

H. Academy 271

Chapter 271 Chapter 63.3 - Divergence

"Why does it have to be you? Why can't it be me?" The anguished voice echoed in the tense atmosphere of the final exam.

The duels between students were underway; each confrontation met with eager eyes from the onlooking students.

In the midst of the arena, Ethan found himself face to face with a mysterious opponent, his eyes meeting the hollow black-purple eyes of the other student.

FLINCH!

A shiver ran down Ethan's spine as an unsettling feeling settled in the pit of his stomach. Of course, he knew who this person was.

It was the gloomy student who never talked with others. After all, he was quite famous for being the last ranked in the academy, and Ethan had heard his name quite a few times.

"What do you mean?" However, Ethan was having a hard time comprehending his words.

"What do I mean? Of course, you wouldn't understand." His response didn't explain much as well, as the student just looked at him.

As the two locked eyes, it was as if time momentarily stood still. The purple hue of the student's eyes seemed otherworldly, but within that vibrant color, Ethan detected a small but distinct blackness, as if something sinister lurked within.

Ethan continued to study the person before him, attempting to understand the cryptic words and the unsettling gaze. However, the young man remained silent, offering no further explanation.

The judge raised his hand, signaling the commencement of the duel. "Ethan Hartley versus Astron Natusalune. Begin!"

The judge's words hung in the air as Ethan and Astron Natusalune prepared to face off. The tension escalated, and the onlookers leaned in, their eyes fixed on the impending clash.

Ethan tightened his grip on his spear, a determined glint in his eyes. Astron, on the other hand, wielded a pair of gleaming daggers, his expression unreadable. The arena crackled with anticipation as the duel began.

SWOOSH!

Ethan lunged forward, his spear cutting through the air with precision. Astron swiftly dodged the initial strike, showcasing agility that contradicted his low rank.

'Hmm?'

However, Ethan continued his relentless assault, pressing Astron back with each calculated move.

CLANK!

The clash of metal resonated as Astron desperately parried Ethan's spear with his daggers.

The power and skill gap between them was evident, with Ethan easily overpowering his mysterious opponent. The onlookers exchanged glances, surprised by the one-sided nature of the confrontation.

Astron's movements became more erratic, and beads of sweat formed on his forehead. Despite his best efforts, he struggled to keep up with Ethan's speed and strength.

"Tch."

The hollow black-purple eyes betrayed a hint of frustration, a stark contrast to Ethan's focused determination.

Ethan's spear danced through the air, its movements fluid and controlled. He anticipated Astron's every move, exploiting weaknesses in his defense. It was clear that Ethan had the upper hand, and the arena buzzed with murmurs as the disparity in skill became more apparent.

'I don't know what is his deal, but I will end it with this.'

「Spear of Hartley. Tiger's Thrust.？」

CLANK!

With a powerful thrust, Ethan disarmed Astron, sending one of the daggers flying across the arena.

"Wow, he did it."

The spectators gasped in amazement at the sheer dominance displayed by Ethan.

However, instead of reveling in his victory, Ethan hesitated for a moment, his gaze fixed on Astron's remaining dagger and his face.

"In the end, I couldn't even do this on my own."

His eyes were locked on his hands as he mumbled to himself. The aura surrounding himself started to change as well, as Ethan started to feel that sinister aura emanating from him.

"I don't know what your deal is, but I won't let you do whatever you are doing."

Ethan's internal conflict fueled his determination as he refocused on the duel. With a newfound resolve, he charged at Astron, his spear poised for another strike.

Astron, despite being disarmed by one dagger, exuded an air of calm confidence as he mumbled expressionlessly. "It is easy to say for you, isn't it? After all, you are Ethan Hartley. The genius of the Hartley family."

CLANK!

As Ethan lunged forward with the Spear of Hartley, Astron effortlessly parried the attack with his remaining dagger.

"Huh?"

Ethan let out a surprised exclamation as he looked at his parried dagger and shaking wrists.

SWOOSH!

Following that, Astron unleashed a surprising punch. The blow was delivered with such speed and precision that Ethan had little time to react—the punch connected, sending Ethan hurtling backward through the air.

CRASH!

The spectators gasped as Ethan crashed to the ground, the impact causing a cloud of dust to rise around him.

The dust settled around the arena as Ethan struggled to rise from the impact. Astron stood calmly, the remaining dagger in hand, a cold expression on his face. The spectators watched in anticipation, unsure of what would unfold next.

Astron's disdainful gaze fixated on Ethan as he spoke with a voice filled with bitterness. "You think it's that simple, don't you? Just train hard and get stronger. But talentless people like us tend to drown in their own pit of mediocrity."

Ethan, still catching his breath, shot a determined look at Astron. Now, the aura surrounding him has already changed.

SWOOSH!

But at that moment, Astron, with an eerie calmness, disappeared from his original position, only to reappear right before Ethan's face. His hands were shrouded in eerie and dark energy, an unsettling sight that sent a chill down the spines of the onlookers.

THUD!

Before Ethan could react, Astron unleashed another punch with ruthless precision. The blow landed squarely on Ethan's battered form, preventing him from standing up.

The force of the punch echoed through the arena, and Ethan crumpled to the ground once more.

The spectators watched in horrified silence as Astron, consumed by an unseen darkness, continued his assault. Each punch was delivered with a mixture of anger and frustration as if Astron was unleashing years of pent-up emotion with each blow.

As Astron beat Ethan mercilessly, he spoke with a voice filled with a bitter resonance that reverberated through the arena. "I hated myself at first. I thought it was my fault for being weak. I blamed myself for everything, thinking I could change all of those. But I realized, no matter what I did, this world was never going to let me stand."

Ethan, struggling to endure the relentless assault, listened to Astron's words with a mix of confusion and pain. The dark energy surrounding Astron intensified, casting an ominous glow on the scene.

"The god himself abandoned first 'her' and then me," Astron continued, his voice carrying a deep sense of betrayal. "No one cared for me, even while everything was happening right in front of their faces."

"Burghk-!" Ethan spat blood from his face as he couldn't bear the blows.

"Even after trying to achieve my revenge in the pursuit of the very beings that made my life hell, I learned the enemy I deemed had never been the ones I sought."

SMASH!

"Do you know how desperate I felt? How empty everything was?"

SMASH!

"It was then I realized it's not the weak's fault for being trampled, nor the strong's fault for using their power. It's this world's fault for giving power to the wrong people."

He looked at Ethan with a face that was spiteful. "People like you who can afford to live in their own fantasies and make them reality just because they were gifted from the start.....This is what I hate the most."

With each word, Astron's punches became more fervent, a manifestation of his inner turmoil.

"And, now, I sold my very soul to the devil so that at least my very being could mean something to this world. You may call it a stupid protest against this shitty place, but at the end of the day, it will never matter at all. The world had taken everything from me. And I will make sure I at least contribute to its destruction."

BOOM!

At that moment, a sound of explosion filled the place where the final exam had been happening.

SCREAM!

Screams surrounded the place as people ran around like their lives depended on it.

As Astron's punches intensified, a realization dawned on Ethan. It wasn't Astron's power that caused his emptiness; it was the very essence of his being, scarred by the world that had turned its back on him to the point where nothing had left. The empathy for Astron's suffering swelled within Ethan, and a straight determination filled his eyes.

Inwardly, Ethan realized that there was only one way to save Astron from the abyss of despair. It wasn't through defeating him in a physical battle; it was by putting an end to his suffering. A deep understanding surged within Ethan – only by ending Astron's life could he bring an end to the anguish that had consumed him.

The determination etched on Ethan's face became unwavering. His battered body seemed to draw strength from an uncharted reserve as he pushed himself up, his gaze fixed on Astron.

'There is only one way.'

At that moment, Ethan knew what he had to do, not just for himself but for the tormented soul standing before him.

As Astron prepared to deliver another devastating punch, the atmosphere hung heavy with tension.

THUD!

However, at that critical moment, Ethan summoned a surge of strength from within. With newfound determination, he intercepted Astron's incoming punch, blocking it with an unwavering resolve.

"I'm sorry," Ethan mumbled under his breath, the weight of his words carried by the gravity of the situation.

He felt the surge of strength coursing through his body as if drawn from an untapped source.

THUD!

Following that, Ethan threw a kick to him, sending him crashing to the other side of the arena.

SMASH!

There were already explosions occurring everywhere around, and Ethan knew he needed to help. But it was going to be a lot more dangerous to let this person go.

Feeling the newfound power, Ethan spat to the ground, a symbolic gesture of defiance against the impending darkness that threatened to engulf them both.

The air crackled with tension as Astron, consumed by the dark energy surrounding him, prepared to unleash his daggers.

"You are sorry for what?"

Astron's hands gripped the daggers tightly, the black energy swirling around him like a malevolent storm.

"...."

"You can't answer, can you? Just like your motives, even your apologies are shallow."

"No matter what I give you as an answer, you will never see it as honest."

"There is no honesty in this world."

Ethan, fueled by a mix of sympathy and determination, readied his spear. The arena seemed to hold its breath, the chaotic sounds of panic and destruction fading into the background.

SWOOSH!

The clash between the two students, now armed with their respective weapons, was imminent.

Ethan, scarred and battered, knew that he had to bring an end to Astron's suffering, even if it meant sacrificing a part of himself in the process.

"YOU DON'T KNOW ANYTHING!"

With a primal scream, Astron lunged forward, daggers gleaming with ominous intent. In response, Ethan met him head-on, the clash of weapons resonating with a melancholic melody.

The black energy surrounding Astron intensified, creating an ethereal display of darkness.

Despite Ethan's determined efforts, the battle took its toll on both fighters. Each strike left its mark – scars etched into their very beings.

As the clash reached its crescendo, Ethan was able to get the feeling.

"I am sorry, you lost soul." He mumbled as he closed his eyes.

「Spear of Hartley. Derived form. Gentle Farewell. 」

With a surge of determination, Ethan executed the technique, a manifestation of both strength and mercy.

The spear, bathed in an otherworldly light, moved with a grace that contradicted the brutal nature of the battle.

It pierced through Astron's dark energy, reaching his very core with a gentleness that seemed out of place in the chaos.

Astron's primal scream was silenced as the ethereal display of darkness dissipated, leaving only the fading echoes of their clash.

"Kurgh-!"

SILENCE!

The arena fell into an eerie silence as Ethan withdrew the spear, ending Astron's life gently.

THUD!

As Astron fell to the ground, the last thing he saw was the face of the very person he yearned for.

However, the victory was not without its cost. As the spear of mercy fulfilled its purpose, Astron's dagger, fueled by the last vestiges of his dark energy, pierced through Ethan's shoulder. The pain was intense, and a scar marked the spot where the dagger had made its impact.

Yet, Ethan's face didn't even grimace at all.

"I am sorry.....for failing everything and seeing such a person turning in this way...."

He bowed his head, leaning on his spear with one.

"May the lord bless your soul....."

Chapter 272 Chapter 63.4 - Divergence

"The parents had been expressing their discontent at the Arcadia Hunter Academy. After the recent scandal during the mid-terms, where many students lost their lives, the academy was now subjected to another attack during the finals. Concerns about the safety of the academy are on the rise, and many of the governors are suggesting there might be a case of money embezzlement.

In a recent press conference, the academy's spokesperson tried to assure the public that they were taking the necessary measures to address the security issues. However, the series of unfortunate events has led to a decline in the academy's reputation, with parents questioning the safety of their children within its walls.

The news announcer's voice echoed through living rooms, conveying the gravity of the situation. Parents, once eager to enroll their children in the prestigious academy, are now reconsidering their decisions. The scandal has cast a shadow over the institution, and the allegations of money embezzlement only add to the growing concerns.

As the investigation into the recent attack continues, the academy finds itself at a crossroads, facing not only external scrutiny but also internal challenges that threaten its standing in the eyes of both students and parents alike."

"Until further notice, you will be having your vacations. We, as the academy, understand the concerns and fears that have arisen due to recent events. The safety and well-being of our students are our top priorities.

In light of the recent incidents and the ongoing investigations, I, as the headmaster, would like to take full responsibility for everything that has transpired. It is our duty to ensure a secure and nurturing environment for every student, and I apologize for any lapse in that commitment.

The academy will now enter a period of reflection and thorough assessment of our security measures. We will work tirelessly to address the concerns raised by both parents and students. Your safety is paramount to us, and we will not rest until we have implemented measures that guarantee a secure learning environment.

During this vacation period, students are encouraged to take the time to relax, rejuvenate, and be with their families. We understand the toll recent events may have taken on your mental and

emotional well-being, and we want to provide you with the opportunity to relieve yourselves of any stress or anxiety.

Rest assured that the academy is dedicated to making the necessary changes to ensure a safe return for everyone. We appreciate your patience and understanding during this challenging time, and we look forward to welcoming you back to a stronger, more secure Arcadia Hunter Academy."

After the recent events and his fight within the academy, Ethan's fame rose even more thanks to his achievements in the attack of the final exam.

He had contributed greatly against the combat, directly neutralizing three demon-followers, one of them being an insider student.

His achievements in the face of adversity had not gone unnoticed, and the association decided to reward him for his exceptional contributions.

In a grand ceremony, Ethan was presented with a prestigious medal, recognizing him as a rising star within the Arcadia Hunter Academy.

The ceremony was attended by various influential figures, including members of the association, academy officials, and renowned hunters.

"Welcome! Today, we honor Ethan Hartley, a young hunter who displayed exceptional skills and unwavering courage during the final exam. Ethan's actions protected his fellow students and made him a beacon of hope and inspiration for us all. We bestow upon him this prestigious medal as a symbol of his accomplishments and potential. Congratulations, Ethan!"

The announcer's voice echoed through the hall, detailing Ethan's accomplishments and highlighting his courage and skill during the recent attack.

"Arcadia Hunter Academy has announced that the second semester of the academic year will soon start. The headmaster announces that they now have taken more extreme measures so that the future Hunters' safety is guaranteed.

"Another terrorism act on the recent south shore of the Phacelia State. What does the increase in the villain's activities mean? Are the citizens safe? What are Hunters doing?"

"In a recent press release, Arcadia Hunter Academy declares the imminent commencement of the second semester for the academic year. The headmaster ensures that extensive measures have been implemented to fortify the safety of future Hunters within the academy's walls. The commitment to safeguarding students has become paramount, with the institution steadfastly adapting to ensure a secure learning environment."

"Breaking News: Yet another act of terrorism has occurred on the south shore of the Phacelia State. As the frequency of villain activities increases, citizens are left questioning their safety. What actions are the Hunters taking to counter these threats? Stay tuned for updates as we delve into the implications of this surge in criminal activity."

"Innovations at the Forefront: Arcane-Powered Transportation Unveiled! The realm of hunter technology sees a groundbreaking advancement with the introduction of arcane-powered vehicles. These revolutionary transports aim to enhance the efficiency and speed of Hunters during their missions."

"Unearthed Mysteries: Ancient Ruins Discovered in the Enchanted Forest! A team of intrepid explorers, including some Arcadia Hunter Academy students, stumbles upon long-lost ruins in the heart of the Enchanted Forest. Speculations arise about the secrets concealed within these ancient structures."

"City on High Alert: Another Demon Incursion Strikes the Eastern District! In the latest wave of attacks, demons infiltrate the bustling Eastern District, prompting heightened security measures. How will the Hunters respond to this sudden surge in demonic activity?"

"As Danger Looms: Newly Devised Defensive Charms Enter the Market! In light of recent threats, enchanters unveil a range of defensive charms designed to protect citizens and Hunters alike. The market witnesses an influx of these magical safeguards, each promising enhanced security against supernatural forces."

"Ethan Hartley and Victor Blackthorn Share the First Place in the Recent Youngster's Olympics!

In a spectacular display of skill and determination, the two rising stars, Ethan Hartley and Victor Blackthorn, have triumphantly secured the top spot in the highly competitive Youngster's Olympics. The thrilling competition, which showcased the exceptional abilities of the younger generation, ended in a rare tie as both participants demonstrated unparalleled prowess.

Both participants are rising stars from the Arcadia Hunter Academy and their exceptional performance has helped to restore some of the lost trust in their academy."

"Mysterious Murders in the City of Vrester. What is the reason for unknown murders? The local security expressed their desire to involve the Demonic Human Bureau. Once again, is this still the work of the Demonic Humans?"

"Increasing Dungeon Threats: Urgent Call for Awakened Hunters!

Dungeon numbers surge, posing a growing danger. The Hunter Association urgently calls all Awakened individuals to become Hunters. With escalating threats, the need for more defenders has never been higher. Awakened individuals are urged to join the fight and undergo training to protect communities from the rising dungeon menace. The fate of the future rests on the collective strength and courage of those willing to step forward."

"Arcadia Hunter Academy Adapts to Rising Dungeon Threats!

Amidst the surge in dungeon numbers, Arcadia Hunter Academy unveils a revamped curriculum. Focused on real-

world scenarios and practical skills, the academy aims to produce specialized Hunters ready to tackle the evolving challenges posed by dungeons. This strategic shift is designed to create a new generation of adaptable and proficient defenders, ensuring community safety in the face of escalating threats."

"Ethan Hartley Secures Victory in Valerian Interacademic Competition!

Arcadia Hunter Academy's rising star, Ethan Hartley, claims triumph in the prestigious Valerian Interacademic Competition. As accolades pour in, the question lingers: Has Arcadia Hunter Academy fully regained the trust of its citizens with this remarkable achievement?"

"A new star appeared! Could Saintess Sylvie be the salvation of the Humanity?"

"Ethan Hartley Yet Smashes Another Record: Youngest Member of the Demonic Human Bureau!

In an unprecedented achievement, Ethan Hartley hailed as one of the latest to awaken, has shattered expectations once again by becoming the youngest member of the prestigious Demonic Human Bureau. His meteoric rise from a novice Hunter to a distinguished figure within the Bureau has left the Hunter community in awe.

The Demonic Human Bureau, renowned for its rigorous standards and stringent selection process, has recognized Ethan's extraordinary talents and unwavering commitment to the safety of humanity. As the youngest member to join its ranks, Ethan Hartley stands as a testament to the remarkable potential harbored by the younger generation.

In response to this remarkable milestone, Ethan expressed his gratitude and determination to fulfill his responsibilities.

"I see this as an opportunity to represent not only myself but also the younger generation of Hunters. We have a duty to protect, and I will strive to be a beacon of hope for those who believe in a safer future."

Ethan's appointment to the Demonic Human Bureau positions him as a symbol of inspiration for aspiring Hunters and a rising hero within the Hunter community.

"The World Once Again Faces Dire Challenges: Re-Invasion of Demons and Escalating Dungeon Threats! As demons reclaim footholds and dungeon numbers surge, the Hunters find themselves grappling with unprecedented challenges. The government takes measures to fortify its defenses, but the safety of citizens hangs in the balance."

"Unveiling the Shadows: Blackthorn Family's Hidden Past Exposed! In a shocking revelation, the Blackthorn family's enigmatic history comes to light. Whispers of past dealings, hidden alliances, and secret pacts send shockwaves through the Valerian Federation. How will this revelation impact Victor Blackthorn and his family's standing in the Hunter community?"

"Crisis in Arcadia Dominion: Pillar Family Exposed and Terminated! In a recent conference of the Arcadia Dominion, the dark past of one of the six pillar families is laid bare. Shockingly, the revelations lead to the termination of the once-

influential family. As political tremors reverberate, the Dominion faces an unprecedented shake-up. What ramifications will this have for the political landscape of magic and the balance of power?"

"Aurora Sanctum's Secrets Unveiled: Strict Nation in the West Holds Hidden Agendas! As the spotlight shifts to the mysterious Aurora Sanctum, a small country to the west, questions arise about its rigid policies and clandestine activities. Speculations circulate regarding the Sanctum's involvement in regional affairs, raising concerns about the true nature of this insular nation. What secrets lie behind the closed doors of the Aurora Sanctum?"

"The Shadows Within Corruption and Intrigue Plague Hunter Association! Allegations of corruption and internal strife cast a shadow over the Hunter Association. Whispers of betrayal, power struggles, and covert alliances threaten the very foundation of the organization. As Hunters question the integrity of their leaders, the future of the association hangs in the balance.

"Dark Unveiling: Ethan Hartley's Shocking Act - Hunter Association Head Terminated! In a shocking turn of events, Ethan Hartley takes matters into his own hands, executing the last remaining head of the beleaguered Hunter Association. Witnesses describe a scene of tumultuous emotions as Ethan, tears streaming down his face, carries out the termination.

The act raises disturbing questions: Is Ethan a true hero, fighting against a corrupt system, or are unseen powers orchestrating a sinister play behind the scenes? As the world watches, uncertainty grips the Hunter community, leaving them to ponder the implications of this unprecedented event."

"The Demonic Cataclysm: Unprecedented Demon Surge Engulfs the Federation! Demonic forces launch a coordinated onslaught, overwhelming Hunter defenses across the eastern region. Cities

teeter on the brink of collapse as demons rampage through the streets. The cataclysmic event forces citizens and Hunters alike to confront the harsh reality of an unprecedented demonic invasion."

"Humanity's Last Stand: Ethan Hartley Emerges as the True Hero in the Demonic Cataclysm! As the Demonic Cataclysm engulfs the Federation, Ethan Hartley rises as the beacon of hope and the true hero in the face of unparalleled adversity. Leading the charge against the demonic onslaught, Ethan becomes the linchpin in humanity's desperate struggle for survival. In the midst of chaos, he orchestrates strategic defenses, rallies Hunters, and stands unwavering against the demonic tide.

The world watches as Ethan emerges as the symbol of humanity's resilience, fighting not only against the demons but also against the shadows of doubt and conspiracy. As cities crumble and alliances shatter, Ethan Hartley stands firm, proving that even in the darkest of times, true heroes rise to defend what remains of humanity's last castle against the relentless demonic surge."

Chapter 273 Chapter 64.1 - Connecting Dots

Irina sat in stunned silence, the weight of the future pressing down on her. The glimpses of events that unfolded over time had shaken her understanding of the world.

As she processed the cascade of information, doubts, and questions swirled in her mind like a tempest.

'Was that even a future?'

The events that had unfolded from the vision that she saw.....There were many things that didn't match what she knew and experienced.

Many of the things were different.

From what she had remembered, Julia wasn't injured in the joint dungeon exploration, and none of the students died, even though a real yeti had appeared.

'Things are a lot different from what I know.'

She remembered what happened at the Blackthorn Family banquet. Even though she didn't know everything in detail, she remembered the attack.

That scene where she had seen such a large-scale attack for the first time was still engraved in her mind, even though it was not her first time encountering a demonic human.

But that wasn't the end.

'Mid-terms.'

The events that happened in mid-terms weren't that different. Ethan ranked up once again. However, his rank didn't increase by three digits but remained at 1110, and that was another divergence.

'Astron hadn't ranked up either.'

Astron's name wasn't mentioned, as he still seemed like he was the last ranked.

As she remembered his perspective of time-frame, she remembered he was approached after the mid-terms.

'Academy curriculum.'

But, if she remembered one important thing, it would be the fact that the academy hadn't introduced a changed curriculum after the mid-terms.

'They did it in the second year.'

Nothing seemed to add up.

Even right now, the trip to the Phantom's Land didn't seem to make any sense. According to what she had seen, they weren't supposed to be here but in the academy training.

'And the attack in the final exams and Astron's death.'

The person whose past she had witnessed died just like that.

"He can't be like that. Astron can't be a demonic human. I refuse to believe it," Irina declared inwardly, her denial a desperate attempt to shield herself from the harsh truth.

The Astron she knew had vulnerabilities and struggles, but the idea of him succumbing to the darkness seemed impossible.

The trip to the Phantom's Land, the altered mid-term events, and the tragic outcome of the final exams all painted a distorted picture of the future.

Irina grappled with the dissonance between what she knew and what she had seen, a battle between the reality she clung to and the unsettling truths that unfolded.

'It can't be, not again.....'

The fear of betrayal, a sentiment she thought she had overcome, resurfaced with a vengeance.

'Please not....'

It was a visceral reaction, an instinctual attempt to protect herself from the heart-wrenching realization that those she trusted might not be who they seemed.

"I won't believe it. Astron, please, let this be some twisted vision, a nightmare," Irina pleaded silently, her thoughts a desperate plea for the reality she cherished to remain intact.

The suffocating fear of betrayal mingled with the anguish of uncertainty, creating a storm of conflicting emotions within her.

But at that moment, she stopped.

'What am I doing?'

As if something danged at her, Irina abruptly stopped herself, her internal tumult grinding to a halt. The realization hit her like a sudden wave, breaking through the tempest of conflicting emotions.

She took a deep breath psychologically, forcing herself to step back from the precipice of despair.

The visions, the diverging futures, the unsettling revelations – they threatened to drown her in a sea of uncertainty.

"No," she muttered, her voice steady. "This is not helping. I can't lose my sense of reality to these visions. What's happened, what's real, is what I've lived, not these fractured glimpses."

Forcing herself to calm down, Irina straightened, her determination resurfacing. The visions might have shaken her, but she couldn't afford to lose sight of her purpose.

She was here to understand, to unravel the mystery of the Phantom's Land, not to succumb to the disorienting effects of glimpses into possible futures.

"Sigh...."

As she sighed, she looked around.

She needed to know what place she was in.

'These are definitely not the memories of Astron nor Ethan.'

It didn't make any sense for her to see the memories of two different people from a third-person perspective, which also didn't add the events that she knew.

'First, I need to check what is different.'

With a resolute focus, Irina retraced her steps, mentally organizing the events that happened in the world she knew. The joint dungeon exploration, the Blackthorn Family banquet attack, the mid-terms, and the recent trip to the Phantom's Land were the events she experienced.

She listed the differences in her mind, slowly and steadily.

Irina meticulously went through the mental list of events, comparing the memories she knew with the visions she had witnessed. The differences began to crystallize in her mind as she focused on each key moment:

Joint Dungeon Exploration: In the visions, there were discrepancies in Julia's well-being, and some students faced fatal outcomes. However, in her lived experiences, no such tragedies occurred. Julia remained unharmed, and everyone survived the encounter with the real yeti.

Blackthorn Family Banquet Attack: The scale and details of the attack on the Blackthorn Family banquet seemed exaggerated in the visions. While she did recall a demonic human attack, the events she saw in the future diverged significantly from her own memory.

Mid-Terms: The rankings of Ethan and Astron didn't align with her knowledge. Ethan's rank remained at 1110, and Astron's name wasn't mentioned, contrary to her own experience where Ethan consistently climbed in rankings, and Astron was the last ranked.

Academy Curriculum Change: The vision portrayed a changed curriculum after mid-terms, while in reality, the academy introduced a revamped curriculum in the second year, not after mid-terms.

Phantom's Land Trip: The current situation, being in the Phantom's Land instead of the academy training, was a stark deviation. The events unfolding around her didn't align with her expectations or experiences.

Attack in the Final Exams and Astron's Death: The vision showed Astron meeting a tragic end, succumbing to becoming a demonic human. This contradicted the Astron she knew, leaving her in disbelief and denial.

With the differences laid out before her, Irina took a moment to absorb the information. The space she found herself in, the visions she witnessed, didn't conform to any logical understanding of time or reality. It was as if she had stepped into a realm that transcended the boundaries of her known world.

"Sigh... What is this place?" Irina murmured, her eyes scanning the unfamiliar surroundings. The landscape seemed ethereal, shifting in subtle ways that defied conventional logic. The space felt both tangible and ephemeral, a paradox that added to the enigma surrounding her.

"Wait...."

At that moment, she saw herself in one of the visions. She was looking at the sky without knowing what to do.

Something dangled into her head.

As Irina pondered the discrepancies and observed the surreal surroundings, a realization dawned on her. The visions, the ability to witness different timelines, the disconnected space – it all pointed to a place beyond the confines of her physical reality. It was as if she had transcended the limits of the world she knew.

"Wait... A place where I can watch myself... Others... Different timelines... Different people... Different locations...", Irina mumbled to herself, connecting the dots between the visions and the space she found herself in.

Curiosity guiding her, she looked around, taking in the ethereal landscape that seemed to exist outside the rules of the physical world. It was then that she tried to sense her own body.

To her surprise, she realized she felt no physical constraints. It was as if she had become a mere observer, detached from the tangible realities that governed her everyday existence.

'Wait...'

Then, a memory surfaced – a recent magical conference where a high-ranking mage and a scholar presented a theoretical framework on dimensions.

The scholars spoke of realms beyond the known, places where the laws of physics and the rules of the world diverged.

'Diverging Dimensions Theory.'

"A high-ranking dimension," Irina whispered, her invisible eyes widening. "This....."

The landscape around her seemed to shimmer with the possibilities of countless realities, each unfolding in its unique way.

In that moment of realization, Irina came to terms with the truth. She wasn't in the physical world anymore.

She had traversed into a higher-ranking dimension, a realm where time and space never even existed before.

'Don't tell me....'

That explained why she was able to see everything. If she was inside a dimension that was way above what any other person normally stayed in...

Then it would make sense.

"If so, then.....This is a parallel world."

The realization danged in. The concept of a parallel world, a different timeline where everything unfolded in an alternate fashion, explained the disjointed visions and the discrepancies between her memories and the glimpses she had seen.

In this higher-ranking dimension, Irina found herself not merely witnessing events but existing in a space where time and reality took unexpected turns.

The landscapes she saw were reflections of a reality that deviated from the one she knew. The realization opened a gateway to understanding the intricacies of the parallel world she now inhabited.

"But, how? Why am I here? What brought me here?"

The moment she asked this question to herself, she remembered what happened before she came here.

"The Magic Spell. Dreams....No, not dreams."

She thought it was a dream, but it wasn't.

"My spell didn't even work as intended from the start."

If it did, she would be inside a dream.

"It was distorted. Because of something....Something outside of my control."

It was because of that distortion that she ended up crossing dimensions.

"The entity."

The entity whose existence she had discovered. The being that she thought was so formidable that she sought help.

"Because of its magic, I ended up here."

At that exact moment, Irina started to question what those phantoms were.

"Crossing dimensions....Phantoms....Lost souls...."

Then she realized.

"They are not lost souls....They are the souls of the people of parallel worlds...The reason why phantoms exist.....is because their original place is taken by their parallel selves...."

As if a revelation dawned upon her, she started mumbling like a maniac.

"The entity.....is the main cause why Phantoms exist. It makes the souls of the people cross dimensions and take the place of their parallel selves by force. And the ones that end up returning to the real world couldn't find their places at all and become phantoms...."

"And the reason why I ended up here....is because Sylvie and my spell intercepted the path, leaving me in the alternate higher dimension that bridges the two parallel worlds."

Her analytical mind, which was going to make her the best and strongest mage in the world, started spinning at a rapid speed.

She interpreted everything as she realized what was happening here.

"But why? Why is it doing this?" Irina questioned aloud, her thoughts racing as she grappled with the revelation of the entity's involvement in the creation of phantoms and the distortion of dimensions.

As she pondered the motive behind the entity's actions, a subtle shift in the fabric of the higher-ranking dimension caught her attention. A slit began to form in the otherwise seamless space, a tiny rupture that seemed to connect her world to something beyond.

Her invisible eyes widened as she stared at the developing slit. It was a portal, a disturbance in the delicate balance of space and time. The entity's goal became clearer – it sought to create a specific portal, a conduit for something far more dangerous.

At that moment, Irina sensed an ominous presence emanating from the opening slit. A palpable feeling of danger and malevolence washed over her. Whatever lay beyond that portal was not only threatening but also held an air of humiliation to the point where she could feel the world would get destroyed.

The realization struck her like a bolt of lightning. The entity's actions, the creation of phantoms, the disturbance in dimensions – they all pointed toward a grander scheme.

The slit in the space was a gateway, and what lurked beyond was a force that could bring about unimaginable consequences.

"We need to stop it."

She mumbled to herself as she looked around frantically.

"But how?"

Chapter 274 Chapter 64.2 - Connecting Dots

"We need to stop it," Irina mumbled to herself, the urgency of the situation pressing down on her invisible form. The realization of the impending threat, the dangerous force beyond the portal, fueled her determination.

"But how?"

But then, a new question presented itself: How? How could she, in her intangible state within this higher-ranking dimension, intervene and put an end to the entity's machinations?

Panic flickered in her invisible eyes as she looked around frantically, searching for a way to take action. The vastness of the higher dimension seemed to close in on her, leaving her feeling both trapped and desperate.

"There must be a way out; there has to be," Irina repeated to herself, her voice carrying a note of urgency. She desperately wished for an exit from this place, a path back to her reality where she could use the knowledge she had gained to prevent the unfolding catastrophe.

Her mind raced, considering the possibilities. Could she manipulate the dimensional fabric and return to her world? Was there a key to unlock the invisible barrier that confined her in this space? The answers remained elusive, and frustration mounted as she struggled to find a solution.

In her quest for escape, Irina's thoughts echoed with determination. "Think, think. There has to be a way out. I can't let this threat manifest."

As she searched for an exit, the developing portal seemed to pulse with ominous energy, a stark reminder of the imminent danger.

"If what I think is correct, then the stronger the mana of the people inside, the more energy that thing can absorb."

She realized that by coming to Phantom's Land, the academy actually presented the entity with the energy it needed.

"That was why..."

She was safe now that she was outside of the constraints of time and space. After all, she was in a higher dimension.

"Wait...A higher dimension?"

At that moment, she caught on to something that she had overlooked.

"How can I, just a human, exist in this place?"

Irina's invisible form seemed to hover in contemplation as she questioned the very nature of her presence in this higher dimension. According to the Diverging Dimensions Theory, she was aware that beings from one dimension couldn't naturally bypass the rules of that dimension and enter another without external influence.

A realization dawned upon her, and a shiver ran through her intangible form. There was something external at play, something that defied the established rules of dimensional travel. It became clear that her existence in this higher dimension wasn't solely a consequence of her own actions; an external force had facilitated her entry into this realm.

"Someone... or something is keeping me here," Irina muttered, her invisible brows furrowed in thought.

The enigma surrounding her presence deepened as she grappled with the realization that she wasn't alone in navigating the mysteries of this higher dimension.

A surge of uncertainty washed over her. The nature of this external force, its intentions, and the role it played in the unfolding events remained obscured. It added another layer of complexity to an already intricate situation.

"Why would something want me here? What purpose does it serve?" Irina pondered aloud, her thoughts a swirl of questions.

'Hmm.....?'

Amidst the swirling questions and uncertainties, Irina felt a peculiar sensation, as if an invisible thread had connected her to something beyond the confines of the higher dimension.

"This...."

A subtle pull drew her attention, and instinctively, she followed the intangible link, hoping it might unravel the mysteries surrounding her existence in this enigmatic space.

As she pursued the connection, the landscape of the higher dimension seemed to warp and twist, responding to the invisible force guiding her. The shift was disorienting, yet Irina pressed on, driven by the need for answers.

In a surreal moment, the ephemeral surroundings transformed once again, revealing a familiar scene. The shifting hues and indistinct forms coalesced into a recognizable time-frame – Astron's.

The link that pulled her through the dimensions seemed to converge with the events unfolding in Astron's time frame.

"Astron...."

Then, she realized.

"He was the target of spell....."

The spell 「Phantasmic Transfer」 seemed to be something that had a special target, and she knew it was Astron. If that spell was what brought her here, the target of that spell was likely the reason why she was able to stay here.

"The law that is pulling me to my dimension is being negated by the pull that connects me to Astron."

If that is the case, then there was only one thing she needed to do.

"I need to sever the connection."

The realization hit Irina like a bolt of clarity – the key to severing the connection between her and the higher dimension lay in Astron. As she contemplated this, the invisible thread binding them felt stronger, pulsating with a mysterious energy that bridged the gap between their worlds.

"How do I sever this connection?" Irina muttered to herself, her mind racing through possibilities. The connection seemed to be tethered to Astron's soul, a lifeline that transcended the boundaries of their respective dimensions.

Astron's soul, anchored in the parallel dimension, was the focal point that kept Irina bound to this surreal space. If she could somehow facilitate Astron's return to his world, it might disrupt the connection and allow her to escape the clutches of the higher dimension.

"I need to find a way to bring Astron back," Irina concluded, her invisible form tinged with determination.

After all, if what she thought was correct, then the residential souls in the parallel world were the ones that lost their consciousness in the real world. If that is the case, if she could somehow make him return, then thanks to her connection with his soul, the laws that were pulling her would no longer be in a stalemate, and she would escape.

"But how?"

Then, that question arose. How could she bring him back? What could she do? What made someone return from there?

"How did Sylvie make me return?"

Sylvie's power made her return from her unconscious sleep, and she needed to know how she did.

"My dream..."

She forcefully tried to remember what happened when she was unconscious.

Irina delved into the recesses of her memories, attempting to recollect the details of her return from unconsciousness. The process was akin to navigating through a fog, with the specifics eluding her grasp. Frustration threatened to take hold as she strained to remember the events that transpired during her dream.

"What happened in that dream?" Irina muttered to herself, the invisible furrow on her brow reflecting her internal struggle. Calling it a dream was wrong, and she knew that, but that wasn't important now. The memories felt distant, almost as if they were deliberately shrouded in a haze.

She replayed the moments leading up to her awakening, grasping at the fragments that lingered in her mind. Faces, places, and emotions flickered like ephemeral shadows, refusing to coalesce into a coherent narrative.

"No, I need to remember," she insisted, a hint of desperation creeping into her voice. The dream held the key to understanding how Sylvie's power had facilitated her return.

In the midst of the mental turmoil, a lone detail emerged from the fog – a fleeting image of a cute squirrel. The memory, though vague, held a peculiar significance. As Irina strained to recall, the image of the squirrel morphed in her mind, transforming from its natural appearance into a shining yellow hue.

"A yellow squirrel?" Irina mumbled, the revelation sparking a glimmer of recognition. The color, the transformation – it hinted at something beyond the ordinary.

"A trigger...."

Then she realized....When she got out of there, the squirrel turned yellow. It was a trigger for her, as she liked cute things.

"Sylvie's power did let her bypass the restrictions and activate a trigger in other dimensions...."

Irina whispered to herself, the realization unfolding like a puzzle falling into place. The trigger, symbolized by the yellow squirrel, was a key element in transcending the dimensional barriers.

In her newfound understanding, Irina discerned that she needed a similar trigger for Astron, something that could resonate across dimensions and prompt a response in the parallel world.

However, the question remained: What could she use as a trigger? How could she reach into Astron's life and make a meaningful connection?

Then, inspiration struck. If she wanted a force that could effortlessly traverse dimensions unaffected by their constraints, she needed to rely on a power that transcended the limitations of the physical realm.

"Telekinesis."

The word resonated in her mind as a solution. Irina realized that 「Telekinesis」, the power to move and manipulate objects with the mind, could serve as the bridge she sought.

Unbound by the restrictions of dimensions, 「Telekinesis」 could potentially reach into Astron's world and influence it in a way that would serve as the trigger for his return.

Determined to put her idea into practice, Irina focused her thoughts on using her 「Telekinesis」 to reach into one of the time-frames of Astron.

"I can do it...."

For some reason, she could feel the mana around herself, and without even activating any magical circuits inside her body, which hadn't even existed, she used mana with her intent.

The abstract nature of the higher-ranking dimension responded to her intent, granting her the means to manipulate the ethereal threads of connection between the worlds.

"What?"

However, as she extended her influence, attempting to move an object in Astron's world, Irina encountered an unexpected challenge.

"It is not enough."

The power of her 「Telekinesis」 wasn't as potent as she had hoped, and her control over it was less than proficient. The connection between the dimensions resisted her efforts, and frustration crept in.

"Right now, I can't do it."

However, Irina was not one to give up easily.

"Again."

It was a failure.

"Again."

It was a failure.

"Again."

In the timeless and spaceless realm she found herself in, she persisted. Again and again, she attempted to bridge the gap, refining her control over the invisible force of 「Telekinesis」 .

"Again."

After numerous attempts, Irina began to grasp the intricacies of her power in this higher dimension.

"No....This is not good...Even if I had finally mastered 「Telekinesis」 at that point, I would be too far in it....."

She predicted that, once successful, the strain on her consciousness might render her a lost cause.

"I need to keep everything simple....so that I shouldn't even need to think."

Undeterred, she set a specific goal for her intervention.

"The watch."

Before she came here, Astron and they found out something about Phantom's Land.

'06.06'

When the time hit 06.06, everything had changed.

"I will need to do it."

With unwavering determination, Irina focused on Astron's watch in his home.

She aimed to keep it unmoving once it hit the timestamp 06.06, a symbolic and meaningful moment for Astron.

The ethereal connection resonated with her intent as she directed her 「Telekinesis」 towards the watch, attempting to freeze time at the designated instant.

"Again."

The timeless space quivered with her efforts, each attempt carrying the weight of her determination.

"Again."

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Again.

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Again.

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Again.

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As the iterations continued, Irina's connection with reality blurred. The endless attempts fused into a ceaseless stream, and at some point, she lost track of what she was doing.

The only focus remained on her 「Telekinesis」 , concentrated on the watch suspended in the timeless void before her invisible form.

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Again.

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Again.

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Again.

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Until she had finally succeeded.

Chapter 275 Chapter 65.1 - Conclusion

What is it that we all want in this world?

Is it money?

Success?

Happiness?

Strength?

Peace?

Tranquility?

The answer would definitely change according to the person that is asked. For me, it is the desire to see the outside world or see what lay beyond the limits of our village.

However, was that really the case? Had I really wanted all those things for myself? All those things were 'really' my desire.

Something inside me always told me that I was missing something. From the moment I opened these damn eyes to this world, I always saw things easily, and that was also the case for my quick head.

And that quick head became a curse in times like this. I always questioned if I was really the one who always desired to leave this place since whenever I saw her, all these feelings always disappeared.

I found myself questioning all those things as the new morning made me greet the rising sun. It became a trend for me to rise from my bed before my general time nowadays. This was something that had frequently happened after our father and mother left this world.

"At-ta-ta- ta-ta....."

As I stirred from my sleep, a dull ache resonated through my body, a testament to the physical strain endured during the wood-gathering task yesterday.

The familiar sensation reminded me of the harsh reality of our responsibilities, a routine that became more pronounced after our parents departed from this world.

The first rays of sunlight filtered through the window, casting a warm glow on the simple room I called my own. The wooden walls held memories of shared laughter and conversations, but the absence of our parents lingered in the quiet corners.

"Sigh...."

With a silent sigh, I swung my legs over the edge of the bed, feeling the cool wooden floor beneath my feet.

"Maybe I overexerted myself."

The weight of yesterday's training still clung to my muscles as I questioned whether I should have not trained that much or not.

After all, even if I had this initial desire to improve my body condition, I also heard it frequently that overexerting myself wouldn't bring much benefits. And considering what I had seen so far in my life, that seemed to be true.

CREAK!

The wind howled through the window as my attention was drawn to that place. Seeing the brown-yellowish silk covering the land and the branches of trees that had lost their green color, it became evident that the winter was already on its way once again, a constant reminder of the tasks that awaited me.

"It was definitely not a wise decision to push myself like that....."

I couldn't help but curse myself for yesterday, as I knew the fact that he was the one that was responsible for the muscle pain I was experiencing right now.

"It is definitely not me."

The question of what I wanted to do with my life continued to linger in the corner of my head.

"What do I truly desire?" The question echoed within me as I moved through the motions of my morning routine. The ritual of splashing cold water on my face seemed to wash away the physical weariness, but the existential questions lingered.

The village, the woods, the training—it was all part of a life predetermined by tradition and responsibility. But as the morning sun painted the world in hues of gold, I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something more beyond the boundaries of our familiar existence.

"Come one....Thinking about it is pointless, isn't it."

However, I knew, in the face of real responsibilities, thinking about those fragile things like this.

"You have a roof over your head....What is there to complain about....That old man would definitely say if he was here..."

Remembering the smile of my father and his gentle attitude, I involuntarily curled the corner of my mouth.

I mean, how can I help it? Elders always said that things that are precious always tend to be appreciated after they are lost.

That was definitely true.

The memories of my father flooded my mind, a bittersweet cascade of moments that defined our relationship.

As I dressed and prepared for the day, I couldn't help but reminisce about the times when his guidance and gentle encouragement shaped my understanding of the world.

"Sigh..." I sighed once again, this time not from fatigue but from the weight of unspoken emotions. The image of my father's smile, etched in the recesses of my memory, brought a mixture of warmth and longing.

Maybe it was the changing seasons or the echo of yesterday's exertion, but my thoughts gravitated toward the moments when I felt like I fell short of my father's expectations. He always smiled at my endeavors, even when I stumbled and struggled.

I recalled the times when I believed he wanted me to be like the other kids in the village—more physically capable, more outgoing.

The memory of his disappointed expression haunted me during those instances when I couldn't keep up or when my weaknesses were exposed.

But now, as I stood alone in the quiet room, I yearned for those moments of gentle correction, those subtle nudges that spoke of a father's unwavering belief in his son. The realization struck me that I missed the very things I once perceived as shortcomings.

The creaky floor beneath my feet seemed to echo the footsteps of the past; each sounded a reminder of shared laughter, conversations, and the unspoken bond between a father and his son.

The window, through which the wind whispered its melancholy tune, framed the landscape that had witnessed our family's journey.

Yet, the rational mind inside me told me that I should no longer waste my time thinking about all those useless things. After all, I needed to prepare breakfast before she woke up and left home for her duties.

"You were probably right, old man...." I mumbled with a rare smile. "As long as you have a roof in your head and someone to share it, you should never complain."

With a deep breath, I shook off the nostalgic thoughts, reminding myself that the present demanded my attention. The rhythmic motions of my morning routine provided a comforting anchor, grounding me in the tasks that needed to be done.

As I stepped out of the room, the quiet hallway seemed to hold whispers of bygone days, and I allowed myself a moment to appreciate the memories etched into the very walls. The creaky floor beneath my feet yielded familiar sounds, each one a silent testament to the shared history of our family.

Passing through the familiar spaces of our modest home, I made my way to the small kitchen.

The kitchen, though modest, held the familiar tools and utensils that had witnessed countless meals shared as a family.

I headed straight for the worn-out kettle, a faithful companion in my morning ritual. The rhythmic sound of water pouring into the kettle filled the room, a precursor to the comforting aroma of brewing tea.

The tea leaves, carefully stored in a small container, released their fragrance as they steeped in the hot water. I watched the swirls of steam rise, momentarily lost in the soothing routine that bridged the past and the present.

"This should be enough."

Next, I ventured into the small garden adjacent to our home. The dew-kissed leaves of the vegetables glistened in the morning light, awaiting their turn to contribute to our daily sustenance.

'I guess I should make her something good.'

For some reason, I knew she would also be moody when she woke up. This would probably enlighten her mood a little more.

I plucked fresh tomatoes, crisp lettuce, and vibrant bell peppers, envisioning the colorful array that would adorn our breakfast table.

A trip to the well provided the water needed to wash the vegetables. The cool water felt invigorating on my hands, a tactile connection to the earth that sustained us.

Returning to the kitchen, I retrieved eggs and cheese from the storeroom. The eggs, with their shells bearing a mosaic of speckles, held the promise of nourishment, while the cheese, aged to perfection, added a touch of richness to our simple fare.

CHOP! CHOP! CHOP!

As I moved through the familiar motions of chopping vegetables, cracking eggs, and grating cheese, the kitchen came alive with the sounds and scents of breakfast in the making. The familiar routine, a dance of culinary artistry, brought a sense of purpose to the start of the day.

The aroma of sizzling vegetables and the crackling sound of eggs in the pan filled the kitchen, creating a symphony of flavors that made my stomach grumble.

HUG!

At that moment, I felt someone's arms wrapping around my waist, a familiar touch that brought both surprise and comfort. Turning slightly, I saw Estelle, her presence enveloped in the soft light of the morning. Her arms held me in a gentle embrace, and for a moment, the world outside the kitchen faded away.

"Hmm, good morning, Astron," she mumbled into my back, her voice carrying a muffled morning grogginess. The warmth of her breath against my clothes and the softness of her embrace all indicated that she sought closeness today.

"Good morning, Estelle," I replied, a soft smile playing on my lips. Her slightly moody morning demeanor didn't escape my notice, and I couldn't help but wonder what thoughts lingered in her mind.

As she nestled her face into my back, I continued with the breakfast preparations, the sounds of chopping and sizzling providing a rhythmic backdrop to the shared silence.

The familiar routine served as a comforting balm, grounding us in the simple acts of daily life.

Estelle's embrace tightened, and I could sense a subtle sadness lingering in the air. The weight of our parents' absence hung between us, a silent acknowledgment of the void they left behind.

In these quiet moments, the memories of our shared past became tangible, and I knew that Estelle, like me, carried the weight of those memories.

As the aroma of the cooking breakfast filled the kitchen, Estelle spoke, her voice still muffled against my back. "Do you ever wonder, Astron, if they're watching over us? If they're proud of who we've become?"

The question hung in the air, a reflection of the unspoken thoughts that often surfaced in the quiet corners of our minds. I paused for a moment, letting the weight of her words settle.

"I do, Estelle," I replied softly. In times like this, I would normally be the one who sought comfort from her past in the past. But, at some point, our roles have been reversed, maybe at the time when our father and mother left us.

"I like to think they are. Their guidance and love linger in everything we do, in the memories that shape us. And maybe, just maybe, they find solace in seeing us carry on."

Estelle's grip on me relaxed, and she pulled away, her eyes meeting mine with a mix of gratitude and sadness.

"Thanks, Astron. Thanks for being here," she said, her voice carrying a genuine warmth. In times like this, I thought staying here wasn't bad at all.

Chapter 276 Chapter 65.2 - Conclusion

"Thanks, Astron. Thanks for being here," she said, her voice carrying a genuine warmth. At that moment, our shared understanding spoke volumes, a silent acknowledgment that, even in the absence of our parents, we were not alone.

With a nod, we turned our attention back to the breakfast preparations. The table was soon adorned with a simple yet hearty meal – scrambled eggs, fresh vegetables, and a wedge of aged cheese. The aroma of the food filled the air, inviting us to partake in the familiar ritual of breaking bread together.

As we sat down to eat, Estelle's demeanor shifted with a mischievous glint in her eyes. Her tone took on an animated quality as she delved into the intricacies of village life, sharing tidbits of gossip that she had likely gathered from her interactions as the village shaman.

"So, you won't believe what happened yesterday," Estelle began, a sly smile playing on her lips. "You know the wife of the village chief? The one who always tries to order me around as if I'm at her beck and call?"

I raised an eyebrow, intrigued by the prospect of village drama. "What did she do this time?"

Estelle leaned in slightly as if sharing a well-guarded secret. "Well, she was at it again, complaining about some trivial matter and insisting that I perform a ceremony to bring good fortune to her family. As if I have nothing better to do!"

I couldn't help but chuckle at Estelle's animated storytelling. "And what did you say to her?"

With a playful smirk, she replied, "Oh, you know me. I 'politely' reminded her that my abilities as a shaman are meant for genuine spiritual needs, not for personal whims. But she's persistent, that one."

We both shared a knowing look, acknowledging the sometimes challenging dynamics that came with Estelle's role in the village. Her position as the shaman made her a sought-after figure, and not everyone approached her with sincerity.

Estelle continued her tales, sharing anecdotes about various villagers and their quirks. From young couples seeking love potions to the elderly seeking remedies for aches and pains, her stories painted a vivid picture of the diverse characters that populated their small community.

Amid the laughter and jest, Estelle's gossip served not only as entertainment but also as a way for her to vent the frustrations that came with her responsibilities.

In these moments, her animated storytelling became a form of catharsis, allowing her to navigate the intricacies of village life with a touch of humor and resilience.

But that didn't mean she was free from my words. After reading books all the time and thinking about how I would act in certain situations while imagining those scenarios, I thought I became good with my words.

"Estelle, isn't it against the shaman's code to indulge in gossip?" I teased, a playful smile tugging at the corners of my lips. "Where did the girl who said 'helping others is my desire' go?"

Estelle chuckled, her eyes sparkling with mischief as she met my playful gaze. "Oh, Astron, you always have a way of catching me, don't you? But in my defense, helping others doesn't mean I can't enjoy a good gossip session now and then. It's like a guilty pleasure."

I raised an eyebrow, feigning skepticism. "Guilty pleasure, you say? I thought the spirits would disapprove of such indulgences."

She leaned back, adopting an air of mock seriousness. "Ah, but you see, the spirits understand the importance of laughter and camaraderie. Gossip is just another form of community bonding, a way for me to connect with the villagers on a different level."

I couldn't help but laugh at her clever response. It seemed Estelle had a knack for turning any situation into a light-hearted banter. "Well, as long as the spirits are okay with it, who am I to argue?"

"Of course. But that is also the reason why you are so stiff all the time?"

"Who are you calling stiff?"

"You, mister, all serious."

"I am not serious all the time."

"Do you never look in the mirror?"

Intrigued by Estelle's comment, I couldn't resist the urge to check my reflection in the small mirror hanging on the kitchen wall. As I gazed at my own face, I couldn't deny the truth in her words. There was a subtle seriousness etched into my features, a reflection of the responsibilities and questions that often occupied my mind.

Estelle, witnessing my contemplative expression, couldn't contain her triumphant smile. "Caught you, didn't I? Mr. Serious Astron, always pondering the mysteries of life."

"For you to keep that smile all the time, you need a way to vent, huh?" I remarked, raising an eyebrow in mock seriousness.

Estelle grinned, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Exactly, dear brother. A little gossip keeps the spirits entertained, and it helps me keep my sanity."

I shook my head, unable to suppress a grin. "Maybe I do need to lighten up a bit. The spirits wouldn't mind, right?"

She laughed a melodic sound that echoed through the room. "Not at all! In fact, they might appreciate the change. A little mischief never hurts anyone."

As we continued our banter, I couldn't help but appreciate the way Estelle effortlessly brought a lighthearted touch to my world. It was a reminder that amidst the responsibilities and ponderings, there was room for laughter and companionship.

"Then, have a nice day, brother."

"You too."

As Estelle left the home, I was left alone right before the empty house as I looked around.

"That was a bit refreshing, wasn't it?"

I mumbled. Having conversations like this tended to calm my heart whenever I felt uncomfortable.

SWOOSH! At that moment, the cold wind brushed against my face, a stark reminder that winter was approaching. I shivered involuntarily, the chill penetrating my bones. A quick glance at the changing landscape outside affirmed the inevitability of the season.

"Winter is coming," I muttered to myself, a claim echoed by the desaturated colors of the surroundings.

The village would soon be covered in a blanket of snow, transforming familiar paths into a serene, white landscape.

With a purposeful sigh, I decided to return to the warmth of the kitchen. The breakfast dishes awaited, and the kitchen needed tidying.

As I washed the dishes and cleaned the remnants of our morning meal, my mind drifted to the upcoming tasks.

I didn't know when it began, but from some point in my life, I always felt like I became a cleaning and order maniac.

'Was I like this before?'

I wondered to myself, but I couldn't answer the question. Sometimes, even my own actions didn't feel like they were completely mine, but I couldn't explain why.

The kitchen being now pristine, I gradually ascended through the modest house.

Each step echoed a sense of routine, a daily ritual that brought order to the quiet spaces we called home.

'The stairs are quite dirty.'

My eyes picked up the details on the corner of the stairs, as well as many other things, and my desire to fix them surfaced immediately.

Without much thought, I found myself retrieving a cloth from a nearby cabinet, determined to address the overlooked cleanliness.

As I wiped away the accumulated dust, my gaze lingered on the intricacies of the wooden banister. The grain, once hidden beneath the layer of neglect, revealed its natural beauty. However, inwardly, I couldn't help but narrow my eyes. This wood didn't seem like it came from the woods of our forest, and it was the first time I had paid attention to it.

'Maybe a now extinct tree?'

I thought inwardly.

It was a small detail but one that brought a subtle feeling to my head. Something felt like it didn't add up. The trees lived long, if I knew, and this house didn't seem like it was that old now. Doesn't that mean these materials came from somewhere else?

'Now that I think about it, how come we have furniture made from metal? I hadn't seen any person in the village who was interested in such things. Where did those come from?

Those questions that I had never asked myself started bothering me. Was it an external influence in my head, I wondered.

–CREAK!

Upon reaching my room, the door creaked slightly as I pushed it open. The familiar sight of bookshelves greeted me, their contents neatly arranged and waiting to be explored.

This was my place to relax, no matter the time or the thoughts in my head.

The room, an extension of my private sanctuary, bore the marks of countless hours spent in contemplation.

'Should I go with this....'

I chose a book, its cover worn from repeated readings, and settled into the chair by the window. It was a book that I started reading recently. A book about a man becoming a piece of society from a nomad.

"He will assimilate himself at the end."

I mumbled without knowing.

"Hmm?"

However, at that moment, something bothered me.

"Assimilate? What does that mean?"

I didn't know the meaning of the word that I had just spoken.

'I wonder, I started creating random verbs out of nowhere.'

It was certainly plausible for me to do such a thing. When you have time, you can do all those pointless things after all.

With a dismissive shake of my head, I started walking towards my bed.

But as I walked, my gaze lingered on the small clock perched beside my bed. The ticking hands, a reliable companion in the quiet moments of the night, now seemed frozen in time.

"Hmm, something's not right," I muttered to myself, my curiosity piqued. Upon closer inspection, I realized that the clock had ceased to function.

The hands, once in harmonious motion, now hung suspended in stillness.

'Wait?'

No. Saying it suspended in stillness didn't make any sense. With my eyes, I could see that there was a small abrasion on the tip of the two hands of the clock.

'Something is holding it.'

I leaned in for a closer look, my fingers delicately tracing the path of the clock's hands. Just as I was about to ponder what could be causing the obstruction, my eyes fixated on the time displayed on the frozen timepiece.

—06:06.

A sudden chill ran down my spine, and a strange feeling gnawed at the edges of my consciousness. Following that, suddenly, countless different images started seeping through my head, as if I was seeing the things that I had forgotten.

"What?"

The images and everything became so overwhelming that I almost lost consciousness on the spot.

"What is this?"

And just as everything started to make sense, suddenly, I felt another chilling sensation.

Took you long enough. ?

It was a cold and chilling voice echoing in my head.

Chapter 277 Chapter 65.3 - Conclusion

What is the first thing that a person remembers?

When we are born, do we remember everything? Is everyone born with the same composure?

If two newborn babies from different parents were put into the same environment, would they naturally become the same?

Does only our environment affect our lives and not our own beings? Or do the things that we define as our individuality stem from the environment?

What makes us what we are?

The first thing I remember is the color of grey.

The sky is gray; the walls are grayish.....The smell of the world that feels grayish...

I was staring at that gray ceiling in my first memory.

Before showing any interest in staring or playing with my fingertips, I simply wondered what this place was.

Well, calling it wondering might not be right. If wondering about something is an act that is done by the completely developed mind, mine was something that was instinctual.

Something that came from our evolutionary roots, something that we humans have done before we acquired the ability how to think.

Day after day, I spent more and more time just staring at that ceiling.

At first, I cried. I cried because I missed people, and then I learned that no one was coming to help me.

Now that I look back on it, it was instinct, not logic.

This is the first thing a newborn baby, who cannot even speak, learns when it accepts its environment.

After that, I realized the existence of my fingers.

I spent all day long looking at, sucking, and licking my little fingers, and nothing else, in the emptiness.

The nourishment necessary for life was never brought to me.

Do you ever know how it felt as a newborn baby with an empty stomach? Your whole body is in the process of developing, and yet there is no nutrition that it can develop on.

For a new human who just appeared in the real world, what could be more detrimental?

Lack of parents? Something like a parental figure that a human needs to develop both mentally and physically?

In the face of the real lack of three basic needs of life, are parents important?

The children of streets....Those who had never seen their parents in their lives, nor had any food that was prepared just solely for their sake....

For them....For us....The world is not a kindergarten but a game of survival in which you will lose your comrades one by one every day.

It is a cruel and harsh world different from the one of those like you who are now reading this from your comfortable and warm houses.

In this world of survival, losing friends became a routine, not due to a misunderstanding or a simple disagreement, but from hunger, from the lack of hygiene, from making wrong people enemies, from not abiding by the rules of the streets.

The streets had their own laws, unwritten yet absolute, dictating who could eat, who could survive, and who would inevitably perish.

But who are the ones that survive? Do they possess the same characteristics?

At that time, I didn't know about the term Natural Selection at all. But it was clearly laid in front of my eyes.

From the corners of the streets, when some of my 'friends' were getting beaten, I watched and listened.

As the days passed, I began to understand the importance of possessing the abilities that enabled me to observe and understand.

It wasn't a hobby; it was a skill crucial for survival. The keen sense of awareness, the ability to read situations, and the skill to discern 'friend' from foe became my weapons in this unforgiving environment.

For me, a friend was something that was useful for the sake of my survival. Something that I could never achieve with my own physical abilities alone.

From the day we were born, I realized that humans were never equal to begin with. Some always were stronger than others, some were faster, some were better at fighting, some were more emotionally strong, and some were more clever.

Was I a clever person?

I never knew. What are the criteria for measuring cleverness? Is it the speed of understanding something? Is it the depth that one can go in one subject? I didn't know.

But, neither did I have to.

In this place of survival, we never had the need to hang on to some random definitions. Those are the problems that can only be created by humans who live in a world different from ours. In a world so comfortable that they have the need to create their own problems.

Survival meant mastering the art of adaptation and learning quickly from every encounter, every loss, and every mistake.

The streets demanded constant vigilance, a perpetual sharpening of instincts, turning every moment into a potential threat or opportunity.

In this harsh reality, the world became a classroom, and the lessons weren't taught by teachers but by the merciless trials of the streets.

It was a place where weakness was exploited, and strength was respected. It was a brutal education in the school of life, where the curriculum was written in the language of scars and survival.

There was no room for sentimentality; emotions were a luxury we couldn't afford.

No, for me, I always knew.

Those emotions that we call. They were a clear weakness that needed to be eliminated. The sense of fondness that you form with the people that you hold close to.

When the necessary time comes, that fondness will be detrimental if you need to cut the people close to you.

After all, if you don't survive, does it matter that you feel that fondness?

As the days turned into months and months into years, I began to see people as pawns on a chessboard that we call the real world.

It was a natural reaction, or so I convinced myself.

With my limited physical capabilities, manipulating others became the only way I could ensure my survival.

If it was the strong eating the weak, then I was never going to let myself get eaten, and for this sake, using others was a necessity.

It was not like those people didn't reap any benefits from my acts either, as the closer they were to me, the safer they would be.

In this board, the most important piece is the one that is saved until last after all.....Or is it?

The life can never go as we always expect. Humans are unpredictable in their own way, and as they are more mentally unstable, they become more non-linear.

But after some point, what kind of person I was became evident to others.

As the realization of my true nature spread, so did my power. The chessboard of the streets was under my control, and I reveled in the authority I held over the pieces. However, the faster I rose, the harder I fell.

The very qualities that propelled me to the top—cunning, manipulation, and a disregard for sentimentality—became the seeds of my downfall.

I became arrogant, convinced that I was invincible in this ruthless game. I underestimated the ever-shifting dynamics of human relationships and the unpredictability of the streets.

The people I once considered pawns in my game started to rebel. Loyalties shattered, alliances crumbled, and trust evaporated like mist.

The web of control I had meticulously woven began to unravel, leaving me exposed and vulnerable.

As I faced the consequences of my own arrogance, the harsh reality of the streets hit me with brutal force.

The same people I had used as shields were now turning against me. Betrayal cut deeper than the wounds from street fights, and the fall from power was swifter than the ascent.

But the betrayal wasn't the one that came from the ones that I kept close to. After all, they were mere pawns to whom I held no attachment.

The reason for the feeling of betrayal was myself. It was my own nature that betrayed me. There was that feeling that I had still yet to cut off from my very being, even if I had cut others.

Without connecting with others, I connected to myself, developing a trait that made me revel when I witnessed the scene where everything went according to my wishes.

In the cold, hunger-ridden nights, I found myself alone, stripped of the false sense of security I had crafted. The pain of getting beaten was not just physical but a reminder of the mistake I had made.

The darkness closed in, and I could feel the chill seeping into my bones.

As I lay there, on the brink of what would probably be called despair, I couldn't help but reflect on the choices that led me to this point.

The arrogance, the overestimation of my own importance—all of it was a recipe for my own undoing.

In the end, the world didn't spare me from my mistake.

Closing my eyes from the cold, hunger, and pain of getting beaten, I accepted my fate. This was something I deserved, as I had lost in this world of power.

But then, something appeared right before my eyes, a hand that was reached to me.

Aren't you quite a fine gem? ?

In that moment of uncertainty, survival instincts kicked in. I grabbed the offered hand without hesitation.

It was the only way for me to live, to escape the impending fate that awaited me in the cold darkness.

Yet I knew there was nothing in this world that was given to us free. I knew no one needed to pay for anything.

Some paid it with money, and others with their lives.

But in the end, everything had a price that we needed to pay.

The one whose hand I had taken led me away from the unforgiving streets, from the cycle of hunger and violence.

The journey took me to a facility, a place where many other children were brought. From that moment on, my life would take a drastic turn, veering into a path I could never have foreseen.

Yet, for me, it was always better than dying. And just as I knew inwardly, everything revealed itself instantly at once.

The facility was not a refuge but a breeding ground for a new kind of survival.

As I stepped into this unknown world, I entered another place, one that would highly likely shape my future.

But then again, once a person becomes who they are, they tend to change less.

At least, this is what I know.

And what is valid for me.

Chapter 278 65.4 - Conclusion

Another fragment of memory is to be dug up.

In the process of erasing unnecessary memories, there are things that come to mind.

"Take your seat and state your name."

State your name—.

The brain received the instruction, and the brain quickly transmitted the signal to the throat. It was something that was natural, something we had already developed.

"001."

It was a symbol. A sequence of numbers.

An important element to distinguish humans.

All of the children here were given numbers as names as one of the ways to identify individuals.

From what I had observed, this place tended to be a place where the children with no parents were brought.

But when I came here for the first time, I immediately sensed the tension in the air.

The atmosphere was thick with hostility, and the looks I received from the other children were cold and unwelcoming.

I was a newcomer, an intruder in a world that had already established its own power dynamics and alliances. It seemed that whatever was happening here, some children came a lot earlier than others.

Seemingly from the name or number given to us, it seemed I was from the third generation of children here. The first generation likely didn't have any zeros at the front of their names, whilst the second generation did have one.

It seemed I was the first one of this batch, most likely because of the test that they had subjected me to before giving me even any food.

The existing factions within the facility eyed me with suspicion and disdain. They had formed their groups, alliances forged through shared experiences and the need for mutual protection. I was an outsider, a threat to their established order.

However, even if that looked disadvantageous at first, I knew these types of places quite well and experienced firsthand how easy it was to just simply break those so-called 'bonds.'

After entering here, from that moment on, my life took a drastic change. At that point, I was no longer in control of my life. I operated the way they wished me to while being subjected to the tests they had prepared for us.

At first, the most important of these was a written test for me, as my body was malnourished and weak.

But that didn't mean others were not subjected to it.

All children straightened their posture and faced the test papers.

The test consisted of simply writing.

Since they'd probably already spent their recent times being thoroughly taught reading and writing when they came here earlier, there was no hesitation in their fingertips' movements as they held the pen.

The students were most likely penalized if they didn't achieve a certain level of performance in a limited amount of time.

In addition, the students were also required to have good handwriting, as I could see how they were trying to pay attention to their writing even though the time was limited for them.

Even if your handwriting was good, you wouldn't receive any rewards if you got the answer wrong, but from how they paid this much attention to their writing, it was most likely that if you wrote poorly in a hurry, points would be deducted from your score, so we had to be careful.

No one at this facility asked whether or not we can solve the problems we face.

This is only true because the only children who were still here even after the tests were the ones who could solve them.

That meant that if I couldn't solve everything, I would be left out, but to keep the information secret, the fate awaiting me was obvious.

Following me, many other children also came, and in a matter of two days, everyone in my batch was also filled.

After that, we spent the whole week learning how to write properly, how to read, and how to do math.

Whether or not I was talented at it, I had given my everything, and then the test began.

The written test was 30 minutes long, but there was enough time to complete it in about half to two-thirds of the time limit if we solved the questions without hesitation.

This was the way it was supposed to be.

The days went on like that.

Solve the equation and move on to the next. Determine the answer and write it down.

At the same time, you review the previous question to see if you've made any mistakes.

When I finished, I raised my right hand straight up.

After signaling that I was done, I turned the paper over.

Getting a perfect score on the written exam was the minimum requirement. At the same time, you were required to be a neat and speedy writer.

This was the 7th written exam since I entered here, and I've won first place four times in a row. The first time I took the written test, I was ranked 32nd; the second time, 19th; and the third time, 11th. I didn't have a good start.

It took me a while to figure out how the written exams worked, its logic, and its efficiency.

Once I solved that, I wasn't overtaken, and I myself have been improving my certainty even more.

The gap between me and the second-place finisher was widening with each written exam, and now the time gap was about five minutes.

Regardless if I got a perfect score or first place, I would never be praised by anyone.

When everyone finished, we moved on to the next part of the curriculum.

"Now, we'll start with martial arts. Everyone, please change and follow the instructor to another room."

Martial arts. This was another curriculum added when we turned four, as was the written test.

I've already been taught judo for months.

While being trained in the basics, we progressed to the stage where we had to fight in actual combat.

"Haa!"

My vision shook, and I felt a strong pain in my back.

In the confrontation with the instructor, the children were always made to taste this bitterness.

I was no exception.

"Get up!"

The relentless slamming into the floor, making it impossible to breathe, didn't allow you a break.

If I didn't get up immediately, I would be reprimanded again and again. Next, arms that were many times thicker than mine flew at me.

I was slammed to the floor again, and I tried desperately to catch myself, but I couldn't absorb the damage.

While I was being knocked down to the ground, similar occurrences were happening all over the place.

All the kids were crying and sobbing while being thrashed around.

"I can't... I can't stand up...!"

As if begging for forgiveness, one girl, whose name was Hazel, clung weakly to the instructor's leg. It was the girl I had been eyeing for a while

"Still, get up!"

The girl was forced to stand up as the instructor forcibly shook off her hands, but her body seemed to be immobilized.

The fact that it's a girl wasn't taken into consideration here.

"I told you to stand up!"

The girl was kicked, spun around and around on the floor, and sprayed vomit all over the place.

Of course, the adults weren't kicking seriously.

Even so, it was obvious to everyone that the force of the kick was unbelievably strong.

"I don't give a damn, even if you're a kid! You already know that!"

The average mind would have a strong resistance to hurting a child this much.

But the instructors who've been called to this place are never ordinary. No, they are even more savage than the adults of the streets.

I know when I see one. Those people here killed countless different people in their lives with those hands. I can see it with my eyes. It is obvious from their even small gestures.

They are the kind of people who had no qualms about sending women and children to the brink of death.

"No one will cry if you disappear! Stand up and face them on your own!"

Hazel, convulsing and unfocused, put her hands on the floor and tried to get up.

"Yes! That's it! Show some spirit!"

"Uh, uh... Ugh... gh...!"

But the previous kick Hazel took was critical, and she collapsed and lost consciousness.

"Damn! You gutless bastard! Get her out of here! Get out of my way!"

The instructor, who had been making irritating footsteps, shouted angrily as he forcibly removed Hazel from the room.

Do you believe such a scene is tragic?

If so, you should change how you think. After all, those reactions are just a way of showing weakness, and that's it. Even the children outside live a different life, and some of them always take it easier while those like me are more severe.

Though this is never a complaint, it is just a comment.

This is only the beginning. Excessive reactions like Hazel's were decreasing day by day, and even the expression of pain was fading away.

Even human instincts were eliminated by the brain as superfluous functions.

It was natural to be thrown. It was natural to have difficulty breathing. It was natural to hurt yourself to the point of sobbing. And even thinking about it was a waste.

The only way out of the situation was to keep trying to reduce the number of times you get thrown within the time limit.

Of course, the most ideal situation was to defeat your opponent.

But the opponent was far superior in strength, size, and skill.

Needless to say, it wasn't easy to bridge the gap between adults and children.

After being forced to fight intensely and breathlessly, everyone rose to their feet, battered and bruised.

After an intense education from our instructors, we were obliged to take part in hand-to-hand combat with three others at the end of the day.

The children never look tired.

But one thing was certain. We were being raised as guinea pigs, and I was never going to accept that.

For me, my freedom is the most important thing, and I only work for myself.

CRACKLE! FOOSH!

"Someone....There is a fire here."

No matter what happens, there are always beings that can never be confined in places and can do whatever it takes to reach their goal.

BOOM!

"What-"

"HELP!"

"AAAAAAHH!"

They can kill others and destroy lives just for the sake of themselves.

Like me.

While reading continuously, I learned one thing. People like me are far from normal, and they will never be.

It is incredibly hard to define this constitution of mine, as I don't know whether I am a psychopath because something inside me is always missing or something else.

But that is no longer important.

After all, I have now achieved what I had hoped. Free from anything binding me, now I can do whatever I want without thinking about any other thing.

It is now to try and understand what I really wished for in my life.

Chapter 279 Chapter 65.5 - Conclusion [Interlude]

What is one's goal? What happens to a machine which had lost its purpose?

As I ventured into the outside world, a new realization struck me. The freedom I had craved for so long made my life become something....

It was something empty.....

With survival no longer a constant struggle, I found myself asking the question that had never bothered me before – what was the meaning of life?

The skills I had honed for survival in the harsh streets and the facility seemed pointless in a world where basic survival was no longer a concern.

Why had I done all of those things before? To step on others? To control? To be the one that always stood above?

All of them seemed pointless. Surely, at the start, I tried to live freely. Entering a normal high school after a bunch of fake identities and stories and then looking at the normal humans and how they lived.

But then again, at this point, I had already become far more different. The emptiness I felt wasn't satisfied by just blending in the crowd.

No, I had never been able to blend in in the first place. I was always an outsider. Even if I had perfectly acted as one and controlled everything inwardly, I always knew that I was in a different frame than others.

It was just how it was.

I became a wanderer, grappling with the void that replaced the constant threat of death. The very essence of my existence seemed uncertain, and I grappled with the question of what I truly desired.

I looked for different types of excitement.

I created a company and took many risks to taste the same feelings when I was a child on the streets. But, operating a company was a lot different from operating in those cold streets where your life was dependent on it.

I tried martial arts and fought to death in countless different types of underground positions.

But it wasn't pleasurable either. This emptiness inside me was killing me, and I knew that. Then, at that point of time, I had entered the college.

It was just to 'experience' how it would feel, nothing more, nothing less. Then, I was introduced to the gaming industry.

For starters, playing games wasn't that different from anything, either. They also felt empty as well, as if something inside me was never satisfied.

I played online games....but it was too easy...once my superior motor reflexes adapted, it became a monotone routine as well.

It was pretty close to fighting.

After that, I started playing story games. Not because I thought it would be different but because I started doing drugs. Even though it was pretty irrational, it was the only way to shut this mind so that I could no longer feel empty.

There, I came across that game.

During the game, I felt something for the first time long in a while.

Whether it was excitement or completeness....I didn't know. Was the game perfect?

It was not. What made it special? I didn't know. Was it something that could be explained by a rational mind?

It wasn't.

And that was what I was looking for. Something I couldn't understand, I couldn't grasp. Then I played the game again and again.

Continuously, at different times.

And that feeling of slight completeness that I could never get from anything else continued to fill me.

But at some point, it started becoming not enough. Just at that exact moment, something happened.

Something that one could never believe. As I lost consciousness and appeared inside a space filled with nothingness, I knew what I was experiencing was something that could never be understood.

Therefore, I was able to keep my sanity in that necklace for three years. Even if this mind of mine never stopped, I knew I was close to filling that emptiness.

And just exactly the moment the opportunity presented itself, I took it.

I made my other self take it, too. After all, he was in a position where he could never refuse. It was interesting how his life had unfolded, but I lacked that feeling of empathy to understand his feelings.

But, I inwardly knew that he would fill this void.

At that point, we became complete, but not entirely, it seemed.

And now was the time once again.

Watching him live his life like how it was supposed to be was certainly a surreal feeling, yet maybe because it was his past, I was buried under his consciousness and was suppressed.

However, the trigger for him to see came not long after. Awakenning me and letting me enter his consciousness once again.

Suddenly, as the clock's frozen hands and forgotten memories overwhelmed my senses, the world around me blurred into darkness.

? Took you long enough. ?

It felt as if an invisible force gently pulled me inward, drawing me into the depths of a new space.

The transition was both surreal and disorienting. Colors melted into shadows, and the familiar surroundings of my room faded away.

It was as if I traversed a nebulous boundary between the tangible reality and an ethereal realm different from anything else.

"Where is this place?"

I asked myself, and following that, another voice came.

"This is your consciousness."

In this realm, I discovered another person sitting on a small rock. It was highly likely the person whose voice I had heard in my head.

"Who are you?" I asked, only to receive the cryptic response, "Don't you know?"

As I gazed upon the figure, a profound sense of familiarity struck me. The features were indistinct, shrouded in a mysterious aura, yet there was an undeniable connection.

"It is you...."

This person...As the memories of everything that had transpired before coming here flooded into my head once again, I realized who this person was.

"The one I had accepted at that time," I mumbled. The voice that had reached me when I was at my lowest.

"Indeed."

He replied, his silhouette still shrouded in mystery. I had never been able to see him before, after all.

"But...."

However, it was surreal and not understandable. Inwardly, I was feeling worried. Worried, fearful, curious...Countless different emotions resided within me.

"You are wondering about my identity, aren't you?"

His voice echoed into my head as if he had read my thoughts.

"You should be able to reach this conclusion on your own."

Just as I thought about it, I turned to look at the events that happened after I had accepted him. How my fate had changed....how everything had differed.

If I was pathetic and weak-willed, he was my complete opposite.

The person who calmly watched other people die just in the first week of his taking control.

The person who calmly dealt with monsters and life and death situations as if he was experienced.

The person who constantly observed everything noticed even the smallest details. The person who led others in a way that was hard to understand.

"You.....you are the one."

While I was a child, I had always felt that sense of freedom in my heart. I always sought and yearned for the world around me. I hated being confined in the spaces like this.

"You are me."

As I mumbled in realization, his shadowy figure slowly revealed itself as I faced the person.

The same body that I had always seen before the mirror, the same eyes and the same face, everything.

"Indeed, I am you."

He replied, his face devoid of any expression. It was scary as if I was looking at a hollow void.

Overwhelmed by a barrage of emotions, I couldn't help but ask, "How? How is this possible?" The echoes of my confusion reverberated through the enigmatic space.

The figure, my other self, responded cryptically, "Haven't you ever wondered why you were powerless all this time?" His words hung in the air, weaving through the darkness like threads of revelation.

The question lingered, a seed of doubt planted in the soil of my thoughts. "Powerless?" I muttered, grappling with the implications. "What do you mean?"

He continued with a question that cut through the fog of uncertainty, "Did it never occur to you that your soul was incomplete?" The words struck me with an unsettling force, unraveling the fabric of my understanding.

"Incomplete?" I repeated, the revelation settling in like a stormy sea. Each word echoed with a weight that I had never considered.

The figure on the rock observed my turmoil, his features an enigma in the shifting shadows. "You were always meant to find me, to complete yourself. To become whole," he explained, the words resonating with an inexplicable truth.

"And I was always meant to find you, to complete myself."

As I heard his words, I couldn't understand. The figure before me looked more composed, and from how he did, it felt like he was perfect.

"What are you missing? What was incomplete in you?" The figure, perched on the rock, turned his gaze towards my eyes, studying them intently.

"I lack one profound thing," he responded his words echoing in the enigmatic space. "Emotions, vengeful feelings, hatred, strong attachments, worries – everything that makes us inherently human. That's what I am devoid of."

"And you, the one who holds all those emotions to the extreme, are the one that could fill this void."

As his words settled, I realized what it was. From time to time, how sometimes my past actions were randomly fueled by my feelings and how he randomly took control of them.

"You can see it, can't you? Those times when we acted non-linearly. We had yet to completely fuse; it was never complete."

"So..."

"Yes. Now, in this place, when we can see each other one last time, it is about time I say my farewells," he declared, his face devoid of any emotion.

I watched, a mix of anticipation and trepidation, as he merged into me. The fusion was slow as if time itself bent around us. As our forms began to intertwine, I felt a surge of emotions, memories, and experiences flooding my senses.

"Now, we are complete," his voice echoed in my consciousness. "I had finally filled this void."

Suddenly, as if expelled from that mysterious realm, my consciousness was thrust back into reality.

"Haaaaaah.....Haaaaaaaah..."

"Astron!"

-----A/N-----

This arc should make you understand why Astron was able to change this much and how easily he was able to adapt at the start. He was never meant to be normal, to begin with.

How his coldness and that grey barrier that Sylvie saw don't actually stem from the original Astron but himself from Earth.

I hope I did a good job with unreliable narratives sometimes, but I am still experimenting with it, so please give me your feedback.

Anyway, we are approaching the end of the volume now, with a lot of foreshadowing and explorations, stay intact.

Chapter 280 Chapter 66.1 - Grave

"Haaaaah...Haaaaah....."

As I continued to release heavy breaths as if I was just about to drown underwater, I looked around.

"Astron!"

As the familiar voice of the certain girl echoed in my head, I turned to face her.

"Are you okay? Here, drink this."

For some reason, I wasn't able to remember anything. As if I had awakened from a dream, every memory of mine was blurry, it felt like.

'What was I doing?'

I knew inwardly that something inside me had changed. Something that was missing. Slightly narrowing my eyes, I resisted the pain that tried to overlap my head and took the water Sylvie gave me.

"Thanks," I mumbled as my brain started recalling the information of what I could remember to last.

'I was looking for some observations and then.....'

Then, everything suddenly became dark. After that, I don't remember much aside from some blurry moments.

"You won't ever leave me, right?"

Once again, a voice echoed in my head as I recalled one of the blurry moments. The voice that is familiar.

'It is her voice, isn't it?'

Most likely, I had awoken from a dream. If it was that, everything seemed to make sense. However, there were many other things in the environment that I couldn't quite put my feelings on.

'The atmosphere....'

–THUMP!

Just as I thought about it, suddenly, I felt a sensation in my chest. The same sensation I got countless different times.

'A demon...'

But this time, it was different. Much more different.

This sense of dread was so much that I was even about to have a hard time breathing. My heart started beating incredibly fast, as if I was running for a long amount of time.

'Everywhere around is filled with demonic energy.'

Whether it was because the demonic energy was incredibly potent or, for some reason, I could see everything better; I was able to notice the energy surrounding us. The dark energy was covering almost every other location around and those dark threads connecting in the air.

It was disgusting, as if something was feeding from it.

"ASTRON!"

Sylvie's urgent voice brought me back to the present. She asked if I was okay, and I nodded, reassuring her that I was fine.

"What happened?" I asked. I had an idea in my head, but right now, I needed to understand the situation first.

"Sigh...." Hearing this, Sylvie released a long sigh as she looked at my right side with a face filled with unease. "I want to explain everything to you, but we need to wake Irina up first."

Before Sylvie could answer, she suggested waking up Irina first. I turned my attention to the side, realizing for the first time that Irina was lying on the ground, unconscious.

'Irina is unconscious as well?'

But something seemed different about her, as her body was slightly convulsing.

'She is about to wake up.'

Realizing that it was the symptoms of waking up, I waited.

—PAH!

"Haaaaah..."

Irina's eyes snapped open as she jolted forward, her sudden awakening accompanied by a sharp intake of breath. The surroundings seemed to take a moment to register for her as she glanced around, confusion evident in her amber eyes.

"Irina, are you alright?" Sylvie asked, her concern palpable. I moved closer, offering a hand to help Irina, and she accepted it, using the support to steady herself.

Her initial disorientation faded, and she nodded in response to Sylvie's question, reassuring us, "I'm fine, just a bit disoriented."

'Everything seems too weird.'

My memories were blurry, and from the looks of it, Irina was in the same condition; she looked blankly around.

But at that moment, suddenly, she bolted from her place.

"We don't have much time!"

And she shouted. Her complexion turned paler as well, and her blood circulation sped up. It was evident that she was now in a state of excitement, but that wasn't what I needed right now.

"What do you mean? Elaborate."

I answered. 'We don't have much time, what does it mean?' While asking this question to myself.

"That.....I don't know."

However, the reply she gave me made everything weirder.

"You don't know?"

"I mean.....I know something is going wrong, but I can't quite put up what it is." She replied, trying to understand what she meant as well.

'Is it related to her memories?'

If that was the case, then maybe she had seen something inside that dream, and even if she had forgotten the contents, that feeling of dread might have affected her subconsciousness.

Right now, inwardly, I was starting to get angry. I knew one thing for a fact: the emotions I suppressed were getting out once again.

The existence of demons around me was getting on my nerves.

Sylvie intervened, reminding Irina of their purpose before entering my dreams. "Remember, we came here to find answers about Phantom's Land and its mysteries. We were investigating the magical properties and the strange occurrences. Maybe something triggered this reaction."

Irina's eyes widened as she brought her hand to her forehead as if trying to grasp elusive memories. "Oh, now I remember... We were trying to find a way to understand the magical energy and the anomalies in this land. Before entering your dreams, we were planning to—"

Suddenly, realization dawned on her face. "Wait, it's all coming back to me. I remember everything now, Astron. Something dark and menacing. It felt like a malevolent force trying to consume everything."

"What? You need to elaborate more."

"I can't. That is all I know from the dream, Urghk-!." As she pressed her temple, she looked at Sylvie. "I am fine, just a second."

After that, she grabbed the water Sylvie gave her without even using her hands but only using her 「Telekinesis」. And the way she did it was certainly in a proficient manner.

'Was she this good at Telekinesis?'

I asked myself, but I didn't linger on that topic for now.

"So, you seem to know what is happening here?"

I asked. From how Sylvie acted and how Irina was trying to talk, it seems these two found something about this whole issue.

"Yes." Irina nodded. "Let me start from scratch. After I had completed the theory, I went to check the facts.....—"

As Sylvie and Irina recounted their experiences, the air inside the bungalow grew thick with tension. Their words painted a picture of Phantom's Land as more than a mere enigma, revealing a malevolent force at play.

I listened intently as they shared encounters with phantoms, the intricacies of magical influences, and the calculated nature of the entity shaping the land.

Irina's amber eyes held a focused intensity as she emphasized, "It's shaped by a powerful entity, with intentions unknown and potentially dangerous."

'It must be the source of this demonic energy.' I thought to myself. The entity Irina was talking about was the demon, but most likely, she was unable to identify it because she had never encountered a real demon before.

After all, demon followers or demonic humans are a lot different from demons.

Sylvie added with worry. "The entity's malevolence explains the dark spells and the complexity we encountered while probing Jasmine's heart. This isn't just a random occurrence; it's a calculated influence."

To sum up the findings, Irina had confirmed that this demon was the reason why Phantom's Land was formed in the first place, and the demon was looking for something.

'Such a large-scale thing, and the original never mentioned something like this.'

There were many questions that needed to be answered, but one thing came first.

"Then, what are those phantoms....."

If those phantoms appeared once someone entered into this sleep-come state, then it meant either those phantoms were their souls or something related to their consciousness.

'What happens to those phantoms once the body is dead?'

This was another question. After all, if the phantoms were somehow related to souls or consciousness, there was a chance that those phantoms who wandered around like that after the clock hit 06.06 would still have their bodies somewhere around.

At that moment, as I contemplated the information, I heard Irina mumbling something under her breath. "Parallel world..."

The words caught my attention, and I immediately asked, "What do you mean, Irina?"

However, she seemed unable to answer; her expression clouded with frustration, as if the answer slipped through her fingers. "I don't know, I can't point anything....."

But the mention of a parallel world triggered something within me.

I started looking around the room as if expecting to find a clue in the shadows or the mist that permeated Phantom's Land.

Then, my eyes fixated on the spell that was connected to the heart of Jasmine. It was a complex array of magical symbols and psions, and as I observed it, a realization struck me.

"Spatial psions..." I muttered to myself. The gears in my mind started turning, and a crazy idea began to form. It was both because of what we found and, at the same time, I knew an enemy from the game.

'What if these phantoms are not just illusions or manifestations? What if they are souls from another world?'

'We all felt like it was like a dream. But what if we actually replaced our parallel selves.'

The notion seemed far-fetched, even to me. However, the spatial positions in the spell hinted at a connection to the manipulation of space.

What if this demon was attempting to create a rift between worlds, a space crack that allowed the souls from another realm to seep into Phantom's Land?

'Then, everything would make sense. Even the identity of this demon.'

After all, there was no way that such a strong boss that could somehow get this amount of humans under its spell would left out in the game.

It was bound to be mentioned, and it was certainly done.

'So, it came from here, huh?'

I asked myself. To think that the boss of one of the future side-

quests was actually something related to Phantom's Land.

'I guess the game can never reveal all the details at once after all.'

If the idea in my head was correct, then from then on, things were about to get both troublesome and good.

Facing an enemy that would normally be far more powerful in the future made it easier for me to respond in any case.

'Then, there is only one thing left.'

To kill the enemy.