

## H. Academy 261

Chapter 261 Chapter 61.1 - Point Break

The dense mist enveloped Sylvie and her friend, Jasmine, as they walked through the mysterious landscape of Phantom's Land. The mist seemed to shroud everything, creating an atmosphere around them.

After they had spent their night together, Irina and Astron were doing something that was far more complex than she had thought, so she got bored.

So she went to get some fresh air if it could be called fresh, and there she met Jasmine and her group.

And thankfully, they let the two do their own thing without objecting much.

And now, here they were.

Jasmine, glancing around with a sense of awe, remarked, "This place is so surreal. It's like we're in a dream or something."

Sylvie nodded in agreement, her senses on high alert. "Yeah, it's unlike anything we've experienced before. I never expected the test to be like this."

Jasmine chuckled, "Well, at least it's not boring, right? But seriously, what do you think about all this?"

Sylvie pondered for a moment before responding, "I don't know. It's fascinating and a bit overwhelming at the same time. Astron seems to know a lot about this place, though."

Jasmine raised an eyebrow at Sylvie's mention of Astron. "That guy?" she inquired, a curious glint in her eyes. Well, considering his prowess at the library, it seemed like he was at least intellectual enough.

"Yeah. They are discussing something with Irina right now?"

"He is with Irina? That Irina Emberheart?"

"Yes."

"Do they get along?"

Sylvie hesitated, her expression becoming slightly complicated. "Well, you know how they are. It's a bit... complicated. They either bicker like there's no tomorrow or... well, it's not like they're best friends."

Jasmine chuckled, sensing there was more to the story. "Complicated, huh? That sounds interesting. What's the deal between those two?"

Sylvie sighed, trying to find the right words to convey the intricacies of Irina and Astron's dynamic. "Irina is.....Well, it is really hard to explain. But their personalities clash, you know? Irina is all about authority and rules, and Astron, well, he's not exactly the obedient type."

"Yeah, he doesn't seem to be the obedient type, certainly."

That guy was pretty rude, both to Sylvie, to her, and to others.

But at the same time, Jasmine remembered something. Her friend's expression when she was with him.

"Are you okay with it, though?" So, she asked.

Sylvie looked at Jasmine, a puzzled expression on her face. "What do you mean, okay with it?"

"I mean....These two are together alone in the bungalow, you know?"

Sylvie still didn't understand. "They're... together in the bungalow?"

Jasmine chuckled, "Yeah, you said they needed some 'alone time' to discuss strategies, I suppose. But you know, being alone in a bungalow, it could lead to... other discussions."

Sylvie's eyes widened as the realization dawned on her, and her cheeks turned a shade of pink, understanding what she was saying. "You....What are you saying? They are not like that."

She wanted to tell her friend that there was no way these two were like that, but at the same time, she suddenly remembered their feelings when they bickered.

"That....No way, right?"

THUD!

But just as her thoughts were about to drag away further, suddenly, she heard the sound of someone falling to the ground.

"Huh? Jasmine?"

Turning towards the source of the voice, she noticed that Jasmine was lying on the ground.

Sylvie rushed towards her fallen friend, panic creeping into her voice. She knelt beside Jasmine, gently shaking her shoulders. "Jasmine, wake up! What happened?"

But there was no response. Jasmine remained unconscious, and Sylvie's worry intensified. Panicking a little, Sylvie shouted for help, hoping someone nearby would hear her.

"Help! Somebody, please help-!"

She was about to shout more, but then she realized where they were. Right now, they were inside the fog of the Phantom's land, and they couldn't see much.

Sylvie, her worry escalating, gazed down at Jasmine, trying to comprehend what had just transpired. The misty surroundings of Phantom's Land added an eerie touch to the unfolding situation, making it even more unsettling.

She felt a creepy sensation rising upon her skin and face, but she couldn't focus on that right now.

Focusing her attention on Jasmine, Sylvie attempted to use her healing powers to revive her friend. She placed her hands on Jasmine's shoulders, closing her eyes to channel mana through her fingertips. The soft glow of healing energy enveloped Jasmine, but to Sylvie's surprise, there was no immediate response.

Panic crept into Sylvie's voice as she continued to shake Jasmine gently. "Come on, Jasmine, wake up! What's happening?"

But suddenly, her world turned cold for a second.

'Calm down, Sylvie.'

As if something inside her was calling her out. No, it wasn't something but herself.

'What are you doing, Sylvie? Are you going to mess up everything again?'

She knew for a fact that right now, they weren't in the perfect position to get help, and neither did they need to. She was a healer herself.

'You must always remain calm, regardless of the situation. This is the most important aspect of learning how to fight, but it applies to everything.'

Remembering his words while he taught her how to fight, she knew if she wanted to be any help to others she needed to keep her calm.

'Start with finding the source of the problem.'

Focusing her attention on Jasmine, Sylvie attempted to use her healing powers to perform a quick check-up on her friend, her friend.

However, as her hands moved over Jasmine's body, she couldn't discern any apparent injuries or ailments. It was perplexing.

The misty environment, coupled with the mysterious nature of Phantom's Land, seemed to obscure the true condition of Jasmine. Sylvie could feel a dark aura enveloping her friend, but its origin and implications remained elusive.

"Something's not right," Sylvie muttered to herself, a sense of frustration and helplessness settling in.

This was no natural thing. Right now, the thing that was surrounding her friend was definitely out of the ordinary and a phenomenon that she had encountered for the first time.

The dense fog distorted her surroundings, making it challenging to comprehend the situation fully.

SCREECH!

The sudden, ear-piercing sound echoed through the misty landscape, sending shivers down Sylvie's spine.

'What?'

As if in response to the unsettling noise, a phantom materialized from the fog, lunging towards Sylvie with menacing intent.

Fear gripped Sylvie, her senses on high alert as the phantom approached.

SWOOSH!

However, a reflex born from her training kicked in. Without conscious thought, Sylvie's body moved, a fluid dance of evasion that narrowly avoided the spectral creature's attack.

The phantom passed through the space Sylvie had occupied just moments before, its ghastly form dissipating back into the mist.

"Haaaah.....Haaah...."

Sylvie's heart raced, a mixture of fear and adrenaline coursing through her veins.

"Calm down, Sylvie," she whispered to herself, remembering the importance of composure in moments of crisis.

'Now phantoms are around, this is not good.'

The encounter with the phantom only intensified the urgency of the situation, urging Sylvie to find a solution for both Jasmine and herself.

'I need to find a safe place.'

And instantly, she remembered where they could protect themselves.

SCREECH!

The unnerving sound of the phantom's screech echoed once again through the misty landscape. Annoyance flickered in Sylvie's eyes, and a surge of frustration boiled within her.

"Shut up!" she shouted, an unexpected burst of anger fueling her voice. In a reflexive motion, Sylvie swung her hand through the air, as if swatting away an irritating insect.

To her astonishment, a radiant white-yellowish light intensified at the tip of her fingers. The light expanded, forming a protective barrier that enveloped the phantom.

In an instant, the ghastly creature dissipated into nothingness, vanishing into the mist.

Sylvie blinked, bewildered by the sudden manifestation of her powers. It was an instinctive reaction, an outburst of magical energy that seemed to emanate from within her.

"Huh... What just happened?" Sylvie mumbled to herself, staring at her hand in disbelief. The misty surroundings held an eerie silence as if even Phantom's Land itself was surprised by the turn of events.

'This.....'

Realizing that her newfound ability might be a key to dealing with the phantoms, Sylvie focused her attention back on Jasmine. The dark aura surrounding her friend persisted, and Sylvie felt an urgency to find answers.

"We need to get out of here," Sylvie muttered, determination replacing her earlier sense of helplessness.

She reached for the small watch strapped around her wrist. She opened it, revealing a magical compass that always pointed towards their accommodations – the bungalows.

"Haaaaah.....Come here..."

Taking a deep breath, she grabbed her friend and put her on her back.

"Ack! You are heavy."

But her friend was a little heavier than she had taken, though after imbuing herself with mana she was able to carry her easily.

'Now, let's go.'

Sylvie followed the gentle pull of the compass needle, leading the way through the thick mist. The path was challenging, with obscured visibility and eerie shadows dancing around them. However, Sylvie pressed forward, carrying the unconscious Jasmine on her back.

SCREECH! SCREECH!

As they moved, spectral shapes materialized from the fog, phantoms drawn by the mysterious energy permeating Phantom's Land. Sylvie, now more composed, swung her hand with purpose each time a phantom approached. The radiant light emanated again, dispelling the ghostly creatures effortlessly.

The journey was not easy, as the mist played tricks on Sylvie's senses, and the constant encounters with phantoms tested her resolve.

'Don't stop Sylvie.'

Despite all the challenges, the determined healer pressed on, guided by the needle of the compass. After all, there was no way she could abandon her friend like that.

Finally, after navigating the maze-like terrain, Sylvie arrived at the familiar sight of the bungalows.

The bungalows stood as beacons of safety amidst the spectral landscape. Sylvie, relieved to have reached their destination, approached her bungalow with Jasmine still on her back.

"Haaaaah....Finally...."

She carefully opened the door, anticipating the comfort and security within. However, what awaited her inside was not the peace she expected. Irina lay on the ground, unconscious, just like Jasmine. Sylvie's eyes widened, and a feeling of dread washed over her.

"Oh no... Irina!"

Leaving Jasmine on the ground, Sylvie rushed to Irina's side. She checked for any signs of injury or ailment but found none. It was as if an unseen force had rendered both Irina and Jasmine into a deep slumber.

"No! Don't tell me....."

A sense of urgency gripped Sylvie as she realized the gravity of the situation. Leaving the bungalow, she ventured into the small town area of Phantom's Land, only to find that everyone else—students, instructors, and staff alike—lay unconscious on the ground.

"No, no, no, no, no..."

Even if she needed to calm down, how could she?



"Something's terribly wrong... What happened to everyone?"

After all, inside this misty fog of the Phantom's Land, only she was awake right now.....

Chapter 262 Chapter 61.2 - Point Break

With a heavy heart and a sense of urgency, Sylvie returned to her bungalow, contemplating the mysterious circumstances that had left everyone unconscious. As she gently laid Jasmine and Irina side by side, a deep worry etched across her face.

"What is happening here? How did everyone end up like this?"

Sylvie pondered the possible causes, but the mysterious nature of Phantom's Land seemed to shroud the answers in uncertainty.

No matter what she thought, this situation didn't make any sense at all. But, one thing was certain, in this place of Phenomena only she was awake now while others were not.

'And there are phantoms.'

The fact that she was attacked by phantoms countless times just on the way alone made the place dangerous as well.

'After the time comes to 06.06 P.M...'

She knew what this implied. The phantoms outside of the bungalows became infinitely more rampant and dangerous after that time.

'And many students must have lost their consciousness outside of the bungalows.'

They came to this land with the academy, and there were at least 200 students here right now, and she couldn't possibly carry all of them back to bungalows.

Let alone carrying them, even finding them in this mist would be quite a challenge.

'I can't possibly leave this place to call help either.'

The academy didn't provide them with possible ways to return since the students were meant to stay here all the time. Therefore, they had no way of knowing how to get out of Phantom's Land.

In the midst of her contemplation, Sylvie's attention was abruptly drawn to Jasmine's resting form.

From the spot where Jasmine lay, a mysterious distortion in the air manifested, taking the form of a phantom.

SCREECH!

Before Sylvie could fully comprehend what was happening, the phantom lunged towards her, catching her off guard.

"What the—"

The ethereal creature's attack sliced through the air, aiming for Sylvie. Instinct kicked in, and Sylvie, driven by a mix of fear and determination, reacted swiftly.

THUD!

With a forceful swing of her hand, she managed to smash the phantom down before it could land its strike.

"Hah..."

Panting slightly, Sylvie realized that this was no ordinary phenomenon.

As she caught her breath, another disturbance caught her attention.

SCREECH!

A phantom emerged from Irina's unconscious form, its spectral presence sending a chill down Sylvie's spine. Without hesitation, Sylvie focused her energy and swiftly dispatched the phantom, ensuring it dissipated into the mist.

"What is going on? Why are these phantoms appearing from our friends?"

The unsettling realization that the phantoms were somehow connected to the unconscious students deepened Sylvie's concern. Adding the fact that they could appear in the bungalows made everything more and more dangerous as well.

'Just what is this?'

She couldn't think of anything else as she sank into the couch. All of these things were taking a toll on her mind.

The chilling encounters with phantoms emerging from her friends only added to the mysterious and perilous nature of Phantom's Land.

As she pondered the situation, a realization dawned on her—a realization that could potentially be the key to unlocking the mystery.

Amidst the chaos, a thought surfaced in Sylvie's mind. Out of all the students in Phantom's Land, only she was awake, and her unusual powers seemed to play a role in her safety.

'First Lord's Authority.....'

The soft glow emanating from her hands caught her attention, reminding her of the unique abilities she possessed.

"What if..." Sylvie murmured, her eyes narrowing in focus. "What if I can use this power to wake others up?"

It made sense. After all, if what she thought was correct, then if she could implement how she did to herself, then everything would be okay.

As a healer who loved to experiment with herself, she closed her eyes and slowly started exploring her own body first.

The gentle glow of her healing powers intensified as she focused on the source of her abilities. As her consciousness delved deeper, she encountered a peculiar sensation—an obstruction within her own heart.

A black aura seemed to swirl around a specific area, creating a barrier that prevented her from getting grasped by the same black misty aura that was covering others.

'I see...'

Then she realized that this was the reason why she wasn't affected by it. Something inside her was autonomously protecting her from the dangers, even if she wasn't reacting to it at all.

Sylvie, realizing the protective barrier within her own heart, saw an opportunity to extend this safeguard to others who lay unconscious in the mysterious mist of Phantom's Land.

She first looked at Jasmine, her friend who was with her.

'No....'

But she knew her friend. In this situation where many other lives were in danger, she needed to be logical and should never think with emotions.

Her gaze shifted towards Irina, the rational and analytic mind that could prove invaluable in this situation.

'Yes. If it is Irina, then....'

She needed to accept. She wasn't the smartest person out there, and someone with a clever mind was needed right now.

"Haaaaah...Let's do it Sylvie."

Approaching Irina with determination, Sylvie took a deep breath, ready to apply her newfound understanding of her powers.

Placing her hands gently on Irina's shoulders, she closed her eyes and focused on the barrier within her own heart. The gentle glow of her healing powers surrounded both of them as Sylvie attempted to share this protective shield.

Initially, the attempt seemed to falter. Sylvie's brow furrowed in concentration as she struggled to extend the protective aura to Irina. It was a delicate process, requiring a deep connection and understanding of the other person's inner workings.

But Sylvie didn't give up.

After several attempts, a breakthrough occurred. The protective aura expanded from Sylvie to Irina, enveloping her in a soft, yellowish glow.

"Haaaaaah....Haaaah....."

A gasp escaped Irina's lips as she jolted awake, breathing heavily as if she had just emerged from the depths of a drowning nightmare.

Sylvie looked at Irina with a mix of relief and anticipation. "Irina, are you okay? Can you hear me?" The success with Irina filled her with hope that she could replicate this process and awaken the others from their unconscious state.

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Irina's daily grind, you know, the usual 'normal' stuff. Every morning, she'd get up with the sun peeking through the window – a bit of warmth, a bit of frosty air, setting the tone for the day. Breakfast served by the household staff, quick and routine, nothing extravagant.

Then it was off to her private study, surrounded by dusty spell books and crackling fireplaces. Hours lost in the arcane, pages turning, and mentors lurking around. Magic, etiquette, governance – a mix of responsibilities and expectations weighing her down, you know?

But there were those brief breaks, those moments of fleeting escape. Sometimes, the gardens provided a respite – blossoms and fragrance, a welcome distraction from the heavy air of the manor. Other times, she'd venture into the streets of Arcadia Dominion, where chaos and magic clashed in a dance of humanity.

Yet, no matter the respite, the weight of responsibility loomed large. Tutors, tower inspections, galas – a constant reminder of her role as the Emberheart heiress. A delicate balance, a dance between duty and desire, each step forward a cautious journey towards an uncertain destiny.

Sometimes, she would steal away to the gardens, where blossoms bloomed in a riot of color, their fragrance a welcome reprieve from the stifling confines of the manor.

And today was one of those days when she decided to escape from her house just as before.

And then, as the sun dipped low, the discontent brewed. Through opulent halls, a silent rebellion unfolded. Maids, tasks, and grumbling under her breath about the constraints of her scripted life. Always cleaning, always obeying – it wasn't the life she wanted, you get me?

So, she slipped beyond the manicured gardens into the wild embrace of the forest. The untamed, the unscripted – a sanctuary away from the mansion's polished walls. The scent of damp earth, the rustling leaves, a soothing balm for her restless spirit.

"Always cleaning, always obeying," she muttered to herself, resentment bubbling beneath the surface. "Do they not see how suffocating it is? This isn't the life I want."

And then came the cliff, the moonlit perch overlooking the city lights. A defiant climb to the highest point, where city sounds turned to distant murmurs. A whispered rebellion to the night air – "I won't be confined by their expectations. This is my life, and I'll shape it as I see fit."

At the peak of the cliff, where the city lights below shimmered like distant stars, Irina found herself caught in a moment of rebellion and self-discovery.

The night air was cool against her skin, and the echoes of her whispered defiance lingered around her.

And then, in that solitary defiance, a small movement caught her attention. A tiny squirrel, its fur aglow in the moonlight, scurried across the rocky ledge.

Irina couldn't help but feel a sense of relief as she watched the creature, taking a moment to forget about her responsibilities. "What a cute little thing," she thought, a rare smile forming on her lips.

The squirrel seemed unfazed by her presence and continued to nibble on an acorn. Irina decided to approach the tiny creature, taking careful steps towards it.

As she marveled at its tiny paws and fluffy tail, the worries of her daily life faded away.

Irina cautiously approached a squirrel, finding solace in her family's grand expectations. She admired the simplicity and beauty of the tiny creature when something extraordinary happened.

But just at that moment, the squirrel emitted a soft, glowing yellow aura in the moonlight, leaving Irina awestruck and confused.

Before she could make sense of the surreal scene, the glow intensified, blinding everything in its radiance. Irina felt a sudden tightness in her chest as the luminous yellow engulfed her senses. The air became thick, almost suffocating, and an unexplainable weight pressed down on her. As the vibrant glow intensified, she panicked, feeling swallowed whole.

Just as she thought she couldn't bear it any longer, the brilliance vanished, leaving Irina disoriented and gasping for air. As her eyes adjusted, she realized she was no longer on the cliff. She looked around, finding herself in a bungalow with the air still tinged with the scent of damp earth and the distant echoes of the forest.

"Irina, can you hear me?"

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"Irina, can you hear me?"

Irina's eyes fluttered open, her vision blurry as she gradually regained consciousness. A dull throbbing pain echoed in her head, and she instinctively brought a hand to her temple, trying to soothe the ache.

"Haaaah... What happened?" Irina mumbled, her voice groggy as she attempted to piece together the fragments of her memory. The misty surroundings and the unusual glow in Sylvie's eyes added to her disorientation.

"Sylvie?" she uttered, her gaze meeting the concerned eyes of her friend and teammate.

Her mind was blank as if some pieces of something were constantly going around her mind.

'Just what is this?'

She couldn't understand at all. A

'I feel like I just woke up from a dream.'

In the pieces of her pictures, she saw her house, the maids.....The memories were blurry, and she wasn't able to understand everything clearly, but it was like waking up after a dream.

"Sylvie, what's going on, right? Why are we here?" Irina's words were accompanied by a pained expression as if the foggy haze in her mind mirrored the mist that enveloped Phantom's Land.

Sylvie's relief was evident, but at the same time, she was having a hard time understanding everything herself, so her face hardened at the mention of recent events.

Recognizing the need for Irina to cool down and gather her thoughts, Sylvie fetched a glass of water for both of them.

'Sigh....What to do...'

She handed Irina the glass, urging her to drink while she took a sip from her own.

"Take your time, Irina. It's a lot to process, and I don't have all the answers either," Sylvie said, her voice comforting yet tinged with uncertainty.



As Irina composed herself, Sylvie began to explain the strange occurrences in Phantom's Land. She recounted how people had suddenly lost consciousness, the eerie encounters with phantoms, and the protective power she had discovered within herself.

"People are unconscious outside, and I think it's related to these phantoms. Somehow, I have this power that protected me, and I managed to wake you up," Sylvie explained, her gaze focused on Irina.

"People are unconscious, huh? Have you checked everyone?"

Irina asked, looking around. She also had a hard time getting a hold of her head, but she forcefully calmed herself down after utilizing a mana circulation method for such cases.

'So, she has a unique power. I knew it.'

Even though it wasn't the time to make such assessments, Irina couldn't help but think. After all, out of all the people here, only Sylvie was awake, and that meant she was exceptional to the point that she defied all the geniuses here.

"Yes. After leaving Jasmine here, I looked for possible Instructors or Professors, yet everyone I saw was unconscious already."

"I see....."

Everything didn't seem to add up.

"So, according to what you're saying, these phantoms are somehow linked to the unconscious state of everyone. Normally, the Phantoms are unable to enter the bungalows, as we all know. But after some time passed while we were unconscious, some phantoms appeared from our bodies and attacked you, correct?"

"Yes. That is right." Sylvie confirmed.

Irina continued with her line of reasoning, her analytical mind at work. "If the phantoms emerged from us, it means the unconscious state of the people is somehow producing these creatures. The fact that they can appear even inside the bungalows after a certain time makes staying here unsafe

as well. We can't afford to let others remain unconscious. It's not only a danger to them but also puts everyone else at risk."

Sylvie's expression tightened as she grasped the gravity of the situation. "So, staying in the bungalows won't keep everyone safe. We need to find a way to wake them up and deal with the phantoms at the source. But how do we do that?"

Irina paused for a moment, pondering the available information. Then, she turned to Sylvie with a determined look. "Sylvie, can you use your power on others? If we can wake them up, we might be able to gather more information and solve this mystery."

Sylvie nodded, her eyes flickering with uncertainty. "I can try, but..." She hesitated, a sudden dizziness washing over her. "I can feel it. The light surrounding me has already diminished. My mana reserves are almost depleted. I won't be able to wake up others without enough mana."

Irina's brows furrowed as she processed the information while checking Sylvie's mana reserves. To a trained mage like her, she could easily discern from the body symptoms, and she saw what Sylvie was saying was right.

"So, the power consumption of forcefully waking others up is so high....."

That meant two things. The first one is that Sylvie wasn't talented enough with her powers and used a lot of unneeded energy. That could be possible, but from what Irina had seen, even if Sylvie wasn't that smart, she had a talent for utilizing mana.

"That means...."

The enemy they were facing, the possible spell that Sylvie had mentioned, was just too strong.

She turned to Sylvie with a questioning look. "The spell you saw, it covered other people's hearts, right?"

Sylvie nodded in confirmation. "Yes, it seemed like some kind of dark aura was surrounding their hearts. That's what I tried to dispel."

Irina's expression grew serious as she decided to investigate the phenomenon herself. She approached Jasmine, who was still unconscious and focused her magical senses on the mysterious energy surrounding the girl's heart.

"This...."

The moment she delved into it, Irina felt a surge of complexity and darkness that almost overwhelmed her.

"Urgh!"

Immediately, she increased the distance between her and Jasmine. Her headache intensified for a second while her whole world shook.

'Just what the hell is this?'

It was so complex and dark that she couldn't find anything inside it at all.

"The energy is ominous, black, and insanely complex. I've never encountered anything like this," Irina admitted, withdrawing from the probing with a hint of exhaustion in her eyes. "It's not just a simple spell; it's something far more intricate and malevolent."

However, Irina had an idea.

Inside her head, she felt something ominous appearing.

Irina, feeling the weight of the situation, excused herself momentarily from Sylvie to check her notes.

She navigated through holographic diagrams and equations that Astron had prepared for her, but her mind was restless, and something tugged at the corners of her memory.

'What am I missing?' Irina pondered, her fingers dancing over the controls as she scrolled through her notes. As she flipped through the holographic displays, her eyes caught a familiar set of calculations related to Phantom's Land.

The recorded data and the expected data for the land's characteristics were neatly organized on one of the holographic papers. As she compared the two, a realization hit her like a bolt of lightning.

'This... It can't be.' Irina's eyes widened as she retraced the calculations and cross-referenced her findings.

Just as before, she had initially assumed that she had made a mistake about her theory since the expected results didn't match the ones that were recorded.

However, what if she hadn't made a mistake?

What if the results were actually true, and the only thing wrong was the perspective they were looking at?

What if, even from the start, everything was right before their eyes, and they just refused to see it?

In a sudden revelation, she understood that Phantom's Land wasn't a natural phenomenon.

It wasn't a random occurrence or a magical anomaly that happened out of nature itself.

Instead, it was the manifestation of an incredibly potent entity's influence.

"By the spirits... Phantom's Land is shaped by a powerful entity residing here," Irina muttered to herself, the pieces of the puzzle falling into place.

The malevolent aura Sylvie encountered, the phantoms, and the unnatural complexity she felt while probing Jasmine's heart – all of it pointed to the presence of a sentient force.

"And all the time....We have been missing this."

To the point that this entity was able to fool countless different mages, even Archmages' eyes.

'And it's not a friendly one.' Irina's mind raced as she considered the implications.

The entity's malevolence explained the dark, intricate nature of the spell Sylvie had encountered and the complexity she felt while probing Jasmine's heart.

The gravity of the situation sank in. Phantom's Land wasn't just a mysterious phenomenon; it was a territory ruled by an entity with intentions unknown and potentially dangerous.

As she contemplated the enormity of their adversary, a realization struck her – the entity's power far surpassed anything they could comprehend.

The fact that it could influence Phantom's Land to this extent and maintain the unconscious state of everyone within its grasp indicated a strength beyond conventional understanding.

'We need more than just Sylvie and me to face this threat,' Irina acknowledged. The two of them, no matter how talented, were insufficient to confront an entity of such caliber.

That was the natural conclusion. No matter how prideful Irina was, she wasn't arrogant enough to think that she could face such an enemy all alone.

Well, she might have thought that in the past, but that was no longer the case.

'But, who should we.....'

And at that moment, a seemingly annoying figure popped into her mind – a boy with black hair and purple eyes.

'Why?'

She couldn't help but ask herself, getting annoyed. Why was this guy's face popping out of nowhere?

Even after excluding all the professors and the instructors, the most rational decision would be to wake up Victor, the strongest person out of all the students.

But why did his face come up?

'I see....'

Then she realized the reason. That guy, with his unconventional approach and irritatingly insightful observations, suddenly seemed like a potential asset.

For some reason, she knew whenever she was with him, she knew he was composed. Never once in her life had she seen him panic before.

'As much as he gets on my nerves, his mind might be the key to understanding and combating this entity,' Irina thought begrudgingly.

If anyone could unravel the complexities of Phantom's Land and devise a strategy against the malevolent force, it might very well be Astron.

There was also the fact that they could only find his location exactly.

"Tch....."

Well, these were only the logical reasonings.....While there was another reason she would never admit.

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"Tch...." Irina clicked her tongue in annoyance, unwilling to admit the less rational reason behind her choice.

"Sylvie," Irina began, her expression a mix of frustration and determination, "I know who we need to find. It's Astron. As annoying as he is, his unconventional thinking might be the key to understanding and combating this entity. Plus, he's always composed – I've never seen him panic. We need someone like that in this situation."

Sylvie raised an eyebrow, a hint of surprise in her gaze. "Ah...." It was not that she disliked it, but more of a fact that it came out randomly. "Astron?" She asked.

Irina nodded a bit begrudgingly. "Yes, really. Despite his quirks, he has a unique way of approaching problems. I've seen it before, and I believe he might have insights that could help us."

"I see...." Sylvie nodded her head, inwardly feeling a little relieved. In this academy, there were only a handful of people that she could talk to, and one of them was definitely him. So, she didn't want something to happen to him, and she had been feeling uneasy about it for a while.

"Even if you didn't say it...I was going to look after him, as well." Hearing this, Irina squinted at Sylvie a little but then didn't say anything.

"But.....How do we find him?" Sylvie asked, looking around the misty landscape from the windows, her eyes searching for any sign of Astron.

After all, since he wasn't in the bungalows and had left earlier in the day, it was going to be a challenge.

However, Irina had already considered this in her decision from the start. After all, if they were going to waste immense hours just for searching him, his value would diminish a lot in this radical situation.

Irina's frustration shifted to a thoughtful expression. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a small watch provided by the academy.

"Remember this watch? It has two compasses inside – one always points to the direction of the bungalows, and the other always points north."

"Yes, I remember," Sylvie replied. This was how she had found her way to bungalows, after all. "But, what will they do for our situation?"

Even then, she couldn't help but be skeptical. They didn't even know which direction Astron went, so how could this prove anything?

Irina nodded, acknowledging Sylvie's skepticism. "You're right; these compasses won't directly help us find Astron in this vast mist. But have you ever thought about what's underneath these compasses?"

Sylvie furrowed her brows, puzzled by Irina's question. "What's underneath? They're just compasses, aren't they?"

Irina smirked, enjoying the intrigue she was creating. She flipped the watch open, revealing the backside of the compasses. There, engraved into the metal, were intricate symbols and lines forming a detailed enchantment.

These compasses are more than just navigation tools," Irina explained, her fingers delicately tracing the engraved symbols and lines forming a detailed enchantment on the back of the compasses. "There's a hidden enchantment on the back. Watch closely."

With a determined focus, Irina activated the enchantment, causing the symbols to glow softly. She then looked around the bungalow, ensuring Sylvie observed the reaction.

"Notice how the compasses point towards another enchantment," Irina pointed out, the glow on the back of the compass subtly aligning with a point in the middle of their own bungalow. "It's not just about finding north or the bungalows; it's about revealing an enchantment in the very heart of this place."

The idea may be that the compasses would point out in the direction of the magnetic field, but in Phantom's Land, the physical features of the world also did change. So, Irina was curious about how the academy handled these compasses and found these enchantments.

Sylvie's eyes closed in realization as she followed Irina's explanation. "So, the compasses lead to an enchantment in each bungalow. But what does that have to do with finding Astron?"

Irina smirked, pleased with Sylvie catching on. "Now, imagine if I reverse the process. Instead of seeking the enchantment in our bungalow, we use the reverse. Utilizing this enchantment, we could see where Astron is. After all, he also has the same watch as us, which means his watch should be connected to this enchantment as well."

Her words made sense. Irina knew this was the most likely way that Academy would be able to trace the students inside the Phantom's Land and move effectively if something had happened to them.

Sylvie didn't know that, but the watches were also linked to another enchantment, which was a lot more complex and hard to understand. This was probably the one that was connected to the center of the town.



'I think they were even expecting us to understand how this worked.'

There was no way that any students would normally be able to understand normal-level magic-engineering products, but simple things like these seemed to be intentionally spread around.

Students with good theoretical knowledge and skills could reverse the process easily, which was why Irina did it.

Though, it wasn't that it mattered now.

Irina wasted no time and immediately began the process of reversing the enchantment. Her fingers moved deftly, tracing symbols and manipulating the magical energies within the watch. The soft glow from the engraved enchantment reacted to her manipulations.

'Wow.....'

Sylvie observed with a mix of awe and anticipation.

The speed movements of magic Irina performed seemed complex, yet she was determined to see if they could locate Astron using this method.

After a minute of focused effort, Irina's eyes lit up with success. The glow on the back of the compass changed, aligning with a new direction. She looked at Sylvie with a triumphant smile.

"It worked. Now we have the enchantment pointing towards Astron's location within Phantom's Land," Irina announced a sense of accomplishment in her voice. "We should move quickly. Time is of the essence, and who knows what kind of danger that guy might be in."

Just as Sylvie and Irina were about to leave the bungalow, Irina placed a gentle hand on Sylvie's shoulder, stopping her in her tracks.

"Sylvie, I think it's best if you stay here and keep an eye on Jasmine. Besides, you need to recover your mana as fast as possible. If something happens, I'll return immediately, but for now, I'll handle the situation with Astron," Irina suggested, her tone carrying a mix of concern and authority.

Sylvie looked a bit worried, torn between 'wanting to assist' and recognizing the validity of Irina's points.

However, she nodded, realizing that looking after her friend and restoring her own strength would indeed be crucial.

"Alright, Irina. Just be careful...." Sylvie replied, her eyes reflecting a mixture of trust and concern.

Irina gave her a reassuring smile before heading out into the misty landscape of Phantom's Land, determined to find Astron and unravel the mysteries that surrounded them.

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Irina, armed with the enchanted watch guiding her toward Astron's location, stepped out into the eerie mist of Phantom's Land.

The compass on the watch pointed her in a specific direction, and she navigated through the fog-shrouded landscape with a determined pace.

'This guy? Why is he venturing this far away?'

Considering his rank, even if Astron was quite good at combat, he shouldn't have been overestimating himself, yet he did it anyway.

'Sigh.....'

As she ventured deeper into the fog, the atmosphere grew thicker, and the fog seemed to cling to her surroundings like a tangible presence.

The strange phenomena of the Phantom's Land intensified, creating an otherworldly ambiance.

FLINCH!

Suddenly, a shiver ran down Irina's spine, and she felt a subtle shift in the air.

Before she could react, shadowy figures emerged from the mist – phantoms.

These spectral entities materialized in front of her, their eerie forms reaching out with their long arms.

SCREECH!

As they immediately lunged at her, she couldn't help but shake her head at herself.

'This is why I hate creepy places.'

It was not because of the strength of enemies but because of the tenseness of the atmosphere. The beings that didn't even have a second of right to stand before her could now dare to bear their fangs.

"Just disappear."

SWOOSH!

With a nonchalant wave of her hand, Irina unleashed a surge of intense flames. The fire danced through the air, instantly dispelling the phantoms as if they were mere illusions. The ghostly figures dissipated in the heat, leaving only the faint scent of burning mist in their wake.

Irina easily dispersed the phantoms but felt uneasy in Phantom's Land. As she moved forward through the thickening fog, she found Astron unconscious.

She crouched down beside him, finding no visible injuries but sensing that he was lost in the mysterious energies of the place.

As Irina crouched down beside Astron's unconscious form, a peculiar sensation washed over her.

Despite the eerie atmosphere and the danger they were facing, his face looked strangely peaceful and relaxed in repose. It was a stark contrast to the usual observant and sometimes annoying expression he wore when awake.

"He looks kind of... calm," Irina mumbled to herself, feeling a strange shift in her own thoughts.

For a moment, she saw Astron not as the persistent and inquisitive individual she knew but as someone vulnerable and at peace. It was as if the mist of Phantom's Land had momentarily lifted something off him.

'What am I even thinking?'

However, she quickly shook off the unusual musings, realizing that her thoughts were wandering into strange territory. Focusing on the situation at hand, she channeled her mana into her body, coating herself.

With a swift motion, she utilized her telekinetic abilities, gently lifting Astron and securing him on her back. Despite the weight, her magical prowess made carrying him seem effortless.

With Astron securely on her back, Irina activated the enchanted watch once more. The reversed compass pointed the way back to the bungalows, and immediately, she started navigating through the thickening fog.

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CREAK!

As the door of the bungalow opened, Sylvie immediately went there to check who had come, and there she saw Irina with Astron on her back.

"Sylvie, we found him. He's unconscious, but I think he's alright," Irina announced, entering the bungalow. She gently lowered Astron onto a nearby bed, ensuring he was comfortable.

"Thank lord."

Mumbling that she followed her steps.

Sylvie looked at Astron with a hint of worry and then turned her gaze to Irina. "Irina, you look exhausted. Rest for a moment; I can keep an eye on them."

"I am fine. We can't waste much time."

Irina mumbled, drinking the water in her cup. "Have you recovered your mana enough?" Then, she asked Sylvie in a small hope. However, Sylvie's response wasn't something hopeful at all.

"No.....I am not sure why, but the mana potions I had don't seem to have recovered the specific type of energy I have been using,"

Irina's expression turned serious upon hearing Sylvie's response. It was an unexpected complication that added to the challenges they were facing.

'Her power is different from mana.'

This was something that was quite a revelation itself, but for the time being, she didn't have the time.

"That's odd. But we can't dwell on it now. We need to figure out our next move," Irina said, determined to find a solution.

As she pondered their options, an idea sparked in Irina's mind. Recalling the dreamlike state she experienced before waking up in Phantom's Land, she suggested a plan.

"Sylvie, there might be another way. I was in some kind of dream state before waking up here. If I can enter Astron's dream, maybe I can help him wake up. It's worth a shot," Irina proposed.

Sylvie's eyes widened at the suggestion. "Entering dreams? That's an advanced magical territory, Irina. Are you sure about this?"

"We don't have many options. Besides, on the way, I was thinking of ways, and I think it will work. But...."

"But?"

"You will need to use that remaining power of yours."

Sylvie hesitated, looking concerned. "Irina, I don't have much power left. How am I supposed to protect you and myself from the phantoms if I don't have any energy left?"

Irina offered a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, Sylvie. Remember the preparations we made? We bought herbs that can repel phantoms without relying on mana. You should stay in the room and use those since you will only be dealing with Jasmine's phantom if what we know is correct. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Sylvie's expression eased a bit as she recalled their earlier preparations. "Right, the herbs. But what if something happens to you in Astron's dream?"

Irina's gaze held a hint of determination. "I'll be careful. Besides, it's our best shot at waking Astron up. We can't afford to waste time. Trust me on this, Sylvie."

Sylvie nodded, accepting Irina's plan. Her eyes were filled with determination as well.

"What do I need to do, Irina?"

Irina explained the plan. "You need to pierce that black spell with your power for just a second. Create an opening, and at that moment, I'll slip my consciousness into Astron. It's a complex rank-4 spell called phantasmic transfer. Once I'm inside, I'll try to navigate through Astron's dream and wake him up. It's risky, but it's the best chance we have."

Sylvie nodded, understanding the task at hand. "I'll do my best, Irina. Just be careful in there. If something goes wrong, or if you need to come back, let me know immediately."

Irina nodded in return. "I will. Now, let's get ready. Once you create that opening, I'll initiate the transfer. We need to synchronize our actions. Ready?"

Sylvie took a deep breath, her determination shining through. "Ready."

SHINE!

And at that moment, Irina felt her consciousness swirl away.....

Chapter 265 Chapter 62.1 - Initiation

It was said that each individual was different from others. That was definitely true.

After all, for me, who had learned all these from life directly itself, those types of words were something I came to a conclusion on my own.

"Astron...Come here....."

It was a natural day for me. Hearing my father's words from outside, I slowly made my way out of my room.

TOK! TOK!

"Oh, you are finally awake, you brat."

As I stepped down the stairs, I saw Mother washing the dishes left from yesterday. She threw a small side look at me, her brows furrowed. Well, she was kind of right; I had overslept. But what can I do?

The book was addicting, and I couldn't stop reading it until midnight.

PUFF! PUFF

The cooker was making puffing sounds from the side. I guess we are going to eat something good today.

"Good morning, mother."

I greeted Mother with a smile.

"....Sigh...."

Mother sighed as her brows returned to their normal shape immediately. I knew that whenever she was angry at me if she wasn't that mad, she would just calm down with my smile. I guess she was weak to that, but at the same time, I needed to pay attention so that she wouldn't get too used to my smile too much.

"Just go away; your father is waiting for you outside."

I couldn't help but feel a sense of inward happiness as I observed my mother's sigh turning into a softer expression. It seemed like my smile worked out once again.

"Thanks, Mother. I'll be quick," I said, trying not to push my luck with her mood.

'I wonder what those cities mentioned in the book look like.'

I asked myself. It was a question that I could never answer, but I could also never stop pondering about it.

Something inside me was always asking me that question; it was never satisfied. But I also knew that thinking about these wouldn't bring me any answers at all.

Leaving the house, I stepped into the crisp morning air, feeling a sense of anticipation for the day ahead. As I approached the front yard, I saw my father waiting for me with his usual warm smile. However, the sight of the axe in his hand hinted at the day's task.

'No.....'

I wanted to protest, but I didn't. After all, knowing that she was doing her best, I needed to do my own part, too.

"Morning, Dad," I greeted, trying to match his cheerful demeanor.



"Morning, Astron! Ready for some hard work today?" he exclaimed, his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.

I nodded, knowing that our family's tradition of gathering woods for the upcoming winter was about to begin. It was a task that brought us together and ensured we were well-prepared for the colder months ahead.

"Today, we're going to get some sturdy ones. Winter's coming, and we need to be ready," he explained, his hand gripping the axe firmly.

As we ventured into the nearby woods, the crisp air filled with the scent of pine, I couldn't help but feel a little bit guilty. After all, even though we led a simple yet fulfilling life, I was never satisfied with that.

Throughout the day, I did my best to assist my father in gathering logs for the upcoming winter. The rhythmic sound of the axe echoed through the woods, blending with the natural symphony of chirping birds and rustling leaves.

Although the task was physically demanding, I couldn't help but appreciate the bonding time with my father.

However, it became evident that my body was not as robust as my father's.

"Haaaah.....Haaah....."

After a short while, I found myself becoming breathless and fatigued. Despite my efforts to keep up, I struggled to match the stamina required for such labor.

'Again....'

This was a crucial weakness of mine. Something I had hated from the bottom of my heart. Whenever something that required physical movement appeared, I would always struggle with it.

I guess that is why the kids from the village don't want to play with me. I can't blame them, though. Who would want to play with someone who can't even run for 10 seconds?

My father noticed my exhaustion and flashed me a reassuring smile. "Easy there, Astron! Don't worry, we're not in a rush," he said, chuckling a bit. "Take a breather, and we'll continue at your pace."

He always smiled at me in times like these, trying to encourage me. After noticing that I wasn't playing with other kids, he came to me and started bringing me to such tasks. He said it was our family's tradition for the youngsters to learn how old ones lived early.

But, yet, inwardly, I knew. There was no such tradition because such a tradition didn't make sense at all. After all, what kind of child would start these labors at such an age?

Other kids are always playing as well. So, I knew. Father was trying to help me so that I wouldn't feel lonely. Maybe that is why he is smiling like that right now and doesn't like staying with me either. Despite his smiles and encouragement, I sensed that he, too, wished I could be more like the others.

As I caught my breath, my mind wandered.

'If I was a little bit like her....'

Remembering how she effortlessly captivated everyone with her talents, and her radiant smile made her a beloved figure among the villagers. I couldn't help but entertain the thought of how different my life would be if I had her skills.

'No, no, no....'

But then, I immediately regretted my thoughts. What I was thinking incredibly felt disgusting to me. After all, I knew it wasn't easy for her, too, and how many countless sleepless nights she had spent on her own so that she could meet the expectations of others.

My father, noticing something was wrong with me, asked, "Is something wrong, Astron?"

I hesitated, torn between expressing my frustrations and maintaining the facade of contentment. But, knowing that telling would never change anything, I decided to stay silent.

"It's nothing, Dad. Just need a bit more rest," I replied, offering a half-hearted smile.

He studied me for a moment as if trying to read beyond the surface. "Alright, take your time. We're in no hurry, and I appreciate your help today."

With those words, he resumed his task, allowing me a moment of solitude.

"Haaah..."

I took a deep breath, appreciating the support my father offered, even if he couldn't fully comprehend the internal struggles I faced.

"Come on, Astron."

My lungs hurt a little, and I felt like my arms were already screaming for me to stop. However, one day or another, this task will fall to me. Some of the uncles in the villages are already on their deathbeds, and their children are doing their labor for them. If I can't do it, who will when my father also becomes like them?

'Don't think about such grim things, stupid Astron.'

I scolded myself internally. Instead, I focused on the present moment, on the shared labor that connected me to my family, on the support my father offered, and on the determination to overcome my physical limitations.

The sun dipped lower in the sky, casting long shadows across the forest floor. With each swing of the axe, I found a sense of purpose and resilience.

My father, sensing my silent struggles, continued to work alongside me, offering both guidance and unspoken support.

As we gathered the last logs and made our way back home, I couldn't help but feel a sense of accomplishment.

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"Oh....Astron!"

Upon returning home, I met with one of the reasons for my internal struggles as well as the reason why I always tried my best.

She stood there with her white hair cascading towards her waist, her shiny green eyes looking at mine.

Her face held an ethereal beauty that never failed to captivate those around her. High cheekbones accentuated her delicate features, and a pair of eyes, the color of lush forests, reflected wisdom beyond her years.

Despite the challenges she faced as the village's future shaman, her expression remained serene and determined.

She wore her usual shaman outfit, adorned with intricate patterns and symbols representing her connection to the spiritual realm. The vibrant colors seemed to complement the natural beauty that surrounded her.

As the chosen successor to our village's spiritual responsibilities, her attire reflected not only tradition but also a commitment to the role she would one day undertake.

It was evident that she had just returned from her duties. The faint scent of herbs and the markings of ritualistic powders on her hands were telltale signs, as well as her clothes.

My sister had a unique talent for communing with the spirits as well as her magic, a gift that set her apart in our small community.

SWOOSH!

She rushed to me and hugged me instantly, her gentle arms holding strength that I could never fight, nor would I ever try to.

"Welcome back," I also greeted her with a genuine smile, momentarily forgetting the physical strain from the day's labor.

"I missed you, Astron," she whispered, her voice carrying a warmth that melted away any lingering fatigue. Her embrace tightened, and for a moment, it felt like the struggles of the day vanished.

"It's only been three days," I teased, gently teasing her as I pulled back slightly to look into her eyes.

"Three days too long," she pouted, a playful glint in her eyes. "I couldn't help but think about you. Did you miss me?"

Her sulking expression was both adorable and endearing. I chuckled, unable to resist the charm she exuded. "Of course, I missed you. The house feels empty without your presence."

Well, it certainly did. At least, when she was around, I didn't need to feel like I wasn't able to do anything. Just being on her side seemed enough in those times.

Different from others, I never got her from the feeling that she disliked whenever I stammered. If there were one thing I was proud of myself, then it would be my eyes, though they were useless most of the time.

And never once in her presence, I thought I wasn't needed.

Her mood lifted at my response, and she beamed at me. "That's more like it. Now, tell me about your day. I heard from Mother that you went to the woods. Did you manage to impress Dad with your wood-gathering skills? Also, she said you stayed late once again and overslept. How many times do I need to tell you? If you want to grow strong, you need to sleep early and wake up earlier."

Her playful nagging never failed to bring warmth to my heart. "You know me. Always chasing the moon when everyone else is asleep," I replied with a smile of my own.

"Dad is there too, you know?" came our dad's voice at that moment.

"Ah....." Realizing that she had been ignoring Father all the time, she immediately jolted back. "Dad..."

Father chuckled, patting her head affectionately. "It's alright. You were excited to hear about Astron's day."

"How was your stay at the shaman's home, my princess?" Father asked, his eyes filled with pride and curiosity."

She beamed, her eyes sparkling. "It was amazing, Dad! I've learned to harness the moon's power more effectively. The shaman said I have a unique connection with the celestial energy."

Listening to their conversation, I couldn't help but notice the genuine happiness in Father's eyes as he listened to her accomplishments.

It was different from the encouraging smiles he gave me during our wood gathering. His pride in my sister's magical abilities was evident, and I couldn't deny a pang of disgusting envy.

"Moon....."

As I looked at the moon shining in the dark sky, I couldn't help but think it was a little cruel that the moon left me like this, different from others.

"Come on, let's eat, Astron."

But then again, none of those feelings mattered at all.

Chapter 266 Chapter 62.2 - Initiation

"Mother, why do we never leave our village? I want to see the outside world, to experience the wonders that lie beyond our borders."

"My dear child. Our village holds secrets, secrets that tie us to this land, secrets we must protect. The outside world is not always as welcoming as it may seem."

"What secrets, Mother? Why must we keep them hidden?"

"My child.... We are happy as we are right now..... We only need each other to live... You will understand everything when the time comes..."

The words mother had spoken to me came into my mind.

'Why am I remembering about these again? It had already been a long time....'

I asked myself. Sitting in front of my window and looking at the stars and the moon had already become a hobby for me.

The night sky, adorned with countless stars, always sparked my curiosity.

"What secrets lie beyond our village? What do the stars know that we don't?" I wondered aloud, my gaze fixated on the celestial canvas.

The allure of the unknown beyond our village boundaries tugged at my heart. I had never set foot outside our close-knit community, and my curiosity about the world beyond intensified with each passing day.

The stories in the books I read fueled my imagination, painting vivid pictures of distant lands, bustling cities, and unexplored territories.

I longed to witness the wonders that lay beyond our borders, to experience a world different from the one I knew.

"What are you doing now?"

At that moment, a voice came from the side.

"Ah....."

It seemed I had already gotten caught. Standing before the door, a small silhouette stood there. Even though the room was dark, her presence alone radiated enough light for me to notice.

"Estelle," I said, addressing my sister by her name. She stepped into the room, her white hair catching a hint of moonlight streaming through the window.

"I thought I'd find you here, lost in your thoughts again," Estelle remarked with a playful smile. Her green eyes gleamed, reflecting a mix of curiosity and affection. "What wonders are you pondering this time?"

I chuckled, realizing that my contemplation hadn't gone unnoticed. "Just dreaming of what lies beyond our village, the stories in the books always make me wonder."

Estelle joined me by the window, her eyes also drawn to the night sky. "The outside world does seem fascinating, doesn't it? Sometimes, I also wish we could explore beyond our borders and see the places we've only heard about in tales."

"However....."

Estelle's voice trailed off, and I turned to look at her. She leaned her head on my shoulder, pushing all her weight onto my body. It was a familiar gesture, one that conveyed both comfort and weariness.

I could tell she was tired from the constant training she underwent to harness the moon's power as her muscles seemed relaxed.

These useless eyes of mine made me proud in times like these.

"Sometimes," she continued, her voice soft and thoughtful, "what I wish for the most isn't to explore everything out there. It's not about seeing distant lands or unraveling mysteries. What I truly wish for is to stay beside you."

Wasn't exploring new things the innate desire for us humans? I always ask this question to myself. Do these questions that always plague my mind are something that is only special to me? Am I the one that can never fit in?

But, in times like this, hearing her voice calms me down. I know for a fact that, in this world, no matter how hard for me to fit in, there is always a place that I could stay.



Smiling slightly, I felt like my worries slowly disappeared as the innate desire to explore the unknown was chained once again.

"If that is what you wish...then I will gladly put every other thing aside."

Unbeknownst to me, I mumbled, it seemed, my words reached Estelle's ears. Her expression shifted, and a hint of anger flashed in her eyes.

She looked at me sternly and spoke with a determined tone, "No! That is wrong. Astron, you shouldn't live your life solely for others. Your dreams, your desires, they matter too. Don't chain yourself to my wishes or anyone else's."

Her words lingered in the air, and for a moment, the room felt heavy with unspoken sentiments. Her concern for me was evident, but I got angry at her words.

While I was here, was she not working for the sake of other people? Mastering the powers of the moon while continuously training with the village's shaman. Wasn't this also selflessness?

How dare she tell me to stop dreaming while she was doing the same for our sake?

Annoyed by her words, I couldn't help but retort, "And what about you, Estelle? Aren't you sacrificing yourself for others too? How is that any different?"

Estelle's response was unexpected. Instead of matching my frustration, she smiled warmly and turned her gaze toward the moon. "You see, Astron, it has always been my dream to help people in need. I've read stories about Saintesses who aided others with smiles on their faces, and I wanted to be like them. The powers I'm mastering, the training I undergo, it's not just for the village; it's for the joy of helping and making a difference."

Her words carried a sincerity that disarmed my anger.

Estelle's dream wasn't just about selflessness; it was about finding fulfillment in making a positive impact.

'Fulfillment....'

The word that I could never grasp.

Her gaze lingered on the moon as if drawing strength and inspiration from its serene glow.

Estelle's eyes shone with determination as she continued, "That's why, Astron, I don't want anyone to give up on their dreams, including you. Everyone deserves to pursue what makes them happy to explore their own desires. What dreams do you have, Astron?"

Her question hung in the air, and for a moment, I felt a stirring in my chest.

I couldn't help but wonder if I truly had dreams of my own.

Aside from learning new things and seeing new places, what other dreams could I have? In this place, we didn't even know anything.

'But, if I were to choose one thing.....'

"Maybe being a hero would be cool..."

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"Astron... T-they are... They are gone?" Estelle's voice trembled with sorrow as she clung to me. Her tears dampened my shoulder, and my heart ached at the loss we both shared.

The air felt heavier, and a pervasive sense of grief hung over our small village. The shadows of a relentless disease claimed our parents, leaving a void that echoed through our home.

"..."

No words left my mouth. What words could I even say in this situation? I asked this question again and again, but none of them was answered.

Estelle's sobs reverberated through the stillness, each cry a poignant reminder of the gaping void our parents' absence left behind. Her anguish was palpable, her questions echoing the unanswerable mysteries of life and loss.

"What... what are we going to do now, Astron?" Estelle's voice quivered with uncertainty, the weight of responsibility bearing down on her fragile shoulders. "Why did this happen? I'm not ready..."

Her words pierced the silence, carrying the weight of our shared grief and confusion. Yet, despite the turmoil raging within me, no words found their way past my lips.

What could I possibly say to ease her pain, to make sense of the senseless?

Instead, I held her close, enveloping her in a silent embrace.

My arms provided comfort, a stable anchor amidst the storm of emotions threatening to consume us. At that moment, words felt insufficient to express the depth of our loss or the uncertainty that lay ahead.

'I....I....'

I refused to succumb to tears, knowing that they could never mend the shattered pieces of our shattered lives.

Instead, I drew strength from the quiet resolve that bound us together, a silent promise to weather the storm as one.

"Astron...." Estelle's voice broke the silence, and she raised her tear-streaked face to meet my gaze. Her eyes, red from crying, searched mine with a mixture of vulnerability and desperation.

At that moment, her lips quivering, she asked the question that hung heavy in the air, "You're never going to leave me, right?"

Without hesitation, I affirmed, "No matter what happens, Estelle, I promise I'll never leave you. Even if the world breaks down, as long as I am still breathing, I will always stay with you."

"Really?" Estelle asked, her voice a fragile whisper as a small tear continued its solitary journey down her face.

I gently caressed her cheeks, showing a slight smile. "Really."

"It is a promise."

"A promise."

"If you ever break it down, I will haunt you to death."

"If I ever do such a thing, I will gladly accept your grace."

"..."

In the tender silence that followed, Estelle buried her face into my chest, taking in the familiar scent. Softly, she whispered, "Thank you. Thank you for being here."

Considering all the help she gave me, what I was doing here meant nothing at all...

Yet I couldn't hold this promise at all.

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The days slipped away, each one blending seamlessly into the next as sunlight painted the surroundings with a vivid glow.

I found myself gazing out of the window. "Sister, when are you coming?" I murmured, my attention momentarily diverted from the greenery outside as I began cleaning the house.

Alone within the confines of our home, I was left to manage the household while my sister fulfilled her duties. "She is always pushing herself," I observed, my eyes landing on a small picture of us smiling together.

A deep sense of responsibility urged me to complete my tasks diligently, hoping to provide a haven for my sister upon her return.

After the completion of my daily chores, I noticed the clouds in the sky and mumbled, "Ah, I need to stock firewood. Winter is coming." With that thought lingering, I left the house, embarking on a journey towards the forest.

The village, nestled close to the mountain range, allowed me a quick arrival at the forest, where I sought out suitable trees, mindful not to waste time and energy on the young and weak ones.

In the midst of my work, however, a sense of urgency disrupted my routine. "Huff... Huff..." My breath became ragged, signs of fatigue evident.

I leaned against a sturdy tree, catching my breath as beads of sweat formed on my forehead.

At that moment, a plume of smoke caught my attention, rising above the treetops and signaling danger in the direction of the village.

'What is this?'

Something ominous was happening.

Fear and worry crept into my consciousness, urging me to sprint back to the village, leaving my gathered wood behind.

With each step, my heart pounded, and as the village came into view, an unsettling feeling gripped me. Something was amiss.

'Don't tell me?'

Despite my physical weakness and lack of magical abilities, my senses screamed at me to hide.

'.....This stench....'

A horrifying presence descended upon the village, accompanied by an otherworldly aura and a stench of burning and iron. The stench was familiar to me.

'Where is she?'

Ignoring the pressure, I pushed forward, only to witness a nightmarish scene.

'Where is she?'

Black, twisted creatures, malevolent and monstrous, swarmed the village.

In the chaos, I desperately searched for my sister and finally spotted her, standing tall and determined, defending our home with powerful magic.

My heart sank as I realized the overwhelming odds against us. Still, instinctively, I moved towards the village, driven by a desperate need to protect my sister. But my actions did not go unnoticed.

'What?'

The magical restraints and bright white light binding my limbs halted my progress, pushing me back into the forest.

Confused and frustrated, I met my sister's eyes, realizing the reason behind my immobilization.

"NO!"

Tears streamed down my face as I struggled against the magical restraints, witnessing the horrifying onslaught of our village. She mouthed words I couldn't hear, her gaze filled with love and sorrow.

Helpless, I watched her turn back to face the demonic horde, her magic blazing brighter than ever. Yet, those vile creatures overwhelmed her, and my heart shattered as her light succumbed to their relentless assault.

Blood poured down my eyelids as I fought against the magical restraints, unable to close my eyes or divert my gaze from the gruesome scene.

"I'll kill you! I'll kill you all!"

From then on, my world lost its light.

Chapter 267 Chapter 62.3 - Initiation

"Pah!"

Irina's senses were in disarray as she found herself suspended in an ethereal void.

The absence of any solid ground or reference points left her feeling weightless, adrift in an infinite expanse of nothingness. It was as if she had been cast into the void between dreams.

As she tried to make sense of her surroundings, she noticed faint glimmers of light, distant and sporadic, flickering like distant stars.

The emptiness around her seemed to pulse with an otherworldly energy, creating an eerie ambiance that sent shivers down her spine.

She attempted to move her arms, but they seemed to move through the empty space without any resistance. Panic threatened to creep in, but she fought to maintain focus.

And following that, she slowly recalled her recent memories. Irina recalled Sylvie's words and realized that this surreal experience was the result of her attempt to enter Astron's dream.

'Was it a dream?'

She couldn't understand.

The spell she used to enter his consciousness wasn't supposed to work like this.

[Phantasmic Transfer] – the spell that Irina had cast was designed to create a psychic link between the caster and the target, allowing the caster to enter the dream realm of the individual by connecting their souls.

However, the disconcerting emptiness and the ethereal void that surrounded her were far from the expected outcome.

Irina focused her thoughts on unraveling the mystery of this unexpected turn. The spell, as she understood it, should have provided her with a dreamscape that mirrored Astron's subconscious, where the dream would play on.

She would enter his dream as a person of her own and move inside, wandering around the dream. The dream would temporarily become the caster's new real world. That was how it was supposed to be.

Yet, this desolate expanse seemed devoid of the usual dream-like elements.

THUD!

Yet, just at this moment, something suddenly happened. The emptiness around Irina quivered, and the subtle hum of otherworldly energy intensified.

The air seemed to vibrate with an unseen force, and in an instant, the desolate expanse transformed.

Everywhere around her, an incredibly complex structure materialized, unfolding like intricate origami. It was as if the fabric of the void had been woven into a mesmerizing tapestry of interlocking patterns and ethereal scenes.

The transition was abrupt, catching Irina off guard.

"What is this?"

Her head, if it even existed, was overwhelmed with the information. Her consciousness threatened to slip away as she felt dizzy from everything happening.



The once-empty space now pulsed with life, and she found herself at the heart of this enigmatic construct.

The structure seemed to defy the laws of reality, constantly shifting and reshaping itself in a dance of relativistic-magicalism.

"Just what?"

She couldn't understand.

At this point, what she was seeing wasn't something that she could describe in words.

"This is...."

In front of her stood a small frame...She could see from the window where two little babies had just left their mother's womb.

"Uwaaaaaaa!"

A loud crying voice entered Irina's ears as she concentrated on the scene. As if now she was part of the frame, she could hear and see everything clearly from an outsider's perspective. This wasn't how the spell was supposed to work, but Irina deemed it fine.

"Ah.....You have two beautiful twins....." Irina, now immersed in the moment, felt the essence of life emanating from the scene.

The midwife, aware of the profound responsibility bestowed upon her, turned to the exhausted but elated parents. "Ah... You have two beautiful twins," she remarked, her voice filled with a sense of joy and reverence.

The mother, her eyes brimming with tears of happiness, gazed lovingly at the newborns. The man, the father, overwhelmed with emotion, held his wife's hand.

The midwife, respecting the sacredness of the moment, gently inquired, "What will be the names of these precious children?"

The man, looking at the two tiny faces wrapped in swaddling blankets, smiled with a warmth that could only come from a father's heart. "Under the full moon, we shall name them Astron and Estelle," he declared, his voice carrying a sense of destiny and connection to the celestial bodies.

The midwife nodded approvingly, acknowledging the significance of the names. "Astron and Estelle," she repeated as if sealing their fate with those words. The room, filled with the tender cries of the newborns, became a sacred space where the bonds of family and destiny intertwined.

'So, this is how he was born....'

Irina couldn't help but mumble to herself. Now, the scene she saw suddenly made sense, as if it had shown her the point of Astron's starting life.

Yet, a question remained.

'Who is Estelle?'

Just as she was thinking about those, suddenly, a second later, she found herself in the same empty space she was in.

A nagging question surfaced, "Who is Estelle?" The assumption that Estelle was Astron's twin sister seemed natural, born at the same time under the same celestial event.

Yet, as Irina delved deeper into her thoughts, a disturbing realization crept in.

"Wait, there isn't someone like Estelle in Astron's life. He's an orphan with no family members," she pondered, her mind racing to make sense of the incongruity. Doubt lingered as she questioned the nature of the connection between Astron and Estelle.

"Did something happen to him?" Irina wondered aloud, her concern for Astron growing. The mystery deepened, and a sense of urgency gripped her.

Determined to uncover the truth, Irina focused her magical senses on different time frames, searching for clues that would shed light on Astron's enigmatic past.

As she navigated through the currents of time, glimpses of Astron's life unfolded before her. Scenes of his childhood, moments of laughter and struggle, all wove a tapestry of his journey. Yet, the absence of Estelle in these moments puzzled Irina even more.

She entered another timeframe as she looked into the scene.

As Irina observed this particular timeframe from her vantage point within Astron's memories, she found herself immersed in a humble yet heartwarming scene.

As Astron descended the stairs, Mother, in the midst of washing dishes, threw a small side look at him, her brows furrowed. "Oh, you are finally awake, you brat," she teased, a playful tone underlying her scolding.

"Good morning, Mother," Astron greeted with a smile, his eyes sparkling with innocence.

Mother sighed, her initial frustration melting at the sight of Astron's smile. "Just go away; your father is waiting for you outside," she chuckled, swayed by her son's infectious cheer.

'So, he can smile like that.'

Now that she had seen it, she realized one very important thing about him. From the moment they met, from the moment Irina first saw him, she had never seen him smile.

Not even once.

His face took different emotions, sometimes annoyance, sometimes anger, sometimes slightly melancholy.....

But never once had he smiled before.....

-WARP!

Following that, she was once again expelled from the frame and returned to the same space as she was.

'I need to see more....'

There were just too many questions, and she needed to find the answers right now if she wanted to operate in this place.

Was this really a dream?

Was she really seeing the memories of Astron right now? If so, why was she not seeing everything directly from Astron's eyes? After all, a person experiencing things can not do it from a person's perspective, which she had been witnessing.

That wouldn't make sense at all.

All those types of questions needed to be answered, and there was far too much missing information right now.

And, even though she didn't even want to admit with her thoughts, she wanted to see more of his childhood. What kind of a person he was, what happened to him, why was he like this?

The existence of Astron Natusalune still held many mysteries.

Thus, she slowly moved forward while looking around the space.

As Irina delved deeper into Astron's memories, she traversed through various timeframes, each revealing a different facet of his life.

In one particular scene, Irina finds herself in Astron's home during the night. Astron and his sister engaged in a heartfelt conversation by the fireplace. The dim light cast flickering shadows on the walls, creating an intimate ambiance.

The room, illuminated by the soft glow of moonlight, became the backdrop for Astron's contemplation. Seated by the window, his eyes fixed on the stars and the moon, he wrestled with memories that resurfaced against his will.

"Why am I remembering about these again? It had already been a long time...." he mused, his gaze drawn to the celestial canvas that adorned the night sky. The vastness of the universe sparked his curiosity, and he couldn't help but wonder about the mysteries beyond the confines of their village.

As his thoughts unfolded, a voice interrupted his solitary reflection. "What are you doing now?" came the voice, and Astron turned to find his sister, Estelle, standing at the doorway. Despite the darkness, her presence radiated a gentle luminosity.

"Estelle," Astron acknowledged, and she entered the room, her white hair catching a glimmer of the moonlight. There was a familiarity in their interaction, a silent understanding that transcended spoken words.

"I thought I'd find you here, lost in your thoughts again," Estelle remarked with a playful smile, her green eyes reflecting a mix of curiosity and affection.

The siblings shared a moment by the window, their eyes drawn to the night sky. Astron confessed his longing to explore the world beyond their village, fueled by the stories he devoured in books. Estelle, too, expressed a similar yearning at times but added a thoughtful layer to her aspirations.

"The outside world does seem fascinating, doesn't it? Sometimes, I also wish we could explore beyond our borders and see the places we've only heard about in tales," Estelle shared, her voice carrying a gentle melody.

Yet, amidst Astron's dreams of exploration, Estelle leaned her head on his shoulder, a gesture laden with comfort and weariness.

"Sometimes, what I wish for the most isn't to explore everything out there. It's not about seeing distant lands or unraveling mysteries. What I truly wish for is to stay beside you," Estelle confessed, her words resonating with a sense of vulnerability.

Astron, feeling the weight of his sister's weariness, responded with a promise, "If that is what you wish... then I will gladly put every other thing aside."

Hearing all those things, Irina couldn't even believe her ears. Was that cold Astron such a considerate person? Certainly unbelievable.

Whenever she talked with him, they always quarreled, and it didn't make sense at all. After that, she had watched him spending days and nights in their village.

His initially weak body constitution continued to prove to be a challenge for him, but he also continued to live his life despite his challenges.

He went out, cut wood, helped his mother and father, and sometimes even trained secretly. Though his training would never be long, thanks to his body, even seeing his spirit, Irina couldn't help but remark.

'Even from before, he was a training maniac, huh?'

Just like that, she continued to watch. But as she watched, she found herself in another poignant moment.

The weight of grief hung heavy in the air as Astron and Estelle grappled with the loss of their parents. Sorrow etched into Estelle's voice as she clung to her brother for solace.

"You're never going to leave me, right?"

"No matter what happens, Estelle, I promise I'll never leave you. Even if the world breaks down, as long as I am still breathing, I will always stay with you."

In the midst of their shared pain, Astron, though silent, provided a comforting presence. The unspoken promise of never leaving Estelle's side echoed in the stillness.

'So, he lost his father and mother early....'

Irina observed the siblings' solemn pact, a moment laden with the fragility of life and the strength found in their bond.

'But what happened to his sister?'

Just as she thought about it, suddenly, she was sucked into a different time frame without her control.

–WRRR!

'What?' She was caught off guard, but as she looked at the scene right before her eyes, she gasped.

"Huh?"

As if to show the answer to her question, in front of her eyes stood the girl whose destiny she was looking for.

With her chest pierced by the claws of a demon.

#### Chapter 268 Chapter 62.4 - Initiation

Irina, locked within the confines of Astron's memories, observed the harrowing events unfold. The days slipped away, marked by Astron's diligent efforts to maintain their home.

As he gathered firewood, a sense of urgency disrupted his routine, and Irina could sense the impending danger.

With trepidation, Astron rushed back to the village, guided by an unsettling feeling. The stench of burning and iron permeated the air, foretelling a nightmare about to unfold. As he reached the village, twisted creatures swarmed, and Irina felt his desperate search for his sister.

The nightmarish scene unfolded as Astron, restrained by magical forces, witnessed his sister standing tall against the demonic horde. Irina shared his helplessness as he struggled against the magical restraints, tears streaming down his face.

The village succumbed to the onslaught, and Astron's world plunged into darkness as he watched his sister's valiant but futile fight.

In front of her, a demon's claws pierced through the chest of the girl – Estelle.

The air became heavy with despair, and Irina could sense Astron's world collapsing around him. The vivid scene revealed the heart-wrenching moment when Astron witnessed his sister's life extinguished by the malevolent force.

"NOOOOOOOOOO!"

Astron's screams filled the air, echoing the anguish of losing a loved one. The sound reverberated through the caverns of his memories, leaving Irina shaken by the intensity of his pain. The agony etched on Astron's face as he tried desperately to reach Estelle conveyed the helplessness of the situation.

"NOOOO!"

As Irina processed the scene, she began to understand the reasons behind Astron's cold demeanor and solitary disposition.

'This is why.....'

The trauma of losing his parents early on and then witnessing the brutal death of his sister left scars that shaped his character.

The sense of betrayal and vulnerability mingled with grief, forging a protective shell around Astron's heart. The experience of loss fueled his determination to stand alone to avoid forming emotional connections that could lead to further heartbreak.

She knew all of this quite well. After all, she herself went through an experience that was close to this.

How would it make the person close up to the outer world, build walls around themselves, and always be reluctant to open others?

How would the scars of the past have become the armor that shielded from the pain of attachment....

She knew everything well.

"I AM GOING TO KILL YOU! I AM GOING TO KILL YOU!"



The scene continued to play out, and Astron, consumed by rage and sorrow, vowed to avenge his sister.

The intensity of his emotions and the trauma etched into his soul all painted a vivid picture of the complex and tormented individual that Astron had become.

As Irina navigated through the layers of Astron's memories, she couldn't help but feel a mixture of empathy and sorrow for the man whose journey she was witnessing.

She may not have wanted to admit it, but inwardly, she knew. For the first time in a long while, she was feeling close to someone else in such a way.

Not in a way that made her heart flutter but in a way that awoke the feeling of camaraderie inside her.

The fact that she was able to understand even the slightest bit of how he became offered some relief, and at the same time, she felt like she slowly understood why, for all this time, she was comfortable when around him.

'I unknowingly felt this camaraderie, didn't I?'

After all, her act of arrogance was also her way of protesting the world. She may be irritating to others, but she actually knew it was better for good.

The more irritating she became, the easier she could woo away the shallow people approaching her with superficial intentions.

—WRRRR!

At that moment, she was once again forcefully expelled from the time frame.

'But, now is not the time to be lost in such thoughts.'

She thought while wandering off into the empty space around her.

Knowing that she had a goal for being here, she decided to discard all those thoughts and start focusing on her goal once again.

Irina refocused on her mission within Astron's past and continued to witness the unfolding chapters of his life. The scene shifted, and she found herself in the aftermath of the tragic events in the village.

As Astron's world crumbled around him, a figure emerged from the shadows – an investigator named Hunter Garrett. The investigator took Astron under his wing, rescuing him from the ruins of his past.

The transition to the orphanage marked a new chapter in Astron's life. Irina observed the isolation and alienation he experienced among the other children, the scars of his past still haunting him.

The weak constitution and the loss of his inner light made him an outcast, subjected to the cruelty of bullying.

The sense of loneliness became a constant companion, shaping Astron's demeanor as he navigated the challenges of orphanage life.

Yet, Hunter Garrett, the investigator who had taken him in, observed Astron's potential. Maybe he could see the mana surrounding him, or maybe it was just an intuition; he decided to take Astron to a test center.

It was then that the revelation came – Astron was an Awakened, possessing latent abilities that set him apart from the other children.

The discovery transformed his narrative, as Hunter Garrett recognized the potential within the troubled young boy.

After that, Astron continued to train, giving his everything for the sake of improving himself. Irina could see the reason for his ambition and what he wanted to achieve.

Deep down, an immense amount of hatred always remained in his eyes no matter what.

One day, a letter arrived – an invitation to the prestigious Arcadia Hunter Academy, the very institution Irina herself attended. Astron, now equipped with newfound abilities, embarked on a journey to the academy that would shape his destiny.

Upon entering the academy, however, Astron faced immediate challenges. The other students, unaware of his past and the transformation he had undergone, mocked him. Placed at the lowest rank, 2450th out of 2450 students, Astron became the target of ridicule and scorn.

'Ah....I remember this....'

She remembered those words. Even though she hated to admit it, the fact that she also laughed behind him made her feel an immense amount of shame and remorse for her actions.

'What was I doing?'

She realized it was quite easy to judge people without knowing anything about them. From the moment she heard about his rank and saw his attitude, in her eyes, he immediately became someone who didn't deserve her attention.

'...'

No words could express the shame and guilt she was feeling now.

Irina witnessed the isolation and bullying that Astron endured.

Four individuals, fueled by arrogance and prejudice, targeted him relentlessly.

'Dylan Miller? Where did I hear his name?'

Irina looked at the past and remembered the certain students that had attended the academy in the first month and then suddenly disappeared mysteriously.

They were the ones who always laughed at the back of the classroom and acted arrogantly. She never liked such people either, as it reminded her of the ugly facade of the high-ranking society she belonged to.

The atmosphere around Astron turned hostile as he navigated through the trials and tribulations of academy life.

The academy, a place meant for growth and camaraderie, became a battlefield for Astron. Irina could sense the resilience within him as he faced the harsh reality of being the lowest-ranked student, enduring the taunts and physical aggression from his tormentors.

'Wait?'

However, as the one-month period passed, Irina suddenly let out an exclamation of surprise.

Dylan Miller and his group, individuals who were supposed to have disappeared mysteriously, were still present, continuing their relentless bullying of Astron.

'They are still here?'

Something was different from her memories. But that wasn't the only strange thing.

'She is not in my team.'

Irina still remembered the first time she had encountered Astron. They were in the same group. At that time, she was angry at the fact that she was going to babysit a defective product, so she acted in the most embarrassing way she could, and she hated it right now.

But what she was seeing now was a lot different. She hadn't encountered Astron as she entered the dungeon, nor had the events that happened in her memories happened.

It was like the life she was watching now was a lot different than what she experienced.

The events surrounding the academy diverged significantly from her memories, and the presence of Dylan Miller and his group, along with the absence of her interactions with Astron during dungeon expeditions, puzzled her.

As Astron navigated through the challenges of academy life, a pivotal moment unfolded.

"Aren't you tired of everything and all that ridicule? Take this if you want strength."

Another student approached him, handing him a mysterious card while questioning if he wasn't tired of something. Irina watched as Astron, seeking a way to escape his struggles, accepted the card, setting in motion a fateful turn in his destiny.

It was at that moment that everything changed for him since Irina knew the place he went to was entangled with demonic humans, and when Astron left, he became one of them as well.

However, there a question arose.

'He hates demons. Why did he become a demonic human? What happened there? Was he brainwashed?'

She needed to know. Now, everything was different from what she had experienced; she needed to know more.

However, when Irina tried to delve deeper into the scene where Astron interacted with the demonic human, the details became blurry and foggy. She strained to hear the conversation, but only one phrase pierced through the haze:

? 'The enemy was never what you knew.' ?

SHIVER!

The moment she heard this sentence and the voice, she felt shivers down her spine.

It was as if the voice alone was able to affect her from where she was, and that was the scary part.

'Just what is this?'

But she had yet to find answers.

'Is this the Astron I know?'

It was impossible to understand.

'I need to know more? I don't think this place shows the memories of Astron.'

Just as she had come to the realization of this, suddenly, she felt a force of suction from somewhere.

–WRRR!

With the voice, her world became blurry as she instantly found herself in a time frame.

A timeframe she had never expected to see.

Chapter 269 Chapter 63.1 - Divergence

What does it mean to be a hero?

A child once wondered. At the age when the children followed their peers on the streets while playing, his mind was filled with such questions.

Why? One would ask. After all, even if the child wanted to be a hero, for what reason those thoughts were implemented into his head?

Was it natural? Was it his innate desire or his very being that was selfless?

The answer would certainly vary from person to person and maybe even evolve with the exploration of the science.

But for the boy, his desire came from his dreams.

Standing in the middle of the battlefield...Against countless different beings that he deemed as his enemies....

Behind him, his comrades, standing proud of their choices.....

It was the scene he continuously saw in his dreams....

But what were those dreams about? Was the person standing in front of everyone with a spear himself?

That would be cool.

That was certainly true. In the eyes of that young kid, the man who swept through enemies looked incredibly cool.

Cooler than anything else in this world.

However, the reason why the man looked cool in the eyes of the boy wasn't because he was flashy and destroyed his enemies efficiently.

After all, not all the time, that man faced the enemies.

The reason was the fact that the man always pushed himself to the limits, so much so that the people standing behind him would never suffer.

Maybe he himself had suffered, or maybe not.

He knew what it meant to suffer. He was gentle yet firm. Whenever he was in front of the enemy, he didn't hesitate, but he never lost his gentleness.

Even faced with betrayals or harsh words, the man never stopped.

He was injured, and his body was tattered. Yet he still kept moving forward.

But at the end of the day, the boy knew one thing. The fact that that person he saw in his dreams was the hero.

The boy admired the hero in his dreams for his selflessness and commitment to protect others.

Amidst the echoes of clashing swords, he found the embodiment of his aspirations and a symbol of strength in character and determination.

And what was this boy's name?

"Ethan." The voice called out, pulling the young child with wavy blue hair and shining eyes from his thoughts. He turned to find his older brother, a mirror image with the same captivating eyes and similar features.

"Ah, brother."

"What are you doing here?"

"I was just thinking about heroes."

His brother chuckled, ruffling Ethan's hair affectionately. "Heroes, huh? What brought that up?"

Ethan's eyes gleamed with excitement as he recounted his dreams and the heroic figure that dominated them. "I dream about this amazing hero, you know? He stands in the middle of battles, protecting everyone behind him."

Hearing this, his brother couldn't help but smile a little, as if reminiscing about his childhood.

"No matter how beaten up he gets, he never gives up. He's strong, kind, and determined."

However, as Ethan's enthusiastic words echoed, a subtle change swept over his brother's face. The playful glint in his eyes vanished, replaced by a more serious and contemplative expression. His features, once softened by affection, became stern and guarded.

"Ethan," his brother began, his tone more measured, "heroes are admirable, but the world out there isn't as pure as the dreams in your head."



Ethan looked up at his brother, confusion flickering in his eyes. "What do you mean, brother?"

His brother sighed a hint of weight in his words. "In real life, battles are not just about protecting others. They involve sacrifice, tough choices, and consequences that aren't always clear-cut. It's not always about being the strongest or the most determined. Sometimes, it's about making hard decisions for the greater good."

Ethan's excitement began to wane, replaced by a somber realization. "But, I want to be like the hero in my dreams. The one who never gives up."

His brother placed a hand on Ethan's shoulder, his grip firm and reassuring. "And you can, Ethan. But being a hero means facing the harsh realities of the world. It means understanding that sometimes, protecting others comes with a price. You have to be strong, not just physically but mentally and emotionally. It's a heavy burden to carry."

Ethan absorbed his brother's words, the echoes of clashing swords in his dreams now carrying a weight he hadn't considered before.

The world his brother spoke of seemed more complex, less black and white than the heroic tales he envisioned.

"Remember, Ethan," his brother continued, "true strength lies in wisdom, in making choices that are for the greater good, even if they are difficult. It's not always about standing in the middle of a battlefield; it's about knowing when to fight and when to find other ways to protect."

However, no matter who said those words, how could a child who had yet to experience the world himself understand all those things just from a bunch of words?

Even if he had absorbed some of them in his head, at the end of the day, he continued to see that dream again and again.....

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But then again, does the world operate in the way people wish?

Sometimes it does, but sometimes it doesn't.

That is the harsh reality.

"Ethan Hartley. Awakening test results. Negative."

Standing in front of the person with a white robe and glasses, the same young boy with wavy hair looked down.

"Ah..." A small exasperated sigh left Ethan's lips as he stood before the person in the white robe with glasses. The words, 'Awakening test results. Negative,' echoed in his mind, and for a moment, it felt like his dreams were being crushed.

The person in the white robe looked at Ethan with a soft smile, "Ethan Hartley, don't be disheartened just yet. Awakening is a process, and sometimes it takes time."

Ethan glanced up, a glimmer of hope flickering in his eyes. "But... it says negative."

The person in the white robe nodded, acknowledging the disappointment on Ethan's face. "True, the initial test results may be negative, but that doesn't mean you won't awaken in the future. Keep in mind that everyone's journey is different."

Ethan's shoulders slumped, but he nodded in understanding. "I guess... I just thought I could be like the hero in my dreams."

The person in the white robe placed a reassuring hand on Ethan's shoulder. "Ethan, awakening doesn't happen for everyone at the same time. Some people awaken later than others, and that doesn't diminish their potential."

Ethan appreciated the attempt at reassurance, but deep down, he knew it was a consideration. Late awakenings were rare, and the odds were comparable to winning a lottery.

He knew this thing for a fact since he himself came from a renowned Hunter Family. From a young age, he had been training so that he could start in a better position once he had awakened.

But that was no longer the case.

'What do I do now?'

FUSH!

As he got out of the awakening test room, reality weighed heavily on him.

The dreams of becoming a powerful figure like the hero in his dreams seemed more distant than ever. The disappointment lingered, creating a cloud over his thoughts.

As he walked through the corridor, lost in his thoughts, he suddenly saw his older brother standing in front of him. The times seemed to do wonders for his brother, as now he had an incredibly more handsome face.

"Ethan," his brother greeted with a warm smile, but as he noticed the downcast expression on Ethan's face, concern replaced the smile. "Hey, is everything okay?"

Ethan clumped his shoulders, taking a deep breath before responding, "I wasn't awakened."

His brother stopped for a moment, surprise flickering in his eyes, but he quickly regained his composure. With a comforting smile, he placed a hand on Ethan's shoulder.

After all, if he were to abandon his brother just because he wasn't awakened, how could he call himself a brother or a family member?

"Awakening tests can be unpredictable, Ethan. It doesn't define your worth or potential. Late awakenings are not unheard of," his brother reassured him.

Ethan appreciated the support but couldn't shake off the weight of his own expectations. "I trained so hard, thinking I would awaken early. I wanted to be like you, to make our family proud."

His brother's gaze softened, understanding the weight of Ethan's words. "Ethan, being awakened doesn't make someone great. It's the choices we make and the actions we take. Even without supernatural abilities, you have your own strengths and potential."

Ethan nodded, appreciating the wisdom in his brother's words. "I know, but it's just... hard to accept right now."

This was one of the days Ethan was the most disappointed in himself.

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Sitting on his bed, Ethan looked at the small panel that had appeared randomly out of thin air. The characters and symbols on the panel indicated that he had finally awakened, a moment he had been yearning for with every training session.

"I did it... I really did..." Ethan whispered to himself, a mixture of disbelief and joy welling up within him. A small tear fell to his bed, a testament to the emotions he couldn't contain.

PAT!

Wiping away the tear, Ethan took a deep breath, his heart still racing with the realization that he had achieved something he had hoped for so long. The panel congratulated him on his awakening, making it all the more surreal.

"Congratulations on your awakening."

Following that, he wanted to take the test so that he could perfectly make sure that he wasn't going insane and being schizophrenic.

Overwhelmed with a mix of emotions, he left the testing area, contemplating the newfound reality that awaited him. As he walked through the hallways, he encountered his father, a stern man with an undeniable presence and authority.

"Ethan," his father's deep voice resonated, and for the first time, Ethan noticed the subtle aura surrounding his father, a mark of his own awakening.

"Dad, I... I awakened," Ethan stammered, still processing the magnitude of the moment.

His father's stern expression softened, and a rare smile appeared on his face. "Congratulations, Ethan." He extended his hand, grabbing Ethan from his shoulder. "You've suffered enough."

His father also knew what Ethan went through. No matter how many times he was told to give up, Ethan never did, and that was something he had always respected.

Ethan felt a weight lift off his shoulders at his father's words. The acknowledgment meant more than he could express.

As he made his way home, his mother noticed the change in Ethan's demeanor. With a beaming smile, she rushed towards him, enveloping him in a warm hug.

"I heard the news, Ethan!" she exclaimed, her eyes shining with happiness as if she knew everything about his son's suffering.

And she most likely did. After all, she was the first one to seek help from many known psychologists in the entire Hunter industry so that his son wouldn't suffer from inferiority.

She lectured his other sons and daughters so that they would never make Ethan uncomfortable with his position.

Even if he stayed as a non-awakened, she was ready to accept him as himself no matter what, but she was now genuinely happy that his son finally got the opportunity he desperately wished for.

Ethan hugged his mother back, realizing that his awakening not only brought joy to himself but also to his family. The pressure and expectations that once felt suffocating had transformed into a sense of accomplishment and acceptance.

Chapter 270 Chapter 63.2 - Divergence

"Welcome to the Arcadia Hunter Academy."

The words echoed for the students; everyone's eyes beamed with happiness. After all, it was the starter day for the students who had wished to become the best in this field by enrolling in one of the most, presumably the most prestigious academies in the entire Human Federation.

"Today marks the start of our 111th semester..."

The headmaster continued with his speech, and Ethan simply stood and watched the entire scene unfold. He couldn't help but smile.

After all, if he wasn't awakened, he would never get the chance to be in this place.

As the headmaster spoke, Ethan's attention shifted to his friends, who were scattered throughout the auditorium. Julia, with her distinctive white short hair, sat beside her twin brother, Lucas. Irina, with her usual grumpy expression, occupied a seat not far away.

Lilia, always busy chatting with her workers, had managed to secure a seat as well. Carl, with his quiet demeanor, was seated in a corner, observing the surroundings.

After the opening ceremony, the friends gathered in a courtyard, finding a spot to talk amongst themselves about the new academy year and exchanging thoughts and expectations.

Julia spoke with enthusiasm. "Can you believe we're finally here? Arcadia Hunter Academy! It's like a dream come true!"

Lucas nodded in agreement, "Yeah, and we're in the same class again. It's going to be awesome."

Irina, wearing her trademark grumpy expression, couldn't hide a small smile. "Well, let's hope they've got more challenging assignments this semester. I don't want to be bored."

Lilia, who had momentarily paused her conversation with her workers, joined in, "I heard there's a new instructor for combat. I hope they're better than the last one."

"Ah, you are talking about Eleanor White? One of the Rankers?"

"Yes."

"Well, considering her rank....."

Carl, the quiet one in the group, didn't say anything and just watched.

Ethan chuckled, "Well, I hope we make the best out of this year. Who knows what challenges and adventures await us?"

"Shut up, you late bloomer. You really worried us last time, you know?"

"Sorry, sorry....I just wanted to see how it was really in the dungeon."

"Do it after you get your license, bastard."

As the friends continued their discussions, the courtyard buzzed with excitement and anticipation for the upcoming semester.

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"Hello. Ethan Hartley."

"Dylan Miller."

As time passed in the academy, Ethan found himself in front of the young man with a bulky build.

He was one of the students who also ranked lower like him. He was pretty loud and always hung out with his group of four.

Ethan had become aware of Dylan primarily due to the attitude of his group. They were often obnoxious and loud, creating an air of annoyance for those around them.

Now, in the combat area of the academy for the practical combat lesson, Ethan found himself facing Dylan.

Today's lesson focused on unarmed combat, and as the instructor explained the exercises, Dylan shot Ethan a sneer, his expression filled with a hint of disdain, and his eyes were looking for someone.

Ethan, sensing the tension, couldn't help but wonder what had caused Dylan's displeasure.

As they paired up for the exercise, Dylan mumbled under his breath while looking at one of the pairs. "Lucky that guy didn't meet me here."

Ethan followed his gaze and noticed that he was looking at one of the students who were standing away. followed

It was the gloomy student who always sat behind and never talked with others. His hood was always down as well.

'What does this mean?'

He wondered to himself, but the instructor's signal cut his thoughts off.

"Everyone, start."

As the signal came, he decided to focus on the spar and forgot about everything in one go.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Welcome to the Spear Club." The club president greeted Ethan and the other freshmen with a warm smile on their faces.

The room buzzed with excitement as introductions were made, and the president outlined the club's activities and goals for the semester.

Ethan felt a sense of camaraderie among his fellow club members, and he looked forward to honing his skills in spear combat. The Spear Club seemed like a place where he could learn, grow, and forge new connections in the challenging yet fulfilling journey at the Arcadia Hunter Academy.

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SMACK!

"Dumbass....Why are you dozing off again?"

As a sound smack echoed, Ethan felt like his back was hurting like crazy.

"Hey! Why do you keep hitting me?"

Turning his face, Ethan saw Julia smirking. This girl was always like that, after all.

"Because it is funny. I like it when you flinch even from a small touch."

"You are saying this is a small touch? Are you crazy?"

"A bit?"

"More than a bit."

"...."

He couldn't answer at all.

"Hey, shut up! It is annoying."

"Tch. You are no fun." Julia spoke as she retracted her hand.

"How is it fun to hit others?" Irina replied. Ethan seemed troubled by the two that were grumbling, but he just stood there.

Thankfully for him, help came sooner than he thought.

"Hey there, everyone!" Jim's cheerful voice echoed through the air, cutting through the banter. He strode towards us with easy confidence, his presence commanding attention.

"This is the first day of our Adventurer and Exploration Club's orientation."

It was Ethan's second club.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Today, we will start with our first dungeon exploration."

Ethan, along with two other students, prepared for their first dungeon exploration. As they stood at the entrance, the air was thick with a mix of excitement and nervous anticipation.

The dungeon's entrance loomed before them, a dark and mysterious portal leading to unknown challenges and treasures.

Well, that was an exaggeration, but essentially, the concept was the same.

Ethan adjusted the grip on his spear, feeling a surge of determination.

One of his companions, a girl with vibrant red hair named Mia, exchanged a quick glance with Ethan and nodded, her eyes reflecting a blend of curiosity and readiness.

Beside them stood a tall and quiet boy named Oliver. His stoic expression betrayed little emotion, but there was a certain intensity in his gaze that hinted at his focus on the task at hand.

As the trio stepped into the dungeon, the atmosphere changed instantly. The air inside felt dense, and the echoes of their footsteps reverberated through the narrow passageways.

This was the first day that Ethan had started making his name in the academy.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Today will be different from other days. We will be having a joint dungeon exploration."

Ethan, along with the rest of the class, awaited further instructions. As the instructor explained the details, he realized that today's exploration would involve partnering with students from other classes, fostering teamwork and collaboration.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Julia! What happened!" Ethan exclaimed, rushing into the room where Julia was supposed to be resting.

As he entered, the sight before him was jarring. Julia lay on the bed, her body battered and bruised. Her face, once vibrant with energy, was now beaten and marked with signs of a fierce struggle. The room felt heavy with an air of distress.

Ethan's eyes widened in shock and concern. He couldn't comprehend how Julia, one of his closest friends, ended up in such a state.

Lilia, who was in the room attending to Julia, turned to Ethan with a somber expression. "She encountered a real yeti in the dungeon."

"A real yeti? What? How is that possible? Aren't the monsters in the dungeon are all copies?"

"We don't know what happened yet. The academy is working on it right now."

"Then, what happened to others?"

"...Many students died...."

It was the start of things going down...

\*\*\*\*\*

As the days passed, Ethan consistently improved himself. Yet, he himself didn't know what the industry had folded in front of his eyes.

CLICK! CLICK!

"These features....Isn't he from the Hartley Family?"

"Yes. He is the youngest member of Hartleys, Ethan."

"Hmm? Ethan Hartley?"

"He is not that known yet since he is a rather late bloomer."

"Ah.....He is the Scapegoat of Hartleys, right?"

"Ssh....Lower your voice."

"Hick! Right!"

"The Middletons are here too? That's Lucas Middleton, right? So striking."

"Is that Carl Braveheart? Just as it was said, the blood of giants runs in his veins!"

"Ah, the esteemed representatives of renowned families. Welcome to the banquet of Blackthorn's...

This day would mark the first time he had encountered a demon follower in his life.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Earlier today, the Blackthorn Family's grand banquet was thrown into turmoil as a group of unidentified intruders launched an assault. The security forces and the estate guards were quick to respond, and the situation is now under control. However, in the midst of this chaotic event, the heir, Kaiser Blackthorn, has gone missing."

\*\*\*\*\*

"As you all already know, it is the mid-term season for the academy."

Even after the death of the students, the academy continued with the semester. It was a decision made by the government and the headmaster, after all, and today was the day when the students conducted their mid-terms.

"You will enter the dungeon all alone and will explore individually. You will be graded according to that."

\*\*\*\*\*

"Ethan Hartley, rank 1110."

The announcement after the mid-terms left a buzz in the air, and Ethan's eyes widened in surprise. His rank had seen a significant jump, and he couldn't believe the sudden leap in his standings.

He tried his best and certainly was sure that his rank would increase after the second test they subjected him to, but he never thought it would be this much.

As the news spread among the students, whispers filled the hallways, and curious eyes turned toward Ethan. The number 1110 had become a topic of conversation among the students, and Ethan found himself at the center of attention.

Julia, with a proud smile, patted Ethan on the back. "You did it, Ethan! That's an incredible improvement. Looks like your efforts are paying off."

Lucas clapped Ethan on the shoulder. "Man, you're climbing up the ranks like a rocket! Teach us your secrets, yeah?"

Even Irina, with her grumpy demeanor, couldn't hide a small smirk. "Not bad, Hartley. I guess you're not just a dreamer after all."

However, amongst that attention, he failed to notice a pair of lifeless purple eyes looking his way at all...

\*\*\*\*\*

"Yo, guys." Jim approached the club members. "Are you ready for today's location?"

Excitement filled the air as the Adventurer and Exploration Club members geared up for their trip to one of the seaside cities. The prospect of exploration and adventure added a spark to their usual routine.

As they arrived at the city, the vibrant sounds and scents of the sea surrounded them. The group explored the picturesque streets, taking in the unique atmosphere of the coastal town. Jim led the way with his usual enthusiasm, sharing interesting trivia about the city's history and landmarks.

Ethan and Julia found themselves in a charming little restaurant, enjoying a moment of respite. The aroma of freshly cooked seafood filled the air, and the sounds of the bustling city outside provided a lively backdrop.

However, the tranquility was shattered when the restaurant suddenly erupted into chaos. Demon followers, their dark presence palpable, barged in with malevolent intentions. The patrons screamed, and tables were overturned in the panic.

In the chaos that ensued, the two of them became an unwitting focal point of resistance against the demon followers.

Word of the incident spread quickly through the city. The Adventurer and Exploration Club's intervention became a tale told among the locals and, after that, in the news.

Ethan's fame continued to soar more and more.

\*\*\*\*\*

"This brings us to this semester's last class. I hope every one of you enjoyed the classes and your first semester here," the instructor addressed the students, her tone reflecting a mixture of nostalgia and encouragement.

As the students exchanged glances, a sense of accomplishment and camaraderie lingered in the air. The challenges, lessons, and friendships formed over the semester had left a lasting impact on each of them.

"Now, before we conclude, I'd like to remind you all that the finals are just around the corner," the instructor continued, bringing the students' attention back to the imminent challenges. "The finals will test not only your knowledge but also your practical skills and application of what you've learned throughout the semester."

She emphasized the importance of thorough preparation and encouraged the students to approach the upcoming exams with diligence and determination. The atmosphere in the classroom shifted as the reality of the impending finals settled in.

"Use the remaining time wisely, review your notes, and don't hesitate to seek assistance if needed. Your hard work and dedication throughout the semester will undoubtedly reflect in your performance during the finals," the instructor concluded, her words carrying a motivational undertone.

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"Why does it have to be you? Why can't it be me?"

And now, in the final exam, where the duels were conducted between students while everyone was watching, Ethan's eyes met with the hollow black-purple eyes.