

## H. Academy 471

Chapter 471 105.7 - What it means to be a Genius

<Acrobatics Training, 11 A.M, Fifth day of training>

Within minutes, Astron completed the fourth stage exam, landing softly and standing with his usual composed demeanor.

Tianna walked over to him, her voice filled with genuine praise. "Astron, your progress is extraordinary. You've completed the fourth stage with remarkable ease."

Astron nodded, acknowledging her words but staying focused.

Tianna continued, "For most of the trainees here, this would be the end of the course. Most of them are either fighters or mages, and they do not need to go beyond the fourth stage. However, your training goal is to master all seven stages, which means you will be different."

She paused, ensuring Astron was absorbing the gravity of her words. "From now on, you will be in the advanced course. You will learn more advanced techniques for the fifth, sixth, and seventh stages. It will be more challenging, and it's crucial that you keep your focus at all times."

Astron nodded his head in understanding. "I understand, Instructor Tianna. I will keep my focus and continue to train hard."

Tianna smiled, a rare expression on her usually stern face. "I have no doubt you will. Prepare yourself for the advanced training. The next stages will test you in ways you have not yet experienced."

With that, she dismissed him as she prepared herself for tomorrow's training. As for the other cadets...

They looked at him as if they were looking at a monster.

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<Stealth Training, 12 A.M, Fifth day of training>

"Good morning, Astron," he greeted, his tone neutral yet expectant. "Today, you will work on mastering the [Veil of Shadows]. Are you prepared?"

Astron nodded, his resolve clear. "I am ready, Instructor Kennet."

"Excellent. Let's begin," Kennet said, stepping back to observe.

Astron closed his eyes, taking a deep breath to center himself. He focused on extending his sensory awareness, feeling the ambient mana in the room. Slowly, he projected his mana, creating a subtle ripple that blended with the surrounding energy.

He began to move, each step deliberate and controlled. His breathing was shallow, his heartbeat steady, syncing perfectly with his movements. The ripple of his mana expanded, forming an almost imperceptible barrier around him. Astron's presence seemed to melt into the shadows, his form becoming one with the environment.

When he reached the end of the course, Astron turned to face Kennet. The instructor's expression was one of approval.

"Well done, Astron," Kennet said, nodding. "You've demonstrated a remarkable understanding of the [Veil of Shadows]. You're starting to grasp the essence of stealth."

"Thank you, Instructor Kennet."

Kennet stepped forward, his tone instructive. "It seems you've begun to understand how things need to work. Before, your main focus was always on how to keep yourself invisible, but now you are starting to understand the importance of other senses as well."

He placed a hand on Astron's shoulder, a gesture of both guidance and acknowledgment. "That was something that I had been planning to inform you about today, but with how things are going, it seems I no longer need to do that."

He could feel the truth in them, as the subtle shift in his approach had made a significant difference in his training already.

'This instructor. He is really earnest.'

Astron thought as he looked into Kennet.

"Continue to practice this technique," Kennet advised. "Expand your awareness, deepen your connection with the ambient mana. The more attuned you are to your environment, the more effective your stealth will be."

"Understood, Instructor," Astron replied, his determination evident. "But there is one thing I am curious about."

Kennet raised an eyebrow, waiting for Astron to continue.

"The manual you mentioned," Astron said carefully. "Is there a more advanced version of the [Veil of Shadows] technique?"

Kennet's face darkened slightly at the mention of the manual. "I thought we had closed that topic yesterday," he said, his tone cooler.

Astron immediately responded, his tone respectful. "If my question was offensive, I apologize. I'm just curious as to what the next stage would be."

Kennet studied Astron's face, his gaze cold and piercing, searching for any hidden intentions or ulterior motives. Astron met his gaze steadily, his expression open and sincere. After a long moment, Kennet seemed to relent, though his expression remained guarded.

"There was a next technique," Kennet began slowly as he stood up. "But, it was not about stealth."

Astron felt a pang of curiosity but remained silent, waiting for Kennet to continue.

Kennet's expression was thoughtful as he chose his words carefully. "The next technique focused on something beyond just blending in or erasing one's presence. It required a deeper understanding and a broader perspective."

He turned away slightly as if contemplating how much to reveal. "Remember this, Astron," he said, his voice low but firm. "One must never forget that traits or arts do not always have to follow the same direction. Many traits have a wider coverage than you think."

With those cryptic words, Kennet began to walk away, leaving Astron to ponder his message.

The moment Kennet's words sank in, something inside Astron shifted. It was as if a veil had been lifted, revealing a broader horizon. He began to realize that his understanding of his abilities had been too narrow, too focused on a single path.

'That is right. Why had I not thought of that before?' He asked himself.

The techniques and arts he had learned did not have to be confined to one purpose. There were multiple ways to apply his skills and multiple directions to explore. The [Shadowborne] arts, for instance, might encompass more than just stealth and invisibility. They could be tools for manipulation, protection, or even attack, depending on how he chose to use them.

'The next stage of my [Shadowborne]. It may not have been related to stealth at all. And the same is valid for [Lunar Enigma].'

While this was something that he had already known, that did not mean his subconsciousness thought the same.

'Because how I was focused on the fact that the [Shadowborne] of the usual game and [Shadowborne] of the easter egg was different, I did not think of the possibility that they may have crossed paths at some point.' He thought as he realized he was once again limiting himself.

'I need to reflect once again. Broaden your horizons, Astron.'

With that thought, he continued his training while making a small mental note.

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As I left the training grounds, Kennet's words echoed in my mind. "Traits or arts do not always have to follow the same direction." What could the next possible stage of my [Shadowborne] trait be? What other aspects could I explore and harness?

Lost in thought, I made my way to the cafeteria. The usual hum of conversation and the clatter of trays provided a comforting backdrop to my musings. As I entered, I spotted Lyra and Kael at a table, waving me over.

"Long time no see!" Lyra greeted with a bright smile.

I raised an eyebrow. "It's only been two days."

Lyra laughed. "The fact that we didn't see each other for two whole days while being roommates is what makes it abnormal!"

"Fair point."

Kael leaned back in his chair, grinning. "Seems like you've been busy. How's the training going?"

"Intense but productive," I replied, taking a seat. "What about you two? How have your sessions been?"

Lyra rolled her eyes playfully. "Same old, same old. Lots of illusions and mana control exercises. It's fun but exhausting."

Kael nodded. "We've been working on strategy and combat drills. It's tough, but it's making a difference."

I nodded, appreciating their dedication. "That's good to hear. We're all pushing ourselves to the limit."

"Speaking of limits," Lyra said, leaning in conspiratorially. "Have you heard about the new guy who's been tearing up the acrobatics course? They say he's a natural."

Kael chuckled. "Oh, come on, Lyra. Don't tease him too much."

I tilted my head, curious. "Who's this new guy?"

Lyra grinned. "It's you, dummy! Everyone's talking about how you aced the first few stages of the acrobatics course. You've got quite a reputation already."

I shook my head with a wry expression. "I'm just doing what needs to be done."

Kael gave a knowing nod. "That's the spirit. Keep pushing, and you'll go far."

We continued chatting, and our conversation was light and easy. Despite the intense training and the challenges ahead, moments like these somehow made me remember that I am no longer in that place.

'Right. This place is a lot different.' There was hope here.

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<Reina's Room, 3 P.M, Fifth Day of Training>

Astron stood before the door of the training room, his mind already working on deciphering the new password. 'The password... It should be, Are you ready to face the second?' As he thought, he deciphered the psions.

"Are you ready to face the second?"

The answer was correct this time. 'Got you.' After entering, he saw Reina sitting. Her fit was different this time, with a slightly short skirt and long boots.

'From the traces, it seems she had visited the outside world.'

It was clear that she came from a field mission.

'I even think she can access this place from anywhere she wants.'

It was just speculation on his end, but that would explain many things.

"Let's begin today's training," Reina said, her tone brisk. She created a new set of psion lines, this time with higher-ranked threads. "Today, you'll start from scratch. The targeted mana psions are of a higher rank, so you'll need to focus on filtering and assimilation for a single mana thread first."

Astron nodded, his determination evident. He extended his mana threads and began the process. The higher-ranked psions resisted more than the previous ones, their complex structure requiring greater precision and control.

He closed his eyes, centering himself. The ambient mana in the room pulsed with energy, and he felt the subtle rhythms of the psion line. Filtering out the unnecessary noise, he honed in on the unique flow of the higher-ranked thread.

'Reina's right,' he thought. 'This is more challenging, but the principles are the same.'

He wove his mana into the psion line, focusing on harmonizing with its rhythm. The process was slow and meticulous, but his previous experience guided him. He adjusted his approach, finding the right balance between his energy and the thread's flow.

As he worked, Reina observed him closely. 'He's adapting quickly,' she mused. 'The higher-ranked psions are not an easy hurdle, but he's applying what he's learned with remarkable efficiency.'

Hours passed, and Astron's progress was undeniable. He managed to filter and assimilate the single mana thread, his understanding of its structure deepening with each attempt. The room seemed to hum with energy as he worked, the ambient mana resonating with his efforts.

By the end of the day, Astron stood before Reina, his expression determined. "I feel like I've grasped it," he said, his voice steady.

Reina nodded, her eyes filled with approval. "You've made significant progress. Tomorrow, we'll tackle multiple higher-ranked threads simultaneously."

"I understand."

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"Welcome, Trainee Astron Natusalune. Beginning body training session focusing on Everchanging Glyph optimization."

He went through the heavy ropes, weighted climbing, and compound exercises with determination.

"Trainee Astron's body limits are pushed to 80%. Increasing the intensity."

In the gravity room, he felt his muscles adapting quicker.

"Bone density and muscle resilience increased by 3%. Mana reserves stable."

He ended the session in the herbal bath, the water bubbling as impurities were expelled.

"Administering high-rank mana potion. The muscle reconstruction process is ongoing. Body limits pushed to 115%."

The session concluded with the AI's final report.

"Process complete. Trainee Astron, muscle and bone density increased by 2%. Adaptation to Everchanging Glyph's influence is on schedule. Recommend rest and further monitoring."

Chapter 472 105.8 - What it means to be a Genius

<Combat Training Arena, Sixth Day of Training, 5 A.M.>

The morning light once again filtered through the high windows, casting long shadows across the training hall. Dakota and Astron stood on the mat, the air between them crackling with anticipation.

"Are you ready?" Dakota asked a fierce smile on her face, her eyes gleaming with excitement.

Astron met her gaze, steeling himself for the challenge ahead. "As ready as I'll ever be, Master."



Dakota nodded, satisfied with his determination. "Remember, we'll use only the [Gale Stance]. Show me everything you've learned."

With a swift motion, Dakota assumed the [Gale Stance], her posture relaxed yet radiating controlled power. Astron mirrored her, his stance solid and focused.

"Begin," Dakota commanded.

Astron moved first, launching into a [High Gale] strike with fluid precision. His fist cut through the air, aimed at Dakota's upper body. Dakota met his strike with a perfectly timed block, her movements effortless.

"Good," Dakota said, her voice calm despite the intensity of the exchange. "Now, keep it going."

Astron transitioned smoothly into [Medium Gale], a horizontal strike designed to break through defenses. Dakota matched his pace, her own strike intercepting his with equal power.

The sound of their strikes echoed through the hall, each impact a testament to their skill and training. Astron's movements were precise and powerful, each strike flowing seamlessly into the next. Dakota's responses were equally flawless, her experience and skill evident in every motion.

"Don't hesitate," Dakota urged, parrying another strike. "Commit fully to each attack."

Astron pushed harder, the rhythm of his strikes becoming more aggressive. He flowed into [Low Gale], his strike aimed at Dakota's lower body. Dakota countered with a swift kick, deflecting his attack with ease.

"Excellent," Dakota said, her tone filled with approval. "Now, let's see your full potential."

Astron's eyes narrowed with determination. He launched into a rapid sequence of strikes, combining [High Gale], [Medium Gale], and [Low Gale] in a relentless barrage. Each strike was executed with perfect form, his mana enhancing every movement.

Despite his speed and precision, Dakota matched him strike for strike. Her movements were a blur of controlled power, intercepting each of his attacks with calculated precision.

'Is she reading me?' She deflected, blocked, and countered with a grace that seemed almost effortless.

'Indeed. I guess I still have yet to engrave the sense of battle to my technique.' He already knew that training his attacks alone would not help him in the real battle. No matter how fast he grasped, he was fighting with his body for the first time.

'The range of the strikes, the posture, everything is different.' Dakota was different.

'She is....Spacing me....' Out of all the people that he had faced, she looked like a wall. There were no surprise attacks, no witty strikes.

Pure Martial Arts.

That was new for him, as even while he was in that place, the sole reason why he had learned to fight was to efficiently destroy his enemies.

Astron felt the burn in his muscles, the strain of pushing his limits.

But he didn't let up. He poured everything into his attacks, and his desire to improve drove him forward.

Dakota's eyes gleamed with a fierce intensity. "Good, Astron. Keep pushing."

The sparring session became more intense, the sound of their strikes filling the hall. Dakota hit Astron multiple times, each impact a reminder of her superior skill.

'What it means to be a Martial Artist.....It is to never back down.' But Astron didn't back down. He absorbed each hit, using the pain as fuel to push himself harder.

Finally, Dakota stepped back, signaling a pause. Her breathing was steady, her expression a mix of satisfaction and approval.

"You've done well, Astron," she said, her voice firm but encouraging. "Your control over the [Gale Stance] is impressive. But remember, in a real fight, it's not just about executing the moves perfectly. It's about adapting and responding to your opponent."

Astron nodded, his breathing steadying as he wiped the sweat from his brow. "Thank you, Master," he said.

Dakota's eyes twinkled with a mix of approval and challenge. "Tell me, Astron. Do you understand why you weren't able to land a hit on me, even though we used the same martial arts?"

Astron considered her question, replaying the sparring session in his mind. His strikes had been precise, his movements fluid, but something fundamental had been missing. His gaze met Dakota's. "It was because my intent was obvious, wasn't it?"

A proud smile spread across Dakota's face. "You're a quick learner," she said, nodding in approval. "Yes, your intent was clear. In a fight, especially against a skilled opponent, you must mask your true intentions. Make your movements unpredictable, blend your attacks, and keep your opponent guessing."

"You must become a master of deception. Your body should move fluidly, but your mind must remain sharp, always adapting to the flow of battle."

Astron turned his gaze towards the simulation rooms, the advanced training areas equipped with state-of-the-art technology designed to push trainees to their limits. He nodded.

"I know what I need to do."

From now on, he will be polishing his skills in those rooms.

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<Acrobatics Training, 11 A.M, Sixth day of training>

Tianna stood in the center of the training area; her expression focused as she prepared to demonstrate an advanced technique to Astron. Today's lesson was critical for Astron's progression into the advanced stages.

"Astron," Tianna began, her voice clear and authoritative, "Today we'll be introducing an advanced technique that requires mastery of a special spell called [Grapple Link]. This spell is essential for navigating certain obstacles in the fifth, sixth, and seventh stages."

Tianna raised her hands, magical energy already forming around them. "The [Grapple Link] is a third-rank spell that imitates the thread of a spider, creating flexible, intricately woven threads. It uses four spell blocks: 'Create,' 'Engrave,' 'Enchant,' and 'Weave,' combined with special circuitry to form the thread."

She demonstrated the spell step by step. "First, we start with 'Create,' which forms the basic structure of the thread." A glowing line appeared between her fingers, shimmering with potential.

"Next, we 'Engrave' the thread, adding the necessary patterns and runes for flexibility and strength." The line glowed brighter as intricate symbols formed along its length.

"Then, we 'Enchant' the thread, imbuing it with magical properties to ensure it can withstand significant force." The thread pulsed with energy, becoming more tangible and robust.

"Finally, we 'Weave' the thread, intertwining the enchanted lines to create the final, flexible product." The glowing line split into multiple strands before weaving together into a single, strong thread.

Tianna extended the finished thread, attaching it to a nearby structure and using it to swing gracefully across the training area. "With the [Grapple Link], you can traverse gaps, climb walls, and maneuver in ways that would otherwise be impossible."

She landed softly and turned to Astron. "This spell is crucial for your advanced training. Mastering it will greatly enhance your mobility and efficiency. Pay close attention to the spell blocks and the circuitry I've shown you. It might take a while for you to be able to completely master how to create the spell at a fast speed, but it is fine to spend a lot of time."

"Do you mean this?" Astron asked, raising his hands as a glowing thread began to form between his fingers.

Tianna's eyes widened in astonishment. "What is this? What am I seeing?"

Astron explained calmly, "In the academy, I had already learned how to use basic blocks and how magic works."

'Thanks to a certain someone.' He could not help but think as he remembered how that certain someone waited for the whole night to teach him how to use magic.

"I can already use certain spells up to the second grade. I wasn't expecting this one to be easy, but I figured I'd give it a try."

Tianna's mouth hung open wide, unable to believe what she was seeing for a moment. "You... you can already form the spell blocks and create the thread?"

Astron nodded, focusing on the thread as he continued to weave it. "Yes, Instructor. The basics came naturally to me, and I've had some practice with similar spells. I'm not perfect yet, but I understand the principles."

Tianna shook her head in amazement. "It was my fault."

'For expecting anything less for you.....What a monster...' "Your fault?"

"Don't mind me."

Once again, Tianna saw a new world.

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<Stealth Training, 12 A.M, Sixth day of training>

"Do you wish to challenge the sixth stage?"

"Not yet. I think it is better for me to train a little bit more."

"Good. You should never get ahead of yourself, especially while training."

"I will keep that in mind."

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<Reina's Room, 3 P.M, Sixth Day of training>

Astron stood before the door of the training room, his mind already working on deciphering the new password. 'The password... It should be, Expand Yourself.' As he thought, he deciphered the psions.

"Only the strong will prevail."

But the answer was not close this time.

"She had a change of heart, it seems. Maybe something happened." He mumbled as he entered the password. After entering, she faced Reina who was sitting on the table with her legs crossed. This time, her suit was not a short skirt but a pair of black jeans with trousers.

"Let's begin today's training," Reina said, her tone calmer compared to normal. She created a new set of psion lines, this time with multiple higher-ranked threads. "Today, you'll start by focusing on filtering and assimilation for a multiple higher-ranked mana thread, as per usual."

"I understand."

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"Welcome, Trainee Astron Natusalune. Beginning body training session focusing on Everchanging Glyph optimization."

And he finished the day with the same voice once again.

<Seventh Day of Training, 5 A.M.>

The early morning light cast a gentle glow across the training hall as Astron prepared for another intense session. However, as he entered the simulation room, a notification pinged on his wrist communicator.

He glanced down to see a message from Dakota.

[Dakota: Hey, Can't make it today. Got some stuff to handle. Keep up with the simulations. Tomorrow, we test you against me. Stay sharp.]

Astron was flabbergasted. Specifically, how the message had been written was that how a master would talk to their disciple. Dakota was really an oddball amongst the others.

'This is.....really something....'

If there were another person like her in the world, that would be a certain tomboy.

'One day....I would like to see the meeting between you two.'

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<Acrobatics Training, 11 A.M, Seventh day of training>

Tianna watched in awe as Astron effortlessly swung around the training area using the [Grapple Link] spell. His speed in conjuring the spell had increased dramatically over the past two days, making it fast enough to be used in real missions. Each thread he created was strong and flexible, seamlessly integrating into his acrobatic maneuvers.

Astron swung from one wall to another, his movements fluid and precise. He landed lightly on narrow ledges, using the [Grapple Link] to maintain his balance while executing complex turns and flips. The combination of conjuring the thread and maintaining his balance while swinging was a challenging task, but Astron made it look effortless.

Tianna could hardly believe her eyes. 'In just two days, he's mastered a technique that takes most trainees weeks, if not months, to perfect,' she thought, shaking her head in disbelief. 'He's not just using the thread; he's integrating it into his movements like a natural extension of his body.'

As the session came to an end, Tianna approached Astron, her expression a mix of pride and amazement. "Astron. You've mastered the [Grapple Link] to a level where you can use it effectively in a mission. Your balance and control are outstanding. I believe you're ready to take the exam for the fifth stage tomorrow."

Astron nodded, but there was a hint of dissatisfaction in his eyes. "Thank you, Instructor Tianna. While I appreciate your praise, I'm not satisfied with my progress yet. I feel like I can do a lot better than this."

Tianna raised an eyebrow, "You can do better than this?"

"That is right. The spell you taught me gave me an idea. If I can master the spell and its usage well, there is something I want to try."

"Ah? I see..." Tianna responded, her interest deepening. "What kind of technique are you talking about?"

Astron looked thoughtful, his gaze distant as if envisioning something complex. "It's hard to explain, Instructor. I'm not even sure of its basics yet. But once I can develop it, it would mean a whole different thing."

Tianna frowned slightly, not entirely understanding but sensing the depth of his ambition. "A whole different thing? Can you give me any idea of what you're aiming for?"

Astron shook his head. "Not yet. It's still forming in my mind. I need to experiment and refine the concept before I can fully explain it. But I'm confident it will enhance my abilities significantly."

Tianna nodded slowly, a mixture of skepticism and admiration in her eyes. "Alright."

'When I was young...I was like that, was I not?'



She remembered the moments when she would also ask a lot of questions and would ponder on herself a lot. However, that type of moment became more and more scarce as she grew older.

'Maybe I should start remembering it too.' "I trust your judgment and your abilities. Keep working on it, and when you need it, you can consult me. I will do my best to try to help you."

At that, Astron looked into her eyes and nodded his head.

"I will do that."

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<Stealth Training, 12 A.M, Seventh day of training>

Astron stepped forward, entering the more complex course designed to test his advanced skills. He moved with precision and confidence, his presence blending seamlessly with the surroundings. Each obstacle was tackled with a fluid grace, his awareness and control evident.

23:06

"Do you wish to challenge the sixth stage?" Kennet asked, his voice carrying a hint of surprise.

"I do," Astron replied, his determination unwavering.

"I see." Kennet nodded, motioning for Astron to proceed.

Astron stepped forward, entering the more complex course designed to test his advanced skills. He moved with precision and confidence, his presence blending seamlessly with the surroundings. Each obstacle was tackled with a fluid grace, his awareness and control evident.

Kennet watched closely, impressed by Astron's progress. "He's almost there," he thought, observing Astron's near-perfect execution. "But the last two stages will be a lot harder to complete."

As Astron continued, Kennet's respect for the young man's abilities grew. The final stages would be the ultimate test of his skills, but Kennet felt a rare sense of optimism.

Astron was proving to be an exceptional student, and his potential seemed limitless.

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<Reina's Room, 3 P.M, Seventh Day of Training>

Astron stood before the door of the training room, his mind already working on deciphering the new password. 'The password... It should be, Embrace the Challenge.' As he thought, he deciphered the psions.

"Rise to the Occasion."

The answer was different this time as well. Astron frowned slightly. "Not quite," he mumbled. "She's keeping me on my toes."

After entering the correct password, he stepped into the room. Reina was seated at the table, her legs crossed. This time, she wore a sleek pair of black jeans and a fitted jacket, giving her a more practical yet still authoritative look.

"Let's begin today's training," Reina said, her tone calmer compared to normal. She created a new set of psion lines, this time with multiple higher-ranked threads. "Today, you'll focus on filtering and assimilation for multiple higher-ranked mana threads. This will test your ability to handle complex flows simultaneously."

"I understand," Astron replied, his voice steady.

"Good," Reina mumbled.

'With how things outside are going, we need to speed up his training. He needs to get ready in three weeks.' Reina thought.

They needed personnel like Astron urgently.

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"Welcome, Trainee Astron Natusalune. Beginning body training session focusing on Everchanging Glyph optimization. Today, a slight change has been made into your training.

Astron paused, listening intently.

"Your progress has been steadily progressing. However, your body is adapting to the extreme stages faster than expected. Precisely because of this, the intensity of your training will now be increased."

He nodded, bracing himself for the new challenges.

"Commencing with the heavy ropes."

The resistance of the ropes was noticeably higher, each wave requiring more strength.

"Trainee Astron's body limits are pushed to 85%. Increasing the intensity."

Next was the weighted climbing. The added weight was significantly more, and the gravity was even stronger.

"Grip strength and muscle endurance improved by 6% from the previous session."

The compound exercises were also more demanding. The weights were heavier, and the repetitions were higher.

"Overall muscle coordination and power increased by 5%."

In the gravity room, the increased gravitational force made each movement a struggle.

"Bone density and muscle resilience increased by 4%. Mana reserves stable."

Finally, in the herbal bath, the water bubbled furiously as toxins were expelled.

"Administering high-rank mana potion. The muscle reconstruction process is ongoing. Body limits pushed to 120%."

Astron drank the potion, feeling the intense surge of energy.

"Muscle reconstruction process nearing completion. Adaptation to increased training intensity progressing efficiently."

The session concluded with the AI's final report.

"Process complete. Trainee Astron, muscle and bone density increased by an additional 4%. Adaptation to Everchanging Glyph's influence is advancing rapidly. Recommend rest and further monitoring."

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"That hurts like hell," I muttered, feeling the cold herbal water piercing through my skin like a thousand needles.

SHIVER! I shivered, my muscles twitching involuntarily as the concoction worked its magic. The AI adjusted the bath's temperature, ensuring the optimal conditions for my recovery. The water's color shifted slightly, indicating the ongoing expulsion of toxins and the absorption of beneficial herbs.

"Adapting bath parameters," the AI announced in its calm, mechanical voice. "Administering final herbal mixture."

I leaned back, trying to relax despite the discomfort. The room was dimly lit, and the soft glow of the runes embedded in the walls created a soothing ambiance. I focused on my breathing, letting the water do its work.

"Meal service activated," the AI continued. A small tray was gently lowered onto the water's surface, containing my final meal of the day. The meal was specifically tailored to complement the bath's effects, ensuring my body received the nutrients it needed for optimal recovery.

I picked up the utensils, careful not to spill any of the food into the bath. The meal consisted of a lean cut of monster meat, various steamed vegetables, and a nutrient-rich broth. The flavors were surprisingly good, considering the functional purpose of the meal.

As I ate, I reflected on the day's training. The intensity had been increased significantly, and my body had been pushed to its limits.

'Now....How to do it....'

I thought as I released small threads from the tip of my fingers. They wriggled as if it were an extension of my will. At this point, I was pretty confident with my control, but they also consumed quite a bit of mana at the same time.

'For them to be useful on battlefields, I need to make them adjusted to my [Lunar Enigma].'

While I was able to use normal magic as per other Hunters, the strength of those magics did not come even remotely close to how my Moon mana worked.

In a simple analogy, with a 5.88 Magic power, a normal Hunter's magic would be a lot stronger than what I could output, but on the other hand, when I used my Lunar Mana, I would match their strength.

In a way, I would experience a downgrade of my powers if I were to use the system of normal Hunters. That was the basic analogy.

As I was thinking, I took another bite of my meal.

"Muscle reconstruction process is stable," the AI reported. "Current status: 95% recovery."

I finished the last bite of my meal, feeling the warmth of the broth spread through my body. The cold of the bath was a stark contrast, but I knew it was essential for my recovery.

"Recommending an additional 10 minutes of immersion," the AI added. "Ensuring complete absorption of herbal mixture."

I nodded, sinking deeper into the water. The initial pain had subsided, replaced by a dull ache that signaled the effectiveness of the treatment.

'The same goes for sword, my fists, or other weapons.....[Celestalith]. I need to find a way for it to take a different shape.'

It had been a while since I had used my weapon here, and my hands were a bit itchy, to be frank. But, learning [Gale Stance] was feeling that emptiness for the time being.

'Aside from that, I need to raise my mana reserves.'

For that, I already had two things on my mind.

'I need to get that first upon leaving here.'

The first thing was to get that thing.

And the second one was.

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[Item: Mana Infusion Elixir]

Description: A rare elixir designed to permanently increase the user's mana capacity. Crafted from a blend of magical herbs and monster essences, this elixir enhances the body's ability to store and channel mana. It is particularly effective for those with specialized mana types.

Price: 450 Arcanum Credits

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This item.

'450 Arcanum Credits....Just barely....'

I checked my current Arcanum Credits balance.

'It's worth it,' I thought. Investing in my mana capacity was essential for maximizing my combat effectiveness. With the Everchanging Glyph and my training regimen, I was already pushing my physical limits. Enhancing my mana reserves would provide a balanced growth.

I confirmed the purchase and felt a slight vibration from the panel as the transaction was processed. The elixir would be delivered to my room shortly.

"Purchase confirmed," the AI announced. "Mana Infusion Elixir will be delivered to your quarters within the next hour."

I nodded, satisfied with my decision. The elixir would be a valuable addition to my training regimen. I took a deep breath, feeling the cold herbal water continuing its work on my body.

'With the elixir and the Everchanging Glyph, I'll be able to push my limits even further,' I thought. 'Every step counts in this journey.'

The AI's voice broke through my thoughts. "Herbal bath treatment complete. Muscle reconstruction process finalized. Please proceed with caution as you resume normal activities."

I slowly stood up, feeling a slight tingling sensation all over my body as I stepped out of the bath. The recovery process had been intense, but I felt rejuvenated and ready for the challenges ahead.

Drying off and dressing in fresh clothes, I made my way back to my quarters. The promise of the Mana Infusion Elixir and the progress I had made today filled me with a renewed sense of determination.

As I reached my room, I noticed a small package waiting for me on the table. The elixir had arrived.

Chapter 474 106.1 - A small talk

I sat on the edge of my bed, holding the Mana Infusion Elixir in my hand. The liquid inside the vial glowed faintly, a promise of the power it held. There was no need for complex rituals or precise timing; the elixir was already refined and ready for consumption.

I uncorked the vial and brought it to my lips, drinking the elixir in one smooth motion. The taste was surprisingly mild, almost sweet, with a hint of something I couldn't quite place. As the elixir flowed down my throat, I felt a warmth spreading through my chest, radiating outward to the rest of my body.

I lay back on my bed, closing my eyes as I let the elixir do its work. The warmth intensified, and I felt my mana reserves expanding, accommodating more energy than ever before. But then, something unexpected happened.

In the darkness behind my closed eyes, a small crescent moon began to form. Its silver light was soft yet mesmerizing, and it seemed to pulse with an energy that called to me.

I tried to reach out to it, but my body refused to move. I realized then that I was in a dream state, caught between reality and something beyond.

I stared at the crescent moon, unable to look away.

"....st....k...th...nsw...i.....u....ho....."

It felt as though it was communicating with me, but the words were incomprehensible, like whispers from a distant place that I couldn't quite grasp. The moon's light grew brighter, filling my vision entirely.

Then, just as suddenly as it had appeared, the moon began to crumble. The silver light fractured into countless pieces, each one dissolving into the darkness. I felt a pang of loss as I watched the moon disappear, its presence leaving an emptiness that was quickly replaced by reality.

I opened my eyes, finding myself back in my room. The warm sensation from the elixir had subsided, leaving behind a feeling of increased vitality and strength. My mana reserves felt fuller and more potent, but the memory of the dream lingered in my mind.



"What was that?" I muttered to myself, trying to make sense of the experience. It felt significant, as though the crescent moon was more than just a dream. There was a connection, something tied to the depths of my powers.

"Sigh....."

Once again, what happened here was something that was similar to the Moonstone.

'But in the end, I can't find what it is.'

I recalled what those words were saying, trying to understand their meanings but not to avail.

RING!

As I was lost in thought, trying to decipher the meaning behind the crescent moon and the incomprehensible words I heard, my smartwatch suddenly rang, pulling me back to reality. I glanced down at the screen to see a message notification.

[Message: You are now permitted to use the communication centers to connect with the outside world. You have one hour to make any calls or send messages.]

I stared at the message for a moment, processing the information. It had been a while since I'd had any contact with the outside world, and the sudden opportunity to do so felt both unexpected and somewhat.....interesting.

'One hour,' I thought.

I stood up from the bed, feeling the lingering effects of the elixir coursing through me.

'Right, before leaving, I should check my stats.' With that thought, I opened the status panel.

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Variable Attributes:

Strength: 4.85 -- > 4.92

Dexterity: 5.13 --> 5.19

Agility: 5.20 --> 5.32

Constitution: 4.88 --> 4.98

Intuition: 5.26 --> 5.39

Magical Power: 5.61 --> 5.69

Mana Capacity: 4.88 --> 5.68

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My eyes slightly twitched at the sight of the status panel. I hadn't expected such a significant change just from one elixir. My mana capacity had jumped from 4.88 to 5.68, a staggering increase that I could already feel within me.

'This... this is much more than I expected,' I thought, staring at the numbers.

It wasn't just a minor improvement; this was a leap in power that could make a real difference in my abilities. I quickly brought up the description of the Mana Infusion Elixir, scrolling through the details. There it was, a line that I'd almost overlooked before.

Elixir Description:

Note: Those with specialized mana types may experience a more significant enhancement in mana capacity.

'Of course,' I thought, piecing it together. My Lunar Mana was anything but ordinary. The elixir had likely interacted with my unique mana in ways that standard elixirs wouldn't have, leading to a

substantial increase in my mana reserves. But at the same time, this elixir would not benefit to the general hunters.

In any case, with how my other attributes were growing, I can easily see the improvements of Everchanging Glyph and the body training that I had been doing with Training Assistant AI.

'As expected. It is paying off. I wonder how it will be at the end of the training.'

With that thought, I slowly left my room.

The communication center wasn't far from my room, so it did not take too long for me to reach that place.

The door to the communication center slid shut behind me with a soft hiss, sealing me inside. The room was dimly lit, the glow from the control panels casting a faint blue hue over the walls. The hum of machinery filled the air, a reminder of the advanced technology at work.

As I stood there, the room began to adjust, the subtle vibrations in the floor indicating that space was being realigned for secure communication. A voice echoed through the chamber, calm and mechanical.

"User is advised to remain stationary during space-time realignment. Be mindful of any spatial disturbances."

I kept my composure, standing still as the room's technology did its work. The air seemed to shimmer around me as if reality itself was being tweaked. It was a strange sensation, like being on the edge of something vast and unknown.

A few moments later, the vibrations ceased, and the room's voice returned.

"Space-time realignment complete. Outside communication now possible."

The tension in the air eased, and the room felt stable again.

RING!

And the moment it did, the normal smartwatch that I had been using started ringing.

RING! RING! RING! RING! RING! RING! RING! RING! RING! RING! RING! RING! RING!

And it was not one.

Countless different notifications started coming down.

'What the?' And it was surprising, as I had never been the type to get so many notifications. After all, not many had my contact number, and even if they had, they would not contact me.

But then, I remembered the possible reason why, as I saw the name on the screen.

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"Sigh.....This is boring....I am really bored...."

A young woman mumbled to herself. She wore a stunning dress that perfectly complemented her features, accentuating her fiery red hair and amber eyes. The dress was a deep, rich crimson, its fabric flowing elegantly around her slender figure, hugging her curves in all the right places. The neckline was tasteful yet alluring, and the intricate embroidery along the hem shimmered in the soft lighting of the banquet hall.

Her fair skin glowed under the chandeliers, and the contrast between her vivid hair and the dark red of her dress was striking. She was undeniably beautiful, and many of the guests had already noticed her, though she hardly paid them any mind.

Irina stood by one of the large, ornate windows, gazing out into the garden beyond. The banquet hall was filled with the hum of conversation, the clinking of glasses, and the soft strains of classical music. Elegant figures in luxurious attire mingled, their laughter and polite chatter filling the air.

But to Irina, it was all just background noise. She felt disconnected from the event, her mind wandering elsewhere.

'I hate these things,' she thought, stifling a yawn. 'Why do I have to be here? I'd rather be doing anything else.'

She absentmindedly twirled a lock of her hair around her finger, her amber eyes scanning the room. The other heirs and influential figures were deep in conversation, discussing politics, business, and alliances.

It was all so tedious, so predictable. While it was not like she did not like politics, most of the time, the topics were all redundant. Same topics, same people.

At some point, it would become a magazine report, and people would start talking about other people's daily actions.

'How can they find this interesting?' she wondered, her boredom growing by the second. She did not have many common interests with the young ladies of her age either. And she was not in a good mood.

She glanced down at her glass of sparkling wine, swirling the liquid around with a sigh. 'And why has that bastard not contacted me? And why is he always leaving me on read? It had been a week already!'

At that moment, she started worrying. Though the said person was him, and he was not someone who would put himself into danger easily, he was also not someone who would shy away when the opportunity represented itself.

In a way, he was both a planner and an action-taker.

Irina's mind started to spiral into worry as she imagined different scenarios. What if Astron had gotten himself into something dangerous? He was known for taking calculated risks, but what if this time something went wrong?

'He's not the type to avoid danger if it presents an opportunity,' she thought, her grip tightening on the stem of her glass. 'He plans, but he also acts. What if he...'

Her thoughts drifted to a particular vision she had seen before, a memory from the past—an image of Astron in a state that was neither fully human nor fully demon. The twisted, demonic energy that surrounded him in that vision was still vivid in her mind, and she felt a shiver run down her spine.

'No way, right? He wouldn't let himself fall into that...' she tried to reassure herself, but the worry gnawed at her, refusing to be silenced.

The possibility, however slim, haunted her. What if he was in danger right now, struggling against forces beyond his control? What if that vision was more than just a distant memory—what if it was a glimpse of a possible future?

She tried to shake the thought from her mind, but it clung to her like a shadow, darkening her mood further. She couldn't reach him, and she had no idea where he was or what he was doing. The uncertainty was maddening.

At that moment, she was pulled from her thoughts by someone's approach. A young man, dressed in an impeccably tailored suit, was making his way toward her.

Jeremy Hawkins.

His presence was commanding, and the air around him buzzed with confidence. Irina recognized him immediately—he was the heir to a prominent family known for their work in the [Awakened Weapon Industry].

"Lady Irina," the young man greeted her with a polite nod, his tone smooth and practiced. "It's a pleasure to see you here."

Irina forced a smile, masking her inner turmoil. "Likewise," she replied, though her mind was still partly consumed by thoughts of Astron.

"Would you mind dancing?" Jeremy Hawkins asked, extending a hand toward Irina with a charming smile. His offer was polite, but she could sense the underlying motive. With her family's standing, it wasn't unusual for someone like Jeremy to seek a connection, and for most nobles, the act of dancing was a casual way to establish rapport.

But Irina had no desire to dance, especially not with Jeremy Hawkins. She knew him from those visions—knew what kind of person he really was.

A man with a smooth exterior but with motives that were far from pure. Her instinct was to refuse immediately, to avoid any unnecessary interaction with him.

Just as she was about to politely decline, her smartwatch suddenly chimed, the sound breaking through the tense moment. She glanced down at the device, its surface adorned with elegant engravings that glinted in the soft light of the banquet hall. Her heart skipped a beat as she saw the name flashing on the screen.

Her face changed in an instant, the tension draining away as a genuine smile spread across her lips. "Maybe next time," she said, her tone light and breezy as she smoothly excused herself. "I need to take this call."

Chapter 475 106.2 - A small talk

"I need to take this call."

Without waiting for his response, Irina turned on her heel and walked away, her heart pounding with a mix of relief and anticipation.

She could feel Jeremy's eyes on her as she left, but she didn't care. All that mattered was that he had finally contacted her.

She moved quickly through the crowded hall, finding a quiet corner where she could answer the call in peace. Taking a deep breath, she tapped the screen and brought the smartwatch to her ear.

"Finally," she murmured, her voice tinged with both annoyance and relief. "Do you have any idea how long I've been waiting to hear from you?"

Irina brought the smartwatch's voice to her ear, activating the formation, her pulse quickening with a mixture of frustration and relief.

—I figured you'd be waiting," Astron's voice came through the line, calm and composed as ever.

"Do you even know how annoying it is to be left hanging like that?" she shot back, her annoyance clear in her tone. "You could've at least sent a message."

–I was busy. Besides, I knew you'd manage," Astron replied, a hint of teasing in his voice.

Irina rolled her eyes, though she couldn't suppress the smile tugging at her lips. "Manage? I was practically going crazy over here."

–And yet, here you are, still intact," he said, the amusement in his voice more evident now.

She huffed in exasperation, though the sound of his voice was enough to ease the tension she had been feeling. "You're impossible, you know that?"

–So I've been told," Astron replied, his tone shifting slightly, becoming more serious. –But enough about that. How are things on your end? You sound like you're at a party."

Irina glanced around the banquet hall, the elegant surroundings a stark contrast to her current mood. "I am. Just the usual—boring, tedious, and full of people I'd rather avoid."

–Sounds delightful," he remarked dryly. –Though I imagine you're handling it as gracefully as ever."

"Hardly," she muttered. "I'd rather be anywhere else. But you finally called, so I suppose that's something."

–Glad I could make your evening a little more bearable," Astron said, his voice carrying a warmth that made her heart flutter.

Irina leaned against the wall, her frustration melting away with each word. "You did. So, what's kept you so busy that you couldn't spare a moment to reply?"

There was a brief pause on the other end, and she could almost picture him weighing his words before he spoke.

–Training. I've been... occupied."

"Training for what?"



–Just usual." "What do you mean just usual?"

–Don't you already know it?"

"I want to hear it from your own mouth."

–...."

Irina could almost see Astron shaking his head on the other end of the line, that familiar gesture of his when he found her persistence both amusing and exasperating. He remained silent for a moment longer, clearly not giving in easily.

'This is what you deserve for ignoring me,' Irina thought, refusing to back down.

Finally, Astron spoke in a calm and measured tone, as always. –"You already know Reina. I've been training with them in a camp, honing my skills."

"Reina?" Irina echoed, her mind instantly conjuring up the image of the woman who had come to watch Astron during the duels. She remembered Reina's confident, teasing demeanor, her playful nature, and the way she had interacted with Astron. There was something about her—something that made Irina feel... uneasy.

A subtle, unfamiliar sensation bloomed in her chest. It was like a mix of irritation and something else she couldn't quite place. She frowned slightly, trying to push the feeling away, but it lingered, gnawing at her thoughts.

"She's the one who was at your duel, right? The woman who was all smiles and teasing," Irina said, trying to keep her tone neutral but failing to hide the slight edge in her voice.

–"Yeah, that's her," Astron replied, seemingly oblivious to the shift in Irina's mood.

Irina bit her lip, feeling a surge of annoyance. 'Why does it bother me so much?' she thought, a frown creasing her brow. The way Reina had acted so familiar with Astron, the way she had teased him—why was it making her feel this way?

She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but it was as if something was being tugged inside her, something she wasn't used to feeling. The more she thought about Reina, the more this odd sensation grew until it finally dawned on her: she was jealous.

'No way...' Irina thought, her cheeks flushing at the realization. 'Am I really jealous of her?'

She hated how petty it made her feel, but there was no denying it. The thought of Astron spending time with Reina and of her being close to him stirred a possessiveness in her that she hadn't expected.

—"You still there?" Astron's voice cut through her thoughts, bringing her back to the present.

Irina took a deep breath, forcing herself to sound composed. "Yeah, I'm here. Just... thinking."

—"About what?"

Irina hesitated for a moment, unsure if she wanted to voice her feelings. She opted for something else instead, trying to deflect. "About how you're spending all this time with Reina. Must be nice, huh?"

There was a brief silence on the other end, and then Astron spoke, his tone slightly teasing. —"Are you getting jealous, Irina?"

Irina's heart skipped a beat, and she could almost feel the heat rising to her cheeks. "N-no! Why would I be jealous?" she stammered, trying to sound indignant but only managing to sound flustered.

Astron chuckled softly, the sound sending a shiver down her spine. —"Just making sure."

Irina huffed, crossing her arms as if he could see her through the phone. "You're impossible."

—"Heh....." She heard a small laugh from the phone. A small laugh that she had only heard once. Now, this was the second one.

So, she could not help but smile as well. In just a matter of seconds, the frustration that had been gnawing at her seemed to melt away.

Her thoughts drifted back to the night under the moon, the night she had seen that rare, fleeting smile on his face. It was a moment she had replayed in her mind countless times, a memory that always brought warmth to her heart.

Irina raised her head, her eyes catching sight of the moon hanging low in the night sky. Its soft, silver light bathed the world in a gentle glow, casting long shadows and illuminating the path ahead. The sight was mesmerizing, and for a moment, everything else faded away.

"It's beautiful," she mumbled to herself, almost forgetting she was still on the phone.

—"What is?" Astron's voice came through the line, pulling her back to reality.

Irina hesitated for a moment, then smiled softly, deciding not to explain. "If you were here, you'd know."

There was a pause on the other end, and then Astron's voice responded. —"It's a pity, then."

"Yes, indeed it is," she agreed, her tone thoughtful.

She realized that, despite her earlier frustration and irritation, just talking to him had already improved her mood. The banter, the teasing, the way he seemed to understand her without needing many words—it all made her feel lighter, more at ease.

Even though he wasn't physically there with her, his presence was still felt through their conversation, and that was enough for now.

'Ah, right....'

And then she remembered why she had been calling him all that time. While hearing his voice was important, she also needed to talk about something else.

"Sigh...." She could not help but sigh to herself. She got carried away by the conversation just now and almost forgotten the most important thing.

—"Did you determine the time?" Astron asked, his voice still calm, though there was a hint of curiosity.

Irina nodded, even though he couldn't see her. "Yes, but I figured you'd be busy. For the next month, you're probably going to be stuck training, right?"

There was a brief pause before Astron responded. —"Yes, that's correct. I'll most likely be busy training, so I won't be able to come out."

Irina had anticipated this. She knew that Astron's dedication to his training was unwavering, and it wasn't something she could easily disrupt. "I thought as much," she said, her tone understanding. "That's why I've decided we'll do it during the last week of the vacation."

She could almost hear Astron considering her proposal on the other end of the line. —"The last week, huh? I suppose that could work."

"It will work," Irina insisted, a smile tugging at the corners of her lips. "So, make sure you're ready when the time comes. I don't want to hear any excuses."

—"I won't," Astron replied. —"Though you better not forget your promise either."

"I won't either." Irina smiled.

'Though, mother also wants to see you.' Well, she wanted to see the expression that he would make when he faced one of the strongest people in the entire Human Domain.

'This is my payback for not getting any replies.'

Irina's smile widened as she thought about what awaited Astron at the end of the vacation. "Oh, and one more thing before you go," she added, her tone softening.

—"What is it?" Astron's voice was calm, as usual, but there was a hint of curiosity.

"I want you to call me at least once a week," Irina requested. "I know you're busy, but it's not too much to ask, right?"

There was a brief pause on the other end as if Astron was considering her request. –"Okay," he finally replied. –"I'll call you every week at this hour."

Irina's heart fluttered with happiness, a warm smile spreading across her face. "Good. I'll be waiting."

But just as she was about to end the call, Astron's voice came through again, his tone slightly more serious. –"Aren't you going to a training camp?"

Irina's eyes widened in surprise. "How did you know?" she asked, genuinely curious. She hadn't mentioned it to him, and yet he seemed to know about her plans.

–"It wasn't hard to guess," Astron replied. –"You've been busy with preparations, and given your family's status, it's only natural that you'd have some intense training lined up."

Irina couldn't help but remember this guy was always like that. 'Always good at seeing things that others won't.' "You're right," she admitted. "I'll be going to a training camp for three weeks, starting tomorrow. It's something my mother arranged for me as the heir of the Emberheart family. I'm visiting a special place, which is why I'll have that last week to myself."

–"I see," Astron said, his voice thoughtful. –"Then I'll make sure to call you during that time. And good luck with your training."

"Thanks," Irina replied, feeling a strange mix of excitement and nervousness. "But remember, I'll be expecting your call. Don't make me wait."

–"I won't," Astron promised.

With that, they ended the call, and Irina found herself staring at the screen of her smartwatch with a contented smile.

Knowing that Astron would be in touch, even during their time apart, made her feel more connected to him.

As she prepared for the days ahead, she couldn't help but look forward to the week they would spend together at the end of the vacation.

Whatever challenges lay ahead in her training camp, she knew that having something to look forward to would keep her motivated.

Chapter 476 106.3 - A small talk

After ending the call with Irina, I decided to reach out to Senior Maya. I owed her an update after all this time. She had been a significant part of my journey, and it was only right to let her know where I stood.

I initiated the call, but the connection failed. The same automated message played, stating that her smartwatch could not be reached.

'Figures,' I thought, a bit disappointed but not entirely surprised.

Senior Maya..... Her situation was kind of weird. I had never heard of Evergreen's family or anything like that, but at the same time, she had immense amounts of resources to which she could have access.

That is why it was not hard to judge that she was some sort of important person as well.

'Now that I think about it, maybe I can obtain the information from this place.'

It was a natural thought, but that was for a different time.

I didn't want to leave things hanging since I know that she can be a bit hard to handle sometimes.

'Let's hope that nothing goes wrong. I had spent a lot of time getting those blood bags ready.'

It was a decision that I had made once, and now, I am going to see the end of it. There is nothing that can be done other than this.

I switched to the voice message function and recorded a short message.

"Senior Maya, it's your Junior, Astron. I'm in the middle of some secluded training, so if you can't reach me, that's why. I just wanted to let you know that things are going well, and I'm making progress. Take care, and stay safe."

I ended the message and sent it off.

'This should suffice.' At least, I hope it does.

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Jeremy Hawkins stood frozen, his extended hand slowly dropping to his side as Irina gracefully turned away, her attention fully captured by the call. The lightheartedness in her tone, the ease with which she dismissed him, stung more than he cared to admit. For a moment, his charming facade faltered, his smile wavering as he watched her retreating figure. The way she had so effortlessly excused herself felt like a slap in the face, and the sting of humiliation burned hotter as he noticed the amused glances from the other heirs scattered around the banquet hall.

They weren't even trying to hide their amusement, their eyes gleaming with barely concealed laughter. A few whispers flitted through the air, subtle enough to avoid overt disrespect but loud enough for Jeremy to catch their derision. He knew what they were thinking: The great Jeremy Hawkins, heir to the mighty Hawkins family, just got publicly snubbed.

The realization made his blood boil. But Jeremy was nothing if not composed under pressure. He forced a smile, his expression betraying nothing of the storm brewing inside him.

With a casual shrug, he adjusted the cuff of his tailored suit as if the encounter had been of no consequence at all. He lifted his chin slightly, meeting the amused gazes of his peers with a cool indifference as though their opinions were beneath him.

But inside, rage simmered. 'How dare she humiliate me like this?' The thought gnawed at him as he made his way back to where his friends were lounging, their smug expressions making it clear they had witnessed the entire exchange. As soon as Jeremy reached them, the jabs began.

"Well, well, well, looks like our smooth-talking Jeremy isn't as irresistible as he thought," one of them drawled, a sly grin spreading across his face.

"I could have told you Irina wouldn't fall for that charm of yours," another added, snickering as he took a sip of his drink. "But you were so confident, weren't you? What was it you said? 'No girl can resist the Hawkins allure'?"

Jeremy's jaw tightened, but he kept his composure, forcing a laugh to match theirs. "She's just playing hard to get," he replied smoothly, though the words felt hollow. "I'll get her next time."

Oh, sure," one of them jeered. "You keep telling yourself that, Jeremy."

The taunting continued, each word chipping away at his pride. They had made a bet earlier in the evening, a foolish wager born out of Jeremy's overconfidence.

He had been so sure of himself, so certain that Irina would fall under his spell like so many others before her. But now, standing there with his friends mocking him, the taste of failure was bitter on his tongue.

Jeremy's mind raced as the mocking laughter of his friends faded into the background, becoming nothing more than a dull hum in his ears. The bitterness of his failure was quickly overshadowed by a growing sense of unease. Why didn't it work? He had been so certain that Irina would be just another conquest, another piece in the puzzle that his family was carefully constructing across the Federation. His charm, honed and amplified by his family's secret skill, had never failed him before.

Father said it was foolproof, Jeremy thought, a bead of cold sweat forming at the base of his neck. 'It was supposed to work on everyone of this age, especially someone like her.'

The memory of his father's stern, calculating face flashed in his mind. His father had been explicit—this skill was their family's trump card, a guarantee of influence and control. It was a subtle power woven into the very fabric of Jeremy's being, passed down and perfected over two generations. It wasn't just charisma; it was a force, an innate ability that bent the will of others to his own.

'Is she that strong now?'

The question gnawed at him. Irina, being a member of the Emberheart family, had always been formidable, but this was different.



If she had resisted his charm so easily, it meant one of two things: either his power was weakening, or she had grown far stronger than anyone had anticipated. Neither option was comforting.

The Hawkins family had made its fortune through cunning and manipulation, and their deals with the demons ensured their rise to power.

The skill Jeremy had inherited was a direct result of those dark pacts—an ability to subtly influence the minds of others, making them more agreeable, more pliable.

It was a tool of seduction and persuasion, one that had brought countless benefits to the Hawkins name. Contracts signed, alliances forged, and rivals eliminated—all with a smile and a few well-placed words.

But now, standing in the glittering banquet hall with the sting of failure fresh on his mind, Jeremy couldn't shake the growing fear that something was wrong. Very wrong.

'What if others find out?' The thought sent a chill down his spine. If word got out that his ability had failed, it could unravel everything. His family's carefully constructed web of influence could start to fray. And his father... his father would not be pleased.

Jeremy's friends continued to banter around him, oblivious to the storm brewing in his mind. He forced himself to laugh along, to maintain the facade of carefree confidence. But his thoughts were elsewhere, spiraling into a dark place filled with doubt and paranoia.

I need to understand what happened. Jeremy resolved, his mind shifting from panic to action. He had to find out why his charm had failed—why Irina, of all people, had been immune to his influence. And more importantly, he had to make sure it never happened again.

'Is it possible she's come into contact with something—or someone—that could shield her?'

The thought of demonic interference crossed his mind, but he quickly dismissed it. While there was more than one demonic organization in the human federation, the Emberheart Family was not the one to do such a thing.

No, this was something different. Something closer to home, perhaps. There were rumors and whispers of Irina's growing strength, but at the same time, something about her also reached his ears.

'Is that him?'

He remembered a certain picture. It was taken by a student of Arcadia Hunter Academy, and it had fallen onto the internet not long ago.

Jeremy's mind raced as he replayed the image in his head—Irina with that young man. The memory of the photograph was as clear as day: Irina's unmistakable fiery red hair, even partially hidden beneath a mask, and the young man beside her. Black hair, a fair-shaped face, and a presence that seemed almost forgettable—almost, if not for the striking purple eyes that set him apart.

'Who is he?' Jeremy's thoughts spiraled back to the rumors he had heard, whispers of Irina's growing strength and her mysterious associations. The boy's face had seemed familiar, but only in the vaguest sense, like someone he had seen in passing but never given much thought to. But those purple eyes had a strange intensity, though for a person like him, there was no way a random person like him could do anything.

But that wasn't the point. No, the point was that Irina, who had effortlessly shrugged off his influence, was seen in public with this boy. Jeremy's gut told him there was a connection, something crucial that he was missing.

Jeremy turned to his friends, who were still bantering and mocking him, oblivious to the shift in his demeanor. He didn't have time for their jobs right now.

He had a plan in his mind.

He first called one of his subordinates to investigate this boy, and not long after, he got the name.

Astron Natusalune. Arcadia Hunter Academy student rank 1071. Orphan, no parents. 'Heh....You bitch.' Jeremy's mind buzzed with the new information: Astron Natusalune. An orphan, a low-ranking student at Arcadia Hunter Academy, with no apparent ties or support. The perfect target. The fact that this nobody had managed to capture Irina's attention—enough for her to publicly associate with him—only fueled Jeremy's anger. How dare she?

As the pieces of his plan began to click into place, Jeremy strode purposefully toward the balcony. His friends were still caught up in their banter, oblivious to the storm brewing inside him, and he had no intention of dragging them into this—not yet, anyway.

The cool night air greeted him as he stepped outside, the soft glow of the moon casting a silver sheen over the terrace. There she was, standing at the edge of the balcony, her back to him, gazing up at the moon with an almost serene expression. But Jeremy knew better. That serene exterior was nothing more than a facade, a mask hiding her true intentions.

So, you ditched me with a fake call, Jeremy thought, a sneer curling at the corner of his mouth. You really think you can play me, don't you?

He forced the anger down, schooling his features into a pleasant, neutral expression as he approached her. No need to let the mask slip just yet. He needed to play this carefully to make sure she understood just how much control he had over the situation—and over her.

"Irina," he called out, his voice smooth and composed, as if nothing had happened earlier. He watched as she turned her head slightly, acknowledging his presence but not fully facing him. "Enjoying the view?"

Irina didn't respond immediately, her gaze still fixed on the moon. The silence stretched out for a moment before she finally turned to face him, her expression calm and unreadable.

"I needed some fresh air," she replied, her tone equally measured. "And some space."

Jeremy smiled, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. "Of course. Everyone needs a break now and then." He took a step closer, his posture relaxed, but his eyes never left hers. "But I couldn't help but wonder if there was something more to it."

Irina raised an eyebrow, a slight smirk playing on her lips. "And what exactly are you implying, Jeremy?"

He let out a soft chuckle, the sound low and almost conspiratorial. "Oh, nothing too serious. Just that I noticed you've been spending time with a rather... interesting individual lately." He paused, watching her closely for any reaction. "A certain Astron Natusalune, if I'm not mistaken?"

Her expression didn't waver, but Jeremy caught the briefest flicker in her eyes. A small victory, but a victory nonetheless.

"I see my reputation as a gossip has spread," Irina replied her tone light but with an edge of warning. "What of it?"

Jeremy's smile widened, though it remained as cold as ever. "It's not the gossip that concerns me, Irina. It's the company you keep. You see, Astron isn't exactly someone you'd want to be associated with. An orphan with no connections, no power... barely scraping by at Arcadia." He leaned in slightly, lowering his voice. "You're playing a dangerous game by involving yourself with someone like him."

"And what exactly are you threatening me with, Jeremy?" Irina's voice was sharp now, her eyes narrowing as she met his gaze head-on.

Jeremy's smile never faltered, but there was a gleam of malice in his eyes as he continued, his tone dripping with false concern. "I'm just looking out for you, Irina. After all, you never know when something is going to happen to someone like him."

Jeremy's words trailed off, the malice in his voice hanging in the air like a dark cloud. He leaned in closer, the sinister threat on the tip of his tongue. "He could suddenly dis—"

But before he could finish, a searing heat flared up right in front of his eyes.

Then came the pain.

"AAAAAAAAAAH!"

Chapter 477 106.4 - A small talk

Irina was in a good mood. The cool night air brushed against her skin as she stood on the balcony, the soft glow of the moon casting a serene light over everything. Her thoughts drifted back to her conversation with Astron, and a small smile played on her lips. The tension of the evening seemed to melt away, leaving her with a sense of peace.

But that peace was short-lived.

She heard the sound of footsteps behind her, and her serene expression hardened. 'What now?' she thought, already dreading the interruption. She didn't need to turn around to know who it was.

"Jeremy," she greeted coolly, not bothering to hide her disdain.

"Irina," he replied smoothly as if they were the best of friends. "Enjoying the view?"

Irina didn't bother to respond, her gaze still fixed on the moon. She could feel the nausea building in her stomach, knowing full well what was coming. Jeremy wasn't one to waste time with pleasantries unless he had an agenda.

He took a step closer, his presence almost suffocating. "I couldn't help but notice you've been... occupied lately," he began, his tone dripping with false concern. "With a certain someone."

Irina's grip on the balcony tightened, her knuckles turning white. 'He knows,' she realized, her heart sinking.

She didn't trust Jeremy, not for a second. The man was a snake, and his words were as venomous as his intentions.

"And?" she asked, her voice sharp. "What of it?"

Jeremy's smile widened, but it was cold, devoid of any real warmth. "It's just that you're associating with someone... beneath you, Irina. An orphan with no connections and no power. Someone who could easily... disappear."

The nausea in her stomach turned to a sickening churn, the bile rising in her throat. 'This bastard,' she thought, her anger boiling just beneath the surface. She could already see the scenario he was painting, the disgusting threat he was weaving into his words. Jeremy was a predator, and she was well aware of his true nature from the visions she had seen.

"Jeremy," she began, her voice laced with venom, "are you threatening me?"

He leaned in closer, his eyes gleaming with malice. "I'm just looking out for you, Irina. You never know when something might happen to someone like him."

'You bastard,' Irina thought, her disgust nearly overwhelming her. The idea of Astron being targeted by this snake, of him being harmed because of her, made her blood boil. 'I'll kill you before I let that happen.'

She could feel her mana pulsing beneath her skin, the fiery energy that she had inherited from her family surging through her veins. It was a familiar warmth, one that had always been in her, sometimes unforgiving, sometimes burdensome, but now it burned with righteous anger.

Jeremy was still speaking, his voice a nauseating drone in her ears. "He could suddenly dis—"

But before he could finish, Irina's mana flared up. A searing heat flared up between them, cutting off Jeremy's words with a gasp of pain.

"AAAAAAAAAAH!" he screamed, stumbling back as a blistering heat singed his skin. His eyes widened in horror, the threat he had been building up in his mind turning to ash in the face of Irina's wrath.

Irina turned to face him fully, her eyes blazing with anger. 'You dare threaten him in front of me?' she thought, her fury barely contained.

'You dare to scheme about him.' Even at this point, she was not able to understand. How come he became a demonic human at that time? With how things have been going?

Was he brainwashed? Was he under some sort of manipulation, or was there something else?

She could not understand or make any sense of it. But there was one thing that was clear.

'Demon Contractors.....They are all dangerous existences to him...' For whatever had triggered him to do something like this, she could not take a risk.

Especially after seeing what happened to him when he took down that route.

'And your disgusting gaze.....The fact that you think you are above everyone else just because you made a contract with a mere demon.....The fact that you think I would fall for your petty tricks....It is all nauseating....'

The same thing happened in the timeline that she had seen. Jeremy targeted her in the life she had seen in vision as well.

Irina's mind raced as she stared down Jeremy, her anger barely contained. The memories of the visions she had seen flooded back, reminding her of how things had escalated in that other life—how Jeremy had schemed against her, weaving his web of deceit and manipulation. But in that timeline, she had been different—more naive, more arrogant, and far less perceptive than she was now.

'Back then, I was hiding behind a facade,' she thought, her grip on the balcony tightening. 'I was weak, pretending to be strong by projecting arrogance. But I didn't see the dangers lurking around me.'

She remembered how Jeremy had exploited her weaknesses, using her pride and insecurity against her. At that time, she hadn't been able to see through his lies, and her lack of awareness had allowed him to pull the strings, leading to a series of events that spiraled out of control.

'Jeremy... he allied himself with one of the other Six Families of the Magic Council,' she recalled, her disgust growing. 'They pressured my family politically, using every dirty trick in the book. I didn't realize until it was too late how deep their schemes ran.'

In that other life, she had underestimated him, and that had been her downfall. Jeremy had wormed his way into her life, manipulating her and those around her, turning allies into enemies.

And all the while, he had hidden behind a veneer of charm and false concern, much like he was doing now.

In the end, things turned into a bloody all-out war. And because of how the Hawkins family grew their influence under the Federation, the Emberheart Family suffered a lot of losses as well, making them weaken.

But this time, things were different. She wasn't the same naive girl she had been. She was stronger and more aware, and she wouldn't let Jeremy or anyone else control her life. Not again.

'You should have not provoked me, you worm....I was planning to deal with you a little bit later... But you brought him out of all people....'

Irina felt the familiar surge of power welling up within her, the fire of the Emberheart Family coursing through her veins. Her eyes turned cold, a steely resolve replacing any remnants of doubt.

The warmth she had felt earlier, reminiscing about Astron, was replaced by a chilling determination. Jeremy had crossed a line, and he would pay the price for his arrogance.

As the fire began to flicker at her fingertips, she advanced toward him, her movements deliberate and unyielding. The coldness in her heart was mirrored in the intensity of the heat emanating from her hand, a heat that seemed to warp the very air around it.

Jeremy's smug expression faltered as he realized what was happening. His eyes widened in fear, the confident facade slipping away as panic set in. "What are you doing?" he demanded, his voice cracking with terror. "Do you have any idea what the repercussions of this will be?"

Irina's lips curled into a smile, one that didn't reach her eyes. The fear in his voice, the way he was backing away, it all fed into a deep, twisted satisfaction within her. "That fear in your eyes," she said, her voice cold and detached, "I like it."

Jeremy's back hit the railing of the balcony, and he flinched as the heat from Irina's hand grew unbearable. The flames were no longer just flickering; they were swirling, gathering intensity, forming a concentrated blaze that radiated an almost tangible force. His panic turned to outright terror as he realized the situation he was in.

"Ir-Irina, stop! You can't—" Jeremy tried to summon some of his own power, but the wisps of fire that danced around Irina were faster. They lashed out, pinning him down, wrapping around his limbs, and holding him in place. His struggles were futile; he was completely at her mercy.

Irina looked down at him, her expression one of cold indifference. There was no hesitation in her eyes, no doubt about what she was going to do. "You should have known better than to provoke me, Jeremy. But you've made your choice, and now you'll live with the consequences."

The fire in her hand condensed, the heat intensifying as it formed into a tightly focused point. Jeremy's eyes widened in horror as he realized what she was about to do. "No! Please, Irina! You don't have to do this!"

But Irina was beyond reason.

"Someone! GUARD JORDAN! WHERE ARE YOU, YOU BASTARD!"



He shouted, trying to call his guard. But, not to avail, as his guard was still far away. Even if he had sensed something was amiss, he would not be able to interfere.

Her mind was set, her purpose clear. "I'm going to leave a mark on you that you will never be able to forget," she said, her voice eerily calm as she raised her hand.

With a swift, decisive movement, she pressed the searing, compressed heat directly against his face.

The fire seared through skin and flesh, branding him with an agonizing mark that would never fade.

"AAAAAAAH! NOOOOOO! NOOOOOO!"

Jeremy's screams filled the night air, his voice raw and desperate as the pain overwhelmed him. He thrashed and struggled, but the fiery wisps held him firm, ensuring that he couldn't escape his fate.

Irina's expression didn't waver as she watched him writhe in agony. There was a cold satisfaction in her heart, a sense of justice being served. This was the price Jeremy would pay for his arrogance, for thinking he could manipulate and threaten her.

'Everything about your family. It will be erased....Nothing will remain.....' "Heh...."

She pressed her hand down further as the smell of skin burning entered her nose. That smell was not unfamiliar.

When she was training against fire, when she was learning fire resistance, she had already smelled it...It was her own skin, but now it was different.

"So....This is why he is doing this.....It is indeed understandable...It feels refreshing...."

Chapter 478 107.1 - Aftermath

"So....This is why he is doing this.....It is indeed understandable...It feels refreshing...."

Just as Irina pressed her hand down further, relishing the twisted satisfaction of her retribution, she sensed a rush of footsteps and the frantic murmurs of people approaching. The air was thick with urgency and fear as guards and other attendees finally realized the situation on the balcony.

"Irina! Stop this!" a voice shouted, panic laced in the tone. Several figures appeared at the entrance to the balcony, their eyes wide with horror as they took in the scene.

But before any of them could reach her, Irina straightened up, removing her hand from Jeremy's face with a calm, deliberate motion. "I can do it myself," she said coldly, her voice cutting through the air like a knife. "No one touches me."

The flames around Jeremy flickered out, leaving behind a charred, disfigured mass where his face had been. He slumped to the ground, sobbing and whimpering, his once-proud demeanor shattered beyond recognition.

Irina turned slowly, her amber eyes locking onto the approaching guards. They hesitated, their steps faltering as they took in the terrifying sight before them.

The fear in their eyes was unmistakable—this was not the haughty, untouchable Irina Emberheart they had known. This was something far more dangerous, something far more ruthless.

Her gaze swept across the gathered crowd, her expression devoid of emotion. The fear she saw reflected in their eyes was real, palpable. They weren't just afraid of what she had done; they were afraid of her.

Irina could feel the weight of their stares, the collective realization that she was not to be trifled with. She had crossed a line, one that few had dared to even approach, and the repercussions of her actions were now etched into the minds of everyone present.

"Make sure he lives," she said coldly to the guards, her tone leaving no room for argument. "I want him to remember this night every time he looks in a mirror."

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Jeremy lay on the cold floor of the balcony, his body convulsing in pain as the searing burn on his face sent shockwaves through his entire being.

The world around him blurred, his vision fading in and out as he struggled to comprehend what had just happened. The agony was overwhelming, consuming every thought, every breath. His skin felt

like it was on fire, every nerve ending screaming in torment. The once-proud heir to the Hawkins family was now reduced to a trembling, broken figure, his mind barely able to process the horror of his own disfigurement.

'What... what is happening to me?' Jeremy's thoughts were frantic, disjointed. 'This... this can't be real... it can't be...'

The sounds of hurried footsteps and gasps of shock surrounded him, but they were distant, muted by the intense pain that dominated his senses. He could hear voices, angry and panicked, but they were nothing more than a dull roar in his ears.

'Why... why is this happening?' Jeremy's mind raced, trying to grasp anything that made sense. 'I'm the heir... I'm supposed to be in control... This... this shouldn't...'

As the other guests of the banquet rushed onto the balcony, they recoiled in horror at the sight before them.

The proud and haughty Jeremy Hawkins, the heir to one of the most powerful families, was lying on the ground, his face a charred and twisted mass.

The once-handsome features that had drawn admiration and envy were now unrecognizable, a grotesque reminder of the wrath he had provoked.

"Do you know what you've done?!" One of the guests, a tall man with a stern expression, shouted at Irina, his voice laced with disbelief and fury. "How could you do this to the heir of the Hawkins family? Do you think we'll stand idly by while our friend is assaulted like this?"

Several others nodded in agreement, their faces twisted in anger and fear. Jeremy's friends, who had mocked him earlier, were now pale and trembling, unsure of what to do in the face of such raw power. They had never seen Irina like this, and the fear that gripped them was palpable.

'I... I need help... I can't...' Jeremy's thoughts were a jumble of pain and desperation. He sought for this pain to end.

He wanted it to end.

But, as he waited, things did not happen as he wished.

'Why... why isn't anyone doing anything?'

Irina stood calmly amidst the chaos, her expression untouched by the panic around her. A smirk curled at the corners of her lips as she surveyed the crowd, her amber eyes burning with a fierce, unyielding light.

"What can you do?" she asked, her voice dripping with contempt. "I'm standing right here. If you want to do something, then by all means, try."

The challenge hung in the air like a gauntlet thrown down, daring anyone to take it up. The crowd hesitated, their anger faltering as they felt the weight of her gaze. No one moved; no one dared to.

And then, with a calm and deliberate tone, Irina called out, "Esme."

In an instant, the atmosphere on the balcony changed. A figure appeared beside Irina as if materializing out of thin air. It was a maid dressed in a simple yet elegant uniform, her demeanor calm and composed.

But the pressure that emanated from her was anything but ordinary. It was immense, suffocating, like a heavy weight pressing down on everyone present.

Esme's presence was overwhelming, her power palpable in the air. The guests who had been so eager to confront Irina now found themselves shrinking back, their bravado evaporating in the face of this new threat. Even those who had been ready to defend Jeremy faltered, their confidence shattered by the sheer force of Esme's aura.

'No... no, this isn't right...' Jeremy's mind was a swirling mess of pain and disbelief. 'She... she can't do this... This... this is wrong...'

Jeremy, still writhing in pain on the ground, could only manage to look up with one eye, the other swollen shut from the burns. His mind was a haze of agony and terror, unable to fully grasp the extent of his situation. All he knew was that he had never felt such pain, such helplessness.

Irina looked down at him one last time, her smirk widening as she spoke, her voice cold and unforgiving. "Remember this. No one can threaten an Emberheart.....Engrave this into your hands, or the Wrath of Ember will be upon you."

"..."

No one was able to reply, as they were all reminded of one simple event that had transpired a hundred years ago.

A hundred years ago, a city was erased from the lands of this world.

「Wrath of Ember」 It was that spell that had burned that city to the ground.

The crowd remained silent, their anger replaced by fear and uncertainty. No one dared to speak out, not with Esme standing there, her presence a constant reminder of Irina's power.

Irina turned to leave, her amber eyes flicking over the gathered guests with a final, disdainful glance. As she walked away, Esme followed, her steps silent but heavy with the weight of her power. The balcony, once filled with murmurs and accusations, was now eerily quiet, the only sound the faint whimpering of Jeremy Hawkins, his spirit broken, his pride shattered.

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As Irina and Esme left the balcony, the tension of the evening still hung heavy in the air. The crowd behind them remained silent, too stunned to react to what had just transpired. The cool night air did little to quell the fire simmering within Irina, her mind replaying the events over and over.

Esme, walking a step behind her, finally spoke, her tone calm but laced with a subtle undercurrent of concern. "Young Miss, what you did back there... It was intense, even for you. What drove you to such an action?"

Irina didn't break her stride, her expression a mask of cold determination. "That little fucker dared to threaten and blackmail me. He thought he could manipulate me, use me as a pawn in whatever twisted game he was playing. There was no way I could allow that."

Esme's steps remained steady, but her eyes narrowed slightly, considering Irina's words. "I understand your anger, Young Miss. However, the Hawkins family is a significant business partner for the Emberheart family. The Matriarch may not be pleased with the consequences of your actions."

A small, bitter smile tugged at the corner of Irina's lips. "You think I'm worried about that? If the Matriarch knew everything, she would rather praise me than get angry."

Esme's expression softened, a hint of curiosity flickering in her eyes. "You sound confident, Young Miss. Are you certain the Matriarch would see it that way?"

Irina finally slowed her pace, turning slightly to meet Esme's gaze. Her amber eyes held a steely resolve. "She will. Jeremy Hawkins is more dangerous than he appears. I've seen what happens when his kind is left unchecked. He's a threat to our family and to everything we stand for. I simply took preemptive action."

Esme studied Irina for a moment, her expression inscrutable. "If that is your belief, then I will stand by your decision, Young Miss. But understand this: your actions will ripple through the Federation. The Matriarch may have her reasons for supporting you, but the other families... they may not be so understanding."

'Other families.....Those who ally themselves with Hawkins....They will meet the same end, you don't need to worry about that....'

This federation had been far too corrupted for its own good, and it needed some cleansing.

Irina's smile didn't waver. "Let them try. I'm not afraid of a few ripples, Esme. If anyone tries to challenge me or my family, they'll face the same fate as Jeremy."

And what was a better cleanser than the Fire of Emberheart?

Esme nodded a subtle respect in her gaze. "Very well, Young Miss. Just be prepared for what comes next."

Irina turned back toward the path ahead, her steps firm and unwavering. "I always am."

'Just as I had promised before....From now on, there is no running away. After facing him, there is nothing that scares me in this world, no more.'

#### Chapter 479 Chapter 107.2 - Aftermath

Jeremy's father, Reginald Hawkins, stood in the grand hallway of their family estate, his face a mask of barely contained rage and disbelief. The news had come suddenly, carried on the breathless words of one of his trusted guards, but nothing had prepared him for what he was about to witness.

When the doors to the room opened and Jeremy was wheeled in, Reginald's breath caught in his throat. His son, his proud and ambitious heir, was unrecognizable. The once-handsome face that had been a symbol of the Hawkins family's future was now a grotesque, charred ruin. The burns covered the entire side of his face, the skin blackened and twisted, a cruel mockery of the young man Jeremy had once been.

Jeremy lay still, his eyes glazed over with pain and fear. He was unable to speak, his body trembling from the trauma he had endured. His breathing was shallow and ragged, each intake of air a reminder of the agony that had consumed him.

Reginald's hands clenched into fists at his sides, his knuckles white with the force of his fury.

"What... happened?" Reginald's voice was cold and controlled, but the underlying threat was unmistakable. He turned his gaze to the guard who had brought the news, his eyes narrowing dangerously. "Tell me everything."

The guard, a seasoned warrior who had served the Hawkins family for years, hesitated for only a moment before he spoke, his voice steady despite the gravity of the situation. "Sir, it was Lady Irina Emberheart. She... she did this to him."

Reginald's expression hardened, his mind racing as he processed the implications of what he was hearing. "Irina Emberheart," he repeated slowly, the name laced with venom. "She dared to do this to my son?"

The guard nodded, his face grim. "Yes, sir. According to witnesses, Lady Irina used her fire magic to brand the young master. They say she did it in front of the other guests, with no hesitation... no mercy."

Reginald's fury surged, his eyes blazing with cold fire. This was not just an attack on Jeremy; this was an open declaration of war against the Hawkins family. The Emberhearts had made their move, and it was a move that would not go unanswered.

He stepped closer to his son, examining the burns that marred Jeremy's once-proud face. His hand trembled slightly as he reached out, stopping just short of touching the injured skin. The sight of his son in such a state, broken and helpless, filled him with a rage so intense it was almost suffocating.

"Have they given him the high-ranking potions?" Reginald asked, his voice barely above a whisper yet carrying the weight of command.

The butler, who had been standing silently by the door, stepped forward and bowed his head respectfully. "Yes, Master Hawkins. We have administered the best options we had at our disposal. But... the burns remain. We even called the head healer of our guild, but she was unable to reverse the damage. It appears that the fire magic used was of a nature we've never encountered before."

Reginald's gaze snapped to the butler, his eyes narrowing. "Are you telling me that nothing can be done?"

The butler swallowed, his face pale. "As of now, sir... we are at a loss. The fire magic seems to have a lingering effect, resisting all attempts at healing. We will continue to search for a solution, but it may take time."

Reginald turned back to Jeremy, his expression a mix of fury and sorrow. His son, his legacy, was lying before him, disfigured and broken. The reality of it was almost too much to bear.

"Irina Emberheart..." Reginald muttered, his voice barely more than a growl. "She thinks she can get away with this?"

Reginald Hawkins stood over his son, his mind a tempest of fury and cold calculation. Jeremy's disfigured face was a painful reminder of the cost of failure, but for a man like Reginald, failure was simply another challenge to overcome, another variable in the complex equation of power and survival.

"We were already planning to get rid of them for a while now..." Reginald muttered under his breath, his voice cold and detached. The decision had been made long before this incident, but now, with Irina Emberheart's blatant assault on his son, the timeline had been forcibly accelerated. "That means we'll be pushing the plans forward from now on."



Jeremy's approach to Irina had been part of that very plan—a calculated move designed to place them closer to the Emberheart family, to gather intelligence and leverage against them. Jeremy was supposed to charm her, to worm his way into her trust. Instead, he had been outplayed, and his arrogance and underestimation of Irina led to this disaster.

'Damn boy,' Reginald thought with a mixture of anger and disappointment. 'You were supposed to be my spearhead, and now you've become a liability.'

But Reginald Hawkins was not a man who allowed setbacks to cripple his plans. The first rule of rising in this wretched world was to be prepared for every eventuality, to adapt and strike when the time was right. Situations like this—where plans went awry and unforeseen challenges arose—were all too familiar to him. They were the crucible in which his power had been forged.

He turned to his butler, who stood nearby, pale and tense. "Prepare the secure line," Reginald ordered, his voice leaving no room for hesitation. "I need to contact the organization immediately."

The butler bowed swiftly and hurried out of the room, leaving Reginald alone with his son. Jeremy's shallow breaths filled the silence, a stark reminder of the stakes they were playing for.

'The organization won't be pleased,' Reginald thought as he waited, his mind already anticipating the conversation that would follow. 'They'll think it's too soon. They'll warn me about the risks.'

But this was no longer just about strategy or timing. Irina Emberheart had made her move, and in doing so, she had revealed too much.

Reginald wasn't a fool—he knew the signs of someone who had caught wind of something they shouldn't have. And if Irina had even the slightest inkling of their true intentions, then delaying was no longer an option.

Moments later, the butler returned, nodding to Reginald as he handed over the secure communication device. Reginald took it, his expression hardening as he activated the link.

The line connected with a soft click, and a voice on the other end answered, low and measured. "Hawkins. We weren't expecting your call this soon."

"There's been a complication," Reginald said without preamble, his tone clipped and businesslike. "Irina Emberheart attacked my son. Burned him—left him disfigured. This wasn't some random act of violence; she knew something. We need to move up the timeline."

A brief pause followed, and Reginald could almost feel the weight of the organization's collective mind considering his words. When the voice spoke again, it was cautious. "This is too early, Hawkins. The plan isn't fully in place. If we act now, we risk exposing ourselves prematurely."

"I understand the risks," Reginald replied, his voice firm. "But we've been forced into a corner. If Irina knows—if she even suspects—then the danger of waiting is greater than the danger of acting. We need to strike before they can counter us."

"Then it's decided," the voice concluded. "Commence with the plan. But keep in mind, Hawkins—our hands are limited now. If anything goes wrong, there won't be a second chance."

Another pause, longer this time. Then, the voice returned colder. "Very well. But know that if this goes wrong, it's on you. The organization won't cover for failure."

"I'll take full responsibility," Reginald said, his mind already working through the logistics of the accelerated timeline. "But rest assured, it won't fail. We've come too far to let a girl and her family stand in our way."

"Then it's decided," the voice concluded. "Commence with the plan. But keep in mind, Hawkins—our hands are limited now. If anything goes wrong, there won't be a second chance."

Reginald ended the call, the weight of the decision settling over him. His hands were tied, and the resources he could call upon were now restricted by the organization's caution. But he was nothing if not resourceful, and he knew how to turn limitations into strengths.

He looked down at Jeremy one last time, his expression unreadable. "You'll have your vengeance, my son," he murmured, more to himself than to Jeremy. "And I'll ensure that the Emberheart family regrets ever crossing the Hawkins name."

With that, Reginald turned and strode out of the room, his mind already moving to the next phase. The game had changed, but the outcome would be the same. The Hawkins family would emerge victorious, no matter the cost.

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<Mansion of the Emberheart Family, Midnight>

The heavy doors of the Emberheart mansion closed behind Irina and Esme with a soft thud, sealing them inside the grandeur and tension that awaited. The grand hall was dimly lit, the flickering candlelight casting long shadows that danced across the polished marble floor.

The air was thick with the scent of burning incense, a tradition Irina's mother insisted upon, its smoky tendrils curling through the air like silent specters.

Esme stopped at the base of the grand staircase, bowing her head slightly. "I will wait here, Young Miss. The Matriarch will see you alone."

Irina nodded, her face set in a mask of determination. She ascended the staircase, her footsteps echoing in the vast emptiness of the mansion.

As she reached the top, two guards stationed outside the Matriarch's chambers opened the heavy oak doors, allowing her to enter.

The chamber was as imposing as ever, a reflection of the woman who ruled from within it. The Matriarch sat at the far end of the room, behind a large desk adorned with documents and relics of Emberheart's legacy.

Her presence was formidable, a commanding figure draped in deep red robes, her eyes as sharp as the fire she wielded. The room's hearth crackled with a steady flame, casting a warm glow on her stern features.

"Irina," the Matriarch's voice was cool, almost indifferent. "Sit."

Irina obeyed, taking a seat across from her mother. The silence that followed was suffocating, the kind that gnawed at the edges of resolve. But Irina held her ground, meeting the Matriarch's gaze with unwavering eyes.

"I've heard about what happened tonight," the Matriarch began, her tone devoid of emotion. "Do you have any idea what you've done?"

Irina's jaw tightened, but she remained composed. "Yes, Mother. I acted to protect our family. Jeremy Hawkins posed a threat, and I neutralized it."

The Matriarch's eyes narrowed, her fingers drumming lightly on the desk. "You disfigured the heir of a powerful ally, a move that could unravel years of alliances and carefully woven ties. Did you think about the consequences?"

"I did," Irina responded, her voice firm. "But I also thought about the future—our future. Jeremy Hawkins is not just an heir; he's a danger to everything we've built. I've seen what he can become, and I won't allow that to happen."

The Matriarch leaned back in her chair, her gaze piercing. "You presume much, Irina. Do you think I don't know the kind of man Jeremy is? Do you think I haven't considered the dangers?"

Irina's heart pounded, but she didn't flinch. "Then you must understand why I did what I did. The Federation is already corrupted, teetering on the edge. If we don't take a stand now, we risk losing everything. Sometimes, alliances need to be broken to protect what truly matters."

For a long moment, the Matriarch said nothing, her eyes boring into Irina's as if searching for something. Finally, she spoke, her voice softer but no less commanding. "You've always been headstrong, Irina. At least before, you were faking it....But that does not seem to be the case right now."

Irina remained silent, her breath steady despite the turmoil swirling within her. There was no doubt her mother sensed the shift in her, the transformation that had taken place.

The Matriarch leaned forward, her voice dropping to a low, probing tone. "Something about you has changed recently... a change I did not foresee. What has happened, Irina?"

Irina hesitated, but only for a fraction of a second. She knew what her mother was implying, the question lurking just beneath the surface. She steadied herself, refusing to show any sign of weakness.

The Matriarch's eyes sharpened further, her voice cutting through the tension like a blade. "That boy... You had been warned."

Irina's heart skipped a beat, but she did not falter. She met her mother's gaze with unwavering resolve, her voice clear and calm. "I've become someone who can choose what is best for me, Mother. I won't be swayed by anyone's warnings or threats. I decide my path."

For a moment, the silence in the room was absolute, the only sound the crackling of the fire in the hearth. The Matriarch's face remained inscrutable, her gaze boring into Irina as if trying to unravel the mysteries she held.

And then, slowly, a smile curled at the corners of the Matriarch's lips—a smile that was anything but warm. It was a smile devoid of warmth, a chilling expression that sent a shiver down Irina's spine despite her resolve. "If that is the case," the Matriarch said, her voice as cold as her smile, "then you should take responsibility for your own actions."

#### Chapter 480 Chapter 107.3 - Aftermath

"If that is the case, then you should take responsibility for your own actions."

The Matriarch's cold, calculated smile remained fixed as she watched her daughter, waiting for a reaction. Irina knew that this was a test, a challenge that her mother had set before her to see just how far she was willing to go, how much she was willing to defy expectations.

The mention of "that boy" had been deliberate, a reminder of the warnings she had received.

But Irina was not the same girl who once cowered under her mother's shadow, who let others dictate her choices.

The visions she had seen, the future she knew could come to pass, had strengthened her resolve. Astron was no mere orphan, no insignificant boy. He was something much more, and she would not allow her mother or anyone else to convince her otherwise.

"I will," Irina said firmly, her voice steady despite the tension in the room. "I will take responsibility for my actions. But know this, Mother—I will not be swayed by anyone's opinion, not even yours. I have seen what lies ahead, and I know the path I need to take. He is now part of that path, and I won't turn away from it."

The Matriarch's eyes narrowed slightly, her expression hardening. "You think you can defy me, Irina? Do you think you can choose someone like him and still hold the respect and power that comes with being an Emberheart? Do you think our family can afford to take such risks?"

Irina met her mother's gaze head-on, unyielding. "Not everyone is like you when it comes to choosing a partner, mother. Do not project your own failures onto me."

The air in the room thickened, growing unbearably hot as the Matriarch's fury ignited. The flames within her eyes seemed to burn with a relentless intensity, and the temperature in the chamber rose to a blistering level. Irina could feel the heat pressing down on her, searing her skin, but she remained unmoved. She had endured this before and had been forced to withstand it as a test of her resolve.

This time, however, she was no longer the frightened girl who cowered under the Matriarch's gaze. She was stronger, and she would not back down.

"You dare speak to me of failures?" the Matriarch hissed, her voice crackling like the very flames she commanded. The sheer force of her anger seemed to warp the air around her, making it difficult to breathe. "You, who have barely begun to understand the weight of the Emberheart name, dare to judge me?"

Irina met her mother's blazing eyes head-on, refusing to look away. "Yes, I dare," she replied, her voice steady despite the fire licking at her skin. "I am not you, Mother. I will not make the same mistakes, nor will I let you dictate my choices. I know what I'm doing."

The Matriarch's fury flared even hotter, and for a moment, Irina thought the flames would consume them both. But then, just as suddenly, the heat began to recede. The Matriarch clicked her tongue in annoyance, the flames in her eyes flickering before settling into a cold, steady burn.

"Your claim," the Matriarch said, her voice now devoid of the earlier rage, "it seems you are confident. Too confident, perhaps. But confidence without wisdom is nothing but foolishness."

Irina nodded, her own resolve unshaken. "Confidence is necessary, Mother. Without it, I would be nothing more than a puppet, doing what I'm told without understanding why. I am confident because I know what I must do."

For a moment, there was silence. Then, the Matriarch's expression shifted. The fiery anger in her eyes dimmed, replaced by something else—amusement and perhaps a hint of curiosity.

"Is that so?" the Matriarch mused, her tone softer, almost contemplative. She leaned back in her chair, studying Irina with a newfound interest. "You've grown, Irina. I see it now. You're not the same girl who once hid behind arrogance and pride."

Irina didn't respond, but the Matriarch's words hung in the air, heavy with meaning. There was a shift in the room, a subtle change in the dynamic between them.

"I'm curious," the Matriarch continued, a slight smile tugging at the corners of her lips. "If you are so sure of your path, then show me. Prove to me that you have what it takes to uphold the Emberheart legacy. Show me that you are worthy of the power and respect that comes with our name."

Irina's heart pounded in her chest, but she kept her composure. "I will, Mother," she said, her voice steady. "I will show you that I am worthy."

The Matriarch's gaze lingered on her for a moment longer; then she nodded in return. "You may go."

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As the heavy doors to the Matriarch's chamber closed behind Irina, the room fell into a deep, contemplative silence. The Matriarch remained seated, her gaze fixed on the door long after Irina had gone.

The flames in the hearth flickered softly, casting dancing shadows across the room, but the Matriarch's thoughts were elsewhere, far from the quiet crackling of the fire.

Irina had changed—there was no doubt about it. The girl who once relied on arrogance and pride as a shield had grown into a woman with a fierce resolve, one that even the Matriarch had not fully anticipated.

The shift was undeniable, and it intrigued her.

The Matriarch leaned back in her chair, her fingers steepled in thought. The confrontation revealed more than just Irina's defiance; it showed the strength of will that the matriarch had long sought for her daughter.

But that strength came with a cost, one that could either elevate the Emberheart legacy or bring it crashing down.

'So she's chosen her path,' the Matriarch mused silently, her thoughts turning to the boy Irina had so vehemently defended. 'Astron Natusalune...' The name lingered in her mind, accompanied by a flicker of irritation. A mere orphan, an insignificant boy in the grand scheme of things—yet Irina had seen something in him, something that made her defy even her mother.

'What could it be?' The Matriarch's thoughts wandered back to the request Irina had made recently, a request that had piqued her curiosity.

The opening of the armory, an act reserved for only the most trusted and capable, had been granted at Irina's insistence. That alone had been unusual, but the fact that it was for the boy—that had been unprecedented.

The Matriarch rose from her chair, her robes whispering softly as she moved toward the large window that overlooked the Emberheart estate. The night sky stretched out before her, dark and unyielding, much like the future that now lay ahead.

'What have you seen, Irina?' she wondered, her gaze drifting toward the distant horizon. 'What makes you so certain of this boy, this path you've chosen?'

The Matriarch had always prided herself on her ability to predict and control the outcomes within the Emberheart family. But this—this was something different. Irina had acted beyond her expectations and had made choices that defied the careful plans that had been laid out. And now, the Matriarch found herself both irritated and intrigued.

'Perhaps I've underestimated her,' she admitted to herself, a rare moment of self-reflection. 'She's no longer the girl I molded; she's become something more. But whether that 'more' will strengthen the Emberheart legacy or shatter it...' The thought trailed off, unfinished, but the weight of it hung heavily in her mind.

The mention of the armory brought her back to Astron. What could that boy possess that warranted such action? The Matriarch's curiosity deepened, and with it, a growing sense of unease. She would need to investigate further to understand what had sparked this change in Irina and whether it was a strength or a weakness.



But one thing was certain: Irina was no longer the obedient daughter who would simply follow orders. She had claimed her independence, her right to choose her path. And that path now included Astron—a wildcard in a game the Matriarch had thought she controlled.

'Very well, Irina,' she thought, her expression hardening with resolve. 'You've chosen your path. But don't think for a moment that I won't be watching your every step. You will prove yourself, or you will fall. And that boy... he will be the test of whether you truly understand the weight of our name.'

'Very well, Irina,' she thought, her expression hardening with resolve. 'You've chosen your path. But don't think for a moment that I won't be watching your every step. You will prove yourself, or you will fall. And that boy... he will be the test of whether you truly understand the weight of our name.'

The Matriarch turned away from the window, looking at a special place distant in the sky.

'The mistake that I had made....I do hope that you will not repeat the same....'

She thought to herself.

'And for the future of our family and the choices you made, you need to be strong.'

With that thought, she waved her hand.

"Esme."

The door to the chamber opened almost immediately, and Esme entered with her usual quiet grace, her expression unreadable. She bowed slightly, her posture respectful but alert, ready to carry out whatever orders were given.

"Yes, Matriarch?" Esme's voice was calm, but there was an undercurrent of understanding, a knowledge of what was likely to come.

The Matriarch did not waste time with pleasantries. "Increase the chamber's intensity."

Esme's eyes flickered briefly, a subtle acknowledgment of the severity of the command. "Are you certain, Matriarch?"

The Matriarch's expression remained resolute, her voice cold and measured. "Yes. Irina must be tested. She has chosen a path fraught with peril, and she must be prepared to endure the consequences of her decisions. The fire of Emberheart does not burn weakly; it must be forged in the harshest of flames."

Esme nodded, her demeanor professional as always, though there was a faint glimmer of concern in her eyes. "Very well. I will see to it immediately."

The Matriarch watched as Esme turned to leave, her mind already focused on what needed to be done next. Irina had shown strength and defiance, but that was not enough. She needed to be molded further, pushed to the very brink of her limits, to see if she truly understood the weight of the Emberheart name.

"Esme," the Matriarch called again, stopping the maid just as she reached the door.

Esme paused, turning back to face the Matriarch. "Yes, Matriarch?"

"Ensure that the chamber is set to its highest level. She must learn that every action she takes, every choice she makes, carries with it a price. If she cannot withstand the heat, then she is not ready to bear the Emberheart name."

As Esme bowed deeply, her mind raced with concern though her face remained an unreadable mask. The Matriarch's order was not just severe—it was extreme. The highest level of the chamber was a trial reserved for those who had undergone years of rigorous training, those who were on the cusp of proving their worth within the Emberheart family. It was a test of endurance, willpower, and the ability to control the formidable fire that coursed through their veins.

"To think that the Young Miss would be subjected to such a trial so soon,\ Esme thought, her heart tightening with a mix of worry and respect. "The Matriarch must be truly furious to push her to this limit."

The chamber was no ordinary place. It was where the true strength of the Emberheart lineage was forged, where the flames of their legacy were tested to their very core. The highest level was a crucible that only the most seasoned members of the family ever faced—and even then, not all emerged unscathed.

Esme knew this well. She had seen many, even some of the most promising, falter under the relentless heat, their bodies and spirits broken by the intensity of the trial. Yet, she also knew that the Matriarch's word was law, and there was no room for questioning her decisions.

"As you wish, Matriarch," Esme replied, her voice calm and steady despite the thoughts swirling in her mind.

She turned and left the chamber, her steps measured but swift. As she made her way through the corridors of the Emberheart mansion, she couldn't help but think of the Young Miss—of Irina, who had always been strong, determined, and fiercely independent.

But this was different. This was a test that could either solidify her place as the heir to the Emberheart legacy or destroy her.

Esme's loyalty to the Matriarch was unwavering, but her loyalty to Irina was something more—an unspoken bond forged through years of service, even if she had not shown it to her.

She could not interfere with the Matriarch's orders, but she could ensure that Irina had every chance to survive this ordeal.

As Esme approached the entrance to the chamber, she steeled herself for what was to come. The chamber attendants, who were trained to handle the intricate workings of the Emberheart trial, bowed as she entered.

"Prepare the chamber," Esme ordered her voice firm. "Set it to the highest level."