

BIOLOGICAL 751

Chapter 751: Finding Max (3)

Erik activated his Chameleon Veil, his form dissolving until he was almost completely invisible.

He donned his mask and hooded cloak, further concealing his existence.

With the grace of a shadow, he tiptoed through the crowds of people who were unaware of his presence.

As Erik ventured deeper into the city, the streets grew crowded. Pedestrians of all types filled the narrow cobblestone pathways, creating a sea of bodies that Erik had to navigate through.

Children, their laughter echoing through the streets, darted around, playing their games, oblivious to the world around them.

Men and women, young and old, haggled with the street vendors, their voices rising above the din.

But it was the mercenaries who dominated the scene. They were a motley crew of roughened individuals, their bodies hardened by countless battles and faces etched with scars.

Despite his best efforts, Erik's near-invisible form brushed against a few pedestrians.

A young boy's laughter echoed through the streets, his small hands tossing a worn-out leather ball with innocent enthusiasm. Joy animated his face, smeared with the grime of the streets, as his eyes sparkled with the thrill of the game he was playing.

Suddenly, his laughter faltered, his movements stilled. His little hands clutched the ball tighter, his gaze scanning the surroundings.

From the corner of his eye, he saw a faint shimmer, like a mirage. It was Erik, his form barely visible under the Chameleon Veil, the light ripples shimmering through his form.

The child stood frozen, his eyes wide with surprise and curiosity. He looked around, but all he saw were the familiar faces of the city dwellers, oblivious to the invisible specter that had just passed by him.

Erik moved stealthily, his Chameleon Veil rendering him nearly invisible yet not entirely imperceptible.

As he navigated the crowded streets, his physical presence occasionally brushed against passersby, stirring ripples of confusion in his wake.

Despite his best efforts to weave through the throngs of people undetected, the challenge of avoiding physical contact in the bustling city proved to be a tricky endeavor.

Erik arrived at his destination - the Mercenary Guild. He stood at a distance, his gaze focused on the imposing building before him. A determined look settled on his face and he said under his breath, "Now, let's find this motherfucker."

As Erik approached the entrance of the Mercenary Guild, he blended into the crowd of mercenaries that thronged the area.

To his left, a cloak of deep green draped a broad-shouldered man. A quiver full of arrows peeked over his shoulder, hinting at his expertise in archery. At his hip hung a short sword, its hilt adorned with intricate carvings.

On his right, a woman stood out with her suit of leather armor dyed a striking shade of crimson. She strapped twin daggers to her thighs, and their blades gleamed ominously under the sunlight.

One burly mercenary, a large scar running down his face, turned to his companion, a lean woman with sharp eyes. "Heard about the new quest?" he asked, his voice a low rumble.

The woman nodded, her hand tracing the hilt of her sword. "Yeah, about the Shapeshifter's killer? Seems like a tough one."

"I heard it pays well. Whoever this killer is, they've got everyone on edge."

Scar-face agreed. "Never seen the Guild this riled up before. Whoever nabs this killer is going to be a legend."

Erik listened to their conversation, his expression unreadable beneath his veil. The irony of the situation was not lost on him - here he was, the Shapeshifter's killer they were talking about, standing amidst them, listening to their plans of hunting him down.

The man's gaze swept across the room, seeking the entrance to the guild's private quarters. Unlike the familiar layout of the mercenary guild hall in Testrovsc's Rest, this place had a different arrangement.

The main hall bustled with activity around the holographic computers, where mercenaries interacted with their quest interfaces, their fingers gliding through digital screens with practiced ease.

To one side of the room was a bar, a mix of old and new - while the counter was made of polished oak; the drinks were dispensed from automated machines.

Mercenaries clustered around it, discussing their quests over glasses of synth-ale.

Giant flat-screen TVs adorned the walls, broadcasting the latest news in high definition.

Live feeds from different parts of the city played out on these screens, providing real-time updates on ongoing missions and city affairs.

On the other side of the room, a long line of counters stretched out. Behind these counters, clerks were busy assisting mercenaries with tasks that required human intervention.

In contrast to the open-plan seating in Testrovsc's Rest, where sofas were interspersed for informal discussions and meetings with Porter companies, this guild hall had designated rooms for such purposes.

The décor was sleek and modern, with clean lines and a high-tech ambiance.

Ambient lighting gave the space a futuristic feel, while the use of glass and polished metals added to the sophisticated atmosphere.

The intentional separation of areas for quest selection and team discussions showed a more organized and hierarchical approach to mercenary operations.

<All this seems over the top. In Testrovsc's Rest, a sofa and a handshake were enough. Here, it's like they need a whole separate room just to decide who's going to fetch the next round of drinks. >

His tone carried a hint of amusement mixed with skepticism, finding the arrangements more for show than practical necessity.

<Whatever. It's not like I have to work here. >

At that moment, Erik's eyes landed on the door he had been searching for.

Tucked away in a less conspicuous part of the hall, it was marked by subtle elegance, contrasting with the high-tech ambiance.

He strode towards it, his steps purposeful, a sense of relief washing over him as he approached.

At one point, he found his path blocked by a large man engrossed in a holographic display. The man was moving his hands animatedly, completely oblivious to Erik's presence.

Erik had to sidestep to avoid a collision. His heart skipped a beat as his shoulder missed the man's flailing hand.

For a moment, he held his breath, waiting for any sign that he'd been detected. But the man went on with his day, unaware of the invisible presence that had just brushed past him.

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"Fuck..." Erik let out a silent sigh of relief and went toward the private area.

Crowds flowed in and out of the building: many were there to take tests, others bustling about as part of their daily work routine.

Erik's lips curled into a slight smirk. He reached up, running a hand through his hair, his fingers brushing against the cool fabric of his hood.

"A door of many secrets." Erik had to pay attention. He couldn't afford to be found.

His hand moved to rest on the hilt of his weapon, a comforting presence at his side.

He flexed his fingers around the grip, drawing strength from its familiar touch.

With purposeful strides, he moved toward the door. In the next moment, he was on the other side.

As in Testrovsc's Rest, the private area was sterile, exuding an aura of efficiency.

The walls were painted a pristine white, giving the place a clean, clinical feel. White-painted wooden doors lined the corridor, each equipped with a window that allowed a glimpse into the rooms.

"Just like they like it."

Through these windows, Erik could see various activities taking place. In one room, a group of mercenaries were engaged in a simulated combat scenario, their movements tracked by advanced motion sensors.

In another room, a clerk was conducting a psych evaluation on a recruit. Erik could hear the clerk's voice asking a series of questions designed to probe the recruit's mental resilience and tactical aptitude.

"Describe a situation where you had to make a tough decision under pressure," the clerk's voice echoed faintly through the window.

Further down the corridor, Erik saw a room filled with high-tech equipment, likely used for physical tests and examinations.

He tiptoed down the corridor, his senses heightened as he listened for any hint of conversation that might provide information about his target.

In a room next to the corridor, Erik heard the muffled voices of mercenaries engaged in a discussion.

"I can't believe they're making us go through another round of physical endurance tests. I thought we proved ourselves already."

"Yeah, but you know how it is. They want to make sure we're always at the top of our game. No room for complacency."

As he continued to listen, he heard the mercenaries exchanging tips and strategies. They discussed the challenges they had encountered during previous tests, sharing advice on how to overcome specific obstacles and maximize their performance.

"Remember to pace yourself during the endurance run. It's easy to burn out if you go too hard too early."

"And don't underestimate the marksmanship test," another said. "Focus on your breathing and be steady."

Erik's eyes darted from room to room, his ears attuned to the fragments of conversation that reached his ears. Unfortunately, despite the situation, it looked like there was no one who knew something about Max.

Frustration grew with each passing room. He then climbed a flight of stairs, determined to exhaust every possibility in his search for a lead.

As he checked each room, his hopes dwindled as he found nothing of significance.

On the second floor, Erik entered a room, his eyes scanning its contents. Disheartened, he moved on to the next room, and then the next, repeating the process on each floor.

As he ascended to the fourth floor. Until now, the best he found were people doing administrative jobs and staying silent for the entire duration.

The minutes turned into hours as he inspected every corner, every object, to find any shred of evidence about the target location.

He had already checked their computers and servers, and there was nothing about the man there. They kept the information either on physical documents or in none.

As he approached the last room on the fourth floor, Erik's expectations were low. He wasn't confident of finding any information that would bring him closer to his target.

With a deep breath, Erik reached for the door window to peer into what was inside.

Inside the room, bathed in a soft, ethereal glow from the overhead lights, stood an intricate and elaborate setup. The space was adorned with an array of equipment and monitors, displaying a multitude of data streams and surveillance footage.

Erik's gaze was immediately drawn to a large, wall-mounted screen at the center of the room.

Next to the screen, a sleek workstation housed an assortment of gadgets and devices.

However, next to the workstation there were two people. His eyes widened in disbelief as he recognized one of them. He didn't expect that person to be there.

Standing next to the workstation in the room, there was Lyria Bannon, the Deputy Chief Administrator of the guild's operations. Memories flooded his mind, recalling their encounters.

Lyria stood at a medium height, her presence commanding attention. Her cascading waves of chestnut hair framed a delicate face adorned with a sprinkling of freckles, adding a touch of charm to her features.

Her deep hazel eyes, filled with intelligence and a hint of playfulness, held a familiarity that only time could forge.

Dressed in a rich maroon robe, Lyria exuded an air of authority befitting her high status within the guild.

Erik's gaze fixated on the woman, his mind swirling with a whirlwind of emotions. Their paths had intertwined many times in the past.

She was the one who had assigned him quests on behalf of the Blackguards, so her presence here could only mean that she came to find him on their behalf.

Perhaps they had already deduced his role as the perpetrator behind the shapeshifters' killings.

To evade their grasp, he had sent a message to Max through the TV, sowing seeds of confusion by implicating the Crystal Cross Gang in the heinous acts.

Erik's gaze remained fixed on her, and his mind was consumed by a surge of curiosity. He couldn't help but speculate that Lyria might have a more significant role in the situation than what he thought.

Maybe she wasn't just someone the Blackguards talked to when they needed help, but a member of the organization herself. These were all Erik's speculations, though, and he couldn't get a clear picture unless they said something relevant.

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Was Lyria involved in the mission to capture him? Or was her presence merely coincidental? The answers eluded him, hidden within the confines of that conversation.

As Erik cracked the door, he held his breath and listened. It was true he didn't expect Lyria being there, but that didn't have to be something entirely negative.

Despite fearing the woman's skills at accomplishing missions, he could still gain some valuable insights from that conversation.

Thankfully, the two were engrossed in their conversation to notice him. Erik transformed into a fly and slipped inside unnoticed, using his newfound shapeshifting abilities.

As he flew around the room, he took in every detail, scanning the area for any clues that could help him with his mission.

Erik's eyes darted around the room, taking in its details while his mind was focused on a more pressing task.

The walls, though beautifully adorned with intricate tapestries and paintings that spoke of wealth and power, little interested him at the moment.

His attention was on the documents over the desk the man was sitting in front t.

All the while, he kept an ear tuned to the conversation between Lyria and the man she was engaged with.

He hoped to glean useful information without drawing attention to himself.

Erik flew closer to them first to better see the documents and second to listen with more ease. He couldn't afford to miss any details.

Lyria leaned forward, her eyes fixed on the man. "I know Erik well," she said, her voice laced with a mix of caution and fear. "I've been keeping him under observation for quite some time."

That surprised Erik. There shouldn't have been a reason for Lyria to monitor him unless she approached him because of that.

<I knew the Blackguards usually sends scouts to someone promising enough to be recruited. But is this really the reason she came to me? >

The man's brows furrowed, his curiosity piqued. "And what have you discovered?"

Lyria paused for a moment, choosing her words with care. "He possesses remarkable escaping abilities that have confounded my agents repeatedly. It's as if he has an uncanny knack for slipping through their grasp."

The man leaned back in his chair, absorbing the information. "Escaping abilities? That could complicate matters."

Lyria nodded, her expression grave. "Indeed. It's a skill that sets him apart from others we've encountered. His agility, quick thinking, and resourcefulness make him a real thorn in the side."

The man's eyes narrowed. "If he's that skilled at evading capture, how do we stand a chance?"

A small smile tugged at the corners of Lyria's lips. "Help is on the way."

"From who?" the man asked.

"The Blackguards," Lyria said.

If Erik could grin in his fly form, he would do that right now. Making the Blackguards come here was exactly what he was hoping would happen when he killed the shapeshifters so blatantly.

The man nodded, at ease because of Lyria's words. "We must find a way to keep him here inside the city until they arrive then. "

<Don't worry. I have no intention of leaving. >

As they continued their discussion, their voices lowered even further, ensuring their plans remained hidden from prying ears.

Lyria leaned in closer, her voice barely above a whisper. "There's something else you need to know about Erik Kay," she said. "He is insanely powerful."

"How powerful are we talking about here?" There was skepticism in the man's tone. How could this young man be stronger than a fully trained team of blackguards?

How could he fight against hundreds of mercenaries? In his opinion, Erik had only been lucky in entering the city.

"He is very powerful." Lyria took a moment to gather her thoughts before replying.

"Based on our observations and encounters with him, I suspect he hasn't even shown a fraction of his actual power. It's as if he's been holding back, concealing his true strength."

The man's brows furrowed in deep contemplation. "But why would he do that? What could he gain from hiding his true abilities?"

Lyria shrugged, her expression thoughtful. "It's hard to say for certain, but even if that is only to mislead us, that would be a good enough reason. By keeping his true power hidden, he maintains an element of surprise and unpredictability. It makes him even more dangerous."

The man leaned forward, his eyes fixed on Lyria with a mix of curiosity and concern. "I need to know just how powerful Erik Kay really is. Can you give me an estimate?"

Lyria took a deep breath, her gaze steady as she met the man's intense stare.

"Based on the extensive analysis we've conducted on his movements and abilities during combat, we estimate him to be at the γ level in terms of physical strength."

The man's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "WHAT?!"

Lyria nodded. "I'm not joking..."

The man, the Deputy Chief Administrator of the guild's operations in Caelora City, sat back in his chair, his shock clear on his face. "That much power at 18?" he said, his voice filled with disbelief.

Lyria nodded, her expression serious. "Yes, it's quite remarkable. But as I said, I believe he's hiding his true strength."

The man's eyes widened further. "If that's true, then he's even stronger than the Fierce Lioness or Becker from Frant. They were considered the pinnacle of power in our world."

Lyria nodded again, acknowledging the man's astonishment. "Indeed, in terms of sheer physical prowess, Erik surpasses them. However, there is a crucial factor that makes him weaker."

Curiosity mixed with concern, the man leaned forward. "What is it?"

Lyria leaned in closer, her voice lowered to a hushed tone. "Based on the information we gathered when he joined the Mercenary guild, his amount of mana is surprisingly low. Despite his immense physical strength, his brain crystal capabilities are limited."

The man's eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "But how can that be? How can someone with such incredible power have low mana?"

Lyria shrugged, a hint of intrigue in her eyes. "That's the mystery we're trying to unravel. Erik may have found alternative ways to channel his strength without relying heavily on mana. Or perhaps he's intentionally concealing his abilities."

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The man pondered for a moment, contemplating the implications of the woman's words. "If what you say is true. Then we have a chance. However, what if he is even stronger than that? Would people like Becker and the Fierce Lioness be strong enough to take him down, eventually?"

Lyria listened to the man's assessment, but her expression remained thoughtful. "I understand your concerns, but I believe it may not be as straightforward as it seems. Even though Erik Kay is physically powerful, both Becker and the Fierce Lioness possess unique abilities that could give them an advantage over him."

She paused for a moment, her eyes focused. "In the case of the Fierce Lioness, her transformation into a Dragon grants her immense power, especially when combined with her ability to breathe fire. This hybrid power makes her a formidable opponent in both ranged and melee fights. I doubt that even with his monstrous strength, he could do something against a titanic beast such as a dragon."

Lyria continued, her voice filled with confidence. "Becker, instead, has honed his skills to perfection. His agility, precision, and mastery of various combat techniques make him a highly skilled warrior. He has proven repeatedly that he can adapt to any situation and emerge victorious. Besides, he has a wind controlling power. That man can make shields, blades, even armors with that.

It is even weirder than the Fierce Lioness's brain crystal power because it is a sort of hybrid between an elemental power and an item conjuring power."

Lyria then paused a moment. She was recalling something. "I've seen Becker fight once. He gave his whole army weapons solidified from wind. Those things were able to cleave Thaid's with the same ease a knife can cut butter."

The man's eyebrows furrowed in contemplation as he absorbed Lyria's words. "So you're saying that despite Erik's physical strength, Becker and the Fierce Lioness have the advantage due to their unique abilities?"

Lyria nodded affirmatively. "Yes, precisely. While Erik may be powerful in his own right, we cannot underestimate the strategic prowess and specialized skills possessed by Becker and the Fierce Lioness. Their abilities give them an edge that might tip the scales in their favor. The Blackguards

are the same. However, while Becker and the Fierce lioness are more powerful, the Blackguards are more."

The man's expression softened as he considered this new perspective. "I see now. However, regardless of what Becker and the Fierce Lioness would be able to do, our situation is not good."

He paused for a second. "If he is at such a high level, it means we need to approach this situation with utmost caution and precision if we want to keep him in the city before the Blackguards arrive."

Lyria's voice carried a note of determination. "Absolutely. We'll also need to explore any potential weaknesses or vulnerabilities he may have aside from the lack of mana. No matter how powerful he is, there's always a way to bring someone down."

In that moment, Erik was thinking of how grateful he was for having the biological supercomputer.

Erik may have had a tiny amount of mana prior to his month long secluded training, but now he had enough to face most of the opponents.

Erik had never analyzed a Blackguard, but he assumed those guys would have at least double his mana levels.

If that was true, he had to use his sparingly and intelligently. That was not easy when 10 or 20 highly trained murder machines were coming at you.

As Erik hovered in his fly form, hidden from their view, he kept listening to the conversation unfolding before him.

The man realized the Blackguards were really behind all of this, and that the most likely reason was the biological supercomputer.

The problem was, Erik heard whispers and rumors about the Blackguards, tales of their strength and ruthlessness. They were known to be a force to be reckoned with.

But Erik remained steadfast in his confidence. Physically, he knew he had surpassed the capabilities of anyone on the planet.

His strength and endurance were unmatched. However, he understood that physical prowess alone wouldn't guarantee his safety, exactly as Lyria said. His weakness could be seen by anyone.

Bullets could still pierce his flesh unless he had a defensive power to shield him.

Numbers could overwhelm even the strongest individual, especially if they were coordinated and intelligent. The situation was far from ideal, and he couldn't shake off the unease that gnawed at him.

However, not knowing the extent of his improvements was going to be what would lead the Blackguards, and Lyria herself, to death under his blade. He was feeling unease, but he was also confident he could pull this off.

As he observed Lyria and the Deputy Chief Administrator discussing his abilities and potential weaknesses, Erik's mind raced with strategies to defend himself.

He pondered the best course of action, considering every scenario based on what the two were saying.

Finding Max now became imperative, as he needed his ability if he wanted to create as much chaos as possible, and if he wanted to get the information he needed from the same guys having that information.

Erik remembered the purpose behind all his actions. He wanted to know their knowledge about the biological supercomputer, their connection to Uncle Benjamin, to learn what they planned to do so he could avoid death, or worse, being captured.

The minutes ticked by as Erik continued to listen, his thoughts swirling.

He wondered how much time he had before the Blackguards arrived. Would he be able to evade imprisonment? Could he outsmart them?

Even with his confidence and unique abilities, doubts crept into Erik's mind. What if he wasn't prepared enough? What if his physical strength wasn't enough to overcome the obstacles ahead?

He had more mana than before, yes, but he was still far from the monstrous people with almost 1000 energy points.

Erik's fly-like senses heightened as he detected a shift in the atmosphere.

The tension in the room was palpable, and he could sense the fear and urgency in the two voices.

The weight of the unknown pressed upon him, fueling his determination to be ready for whatever lay ahead.

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The man's gaze hardened, his eyes turning into shards of steel as his voice, laced with a sense of urgency, cut through the air. "When are the Blackguards expected to arrive?"

Lyria glanced up. Her brows knitted together in a frown, a shadow of uncertainty passing over her eyes.

"In three days. I don't know why they're not already here."

"Perhaps they believe Erik Kay cannot escape the city, but they are mistaken. Of that I'm certain."

The man leaned back in his chair, the creaking sound echoing in the silence. His expression turned thoughtful, a wrinkle forming between his brows as he processed the information.

His fingers drummed on the wooden table, each tap echoing his growing concern. "So, they've asked us to keep the city closed and prevent anyone from leaving?"

Lyria nodded. "Yes, that's what they've told us to do."

In his fly form, Erik clung to the rough texture of the ceiling, his compound eyes a mosaic of countless tiny lenses focused intently on the duo below.

His minuscule heart pounded in his chest, a rapid staccato in sync with the fluttering of his wings.

He was digesting the information, turning it over in his mind like a puzzle with missing pieces. Three days.

A countdown had begun, three days before the Blackguards would breach the city's tranquility.

His mind raced, a whirlwind of questions and doubts stirring within him. Why were they so confident he couldn't escape? What did they know he didn't?

<Are they brewing something, or they are just that confident? Regardless, I can't lower my guard. >

His thoughts spiralled deeper, probing the shadows of uncertainty. The Blackguards' confidence suggested knowledge - knowledge that he was yet to uncover.

The conversation below continued, but Erik's thoughts were elsewhere. His wings buzzed as he considered his options.

<Should I leave the city? No. No. That would be an enormous setback. Besides, I lured the Blackguards here to get information. This is the only chance I've got.

>

The Blackguards were infamous for their ruthlessness, their name alone enough to send a shiver down the spine of the bravest warriors.

Many thought confronting them was a fool's errand. Yet Erik decided to do so.

He was not like the others. He had abilities they didn't know about, skills that even the most formidable Blackguards would find challenging to counter.

The perception of him being an easier prey than he really was would serve him well.

Erik had an insatiable curiosity, a thirst for knowledge that was yet to be quenched.

He wanted to know more about the Blackguards, understand what they were doing, why they were chasing him. He wanted to know if it were them who sent people to capture him back in New Alexandria.

This was an opportunity, a chance he couldn't pass on.

However, what Lyria said placed doubts. He had to come up with a plan and find Max before the situation became messier. He had little time on his side, as the guild would soon lock the city down.

He could feel a knot forming in his stomach - or what passed for a stomach in his fly form - as he realized the gravity of his situation.

Erik, perched high on the ceiling, listened as the conversation below continued. However, it was clear the two were done. Then Lyria stood up. She cast a last look at the man before leaving the room.

From his vantage point, Erik watched her retreat, his eyes following her every movement until she vanished from view. He needed more information, and Lyria seemed to be a key player with direct links to the Blackguards.

The man below appeared to be less informed, unlikely to possess the valuable insights Erik sought.

Determined, Erik tailed Lyria. She was his best chance to unearth deeper secrets and understand the intricate web of plans the Blackguards were brewing.

Erik knew Lyria's capabilities well; she was a master strategist, always finding the optimal path and the right individuals for her missions.

Her planning skills were exceptional, and that's what concerned Erik the most.

His suspicions about her were more intuitive than concrete. Observing her, he noted the minute shifts in her demeanor, the nuanced expressions that flickered across her face as she spoke.

Her posture, the way she articulated her words, and the brief pauses between her sentences all pointed to a deeper involvement than she let on.

It seemed likely that Lyria played a far more significant role in the unfolding events than what was apparent from their conversation.

Erik's gut feeling told him to tread carefully. Lyria was not one to be underestimated.

The hidden layers of her involvement were a puzzle he needed to solve to understand the bigger picture.

Lyria walked through the Mercenary guild corridors, her footsteps echoing in the empty hallways.

Erik watched as she entered a dimly lit room at the end of the hallway. He darted in after her, his tiny form invisible in the shadows.

As Lyria entered the room, Erik hovered near the entrance, careful not to draw attention. He watched with curiosity as Lyria approached a seemingly ordinary wall and pressed a hidden button.

She looked behind, as if she expected someone following her. She was right. Albeit she couldn't see him, Erik was there.

A section of the wall slid open, revealing a secret exit leading to the outside.

<Look at how cowardly these guys are. Secret exit doors to flee when everything goes south, uh? >

Lyria stepped through, and Erik followed, his wings propelling him through the opening.

Once outside, they found themselves on a silent street. Lyria glanced around cautiously before setting off with purposeful strides.

Outside, Erik saw a car parked on the street, its engine running. He flew towards it, landing on the roof and clinging to the metal surface with his tiny legs.

Lyria walked towards the car and then entered the vehicle. Without a moment's hesitation, Erik flew through the open window and went to the back of the car, where Lyria wouldn't look.

Aside from Lyria, there was a driver.

A middle-aged woman with sharp features glanced at Lyria through the rearview mirror before turning back to the road. Erik tried to make himself as inconspicuous as possible, his heart pounding in his chest.

The driver's eyes flickered with curiosity as she glanced at Lyria through the rearview mirror.

Her posture was tense, as if she was eager to know more, but didn't want to pry. "Ma'am, did everything go well?" she asked, her voice laced with respect.

Lyria's face remained calm and composed, but Erik could sense a hint of weariness in her eyes. That was weird.

<Why she should be wary of a driver? >

"Yes," she said. "I did what I could here." She paused for a moment, her gaze distant, as if lost in thought. "Now, it's just a matter of preparing, and wait."

Erik watched as Lyria leaned back in her seat, her body language relaxed yet alert. He could see the tension in her muscles.

The driver's voice was respectful, but there was a hint of curiosity in her tone. One a mere driver shouldn't have. Their job was simply to drive. Her eyes flickered with interest as she awaited Lyria's response.

Lyria's expression remained impassive, but Erik could see a flicker of concern in her eyes.

<What if...? >

"You should stop looking at me that way," Lyria said.

In the meantime, Erik thought about his situation. If the Blackguards had indeed discovered his involvement in the destruction of the Crystal Cross Gang back in Testrovsc's Rest, it was inevitable that they would have launched a thorough investigation into his background.

The Blackguards held a monopoly on cross-information from all corners of the world, making it clear how they had got such sensitive knowledge.

Erik couldn't help but acknowledge the immense power wielded by the Blackguards.

They were practically the reigning monarchs of the world, their influence extending far beyond the boundaries of Etrium.

Not only they controlled the Mercenary Guild, but their reach extended into various governments elsewhere. That was common knowledge. Albeit, most thought it was a sort of partnership.

This realization left Erik pondering about Frant, his homeland. Were the Blackguards just as influential there?

Had they infiltrated the government and established their supremacy?

With each passing moment, Erik realized how deep-rooted these guys were.

The driver cleared her throat, her tone now less deferential than before. It looked like she had enough of Lyria not replying.

Her eyes narrowed with impatience as she turned to Lyria. "So, what do you think the higher-ups will do with him once they get their hands on him?" she asked, her voice tinged with frustration.

"You should stick to your role and do not break character, July," she said. While most people would feel irritated about that blatantly direct question about secret affairs, Lyria tried to be as polite as possible.

<Now I'm certain. > It was clear. This woman was a blackguard.

The woman rolled her eyes, clearly annoyed. Her lips curled into a sneer as she spoke.

"Come on, Lyria. There's no one in this car aside from us. Can't we just talk like normal people?"

Her frustration was palpable, a clear sign she was growing tired of the secrecy and subterfuge.

Lyria's voice remained firm, her eyes fixed ahead on the road. She could sense the woman's impatience, but she knew she couldn't afford to let her guard down.

Chapter 756: A Blackguard?

"That is not an excuse to jeopardize the mission."

July shifted in her seat, her hands gripping tightly the steering wheel. She knew Lyria was right, but she couldn't help feeling frustrated by the constant need for secrecy and caution.

"How could he possibly hear us? We're in a moving car with the windows rolled up." July used a sarcastic tone, clarifying that she thought Lyria was overreacting.

Lyria's expression remained impassive, her eyes fixed ahead on the road. She knew that July's skepticism was anything but not an anomaly, and that they couldn't afford to let their guard down.

"Erik Kay. No, Erik Romano," Lyria said, "Found people that your organization couldn't locate for months, and he did it in a matter of days. You shouldn't underestimate him."

<Bingo! > Erik just got lucky. If a Blackguard was here, he could use her to gather more information.

However, he was a little disappointed. He didn't know why, but he always imagined the blackguards as stern and stoic people, cold-blooded individuals, solely focused on their work.

But the woman in front of him was a far cry from being stern and stoic. She ruined that image he built during the years.

July's eyes rolled with disbelief as she turned to face Lyria. "I still don't believe he would be able to hear us talk in a flying car at a hundred meters in the sky."

"Can you please focus on the road? Remember what I said. Do not underestimate him." The woman could only sigh. The situation was too much complex, and the target too dangerous.

July shifted in her seat, her eyes narrowing as she glared at Lyria from the rear mirror.

She couldn't help feeling frustrated by the constant need for caution and secrecy. July was a free spirit, and she preferred to live life on the edge, taking risks and embracing danger.

However, Lyria's words didn't fall on deaf ears, and she knew they had to be vigilant if they were to succeed.

The mission was too important to take it lightly, and any misstep could have dire consequences. The higher ups stressed a lot about capturing Erik Romano.

They didn't explain why, as she was at the bottom of the food chain there, but she heard rumors. If the rumors had to be true, then Erik Romano was the most dangerous individual on the planet.

July knew she needed to put aside her impulsive nature and focus on the task at hand. But it wasn't easy.

Meanwhile, Lyria's anxiety over her safety grew, her mind consumed with worry.

While she had unwavering confidence in the Blackguards' ability to apprehend Erik Romano, the pressing concern was whether they could do so before he reached her.

While knowing Erik's exceptional skills, Lyria couldn't shake the feeling that he was already aware of her presence in the city and the unfolding events.

For months, she, alongside the Blackguards, had searched for him, but he had vanished as though swallowed by the earth itself.

His departure from Testrovsc's Rest was the only certainty they clung to, yet attempting to trace his steps beyond the city's boundaries proved to be a dangerous endeavor.

The vastness outside the city rendered their search nearly futile, akin to the daunting task of locating a single, elusive needle within an expansive haystack, and that was without contemplating the Thaid.

The unexpected revelation of Erik's presence in Caelora City, however, cast a new light on their prolonged quest.

This unforeseen turn of events stirred a mix of bewilderment and strategic anticipation among them.

Here was a tangible clue, a glimmer of hope in the murky waters of uncertainty, pointing towards the potential hideout of the awakener from Frant.

This development, perplexing as it might be, opened up avenues for a more focused hunt, presenting them with a chance to close in on their target.

Erik couldn't help but be intrigued by the blackguard's behavior as he continued to observe her.

She seemed to possess a level of independence and defiance that he hadn't expected from such an organization, and his amusement grew. If there were more like her, he could exploit it.

That also made him wonder if there was more to her than just a loyal member of the organization.

Erik mulled over the idea of winning July's trust or subtly influencing her to divulge critical details about the Blackguards and their objectives. It was unfortunate he hadn't yet gained Max's brain crystal power; impersonating Lyria and interrogating July directly would have been an effective tactic.

Yet, the likelihood of July being deceived by such a ruse was uncertain. Erik's understanding of the Blackguards was too limited. He pondered whether they had received training to detect deceit or if they possessed any brain crystal powers capable of identifying falsehoods.

This gap in knowledge made him cautious. Directly approaching July without a solid understanding of her and the Blackguards' capabilities and countermeasures could be reckless.

This was not something his analysis could help him with. Erik recognized the need for a more calculated approach, considering the risks of engaging with someone as unpredictable and well-trained as July.

Besides, the woman was no ordinary individual since she was in the Blackguards, a secretive organization known to poach talented individuals from various backgrounds.

The Blackguards were hunting for people with outstanding combat abilities, powerful brain crystal powers, or distinct skills that set them apart as invaluable.

This prompted Erik to question what specific talent or ability July had that caught the Blackguards' attention, especially given her volatile nature.

While considering the risks of directly confronting July, Erik opted for a less hazardous approach.

Since approaching the woman was dangerous, Erik took an alternative but safer route. This strategy would allow him to uncover July's secret safely, without exposing himself to unnecessary danger from a direct encounter with her.

<System, I need you to create a virus to keep track of this car and both women's phones. The virus must spread to all the surrounding devices, so that I can see what she does and control their devices remotely. >

[UNDERSTOOD. CREATING VIRUS WITH THE SPECIFIED REQUIREMENTS.]

[VIRUS CREATED. SENDING VIRUS TO THE DEVICES. INJECTION COMPLETE.]

<Good. > With that done, Erik only needed to contact his clones to see if they found out something about Max.

Chapter 757: Mercenary-Police Station (1)

Matthias, one of Erik's clones, meandered through the streets, his eyes scanning the diverse throng of people that populated the city.

Men and women in suits hurried past, their faces buried in their devices, oblivious to the world around them.

Street vendors hawked their wares, their voices rising above the city's constant hum. Children scampered around, their laughter echoing through the narrow alleyways.

His destination was the mercenary-police station, a unique establishment that straddled the line between law enforcement and a private military contractor.

This wasn't your typical police station, not in the same way Frant had it. It was a place where mercenaries with police duties worked, a testament to the nation's unconventional approach to maintaining order.

The mercenaries were not just guns for hire in Etrium. They were an integral part of the culture.

Their duties ranging from defending the borders against Thaid's incursions to mediating disputes among the citizens within Etrium.

Beyond their martial prowess, mercenaries often served as advisors to the rulers of Etrium, lending their expertise in security and military strategy.

Their presence was woven into the fabric of Etrium's society, symbolizing strength, resilience, and the unyielding spirit of its people.

Erik had tasked the clone with this mission. His creator's idea was simple: infiltrate the mercenary police station and gain a potential list of safe houses where their target, Max, could be hiding.

Identify any individuals who might have knowledge about Max's whereabouts and spy on them.

The mercenary-police station Matthias approached was an imposing structure, standing out against the backdrop of the city's more ordinary buildings. Its exterior was a blend of modern architecture and fortified design.

The building was much larger than a typical police station, equipped to accommodate the unique needs of this hybrid force.

The entrance led to a spacious waiting area, somewhat reminiscent of a hospital waiting room, where civilians could wait to speak with officers.

The clone paused for a moment, taking in its fortified walls and guarded entrance. Matthias paused, absorbing the sight of the fortified mercenary-police station.

His gaze roved over the imposing walls and the guarded entrance, taking note of the many agents patrolling the area.

"This won't be a walk in the park. Getting in undetected will be a challenge."

Through the glass doors, Matthias could see the interior of the station. The spacious waiting area was filled with civilians, some looking anxious, others resigned, all waiting for their turn to speak with an officer.

As he assessed his options, Matthias knew he needed a plan to infiltrate the building without drawing attention.

He couldn't just walk in; the officers were too vigilant, their eyes scanning each person who entered or exited. He needed to be invisible, unnoticed. And he knew just how to do that.

As a clone with the ability to shape-shift, he had an advantage. But timing and positioning were crucial. The last thing he wanted was for someone to attack him while in that form. Animal cruelty was something humanity had never been able to get rid of.

However, he needed to find a secluded spot, away from prying eyes, before shape-shifting.

He scanned the surroundings, his gaze landing on a narrow alleyway next to the station. It was shadowy and deserted - perfect for his needs. He would shift there, then slip into the station as a stray cat.

Matthias moved discreetly towards the alleyway, his every step calculated to avoid attention.

Once there, he took off his clothing and placed them in a small pile tucked away behind a weathered dumpster.

The alleyway was deserted, but Matthias took no chances. He ensured his clothes were well hidden and would remain undisturbed during his absence.

While taking a deep breath, the clone started his transformation. His body began to contract and twist, his human features fading into a blur as they reshaped.

Thick black fur sprouted across his skin, covering him entirely. Within moments, the transformation was complete.

Where there had once been a man, there was now a sleek black cat now crouched, its eyes gleaming with intelligence and a touch of human awareness.

With his transformation complete, Matthias emerged from the alleyway. He padded towards the mercenary police station, while his eyes looked at the guarded entrance.

As he neared the station, a police officer entered the building, creating an opportunity for Matthias to slip inside.

He timed his movements, shadowing the officer just as he was about to enter the building. As the door swung open, Matthias darted in, slipping past the officer's feet unnoticed. He was much faster than the man, as his base agility and speed got only stressed by his feral form.

Once inside, he oriented himself, his keen feline senses taking in the sights, sounds, and smells of the bustling station.

The first part of Erik's plan had been successfully executed. Now came the harder part: finding that list and any potential leads on Max's whereabouts.

The station was abuzz with activity, something he knew he had to take advantage of. Officers were moving about, some engrossed in their paperwork, others engaged in hushed conversations.

Civilians, a mix of the anxious and the resigned, were scattered throughout the waiting area, their eyes flicking between a clock and the officers.

Matthias needed to navigate this sea of people and make his way to the private section of the police station. He scanned the room, his keen eyes noting the layout, the movement patterns of the officers, and potential routes to his destination.

He noticed a door on the far side of the room that appeared to lead to the private area. It was heavily trafficked by officers, but there were brief lulls in between. Timing would be key.

With a plan in mind, Matthias moved. He stuck close to the walls. He darted between hiding spots - under benches, behind potted plants - moving swiftly while avoiding to be seen.

Finally, he reached the door. While waiting for a lull in foot traffic, he nudged it open with his head just enough to slip through.

Chapter 758: Mercenary-Police Station (2)

The man Matthias was searching for was Chief Inspector Frederick Latham.

A man of considerable influence and status, Latham oversaw the witness protection service and was privy to the locations of all the safe houses in the city.

Erik found this out thanks to the biological supercomputer and tasked the clone with this mission. Matthias had everything: a face, a name, a location.

The clone was currently prowling through the private quarters of the station, his eyes scanning for signs that would lead him to Latham's office.

The scent of coffee, the rustle of paperwork, the hushed conversations of officers - he took in all these details as he navigated the labyrinthine station.

After passing through a maze of corridors and offices, Matthias found what he was looking for.

A polished wooden door stood before him, the nameplate reading 'Chief Inspector Frederick Latham'. He could hear the faint sounds of someone shuffling papers inside.

<Bingo! >

However, despite the clone not fearing the man inside, due to him being as strong as Samuel back in Liberty Watch Village, Matthias knew he had to be careful.

He had to stay hidden and silent, ready to escape at a moment's notice. The last thing Erik needed was for his enemies to know he had clones that could turn into animals and spy on anyone.

Besides, Erik told Matthias to only listen, to wait for Latham to reveal something, and once he left the room, searching for the documents he needed. Yeah. Erik asked Matthias to stay there for the night.

With a last glance around to ensure he wasn't noticed, Matthias slipped under the small gap at the bottom of the door and into Latham's office, a feat possible only thanks to his cat-like form.

The room was an echo of a time gone by, its walls lined with towering shelves that groaned under the weight of countless files and documents.

Matthias wondered when was this place built. He expected the police station to be at least renovated from time to time, but he guessed these guys received little funds.

Each one was a whisper of the past, a testament to the many years and people this room was used for.

In the heart of this labyrinth of information, there sat a desk. It was an island amidst the sea of paper, and at it, engrossed in a dance of holographic images and data streams, was Frederick Latham himself.

His figure was sturdy and commanding, yet softened by the touch of time. His hair, once a fiery red, was now a dignified silver that gleamed under the overhead lighting.

Latham's hands moved deftly, tracing patterns in the air as he handled the three-dimensional interface. His fingers were calloused and strong.

They told a story of a man who knew hard work, who had spent countless hours over documents and typing up reports.

His clothes were simple but neat. A crisp white shirt tucked into dark trousers.

Around his neck hung a badge, glinting with the emblem of the force he served so diligently.

Despite the years etched onto his face and the silver in his hair, there was an undeniable vigor about him.

The room was not just a workspace. It was a reflection of Frederick Latham himself - meticulous, full of history.

<Well. I found Frederick at least. >

Matthias moved with a cat-like grace. He navigated the room, his gaze careful to avoid meeting Frederick Latham's.

The older man was engrossed in his work, his attention ensnared by the holographic computer.

Seizing the opportunity, Matthias slipped further into the room, his presence as unobtrusive as a shadow.

Amid the chaotic room filled with stacks upon stacks of documents and files, he picked a corner bathed in shadows.

His figure blended with the papered landscape as he nestled himself among them.

Tucked away in the shadows, Matthias found himself with an unobstructed view of Latham's workspace.

Despite the advantage his hiding place provided, a sigh of resignation escaped him.

<This will be boring... > The clone was already dreading the monotony of waiting.

Matthias realized there was little action to take until Frederick made or said something significant.

Despite this, Matthias's vigilance didn't waver. His gaze remained fixed on the old man, watching every move with the intensity of a hawk.

He waited for Latham to reveal the information he sought.

The room was punctuated by the occasional chirp of incoming calls, each one pulling Latham away from his work.

Matthias watched as Latham's face would soften, a hint of annoyance flickering in his eyes, before he'd answer in a friendly tone. It looked like he didn't like the callers that much.

The conversations were mundane, often about people and events that held no significance to Matthias. Besides, based on their content, they had nothing to do with Frederick's work.

The man was treating this place like his home.

<Fucking prick... I'm sorry for those that will need his help. >

The clone listened, sifting through the trivial chatter for any nugget of useful information.

Each time Latham returned to his work revealing nothing of importance, Matthias felt a pang of frustration.

Matthias couldn't help but roll his feline eyes, his patience wearing thin.

<Fuck... does this guy do nothing aside from talking on the phone? >

There was a mix of disbelief and annoyance coloring his thoughts.

Observing the figure, whom Erik told him was an authoritative one, he was struck by the man's apparent preoccupation with endless and useless phone calls.

This behavior left Matthias to speculate on the competence, or lack thereof, of the rest of the officers.

If this was the standard of leadership here, the clone dreaded to think what the rank and file were like.

But the clone's reaction was one of resignation rather than shock.

Even back in Frant, the police was known for their unsavory reputation.

Their dealings were often murky, their methods questionable, and their loyalty as fickle as the wind.

He had seen firsthand how they operated, bending the rules to suit their needs.

Chapter 759: Richard's guests (1)

New Alexandria was a city in ruins. The once bustling metropolis was now a skeletal remnant of its former glory, its buildings standing like broken teeth against the sky.

The scars of the Heniate attack were still visible, a grim reminder of the devastation that had befallen the city.

Yet, amidst the rubble and ruin, there were signs of life. The sound of hammers striking metal echoed through the streets, mingling with the distant hum of construction machinery.

The city was being reborn, rising from the ashes like a phoenix.

In a mansion overlooking this scene of reconstruction, Richard Stone sat across from his daughter Emily.

The room was bathed in the glow of the setting sun, casting long shadows across the polished wooden floor.

Richard looked at Emily, his gaze filled with a mixture of love and concern.

Emily had blossomed into an enchanting young woman during these years.

She sat poised in her chair, her hair cascading over her shoulders like a waterfall under the moonlight.

Her face, once youthful, now bore the refined elegance of maturity, much like a diamond that had weathered pressure to emerge brilliant and resplendent.

"Emily," Richard said. "You must understand the situation we are in."

She looked at her father, her eyes reflecting a wisdom beyond her years.

"Especially now. You can't leave the mansion to visit Amber. Ever since Becker's fall, Volkov's regime doesn't look kindly upon us, the Stone Family, nor the Joyces."

Richard held his gaze. "You must exercise caution. Your beauty... it could be a danger."

Richard was not one to mince words, but this was a delicate matter and it related to his precious daughter.

He did not want to scare her, but he needed her to understand the danger they were facing.

"I don't want you to attract unnecessary attention, especially not now."

Emily's brows furrowed, a hint of defiance sparkling in her emerald eyes. "I can't stay cooped up in this mansion forever, dad."

Richard's stern expression did not soften. He leaned forward, his hands clasped in front of him.

"I will not sugarcoat my words, Emily. You are a beautiful young woman, and in these dangerous times, that beauty can invite unwanted attention."

Emily opened her mouth to protest, but Richard raised his hand to stop her. "If someone were to force themselves upon you, my options to intervene would be limited. Any rash action could spell the end of our whole family."

"But I only want to go train with Amber and the others," Emily said. "I have no intention of being seen by anyone else. I will take a car!"

Richard's stern gaze remained unyielding, his frustration simmering just beneath the surface.

A slight twitch of his jaws revealed the strain of his tightly coiled emotions.

The lines on his forehead deepened. His eyes, usually warm and inviting toward his daughter, were now steel grey and distant, mirroring the storm of discontent brewing within him.

He paused.

"Do you know what happened in New Alexandria?" Richard asked. Emily nodded, but he shook his head. "You think you do, but you clearly don't."

"Becker was a close friend of mine. I know for a fact he had no dealings with the Crystal Cross Gang, and he certainly didn't bring the Heniate into our nation."

His voice hardened as he went on. "Yet Volkov fabricated evidence that said otherwise. He accused Becker, the strongest man in Frant and our nation's leader, of treachery. And the people believed him."

He turned to Emily, his eyes filled with a somber intensity. "If Volkov could do that to Becker, what's stopping him from doing the same to us? To the Stone family?"

He paused for a moment, letting his words sink in. "Caiden is in the same boat as us. Amber's father is just as vulnerable."

Emily was silent for a moment, absorbing her father's words.

"I understand," she said, her voice subdued but resolute. "I won't go..."

Richard nodded, his stern expression softening. "Good."

He knew Emily's decision would not last for long, but for a moment, at least, the weight of his worries lifted. "Your mother and I have a meeting in an hour," he said.

Emily tilted her head, curiosity lighting up her eyes. "With whom?"

"A representative from the Nexthorn Vanguard guild in Etrium."

"Have they come to help us?" Emily asked, a flicker of hope igniting in her voice.

Richard shook his head, his eyes reflecting a bleak reality. "They have no reason to help us. Besides, there are few who would willingly part with their money to hire a mercenary guild to stand against Volkov."

Emily's brows furrowed in confusion. "Then why are they here?"

Richard leaned back in his chair, his fingers drumming a thoughtful rhythm on the armrest. "They've come for business of a different sort," he said, his voice steady and measured.

"The guild has a production department. They've developed a brain-stimulating serum with milder after-effects."

"Amber mentioned this once," Emily said. The woman's voice was barely above a whisper. "She bought several boxes for herself, her friends, and her family."

"That's why we've contacted them," Richard's eyes held a glint of determination. "I want to make our family and our people stronger."

Emily sat silent, absorbing the implications of her father's words.

The world outside their mansion walls was changing, and they had to adapt or risk being swept away by the tide of change.

As the door closed behind him, Richard sat alone in his study.

He knew he had to get the most out of this meeting, exploiting all his cards and information to get a good deal and a partnership.

He was a Stone, and stones never crumbled under pressure.

The meeting with the Nexthorn Vanguard guild representative would be crucial.

It was not just about acquiring a brain-stimulating serum; it was about securing their future.

Just then, the door creaked open, and Lucy, Richard's wife, glided into the room.

She was a vision to behold, much like a delicate blossom amid a harsh winter.

Her lips were curved into a gentle smile. Albeit she wasn't happy, she knew that was the least she could do to ease her husband worries. It wasn't much, but it helped Richard a lot.

"Lucy!"

"Richard. You should get dressed. Our guest is almost here, and we can't make a bad impression."

"I know that... Sorry, it's just that I'm tired. This situation is draining me."

Richard was doing the best he could to manage this situation under Volkov's scrutiny, but there wasn't much he could do despite using his money, most of which got seized by Frant's new leader.

"I know, honey. But the meeting we are going to have is another battle you must fight. But I will be here to help you."

Lucy's words were soft, yet firm, a soothing balm to Richard's frayed nerves.

She understood the battles her husband had to face, the struggles he grappled with.

She knew the weight of the decisions he had to make and the impact they would have on their family and business.

Every word she spoke was aimed at easing his burden, her voice a gentle whisper against the storm of his worries.

She stood by his side, reaching out her hand and gently squeezed his in a silent promise of unwavering support.

Lucy wasn't just his wife; she was his confidante, his partner, his best friend.

Chapter 760: Richard's guests (2)

A figure moved through the sprawling expanse of Richard's mansion, escorted by a man wearing a butler's dress.

The figure, clad in a hooded cloak, moved with purpose. The confident strides and the tall stature made the few remaining people in the Stone's mansion turn to look at him.

Most of all, it was his masked face that attracted attention, as it didn't leave even to glimpse at the eyes.

Though that didn't mean he couldn't see. His eyes were taking in every detail of the place as he navigated through the labyrinth of rooms and corridors.

The butler brought the figure into a room that he called "the Master's Study room."

The man then announced the guest from the Nexthorn Vanguard guild and opened the door.

A massive oak desk dominated the study, its surface littered with papers and books.

A large bookshelf spanned one wall, filled with volumes of books that spoke volumes about the man who owned them.

Inside the study, he found two figures. One was a stern, imposing man who commanded respect for his mere presence.

Years of decision-making and leadership hardened his features.

There was a glint in it that the masked man already saw in people not easily fooled, and in those that were used to the conversation they were going to have.

Beside him stood a woman of breathtaking beauty. Her features were soft yet strong, her eyes sparkling with intelligence and grace.

The woman stood beside him, a stark contrast to the stern man. Her beauty added warmth to the austere room, but the guild's representative could easily tell that the same paste made both the man and the woman.

The cloaked figure remained silent in front of the door, his gaze lingering on the beautiful woman before shifting to the stern man.

"Please, come inside," Lucy said.

With a nod, the cloaked figure stepped further into the room, his footsteps muffled by the plush carpet underfoot.

"Thank you." The man's voice surprised Lucy, a low, gravelly hum that seemed to fill the room at his every word.

He moved toward the chair opposite Richard's desk, his cloak billowing with each step.

Richard rose from his chair, a sign of respect towards their guest.

"We appreciate your coming," he said, his voice firm yet welcoming and his hand stretching for a handshake the man reciprocated.

Lucy echoed her husband's sentiments. "Indeed, we are glad you could make it." Her voice was a soft contrast to Richard's stern tone professional tone. The masked man was smart.

He knew that was a tactic, and that they likely used that many times before this meeting. The idea was to make Lucy appear as the good one among them.

If they were negotiating something, Lucy's role would cause the other party to cling more to her, and after their defenses were lowered, she would ask him something they would find hard to refuse, given who made the request.

As the cloaked figure settled into the chair, Richard and Lucy resumed their seats.

"It's an honor to meet with the renowned Richard Stone and his equally distinguished wife," the man said. He turned his gaze towards Lucy, adding, "Your beauty truly matches your reputation, Mrs. Diaz."

Lucy chuckled at the compliment, a glint of amusement in her eyes. "You are too kind."

Richard, however, was quick to steer the conversation back to business while using a professional tone. "I asked for your presence because I am interested in purchasing large quantities of your guild's brain-stimulating serum."

The hooded figure nodded, not at all surprised by this revelation. "I expected as much. I am well aware of the situation your family is facing."

He carefully chose his words, hinting at knowledge that was not openly discussed.

Richard maintained a poker face, betraying no emotion. But inside, he was not pleased.

"Let's hope we can reach an agreement," Richard said, his voice steady and determined.

"I was sent here under full authority. I aim to settle our business today. However," he said, "That, of course, depends on several factors."

The conversation then shifted to the financial aspect of their transaction.

Richard kept his professional demeanor, talking with a calm voice that betrayed no emotions.

"I understand that a bottle of your serum is priced at 500,000 eurems." He had then converted the amount into New Dollars. "With the current exchange rate, the cost should come out to be 535,000 New Dollars."

"That's correct."

"Can't we lower the price a bit?" Lucy asked, her voice filled with hope.

The man, however, was not someone easily persuaded. "Our serums already cost less than half of a standard Brain Stimulating Serum, and the after-effects are significantly milder."

Lucy nodded in acknowledgment. "I'm aware of that," she said. But then, she leaned forward, "But considering your current situation... I believe we could reach an agreement."

A grin had spread across the man's hidden face, but neither Richard nor Lucy could see it.

<Uh... they are playing the reverse card. They swapped roles. >

"You seem pretty sure about that." The masked man couldn't confirm the rumors, not directly. He had to play it smart if he wanted to achieve his true goal of going there.

"I am," Lucy said.

The masked man nodded. "My Master will soon rectify the situation."

"Wasn't your guild master the reason this whole problem started?"

"The accusations against my master were fabricated, much like in Becker's case."

That sent waves of surprise through the room. Richard and Lucy, caught off guard, stared at the man in stunned disbelief.

Richard's usual composure faltered. His eyebrows furrowed, his eyes wide in shock as he tried to understand how could that foreigner know that much about their situation.

Few knew the allegations against Becker were fabricated, and what had been told to the press was simply that the previous general was under investigation and stripped of his titles.

The corners of Richard's mouth twitched as if he was about to speak, but no words came out. How could this foreign know about Becker's true situation?

Lucy, too, was taken aback. Her eyes, usually so calm and calculating, were wide with surprise.

"How...how could you possibly know that Becker's accusations were false?" Richard stammered out.

"We have our sources..."

However, the man hadn't given them much time to dwell on this revelation.

"There might be a chance for us to lower the price," the man said. "But that depends on your willingness to cooperate with us."

"You see. We're currently working on another project and we require some help."

Richard looked at the hooded man, his curiosity piqued. "What kind of project are you referring to?"

The man had shrugged. "I'm afraid I can't divulge that information unless you actively take part in it. But it involves construction."

"Is dealing with real estate really the best move for your guild, given your current situation?"

The man had laughed at her question. "That's a reasonable concern," he said. "But rest assured, real estate projects are but some of the ones we are currently undertaking."

Richard looked at the masked man's face, a flicker of doubt crossing his features. "I can't really help you if I don't know what you need."

"We need resources," he said, "And of course we need them delivered... Discretely."

Richard smiled, a light-hearted moment in the tense atmosphere.

"I apologize," Richard said, his expression tense as he looked at the man. This guy was an interesting fellow, one he didn't expect to find in a mercenary guild. He paused. "But your name seems to have slipped my mind."

"That's quite rude," the man said, although there was no real heat in his words. Instead, the man made a soft chuckle.

"I'm sorry again." Richard then smiled. "But I thought I was going to be dealing with some... henchman."

The man nodded, accepting Richard's apology. A moment of silence had stretched between them, the tension in the room mounting.

His voice filled the room, echoing off the walls as he revealed his identity. "My name," he said, his words resonating with an intense gravity, "is Noah."