

BIOLOGICAL 591

Chapter 591: An Unexpected Call (2)

Lyria's controlled but tinged with urgency voice carried through the phone as she delved into the details of the situation. Erik's attention was fully captured, the room around him fading into the background as he listened intently to what she had to say.

"After you found Doran," she began, "we were able to uncover his connections to the Haven Market. The place turned out to be the hub that supplied him with everything he needed for his operations. But the situation is far more complex than we initially realized."

Erik's heart rate increased, sensing that what he had uncovered was just the tip of a dangerous iceberg.

"Doran's influence and dealings extend far beyond Etrium," Ms. Bannon continued. "He had contacts in Hin, Frant, and Khunelerp. His network is intricate and widespread, and it's become clear that we're dealing with something much larger than a single rogue element."

"What do you need me to do?" he finally asked, his voice firm.

"We've identified a key player in this network," Lyria said, her tone sharpening with determination.

"A woman we believe has critical information about the people involved in this mess. She could be the link we need to unravel the entire operation. Erik, I'm sending you a file now. Take a look at your target."

Erik's phone buzzed as the file arrived, and he quickly opened it. A dossier appeared, filled with details and images of a woman whose face exuded intelligence and cunning.

The young man's eyes widened as he recognized the face staring back at him from the file. It was Catrina, the woman he had found beside Doran in the secret lab where the man's covert operations were conducted.

Her sharp features, high cheekbones, and cold, calculating eyes were unmistakable.

He knew back then that she was no ordinary person, and Lyria's asking him to find her confirmed this. Her presence in that place had hinted at something deeper—a connection to the twisted web of corruption and crime he was now unraveling. It was clear that her role in the organization wasn't simple.

However, Erik's entry into the lab was a secret, a hidden aspect of his investigation that he had not shared with anyone since the guild asked him not to approach the target.

Revealing that he knew about Catrina would undoubtedly lead to questions about how he knew her—questions he couldn't answer. He would keep his knowledge of Catrina's presence in the lab to himself.

With a determined look, he closed the file on his phone, his thoughts already turning to the task ahead.

He took a moment to absorb the information, his mind already formulating a strategy.

"Understood, Ms. Bannon," he said finally, his voice tinged with resolve.

"I can find her and get the information you need. But before that, I must know how much you will pay me."

"Erik, I know this is a substantial task," Ms. Bannon began, her tone professional but laced with a hint of urgency. "We're prepared to offer you 200,000 Eurems for your services."

As Erik listened to the woman's offer of 200,000 Eurems, his brow furrowed in contemplation and with a tint of anger. That was an insulting offer, to be honest.

However, he could sense the faintest hint of doubt in her voice, a telltale sign that she knew the offer might not be enough to entice someone with his exceptional skills. Erik's mind raced as he considered his options, weighing the potential rewards against the risks.

His lips pressed into a thin line. He could earn much more by hunting with his guild and knew his worth. He also knew that what Lyria asked him to do would not be simple, especially given the target.

"Ms. Bannon," Erik replied, calm but firm, "I appreciate the offer, but I make around 300,000 Eurems a day with my guild. I need a more compelling reason to take on this assignment."

There was a pause on the other end, and Erik could almost hear the gears turning in Ms. Bannon's mind. She was caught between a rock and a hard place. Erik's expertise was necessary, but the guild's resources put her in a difficult situation.

"Erik, I understand your position," she finally said, her voice tinged with determination. "I'm willing to negotiate. What's your price?"

Erik considered the question for a moment, weighing his options. He knew that he had the upper hand, and he also knew that he could not afford to be greedy.

He needed to strike a balance and find a figure to reward him for his efforts and be acceptable to the guild.

"1,000,000 Eurems," he stated, his voice steady and confident.

There was a sharp intake of breath from Ms. Bannon, followed by a lengthy silence. Erik could feel her evaluating his proposal, analyzing the risks and benefits. It was an absurdly high pay for a Seeker rank, but he knew his skills warranted it.

"Very well, Erik," Ms. Bannon finally said, after much thought, her voice filled with a mixture of resignation and determination. "You drive a hard bargain, but I agree to your terms. 1,000,000 Eurems it is. But I expect results, and quickly."

Erik's lips curled into a small smile. "You'll have your results, Ms. Bannon," he assured her. "I'll find Catrina, and I'll do it quickly." With that, the deal was sealed.

"Good," Lyria replied, satisfaction in her voice. "This is a delicate operation, Erik. We're dealing with powerful and dangerous people. Be cautious, but also be relentless. We need to know what she knows. As usual, do not make contact with the target; report to me once you find her."

The mission was clear, and the risks were evident. But Erik couldn't pass up the opportunity to dismantle a vast and malicious network, especially considering that Uncle Benjamin was involved in the matter, and he wanted to know how and why.

"I'll do whatever it takes," he assured her, feeling a steely determination building within him.

"I know you will," Lyria said, her voice softening slightly. "Oh, before I forget, there is someone you will have to cooperate with during this mission."

<Oh god, no...> the young man thought in annoyance.

"Her name is Rebecca. I will give you the contact; call her as soon as you start to move," Lyria said.

"Understood. Goodbye, Ms. Bannon."

The call ended, leaving Erik staring at the screen, the image of the woman still displayed. He felt a mixture of excitement, trepidation, and resolve.

Glancing back at Noah, who had been quietly observing him while he was dealing with Lyria, Erik's mind shifted gears. There were preparations, plans to be formulated, and a mission to embark on.

Chapter 592: Rebecca (1)

It had been three days since Erik last spoke with Ms. Bannon after she had called him. However, he needed to attend to some other urgent matters that demanded his attention before he could fully commit himself to the investigation the woman tasked him with making.

During the following days, Erik was occupied with the intricate process of merging the various brain crystal powers he had acquired in the past with the Feral Worm Soldier brain crystal power he recently got.

While doing so, he was also in charge of essential administrative tasks within the guild, which at the moment consisted of two five-person teams that Erik was already thinking of expanding.

The administrative work that Erik had to handle alongside his ongoing investigation proved to be quite challenging.

Balancing these responsibilities was difficult, demanding a lot of time and effort from Erik. Despite being eager to fully commit himself to the investigation, the administrative work made it hard for him to do so.

The brain crystal powers Erik used for the merging process included "Metallic Edge Enhancement," "Biomantic Armor," and "Animal Shapeshifting." These powers had seamlessly integrated with the Feral Worm Soldier, giving the Worm Slaves their unique abilities.

However, differently from how they worked with humans, who possessed brain crystals, these powers operated biologically, distinct from the conventional mana-dependent abilities.

Erik scrutinized the results with a discerning eye. While these abilities were somewhat less powerful than what he could achieve through mana manipulation, they still constituted significant improvements for the clones. Their relatively high proficiency levels ensured their effectiveness in multiple situations, making them valuable assets in specific contexts.

Erik, however, was cautious in his selection of brain crystal powers for merging, opting to steer clear of those heavily reliant on mana. He understood that such powers would offer limited utility when fused with the Mirror's Centipede Brain crystal power; that was the case, for example, of those powers that allowed the manipulation of the natural elements such as fire and water.

With a sense of satisfaction regarding his choices, Erik turned his attention to a corner of the room, where Noah was deeply engrossed in browsing something on his master's computer.

Noah's growth had been nothing short of remarkable, with his intellect and physical strength evolving rapidly within a brief span.

As Noah absorbed the information on the screen, his rapt concentration and adept keystrokes hinted at the developing intellect beneath his unique exterior.

"You're studying a lot, Noah," Erik remarked, his voice infused with pride. It was true that Noah had Erik's memories, but the young man didn't know everything, and apparently, Noah had already developed some interest.

Noah raised his gaze from the screen, his eyes reflecting a deep understanding that intrigued Erik. "Yes, Master," he replied, his tone measured and articulate. "I find knowledge truly fascinating. There's so much to learn and understand, and thanks to your guidance, comprehending things has become much easier."

Erik nodded, a sense of pride in Noah's progress swelling within him. Despite the kid's unusual origins, a spark of life and potential resided within him that Erik couldn't ignore.

"I'm happy to hear that you found something you like already," Erik replied warmly, placing a reassuring hand on Noah's shoulder. "But remember not to overexert yourself with studies; taking breaks occasionally is important. You'll be confined to this room for the next month, but you'll join me outside afterward."

Noah's eyes widened slightly, a glimmer of anticipation shining within them. "I'll comply with your wishes, Master. Thank you for your concern."

Erik's lips curled into a thoughtful smile. He noticed that, although Noah was bound to follow his orders, there was a genuine willingness, even eagerness, to assist him, devoid of greed.

"Thank you, Noah," Erik replied, his hand still resting on the creature's shoulder. "We have a lot of work ahead of us."

As he gazed into Noah's eyes, Erik felt a connection—a bond that transcended mere mastery and servitude. He perceived potential, promise, and the knowledge that he had created something truly unique.

With renewed determination, Erik redirected his thoughts to the impending task. The start of the investigation loomed, and he knew it was time to take action now that everything at the guild was ready.

Erik sat in his well-furnished office, his fingers deftly scrolling through his phone contacts. The moment to address the assignment he had been given had arrived, and he had a specific person in mind to contact. Locating Rebecca's name among his contacts, he tapped the call button and waited for her response.

After just two rings, Rebecca's sharp and businesslike voice came through the phone. "I was wondering when you'd reach out, Mr. Kay."

Erik couldn't help but smile at her directness. "My apologies for the delay, Rebecca. I had some pressing matters to attend to."

Rebecca's tone softened slightly, and curiosity seeped in. "No worries about that. I've heard from the guild that you've handled these types of quests for them before; is that correct?"

"Yes, you're right," Erik confirmed, leaning back in his chair with a dossier about Catrina, his quest's subject, spread across his desk. "I believe it's time for us to meet and discuss the quest's details."

Rebecca paused, her mind clearly assessing the best course of action. "I agree. A face-to-face meeting would be ideal. Where do you propose to meet?"

Erik's eyes drifted to the window, taking in the view of his bustling guild headquarters. "You can come to my guild headquarters," he suggested confidently. "We can hold our meeting here, in private."

Rebecca's agreement was swift and decisive. "That works for me. I'll be there tomorrow at 10:00 a.m. Does that suit your schedule?"

"Perfectly," Erik replied, a growing sense of anticipation building within him.

"Very well, Erik. I'll see you then." With those parting words, Rebecca ended the call.

Erik placed his phone down and leaned back in his chair, his mind deep in thought. He couldn't help but wonder about the reasoning behind Lyria's choice to involve this woman in this quest. While Rebecca's experience, knowledge, and connections held potential benefits, Erik remained uncertain about her true role or who she was. For now, he only had a name.

Sitting in the quiet peace of his apartment within the guild's headquarters, Erik felt a resolve settle over him. The investigation loomed ahead, and he was determined to uncover the secrets that awaited.

Chapter 593: Rebecca (2)

The next day, at precisely 10:00 a.m., the guild's premises erupted, with many people pouring out of the main entrance as a sleek black SUV glided gracefully into the parking lot.

Erik had meticulously prepared for this meeting, making certain that every detail was perfect. He stood there, hidden behind his mask, watching the car's engine roar to a hushed halt.

This mask, unlike his usual one, concealed as much as it revealed, lending mystery to his presence.

A woman emerged from the car as the door swung open, embodying a harmonious blend of elegance and strength. Rebecca, petite and lovely, possessed a body that clearly bore the marks of rigorous training despite everything else.

Her movements screamed power and control, as if every step she took were a carefully choreographed dance. Rebecca was obviously not just any ordinary woman. Despite her meticulous attention to her appearance, her hands bore clear evidence of calluses.

Her lustrous black hair fell in gentle waves down her back, framing a face that radiated intelligence and curiosity. Her attire was intricately embroidered, a fusion of cotton and silk that enhanced her presence.

Long black socks and a white dress with a skirt that gracefully reached her knees completed her outfit. The end result was a stunning combination of aesthetics and functionality, a true representation of subtle sophistication.

Erik's assembled team of waiters greeted her with reverence, their expressions reflecting admiration and curiosity. They didn't know what she was doing there, but they knew who she was, and that was enough to command their respect. Erik was the only one who wasn't aware of her identity since he wasn't from Etrium, and he didn't care about her.

He was briefly lost in thought, however, as he noticed Rebecca exiting the SUV. Her effortless grace complemented her undeniable beauty, which was immediately noticeable.

Her long, black hair, exquisitely tailored dress, and gentle contours of her face all worked together to create an aesthetically pleasing whole.

Erik, though, was not one to let appearances influence his decisions.

Aside from her beauty, he noticed signs of rigorous training. The calluses on her hands bore witness to a life of hard work and discipline, which was something he appreciated much more than aesthetics.

Nevertheless, despite still being a young man and being susceptible to such beauty, he quickly turned his attention back to the discussion. He was well aware that this was a professional gathering, and the nature of their cooperation demanded undivided attention and dedication.

Erik took the initiative, his posture exuding confidence as he approached Rebecca while still concealed in mystery behind his mask. His hidden eyes followed her as he extended his hand in greeting.

"Welcome to our guild, Rebecca," Erik said courteously. "I really appreciate your presence here."

Rebecca responded with a warm smile and an open and engaging demeanor. "Thank you very much, Mr. Kay. It's my pleasure. I've heard a lot about you. Your founding of this guild did not surprise me."

The conversation flowed easily, like a natural exchange between two consummate professionals. They started walking toward the guild's main edifice, the team of waiters following in their wake. The surroundings were immaculately kept, reflecting the effort the workers here put into making the place as pleasant to the eyes as possible.

They sat in elegant armchairs in Erik's office; the decor and ambiance were impeccably formal, befitting the importance of the meeting.

"Would you like something to drink or perhaps a snack?" Erik, who was always a welcoming host, asked. Rebecca's response was firm but kind. "Water will suffice, thank you."

Erik directed one of his colleagues to go get the water, and the task was completed with the efficiency of a well-organized team. Rebecca was promptly served water, and Erik excused everyone from the room. Privacy was critical for the forthcoming discussion.

Erik wasted no time once he was alone in addressing the issue at hand. "I must admit, it's not an easy question to ask, but I assume you're aware that I've worked alone on missions of this nature in the past; am I correct?"

Rebecca's fierce gaze met Erik's mask as she replied, "Indeed, Mr. Kay."

"Then," Erik continued, his tone neutral but genuinely curious, "you won't find it impertinent of me to inquire why the guild has seen fit to assign you to work alongside me?" He said it in the most

articulate way possible to leave a good impression. Clearly influenced by the need to impress the woman.

"I don't know why I was chosen for this mission, but it was probably because of my mother," Rebecca said, her eyes fixed on the ground.

Erik's eyebrows raised slightly when she mentioned her mother, but he remained silent, waiting for her to elaborate. Rebecca, on the other hand, didn't ask any questions about it, her demeanor implying that her previous statement was self-explanatory.

Erik's mind began to race as he considered the connections this young woman might have within the mercenary guild. However, he chose not to ask anything else since her statement implied he had to know who her mother was, and if she was the child of a prominent figure within the organization, he would make a bad impression.

"What did the guild ask you to do exactly?" Erik asked, returning the conversation to their mission.

"They only told me to come here and assist you, but I suspect my mother sent me here to learn from you and gain insight into how to handle missions of this nature on my own," Rebecca admitted. "She saw it as a priceless opportunity, especially since we are the same age."

Erik's shock would be easy to see if it weren't for the mask. Did she really just turn seventeen? He thought she was older because of how she carried herself and how nice she looked. His original plan did not include helping someone who had never done anything like this before, and he was upset with the guild for having forced him to bring this woman with him despite the secrecy of the mission.

Wasn't this supposed to be something no one had to know? But then, if she were the daughter of some important person in the organization, sending her wouldn't be a problem for them.

The guild had a reason for involving her, and he was obligated to work alongside her to achieve their common goal.

Erik decided to take the situation in stride by giving a firm nod. "Very well," he replied in a steady voice. "Let's get down to the details of our mission."

"Of course," Rebecca replied with a radiant smile.

Chapter 594: The Slums (1)

Erik and Rebecca spent the next hour discussing the quest's details, including strategy, timelines, and possible outcomes. Despite his initial reservations, Erik found himself respecting Rebecca's insights; it was clear she wasn't stupid. Her questions were thoughtful, her understanding deep, and her approach methodical.

Eventually, Rebecca leaned back in her chair and asked, "So, what's the first thing we must do? Where do we begin?"

Erik steepled his fingers and looked thoughtfully at the dossier being shown on the holographic computer before them. The Hologram showed her looking at someone they couldn't clearly see, while her cold calculating gaze made her scarier than what someone may have assumed otherwise. The information the file provided was scant but valuable, and according to the report.

"Based on what the guild provided," Erik began after watching the hologram, his voice measured, "Catrina was last spotted in the slums. It's not much to go on, considering she could be anywhere by now. However, it's likely she still has contacts there, and probably her base was or is located in the slums."

Rebecca's eyes narrowed as she considered this. The slums were a labyrinth of narrow streets, hidden alleys, and dense populations, mostly mercenaries who weren't able to hunt anymore or drug addicts. However, finding her was going to be challenging. Information was currency, and trust was rare in the slums.

"So we'll have to go into the slums and see what we can find," Erik continued, his tone resolute. "We'll need to tread carefully, though, the people there are wary of outsiders. We can take many approaches, but I would like to go for something fast. This means that you can't dress up like that."

Rebecca nodded, her mind already working through the logistics. "Yeah, don't worry about that. I bought some spare clothes for this kind of situation. How do you suggest we proceed then?"

Erik appreciated her tactical thinking.

"Disguises are a good idea. We'll need to dress down and appear as part of the crowd. But more than that, we'll need to understand the dynamics of the slums. We need to understand who holds power, who's willing to talk, and who might be connected to Catrina. However, the first thing we must do is to search around.

I thought it could be good to enter their organization, but with you here it's a problem, and there wouldn't be a point if you don't come. So, we will go for the usual approach, search the end of the chain and follow it."

Rebecca's eyes sparkled with determination. "I understand."

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The duo spent the rest of the meeting finalizing their plan, ensuring they had considered every angle and prepared for every eventuality.

The urgency of the mission pressed heavily on Erik as he instructed Rebecca to go change. They needed to start immediately, for the trail could go cold and the woman they sought to catch could slip through their fingers.

"There are rooms where you can change," Erik said, his voice firm but considerate. "I'll have one of my men escort you."

Rebecca nodded in understanding, her eyes determined. She knew the importance and power of disguise.

Erik called one of his men waiting by the door. "Escort the lady to a room where she can change, and make sure her luggage is brought inside."

The man saluted and led Rebecca away, leaving Erik to his thoughts. He, too, needed to change. His usual attire would be too recognizable, and his signature mask would give him away instantly. However, it was clear he couldn't go without his mask with Rebecca around. People used masks there, so he too could do it, but he needed to change it.

After having gone to his room, he picked out an ensemble that was average in every way, not torn but not too refined. It was the clothing of someone who belonged in the slums.

After dressing, Erik took a moment to look at himself in the mirror. The man staring back at him was a stranger, an everyman, someone who could pass unnoticed in a crowd. He donned a more inconspicuous mask, one that concealed his identity without drawing attention and wouldn't reveal his identity. Satisfied, he made his way to the guild's entrance.

Erik was astounded by Rebecca's transformation when she soon arrived. Gone were the elaborate clothes made of cotton and silk, the soft curls, and the air of elegance.

Instead, she wore simple trousers and a blouse, her hair pulled back into a no-nonsense ponytail hidden by a hood. Her eyes were sharp, her posture poised, and she, too, wore a mask, hiding her beauty and giving her a look of anonymity.

For a moment, they simply looked at each other, taking in the transformation. Then Erik broke the silence with a low rumble. "Well done. You look perfect for our mission."

Rebecca's eyes crinkled at the corners, a smile hidden behind her mask. "As do you. We'll make quite the pair in the slums."

Erik couldn't help but agree. They looked like normal people, average citizens, going about their daily lives. It was a clever disguise, one that would allow them to navigate the maze of the slums without drawing undue attention.

"Let's get going," Erik said, his voice filled with resolve. "Time is of the essence, and we have a lot of ground to cover."

Erik and Rebecca alighted from the car at the edge of the slums, stepping into a place vastly different from the rest of the city. The polished, vibrant streets gave way to cracked and grimy roads filled with potholes and strewn with refuse.

The buildings were ramshackle and dilapidated, a stark contrast to the elegant architecture that adorned the wealthier districts.

The air was heavy with the scent of decay and dead animals, an olfactory assault that lingered and clung to the very soul of the place. Beggars lined the sidewalks, their faces etched with lines of despair and hardship.

Their eyes were vacant and hollow, as if the spark of life had been extinguished long ago.

Graffiti marred the walls, a chaotic explosion of colors and words, some of it angry, some pleading, but all speaking of a raw, unfiltered emotion that permeated the slums.

It was a visual testament to the anger and frustration that festered beneath the surface, a cry for help that went largely unheard.

Everywhere they looked, Erik and Rebecca saw evidence of a place abandoned by hope and prosperity. Filth lay in piles on the streets, and ragged children played in the alleys, their laughter tinged with a sadness that was far too profound for their tender years.

"Let's go," Erik said, and the two started walking along the city's streets.

Chapter 595: The Slums (2)

Navigating through the squalor of the slums, Erik and Rebecca remained close, a sense of unease weighing on them. The slums seemed to be a living entity, breathing and pulsating with the grim realities of life on the fringes of society.

"What should we do once we reach the place?" She asked with a slightly concerned tone, her eyes fixed on Erik. "Catrina had been seen at a shop in the slums, Rundel's Emporium, where they sell potions and mana-filled ingredients. But after that, she disappeared. The guild talked to the owner and looked into it but found nothing."

Erik's expression tightened, his mind racing through the information he'd downloaded from Doran's lab before the Blackguards, whose presence made the whole situation a dangerous game, had set it aflame.

He knew that the shop was involved in the matter, but aside from giving ingredients to Doran's lab, it didn't do much according to Doran's documents. The fact that Catrina had been spotted at an alchemical shop was not a mere coincidence since she worked with the man.

"We have to approach this cautiously," he told Rebecca, his voice low and measured. "I'm sure Catrina had a reason to be at Rundel's. Maybe she was acquiring something or meeting someone."

He paused, his eyes narrowing as he considered the possibilities.

"We'll start by observing the shop from a distance and seeing who comes and goes. We may even find a way to question Rundel without arousing suspicion. But whatever we do, we must tread lightly. If these guys suspect we're on their trail, they won't hesitate to eliminate us. Of course, we will change our approach if the situation demands it."

Rebecca's eyes widened momentarily before she nodded, determination settling over her. "Understood," she said, her voice firm.

The duo made their way to Rundel's Alchemical Emporium, a dimly lit shop tucked away in a crooked alley in the slums. The shop's exterior was weathered, and an old wooden sign creaked overhead, swaying in the wind.

The windows were clouded with age and grime, revealing little of the interior. An array of bottles, flasks, and odd trinkets could be glimpsed through the murky glass, hinting at the treasures and secrets hidden within but nothing more.

"Rebecca," Erik instructed, his voice a hushed whisper, "I want you to go up that building there and keep an eye on the shop. Try not to be seen."

Rebecca nodded, her eyes sharp and focused. Without a word, she scaled the wall with practiced ease, disappearing onto a rooftop that offered a clear vantage point of Rundel's shop.

Meanwhile, Erik settled himself in a concealed spot where he could observe the entrance. He immediately addressed the biological supercomputer.

<System, connect to the devices inside; I want to see what this place holds.>

[UNDERSTOOD. CONNECTING TO DEVICES INSIDE THE SHOP. ACCESSING SECURITY CAMERAS. CONNECTION SUCCESSFUL.]

As soon as Erik got access to the shop's surveillance system. Through the eyes of the hidden cameras, he was able to see the interior of the shop.

Shelves lined the walls, filled with ingredients and potions. Customers browsed the wares, but there weren't many of them. The place looked incredibly ugly and dirty, with layers of dust covering the shelves and cobwebs hanging from the corners. The once vibrant and colorful potions now appeared faded and neglected.

The lack of customers further emphasized the unappealing state of the place, as it seemed that even potential buyers were put off by its unkempt appearance.

It wasn't long after Erik found a hidden room.

<Typical... But I wonder how the Blackguards didn't find this out.>

Behind a library in the back of the shop lay a concealed door leading to a vast space hidden from view.

He said nothing to Rebecca about it, not wanting to reveal what he'd found just yet, as he needed to make the discovery appear like a lucky one.

The hidden room behind the library in Rundel's emporium was a stark contrast to the front of the shop. It was a place devoid of the magical charm that filled the public, but dirty area. Instead, it was a cold, clinical space filled with a sense of purpose and secrecy.

Long steel workbenches covered in chemists' tools dominated the spacious and well-lit room. Flasks, beakers, burners, and a plethora of scientific apparatus were meticulously arranged, all of them pristine and ready for use.

Lining the walls were shelves filled with various plants, some common and others rare and exotic, most poisonous. These were not the magical herbs used for brewing medicines and body-enhancing stuff; they were raw materials for a more sinister purpose. Erik knew this because he was interested in opening an alchemy branch of the guild once he had the money.

Despite the façade of a legitimate alchemical operation, the hidden room's true function was apparent to Erik.

The secretive nature, the state-of-the-art equipment, and the careful organization all pointed to one conclusion: this was a clandestine drug manufacturing facility; for what purpose and what kind of illegal substance they produced was unknown.

<Based on what they make, probably this stuff here was made to be used on the guys held captive at the lab. Yeah, probably, but were they used to keep them in a vegetative or controllable state or to help Doran in his research?>

Erik was looking around to see if there was something he could find before entering. He knew that the only thing he had to do was enter, but he had to pay attention to Rebecca. If he told her he had found something already, she would question him.

Over the course of several hours, Erik and Rebecca observed a consistent flow of people entering and leaving Rundel's Alchemical Emporium.

Most appeared to be ordinary customers, with no signs of suspicion or awareness of the hidden operation within.

They would browse the shelves, make their purchases, and leave, following the normal rhythm of a business day. In total, around thirty individuals entered the building throughout the day, each spending varying amounts of time inside, with no one's behavior standing out as particularly unusual or secretive.

The scene was mundane, almost painstakingly so, lending to the hidden room's secrecy. It was clear to Erik that whatever illicit activities were happening in the hidden room, they were well-concealed, and those involved were careful to maintain the appearance of a legitimate business.

Chapter 596: The Inside of the shop (1)

The owner of Rundel's Emporium, a middle-aged man with a weathered face and solid frame, emerged from his shop just as night began to settle over the empty and desolated streets of the slums.

While he was making sure that all of the shop's security measures were in place, he gave a wary glance in every direction before locking the doors. His hands moved slowly and deliberately as he checked and rechecked the locks as well as the other safety precautions.

Thefts were widespread in the dirty slum's lanes, and the complex safety system was not out of place. However, his movements had an edge to them, a certain tightness that alluded to the existence of a different thing altogether.

Erik remained hidden on the street as he viewed the scene below with a focused gaze, narrowing his eyes. He had the impression that there was something more going on behind the seemingly ordinary act of the shopkeeper locking up for the night. He was hiding something, and the young man knew that had to do with the secret lab inside the shop.

He grabbed his phone and called Rebecca, who was hiding on the rooftop. He said in a low voice, "Come down. Follow the man, but stay hidden. I'm going inside to look for more information."

Rebecca's strong, determined voice came back.

"Understood." With a swift, graceful movement, she descended from the roof, her figure blending into the shadows as she landed on the ground.

During this time, the owner of the store resumed the thorough approach he had been using to secure the store. His eyes raced across the dimly lit street, searching for any indication that he was being followed or observed without permission. Following the last step of all of the closing procedures, he left the store and walked away, and Rebecca started following him.

Erik observed as the woman, who was now at ground level, began to tail the man. She moved with the poise of a skilled expert, her steps being light and silent, and her figure being hidden by the shadows. He was impressed; it was clear she received extensive training.

Erik switched his attention back to the shop once he was certain that Rebecca was successfully following the shop owner and once he determined that they were both a suitable distance away from the location in question.

<System, deactivate any security system or camera, open any lock, whatever.>

[UNDERSTOOD. ACCESSING THE DEVICES. PROCEDURE COMPLETE.]

After that was finished, Erik turned on the Chameleon Veil and opened the door, after first removing any mechanical locks that may have been present on the store's primary entrance.

Erik entered the store stealthily and quietly, the brain crystal power he possessed partially concealing his exterior as he did so. He stopped for a second and took in his surroundings, his eyes scanning the area carefully for any traps that were not activated electrically. There shouldn't have

been anyone inside the shop. Erik made sure to check through the security system, so at least he was safe.

His nostrils were flooded with the shop's aroma, which was an intoxicating concoction of unusual flora, pungent herbs, and a lingering hint of something chemical and caustic.

The scent was an enticing concoction, which provided a clue as to the dual nature of the location, which was in part a shelter for alchemists and in part a covert drug laboratory.

Erik, now pleased that he was by himself, proceeded hastily towards the back of the shop, his movements being light and deliberate the entire time.

Thanks to the biological supercomputer's help, the young man was able to get to his destination without any trouble. The secret lab door, cleverly hidden behind a bookshelf, was already unlocked, its mechanism bypassed by the supercomputer.

Erik opened the concealed entry with a light push, which revealed a dimly illuminated stairway descending into the subterranean depths of the establishment.

As soon as Erik stepped foot inside the laboratory, the smell hit him; it was different from the one that was upstairs, and it was not in the least bit pleasant. The benches were lined with rows of chemist's tools, which shone brightly beneath the artificial lights.

Shelves were stacked with jars and containers that held a variety of plants and chemicals, and vats of unidentified liquids boiled away in the background.

But Erik did not linger for long in admiration of the arrangement. He was aware of what he needed to find, and he moved with purpose as he searched the room for documents and any other material that could shed light on the real nature of the operation.

His search was methodical and exhaustive, as seen by the deft movement of his hands as they moved over the surfaces, opened drawers, and rummaged through files. He discovered folders that were jam-packed with documents, diagrams, and notes that had been meticulously cataloged and categorized, but nothing was on a computer.

Since time was of the essence and Erik was confident that he would be able to assess the content at a later time, he did not pause to read any of them.

He began to assemble the documents in an orderly and methodical manner, placing them one by one into his backpack. Every file folder and sheet of paper could potentially conceal information that would reveal where Catrina was or how the illegal activity was carried out.

He took everything that even vaguely seemed pertinent to the situation, his mind working swiftly to evaluate the worth of each object he was taking.

The room gradually became devoid of its hidden secrets, the shelves and drawers emptied, the evidence of criminal activity carefully collected and stowed away.

As he zipped up his backpack, he cast one final glance around the room. The silence of the place seemed to echo with the ghosts of its past, a haunting reminder of the darkness hidden beneath the surface of the city.

With a last lingering look, Erik turned and made his way back up the stairs, his mind already racing ahead to the next phase of the investigation.

Chapter 597: The Inside of the shop (2)

As Erik ascended the stairs, a sudden noise jolted him from his thoughts. It was a soft sound, almost indistinguishable from the ambient noises of the slums, but to Erik's finely tuned senses, it was as clear as a bell.

He stopped in his tracks, heart pounding, and peered cautiously around a corner to identify the source of the disturbance.

To his surprise, he found Rebecca standing there, her eyes wide with curiosity and her posture tense. Erik quickly stopped channeling mana through the Chameleon Veil's neural links, allowing his form to become fully visible once more. He stepped out from behind the door, his expression a mixture of relief and curiosity, and showed himself to the woman.

"Rebecca? What are you doing here?" He asked, his voice betraying a hint of frustration. This was not part of the plan, and Erik was not one to appreciate surprises in the middle of a delicate operation.

Rebecca's face flushed slightly, and she looked down momentarily before meeting Erik's gaze.

"The owner went to a garage and took a car," she explained, her voice tinged with disappointment. "I couldn't possibly follow him, so I came back here. I thought you might need help."

Erik's annoyance softened at her explanation, and he nodded, understanding her reasoning. "Did you find anything useful?" she asked, her eyes bright with curiosity.

Erik's lips curved into a thin smile as he recounted his discoveries. "I found a secret lab under the building," he said, his voice low and serious. "And I took every document from there. They might hold valuable information about Catrina's whereabouts or her ties to this whole mess."

"Good job!" Rebecca exclaimed, her eyes widening with excitement. She seemed genuinely impressed, but her enthusiasm quickly gave way to curiosity. "But how did you manage to enter inside the shop?" she asked, her eyes narrowing suspiciously.

Erik's smile turned down; of course, it was hidden behind his mask, so she couldn't see it. He shook his head, a finger raised to his lips. "That's a secret," he replied, his tone teasing but firm. "Every mercenary has a hidden ace up his sleeve. Some things are better left unsaid."

Rebecca looked at him for a moment, her eyes searching his masked face, but she seemed to understand that he was not going to reveal his methods. She sighed and nodded, a smile tugging at her lips. "Fair enough," she said, her voice filled with a mixture of respect and amusement. "I guess I'll have to accept that."

Erik's smile widened, and he clapped her on the shoulder, a gesture of camaraderie and trust. "Let's get out of here," he said.

Rebecca's face lit up at his words, and she nodded, her expression filled with determination. "Yes, let's go," she said, her voice filled with resolve.

However, as Erik and Rebecca turned to leave, an unexpected sound froze them in their tracks. The shop owner had returned, his face contorted in surprise and rage as he took in the scene before him.

He must have forgotten something in the shop and come back to retrieve it, only to find two intruders in his domain.

"WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU?!" he roared, his voice filled with fury and shock. His eyes locked on Rebecca, the closest one to the door, and without a moment's hesitation, he charged at her, his body a lethal weapon of anger and strength.

Rebecca's reaction was immediate and graceful. With a quick somersault, she avoided the man's lunge, her body twisting in the air as she unsheathed a sword in one fluid motion. Her eyes narrowed, and her stance shifted into a defensive position as she faced her attacker.

The shop owner was not to be outdone. With a snarl, he drew his own blade, his eyes wild with anger. But he was outnumbered, and Erik was not one to stand idly by while his partner faced danger alone.

<Analysis.>

Name: Unknown

-Brain Crystal Power: Mana Poison. The man's Brain crystal power allows the man to create poisonous mana that he can use to coat items to fight.

-Physical Characteristics:

Size: 1.8 meters tall. Lean build.

Age: 57

Hair: Bald, brown to the sides.

Eyes: Brown

{Attributes}

-STRENGTH: 63

-INTELLIGENCE: 20

-DEXTERITY: 52

-ENERGY: 295

{Others}

-Power Level: 194

-Brain Crystal Rank: Cξ3E

-Estimated Experience by killing him: 2

<Bald fucker. He is only a Cξ3E and he dares to attack us...>

Erik and Rebecca circled the shop owner. The young man's eyes narrowed as he observed the man move against Rebecca while she gracefully, as a dancer, avoided the owner's lunges and parries, her strength equal to that of a 57-year-old man. That alone was impressive since Rebecca was only 17, and she was already on par with a ξ3-ranked fighter.

The woman knew Erik was stronger than her, based on what she knew about the young man, but she didn't know how much stronger he really was.

With a swift movement, Erik led the offensive, aiming a punch at the man's face, he didn't even need to take his weapon or use his brain crystal powers.

The shop owner didn't even have time to react when Erik's fist collided with his face and he fell to the ground unconscious.

"Are you ok?" Erik asked Rebecca, who looked at him as if he was a monster.

"How did you do that?" She asked.

"What do you mean how? I punched him," he sarcastically replied.

"Not that. How were you able to go that fast?" she asked inquisitively.

"My brain crystal power, of course."

"But I didn't feel mana coming from you," she replied. She wasn't stupid.

"I'm good at managing mana, but aside from that I think you simply didn't notice."

Rebecca immediately understood Erik didn't want to talk about that, so she refrained from saying anything else.

She then looked at the unconscious man. "What do we do about him? If he really is implicated in all of this he will surely call the target."

"Let's call Ms. Bannon; she can for sure take care of him," Erik firmly replied.

Chapter 598: Analyzing the documents

Erik stood by the entrance, watching as the guild members swarmed the shop, cataloging evidence and snapping photos of the hidden lab after he and Rebecca called Ms. Bannon.

His eyes were troubled, his mind racing with the possible consequences of this whole messy situation. Ms. Bannon had quickly arranged for the extraction of the unconscious shop owner, efficiently moving to lock down the premises, but Erik wasn't happy about what was happening.

This situation wasn't going to make him look good in front of Ms. Bannon, as being caught in such situations could mess up the whole operation.

Rebecca approached him, her expression thoughtful. "We've got what we came for; shouldn't we go studying these documents? "

Erik glanced at her, his eyes dark with a little bit of annoyance. "Yeah, but I'm worried Catrina will catch wind of what happened here. If that happens, we might lose our lead on her."

Rebecca nodded, understanding his sentiment. "We should hurry up, then."

Erik's jaw tightened. "Yeah..."

They watched silently as the guild members continued their work, the shop's once-secret operations laid bare for them to see.

Finally, Ms. Bannon approached them, but she sighed once she was in front of Erik. "You made a mess..." The woman said.

"I usually work alone, Ms. Bannon, did you forget that?" he said trying to shift the blame to Rebecca for the situation. That was partially true, even if the man came back to the shop he wouldn't have been found out if it wasn't for the woman since Erik was going to be almost impossible to see, but saying that in front of Rebecca wasn't really polite.

"I guess so... Try not to mess up from here on. We can manage this situation somehow, but if something like this happens again, things may become complicated."

"We'll try to be more careful..."

Ms. Bannon placed a reassuring hand on his arm. "I'll trust you this time."

Erik and Rebecca left the scene, the night heavy with tension. Rebecca's brow furrowed, leaving a trace of annoyance in her eyes. Even though she remained silent and kept her thoughts to herself, Erik could feel her irritation at what he had said.

As they reached the car, Erik handed some documents to Rebecca, trying to shift the focus from what happened. "We should start reading these. There might be a link we can exploit."

Rebecca took the documents, her eyes scanning the pages. She was still clearly bothered, but she kept her thoughts to herself, focusing instead on the task at hand.

The drive to Erik's guild's headquarters was quiet, the silence between them filled with unspoken thoughts and lingering doubts. Erik's mind was already on the next step, analyzing the information they had gathered and planning their next move. Rebecca, however, seemed lost in thought, her mind clearly on something else.

When they arrived at Erik's guild's headquarters, they headed straight to Erik's office.

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Erik looked up from his papers, his eyes meeting Rebecca's. "Have you found anything useful?" he asked as they walked toward the office. Rebecca set down the document she was reading 5 minutes ago, her expression thoughtful. "Yes, it seems the shop owner was supplying Catrina with mind-numbing drugs. Clearly, they were being used to make someone obedient, but for what end, he didn't know."

Erik's brow furrowed, his mind racing. The connection between Catrina and the shop owner was a significant piece of the puzzle.

<That explains why the people Doran kidnapped were so obedient. I thought it was due to a brain crystal power.>

The drugs, the secret laboratory, the hidden agenda, the blackguards' involvement – it all pointed to something much larger, something that went beyond mere criminal enterprise.

As they walked through the halls, one of Erik's employees approached them, a polite smile on her face. "Sir, it's quite late. Would you and your guest like something to eat? We can prepare something and bring it to your office."

Erik glanced at Rebecca, noticing the tired look in her eyes. "Yes, please prepare something. Thank you."

As they continued to his office, Rebecca broke the silence; her voice edged with frustration. She had been really annoyed by what Erik said and wanted some clarification. "Erik, back at the shop, you seemed to shift the blame on me. As if it were my presence that caused the discovery."

Erik stopped, turning to face her, his expression serious. "It was kind of true. But it's not like you did something wrong."

"What do you mean? The man would have come back regardless I was there or not," the woman said with annoyance.

"Yes, but I'm an expert at this kind of operation; I could have simply concealed myself. I know my stuff."

"You are not the only one..." Rebecca sighed. "If hiding is the only problem, then I will take care of this," she said with a slightly enraged tone.

"Good, the sooner, the better."

After that, they arrived at Erik's office, settling in to analyze the documents. The tension between them had dissipated. They were professionals, and they couldn't let this situation ruin their temporary partnership.

As they settled into their chairs, they started studying the documents again. After some time, Erik leaned back in his chair, his eyes fixed on Rebecca. "This is big, Rebecca."

"What?" She asked.

"This guy wasn't only supplying Catrina, but even people in Nokisi Point with the same drug."

"Really?" She asked in incredulity.

"Yeah... but the problem is that the amount sent there was at least ten times what he gave to Catrina. If this is true, I don't get the guild is focusing their search here when they should go to Nokisi Point."

Rebecca nodded, her eyes reflecting the same determination he felt. "Agreed. It's certainly weird. Do you think the guild knows something that we don't?"

"That is for sure, but I was told not to pry into this matter and we are already overstepping our boundaries making this research. Ms. Bannon told me to only search for Catrina, and that is what I intend to do, but without reading this stuff, there is little we can do."

Rebecca looked at Erik with a pensive look. It was clear that her mother gave her a serious quest. It was clear that it was to test her, but what if this mission was more dangerous than even she thought?

Chapter 599: A new suspect

The soft knock on the door broke the concentration that had enveloped the room. Erik looked up to see one of his employees, a young waiter, balancing a tray laden with their dinner.

"Ah, thank you," Erik said. "You can leave it here on the table."

The waiter nodded, his eyes flicking curiously between Erik and Rebecca, before he quietly withdrew from the room.

The young man turned to his partner, his eyes softening. "We should take a break. Let's eat something to replenish our energy. We have much to go through, and I don't want us to work to exhaustion."

Rebecca looked up from her papers, her eyes tired but appreciative. "You're right," she agreed, stretching her arms above her head. "A break would be good."

They moved to the small table near the window, and the city's lights twinkled outside as the night deepened. The dinner was simple but nourishing, a welcome respite from the intense focus of their work.

Of course, Erik went to change his mask to one that only hid half his face so that he could eat, and then they allowed themselves to relax a bit, the conversation turning to lighter topics. It was a necessary pause to breathe and gather their strength for the task ahead.

"I must admit," Rebecca said, taking a sip of her drink. "I didn't expect our investigation to lead us here. This is bigger than I thought."

Erik nodded, his gaze thoughtful. "Me neither," he lied.

Rebecca smiled, her eyes meeting Erik's. "Is it that much that you are doing the mercenary?" She asked the young man; of course, she knew that already from what she read about him.

"Less than a year."

"And you are already at the seeker rank? Most people usually take a minimum of two years to go up a rank," Rebecca said with a curious tone.

"I worked a lot, and since the quests were easy..."

"The quests are certainly not easy, it is just you who are too strong for your age."

"Maybe, but this only means that people should start working as mercenaries at a later age and train more."

They continued to eat, the food restoring their energy. Finally, as they finished their meal, Erik looked at Rebecca, his expression serious once again. "Ready to get back to work?"

Rebecca's reply was immediate; her voice was filled with resolve. "Ready."

They returned to their work, their minds clear, their bodies nourished, and their spirits buoyed by their shared purpose. They persisted in their search for the truth throughout the night, and neither of them gave up.

Erik and Rebecca sat hunched over the documents, the hours stretching on as they pored over the pages, searching for anything that might provide them with a clue or a connection. The room was filled with the sounds of rustling paper and the occasional frustrated sigh, as both seemed to find only dead ends and irrelevant information.

Then, a sharp intake of breath broke the silence. "Rebecca, I think I may have found something," Erik said, his voice serious. She looked up, her eyes wide with interest. "What is it?"

Erik's eyes scanned the lines again as if to confirm what he had found. "This text... it's a little bit weird. Some parts don't make much sense. But there's something that's been mentioned repeatedly. A word, Lumina."

Rebecca frowned, thinking back to what he had read. "Lumina?"

"Yeah, initially I assumed it referred to a plant used as an ingredient to produce the drug. But What if it refers to a person rather than an ingredient?"

Rebecca nodded her head, her eyes wide with realization. "My mother talked about a woman whose nickname was Lumina. No one knows who she is or where she works from, but she is said to be a genius alchemist."

Erik's eyes narrowed as he considered Rebecca's words. Could this be a coincidence? Or was there something more to this Lumina? The name seemed too specific and significant to be just a random reference.

"Are you sure about this?" Erik asked, his voice filled with a mix of skepticism and hope.

Rebecca nodded, her face serious and determined. "I'm sure. My mother wouldn't make up something like this. This text probably does refer to her if what you say is true."

They sat in silence for a moment, the implications of Rebecca's information sinking in. If what she said was true, then everything they had read until now had a different meaning.

Erik reached out for a paper he had already read. "Assuming Lumina is a person and not a plant, then this text may mean something else."

He gave the paper to Rebecca, and she read it.

"This means that Lumina is here in Testrovsc's Rest and that she is working with Catrina," Rebecca said realizing what Erik was thinking.

"Exactly," Erik replied, "but now read this," he added by giving another paper to the woman.

"This..."

"Yeah, if we take into account that Lumina is a person rather than an ingredient, the same could be said for this," Erik pointed to a word.

"The hummingbird."

"Yeah... The hummingbird," Erik replied. "It's not just a word, Rebecca, or an ingredient. It's a place, a pharmaceutical company."

Rebecca's eyes widened as she caught the connection.

"Where is it?" the woman asked.

"Here in the city."

"Should we go investigate there?"

Erik nodded, his mind already racing ahead to their next steps. But then he glanced at his watch, realizing how late it had already become.

"But let's do it tomorrow," he said. "It's late, and we both need rest. We'll be more effective with fresh minds."

Rebecca looked up and sighed, recognizing the wisdom in his words.

"You're right," she agreed, slowly closing the document. "We should head to bed."

A few more words were said between them, during which they speculated about what they would discover at the Hummingbird Pharmaceutical Company and discussed their plan for the next day. They both seemed to have a sense that they were on the edge of something significant, which contributed to the quiet intensity of their conversation.

After what seemed like an eternity, they got up from their chairs, stretched their achy limbs, and exchanged resolute looks. As they exited, the room seemed to reverberate with the significance of what they had discovered, and the door swung shut behind them.

Chapter 600: A Revelation

Erik was lost in thought, replaying the day's discoveries as he made his way through the quiet corridors of his guild's headquarters.

The word "hummingbird" was still echoing in his mind, a puzzle waiting to be solved. As he was passing a nondescript closet door, it suddenly swung open, and a woman appeared.

"Mira?" Erik stammered, taken aback by her sudden appearance.

But she didn't reply. Her eyes were determined, her movements decisive as she grabbed Erik by the collar and pulled him into the closet, shutting the door behind them.

"Mira! What are you—" he began to protest, but she silenced him, her fingers deftly removing his mask.

"Less talk, more kisses," she commanded, her voice a soft yet insistent whisper.

Erik's heart pounded in his chest as he looked into her eyes, seeing a fire there that left no room for argument.

Mira's eyes locked onto Erik's, and there was no mistaking the intensity and desire in her gaze. With grace and certainty that left no room for doubt, she reached up, her fingers tracing the contours of his face before gently cradling the back of his head. Her other hand slid to his waist, pulling him closer, eliminating any space between them.

As their lips met, there was nothing tentative or uncertain about the kiss. It was a deep and passionate one, a mingling of breath and longing that spoke of unspoken needs. Mira's lips were soft yet insistent, her tongue exploring Erik's mouth with a hunger that was both surprising and thrilling.

Erik responded in kind, his hands finding their way to her hips and holding her firmly as he lost himself in the sensation of the kiss and the rest of her body.

With a look that communicated more than words ever could, Mira reached for the hem of Erik's shirt, her hands sliding up his chest as she began to unbutton it.

The tenderness in her eyes was matched by a palpable sense of urgency, as if they were both deeply aware that time was of the essence. Erik's breath caught in his throat as her lips wet his neck, sending a shiver of anticipation down his spine.

Erik responded by reaching for the fastenings of Mira's dress, his movements deliberate and sure. The fabric slid over her shoulders, revealing the graceful curve of her neck and the soft swell of her breasts.

Their eyes met, and in that moment, all pretense was gone. They were two people standing on the precipice of something profound and undeniable, and the pull between them was irresistible.

Mira's hands continued their exploration, deftly undoing Erik's belt and trousers, revealing him to her in a way that was both intimate and profound. Her touch was gentle but insistent, her gaze unwavering as she took in the sight of him. There was no shame or hesitation, only acceptance and desire.

In turn, Erik's hands traced the lines of Mira's body, his touch both reverent and possessive as he undid the last of her clothing. Her skin was soft and warm, her body yielding to his touch in a way that was both thrilling and deeply familiar.

The world outside the closet had ceased to exist; all that mattered was the connection between them, a connection that was about to be consummated in the most profound and intimate way possible.

Their bodies spoke a language all their own, and as they moved toward each other, there was no doubt that they were answering a call that was as old as time and as deep as the soul.

After the deed was done, Erik and Mira found themselves seated on the ground, a mix of satisfaction and exhaustion in the air. The closet was filled with the gentle sound of their breathing as they began to come back to themselves, the reality of the world outside slowly intruding once more.

"Erik?" Mira's voice was soft, her eyes on his face. "Who was the woman with the mask I saw with you this morning?" She asked, as she wasn't there when Rebecca arrived.

Mira's teasing tone was met with a playful glare from Erik. "Jealous, are you?" he asked, a hint of mischief in his eyes.

"Maybe just a little bit," she admitted, her grin widening. "But seriously, who was she?"

"Her name's Rebecca," Erik replied, his tone becoming more serious. "We're working on a quest for the guild together."

"Rebecca, who?" Mira's voice was sharp, her eyes narrowing.

"I don't know her surname; I didn't ask," Erik said, shrugging.

Mira's scolding tone took Erik by surprise. "Why didn't you investigate about her? Isn't it a little bit irresponsible?"

"I didn't have time or the right information to look into who she was. She said something peculiar, though," he said, his voice thoughtful. "Something about her mother sending her on this quest by asking the mercenary guild."

Mira's eyes widened, a look of puzzlement crossing her face. There could only be one person who could tell the mercenary guild what to do in the whole of Etrium.

A thought seemed to cross her mind, and she reached for her purse, pulling out her phone. Her fingers flew over the screen as she conducted a quick search, then she turned the phone to Erik, her face pale.

"Is this the face of the woman behind the mask?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Erik's eyes went wide as he looked at the photo. It was Rebecca, no doubt about it. He looked up at Mira, confusion in his eyes. "Yes, it is her. What's the problem?" he asked, sensing her distress.

"How could you not know who she is?" Mira's voice was incredulous, her eyes wide with shock.

"Why should I know?" Erik's voice was filled with genuine confusion, his mind racing to make sense of Mira's reaction. "I mean, I guessed she was the daughter of someone important, but there are many people like her in the city, let alone in the country."

"No, Erik. She isn't merely an important person's daughter; she is the Fierce Lioness's daughter!" Mira's voice rang out, her eyes filled with disbelief.

Erik's heart stopped in his chest, the words echoing in his ears. The Fierce Lioness's daughter?

The room was filled with silence as Erik and Mira stared at each other, the weight of the revelation settling over them. Erik just realized he made a rude remark to the daughter of the most powerful person in the whole nation.

His face flushed with embarrassment, Erik felt a wave of regret wash over him. How could he have been so oblivious to her true identity? The Fierce Lioness was a name that commanded respect and struck fear into the hearts of even the bravest souls.

Her reputation as a formidable leader and ruthless warrior was legendary, and now he had unknowingly insulted her daughter. The gravity of his mistake weighed heavily on Erik's mind, and he couldn't help but wonder what consequences awaited him for his thoughtless words.

"FUCK!"