying to make sense of the flurry of events that had just occurred, trailed, eager to learn what lay ahead and how well he had performed on the test. The act of freeing the prisoner was only one component; the final result was still unknown since it depended on many things.

After navigating two flights of stairs, they stood before a massive metallic door. Lucy gestured to a button on its right. "Press that," she directed. "It'll take you back to the entrance."

As Erik did so, Lucy continued, her voice professional but with a hint of warmth, "Once you're out, head to the locker room and wait. There'll be some refreshments available. Your results will be calculated and shared with you soon."

Erik nodded, appreciating her clarity. "Thanks," he replied, a sincere smile on his lips. The test's intensity and abrupt conclusion left him feeling a mix of exhaustion and anticipation.

After a few moments, the door slid open, exposing a large room resembling an elevator but with modern touches everywhere. Its walls were constructed of a combination of mirrors and shiny metal. A pedestal with a single button labeled "Start" stood at the center of it all.

Erik pushed the button after a moment of doubt. After the door was securely shut, there was complete silence, and instead of the usual sense of climbing higher or lower, Erik perceived the space as moving laterally, much like a fast-moving train.

The smooth motion of the elevator-like space made Erik feel as if he was gliding through a futuristic tunnel. As he looked around, colorful LED lights illuminated the walls, creating a mesmerizing display that shifted and changed with each passing moment.

The beginning of his travel back was signaled by a quiet hum that permeated the area, and the walls vibrated in a tiny way.

Erik gathered his composure and began to take several deep breaths. The sudden shift from a world filled with swords and shields to this room filled with cutting-edge technology was disorienting, but it was all a part of the rigorous testing procedure that the Mercenary Guild had in place.

Chapter 532: Test results

The live stream's chat section on the various streaming platforms began to buzz with activity as soon as the bell that signaled the end of Erik's trial rang out. The conversation began to be

inundated with comments from the thousands of viewers following Erik's mercenary adventure with great interest.

"Wow! He did it! Erik completed the test!" wrote one viewer.

"Seriously, after watching him, I understood I still have a long way to go. This guy's on another level," another added, peppering their comment with applause emojis.

A digital scoreboard located in the corner of the broadcast kept track of the points Erik collected for completing the various tasks. The air was heavy with expectation throughout the websites, homes, and bars, and the chatter went nonstop the entire time.

"He's going to get a stellar score. Those robots were no match for him," a fan predicted.

Another admirer noted, "His agility and tactics against those robots? Unprecedented for a newbie. He's a natural talent!"

Even though many viewers debated and contrasted Erik's methods with those of other participants from previous streams, the consensus was unanimous: Erik had introduced a distinctive and successful strategy.

However, amidst the praise, a recurring topic of discussion was Erik's choice to wear a mask. "Why's he wearing that mask? What's the story there?" a curious viewer pondered.

"I don't understand the need for it. Unless there's some scar or something he's hiding," another speculated.

A more understanding viewer responded, "Perhaps he just wants to keep his identity private. In this age, sometimes being in the limelight can be more of a burden."

The chat was rife with theories about Erik's true identity. "Could he be the offspring of some legendary mercenary? Maybe Erik isn't even his real name!"

"Yeah! Or he might have been trained at some clandestine academy, and the mask is their trademark," another viewer mused.

However, a section of the audience seemed more focused on his abilities than his appearance. "The mask doesn't matter. It's his skills that have left an impression. That's what counts," one viewer pointed out.

The stream's host then appeared on screen, addressing the captivated audience. "What an incredible display of prowess and tactical acumen, ladies and gentlemen! As we await Erik Kay's final score, let's revisit some of his most memorable moments."

The screens shifted to a highlight reel as the switch occurred, displaying Erik's incredible actions, clever decisions, and spectacular rooftop pursuit.

Even though the conversation was buzzing with activity, one thing was abundantly clear: the adoration for Erik's apparent skill, even if he hid his identity.

The host returned as the highlights wrapped up: "The moment of truth is upon us. Erik Kay's final score will be unveiled soon. Don't go anywhere! Stay tuned!"

The vibe was pure electricity online and in the physical viewing halls. Everyone was on the edge of their seats, waiting eagerly to find out the test results that had kept their attention for the entirety of its duration.

After stepping out of the unusually lateral-moving elevator, Erik saw that he was in a contemporary locker room with low lighting. It was a startling change from the bustling metropolis with a medieval flavor that he had just finished navigating. This location exuded peace and was a refuge for modern architecture and design.

The chamber continued into a corridor that took Erik back to the door he had used to enter the building when he arrived.

As he progressed deeper into the locker area, he became aware that it was empty of anyone. Instead, a silent order was maintained by rows of sleek gray lockers, each equipped with an electronic security pad.

The quiet hum of the air conditioning system whispering in the background contrasted with the clamor of the virtual environment he had left behind.

To his left was a wooden bench that ran the length of the room and was covered with towels and water bottles arranged in an orderly fashion. Across from the seat was a table with a selection of snacks, including various fruits and beverages.

But Erik wasn't concerned with these comforts at all. Maintaining his secrecy was his major priority at all times.

His mask wasn't only for show; it also protected him. Even at a location that appeared to be safe, he couldn't take the chance of being exposed because he lived in a society where monitoring was always taking place.

Erik chose a location at the far end of the room, away from potential distractions, and sat down on the bench there.

The pressure of the examination and the difficulties it presented pressed down on him, but he started feeling the weight wear off. The cold atmosphere in the room did a great job of balancing the simulation's intensity.

On Erik's side of the room, an electronic board built into the wall began to light up. It presented the findings of various test measures, ranging from strategy to agility, but the results still needed to be filled in.

Erik's thoughts wandered as the minutes ticked by in front of him. He reflected on the grueling workouts, the never-ending search for perfection, and the numerous self-denials he had to make along the way.

It was like he was watching a movie in his head as images of the mechanical foes, the high-adrenaline chases, and the feeling of Lucy's weight in his arms kept playing like a reel.

After an eternity, the board finally started updating the information. The screen was covered with many 8s and 9s, with a few flawless 10s thrown in here and there.

About fifteen minutes into his wait, numbers began populating next to each category on the board. A series of 8s, 9s, and perfect tens filled the screen, leading to an average score of 9.

Even though it wasn't ideal, it was a testament to his abilities. He had advanced to the pupil rank, which opened the door for him to participate in actual missions and earn real money.

He took a few deep breaths and gave himself a momentary break by leaning back in his chair. While most people would be content to revel in the glory of such numbers, Erik set his sights on a more significant objective: growth. The scores were a demonstration of his ability, but they were not the goal of his game.

As he sat there, lost in thought, the soothing atmosphere of the room wrapped itself around him and comforted him. This was only a tiny part of Erik's adventure, yet it marked a significant turning point in his development as a mercenary and a man on the path to independence.

Chapter 533: Getting Help

As Erik walked through the pristine hallways leading out of the arena, his footfall reverberated gently. The muffled hum of talks taking place further away became steadily more audible, eventually developing into a vibrant mixture of cheers and active dialogue.

As he got closer to the door, he started to pick up pieces of other people's conversations, including praise for his accomplishments, praise for his name, and passionate debates over his strategies.

Pausing briefly, he rested against the cool corridor wall. "Of course," he whispered to himself, reflecting on the recent events in the guild hall. The buzz around him was expected.

Even with his face concealed by a mask and hood, his actions made a lasting impression. He was troubled by the knowledge that he had become the center of attention in the arena.

Erik decided to take a diversion to avoid the excited gathering, likely composed of supporters and detractors. He recalled the complex backstage arrangement of the arena, which had been constructed to fulfill the requirements of all participants.

Within this labyrinth, there had to be an administrative office, an escape where he might seek aid, and a more peaceful departure—all of these things needed to be located somewhere.

With this thought, Erik retraced his steps, scanning the hallway for any indication of the office. After navigating a few winding passages, he stumbled upon a slightly open wooden door with a polished silver plaque reading "Administrative Office."

Gently rapping on the door with his gloved hand, Erik waited. The soft rustling of papers and the subtle creak of a chair broke the silence. "Enter," came a deep voice from within.

A sizable office with wooden paneling on the walls greeted Erik when he pulled open the door. An enormous desk packed with documents, maps, and a few scattered quills took up most of the space in the room.

A middle-aged guy was seated behind the desk, and his eyes were now focused on Erik. His graying hair provided a stark contrast to the sharp, alert, and weirdly young eyes he had.

The walls were covered in bookcases crammed full of tablets and books, and the one window in the room let in a sliver of sunshine.

The man motioned for Erik to come closer, his gaze unwavering. Gathering his thoughts, Erik began speaking with an apologetic tone. "I'm sorry to barge in," he said immediately.

"I'm in a tight spot. Many people were outside after my test and the events in the guild hall. I'd rather stay out of the spotlight. Can you help?"

Still studying Erik's concealed face, the administrator paused before responding in a composed yet firm tone, "I understand. You're not the first to seek discretion, especially after a standout performance. You're Erik Kay, correct?"

Erik nodded, "Yes, sir."

The man leaned forward, activating a hidden button on his desk. A faint voice emanated from a concealed speaker. After a brief exchange, the man reclined, hands clasped atop his desk.

"Help is coming. We have a few ways out of situations like yours that don't draw attention. You won't have to do anything difficult to get out."/

Erik, feeling a wave of relief, expressed his gratitude. "Thanks a lot. I didn't think I would get this much attention."

As Erik waited, the minutes seemed like hours to him, and the only sounds that broke the hush in the room were the far-off chatter of the audience and the meticulous ticking of a large clock that was mounted on the wall.

The door eventually opened, displaying a robustly built man dressed in a black uniform, which made it evident that he was working as security for the arena. He had an authoritative bearing, with eyes that were intent and keen.

The administrator introduced the newcomer: "Daren, this is Erik. He will make sure you get out safely. Daren, take him to the basement parking lot and bring him where he wants to go." The man's response was concise: "Got it." He then motioned to Erik, "Come with me."

Erik nodded appreciatively towards the administrator, his posture conveying his gratitude. "Thanks again," he whispered.

Both Erik and Daren went together through the maze-like corridors of the arena. The distant commotion of the crowd eventually faded away as they descended, and what took its place was the calm atmosphere of the underground.

They made their way down a series of underground corridors and went through a number of security doors, each of which required Daren to use a unique key.

Eventually, they entered the underground parking area, which felt worlds apart from the arena's historic charm. Modern vehicles sat in neat rows, their polished exteriors gleaming under the artificial lights.

Daren pointed to a sleek, unassuming car. "We will use this one," he remarked.

Erik expressed gratitude as they approached the vehicle, saying, "Thanks for the help, Daren."

The man, ever the professional, nodded and took the driver's seat.

"Hop in," he said in an impassive tone.

Once settled inside the car, Erik felt the soft embrace of the leather seats. Daren started the engine, which hummed to life, and the car began to hover slightly above the ground, preparing for departure.

After a brief silence, Daren inquired, glancing at Erik through the rearview mirror, "Where to?"

Erik pondered briefly. The plaza was always teeming with activity, making it an ideal place to merge with the crowd and remain inconspicuous. "The nearest plaza, please," he decided. Daren acknowledged with a quick nod, "As you wish."

The drive was smooth, with the automobile gliding through the city like it was on rails, quickly navigating around other vehicles, facilities, and the fans outside the stadium. Erik kept silent while looking at the world outside through the tinted car's windows.

They arrived at a bustling square shortly after. A stunning fountain served as the place's focal point, surrounded by bustling market booths, lively performers, and a large audience.

The atmosphere was alive with the tantalizing aroma of food being sold on the street, the upbeat sounds of laughing and discussion, and the merry shrieks of youngsters having fun running after birds.

Daren found a quiet place to stop and told Erik, "We're here. Do you need anything else?"

"That's all," Erik said, shaking his head. I'm grateful for your help."

"Take care," Daren said with a nod.

"Have a nice day, Daren," Erik said as he walked into the busy square.

Chapter 534: Three days later

It had been three days since Erik's impressive performance on the exam, and although most people probably would have basked in their momentary success, Erik had other intentions.

He committed himself fully to rigorous training as a result of the pressure of his goals and an old vow to himself. He had no time for frivolous get-togethers or light conversation.

Erik woke up early on the third day, well before the sun had risen beyond the horizon. He quickly put on his trademark hood and mask to conceal his identity and paused for a moment of reflection.

Today marked the beginning of a new chapter; his first assignment as a pupil-ranked mercenary awaited him. It was a minor milestone but a crucial one in his journey.

When he left his dwelling, the city was just beginning to wake up. The morning still held the crisp freshness of early daylight, and the typically crowded streets were rather quiet. Erik grabbed his brand new phone and called for a taxi, which arrived quickly, its motor quietly humming as it drove up next to him.

Erik's concealed appearance caught the driver's attention, a middle-aged man with salt-and-pepper hair, but he decided not to inquire. The city was home to all sorts of characters, especially at this hour. "Where are we headed?" he inquired, a tinge of curiosity coloring his voice.

"The Mercenary Guild," Erik responded, keeping his words to a minimum.

Erik's thoughts began to wander as the cab wound through the city's waking streets, and he prepared for the day ahead. With his new student status, he was able to take on more difficult but rewarding jobs.

Erik left the cab, paid the driver, and walked up to the massive Mercenary Guild building. Awe was always aroused by the magnificent appearance of the Guild's exterior.

Then he walked steadily into the building, drawing a few looks from onlookers but not deterring him from the task at hand. He had a job to do.

A cutting-edge holographic computer took center stage in the guild hall. The space above the console sprang to life as Erik got closer, exposing a profusion of symbols and data. The machine responded to his touch. After entering his credentials, the interface reworked itself to display pupil-level missions.

Rows of holographic columns presented him with a list of jobs, each with its own brief description, location, and potential rewards. There were tasks that needed him to track down Thaidis and others that had him escorting merchants or retrieving precious artifacts.

Images of Thaid and intricate maps flashed colorfully in the holograms, beckoning him to make a selection.

Quest Name: The Silent Stalker

Type: Thaid Hunt

Description: Villagers around Whisper Woods have reported sightings of the "Mistlynx". Hunt it down to ensure the safety of the area.

Reward: 500 Eurem (Profits can be made from the Mistlynx's soft pelt.)

Quest Name: Ripples in Clearwater

Type: Thaid Hunt

Description: The "Azure Serpent" of Lake Clearwater has been snatching away livestock from the shore. This large aquatic snake poses a threat to local settlements.

Reward: 850 Eurem (Selling the serpent's shimmering scales can fetch a good price.)

Quest Name: The Brute of Boulder Gorge

Type: Thaid Hunt

Description: A hulking creature known as the "Gorge Gorger", has been blocking the key trade route through Boulder Gorge. Hunt this massive beast and reopen the pathway.

Reward: 750 Eurem (Its hide is rugged and used in high-quality armor crafting.)

Quest Name: Shadows in the Savannah

Type: Thaid Hunt

Description: Packs of "Golden Hyenas" have grown bolder, attacking travelers in broad daylight. Reduce their numbers to ensure safe passage through the Savannah.

Reward: 600 Eurem (Golden hyena pelts are in demand in the market.)

Quest Name: The Horned Havoc

Type: Thaid Hunt

Description: The "Razorhorn Rhino" has been rampaging through the villages near the Dusty Dunes. Subdue or eliminate the creature to ensure village safety.

Reward: 900 Eurem

Quest Name: The Whispering Heirloom

Type: Retrieval

Description: An ancestral amulet has been stolen from the House of Virel. Retrieve it from the thieves hiding in the forest.

Reward: 850 Eurem

Quest Name: Escort to Eldertown

Type: Escort

Description: Protect a caravan of traders traveling to Eldertown through the treacherous Golden Pass.

Reward: 450 Eurem

A group of mercenaries, some more experienced than others, surrounded Erik, each immersed in his or her own holographic terminal.

They discussed the scenarios, made plans, and even organized into groups. At that time, though, Erik could see nothing beyond the list of missions in front of him.

His eyes wandered through the quest board once more before resting on "The Silent Stalker" quest.

The Mistlynx, a subtle and evasive beast, was the target of this quest's search. The choice he made was motivated not just by the thrill of the hunt but also by the monetary rewards it promised.

The Mistlynx's plush fur was worth more than just the 500 Eurem that were going to get paid to him upon completion. The total revenue potential of this quest was what made it so appealing.

With nimble fingers, Erik tapped the holographic screen to accept the mission. A pleasing chime rang out, and a notification flashed, confirming his acceptance. As he read further, he noticed a detail he had initially glossed over the need to appoint a porter.

When predators like Thaidis were killed, their corpses were typically difficult to retrieve and carry, therefore, specialist companies called "Porter Companies" were tasked with the duty. They were able to preserve the creature's value so that they could be sold for more money. Having a trustworthy porter was essential for a fruitful and lucrative hunt.

Erik's expression briefly turned irritated. Instead of waiting around, he wanted to get right into the action. But he also knew that there were usually certain practical prerequisites for such missions.

While it was possible for him to assign a porter later and head off on the hunt without any delays, the risks were obvious. He could be delayed, and there's a chance he might even ruin the Mistlynx's priceless fur if he didn't have a porter around.

Erik's hands froze a few inches from the screen as he contemplated what to do next. The guild would have a list of approved porters for him to peruse, or he may meet with potential candidates in person to determine their trustworthiness and negotiate rates.

After scanning the list of providers, he realized quickly that their prices were quite high. The only way to reach a fair agreement was to meet them in person.

Chapter 535: Lustrous Haulers

Erik moved away from the hypnotizing light emanating from the holographic mission board and made his way to the solid main counter of the guild. It appeared as though the wood, which had been engraved and worn down over many years of business, could recite the exploits of the innumerable explorers who had stood there before him.

When Erik came closer, the clerk, a middle-aged man with hair that was a mixture of salt and pepper and spectacles that were perched on his nose, glanced up.

"Morning," Erik said, nodding politely. "I've just accepted a Thaid hunting quest, and I'm looking for a porter. Any reps from Porter companies around?"

The clerk glanced at the list before him, his eyebrows arching slightly. "We usually have a few reps hanging around, hoping to secure contracts with mercenaries," he said, pulling up Erik's quest details on his computer.

"Any you'd recommend?" Erik leaned in, intrigued.

The clerk paused to clean his glasses. "Given the nature of your hunt and the value of the Mistlynx pelt, I'd suggest Lustrous Haulers. Their rep, Thane, is here today. Last I saw him, he was by the fireplace."

Erik's eyes instinctively darted toward the grand fireplace, which served as the hall's centerpiece.

"Thanks," he said, genuinely appreciative. "I'll go have a chat with Thane."

"Good luck," the clerk replied, putting his glasses back on. "The Mistlynx is no easy target, but it could be quite profitable with the right team."

Erik nodded and approached the fireplace, spotting a man who fit Thane's description. Thane was engaged in discussion with another mercenary, and the atmosphere around them was seasoned competence.

Erik patiently awaited Thane's response while watching him conduct himself during the negotiation.

As the other mercenary left, contract in hand, Erik seized the opportunity to introduce himself. "You're Thane, I assume? I've heard good things about Lustrous Haulers. I have a hunt coming up and need a reliable porter."

The mood in the guild hall was characterized by hushed whispers and armor clattering against one another. Both Erik and Thane sat on opposite sides of the fireplace, which added a level of drama to the conversation that was taking place between them.

Thane readjusted the cuffs of his shirt. "I take it you're Mr. Kay, right? The guild is excited about your recent performance in the arena exam. Indeed, it is quite a remarkable result. Many guilds are doing their best to find information about you."

Then Thane asked, "Did they already contact you to join their guilds?"

"Yes," Erik replied. "I don't know how they found my number, but it was a bother..." he added annoyedly.

"Why? It would be best if you were honored that so many guilds are trying to recruit you," Thane stated.

"I am, really," Erik replied. "But for now, I want to do things my way." Erik's voice hinted at pride, something Thane noticed quickly.

"Well, I guess this is the right of someone as talented as you," he said.

Erik nodded in agreement with the remark but didn't let it divert him from the task. They were all aware that the decisions made at the moment might have a massive influence on the result of Erik's future travels, so before getting down to business, they started by sharing pleasantries.

Erik showed his appreciation for Thane's friendly ways, but he continued to focus his attention on the task at hand. The conversation went in several other directions until it finally returned to the primary topic of discussion.

Thane began by putting a tablet on the table, highlighting the services Lustrous Haulers gave. "Before we dive in," he said, "you should know that we take great pride in managing hunts efficiently. That being said, our fee is ten percent of the overall proceeds from the hunt."

Behind his mask, Erik's eyes expanded just a little. "Ten percent? " He responded, "That's a significant reduction of my earnings," he added with some doubt in his voice.

Thane relaxed his posture and offered a comforting smile. "When you first look at it, it could appear to be a lot, but remember that you're not just paying for transportation.

You are investing in knowledge, dependability, and the peace of mind that comes with knowing that your expensive and valuable cargo, such as the fur of a Mistlynx, will be treated with the utmost care. It's a good way to put your money to work."

Erik tapped his fingers on the table rhythmically while contemplating what Thane had just said. Despite the high price, the promise provided by Thane and the standing of Lustrous Haulers helped to provide credibility to the offer.

"What will happen if I catch more Thaid's than a regular retrieval can handle?" Erik inquired, looking forward to any potential snags in the road.

Thane had been anticipating the question by the way he nodded. "A legitimate worry. Be assured, however, that if the circumstance warrants it, we can dispatch additional vehicles and employees.

A squad of five individuals usually accompanies a mercenary team regularly, but we can increase or treble that number if necessary easily."

The furrows between Erik's brows deepened. "And that's included in the ten percent?"

Thane let out a chuckle. "Without a doubt. We want to make this as easy and stress-free as possible for you. You won't have to be concerned about the organization of the logistics."

Erik hesitated for a moment while he considered his choices. The sum was substantial, but the assurance of effectiveness and proficiency was alluring, particularly given that this was his first mission of this scope. In addition, given that he was going into business by himself, the entire profit would be his alone to keep.

Finally, Erik extended his hand across the table. "All right, Thane, I must admit that you persuaded me. Let's make this quest a productive one, shall we?"

Thane's handshake was firm, sealing their newfound partnership. "Success is the only possibility," he assured Erik, "with Lustrous Haulers by your side."

Chapter 536: Thorne's team

As Erik stepped out of the mercenary guild, the golden rays of the rising sun cast a warm glow over Testrovsc's Rest. The city was beginning to stir; merchants were putting out their wares, and the sound of bargaining could be heard throughout the streets.

Erik called for another cab, and not much longer after that, he arrived at the enormous entry hub of Testrovsc's Rest.

From afar, it appeared to be an ordinary city gate; nevertheless, once Erik and the other people who approached it got closer, the enormous magnitude of the structure became apparent.

On the inside of the building, there was a constant hum of activity. The hall was lighted by bright artificial lights, which projected a bluish-white radiance reflected off its marble flooring when it was polished.

The corridor was lined on all sides with shops selling anything from modern clothing to traditional tools.

Erik's attention was particularly drawn to the weapon shops since the exhibits in those stores demonstrated the superb craftsmanship for which Etrium was renowned.

Only a couple of the weapons even gave out a faint light, giving away the fact that they contained extremely rare Thaid brain crystals.

The buzz of innumerable conversations, the odd yell of a vendor, and friends' laughs made for an energetic environment permeating the marketplace.

Erik couldn't help but be overcome with wonder as he made his way through the crowd. The juxtaposition of old and modern, the enormous size of the location, and the wide variety of people that worked there were all very overpowering.

Erik searched the crowded room for the members of the Porter firm he had recruited. It took him only a short time to figure out where they were.

A mishmash of people, all decked out in various combinations of rugged work attire and safety equipment, had assembled in the area next to the exit.

They had been deeply involved in the discussion up until the moment that Erik came into view. As soon as they realized he was alone, they stopped talking.

Erik could pick up on the brief expressions of apprehension on their faces. As he approached them with self-assurance, he quickly nodded his head in acknowledgment before continuing.

The man who appeared to be the head of the group, who had a scruffy beard and a cut that ran down the side of his jaw, cleared his throat. He inquired, "Where's the rest of your team?" while attempting, but failing, to conceal the worry in his voice.

Erik's response, tinged with humor, was, "I'm hunting solo, at least for this mission."

The shock was evident on the man's face as his eyebrows sprang upward. He said with a hint of anxiety, "Are you sure about that?"

"We are capable of handling ourselves, but we are here to retrieve something; we are not here to provide backup. You are responsible for anything that occurs while you are out there."

Erik and the man exchanged looks. "There is no reason to be worried," he reassured him. "I am aware of the difficulties. Just focus on the task at hand while you're here."

The atmosphere lightened a bit as Erik spoke. Thorne took a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. "Alright, then," he said, extending his hand toward Erik. "I'm Thorne, and these are the folks you'll be working with." He gestured to each member of his crew as he introduced them.

Standing beside him was a tall woman with a lean physique and piercing, hawk-like eyes. Her auburn hair was neatly pulled back into a bun. "Meet Elara," Thorne said. She acknowledged Erik with a brief nod, her face giving nothing away.

Beside her was a younger guy, probably in his mid-twenties, with sandy blonde hair and a wiry build. His eyes met Erik's with open curiosity. "This is Faelan," Thorne added.

A bit removed from the group stood a broad-shouldered man with dark skin and a shaved head. He assessed Erik cautiously but with a hint of interest. "And that's Bram," Thorne noted.

Finally, Thorne pointed to a petite woman with jet-black hair and striking blue eyes. She looked at Erik discerningly, her lips curling into a subtle half-smile. "And last but not least, Sylvi," he concluded.

Erik nodded at each of them in turn. "Nice to meet you all," he said, his tone steady. "Let's make sure this collaboration benefits everyone involved."

Turning back to the crew, Erik asked, "You've been briefed on the quest I've picked, right?"

Thorne nodded. "Yes, we're aware. Hunting a Mistlynx is a solid choice for a pupil rank. But doing it solo?" His voice trailed off, leaving a cloud of skepticism.

Unfazed, Erik locked eyes with Thorne. "I get the concern. But I've done my homework, and I have a plan. Let's focus on doing our respective jobs."

Elara, her eyes still sharp, added her two cents. "We've seen mercenaries use unconventional tactics before, but taking on a Mistlynx alone is gutsy. I respect that, but I hope you know the risks."

Bram grunted in agreement while Sylvi and Faelan exchanged looks. The air was thick with unspoken questions, but no one pressed further.

The appearance of a rough-looking vehicle that was parked nearby brought an end to their talk. Heavy-duty tires and more robust shielding were used in the construction of this vehicle so that it could handle off-road terrain.

The distant cries of the flying Thaid's provided a terrifying reminder of the perils that lurked above.

After following Erik to the van, the rest of the group got in. When the door on the back opened with a hissing sound, it exposed a large interior equipped with seating and storage spaces.

Bram, the most physically imposing, climbed into the driver's seat and made the necessary adjustments so that it could handle his size.

While the rest of the crew settled into their seats with the familiar ease of veterans, Erik chose a spot that offered a clear view of the wilderness they were about to enter.

The hustling activity of the entry hub gradually receded into the background as the van's engine started roaring to life.

They made their way through the gates, leaving the recognizable boundaries of civilized society behind them. A wild world awaited them ahead, full of twisted trees, treacherous vistas, and the inherent dangers of chasing a creature like the Mistlynx.

The ride was punctuated by the van's steady hum, sporadic conversations among the crew, and the ever-changing scenery outside. Everyone, Erik included, was acutely aware of the adventure that awaited them.

They were stepping into a dance with danger, and the music had just started playing.

Chapter 537: First official quest (1)

Bram's firm hands on the wheel effectively managed the undulating terrain as the VAN's wheels pounded their way through the harsh environment. Inside, there was a lot of light conversation between the porters, but Erik's attention was elsewhere.

His gaze traveled across the countryside, looking vigilantly for any traces of the elusive Mistlynx as they went.

As the forest grew denser and dappled sunlight filtered through the overhead canopy, Thorne broke his gaze away from a side window to address Erik.

"We're nearing the Mistlynx's usual hunting grounds," he noted. "It might be best to go on foot from here. Thuids are sensitive to noise; the engine will send them running."

Erik nodded, grateful for the seasoned advice. "Good idea," he agreed, fully aware that stealth would be his ally in hunting a creature as wily as the Mistlynx.

Sylvi, who had been organizing some gear from the back of the van, added her own caution. "Once the hunt's done, use the communicator to reach us. We'll come for the retrieval." Her tone was a blend of professional distance and genuine concern.

Elara said, "And make sure you're in a safe spot when you call. This terrain doesn't forgive mistakes, and neither do Thaid's."

"Understood," Erik replied, nodding firmly.

The VAN came to a smooth stop, the engine gradually losing its loudness until the only sound that could be heard was the natural background tunes of the forest, like birdcalls in the distance or the faint rustling of leaves. There was a palpable sense of excitement in the air.

Unloading the equipment, including storage containers, recovery tools, and other necessary items, kept the workers busy. A portable communicator was delivered to Erik by Faelan.

"This should do the trick. The signal's strong, so you'll have no trouble reaching us," he assured Erik.

After grabbing the item, Erik put it away in the backpack he was wearing. He looked around him and noticed that the surrounding woodland was a perfect place to live for the Mistlynx due to the tall, age-old trees and the dense fog that covered the undergrowth.

While the rest of the team was securing the van, Erik made his way into the woodland with deliberate and stealthy strides.

The parting words of Thorne continued to reverberate in Erik's ears: "This job. It's not only about the hunt or the money, Erik. Be cautious not to get hurt because your life is more important."

Erik vanished into the dense vegetation with the wave of his hand, ready to face whatever obstacles were in store for him in the future.

Erik proceeded prudently as he traveled through the woodland surrounding Testrovsc's Rest. Because of his many hunts, each action he made was deliberate and had been well-rehearsed.

A monster like the Mistlynx required an intricate dance of patience, sharp observation, and instinct to be located, and the fog made this task much more difficult.

Erik's eyes caught sight of something, a patch of overturned earth, as shafts of sunshine through the canopy created spooky shadows on the misty ground below.

The paw prints of a Mistlynx have pointed, well-defined edges, as was discovered upon closer scrutiny.

They were only recently made. Nearby, he discovered droppings, which even reassured him that he was heading in the correct direction. He took one apart and discovered many little bones, providing insight into the creature's recent meal.

"Bingo," he thought to himself.

As he continued down the path, his senses became sharper. His exploration was set amid the backdrop of the natural noises of the forest, including the chirping of birds, the rustling of leaves, and the ever-present fog.

After tracking the beast for around 10 minutes, Erik's attention was eventually drawn to the target.

Even through the mist, the silvery-white fur of the Mistlynx, perched on a limb of a tree up ahead, appeared to gleam. Its eyes were a brilliant ice blue, and they shone like beacons as they surveyed the forest floor below.

The thick fog made it difficult to see the beast, but Erik's sharp eyes overcame this obstacle, mainly due to Hais's Brain Crystal Power, which allowed him to notice things quickly among the things it could do.

Even though the Mistlynx was far smaller than he thought, its air of unbridled power was undeniable. Erik was aware that even a group of pupil-ranked mercenaries would find this species to be a challenging adversary, mainly due to the restricted visibility.

The Mistlynx's claws became longer as if it could sense Erik's presence, and its ears pricked up as if alerted to the slight noise Erik had produced while walking.

"Time for an analysis," Erik muttered to himself, eager to size up the capabilities of this elusive creature.

Name: Mistlynx

-Brain Crystal Power: Retractable Enhancement.

Description: The Mistlynx's brain crystal lets it grow its razor-sharp claws. This lets it catch its food from greater distances. It can also fully retract them when it wants to creep through its surroundings so it doesn't accidentally make any noises.

-Physical Characteristics:

Size: Standing roughly 1.5 meters tall at the shoulder and roughly 1.2 meters long, excluding the tail.

Color: ...

Eyes: ...

Tail: ...

Claws: Even when the Mistlynx isn't using its Brain crystal power, its claws are strong, sharp, and curled. When stretched out, they can get as long as 30 centimeters.

Body: The Mistlynx is a top predator in misty environments thanks to its muscular, agile body designed for stealth and speed.

-Ecology:

Habitat: The Mistlynx prefers dense forests, especially those frequently shrouded in mist or fog, such as valleys and lakeshores. It is primarily nocturnal.

Diet: ...

Behavior: Mistlynxes are solitary animals whose territories are marked by smell marks on trees and rocks. These territories are not very big, though. It is known to be very protective and will fight off any invaders, whether they are of the same kind or not.

Reproduction: ...

Predators: ...

{Attributes}

-STRENGTH: 70

-INTELLIGENCE: 4

-DEXTERITY: 72

-ENERGY: 300

{Others}

-Power Level: 202

-Estimated experience: 4 per kill

Observing the Mistlynx from his hidden perch, Erik found himself thinking, "This creature won't offer much in terms of experience; it's just a small addition to my pool."

Erik didn't think much of the Mistlynx, even though others might have been scared off by its dangerous claws and watchful eyes.

He had fought Thaid's, who were bigger and scarier than in the past. Still, he knew that each hunt was essential and that even fights that seemed easy at first could be challenging in ways he didn't expect.

After all, his main goal wasn't to get more experience but to sell the Thaid's expensive parts.

Chapter 538: First official quest (2)

The calm prevailing in the woods was abruptly disturbed when the Mistlynx leaped at Erik from where it had been perched on a tree branch. Its eyes glittered with predatory intent, and its razor-sharp claws glinted menacingly in the sunshine filtered through the trees.

Erik, ever watchful, had readied himself for the impending aggression without batting an eyelid.

The Mistlynx was quick, and its first jump was a flurry of motion directed at Erik's throat. It was a potentially fatal blow designed to end the hunt immediately. But Erik could evade the attack by relying on his quick reflexes and heightened awareness. He felt the whoosh of air as the claws missed his throat.

<It is better than I expected, but not enough to threaten me,> the young man thought.

As Erik moved out of the way, the Mistlynx adjusted the trajectory of its assault and began advancing again using its muscular rear legs. However, it was time for Erik to move now.

He evaded another blow by pivoting, and the creature's claws tore into the ground nearby where he had been standing just a few seconds earlier.

Erik took advantage of this window of opportunity. He felt a surge of mana within himself as he ignited the brain crystal power associated with his Force Fist, the power he got from Nathaniel's brain crystal.

The tension in the air appeared to make the air thicker. A focused light of mana emanated from his fist when he drew back. He took a rapid and accurate shot at the Mistlynx's head, which was the target of his attack. The result was catastrophic.

The impact echoed throughout the woods, producing a dull thud that shook the air. The Mistlynx's skull could not take the impact and caved in quickly.

The creature's fur was unharmed, but the beast suffered severe brain injuries from the young man's blow. The thing stumbled before collapsing in a heap, blood dripping from its eyes, ears, and mouth as it died.

Erik observed the dead husk of the once-frightening beast. The monster was dispatched humanely and effectively, allowing the costly hide and essential organs to be recovered afterward.

[MISTLYNX KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[0%...1%...5%...30%...70%...100%]

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING CONVERTING PROCEDURE.]

[3...2...1...0]

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. 4 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

While the tranquility of the woodland was restored to its normal state, Erik considered his options.

<What do I do now? I could take its brain crystal, but it could be more powerful and frankly useless to me. I would only spend DNA points for nothing. I could merge them, but I don't know what to do. Besides, I have far too many powers on my hands now, and training them all is gruesome.>

After a moment's consideration, Erik decided that having it was better than not having it. He prepared to make his next move, pleased with the efficiency and speed of his hunt.

[MISTLYNX'S DNA ACQUIRED. STARTING THE ANALYSIS.]

[ANALYSIS COMPLETE.]

[MISTLYNX'S DNA HAS BEEN FOUND COMPATIBLE WITH THE BRAIN CRYSTAL POWER "ANIMAL SHAPE SHIFTING" TO STRENGTHEN THE POWER; THE HOST IS REQUIRED TO DRINK AT LEAST 20 CC OF BLOOD.]

[100 DNA POINTS ARE REQUIRED TO EXTRACT THE DNA. 500 TO GET IT WITHOUT INCURRING PAIN AND LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS. ANOTHER 500 TO ABSORB IT INSTANTLY.]

[14650 DNA POINTS DETECTED. COMMENCING EXTRACTION?]

<No, I will do it later.>

However, he cupped his hand and drank the blood until a new notification appeared in front of him.

[BLOOD ABSORBED. DNA STORING PROCEDURE STARTED. PLEASE WAIT.]

[PROCEDURE COMPLETE.]

"Good." After that, he removed the crystal from the thaid's brain by entering the skull through the eye socket.

The skull has already been broken; therefore, it wasn't difficult to do so. However, he decided to sever the head of this specimen to avoid problems with the Porter Company.

[MISTLYNX'S BRAIN CRYSTAL ACQUIRED. STARTING THE ANALYSIS.]

[ANALYSIS COMPLETE.]

[100 DNA POINTS ARE REQUIRED TO EXTRACT THE POWER. 500 TO GET IT WITHOUT INCURRING PAIN AND LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS.]

[14650 DNA POINTS DETECTED. EXTRACTION IS NOT ADVISED; THE HOST HAS INCOMPATIBLE DNA.]

[EXTRACTION ABORTED]

After ending the Mistlynx's threat, Erik immediately set to work. After unsheathing his Flyssa, he swiftly severed the head of the beast, and the blade of the weapon cut through the creature's neck with an almost unsettling ease.

The next step was for Erik to dig a small hole in the dirt and set the creature's head inside.

He did not want the other crew members to inquire about the missing brain crystal. Even though he had previously been in a position with the Densoph similar to this one, he decided it was best to be careful rather than sorry. It was never a good idea to raise doubts about his actions.

Erik went into his pocket and removed a little gadget from within it. The company that employed him as a porter gave him a portable communicator.

After activating it, he established a connection with Thorne right away. "Thorne," Erik's voice came through the device, calm and collected as always, and he said, "I've secured the first Mistlynx. You are welcome to come pick up the body."

Thorne received an instant notification of his whereabouts thanks to the cutting-edge technology contained in the communicator. After a brief break of only a few seconds, Thorne's voice came back on, somewhat chaotic but still clear.

"I see. All right then, it won't take long until we get there. By the way, good job," he said, his tone tinged with appreciation for what Erik had accomplished.

"We were surprised to get a message from you so quickly, but I guess you were sure of what you were doing when you accepted the quest."

Erik nodded, knowing that Thorne was oblivious to the gesture. He paused momentarily to collect his thoughts before turning off the communicator and taking a deep breath.

As soon as he was ready, he dashed into the woods, looking for his next target. It was not even close to being over yet.

Chapter 539: First official quest (3)

The mist clung to Erik's clothing, giving the woodland an eerie, peaceful atmosphere. He was cautious about making noise as he walked, considering the fallen leaves and twigs. The Mistlynx were notoriously evasive since they were masters of disguise in the mist.

Erik continued farther into the woodland, where the mist became thicker and his vision worse. Here, the ability to quickly and efficiently scan the area with Hais's brain crystal proved helpful.

He closed his eyes and listened intently to the sounds of the forest around him: crickets in the distance, the gentle rustling of leaves, and then, strangely, a succession of low growls and snarls.

Erik, intrigued, cautiously approached the sound's origin. Through the mist, he could make out the silhouettes of two Mistlynx as he got closer.

Their silvery fur glistened and made them look ethereal. They were fighting for territory and were eyeing a Thaid's carcass, which they probably wanted to eat.

Erik hid behind a sizable fern as he watched the show. The Mistlynx were incredible to watch in action.

Their claws went menacingly as they rushed and swiped at each other, each armed with the strength of their specific brain crystal. Amazingly agile, they danced a lethal duet of avoidance and counterattack.

Only the snarls of the Mistlynx, the thud of their bodies, and the delicate touch of the mist could be felt in the silent forest. Erik was amazed by their feral vigor and elegance as he saw their fur rise and fall over straining muscles.

At last, one of the Mistlynxes struck a strike that sent its foe reeling. The defeated beast gave a mournful howl and fled into the fog, allowing the winner to take possession of the loot.

The Mistlynx was so pleased with its victory that it decided to eat right then. Erik recognized an opening. The beast was distracted for just long enough for him to make his move.

As he readied his attack, though, he couldn't help but think of the delicate equilibrium in the wild. Erik briefly pondered letting the Mistlynx enjoy the victory because it was well deserved.

But he had a job to finish. He took a deep breath and mentally prepared himself for a swift and merciless blow.

The misty forest appeared to stop, and the Mistlynx's happy purring as it began to feast was the only sound to be heard. Dim light cast shifting shadows, and the boundaries between truth and illusion became hazy.

He appeared to stretch beyond them for a split second—an eternity. Erik was particularly mindful of his surroundings; his focus amplified the most minor details and caused him to become hyperaware of his surroundings.

With a silent exhale, he sprang forward from his cover among the ferns. The fog parted as if it were a stage curtain, showing his drifting body, muscles tensed, and eyes fixed on his extended arm.

The Mistlynx missed the imminent threat and proceeded to eat its prey. Its defeated opponent, still hanging about on the margins and nursing its wounds, noticed something was off.

Its eyes widened in horror when it saw Erik flying through the air. It seemed to emanate a strange light from Erik's fist.

In that instant, the situation reached a critical point. Mana from Erik's brain crystal powered his force fist, which made contact with the Mistlynx.

There was no wail of pain or a feeble attempt at resistance, just a loud thump vibrating through the soil, sending leaves flying and mist swirling in a haphazard dance.

There was no time for the other Mistlynx to process what was happening. Its once-vibrant body quickly crumpled to the ground. As its survival instincts kicked in, its beaten adversary froze, still watching from a distance.

But Erik still needed to be finished. He turned in the air, using the force of his jump and the extra speed from his brain crystal to change his course.

His still-mana-charged fist connected for a second time. With a second resounding thud, the second Mistlynx joined in the death of its defeated brethren on the forest floor.

Erik landed softly, with the woodland floor cushioning his fall. As he got to his feet, a cloud of leaves and mist whirled about him before settling.

The two Mistlynx were quiet and lifeless on the ground, their deaths a peaceful contrast to the fierceness of their previous fight. The claws retracted for the last time, leaving silver fur gleaming in the gloom.

[MISTLYNX KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[0%...1%...5%...30%...70%...100%]

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING CONVERTING PROCEDURE.]

[3...2...1...0]

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. 8 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

Erik hesitated, contemplating the importance of his deeds. These magnificent animals, who had been engaged in a primal battle just minutes before, now lay immobile as a result of what he had done.

He shook off the feeling and focused on the urgency of attaining his objective. He took a moment to gather his thoughts and then moved on to the next phase of his work.

He quickly manipulated the compact communicator in his hand, and Thorne's voice soon crackled to life. "Thorne, add two more Mistlynx to your retrieval list," Erik announced, his tone crisp and businesslike.

Thorne's voice betrayed his astonishment. "You're kidding! It's only been ten minutes since your last call. You've taken down two more in that short period?"

Erik nodded to himself, a subtle smirk crossing his lips. "I told you there was no need to worry."

Thorne's chuckle came through the speaker, tinged with a blend of disbelief and respect. "If you keep this up, we'll reach our quota by noon! We're on our way. Keep your location signal on."

Erik nodded in agreement, disconnected, and put the device away. He paused for a bit to look around at the woods. The fog had thickened, its slender strands winding silently through the overgrown vegetation and towering trees.

The sound of far-off creatures and the gentle crunch of leaves under his boots disturbed the forest's calm, creating an eerie yet beautiful mood.

With his senses sharp, Erik continued further into the woodland. Seeing another Mistlynx in the dense fog could be difficult, but he wasn't worried. After all, his eyes weren't the only thing he used to find the monsters.

Chapter 540: First official quest (4)

Calm settled over the woodland as the sky glowed pink and gold with the dawn's first rays. The sounds of a city awakening could be heard in the distance, and the midnight symphony that had filled the air began to fade. The group drove back to the city with the enormous haul Erik had amassed on his own.

Breaking the contemplative silence, Faelan couldn't help but express his amazement from the backseat. "Forty Mistlynx in less than a day, and all by yourself, Erik? Are you even human?"

Erik looked back, his eyes dancing between modesty and pride, and offered a playful half-smirk. "Just another day at the office for me."

Sylvi laughed, and it was a happy, natural sound. "I've seen teams of people have a hard time defeating 10. Besides, the Mistlynx often appear to have been through a war and have returned with the scars to prove it."

Elara said, her eyes penetratingly weighing up Erik with a newfound reverence. "And all on your own. Amazing doesn't even begin to describe that."

Erik, flattered but embarrassed, scratched the nape of his neck. "There wasn't any cause for concern."

As he drove, Bram, who usually maintained a calm conduct, wrinkled his brow thoughtfully. "I have to know—what's the rank of your brain crystal power? "

Erik hesitated, a look of discomfort crossing his features. "I'd rather keep that private if it's all the same to you."

The rest of the crew sent him knowing looks but ultimately accepted his need for privacy. "Fair enough," Bram said, nodding in agreement.

Erik looked to Thorne to change the subject of their heated conversation. To put it another way, "So, what's the average price for a Mistlynx these days?"

Thorne thoughtfully stroked his beard as he considered his response. "The average rate for a Mistlynx carcass is about 2,500 Eurems, which goes up if there is less evidence of a fight. However, your kills are in such excellent shape that they may sell for 3,500 Eurems or more."

Erik's eyes widened in a mix of astonishment and gratification. "That's an unexpected news."

Elara, ever the quick thinker, did some rapid calculations. "For all forty, that comes to an astounding 140,000 Eurems. You may expect to walk away with around 126,000 Eurems after we take our 10% cut for the job."

Erik whistled in approval. It was "Not a bad haul for a day's work."

In a hopeful tone, Thorne said, "A promising start to what I hope will be many more successful collaborations."

The atmosphere inside the car was upbeat and buoyant as it set off on its drive back to the city; it was filled with the warmth of shared laughter and newly found friendship.

It felt like the group, including Erik, had known each other for years rather than just a few hours. However, as soon as Erik could see the city walls, his serious stance returned, completely replacing the lighthearted mood that had been there just seconds earlier.

He then shifted his attention to Thorne after clearing his throat. "Once we get back to the base, what steps are required to sell the Mistlynxs?"

Thorne started outlining the stages while leaning back comfortably in his seat. "It's not too difficult for beginners to comprehend. To begin, we will stop at the administration office at the city entrance so that you may have your mission verified. After that, you will have several alternatives to choose from on how to proceed."

Erik gave Thorne his full attention as he held a finger and began describing the possibilities. "To begin with, you can sell to us directly at the current market value—no haggling, no hassle."

Thorne pointed his index finger upward and said, "Alternatively, you might find a trustworthy merchant in the city. You must deal with every aspect of the bargaining process to obtain a better price. As a last option, you can sell items through the guild's administrative center stall.

They will likewise provide value relative to the market, but rather than private businesses such as ours, the city will benefit from the materials."

Erik's expression was one of deep thought as he considered the available options. The prospect of engaging in a drawn-out negotiation did not pique his interest. After a moment's reflection, he concluded.

"I'll sell you the Mistlynx if you're interested. After such a hard day, I'd much rather not get mired down in the complexities of a trade."

Thorne showed his approval by giving a knowing nod and smiling simultaneously. "That was a clever decision, particularly for your first business in town. The excessive amount of bureaucracy may be a genuine pain. By doing it in this way, not only will you receive an excellent deal, but you also save some time."

Sitting next to Thorne, Elara added her two cents by saying, "City merchants can smell inexperience from a mile away. They will attempt to pay you less for your catch if they believe they can get away with it."

Bram chuckled as he thought back on an earlier incident. "Oh, you are very much correct. Remember when they attempted to get away with giving those Thunder Salamanders a lower price to the Black Cats?"

Suddenly, Sylvi broke out laughing. "Oh, what a day it turned out to be! Their captain came dangerously close to flipping the table over."

Faelan grinned and said, "I wish I'd been there to see it!"

Erik felt a blend of fatigue and fulfillment as the vehicle steadily approached the city. The day had been both grueling and rewarding, and he was thankful for the support from the Porter Company, particularly Thorne's guidance.

With heartfelt sincerity, Erik said, "Thanks for everything, Thorne. I'm glad our paths crossed today."

Thorne looked back at Erik, his eyes radiating genuine warmth. "The feeling is mutual, Erik. Here's to the beginning of a prosperous partnership."

The remainder of the trip was filled with humorous talk, with the initial air of formality giving way to a developing sense of camaraderie nurtured by the shared adventures. As they got closer to the city gates, Erik had an overwhelming feeling of self-satisfaction and looked forward to the exciting times ahead.

A couple of hours later, Erik successfully traversed the bureaucratic maze at the administration center to sell the Mistlynx to the Lustrous Haulers. It took only a short time until his payment was completed, which served as a gratifying capstone to a day that had already been profitable.

-Sender: Etrium's Bank.

-Message: 126,000 Eurems have been accredited to your account.

<These will be handy.>