

H. Academy 521

Chapter 521 117.3 - Second Mission

The man reluctantly led me through the town and toward the isolated field on the outskirts. The walk was quiet, the air thick with unspoken tension. As we approached the house at the center of the untouched field, I noticed the man's pace slow, his expression darkening as he looked at the modest home.

"This is it," he said, his voice flat. He cast a disdainful glance at the house, his lips curling slightly as if the very sight of it repulsed him. "I'm going to leave now. I don't want any part of this."

I watched him for a moment, noting the emotions playing across his face—disgust, fear, and a deep-seated hatred. It was clear that whatever lay behind his feelings toward this family was deeply ingrained, perhaps fueled by years of isolation and suspicion.

'Interesting... fear, hatred, and something else... a deep sense of rejection.'

He turned and walked away without another word, leaving me standing alone at the edge of the porch. I watched him go, then turned my attention back to the house.

The air here was different—calmer, almost serene.

I stepped up to the door and knocked firmly, my hand steady against the wood. There was a brief pause, and then the door creaked open just enough to reveal a young boy, no older than fifteen, with a stern expression on his face. His eyes were sharp and unwelcoming, and his posture suggested that visitors were neither common nor particularly desired.

"What do you want?" he asked curtly, his voice edged with suspicion.

"I'm Astron Natusalune," I replied, my tone even and professional. "I've been sent to investigate the situation in Shange Town. I'm here to ask a few questions about your field. It seems to be the only one that hasn't been affected by whatever's happening."

"What a weird name." The boy's eyes narrowed slightly as he studied me. "We're not interested," he said bluntly, starting to close the door.

I quickly placed my hand against the door, holding it open just enough to prevent him from shutting it completely. "This is important," I insisted, my voice firm but not aggressive. "You may not think it matters now, but what if the same thing happens to your field? Once it's gone, how will your mother continue to make the ointments she uses to make a living?"

While their field also had Moonberries, there were also some other herbs growing there. I took a note on them while looking at them, and there I can easily say that the mother is indeed an herbalist.

The boy hesitated, the door half-closed, as he considered my words. His stern expression softened just a fraction, the reality of the situation sinking in. He knew, as well as anyone, that if their field were to fall prey to the same fate as the others, their livelihood would be in serious jeopardy.

The boy hesitated, the door half-closed, as he considered my words. His stern expression softened just a fraction, the reality of the situation sinking in. He knew, as well as anyone, that if their field were to fall prey to the same fate as the others, their livelihood would be in serious jeopardy.

After a tense moment, he let out a small sigh and opened the door wider, stepping aside to let me in. "Fine," he said, his tone grudging but resigned. "You can come in, but don't take too long. My mother isn't well."

As I stepped, I naturally took a look around the house. The interior of the house was modest but clean, with the scent of herbs and medicinal plants filling the air.

It was clear that the boy and his mother lived simply, relying on the land and their knowledge of healing to sustain themselves.

As I followed the boy further into the house, I could sense the weight of the situation pressing down on him.

He was young, but there was a hardness to him that spoke of someone who had been forced to grow up quickly, likely due to the circumstances surrounding his family.

"Wait here," the boy said, leading me to a small sitting room. "I'll get my mother."

As I waited, I couldn't help but notice the small details around the room—shelves lined with jars of herbs, a mortar and pestle on the table, and a few well-worn books on medicinal practices, though most of them were old ones.

It wasn't long before the boy returned, leading his mother into the room. The moment she entered, I could sense her presence—a gentle, calming aura that seemed to fill the space around her.

She moved with grace, though it was clear from the slight tremor in her steps and the pallor of her skin that she was not in the best of health.

As she approached, I noted several telltale signs of her condition. Her skin had a slight yellowish tint, indicative of jaundice, likely due to liver dysfunction.

The faint puffiness around her eyes and the slow, deliberate way she moved suggested a chronic illness, perhaps something that had been wearing her down for years.

The way she occasionally pressed a hand to her side hinted at discomfort or pain in her abdomen, reinforcing my suspicion that her liver might be the source of her ailment.

Despite her condition, she offered me a warm, genuine smile as she gracefully took a seat across from me. There was no trace of animosity or suspicion in her demeanor—just a quiet strength and kindness that seemed at odds with the disdain the townsfolk held for her.

"I'm sorry if I kept you waiting," she said softly, her voice carrying a soothing, almost melodic tone.

I shook my head, offering a respectful nod. "There's no need to apologize. I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me."

She smiled again, the gesture lighting up her tired features. "You're quite young to be sent on such an important task," she commented, her eyes reflecting a mixture of curiosity and mild surprise.

"I am younger than most would expect for this kind of work," I admitted. "But I assure you, I'm here to help, and I take my responsibilities seriously."

Her eyes softened at my response, and she leaned back slightly, studying me with a kind of quiet wisdom. "Youth is often underestimated," she said, almost as if she were speaking from experience. "But I believe you have more than enough capability to do what you've been sent here to do."

I appreciated her faith in me, though it was clear that she was a woman who had faced her own share of challenges in life. The way she carried herself, despite her obvious illness, spoke volumes about her resilience.

"Thank you," I replied, my tone sincere. "What should I call you?"

"Ah....I was rude....You can call me Maria."

"Miss Maria." Repeating the name, I started. "I've been informed that your field is the only one in Shange Town that hasn't been affected by the blight. I'd like to understand why that is, if possible. It could help us prevent the spread to other areas."

She nodded thoughtfully, her gaze turning inward as she considered my words. "Our field has been untouched, yes," she acknowledged. "But I'm not sure why. I've done nothing different than what I've always done—tended to the plants with care and used the same herbs and remedies that my family has passed down for generations. Perhaps... it is simply luck."

'A lie.' As she spoke, I watched her carefully. The slight hesitation in her voice, the brief flicker of her eyes away from mine, and the almost imperceptible tension in her posture—these were all subtle signs that betrayed her words.

I could easily detect these small cues; the tells that people often unknowingly displayed when they weren't being entirely truthful.

Her insistence that it was simply luck rang hollow. No one who had experienced such consistent results, especially in the face of a widespread blight, would truly believe it was just chance. There was something she suspected, perhaps even something she knew, but she wasn't ready to share it.

I decided to shift my approach. If she was hiding something, pressing too hard might cause her to shut down completely or, worse, make her son even more defensive. I needed to reveal a bit of my own findings, something to show that I wasn't just here to ask questions but that I had already uncovered some unsettling truths.

"I understand that you might not be certain," I said, my tone gentle but firm. "But I've been investigating the situation in Shange Town, and I've found evidence that this blight isn't natural. The way the land is affected, the way the life force seems to be drained from the soil—it's not something that happens on its own."

I saw a flicker of recognition in her eyes, a momentary widening that confirmed my suspicion. She knew something, but she was still reluctant to share it.

I leaned forward slightly, maintaining eye contact. "I'm not here to accuse anyone or to disrupt your life. I'm here to help. But to do that, I need to know if something happened in the past that could have caused this. Even if it seems unrelated, anything you can tell me might be the key to stopping this blight."

For a moment, the room was silent, the weight of my words hanging in the air. The mother glanced at her son, who had been standing quietly by her side. His posture was tense, his eyes darting between his mother and me, clearly uneasy with the direction the conversation was taking.

Finally, she spoke, but her voice was more guarded than before. "I don't know... I can't think of anything that would cause this," she said, her tone carefully measured. But I could tell she was lying again—this time even more deliberately.

'Something did happen,' I concluded silently. The way she avoided my gaze, the slight tightness in her voice—it all pointed to the fact that she knew more than she was letting on. But whatever it was, she wasn't willing to share it, at least not yet.

I could sense the tension rising in the room, especially in the boy. His hands were clenched at his sides, his jaw set as if ready to defend his mother from further questioning. Pushing any harder could risk alienating them completely.

I decided to ease off, knowing that sometimes patience was the better strategy. "I understand," I said calmly, standing up. "I won't press you further, but if you do think of anything—anything at all—please let me know. I'm here to help, and I want to do everything I can to protect your field and the rest of Shange Town."

She nodded, a mixture of relief and guilt in her eyes as she rose to her feet as well. "Thank you," she murmured. "I'll... think about it."

I turned to the boy, who was watching me with a mixture of wariness and curiosity. "Take care of your mother," I said, offering a small nod. "And keep an eye on the field. If anything changes, don't hesitate to reach out."

The boy didn't respond, but he gave a slight nod, his expression softening just a fraction.

I took my leave, stepping out into the fresh air, the scent of herbs and earth still lingering around me.

"Sigh.....What a pain...."

This mission somehow turned into something similar to my first one. However, this time, since I was alone, I needed to act more.

'Well, not that it matters.' With that, I started walking around town once again.

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I walked back to the town, my thoughts swirling with the implications of what I had just learned—or rather, what I had not been told. Something had happened here, something that the mother and son were keeping to themselves.

The pieces of the puzzle were slowly falling into place, but there were still too many missing for me to see the full picture.

When I arrived at the mayor's office, I found him pacing near his desk, his fingers tapping nervously against the wood. He looked up as I entered, his eyes searching mine for any sign of hope.

"Did you find anything?" the mayor asked, his voice tinged with a mix of anxiety and expectation.

I kept my expression neutral, my face a practiced mask of calm. "Nothing conclusive," I replied evenly. "There's no logical explanation that I can see at the moment. The blight doesn't seem to have a natural cause."

The mayor's face fell slightly, the hope draining from his eyes. He ran a hand through his thinning hair, clearly frustrated by the lack of answers.

"And what about them?" he asked, his tone shifting slightly as he referred to the mother and son. There was a subtle edge to his voice, a hint of something more than just concern. "Did they tell you anything useful?"

I shook my head, maintaining my composure. "No, they didn't have any information that could help," I said, my voice steady. I had long since mastered the art of controlling my expressions, and the mayor wouldn't detect any hint of deception.

The mayor studied me for a moment, his eyes narrowing slightly as if trying to gauge whether I was telling the truth. But he found nothing in my demeanor to suggest otherwise. Instead, he seemed to relax slightly, as if relieved that the young operative before him wasn't as sharp as he had feared.

I caught the subtle shift in his posture, the way his shoulders eased, and his gaze lost some of its intensity. He was underestimating me, dismissing my capabilities because of my age. It was a common reaction, one that I had encountered many times before. But in this case, it worked to my advantage.

As I watched him closely, I noticed something else—a flicker of restlessness in his eyes, a tension in his jaw that hadn't been there before. The mayor wasn't just worried about the blight; there was something specific about the mother and son that was bothering him. His questions, though carefully worded, revealed a deeper concern.

"This is quite a reaction, huh?" I thought, storing the observation away for later. The way he had pressed for information, the subtle anxiety when I mentioned that I hadn't found anything—it all pointed to something more than just a passing interest. He was worried, and that worry wasn't just about the blight.

But I gave no sign that I had noticed. Instead, I kept my tone casual as I spoke. "I'll continue to investigate, but it might take some time. These things are rarely straightforward."

The mayor nodded, though I could see the disappointment in his eyes. "I understand," he said, though his voice was strained. "Just... do what you can. The town is counting on you."

CREAK! "Hey, Father....Give me some money!"

Just as I was about to leave the mayor's office, the door swung open, and a young girl stepped inside. She was slightly tall, with striking features that immediately caught my attention. Her resemblance to the mayor was unmistakable—same sharp eyes, the same shape of the jaw. It didn't take much to conclude that she was most likely his daughter.

She was well-dressed, in clothes that spoke of both quality and taste, and she carried herself with the kind of confidence that comes from being accustomed to having her way. There was a slight haughtiness in the way she walked as if she owned the place and everyone in it.

"I will meet with some friends from the city."

As she entered, her gaze swept the room, initially ignoring my presence as if I were just another piece of furniture. But then her eyes landed on me, and her expression changed in an instant.

Her eyes widened, and she froze in place, staring at me as if she had just seen something—or someone—unexpected.

Without warning, she blurted out, "What a handsome guy!"

The words hung in the air, and for a moment, there was a stunned silence in the room. The mayor, who had been lost in his thoughts, looked up sharply, his eyes flicking between his daughter and me with a mixture of surprise and mild annoyance.

Sometimes, I forget that I was also quite good-looking. Considering there were guys like Ethan, Victor, and Lucas in the academy, I did not think much of my looks, but outside, I would get a lot of gazes when walking.

"Ah, this is my daughter, Celia," the mayor said, recovering quickly and clearing his throat. "Celia, this is Mr. Natusalune, who has been sent to help us with the situation in town."

Celia, still staring at me, blinked a few times as if snapping out of a trance. She quickly composed herself, her haughty demeanor returning as she gave me a smile that was equal parts charming and confident.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Natusalune," she said, her voice suddenly taking on a more measured tone, though her eyes still held a hint of that initial surprise. "I didn't realize we had such... capable-looking help on the way."

The girl's gaze remained fixed on me, her initial surprise quickly morphing into a more calculated expression. It was clear that she was used to getting what she wanted, and the townsfolk likely found themselves at the receiving end of her haughty demeanor more often than not.

As she continued to speak, there was a subtle condescension in her tone, as if she viewed herself as being above the rest of the town's inhabitants.

"I must say, it's refreshing to see someone of your... caliber here in Shange Town," Celia continued, her smile a touch too perfect. "The people here can be so... simple. It must be a nice change for you to deal with someone who can actually appreciate your skills."

Her words, though outwardly polite, were laced with a thinly veiled contempt for the townsfolk. It was as if she saw them as beneath her, mere background figures in her world.

The mayor shifted uncomfortably, clearly aware of his daughter's attitude but either unwilling or unable to correct her. I noticed the subtle tension in his posture, the way his gaze flickered between Celia and me as if trying to gauge how I would react to her words.

I maintained my calm demeanor, not letting her attitude faze me. I had encountered people like Celia before—those who believed their status or appearance made them superior to others.

'Well, she was like that too.'

However, that did not mean I would play such games.

'Hmm....Let's make her talk a little bit more....'

Something about this girl made me tense.

'I sense animosity?' It was subtle and not direct, but it was there.

That is why....."The people here are doing their best in a difficult situation," I replied evenly, my tone measured. "They deserve respect and support, especially in times like these."

Celia's smile faltered for a brief moment, clearly not expecting my response. She quickly recovered, though, her expression smoothing back into one of polite interest.

"Of course," she said, though her tone lacked sincerity. "It's just that... well, sometimes it feels like they could use a bit more... sophistication in their lives. But I suppose that's why you're here—to bring some much-needed expertise to this place."

Her gaze flickered over me again as if appraising my worth. It was clear she saw me as someone she could potentially manipulate or at least use to her advantage in some way.

"Indeed," I replied, not giving her any indication of what I was truly thinking. "I'm here to assist in any way I can."

The mayor, sensing the growing tension in the conversation, quickly interjected. "Celia, Mr. Natusalune has a lot of work to do. I'm sure he'll appreciate not being distracted from his duties."

Celia gave a small, dismissive wave. "Oh, Father, I'm sure Mr. Natusalune can handle a little conversation. After all, it must be lonely doing such serious work all the time."

She turned her attention back to me, her eyes gleaming with curiosity. "If you ever need a break from all the dreariness of this town, you should join me and my friends in the city. We know how to have a good time—something I'm sure you could use."

Her invitation, though framed as an innocent suggestion, was clearly meant to entice me away from my duties, to see if I could be swayed by her charms.

'Hmm.....'

But at the same time, there was something that felt like there.

My hunch was tingling.

'Something.' I was just about to say don't talk to me anymore, but then I decided to go against it.

"I appreciate the offer," I said politely, "but my focus is on the task at hand. There's a lot at stake here, and I intend to see it through."

Celia's smile tightened slightly, the first hint of frustration breaking through her composed exterior.

This girl wasn't used to being turned down, and I did not miss the increased animosity behind the gaze.

But she quickly masked it, offering a more subdued nod.

"Of course," she said, though her eyes flashed with something unreadable. "I wouldn't want to keep you from your important work."

"That would be nice." I nodded and then turned my attention to the mayor.

As I turned my attention back to the mayor, I let my tone shift to a more contemplative one. "Given the current situation, the fields belonging to Miss Maria and her son are our only real lead," I said, carefully watching the reactions in the room. "I plan to investigate further, focusing on anything in the past that might prove useful in understanding what's happening now."

The moment I mentioned Maria and her son, I caught a subtle shift out of the corner of my eye—Celia's shoulders tensed ever so slightly, a reaction that lasted only a fraction of a second before she quickly regained her composure. It was barely noticeable, but it was exactly the reaction I had been expecting.

'There it is.'

My instincts had been right.

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The mayor, oblivious to his daughter's reaction, nodded in agreement, seemingly relieved that I had a plan.

At least, that was how it looked like.

If not for the slight shake in his movements, once again.

Common folks were like that, especially those who were from the countryside. Many were not that proficient in hiding their expressions.

"That sounds like a wise course of action," he said.

The mayor, still recovering from the subtle slip in his demeanor, quickly masked his feelings, his expression settling back into the practiced neutrality of a man used to holding a position of authority. Celia, without another word, turned on her heel and left the room, her earlier bravado now tempered by a quiet, simmering tension that I didn't miss.

Once she was gone, the mayor turned back to me, his voice carefully controlled. "So, Mr. Natusalune, what do you plan to do next?"

I considered his question for a moment, allowing a thoughtful expression to cross my face. "I'll start by asking some questions around town, getting a better sense of the situation from the locals. After that, I'll take another tour around the fields and the town's perimeter, just to make sure there aren't any signs we might have missed—anything that could indicate a larger issue, like a dungeon or a monster infestation."

The mayor's brow furrowed slightly, a flicker of concern passing through his eyes. "A dungeon? You think there could be one appearing here?"

I shook my head, maintaining a calm, reassuring tone. "I didn't see any traces of a dungeon during my initial assessment. But it's always better to be thorough. There's a possibility that I might have missed something, so I want to double-check. Dungeons are unpredictable, and it's better to be cautious."

'Well, that is a lie.' Inwardly, I was confident that no dungeon had appeared in Shange Town. I had been trained to detect such anomalies, and the town didn't show any of the usual signs.

But I kept my thoughts to myself, playing the part of the diligent investigator. My words were simply a part of the act, meant to keep the mayor and the townsfolk at ease while I continued to piece together the real mystery.

The mayor nodded, clearly reassured by my apparent thoroughness. "I see. Yes, it's best to be careful. The last thing we need is a dungeon causing even more trouble on top of everything else."

"Exactly," I agreed, giving him a brief nod. "I'll report back to you once I've completed my survey of the area."

With that, I took my leave, stepping out into the bright afternoon light that bathed the town in a deceptively peaceful glow. The tension from the mayor's office lingered in the air, but I set it aside for now, focusing on the task at hand.

As I walked through the town, I kept my senses sharp, scanning for anything unusual—anything that might have slipped under the radar during my previous investigation.

The fields were still as barren as before, the lifeless soil a stark contrast to the vibrant greenery that should have been there. But I detected no signs of monsters or any energy fluctuations that would suggest the presence of a dungeon.

As I wandered through the town, I approached the locals with a casual demeanor, asking seemingly innocuous questions to ease into the conversations. The town was small, and the people here were naturally cautious around outsiders, especially one who had only been in town for a few hours.

Their guarded expressions and polite but distant responses made it clear that they weren't ready to open up about anything serious just yet.

I started with simple inquiries, asking about the town's history, the usual state of the fields, and how they had been coping with the recent troubles.

The responses were typical—small talk about the weather, the decline in crops, and the general unease that had settled over Shange Town. Nothing particularly revealing, but I was patient.

As I continued, I began to subtly guide the conversations in the direction I wanted, steering them toward the topic of Maria and her son. It was a delicate process—pushing too hard could raise suspicion, but I was practiced in the art of subtlety. I asked about old traditions, the local customs surrounding agriculture, and if anyone had noticed anything unusual in the past that might be relevant now.

At first, the responses were vague and noncommittal. People spoke of hard times, of the land changing in ways they didn't understand, and of their frustration with the mysterious blight. But as I listened, I started to pick up on the underlying currents in their words—the hints of superstition, the fear of the unknown, and the quiet resentment toward those who seemed untouched by the town's misfortune.

"Maria's field is the only one still thriving, isn't it?" I commented offhandedly to an older man tending to his shop, my tone casual as I examined a small trinket on display.

The man hesitated, glancing around as if to ensure no one else was listening. "Aye, it is," he replied, his voice lowering slightly. "Strange, that. No one knows why, but folks have their suspicions."

"Suspicions?" I echoed, feigning mild curiosity. "What kind of suspicions?"

He shrugged, a cautious look in his eyes. "People talk, you know? Say maybe she's got some kind of secret, something that's keeping her land safe. Others think it's just plain luck. But... well, there's always been something a bit different about her and that boy."

"Different, how?" I asked, keeping my tone light as I pocketed the trinket I had been examining.

"Can't say for sure," the man muttered, avoiding my gaze. "Just... they keep to themselves, always have. And now, with everything going wrong, folks are starting to wonder if they've got something to do with it. Not that I'm saying I believe it, mind you," he added quickly as if regretting his words.

I nodded, letting the subject drop as I thanked him for his time and moved on. The man's reluctance to speak more openly was telling—there was clearly a stigma attached to Maria and her son, one that had only grown with the town's recent troubles.

But at the same time, there was something more to that.

'They were talking as if this was not the case before.'

From the way they were addressed, Maria and his son, whose name I learned was Richard, it seemed like they were close with the townsfolk before.

That made me understand that, at some point, things changed.

'Something must have happened.' And that something was also related to the mayor and his daughter.

At the very least, they knew something about it.

After speaking with several more townsfolk, I noticed a pattern beginning to emerge. The answers I received were becoming increasingly redundant, offering little new information beyond what I had already gathered. The town was small, and rumors traveled quickly.

It was clear that the community shared a collective unease about Maria and her son, but they were hesitant to say much more, likely out of a mix of fear and uncertainty.

By the time the evening sun cast long shadows across the streets, I decided it was time to wrap up my questioning for the day. There was only so much to be gleaned from casual conversation, and I had already pushed the limits of what the townsfolk were willing to share.

As the sky deepened to a dusky purple, I took a detour, walking the perimeter of the town and observing everything around me with a careful eye. My [Eyes] allowed me to see beyond the physical structures, revealing the intricate flows of mana and the hidden details that others would overlook.

I walked past homes where women were busy with housework, their movements efficient and practiced. The scent of evening meals wafted through open windows, mingling with the sound of children reading and doing their homework, their youthful voices murmuring through the walls.

In one house, I saw a woman carefully folding laundry; her brow furrowed in concentration as she worked by the fading light. In another, a man sat at a small desk, his glasses perched on the tip of his nose as he helped his daughter with her schoolwork. The scene was almost picturesque, a moment of quiet domesticity that belied the tension I knew lay beneath the surface of this town.

I continued my walk, my gaze drifting over the rooftops and through the streets.

As I moved further along, my [Eyes] picked up something unexpected—a faint glow of mana emanating from within one of the houses. It wasn't particularly strong, but it was enough to catch my attention. I shifted my focus, peering through the walls to see what was inside.

In one of the bedrooms, a couple was engaged in an intimate act, completely oblivious to the world around them. The mana glow wasn't coming from them directly but seemed to be lingering in the air as if something had been recently activated or disturbed. It was a curious detail, one that didn't fit with the otherwise mundane scene.

I didn't linger, quickly moving on to avoid intruding on their privacy any further.

'Hmm....' But at the same time, something had alerted me.

'That.....'

It was the fact that someone's intimate act triggered something.

'And it was not a normal mana.'

The mana looked different.

'Similar to Sylvie's but at the same time a completely opposite one.'

Something that I had been encountering for the first time. I had never seen something like that before, even with [Perceptive Insight].

'What could it be?'

As I neared the outskirts of the town, my attention was drawn to the ground just ahead of me. There, almost hidden in the fading light, was a series of footprints.

They were shallow and faint, easy to overlook if one wasn't paying close attention.

I crouched down, examining them more closely. The prints were well-formed, suggesting that the person who made them had passed through recently.

I could tell by the depth and the spacing of the steps that the individual was relatively young and not particularly heavy. The impressions left behind by the boots were distinct enough to indicate that they belonged to a male.

'Three days, give or take,' I estimated, running my fingers lightly over the earth.

The soil had dried since the last time it rained, and the prints had weathered slightly, but they were still clear enough to analyze.

But what intrigued me most was the frequency of these prints. The path was well-worn, suggesting that whoever had made these tracks used this route regularly. It wasn't just a one-time occurrence—this person had a reason to walk this way, and they did so often.

'What's out here that's worth visiting so frequently?'

I rose to my feet, my eyes following the trail as it led away from the town and into the underbrush. The direction was odd, too—it didn't lead to any of the main roads or paths that I had noticed during my initial survey of the area. This was a more hidden route or more of a shunned.

The footprints, though faint, guided me deeper into the outskirts, where the town's lights grew dimmer and the air grew cooler. The path twisted and turned, leading me through a sparse thicket of trees and underbrush that seemed to close in around me as I ventured further.

'The forest is getting thicker, huh?' The footprints were becoming harder to follow now, the ground less cooperative as the terrain grew rougher. But I could still make out the faint impressions, guiding me like a breadcrumb trail through the shadows.

Finally, the trail led me to a small clearing, hidden away from the main town and surrounded by a dense thicket of trees. The clearing itself was unremarkable at first glance, but as I stepped closer, I noticed something that made me pause.

In the center of the clearing was a small, unassuming structure—little more than a shed, really.

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The morning light filtered through the curtains of the Mayor's office, casting long shadows across the room. The Mayor, seated behind his desk, appeared restless, his fingers drumming lightly on a

stack of documents. His eyes, weary from lack of sleep, flitted over the papers, but his mind was clearly elsewhere. He occasionally glanced at the door as if expecting someone to enter at any moment.

The silence was abruptly broken by the soft creak of the door opening. The Mayor looked up, his expression a mix of hope and anxiety. Astron Natusalune stepped into the room, his presence commanding despite his young age. The Mayor quickly straightened in his chair, trying to mask his unease.

"How was it?" the Mayor asked, his voice tinged with anticipation. "Were you able to find anything useful?"

Astron nodded, his expression calm and composed. "Yes, I was," he replied. "The investigation is finished."

The Mayor's eyes widened in surprise and relief. "You were able to find the reason?" he exclaimed, his voice rising with excitement. "Then, what is it? What's causing the blight?"

Astron remained steady, his gaze unwavering. "I did find the reason," he confirmed, his tone measured. "But before I explain, I need you to call a few people."

The Mayor's enthusiasm faltered slightly, a flicker of confusion crossing his face. "Of course," he agreed, his eagerness still apparent. "Who do you need?"

"Please call Miss Celia, Miss Maria, and Mister Damian," Astron requested, his voice calm yet firm.

The Mayor blinked, clearly taken aback by the names. "How are they related to all this?" he asked, the confusion deepening in his voice.

"It's important," Astron replied, his tone leaving no room for argument. "Please comply."

The Mayor hesitated for a brief moment, his mind racing as he tried to connect the dots. But seeing the resolve in Astron's eyes, he quickly nodded, the urgency of the situation overriding his questions. "Very well," he said, reaching for the intercom on his desk. "I'll have them summoned immediately."

As he made the arrangements, the tension in the room thickened, the Mayor's earlier excitement now tempered by a growing sense of unease.

There was something, something that he could not make complete sense of.

Something that was in his gaze sent shivers down the Mayor's spine.

As for Astron, he was just standing there without saying anything.

Not long after the Mayor sent the summons, the door to his office creaked open once more. Maria entered first, her steps slow and measured. The signs of her illness were more apparent in the daylight; her skin was pale, and her movements were slightly unsteady. Despite this, she carried herself with a quiet dignity, though her tired eyes betrayed her fatigue.

Behind her followed Damian, his expression fierce and protective. The young man's eyes immediately locked onto Astron, his glare sharp with suspicion and anger. The fact that his mother, clearly unwell, had been called to the Mayor's office without explanation only fueled his ire.

"Why did you call us here?" Damian demanded, his voice hard as he stepped forward, placing himself slightly in front of Maria as if to shield her. "My mother is sick. She shouldn't be dragged into whatever this is."

Astron met Damian's glare with calm indifference, his expression unchanging. He simply raised a hand in a gesture of patience. "Please, just wait a little," he said, his tone even and composed. "You will soon see the reason why."

Damian's eyes narrowed, his frustration evident. He wasn't satisfied with the vague response, and the tension in the room spiked as he clenched his fists. "This better be good," he muttered, clearly ready to argue further, but before he could, Maria placed a gentle hand on his arm.

"Damian, please," Maria said softly, her voice carrying a soothing calm despite her weariness. She looked up at her son with a tired smile, trying to ease his temper. "Let's hear what Mr. Natusalune has to say."

Damian glanced at his mother, the protective anger in his eyes softening slightly at her touch. He hesitated, clearly torn between his desire to shield her and her request to stay calm. After a moment, he let out a quiet sigh, stepping back slightly but keeping a wary eye on Astron.

Maria nodded in gratitude to her son before turning her attention back to Astron. Her expression was one of quiet patience, though her eyes held a hint of curiosity, wondering what had brought them here.

Astron acknowledged her with a small nod, his demeanor remaining steady. The room fell into a tense silence as they waited for the final person to arrive, the weight of the moment pressing down on everyone present.

The tension in the room thickened, and just as the silence began to settle, the door to the office swung open with a loud creak. Celia burst into the room, her entrance accompanied by a shout.

"What's the meaning of this? I was just woken up! Why am I being dragged here so early?" Her voice was sharp, tinged with annoyance, and she stormed into the room with her usual haughty demeanor.

Celia's appearance was slightly disheveled, her hair not yet fully tamed, and her attire hastily thrown on, clearly indicating that she had been roused from sleep. She looked around the room, her eyes narrowing in confusion and irritation as she noticed the others gathered.

The Mayor's face tightened with a mix of embarrassment and frustration at his daughter's behavior. He quickly stepped forward, his tone firm as he addressed her. "Celia, this is not the time for your outbursts. You will be polite and respectful. This is a serious matter."

Celia rolled her eyes, clearly displeased with the reprimand. "Fine, fine," she grumbled, crossing her arms as she leaned against the wall with a huff. Her gaze flicked to Astron, a trace of that earlier surprise and curiosity from their first meeting still present in her eyes, though now overshadowed by her irritation.

Astron remained unperturbed by her entrance, his expression as calm and controlled as ever. He allowed a moment for the tension in the room to settle before speaking again. "Thank you all for coming. Now that everyone is here, we can proceed."

Celia, still looking somewhat out of place, gave a small, reluctant nod, though her posture remained stiff and her eyes narrowed in suspicion. The Mayor, clearly trying to maintain some semblance of control over the situation, gestured for everyone to take a seat.

Maria, with a gentle nod of gratitude to the Mayor, slowly took a seat, her son Damian standing close by, still glaring at Astron. Celia, after a moment of hesitation, begrudgingly followed suit, though she chose a seat that allowed her to keep a close watch on everyone in the room.

Astron stood in the center of the room, his gaze steady as he looked at each of the assembled individuals. The atmosphere was thick with anticipation, each person waiting for him to explain why they had been summoned. But instead of diving straight into the matter at hand, Astron began with an unexpected question.

"What do you think of death?"

His words hung in the air, causing a ripple of confusion to pass through the room. The Mayor furrowed his brow, Maria looked perplexed, and Damian's fierce expression faltered slightly as he tried to make sense of the question. Celia, sitting with her arms crossed and a scowl on her face shot Astron a look of disbelief.

"What are you talking about?" Celia snapped, her tone impatient. "Why are you asking us about death?"

Astron, unfazed by her outburst, continued without acknowledging her complaint. "Most of the time, death is associated with the cessation of bodily functions. The heart stops beating, the lungs cease to breathe, and the brain halts its activity. Medically, it's defined as the irreversible loss of consciousness and the permanent absence of vital signs."

He paused, allowing his words to settle before he continued, his voice calm and almost reflective. "But is death really just about the body? Is it only about the organs shutting down, the blood ceasing to flow, the breath leaving the lungs?"

The room was silent, the occupants clearly bewildered by the sudden turn in the conversation. The Mayor shifted uncomfortably in his seat, glancing at the others as if searching for an explanation in their faces. Maria's tired eyes held a hint of curiosity, while Damian continued to glare, though now with a mix of confusion. Celia, on the other hand, looked thoroughly irritated.

"This is ridiculous," Celia muttered, shaking her head. "What does any of this have to do with—"

Astron cut her off, his tone firm but not unkind. "Please, just bear with me a moment longer."

Celia huffed but said nothing more, clearly unhappy but willing to wait—if only to see where this strange line of questioning was leading.

Astron let a moment of silence pass before answering his own question. "Of course not," he said, his voice taking on a more serious tone. "Death is not just about the body. It's also about the soul, the spirit—whatever you choose to call the essence of life. When that essence is drained or corrupted, it doesn't matter if the body still functions for a time. The person is effectively gone. Death can come long before the heart stops beating."

He looked around the room, his eyes lingering on each of them in turn. "And the same can happen for the inverse. The things that we consider dead, from a medical perspective, might still be alive. Still in this world, attached to something else."

Astron allowed the silence to stretch for a moment, letting his previous words sink in before he continued. The tension in the room was palpable, the air thick with anticipation. He took a measured breath and then spoke again, his tone calm but carrying an undercurrent of gravity.

"There is a phenomenon known as Lingering Resonance," he began, his eyes scanning the faces of those gathered. "It occurs when a person dies an unfair or tragic death, and in their final moments, they experience overwhelming emotions—anger, sorrow, fear. These emotions can be so powerful that they leave an imprint, a piece of that person's essence, still attached to this world."

He paused, watching as the others absorbed his words. The Mayor's discomfort grew, his fingers fidgeting nervously on the edge of his desk, and the same could be said for the other three.

"When a person's spirit is unable to move on because of these unresolved emotions," Astron continued, "they become trapped, tethered to the physical world by the intensity of their feelings. This attachment to the world of the living doesn't manifest as a peaceful presence but rather as something far more sinister."

He let his gaze sweep the room, ensuring that each person was following. "These spirits, unable to find peace, begin to haunt the living. They are driven by the very emotions that bound them to this world."

The tension in the room thickened as Astron spoke, his words weighing heavily on those present. The Mayor, already uncomfortable, now seemed increasingly unsettled. His fingers tapped nervously against the edge of his desk, his eyes darting from Astron to the others in the room as if seeking some kind of reassurance.

But as Astron continued, the Mayor's anxiety grew too much to contain. He suddenly interrupted, his voice tinged with frustration and desperation. "What does any of this have to do with what's happening in Shange Town? There are no spirits or hauntings here! The people are living well enough despite the blight. This is a farming town, not some place haunted by ghost stories."

His words came out in a rush, almost as if he were trying to convince himself as much as those around him. But his body language betrayed him—his hands trembled slightly, and a faint sheen of sweat glistened on his brow. It was clear that the Mayor was far more disturbed by Astron's words than he was letting on.

Astron met the Mayor's gaze calmly, his eyes narrowing slightly as he looked deeply into the older man's eyes. The room fell into an uneasy silence, everyone waiting to see how Astron would respond to the Mayor's outburst.

"Really?" Astron said, his voice low and deliberate. He didn't look away, holding the Mayor's gaze with an intensity that seemed to pierce through any facade. "What about the family named 'Carpenter?'"

It was at that moment a chill fell down to the whole room.

Chapter 525 117.7 - Second Mission

"What about the family named 'Carpenter?'"

The name hung in the air like a sudden chill. The Mayor's reaction was immediate and telling. His face paled, and his breath caught in his throat. His hands, which had been tapping nervously on the desk, stilled completely, gripping the edge of the wood as if to steady himself.

Maria's eyes widened in recognition of the name, a flicker of something like sorrow crossing her tired features.

Damian, who had been glaring at Astron with suspicion, now looked slightly down as if something had been revealed. Something that he wanted to hide. Celia, who had been simmering with irritation, now stared at her father, her expression shifting to one of shock.

The Mayor's mouth opened, but no words came out. It was as if the very mention of the name had robbed him of his voice. The room seemed to grow colder, the oppressive weight of unspoken truths pressing down on everyone.

Astron's voice cut through the silence, his tone still calm but carrying an undeniable edge. "It seems the name does ring bells for everyone here." He said while looking at everyone. "That is good, as this makes things easier."

Celia's voice cut through the thick silence, her tone defensive and strained. "That name... it can't have anything to do with what's happening now," she insisted, her eyes flicking nervously between Astron and her father. She tried to muster her earlier confidence, but there was a tremor in her voice that hadn't been there before.

Astron turned his gaze to Celia, his expression unreadable. "Really?" he replied, his voice carrying a weight that silenced any further protests. The single word hung in the air, challenging the very foundation of her denial.

The room remained silent as Astron began to speak again, his tone steady and deliberate, each word carefully chosen. "Let me tell you a story—a story about a family named Carpenter, who once lived in this very town. They were a family of three: a father, a mother, and a daughter. Simple farmers, like many in Shange Town, living a quiet life, tending to their crops, and contributing to the community."

Astron's voice remained calm, but there was an intensity in his eyes as he continued. "But then, things began to change. Rumors started to spread—rumors that the Carpenter family was involved in something dark, something unnatural. Witchcraft, they called it. The townsfolk whispered that while everyone else was struggling with their crops, the Carpenters were thriving. Their fields remained green, their harvests plentiful, even as others withered away."

He paused, letting the weight of the words settle over the room. The Mayor looked down, his face a mask of guilt and fear, while Maria's eyes brimmed with unshed tears, her sorrow palpable. Damian's earlier defiance had crumbled, replaced by a look of quiet shame, his eyes fixed on the floor. Celia, though still trying to maintain her composure, was visibly shaken, her earlier bravado now a distant memory.

"But," Astron continued, "the truth was far less sinister. The reason for the Carpenter family's success wasn't witchcraft. It was something much simpler, much more mundane. They refused to use the seeds that most of the town had been provided with—the seeds that had been supplied by a company with ties to a certain influential figure in this very room."

At this, the Mayor visibly flinched, his knuckles whitening as he gripped the edge of his desk. Astron's gaze bore into him, unyielding. "Those seeds were of low quality, bought at a fraction of the price they should have been. They were subpar, and they were the reason why the crops failed across the town. But the Carpenters, being prudent, chose not to use them. They stuck to their own methods, their own seeds, and that's why their crops thrived."

The realization began to dawn on the others in the room, the pieces of the puzzle falling into place. Celia's eyes widened in shock, her gaze snapping to her father, who sat trembling in his chair, unable to meet anyone's eyes.

"But someone couldn't afford to have that truth come to light," Astron said, his voice now edged with steel. "Someone who had made a deal embezzled money and provided those faulty seeds to the town. Someone who needed a scapegoat to cover their tracks. And so, the rumors of witchcraft were born—whispers seeded by that very person to turn the town against the Carpenters."

Maria's soft gasp broke the silence, and Damian's fists clenched at his sides, his knuckles white with the effort to contain his anger. Celia, still in shock, slowly shook her head, unable to reconcile the story with the man she knew as her father.

"The town began to shun them, ostracizing the Carpenter family, driving them further and further into isolation," Astron continued, his voice softening slightly. "And in the end, the weight of those lies, the cruelty of the townsfolk, led to their demise."

The room was deathly silent, the gravity of the story sinking in.

"But of course, that is not the end," Astron continued, his voice steady yet laden with the gravity of what was to come. The silence in the room was thick and suffocating as each person grappled with the dark truths that had been unearthed.

"Lingering Resonance," Astron explained, "is a phenomenon not commonly found in adults. Their emotions, though strong, are often tempered by experience and the ability to rationalize their suffering. It is the younger, more vulnerable souls—those whose hearts are untainted by the harshness of life—that are most susceptible to this phenomenon. When a child or a young person experiences an overwhelming sense of betrayal, fear, or despair, their emotions can become so intense that they leave an indelible mark on this world."

He let his words hang in the air for a moment, allowing their weight to sink in before continuing. "While the Carpenter family was ostracized, there were some in the town who were not satisfied with merely pushing them to the margins. There was a certain someone who despised the family even more—someone who was consumed by jealousy, particularly toward their daughter, Abigail."

The mention of Abigail brought a new tension into the room. Maria's face paled even further, her hands trembling in her lap.

Damian's knuckles were now bone white; his fists clenched so tightly that the tendons stood out starkly against his skin. Celia's wide eyes remained fixed on Astron; her earlier shock now mingled with dawning horror as she realized where the story was leading.

"Abigail Carpenter," Astron said, his voice softening as he spoke the girl's name, "was a bright and beautiful soul. She was kind, graceful, and intelligent—a girl who loved to help others. It wasn't surprising that many of the boys in town had a crush on her. But there was one person who couldn't stand the attention she received—someone whose jealousy twisted their perception, turning admiration into something far darker."

Celia's breath hitched as she listened, her gaze never leaving Astron's. The color drained from her face as she began to piece together the implications of his words.

The room seemed to grow colder with each word, the darkness of the story casting a suffocating pall over everyone present. Astron's gaze never left Celia, his words striking deeper with every revelation.

"And so, this certain person began spreading a vile rumor about Abigail," Astron continued, his voice calm. "A rumor that she was not only a witch but that she was selling her body, using her beauty to corrupt the town's boys. It was a lie, of course, but the seeds of doubt had already been sown with the rumors of witchcraft. It wasn't hard for these young, impressionable boys to be manipulated into believing the worst."

The tension in the room was unbearable. Maria covered her mouth, tears welling in her eyes as the full horror of what had happened began to take shape. Damian's hands were clenched so tightly that his knuckles had turned white, his whole body trembling with barely suppressed rage. Celia's face was ashen, her eyes wide with disbelief and growing terror.

"And then," Astron said, his voice dropping to a chilling whisper, "that certain person made a plan. They waited until the day when Abigail's parents had left the town to seek help from a doctor in another town. That night, a group of boys, emboldened by the lies they had been fed, went to the

Carpenter home. They grabbed Abigail and dragged her to a shed on the outskirts of town—a shed that had been prepared for this very purpose."

Celia's breath grew shallow, her heart pounding in her chest as Astron's words struck deeper. His gaze remained locked on hers, unyielding, as he continued to speak.

"They were waiting for this very moment," Astron said, his voice a chilling whisper that seemed to echo in the silence of the room. His eyes bore into Celia's, never wavering. "From then on, days became hell for that girl. Confined, assaulted, with no one to call for help, no one to speak of her suffering."

He took a slow, deliberate step forward, stopping just inches from Celia. The cold emptiness in his eyes was overwhelming, a void that seemed to consume all light and warmth. It was a look devoid of rage, of anger, or even of sadness—just pure, pitch-black hollowness.

"Does that ring a bell?" Astron asked, his voice as empty as his gaze.

Celia recoiled slightly, her body trembling. The intensity of his stare sent a shiver down her spine, a cold, paralyzing fear taking hold of her. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. The truth, or perhaps the fear of it, had stolen her voice.

Astron turned away from Celia, his gaze shifting to Maria and Damian. "But well, that doesn't mean it ends here, does it?"

He paused, allowing the weight of his words to settle. Maria looked down, her eyes filled with tears, while Damian clenched his fists even tighter, his body shaking with barely restrained fury.

"While all of this was happening," Astron continued, "there was one family in this town that did not believe the rumors about the Carpenters. A family of two—a mother and her son—who knew the truth. The mother was an herbalist, knowledgeable about herbs and plants, and she understood that the Carpenters' success had nothing to do with witchcraft. She knew it was because they had refused to use the low-quality seeds that had been forced on the rest of the town."

Maria's head dipped lower, her shoulders trembling as she recalled the painful memories. Damian's eyes, now brimming with unspoken pain and anger, remained fixed on Astron.

"That family of two," Astron continued, "decided to help the Carpenters. The woman provided them with medicine, helping to ease their worries, while the boy played with the Carpenter girl, Abigail. He didn't want her to be alone, especially when the rest of the town had turned their backs on her. They even wanted to speak out, to defend the Carpenters, but the one who was truly guilty couldn't afford to let that happen. So, the rumors spread to them as well. They were also ostracized, associated with witchcraft, and shunned by the town."

Maria's silent tears fell, each drop a testament to the burden of guilt she had carried for so long. Damian's face was contorted with anguish; his teeth gritted as he struggled to contain the storm of emotions raging within him.

"The boy didn't care about the town's rejection," Astron continued, his voice a low murmur. "He had already begun to hate the townspeople for their cruelty, for their willingness to believe lies over the truth. He continued to visit Abigail, only to find one day that she was no longer there. Surprised, he assumed she had left with her parents, perhaps to find safety elsewhere."

Astron paused, his voice growing even quieter, more somber. "But when the Carpenter parents returned to their home, they found it empty. Abigail was nowhere to be found, and their panic set in. They came to the family of two first, desperate for answers. When they saw that she wasn't there, their panic turned to terror. And when the truth finally emerged..."

He looked back at the Mayor, whose face was ashen, his eyes wide with horror as he relived the events Astron described. "The family of two could no longer contain their anger. The truth of what had been done to that innocent girl was too much to bear."

Astron's voice hardened, the cold edge returning. "From then on, the deaths of two people occurred in this town. Two lives were taken, not by accident, but as an act of vengeance. To bury the truth, to ensure that the full extent of what had happened would never come to light."

The room fell into a silence so deep it felt as though the air had been sucked out.

But then, suddenly, a voice echoed all across the room.

"AHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

It was a mad laugh of someone.

Chapter 526 117.8 - Second Mission

The silence that followed Astron's words was shattered by an unexpected sound—a mad, echoing laugh that filled the room with an unsettling energy. Everyone turned in shock to see Celia, her head thrown back as she laughed heartily, the sound growing louder and more unhinged with each passing second.

"AHAHAHAHAHAHA!" Celia's laughter was wild, her eyes gleaming with a mixture of amusement and something far darker. She wiped a tear from the corner of her eye as she finally managed to stifle her laughter, her gaze settling on Astron with a mocking smile.

"Oh, that was good," she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Really, you're quite the storyteller, Astron. The way you spun that tale—so detailed, so tragic. It was almost as if you were there yourself."

Her smile widened, but it was a smile that never reached her eyes. They remained cold, calculating, and filled with a twisted amusement. She leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms as she continued to speak.

"It was fun to sit here and listen to your words," Celia continued her tone light but with a sharp edge that made everyone uneasy. "You wove it all together so well—the rumors, the guilt, the deaths. A perfect little horror story for our quaint little town. But you know what? That's all it is—a story."

She emphasized the last word, her eyes narrowing as she looked around the room at the others. "And the best part? Everyone here seems to be playing right into it. Look at you all—so ready to believe in ghosts and curses, so eager to think that there's some tragic, supernatural explanation for what's happening."

Celia's voice took on a mocking tone as she continued, "But here's the truth, Mister Astron. You're just a man with a good imagination and a flair for the dramatic. You came here with your little theories and your accusations, and you got everyone to buy into it. But at the end of the day, it's nothing more than that—a theory."

Her words hung in the air, but the effect she seemed to be aiming for was lost. The room was still tense, the weight of Astron's revelations lingering despite Celia's attempts to dismiss them. Her laughter, though loud and forceful, didn't seem to erase the growing sense of dread that had taken hold of the others.

Maria's tears continued to fall silently, and Damian's anger hadn't lessened. The Mayor, too, remained visibly shaken, his mind clearly racing as he tried to reconcile Celia's words with the heavy truths Astron had uncovered.

Astron remained unflinching, his expression as calm and cold as ever, unaffected by Celia's outburst. He allowed her words to hang in the air for a moment before responding.

"Stories," Astron said quietly, his voice cutting through the tension like a knife, "often have a way of revealing the truth, even when some people would rather not see it."

Celia's smile faltered slightly, but she quickly recovered, her eyes flashing with defiance. "Oh, please. Save your cryptic nonsense for someone who cares. You've had your fun, but let's be real—there's no proof to back up your little tale. It's all speculation."

Astron tilted his head slightly, his gaze still locked on Celia. "Is that what you truly believe, Celia? That everything I've said is just a fabrication?"

Celia's defiance didn't waver as she crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes at Astron. "Yes, that's exactly what I believe. You're fabricating everything, trying to twist a sad story into something more sinister for your own agenda."

Astron simply shook his head. "Celia, for things like this, it's often far too easy to find evidence. Especially when those who know the truth are still among us."

With that, Astron reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small, worn diary. The leather cover was cracked with age, and the pages were yellowed and frayed at the edges. He held it up for everyone in the room to see.

"This," he said, his voice steady and calm, "is the diary of Abigail Carpenter."

The room went silent. Celia's eyes widened in shock, her bravado suddenly faltering as she stared at the diary in Astron's hand. The Mayor's breath caught in his throat, and even Maria and Damian looked at the diary with a mix of recognition and dread.

Astron continued, his voice calm but unyielding. "The more people who know the truth, the easier it is to reveal it—especially if one of those people is standing right in front of you."

He turned his gaze to Maria and Damian, who were visibly shaken. "You no longer need to hide anything," Astron said softly but with firm resolve. "The truth is already out. You were pressured by the Mayor, forced into silence, but now... now it's time to speak."

Maria trembled, her eyes filling with tears as she looked at the diary in Astron's hand. Damian, his anger simmering just below the surface, clenched his fists, his gaze shifting from the Mayor to Celia and back to Astron.

Celia, still staring at the diary, took a step back, her earlier confidence crumbling as the weight of the situation pressed down on her. "That... that doesn't prove anything," she stammered, but her voice lacked the conviction it had before.

Astron didn't relent. "This diary contains the words of a girl who suffered at the hands of those who believed the lies that were spread about her. It's a record of her pain, her fears, and her final days. And it's more than enough to show the truth."

He gently opened the diary, flipping through the pages until he found the entry he was looking for. "In her own words," he said, his tone somber, "Abigail wrote about how she was taken, how she was tormented, and how she prayed for someone to save her. She even wrote about the people who hurt her... people she once trusted."

Maria let out a soft sob, and Damian's eyes filled with tears of rage and sorrow.

Celia's defiance was gone, replaced by a look of horror and disbelief. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. The reality of the situation was too much to deny.

Astron closed the diary and looked around. "Everything is clear now."

Astron had just finished speaking, the gravity of his words hanging heavily in the room when the Mayor suddenly broke the silence. His voice was low, but there was an unmistakable edge to it—one that sent a chill through the air.

"So what?" the Mayor muttered, his eyes narrowing as he turned to face Astron. The cold expression on his face was a stark contrast to the fear and guilt he had shown earlier. He seemed almost... defiant.

Astron slowly turned to meet the Mayor's gaze, his own expression unreadable. "What did you say?" Astron asked, his voice calm but laced with an undercurrent of warning.

The Mayor straightened in his chair, his demeanor hardening as he spoke with a new resolve. "I said, so what?" he repeated, louder this time. "What if you know the truth now? What if everyone in this room knows? What difference does it make?"

The question hung in the air, and the room seemed to grow colder as the Mayor continued, his voice growing more confident, more emboldened. "You have this diary, you have your story, and you have these people's tears," he said, gesturing toward Maria and Damian. "But what can you really do with it? Who will believe you? You think you can bring justice to this town? You think you can undo what's been done?"

Astron's eyes narrowed slightly, the intensity of his gaze cutting through the Mayor's bravado. "The truth has a way of coming to light, no matter how deeply it's buried," he said quietly. "And it has a way of destroying those who try to keep it hidden."

The Mayor scoffed, though there was a slight tremor in his voice that betrayed his unease. "You're just an outsider," he spat. "A stranger who knows nothing about this town, about its people, or its history. Do you think you can waltz in here and tell some tragic tale, and everyone will fall to their knees, begging for forgiveness? It doesn't work that way, Astron."

He leaned forward, his eyes gleaming with a mix of desperation and defiance. "This town has lived with its secrets for years. People here know how to keep their mouths shut and how to look the other way. You can't change that. You're just one man. You're nothing."

Astron remained unfazed, his expression calm and resolute. He took a step closer to the Mayor, his presence looming larger as he spoke in a low, measured tone. "You're right about one thing," he said. "I'm just one man."

"That is right, just one man." Saying that, the Mayor smiled. "Just like them, you will be buried here. With all the secrets that were revealed." Astron's expression remained calm, almost serene, as he looked at the Mayor. "I'll be buried here?" he asked, his voice steady, without a hint of fear.

The Mayor's eyes gleamed with triumph. "Indeed. You're just one man. Did you really think we wouldn't be prepared for something like this? We've been keeping secrets for years, Astron. We know how to deal with problems like you. If the truth ever came to light, we were ready to bury it again, no matter the cost."

Astron tilted his head slightly, his gaze unwavering. "And how exactly do you plan to do that? How do you intend to solve the problem if I disappear?"

The Mayor chuckled darkly. "Thanks to you, we've already identified the problem. It's some kind of spiritual phenomenon, isn't it? A lingering spirit or whatever nonsense you believe in. Well, if you're gone, we can just call another expert to deal with it. Someone less... troublesome."

Astron raised an eyebrow, his curiosity piqued. "And what about the organization that sent me here? How do you plan to explain my sudden disappearance to them?"

The Mayor's smile turned cold as he glanced at his daughter, Celia, who was still standing in stunned silence. "That's simple. We'll say that you tried to assault my daughter. A father defending his child—who could blame me? The organization will understand that I had no choice. They'll see me as a hero, and you... well, you'll be forgotten."

Celia's eyes widened, the horror of the plan dawning on her, but she remained silent, her shock rendering her speechless.

Astron nodded slowly as if considering the Mayor's words. "Not bad," he said quietly, his tone almost admiring. "You've thought this through."

The Mayor's confidence grew, his smile widening as he misinterpreted Astron's response as a sign of defeat. "Of course. You think you're clever, but we've been playing this game for years. You're just another piece on the board, easily discarded."

Astron's calm demeanor never wavered, but there was a glint in his eyes, something cold and calculating that the Mayor failed to notice. "But there seems to be a misconception." He said as he looked into the Mayor's eyes. "There are just 23 people surrounding this building, and only 8 of them are Awakened, and only two of them are Awakened of 4th rank."

The moment he said that Mayor's eyes widened slightly as he saw Astron's eyes turn cold.

"I am not in trouble here. If you want to bury me here, you will need ten times that number."

The Mayor's eyes widened in shock as he processed Astron's words, his earlier confidence starting to crumble. "You're lying!" the Mayor shouted, his voice cracking with desperation. "You're just bluffing! You think you can scare me with empty threats? You're finished, Astron!"

As if on cue, the door to the room burst open, and a group of men—tough, armed, and clearly prepared for violence—stormed in. They quickly surrounded Astron, their weapons drawn, their faces set in grim determination. Among them were two individuals whose aura immediately marked them as Awakened of higher ranks.

The Mayor's face twisted into a triumphant sneer as he watched the scene unfold. "See? You're done! There's no way out for you now."

But Astron remained calm, his eyes sweeping over the group that had surrounded him. He let out a quiet sigh, almost as if in disappointment, and shook his head. "It's a pity," he murmured, his voice carrying a note of genuine regret. "I warned you."

Before the Mayor could respond, a sudden, unnatural movement caught his attention. The shadows in the room seemed to writhe and twist, moving of their own accord. They snaked along the floor, climbing the walls, wrapping around Astron-like living tendrils. The men surrounding him hesitated, their weapons raised, unsure of what they were witnessing.

And then, in the blink of an eye, Astron was gone.

The shadows enveloped him completely, and when they dissipated, there was nothing left—no trace of his presence, no sign that he had ever been there. The room fell into an eerie silence, the only sound the heavy breathing of the men who had come to apprehend him.

The Mayor's face drained of color as he stared at the empty space where Astron had stood just moments before. "What... what just happened?" he stammered, his voice trembling with disbelief.

One of the Awakened men, his face pale, stepped forward and began to examine the area where Astron had vanished, but there was nothing to find. No footprints, no residual energy—just empty air.

"He's gone," the man muttered, shaking his head in bewilderment. "He just... disappeared."

The Mayor's triumphant expression twisted into one of fear and confusion. He had believed he had Astron cornered, that his plan had been foolproof. But now, with Astron vanished and his threats hanging in the air, the Mayor realized he had severely underestimated the man.

The room was heavy with tension as the Mayor's men exchanged uneasy glances, unsure of what to do next. The Mayor, for the first time, was at a loss for words. The reality of the situation was setting in—he was no longer in control, and the consequences of his actions were beginning to close in around him.

Celia, who had been silent throughout the entire ordeal, finally found her voice. "Father..." she whispered her tone a mix of fear and disbelief. "Wh-what do we do now?"

The Mayor's eyes darted around the room, searching for answers, for a way out of the nightmare that was rapidly unfolding. But there was nothing—just the cold, hard truth that Astron had left behind.

Outside, the town of Shange remained oblivious to the events that had just transpired within the Mayor's office. But inside, the seeds of reckoning had been planted, and it was only a matter of time before they bore fruit.

As I slipped through the shadows, making my way to a safe distance from the Mayor's office, I let my mind replay the sequence of events that had led me to this point. Everything had started to come together when I found that old shed on the outskirts of town—the shed that had once been Abigail Carpenter's refuge.

The moment I stepped inside, I could tell that this place had housed someone for a significant period of time. The remnants of a small bed, the scattered clothes—it all painted a picture of a young girl who had lived here, hidden away from the world.

But there was something else, something more unsettling, that caught my attention.

The shed hadn't just housed Abigail. There were traces of others as well—multiple presences, though faded with time, still left behind faint imprints that my [Eyes] could detect.

It was as if different energies had clashed and intertwined within that small space, leaving a residual aura that hinted at the darkness that had transpired there.

But the real breakthrough came when I observed the couple during my reconnaissance of the town. The energy I felt in that moment wasn't just the natural aura of life; it was something far more potent and disturbing. It reminded me of the energy I'd encountered in the shed, but with a twisted edge, as if it had been tainted by strong, negative emotions.

'Similar to Sylvie's, yet completely different,' I had thought at the time.

The energy was a clue—an echo of something terrible that had happened, a spiritual residue left behind by a soul that had suffered greatly.

One can easily consider Sylvie's energy associated with [First Lord]. Her trait is [First Lord's Authority].

It is Divine Power.

A power that is different from the normal mana, something that is superior.

But then, what would the fact that this energy being similar to hers would mean?

That would mean something simple.

It is the reverse of Divine Power.

If the divine Power is the power of the heavens, this energy would mean the energy of the underworld—the opposite of the heavens.

The energy of abyss, the energy of death.

It was then that I realized what I was dealing with Lingering Resonance, the phenomenon where a person's intense emotions and unresolved trauma bind them to the physical world, even after death.

The diary was the final piece of the puzzle. Abigail Carpenter's words, though simple and childlike, painted a vivid picture of her life before everything fell apart. The entries were full of love for her parents and her daily life.

It was not complex as she was just a countryside girl and she had just written a diary to improve her writing. Thus, it was not long and detailed, but it is enough if you know how to read.

Though she didn't explicitly write about her confinement or the torment she endured, the evidence was there in the way she described how she felt when she and her family were ostracized by the town.

Since she had written about her feelings in the diary of that time, I came to know that such a thing transpired.

And the fact that there were no people named Carpenters meant that the family was long gone.

It wasn't hard to deduce what had happened to her, especially when I combined it with the other clues I had gathered.

As I pieced it all together, everything made sense: Abigail had been taken, confined, and ultimately broken by the cruelty of those who believed the lies spread about her. Her despair, her fear, her overwhelming sense of betrayal—all of it had bound her spirit to this place, creating the very blight that now threatened to consume Shange Town.

But it wasn't just the blight that had formed; there was also a sense of vengeance, an echo of the wrongs done to her that still lingered in the town.

This wasn't just about the land dying; it was about a spirit unable to move on, still bound by the horrors of the past.

'The dead who is bound by the emotions.'

Oddly similar to the case in the Mana Stone Mine.

Those who are wronged made such events happen.

From my vantage point on the roof of the highest building in Shange Town, I gazed down at the darkened landscape below.

The town was still, bathed in the light of the sun. The fields, once fertile and vibrant, were now lifeless, their soil tainted by the lingering resonance of Abigail Carpenter's pain. The air was thick with a sense of unease as if the town itself was holding its breath, waiting for something to happen.

'This town deserves whatever is happening to it,' I thought, my gaze cold as I observed the streets below.

The truth was clear: the people of Shange Town had allowed this tragedy to unfold, had turned a blind eye to the suffering of a young girl, and were now reaping the consequences of their actions.

I could see a group of young people walking down one of the streets, their laughter echoing faintly in the night air. They appeared carefree, but I knew better. I could sense the taint on them, the dark energy that clung to their auras like a shroud.

These were the same young people who had likely participated in the act of cruelty that had led to Abigail's torment. Whether they had been directly involved or simply complicit through their silence, they were all guilty in some way.

'They're part of it.'

It was hard to keep the anger to myself.

Because it reminded me of that time.

That time when she had also lost her life like this, at the hands of those.

'The emotions you felt....Was it similar to this girl?' Aren't the feelings of fear that she must have experienced similar?

It must be. And seeing that, how can I just turn a blind eye to that and act like it had never happened?

With a measured breath, I pulled out my smartwatch and opened a secure channel to the headquarters. My fingers moved quickly as I typed out the message, my mind already calculating the next steps.

TO: HQ

FROM: Astron Natusalune

SUBJECT: Shange Town Investigation Completion

Investigation complete.

Summary: The source of the blight in Shange Town has been identified as a lingering resonance caused by the spirit of Abigail Carpenter, a young girl who suffered extreme torment and was bound to the land by her unresolved trauma. The blight is not natural but a manifestation of her suffering, which has poisoned the soil and disrupted the town's livelihood.

Recommendations: Due to the nature of the curse, direct intervention may be required to either appease the spirit or neutralize the lingering energy. The town itself is complicit in the events that led to this situation. Further action may be necessary to address the root cause and prevent similar occurrences in the future.

The details are in the report, which is included in the attachments.

Awaiting further instructions.

Astron Natusalune

I sent the message, knowing that my report would trigger a response from the higher-ups. This mission had been a test—a way to gauge how I would handle a situation where the lines between right and wrong were blurred, where the true enemy wasn't just a physical threat but something far more insidious.

'But first and foremost, let me visit you first.' With that thought, I slowly moved, with my presence erased. It was the time to visit the girl's cemetery.

Chapter 528 118.1 - Abigail

I moved through the shadows, my presence completely erased, slipping unnoticed through the town's deserted streets. The air was crisp, the chill biting at my skin as I made my way toward my next destination.

'First, I need to visit the cemetery,' I thought to myself, but there was something I had to see before that. The house of Maria and Damian.

As I approached the house, I could see that the windows were dark, the curtains drawn. It made sense, considering the fact that I revealed everything before them and then disappeared. They must think I am still here.

And that is correct, as I am indeed.

I moved silently, slipping into the house through a shadowed corner where the door hung slightly ajar. The interior was dimly lit, the air thick with the scent of despair. It didn't take long to find them—Maria was lying on a small cot, her eyes red and swollen from tears, while Damian sat beside her, speaking in a low, comforting voice.

"I'll figure something out, Mama," Damian was saying, his voice strained but determined. "I will protect you."

"You don't need to worry, son," Maria said as she looked at him. "That boy, he was not someone who would harm innocent."

"How can you be that sure?"

"I could see in his eyes."

"How? The only thing I saw in his eyes was emptiness."

It seemed they were talking about me. That made sense for Damian to think such for me, as I am indeed not someone who is good at expressing myself from my eyes.

"Is that so?"

The moment I revealed myself from the shadows, Damian's reaction was immediate and instinctual. His eyes widened in shock, and he flinched back, his hand darting behind him to grab the knife he had hidden. The blade gleamed faintly in the dim light as he held it out defensively, his body tense and ready to strike.

"Don't approach me!" Damian's voice was shaky, filled with a mix of fear and determination.

I met his gaze, unflinching, and simply shook my head. "If I wanted to hurt you, you'd already be dead. There's no need for that knife."

My words hung heavy in the air, and for a moment, Damian seemed to waver. The tension in his body didn't fully dissipate, but there was a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes as he processed what I had said.

Maria, who had been watching the exchange with wide, tear-filled eyes, reached out and placed a hand on Damian's shoulder. She shook her head gently, her voice soft but firm. "Damian put it down. He's right... If he meant us harm, he wouldn't be standing here talking."

Damian hesitated, his grip on the knife tightening for a brief moment before he finally lowered it. His eyes remained locked on mine, wary but no longer hostile.

"What do you want?" Maria asked, her voice carrying a note of exhaustion. "Haven't you already seen everything there is to see?"

I studied her for a moment before responding, my tone even. "One last thing."

Maria's brows furrowed in confusion, but before she could ask what I meant, I turned my gaze to Damian. "Where is Abigail buried?"

The question struck them both like a physical blow. Damian's eyes widened in surprise and fear, and Maria's breath hitched, her face paling as she clutched the edge of the cot for support.

"Why do you want to know?" Damian asked, his voice trembling. "What are you planning to do?"

"Nothing much," I said. "I just want to visit."

"Why?"

"To have one final talk."

"..." Maria closed her eyes, her expression one of deep sorrow. "She... She wasn't given a proper burial," she whispered. "We couldn't... We couldn't give her the peace she deserved."

Damian looked at his mother with concern, then back at me. "She's not buried in the cemetery. They wouldn't allow it."

"So where is she?" I pressed.

Damian hesitated, glancing at his mother before finally speaking. "There's an old tree, deep in the forest, near the edge of town. We buried her there, away from everyone. It was the only place we could think of."

Maria nodded, tears streaming down her cheeks as she spoke. "It was the only place where she could be at peace, away from the people who hurt her. But... but even then, I'm not sure if she ever found peace."

"She did not," I answered as I moved to leave.

Maria looked up at me, her eyes filled with a mix of hope and despair. "Please... if you can do anything to ease her suffering... please, do it. She doesn't deserve this."

"I will."

As I moved toward the door, Damian's voice called out to me, hesitant but sincere. "Why... Why are you doing this? You don't owe us anything. You don't even know her."

I paused, looking back at him. "I'm not doing it for you," I replied simply. "I'm doing it because it's the right thing to do. And I suggest you get ready for the future. Things will get hard from now on."

"What do you mean?"

"What else? The girl.... She will get her revenge."

And with that, I slipped back into the shadows, heading toward the forest and the hidden grave where Abigail Carpenter's spirit still lingered, bound by the pain and suffering of her past.

The forest was eerily quiet as I made my way deeper into the woods, guided only by the faint moonlight filtering through the thick canopy above. The air was thick with the scent of damp earth and decaying leaves, a stark contrast to the crispness of the night air in town.

As I neared the place Damian had described, I activated my [Eyes], scanning the area for any sign of the energy I had sensed earlier. It didn't take long before I saw it—a dark, pulsing aura that clung to the air like a thick fog.

The same energy I had detected in the shed, the energy of the abyss, was concentrated here. It was undeniable; this was where Abigail's spirit was anchored, her soul bound by the pain and suffering she had endured.

I followed the trail of energy until I reached the base of the gnarled tree. Its roots twisted out of the ground like skeletal fingers, and the bark was scarred and weathered as if it had borne witness to countless years of torment.

The air around the tree was heavy, almost suffocating, as if the very ground was weighed down by the sorrow that emanated from it.

'This is the place,' I thought, my gaze narrowing as I focused on the energy swirling around the tree. The darkness here was palpable, a physical presence that pressed against my senses. It wasn't just the remnants of Abigail's suffering; it was something deeper, more malevolent, a force that had twisted her spirit into something vengeful and dangerous.

As I approached the grave, the air grew colder, and suddenly, a piercing screech shattered the silence.

The sound was filled with rage and anguish, a cry that echoed through the trees, sending a chill down my spine. Before I could react, a cloud of darkness surged toward me, moving with unnatural speed, like a living shadow intent on tearing me apart.

But I was ready.

With a swift movement, I sidestepped the attack, the darkness barely missing me as it lashed out with wild fury. As it passed, I reached out, my hand moving with practiced precision, and I grabbed hold of the dark cloud, feeling its icy tendrils coil around my arm.

I tightened my grip on the writhing darkness, feeling its cold, malevolent energy coil tighter around my arm, almost as if it were trying to devour me whole. But I remained resolute, unflinching as I pulled the dark cloud closer, forcing it to confront me face to face.

The darkness thrashed violently, its form shifting and twisting, but I held firm. My gaze bore into the heart of the shadow, searching for the essence of the one trapped within.

"Abigail," I said, my voice calm yet commanding, cutting through the rage that filled the air. "I'm not here to hurt you."

The cloud hesitated, its violent movements slowing, as if my words had momentarily pierced through the haze of anger and pain that consumed it. I could feel the energy of the abyss clawing at my senses, trying to overwhelm me, but I pushed back, focusing on the core of the spirit within.

"Listen to me," I continued, my tone softening just slightly, "I know what happened to you. I know the suffering you endured, the betrayal you faced. I know the pain that has kept you tethered to this world."

For a moment, the darkness seemed to falter, the chaotic energy easing as if the spirit inside was listening, perhaps for the first time in decades.

"I'm here to help you," I said, my grip steady. "I'm here to give you the peace you deserve, to help you find the rest that was denied to you."

The darkness stopped moving entirely, and in that stillness, I felt a flicker of recognition, a faint pulse of something that was once human—a memory of who Abigail used to be before she was consumed by the abyss.

I released my grip slightly, allowing the shadow to pull back but keeping it close enough that it couldn't escape. The air grew heavier, thick with an oppressive silence as the darkness began to coalesce into a more defined shape.

Slowly, the swirling mass of darkness began to take form, condensing into the faint outline of a girl—Abigail. Her features were vague, almost ethereal, but the sorrow and pain etched into her expression were unmistakable. Her eyes, two hollow orbs of shadow, stared at me, filled with a mixture of fear, anger, and a deep, abiding sadness.

'She looks oddly familiar....Doesn't she?' I just recently promoted myself to the point that I needed to stop seeing her in other people.

But presented in such a situation, how could I?

'I need to focus,' I reminded myself, pushing the thought aside as I continued my approach. The air around us grew thicker, almost suffocating, as if the very atmosphere was charged with the weight of her unresolved pain.

"I know it's hard," I whispered, my voice gentle yet firm, "but you can trust me."

At the very least, I needed to do this much.

So that this girl could live in peace and that she would not experience the same things as her.

Chapter 529 118.2 - Abigail

"I know it's hard," I whispered, my voice gentle yet firm, "but you can trust me."

Abigail's shadowy form remained still, her hollow eyes locked onto mine, filled with a mixture of fear and deep, abiding sadness. The darkness around her seemed to pulse in response to my words as if testing the sincerity of my intent. I kept my movements slow and deliberate, allowing her to sense that I was not a threat.

As I closed the distance between us, I could feel the weight of her suffering pressing down on me, a heavy, oppressive force that had anchored her to this place for far too long.

"You've been trying to gather your strength, haven't you?" I said softly, my tone carrying both understanding and a quiet certainty. "All those Moonberries... they're not just ordinary plants. They're mutated, filled with vitality far beyond that of any normal crop. You were absorbing their energy, trying to grow stronger, preparing yourself for the revenge you've been denied."

The girl's form wavered slightly as if my words had struck a chord within her. I could see the faintest hint of recognition in her eyes, though she remained silent, unable—or perhaps unwilling—to speak. The sorrow and anger that had defined her existence for so long seemed to ripple through the darkness, swirling around us like a living entity.

I slowly raised my hand, palm open, allowing a faint red glow to emanate from my fingertips.

The unique red mana of the moon, the power that had become a part of me, shimmered softly in the dim light, casting an eerie yet calming glow over the darkened forest.

"This mana," I said, my voice steady, "will help you get stronger, faster. It's the energy of the moon, filled with the same vitality you've been seeking. Let me guide you."

A slight smile tugged at the corner of my lips as I watched the girl's form react to the light.

Somehow, it felt fulfilling. It was as if the fire inside me that I had somehow started to forget was being extinguished.

Similar to that at that time.

Maybe it was because of Irina, or was it for another reason, but it made me think.

'This change...It is not that bad.'

Abigail's shadowy figure seemed to hesitate as if torn between fear and curiosity.

She took a tentative step forward, her movements cautious, almost childlike in their uncertainty. The closer she got, the more I could feel the intensity of her emotions, the overwhelming desire for justice that had kept her bound to this place.

"It's okay," I murmured, my voice soft and reassuring. "You don't have to be afraid. I'm here to help you, to give you the strength you need to finally find peace."

The normally berserk red glow from my hand pulsed gently now for some reason, casting a warm light that contrasted with the cold, oppressive darkness surrounding us.

Normally, that energy would make me crave blood, but that was not the case right now.

Abigail's form continued to approach, inching closer with each passing moment. I could see the faint outline of her face more clearly now, the sorrow and pain etched into her features, but also a glimmer of hope—hope that perhaps, after all this time, she might finally be free.

She reached out toward the light, her shadowy hand trembling as it neared mine. The connection was tentative at first as if she was still unsure whether she could trust me. But as our hands met, the red mana flowed between us, a bridge of energy that seemed to fill her.

As our hands touched, the red mana flowed between us, the energy pulsing gently as it filled Abigail's form with a warmth she hadn't felt in years. With each passing second, the darkness surrounding her began to lift, replaced by the strengthening glow of the mana. Her once-transparent, featureless silhouette started to solidify, her form becoming more tangible, more real.

Her face, once hidden in the shadows, slowly revealed itself. Features that had been lost to time and pain began to emerge—delicate yet marred by the remnants of the torment she had endured. Bruises and traces of her suffering became visible on her skin, a stark reminder of the cruelty she had faced. But despite this, there was a quiet dignity in her gaze, a resilience that had kept her spirit from breaking entirely.

As her body continued to take form, hovering slightly above the ground like a ghostly apparition, I could feel the strength within her growing. The red mana coursed through her, imbuing her with the power she had long sought, the power to finally take her revenge.

Abigail's eyes, now fully formed and filled with a mix of emotions, met mine. A single tear, shimmering and ethereal, slid down her cheek, the weight of her sorrow and pain evident in that simple act. Her spirit, though strengthened, still bore the marks of her tragic past, and it was clear that her journey was far from over.

Slowly, I raised my hand and placed it on her head, the gesture tender and reassuring. My fingers passed through her ethereal form, yet it felt as though I was touching something real, something fragile and precious.

As I patted her head softly, Abigail's lips parted, and a small, almost inaudible voice emerged. "Re...ve..ge....." The word was weak, but it carried the full weight of her determination, the resolve that had kept her tethered to this world for so long.

She looked up at me, her eyes filled with a mixture of gratitude and sadness. "Thank you," she whispered, her voice trembling with the emotions she could barely express.

There was no smile on her face, no joy in her eyes. She had lost the ability to smile long ago, her spirit too weighed down by the horrors she had endured. Instead, she looked like a sad, broken doll, a reflection of the innocence that had been stolen from her.

'If she were to be alive....Would she make the same expression?'

I wondered. For someone who endured such horrors, could a child really do that?

'Not that it matters now.'

She was no longer here anyway.

With that thought, I met Abigail's gaze with calm resolve, understanding the burden she carried. "I just did what needed to be done," I replied softly. "Go and get what you deserve."

Abigail's form lingered for a moment longer, her eyes holding mine as if searching for some final reassurance. Then, with a slight nod, she began to fade, the red glow of the mana intensifying one last time before her spirit disappeared into the night.

The forest around me grew quiet once more, the oppressive darkness replaced by a serene stillness. The air was lighter now, as if the very land itself was relieved of the burden it had carried for so long.

I stood there for a moment, letting the silence wash over me, before turning away from the ancient tree. Abigail's spirit had found the strength she needed, and now she was free to seek the justice that had been denied to her.

As I stood there in the forest, the silence settling around me like a shroud, the soft chime of my smartwatch broke the stillness. I raised my wrist and glanced at the screen, the message from the organization appearing with a familiar, cold efficiency.

FROM: HQ

TO: Astron Natusalune

SUBJECT: Mission Conclusion - Shange Town

Your investigation and actions have been reviewed. Your report was thorough, with clear evidence and detailed accounts. The case is now considered closed.

Instructions: You are to leave the location immediately without further action. A car has been dispatched to the coordinates provided in the attached map. It will take you to your next destination.

Thank you for your service.

HQ

I lowered my wrist, the screen's glow fading as I processed the message. My second mission was officially over, and the organization had decided that there was nothing more to be done here. They

were efficient, as always, moving on as soon as the objective was achieved, leaving the aftermath for others to deal with.

The forest around me was quiet, almost peaceful, now that Abigail's spirit had been freed. But I knew that peace would be short-lived. The town's reckoning was still to come, driven by the justice she sought in her final moments.

I turned away from the ancient tree and began walking, my steps deliberate as I followed the map's coordinates to the pickup point. The path was clear, the moonlight casting long shadows through the trees, but I felt no urgency. The mission was done, and my work here was finished.

The town of Shange would have to face its own demons now. I had done what I could, and it was time to move on to the next task, whatever that might be.

As I approached the designated location, I saw the faint outline of a car waiting in the distance, its headlights dimmed to avoid drawing attention. The driver was a professional, likely another operative sent to ensure a smooth extraction.

I reached the car, and the driver stepped out to open the door for me without a word. His face was impassive, and his demeanor was focused on the task at hand. I nodded to him in acknowledgment as I slid into the back seat.

The car's interior was quiet; the only sound was the soft purr of the engine as we pulled away from the forest. I leaned back in my seat, my thoughts already shifting to the next mission, the next objective.

Shange Town was behind me now, and whatever lay ahead, I would face it with the same resolve. There was always another mission, another problem to solve, another wrong to right.

The car sped through the night, leaving the town—and its haunted past—far behind.

The night in Shange Town was eerily still, the air thick with a suffocating silence that seemed to press down on the town like a heavy shroud. The moon, half-hidden behind a veil of clouds, cast a faint, pale light over the cobblestone streets, creating long, twisted shadows that danced in the cold wind.

Inside the Mayor's mansion, Alex lay in his bed, his sleep restless. Sweat beaded on his brow as his dreams twisted into nightmares, replaying the events of the day over and over. Abigail's name echoed in his mind, a haunting whisper that refused to fade.

Suddenly, a cold breeze swept through the room, extinguishing the candles and plunging the space into darkness. The temperature dropped sharply, and the silence grew even more oppressive. Mayor Alex stirred, his eyes fluttering open as he sensed something was wrong.

A shadow moved in the corner of the room, almost imperceptible, but there—watching, waiting. Alex's heart pounded in his chest as he sat up, his breath catching in his throat. He tried to speak, but no sound escaped his lips.

Then, the shadow lunged.

Alex's scream was cut short as he felt a searing pain in his eyes. He thrashed wildly, but it was futile. The darkness enveloped him, his vision consumed by agony as unseen hands gouged out his eyes. Blood poured down his face, hot and sticky, and he could feel the presence of something—or someone—standing over him, cold and malevolent.

Before he could react further, sharp, relentless pain erupted in his chest. Again and again, something stabbed into his flesh—eighteen times in total, each strike more brutal than the last. His body convulsed, blood spilling onto the sheets, soaking the bed in crimson. The last thing he heard before slipping into unconsciousness was a faint, childlike whisper—a voice filled with both sorrow and wrath.

"Revenge."

Celia, the Mayor's daughter, was tossing and turning in her own bed, the events of the day swirling in her mind. She had tried to convince herself that it was all just a bad dream, that the things Astron had said were nothing but lies. But deep down, she knew the truth. The guilt gnawed at her, a relentless beast that wouldn't let her rest.

The room grew cold, and Celia shivered, pulling the blanket tighter around her. But the chill only intensified, creeping into her bones. She opened her eyes, only to be met with an unnatural darkness that seemed to swallow the very light.

Suddenly, her body seized up, an invisible force pinning her to the bed. Her bones began to creak, the pressure building within them until the pain became unbearable. Celia screamed, her voice hoarse and filled with terror, but there was no one to hear her.

The darkness moved over her, pressing down like a crushing weight. Her bones snapped one by one, the sound echoing in the empty room like brittle twigs breaking underfoot. The pain was unimaginable, her body wracked with agony as she felt each limb twisted and shattered, her flesh tearing under the pressure.

Blood pooled around her, staining the pristine white sheets a deep, dark red. Her screams grew weaker, her voice fading into whimpers as the life drained from her broken, mangled body. And just before the darkness took her completely, Celia's mind was filled with a single thought—the image of a girl, her face bruised and battered, but her eyes burning with vengeance.

The horrors spread through Shange Town like a plague, one by one. The people who had played a part in the Carpenter family's demise found themselves visited by the vengeful spirit of Abigail.

A woman, once a close friend of Abigail's mother, woke to find her home filled with the scent of rotting flesh. She barely had time to scream before her throat was slit, her blood splattering across the walls in a gruesome display of retribution.

A man who had been one of the boys to torment Abigail felt his limbs freeze in place as he was dragged from his bed, his body lifted into the air by an unseen force. His bones shattered, one by one, before he was left to hang by his neck in the center of his home, his eyes wide with terror, his face contorted in a silent scream.

A farmer who had spread the rumors of witchcraft felt his body ignite from within, a burning sensation that started in his chest and spread through his veins like wildfire. He writhed in agony, clawing at his skin as the flames consumed him from the inside out, leaving nothing but charred remains.

Each death was more horrific than the last, each victim left mutilated and broken, their bodies twisted and defiled in ways that mirrored the pain they had inflicted on Abigail. The town was gripped by fear, the once peaceful night shattered by the sounds of screams and the scent of death.

And as the last echoes of terror faded into the cold night air, Shange Town was left in a silence even more oppressive than before, the spirits of the guilty now joining Abigail in the darkness, forever haunted by the vengeance they had wrought upon themselves.

Chapter 530 118.3 - Abigail

HOWL~!

The wind howled through the frozen landscape, whipping up flurries of snow that danced in the air like tiny, crystalline shards.

The ground beneath was a blanket of white, stretching endlessly in every direction, broken only by the occasional jagged outcrop of ice.

A woman moved steadily through the snow, her footsteps leaving crisp, precise imprints in the powder. Each step was deliberate, her movements unaffected by the biting cold or the relentless wind that lashed against her.

Her body was wrapped in insulated clothing, the dark fabric designed to withstand the harshest of environments. Protective goggles covered her eyes, shielding them from the stinging snow and the blinding glare of the white world around her. Despite the hostile conditions, the woman's posture remained composed, her presence as unyielding as the winter that surrounded her.

As she walked, the smartwatch on her arm buzzed, its vibrations subtle against her wrist but impossible for her to miss.

RING! "Sigh...."

She paused, the wind momentarily muffling its sound as she lifted her arm. With a smooth motion, she tapped the screen, activating the call.

The holographic display shimmered in the cold air, and the voice of a man came through, clear and direct.

"Sentinel Reina," his voice carried a weight that cut through the wind, commanding yet respectful.

Reina's gaze remained fixed on the snow ahead, her expression hidden behind the protective gear, but her tone was calm and measured as she responded, "Anchor Steelclad."

"The other Anchors are requesting a report."

"A Report?"

"Yes. Regarding Adept Natusalune. There have been some complaints, as you know."

Reina nodded once, the gesture barely perceptible beneath her layers of protective clothing.

FLICK! With a flick of her fingers, a surge of energy rippled through the air, and in an instant, the snowy mountains were left behind in silence, the only trace of her presence being the rapidly fading footprints in the snow.

The scene shifted seamlessly from the icy wilderness to the warmth and precision of Reina's office. The walls, adorned with various strategic maps and glowing data streams, pulsed softly with the quiet hum of advanced technology.

Reina now stood in the center of the room; her attire transformed into a sleek, dark uniform that exuded authority and efficiency. Her goggles had been replaced by a sharp gaze that missed nothing, and her smartwatch had seamlessly integrated with the holographic interface in front of her.

Before her, the hologram of Anchor Steelclad flickered to life, his imposing figure standing in stark contrast to the sterile environment of the office.

"Please wait a little, Sentinel Reina."

He said as he tapped onto his desk.

"I am connecting to other Anchors."

Reina stood motionless, her sharp gaze fixed on the holographic display as Steelclad worked at his desk. The hum of advanced technology filled the air as the connection was established, and one by one, the holograms of other Anchors materialized around the room.

Their figures were imposing, each one radiating authority and power, yet there was a noticeable undercurrent of tension as they settled into the meeting.

"Sentinel Reina," one of the Anchors greeted her curtly, his tone cold. "We've been informed that you have significant updates regarding Adept Natusalune. We are here to review the data."

Another Anchor, her voice laced with skepticism, interjected, "I hope this will justify the substantial resources that have been diverted to this trainee. It seems excessive to some of us."

Reina's expression remained composed, her confidence unshaken by the skepticism in the room. She had anticipated this reaction, knowing that some would question the investment in Astron. With a steady hand, she activated the holographic interface, bringing up the data she had meticulously compiled.

"Thank you, Anchors," Reina began, her voice calm and measured. "I understand that there are concerns regarding the allocation of resources to Adept Natusalune. However, I believe that his recent performance will speak for itself."

She tapped a command, and the holographic display shifted to show detailed data from Astron's first mission in Veilcroft. The visual representation of the mission's timeline, key events, and outcomes was presented with precision, highlighting Astron's contributions.

"His first mission in Veilcroft, as you can see, was not a simple task. The investigation had been ongoing for two months with limited success, until Adept Natusalune was assigned to the team. His unique understanding and perspective allowed him to identify critical information that had been overlooked by others. His observational skills and ability to comprehend complex situations were the main reasons the operation was brought to a successful conclusion."

The data points on the hologram were reinforced by official reports, including one prominently signed by Warden Shanks, who had overseen the mission. Reina continued, her voice unwavering, "Warden Shanks himself has documented that Adept Natusalune's contributions were instrumental, exceeding those of other adepts involved in the operation. This is not just a statement of potential; it is a record of results."

One of the Anchors, a stern-looking man with a deep frown, spoke up, his voice tinged with skepticism. "Results or not, the resources allocated have been overwhelming. Why should we continue to invest so heavily in one individual?"

Reina met his gaze directly, her voice firm but respectful. "Because Adept Natusalune is not just any individual. His capabilities in both investigation and combat have already set a new standard within our ranks. His performance under pressure, his ability to process and act on information swiftly, and his calm demeanor in the face of danger are precisely what we need in our operatives. The resources spent on him are an investment in the future of our organization."

There was a brief silence as the Anchors absorbed her words, the data still displayed before them. Steelclad, who had remained silent until now, finally spoke, his voice carrying the authority of his position. "The results from Veilcroft are undeniable. The decision to continue supporting Adept Natusalune's development will be based on these concrete outcomes. If he continues to deliver, the resources are justified."

"Rest assured, I just received a new report this morning," Reina said, her voice carrying a quiet confidence as she brought another document to the forefront of the holographic display. The data shifted to show a detailed account of Astron Natusalune's recent solo mission.

"As many of you are aware," she began, her tone firm and measured, "there are several remote towns under our control that are vital for cultivating specific materials crucial to our operations. Shange Town is one such location, known for its Moonberry crops, which are essential to several of our alchemical processes."

The hologram displayed a map of Shange Town, highlighting its strategic importance. Reina continued, "Recently, there was an issue concerning the harvests in Shange Town. The crops were failing, and the local authorities were unable to identify the cause."

She paused, allowing the situation to sink in. "Adept Natusalune was sent to investigate the matter. Given the remote location and the peculiar nature of the problem, this mission required not only investigative skills but also a deep understanding of the land and its energies."

The hologram zoomed in on the town, showing the fields affected by the blight. "What he uncovered was not a simple agricultural issue but something far more insidious. The blight affecting the crops was the result of a deliberate act, draining the life force from the land itself. This was no ordinary mission—it required a keen eye and a deep understanding of mana flows and environmental manipulation. As per you know, such missions are often used as a training for more complex missions as they are rather bound to be failed."

Reina's gaze swept over the assembled Anchors, noting their attentive expressions. "But contrary to expectations, Adept Natusalune identified the source of the blight, which had eluded even our most

experienced operatives. His unique perception allowed him to trace the energy patterns back to a rather disturbing act that has happened in the town."

Reading the report that has been presented to them, most Anchors could not help but nod their heads. In fact, what Reina was saying was indeed correct.

Such missions were where newbie adepts were sent to remote places, which often acted as training to make them understand the importance of time and human resources.

Most of them would fail solo missions, would understand the importance of teamwork, and would thrive in working with a team in a better case.

But even then, this mission seemed to be exceptionally hard, as there was a phenomenon called Lingering Resonance that was hardly found in this town.

"Are you sure about the authenticity of this report?" he asked, his gaze narrowing. "Such a tale seems almost too far-fetched, more suited to a work of fiction than a mission debriefing. A solo adept uncovering such a complex phenomenon, especially one as rare as Lingering Resonance, is nearly unheard of."

Another Anchor, a woman with a stern demeanor, added, "Indeed. Lingering Resonance is a phenomenon that even seasoned operatives struggle to deal with. For a novice to not only identify but also handle it successfully—one could be forgiven for questioning the plausibility of this story."

Reina met their skepticism head-on, her expression unwavering. "I understand your concerns, but I assure you, the report is accurate and has been thoroughly verified. The team that was dispatched to clear the phenomenon after Adept Natusalune's investigation found undeniable evidence supporting his findings."

She tapped the holographic interface, bringing up additional data that had been logged by the follow-up team. "The team discovered that the mayor and several other individuals in Shange Town had been subjected to Abyssal Energy, a corrupting force that is consistent with the presence of Lingering Resonance. This energy was traced back to a tragic event that had occurred before, one that left a powerful emotional and spiritual imprint on the town."

Reina explained that she did not mention that the mayor and all other people who were involved in this tragedy were no longer in this world.

'You did something reckless, but I shall cover for you once.'

There was no need to mention such details, was there?

Reina continued with her words after stopping a little so that everyone could absorb the information.

"Adept Natusalune's unique perception allowed him to identify the energy patterns and trace them back to the source—a young girl's soul, which had been trapped in a state of torment due to the unresolved trauma. The Abyssal Energy was a manifestation of her pain and suffering, affecting the entire town and its crops."

The hologram shifted to show the detailed findings of the follow-up team. "The team confirmed the presence of Lingering Resonance and, following Adept Natusalune's initial investigation, they were able to perform an exorcism to release the girl's soul, allowing her to finally rest. The phenomenon was contained, and the blight on the land has begun to recede, thanks to the actions taken."

The room was silent for a moment as the Anchors absorbed this information. The skepticism in their eyes was slowly being replaced by a reluctant acceptance. They understood that the situation in Shange Town was not just an ordinary mission but something far more complex.

While the danger it posed was not hard, solving the situation would be.

Steelclad, who had been quietly observing the exchange, finally spoke, his tone serious. "The presence of Abyssal Energy and Lingering Resonance is not something to be taken lightly. If the report is accurate, and I have no reason to doubt Sentinel Reina's verification, then this mission was indeed exceptional."

The cautious Anchor who had spoken earlier nodded slowly, his skepticism fading. "If this is true, then Adept Natusalune has handled a situation that would challenge even our most experienced operatives. His ability to uncover the truth behind such a complex phenomenon speaks to his potential."

Reina nodded, her voice calm and authoritative. "Exactly. Adept Natusalune has demonstrated not only exceptional investigative skills but also a deep understanding of the forces at play in the world we operate in."

The Anchors exchanged glances, their earlier doubts now tempered by the undeniable evidence presented. Steelclad gave a final nod of approval, his tone firm as he addressed the room. "We will continue to monitor Adept Natusalune's progress closely, but for now, it seems that our investment in him has been more than justified."

Reina inclined her head in acknowledgment, her expression one of quiet satisfaction. "Thank you, Anchors. I will ensure that Adept Natusalune continues to receive the support he needs to further develop his abilities."