

BIOLOGICAL 841

Chapter 841: Meeting the Fierce Lioness (1)

Inside the room, Rebecca and Erik settled into an uneasy silence that gave way to sporadic conversation.

They chatted about unimportant things, trying to ease the tension for their upcoming discussion with the Fierce Lioness.

The room, with its grandeur and solemnity, seemed to amplify their unease, making each attempt at levity fall short of its mark.

Time trickled by, measured only by the shifting light through the windows and the occasional shuffle of their seats.

"So, what happened when I left the city? You can now tell me why you wanted me to leave the city."

Erik sighed. He could tell her. "I didn't want you to get hurt," Erik said. That left Rebecca startled, but also happy.

"What could have possibly put me in danger?" Rebecca asked.

"The Blackguards." Rebecca made a confused face. What did the Blackguards had to do with all that?

"What? Why would the Blackguards have something to do with me?"

Erik paused for a second, but it wasn't hard to think about what to say. To be honest, he had a lot to say about the matter, but he kept it simple.

"They are the ones who controlled the Crystal Cross Gang. Shade works for them, as the targets of our missions did. Well, they did until they got sick of it, and then who do you think the Blackguards sent to take care of them?"

"Us?"

"Indeed."

But Rebecca thought about something else. Erik could tell due to the visible change in her facial expression.

"Wait. Are you saying that those experiments were made for the Blackguards? Are you sure we are talking about the same people?"

"I am," Erik said. Rebecca thought for a second. That explained why Erik wanted her to leave.

If they were stirring the hornets' nest, and that nest was that of the biggest, deadliest hornets around, there was nothing she could have done back there.

In retrospect, she was glad Erik sent her away. She wasn't sure her mother could help her if she created troubles for the Blackguards.

"Do you have proof?" she asked. As much as she trusted Erik, it wasn't like she could blindly trust his words.

"Plenty. I also have witnesses."

Rebecca looked at him with a shocked face. "If what you say is true, this is no small matter."

Erik sighed.

"That is why I told you your mother could be interested in helping me. If she is the one bringing the Blackguards down, she will gain much more fame than she and the Band of Giants currently have. That comes with money, as well."

"She could still kill you for your bounty. Mom is very greedy. She will probably want to get the bounty, too."

The door swung open, and the Fierce Lioness entered. She moved with an authority that seemed to fill the space, her presence undeniably big.

Long red hair cascaded down her shoulders, framing a face that was both striking by the tales of countless battles.

Her brown eyes, sharp and penetrating, swept the room before settling on Erik with an intensity that felt almost tangible.

Scars adorned her visible skin, each a badge of survival and triumph, including a prominent one that traced her jugular.

To her, these weren't flaws to hide, but triumphs to show off.

The Fierce Lioness's gaze lingered on Erik, her expression hardening into a look of suspicion and scrutiny.

She addressed Rebecca directly, her voice carrying a mix of command and curiosity.

"Is the reason you've asked for this meeting to tell me you're pregnant by that man?"

Rebecca had a dumbfounded look. Erik almost burst out laughing.

She replied right away, but her cheeks turned red, showing she was embarrassed by that statement.

She sat up, the awkwardness of the moment wrapping around her like a thick blanket.

"NO!" she said, her tone leaving no room for doubt.

She gave Erik a look, hinting that they were up to something else.

"There's something really important we need to discuss with you," she said.

Rebecca had an undeniably serious look on her face, but the Fierce Lioness wasn't someone easily swayed by serious looks.

Things happened all the time, and there were things that, albeit important for some, weren't really that important.

"Is this more important than the shareholder's meeting?"

Amanda looked at her daughter with a suspicious look that then wandered to Erik. Her eyes narrowed slightly, her suspicion not entirely abated, but her interest piqued.

"Then what?"

She motioned for them to go ahead and gracefully sat down, despite her tough reputation and murderous gaze.

"I think I may answer that question," Erik said. He leaned forward, and Rebecca drew a deep breath.

It was at that moment that Erik's face started shifting and moving like water stirred by an unseen breeze.

It started off subtle, but then it became clear. The Fierce Lioness paid close attention when the older man started to look like Erik Romano.

His real face, that of a man in his prime, replaced the carefully constructed facade, revealing his true identity under the watchful eyes of both women.

Rebecca's reaction was one of sheer shock; her mouth agape, eyes wide with disbelief. She did not know Erik possessed the ability to change his face.

As far as she knew, Erik was an 'awakener' and as such, he had two Brain Crystal Powers, but this display of shapeshifting unveiled a third one he shouldn't have had.

It totally blew her mind when she found out. What Erik did shouldn't even be possible.

Amanda, the Fierce Lioness, maintained a serious, almost menacing demeanor as she witnessed the transformation.

Her gaze hardened, focusing on Erik with an intensity that seemed to cut through the air.

She was surprised as much as Rebecca, her daughter, was, but shock and confusions weren't the first things she thought about.

It was the fact Erik Romano was a bigger menace that she expected.

Only a calculating coldness was in her eyes as she assessed the man who had just changed his face in front of her.

The air in the room thickened with tension. "Do I have your attention now? "

"You do. So, tell me, Erik Romano. Why are you here, in my daughter's company, nonetheless?"

Erik bowed down. He wasn't too thrilled about it because he thought he might have a chance against her in a fight, but he did.

"I'm searching for Shade."

"Shade?" Amanda asked. "What do you know about him?"

That, of course, was a weird question. Shouldn't Shade have been a legend? In theory, the fierce lioness should have known nothing about him, and here she was, with an expression that said otherwise.

"I know he is the leader of the continent's underworld, but most importantly, I know he works for the Blackguards."

While hearing those words, a huge grin appeared on the fierce lioness's face.

Chapter 842: Meeting the Fierce Lioness (2)

"Let me get this straight," The Fierce Lioness said.

"You want us to help you find this man, but you also said he works with the Blackguards. If this is true, doesn't this mean the Band of Giants will become a target?"

"I didn't think you were the type to be scared by those guys."

To that, Rebecca gave him a mad look at Erik. To provoke her mother was the worst thing he could do.

Though, contrary to Rebecca's expectation, her mother laughed.

"I can't understand if you are brave or just a fool by asking me this."

"A fool, you say..." Erik paused, the air charged with tension. "Even if I was, this should let you understand something..."

The Fierce Lioness looked at him, her grin spreading across her face, a gleam of amusement in her eyes.

"Are you implying you are not scared of me?" The Fierce Lioness' grin widened.

"I'm not," Erik said, his voice resonating with confidence.

Quickly launching herself across the room towards Erik, the Fierce Lioness left Rebecca's head spinning.

Rebecca blinked, and before she could process what was happening, her mother stood in front of Erik, her fist halted in mid-air by Erik's hand.

He had caught her punch, a feat that seemed impossible given the Fierce Lioness's renowned speed and strength.

Rebecca gaped, her mind struggling to catch up with the rapid turn of events.

Both Erik and the Fierce Lioness, however, had huge grins on their faces.

The Fierce Lioness retreated to her seat as if nothing extraordinary had occurred.

The once tense atmosphere now buzzed with a distinct energy.

"What will you give me in return for my help?" she asked, leaning forward, her interest piqued.

"I can give you the schematics to produce the brain crystal rifles," Erik said, but he knew the woman wouldn't accept.

The Fierce Lioness scoffed. "I can buy plenty of those with how well we earn." Her reply was dismissive, but the grin that followed was anything but.

With a grin from ear to ear, she leaned in and unexpectedly said, "Marry Rebecca."

The room fell silent. Both Erik and Rebecca were stunned, the latter's face turning a deep shade of red.

"MOM!" Rebecca said, her voice a mix of shock and embarrassment.

Erik cleared his throat, addressing the bizarre proposition.

"While Rebecca is undoubtedly a beautiful woman, for now, there can only be friendship between us."

He turned to Rebecca, his eyes softening. "I apologize," he said, his apology directed as much at the situation as at Rebecca herself.

Rebecca's emotions were a whirlwind. On one hand, she felt a flutter of happiness at her mother's suggestion.

She had liked Erik for a long time now. On the other, disappointment clouded her heart at Erik's polite refusal.

Erik shifted the conversation to make it less awkward.

"Instead, I propose an alliance with my guild, the Nexthorn Vanguard," he said.

"As long as it stays professional and doesn't cross into personal territory, I will grant you one 'ticket' - a favor that you can ask me to do whatever you want."

The Fierce Lioness leaned back in her chair, her expression contemplative.

"I wouldn't gain much from that," she said, her voice steady.

"Your guild is currently being hunted across Etrium, and if the Blackguards learn of our alliance, the situation could spiral out of control."

Erik nodded, acknowledging the truth in her words.

"That is true," he said. "Still, by doing this, you could tie me to you and your guild."

He paused, a hint of a challenge in his gaze. "Wasn't that the reason why you just proposed marriage?"

With that, the Fierce Lioness's grin returned wider than before. She was amused by Erik's astuteness.

"Very well," she said after a moment.

"I accept your conditions." Her tone shifted, showing she had more on her mind. "However, I'd like to use that ticket right now."

Erik's face remained impassive but his eyes narrowed in anticipation of her request.

"A wyvern has been seen roaming the nation," the Fierce Lioness said. "Given your ability to block my attack, you'd be extremely useful in dealing with it."

Erik's response was a momentary silence, his expression turning awkward.

The Fierce Lioness, misinterpreting his hesitation, pressed him.

"Are you unwilling? If that's the case, you can simply leave and we can forget about all of this."

"It's not that." After a brief pause, where the room seemed to hold its breath, he said, "I can't help you with that because the black wyvern everyone saw flying through Etrium's skies is, in fact, not wyvern. And... it is mine."

The Fierce Lioness's eyes narrowed. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Erik paused, this time not to gather his thoughts, but to communicate telepathically with June.

Then, as if on cue, the black wyvern emerged from the garden, visible through the window.

Its massive form cast a shadow over the room, a proof of Erik's claim.

Rebecca's mouth fell open in shock at what she was seeing, her mind racing to comprehend what the hell was happening.

Meanwhile, the Fierce Lioness's initial surprise morphed into a full-blown laugh, her amusement echoing through the room.

The sight of the wyvern, coupled with Erik's unexpected strength, transformed the tense atmosphere into one of incredulity and humor.

The Fierce Lioness, once she regained her composure, looked at Erik with a newfound respect.

"Well, that's certainly a surprise," she said. Her chuckle was cute, but at the same time, horrific.

"It seems there's more to you than meets the eye, Erik Romano."

"You can bet on it."

Then the Fierce Lioness asked something. "How did you do that?"

Erik's reply took her by surprise, but he didn't explain. Instead, he made another question. "You know that already, right?"

His statement hinted at her having the answer to her own question, a thought that momentarily confused yet captivated her.

Erik had read her mind, and he knew the Fierce Lioness was aware of something that the public didn't. She knew Erik had multiple powers.

Chapter 843: An Agreement

After the surprising turn of events, the Fierce Lioness said, "I'll provide a room for you and your follower to rest," showing with a nod that Rebecca would show them the way.

With that, she left the room, her laughter still echoing behind her.

Once the door closed, Rebecca turned to Erik, her expression a mixture of admiration and concern.

"You risked a lot today."

"There were very low chances to know if my mother was going to react as she did."

What Rebecca didn't realize was that Erik had an advantage she was unaware of—his ability to read minds had made the encounter far less risky than it appeared.

However, Erik chose not to reveal this detail to her, as that could complicate things a lot, but was sure he was going to sooner or later.

For him, having the conversation with the Fierce Lioness had been easier than Rebecca could have imagined.

Rebecca sighed, the tension of the meeting leaving her shoulders. Just then, a butler escorted June to their room.

Rebecca's gaze settled on him with a complex mix of emotions flickering across her face.

On one hand, she recognized June's intelligence. Erik wouldn't keep him if he wasn't useful.

That, if she hadn't misinterpreted her friend. However, because of how they parted back in Testrovsc's Rest, she was keen on believing she was right.

Yet, on the other hand, June's childishness presented an unpredictable variable.

The knowledge that within this seemingly innocuous man lay the capability to transform into a black wyvern sent a shiver down her spine.

The thought of him, in a moment of childlike, impulsive or angry behavior, choosing to transform and unleash chaos, was a frightening prospect.

Her eyes, reflecting this whirlwind of thoughts, watched him with a cautious curiosity, wondering which side of him would prevail in the moments to come.

Rebecca led them to a guest room that exuded luxury, with its plush furnishings and array of amenities.

The room was akin to a high-end hotel suite, complete with a bathroom that boasted a jacuzzi, two single beds, tables, and more.

The lavishness of the accommodations spoke volumes of the Band of Giants' wealth and status within Etrium.

June, upon laying eyes on the jacuzzi, could barely contain his excitement.

Filled with a childlike sense of excitement, he eagerly removed his clothes and leapt into the water, which was already warm, joyfully splashing about.

"What the?"

Rebecca, taken aback by his sudden and unabashed behavior, felt a mix of shock and embarrassment.

"What is he doing?" She asked. It was clear she didn't really like the situation.

"I'm sorry for his behavior." His apologetic look hid a hint of amusement. "He could be childish at times."

Rebecca, trying to regain her composure, waved off the apology. "Also, I want to thank you for what you did. I know it wasn't simple to trust what I said."

"Don't worry about it," she said. "After all, we're friends. Helping you is the least I could do."

"Thanks."

Rebecca turned to leave the room. "I will keep you informed about any plans my mother has. It's likely we will start tomorrow. If you want to rest, this is your best chance," She said.

"Thanks for the advice."

As Rebecca prepared to leave the room, she cast one last glance at the odd duo before her.

Despite the unusual circumstances of their meeting, she was quite happy to have them there.

That was especially true for Erik. She still had some feelings for him, even if some time passed since the last time they saw each other.

"Rest well," she said with a smile, then left the room, leaving Erik and June alone.

In the silence that followed, Erik pondered the day's events, grateful for the alliance they had formed with the Band of Giants.

Meanwhile, June continued to enjoy the jacuzzi. <Is she gone? > he asked.

<Yes. You could stop being so stupid. >

However, it was June's turn to ask questions. <Mind telling me why I had to first turn into a wyvern and then behave like an idiot? >

<It's not like you usually don't, > Erik said.

<True, but this doesn't explain why you asked me to do that. The Fierce Lioness wanted to ask you to hunt the black wyvern in return for her help. We knew that. But you could have said yes, and they wouldn't have found the wyvern. You would still have helped her, and she was going to have used the ticket. >

Erik paused for a second. He already checked the room to see if there were cameras or microphones, and of course, the room was full of it.

Erik jumped on the bed and turned to his side. He was going to talk to June telepathically, but wanted to make it look like he was going to sleep while June bathed.

<There were two reasons. The first was to let them understand they can't mess with me. Even if they know I'm strong, the Fierce Lioness is very prideful. She thinks I'm beneath her, and due to that, it's likely she would not listen to me when required. By making you turn into a wyvern, I let her think I can bring hell to this place. >

June thought about it. It made sense, but only up to a certain point.

<Didn't she already know you have multiple powers? She shouldn't have thought you were an easy target or a pushover. >

Erik's expression was a mask of contemplation. <The Fierce Lioness likely got her information about me from the guild, which in turn got it from the Blackguards. > A frown crossed Erik's face.

<They think I'm dangerous, but they've also figured out my mana isn't as substantial as theirs. They must have assured her she could handle me. >

But June still wasn't convinced.

<And the second reason? > the clone asked.

Erik smiled at that question. <The second reason is to let them think that accompanying me there is someone they must walk on eggshells around. >

Chapter 844: Hunting for Shade (1)

The following day, early in the morning, Erik received a call from Rebecca.

She asked him to meet at the building's cafeteria. Based on what she said, it was impossible to get lost or be late.

Erik and June made their way to the agreed-upon meeting place without wasting time. They couldn't leave a bad impression, could they?

The two arrived, not knowing what to expect by that meeting, but eager to know what the Fierce Lioness took from her magical hat.

Rebecca was waiting for them, her expression a mixture of earnestness and a hint of nervousness, which seemed out of place for someone who had faced as much as she had.

Alongside her were two people, and it was clear she was nervous because of the duo.

Erik and June settled into their seats at the table, which was spread with an assortment of sweets and beverages for breakfast.

The array before them was a delightful sight, featuring freshly baked croissants that exuded a warm, buttery aroma, bowls brimming with vibrant, fresh fruit, and pastries dusted with powdered sugar.

Alongside these treats stood carafes of freshly squeezed orange juice and steaming pots of coffee.

Before the conversation could even take a turn towards the first topic, June, unable to restrain his enthusiasm at the sight of the feast, reached out.

<He wasn't happy about yesterday, yet it looks easy for him to act like a fool. >

With little regard for formalities, he began sampling the spread with a gusto that was both infectious and comical.

He tore into a croissant, its flaky layers crumbling delightfully with each bite, then followed it with a handful of berries.

June's eagerness was clear in his wide eyes and the pleased hums he made as he moved from one item to the next.

Erik and the others watched with a bemused smile playing on his lips at June's enthusiasm.

"Thank you for coming," Rebecca stepped aside to introduce two individuals Erik had not encountered before.

"These are Ramon and Camille. You didn't get the chance to meet them when the Heniate attacked New Alexandria, but they were there."

"Ah, a pleasure to meet you." Ramon nodded while Camille smiled.

"I heard a great deal about you, Erik Romano."

"Were those rumors good or bad?"

Camille smiled even more. "It depends. If you are on the receiving end, it's definitely bad."

"Ah. You heard THOSE rumors, I get it," Erik observed the woman.

Camille, despite her youth, carried an air of intensity about her.

She was in her early thirties, with sharp, discerning eyes that seemed to miss nothing.

Her hair was a wild cascade of curls, framing her face in a way that stressed her sharp features and the slight, almost imperceptible smirk that hinted at her confidence.

Her posture was relaxed, but there was an underlying tension, like a coiled spring, suggesting that her calm demeanor belied a ferocious nature.

"A pleasure," she grinned while giving a handshake to Erik.

Ramon, instead, was an older man, his age clear in the lines etched into his face and the silver threads running through his once blond hair.

He stood with a dignified bearing, his eyes reflecting years of experience and a calm that had likely been hard-earned.

He too extended a hand to Erik, his grip firm. "Good to meet you."

"Camille and Ramon will collaborate with us on this investigation," Rebecca said, her gaze shifting between Erik and the eager June.

The announcement brought a momentary pause to the meal.

"The two works together, but it's actually Ramon that will help us in finding Shade."

"That's cool and everything, but I need to get a better grasp on this situation. What kind of help can he offer?" Erik asked.

"Well... he..." Rebecca was interrupted by the man himself.

"Let me take care of that," Ramon said, his gaze meeting Erik's.

He then turned to include June in the conversation, ensuring both men understood the situation.

"I was a thug when I was young. In my years in the underworld," Ramon said, his voice steady with the weight of memories.

"I operated as a low-level thug, a peripheral figure among the ranks of one of the many criminal organizations that thrived in Etrium. Despite my limited role, I possessed a significant skill in observation and remembering details that many overlooked."

Ramon paused, reflecting on the path that had led him here.

"This ability, while it never elevated me beyond my subordinate status, allowed me to accumulate a vast and detailed knowledge of the internal dynamics of the underworld, which I still remember today."

His explanation provided Erik and June with insight into his qualifications, and made it clear that Ramon's knowledge might be beneficial to locate their target.

"The boss told me you are searching for Shade," Ramon said.

"You believe in his existence?" Erik asked.

"I do. My belief stems not from rumors, but because of something I heard in the past, and saw with my own eyes the transformations that the underworld underwent when rumors about him started. But let's not delve into this for now. The point is that I know a place where we could start our investigation."

"What's this place supposed to be?" Erik asked.

"It's an old warehouse near the slums," Ramon said, his voice carrying a tone of solemnity as he delved into the memories of a dark chapter of the criminal underworld's intricate network at Nokisi Point.

"Back in my days within the underworld, the warehouse served as a distribution point for contraband and a meeting place for transactions among various criminal factions. It was a den of illegal activities, well-known to the bad guys but off the grid for the authorities."

Ramon's eyes reflected a blend of nostalgia and regret. Though they did well to convey the significance of this place in the past.

"This warehouse represents more than just a physical structure; it's a symbol of the underworld's complex operations before Shade took power. It thrived for a long time, making it a vital part of our operations back then."

Chapter 845: Hunting for Shade (2)

Ramon leaned forward.

"I think the warehouse might have some clues about Shade's underworld operation. In my opinion, things are pretty much the same even with Shade in charge."

Ramon's insight into the underworld's dynamics suggested a deep, albeit grim, understanding of its workings.

"Plus, I have a feeling Shade might have hidden some important documents or artifacts in the warehouse before, given how important it used to be."

The chances that the warehouse still contained secrets of the underworld's inner workings under Shade's reign was a lead they couldn't ignore.

"It was a spot where people teamed up and schemed, all in the dark. The law never really saw through its disguise, so it was the perfect place for our shady business."

Erik and June listened, absorbing Ramon's account of the warehouse's significance.

The information provided a link to Shade, at least if Ramon's word were true, and if clues were still there.

"Based on the place's past importance in the underworld, it's would be the most ideal place to search for clues. If Shade used it to hide something valuable, chances are it's still hidden or they might have left something behind."

Ramon's idea was a start, and it was still better than having to roam around the city killing and torturing criminals to find any lead.

"Are you sure about that?" Erik said. "You realize we may die if we go there and there is an army of thugs, right? We can't go there simply to remain empty-handed."

"Don't worry, the last thing I want to do is to risk our lives for nothing. Besides, do you have any other suggestion?" Erik knew there wasn't anything better than Ramon's idea.

He didn't have any lead to find Shade. He only knew the guy was here in Nokisi Point.

It was honestly weird that not even Howell, the Crystal Cross Gang's leader, knew nothing about him.

Besides, there were many questions he still had no answers to.

For example, why did he move to Nokisi Point? Was he here temporarily, or was there another and more important reason for that?

"No. Let's do as you suggest," Erik said, nodding towards Ramon.

Erik was the one searching for Shade. Ultimately, it was his right to make the last decision.

"Are you convinced?" Rebecca said, her gaze locked on Erik, searching for any sign of hesitation.

Erik met her look squarely, a trace of resignation in his voice.

"It's not like we have any alternatives."

Just as the group seemed to settle on their course of action, Camille chimed in.

"We should get our equipment ready to depart," she said, her tone all business.

Rebecca stood up from her seat with a sense of purpose.

"I'm good to go," she said, showing her determination.

"I'll go get a car so we can leave as soon as possible. Don't waste too much time. We have little to spare."

With a nod, Ramon and Camille went their separate ways to prepare for the departure.

Camille moved towards her quarters, her mind already cataloging the guns and ammunition she would need.

Ramon, on the other hand, headed to his own space, where his collection of blades awaited.

Erik and June were ready and watched as their new allies disappeared to gather their gear.

Once everyone was out of earshot, Erik turned to Rebecca, a hint of concern in his expression.

"Do you trust those guys?" he asked, his voice low.

Rebecca paused. "They are among the strongest fighters within the Band of Giants," she said.

"They might not look very trusting, but they know how to get a job done."

"But you look concerned. I couldn't help but notice you stiffening in their presence."

"That's because they usually keep an eye on me, and today won't be different."

Erik's concern didn't wane. "OK, but Camille seemed... odd. Like a crazy lunatic," he said, trying to reconcile the fighter's weird glinting eyes with the assurance Rebecca made about the two mercenaries.

Rebecca sighed.

"Camille... She is... unusual when she fights. But she's dependable. Don't worry about her."

Her assurance was tinged with the awareness of Camille's eccentricity, yet it was clear she had faith in her capabilities.

The exchange left Erik pondering the dynamics of the group they were about to venture into danger with. Then Rebecca left to prepare the car.

While the woman was away preparing the car, Erik and June sat down for breakfast, seizing the moment of calm before the storm.

"This is going to be one hell of a mission," June said, spearing a piece of fruit with his fork. "Do you trust them?"

Erik, munching on a croissant, took his time to think.

"It's true they seem capable. Rebecca trusts them, and that's says something."

June then sipped his coffee. "True. It's just the unknown factors that worry me. We are searching for Shade, after all. I doubt he surrounded himself with weak people. But I guess that's part of the job."

It wasn't long before Camille and Ramon appeared at the cafeteria entrance, signaling it was time to leave.

Camille's demeanor was focused, Ramon's steady; both were equipped and ready for action.

The group exchanged brief nods and made their way to the parking lot, where Rebecca and the car awaited.

The parking lot was a sprawling expanse of concrete, dotted with an impressive array of military might.

Armored vehicles stood in neat rows, their surfaces gleaming under the harsh lights.

Each one was outfitted with machine guns, their barrels pointing skyward in silent vigil.

Trucks, rugged and imposing, bore the scars of countless missions, while tanks, formidable beasts of war, rested on their haunches, ready to spring into action at a moment's notice.

Emblazoned on each vehicle was the insignia of the Band of Giants mercenary guild, a mark of pride and a testament to the power contained within this motorized arsenal.

Erik's eyes widened as he took in the sight of the formidable fleet of vehicles.

The array of armored might before him was nothing short of awe-inspiring.

For a moment, he stood there, soaking in the view of the mechanical beasts that sprawled across the parking lot, each one more intimidating than the last.

Rebecca caught the look of astonishment on his face and couldn't help but smile. "Pretty impressive, uh?" she said. Erik noticed a tint of pride in her tone, and how could he blame her?

Not even him, with all the money he had, possessed such a fleet of vehicles. The band of giants could wage war against anything.

Erik turned to her, his initial shock melting into a broad grin.

"Yeah, very impressive," he agreed, nodding in appreciation.

It was time to start their plans.

Chapter 846: Hunting for Shade (3)

The car hummed through Nokisi Point's sky, its occupants wrapped in anticipation as they neared the warehouse.

Inside, Erik, June, Ramon, Camille, and Rebecca were deep in discussion, outlining the potential scenarios they might encounter at the warehouse.

"Let's consider the likelihood of it being guarded," Erik said, his eyes meeting each of his companions in the rearview mirror.

"If that place is really connected to Shade, it means we should expect even greater resistance than you remember."

Ramon nodded in agreement. "It's likely they've set up surveillance systems, too. We'll need to be cautious about approaching the perimeter."

"If we encounter guards, I suggest a divide-and-conquer strategy. Distract and disable. We can't afford to get bogged down in a firefight."

"I can help with the distraction.," June said, but he wasn't that thrilled about a fight. "If things become dire, I can turn into a wyvern. Do you think that would attract their attention?" He smiled and a mischievous grin appeared on his face.

Rebecca rolled her eyes.

"Yeah. Turning into a wyvern will surely attract their attention, and that of the rest of the city, for all that matters. No, thanks."

Erik had a contemplative look as the car got closer to its destination.

"We need to be prepared for traps inside," Erik said. "Even if the warehouse hasn't been active for a while, it doesn't mean it's safe."

The conversation shifted towards entry points and exit strategies, with each member contributing their insights. "What about the multiple exit plans? If things go south, we'll need to know from where we can leave."

"There are two side exits to the east and west sides. There are a couple in the northwestern and northeastern. These are our best bets in case everything goes south, and we can't use the main entrance. Also, I suggest we'll split into teams; it'll give us a better chance at covering more ground quickly."

As the car turned onto a less traveled sky-road, the warehouse came into view, a looming structure that stood as a testament to the underworld's once-thriving illegal activities.

The group fell silent, each lost in their own thoughts as they contemplated what they had in front.

June broke the silence. "It doesn't look that guarded."

An awkward silence ensued. "Maybe they are inside," Rebecca said.

"Or maybe there's no one." Camille had an amused look on her face.

The car slowed to a stop a safe distance from the warehouse, hidden from immediate view.

The moment of truth was upon them, the culmination of their planning and discussions about to be put to the test.

They gathered their gear and stepped out of the car, moving towards the warehouse with a silent resolve.

Camille, gun at the ready, approached the door with caution.

She gave her back to the door and peered inside. She found the interior abandoned, void of any immediate threat.

"It's clear," she said to the group, her voice barely breaking the stillness that enveloped the structure.

Erik, meanwhile, had other concerns. Silently, he consulted his biological supercomputer, probing for any hidden traps that might lie in wait.

The computer's response, however, was unexpected - no traps detected.

This anomaly raised a silent alarm in Erik's mind, but it wasn't like he couldn't trust the biological AI.

Though everything looked too easy, too convenient. Yet, without tangible evidence of danger, he pressed on, opening the door despite the confused and concerned protests from his companions.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"STOP! THERE COULD BE TRAPS!"

But Erik still entered. The warehouse had been clearly abandoned.

Dust layered every surface, thick enough to trace history in its particles.

The air was stale, heavy with the weight of years gone by without disturbance.

The group hesitantly followed Erik inside, their footsteps echoing in the vast emptiness of the space.

Rebecca looked around. "What do we do now?" she asked to Ramon.

The older man had many thoughts in mind. Memories were resurfacing as he observed the place.

The surrounding emptiness was the opposite of what he remembered.

Some time in the past, this place had pulsed with life, a nerve center for the underground network he had been a part of.

Ramon was no stranger to the shadows that clung to these walls; he had worked here amidst the chaos of criminal operations that flowed through this very building.

Here, there had been crates filled with weapons and drugs being shuffled in and out of the building.

He could almost hear the echo of hurried footsteps and muffled conversations, the air thick with anticipation and the sharp scent of danger.

In the same place where he was standing now, Ramon had watched as those crates, the lifeblood of their operation, passed through the hands of his associates.

"Search around. This place has many rooms."

Nodding in agreement, they split up, each taking a different direction, hoping to find anything that might lead them to the clues they sought to find.

Erik, wandering through the desolation, stumbled upon a room that must have once served as an office.

The small space was cluttered with remnants of its past purpose, but among the debris, a single piece of paper caught his eye. Not that there was anything else in that place.

He picked it up, noting its fragile state - most of the paper was destroyed, save for a single image on its left which was strangely intact, albeit the paper had aged considerably.

It was a symbol, unfamiliar yet clearly significant.

With the document in hand, he sought Ramon, hoping for insights into the symbol. "Do you know what this is?"

Ramon examined the paper, his brow furrowing in concentration. After a moment, he shook his head.

"No," he said, "but I know someone who might."

The decision was made quickly. Calling the others back, they convened in the car.

The air was filled with questions and speculation. The warehouse was empty, disappointingly so, but at least there was a clue.

With the chance of gaining new insights into Shade's operations, they drove off, the warehouse fading into the distance behind them. The hunt had just started, but they already got something to use.

Chapter 847: Hunting for Shade (4)

As the group zoomed through the skies of Nokisi Point in their flying car, Ramon took the wheel this time, his focus unwavering as the cityscape whizzed by below.

Rebecca, curious and a bit puzzled, turned to Erik.

"Why did we head back so soon? There was still so much to explore."

Erik, leaning back in his seat, glanced at the piece of paper he had discovered in the warehouse. "It wasn't necessary to stay any longer," he said.

"Besides, if we need to, we can always go back later."

The ease in his tone suggested he was confident in their next move. There must have been a reason both he and Ramon were confident about leaving the warehouse.

Rebecca, not quite satisfied with the answer, pressed on.

"But why isn't it necessary anymore?" she asked, her brows knitting together in confusion.

"Because I found a lead," he paused. "We're on our way to meet someone who might know what this is all about." He handed the paper to Rebecca.

"What is this?" she asked. "The lead."

The conversation caught Ramon's attention, his serious demeanor as the driver not faltering as he navigated through the air.

Erik turned to him. "So, who is this guy we're going to meet?"

Ramon looked pensive, then he sighed.

"The Informant: Vincent Hawk," he said, his voice carrying a respect that suggested this was no ordinary contact.

"Vincent is known in the underworld as 'Hawk Eyes,' is a seasoned veteran of Nokisi Point's criminal scene. He is... or rather... he was a friend of mine. Vincent started off as a thief but eventually became an informant."

A few silent seconds ensued.

"Vincent built his reputation by being able to find information without getting caught and remembering every little detail spot-on. Despite knowing the ins and outs of the city's underworld, he stays neutral, selling info to anyone willing to pay his price. It is very rare, if you ask me."

Erik, still pondering the potential of their upcoming meeting, turned once again to Ramon with a question that had been nagging at him.

"Are you sure this guy will have the information we're after?" There was a hint of skepticism in his voice.

Ramon nodded. "Yes, I am," he said. "Vincent once worked alongside me. We were part of the same crew, serving the same bosses back in the day."

The car turned to the right at a crossroads.

"When I decided to leave that life behind, Vincent stayed on for a while longer before striking out on his own. He's been in the game long enough to know the ins and outs, especially of that warehouse. He stayed there years before I left, so it stands to reason he'd know something that could help us now. Since he was there, he must know."

"If you say so," Erik said. A note of cautious optimism appeared in his voice as the group neared their destination.

Before them stood a towering skyscraper, its sleek design cutting a striking silhouette against Nokisi Point's skyline.

Rebecca, peering through the car window, turned to Ramon with a puzzled look.

"Is this the place where Vincent works?" she asked, her gaze scanning the imposing structure.

Ramon shook his head, a slight smile playing on his lips.

"No, this is where he lives." That prompted a whistle of surprise from Camille.

"If he lives in a place like this, he must be one hell of an informant."

The skyscraper was a testament to luxury, with high-end flying cars gliding in and out of the parking lot at the top of the building.

Below, the base of the skyscraper had many luxury shops, their bright displays and elegant facades promising exclusivity and opulence.

The group arrived at the parking lot, where Ramon maneuvered their car into a vacant spot.

Together, they headed toward the elevator, the gateway to the upper echelons of the skyscraper.

Ramon navigated the panel to find Vincent's bell and pressed it, starting a call to the informant's doorbell.

To their surprise, Vincent's voice crackled through the speaker, a mix of curiosity and surprise clear in his tone.

"Ramon?" Vincent smiled, but had a visibly shocked face. He hadn't seen Ramon in years.

"RAMON! HAHHAHA! How are you? What brings you here?"

Ramon leaned closer to the speaker, his voice steady.

"I came to visit, Vincent. And to buy 'something'," he said, the last word heavy with implication.

Vincent's response was immediate, his demeanor shifting to one of warm hospitality.

"You're always welcome here. I'll send the elevator down for you." He said those words, but he couldn't see everyone, only Ramon and Camille.

The group stepped into the elevator, a silent bubble of anticipation surrounding them as they ascended to Vincent's apartment.

The ride was swift, lasting less than a minute, but the tension seemed to stretch it longer.

When the doors finally slid open, they were greeted by the expansive luxury of Vincent's living space, a reflection of his success as an informant.

However, the moment Vincent laid eyes on Rebecca and especially Erik, his reaction was one of sheer shock.

His welcoming demeanor vanished, replaced by a look of utter fear.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?!" Vincent's gaze was fixated on Erik with a mix of fear and incredulity.

He then turned to Ramon, "DID YOU COME HERE TO KILL ME?!"

"What?! No!" Ramon said.

"Then why did you bring Erik Romano here?!"

That left Ramon surprised. He knew the Blackguards were searching for him, and that he was rather famous as Erik Kay here in Etrium.

But what if there was something more? However, Erik stepped forward. "Why is it a problem I am here?"

Vincent turned to him with a confused face. "Are you really asking that after what you did to the Crystal Cross Gang and Howell?"

"How do you know about that?" Erik had a murderous glint at that point.

Ramon stopped him from walking further, his eyes were conveying a single message: do nothing rush.

"You really think no one was going to talk in that little resistance group of yours?"

"Sorry, Vincent," Ramon said. "I swear this wasn't intentional or to harm you. We just came here to find some information." An apologetic look appeared on the man's face.

It was at that point, Erik started playing with his Instability Brain Crystal Power, calming the man down.

Chapter 848: Hunting for Shade (5)

"Whatever," Vincent said.

"Why are you here? What did you want to buy?" Vincent said with a weak but real smile.

Ramon had been taken aback by Vincent's sudden change.

It was weird. For a moment he was freaking out, and the following one he was almost normal.

"Well... we came here to inquire about this..." Erik gave Vincent the sheet of paper containing the unknown symbol.

The moment Vincent's eyes landed on the unknown symbol adorning the paper, his complexion turned ashen.

A visible shudder ran through his body, as if the mere sight of the symbol had chilled him to the bone.

His hands trembled as he took the paper, his gaze locked on the symbol with a mixture of recognition and dread.

It was clear from his reaction that he was familiar with what the symbol represented.

The color drained from his face, not just from fear but from the weight of the secrets the symbol carried.

His eyes darted from the paper to Erik and back again, a silent plea for understanding mingling with the alarm in his gaze.

The heralded implications of whatever the symbol signified were far more ominous than any of them had anticipated, judging by the dramatic shift in his demeanor.

But Vincent's reaction also meant that they were on the right tracks.

"Where did you find this?" Vincent asked.

"In the old warehouse," Ramon said. "You know to what I'm referring to."

"You shouldn't ask me questions about this. Matter of fact, ask no one about it."

"Why?" Rebecca asked. Whatever Vincent knew, it was clear this symbol had a lot of meanings.

Vincent's expression hardened, and a defensive edge crept into his voice.

"My lips are tied," he said tersely, the tension in the room escalating.

Suddenly, his demeanor shifted from shock to aggression.

"You need to leave, now!" Vincent was getting more and more agitated.

The friendly atmosphere that had greeted their arrival evaporated, replaced by clear hostility as Vincent urged them towards the door, unwilling—or unable—to say anything more.

It was at that moment that Erik took action. He increased the mana load on his neural links and pushed his Instability brain crystal power.

He was influencing the man to talk. However, it was also true that he was already reading his mind, and what he was finding out from the man's thoughts was nothing good.

"Are you sure you want to send us away like this?" Erik said with a smile.

"Well... you know... I shouldn't..."

"C'mon, we are already here. We won't tell anyone about this, and Rebecca, here," he said, pointing at his friend, "will pay you handsomely for this information," he smiled.

The others looked at Erik with a weird look, most of all because Vincent was slowly relenting.

Though Rebecca gave him a bad look. This was his mission, why she had to pay for this information?

"I... maybe... All right," Vincent conceded, his resolve crumbling under the weight of their expectant gazes.

He turned and walked over to his bar counter at the far end of his spacious apartment.

With a shaky hand, Vincent reached for a glass and a bottle of very strong liquor, his movements betraying a need for something to steady his nerves.

As he poured himself a generous measure, he lifted the glass to his lips and chugged down the liquid in one go, with the harsh burn of the alcohol doing little to mask the turmoil within.

With the empty glass now on the counter, Vincent turned back to face his guests, a look of resignation etched across his face.

"The symbol," he said, his voice steadier now, though still laced with apprehension, "belongs to the Shadow's Market."

He paused, as if gathering the strength to continue.

"The Shadow's Market is a place shrouded in mystery, a secret meeting point for criminals from all factions. Of course, I found this information after a lot of time." Vincent took another sip of the liquor.

"GAAH," he cleaned his lips with the sleeve of his shirt. "Apparently, this place had been founded about thirty years ago by a consortium of thieves, assassins, and traders of illicit goods, but I never found out who did it exactly. The Market serves as a hub where business can be conducted away from the prying eyes of the authorities."

Vincent paused, then took another sip of his liquor. "The point is, this is no simple black market. It is a place for the elites. You can find anything there."

The man paced back and forth as he spoke. "There, identities are hidden behind masks and pseudonyms, making every transaction anonymous and secure. It's a place where the underworld's elite can trade without fear of retribution or exposure."

He looked at his now empty glass, then back at the group.

"The Shadow's Market is not just a location; it's a symbol of the underworld's unity and secrecy."

Vincent's tone clarified that what Erik and his group were searching for was nothing good.

"Finding it is not easy, and for good reason. Its members go to great lengths to protect its secrecy."

As Vincent finished his explanation, the group processed the information.

The revelation opened up new avenues of investigation but also new dangers, as they now found themselves having to delve deeper into the heart of the city's criminal underbelly.

"But I bet you know how to go there, right?" Erik asked. He already saw that information within Vincent's thoughts.

"I do, but..."

After feeling Erik's intense gaze intensifying, Vincent took a deep breath and proceeded to address the group.

"The Shadow's Market," Vincent's voice gained a bit of strength from the liquor he chugged down, "is where the underworld's most valuable information intersects. It's a place you can find goods unavailable anywhere else. I said that already."

He paused, making sure he had everyone's attention.

"But let me be clear, the Market isn't for the faint of heart. Entering without an invitation is not just frowned upon—it's downright dangerous."

"So, an invitation is needed," Ramon said.

Vincent paused and said: "Not an invitation per se, but a pass phrase."

The conversation went on, but Erik knew Vincent didn't say everything he knew about the place.

Chapter 849: Hunting for Shade (6)

Back in the car, Rebecca broke the silence that settled over the group.

"What do we do?" she asked, looking around at her companions for guidance.

Erik, the de facto leader, didn't hesitate. "We're going to this Shadow's Market," he said, his tone resolute. "And find all the information we need."

Ramon, leaning back in his seat, rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"It'll be dangerous, based on what Vincent said." He voiced the concern that lingered in his mind.

"Don't trust Vincent," Erik said, a hard edge to his words. Ramon raised an eyebrow. "I never did, but why do you say that now?"

Erik sighed. "Vincent didn't tell us a lot of things."

His gaze sweeping across the faces of his companions.

"What he omitted to say is that the Shadow's Market also hosts an underground arena where the most dangerous criminals fight, high-stakes betting takes place, and even auctions for mysterious stuff are held."

"But that's not important. What was important, and which he didn't talk about, is that there's a secret level to the Market, accessible only to a select circle of the criminal elite. It's there that the darkest and most dangerous operations are planned, operations that have direct ties to the shadows within Etrium's government."

"This means Shade..." Ramon said.

"Exactly."

Camille shifted, her expression strangely grin. "So, it's worse than we thought."

June, who had been silent, finally spoke up. "This just got a lot more complicated. If there are ties to the government, we need to tread carefully."

Erik nodded, acknowledging June's concern. "Exactly, and we can't take Vincent's words at face value. Why did he omit this information?"

"Maybe he was scared," Rebecca said.

"Yeah. But he already told something he shouldn't have. Why omit this at that point?" Camille voiced a reasonable question, but another important want was voiced by Rebecca again.

"Do you think we're walking into the lion's den?"

"That's for sure," Erik said.

"I think Vincent understood what we wanted to do, and omitted this information to make us die, or because he is tied to that place somehow. Regardless, based on this, that place likely has someone knowing Shade, or at least believing in his existence."

"Then we need a solid plan," Ramon said. "If we're going to infiltrate this place, we need to know what we're doing and have contingencies in place."

Rebecca ignited the engine of the flying car, and they began their journey toward the Shadow's Market.

The conversation shifted toward strategies, each member contributing their thoughts on how to approach the Shadow's Market.

As the car continued its journey, the group kept talking and thinking.

As the city passed below them, a curious Camille turned to Erik. Something was swirling in her mind.

"What I really itch to know is: How did you learn all of this?" she asked.

Erik leaned back, his response laced with nonchalance. "It's pretty obvious," he said, but didn't utter a single word more.

"Can you read our minds?" Rebecca asked, half-joking, yet having guessed the right answer without knowing.

Erik met her question with a cryptic smile, choosing not to reveal the extent of his abilities. His silence only deepened the intrigue surrounding him.

However, in his mind, Erik was piecing together the larger picture.

Despite Vincent not believing in the existence of Shade, considering him more myth than actual underworld leader, Erik was convinced of the crucial role the Shadow's Market played in Shade's criminal empire.

He believed that this place likely served as the hub for Shade's most ambitious and secretive operations.

Vincent's lack of awareness only highlighted Shade's ability to control and remain unseen, even to well-informed underworld sources. He was an opponent Erik wasn't going to underestimate.

As the group traveled toward the Shadow's Market, the scenery outside the car shifted.

The polished, bustling districts of Nokisi Point gave way to more shadowed, secretive areas of the city, where the air thrummed with a distinct energy.

The buildings here were older, their facades steeped in mystery and tales untold, hinting at the clandestine activities that occurred within their walls.

"We should buy masks," Erik said, remembering Vincent's mention of how identities were concealed within the Market.

"They're not uncommon there, i guess, and it'll help us blend in. The last thing we want is for someone finding out who we are, or questioning us."

The group agreed, and soon, they stopped at a small, nondescript shop tucked away in a side alley.

Inside, they selected masks that ranged from simple to elaborate, each choosing one that felt right.

With their new disguises in hand, they resumed their journey.

Eventually, they arrived at a very luxurious building that stood as a stark contrast to its surroundings.

While it wasn't the largest structure they had ever seen—the Band of Giants' headquarters held that distinction—the building before them was all the same impressive.

It was clad in shimmering glass windows that reflected the city lights, casting an aura of exclusivity and wealth.

The entrance was guarded by sleek, modern sculptures, and the ground floor boasted high-end shops that seemed out of place in the underworld market they sought.

Not only was the building very tall, but it was also very large, among the largest they had seen.

<This must be due to the underground fighting arena, > Erik telepathically said to June.

<These guys spare no expense, Master. >

<Yeah. >

Ramon, Camille, and Rebecca, accustomed to the grandeur associated with their mercenary guild, couldn't help but shrug at the building's design and the statement it made.

They knew this was the gateway to the Shadow's Market, based on what Vincent said.

The group parked nearby and Erik led the way, his mask firmly in place, as they approached the entrance.

The group's demeanor changed; with their faces concealed, they felt safer, but they were still on edge.

They were about to step into a world few knew existed, armed with masks to hide their identities and a resolve to uncover the secrets that lay within.

As they entered, the group knew they were stepping into the lion's den, their disguises their only protection as they ventured deeper into the shadows of Nokisi Point's criminal empire.

Chapter 850: Hunting for Shade (7)

Once inside the luxurious building, the group felt an immediate shift in the atmosphere.

The opulence of the exterior gave way to a more subdued, albeit still richly appointed, interior.

Erik took the lead as he saw the entrance to the Shadow's Market from Vincent's memories.

The others followed closely. They had to keep a low profile, but were still alert for any sign of danger.

"How do we plan to enter the Market?" Rebecca asked, her voice low to avoid drawing attention.

Erik glanced back at her, a hint of a smile playing at the edges of his masked face. "I know how to do that."

Vincent didn't give them the pass phrases it was needed to enter, Erik saw he didn't know it. But a lead was still better than nothing, and in fact, Erik could easily solve that problem.

"Can you at least share your plan with us?"

Erik's response was brief. "Just leave it to me," he said, silencing further inquiries with his air of mystery.

The group continued to navigate through the building until they arrived at a door that was unmistakably the entrance to the Shadow's Market.

It was heavily guarded by five individuals, each armed with brain crystal rifles, their stances alert and ready for any sign of trouble.

<Great... >

Erik stepped forward, his demeanor calm as he faced the guards.

In that moment, he tapped into his Instability brain crystal power, a subtle glance at each guard allowing him to sift through their thoughts for the information he needed.

With the pass phrase now clear in his mind, he addressed the guards, "The shadows whisper only to those who listen."

The guards exchanged quick looks, the tension in the air palpable as they assessed Erik and his companions.

Then, almost imperceptibly, they relaxed their stances, stepping aside to grant them access.

The pass phrase was undeniably effective. It had proven their right to enter.

The group exchanged glances, a mix of surprise and relief at Erik's successful move.

It was now clear to them he could read minds. It was a good thing if they were not on the other side of that ability, but it was also scary, since there was nothing they could hide from him, being secrets or weaknesses.

They stepped through the doorway, leaving the guarded entrance behind as they ventured into the Shadow's Market.

As they moved forward, the corridor beyond the door unfolded into an expansive, dimly lit space that pulsed with the energy of the underworld.

The air was thick with the scent of incense and the inaudible murmur of conversations, the market's patrons hidden behind masks and pseudonyms.

Around them, people lounged on plush sofas, their conversations a blend of whispers and chuckles.

Some patrons sat at the bar, their masks half-removed, indulging in drinks, while others stood in corners, enveloped in smoke from their cigars, their identities obscured behind elaborate masks.

"We should split up to find the entrance to the secret area," Erik said.

Camille, quick to offer a solution, asked Erik, "Why don't you just read the minds of those around to speed things up?"

"I was planning to do just that," he said without hiding his ability anymore, "But I'd also like you to ask questions to the people here and get a general layout of the place. Better safe than sorry, no?"

They agreed, dispersing among the market's patrons to eavesdrop and observe, while Erik focused on his task.

He wandered the place, his senses attuned to the thoughts of those around him, but they got nothing useful.

After some time, he spotted an obvious guard, a man whose vigilant gaze swept over the crowd. Erik approached him but remained as far away as possible, delving into the guard's thoughts.

The man was thinking about a lot of things. Women, weapons, drinks, gambling.

But then he went to the layout of the place, as he was thinking about security.

Then the man recalled a door in an adjacent room, one the guard knew nothing about except for strict orders never to enter it.

This piece of information, though scant, was a lead he couldn't ignore.

<I bet that's the place. >

After having gathered the others, they stealthily made their way to the room.

Surprisingly, the door they found there was unguarded, likely to suggest it led nowhere of importance, and to deter curiosity.

Erik reached for the handle, and with a push, the door swung open, revealing a corridor that stretched into darkness.

"Do you think it is safe?" Rebecca asked.

"There is nothing safe in this place," Erik said.

With resolute nods, the group proceeded, the corridor leading them into a vast room that bore a striking resemblance to ancient monasteries.

In front of them, there was an indoor garden with an open ceiling above. It was obviously fake. They were inside a building, after all.

The room had columns and small walls meant to separate the garden from the open corridors around it.

On the side of the opposite walls, there were many rooms.

"Let's search around," he said, his voice low to avoid drawing unwanted attention. The group nodded, splitting up to cover more ground within the expansive space.

Ramon ventured to several doors, pushing each open with a cautious hand, only to find them leading to empty rooms.

Camille and Rebecca undertook a similar exploration, their findings mirroring Ramon's.

The rooms were devoid of any immediate interest, their emptiness echoing the silent mystery of the place.

June, on the other hand, found himself drawn to a door distinct from the others.

As he approached, the muffled sounds of conversation reached his ears.

<Someone is inside... I must tell Master Erik. > June hurried back to Erik and told him.

"Good job, June. Go tell the others."

"Yes, Master."

The group reconvened. There were many questions in their mind, but they couldn't lose time talking about who or what was inside that room.

They approached the door June had identified. Erik carefully cracked the door open just enough to peer inside.

Before them was a vast room, with a very large bookshelf two meters from them, but not facing the wall.

The bookshelf gave more privacy to those inside, as it created a small area where no one could see who was talking.

Beyond the bookshelf, shadows belonging to people danced on the walls and on the ground.