

H. Academy 321

Chapter 321 Chapter 76.2 - No title

<Monday Morning, Arcadia Hunter Academy>

—CLANK!

The room, whose sole purpose was to accommodate students engaging in a spar, was now filled with weapons clashing. It was still very early in the morning, even before the classes.

On the first day of the week and its first hours, it was expected that the training grounds would be deserted.

Yet there were two students who were doing different things from others.

—CLANK!

With each second passing, sparks continued to fly through the ceiling, two weapons clashing. One was two short blades coated with a red aura, while the other one was a long stick with a metal head coated with a yellowish aura.

SWOOSH!

The figures were blurry, as it was very hard for any normal onlooker to clearly see what was happening there. But the constant sounds of weapons clashing made it evident that there was an intense clash going on there.

—CLANK! CLANK! CLANK!

The spear rapidly pierced through its opponent, the yellowish aura flashing in rapid succession.

Yet, the daggers, now turning the aura of colors to gray, also rapidly intercepted its path, clearly not letting the spear do as it wished.

For a split second, the fight seemed to enter a stalemate as the two figures stopped moving. There revealed a blue-haired young boy holding a spear, his eyes focused yet his face with a smile.

"HA!"

He gathered his breath and, with a shout of spirit, converged his aura right on top of the spear, swirling like a hurricane.

「Spear of Hartley. Extension」

The swirl of energy shot forward in an attempt to take down its target.

—SWOOSH!

Yet, before the energy could hit the target, the young boy's purple eyes flashed for a second. Shadows swirled around his feet, channeling energy. In an instant, he disappeared, flashing away.

The swirl of energy was missed, reaching out to the wall and getting nullified by the formations surrounding the training grounds.

"Here I come!"

However, contrary to how his attack was missed, the spear-holder didn't even seem to be flustered, as if he had already expected this to happen.

Utilizing his superior stats and his talent at controlling mana, he appeared right before the purple-eyed boy, his spear already targeting his shoulders.

"Tch."

The purple-eyed boy clicked his tongue in annoyance, seeing his opponent not giving up the pursuit. Since he was in the process of evading the attack, it was hard for him to move normally.

The purple-eyed boy, realizing he was in a tight spot after narrowly evading the spear attack, relied on his agility and close combat training.

–THUD!

With a swift, acrobatic movement, he dodged the spear's stab and kicked the spearhead upwards, creating an opening.

Seizing the opportunity, he quickly grabbed a dagger from his belt and hurled it towards the spear user, aiming to exploit the moment of weakness.

However, the spear user, with his fast reflexes and strong physique, anticipated the incoming attack.

"This....I can't use my spear fast enough."

Realizing he wouldn't be able to retrieve his spear in time, he made a split-second decision. He freed his second hand from the spear and channeled mana into it, forming a protective barrier.

CLANK!

As the dagger hurtled towards him, he intercepted it with his bare hands, the mana coating acting as a shield against the blade. The dagger clinked harmlessly against his hand, deflecting off to the side.

"Huh?"

Yet, just as he thought the attack was over, his vision, as well as his senses, grasped an incoming projectile. Before his eyes stood something; he could feel the mana swirling around that very thing.

"Magic?"

–THUD!

Before he could even question just when he conjured the magic and fired it, his forehead echoed with pain, his posture shaking. Though the attack lacked the necessary strength to deal a serious

injury to him, let alone fatal, the precise location of the attack messed with his eye nerves, blurring his vision.

–SWOOSH!

Following that, as his vision cleared, he saw a silhouette appearing right before his face and felt the cold blade on his neck. He heard rough breathing from the person before him while he himself remained untired. The boy's hoarse voice broke the silence, "It is over," he declared, his cold purple eyes showing no emotion.

Realizing the seriousness of the situation, the spear user smiled while raising his hands in surrender. "Yeah, I lost," he admitted defeat. "You really are clever when it comes to fighting, Astron."

Hearing him speaking like that, Astron looked into his eyes, opening his mouth. "Not everyone is blessed with overwhelming talent like you, Ethan 'Hartley.'" He spoke while emphasizing the word Hartley, his hoarse voice slowly returning to normal.

It seemed he was slowly recovering his energy.

".....Right...." Ethan didn't deny it; instead, he lowered his head, looking at the traces of fighting around the training room.

There was a lot of leftover mana on the formations and the walls that were slowly repairing themselves—some cracks on the ground as well as cuts on both of their clothes.

'To think I wasn't able to land a decisive blow on him....Though I didn't go all out for the sake of training, considering my stats and my prowess, I thought I would win this spar at the end.'

He thought to himself, looking at the purple-eyed boy floating the dagger he had just thrown.

'He had even managed to master some magical spells....He really is an all-rounder type...'

The guy named Astron was an enigma to Ethan. He couldn't understand him, no matter how hard he tried. He didn't know what he wanted or what kind of person he was. He knew he was talented at using daggers and bows and fighting in close combat. Adding magic to that, he somehow became very unique.

'Yet, it feels like his stats can match mine.....how is it possible? Is he also in the range of mid-rank-5? Even with my newly risen stats, I couldn't overpower him clearly. Maybe it is his way of fighting? Hmm

He threw a quick look at the status window appearing at the corner of his eyes.

?Name: Ethan Hartley

?Occupation: Spearman (Level 5)

?Talent Limit: ?????

?Passives:

-?????'s Might

?Attributes:

-Variable Attributes:

Strength: 5.69

Dexterity: 4.42

Agility: 4.60

Constitution: 5.92

Intuition: 4.65

Magical Power: 3.9

Mana Capacity: 4.5

-Invariable Attributes

·Might: 9

·Charisma: 10

·Vitality: 10

·Will: 16

Looking at the stat, he couldn't help but think that Astron wouldn't be able to come close to his stats, knowing that he had a cheat in terms of raw physical power.

Reflecting on his past spars with Astron, Ethan's mind wandered back to their earlier encounters when they first began training together at Arcadia Hunter Academy.

He recalled their initial spars, where they fought without weapons, relying solely on hand-to-hand combat and martial arts techniques. Despite Ethan's superior strength and physique, Astron proved to be a formidable opponent, using his agility and quick reflexes to evade Ethan's attacks and counter with precision strikes.

Then, as they progressed to sparring with weapons, Astron's fighting style became even more apparent. He would wait for Ethan to make a move, observing his opponent's actions and patiently biding his time.

And when the opportunity presented itself, he would strike with calculated precision, exploiting even the slightest opening in Ethan's defense.

It was as if Astron had a sixth sense for identifying his opponent's weaknesses and vulnerabilities, allowing him to adapt his strategy accordingly.

'Yeah...It must be his eyes that are special...At first, I thought he was someone like me, but that may not be necessarily true...He is somehow different...While I improve constantly in fights, thanks to my traits, I still maintain my core identity as Hartley. But he is like water, slipping into every different bottle, taking different shapes.'

Ethan realized that Astron wasn't just fighting against him; he was fighting against his own limitations, using his opponent's strength against them.

'Certainly...I could see that....'

As Ethan pondered over their past encounters, a newfound respect began to bloom within him for Astron's cunning and tactical prowess.

Despite his initial frustration at being unable to defeat him in combat, Ethan now understood that Astron's strength lay not in brute force but in his ability to outmaneuver and outsmart his opponents.

"He's always fought against people stronger than him," Ethan mused to himself, a sense of admiration creeping into his thoughts. "And yet, he never backs down. He always finds a way to turn the tide in his favor, no matter the odds."

With a newfound appreciation for Astron's unique fighting style, Ethan made a silent vow to continue sparring with him.

"I can hear you."

As Ethan heard Astron's irritated response, he couldn't help but chuckle, a sense of familiarity washing over him. Despite everything that was happening around them, Astron remained steadfast in his demeanor, unwavering in his attitude.

"Right," Ethan replied, his smile widening as he looked at Astron. "I forgot you were always so perceptive, being an archer."

Astron raised an eyebrow in response, his expression unreadable as he listened to Ethan's words.

"Being an archer is irrelevant," Astron continued, his tone serious. "All Awakened people have strong senses. You should get rid of this speaking habit of yours."

Ethan nodded in acknowledgment, his amusement still lingering as he considered Astron's advice. Despite the seriousness of their conversation, Ethan couldn't help but feel a sense of comfort in Astron's presence.

Recently, the world around him was changing, and Ethan could feel it. He was getting stronger and stronger with each day, climbing the ranks. He also found himself in a lot of different situations, from Emily to Lucas and then to Jane.

People were changing, and he was having a slightly hard time adapting to it. Yet, seeing Astron the same as ever, he somehow liked this.

'Yeah, from time to time, I should meet him.'

"I will pay attention to it," Ethan assured him, his smile softening.

"You better."

With that, Ethan made a silent vow to himself to heed Astron's advice and become more mindful of his words in the future. But for now, he wanted to enjoy the moment of camaraderie between them.

"Hey, Astron," Ethan began, his tone light and casual. "How about we grab breakfast together?"

Before Astron could refuse, Ethan added with a grin, "It is my treat. Consider it a token of my appreciation for all those times you've outsmarted me in sparring. I learned a lot from this sparring."

Seeing Ethan looking at him with earnest eyes, Astron didn't refuse the offer of treatment. He didn't have any plans after this training either, or he had already exerted himself enough for the day before the assignment. Thus, it was a good time for a free meal.

After a brief pause, he nodded in acquiescence, a faint hint of satisfaction dancing in his purple eyes.

"Sure, why not," Astron replied, his voice calm and composed. "I could use a decent meal after all that sparring."

With their plans set, Ethan and Astron finished their training session and made their way towards the showers.

The training grounds were gradually emptied out already as the other diligent students also concluded their morning routines, leaving the two of them with a sense of tranquility amidst the bustling academy.

After a refreshing shower and a change of clothes, Ethan and Astron emerged from the training grounds, ready to head to the dining hall for breakfast. As they walked side by side, their footsteps echoing in the quiet dawn, Ethan shuddered for a second.

'What?'

Turning his eyes, there he saw a group of eyes looking at him as if they could strip him at any moment.

'Ah....'

Realizing the source of the gazes, he couldn't help but get embarrassed a little, though this wasn't the first time he was getting such attention from girls, especially since this was more severe after the changes he could feel in himself, awakening that passive [?????'s might].

Yet, seeing Astron undisturbed, he followed him, attempting to chat....

Chapter 322 76.3 - No title

"Guys, did you see the new boys ranking?"

Irina, who was just about to pass through the group of girls, stopped her tracks after hearing these words.

As for why she did it, she didn't know the answer to that question. However, the feeling of intrigue in her heart somehow seemingly took control of her body for a while. She 'slightly' pricked her ears, listening to the conversation with her amplified senses.

Hearing their friend's words, the other girls' eyes seemed to shine with excitement. "I did! And guess what? Victor is still holding the top spot," one of the girls exclaimed enthusiastically. "He's just so dreamy, isn't he? I can't believe there is someone like that in this world! Just him existing alone makes the world shine brighter." Her eyes were sparkling as she somehow held a dreamy look.

"You are crazy, Thea."

"I am perfectly normal. He is just that amazing," Thea insisted, her eyes still gleaming with admiration for Victor. The others laughed at her antics, seeming accustomed to her infatuation with the top-ranked boy.

Hearing the girls, Irina somehow looked bewildered. 'You don't even know him. How can you fawn over him this much? This is crazy....' She thought inwardly. She had known Victor from her childhood, meeting him a lot of times.

They had trained together, went out to many banquets, etc. In a way, she could be very well considered someone who knew Victor the most in this academy with their friend group since Blackthorns weren't someone to socialize with normal people too much.

Thus, it was evident to her that this girl didn't know what kind of person Victor was, and neither did she know that he liked Julia.

"He may be amazing, but don't you think you're exaggerating a bit?" one of the other girls, Lilly, teased, though there was a hint of amusement in her voice.

"I don't think so. He's like a prince charming straight out of a fairy tale," another girl, Ria, chimed in, nodding fervently.

"He's got the looks, the talent, and the background. It's no wonder he's always on top."

"Yep. Anyone other than him won't satisfy me." Thea said, raising her head haughtily, showing her figure.

'Then you will be single until you die.' Irina thought as she knew Victor wasn't interested in anyone other than Julia. Also, being from a very high-ranking family like Victor's, she was very well aware of the fact that this girl didn't have the necessary qualifications to be with Victor or someone of his caliber since if she had, Irina would have known her way long ago.

The conversation shifted, and Irina listened intently as the girls discussed the significance of the new boys ranking.

"It's not just about Victor, though. This time, the rising stars are really catching everyone's attention."

"Yeah, I heard there are a couple of new entries that are causing quite a stir. It's going to be interesting to see how things shake up."

At this point in the moment, Irina's interest was piqued by the gossip and the conversation. It was like watching a theater play unfolding before her eyes, as the girls' reaction was somehow making her feel funny.

And as she was into the gossip, she also started wondering about who the new rising stars could possibly be.

'It will be Ethan, won't it?'

Though she wasn't engrossed in such topics in general, she could see the name that was going to appear now.

Just then, as if to prove her right, Ria's eyes seemed to light up with excitement as she leaned in closer to the group. "You guys know Ethan, right? He is the new campus prince."

The other girls nodded eagerly, indicating their familiarity with the name. Ethan had quickly become a prominent figure among the freshmen, his name on everyone's lips.

Lilly chimed in with her expression contemplative. "Yeah, we all heard of him. The way he jumped more than a thousand ranks in just half a semester was really eye-catching. But I guess, being a Hartley, it makes sense."

Ria nodded in agreement, her eyes reflecting admiration as she continued, "And he's not just talented; he's handsome too. But what makes him truly stand out is none of those. It's that he's so gentle and polite, not like those arrogant boys who think they own the world."

Her voice softened with reminiscence as she shared a personal anecdote, "I'm in the same class as him, and I once dropped my pen during a lecture. Without hesitation, Ethan picked it up and handed it to me with a smile. It's the little things like that which really show his character."

"And it's not just that one instance," she went on, her expression earnest. "He's helped many people during the Phantom's Land incident and in dungeon explorations as well. He's always willing to lend a hand, no matter the situation. These are the things that show the character of a man; it is not the looks and background that is always important."

'Indeed....Ethan is like that.' Irina felt proud of her friend, as Ethan was now getting the recognition he deserved. Out of all the people she knew, Ethan and Sylvie were probably the purest ones, with the former being more idealistic and the latter being just naïve.

They scoffed at Ria's words, her expression skeptical. "Please, Victor is still better," she said dismissively.

But Ria wasn't about to let that comment slide. "Oh, come on, Thea. With the way Ethan is progressing now, it won't be long before he takes over that cold-prick Victor. People who have warm hearts deserve the world," she retorted passionately, her eyes flashing with determination.

But Thea also wasn't about to let Ria's praise for Ethan go unchallenged. "Please, Ria. No matter how much Ethan progresses, Victor will always be superior. He's a Blackthorn, after all. No one can compete with that."

A smug smile played on Thea's lips as she continued, her tone filled with confidence. "And just imagine Victor giving Ethan one of his cold looks while he steps on him... Kyaaa~" she added with a happy sigh, her expression dreamy as she imagined her beloved Victor asserting his dominance.

"You are just gone...." The others just couldn't help but facepalm. Their friend was crazier than they expected!"

"Oh, really? That stupid shit can only do things like that...After all, aren't Blackthorns known to be shady and vile? That Victor certainly suits that image." At this point, Ria just hates Victor for the sake of fanaticism.

'Why did Victor become the bad guy now? You guys are just too crazy. Just because you want to defend the person you admire, do you have to put others below? Where is the character you just mentioned? Is this how people think now?'

Somehow, to Irina, the comments that were coming to her now seemed a lot less angering. Seeing people like this, she now understood that most of the comments on there came from people like these, and she was the one who was stupid to get angered by those.

'So, this is what he meant by keyboard warriors. So, they are people like these in real life.'

Remembering the talk she had with Astron when she confronted him about the rumors, she now realized the shallowness of the general people's topics of talk.

—SILENCE!

Just at that moment, Irina felt like the noise disappeared.

As the girls fell silent and turned their attention elsewhere, Irina followed their gaze to the training grounds. There, she spotted two figures making their way out, and she recognized them immediately.

One of the boys had striking blue hair, slightly wavy and damp from what appeared to be a recent shower. Despite the chill in the air, he seemed unaffected, exuding an air of calm confidence. It was Ethan, unmistakably, with his warm smile and gentle demeanor, that seemed to light up the area around him.

Beside him walked another boy, his hair as dark as the night sky. He had an air of mystery about him; his posture, though seemed relaxed, was somehow commanding.

Even from this distance, Irina could see that Ethan was trying to strike up a conversation with him, constantly talking about something, and this put a smile on her face somehow. It was quite funny, as Ethan somehow looked like a bee flying around a flower.

The girls nodded their heads in agreement as they watched Ethan and Astron walk away. Lilly was the first to speak up, her eyes lingering on Ethan's figure. "Okay, he is definitely hot," she commented as if this was natural.

"Yeah....I somehow can understand...But Victor is still better." Thea said, but then she squinted her eyes, looking at the boy before Ethan. "Hmm....Who is he? He somehow feels familiar?"

Ria nodded in response to Thea's question, her gaze fixed on Astron's retreating figure. "That's Astron," she explained, her tone tinged with a hint of uncertainty. "He's our classmate, but he's a bit of an oddball among the students. Doesn't talk much, but when he does, he can be edgy and kind of rude, to be honest." She paused, furrowing her brow as if trying to recall something. "He was the one with the rumors, too. Some say he's got a shady past or something, but who knows? He keeps to himself most of the time."

Thea's expression shifted as she recalled something, her eyes widening slightly with realization. "Oh, right! I remember now," she said, nodding to herself. "He's also one of those rising boys, isn't he? Advanced quite a lot in the mid-terms, and with those good looks and that aloof demeanor of his, he's been turning heads lately." Though she said those, she didn't seem to be much impressed.

'Hmm....he is becoming a more hot-topic? Heh...This is what you get for doing this to me....You think you can fool everyone easily like that; look how things are not going the way you want.'

She thought, remembering how she needed to deal with the aftermath of that time because of his request. Somehow, she seemed to ignore that she got something she wanted out of that deal, but this and that were different.

"Hmm...he is quite my type, though," Lilly said, a mischievous grin playing on her lips, seizing him from top to bottom. Then, she continued, licking her lips suggestively. "I don't know about gentleness or whatever, but he can make me forget about all my worries," Lilly added with a suggestive wink, her tone laced with innuendo. "I wouldn't mind getting lost in those dark eyes of his for a while if you know what I mean."

—CREAK!

As Lilly's suggestive comment hung in the air, the group suddenly heard a creaking sound nearby, as if something was being crushed. Their conversation halted abruptly as they turned to see the source of the noise, only to find a girl with fiery red hair glaring at them with an annoyed expression. A palpable aura of intensity surrounded her, sending chills down their spines.

'Irina Emberheart!'

All had the same thought in their heads, voicing the girl's name in their minds.

"Tch."

Before any of them could utter a word, the girl stormed past them, her gaze fixed ahead as she hurried in the direction Ethan and Astron had gone.

"Huh?"

As the girl stormed past them, a sudden wave of heat washed over Lily, causing the hem of her clothes to burst into flames.

"Fire!"

Shocked and startled, she let out a yelp of surprise, frantically patting at the flames in a panic.

The other girls gasped in horror, watching as Lily's clothes smoldered and the fire quickly spread. It was clear that this was no ordinary accident; it seemed like a petty act of revenge orchestrated by the fiery-haired girl they had just encountered.

"Noo.....My clothes...."

It was a good lesson....At least, Irina felt like that.

Chapter 323 76.4 - No title

After they left the training grounds, Ethan led Astron to their destination. After walking for a little while, they reached the place.

Outside, the restaurant stood nestled amidst a cluster of trees, its rustic wooden facade blending seamlessly with the natural surroundings at the edge of the Academy Forest.

A quaint sign hung above the entrance, bearing the name of the establishment in elegant script.

[Whispering Oaks]

Soft lanterns adorned the exterior, casting a warm glow that illuminated the path leading up to the entrance.

DING!

The door opened, with the bell ringing. As Ethan and Astron entered the restaurant, they were greeted by the tantalizing aroma of freshly cooked food and the gentle hum of slow music.

Unlike the opulent establishment they had visited before, this restaurant had a more laid-back atmosphere, with wooden tables and chairs arranged in a cozy arrangement.

'Yeah....This place never disappoints....'

Taking in the sights and sounds around them, Ethan couldn't help but feel a sense of familiarity wash over him. He had frequented this restaurant numerous times in the past, often grabbing a quick meal between training sessions or classes.

Turning to Astron, Ethan raised an eyebrow in curiosity. "Have you ever been here before?" he asked, gesturing to their surroundings.

Astron shook his head, his expression neutral. "No, I haven't," he replied simply.

Ethan's mouth fell open in surprise. "Really? You've never been here?" he exclaimed, unable to hide his astonishment.

This place might seem like it was now deserted, but the time was not normal to begin with. After all, it was still early in the morning, and many students skipped breakfast to make it to the morning lessons, let alone come into such a place.

But that didn't mean this was the case normally. When it was noon or slightly late evening, this place would be filled with students.

Astron nodded in confirmation. "I didn't even know this place existed," he admitted, his tone matter-of-fact.

'There wasn't a place like this in the game.'

Most of his knowledge of the academy, in fact, stemmed from the game, as he never intended to explore the campus. For him, things like these were a waste of time, after all, as he would rather train or do something else in that said time. He knew where the important locations for his goal were, but aside from that, he wasn't interested in anything else.

Ethan couldn't help but chuckle at Astron's response, finding it amusing that someone as observant and perceptive as him could overlook such a prominent location on campus.

"Well, consider this your lucky day then," Ethan said with a grin, leading the way to an empty table. "I'll show you the ropes and introduce you to some of the best dishes on the menu."

"What makes you think that I trust your judgment?" he asked, his tone neutral.

Ethan's expression turned deadpan, caught off guard by the question. He wasn't even expecting such a response from Astron. "Well, I, uh... I guess I assumed," Ethan stuttered, trying to come up with a suitable reply.

Astron simply nodded in response before saying, "I'll choose my own food."

With that settled, Astron took a seat by the window, his gaze fixed on the forest outside.

"Hahaha...."

Ethan followed Astron's movements, but before he could speak, a familiar chuckle caught his attention.

Turning his head towards the entrance, Ethan's eyes widened in surprise as he spotted his fiery-haired friend, Irina, standing at the door.

Ethan's surprise was evident as he watched Irina enter the restaurant, a warm smile spreading across his face. "Irina! What are you doing here?" he exclaimed, waving her over to their table.

Irina's cheeks flushed slightly as she remembered just what happened before coming here. The words spoken by that girl, Lillick or whatever, somehow sounded more embarrassing than annoying now.

She made her way over to them, her gaze momentarily flickering away before meeting with his classic look.

"Oh, uh... I just happened to be passing by," she replied, her tone casual as she tried to brush off any suspicion.

"Passing by? In the middle of the forest?" Astron was the one to open his mouth as he seized her up. "Your clothes, your sweat, and the size of your irises don't say so." His demeanor was calm and aloof, yet for Irina, it felt like he knew what she was doing.

'Tch....That's why dealing with this bastard is tiring.'

Sometimes, his quick way of grasping things was certainly helpful, especially if it was directed at something she was searching for as well, but if she was at the receiving end, it was annoying and troublesome to deal with.

Irina released a slight sigh, feeling a twinge of annoyance at Astron's perceptiveness. "Well, I couldn't sleep, so I decided to go for a run to clear my head," she explained, her tone genuine. "And when I was running, I happened to see you two and thought I'd tag along."

Astron nodded, seemingly satisfied with her explanation, but Irina could tell he wasn't entirely convinced as his eyes continued to seize her up, focusing on her facial expressions. His calm demeanor only added to her frustration.

Ethan, on the other hand, looked genuinely curious. "But why didn't you come in sooner?" he asked, tilting his head slightly in confusion.

Irina shot him an annoyed look before replying, "Because you two were practically speed-walking! I couldn't catch up with you," she explained, her irritation evident in her tone. "It's like you were being chased by something."

Ethan's eyes widened in surprise. "That...."

'It might be because I felt uncomfortable at that time, yeah...That might have been the case.'

"Maybe I was walking a bit fast," he admitted sheepishly, scratching the back of his head.

Contemplating that, he threw a look at Astron.

Astron, classic the indifferent observer, simply shrugged in response. "After leaving, you suddenly sped up, and I just went with the flow," he remarked casually as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Ethan shook his head helplessly, chuckling at the realization. "Guess I got a bit carried away," he conceded with a grin.

Irina harrumphed in response, her irritation dissipating slightly as she found herself naturally gravitating towards Astron, taking a seat beside him.

While they perused the menu and placed their orders, Irina couldn't help but ask curiously, "What were you two doing out this early in the morning?"

Astron's reply was simple and to the point. "Training," he stated flatly. Irina, familiar with Astron's terse way of speaking, understood his implication.

"Sparring?" she inquired, raising an eyebrow.

Astron nodded in confirmation. "He offered," he added, his expression neutral. "No, rather he forced. This guy suddenly barged in, demanding a spar out of nowhere." He looked a bit annoyed, but Irina knew this was how he usually was.

Somehow, she could imagine Ethan doing that, remembering how it was while they were walking and Ethan trying to strike up a conversation.

She nodded knowingly, a small smile playing on her lips. "Sounds like something he learned from Julia," she remarked, remembering Ethan's past self and current one – his competitive streak and his tendency to challenge others to improve his skills.

Astron nodded in agreement. "Makes sense," he conceded with a shrug, his attention returning to the menu.

Somehow, Irina was curious about the spar, as she knew Astron rather disliked showing his skills in general. Even though she didn't know the extent of his abilities, at the same time, that was the case with Ethan as well.

If Astron was unfathomable because he was hiding himself, Ethan was incomprehensible because of his incredibly rapid pace of improvement. Thus, the outcome of the fight between these two individuals, who were somehow ranked higher than other people in her eyes, was important.

Irina leaned in slightly, her curiosity getting the better of her. "So, who won?" she asked, her eyes flickering between Ethan and Astron.

Astron turned his head to Irina, his expression saying it all – 'Isn't it obvious?' Irina couldn't help but grin mischievously. "Ah, so Ethan won," she stated confidently, already picturing the scene in her mind.

Astron simply shrugged his shoulders, his demeanor nonchalant. "You're free to think whatever you want," he replied.

"You're no fun."

Astron met her gaze with a deadpan expression. "Your sense of humor is just as bad," he retorted calmly, unfazed by her jest.

Irina couldn't resist the urge to pinch him in response, but Astron remained stoic and unaffected by her actions. She also knew he wouldn't say anything since he owed him quite a lot of favors, so she was doing this inherently.

Ethan watched the exchange between Irina and Astron with a mixture of amusement and slight envy. Their familiarity with each other was evident, and he couldn't help but feel like an outsider witnessing their interaction.

'These two....Somehow, they seem rather close...I had never seen Irina like this before.'

"You guys.....You look like a"

"Here, the food you ordered."

For a moment, he considered teasing them about seeming like a couple, but before he could utter a word, the waitress arrived with their food, effectively cutting him off.

With Irina's gaze now fixed on him, Ethan felt a sudden urge to keep quiet. He shrugged off the thought of making any comments and instead focused on his meal and conversation differently.....

Inside the buzzing classroom, the students sat on their seats, waiting for the instructor to show up.

"I wonder, what will today's assignment be? Any clues?"

"I don't know. In the mail, it was stated that this one wasn't going to include much combat but rather an observation, but man, Phantom's Land was supposed to be an observation assignment as well. Look what happened, though."

"You are right, but I think this time they will keep it more simple. My mother is a civil servant in the government, and she had already submitted a complaint."

—CREAK!

Just then, the atmosphere shifted as the door creaked open wide, drawing the attention of every student in the room. In walked the classic stern instructor, Eleanor, her presence commanding respect and silence.

The students fell silent as Eleanor scanned the room with her piercing gaze, seizing the attention of each individual.

"Good morning, cadets," she announced briskly, her tone leaving no room for chatter or hesitation.

Without wasting any time, Eleanor delved straight into the purpose of their gathering.

"Today's assignment will take us to the Mana Stone Mine operated by the Blackthorn Family," Eleanor began, her tone crisp and authoritative. "Our objective is twofold: first, to observe the mining operations firsthand, and second, to analyze the techniques and strategies employed by the miners in extracting mana stones from the earth."

She paused momentarily, allowing her words to sink in before continuing. "Each of you will be assigned a specific area of the mine to observe closely. Pay attention to the tools and equipment used, the methods of excavation, and any safety protocols in place. Your task is to gather detailed observations and insights into the process of mana stone extraction."

Eleanor's gaze swept across the room, ensuring that every student was attentive and focused. "Furthermore, be prepared to analyze the quality of the mana stones unearthed. Note any variations in size, color, or purity, and consider how these factors might impact their usefulness in magical applications."

"As always," she concluded, her voice unwavering, "accuracy and attention to detail are paramount. Your observations will form the basis of your evaluation for this assignment. Any questions?"

Her question hung in the air for a moment, but no one dared to speak up. Just as she was about to nod her head, she saw a hand raised.

It was Ethan.

"Instructor, will we enter the mine with our previous groups?"

Eleanor observed the raised hand of Ethan, a glimmer of approval shining in her eyes as she nodded in acknowledgment of his question.

"Yes, Ethan," she replied, her voice calm and measured. "You will indeed enter the mine in groups, but these groups will be different from those you've previously worked with on assignments. The reorganization is intended to encourage collaboration and teamwork among different cadets."

She paused briefly to allow her words to sink in before continuing. "The specific group assignments will be distributed to you before we enter the mine. Each group will be carefully selected to ensure a balance of skills and expertise."

Eleanor scanned the room, her gaze lingering for a moment on each student before moving on. "Are there any further questions?"

Silence greeted her inquiry, confirming that her instructions had been understood. With a decisive nod, she gestured for the cadets to prepare for departure.

"Very well. Make sure you have all the necessary equipment and supplies before we depart. We will reconvene outside to board the buses shortly."

With that, Eleanor turned on her heel and strode out of the classroom, her presence commanding respect and obedience as the students followed suit, their minds already turning to the task ahead.

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"It is breathtaking, isn't it? This is how we mine the Mana stones," the guide exclaimed, her voice echoing in the vast underground cavern illuminated by countless different lights.

Her clothes were formal, an attire belonging to someone with a higher ranking, as she was well-versed in her explanations and knowledge.

'Someone either from the HR team or from the management. Hmm....Her clothes are fresh, and she lacks the habits those who would venture to this place frequently have. So, she is either a new recruit or someone from the office part.'

The necessary information was missing to deduce the remaining part, but that wasn't important.

'Considering the amount of students that would come here, they can't employ a high-ranking member.'

This was, in fact, normal since around two hundred students were in this factory. Of course, with the number of students the academy had, different classes were scheduled to visit the factories on different days. And the Blackthorn's even let them use two factories.

'Must be an attempt to regain the public trust.'

Both Blackthorn's and the Arcadia Hunter Academy had their ups and downs; therefore, it was necessary for them to make up for those.

"Now, please follow me."

With her words, the group of students followed closely behind her, their eyes wide with wonder and anticipation.

"The entire process starts from the moment we identify a promising vein of Mana stones," the guide continued, gesturing towards a wall shimmering with faint magical energy. "To scout these precious stones, we employ a combination of traditional mining techniques and advanced magical artifacts crafted by our specially groomed mage-engineers."

She led us towards a cluster of miners who were diligently working with pickaxes and shovels. But alongside them stood mage-engineers, their intricate devices humming with magical energy as they scanned the walls for signs of Mana stones.

"These artifacts amplify our ability to detect Mana stones and pinpoint their exact locations within the rock," the guide explained, pointing to a device resembling a cross between a telescope and a compass. "With the help of these tools, we can ensure a more efficient extraction process while minimizing the risk to our miners."

In general, the students of the Arcadia Hunter Academy came from high-end families, but they all aspired to be Hunter and Combatant. Therefore, almost none of them knew how the process was in many factories.

"Wow....I never expected it to be like this."

"Indeed."

The artifacts that were used gathered the attention of the students as they were colorful and potent in mana. Being sensitive to mana, they could see what couldn't be seen with naked eyes, impressing them.

That was also the case with me, as I was, in fact, overwhelmed by the raw amounts of mana present here. Therefore, I even needed to deactivate [Perceptive Insight] to some extent. This was something I had been pondering about in the past, as there were times when one could see things they mustn't see with their current strength.

Therefore, I created a method in my subconscious utilizing basic psychic magic. In fact, it wasn't complex since I was just dealing with myself.

In any case, with my deactivated eyes, I observed the process.

As many students watched in fascination, the guide detailed the intricate process of extracting Mana stones from the earth.

From drilling and blasting to carefully extracting the stones without damaging their magical properties, every step was executed with precision and expertise, and the guide explained it well enough.

"Now, you will see our first contact with mana stones."

While walking, we approached a room where the temperature noticeably rose.

'So, they are sealing the mana there, utilizing the heat?' The mana may look like something outside of reality, but in this world, it is not. The rules of the universe were made according to it, though who knew who made those rules?

Just as we were about to enter, I sensed a sudden movement and instinctively tilted my head, narrowly dodging a small stone hurtling toward me.

With a quick turn, I locked eyes with a girl standing nearby, a mischievous grin on her face as she chewed gum with casual nonchalance.

"Hey there, low-rank," she greeted, her voice carrying an annoying tone. "Quick reflexes. Did you take notes? Are you keeping up with your duties?"

The girl before me was Taylor Bowman, one of my assigned partners for this excursion. She exuded an air of confidence and privilege, likely due to her high-ranking status as the 212th-ranked student and heir to a Media Tycoon.

She was quite a beauty, clearly above the standards. Her make-up and ornaments were all first-class — obviously, some of them being artifacts.

Of course, I had already made a quick background check for all the students in my classroom. The game may not have been mentioned, but there could be some demon contractors in there. However, I couldn't find any in our class, though it didn't matter much. My channels were a little narrow back then, with me lacking the money to buy the necessary information.

And this girl before me was someone who was in the upper ranks of the academy and class, and she was the highest rank in my group.

She seldom assigned me a role while she was lazily looking around. This was the common type of acting from these types of heiresses.

"No."

"What?"

Her mouth twitched, hearing my refusal. Just then, the guy beside her narrowed his eyes, asking me, "What did you say?"

The guy's name was Asher Valencia, ranked 1058.

"No," I repeated calmly, meeting Taylor's gaze squarely.

Her reaction was immediate. Taylor's eyebrows furrowed in annoyance, and her lips formed a thin line. Clearly, she wasn't accustomed to being defied, especially by someone she considered beneath her.

Next to her, Asher's glare intensified, his voice rising slightly as he spoke, "How dare you refuse what-"

He was already taking sides, clearly licking Taylor's boots. It was the normal choice, and I didn't reprimand him. In a world where powerful people stepped on others, making connections was important. After all, academy life was limited, and many had families outside the academy.

"It is okay." But Taylor stopped Asher while raising her hand. At this point, some of the onlooker's attention was on us. Thus, she made a quick judgment.

'At least she is not stupid...'

Even Eleanor had turned her gaze to us.

Choosing not to engage in a confrontation, she simply shrugged and started walking.

As Taylor started walking past me, her voice barely audible, she whispered, "If I were you, I'd be careful."

Her words sent a slight chill, showing her intent, but I maintained my outward composure since it wasn't the first time. It was a warning, subtle yet clear.

"Is this a threat?"

"You can take it as one."

"I see."

With that exchange hanging in the air, Taylor continued past me, her demeanor unchanged despite my question.

It was clear that she didn't feel the need to conceal her intentions; after all, in this world of power plays, subtlety often held little value.

I followed behind Taylor, keeping a careful distance, while Asher trailed close behind her, still shooting me disapproving glances.

It was evident whose side he had chosen, but it wouldn't bother me. In this cutthroat environment, alliances were fluid, and loyalties could shift in an instant.

As we entered the room, the temperature noticeably rose, the air thick with humidity, and the scent of magic lingered in the air.

"Now, as you can see....."

As Taylor walked through the room, her mind churned with frustration and indignation.

How dare he disrespect her like that? The nerve of that low-

ranking student to defy her authority in front of everyone.

She wore a smile on her face, but her eyes betrayed her true feelings, cold and calculating.

Seeing Taylor's expression, Asher sensed her displeasure and decided to intervene. "Should I deal with him?" he asked quietly, his voice laced with a hint of eagerness to please her. It was evident in her eyes, but she didn't mind.

In fact, she rather liked these types of guys, as they lowered their heads when it was needed.

She raised her eyebrows, considering her options. "What can you do?" she replied dismissively, her tone dripping with disdain.

A smile tugged at Asher's lips as he realized this was an opportunity to gain favor with Taylor.

Leaning in closer, he muttered his plan under his breath, his words barely audible over the ambient noise of the room.

"I see..." she mumbled and then nodded her head.

'Let's see how useful this bastard is.'

However, she also evaluated Asher inwardly.

As the tour of the room came to an end, the guide halted the group, announcing the conclusion of the three-hour excursion. The students murmured amongst themselves, exchanging whispers of excitement and curiosity.

Once the guide had their attention, she threw a quick glance at Eleanor, who nodded in response. With a confident demeanor, the guide posed a question to the students, her voice echoing in the cavernous space.

"Just as you have seen, we are using machines and artifacts for mining. But, how did the miners, before the machines were generalized, mine the stones?"

The question hung in the air, prompting the students to rack their brains for an answer. Some furrowed their brows in concentration while others exchanged uncertain glances.

Seeing no one stepping forward to answer, the guide cleared her throat and spoke up. "In the past, miners relied on their intuition of Mana to locate and extract the stones. It was a skill honed through years of experience and understanding of the natural flow of magical energy within the earth."

As her words settled over the group, Eleanor stepped forward, adding to the discussion. "Indeed, and now it's your turn to put your skills to the test. We'll be entering the tunnels shortly, where you'll have the opportunity to mine Magic Stones with your groups. This task will not only assess your mana sensitivity but also your creativity and intuition as aspiring Hunters."

With a nod from Eleanor, the guide led the way, guiding the students deeper into the labyrinthine tunnels of the mine.

"Really?"

However, someone was not happy with what he was seeing in front of his eyes, as the darkness prevailed and the tunnel was blocked.

"She really did this, didn't she?"

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"How was it?"

On the outside of the rubbles, slightly rising, Asher raised his head, looking at the heiress he was trying to impress.

"....."

Taylor watched the scene with her cold eyes without responding. Though inwardly, she was feeling satisfied.

As Asher awaited Taylor's response, a slight tension crept into his demeanor, his eagerness to please her mingling with uncertainty. Did she find his efforts lacking? Was there something she disliked about his actions?

Taylor observed Asher's subtle shift in posture, her cold eyes betraying no emotion outwardly. However, inwardly, she felt a sense of satisfaction. "This guy is not bad," she thought to herself, impressed by Asher's usefulness and his ability to assert their dominance over others like Astron.

'But, he is a bit of a chicken, and this is a lot better.' Sensing Asher's tension, Taylor couldn't help but feel a surge of power wash over her. She held the upper hand in these types of dynamics, able to influence his emotions with a mere glance or word, and she was addicted to it.

It had been like this from the start, in any case.

With a small chuckle, she decided to alleviate his anxiety.

"No, you did well," she said, her voice calm yet authoritative. "There's nothing to dislike."

Relief flooded over Asher as he heard Taylor's reassurance, his tense muscles relaxing as he realized he had succeeded in earning her approval.

'This crazy woman is like bipolar. I can't read her at all.' Grateful for her 'acknowledgment,' he nodded slightly, a sense of calm warming his heart. But then again, it was only temporary as he heard her following words.

"Now, enter there and mine me some stones."

As Asher looked at Taylor, he noticed a subtle grin playing on her lips as she spoke. Her words carried a hint of authority, an order disguised as a request. Top of FormIt was like she was saying, from now on, you will be in my command.

"I-"

Just as he was about to say something, Taylor threw another provocation his way. "I guess you can't do it," she remarked casually, her tone taunting. "I thought this trait of yours enabled you to interact with the earth to blast this tunnel?"

Her words hit Asher like a slap in the face, as she had implied that it was obvious who made this tunnel like this.

'Sigh....I underestimated this woman's craziness.' Sighing inwardly, he thought, shaking his head. And then he accepted his fate.....

"This tunnel is quite long."

I thought to myself, looking around. Now that I had been trapped in this place, I couldn't do anything other than walk deeper.

Of course, the situation I was in wasn't something grave. For miners, there is always the possibility of tunnels collapsing and them being trapped. Therefore, the academy had already given us the necessary tools to call them in case such a thing happened.

"Though it will affect our grades."

Calling the academy means that you are unable to solve your own problems as a Hunter, and this will result in a reduction of one's grades. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule, as there are some situations that are beyond the scope of a student.

It will also affect one's reputation. This was likely why Taylor had done such a thing, as she wanted me to get a negative grade on this assignment.

'Childish games.'

With that thought, I continued my walk, observing the cave. Finding magic stones is not that hard if you have the necessary features under you.

"Mana Observation is probably the most fundamental method to utilize."

Normally, [Mana Observation], which was one of the most important advanced techniques for a hunter, would be utilized here.

However, from the moment my [Perceptive Insight] had evolved and increased its rank, I no longer needed to use it. It was already engraved in my subconsciousness, my brain doing it on its own.

Though I needed a blocker for it, after closing the mental switch I had constructed in my head, the mana veins immediately became visible in front of my eyes.

"The color of the Magic Stones represents the attribute of psions stored, and the radiance of it represents the density. However, I need to learn something to classify the density of mana stones.

But I need to get more and more closer to it.' Magic stones are basically chunks of mana veins that have gathered around some point. They are also called 'Nodes,' which are the intersection points of those veins.

'It represents the human body. I wonder if this whole planet can be considered a living being with all these mana veins and magic Stones. With the existence of mana, maybe it even has its own will.' While observing, everything was fine, but the information was basically overwhelming. Seeing all these mana veins and trying to discern their intersection was too hard to continuously do that.

It was mentally taxing.

'This should be the reason why not many human detectors like me are not hired. We lack a machine's consistency.'

I could, of course, continue doing this, but at one point, both my mana and my mind were bound to be exhausted. That wouldn't be the case for the machines since as long as they had enough storage to keep data, they could move forward in a desired way.

Opening the switch once again, I limited my [Perceptive Insight] and then moved forward.

As I continued to walk deeper into the darkness of the tunnel, my senses attuned to the subtle fluctuations of mana around me.

The air grew thicker with each step, a tangible reminder of the vast network of mana veins that crisscrossed beneath the earth's surface.

'This should be enough.' Finally, I reached a point where the concentration of mana seemed to peak, indicating the presence of magic stones nearby.

I reached out with my hand, feeling the rough texture of the rock beneath my fingertips.

Closing my eyes, I closed the switch, allowing the intricate patterns of mana veins to reveal themselves to my mind's eye. In the darkness, the magic stones glowed faintly, their colors representing the attributes of psions stored within.

'I see...So these are water-magic stones.' Sensing the calmness of the water and its fluidity, I slowly counted the stones.

'There are five of them here. From its looks, all of them are around the level of low-grade Magic Stone.' Feeling the mana, I estimated its diameter to be around 15 centimeters. Using this measurement, I calculated its approximate volume using the formula for the volume of a sphere. Assuming the stone was spherical in shape, the volume came out to be approximately 3,530 cubic centimeters.

'Though it is a little bit bigger than that since it has intrusions around the surface. But, according to what she mentioned, the average density of Water Magic Stones is around 2.65 grams per cubic centimeter. Multiplying the volume by the density, it can be estimated the weight of the stone to be approximately 9,345 grams or 9.345 kilograms.'

From then on, it was in the common knowledge. One could sell magic stones in the market at a price of 1000-100.000, which was dependent on the density of the pieces stored inside.

This would determine the quality of the stone. The ones before me were low-quality; thus, I would probably get approximately 9000U for the biggest one.

'Well, since I have basically undetectable storage, why not grab some stones for myself?' After all, not every stone needed to be submitted to the academy....

'It will be a good way to train my mana control as well...'

With that, I started working.

In the dimly lit tunnel, the young man with a bulky build turned his head backward and asked. "What do you think? How long is it left?"

His voice was calm, but it was filled with authority. Behind him stood a girl. She had a slender figure, her short hair reaching only the end of her ears. Her eyes shone for a second as she observed the veins.

"I am sensing a good amount of Mana condensed around fifty meters. I think there are some mana stones there."

Her name was Becky, and she was an archer. Being in the role of scout in general, rangers tended to require strong senses. Though her rank wasn't that high, she at least trusted her senses enough.

"I see." Carl nodded and continued moving. However, Becky was somehow tense.

'Why am I in the same group as a ranker?'

She had been put into the same group as one of the strongest people in the academy as well as the heir of one of the heirs belonging to the Pentagon.

Also, it was the scariest of all of them since Carl had a bulky build and a serious face all the time.

"Don't get too tense; he is not that bad." At that moment, a voice came from her side. It was the remaining member of the group. His name was Martin Bryan. He was slightly on the lower-ranking side, but he was good at theory, which made his opinions valuable.

Becky glanced at him, her curiosity piqued by his cryptic words. "What do you mean?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Martin chuckled softly, a knowing smile playing on his lips. "Mister Carl just looks serious and stern from the outside. In fact, he has a warm heart, and he is a good person," he explained.

'Mister Carl?' Becky raised an eyebrow, sensing that Martin knew something more about Carl than he let on. "Why do you think so?" she inquired, her interest growing.

Martin's smile widened slightly as if reminiscing about something. "I once received his help," he replied simply.

Becky nodded, feeling a bit more at ease with Martin's words. She trusted his judgment, and if he believed that Carl was a good person, then perhaps there was more to him than met the eye.

Just then, Becky and Martin caught sight of Carl's silhouette approaching them silently.

"Mister Carl? Did something happen?" Martin called out to him, but there was no response.

SMASH!

Before they could react, a hammer came hurtling out of the darkness, striking Carl's head with a sickening thud.

THUD! "Kyaaaa!"

Becky gasped in horror as Carl's body crumpled to the ground, his lifeless form slumping against the tunnel wall, its brain scattering around....

Chapter 326 77.3 - Mine

"Kyaaaa-!"

The scream echoed in the tunnel as the huge body crumpled to the ground. It stood lifeless form slumping against the tunnel wall, its brain scattering around, pieces of flesh painted the wall dark red.

"Wha-"

Martin's mouth was wide agape as if he had witnessed the most horrifying scene of his life. His mind raced with disbelief and horror as he stared at the grisly scene before him. The image of Carl, the person he had respected and trusted, lying lifeless on the ground shattered his sense of security and understanding.

Despair and fear gripped Martin's heart as he struggled to comprehend what had just transpired. His thoughts whirled with questions and doubts, unable to make sense of the sudden and brutal attack.

Before he could utter a word, a figure emerged from the shadows, stepping forward with purpose. Martin's eyes widened in surprise as he recognized the silhouette, his heart pounding with a mixture of fear and dread.

"Who... who are you?" Martin stammered, his voice trembling with fear. "What is happening?"

The figure stepped closer, revealing himself to be the real Carl, his expression serious but with a little bit of annoyance, while holding the huge hammer in his hand.

"It was an enemy that took my appearance," Carl explained, his voice low and steady despite the chaos around them. "We're not alone down here."

Just as Carl finished his explanation, the body of the imposter he had smashed began to transform before their eyes. Martin watched in horror as the once-solid form turned black, its flesh deteriorating rapidly.

A putrid smell filled the air, making Martin gag and cover his nose with his sleeve. Smoke started rising from the ground where the imposter's body lay, curling upwards in eerie wisps.

As the smoke thickened, obscuring their view, Martin's heart raced with trepidation. What horror would be revealed next?

Slowly, the smoke dissipated, revealing a gruesome sight. Where the imposter's body had been, now lay a pile of bones and indiscernible flesh, twisted and contorted in a grotesque heap.

Martin recoiled in disgust, his stomach churning at the sight.

"Burghk-!"

Following that was a puke from Becky, as she witnessed everything. Martin didn't blame her as he was about to do the same if not for holding it with every bit of willpower he had.

"We need to be careful," Carl's voice broke through the tension, his gaze scanning their surroundings warily. "There may be more of them lurking in the shadows."

—SWOOSH! But then, before he could say more, something flew through the darkness, aiming right into his eyes!

THUD! Yet, with a fast movement, Carl's arm moved, and his hand grabbed the projectile. It was an arrow, an arrow that was specially made.

"Hmm?"

As Martin and Carl turned to look at the angle from which the project came, they saw the girl Becky trying to clean the puke from his mouth.

Becky raised her head, wiping the remnants of vomit from her mouth with a shaky hand. "What?" she asked, her voice weak and confused.

Martin felt a chill run down his spine, his mind reeling with confusion and fear. He couldn't discern who was real and who was not amidst the chaos and deception surrounding them.

Suddenly, a silhouette appeared beside Martin, causing him to startle. It was Becky—or at least, someone who looked like her. But this version of Becky was injured, her arm cut down and bleeding profusely.

Martin's heart sank as he realized the gravity of the situation. "Becky?" he whispered, his voice trembling with uncertainty.

The injured Becky mumbled through panting breaths, her words barely audible. "This girl... imposter," she gasped, her eyes wide with pain and fear. "But don't... don't say it... aloud... to not... alert it."

Martin's mind raced as he processed her words. His already unstable mind didn't even doubt her words, seeing her injuries.

"Deal with....her secretly...I know...I can trust you...." Becky mumbled while retreating back to the darkness.

—CRACK! But before anything else could happen, a sudden cracking sound echoed through the tunnel. Martin's heart skipped a beat as a pillar of earth erupted from the ground right where the injured 'Becky' had disappeared into the shadows.

The 'Becky' let out a bloodcurdling scream as the earth enveloped her.

Martin's eyes widened in shock as he felt a figure dash past him, the rush of air sending shivers down his spine. He turned just in time to see Carl's hammer strike down on the exact spot where the injured 'Becky' had been moments ago.

"What are you doing?" 'Becky' exclaimed in surprise, evading the strike at one last second.

"Huh?"

"Don't let it fool you, Martin." Carl's cold voice echoed around the place while looking around. He raised his hand and utilized his trait once again while looking at where the silhouette was.

CREAK! The ground once again cracked, creating a cage of earth to trap the girl.

"Heh...." Yet, suddenly, 'Becky's' expression became twisted, her smile widening like a devil's.
"Kekekekekekekeke...."

She laughed loudly, sending shivers down everyone's spine.

"Hope you will like my present~ After all, it won't be the end."

Martin's blood ran cold as he watched 'Becky' transform into a clump of black flesh before their eyes.

Suddenly, Carl's expression darkened as he sensed something amiss. Martin's heart pounded in his chest as he felt the ground tremble beneath them.

RUMBLE! His worst fears were realized as the ground began to crumble, sending them all tumbling into darkness.

"NO!"

Both Becky and him were falling, but they were somehow spread from Carl. The fall seemed to be long and dangerous, but just as the two could feel the dread, they felt a sphere conjured from Earth enveloping them.

Yet the crumbling was what was happening all across the tunnels on the western side of the mine, though not as serious as this.

"Hmm....This is quite tiring..."

I mumbled while looking at the Magic Stones I had mined.

"Fourteen low-quality and one mid-quality."

Counting the numbers, I calculated how much money I would make from this. Submitting some of them to the academy for grades was a must, but aside from that, I could just sell them.

As I finished my calculations, a sudden tremor ran through the ground beneath my feet.

At first, it was barely perceptible, but as I focused my senses, I realized that it was growing stronger by the second.

'This...There is no way such a tremor naturally happens.' I realized that this wasn't a natural earthquake; it was something artificial from the findings. Then, again, I didn't have any time to analyze it more since it was approaching rapidly.

Instinct kicked in, and without hesitation, I grabbed the defensive capsule provided by the Blackthorn's. It was a special capsule to protect students in such situations, as neither the academy nor the Blackthorn's could deal with another scandal.

With practiced movements, I activated it and stepped inside, sealing myself within its protective shell just as the ground beneath me began to crumble.

With a deafening roar, the earth gave way beneath me, and I plummeted into darkness as the tunnel collapsed around me. Rocks and debris rained down, pummeling the capsule's reinforced exterior as I braced myself for the impact.

For a moment, time seemed to stand still as I hurtled through the darkness, the sound of my own heartbeat echoing in my ears. Then, with a bone-jarring thud, I slammed into the ground below, the force of the impact knocking the wind out of me.

"Haaaah....Haaaah....."

Gasping for breath, I struggled to regain my bearings as the dust settled around me as I left the capsule.

The defensive capsule had successfully held up against the onslaught, shielding me from harm as the tunnel collapsed above.

The adrenaline of the life danger coursed through my veins, but I forcefully calmed myself down.

"Sigh...." Releasing a hearty sigh, I couldn't help but feel a bit annoyed. First, I was trapped in a tunnel, and then I was buried in one of them. Standing up, I observed the place.

Brushing the dust and debris from my clothes, I took stock of my surroundings. The tunnel I found myself in now was different from the one I had been in before. Its ceiling was higher, allowing more space above, and the walls seemed to stretch further into the depths. There were no lights, but with Shadowborne, I was able to see in the dark as if it were normal.

However, as I examined the ground beneath me, I noticed something peculiar. Unlike the previous tunnel, which showed signs of recent activity with footprints and disturbed earth, this one appeared untouched.

The ground was smooth and undisturbed as if no one had set foot here in years. The mana traces around me were also saying the same.

'An abandoned tunnel. Just what I need.....' Shaking my head, I was about to move, but I suddenly felt something.

SWOOSH! From the darkness, a silhouette appeared. Even before I could look at its outline, I was forced to dash to the right, utilizing my full speed.

SMASH!

The place I was in was smashed with debris rising. A silhouette revealed himself there from the debris. It was our bulky military guy with his hammer in his hand. He seemed to be a bit tense for some reason, though.

"Calm down."

I said, looking at him.

"Are you real?" He asked in response. His brown eyes looked cold, but he seemed to be doubtful.

"Real?"

'Something happened that made him question me the moment he saw me. Something is messing with his senses? An illusion? No, that can't be. I don't see any traces of illusion with [Perceptive Insight], and I would like to know if he was in a dream or not. His body state tells me there is no such thing. Then, is there something else? A clone? That can be possible. Did he encounter something that could copy other people's appearances? If that is so, there is only one thing I need to do.' As those thoughts flashed in my head in a second, I raised my hand and then looked at him.

"I am different from the other students. Something about me tells you about it."

As I repeated the words he had spoken to me after we had sparred, he relaxed.

"I see....You are real." He also seemed to understand what I had implied. Whatever he had faced, I assumed he didn't have a long contact with it since it should appear in these tunnels.

"What happened here?" I asked, gesturing to the debris and the aftermath of the explosion.

"Sigh..."

And with a sigh, he started explaining everything that happened.

After recounting everything to Astron, Carl looked at him, checking his response. This fellow before him was regarded as quite highly in his mind and in their circle.

He was especially known to be logical and observant. This was what he had heard from Irina, and in their spar, he was able to conclude this was the case.

With the tools given to them, the tunnel was being illuminated now. The reason why he attacked Astron initially was because he wasn't able to sense him before Astron entered the lethal range.

Astron didn't make any sounds, and his presence was concealed. He wasn't using the light in the darkness either, so Carl then made the assumption that he was an enemy. But then, after he had missed the first attack, he noticed that the enemy didn't have a clear killing intent different from the monster they had encountered.

This made him stop his consecutive attacks, and it was the right choice.

Astron listened intently as Carl recounted the events that had transpired in the tunnel. His mind processed the information, piecing together the sequence of events and the decisions Carl had made in the heat of the moment.

"So that is what happened," Astron mumbled, acknowledging Carl's explanation.

Sensing a question forming in Astron's mind, Carl waited for him to speak. Sure enough, Astron soon broke the silence with a thoughtful inquiry.

"The 'thing' you have encountered was able to take the form of your teammates, correct?" Astron asked, his brow furrowed in contemplation.

Carl nodded in confirmation, but he raised an eyebrow at the choice of words. "Yes, that's correct," he replied. "But why do you refer to it as a 'thing'? It was not a monster?"

Astron paused, considering his words carefully before responding. "I suppose 'thing' is a more neutral term," he explained. "It's difficult to categorize something that can mimic human form and intelligence, and it is always important to choose the words that you use as those words limit one's own subconsciousness. If you use the word 'monster,' it generally implies the life forms coming out of dungeons, but this case may not necessarily stem from a dungeon. This may affect your thought process in general, making it hard for you to be open to a new perspective."

Hearing his words, Carl nodded, impressed. This guy certainly was not normal; aside from combat, his thought process and analyses were extraordinary. "Impressive."

With a nod, Astron received the compliment. "You do suspect that it was that monster that had caused this tunnel to collapse, right?"

"That's right." ?Carl thought back to the chilling words the creature had left echoing in the aftermath of their encounter. "Before it disappeared, the 'thing' left us with a haunting message," Carl began, his voice tinged with unease. "It said, 'Hope you will like my present. After all, it won't be the end.'"

Astron's brow furrowed in thought as he processed Carl's words. "That's quite ominous," he remarked, his tone serious. "It suggests that whatever this creature has planned, it's far from over. We need to be prepared for whatever comes next."

Carl nodded in agreement, the weight of the creature's words settling heavily on his shoulders. They were facing a formidable adversary, one capable of deception and destruction on a grand scale.

"Do you have something in your mind?" But looking at Astron, who somehow looked relaxed and composed, he got the feeling that he had an idea.

"What makes you think so?"

"I had seen a lot of soldiers." He didn't elaborate on it any further.

"I see." Astron realized that, even though he had complete control over his body and mimics, there would always be oddballs like Carl who could somehow 'sense' what the person before him thought. This couldn't be tied to a clear logic, either.

"Well, I do have something in my mind," Astron said, channeling his mana to the tip of his finger, creating a small mana blade. And then, he started drawing on the ground.

As Astron channeled his mana and began drawing on the ground, Carl watched intently, curious about what thoughts were running through his companion's mind.

After a moment of silence, Astron spoke, his voice measured and thoughtful. "We know that this 'thing' has the ability to transform its body, taking the form of other people," he began, tracing intricate patterns with his mana blade. "It can mimic their voice clearly enough to deceive even those closest to them."

Carl nodded in agreement.

"But," Astron continued, his expression grave, "this 'thing' also has the ability to cause quakes, and from how it seems, it knows these tunnels well."

Again, Carl nodded, his brow furrowing with concern. The creature's ability to manipulate the earth itself added another layer of danger to their already perilous situation.

"Though all these traits are not common," Astron said, his voice trailing off slightly, "there is one 'thing' that fits this explanation."

Carl's eyes widened in realization as Astron's words sank in. "An Earth Spirit." He then realized why, even at the start, Astron didn't use the words monster. Because an Earth Spirit was not a monster but something rather different.

'Did he know even at the start?' Carl asked himself, feeling a little bit terrified of this guy now.

"I suspect it is a mutated one." Astron nodded, standing. He had already started influencing the academy and the other main cast, so he was becoming more active.

"Mutated one...."

"Yes. Though, in general, the spirits can change forms, they dislike taking other people's forms since it goes against their self-identity. However, this spirit seems to like it, and it also has a different goal. And, it is rather dangerous."

"....." Carl didn't answer but understood what Astron implied. The parting words of the spirit and the quake made it clear that its intentions weren't good. "Then we should move." Following that, he instantly stood up.

As a soldier and a member of the Braveheart Family, Carl knew it was his responsibility. It was the code of Bravehearts, 'don't ignore the misfortune that may befall others.'

And Astron, knowing Carl's character, didn't object to it. However, he had something different in his mind.

'If my theory is correct, then I will be able to make a really good haul from this.'

Inwardly, he thought and then started following Carl.

"Tch, what the hell is this?"

In the darkness, the short-white-haired girl looked around, clearing the debris from her clothes.

She didn't have any injuries, but she somehow had an annoyed face.

"Just know, everything was going well, but then some bastard decided to collapse the tunnel? If I find them, I will crush their bones."

CREAK!

At that moment, she heard a cracking sound coming from the side. In an instant, she took a combat stance, pulling her sword from her spatial ring.

"Tututututu.....Are you okay?"

But suddenly she heard the familiar voice of a young guy.

"I am fine. Thank you....."

Followed by the voice of a girl. The girl's voice didn't strike as unfamiliar, but it was also not that familiar. In a way, she felt like she heard this voice a lot, but she wasn't hearing it frequently.

–PUFF!

Following that, smoke rose from the debris with a puffing sound. There, a capsule revealed itself, and from that, two people rose up.

"Ethan?"

Julia reacted first, as the guy getting out was someone just like she thought.

"Ah, Julia," Ethan revealed a smile. "You fell down as well." He was happy that his friend was safe.

"Yeah, I did." But, for Julia, she was rather embarrassed. This was because she forgot that she had a capsule given to them and rather went a troublesome way to fall down without injuring herself.

"Umm...." Then, she noticed the person beside Ethan. Flowing chestnut hair and clear blue eyes. She remembered the person as the girl sitting on the right side of the classroom.

Emily Anderson.

"Ah, right...." Ethan released his arms as he supported her in standing up. Emily somehow had a red face, feeling embarrassed.

"Thank you." With a slight thanks, she widened the distance.

Julia glanced at Ethan with a puzzled expression. "So, you two fell down randomly too?" Ethan nodded, his expression serious.

"Yeah, it was unexpected. We were exploring the tunnel when we felt the tremors. We realized it was about to collapse, so we activated the emergency capsule."

"Quick thinking. Good thing you had that capsule with you."

"You didn't have?"

"I did. But I already close it."

The newly formed trio continued to talk with them.

In the tunnel, Irina found herself in a rather troublesome situation. It was because she was in front of someone that she didn't expect at all.

After falling down, thanks to the quake, she used a capsule and protected herself. Using fire in such closed spaces was definitely dangerous, as the smoke would make it hard to breathe.

But then, she met someone she didn't expect.

"Where are you going?"

The current first-ranked student of the academy first-year. The guy had a cold and icy demeanor but was in the hearts of many.

The strongest person in the youngest generation.

"I am going to find the source of this quake."

As well as the heir of the owner of these mines.

Victor Blackthorn.

"Really? What will you do once you find it?" Irina asked, following him. Now, the situation somehow became different from the supposed course; she didn't refuse.

She also disliked being alone in such darkness, but she would never say it, of course.

Victor paused for a moment, his piercing gaze fixed on Irina. After a beat, he spoke, his voice measured and deliberate, "I will do what is necessary."

"Is that so?" Irina shrugged, matching her steps with him. "Do you know how to find it?" she inquired, her tone casual as she glanced at Victor.

Victor's response was terse, his voice carrying a hint of annoyance. "I have my own methods."

"What kind of methods? Is there anything I can help with?" She asked naturally.

"My methods don't concern you. And I don't need your help."

His words hung in the air, conveying a sense of independence and self-assurance. Irina sensed the subtle shift in his demeanor, recognizing that he wasn't keen on engaging in conversation.

This was how Victor had been from the start—the same guy who gave the terse replies to everything she said and acted like a wall no matter what she did.

"I see."

Irina nodded, but her mind was pondering on something. In the past, whenever something like this happened, she would feel hurt and anger inside. She would feel that it was unfair. After all, she admired Victor and liked him for a long time.

'But, why don't I feel anything?'

Yet now, it was different. She neither felt annoyance nor felt disappointed. She felt nothing at all, as she just naturally accepted Victor's words.

'Is it because I am used to it? It must be because of that.'

She came to the conclusion, though she couldn't help but think about how things would be if he were there rather than Victor.

"It would be fun, wouldn't it?" she mumbled to herself, her words barely audible in the confines of the tunnel. The thought of a different scenario where someone else was here lingered in her mind, though she quickly pushed it aside.

In the dim light, Victor glanced at Irina for a moment, his expression unreadable. But without a word, he continued walking forward, his pace unwavering.

His silence spoke volumes, and Irina couldn't help but feel a pang of understanding at the realization that some walls were meant to remain unbroken and some people meant to stay behind those walls.

Chapter 328 Chapter 77.5 - Mine

TAP! TAP!

The rhythmic sound of Astron and Carl's footsteps echoed through the tunnel as they continued forward, the soft glow of the light in their hands casting eerie shadows on the walls.

As they walked, they noticed signs that the tunnel had once been frequented by others. There were remnants of old bearings, worn and weathered from years of use. Tools lay scattered along the ground, their handles covered in dust and rust from disuse.

Carl bent down to examine one of the abandoned tools, running his fingers along its surface with a thoughtful expression. "It seems like this tunnel was once actively used," he remarked, his voice echoing softly in the confined space.

"That is right." Astron nodded, already having reached that conclusion. "But it was way too long ago. This equipment wasn't the ones that were shown to us."

"I thought the same." Carl agreed. Though he wasn't an expert when it came to mining or technical things like these, he at least had the basic knowledge.

HOWL!

Just at that moment, the wind howled in the tunnel, alerting the two. An eerie feeling enveloped both of them as if there was an enemy in front of them.

Carl, being constantly in such a situation, was already accustomed to it. Instinctively, he tensed, his senses in high alert as he scanned the darkness ahead.

SWOOSH!

Suddenly, Carl caught movement out of the corner of his eye. Before he could react, Astron lunged at him with the pickaxe they had been given to mine. Carl's reflexes kicked in, and he swiftly grabbed Astron's weapon, twisting it out of his grasp with practiced ease.

With a quick motion, Carl delivered a powerful punch to Astron's chest, sending him staggering backward. 'Astron' spat out a black substance, his features contorted in pain and rage.

Before the substance could dissipate, Carl heard a slicing sound as well as a flash. He turned to see Astron's head roll to the ground, severed cleanly from his body. He saw Astron standing behind the impostor, a dagger in his hand.

But before they could catch their breath, another silhouette emerged from the darkness, wielding a massive hammer aimed at Astron's neck.

"!"

In an instant, Carl's body moved as he saw the hammer approaching.

CREAK!

From the ground, a pillar of earth instantly rose up, hitting the hand holding the hammer. It worked as a disruption of motion and slightly changed the trajectory of the attack.

SWOOSH!

And then he rushed to the assailant.

But to his surprise, as Carl charged toward the assailant behind Astron, he felt the ground beneath him begin to shift and tremble. It was as if the earth itself was rising up to impede his progress, disturbing his balance and slowing his movements.

Realization dawned on Carl as he recognized the sensation. It was one of the skills he had derived from his [Earthen Giant], the ability to manipulate the earth itself. But now, it seemed that his own skill was being turned against him by their assailant.

"Be careful!" Carl shouted, his voice filled with urgency. But when he glanced back to where Astron had been standing, he realized that he was no longer there.

CRASH!

The hammer flew past the spot where Astron had stood just moments before, its impact sending vibrations through the ground.

WOOSH!

But then suddenly, Carl's eyes picked up a subtle movement. He saw Astron behind 'himself,' attacking from above.

'He went to the ceiling?'

Note that the ceiling wasn't low, and it was at least 8 meters high.

SLASH!

With a smooth movement, Astron's dagger flashed in silver light, and then he cut the 'Carl' into pieces, making it fall to the ground.

"Kekekekekeke....."

As Astron's dagger flashed in silver light, cutting the imposter into pieces, chilling laughter echoed through the tunnels once again, sending shivers down their spines. The laughter seemed to emanate from the depths of the darkness, its eerie tone filling the air with a sense of foreboding.

Then, cryptic words followed, spoken as if by someone driven mad by the depths of the tunnels.

"In shadows deep where echoes creep,

Forgotten souls in silence keep.

Abandoned by light, in darkness sealed,

I ask of you, can truth be revealed?"

Before they could even process the meaning behind the words, the tunnels began to tremble once more. A wave of earth, like an avalanche, poured down from the tunnel they had entered from, threatening to engulf them in its fury.

With no time to spare, Astron and Carl were forced to rush forward, their instincts guiding them through the darkness.

Carl utilized his [Earthen Giant] ability, creating a landslide to propel them forward as they slid through the darkness.

As Astron and Carl slid through the darkness, propelled by the force of the landslide, they eventually reached a cavern where many tunnels intersected, creating a vast underground expanse.

CRUSH! BOOM!

Then, the avalanche of rocks hit and crushed the tunnel, blocking the entrance.

Carl and Astron took cover for a second until everything finished.

"....." Neither of the two spoke as they walked out of their cover, observing the place.

The cavern was eerily silent, with only the faint echoes of their movements reverberating through the stillness.

Despite the dim lighting, they could make out remnants of the past when this place was frequented by others. Tools lay abandoned, their surfaces worn and rusted from years of neglect. Small doors showed signs of corrosion, hinting at a time when they might have led to other chambers or passages.

However, what disturbed them the most were the scattered skeletons strewn about the cavern floor. The bones lay where they had fallen, seemingly forgotten by time, a grim reminder of lives lost in this desolate place. Some of the skeletons appeared to have been there for centuries, their remains weathered and decayed by the passage of time.

"This...." Even Carl was disturbed by the amounts of skeletons. It was as if a massacre had happened here.

Whatever had transpired in this forsaken place, it was clear that it held dark secrets buried within its depths.

"How many people died here?" Just as he asked, he saw Astron looking at the place around.

"No....They didn't die here." Astron mumbled, slightly crouching to look at the ground. "Their remains were brought to this place."

After all, it didn't make any sense for miners to die in such a huge cavern unless something extreme happened.

Hearing this, Carl sensed it as well. There were marks of earth being moved on the ground. Knowing how Earthen spells worked from his trait, Carl easily inferred the purpose of the spell used there.

Though Carl was unaware of it, Astron, with his eyes, could see the amounts of mana veins gathered right before the passage.

'We are close.'

He knew they were about to find the source of everything. Of course, at this point, the theory in his mind was strengthened by what they were seeing.

All of them fit the thing he thought aside from one thing.

"Kekekekekeke...."

As the creepy laughter echoed once again, the dimmed lights in the cavern suddenly flickered to life, casting an eerie glow upon the scene. The earth beneath their feet began to quake once more, adding to the sense of foreboding that filled the air.

"Did you like the riddle?" the voice taunted playfully, its tone filled with mischief. "You will get it more, don't worry."

With a sense of urgency, Carl watched as the skeletons scattered around the cavern started to rise, one by one, their forms encased in earth as they transformed into undead creatures.

"Once lost below, now call my name,

In whispers soft, I'm still the same.

Though time has worn the stones to dust,

I linger on, in echoes thrust.

What am I, in this realm of gloom?

A spirit bound, denied a tomb.

Yet in these depths, my plea I cast,

To those who roam, in shadows vast.

Answer true, and find your way,

Through tunnels dim, where spirits stray.

For in the heart of darkness lies,

The key to break eternal ties."

With each word, the skeletons became more and more profound, as if they were rising humans.

Carl threw a look at Astron and saw he was looking at him, too. "Can you deal with them?" Astron asked, without anything much.

Carl assessed the situation and saw it wasn't hard to deal with. Though it would tire him out eventually, this situation wasn't something that exceeded the combat prowess of such a high-

ranker.

"I can."

"Then, I will leave this place to you," Astron stated calmly, preparing to move.

Carl looked at Astron and felt a sense of assurance. Despite the chaos around them, he knew that Astron wouldn't simply run away. He wasn't foolish enough to abandon a person like Carl, as that would mean making an enemy out of him.

"Can you deal with the Earthen spirit?" Carl asked, seeking confirmation.

Astron nodded confidently. "Yes, I am sure I can handle it," he replied.

Carl raised an eyebrow at Astron's response, sensing that there was more to it than met the eye.

However, he chose not to press further. Astron had proven himself to be resourceful and insightful, and Carl trusted his judgment.

With a nod, Astron dashed through the cavern, disappearing into one of the tunnels. Carl watched him go, feeling a sense of responsibility settle over him as he prepared to face the undead creatures alone.

Turning his head to look at the enemies, he took a deep breath and then faced the huge numbers.

Inside the eastern sides of the tunnels, many of the students were not aware of what was happening on the other side.

They were walking around with their teams, mining for the stones.

"Lucas, we have finished our side."

A young man approached Lucas, who was mining his own stones. His name was Kayn.

"Both of you?"

"Yes."

"Okay, we can move then."

Lucas continued to chip away at the stone, carefully severing its connection to the Mana Veins. With a final strike, he dislodged the stone and dusted off his hands.

"Done," he announced to Kayn, who nodded in approval.

As they walked through the dimly lit tunnels, Lucas couldn't shake the feeling of unease that lingered in his mind. He had been investigating Astron Natusalune, but he couldn't come up with clear clues as to why he had changed this much.

'That guy bothers me.....I feel like I need to eliminate him.'

For him, who had already seen the future and found his resolve, things like these didn't matter.

After a short while, they encountered another group of students up ahead. At the forefront of the group was someone he was having a hard time dealing with as well.

"Lucas."

"Lilia."

Chapter 329 Chapter 77.6 - Mine

While Carl was fighting with the bodies rising from Death, Astron plunged into the darkness of the chosen tunnel, his steps silent against the cold, hard ground.

The tunnel bore the scars of heavy use, with marks on the walls where tools had chipped away at the stone and footprints long set in the dust, leading deeper into the heart of the earth.

As he advanced, the unsettling laughter that had accompanied them thus far resonated through the tunnel once more, wrapping around him like a chilling breeze. "Have you discovered the answer to my riddle, wanderer?" the voice taunted, its tone dripping with amusement and malice.

Astron remained silent, focusing on the environment.

He had considered the riddle, its words echoing in his mind, but he decided to not answer it.

Seemingly disappointed but not deterred, the voice cackled again. "No answer? Perhaps you require a clue to guide your way. But remember, every clue has its price," it sneered, and with a final, mocking laugh, it vanished into the silence that followed.

Before a second passed, the ground beneath him stirred. From the earthen floor, figures began to emerge, not of bone and decay, but formed from a viscous, black liquid that seemed to absorb the faint light around them.

These figures, shaped into the forms of miners complete with uniforms and pickaxes, stood before him, a ghastly imitation of life.

Their eyes, empty yet filled with a haunting light, fixed on Astron as they brandished their tools menacingly. "He has the 'thing,'" they whispered amongst themselves, their voices a chorus of despair and accusation.

"Give it to me!"

"Give it to me!"

"Give it to me!"

Without hesitation, the liquid-formed miners charged at Astron, their movements eerily silent. Astron, had already noticed that he would combat against something, so he didn't mind.

These were no ordinary foes; they were manifestations of the earth spirit's power, shaped from the memories and despair of those who had once toiled in these tunnels.

Dancing between the swings of their pickaxes, Astron fought back with precision and grace. Each strike he delivered disrupted the liquid forms of his attackers, causing them to momentarily lose cohesion before they reformed, relentless in their assault.

SPURT!

And after not even a minute have passed, the miners all disappeared, returning to the black liquid they once were.

However, in the corner of his eyes, Astron could see a source of mana moving. It had the small black liquid form, but he knew it was the culprit.

Yet, as he attempted to chase, another wave of miners rose from the ground.

"I need it. I need the reward."

"I need it. I need the reward."

"I need it. I need the reward."

"I need it. I need the reward."

This time they had repeated a different word, yet they pounced at him with their eyes bloodshot.

As Astron continued to fend off the relentless waves of liquid-formed miners, he couldn't shake the feeling of unease that gnawed at him.

Each time he dispatched a wave, they dissolved back into the black liquid from which they came, only for another group to rise up in their place.

As he continued to fight, Astron's mind raced with possibilities. Perhaps there was a relic or artifact hidden within these tunnels, something that held the power to control or manipulate the earth spirits.

Or perhaps it was something more sinister, a curse or enchantment that had bound these miners to an eternity of servitude and suffering.

But regardless of the cause, Astron knew that he could not afford to falter. With each step closer to the end of the tunnel, he felt the weight of his task pressing down upon him, urging him forward.

But it wasn't just the ceaseless onslaught that troubled him. There was something different about these miners compared to the previous attackers.

They all referred to him as if he possessed something they desired, repeating the same phrase with a disturbing fervor: "I need it. I need the reward." Or with something like, "I am the one who can only get it."

Their eyes, once filled with haunting light, now glinted with madness and cruelty, a stark contrast to the hollow gazes of their predecessors.

Astron realized that there was a pattern emerging—a pattern that hinted at a deeper connection between these miners and the source of the voice.

Sometimes, we people wonder what fate is awaiting us. Is this life worth going through? Do we really need to overcome all these obstacles?

Everyone had these types of moments to think. But then, as we live our lives in our monotonous ways, in the flow of our daily lives, we forget to question such things.

After all, even after questioning, how many could get the answer they wished? This was essentially why most of the nihilist and anarchist people were observed to be the ones who had a lot of free time.

Then, what happens to those who are tied into this underground place, working for their lives on the line? Do they get to question these things? Do they have free time?

Do they even live as a human being? Living in the darkness underneath the ground where no sun could enter, trying to meet the next month's daily expenses.

How do the people giving them these jobs view them?

Isn't the answer obvious?

Numbers.

Just numbers. Many can go, and many will come. The people will leave, and others who need money will come. The cycle will continue, and the things will remain the same.

These were the questions that suddenly appeared in my head as if my thoughts were influenced by the surrounding atmosphere.

'It makes sense, though. I had far long noticed the Psychic- Mana influencing me.'

It was kind of ironic that now, after encountering Belthazor, such things felt like child's play.

'And maybe that is the case?'

But then, before my thoughts could linger about those things any longer, I saw something materializing before me.

It was a body that was slowly being made from the black liquid.

I already knew what was awaiting me the moment I entered this tunnel. With my eyes, I could see that the number of mana veins that were connected to just one place concentrated there.

It supported my assumptions, so I didn't hesitate.

'And now here we are. Facing myself three times.'

The clones materialized fully before me, and their appearances were strikingly similar to mine—identical, in fact, except for the uncanny smiles that stretched across their faces.

These expressions, eerily out of place, were a clear divergence from my usual demeanor. The smiles were like of a grin, but at the same time they held the innocence of a child, and I knew I didn't have such a thing any longer.

It was disconcerting, a visual reminder that these were not mere reflections but entities with their own intent.

Each clone was dressed in the same attire I wore, their purple eyes and black hair mirroring my own, yet the light within those eyes seemed different, almost twisted.

The paleness of their skin under the dim light of the tunnel added an otherworldly aura to their presence.

"Why don't you smile?"

I heard myself saying that, but the tone was somehow sound unnatural.

"There is no need for me to."

"....."

Without another word being exchanged, it was as if an unspoken agreement was reached—a silent acknowledgment of the challenge that lay ahead.

The tension in the air was palpable, a prelude to the imminent confrontation.

SWOOSH!

With a burst of speed, I dashed forward, closing the distance between us with swift, decisive steps.

My grip on my daggers tightened, the familiar weight of the blades offering a semblance of comfort amidst the uncertainty.

The clones mirrored my movements, advancing with equal speed and intent, their own daggers poised for attack.

The engagement was immediate and intense, a flurry of movements and clashes. Our blades met with sparks, each strike and parry a testament to our mirrored skills and capabilities.

The clones, despite their unsettling smiles, fought with a precision and agility that matched my own, their attacks seemingly predicting my every move.

At least that was what they probably thought.

'I see.'

The exchange made me realize what was happening. After all, essentially what they were doing now was the moves they saw before me while fighting the previous monster. As if like an collective consciousness was around, it transferred the information.

This was already what I had suspected from the start, as the previous clone attacked me with a pickaxe while these ones were holding the same dagger in my hand.

I understood their strategy, their potential moves, because, in essence, they were an echo of my own.

–SWOOSH!

As I engaged the first clone, my initial attack was a feint, designed to be evaded, playing into the expected choreography of the clash.

True to form, the clone sidestepped my strike, its movements mirroring my own anticipated reaction. In the instant it moved to exploit the perceived opening, I tapped into the essence of my skill [Umbral Steps] derived from [Shadowborne], vanishing from sight only to reappear behind it.

–SLASH!

Before it could react to my sudden disappearance, my dagger found its neck, severing the connection to its existence with a decisive slash. Its form started to dissipate in an instant, turning black liquid, returning to the darkness.

The momentary focus on the first clone left me ostensibly vulnerable, a weakness the second clone did not hesitate to exploit.

CLANK!

It lunged forward, aiming to capitalize on my engagement. However, prepared for such a retaliation, I deflected its dagger with a swift parry, redirecting its momentum.

In that fleeting opportunity, I invoked the [Celestalith]'s Nebula form, unleashing the energy of Dark Moon that snared the remaining clones in a gravitational bind.

The first of these caught in the Nebula's embrace met a swift end as my blade cleaved through it, dispersing its form into nothingness.

The second clone, however, faced a different fate. Instead of a quick destruction, I chose to trap it within the intensified gravity of [Celestalith]'s Nebula form.

The air around it thickened, an invisible force pressing down with overwhelming weight, immobilizing it completely.

After all, it was the source of this whole ordeal.

"You got me."

Chapter 330 77.7 - Mine

"You got me."

Standing before me stood the faceless figure. Its face didn't have any features, neither did it show any reaction aside from the smile of 'innocence.'

Now, with the gravity pressing on it, the 'thing' was unable to escape as it used to. Yet, I knew it no longer had the intention to do it in any case.

"Was that fun?"

I asked, looking at the dark, faceless figure. Though its face didn't contain any distinct features aside from a mouth, pair of eyes, and nose, I could see that his pupils shook for a second.

"...."

There was no answer for a second, but then it turned to look at me, raising its head.

"I had fun.....But, I still haven't got my answer."

It replied, looking at me with its eyes sparkling.

"Do you have the answer to my riddle?"

The voice sounded creepy while somehow its smile seemed 'innocent.'

This whole idea of a riddle made me sure that what I was facing was a Spirit. Most of them tended to be unique, and in general, they had the tendency to be influenced by fairies, making them mischievous and attention-seeking.

Thus, I initially thought it was an evil earthen spirit, something that eventually mutated from a normal Earthen Spirit.

But then, I realized there were many things contradicting that. First was the lack of deaths. When Carl's group was attacked first, the spirit had the ability to definitely kill the girl named Becky, according to Carl. He remarked that she was out of vision and Martin had already been affected by the clone for a split second.

Yet, contrary to what one would expect, the spirit didn't kill Becky, let alone gravely injure her. However, at the same time, there was definitely an intent behind the attacks. According to Carl, he could even sense a remnant of madness inside there.

This was the first contradictory thing, making it somehow unique.

Secondly, the tremors that were created by the earthen spirit somehow lacked destruction.

Sure, the tunnels collapsed, but they somehow collapsed in such a manner that only a handful of people were affected. Though I wasn't sure of this part, from the direction the seismic wave traveled, I noticed that its direction wasn't into the mine but to the outer side of it.

This made even less sense; if it was an evil spirit, there was no need for it to hold back. Burying students under the ground, trapping them, and then savoring their souls would be a lot better and the most reasonable act.

Yet, it didn't do it; it made the tremors so that people who were affected by it mostly fell into another tunnel.

This was the case for Carl and me, and it seemed Carl's group was precisely targeted. These things made me think of a certain scene in my head, a small hypothesis.

'The enemy I am facing is a remnant spirit formed in this place. Something had happened in there, maybe an accident. The person died with strong emotions still lingering, making it deflect the death fully. Their soul was still attached to this place because of their feelings.'

I thought. But, for such an assumption, there was an important thing.

'For a remnant spirit to be formed and control the earth in such a manner, it needs an energy catalyst, and that catalyst is basically something that could be easily found here. That indicates a possible bonanza zone.'

If a place had a dense amount of mana in it, it was possible for the spirit to mutate and acquire the attributes of the mana around. And, under such mine, there was no lack of such locations.

This was the reason why I decided to track this spirit down, since by finding the source, I could basically find the Magic-stone bonanza filled with High-grade Magic Stones.

'Then, this brings us to another problem. What made this spirit attach this place in such a manner? What is its origins?'

This question wasn't that important. After all, I could easily deal with this spirit before me by just destroying it. Yet, at the same time, my intuition told me that I shouldn't act rashly.

'This spirit acts like a bipolar. It has madness inside it, but it doesn't completely act with that madness. Does that mean something inside it restricts itself? The man that made it evolve contained a type of madness qualities, making it half-mad, but the inner soul is resisting it?'

This was the thought process that followed.

'Then, I should act as it wishes, satisfying the inner soul and releasing it from reality. After all, its only attachment to this world as a dead person is its strong emotions. Once that anchor is removed, it can be satisfied, and the spirit will disappear. This is definitely the safest and least dangerous option.'

" ... "

The spirit looked at me intently as if it was waiting for my answer. At this point, I had already reached my conclusion.

"Once lost below, now call my name,

In whispers soft, I'm still the same.

Though time has worn the stones to dust,

I linger on, in echoes thrust.

What am I, in this realm of gloom?

A spirit bound, denied a tomb.

Yet in these depths, my plea I cast,

To those who roam, in shadows vast.

Answer true, and find your way,

Through tunnels dim, where spirits stray.

For in the heart of darkness lies,

The key to break eternal ties."

I whispered the riddle that was spoken by the 'creepy' voice. And then, looking at the faceless spirit, I spoke.

"The answer is 'Forgotten one,'" I declared, holding the spirit's gaze if one could call it that. Its reaction was immediate; its form, though featureless, conveyed a sense of shock, an astonishment

that rippled through the very air between us. I hadn't anticipated this answer, perhaps not from me, not at this moment.

"Was that correct?"

"It was."

It replied.

But I didn't halt at that revelation. Stepping closer, I saw its form quiver, a shadow amidst shadows, yet now tinged with an aura of vulnerability. "It must have been painful," I continued my voice a whisper against the stillness of the underground. "Being abandoned in the tunnels as a child. Wasn't this the real answer to the real riddle?"

The spirit's reaction was visceral, a tremor that seemed to shake its very essence. It looked up, its face still a blank canvas, yet somehow now etched with an emotion that pierced the veil of its formlessness. "Why did you think so?" It asked, its voice a mixture of curiosity and an almost forgotten pain.

While I was pondering how to satisfy the spirit, I thought about certain things.

"This place," I began, my eyes scanning the darkness that enveloped us, "is steeped in history and tragedy. Miners, men, and women who came here seeking fortune or maybe just survival had been your companions once. But your presence and your actions don't speak of malevolence, not entirely. They speak of a longing, a desperation."

I paused, letting the words hang in the air, heavy with implication. "Firstly, it was those miners. The ones you had conjured once I had entered this tunnel. It was where everything took place, wasn't it? The place where you have been betrayed by the ones you had worked back-to-back."

I took a moment to let it sink.

"Their voices were real, as they each were different. Those were the ones you conjured from your memories. From their words, I concluded that they were corrupted by something inside these tunnels. They attacked me, but initially, you were the one who was subjected to that attack.

Once in these tunnels, you were working, trying to make a living for yourself. But then, you found a special Bonanza where many different magic stones were gathered. You wanted to report it to your overseer, the one responsible for you. But maybe because you were a child, you were naïve. You didn't have many people that you could play with; maybe you didn't even know what it meant to play. Therefore, you spoke to others about what you had found in there to somehow form connections."

I knew those feelings well. Especially the Astron of this world knew it a lot more. How it felt to not be understood and not to be able to speak to anyone.

"But then, this resulted in your end. It was because the humans were greedy. The ones that you spoke to wanted to get recognition for themselves since they saw this as an opportunity to fill their quota and leave as early as possible. But then, they decided to ensure you'd never speak of it again. They plotted against you, a child with no malice, only a desire to share, to belong. In their greed, they saw you not as a companion but as a risk to be mitigated, a voice to be silenced."

I watched the spirit closely, its form now flickering like a candle threatened by a breeze. "They led you deep into the tunnels under the guise of seeing the Bonanza together, but their intentions were as dark as the earth that would soon become your prison. They left you there, alone, abandoned in the darkness. You called for help, your voice echoing off the cold, unyielding stone, but there was no one to hear your cries."

"The madness of the stones, the Bonanza you found, it was real. It contained energies unknown, ancient, and capable of warping minds and hearts. Those miners, after sealing you away, sought to claim the treasure for themselves. But they were not left untouched. The madness seeped into them, corrupting their minds and turning them against each other in a frenzy of violence and paranoia. They massacred each other, their sanity unraveled by greed and the malignant force of the stones. All the miners here died because of that."

I paused, letting the tragic narrative sink into the silence between us. "But you, the first to encounter energy and with a soul so strongly attached to this world, were transformed in a way none of them were. In your final moments of desperation and solitude, your essence merged with madness, grief, and the unyielding desire to live. It changed you, mutated you into something more than a mere ghost. You became a spirit, bound to these tunnels, fueled by the anguish and the unresolved torment of your demise."

I stepped closer, my voice soft but firm. Somehow, regardless of it was logical or not, I wanted to satisfy this soul before me.

Rather than attempting to destroy it, I wanted it to leave this world on its own. To have the salvation that it wished.

'She probably would do it this way, wouldn't she?'

Thinking about her somehow made me bitter.

"But I see you now. I understand the depth of your tragedy and the injustice of your fate. Your actions, born of isolation and despair, were never meant to harm but to speak. To tell your story to those who would listen."

The spirit, slowly started taking its form at the end of my words. Slowly, an outline of a young kid appeared.

The child before me had slightly dark skin, his body skinny, a clear sign of the lack of nourishment he had endured in life. His lips were a bit too large for his small face, but it was his eyes that caught me—the innocence within them, a stark contrast to the tale of betrayal and abandonment he had suffered.

He looked at me, a mischievous smile playing on his lips, and for a moment, I saw a glimmer of the child he once was, free from the burdens of his tragic end. "You're like one of those detectives my mother told me about," he said, his voice carrying a lightness it probably hadn't in centuries. "I always wanted to meet one." His gratitude was palpable, his small form bowing slightly in a gesture of thanks.

'It seems his mother taught him how to thank others.'

Before the moment could slip away, I reached out, my hand gently ruffling his curly hair. "You did well, enduring for this long," I told him while stuffing my voice with emotions if it even existed.

"You're one of the strongest people I've ever seen." The words felt heavy, laden with more meaning than I intended.

For a fleeting second, his face overlapped with 'hers,' the memory sharp, piercing through the veil of time and grief that separated us.

A single tear traced its way down his cheek, falling to the ground with a weight far greater than its size. The child's smile widened, pure joy radiating from him. It was a smile that reached deep into the heart, touching something primal within.

"Un," he voiced in agreement, a sound of contentment, of peace finally found. And then, with a softness that filled the cavernous space around us, he disappeared into nothingness, leaving this world behind.

Yet, at the same time, behind the child revealed the Magic Stones that were already mined, as if to give me a present.