

BIOLOGICAL 851

Chapter 851: Hunting for Shade (8)

Without a word, the group slipped inside, using the bookshelf as cover to conceal their presence.

They positioned themselves just outside the lit area, close enough to hear the conversation but hidden from view.

The voices were low, but carried a sense of urgency and importance.

"I didn't like the mayor's move," a man said. "We need him to know he shouldn't mess up with us."

"The problem lay elsewhere," a woman said. "We are losing control over the government because of the Band of Giants. If the mayor thinks we can't reach him because of them, then it is a problem."

From their concealed position behind the bookshelf, Erik and his team had a clear view of the gathering, though they themselves remained unseen.

"And how do we ensure our influence remains undetected while expanding our reach?" The man's keen eyes scanned the room.

"Can't you place more spies there?" a woman asked, turning to someone else.

The man she turned to remained silent until that point.

"First of all, you should all wait your turn to talk," the man said. However, he wasn't the only one with something to say.

Ramon turned to Erik. A look of recognition in his eyes, he knew someone among those inside the room.

"Sorry, Gabriel," the other said. Based on this small interaction, Erik could assume this guy, Gabriel, was the one leading the conversation.

It must have been a sort of arbitrator, or leader of the sort.

The respectful tone in the other men and women there, all likely criminal organization's bosses, and for sure, part of the underworld elite, clarified that Gabriel held some sort of power.

"Yes. I can send more people to the town hall. They should be able to manage the Band of Giants, but it's not like they are easy to fool. Regardless, I will take care of the matter," Gabriel said.

"I will send some trusted men there." He paused.

"There is something else I want to talk about, and for which I summoned you here today." Gabriel paused again.

"I know there had been problems between the Shadow Brigade and the Cobra's Venom."

That left everyone surprised. Those were highly confidential information, something the gang's leaders, the ones present, tried to hide as best as they could.

Gabriel turned to look at the woman. "Lena, if I'm not wrong, one of your men told the police about the heist you were planning to make, right?"

Shock appeared on Lena's face once again. She told very few people about the Heist. Gabriel shouldn't have known about it.

"And you, Arthur. Didn't one of your men betray you? Didn't he steal a huge crate of drugs?"

Arthur didn't talk. "If I'm not wrong, your gang should have sent those crates to Khunelerp, right? Wasn't it a trade I supervised to deepen our bonds with the White Hands?"

Gabriel was referring to a criminal group nested in the distant nation. The two didn't reply. They were too ashamed of not having been good enough to avoid those incidents.

Gabriel sighed. "From now on, I will send some of my men to keep an eye on your people. I'm sick of all those incidents."

"But this means having control of our affairs!" Lena said.

"It is not my problem. This is a situation you created with your own hands."

To Erik, it was clear who Ramon recognized: Gabriel. This guy was basically controlling the others, and they were gang leaders.

These guys were here in the Shadow's Market, a place that was likely built only for the top elites in the underworld. It was clear they were not just some random people, and yet, he almost acted like he was the boss.

Erik picked up on Ramon's thoughts and realized he suspected Gabriel knew where to find Shade.

Besides, Erik understood what Gabriel did as a primary job. He was an informant, and one powerful judging by what Ramon was thinking.

To say he was an informant was an understatement. He was a sort of spy, or something like that.

It was likely that his influence and power expanded through the entire world, making him have spies in all places.

However, that didn't fully explain Erik's doubts. How could Gabriel know something about Shade, when no one else, not even other good informants, could?

But it was also clear that Gabriel was at the top of the hierarchy here.

That meant it wasn't just about his network of spies. Shade had to be in contact with other people.

There was no way he could manage the underworld alone.

Shade was a shadow, but even shadows left traces in the right light. Those shadows were likely the few underlings the man, or woman, had.

"I will surely open my doors for your people," another woman said.

"Thank you, Sophie," Gabriel said. "What about you, Mikhail?"

"I don't like it either," the man said. "But if this would make our organization safer, then I have no right to object."

"Good. What about you two?" Gabriel's attention shifted towards Arthur and Lena, his gaze piercing and expectant.

Under the weight of his scrutiny, their reluctance was easily seen. Arthur's face betrayed a momentary flicker of hesitation.

His eyes darted to the side, while an internal debate raged within him.

Lena, for her part, wore her reluctance more openly. Her sharp features tightened, and her lips pressed into a thin line.

Despite their initial resistance, the atmosphere in the room, charged with a blend of anticipation and subtle pressure, seemed to push them towards agreement.

After a tense moment that stretched longer than comfortable, both gave a slow, almost imperceptible nod.

Arthur's agreement came with a resigned sigh, his shoulders dropping as if relinquishing a burden he'd hoped to avoid.

Lena's nod, on the other hand, was accompanied by a sharp intake of breath, her decision clearly not made lightly.

Her eyes met Gabriel's, a spark of defiance flickering within them, signaling her acquiescence was not a sign of submission but a strategic choice.

Gabriel offered a slight nod of acknowledgment in return. His expression softened momentarily.

"Now, let's go to the next point," Gabriel said.

Erik made a slight gesture to the others. He wanted to get the hell out of there and think about their next move. This could be a great chance to find Shade, based on what Ramon knew, but the others need to know and give some insights.

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The group left the room, but it was clear they had little time before the meeting ended.

They needed to decide on what to do, and exactly as in Gabriel's case, it was Erik's right to make the last decision.

This operation, fraught with danger and high stakes, was started at his behest, weaving his personal vendetta and strategic objectives into a single thread.

The eyes of his comrades turned to him, their expressions a mix of anticipation and readiness, all too aware that the window of opportunity was closing as the meeting drew to an anticipated close.

"Anything to say?" Erik asked to Ramon.

The man, usually more reserved with his thoughts, seemed to carry an unusual weight behind his face this time.

Erik already knew what he was thinking. Erik's decision to prompt Ramon wasn't without purpose. He knew the value of Ramon's insights, and that was why he asked that question. He prompted him to talk, because the others needed to know.

"Yes. A lot, indeed."

Rebecca and Camille turned to look at him. "You know something?"

"I do. The man they called Gabriel, the one who appeared to be the leader... I know him."

The group turned to look at Ramon with surprise and curiosity etched across their faces.

It was unexpected. His reputation had always preceded him; known across Etrium for his formidable prowess in battle and his membership in the esteemed Band of Giants, Ramon was a figure many looked up to.

The idea that he might have a deeper connection to the underworld, or possess insider knowledge about gang activities, had never crossed the people's minds.

"Gabriel is an informant, like Vincent, but he is apparently much more powerful than him."

"That explains why he talked about sending his people to the other gangs." Camille said. "I bet he wants to control the gangs, since they messed up somehow."

"Right."

"But that was clear to everyone. What do you know we are not aware of?" Erik asked.

"Hmm..." Ramon had a pensive look on his face, his brow furrowed in concentration as he delved into the recesses of his mind.

Ramon furrowed his brow, straining to dredge up as many details as he could from the recesses of his memory.

Time had a way of blurring the edges of recollections, and it had been quite a while.

Some pieces were clear as day, while others seemed to fade into the background, making it a challenge to piece everything together accurately.

He sifted through his thoughts, determined to provide as much useful information as possible, despite the fog that time had cast over certain memories.

The dim light of the room cast shadows across his thoughtful expression, highlighting the effort he was putting into piecing together the past.

His lips moved, murmuring inaudible words to himself as he sifted through the fragments of his past encounters with Gabriel, searching for better clues that might help the group understand more about the man who seemed to hold significant influence within the underworld.

He started with this: "Me and Gabriel started out at the same time, in the same place," he paused.

"We worked at the same warehouse I brought you this morning. Back then, Gabriel was an information broker. He had a good net, but he wasn't as powerful as he is today." Ramon said, capturing everyone's attention.

"He had this unique ability to stay a shadow among shadows, gathering secrets that allowed him to manipulate events to his advantage, and that is not even his brain crystal power."

Ramon racked his brain, searching for the right words to shed more light on Gabriel's character.

He knew it was crucial to paint a clear picture for his teammates, to help them grasp the essence of the man they were dealing with.

As he sifted through his memories, he sought a detail, a story, or an anecdote that would bring Gabriel's role into sharper focus for them.

"Even though he wasn't leading the 'Night Whisperers' at the time, his influence in the underworld was already significant. He was building what would become the continent's largest network of spies and informants, positioning himself as a key player in the criminal power game."

Of course, Gabriel started doing that when Ramon was still in the underworld, but since he had many friends there, even when he left, he got words about what was happening.

"How did he build such a network without drawing attention to himself?" Erik asked, but he could already see the reply in Ramon's mind.

"Gabriel was exceptionally good at staying out of the limelight, using others to gather information while he remained in the background."

"Like Shade," Erik said.

"Like Shade."

Rebecca thought for a second. There were things she couldn't understand.

"But if he was that exceptional, why join a criminal organization?" she asked.

"Family reasons, for what I remember." Ramon's answer didn't come late.

"His life was full of tragedies. But it wasn't just about revenge for him; it was about control. To know everyone's secrets gave him leverage over friends and foes alike. That allowed him to achieve both his goals."

"For sure he came a long way," Camille said, smiling.

"Indeed. It looks like he's at the top of the food chain now. Forgive me for not having known this."

Erik nodded, piecing together the information. "This still doesn't explain how he could be of help to us. Shade remained hidden for decades. No one knows about him, and as much as we know, not even Gabriel might know about his existence."

"That's a reasonable thought, if it wasn't for..." Ramon paused.

"For what?"

"For something that happened years after we both joined the underworld."

The group fell silent, each one waiting for Ramon to talk.

The man gathered the group closer, his voice dropping to a whisper as he recounted a pivotal moment from his past.

"During my years in the underworld, I worked as a middleman in a smuggling operation for my gang. One night, while waiting for a shipment of goods inside the warehouse, I found myself accidentally behind some crates when Gabriel and another individual entered." Ramon let the memory wash over him.

"At that time, Gabriel was already an influential information broker. He didn't have the power he holds now, but he enhanced his already impressive network of contacts and spies, and was an important figure within the organization."

He paused for a moment, the memory vivid in his mind. "That night, I overheard Gabriel talking about Shade, describing him as an emerging entity in the criminal landscape of Frant, whose cunning and ambition were unmatched. Believe me when I say that, if Gabriel thinks so highly of someone, it means it's true." He looked at his companions with focused eyes.

"Gabriel discussed the importance of monitoring this Shade, predicting that his rise might reshuffle the power dynamics in the underworld. Not even him could keep the man under control, or spy on him for all that matter. Can you believe it?"

Erik, intrigued, leaned in closer. "So Gabriel knew about Shade from the beginning. He saw him as a threat, or perhaps an opportunity?"

Ramon nodded. "Yes, it was clear that Gabriel respected Shade's capabilities. He saw him like an opportunity, most likely."

"If he knew about him, it means he likely reached this level by siding with him," Camille said.

"Ok, assuming he works with Shade, we have found a concrete lead. But if that is true, it means that messing with him will be an enormous problem, and I doubt he will talk."

Camille flashed a knowing smile. "True, but it's not about getting him to talk. We just need to ask the right questions," she said, her eyes sparkling with a blend of mischief and expectation as she turned towards Erik.

Her grin widened, acknowledging the ace up their sleeve. The rest of the group followed her gaze, their expressions mirroring her sentiment.

Grins appeared on their faces. For sure, Erik's ability to read minds was going to come in handy.

"Can you do it?" Rebecca asked.

"Who do you think I am?" Erik said with a confident smirk. His assurance was infectious, and the group felt a surge of optimism.

"We need a plan, though," Rebecca said, capturing everyone's attention. "What do you suggest?" she turned to look at Erik. "This is your operation, after all."

Erik thought for a second, but there wasn't much they could do, actually. "The best approach is to wait for Gabriel to be alone. Once we have him isolated, we can ask our questions."

Rebecca nodded in agreement. The others concurred. It wasn't like they could barge in, kill everyone and then see.

"Alright, let's find a good spot to hide and wait for our chance."

The group scanned their surroundings, looking for the ideal hiding place. It was crucial they remained unseen until the perfect moment.

"Let's move," Erik said, leading them to a secluded area where they could wait for their opportunity to confront Gabriel alone.

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As their conversation drew to a close, Gabriel scanned the room.

"Is everything clear?" he asked, his voice carrying the expectation of compliance.

The others nodded in agreement, affirming their understanding of Gabriel's orders.

One by one, the gang leaders left the room in silence, a dance of shadows retreating into the night.

The echoes of their steps faded as they disappeared beyond the door, leaving Gabriel alone inside the room.

He had a phone call to make, a last piece of business, before he could consider their meeting concluded, and head home.

Reaching for his phone, Gabriel found, to his surprise, that it refused to work. An oddity, given the meticulous care he took to ensure his lines of communication were always operational. The screen remained dark, unresponsive to his touch.

In truth, it didn't work because Erik asked the biological supercomputer to take care of it.

It was in this moment of confusion that Erik, June, Camille, Rebecca, and Ramon emerged from the shadows surrounding Gabriel.

The sudden appearance of these masked strangers caught him off guard, his shock clear in the brief widening of his eyes.

"Who are you? How did you enter?" For a second, his usual composure slipped under the weight of his surprise. This place should have been an inner sanctum within an inner sanctum. How were they able to find it, and how were they able to enter?

Camille stepped forward, her smile sharp. "We're the ones asking the questions. For your sake, it's better if you comply." Her tone left no room for argument.

Gabriel, though initially taken aback, quickly regained his poise. He quickly estimated the situation. He could fight his way out of whatever all of this was, but there was a problem.

They were five, while he was alone. Even if he made enough noise to attract the guards, it was unlikely they arrived before those guys killed him.

"Do you know who I am?" he asked, a challenge underlying his question. The only way he had to get out of this predicament was to make them unwilling to kill him.

It was then that Ramon stepped forward, removing his mask to reveal his identity. "Gabriel Leone," he said, his voice steady.

Recognition flickered in Gabriel's eyes. "Ramon, it's been a long time."

There was a hint of surprise coloring in his tone. Ramon was a strong fighter many years ago, and his exploits with the Band of Giants were known to many, including him, of course. He couldn't even comprehend how strong he became after so many years, while he mostly focused on work. If Ramon was among the fighters, escaping through fights was going to be even harder.

"Not enough," Ramon said.

He glanced on Ramon's left. There was a woman with him, one he recognized from her build, but only because she was with his old friend.

"I bet your lovely friend here must be Camille."

"It's none of your business," the woman said.

Gabriel couldn't understand. Why was he here? Was there a bounty on his head? But how was it possible? He controlled the information inside Etrium.

No one never found out about him, so how was that situation possible? Well, of course, if someone betrayed him.

<Those cutthroats...>

He asked them that question.

"Why did you come here?"

Ramon didn't hesitate. "We came to ask about Shade," he said plainly, cutting straight to the heart of their visit.

"Shade?" Gabriel laughed. "For a second, I thought you came here for some important reason. Yet I see you came here to ask about fairy tales.

"Stop wasting our time," Camille said. "We know you work for him." Gabriel looked at the woman with a contemplative look.

"Do you really believe in his existence?" he said, his question laced with skepticism. Of course, Erik was already reading his mind, and he knew he was faking ignorance.

Ramon's answer came shortly after. "To fake ignorance won't help you."

The man pressed on. "Do you know who Shade is?" His voice was firm, an obvious challenge to Gabriel's evasiveness.

Gabriel laughed off the question, his amusement thinly veiling his disdain. "You're chasing shadows, Ramon. Believing in myths now, are we?"

He mocked Ramon's earnestness, feigning ignorance with a flair that suggested he considered the topic beneath him.

Inside, Gabriel was cautious, aware of Shade's reality but outwardly dismissive to protect his knowledge.

Erik, monitoring the exchange, delved into Gabriel's mind. Though the man's words painted a picture of disbelief, his thoughts confirmed he knew exactly who Shade was, not that he knew his real identity, but he knew the figure, the legend. Erik, however, remained silent, not revealing his insight.

"Then, who are those that can lead us to Shade?"

Gabriel's laughter continued, treating Ramon's persistence as a joke.

"You're lost in a fantasy, Ramon. There's no breadcrumb trail to follow."

Yet, as he said this, Erik's uncovered valuable leads within Gabriel's mind.

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"What do we do about him?" Camille asked.

"We can't keep him alive. He knows who we are, among the many things. Besides, I don't want to," Erik said.

"Did you really have to take your mask off?" Camille looked at Ramon with a murdering stare. The man said nothing.

Upon hearing those words, though, a visible shift occurred in Gabriel. His confident demeanor, once unshakeable, faltered as the seeds of fear took root.

His eyes darted around the room, seeking an escape or advantage where none existed.

The laughter and mockery that had so easily flowed from him moments before dried up, replaced by a tightness around his mouth and a slight pallor that crept over his face.

His hands, previously relaxed at his sides, now clenched and unclenched involuntarily, betraying his growing anxiety.

To wrest back some semblance of control, Gabriel resorted to making threats.

Since he exhausted all his options to dissuade them from taking his life, this was his last stand.

Despite his efforts to sway them with reason and bargaining, his situation had spiraled beyond his control.

Now cornered and with dwindling options, threats were the only weapon left in his arsenal.

"You do not know what forces you're meddling with." His voice was laced with venom. "I have allies that could make you disappear without a trace. Not even the Fierce Lioness could help you!"

"Who, Shade?" Camille asked. She grinned while Gabriel scoffed.

Gabriel's words fell on deaf ears. Ramon, Erik, and the others regarded him with a calm indifference that only deepened his fear.

They stood unmoved, their collective resolve clear in their steady gazes and firm stances.

Gabriel's threats, meant to intimidate and scatter, only highlighted his sudden vulnerability.

"I will take care of this," Erik said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. He may escape if it's one of you," he said.

"No offense, of course."

Gabriel, at that point, was starting to panic. He wasn't a fighter, and trying to escape five people was impossible for him.

"We will wait for you then." The group left the room, much to Gabriel's pleasure. Maybe he had a chance now.

"If you really think it will be easy, the — "

With a predator's grace and a chilling calm, Erik assessed the situation, the weight of his Flyssa balanced in his hand.

The blade, a gleaming arc of death, reflected the faint light, hinting at the impending doom it was about to deliver.

In a heartbeat, the tension broke. Erik lunged forward, the Flyssa moving with him as an extension of his will, a swift, almost invisible flick of his wrist directing its lethal dance.

The blade sliced through the air with a whisper, its sharp edge meeting the neck of his foe with precision and finality.

The cut was clean, almost surgical, a testament to Erik's skill and the Flyssa's deadly craftsmanship.

For a moment, everything seemed to pause, the world holding its breath.

Then, the head detached from the body, beginning its descent to the ground.

Time resumed its march, and the head landed with a sonorous thud that echoed in the silent room.

Blood started staining the plush carpet with the color of Gabriel's crimson blood.

[HOSTILE HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[0%...1%...5%...30%...70%...100%]

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING CONVERTING PROCEDURE.]

[3...2...1...0]

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. 6000 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

"Well, at least this will be a problem for Shade."

Erik had many thoughts crossing his mind. What Gabriel unwillingly revealed was a lot.

The information hinted at a tangible possibility of locating Shade soon. However, he recognized several tasks remained before that goal could be achieved.

After leaving the room, Erik rejoined his companions, ready to share the news.

"So?" Camille asked, her eyebrows raised in anticipation as she turned to face Erik.

The curiosity in her eyes was visible. "Did you find something?"

The group's collective breath seemed to hang on Erik's response, each member leaning in slightly, not wanting to miss a word.

Erik met her gaze, a flicker of determination in his eyes. "I found a lot, actually," he said.

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Erik paused for a second, grappling with the wealth of information he had uncovered and the urgency of their situation.

"First of all, I found out that Gabriel has a detailed list of contacts regularly used by Shade to coordinate underworld operations on an international level." Erik looked at his friends' masked faces. They were all looking at him.

"This list comprises names, locations, and signals for secret meetings. It is a tangible point for tracking Shade's movements. "

He let the significance of his findings sink in among the group, each member processing the implications of such a network.

"However," Erik said, "using this might not be necessary at the moment, unless things take a turn for the worse."

"Why so?"

"Because I found out something else," Erik said, pausing again to gather his thoughts before delivering the next piece of crucial information.

"Apparently, Gabriel is aware of an upcoming secret meeting that's considered pivotal to Shade for his future operations. This event will take place at an abandoned location on the outskirts of Nokisi Point, an old city in ruins because of the thaid. It was chosen for its isolated position and the ease of defending it."

As Erik shared his discovery, a collective grin spread across the faces of those present. Finally, they had not only one, but two possibilities to find Shade.

One was the list, the names there would eventually lead them to him. The second was the meeting, which was much more immediate to find Shade compared to the list.

There was only a problem: while the list could lead them to him, maybe when he was alone, or in a moment of vulnerability, the meeting would not be simple. Shade was bound to have guards with him, making everything dangerous.

But despite everything, a swell of pride filled them. They did something no one achieved: to trace a figure shrouded in myth, all within a single day's work.

However, this pride was tempered by the acknowledgment that their success was not the result of their own skills or cunning.

It was Erik's extraordinary ability that had paved their way to this moment.

His mind-reading power was not merely useful; it was invaluable, transcending any description of utility. Words fell short of capturing the advantage it provided them.

This singular ability had not only led them to the Shadow's Market and its hidden sanctum, but also enabled them to extract vital information from Gabriel—the man seemingly orchestrating the underworld's chessboard.

That was important. Gabriel looked like the actual leader of the underworld, and if it wasn't for them, knowing Shade was real, someone else might have killed Gabriel and went home, not knowing that the real threat was still lurking the shadows.

Though, doing all of this was still akin to a miracle.

However, a thought spread across their minds as they heard Erik talk. "What is this meeting about?" Ramon asked.

To that question, Erik grimaced. Gabriel possessed little information, suggesting that Shade might not fully trust him, or perhaps Shade intended to unveil his plans to all his important associates simultaneously.

Was Shade simply one that loved theatrics, or did he really not trust Gabriel? Honestly, Erik didn't care.

From the fragments of Gabriel's thoughts, whatever was in the works would be monumental, sparking several theories in Erik's mind.

Thanks to what he already knew, plus what he found out from Gabriel, he pictured everything together, at least enough to make an educated guess.

"I discovered hints of an ambitious project that Shade is about to launch. Something that could not only solidify his dominance over the underworld but also pose a threat to the global balance of power."

He paused, letting the gravity of his findings sink in among his companions. "Although the specifics are vague, it's clear that this project represents a never seen threat."

Erik pieced together the puzzle with a clarity that sharpened the gravity of their situation. He identified two chances, or things, that had the potential to alter the global power dynamics.

First, there was the proliferation of brain crystal weapons. These weren't just the melee variants that had become somewhat common within certain circles; Erik was talking about brain crystal rifles and other advanced armaments.

While in Etrium were relatively spread out, it wasn't true for the rest of the world.

Since he faced these weapons himself, Erik understood their lethality, even against opponents like the Thaidis. It was clear they were going to make whoever had them much more powerful.

Yet, as dangerous as these weapons were, their spread throughout the underworld—and beyond—even if not common, made Erik believe this wasn't what Shade hinted at in his conversation with Gabriel. It was a significant concern, certainly, but there had to be more.

This led Erik to his second, and far more alarming, realization: Doran's research.

The infamous mad scientist had conducted his experiments under the auspices of the Blackguards, who, through Shade, exerted control over the underworld's intricate web.

Erik was convinced that the Blackguards had not only completed Doran's research but were on the brink of employing it to enhance their pawns.

This wasn't just about escalating violence through more sophisticated weaponry.

It was about fundamentally changing the playing field. If the Blackguards completed Doran's research, they would likely end up with people with double or triple Brain Crystal Powers.

That also raised other concerns. His father's rescue operation was going to be carried out soon, after all.

"Ok, then what's our next move?" Rebecca asked.

Erik turned to face her, his expression serious yet determined. "The first step is securing our entry key into the meeting," he said.

"A key?" Rebecca's brows furrowed in curiosity.

"Yes, but not just any key. A small sculpture of a dragon, carved from onyx."

"And where might this key be?" June chimed in.

"Shade has entrusted one to Gabriel. He keeps it well-hidden in his house, specifically within his bedroom."

"So, our plan is to infiltrate Gabriel's house, secure the sculpture, and then?"

"Then we wait, and then we strike." A grin slowly spread across his face, not one of arrogance but of confidence in their collective capability to pull off such a critical part of their mission.

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After leaving the Shadow's Market, the group made their way to their flying car.

Their next destination was clear: Gabriel's villa, which Erik saw through the man's memories.

"I expect a lot of resistance there," he said, reflecting on Gabriel's role as the puppet leader of the underworld.

"Even if he's technically under Shade, Gabriel's power is undeniable. It is very unlikely that the place is not massively guarded, and I bet those guards are not weak."

Camille nodded in agreement. "Entering that place won't be easy. So, what will be our approach?"

"If June and I go alone, we could easily take the onyx sculpture and leave," he said.

They did this missions several times, there wasn't a place where they hadn't been able to enter yet.

The proposal was met with immediate skepticism. "Are you out of your mind?" Camille said.

"There will probably be a lot of guards," Ramon said, but Erik already knew that and still thought it wasn't a problem. "If you two go alone, you will just die."

"Then what do you suggest?"

Ramon was quick to respond. "We should stick together. To sneak in would be the best approach, but done together."

Erik knew the security at Gabriel's villa was high and that it would make sneaking in large groups challenging, but held back his reservations. The others had all serious faces, like they were mad at being underestimated.

"If you think we can handle that level of security, then I won't stop you," he said. The last thing he wanted to do was for them to resent him and think he was arrogant.

With a series of nods, the group solidified their plan, and soon, they arrived at the outskirts of Gabriel's property.

The building was set within a private park inside Nokisi Point, a luxury even the members of the Band of Giants found unusual.

However, given Gabriel's wealth, it wasn't entirely beyond the realm of possibility.

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The villa, nestled among the trees, presented a serene picture from afar. They finally arrived.

After having parked the car outside, they prepared to infiltrate the property under the cover of the natural surroundings.

As they made their way through the streets, the villa's imposing structure grew larger with each step, and the vegetation grew taller.

Gabriel's villa was massive. There were at least 80 hectares of land surrounding the villa itself, was not less small, it was at least 4000 square meters divided into multiple floors. In one word, it was massive.

They jumped over the tall stone fence that surrounded the area and then entered unseen.

"Let's go."

As the group advanced through the park, they moved with a silent coordination, using the cover of trees to shield themselves from view.

The density of the trees, while initially a concern for spotting all the guards, turned out to be an asset.

The natural camouflage allowed them to observe the guards' movements and plan their approach with minimal risk of detection.

Despite the protection offered by the foliage, it became apparent that the area was heavily guarded.

Camille was the first to spot a group of ten guards patrolling the vicinity and headed in their direction.

"Incoming at 3." Ramon looked at her and nodded. The others saw the patrolling unit, too.

The silent consensus was clear: they needed to neutralize the guards quickly and without raising an alarm.

Erik signaled to the group, each member nodding in understanding before splitting up to use the trees as both shield and vantage point.

They circled around the guards, staying low and quiet, their movements barely disturbing the underbrush.

Camille and Ramon, leveraging their team play, took positions behind two guards who had strayed from the group.

They incapacitated them using chokeholds, their actions synchronized to avoid any chance of alerting the others.

Then they brought their unconscious bodies inside the foliage, where they killed them. Erik absorbed their mana as the bodies were within range of his biological supercomputer.

Rebecca and June, meanwhile, took down another pair of guards, their actions swift, ensuring the guards were rendered unconscious before they could react. Then, hiding them in the foliage, they killed them.

June didn't care, but Rebecca was not entirely OK with killing two unconscious people.

Instead, Erik did the rest. He didn't even have to use his Brain Crystal Powers as he was simply too fast for the guards to even react.

He took care of the remaining six with ease. The others arrived, and after having hidden the bodies again, they killed them.

"Good."

However, there was concern in Erik's eyes. He already knew the number of the people inside the villa based on Gabriel's memories, but he didn't know how strong they were, or if the number increased.

At some point, they reached the middle of the park, but there were many guards around. Erik used his instability brain crystal power to find the guards, and one by one, he scanned them all.

They were much more powerful than the others thought. These guys were all around the μ level, as they all had around 30 neural links. This meant they had 9 neural links more than the average.

Their stats ranged between 130 and 108, with the weakest being their intelligence around 40.

Despite his confidence in his team's abilities, especially not that of June, the number of people in the area was too much, and he doubted everything was going to go smoothly.

"Are we sure we want to proceed?" Erik asked, offering them one last opportunity to reconsider.

"The guards are not only many, but also exceptionally strong. If we're found out, the element of surprise will no longer be an option and kills won't be as easy."

A silent communication passed among the group, their resolve manifesting in different ways.

Camille's eyes sparkled with a mad glint, almost welcoming the challenge and the kills she was going to make.

Ramon's expression was set in a grim resolve, understanding the stakes yet ready to confront them.

Rebecca, however, showed a hint of hesitation, reflecting her awareness of being the weakest among them.

Yet, the collective decision was palpable; retreat was not an option they entertained.

"I'm in," Camille said. Ramon simply nodded. Rebecca, instead, thought about it for a second. "Let's go," she said.

Erik turned toward the Villa, still far away but not as before. Resolve surged through him.

Chapter 856: Hunting for Shade (13)

After taking down the first set of guards, the group moved deeper into the lush surroundings of Gabriel's villa.

The natural camouflage of the park's dense foliage offered them the advantage of stealth, but the high number of patrolling guards meant they had to be vigilant and adaptable in their approach.

As they crept closer to the villa, Erik signaled for a halt. "Guard on the right," he said, spotting a lone figure moving through the shadows ahead.

Without a word, the group veered left, weaving through the trees, their footsteps muffled by the underbrush.

To risk exposure to eliminate just one guard seemed reckless and unnecessary, particularly when they could simply bypass him with no trouble.

They went deeper, and it wasn't before long that Camille spotted some more trouble.

"Two guards ahead, by the statue." She pointed towards a marble statue.

"Luckily, we didn't kill that guy, or they would have found us."

"Right."

This time, it was Ramon taking the lead, guiding them around the obstacle, choosing a path that skirted the edge of a small pond, their reflections ghosting across its still surface.

Rebecca kept the pace, her determination masking the anxiety that flickered in her eyes.

Each time they bypassed a guard, she felt a mix of relief and a growing confidence, but it was clear all of this wasn't easy for her.

Their path took them near the villa's ornate garden, where the scent of exotic flowers hung in the air.

"Guard duo coming down the path," June said in a low tone. This time, their detour led them through a thicket of high hedges.

At last, after a period that felt endless yet was brief in reality, they arrived at the entrance of the villa.

Erik scanned the area one last time, his power reaching out to sense any immediate threats.

The coast was clear for the moment, their approach unnoticed by the villa's defenders.

"Here we are." A hint of triumph pervaded Erik's voice. "We only need to take the sculpture and then head out. Is everything clear?"

"Yes."

The group exchanged looks, their faces set in grim determination.

As soon as their feet crossed the threshold, the silence was shattered by the deafening roar of brain crystal rifles.

Erik, leading the charge, was the first to react. "Take cover!"

The group scattered, finding shelter behind the ornate outer walls of the villa.

"Didn't you say the place was clear?!" Camille asked him.

"It was!" the truth was, those guys were outside Erik's range, and entered the room as soon as they stepped foot inside.

Erik had many powers, one more useful than the other, but he wasn't omnipotent, and the brain crystal rifles could kill him, too.

"Fuck," the sound of gunshots kept echoing inside the villa.

The guards around were immediately alerted and started rushing back to the villa.

Then Rebecca noticed Erik shifting his position. It was clear he was going to enter inside.

"What are you doing?!" Rebecca's eyes were full of concern.

"I'll distract them."

"That's insane!"

Erik looked at her.

"While I distract them, you rush inside and head for Gabriel's bedroom. I'm not sure I'll be able to prevent the guards from shooting at you for long."

If the number of guards remained as before, he could have eliminated them all in a short time.

However, the issue was the growing number of people at the villa's entrance.

Besides, about 40 guards were returning from the garden, leading to their encirclement.

"Erik, don't!" But her words were lost to him; Erik had already darted into the line of fire.

The group waited a couple of seconds. "We won't have another chance like this," Ramon said. "Let's go!"

They entered the room, and what they saw left them utterly stunned.

Erik had transformed into something otherworldly as he was fighting, a blur which made blood flow and people die as it passed.

In mere seconds, Erik ascended to the upper floor, killing guard after guard with a speed that defied belief. He looked like a demon, or maybe he was.

His movements were fluid and precise, but were also bloody and vicious. He was performing a dance that unleashed death and havoc in the span of a few heartbeats.

To Rebecca and the others, Erik's actions bordered on the supernatural, and that was in a world where the supernatural's domain was frequently invaded.

They had never witnessed such a fighting style, so brutal but precise. Even the Fierce Lioness wasn't able to match those moves, and that maybe surprised them the most.

Unbeknownst to them, Erik was channeling multiple brain crystal powers to achieve this feat, including Hais's ability, which sharpened his reflexes and heightened his perception to almost prophetic levels.

Each motion, each decision, was calculated with such rigor that Erik seemed to anticipate the guards' actions before they even made them.

But this display of power came at a cost. The exertion of using so many abilities simultaneously was depleting Erik's mana reserves.

As another guard on the upper floor slumped to the ground, Erik's breathing grew heavy.

"To Gabriel's bedroom, for the onyx sculpture!" Ramon said.

With a determined nod, Rebecca, Camille, and Ramon dashed into the villa, splitting up to cover more ground and make the most of the chaos Erik had sown.

The villa's interior was a labyrinth of luxury and opulence, with grand hallways leading off in all directions.

The sound of their footsteps was muffled by the thick carpets as they navigated through the maze, driven by the singular goal of reaching Gabriel's bedroom.

As they moved, the villa seemed to pulse with an undercurrent of danger, each shadow a potential threat.

The group pressed on, their training keeping them focused. The group was initially attacked by a group of guards.

"I'll take care of them," Rebecca said. She stayed behind to give time to her friends to achieve their goal.

Camille and Ramon proceeded. They arrived in front of a crossroads. "You take the left, I'll take the right," Camille said. With that, the two split.

Chapter 857: Hunting for Shade (14)

As the clamor of battle echoed through the grand halls of Gabriel's villa as Erik kept killing the guards, Rebecca faced down five guards, their swords drawn and gleaming.

Her decision to stay behind and confront the threat had been instinctive.

She didn't know if she would be strong enough to stop these guys, but she had to try.

The fights throughout the mission hadn't been simple for her, as she was weaker than her comrades.

Though determination surged through her after seeing what Erik did.

It gave her hope that one day, she could reach the same heights, but to do that, she needed experience.

Though she knew that carrying out this mission was outside the scope of her abilities.

As the guards closed in, she grasped the severity of the predicament into which she had thrown herself into.

With a deep breath, she called upon her power, feeling the familiar heat spread through her veins as her form shifted.

Her skin thickened into scales, shimmering with a metallic hue, while a tail sprouted behind her, lending balance and strength.

Her face elongated into a lizard visage, eyes narrowing into slits.

It was at that moment the guards recognized who she was. The daughter of the Fierce Lioness. The five guards looked at each other, but then they nodded.

The first guard charged, sword raised high. Rebecca's instincts kicked in.

Powered by her brain crystal power, she sidestepped the attack, using her tail to sweep the guard's legs out from under him.

As he fell, she killed him with a sharp twist of her hand, sending her sword plunging into the man's chest.

The other guards looked at each other. They understood they couldn't underestimate her.

Victory was short-lived. As she killed the first guard, two more appeared, swords at the ready.

<Shit! >

Rebecca's mind raced. The confines of the hallway limited her mobility, but she could use this to her advantage, preventing the guards from encircling her.

She confronted the new challengers directly, deflecting their blows with her sword. Each parry and riposte was executed with precision, and she killed the two adversaries.

However, the guards were well-trained, their formations tight and disciplined, making it hard for Rebecca to find an opening.

<Fuck! Another one arrived! >

With each passing moment, the fight grew more intense. Rebecca's strength allowed her to hold her ground, but the constant onslaught wore on her.

Her scales provided protection against the swords' edges, yet the sheer number of opponents threatened to overwhelm her.

To fight against five opponents at the same time was challenging enough, but as she defeated each one, another would take its place. Now, she contended with seven opponents.

Just as she killed another guard, two more joined the fray.

The pattern repeated itself, a never-ending cycle of combat that pushed Rebecca to her limits.

<I can't keep a defensive stance. They will tire me out. >

It was essential for Rebecca to be strategic and use the resources available in her environment.

Luckily, those guys had weapon-conjuring Brain Crystal Powers, so she wasn't scared they could do something that caught her off guard.

But someone with a ranged Brain Crystal Power could come at any time, worse if they had brain crystal rifles.

With remarkable agility, she evaded yet another swipe and used her tail to push a vase off a nearby pedestal, creating a distraction.

As the guards put their hands in front of their faces to avoid shards ending up in their eyes, she lunged, using her enhanced strength to push one guard into another, disrupting their formation.

"Die!" She killed both of them, but there were still other people inside the room.

Even as she fought with all her might, Rebecca couldn't help but wonder how long she could keep this up.

<My mana is running dry. >

With each new wave of guards, the possibility of getting out of that room unscathed seemed more and more like a distant dream.

The battle raged on, with Rebecca maneuvering around the guards' attacks, her dragon-like agility allowing her to dodge with an almost preternatural grace.

But Her breaths came in heavy gasps, and her movements, though still fast, carried a hint of fatigue.

She knew she couldn't let it show; any sign of weakness could be exploited by her opponents.

With her back against the wall, literally and metaphorically, Rebecca's mind raced for solutions.

The guards were skilled, no doubt, but they lacked the training the band of giants provided and which she underwent for years.

An idea for a daring and potentially game-changing maneuver flooded her thoughts, one that had the potential to shift the entire course of the battle.

As two guards converged on her, Rebecca feigned a stumble, luring them into a false sense of security.

As they closed in, confident of their victory, she unleashed a roar, a sound so deep and primal that it momentarily stunned her attackers.

The intensity of the noise was so overwhelming that the guards started bleeding from their ears.

She seized the moment, spun her tail, whipping out to catch the legs of one guard while she stabbed the other with her tail.

The once clean area was now filled with the lifeless bodies of those who had fallen. The move worked, but not as intended. Not all the guards fell for it.

The sound of additional footsteps reverberated through the hallway, showing that even more guards were making their way towards her.

"Damn!"

With a smirk on their faces, the guards directed their gaze towards her. "What? Out of juice already?"

That was exactly what was happening. She couldn't say that, but there was no need, as it was now very clear.

While tapping into her dwindling reserves of strength, Rebecca shifted to a defensive posture.

She fell back gradually, focusing on conserving her energy to confront the guards only if and when the opportunity arose.

The guards, sensing her apparent retreat, pressed forward with renewed vigor, but Rebecca was far from defeated.

She parried, dodged, and struck with the precision of a seasoned warrior, her draconian form giving her an edge that was impossible to ignore.

Chapter 858: Hunting for Shade (15)

Camille crouched behind a shattered wall, her breath steady despite the adrenaline coursing through her veins.

She peered through a crack, her eyes locking onto her opponent.

The man standing in front of her was dressed in the same uniforms as the guards in the villa.

The most striking feature, however, was not the attire but the cold, calculated demeanor that radiated from the silhouette, a brain crystal gun in his hands.

This man spelled trouble. Clearly, he had extensive training and was proficient with firearms.

For years Camille had been the only one that made guns effective against Thaid's.

Her power allowed her to imbue mana into items, and by using particular material, such as Eshalt, she could increase the power her bullets unleashed.

However, as brain crystal guns spread, more and more people started using them.

The difference was that, contrary to her, they also had their own brain crystal power.

Camille was in disadvantage against foes with gun, because they erased any advantage she had, but had one she didn't possess.

<Fuck... this isn't looking good. > she thought while loading her gun with her Eshalt-made bullets.

Then a mad glint appeared in her eyes. The situation was hard, but that was quite what she liked about it.

Her finger caressed the trigger, imbuing the next bullet with raw mana and amplifying its destructive power. She took a deep breath and then got out of cover.

BOOM BOOM BOOM

BOOM BOOM BOOM

Camille and the man exchanged bullets, one after the other.

However, neither of the two landed one. Both fighters were fast, and taking aim in an area littered with items obscuring their sight wasn't simple.

This was the first time Camille found herself in such a situation, because never she failed a shot.

<This guy is getting on my nerves! >

A gunshot echoed, and Camille barely dodged in time. The bullet grazed her shoulder and sending shards of the wall flying.

Pain flared, but she pushed it aside, understanding that any sign of weakness could be her downfall.

<He is good, > she said. That admission wasn't easy to make and forced her to reassess her strategy.

<But I didn't get to where I am by being outplayed. >

She grinned. She started unloading her magazine with a savage glint in her eyes.

The man did the same, avoiding Camille's bullet while shooting at her with his.

"Take this!" she shot another one, which grazed the man on his leg.

But he was unfazed. The attack was not painful and for sure not disabling.

Then, both he and Camille shot another bullet, but the only sound that came out was that of empty magazines.

"Fuck!"

Here, both had two options, and they knew it. They could either run and load their guns, or go melee.

The man hadn't doubts about it, he still had his brain crystal power, and it allowed him to summon a sword.

He conjured the weapon; the mana swirling around his hands, and then he charged.

"CRAP."

Camille didn't have the time to load the gun. "If you think I'm weak in a melee fight, you are entirely mistaken."

The woman wasn't crazy enough not to bring a melee weapon with her.

There was a real beauty with her that day, a sword entirely made of Aclaitrium.

Camille stepped back a couple of meters, just enough to have the time to unsheathe her sword.

The man followed and swung his sword down to cut the woman in two.

Camille barely made in time to take the weapon and parrying the attack.

"Not so lucky, uh?"

"Shut up," the man said. "You are getting on my nerves."

Camille's grin increased even more. "Oh, c'mon, I thought we were having fun."

The man redoubled his efforts to win against the woman using brute strength.

The fact that he was unable to do it left him utterly perplexed.

Camille was famous in Etrium, even more in Nokisi point, and he knew she was a gunner.

Tales of her aiming skills were legendary. There were rumors she killed a target at a 7 kilometers distance with a pistol. A fucking pistol.

She shouldn't have been able to resist him, right? Besides, she was using an Aclaitrium sword, while he was using a mana made one.

There was no chance that a physical sword, no matter how durable its material was, could sustain the strength of a mana sword.

But here was the point: Camille could imbue ITEMS with mana, not simply bullets. "I think you underestimated me."

Camille unleashed a powerful kick aimed directly at her opponent's stomach.

Her leg connected with a force that seemed to echo through the room, propelling the man backward with such intensity that he flew several meters through the air before crashing against the wall.

The impact resonated with a heavy thud, dust billowing around him as he slumped to the ground, momentarily dazed by the sheer force of the strike.

Camille's hand moved to her back, right near her waist, where she drew a second gun, its metallic sheen catching the faint light of the desolate environment.

Her gaze locked onto the man, now struggling to regain his bearings against the wall.

A victorious grin spread across her face as she noted the unmistakable glint of fear in his eyes, a fear that hadn't been there moments before.

"Did you really think I didn't have a backup?" Her grin widened, the thrill of the hunt clear in her stance.

At that critical moment, Camille's finger tightened on the trigger with deliberate intent.

The man found himself with no avenue for escape. His miscalculation of Camille's preparedness sealed his fate.

He had underestimated her, a mistake that was going to cost him his life.

With the inevitability of the situation hanging in the air, the realization dawned on him too late. Camille was about to claim her victory.

Suddenly, she spotted her opportunity—a brief lapse in her opponent's vigilance. She took her position; her aim steady.

"This one's for all the marbles," she said, squeezing the trigger.

The bullet flew, a streak of mana-enhanced destruction aimed straight at her foe.

Chapter 859: Hunting for Shade (16)

SWOOOSH

A blade slipped past Ramon, one under his own command. He directed it to strike the man before him, a colossus wielding an enormous sword.

The blades under Ramon's control circled the man like starving predators on the hunt, but that guy was phenomenal. He wielded his sword as if it was a damn tooth picker.

<This guy likely has a brain crystal power that enhances his strength. >

There weren't any other chances. That sword was too big, and the man's ease in wielding it was too extreme.

But it wasn't only that, that guy was also skilled. Many times Ramon attacked him from behind, and many times he failed delivering a lethal blow.

No, he failed to deliver a single one. It was as though the man had eyes on the back of his head.

Unperturbed by Ramon's blades, the giant charged forward, swinging his weapon in an arc to intercept Ramon's strikes.

But the band of giant's mercenary was not stupid, it was clear that if he came under the range of that weapon, there wasn't going much he could do against all that weight. He had to keep his distance.

"You coward."

"Calling me a coward?" Ramon said. He couldn't help but scoff at the man. Cowardly acts? They didn't matter in a battle where life and death had been on the bet.

With a scoff, locking eyes with his adversary. "No, my friend. This is what true intelligence looks like."

The man grunted and swung down his massive sword in a horizontal arc.

As his massive sword sliced through the air, Ramon's instincts kicked in. He ducked, the blade whistling close above his head.

However, if Ramon avoided the attack, the surrounding furniture weren't that lucky.

The powerful swing, missing its intended target, found another in the opulent décor of the room.

A grand, ornately carved wooden chair, caught in the blade's path, was cleaved in two, its halves crashing to the floor in a cloud of splinters and dust.

Nearby, a tall, elegant vase, perched on a pedestal, trembled from the force of the air displaced by the sword's movement.

It teetered for a moment before succumbing to gravity, shattering upon impact with the ground and scattering shards of porcelain and fragments of once-beautiful flowers across the polished marble tiles.

<Too much strength, and not a lot of finesse, > Ramon thought.

Not wasting a moment, the mercenary unleashed his counterattack, commanding his levitating swords to strike.

One of his flying blades darted forward, aiming straight for the man.

However, with a quick adjustment, the giant countered, using his massive sword to deflect the attack.

"Killing you will make me very famous, and very rich," the man said.

"I guess there is a bounty on my head in the underworld, uh?"

"And I will claim it."

Ramon doubled down on his attack, launching two of his levitating blades towards the man.

The man, anticipating the move, executed a masterful rotation of his colossal sword, positioning it with precision to intercept both swords.

With a resounding clang, the sword's broad surface collided with the incoming blades, halting their momentum dead in their tracks.

The force of the impact sent vibrations down the length of the sword. The man's arms tensed, muscles bulging under his armor as he absorbed the shock of the collision, his stance unwavering.

The two blades spun away, their trajectories altered but not destroyed.

<To win here, I need to play it smart. This guy is tough. >

Ramon had an idea. It was a daring one, but he doubted his opponent was going to anticipate his move.

The man in front of him had both power, strength and skills, but it was clear there was something missing in him: Experience.

As the man advanced towards Ramon with aggression, the latter deflected a series of rapid strikes.

It wasn't easy. The weight of the blade was massive, and the strength the man exerted was incredible.

The cold steel of Ramon's blade clashed against his opponent's, sending sparks flying into the room.

After blocking a forceful strike, Ramon left his left side unprotected.

The man, eyes gleaming with the anticipation of victory, could hardly conceal his satisfaction.

"You are done," he said, certain of his impending triumph.

However, Ramon was smirking.

"Wha—"

The following second, a couch nearby hit the man from behind. The behemoth didn't see the piece of flying furniture; he didn't even expect it.

Ramon used his brain crystal power to seize control of the surroundings.

His smirk vanished, replaced by a look of sheer astonishment. The impact was thunderous; the sound reverberating through the room as the man was brought to the ground, the weight of the couch pinning him in a vulnerable position.

A single second was enough to make him end up on the floor, his weapon out of his hands, and his opponent in front of him.

The man tried to take his sword from the ground, but a foot pinned it down. It was Ramon's. The guard raised his head and looked at Ramon in the eyes. There was fear in them.

"How is that possible?" the man asked. "Shouldn't you have been able to only move blades?"

Ramon looked at the man. His face was a mask of fear, disbelief, and disappointment.

"This is the problem with you youngsters, you don't think. My power is telekinesis, you idiot."

With those words, multiple blade sank into the guard's body.

From behind, from his front. The last blade lodged itself in the man's skull, passing through the nape and bisecting the head at the mouth's height. Blood streamed down like a fountain.

"You should have trained more."

With a calm command, Ramon summoned his swords back to his side.

The blades glided through the air with precision, returning to their master as if beckoned by an invisible force.

Taking a moment, he wiped each blade clean, his movements deliberate and devoid of emotion.

His face was a mask of indifference, betraying none of the intensity of the battle that had just taken place. This was routine for the old man.

Without a lingering glance at the man now dead beneath the heavy couch, Ramon turned on his heel and strode out of the room.

Chapter 860: Hunting for Shade (17)

Erik and June moved with such speed and precision that they appeared as nothing more than blurs to the few guards who dared to face them.

Their movements left no room for the guards to counter or escape. Within moments, the last of the opponents crumpled to the ground, dead.

While catching their breath, June turned to Erik with a look of concern. "Are the others okay?"

Erik closed his eyes for a moment, concentrating. He used his instability brain crystal power to see if their emotions and thoughts were somewhere around, which was a sign they were alive.

It wasn't hard since there weren't many people in the villa now.

When he opened his eyes, there was a flicker of unease in his gaze. "They are all alive, but Rebecca is not ok."

Without another word, Erik made a quick decision.

"Go to Camille, since Ramon has finished his part. Leave the building as quickly as possible." He then explained to him where she was.

June nodded. Without wasting another second, he turned and dashed towards Camille's location.

Meanwhile, Erik set his sights on Rebecca. Her thoughts were a mess.

She was locked in a fight against someone, but based on what she felt and thought, the situation was not good.

Erik made his way through the corridors while the echoes of conflict guided him.

He arrived just in time to see the tail end of Rebecca's stand against the villa's guards.

The room was strewn with the bodies of at least twenty guards. It was clear Rebecca gave hell to those guys.

However, she was still fighting against ten opponents, which Erik found astonishing considering she wasn't considerably stronger than them.

The well-trained guards swarmed around her, their movements coordinated and relentless.

Erik could tell that Rebecca pushed herself to stand her ground, even though the odds were against her.

It took little for Erik to see Rebecca's wounds. There were many on her, but her key problem was, she almost ended her mana, and most importantly, her stamina.

Erik had to move. He had to attack. Without even thinking, he leaped into the fray. For a second, the guards thought a Thaid entered the villa.

Erik was too feral, too bestial, and they got deeply confused, but more than that, scared, to realize it was a human they were fighting.

But was he, really? Not for them. That was a demon, a creature that came there just to bathe the room in their blood.

It wasn't hard for Erik to kill those guys. After all, he had just killed almost 80 of them with June.

Honestly speaking, Erik noticed the clone was reaching his limit.

Until now, since Erik killed a lot of weaker opponents, June didn't have problems, but now that they were fighting against cities, organizations, humans, June was lagging.

Without the ability to grow more powerful since he didn't have a brain crystal, June could be useful only up to a certain point.

Erik ignored the many notifications, since there was a more pressing matter to account for.

He rushed to Rebecca's side. "Are you ok?"

Rebecca, panting from exertion and pain, managed a wan smile.

"I could have been better." Even saying that hadn't been simple, as her voice was tinged with fatigue. "Thank you, Erik. I owe you one."

"Are the others ok?" she asked.

Erik nodded. "They're all safe. Ramon has already secured the onyx sculpture. We need to get out of here now."

Rebecca tried to stand, but her injuries and exhaustion clarified that she wouldn't make it on her own.

Erik scooped her up into his arms, mindful of her wounds. A wave of embarrassment washed over her.

To be carried like this, so dependent on someone else for her safety, was not a position she was accustomed to or comfortable with.

In any other situation, she might have protested, especially considering Erik was her weak spot.

However, the toll of the battle had left her body exhausted and her energy sapped to the point where even the thought of voicing a protest seemed like an insurmountable effort.

Despite the flush of embarrassment warming her cheeks, Rebecca lacked the strength to push Erik away or to insist on standing independently.

The physical and mental exhaustion from fending off many guards, along with the injuries she had endured, left her nearly powerless.

She rested her head against Erik's chest, the steady rhythm of his heartbeat a comforting sound. It almost made her fall asleep.

Gratitude mingled with her embarrassment, knowing that Erik's intervention had saved her from a grim fate.

With ease, Erik carried her through the villa's corridors, heading for the exit.

Their exit was expedited by Erik's knowledge of the villa's layout, thanks to Gabriel's memories, and the lack of additional guards, ensuring a swift escape.

As soon as they got out, they saw the three remaining team members. Their faces got ashen as they saw Rebecca's state. She was the band of giants' princess.

"I didn't think things would be this hard," Ramon said.

"And this is nothing."

Erik set Rebecca down, ensuring she was comfortable, before turning to assess the situation.

He turned to Ramon. In his hands there was a small black sculpture resembling a dragon. "You did it."

"I did it," Ramon said.

Camille smiled and then put her arm on Ramon's shoulder. "Did you have any doubt?"

Erik sighed. "Let's go. I bet more people are coming here right now. Rebecca needs to have her wounds tended and to rest. This has been a weird day."

Ramon and Camille's gazes lingered on Rebecca with a blend of worry and respect.

They saw her journey from a spirited child to the formidable fighter before them, their concern was tinged with pride.

They had been part of her training, acting under instructions from her mother to forge her into a warrior capable of facing the world's harsh realities.

"Never treat her softly," her mother said, understanding that leniency would ill-prepare Rebecca for the challenges she knew she would face.

Ramon and Camille knew that coddling her now would do more harm than good.

Yet, the line between guidance and support was a fine one. Camille stepped forward, and offered a hand to Rebecca, not as a gesture of pity, but as an acknowledgment of her strength and the grueling battle she had just endured.

"You did well," Camille said.

Rebecca met Camille's gaze with weary eyes, a flicker of resolve shining through the exhaustion. "I know."

With the villa now behind them, the group set their sights on the Band of Giants headquarters.