

BIOLOGICAL 541

Chapter 541: Searching for a new weapon

Even though the city was bathed in the artificial glow of its lights, the expansive maze that was Testrovsc's Rest gave off the impression that it was teeming with activity. The sound of rhythmic hammering from blacksmiths at their forges, combined with the talk of merchants selling their wares, filled the area around Erik with sound.

The young man said to himself, "Guess this city never sleeps," as he walked across the metropolis.

After he had finished his business with the Porter Company, he found himself wandering through the complex shopping district of the city.

Each shop window displayed an impressive array of shining weaponry, ranging from longswords with delicately wrought hilts to recurve bows with perfectly constructed limbs.

However, despite the plethora of options available, Erik departed each store with a sense of dissatisfaction. Some of the weapons, although having spectacular aesthetics, needed to have the proper balance.

Although skillfully designed, the others failed to strike a chord with him on a more fundamental level.

The ones that did attract his attention were prohibitively costly, particularly those infused with brain crystal powers. This technology was still in its infancy, so the items made with it were priced extremely high.

When he was on the verge of giving in to the rising frustration he was experiencing, his attention was drawn to a bit of business. A sign hung from the ceiling that said "Matthias' Blades.

"The only display was a single blade perched on a pedestal made of oak placed in the window. Its subtle shine gave the impression that it was more solid than the glitzy products sold in other shops.

A bell quietly sounded as Erik opened the door, signaling his arrival and declaring his presence. The shop had low lighting, which gave the variety of firearms and other weapons a warm, golden color.

An elderly gentleman, who appeared to be Matthias, gazed up from where he was while meticulously cleaning a dagger. His eyes were clear and perceptive despite their appearance of aging.

Matthias welcomed Erik, saying, "Good evening, young man," with a warm, gravelly voice. "What brings you in to visit us today?"

As Erik made his way toward the counter, he gazed over the assortment of weapons, each of which was a striking example of expert craftsmanship. "I've been looking for a weapon, but so far, nothing's felt right," he said.

With a solemn nod, Matthias acknowledged that he understood the crux of Erik's difficulties. "For a mercenary, a weapon is more than just a tool; it is an extension of themselves and their identity. Having a weapon suited for its owner is important when mana cannot be counted upon."

In an instant, Erik saw in Matthias a kindred spirit. The wise elderly guy expressed eloquently what Erik had been thinking and feeling all along.

Matthias handed Erik a sword with a well-made hilt. "Why don't you give this one a try?" The older man said to the pupil-ranked mercenary.

As soon as Erik took hold of the weapon, he was hit with a wave of nostalgia. However, even though the weight and balance were almost perfect, there was still the feeling that something was off.

Erik replied, "It's a beautiful piece, but it's not quite what I'm after," with a trace of disappointment in his voice.

Matthias, a seasoned veteran of dealing with the many preferences of combatants, nodded knowingly in acknowledgment. "Well, we do have other options," he remarked as he moved into another area with various blades while gesturing for Erik to follow him.

Erik watched him, and with each step, he felt a fresh surge of optimism. He was eager to find the one weapon that would make him feel like he was using an extension of himself.

Erik's initial joy started to wane as he tested various weapons, but he was still curious. Even though each blade was a work of art in its own right, he could not find one that spoke to him more profoundly.

After demonstrating another weapon by flinging it into the air, he returned it to Matthias and commented, "It's a work of art, really, but it's not exactly what I'm looking for."

Matthias was unaffected by Erik's refined palate, and he merely nodded in response. "I am aware of that." After that, he went to a separate exhibit and chose a new blade with a distinct shine and a more detailed pattern. "Perhaps this one will appeal to you more than the others."

After giving it a few test swings, Erik could determine the weight of the blade. However, despite his high hopes, this one did not live up to what he was searching for again.

He carefully set it back on the counter, stating, "The craftsmanship is extraordinary, again, as with all the weapons you showed me until now, but I have something particular in mind."

Matthias gave Erik a contemplative gaze while drumming his fingers softly on the wooden counter. "If you can't find what you're looking for, have you considered having something made specifically for you?"

After hearing the proposal, Erik's eyes lit up with excitement. "You do that too?"

"Of course," Matthias stated unequivocally. "But making a customized order is a labor-intensive procedure. We will need to ensure that every facet is in accordance with what you wish, and it will require time."

Erik's response was, "That's fine by me. I would love to place a custom order. Who exactly is the master bladesmith who created these tools, by the way?"

"My son, Fabian," Matthias said with a tone of pride in his voice. "Since he was young, he has been working hard to improve his skills. He gained knowledge from the very best," he said, smirking and referring to himself.

The more Erik learned, the more curious he became. "Can I talk to him? I believe having a straight conversation about the particulars with the artisan would be the best option."

Matthias gave a tiny shake of the head. "At this moment, he is unable to meet you. But I can arrange a meeting if you're serious about having a custom order."

"I am serious," Erik affirmed. "When would be a good time to schedule a meeting?"

Matthias checked on a tablet, which he mainly used to schedule appointments, including various notes and dates. "The 15th of April—how does that date sound? It's a Wednesday."

"That works for me," Erik said firmly.

Before Erik left, Matthias offered additional advice on what to consider regarding design and functionality for their upcoming meeting.

As Erik walked outside the shop, he felt a surge of adrenaline and exhilaration, not just for the weapon he would have a hand in designing but also for the possibility of working with a genuine craftsman such as Fabian.

Chapter 542: The Bread & Blade

Erik's boots reverberated through the evening air as he stepped into the cobblestone streets of Testrovs's Rest.

After such a long and hectic day, just the notion of a good lunch made him feel better about everything. He recalled a warm and welcoming inn he had stopped at on several occasions since moving to the city.

The mouthwatering, freshly prepared meals initially attracted him, not the lavish surroundings of the establishment.

Children ran between stalls, their laughter merging with the voices of adults as they bargained, and salespeople hawked their wares with well-rehearsed pitches as they moved through the crowded market.

Erik's stomach rumbled in anticipation as a mild wind carried the tantalizing smells of roasted meats and freshly baked bread from nearby stalls. This prompted Erik to quicken his steps.

Soon after, he arrived at the inn, which had a wooden sign that creaked subtly in the breeze as he approached.

The inn was named "The Bread & Blade," the sign displayed its logo: a loaf of bread with two knives crisscrossed over it. Before opening the door, he could hear the lively sounds of people talking, drinks clinking, and food being cooked.

When Erik arrived, he went directly for an empty seat near the window, where he sat down and began anxiously anticipating the delectable meals to come. The air was filled with the aroma of fresh bread and flavorful stew, which caused his stomach to rumble even more forcefully.

He was looking for a waitress when his eyes caught on someone he recognized as he looked around the room.

Mira's long, black hair was braided over one shoulder as she sat with the other team members and participated in the talk. Because of her unique green clothing and the mischievous twinkle in her eyes, it was easy to spot her immediately.

Next to her was Aiden, his towering figure leaning into the table, his often severe visage softened by the soft warmth of the lanterns hanging over them. His longsword was accessible by merely reaching across the table where it was propped up.

Kael sat down next to him, his halberd lying in the vicinity, and he appeared thoughtful but relaxed. Lila, the most lively member of the group, was delivering an exciting story while her twin daggers were nowhere to be seen. Still, the entire space was filled with enthusiasm.

Mira's eyes lit up when she saw Erik and waved him over. "Erik!" She called out, "Come join us!" It wasn't their first meeting at this inn; they were regulars because they liked the food.

Erik walked over to their table and gave them a friendly grin. "Fancy meeting you all here," he said pleasedly.

Mira laughed. "The Bread & Blade is well-known. Also, who could say no to some warm, hearty bread and stew after a hard day?"

Erik dropped into his chair as a steaming plate of stew was placed before him. The heady aroma of the stew filled the room. He turned his attention to Mira and the other members of her team, all of whom appeared to be exhausted but were beaming with joy.

"So, how has life been treating all of you as of late?" Erik asked while Mira started eating her soup.

The first person to answer was Kael while he swirled his drink. "Today was a hectic day for us. We were given the mission to eliminate a sizeable number of Eganesus."

Mira continued, saying, "It seems as though they traveled from Frant. It's baffling. Nobody understands what their reason is for being here."

Kael sat back in his chair and took a leisurely swig from his mug. "Their numbers were a cause of concern for the city. For this reason, the guild sent us and many other teams to cull their numbers. Doing this job with so many people was a blessing."

Always energetic, Lila chimed in. "Oh indeed, there were so many of them! It was like struggling against an unending tidal wave of water." She paused to take a bite of bread, her expression contemplative as she did so. However, we were victorious and earned a ton of money."

Concerned frown lines formed between Erik's eyebrows. "I'm glad to hear that none of you were injured."

Kael smiled in a restrained way, and his eyes became more kind. "It was a challenging day, but the payoffs made it all worth it." After seeing Erik's eye contact, he said, "Let's not get into specifics, though."

Mira then turned to look at Erik and, with a mix of merriment and interest, asked, "What about you, Erik? Have you started taking on quests yet?"

Erik put a straw inside the drink the waiter had just brought him and let it slip under his mask. He waited momentarily before taking a gulp, then replied, "I started today. I did hunt some Mistlynx."

"And?" Lila pushed forward, pressing in closer with eagerness.

Erik said, "Let's just say it was an eventful day," with a slight smile on his lips. He had taken care to choose his words wisely.

Mira was able to pick up on his resistance and responded with a kind grin. "I understand. We all have stories we're willing to share and others we'd rather keep to ourselves."

A comfortable stillness arose at the table, only broken by the background chitchat and the clanking of various cutlery. Everyone was immersed in their thoughts, meditating on the highs and lows of the day.

Even though Erik was not a Mira squad member, he felt a sense of kinship with the other members.

They were all warriors who lived in a city full of adventures and dangers and shared the same risks and benefits.

As the evening progressed, the inn took on a livelier and more animated air. Erik, Mira, and the rest of the staff continued to swap stories, and the inn had a cheery atmosphere due to their laughter.

Plates were cleared, cups were replenished, and the more seasoned mercenaries selected ale as their drink.

Their stories became more outrageous as they got drunk; their voices became louder, and their laughter reverberated throughout the inn, reflecting the joyous mood that permeated the establishment.

Each group enjoyed the night uniquely, contributing to the camaraderie that permeated the younger mercenaries and the more experienced veterans.

Chapter 543: Designing the blade

Time had flown by in the two days since Erik's unexpected meeting at the inn. The city of Testrovsc's Rest was teeming with activity as the early sun painted the sky a gentle hue. Children ran crazily through the crowds, playing morning games.

At the same time, street merchants shouted out to passing customers and displayed their products.

Adjusting his cloak, Erik walked out of the hotel. The fresh morning air was revitalizing, tinged with the subtle metallic aroma that lingered wherever blacksmith shops were present. He followed the steady beat of hammers on anvils as it resonated through the narrow streets.

The city's buildings were a hodgepodge of styles, ranging from ancient stone structures to newer ones made of cement and brick. Erik was occasionally reminded of the city's thriving nightlife by the discarded shoes and upturned glasses that littered the streets.

As he navigated through the maze of streets, he noticed the gradual increase in weapon shops and armories, signaling his proximity to Matthias's Blades, the shop he was in two days prior.

The familiar sign, carved intricately with the image of a gleaming sword, swung gently in the morning breeze as he approached.

A queue of warriors and mercenaries formed outside the store to examine the wares and debate the relative advantages and disadvantages of the various weapons on display.

Their armors made a soothing metallic symphony as they moved. Erik, however, was interested in something other than the shown objects but rather in acquiring a unique piece.

The bell overhead chimed quietly as he pulled open the sturdy oak door. As he entered the shops, he saw that the inside was dark but covered from floor to ceiling in knives, swords, and other lethal instruments.

Matthias, recognizing Erik immediately from their previous encounter, greeted him with a warm nod.

"Ah, you're here for your meeting with Fabian," he said, beckoning him further into the shop. Erik could feel the anticipation building; he was one step closer to obtaining the perfect weapon.

Erik politely nodded, saying, "Good morning, sir." Recognizing the moment's importance, he continued, "Indeed, I am here for our scheduled appointment."

"Good, then follow me, we will go to the forge. My son is there."

Without any delay, Matthias, with a gesture of his hand, led Erik through a narrow passage that opened up into a vast workshop behind the shop.

The clang of metal on metal grew louder, and the warmth from the furnaces engulfed the space. Amidst the organized chaos, a young man, broad-shouldered with dark hair, was intently working on a blade, his hands moving with practiced precision.

"Fabian," Matthias called out, capturing the younger man's attention.

The blacksmith looked up, his face smeared with soot but eyes sharp and inquisitive. Setting down his tools, he approached the two men, wiping his hands on a rough cloth. "Ah, you must be Erik," he said, extending a firm handshake.

"Dad mentioned your request. You want a custom weapon, am I right?"

Erik nodded, feeling the weight of the younger blacksmith's gaze. "That's right. I need a Flyssa, and I was hoping you could craft one to my specifications."

Fabian's brow rose slightly in interest. "A Flyssa, you say? It's not a common request, but certainly doable." He paused, thinking for a moment. "As for materials, we have several options." He began to list them: "Eshalt, Vordium, Prenstal, Quorilite, Aclaitrium, Larnox, Terphine, Bristalite, Mernium, and lastly, Dranstone.

These are rather common ores; if you need something more sophisticated, we would need more time to find the materials."

Erik took note of the variety of materials mentioned; Eshalt was a well-known, low-quality ore, while Aclaitrium was renowned for its strength, flexibility, and good mana conductive qualities.

Fabian continued, "The price can fluctuate based on the length of the blade, design intricacies, and the chosen one. But we will ensure the end product is worth every Eurem."

Understanding the constraints, Erik said, "I appreciate the options. However, I have a budget of 130,000 Eurems. Can we design something exceptional within that range?"

Fabian paused for a moment, calculating. Then, with a confident nod, he responded, "With that budget, we can craft a Flyssa that won't just meet but exceed your expectations. Let's discuss the specifics." Ironing out all the design details took the two men an hour.

Fabian leaned back, deep in concentration, after taking notes on Erik's requirements and discussing the finer points of the blade's design and the materials to be utilized.

He stopped for a second to do a mental cost analysis, factoring in the number of hours of work and the price of the materials he had settled on.

"After taking everything into account," Fabian began, his voice steady, "the price would come to around 123,000 Eurems. Does that work for you?"

Erik, pondering the sum and the promised craftsmanship, nodded in agreement. "Yes, that will be acceptable."

With the deal finalized, Fabian extended his hand again, his grip firm and filled with the promise of delivering a masterwork. "Thank you for entrusting us with this project. I assure you, you won't be disappointed."

Returning the handshake, Erik responded, "I believe I've made the right choice." With that, he excused himself from Fabian and returned to the front of the store.

There, he was met by the familiar face of Matthias, who was carefully organizing a display of newly finished blades. Noticing Erik, the older blacksmith paused and addressed him.

After a short talk, Matthias said, "Given the specific requirements and the quality you seek, crafting your Flyssa will be meticulous. I expect it'll take us at least a month."

Erik nodded in understanding. "Quality work takes time," he remarked.

"Indeed, it does," Matthias agreed, then hesitated momentarily. "To update you on the progress and inform you once the blade is ready, may I have your phone number?"

Erik readily provided his contact details, trusting that the information would be used responsibly. "Call me once it's ready, and I'll come to collect it," he said.

Matthias scribbled down the number, nodding his affirmation. "Of course, young man. We'll be in touch."

Erik ensured everything was ready before leaving to gain a sword from Fabian's skilled hands. The prospect of owning such a weapon was thrilling.

As he stepped out of Matthias's Blades, the shop Fabian worked in with his father, he was greeted by the warm afternoon sun. The city's bustle and activity looked even more vibrant and energized. Erik continued his journey with anticipation for the future and the creation of his new weapon.

Chapter 544: Two Months

Erik's life became increasingly chaotic in the subsequent two months. As the days passed, the difficulties he encountered in terms of his professional and personal development changed him.

His promotion to the 'Seeker' level in the mercenary guild was his most remarkable achievement during this period. It wasn't simply a title; he had earned the Seeker rank by demonstrating his prowess and staying on the leading edge of the profession and rank he worked in.

Because of his promotion, he was able to take on jobs that, up until this point, were beyond his reach. More difficult and dangerous hunts for Thaidis, with rankings similar to the $\xi 1$ rank, were now available to him.

He could now participate in these hunts. Because he possessed such a vast network of neural links, Erik could breeze through these hunts with ease since he was far more powerful than the monsters he went to hunt.

However, this promotion in status was only one of the signs of Erik's development during this time.

He also became more and more independent. His inner power, in addition to his physical prowess, underwent a huge metamorphosis at the same time.

Erik effectively developed three additional neural links for his Plant Master power during the two months.

Each link constituted a qualitatively different advance in his abilities. The links quickened the pace at which he could call forth plants from the very ground beneath his feet.

With a mere thought, plants would now sprout, weaving and darting according to his will. They also bolstered the vitality of these plants.

They seemed to have more vigor, strength, and resiliency than they had in the past, which reflected the energy of their master's spirit.

All of this provided him with a greater degree of control over his arsenal of plant-based weapons. It was almost as if the plants were an extension of his essence; they responded more fluidly to his thoughts and feelings. This synchrony was profound, creating an unparalleled bond between man and nature.

In addition, the cumulative impact of these neural links resulted in a significant reduction in the amount of mana Erik needed to use to activate his power.

This meant that he could use his abilities for extended periods, which made it possible for him to participate in extensive conflicts without worrying about depleting his energy supplies.

Erik could feel himself maturing and becoming a formidable opponent each day. Because of his meteoric rise, the streets of the city were filled with rumors of his bravery, and many people would look up in wonder as he walked down the street while concealing his identity behind a mask.

The final thing he acquired over these two months was a brand new Flyssa, which he could use without worrying about Frant finding out about it.

The splendor of the sword could not be denied, especially when compared to the other, more mundane blades.

The slick Prenstal alloy gave the Flyssa a brilliant silver sheen that tricked the eye; depending on how the light hit it, the color would alter gradually, making the blade look almost alive. This created the impression that the Flyssa was alive.

The complex design of the Flyssa's hilt made it equally as remarkable as the blade itself, if not more so, due to the material it was created from, Prenstal ore.

A meshwork of exquisite, intertwining vines wrapped around the sword's hilt. These vines were so delicately fashioned that they looked like a professional jeweler rather than a blacksmith had made them.

The pommel was a standalone piece of art in its own right. It was fashioned as a regal bird, maybe a phoenix or an eagle, with extended wings that gracefully wrapped around to hug the blade's hilt.

The level of craftsmanship was such that each feather on the bird was discernible; each caught the light and shimmered in its distinctive manner, lending the weapon an elegant and unrivaled personality.

Erik and the other members of the Thorne group were making their way back from a productive hunt for Thaid. Erik took a quest to hunt the dangerous Erendus, which belonged to a tauric race of thaids famed for having horned heads and plated plating on their bodies.

Hunting two would have been challenging for any party at the Seeker rank, but Erik was not concerned. In fact, they lacked the experience they provided to the young man, meaning they were much weaker than him.

As the party drove toward the city, their car becoming heavier and heavier under the strain of transporting his prize, there was a distinct sense of pleasure and admiration in the air.

The truck lurched through the bumpy terrain of the woods as it sometimes shook, demonstrating the weight of the Erendu bodies it carried.

"Five Erendu, Erik," said Thorne. Even experienced hunters would be afraid to go up against that number. You've gone above and beyond."

Elara gave a grin. "At this rate, Erik, you might become a local legend. Besides, these creatures will bring you and us a lot of money."

Faelan laughed and ran his hand through his brown hair as he did so. "I've been on many hunts, but this one was different. Erik, you are smart. It was a pleasure to fight with you. When Thorne said you would hunt Erendus alone, I didn't believe him. But seeing you out there, Erik, I wouldn't bet against you even if you said you were going after ten of them!"

Thorne, who was driving, laughed out loud, and the sound reverberated through the car. "I've hauled a lot of creatures in my time, but this haul is special."

Erik leaned back, but his mask made it hard to tell how he felt. "I appreciate the trust, everyone. These Erendus will certainly fetch a good price."

As they returned, they kept talking, and the landscape in front of them promised the ease of society. The car was full of stories about past hunts, close calls, and laughs, which brought the group closer together.

ERIK'S STATUS:

[Host Information]

NAME: Erik Romano

AGE: 17

POWER LEVEL: 247

SYSTEM LEVEL: 34

EXPERIENCE: 33577/48400

DNA POINTS: 20950

HEALTH: 2240/2240

MANA: 2170/2170

{Attributes}

STRENGTH: 123

INTELLIGENCE: 160

DEXTERITY: 103

ENERGY: 107

Available Attributes points: 0

{Powers}

[Biological Super Computer Powers]

-Brain Crystal Manipulation

-Brain Crystal Power Extraction

(Allows the absorption of the brain crystal, making the host able to acquire the power contained within. Notice: the DNA must be changed in order to allow the body to use the power. See DNA extraction.)

-Brain Crystal power Merging

(Allows to merge two powers, birthing a new one. It requires the merging of the DNA to work.)

-Brain Crystal Power Analysis

(Allows to Analyse the target brain crystal without the need to know the creature.)

- (LOCKED)

- Brain Crystal Power Strengthening

(Allows the gaining of the energy attribute points)

-(LOCKED)

-DNA Manipulation DNA Extraction

(Allows the absorption of foreign DNA, allowing the host to replicate it inside his own body.
Notice: Changing the DNA is a slow process and requires new brain crystal powers.)

-DNA Merging

(Allows to merge two DNAs, birthing a new one. Required to accommodate merged powers.)

-DNA Analysis

(Allows to Analyse the enemy DNA from the distance for a better understanding of the target's stats.)

- (LOCKED)

-DNA Strengthening

(Allows the gaining of the Strength, Intelligence, and Dexterity attribute points)

-(LOCKED)

- Analysis

(Gives the host information about his surroundings, plants, creatures, and ores.)

-Brain Information Injector

(It allows the injection of information directly to the brain. Based on touch)

-Device Manipulation

(Allows the Host to manipulate electrical and mana-driven devices. Based on touch)

[Host's Powers]

-POISONOUS MANA DARTS D σ 3 D RANKED

(Conjure poisonous mana darts whose lethality depends on the mana injected)

-ANIMAL SHAPESHIFTING D σ 3 E RANKED

(Shapeshift the body into that of animals. Animals must be absorbed to unlock their shapeshifting.)

-POISONOUS ASTRAL WOLF BITE D σ 2 D RANKED

(Conjure an astral but solid projection of a Leylahad's head whose only aim is to bite at whatever target the host is aiming. Its teeth have a poisonous element whose Toxicity depends on the mana used. Notice: the target must be close to the projection)

-FORCE MANIPULATION D ξ 1 B RANKED

(Manipulate a mana-driven force to produce powerful shockwaves that can change in intensity, radius, speed, and power. It is also possible to use the power differently as to generate force shields.)

-PARALLEL WILLS D ξ 1 C RANKED

(Allows the user to passively increase Intelligence based on the number of neural links. It also allows the construction of a mana brain that allows independent thoughts and can be used for multiple purposes)

-ICE SWORD D σ 1 E RANKED

(Allows the creation of a powerful ice blade, but needs a real weapon to be used as a base)

-STRENGTH ENHANCER D ρ 2 D RANKED

(Depending on the amount of mana used, the amount of strength increases)

-PLANT MASTER D ρ 3 B RANKED

(Allows to grow and control plant-based organism. The usage depends on the plant and the user's will.)

-CHAMELEON VEIL D σ 3 C RANKED

(Allows to turn totally transparent and to project what is behind you, making it almost impossible to be seen. The user can move while using this Brain Crystal power. However, notice that the ripples in light the power creates while moving decrease the power's hiding abilities increasing the chance of being seen.)

-BESTIAL ROAR D σ 2 C RANKED

(Allows to emit a roar that can instill fear into the surrounding creatures. It does affect all but the user.)

-BIOMANTIC ARMOR D ρ 2 B RANKED

(This power allows the user to envelop any object or body part in a mana-infused metallic layer, increasing its durability and sharpening its edges for enhanced cutting ability. The effect's strength depends on the amount of mana used.)

-METALLIC EDGE ENHANCEMENT D ρ 2 B RANKED

(This power enables the user to alter their skeleton to create external structures, such as spikes or plating, and wrap themselves in a protective energy exoskeleton derived from their own mana.)

{Skills}

-Kyokar hand-to-hand style (ADVANCED)

(A military fighting style developed in Frant)

- Crypt of the Desert Style (INTERMEDIATE)

(Flyssa fighting style developed by Master Nieminen)

- Etrium's sword style (BASIC)

(Basic Sword Style developed in Etrium.)

Chapter 545: Dangerous winds ahead

Erik entered the administration center at the gate hub, the heart of Testrovsc's Rest's bureaucratic machinery. The hum of activity was incessant, with administrators moving to and fro, engaging in animated discussions, and hunching over desks piled with papers.

The high ceiling and broad windows allowed golden beams of sunlight to filter in, casting the vast room in a warm glow.

At one of the counters stood a stout woman with spectacles perched on her nose. Erik went to the counter, and the woman started, "Ah, Mr. Kay," she greeted, scrolling through a tablet. "Good morning; I just completed the quest I took at the guild hall," the young man said.

"Let's see... and Erendu Killing quest."

"Yes, and I killed five Erendus," Erik replied.

"These beasts' worth is around 7000 Eurems each. Do you want to sell them to us or do otherwise?"

"Otherwise," he replied.

Erik patiently awaited as she scribbled some calculations, "That's 20,000 Eurems for the quest completion."

Erik nodded, mentally tallying the numbers. As the data was inserted into the guild's system, the woman peered at him with a slightly more serious expression.

"Mr. Kay, the guild has requested your presence. They mentioned it was urgent."

Erik raised an eyebrow. It wasn't typical for someone of his rank to be summoned so suddenly. "Any idea what it's about?"

The woman shook her head, "I'm not privy to the specifics, but I suggest you make your way to the guild hall posthaste."

Erik nodded, the weight of curiosity now joining the Eurems in his bank account, and there were more to come. As he moved to the exit, he couldn't help but scan the room. Guild administrators were generally apathetic, focused solely on their tasks. But today, there were murmurs.

Whispers that punctuated the regular cadence of the center's operations. Something was up, and he was keen to understand what happened.

Erik then went to Thorne, telling them he wanted to sell the bodies to them. He got 35,000 Eurems for the bodies alone due to his hunting quest, and considering he owed 10% to the Lustrous Haulers, he received 51,500 Eurems.

The city's gates loomed ahead as Erik made his way out of the administration hub. The streets of Testrovs's Rest echoed with the bustling sounds of merchants peddling their wares, children playing, and the distant clang of blacksmiths at work. But his destination was clear—the guild hall.

Erik's pace quickened. Whatever the guild wanted, it had piqued his interest. He was determined to find out what they wanted and if it was related to the clamor outside.

The guild hall's doors were massive, sturdy oak with golden handles that gleamed in the dappled sunlight. Pushing them open, Erik stepped into the huge atrium, his footsteps echoing through the vast space.

Stained glass windows bathed the hall in a dance of colors, and the air held an aura of solemnity. It was where mercenaries' fates were decided, where adventures began and tales ended.

He approached one of the counters where a clerk was meticulously organizing documents. Clearing his throat, Erik introduced himself, "I'm Erik Kay. I was told someone from the guild wanted to see me."

The clerk glanced up, quickly scanning a document on his desk. "Ah, yes," he said, "someone has requested to see you privately. Please proceed to the second floor, room 36."

Erik nodded in agreement, following the instructions. He walked the guild hall's labyrinthine passageways, observing the various flags, insignia, photographs, and paintings that were put on the walls.

Murmurs from adjacent rooms suggested talks, combat preparations, or stories of misadventure.

Finally, he found himself in front of a wooden door with the number '36' carved on it. Erik knocked quietly after a few seconds of reflection. A female voice from inside invited him to come in.

The area needed to be more sparsely equipped, with a few seats, a table, shelves brimming with scrolls and books, and a contemporary holographic computer in the center. But it was the lady behind the desk who drew Erik's attention.

She was of average height, with cascading waves of chestnut hair surrounding a lovely face dotted with freckles.

Her stunning hazel eyes sparkled with intelligence and a hint of humor. Despite wearing a lovely maroon robe that made her appear more like a model than an important guild member, she exuded authority. She carried herself with a sense of power.

"Erik," she chirped, "I'm Lyria Bannon, the Deputy Chief Administrator of the guild's operations."

Erik wrinkled his brow slightly. It wasn't every day that someone of Lyria's prominence summoned someone like him. He bowed politely and said, "Ms. Bannon, it's an honor."

Lyria motioned for him to sit while pointing at the chair before them. "I've been hearing about your recent exploits," she said. "Your performance in the field, combined with your unique abilities in retrieving information, has caught our attention."

Erik swallowed, unsure of what the hidden meaning behind her words was. "Thank you," he said nervously, "I've just been trying my best."

Lyria leaned back, her eyes admiring. "And that is exactly why you are here. The guild has particular duties, and from time to time, we need someone with certain skills to do jobs we can't complete. But we can talk about it later. First, Erik, tell me about your life as a mercenary in Testrovs's Rest; how is it going? Did you have problems acclimating to this place after coming from the capital?"

Erik paused for a time, gathering his thoughts. This encounter would greatly influence his path in this city and maybe beyond, so he needed to reply satisfyingly.

Erik settled into the chair across from Lyria, the soft fabric conforming to his frame. The room, bathed in the gentle glow from a nearby window, felt inviting despite the weight of the conversation they were about to have. The scent of aged parchment and polished wood filled the air, a testament to the history and lore of the guild.

"I've been having a good time, Ms. Bannon," Erik began, his voice steady. "With my skills, I've handled challenges fairly well."

He paused, looking out of the window for a moment as if recalling his many adventures. "And I've earned an excellent income. It's been rewarding, both in experience and wealth."

Lyria leaned forward, her hazel eyes reflecting genuine interest. The corners of her lips curled into a subtle smile, "I'm glad to hear that. Many who come through these halls face challenges adapting to our ways. But it seems you've found your footing swiftly."

Erik laughed and said, "I've always believed in making the most out of what one has. And I have goals that are more ambitious than my current goals."

Her eyes sparkled with a mix of curiosity and admiration. "Ambition is a powerful tool when channeled correctly. And from what I've seen, you have the potential to harness it well."

"Thank you," Erik replied, his cheeks tinting pink. "Your words mean a lot, especially from someone important within the guild."

Lyria's smile deepened. "It's merely an observation. Nothing more than stating the obvious. But remember, Erik, that while ambition can lead you to greatness, you must keep your core values lit. They'll be your guiding star."

The room was enveloped in a thoughtful silence for a moment. The wisdom in her words resonated deeply with Erik, a reminder of the path he had chosen and the journey ahead.

Chapter 546: Personal Request

Erik felt a rising weight in the pit of his stomach when he saw Lyria's mood change. "Ms. Bannon," he asked slowly, moving in his seat, "May I ask what this meeting is about? You mentioned it was important."

Lyria took a deep breath and put her fingers together as she put them on the table. "Yes, that's true. Your prowess, especially your ability to gather information, has caught the attention of many within the guild."

She waited a moment to see what he would do. "In particular, your performance on the practice test for the test to move from novice to pupil was nothing short of remarkable."

Erik raised an eyelid, looking both interested and worried. "Thank you for letting me know. But how does that relate to today's meeting?"

After hesitating momentarily, Lyria said, "The guild wants to give you a mission similar to the one you got during the assessment." Erik moved closer, interested. "What could this quest be about?"

She looked straight into his eyes. "It's a search operation. We need you to find someone for us. Your primary task is to identify and locate this individual." Erik nodded and thought about what had been said. "What if I find the individual? What should I do?"

Lyria's eyes were so intensely focused on him that it made him shiver. "You stop. Do not approach. Do not engage. It's imperative that you understand this. The person we want is not someone to mess with."

The only thing you have to do is find out where he is and then back off. We have a team of experts who are much better prepared than you are to handle the following steps. Your safety and the mission's success rely on your discretion. Also, privacy is paramount, and you can't tell anyone about this job."

Erik scowled as he thought about what she said. "This seems important. Who is this person, and why does the guild want him?"

Lyria slowly breathed and nodded in response to Erik's questions. "His full name is Doran Stedman."

As soon as the name was said, the room's lights got darker, and an image appeared before them. A picture of a guy was shown, and as it was displayed, his blurred visage slowly changed until the whole man could be seen.

He was tall and had a slim but muscular body. The lines of his body made him look agile and robust. His jet-black hair fell to his shoulders like a curtain. The strands were curly but kept in place.

His complexion was olive-toned, juxtaposed by piercing blue eyes that seemed to harbor an unknown depth. A strong face led to a chiseled chin with a small patch of beard, and a jagged scar from his head to the bottom of his cheek stood out.

The text beside the hologram reported that he was about 35 years old. Lyria looked at Erik as he looked at the hologram. "Doran is a person who got off on the wrong foot, that much I can say. Finding him is the most important thing in your quest."

Erik raised an eyebrow, clearly unsatisfied by the meager information he got about his target. How was he supposed to find him without a damn hint?

"I'm glad to have a picture, but how am I supposed to find a guy based only on his appearance? The world is big, and even if you have a unique face, it may not be enough."

"That," Lyria said with a soft sigh, "is exactly why we've called you. You are here because you are good at finding information and making connections between things that don't seem to go together. This may seem like an impossible job, but we have faith in your skills. We will provide you with more information, but given the quest's confidentiality, we can't give you much."

Erik frowned and looked a little less sure of himself. "Still, you're asking me to find a needle in a haystack."

Lyria nodded, showing that she understood. "We are aware; again, I will give you more data. Do not worry about that," she said, pulling out a small device and tapping it. "I'll send you a file. It has all the general facts about Doran that the guild can share. Background, last known address, and friends are the most important things to know."

But remember, Erik, that you can't talk about this. It is against the rules to share this information with anyone outside this effort."

Erik's phone buzzed, which meant the file had arrived. He took a quick look down before he looked at Lyria. "I know how important this job is. But I can't promise anything."

Lyria leaned forward and stared intently. "Erik, we don't want you to promise anything. We just want you to try your best. This job is very important, but we know we can't ask you to do the impossible. And if you need help or tools along the way, the guild will be there to help you."

Before making a final decision, Erik stopped and looked at Lyria carefully. "We haven't talked about pay before; I agree. How much do I get for this?"

Lyria didn't hesitate. When he looked at her, she gave him a firm look back. She said, "If you find Doran Stedman, you'll get 100,000 Eurems as a reward." The eerie silence gave Erik the feeling that the sum was even higher than Lyria's statement.

Erik's eyebrows rose; he was surprised by the large amount he would receive. "Only to find him?" he asked again to ensure no hidden tasks.

"That's right," Lyria said to make sure. "Find him and tell us what you did find out, especially where he is. You don't need to do anything else."

Erik gave a slow nod, considering the generous offer momentarily before speaking up his thoughts. The pay was undeniably tempting for such a specific task.

Erik gave a slow nod as he thought about the task's challenge. "Okay. I'll start tomorrow. Thank you, Ms. Bannon," he added after a short pause, "for believing in my skills and giving me this huge opportunity."

"Just find Doran Stedman," Lyria said with a small smile. "All we want is that." Doran's hologram flashed and disappeared, leaving the room partially in the dark.

When Erik and Lyria had finished their lengthy but confidential discussion, he left room 36, and the door quietly shut. The carpet in the hallway was plush and burgundy, but Erik's thoughts were racing.

The encounter had been bizarre, he had to admit. In Testrovsc's Rest, you may quickly come across competent individuals.

The city had many skilled spies, agents, and hunters. Some had worked in the industry for decades, while others had been in it for years. He was just a few weeks into his career as a mercenary; why were they asking so much of him so soon?

Furthermore, the pay was ridiculously exorbitant. One hundred thousand Eurems was a lot of money for an individual at the Seeker rank. Such a sum was usually reserved for higher-risk operations.

But this? This was a simple information-gathering quest, with no confrontation or direct conflict required. It just didn't add up.

Erik strolled through the twisting hallways of the guild hall, making a little noise as he went. He was deep in thought, trying to figure out what was happening. Was it because of his performance during the assessment?

If so, it suggested that the guild monitored the tests more closely than expected. Or there was something else—a detail—that he was aware of but that no one else knew.

After leaving the guild hall, he was welcomed by the chilly evening air. Erik chose to proceed with caution on this mission. Things were still unclear to him, and the price tag of the job may have been a warning that he was about to enter a maze of unknowns.

Chapter 547: Elegance (1)

As Erik emerged from the steamy bathroom, he wiped the moisture off his hair with a towel.

It was a momentary reprieve from the day's events, exacerbated by the soothing embrace of his freshly laundered clothes.

He lounged in the velvety embrace of the armchair, gazing out the window as the rising sun's warm glow filtered through the drapes, imbuing the room with a serene and enchanting aura.

"System, open the file Ms. Bannon sent on my phone," Erik instructed, addressing the biological supercomputer.

A neatly organized document appeared on his phone screen, catching Erik's attention with its header reading "Doran Stedman - Classified Information." As he delved deeper into its contents, he furrowed his brows in deep thought.

Erik quickly noticed something bizarre as he read the file: no information was available about Doran's job. Moreover, it was surprising how little was known about his day-to-day activities, considering that he had attracted the guild's attention.

Nevertheless, Erik's attention was drawn to a single name mentioned several times throughout the report: the Silver Serpents. While Erik stayed in Testrovsc's Rest, he naturally searched and learned about the criminal organizations inside the city.

Despite not having the same size and power the Crystal Cross Gang had in New Alexandria, Frant's capital, where the previous leaders had given in to corruption and messed the whole country up, here in Etrium, this criminal organization gained a bad reputation for its nefarious but presumed activities, most notably the kidnappings they carried out.

The perpetrators of kidnappings in Etrium were notorious for having extensive information networks, and the country could not eradicate them despite extensive searches.

It was clear that meticulous planning was behind their operations, which made it challenging to free those who had been taken captive and arrest the culprits since it was challenging to gather the

evidence necessary. It was presumed that they were the primary perpetrators behind the kidnappings.

Moreover, Testrovsc's Rest was unique in and of itself, mainly because it was far from Nokisi Point's authority and a frontier city.

Photos appended to the file depict Doran in various settings across the city, most frequently in the company of other people.

This made Erik believe that the man likely belonged to an organization, as he was never alone in these circumstances.

This was further implied since Doran was observed having dinner with a person thought to be the leader of the Silver Serpents, even though there was no evidence that he was a member of a criminal organization.

Erik relaxed his posture and rubbed his temples. This was no run-of-the-mill quest. The stakes were high, and there was a great deal of mystery surrounding Doran.

What was his link to this organization? Did he join it? Who exactly was he supposed to be? A leader, an intermediary, or maybe even an unwilling participant? It was very frustrating that there were a lot of informational gaps.

<But that was precisely the challenge, wasn't it?> Erik thought.

Erik was lost in thought, mentally charting Doran's commonly frequented locations and attempting to solve the mystery surrounding this enigmatic person.

He looked into the locations that the man frequented the most. Although the list of locations was quite long, one location in particular stood out: "Elegance."

Upon conducting a swift investigation, Erik discovered that the restaurant in question was a luxurious and high-end establishment in the heart of the bustling central business district of the city. This restaurant, renowned for its exceptional cuisine, drew in an even more refined and sophisticated clientele, cementing its reputation as a must-visit dining destination.

Erik couldn't help but feel perplexed by Doran's alleged affiliations and frequenting such a prominent establishment. Was it a cover? A rendezvous spot, perhaps? Or was it just a place he enjoyed going to? Erik couldn't help but wonder if this was a way to attract attention.

After careful consideration, Erik concluded that this restaurant, "Elegance," would serve as his jumping-off point. He would go there to monitor the situation. See if they had some information he could make use of. Since most of these places had cameras and surveillance systems, Erik was hopeful he could find something good there.

See if he could identify any strange behaviors, recognize any faces, or even get a glimpse of Doran himself, something highly unlikely given that not even the guild had been able to locate him.

Moreover, since Erik now had enough money, he saw the chance to relish a delightful meal at a prestigious high-end restaurant, as he had a soft spot for good food.

Erik considered the problem deeply while leaning back in his chair. Considering the restaurant's exclusive nature, it was logical to assume that the staff at Elegance were highly trained and that they would try to safeguard their customers' privacy.

However, the repeated mention of the restaurant also presented Erik with a potential advantage. It was a tangible and solid starting point for an investigation that was otherwise akin to chasing shadows.

If Doran really frequented the place as often as the file suggested, In that case, the chances of Erik gaining some insight were promising.

The young man took his phone from his pocket. He made a same-day table reservation under the alias "Anderson Red."

Erik then turned away from the phone and glanced at the hotel room's clock. A soft beam of sunlight entered the space through the curtains. It was getting close to noon. Since he had a reservation at Elegance Restaurant in less than an hour, he needed to leave the hotel and head there.

He went to his wardrobe and extracted a collection of clothes that were both refined and sophisticated in their simplicity. He picked up a set of trousers, a pristine white button-down shirt, and a pair of leather shoes that complemented the overall aesthetic of the ensemble.

As he buttoned up his shirt, Erik's eyes wandered to the far corner of the room, where his old weapon was stashed. An instrument he had heavily relied on in the past but that now appeared to him to be more of a relic from a sad period in his life.

The weapon had lost its primary utility since he could no longer rely on his sharpening brain crystal power.

Erik sighed, feeling a twinge of nostalgia. Something quickly went through Erik's mind as he dressed. Even though the public didn't know his face, the guild did, meaning he had to exercise caution while using his other brain crystal powers.

He reached over to the bedside table and grabbed a leather bag, then proceeded to pack it with the things he thought he might need if he was forced to fight, including his distinctive mask, a probably necessary disguise; he also brought a stash of Eurems to use at the restaurant to pay without a card and avoid being recognized.

In particular, the mask posed an intriguing problem to consider. While he used it to conceal his real identity, at the same time, it became somewhat iconic, making it so that people would immediately find out it was him at the restaurant.

It presented an example of his rapidly growing reputation but also something that could make him fail. He didn't wear it.

After ensuring he didn't forget anything, Erik gave the room one last look. He glanced at the mirror and saw the reflection of a changed man. It wasn't only a physical change but also an internal one. His goals were now significantly different from those he had the previous year.

After exiting the room, he walked out into the plush, carpeted hallway of the hotel. Along the way, he passed a few hotel employees who greeted him with polite smiles, even though they were unaware of who he was since he didn't have the mask on.

The lavish doors of the hotel's main entrance opened to reveal the hustling and bustling cityscape of Etrium. The hotel's main entrance loomed ahead. Erik called a taxi, and he left the place once it arrived.

Chapter 548: Elegance (2)

Erik came to the restaurant later. "Elegance's" exterior was a stunning example of modern design, with a harmonious blend of glass and metal interwoven with vertical gardens that offered a touch of green to the urban scene.

A neon sign spelled out its name in flowing cursive overhead, giving a gentle glow that invited customers in.

Erik was initially struck by the restaurant's promise of refinement. The delicate melody from a live piano, combined with the ambient lighting, produced an ambiance that was both intimate and opulent.

The floor was a thick crimson carpet, and the walls were carefully arranged artwork. Crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling, their light reflecting off the mirrored walls and brightening the space.

The employees received Erik, who went under Anderson Red, with the respect reserved for their most distinguished guests.

With a friendly grin, a hostess in a fitted suit with a silver name tag read "Lana" approached him. "Mr. Red," she said softly, "it's a pleasure to have you with us today. Please follow me."

Erik surveyed the customers as he was led through the main eating area. Business tycoons and mercenary guild leaders were discussing their latest endeavors, affluent couples were absorbed in quiet chats, and people like himself came to enjoy the environment and exquisite meals.

The tables were dressed with crisp white tablecloths and shining cutlery. Large windows provided a panoramic view of the city, while private booths were available for those who preferred more privacy.

Lana guided him to a table near a window with a city view. "Your table, Mr. Red," she said elegantly. A waiter approached him as he sank into the luxurious seat, holding a leather-bound menu.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Red," the server chirped. "May I interest you in today's specials, or do you have a preference?"

Erik opened the menu and scanned the outlandish selection of foods. "I'll start with the pan-seared scallops with lemon beurre blanc," he said, recognizing the meal from a previous visit with Amber to another exquisite restaurant, and memories surged in.

"Followed by roasted duck breast with berry reduction and lavender-infused crème brûlée for dessert."

<This will be a pricey lunch, but hey... I don't have money problems right now...> He smiled as he pondered.

The waiter nodded, noting Erik's selections on his notepad. "A fantastic choice, Mr. Red. Would you like something to drink with your meal?"

"A cola will be enough," Erik replied, returning to the menu.

"Very well," the waiter said with a little bow. "Your order will be ready soon."

Erik took a moment to take in his surroundings as the waiter walked away. The atmosphere of "Elegance" was a tool for him; no one would think he was there to investigate someone.

Erik's thoughts alternated between the goal at hand and the luxury he was about to taste as he waited for his lunch.

<System, enter the computer and search for the target last meal here.>

[UNDERSTOOD. CONNECTING TO THE COMPUTER. SEARCHING FOR THE TARGET. PROCEDURE COMPLETE. INJECTION TO THE HOST'S BRAIN.]

Data surged into his brain within moments as it was instantaneously 'injected.' It was odd, like a sudden burst of knowledge flooding his senses.

Erik gleaned important details regarding Doran Stedman's trips to the restaurant as the information settled.

Doran had last visited "Elegance" two weeks earlier, which confirmed Erik's assumptions that the man had come here before the search had begun.

A piece of information piqued Erik's interest: Doran was not alone on that particular visit. He was accompanied by a second man, Joonas Koskinen.

The young man's eyes sharpened at this new piece of the puzzle. Who was this man, and what did he have in common with Doran? Was it a friendly meal or a secret meeting of business associates?

He began to mentally backtrack on any information on such a person that may link him to Doran or the Silver Serpents.

Erik was intrigued by the name Joonas Koskinen, a lead he had yet to come across. As he eagerly anticipated the arrival of his pan-seared scallops, the tantalizing aroma briefly diverted his attention.

He couldn't wait to follow up on this new lead, hoping it would bring him closer to Doran Stedman.

At that moment, the exquisite melodies of a live piano performance filled the air, and his focus shifted again, but to the music this time.

<System, connect to the internet through the restaurant's computer and learn more about this Joonas Koskinen,> Erik silently directed towards his internal ally.

[UNDERSTOOD. SEARCHING INTERNET DATABASES FOR JOONAS KOSKINEN. PROCEDURE COMPLETE.] The biological supercomputer's response echoed in Erik's mind.

The young man waited patiently, taking a sip of his drink, letting the chilly beverage run down his throat, feeling it contrast with the information surges he was experiencing as the information was injected into his brain.

Joonas Koskinen's face, details, and associations were laid bare. Erik saw a driven man with excellent business sense. A central piece of his business was the "Haven Market."

The Haven Market wasn't just an ordinary place but an opulent emporium. A gigantic architectural masterpiece where top-tier vendors congregated to promote their premium goods and services.

Thanks to the injected information, Erik saw enormous passageways filled with exquisite weapon displays, luxurious homes in holographic viewports, top-tier armor models displayed like haute couture, and a parade of high-end automobiles, each a beacon of workmanship and invention.

It was more of a symbol of grandeur, an epitome of excess where the wealthy and prominent of Testrovsc's Rest came to satisfy their sophisticated tastes.

But Joonas, the place owner, drew Erik's attention more than the market's grandeur. His relationship with Doran could be business-related or more hidden.

With its renown and vast clientele, Haven Market might conceivably be a front, or at the very least a nexus point, in whatever operations Doran was involved in, or they could simply have a buyer-seller connection.

There was also a strong sense of irony in the scenario. Erik sat in a luxurious restaurant, and his target, Doran, was associated with a place that sold the same kind of opulence. Both locations were linked by the complicated web of the city's high society, and Erik was now right in the center of it.

After finishing his lunch and taking the last bite of his dessert, he contemplated his next steps. He realized he needed to visit Haven Market but had to be careful.

If Doran and Joonas were running the business together, they would likely be suspicious of outsiders, especially those who asked too many questions.

Erik paid the bill as Mr. Red, mentally preparing for his next destination, Haven Market.

Chapter 549: Haven Market (1)

The pleasant breeze of the evening tousled Erik's hair as he walked out of elegance, momentarily pushing away the weight of his mission.

He summoned a cab, and the sleek vehicle discreetly approached him. Before entering the vehicle, he took a moment to admire the restaurant's stunning exterior before leaving, thinking about what he had found there.

"Head to the Haven Market," he urged the driver. The driver's brow lifted slightly in surprise, giving Erik a brief glance in the rearview mirror.

Haven Market was different from your typical tourist attraction. According to what he knew, the creme de la creme of Testrovsc's Rest frequented it. Celebrities, business moguls, and politicians - people with clout and the means to gratify their every whim. It would be an understatement to say it was elite.

Erik chose not to play any more charades. Going under an alias had served its purpose in the restaurant. Still, it could have been more helpful at the Haven Market.

It was a place where identities and status were crucial, where genuine power and influence reigned supreme. Erik fit the description with his growing reputation and accomplishments in the mercenary guild.

The skyline began to alter as the cab passed through the busy streets of Testrovsc's Rest. Towering constructions gave rise to larger ones, each grander than the previous, as the taxi went further inside the rich part of the city.

Haven Market suddenly materialized before him as if emerging from a surreal dream. A towering edifice, it gleamed in the evening light, its intricate patterns dancing and shimmering on its majestic exterior.

"Don't pull close to the building." Erik said to the driver as they approached the building, "Leave me there." The young man was left on the ground when the cab arrived.

Erik's senses kicked in just as he approached the entrance to Haven Market, informing him that prudence could be required. He looked around and noticed a narrow alleyway off to the side.

He swiftly turned his course and stepped into its gloomy embrace, briefly disappearing from the prying eyes of the people gathered outside.

The young man took a deep breath and reached into his leather bag to retrieve the mask he had prepared earlier.

It was a modest item with a mysterious and enticing style, but not really ideal for a location like Haven Market. However, he needed to wear it since, otherwise, people wouldn't recognize him.

His features were hidden as soon as he wore them, changing him into an intriguing figure, a seeker of truths concealed beneath layers of deceit.

He took a moment to settle himself after adjusting the mask for a snug fit. He felt safer with the mask on, an added layer of protection from the prying eyes and ears that would be everywhere in the market.

Emerging from the alley, the masked Erik stood in stark contrast to the well-dressed crowd. While many people in the area used masks as status symbols or fashion statements, Erik's had a more serious purpose.

The young man arrived at the entryway, where a queue of luxury vehicles awaited him. Valets in uniform rushed around, opening car doors and greeting the city's affluent.

As Erik approached the entryway, a few heads turned. He was a new face among the regulars, but his confident stride and demeanor indicated he belonged to that place. A few murmurs and whispers followed him, but he paid little attention.

Two guards in sharp suits nodded to him as he reached the entrance. His exploits had made headlines in some circles, and the guards plainly knew them. "Welcome to Haven Market, Mr. Kay," one stated with a slight smirk playing on his lips.

Erik nodded in appreciation. "Thank you so much. I'm here for business."

"We are glad to hear this, sir," said the other guard. "Please let us know if you want any support."

Erik entered the Haven Market's building with a sense of excitement and anticipation. This was a different playground, with bigger stakes but also higher rewards.

He knew he was entering a place that could provide information about Doran's whereabouts and relationships. But it was also a world where every move was analyzed, and every intention was scrutinized.

As soon as Erik entered Haven Market, he was struck by its magnificence. The atmosphere was buzzing with conversations, and the high ceilings were adorned with crystal chandeliers, creating a pleasant ambiance.

Clearly, this was not an average place; it was a luxurious destination for the affluent and discerning.

As he stood there taking in his surroundings, an incredibly poised and regal-looking woman caught his eye. She had chestnut brown hair that cascaded down her back in perfect waves, and her every movement exuded an air of elegance and grace.

The woman's demeanor exuded an air of professionalism, yet her countenance was warm and inviting, displaying a genuine smile. Her magnificent gown cascaded softly around her, the lustrous blue fabric reflecting the light in a subtle shimmer.

"Good morning, sir," she greeted softly and pleasantly. "I'm Olivia, and I'm here to assist you during your visit to Haven Market. I'm at your service if you'd like something to drink, inquire about our range of products, or need help with pricing and transactions. Please feel free to ask me anything."

Erik nodded, pleased with the amount of service and attention he was getting. It wasn't every day that he was treated so respectfully, especially while wearing his mask.

"Thank you, Olivia," he said, his voice tinged with curiosity. "I'd like to look around, but perhaps a drink to refresh myself first would be better."

Olivia nodded, her smile broadening slightly. "Certainly, sir. We have an exceptional selection of beverages. How about a glass of our unique tea, prepared with rare herbs from the eastern provinces, or a glass of vintage wine?"

"The tea. I don't really like alcohol," Erik replied.

Erik studied the surroundings, taking in the wealth, and wondered where his inquiry may lead next as Olivia used a device to obtain it.

Chapter 550: Haven Market (2)

As Erik sipped the hot tea Olivia brought him, he mentally instructed the biological supercomputer to scan the building for devices. He needed the System to enter the company's network and see if he could find anything useful.

Expecting that these people kept information about Doran was wishful thinking, especially if they knew his job wasn't legal.

Usually, if they sold him something they shouldn't have, they would only have kept information about it if they had it stored in some secret or unhackable place.

< System, I want you to connect to any devices in this building and find information about Doran,> he ordered. There was no time to lose.

[UNDERSTOOD. CONNECTING TO THE BUILDING'S SERVERS AND COMPUTERS. INITIATING DEEP SCAN FOR INFORMATION RELATED TO DORAN STEDMAN.]

The biological supercomputer's reply flashed in his peripheral for a brief moment.

[CONNECTION COMPLETE. ESTIMATED TIME FOR A THOROUGH SCAN AND DATA EXTRACTION: APPROXIMATELY 10 MINUTES.]

<What the hell? 10 minutes? How much data do they have stored?>

Erik took another drink of tea nonchalantly, its unique flavor tingling on his tongue. At the same time, he mentally replied, <Proceed with the scan. Take the time you need.>

[UNDERSTOOD. SCANNING NOW.]

Since he didn't have anything else to do, and despite his visit would be brief, Erik decided it was worthwhile to take a look around. Furthermore, he would ask about some goods he needed and could purchase here. No one would suspect that he was actually looking for the man.

Erik went through Haven Market's many aisles, admiring the various products on display and occasionally exchanging pleasantries with Olivia.

Every second he waited for the System to be done seemed like an eternity. While distracting, the bustling environment of the market could not quell the anticipation building within him.

Would there be any evidence of Doran in the market's clearly massive network systems? What information would he receive about his elusive target if that were the case?

Erik's senses stayed sharp as the minutes passed, absorbing every aspect of the place around him while waiting for the biological supercomputer's conclusions.

The bustle of conversation and the odd chime of a sale filled the air inside the magnificent expanse of the Haven Market.

Olivia accompanied Erik with exquisite poise, her gaze occasionally drifting to him, appraising or perhaps wondering about the masked guy who had seemingly materialized out of nowhere inside the city and quickly took it by storm.

After a few minutes, she inclined her head slightly and asked, "Mr. Kay, is there anything specific you're looking for today?"

Erik paused for a bit as he considered his response. "Actually, yes. I'm particularly interested in items that contain Thaid's brain crystals. Do you happen to have any?"

Olivia's eyes widened in realization. "Of course we do. I expected this reply since you are a mercenary. Haven Market specializes in such products, but given their price, it is not easy to find buyers." She paused, a severe expression on her face.

"We need to go to the 10th floor for these products. We have a carefully curated array of weapons and armor infused with Thaid's brain crystals. These weapons completely transformed the game by allowing users to wield various brain crystal powers. Even if the person in question does not have powerful brain crystal, these weapons can help to level the playing field."

Erik nodded; his curiosity piqued. "That seems intriguing. I'll certainly want to take a look at them." Olivia then pointed at a row of elegant elevators gleaming with polished brass and exquisite decorations.

"Please allow me to accompany you. The 10th floor is restricted, and only employers can access it."

The ambient sounds of the market seemed to become quieter, the air cooler, and the lighting more subdued as they went toward them. Each floor they passed appealed to different tastes and interests, showing the market's colossal merchandise assortment.

Olivia tapped a button as they arrived at the elevator, and the doors slid open silently. The inside was luxurious, with velvet-padded walls and a mirrored roof.

"Our collection on the 10th floor is one of the greatest in Testrovs's Rest," Olivia said as the doors closed behind them and the elevator began its ascent.

"Our items are sourced from famous artisans. Each element was designed with functionality and practicality in mind, but this doesn't mean the products are bad looking."

"I appreciate the guidance," Erik said, leaning against the elevator's back wall. "Such rarities do not come along every day."

Olivia smiled softly. "We appreciate it, Mr. Kay. At Haven Market, we take pride in meeting our customers' needs."

The doors slid open as the elevator reached the tenth story, revealing a new world of splendor and mystery. Erik was immediately immersed in an aura of exclusivity and magnificence.

The area inside this level of Haven Market was a spacious and well-lit room, with a soft white light emanating from the walls.

A magnificent chandelier made of crystal and gold hung above the polished marble floor, casting beautiful patterns all around. Erik had seen such opulence only at Amber's house.

Grand pedestals in front of him displayed an array of weaponry and armor. Each piece was displayed as a work of art, with light beams expertly focused to make particular features shine and glow.

The sheer diversity and creativity of the collection were terrific, from masterfully carved swords with hilts wrapped in leather and jewels to ornate chest plates and helms inlaid with gold and rare stones.

As he looked around, Erik moved carefully through the aisles, his gaze riveted to the nuances of each piece.

Armor suits appeared almost ethereal, their designs implying tremendous protection and a lightness that defied their look.

However, he didn't like wearing armor; his multiple brain crystal powers made them useless. However, they were beautiful to look at.

There were also bows with shimmering blue and green strings, and quivers filled with elaborately feathered arrows were displayed nearby.

"Is all of this made from Thaid's bodies?" Erik inquired.

"Indeed, sir. We only trade the best here."

Holographic panels were scattered across the floor, displaying item descriptions and, most importantly, the pricing of the objects. Erik stopped in front of one such plaque, next to a superb double-edged sword with a Thaid's crystal inlaid in its hilt.

The cost was staggering: 5.2 million Eurems. Another weapon immediately after cost 5.8 million Eurems and was linked to a wonderfully constructed gauntlet set with many tiny gems.

Erik could tell that these were not conventional weapons or armor. Their design, craftsmanship, and the apparent power that flowed through them made it clear why they were so expensive. Erik could feel the Thaid's mana it was made from still lingering inside the brain crystal.

Though while the price was beyond most people's means, the items here promised unrivaled excellence and power to those who could afford them.

He whistled softly, more for himself than for anyone else. "This place is something else," he muttered, awestruck and slightly intimidated by its magnificence. He couldn't help believing whoever owned such massive weapons and armor was powerful, not only financially.

Olivia, who had been watching him silently, nodded proudly. "Yes, Mr. Kay. Only the finest and most uncommon equipment is housed on the 10th floor. Each piece here is a testament to the pinnacle of craftsmanship and power."