

BIOLOGICAL 571

Chapter 571: Aiden and Mira (2)

As Erik spoke, the inn's background noise seemed to disappear because of the authority and intensity in his tone.

"Something major is about to happen. I've chosen to start a guild of my own." He took a few long breaths while he sized up his friends' reactions. "I need fifteen members in total, including me. I have a solid long-term plan, vehicles, and a local business owner willing to help us and facilitate our operations."

Mira sat forward in her chair, staring intently at Erik's masked face. "A guild, you say? That's a big thing to manage, Erik. Why now?"

Erik looked quite serious. "Now seems like a good moment to launch a project of this nature. It was the main reason for my visit," Erik said, lying. "This is our opportunity to leave our mark in this world, to get safety and success. To get trusty comrades."

Aiden, ever stoic, leaned his chin on his hand as he thoughtfully processed Erik's remarks. He said, "You've always been one to think ahead. This, however, is no easy task. It's not only your duty but the duty of every single member to push the guild forward."

As Erik understood it during these past months, caution was typical for Aiden. The young man nodded. "I know, and that's why I considered you two and the others to join the guild as the first members. I know you are cool-headed people and can hold your ground against Thaidis; after all, I saw you fight them outside the city."

"Besides," he added, "it's been a long time since we first met, and I learned to trust you. What's more, didn't you ask me to join your group? In this case, though, it is a guild, and it is not yours but mine. Almost everything is the same."

When Erik's sentiment touched her, Mira's lips curled into a smile. "It's an intriguing proposal."

"Indeed," Aiden's piercing gaze momentarily interrupted the pleasant atmosphere. "But what's in it for us? If we hunt alone, the earnings are split four ways. Joining a guild, especially a small one—how do the financial arrangements work out? I assume the guild would take a cut of our hunts?"

Mira nodded in agreement. It was clear they were both contemplating the offer, but there were still many things to clarify about the matter. Her eyes were fixed on Erik, waiting for an answer. The air in the once-warm inn grew chilly as their questions hung heavy.

Erik paused for a second to collect his thoughts. He knew the value of being precise at this point.

"You are right," he said, "if you were to join the guild, 20% of your revenues would go to the guild's coffers, but here is the proposition." He paused to increase the suspense and gather more of their attention.

"When you come along on my hunts, we're not only after rabbits and squirrels. The Thaidis I seek out are significantly more powerful than the ones you are used for hunting and, hence, offer more payoffs. You could go hunting alone, but you'd make much more money if you teamed up with me.

Besides, I plan to provide vehicles, training grounds, places to live, weapons, and, if our coffers allow, even stimulating serums. A joint effort to secure these things is much better than doing so alone."

Aiden raised an eyebrow while considering Erik's proposal. "But it's not all about the money," Erik continued.

"Doors aren't closed to me because of my reputation and network. The respect I've earned in the mercenary community here in Testrovsk's Rest has opened doors and connections for me. If we had the support of a guild, we could take on quests that were previously out of our reach. Quests that require higher numbers of people and strategic planning are possible.

He leaned in, his voice serious: "It's not just the hunting, either. The group will have access to resources and critical information. It would be available to you as much as to me."

Aiden's coldly analytical stare was unflinching. "And what about the risks? With bigger prey come bigger dangers."

Erik admitted, "True, but you won't be forced to join me. However, if we combine our resources, we may reap the benefits. If you're on your own, you might not be able to afford a weapon equipped with brain crystal technology. But if we work together, we will succeed."

Mira seemed very interested in this proposal. "That's a very good proposal, Erik. Reputation, though, can cut both ways. The more well-known you are, the higher the stakes will become. It all could go to hell if we make a mistake."

Erik nodded in agreement with her statement. "I'm not going to deny that. However, with a good reputation comes favor, access, and means. The possibilities are endless if we do this well and establish a solid framework. I can continue handling the most pressing matters, and you can continue with your regular quests.

You'll have to give up 20% of your pay instead of the standard 10% to a porter guild, but the money we save will be shared equally. Access to improved training facilities, housing, food, social support networks, and weaponry. You name it."

The two friends sat in silence for a while, considering Erik's offer. The inn was going on with its regular activity, but for them, things had paused.

Aiden finally spoke up after a long pause. "Your vision is ambitious, Erik. But you've been one to dream big. If we're doing this, we're doing it as equals."

"It's hard to say no when there are so many benefits," Mira grinned. "But remember that we are a team here; this must be a partnership. You can count on us to be by your side at every turn." The stress on Erik had been lifted a little. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

Aiden relaxed in his chair, drumming his fingers steadily on the wooden table. Calmly, he said, "Look, Erik, I can't make this decision only for myself, and Mira can't either. Kael and Lila are entitled to have an opinion as well. We need to talk with them before coming up with a reply."

Erik inclined his head, appreciating the loyalty Aiden showed to his comrades. "Of course, Aiden. I'd expect nothing less."

The waiter's scuffling feet neared their little corner of the inn just as the tension in the talk had begun to ease. The young man wore an unadorned apron as he carefully juggled a tray full of plates, mugs, and an assortment of tasty treats, the smells of which filled the air. He sketched a quick smile, familiar with Erik and the others due to their frequent visits.

"What can I get for you today?" the waiter asked, trying to lighten the heavy atmosphere.

Erik, relieved to have something else to do, relaxed and took his time perusing the menu, allowing the enticing aromas from the kitchen to direct his selection. He decided: "I'll have the roast lamb with some garlic mashed potatoes and a fresh beverage."

The waiter scribbled the order and glanced at Aiden and Mira, who signaled they were good for now. With a nod, he whisked away, leaving them in another moment of contemplative silence.

The buzz of the inn became like a warm blanket as the minutes passed. A familiar soundscape of laughter, the clink of mugs, and the buzz of talk provided a little reprieve from the pressing decisions ahead.

Chapter 572: Aiden and Mira (3)

After finishing his meal, Aiden exited the building, and from that point on, Mira and Erik were on their own. The remnants of their earlier conversation were still present, giving the atmosphere of the inn a gloomy, heavy quality.

"Want to get some fresh air?" Mira suggested, her voice soft yet eager. "I could go for an ice cream right about now."

Erik raised an eyebrow, a hint of a smile on his lips. "Ice cream, really?"

Mira shrugged with a playful grin. "Hey, sometimes the little things help, right?" Erik replied.

As a result, they found themselves out in the fresh air and were drawn toward a quaint and cozy ice cream shop sandwiched between two more significant buildings. The teeny bell started to jingle as soon as they walked through the door, and the aroma of freshly baked waffle cones welcomed them. Before making their decisions, they paused for a few moments to consider the variety of flavors available.

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As they strolled along the streets, the day began to draw to a close, casting a warm golden hue that reflected the calm atmosphere that pervaded the area. They walked around until they found a nice bench with a fountain view and sat down there.

For a moment, they simply enjoyed their treats in silence, the sounds of the bubbling fountain and distant chatter filling the air. Erik finally broke the silence: "I realized I don't know much about you, Mira. How'd you come to be who you are today?"

Mira took a deep breath, her gaze distant as memories flooded back. "It's a long story," she began hesitantly. "But if you're really curious... Erik simply nodded, giving her an encouraging look.

Mira licked her ice cream thoughtfully. "I grew up in the town of Eleynard in the northeast. It's a secluded place, cut off from much of the world. My parents, Loral and Elia, were a healer and a mercenary."

She paused, taking a deep breath as if steeling herself for what came next. "Our town had always lived in harmony with nature, and I was taught from a young age about the balance of life. My mother often spoke to me about the importance of understanding the world around us, listening to nature, and letting it guide you."

"My dad taught me to use a bow, especially when I developed my brain crystal power," she said. "Of course, I was always fascinated with my dad's work because he killed Thaid and ensured a future for everyone. So, I decided to come here and become a mercenary when I left home."

"As months passed, my path crossed with Aiden, Kael, and Lila."

Mira leaned back, a playful glint in her eye as she remembered. "Erik, the story of how I met them is quite long. We were all hired for the same hunting job: to kill some terrifying monsters in the forest nearby."

"We were strangers, thrust together for a shared purpose. Kael, with his meticulous nature, took charge immediately. Even in our first meeting, he was going through plans, understanding every person's strengths, and plotting our approach. There's an analytical calmness about him that you can't help but trust."

Erik raised an eyebrow in curiosity. "And Aiden?"

Mira chuckled, her face alight with the memory. "Ah, Aiden. From the get-go, he was the silent, watchful type. His gaze always seemed to be assessing, calculating. But amidst that stoic exterior was a person of such integrity. I remember him stepping in to mediate when tempers flared during a disagreement on how to tackle a particularly tricky beast.

He was always looking out for the team."

A smile danced on Mira's lips. "Lila was our group's heart. She could make people feel better with her energy and contagious laughter. It seemed like she was always in the moment, enjoying the thrill of the hunt and the adventure. I liked that she was like that."

Erik's face reflected Mira's buoyant mood, the joy of reliving happy memories. "It sounds like fate brought you all together."

Mira gave a nod and said, "I believe it was fate. Since that hunt, our friendship has only grown stronger. They're more than just teammates; they're family. Every day, the trust, the fights we've fought together, and the happy times remind me how lucky I am to have met them."

The atmosphere around them brightened, suffused with the comforting warmth of cherished memories.

As Erik and Mira watched the day draw to a close while seated next to one another, the golden tones of the setting sun flooded the city walls. The sounds of the city below provided a backdrop for the conversation about to be had in the serene setting.

"You know, Mira," Erik began, breaking the comfortable silence, "I was thinking of taking on a quest tomorrow. Fancy joining me?"

Mira turned to him, a gleam of excitement evident in her piercing eyes. "I really want to, but you'd have to take a lower-level quest if we teamed up because you're higher-level than I am. I don't want to hold you back."

Erik chuckled lightly, waving away her concerns. "Honestly, after all the high-tension missions I've been on lately, I could use a more relaxing quest. Don't worry about the rank. Think of it as a day off for me. "Moreover, even a boring task would become an adventure with your company," he continued with a sly grin.

Mira laughed, her worries alleviated by Erik's lighthearted approach. "Alright then, it's a deal. Where and when do we meet?"

"How about 09:00 at the guild headquarters?" Erik proposed, picturing the imposing stone building that served as the heart of all guild activities in the city.

Mira nodded, mentally noting the time. "Sounds good. Just promise me you won't oversleep and make me wait," she teased.

Erik mockingly placed a hand over his heart, feigning hurt. "Your lack of trust wounds me! I shall be punctual, scout's honor."

They both laughed, their camaraderie evident in the easy banter between them. The duo rose from their perch as the final rays of sunlight retreated, giving way to the encroaching darkness.

"Well, Erik," Mira exclaimed, "it's been a delightful day." I'm excited about our adventure tomorrow. Don't go with a boring one, okay?"

"Trust me, there's no chance of that with me by your side," he grinned.

They parted ways with a final exchange of goodbyes, anticipating the next day's exploits remaining in the air.

Chapter 573: Relaxing Hunt (1)

The colorful patterns projected onto the elaborate mosaic floor by the morning light in the guild hall resulted from the light shining through the stained glass windows of the building. After entering, Erik didn't have to look very hard to find Mira; he found her right away. She was already there, her sharp eyes sweeping the bustling hall, and when they landed on Erik, they lit up in recognition.

She knew immediately that he was the person she was looking for.

"Morning," she greeted him with a grin, her usual spirited energy evident.

"Morning to you, too," Erik replied warmly, closing the distance between them. "Did you mention to your comrades about our hunt today?"

Mira shrugged lightly, her dark braid swinging over her shoulder. "I did. I told them I'd be accompanying you. They seemed to be in the mood for a day off anyway, so no objections there."

Erik's relief was palpable. The last thing he wanted was unnecessary tension. "I'm glad it went smoothly. No need for added drama."

After finishing their pleasantries, the two mercenaries turned their attention to the task of selecting a quest to take on. They moved closer to the holographic computer housed within the guild, a technological marvel that presented active quests in real time. Mira's deft hand moved fluidly over the controls as she skillfully navigated the user interface until a specific quest drew her attention.

"Look at this," she said, pointing to a listing. "A request to hunt down thirty Mires. It sounds easy enough."

"Yeah, everything is fine for me." Mira registered them for the quest as a party with a few taps on the console when he nodded affirmatively. They heard a chirp from the computer, indicating that it accepted their choices and gave them the appropriate coordinates and details.

Having accomplished their primary task at the guild, the two made their way to the exit. The mercenaries gathered in the guild hall, which was always a hub of activity, to discuss their plans for the day, do business, or simply catch up on the most recent news. Erik and Mira weaved through the crowd, nodding to familiar faces as they left the building.

Once they were outside, they immediately headed in the direction of the town's gate. The imposing building served as both an indicator of security for those new to the area and a deterrent to those who might pose a threat. After recognizing Erik, the security guards gave him a nod and waved him and his companion through without further incident.

Mira turned to Erik while they were walking inside the gate building with a playful glint in her eye. "So, where are those fancy vehicles you boasted about yesterday?" she asked, a teasing tone in her voice.

Erik chuckled sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Well, about that," he began, a slight hesitation evident, "I'm still searching for a reliable team to manage and drive them. I didn't expect it to be this difficult."

Mira laughed, her mirth clear. "So the great Erik Kay is not as prepared as he'd like?"

Erik smirked, taking the joke in stride. "Looks like it. This means that, for today at least, we'll have to rely on the old reliable porter companies."

Mira nodded, pretending to weigh the options: "Hmm, I suppose the renowned Lustrous Haulers will do."

After finalizing their strategy, the two individuals proceeded to the office of the Lustrous Haulers, located within the gate building. The location was bustling with activity at all times. Porters, loaders, and coordinators were all seen bustling about as they entered. They exited the office after completing their tasks or while the procedure was in progress.

As Erik and Mira approached the main counter, a tall man with a chiseled jaw and a neatly trimmed beard greeted them. "Good day! Looking for a team, are we?"

Erik acknowledged, "Yes," before elaborating on where they were going and the scope of their mission. The two finally reached an agreement after a rapid exchange over prices, which Erik expertly navigated with the deftness he was used to employing in such circumstances.

"A team will accompany you swiftly and safely," the coordinator assured them, pointing to a sleek, armored vehicle. It was one of Lustrous Haulers' best models, with the latest navigation systems and safety features.

Mira whistled appreciatively. "Not bad for a backup plan."

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The truck's engine began to rumble to life as the Porter team boarded it, and the engine's steady hum indicated that it was prepared for its arrival. They received a nod from the driver, a young red-haired woman who smiled at them. "All set?"

Erik nodded. "Go 10 kilometers east from here to the Mires territory."

"Understood. Put on your seatbelts."

They began their journey with a good turn of the wheel. As they progressed further into unfamiliar territory, the scenery around them changed. Many hunters had previously traveled the trail to the Mires region. Yet, each trip presented its own particular difficulties. Like most surrounding areas of Testrovsc's Rest, the terrain was always forest.

While the truck was moving out, Mira and Erik continued a light conversation in which they fantasized about the future and discussed possible plans for the day.

Erik would occasionally steal a glimpse out the window, his sharp eyes searching for any indication that the Mires were around. Even though the beasts were not particularly hostile, anyone who underestimated their intelligence and number risked encountering a dangerous situation.

Before they knew it, the driver announced that they were getting closer to their destination. Erik and Mira gave each other resolute glances, indicating that they were prepared to tackle the challenge of the day head-on.

As the vehicle came to a stop, the great expanse of the Mires' territory opened up in front of them, revealing a world that was both eerie and beautiful but also fraught with danger. And the creatures they sought were most likely dispersed across this vast landscape.

After stepping outside, the two daring adventurers inhaled deeply as the fresh, brisk air filled their lungs.

The vibrant energy of anticipation thrummed between them. With a twinkle of mischief and determination in her eye, Mira looked at Erik. "Let's find these bastards!" she declared fervently, her hands resting confidently on her bow.

Erik chuckled, sensing her spirited mood. "That's the spirit!" he agreed, drawing his own weapon, its gleam reflecting his readiness. "Lead the way, sharpshooter."

The two hunters continued their foray into the region while engaging in this playful banter, which helped establish the tone for their expedition.

Their experience as mercenaries shone through in every move they made, which demonstrated both caution and confidence.

Erik's ears were well trained, listening for the faintest sounds that might betray the Thaid's presence. At the same time, Mira's fingers were always near an arrow, ready to nock it at the earliest sign of danger.

As they approached the dense vegetation, Mira signaled Erik to stop. She pointed to a smudged footprint line leading into the thick undergrowth.

They were fresh. "It looks like we're on the right path," she whispered with a grin.

Erik nodded, his own excitement palpable. "Then let's not keep them waiting."

Chapter 574: Relaxing Hunt (2)

As they navigated deeper into the woods, Mira, with genuine curiosity, asked Erik, "Can you be honest? Why did you truly decide to create a guild? There are already many established ones out there. You could have joined any guild with your fame and earned much money."

Erik walked silently for a few moments, pondering how to answer her. He looked up at the canopy, filtering his thoughts through the dappled sunlight. "Honestly?" he began, his voice somber. "I'm tired of being poor. I'm tired of watching opportunities slip through my fingers because I lack the resources or backup to seize them. Besides, I want to be under no one."

When Mira gazed in his direction, she saw genuine honesty in his eyes. However, before she could respond, both attentions were drawn to a rustling in nearby bushes. Five huge Mires stepped out of the shadows as they got closer. These beasts were scary and three times the size of a large dog.

Their thick black carapaces gleamed in the light of the surrounding environment, illuminating a spectral glimpse of transparent wings beneath.

The Mires moved forward with a determined pace; their double-pointed horns perched menacingly as they advanced, which was a clear sign of their intentions. The most disturbing thing about them, though, was their mouth.

Two appendages resembling pincers writhed before the monster, moving with uncanny flexibility. These monstrous fangs were jagged and appeared to be on the verge of snapping at any moment. They looked as if someone had melded barbed tentacles with the substance of solid bone.

Erik and Mira went straight into fighting stances when they saw the monsters. They exchanged a brief look, acknowledging the sudden turn of their situation.

Mira caught her breath, her gaze momentarily flitting to her comrade. "Erik," she said, her voice a blend of courage and concern, "Remember that I'm not as strong as you. Facing these Mires head-on isn't simple for me."

Erik turned to her, his eyes softening with understanding. "Don't worry," he said, "Just knock some arrows and keep your distance. I'll take care of the close combat."

She looked into his eyes, searching for the sincerity behind his words, and found it. Mira nodded, her face set in determination. "Alright, but don't get reckless with me."

Erik smirked, "Yeah."

Mira swiftly retreated and notched an arrow, her fingers deftly adjusting for the wind and the distance. Erik channeled mana through his fists, calculating the distance and speed of the advancing threats.

With a resounding twang, Mira released her arrow, piercing the closest Mire's wing and momentarily hindering its movement. Using this brief distraction, Erik lunged forward, his supercharged punch tearing through the air with precision.

Swiftly drawing another arrow, Mira nocked it, aimed, and released. The arrow zipped through the air, its tip shimmering with an ethereal light. It struck the ground directly before the foremost Mire, stopping a Mire from moving. She quickly dispatched several more arrows, doing the same for the others. Everything happened in an instant.

A Mire, its jagged teeth snapping, lunged towards him. With a swift uppercut powered by his mana-charged fist, Erik sent the creature flying backward, its carapace cracking upon impact with a tree. The sheer force of the blow resonated throughout the forest, leaving an echoing silence in its wake as the beast died.

Erik immediately twisted on his heel, narrowly escaping the pincers of another Mires, and continued fighting without skipping a beat. In retaliation, he delivered a vicious straight punch to the beast's abdomen, which caused the mana contained within his fist to burst upon impact. The Mires were left staggering, their dark ichor dripping from the enormous wound Erik's strike had caused.

Mira then killed the beast by cocking an arrow that penetrated its eye socket.

Erik spotted another Thaid out of the corner of his eye; it was coming behind him and making an attempt to kill him. Mira was on the beast already; another arrow was shot, and this one hit the creature's wing, pinning it to the tree trunk.

Erik grinned in acknowledgment, quickly closing the distance and delivering a roundhouse kick that destroyed the Mires's carapace.

However, despite just two Thaid's leaving, they continued their attacks. They approached Erik with savage fury, even though they were outnumbered. Erik was able to kill the other two quickly. Still, since he wasn't by himself, he didn't want to steal the spotlights, fearing that the woman would feel useless, which is something Erik didn't want to happen.

Mira retrieved an arrow from her quiver, took a few deliberate aims, and then released it. At the moment of impact, it went into the mouth of the Mires, but it only pierced the mouth and wasn't enough to kill the beast.

Erik made the most of this opportunity by racing forward lightning-fastly. One blow was all it took to end the beast, and in seconds, it was lying defeated at his feet. The last one took little time before meeting the same fate.

The forest fell silent once more, save for the woman's panting. Mira lowered her bow, nodding appreciatively at Erik. "It would have taken at least ten minutes for my team to kill them all," she remarked, a hint of a smile on her lips.

Erik chuckled, wiping some sweat from his brow. "It's normal, don't worry." They rested for a bit, basking in the post-battle excitement, before getting ready to hunt down the other Mires, but the two hunters knew there was little time to waste. While the sense of victory was sweet, they were only a fraction of the way through their quest.

"Can you keep going?" Erik asked, his voice showing a hint of concern. He'd been in the thick of the battle, fists flying and mana sparking, but Mira was much weaker than him, and he didn't know if she overexerted herself.

The woman stretched her arms, feeling the minor twinges of exertion but nothing more. "I'm good. I didn't use much mana, and you drew most of their attention," she replied with a slight smirk. "It made my job easier, not having to dance around too much."

Erik chuckled. "Glad I could be of service." His gaze lingered on Mira for a moment longer, ensuring she was all right, and then he nodded. "Let's go."

Before heading deeper into the forest, Erik retrieved a small communication device from his pocket. Dialing the porter company that had accompanied them, he relayed their current location.

"We have five Mire bodies for you to collect at these coordinates," he explained. The company had a reputation for efficiency and discretion, allowing mercenaries like Erik and Mira to focus on their tasks without worrying about transporting their kills.

In moments, the Porter company replied that they had received the message. It informed Erik that they would be heading to take away the bodies of the Mires. It was optional for the two hunters to wait; they could continue their job without stopping.

There were only 25 more Thaid's left to be eliminated for the quest to be a success.

Chapter 575: Mira's apartment (1)

As the two remaining Mires made their way toward Erik and Mira, the atmosphere was tense, at least for Erik's companion.

Mira took a long breath before quickly nocking an arrow, her fingers finding the familiar position and releasing the projectile. Mira released her arrow when one of the beasts approached her with its horrifying maw gaping open.

The arrow flew through the air, hitting its target directly in the middle of its eyes and penetrating its brain. The Mire died and fell to the ground in a single swift motion. At the same time, Erik concentrated his mana, causing a glow around both fists.

He made a beeline for the final Thaid and landed a decisive blow directly on its carapace. The intensity of the hit caused the shell to break quickly, which sent the creature to its "knees."

Erik looked at Mira. He wasn't tired, but he still faked a little to be tired. That's the last of them," he said, wiping sweat off his brow.

Mira chuckled and then surveyed the area to ensure no more monsters were around. "And to think, it's still so early in the morning. We completed the quest before lunch. I can't figure out if that's efficient or just overachieving."

Erik laughed, "Maybe a bit of both. Either way, I'd say it's a job well done."

The roar of far-off engines abruptly cut them off in the middle of their chat. Vehicles belonging to the Porter company drove up, each geared up to deal with recovering the bodies of the Mires.

The workers moved quickly and effectively as they loaded the creatures' dead bodies onto their vehicles. After having placed everything on the VANs, they were ready to turn around and go back to the city.

"We should get going," one of the Porter workers said, pointing towards the vehicles.

Both Erik and Mira nodded in assent while exchanging a brief look. The two joined the Porter company on board the transporter. As they emerged from the woods, the city's walls started to be seen in the distance.

They were alerted to the completion of the transaction by the blinking of the digital receipts on their respective devices as they left the guild's trade post.

After completing the paperwork, 25,000 Eurems were deposited into their bank accounts. It wasn't the weight of the coins in their pockets that made them feel good; instead, the significance of completing the quest in such a short amount of time made them feel better.

That was true for Mira, at least, but Erik felt simply good at having the chance to show how strong he was in front of such a cute woman like Mira. He was still a kid, after all.

The woman stared at her account balance, her eyes widening. "The split would've been much smaller with Aiden, Kael, and Lila. This is much more than I'm used to for a single quest."

Erik grinned. "That's the beauty of being in small teams, I guess. And, well, taking down a heap of Mires early in the morning does have its perks. At higher levels, the pay is much higher. I'm only one mercenary rank above you, and my earnings doubled, but that is also because I can do a team's job alone."

She understood what he had just said, and in fact, she looked at him with a grateful look and said, "You have no idea how grateful I am. Today was... fun and rewarding, not just because of the money. It's been a while since I had a hunt as easy as this."

Erik's eyes softened, and he nodded, genuinely pleased. "I'm glad you enjoyed it. That was the whole point, right? To find joy in what we do, earn well, and share good company," he said, hidden behind his mask.

The atmosphere became comfortably quiet for a few moments. Around them, other guild members were going about their business as usual. Merchants were haggling, hunters were discussing their latest quests, and officials were watching everything.

Breaking the silence, Mira suddenly yawned, stretching her arms. "Oh, that felt good." She thought momentarily and said, "I think a long shower is calling my name."

Erik chuckled, "Sounds like a plan. Rest is as important as the hunt."

She looked at him with a hint of mischief in her eyes. "You know, you could come over if you'd like. See my place. It's not as grand as some, but it's home."

Erik raised an eyebrow, intrigued. It was a weird request, but after everything he got through, he wasn't any more inclined to shy away from certain... opportunities. "Really? Well, I wouldn't mind. I'm curious to see where you've set up your "base" in this city."

She smiled, her fatigue apparent but her spirits high. "Great! It's not too far from here. Plus, I've got some aged wine I've meant to crack open. Could be a good way to wind down after today."

Erik laughed, "You know, you shouldn't ask an underage guy to drink wine," he said teasingly.

"Well, if I shouldn't, then the guild should have prevented you from becoming a mercenary in the first place," she replied teasingly.

"Hahahaha, yeah, you are right. Then show me the way."

When the two of them left the guild hall, the sun was already relatively high in the sky. Mira signaled for a neighboring taxi with a glossy exterior that reflected the ambient lights of the city.

They were seated in the car within seconds. The taxi's plush seats quickly adjusted to their shapes for comfort. The radio was tuned to a rock station, but the volume wasn't that high as to interrupt their conversation.

"23 Lorian Street," Mira instructed the cab's driver as they settled in. The vehicle hummed to life, moving smoothly through the interconnected roads of the city.

As they traveled, the views outside the window rapidly changed, going from a lively marketplace with various colorful stalls to peaceful parks where children played and couples enjoyed the evening air.

Erik turned his gaze from the window to Mira. "You live in a good part of the city," he commented, noting the gradual transition from commercial districts to more residential, tree-lined areas.

She chuckled. "It's peaceful and close to the guild, making things easier."

They passed the time during their trip by talking about random topics and listening to rock music. In contrast, the sights and sounds of the cities they passed created a calm atmosphere.

Before they knew it, the taxi was beginning to slow down in front of a well-- maintained apartment complex. The front of the building had a distinctive allure thanks to its contemporary architecture, filled with historic architectural elements.

Mira paid the fare, and they stepped out. "Welcome to my place," she said, leading the way.

Chapter 576: Mira's Apartment (2)

When Erik entered Mira's flat, he was greeted by a spacious open area that reflected a simple yet well-designed style. The primary living space was bright and open, with high ceilings and huge windows that let in a lot of evening light and provided ample headroom.

On one side was a sumptuous couch in front of a contemporary entertainment center, and beside it was a dining table with comfortable chairs.

On the other hand, there was a contemporary kitchen that was bright and shiny. It had worktops made of polished granite, fixtures made of chrome, and every piece of equipment imaginable.

The sheer size of the place made Erik whistle in admiration. "This place is huge for one person," he commented, genuinely impressed.

Mira laughed. "Yeah, I spent a lot of money on it. But every room has a purpose, and I have all the space for other things." She beckoned him to follow, and Erik trailed behind her, curious to see the rest of the space.

The first door they approached was propped open just a little bit. There was a training room on the inside. There was matting on the floor, and along one wall, there was a range of practice dummies and targets ready to be utilized.

The wall opposite the door was lined with mirrors to enhance self-evaluation during individual practice sessions. Erik, who had already spent significant time training himself, understood and immediately appreciated the setup.

"It's easier to train at home sometimes, especially when you don't want an audience," Mira explained with a wink.

Erik nodded in agreement. "It's well-equipped. You've got everything here for a full regimen."

But Mira was already moving to the next room, her excitement palpable. "This," she said with evident pride as she opened the door, "is my favorite."

Anyone familiar with the lifestyle of a hunter would have described the sight Erik first laid eyes on as nothing less than breathtaking.

The walls were adorned with rows of weapon racks, each holding weapons that had been meticulously maintained. These weapons included swords of varying lengths, spears, maces, and other more unusual types of weaponry.

A armor stands displayed various sets of protective gear, each designed for use in a specific environment or circumstance. Cabinets with see-through doors revealed many items that had been painstakingly labeled.

But it wasn't just the quantity that impressed Erik; it was the quality. Every item in the room shone with a well-cared-for luster, each weapon sharp and ready, every piece of armor polished.

"Over the years, I've collected and maintained them," Mira said, her voice tinged with pride.

"It's not just about having the right weapon but knowing each well— its weight, balance, and quirks. When you're out there, your life depends on them."

Erik moved closer, his fingers brushing over the hilt of a particularly ornate dagger. "Your collection is impressive," he said, admiration evident in his tone. "Can you use them all?."

Mira smiled, pleased. "I can, but for obvious reasons, I use a bow as my main weapon."

The two continued their tour, with Mira sharing snippets of tales associated with various weapons and armor sets.

Erik found himself drawn into her stories, appreciating not just the tools of the trade but the hunter who owned them.

After the tour, they returned to the living area, and Erik looked around with newfound appreciation. "You've got a beautiful place, Mira. I bet you worked hard to buy it."

She gave a slight nod in appreciation of his words. "Thanks, Erik. I did." Then, she moved away from him and said, "OK, I think I will shower then."

"All right, I will wait for you here," Erik replied.

While Mira went to the bathroom, Erik relaxed on the couch and let his mind wander while he watched her leave.

It was impossible for him not to think about what had happened over the previous month. He never anticipated in his wildest fantasies that he would get to this position and generate so much money before a year had passed.

A few minutes later, while Erik was still lost in his thoughts, there was a soft click, and Erik turned his head, jolting himself out of his thoughts only to see the bathroom door ajar.

Mira remained standing there, not even wearing a bra, as the dim light from the bathroom illuminated her silhouette.

Erik's heart raced as he looked at her. This was a clear and open invitation; what she wanted was clearly in her eyes, the curve of her lips, and her alluring body.

The world around them appeared to become hazy for a moment, and all he could concentrate on was the charm of her gaze and the way she was baring her breasts.

She stepped forward, her voice soft yet clear: "Mind joining me for a quick shower?" She said it in a seductive voice.

Erik quickly stepped up from the couch and reached her at the door. She traced her fingers on his pecs.

"Erik, you do not need to wear your mask here," she said. He could see her more clearly—every nuance of her form, every flicker of emotion across her face.

Feeling a sudden rush of warmth, Erik's breath caught in his throat.

"Besides," she whispered, her tone playful and teasing, "I've already seen your face the first day we met in the forest."

With a boldness that both surprised and enticed Erik, Mira gently took his face into her hands, her fingers tracing the contours of his mask. "No masks here," she whispered in his ears.

Erik allowed her to remove the barrier that separated them. Their eyes met, and at that moment, layers of unspoken emotions, tensions, and curiosities unraveled.

She then took off the mask. "You are more handsome than I remember," she added.

Mira's lips met his in a fierce and tender kiss. Holding her close, Erik used his foot to push the bathroom door closed, ensuring their privacy.

The world outside ceased to exist, and all that mattered was the moment they were in, lost in each other.

Chapter 577: Nexthorn Vanguard

A week had passed since Erik's personal meeting with Mira, and he strode into the guild hall with newfound confidence.

In his hand, he clutched a list containing the names of fifty prospective members who wished to be part of his new guild.

These were brave souls, mostly young and looking for direction. They saw Erik as a beacon of hope in the vast sea of the mercenary world.

The hall buzzed with its usual activity. Groups clustered around tables, discussing quests, strategies, and trade secrets.

With their grizzled looks and battle-hardened expressions, veterans eyed Erik with suspicion and begrudging respect. They were the ones who'd seen countless seasons, each carrying a hoard of experiences.

They were skeptical of Erik's new guild. To them, managing was a whole different battlefield than actual combat.

And while Erik's prowess was not to be doubted, his ability to lead a guild was an unknown variable. That was why all those who joined his guild started relatively recently as mercenaries. They saw Erik differently from the veterans, primarily due to the hopes they still had.

Joining his guild was an attractive proposition, not just because of his name, but because they believed association with him meant better quests, respect, and, most importantly, a shot at making a name for themselves.

"That's Erik Kay," the people whispered once they saw him stride toward the counter, eyes wide with admiration, jealousy, and greed.

Starting a guild was a challenging task. The guild had its hierarchies, procedures, and rules. While Mira, Kael, Lila, and Aiden were already part of his close-knit circle, the influx of so many newbies was sure to be complicated to manage.

Erik approached the clerk's desk, the weight of the list in his hand seeming more significant than it looked. Fifty new names, fifty fresh faces eager to be part of something bigger than themselves.

The clerk looked up; eyebrows raised slightly at the sheer number of names Erik had brought. "Mr. Kay," she said. "Back so soon?"

Erik smiled, offering the list. "Fifty new recruits for my guild."

She took the list and skimmed through the names, her eyes widening slightly. "You did fast. I'm glad you found comrades," she remarked.

"They believe in the path we're paving. I just hope the mercenary guild will accept our application and allow me to establish the private guild," Erik said, a hint of nervousness creeping into his voice.

The clerk tapped a few buttons on the terminal in front of her, listening to the soft hum of the system processing the information.

After a few minutes, she looked up. "All done. Your new members are now officially a part of your guild, Nexthorn Vanguard. Congratulations, Mr. Kay, for having founded it."

Erik let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you," he replied, a weight lifting from his chest.

With everything done. Leaving the administrative area of the hall, Erik then made his way to the cafeteria, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee filling the air.

He spotted Vance almost immediately. The old man sat at his usual corner table, his silver hair contrasting against the dark wood around him.

"Vance," Erik greeted, taking a seat opposite him.

Vance looked up, a twinkle in his wise old eyes. "Ah, Erik. How did it go?"

"Smoothly, thanks to your guidance," Erik replied gratefully.

"Without your help, finding all these people would've been much more difficult."

Vance chuckled, taking a sip from his mug. "All I did was spread the voice. You did the rest."

Erik smiled. "Still, I wanted to thank you personally. Your advice and help made all the difference."

Vance leaned back, his gaze distant. "In my years, I've seen many come and go. Young mercenaries are eager to make a name for themselves and build something of their own. But not many have the determination you do."

The praise caused Erik to look down. "You are exaggerating," he said with an embarrassed smile.

Vance nodded approvingly. "However, remember this, Erik: it's not just about numbers or reputation. It's about the people—nurturing them and leading them."

Erik nodded. "I'll keep that in mind. Thank you, Vance."

The two continued chatting for a while longer, sharing stories and experiences. As they did, Erik's phone buzzed in his pocket.

"Excuse me, Vance," the young man said apologetically.

"Don't worry. You will be much more busy from now on due to your role."

Retrieving the phone from his pocket, he opened it, recognized Lysa's number on the display, and promptly answered, "Lysa. What do you need?"

There was a brisk professionalism to Lysa's tone, cutting straight to the point. "Erik, I've found the drivers for the vehicles I sold you a week ago, plus the other six you bought two days ago. It took some maneuvering, but the slots are filled."

Erik raised an eyebrow, both surprised and pleased at her efficiency. "That was faster than anticipated. I trust they're competent?"

Like most of us, Lysa replied dryly, "They have monetary reasons to join you. They're aware that being associated with you offers great financial opportunities. While they might not be the most experienced, they're eager to get to work. They are also very young and ready to learn."

Erik processed this for a moment. "Good. With the drivers ready, our operations can scale. We can haul more Thaid's bodies and increase our money stream."

A glint of avarice was evident in Lysa's voice. "Exactly. Just don't disappoint me, Erik. Managing a guild is different from hunting alone."

Erik nodded, appreciating her single-minded focus. "Don't worry about that. By the way, have you projected our potential earnings with this uptick in operations?"

Lysa responded with a hint of smugness, "Based on the current market rates for Thaid's parts and an estimated increase in your haul, we're looking at a significant profit for you and me. However, consistent deliveries and well-kept bodies are the keys."

Erik smirked. "I have no intention of slowing down. Even if the teams under me won't earn well, I can always go hunting alone. Don't worry about this."

"That's what I like to hear," Lysa remarked, hearing the sound of papers shuffling in the background. "All right, let me know when the first product batch will start coming. Make haste."

"Don't worry, Lysa," Erik responded. "Keep me posted on any changes, and ensure those drivers are put to work immediately."

"Will do," Lysa confirmed. "See you soon, Erik."

As the call ended, Erik mentally calculated the potential earnings. The business partnership with Lysa was going to be good. However, now that the groundwork had been laid, the young man needed to do more.

Chapter 578: A surprise

Having wrapped up his call with Lyla, Erik stepped into this hive of activity, a familiar landscape. The guild hall constantly buzzed with unmistakable energy: a cacophony of mercenaries discussing quests, blades clanging, and the omnipresent hum of the holographic quest boards that stood like pillars of opportunity in the grand room.

As he moved deeper inside, his gaze naturally shifted to where Vance was a few minutes earlier. However, now the old man was busy, engaged in a lively conversation with another customer. Erik, not wishing to interrupt, decided this was the right moment to check the quest board.

Walking up to one of the holographic panels, he turned it on, the air before him filling with windows and panels detailing quests, each represented by vibrant icons and accompanied by brief descriptions.

He began scrolling, fingertips grazing over the holographic interface. As he skimmed through the quests' names, his practiced eyes darted from one quest to another, searching for something that would pique his interest. His abilities were far superior to these quests' difficulty, so he wasn't worried about the outcome, only about how much time he would waste.

After that, he came across a hunting quest with good opportunities for financial gain. The mission was easy to understand but annoying to complete: find and eliminate as many Verandors as possible.

The creature in question and the potential reward the quest could provide made it stand out from the others.

Despite being a very common Thaid in these parts of the world and not a very worthy opponent, the young man was interested in the Verandor because of the creature's unique brain crystal power.

According to what was known about the creature, the Verandor could zero in on the mana signature of a particular target and lock onto it, allowing the Verandor to find the target within kilometers.

If Erik were to get such a power, it would prove to be an extremely useful ability for him, mainly when he was on a mission that required him to hunt or search for something.

This is because he would be able to locate and follow a target precisely, regardless of the distance between them or the obstacles in their path, simply by locking onto the mana signature of the target. Erik could not turn his back on the opportunity to acquire such an ability; It was too useful.

Erik touched on the information about the quest, further submerging himself in its particulars.

QUEST DETAILS:

Quest Name: The Verandor Menace.

Goal: Kill Thaid, known as Verandors.

Quest Type: Hunting (Periodic).

Location: Testrovsc's Rest's forest.

Guild Reward: 15000 Eurems.

Minimum Kills Required for Completion: 30 Verandors.

Average Market Price for Body: 6000 Eurems.

Thaid Level: ξ1-ξ3.

Quest Briefing: Verandors have recently surged in numbers within the region. Known for their unique reproductive capabilities, they have the alarming ability to breed with other Thaid, invariably resulting in Verandor offspring. This has led to an imbalance in the ecosystem, with Verandors swiftly dominating in numbers and often attacking nearby settlements.

Their strength, combined with their high reproductive rate, poses a significant threat to the area. This quest seeks skilled mercenaries to control their population.

Making up his mind, he accepted the quest. The hologram responded with a brief confirmation message before the quest details disappeared, replaced by the guild's insignia and a text saying "Quest Accepted."

Now committed, Erik felt a surge of adrenaline, a mix of anticipation and excitement.

As he was about to turn away from the board, his eyes caught another hunter examining the same quest.

Their eyes met for a split second, a mutual understanding passing between them. For the guy, the only gain from hunting such creatures was their monetary worth.

Sunlight pierced through the high windows of the guild hall, scattering across the floor as Erik fished out his phone from his pocket. He needed a driver for the newly acquired vehicles—someone reliable and skilled.

Without hesitation, he dialed one of the numbers of the new logistics team members Lysa had recruited for him. The call connected swiftly, and a familiar voice echoed from the other end.

"Hello!" Erik's eyes widened in surprise as he heard the voice. "Thorne?"

On the other line was a brief chuckle and then a voice dripping with its customary confident tone. "I wondered when you would have called me," Thorne retorted, amusement evident in the tone of his voice.

Confused, Erik adjusted the grip on his phone. "Thorne, why—how are you part of the new recruits?"

Thorne sighed, the sound reminiscent of rustling papers. "It is not just me, but the rest of my team is here as well. We decided it was time we found better opportunities. We quit at Lustrous Haulers and thought your guild might be a good opportunity, a fresh start."

"Why?" Erik pressed, genuine curiosity coloring his words. He and Thorne had a reliable working relationship during the past months, but the sudden workplace change was unexpected.

There was a brief pause on the other end as if Thorne had chosen his words carefully. "For now, let's just say it's a hunch on our part," Thorne began, a hint of his smirk audible. "Besides, the pay was noticeably better than what the haulers were shelling out. You can't blame a man for wanting more Eurems in his pocket, right?"

Erik let out a small laugh. "No, I can't. Guess we're in the same boat then," he said with a smile.

Cutting through the brief moment of levity, Thorne's voice became more businesslike, "So, why'd you ring me up?"

Shifting his attention back to the task, Erik responded, "I'm heading out on a quest to hunt Verandors. I need as many vehicles as we have available to transport the bodies."

There was a momentary rustling on the other end, likely Thorne checking the available vehicles. "Alright, give me an hour to see how many vehicles I can gather. Meet me at the city gate."

"Sounds good," Erik replied, his voice steady and filled with a renewed sense of purpose.

"See you then... boss," Thorne said, the term filled with jest and genuine respect.

Erik looked around the guild hall as the call ended, absorbing the familiar surroundings. With each passing day, things were falling into place. He had his guild's trusted allies like Mira; now, even Thorne was part of the crew.

Chapter 579: Verandors' quest (1)

Erik eventually found himself at the city's entrance. Then, a group of four stout vehicles drove in front of him and were parked around him.

Their engines were humming in a synchronized rhythm while parked in a semicircle, which hinted at their power and dependability. However, it wasn't the machines that piqued his interest; instead, a group of people came out of them.

Thorne, the most senior crew member, gestured with his grizzled beard as he spoke to the other crew members. The long, deep scar along his jaw gave him the appearance of authority.

Elara, the tall and slender woman standing beside him, scanned the area with her eyes like a hawk.

Faelan, the younger group member, had sandy blonde hair and was intently checking some of the equipment in the vehicle. His wiry frame conveyed a sense of pent-up energy.

Then there was Sylvi, a petite woman with jet-black hair that fell in a cascade down her back and bright blue eyes.

Standing with an air of calm strength, Bram was the last but not the least. His dark skin complimented his face's sharp features, while his broad shoulders and freshly shaved head shone brightly in the sunlight.

Everyone in Thorne's group concluded that they should support Erik in this endeavor. They didn't think Erik would give them important roles inside the guild, but hope remained. Despite their doubts, Thorne's group believed in Erik's leadership and were willing to lend their support.

They understood that even if they weren't given prominent positions within the guild, being part of Erik's journey held the potential for growth and adventure.

Erik approached the group with a look on his face that conveyed a mixture of surprise and gratitude, but he said nothing as he got closer.

"Is everything all right?" Thorne asked when the young man was close enough.

"Yeah, I was just thinking about something."

Thorne cleared his throat and said, "All right, let's not waste more time and focus on the task." Erik nodded. "Pleasantries can wait," he said to the young man.

Erik's demeanor changed to reflect a more businesslike approach. He had to make a good impression on the others, and Thorne's hint made him snap back to reality.

"How many Verandors are we able to transport in each van?"

Thorne already knew the answer; his many years of experience made it easy to figure this out. He briefly looked at the VANS and then said, "Depends on their individual size, but based on the average one, I would say roughly ten each if we pack them right," while running his fingers along the side of the vehicle closest to him.

Erik's eyes briefly turned to the vehicles as if to try to understand if Thorne's prediction was accurate, "And if a van ends up being full, can we make trips back to Lysa's place to unload? This allows us the opportunity to hunt more Verandors."

Elara immediately chimed in: "It's possible," she said, grabbing everyone's attention, "but with Thaid's roaming nearby, even a short journey could be risky, especially if we go alone; after all, there are only five of us, and someone must drive the other vehicles."

Bram stepped forward before Erik could respond, his deep voice resonating with conviction, "The Thaid's around this area aren't particularly powerful. If we can keep up our current speed, we should be okay," he told the woman confidently.

However, even if Bram was right, Erik didn't want to risk their safety. Even if they started to work for him recently, they were still his friends. "I won't push it if you believe it's too dangerous. It is not worth taking the chance."

The group members glanced at each other furtively, but Erik noticed that. Surprisingly, they didn't even have to say a word because they immediately reached a consensus. However, Thorne said, "Don't worry, Erik. We've got this. It shouldn't be a problem at all."

"Then we're going to earn a ton of money today," Erik said with a gleam in his eyes and a broad smile stretching across his face.

Exuberance began to permeate the space, and it was clear that everyone on the team was eager to start this fruitful endeavor; if Erik said they would earn a lot, then it was true.

The city's gates started to open slowly. With Erik at the helm, the group moved out of the city, prepared to face whatever obstacles they might encounter on their journey.

The atmosphere inside the convoy's lead vehicle was a mixture of quiet anticipation and lighthearted banter as it went through the winding forest paths the party was following.

Erik was traveling with Bram and Elara; the engine hummed softly, and the road bumps formed a rhythmic pattern with the occasional snippets of conversation.

"Is everything going well for everyone?" Erik inquired while looking in the rearview mirror to ensure the other vehicles proceeded similarly.

"Yeah," Elara said with a sly grin. "About that, did you know that Bram's wife is expecting?"

A look of genuine surprise spread across Erik's eyes as he watched. He turned to look at his friend and said, "Congratulations, Bram! That is exciting news."

"Thanks, Erik," Bram said, visibly embarrassed while a shy smile formed. "We're both very excited."

While they were talking, the thick tree canopy above them diffused the sunlight and cast dappled shadows on the road below.

After an eternity, the convoy finally got close to a clearing. This was the Verandors' last known location, according to the most recent report submitted to the guild.

The vehicles stopped gradually, and as they did so, the muted chirping of crickets and the far-off calls of unidentified animals could be heard. Quickly, Erik and the others jumped out of the vehicles.

"All right, we're in the right spot. I'll go in and do some reconnaissance on the area." Erik said after having surveyed the area. "We will proceed as usual."

Thorne arched his brow and said, "All right. Let us know when we have to take action."

Erik nodded. "Will do; stay safe, guys." Then, the young man left the area by heading inside the thick woods.

Chapter 580: Verandors' quest (2)

Many old trees in the forest and their intertwined roots made a natural carpet on the ground. Erik sped through the brush, careful not to disturb the quiet with the sound of twigs breaking or leaves rustling.

His Chameleon Veil did its trick even as he moved, making him almost undetectable to onlookers by blending him in with the background.

The forest was teeming with life, from the chirping of birds to the scurrying of small animals. Erik marveled at the intricate ecosystem thriving around him, grateful for his ability to navigate it unnoticed.

While most would rely heavily on sight and sound to track a creature, Erik had a few tricks up his sleeve. The Parallel Will brain crystal power allowed him to multitask inhumanly.

One part of his brain meticulously scanned the ground for tracks or signs of the Verandor's passage.

At the same time, another part kept an eye out for potential threats and allowed him to move at breakneck speeds without losing his balance or sense of direction.

The forest floor was bathed in dappled sunlight as rays filtered through the leaves of towering trees. In this tranquil setting, the only disruptions to the silence came from the distant calls of birds and the elusive movements of unseen creatures.

Erik's attention immediately shifted to the traces he found on the ground, a trail that weaved through the thick foliage.

The tracks were unmistakably Verandors', meaning he was on the right path.

Following the tracks with stealth and precision, he came across a clearing where the ground was disturbed and foliage flattened.

A closer inspection revealed smaller trails leading to and from the area, indicating that a group of Verandors had recently passed through.

With caution, Erik continued, letting the tracks guide him deeper into the clearing. Still, he had to pay attention to the flying Thaidi and keep an eye on the sky. Then, he saw them.

A pack of 20 Verandors congregated near a huge water puddle inside the clearing. It was more than a puddle, to be honest, but it wasn't a lake either. Erik's eyes scanned the creatures before him.

The Verandors stood as majestic tauric beasts, their two curved horns elegantly arching backward, perfectly framing their unique eyes.

Each stood firm on four robust legs, their slender torsos rippling with powerful muscles beneath their green and brown striped hides.

From a concealed position, Erik studied them while they moved through the clearance; he noticed the tails, longer than he'd imagined, with tufts of fur dancing at their ends. However, the young man knew these creatures were very cowardly despite having muscular bodies.

Erik knew he had to be careful here. Killing the beasts wasn't a problem; what really was an issue was that he had to kill the monsters fast because they would start fleeing and scattering as soon as they noticed something killing their kin, making his quest complicated. He needed to thin the numbers in the shortest amount of time possible.

<I think the Xeridon Anteris and Nathaniel's power would suffice,> Erik thought. So, while channeling mana into his Chameleon Veil, he started pumping mana through the neural links for the other two powers.

Immediately, Erik's strength increased by at least 40%, and his speed also increased thanks to Nathaniel's power. The problem was that he could only keep that mana consumption up for ten minutes.

He took a deep breath, grounding himself in the moment and mentally preparing for the challenge. He would need every ounce of his focus to take down the Verandor pack completely and quickly.

The Verandors were out enjoying the evening breeze while standing on the grass when they noticed a threatening presence nearby. They looked around for any indication of trouble but saw nothing. However, a sudden rustling of leaves and twigs snapping made them realize something was sneaking up on them.

A Verandor suddenly screeched in agony, collapsing to the ground with a fatal wound as if struck by a sledgehammer. Its packmates turned their heads in shock, scanning the surroundings with wide, panicked eyes.

Before they could react, another Verandor fell, then another, each collapsing with precise, lethal blows.

The forest echoed with their cries, a chorus of confusion and terror.

It seemed as if the very air around them had turned hostile. The area Erik was in quickly became a death zone for these creatures, his swift movements leaving a trail of fallen beasts in his wake.

The Verandors began to scatter in fear. Erik's maneuvers were graceful yet deadly, with each flip and somersault culminating in the takedown of another target. The forest became a dance floor where death twirled with life, each leap and pivot dispensing death to these creatures.

The Verandors, although naturally formidable beasts, were gripped by an indescribable fear.

Their numbers dwindled rapidly, each one desperately trying to flee the carnage.

Some crashed into each other in panic; others trampled their fallen kin to escape the unseen menace. Their communication, usually so harmonized, was now a chaotic blend of distress calls and panic.

Yet, Erik remained calm and methodical amidst this chaos, striking down his targets individually.

Moments felt like hours for the Verandors; the forest was a maze of death from which there seemed to be no escape.

But for Erik, it was a dance he had perfected, the culmination of skills honed over time. As the last Verandor fell, the forest seemed to hold its breath, the silence only punctuated by the distant rustling of leaves and the soft thud of Erik's feet against the forest floor.

Once all the Verandors lay motionless, Erik ceased his dance, pausing to catch his breath. He surveyed the scene, eyes scanning the fallen Verandors with satisfaction and weariness.

The forest, once suffocating with danger, now exuded an eerie calmness that mirrored Erik's own state of mind. The only witnesses to the swift carnage were the trees and the unseen birds that chirped cautiously from their perches.

[MULTIPLE VERANDORS KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING CONVERTING PROCEDURE.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. 5840 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]