

## BIOLOGICAL 561

### Chapter 561: Blenheim Close (4)

Erik's mana reserves were starting to run low because he used his powers so extensively, despite his feline form giving him an advantage regarding stealth. His thoughts were racing as he was in the laboratory while the constant hum of machines and computers filled the air. He had to collect evidence about what was going on here.

<Copy all the data from the computers. I need to know what they're up to and check for any information related to Uncle Benjamin,> Erik mentally commanded his biological supercomputer, aiming to collect every shred of damning evidence.

[UNDERSTOOD. CONNECTING TO THE DEVICES. PROCESS INITIATED], the voice of the supercomputer resonated in his mind. As more and more data entered the system, it seemed like time was moving more slowly; Erik's sense of urgency increased with each new byte the supercomputer downloaded.

[DATA ACQUISITION COMPLETE.] The message was music to Erik's ears.

He was aware that it was time to leave the building. He could feel his mana reserves dwindling with each second passing, which caused his heart to pound. He was becoming increasingly conscious that he could no longer rely on his Chameleon Veil as a concealment as it had begun to lose its efficacy due to the dwindling mana.

The young man tried to remain as hidden as possible, so each step had to be meticulously planned to align with the shadows.

The constant hum of the machinery in the background provided some cover, which muffled the sound of his padded paws rubbing against the hard floor.

Erik noticed a group of guards engrossed in a quiet conversation as he approached the lab's exit. Their attention was focused on a handheld device, however. Seeing an opening, he took advantage of it by sneaking past them while his steps were muffled by the background noise in the area.

Once out of the lab, Erik ended up again in the dimly lit hallways. Here, without the cover of machinery, every footstep seemed to echo, and each breath sounded louder. Of course, that was only Erik's perception, amplified by what he had seen and found out. Now that the mission was complete, the adrenaline in his veins made him freak out a little.

Still, he was as safe as he entered, with the only difference being the dwindling mana.

He weaved through corridors, dodging guards by blending into the shadows, and finally approached the building's entrance. But there was a hitch: two guards were stationed at the door, seemingly conducting a routine check.

His heart raced. With his mana running low, he couldn't afford to use another power to distract them. He needed a quick plan.

Spotting a stack of crates nearby, Erik hatched a quick plan. Silently climbing to the top, he knocked over a small canister. The resulting noise caught the guards' attention. Erik seized the moment as they moved toward the sound, leaping from the opposite side and sprinting toward the exit with incredible speed.

<Here comes the Money! Money! Money! Money! Money! Money!> Erik couldn't help but sing this tune in his mind, buoyed by his now elated mood.

As he burst out of the building, the night air greeted him like a breath of freedom. The sounds of the city—distant cars, chirping crickets, and muffled conversations—wrapped around him.

He didn't stop running until he was well away from the building, his heart still pounding from the adrenaline and the weight of what he had just uncovered.

Eventually, he made it back to his hotel, finding everything as he had left it. Once he felt safe, he shifted back into his human form, draining the last remnants of his mana. Exhausted but resolute, Erik knew he had gathered crucial information. Now, it was time to act and finally complete the quest.

Still grappling with the shocking discoveries he'd made in the lab, Erik took out his phone and dialed Lyria Bannon's number. The guild had been urgently searching for Doran Stedman, and Erik was the man they'd chosen for the job.

After a few rings, Lyria's incisive voice came through, "Hello, Mr. Kay? I hope you called me this late because you have some good news..."

"I've located him," Erik responded, cutting to the chase.

A brief pause, then Lyria asked, "In just two days? Are you certain it's him?"

Erik sighed, "Yes, Ms. Bannon, I'm certain. I saw him with my own eyes."

"That's... great," she conceded, her voice tinged with genuine astonishment. "Most people thought this would be a futile search lasting weeks, if not months."

A slight smirk crossed Erik's face, though she couldn't see it. "Let's just say luck was on my side."

Lyria sensed there was more to it but decided not to probe further. "Where is he?"

"He's hiding out in a building at 13 Blenheim Close. But listen," Erik's voice took on a more serious tone, "the place is crawling with guards. It's practically a fortress."

Lyria drew in a sharp breath, "That complicates matters."

"There's more," Erik said, his voice laden with gravity. "They're holding people captive there, innocent people, including children. You must send rescue teams and prepare for a significant operation."

Lyria seemed to lose her usual poise for a moment. "This is far worse than we anticipated," she muttered. After a thoughtful pause, she added, "Erik, this additional information is invaluable. Thank you."

Erik nodded, even though she couldn't see him. "I'm just doing my job," he said. Soon after, Lyria replied, "We'll inform our employer and request immediate action," she assured him. "As for your fee, expect a prompt transfer with a little extra. You've earned it."

A hint of a smile graced Erik's lips. "I'm glad I could assist. Make sure Stedman faces justice for his actions."

"I assure you, he will," Lyria said, carefully choosing her following words. "And Erik, if anything like this comes up in the future, you'll be the first person we contact. Your skills are exceptional."

Erik felt a sense of warmth at the genuine respect in her voice. "Thank you, Ms. Bannon. That means a lot."

The woman took a deep breath, "Take care, Erik. And once again, thank you."

The call ended, leaving Erik with a sense of accomplishment. He had done more than just find a man; he had unearthed a dark and twisted operation that the guild was now in a position to dismantle.

#### Chapter 562: Blenheim Close (5)

In the wake of the evening's unsettling events, Erik perched on a nearby rooftop, the fantastic night breeze gently caressing his face. The distant hum of the city served as a backdrop, filling the air as he grappled with the revelations he'd uncovered.

Doran Stedman had always been an enigma, but now he loomed even larger and more menacing in Erik's mind. Erik wrestled with the motives behind Doran's dark operations.

What could drive someone to engage in such heinous activities—kidnappings, experiments, and the trade of brain crystals? Was it the allure of power, the greed for money, or some other insidious goal that Erik couldn't quite fathom? The thought that people like Doran existed harboring such malevolence was deeply unsettling.

Yet, what had truly rocked Erik to his core was the unexpected involvement of Uncle Benjamin. The image of him in that video replayed incessantly in Erik's mind. Uncle Benjamin had been a pillar in his life.

This trusted figure had offered some semblance of stability during his formative years. What could possibly link him to a man like Doran? And why?

The face of Benjamin in the video was familiar yet altered. The rugged features, the chiseled jaw, and the signature goatee were all there.

Still, his eyes held a new hardness, a grim resolve Erik had never seen before. It was evident that Benjamin was more than just an observer; he was deeply implicated.

This led Erik to question the very fabric of his past. How had their lives veered so far apart that they found themselves on opposite ends of a perilous situation?

Could it be that Benjamin had always harbored this latent darkness, and Erik had simply been too young or naive to perceive it?

Frustration surged through him as he ran his fingers through his hair. The questions were piling up, and answers were in short supply.

Sitting high above the city, Erik's eyes looked distant as he sank deeper into his thoughts. The whirlpool of memories and newfound information made him feel on the brink of an abyss, teetering dangerously close to falling in.

<Is all of this connected?> Erik pondered, his thoughts turning inward. <That day, when Uncle Benjamin took me to lunch, I returned to find my home ransacked. Was someone searching for something specific? Maybe the biological supercomputer?>

The memory of that violation, of seeing his personal space invaded and belongings strewn about, came flooding back. Even then, a younger and less experienced Erik had sensed that there was more to the story.

<Could that incident be tied to my father's sudden return?> he wondered. His dad's unexpected reappearance had been jarring, and now the timing seemed too coincidental to ignore. His father had always been a mystery, burdened by some unspoken secret he never shared.

<Is it possible that what those intruders were looking for is connected to what Uncle Benjamin is up to in Etrium?> Erik's mind raced, drawing lines between dots he'd never thought to connect.

The enigmatic circumstances surrounding his father's return, the unsettling incident at his home, and now Uncle Benjamin's association with Doran Stedman seemed to be pieces of a larger, more ominous puzzle.

Erik had looked up to Uncle Benjamin for years, placing unwavering trust in him. Now, he was wrestling with a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces refused to fit neatly together.

<There's so much I don't understand. So many hidden truths...> A tightness gripped Erik's chest, each heartbeat amplifying the storm of emotions within him.

<Who originally created the biological supercomputer? Why did my dad speak in such cryptic terms about the future of humanity?>

As the night wore on, Erik felt he was standing at the intersection of truth and deceit. He knew he had to delve deeper, to peel away the layers of history to make sense of the present.

Uncovering these truths would undoubtedly be challenging, but he was steadfast. The search for answers had become deeply personal, and retreat was no longer an option. The mysterious video was merely the beginning.

Erik's thoughts circled back to the building where he had encountered Doran. Within those walls, he had stumbled upon Doran's dark operations and, potentially, Uncle Benjamin's involvement.

He would have to rely on his biological supercomputer to get a closer look. <Connect me to the building's internal cameras,> he mentally commanded.

[ACKNOWLEDGED. INITIATING SEARCH FOR DEVICES THROUGH THE INTERNET. SEARCH COMPLETE. ESTABLISHING CONNECTION.]

Erik waited for the biological supercomputer to complete the task. The wait was terrible, as Erik couldn't wait to see the guild do its job and kill these fuckers as soon as possible. In the meantime, his biological supercomputer combed through the plethora of electrical pulses around the building and successfully gained access to the building's surveillance camera feeds.

Corridors, rooms, and stairwells were some of the things Erik could see through images that flooded his mind. The complex layout of the building was laid out before him in front of him like a digital maze. He saw security personnel patrolling the corridors, their conversations apparently normal.

However, the young man knew that something was bound to happen sooner or later, maybe in a couple of seconds, and these people, these pieces of shit, were unaware of the destiny awaiting them.

The technicians appeared deeply involved in time-sensitive conversations or examinations in the other rooms. Their posture seemed okay, indicating that, at least on the surface, these people didn't find out about Erik's recent incursion. That was a good thing.

He zoomed in further, searching for Doran, who was likely still in the underground lab. At moments, Erik felt a jolt of anxiety as if he'd been discovered—a guard staring directly into a camera, a technician tweaking a feed. His heart leaped into his throat each time.

Still, it was clear that these people, or no person in the world, could detect the biological supercomputer unless they were in front of him and detected the weird mana fluctuations it released.

It became increasingly clear that whatever was happening inside that building was of monumental importance. Erik realized that the intricate web of deceit and subterfuge was far more extensive than he had initially thought.

#### Chapter 563: Blenheim Close (6)

While Erik waited, he kept his eyes glued to the camera feeds, and during that time, he saw a sudden outbreak of chaos. The building was stormed by a group dressed in black tactical gear.

The swiftness and precision they moved gave the impression of a deadly choreography in the sterile, metallic corridors. The number of guards either killed or rendered unable to defend themselves rose considerably. The attackers were extremely efficient and left no room for the defenders to put up a fight.

The remaining guards were overcome with fear and panic. Some of them tried to run away, while others tried to put up a fight, but it was clear that they were outmatched by their opponents. The efficiency with which the black-dressed attackers carried out their assault rendered any resistance pointless.

Then, Erik's eyes widened as he recognized the distinctive insignia affixed to the assailant's clothes. "Blackguards," he said to himself, a tone of bewilderment creeping into his voice as he uttered the word. His mind was flooded with the many stories surrounding these legendary figures.

Most were stories about their prowess; if such prowess was directed toward the Thaidis, it was a good story, but when they were said to have dealt with people, such stories took weird and scary turns. Chills ran down his spine.

The Blackguards were basically mythical figures from legend, unseen killers whose very names struck terror into the hearts of their victims, primarily criminals, and dangerous people. But it wasn't just their presence that unnerved him; it was the realization that he had stumbled upon a conspiracy of staggering proportions since it involved them. That was what really threw him for a loop.

It was well known that these elite warriors would undertake the riskiest of missions. Still, they would always succeed in accomplishing their goals, no matter what the cost. Those who supported their cause hailed them as the saviors of humanity, but those who opposed them viewed them as nothing less than demons.

As Erik began to understand what was at stake, his heart began to race. The Blackguards were not ordinary contract soldiers, mercenaries, or police forces. Instead, they were an independent power, an organization over the nations, and a law that even the seven countries had to respect and bow to.

Their involvement signaled that the situation was far more dangerous than he'd initially thought.

<No wonder the guild went to great lengths to keep this confidential,> he mused.

The camera feeds continued to show the chaotic situation as it went on. A Blackguard drew a blade from its sheath; it glistened in the artificial hallway light. With a swift and decisive motion, he severed a guard's head.

Another Blackguard demonstrated extraordinary marksmanship by quickly taking out multiple guards with headshots that hit their targets with pinpoint accuracy right in the middle of their foreheads. Everyone praised their abilities for a reason, but the most surprising thing was that they weren't even using their brain crystal powers.

Erik's thoughts raced. Why were the Blackguards here? <It does make sense that they came here to eliminate Doran, given their reputation as protectors of humanity. But if that's the case, why the secrecy? Why haven't they issued a public search warrant like they've done in Frant many times before?>

As he kept looking, he noticed that the assault was winding down. Only a handful of guards were left, so the Blackguards started methodically securing the area. The feeds depicted them going into various rooms, looking for something—or someone.

<It's clear they came here for Doran.> There was no mistaking it. They were the ones who asked the guild to find the man.

At that moment, the camera feeds showed the Blackguards reaching the door to the underground lab. <They found it. I wonder what Doran will do,> Erik mused.



The initial mayhem that the assault caused had given way to a more structured and methodical operation. Erik watched as the Blackguards moved through the building with surgical precision, like predators who were sure that their prey had nowhere to run because there was nowhere else to go and no other way to end up but dead.

Then, the camera feed near the underground lab flickered, revealing guards escorting a figure Erik instantly recognized—Doran Stedman.

There was no longer the usual air of arrogance surrounding Doran; instead, there was a noticeable sense of fear. He was tightly bound and had his hands cuffed to eliminate any chance of escape. Surrounded by many guards to avoid escape.

Erik's eyes were initially drawn to Doran but quickly refocused on the broader situation. The Blackguards concentrated on Doran, not bothering to secure the building or subdue the remaining guards.

More disturbingly, they made no move to free the captives in the underground lab. This didn't align with Erik's knowledge of the Blackguards, who, despite their ruthless efficiency, were believed to have a robust moral code.

As the Blackguards began to leave, grim reality set in. They weren't there to rescue anyone or bring Doran to justice; they were there to extract him.

The revelation hit Erik like a sledgehammer. His mind raced, trying to make sense of it all. This wasn't a mission of justice or law enforcement but a targeted extraction, likely backed by deep pockets.

Doran, for all his evil deeds, was valuable to someone. Whether it was his alchemical expertise or involvement in shady experiments, he was now in the hands of forces even more menacing than Erik had initially thought.

<What the fuck?!> Erik mentally exclaimed as he watched one of the Blackguards set the building ablaze.

A sense of bitterness washed over him. The blatant disregard for innocent lives left behind heavily weighed on his conscience. The world he believed he understood was showing its darker, more sinister layers. In this realm, power and money overruled morality.

Erik felt the ground beneath him shift as the lines between friend and foe blurred. What he had stumbled upon was far more complex and dark than he had ever imagined.

#### Chapter 564: Preparations

Since the night Erik discovered Doran's dark secrets, a whole month passed; it flew by in a flash. Each day was a whirlwind of activities, and Erik felt the world around him subtly shifting.

The terrifying images and mind-blowing revelations lingered in the back of his mind. Still, life continued to move forward, and so did he.

Erik has made significant progress toward mastering his brain crystal powers in recent months. He had succeeded in reaching the v level with both Nathaniel's and Hais' abilities, which was an accomplishment that was not simple to achieve at all.

In addition to that, he had taken in the power of the Mistlynx brain crystal power. His control over mana significantly improved compared to when he began and was still in New Alexandria.

Every practice session, each moment of focus, had brought him closer to levels of mastery he previously believed impossible to reach. The increase in power he experienced was terrifying for anyone else, but for him, it was exhilarating.

But accumulating power wasn't, by any means, the only goal of his life. In addition to what he accomplished during this period, he dove headfirst into his work with unyielding enthusiasm.

He tackled all his quests, tasks, and challenges with a dogged determination that was not lost on anyone who witnessed him. The fruits of his labor were monetary rewards and growing respect within the guild.

Amid this busy period, one thing remained a constant focus for Erik: the data he'd extracted from Doran's lab. Whenever he found a quiet moment, he would dive into the information, compelled to grasp the full scope of Doran's twisted plans. However, the lack of information wasn't enough even for Hais's brain crystal power.

What he found was deeply disturbing, but most of what Erik came up with was speculation.

As Erik pored over experiment logs, anatomical sketches, and arcane symbols, a horrifying picture began taking shape in his mind.

Doran's ambitions went beyond greed or a lust for control; they verged on the insane. He was attempting to replicate a process previously only achieved by blacksmiths using Thaid's brain crystals. But Doran wanted to go even further, to venture into uncharted territory.

Erik's heart pounded as he read Doran's personal notes over and over again. The scientist envisioned not just bestowing humans with additional brain crystal powers but implanting them with actual additional brain crystals, complete with the accompanying mana.

The idea was tantalizing: amplified abilities, increased mana, and previously unimaginable levels of power. But such power came at a terrible price.

Erik discovered that the cost was measured in human lives. The abducted individuals weren't random; they were carefully selected test subjects.

Erik felt sick as he read the cold, clinical descriptions of the experiments they endured.

Many had been subjected to excruciating procedures that horrifiedly altered their minds and bodies. Doran's notes were peppered with terms like "failures" and "necessary sacrifices," implying that many didn't survive the experiments.

The young man leaned back, running his fingers through his hair, grappling with the enormity of Doran's twisted vision.

While the concept of humans possessing multiple brain crystals could be revolutionary, the methods used and the ethical lines crossed were the stuff of nightmares.

The abducted weren't just victims; they were unwilling pioneers on the fringe of arcane science, their humanity sacrificed on the altar of Doran's ambition.

As Erik sat there, enveloped by the staggering implications of his discoveries, a chilling thought wormed his mind: What would happen to the world if Doran succeeded?

If a society teeming with humans wielding so much power. What would happen to humanity, to the world, if the Power scales were irrevocably tipped and ethical boundaries were hopelessly muddled?

Erik shivered, fully clutching at the information he had unearthed. Doran's warped dream wasn't just a threat to his victims; it jeopardized the very essence of their world.

The young man knew, in the core of his being, that this technology could be a game-changer.

The vibrant streets of Testrovsc's Rest had always been a wellspring of inspiration for Erik.

The city's pulse was rhythmic with trade, its lifeblood rich with possibilities. But today felt different. Erik walked purposefully, eyes scanning each storefront as if hunting for treasure.

Flush with earnings from his recent endeavors, Erik was eager to take the reins of his operations. The Lustrous Haulers had been good to him, but they were an expense he was ready to shed.

His goal was straightforward: own a vehicle fleet, hire his crew, and operate an independent venture, a guild. The allure of having complete control over his logistics and finances was too enticing to pass up. More than that, it was another building block in crafting his legacy.

As he meandered through the streets, Erik's imagination took flight. He envisioned a sprawling warehouse, its parking lot filled with gleaming trucks, each bearing his chosen logo. Inside, a hive of activity, with staff orchestrating shipments and mapping out routes.

His daydream was interrupted when he stumbled upon an empty lot between two bustling businesses. It was a sizable space flanked by accessible roads on either side.

Erik saw the untapped potential, a blank slate awaiting his transformative touch. He jotted down the address, planning to inquire further.

Further along, he discovered an auto dealership showcasing a variety of commercial vehicles. A wave of excitement washed over him as he examined the options.

Engaging with the dealer, he discussed specs, prices, and custom features. Erik realized he wasn't just investing in vehicles but in the cornerstones of his future empire.

He met with prospective employees throughout the day, seeking out skilled drivers and logistics experts. He sensed their initial surprise at encountering someone so young yet so driven. But Erik's passion and vision were infectious, almost compelling them to join his cause. Yet, they weren't convinced, and they refused to join him.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, Erik found himself armed with a list of potential properties, vehicles, and a nascent team. His dream was within reach, no longer a far-off aspiration.

As he reviewed his day's accomplishments that evening, Erik felt a swell of pride. His life's pieces were falling into place, and the road ahead seemed brighter than ever.

Launching his own guild, particularly in light of his recent experiences, was more about independence than financial gain.

Chapter 565: A proposal (1)

Erik found himself nearing his hotel as the sun dipped below the horizon, casting elongated shadows on the city streets.

Yet, when he thought his day was winding down, a modern-looking establishment caught his eye. Its spacious parking lot was filled with a variety of vehicles.

Despite the creeping fatigue that urged him to call it a day, Erik's entrepreneurial instincts kicked in, compelling him to investigate.

The shop's exterior was sleek and inviting, with clean architectural lines and expansive glass panels. The parking lot, although spacious, was bustling with parked cars, suggesting a thriving business.

Intrigued, Erik felt an irresistible pull toward the place. He thought it might be worth a quick look if only to satisfy his curiosity.

Upon entering, Erik was immediately struck by the palpable tension in the room. A woman with sharp features and an authoritative demeanor was locked in a heated exchange with a younger man who appeared to be one of her employees.

"I told you those security measures were inadequate!" she snapped, her eyes narrowing into slits. "We've lost a significant amount of merchandise. Do you have any idea how much that sets us back? We're not running a charity here!"

The young man looked visibly rattled. "I understand, ma'am. I just never thought anyone would have the nerve to do this."

Trying not to draw attention to himself, Erik casually browsed through a nearby shelf while keeping his ears attuned to their conversation.

"Yeah. and now," the woman continued, her voice tinged with frustration, "we have the added headache of dealing with those mercenaries. They've already sent their warning. We're in even deeper waters if we don't settle our debts for those Thaid's bodies. I've heard these guys are not the forgiving types regarding delayed payments."

Intrigued by the unfolding drama, Erik discreetly moved closer, pretending to be engrossed in another product display.

"We could try negotiating," the young man timidly suggested, "perhaps work out some installment plan?"

The woman shook her head dismissively. "Mercenaries aren't exactly known for their flexibility or willingness to negotiate, especially these guys. We need a quick solution."

As the gravity of their predicament settled in, an uneasy silence enveloped the room. Erik could almost feel the weight of their concerns pressing down on them.

Seizing the moment, Erik approached the duo, his expression one of casual curiosity. "I couldn't help but overhear your conversation," he began, locking eyes with the woman. "Perhaps I can offer some assistance?"

The woman and her employee turned towards him, their faces contrasting with surprise and suspicion.

The air was thick with tension, but the potential for a new business venture—or, at the very least, a chance to gather more information—was too enticing for Erik to ignore. This was an opportune moment for him to demonstrate his value and seize good business opportunities.

He had initially entered the building out of mere curiosity. However, as he stood amidst its contemporary decor, fully grasping the situation's urgency, Erik realized he might have stumbled upon an opportunity far more intriguing than he had initially anticipated.

The woman's eyes bore into Erik as if trying to read his soul. "Who are you?" she demanded, her voice tinged with a subtle hostility.

Before Erik could even open his mouth to reply, her eyes darted to Erik's distinctive mask. A flash of recognition gleamed on her features.

"Erik Kay," she whispered, as if she couldn't quite believe it.

"Precisely," Erik said, a wave of satisfaction washing over him. The power of his name and the mask he wore was not lost on many; his reputation had a far reach, for better or worse.

"What brings you here?" she inquired, her voice now laced with a trace of apprehension.

Raising an eyebrow, Erik gestured to the merchandise surrounding them. "Is there any reason to be in a shop other than to make a purchase?"

She looked at him skeptically for a moment before letting out a reluctant chuckle. "Point taken."

Sensing an opening, Erik leaned in slightly, lowering his voice to a near whisper. "You seem to be in a bit of a predicament. Again, do you need some assistance?"

She paused, clearly weighing her options, before cautiously asking, "And how would you be able to assist us, Mr. Kay?"

Erik straightened his posture, casting a quick glance around the shop. "I'm currently looking to buy vehicles and plan to hire a team to manage them."

A glimmer of understanding flickered in the woman's eyes. She exchanged a quick, surprised glance with her employee.

While Erik's reputation had its advantages, it was evident that she didn't anticipate this situation. She knew what Erik wanted to do; understanding others' wishes was a skill she learned long ago.

"So, you're not just looking for a good deal," she began cautiously, piecing together the elements of the situation. "You're offering to inject much-needed cash into our business, helping us settle our debts."

"Exactly," Erik confirmed, impressed by her quick comprehension. "In return, I get the vehicles I need, and perhaps you could offer me a discount on future transactions."

A heavy, contemplative silence enveloped the room. The distant sounds of the city and the soft hum of the air conditioner seemed to fade into the background as the woman considered Erik's proposal.

After an endless period, she finally broke the silence. "Your offer is quite tempting, Mr. Kay."

Erik allowed himself a slight, self-assured smirk. "I thought you might find it so."

She sighed deeply, massaging her temples as if trying to alleviate a headache. "We're clearly in a tight spot. Your offer is tempting, but desperate times often lead to risky decisions. Besides, do you even have the money? I heard you started working as a mercenary not even 6 months ago. Frankly, I doubt you have enough money to solve our problem."

Erik met her gaze, unflinching. "My reputation should speak for itself. I'm a man of my word. Do you really think I'd have trouble financing a few vans and cars?"

She studied him for a long, intense moment before finally extending her hand. "Shall we continue this discussion in my office?"

"Delighted that you're considering my proposal," Erik replied, feeling like he'd just maneuvered another piece into place on a complex chessboard.

Chapter 566: A proposal (2)

Lysa guided Erik through a set of frosted glass doors into her tastefully decorated office.

Some unnaturally large windows flooded the room with natural light, highlighting the contemporary furniture and the gleam of the polished wooden floor.



She motioned for Erik to sit across her broad mahogany desk. As he made himself comfortable, she took her own seat behind the piece of furniture.

"Mr. Kay," she started, her voice tinged with relief and caution, "it's not every day that someone offers a lifeline. So, I bet you understand how hard it is for me to trust your offer for help."

Erik nodded, acknowledging her point. "Life is full of surprises, Lysa. I'm here for a mutually beneficial arrangement, not to rip you off."

Her eyebrow arched in curiosity. "And what might this arrangement be?"

"As I said, I need some vehicles," Erik began, "Specifically, four large VANs capable of handling the weight of Thaidis and rugged terrain."

Lysa reclined in her chair, her fingers interlocking thoughtfully. "I can provide the vehicles, but even given our circumstances, I can't just give them away with a huge discount."

Erik offered a knowing smile. "I wouldn't expect you to. The discount doesn't need to be much," he said, winking at the woman.

Lysa sighed; she was in a position where she was in desperate need of money. So, she directed Erik to a series of holographic displays showcasing the shop's inventory. "For your requirements, the Traxler V-12 Cyclone vans would be perfect. They're engineered by Aeon Dynamics Corporation," she said, pointing to a rotating hologram of a sleek, modern van.

Their design was aggressive and elegant, with a matte gray finish that added a touch of sophistication.

"These vans come with adaptive suspensions, suitable for city driving and off-road conditions. They're also powered by hybrid hydrogen fuel cells, offering a range of over 5,000 kilometers between refueling," she elaborated, her voice tinged with a hint of pride.

"Additionally, they feature NanoSkin technology, a self-repairing technology that fixes the exterior and can mend minor damages within hours."

Erik moved closer to the display, scrutinizing the details. "Impressive. What about the interior?"

Lysa tapped a few commands, and the hologram split to reveal the van's spacious cargo area. "The interior is modular, allowing for customization based on your needs. The driver's cabin also has cutting-edge NaviTech AI navigation and robust anti-hacking security."

Erik nodded, clearly impressed. "It sounds like the right fit. What's the price tag?"

Lysa leaned against the console, her demeanor shifting to a more business-like tone. "Given the technology and capabilities, each Traxler V-12 Cyclone is priced at 180,000 Eurems, but I can offer them at 150,000; I can't go lower, though."

Erik pondered briefly. The price was high, but the vans offered good value for the money. "I'll take them," he said, nodding decisively. "But I have another request."

Lysa's eyes narrowed slightly, intrigued. "Do tell me."

"I need teams—two to be exact, each consisting of five individuals," Erik began cautiously, carefully choosing his words. "Their role would be similar to that of a Porter company."

Lysa looked at him, her eyes reflecting a mix of surprise and interest. It was clear that Erik's true goal was more than she had initially expected. Still, in a world of high stakes and unpredictable turns, it was an offer that held the promise of changing their fortunes.

And so, in that well-lit office, two savvy business minds prepared to strike a deal that could redefine their respective paths.

Lysa appeared thoughtful. "It's doable. Do you have any specific qualifications in mind for the team members?"

"I'd prefer someone with experience in this line of work to lead," Erik replied, "but it's not a strict requirement for everyone. I just need a leader who can provide directions to the others."

The atmosphere in Lysa's office was electric with the tension of pending deals. Sunlight streamed through the blinds, casting a pattern of light and shadow on the polished desk that separated them. Erik leaned in, his elbows on the table, the overhead lights glinting off his iconic mask.

Breaking the momentary silence, Lysa asked, "So, where should we deliver the vehicles?"

Erik hesitated, his eyes briefly wandering to the view beyond the window. "I haven't secured a location yet," he admitted, a tinge of self-directed irritation in his voice.

Lysa's eyebrow shot up, clearly surprised. "You're diving into this considerable investment without a parking space lined up?"

Erik met her gaze unflinchingly and nodded.

Lysa leaned back, reassessing Erik. "Fascinating and yet stupid," she mused, primarily to herself. Erik's candid admission had subtly shifted her view of him. The conversation hung in the balance, with each party contemplating their next move. After a moment, Lysa spoke again.

"Erik, if you don't have a place for these vehicles, how about a different arrangement?"

Erik's eyebrow arched in curiosity. "I'm listening."

"We have plenty of space here," she said, gesturing broadly to her expansive facility. "You could keep the vehicles on our property. In exchange, you could sell the Thaid's bodies directly to us."

Erik paused, weighing the unexpected offer. It was a mutually beneficial proposal. Selling directly to Lysa would cut out the middleman and associated costs. But he needed to clarify the terms.

"And the rate you'd offer for these bodies?" he asked cautiously.

Lysa leaned in, her eyes meeting Erik's. "Market price. It's a fair deal. Once we have the bodies, we'll handle all the logistics and details. You just need to ensure a steady supply."

Erik pondered the offer. A direct deal with Lysa would bypass the Porter Company and their 10% fee, a significant saving. At the same time, Lysa would acquire a new supply chain to boost her company.

<But I still have to pay the drivers,> Erik thought. <Having my own team would reduce costs over time. Instead of paying a third-party service, I'd have fixed salaries for my drivers. Plus, given our arrangement, the vehicles wouldn't need to travel far, saving on fuel and reducing wear and tear. The entire operation could be streamlined; the handoff would happen right here.>

The more Erik thought about it, the more appealing the idea became. He leaned back, taking a deep breath.

The offer was too good to pass up. It could be the key to expanding his operations and making them more efficient and profitable. After a long pause, he finally spoke.

"In that case, Lysa. We have a deal."

Lysa beamed with happiness, her eyes sparkling with excitement, and a triumphant smile spread across Lysa's face. "You won't regret you did this, Mr. Kay."

With a solid shake of hands, they sealed their new relationship, and Erik couldn't help but think of the life-changing potential of their collaboration.

Yet, A small, persistent voice in his head cautioned him to proceed carefully. Alliances in his field were as likely to break as a pane of glass, no matter how promising they initially seemed. People were like this, after all.

#### Chapter 567: A proposal (3)

The ensuing 60 minutes were a whirlwind of intricate bargaining. Contracts were examined, monetary amounts were tossed back and forth, and clauses were negotiated. They could walk out of the office, knowing they had struck an agreement that could not be broken.

Erik felt the thrilling high that always came before a good business transaction as he sat on Lysa's office chair.

This partnership represented yet another significant achievement in the development of his guild. However, despite everything he had achieved up to this point, he was fully aware of the difficulties ahead. This may seem like a modest success to some, but for a single individual, it was a fantastic way to launch their firm.

Building trust, overseeing operations, and ensuring everything was perfectly carried out were enormous tasks. On the other side, Erik Kay was capable of completing the work. Despite this, he knew he would require help in the future.

After they had finished their conversation, Lysa turned to the intercom that was located on her desk.

"Jerome, please bring the V-12 Vans to the front parking area." Her voice was warm this time, as it was clear that she was happy with their agreement.

"Will do, Miss. They'll be ready in no time," came the vibrant, reassuring reply.

Lysa led Erik into the building's maze of corridors, their footfall echoing off the polished floors. When they stepped outdoors in the parking lot of Lysa's shop, the city's refreshing temperature greeted them like an old friend.

A layer of gray clouds covered the sky, obstructing the sun's rays and giving the cityscape a subdued hue.

Erik's coat flew in the brisk breeze as they entered the building, and he followed Lysa into the spacious parking lot. Although only a few vehicles were parked there, the space could easily accommodate a more significant number.

Jerome acknowledged them with a nod, wiping his hands on his dark trousers. "These are the ones, Miss Lysa," he said, his voice rough yet respectful.

Erik surveyed the Vans, impressed. They appeared immaculate and well-suited for the job they were going to perform.

Lysa gestured toward the row of parked vehicles, their exteriors gleaming under the soft glow of the outdoor lighting. "Here they are," she declared, a note of pride coloring her words. Erik's eyes roved over each of the four Vans, absorbing their features.

The parking lot, largely vacant except for a smattering of other vehicles, began to hum softly. Erik watched as the four Vans gracefully rolled into their designated spots, aligning perfectly. Seeing them in motion only amplified their allure—they were sleek and contemporary and radiated an undeniable sense of capability.

Each Van was a marvel of design, balancing functionality with aesthetic appeal. Coated in a polished gray coat, they exuded both elegance and durability. The front was expansive, featuring aerodynamic curves and state-of-the-art LED headlights that, as much as Lysa said, automatically adjusted their luminosity based on the surrounding light conditions.

The sides of the Vans were equipped with large, sliding doors, offering effortless access to the roomy interiors. Inside, an intelligent cargo management system promises efficient organization and transportation of goods. In Erik's specific case, this meant an optimized space for the bodies he would transport and sell to the woman.

Erik felt satisfied as he stood there, taking it all in. This deal, he knew, was more than just an acquisition of vehicles; it was a strategic move, one that would play a pivotal role in the future of his operations. To start a guild, he needed more money, and to do so, he needed various things.

Still, the most important was a means to cut his expenses and automate the process of corpse retrieval to the maximum.

The standout feature that caught Erik's eye was the hybrid nature of the Vans. Not only could they traverse the ground, but they could also hover just above it, thanks to an advanced propulsion system.

Only a few vehicles did this, and most Porter companies didn't provide such vehicles to all their customers. That didn't mean the Vans they used were bad or uncomfortable.

Outfitted with cutting-edge hover technology, these vehicles were ideally suited for the world's diverse terrain, promising a smooth ride in all circumstances. Erik noticed the bluish glow from the hover pads beneath each Van, signaling they were in standby mode.

Lysa broke into his reverie. "As I said, they're also equipped with an integrated AI system," she added. "It helps with navigation, provides real-time traffic updates in the city, and even includes some diagnostic tools for mechanical issues. They allow communication with whatever place you want and can even reply to your questions."

Erik nodded, thoroughly impressed. These weren't just modes of transportation; they were technological masterpieces. He approached the closest Van and let his fingers glide over its sleek surface, feeling the chill of the metal. Every aspect of these vehicles had been meticulously crafted for a specific purpose.

Lysa grinned, clearly pleased. "I hope they live up to your expectations, Erik."

He could only nod in agreement. The Vans had indeed exceeded his expectations. "They're amazing," he finally said, turning back to Lysa, who looked delighted with his response.

"They're among the best available right now. I have no doubt they'll serve you well," she assured him.

Erik took one last look at the Vans, already picturing how seamlessly they would integrate into his future plans. This was more than an investment; it was a game-changing move.

As they stood among the gleaming vehicles, Erik posed another question. "When can you provide details about the two teams I'm interested in hiring?"

Lysa pondered momentarily, her eyes drifting over the sprawling parking lot as the day's last light danced in her eyes. "Give me a week," she finally said. "I have some industry contacts who might know of experienced drivers seeking new opportunities. Given the nature of your business, we need people who can handle its unique challenges."

Erik nodded, fully grasping the need for reliable and skilled drivers. "A week it is. I'll be waiting for your call."

They started walking back toward the building, their footsteps echoing harmoniously on the concrete. The early evening wind tousled Lysa's hair and fluttered the collar of Erik's coat.

Pausing at the entrance, Erik had one more point to clarify. "I want to make sure our partnership remains under wraps. It's not just about business; it's about ensuring everything goes smoothly."

Lysa looked him straight in the eyes. "You have my word, Erik. Trust is the bedrock of all we do in our line of work. I won't let you down."

Erik offered a subtle smile, appreciating her forthrightness. Both were acutely aware of the high stakes and the critical role of discretion in their burgeoning partnership. The cornerstone of their business alliance had been laid, and the path ahead seemed filled with promise.

Chapter 568: Starting a guild

After leaving Lysa's establishment, Erik's thoughts began racing as he walked out the door. He needed to establish his own guild to make the most of his time and strengthen his standing in the market.

He would, in fact, cut down on the fees he needed to pay daily. Still, he had to be careful since he needed to manage people now, and that had several expenses to keep in mind. He signaled for a neighboring taxi and climbed into the vehicle's backseat.

"Mercenary Guild," he instructed the driver. The cab weaved its way through the city, the lights reflecting off the glass panes as Erik plotted his next steps.

When Erik finally reached the imposing structure that housed the Mercenary Guild, he inhaled deeply before striding confidently inside. The building was alive with people and activity.

In the enormous lobby, people working in various professions carried on conversations made deals, and held heated discussions. He went to the long, polished counter where guild clerks maintained registrations, processed requests, and oversaw other day-to-day operations.

A bespectacled young man looked up from his papers as Erik approached. "How may I assist you today?" he inquired, a practiced smile on his face as he recognized Erik's mask.

"I'm interested in establishing a guild," Erik stated, his tone confident.

The clerk's eyebrows raised slightly in interest.

"Very well. Forming a guild is a multi-step process. Firstly, you'd need to submit a formal application detailing the guild's name, its primary objectives and services provided, and so on; you can look at what the application asks. Once that's reviewed and approved, you must pay an initial registration fee."

The young man paused, sifting through a few papers before continuing, "Afterwards, you'd need to present a charter with a minimum of fifteen registered members. Additionally, the guild must have a code of conduct and a set hierarchy, which you'll submit alongside your charter."

Erik nodded, absorbing the information. "Is there anything else?"



"Yes," the clerk continued, "you must also ensure the guild maintains an active presence. This means undertaking a minimum number of quests per month. Failure to do so can lead to probation or, in repeated cases, the guild's dissolution."

Erik considered this for a moment. "And the registration fee?"

"It's 500,000 Eurems," the clerk said without missing a beat.

Erik displayed a calm and relaxed exterior, although experiencing an inward wince. He had anticipated some expenses, but this was on the higher end of the scale. Having said that, considering the new businesses he had started, the investment was essential.

"One last thing," the clerk added, "once your guild is established, a Mercenary Guild Oversight Committee representative will periodically check in, ensuring that your guild is abiding by all regulations and maintaining the guild's standards."

Erik nodded, taking a deep breath. "Thank you for the information. I'll fill out the application immediately."

The clerk handed over a stack of forms. "Fill these out, and once everything's in order, we'll move ahead."

Erik left the counter with the forms tucked securely under his arm, his path forward more concrete.

Erik took a few steps back from the crowded counter as the pressure of the upcoming task bore down on him. As he retreated into his own thoughts, the commotion in the guild's lobby appeared to recede into the background.

<The registration fee isn't the issue,> he mused. The money he had accumulated in these months amassed around 7 million Eurems; it was more than enough to cover the substantial sum. It was the requirement for members that tugged at his thoughts.

<I need fifteen members to form the guild. No, with me, it's fourteen. Fourteen dependable individuals.>

However, as he pondered, a slow grin began to form. <Wait, is this really a problem?> He was aware that many people, particularly young people, would jump at the chance to join a guild under the leadership of Erik Kay, given his achievements and subsequent fame. His reputation would undoubtedly draw potential members to him.

<Plus, there's always the added appeal of the business partnership I'm diving into with Lysa.> He felt a surge of optimism. His guild could offer its members lucrative opportunities and solid careers if pitched right.

A structured hierarchy, steady income, and the chance to work with one of the most recognized figures in the city would be compelling offers.

Erik approached the counter once again after he took his decision, attracting the attention of the same young cashier as before. He took a guild's tablet and started filling in information for the application, including names, aims, and the services the guild would give.

"Back so soon?" the clerk remarked, his tone light.

"I'm ready to initiate the process," Erik replied. He finalized the details, transferring the necessary sum to cover the registration fee.

The transaction was completed with a soft chime, and the forms, now filled out, hovered over the counter, ready for submission.

The clerk glanced over the documentation. "Everything seems to be in order. As for the member list..."

Erik interrupted, "I'll provide it in the coming weeks. I assure you, assembling the right team is my top priority."

The clerk nodded, tapping a few commands into his console. "That's fine. Once you've gathered your members and have the list, bring it over. We'll take the final steps then. And remember, quality is often better than quantity."

Erik smiled, appreciating the advice. "Duly noted."

"Best of luck, Mr. Kay," the clerk offered with genuine warmth. "Given your reputation, I have no doubt your guild will be one to watch."

Erik showed his appreciation by bowing his head and then turning to walk away, his movements becoming more determined than they had been previously.

When he walked out of the Mercenary Guild via its massive doors, he couldn't help but feel excited for the new things he would face. Managing the guild, searching for people to join, buying items, and training his guild's members.

However, he had to pay attention since he would be forced to disband the guild if he did things half assuredly. Nonetheless, he had self-assurance. Ultimately, this was merely the beginning of yet another exciting journey.

#### Chapter 569: Upsetting news

After the conversation at the counter, Erik followed the low murmur of conversations and the soft clinking of ceramic as he moved through the enormous guild building.

He eventually found himself in the familiar setting of the guild's cafeteria. The scent of freshly brewed coffee and a blend of spices from various meals filled the air.

Vance stood at one of the counters amidst the heavy foot traffic of mercenaries and clerks. The tall, wiry figure with stark white hair was methodically pouring over a hot drink, attention to detail evident as always. Despite his age, Vance was known for his inexhaustible energy and was a cherished figure among the guild members.

He often gave much-appreciated advice to newbies, but even veterans found themselves reprimanded by the old man if they did something stupid.

"Erik!" Vance boomed in greeting, his pale blue eyes twinkling in delight. "It's been a while!"

Erik grinned, returning the sentiment. "Too long, Vance. How have you been?"

"Ah, the usual hustle and bustle," Vance chuckled, wiping his hands on his apron. "This place never sleeps, as you certainly know. But what brings you here? Not just for my amazing coffee, isn't it?"

Erik smirked, settling onto a stool at the counter. "Of course I want a cup of coffee, an espresso, please, but no, officially, I'm here for business. I started the process to establish a guild."

Vance's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "A guild, you say? Well, that's ambitious, even for you."

Erik sighed, his playful demeanor fading. "It's been a long time coming, Vance. The kind of operations I will dive into demands a level of structure and teamwork that a guild can provide; besides, I work almost every day and sometimes need a break while still earning money. Besides, since I plan on doing a lot of stuff, I need help from other people, and I don't want to work for someone else."

Vance leaned on the counter, narrowing his eyes thoughtfully. "I get what you mean, but a guild requires more than just paperwork. You need people. And not just any people. The right ones," he said while handing Erik a cup of espresso.

Nodding, Erik replied, "That's the problem. I need fourteen members. And I want each of them to be good."

For a moment, Vance was silent, considering. Then, a thought seemed to strike him. "Over the years, I've seen many faces pass through this cafeteria. While I can't personally vouch for everyone, some folks caught my eye. Young talents, experienced veterans, and those with unique skill sets."

Erik's gaze sharpened, hope lighting up his face. "Anyone you'd recommend?"

Vance sighed, pouring another cup of coffee. "There are a few names that come to mind. But remember, my perspective is based on character and the little tidbits of conversation I've picked up here and there. I can't say for sure if they'd join your guild or how good they are. Still, it might be worth reaching out."

Erik's respect for Vance was evident in his earnest response. "Even a hint is invaluable, Vance. I trust your judgment."

The older man smiled, visibly touched. "Very well, I'll give you some names. But more than that, I'll spread the word that Erik Kay is forming a guild. News like that tends to travel fast around here."

Erik clasped Vance's hand in gratitude. "Thank you. This means a lot."

Vance nodded, patting Erik's hand. "Always happy to help. And remember, while numbers are important, the quality and loyalty of the members will determine your guild's success."

With a thoughtful look, Erik responded, "Duly noted, Vance. I'll keep that in mind."

Erik took a deep breath, finishing the last of his coffee. "Vance," he started, "have you heard any recent news? Something big, perhaps?"

Vance, who had been in the process of refilling another customer's mug, paused. "Of course; who do you think I am?" he said quietly, glancing at Erik.

Vance set the coffee pot down and leaned in, speaking in a low tone. "There's been talk, mostly whispers. Something big happened in Frant, and they've tried hiding it up, but you know how news travels."

Erik felt his heart rate increase. "What happened?"

Vance hesitated, surveying the room, before he continued. "It's just common talk, but word has it that New Alexandria has been almost wiped out."

The weight of that statement settled heavily on Erik's shoulders. "New Alexandria? But how?"

The old man took a deep breath. "They say a Heniate has crossed into the nation's borders. And, Erik, the situation isn't good. Many have been infected."

The blood drained from Erik's face. Memories of the past came flooding back: the chaos, the fear, and the attack on the city. The Blirdoth. He had witnessed their terror firsthand, having been in Frant during the first invasion. It was an experience he hoped he'd never have to live again.

"That's not all," Vance continued, his voice filled with gravitas. "The rumors suggest it isn't just about those who've turned. New Alexandria has become a city of parasites, and they managed to eradicate them only recently."

Erik felt a rush of cold dread. The magnitude of what Vance was saying was almost too much to bear. A city he had known, streets he had walked, friends he had laughed with—could all of it genuinely be lost? He didn't feel sorry for the city itself, but beyond the political and social implications, a more personal concern gripped him. Amber. His friends and their families—were they safe?

Were they still alive to begin with? A tempting thought crossed Erik's mind: Should he contact them?

<No, if I do, Frant will find out that I'm still alive.>

He struggled to find his voice. "How did this happen?"

Vance shook his head, his eyes filled with sadness. "It's hard to say. Maybe there were signs, but they were missed or ignored. Frant tried to contain the information, perhaps to prevent panic. Still, it's impossible to keep something of this magnitude under wraps."

"Thank you for telling me, Vance; this is an interesting matter," Erik said.

The white-haired barista sighed, his gaze distant. "In times like these, information is as vital as food and water."

Erik managed a weak smile. "Yeah, I need to keep this in mind while managing the guild."

But as he left the cafeteria, Erik's mind was awlirl. The news about the situation in New Alexandria wasn't just shocking; it was personal.

As the young man rose from his seat, Vance asked, "Are you leaving?"

"Yes, I have a lot of things to do..." The young man replied.

"Come back sometime, even if it's just for coffee. You're always welcome here."

Erik smiled, tipping an imaginary hat. "Will do, Vance. Take care."

Walking away from the cafeteria, Erik felt the weight on his shoulders lighten a bit. With Vance's network and reputation, word about his guild was bound to spread faster than he'd anticipated. The first step towards building his dream team was set in motion.

#### Chapter 570: Aiden and Mira (1)

Erik left the guild hall, carrying the news on his shoulders. The regular commotion of the city looked far away, almost subdued; he felt like he was looking out from behind a thick glass. Everything appeared without colors. He raised his hand to signal for a passing taxi to stop; the motion was automatic.

After the door hissed open, Erik slid into the plush passenger seat and told the driver where he wanted to go. As the engine roared to life and the car started moving, Erik's mind returned to New Alexandria.

He had a terrible experience in the city. The place and the people had been awful to him. Nonetheless, it was where he had made connections where he met people he considered like family. It was where he had successes and disappointments and produced numerous memories. Most were terrible, but some precious ones were there too.

Even if the danger had passed, or at least lessened, even if they managed to repel the parasites the Heniate sent, Erik still worried about the people he had left behind.

He suffered from anxiety over the fate of his companions, Amber and the others. However, contacting them was out of the question. Frant's watchful eyes and ears were probably on him. The Crystal Cross Gang wanted him for who knew what reason; the government wanted him because he faked being an awakener, so any open lines of contact would put him in grave danger of having his whereabouts revealed.

The only silver lining was that he left a hint for his friend.

In fact, during his Novice practical exam, Erik purposefully revealed the hilt of his Flyssa for a brief period. That was a risk, but there were more chances that Floyd picked up this hint rather than the government finding out he was alive.

The hint was not that much, to be honest, but he hoped they'd get it: he was still alive and waiting for them.

Now, the ball was in their court. If they found him, they could try to communicate, but until then, Erik wouldn't let anyone tell him how to live his life. He wanted to be free, he wanted to be rich, and he wanted to be strong enough so that anyone could impose their views on the world on him.

As they drove through different city sections, the view from the taxi window changed. People flooded in and out of buildings as neon signs flickered, but Erik paid them little mind.

As the vehicle glided silently and smoothly through the city, he focused on something other than past memories. Instead, he focused on the present and, more importantly, the future.

Creating the guild was a step in the right direction, which would give him a purpose amidst the chaos he was living in.

Plus, things looked good professionally, thanks to his agreement with Lysa. He had to keep moving forward to make the best of his situation.

When the cab pulled up to the Bread & Blade Inn, Erik got out, paid the driver, and entered. He took a few long breaths, straightened himself, and went inside.

Erik opened the thick wooden door of the inn, and the sudden rush of warm air, filled with the smells coming from the kitchen, immediately chased away the brisk night air and the depressing thoughts in his mind. This place made him feel at home.

Due to the mouthwatering fragrance of baking bread and stews boiling on the stove, Erik's stomach let out a rumble as the thought tickled his appetite.

Off to one side, a skilled bartender displayed his talents. He poured cups of frothy beer with deft fingers and undivided attention, ensuring no drop was wasted. It was a practiced dance honed over countless nights with many patrons.

Erik came to the Bread & Blade for two reasons: to satisfy his appetite and, more importantly, to find Mira and the others.

They could have been stronger, just an average team in a border city. Nonetheless, since they had invited him to join their team, it showed they were willing to have him as a partner. And out of all the people he'd seen in the city, they were some of the few he recognized as worthy people because of their skills and ethics.



They were friends he often met here and the Bread & Blade, someone he shared food and stories with.

Erik looked around the bar in search of a friendly face, trying not to be distracted by the place's rustic appeal or the toasting patrons' clinks and clanks. Then he saw them, huddled in a shadowy nook.

Aiden sat there, commanding attention, his demeanor strikingly contrasting the buzzing activity around him at the inn. He had the air of a mature and experienced person at just 24 years old. The weight of responsibility, evident in his posture, confirmed Erik's knowledge of Aiden as someone who shouldered the burdens of his group.

Next to him, propped against the wall with extreme care, was his long sword. Even in this laid-back environment, Aiden exuded an aura of unwavering focus, occasionally broken up by his dry wit that would appear in the most unexpected situations.

Mira was there with him. Her green dress popped against the contrast of her lengthy, black hair, braided nicely over one shoulder. The hue complimented her, speaking volumes of her affinity for nature.

Those brilliant, piercing eyes, a color Erik had trouble defining, darted curiously from one corner of the room to another. They occasionally paused to take things in as if in severe contemplation or amazement.

The bow and arrows, which rested near her, were not just weapons but an extension of herself, and through the use of her brain crystal power, she was able to manipulate air currents surrounding her arrows, increasing their chances of a successful hit, even increasing their penetrating power.

After navigating through the numerous tables, Erik finally reached the two friends.

Aiden saw him first as he came closer. He raised his head, and his lips formed a genuine grin for once. Mira followed his glance with a mixture of surprise and excitement.

"Erik!" Amidst the noise of the inn, Mira's voice was a welcome tune. "It's been ages! What brings you here?"

Erik sat before them and said, "I was in the area; I figured I'd grab a bite since I was here." Then, pausing for emphasis, he said, "I was also hoping to find you guys."