

BIOLOGICAL 651

Chapter 651: Guild Duties and Personal Desires (2)

Erik stepped out of the shower, the warm water droplets still clinging to his skin as he toweled off. He moved to his wardrobe, selecting a tailored suit that was both elegant and understated.

As Erik dressed, his thoughts drifted to Mira, the woman who had become a source of comfort and joy in his life. He imagined the smile that would light up her face when she saw him, and his heart swelled with a sense of warmth and contentment.

But even as he savored the thought of Mira's smile, his mind couldn't help but wander to Amber, the girlfriend he had left behind in Frant. Guilt gnawed at him as he thought of her, knowing that he had betrayed her trust by finding solace in another woman's arms.

Erik knew he needed physical connections and attention, something he had been deprived of as a child. But that didn't excuse his actions, and he couldn't help but feel remorseful for his actions.

He swore to himself he would make it up to her if they ever met again in the future, but deep down, he doubted that would ever happen.

As he finished dressing, Erik took a deep breath and pushed his thoughts aside. Then he picked up his phone and dialed the number for "Elegance," the high-class restaurant he had visited while hunting for Doran.

The line connected, and a polite voice answered the phone, "Good evening, Elegance Restaurant. How may I assist you?"

"This is Erik Kay." The young man knew his name now carried weight in the city, and he intended to leverage that influence to secure a table for the evening.

As he spoke, Erik's face held a confident expression. His brow was furrowed in concentration, but his eyes remained focused and determined. He exuded an air of authority, knowing his request would be taken seriously.

"Ah, Mr. Kay," the voice on the other end responded, tinged with a newfound respect. "What can I do for you?"

Upon hearing the voice on the other end respond with newfound respect, Erik's lips curled up in a small smile. The recognition of his name was gratifying, and he felt a sense of pride in his accomplishments.

"I need a table at your restaurant for dinner. I was hoping you could find me a nice table."

As he waited for a response, Erik's brow furrowed in anticipation. He was eager to enjoy a delicious meal, but he knew securing a table during the lunch rush could be a challenge.

The man on the other end of the line took a moment to consider his options, and Erik's fingers tapped on the phone. He felt a sense of urgency, knowing time was of the essence.

"The reservations for today almost filled our tables. But we will do our utmost to accommodate you. Please hold for a moment."

As he was asked to hold for a moment, Erik's mind wandered to the delectable dishes he had enjoyed at the restaurant in the past. He felt a sense of excitement and anticipation, eager to indulge in his favorite flavors once again.

Erik waited, his thoughts drifting to the evening ahead. He envisioned the candlelit atmosphere, the sumptuous food, but, most importantly, the time he would spend with Mira.

"Mr. Kay, you're in luck. We've reserved a table for you. Will it be for two?" the voice said, the tone deferential but warm.

Erik's smile grew wider, his lips curling up at the corners. He felt a sense of excitement and satisfaction knowing his request had been granted.

"Yes, for two," he confirmed, his voice filled with enthusiasm. He couldn't help but feel a surge of happiness, knowing he would share this special evening with someone dear to him.

As Erik spoke, his body language relaxed, his shoulders easing down. He imagined the pleasant atmosphere, the restaurant's warm ambiance, and the delightful company he would enjoy.

The voice on the other end of the line continued, and Erik's eyes widened with anticipation. A smile spread across his face, his lips curling upward as he imagined the delightful evening ahead.

"Very well, your table will be ready by 20:00," the voice said, and Erik's eyebrows raised in excitement.

"If you want, you can come earlier to have an aperitivo served. We look forward to serving you tonight," the man said.

"Thank you," Erik said, his voice filled with appreciation. He ended the call with a contented sigh.

Erik couldn't help but reflect on how much his life had changed in the past year. Just twelve months ago, he had been struggling to make ends meet, scraping by with the little money he had.

He remembered the days when he had to skip meals just to make ends meet, and the nights when he would lie awake, worrying about how he would pay his bills.

But now, things were different. With hard work and determination, Erik had turned his life around. He had worked tirelessly, building his business from the ground up, and now he was reaping the rewards of his labor.

The fact that he could now dine in some of the finest restaurants in the world was a testament to his success. It was a far cry from the days when he couldn't afford a decent meal.

Erik glanced at the clock, noticing it was almost time to leave. He took a deep breath, savoring the anticipation that tingled through him.

Erik sat in the plush backseat of one of his luxury cars, his eyes meeting Mira's as they made their way to Elegance, the city's most prestigious restaurant.

The car glided through the city streets, but Erik's attention was on Mira. She was a vision of elegance, her beauty magnified by the effort she had put into her appearance for the evening.

Gone was her usual braid; tonight, her dark hair cascaded in soft waves down her back, adding a touch of sophistication to her look. She wore a stunning dress that shimmered in the soft light of the car's interior—a far cry from her usual green attire.

Her eyes, always bright and piercing, seemed to sparkle with an inner light, reflecting curiosity and zest for life that Erik found captivating.

However, despite her bright and captivating eyes, Erik found his gaze wandering to her ample bosom, which was subtly revealed by the dress she wore. He couldn't help but feel drawn to the curves of her body, his eyes lingering on the soft swell of her breasts.

"So, Aiden took..."

Erik struggled to keep eye contact, his attention drawn to her chest. He felt a sense of attraction that he couldn't deny, his mind consumed with thoughts of her body.

Erik's gaze was fixated on her bosom, and he stared. He felt a sense of desire he couldn't ignore, his eyes drinking from the sight of her curves.

"Are you listening?" Mira asked, her voice tinged with a hint of annoyance.

"Uh? Ah... Yes!" Erik's mind wandered to the curves of her body that he had been admiring just moments before.

Then a devilish grin appeared on Mira's face, and Erik felt his heart skip a beat. He knew he had been caught staring, and the embarrassment washed over him like a wave.

"You can look at it without the clothes later," Mira said in a teasing manner, her tone playful but suggestive.

Erik's cheeks burned with embarrassment, and he struggled to maintain his composure. The only solace was that his mask hid his reddened cheeks.

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As they arrived at Elegance, Erik stepped out of the car first and extended his hand to help Mira out. The moment her feet touched the ground, it was as if the world admired her. Erik felt a swell of pride; she was extraordinary, and she was his.

The maitre greeted them with a deferential nod as they entered the restaurant. "Mr. Kay, a pleasure to have you. Your table is ready."

They were led to a secluded table, elegantly set with fine porcelain and crystal glassware. As they sat, Erik couldn't help but admire how the soft glow of the chandeliers danced in Mira's eyes, making them even more mesmerizing.

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The dinner unfolded like a dream. They talked about everything and nothing—missions they'd been on, the growth of the guild, and even the books they'd been reading. The conversation naturally shifted to plans for the future.

"I've been thinking," Erik began, locking eyes with Mira, "about expanding the guild's reach. Maybe even establishing branches in other cities."

Mira's eyes lit up at the idea, and Erik felt a surge of excitement. He knew that this was a bold move, but he couldn't ignore the potential for growth and expansion.

But as Mira spoke, Erik could sense her hesitation. He could see the furrow in her brow, and the slight tension in her body language. He knew she had concerns, and he felt a twinge of doubt creep into his mind.

"I think it is too soon to think about it, to be honest." Mira had a measured tone as she said those words.

"The guild doesn't even have a year and making other branches seems too rushed. I think we should expand the number of workers, and then maybe think about other cities later. Don't let these months' successes cloud your judgment."

Erik felt a sense of disappointment wash over him, knowing that Mira was right. However, he nodded, pleased by her insight. "Yeah, maybe you are right... But let's stop talking about the guild; what about you? How are things going for your party?"

Mira paused, her eyes meeting his. "Well, we are there to increase our guild rank, but as you know, things aren't simple. However, thanks to the vehicles you bought and the people are coming with us to hunt. Killing Thaid's became easier."

"Glad to hear this; I knew you joining was bound to be a good choice. Aside from that, how is life going in general?"

"Glad you asked," Mira said, "Lately, I'm having problems with my neighbor; that bitch won't stop blasting music at high volumes every time I come home to sleep. It's exhausting."

The dinner continued, and as Erik and Mira finished their dessert, a sense of contentment settled over Erik.

Everything had been perfect, not just because of the luxurious setting or the exquisite food, but also because of the warmth and affection emanating from the woman sitting across from him.

However, his heart wasn't only for her; every time they talked, he couldn't stop thinking about Amber.

How was she? Was his fake death affecting her? Then his thoughts wandered to other people. Specifically, there was someone else Erik couldn't stop thinking about, Emily. Was she alive? Did his father protect her?

Was she healthy?

Even if Erik was with Amber or Mira, he never forgot the woman who made his heart beat for the first time. It was weird, and Erik felt guilty. Unfortunately, the heart decided on its own, so he had turmoil feelings and didn't know what to do.

Chapter 652: Guild Updates

A week had elapsed since Erik's memorable dinner with Mira. During that time, he had been relentless in hunting Thaidis. His efforts had filled the guild's coffers with a substantial amount of money and made him gain a lot of experience points.

However, Erik had delegated the day-to-day affairs of the guild to his clones—Noah, Luke, Ari, Yori, Nick, Damon, and Swaran. This allowed him to focus on broader plans and personal matters.

On this morning, Erik found himself in his office. He picked up the phone and dialed Luke's number.

Erik's voice was firm as he spoke into the receiver. "Luke, could you and the others come to my office? It's time for an update." His brow furrowed, a physical manifestation of the thoughts swirling in his mind.

On the other end of the line, Luke's voice echoed back, steady and respectful. "Understood, sir. We'll be there shortly." His response was punctuated by the unmistakable sound of the call ending, leaving Erik alone once again in his sunlit office.

Erik hung up the phone. He leaned back in his chair, a sigh escaping his lips as he ran a hand through his hair.

His gaze drifted towards the window, his eyes taking in the peaceful scene outside. A sense of anticipation hung in the air, the quiet before the storm.

Within a matter of minutes, the heavy mahogany door to Erik's office creaked open, breaking the silence that had settled in the room. One by one, the seven clones stepped over the threshold.

They filed in with an air of discipline and respect, their boots making soft thuds against the polished wooden floor. They arranged themselves in a neat line, standing shoulder to shoulder, their gazes fixed straight ahead. Their postures were rigid, their backs straight as arrows, their hands clasped behind them in a stance that spoke volumes about their training and dedication.

Without a word, they raised their right hands in a crisp salute, a gesture of respect and allegiance towards Erik. Their movements were synchronized, like a well-rehearsed dance.

Erik looked at each of them in turn, acknowledging their salute with a nod. "Can you avoid doing this? It's embarrassing..."

"Yes, Master," the clones said in unison.

With a calm and composed expression, Erik extended his hand, gesturing towards the array of seats arranged in front of his grand oak desk. His fingers moved in a gentle sweep, an unspoken invitation for the clones to make themselves comfortable.

"I've been out of the loop for a week, focusing on hunting and other matters," he began, his voice steady and clear, echoing around the room. His eyes held a reflective glint, hinting at the countless hours he had spent in the wild, battling Thaidis.

His hands clasped together on the desk, fingers interlacing in a show of determination. "I'd like to know how things are going with the guild. Let's start with finances." Erik's gaze swept over each clone.

His words hung in the air, a tangible reminder of his role as their leader and his commitment to their collective cause. The clones nodded in understanding, each one preparing to contribute to the discussion, their faces mirroring Erik's serious demeanor.

Damon, who had been entrusted with the guild's financial matters, cleared his throat and stepped forward.

"We've seen a steady increase in revenue, especially after your recent hunting expeditions. The guild's financial health is robust," he reported, his voice resonating in the quiet room.

Erik listened, his sharp eyes never leaving Damon's face. At the reassuring news, a small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. He nodded.

"Good," he acknowledged, his voice carrying a note of satisfaction. His stern demeanor softened, a glimmer of pride visible in his eyes.

His simple affirmation held a wealth of meaning - recognition of their collective efforts, appreciation for Damon's efficient management, and a subtle reassurance that they were on the right path.

Seated at his desk, Erik's gaze moved across the faces of his seven clones—Noah, Luke, Ari, Yori, Nick, Damon, and Swaran. They stood before him, forming a semi-circle, their attention focused on their leader.

Erik's gaze moved from the stack of documents, his eyes narrowing as he focused on the next issue at hand. "What about the weapons and vehicles I ordered from Lysa's shop?" he asked, his tone carrying a hint of anticipation.

The room fell silent, all eyes on Luke and Ari as they prepared to respond. There was a palpable sense of expectancy, a collective holding of breath as they waited for the report.

Luke stepped forward, his eyes gleaming with a sense of purpose and determination. "Master, I've got the weapons from Lysa's shop," he began, the pride in his voice clear.

"We now have an assortment of melee weapons, from swords to daggers. I also bought pikes, spears, and many more."

Turning his attention to ranged options, Luke's expression grew animated. "We've stocked up on laser rifles, photon blasters, and even some specialized grenades that can disrupt electronic systems. I also bought bows and crossbows for those who have brain crystal powers that can be used with them."

His expression sobered as he said, "I've selected weapons that would be versatile and effective for most guild members, and I tried to buy high-quality items." A hint of regret seeped into his voice as he confessed, "Of course, the best materials were out of our budget, so there was not much I could do to buy them."

Erik nodded, pleased. "Don't worry about that. Soon we will have more money. Excellent work, Luke." He then turned to look at Ari. "What about the vehicles?"

Ari stepped forward, clearing his throat to get the others' attention. His eyes held a determined gleam, reflecting the responsibility he had undertaken. "I've purchased a fleet of ten 'Valkyrie Titans,' Master," he began, his voice steady and confident.

"These are land-only vehicles, but they come equipped with heavy laser cannons and missile launchers," he said, a note of pride seeping into his tone.

His gaze intensified, "They also have advanced shielding technology and are capable of deploying smoke screens for tactical advantages."

Pausing for a moment, Ari's expression softened as he described the comforts within the vehicles. "The interiors are designed for maximum comfort and have integrated AI systems for navigation and threat detection," he concluded, his voice echoing around the room.

His report was met with a moment of silence, the clones absorbing the information.

The seriousness of Ari's demeanor underscored the importance of these acquisitions, each feature chosen to enhance their battle readiness and ensure their safety.

Erik's eyes widened, a rare expression of surprise and admiration crossing his face as Ari concluded his report. "Outstanding, Ari," he commended, his voice carrying a note of genuine appreciation. "Those vehicles will advantage our low-level members during hunts."

Without missing a beat, Erik continued, his gaze shifting towards Nick. His expression hardened, signaling the gravity of his next request. "Nick, I want to add some healers to our ranks. They're scarce, but we need them."

Nick met Erik's gaze, nodding in understanding. His eyes held a serious glint, but also a sense of resolve. "I understand, Master. I'll do my best to find and recruit skilled healers," he assured, his tone echoing his commitment.

Erik maintained his focused gaze on Nick, his eyes reflecting his keen interest. "Good. Have we recruited any other worthy members?" he inquired, his words laced with an underlying expectation.

Nick responded, his eyes meeting Erik's without flinching. His voice steady and confident, he reported, "We've added thirty more mercenaries to our ranks, Master. They're undergoing training."

There was a shared sense of achievement, a subtle nod to their collective efforts and the progress they had made.

A nod of satisfaction from Erik acknowledged the progress. His features softened as he turned to Yori. "Excellent. Yori, how are we doing on the quest front?"

Yori grinned, excited by his role. "We've been liaising with the Mercenary Guild, Master. Our quest boards are updated daily, and I've been matching our members with quests that suit their skill sets."

Then Erik turned to look at Damon, and the clone stepped forward. Without waiting for Erik to ask a question, he said, "All departments are coordinating well, Master. Resource allocation is optimized, and we've streamlined our supply routes."

"Good to hear. Swaran, what about supplies?"

Swaran stepped forward, his eyes sharp. "As Damon already stated, our stocks are full, Master. We have ample food, medical kits, and other essentials. We're prepared for any situation."

Erik looked at Noah, his first and most trusted clone. "Noah, you've been overseeing all of this. Are you satisfied with their performance?"

Noah met Erik's gaze, his eyes filled with a mixture of apprehension and resolve. "They've exceeded expectations, Master. I have no doubts about their capabilities."

"One more thing," Erik said. "We have training grounds within our building, and it's time we make better use of them. I want to find experts to train our weaker members in combat skills, not just physical fitness."

Nick, who was in charge of the human capital, nodded. "You're thinking swordsmanship, marksmanship, that sort of thing?"

"Exactly," Erik confirmed. "Find people who can teach sword fighting, how to handle ranged weapons, and other combat-related skills. We need to elevate the capabilities of every guild member."

Ari chimed in. "That will also allow us to test and adapt the new weapons and vehicles in a training environment."

Erik nodded, pleased with the proactive thought. "Point, Ari. Make sure the trainers are familiarized with our new gear."

Noah met Erik's eyes. "We'll get on it right away, Master."

"Ah, before I forget, I made you some fake identities; you can join the guild when you want. Do not disappoint me." Erik said, his eyes meeting each of theirs in turn. "You're dismissed."

As the door closed behind his clones, Erik leaned back in his chair, a sense of satisfaction washing over him. He looked around his office, his eyes lingering on the maps and tactical displays that adorned the walls.

The guild was growing stronger, more organized, and better equipped for the challenges that lay ahead.

"Things are looking good," he muttered to himself, allowing a rare smile to cross his lips. With capable clones and a dedicated guild, Erik felt more confident than ever that they were on the path to greatness.

Chapter 653: A work proposal

Just as the door clicked shut behind his clones, Erik's communication device buzzed on his desk. The caller ID displayed Lysa's name. Intrigued, he picked it up.

Erik maintained his calm and composed demeanor as he addressed Lysa. "Lysa, to what do I owe the pleasure?" His voice carried a cool and collected tone, tinged with curiosity. His expression remained neutral, betraying no hint of excitement or surprise.

Lysa, standing nearby, met Erik's gaze with a poised and professional demeanor. Her tone matched his coolness as she spoke.

"Erik, there's someone who wishes to speak with you," Lysa maintained a formal undertone while speaking. "He's asked me to act as a proxy and set up a holographic call with you."

Curiosity danced behind Erik's cool exterior as he inquired further. "Do you know what this is about? Who is the guy?" His voice remained steady and composed, betraying no trace of eagerness or excitement.

"It's a merchant from here; he mentioned he wanted to give you a private quest directed at you and your guild. Beyond that, he didn't disclose any details," she replied.

Erik considered the implications of the call. As his guild gained notoriety, private jobs were inevitable.

After a moment of consideration, Erik nodded. "Alright, pass the call through." His voice was steady and confident, his expression betraying no hint of hesitation or doubt.

"Will do," Lysa said before disconnecting.

As Lysa set up the holographic call, Erik's body remained relaxed and poised. He exuded a sense of calm and confidence, his cool demeanor remaining unbroken and his mysterious aura was enhanced by his mask.

Erik swiveled his chair to face the holographic projection platform on the other side of his desk.

A few seconds later, the air above the platform shimmered, and a three-dimensional figure materialized.

The hologram that appeared was of a man who looked to be in his late forties. He had a trimmed beard, graying at the edges, and wore a tailored suit that screamed affluence. His eyes were a striking shade of blue, and they held a calculating glint.

A set of ornate rings adorned his fingers, and a golden chain could be seen peeking out from under his shirt collar.

His overall demeanor radiated confidence and cunning, the hallmarks of a seasoned merchant.

Erik leaned back in his chair, his eyes locked on the holographic figure. The man's appearance alone told him that this was no ordinary request.

Whoever this merchant was, he meant tremendous business opportunities, and Erik found himself intrigued to hear what the man offered or requested.

The holographic figure of the merchant materialized before Erik, the projection stabilizing into a lifelike representation.

The merchant's eyes locked onto Erik's with a mixture of urgency and calculation, his gaze intense and focused.

"Greetings, Mr. Kay. My name is Victor Hale," the merchant introduced himself. Erik maintained his relaxed posture, leaning back in his chair, but his attention remained engaged. "I've asked Lysa to introduce us because I need your help."

"Lysa mentioned something of the sort," Erik acknowledged, his tone measured and composed. He chose his words carefully, conveying both his intrigue and wariness. He was cautious, aware that private quests often came with their fair share of risks and challenges.

"What seems to be the problem, Mr. Hale?" Erik inquired, his voice steady and controlled. He maintained a calm and collected exterior, but his mind was processing the possibilities.

Victor took a deep breath before launching into his explanation. "I am a merchant and recently gained a substantial shipment of goods from Nokisi Point. The cargo was being flown back here to Testrovsc's Rest when I lost all contact with the plane. I hired a group of mercenaries to locate the crashed aircraft, but they've also gone missing."

Erik's eyebrows rose, his expression betraying a mixture of surprise and concern

. Losing both a shipment and a search party was no small matter, and he understood the gravity of the situation.

He leaned forward, his body language conveying a heightened focus as he prepared to delve deeper into the matter at hand.

"And you've come to me because?" Erik inquired, his voice laced with a mix of curiosity and skepticism. He wanted to understand why Victor Hale had sought him out for this problem. It was weird considering there were guilds with many members and of greater strength, on average, of his members.

Victor Hale's eyes narrowed, his gaze sharpening as he listened to Erik's question.

"I've heard a lot about you, Mr. Kay," there was admiration in the man's voice. "Your reputation for finding 'things and people' is becoming quite renowned. I believe you're the man for this job."

Erik maintained a composed expression, but a glimmer of pride danced in his eyes. He had dedicated himself to building a reputation as a skilled and resourceful individual, and it was evident in his demeanor.

The acknowledgment of his capabilities fueled his confidence, and he felt a surge of motivation to prove himself once again.

However, Erik wondered how this kind of information got around. After all, the only quests he made about finding people were when he went to find Doran and later to find Catrina. The only explanation was that someone said something about him and the Fierce Lioness's daughter, which wasn't good.

Still, there were some things he found weird, "Forgive me if I say this, but this doesn't explain why you came to us. There are high-ranked guilds in the city who could do the same job. They would have highly skilled people overall and probably better equipment. My guild is young, after all."

Victor chuckled, the sound devoid of any genuine joy. His eyes narrowed, his expression betraying a hint of frustration.

"Finding Warden-ranked mercenaries in Testrovsc's Rest isn't as straightforward as one might think, Mr. Kay." the exasperation in his voice was clear.

"You underestimate your worth."

He leaned forward, his body language showing a desire to understand the merchant's perspective.

"Besides, your guild is rising fast, and I suspect you're more affordable than the top-tier guilds inside the city," Victor was honest while talking to Erik. "Which, by the way, only have a couple of mercenaries a rank higher than yours. You rose in guild ranks a lot faster than everyone expected."

However, Erik's words held a hint of skepticism, and he sensed something was off.

"Don't misunderstand; I'm not looking to pay a pittance." Victor had no intention of making an enemy out of Erik. On the contrary, he wanted to impress the young prodigy. "I understand the value of good work."

Erik nodded in acknowledgment, his expression reflecting a sense of understanding.

Erik narrowed his eyes as he thoughtfully considered Victor's proposal. It was clear that Victor had done his homework, as he knew the limitations of the local mercenary market and had identified Erik's guild as a viable and cost-effective option. This was a smart move, and it made Erik even more curious about the lost shipment.

Erik's expression shifted to a more business-like tone, his eyes narrowing as he prepared to delve deeper into the details of the task at hand.

He leaned forward, his body language conveying a sense of focus and determination.

"Before I agree to anything, I need more details," Erik said, his voice measured and controlled. He wanted to ensure that he had a full understanding of the situation before committing to any course of action.

"What was the nature of the goods? Any idea why the planes might have gone down? And what were the last known coordinates?" he inquired, his voice carrying a note of professionalism. He was thorough in his approach, leaving no stone unturned in his quest for information.

Victor's expression remained composed, but a sense of urgency flickered in his eyes as he responded to Erik's questions. He leaned forward while his fingers tapped impatiently on the desk, betraying his growing anxiety.

"The cargo is a mix of high-tech equipment and weapons," he said, his voice carrying a note of concern. "However, the problem is that I also bought a couple of brain crystal weapons, and you can easily understand how much they cost."

Erik's eyebrows rose, his expression reflecting a sense of surprise.

Brain crystal weapons were highly sought after and incredibly expensive, and their loss would be a significant blow to Victor's business.

He nodded in understanding before responding.

"I see," he said, his voice measured and controlled. "That certainly complicates matters."

Victor's frustration was palpable as he talked. His hands clenched into fists on the desk, and he leaned even closer to Erik, his eyes blazing with intensity.

"As for why the planes went down, I do not know," he said. "They were in good condition, and the pilots were experienced."

Erik's expression shifted to one of concern as he considered the implications of this information.

The well-maintained planes were piloted by experienced individuals, but the crash suggested foul play.

"The last known coordinates put them over the White desert," Victor said, his voice carrying a note of urgency. "Time is of the essence, Mr. Kay. I need those weapons recovered as soon as possible."

"The White Desert?"

This place was a perilous land stretch between Nokisi Point and Testrovsc's Rest. It was a vast expanse of white dunes stretching as far as the eye could see.

The sun above was relentless, its rays magnifying the unbearable heat radiating from the ground.

Not only were the harsh environmental conditions a deterrent for mercenaries, but the area was also infested with dangerous Thaid.

Erik's mind raced with a vivid imagination as he contemplated the dangers that awaited anyone foolish enough to venture into the White Desert unprepared or low-leveled.

Though he had never set foot in that treacherous landscape, he had studied Etrium's landscape, and he knew the perils that lurked beneath the shifting sands.

Most of the Thaidi had a sinister penchant for burying themselves deep within the desert dunes, lying in wait as patient predators ready to ambush unsuspecting prey.

The ground-dwelling Thaidi were notorious for their ferocity and strength, and their ability to blend with the desert terrain made them a formidable menace, striking fear into the hearts of those who dared to traverse their territory.

But it was the flying variants of the Thaidi that ignited Erik's imagination with a heightened sense of dread.

He envisioned these winged monstrosities soaring through the desert skies, their sinewy bodies and membranous wings casting ominous shadows over the barren landscape.

If one traveled by air, flying at a low altitude was tantamount to suicide. The flying Thaidi could ascend from the ground, their powerful wings carrying them high into the sky to intercept any intruders.

This posed a significant problem for Erik's mission to retrieve Victor Hale's lost cargo if he planned on doing it.

Flying a plane or any aerial vehicle would require maintaining a high altitude to avoid the flying Thaidi, but landing to collect the cargo would expose them to the same airborne threats.

The descent would be like a dangerous tango, a risky gamble that Erik had no desire to engage in.

The alternative—traveling by foot or car—was fraught with danger. Ground vehicles would have to navigate the treacherous dunes while looking for Thaidi bursting from the sand. And the flying Thaidi would still be a concern, swooping down from above to attack.

Erik pondered the dilemma. Did he have to accept the quest or not?

"Alright, Mr. Hale, you've got my attention," Erik said, his voice steady and his gaze unwavering as he locked eyes with the holographic image of the merchant. He leaned forward, his posture conveying both engagement and a hint of skepticism.

The holographic representation of Victor appeared to relax visibly, with a subtle shift in his facial expression as a relieved smile spread across his features.

The tension that had been present in his eyes moments ago seemed to dissipate, replaced by a glimmer of hope and anticipation.

His shoulders eased, and he leaned back, his body language mirroring his newfound confidence.

"Send over the full details and your proposed compensation," Erik's tone was firm but open to negotiation. His hands rested on the table before him, fingers tapping in a rhythm that betrayed a mix of eagerness and caution.

Victor's holographic face lit up with a genuine sense of satisfaction, his smile widening as he sensed Erik's receptiveness to the proposition.

He nodded in affirmation, his body language exuding newfound energy and enthusiasm, reflecting a subtle sparkle in his eyes.

"Excellent. I'll forward everything immediately," Victor responded, his voice filled with a renewed sense of optimism.

His fingers danced across the holographic interface, navigating through the digital documents to fulfill Erik's request.

"I look forward to a successful partnership, Mr. Kay," Victor said, his voice laced with anticipation. His holographic image leaned in as if trying to bridge the gap between them.

"As do I," Erik replied, his voice tinged with a mix of confidence and caution. He maintained his composed demeanor even as the hologram flickered and disappeared, leaving behind a faint echo of their conversation.

Erik sat back, contemplating the new mission. It was risky, but the financial and reputational rewards could be significant. Once again, his guild had the chance to prove its worth, and Erik was eager to rise to the challenge.

Chapter 654: Accepting the quest or not? (1)

"What to do...?"

Erik leaned back in his chair, his eyes narrowing as he considered the quest details. The White Desert was a huge problem, but the Thaid made the mission dangerous. He had never been there, but was aware of what monsters he was going to face.

Erik's spine was chilled by the image of the first Thaid he thought of. A Scorpion, a frightful combination of scorpion and nightmarish desert beast, had the power to send shivers down the spines of even the most courageous fighters.

The beast was colossal, its ominous shadow stretching across the desert under the scorching sun. It stretched six meters long from its head to the tip of its tail, a monstrous length that made it a daunting adversary for any who dared to cross its path.

Its exoskeleton was not just any shell; it was a dark, chitinous armor, as black as the desert night. The armor's surface was covered in sharp, jagged ridges and spikes, giving it an even more menacing appearance. It seemed impenetrable, a formidable barrier that would be hard to pierce for any average mercenary wielding standard weapons.

But what struck fear into the hearts of those who knew of the Scorpion was its tail. It wasn't just a tail; it was a weapon of death. A long, sinuous appendage that moved with a lethal grace, ending in a stinger. The stinger wasn't just sharp; it carried a potent neurotoxin, a deadly poison that could paralyze a grown man in mere seconds.

One sting from the Scorpion wasn't just painful; it could lead to a slow, agonizing death. The victim would be rendered helpless, their body shutting down while their mind remained trapped in a state of terrifying awareness. The thought of such a fate was enough to make even the most hardened warriors think twice before venturing into the White Desert.

What set the Scorpion apart in Erik's mind was its extraordinary brain crystal power. He had never seen it in action, but the vivid descriptions from the texts painted a picture that was both fascinating and terrifying.

According to these sources, the Scorpion didn't just inhabit the desert; it held dominion over it. The creature's mere thought could cause the sand to stir and move, altering the landscape to its advantage.

The texts described how the sand could collapse, creating deadly pitfalls that could engulf unsuspecting victims. It could rise, forming barriers that entrapped the creature's prey.

The desert, under the alleged influence of the Scorpion's brain crystal power, became an extension of the creature itself, a fearsome accomplice in its relentless pursuit.

The second threat that loomed in Erik's thoughts was the Terrapene, a creature as horrifying as the Scorpion, if not more.

Based on the descriptions he had read, the Terrapene was a colossal beast, reminiscent of a centipede but on a scale that defied belief. It could stretch up to an astounding fifteen meters long, its enormous body a sight that would send shivers down any observer's spine.

Its multitude of legs, each one covered in coarse, chitinous armor, skittered across the sand at an alarming speed.

The texts described how they moved in a synchronized manner, creating a terrifying spectacle of coordinated movement that allowed the creature to traverse the desert with uncanny agility.

The Terrapene's mandibles were another source of dread. According to the accounts, they were powerful enough to crush many metals.

However, what set the Terrapene apart was its brain crystal power. This power didn't just enhance the creature; it transformed it into a living armor. It hardened the Terrapene's already tough exoskeleton, turning it into a very tough shield.

Erik had read accounts of battles against the Terrapene where bullets and blades alike had bounced off the creature's body.

The descriptions clarified that most conventional weapons were rendered useless against this beast.

Erik sighed, rubbing his temples as he weighed his options. Both Thaid's presented unique challenges that would require specialized tactics. Not for him, but for his team.

The Scorpion's neurotoxin meant that they would need antivenom and lots of it. Its ability to manipulate the terrain would require constant vigilance; they couldn't afford to be caught in a trap. They would need to be fast; the Terrapene was agile for its size.

As for the Terrapene, if they faced some of them, the best he could do was to fight them head-on. Erik wasn't worried about facing these Thaid's; the problem was to retrieve the cargo and ensure the safety of his men and women.

His guild was growing, but the strength of its members wasn't that high, so he had to fill a difficult role, the protector.

Erik thought that the best thing to do was to bring his clones with him. They were not as strong as these Thaid's, but they were close, meaning they could help the others in case something went bad. The problem was that if they left the guild now, it would end up unattended and he couldn't risk that.

Besides, he couldn't only bring them, as he needed more manpower to search and retrieve the cargo. The most skilled team after them was Mira's.

Erik's mind worked overtime as he considered the logistics of such an expedition. They would need a team, not just any team, but a well-armed and skilled one. Each member would need to be equipped with a diverse arsenal of weapons, selected to counter as best as possible the unique abilities of each thaid.

Besides the armament, they would need vehicles. But these couldn't be ordinary vehicles; they would need to be designed for navigating the treacherous terrain of the White Desert.

They would need to be robust enough to withstand the harsh conditions, yet agile enough to maneuver around sudden sand shifts and pitfalls.

These vehicles would need to be designed with soundproofing to ensure they operate quietly. Making noise in the vast, open expanse of the desert was a surefire way to attract unwanted Thaid attention.

Chapter 655: Accepting the quest or not? (2)

They would need vehicles that could blend into the landscape, perhaps equipped with some form of camouflage or noise reduction technology.

It was a daunting task, but Erik felt a surge of adrenaline at the thought. He lived for this: the thrill of the hunt, the challenge of overcoming insurmountable odds. And as he looked over the quest details one final time, he couldn't help but smile. He wanted to do this, but by bringing a team, he needed to make sure his men were with him on this.

Erik knew it was going to be a mission like no other, a challenge that would test their organization and push it to its limits. With a deep breath, he picked up his phone and dialed Mira's number.

As soon as her familiar voice echoed from the other end, he requested her to come to his office. He also asked her to bring along Aiden, Kael, and Lila, knowing that their skills and expertise would be invaluable for the task at hand.

Roughly half an hour later, the office door swung open and the four of them walked in.

Their faces were etched with a mix of curiosity and a hint of urgency, a clear sign they understood the gravity of Erik's sudden summons.

They took their seats around the large wooden table that dominated Erik's office, their eyes fixed on him, questioning the reason for this impromptu meeting.

Erik's gaze swept across the room as Mira, Aiden, Kael, and Lila settled into their seats.

"Thank you for coming on such short notice," Erik began, his voice carrying a sense of appreciation.

"I've called you here because I have a high-risk, high-reward quest on the table, and I need people I can trust." His words hung in the air, heavy with the weight of the task at hand.

Mira's eyes narrowed, her brows furrowing with a mix of curiosity and caution. She leaned forward, her body language reflecting her desire to understand the gravity of the situation.

"A quest?" Her voice held a tinge of curiosity.

Erik leaned back in his chair, his posture relaxed yet filled with a subtle tension. He took a deep breath, his chest rising and falling with deliberation, as if mentally preparing himself for what he was about to reveal.

"We need to retrieve some cargo from the White Desert." His voice dropped, carrying a mixture of determination and apprehension. His eyes darted across the room, gauging the reactions of those gathered, hoping to find a shared sense of purpose and resolve.

The room went silent, faces paling at the mention of the notorious desert. The White Desert was a name that evoked fear even among the most seasoned mercenaries. But before anxiety could set in, Erik continued.

"I know what you're thinking, but hear me out." Erik's tone was persuasive, his eyes flickering with a hint of desperation as he spoke. He leaned forward in his chair, his hands clasped together in front of him, almost as if he was pleading with them to listen.

"Each member who joins this mission will receive a substantial sum of money. We're talking life-changing amounts here." His voice was filled with conviction, his words almost hypnotic in their appeal. He held their gaze, hoping to find a glimmer of agreement in their eyes.

Aiden raised an eyebrow, intrigued despite the risks. His body language was relaxed yet attentive, as if he was weighing the pros and cons of the offer.

"That's tempting, but the White Desert is crawling with Thaid's. How do you plan to deal with them? They aren't your average Thaid's, they are strong." His voice carried a tinge of skepticism.

The White Desert was a very dangerous place. Few in the city would be able to survive there. What chances were going to have?

Erik grinned, sensing the shift in the room. "I will deal with the ones we can't collectively deal with. As for the rest, we'll take a fleet of our new armored vehicles to retrieve the cargo," Erik was confident in his ability to take down the beasts.

"It's a perfect opportunity to test them in actual combat conditions."

Kael, known for his strategic mind, chimed in with a thoughtful expression. His brow furrowed, showing his deep contemplation.

"Armored vehicles could level the playing field." That was a reassuring thought, but not enough to convince him to go.

"But what about manpower? The Thaid's won't make it easy for us." His eyes flickered with concern.

"That's why I need you," Erik responded, his voice unwavering. His gaze locked onto each of them, a sense of trust and reliance clear in his eyes.

"I'll be dealing with the stronger Thaid's, but I need people I can trust to protect the weaker members of our team." His words carried a weight of responsibility, emphasizing the importance of their role.

Erik's intensity heightened, his eyes burning with a fierce determination. He leaned forward, his body language conveying a sense of urgency and purpose.

"I can't think of anyone better suited for that role than you four." He had faith in their abilities and wished they would meet the challenge.

The group exchanged uncertain glances, their expressions reflecting a mix of hesitation and curiosity. Mira spoke up, her voice laced with caution.

"Erik, we appreciate your trust in us, but before we decide, we need more information. How do you think we should move? What is the strategy you want to employ? How is the situation in general?"

Erik's brows furrowed as he paused, considering their request. He knew that withholding information would only breed further doubt and uncertainty. With a sigh, he leaned back in his chair, his intensity giving way to a more thoughtful demeanor.

"You have a valid point," he admitted, his voice tinged with a hint of regret.

"Let me explain what I planned to do..."

The group exchanged glances once again, their expressions shifting from uncertainty to intrigue. They could sense the weight of the decision before them, the potential for adventure and discovery.

Chapter 656: Accepting the quest or not? (3)

Erik's gaze swept over the faces before him, studying the mix of curiosity and apprehension etched on each one. His eyes lingered on the more guarded expressions, noting the furrowed brows and crossed arms.

"Let's get into details," he said, his voice calm. He activated the holographic map, causing it to flicker to life with a soft hum. The group's attention shifted to the glowing projection, their gazes fixated on the intricate details of the White Desert layout.

"We'll be taking a convoy of our newly gained armored vehicles," Erik continued, his hands gesturing toward the holographic vehicles.

"Each will be equipped with heavy artillery." He clenched his fists briefly, emphasizing the power and strength of their weaponry. "I've ensured they're as Thaid-resistant as possible."

Erik zoomed in on a specific area of the map, his eyes narrowing in concentration. A sense of determination filled the room as the group leaned closer. "Our aim is in this area here," he said, pointing to the designated spot on the holographic map.

"We need to search for it," Erik stated, his voice steady and composed despite the mask covering his face. His mind raced with strategic calculations and a sense of determination. "But I don't think it will take us a lot of time."

As he spoke, Erik's eyes scanned the room, observing the reactions of his team. Behind his mask, his brows furrowed slightly, analyzing their expressions for any signs of doubt or concern. He exuded an air of confidence, knowing that his calm demeanor would help instill trust and reassurance in his comrades.

"We'll move in a V-formation," Erik continued, his voice unwavering. He gestured with a gloved hand, outlining the shape in the air. "With heavy artillery at the front and rear."

"I'll lead," Erik said, his gaze locking with each team member's eyes. Despite the mask concealing his face, his eyes conveyed a sense of unwavering determination and trust. "And I'd like each of you to command a vehicle." He paused, allowing his words to sink in.

A mix of emotions flickered across the faces of his team - a combination of respect, anticipation, and a hint of nervousness. Erik's calm presence and composed demeanor served as an anchor amidst the uncertainty. He exuded a quiet confidence that inspired trust in his leadership.

"We'll maintain constant communication," Erik said, his voice carrying a sense of assurance. "And if we encounter Thaid, we'll form a defensive circle." His hands moved gracefully as he showed the defensive maneuver, showing a keen understanding of their tactical advantage.

Behind his mask, Erik's thoughts were focused and calculating. He analyzed every scenario and prepared for any challenges that might arise during their mission.

His unwavering composure and masked expression concealed any hint of doubt or fear, projecting an aura of strength and resilience.

As the team absorbed Erik's instructions, they found solace in his calm presence. They trusted in his strategic planning and leadership skills. With each passing moment and further detail given, their confidence grew, ready to face whatever obstacles lay ahead under the guidance of their composed and resolute leader.

"What are your thoughts?"

Mira hesitated, her eyes darting between Erik and the rest of the team. Her body language was guarded, her arms crossed in front of her. "Erik, you know I trust your leadership," she began, her voice tinged with uncertainty.

"But what about the others? They're not as experienced as we are." Her brow furrowed with concern. "And we can't expect you to handle every Thaid we encounter."

Aiden's agreement gave more weight to Mira's concerns. His body language mirrored hers, his arms crossed and his expression serious.

"I agree with Mira," he said, his voice calm but firm. "The armored vehicles are a good touch, but they're not foolproof." He leaned forward, his gaze fixed on Erik. "And if we're relying too much on you, Erik, what happens if you're occupied with a high-level Thaid?"

Erik's expression remained calm and composed, but behind his mask, his mind raced with concern. He had expected these concerns from his team, but hearing them voiced aloud added a layer of pressure.

Kael leaned back in his seat, his eyes fixed on the holographic map in front of him. His expression was contemplative, his brow furrowed with concern. "The plan has merits," he began, his voice measured and thoughtful. "But it's not without its holes."

His fingers drummed a steady beat on the armrest of his chair. "We have to consider the worst-case scenarios, especially concerning the less experienced guild members. They're the most vulnerable."

Lila's voice cut through the silence, her tone cautious and measured. Her eyes flicked between Kael and Erik, her body language guarded.

"I'm concerned about the other guild members too," she said, her gaze fixed on Erik. "And let's not forget, even with you leading Erik, you're not omnipotent." Her words were tinged with a hint of skepticism. "You can't be everywhere at once."

Erik nodded, absorbing their concerns. "You all raise valid points. If you don't want to, we can always refuse."

The room was filled with a heavy silence, each contemplating the weight of the decision before them.

Aiden's gaze shifted uneasily between Erik and the rest of the team, his expression reflecting the inner turmoil he felt.

His brows furrowed with uncertainty, his body language revealing his internal struggle. He clenched his fists, his knuckles turning white, as he grappled with the decision before him.

The conflicting thoughts and emotions played across his face, a battle between caution and determination.

Aiden took a deep breath. At that moment, a flicker of resolve sparked within him. He realized that sometimes, the greatest risks held the potential for the greatest rewards.

"It's a dangerous mission, Erik," Aiden began, his voice tinged with a mixture of apprehension and determination. "But if you believe we can pull it off..." He paused, his voice trailing off momentarily as he gathered his thoughts.

As if a surge of determination overcame him, he straightened his posture and met Erik's gaze with newfound conviction.

"I'm in," he said, his voice carrying a blend of determination and vulnerability.

Chapter 657: Accepting the quest or not? (4)

Erik's expression softened, a glimmer of appreciation shining in his eyes. He recognized the internal battle Aiden had fought and respected the courage it took to commit to the mission.

Aiden's agreement brought a renewed sense of solidarity among the team, reinforcing their collective resolve to face the challenges ahead with unwavering determination.

Mira's gaze locked with Erik's, her eyes filled with a mix of uncertainty and trust. She searched his face for reassurance, her voice wavering slightly. "Yeah," she said, her tone hesitant yet determined. "If Aiden thinks we can do this, then you can count on me too..."

Lila's expression transformed into a mischievous grin, her eyes sparkling with excitement. Her adventurous spirit shone through as she nodded, her voice laced with a hint of thrill.

"Well, it sounds like a suicide mission," she admitted, her tone tinged with a touch of amusement. "But what's life without a little excitement?"

Kael's analytical nature took over as he listened to his teammates' responses.

His face settled into a thoughtful expression, his mind already working through the details.

He clapped his hands together, a burst of energy punctuating his words. "I'll come," he said, his tone filled with determination.

"But we need to think things through better." His words reflected his cautious and logical approach, emphasizing the need for careful planning and consideration.

Erik leaned forward, his eyes meeting each of theirs in turn. "Excellent. Then I will tell the quest giver that we will accept the mission. Thank you all; I couldn't do it without you."

As the team members filed out of the room, a surge of adrenaline coursed through Erik's veins. The mission ahead was no ordinary task. While Erik felt confident in his abilities, he couldn't shake off the weight of responsibility he felt towards his guildmates. It was his duty to ensure their safety and well-being.

Erik was determined to leave no stone unturned, to create an environment where his guildmates could operate with a sense of security. He knew that while he couldn't eliminate all dangers; he had to make the mission as safe as reasonably possible.

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The young man activated the holographic computer on his desk, dialing the number of the merchant who had offered the quest. The man's image flickered into existence before him, his eyes filled with a mixture of hope and apprehension.

"Mr. Kay, I presume you called me because you have decided," the merchant's voice echoed through the line, laced with a palpable sense of urgency. His words hung in the air, a silent plea for a positive response.

Erik, steady as ever, responded in a calm and composed manner. "We're willing to accept the quest," he began, carefully choosing his words to convey his team's commitment.

"But we'll need time to prepare. Our team will head into a high-risk area, and we can't afford to be ill-equipped." His voice was firm and confident, reflecting his unwavering belief in their ability to succeed.

A sigh of relief escaped from the merchant, his initial apprehension giving way to a wave of reassurance. "Of course, take all the time you need," he said, doing his best to keep the happiness out of his voice. But his relief was clear, a bright light at the end of a long, anxious wait.

Erik leaned forward, his gaze sharply focused on the holographic figure before him. His eyes, clear and determined, locked onto the merchant's image. His voice, steady and unyielding, echoed in the room, "I also want to clarify the payment terms. The document you sent mentioned a sum of 7 million Eurems. Is that correct?"

His question was not simply an inquiry, but a definitive statement - he refused to be exploited. Through his confident stance and piercing gaze, he conveyed his utmost seriousness about the matter at hand.

He built his reputation on his meticulous nature and his unwavering ability to hold his ground, even when confronted with potential manipulation.

"Yes, that's correct," the merchant confirmed. "And let me add, if you retrieve the brain crystal weapons, I'd be willing to pay an additional couple of million eurems."

Erik's eyes, visible through the slit of his mask, narrowed slightly, carefully evaluating the merchant's sincerity.

His gaze was piercing, scrutinizing every flicker of the holographic figure before him.

"If that's the case, then you can count on us," he said, his voice steady and resolute. "But I want this in writing, an official contract that outlines the terms and the additional bonus for the brain crystal-embedded weapons."

His words were resolute, allowing for no ambiguity. He sat up straight, showing how important professionalism and integrity were to him. The mask made him seem more mysterious and serious, which made it clear he wanted a formal contract.

The merchant responded promptly, his voice echoing with newfound enthusiasm. "Absolutely. I'll have it sent to you immediately," he said, matching Erik's professional tone. His words were filled with a sense of respect and acknowledgment of Erik's demands.

The exchange between them was marked by a mutual understanding of the gravity of their agreement.

Their conversation was devoid of any unnecessary pleasantries, focusing solely on the business at hand. Their shared professionalism set the tone for their future interactions, laying a solid foundation for their newly formed partnership.

"Very well," Erik concluded. "Once the contract is signed and the preparations are complete, we'll head out to retrieve your cargo."

"Your reputation precedes you, Mr. Kay. Your guild's accomplishments are well-documented, and I hold the utmost confidence in your ability to execute this task efficiently," the merchant expressed, his tone echoing his high regard for Erik and his team.

"Rest assured, we shall strive to meet your expectations," Erik responded, his voice steady and firm. His words were a promise, a commitment to uphold the trust placed in them. With a last nod of acknowledgment, he ended the call.

Erik leaned back in his chair as the hologram flickered out, contemplating the mission they had just accepted.

He then picked up his phone and sent a message to Noah, telling him to come to his office.

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The door to his office opened after ten minutes, and Noah walked in, his face concealed by a mask and hood.

"You summoned me, Master?" Noah inquired, maintaining a respectful stance as he addressed Erik.

"Yes," Erik began, his hand making a slight gesture towards the seat, showing for Noah to sit.

"I've accepted a dangerous mission. We will need a team of thirty, including Mira, Kael, Lila, and Aiden. I want you to coordinate with the others and arrange the mission."

"As you command, Master. May I inquire about the quest?" His tone was deferential, his words reflecting the deep respect he held for Erik.

The young man forwarded the files he had received from the merchant to Noah's phone. "We're tasked with retrieving a missing cargo in the White Desert. The merchant is offering a substantial sum and a bonus if we recover brain crystal weapons."

Perusing the files with swift precision, Noah assessed the information before him. "The risk associated with this mission is indeed substantial, Master," he acknowledged, his tone solemn yet composed. "However, the potential reward warrants serious consideration." His words were carefully chosen, reflecting both the gravity of the situation and the respect he held for Erik's decision.

"Exactly," Erik said. "I need you to develop a solid plan based on these files. Work with Ari, Luke, and the others to locate the likely crash sites and where the cargo might be."

Rising to his feet, Noah maintained a straight posture, exuding a sense of quiet confidence. "Rest assured, Master, you may entrust this task to us," he stated respectfully. "We shall collaborate effectively within our ranks and plan a strategy that mitigates risks and optimizes our probability of success." His tone was one of deference, underlining his deep respect for Erik.

"Good," Erik said, feeling a sense of relief wash over him. "I trust you'll handle this efficiently. Keep me updated on your progress."

"Yes sir," Noah affirmed, before turning to leave the room.

Chapter 658: Departing

It took a week for Erik and his people to set everything up for the oncoming quest. They planned every aspect, from gathering essential supplies to coordinating the roles and responsibilities of each guild member.

The young man stepped out of the guild's main building, his eyes scanning the bustling scene before him. The parking lot had transformed into a hive of activity, a staging ground for the high-stakes mission that lay ahead.

The air was thick with a blend of excitement and tension, each guild member aware of the risks and rewards that awaited them. The anticipation was palpable as they prepared themselves for the challenges that awaited.

Thirty guild members, including Kael, Mira, Aiden, and Lila, were already outside, busy with last-minute preparations.

They formed a diverse group, their armors reflecting their varying levels of affluence and taste.

Some wore sleek, futuristic exoskeletons that shimmered in the morning light and gave the user a little more strength and speed.

These innovative suits were equipped with advanced technology, featuring integrated energy modules and augmented reality displays that provided vital information in real time.

The exoskeletons emitted a soft hum as they powered up, emanating an aura of sophistication and innovation.

In contrast, others donned more traditional garb—a fusion of leather, cloth, and metal that spoke of practicality over style and allowed freer movements.

Their armor bore the marks of battle, with scratches and dents serving as badges of honor. Though not as flashy as their high-tech counterparts, these battle-tested attires showcased resilience and adaptability.

Guild members expressed their individuality through their chosen attire. Some opted for a sleek, modern aesthetic, fully embracing the benefits of advanced technology.

Others found comfort and familiarity in the traditional gear, relying on their skills and experience to navigate the challenges ahead.

Weapons were in abundance. Traditional arms like bows, swords, pikes, maces, and spears were slung over shoulders or strapped to backs. The weapons were made of various materials, including steel and other materials.

Some were exquisitely crafted, with intricate designs etched into the blades or handles, while others were more plain and functional.

Yet, the modernity of the mission was not lost on anyone; each member was also armed with laser rifles, pistols, and an assortment of grenades given by the guild, which was why Erik bought such items.

These weapons were cutting edge, equipped with advanced targeting systems and potent energy cells. Their power could deal crushing damage to lesser thaids. Their addition significantly bolstered the guild's arsenal, lending it an extra layer of strength.

Several guild members were busy loading rocket launchers onto the vehicles, their faces focused and their movements precise. Others were calibrating mortars, ensuring their aim would be true when the time came.

Machine guns had been mounted on several vehicles, their barrels gleaming.

These were additions to the heavy laser cannons and missile launchers that came pre-installed, turning each vehicle into a mobile fortress.

Six of these heavily armed vehicles were lined up, engines idling, ready to roll out. They were accompanied by five Traxler V-12 Cyclones, the all-terrain vehicles Erik had purchased from Lysa.

Their reinforced frames and advanced navigation systems made them ideal for the treacherous journey through the White Desert.

Erik thought about using more Traxlers and employing more people, but as his friends said.

He couldn't be anywhere, and his guildmates were still too weak to do this dangerous job without him. Aside from really valuable Thaid bodies, Erik planned to leave them all behind.

Kael nodded at Erik, signaling that everything was ready. The young man felt a surge of pride as he looked at his team. They were young, some still inexperienced, but each had courage it was hard to find elsewhere. That was all due to how strongly they believed in their guild master.

Mira, Aiden, and Lila approached Erik, their faces a mix of anticipation and resolve.

Mira's hands were fidgeting with her bowstring, a sign of her restless energy. Aiden was tapping his foot nervously, his eyes darting around their surroundings. Lila was the usual flurry of energy, her movements quick and precise.

"We're all set, Erik," Mira said, her voice tinged with nervous excitement. She glanced at her comrades, seeking reassurance in their familiar faces.

"Good." Erik's eyes met each of theirs in turn. He leaned forward, his expression serious. "This won't be a comfortable journey. Do you feel ready?"

Mira nodded despite the butterflies in her stomach, her eyes shining with determination. Aiden clenched his fists, his jaw set in a determined line. Lila gave a small smile, her eyes shining with confidence.

A knot of apprehension twisted in Erik's gut, prompting him to seek reassurances. He turned to Kael, his gaze piercing and intense. "Kael, did we encounter any issues with the weapons?" Erik's voice was steady, but the undercurrent of concern was palpable.

Kael responded with a shake of his head, his expression calm and reassuring. "We had to substitute a few laser rifles and rocket launchers, but apart from that, everything is in order."

Still not satisfied, Erik probed further, his brow creasing with concern. "What about the explosives?" he asked.

Kael responded with a decisive nod, motioning towards the convoy. "All are loaded onto the vehicles," he confirmed. His voice, steady and sure, seemed to ease a portion of Erik's lingering unease.

Erik was on the brink of voicing his concerns about the guild members' morale for the upcoming quest when Mira's presence interrupted his thoughts.

"Erik, it's okay," she said, her voice a soothing whisper amid his brewing storm of worries. Her hand found his arm, a warm, reassuring weight that grounded him. "Everything is ready and everyone is focused. Don't worry."

He met her words with a nod, a silent acknowledgment of her reassurances. A soft sigh eluded him as he allowed her confidence to seep into him. They were as prepared as they could ever be for the trials that lay ahead.

With that, Erik climbed into the lead vehicle, his team following suit.

As the engines roared to life and the convoy moved, Erik couldn't help but feel the weight of his responsibility.

Lives were at stake, and failure was not an option. Everything depended on how he and the others, in particular Kael and Aiden, managed the situation.

Erik's convoy rolled out of the guild's parking lot, a procession of armored vehicles and Cyclones adorned with the unmistakable insignia of the Nexthorn Vanguard.

The vehicles were in pristine condition, their surfaces gleaming under the sun's rays. The Cyclones, in particular, were a sight to behold with all those heavy weapons mounted on them.

As they navigated the labyrinthine streets of Testrovs's Rest, their heads turned, and eyes widened.

The sight of such a heavily armed caravan was enough to stir curiosity, but the emblem it bore captured the city's attention.

People paused in their daily routines to watch the convoy pass, their expressions a mix of awe, curiosity, and, sometimes, envy.

Shopkeepers watched from their storefronts, their gazes tracking the procession through the bustling streets. Children scampered next to the vehicles, their faces glowing with awe and exhilaration.

Whispers spread like wildfire, each onlooker speculating on the nature of this high-stakes mission that warranted such a show of force.

The city's inhabitants buzzed with excitement and curiosity, their conversations filled with theories and rumors about the guild's purpose.

Erik's guild had become a subject of citywide fascination, a meteoric rise that had not gone unnoticed.

Among the crowd were some individuals whose gazes lingered longer, their eyes narrowing as the convoy moved out of sight.

They wore the colors of the Border Wolves, the most powerful and renowned guild in Testrovsc's Rest.

Their presence alone commanded respect, and their reputation preceded them wherever they went.

For years, they had been the undisputed leaders in the mercenary world there, their reputation built on a foundation of high-profile quests and unparalleled skill.

As the Border Wolves watched the convoy disappear into the distance, a mixture of curiosity and a hint of concern flashed across their faces.

They were not accustomed to sharing the spotlight, and the emergence of Erik's guild posed a potential challenge for their dominance.

To the Border Wolves, the Nexthorn Vanguard were upstarts, newcomers who had yet to prove themselves inside the city.

Despite their seeming lack of experience, Erik's guild was gaining momentum. The level of fame Erik had accumulated was truly remarkable.

Erik's reputation resonated ahead of him on all his travels. His exploits were the buzz of the city, and increasingly, clients were opting to bypass the Border Wolves, choosing instead to contract the Nexthorn Vanguard for private quests and specialized tasks.

The guild stood out with an unrivaled success rate. Its members were known for their absolute commitment to any mission they took on. They had evolved into a powerful force, their emergence causing significant waves in the mercenary world of Testrovsc's Rest.

This shift in public sentiment was not just a blow to the Wolves' pride but a threat to their long-standing dominance.

The Border Wolves had been the city's most powerful guild for as long as anyone could remember.

The Border Wolves were not used to being on the defensive, and their frustration grew with each passing day.

As they watched Erik's convoy disappear into the distance, a sense of unease settled over them. They exchanged glances, their eyes reflecting a shared understanding.

Something would have to be done about this new player on the field, this guild that had so audaciously stepped into their territory and was now diverting the spotlight away from them.

As the convoy continued its journey, unaware of the silent scrutiny it had just undergone, Erik felt a sense of accomplishment.

Chapter 659: First Hostile Encounter (1)

The convoy exited the colossal gate-mall building that marked the boundary of Testrovsc's Rest.

The convoy vehicle hummed, a steady rhythm in the background as Lila's voice broke through the communication system, alive and electric with anticipation. "I wonder what beasts we'll meet in the White Desert. I'm itching for a fight, and those bounties won't collect themselves!"

Kael's voice came next, a rock amidst the static. "Lila, did you bother with Noah's dossier? It's got the lowdown on the critters we might face. Knowledge is a weapon, too, you know."

Lila's laugh bounced around the comm system. "Well, I gave it a shot, but lost interest after three pages."

Kael almost facepalmed.

"Lila, recklessness won't do us any good. Disregarding information is a gamble we can't afford. This mission needs caution and wisdom," Aiden said. He was accustomed to Lila's antics and wondered how Kael still couldn't, despite being more intelligent than he. Maybe it was because of his intelligence.

It was at that moment Mira stepped in. Much like Aiden, she was well-acquainted with their comrade and friend's tendencies. She had often assumed the role of a guide, steering her back on track whenever she strayed.

"Don't even try Aiden, you are talking with a stone-brained idiot." She sighed.

"If Lila steps out of line, I'll be there to pull her back."

Aiden could do nothing but sigh, too. He pressed the button on the communication device. "Lila, make sure you finish that dossier next time."

Lila said nothing.

As the car trudged into the dense forest that skirted the city, the atmosphere inside the vehicles was a mix of anticipation and tension.

The occupants, mostly low-ranked mercenaries with more enthusiasm than experience, exchanged nervous glances.

Their youth and inexperience added a layer of apprehension to the already tense environment.

Erik could feel their unease, their anxious energy palpable in the confined space of the vehicle.

They all knew they were heading towards the White Desert, a place notorious for the high-level monsters that lived there.

Despite their bravado and eagerness to prove themselves, Erik knew that the young mercenaries were aware of their lack of experience and the potential risks they were about to face.

Their youthful exuberance was tempered by a healthy dose of fear and respect for the environment they were venturing into.

At the moment, they were just outside Testrovs's Rest, a place with a low concentration of Thaid, who were periodically killed by the mercenaries inside the city. This part of the forest was safe, with Thaid being on the lower end of the power spectrum.

However, the place was a transitional zone, a buffer between the relative safety of the city and the dangerous unknowns of the land ahead of them — not only the White Desert.

Erik sat in the lead vehicle, his posture relaxed but his senses alert.

His mask concealed his facial expressions, rendering his mood mysterious to those around him.

He activated the communication system, his voice resonating through the speakers of Kael's vehicle.

"How's everything going, Kael?" Erik inquired, seeking an update on their progress.

Kael, who was to lead the way and coordinate the convoy, responded.

"All systems are operational, and the convoy moves optimally. We should reach the White Desert in approximately two days if we maintain this pace."

Erik nodded, even if Kael couldn't see him. "Good. Keep me updated on any changes and tell me if there are problems."

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The convoy continued its journey, the vehicles' heavy-duty tires crunching over the forest floor, their advanced suspension systems absorbing the impact of roots and rocks.

Everyone wished they could have taken flying vehicles to reach the place, as that would have been much faster, especially considering that they now had to drive for at least sixteen hours a day to reach the White Desert in two days.

However, every sane person knew if they did, they wouldn't have been able to land in the White Desert because of the Flying Thaid's.

The problem was that the forest was a labyrinth of towering trees and thick undergrowth that made it difficult to travel, and the bumpy road made the journey very uncomfortable.

However, their path had been mapped out by Noah and the others to avoid any unnecessary detours or obstacles, and Kael helped them do so.

Many people within the guild found themselves puzzled by Erik's choice of management.

They wondered who Noah and the other individuals that Erik entrusted with the guild's administration were.

Questions arose about the reason Erik didn't delegate the task to Mira, Lila, Kael, and Aiden, despite them being co-founders of the guild along with him.

They were also well-respected figures within the guild, and their exclusion from leadership roles led to speculation and conjecture among the members.

Noah, in particular, was a source of intrigue. An imposing figure, he stood as tall as a tree, his stature itself commanding respect and curiosity.

His imposing height was often the topic of discussion among the guild members, with some comparing him to the ancient trees that stood tall and mighty in the forest's heart.

He was always masked, mirroring his employer Erik in this mysterious demeanor, which only added to the enigma surrounding him.

His silence was another characteristic that stood out - Noah was a man of few words, often choosing to communicate through his actions rather than lengthy conversations.

Despite his quiet nature and the mystery surrounding him, Noah commanded a certain respect within the guild. There was an unspoken understanding that he was someone Erik trusted, and this alone was enough to earn him a place of importance within their ranks.

As they moved deeper into the forest, the members of the Nexthorn Vanguard remained vigilant.

The forest was not without its own set of dangers—Thaids, treacherous terrain, and the ever-present risk of mechanical failure.

Yet, their journey was uneventful for the moment, the forest almost eerily silent, as if aware of the formidable convoy passing through it.

Inside the vehicles, guild members checked and rechecked their equipment.

Laser rifles were inspected, grenades counted, and communication devices tested.

Chapter 660: First Hostile Encounter (2)

Despite the calm, everyone knew they were heading toward a far more hazardous environment, and the sense of pressure was palpable.

Amidst the hum of the guild convoy, a conversation emerged between two young guild members.

Their voices were hushed, rising above the drone of the engine, their words carrying the weight of the anticipation and tension they were feeling.

The younger of the two, a fresh-faced recruit with bright, anxious eyes, turned to his more experienced companion. "Hey," he began, his voice unsteady, "what's the strongest Thaid you've ever taken down?"

The older youth paused, his gaze fixating on the road ahead. His voice, when he spoke, was measured, betraying an undercurrent of apprehension. "Fereles."

The younger man's eyes widened, his apprehension mirrored in the older youth's eyes. "Fereles? I've heard they're brutal. Very aggressive with the ability to conjure fireballs. That sounds... intense."

His companion nodded, a flicker of pride crossing his otherwise serious face. "Yeah, they're no joke. I took one down, though." He then redirected the question back to his comrade. "What about you?"

The younger man swallowed hard before giving an answer, "I... I took down some Grythoks with my party members."

The older youth gave a low whistle of admiration. "Grythoks... that's quite an achievement." He was aware these Thaides were nothing special, but he could see that the young man in front of him was much weaker than him and had much less experience.

He clapped his companion on the shoulder, a camaraderie-filled gesture that did little to dispel the tension.

The older youth, after a few seconds of contemplation, broke the silence. "I would like to know how the hell the guild master can be so strong at his age. Damn! He's five years younger than me and he's already running a whole damn guild."

The younger one nodded in agreement, his gaze distant. "I know what you mean," he admitted, "I train and hunt a lot, but I'm still nowhere near as powerful as even a third of the guild master."

He paused for a moment. "I think the guild master must come from a wealthy family that provided him with body and brain-stimulating serums."

The older youth considered this. His brow furrowed in thought. "It's possible," he conceded, "But those serums have a lot of side effects. It's unlikely he could have used them without suffering."

The younger man didn't respond, but the thoughtful look in his eyes made it clear he was mulling over their conversation.

He seemed to wonder if he could ever become strong enough to at least lead his own party.

The silence stretched on, the drone of the engine the only sound filling the space between them.

Their conversation faded, their anxiety hanging in the air like a thick fog that refused to lift.

And so, they traveled on, each vehicle a small island of focused energy, moving through the forest that served as the gateway to their upcoming trials. T

he Nexthorn Vanguard was on the move, and the gravity of their mission weighed on each one of them.

Three hours into their journey through the forest, the atmosphere inside the convoy shifted.

Alina Hayes, a young woman with jet-black hair and emerald-green eyes who recently joined the guild, activated her communication device.

Alina had a brain crystal power that allowed her to manipulate Thaid's and feel their presence to a certain degree.

However, since there were many ways to find Thaid's through technology, her power was not that useful from that point of view, and since she could not subjugate Thaid's, as she was still not strong enough and had few neural links, few wanted her in their guild.

But Erik did, as he saw the potential in this ability, especially if she increased the number of her neural links. It was an investment in her future.

Erik harbored many plans and, thanks to the system, he had the potential to develop stimulating serums. All he needed was to arrange everything, and her strength would surge.

"Guild Master, I sense a group of Thaid's approaching us," she said, her voice tinged with urgency.

"They're moving fast, and I feel they are strong."

Erik's masked face turned toward the communication device. "Can you give me more details?"

Alina closed her eyes, focusing on her mana. "I believe they're a group of Erendus, but I can't be certain."

"Which direction?"

"From our right."

Erik wasted no time. He activated the convoy-wide communication system.

"Everyone, brace yourselves for combat. We've got a group of Thaidi closing in from the right, likely Erendus. Those among you with ranged brain crystal powers, prepare to deploy them. The rest of you, take your positions at the vehicle-mounted weapons."

He paused for a moment, letting his words sink in. "Just so you know, the mounted weapons won't do much against these creatures. But they can help keep them at bay, especially if our ranged fighters do their job right."

The convoy erupted into a flurry of activity.

Guild members scrambled to their positions, but it wasn't simple since they were on moving vehicles on bumpy roads. They checked laser rifles, grenades, and the heavy artillery mounted on the cars.

The tension was palpable; everyone knew that an encounter with Erendus—tauric Thaidi with bone armor plating and a brain crystal power that increased their strength—was a dangerous proposition.

Erik positioned himself at the front of the vehicle, primed to leap into action and eliminate the beasts if they dared to venture too close.

He knew well that their initial encounter with the Thaidi on this mission would lay the groundwork, setting the atmosphere for the entirety of their expedition.

Alina, meanwhile, took her position beside a mounted machine gun.

Her eyes focused, her senses attuned to the approaching Thaidi.

A shiver coursed down her spine. In her current state, confronting these Thaidi seemed an insurmountable task.

However, she didn't know the scope of Erik's true abilities. If she did, she wouldn't be so scared.

Kael, Mira, Aiden, and Lila also took their positions, their faces set in grim determination.

They had never faced these Thaid's before and knew they were powerful. Even for them, this would not be just another walk in the park.

As the minutes ticked by, the surrounding forest seemed to grow quieter, as if even the birds and insects held their breath.

The hum of the vehicle engines and the occasional crackle of the communication devices were the only sounds that punctuated the heavy silence.

At that moment, a distant yet intensifying drumming sound permeated the surroundings, acting as the harbinger of doom, much like the grim tolling of a funeral bell echoing in the night's stillness.