

H. Academy 511

Chapter 511 115.9 - First Mission

SWOOSH!

The beast lunged at me, its dark form a blur of shadow and ferocity. But I was ready.

In one fluid motion, I pulled out my daggers, their edges gleaming faintly in the dim light of the alley. My movements were swift.

As the creature closed in, its claws outstretched, I slashed my blades through the air.

The daggers cut through the beast's body with a whispering hiss, their sharpness almost unnatural. Indeed, they felt unnatural.

'This is really different. The feeling of powering up is indeed real.' SLASH! The creature let out a guttural snarl, but its momentum carried it right into the path of my strikes. My blades met little resistance, slicing cleanly through the creature's form as if it were made of mist and shadows.

For a brief moment, the alley was filled with shimmering darkness, the beast's body unraveling as it split in two.

The halves of its form twisted and dissipated into the air, leaving behind a faint, lingering echo of the growl that had heralded its attack.

I stood still, my breathing controlled, watching as the last remnants of the creature dissolved into the night.

The alley was silent once more, the oppressive tension lifting as quickly as it had descended.

I took a moment to observe the remnants of the creature as they dissipated into the air, my mind quickly analyzing what I had just encountered. The beast's form, while twisted and grotesque, revealed certain features that were familiar to me. Its dark, shadowy essence, the way it moved, and the predatory intent in its attack—all pointed to a specific kind of creature.

'A rank-3 [Umbral Wraith],' I realized, my thoughts aligning with the knowledge I had acquired during my training. This particular type of creature was known for its ability to manipulate shadows, often lurking in areas where negative energy was abundant.

While it wasn't among the highest-ranking beasts, a rank-3 [Umbral Wraith] was still dangerous enough to be a serious threat to anyone unprepared.

The fact that it had been stationed here guarding this specific alley indicated that it was serving a purpose beyond mere survival.

Someone—or something—had placed it here to deter intruders, to protect whatever lay deeper within the shadows.

I knelt down and reached out with my hand, channeling a small amount of mana to stabilize the creature's fading essence.

The remains of the [Umbral Wraith] responded to my touch, allowing me to gather what was left of its carcass. With a fluid motion, I opened my spatial storage.

The carcass vanished into the storage, leaving the alley empty once more. I stood, my presence blending seamlessly with the shadows around me. With a practiced motion, I activated [Shadowborne], effectively erasing my presence from the physical world.

Now hidden from sight, I settled into a quiet stillness, my thoughts turning inward as I assessed the situation.

'The fact there are not many mentions of attacks around the place when the Local Awakened Association or the organization had investigated means that they were already anticipating that. The way they do it is through a channel of sensing mana. If an Awakened is detected, they can just lock the monster, and when there are no awakened, they can send the monster.' I waited, my presence completely masked, allowing the shadows to conceal me from any prying eyes. Time passed slowly in the stillness of the alley, but I remained vigilant, knowing that something—or someone—would eventually show up.

And then, it happened. A subtle shift in the air, a disturbance that rippled through the mana around me. I looked at them, my senses sharpening as I detected the movement. Someone had appeared, materializing from one of the nearby buildings.

The figure moved with purpose, stepping into the alley with an air of cautious authority. His face was obscured by a mask, the kind that concealed both his identity and his intentions. He carried himself with a certain confidence, suggesting that he was familiar with this place and its secrets.

The masked man paused, his eyes scanning the area, searching for something—likely the remnants of the [Umbral Wraith] I had just dispatched. I remained motionless, my presence completely suppressed, knowing that any detection of mana would alert him to my location.

The man continued his search, his gaze passing over the exact spot where I was hidden. I could sense his frustration building as he found nothing, no trace of the creature that should have been there to report back or to continue its patrol. His hands moved subtly, checking a device he carried, likely something that monitored the area for any anomalies.

After what felt like an eternity, the masked man let out a low sigh, his frustration palpable even from where I stood. He gave one last look around, his eyes narrowing as if he suspected something was amiss, but with no evidence to support his suspicion, he eventually turned to leave.

I watched as he disappeared back into the building he had come from, his movements precise and calculated.

As soon as the masked man disappeared into the building, I knew this was my opportunity. I waited a few more seconds to ensure he wasn't coming back, then activated my [Eyes], focusing on sending out small amounts of psions. My [Eyes] allowed me to perceive what lay beyond the walls.

Through the walls, I saw the man descending a staircase that led to what looked like an old, narrow well. The passageway was cleverly concealed, its entrance masked by the structure of the building itself. The stairs spiraled down into the earth, but as they descended further, the thickness of the ground interfered with my perception, blocking my ability to see deeper.

'So, that's how they're hiding it,' I thought, the pieces of the puzzle clicking into place. The well likely led to a subterranean space.

The further down it went, the more it seemed that whatever was below was shielded by layers of earth and, perhaps, additional barriers meant to block or distort mana.

With a quick, controlled breath, I activated [Shadow Leap], slipping through the physical barrier of the wall as if it weren't there. I moved swiftly and silently, reappearing inside the building just beyond the point where the man had entered.

As I slipped through the wall and into the building, I found myself in a dimly lit room, the air thick with the scent of damp earth and old wood.

The room was sparsely furnished, with only a few pieces of worn furniture—a table, a couple of chairs, and some shelves lined with nondescript items.

Everything seemed ordinary at first glance as if the room had been designed to blend into the background, to be unremarkable.

But my trained eyes picked up the subtle signs that told a different story. The floorboards were scuffed in specific areas, suggesting frequent use. A thin layer of dust coated some of the shelves, but the table in the center of the room was spotless as if it had been wiped clean recently. There was a faint imprint on the surface where something heavy had been placed—a box or a case, perhaps.

'This place is definitely in use, and regularly at that,' I thought, my eyes narrowing as I moved silently through the room.

I turned my attention to the well in the corner, partially concealed by the shadows cast by the dim light. It was ancient, and the stones had worn smoothly over time, but there were signs that they had been renewed recently. The mortar between the stones was fresh, the surface free of the moss and grime that should have accumulated over the years. It was clear that someone had gone to great lengths to maintain this well, keeping it functional despite its age.

'A well this old should have been abandoned long ago, yet it's been preserved—no, restored.'

As I moved closer, I noticed a faint shimmer in the air around the well, a barely perceptible distortion that indicated the presence of an illusion. It was subtle, designed to make the well appear ordinary to the untrained eye, but my [Eyes] saw through it with ease.

I reached out, my fingers brushing against the surface of the well. The illusion rippled slightly at my touch, revealing the true nature of the structure. The stones were engraved with symbols, old and faded, yet still powerful.

These were likely the remnants of an ancient protective spell layered with more recent enchantments meant to conceal and protect whatever lay beneath.

'As expected.'

I knelt down, examining the base of the well. The symbols etched into the stone were partially obscured by the fresh mortar, but I could still make out enough of them to recognize their purpose. They were designed to ward off intruders, to confuse and mislead anyone who might stumble upon this place by accident.

'All of this confirms what I think.'

The mission was completed. The only thing left for me was to gather some more evidence and then press it in tomorrow's gathering.

That was it.

The following evening, as the clock struck 7 P.M., the team gathered once more in the dimly lit meeting room at the Veilcroft branch.

The atmosphere was tense but focused, everyone acutely aware of the growing urgency to uncover the source of the disturbances plaguing the city.

"Let's get started," Shanks said, his voice cutting through the quiet. "I hope everyone has something to contribute tonight. The situation in Veilcroft is deteriorating, and we're running out of time to get ahead of it."

He glanced at Lira first. "Lira, you mentioned yesterday that you were continuing your investigation into the psychological patterns of the victims. Any updates?"

Lira shook her head slightly, her expression indicating the frustration of a stalled investigation. "Not much to report," she said. "The patterns are consistent, but there hasn't been any significant change

since yesterday. The victims are still showing signs of heightened anxiety and fear, but no new insights into why specific individuals are being targeted."

Shanks nodded, his expression neutral, before turning to Mikhail. "Mikhail, what about your end? Any progress on the historical records or underground network?"

Mikhail sighed, a rare display of emotion from the usually composed man. "Unfortunately, no. I've gone through all the available records and cross-referenced them with the city's maps, but there's nothing new that stands out. The tunnels are still our best lead, but without further information, we're hitting a wall."

Shanks let out a low grunt, his frustration evident. "If that's the case, it seems like today's meeting will be short. We're running out of time, but it looks like we'll have to regroup and—"

Before he could finish, I raised my hand, catching everyone's attention. Shanks paused, his gaze shifting to me with a hint of curiosity. "Astron?"

"I have something to report."

It was the time to reveal everything.

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"I have something to report."

The room fell silent as all eyes turned to Astron, their attention captured by the unexpected interruption. Shanks, his curiosity piqued, leaned slightly forward. "What is it you want to report, Astron?"

Astron remained calm, his expression composed as he glanced at the faces around the table. He took a moment before speaking, his tone measured but carrying an underlying intensity. "Before I present my findings, I have a question for Mikhail."

Mikhail's gaze sharpened, intrigued by the shift in focus. "Go ahead," he said, his voice steady.

"Why do you believe there is a monster behind this whole ordeal?" Astron asked directly, his eyes locked onto Mikhail's.

Mikhail didn't hesitate, and his response was firm and confident. "Because the evidence corresponds to that conclusion. The disturbances, the strange phenomena—everything points to the presence of an ancient being, something far beyond our current understanding."

Astron nodded thoughtfully, his expression unreadable. "What evidence, specifically, leads you to that conclusion?" he pressed, his tone more probing now.

Mikhail leaned back slightly, his demeanor still composed. "The patterns of the disturbances, their frequency, and the areas they affect are consistent with what we know about ancient entities. These creatures leave behind certain signatures—whispers that echo through time, disturbances that seem to follow no logical pattern but are actually the byproduct of a creature's reawakening. The data we've gathered aligns with historical accounts of such beings. Especially the history and the past records of Veilcroft City."

Astron listened carefully, waiting for Mikhail to finish his words. The room remained tense, the weight of the conversation pressing down on everyone present.

Astron nodded again, his gaze unwavering as he processed Mikhail's words. "That indeed aligns with the past records of Veilcroft City," he acknowledged. The tension in the room seemed to thicken as everyone awaited his next words.

"But," Astron continued, his tone becoming sharper, "which records exactly have you been talking about?"

A flicker of confusion crossed Mikhail's face before he quickly composed himself. His brow furrowed slightly as he responded, "Is it not obvious? These are the records uncovered by historians and academics. I've even obtained an official permit to access them."

Astron's expression remained neutral, but there was a subtle shift in his demeanor, a hint of something more inquisitive beneath the surface. "When exactly were those records made public?" he asked, his voice calm but carrying an edge of curiosity.

Mikhail's frown deepened, sensing the underlying implication in Astron's question. "They were released to the public only recently, during the last major excavation of the ancient sites around

Veilcroft," he replied, his tone now more guarded. "The records were thoroughly examined and authenticated by reputable scholars. Why do you ask?"

Astron paused, allowing the weight of his next words to settle in the room. "Because," he began slowly, "if those records were only recently uncovered, there's a possibility they might not be as reliable as we think. What if the information within them was altered or fabricated to mislead us? After all, the timing of their release coincides suspiciously with the onset of these disturbances."

"That is not possible. When I say 'recently,' I mean it is recent compared to other types of historical information. It was published ten years ago, and there are also many other referrals to the history of the Veilcroft and the folk stories."

Astron leaned slightly forward, his expression intent as he responded, "The thing with folktales is that they're easily manipulated. With the right resources, planting spies or individuals with specific [Traits] to convince others could easily accelerate the process of spreading these stories. If someone were to craft a legend, make it pseudo-academic with a few well-placed articles and records, it would create a perfect veil to hide their true intentions, wouldn't it?"

The room was thick with tension as Astron's words lingered, the implications clear to everyone present. Mikhail's frown deepened, though his eyes showed a flicker of acknowledgment. "That can indeed happen," he admitted, his tone measured. "But it's also a very difficult thing to do, especially on such a scale. The probability of successfully executing something like that is low."

"Low, but not impossible," Astron countered. "Especially if the thing or organization behind these disturbances is cunning, as we suspect. It might have had centuries, if not millennia, to plan and prepare for something like this. The very fact that it seems improbable could be the reason it's been so effective. Who would question a well-documented history, especially when it's been validated by scholars and academics?"

Mikhail remained silent for a moment, contemplating Astron's reasoning. The rest of the team watched the exchange closely, the weight of the discussion pressing down on them.

Finally, Mikhail spoke, his voice more subdued but still firm. "You're right to bring this up. The possibility of fabricated history is something we should consider. But let me ask you this, Astron—what about the people who were attacked by these monsters? If there isn't an ancient entity or monster behind it all, how do you explain the very real attacks? What force is controlling these creatures?"

Astron didn't hesitate. "There are indeed monsters attacking the people, and they're dangerous—no one is disputing that. But I don't believe they are the main perpetrators. Instead, they're being used as tools by someone—or something—with a much more deliberate agenda."

He paused, allowing his words to sink in before continuing. "Last night, I encountered a rank-3 [Umbral Wraith] in one of the southern districts, guarding a concealed passage. The creature was clearly stationed there to deter intruders. But what struck me was the method in which it was deployed."

Following that, he brought the monster out of his spatial storage.

"Here is the body."

There lay a monster with clean cuts all over the place. It was evident that the monster was handled with precision, as no body parts were missing. That alone showed the skill of this newcomer, who somehow changed the entire scene.

"Now, please take a look."

Astron activated his device, projecting a detailed map of the area he had investigated. "The [Umbral Wraith] was placed strategically, and it was not acting on instinct. It followed specific orders meant to protect a hidden passage leading to an underground network. The fact that the creature was able to avoid detection by the Local Awakened Association or even our organization until now is telling."

"How?"

"It is because they have an artifact that can detect the mana of another person. If an Awakened enters their range, monsters are not released. By doing that, they can get rid of the possibility of monsters being discovered and keep the investigation in the dark."

"Ah...." A gasp left one of the member's mouth. It was evident that this plan was crafted quite detailed, especially since the other party expected a lot of things.

"I see....By doing that, they can hide the fact that the monsters that are attacking the people are not an [Umbral Wraith] but something dangerous."

"Correct. The less information there is, the more speculation it would cause."

He pointed to the map, highlighting the concealed passage he had uncovered. "The monsters are being controlled and deployed with precision. They're being used to guard something, not as the primary threat but as a means to obscure the true danger. This isn't the work of an ancient entity acting out of instinct; it's the work of an intelligent force with a plan."

Mikhail's gaze sharpened as he considered Astron's words. "So you're suggesting that the monsters are a smokescreen, a way to keep us distracted while the real threat operates in the background?"

"Exactly," Astron replied. "The disturbances and attacks are real, but they're being orchestrated to mislead. The ancient entity you suspect may exist, but it's not the one pulling the strings. Someone—or something—is using the legend of this entity to cover their tracks and manipulate the investigation into focusing on the wrong threat."

Astron then described his encounter with the masked figure he had observed after defeating the [Umbral Wraith]. "This figure was clearly involved in maintaining the illusion. He was checking the area for anomalies, ensuring that the monster had fulfilled its purpose before retreating into a hidden passage. The well I discovered was protected by enchantments—both ancient and modern—indicating that someone is actively working to keep this operation concealed."

As the room absorbed Astron's words, a murmur of speculation rippled through the team. One of the members, a young adept with keen eyes, leaned forward, a question evident on his face. "But why? For what reason would they go to such lengths to orchestrate this? What are they gaining from all this chaos?"

Astron took a deep breath, ready to present the final piece of the puzzle. "The reason they're doing this is because they're benefiting from the discord they're sowing in the city. The fear, the anxiety, the despair—it's all being harvested."

Another member, a woman with a sharp mind for analysis, frowned in thought. "Harvested? You mean they're feeding off it somehow?"

"Exactly," Astron confirmed. He pulled up the holographic map again, this time zooming in on the most concentrated areas that Lira had previously identified. "During my investigation, I noticed that the areas with the highest concentration of disturbances—the places Lira had marked—had something in common."

He pointed to the locations on the map, each one glowing with a faint red hue. "These areas aren't just random spots of chaos. They're focal points, almost like nodes in a network. The negative emotions—fear, despair, anger—are being channeled and absorbed through these points."

Lira's eyes widened slightly as she began to see the connections. "Are you saying these locations are acting like... conduits?"

Astron nodded. "Precisely. The despair and fear are not just incidental—they're being deliberately amplified and drawn into these focal points. I found traces of an energy conduit system, hidden beneath the city, that is siphoning these negative emotions. It's subtle, almost undetectable, but it's there."

He tapped the map, highlighting the pathways of the conduits. "These conduits are connected to the underground network I discovered. The energy being gathered is being funneled somewhere—likely to the source of this entire operation. This isn't just about causing chaos; it's about accumulating power through the despair of Veilcroft's citizens."

Mikhail, who had been silent for a moment, finally spoke up, his voice tinged with realization. "That's why the disturbances have been escalating. The more fear and despair they generate, the more power they can draw from it. This isn't just a plot to release a monster—it's a deliberate strategy to weaken the city and empower whoever is behind it."

Shanks, who had been listening intently, nodded slowly as the pieces began to fit together. "So they're using the legend of the ancient entity as a cover to hide their real goal. The monsters are a smokescreen, and the true threat is the power they're amassing through the despair of the city."

The room was silent for a moment as the full scope of the plot became clear. The team realized that they were not just dealing with random attacks but with a highly organized effort to destabilize Veilcroft and empower a hidden force.

Astron continued, "I found traces of this siphoning at the locations Lira had identified. The patterns of despair and fear align perfectly with the conduits I discovered. This is why the disturbances seem so concentrated and why they're spreading—it's all part of a larger design to draw in as much negative energy as possible."

Lira, visibly impressed by Astron's deductions, nodded thoughtfully. "That explains everything. The reason why it looked like they were targeting the special people. In fact, they were not targeting

special people; they just knew that between all those people there would always be some who would show extreme reactions."

"Indeed."

"That.....That is impressive."

The moment Astron had finished what he was saying, Shanks stood up.

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As Shanks stood up, all eyes were on him, waiting for the next move, the plan that would determine the course of their actions in the coming days.

I remained seated, my expression calm, but my mind was racing. The information I had uncovered, the connections I had made—all of it was crucial.

But now, it was up to Shanks to guide us forward, to take this tangled web of deceit and transform it into a strategy that could save Veilcroft from whatever dark force was lurking beneath its surface.

'It was a really coolly crafted plan. Considering the fact that this place was in shadows for a long time, it seems that the investigation team was not successful at unveiling things before.'

There was no information that I could obtain from the game aside from the fact that the investigation team was going in the wrong direction. And even that could not be directly confirmed.

Shanks began to speak, his voice carrying the authority and clarity that had made sense as he was the leader of this operation. He threw a look at me for a split second.

"Adept Astron's findings have provided us with the missing pieces of the puzzle. It's clear that we're dealing with a highly organized and intelligent force, one that's using fear and despair as tools to amass power. This isn't just a matter of stopping random attacks—we're facing a coordinated effort to destabilize Veilcroft and empower a hidden entity."

He was able to get a grasp of what was happening quite well. Now that the enemy has been discovered, the only thing that we need to do is to get rid of them.

"Astron's discovery of the underground structure is a crucial breakthrough, but we're still operating with limited information," he began, glancing at the holographic map that displayed the known hotspots. "We don't have a complete map of the tunnels, nor do we know the full extent of the enemy's defenses. Charging in blindly could be disastrous. We could walk right into a trap, and the consequences would be severe—not just for us, but for the entire city."

He paused, letting his words sink in. The reality of the situation was grim, and it was clear that Shanks was considering every angle. "The safest option," he continued, "is to gather more intelligence before we make our move. We need to know what we're up against—where the key points are, how the enemy is organized, and what kind of defenses they have in place. Only then can we plan a precise strike that will dismantle their operation without unnecessary risk."

The room was silent for a moment, the weight of Shanks' words hanging in the air. But the tension quickly rose as one of the team members, a burly man with a stern expression, spoke up.

"Waiting could cost us valuable time," he argued, his voice laced with urgency. "Every moment we delay, more people in the city are suffering. If we cut the energy flow now, we could disrupt their operations and force them to react. Yes, it might alert them, but it would also buy us time to figure out their next move."

There were murmurs of agreement from a few others around the table. The idea of taking immediate action was tempting—after all, the longer they waited, the more the city would be drained by the enemy's insidious plan.

"If we wait too long, they might accelerate their plans. They could be close to achieving their goal, and if we're not quick enough, we could miss our chance to stop them."

Shanks listened carefully to the objections, his expression thoughtful. He understood the urgency, the desire to act swiftly and decisively. But he also knew that rushing in without the necessary knowledge could lead to disaster.

There, he needed to balance it. That is what I could see within his eyes: the conflict that he was experiencing.

That is the hard part of being a leader. Decisions need to be made, and responsibilities need to be taken.

But, is it that risky, really?

The situation was precarious, yes, but the enemy's reluctance to confront us head-on suggested something crucial—they were likely not strong enough to withstand a direct assault from a well-prepared force.

If they were truly as powerful as everyone suggested, they wouldn't be hiding in the shadows, manipulating events from behind the scenes. They'd be out in the open, exerting their dominance.

Shanks seemed to come to the same conclusion, his thoughtful expression hardening into one of resolve. He straightened, his voice cutting through the murmurs of the team as he made his decision. "It seems we are on the same page—we can't afford to wait too long, or we risk letting them complete whatever it is they're planning. But rushing in without a plan isn't the answer either. That's why we're going to move forward but with calculated steps."

He turned to face the entire team, his gaze sweeping over us with the authority of someone who understood the stakes and was ready to shoulder the responsibility. "Here's how we're going to proceed. We'll start our operation tomorrow at dawn. This gives us enough time to finalize our preparations and ensure that we're as ready as we can be. In the meantime, we will prepare a plan....."

With that, he turned his attention to Elysia.

"Elysia."

"Ready," Elysia responded, her tone sharp and focused.

"Good," Shanks nodded. "Since you're our strategist, I need you to develop a plan that accounts for every possibility. We'll be dealing with an unpredictable enemy in unfamiliar terrain. Make sure we're prepared for anything they throw at us."

Elysia nodded her mind already at work. She was known for her ability to think several steps ahead, and this mission would require every bit of that skill.

Shanks then turned to Ren, his expression serious. "Ren, make sure all the gear is in top condition. We'll need surveillance equipment, communication devices, and any specialized tools we might require to navigate the underground tunnels. I want everything ready by the time we move out."

Ren gave a quick nod, his fingers already tapping on his smartwatch as he began coordinating the preparations. "I'll have everything prepped and double-checked. We'll be ready."

Finally, Shanks faced Jim, who had been silently absorbing the details of the plan. Since he was the combat specialist, it was understandable why he was not that helpful in terms of investigating. He was more of a fighter, after all.

"The teams will be divided, most likely."

With the key roles assigned, Shanks looked around the room one last time, his eyes landing on each team member as he delivered his final words. "This mission is critical. Now that everything has been assessed and assigned, we are ready. We also have the advantage of surprise. Tomorrow, at dawn, we'll execute our plan and put an end to this threat. Be prepared, stay focused, and remember—this city is counting on us."

The room fell into a heavy silence as everyone absorbed the gravity of Shanks' words. Each member knew what was at stake and understood the importance of their role in the operation.

"Dismissed," Shanks said, signaling the end of the meeting.

As Astron stepped out of the meeting room, he noticed a familiar figure waiting for him in the dimly lit corridor. Lira leaned against the wall, her arms crossed and a faint smile playing on her lips.

"Impressive work in there," she said, her tone genuine. "You've found something that I wouldn't have easily uncovered. You fulfilled your promise."

Astron nodded, acknowledging the compliment. "That's correct. While you're excellent at observing the details, there's something that you couldn't detect, no matter how thorough your investigation."

Lira's eyes narrowed slightly, her curiosity piqued. "Those energy flows, right?"

"Indeed," Astron confirmed, his voice calm but carrying a hint of satisfaction. He could see the realization dawning in Lira's eyes as she began to piece together the significance of what he had just revealed.

She straightened up, her gaze more focused now. "So that's why you were sent here, even as a newbie. You've got special [Eyes], don't you? And on top of that, you can think outside the box in ways that even seasoned investigators might miss."

Astron met her gaze, his expression unreadable. "You're not wrong."

'This kid likes to act cool.'

Lira thought, though she inwardly even doubted that. There was also a chance that he was inherently like this, as she did not see him talking more than he would.

Lira nodded thoughtfully, clearly impressed by Astron's insight. "That explains why you were able to leave training after just three weeks. You've got the tools and the mindset to handle this."

"Seems like your trust in the organization has been restored."

"It was my own fault for doubting them."

"That could be the case."

"Sigh...." Lira released a sigh as she smiled. "It will be an honor to be someone who has worked with someone like you in the future."

"Why do you think so?"

"Well, I am not blind, at least."

"Is that so?"

"Anyway, I'm not going to keep you here, as you'll be busy from now on," Lira said with a light smile, stepping aside to give Astron room to leave.

As she spoke, a shadowy silhouette emerged from the corner of the room. It was Elysia, her presence commanding attention even before she spoke. Her gaze was sharp and focused as she addressed Astron.

"Astron," she called out, her voice steady but carrying an undercurrent of urgency. "I need you to follow me. We're discussing strategies, and your input is required."

Astron glanced briefly at Lira, who gave him a knowing nod before turning his attention to Elysia. Without a word, he fell into step beside her as she led the way out of the room. The atmosphere between them was serious, the weight of the mission pressing down on both of them as they moved through the dimly lit corridors.

As they walked, Elysia spoke without turning to face him. "You've proven yourself capable, young adept. At first, everyone was skeptical, but now that they have seen your capabilities, no one will doubt you anymore."

"I understand."

"That is a good mindset. Having such petty grudges would mostly ruin your future."

Astron was not narrow-minded as he could easily think from their perspective. That was why he did not think much of their treatment; if he had been there, he would have done the same.

"Understood."

"Good. Let's start then."

Elysia said as she entered her office.

Chapter 514 115.12 - First Mission

<Next Day, at dawn>

The dawn broke with a chilly wind that whispered through the empty streets of Veilcroft. The sky was a canvas of muted grays, the sun still hidden below the horizon, casting long shadows that clung to the city's walls like dark memories.

The streets were silent, more so than usual. Veilcroft had always been quiet at this hour, but today, the stillness felt different—oppressive, almost suffocating. The recent disturbances had driven people indoors, their fear and unease palpable even in the empty spaces they left behind.

I stood beside Warden Shanks, the only other figure in the vicinity. The chill didn't seem to bother him, his imposing form a stark contrast to the cold, quiet dawn. Indeed, it seemed that he was a man accustomed to this kind of tension, his expression set in a cold mask.

'As expected. Becoming a Warden would not be easy.'

While not at the level of Dakota, the strength that Shanks possessed should be similar. That is why a simple plan was devised, though simplicity didn't mean it was easy. It was straightforward because it was better that way.

Jim's team would enter the underground tunnels from one side, leading the initial assault, while Shanks and I would take a different route. Our goal was simple—reach the heart of this operation and dismantle it before it could cause any more damage while the others are causing disruption.

But in reality, Shanks and I were the primary force.

Jim should also have been capable, no doubt, but Shanks was on another level. The title of Warden wasn't just for show; it signified power, experience, and an ability to command the battlefield. And with me acting as the navigator, our duo was designed to cut straight to the core of the enemy's operation.

Why do we do this? This is because if we all enter from the same place, it will be harder to move, and we will be slowed. And if the first entering team is too weak, they can easily suspect that there is another squad here. In the end, neutralizing other threats is also important.

Shanks glanced at me, his eyes sharp and focused. "Ready?" he asked, his voice low and steady.

I nodded, feeling the familiar weight of my daggers at my sides. "Ready."

He didn't say anything more; he just gave a slight nod of approval. We both knew what was at stake, but there was no tension, no anxiety. I was calm—almost too calm, considering this was my first mission of this magnitude.

But I already knew how this would play out.

We stood there in silence for a few moments, waiting. The air was thick with anticipation, the dawn's chill still lingering around us.

I could hear the distant hum of the city waking up, but down here, it felt like we were in an entirely different world.

Finally, Shanks received the signal through his communicator. Jim's team had entered the tunnels from the southern side, just as planned. Shanks nodded to himself, then turned to me. "Let's go."

With that, we moved toward our entry point, located on the opposite side of the underground network from where Jim's team had entered.

It was a calculated decision—by entering from different directions, we could strike from multiple angles, making it harder for the enemy to anticipate our movements and mount a defense.

Our entry point was well-hidden, a narrow passage that led down into the earth, just like the one I had discovered two nights before. The shadows clung to the walls as we descended, the stone steps cold and damp beneath our feet.

I could feel the energy growing stronger the deeper we went, a pulsating rhythm that guided us forward.

As we reached the bottom of the staircase, the passage opened into a wide corridor, its walls lined with more of those strange symbols I had seen earlier. They glowed faintly in the dim light, casting eerie shadows across the floor. The air was heavy with the scent of Earth and something else.

'Blood.'

It was blood.

'As expected.'

Contrary to what one would think, this place did not have even an ounce of demonic energy. In fact, I was expecting a demon to be behind it at first, but that was no longer the case, as there were no traces of them.

The corridor ahead branched into several paths, each one disappearing into the darkness. Shanks paused beside me, his gaze sharp as he scanned the area. "Which way?" he asked, his voice low.

I didn't hesitate, pointing to the passage where I could see the strongest flow of energy. It was as if the very air was being drawn into that direction, converging on a central point deeper within the underground complex.

Shanks nodded, trusting my judgment. We moved forward, our steps silent as we advanced through the corridor. The atmosphere grew more oppressive with each step, the air heavy with anticipation.

As we rounded a corner, I felt it—movement in the shadows ahead. My [Eyes] picked up on the flow of mana, detecting the presence of both monsters and people. Their faces were obscured by masks, their postures tense and alert.

I quickly assessed their strength, noting the level of mana they emitted. They were strong, around intermediate rank-4 to high rank-4—a formidable force. It was clear they had been alerted, likely by Jim's assault on the other side.

Shanks tensed beside me, ready to strike, but I held up a hand, signaling him to wait. "I can handle this," I said quietly, my voice steady.

Shanks raised an eyebrow, a flicker of surprise in his eyes, but he nodded, stepping back to give me space.

It seemed he knew what I was capable of, though this was the first time he'd seen me in action.

'Let's put everything to the test.'

It was also a test for me in a way, as I had never used my abilities against real people in a while.

I focused, raising my presence just enough to draw the attention of the enemies ahead.

There were five of them, their mana swirling with tension. Two of them were hiding—one behind a wall, the other on the ceiling. They thought they were concealed, but my [Eyes] saw through the barriers, revealing their positions with crystal clarity.

In a single, fluid motion, I moved. My body became a blur as I activated [Shadowborne], blending seamlessly with the shadows. I ascended to the ceiling in a breath, my daggers drawn.

Normally, I would not use [Shadowborne], but since we are no longer in that domain, I doubt that they can see through it. While it was possible if they were there, in such a remote place in the outside world, it should not be possible.

SWOOSH! Before the man hiding there could react, I struck. My blade sliced cleanly through his neck, the movement so swift that he didn't even have time to gasp before his life was snuffed out. His body slumped against the wall, the sound barely audible in the silence.

I didn't stop. Using the momentum of my leap, I launched myself toward the second hidden figure, the one behind the wall. My movements were precise, as I had been practicing acrobatics and such movements for a while already.

[Eyes of Hourglass]

SWOOSH! Time seemed to slow as I leaped through the air; my senses heightened, and my [Eyes of Hourglass] allowed me to perceive every detail. The dagger in my hand flew with deadly precision toward the figure below, its trajectory set to end his life in a heartbeat.

At the same time, I closed the distance to the man I had targeted behind the wall. My blade flashed as I descended upon him, slicing cleanly through his neck. His head fell forward, severed from his body, and his lifeless form crumpled to the ground.

Landing with practiced grace, I didn't waste a moment. My eyes flicked to the remaining two enemies, who were already moving, likely trying to alert others of our presence. But they wouldn't get the chance.

Activating [Shadow Leap], I vanished from my spot and reappeared right before the one who was furthest back.

His eyes widened in shock, but before he could react, my palm struck with the precision of the [Gale Stance].

—THUD! The impact was swift and brutal, shattering his sternum and sending a shockwave of force through his body.

As his body slumped to the ground, I reached out with my other hand, the thread already coiled around my wrist. With a sharp tug, I retrieved the dagger I had thrown earlier, guiding it through the air with deadly intent.

The dagger streaked toward the final enemy, who had barely begun to turn in response to the chaos. It pierced the back of his neck with a sickening crunch, severing his spine and ending his life in an instant.

THUD! THUD! THUD! THUD! THUD! And just then, the sounds of five bodies hitting the ground sounded at the same time. The entire encounter had lasted mere seconds and ended before the first one on the ceiling could fall to the ground.

"Not bad...."

I took a deep breath, steadying myself as the rush of adrenaline subsided. The room was silent once more, save for the faint hum of energy that permeated the underground complex.

I could sense Shanks behind me, his gaze heavy with a slight sense of surprise on it. It seemed I had made quite an impression.

Shanks's voice broke the silence, carrying a tone of both surprise and approval. "I knew you had skills, Adept Astron. The headquarters gave me a heads-up about your capabilities, but they didn't even prepare me for this. That spatial teleport... you have a skill like that?"

I turned to face him, my expression calm despite the adrenaline still coursing through me. "Yes," I replied simply. "I awakened it recently after advancing my trait. It's been... useful."

Shanks nodded, his eyes narrowing in thought. "I see. That kind of ability can change the tide in a battle, especially when you can strike from angles the enemy can't anticipate. Impressive."

There was a moment of silence between us, a shared understanding of the weight of the mission ahead. Shanks was clearly pleased with what he had seen.

'Let's hope that they won't give me annoying missions like this where I need to work under others.' It was not preferable, and that is the reason why I was showing this much.

"Let's keep moving," Shanks said, his voice steady and commanding once more. "We need to reach the core of this place before they realize we're here. If they haven't already."

"They haven't. No signals had been transmitted."

"I see. That is good, then."

We continued down the corridor, our footsteps echoing softly against the cold stone. The energy in the air grew thicker as we advanced, a palpable tension that signaled we were drawing closer to our goal.

Chapter 515 115.13 - First Mission

Each step took us closer to the heart of the enemy's operation, and with every turn, I could feel the malevolent energy intensifying.

We encountered more resistance along the way—more masked figures, more monsters lurking in the shadows. But they were no match for us.

The first group we encountered barely had time to react. A group of three masked men appeared from a side passage, their auras sharp with intent. But before they could even draw their weapons, I was already moving.

I activated [Shadowborne], merging with the darkness around us, becoming a flicker of movement they couldn't track. My daggers flashed, slicing through the air with lethal precision.

The first man fell before he even knew I was there, a clean cut across his throat silencing him instantly. The second tried to turn, but I was already behind him, my blade plunging into his back, severing his spine. The third barely had time to register the deaths of his comrades before my dagger found his heart.

Three bodies hit the ground in the span of a few breaths, their lifeless forms crumpling silently to the floor. I didn't even break stride, continuing forward as if nothing had happened. Shanks followed closely behind, his expression unreadable but his eyes sharp with approval.

We pressed on, the corridor narrowing as we approached our destination. The next group of enemies was more prepared, their stances indicating they were expecting trouble. There were five of them, positioned strategically to block our advance.

But strategy meant nothing when faced with overwhelming speed and precision. I launched myself forward, closing the distance between us in an instant. My movements were a blur, my daggers slicing through the air with deadly accuracy.

"You don't leave anything to chance," he remarked quietly as we moved on.

"I don't."

Leaving things to chance. I had long learned my lesson.

We continued down the corridor, the air growing colder and more oppressive with each step. The symbols on the walls grew more intricate, their faint glow casting eerie shadows on the floor.

Finally, after a while, we reached a massive iron door at the end of the corridor. It was old and heavily reinforced, the surface covered in writings that pulsed with dark energy.

It seemed even Shanks could sense it as his breathing changed a little.

"This is it," Shanks said, his voice low. "The heart of their operation lies beyond this door."

I nodded, my eyes narrowing as I focused on the door. The energy emanating from it was strong, almost overwhelming, but I could sense something beyond it—a presence.

'My eyes are not working.'

The raw mana across the place was overwhelming, and the level seemed to be higher than mine. That was something that could happen if the enemy was stronger, and from how things looked, it was indeed the case.

"The enemy is as strong as we have expected," Shanks said as he looked at me. "From now on, I am going to take over."

Though the strength of the enemy was already within the expectations, considering the fact that there have been many events like this happening before, I could infer to some extent.

If I were to come here alone and go in all by myself, things would get tricky as I would need to use everything.

"Understood."

But would I lose?

I guess we will never know about that, as Shanks stepped forward while I retreated back, blending into shadows once again.

After Astron blended into shadows, Shanks showed no hesitation. He reached for the handles, his grip firm as he prepared to confront whatever lay beyond.

With a decisive motion, Shanks pulled the door open. Instantly, an immense amount of energy surged from within, a gust of wind rushing out to meet him.

The stench of blood followed, thick and nauseating, filling the air with a palpable sense of dread. The room beyond was shrouded in darkness, but the faint glint of liquid on the floor hinted at the horrors within.

'Tch.' Shanks grimaced as the foul odor hit his face, the coppery tang of blood overwhelming his senses.

'Blood....Bastards....' He knew he couldn't afford to waste even a second. His instincts sharpened, and he immediately scanned the room, his eyes locking onto a figure standing within a circle of intricate engravings.

The figure was bathed in an eerie glow, their presence exuding an aura of malevolence.

SWOOSH! Shanks didn't hesitate. His saber was drawn in a flash, the blade gleaming as he dashed toward the target with deadly precision.

The figure moved just as swiftly, sensing the attack before it even arrived.

In one fluid motion, they deflected Shanks' strike with a skillful parry, their own weapon appearing almost out of thin air.

CLANK!

The clash of steel echoed through the chamber, the force of the impact sending sparks flying.

'Hmm....Around peak rank 6 or maybe rank 7.' Shanks didn't falter. His years of experience and combat training kicked in as he adjusted his stance, readying himself for the next exchange. The figure before him was no ordinary foe—they were fast, precise, and powerful.

The two combatants circled each other, the tension between them thick enough to cut. Shanks' eyes narrowed as he assessed his opponent.

The engravings on the floor, the dark energy in the air, and the overpowering scent of blood all pointed to a ritual.

With a grunt of effort, Shanks launched a series of rapid strikes, his saber slicing through the air with deadly intent.

But the figure met each attack with calculated precision, their movements almost preternatural. It was clear that they were not only skilled but also had the advantage of the ritual's dark power bolstering their strength.

'But this place....It is indeed suffocating. Most likely, it stems from this energy. I feel weaker, and he is getting stronger.' Shanks understood the situation well. The enemy was drawing power from the ritual, growing stronger as the dark energy permeated the room.

But Shanks was no novice; he was a peak rank-8 Awakened, and even with the oppressive energy in the chamber, he knew he had the upper hand in raw power and skill.

As Shanks prepared for the next move, the enemy spoke in a hoarse, gravelly voice, "Who are you? How did you find this place?"

The question hung in the air, but Shanks had no intention of answering. There was no point in engaging in conversation with a foe who was clearly beyond redemption.

He had seen enough to know that whatever ritual was taking place here needed to be stopped.

'If I knew they were this weak, I would not even have come here. Just Jim would be enough.' Channeling his energy into his blade, Shanks felt the familiar surge of power as his mana flowed through him, enhancing his strength and speed. The energy crackled along the edge of his saber, the blade now glowing with a fierce light.

Without a word, Shanks dashed forward, his movements a blur as he closed the distance in an instant. The enemy might have been growing stronger thanks to the energy in the chamber, but Shanks was still far more powerful.

The figure barely had time to react before Shanks' blade flashed through the air. The enemy attempted to parry, but the speed and precision of Shanks' strike were overwhelming.

SHING!

In a heartbeat, the enemy's arm—still clutching the sword—was severed cleanly at the shoulder. The limb fell to the ground with a heavy thud, blood spurting from the wound. The crimson spray confirmed what Shanks had suspected—the enemy was human, at least in body.

The figure let out a howl of pain, staggering back as they clutched the bleeding stump where their arm had been. The dark energy around them seemed to flicker and wane as if momentarily disrupted by the sudden loss.

Shanks didn't let up. He pressed the advantage, his saber poised for another strike. The enemy, now severely weakened, was at his mercy. But Shanks knew better than to underestimate a cornered opponent, especially one who had dabbled in such dark rituals.

The figure glared at Shanks, hatred burning in their eyes. "You... you'll pay for this," they hissed, their voice dripping with malice.

And truly, as he had expected, the enemy's body suddenly turned dark.

SWOOSH! The entire room was suddenly engulfed in thick, choking smoke. The darkness was so dense it felt almost tangible, pressing down on Shanks like a suffocating blanket. His senses were immediately dulled, his vision obscured to near blindness. The acrid scent of the smoke filled his lungs, and he could feel a disorienting pressure in his ears.

But Shanks was no stranger to such tactics. He sharpened his focus, relying on his instincts and training to cut through the sensory overload. Despite the suppression, he could still sense the shifts in the air, the subtle disturbances that signaled approaching danger.

In an instant, he realized that the figure had summoned others—shadows or thralls, likely drawn from the surrounding dark energy. They weren't as powerful as the main target, but they were still a threat, especially in this disorienting smoke.

'Enemies. Around low rank-6, no maybe just even rank-5.' He could feel the first attack coming from his left, a sharp displacement of air as a blade cut toward him. At the same time, two more strikes were aimed at him from the front and right.

Shanks didn't hesitate. With a swift motion, he sidestepped the first attack, his saber slashing through the air with deadly precision.

CLANG!

The first enemy's weapon was knocked aside, and Shanks pivoted on his heel, driving his blade into the second assailant with a quick, lethal thrust. He didn't stop, his movements fluid and efficient as he turned to meet the third attacker, disarming them with a flick of his wrist before delivering a final, decisive strike.

It took only six moves for Shanks to dispatch all three of them, their bodies falling lifelessly to the ground. The smoke still hung thick in the air, but Shanks wasted no time. He reached into his spatial ring, retrieving a small gadget—a cylindrical device designed for situations exactly like this.

With a press of a button, the device hummed to life, emitting a soft, pulsing light. The smoke around him began to swirl and then was rapidly sucked into the device, clearing the air in a matter of seconds.

As the smoke dissipated, Shanks scanned the room, his eyes quickly finding something that he did not expect.

There, not far from him, was Astron, locked in combat with the figure. The dark energy still clung to the enemy, but Shanks could see that they were struggling.

The loss of their arm—the one that would normally hold their blade—was evident in the way they fought. They were still powerful, stronger than Astron in terms of raw strength, but their movements were off balance, their attacks lacking the precision they might have otherwise had.

Astron, for his part....

He was moving without wasting even a bit of movement.

'Indeed. The kid has the combat ability to confront at least a peak rank 6.' Shanks was impressed.

Chapter 516 115.14 - First Mission [Interlude]

Deciding to watch the fight to assess Astron's combat abilities more to give feedback, Shanks waited, ready to intervene if things could go south.

Astron didn't hesitate. With his daggers firmly in hand, he dashed forward, closing the distance between himself and the figure in an instant. His eyes were cold, focused, unyielding.

The figure, now desperate and furious, shouted as Astron approached. "Where did you come from? Do you even understand what you're interfering with? You have no idea the power you're challenging!"

Their voice was filled with a mix of rage and desperation, but Astron showed no sign of being affected. His expression remained stoic, his focus unbroken. He didn't respond—there was no need. Words wouldn't change the outcome of this battle.

'Not bad. Serious and compromised.' In a swift, fluid motion, Astron struck. His daggers sliced through the air, aiming for the figure's exposed side. The enemy tried to parry with their remaining hand, but their movements were sluggish and unbalanced. Astron's strike found its mark, his dagger cutting deep into the figure's side.

The figure howled in pain, stumbling back as blood seeped from the wound. But Astron didn't relent. He pressed the advantage, moving like a shadow as he followed up with a series of rapid strikes, each one designed to exploit the enemy's weakened state.

Shanks watched closely, noting the way Astron handled the situation. His movements were sharp and deliberate; every attack aimed to incapacitate or kill.

There was no wasted energy, no hesitation. Astron was methodical, almost surgical in his approach.

The figure tried to lash out; their remaining strength channeled into a wild, desperate swing. But Astron was already a step ahead. He sidestepped the attack with ease, his dagger flashing as he countered with a slash across the figure's chest.

The enemy staggered, their body trembling as they struggled to stay upright. The dark energy that had once bolstered their strength now seemed to be failing them, flickering and fading as the blood loss took its toll.

"Gr..."

But as the realization dawned on them that their hands were significantly trapped, their options narrowing, a desperate, crazed glint flashed in their eyes.

They knew escape was impossible, and the only option left was to take at least someone down with them.

"Hehehe.....If I am not going out, then neither you!"

A twisted smile curled on the figure's lips as they began to forcefully raise their energy, drawing upon the forbidden technique that even demonic humans rarely dared to use. The room darkened, the oppressive energy intensifying as the figure began to burn their lifeforce, their body trembling with the sheer power being unleashed.

Shanks, watching from the shadows, felt a sudden pang of alarm. He recognized the telltale signs of a lifeforce-burning technique. "No... this is bad," he muttered under his breath, his hand tightening around the hilt of his saber as he instantly dashed forward.

His eyes widened as the figure's aura surged, their strength seemingly multiplying in an instant.

The figure, now revitalized by the forbidden energy, charged at Astron with terrifying speed, their injuries seemingly forgotten. They moved with the reckless abandon of someone who had nothing left to lose. Astron, despite his skill and precision, was suddenly overwhelmed by the sheer ferocity of the attack.

The enemy's speed was overwhelming, far beyond anything Astron could match. He tried to dodge, to counter, but the figure was upon him in an instant.

The next moment, the figure's strike connected with brutal force, and Astron was blasted back, his body slamming into the ground with a sickening thud.

"Kid!" Shanks shouted, his voice tinged with panic as he saw Astron crumple to the ground. Without wasting a moment, he reached the figure, his saber ready to strike. But as he closed the distance, he saw something that made his blood run cold.

As the figure's twisted and bloodied face was revealed, recognition flashed across Shanks' eyes.

"So it was you," Shanks muttered as he grabbed the figure by the neck, lifting them off the ground with ease. The bloodied face, now fully exposed, was unmistakable.

It was Counselor Varnis, a man Shanks had known well. A man who had once been an ally to the city and its people now twisted into something unrecognizable, corrupted by the dark energy that had consumed him.

Counselor Varnis, his eyes wild and full of hate, choked out a bitter laugh despite the crushing grip Shanks had on his throat. "You... you have no idea what you're meddling with. This... this is just the beginning."

Shanks tightened his grip on Counselor Varnis' throat, his anger boiling over. The almost failure stung deeply, and the thought that this man and his lack of awareness had nearly cost him Astron, a promising talent, only fueled his rage further.

Though he controlled himself barely.

But just as Shanks prepared to strike, a faint, raspy voice interrupted him.

"Warden... don't let him bite the capsule," Astron croaked from the ground, his voice weak but clear enough to cut through the tension.

Shanks' eyes widened in realization. In an instant, he understood what Varnis was trying to do. A suicide capsule—a quick and efficient way to end his life and take whatever secrets he had to the grave.

Without hesitation, Shanks forced Varnis' mouth open, his fingers prying past clenched teeth. The counselor struggled violently, his eyes filled with a mix of desperation and hatred. But Shanks was faster. He felt the small, hard object inside Varnis' mouth and grabbed it, yanking the capsule out before it could be crushed.

The counselor's eyes widened in shock and fear as the capsule was removed from his mouth, his final means of escape taken from him. Shanks tossed the capsule aside, ensuring it would be of no use.

"Sigh....Just what am I doing?" Shanks growled, his voice low and menacing. The moment of panic had passed, replaced by a cold, calculating fury. "You'll pay for what you've done. But not on your terms."

Varnis, now powerless and defeated, could only glare back, the last vestiges of defiance fading from his eyes. The dark energy that had once empowered him was now dissipating, leaving behind a broken, twisted man.

GULP!

And then, while enduring all the hatred that he was feeling, Shanks fed the man a healing potion as he needed to be alive for the sake of the investigation.

Following that, he took a deep breath, calming himself as he looked over at Astron, who was slowly pulling himself up from the ground. The young warrior was bruised and battered but alive.

"You did well," Shanks said, his voice softening slightly as he addressed Astron. "Thanks to you, we'll get the answers we need."

"I did what needed to be done," Astron replied while gulping the remaining health potion that he must have taken out just now.

Shanks sighed, running a hand through his hair. "To think that the Counselor was the one behind all this," he muttered, his voice tinged with disbelief. "I never would have suspected Varnis."

"It had to be someone of his standing," Astron replied, his tone measured. "To construct something of this scale, influence over the scholars and the ability to bribe them to craft false narratives would be essential. A lower-ranked individual wouldn't have had the reach or the resources to pull this off."

Shanks nodded in agreement, his mind racing as he considered the implications. Varnis had been a trusted figure, someone who had been a part of the city's leadership. He was already expecting that someone from the higher-ups was involved, as only someone with that level of authority could have orchestrated such a complex and dangerous plan.

But it was still not a good feeling.

"You've done enough, kid," Shanks said after a moment, his tone more gentle. "You should head back and rest. The remaining cleanup will be handled by Jim and his team. They're on their way as we speak."

Astron hesitated for a moment, his eyes flicking back to the fallen counselor. He clearly wanted to see this through to the end, but the 'exhaustion' was evident in his posture. Finally, he nodded. "Understood. I'll leave it in your hands, then."

Shanks placed a hand on Astron's shoulder, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "You really have a bright future ahead. It was nice working with you."

Astron nodded again, turning to leave the chamber. As he walked away, Shanks watched him go, a sense of pride swelling in his chest. The kid had more than proven himself today, showing not just skill but also the presence of mind that would serve him well in the future.

Once Astron was out of sight, Shanks turned back to Varnis, who was still slumped on the ground, his eyes downcast. The counselor was a broken man, and while the healing potion had kept him alive, there was no doubt that his fate was now sealed.

'Let's just end this thing. It has been a tiring two months already.' While most people were investigating, Shanks was not staying idle either, even if he was not actively participating in the investigation.

After all, seeing the city's situation, there were many villains who were looking to go rampant, and someone needed to deal with some of them.

As I lay on the infirmary bed, the sterile white walls around me seemed almost too bright, the contrast stark against the dim, shadowy corridors we had just emerged from.

The air was filled with the faint scent of antiseptic, and the gentle hum of machinery provided soothing background noise.

Nadia moved efficiently, her hands steady as she tended to the wounds I had allowed to remain visible.

In reality, I could have handled the injuries better myself. My red dagger, capable of absorbing vitality from enemies, had already done most of the healing during the fight.

My newly enhanced physique, a result of recent advancements in my [Everchanging Glyph], allowed me to adapt and recover faster than most.

But I had made a decision to downplay my abilities.

'It is always better to show that you are vulnerable so that you are not exploited by your boss.' As Nadia applied a fresh bandage to a gash on my arm, I reflected on the events that had just unfolded. Shanks had been impressed—there was no doubt about that—but I knew better than to reveal all my cards so early in the game.

I had spit out the potion I pretended to drink on the way back, making it seem like I was still injured despite receiving treatment. It was a small deception but a necessary one. In a world where power dynamics shifted constantly, it was important to control how others perceived you.

"How are you feeling, Astron?" Nadia asked, her voice gentle but professional. She was focused on her task, but I could sense the underlying concern in her tone.

I showed a slightly pained image, keeping up the facade. "I've been better, but I'll manage. You're doing a great job, though."

Nadia nodded, her expression softening slightly. "I never expected someone from the city government would do such a thing."

For now, I have earned quite some time to rest. At least until this night, I will not be sent anywhere else.

However, to satisfy the promise, I will eventually need to go on another mission once again.

Chapter 517 116.1 - Faceless woman

Nadia continued to work, her hands steady as she applied the bandage with practiced precision. "You know," she said after a moment, her voice thoughtful, "I have to admit, I was leaning more toward Mikhail's theory. The idea of an ancient entity, something primal and unstoppable, it just made sense with everything we were seeing."

I nodded slightly, acknowledging her perspective. "It did seem that way. From the start, all the evidence was pointing in that direction. The disturbances, the fear, the rumors—everything lined up perfectly with what you'd expect from an ancient force reawakening."

Nadia glanced up at me, curiosity in her eyes. "Then what made you think otherwise? What was it that tipped you off?"

I leaned back slightly, letting the bed support me as I considered her question. "That was exactly the problem," I said, my voice calm. "It was all too perfect. The signs, the patterns, they were so neatly aligned that it felt... artificial like someone had crafted the narrative to fit our expectations. It was almost as if we were being guided to that conclusion."

Nadia paused in her work, her eyes widening slightly as she absorbed my words. "So perfect that it looks artificial, huh? I see... that does make sense. When something fits too well, it's easy to overlook the possibility that it's been manufactured."

"Exactly. It's a classic misdirection. When you feed people the information they're expecting to see, they're less likely to question it. That's why I started looking for inconsistencies, for anything that didn't quite fit with the narrative we were being shown."

Nadia finished securing the bandage and stepped back, her expression thoughtful as she regarded me. "I have to say, Astron, your abilities and instincts are impressive. After you arrived, everything seemed to fall into place. In just two days, we've gone from chasing shadows to uncovering the real threat."

"It was a team effort," I replied. "The investigation had been ongoing for a while, and everyone's work laid the groundwork for what we discovered. I just happened to be there at the right time."

Nadia shook her head slightly, and I could see a small smile. But it seemed she also realized that if she were to continue with her point from here, it would open up some misunderstandings.

And that was not something she should want.

"I guess that is right."

And that is why she took a step back.

Sensing the shift, I decided to steer the conversation in a different direction. "So, how's the local job around here? Is it as intense as it seems?"

Nadia relaxed a little at the change in topic, nodding thoughtfully. "It can be, especially lately. Most of the time, things were relatively calm—routine investigations, minor disturbances, that sort of thing. But when things get out of hand, like with this recent situation, it can become pretty overbearing."

"Were?"

"Yeah." She moved to organize the supplies she had used, her hands moving with the ease of someone used to multitask. "The local government used to do an okay job managing the gates, but they're stretched thin. Recently, with the increase in gate openings, they've even found it hard to keep up. It's putting a lot of pressure on everyone, especially us."

I leaned back slightly, listening carefully. "And what about the villains? Has their activity been increasing too?"

Nadia sighed, a weary look crossing her face. "Yes, unfortunately. With more gates opening, there are more opportunities for them to cause trouble. They seem to be getting bolder, too, likely sensing that the authorities are overwhelmed. It's like they're taking advantage of the chaos, knowing that we can't be everywhere at once."

'That is why Shanks was not here, isn't it?'

While the motives of the organization were still clearly unknown to me, their actions aligned with the fact that they were somehow against the fall of the federation.

At least, that was the case for some places.

'There are still many things that I don't know about.'

It was evident that I needed to learn more for the time being.

She paused for a moment, her expression darkening slightly. "It's not just the gates, though. There's something else... like a shift in the air. It feels like more than just a coincidence that all these things are happening at once. Almost as if something bigger is brewing beneath the surface."

And what she was saying was indeed correct.

Whether the timeline of the game's events was pushed sooner or not, in the end, the inevitable would come.

'The war of Demons, the coup attempt, The Elven Disaster, Orc Invasion.....'

All of these things were bound to happen one way or another. Those things added to the chaotic descent of the Demon King and many other threats.

This world is bound to be burnt by the chaos itself. After all, the border between the worlds is getting thinner and thinner with each second, and this results in the change in the Mana Ratios around the world, the gate spawn rate, the space ripples, the phenomenon rate, and everything else.

The day of Nexus Convergence.

It was just a start, and the convergence has yet to stop.

"Sounds like things are getting more complicated," I said, my tone reflective.

Nadia gave me a small, appreciative smile. "Yeah.....But it's also an opportunity, isn't it? For us to prove ourselves, to make a real difference."

"That's one way to look at it. And you're right—every challenge is an opportunity in disguise."

That was indeed correct.

Amidst that whole chaos, there also laid an opportunity.

The opportunity of my revenge.

Following that day, I was granted a day off.

The investigation concluded smoothly, and the counselor's capture provided the organization with all the information it needed to close the case.

I spent the morning in my room while also remembering what the Counselor did.

His motivations were both simple and twisted—a hunger for power born from the discovery of his Trait's true potential.

Twenty years ago, Counselor Varnis had stumbled upon a special property of his Trait, one that allowed him to absorb the emotions of others, particularly despair and fear. At first, he hadn't realized the full extent of this ability.

He'd assumed, like many others, that his Trait was minor, offering little in the way of power or influence. But as he experimented, he began to understand the potential that lay within.

It started slowly. Varnis absorbed the despair of those around him, growing stronger with each passing day. He realized that by cultivating and manipulating these emotions, he could feed off them, using them to enhance his own strength.

His rise to the position of Counselor had been part of a carefully crafted plan, one that would allow him to expand his influence over Veilcroft.

After all, he was from a wealthy family with rooted backgrounds. While not on the level of Hartley or others, locally, they held a good influence.

Once in power, Varnis had begun orchestrating the city's slow descent into chaos.

He manipulated events, sowing discord and fear, allowing the city's despair to grow.

'He really did quite crafty. Even the increased actions of villains do stem from him.' The lack of city governing came from that. He intentionally leaked the plans and intel from inward, making villains act a lot more efficiently.

However, he kept it still under control so as not to attract too much attention by keeping it periodical.

He fed off that despair, steadily increasing his power over the years. However, at some point, he reached a bottleneck.

But he was already expecting this, and that was why he decided to push for one of the most detailed plans he had made.

His first plan.

When he started as a counselor, he initially bribed a bunch of scholars so that they could create stories about an ancient monster's traces being found in Veilcroft. The reason for that was to just sow some small discord into the public.

There was nothing complex. While they were baseless, and most scholars knew about that, that would not be the case for the general public as stories held more importance than a bunch of official papers.

Varnis had always been meticulous, his mind working several steps ahead of everyone else. He knew that his plan needed more than just rumors and whispers—it required a physical manifestation of the fear and despair he intended to cultivate. That's when he decided to establish his own company under the guise of a construction firm.

The company was named "Veilcroft Development Consortium," and it appeared to be a legitimate business on the surface, specializing in urban development and infrastructure projects. Varnis used his family's wealth and influence to secure contracts from the city, allowing him to dig deep beneath the surface and create the tunnels and chambers he needed for his plan.

The official reason for the extensive underground work was to modernize Veilcroft's aging infrastructure, including the installation of new sewage systems, the construction of underground transport routes, and the reinforcement of old foundations. But in reality, these projects were a cover for something far more sinister.

Using the construction company as a front, Varnis secretly expanded the underground network beneath the city, creating a labyrinth of tunnels and chambers that mirrored the ancient tales he had fabricated.

The layout of the network was deliberately designed to match the descriptions in the stories that the bribed scholars had spread years before.

This was no coincidence; Varnis wanted to ensure that if anyone ever stumbled upon his secret operations, they would attribute it to the ancient legend rather than his machinations.

To make his plan even more convincing, Varnis enlisted the help of a specialist—an expert in ancient symbols and runes.

This expert was skilled in creating energy conduits, and Varnis commissioned them to inscribe the tunnels and chambers with intricate symbols that would channel the fear and despair of Veilcroft's citizens directly into the heart of his underground network.

These symbols were carefully placed to form a web of energy flow, converging on a central chamber deep within the network.

This chamber was the heart of Varnis' operation, where the accumulated negative energy would be concentrated and absorbed by him, further amplifying his power.

Once the network was complete, Varnis began to push his plan into action. He subtly encouraged the spread of the ancient legend through his controlled media outlets and well-placed rumors, ensuring that the citizens of Veilcroft would begin to fear the supposed reawakening of an ancient monster.

The whispers of the monster's return grew louder, feeding the collective anxiety of the city.

And he was just about to break through.

Even if he discovered the potential of his trait later than any others and his talent limit was just a 6, he breached the limit and was about to reach the rank of 7 for all of his parameters.

If not for the investigation team.

'Well, that basically sums up.'

Yet there were some things that were suspicious.

'In the game, the city became more desolate than ever. But if Varnis only wanted to strengthen himself, he would have finished his plan and would lay down for a while.'

It seemed there was another force in the play.

'Wait.'

And that made me think of something as I slowly stood up.

Chapter 518 116.2 - Faceless Woman

"Astron," Shanks stood before me with a greeting. "What are you doing here? You should be resting."

"I need to speak with Varnis," I replied, my tone resolute.

"Why?"

"There's something I want to ask of him."

"Can you promise to make it quick?"

"It will not take more than five minutes."

Shanks studied me for a moment before nodding, a trace of understanding in his eyes. "You're thinking there's more to this than what we've uncovered."

"Indeed," I confirmed. However, revealing the source of my concerns was clearly impossible for now, as how could I say I suspected this because of a game?

Well, not that I need to reveal this anyway. It is not like I have any responsibility, and I should have earned at least this much right to probe a little.

Shanks gave me a final, scrutinizing look before he stepped aside, allowing me to enter the room. I nodded in acknowledgment and walked past him, pushing the door open to the interrogation chamber where Varnis was being held.

The room was dimly lit, a single overhead light casting harsh shadows across the cold, sterile walls. Varnis sat slumped in a metal chair, his hands shackled to the table in front of him. His appearance was haggard, his eyes bloodshot and tired, a far cry from the once-imposing figure he had been. With his mana sealed, he was nothing more than a normal human—vulnerable and powerless.

As I stepped into the room, Varnis slowly lifted his head, his gaze locking onto mine. For a brief moment, there was a flicker of recognition in his eyes, followed by a deep, simmering resentment. He knew exactly who I was—the one who had caught him just as he was about to escape, who had thwarted his plans in the final moments.

"You..." Varnis rasped, his voice rough from exhaustion and defeat. "You should have killed me when you had the chance."

His words were laced with bitterness, but they didn't faze me. I remained calm, my expression unreadable as I regarded him. "If you wanted to die, you wouldn't have fought so hard to escape."

Varnis sneered, though the effort seemed to drain what little strength he had left. "Escape was the only option I had left. But now... now I'm just a prisoner, awaiting whatever fate your organization deems fit. Death would have been a mercy compared to this."

I didn't respond to his self-pity. Instead, I pulled out the chair across from him and sat down, my eyes never leaving his.

Varnis chuckled, though it was laced with bitterness. "So, now you're here to play the interrogator, huh? Fine, ask your questions, but don't think for a second that a kid like you can do anything to me."

I didn't rise to his taunts. Instead, I remained calm, my expression neutral. "How did you first realize that your Trait had a special quality?"

Varnis barked out a laugh, his voice dripping with contempt. "Oh, I see what this is. You're hoping to find some hidden potential in yourself, aren't you? Hoping to use the same method I did to get stronger? How pathetic."

His words were meant to cut, to provoke a reaction, but I didn't give him the satisfaction. I simply repeated the question, my tone steady. "How did you notice that your Trait had a special quality?"

Varnis sneered, leaning back in his chair as he stared at me with disdain. "Even if I told you, it wouldn't matter. It's not something that just anyone can do, even if you wished for it with all your heart."

I nodded slightly, acknowledging his response. "That must be correct," I agreed, my voice calm. "After all, not everyone can swallow such a seed from an eyeless woman."

The moment the words left my mouth, Varnis' demeanor changed. His eyes widened in shock, his breath hitching as if he had been struck. The confident, sneering expression he had worn moments before vanished, replaced by a look of utter disbelief.

'As expected.' I thought to myself.

'That thing was involved.' Such a discovery of a trait. While it was something that was not impossible, its direction was slightly strange.

I leaned forward slightly, my voice calm but firm as I pressed him for more information. "Did she give you a name, Varnis? What did she call herself?"

For a brief moment, Varnis hesitated as if weighing the consequences of speaking further. His lips parted, and it seemed as though he was about to reveal something, the name lingering on the tip of his tongue.

But before he could utter a word, his body convulsed violently. His hands shot to his throat, his eyes bulging as he struggled to breathe. A choking, gurgling sound escaped his lips as he gasped for air, his face contorted in agony.

I stood up quickly, my eyes narrowing as I watched him. It was clear that something—or someone—was preventing him from speaking, and I knew what it was.

"The psychic mana in his mind. It is a 'Placate'." It was just as expected.

That thing would not leave any loose ends.

Within moments, Varnis' struggles began to subside, his body going limp as the last of his strength faded. His eyes, once so full of terror, now stared blankly ahead, his chest rising and falling in shallow, ragged breaths.

Just then, the door to the room burst open, and Shanks rushed in, his expression one of urgency. He took one look at Varnis' condition and immediately moved to assess the situation.

Shanks knelt beside Varnis, his fingers checking for a pulse even as he shot a questioning look at me. "What happened here, Astron?"

"A 'Placate,'" I replied, my voice steady but filled with the gravity of the situation.

Shanks' eyes widened in shock as he pulled back slightly from Varnis' limp form. "Are you sure?" he asked, his tone tinged with disbelief.

"I am," I confirmed, meeting his gaze. "The moment he was about to reveal something, it was triggered. His reaction, the sudden convulsions—it all points to a psychic mana curse. A Placate, to be precise."

Shanks looked back at Varnis, a grim expression settling over his features. "Placate... that's rare and dangerous. Almost impossible to counter unless you have someone with high-level psychic mana. It's a failsafe designed to silence anyone who gets too close to the truth."

"Exactly," I agreed. "Whoever placed this on him didn't want any loose ends."

"What did you ask?"

"I was suspicious of how he had discovered his trait. When I asked, he revealed that he had seen an eyeless woman in his dream. But, when he was about to reveal her name, the placate was activated."

Shanks furrowed his brow, the wheels turning in his mind as he tried to make sense of the situation. "It doesn't add up," he muttered, his voice laced with suspicion. "Why would the Placate only activate when he mentioned the name? Why not when he started talking about how he discovered his trait? It's too specific, too targeted."

I knew the answer, but it wasn't something I could reveal. The Placate had triggered because I had brought up the eyeless woman myself. The curse hadn't recognized the earlier part of our conversation as a breach because I was the one who had introduced the subject. But when Varnis tried to speak the name, that was when the trap was sprung. It was a clever safeguard designed to prevent any direct exposure of the woman's identity.

But I couldn't share that knowledge—not without raising questions I wasn't prepared to answer. Instead, I offered a plausible explanation.

"Maybe the person behind this wanted to leave a clue. A name could be a breadcrumb, something to mislead us or maybe even point us in the right direction. It's possible they wanted us to know something, but not too much."

Shanks stared at me for a moment, his eyes searching for any sign of deception. I kept my expression neutral, waiting for his reaction.

No person, unless a mind reader, can get something out of me just by looking at my body.

Finally, he let out a heavy sigh, rubbing the back of his neck as if trying to relieve the tension building there.

"Maybe," he conceded, though it was clear he wasn't entirely convinced. "It's a stretch, but it's the only explanation that fits for now. I'll buy it, but we need to tread carefully. Whoever we're dealing with, they're smart—smart enough to plant these traps and cover their tracks."

He glanced back at Varnis, who was now slumped in his chair, barely conscious but still breathing.

The man's once notable presence had been reduced to a hollow shell, a stark reminder of the consequences of delving too deeply into dangerous waters.

'Dangerous waters.....Knowing too much can be dangerous sometimes.' Shanks turned back to me, his expression softening slightly. "Go back to your room and get some rest. I need to handle the aftermath of this."

I nodded, understanding the subtle dismissal. Shanks had a lot on his plate now, and I had pushed the boundaries of what I could probe without drawing too much attention to myself. "Understood. If there's anything else you need from me, just let me know."

"Most likely not," Shanks mumbled with a low voice, though I could hear him. Not that I cared.

After all, most likely, I will be sent to another place this evening.

Later that evening, as I rested in my room, recovering from the day's events, the notification I had been anticipating arrived.

My smartwatch buzzed softly, the screen lighting up with a message from the organization. I reached for it, my fingers brushing against the cool surface as I opened the message.

MISSION NOTICE: SOLO OPERATION

Location: [Shange Town]

Objective: Investigate recent anomalous activities and neutralize any threats.

Details: The mission requires discretion and swift action. Further details will be provided upon arrival.

Departure: Immediate.

I wasn't surprised. After what had transpired with Varnis, it was only natural that they'd want to send me on a solo mission, away from the prying eyes of others. A chance to test my capabilities further and, perhaps, to keep me occupied while the higher-ups dealt with the aftermath of the Veilcroft operation.

'It seems they really want to keep me busy,' I thought.

But it didn't matter. If anything, a solo mission suited me perfectly. There were fewer variables and fewer people to worry about or to cover for. Just me, my abilities, and the task at hand.

'And if I showed that I was better at solo missions, that would also suit better for my future.'

I leaned back against the headboard, the soft glow of the smartwatch illuminating the room. The details were sparse and intentionally vague, but that was standard for operations of this nature. They'd fill me in once I was on-site, ensuring that only those directly involved would have the full picture.

'A solo mission means they trust me, at least to some extent,' I mused, my mind already shifting gears to prepare for what lay ahead. I needed to be ready—physically, mentally, and strategically. Whatever awaited me at the mission site, I would face it head-on, just as I had done in Veilcroft.

As I began to pack my gear, methodically checking each item to ensure it was in perfect condition, I couldn't help but wonder what this new mission would reveal.

'Well, let's see what you have in store for me this time.'

Chapter 519 117.1 - Second Mission

The night was quiet as I stepped out into the cool air, the city's lights casting a faint glow over the streets. Instead of heading toward the Warp Gate, which would have been the usual mode of transport for an operative on a mission, I made my way to the nearest station.

The choice of a speed train for this journey was deliberate—another layer of discretion in an already covert operation.

The station was nearly empty, the late hour ensuring that only a few travelers were about. I purchased my ticket and boarded the train, finding a seat near the back where I could observe a few other passengers.

The train hummed to life, and the soft vibrations of the engine beneath my feet were a constant reminder of the speed.

As the train sped through the night, the landscape outside the window blurred into a dark tapestry of shadows and distant lights.

I pulled out my smartwatch, intending to extract some details about the mission. But when I requested additional information, the response was immediate and firm:

"Request Denied. Mission details will be provided upon arrival. Maintain discretion and readiness."

I wasn't surprised. This mission was clearly designed to test my efficiency and adaptability. They wanted to see how I handled situations with minimal information, relying on my instincts and training to navigate the unknown.

With nothing more to do, I leaned back in my seat, closing my eyes. My thoughts drifted back to the encounter with Varnis. The fight had been quick, brutal, and effective, but there were still areas I could improve upon. Every movement and every decision I made in that battle could be refined and perfected.

I began to replay the fight in my mind, visualizing each step and strike.

It was a habit I had developed—a way to dissect my actions, analyze my mistakes, and ensure that the next time I faced an opponent, I would be even more precise.

The memory of Varnis' desperate attacks, his use of forbidden techniques, and the final moments of his defeat played out in my mind's eye.

I analyzed the angles, the timing, and the subtle shifts in his stance that I could have exploited more efficiently.

Each replay brought new insights and new possibilities for improvement.

As the train sped on through the night, the rhythmic hum of the engine became a backdrop to my thoughts.

Not long after, the train began to slow, signaling the approach of my destination. I opened my eyes, letting the memories of the fight with Varnis fade into the background as I focused on the task ahead. The mission was waiting, and there was no room for distractions.

Not long after, the train began to slow, signaling the approach of my destination. I opened my eyes, letting the memories of the fight with Varnis fade into the background as I focused on the task ahead. The mission was waiting, and there was no room for distractions.

The train pulled into the station, its lights cutting through the early morning fog that hung low over the tracks. I stood, grabbed my small bag, and made my way to the exit. The city was quiet at this hour, the streets lit only by the occasional streetlamp casting long shadows across the pavement.

I stepped off the train and into Riko City; the air was crisp and cool against my skin.

The city itself was a mix of old and new, with towering skyscrapers casting their reflection onto the older, more worn buildings that lined the streets below.

'Though, this city seems to be more developed than Veilcroft.' From the map on my smartwatch, I could see that [Shange Town] was my true destination. It was a small, slightly desolate town located in the east-southern part of the Federation, closer to the border.

The train didn't go directly there, likely due to the town's remote location, so I'd have to make my way from here.

Without wasting any time, I started walking through the darkened streets. The city was still asleep; the only sounds were the occasional hum of a distant car or the rustle of leaves in the early morning breeze. As I walked, I flagged down a passing cab, the driver's eyes meeting mine in the rearview mirror as I settled into the back seat.

"Where to?" the driver asked, his voice rough from what I assumed was a long night.

"Shange Town," I replied, watching his reaction closely.

The driver gave a slight nod, not questioning the destination but clearly noting the unusual request.

"It is my hometown."

"Ah.....Returning to home.....you must be an academy student."

"You are sharp."

"It is my line of work."

"I see."

The driver seemed to relax slightly after I mentioned Shange Town was my hometown. He eased the cab into motion, the quiet hum of the engine filling the silence as we began our journey out of the city.

"I had been away for four years. I really missed my home."

"So, four years, huh?" the driver said, glancing at me through the rearview mirror as we drove along the darkened road. "That's a long time to be away from home."

"Yeah," I replied, keeping my tone casual. "A lot can change in four years."

The driver nodded thoughtfully, his gaze returning to the road. "That's true. Shange Town's a quiet place, though. Not much changes there—at least, not usually."

I picked up on the slight hesitation in his voice, sensing an opportunity to steer the conversation further. "Not usually? Has something been going on recently?"

The driver hesitated for a moment, his expression tightening as if he were weighing whether to speak freely. Finally, he sighed, his shoulders slumping slightly. "You could say that. It's been quiet, like always, but..."

"But?"

"Recently, a plague has been polluting that town." The driver's voice dropped to a near whisper as if even mentioning it might bring misfortune.

"Plague?" I echoed, feigning surprise and concern. "What kind of plague?"

The driver shook his head, his eyes narrowing slightly as he focused on the road ahead. "It's not a disease, at least not one that affects people directly. It's the land—the crops, specifically. The harvests aren't as good as they used to be. You see, most of the people in Shange Town rely on agriculture to get by. We've got a special kind of fruit that grows well there, the [Moon berry]."

"Moonberries?" I repeated, the name ringing a faint bell. I had heard of them before—a rare fruit known for its unique properties, often used in both cuisine and certain medicinal concoctions.

"Yeah, Moonberries," the driver confirmed. "They're the town's pride and joy, really. But lately, the harvest's been off. The berries are coming in smaller and less vibrant. Some of them don't even ripen properly. And that's not the worst of it."

"What else is happening?" I asked, my curiosity piqued.

The driver sighed again, his face a mixture of frustration and concern. "Some of the fields have started to rot like the soil's gone bad overnight. It's like there's something in the ground poisoning it. The farmers have tried everything they can think of, but nothing's working. They're losing hope, and if the Moonberry crop fails... well, it'll be the end for a lot of folks in Shange Town."

"Sounds serious," I said, keeping my tone sympathetic. "Any idea what's causing it?"

"Not really," the driver admitted, shaking his head. "Some folks think it's just bad luck, or maybe the weather's changing. Others whisper about curses or old spirits being disturbed. But there's no proof, and without a clear cause, no one knows how to stop it."

The mention of curses and spirits made me wonder if there might be something more to this than just a simple agricultural problem. Shange Town was remote, and small towns like these often had their own folklore and superstitions. But sometimes, there was truth buried in those old tales.

"Has anyone from outside come to investigate?" I asked.

"Not yet," the driver replied. "The town's pretty isolated, and with everything going on in the Federation, we're low on the priority list. But if things don't turn around soon, they'll have no choice but to ask for help. The whole town's livelihood depends on those berries."

I nodded, making a mental note.

As we continued our journey, the town grew closer, the first hints of daylight casting long shadows over the quiet landscape.

The once distant cluster of buildings was now within reach, and I could see the fields surrounding the town—fields that should have been lush and green, but even from a distance, I could tell something was wrong.

Well, at least, I needed to act like something was wrong, just to show that I was a townsfolk before.

"This...."

"Yeah....It is pretty bad, isn't it?"

"It was vibrant."

The driver pulled up to the town's edge, slowing the car to a stop. "Here we are," he said, turning to look at me. "Shange Town. I hope things aren't as bad as they seem, but... well, you can see for yourself."

I nodded, stepping out of the car and onto the rough dirt road. "Thanks for the ride," I said, handing him the fare. "I'll see what I can do while I'm here."

"Good luck," the driver replied, his tone earnest. And then he left.

As soon as the driver left and the dust settled from the cab's departure, my smartwatch buzzed softly, signaling an incoming message. I glanced down, my eyes scanning the screen as the mission details appeared.

The message was brief, as expected:

MISSION UPDATE

Objective: Meet with the Mayor of Shange Town. He has been informed of your arrival.

Instructions: Introduce yourself as Astron Natusalune. The Mayor will provide further details on the situation.

There wasn't much to go on, but that was typical for missions like this—need-to-know basis until you were on the ground.

I tucked the smartwatch away and took a moment to survey my surroundings. The town was quiet, with only a few people out and about, their faces drawn with worry.

The fields, once thriving with the renowned Moonberries, now looked sickly and forlorn, the plants struggling to survive in the poisoned soil. Whatever was causing this, it wasn't just a natural occurrence.

'It seems the Major has some connections in the organization. Or, the organization might own this place....'

Considering that they did not want to waste much resources, that could be the case. After all, even such an organization can't function without money or resources like this.

I began walking toward the center of town, where the Mayor's office was likely located. The buildings here were old, some even historic, their stone walls and wooden beams telling tales of a time when the town had flourished.

I walked up to the entrance and knocked on the door, the sound echoing in the still morning air. A moment later, the door creaked open, and a man in his late fifties, with graying hair and a weary expression, stood before me.

"Can I help you?" he asked, his tone cautious.

I met his gaze steadily, keeping my voice calm but firm. "I'm Astron Natusalune. I've been sent to assist with the situation here. I believe the Mayor is expecting me."

The man's eyes widened slightly at the mention of my name, and he quickly stepped aside, gesturing for me to enter. "Yes, of course. The Mayor has been awaiting your arrival. Please, come in."

I stepped into the building, the interior dimly lit but well-maintained. The man led me through a narrow hallway and into a small office, where the Mayor sat behind a cluttered desk, papers and maps were strewn about.

The Mayor looked up as we entered, his eyes filled with a mix of relief and apprehension. He was a tall, slender man with sharp features, his hair neatly combed back despite the stress evident in his expression.

However, upon seeing me, his face betrayed his emotions as he showed a little bit of disappointment.

The Mayor's eyes narrowed slightly as he took in my appearance, his initial relief giving way to a more scrutinizing look. He leaned back in his chair, folding his hands on the desk as if trying to gauge whether I was really who I claimed to be.

"Are you really sent by 'them'?" he asked, his tone laced with skepticism.

I met his gaze steadily, understanding the weight of his question. "Yes," I replied, my voice calm and confident. "I'm Astron Natusalune, and I was sent by the organization to assist with the situation here."

The Mayor studied me for a moment longer, his eyes searching for any sign of deception. After what felt like a tense eternity, he finally exhaled, the tension in his shoulders easing slightly.

"I see..." he murmured, though the disappointment still lingered in his expression. "Forgive my reaction, Mr. Natusalune. It's just... I was expecting someone a bit more, well... seasoned."

It was understandable. The situation in Shange Town sounded dire, and my appearance—young and unassuming—probably didn't inspire the confidence he was hoping for. This wasn't the first time I'd faced such skepticism, and it wouldn't be the last.

But at the same time, understanding did not mean I should look over this matter.

"I suggest you keep your expectations to yourself. Judging someone just by their age can be detrimental if you might not know."

It was a short threat, but a threat nonetheless.

Chapter 520 117.2 - Second Mission

"I suggest you keep your expectations to yourself. Judging someone just by their age can be detrimental if you might not know."

The Mayor's eyes widened slightly at my response, clearly taken aback by the firmness in my tone. He wasn't used to being spoken to in such a way, especially by someone he perceived as inexperienced. However, the authority in my voice and the confidence I exuded made him reconsider his initial judgment.

He hesitated for a moment, his gaze flickering to the guards who had been standing silently at attention by the door. Their presence was more symbolic than necessary, a show of force to ensure that anyone entering his office understood their place. But as they looked at me, it was clear that I wasn't fazed by them in the slightest.

The Mayor shifted uncomfortably, the weight of the situation settling in. He realized that underestimating me could be a mistake—one that he couldn't afford to make, given the town's precarious state.

"Very well, Mr. Natusalune."

And he accepted my words.

"I'll defer to your expertise. The situation here is serious, and I can't afford to let personal judgments cloud my decisions."

He motioned for the guards to step back, giving me space. The tension in the room eased slightly, the power dynamic subtly shifting as the Mayor acknowledged my authority.

"Let's proceed with the investigation," I said, maintaining a calm but firm demeanor. "The sooner we start, the sooner we can get to the bottom of this."

The Mayor nodded, clearly more respectful now. "Of course. I'll have someone take you to the fields and introduce you to the farmers immediately. They've been dealing with this for weeks, and any insights they can provide might help you understand what's happening."

"That is good."

He quickly gave instructions to one of the guards, who left the room to make the necessary arrangements. The Mayor then turned back to me, his earlier apprehension replaced by a cautious respect.

"Thank you for your understanding, Mr. Natusalune," he said. "I'll ensure you have everything you need to conduct your investigation."

With that, he gestured for me to follow him as we prepared to head out to the fields. As we walked through the building, the Mayor's demeanor was markedly different—more cooperative, less dismissive. He had come to understand that while I might not look the part of a seasoned operative, I carried the weight of my mission with confidence and resolve.

I followed the Mayor and the personnel he assigned to guide me out of the office and through the winding streets of Shange Town.

The fields weren't far from the town center, and as we approached, the signs of the problem became increasingly apparent.

The once vibrant and lush fields that were the pride of Shange Town now looked sickly and barren.

Rows of Moonberry plants, which should have been bursting with the rich, dark fruit they were known for, were instead withered and dry. The ground beneath them was hardened and cracked, a far cry from the fertile soil it should have been.

The personnel stopped at the edge of one of the fields, allowing me to take in the sight before us.

I could see the plants up close now; their leaves yellowed and curled as if they had been drained of life. The Moonberries that had managed to grow were small, misshapen, and covered in a strange, mottled pattern that hinted at some kind of infection or blight.

I crouched down, running my fingers over the dry, brittle leaves. They crumbled at my touch, the plant disintegrating into dust. The soil was similarly unyielding, more like stone than the rich, loamy earth that should have nourished these crops.

"This is worse than I expected," I muttered to myself, though loud enough for the personnel to hear.

"The farmers have tried everything," the man assigned to me said, his voice tinged with frustration and helplessness. "Fertilizers, new irrigation methods, even burning the infected plants to stop the spread... but nothing's worked. It's like the land itself is dying."

With that, he gestured for me to follow him as we prepared to head out to the fields. As we walked through the building, the Mayor's demeanor was markedly different—more cooperative, less dismissive. He had come to understand that while I might not look the part of a seasoned operative, I carried the weight of my mission with confidence and resolve.

He quickly gave instructions to one of the guards, who left the room to make the necessary arrangements. The Mayor then turned back to me, his earlier apprehension replaced by a cautious respect.

I followed the Mayor and the personnel he assigned to guide me out of the office and through the winding streets of Shange Town.

I nodded. It was evident that this wasn't just a simple agricultural problem; it was something different.

I needed to dig deeper, both literally and figuratively.

I activated my [Eyes], focusing on the flow of mana within the field. What I saw only confirmed my suspicions.

The mana was stagnant.

It wasn't just that the plants were infected—the very life energy of the land was being drained away, leaving nothing but a barren husk in its place.

I walked further into the field, my gaze sweeping over the rows of withered plants. I noticed that the damage wasn't uniform; some areas were more affected than others. I crouched down again, this time digging into the soil with my fingers.

Beneath the hardened surface, the earth was cold and lifeless, as if something had poisoned it from within.

'Hmm...Is it corruption? No, there is no evidence of corrosive mana.' That was weird. Compared to how things would look when corrosive mana would affect the environment, this one was different.

In a sense, normally, the mana would directly assimilate with the body and the living parts, affecting those parts. And if that were to happen, I would have seen the traces of mana in this place.

But that doesn't seem to be the case now.

'Something that has the corrosion ability without applying mana on it?' If that were the case, then things would become tricky, especially since it would get a lot harder for me to trace it back.

I looked around with my eyes enveloped with mana, my fingers sifting through the cold, lifeless earth, searching for any signs of disturbance—footprints, claw marks, or even the remnants of burrowing creatures.

But as I examined the ground, it became increasingly clear that there was nothing. No tracks, no signs of animals or monsters that might have entered the field. The soil was unnaturally undisturbed, almost as if the land had been abandoned by life itself.

'Nothing... not even the smallest trace of activity.'

I rose to my feet, brushing the dirt from my hands. The lack of any physical evidence was troubling. In most cases of environmental decay, there would be some indication of the presence of creatures—whether they were feeding on the land or simply passing through. But here, it was as if everything had been erased, leaving behind only the withered remnants of the crops.

'This goes beyond natural decay or even a typical magical corruption. It's as if something has drained the very essence from this place, leaving no trace of how it was done.'

I walked further into the field, my eyes scanning the surroundings for anything that might provide a clue. The fields stretched out in all directions, each row of crops in various stages of decay, but the pattern of destruction was inconsistent. Some patches were almost completely dead, while others showed signs of recent damage as if the corruption was spreading unevenly.

'If there's no sign of creatures on the surface... could it be something deeper? Something underground, perhaps?'

I crouched down again, this time focusing on the ground beneath my feet. Activating my [Eyes] once more, I directed my attention to the layers of earth below, searching for any disturbances in the mana that might indicate a hidden presence.

But again, I found nothing. The ground was still, devoid of any signs of life or activity. The only thing that registered was the same stagnant, lifeless mana that permeated the entire field.

'No creatures, no signs of physical intrusion... what could be causing this?'

I straightened up, my mind racing through the possibilities. The lack of evidence suggested that whatever was affecting the land was not a conventional force. It wasn't a creature or a magical attack, at least not in any way I was familiar with. Instead, it seemed to be something more insidious, something that drained life without leaving a trace.

I turned to the man who had been assigned to guide me. His expression was a mix of frustration and concern, clearly hoping I might have some answers.

"Have there been any reports of unusual activity in the area?" I asked, keeping my tone measured. "Anything at all, even if it seems insignificant?"

The man hesitated, thinking back. "There have been some strange occurrences... people have mentioned hearing odd sounds at night, like a low hum or a distant rumbling. But no one's seen anything. It's all just... eerie like the land is haunted or cursed."

I nodded, considering his words. "And what about the weather? Any changes, sudden storms, or temperature shifts?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary," he replied. "The weather's been mild if anything. It's like the land just started dying for no reason."

His response confirmed what I had already suspected. The phenomenon wasn't linked to any natural occurrences or external forces. Whatever was happening here, it was coming from within the land itself—or perhaps from something deep beneath it.

I scanned the horizon, my gaze shifting to a field on the outskirts that seemed untouched by the decay plaguing the others. It stood out like an oasis amidst the withering landscape, its crops still vibrant and healthy, a stark contrast to the surrounding desolation.

"Why hasn't this field been affected?" I wondered, intrigued by the anomaly.

I gestured toward the field, turning to the man beside me. "What about that one?" I asked, my tone neutral but curious. "It looks like it's avoided whatever is happening here."

The man followed my gaze, and as his eyes landed on the untouched field, a look of disdain crossed his face. He hesitated for a moment, as if weighing whether to speak openly, but eventually, he sighed and replied.

"That field belongs to a mother and her son," he said, his voice tinged with contempt. "They're... different. Keep to themselves mostly, don't interact much with the rest of the town. Some say they're strange, maybe even cursed."

I raised an eyebrow at the man's tone, noting the bitterness in his voice. "Different how?" I pressed, trying to get to the heart of the matter.

The man shifted uncomfortably, clearly reluctant to elaborate. "The mother... she's a bit of a recluse. Some folks say she practices... unusual things. Herbs, remedies, that sort of thing. And the son, well... he's always been odd. Keeps to himself, doesn't speak much. People avoid them, mostly. They're outsiders, even though they've lived here as long as anyone can remember."

I nodded thoughtfully, piecing together the information. The field's untouched state and the family's reputation as outsiders suggested there might be more to them than met the eye.

"Have they said anything about the situation?" I asked, keeping my tone even.

The man shook his head. "Not much. They don't talk to anyone unless they have to. But their field... it's the only one that hasn't been touched by whatever's going on. Some of the other townsfolk think they're responsible, that maybe they've done something to protect their own crops while the rest of us suffer."

I could hear the resentment in his voice, a common reaction in situations like this where fear and uncertainty fueled suspicion.

But I wasn't interested in hearsay; I needed facts, something concrete to go on.

"Take me to them," I said.

The man blinked, taken aback by my directness. "Are you sure? They're not exactly... welcoming."

"I'm sure," I replied.

"Th-"

"I will not repeat."

".....Understood..."