

## H. Academy 501

Chapter 501 114.5 - Young Hearts

–"You.....You are jealous, aren't you?"

Jealousy. It was indeed a word that would trigger many people.

Why was that?

Was it because of the fact that admitting that one was jealous would show that they were on the losing side?

Would it hurt their pride?

–"You.....You are jealous, aren't you?"

The moment Irina heard about this, she felt her cheeks flush with embarrassment at his accusation. "I'm not jealous!" she shot back, her voice a little too sharp to be convincing.

And that was something that would never go past that guy's eyes. He would always find out about things like that too easily, just like how it was right now.

–"Then what are you doing right now?" Astron asked his tone calm but with that ever-present hint of amusement. –"Because it sure sounds like jealousy to me."

Irina huffed, crossing her arms even though he couldn't see her. "I just want to talk to you a little longer, that's all," she said, trying to sound nonchalant but failing miserably.

–"You do realize you'll have an entire week with me soon, right?" Astron pointed out. –"Shouldn't you stop being so greedy?"

Irina bit her lip, her frustration bubbling up again. He was right, of course, but that didn't make it any easier. The idea of waiting felt unbearable, especially when she knew he'd be spending time with Maya in the meantime.

Because she did not forget what she had seen at that time. The way how she had pushed her fangs onto his neck, the expression she made.

Astron may not be like her, but Maya was different. Irina knew what she had seen there and what kind of thoughts Maya had.

That was why it was harder for her to just let him go.

Irina tried to muster her strength, determined not to let him have the last word. "I'm not being greedy," she insisted, her voice firm. "I've been spending my time in the fire, pushing myself to my limits, and this is one of the few times I can actually rest."

There was a brief pause, and then Astron's voice came through, softer this time. –"That's true. You are working hard. I know that."

Irina felt a small smile tug at her lips, thinking she had finally convinced him to stay on the call a little longer. But before she could get too comfortable, he continued.

–"But that's exactly why you need to rest. I enjoy talking to you like this, Irina, but you shouldn't forget your priorities. Just to talk, you shouldn't throw away your chance to recover and prepare for the week ahead. Resting is important, too."

Irina frowned, feeling the sting of his words. "You're the one saying that?" she retorted, her voice tinged with disbelief. "The person who trains relentlessly, pushing himself beyond the brink without ever taking a break? And you're telling me to rest?"

Astron didn't respond immediately, and when he did, his tone was calm and resolute. –"Exactly because I know how it feels; I'm telling you to stop. You shouldn't push yourself the way I do. It's not worth it."

Irina was left speechless for a moment, the weight of his words settling over her. There was a sincerity in his voice, a concern that she hadn't expected.

Despite his teasing and his stubbornness, there was a part of him that genuinely cared for her well-being, and that realization both warmed her heart and made her feel a little guilty.

And that guy....she knew why he was training that hard.

It was most likely to forget about that time.

'Really....Now, how can I retort you?' She sighed, finally relenting. "Fine. But don't think I'm doing this because you're right."

—"Of course not," Astron replied, the amusement returning to his voice. —"You're doing it because you're smart enough to know when to listen to good advice."

Irina couldn't help but smile at that, shaking her head. "Goodnight, Astron."

—"Goodnight, Irina. Rest well."

As the call ended, Irina stared at the stars for a moment longer, the echo of his voice lingering in her mind. She hated to admit it, but he was right. She needed to rest to be ready for the challenges ahead.

But that didn't make the waiting any easier.

With a sigh, she closed her eyes, letting the exhaustion take over as she drifted into a much-needed sleep, thoughts of Astron still lingering in the corners of her mind.

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Maya's gaze remained fixed on the smartwatch, her frustration simmering just beneath the surface. The seconds ticked by, each one dragging longer than the last. The warmth of the bath, once comforting, now felt almost suffocating as she waited for the call to end.

Her mind was racing, filled with thoughts of what she would say, how she would confront him about the cold distance he seemed to maintain.

Then, just as she was about to lose patience, her smartwatch vibrated softly, the screen lighting up with a notification.

Caller: Junior

Her heart skipped a beat, and without a moment's hesitation, she accepted the call. The screen flickered as the connection was made, and then she heard his voice—calm, steady, and frustratingly composed.

"Senior Maya," Astron's voice came through, as usual, devoid of unnecessary emotion. "I'm sorry I missed your call. I was on another line."

Maya's grip on the edge of the tub tightened slightly, but she kept her voice even, hiding the tumultuous emotions swirling inside her. "It's alright, Junior," she replied, her tone softer than she felt. "I wanted to check in on you. I received your message, but I needed to hear your voice."

There was a brief pause on the other end as if Astron was processing her words. "I appreciate your concern, Senior. I'm doing well and progressing in my training. How have you been?"

Maya's eyes narrowed slightly at the question. He was deflecting, turning the focus back on her. She resisted the urge to let her irritation show. "I've been fine, Junior," she replied, her voice taking on a more pointed edge.

"But I was hoping for more than just a progress report. You've been distant lately, and I wanted to know why."

"Distant? What do you mean, Senior?" Astron's voice carried a hint of genuine confusion, and Maya could almost picture his brow furrowing on the other end of the line.

Maya took a deep breath, trying to organize her thoughts. "What I mean is... was that all you wanted to say in the voice message you left for me? It felt like you were just giving me a progress report like I'm some instructor you're reporting to."

There was a moment of silence, long enough for Maya to feel the tension building in her chest. Then, she heard Astron cough softly as if gathering his thoughts. "I... well, it was my first time leaving a voice message, Senior. If it came off as curt, I'm sorry. I thought it would be better to talk on the phone directly."

Maya blinked, her irritation softening as she processed his words. It was easy to forget that not everyone was as comfortable with certain forms of communication. Astron's reserved nature, coupled with the novelty of leaving a voice message, made his response understandable.

Her grip on the tub's edge relaxed slightly as she let out a small sigh. "I suppose that makes sense," she admitted, a bit of the tension easing from her voice. "I don't leave voice messages either, so I can understand how it might feel awkward."

Astron's tone was apologetic though still tinged with his characteristic calmness. "I didn't mean to come across as distant, Senior. I guess I'm just not used to this... kind of thing."

"I see...." Maya mumbled.

"But, Senior. How is your training going? Are you able to control it a little bit better now?"

Maya paused, the question hanging in the air as she considered how to answer. The gentle warmth of the bath water enveloped her, but the tension in her chest hadn't fully dissipated. She knew Astron's inquiry was genuine, a sign of his concern, yet her thoughts kept circling back to the nagging curiosity about his previous call.

After a brief silence, she began, "The training has been... challenging. The forest is rich with natural energy, so it's been helping me focus on balancing my two sides. But it's not easy. Sometimes, it feels like the darkness inside me is just waiting for the slightest slip to take over."

She sighed softly, running her fingers through the water as if the motion could soothe her inner turmoil. "I've been trying different methods, combining what we researched, but it's slow progress. I can feel myself getting stronger, more in control, but there are moments when it's... difficult."

Astron listened intently, his presence on the other end of the line steady and reassuring. "You're doing well, Senior. This kind of control takes time. The fact that you're progressing at all is a good sign."

Maya smiled faintly at his encouragement, but the unease in her heart remained. She couldn't shake the feeling that there was something she wasn't addressing, something that gnawed at the back of her mind. She wanted to ask about his previous call and to know who he had been speaking with, but she hesitated. It felt intrusive, almost as if she would be crossing a line she wasn't sure she had the right to cross.

But the curiosity was persistent, a quiet voice that refused to be silenced. Maya took a deep breath, gathering her thoughts, trying to find a way to broach the subject without sounding accusatory or insecure.

"So, Junior," she began cautiously, her voice careful and measured, "earlier, you mentioned you were on another call. Was it... anything important?" She tried to keep her tone light as if the question was asked out of casual interest rather than the deep-seated curiosity she truly felt.

"It was just a conversation with someone from the academy," he replied, his voice calm without giving anything away.

"Someone from the academy?"

"Yeah. We were just adjusting the training schedules."

Maya's heart skipped a beat as she listened to Astron's response, trying to pick up on any subtle clues in his tone, but he remained as composed as ever. She knew he wasn't one to give away much, but her curiosity had already latched onto the idea that there was more to this conversation than he was letting on.

"Is it someone I know?" she asked, keeping her voice light. "I'd love to help as well, especially if she's your friend."

Astron hesitated for a fraction of a second, but Maya caught it. "It was Irina," he said simply, his tone matter-of-fact.

Maya's mind raced as she processed the name. "Irina Emberheart?" she asked, her voice tinged with a mixture of surprise and something else she couldn't quite place.

"The fiery red-haired girl from the academy? The one I... saved and... well, attacked at the same time?"

She thought. And then remembered something.

'Don't tell me.'

That girl.

The expression she made when she was leaving at that time. It was an expression that she could not quite make sense.

But now that she looked at her reflection in the bathtub, she could see that she was making the same expression.

'.....' She did not say anything for a while, looking at her reflection.

If that was indeed the case, that meant danger.

The danger of losing him.

The danger of him being taken away.

"Senior?"

And she could not live with that fact.

Chapter 502 114.6 - Young Hearts

"Senior?" Astron's voice came through the phone, pulling her out of her thoughts.

Maya took a deep breath, forcing herself to keep her voice steady. "Sorry, Junior. I was just... thinking," she replied, trying to sound composed.

"Is everything all right?" Astron asked, his tone carrying a hint of concern.

"Yes," she said quickly, perhaps too quickly. "I'm just... tired from the training. But I'm fine."

But she wasn't fine. Not really. The fear of losing Astron to someone else, especially someone like Irina, gnawed at her, making her feel vulnerable in a way she hadn't experienced before. She had always prided herself on being strong, composed, and in control, but this was different. This was a matter of the heart, and it terrified her.

'He's mine,' she thought fiercely, a surge of possessiveness rising within her. 'I can't let anyone take him from me. Not Irina, not anyone.'

She knew it wasn't fair to think this way, but emotions weren't always fair. The connection she felt with Astron was special and unique, and she wasn't about to let anyone come between them.

She had to find a way to secure her place in his life, to make sure he saw her as more than just a senior, more than just a mentor.

She had already confirmed her feelings, but when it came to things regarding relationships like this, she was still immature.

After all, with her unique condition, she was not able to have any relationship with any other man before, and that still did not change.

And it was not like she had any reason to do so since she had never gotten into such a situation before.

"You are tired of your training, huh? You must not push yourself too hard."

"Don't worry, I am not pushing myself."

"That is good. As we talked before, if you tire yourself too hard, your vampiric tendencies will be harder to suppress."

"I know, I know," Maya said.

As she leaned back in the tub, her mind was racing with thoughts of how to secure her place in Astron's life.



She knew that being physically present around him would be the most effective way to deepen their bond, to ensure that she wasn't just another senior or mentor to him.

"When will you finish your training?" she asked, trying to sound casual but unable to fully mask the underlying eagerness in her voice.

Astron's response was as measured as ever. "My training is almost complete, Senior. But I need to take care of a few things during the remaining break."

Maya sensed an opportunity. This was her chance to intertwine their lives more closely, in a way that felt both natural and significant. She leaned forward slightly, a subtle smile playing on her lips as she spoke into the phone.

"I see," she said, her tone thoughtful. "But, Junior, do you need any help?"

"Help?" Astron echoed, a hint of surprise evident in his usually steady voice.

"Yep," Maya confirmed, her smile widening just a fraction. She could almost picture the slight arch of his brow on the other end, his mind processing her unexpected offer. Memories of their past interactions flashed through her mind, reminding her of the patterns she had observed in him over time.

Astron had a principle he lived by—a steadfast rule that guided his interactions. He always believed in balancing the scales, repaying in kind whatever he received. Acts of kindness were met with equal generosity, and he held a deep respect for the wishes of others, especially when they aligned with his own moral compass.

Drawing on this knowledge, Maya continued smoothly, "After all, you've been helping me all this time. It's only fair that I repay you."

There was a brief pause before Astron responded, his tone measured. "That's not necessary, Senior. You've already done more than enough."

Maya's eyes gleamed with determination as she leaned back against the cool porcelain of the tub, refusing to relent. "No, I don't think so, Junior. The support and guidance you've given me have been invaluable. I feel like I owe you, and I want to make sure I balance things out."

A soft sigh filtered through the speaker, and Maya could almost feel the slight shift in his demeanor. "If you insist," he conceded finally, his voice carrying a hint of resignation. "I wouldn't want to disregard your feelings on the matter."

"Great!" Maya replied brightly, satisfaction evident in her tone. "Just let me know how I can assist you, and I'll make the necessary arrangements."

There was a momentary silence, a pause that seemed to stretch just a bit longer than usual. Then, Astron's voice came through, tinged with a subtle curiosity. "Senior, your family... it's not simple, is it?"

Maya's lips curved into a knowing smile, intrigue sparking in her eyes. This was an unexpected turn in the conversation but one she found intriguing. "What makes you say that?" she asked, her voice smooth and inviting.

"I've noticed certain things," Astron replied, his tone as composed as ever. "For instance, not many families have the resources or capabilities to procure something like 'Starbloom Essence' so readily, let alone cultivate it themselves."

"Really? I thought everyone had that at home."

".....You really....." Astron said with a sigh. "Well, this alone shows that your family is not normal. Aside from that, the fact that you are able to retain your position as the top student in the sophomore year while there are many students of high-ranking families without getting pressured yourself alone shows that you also must have a backing."

Maya chuckled softly, a melodic sound that echoed lightly in the steamy confines of the bathroom. "You're quite perceptive, as always," she remarked. "Yes, my family isn't exactly ordinary. We prefer to stay out of the public eye and avoid entanglements with the central families, but we hold our own influence where it counts."

"I suspected as much," Astron responded thoughtfully. "The ease with which you provided the essence indicated a level of resourcefulness and access that's quite rare."

Maya's eyes softened as she considered his words, a sense of pride welling up within her.

Her family had always valued discretion and autonomy, choosing to operate silently rather than bask in the limelight.

Well, it was not that they loved staying in the shadows. But there was a reason for everything.

"Next time, I should look at the normal people a little bit more, then."

Astron nodded, seemingly satisfied with her answer for the moment. "That would be better," he said thoughtfully. Then, after a brief pause, he continued, "Your family... do they have any connections with a family named 'Cox'?"

Maya's expression shifted slightly as she thought back to the connections her family had. The Cox family was indeed a name she was familiar with—one of the smaller, though respectable, families in the area near where her own family operated. They had some business ties but nothing particularly noteworthy from her perspective.

"Yes, I know of them," Maya replied, her tone more contemplative. "The Cox family is connected to us through some business dealings, though nothing major. They're a respectable family, but not one that commands significant influence compared to others we work with."

Astron seemed to weigh this information for a moment before speaking again. "If that's the case, are you aware of the banquet they're hosting next week?"

Maya frowned slightly, trying to recall any mention of such an event. After a moment, she shook her head. "No, I wasn't aware. But that's not surprising—I've been in secluded training recently, and my family doesn't usually concern themselves with the affairs of smaller families. It's not something that falls under my responsibility either."

Astron remained silent for a few moments, considering what she had said. "I see. I thought you might have heard about it, given your connections. The banquet is supposed to be quite an event—several key families from the region are expected to attend. It's likely to be more significant than usual."

Maya raised an eyebrow, intrigued by Astron's knowledge of the event. "And how did you come to know about this, Junior? It's not like you to be interested in such gatherings."

Astron's expression remained calm, but there was a hint of something more in his eyes—perhaps a trace of caution or even anticipation. "I have my sources, as well Senior."

"What sources are they?"

"It would be a breach of contract if I were to mention."

"Junior, you like to hide a lot of things."

"It is not that I like to hide, it is just revealing them is tricky."

Maya's curiosity deepened as she listened to Astron's measured responses. There was something more to this banquet than just a social gathering, and Astron's interest in it was anything but casual.

"What about this banquet, Junior?" she asked, her voice carrying a note of genuine curiosity. "Why are you so interested in it?"

Astron paused briefly as if weighing how much to reveal. "I need to attend that banquet if possible, Senior. There's something I need to do there, something important."

Maya's eyes lit up as a thought began to form in her mind. This was her opportunity not only to assist Astron but also to position herself closer to him.

'Hehehehe...'

If she played her cards right, she could ensure that they attended the banquet together, further solidifying their bond.

A plan started to take shape. "If that's the case, then I can certainly help you attend," Maya said, her voice carrying a hint of excitement. "My family has the influence needed to secure an invitation for you. But," she added, leaning forward slightly, "you'll need to come here before the banquet. There are preparations we'll need to make, and I can ensure everything goes smoothly."

Astron considered her offer, understanding the implications. Maya's assistance would indeed make his entry into the banquet easier, and her presence could provide him with additional cover. It wasn't

an opportunity he could easily pass up. He nodded, his decision made. "Alright, Senior. I'll come to you before the banquet."

Maya felt a surge of satisfaction at his agreement, her plan moving forward exactly as she'd hoped. Not only would she be able to attend the banquet with Astron, but she would also be in a position to help him with whatever task he needed to accomplish there. It was a win-win situation for her, and it brought her one step closer to solidifying her place in his life.

"I'll make the arrangements," she said, her voice warm with the promise of their upcoming collaboration. "And Junior, don't worry. I'll make sure everything is perfect."

'Perfect, so that you can see what I can do for you....So that you can never leave me.' Astron nodded again, appreciating her offer. "Thank you, Senior. I'll be there soon."

A little bit of a Maya arc is coming.

#### Chapter 503 115.1 - First Mission

After talking with Irina and Senior Maya, I had nothing else to do. Thus, I returned to my room and got ready for the next day.

As I sat on the edge of my bed, I reviewed the information I had gathered so far, piecing together the details that led to my decision to attend the upcoming banquet organized by the Cux family.

The banquet itself was just an elaborate pretense, a social event designed to flaunt their wealth and influence. But beneath the surface, it was much more than that.

'Silas Vayne...' The name lingered in my mind, a focal point of my thoughts. From the information I'd managed to extract, it became clear that Silas had deep connections with the Cux family.

This wasn't just some passing acquaintance; it was a relationship rooted in mutual benefit, secrecy, and power.

The Cux family, known for their influence in both the legal and shadowy aspects of the Federation, was involved in more than just business.

They were deeply entrenched in the political machinations and underhanded dealings that shaped the world from the shadows. Silas Vayne, with his own agenda, was a key player in their latest scheme.

There was a deal set to take place during the banquet, something crucial enough to bring Silas out into the open, away from the usual layers of secrecy he shrouded himself in. That was why I needed to be there.

'After all, if he is there, that means I can mark him.'

The investigation and the tracking would take too long for me if I were to just normally conduct it all by myself.

I need to track him, looking for his past traces to reveal where he is hiding himself. Even the organization had no way of completely knowing where that bastard was staying.

That is why I need to deal with him when he shows his face. Though, it will be tricky and hard.

'Especially since there will be many eyes on the banquet.'

But that does not mean he will be impossible to be caught. After all, there are many intervals that can be exploited if planned correctly.

'This could be my only chance,' I realized, my resolve hardening.

If I missed this opportunity, it could set me back months, maybe even years, in my pursuit.

The banquet was the perfect opportunity to gather intel, to observe, and, if necessary, to act.

With that in mind, I began to mentally prepare for what was in the future, though for the time being, my focus must be on the mission that I will be sent.

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The next morning, I woke up early, just as before. After a quick shower, I dressed in my standard gear, making sure everything was in place.

I checked my reflection in the mirror one last time, ensuring that nothing was out of place.

'All set,' I thought, feeling the familiar weight of readiness settle over me.

I left my room and headed to the dining area for an early breakfast. The halls were quiet, the rest of the facility still wrapped in the last remnants of sleep. The cafeteria was nearly empty, with just a few staff members preparing for the day. I grabbed a simple meal, focusing on nourishment rather than taste—today was not a day for indulgence.

The meal was quick, and my mind was already on the task ahead. I finished and left the cafeteria, making my way to the area where the Warp Gates were located.

The facility was sprawling, but I knew the layout well. I moved with purpose, navigating the corridors with ease.

When I arrived at the Warp Gates, the area was alive with activity. Personnel moved efficiently, coordinating the various operations required to maintain the gates. The Warp Gates themselves stood in a wide, open space, each one a towering structure humming with energy. They were the lifelines that connected different parts of the Federation, enabling instant travel across vast distances.

I headed straight for Warp Gate Number 3, weaving through the organized chaos. The gate loomed ahead, its surface shimmering with a faint, otherworldly light. As I approached, the personnel stationed there noticed me and moved to confirm my identity.

One of them, a sharp-eyed woman in a uniform, stepped forward with a device in hand. "Adept Astron Natusalune?" she asked, her voice brisk but polite.

I nodded. "That's correct."

She scanned the device over a small card I produced, checking the details. A moment later, she looked up and confirmed, "Destination: Veilcroft. Everything checks out, Adept Natusalune. You're clear to proceed."

"Thank you," I replied, stepping forward as the personnel activated the gate.

The shimmering light of the Warp Gate intensified, forming a swirling vortex of energy within the frame.

I took a deep breath and stepped through, feeling the familiar, disorienting sensation of being pulled through space. The world around me twisted and blurred, and for a brief moment, everything was a rush of colors and sound.

As I stepped out of the Warp Gate, the disorienting swirl of colors and sound gradually faded, giving way to the reality of Veilcroft.

~~whisper whisper whisper~~

The gate behind me closed with a sharp hum, the swirling vortex of energy collapsing into nothingness as if it had never existed.

I paused for a moment, letting the familiar sensation of vertigo settle. The faint whispers that accompanied the transition lingered in my mind, though I couldn't quite make out their meaning. 'This feeling...' I thought, narrowing my eyes as I tried to grasp the elusive memory. It reminded me of the first time I entered the organization's base, the same eerie commotion, like distant voices just beyond the edge of comprehension.

'What is it about these gates that carry this echo?' I wondered, but there was no time to dwell on it. I had a mission to focus on, and distractions could be costly.

The space around me was a stark contrast to the bustling Warp Gate facility I had just left.

'Outskirts....I see.' I scanned my surroundings, taking in the sparse landscape and the traces of wear on the buildings nearby. The outskirts... it made sense. The last time I used a Warp Gate to enter, I had been taken from a similarly remote location. 'A precaution,' I mused, 'to keep our arrivals discreet.'

The area was quiet, almost unnervingly so. The air carried a stillness that seemed out of place as if even the wind knew better than to stir up trouble here. The buildings were functional and sturdy,



with none of the ornate touches found in the heart of a city. It was clear that this was a place where function mattered more than form, where people came to do business and then left without looking back.

As I took a step forward, the faint crunch of gravel under my boots brought me back to the present.

RING! Just then, my smartwatch buzzed softly, pulling my attention downward. I lifted my wrist and tapped the screen, bringing up the latest directive. A map appeared, and the location of the mission base was marked clearly in red. The place wasn't exactly close—it was on the other side of the city, deeper into Veilcroft.

'At least they gave me some clarity,' I thought, mentally calculating the distance. It was far enough that walking would be impractical, and while I could use the time to familiarize myself with the area, there were better ways to do that.

I glanced around again, noting the lack of obvious transportation options. 'Taxi it is,' I decided.

One of the perks of my new Adept status was a slightly more generous allowance, and quite a bit of money for the mission had already been deposited.

However, since that money could only be used for missions, any signs of corruption would result in a penalty.

I started walking toward the nearest main road, my pace steady but unhurried. 'No need to draw attention,' I reminded myself. Blending in was crucial, especially in a city where unknown entities might be watching. As I reached the road, I spotted a taxi idling nearby, its driver lazily flipping through a magazine.

I approached and knocked on the window. The driver, a grizzled man with a worn cap pulled low over his eyes, looked up and gave me a once-over before rolling down the window. "Need a ride?" he asked, his voice a mix of curiosity and boredom.

"Yeah," I replied, showing him the map on my smartwatch. "I need to get here."

He glanced at the map, nodded, and motioned for me to get in. "Hop in. I'll get you there."

I slid into the backseat, the leather creaking under me as the driver turned the key, and the engine rumbled to life. As we pulled away from the curb, I let my gaze drift out the window, watching the outskirts of Veilcroft fade into the distance.

The taxi hummed along the road as we left the outskirts behind, the city of Veilcroft slowly unfolding before my eyes. The streets grew busier as we moved further in, lined with shops and buildings that bore the marks of time and use. It wasn't exactly a thriving metropolis, but there was a certain vitality to the place—one that hinted at layers beneath the surface.

As I observed the passing scenery, I couldn't help but notice the taxi driver glancing at me in the rearview mirror. His eyes, though weary, held a sharpness that belied his casual demeanor. After a few moments of silence, he finally spoke up.

"You look pretty young," he remarked, his voice rough but not unkind. "What brings you to a city like Veilcroft? Not exactly the kind of place you see many fresh faces."

I met his gaze in the mirror, assessing the situation. Normally, I wouldn't indulge in small talk, but information could be valuable, especially in a new city. If this driver knew the area well, he might have insights that could be useful later on.

"I'm here for an internship," I replied, keeping my tone light and unassuming. "Part of my training requires me to spend some time in different cities and learn the ropes, you know?"

He chuckled a dry sound that suggested he didn't fully buy the story but wasn't about to call me out on it. "Internship, huh? It must really be some internship to bring you all the way out here. What kind of work are you doing?"

"Mostly administrative stuff," I said, keeping the details vague. "But I'm also supposed to get a feel for how things operate on the ground level. Veilcroft's got a reputation, so it seemed like a good place to learn."

The driver grunted in acknowledgment, his eyes flicking back to the road. "Reputation, yeah. This city's seen better days. A lot of folks come through here thinking they can make a difference. Most of 'em don't stick around."

I tilted my head slightly, feigning curiosity. "Why's that? The city seems... interesting."

"Interesting's one way to put it," he said, a hint of bitterness creeping into his voice. "Veilcroft's got its charms, but it's got its dark side too. Not everything you see on the surface is what it seems. You'll find that out soon enough if you're paying attention."

'Ah....Don't worry, I can see that already.'

Just as he said, this place was under a veil of darkness.

#### Chapter 504 115.2 - First Mission

"I'll keep that in mind," I said, directing the conversation back to him. "You must see a lot, driving around the city every day. Anything I should be aware of?"

The driver shot me another look in the mirror, his eyes narrowing slightly as if trying to gauge how much to share.

The driver hesitated for a moment, his gaze flicking back to the road before he finally spoke. "Lately, this city's been under a bit of a veil at night. Things aren't as safe as they used to be, especially after dark. If you're smart, you'll keep your head down and avoid wandering around alone."

I leaned forward slightly, feigning concern. "Why's that? Something going on?"

The driver glanced around, his fingers tightening on the steering wheel. There was a subtle tension in his posture, as if he were wary of being overheard, even within the relative safety of the taxi.

"Hard to say for sure," he muttered, his voice dropping to a near whisper. "But people have been hearing things. Screams... weird sounds creeping through the streets at night. No one's seen much, but you can feel it in the air—something's not right. A lot of folks are on edge, and some have even packed up and left."

He paused, his eyes shifting nervously to the rearview mirror, then back to the road. "There's talk, too—rumors about people going missing, strange shadows moving where they shouldn't be. The cops don't seem to know what to make of it, or if they do, they're not saying anything. But whatever it is, it's got everyone spooked."

I could see the fear etched in his features, the way his voice wavered slightly.

I watched the driver closely, my eyes tracing the subtle shifts in his posture and the tension in his grip on the steering wheel. His breathing had grown shallower, his gaze darting around as if searching for something lurking just beyond the edges of the road.

'So he has witnessed.' The way his muscles tightened, and the slight tremor in his voice spoke volumes. This wasn't just hearsay—he'd seen or experienced something firsthand.

'Classic signs of heightened anxiety,' I noted mentally, recalling my studies on body language and neuroscience. When someone's sympathetic nervous system kicks in, it triggers a fight-or-flight response. The increased heart rate, the shallow breathing, the heightened awareness—these are all evolutionary traits designed to prepare a person for danger.

But here, in the relative safety of a taxi, these reactions told me one thing: this man was genuinely afraid of whatever was happening in Veilcroft.

I leaned back slightly, careful to maintain a relaxed posture, projecting an air of calm understanding. "I appreciate the warning," I said, my voice steady and reassuring. "I'll make sure to stay alert all the time. It sounds like things have been tough here lately."

The driver glanced at me in the rearview mirror again, his eyes searching mine for sincerity. He must have found what he was looking for because he relaxed just a fraction, though the tension didn't entirely leave him.

"Yeah, tough... you could say that," he muttered. "It's not something people like to talk about, you know? But you hear things, see things... It gets to you after a while. Even folks who've lived here their whole lives are starting to get spooked."

I nodded, giving him the space to continue without pressing too hard. "I can't imagine what it must be like. Have you seen anything yourself?"

He hesitated, his gaze flicking away from mine. It was clear he was weighing whether to share more, his instincts telling him to be cautious. I kept my expression open and non-threatening, letting him know I was just a concerned outsider trying to understand.

"There was this one time..." he began slowly, as if unsure he should continue. "Late one night, I was driving back from a drop-off on the edge of the city. It was quiet, too quiet, you know? And

then I heard it—this low, guttural noise. Like something was growling, but it wasn't any animal I'd ever heard. Gave me chills, man."

He shuddered, and I could see the memory was still vivid in his mind. "I didn't stick around to find out what it was. Just hit the gas and got out of there as fast as I could. Since then, I don't take late-night fares anymore. Not worth it."

'A growl...' That piqued my interest.

That was something to make a mental note of.

"I don't blame you," I said, nodding in sympathy. "I'd do the same in your shoes. It's good to know when to trust your instincts."

The driver gave a short, humorless laugh. "Instincts, yeah. Those are the only things keeping people safe around here these days."

"Thanks for the heads-up," I added, keeping my tone light. "I'll be sure to stick to the safer parts of town."

He gave me a curt nod, his eyes back on the road, but I could tell he appreciated the understanding. I'd gotten what I needed without pushing him too far, and now I had more insight into what I might be facing.

The key was to remain subtle, to let the information come to me without raising the alarm. The driver had already provided more than he probably intended, and I could sense that pushing further might close him off completely.

After a bit more driving, the taxi slowed down as we neared my destination. The area wasn't in the bustling heart of the city but close enough to feel the hum of activity. The streets were lined with buildings that were more subdued than the ones at the city's center—functional, nondescript, perfect for blending in.

"Here we are," the driver announced, pulling up to the curb. I glanced out the window, taking in the sight of the building I'd memorized from the map on my smartwatch. Just as expected from the organization—plain and unremarkable, the kind of place that wouldn't draw a second glance from anyone passing by.

I nodded, handing the driver the fare and stepping out of the taxi. He gave me a final, wary look before driving off, the sound of the engine fading into the background as I turned my attention to the building ahead.

I walked towards the entrance, my steps measured and unhurried. The street around me was relatively quiet, with only a few pedestrians moving about their business. As I approached the building, I noted its unassuming facade—clean lines, simple architecture, nothing to indicate what lay within.

Reaching the door, I pulled it open and stepped inside. The interior was just as understated as the exterior—neutral tones, minimal decor, and a reception desk set against one wall. A woman in her thirties sat behind the desk, her expression polite and professional as she looked up to greet me.

"How can I help you?" she asked, her voice pleasant but with a hint of formality.

"I'm here to meet Warden Shanks," I replied, keeping my tone straightforward.

The moment I mentioned the name, her expression shifted. The polite demeanor was replaced by something more serious, her eyes narrowing slightly as she assessed me. She glanced at my smartwatch, and for a split second, I saw her right eye flash with a brief, almost imperceptible light.

She nodded, the tension in the air palpable. "Please follow me," she said, her tone now all business.

I did as instructed, following her through a series of corridors that twisted deeper into the building. The layout was designed to disorient, with turns that made it easy to lose track of direction.

But I kept my focus, noting the subtle details that marked the path—small signs, shifts in the lighting, the occasional security camera discreetly tucked into corners.

After a few minutes, we arrived at a sleek, modern elevator. The woman gestured towards a small scanner panel beside the doors. "Please scan your smartwatch," she instructed.

I raised my wrist, aligning the screen of my smartwatch with the scanner. There was a brief pause, and then the panel lit up with a soft green glow, acknowledging my credentials. The elevator doors slid open with a quiet hiss.

"This way," she said, gesturing me to step in.

With a nod, I entered the elevator.

"Good luck, Adept Astron," she said, her tone professional but with an undercurrent of something that I couldn't quite place.

With a final nod, she stepped back, leaving me alone as the elevator doors slid shut with a soft click.

The elevator began its descent, the motion smooth and nearly imperceptible. I could feel the subtle shift as we went deeper underground, the air growing cooler with each passing moment.

The faint hum of the elevator was the only sound, a reminder of the layers of security and secrecy that surrounded this place.

When the elevator finally came to a stop, the doors opened to reveal a wider space than I'd anticipated. The area before me was a sprawling underground complex, efficiently designed with a network of offices scattered around. The lighting was soft but bright enough to highlight the sleek, modern architecture.

I stepped out of the elevator, my footsteps echoing slightly in the open space. The air carried a faint scent of polished metal and something else—something more sterile, like the faint trace of antiseptic.

As I moved further into the space, I noticed that the offices were spread out in a way that maximized privacy. Frosted glass walls offered a glimpse of the figures working within, but details were obscured, maintaining an air of confidentiality. The layout was designed for functionality, with minimal decor and a clear emphasis on efficiency.

Several people moved about the area; each one focused on their tasks. They paid me little attention, their expressions serious and absorbed in their work. This was clearly a place where discretion was key, where everyone had a role to play and little time for anything else.

'Everything's in its place,' I thought, observing the smooth operation of the facility. 'Just as expected from the organization.'

I continued walking, heading towards a central hub where a large digital display mapped out various operations currently underway. It was here that I expected to find Warden Shanks or at least someone who could direct me to him.

As I approached, a tall man with sharp features and a neatly trimmed beard stepped out from one of the nearby offices. He carried an air of authority, his movements precise and controlled. Our eyes met, and I could tell from the way he assessed me that this was Warden Shanks.

"Adept Natusalune, I presume?" he said, his voice carrying the weight of someone accustomed to command.

"That's correct," I replied, maintaining eye contact. "I'm here to assist with the investigation."

"Hmm....." He looked at me from top to bottom and then gestured to me. "Follow me," he said, turning on his heel and leading me further into the complex.

It seems my first mission was about to start.

I am quite sick; caught a cold, prob. After resting a little, I will keep up with the pace.

## Chapter 505 115.3 - First Mission

"Follow me."

As we walked, I took in the surroundings, noting the high level of organization and the sense of purpose that permeated the air.

The vibe was similar to the base, albeit less organized. That was understandable. The branch of Veilcroft was most likely not that big, considering the fact that while the city was big, the population did not reach the necessary amount.

"We've been monitoring the situation in Veilcroft closely," Shanks began, his tone matter-of-fact. "The disturbances have been increasing in frequency and intensity. Your presence here is part of our efforts to contain the situation before it escalates further."



As we continued walking, I could feel the weight of the moment settling in. This was my first mission as an Adept, and while my official role was to support the investigation, I knew that every move I made would be scrutinized.

This was as much a test of my abilities as it was a mission to contain whatever disturbances were plaguing Veilcroft.

The atmosphere in the complex was tense, charged with a sense of urgency. It was clear that the situation in the city was serious, and the people here were fully aware of the stakes.

I could feel their eyes on me, subtle glances that conveyed a mix of curiosity and appraisal. They knew I was new, and they were undoubtedly assessing whether I could pull my weight in this operation.

'They're not going to make this easy,' I thought, but that was to be expected. The organization didn't hand out responsibilities lightly, and they certainly didn't let anyone rise without proving themselves first.

We reached a large room at the end of the corridor, and Shanks led me inside. The space was dominated by a central table, surrounded by monitors displaying various data streams, maps, and live feeds from different parts of the city. Around the table stood four other individuals, each one radiating a quiet confidence that marked them as seasoned operatives.

"This is the core team," Shanks said, introducing them with a wave of his hand. "You'll be working alongside them during this mission. Let me introduce you."

He pointed to a tall woman with short, jet-black hair and sharp, piercing eyes. "This is Elysia, our field strategist. She's in charge of coordinating our movements and making sure we're one step ahead of whatever's out there."

Elysia gave me a curt nod, her gaze assessing me with the same intensity I'd sensed from the others. "Welcome aboard," she said, her tone clipped but not unfriendly.

Next, Shanks gestured to a stocky man with a shaved head and a scar running down the side of his face. "That's Jim, our combat specialist. If things get rough, you'll be glad he's on your side."

Jim grunted in acknowledgment, his eyes briefly meeting mine before returning to the map in front of him. He had the look of someone who had seen plenty of action, and his demeanor suggested that he was all business.

Beside Jim stood a wiry, lanky man with a nervous energy about him, his fingers constantly tapping on the table. "This is Ren, our tech expert. He handles all the gadgets, surveillance, and data analysis. If you need something hacked or monitored, he's your guy. He is also in contact with headquarters and has access to the database. If you wish to see the related records after getting permission from me, you can make a request."

"Understood."

Ren offered me a quick, almost jittery smile before turning back to his array of screens. It was clear his mind was constantly in motion, processing information at a rapid pace.

Finally, Shanks nodded toward a woman with auburn hair tied back in a ponytail, her expression calm and focused. "And that's Nadia, our medic and support specialist. She's the one who'll keep you on your feet if things go south."

'A healer.....As expected.'

It was understandable that the branch had at least a healer.

"These four.....They must be the core members of this branch. Most likely accommodating the newcomers like me or the adepts sent to the missions.' Nadia gave me a warm smile, the kind that put people at ease, even in tense situations. "Nice to meet you, Astron," she said. "Don't hesitate to ask if you need anything."

Shanks nodded, satisfied with the introductions. He then turned back to me, his expression serious and focused. "Now that you've met the core team, there's something you need to know. In addition to us, there are two other Adepts assigned to this investigation. They're out in the field right now, handling the on-the-ground aspects of our operation."

I nodded, absorbing the information. "I see. When will I be able to meet them?"

Shanks glanced at the digital clock on the wall, then back at me. "You won't have the opportunity to meet them until this evening. They're scheduled to return to the base at 7 P.M. for a briefing. Every

day at that time, we convene here to discuss the day's findings and plan our next moves. It's a crucial part of our strategy, and it's when you'll get a full picture of what's happening in Veilcroft."

"Understood," I replied, noting the importance of the evening meeting. It would be my first real chance to integrate with the full team and get a sense of the progress that has been made so far.

Shanks continued, "For now, your primary task is to familiarize yourself with the base and the resources we have at our disposal. You'll be supporting our efforts, so it's critical that you know how to access information, use the equipment, and coordinate with the rest of the team. Ren will be your point of contact for anything related to tech or data. If you need access to specific records or databases, he can facilitate that after you've gotten permission from me."

I glanced at Ren, who gave me another quick smile, though his focus was already drifting back to his screens. It was clear that he was constantly engaged with multiple streams of information, a vital role in an operation like this.

Shanks paused for a moment, studying me as if to gauge my understanding. "This isn't just about following orders, Adept Astron. You're here to learn but also to contribute. Pay attention, ask questions if you have them, and don't hesitate to step up when needed. This investigation is complex, and we need everyone at their best."

"I'll make sure I'm ready."

He nodded, seemingly satisfied with my response. "Good. You have until the evening to get yourself situated. I'll be in my office if you need anything before then."

With that, Shanks gave a final nod and turned to leave, heading towards the command center where his office was located. The rest of the team returned to their tasks, the room humming with the quiet efficiency of an ongoing operation.

'Two other Adepts in the field,' I thought. 'Interesting. Were they assigned at the same time, or was the size of the team gradually increased?' I pondered as I slowly made my way toward the tech station where Ren was working, ready to dive into the details that would help me support the investigation.

As I approached the tech station, Ren was engrossed in his work, his fingers flying over the keyboard as multiple screens displayed streams of data. I waited for a moment, not wanting to interrupt his rhythm, but he seemed to sense my presence and glanced up.

"Need something?" he asked, his voice quick and to the point.

"Yeah," I replied. "Which desk is mine?"

Ren paused for a moment, then pointed towards a row of doors along the far wall. "Each Adept has their own office. Yours is the one on the left, third door down."

I nodded, following his gesture. "Thanks. And how do I access the past findings or the progress of the investigation? I'd like to get up to speed as quickly as possible."

Ren gave a quick nod of approval. "Good thinking. I'll send the relevant files to your account. Every Adept has their own account with access to an online drive. It's where we store all the data, reports, and mission briefs. You'll find everything you need there."

I raised an eyebrow, intrigued by the setup. "So, everything's digital? No physical files?"

"Correct," Ren confirmed. "The organization prefers it that way—keeps things streamlined and secure. You can access the files from your office terminal or your smartwatch, but they are all tied to your account. I'll make sure the most recent data is synced to your drive so you can review it at your convenience."

"Appreciate it," I said, already thinking ahead. The ability to access and analyze the investigation's findings from anywhere would be invaluable, especially given the complexity of the situation in Veilcroft.

Ren offered me a quick smile, though his attention was already drifting back to his screens. "If you need anything else, just let me know. I'm here to keep the tech running smoothly, so don't hesitate to reach out."

With that, I turned and headed towards my office, my mind already shifting gears. The office itself was small but functional, designed for efficiency. I took a seat at the desk, powering up the terminal and waiting for the files to come through.

As the files began to populate my account, I leaned back slightly.

'Let's see what they have got,' I thought, opening the first report and beginning to dive into the details.

I settled into my chair, the terminal screen glowing softly as I began to sift through the files Ren had sent to my account. The data was neatly organized, with each report and piece of intelligence cataloged for easy access.

I started with the earliest records, keen to understand how the situation in Veilcroft had escalated to the point of requiring our involvement.

The first file I opened detailed the initial reports of strange whispers and noises at night. These reports dated back two months when the first murmurs of something unusual began to circulate among the city's residents. At that time, the incidents were few and far between, and the level of concern was relatively low.

The complaints were mostly dismissed as figments of the imagination or simply the result of overactive nerves. The authorities had recorded them, but there was no sense of urgency, no indication that these events were anything more than isolated oddities.

I continued reading, and the pattern started to emerge. The complaints, while initially sporadic, began to increase in frequency.

The reports described unsettling experiences—faint whispers that seemed to come from nowhere, strange noises that defied explanation, and an eerie sense of being watched.

At first, these incidents were limited to certain parts of the city, mostly the quieter, more secluded areas. The reports were easy to overlook, blending into the usual noise of city life.

But then, about a month ago, something changed. The number of complaints began to rise sharply. What had once been an occasional disturbance became a nightly occurrence for many of Veilcroft's residents.

The tone of the reports shifted as well, reflecting a growing unease. People who had initially dismissed the noises as harmless or imagined were now genuinely afraid. The whispers were no longer just unsettling; they were terrifying. The strange sounds grew louder, more persistent, and harder to ignore.

The public mood shifted accordingly. What had been a low-level anxiety began to escalate into something more serious. The reports described neighborhoods growing tense, with residents hesitant to leave their homes after dark.

The local authorities, once dismissive, began to take the complaints more seriously, but their efforts to investigate yielded little. The phenomena were elusive, defying any logical explanation, and the fear in the city started to spread like wildfire.

I paused, tapping a finger against the desk as I considered the timeline.

'First, it's just a month of just showing the presence and then suddenly increasing the activity. Interesting.' Though speculating with this amount of information would not be advised, something slowly formed in my head.

#### Chapter 506 115.4 - First Mission

I continued to sift through the files, searching for any additional clues. The reports from the past month were more detailed, with witness statements, locations of the disturbances, and attempts by the authorities to investigate.

But the results were the same—no concrete evidence, just an overwhelming sense of dread that seemed to be infecting the city.

The later reports mentioned the public mood more explicitly. Fear was taking hold, not just among those directly affected by the noises but throughout Veilcroft.

The city was becoming a place of shadows and whispers, where people no longer felt safe in their own homes. The escalation was clear, and it was only a matter of time before something snapped.

'The rates of investment around the city are getting lower and lower, with the inner economy collapsing. With everything happening here, either the people will leave the city or the city will become something that no one visits.'

The organization needed to send someone here.

'That is why this place would only be accessible at the starting stages of the game, and at some point, Ethan would not come here as a student. It seems whatever has happened here really took hold.'

Remembering the information from the game, I thought. However, because there were not any details shown, I could only infer that whatever was happening in this city plagued the city for a while.

It seems the organization also doesn't want this city to become a desolate place. As for their reasons, I don't know, nor do I need to, for now.

After combing through the initial reports, I turned my attention to the findings and results gathered by the other Adepts and Warden Shanks.

The deeper I delved into their work, the more the complexity of the mission became apparent.

The first Adept to arrive in Veilcroft was Adept Lira Hensley. Her reports reflected a methodical approach to mapping out the hotspots of disturbances, with detailed notes on the locations most affected by the whispers and noises. Lira had focused on understanding the geographical and psychological impact of the disturbances on the city's populace.

Despite her thorough efforts, she struggled to uncover anything concrete, growing increasingly frustrated as the situation worsened. After two weeks of investigation, it became clear that the complexity of the situation required additional resources.

That's when the organization sent Adept Mikhail Grayson to assist. Mikhail was a more seasoned operative known for his methodical and analytical mind. Unlike Lira, who had focused on the here and now, Mikhail's approach delved into the past.

He scoured historical records, local legends, and any available information that might hint at a deeper, underlying cause for the disturbances.

His reports mentioned old tales of Veilcroft being built on cursed ground and references to abandoned mines beneath the city, though he found little to connect these elements directly to the current events.

'The abandoned mines and the cursed grounds, huh....Reminds me of a certain moment.'

It was similar to what happened at that time, though I doubted it was the same this time.

With all this information in hand, I turned my attention to the map of Veilcroft displayed on my terminal screen.

The city was sprawling, with a mix of older, more established neighborhoods and newer developments. The layout was a complex web of streets, alleys, and districts, each with its own character and history.

I opened the file containing Lira Hensley's detailed notes on the hotspots of the disturbances. The map immediately lit up with a series of red markers, each one representing a location where residents had reported strange whispers, unsettling noises, and other inexplicable phenomena.

As I zoomed in, I could see that these hotspots were scattered across the city, though there were clear clusters in certain areas.

Lira had meticulously documented each location, noting the frequency of disturbances, the nature of the sounds reported, and any other relevant details. Some areas had been plagued by constant activity, while others had only sporadic incidents.

The map provided a visual representation of where the city's fear was most concentrated, and it was clear that some neighborhoods were suffering far more than others.

I studied the map carefully, cross-referencing it with Mikhail Grayson's findings. His work had focused on the historical context of Veilcroft, and while he hadn't found anything directly linking the city's past to the current events, his notes on old legends and the city's foundations hinted at deeper, more ancient influences.

I overlaid his notes onto the map to find any if there were connections between the historical sites and the current hotspots.

One thing that stood out immediately was the proximity of several hotspots to the old, abandoned mines that Mikhail had mentioned.



These mines were located beneath some of the oldest parts of Veilcroft, areas that had seen significant activity, according to Lira's reports.

It was possible that whatever was happening in the city now had its roots in these underground caverns, though the connection was still tenuous.

I zoomed in further on these areas, paying close attention to the clusters of disturbances. The pattern wasn't entirely random; there was a clear path of increasing intensity that seemed to radiate out from the vicinity of the old mines.

This suggested that something might be emanating from below, slowly spreading its influence across the city.

Another cluster of hotspots was located near areas mentioned in the local legends Mikhail had uncovered.

These stories spoke of Veilcroft being built on cursed ground, and while such tales were often exaggerated or entirely fictional, the consistency with which these locations were mentioned gave me pause.

It was as if these legends had a kernel of truth, something that had been buried over time but was now resurfacing.

'Hmm....' But, when things like these were mentioned, it was always better to hear from the local folks directly rather than just look at some documents.

'Indeed, that is a better approach.' I leaned back in my chair, the faint glow of the terminal screen casting a soft light across the room. The pieces were beginning to fall into place, but there was only so much I could glean from reports and maps. If I wanted to truly understand what was happening in Veilcroft, I needed to get out there and see it for myself.

'Documents are one thing, but the feel of the city, the way people move, talk and react—those are the clues that can't be captured on paper.'

I stood up, the chair scraping softly against the floor as I pushed it back. I took a moment to gather my thoughts, then headed towards the command center where Shanks was likely going over the

latest updates. I needed to inform him of my intentions to leave the base and start my own investigation.

As I entered the room, Shanks looked up from a set of monitors, his expression as unreadable as ever.

"I'm heading out," I said, keeping my tone professional. "I want to get a closer look at the city, see if I can pick up on anything we might have missed."

Shanks studied me for a moment before nodding. "That's fine. Just make sure to keep your communicator on. If anything comes up, we need to be able to reach you immediately."

"Understood." I turned to leave but then paused, glancing back at him.

'Let's not come too arrogant at the start.' With that thought, I asked. "Any particular areas you'd suggest I start with?"

"The southern districts," Shanks replied without missing a beat. "That's where the disturbances have been most frequent in the last few days. And keep an eye out for anything unusual—this situation has a habit of throwing curveballs when you least expect them."

I gave a brief nod and made my way out of the command center, the doors sliding shut behind me with a soft hiss. The corridor was quiet, and the hum of activity from the adjacent rooms was barely audible as I headed toward the exit.

When I reached the main entrance, the same woman who had initially greeted me was there, her expression still professional and composed. She gave me a brief nod, acknowledging my departure.

I returned the nod, keeping my own expression neutral. "I'll be back later," I said, more as a courtesy than a necessity. She merely acknowledged with a slight inclination of her head before returning to her work.

Stepping outside, I was greeted by the bright light of noon. The city of Veilcroft stretched out before me, bathed in the stark light of the midday sun. The shadows, though short, seemed somehow heavier, as if they were waiting for the night to reclaim them. I took a deep breath, inhaling the city's unique scent—a mix of urban grit and something older, more primal, that lingered just beneath the surface.

'First, it is better to see what's really going on out here,' I thought, adjusting my jacket as I started walking.

The southern districts were my first destination, as Shanks had suggested. But before diving straight into the hotspots of disturbances, I decided to take a more measured approach.

Veilcroft was a city of many faces, and the best way to understand its current state was to listen to the people who lived there. I needed to get a feel for the mood of the locals, hear their stories, and see how they reacted to the world around them. Often, it was the subtleties of human behavior that revealed the most.

'Is it the same with the driver or not? That is what it is important.' As I walked through the city streets, I took my time, observing everything around me. The architecture was a mix of old and new, with some buildings showing signs of wear and neglect while others stood as modern contrasts. The streets were moderately busy, but there was an undercurrent of tension in the air.

People moved with purpose, but there was a guardedness in their expressions, a wariness that hadn't been there a few months ago—if the reports were to be believed.

I stopped at a small café near the edge of the southern district, choosing a spot where I could easily overhear conversations while blending into the background. The café was modest, with a few patrons scattered around, quietly sipping their drinks or reading. I ordered a coffee and sat near the window, the sunlight filtering through the glass and casting soft patterns on the table.

As I sat there, I listened. The conversations around me were mostly mundane—discussions about work, family, and the usual day-to-day concerns. But every now and then, a hushed whisper would carry over from a neighboring table, a mention of the strange happenings in the city or a reference to someone who had moved away recently.

"I heard them again last night," a woman at the next table said in a low voice, her tone tinged with fear. "Those whispers... It's like they're coming from inside the walls."

Her companion, a man with tired eyes, nodded grimly. "I know what you mean. My neighbor packed up and left this morning. Didn't even say goodbye, just up and gone. Can't say I blame him."

Another group, seated a little further away, was discussing the lack of response from the authorities. "The cops don't know what to do about it," one man said, shaking his head. "They're trying to keep it quiet, but everyone knows they're just as scared as the rest of us."

The more I listened, the clearer it became that the fear was real and pervasive.

The locals weren't just frightened by the strange occurrences—they were starting to lose faith in their city, in the very foundation of their lives here.

After finishing my coffee, I left the café and continued to walk through the southern districts. The further I ventured, the more the atmosphere shifted. The buildings here were older, some of them crumbling at the edges, with narrow alleyways that seemed to twist and turn in unnatural ways. The shadows in this part of the city felt different—deeper, more oppressive, even in the bright light of day.

I stopped at a small market, where vendors were selling their goods with forced smiles and quick glances over their shoulders. Here, too, the conversations were filled with the same unease I had heard at the café. People spoke of sleepless nights, strange sounds that seemed to follow them, and a sense of being watched even in the safety of their own homes.

As I moved through the market, I struck up small conversations with the vendors, asking about their business and the state of the city. Most were hesitant to talk about the disturbances directly, but their expressions and body language spoke volumes. The fear was palpable, and it was clear that it was affecting every aspect of life here.

After gathering as much information as I could, I decided to head deeper into the heart of the southern districts, toward one of the hotspots that Lira had marked on the map.

It was time to see for myself what was happening in these places, to feel the energy of the city firsthand, and to look for any clues that might have been overlooked.

## Chapter 507 115.5 - First Mission

As I made my way deeper into the southern districts, the atmosphere grew heavier, as did the 'scent' in the mana.

'Indeed, this veil of darkness, it gets thicker around some places.'

I thought. With my eyes now developing a lot more, I could see more intricate details of the mana around me.

After several more minutes of walking, I reached the location marked on Lira's map—the first hotspot. It was an entrance to a slightly old shopping bazaar, its once vibrant exterior now faded and worn.

The large archway leading into the bazaar was cracked and weathered, with signs of neglect visible in the chipped paint and the creeping vines that had begun to reclaim the stone.

I stood at the entrance, taking in the scene before me. The bazaar itself was partially covered, with a series of narrow alleyways branching out from the main thoroughfare. Stalls lined the sides, filled with various goods, though the activity within the bazaar was indeed less than what one would expect.

'Still, it seems like the locals still need to follow their daily lives.' Not that it was desolate or anything. At least, in daylight, they seem to be a little more relaxed.

As I walked further into the bazaar, I focused on the mana around me, allowing my [Eyes] to filter out the noise and reveal the intricate details hidden within the energy that flowed through this place.

The ambient mana was thick, almost cloying, and as I honed my perception, I noticed something unusual—a subtle yet distinct flow of energy moving through the air.

'This isn't natural.'

The flow was faint, almost imperceptible to anyone, even to me, if I was not paying attention. Or, if it was me before the training, I would have missed it most likely. But now, to me, it stood out like a thin thread woven into the fabric of the bazaar's atmosphere.

I followed the flow with my eyes, tracing it as it wound through the narrow alleyways and around the stalls, eventually converging toward a small group of people gathered near the back of the bazaar.

I approached cautiously, my gaze fixed on the individuals in the group. The energy emanating from them was odd—twisted and tainted, as if something was siphoning their life force. They looked rough and worn down; their postures slumped as if they carried a heavy burden on their shoulders.

Their clothes were dirty and frayed, their skin pallid, with dark circles under their eyes that spoke of sleepless nights and constant anxiety.

'What happened to these people?' I wondered, observing them closely. There were small clues, subtle details that hinted at their occupations and recent activities. The rough calluses on their hands, the faint traces of dirt under their nails, the worn-out boots caked with dust and grime—all pointed to manual labor, likely in harsh conditions.

'Miners... or perhaps they work in the quarries nearby,' I deduced, noting the fine particles of dust on their clothes, which were indicative of stone or earth. But it wasn't just their physical state that concerned me. The flow of energy I had detected earlier seemed to be seeping from them, drawn out by some unseen force, leaving them drained and listless.

I moved closer, careful not to draw attention to myself, and listened to their conversation. It was fragmented, filled with half-spoken sentences and muttered complaints, but one thing was clear—they were afraid. They spoke of strange occurrences, of whispers that followed them even into their homes, of shadows that seemed to move on their own.

"... it's getting worse," one of them mumbled, his voice shaking. "Every night, the voices get louder... I can't take it anymore."

Another nodded, his expression grim. "I tried to tell the foreman, but he just shrugged it off. Said it was nothing, just our minds playing tricks... but I know what I heard."

I continued to listen, piecing together the fragments of their conversation. It was clear that these people were deeply affected by whatever was happening in Veilcroft. The flow of energy that surrounded them was evidence enough that something was feeding on their fear, their despair.

'Feeding on despair. In a way, negative emotions.' I needed to know more, and the best way to do that was to find out where these people had come from and what they had been working on that might have exposed them to this insidious force. I looked for more clues—traces of mud on their boots suggested they had been working in a damp environment, possibly underground.

The fine dust on their clothes was typical of stone, confirming my earlier suspicion that they were likely miners or quarry workers.

'They must have been working somewhere near the old mines... or perhaps in one of the quarries that dot the outskirts of the city,' I speculated.

As I continued to observe, I noticed that the group of miners wasn't the only cluster of people affected by this strange energy. A little further down the narrow alleyway, I saw another small group, their faces just as drawn and pale, but these people were different. Their attire, posture, and the subtle signs of their professions set them apart from the miners.

Intrigued, I moved closer to this new group, careful to remain inconspicuous. These individuals weren't covered in dust or grime, nor did they have the rough, calloused hands of manual laborers. Instead, their clothes were slightly more refined, though still showing signs of wear.

A woman in the group had ink stains on her fingers, likely from handling paperwork or writing, while a man beside her had the faint scent of chemicals clinging to his clothes—perhaps a pharmacist or someone who worked with cleaning agents.

I scanned the rest of the group, taking in the details that told their stories. One man had a few stray threads stuck to his sleeves, his hands showing the dexterity of someone who worked with fine materials—likely a tailor. Another woman had faint marks of sun exposure on her neck and arms, though her hands were clean, suggesting she worked outdoors, possibly as a gardener or vendor.

'These people are from the surface, from normal jobs. And yet, they share the same pallor, the same haunted expressions as the miners.'

It was a curious development. The miners could easily have been exposed to something underground, perhaps in the old mines or quarries, but these surface workers? They should have been far removed from whatever was causing the disturbances. Yet here they were, displaying the same signs of weariness, the same aura of fear and despair.

I listened to their conversation, which, like the miners', was filled with unease. They spoke of the same strange occurrences—whispers in the dark, shadows that seemed to follow them, a constant sense of being watched.

"Last night, I heard them again," the tailor murmured, his voice tinged with fear. "They were right outside my window... but when I looked, there was nothing there. Just darkness."

The pharmacist nodded, his eyes hollow. "It's like the air is thick with it... you can't escape it, no matter where you go."

The gardener, her voice trembling, added, "My plants... they're withering. I've never seen anything like it. It's as if something is draining the life out of them."

As I listened, I began to piece together the common thread that connected all of these people—regardless of their profession, their location, or their daily routines, they were all being affected by the same malevolent force. The flow of energy that I had seen earlier wasn't just limited to the miners or those working underground; it was permeating the entire city, targeting anyone and everyone.

'Feeding on despair... negative emotions,' I mused once again, confirming it a little more. 'This force isn't just isolated to specific locations. It's spreading, seeping into the lives of everyone in Veilcroft, regardless of who they are or where they work.'

The implications were clear. This wasn't just a random series of events; it was a calculated effort to sow discord and fear throughout the city. The more fear and despair it created, the stronger this force became, feeding off the negative emotions of the people.

I took a step back, my mind thinking.

The city was already on edge, and the people were tense and afraid. If this continued, it wouldn't just be a matter of a few strange occurrences—it would spiral into full-blown panic, with the city tearing itself apart from within.

'Interesting.'

The more I looked at the things, the more interesting they were starting to become.

Intrigued by the growing complexity of the situation, I took a moment to steady myself. The implications of what I had uncovered were both alarming and fascinating. This was no mere disturbance; it was a deliberate attack on the city's very soul, an insidious force that thrived on the fear and despair of its inhabitants.

'Interesting... very interesting.'

But understanding the situation was only the first step. Now, I needed to trace the source of this malevolent energy. My eyes narrowed as I focused on the flow of mana once more, honing in on the



faint threads that seemed to weave through the air, linking the affected individuals to something deeper within the city.

I followed the trail, my senses attuned to the subtle shifts in the energy around me. The flow was erratic, twisting and turning through the narrow alleys of the southern district, almost as if it were trying to evade detection.

But I was persistent, and soon, I found myself standing in front of a small, unassuming store at the edge of the bazaar.

The energy converged here, drawing me to the back of the building. I moved quietly, activating [Shadowborne] and erasing my presence.

I slipped into the narrow space between the store and the adjacent wall, my eyes scanning for anything out of the ordinary.

It didn't take long to find it—a small symbol etched into the stone, almost hidden beneath layers of grime and age.

'There it is.'

The symbol was simple yet precise, carved with a steady hand. It pulsed faintly with the same twisted energy I had been following as if it were a conduit for the force that was spreading throughout the city.

I crouched down, examining the symbol more closely. The lines were sharp and clean despite the wear of time. But as I tried to focus on the mana surrounding it, I encountered something unexpected—a disturbance in the flow, a kind of interference that prevented me from seeing beyond the surface.

'Ah... I see. Clever, but not clever enough.'

The interference was deliberate, designed to obscure the true nature of the symbol and what lay behind it. But it was also clumsy, not because of the design but because of the lack of caution.

I nodded to myself, recognizing the intent behind the interference. Whoever had carved this symbol had tried to hide it, but their attempt was far from perfect.

I could still sense the underlying energy and could still feel the faint traces of mana seeping through the cracks in the barrier.

Reaching out, I touched the surface of the symbol, feeling the rough texture of the stone beneath my fingers. The carving was fresh, the edges still sharp, indicating that it had been made recently.

The depth of the cuts and the smoothness of the lines suggested that the person who had carved it was skilled but not a master.

The strokes were confident, yet there was a subtle unevenness in the pressure, a sign that the carver had been right-handed.

'Recent... within the last two months, perhaps.' It aligned with the time when the rumors started.

'Hmm....I see....'

However, there was something that needed to be seen more. Something that I must look for more details.

Thus, it was better to investigate more before making the conclusions.

However, I doubted that it would take too long since I feel like the investigation has already been finished.

## Chapter 508 115.6 - First Mission

Just as I finished examining the symbol, my smartwatch buzzed with an incoming call. I glanced at the screen, noting that it was Shanks. The timing was perfect, given the insights I had just gained.

I answered the call, keeping my voice steady. "Astron here."

"Adept Natusalune," Shanks' voice came through, as composed and direct as ever. "It's now 6 P.M. You're to return to the base. The meeting with the field Adepts will begin shortly, and I expect you to be ready."

I nodded, though he couldn't see it. "Understood. I'm wrapping up here and heading back now."

"Good. Don't be late." The call ended as abruptly as it began, leaving me standing in the narrow alley with the faint hum of the symbol's energy still lingering in the air.

I took a final look at the carving, memorizing the details before standing up. The investigation was starting to come together, the pieces falling into place, but there was still more to uncover. For now, though, it was time to regroup and share what I had found with the rest of the team.

As I made my way back through the bazaar, I decided to indulge in a small treat before returning to the base.

Street food was one of the simplest ways to get a feel for the local culture, and it had been a while since I'd taken a treat from the outside world.

I spotted a vendor selling skewers of grilled meat and vegetables, the scent wafting through the air and drawing my attention. The stand was modest, the grill sizzling with a variety of options, and the vendor was a middle-aged man with a friendly, if tired, smile. A small crowd had gathered around, each person eagerly awaiting their turn.

I joined the line, observing the interactions between the vendor and his customers. Despite the underlying tension in the city, there was still a sense of community here—people coming together over something as simple as a good meal.

It was a reminder that, even in the darkest times, life found a way to persist.

'Indeed....The hope never disappears, is it not?' Maybe or maybe not. For some, that was not the case.

When it was my turn, I ordered a couple of skewers, and the vendor handed them to me with a nod and a brief "Enjoy."

I took a bite as I continued walking, savoring the flavor and the warmth of the food. It was a small comfort, a moment of normalcy amidst the chaos. The meat was tender, seasoned just right, with a slight char that added depth to the taste. The vegetables were fresh, a bit of a rarity given the recent events, but they were grilled to perfection.

As I made my way back to the base, the streets around me began to shift, the vibrant activity of the day gradually giving way to the more subdued pace of the evening. The shadows were growing longer, the air cooling as the sun dipped lower in the sky. Veilcroft was a city of contrasts, its light and darkness in constant battle, much like the forces at work beneath the surface.

By the time I reached the base, I had finished the skewers, the taste lingering on my tongue as a reminder of the brief respite. The entrance loomed ahead, and with a nod to the woman at the front desk, I made my way back inside.

The halls were quieter now; the earlier hum of activity dimmed as people prepared for the evening meeting.

'Let's wait and watch a little bit.'

While the things that I had learned could be deemed important, it was also important to note that I was just a newcomer who came here just now.

So, I intended to watch how they conducted their daily procedures a little bit to get a general idea of how things worked in the organization.

As I made my way through the quieter halls, I allowed myself to observe the surroundings with a keener eye.

As I approached the meeting room, I saw Elysia waiting just outside. She caught sight of me and gave a nod of acknowledgment, her expression as sharp and focused as ever.

"This way," she said, her voice direct but not unkind. She turned and led me to the door, opening it for me to enter.

I stepped into the room and immediately took in the scene. The core personnel were already assembled around a large table; their attention focused on various reports and data displayed on the monitors that lined the walls.

The air was thick with a mix of tension and anticipation, the kind that precedes a critical discussion.

In addition to the familiar faces of Shanks, Jim, Ren, and Nadia, there was another presence in the room—a woman with short, practical hair and a no-nonsense demeanor.

She was poring over a set of documents, her sharp eyes scanning each page with practiced efficiency. It didn't take long to recognize her from the reports I had studied earlier—this was Adept Lira Hensley, the first to arrive in Veilcroft and the one who had laid much of the groundwork for the investigation.

The woman, Lira, looked up as I entered, her gaze assessing me for a brief moment before she returned to her work. It was a quick, professional acknowledgment, and I could sense that she was fully focused on the task at hand.

Shanks, who was standing near the head of the table, glanced in my direction as I found a seat. He gave me a brief nod before turning back to the discussion that had been ongoing before my arrival.

"We'll begin the briefing shortly," Shanks said, addressing the room. "Everyone, finalize your reports and prepare to share your findings."

I settled into my chair, taking a moment to observe how the team operated. There was a clear hierarchy but also a sense of mutual respect among the members.

'Not bad. This state is most likely what the Academy also wants to achieve.' It was a clear and concise one.

Elysia took a seat next to Lira, and for a moment, the two exchanged a few quiet words. Whatever was said, it was brief, and both women quickly turned their attention back to the upcoming briefing. Lira seemed to have a natural authority about her, a presence that was natural.

'Not like Dakota's bloodthirstiness or battle-crazed expression, but more of a calm and natural one.'

I took a moment to observe Lira more closely. Her demeanor was calm and focused, but there were small traces that hinted at the activities she'd engaged in before arriving here.

Her boots were slightly scuffed, with a faint layer of dust clinging to the soles—likely from walking through an area that was less maintained, perhaps an older part of the city where the disturbances were most prevalent.

A few stray cat hairs clung to the lower hem of her trousers, and I noted a slight smile tugging at the corner of her lips as if she had encountered something pleasant or familiar earlier—most likely a stray cat she had taken a moment to interact with.

Her hands rested lightly on the table, fingers slightly worn from the repetitive action of turning pages, and I noticed the faint ink stains on her left hand—a clear sign she was left-handed and had been taking extensive notes or drafting reports.

The subtle wearing on her fingers also suggested she frequently handled delicate materials or was used to precise, controlled movements—common traits for someone who practiced magic regularly.

The slight callus on her index finger reinforced this idea, indicating she was accustomed to wielding a quill or stylus, tools often used in the intricate work of spellcraft.

'Left-handed, a mage, and meticulous in her work and pays attention to how her upper body looks,' I concluded, appreciating the quiet efficiency she seemed to embody.

As I continued to study her, the door to the meeting room opened, drawing my attention. The second Adept, Mikhail Grayson, entered with a measured stride, his expression thoughtful but sharp as if his mind was constantly analyzing the world around him.

Mikhail was a stark contrast to Lira. Where Lira's presence was calm and steady, Mikhail carried an air of intense focus and quiet determination. His eyes, sharp and perceptive, took in the room with a glance, assessing everyone present in an instant.

There was a quiet confidence in his movements, a sign that he was someone who had seen his share of challenges and overcome them with methodical precision.

As he approached the table, I noticed the slight wear on the cuffs of his sleeves, a sign that he had been handling old documents—likely the historical records and local legends he had been investigating.

There was a faint scent of parchment and aged leather that clung to him, a telltale sign of his time spent in archives or libraries, poring over texts that might hold the key to the mystery of Veilcroft.

Mikhail's right hand bore the subtle calluses of someone who was accustomed to both writing and more physical tasks—perhaps from handling tools or equipment in the field.

His posture was upright, but there was a slight tension in his shoulders, indicating that he was always ready to act and react to any sudden developments.

'Before entering the organization, there is a high chance that he was an antique smuggler. He is someone who doesn't leave things to chance,' I mused, noting the way his gaze briefly flicked over to the various data displays before settling on Shanks. 'He's thorough, calculating, and likely has a contingency plan for every scenario.' With Mikhail now seated, the room fell into a focused silence. The core team was assembled.

Shanks, who had been quietly observing the team as they settled in, finally cleared his throat, signaling the start of the briefing. "Now that everyone's here, let's begin."

The monitors around the room flickered to life, displaying various maps, charts, and reports that summarized the investigation's progress thus far. Shanks took his position at the head of the table, his expression serious as he addressed the team.

"Let's start with the reports. Anyone want to go first?"

Lira adjusted the documents in front of her and nodded, signaling that she would begin. The room fell into a focused silence as everyone turned their attention to her.

"Today....."

And then she started.

Chapter 509 115.7 - First Mission

"Today, I continued my work researching the places where I had marked before." She said as she tapped onto her smartwatch. Following that, right on top of the table, the holographic map of the Veilcroft appeared.

The map flickered briefly before stabilizing, showing a complex network of streets and districts, with several locations marked prominently in red.

Lira pointed to a specific location on the holographic map, a cluster of red markers indicating one of the most affected areas in the southern district. The room's attention remained fixed on her as she continued her report.

"This location," she said, zooming in on the map, "has shown the highest frequency of disturbances. Over the past few days, I've been focusing on more than just the physical and environmental factors at play. I've started investigating a possible psychological commonality among the victims."

She tapped her smartwatch again, and the holographic map shifted to display a series of profiles—images and brief descriptions of individuals who had reported encounters with the whispers and other phenomena.

"What I've found is that many of these individuals share certain psychological traits," Lira explained. "Specifically, they have all experienced significant emotional stress in recent months—loss of a loved one, financial difficulties, personal crises. It's as if these disturbances are targeting those who are already vulnerable, amplifying their fears and despair."

She paused, letting the gravity of her findings sink in. The monitors displayed data points and correlations she had uncovered, showing a clear pattern in the psychological profiles of the affected individuals.

"I believe that there is an intelligent design behind these disturbances," Lira continued, her tone resolute. "The way these whispers and phenomena are escalating suggests that someone, or something, is deliberately manipulating the emotions of the people in Veilcroft. This isn't just a random occurrence—it's a planned activity, likely orchestrated by a villain with a specific agenda."

She looked around the room, gauging the reactions of her colleagues. "If this is the case, then we're dealing with an adversary who understands human psychology and is using these disturbances to create fear and chaos. The whispers are likely a tool to sow discord and weaken the populace, making them easier to control or manipulate."

The room was silent for a moment.



However, before anyone could respond, Mikhail leaned forward, his expression thoughtful but firm. "I disagree," he began, his voice calm but carrying an underlying tension. "While I respect Lira's findings, I believe we're looking at this from the wrong angle."

He tapped his own smartwatch, and the holographic map shifted again, this time highlighting several older, less populated areas on the outskirts of the city.

"There's a different pattern here," Mikhail continued. "The locations Lira has pointed out are indeed significant, but I've been studying the history of Veilcroft and cross-referencing it with reports of ancient creatures and forgotten entities. I believe these disturbances are the result of an ancient monster being awakened—something that has been dormant for centuries, perhaps even millennia."

He paused, letting his theory take hold before continuing. "The whispers, the strange phenomena—they're not just psychological attacks. They're the echoes of a being that is gradually regaining its strength. The people who are most affected may not just be psychologically vulnerable—they could be more sensitive to the influence of this creature, drawn to it in ways they don't fully understand."

Mikhail's words introduced a new layer of complexity to the situation. While Lira's theory focused on an intelligent, calculated plot, Mikhail suggested that the disturbances were the result of something far older and far less human—an ancient force of nature that was reawakening after a long slumber.

"This being," Mikhail continued, "could be influencing the city on a subconscious level, drawing power from the fear and despair of its inhabitants. But its ultimate goal might not be to control or manipulate—it could be something much more primal, like survival or feeding. If that's the case, then we're not just dealing with a villain—we're dealing with a force of nature that needs to be contained before it consumes the entire city."

The room was tense, but at the same time, people here looked like they were used to it.

'Hmm.....Has this been happening before as well?'

As I asked myself this, the answer became clear. It was most likely a yes, as the reports belonging to Lira and Mikhail were all focused on their respective perspectives.

Lira didn't let Mikhail's theory stand unchallenged for long. She leaned forward slightly, her expression thoughtful but with a hint of skepticism.

"Mikhail, if such an ancient monster existed and was powerful enough to influence the city on this scale, why would it suddenly decide to wake up now? What triggered its reawakening? Creatures like the one you're describing don't just stir after centuries of slumber without a reason. If this were the case, there should have been signs, gradual increases in disturbances leading up to this point—not a sudden, concentrated escalation."

Her voice was calm but firm, and she continued, "Also, if this entity is truly ancient and primal, it would likely act in predictable, cyclical patterns aligned with natural phenomena or certain historical events. But what we've seen here is a targeted attack on specific individuals, which suggests intention, not just instinct."

Lira's gaze remained steady as Mikhail responded, his voice measured but firm.

"The patterns you're talking about, Lira—how can you be so sure they're intentional?" Mikhail asked, leaning slightly forward. "The whispers and disturbances we've observed aren't specifically targeting individual people but rather affecting broader areas, impacting the entire crowd. There's no clear evidence that the victims were chosen based on their psychological state. The disturbances are widespread and affect anyone within range, regardless of their mental stability."

Lira's expression tightened slightly, but before she could respond, Ren, who had been quietly analyzing the data, interjected.

"Mikhail's right," Ren said, his voice carrying a note of certainty. "I've been going through the data we've collected so far, and there's no strong correlation between the disturbances and the mental health of the individuals affected. In fact, the data suggests that the whispers and phenomena are indiscriminate in their targets. They're not honing in on specific people with psychological vulnerabilities; they're impacting entire areas without distinction."

He tapped a few buttons on his terminal, and the holographic display shifted to show a series of graphs and charts. "If we look at the distribution of reported incidents, it's clear that the disturbances are concentrated in certain regions, but within those regions, the impact is spread out evenly among the population. The analysis doesn't support the idea of a targeted psychological attack. Instead, it points to something more generalized—something that affects everyone within a certain proximity, regardless of their individual state of mind."

The graphs highlighted the spread of incidents across different areas, showing that while some areas were more affected than others, there was no clear pattern of targeting specific individuals.

Lira listened carefully, her expression thoughtful. She was not one to dismiss evidence lightly, and it was clear that the data presented by Ren was compelling.

"I see your point," Lira said slowly, her tone shifting to one of consideration. "If the disturbances are affecting broader areas without targeting specific individuals, then it does suggest a different kind of influence—something more primal, as Mikhail suggested."

She glanced at Mikhail, acknowledging his theory with a nod. "However, I still believe that there's an element of intent here. Even if the disturbances are not targeting individuals based on their psychological state, the fact that they're spreading fear and despair so effectively suggests that whoever or whatever is behind this is aware of the impact they're having. The whispers might be designed to create an atmosphere of fear, regardless of who's hearing them."

Mikhail nodded in return, appreciating Lira's willingness to consider his point. "That's a possibility. If this entity is ancient, it may be using its influence in ways that we don't fully understand—ways that could appear both calculated and instinctual."

Ren, ever the pragmatist, spoke up again. "Whether it's intentional or not, the result is the same: widespread fear and destabilization. Our focus should be on finding the source and understanding its capabilities so we can figure out how to neutralize it."

Shanks, who had been listening to the exchange with a thoughtful expression, finally intervened. "This discussion has clarified that we're dealing with a complex situation, one where both theories—Lira's and Mikhail's—could be contributing to the overall picture. The disturbances may be the result of an ancient force that's reawakening, but that force might also be manipulating the environment in ways that are more deliberate than we realize."

He looked around the room, meeting the eyes of each team member in turn.

"Is there anything one of you wants to add?"

Shanks's gaze swept over the room, finally settling on me. His expression remained neutral, but there was a subtle expectation in his eyes as he addressed me directly.

"Anything you want to add, newbie?" Shanks asked, his tone almost casual, though it carried the weight of authority. Before I could respond, he gestured towards Lira and Mikhail. "Lira, Mikhail, this is Astron Natusalune. He's new to our team, but he's got a reputation for being sharp. Astron, you've had some time to review the reports and get a feel for the situation. What's your take?"

I nodded in acknowledgment, appreciating the introduction but aware that all eyes were now on me. Keeping my expression neutral, I took a moment to gather my thoughts before speaking.

"I've read through the reports carefully," I began, my tone measured. "Both of your theories have merit, and from what I've seen, they're not mutually exclusive. The disturbances could very well be the result of an ancient force reawakening, as Mikhail suggested. But at the same time, Lira's point about the calculated nature of these events can't be ignored."

I paused, glancing at the holographic map still displayed on the table. "If this force is ancient, it's possible that it's acting on instinct, following patterns that we don't fully understand yet. But that doesn't mean there isn't some level of intentionality in how it's spreading fear and chaos. The line between instinct and intention can be thin, especially when dealing with something that's been dormant for so long."

I kept my words carefully balanced, appearing to play it safe. But in reality, I was already piecing together a different understanding of the situation—one that I wasn't ready to fully reveal yet.

At least, I needed enough evidence. Without it, I would look like a fool.

"The reports indicate that this situation is evolving rapidly," I continued, "and both perspectives will be important as we move forward. We need to remain adaptable and ready to shift our approach as new information comes to light. For now, I think it's wise to continue exploring both angles."

Shanks watched me closely, his expression unreadable, before giving a slight nod.

"Not bad. At least you seem to know how to talk."

I could feel the scrutiny of the team, especially from Lira and Mikhail, both of whom clearly assessed me.

In a way, I had just repeated what they said, but at the same time, it was a slight warning of what was there to come tomorrow.

Shanks shifted his focus back to the rest of the team. "Alright, let's wrap this up for now. We'll reconvene when we have more data."

Just like that, the team dispersed.

## Chapter 510 115.8 - First Mission

As the team began to disperse, I took my time gathering my thoughts, making sure I didn't appear too eager to leave the room.

Shanks had given me a nod of approval, but I knew that my words were only the first step in gaining the trust and respect of the team. I needed to prove myself in action, not just in conversation.

I left the meeting room and made my way down the quiet corridor, my mind still turning over the details of the discussion. The investigation was complex, with multiple layers to unravel, and I was certain that the truth was lurking somewhere beneath the surface, waiting to be uncovered.

As I reached the exit, I noticed a figure waiting just outside. Lira stood there, her posture relaxed but with a sharpness in her gaze that suggested she wasn't just idly lingering. She was waiting for me.

I met her eyes as I approached, and there was a brief moment of silence as we both assessed each other. Lira was the first to speak, her voice calm but laced with a hint of scrutiny.

"I requested someone capable from headquarters," she began, her eyes narrowing slightly. "And they sent you?"

It was clear that her words weren't just a casual inquiry—they were a challenge, a subtle questioning of my qualifications. I knew this was a test, one that I had to navigate carefully.

"Why would you think I'm not capable?" I replied evenly, meeting her gaze without flinching. There was no point in deflecting her question; it was better to address it head-on.

Lira studied me for a moment longer, her expression thoughtful but guarded. "You're just a newbie," she said, her tone direct. "For someone who's new to the field, these types of missions aren't exactly the best place to start. You have much to learn, and it's usually better to send someone in your position to a more controlled environment—somewhere they can observe and grow at a steady pace."

I nodded slightly, acknowledging the logic in her words. "That would indeed be better," I agreed, "if someone were learning at a slow pace. But that's not the case for me."

Lira's eyes narrowed slightly, intrigued by my response. "Why is that?"

"Because I'm a fast learner," I said, my tone confident but not arrogant. "I'm here because I can adapt quickly, analyze the situation, and contribute effectively, even under pressure. I understand that this mission is complex, and I'm aware of the risks. But I wouldn't be here if I wasn't ready."

Lira's eyes narrowed slightly as she continued to assess me, her mind clearly working through what I had just said. The silence hung between us, heavy with the weight of her scrutiny. Finally, I decided to add a bit more context to my situation.

"To add context," I began, my tone calm and measured, "it's only been three weeks since I entered the organization."

The moment the words left my mouth, Lira's expression shifted. Her eyes widened slightly in surprise, and she couldn't hide the disbelief in her voice as she responded. "Three weeks? And no prior training?"

I shook my head, keeping my expression neutral. "Not in the traditional sense. But I'm also a student of Arcadia Hunter Academy."

The mention of the Academy had the effect I anticipated. Lira's eyes widened a fraction more, and for a brief moment, she seemed taken aback. "Arcadia Hunter Academy?" she echoed, her tone now tinged with a mix of respect and understanding.

I nodded. "Indeed."

Lira released a quiet sigh, her earlier skepticism giving way to a more measured consideration. "I see. If you're from Arcadia, that explains a lot."

The Arcadia Hunter Academy was known for its rigorous training and the high standards it set for its students. Graduates of the Academy were often among the best in their fields, and the fact that I was currently enrolled there clearly shifted Lira's perception of me.

'Though you would not think if you were to see it from inside.' But let's not mention that.

"If that's the case," Lira continued, her tone more thoughtful now, "then it makes sense why you were assigned to this mission so quickly. The Academy doesn't produce novices. Even if you're new to the organization, you've already undergone some of the most intense training available."

I could see the gears turning in her mind as she recalibrated her expectations. The mention of Arcadia had changed the dynamic between us, and while I could still sense a degree of caution in her, there was also a newfound respect.

"Alright," Lira said finally, her tone decisive. "I'll be watching to see how you handle yourself on this mission. Arcadia or not, this is a different environment, and the stakes are high. But if you're as capable as I think you might be, then this should end sooner rather than later."

"That will indeed be the case," I mumbled.

Lira's eyes narrowed slightly at my mumble, her curiosity clearly piqued. "What? Did you find something?" she asked, her tone sharp with interest.

I met her gaze, weighing my words carefully. "Well, let's just say you should look forward to tomorrow's meeting."

Lira wasn't satisfied with that. "If you know something, it's better for you to share it now," she pressed. There was an edge to her voice, a mix of concern and impatience. She wasn't someone who liked to be kept in the dark, especially when the stakes were this high.

I held up a hand, trying to reassure her without giving too much away. "I have something in mind," I admitted, keeping my tone measured, "but I need to gather more evidence before I can be sure. It's a theory that could change how we approach the situation, but I want to make sure it's solid before I bring it to the table."

Lira's expression remained intense, but I could see her considering my words. "Until tomorrow's meeting, I'll be working to get the pieces in place. I don't want to plague your mind with half-baked ideas. It's better for both of us if I come prepared with something concrete."

She seemed to weigh my response, her eyes searching mine for any sign of hesitation or doubt. But when she found none, she finally nodded, albeit reluctantly. "Alright," she said, her tone a bit more resigned. "I'll be waiting for that then."

I could tell she wasn't entirely satisfied with being kept in suspense, but she also understood the importance of being thorough.

Lira was too experienced to dismiss the need for solid evidence, even if it meant waiting a bit longer for answers.

With our exchange concluded, she gave me one last assessing look before turning to leave. "Don't disappoint me, Astron," she said over her shoulder as she walked away.

"I had been hearing that a lot."

"Well, you must be."

As I watched her go, I also started getting ready for my investigation.

I made my way toward the exit, my mind already shifting gears to the task at hand.

As I stepped out of the building, the cool evening air greeted me. The sky was darkening, the sun dipping below the horizon and casting long shadows across the city. It was around 7:30 P.M., and the familiar transition from day to night was settling over Veilcroft. The once-bustling streets were now quieter, the energy of the city shifting as the evening wore on.

This was the time when the whispers and disturbances were at their most active, and I knew that to truly understand what was happening, I needed to experience it firsthand.

I pulled my collar up against the chill in the air and set off into the deepening twilight. The city's lights began to flicker on, casting a soft glow over the streets as I walked.

I had already identified several locations where the disturbances were most concentrated, and it was to these places that I was now heading.



My first destination was an older section of the city, one that had seen better days. The buildings here were worn, their facades cracked and weathered by time. This area has been mentioned frequently in reports, with a higher-than-average number of victims reporting strange phenomena.

The streets here were narrow, the buildings close together, creating an atmosphere that felt almost claustrophobic in the growing darkness.

As I walked, I kept my senses sharp, my eyes scanning the surroundings for any signs of unusual activity. The streets were relatively empty, but there was a palpable tension in the air as if the city itself was holding its breath, waiting for something to happen.

'This is where it all begins,' I thought, feeling a familiar surge of adrenaline. The city's whispers and disturbances were strongest in these places, and I could already sense the faint traces of the unnatural energy that had been plaguing Veilcroft.

The closer I got to the epicenters of these disturbances, the more I felt the atmosphere change. It was subtle at first—a slight chill in the air, a faint hum of something just beyond the edge of perception. But as I continued, the sensations grew stronger and more defined.

I paused at the entrance to a narrow alley, one of the hotspots I had marked earlier. The energy here was thick, almost tangible, and I could sense the fear that lingered in the air, like an invisible mist that clung to the walls and pavement.

'This is it,' I thought, taking a deep breath and stepping forward into the shadows.

The alley was eerily quiet, the only sound coming from the distant hum of the city beyond. As I walked deeper into the alley, I allowed my [Eyes] to open further, filtering out the noise and focusing on the underlying currents of mana that flowed through this place.

The energy was erratic, twisted, and unnatural. It moved in strange patterns, looping back on itself and creating a web of tension that seemed to pulse with a life of its own.

The whispers were faint here, almost imperceptible, but they were present—a low murmur that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once.

I could see the faint traces of the people who had passed through here, their fear leaving an imprint on the mana that hung in the air.

It was as if their very presence had been absorbed into the fabric of the alley, contributing to the growing disturbance.

'So, in a way, what this spell does is simply create the voices of the morning or past in a strange manner to cause disturbance?' I continued to explore the area, carefully following the threads of mana as they wound through the alley and into the surrounding buildings. The deeper I went, the more I understood the patterns that were at play here.

My focus sharpened as I delved deeper into the alley, the patterns of mana becoming more intricate, more deliberate. The energy here was like a web, its strands leading back to something hidden, something that was manipulating these threads for a darker purpose. I was on the verge of uncovering something significant when—

A low growl cut through the silence, a sound that sent a chill down my spine. It was close, too close, and it carried with it a primal, predatory intent.

Instincts honed by years of training kicked in, and I froze, every sense on high alert. I could feel it now, a presence looming just behind me, its intent clear—this was no ordinary creature.

'Indeed,' I thought, nodding inwardly as I kept my breathing steady. 'Suppressing my mana was the right choice.'