

## **BIOLOGICAL 641**

### Chapter 641: Victory

The Crombo's rage was palpable, its entire body thrashing and twisting as it attempted to dislodge Erik from its back.

However, he held on, his muscles straining, his focus sharp. He could feel the creature's raw power, its desperation to free itself from this unexpected and relentless adversary.

It was a furious dance, the Crombo's wild movements countered by Erik's agility and strength.

With a sudden surge of energy, the Crombo lunged forward, its enormous, scale-covered body propelling towards a towering tree. Its intent was clear - to crush Erik against the tree's massive trunk, ending the threat he posed.

Erik's survival instincts kicked into high gear. With a swift, agile leap, he disengaged from the beast's back, his body arcing through the air to land nimbly on a branch of an adjacent tree. His heart pounded in his chest as he watched the imminent impact.

The impact of the Crombo crashing into the tree was devastating. A deafening crash echoed through the forest, a testament to the creature's raw power.

Such was the intensity of the assault that the tree groaned audibly and its bark splintered.

Once a towering giant in the forest, the tree couldn't withstand the brutal assault of the Crombo.

It buckled under the force, its trunk giving an almost human-sounding groan of surrender.

The bark, once a protective layer, splintered into countless fragments, each one sharp and lethal as it was propelled outward.

These fragments, akin to deadly shrapnel, whizzed through the air with an alarming speed, their trajectory unpredictable.

They left behind a trail of destruction, gouging out chunks from other trees, and embedding themselves into the soft forest floor.

The snapping sound of the tree echoed throughout the forest.

A cloud of dust and leaves was kicked up by the force, swirling into a gritty maelstrom that filled the air, obscuring vision and adding to the chaos of the moment.

Erik found himself perched on the branch, hidden within the leafy canopy, shielded from the pandemonium unfolding below.

The surrounding air was thick with dust and the scent of fresh wood. He could hear the beast's roars reverberating through the forest, each furious bellow shaking the leaves around him and sending a shiver down his spine.

The Crombo's frustration was palpable, each roar laced with a primal rage that echoed in the eerie silence that followed.

"Clever move," Erik said to himself, his voice audible over the cacophony of the forest.

His fingers gripped the rough bark of the branch beneath him, feeling the life of the tree pulsing under his touch.

"But you'll have to do better than that," he said, a determined glint in his eyes as he prepared for the next onslaught.

The dust settled, but the Crombo's location was still hidden. Erik's heart pounded in anticipation, his senses heightened, ready for the beast's next move.

He knew the Crombo was far from defeated. It was a creature of power and cunning, and the battle was far from over.

Five tense seconds passed before the Crombo charged again, aiming for the tree where Erik was standing.

Its massive body collided with the trunk, a force that sent the tree crashing to the ground.

Erik was already in motion, leaping high to avoid the falling timber, his eyes fixed on the Crombo's form.

"Persistent, aren't you?" Erik taunted, his voice laced with a biting contempt that echoed through the forest.

With fluid grace, he descended from his leafy perch, his body cutting through the air like a falcon diving for its prey.

He landed on the creature's back. The impact was partially absorbed by the thick scales beneath him.

With swift agility born of countless battles, he traversed the expanse of the creature's back, his boots finding purchase in the rough texture of its scales. His destination was clear - the creature's head.

Upon reaching it, Erik launched into a barrage of punches. His fists flew with a blinding speed, each one landing with a resounding thud against the hard scales while the beast tried to get him off.

His knuckles ached with the impact, but he ignored the pain, focusing on his target. Every punch was a challenge, a defiance against the beast's reign of terror.

Each blow landed with a satisfying thud, the power of Erik's strikes clear in how the Crombo's head reeled with each hit. The creature's roars were a constant soundtrack to their battle, a symphony of rage and pain that only fueled Erik's determination.

He could feel the Crombo weakening, its movements becoming less coordinated as it took too many hits to the head, its roars less forceful.

"This fight is mine," Erik said.

The Crombo's desperation grew, its movements wilder, its attacks more frenzied.

With each passing moment, the battle reached new heights of intensity, amplifying the dance between predator and prey.

Faced with desperation, the Crombo resorted to channeling mana through its neural links, unleashing its trademark hardening slime.

As the beast released the viscous substance from its body, a strange hissing sound filled the air, and this substance rapidly solidified upon contact, encasing everything in its path.

Erik's reflexes were honed to perfection, and he leaped away just in time to avoid the substance, his eyes widening at the surreal spectacle unfolding before him.

Trees, rocks, and the ground itself became encased in a strange, cement-like substance, frozen in time by the Crombo's unique power.

"Tricky move," Erik said, his gaze never leaving the creature as he darted from tree to tree, his movements a blur.

The Crombo was struggling now, its breathing labored, its movements sluggish. But it kept Erik in its peripheral vision, its reptilian eyes filled with a mixture of fear and defiance.

Then, something changed. A shift in the beast's demeanor, a sudden realization that the fight was lost. It turned to flee, a desperate attempt to escape its likely killer. But Erik was having none of it.

"Not so fast," he called out, his voice filled with determination as he raced after the Crombo.

The beast had already covered an impressive 200 meters, its massive body moving with surprising speed but hindered by the lack of space nearby.

But Erik was faster, his mana-fueled speed allowing him to close the gap with ease.

He reached the Crombo's back, his body a coiled spring as he leaped into the air.

The world seemed to slow down as he rose higher and higher, his leg raised, his body poised to strike.

He looked down at the fleeing Crombo, its scales glistening in the dappled sunlight. Its eyes were wide with terror.

"This is the end," Erik said, his voice filled with a grim finality as he descended like a god of death.

The power in his leg was immense, the force of his strike a testament to his strength and skill.

He brought his leg down on the Crombo's head and channeled mana, increasing the output of his soon-to-be-made attack with force-mana.

With a sickening crunch, the sound echoing through the forest like a death knell, his leg met Erik's target.

The Crombo's body buckled under the impact, its legs giving way as it crashed to the ground. Blood oozed from its ears and eyes, its body writhing in its death throes.

Erik landed on the ground, his eyes fixed on the dying beast, a mixture of respect and satisfaction in his gaze.

"I think I was too worried about this," he said, his voice soft as he looked down at the Crombo. "Rest in peace, bro."

Erik watched, his breaths ragged and heavy, as the spark of life began to flicker and dim in the beast's reptilian eyes.

The once vibrant orbs dulled, the fierce predator's spirit fading into a vacant stare. Its colossal body, once brimming with raw power and lethal agility, grew still beneath him, each breath growing shallower until they ceased altogether.

The once-mighty predator, the terror of the forest, was reduced to nothing more than a lifeless husk. Its scales, once a formidable armor, now lay lifeless under the canopy of the forest.

Monstrous roars, which had once echoed through the trees, were now replaced by an eerie silence that seemed to hold the entire forest in its grip.

The fight was done, and the hunt, a deadly dance of predator and prey, had reached its inevitable conclusion.

Erik stood victorious, the adrenaline of the fight ebbing away, replaced by a profound sense of triumph.

[CROMBO 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. 812 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

Erik took a moment to survey the battlefield, his eyes taking in the destruction wrought by their battle.

The surrounding landscape was a grotesque tapestry, marred by the Crombo's slime-cemented traps.

The ground was littered with hardened patches of the beast's unique weapon, each one a chilling reminder of the predator's power.

They glistened under the dappled sunlight, their unnatural sheen a stark contrast to the natural beauty of the forest.

The trees bore scars of the battle, their bark gouged and splintered, some even bent under the weight of the hardened slime.

The air held a lingering scent of the beast and its peculiar slime, a pungent aroma that spoke of danger and the raw, untamed power of nature.

Everywhere he looked, Erik saw the aftermath of the Crombo's reign, each detail a stark reminder of the unpredictable and often brutal reality of the wild.

Now Erik only had to call Thorne and tell him to come pick up the corpse. After that, he had to bring it to the guild and then give them the body.

#### Chapter 642: Victory

Erik cautiously advanced towards the fallen Crombo, the crunch of leaves and twigs under his boots piercing the forest's eerie silence. The creature, even in death, was a grotesque testament to the wild's unforgiving nature.

Its massive form sprawled across the forest floor, uprooted vegetation crushed beneath its weight. The scaly hide, which had once shimmered with a dangerous allure, now lay lifeless.

Its once fearsome claws, sharp as razors, were now still. Their deadly dance ended. The reptilian eyes, which had glinted with predatory intent, were now glazed over in the finality of death.

The silence around the creature was oppressive, the forest holding its breath in the battle's aftermath. Even in death, the Crombo commanded respect and fear - a monstrosity that had once been the terror of the forest.

The giant lay sprawled on the ground like a grotesque sculpture. Its lizard-like skin, a patchwork of scales and fur, was dirty with the beast's own blood. The long, razor-sharp claws on its frontal arms were still menacing, even in their lifeless state.

Its gecko-like head was still pouring blood, and the rows of sharp teeth that filled its gaping mouth still had bits and pieces of Lomalins' meat. Its reptilian eyes were now dull, the light in them extinguished.

Erik stood there, staring at the lifeless Crombo, its once-menacing form now just a hulking corpse. "A few years ago, I would've been the prey, not the predator," he muttered to himself.

His voice trembled, not with fear, but with a newfound realization. "I've become strong enough to carve out my own place in this world."

He had faced the Crombo, a creature of nightmares, and emerged victorious. It was as if he had crossed an invisible threshold, stepping into his life's new, uncharted territory.

Two years ago, he would have sold his soul to get the power he now held. He made his bullies pay and was building an empire. However, there were still many things he wanted to do.

Mainly finding out the truth about Uncle Benjamin, the Crystal Cross Gang, and the biological supercomputer.

Erik unsheathed his blade, taking a deep breath to steady his shaking hands. The steel glinted in the dappled sunlight, a stark contrast to the dark scales of the Crombo.

He carved out one of the creature's eyes with surgical precision; the blade slicing through the tough membrane easily. A viscous fluid oozed out, but Erik was unfazed.

He reached into the empty eye socket, his fingers searching for the skull. Finding a weak point, he used his blade to crack it open.

The sound that ensued was harsh and unsettling, a grating intrusion that seemed to echo through the silent forest. It was the sound of violation, of penetrating the creature's once invincible form, but it was a necessary transgression.

Erik moved with calculated precision, his fingers navigating the complex maze of the Crombo's skull. His hand, steady despite the gruesome task, delved into the creature's brain cavity. The forest seemed to hold its breath as he reached for the prize - the beast's brain crystal.

The bead-like crystal was cold and slick against his fingers. It pulsed with a strange energy, a last reminder of the power that had once lived within the Crombo.

With a firm grip, Erik extracted it from the creature's head, his action marking the final chapter in the life of the monstrous predator.

Erik closed his eyes for a moment. "Rest in peace," he whispered to the fallen Crombo, sheathing his blade and tucking the brain crystal safely into a pouch.

He wasn't done, though, as he stood over the fallen Crombo, his gaze drawn to the dark blood oozing from its ears, mouth, and eyes. It was a grim tableau, yet something primal within him stirred.



With a sense of purpose, he pushed his fingers into the thick, warm blood; they trembled slightly as he did so. It clung to his skin like a second layer, dark and viscous.

Lifting his blood-coated fingers to his lips, he hesitated for just a moment. Then, with a deep breath, he sucked the blood off his fingers. The taste was metallic, tinged with the wild, untamed essence of the creature.

Erik felt indescribably connected to the beast as the blood flowed over his tongue and down his throat.

For a fleeting moment, Erik allowed his eyes to fall shut, immersing himself fully in the experience. The sensation was raw, an unfiltered connection to the primal laws of nature.

The cool touch of the brain crystal in his hand, the lingering scent of the battle, the taste of victory on his lips - they all coalesced into a powerful wave of emotion that washed over him.

[CROMBO'S DNA GAINED. STARTING THE ANALYSIS.]

[ANALYSIS COMPLETE.]

[200 DNA POINTS ARE REQUIRED TO EXTRACT THE DNA. 500 TO GET IT WITHOUT INCURRING PAIN AND LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS. 1000 DNA POINTS USED TO ABSORB INSTANTLY THE THAID'S DNA.]

[23250 DNA POINTS DETECTED. STARTING EXTRACTION?]

"Absorb it instantly."

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

[PROCEDURE COMPLETE.]

After absorbing the Crombo's DNA, Erik felt a warmth spread through his veins, as if a new energy was coursing through him.

It was invigorating, like a shot of adrenaline, but deeper, more primal. He felt as if he had tapped into a wellspring of power, a connection to the raw, untamed mana of the creature he had just defeated.

The blood was just meant to be absorbed to make the body able to get the brain crystal power, but he knew that the true prize lay in the brain crystal.

He looked down at the fallen beast, its lifeless form a stark reminder of the brutal realities of this world. "There's still much to do," he murmured to himself, his eyes narrowing doggedly.

The young man then thought about the brain crystal he had carefully tucked away in his pouch. With a sense of solemnity, he took it out and held it up to the light one last time.

Taking a deep breath, he placed the crystal in his mouth. The texture was smooth, and the crystal still pulsed as if it still held the life force of the creature it came from; the mana was still there. As he swallowed, Erik felt the crystal slide down his throat.

For a moment, he stood still, his eyes closed. He could almost feel the crystal going into his stomach and becoming a part of him.

[CROMBO'S BRAIN CRYSTAL GAINED. STARTING THE ANALYSIS.]

[ANALYSIS COMPLETE.]

[200 DNA POINTS ARE REQUIRED TO EXTRACT THE POWER. 500 TO GET IT WITHOUT INCURRING PAIN AND LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS. 1000 DNA POINTS USED TO ABSORB INSTANTLY THE THAID'S POWER.]

[22250 DNA POINTS DETECTED. EXTRACTION IS POSSIBLE; WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DO?]

<Absorb it instantly again. The sooner, the better. >

[UNDERSTOOD. STARTING PROCEDURE. PLEASE WAIT.]

[PROCEDURE COMPLETE.]

Erik felt a surge of energy ripple through him as if the very essence of the Crombo was now fueling his own life force.

Erik, still standing amidst the fallen leaves and broken branches surrounding the lifeless Crombo, fished out his phone from his pocket.

His fingers, smeared with the remnants of the battle, traced the familiar pattern on his device, unlocking it. His heart was still pounding from the adrenaline rush, but his hand was steady as he dialed Thorne's number.

The phone rang, its tone a sharp contrast to the otherwise quiet forest. After a few heartbeats, the grizzled voice of Thorne, Erik's guild's porter team leader, crackled through the speaker. The sound was a comforting reminder of civilization in the wild.

"Thorne here," he growled, his voice bearing the weight of countless battles and experiences.

"What's the situation?"

Erik took a moment to gather his thoughts before responding. He glanced at the Crombo's massive form sprawled out on the forest floor, its once vibrant eyes now dull in death.

"It's done," Erik finally said, his voice echoing through the silent forest. "The Crombo is dead."

There was a pause on the other end, a moment of silence to acknowledge Erik's feat. The young man could almost picture Thorne's grizzled face softening into a rare smile of approval.

"Good job, kid," Thorne finally replied, his voice gruff but not devoid of warmth. "You've done well."

Erik couldn't help but feel a surge of pride at those words. He looked down at his hands, still stained with the Crombo's blood, and felt a twinge of satisfaction.

"I need you and the team to come pick up the body," Erik continued, his gaze lingering on the fallen beast. "It's quite a sight."

"Roger that," Thorne responded, and Erik could hear the roaring of an engine in the background. The old man was likely already coming to pick up the beast's body. "We'll be there as soon as we can."

Erik nodded, even though he knew Thorne couldn't see him. "Thanks, Thorne," he said sincerely. "I'll wait here."

"Stay safe, kid," Thorne replied, before ending the call.

As Erik pocketed his phone, he took one last look at the fallen Crombo. He felt a strange mix of exhaustion and satisfaction - a testament to his hard-fought victory.

He knew that he would have to wait for Thorne and his team to arrive, but he didn't mind. For now, he was content to sit amidst the quiet forest, accompanied by the silent form of his defeated foe.

#### Chapter 643: Reactions

It wasn't long before the sound of engines roared close to Erik's position, breaking the natural silence. The familiar hum of the truck's engine cut through the stillness as it pulled to a stop.

The doors slid open with a soft hiss and out spilled Thorne's team. The man was the first to step out.

His eyes widened, astonishment replacing the usual calm as they fell upon the fallen Crombo.

The massive creature lay still, an eerie silence replacing the roars that once shook the forest. "By the gods," he said, his voice barely above a whisper as he took a step closer, his boots crunching on the underbrush.

"You did it, Erik." His gaze moved from the Crombo to Erik, admiration shining in his eyes. He clapped a hand on Erik's shoulder, a firm and reassuring weight. "You've reached the Warden Mercenary rank with this kill."

The Warden rank was not easily attained; it was a testament to strength, skill, and sheer determination. It was a rank that commanded respect and admiration, and Erik had earned it.

His gaze returned to the fallen Crombo, its once fearsome form now lifeless. Erik felt a swell of pride but kept his expression neutral. "It seems like it."

Thorne's deep chuckle echoed through the clearing, the sound warm and familiar. His eyes crinkled at the corners, a telltale sign of his amusement. "Stoic, as always," he observed, his voice rich with affection and a hint of pride.

He clapped Erik on the shoulder again, this time with more force, a physical manifestation of his hearty congratulations. His weathered face broke into a wide grin, the lines of age deepening as he did so.

"But this is your victory, lad," he said, his gaze meeting Erik's. His words held a certain gravity, acknowledging not just the physical battle Erik had won, but the personal journey he had undertaken to reach this point.

It was a victory hard-earned and well-deserved, and Thorne was honored to bear witness to it.

The team set to work, their movements efficient and practiced. Chains were wrapped around the Crombo's massive limbs, and winches on the truck groaned as they hoisted the creature's body onto a flatbed.

Elara directed the operation with military precision, while Faelan and Sylvi secured the chains. Bram operated the machinery, his large hands deftly maneuvering the controls.

As Erik watched them work, he felt a sense of camaraderie. These were his people, skilled and reliable, each contributing to the success of the mission in their own way.

But even amidst the bustle of activity, Erik's thoughts drifted back to the hunt. He had felt an ease, a flow, that he had never felt before.

The battle had been intense, but not as challenging as he had expected. He kept this to himself, though; humility was a virtue, especially among mercenaries.

Finally, the Crombo's body was secured, but it barely fit, and the team climbed back into their truck.

As the truck rumbled back towards the city, the bright city lights twinkling in the distance, Thorne turned in his seat to face Erik. His mask was illuminated by the soft glow of the dashboard, casting deep shadows that made him look scary.

"You know," he began, his voice rumbling above the hum of the truck's engine, "reaching the Warden rank is no small feat." There was a note of seriousness in his tone now, a departure from his earlier joviality.

His gaze was steady on Erik's face, gauging his reaction. "You'll be getting more challenging assignments and higher pay," he said, ticking off each point on his fingers. The light caught on his worn hands, revealing the callouses and scars etched into his skin from years of hard work.

"And, of course, more danger," he finished, his gaze never wavering from Erik's.

He paused for a moment before saying, "Besides, you are seventeen. This is a feat no one replicated." His voice held a note of pride now. "Well, aside from the Fierce Lioness..." His voice trailed off as he mentioned the legendary figure, a hint of respect coloring his words. This was not just a victory for Erik; it was an achievement that put him in the ranks of legends.

Erik wasn't fascinated by the Fierce Lioness, so he didn't inquire, however, he couldn't say so, as it would be weird that someone, who was allegedly born in Nokisi Point, didn't know that the Fierce Lioness reached Erik's rank when she was just seventeen, exactly like Erik did.

The young man simply nodded, his eyes meeting Thorne's. "Yeah, I guess what you are saying is right. But I don't think I will have problems managing the consequences."

Thorne grinned. "I have no doubt, lad. No doubt at all."

The trucks rolled on, leaving behind the forest, but carrying with them a sense of accomplishment, a moment of triumph in a world that offered few.

Erik leaned back in his seat, his thoughts already turning to the future. There were more battles to fight, and more challenges to overcome, but for now, he allowed himself a moment to savor the victory.

As the city lights appeared on the horizon, Erik felt a sense of closure, but also a sense of anticipation. He was a warden now, a rank that came with opportunities and dangers. However, before he could be said to be a Warden-ranked mercenary, he had to go to the guild.

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Erik strode into the mercenary guild's headquarters in Testrovsc's Rest, his boots echoing on the polished stone floor. The grand hall, usually filled with the bustling noise of mercenaries discussing their latest exploits, fell into an unusual hush as soon as he walked in. The chatter and laughter that typically filled the air were replaced with a palpable anticipation.

As he walked in, heads turned, and conversations halted mid-sentence. The recognition in their eyes was unmistakable. Erik wasn't just another face in the crowd; he was a known figure, a young prodigy who had made a name for himself in the city. His exploits had been the talk of Testrovsc's Rest, his name whispered in awe and admiration.

Everyone knew Erik had undertaken the quest to rank up to the Warden Rank, a daunting task that many seasoned mercenaries hesitated to take on.

They had watched him leave, uncertainty etched into their faces. Now they watched him return, their eyes wide with anticipation and curiosity.

The room was filled with a mix of seasoned veterans and young hopefuls, all waiting to hear the result of the hunt.

Erik's success or failure wasn't just his own; it was a reflection of what was possible for each of them. And in Testrovsc's Rest, where everyone knew everyone else's business, Erik's quest had become their shared story.

However, they could imagine the result, as the young man was still alive. They parted, allowing him a clear path to the reception desk while staring at him and his mask.

The woman behind the counter, a long-serving guild clerk known for her stern demeanor, looked up as Erik approached. Her eyes, sharp and calculating, met Erik's mask with a cool professionalism. "How may I assist you?" she asked, her voice carrying a hint of curiosity.

"I've completed my ranking up quest. I killed a Crombo as per request," Erik announced, his voice steady and devoid of any hint of the triumph that others might have expected. His words echoed in the silent hall, commanding the attention of every person present.

The woman's eyes widened in disbelief, her usually composed face betraying her shock. "You killed a Crombo? That quickly?" she echoed her voice, a mixture of awe and skepticism. Killing a Crombo was a feat that even seasoned mercenaries struggled with, let alone accomplishing it in such a brief span of time.

Erik simply nodded in response. "The body is in my truck outside. My team is guarding it." His words were matter-of-fact, as if he was discussing a routine task rather than a monumental achievement.

The clerk seemed taken aback by his calm demeanor and the apparent ease with which he'd completed such a dangerous task. For a moment, she seemed at a loss for words; her gaze flitting between Erik's steady eyes and the bustling crowd behind him.

"Very well," she finally said, regaining her composure. "I'll send someone to verify your claim. If what you said is true, then your information will be updated." Her voice held a note of respect now, acknowledging the magnitude of Erik's potential achievement.

She pressed a button on her holographic computer, summoning a man from a nearby office. "Go check the truck outside from the Nexthorn Vanguard Guild. Confirm if Erik Kay killed a Crombo and ensure the beast is indeed dead."

The man nodded and left. Erik stood there, feeling the weight of the room's attention on him. Whispers filled the air, a mixture of awe and skepticism.

Ten minutes stretched out like an eternity, the seconds ticking by painfully slowly as the entire hall waited in anticipation. Finally, the door creaked open, and a man stepped inside, his face pale with a shocked expression that spoke volumes.

"He... he is telling the truth. Erik Kay really killed a Crombo at seventeen," he confirmed, his voice barely above a whisper, yet it echoed throughout the silent room. The man swallowed hard, his eyes wide with disbelief. "But the head is... missing."



His words hung in the air, a bombshell that sent ripples of shock through the crowd. The murmur of surprise and awe swept through the room like a wave, everyone present absorbing the enormity of what they'd just heard.

Erik simply nodded, unfazed by the reaction his achievement had garnered. "Yeah, I severed it during the fight..." he admitted casually, as though decapitating a Crombo was an everyday occurrence.

The woman behind the counter was already inputting something into her holographic computer, her fingers dancing over the virtual keys with practiced ease.

The holographic screen cast a soft glow on her face, highlighting her furrowed brows as she worked.

"Very... Very well," she stuttered, clearly taken aback by Erik's feat. "With the kill confirmed, you've... uh... you've earned enough points to advance."

She paused, her fingers hovering over the keys, as she looked up at Erik. Her eyes met his mask, the only barrier between them. "Congratulations," she said, her voice steady now, filled with a grudging respect. "You've reached the Warden Rank in the mercenary guild."

Her words echoed through the silent hall, marking a moment that would be etched into the history of Testrovs's Rest. The youngest warden in history was standing right before their eyes.

They fell silent for a second and then erupted into murmurs. Heads turned, eyes widened, and the atmosphere became electric. Erik was only seventeen, yet he had achieved a rank that signified he was stronger than most v-ranked fighters. It was almost unheard of.

Erik felt a swell of emotion but maintained his composure. He nodded at the woman, acknowledging her congratulations, but his mind was already racing ahead.

The Warden Rank wasn't just a title; it was an opportunity, a declaration of his capabilities, and an invitation to greater challenges.

After getting paid for the quest, Erik turned to leave; he felt the weight of every gaze in the room. Some looked at him with awe, others with envy, and a few with thinly veiled skepticism.

But Erik didn't mind. He had proven himself, not just to the guild, but to the city.

He stepped out of the guild's headquarters. There would be new quests, more dangerous foes, and greater rewards. But that came with a lot more things to do with the guild.

#### Chapter 644: Preparations

In the week that followed his ascension to the Warden Rank, Erik was a whirlwind of activity.

He threw himself into quests with a fervor that was almost manic, his newfound status granting him access to more challenging and lucrative jobs.

His efforts bore fruit. Erik gained three levels in a very short period and also three neural links for the cloning power.

Erik had also completed several System's quests, which had rewarded him with an additional 30 stat points. These were evenly distributed, with ten points added to each of his statistics, excluding energy. It was a significant boost, a sudden surge in power that seemed almost surreal.

If he were to share this information, it would undoubtedly cause a stir. The idea of such a rapid increase in abilities was unheard of, and that he was only 17 years old would only amplify the shock.

But Erik wasn't content with merely leveling up; he focused on enhancing his energy statistic with the stats he got from leveling up.

The new stats resulted in a qualitative and quantitative improvement for Erik's brain crystal, which jumped to the Ferebitz scale's C-rank.

He was still far from having a lot of mana, but at least he could use much more extensively his powers.

Financially, Erik was in a prosperous position. His successful completion of quests had not only bolstered his reputation but also significantly increased his wealth.

Each quest brought with it a substantial reward, filling his coffers with a steady stream of income that showed no signs of slowing down.

But it wasn't just his own efforts that were contributing to this financial success.

The guild members, whose numbers now hovered around 150, were also undertaking quests.

Each completed mission by a guild member added a fraction of the reward to the guild's treasury, creating a collective wealth that was growing exponentially.

The combination of individual and collective success had placed Erik in a position of financial stability that was rare for someone his age.

His wealth was not just as tangible as assets, but also in the form of the respect and influence he commanded among his peers.

Erik was closing in on the 8 million Eurems mark, a sum that would have been unimaginable just a year ago. Yet, despite his successes, Erik knew he had more to do. His strength had increased, but it wasn't enough for what he intended to do, fight the Crystal Cross Gang.

His physical prowess was very high at the moment, and his intelligence was the highest he had ever seen thanks to Hais's brain crystal power, but facing people with elemental powers would be problematic, but the problem stood even for the generic ranged powers.

They were rare, but dangerous because the more mana the user pumped into the attacks, the deadlier and faster the attack was going to be.

So Erik made a decision. He would take some time from the guild, leaving for some months to focus on increasing his level and his energy.

It was a move that would slow down his guild's progress and take him away from the organization he had worked so hard to build. But Erik had a plan.

Over the past week, he had been working on preparing his seven clones; they would manage the guild in his absence.

In the past week, Erik had acquired human blood and given it to them so that they could use their ability to shapeshift to turn into humans.

His clones would be his proxies, managing the guild while he was away, ensuring that everything ran smoothly in his absence, and earning money.

But Erik knew that this was just the beginning. The real challenges lay ahead, in the unknown territories he would explore, in the foes he would face, and in the limits he would push.

Once he felt he was strong enough, Erik was going to investigate Uncle Benjamin's situation.

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Erik stood in the room, surveying his new clones—Ari, Yori, Nick, Damon, and Swaran. They had just completed their shapeshifting into human forms, and the transformation was remarkable.

Each clone was a mirror image of Erik, bearing his raven-black hair and deep chocolate-brown eyes. Yet, they also carried unique traits, a result of the human blood DNA they were crafted from, making each one distinct.

Ari was slender, his physique lean but sturdy. His eyes, slightly more almond-shaped than Erik's, held an enigmatic allure that gave him an exotic appeal. His movements were fluid and graceful, a testament to his agility and finesse.

Yori was the embodiment of strength, his muscular build a stark contrast to Ari's lean frame. His jawline was more chiseled than Erik's, carving a strong profile that exuded an air of rugged masculinity. His movements were powerful and deliberate, showcasing his physical prowess.

Nick, in contrast, had a softer appearance. His eyes were a lighter shade of brown, teetering on the edge of hazel. There was a gentleness about him, a quiet strength that was as comforting as it was formidable. His demeanor was calm and composed, reflecting a depth of understanding beyond his age.

Damon bore a rugged look, his hair slightly wavy compared to Erik's straight locks. His features were rough-hewn but attractive, adding to his air of untamed charisma. He moved with a confident stride, each step echoing his indomitable spirit.

Swaran overshadowed them all in height. His stature was emphasized by his slightly deeper complexion.

The intensity in his eyes was captivating, a swirling blend of determination and intelligence. Among the group, his tall frame and intense gaze made him impossible to ignore.

Noah, Erik's first clone, and Luke, his second, were in the room with them. Luke had already undergone the transformation some time ago, but Noah couldn't, so he was still masked.

Noah broke the silence. "Master, so have you decided what to do?"

Erik looked at each of them, his gaze lingering a moment longer on Noah and Luke, who had been with him the longest.

"I'm going to prepare to leave the city soon," Erik began, his voice steady and resolute. His eyes held a determined glint, reflecting his unwavering resolve.

"I must increase my energy levels, so I need to hunt a lot and make System's quests. But I can't leave the guild unattended, so I need to prepare. That's where you all come in."

Luke nodded in understanding, his expression serious as he took in Erik's words. His eyes met Erik's, mirroring his determination.

"You want us to manage the guild in your absence," he stated, not as a question, but as a confirmation of his commitment to the task.

"Exactly," Erik confirmed, a hint of relief flashing across his face as he saw Luke's acceptance. His hands gestured expressively as he talked, "But it's not just about keeping the lights on. We need to grow, to expand. I want you to take on quests, negotiate contracts, and make money. The guild has to thrive, not just survive."

Ari spoke up next, his almond-shaped eyes filled with curiosity and a touch of anxiety. His lean frame leaned forward slightly as he asked, "Master, are there any specific quests or contracts you want us to focus on?" His tone was respectful, yet eager, reflecting his readiness to take on the responsibility Erik was entrusting them with.

Erik considered the question. "High-reward quests that don't require immediate completion would be ideal. But use your judgment. If an opportunity arises that you think is worth taking, go for it."

Yori, his muscular arms crossed over his chest, asked, "What about alliances or partnerships with other guilds?" His voice was deep and steady, a hint of concern underlying his question as he pondered the potential challenges they might face.

Erik shook his head, his raven-black hair swaying slightly with the motion. His eyes held a firm resolve as he responded, "Not for now. We're not strong enough to enter alliances without compromising our independence. Once I'm back, we can reconsider." His words were decisive, leaving no room for doubt about his stance on the matter.

Damon, his rugged features set in a thoughtful expression, chimed in next. "And what should we do if we encounter problems we can't handle?" His slightly wavy hair fell over his forehead as he tilted his head, awaiting Erik's answer.

Erik smiled at that, his chocolate-brown eyes twinkling with a mix of amusement and pride. "That's why there are multiple ones of you. Collaborate, strategize, and find a way. You have different strengths and a lot of intelligence; use them.

"His were encouraging words, instilling a sense of confidence and camaraderie in the group. His smile was infectious, easing the tension in the room and reinforcing the bond they all shared.

Swaran, the tallest among them, finally broke his silence. His voice, deep and resonant, echoed in the room, tinged with an unmistakable curiosity. "How long will you be gone?" He asked, his intense eyes focused on Erik, awaiting his response.

Erik met his gaze, his chocolate-brown eyes reflecting a mix of determination and slight uncertainty. "A couple of months, maybe more," he said, his voice steady despite the daunting task ahead. "It depends on how quickly I can achieve my objectives." His hands were clasped together in front of him, his fingers tapping lightly against each other as he contemplated the journey ahead.

Noah, who had been quietly observing the exchange, finally spoke up. His expression was serious, his hazel eyes reflecting a deep understanding of the gravity of Erik's words.

He nodded, a gesture of acceptance and commitment. "We understand, Master. We'll do our best to fulfill your expectations." His words were resolute, echoing the shared resolve among the group to uphold Erik's trust and make him proud.

Erik felt a sense of pride looking at his clones. They were extensions of him, yet unique in their ways. "There is still time before I leave. I need to provide better equipment to the guild members, and to you all, and aside from that, I would like to buy armed vehicles. Finding some outstanding candidates to join would also be good."

"Understood, master, do you need our help?" Noah asked.

"Not really," Erik said, "But you will come with me. You need to meet some people."

#### Chapter 645: Meeting Lysa (1)

Erik stepped out of the guild's second building, his clones trailing behind him.

The world outside was bustling with activity—merchants hawking their wares, adventurers discussing their latest quests, and children running around in playful abandon.

The city was alive, a vibrant tapestry of sights, sounds, and smells that Erik had long since grown accustomed to. But this was a fresh experience for his clones, and their reactions were a sight to behold.

Noah, Ari, Yori, Nick, Damon, and Swaran walked alongside Erik, their eyes wide with wonder.

They looked at everything—the towering buildings, the intricate architecture, the colorful market stalls—with a sense of awe and curiosity that was almost childlike.

Despite having Erik's memories, being physically present in the outside world was a unique experience altogether.

Noah, who had been with Erik the longest, was the first to break the silence. His voice, slightly muffled by the mask he wore, was filled with a mix of awe and apprehension. "Master," he began,

his words punctuated by the soft, mechanical hum of his mask's filtration system, "I remember all of this from your memories, but seeing it firsthand is... overwhelming."

His gloved hand swept out to gesture at the enormous, alien landscape around them, his movements slow and deliberate as if he was trying to take it all in.

His posture was rigid, the usually fluid grace of his movements replaced by a tense readiness. The mask hid his face, but the slight tremor in his voice and the rigid set of his shoulders spoke volumes about his emotional state.

"Everything is so big, so real," he said, his voice barely above a whisper now. Even behind the mask, Erik could tell that Noah was struggling to reconcile the memories he'd seen through Erik's eyes with the reality in front of him.

Erik turned his gaze to Noah, his eyes meeting those of his first clone through the clear visor of his mask.

He saw a reflection of his own curiosity mirrored in Noah's eyes, a testament to their shared experiences yet individual perceptions.

"Memories can only capture so much, Noah," Erik began, his voice steady yet soft, acknowledging the vastness of their surroundings. He gestured to the surrounding landscape, the sight of the alien wilderness stretching out before them. "They can give you the outline of an experience, but the details—the sights, the sounds, the smells—those you have to experience for yourself."

His gaze shifted to his other clones, their eyes still wide with awe and wonder. The raw emotion on their faces—fear, excitement, curiosity—made him smile beneath his mask. They were a part of him, yet each had their unique reactions to this new world.

"So," he said, injecting a note of excitement into his voice to lighten the mood, "do you guys want to walk or drive to our next destination?"

The clones exchanged glances, their excitement palpable. "Walk," Noah spoke first, his voice tinged with eagerness. The others nodded in agreement, their faces lighting up at the prospect of exploring more of the city on foot.



Erik chuckled at their enthusiasm. "Let's go then," he said, leading the way as they resumed their journey through the bustling streets.

As they walked, each clone seemed to absorb the world around them with an insatiable curiosity.

Buildings that Erik had passed a hundred times, their familiar facades barely registering in his daily routine, seized on a new life under the curious gazes of his clones. Structures he'd deemed mundane became subjects of intense fascination. Their eyes traced the architectural details, lingered on the weathered bricks and the faded murals that adorned some walls.

The cityscape, so familiar to Erik, was a novel wonderland to his clones.

Street performers, often relegated to mere background noise in the hustle and bustle of Erik's life, now held a captivating allure. The clones stood transfixed, their attention riveted.

A simple juggling act seemed as mesmerizing as a grand spectacle, the rhythmic thud of balls hitting palms echoing like a symphony in their ears.

A mime trapped in an invisible box evoked peals of laughter, their eyes wide with delight at the silent performance.

Each sight and sound, so commonplace to Erik, was a thrilling discovery for his clones, turning an ordinary walk through the city into an adventure of exploration and wonder.

Erik found their enthusiasm infectious. Seeing the city through their eyes, he was reminded of his own first experiences, the sense of awe and wonder that had long since been replaced by familiarity.

It was a refreshing perspective that made him appreciate the beauty and complexity of the world around him.

As they walked, Ari was captivated by the array of colors at a fabric stall, his eyes lingering on the vibrant hues. Yori seemed fascinated by a blacksmith's shop, the clang of metal on metal drawing his attention.

Nick was visibly delighted by the aroma wafting from a food cart, while Damon seemed intrigued by a group of musicians playing on a street corner.

Swaran, the most reserved of the clones, quietly observed everything, his eyes taking in the complexity and diversity of the world around him.

Finally, they reached their destination. Erik stopped in front of Lysa's shop. Currently, the woman was expanding the building. The stream of products Erik brought her was significant, so she bought the adjacent buildings and started an expansion process.

"We're here," Erik said, his voice echoing slightly in the vastness of their surroundings. His gaze met each of his clones in turn, taking in their varying expressions of anticipation and curiosity.

Noah, his eyes reflecting the building's image, turned his gaze back to Erik. His voice held a note of uncertainty mixed with excitement. "Is this where we're meeting Lysa?"

Erik nodded, a hint of a smile playing on his lips beneath his mask. "Yes, it's time you meet her." His tone turned serious, a subtle warning underlying his words. "Be careful; she is a good person but also a cunning fox." His eyes held Noah's, conveying the importance of his words. He wanted them to understand that while Lysa was an ally, she was also a force to be reckoned with.

Erik and his clones crossed the threshold onto Lysa's property, their arrival acting like a magnet that pulled people from the interior of the building.

A group quickly formed around them, their faces professional but curious, their questions flowing in a rapid stream of hospitality. "Do you need anything to drink? Are you hungry? Can we assist you with your bags?"

Despite the barrage of questions and the palpable sense of welcome, Erik's clones remained silent, their faces unreadable.

They had received no verbal command from Erik to keep quiet, but they understood his unspoken wish for discretion. Besides, he wanted to present them as elite guild members.

As the waiters from Lysa's establishment asked if Erik and his men needed something, they were left impressed by the people he brought with him. They saw them for the first time, while Erik was a regular.

Their towering presence added an extra layer of intrigue to the situation; each clone stood at least 30 centimeters taller than Erik, making for a striking contrast.

Among the clones, it was Noah who drew the most attention. Like Erik, he wore a mask that concealed much of his face, leaving only his eyes visible.

The mask added an air of mystery to his already imposing figure, making him seem like a riddle waiting to be solved.

To those who had come to greet them, Noah seemed like a figure of significance, as if he were the embodiment of strength and authority.

Sensing the growing curiosity and the need to move things along, Erik finally spoke. "We're fine, thank you. There is no requirement for refreshments. Our presence here is solely to visit Lysa. Could you please accompany us to where she is?"

His words, delivered in a polite yet firm tone, resonated through the crowd.

They nodded in understanding, their faces reflecting a complex cocktail of emotions. Relief washed over them like a comforting blanket, softening the hard lines of worry etched on their faces.

Yet, beneath the relief, a spark of anticipation flickered in their eyes, lighting them up with a curious intensity.

"Of course," one of them responded, stepping forward from the crowd. His voice carried a newfound confidence, echoing Erik's firmness.

The man's posture straightened as he took on the role of a guide, his shoulders square and his head held high. His face was set in an expression of determination, but his eyes held a welcoming warmth. "Please, follow me."

As they moved through the building, Erik took note of the surroundings.

The interior was expansive, filled with various goods ranging from everyday items to exotic artifacts.

It was a place that catered to a diverse clientele, and Erik couldn't help but wonder about the stories that each item could tell.

Finally, they were led into a room at the far end of the building. The door closed behind them, sealing them off from the prying eyes and inquisitive minds they had left behind. Erik looked around, his eyes meeting those of his clones.

The man brought them into Lysa's office, but she wasn't there. So, they sat on the neatly arranged sofas and waited for Lysa to come.

#### Chapter 646: Meeting Lysa (2)

After several minutes of waiting, the door finally creaked open, revealing Lysa in the doorway. Her hair was swept up in a hasty bun, a few rebellious strands escaping to frame her face. Her eyes, a captivating shade of green, immediately met Erik's mask, a familiar sight that represented his enigmatic persona.

A soft, apologetic smile tugged at the corners of her lips, failing to mask the clear fatigue etched in the fine lines around her eyes. "I'm sorry for keeping you waiting, Erik," she said, her voice laced with a hint of guilt.

As she crossed the threshold into the room, Lysa's gaze involuntarily dropped to her hands. Her slender fingers were restlessly playing with the frayed hem of her work attire, a physical manifestation of the nervous energy coursing through her. The fabric, once vibrant, was now faded and worn from countless hours of labor, much like herself.

"The expansion project has been consuming a lot of my time," she confessed, her voice barely more than a whisper. Her tone echoed the countless sleepless nights she had spent immersed in her work, the stress etched into her features like a map of her struggles.

Dark circles framed them, and there was a certain dullness that wasn't there before. Yet within them, a spark of determination still flickered, undeterred by the exhaustion that was clear in her posture.

A fleeting grimace crossed her face as she mentioned the project, revealing a glimpse of the internal battle she was fighting.

Erik watched as Lysa ventured further into the room, her footsteps barely audible against the wooden floor. Her usually upright posture was slightly bent, a physical testament to the weight of her responsibilities that seemed to press down on her slender shoulders.

Despite her clear exhaustion, there was an undeniable spark in her eyes - a glimmer of resilience that seemed to defy the weariness etched in her features.

With a casual flick of his hand, Erik dismissed her apology, his lips curving into a gracious smile that softened the lines of his mask.

"I noticed the construction on my way in, both outside and within the building," he said, his voice carrying an underlying note of understanding.

His eyes reflected the sight of the bustling activity he'd witnessed - the scaffolding, the workers, the noise. "It looks like a massive undertaking. Don't worry about it; I understand how these things can be."

His understanding smile remained, but in the end, he was here to add to her burden, so it was more apologetic than anything else.

Lysa's eyes then shifted from Erik's comforting presence to the group of men standing behind him.

Lysa's gaze roved over the group of men, her eyes flickering with curiosity.

Each man was different in appearance and demeanor, yet they all shared a certain air of importance that was hard to miss.

Her eyes narrowed slightly as she studied them, her mind working overtime to place their faces or guess their purpose.

"And who are these gentlemen you've brought with you?" she said, her voice maintaining a steady calm that belied the surprise she felt.

As she spoke, her hands subtly stopped their nervous fidgeting, instead folding themselves professionally in front of her.

Her posture straightened, the earlier slump replaced by a more authoritative stance. Her brows arched slightly in a silent query, her lips pressed into a thin line as she awaited Erik's response.

At Erik's subtle nod, each clone rose from its seat in a synchronized motion, their movements precise and coordinated. They bowed slightly, a gesture of respect but also discipline, before introducing themselves.

"Noah," the first man introduced himself, his voice resonating with an air of authority that matched his imposing presence. He stood tall, a mask similar to Erik's, obscuring his features, yet the confidence in his posture was unmistakable.

"Ari," announced the second man, his tone crisp and devoid of unnecessary embellishments. His introduction was as straightforward as his demeanor, a testament to his no-nonsense approach.

"Yori," the third clone stated, his voice equally succinct. His introduction was brief, mirroring the others' straightforward manner, yet there was a subtle difference in his tone.

"Nick," came the fourth introduction. His voice was steady and firm, matching the others in its brevity.

"Damon," the fifth clone said, continuing the pattern set by his predecessors.

"Swaran," concluded the sixth clone, his voice harmonizing with his brethren.

"Luke," said the last man, his voice echoing slightly in the room. Like Noah, he too wore a mask similar to Erik's, yet there was something distinctly different about him - a certain calmness in his demeanor that set him apart from his counterparts.

Throughout the introductions, Lysa's gaze shifted from one man to another, her expression a careful mask of neutrality.

Her eyes flickered with silent recognition at each name, her mind already working to remember each one.

The introductions were brief, almost terse, but they carried a weight that went beyond mere names.

Each clone spoke respectfully and assertively; their voices tinged with a military-like discipline that spoke volumes about their training and their loyalty to Erik.

Lysa looked at each clone in turn, her eyes lingering for a moment on Noah, who seemed to be the group's de facto leader without including Erik.

Once the introductions were completed, Lysa's gaze returned to Erik, the young man who had brought this intriguing group.

"Impressive," she finally said, her voice carrying a note of genuine admiration that softened the edges of her professional demeanor.

The corners of her mouth twitched upward in a rare, unguarded smile, acknowledging the remarkable feat he had accomplished.

"You've always had a knack for surrounding yourself with capable individuals," she said, her gaze sweeping over the group once more before settling back on Erik.

"But this," she gestured vaguely towards the group, "is something else entirely." Her voice trailed off, leaving the sentence hanging in the air.

Then, with a slight nod of acknowledgment, she stepped back, ready to delve deeper into the purpose of this visit.

Erik smiled, acknowledging the compliment. Lysa nodded, clearly impressed.

Lysa sat and then leaned back in her chair, her eyes meeting Erik's mask as she posed her next question. "So, what brings you and your team here today? Business, I presume?"

Erik nodded, his gaze steady. "Yes, business, but also introductions. I'm planning to go on a trip for an extended period, and these men will manage the guild in my absence. I thought it was important for them to meet you."

Lysa's gaze flicked over the group of clones, her eyes taking in their disciplined postures and attentive expressions.

There was an undeniable air of readiness about them, a silent testament to their training and preparedness. "I see," she said, her voice carrying a note of approval. "Well, it is good to meet the team that will hold down the fort. What else do you need?"

Her question was straightforward, a reflection of her no-nonsense approach to work.

Erik leaned forward, mirroring Lysa's focused demeanor. "Right to business, uh?" His tone was teasing, yet there was an undercurrent of respect for her direct approach. His eyes held a spark of amusement, a hint of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"Indeed, there is a lot to do, and usually, your requests take a lot of time. So, better avoid the chitchat." Lysa's response was firm, her voice holding a hint of dry humor.

"All right then. First, we need more vehicles. But this time, I'm interested in acquiring armed ones. I don't have specific requirements, but I'd like you to show us the options and discuss the specifics with my men."

Lysa nodded, making a mental note. "Armed vehicles, got it. Anything else?"

Erik said, "Yes, we also need weapons and armor. And I'm not just talking about traditional arms like swords, shields, and bows. I'm also interested in modern weaponry—laser rifles, grenades, and the like. They are not very useful against strong thaids, but the Pupils in my guild would be able to hunt better with them if they focus on low-leveled Thaids."

Lysa raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued by the scope of Erik's request. "You're gearing up for something big, aren't you?"

Erik offered a cryptic smile. "Let's just say I like to be prepared."

Lysa considered for a moment before asking, "Is that all, or is there more you need?"



Erik shook his head. "That covers the immediate needs. I'd like you to coordinate with my men for the details and any further requirements. They'll be the ones actively managing the guild and will be better positioned to handle the specifics."

Lysa looked at the clones, her gaze lingering on each one as if assessing their capabilities. "Very well," she finally said. "I'll discuss the details with them."

Erik nodded, satisfied. "Excellent. I knew I could count on you, Lysa."

Then they talked for some time. There were things Lysa was curious about regarding Erik's situation.

The pieces were falling into place; the groundwork being laid for the next phase of his plans.

Lysa rose from her chair, signaling the end of the meeting. "I'll get started on this right away. Safe travels, Erik, and good luck with whatever you're planning."

Erik stood, his clones following suit. "Thank you, Lysa. I am confident that things will run smoothly, especially with your help."

With final handshakes and nods of acknowledgment, Erik and his clones left the room, leaving Lysa to ponder the intriguing developments.

Chapter 647: To each a Weapon (1)

Erik led the way out of the building, his clones falling into step behind him. "Our next stop is a shop I found a while back. Matthias's blades"

Noah, ever curious, looked at Erik with wide, eager eyes. "Are we going to make some weapons, Master?" He asked, the anticipation clear in his voice and mirrored in the way he leaned forward slightly.

"Yeah, we're going to get you all custom weapons," Erik replied, a hint of excitement creeping into his voice.

A smile tugged at the corner of his lips, and his eyes sparkled with enthusiasm.

As they walked through the city, the clones couldn't help but marvel at the towering structures surrounding them.

Skyscrapers stretched towards the sky like glass and steel giants, while holographic billboards flashed with vibrant colors, advertising everything from the latest tech to exotic vacations.

The city was a bustling hub of activity, filled with people from all walks of life, each absorbed in their world yet collectively contributing to the city's vibrant tapestry.

For the clones, this was a revelation. They had Erik's memories, of course, but seeing the city firsthand was a unique experience altogether.

The sheer scale of it, the complexity, and the diversity were awe-inspiring. Noah summed it up best when he said, "Remembering the outside is one thing, but seeing it is something else entirely. Everything is so... big."

Erik couldn't help but smile at Noah's innocent remark. "Yes, the world is big," he agreed, his eyes crinkling at the edges with genuine warmth.

After navigating through the maze of streets and alleys, they finally arrived at their destination: Matthias' Blades.

The shop was modest but exuded an air of quality and craftsmanship. The sign hanging above the door was carved from wood and meticulously painted.

As they stepped into the shop, the distinct scent of cold metal and rich oil immediately filled their nostrils.

The air was heavy with it, intertwining with the faint smell of burnt wood and lingering traces of raw materials.

In the background, the rhythmic clanging of a hammer against metal echoed, punctuated by the occasional hiss of steam or whirr of machinery.

Shelves lined the walls, cluttered with tools of every shape and size, each with a specific purpose in the creation process.

Behind a counter stood Matthias, a middle-aged man with a rugged face and calloused hands. His eyes lit up when he saw Erik.

"Ah, Mr. Kay! Good to see you again," the shopkeeper greeted, his face lighting up in a warm, welcoming smile. His eyes twinkled with recognition and genuine glee. "What brings you here today?"

Erik, returning the smile with an appreciative nod, gestured to the men standing behind him.

"Matthias," he began, his voice steady and filled with respect. His eyes held a glint of anticipation as he introduced his team.

"These are my associates." He swept his arm in a broad gesture, encompassing his group. "They need custom weapons, and I couldn't think of a better place to come."

His words held a note of sincerity, his expression earnest. He trusted Matthias, and the thought of equipping his team with top-notch weapons stirred a sense of excitement within him. He watched the man's reaction closely, hoping the man would accept the task.

Matthias looked over at the group, sizing them up, before nodding approvingly. "Well, you've come to the right place. My son is in the back."

"I must have been lucky then," Erik said.

"Indeed, you were."

Erik moved deeper into the shop, towards the forge where Matthias' son worked.

As they stepped into the forge, the intense heat from the furnace washed over them like an invisible wave. It was a palpable force, radiating outwards and filling every corner of the room. The air shimmered with it, becoming a living entity that danced and flickered in the dim light.

The heat was not just a physical sensation; it was an embodiment of the forge's relentless energy and purpose. It clung to their clothes, seeped into their skin, and made sweat beads on their foreheads almost instantly.

The furnace itself roared like a mighty beast, its fiery maw glowing with an intense light that painted everything in hues of orange and red.

Sparks flew from it occasionally, like tiny stars birthed from its fiery heart. The walls of the forge seemed to pulsate with the furnace's rhythm.

Fabian, Matthias' son, and the craftsman behind the blades looked up from his workbench. His eyes met Erik's, and a smile spread across his face.

"Ah, Mr. Kay, welcome back," the blacksmith greeted, his eyes lighting up with recognition and a warm smile spreading across his face. "What can I do for you today?"

"Hello, Fabian," he responded, his tone carrying a note of respect. He paused a moment, his gaze steady on Fabian, subtly building suspense.

"I'm here for something special today. I need seven custom weapons made," he announced.

Erik watched Fabian's reaction closely, eager to see the craftsman rise to the challenge. His mind was already buzzing with potential designs and specifications for each weapon, excitement stirring within him at the prospect of equipping his team with uniquely crafted armaments.

Fabian's eyebrows shot up, clearly intrigued by the size of the order. "Seven, you say? That's quite a number. May I ask who they're for?"

Erik gestured toward the door where his clones were. "They're for my men. They're in the other room right now."

Fabian nodded, setting down the tool he was holding and wiping his hands on a rag. "Very well, Mr. Kay. Making custom weapons for seven individuals is a significant undertaking, but you've come to the right place. I guess they are mercenaries, am I right?"

Erik nodded affirmatively, his gaze steady on Fabian. "Yes, they work with me and are part of a special team," he confirmed, his voice carrying a note of pride.

He glanced back at his team, a fond smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, but it was hidden by his mask. His hand made a sweeping gesture towards them, subtly emphasizing their importance.

"So, I would like something good," Erik continued, his gaze returning to Fabian. His expression was serious and composed. His eyes held a firm resolve, reflecting the importance he placed on the quality of the weapons.

"But following their preferences." He added, his voice steady and firm. He gestured subtly to his team, a silent acknowledgment of their individuality and unique combat styles. His brows furrowed slightly in thought, contemplating the diverse needs and preferences each of them had.

"Can you do it?" he asked. He held Fabian's gaze, silently urging the craftsman to accept the challenge.

Fabian's face broke into a wide grin, his eyes twinkling with a craftsman's pride. "You know me, Mr. Kay," he responded, his voice filled with enthusiasm. "I love a good challenge. Tailoring each weapon to its wielder is what I do best."

Erik, maintaining his serious and composed demeanor, nodded in satisfaction. His eyes reflected a quiet confidence, his expression unchanging but his relief clear.

"Excellent," he said, his voice steady and filled with appreciation. He raised a hand and clapped Fabian lightly on the shoulder, a gesture of both gratitude and camaraderie. "I knew I could count on you, Fabian."

Inwardly, Erik felt a surge of relief and anticipation. He had trusted Fabian would accept the challenge, but hearing the confirmation brought a sense of certainty and calm. His mind churned with ideas and plans, eager to see the final products of Fabian's craftsmanship.

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While Erik was in the workshop discussing the details of their custom weapons with Fabian, Noah and the other clones, found themselves engrossed in the array of weaponry displayed throughout the shop.

Swords with intricate hilts lay beside bows of fine craftsmanship, each piece a testament to the skill and artistry that went into its creation.

Noah was particularly captivated by a sword with a unique design, its blade shimmering in the soft light of the shop. As he examined it, Matthias approached him with a knowing smile.

"That's one of our finest pieces," Matthias began, "Forged from Terphine steel and balanced to perfection. The hilt is wrapped in genuine Thaid's leather for a comfortable grip. It's a weapon made for a true warrior."

Noah looked up, meeting Matthias' eyes. "It's a magnificent sword."

Just then, Erik and Fabian emerged from the workshop, their faces reflecting a successful negotiation. Erik glanced at his clones, who were enamored by the surrounding weapons.

"Ok, guys," Erik announced, "You need to talk to the man here, Fabian, about what you would like to use as weapons. He'll be crafting them for you."

Fabian stepped forward, extending his hand in greeting. "It is a pleasure to meet you all. I've heard you're Mr. Jay's men, and that's recommendation enough for me. Let's talk about what you're looking for in a weapon."

The clones stood up, each offering a firm handshake and a nod of acknowledgment. "Pleased to meet you," Noah said, speaking for the group. "We're looking forward to working with you."

Erik, however, had one more detail to add. He turned to Fabian, "Don't forget to make the hilt with the design I told you about earlier. It must come out exactly like that."

Fabian nodded, locking eyes with Erik. "Of course, Mr. Kay. The design will be as you specified, down to the last detail. You have my word."

Erik felt a sense of satisfaction wash over him. He had set the wheels in motion, not just for the creation of custom weapons, but for the forging of identities.

As he looked at his clones—Noah, Ari, Yori, Nick, Damon, Swaran, and Luke—and then at Fabian and Matthias, he knew he was leaving this task in capable hands.

#### Chapter 648: To each a weapon (2)

Fabian, his brow furrowed in curiosity, turned his attention to Luke. The latter had been observing the various weapons on display, his eyes reflecting the glinting steel and polished wood. "So, what'll it be for you? A sword, a bow, perhaps something more exotic?" Fabian inquired, his voice echoing in the vast armory.

Luke, his fingers tracing the edge of a nearby table, pondered. His eyes drifted over the assortment of weapons. His gaze was thoughtful, almost introspective, as he considered his options.

His eyes then settled on Fabian. A small, knowing smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "I think I'll go for a Flyssa," he said, his tone confident but not arrogant.

Erik, standing a few feet away, couldn't help but chuckle at Luke's choice. He'd expected nothing less from his clones.

They shared more than just appearances; they shared skills and preferences too.

The Flyssa was a familiar weapon, and they all knew how to wield it with deadly precision.

Fabian raised an eyebrow, surprised by the choice. The Flyssa was a unique weapon, not commonly chosen by those unfamiliar with its intricacies.

But then again, these were Erik's men, and if their leader wielded a Flyssa, they might also be drawn to it.

"A Flyssa, you say?" Fabian echoed, his eyebrows arching in surprise. His eyes gleamed with a newfound respect. It was an excellent choice and one that required a skilled hand.

He crossed his arms over his chest, leaning back. "You're sure about this?" He asked.

Luke met Fabian's gaze, his eyes sparkling with determination.

He nodded, his expression resolute and his posture straightened, radiating confidence. "Yes, I'm sure," he said, his voice steady.

His hand instinctively moved to the space at his side where the Flyssa would rest. "It's a weapon that offers both reach and precision," he said, his voice taking on an admiring tone as he spoke of the weapon. "Qualities I find appealing."

"Very well," Fabian conceded, a hint of approval in his voice. He pulled out a sleek digital pad from his pocket, its screen glowing in the light. His fingers danced across the surface, jotting down the details with practiced ease. "A Flyssa it is."

He then lifted his gaze, his eyes scanning the room. A playful smirk tugged at the corners of his mouth as he asked, "And for the rest of you, gentlemen?" His tone was light, almost teasing.

The clones, who had been huddled together and listening to the exchange. They found themselves under Fabian's gaze.

One by one, they each voiced their choice, and to Fabian's growing astonishment, everyone also opted for a Flyssa. Ari, Yori, Nick, Damon, and Swaran chose the same weapon as their leader and the second-born, Luke.

"A Flyssa for me as well," Ari stated, stepping forward. His voice was firm, and his decision made without hesitation. His eyes glowed with a certain determination, reflecting the certainty of his choice.

"Same here," Yori said, nodding his agreement. A grin spread across his face, revealing his excitement. His hands clenched and unclenched as if already feeling the grip of the Flyssa.

"Make it another Flyssa," Nick chimed in, his voice echoing in the room. He crossed his arms over his chest, a playful smirk playing on his lips. His eyes sparkled with a shared camaraderie, appreciating the unanimous decision.

"I'll go with the Flyssa too," Damon said, his voice softer but no less resolute. He gave a small nod, a quiet intensity in his gaze. His fingers traced an imaginary Flyssa in the air, already visualizing the weapon in his grasp.



"And I'll round it out with yet another Flyssa," Swaran concluded, his voice carrying a note of finality. A knowing smile spread across his face as he looked at his fellow clones.

Fabian couldn't help but marvel at the unanimity of their choices. It was unusual for an entire group to opt for such a specialized weapon, but he held his tongue.

"Alright, then," Fabian said, still jotting down notes. "Six Flyssas, each customized to its wielder. This will be quite the project, but I'm looking forward to the challenge."

The clones nodded, their faces reflecting a mix of anticipation and satisfaction. They had made their choices, aligning themselves with a particular weapon and a shared identity, a collective strength that mirrored their skills.

Fabian's eyes settled on Noah, who stood apart from the others. The masked figure seemed to wrestle with a decision, his posture betraying a hint of uncertainty. "And for you, sir? Will it be another Flyssa to complete the set?"

Noah stood there, his eyes darting between the Flyssas and the other weapons displayed on the walls.

His mind was a whirlpool of conflicting thoughts. On one hand, he felt a powerful pull towards the Claymore, its broad, double-edged blade and cruciform hilt resonating with something deep within him.

It was as if the weapon spoke to his very essence, promising a blend of power and balance that felt just right.

On the other hand, there was the Flyssa—the weapon of choice for Erik and the other clones.

Choosing it would mean fitting in and aligning himself with the collective identity they were forming.

The Flyssa was more than just a weapon; it symbolized their unity and shared purpose. To deviate from that felt like a betrayal, a rejection of the bond he shared with Erik and the others.

Would Erik, their shared origin and mentor, be disappointed if he chose a weapon different from the Flyssa? Would his choice cause a rift, a subtle shift in the dynamics of their tightly-knit group? The thought of Erik's possible disapproval sent a chill down his spine, causing his heart to pound in his chest.

And what about the others - his brothers? Would they see him as less committed, less a part of their unique brotherhood?

The mere thought filled him with a sense of dread, an icy knot of fear forming in his stomach.

He could almost see their questioning glances, their expressions of surprise and, perhaps, disappointment.

The weight of these questions, these possibilities, bore down on him like a crushing burden.

They swirled in his mind, intensifying his inner turmoil. His palms grew sweaty, his breath hitched, and he could feel a lump forming in his throat.

He was standing at a crossroads, his decision carrying more weight than just the choice of a weapon.

He felt Erik's eyes on him and sensed his master's understanding. It was a silent acknowledgment that the choice was his to make, and whatever he chose would be accepted.

But that freedom, instead of easing his burden, seemed to make it heavier. It was one thing to be told what to do; it was another to choose for oneself and live with the consequences.

Like a beacon in the storm of his thoughts, Erik's words broke through the fog of his indecision. "It's alright if you don't want a Flyssa, Noah. Choose what feels right for you."

The older clone's voice was firm yet gentle, his gaze understanding. His words were not just a suggestion, but a permission - the permission Noah didn't know he needed, the nudge that tipped the scales of his wavering decision.

With Erik's words echoing in his mind, Noah took a deep, steadying breath.

He could feel the tension easing from his shoulders, the knot in his stomach unraveling.

Raising his head, he met Erik's gaze. His eyes, previously clouded with uncertainty, now shone. "I'd like a Claymore, please," he declared. His voice was steady, his decision made.

A sense of relief washed over him as he spoke the words. His choice laid bare for all to hear.

The room fell silent for a moment as everyone absorbed his decision. Then, to Noah's surprise and relief, smiles spread across the faces of his brothers - not of disappointment, but of acceptance and respect for his choice.

He looked at Erik, searching for any sign of disappointment or disapproval, but found none. Instead, he saw a nod of affirmation, a simple gesture that spoke volumes.

At that moment, Noah realized that his choice was not a rejection of Erik or the others but an affirmation of himself—of his right to be different, to choose what felt true to him.

And as he stood there, at peace with his decision, he felt a newfound sense of freedom, a liberation from the invisible chains of expectation and conformity.

Fabian's eyes widened, taken aback. After a string of Flyssas, the choice of a Claymore—a weapon so different in form and function—was unexpected.

"A Claymore, you say? That's quite a departure from the others. But it's your choice and a fine one at that."

Erik was pleased that Noah had chosen a weapon that suited him, regardless of what the others had picked. It was a moment that underscored the individuality within their collective identity.

"Alright, gentlemen," Fabian said, regaining his composure. "Since Erik has already decided on the hilt design, you can focus on the materials and other aspects of the blade itself. Any preferences?"

The clones, now more relaxed, discussed their choices. Some opted for specific alloys to enhance durability, while others chose intricate etchings to add a personal touch to their weapons.

Noah, still feeling the weight of his unconventional choice, decided on a high-carbon steel blade with a fuller to reduce weight, making it easier to wield.

Fabian, his fingers gliding over the digital pad, noted each specification. His eyes sparkled with an unmistakable excitement, the prospect of the challenge ahead lighting a fire within him.

"Seven custom weapons, each unique in its way. This will be a project to remember," he said, his voice filled with anticipation.

Erik stepped forward, his tall figure cutting an imposing silhouette in the lit room. He extended his hand towards Fabian, a gesture of gratitude and respect.

"Thank you, Fabian, and you too, Matthias. We look forward to seeing your craftsmanship." His voice was firm yet warm, expressing his trust in their abilities.

Fabian looked up at Erik, meeting his gaze. He reached out, clasping Erik's hand in a firm handshake.

Fabian shook Erik's hand, a smile spreading across his face. "It's always a pleasure, Mr. Kay. Your weapons will be ready in three months. We'll make sure they're worth the wait."

Matthias, who had been observing the proceedings from the sidelines, now stepped forward.

His usually stoic face softened into a small, appreciative smile as he extended his hand to Erik. "We'll put our best into these weapons. You can count on that," he said, his voice steady and sincere. His eyes held a spark of determination, reflecting his commitment to their task.

Erik nodded in response, a sense of mutual respect and understanding passing between them.

His gaze then swept over his clones, their faces lit up with anticipation and excitement. "Alright, guys, let's head out. We've got a lot more to do," he announced, his voice carrying a note of leadership and determination.

As Erik's words hung in the air, the clones moved. Some nodded their agreement, others clapped their companions on the shoulder, all of them buzzing with renewed energy.

As they left Matthias' Blades, each clone felt a sense of anticipation and a newfound purpose.

While they were indeed Erik's clones, they were also unique individuals in their own right and deserved to be treated with the same dignity and respect as any other person.

They were more than just replicas; they were sentient beings with their own identities, existing not merely to serve Erik. Despite their created purpose, they were living entities and were deserving of respect and consideration.

As they stepped out into the bustling streets, the sun setting on a day of decisions and beginnings, they all knew that their choices today were but the first steps in a journey that promised to be as challenging as it was rewarding.

#### Chapter 649: Roles

Erik and his clones made their way back to their guild headquarters, weaving through the busy streets of the city.

The city was already bustling with activity, its streets teeming with people going about their daily routines.

The vibrant energy of the metropolis was palpable, with the hum of activity filling the air.

The sidewalks were crowded with pedestrians, jostling for space as they hurried to their destinations.

Cars and other vehicles clogged the streets, honking impatiently as they inched forward in the traffic.

The shops and markets lining the streets were open for business, their owners hawking their wares to passersby. The smells of freshly baked bread, roasted coffee, and exotic spices mingled in the air, creating a heady aroma that tantalized the senses.

The surrounding cityscape seemed to blur, its towering buildings and bustling crowds fading into the background as they focused on the future.

Noah walked beside Erik, his earlier hesitation replaced by a palpable sense of eagerness.

The decision to choose a Claymore had lifted a weight off his shoulders, and he felt a newfound sense of freedom.

The other clones, Ari, Yori, Nick, Damon, and Swaran, chatted animatedly among themselves, their voices tinged with excitement as they speculated on the designs of their Flyssas.

After a while, the group arrived at the guild and headed to Erik's office, escorted by a huge number of waiters and people walking along the guild.

Erik settled into his chair, the weight of responsibilities pressing on him as he looked at the faces of his clones—each a reflection of his potential, yet uniquely individual.

He leaned forward, his eyes scanning the faces of his team. "Ok guys," he said, his voice firm but calm. "I'm going to give you some tasks to make everything simpler and more manageable."

He raised his hand, gesturing for them to pay attention. His face was serious, but there was a hint of determination in his eyes.

As he spoke, he could sense the tension in the room. His team members were all staring at him, their faces reflecting a mix of anxiety and determination.

"Ari," Erik began, looking at the clone, who bore a striking resemblance to him but with a more rugged demeanor.

"You're in charge of vehicles—maintenance, supervision, the whole shebang. Make sure they're always in top condition, ready for any mission. Coordinate with the mechanics and monitor fuel and spare parts inventory, and ensure that the vehicles are enough. Try to buy as many armored and armed one as possible, and coordinate with the others for quest and personnel."

Ari nodded, his eyes focused and determined. "Understood, Master."

"Luke," Erik continued, turning to the tall clone, whose presence was as commanding as his own. "Weapons are your domain. Ensure they're well-maintained and stored properly. Keep track of ammunition and work closely with the armory. I want every guild member to have access to the best gear. Buy new ones if necessary."

Luke's eyes gleamed with a sense of purpose. "I won't let you down."

Erik's gaze shifted to Yori, the youngest-looking of the clones. He leaned forward in his chair, his eyes locking onto Yori's. His facial expression was serious, conveying the weight of the responsibility he was about to entrust to him.

"You'll handle everything related to quests," Erik said, his voice firm but calm. His words carried a sense of trust and confidence in Yori's abilities.

Yori's face lit up as he knew that this was a crucial role, one that would require him to be organized, efficient, and diplomatic. But he was eager to prove himself and contribute to the guild's success.

As Erik continued, Yori listened intently, his body language reflecting his focus and determination. His hands rested on his lap, his fingers tapping restlessly as he absorbed Erik's instructions.

"That means liaising with the Mercenary Guild, updating our quest boards, and ensuring our members are well-suited for their assignments," Erik said, his words emphasizing the importance of Yori's role.

Yori nodded, his eyes shining with eagerness. He knew he had big shoes to fill, but he was determined to rise to the occasion.

As he stood there, Yori's posture radiated confidence and readiness. He was eager to get started, knowing that his contributions would be invaluable to the guild's success.

Yori grinned, clearly excited by the responsibility. "Got it, Master."

"Nick," Erik said, "you're responsible for human capital. Recruitment, training, and personnel management fall under you. Make sure we have the right people in the right roles. I want the guild to have double the members when I return."

Nick nodded, his eyes serious but filled with understanding. "I'll see to it."

Erik's gaze shifted to Damon, the clone with a more analytical demeanor. He observed Damon with a discerning eye, recognizing his aptitude for logistics.

As Erik spoke, his brows furrowed slightly, showing the gravity of the responsibility he was about to give to Damon. His voice carried a tone of confidence and expectation, emphasizing the importance of the task at hand.

Damon's eyes met Erik's with a sharp, analytical gaze. His expression remained composed, but a flicker of determination sparked in his eyes. He was already mentally assessing the complexities of the role, preparing himself for the challenges that lay ahead.

His hands instinctively moved to his sides, ready to take on the organizational tasks that awaited him.

As Erik outlined the responsibilities, Damon's mind churned with thoughts and calculations.

A confident smile played at the corners of Damon's lips as he responded, his voice filled with assurance. "Consider it done," he replied, his words carrying a sense of conviction and readiness.

"Swaran," Erik said, turning to the last clone, whose eyes were as sharp as his own. "You're in charge of supplies—food, medical kits, and other essentials. Keep our stocks full and ensure we're prepared for any situation."

Swaran nodded, accepting the task with a sense of gravity. "I understand, Master."

Finally, Erik looked at Noah, his first clone, the one who had been with him the longest. "Noah, you have the most challenging role. You'll oversee everything, make sure these guys are doing their jobs right, and handle high-level decisions."

Noah met Erik's gaze, his brows furrowing slightly with a mixture of apprehension and resolve. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest as he locked eyes with his master.

He knew that this was a crucial moment, a test of his abilities and loyalty.



As he spoke, his voice quivered slightly, betraying the nervousness that he felt deep inside. "I won't disappoint you, Master," he said, his voice filled with determination.

Noah's mind raced with thoughts and emotions. He wanted to prove himself to Erik, to show that he was capable and worthy of the trust placed in him.

Behind his apprehensive gaze, there was a flicker of resilience and a burning desire to succeed.

He took a deep breath, trying to steady his racing heartbeat. With a subtle nod, he silently communicated his commitment to Erik and their shared mission.

Erik leaned back, looking at each of them in turn. "I know you won't. If I could manage all these tasks alone, I do not doubt that each of you can excel in your respective roles. We're in this together."

Erik stood up, his eyes sweeping across the room to meet each clone's gaze one last time. "There's one more thing," he said, his voice tinged with a sense of urgency.

"You're not just administrators; you're also among the strongest members of this guild. I expect each of you to register at the Mercenary Guild, take the test, and aim for the Pupil rank within a month. And not just pass it—I want high scores."

The clones exchanged glances. Noah, the voice of the group, spoke up, his voice tinged with concern. "We do not have an identity. What do we do about it?" His forehead creased with worry, and his eyes searched Erik's face for guidance.

Erik's expression remained calm and composed, his lips forming a determined line. He met Noah's gaze with a reassuring nod, silently conveying his confidence and determination. "I will take care of it," he replied, his voice steady and resolute.

Noah's shoulders relaxed slightly as he absorbed Erik's words. A sense of relief washed over him, knowing that their leader had a plan. He glanced at the other clones, his eyes filled with determination and a hint of optimism.

With a firm nod, Noah spoke on behalf of the group, his voice tinged with determination. "Then we'll do our best, Master," he assured.

As they stood there, a silent understanding passed between them. Their facial expressions and body language conveyed their readiness to face the unknown, united in their purpose and commitment to Erik's mission.

"Good," Erik nodded approvingly, a small smile playing at the corners of his lips. His facial expression conveyed a sense of satisfaction and confidence in his team's abilities.

As Erik spoke, his hands gestured with purpose, emphasizing the importance of their tasks. His body language exuded a sense of authority and determination, underscoring the weight of his words.

Ari, standing tall and straight, met Erik's gaze with unwavering determination.

His voice resonated with resolve as he spoke, projecting confidence and determination. "We understand, Master," Ari said, his tone unwavering.

Internally, Ari felt a surge of motivation and determination. He was ready to push himself beyond his limits, both inside and outside the guild.

At that moment, a shared sense of purpose filled the room. Erik's nod of approval and Ari's resolute words solidified their bond as a team.

Erik smiled, satisfied with their responses. "I know you will. And don't forget to coordinate with Lysa about the orders I placed. She'll fill you in on the details."

"We will, Master," Luke confirmed, his eyes sharp and focused.

Erik pulled his coat from the back of his chair and slung it over his shoulder. "Then I'll leave you to it. Remember, the guild's future is in your hands as much as it is in mine."

With those parting words, Erik stepped out of the office, the door closing softly behind him.

As he walked away, he couldn't help but feel a sense of pride and anticipation. His clones were ready, and so was he. The guild was entering a new era, and the possibilities seemed endless.

#### Chapter 650: Guild Duties and Personal Desires (1)

Erik had been walking through the corridors of his guild's headquarters, his boots echoing against the floor.

His initial destination had been his room, but the gnawing hunger in his stomach persuaded him to make a detour to the cafeteria. He wasn't the only one with that idea, as fate would have it.

"Erik!" a voice echoed, its tone laced with an unmistakable joy that danced in the chilly air. Turning around, Erik's eyes met Mira's.

Her face radiated pure elation, her eyes sparkling like stars.

Her lips curved into a wide, sincere smile that seemed to light up her entire face, and her rosy cheeks glowed with warmth and happiness.

She was a few meters away, but at that moment, the distance felt insignificant.

Erik's heart pounded in his chest, a rhythm that matched the excitement mirrored in Mira's eyes.

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth, his eyes crinkling with joy as he watched her approach. Affection overwhelmed the young man, leaving him breathless.

As she approached, he readied himself, opening his arms to embrace her, and realized, in that instant, that being with her was all he desired.

Erik felt her body press against his, her arms wrapping around him. He caressed her head, his fingers running through her soft hair.

"It's been a while, Mira," he whispered, his voice soft as a feather, laced with an undercurrent of warmth that seemed to radiate from him. His eyes, deep pools of affection, held hers in a tender gaze.

His hand reached out to brush a loose strand of hair from her face.

As his fingers brushed against her cheek, they lingered there for a moment, conveying a deep sentiment through their light touch.

Meanwhile, his thumb traced a soft line, causing a warm sensation to spread and leaving her cheeks flushed in its wake.

His heart throbbed in his chest, beating a rhythm that spoke volumes of his feelings for her. The way she looked at him, the way she fit into his arms - it seemed like she was made for him.

From an outsider's perspective, saying "It's been a while" after only three days since their last encounter might seem odd.

But for Erik and Mira, who had spent months side by side, sharing secrets and nurturing feelings that were as fierce as they were tender, three days felt like an eternity.

Mira gently pulled back, creating a delicate space between them. Her eyes, a mirror of her soul, studied his face hidden behind the familiar mask. Her brows furrowed in a mix of curiosity and concern. "You've been away. What was so urgent?" she asked, her lips forming a playful pout, but her voice was laced with a layer of worry that she couldn't quite hide.

Erik sighed, a soft exhalation that ruffled his mask. His eyes, so full of warmth and mirth, clouded over - a stormy sea reflecting the burdens he carried.

His jaw tightened. "Guild matters," he replied, his voice steady. He chose his words carefully, not wanting to delve into the complexities of his recent tasks, as it was too bothersome.

Erik's hand reached out, finding Mira's in a comforting embrace. Fingers entwined, a gentle stroke over her knuckles conveyed a silent promise of unwavering support.

Thoughts of Mira filled his mind - a whirlpool of concern for her well-being, a burning desire to protect her, coupled with a wave of gratitude for her steadfast support. Each heartbeat echoed these sentiments, their silent exchange speaking volumes about the depth of their bond.

"And you? What have you been up to?" Erik steered the conversation away from himself, his voice laced with genuine interest. His eyes, still holding hers, sparkled with curiosity. His fingers squeezed hers, a silent encouragement for her to share.

A radiant smile blossomed across Mira's face, transforming her features into a picture of pure joy. Her eyes twinkled with excitement, and her cheeks flushed with pride. "Quests and training," she began, her voice filled with enthusiasm. Her free hand moved as she spoke, reflecting the energy in her words.

However, it was her next words that lit up her face. "I have to share some news: I established a new neural link. I've reached the  $\xi$  level!" She announced, her voice ringing with triumph. Her chest swelled with pride, and she held his gaze, eager to see his reaction.

Erik's eyes widened, his heart swelling with pride. "That's incredible, Mira! You did a good job!" he said, his voice tinged with awe and admiration. Erik lifted and spun Mira in the air. They shared a tender laugh before Erik placed her back on the ground.

"We should celebrate this," Erik said, his voice carrying a note of excitement. His eyes, hidden behind the mask, locked onto hers, their depths reflecting his sincere admiration for her achievement.

His fingers intertwined with hers, confirming his words and his heart pounded in his chest, a rhythm that echoed his anticipation.

Mira's eyes sparkled at his suggestion, intrigue lighting up her gaze. A playful smile tugged at the corners of her lips as she tilted her head, her curiosity piqued. "Oh? And how do you propose we do that?" she asked, her voice dropping to a seductive whisper that sent a thrill down his spine.

Her question hung in the air between them, a tantalizing invitation that promised a world of possibilities. Erik could see the excitement mirrored in her eyes.

The young man grinned, his eyes twinkling in the lights. "Nothing too extravagant. How about a dinner? Just the two of us."

A delicate blush bloomed on Mira's cheeks, painting a picture of mixed emotions. Her eyes, so bright, held a hint of disappointment that she couldn't quite mask. However, the spark of happiness in her gaze was undeniable.

"A dinner sounds perfect, Erik," she responded, her voice holding a note of slight disappointment that was overshadowed by her genuine happiness. Her lips curved into a warm smile, softening the disappointment in her eyes.

Her fingers tightened around his in a reassuring squeeze, communicating her acceptance and anticipation. Despite the initial disappointment, her heart fluttered with excitement at the thought of spending more time with him.

The world around them seemed to fade away as they stood there, wrapped in each other's arms. All that remained was the profound connection between them.

"Ok, but let's go grab a coffee if you don't mind. I was headed there," Erik said, his voice carrying a casual tone.

"Me too." Mira's response was immediate and accompanied by a bright smile lit up her face. Her eyes sparkled with shared anticipation, and she gave his hand an eager squeeze.

Erik and Mira left the embrace of the corridor's bright light, making their way to the guild's cafeteria.

The atmosphere was casual, filled with the aroma of freshly brewed coffee and the indistinct murmur of conversations.

Erik modified his mask so that he could eat and drink without removing it, a feature that came in handy in moments like this.

"Two coffees, please," Erik said to the barista, who nodded and prepared their beverages.

As they waited for their orders, Mira turned to Erik, her eyes filled with curiosity.

"I've been so wrapped up in quests and training that I've lost touch with the guild's affairs. How are things going?" Her voice held a note of concern.

Erik's eyes remained on Mira, reading her expressions as he planned his response.

"We're doing well financially and slowly expanding our fleet of vehicles. Our reputation has spread, and the number of applicants wanting to join is rising." His voice held a note of pride, reflecting his satisfaction with the guild's progress.

Mira's eyes widened at his words, her surprise clear. Her lips parted, a silent gasp escaping them as she took in the information.

"That's fantastic news," she said, her voice filled with genuine admiration.

Erik couldn't help but return her smile, his heart warmed by her reaction. He felt a sense of satisfaction wash over him, knowing that their hard work was paying off.

"Indeed, I've also found some powerful people, and I plan on making an elite team with them," Erik said.

"Also, today, I met with a merchant to purchase armored vehicles. The idea is to help our newer and newbie members step up their game. I also ordered a large batch of high-quality weapons."

Mira nodded, taking a sip of her own coffee. "That's a smart move, especially considering how dangerous our missions can be. Having spare weapons could be a lifesaver, but I guess the cost was high, right?"

Erik made a face that was halfway confirming what she said and halfway denying it. "Yes, and no. I know the merchant, and we have an agreement, so I'm not worried about the price. But I can't tell how much it will cost since I left the specifics to others who will start taking care of these matters on my behalf. Honestly, I didn't have time even to go to the bathroom."

Mira chuckled, "Glad you found the time to take a shit, then."

"Stop it..." Erik said, faking being annoyed but also smiling.

Mira paused, her eyes narrowing. "We should invest in advanced medical supplies and maybe even hiring a full-time healer. Our missions are getting riskier, and having immediate medical attention could make a difference."

Erik looked at her, his eyes reflecting deep thought. "That's an excellent suggestion, Mira. I'll give it some serious consideration."

They finished their coffees, the empty cups a testament to the warmth and depth of their conversation. Erik glanced at his wrist communicator, noting the time.

"We should get going," he said, standing up. "Why don't you go get ready? I'll pick you up in an hour, and we can head to the restaurant."

Mira's eyes sparkled, her smile radiant. "I'll be ready."

They stood, and Erik pulled her into a brief but meaningful hug. "See you in an hour," he said, his voice tinged with anticipation and affection.

Mira nodded, her eyes meeting his one last time, before she turned to leave. "See you, Erik."

As she walked away, her steps light and her heart full, Erik watched her go.