

H. Academy 291

Chapter 291 Chapter 68.4 - Another Perspective [Interlude]

How does this world work?

Was life hard?

A child once thought of it, reading it in a book that he got from his family's library.

It is definitely not hard.

That child thought. After all, for him, everything was as easy as it was. He had a warm place to live and countless different caretakers to take care of him.

Even if it was hard to see his mother and father, at least he wasn't alone. He had his twin sister with him all the time.

The child lived in a world that seemed to dance with hues of wonder. His days were adorned with laughter and warmth, his ever-present smile a testament to the joy that permeated his life.

A perpetual smile adorned the child's face, a beacon of happiness that seemed to radiate through his world.

Unbeknownst to him, his infectious joy became a source of delight for the caretakers who watched over him.

Mischievous stunts, carefully crafted to evoke laughter, painted the canvas of his everyday life.

The caretakers, a diverse and caring ensemble, created a supportive environment that allowed the child's exuberance to thrive.

His twin sister was the same as she shared in his zest for life, their unspoken connection weaving an invisible bond that only twins could understand.

But was that really the case?

As the child grew, his radiant smile hadn't disappeared, yet things had changed. From staying in their rooms together while constantly being cared for by the teachers that their family had paid for specifically, they started to be expected to enter the world of their family's real face.

At the age of five, both he and his twin stood in front of the man whom they hadn't seen in quite a while.

The person who made them born is their father. His face was just as they had remembered: strict yet incredibly handsome. Behind him stood another person that they rarely saw. A woman with an incredibly beautiful face – their mother.

That was a face that was so beautiful that it shared radiance to the atmosphere.

Yet, that moment was the point where things would start to differ from anything else.

He remembered the words of the man, their father.

As he began to speak, his words carried a weight that echoed through the room. "My children," he said, his tone firm, "it's time for you to learn the ways of our family. The path we follow requires strength, discipline, and a commitment to our legacy to stand on the top."

With those words, the children were introduced to a reality beyond the warmth of their home and the laughter-filled days with caretakers.

Their father, a figure of authority they hadn't fully understood until now, handed each of them a sword.

The weight of the weapon in their small hands felt foreign, a stark contrast to the mischievous stunts and laughter that once painted their lives.

"This is the way of our family," their father continued, his gaze unwavering. "For the path of sword.....starting strict is necessary. You will be trained to uphold the values that define our family's sword and uniqueness."

For the first time, the perpetual smiles on the children's faces wavered, replaced by a mix of uncertainty and curiosity.

The long metallic knife in their hands felt familiar as if it was engraved in their blood.

Daily training sessions commenced, turning the once carefree days into a routine of discipline and endurance.

The children, guided by their father and the radiant woman standing beside him, navigated the intricacies of swordplay and the principles ingrained in their family's history.

The laughter that echoed through the halls now mingled with the clashing of blades and the stern commands of their trainers—the caretakers, once the bearers of joy, were replaced by mentors who demanded precision and focus.

The twins now stood side by side as they honed their skills.

Through sweat and determination, the children learned the art of combat. The sword became an extension of their beings. The strict teachings, at first met with resistance, gradually became a part of their identity.

Yet, at those times of finding their identity, the child had noticed something different for the first time.

Something different between his twin and himself. It was a subtle difference, a very small one. Yet that difference was blatantly obvious in the face of someone who faced her every day.

—CLANK! SWOOSH!

A sword flashed in front of his eyes for a second, and after that, all he saw was the blade that was pointed at his neck.

"Winner. Middleton Household, First ring disciple, Julia."

"Loser. Middleton Household, First ring disciple, Lucas."

In the aftermath, Julia's voice reached Lucas's ears, breaking through the tension of the training ground. She smiled innocently, her eyes holding a mixture of camaraderie and sympathy. "Lucas, you did well out there," she praised, her tone genuinely encouraging. "It was a close match, and you almost had me a few times."

This was how she was, and Lucas knew it firsthand. After all, they had grown up together doing everything together.

'What is this? I lost?'

However, inwardly, frustration swelled within Lucas—a feeling entirely new to him.

From the start of their education in their rooms, he had always been the one who had the better scores on the small tests their teachers had given to them.

He had been the one that was praised. Therefore, he always thought it was natural for him to win.

Yet, now was different. He felt a new feeling rising from inside, something that made him clench his fists so bad that it started to hurt a little.

He wanted to shout and complain. And to do so, he raised his head. However, at that moment, he saw the faces of his stern father, the instructors, and his nanny looking at him with an expression he couldn't comprehend.

Their eyes bore into him, assessing not just his skill with the blade but, it seemed, something deeper. Words knotted in his throat, overwhelmed by the weight of expectations he hadn't fully grasped until this moment.

'What is this?'

His stern father, usually a figure of authority, seemed to hold a different intensity in his gaze—a blend of expectation and scrutiny.

'Why?'

The instructors, with their arms crossed, exchanged glances that hinted at silent conversations. Even his nanny, who had always been a source of comfort, now observed him with an unreadable expression.

Even if those things weren't completely true, at that exact moment, for the child who had been struggling with his internal feelings, their composure made him think in such a way.

In that moment, Lucas felt the frustration within him morph into a new emotion—uncertainty.

What if they were not satisfied with him? What if it was not enough? How should he act now? What should he do so that others wouldn't be disappointed in him?

Amidst the sea of gazes, he turned to Julia, his twin, and found that she was smiling while looking at him.

'Smile....'

And the realization hit him. It was a conclusion that he came to with his limited life experience and knowledge at that time as a child.

'I need to smile.'

He remembered how everyone laughed when he smiled, how his nannies acted. The memories of his young life returned.

"Haaaah....."

Lucas took a deep breath, realizing that he needed to act, to wear the mask of normalcy he had worn for years.

'I can do it....Just like I had done all this time.'

The clenching fists relaxed, and he summoned a smile mirroring the one on Julia's face. He accepted her words gracefully, acknowledging the close match and adding a touch of humor to diffuse the tension.

"You got me this time, Julia," he said with a playful wink. "But just wait; next time, I might surprise you. After all, it's not every day you see a loser with such style, right?" The words carried a lighthearted tone, a deliberate choice to deflect the weight of the moment.

"Hehehe....We will see about that."

'I will make sure not to lose next time.'

That was what he thought, yet the reality was never what he had expected after all.

Years passed, and the children had now become teenagers. However, the reality once again proved the young Lucas wrong.

In the following years of training, Julia displayed a natural talent for swordplay that surpassed Lucas's efforts.

Despite his dedication and hard work, he couldn't match the fluidity and instinctive grace with which Julia wielded the blade.

Even though the difference was small, as they were both talented to the edges and were able to defeat their instructors at the age of 12, two years after awakening, Lucas always knew that small differences always existed.

The family, particularly his stern father and the instructors, showered Julia with praise for her remarkable skills.

While Lucas excelled in academics more, the very foundation of his family's values, it became evident that in the realm of swordsmanship, Julia was the one born with a natural gift.

'A genius that would only come once in a century.'

Was what his father said about her.

The realization struck Lucas, a mix of astonishment and a tinge of disappointment. His family's expectations were leaning towards the prowess of a sword, and Julia seemed to effortlessly fulfill those expectations.

The uncertainty he felt before transformed into a silent resolve—a determination to prove himself despite this unexpected turn of events.

As the days passed, Lucas continued to smile to maintain the facade of normalcy.

But beneath that smile lay a burning desire to catch up, to bridge the gap between their skills, and to show his family that he, too, could wield a sword with the grace and finesse they admired.

Yet, he never was able to.

"School of Middleton. Fifth style."

"Failed."

While she was able to master one of the hardest techniques in their family, he was not able to do so after all.

And that feeling was inwardly eating him alive.

'Feeling of being in the shadow of someone.'

Yet, at those moments, he was somehow able to cope with it, thanks to someone.

His best friend, Ethan.

In the presence of Ethan, Lucas found solace. Ethan, a non-

awakened in their age and weaker in terms of physical abilities, became a refuge for Lucas.

In a world where Julia's prowess cast a long shadow over his ambitions, Ethan's friendship provided a sense of safety and assurance.

Lucas convinced himself that, no matter what happened, he would always be better than Ethan since he was a non-

awakened. It became a reassuring thought, a pillar supporting his fragile ego in the face of Julia's undeniable excellence.

Even though it may sound disgusting, at the very least, he was able to make himself relieved a little at least.

As the shadow of inadequacy loomed, Ethan's companionship became a balm, offering temporary relief from the relentless pursuit of familial expectations.

Yet, things changed a little just before the academy started.

Ethan, the non-awakened friend who had been Lucas's pillar of reassurance, underwent a transformation.

The awakening, delayed but inevitable, occurred just before they entered the academy. It was a term called 'late awakening.'

'Well, he won't be able to catch up to me ever.'

Lucas was a little worried, yet he reassured himself inwardly that Ethan was way too late and would never be able to catch up to him.

Even then, the relief that came with Ethan's non-awakened status was replaced by an unforeseen twist—a twist that stirred a newfound insecurity within Lucas.

Ethan, the friend who had always been a step behind in the realm of abilities, had now entered the awakened realm.

Lucas could feel the ground shifting beneath his feet, and the pillar of reassurance he had built started to waver.

"Haaaah....haaaah....."

He had just recently woken up from a long sleep, yet he was able to remember everything clearly.

'No way.'

He didn't want to believe it, yet inwardly, he knew for some reason he had seen a weird dream.

?This is my gift to you.?

A voice echoed inside his head, a voice that was both strong but at the same time slowly trailing away.

'What is this?'

He asked to the voice inside his head.

?It is the life you were supposed to live.?

'The life I was supposed to live.'

?That is right.?

The voice replied inwardly.

'Who are you?'

He asked, trying to understand who was the source of the voice.

?Who am I??

The voice asked.

And now it was crushed to the pieces, thanks to the future he had seen and still remembered.

?I am a being who never desired to be in the shadow of others, yet couldn't find a solution for it before. But now, the solution presented itself.?

The voice continued, revealing fragments of its existence. Lucas, confused and intrigued, questioned further, asking the voice to explain what it meant.

?It is a feeling you know all too well, don't you? But now, I have found a way to step into the light.?

The voice conveyed a mix of emotions, from bitterness to a strange sense of liberation. Lucas, still grappling with the surreal nature of the conversation, asked,

'What are you saying?'

Yet, the voice fell silent, refusing to provide any more answers.

Though inwardly, Lucas knew one thing.

'I was never able to leave his shadow no matter what?'

As he saw the future, he realized what was about to happen to him and how Ethan was about to be the hero while he was always on the backlines.

'I will never accept it; I refuse.'

It was at that moment that Lucas had accepted the feeling inside him.

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

This brings us to the end of the second volume. Hope you liked this arc.

I think it is quite important to build every character so that they don't sound one-dimensional, and Lucas has been on the backlines for a while.

I may take a one-day break after this, and my college semester has started as well, so I will try to upload as much as I can.

Have a nice weekend.

Chapter 292 Chapter 69.1 - Aftermath

"Urghk-!"

"Just what happened?"

Countless different sounds like this were echoing all the way around the Phantom's Land.

"My head....It hurts...."

Many students were saying that their heads were hurting while others were trying to remember what had just happened.

Most of their memories were bleak as if they were covered under the shadows. They felt like they had experienced something, yet at the same time, they all felt like the things they had experienced were no longer connected to them.

It was a very surreal feeling.

And that was no different with Ethan, as he also gradually woke up from his state.

Amidst the disoriented voices, Ethan gradually regained consciousness.

As he opened his eyes, he found himself standing in a different part of the Phantom's Land. His surroundings felt unfamiliar, and a dull ache in his head made it hard to focus.

"My head..."

Ethan touched his forehead, trying to calm the pain and make sense of his disoriented state. The memories of recent events eluded him, leaving only a vague sense of insects crawling on his skin and a subsequent blur.

"Just what happened?"

He attempted to recall what had happened, but the details remained elusive. It was as if he had lost something. A part of something that belonged to him, but at the same time not.

"Ah, I remember...."

Then, slowly, things started crashing down. He and his friends had just separated so that they could observe the Phantom's Land in a better and more efficient way. After all, recording their findings wouldn't be that hard.

"I lost my consciousness, didn't I?"

Then, he remembered how his vision blurred as if something external had entered his body. Considering this body as a Hartley and his lineage, it would be rather abnormal if he wasn't able to sense something was wrong.

"But, after that?"

As he collected the recent times, he realized that after he lost consciousness, something very dangerous happened. Even though he wasn't sure what it was, his instincts could feel it.

Something around him was missing.

'Something around?'

At that moment, he remembered where he was.

Looking around, Ethan noticed the confusion among other students who were also awakening. The aftermath of whatever had transpired left them disoriented, with fragmented memories and a collective sense of bewilderment hanging in the air.

'Wait? I can see the students?'

Maybe a tad bit slow, Ethan realized a very important thing.

He was able to see the students!

This revelation could mean only one thing.

'The fog disappeared.'

He instantly realized. There was no other explanation for that, as Ethan had been living in this place for a while and had adapted to it to a certain extent.

'Now that I am paying attention to it, I can no longer feel the oppressive atmosphere of Phantom's Land.'

He instantly realized. The fact that the mana around him was no longer oppressing him as before directly means that the mana phenomenon of Phantom's Land has now disappeared.

"Urghk-!"

Suddenly, a sharp pain assaulted Ethan from his chest, jolting him into awareness. He instinctively looked down, discovering claw marks on his chest, blood dripping from the wounds.

"What... what happened to me?"

Ethan's eyes widened as he assessed the extent of his injuries. More pain surged through his body, and as he examined himself further, he realized that almost every part of his body was covered in wounds.

"These wounds... were they caused by Phantoms?"

His mind raced to connect the pieces of the puzzle. The fog had dissipated, but it seemed that when he lost consciousness, the Phantoms, the spectral entities he had encountered before, took advantage of the opportunity to attack him.

'That would make sense.'

After all, Phantoms were the main reason why this place was considered dangerous and wasn't advised to be visited by non-awakened people.

"Did they retaliate when the fog disappeared?"

He thought soundly. In the absence of the mystical fog that concealed the Phantoms, they might have become more aggressive.

But then, as he looked around, he could no longer see or sense any phantoms around.

"No, that doesn't make sense. Ethan, are you stupid?"

He reprimanded himself. If the Phantoms weren't related to the fog, that would mean they could appear anywhere in the world regardless of this phenomenon, yet that wasn't the case.

"Rather, maybe because the fog had dissipated that we had been awakened."

Then he realized. If, somehow, the Phantom's Land was the reason for their loss of consciousness, that would also explain why he was awake when the fog no longer appeared. Probably, when he lost his consciousness, the Phantoms attacked him.

'The other students seemed to share the same conditions as me.'

As Ethan looked around, he noticed that many other students were in a similar condition, if not worse. Some were covered in more severe injuries, and the air was thick with a sense of urgency and desperation.

"This is bad... They're in real danger."

Ethan couldn't stand idly by. Despite his own injuries, he knew he had to act quickly to help those in need. Even though he was also not in good shape, compared to his counterparts, he was in a much better condition. Whether this was because he was a Hartley or for some other reason....

Nobody knew about it.

He reached into his Spatial Bracelet and retrieved a healing potion.

"Hey, hang in there!"

Rushing to the aid of a fellow student whose injuries seemed particularly severe, Ethan knelt beside them and carefully administered the healing potion into their mouth.

"Argh! My leg!"

At the start, the young student had a hard time just even drinking it, yet Ethan somehow managed to make him drink.

Following that, the potion began to take effect, closing wounds and alleviating pain.

"I hope this helps."

Though Ethan knew that the potion could only do so much, he did what he could to provide immediate relief. The Phantom's Land had become a perilous place, and he felt a responsibility to ensure the safety of those around him.

'What happened to others? Hope they are safe.'

He couldn't help but worry about her friends. Especially Caleb, as he was rather low-ranked in terms of combat. He sincerely hoped that Caleb would be able to hold his own ground.

—DING!

Just at that moment, he heard his smartwatch ringing.

—DING!

—DING!

—DING!

And it wasn't only his. He could hear the same notification from other students as well.

The sound echoed across the now-clear landscape, and to his surprise, Ethan realized that his own smartwatch was indeed functioning. With a sense of relief, he opened the watch and found a notification from their homeroom teacher, Eleanor White.

The message, though brief, conveyed a sense of urgency. Eleanor instructed the students to return to the town immediately. The town's location was shared in the message for those who were far away.

"Finally, some guidance. We need to get back to town."

Ethan, aware of the gravity of the situation, made a quick decision. With a last glance at the injured student, he gathered his belongings and prepared to lead the way back to the town. The disappearance of the Phantom's Land phenomenon now made everything unpredictable, and he was dying to know what had happened.

The moment the instructors and others had regained their consciousness, different from young students, they instantly composed themselves. They all had their fair share of experiences; thus, they were rather fast to adapt.

"This...."

From the injuries themselves, they realized they all had been attacked, even in their homes, safe from the phantoms.

That meant the other students could even be in a more severe condition!

"I am going to leave the Town to you, instructor Eleanor."

"Yes, you can leave it to me."

As some of the instructors immediately went to search for dangerously injured students outside of the town, Eleanor was present in the town square, coordinating with other instructors to set up a makeshift medical center.

Students with healing abilities were summoned to assist, creating an efficient and organized space for triage. The injured were quickly attended to, and the healing potions provided some relief.

Once the initial chaos settled, all the students gathered in the town square, their faces marked with a mixture of confusion and anxiety. Eleanor stepped forward, her expression serious yet composed.

"Students, I know this has been a harrowing experience, and I appreciate your resilience in the face of adversity. As you might have noticed, the Phantom's Land phenomena have disappeared unexpectedly. This means that the exam we were conducting is nullified."

A murmur of concern spread through the group. Eleanor continued, "We have already communicated with the academy and the government. Additional help is on the way, including specialized teams equipped to deal with the unique conditions of Phantom's Land."

She glanced at her smartwatch and continued, "Our immediate concern is ensuring everyone's safety. The healing process will continue here, and we will be providing further updates as soon as we receive more information from the authorities."

Eleanor's tone remained steady, attempting to reassure the students. "I understand that many of you have questions, and we will address them as soon as possible. Right now, focus on recovering from your injuries, and rest assured that we are doing everything in our power to ensure your well-being."

As Eleanor concluded her brief statement, other instructors circulated among the students, offering words of comfort and assistance.

The town, once a quaint and mysterious backdrop, now became a center for support and recovery.

Most students, though relieved to be back in a familiar and relatively safe place, couldn't shake the sense of unease. After all, just with this explanation, such future Hunters would never be satisfied.

They wondered about the abrupt disappearance of the Phantom's Land phenomena and the implications it held.

The mystery deepened, and they eagerly awaited more information from Eleanor and the incoming assistance.

Eleanor observed the unease among the students and decided to address their concerns further. She raised her hand, gesturing for their attention.

"Students, I understand that this turn of events has left many questions unanswered. I want to assure you that we are actively seeking more information, and we will keep you updated. For now, those of you who have received treatment or don't require immediate attention should proceed to your bungalows. This will allow our medical teams to operate more efficiently in the town center."

She paused, allowing the students to absorb her instructions. "If you have team members who are not present here, I encourage you to try and contact them. If you are unable to reach them, please report it to the instructors. We need to ensure that everyone is accounted for and safe."

Eleanor's gaze swept across the gathering, her tone firm yet empathetic. "Your cooperation is crucial in maintaining order and ensuring the well-being of all. The instructors will be available to assist you in any way possible. Trust that we are doing everything in our power to manage this situation."

As Eleanor finished speaking, the students, now with clearer instructions, began to disperse. Some headed towards the bungalows, while others grouped together to discuss the recent events. Instructors moved among them, offering guidance and support.

Ethan, still processing the sudden changes, made his way to the bungalows with a group of students. The town, once a place of mystery and excitement, now felt different. The fog had lifted, but a different kind of uncertainty hung in the air.

CREAK!

"Lucas!" Ethan exclaimed as he entered his bungalow, spotting his best friend sitting on the couch. The town, once a mysterious place, now felt filled with an odd tension.

"Hey, Ethan," Lucas replied, looking up from where he sat. His normally vibrant white hair seemed a bit disheveled, and there was a weariness in his eyes that Ethan hadn't noticed before.

Ethan approached him; concern etched across his face. "Where's Caleb? Is he okay?"

Lucas nodded, "Yeah, he's getting treatment. Some of us got pretty banged up out there. They said he'll be fine, though."

A sense of relief washed over Ethan at the news about Caleb, but as Lucas continued talking, a subtle feeling of unease crept in.

'What is this feeling?'

Something about Lucas seemed different, and Ethan couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"Lucas, you seem... different. Are you alright?" Ethan asked, studying his friend more closely.

Lucas looked away for a moment before meeting Ethan's gaze again. There was an intensity in his eyes that Ethan hadn't seen before, and it sent a shiver down his spine.

"I'm fine, just a bit shaken from everything that happened," Lucas replied, but his gaze seemed to linger on Ethan in an unsettling way.

Ethan couldn't shake the feeling that something had changed, something beyond just the physical toll of the recent events. It was as if a subtle shift had occurred in Lucas, and it left Ethan with a sense of discomfort.

"Lucas, are you sure you're okay?" Ethan pressed, trying to decipher the strange energy emanating from his friend.

As Ethan pressed further, trying to decipher the strange energy emanating from Lucas, for a split second, Lucas's eyes widened. He seemed almost startled, and an involuntary shiver ran through him. But just as quickly as it happened, he composed himself, smiling as if nothing had occurred.

"Puhahahahahahaha...." And then he broke into a hearty laugh. "Maan....Were you scared?" Lucas replied, his tone light, just as usual.

But the unsettling feeling lingered.

Ethan couldn't shake off the unease, sensing that there was something more to Lucas's reaction. The subtle change in demeanor didn't go unnoticed, but before Ethan could delve deeper, Lucas chuckled, attempting to lighten the mood.

"Hey, Ethan, it seems I was able to trick you again, huh?" Lucas said, a playful glint in his eyes. "Do you think something like this would be able to shake me, huh? Who do you take me as?"

Ethan, though still concerned, couldn't help but smile in response to Lucas's attempt at humor. Perhaps it was just the stress of the situation playing tricks on his mind. The mysteries of Phantom's Land had already proven to be more profound than anyone had anticipated, and the recent events had taken a toll on everyone.

"Yeah, yeah, you got me again," Ethan said, trying to shake off the lingering unease. "Just take it easy, alright? We all need some time to process everything that happened."

"Yeah....Process...."

Chapter 293 Chapter 69.2 - Aftermath

In the middle of the Phantom's Land, Irina, Astron, and Sylvie were facing Eleanor.

"So, you are saying you know what happened here?" Eleanor asked. After the initial chaos and confusion passed, everything started falling into order. The students, who were outside of the town and critically injured, were found by the instructors and urgently formed student teams.

Following that, the help from the government and the closest city came as well. Now the situation was controlled, and Eleanor could have a breather since the officials and the vice-headmaster were also here.

At least that was what she thought, but well, life never played as she wished. And now she had heard one of the strongest claims of the recent three days.

"Yes, that is right, Instructor," Irina replied, keeping her composure in front of Eleanor's stern face. After all, she had her own experience of being in front of strong people, considering her mother. So, she was rather relaxed.

As for Astron, inwardly, he was also relaxed. Even though his relationship with Eleanor wasn't as good as others, recently, she hadn't been picking on him that much. It could even be said that she forgot about his existence completely.

And that meant, rather than negative, her opinion somehow naturally became neutral.

Though, Sylvie was a little different. She was a little shaky while standing in front of Eleanor since what had happened here meant talking about her powers. However, she was also well aware that they needed to report this matter as the scale of what happened here was way too big, and eventually, many experts were going to be involved in this matter one way or another.

Thus, Astron had advised her to at least explain it to the academy, as he was well aware that the academy knew about Sylvie's awakening, and they could better find a way to conceal it from the government.

Eleanor scrutinized Irina's expression, her eyes narrowing as she awaited a detailed explanation. Irina, with a calm demeanor, began narrating the events from the beginning.

"It started when we were exploring the Phantom's Land. Everything seemed normal initially, but as we delved deeper, I lost consciousness at some point, and when I woke up, the situation had escalated."

Eleanor's gaze remained fixed on Irina, studying her reactions and the nuances in her story. Irina, however, kept her composure, recounting the events with precision.

"During the chaos, Sylvie was the one who pulled me out of that distorted state. At that moment, I regained my consciousness and control over my actions. The awakening was a significant factor in neutralizing the threat within the Phantom's Land."

Eleanor's brow furrowed slightly as Sylvie was mentioned. She shifted her attention to the third member of the group. She seized Sylvie from head to toe, but she didn't show much reaction on this part.

Eleanor's brow furrowed slightly as she shifted her attention to the third member of the group.

"Sylvie, care to explain your part in this?" Eleanor prompted.

Aston analyzed her reaction as he looked into Eleanor's face. There, he could see one important thing.

'She wants to make it seem like Academy wasn't well aware of Sylvie's abilities.'

It made sense since if Sylvie knew the academy was well aware of her powers, she might get wary of them.

'She is also probably testing her awareness.'

This situation could also prove a good indication for future events where Sylvie needed to navigate through to hide her specialty for her own sake.

Sylvie, feeling a bit uneasy, took a deep breath before speaking. "Yes, Instructor. When Irina lost consciousness, I could somehow sense her presence within the distorted realm. It was as if a part of her was trapped in a different plane. After sensing, I used my mana to reach out to her and pull her back."

Eleanor's expression became more serious as Sylvie continued her explanation. She realized the significance of Sylvie's involvement in stabilizing the situation and how much her powers were used. She was sorting her thoughts to report to the chairman.

"Irina's awakening within the Phantom's Land was crucial in preventing a potential disaster. It allowed us to tackle the threat and eventually neutralize it," Sylvie added.

Eleanor nodded thoughtfully, piecing together the information she received. Yet, at the same time, she couldn't help but narrow her eyes.

"Why hadn't you chosen to wake up some other instructors?"

Sylvie hesitated for a moment, carefully choosing her words. "Instructor, I... I didn't have much control over the situation. It felt instinctive, like an impulse. Irina was the one I sensed most prominently, and it felt urgent to bring her back. I wasn't aware of the full scope of what was happening."

Eleanor continued to scrutinize Sylvie's response, searching for any signs of deception. The delicate balance between concealing Sylvie's true capabilities and ensuring her cooperation in the future was crucial.

"It's understandable," Eleanor acknowledged, her tone neutral. "Given the circumstances, your actions were commendable. However, be mindful of your abilities and their implications. We will discuss this matter further during the debriefing at the academy."

Sylvie nodded, relieved that her explanation seemed to satisfy Eleanor.

Astron, however, couldn't help but notice the careful dance of words and intentions taking place.

'She is saying this to Sylvie so that in the future, she can take this as a ground for academic perceptiveness. This will most likely be an attempt to lower her guard and make her more reliant on the academy. After all, if Sylvie thinks the academy is easy to fool, she will act more carelessly, revealing more.'

Eleanor was a seasoned instructor, adept at handling delicate situations, and she was subtly guiding the narrative. Astron inwardly praised her for how she managed to control her words.

"Then...What happened after that?" Eleanor turned her attention to Irina and Astron, looking directly into their eyes. She had a hunch that these two were at the center of events now. "And, how were you able to wake Astron up, and why did you choose him?"

Irina took a deep breath before explaining, meeting Eleanor's gaze steadily.

"After Sylvie brought me back, I found myself near our bungalow. Astron was still unconscious inside, and we couldn't wake him up through conventional means since Sylvie didn't have any sufficient mana left inside herself.

Therefore, I thought of using a spell called 「Phantasmal Transfer」 to use it to reach Astron's dream and bring him back."

Eleanor nodded, absorbing the information. Her focus shifted between Irina and Astron, a silent acknowledgment of the significance of the unfolding events.

Irina continued, "As for why we chose Astron, he was the lowest rank in proximity. With Sylvie's mana, we have observed that lower-ranking individuals were easier to pass through, and we thought it would be a quicker and more efficient way to bring him back since more mind would be better than zero."

Of course, what she had said wasn't all true. There were many lies mixed in there, yet this was a more logical response. After all, Astron himself had purposefully handled this part of the speech.

Eleanor's gaze shifted between Irina and Astron, a subtle hint of amusement playing in her eyes. "Better than zero, you say? Well, I wouldn't be so sure of that," she remarked, her words laced with a hint of sarcasm as she threw a quick glance at Astron. His response was a nonchalant shrug, seemingly unfazed by her comment.

The tension in the air eased as Eleanor chuckled, acknowledging the complexities of the relationships within the academy. "Well, regardless of rank, you managed to bring him back successfully. Impressive, Irina. Using a spell-like 「Phantasmal Transfer」 is no small feat, especially considering its high ranking."

Astron could sense the underlying tone of surprise and acknowledgment in Eleanor's words. Irina's proficiency in magic and her quick thinking were earning her commendation even from someone like Eleanor, whose praise was sparingly given.

Eleanor's squinty remained undiminished as she continued to take notes about their explanations. She needed to listen to everything they had said first to report the authorities, especially the headmaster.

"Then, what happened next? How did you two manage to solve the problem, and what was the source of this disturbance?" Eleanor inquired, her stern gaze focusing on Irina.

Irina met Eleanor's gaze, and for a moment, her eyes darted to Astron before she continued her explanation. "After waking Astron up, we quickly assessed the situation. With both of us awake and alert, we realized it was nearing the time when Phantoms usually go berserk. Astron and I have good senses, and we sensed an abnormal convergence of energy spreading across the Phantom's Land."

Astron nodded, confirming her statement. Then he spoke for the first time. "It was a distinctive surge in energy, not typical for this region. We knew something was off, and with Irina's capabilities and my combat experience, we decided to investigate immediately."

Eleanor listened attentively, her stern expression hinting at a sense of approval for their proactive approach. "Continue."

"We started tracing the energy surge to a cavern. Yet, tracing wasn't easy. Countless different phantoms blocked our way, and we had a hard time breaking through their barricade."

"Hmm...." Eleanor nodded thoughtfully. "This makes sense, considering the phantoms most likely obeyed whatever the reason for this state was."

"This was what we thought as well, but thankfully, since I and I had been on the same team from the start of the semester, we coordinated quite well and managed to break the horde."

Irina continued with the narrative, "Once we reached the cavern, I sensed the overwhelming energy of the enemy within. It was much stronger compared to the phantoms we had encountered before. At that moment, I made a quick judgment that the enemy might be too formidable for Astron to handle alone."

Astron interjected, "Irina decided that I should guard the cavern entrance to prevent more phantoms from interfering while she faced the enemy inside. I was able to sense the energy inside and noticed that it was the only logical decision."

Eleanor nodded, understanding the tactical decision, yet she was still impressed. Considering Irina's past behavior, she rather thought she would barge in.

'She changed....But, still...The idea must have come from him.'

Yet, even then, Eleanor was no stranger that Astron did have a good sense of awareness and leadership. Especially in such situations since she had analyzed and graded his previous dungeon explorations.

"A wise choice to divide your roles based on your strengths. Continue."

"As I entered the cavern, I encountered a demon inside, conducting a ritual of some sort. It seemed recently awakened and lost control, causing the disturbance in the Phantom's Land. At least, this is what I suspect."

Eleanor raised an eyebrow at the mention of a demon. "A demon in the Phantom's Land? "

"Yes. It was a demon."

"I see."

"The battle with the demon was fierce, but I was able to defeat it with my abilities," Irina finished, her tone reflecting the intensity of the encounter."

"That's highly unusual. We'll need to investigate the circumstances of its presence here. What happened after defeating the demon?"

Astron continued, "The demon's defeat triggered an explosive reaction, leading to the collapse of the Phantom's Land's whole phenomenon. Yet, we were unable to immediately return back since we had already exhausted ourselves to the maximum."

"I see." Eleanor nodded, piecing together the sequence of events. "Your actions have averted a potential disaster, but the appearance of a demon raises questions about the stability of the Phantom's Land. We'll need to conduct a thorough investigation. Thank you both for your detailed report. I will ensure that the academy takes appropriate measures in light of this incident. You are dismissed."

Chapter 294 69.3 - Aftermath

"Are you happy now?"

Entering the bungalow, Irina asked, looking at me.

"I am satisfied."

I replied. This whole thing went just as we had expected. Irina had taken the credit for defeating the demon while Sylvie also played her role correctly.

Of course, she didn't do it perfectly, but it was still within my expectations. In any case, this whole thing was somehow disturbing, and I had yet to have alone time to check the things I needed to do.

After everyone lost their consciousness and we all somehow entered that dreamlike state, things progressed very differently compared to the game.

'This whole thing will change the future a lot.'

Even if the things were different from the game and the knowledge from it wasn't completely reliable, it was somehow acceptable to some extent.

Yet, this whole Phantom's Land incident is much more of a scale different from others.

With Belthazor's disappearance, many things will change.

'Well, it is not that important.'

Even if the events are not predictable, at the very least, there is some other information that wouldn't be changed.

"Oh....Our prince is satisfied. Should we cut a cake?"

Irina's sarcasm laced her words, but I merely shrugged it off. Now, I was not in the mood.

"Tch."

And sometimes, mere gestures would prove to be a better answer than any words.

"Umm...." At that moment, Sylvie interjected, looking at me. "What will happen from now on?"

It seemed she was still slightly insecure about how the academy would react to her explanations.

"They will probably wait for a while until the investigation is finished. If what we have told them matches with their findings, they will make it official."

I replied. I had already explained this to her, but knowing Sylvie, it was understandable that she would react in such a manner.

Sylvie threw me a quick glance before turning her attention to me and asking, "W-Will my name be on the papers?"

Her voice was a little shaky, yet from her body language, it wasn't that hard to see that she was rather feeling excited.

'I guess this will be her first time.'

Sometimes, I tended to nearly forget that Sylvie came from a rather small village as well. In a sense, she was also one of the most common people, yet at the same time, she was the future Saintess.

'One really can't understand the world.'

Just as I was thinking to myself, Irina, with an amused smile, couldn't resist chiming in. She grabbed Sylvie's cheeks, saying, "Oh, Sylvie, you're so cute when you're innocent."

Sylvie, clearly embarrassed by the attention, averted her gaze shyly. I couldn't help but feel a slight feeling at their interaction.

'They became rather close.'

It was a lot different before compared to how Irina and Sylvie were in the previous tests. Irina was a rather stiff and fiery girl, so outsiders most likely had a hard time interacting with her for the first time. And Sylvie was not someone with an incredibly high self-esteem like Julia either.

'Then, I guess Irina is getting better at reading the room.'

Irina's teasing and Sylvie's modest reactions created a dynamic that was oddly endearing, but at the same time, it could be explained as her attempt to relieve Sylvie.

Irina reassured Sylvie, "Yes, your name will likely be mentioned. You played a crucial role in all this, Sylvie."

After witnessing their playful interaction, I felt that it was a good time to leave. As the atmosphere lightened, I decided to take advantage of the situation.

"I think I need some rest," I declared, feeling the weight of the recent events and the mental strain from unraveling the mysteries of Phantom's Land.

Irina looked at me for a moment, and then, with a nonchalant tone, she said, "Sure. Do whatever you want."

I nodded in acknowledgment, appreciating the permission she gave. Following that, I entered my room and closed the door.

'Finally, I have some alone time.'

I thought. From the moment I had finished Belthazor, I knew something inside me had changed.

No, even before that, from the moment I had woken up from that dreamlike state, I knew for a fact that I felt different.

It was as if something inside me felt more complete than anything else, and I knew that something definitely had changed.

'Status.'

Following that, I called the status window in my head, and instantly, the long-awaited panel appeared right before me.

?Name: Astron Natusalune

?Occupation: Weapon Master (level 2 --> 3)

?Talent Limit: 7.5 --> 9

?Passives:

- Vengeful Bane

- Bloodline Resonance

- Psychic Cognizance

?Attributes:

Variable Attributes:

Strength: 3.25 --> 3.57

Dexterity: 3.90 --> 4.17

Agility: 4.20 --> 4.49

Constitution: 3.25 --> 3.57

Intuition: 4.35 --> 4.64

Magical Power: 4.65 --> 4.97

Mana Capacity: 3.65 --> 3.90

?Traits:

- Perceptive Insight (Epic)(Unchanging)
- Lunar Enigma (????) (Growth Type) (Stage 1)
- Shadowborne (Legendary) (Growth Type)(Stage 1 --> 2)

?Arts:

- Lethal Arsenal Ascendancy (????)(%22 --> 29)

?Skills:

- Eyes of Hourglass

?Body Imprints:

?Bonds:

- Aurora Raven (Rare)(Growth Type)

- Celestialith, The Transcendent Eclipse

I observed the changes in my status window meticulously, each line unveiling new information about the transformation I had undergone.

The details unfolded like a map of my newfound capabilities and potential.

'Hmm....The Weapon Master's level increased once again.'

That meant the advancements in my occupational prowess. The Weapon Master class had ascended to level 3, signifying a deeper understanding of weaponry.

'That was the feeling of grasp? It is rather interesting.'

For the first time in a while, I, for some reason, felt interested in how the status window worked. In a sense, I could feel like this change was the feeling I got after waking up from that dreamlike state.

'Was it because of the parallel world? What even happened?'

I could sense the potential for more profound mastery over a broader array of weapons, making me a more diverse force. It was hard to understand the reason completely, but some questions were bound to be non-answerable.

Yet, aside from the weapon master, my talent limit also increased.

'This increase is quite high.'

Considering how hard it was for any awakened to increase their talent limits, I knew there was no way this was because I had beaten Belthazor.

No matter how good of a passive skill [Vengeful Bane] was, every passive skill had its limits to some extent, and they were in no way strong enough to be remarked as game changers most of the time.

Thus, I doubted the increase in my talent limit came from the passive.

'Most likely the result of that state as well.'

It seemed that whatever happened was quite significant. I tried to recall it, but once again, I was not that successful at all.

However, that wasn't the end. In front of me stood another passive skill, a new one.

'Psychic Cognizance, huh? What a weird name.'

I thought as I opened the description of the passive.

Passive: Psychic Cognizance

Description: Upon recent triumph over a demonic adversary, the user, Astron Natusalune, has unlocked a new passive skill known as Psychic Cognizance. This innate ability empowers him with a heightened understanding of psychic magic, souls, and the intricacies of the mind.

Effect: The user's mind becomes attuned to the subtle currents of psychic energy, allowing him to comprehend psychic phenomena with remarkable clarity and depth. This newfound cognitive acuity extends to the realm of souls and the complexities of the mind, enabling him to grasp related concepts and intricacies more rapidly and with enhanced detail.

Benefits:

Psychic Mastery: The user gains an intuitive grasp of psychic magic, facilitating quicker learning and mastery of psychic abilities.

Soul Insight: The User's understanding of souls deepens, allowing him to perceive and analyze the nuances of soul-

related energies and phenomena.

Mindful Precision: When dealing with matters of the mind, the User's cognitive prowess enables him to unravel complexities and discern patterns with heightened efficiency.

Manifestations:

Enhanced Psychic Sensitivity: The User's senses become finely tuned to psychic energies, allowing him to detect and interpret psychic phenomena in his surroundings.

Soulbound Clarity: The intricacies of souls reveal themselves more vividly to the user, aiding him in interactions with soul-

based entities and phenomena.

Mental Alacrity: The speed at which the user comprehends and processes information related to the mind accelerates, providing him a distinct advantage in mental engagement.

Note: As with all passive skills, the effectiveness of Psychic Cognizance will further evolve and grow as the user continues his journey, delving deeper into the realms of psychic magic, souls, and the mysteries of the mind.

The revelation of the new passive skill, Psychic Cognizance, intrigued me.

'Interesting. Was it because Belthazor had a Psychic Attribute?'

I asked myself. If that was the case, that would make sense that [Vengeful Bane] had provided me with a new passive regarding its attribute. Even though I wasn't able to test it before, I had my hypothesis regarding this, and it seemed it was true.

But, the new passive's effects were far-reaching, enhancing my understanding of psychic magic, souls, and the complexities of the mind.

'Is it related to the strength of the enemy?' That completely made sense. If the enemy was stronger, the more power I could rip off them as a percentage. It seemed the math worked as a percentage for [Vengeful Bane].

Adding the note about the effectiveness evolving and growing with further exploration of psychic magic, souls, and the mysteries of the mind hinted at the untapped potential.

'It seems my main focus of magic in the future is determined.'

I was already considering using magic as a means of utility rather than combat since, in terms of combat, I wasn't lacking in any means. But this gave me a bigger motivation now.

Coming into my variable attributes, the increase was normal.

'My normal training and the stats I had absorbed from Belthazor only turned such an increase, huh?'((N1))

If my stats were to increase just as previously every time, I would be the strongest at some point, yet passive skills had their limits, just as I had explained. Therefore, it was most likely to stay like this in the future as well.

'But, I think I can increase my lacking strength and endurance more now. For some reason, I feel like those parts of my talent limit had increased, though I have no way of confirming it.' ((N2))

However, out of all those, there was one that had somehow become different from usual. At least, it's different from how it used to be.

'[Dash] disappeared.'

My skill [Dash] had disappeared. Such cases were not normal and rarely happened. For a skill to disappear, there were two different reasons.

One, an external force sealed the skill somehow or had stolen it.

Two, the skill had merged into another [Skill] or [Trait].

If the first tone were to happen, that awakened would most likely be in danger, and as for the second one, that meant their skill was strengthened.

Looking at it from my position, the second one seemed to be the case since [Shadowborne] had also increased its stage.

Trait: Shadowborne (Stage 2)

The user had met the conditions to advance to the second stage.

Conditions:

-Spatial Understanding

-Understanding of Mobility

-Understanding of Shadows

Description: Astron Natusalune's innate trait, Shadowborne, has evolved to Stage 2, unlocking the extraordinary ability known as Umbral Step.

This advancement signifies a profound mastery over manipulating shadows, enhancing Astron's mobility and opening the gateway to seamless teleportation through shadowy realms.

Umbral Step: With the newfound mastery of Shadowborne Stage 2, the user gains the ability to execute Umbral Step. This remarkable skill allows him to teleport short distances through shadows, enabling swift and strategic movement. By seamlessly traversing between shadows, Astron can

disappear from one location and reappear in another, introducing an element of surprise to his maneuvers and facilitating both offensive and defensive strategies.

Integration with Dash Skill: The disappearance of the Dash skill from Astron's stats is a result of the synergy between Umbral Step and Dash. While the Dash skill no longer appears separately, Astron retains the ability to move at double speed, maintaining the swift bursts of movement characteristic of Dash. This integration allows for a seamless combination of traditional swift movements and teleportation through shadows, providing Astron with a versatile and dynamic set of mobility skills.

As I looked into the panel, everything seemed to fit in my head.

'The spatial attribute from Belthazor merged with [Shadowborne] and improved it to the second stage. That means, for me to advance in my traits, I need to somehow increase my understanding of the next stage, without knowing about it.....'

In the game, if you want to improve your character, you need to spend your character points. Yet, the real world is a lot different from it.

But, then, there was no use in complaining....

After all, all of these improvements were quite insane.....

Chapter 295 Chapter 69.4 - Aftermath

–I see. So, that is what happened here?"

"Yes, that is exactly what the three students exclaimed."

Inside the now-changed office of the Phantom's Land, Eleanor faced the hologram right in front of her face. With the removal of Phantom's Land's conditions, she could utilize any type of mana artifact just as she wished.

The first thing she did after getting the testimony from Irina and the others was to contact the headmaster about what they needed to do.

–Hmm....Things got a little troublesome here..."

The headmaster's voice echoed from the artifact, seemingly troubled.

–With the involvement of a demon, we can no longer hide this case as we wish." He continued his words.

"Then, what shall we do?" Eleanor asked. She had been getting pressured by Mage Towers, the Hunter Association, and the government. Thus, she was getting a little restless as well.

All three were interested in what happened in Phantom's Land. Mage Tower was undoubtedly interested in the phenomenon itself, while the other two were interested in what transpired exactly.

The Phantom's Land was something that had been bothering the government for quite a long while, as it was akin to a bomb that could explode at any moment.

In the past, countless different cases where such phenomena had caused a disaster out of nowhere without any warnings.

Thus, it was undoubtedly important for the government and its safety.

–Hmm....." The headmaster hummed, seemingly thinking about it. -

–If we go completely identical to their testament, it will be a lot harder for us to hide student Sylvie's powers."?And he spoke.

The fact that Sylvie had been in the middle of many different incidents and her prowess was already gaining quite a bit of attention from the authorities.

Despite the fact that the headmaster was trying his best to keep the information within the walls of the academy, there were undoubtedly many personnel who weren't completely under his control.

Different factions existed in the academy, even now, and they were likely keeping tabs on this incident.

"Then, should we reveal that she wasn't affected by the spell?"

–We can do that.....I will handle it."

"Understood."

Just like that, the call was finished.

The headmaster, using the mana artifact, initiated a holographic communication with the government officials.

–Headmaster Jonathan."

From the hologram, a cold voice echoed, facing the imposing figure of the headmaster in his own room.

–We wish to know what happened inside the Phantom's Land."

Headmaster Jonathan inclined his head respectfully as he addressed the government officials through holographic communication.

"Of course, Minister Veridian, Director Harlow, and General Thornfield. I appreciate your swift response to this matter. Allow me to provide a comprehensive overview of the events that transpired within the Phantom's Land."

Minister Veridian, the head of the Department of Magical Affairs, scrutinized the holographic image with a stern expression. Director Harlow, responsible for Supernatural Anomaly Investigations, maintained a neutral demeanor. General Thornfield, overseeing Paranormal Defense Forces, observed the proceedings with a keen eye.

"As we delved into the Phantom's Land, unforeseen magical anomalies occurred, resulting in a critical situation. Student Sylvie, possessing unique healing abilities, played a pivotal role in mitigating the immediate threats to her fellow students, Irina and Astron."

The headmaster proceeded to narrate the version carefully constructed to divert attention from Sylvie's true capabilities.

"However, due to the extensive use of her powers, Sylvie experienced a temporary loss of consciousness. Rest assured, we have taken measures to ensure her well-being, and she is currently under observation by our medical staff."

Minister Veridian interjected, –Headmaster Jonathan, we understand the need to protect our 'students.' However, the presence of a magical anomaly within the Phantom's Land is a matter of great concern. Can you provide details on the origin and nature of this anomaly?"

The headmaster maintained his composed demeanor as he responded, "Our preliminary investigation suggests that the magical anomaly was an internal disturbance within the Phantom's Land itself. It was not caused by external entities or influences. Our experts are conducting a thorough analysis to understand the specifics of this unique occurrence."

Headmaster Jonathan continued his narrative, addressing the government officials with a tone of candor and transparency.

"The origin of the magical anomaly within the Phantom's Land is currently under investigation. Early assessments lead us to suspect that the manifestation of the Phantom's Land itself may have been influenced by the presence of a demon."

He took a moment to gauge their reactions before elaborating further.

"According to the firsthand accounts of students Irina Emberheart and Astron Natusalune, after waking up within the Phantom's Land, they sensed a powerful energy converging into a specific space. Following this energy, they encountered a demon conducting a ritual of some sort."

Minister Veridian's expression grew more serious while Director Harlow furrowed her brow in contemplation. General Thornfield maintained his stoic demeanor, awaiting more details.

"Student Irina Emberheart engaged in a battle with the demon and successfully defeated it. The subsequent collapse of the Phantom's Land was triggered by the defeat of the demon, resulting in the dissipation of the magical anomaly."

The headmaster chose his words carefully, emphasizing the students' role in averting a potential catastrophe while downplaying the involvement of external entities.

As he finished his words, all three officials fell into silence for a second, and following that, Minister Veridian turned his attention to the other two, Director Harlow and General Thornfield.

–Do you have any words about this?" And he asked.

–I don't." General Thornfield was the first one to respond. Since he had already been notified by the investigation team, he was sent to Phantom's Land. "Just as the Headmaster recounted, our investigation team also reported the existence of the demonic energy in the cavern, where the energy was the most potent."

General Thornfield continued his explanation, addressing Minister Veridian's inquiry with a composed demeanor.

–Traces of fire magic were found throughout the cavern, indicating a confrontation had taken place. The body of the demon was located, burnt beyond recognition."

He paused momentarily before providing further details.

–Our analysis indicated that the demon attempted to flee the scene, but it was intercepted and defeated by student Irina Emberheart. The utilization of fire magic in the confrontation aligns with the findings in the cavern. We also obtained confirmation from Matriarch Emberheart, who identified the magical signature as belonging to the Emberheart family."

General Thornfield exchanged a glance with Director Harlow, emphasizing the cohesion between their reports and the information provided by the academy.

"Everything reported by student Irina Emberheart and the other two students matches the evidence we found in the cavern. The demon's attempt to escape and subsequent demise align with the sequence of events described by the students. It appears they played a crucial role in neutralizing the threat within the Phantom's Land."

Minister Veridian, though still stern, nodded in acknowledgment. "Director Harlow, do you have anything to add to this assessment?"

Director Harlow, maintaining her neutral expression, responded, "Minister Veridian, General Thornfield's report accurately summarizes our findings. The students' accounts and the evidence collected align, indicating a successful resolution of the situation within the Phantom's Land. We will continue our investigations to ensure a complete understanding of the anomaly and its origins."

At that point, Minister Veridian interjected, his face turning serious. "Director Harlow, General Thornfield, I appreciate your diligence in this matter. However, effective immediately, this matter shall no longer be investigated any further. The case is to be closed."

Director Harlow appeared surprised by the abrupt decision and questioned, "Minister Veridian, may I inquire about the reason behind such a directive? The anomaly within the Phantom's Land and the involvement of a demon raise concerns about our security protocols. Closing the investigation prematurely may leave crucial questions unanswered."

Minister Veridian's expression remained stern, and he offered no explanation. "Director Harlow, the details of this incident, particularly the involvement of a demon, must be kept hidden. Any further investigation into this matter is to cease immediately. No questions asked. The government deems it necessary to suppress certain information for the greater good."

Director Harlow persisted, "Minister Veridian, understanding the potential risks is essential for ensuring the safety of our jurisdiction. Closing the investigation without a clear reason compromises our ability to address vulnerabilities and protect our citizens, as well as to find possible ways to fight with the demons."

Minister Veridian's tone became more authoritative, "Director Harlow, this is not open for discussion. The government has made its decision. Cease the investigation and ensure that this information does not reach any unauthorized individuals."

He then turned his attention to the headmaster, "Headmaster Jonathan, you are to contact the three students involved in this incident immediately. They are to be informed that the details of what transpired within the Phantom's Land must remain a closely guarded secret. Failure to comply will result in the application of Valerian Clause 29. The government will not tolerate any breach of confidentiality, and traitorous actions will be dealt with accordingly."

With that ultimatum, Minister Veridian concluded the holographic communication, leaving the headmaster on his own inside his room.

"Just as expected from them....Rotten bastards...."

The headmaster shook his head, looking at the sky. "The future of the humanity seems to be bleak...."

He couldn't help but think to himself as his arms and legs were bound to one place and could only gain this much time.

"Let's hope the future generations can fight whatever is to come."

With those, he changed the contact of the hologram and contacted Eleanor White.

Following the day everyone woke up, life in the ex-Phantom's Land returned to normal immediately.

Most students were waking up like they normally used to, as their injuries were all healed. Miraculously or not, not a single life had been lost in this incident.

Even though some students were in serious condition after they had been unconscious against the phantoms, they were still in the scope of being able to be saved. Therefore, the academy had certainly gotten over a very possible disaster.

Yet, one girl wasn't happy with what she had heard from Professor Eleanor.

"We need to keep the appearance of Demon secret? After all of the things that happened, they dared to ask that?"

She certainly had every right to be angry about it. After all, they had risked their lives to combat that demon only to keep its identity hidden.

"Tch. So annoying."

And that was the reason why she had woken up in such a bad mood. She wanted to burn something so bad at that moment, yet she remembered that she was not alone right now.

'Yeah, that guy and Sylvie are here. I shouldn't probably do that.'

Deciding that she needed to get some fresh air, Irina stood from her bed and got out with her pajamas.

Irina stepped out of her room, and in an instant, the tantalizing aroma of a delicious meal wafted through the air, instantly diverting her thoughts.

The scent was so captivating that it cut through her annoyance, leaving her intrigued. Irina followed the inviting aroma with her eyes, only to see the 'that guy' in front of the stove, stirring a pan with practiced ease. The enticing fragrance filled the room, and Irina found herself momentarily forgetting her earlier discontent.

'Yeah...He could cook, I forgot.'

Even though it had just been two days, she couldn't help but feel like everything that had transpired had been longer than that.

Irina watched from the side as Astron, calm and composed, worked on the stove, the tantalizing aroma of a delicious meal enveloping the room. The rhythmic clatter of utensils against the pan seemed almost like a soothing melody. It was a surprising sight, given his typically stoic demeanor.

As she stood there, captivated by the culinary spectacle, Astron's purple eyes met hers. Irina stiffened, momentarily caught off guard. Despite the unexpected eye contact, she managed to compose herself.

"Morning," she greeted, her voice a tad more subdued than usual.

Astron turned his attention from the stove, meeting her gaze with a nod. "Morning," he replied calmly, his tone devoid of the tension from their previous conversation. The air in the room felt different—more relaxed.

'Isn't he angry about that? He had defeated the demon, yet they want him to keep it secret.'

Irina found herself caught in a strange mix of irritation and curiosity.

"I am not mad."

At that moment, his voice echoed.

"What?"

And Irina couldn't help but be surprised.

'Can he read minds now?'

"It is all over your face."

"Really?"

"Yes. You should work on your expressions."

".....I think it is you with abnormal eyes...."

"That might be true."

"It is definitely true."

"If you say so."

Just as Irina continued to talk with him without any purpose or whatever, she couldn't help but think.

'For which reason do I feel calmer when I am with him?'

Yet, she couldn't find the answer to that at all, and just like that, the trip to the Phantom's Land had ended as all the students were returned to the academy.

Chapter 296 70.1 - Award Ceremony

?"Sigh...I am too tired...."

Inside one of the buses, Ethan mumbled as he looked at the interior. After all the things that had happened in the Phantom's Land, he was a lot more tired than he initially expected himself to be.

For some reason, he felt like his mind was under immense pressure even though he wasn't able to recall what had transpired.

"Same."

At that moment, a voice came from his side. It was the bob-cut white-haired girl looking at Ethan with a tired smile. Her usual and cheery demeanor was nowhere to be found, and she was just looking at everything with a tired face.

"Man....I just want to relax in my room for the whole weekend. They for sure must empty our next following days of school, or else I am skipping."

Ethan nodded in agreement, "I was thinking the same. A weekend of pure relaxation sounds like the perfect recovery plan."

He himself wanted to play games for the first time in a while, as well as wanted to see a certain 'someone'....

However, Lilia, sitting across from them, chimed in with a dissenting opinion. "I disagree. Knowing the academy, they're more likely to push us forward rather than let us rest. They love keeping us on our toes."

Ethan and Julia exchanged glances, realizing the truth in Lilia's words.

'She is right...Sigh....'

The academy had a knack for maintaining a relentless pace, ensuring that the students were always challenged and prepared for any situation. This was especially the case with the new semester since the students were said to be pushed to their limits.

"You might be onto something, Lilia," Ethan admitted a hint of resignation in his voice.

Lilia smirked as if enjoying being the voice of reality. "Heh....It's not called the best academy for anything. Get ready for another whirlwind week, my little lazy peaches."

"Peaches?" Ethan raised his eyebrows as he was unable to understand what she meant.

"You didn't get it?" Lilia scoffed as he looked into her smartwatch. "You should keep tabs on recent trends more, or else girls will mark you as boring."

Lilia decided to enlighten Ethan by showing him a small picture on her smartwatch, revealing a seemingly popular TV show. Ethan, taking it seriously, asked, "Really?"

At that moment, Julia couldn't resist the opportunity to tease him, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Of course not, my dear innocent Ethan. But hey, peaches are trending now. Maybe you should consider a peachy makeover."

Ethan, slightly perplexed, raised an eyebrow while turning her head to Julia. "A peachy makeover? Is that even a thing?"

Julia chuckled, enjoying Ethan's confusion. "Maybe it is, maybe it isn't. You'll never know until you try. Imagine the talk of the academy – Ethan, the Peach Prince!"

Ethan shook his head, a small smile forming. "I'll pass on the Peach Prince title, thank you very much. I'll stick to being the guy who survives the academy's whirlwind weeks."

"Can you survive my whirlwind though?" Yet, Julia raised her arms, clenching her biceps. Following that, seemingly, those slender arms turned to sculptured muscles, and Ethan immediately flinched.

"No, thanks. I would rather drown in the whirlwinds of the academy." Ethan answered.

'There is just no way I can take this mad woman head-on now.'

Though his inward thoughts didn't match his polite words.

"You just thought something rude, didn't you?"

"Cough...." Ethan coughed, seeing Julia's squinted eyes. "Of course not." And tried to lie.

'A Woman's intuition is crazy....'

He couldn't help but feel a little more fearful in Julia's presence, as if he felt like his mind was being red.

"Humph.

Just as the two were talking, Lilia turned her attention to the side, only to see Lucas looking out of the window, seemingly in his thoughts.

'Just what is the deal with this guy.'

Being a sharpshooter and a very good archer, she immediately noticed how different Lucas' demeanor was. Yet, she decided not to ask anything, as she knew if there was something Lucas would surely tell her and others.

This was what 'friendship' meant, after all.

<Arcadia City, Golden District>

Inside one of the highest buildings in the vicinity, a meeting was ongoing between some high-ranking officials. The room was dimly lit, and the atmosphere was tense. At the head of the long table, a figure sat in a high-backed chair, their features concealed by shadows and a veil. The other officials, similarly shrouded in veils, projected dark holograms to mask their identities.

The person at the head of the table leaned forward, their voice echoing through the room, "Report. What have you discovered?"

One of the black figures, their holographic image displaying only a silhouette, spoke up, "Our agents have thoroughly investigated the incident in the Phantom's Land involving the three academy students. According to our findings, their testimony aligns with the events that transpired."

The veiled figure at the head of the table nodded, "Continue. Elaborate on the details. Were there any discrepancies or additional information not provided by the students?"

The black figure continued, "The investigation supports the claim that a magical anomaly occurred within the Phantom's Land, and the leader of the three students, Irina Emberheart, successfully dealt with our kin. His existence was verified through traces of fire magic and the burnt remains found in the cavern."

The veiled leader remained composed, "And the government's involvement?"

Another figure, whose hologram showed a different symbol, responded, "As per your request, the government has chosen to close the investigation into the Phantom's Land incident. We made sure that Minister Veridian issued a directive to cease any further inquiries."

The leader at the head of the table nodded in satisfaction, "Good. This information should be sufficient to control the narrative."

However, at that moment, one of the shadows interrupted, "Forgive my intrusion, but I have been suspecting something."

"How dare you interrupt-"

Just as one of the shadows was about to scold him, the headman raised his hand, calming it down.

The headman turned towards the interrupting figure, his tone turning serious, "The Flare. Speak, and choose your words carefully."

The shadow, known by the alias 'The Flare,' hesitated for a moment before revealing, "As per your request, my team also investigated the scene. But, rather than looking for the demon's remnants, we analyzed the scale of the spell used."

The headman leaned back, intrigued, "What are you getting at, Flare?"

The Flare took a deep breath before continuing, "According to our findings, the mana levels of the spell used at the Phantom's Land indicated a strength equivalent to tier-6 or tier-7 magic in modern classifications."

The room fell into a heavy silence as everyone processed the implications of The Flare's revelation. The headman's expression turned contemplative as he absorbed this new piece of information.

"What are you suggesting?" the headman asked.

The Flare met the headman's gaze, "I'm not implying that the student's accounts are wrong. However, it seems improbable that a student, even one as capable as Irina Emberheart, could withstand such powerful magic, let alone a student named Sylvie. It raises questions about the authenticity of the reported events."

One of the shadows couldn't contain their hostility and exclaimed, "Are you implying that our findings were inaccurate? We investigated the Phantom's Land thoroughly afterward!"

The Flare remained composed, "I am not implying that. Initially, we had also assumed the tier of the spell lower, around 3-4, thanks to its strength. However, we noticed that we had overlooked one thing."

The room fell into a contemplative silence as everyone absorbed this revelation. The opposing shadow, initially hostile, now remained silent, realizing the oversight in their analysis.

The headman nodded, acknowledging The Flare's explanation. "Continue."

The Flare took a breath before elaborating, "Given its ancient nature, the tier analysis becomes complex. It's not a direct comparison to modern classifications. We need to reassess the magical landscape of the Phantom's Land and consider the possibility that ancient magic, not conforming to our current understanding, played a role."

The opposing shadow remained silent, digesting the new information.

The headman, with a thoughtful expression, raised two crucial questions. "Firstly, how could a normal healer with a low rank withstand such a potent spell? And secondly, how did Irina Emberheart manage to defeat such a strong demon, supposedly one of 'his' descendants?"

The leader contemplated for a moment before making a decisive decision. "We need to investigate or possibly capture both Irina Emberheart and Sylvie Gracewind further. I want a thorough background check on their abilities, affiliations, and any potential connections. Additionally, raise a target bounty for both of them. We need to know more about these students and the events within the Phantom's Land."

His voice echoed in the room as he made his final decision.

"What about Astron Natusalune? He also played a crucial role in this event."

The headman's contemplative gaze shifted to the holographic image of the young student with slightly pale skin and a downcast expression, displayed with his information beneath it.

'I'm tempted to consider him merely a lucky Awakened who happened to be on the same team as Irina Emberheart. However, simplicity can sometimes be deceptive. I learned it the wrong way, and I shall not underestimate the potential complexities of this situation. I feel like something is amiss for some reason.'

After a moment of silent scrutiny, he spoke, "Astron Natusalune. While he may seem like a mere bystander in this event, we cannot afford to dismiss any potential connections or influences he might have had. I want a separate investigation team to delve into his background, affiliations, and any unusual occurrences surrounding him."

The veiled figures remained silent, absorbing the decision. The headman concluded, "Proceed with the investigations. Report back with any significant findings. We need to understand the full extent of the events within the Phantom's Land. This matter is a sign from our lord. His descent is near."

With that, the holographic communication ended, and the veiled figures dispersed, each attending to their assigned tasks.

The headman, however, continued to gaze at the holographic images as his mouth curled up.

"Thank you for showing me another future threat, My Lord. I shall do my best to end them here and now."

With those words, he closed his eyes as the scene of a man with his arms hung on a cross appeared.

"She has once again proven herself to be a beacon of courage and heroism. Irina Emberheart, with her indomitable willpower, faced a unique and formidable monster that emerged during the collapse of the Phantom's Land. This monstrous entity, unlike anything we had encountered before, threatened the lives of our fellow students. But Irina, guided by her noble Emberheart lineage, fearlessly stood against the unknown threat."

The commentator's voice resonated through the auditorium as the crowd's applause continued.

Irina's expression remained composed, at least she tried to, though her amber eyes betrayed a subtle mix of 'annoyance' and 'arrogance.' Deep down, she knew the accolades were not entirely genuine.

"It was her quick thinking, honed skills, and unwavering commitment that allowed her to single-handedly confront this aberrant creature, ensuring the safety of her peers. Irina's actions exemplify the core values of our academy – bravery, selflessness, and the ability to face the unknown head-on."

As the commentator praised her, Irina couldn't shake off the feeling of being a mere pawn in a performance. Her internal disdain was palpable.

—CLAP!

'Tch. I feel like a clown.'

Despite the outward acknowledgment, Irina's mind echoed with dissatisfaction. The commentator continued, emphasizing the unique strength that resonated from her Emberheart lineage.

"It is thanks to her unique and strong willpower, a testament to the enduring legacy of the Emberheart noble family, that she was able to overcome such a perilous situation. The noble blood that runs through her veins undoubtedly played a pivotal role in her triumph over adversity."

The applause intensified, but Irina's internal monologue persisted.

'Strong willpower, my foot. They have no idea who even did it.'

At that moment, she slightly turned her head and saw the reason for her being in this place: he was just looking around with his usual emotionless eyes.

But, at that moment, she couldn't help but notice another woman in front of the crowd.

'Huh?'

It was someone she would have never expected.

Chapter 297 70.2 - Award Ceremony

?For Irina, from the moment she was born, she had never had a good relationship with her parents.

Her mother, who held the strongest position in the family as the matriarch, had just recently subdued her sisters and brothers when she was born. It was a very long successor fight, according to the words of her nannies.

Therefore, when she was born, her mother was a lot busier than compared to before. Considering the fact that she needed to stabilize the family and the finances, it made sense, but as a child, she was deprived of her mother's love.

Yet, there was someone there. A person who could be called a parent to her. A woman who gave her the care that she needed, a woman who was beside her when she was a child and sought parental love.

She had filled the emptiness that came from the lack of parental interest, and naturally, the young Irina couldn't help but somehow connect her figure with her mother.

It was like she was her second mother.

Yet, the reality crumbled really fast. As she passed the age of the certain threshold, suddenly, that person left her side.

Then, Irina realized. Even from the beginning, she had never been a parental figure for her. The person she thought of as a second mother was, in fact, just an attendant who was sent by her mother.

That was all she was for her. And, naturally, the young Irina didn't take it well. Her mother might have wanted to teach her the harshness of life, and she was successful at it. Maybe the biggest reason for her acting like an arrogant noble girl was this.

Yet, now, that said person stood there, facing her in the back of the crowd.

'Esme.'

The memories flashed in front of her eyes as her face hardened.

'Why is she here?'

She asked herself as she saw one of her childhood figures. Yet, just as she was about to drown in her thoughts, she felt a touch on the right side of her waist. A pair of fingers grabbed her from there, making her squirm a little.

—FLINCH!

'Hick!'

She exclaimed inwardly, barely suppressing the moan that was about to escape from her mouth. Turning her attention to the source of the touch, her eyes met with a pair of purple ones.

[Calm down.]

As his lips moved silently, she read what he said and realized the face she was making in front of a crowd.

'That is right. I mustn't show any weakness.'

Whatever the reason that woman was here, she could care less. With that thought, she once again steadied herself, looking directly at the crowd with her usual arrogant expression.

'How did he realize that quickly?'

Yet, she couldn't help but ponder inwardly. That guy's perception was surely one of the most dangerous aspects of him, to the point it was scary.

As she tried to shake off her feelings, the commentator's voice once again filled the air.

"And now, let us acknowledge two more outstanding students who have demonstrated remarkable bravery. Astron Natusalune and Sylvie Gracewind, please step forward!"

His introduction for them was blatantly less, as the two were fairly less known compared to Irina, and naturally, the commenter was aware of that as well.

'Just as he said.'

Irina observed the crowd's reaction and noticed nobody was even paying attention to Sylvie and him aside from some scouts. Most of the eyes were on her.

The commentator continued with the ceremony, "And now, to present the reward to our extraordinary students, let us welcome a distinguished guest from the association, a seasoned Hunter who has been a guiding light in our community."

The crowd hushed, and a distinguished figure stepped forward, his posture radiating authority. As he approached, Irina's attention sharpened. The man, known for his formidable reputation, was none other than Captain Melwin "Abyssal Tide" Howell.

Irina maintained her composed exterior, but an unsettling feeling gnawed at her as Captain Howell reached her side. His smile, though seemingly pleasant, sent shivers down her spine.

"As we honor Irina Emberheart for her outstanding bravery, we believe the future is in good hands with individuals like her," Captain Howell declared, his voice carrying an undertone that Irina couldn't quite decipher.

—FLINCH!

As he handed her the commendation and reward, his fingers brushed against hers, sending a chill through her.

'This.....'

The smile on his face remained, but Irina couldn't shake off the creeping sensation that there was more behind it than mere courtesy.

'What is this feeling?'

"Congratulations, Irina Emberheart. Your actions have showcased remarkable potential. The association is proud to have individuals of your caliber," he continued, his eyes holding an intensity that made Irina uncomfortable.

"Thank you, Captain Howell," Irina responded politely, though her mind raced with an unspoken unease.

As if insects were crawling on her skin, she wanted to scratch it so badly. The urge to puke was raised, and she averted her gaze to the side.

There, she noticed him glaring at the Hunter. His purple eyes were wide open. It was only for a second, a split second that would go unnoticed if she hadn't accidentally seen it.

'What?'

As Captain Howell retreated, Irina's gaze lingered on him. The commentator's words and the ceremony's spotlight couldn't mask the subtle feeling of discomfort that had settled within her.

'Why was he looking at him like that? Just what was it?'

She asked herself, raising those questions. His face was now returned to its normal demeanor, the same expressionless face, yet Irina couldn't help but constantly compare his calm face with the one she had just seen before.

But, before she could ponder about it any longer, the commenter's voice echoed once again.

"And with that, we conclude this ceremony of bravery and excellence. Let us applaud once again for the remarkable students who have showcased exceptional courage. Thank you all for joining us today."

—CLAP!

The applause swelled, and the commentator gestured for the students to leave the stage. Irina, alongside Astron and Sylvie, made her way down, still feeling the remnants of discomfort from the encounter with Captain Howell.

As they left the stage, the applause followed them, and the commentator's voice faded into the background.

In the backstage area, the atmosphere was buzzing with a mix of excitement and relief. Irina, Astron, and Sylvie navigated through the crowd, the applause still echoing in their ears. Irina's mind, however, was preoccupied with the unsettling encounter with Captain Howell, as well as the person she had just seen.

Just as she was about to continue walking, she saw Esme standing at a distance, her gaze fixed on Irina. The memories of their past encounters and the revelation that Esme was nothing more than an attendant sent by her mother flooded Irina's mind.

Irina's steps faltered as she noticed Esme standing amidst the bustling backstage area. Her gaze lingered on Astron, who had also cast a knowing glance in Esme's direction. Sylvie, on the other hand, seemed a bit overwhelmed by the recent ceremony, her demeanor shy and reserved.

Sparing a brief nod to Astron, Irina gestured towards Sylvie. "You two can head back. I need a moment alone."

Understanding Irina's unspoken request, Astron nodded and guided Sylvie away from the backstage chaos. As they left, Irina felt a mixture of gratitude and apprehension. She took a deep breath, mentally preparing herself for the impending conversation with Esme.

Turning her attention back to Esme, Irina walked towards her, her expression guarded.

"Esme," Irina called out stiffly, her tone laced with a mixture of surprise and coldness. "What are you doing here?"

Esme remained silent for a moment, her eyes locked with Irina's. The air between them seemed charged with unspoken tension. Irina couldn't help but feel a knot forming in her stomach, a blend of resentment and confusion.

"Why are you here?" Irina repeated, her voice more assertive this time. The echoes of the applause served as an eerie backdrop to their confrontation.

Esme finally broke her silence, her voice calm but carrying an undertone of intensity. "Irina, it's been a long time."

Irina narrowed her eyes, her composure momentarily faltering. "Cut the pleasantries. Why are you here?"

Esme's gaze softened for a moment before returning to its steely resolve. "Irina, I wanted to see you. To see how much you've grown."

Irina scoffed, a bitter smile playing on her lips. "Grown? Is that what you call it? Leaving me when I needed someone the most? Bullshit." She spat her tongue venomously. "Or rather, this is what that woman calls 'growth,' right?"

Esme's eyes narrowed slightly, her composure unwavering despite Irina's outburst. She locked eyes with Irina, a silent exchange of emotions passing between them.

"The Matriarch was pleased with your recent achievements, Young Miss," Esme said, her voice carrying a subtle weight. "She's proud of you as an Emberheart."

'Heh....Now, you are calling me Young Miss. Are you implying that you are no different than any other servant of our house? What you did wasn't out of your own feelings but because you were ordered to. Yeah, it was my fault to expect anything different.'

Irina scoffed again, a bitter laugh escaping her lips. "Proud, you say? Is that what this is about? Her pride in the family name? I don't need her empty praises."

'It wasn't even me who have done it.'

The disgust in her chest raised more and more, yet she couldn't say anything to match his wish.

Esme's gaze remained stern and devoid of any warmth as she responded to Irina's bitter laughter. "The Matriarch is watching you, Young Miss, and she's genuinely looking forward to your potential. It's not just empty praises. She believes in what you can achieve for the Emberheart legacy."

Irina met Esme's gaze, a mixture of skepticism and resentment in her eyes. "Believes, you say? More like she's shaping me into her ideal puppet. But go ahead, tell me more about the Matriarch's expectations."

Esme sighed, acknowledging the frustration in Irina's tone. "The Matriarch has high hopes for you. She sees a future where you lead the Emberheart name with strength and honor. Your recent accomplishments are just the beginning."

Irina tilted her head, a sarcastic smile playing on her lips. "Accomplishments, or the tasks she set for me? There's a difference, Esme."

Ignoring Irina's cynicism, Esme reached into a small box that materialized from her spatial bracelet. "The Matriarch wanted me to give you this," she said, handing the box to Irina. "It's a symbol of her appreciation for your efforts."

Irina eyed the box suspiciously, her fingers hesitating before taking it, yet she didn't open it.

Esme continued, "She knows you have the strength to overcome any challenges, Young Miss. This is a reminder of the faith she places in you."

Without another word, Esme turned to leave, her departure silent and leaving behind an air of unresolved tension, but just as she was about to finish leaving, she stopped and turned to take one last look into Irina.

"Young miss, be mindful of whom you associate yourself with," Esme cautioned. "Not everyone deserves to be in the same space as an Emberheart. Remember, the legacy you carry is not to be tainted by those with severed roots and no discernible future."

Irina's eyes narrowed at the thinly veiled warning, her grip tightening on the unopened box as she knew whom Esme was referring to.

'A person with severed roots and no discernible future knows me more than my own mother.'

The words were stuck in her heart, as she watched Esme leaving.

Chapter 298 Chapter 70.3 - Award Ceremony

"Sigh....."

A heavy sigh occurred in the middle of the room.

The room exuded opulence, adorned with countless expensive ornaments that showcased the Emberheart family's wealth and status.

Intricately carved figurines, glistening gemstones, and rare magical artifacts adorned every surface.

The most recent technological devices seamlessly blended with antique furnishings, creating a unique juxtaposition of modernity and tradition.

This was her own way of designing her room, after all.

In the midst of this lavish setting, Irina reclined lazily on her bed. The crimson gown she wore cascaded around her like a cascade of flames, contrasting with the subdued hues of the room.

Her fiery hair spilled over the pillows as she released a heavy sigh, the sound echoing with a blend of weariness and frustration.

Her gaze lingered on the unopened box and the plaque resting in front of her. The box, a symbol of appreciation from the Matriarch, her mother, held the weight of familial expectations.

The plaque, a testament to her recent 'bravery,' served as a reminder of the path she was expected to tread.

"Sigh..." Irina sighed again, the sound resonating in the room filled with luxury. "If I knew that woman was going to contact me like this, I would never accept his request."

She couldn't help but mumble a little, thinking that the deal she made no longer benefited her. Of course, gaining the favor of that guy wasn't wrong, yet now these feelings that her decision resulted in no longer made the deal worthwhile, in her opinion.

'I don't even want to look into this plaque again.'

It was a useless gift. Of course, she knew that having such types of awards would naturally bring one higher in the social ladder of nobles and Awakeners, yet at the same time, she hated to be like those superficial bastards.

'Also, why did she give this to me?'

On paper, a mother giving a gift to her child seemed normal in a family, yet Irina knew her mother had never been a normal one, to begin with. Whatever she did in the past had always served a purpose, and her steps were calculated.

Therefore, she couldn't help but think that this gift, for some reason, also served a purpose aside from being a simple gift.

Irina's hand reached for the unopened box, her fingers delicately tracing its intricate design.

As she examined the box, Irina couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to this seemingly innocuous gift than met the eye. The room, with its wealth and luxury, held secrets, and she was determined to uncover them.

'I wonder if I can do it too?'

In an attempt to imitate 'that guy,' whose perceptiveness often left her in awe, Irina focused her attention on the box.

'Of course, if he can do it, why can't I?'

She concentrated, searching for any subtle clues or anomalies. Her trained eyes scanned for mana fluctuations, a skill she had honed through years of magical study.

'It looks like a normal box.'

At first, she couldn't find anything, but she also didn't want to directly utilize her [Trait] as her pride didn't allow it.

She looked into it, again and again, trying to somehow naturally feel it.

'Hmm?'

Then, there it was – a faint shimmer, a small dance of mana around the box. It wasn't immediately apparent, but 'that guy's' influence had taught her to look beyond the surface. The box, she realized, was working as a seal of sorts.

'As expected, the thing inside is an artifact.'

A challenge presented itself, one that ignited the spark of curiosity within her. With a subtle shift in her posture, Irina delved deeper into the study of the mana surrounding the box. She observed its patterns, its nature, and the intricate dance it performed, trying to solve the equations she had created in her head.

She also didn't notice it, but at some point, the box started floating in the air rather than her hand holding it.

After a moment of concentration, she deciphered the mana psions surrounding the box. It wasn't just any mana; it was dark mana – a type of Psions that was associated with both the cosmos as well as the evil cults.

Though one may think that the dark mana was used only by evil people, this was inherently wrong. No power in this world was pure as at the start; it was up to the user how to wield it.

'Hmm....If the seal is using dark-attribute psions, that means the inside should have its countering attributes.'

Most of the time, to use seals with minimal energy, the seals would be made according to the type of the desired artifact to be sealed.

'But, can I eliminate it further than that?'

As she thought of trying to find more clues to narrow down the exact attribute, she started studying it once again immediately.

The box floated in the air, caught in an invisible dance of magical examination. Her efforts to imitate 'that guy' persisted, and her mind focused on unraveling the mysteries concealed within.

However, as time passed, she found herself unable to narrow down the exact attribute or nature of the seal. The equations in her mind remained unsolved, and the frustration built up.

'Maybe this is beyond me.'

With a sigh, Irina conceded defeat, letting the box return to her hand. Her gaze lingered on the unopened gift, a mix of curiosity and acceptance in her eyes.

'Enough of this. Let's see what's inside.'

Carefully, she opened the box, revealing a small, shiny bracelet within. The color of yellow emanated a warm glow, and a shiny blue jewel adorned its center.

'Wait?'

She couldn't help but gasp in surprise after seeing what it was. Who wouldn't be?

A wave of recognition swept over Irina as she beheld the heirloom.

"Solar Radiance?"

It was one of their family's cherished artifacts, a protective bracelet that could shield the wearer three times from significant harm. However, only two uses remained, as her mother had utilized it once when she was young and a prospective prodigy of their family.

"She gave this to me?"

Her initial skepticism and desire to decipher the seal immediately was satisfied after seeing the artifact. After all, it utilized the Light Psions and some unknown power. Therefore, it made sense that it was sealed by dark psions since it countered it.

Irina's fingers traced the intricate design of the bracelet. Its significance weighed heavily on her, a tangible connection to her family's legacy. The bracelet, capable of safeguarding against attacks even from an intermediate rank-9 Hunter, held both sentimental and practical value.

"Does that mean she suspects that I could somehow be in danger?"

She asked herself. If that woman gave her this bracelet, it probably also meant something. She knew her mother didn't always talk with her directly and sometimes left her with clues for her to understand on her own.

As she walked, memories of recent events flashed in her mind. The encounter with the demon in the Phantom's Land, the unsettling feeling from Captain Howell, and the hushed instructions to keep silent about certain occurrences all resurfaced.

'Those are not likely to be normal.'

Irina's instincts, finely tuned from a lifetime of navigating the complexities of her noble lineage, kicked into high gear.

"Something isn't right," she muttered to herself. "I feel like the things happening in the Phantom's Land was not a small matter, and the demon's identity wasn't normal either."

She had thought of it countless times and even asked Astron about it, yet he chose to keep it silent, saying he didn't know anything. Of course, she didn't believe him, yet she couldn't force him to talk either.

"In any case...I should be careful...Both for me and for those close to me."

For some reason, an annoying guy's face came into her mind, yet she refused to accept it.

"Tch."

In an attempt to shift her focus, Irina decided to open her smartwatch, a device that connected her to the latest news and trends.

As the holographic interface flickered to life, she entered the school forum. She hadn't been updating herself in the forums since she was busy with assignments and remembering the basics of magic to teach someone.

While she navigated through the forum, a post caught her attention – a post that highlighted her recent recognition at the ceremony.

'What? It instantly became popular?'

Irina's image adorned the post, capturing the moment she received the award for her bravery. The praises poured in from fellow students, hailing her as the savior of the students who had fallen into a dreamy state.

The post commended Irina not only for breaking the enchantment but also for showcasing an impressive progression in her magical abilities, allowing her to unravel the complexities of the magic that had ensnared them.

The comments overflowed with admiration, acknowledging Irina's skill and resilience. Some hailed her as a beacon of hope, while others speculated about the mysteries that surrounded her. The forum buzzed with discussions, and Irina found herself at the center of attention.

Of course, there were some haters hinting at her personality and her previous deeds but recently hyped students ignored those and shut them off with their fanatical remarks.

'It had this much effect? Wow.'

She had attended many banquets and social events, but this was the first time that she saw how dangerous social media was and how detrimental it was, as the numbers of people were basically too many.

'So, this is why he didn't want to use his name. Now it makes sense.'

If such a reaction came for her, she couldn't help but think what would have happened if it was Astron who was labeled as a hero.

Most people wouldn't believe it, and there wouldn't be many fans. Even now, there are still many haters hating her.

'But....This is not that bad...'

Yet, she smiled a little, seeing her reputation turning to normal.

Inside a place with red lighting illuminating the room, a lone figure stood in front of a bunch of shadows, mere silhouettes suspended from above. The crimson glow cast an eerie ambiance, highlighting the grotesque shapes that danced upon the walls.

As the enigmatic figure moved, her silhouette seemed to embrace the dance of the shadows. She glided alluredly through the dimly lit space, her every movement captivating, like a seductive choreography that only she understood.

"Haaa~"

The room echoed with an unsettling silence, broken only by the soft whispers of fabric as the figures gently swayed above her.

Approaching the suspended forms, her slender fingers gracefully caressed their 'lifeless' skin.

"I wish you could last a little more."

The red glow reflected off her dark, long hair, casting an ethereal halo around her pale face. The curves of her body, alluring and mysterious, were revealed in fleeting moments of illumination.

Suddenly, a flash of lightning cut through the darkness as if nature itself sought to unveil the secrets concealed within the red-lit room.

—RUMBLE!

The room lit up, exposing the figure's features in stark detail. Her long, dark locks cascaded down her shoulders, framing a face that bore an otherworldly allure. Pale skin that wasn't covered even the slightest bit of fabric seemed to absorb the crimson glow, making her appear both enchanting and unnerving,

Suddenly, the figure's eyes opened wide as she looked into the lighting and storm flashing in the sky.

"Belthazor is dead."

She mumbled.

"To think my pathetic brother died just like that...." as she licked her lips, her fingers moved, slowly caressing the neck of the 'young man' whose arms were tied.

"I wonder who it is....."

CLENCH!

Following that, she grabbed the man by his neck and forcefully brought his lips closer.

Chapter 299 Chapter 70.4 - Award Ceremony [Interlude]

As the haunting echoes of the men whose souls had no longer belonged to themselves sounded in her head, the woman on the throne continued to indulge in the intoxicating dance of her thoughts. The crimson liquid within the glass mirrored the storm outside, its deep hue reflecting the complexity of her emotions.

Leaning back against the ominous throne, the woman's eyes, like shards of wine, gazed into the abyss of her memories. The dance of shadows, once confined to the red-lit room, now wove itself into the fabric of her contemplation. The enigma of her past unfolded like a dark novel, each chapter revealing a layer of her mysterious existence.

"It had been a while since I felt like this," she mused her voice a sultry whisper that resonated with the echoes of the shadows. Her fingers traced patterns on the surface of the wine-filled chalice, a silent acknowledgment of the power she derived from the intoxicating concoction.

With a languid swirl of her glass, she brought the crimson liquid to her lips, savoring the rich taste as though it held the essence of her own power. The room seemed to quiver with her every movement as if it, too, succumbed to the enchantment she exuded.

"I can't help it, though," she confessed, her gaze fixed on the depths of the wine. The allure of the liquid seemed to amplify the haunting whispers in her mind, a symphony of voices that spoke of ancient grudges and long-forgotten vendettas.

Her movements continued, a seamless ballet of allure, as she crossed her long, white legs. The shadows danced in homage to her, the very air bowing to the presence of the queen who held court over her own kingdom of shadows.

Leaning forward, she peered into the crimson depths of the wine, her reflection distorted by the shifting liquid. A wicked smile played upon her lips as she mumbled to herself about the demise of her foolish brother, someone she hadn't seen in a hundred years.

"Foolish Belthazor," she murmured, her words caressing the air like a forbidden incantation. "To think you met your end in such a mundane way. A hundred years of absence, and this is the fate you chose."

Her eyes, twin pools of darkness, remained fixed on her reflection, the storm outside reflecting in the depths of the red wine.

"Yet, no matter how foolish you are, you are my brother at the end. Your end should have never happened this fast."

As she uttered those words, she slowly raised her hand, fingers adorned with long, claw-like nails that gleamed in the ambient light. With a languid grace, she admired her own beauty, the power she exuded palpable in the very air around her.

'Should I check the strings of fate?'

Closing her eyes momentarily, she began to delve into the depths of her ancient powers. The room seemed to respond to her call, and shadows gathered, shrouding everything in darkness. A pregnant pause filled the air, a prelude to the unfolding mysteries that lay beneath the surface.

–FOOSH!

Suddenly, the room transformed. A dense red fog, thick and ethereal, enveloped the space, obscuring the throne, the wine, and the haunting shadows.

It was within this crimson mist that the woman could discern two silhouettes engaged in a fierce battle.

One figure soared through the air with wings outstretched, an ethereal presence illuminated by the faint glow of the moon.

The other, grounded and resolute, faced the airborne assailant with countless different weapons.

'Ho? Would you look at that? He really was awakened secretly.'

She thought as the battle unfolded in the surreal haze. The one soaring with wings was Belthazor, her foolish brother, as most of the time, her kin was represented in such a way in mysticism.

'But, who is this?'

That meant the figure on the ground was the mysterious assailant, the one responsible for his untimely demise.

Her eyes widened as the moonlight seemed to shine upon the figure suddenly!

'Moon....?'

The moon could represent many things in her visions as she used to use her ability more frequently, yet this was the first time she had seen the moonlight directly shining upon someone. Most of the time, the moonlight would just appear in the background with different colors as if to symbolize some sort of ritual.

Either it was red, silver, blue, or many others. The red moon symbolized vampires; silver blood symbolized werewolves; the blue moon symbolized witches of blue fire and many others.

However, she stood in a very different phenomenon that she had never encountered.

'Colors of the moon are constantly changing.'

It was akin to showing that something was fundamentally different from what she had expected. One's race couldn't be changed in such a fast way, and it wasn't a shapeshifter in any case.

As the surreal battle unfolded before her, the woman watched with a keen interest, her mouth curling into a twisted smile.

"Hahaha...."

The crimson mist swirled with the chaotic energy of the conflict, and her laughter, low and haunting, echoed through the obscure space.

"Interesting....What is this, I wonder?"

Finally, she had found something intriguing, something that stirred the stagnant pool of her ancient existence. The unpredictable nature of the moon's glow upon the enigmatic figure intrigued her, and she reveled in the mystery that unfolded in the midst of the crimson fog.

—SLURP!

She licked her lips as she attempted to stand from her throne and got out. However, an invisible force, not comprehensible by the ordinary senses, held her back.

"Tch..."

She clicked her tongue in frustration, realizing the seal was still too strong, and she couldn't leave her place.

The laughter that had rung with amusement now took on a darker tone as her smile widened. Her eyes glinted with a malevolent gleam, and she mumbled to herself, "If I can't get out, perhaps I can bring him here."

She raised her hand, conjuring a sphere of red color around her, and following that, she saw the face of someone in the sphere.

It was a woman, her subordinate.

"Zafira," she whispered, the name rolling off her tongue like a sultry incantation. The sphere glowed with an otherworldly light as the face of the succubus materialized within it.

The night was draped in darkness, the only illumination coming from the faint glow of the moon and the distant shimmering stars.

"Maaan....This is the life...."

A man in his late thirties drove down the winding road in his sleek, expensive car.

–WROOM!

The engine's purr resonated in the quiet night, echoing through the empty spaces between the trees that lined the desolate highway.

His mood was buoyant, fueled by the recent success of his dubious endeavors. The man possessed a unique trait after awakening, [Deceit] – a mastery of persuasion that allowed him to manipulate the unsuspecting.

"Those old dogs must be dreaming about the 'imaginary free' money they would be receiving tonight."

He had recently swindled a considerable amount of money from a group of naive elderly individuals who had fallen prey to his silver tongue.

"Ahahahaahah....I love how stupid the humans are...."

With a triumphant grin, he reached for a can of beer in the cup holder, the cold metal sending a shiver down his spine.

Popping it open, he took a triumphant gulp, the fizzy liquid adding to the euphoria of his ill-gotten gains. The car's interior was dimly lit by the soft glow of the dashboard, casting a subtle gleam on his satisfied expression.

As he continued to revel in his victory, his eyes expertly scanning the surroundings for potential pleasures, he suddenly noticed a silhouette on the corner of the road.

Despite the darkness, his eyes, already expert at finding beautiful women, instantly recognized the shape of a woman with a captivating figure. When he was young, he never missed whomever he pursued.

His foot eased off the gas pedal, and the car coasted to a slower pace. Intrigued, he squinted into the night, trying to discern the details of the mysterious woman on the roadside, then saw the probably most beautiful face he had ever seen before.

A cascade of raven-black hair framed a face so flawless it seemed sculpted by the divine. The moonlight played upon her features, enhancing the allure of her captivating gaze and delicate features.

A slender figure stood there, bathed in an ethereal glow, as if she were a specter woven into the fabric of the night.

Snapping out of his stupor, the man quickly rolled down his car window and called out to the mysterious woman. "Hey! What are you doing out here on such a cold night?"

'I can't miss such an opportunity.'

The woman turned towards him, her eyes meeting his with an enigmatic gleam. "My car broke down, and I was hoping to find someone kind enough to offer assistance."

A sly grin stretched across the man's face as he heard her words. "Well, it seems fate has brought me here just in time. I can't resist the call of destiny, can you?" He chuckled, the arrogance in his voice veiled by a charming tone.

The woman's lips curled into a subtle smile. "Perhaps it has," she replied, her voice soft and melodic.

Without missing a beat, the man extended an invitation. "How about I give you a ride? I'm sure we can sort out your car troubles together."

She considered his offer for a moment, her gaze piercing through the darkness. "That would be most gracious of you," she finally said, her tone carrying a hint of 'gratitude.'

The man unlocked the car doors, and she gracefully slid into the passenger seat. As the sleek vehicle pulled back onto the road, the air inside the car seemed to hum.

The man couldn't resist the opportunity to fill the silence, and he began chatting flirtatiously with the mysterious woman beside him.

"So, what brings you out on a night like this?" he inquired, his eyes occasionally darting away from the road to appraise her beauty.

She responded with a measured tone, "Just a stroke of misfortune with my car. But fate has a funny way of bringing people together, doesn't it?"

He chuckled, taking a moment to ogle at her as they idled at the traffic lights. His eyes lingered over her figure, appreciating every curve as if they were a masterpiece. The woman's expression remained composed, and she seemed unfazed by his invasive gaze.

The man, now growing bolder, asked, "A woman like you must be afraid of men at night, right? There are so many predators out there."

Her gaze shifted towards him, and she asked, "Are you one of them?"

The question caught him off guard, but he smirked and replied, "What would you do if I were?"

Her lips curved into a mysterious smile. "This," she said, and with a flick of her fingers, two small droplets of blood flew from her fingertips, penetrating the air.

Before the man could react, the droplets struck him square in the face, the warm liquid stinging his eyes. He instinctively clutched his face, the pain and surprise evident in his muffled exclamations.

"Your insolent eyes savored my body quite a long while."

And the last voice he had heard was the cold voice filled with arrogance, as he experienced the most painful moments of his life....

"Haaaah....This is it..."

Just as the woman was reveling by herself, suddenly she heard a voice in her head.

?Zafira?

An ethereal voice that she hadn't heard in a long while.

'Lady?'

?It seems you haven't forgotten about me.?

'How dare I forget about you, my lady?'

?Cease your pleasantries. I have a mission for you.?

'A mission.'

?Belthazor is dead. The one responsible must be found and brought to me.?

The news echoed through her consciousness, and the woman's eyes gleamed with a newfound intensity. The voice continued, entrusting Zafira with a mission – to find the killer of Belthazor and bring 'him' to her.

Zafira's lips curled into a confident smile. "I shall fulfill this mission, my Lady. The perpetrator will be brought before you."

Chapter 300 Chapter 71.1 - Approaching Event

After returning to the academy, we were contacted by the government, a simple reward for the things that happened in the Phantom's Land.

That was in the range of expectations. After confirming that their findings matched with what we had described, things would operate smoothly.

At that time, I had already instructed Irina to leave many fire marks on the ground to show that she was the one who clashed with the demon. Though there were some Awakened with wide abilities regarding time and investigations that could reconstruct the scene normally, Belthazor's unique space manipulation made it impossible.

Most of the time, when one defeats any type of Awakened or monster with specific qualities, the defeated Awakened would leave a small phenomenon regarding their abilities.

For instance, if I were to kill Irina, she would most likely explode. For Belthazor, he created a small space ripple around the place, disturbing the magical spells and traits.

That was the reason why the investigation team sent by the government was most likely unable to reconstruct.

In any case, after we got the reward, which for me was quite a lot of Valer, a hefty sum of fifty thousand, we returned to the academy.

'The academy had declared a three-day vacation.'

Since the events of the Phantom's Land also shook quite a lot of students as well as the personnel instructors, the academy decided to give students some time.

It made sense since I also felt quite disturbed after waking up.

'It all makes sense if we all lived a different life, yet it is also impossible to confirm.'

There were many pieces of information in my head, yet all of them were blurry and non-continuous. Thus, at the end of the day, I could only leave those thoughts to myself.

'Maybe after learning more about [Mind Magic] or, in other words, [Psychic] magic, then I can look for a spell to recover whatever happened there.'

Then, without any further thought, the place I needed to head was confirmed.

CREAK!

As I entered the library, the familiar scent of old books and some parchment surrounded me. The vast shelves filled with tomes and some hidden 'grimoires' were a testament to the accumulated knowledge within these hallowed walls.

'Hmm....There are still some students here...'

The atmosphere was tranquil, with only a few diligent students scattered around, engrossed in their studies.

I generally didn't visit the library in the morning hours since it was pretty crowded, and I was more focused on my physical training and improvements.

Though I could do the same today as well, I decided not to do so and take a break for my body to recover. It was my guess, but after the battle with Belthazor and absorbing some of its stats with [Vengeful Bane], I needed to give my body some time to adapt.

I made my way to the section dedicated to magic books, my eyes scanning the spines for anything related to mind magic. The titles ranged from the basics of telepathy to advanced topics on psychic manipulation. Finally, I spotted a rather modernly covered book titled <How to Unveil the Mysteries of the Mind: A Comprehensive Guide to Mind Magic.>

The cover gleamed with a sleek design, a departure from the ancient aesthetic of many other volumes in the library.

As I opened the book, I noticed the clean layout and organized structure. The author, a recently promoted Mage Scholar from the prestigious Valerian Magic University, had divided the content into chapters, making it accessible for beginners like me.

'A recently promoted Mage Scholar.'

On the way to return, I searched for some articles regarding the Disciple of Psychic Magic to see how developed it was or what it was used for.

And, just as I had initially assumed, most humans didn't possess skills or traits regarding psychic attributes. This was somehow explained in the [Awakened Distribution Theory], but it was still a theory and not a law that was confirmed.

However, those who rarely possessed Psychic attributed [Traits] were mostly deemed dangerous by the government since they tended to perform villainous acts.

As you know, trait development is directly related to the users understanding of the concept and how much they use their own traits to develop it.

To improve such traits, one generally needs to use them. For instance, if one possessed a unique trait named [Puppeteer], which is a type of Psychic Attribute, they needed to control other humans and beings to improve such traits, and this tended to be viewed as an evil act.

Therefore, it was very hard to find information on such traits. Of course, there are also many magical spells that are developed in the field of magic that anyone can use. However, these spells are also strictly regulated and very hard to master and use.

For instance, the spell Irina had used to enter my dream, 「Phantasmal Transfer」, a type of Psychic attribute spell. Though it is more of a low-level and simple magic, it is still quite effective.

Entering a person's dream and consciousness to explore their memories of the past or an important event could be utilized by many government officials to interrogate.

As those thoughts passed through my head, I started reading the book.

The first chapter was named Chapter 0, and it delved into the fundamental concepts of mind magic as well as psychology, introducing terminology and explaining the basics of how a mind works. Though it was very good for a person to achieve general knowledge before reading about the spells and magic part, I was already knowledgeable in such terms.

After all, all that education from Earth was still inside my head, as well as my own experiences.

'Still, let's see the opinions of a new graduate.'

There were some discrepancies in the development of psychology of this world compared to Earth, but I still decided to read the author's marks.

The author's commentary on general psychology was enlightening, offering a fresh perspective on familiar concepts. Their writing style was engaging, weaving together theory and practical application in a seamless narrative.

'Interesting. He is quite talented at analogies.'

As I read through the pages, I found myself nodding in agreement with the author's observations.

They touched upon topics such as cognitive processes, memory formation, and the subconscious mind, providing a holistic understanding of the human psyche.

'Manipulating Cognitive Process, huh? An interesting idea.'

There were also some small hints at the author's thoughts and how the future of the book would be designed.

'This guy possesses a trait related to Psychic attributes.'

The author's own experiences and insights added depth to the discussion, bridging the gap between theory and practice that couldn't be normally understood.

I could easily confirm it since with [Perceptive Insight], my speed of understanding the essence of any concept was a lot faster, and somehow, I could even grasp the the feeling of its intervention.

'Aspiring Assistant Professor Mitchell Brady, huh? I may pay him a visit in the future.'

Recording the name of the author in my head, I continued to read the book while studying it,

With each turn of the page, I felt a sense of familiarity and intrigue, eager to explore the depths of mind magic in the chapters to come.

The author's emphasis on foundational knowledge before delving into spells and incantations mirrored my own approach to learning, reinforcing the importance of understanding the fundamentals.

PUFF!

As I closed the book, the newfound knowledge about mind magic lingering in my thoughts, I decided to leave the serene atmosphere of the library.

'So, utilizing. Psychic Psions to somehow connect the Spiritual(Astral) projection of a person is a thing. Interesting.'

There were many concepts that needed to be practiced, yet for the first day, this amount was enough.

Just as I was leaving, suddenly, I felt a presence before me. No, the correct world would be the person before me suddenly tripped.

–THUD!

"Careful."

Instantly reaching out for the person's arm, I made her regain her balance, grabbing her from her right wrist.

"Ah...."

She gasped, turning her head to look at me. The bangs covered the student's head, and her posture was slouched.

'Lack of confidence. Bad posture, lack of physical activity.'

I met her gaze for a brief second, and in that moment, I sensed a hint of vulnerability.

However, as quickly as our eyes connected, she averted her gaze, unable to maintain eye contact. She held a stack of books tightly against her chest, and her gratitude was expressed with a soft "Thank you."

It was clear she struggled with social interactions, and the brief encounter left an impression. As she mumbled her thanks, she walked past me, yet my eyes didn't miss the lack of synched movements of her right leg and left one.

'Injured left ankle and damaged glutes. I guess she is still being bullied.'

I thought, remembering that evening. People didn't change in such a short amount of time, and what Ethan did wasn't necessarily a good thing for the victim either.

Rather than giving hungry people a caught fish, teaching them how to catch tended to work more.

'Well, this still is enough.'

After confirming that she still continued to come to the library, I slowly reached the door.

CREAK!

The heavy wooden door creaked as I exited, and the scent of old books slowly faded behind me.

The evening sun painted the academy grounds with warm hues as I strolled along the cobblestone paths. Students were scattered across the campus, enjoying the unexpected holiday. Laughter and chatter filled the air, creating a lively ambiance.

As I walked, I couldn't help but notice the benches were occupied by students engrossed in conversations; some engaged in animated discussions, while others simply enjoyed each other's company. The holiday spirit was palpable, and the usual seriousness of the academy seemed to have momentarily lifted.

I observed couples sitting close together, sharing stories and laughter. The atmosphere was so different from the usual intensity of training and studies.

'Still, being watched in such a situation certainly makes me unable to enjoy it.'

I couldn't help but shake my head inward as I made my way to my room.

—DING!

Just at that moment, the voice of my smartwatch ringing echoed in my head.

'Hmm?'

Looking at the notification, I saw it came from the [Horde].

[Horde: Sir, as per your request, we have been watching the movements of the Azure Guild and the events surrounding them. And we can confirm that Redcrushers are starting to move. The rest of the information is in the attachment.]

The moment I saw the message, I couldn't help but shake my head.

'I guess the time for Emily's Guild event is approaching. It is time to maximize my profits.'

With that thought, I started typing my reply.

[Sell the Shares I own in Azure Crest Guild to the possible investors, and then transfer the money into many different accounts to make it untraceable.]

With that instruction, I closed the smartwatch and returned to my room.

After all, just from investing in Emily's guild, I had made close to 1 Million Valer profit....