

H. Academy 251

Chapter 251 Chapter 58.5 - Crossing Hearts

As the girls hastily fled the scene, the two guards approached cautiously. Their stern expressions softened with concern as they surveyed the moonlit backyard and discovered the unconscious figures lying on the ground.

"What's happened here?" one of the guards inquired, a note of urgency in his voice.

The other guard, his gaze sharp and discerning, examined the scene. The moonlight revealed the bruised and battered state of Ethan and the girl who had fallen victim to the earlier assault. The air hung heavy with tension and the unsettling aftermath of an altercation.

The guard's radio crackled to life, and he spoke into it, summoning additional assistance. "We need medical attention and backup in the academy backyard. It's an emergency."

While awaiting reinforcements, the guards maintained a watchful eye over the unconscious forms.

"Umm...Thank you."

The girl thanked Ethan, looking down. She had bruises all over her body, but with bandages and the potions, she was now healed to some extent.

Ethan, still nursing his own wounds but displaying a reassuring smile, responded, "It's no problem. I couldn't just stand by and do nothing."

The girl met his gaze, gratitude evident in her eyes. "You saved me. They were going to... I don't know what would've happened if you didn't come."

Ethan sighed, a mixture of frustration and concern lingering in his expression. "No one deserves to be treated like that. I couldn't ignore it."

TAP! TAP! TAP!

The sounds of approaching footsteps interrupted their conversation as the nurse of the night appeared. She approached Ethan and gave him a gentle smile, her eyes flickering with a mix of concern and admiration.

"Let me take a look at you," she said, her voice calm and reassuring. The nurse inspected Ethan's wounds, her touch gentle as she examined the bruises and cuts. After a thorough examination, she smiled and looked up at him.

"Fortunately, it seems like nothing too serious happened. You're quite strong," she remarked, a hint of admiration in her voice. "Bruises and minor cuts, but nothing that won't heal with a bit of rest and some potions."

Ethan nodded appreciatively, his expression reflecting gratitude for both the nurse's care and the acknowledgment of his strength.

"If you ever find yourself in need of healing or someone to talk to, don't hesitate to visit the infirmary," she added, a warmth in her smile. "And...." she turned to take a look at the girl she had just healed with worry in her eyes.

"Thank you for stepping up to help. We need more students like you around here."

Though she smiled brightly, Ethan was having a hard time trying to avert his gaze.

'Don't look down, don't look down, don't look down, don't look down, don't look down, don't look down, don't look down.'

After all, there were two small mountains there.

"Cough....." With a cough, he tried to mask his embarrassment, but he couldn't.

The nurse, noticing Ethan's struggle to avert his gaze, couldn't help but find it endearing. A playful glint appeared in her eyes, and she decided to tease him just a bit more.

"Oya..... it seems like you've got your own set of 'battle scars' there," she remarked with a sly smile, gesturing playfully toward his blushing face. "Mind turning your face so I could check it out?"

Ethan's embarrassment deepened as the nurse continued to playfully tease him. A drop of sweat rolled down his blushing face, and he awkwardly shifted his gaze away.

"Oh, no, it's really not that bad," he muttered, trying to deflect the attention away from his embarrassment.

The nurse chuckled softly, finding Ethan's reaction amusing. Before she could tease him further, the instructor, who had entered the room, cleared her throat.

"What's going on here?" she inquired, her stern gaze now fixed on Ethan, the healed girl, and the nurse.

"Ah, Professor Eleanor." Ethan immediately recognized the identity of the person before him. It was his own homeroom teacher, the same stern instructor, that sent cold gazes to every student.

The nurse quickly composed herself, offering a professional explanation. "Just a minor incident in the academy grounds. This student," she gestured toward Ethan, "stepped in to help a fellow student who was being bullied."

"Bullied, you say?" Eleanor's eyes were narrowed at those words.

"Yes, instructor." Ethan nodded.

"Yes, instructor." Ethan nodded, his expression serious. He recounted the events that transpired in the secluded backyard, detailing how he had stumbled upon the bullying and intervened to help the girl in distress.

Professor Eleanor listened attentively, her stern gaze unwavering as she absorbed the information. After Ethan finished his account, she turned her attention to the senior named Jane.

"Is what he said true?" Eleanor questioned, her tone firm.

Jane, the healed girl, nodded with a mix of gratitude and relief. "Yes, Professor. He stepped in just in time. I don't know what would have happened if he hadn't."

"Do you know the identity of those that attacked her and you?" Eleanor asked Ethan, but she was also looking at Jane at the same time.

Ethan didn't hesitate to describe the three girls involved in the incident. "I don't know their exact names, but they looked like this..." Then he continued to describe their looks.

Jane, looking at the instructor, confirmed Ethan's words. "Their names are Emma Thompson, Yvonne Rodriguez, and Rhonda Baker."

"You do know them then?"

"Yes, they are my classmates." Looking down, Jane mumbled in a quiet voice. It seemed that using the word 'classmates' to define the very people that had brought her to this state didn't seem to fit well.

"..."

Professor Eleanor's eyes seemed to bore into Jane as if scrutinizing the truth. After a moment, she gave a curt nod. "Very well. Thank you for reporting, Student Ethan and Student Jane. You may return to your dormitory. The academy will look into this matter."

Hearing those words, Ethan and Jane nodded their heads as Eleanor left the place.

The nurse, sensing that her presence was no longer required, offered a reassuring smile to Ethan and Jane. "If you need any further assistance or have concerns, don't hesitate to visit the infirmary. Take care of yourselves."

With that, she left the room, leaving Ethan and Jane alone. The weight of the night's events lingered in the air, but there was also a sense of relief that the truth had been brought to light.

Ethan turned to Jane, a concerned expression on his face. "Are you okay?"

Jane managed a small, appreciative smile. "Thanks to you, I am. I really appreciate what you did back there."

Ethan nodded, genuine warmth in his eyes. "No one should have to go through that. If you ever need anything, just let me know."

"...." But, hearing his words, Jane lowered her head as if she couldn't look into his eyes. "Won't you ask?"

And with a voice as tiny as a whisper, she mumbled to herself.

"What?" Ethan questioned, genuinely puzzled by Jane's sudden change in demeanor.

"Why don't you ask?" Jane repeated, her voice barely audible. "You must have seen... those photos. You should know what kind of girl I am."

Ethan's expression softened as he looked at Jane. Even though she was the senior, for some reason, Ethan felt like he was sitting in front of a child.

'My hand....'

And the urge to pat that head appeared.

Placing a comforting hand on Jane's head, Ethan answered. "I don't care about your past or any photos. What happened tonight wasn't right, and no one deserves to be treated that way. I stepped in because it was the right thing to do."

Jane's eyes flickered with a mix of surprise as she heard his words.

"B-but-"

"Also, I don't know why, but it doesn't feel like you are the sort of person who would indulge in such acts."

Jane's eyes flickered with a mix of surprise as she heard his words. She slowly raised her head, meeting Ethan's warm smile.

'Ah....What is this?'

THUMP!

She didn't know why. The reason just disappeared from her head as all the blood immediately pumped to her face, making it incredibly crimson as a tomato.

Ethan misunderstood her reaction, thinking she might be upset. "Of course, it is not that you can't because you are not beautiful or anything....."

He absolutely meant his words.

"You know, you have brown hair that shines under the light and these bright, green eyes. Your skin looks soft, and those freckles on your face make you look tender, almost innocent."

'Hick.'

But seeing Jane turning more and more crimson at his words, he realized what he had just blurted out right now.

"Ah....What am I even saying, ahahahaha....I am feeling embarrassed for some reason." Ethan chuckled nervously, averting his gaze and scratching the back of his head.

"I-it is fine....." Jane also averted her gaze, not being able to look at him as well.

The two of them sat in silence for a moment, both feeling a bit self-conscious after the unexpected turn in the conversation.

'Aaaaah.....So embarrassing, soooooooooooooooooo embarrassing.....You stupid Ethan, what did you just say? Is this how you talk to a girl?'

Ethan reprimanded himself internally, his face still flushed with embarrassment.

'I can't believe I said all that out loud. Smooth, real smooth, Ethan.'

TUCK!

Just as he was in the session to beat himself, suddenly, he felt a small tuck on the side of his clothes.

"Hmm?"

Turning his attention to the side, he noticed Jane, her eyes still moist, grabbing the hem of his clothes. With a flushed face and tears falling from her eyes, she managed to speak through her emotions.

"Th-thank you....Thank you so much, Ethan. You saved me tonight. I-I don't know what I would've done if you didn't come."

Ethan, surprised by her sudden gratitude, blinked a few times before offering a reassuring smile. "It was nothing. I trust my intuition, and my intuition tells me you're not that kind of girl. So, those photos don't mean anything to me."

Hearing those words, Jane's teary eyes lit up, and she gave Ethan the brightest smile he had ever seen coming from someone.

"Thank you for believing in me."

THUMP!

Seeing that radiant smile from Jane, Ethan felt a sudden rush of warmth flooding his chest, his heart beating faster than ever before.

'W-what?'

It was as if a knot had formed in his chest, a sensation he couldn't quite understand.

"Umm... I should... go," Ethan stammered, his voice slightly shaky as he hastily got up from his seat.

"E-ethan?" Jane's voice was laced with concern as she watched him leave the room so abruptly.

Without offering any explanation, Ethan hurriedly exited the room, the sound of his footsteps echoing down the hallway.

'What was that?' he wondered, his mind swirling with confusion and emotions he couldn't quite comprehend, though he inwardly knew what it was.....

Chapter 252 Chapter 59.1 - Before the trip

The classroom buzzed with the energy of students trickling in in the early morning of the day. Anxiety hung in the air, palpable as the weight of impending deadlines loomed over them. Among the students was a distressed girl, her face reflecting the fatigue of sleepless nights.

As she shuffled into the room, her classmates noticed the desperation in her eyes. The girl whispered anxiously to her friend, "What do I do? What do I do?" Her distress was evident, and the concerned looks exchanged among her peers hinted at a looming crisis.

Puzzled, her friend asked, "What happened?"

With a heavy sigh, the distressed girl confessed, "I just forgot to submit the assignment."

"You did what?" gasped her friend, disbelief etched across their face.

"I forgot to submit it," she repeated, her voice tinged with regret.

As the realization of the situation sank in, murmurs of sympathy and concern rippled through the classroom.

The girl's eyes welled up with tears as the weight of the consequences became apparent. She stammered, "My grades will fall off, and I could lose my scholarship."

A somber atmosphere settled over the room, and her friends exchanged glances as they looked worried.

However, in the other corner of the classroom, another conversation was going on.

"Bro...."

One guy entered the classroom and put his bag on the desk.

"What's up?"

"You know what went down?"

"Not a clue."

"We messed up and didn't submit the assignment."

"Oh.... Got it."

"Yeah, it is what it is, bro."

"Aren't you worried about your grades taking a hit, though?"

"They've already plummeted. But next semester, I'm planning a comeback; no sweat."

"..."

The second boy leaned back in his chair, an easygoing grin on his face. "Nah, man. Grades are just numbers. I'll bounce back. No need to stress about it."

The contrast between the two conversations was stark.

While the distressed girl carried the weight of potential consequences, her friend seemed almost nonchalant about the situation. The boy's carefree attitude hinted at a different perspective on academic challenges.

"Sigh...."

Changing the perspective to the front seats, the girl with bob-cut white hair pushed her face to the desk, burying herself.

"What was with that assignment, man?"

"Couldn't do it?"

"Well, we wrote some things, but....."

"Expected from you?"

"Ha!"

"Just joking."

"Did you do it then?"

"Of course. The answer was pretty easy, though."

"Ho? What was it then?"

"You will see soon."

"Scared to reply?"

"Who the hell is scared!"

"Obviously, you."

"....."

It was the usual day for the two twins.

"Come on, say it. Say it." Julia smirked, seeing Lucas backing down a little. She knew her twin well, and there was no way he could find the correct answer.

".....Cough....Plagiarism is prohibited."

Julia scoffed, shaking her head. "Plagiarism? Seriously? You're such a goody-two-shoes, Lucas."

"Better than risking a lecture on ethics."

Julia rolled her eyes, seeing the smirk on his face. "Whatever. Let's see how well your 'ethics' hold up in the real world."

However, she had yet to have her fill for the morning. She needed more attention and energy; there was no way this was enough after all.

Turning her attention to Irina, who seemed engrossed in something on her smartwatch, Julia couldn't resist the opportunity for some playful teasing.

"Hey, Irina, what's so interesting on that watch of yours? Checking out some boys, huh?"

Irina scoffed, shooting Julia a disapproving look, and promptly closed her smartwatch. "Please, Julia, don't be absurd."

However, Julia didn't miss how she flinched a little. She chuckled, leaning in a bit. "Come on, spill it. What's the secret info you're hiding there?"

Irina raised an eyebrow, unamused. "It's called privacy. You should try respecting it sometimes."

"Privacy? In this day and age? How quaint."

"Sigh....."

Knowing that this would go on like that for a little longer, Irina accepted her fate.

CREAK!

Just at that moment, the door opened wide, coming to her aid.

"Huh?"

Revealing a guy they knew well.

"Ethan?"

The trio turned to look at Ethan, expecting their usual exchange, but something seemed off. Ethan appeared lost and dazed, his usual composed demeanor disrupted. He absentmindedly walked to his desk and sat down, his gaze fixed on some unseen point.

"Hey, Ethan, you alright?"

"Did he turn into an NPC? Will he give us quests now?"

"Maybe? What if this world was a game, though?"

"That would be weird."

"Why? You look like a typical dumb female lead."

"Who are you calling dumb, bastard? You are dumb."

"See. You can't even come up with other words."

"Wanna die!"

Just as the two of them continued their banter, Irina turned her attention to absentminded Ethan.

"Hey."

Irina called out to him, but there was no response. Ethan remained lost in his thoughts, seemingly oblivious to his surroundings.

"Earth to Ethan!" She continued, waving her hand in front of his face. Still, no response.

"Sigh..."

FLICK!

Growing impatient, Irina conjured a small flicker of fire in her hand and casually tossed it towards Ethan. The tiny flame landed on his desk, prompting a flinch from Ethan as he returned to reality.

"Huh? What? Oh, sorry. I was somewhere else for a moment," Ethan mumbled, shaking off the daze.

"What happened to your face?"

Irina immediately asked. The others didn't notice, but nowadays, Irina was checking other boys' faces with more detail, and she didn't miss those small bruise marks that were healing already.

"Ah...This...."

Following that, Irina witnessed something for the first time in a while. A small smile was on Ethan's face, but it was not his usual smile.

"Just encountered something."

Ethan smiled bashfully, his gaze a little distant, as if lost in a dreamy reverie. His usual composed demeanor seemed to soften, revealing a hint of something that Irina had never seen before.

Irina studied him for a moment, noting the subtle change in his expression. There was something different about him, something she couldn't quite put her finger on. At the same time, she felt like this kind of look was familiar, and she felt bothered.

"Urghk.....Gross...."

Irina couldn't contain her disgust, her face contorting into a cringe as she looked at the dreamy Ethan and his smile. The unexpected shift in his demeanor was too much for her to handle.

"Ethan, please spare us the romantic daydreams," Julia teased, catching onto Irina's discomfort.

"Yeah, we don't need any of that lovey-dovey stuff around here," Lucas added, a playful smirk on his face.

"W-who said it was about romance?"

'It is fucking obvious.'

All three of them had the same thought in their heads, looking at Ethan. Irina threw a quick look at one of the backseats without even knowing.

CREAK!

Julia, ready to tease Ethan even more based on his reaction, had her retort ready, but at that very moment, the door swung open once again, saving Ethan from another round of playful banter.

"Saved by the door," Julia whispered, grinning mischievously. Irina couldn't hide a small sigh of relief, grateful for the timely interruption.

She wasn't sure how much more of Ethan's dreamy musings and the teasing in the morning she could endure.

TAK! TAK! TAK!

As the sound of high heels echoed in the classroom, the noise filling the classroom disappeared one by one.

With a swift motion, Eleanor made her way to her desk, a commanding presence that demanded the room's attention. The students, now silent, watched as she dropped her papers onto the desk with a purposeful

THUD!

"Good morning, class," she greeted, her voice cutting through the air. The students responded in unison, a subdued acknowledgment of her presence.

Eleanor spared no time in getting to the business at hand. "I trust you all had enough time to ponder over the assignment from Monday. Today, I will reveal the answers and discuss the significance of your findings."

As she spoke, the students exchanged glances, curiosity mingled with a sense of anticipation. Eleanor continued, "The location you were deciphering in the assignment is no ordinary place. It is known as Phantom's Land."

"What?"

"It was Phantom's Land?"

"I fucking knew it. Though wish I had submitted it..."

"Where is Phantom's Land?"

"You don't know?"

"I don't."

A murmur of uncertainty swept through the room. Some students exchanged puzzled looks, unfamiliar with the term.

TAP! TAP!

Eleanor, however, remained composed, her eyes scanning the room to gauge their reactions while tapping on her papers. Normally, she would shout at the students and reprimand them.

"QUIET!"

And this was any other normal day, it seemed."

SILENCE!

As the silence fell onto the classroom, thanks to her voice, she started once again.

"Phantom's Land," she explained, "is not a physical place as we know it. It is a complex magical realm that exists within a special type of mana-phenomenon field."

She pointed to a diagram on the chalkboard to help the students understand the intricacies of this field. "Within this field, the line between the physical world and the magical world is blurred. It's as if reality has two natures, one being our physical world and the other being the spectral remnants of those who once lived in this land."

Eleanor glanced around the room to make sure the students were paying attention. "Imagine a peninsula where the sea meets the ethereal. The coastline is like a border between our world and the unseen. Waves crash against the shore, carrying with them echoes of a past that refuses to fade."

She paused, allowing the students to picture the haunting scene she described. The weight of the unexplained disappearances and the subsequent transformation into a ghost-filled realm hung in the air.

"As you move further inland," Eleanor continued, "you'll find a terrain steeped in both history and enchantment. Ghostly apparitions roam amidst the remnants of their former lives. The air is thick with the energies of the mana-phenomenon field, creating an atmosphere where the mundane and the magical coexist."

She stopped at that second, letting everything sink in. "And your task will be to observe the phenomenon there and write a report about the properties of that realm."

The students absorbed this information, a mix of surprise and intrigue evident on their faces. The atmosphere in the room shifted as the realization that their assignment had real-world implications settled in.

Eleanor continued, "Your understanding of the magic formulas was crucial to deciphering the coordinates leading to Phantom's Land. This field presents unique challenges and requires a comprehensive grasp of magical principles for safe traversal."

The students exchanged glances, now aware of the gravity of their assignment. Eleanor's stern gaze held their attention as she emphasized, "This is not merely an academic exercise; it is a preparation for the practical challenges you will face as future Hunters."

With that, she concluded, "Prepare yourselves, for your next task involves navigating Phantom's Land. Use the knowledge you've gained wisely, and remember, success in the field requires more than just theoretical understanding."

"Now, ready your bags. We will leave one hour later."

With those words, she had left the room.

Chapter 253 Chapter 59.2 - Before the trip

The moment Eleanor left, all the students became in an uproar.

"I can't believe we're actually going there! Do you think we'll see real ghosts?" whispered one student, wide-eyed with a mixture of fear and excitement.

"Real ghosts? Come on, it's probably just some magical illusions. This is a test, right?" replied another, skepticism evident in their voice.

A group near the back of the room was engrossed in heated speculation about the practical challenges they might face. "I heard Phantom's Land messes with your perception. We better be prepared for some mind-bending stuff."

Of course, things like this were bound to happen, and this was a reaction that I had expected from the start.

After all, not many students knew about the Phantom's Land, and people certainly had the conception of either exaggerating things or downplaying things when it came to supernatural events.

The idea of visiting ghosts itself was out of the ordinary, after all.

'Well, it was kind of expected that our mission would be just observing.'

Again, things like fighting with ghosts or solving the situation of Phantom's Land were way out of any academy students' league. Even seasoned Hunters would have a hard time dealing with ghosts since they are rather in the area of magic, and not many mages have both the power and the desire to solve it.

There were some that came to my mind from the game, but I knew almost all of them were nearly impossible to find traces, let alone meet or see.

Looking around, I scanned the whole student group. I was already ready after all, and had nothing to do until we left.

The room slowly settled into a low hum of discussions as students exchanged theories and shared stories they might have heard about Phantom's Land. The atmosphere became charged with a blend of excitement and tension, and I sensed that the next hour would be a mix of preparation and speculation.

At that moment, my eyes met with Ethan, who was already about to leave.

'He handled it well enough.'

Even though Ethan was the protagonist, he wasn't strong from the start and needed some interactions to get stronger. This was the type of character he was, and it was about one of those times he got one of them.

His way of handling things certainly clashed with mine, but that was what made him Ethan, after all.

"What are you thinking about?"

Just at that moment, our party leader came to me.

"Nothing."

I shook my thoughts, turning my head to the newcomer. There stood our fiery magician leader with her haughty expression.

Well, whether it was her usual face or her haughty face.....That was something even she probably didn't know anyway.

"Yeah, just nothing. Sounds like you."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing."

"..."

Irina suddenly approached me in a swift movement, her fiery red hair somehow feeling a lot more colorful.

Without a word, she casually sat down beside me, her expression unreadable. The air around us seemed to crackle with the tension that usually accompanied her, but something was kind of different as well.

"You seem lost in thought," she remarked, her eyes fixed on the room where students were still buzzing with anticipation.

"I was just observing the chaos," I replied. "Phantom's Land has certainly stirred up quite the reaction."

We both were well aware of where we would be going, so after my initial warning to her, we were ready for the upcoming exam.

She sighed, her gaze finally shifting to meet mine. "It's expected. People fear the unknown, and this place is the epitome of it."

"Unknown....Certainly a scary word."

"Unknown people tend to be scary, too."

"Is that so?"

"It is."

"But, isn't it our human nature to hide things?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"There was a saying from my hometown that still resonates with me."

At the mention of my hometown, Irina's eyes perked up. Well, I guess choosing that word wasn't wise, considering my situation as an orphan, but then there was no other way to explain the situation I was in.

"I was ashamed of myself when I realized life was a costume party, and I attended with a real face."

Irina looked at me, her eyes reflecting a mix of curiosity and understanding. "The person saying that was wise."

I nodded my head in agreement, acknowledging the wisdom behind those words. "Yeah, they were. Sometimes, simplicity carries profound truths."

She smiled a rare, genuine smile that softened her usually forced and intense features. "You surprise me sometimes, you know that?"

Looking at her like that, I suddenly realized that she looked kind of pure when she smiled. I guess even the fiercest woman in the world somehow became soft from time to time.

I shrugged. "Life tends to be full of surprises, even for someone like me."

"Even for someone like you. You think you are different than others?"

"Am I not?"

".....Well, you certainly are not normal."

The word normal itself was something that could never be defined. A person could be normal in one place of the world and would be considered crazy in another.

After all, the human mind is diverse, and this is what makes us individuals.

Once that individuality was lost, then from now on, humans would no longer be considered as separate beings but just numbers.

"Hey." A soft voice interrupted our conversation, and I turned to see Sylvie standing there, a small smile playing on her lips. Her presence had a calming effect, a stark contrast to Irina's fiery aura.

'Her powers are progressing well.'

I thought, noticing the small white-yellowish aura covering Sylvie. From the moment I upgraded my [Perceptive Insight] to the next level, I was able to see her aura that I couldn't before.

"Sylvie," Irina acknowledged with a nod.

"Did you get everything?" I asked. After noticing that Irina actually thought the visit to the Phantom's Land would be easy, I decided to inform Sylvie.

And, thank god, I did. Since she also hadn't prepared anything at all.

"Yes....." She lowered her head. I guess she was feeling embarrassed that she overlooked such a simple thing.

"You don't need to be embarrassed. Our leader was no different than you."

"Hey!"

"Really?"

"Was it a lie?"

"..."

"Can't refute, can you?"

"Tch."

Irina harrumphed with her arms crossed. Well, she brought this onto herself alone since my words were the results of her own actions.

"Then, should we leave as well?"

At this point in time, only we were left in the classroom, and all other students had left. Well, considering they only had one hour to prepare, it made sense. Though, I am sure it won't be enough to both research and prepare the things that are needed.

Sylvie was the first one to reply, standing from her seat. "Okay."

"Cough...If you are free, should we go together?"

Irina suddenly asked Sylvie. It was out of her character to act this way, but I decided not to dwell on it too much, as she was rather behaving like that today. Something must have been on her mind.

"Umm.....Why not?"

"I will see you at the meeting time."

After those words, I left the two alone and started walking to my room for one last check.

After Astron left, Irina and Sylvie were left alone inside the classroom. The atmosphere between the two was quite awkward.

After all, before they became a team, they hadn't interacted much with each other, and Irina wasn't the best person to make new friends.

However, recently, she had come to a realization of something. Sylvie was going to become undeniably one of the pillars in the future.

This was what she got after seeing her talent and her 'strength.' Thus, it was essential to make good connections with her that transcended the professional relationship.

This was how she had justified herself, but there was one other thing she would never admit.

But one thing was certain.

'How do I start?'

She had no idea what to say after coming into this stage at all.....

Sylvie hesitated for a moment, sensing the unusual atmosphere in the room. She decided to break the silence and address the awkwardness directly. "Um, Irina, is there something you wanted to talk about?"

Irina looked at Sylvie, surprised by the direct question. She was caught off guard, as opening up and initiating conversations were not exactly her strong suit. "Well, it's just that..."

The words didn't come out. However, Sylvie, who had been right beside her, knew what she was feeling.

Though not exactly her thoughts, Sylvie knew she was feeling embarrassed.

Sylvie gently encouraged her, "It's okay, Irina. You can talk to me."

Irina took a deep breath, her usual fiery demeanor softening for a moment. "I wanted to talk because... well, we became a team recently, but I realize I don't know much about you. And, um, you probably don't know much about me either. It feels weird being part of a team where we're practically strangers, doesn't it?"

Sylvie nodded, offering a reassuring smile. "I understand. It does feel a bit strange, especially since we're going to be working together. It's important to know each other well to build trust."

Irina seemed to relax a bit, grateful for Sylvie's understanding. "Exactly. We know Astron, but that's about it. I don't like feeling disconnected from my teammates. I thought, maybe, we could change that."

Sylvie's smile widened. "I'd like that too, Irina. It's nice that you want to get closer. We're a team, after all."

Irina nodded, looking a bit relieved.

For the first time in her life, she had taken the first step to approach someone after all.....

In the spot where the students would meet, Astron was standing with everything ready from his end.

CHATTER!

The students' chatter filled the place, as everyone looked rather both tense and excited. As he was scanning the surroundings with his usual calm demeanor. Irina and Sylvie walked in together, the air around them seemingly lighter than before.

Astron looked at them, a subtle shift in the atmosphere catching his attention. Something had changed. The tension that once hung between Irina and Sylvie seemed to have dissipated, replaced by a newfound understanding.

"Did something happen?" Astron asked, his keen eyes narrowing as he observed the two.

Irina and Sylvie exchanged a brief glance before Sylvie spoke up, "We just had a little talk, that's all."

"Yeah," Irina added with a nonchalant smile. "Just clearing the air, you know."

Astron continued to gaze at them, sensing that there was more to their interaction than they were letting on. However, he decided not to press further.

RING!

At that moment, the bell rang.

It was the start of the Phantom's Land trip.

Chapter 254 Chapter 59.3 - Before the trip

CHATTER! CHATTER!

The designated gathering point buzzed with anticipation as students, clad in their academy uniforms, gathered in small groups.

The air was thick with a mix of excitement and nervous energy, the prospect of venturing into Phantom's Land fueling both curiosity and trepidation.

At the forefront of the assembly stood Professor Eleanor, flanked by other instructors who would guide the first-year students on their mystical journey. Eleanor, with her characteristic stern expression softened by a hint of excitement, stepped forward to address the eager crowd.

"Quiet," she began, her voice cutting through the chatter and drawing all eyes toward her. "As every one of you has been informed, we will be traveling to Phantom's Land, a realm shrouded in magical phenomena."

Eleanor gestured toward the academy's entrance, where a fleet of enchanted buses awaited. "Our first step involves a bus journey to the Teleportation Center in the city. From there, we'll use a teleportation gate to reach one of the nearby cities bordering Phantom's Land. And from that point, we will take another bunch of busses to enter the Phantom's Land."

When buses were mentioned, some students showed dissatisfaction. That was expected; after all, most of them came from wealthy families, and none of them had traveled by bus before.

"Rest assured, the buses have been enchanted for a smooth and comfortable journey."

Eleanor reassured the students, though it was kind of ironic that the students who would become the future combatants and Hunters were awkward with some 'buses.'

Though instantly, a murmur of excitement and curiosity flowed through the students as they eyed the waiting buses. Some exchanged glances, their expressions a mix of enthusiasm and nervous anticipation.

"In Phantom's Land," Eleanor continued, "the mana structure is unique, creating discrepancies that prevent direct teleportation. Hence, there is a need for this two-step journey. Once we reach the Teleportation Center, the gates will transport us to the outskirts of our destination."

As she spoke, the students formed orderly lines, preparing to board the buses. The instructors, positioned strategically, ensured a smooth and organized departure.

Just as the first students stepped onto the buses, a gust of magical wind swept through the area, causing a momentary disruption. Eleanor's gaze narrowed briefly, assessing the situation. "Remain calm, students. It's a minor magical disturbance. The enchantments on the buses and teleportation gates are designed to handle such fluctuations."

In reality, though, it was something she had intentionally done. After all, showing and demonstrating always had the upper hand when convincing someone.

The buses roared to life, their engines humming with enchanted energy. The students settled into their seats, the excitement of the impending journey evident in their expressions.

"Get in the line."

Reaching the teleportation gate, we waited for around ten minutes for other classes to use their turns.

Since transporting such a huge amount of individuals once was impossible, each class was going at their designated gate.

"Class HA25, step forward!" Professor Eleanor's voice resonated through the designated area, calling our class to attention. The students shuffled into formation, and I followed suit, maintaining my usual composed demeanor.

Eleanor's sharp eyes scanned the group, her expression a blend of authority and vigilance. "Remember, stay close and follow the instructions. No wandering off or engaging in unnecessary magical antics. This is not a field trip but an important examination."

The teleportation gate, an imposing structure adorned with intricate runes, loomed ahead. It emanated a subtle hum, the magical energy swirling within its archway. Eleanor signaled to our class, leading us toward the gate.

"As you step through the gate, remain focused. Disorientation is common, but it will pass quickly," Eleanor advised, her gaze stern. "Once we arrive on the other side, follow the instructors' guidance and proceed to the next set of buses. Phantom's Land awaits, and our journey has just begun."

With her instructions given, Eleanor stepped through the teleportation gate, and the students of Class HA25 followed suit.

'Here we go again.'

The sensation was familiar to me – the temporary disorientation, the brief sense of weightlessness as spatial mana rearranged our location.

At this point, I no longer felt the feeling of nausea when taking a teleportation gate. After all, whenever I had free time on the weekend, I at least visited the [Wildcatter] to explore more dungeons, making myself comfortable with dungeons.

As the world shifted around us, we emerged on the other side.

The air felt different, charged with a unique mana structure that signaled our arrival at the outskirts of Phantom's Land.

'Even breathing here is weird.'

The mana density seemed to affect the outer atmosphere itself. Without even realizing it, my body started to adapt with increased heart beating rates and breathing to pump more oxygen to my cells.

"You seem rather relaxed."

Irina remarked, looking at my reaction. She was breathing slightly heavily as well, but aside from that, she didn't look much disturbed.

"Isn't it a Hunter's job to be relaxed in such situations?"

"It is. Though not everyone can do it, it seems." Signaling the other cadets behind us who were already throwing up, she remarked.

Irina's observation barely registered with me as I glanced around at the chaotic scene unfolding. The other cadets were stumbling about, some retching while others looked disoriented, their faces varying shades of green.

The reaction was more severe compared to the teleportation to dungeons before. The reason for that was highly likely the discrepancies between the mana levels and the bodies' attempt to adapt it.

But, again, it was not like that was my problem.

Irina raised an eyebrow at my lack of reaction. "Aren't you at least curious about what's happening?"

"Not particularly. We're in Phantom's Land, sure, but it's just another mission. We will probably be through worse in the future."

This was not a lie. I had already been through much worse than these, but the future will be a lot worse. Starting from the demons' invasion, wars, dungeon collapses, and many other things, it will be a lot harder than under such conditions.

'Even the Phantom's Land directly will be a lot more severe.'

"Always the stoic one, aren't you? But even you have to admit, the atmosphere here is unlike anything we've encountered before."

At that moment, I sensed the familiar energy entering. Sylvie, who emerged from the gate, seemingly unfazed.

Her calm demeanor contrasted sharply with the discomfort exhibited by a significant portion of the students.

"You seem perfectly fine," I commented, noting her relaxed posture.

Sylvie smiled, though slightly embarrassed. "I don't know. I just don't feel anything. It wasn't like this before."

'It is because of your powers.'

I thought inwardly. Her ability was truly broken anyway.

"...." Irina was also looking at Sylvie intently, but after a second, her gaze returned to normal. I guess she was trying to understand what kind of power Sylvie had and how she was not normal at all.

"Cough.....Should we go?"

At Sylvie's suggestion and attempt to get away from our gazes, we both nodded and made our way to the busses.

From this point on, a trip that would take around 4 hours was awaiting us after all.

The buses were designed in a manner that three students occupied a seat in the same row. This was so that the group of students would be sitting on the same block and would be allowed to discuss things related to their observations on the bus.

Of course, when things like buses entered the equation, there would always be a discussion regarding the window seats.

"Why are you taking the window seat?" Irina asked, looking at the guy who had already leaned his head with his hood covering his face.

Astron, with his head slightly tilted, gave a nonchalant response, his voice muffled by the hood. "I like the view."

Irina, not satisfied with the brief answer, frowned. "Well, I like the view too. Why should you get the window seat?"

Astron sighed, his hood shifting slightly as he turned to face her. "It's just a seat, Irina. Doesn't matter if it's by the window or not."

Irina crossed her arms, leaning back in her seat. "It matters to me. I like to see what's outside. You can sit in the middle or by the aisle. Also, if it doesn't matter which seat you sit in, why don't you come and sit here? After all, it just doesn't matter right."

Astron raised an eyebrow, "Middle? No thanks. I don't want to be around many people."

"I don't want it either." Irina scoffed. Of course, inside her head, she didn't mind sitting in the middle, but if she conceded like this, she felt like she had lost to this annoying guy, and she didn't want it.

Sylvie, seated nearby, finally intervened. "Guys, it's just a seat. Can't you compromise?"

Irina and Astron both turned to Sylvie, momentarily pausing their argument. "Compromise?" Irina scoffed. "What's there to compromise? He just doesn't even regard us as humans."

"How did this subject come to consider others as humans or not?"

"Isn't it? You should have at least asked me."

".....Even if I asked, it wouldn't change anything. Regardless of your answer, I would be sitting here, so it is just pointless action."

"See....He doesn't even consider me as an individual."

Sylvie sighed, sensing the tension rising. "How about you both take turns? On one trip, Irina gets the window, and the next, Astron gets it. Problem solved."

She also wanted to sit on the window seat, but for some reason, while in front of the two, she felt like things would get a much weirder turn if she said it out loud.

Also, the other students were already looking in their direction, and it was so embarrassing.

Astron, seemingly unyielding, leaned back in his seat, a stubborn expression on his face. "I don't see the point. I'll keep the window seat."

"You're impossible, Astron. It's just fair if we take turns."

"Life's not fair, Irina. Aren't you one of those who benefited from that the most?"

"What do you imply, huh? You punk!"

Sylvie's face deadpanned as she looked at her supposed 'mentor,' who was always a calm guy.

'Are you a child?'

His actions didn't fit into his previous impressions at all, and she felt like he was doing it on purpose.

'I am the only one getting embarrassed.'

Feeling like she was getting unfair treatment, she got angry and was about to shout.

'Calm down, Sylvie, calm down.'

However, different from someone, she needed to act like her character. In times like these, she wanted to swear to the author for making her such a rigid character.

Trying to maintain peace, she suggested. "How about we settle this with a quick game of rock-paper-scissors?"

"Rock-paper-scissors? Seriously?"

Irina agreed with a confident nod. "Yeah, let's do it. Best of five. The winner gets the window seat."

Astron sighed, seemingly resigned to the proposal. "Fine, let's get this over with."

'Rock-paper-scissors against me.....I can read your body movements...'

Though, inwardly, he knew the game would be over in an instant.

And just as he thought, the result was clear.

"This is ridiculous."

"Three-zero. Looks like I'll be enjoying the window seat. If you want to win against me, you have to touch some grass first. Your scissors are not sharp enough."

"..."

"..."

Two deadpanned faces welcomed his words.

"It was incredibly cringe."

"....."

As the bus continued its journey, the trio settled into their seats, and the window seat dispute was resolved, albeit in an unexpected manner.

Irina, sulking a bit, couldn't help but think Astron would be a good gamer if he wanted, and Sylvie found herself 'amused' by the peculiar turn of events.

Chapter 255 Chapter 60.1 - Phantom's Land

The buses reached the desired destination just as in the given time.

"Alright, everyone, we have reached our destination."

Immediately after the announcement, the students left their seats. Even though some of them complained about how uncomfortable it was, most of them had excited faces on themselves.

After all, they were about to reach the rumored Phantom's Land, the place where the souls of many disappeared.

"Cough....Cough...."

"What is this?"

However, contrary to their expectations, as the students stepped off the buses and onto the ground of Phantom's Land, an immediate change in the atmosphere engulfed them.

"Haaaah.....haaaaaah...."

The air felt dense and suffocating as if the mana itself was resisting their intrusion. Whispers of discomfort rippled through the group, and some students exchanged worried glances.

The mana phenomena in Phantom's Land hit them with an unexpected force, making it difficult to breathe. It was as if the very air was resisting their presence, causing an overwhelming sensation of lightheadedness.

Eleanor, who had experienced this phenomenon beforehand, remained composed. She swiftly moved among the struggling students, distributing a special herb that glowed with a faint magical aura.

"Chew this," she instructed, her voice cutting through the strained atmosphere. "It's a herb specially enchanted to help you adapt to the unique mana structure of Phantom's Land. It will ease the discomfort and help you breathe more easily."

The students, grateful for the relief promised by the herb, took the enchanted plants and began to chew. Almost instantly, the magical herb worked its wonders.

The air seemed to thin out the discomfort, and the students gradually regained their composure. The lightheadedness started to fade, making them return to normal.

The students, having adjusted to the unique mana structure of Phantom's Land with Eleanor's enchanted herb, found themselves in a surreal environment.

"Wow....."

"Just what is this?"

"This is insane."

The intense fog draped the surroundings, limiting visibility to a mere few meters. It clung to everything, creating an eerie atmosphere as if the world itself had become a ghostly illusion.

"There is no sun?"

The lighting was peculiar as if the absence of the sun was compensated by an ethereal glow emanating from the very air.

The students squinted through the thick fog, trying to discern shapes and shadows in the mysterious landscape that unfolded before them.

But, after everyone calmed themselves, they noticed the small shadows around. It was a small town within Phantom's Land, where the students could see modest buildings scattered around.

The reason for the diminutive structures became apparent – it was nearly impossible to build anything taller than 25 meters in this place. The town was the designated stopping point, welcoming the students with its quaint charm as they disembarked.

Eleanor, sensing the curiosity in the students' eyes, took the opportunity to start describing Phantom's Land.

"As you can see, this town is a rare sight in Phantom's Land. Building structures higher than 25 meters is quite challenging due to the unique mana density here. Now, let me tell you more about this mysterious place."

As the students acclimated themselves to Phantom's Land, a distinguished figure approached. Eleanor saw him and instantly stopped her talk.

"Allow me to introduce a prominent professor and formidable mage, Professor Eldorium," Eleanor announced, gesturing toward the approaching figure.

Professor Eldorium, with a presence that resonated with authority and expertise, greeted the students.

He had a tall and lean figure draped in long, flowing robes adorned with intricate arcane symbols. Silver hair framed a weathered face, marked by countless experiences and years devoted to the study of magic. Sharp, intelligent eyes behind spectacles exuded both kindness and formidability. A well-maintained beard completed the look. His soothing aura added to the air of wisdom that surrounded him.

"Welcome to Phantom's Land, young students. I oversee this small town and the magical wonders it holds. If you have any questions or concerns during your stay, don't hesitate to reach out."

With a nod of acknowledgment, Professor Eldorium left the students and Eleanor, giving them time to settle into their accommodations.

"As Professor Eldorium mentioned, make yourselves comfortable with the environment. Tomorrow at 12 P.M., a hearing will commence for those interested. It's an opportunity to gain insights and ask questions," Eleanor informed the students.

After Professor Eldorium's departure, Eleanor resumed her explanations. She began painting a vivid picture of Phantom's Land, explaining its unusual atmospheric conditions, the intense fog that enveloped the surroundings, and the peculiar lighting that seemed to emanate from the space itself. The students listened intently, absorbing the information that would guide them through their exploration.

"Your task during your stay here is to navigate through Phantom's Land, observe the peculiar phenomena, and compile a detailed report on your findings. The experiences you gain here will not only enhance your understanding of mana but will also have a positive impact on your body and mana capabilities. Consider it an opportunity for training."

She paused, allowing the significance of her words to sink in. The students exchanged glances, absorbing the dual nature of their mission—both observation and personal growth.

"Now, let me show you to your accommodations."

Eleanor led the group towards a cluster of small bungalow-type houses nestled in the thick fog. Each house, though modest, exuded an inviting aura. Eleanor explained, "Everything you need for your daily life can be found within these houses. Feel free to settle in and make yourselves comfortable. You'll be staying here until Sunday."

Once inside, Eleanor distributed special watches to each student. She explained, "Due to the unique mana density of this place, regular artifacts won't work. These watches will serve as your guide. One compass will always point to the location of your accommodation and the center of Phantom's Land, while the other will indicate the north. They are enchanted to function seamlessly within this environment."

With the distribution complete, Eleanor concluded, "Now, take your time to explore, observe, and document. You have the freedom to train and make the most of this opportunity. I'll be around if you need any assistance. Enjoy your time in Phantom's Land."

With those words, Eleanor left the students to embark on their individual journeys, the fog swallowing her figure as she disappeared into the enigmatic landscape.

As the group dispersed and students began settling into their accommodations, I found myself standing alone in the midst of Phantom's Land.

The fog, thick and ethereal, clung to every corner, creating an otherworldly ambiance. The small town, with its quaint structures barely reaching above 25 meters, looked like something out of a mystical tale.

My gaze wandered, observing the peculiar lighting that cast an eerie glow on everything. It seemed like rather than the atmospheric sunlight refraction, here, the photon-type psions were the ones that were being refracted, influencing the atmosphere in ways that defied the relations of psychics.

'It still feels uncomfortable, though it is interesting.'

Despite the discomfort from earlier, the unique environment piqued my interest.

'This is Phantom's Land, huh? No wonder it has its reputation.'

Just as Eleanor mentioned, the different conditions in this place seemed to change our bodies. Even now, I can feel like my mana pores and my mana core is changing.

'Maybe the method of Starbloom Essence also came from here.'

It was just a random thought, but the possibility seemed to be high. When discovering something, most of the time, one experiences the said thing beforehand and then finds the rules and relations regarding that.

Physics rules, Chemistry rules.....Many others were developed in the same way.

"This fog is insane."

Irina's voice cut through my thoughts, and I turned to see her and Sylvie approaching. Irina seemed a bit uneasy, and Sylvie appeared to be composed.

'Hmm?'

I felt like Irina's reaction wasn't as usual, but considering the environment we were in, it was kind of normal.

The fog, dense and ever-present, seemed to affect everyone differently.

Sylvie offered an explanation. "I think it might be the water attribute Psions compressed to create this fog. It's a common phenomenon in dungeons."

Irina, however, shook her head, her expression reflecting a deeper understanding.

"No, Sylvie, this fog isn't that simple. I can feel something else in the air, something more complex. It's not just water psions. There's an underlying energy that's different, something I can't quite put my finger on."

What Irina had said was correct. Most of us Awakened had the ability to sense the specific mana psions that we were compatible with a lot better. But even then, we could still sense the other psions.

That was especially the case for Irina, being a mage. And, I, myself, am not normal either, with my eyes and my newly increased sensitivity thanks to certain Senior's help.

I could see that the structure of this place was a lot more complex, which was why it had yet to be solved.

Sylvie arched an eyebrow, "Different energy? You can sense that?"

Irina nodded, her gaze scanning the surroundings as if trying to discern the secrets concealed within the fog. "Yeah, it's like an amalgamation of various elemental psions, each contributing to this atmospheric anomaly. Water might be part of it, but there's more at play here."

Hearing her explanation, Sylvie looked at me. It seemed she wanted to ask whether I thought the same or not, and the shrug as the answer probably did it.

"I think we should start by settling into our bungalow," Irina suggested, breaking the momentary silence. Her gaze lingered on the fog, as if challenging the mystical atmosphere, and determination flashed in her eyes.

Sylvie and I exchanged nods, both in agreement with Irina's suggestion. Despite the mysteries surrounding Phantom's Land, the immediate need for comfort and a base of operations was undeniable.

"Right, let's get to our bungalow," I said, taking the lead and gesturing toward the small cluster of houses emerging from the fog.

As we walked towards our designated accommodation, the fog seemed to part, revealing the quaint bungalow with its inviting aura. The structure, though modest, carried a certain charm that resonated with the unique atmosphere of Phantom's Land.

Upon entering, the interior of the bungalow held a surprising warmth. Simple yet cozy, the space was equipped with everything we needed for our stay. The furniture, though not extravagant, had an air of functionality, and the magical enchantments on the utilities indicated a thoughtful design.

"I'm glad they've made it comfortable for us," Sylvie remarked, looking around appreciatively.

Irina, who had been silently observing the surroundings, nodded in agreement. "Yeah, at least we have a place to retreat to amidst all this strangeness."

'Interesting.....This place....'

I felt like there was a lot more here than to meet an eye. I could see the enchantments around, and there were some that I hadn't seen before.

'What are those?'

There seem to be dangers here that need to be fended off differently from outside. Well, considering the creepiness of this place, it felt like it suited here, but not knowing the details still bothered me a little.

The bungalow revealed itself to have three separate rooms, providing each of us with our own personal space. A quick inspection showed a well-furnished bedroom for each of us, a compact yet well-equipped bathroom, and a communal space that included a small kitchenette.

"Looks like they've given us our own rooms. That's a relief," Irina noted, visibly pleased with the arrangement.

I took the lead, entering my designated bedroom. The space, though not expansive, provided a comfortable bed with soft linens, a nightstand, and a small window that allowed a glimpse of the fog-shrouded surroundings.

'Similar to our academy rooms in terms of structure.'

Though the facilities were different, the structure was the same. It seemed this wasn't the first time someone had come here as well since I could see some marks on the walls.

'This is at least 2-years ago.'

It seemed like things were about to get weird.

Chapter 256 Chapter 60.2 - Phantom's Land

"Hey, Ethan. What are you doing?"

Sitting on his bed, Ethan was lost in his thoughts. This has been happening quite frequently nowadays.

Especially with the mist covering everything, he felt cozy and relaxed, different from others.

"Hey, Ethan."

But, his introspection was interrupted by a voice. Looking up, he saw Lucas, a young white-haired boy, waving his hands with a hint of annoyance.

"Hey, Lucas. What's up?" Ethan asked, realizing he had been in his own world again.

Up? Man, come on. We just came here and you are wasting your time sitting like that." Lucas remarked. "We need to observe, you know?"

"Ah...."

Just as he said, they were now in the Phantom's Land for the assignment and they needed to do their job as a student.

Ethan realized that he was wasting his time and clapped his cheeks.

Ethan stood up, shaking off the remnants of his contemplative mood. He clapped his hands together, preparing to join the observation team with Lucas and Caleb, his teammate, who was in the lower ranks. "You're right. Let's get to work," Ethan said, a renewed determination in his eyes.

"Finally." Lucas smiled, seeing Ethan returning to being normal again. "But, where are you going?"

"Won't we observe?"

".....Man.....Are you dumb?"

"What?"

"You haven't even settled yet..."

-GRUMBLE!

"And we are all hungry."

Realizing his oversight, Ethan felt a slight blush creeping up his cheeks. "Ah, right. I guess I got a bit hasty there."

Lucas burst into laughter, finding Ethan's embarrassment amusing. "You really need to think before you act, Ethan."

"Hey, I'm not perfect," Ethan replied with a good-natured smile, appreciating Lucas's teasing. "So, what's the plan then?"

"Caleb's preparing us a meal," Lucas informed, still chuckling. "He's quite handy in the kitchen, unlike someone I know."

With that, Ethan left his room and joined Lucas in the common area, where they found Caleb, a young man with glasses and a skinny body, working in the small kitchenette.

"Hey, Ethan," Caleb greeted with a friendly smile. "I'm making some instant pasta. It won't be anything fancy, but it'll fill our stomachs."

Ethan nodded in appreciation. "Sounds good...."

Well, beggars couldn't be choosers, he guessed.

As they gathered around the modest dining table, Caleb served the instant pasta, and the trio shared a meal in the cozy atmosphere of their temporary abode in the Phantom's Land. Despite the simplicity of the dish, the camaraderie among the teammates made the meal enjoyable.

"So, how do we proceed with the test?" Caleb asked, slurping the long pasta.

"I don't know much," Lucas replied. "Even though we will be living here without any types of artifacts, how do they expect us to observe."

What he said made sense. Most of the time, making measurements and finding results were important while researching something, and they did none of those.

"I think they will grade us according to what we have. I doubt they expect us to write a report like magicians of the tower."

"Makes sense."

As they discussed the logistics of their assignment, the conversation was suddenly interrupted by a faint tapping sound against the window. Ethan, who was sitting closest to the window, felt a shiver run down his spine.

"Hold on," he said, looking outside.

The mist outside seemed to swirl, and Ethan could have sworn he saw fleeting shadows dancing within it. The tapping against the window continued, each tap sending an unsettling shiver through his body.

"Did you guys hear that?" Ethan asked, his voice slightly tense.

Lucas and Caleb exchanged puzzled glances, their expressions indicating that they hadn't heard anything out of the ordinary.

"I didn't hear anything," Lucas said, shaking his head.

"Yeah, me neither," added Caleb.

But, looking at Ethan's complexion, they felt like something was definitively not right with him.

"Man, are you going crazy or something? If so, let me know."

Ethan, although still feeling the strange tingling sensation and hearing those faint voices, decided not to press the matter. He gave a small, dismissive smile. "Must have been my imagination, then. I guess I still haven't adapted yet."

Lucas, realizing this was an opportunity, smirked at Ethan and remarked, "If your imagination is getting the best of you, maybe you should spend more time in your own world."

Ethan, feeling a playful sense of protest, picked up his cup, which had a small amount of water left, and sprayed it lightly towards Lucas. The droplets splattered across Lucas's face, prompting him to squint his eyes in mock annoyance.

"Hey, what was that for?" Lucas laughed, wiping away the water with the back of his hand.

"Just a reminder that I'm still very much a part of this world," Ethan said with a smirk.

"Tch. Bastard....."

"So, what do we do now?"

Sylvie asked, looking around. After everyone settled and rested a little bit, we met in the saloon of the bungalow.

I think we should start with some light observation and take notes," Irina suggested, looking outside. "This place doesn't seem to have the concept of day and night."

Just as she suggested, the Phantom's Land didn't have any type of day or night. Almost all the time, it had light around.

However, even this place needed its own type of time measurement scale, and for that, a small device was created here.

'5 P.M, huh?'

It was highly likely that the device's method of working had something to do with mana levels, but I decided not to ponder on that matter.

"Sounds good to me." Sylvie also agreed. "Considering we need to understand the mana structure and atmospheric anomalies here, I doubt it will be easy. Starting early might give us clues about the unusual phenomena."

"You talk like a professor."

"Cough....Was it that obvious?"

"Kind of."

Just as the two were talking, both of them turned to me. "So, what do you think?"

"I am okay with whatever you want."

For the time being, I was free. Even though I wanted to take a look around by myself, I doubted there would be something life-threatening here.

After all, this place seemed to be visited by others in the past, and if something had happened, there was no way the academy would choose to come here.

After agreeing to start our observation, we each grabbed our enchanted notebooks and pens.

"Oww.....It is too cold."

As we prepared to leave the bungalow, we adorned our coats to shield ourselves from the intense cold that welcomed us outside.

The chilling wind carried a mystical touch, and the fog seemed to thicken, enhancing the eerie ambiance.

"Let's start with the town."

Since we would be here for quite a while, it was important to familiarize ourselves with the surroundings. For some reason, I thought this place was important for our task.

Something about this place seemed a little off to me.

We wandered through the small town within Phantom's Land, observing the townspeople going about their activities. Not many people could be seen on the streets, and most of them were either researchers or personnel.

The atmosphere was bustling yet surreal, with the fog adding an element of mystery to the scene.

"You know, this is the first time I've been in a place like this. It's... different, but in a fascinating way," Irina remarked, her eyes scanning the foggy surroundings.

Sylvie nodded in agreement, "Yeah, it has a unique charm. It reminds me a bit of the Western Uxbridge, but there's an underlying eeriness that sets it apart."

While saying those words, she threw a quick look at me. I could see her shaking a little.

'I guess she still hadn't forgotten.'

Well, that made sense. However, I couldn't help but agree with Sylvie's observation. While the Western Uxbridge had its own peculiarities, Phantom's Land seemed to have an added layer of the supernatural.

The mysterious phenomena, the dense fog, and the unusual atmospheric conditions created an environment that felt both enchanting and slightly foreboding.

As we strolled through the fog-laden streets, I couldn't help but notice a small bakery that seemed to be preparing for something.

Intrigued, I approached the bakery, watching as the townspeople carried on with their tasks. The man behind the counter noticed me and greeted me with a friendly smile.

"Hello there! What brings you to my humble bakery?" he asked, his voice carrying a warm undertone. But in that tone, I felt something.

'His body.....'

It lacked soul.

Curious, I inquired about the preparations, and the man's expression turned slightly solemn. "I'm preparing to close up shop. You see, once the time passes 06:06, nobody should be outside."

"Why is that?" I questioned, intrigued by the specificity of the time.

The man hesitated for a moment before responding, "There's an old belief here in Phantom's Land. As the clock strikes 06:06, the boundary between our world and the spirits' realm weakens. It's said that during that time, the spirits are free to roam, and it's safer for everyone to be indoors."

"Spirits?"

I wanted to ask more. The term 'Spirit' was something common in the games, and [Legacy of Shadows: The Hunter's Destiny] wasn't much different.

However, in this game, they were not as underwhelming as they had sounded.

"I have talked too much already."

However, the man didn't answer me anything more than what he had already said.

"Do you wish to get any bread?"

".....No thanks....."

I left the bakery and met up with Sylvie and Irina, who were waiting nearby. They looked at me expectantly, and Sylvie was the first to speak up.

"What were you doing in there? Find something interesting?" she asked, a curious gleam in her eyes.

I briefly summarized what I learned about the belief in spirits and the caution surrounding the time 06:06. However, I chose not to mention my suspicion about the man at the bakery.

'For that, let's wait a little more.'

It felt premature, and I didn't want to cause unnecessary alarm, especially knowing these two personalities.

Even right now, Irina was shaking a little from the mist's pressure, and Sylvie seemed to be bothered as well.

As I spoke, the girls glanced around, and Sylvie pointed out something unusual. "Look, everyone seems to be preparing to go indoors. Do you think it's related to what you heard?"

Irina nodded, her expression thoughtful. "It's possible.

"But why did the school not inform us about this?"

At Sylvie's question, Irina put his hand on his face for a second.

"I see..." And then came to the realization.

"What?"

If what I think is correct, then the school wants us to experience and observe these things firsthand. They're not holding our hands, but rather, they're letting us figure it out on our own."

"Hmm....It makes sense."

As we observed the townspeople following the tradition of heading indoors before 06:06, it became evident that the academy had intentionally left certain aspects undisclosed.

'Certainly, something the academy would do.'

This experience was not only about studying the magical anomalies but also about adapting to the unexpected, a valuable lesson for future hunters.

However, something about the phrase 06.06 still bothered me.

After all, this place's time was measured in a different way from others.

Chapter 257 Chapter 60.3 - Phantom's Land

After Astron's initial explanations and their observations about the Phantom's Land, both Sylvie and Irina couldn't help but shudder a little.

'If this is how it feels to be around the phenomenal....'

A new feeling of respect bloomed in Irina's heart. She had always been arrogant thanks to her lineage and thought being a mage was relatively easy, but looking at it like that, those who worked in places like this needed quite a strong will and mental.

'But, what is our purpose here.'

Even if the academy wanted them to observe things, this place seemed rather different compared to the pieces of training before. Rather than focusing on combat, this time, they were in a place where the purpose was lost.

"Let's return."

Astron mumbled. At this point, in Phantom's Land, the air grew colder, and the mystical atmosphere intensified. The townspeople also were hurriedly retreating indoors, following the local tradition as the clock ticked closer to 06:06.

"Okay."

There were some other students as well.

"Why are they leaving?"

"What is with the issue here?"

Though most of them were looking around with surprised faces, it seemed they were rather clueless about this part.

'Well, they will learn sooner or later anyway.'

As the trio began their journey back to the bungalow, they noticed an unusual change in the atmosphere. The fog, which had previously been a mere backdrop, started to thicken with every passing second.

It clung to the surroundings like a dense curtain, obscuring their vision and creating an unsettling ambiance.

"This fog is getting thicker. Is this part of the usual phenomenon here?" Sylvie questioned, her gaze fixed on the ever-increasing density of the mist.

Astron furrowed his brow, observing the phenomenon closely. "It's not usual." His purple eyes were narrowed, but Irina felt like he wasn't as tense as he should be.

Being within his team for a long time, she knew how he acted whenever he was unsure of something, and this wasn't the case right now.

'Well, if he hadn't noticed something, then we should be fine.'

She reassured herself. He was unusually perceptive most of the time, so she had at least this much faith in his judgment.

As they ventured further, the fog became so thick that their surroundings turned into an impenetrable veil of gray.

Visibility was reduced to a mere few feet, and the air grew colder, carrying an eerie stillness. The sounds of footsteps echoed like ghostly whispers in the dense fog.

"Check the compass."

She opened her watch and chose the option of home. As the compass appeared, it showed the direction of their home. They had already tested it before leaving upon Astron's request, so they were sure that it worked.

Navigating through the thick fog with the assistance of the compass, the trio managed to reach the bungalow not long after. The enchanted device proved to be their guiding light in the murky surroundings.

Upon entering the bungalow, they felt a sense of relief as the fog's oppressive presence was temporarily held at bay.

"Haaaah...." The first one to relieve was Sylvie. Irina also wanted to do the same, but she refused to show weakness before this guy.

The interior offered a familiar sanctuary, and the trio decided to take a moment to gather their thoughts on the couch.

"So, what do you guys think?"

"Not sure."

"Let's wait for a little while," Irina mumbled. "But stay alert. I feel like something will happen."

Just as she said, the timer on the wall steadily counted down the minutes, and as it finally reached 06:06, an inexplicable transformation occurred.

SWOOSH!

The mist that had veiled the landscape outside suddenly turned dark, as if the sky had plunged into night within moments.

CREAK! CREAK!

The abrupt change was accompanied by strange noises emanating from the darkened mist. Whispers echoed, and indistinct voices filled the air, creating an unsettling symphony that resonated through Phantom's Land.

SWOOSH!

Silhouettes, barely visible in the pitch-black mist, began passing through the windows of the bungalow. Eerie sounds echoed, filling the air with an otherworldly symphony. The trio, Astron, Irina, and Sylvie, exchanged uneasy glances as the mysterious figures moved silently around them.

The unsettling atmosphere escalated as the windows began to shake violently as if they were about to shatter. The trio sprang into action, rushing to close the heavy lids of the windows to ward off the impending threat.

"Quickly! Seal the windows!" Astron commanded, his voice calm despite the surreal events unfolding.

Irina and Sylvie followed suit, hastily securing the windows to keep whatever lurked outside from entering. The shaking intensified, accompanied by a chorus of haunting whispers that seemed to seep through the smallest gaps.

"What...what are these things?" Sylvie questioned, her voice barely audible over the disconcerting sounds.

Astron, his eyes focused and intense, scanned the room. "Phantoms." He replied.

"These are phantoms?"

"High likely."

Even though they researched before coming here, there wasn't much-published information about both phantoms and how Phantom's Land worked. This wasn't a touristic place, and the government-controlled the information network about this one.

"I see."

Sylvie nodded her head, understanding.

CREAK!

The creaking sounds continued for a little while as the silhouettes surrounding them continued their movements.

However, at this point, they had gotten used to it. Even though it may have been a little overwhelming at the first minute, they were future hunters and had seen their fair share of weird things.

Irina couldn't help but ask, "What should we do now?"

Now that they couldn't go out, there wasn't much they could do after all.

Astron glanced at his watch, his purple eyes focused on the enchanted timepiece. "We wait. This seems to be part of the phenomena Eleanor mentioned. As long as we keep the windows closed, we should be safe."

He didn't see any signs of phantoms inside, and the academy should give the students at least this much salvation.

GRUMBLE!

Just as he spoke, a distinct sound echoed in the room, cutting through the eerie ambiance. It was the unmistakable grumbling of a hungry stomach.

Everyone turned to look at Sylvie, who appeared slightly embarrassed. "Uh, sorry about that. Guess I'm hungrier than I thought."

Irina couldn't help but smirk, finding the timing rather amusing.

GROWL!

However, her triumphant expression quickly faded as her own stomach joined in, producing a sound that mirrored Sylvie's hunger.

"Remarkable. Despite the unusual circumstances, you two still manage to have an appetite."

Irina, trying to salvage her pride, crossed her arms defensively. "Well, we can't control when we get hungry, even in a place like this."

"I guess our bodies don't care if we're surrounded by phantoms or not."

However, at the mention of their stomachs rumbling, a problem appeared immediately.

'Who will cook?'

It was a question that needed to be answered immediately.

"So, any of you know how to cook?"

Irina's confident demeanor wavered, and a faint blush colored her cheeks. "Cook? Well, I, um, I've never really cooked before. It's not something nobles typically do."

Her point was fair. As a person from one of the six main magic families, she had never have any need to cook in her entire life.

"Tch...Entitled nobles."

"What did you say?"

"You should know how to cook. It is an essential skill to survive."

Irina huffed, defensively crossing her arms. "I've always had servants to do the cooking. I never needed to bother with it, and I am sure I will never do in the future."

"Are you dumb? What about now?"

"Now is an exception."

"Those exceptions are what we call life-threatening situations. I guess you will just pray to god that you don't encounter one?"

"..."

Seeing Irina's defeated expression, Astron's gaze shifted to Sylvie. However, despite her initial embarrassment, she met his eyes for a moment before averting her gaze.

The silence spoke volumes, and it was clear that neither of them had much experience in the culinary arts.

Sylvie mumbled, "I can make instant noodles, I guess."

"Really?"

And he couldn't help but shake his head.

'Modernity ruined femineity.'

He wanted to say, but there was no need to trigger some people. And it was not like cooking was associated with femininity anyway.

But he still couldn't help but sigh at the lack of cooking skills displayed by the two noble ladies.

Standing up from the couch, he made his way to the kitchen. Irina, puzzled by his sudden movement, called after him, "Where are you going?"

Astron glanced over his shoulder with a deadpanned face. "Where does it seem like I am going?"

"....."

'What is with you, humph? Not everyone needs to know how to cook?'

Seeing his crappy attitude, she got annoyed. But, she couldn't do anything at all.

As he reached the kitchen, Astron began rummaging through the cabinets, seemingly well-acquainted with the contents. Irina and Sylvie exchanged curious glances, wondering what culinary skills he possessed that they were unaware of.

Astron's proficiency in the kitchen wasn't a recent development. Living alone for a considerable time had forced him to pick up various skills, including cooking.

His frequent visits to dungeons had also played a role in refining his abilities, as resourcefulness often meant the difference between a satisfying meal and an empty stomach in the unpredictable environments of dungeons.

Being nutritious was pretty important for hunters, and those who could fill stomachs fast enough had an advantage over those who didn't.

Though, of course, his skills weren't on the level of a chef, it was satisfying enough, nevertheless.

He thought that, at least.

Soon enough, the kitchen was filled with the sound of sizzling as Astron expertly prepared a meal. The enticing aroma gradually filled the room, catching the attention of both Irina and Sylvie.

Irina couldn't help but be a bit intrigued. "What are you cooking?"

FUSH!

Astron, focused on his culinary task while stirring the pan constantly, replied, "A simple stir-fry. It's a quick and tasty option."

Sylvie, still amazed by his unexpected cooking skills, added, "Wow, I didn't expect you to be so good at this."

'It is not that this is good....It is just you had never bothered to see any chef working.'

He wanted to say but kept it inside. Dexterity was something he was proud of, but he never initially thought he was an extraordinary cook.

"This is nothing."

Irina, unable to resist a challenge to her capabilities, declared, "Well, I could do it too if I tried."

But that scratched our edgy boy's pride. Without missing a beat, he handed her the pan

"Ho? Give it a shot, then."

Irina took the pan confidently, trying to mimic Astron's stirring technique. However, as she attempted to showcase her culinary prowess, the pan wobbled dangerously, and it was clear she was struggling to maintain control.

Astron, with a deadpan expression, stretched his hand towards the pan, activating his [Telekinesis] without a word. The pan floated effortlessly in the air, evading the imminent disaster that Irina's attempt threatened.

"I had a feeling this would happen."

Irina, slightly embarrassed but unwilling to admit defeat, crossed her arms defensively.

"Cough...Well, it's not as easy as it looks."

However, she also noticed how fast he deployed 「Telekinesis」.

'This guy? When did he get this proficient.'

Just a week ago, he started studying Level 0 magic, and now he is using Level 1. Of course, considering his learning skills, it was good, but he seems to be exceptionally working on [Telekinesis] a little more.

Sylvie, suppressing a giggle, added, "Cooking is an art, after all. It takes practice."

Astron grabbed the pan and continued to stir it. "Exactly. An art that you seem to be ignoring."

"....."

As the stir-fry continued to sizzle, Astron gracefully took back control of the pan, demonstrating his skill with ease.

The aroma of the cooking meal filled the air, and despite the initial attempt at participation, Irina and Sylvie found themselves content to let Astron handle the culinary duties while they prepared the table and the cups.

Chapter 258 Chapter 60.4 - Phantom's Land

"Hmm....Certainly interesting....."

I was walking, looking around. The mist that had been covering everything slowly started to cease from my eyes.

'It even blocks [Mana Observation] from time to time.'

Certainly, it was an interesting concept. If possible, I wanted to be able to store some of this mist to analyze its property. If I could create something similar....

'I am sure the other professors here are working on this as well.'

Right now, I was here all by myself. After the hectic night in the bungalow with all windows closed, I decided to check something.

And just as I had expected, right at 06.06 A.M., the mist turned brighter once again. It seemed, here, the concept of day and night was determined by the exact time.

Of course, calling this 'day' wouldn't be exactly true since, even now, there aren't many lights around. However, compared to the mist before, it is a lot better.

'Should I start my training.'

Entering the Phantom's Land won't be possible this easily in the future, and the atmosphere is certainly a lot better for training both my body and my mana circuits.

Now that the mist had become more translucent, I could also observe my surroundings with increased clarity.

'This should be enough.'

Finding a suitable spot, I commenced my training routine, seamlessly blending physical exercises with mana-enhancing techniques.

Moving with purpose, I integrated martial arts forms with bursts of mana manipulation. Phantom's Land provided a distinct atmosphere for training, and I seized the opportunity to enhance both my physical and magical capabilities.

-CHATTER!

Inside the city hall of the Phantom's Land town, people had gathered, waiting for Professor Eldorium to arrive.

Most of them were the students of Arcadia Hunter Academy who were here for a short trip of four days. After the notice that was given to them by their instructor, those who were interested in academic hearings immediately filled the seats.

Though seemingly small from the outside, the unique space magic employed by Professor Eldorium expanded the interior, creating an expansive hall with high ceilings adorned with mystical symbols that seemed to shimmer in the ethereal lighting.

As the students settled into their seats, the air in the expanded city hall hummed with subtle energy, a manifestation of the unique mana density that permeated Phantom's Land.

And considering the events of yesterday, some of them even had dark circles under their eyes.

"Just what the hell was those noises?"

"Right? I almost even pissed myself. Why didn't they tell us about those bastards? I pushed myself to my home at the last second."

"Well, you are lucky. One of my team members thought he could fight them, but then he was knocked down when we found him. Following that, teachers came and got him out."

"I see, so they know our progress, right?"

"Most likely."

While the students were talking amongst themselves, suddenly, the sounds of walking echoed.

TAK! TAK! TAK!

Professor Eldorium entered the hall, his imposing presence magnified by the magical ambiance.

"Good day, esteemed scholars," Professor Eldorium greeted with a glint of amusement in his sharp, intelligent eyes. His gaze shifted to some students who displayed signs of fatigue from the previous night's unsettling events.

"Well, it seems some of you had an encounter with the local inhabitants of Phantom's Land," he remarked with a sly grin. "I hope you enjoyed their... nocturnal melodies. It appears they've left their mark on a few of you," he added, gesturing playfully towards the dark circles under some students' eyes.

A ripple of nervous laughter spread through the students as they realized the professor was well aware of their nighttime encounters.

"Just a friendly reminder," Professor Eldorium continued in a light tone, "next time, perhaps bring some earplugs if you plan on having a peaceful night's rest. Those phantoms can be quite the enthusiastic musicians, as you've witnessed."

-LAUGHTER!

The students chuckled, appreciating the professor's ability to lighten the mood. Professor Eldorium himself chuckled along, the warmth in his eyes contrasting with the imposing figure he cut.

"Now, let's move on to more serious matters, shall we?" he said, transitioning smoothly. "Today, we delve into the realm of Integrated Magical Circuits. But before we embark on this journey, let me assure you, there will be no phantom-related symphonies involved."

The students laughed again, relieved at the professor's humor.

"Integrated Magical Circuits," he continued, his tone becoming more focused, "represent a convergence of magical theory and adaptability. It's a concept that requires finesse and an understanding of the dynamic relationships between magical elements and the changing conditions of the environment. And as you can see, Phantom's Land is a perfect place for that."

However, at that point, he stopped.

"Let me make it clear, young scholars, that the concept of Integrated Magical Circuits is one typically reserved for advanced magic college-level studies. It requires a depth of understanding and a mastery of magic principles beyond what is usually expected at an academy level."

He paused, allowing the weight of his words to settle on the audience.

"However," he continued with a thoughtful expression on his face, "I understand that your presence here in Phantom's Land is not just an academic pursuit. It's an exploration, an opportunity to push the boundaries of your magic knowledge. While Integrated Magical Circuits may be a challenge, I believe it can also be a valuable insight for each and every one of you."

He advised the students to consider staying and delving into the advanced topic, assuring them that the knowledge gained would be a rare and profound addition to their future insights.

Despite the warning about the complexity of the subject, all of the students, fueled by curiosity and the desire to unravel the mysteries of Phantom's Land (getting better grades for the practical exam), unanimously chose to remain.

After all, they were already aware that the concepts talked about here would be at a much higher level compared to others.

"I see..." Professor Eldorium's gaze swept across the enthusiastic faces of the students, a pleased smile playing on his lips. He felt kind of proud seeing their collective decision to stay here.

"I am delighted by your enthusiasm, young scholars," he commended, his voice carrying a tone of approval. "Your willingness to delve into such matters, even knowing the challenges, is deserving of praise."

As the professor continued his discourse, elaborating on the Integrated Magical Circuits, he couldn't help but notice the focused expressions on the faces of two students seated at the front – Irina Emberheart with her fiery red hair and amber eyes and Seraphina Frostborne with her silver hair and piercing blue eyes.

'Ho? To think I could see two heirs of future pillars....Am I lucky or unlucky?'

He inwardly thought to himself. After all, he himself knew the personalities of those two heads firsthand and was sure that their daughters would not be that different.

"In any case, the reason for the change in the formulas and circuits mostly stems from Mana Junctions. In normal concepts, Mana Junctions serve as the points of convergence where different magical elements harmonize, allowing for a seamless flow of mana, but as the conditions change, the properties of the mana junctions change as well."

"Therefore, it is incredibly crucial to understand the dynamics of Mana Junctions in these ever-changing spaces." Professor Eldorium emphasized his words.

He produced diagrams and equations detailing Mana Junctions to the board with a flick of his finger. It was an incredibly good way to control mana as if he was utilizing his other limb.

"These equations," he continued, projecting the diagrams onto the holographic display, "represent the movements of mana psions at these Mana Junctions."

"You see, the properties of these junctions are not static; they adapt and evolve based on the ambient mana and even the subtle fluctuations in Phantom's Land itself."

The diagrams on the display shifted, demonstrating the dynamic nature of Mana Junctions.

"Here," he pointed to a particular equation, "we have the Mana Harmonization Coefficient, denoted by Ψ . It quantifies the degree to which different magical elements synchronize at a Mana Junction."

"A higher Ψ indicates a more harmonious convergence, facilitating a smoother flow of mana."

After that, he continued with another bunch of explanations for the new terms he had named.

-Spatial Flux Integration Constant

-Temporal Mana Flux Constant

Just as he had explained, while most of the students looked at the equations with a mix of confusion and awe, a student with purple eyes had a different thing in his mind.

While Professor Eldorium discussed Integrated Magical Circuits, my mind focused on the dynamic nature of Mana Junctions, illuminated by the holographic display's diagrams and equations.

Those terms were all familiar to me from college. After all, once I had learned something, it was almost impossible to forget.

As I was going through equations and theoretical discussions, an idea came to my mind.

It was something that had been discussed on Earth as well.

What if I could theoretically reverse the process of Integrated Magical Circuits? Instead of adapting to the environment, what if I could tailor the magical circuits to harness specific characteristics of Phantom's Land itself?

During the lecture, my mind wandered ahead, and I started thinking of an innovative way to apply the reverse-engineering concept.

If I could possibly create a series of magical circuits that would improve specific qualities of Phantom's Land, such as manipulating the mist, utilizing the distinct mana density, or adapting to its temporal fluctuations.....

That would be....Insanely good.

'This....'

However, I also knew that I lacked the necessary general magical knowledge and adaptation for it.

At least for the time being. No matter how much of a fast learner I am myself, there was no way I could apply such a complex theory right away.

However, for this purpose, I had the exact individual right beside me.

The girl with her fiery hair and amber eyes.

Irina was already immersed in the lecture, listening to everything attentively, but right now, she was needed for something else.

Feeling a surge of excitement about my idea, I nudged Irina subtly from the side.

"Hiiick-!"

Caught off-guard, she let out an involuntary moan, drawing the attention of nearby students.

"You! What was that for?" Irina hissed, her face flushing with a mix of embarrassment and irritation.

I leaned in and whispered, "Irina, I have an idea. Listen to this."

She shot me an annoyed glance but couldn't hide the curiosity in her eyes as I explained the concept of reverse-engineering Integrated Magical Circuits for the specific environment of Phantom's Land.

As I spoke, her expression shifted from annoyance to a thoughtful frown. It seemed the idea resonated with her, and she began to see the potential applications.

After sharing the idea, I leaned back, waiting for her response. Irina, now intrigued, whispered back, "Well, it's not a bad idea. But why did you have to nudge me like that?"

"Just getting your attention. You seemed too engrossed in the lecture."

"Of course. It is not your usual day to listen to such a lecture from a high-ranking professor."

"..."

Irina huffed, a glare in her eyes. "Next time, just say something. No need to resort to such tactics."

"My bad."

"Let's talk about this after the lecture ends. I think I can do what you want from me."

It seemed the idea sounded plausible to her...

Chapter 259 Chapter 60.5 - Phantom's Land

After the lecture, Irina and Astron had a very long talk about his own idea about the Phantom's Land itself.

'This guy....'

And the more she listened to his idea, the more she couldn't help but get impressed. To be able to come up with such a thing wasn't hard. Most of the mages could easily think of the reverse-engineering process as a concept.

However, when it came to applying that in both calculations on paper and reality, they would stumble.

What Astron did was solve it just at point. The way he provided insights pointed to the source of the problem exactly. Irina herself was one of the best mages amongst her peers, and she was pretty confident in her analytic capabilities.

'If he wanted, he could easily get a job as a scholar....'

But even she had to acknowledge the fact that this guy was something else. Even right now, Astron could just focus on studying magic and would most likely become a scholar in just a year with his capabilities.

'Though, he will obviously never do that.'

Irina sat in their bungalow, surrounded by holographic diagrams and equations that Astron had prepared for her.

The concept of reverse-engineering Integrated Magical Circuits for the specific environment of Phantom's Land lingered in her mind.

She traced the lines on the holographic display, pondering the potential applications of harnessing the land's unique characteristics.

Astron's idea intrigued was certainly plausible.

Deep in thought, Irina considered the diagrams and calculations that Astron had handed over to her. He had simplified the complex theory, making it more accessible for her to grasp. The challenge now was to translate those theoretical concepts into practical magical applications.

As her fingers danced over the holographic controls, she began experimenting with the magical circuits.

Irina focused on manipulating the mist, attempting to create a spell that would allow her to control and shape the ethereal substance unique to Phantom's Land.

'If I can do it in this way, then.....I can do it this way, too.'

But, what she had in her mind wasn't to control the mist but rather to retrace the spell. If she could somehow retrace the spell and find a way to 'feel' it, she was sure she could do it for any other of a similar kind.

Though she didn't know, Astron actually knew her talent. His observant eyes were already well aware of the fact that Irina's talent didn't come from her speed of calculations but her innate talent to understand without even thinking.

She basically lived those magics herself.

While his approach was rooted in analytical calculations, Irina's strength lay in her ability to intuitively grasp the essence of magic.

As Irina continued to experiment, she felt a sense of deep connection. It was as if the mist around her was an extension of herself.

With subtle manipulations, she was able to reveal the underlying magic that shaped Phantom's Land through the holographic display.

'I see, so this works like that.'

While alone, Irina explored the complexities of the mist, carefully manipulating the holographic controls like a conductor leading a magical symphony.

Well, that was definitely an exaggeration, but she wasn't in the mood to correct herself.

'Quantum Entanglement.'

Astron had named it in such a manner. Though she wasn't sure why he named it 'Quantum,' the word 'Entanglement' was quite correct.

Drawing inspiration from her extensive knowledge of magical theory and Astron's writings, Irina began to employ principles of quantum entanglement.

At first, it was hard.

'No, it should be like that.'

'No.'

'No, again.'

She used psionics to bridge consciousness and magic in her experiments. Her thoughts blended with the magic, creating a spectrum of light on the display.

'No, again.'

But, it was still not enough. Even though she could see the spectrum, that wasn't the desired output; she needed to see more detailed information out there.

Irina experimented with various approaches to understand the essence of the mist in Phantom's Land.

'No, again.'

She manipulated the holographic controls and tried different combinations, but the breakthrough she craved remained elusive.

As she persisted, the mist responded to her thoughts, revealing glimpses of its magic. Frustration threatened to surface, but Irina pressed on. After all, she felt like she was at least getting closer.

Though no one was pressing on her on this matter, it felt like she needed to do her best.

Then, like a thief on the verge of unlocking a case, she felt it – a subtle sensation, a whisper in the psionic currents. It was akin to that elusive tick noise, a sound heard by a thief skilled enough to open a secured lock without any lock in the movies.

'Wait...'

In an instant, everything aligned. The mist unraveled, revealing its mysteries, and Irina felt a transcendent connection beyond anything.

'I hear it.'

It was like she was now inside the mist itself, not physically but in terms of constructing the magic itself.

'I've got it.'

After all, the Phantom's Land wasn't here fifty years ago, and it appeared suddenly out of nowhere. That was why it was classified as a 'Phenomenon.'

Mages could only explain it as the interference of mana with the world.

Irina's eyes widened with realization, and a triumphant smile graced her lips. The mist, once an enigma, now yielded its secrets to her mastery.

"I've got it!"

Irina exclaimed with unrestrained joy, feeling the rush of success coursing through her veins. Her triumphant moment echoed in the room as she reveled in her mastery over the mist's magic.

"Ahahaha! I did it!" she continued, her laughter echoing through the chamber.

Just as she was reveling in her accomplishment, a voice from the side interrupted her jubilation. "Impressive. You finally cracked it."

"Kyaaaaa!"

Irina was caught off guard and jumped in her place with a yelp. Her heart raced as she turned to the source of the voice. It was Astron, standing there with his characteristic indifference as if he had materialized out of thin air.

"Whoa! Bastard, are you a ghost?" She even swore a little, not being able to contain her words.

Astron raised an eyebrow, acknowledging her surprise. "You looked quite immersed. I didn't want to disturb your process."

Irina, still recovering from the shock, huffed. "Couldn't you at least make some noise or announce yourself? Sneaking up on people is not cool, you know."

Astron shrugged, unfazed. "You seemed focused. I didn't want to break your concentration. Congratulations, by the way. Impressive breakthrough."

Irina, regaining her composure, grinned. "Well, it is all thanks to you."

After all, if he hadn't provided her with his calculations and the concept itself, she would never be able to come up with this process.

But, hearing this, he shook his head.

"Not really."

"What?"

"If not for you, I wouldn't be able to do anything. I just came up with the idea."

"That is the hard part."

"Nope. Probably only a handful of people could solve what I had written there in such a short amount of time. Coming up with the ideas is certainly important, but not all ideas are applicable, and people like you are the ones making it possible."

Irina felt an odd warmth spreading through her chest at Astron's sincere acknowledgment. It was a rare occurrence to hear him praise her in such a way, and she couldn't deny the genuine happiness welling up inside her. As he spoke, she sensed her cheeks turning crimson, and an unfamiliar fluttering feeling danced in her stomach.

"Hey, stop it," she mumbled, trying to downplay the emotions bubbling up within her.

"Stop what?"

"Stop praising me like that. It's... it's weird," Irina stammered. "This is not like you."

Astron tilted his head slightly, studying her reaction. "Weird? I was just stating the facts."

"Well, it's making me feel weird. Just stop," Irina insisted, attempting to hide the blush on her cheeks.

"Are you possessed or something?"

"You are the one possessed, bastard! Just leave me alone!"

"You! What the hell is wrong with you? Why are you cursing me now?"

"Shut up and leave me alone."

"Tch. What a weird woman," Astron muttered, shaking his head before exiting the room.

SHUT!

"....."

As the door closed behind him, Irina slumped into a chair, her face buried in her knees. Despite her attempt to appear indifferent, a slight grin played on her lips.

The mix of emotions – the unexpected praise, the warmth in her chest, and the fluttering feeling – left her in a state of confusion.

"Stupid Bastard," she murmured to herself, her voice muffled by her knees.

The conflicting emotions seemed to have brought out an unusual side of her, and she couldn't quite comprehend the intensity of her reaction.

But she herself didn't notice that her small grin was creepy as hell.....

CREAK!

Beneath the ancient canopy, where moonlight fought a losing battle against the thick mist, the figure slinked through the gnarled trees with the ominous grace of a predator.

His every step seemed to whisper secrets to the forest floor, and the air was laden with a foreboding tension.

A wicked laughter, sharp and unsettling, echoed through the trees, sending shivers down the spine of every living creature in the woods. The figure's gleaming claws traced malevolent patterns on the bark as if etching the forest's dread into the very fabric of nature.

"Kekekeke... the child of the moon is near," the figure crooned, his voice a sinister melody that resonated with the haunting notes of the Mist.

In the midst of his journey, the figure's senses heightened, detecting the distant heartbeat of a lone human waiting in front of his destination.

".....Kekekeke...."

A wicked grin spread across his obscured face, and his laughter, a macabre melody, resonated through the silent woods.

"I had been hungry for a while."

After all, it had been traveling for a very long time and was now hungry.

SWOOSH!

As the human stumbled into view, the figure emerged from the shadows, his claws unsheathed and glistening with a dark intent.

STAB!

The moonlit glint in the figure's eyes reflected the imminent demise of the wandering soul. In a swift and silent motion, the figure struck, claiming the human with fatal precision.

"Kurghk-!"

The forest bore witness to the macabre dance of shadows as the figure's victim succumbed to the darkness, the life force extinguished in a silent scream.

"Kekekekekekkeke....."

The figure dragged the lifeless form into the shadows and had a wicked feast under the ancient canopy.

Gnashing sounds punctuated the eerie silence as the figure voraciously consumed the human essence. Each gulp seemed to amplify the macabre melody that danced through the mist-

laden air. The remnants of the victim's life force fueled the figure's hunger, infusing him with a renewed and ghastly vigor.

"Kekekeke... a delectable morsel," he chuckled between feasts, the sinister notes weaving through the forest like a haunting lullaby.

After finishing his meal, the figure continued his journey through the eerie forest, making the trees seem to lean away from his malevolent presence.

As the figure approached the place filled with mist, anticipation hung in the air. Yet, just as the ethereal clearing came into view, his body abruptly halted. A tremor seized him, causing his form to convulse in an unnatural dance. The laughter that had echoed so triumphantly moments ago now dissolved into strained gasps.

"Kekeke... what... is this?" The figure's voice wavered, a rare note of uncertainty tainting his macabre melody. His claws, once poised for the next hunt, now shook uncontrollably as if an unseen force had gripped him.

-THUD!

And just at that moment, suddenly, in front of his face stood two black eyes.

Two hollow eyes that he couldn't look even a millisecond.

"Finally, one of our kin returns to this forsaken place," a haunting voice echoed, emanating from the void within the hollow eyes. The figure, trapped within the paralysis of fear, strained to comprehend the eerie presence before him.

The Mist, once a malevolent dance partner, seemed to recoil in the face of this unseen force. The air thickened with an otherworldly aura as the figure's trembling form stood frozen, entrapped not by physical claws but by an intangible power that transcended the realm of the living.

"Kekeke... kin?" The figure's voice, now laced with confusion, faltered as the hollow eyes bore into the very essence of his being. The forest, silent witness to countless horrors, held its breath as if awaiting the revelation of an ancient secret.

In the midst of the mysterious encounter, the figure felt a surge of disorienting energy coursing through him. The haunting voice continued, "Thanks to your unwitting presence, I have finally awakened from my slumber."

The words hung in the air like a chilling breeze, carrying an ancient weight that resonated through the haunted woods. The Mist, once a malevolent force, now cradled the figure in its ethereal embrace, guiding him into an unconscious abyss that held many of the souls.

To his very end.

Chapter 260 Chapter 60.6 - Phantom's Land

At the time of 06.06 A.M., when life started to settle in the Phantom's Land, Ethan found himself wandering alone through the dense mist.

The fog cloaked everything in an otherworldly ambiance, and he couldn't help but feel a sense of unease lingering in the air.

'Again, this feeling...'

His footsteps echoed softly as he strolled along, the mist swirling around him like ethereal tendrils. The Phantom's Land was known for its mysterious and magical phenomena, and Ethan's assignment was to observe and document any unusual occurrences.

After the first day of collaborative observation with Lucas and Caleb, the team decided that it might be more efficient for each member to venture out alone.

'What did Caleb say again? Was it to measure the Temperature and the Humidity?'

The limited time they had in this peculiar environment urged them to collect as much data as possible, and splitting up seemed like the best approach. And, since Caleb was the best one amongst the trio in terms of theory, they decided to leave him the decisions.

He didn't want to admit it, but when it came to the theory, he was not the best. That was how he was. He didn't hate studying and was pretty much diligent, but he himself knew he lacked the inherent talent of those academics.

Though he didn't mind it, in this world where people were ruled by strength, he couldn't mind it at all.

As Ethan continued his solitary walk through the mist-shrouded landscape of the Phantom's Land, he found himself surrounded by unusual and magical sights.

Ethan's senses were on high alert as he continued his solitary walk, periodically stopping to jot down notes in his observation journal.

'Again, once again.....'

But, there was something foreign here.

The air was thick with mystical energy, and the ethereal tendrils of fog seemed to dance in response to the unseen forces that governed this realm. However, different from how he had seen previously, there was something unnatural here.

And the feeling he was getting now was a lot more disturbing than at the start.

'As if something is preying upon me.'

That was why he was armed with his spear, ready to strike. However, even after leaving his home, he had yet to encounter anything that would threaten his life.

SCREECH!

Aside from these wandering phantoms.

Ethan swiftly turned in the direction of the sound, his hand instinctively tightening around the shaft of his spear.

Through the mist, he spotted a phantom, a spectral entity with an eerie glow, closing in on him with hostile intent.

'Another phantom. Today, I have been encountering these more frequently.'

Without hesitation, Ethan shifted into a defensive stance and confronted the phantom.

SCREECH!

The screeching intensified, echoing through the mist, as the ethereal creature lunged at him. With practiced precision, Ethan parried its attacks, utilizing his spear to keep the phantom at bay.

SWOOSH!

After that, feeling a surge of mana coursing through him, Ethan seized the opportunity. With a swift motion, he coated the tip of his spear with his own mana, imbuing it with a shimmering energy.

PUFF!

The next thrust pierced through the phantom, shattering its spectral form into small, shiny pieces.

'Just as the professor informed me, this seems to be working.'

According to Eleanor's words, dealing with phantoms was easy. One just needed to apply a mana-infused attack to the shiny cores of the body.

'But, they are not dead.'

It was a temporary solution. No matter how many phantoms one killed utilizing this method, in reality, they were just disturbing their manifestation bridge, making those souls return to where they came from.

Well, in any case, he had already gotten used to this feeling, so he didn't care. It was quite exhausting to keep one's guard up all the time, but that also proved how effective this place was to be used as a training location.

As Ethan ventured deeper, he noticed an array of peculiar trees, their bark adorned with strange patterns that seemed to pulse with magical energy.

-THUMP!

Remembering the task at hand, he approached one of the unique trees, intending to collect the samples required for the observation.

Amidst the leaves and branches, Ethan recalled the small parchment Caleb had given him before they departed. It was enchanted by Caleb, utilizing his unique trait. The parchment could temporarily manifest an artifact-like effect in this magical environment, aiding Ethan in his tasks. In this aspect, Caleb was the perfect teammate for those like him who struggled to understand concepts of magic and mana engineering.

Closing his eyes, Ethan focused on the enchanted parchment supplying it with mana. A soft glow emanated from it, creating a spectral image of a tool specifically designed for collecting samples.

As the magical image materialized, Ethan reached out and found that the spectral tool behaved as if it were a tangible artifact.

'Caleb's enchantments are always impressive.'

Utilizing the spectral tool, Ethan carefully collected samples from the unique tree, noting its texture and magical resonance. The parchment's enchantment made the task efficient, allowing him to gather the necessary data without any issues.

As Ethan carefully collected samples from the unique tree, a sudden sensation of insects crawling upon his skin caused him to flinch.

-SWOOSH!

His instincts kicked in, and he immediately shifted into a combat position, ready to face a potential threat.

However, in an instant, the world around him blurred, and a strange dizziness overcame him. The mist seemed to dance in erratic patterns, and Ethan felt the ground beneath him become unsteady.

'What is happening?'

His consciousness wavered, and the mystical energies of the Phantom's Land played tricks on his senses. It was as if the very fabric of reality had been altered, and Ethan struggled to maintain his focus.

In the midst of the disorienting experience, Ethan's vision dimmed, and he felt a profound exhaustion enveloping him. It was as if the mana in this peculiar realm were draining him of strength.

'Not a-...'

With a final effort, Ethan tried to steady himself, but the force that was enveloping him had other plans. In his final moment, before losing consciousness, he was able to catch a glimpse of something materializing in the phantom form.

'Eyes.'

Two eyes looked deep into his soul.

Irina, still struggling with her conflicting emotions after her unexpected breakthrough and Astron's rare acknowledgment, decided to seek confirmation from a more reliable source.

With a determined expression, she stood up and left the bungalow, making her way towards Professor Eldorium's residence.

After all, even if she had felt like she was able to do something without getting any feedback and confirming results, she knew she wouldn't be able to be sure about it.

The fog outside had taken on an otherworldly glow as the magical lighting in Phantom's Land played tricks on perception.

'This....'

Irina navigated through the quaint town; her thoughts focused on gathering data to validate her newfound understanding of the mist's magic.

'The data from the previous years should be enough.'

TOK! TOK! TOK!

Reaching Professor Eldorium's residence, a building that held an aura of both wisdom and simpleness, Irina knocked on the door. It was pretty common for scholars to live in such a way, whilst mages tended to be a lot more extravagant with their accommodations.

CREAK!

A few moments later, the door creaked open, and Professor Eldorium stood before her, his intelligent eyes studying her with a knowing gaze.

"Ah, Irina Emberheart, isn't it?" he greeted with a warm smile. "What brings you to my humble abode?"

"Professor Eldorium," Irina began, her voice composed but carrying an undertone of excitement, "I've been working on a theory regarding the mist's magic in Phantom's Land. I was wondering if you could provide me with some data for comparison. I want to see if my understanding aligns with the known magical phenomena of this place."

Professor Eldorium's eyes twinkled with interest. However, one would never be sure if it was because of his innate desire as a scholar or because of his desire to get closer to the heir of the Emberheart family.

Though again, the world worked in such a way, so who were we to judge?

"Ah, delving into the mysteries of Phantom's Land, are we? I commend your curiosity and initiative. Please, come in."

He gestured for her to enter, and Irina stepped into the professor's study. The room was filled with ancient tomes, magical artifacts, and a subtle aroma of enchantments.

Irina took a seat as Professor Eldorium began to retrieve relevant scrolls and documents.

'He has no assistant?'

Though she couldn't help but ask herself, after all, this place seemed to be quite untidy and messy.

"Now, my dear," he said, handing her a parchment covered in intricate runes, "Normally, students are encouraged to make their own observations and draw their conclusions from the conditions surrounding them."

"It's an integral part of the learning process. However, exceptions can be made for those with a unique understanding, those who need not rely on shared data."

He paused, allowing his words to settle in the air, creating an unspoken understanding that his gesture was exceptional.

"In your case, Irina, I detect a sharp mind and an intuitive grasp of magic without relying on existing information. Sharing this information with you is, indeed, an exception. Consider it a favor extended to a promising mage with a notable lineage."

The subtle implications hung in the air, a silent acknowledgment of the Emberheart family's contributions to the magical community and a reminder that such favors were not granted lightly.

This was basically saying, I am doing a favor for you, and I hope that you won't forget it in the future.

"Of course, professor. I know such favors are not to be taken lightly. Rest assured, I will always remember this generosity," Irina replied, her voice composed but carrying a tone of sincere gratitude.

She accepted the parchment covered in intricate wards so that the records were protected, feeling the weight of the implied exchange. The dance of favors and expectations was a delicate one, especially within the intricate web of the high society.

And she knew how to navigate through them.

"Then, I won't keep you busy any longer, professor. I wish you the best with your research." With a nod of gratitude, she got ready to leave Professor Eldorium's study, parchment securely in her possession.

"Student Irina, remember to return those data before 5 P.M.," he advised, his voice carrying a subtle warning. "Those are the documents governed by the Association."

Irina nodded in acknowledgment, her focus undeterred. "I'll make sure to return it on time, professor. Thank you again for entrusting me with this valuable information."

And with those words she left.

Irina returned to her room, parchment in hand, excitement still bubbling within her.

The holographic displays and equations that Astron had provided were ready for comparison with the data she had just acquired from Professor Eldorium.

Seated at her desk, surrounded by the magical glow of her holographic apparatus, Irina meticulously compared the two sets of information.

The parchment from Professor Eldorium contained years of recorded data on the mist's magical properties in Phantom's Land.

"Let's see if my theory holds up," Irina muttered to herself, her fingers dancing over the controls.

The holographic displays flickered to life, showcasing the intricate patterns and values she had recorded based on her reverse-engineering concept.

However, as the comparison unfolded, a furrow appeared on Irina's brow. The values didn't align as expected. It was as if something crucial was missing or, worse, inaccurately interpreted.

"This doesn't make sense," Irina murmured, flipping through the parchment and her own notes. She double-checked the equations, ran simulations, and recalibrated the magical circuits. Yet, the discrepancies persisted.

Frustration crept into her expression. It wasn't just a matter of small deviations; the entire set of values seemed to be at odds with each other.

It was a puzzle with missing pieces, and Irina couldn't fathom what was going wrong.

"Am I missing a step? Did we overlook a factor?" Irina questioned herself, her mind racing through the intricate details of her theory. Doubt clouded her initial certainty, and the frustration grew.

But just as she was thinking about all those things, suddenly she felt like her world started blurring.

'What is happening?'

But, before she could even do anything, her world went dark.

-THUD!

As her body fell to the ground.