

BIOLOGICAL 551

Chapter 551: Haven Market (3)

Erik kept looking around for something that piqued his interest, but he could buy nothing. However, he had to fake having the financial means to buy something. For this reason, he decided to ask something specific.

"Do you have anything with a brain crystal for controlling elements?" he asked Olivia.

Olivia's face held a brief pause, recognizing the rarity and importance of such a request.

"Yes," she said measuredly, "but I must let you know that items with the ability to control elements are certainly hard to come by. And as you can imagine, they are quite expensive."

Erik's eyes narrowed slightly, his curiosity palpable. "Do you have anything related to the earth element?"

Her eyes widened in recognition as soon as she remembered one particular item. "Ah, yes. We do have an item that you might be interested in. It's a wand," she explained, her voice tinged with reverence.

"A wand? A strange choice for a weapon," Erik said.

"Yes, indeed. This was because of the crafter. He was apparently fascinated by magicians, and when he found the beast's brain crystal, he couldn't stop himself from creating the weapon that way."

"May I look at it?" Erik inquired, his voice calm but with a tinge of excitement.

"Certainly," Olivia said, motioning Erik to follow her.

They walked through the immense showroom, skillfully evading other artifacts that would have aroused Erik's curiosity. Olivia guided him to a more secluded area on the same floor, where objects of high power and rarity were displayed in separate, well-lit cases.

At the end of the row, there was a case containing a wand, which, despite its simple design, emanated an undeniable aura of power.

The wand was approximately a foot long and made of a deep, ancient mahogany wood. It was carved with intricate lines that gave the wand a sort of tribal look, and a brain crystal was embedded halfway up the wand, its deep green hue pulsing gently like the heart of the earth.

"That," Olivia said, her voice full of respect for the crafter who made that piece, "is the Earthward Wand. It was created using Terragor's brain crystals and does exactly what you want: control the earth around you."

Erik approached the case with caution, his gaze fixed on the wand. The closer he got, the more he felt the crystal's pull, its energy resonating with his own. "It's beautiful," he murmured almost to himself.

Olivia gave a nod. "Indeed. The Earthward Wand is one of the most impressive items in our inventory. When manipulating the earth element, its power is unrivaled."

Erik paused momentarily, allowing her words to sink in. "And the price?" he finally asked. Such a weapon had a very high cost, but no price tag was attached anywhere.

Olivia paused for a split second. "The Earthward Wand is priced at 50 million Eurems due to its rarity and immense power."

Erik inhaled deeply, taking in the amount. Due to the mask, his expression was unreadable, whether in shock or contemplation.

He returned his gaze to Olivia after another look at the wand, the allure of its power visible in his eyes, but when he was going to say something, the biological supercomputer broke the momentary silence by sending a message directly into his consciousness.

[SEARCH COMPLETED. INFORMATION ON DORAN STEDMAN FOUND.]

Erik's attention was drawn away from the wand by the sudden notification.

<Inject the data> Erik ordered, and the biological supercomputer didn't waste time.

His attention shifted inward, sifting through the information retrieved by the supercomputer while it injected it into his brain.

The constant hum of the market faded into the background as he processed the new information, looking for any hints that could lead him closer to finding Doran Stedman.

Erik had learned to trust his supercomputer long ago, understanding its efficiency and precision.

As the data streamed into his mind, he realized how important this machine was to his investigations. Without it, he would still be bullied and beaten every day in New Alexandria.

Erik was right when he assumed that the Haven market held information about Doran. The extensive establishment's network had stored more information on Doran than Erik had anticipated, giving him a clearer picture of the man's movements and associations.

There were two kinds of trade information, though, some that the place could freely share, as they were related to regular products the Haven Market sold everyone; some, instead, were kept in well-hidden and protected servers and detailed much darker trades.

While processing this new information, he remembered Olivia's presence beside him. She had a curious and patient gaze and wondered why Erik wasn't saying anything. Erik had to pay attention to his surroundings.

He had to put up a believable act, ensuring his reactions didn't reveal the real reason why he was there. Not that they could prove anything, even if they had some suspicions.

"Thank you for showing me this," he said, his thoughts clearly racing.

Erik's gaze was drawn to the ornate wand for a moment longer before he started shaking his head. "It's an impressive piece, for sure," he said, raising his head to meet Olivia's expectant gaze, "but I'm more accustomed to using Flyssas."

Her brow arched delicately in response to his admission. "Flyssas?" she wondered, her tone tinged with surprise and intrigue. "That is an unusual choice. They're not a popular weapon selection, especially among our clients."

He shrugged casually, a hint of a smile on his lips. "I've always liked to deviate from the norm."

Olivia chuckled lightly, her gaze darting around the vast collection, and then she sighed.

"Unfortunately, we do not currently have any Flyssas in stock. However," she paused, leaning in slightly, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper, "we could arrange a custom weapon tailored exactly to your specifications."

Erik raised a hand to reject her generous offer. "I truly appreciate the offer. However, there is no need. My Flyssa has served me well, and I do not plan to replace it soon."

She nodded, but her face was tinged with disappointment. After all, they were selling the best equipment, and every potential sale was welcomed. "Is there anything else that might pique your interest?"

Erik's gaze flitted to a nearby glass cabinet, which housed an array of small vials containing luminescent liquids. "Actually, do you have any brain-stimulating serums?" he asked. He had the chance to get some but couldn't do so when he was in New Alexandria.

Olivia's face brightened instantly, and she motioned to the elevators from which they came. "We do, indeed. They're a specialty of ours. Many clients use them to improve cognitive functions or for specialized training sessions."

Erik couldn't help but feel excitement as they approached the section. He had never been able to try the serums, but now that he could afford them, he wanted to try and, if he could, maybe make them at home.

Chapter 552: After all a transaction was done

The elevator doors revealed an otherworldly expanse of colors, scents, and shimmering vials as it descended to the sixth floor, dedicated to plant derivatives.

The entire floor was illuminated by lights that enhanced the brilliance of the liquid-filled containers adorning the many shelves, tables, and pedestals strewn about the room.

Olivia smiled proudly as she noticed Erik's wide-eyed amazement.

"Welcome to the sixth floor," she said, sweeping her arm across the room.

"This is where we keep our potions, elixirs, and concoctions sourced from the world's mana-rich flora."

Erik walked slowly down the aisles, his footsteps soft on the polished marble floors.

In front of him, a wondrous universe unfurled, and with each new gaze, he was greeted by a kaleidoscope of colors. Each bottle and jar contained a one-of-a-kind concoction of magic and nature, which carried the promise of something extraordinary and uncommon.

Shades of blue glistened like the ocean's depths, greens swung like summer meadows, and reds surged with the intensity of a beating heart.

Each hue appeared to move and dance, brimming with power and possibility and begging him to come closer so that he could investigate its secrets.

The air smelled like a concerto of scents, a tapestry made from the sweet perfume of flowering gardens and the deep, earthy notes of ancient trees.

The room was packed to the brim with intoxicating aromas. Erik had trouble not making them go to his head.

The whispered tales of alchemists and botanists who ventured to capture the raw power of nature in a bottle reverberated through the fragrant air.

They brought to life the legends of those who dared to attempt to do so. It was a realm of fantasy and wonder, where the splendor of the natural world was praised in all its majesty to behold.

Taking a moment to regain his composure, Erik thought, <I've heard many things in New Alexandria but never about the existence of a place like this.>

He chuckled softly, <Probably because I didn't have the money even to approach these kinds of establishments.>

Olivia looked at Erik; she could tell he was thinking about something and that the 17-year-old was pleased with what he saw.

She was sure he'd buy something here. "Quality potions often demand a certain, and often high, price. But the effects? We guarantee them, and I assure you they're worth every Eurem. These potions aren't just solutions in bottles. They're art.

A culmination of expertise, scientific knowledge, and nature's raw, indomitable power."

Olivia said this, trying to push Erik to buy something. Her was a clever tactic aimed at making everything alluring.

Erik took a vial containing a silver liquid that sparkled like a starry night sky. "What does this potion do?" he asked, his voice full of genuine curiosity.

"That," Olivia began reverently, "is a Lunar Elixir. It lets you see clearly on the darkest nights, as if the world around you is bathed in full moonlight. It's made from the petals of the Moondrop flower, which can only be found in the most remote parts of Etrium."

Erik blew an impressed whistle as he looked at the vial. Every potion here was a testament to the country's wonders.

Erik had no idea something like this could be made. It could be because Frant didn't have them or because it was a closely guarded secret known only to the wealthy and the military.

He knew there were potions, but they were primarily healing ones and couldn't compare to healing brain crystal powers.

Olivia looked at Erik as he was observing the potions behind his mask. It was impossible to tell if he was pleased or interested, but the time his gaze lingered on the potion gave her some hints.

"Whenever you're ready," she said, motioning toward a more private area, "I will show you the brain-stimulating serums."

Erik took more time to observe his surroundings and see if there was a potion that could be useful, but he found nothing he could afford. So he asked Olivia to bring him to the most exciting section.

The section devoted to the brain and body stimulating serums was slightly darker than the rest of the floor and bathed in a soft blue light.

Elegant glass stands supporting slim bottles filled with gleaming, silvery liquids filled the entire section.

The atmosphere felt more like a revered temple than a marketplace, a clear indication of the serum's importance in a world where the power of each brain crystal meant everything to each individual, and what helped in improving one's personal power was almost deified.

Olivia delicately picked up a bottle and held it up to the light. As she began to describe its properties, the liquid shimmered and danced. "This serum," she explained, "aids in forming neural links. It multiplies the brain crystal activity, increasing the ability to control mana and making the patterns required to make neural links easier to form."

Erik was already aware of its effects, having heard of its unrivaled benefits in New Alexandria.

Even so, hearing it from someone like Olivia firsthand added weight to the stories. He knew that higher-ranking users and wealthy individuals frequently used them to speed up their training.

"How much does it cost?" Erik inquired, already bracing himself for the hefty price of such a wonder potion.

Olivia paused briefly before revealing, "2 million Eurems per bottle."

Erik's gaze did not waver even though the figure was significant; that was because, this time, he was significantly prone to buy the serum. His projects and various tasks had allowed him to accumulate a respectable sum of 6.5 million Eurems over the previous few months.

A quick calculation revealed that he could afford three bottles, but he planned not to squander his money.

"I'll take two," Erik declared without even thinking. However, he was secretly hoping that the biological supercomputer would be able to decipher the serum's formula so that he could reproduce it.

He might not need to buy more serum in the future if he can cultivate and grow the plants required for it, something he could do; he just needed to find them.

Olivia nodded, not reacting to his purchase decision. "Very well. Two it is."

While carefully packing bottles into a protective case, Erik's mind wandered to his previous efforts of finding alchemical formulas. No matter how advanced the biological computer was, it had often failed to find any information on the internet regarding these closely guarded secrets.

Evidently, in a world where power meant everything, knowledge of such potions was a valuable asset the pharmaceutical companies tried to hide at any cost.

If he really wanted to find something, he had to search these companies' servers directly, something he didn't do because there was no real need to use these serums for him. However, it may be different now that he was considering expanding his business.

Olivia gently handed the secured case to Erik. "These serums are extremely valuable, Mr. Kay. Use them wisely. They have the potential to alter the course of one's life."

Erik accepted the case, feeling the weight of the serums and the potential they represented. "Thank you, Olivia," he said solemnly, matching her tone. "I'm aware of their worth."

The two exchanged a brief look of understanding. Some treasures, like Erik's serums, had more than monetary value in a place like Haven Market, where opulence was the norm.

They were portals to power and evolution, and in the right hands, they could change the course of history.

As Erik walked out of the Haven Market, the sun began to set, painting the sky with orange and pink hues.

Erik felt a sense of accomplishment as he thought about his discoveries, mainly about his primary target, Doran Stedman.

The streets were bustling with activity, with vendors selling their wares and musicians playing tunes that blended with the lively atmosphere. But Erik's mind was elsewhere. There was no need for him to investigate anymore that day.

The protective case containing the brain-stimulating serums was tightly gripped in his hand.

The promise of its effects and the potential power it could bestow on him was alluring, and he was eager to test its effectiveness. He'd heard stories about its efficiency, but experiencing it firsthand was completely different from hearing it from others.

Erik found a quiet alley and flagged down a cab, instructing the driver to take him near his hotel without telling him its name for privacy reasons.

Erik sat back in the cab's comfortable seat, thinking about the serum. Its silvery liquid beckoned to him, and he immediately considered taking a dose.

But patience was essential. It would be best to use it when he was alone and far from prying eyes. After all, a massive power boost like this required the right environment to be fully embraced, and he wanted to get everything right.

Erik quickly made his way to his hotel suite upon arrival. The room was dimly lit, with a soft hum of the city in the background. He carefully removed one of the bottles from the case and placed it on the table. The serum glinted in the room's soft light as he held it up.

Taking a deep breath, Erik uncorked the bottle, not knowing what to expect. Would the changes be noticeable or subtle? There was only one way to find out.

Chapter 553: New Alexandria

In the aftermath of the chaos that had befallen the city, Amber stood amidst the ruins with her father, Caiden.

Her fiery red hair swayed in the wind while she and her father walked through the city's streets. Her glasses highlighted her beautiful face, giving her an allure that few men could resist.

The parasitized people attacked the city without mercy and caused much damage. Still, with the help of the military personnel and the citizens' efforts, they eventually got rid of the awful creatures that used to roam the streets.

After hearing about how unstable things were in the city, the military sent an army of soldiers to check out the situation and help.

But when they saw how much damage had been done and how often the infected were attacking, they quickly understood how bad the situation was and asked for more troops to help.

More than half of the troops sent out to find the Heniate had returned to the city. But while they were outside looking for the beast, the parasite infection took a heavy toll on the people and left scars on the city.

Amber and Caiden saw the weariness etched into the faces of the survivors, evidence of the price they had paid to protect the city. The Joyce and Stone families, tycoons of New Alexandria, worked in tandem to assist however they could, providing money, tools, and weapons.

Amber frequently participated in the battles and saved many people, making her father proud. Her friends helped her throughout the difficult time. After Anderson and Erik passed away, it became her responsibility to defend and care for her friends, but it wasn't easy.

They gave the impression that they were born to play that role because of how simple some of their decisions appeared. Still, she realized how difficult it was once Amber was in their position.

However, freeing the city was also possible thanks to the help of the city's brilliant minds, who worked tirelessly behind the scenes to find a cure for the disease that spread inside the city.

Amber had no idea who they were, but she was sure they worked for Becker. These individuals managed to develop a vaccine that, when provided on time, inhibited the spread of the illness.

Caiden and Amber strolled through the city's bleak and rubble-strewn streets. The devastation caused by recent events could be seen in the surroundings, and the weight of it all could be felt in the heaviness of their steps.

They strolled through the skeletal ruins of once beautiful buildings that had been reduced to little more than piles of debris, which gave the city a gloomy atmosphere. The silence around them and the lack of people were oppressive.

Everything was so ruined that the silence was only interrupted by the groan of twisted metal or shattering glass beneath their feet.

There was a slight shift in the silence as they walked. The daughter and father pair started hearing the distant cries of people under the rubble and the constant hum of the machines trying to get them out of there.

As they walked, observing the desolation and trying to understand what they could do to help, Caiden turned to his daughter with a concerned expression. "How do you feel?" he asked, his voice rising slightly over the background noise.

Amber glanced around, taking in the scene of devastation, and then back at her father. "I'm feeling better," she said, her voice almost a whisper. "All this chaos stopped me from thinking about him."

Caiden's brow furrowed, his gaze fixed on the road ahead. "It's a little unsettling, but whatever helps you is welcome. However... I've noticed something," he began hesitantly, choosing his words carefully. "During these months, you've relied heavily on the stimulating serums."

Amber's steps slowed for a brief moment. "They help, Dad," she stated, her tone firm. "I wouldn't be as strong as I am today without them. Isn't that what we need right now, with all that's going on?"

Caiden came to a halt and turned to face her. A collapsed statue stood silently behind them, a quiet testament to the city's lost grandeur.

"Amber, your growth has been impressive, and yes, we require strength now more than ever. But those serums aren't the solution. The side effects can be severe."

She chewed her lower lip, her gaze darting from one damaged structure to the next. "I know, but I got to the v rank by using them, and I became much stronger than before. The body-stimulating serum also significantly improved my strength and speed. I'm stronger than the average person my age and stronger than most v-ranked soldiers."

Caiden stretched out and softly cupped her face with his hands. "I know. But I can't help but think you've gone too far. I know losing Erik was hard, but it's a void that only time can fill. Putting yourself in danger is just dumb."

Amber nodded, tears glistening but not falling. The two continued their journey through the desolate streets, drawing strength from each other amidst the ruins of a city—and life—they once knew.

The pair kept walking side by side when familiar figures appeared in the distance. The silhouette of Floyd, with his characteristic tall and lean build, was unmistakable even from that distance. Beside him was Martha, her stride showing that their purpose in approaching was of some importance.

Amber's steps quickened when she realized it was them, and she drew away from her father's side, leaving him with a reassuring nod. Caiden understood that their age had battles to fight and secrets to uncover.

Amber sensed an obvious tension in Floyd and Martha's eyes as she approached them. "What's going on?" Amber asked as soon as she was close to them.

Martha looked at Amber; her face creased, and her hair fluttered in the wind. "We found something, something you need to see," she said, her voice shaking.

Floyd took his phone from his jacket pocket without saying anything at all. The screen lit up, presenting a blurry video.

According to Floyd, the footage revealed an arena packed with the gleam of metal and the humming of robots, most likely someplace in Etrium. A cloaked person moved with precision among the mayhem, his prowess clear as he dismantled one robot after another.

Amber stared carefully at the video, her eyes bright and alert. The scenario was that of an ancient city, but it wasn't the setting that caught her attention or the magnificent display of ability of the masked man; it was something much more personal and intimate.

A fleeting gleam revealed the hilt of a sword as the masked figure pivoted. It was only a fraction of a second, but it was enough for her to recognize it.

"That hilt," Amber whispered, her voice barely audible.

Floyd paused the video and looked up, locking eyes with Amber. "Did you think what I did?" he asked, though he already knew the answer based on Amber's reaction.

Amber nodded slowly, her heart pounding against her chest. "It looks just like... Erik's."

Could it really be him? Was Erik still alive after all that had transpired? The glimmer of hope was tantalizing, yet they all knew the dangers of having hope.

Martha took a step closer, reaching out to grab Amber's hand. "We need to be sure, Amber," she remarked, her voice hopeful but cautious.

Amber took a deep breath and fought back the tears threatening to come out. "We surely will."

A flame of hope was reignited in the middle of a disaster, a possibility that might transform everything.

Chapter 554: The brain stimulating serum's effects

Erik hesitated momentarily, the dim lighting of his room casting a brilliance over the vial containing the Brain Stimulating Serum. Holding the small bottle to the light, he observed the liquid shimmer and ripple as if alive.

The color was a deep shade of silver, almost ethereal in its glow. He had heard of these elixirs' wondrous effects and unparalleled benefits in hastening the neural links-forming process. Still, he couldn't blindly accept something with a thorough investigation.

He brought the bottle to his nose with a steady hand; a faint, almost metallic scent wafted into the air. The aroma was unlike anything he had experienced before, foreign and yet intriguing.

<Can you analyze this?> Erik thought, his thoughts directed at the biological supercomputer.

There was a momentary pause before the reply came, distinct and unwavering.

[ANSWER: I CAN, BUT YOU NEED TO DRINK THE VIAL'S CONTENT.]

<Good, I want you to find the materials it is made from, the positive and negative effects, and how it affects the brain and the neural links.>

[UNDERSTOOD. DRINK TO START THE PROCESS.]

With a momentary hesitation, Erik raised the vial. He brought it to his lips, letting the silvery serum slide down his throat. It was at that moment that he started feeling weird.

<What the...?>

Almost immediately, the world around him seemed to warp, a feeling similar to the one that result from the activation of Hais's brain crystal power. He felt he had been thrust into a dense environment where time had been ensnared and subdued, flowing like honey rather than water.

The steady tick of the room's clock, the distant hum of the city, and even the rustle of fabric against his skin appeared to be in an exquisite slow motion, accentuated in detail and sound.

But more than the altered perception of time, his mana perception left Erik astonished. The energies that had once been a faint, elusive current now pulsed vibrantly, a vast network of luminous threads interwoven within and around him.

It was as if he had been granted a magnifying glass, boosting his ability to see the minutiae of mana, once a subtle and intricate flow. He could discern its ebb and see its flow with unprecedented clarity.

Every pulse, every whisper of the otherworldly force coursed through him, the patterns and oscillations more discernible than ever. His very skin seemed attuned to its vibrations, each pore receptive to the tiniest shifts in its dance.

The feelings weren't just limited to within him; they extended outward, allowing Erik to sense the ambient mana in the room, in the air, and beyond.

Erik closed his eyes, attempting to center himself amid the overwhelming feelings. With every inhale, the richness of the mana seemed to fill him, and with each exhale, he tried to make sense of this amplified world.

It was at that moment that he started creating neural links. The process, mainly thanks to his unique technique, was much more unrestricted than ever.

This moment was totally different compared to the first one he had when he fixed his brain crystal deformity. Minutes seemed like hours, but finally, the biological supercomputer communicated the result of its analysis of the serum.

[ANALYSIS COMPLETE. THE BRAIN-STIMULATING SERUM COMPRISES MULTIPLE RARE ELEMENTS AND HERBS, SOME UNKNOWN TO RECORDED DATABASES. PRIMARY EFFECT: STIMULATION OF NEURONS' ACTIVITY FOR ENHANCED MANAGEMENT OF THE BRAIN CRYSTAL. INCREASING OF THE NEURAL LINKS GIRTH FOR BETTER MANA FLOW. SHORT-TERM SIDE EFFECTS: MINIMAL, MOSTLY LIMITED TO TEMPORARY FATIGUE.

LONG-TERM EFFECTS: UNCERTAIN WITHOUT ADDITIONAL DATA.]

The system's voice briefly distracted him from his training.

"Can you determine its ingredients and how exactly they aid in neural link creation?" Erik's curiosity deepened, his thirst for knowledge insatiable.

[WORKING ON DECONSTRUCTING THE SERUM'S INGREDIENTS. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE ANALYSIS DEPENDS ON THE DURATION AND INTENSITY OF THE SERUM'S EFFECTS. PROLONGED OBSERVATION MAY BE REQUIRED.]

The biological supercomputer continued, [IT IS ADVISED TO PROCEED WITH CAUTION. WHILE IMMEDIATE EFFECTS ARE BENEFICIAL, UNKNOWN LONG-TERM EFFECTS POSE A POTENTIAL RISK. FURTHER OBSERVATION AND ANALYSIS ARE RECOMMENDED BEFORE REGULAR CONSUMPTION.]

<I know, but we still have to try it at least once to get some conclusion, right?>

[YOU ARE CORRECT.]

Erik was impressed by the supercomputer's capacity to evaluate complex data thoroughly. He gave a grateful nod before inhaling deeply and continuing his training. He trusted the system to work its magic and assist him in achieving his dreams as he worked.

The room was filled with a tranquil and peaceful atmosphere, which was only interrupted by the steady sound of Erik's breathing. He was utterly engrossed in the complex process of creating neural links.

His capacity to focus sharpened as the seconds passed. The mana within him flowed into his body in perfect synchronicity with his steady focus. He was committed to the work at hand with every ounce.

The biological supercomputer's technique acted as a guide, helping Erik navigate the complex pathways between his brain and the brain crystal.

It was a dance of precision, balance, and intuition as Erik coaxed mana through these pathways to establish a firm and lasting connection between the crystal and the brain.

Erik could sense the serum's effects beginning to recede as hours passed. The once intense, vivid perception of mana started to blur slightly; the details were not as clear, and the ability to feel mana was not as precise as before.

Yet there was an inner drive, a compelling urge that kept him anchored to his task. He felt tantalizingly close to success.

And then, in a moment of clarity, two distinct neural links took form. The feeling was electrifying, a rush of pure energy and awareness that coursed through every fiber of his being.

He felt inflated, transformed, and more integrated with the vast realm of mana. Erik slowly opened his eyes, their depths shimmering with new light. He took a moment to reorient himself, the weight of his accomplishment sinking in. A slow, appreciative smile graced his lips.

"This serum... It's truly marvelous," he murmured in awe. The fact that he had gotten neural links so quickly was a testament to the serum's potency. It had accelerated his progress and provided insights into the depths of mana manipulation he hadn't known were possible.

Chapter 555: Two more neural links

Erik's fingers tapped rhythmically on the table, an empty vial that once held Brain Stimulating Serum sitting next to him.

"What did you conclude about the serum?" He mentally asked the biological supercomputer. After a brief silence, the supercomputer's answer thickened in Erik's mind.

[I HAVE IDENTIFIED MOST OF THE INGREDIENTS IN THE SERUM. HOWEVER, SOME ELEMENTS ARE BEYOND THE CURRENT DATABASE'S COMPREHENSION. THEY ARE NEITHER FROM ETRIUM NOR FRANT. I ADVISE "INJECTING" ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT FLORA FROM VARIOUS REGIONS FOR A MORE COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS.]

A furrow appeared on Erik's brow as he pondered the information. "And the effects on the brain?"

[THE SERUM'S INGREDIENTS WORK IN HARMONY TO BOOST NEURAL ACTIVITY. PRIMARY EFFECT: STIMULATION OF NEURONS' ACTIVITY FOR ENHANCED MANAGEMENT OF THE BRAIN CRYSTAL. INCREASING OF THE NEURAL LINKS GIRTH FOR BETTER MANA FLOW. THEY ENHANCE PERCEPTION, REACTION TIME, AND COGNITIVE ABILITY BY STIMULATING CERTAIN AREAS OF THE BRAIN RESPONSIBLE FOR THESE FUNCTIONS.

HOWEVER, I MUST CAUTION THAT THE EFFECTS CAN'T BE REPLICATED THROUGH A NEW TECHNIQUE; IT IS THE UNIQUE COMPOSITION OF THE INGREDIENTS MAKING UP THE SERUM THAT CREATES SUCH A RESPONSE. IF YOU WISH TO GAIN A COMPLETE UNDERSTANDING OF THE SERUM, YOU WOULD NEED TO PROVIDE MORE INFORMATION ABOUT VARIOUS FLORA AND DRINK ANOTHER DOSE.]

Erik's eyes narrowed in contemplation. "And what about the risks you previously mentioned? Are there risks involved?" Without missing a beat, the biological supercomputer replied.

[THERE ARE ALWAYS RISKS WITH SUCH POTENT SUBSTANCES. CONSUMING THIS SERUM IN QUICK SUCCESSION COULD LEAD TO PERMANENT SIDE EFFECTS, WHICH COULD ALSO LEAD TO THE INABILITY TO CHANNEL MANA. IN THE SHORT TERM, IF THE CONSUMPTION IS NOT EXCESSIVE, THERE ARE ONLY SOME TEMPORARY SIDE EFFECTS, SUCH AS NEUROLOGICAL OVERLOAD, DIZZINESS, OR FATIGUE.

THESE EFFECTS ARE TEMPORARY ONLY IF THE SERUM IS TAKEN AT LONGER INTERVALS, ALLOWING THE BRAIN TIME TO RECOVER AND ASSIMILATE THE BOOST.]

Erik reclined in his chair, weighing the pros and cons. The allure of untapped knowledge was tempting, but the potential dangers held him back. "How long would it take for you to assimilate and understand the complete data if I provided it?"

[IF YOU INJECT THE REQUIRED INFORMATION ABOUT THE FLORA AND COMBINE IT WITH ANOTHER DOSE, I ESTIMATE A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS WITHIN HOURS. BUT I ADVISE CAUTION AND ADEQUATE RECOVERY TIME BEFORE CONSUMING ANOTHER DOSE.]

His eyes settled on the other vial he owned, which was still resting inside the container Olivia gave him at the Haven's Market, its silvery contents seemingly glowing with untapped potential as the light reflected on it. It was a momentous decision.

The promise of unlocking the serum's secrets beckoned, and he was eager to download as much information as possible and to let the system try again. However, recklessness risks loomed large. Erik then took a deep breath; he had already decided what to do.

"Thank you for the insights. I'll proceed with caution," he said. The supercomputer's ensuing silence served as its tacit understanding. Then Erik began to map out his next moves, invigorated by a renewed sense of purpose.

He leaned back, taking a few moments to reflect on his advancements. Two new neural links marked a substantial step in his self-improvement journey.

As the serum's effects diminished, he shifted his attention to these new links. The first was a link to the Chameleon Veil brain crystal power. This link would enable Erik to blend into his environment more efficiently, making him nearly undetectable to the untrained eye.

While exploring his newfound capability, he felt a cloak had been draped over him, separating him from the world around him.

The second neural link was connected to the Plant Master's brain crystal power. After some moments playing with it, the young man stopped.

Even as he reveled in the day's progress, another task loomed large in his mind. He still had to sift through the data he'd gathered from Haven Market about Doran Stedman.

Erik began to sort through the files he'd acquired by accessing the biological supercomputer. A flurry of images, texts, and videos scrolled by, each one a potential key to unlocking the enigma that was Doran.

This man wasn't just anyone; he was deeply entrenched in a world of affluence, influence, and authority. But what drove him? What alliances did he have? What weaknesses could Erik exploit? Where was he?

Erik's eyes flicked from one piece of data to the next; the digital terrain before him resembled a complex web, with Doran Stedman at its core. As he delved deeper, Erik's pulse quickened.

Timestamps indicated that Doran had visited Haven Market shortly after the guild had initiated their search for him. Even more unsettling was what Erik discovered as he decrypted classified data: Haven Market was involved in some genuinely sinister activities.

A chill ran down his spine. This wasn't just a marketplace for luxury items; it was a marketplace for human lives.

The transaction logs were deliberately ambiguous, a tactic those in illicit trades used to obscure their true dealings. But this information came from the company's hidden servers, and he was sure these dealings were true.

But Erik's keen eye, enhanced by the biological supercomputer's algorithms, saw through the subterfuge. The language used, the sums exchanged, and the specifics of the deals all led to a horrifying conclusion: Doran was involved in human trafficking.

Images flashed on Erik's interface, revealing the faces of the people Doran had "acquired."

They were young, their expressions a mix of confusion and fear. Some were foreign, likely naive vagabonds who'd been ensnared, while others were locals, making the revelation even more gut-wrenching.

Erik's fist clenched involuntarily, his blood boiling with anger. "How can anyone stoop so low?" he muttered, his voice quivering with fury and disbelief.

"Trading lives like they're mere trinkets. And Haven Market, this so-called reputable establishment, is nothing more than a hotbed of greed and inhumanity."

The realization that such horrors were happening right under the noses of Etrium's authorities was infuriating. Clearly, the guild's quest to find Doran was more than justified.

"But why is he doing all of this?" Erik pondered. He had been instructed to locate Doran and report back to the guild, not intervene. This in itself was very weird. Was that because they thought he wasn't strong enough?

As much as the situation revolted him, Erik knew there were limits to what he could do. Just as he had turned a blind eye to similar atrocities in Frant, he had no plans to act differently in Etrium. His own survival was the priority.

Chapter 556: Betrayal

Erik delved into the data with painstaking precision, examining each file as if it held the key to a hidden world.

Videos flowed in his mind, each one a glimpse into Doran's murky past. Erik had seen his share of unsettling things, but nothing could have braced him for what he was about to see.

The video opened to reveal an upscale restaurant within Haven Market, its ambiance set by the soft glow of overhead chandeliers. The setting was lavish, with plush red velvet chairs, crystal glassware, and polished mahogany tables.

A private booth was tucked away in a corner, separated from the main dining area. Three men sat there, each radiating an undeniable aura of power.

Doran, his grin as ominous as ever, sat on one side of the table. Across from him was a man Erik recognized from the guild's intelligence files—a high-ranking member of the Silver Serpents.

But the third man seized Erik's attention, making his heart skip a beat. There, attempting to blend in with a disguise, was Uncle Benjamin.

Erik had always seen Benjamin as a supportive figure from his childhood. Although he had once suspected Benjamin's involvement in past events, he had never imagined anything like this. Even the disguise couldn't mask Benjamin's athletic build and dark skin. He knew him too well to be mistaken.

Besides, that goatee—neatly trimmed—was a dead giveaway. It framed his chiseled jaw, making him look exactly like the man Erik remembered. But what was he doing here, mingling with these people?

Erik replayed the clip to make sure he wasn't mistaken. The men seemed at ease, laughing and clinking glasses like old friends. Dark deals were undoubtedly cemented, knowing the kind of people he was dealing with.

A storm of emotions engulfed Erik—confusion, disbelief, and rising anger. The man he had looked up to, considered a mentor, was in cahoots with Doran and the Silver Serpents, two scum of human beings. It felt like a betrayal that cut deeper than any blade. And what was Benjamin doing in Etrium, of all places?

Memories of warm summer days filled with Uncle Benjamin's stories of courage clashed violently with the reality unfolding before him. Had all those lessons on morality and integrity been a sham? Was the Uncle Benjamin he knew just a mask?

Questions flooded Erik's mind, each demanding an answer. His initial shock morphed into a steely resolve. If Benjamin was entangled in this dark web, Erik vowed to unravel it, no matter how personal the cost. He needed the truth and would go to any lengths to find it.

Sitting silently, Erik felt the weight of the video's revelations pressing down on him. Although the footage showed the faces of the three men, including Uncle Benjamin, the dialogue was muffled and indistinct. But Erik was resolute in his quest for clarity.

Turning his focus to the entity within him, he addressed the biological supercomputer. "Can you enhance the video? I need to know what they were saying," he asked, his voice tinged with an unyielding determination.

For a moment, everything seemed to pause, as if the gears of a complex machine were realigning themselves. Then, in the straightforward, emotionless voice Erik had come to expect, the biological supercomputer spoke up.

[AUDIO ENHANCEMENT IS POSSIBLE TO A DEGREE. HOWEVER, I CANNOT GENERATE PERFECT AUDIO. MY ABILITIES ARE CONSTRAINED BY THE DATA WITHIN YOUR BRAIN.]

Erik took a moment to absorb this. The data he'd gathered from Haven Market was still limited to what the cameras and microphones had captured. As advanced as the biological supercomputer was, it was not almighty.

"I get it," Erik responded, his voice tinged with hope and caution. "Do your best."

[PROCESSING REQUEST. EDITING DATA FOR AUDIO ENHANCEMENT.]

The world around Erik seemed to fuzz out for a second. His recollection of the video surged to the forefront of his consciousness.

The supercomputer set to work, refining the jumbled audio and attempting to separate the dialogue from the background noise. Erik felt an odd, ticklish sensation as if someone were gently poking around in the corners of his mind.

Time stretched, each minute feeling like an eternity as Erik waited, his breath held in anticipation. Then, the video started relapsing; a word or phrase would occasionally emerge more clearly, but the complete conversation remained elusive.

The mental exertion was draining, but Erik clung to the hope that each enhancement brought him closer to understanding the truth about the secret meeting and Uncle Benjamin's role.

[FOCUSING ON TARGETED AUDIO. PLEASE NOTE CAPABILITIES ARE LIMITED TO EXISTING DATA. CANNOT GENERATE OR REPLICATE MISSING INFORMATION.]

Erik braced himself, channeling all his focus into the memory. The scene's visuals started to blur as if a camera lens adjusted its focus. The ambient sounds—the clinking of glasses, the murmur of other diners—began to fade while the voices of the three men grew more distinct.

Though still marred by static and distortion, fragments of the conversation became clearer.

"...important shipment... next week to... Blenheim Close," Doran's voice broke through.

"...trust your judgment, Benjamin. But we can't afford mistakes..." added the member of the Silver Serpents.

Erik strained his ears to hear every word, aware that each phrase was packed with meaning. The conversation was all over the place, yet it seemed to hint at bargains, secret activities, and broader plots. The most important thing was that it mentioned a location, and that location was Blenheim Close, which was located in a street in Testrovsc's Rest.

It was a fact that couldn't be refuted that Uncle Benjamin was mired to the core in this murky swamp. The initial shock that Erik felt quickly gave way to a grim intent. He had to go deeper if he planned to understand the entire extent of Benjamin's involvement and if he wanted to reveal the broader plot at hand.

[TERMINATING EDITING PROCESS. DATA ENHANCEMENT COMPLETE,] the biological supercomputer finally announced.

Taking a deep breath, Erik tried to wrap his mind around the implications of what he'd just heard. There were still many unanswered questions, but he was one step closer to the truth and to find Doran.

Chapter 557: Preemptive search

Erik's fingers flew across his phone's sleek screen as he keyed in "Blenheim Close." A torrent of information filled his display, various links offering glimpses into this seemingly ordinary street name.

Tapping on the most relevant link, he looked at an aerial view of a street on a digital map, snaking through a bustling part of the city like a vital artery.

Blenheim Close was a street of dichotomies. There were seemingly ordinary and new buildings, nestled among some that looked at least 200 years old. Large warehouses dominated the street, their sprawling rooftops visible from above.

These structures were industrial titans, with broad entrances for heavy trucks and exhaust vents hinting at temperature-sensitive operations.

While some of these warehouses showed their age with rusted exteriors and peeling paint, they stood as enduring monuments to the city's industrial past.

Nestled among these industrial giants were more enigmatic buildings. Unlike the expansive warehouses, these structures were compact, rising vertically with brick or concrete walls.

Their sparse windows lent them an aura of secrecy, suggesting businesses that operated away from the public eye.

Erik zoomed in further, scanning for business names or signs that might offer a clue. A few familiar names in logistics and manufacturing appeared, but what really piqued his interest was an unmarked

building sandwiched between two warehouses. Its anonymity amidst a street of businesses struck him as odd.

He scrolled through reviews and comments from locals. While some griped about daytime traffic and noise, others noted how the street took on an eerie quiet at night, broken only by the occasional mechanical hum of something unknown. A sense of concern began to coil within Erik.

An idea flickered to life in his mind. "Can you connect to the cameras on Blenheim Close?" he asked, directing his question to the biological supercomputer.

[ATTEMPTING TO CONNECT TO SURVEILLANCE CAMERAS IN THE VICINITY OF
BLENHEIM CLOSE THROUGH INTERNET.]

Almost instantly, Erik's perspective shifted. The digital map dissolved, replaced by a live feed from an overhead street camera. The angle offered a clear view of the front of the mysterious, unmarked building, which stood unassumingly among its larger neighbors.

People meandered along the sidewalk, absorbed in their daily routines. Yet, Erik's focus was riveted on a group gathering near the entrance of the unnamed building.

Their behavior was cautious, their glances furtive, and their whispered conversations suggested something clandestine was afoot. Their clothes were deliberately nondescript, but their body language spoke volumes.

What really caught Erik's eye, however, was a peculiar ritual each person performed before entering the building. They would step forward until their faces were just inches from the door.

Their heads tilted slightly as if engaging with something at eye level. Erik couldn't see any devices but noticed a soft glow where their eyes met the door. It was fleeting but enough to unlatch the door and grant them entry.

Erik's instincts were on high alert. "That's got to be some kind of retina or facial recognition system," he thought aloud. The level of security hinted that whatever—or whoever—was inside was important.

Eager to dig deeper, he queried, "Can you locate any cameras inside the building or other viewpoints that might offer a clearer picture?"

[SEARCHING FOR INTERNAL CAMERAS.]

For a brief moment, everything froze. Then, the view shifted to a camera inside the building just past the entrance. The footage was grainy, and the angle less than ideal, but Erik could still make out the details of the interior.

The entrance opened into a spacious hallway, its walls punctuated by doors. The group he'd observed outside was scattered, each heading toward a different door.

Their movements were purposeful, indicating a familiarity with the place. The interior was stark—no decorations, signage, just cold, calculated functionality. It felt more like a covert facility than a regular building.

Erik's pulse quickened as another figure entered the frame. This woman was different, radiating an aura of authority. She exchanged brief words with one of the earlier arrivals before venturing deeper into the building.

Erik leaned in, hoping to catch some audible conversation, but the feed was video-only. "Well, that's a dead end," he muttered in frustration.

His viewpoint began to shift rapidly, like flipping through TV channels. Each room seemed ordinary—men sitting around, chatting, sipping what appeared to be beer or whiskey. Nothing stood out until his perspective shifted to a well-lit office.

This room was a stark contrast to the others. Plush carpets, elegant drapes, and mahogany furniture filled the space. Expensive artwork and trophies adorned the walls, signaling power and wealth.

Behind a grand desk cluttered with papers and a sleek, modern computer sat a figure Erik instantly recognized: the third man from the video he'd seen earlier. The man was deeply absorbed in his work, scanning documents intensely.

The presence of this man in such a luxurious office, along with the vaguely familiar symbols around the room, made it click for Erik. "The Silver Serpents," he whispered, his voice tinged with dread and realization.

The unfolding scene was like a jigsaw puzzle coming together. Uncle Benjamin's ties to Doran, and now this office, were pieces falling into place. But what was the bigger picture? What roles did Uncle Benjamin and Doran play in all this?

Right at that moment, the man seated behind the desk looked up, and it appeared his eyes could see right through the camera. Erik had the fleeting impression that he had been seen briefly.

The man's attention was then diverted when there was a knock on the door, and he sat back in his chair while indicating for the guest to enter.

The rapid beating of Erik's heart was apparent. With each fresh piece of information revealed, the stakes became higher, and the web of mystery grew. He knew he needed to proceed cautiously, yet he could not simply abandon the situation.

Uncle Benjamin's involvement brought a whole new level of intensity and personalization to the situation. Erik had a ravenous need for answers, and he was getting closer and closer to obtaining them.

Chapter 558: Blenheim Close (1)

Erik began preparing for his undercover operation as the darkness engulfed his motel room. The distant buzz of automobiles and the odd siren wail permeated the heated air. The night's unknowns and prospective perils fell heavy on him, yet his hunger for answers drove him forward.

Erik went through his strategy one last time in the warm glow of his dimly lit room. The Chameleon Veil served as his go-to tool for stealth and discretion. But tonight, he'd also use something he rarely did: Conal's brain crystal power.

The Chameleon Veil would allow him to blend seamlessly into his surroundings. Still, Conal's unique ability to morph into Thaid's and animals would give him an added layer of camouflage, making it easier to move around without arousing suspicion.

However, he planned on using it later. A cat in the streets wasn't something that someone would find weird, and he couldn't waste mana.

While contemplating this, he remembered the strange sensation of his bones rearranging, his muscles contracting, and his senses becoming razor-sharp the first time he tapped into Conal's power.

Erik's shape-shifting abilities were previously limited to specific Thaid's. But a recent meeting with some dead cats and dogs had allowed him to absorb their DNA, broadening his transformation choices, although in a disturbing manner.

But entirely morphing into an animal came with its challenges. To begin, he'd have to be entirely naked. With clothes on, partial transformations, such as shifting a hand or a foot, were possible. Still, a full-body transformation required the capacity to morph without fabric constraints.

Taking a deep breath, Erik undressed, neatly folding his clothes into a compact bag. He caught his reflection in the mirror—his eyes were as determined as ever. Still, a flicker of uncertainty was there, too. He knew the risks he was taking tonight, but his resolve was unshakable.

He closed his eyes and summoned mana, which he then directed through the neural links belonging to Conal's power. The transformation started deep within him and spread outward. As his bones twisted and contorted, the disorienting experience caused him some mild pain.

A few moments later, a sleek black cat flexed its muscles and stretched in the spot where Erik had been standing just a couple of minutes before. Its piercing brown eyes scanned the room as it got used to seeing things from this new, lower point.

The world appeared more expansive, smelled more vividly, and sounded more distinct. After Erik also activated the Chameleon Veil, a soft shimmer surrounded him, making it nearly impossible to tell him apart from the shadows around him.

He moved through his apartment with such grace that it was almost ghostly, and then he vanished into the darkness.

As Erik was in his feline form, walking through the city streets gave him a unique sensory experience. He was more sensitive to the minute details, such as the scurrying of rats in dark alleys, the fluttering of birds near the streetlights, and even the far-off thumping of music from a nightclub.

Despite this barrage of stimuli, Erik's concentration remained unwavering, and he carried out his task without hesitation.

As his visage was that of a black cat silently walking through the streets, he navigated the city with an elegance that concealed his true identity.

The urban symphony of distant car horns, muffled conversations, and the occasional distant siren didn't bother him.

The twitching of his whiskers in response to the night's offerings and the assured raising of his tail made him appear to be a cat like any other. There was no way anyone could tell that it was not a real cat.

The Moonlight danced on his glossy fur, giving his form an almost ethereal glow. The towering buildings cast intricate shadows on the cobblestone below.

Erik used these pockets of darkness to his advantage, effortlessly gliding in and out of them. Every now and then, his green eyes would catch the light, flashing with an intelligence and alertness that were anything but animalistic.

As he moved, the city's bouquet of smells enveloped him—the fresh scent of bread from a late-night bakery, the smoky aroma of a far-off barbecue, and the earthy dampness lingering after a rain.

Occasionally, he'd stop, cocking his head as if pondering a peculiar sound or scent. It was a weird feeling; the ability to pick up the scents in the air at great distances and hear sounds kilometers away from his position was undoubtedly a significant stimulus for his brain.

As he neared his target, Erik's feline steps became more measured. He was close, and every fiber of his being sensed it.

The imposing metallic door of the Silver Serpents' headquarters stood before him, bathed in the soft light of nearby street lamps. It was a formidable barrier, clearly designed to deter intruders. Yet, with the biological supercomputer, Erik found most obstacles trivial.

<Open the entrance door,> Erik mentally commanded.

[DOOR ACCESS INITIATED], the biological supercomputer communicated back. A faint mechanical whir filled the air as the door's advanced lock was bypassed, and the door creaked open just enough for entry.

Without hesitation, the black cat slipped through the gap, his feline agility making the maneuver look effortless.

The corridor inside was dim, its amber lighting casting elongated shadows. The soft hum of air conditioning and distant, muffled conversations were the only audible signs of life.

<Better activate the Chameleon Veil,> Erik thought. He increased his mana output, confident that the added layer of invisibility would keep him undetected in the dim corridor.

With cautious precision, Erik explored the building. His heightened feline senses detected the minutest movements, the faintest sounds, and a complex tapestry of smells.

He felt the floor's vibrations whenever someone walked nearby, and his keen ears picked up whispered conversations behind closed doors. The place was buzzing, even at this late hour.

While the biological supercomputer was a powerful ally, Erik leaned heavily on his animal instincts, particularly in this unfamiliar setting. He sought hiding spots, pausing to survey his environment or eavesdrop on the building's inhabitants.

More than once, he narrowly dodged guards or Silver Serpent members. Each time, he melted into the shadows, his chameleon-like abilities rendering him nearly invisible against the corridor's dark backdrop.

His main goal was information gathering, but he also hoped to encounter Doran or perhaps even Uncle Benjamin. With each step, he drew closer to the answers that had eluded him, and the stakes felt higher than ever.

Chapter 559: Blenheim Close (2)

As Erik walked through the building, his feline senses were on high alert and ready for action. The mystery was gradually being unraveled as Erik searched room by room.

The presence of alchemical tools suggested that obscure research was being conducted, the presence of gleaming weapons suggested that the location was prepared for conflict, and the presence of stocked food supplies suggested that preparations were being made for a long-term operation or a large group.

The offices were immaculate examples of meticulous organization, with files tidily filed away, computers humming quietly, and charts prominently displayed on the walls.

Erik made mental notes of the references to the shipments, transactions, and unfamiliar names. He filed them away for later consideration and analysis.

The occupants' calm breathing in the sleeping quarters starkly contrasted with the harsh reality of their surrounding environment.

The presence of guards was a persistent risk. When Erik sensed one was getting closer, he would quickly duck under some furniture or blend into the shadows as his heart raced.

These were different than some run-of-the-mill security guards, as evidenced by their conversations, which consisted of mundane gripes and the occasional crucial information. They couldn't keep silent and often said things they shouldn't have.

However, their well-defined procedures and regimens gave the impression that they ran an exceptionally well-organized business. Which was weird for the young man.

Erik clung to the hope of finding a clue that would help him unravel the true nature of the activities that were taking place within this mysterious building as he moved throughout the area.

He planned to investigate the room at the end of the dark corridor ahead. When he walked across the cold, hard floor, his padded paws barely made a sound. At each step, an attempt was made to reduce his noise and evade detection.

However, just as he reached the middle of the corridor, a security guard appeared from behind a doorway. The man stopped moving and cocked his head as if he had just heard something peculiar. He halted for a moment before slowly turning his gaze in Erik's direction, his eyes narrowing.

A fleeting fluttering sensation occurred in Erik's chest at that very moment. He quickly weighed his options, which included hiding inside an alcove for maintenance to his right, an unmarked door to his left, and the corridor that stretched out in front of him, which was heavily laden with the likelihood that he would be discovered.

Erik quickly decided and entered the alcove in a split second. The Chameleon Veil did an excellent job concealing his form as his slender, cat-like body blended in with the shadows. He crammed himself up against the wall and held his breath as he did so.

The guard moved cautiously down the hall, pausing every so often to take stock of his surroundings, and his footsteps echoed throughout the space. He rumbled, his tone tinged with suspicion, "Who's there?" The deafening hush that followed was the only response.

Even though Erik couldn't see the security guard, he could still feel his presence. He picked up on the fabric's muted rustle, the security guard's steady breathing, and the metallic jingle of the belt he wore. Time appeared to slow down, and the tension in the room increased with each passing second.

Now that the guard had gotten so close, Erik's hiding spot was at risk of being found out. He could see the man's boots and hear his heartbeat all at the same time.

The security guard whipped the air before turning on a flashlight and sweeping it around the area. The light's beam came dangerously close to where Erik was hiding.

Erik's thoughts were racing. The possibility of being found out was concrete. If that happened, this would jeopardize his mission, and in his current cat-like state, he was not well prepared for battle.

The young man was barely bypassed by the flashlight's beam as it swept past him. He didn't want to take any chances because if the guard had heard him earlier, there was a chance that he would also notice him now.

Seemingly satisfied, the guard muttered, "Damn rats," likely attributing the noise to some nuisance. He turned and continued down the corridor, his footsteps gradually receding.

Erik did not breathe until he was sure the guard had moved on, and his entire body trembled from the adrenaline rush.

Erik's cat-like stealth and heightened senses served him well as he navigated the building's corridors, which appeared to go on forever but were more like a maze.

His eyes had no trouble adjusting to the varying brightness levels. At the same time, his ears picked up on conversations and footsteps further away.

In the end, he came across a massive door made of metal, and when he put his paw on it, it gave off a chilling and imposing vibe.

In contrast to the rest of the aging building, this door appeared to be newer and more robust, which led him to believe that something important lay hidden behind it.

The intricate locks and security features had piqued Erik's interest even more.

<Open it,> Erik silently instructed his biological supercomputer.

A brief silence followed, and then a series of soft clicks filled the air as the advanced locks disengaged one by one. The door creaked open slightly, revealing a dim staircase leading downward.

A damp, heavy air wafted up, carrying a blend of earthy smells and something else—something that hinted at long-hidden secrets.

Erik cautiously started his descent. The worn stone stairs, which had been used for years, did not make a sound under his padded paws as he walked down them.

As he proceeded further into the cavern, the lighting gradually improved, which lessened the impression that he was falling into an abyss.

His cat-like eyes quickly adjusted themselves. The ample light provided by the large wall-mounted bulbs made navigation easier. It increased the likelihood that someone would notice you.

The atmosphere was surprisingly modern like a cutting-edge research facility lay concealed behind the building's antiquated façade. As it turned out, Erik's intuition was pretty close to being correct.

Erik stopped once he reached the bottom, his senses more acute than ever. He had made his way to the deep underground center of the building.

Chapter 560: Blenheim Close (3)

As Erik descended the final flight of stairs into the vast underground chamber, his cushioned paws made contact with the icy, sterile floor below them, making it so that no sound was made.

Bright lights hung from the ceiling, indicating the room was an underground laboratory. Erik had never seen anything like it before, but he was starting to have a bad feeling.

Large glass partitions could be seen directly before him, separating the space into several distinct enclosures. Inside, Erik observed several people whose state was clearly hopeless. The physical wounds were just some of the things that were visible to them. They probably became mad after what they saw and heard there.

Some huddled together, their eyes wide with fear, while others sat listlessly facing the room's walls with void looks.

Their clothing was tattered, and the dirt and grime of their ordeal were visible on their faces.

Erik's stomach dropped as he realized these people were probably kidnapped or bought from the Haven Market.

As he continued to look, he came face to face with an even more horrifying sight. One side of the laboratory was lined with rows of tables made of stainless steel, and each table held a lifeless body. There were people of all ages and genders sitting at the tables.

Some were hidden from view by white sheets. In contrast, others were left uncovered, exposing the dreadful work done by whoever managed this establishment.

A disturbing assortment of severed body parts were laid out on trays and placed next to the tables in an orderly fashion. However, what genuinely captivated Erik's attention was a shelf containing glass jars filled with glowing liquids.

Each jar contained brain crystals, which retained the inherent power that characterizes them despite their detachment from the Thaidi that produced them. Erik felt a chill run down his spine as he realized this was no ordinary laboratory but a room filled with unimaginable horrors.

Antiseptics and a metallic odor, most likely blood, permeated the air heavily, making breathing difficult.

The only sounds that could be heard were the hum of the machinery and the intermittent beeping of a monitor, which contributed to the unsettling atmosphere in the room.

Under the bright lights, surgical implements such as scalpels, forceps, and other similar implements glowed menacingly. Each instrument was a testament to the sinister deeds that had been carried out in this location.

Even in his guise as a cat, Erik experienced a rising tide of rage and revulsion. How many people had been hurt in this place? How many people's lives had been taken for some sickening goal? The sight of the victims held captive, juxtaposed against such heinous acts of inhumanity, was almost too much for anyone to bear.

Erik hid in the shadows momentarily while trying to regain his composure. With his eyes roving around like cats, he tried to take in the horror he saw. It was absolutely necessary to avoid being discovered.

The constant buzz of machines and the unnerving silence of the underground laboratory were abruptly broken by the sound of footsteps reverberating down the staircase. The whiskers on Erik's cat ears flickered, and he became instantly alert. His eyes darted around the room as he looked for a place to conceal himself.

Erik did not waste any time after discovering a secluded nook obscured by darkness. As he raced toward it, his Chameleon Veil power made it even easier for him to blend in with the shadows and become almost impossible to distinguish from his surroundings.

From this hidden vantage point behind some equipment, Erik's feline eyes watched keenly as two figures began to descend the staircase.

The overhead lights first illuminated the man's face, revealing the unmistakable features of Doran Stedman—a surge of recognition shot through Erik, momentarily quickening his feline pulse.

<Easy money and just two days of work.>

Next to Doran was a woman who appeared to be in her early forties. Her face was angular, framed by high cheekbones and icy, calculating eyes that seemed inappropriate in a research setting.

Her jet-black hair was pulled back into a tight bun, lending her an air of stern authority. Both were dressed in immaculate white lab coats, their sterile appearance jarringly at odds with the grim environment.

Erik strained his ears to catch snippets of their conversation. Doran's deep, confident voice filled the chamber. "The last batch showed promise, but we must refine the process further. The subjects are resisting more than I anticipated."

The woman tinged with a steely impatience, responded, "We're on a tight schedule, Doran, and with THEM on our tail, we can't afford any delays."

Doran laughed, a sound grotesquely out of place in such a setting. "Always the pragmatist, aren't you, Catrina? Don't worry. Once we've perfected the technique, even they won't be able to stop us."

Catrina shot Doran a sidelong glance, her lips curling into a slight smirk. "Just make sure there are no more... complications. We can't afford any more surprises."

Erik's thoughts were racing as he attempted to interpret what was being said in their cryptic conversation. Which 'technique' were they talking about exactly? What exactly did Doran mean when he said that the subjects were resisting?

Erik could see the two individuals initially, but as they went deeper into the laboratory, they eventually disappeared from his line of sight.

However, the implications were crystal clear and sufficiently chilling: the atrocities he had seen were merely the surface of something much more sinister.

Not only was Doran a participant in these horrifying experiments, but he was also the mastermind behind them. Catrina, the woman in question, was most likely an accomplice of his, but of course, he didn't know at which level she cooperated or what her role was. The stakes had just been raised to an entirely new level.

Erik's feline form remained hidden in the shadows, and despite this, it was tense and ready to move at any moment. He believed he had enough evidence but continued his investigation by copying all the data from the lab's computers.

However, he also needed to discover what part his Uncle Benjamin played in this dreadful enterprise.