

## H. Academy 101

Chapter 101 Chapter 25.3 - Joint dungeon

"Get ready for the battle."

With Irina's words, everyone's attention turned to the monster standing there.

The Lesser Magma Wurm loomed before us, its fiery scales glinting ominously in the torchlight.

"Grrrr...."

Its eyes, a fierce orange hue, were fixed on us, and it let out a deep, rumbling growl.

It was a type of draconic monster that was on the lesser part of the evolutionary tree.

"It's a Lesser Magma Wurm, alright," Nora whispered, her grip tightening on her sword. "This is going to be tough."

'Ho....It seems she did her homework.'

Even though the academy is cruel when it comes to practical exams, they are also fair. The academy knows not all Hunters excel in combat, and there are several of those that pursue utility in this place. And to test those skills, the monsters we encounter inside this place would always be taught in lessons before entering the dungeon.

But, of course, since we learn about quite a lot of monsters, only those who are either lucky or those who know everything would be rewarded in that aspect.

It seemed like Nora was on the latter side.

Byron, trying to muster his waning bravado, took a step forward. "Fear not! Together, we shall conquer this creature!"

It was as if he had just come from a medieval world-based novel.

"Pffft...."

Even Nora and Erika, the mage of the other party, couldn't contain their laughs at what Byron just said.

"What is so funny?"

"Nothing."

"Tch."

Though, seeing him grumbling, they didn't say anything. And simply pursed their lips.

"ROAR!"

However, someone was not happy at the fact that its space was intruded, and the intruders seemed to laugh at its face. Even monsters somehow had a pride, it seemed.

THUMP!

As the Magma Wyrn released a hearty roar, it lunged, its fiery maw open wide.

SWOOSH

Irina reacted quickly, attempting to unleash a stream of fire, only to see it absorbed and negated by the creature's fiery nature.

"Tch."

The fire mage gritted her teeth, frustration evident in her glare towards Byron. The monster's resistance made her main offensive abilities nearly useless in this battle, and this was what I was implying.

The creatures born in a fire-type field would be harder to get damaged by fire-related skills, and this was the proof.

SWOOSH

However, she immediately turned her attention to the front once again as she dodged the maw of the monster by blasting herself back.

"Nora, George."

Calling Nora and George, she immediately signaled them both with her head.

"Got it." "Yes."

Nora and George moved to the front, expertly coordinating their attacks to distract the creature.

'Ho.....Their teamwork improved.....' Looking at them like that, they were different from the time when I commanded them. It seems they took it seriously when I showed them their weaknesses while training.

THUD!

George's shield crashed with the monster as he absorbed the effects of the attack.

"HA!"

SLASH!

Immediately, Nora jumped over George, her sword slashing the Magma Wyrms face with her skill activated as mana concentrated on her sword.

SPURT!

And following that, a small wound appeared on the monster's face, blood spurting from there.

ROAR!

The monster released another roar filled with pain.

THUD!

The two immediately got behind George while I distanced myself from the boss.

"Support them!"

Byron shouted as he conjured a small mana barrier to fend off the attack of the boss.

'He is quite good for an extra.'

It seemed even though he was an extra; there was a reason for him to become a captain of the team. The other members were also not bad, as Jake, the tank, immediately went to protect the mage, and Leon increased the distance just like me.

Of course, that should have been like that since they were students of one of the best Hunter academies.

"Jake, join George and take the aggro. Erika, can you use a water-attributed attack?"

"No. I am not proficient enough to damage it."

"I see. Then, make sure to support us from behind. Leon, you will cover us from behind and will look for opportunities to strike lethal points. Clear."

"Yes."

"Good, let's go."

With those words, immediately, Byron grabbed his sword and dashed to the monster just like Nora with Jake behind him.

SWOOSH!

The battle was a noisy one, filled with the struggle of inexperienced fighters coming face to face with a strong monster that countered them.

The Magma Wyrn, with its scorching breath and mighty tail, proved to be a significant challenge for the team that had just grouped up.

Even though Byron and Irina were not that bad at leading, they were still not good enough. The orders they gave sometimes clashed with each other, making it harder to fight.

Moreover, Byron and Nora, though displaying enthusiasm and courage, were far from flawless.

Their attacks often lacked synchronization, leaving openings for the Magma Wyrn to counter. Their swings and strikes were filled with vigor but lacked finesse, at times colliding with each other rather than the intended target.

And there was Irina.

BOOM!

"Tch.....This bastard!"

Irina's frustration grew with every failed fire spell, the creature's resistance destroying her attempts to deal significant damage.

She grumbled in annoyance, her confidence taking a hit as she struggled to find an effective way to contribute to the fight.

"Why is this bastard out of all monsters?"

Of course, it was a response I was expecting from her. As a hot-blooded kid who always did everything she wanted and beat everyone without tasting the defeat, this would be the first time her spells hadn't worked.

However, even though her attacks didn't deal significant damage, they were still quite effective, thanks to the team's efforts.

'Especially that girl, Erika. She is quite good at supporting.'

Most mages had egos and they disliked supporting and they would boast about their attacking spells. But, Erika was pretty good at reading the enemy and adjusting herself for her team.

Whenever Irina tried to hit with a spell, she immediately conjured an ice-attributed spell and attacked the same place where Irina's spell hit. The change of the temperature from hot to cold would always disturb the monster's balance.

George and Jake were also quite good at managing the fighting scene. There was a weird assumption of the tank role being easy, but that is far from being true. As a tank, one needs to know when to take aggro and when to leave it.

And they were doing it quite fine, even though it was still far from being perfect.

And lastly, Leon.

SWOOSH SWOOSH

'To think this guy boasted for being a good archer.'

If that was what the academy offered for archers, the quality was quite low. I now understood why the level disparity was this high for archers.

His arrows were strong, and his mana control was not bad, but he lacked one important thing.

'His intervals for attacking are the worst I have seen so far and his positioning is also questionable.'

For a ranger, that was one of the most important things, and the way to acquire it was not through the status window.

Turning my attention to the fight once again, I observed what Irina was doing. Her eyes were on the blade Nora holding as she sighed.

'The fight will be over soon.'

And just as to prove my point, Nora's blade slowly started shining as she looked surprised.

"What is this?"

"It is an enchantment."

"Enchantment."

"Yes. Be careful, though. It will be quite strong."

As Irina spoke while gesturing to Nora's sword, Nora also turned her attention there, and before her eyes stood a shining plasmic weapon.

'So, you finally understood.'

Every monster has a weakness that could be exploited, and the Magma Wurm also had one. Even though it was resilient to fire and his skin was tough, once you went past that skin, the body underneath was weak.

And how could you go past behind a tough skin? By concentrating the energy on one point. The fire magic she had used was the most destructive, but that destructiveness didn't focus on one point but rather on a general surface, and this was where her attacks became useless.

Everything in this world can burn; the only important thing is when.

That was the same as Nora and Byron.

Their swords didn't contain enough strength to simply cut through the tough skin of the monster, but that was different now.

"Understood. I will be careful." As she finished assessing her weapon, she looked at the battle. Jake and George were fending the monster off, and it was not that hard

SWOOSH!

Nora, her eyes gleaming with a clear desire and fighting spirit, lunged at the Magma Wyrms with her enchanted blade. The plasmic weapon cut through the air, trailing a shimmering arc as it descended upon the creature.

SLASH!

The blade connected, finding its mark and cutting through the Wyrms' tough exterior.

SPURT!

A spray of molten blood erupted from the wound, and the creature roared in pain, momentarily disoriented.

ROAR! FUSH!

However, the Magma Wyrms were monsters that honed their instincts. Thus, they quickly realized the threat. They first released a loud roar, and following that, they released a wave of vapor, blasting everyone off.

Then, it shifted its massive body, instinctively guarding the vulnerable area and allowing its natural regeneration to start healing the wound.

"It's healing itself!"

Nora exclaimed, frustration evident in her voice. The feeling of elevation from her initial success was tempered by the realization that the Wyrms could heal its injuries.

"It's not over yet," Byron encouraged, eyeing the situation. "We just need to find a way to bypass its regeneration."

He darted in, his blade whistling through the air as he sought to distract the creature, keeping it focused on him.

Meanwhile, George and Jake took turns drawing the monster's attention, using their roles as tanks and diversions. Their coordination had improved, their movements more precise and calculated. They were not ranked in the middle high for no reason.

But, then, even though the group found a way to defeat it, they lacked the strategy.

Despite their efforts, the Wyrms' regeneration seemed insurmountable.

The beast was adapting, becoming more aggressive as it countered their attacks. It was a race against time; they needed to finish the fight before the creature overwhelmed them.

Irina's face looked frustrated as she looked at the wound they had made. She knew her options were limited, and she needed to find a solution quickly.

And she finally looked at me, her face looking annoyed.

"You."

And she called. But of course, I didn't respond. After all, my name was not you but rather something else.

"Sigh.....Astron...."

Understanding what I was doing, she released a sigh, looking at me.

"Can you deal with it?"

It was a phrase containing five simple words, but those words were the ones that showcased she believed in my skills.

"I can. You just need to open the way." I simply replied, looking at the blazing sword in Nora's hand. If she cut the monster, I could easily follow her attack with my arrows, destroying the monster from the inside.

"..."

She looked skeptical for a second, probably measuring the pros and cons of accepting that fact. If she accepted it, she would need to change her attitude probably. But even while she was thinking, she still supplied the magic she was using.

'She really deserves her seat.'

She was doing three things at the same time, and that was why she was ranked this high. For her, using fire magic must be a reflex, just as it should be.

"Come on! Leon just hit him from here."

"I fucking know it. Do you think it is that easy?"

At that moment, her eyes picked up the sound of Leon and Byron chatting. Byron was urging Leon, the archer of the other party, to attack the monster from the place Nora had wounded, but Leon's aim was quite off.

"Tch."

Seeing it, she clicked her tongue as she turned her attention to me.

"Do it."

"Really? I think you should say it like you are talking to a 'person,' not a tool."

"..."

"I will ask you this only once. Do you believe those rumors?"

".... Shouldn't I have?"

"I am not asking you if you should. I am asking you whether you believe them or not?"

"..."

As she stood there without answering and only looked at me with annoyance, I got my answer.

'In the end, you are no different.'

I thought as I grabbed my bow and nocked an arrow.

"This prejudice of yours.....One day, it may bite; you should be careful."

Eyes of Hourglass.

Dash.

The moment I activated my skills, I felt the time around me slowing down, as well as my body feeling lighter. My head started hurting since information continuously started pouring down from all around.

I focused my vision around on the wound of the monster as I aimed my bow.

SWISH!

With my arrow imbued in the color of green, I attacked the monster from the side.

SWISH!

Following that, the moment the first one hit the mark, I fired the second one, this time using my blue-colored mana.

In a matter of a second, I fired two arrows, each filled with a huge amount of magical power.

THUD!

The first one simply reached the wound, marking it.

THUD! BOOM!

And the second one followed the green tendrils the first one created. The moment the second one hit, an explosion occurred from inside of the monster.

SPURT!

With the blood pouring from the wound.

THUD!

And with a final sound, the monster fell to the ground, its body lying on the ground.

Chapter 102 Chapter 25.4 - Joint Dungeon

"This prejudice of yours.....One day, it may bite; you should be careful."

As Irina heard those words, she couldn't help but chuckle inwardly.

'You are just a trash like others.'

Last time, when they finished exploring the labyrinth, Irina understood that she was lacking in terms of party management.

She wasn't suited to be a leader, as Astron showed her the difference between the two.

Even though she knew she was the strongest of the party, there were times when the strength wasn't absolute.

And when she understood that fact, in her heart, she slightly respected him, thinking that he at least deserved to be here.

Even though Astron was annoying and different, she at least started appreciating his different talents.

But all those things crumbled as she entered the school forums. It had already become a habit to check the [ArcadiaSurf] site for her since it was one of the best places to communicate with seniors and learn about the school.

The dungeons, study materials, clubs, assignments.....

The academy life was hard even for a talented mage like her who came from a renowned family.

And thanks to what Julia and Lilia suggested, she started using that site. However, as she was surfing the site, suddenly, she came across something she was least expecting.

<DISGRACE OF ACADEMY'S LAST PLACE>

That was the title of the post. Normally, she wouldn't even bother with reading such a pointless article, but for some reason, the word 'Last Place' took her attention.

It might have been that guy, after all.

And her assumption was correct.

As she started reading the article, her eyes widened since numerous pictures of that guy, the places he had been, and the people he had talked to had leaked.

His bank account details were leaked, and inside there, the places he had visited could be seen. A lot of money coming from unknown sources could be seen there.

However, that wasn't even the end.

Even a testimony of three girls was on the post.

-He didn't even listen to me.

-He just threatened me, saying he could kill me anytime he wanted.

-He said we would date, but then he suddenly forced himself upon me.

Three articles that made her nauseous – all of them were listed on the post.

In fact, when she read the post, she started comparing his attitude from the past to now.

'I see...'

She realized this after looking at the victims' identities. They were simple, normal citizens who had nothing to do with the Hunter industry.

'He acted cold in front of me since he understood he wouldn't be able to lay a hand on me.'

As his attitude came before her eyes, she looked at the girls on the post. They were all young girls who were just in their prime, and now they were crying, looking sullen.

Unintentionally, her blood boiled, seeing how their future was destroyed. One of them quit their school, and the other ones became depressed and locked themselves.

'You trash-like bastard.'

And in the end, she swore to put this guy in his place.

He was a student who was accepted to the academy. Even though the article said he used personal connections, she knew it wasn't that easy to come here.

But even then, instead of training and making himself stronger, this guy was playing around, making other girls' lives hell. Countless people wanted to enter this academy; countless people tried their best....But this guy was doing nothing but wasting his time doing such acts.

That was the reason why she didn't even talk to him at the start; no, that was the reason why she was glaring daggers at him.

Since she knew if she didn't come from a strong lineage, she would also fall prey to his actions.

However, now, before her, stood something different.

The guy she thought wasn't training stood before The Magma Wurm that was laying defeated.

She saw it. At that exact one second, that guy fired two arrows consecutively, the first one opening the wound and the second one exploding inside.

"What?"

"H-how?"

Erika and Leon just stood there and watched in a daze as the dead body of the monster lay on the ground. The two knew, as the last ranked student of the academy, there was no way that guy would be able to land a hit on the monster, let alone killing it.

Byron, always quick to let his emotions surface, was the first to voice his thoughts, laced with both awe and a hint of resentment. "Astron... what did you just do?" His tone carried a sense of jealousy and anger. "If you could do such a thing, why didn't you do it from the start."

Astron, accustomed to the skepticism, didn't show any signs of surprise.

He glanced at Byron and offered a vague explanation. "Nobody asked."

Rather than explaining, it looked more like a mocking statement, and Byron wasn't the one to take it lightly.

"You bastard, are you mocking me right now?"

He approached him with an angry expression and was about to grab him from his collar.

SWOOSH

But, with a smooth move, Astron just slipped away.

"Watch your actions. And don't talk to me." His purple eyes looked cold, and most importantly, those eyes looked down on him.

Byron's frustration grew, realizing Astron was simply discarding him as a random nobody, and this was what made him angrier.

The fact that the guy before him had the audacity to ignore him while he was the weakest of the academy.

However, before the confrontation could escalate further, Irina intervened, her voice firm and commanding.

"Byron, stop. It's not worth it. We have a mission to complete." Her gaze shifted to Astron, cold and dismissive. "You used explosive arrows, right?"

"I did."

"I won't ask you why you have not told us about those arrows."

"It is good that you know the answer already."

"Tch.....I really want to smash your face right now."

"What does hold you back?"

"Contrary to you, I am mindful of my grades."

"So, if your grades weren't affected, you would attack me right here?"

"I would."

"I see." With those words, Astron simply nodded his head and looked as if he was saying as expected from Irina.

Seeing him looking at her like that, the anger inside her soared. She couldn't contain her words as she asked.

"What? Wasn't that how you behaved against others?"

"How I behaved, what do you mean?"

However, the clueless expression on his face....

"You!"

It made her angrier and angrier. For him, those acts must have been natural, as if he wasn't doing something bad at all.

"Tch.....You monster."

With those words, she turned her head back and started walking away from the place where the monster was lying.

Since the Trigger had been killed, the dungeon was going to change its inner structure the moment they had left this place, and Irina wanted nothing but to finish this assignment as fast as she could.

Since she didn't want to see his face any longer.

And just like that, the party started walking once again, everyone throwing glances at Astron and Irina from time to time.

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"I think this route was the right choice."

"Right? The road had been super easy. I guess Mason was right."

Inside the other part of the same dungeon, eight people were walking while talking among themselves. The tunnel was slightly dark, but it wasn't to the point where no one could see each other.

"But, when are we going to leave this place? It has been dark for a while now."

One of the guys on the side asked, while looking at the front. A girl with short white haired was leading the way, a smile on her face.

"It won't take long, don't worry. We should be there soon." She turned her head backward, her blue eyes shining in the middle of the darkness.

"I see.....Then, we will do as you say?"

The boy asked, looking for confirmation. Since the girl was leading the group, everyone thought she would naturally be the leader.

"I won't say much. We can just crush the monster with our strength, right?" However, the answer they got was not something they were expecting. "Sylvie can heal us while we are fighting? Isn't this how a warrior fights?"

"Well.....As expected from a Middleton Family, I guess. Miss Julia is really a warrior." The boy awkwardly smiled in the response that he was not expecting.

"I-I will do my best," Sylvie said, looking a bit shaky.

For the past explorations, she got slightly comfortable with her team, but she was still afraid of the monsters and fighting.

"I will cover you, don't worry." At that moment, a boy at the back spoke with a hearty tone, his green eyes shining brightly.

"T-thank you." It was a boy Sylvie had known before, as he was someone who belonged to the same club as her.

'Mason Kent from Art and History Club.'

They were matched together in this exploration as a team, and he had been given the position to protect supporters and healers from the back.

However, she was still slightly uncomfortable with others, especially in the dungeon, since her fear was overflowing. Even though in the past times, she only did her job as a healer and supported Julia from back, this time, the monsters were a lot stronger, and they looked more dangerous.

"We are getting close; I can feel a strong presence," Julia informed, and just as they said that, suddenly, everyone heard a long roar coming from the tunnel.

"AUUUU!"

It was the sound of a wolf.

SWOOSH!

And just at that second, suddenly, something flew from the darkness as if it was targeting the members of the party.

"Careful."

SWOOSH!

Sylvie felt a gust of wind rush by her, and she instinctively ducked, thinking someone was jumping towards her. She stumbled, falling a bit forward, and then she felt a strong grip on her arm, pulling her out of harm's way.

"Whoa, are you okay?" Mason's voice came from behind her, sounding slightly out of breath.

Sylvie, flustered and surprised, looked up to see Mason, his face close to hers due to the sudden rescue. For a moment, she misunderstood the situation, thinking he had jumped on her.

"Um, I-I'm fine," she stammered, looking away. "P-please go away." As she pushed the boy, Mason immediately understood and turned his face.

"Sorry...." And gave her the space she wanted.

Then she noticed the arrow plunged into the ground just where she had been standing. Her eyes widened in realization.

"Oh, it was an attack..." she said, her voice trailing off as she understood the danger they were facing.

Mason followed her gaze and spotted the arrow as well. "Yeah, we were almost hit. Good thing you're quick on your feet."

Sylvie felt a mix of relief and gratitude. "Thank you again. I thought..."

Mason grinned, trying to lighten the mood. "You thought I was jumping you?"

Sylvie's face turned even redder. "N-no! I mean, yes, but not like that! I just..."

Mason laughed, putting a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "It's all right, Sylvie. Let's stay on guard. Looks like we've got some trouble ahead."

Sylvie nodded, feeling slightly happy at the fact that he had covered her at that exact moment. The fear in her heart slightly calmed down as she looked at the brown-haired boy.

She could see the 'pure' feelings inside him, the 'pure' desire to help her, and the fact that he didn't have any hidden agenda made her even happier since she felt like at least she could relax a little now.

Little did she know, as she turned her head to the front, the boy revealed a smirk, looking at the front with a smile.

'I guess this worked quite well.'

After all, he and his group were the ones to put all those traps into this dungeon to gain this girl's trust.

## Chapter 103 Chapter 25.5 - Joint Dungeon

Inside the place, filled with countless monitors and holograms, people with white uniforms were running all around the room. The air buzzed with urgency and excitement as the control room of the artificial dungeon at Arcadia Hunter Academy brimmed with activity.

Head of the personnel, Senior Faraday, a stern woman with gray streaks in her dark hair, barked out orders, her eyes darting across the monitors.

"Team Alpha, increase the elemental challenges on Level Five. Let's see how they handle a sudden surge of fire elementals. And patch into the audio feed; we need to hear their reactions."

A technician responded, tapping away at a holographic display. "Elemental levels increased. Audio feed connected. Proceeding with the fire elemental surge."

Down in the dungeon, students of Arcadia Hunter Academy were battling their way through simulated challenges.

However, behind the place, a young woman's hands were shaking as she clutched a small, dark-looking USB drive. Her name was Amelia, a brilliant but conflicted young technician working at the heart of the Arcadia Hunter Academy's control room.

Summoning her courage, Amelia approached one of the central control consoles. Her heart raced as she inserted the USB drive, her hands trembling. The drive contained a carefully crafted program designed to temporarily disrupt the simulated challenges, providing the students with a much-needed respite.

As she activated the program, a subtle change rippled through the control room. The monstrous adversaries slowed down slightly, giving the students a chance to regroup and catch their breaths. The fire elementals became more manageable, and the tree and lizard creatures exhibited signs of fatigue.

Commander Faraday noticed the anomaly on her screen. "What's going on? Something's not right," she demanded, her gaze narrowing at the monitors.

Amelia knew she had to act quickly. She subtly masked her actions by pretending to fix an unrelated technical glitch. "It's a minor system hiccup, Commander," she stammered, her voice betraying her anxiety.

A fellow technician chimed in, trying to cover for Amelia. "Just a momentary glitch in the dungeon's AI. We're resolving it."

Faraday, still suspicious but pressed for time, relented. "Handle it swiftly. We can't afford any disruptions during the testing."

Amelia breathed a sigh of relief, her plan temporarily successful. She repeated her silent mantra, "This is all for my son." She knew she had just taken the first step in a battle for change within the Academy.

Unbeknownst to everyone, the disruption in the system was only a prelude to what loomed ahead. The dungeon's safeguards were flickering, and the simulated monsters were beginning to show signs of a berserk frenzy, their pixelated eyes glowing ominously. The storm was brewing, and chaos was on the horizon.

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After the fight with the monster was over, the scenery of the dungeon changed just as I had expected.

The surroundings turned from a hot one to a scene filled with blue marks all over.

'Contrasting Scene, huh?'

HOWL

The cold wind blew through the team's face as our vision was slightly burdened by the storm of snow around.

Of course, that wasn't completely the case for me. I could see the traces of mana even in the storm and could pick up the small marks left by the monsters around us.

'Hmm....Considering the depth of the footprints and the storm, I can say those monsters are quite big. However, some time had passed after they left.'

Since we were in a place where it was snowing, the traces left on the ground would soon be covered by the monsters.

'They must be Snow Tigers.'

On Earth, Lions and tigers were animals habituated in places close to the equator. However, in this world, there were countless different evolutions, and in dungeons, there were monsters like this, who evolved from Tigers in a snowy environment.

'If this is the case, there should be Snow Squirrels as well.'

In the game, the environment of this practical exam would continuously change, and there wasn't a fixed one, but I was slightly familiar with this one.

It was because this one was the route I took in my first playthrough, and that was one of the hardest ones.

"Sigh.....From hot to cold, why are they trying to push us like that...." Byron spoke with a sigh as he clung to his clothes.

"I know, right.....I thought the second environment would also be hot, but they really want us to give up this time...." Leon replied, as he also clenched on his clothes.

These two had been throwing glances at me from time to time with annoyance, but they didn't say anything, and neither did they do. They were probably afraid of Irina since she looked like she was in more of a bad mood after the boss.

'This is why preparing for everything is important.'

"Everyone, come closer."

At that moment, Irina called as she gestured for everyone to come together. However, when she looked at me, her eyes were saying I shouldn't even dare to take one step.

As everyone gathered around her, suddenly, underneath her feet, a small circle of orange color appeared.

"Hmm? It is warm?" Nora was the first one to notice as she looked at the circle.

"This will help you stay warm in this place,"? Irina said with a proud tone as she continued to move forward. With each step she had taken, the zone around her also moved continuously, supplying the people around with warm temperatures.

The snow around her was melting; even the snow in the air was melting thanks to the high temperature.

From time to time, she threw a gaze at me, filled with arrogance. It was like she was trying to show off or maybe reprimand me, but I didn't care.

I was doing quite fine.

The coat I was wearing right now was doing its work as it was supposed to. I got this one in order to use it in the Chrono Groove, and it was staying on my bracelet.

And thanks to that, now I was quite warm walking around leisurely. If not, I would be the first one to surrender since my body wouldn't be able to stand this cold.

My boots and pants were all supplied by the academy, so they were already high quality, but the coat was doing wonders.

However, our peaceful walk under the storm was soon about to reach its end since the monsters were on the way.

'Just as expected. Snow Tigers and Snow Squirrels.'

I thought to myself, sensing the presence of monsters. Even though I couldn't directly see them, my increased intuition was doing quite well. It was now on the border of rank three and was above average.

And just as I thought about that, suddenly, a bunch of shadows appeared around the party.

"Monsters!" The first one to notice was Leon, as he shouted in order to alert everyone.

-SWOOSH

And immediately, Irina, attuned to the mana around her, quickly identified the approaching Snow Tigers and Snow Squirrels.

"Stay away."

Without waiting for further instruction, Irina took charge, her eyes blazing with irritation and slight anger.

'She must be angry that she couldn't deal with the Lesser Magma Wyrms.'

The Irina I knew from the game would certainly take her anger out of monsters, and that was exactly what she did.

She thrust her staff forward, summoning her fire magic.

SWIRL!

Flames erupted, dancing in the cold air, their warmth a stark contrast to the snowy surroundings.

"Grrrrr..."

As if on cue, a group of Snow Tigers emerged from the snowy surroundings, their white fur blending in with the landscape.

"Quaaaaa....."

The Snow Squirrels scurried among the trees, their eyes fixed on the intruders in their territory.

'Hmm....13 squirrels and five Snow Tigers, huh?'

I counted the numbers immediately, as my boy was ready if something unusual happened.

"Die."

SWOOSH!

With a sweeping motion, she directed a surge of fire toward the approaching Snow Tigers.

"ROOOOAAAAR!"

The intense heat engulfed them, their white fur providing no protection. The monsters roared in agony as they were incinerated by the powerful fire magic.

However, she had yet to finish her massacre.

Simultaneously, she channeled her magic towards the trees where the Snow Squirrels had hidden.

SWOOSH! CREAK!

The fiery inferno engulfed the branches, forcing the creatures out into the open. Their attempts to escape were futile as Irina's relentless assault left them no room to evade.

'What a strong power.'

She was even stronger than before as her fire magic simply scorched every monster in seconds. It seems just like me, she was not wasting her time either.

The rest of the team could only watch in awe as Irina single-handedly dispatched the monsters. Her control over the element of fire was masterful, and in this snowy environment, her power was unmatched.

'As expected. The single-digit rankers are surely different.'

There was a reason why she was ranked third in the academy, and now she was proving that. She might not have been able to showcase her talents while fighting with fire-resilient monsters before, but things were different now since almost all of the monsters here were weak to fire elements.

Of course, since the environment was filled with water psions, it was a lot harder to use the fire psions since their density was a lot lower.

But that added more credit to her talent since she flawlessly manipulated fire even in such conditions.

As the last embers faded, the battle was over. The monsters lay defeated, leaving only charred remnants in their wake.

Byron, eager to gain favor, seized the moment to voice his admiration. "Incredible, Irina! Your control over fire is truly remarkable. I've never seen anything like it."

He immediately started flattering her, but even his words were flatter. I could see the genuine appreciation in them. It was clear that he was really impressed this time.

Nora also chimed in, offering her praise as well. "Yeah, seriously. That was amazing! You made short work of them. I knew you were amazing before already, but I guess you are an Emberheart for a reason." Her eyes were twinkling as she approached the corpses. "You have killed 17 monsters already."

However, the moment Nora spoke those words, I suddenly got chills on my body. The number of monsters didn't match the one I counted.

'Don't tell me.'

Not long after, a monster jumped from the flames that were burning the trees; its small fangs wide open, green liquid pouring from there.

SWOOSH!

"Quaaaaa!"

It was a Snow Squirrel; however, one thing was different. Rather than normal black eyes, the monster's eyes were shining bright red.

'Demon Followers.'

I immediately understood the reason why this monster was different, as this was a common scene in the game. There were monsters that were affected by the spells of demon followers. They would become berserk, but as the price, they would be stronger.

'Tch..... You better pay me, you woman.'

Eyes of Hourglass.

After activating my skill, I felt the time slowing around me for a second, and following that, I simply aimed my bow, putting a good amount of mana into the arrow.

SWISH!

As I released the arrow, it went past me immediately.

PIERCE! SPURT!

And stabbed the monster in the air.

"Queeeeeck!"

The monster let out a hearty scream with its trajectory changing in the air.

THUD

It fell to the ground, and the pure color of white slowly turned into red.

\*\*\*\*\*

"What was that?"

The first one to notice something was amiss was Irina as she looked into the source of the noise. Her gaze first shifted to the monster.

There, she probably saw the arrow stab the monster from its body, overflowing with mana.

Her eyes widened as she followed the trajectory of the arrow. Her gaze shifted from the fallen Snow Squirrel to Astron, who stood calmly, bow in hand, eyes focused.

There was a mix of surprise and something else in her expression.

'I missed one monster.

She was surprised at the fact that this monster was able to breach her senses and almost landed a sneak attack on her.

'But, how was he able to notice it.'

However, the difference thing was not the fact that she had missed it but rather the fact that Astron was able to sense it.

Byron and Nora were equally astonished by the accuracy and efficiency of Astron's shot. The Snow Squirrel's sudden appearance had caught them off guard, and it was clear that Astron had saved the day.

"That was... amazing," Erika exclaimed as she looked into the squirrel. She had no idea.

Irina, regaining her composure, nodded in acknowledgment. There was a brief moment of eye contact between her and Astron. She recognized the timely intervention and the potential danger that had been averted.

There was a hint of pride in Irina's eyes as she looked at Astron with her gaze squinting. She didn't openly express gratitude but rather frowned. "Not bad," she remarked, but her voice contained irritably.

'I don't know how he did it, but I will never owe this guy anything.'

"After we leave this place, I'll make sure to settle the score with you so no debt remains here." With those words, she turned her head back as she started walking once again.

"Good to know," Astron mumbled as he started walking to the corpse.

"What did you say?"

"I said it was good to know. I didn't do it for free either."

"Tch...."

Clicking her tongue, Irina walked forward while Astron simply reached the corpse and purged his arrow back.

BOOM!

And just as the group walked a little more, suddenly, they heard the voice of something exploding as well as the sounds of shouts all around.

"I guess we reached the boss monster."

"Sigh.....Out of all the monsters, it is this one...."

Standing before the lair, Julia looked at the monster ahead. It was a huge monkey-like monster who was simply lying on the ground with a sleeping posture.

"Can you see it, Miss Julia?"

"Tch....Didn't I tell you to simply call me Julia? Why are you refusing to listen to me."

"B-but...."

"No buts. If you are that uncomfortable, call me captain instead."

"Ah...Okay....Then, captain, can you see it from here?"

"I can't clearly see it, but I can sense it."

"You can sense it?"

"Yes. It is a Yeti."

"A yeti?"

The party members gathered around, peering cautiously at the slumbering beast. The Yeti was massive, covered in shaggy fur, and had long, powerful limbs.

"It's enormous," Sylvie whispered, her eyes wide with awe and a touch of fear.

Barry, the always the analytical one, spoke up. "Yetis are known to be strong and extremely territorial. We need to approach this carefully."

"Right," The girl with the spear in her hand agreed, her eyes fixed on the monster. "We should have a plan in place before we attempt to engage it."

For this whole time, this party just brute forced their way to this place, thanks to the unique strength of Julia Middleton. However, considering even she was looking slightly skeptical, it was evident to the party members that it wouldn't work that easily.

"Well, since we have Sylvie, we can start by testing things out," Julia said as she looked at the sleeping monster. Since it was sleeping peacefully, they could also wait for another team.

Sylvie looked nervous but determined. "I'll do my best to support you all."

Hearing this Julia smiled. This girl was quite cute and innocent. Her reactions, the way she looked at everyone with a smile, the way she was scared but still tried to help everyone.....For Julia, that was what strong people did, regardless of their strengths.

'She is a strong girl.'

She nodded inside as she patted Sylvie on her shoulder.

"You can-"

However, just as she was about to continue, a low rumbling sound reverberated through the cave. Julia felt the ground tremble beneath her feet, and her eyes widened in realization.

"Get down!" she yelled, quickly pushing Sylvie and Barry behind a large rock formation nearby. The rest of the party members scrambled for cover, their hearts racing. It was as if an earthquake was about to occur.

CRUMBLE!

The rumbling grew louder, and within moments, a rush of snow and ice cascaded down from above, engulfing the cave entrance in a deafening roar. An avalanche was descending upon them.

As the cascade of snow came to a rest and the noise subsided, they emerged from their hiding spots. The landscape had changed drastically; the cave entrance was now buried under a massive heap of snow and ice.

"We're trapped," At that moment, Mason appeared as he said grimly, surveying the scene.

Julia clenched her fists, her mind racing since the whole plan was shattered now because all of the party members could feel another rumbling voice coming from the place in front.

"ROAAAAR!"

As a hearty roar echoed all around the place, the party understood there was no way to escape anymore.

"ROAAAAR!"

Julia took a deep breath, steadying her nerves as she prepared to lead the battle. The monstrous roar of the Yeti echoed through the cave, shaking the very ground they stood on. With a stern expression, she addressed her party members.

"Listen up, everyone. We don't have a choice but to face the Yeti head-on. Sylvie, I need you to stay close and focus on healing. Don't worry about fighting; we'll protect you."

Sylvie nodded, her face pale but determined. She clutched her staff tightly, ready to support her companions.

Julia continued, "Barry, keep analyzing the Yeti's movements and weaknesses. We need that information to formulate a strategy. Mason, you're on offense. Hit hard and draw its attention. I'll coordinate and provide cover...."

She continued to give orders. Even though she might not look like that, Julia was actually a girl with quite a lot of dungeon experience. From the day she had awakened, she had been going into the dungeons her family operated, and for her, that was how her life worked.

Thus, she was able to pick some habits of the seniors she had worked under.

"Let's move out."

With those words, the briefing was over.

SWOOSH!

As the Yeti stirred and began to rise, Julia charged forward, leading the assault.

The ground beneath them was still unstable from the avalanche, adding to the challenge. Yet, the party moved swiftly, each member fulfilling their designated roles.

'Wow....She can lead like that, huh?'

The playful demeanor of the previous Julia was nowhere to be seen, and at that exact moment, Mason understood.

'Just as they said, this girl is also dangerous. Maybe I can even hit two birds with one stone today.'

With that thought, Mason turned his attention to the slightly trembling girl beside him.

'Let's see how long she can hold on.'

Of course, they had a plan specifically prepared for today. After all, they had already managed to put quite a number of their people inside this place.

SWOOSH!

He lunged at the Yeti with his weapon, attracting its attention.

The beast roared in fury and swung its massive arms, immediately lifting the veil of the snow on the ground.

SWOOSH!

"Careful!" Julia shouted as she saw the girl with a spear almost getting hit by the monster before her.

CLANK!

She blocked the monster's attack with her sword. The force behind the attack sent waves to her body as she convulsed.

"Captain."

SWOOSH!

The spear girl immediately came to her help and covered for her.

And strangely, at that moment, Julia had a weird feeling that this monster before them was something that shouldn't be here.

She was getting the feeling she had never felt in the academy before.

She was slightly familiar with that, but it was something that shouldn't have existed here.

'This is Bloodlust?'

It was the feeling of bloodlust. When faced with a monster that evolved while competing with countless others, in the end, one was bound to feel the overwhelming past of that said monster.

However, the monsters created by the dungeon in the academy were artificial; thus, they would not normally exclude such bloodlust.

'Something is wrong.' She realized it immediately as the bloodlust suddenly increased. The yeti's eyes were filled with a crimson glint and that sent shivers to her spine.

"CARE-"

"ROOOOOAR!"

SMASH

With a loud roar, the Yeti raised its hands and smashed the ground.

SWOOSH!

And as the aftereffects of that smash, everyone surrounding the yeti was immediately blasted off, not being able to fend off the attack's momentum.

Aside from Irina, she immediately activated the skill she had and jumped, evading the wave of snow.

"ROAAR!"

However, that left her alone with the monster before her, which meant she was the sole target of the said monster.

CLANK! CLANK!

The battle between Julia and the Yeti escalated into a fierce struggle. Julia's movements were fueled by desperation and determination.

'What is this power?'

She parried the Yeti's attacks, her blade clashing with its savage strikes. Each blow she blocked sent tremors through her arms, threatening to shatter her guard.

Even the sword she was holding was about to shatter; a sword that was provided by the academy was about to get damaged.

Yet, the Yeti was relentless, its strength seemingly inexhaustible. It pushed Julia to her limits, driving her to the brink of exhaustion.

She fought valiantly, her sword slashing through the air, but the monster's ferocity was overwhelming.

'Tch.....Do I really need to use it now?'

She really didn't want to use the special skill that was given by her family. It had a huge mana consumption and quite a lot of side effects.

'But the conditions are already met.'

Seeing the monster's claws, she understood she had no chance. She was about to use her skill.

SWOOSH!

But just at that moment, as the battle reached its zenith and Julia felt the claws of defeat closing in, a sudden blaze erupted from the sky.

"What?"

She immediately felt the pressure of the attack, as the immense amounts of energy of fire psions had already gathered all at one point.

"EXPLOSION!"

And the moments she heard the familiar voice, she understood the reason.

Sword of Middleton – Vortex

SWIRL!

Putting every mana on her sword, she got ready for the overwhelming attack that was about to come.

BOOM!

Following that, a torrent of fire crashed into the Yeti, throwing it off balance and buying Julia a precious moment.

With her sword swinging around, she redirected the fire coming her way, making her team behind her not getting affected by the attack.

Cutting the scene right there, the battlefield was transformed into a spectacle of fire and chaos. The smoke and flames obscured the Yeti momentarily, leaving the outcome of this fierce battle hanging in the balance.

'So, she is the one.'

As she thought about that, she intently looked at the smoke covering the place where the monster stood.

As the smoke began to clear, revealing the defeated Yeti, Julia's heart was still racing from the intensity of the battle.

"Haaaah...."

Her blade, scuffed and battered from the relentless onslaught, rested in her hands as she caught her breath.

Irina emerged from the dissipating smoke, her demeanor poised and victorious. She grinned at Julia, a playful glint in her eyes. "Need a little help, Middleton?"

Julia couldn't help but smile back, the rush of battle subsiding as she chuckled. "Irina, you just love stealing my thunder, don't you?"

"Well, what are friends for?" Irina teased, giving a wink. "Besides, we've got to make sure you keep that title of the academy's strongest intact, don't we?"

She was smiling happily, but Julia noticed that Irina was giving glances to someone from time to time. Still, she playfully rolled her eyes. "Oh, of course. Wouldn't want to disappoint the fans."

"HRRRRR!"

But, just at that exact moment, suddenly, both Irina and Julia heard something. The yeti behind the two started moving once again.

"What?" Irina, surprised, was about to raise her fire once again, but at that moment, Julia sensed the mana condensing around the monster's hands.

It was the same pattern the monster attacked before.

"IRINA! CAREFUL!"

She immediately called, trying to warn her friend.

SMASH!

As Julia's warning rang out, the Yeti unleashed a devastating shockwave by smashing the ground with its massive fists.

The force of the blow sent a powerful shockwave rippling through the air, hurtling towards Irina, who was closest to the monster.

Irina, quick on her feet, acted instinctively. With a swift motion, she summoned a protective barrier of fire, attempting to shield herself from the oncoming force.

BOOM!

The shockwave collided with the barrier, causing a violent explosion of flames and force. The impact sent Irina flying backward, the fiery shield absorbing the brunt of the attack, but the shockwaves transmitted after the clash still doing their work.

SWOOSH!

She flew at a rapid speed, and following that, she disappeared in the middle of the smoke.

"IRINA!" Julia shouted, rushing to her friend's aid.

ROAR!

However, before she could even move a step, she felt the roar of the monster behind her as the ground trembled.

The Yeti, with its eyes shining red, was still standing after all.....

## Chapter 105 Chapter 25.7 - Joint Dungeon

BOOM!

And just as the group walked a little more, suddenly, they heard the voice of something exploding as well as the sounds of shouts all around.

"I guess we reached the boss monster."

Byron mumbled as he felt the tremors under his feet. The smoke of white color was rising from where the tremors were coming from, but even between the smoke, the sound of clashing could be heard.

CLANK! CLANK! CLANK!

It was a sound that everyone here was familiar with.

The sound of a sword clashing with another. That meant the fire was close.

Just as the party was about to discuss what they needed to do, suddenly Irina revealed a smirk, turning her frowning face to the face she always made.

"Finally, I can take my anger out."

BLAST!

And with that mumble, she immediately blasted herself off with a boom sound. And thanks to the after-effects of the blast, Irina shot off like a rocket towards the direction of the boss monster, flying in the sky like she was a bird.

However, for those who were watching the scene, rather than a bird, she looked more like a missile shot from those old weapons from ancient nations.

Byron, his eyes widening, shouted after her, "Irina, that's too reckless!" But Irina was already gone, her fiery fires carrying her into the heart of the battle. "Seeing her grinning with her teeth out like that, I guess I should have expected something like this." He sighed as he also readied her weapon.

"She's not one for subtlety, is she?" Leon also looked at the small fire in the sky with both awe and envy. "Always stealing the spotlight, that one."

Nora was both amazed and slightly worried. "Well, she's definitely going to make an entrance."

Just as the team members were mumbling to themselves like that, Geoge and Jake started running towards where Irina flew.

"Let's not waste any more time. Even if she is Irina Emberheart, we can't ever be sure what may happen."

"Right."

As Byron also agreed, the members of the team immediately started running to the source of the sound. Everyone was already tired from all that constant fighting, at least mentally, so they wanted to finish this exploration as fast as they could.

And, with Irina flying herself on her own, the source of their warmth had also left, so they were more eager to fight the monster than ever.

But, there was one person who stayed behind while everyone was running to the fight.

"This amount of pressure is certainly not normal."

Astron mumbled to himself as he felt something that shouldn't have existed in this place.

"Bloodlust."

He had been exploring the dungeons and fighting with monsters all this time, and he was already aware of the fact of how different the real monsters were from those in these artificial dungeons.

That was also one of the reasons why he didn't care much about these explorations since, in the end, nothing could be more helpful than a real experience.

Of course, this was what the academy also knew, and these practical sessions were there to set the base up for real explorations in the future, but even then, for now, things were less serious.

In any case, the moment Astron sensed the bloodlust around the air, he immediately understood where that came from and what the reason for that was.

"The boss monster must have also been tempered."

If that was the case, that meant the demon followers were basically moving, just like in the game.

However, this time, there was one thing that was different. It was the fact that which students took which path and which teams were paired up to go against the monster.

"I guess, where situations like these with multiple options occur, it will be very hard to rely on the knowledge of the game, huh?"

Right now, he didn't know which team was confronting the monster ahead, but even then, nothing would change.

'Since things are progressing as usual, nothing must have happened.'

In the game, Irina had gotten away uninjured from this event, so Astron guessed this would be the same.

'But it is better to be safe than sorry.'

However, with that thought, he collected his thoughts and also started running to the place where the tremors were coming from.

No matter what, he could also collect some clues about the demon followers and possibly interfere with their plans in this place.

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BOOM!

As the fire of explosion occurred around where the boss monster resided, the members of the party understood that it was Irina's attack. Only she could make such a huge explosion before their eyes.

"Hurry." Even though Byron knew Irina was reckless, he also wanted to contribute to the battle to raise his grades as well as impress Irina.

He hadn't had enough opportunity to do that, and he was getting more impatient with each second time.

He didn't know when he could even get such an opportunity before, after all.

ROAR! BOOM!

But, just as the team was about to reach where the monster had resided, suddenly another explosion occurred, but this time, rather than the fire rising, it was the smoke of snow, followed by a bunch of tremors.

SWOOSH!

And before the party's eyes, Irina flew out from the raised smoke, blood flowing from her nose.

"Huh?"

Everyone was left dumbfounded seeing the unexpected scene. Rather than Irina flying out, they thought she was the one to make that attack.

However, that wasn't the case at all. Even then, they were the cadets of the world's one of the best Hunter Academies.

"ROAR!"

They immediately understood the situation with the roar of the monster reaching their ears.

"I will take care of her; you guys go and help the fight with the boss. The other team seems to be in need of help."

Byron immediately assessed the situation in his favor as he started running to where Irina flew. He knew gaining the favor of Irina would help him in the future, and he didn't want to miss such a chance.

She looked unconscious, and that was one of the rare moments.

"Okay."

The others didn't say anything against it either as they simply nodded their heads and started running towards the boss monster, with the intention of helping the other team and raising their grades.

"Heh....Fools."

Byron mumbled to himself as he immediately understood their thought process.

"That's why you won't advance in society. Sometimes giving up the short gain for someone's favor is the best choice." With a smirk on his face, he continued running to where Irina flew.

However, in this world, things would always have the chance to not go in the way of someone's plan.

And Byron was about to learn this firsthand.

"Grrrrr...."

Before his eyes stood the wolves they had encountered before.

"Tch."

Seeing this, Byron clicked his tongue. He wanted to be on Irina's side when she was in need, but these bastard wolves were on their way.

'Irina roasted them with a wave of her hand. They are just small fries.'

Rather than studying, Byron was the type to train his physical capabilities more, so he didn't know what these monsters before him were.

'Snow wolves or whatever....You are in the way.'

SCHLINK!

Byron, overconfident and underestimating the snow wolves, unsheathed his sword with a haughty smirk.

He thought he could deal with them easily, given how effortlessly Irina had dispatched them earlier.

"Prepare to be impressed by my skill," he taunted, attempting to strike a heroic pose.

"Grrrr....Hrrrr..."

SWOOSH!

The wolves, however, had other plans. In a flash, they lunged at him with agility and precision that took Byron by surprise. They were different from the way the first wolves behaved.

"What?"

SWOOSH!

Feeling the surprised speed of the wolves, he panicked for a second and threw a swing of sword.

"Hrrrrr...."

SWISH! SCRUNCH!

However, the first wolf dodged his hasty swing and clamped its jaws on his arm, drawing blood.

"Ah!"

He grimaced in pain, hastily attempting to shake it off.

"Get off me, you mangy mutt!"

But before he could regain his composure, another wolf pounced, claws slashing across his chest.

"Grrrrrr-!"

THUD!

The impact sent him staggering backward, and his bravado shattered.

'What is this? Why are they so fast and strong?'

He couldn't understand it. He was unable to. They were faster and stronger than they were supposed to be.

He struggled to maintain his footing, trying to fend off the relentless assault.

"No, this can't be happening!" He shouted, feeling the pain all around his body. He wanted to shoo the pain away by shouting, but he understood that it wasn't possible. The cold wind and the snow weren't doing good to him either.

"AAAAAH!"

Seeing that, he activated the skill he had been hiding as a last resort.

[Strengthen]

It was a simple skill that increased his body's strength for a short period of time.

SWOOSH! THUD!

With his body starting to shine, he immediately fended the monsters off, making them fly away.

However, the fight had yet to finish.

"Grrrrr...."

The third wolf circled him, looking for an opening. Byron, still reeling from the earlier blows, tried to defend himself.

However, the wolves were coordinated and relentless. They attacked in quick succession, their bites and claws tearing into him.

Even with his increased strength, Byron did one of the worst things a Hunter could do against a monster.

Losing their cool.

As he felt the desperateness of the situation, fear started enveloping his body. Without knowing, he was getting affected by the bloodlust the monsters were releasing, making him feel more desperate.

CLANK! CLANK!

"Don't come closer, you bastards!"

Panicked and humbled, Byron fought desperately, but he was outmatched. He was able to deal blows to monsters, but none of them died.

Even though the monsters were wounded and losing blood, like frenzied maniacs, they ignored their own lives and continued attacking.

His bravado had turned into desperation as the wolves overpowered him, biting, scratching, and gnashing with a fury that belied their seemingly ordinary appearance.

At that point, he even forgot the reason why he was there. In a matter of one minute, from being a cadet of the academy, he became a random hunted fighting for his life.

"Somebody, help!" he yelled, realizing too late the error of his arrogance. He looked around for help, trying to find someone from his party.

But the party was too far ahead, engrossed in their own battle against the Yeti.

"Grrrrr..."

SWOOSH!

Of course, the monsters with their crimson eyes shining didn't wait for him to call help in desperation but rather attacked him.

"STOP! DON'T COME CLOSER! I CONCEDE! I CONCEDE!"

As the onslaught continued, Byron's vision blurred with pain and fatigue. He could feel his strength waning, and his struggles grew feeble.

He continued to repeat the same words, remembering if they encountered a monster they couldn't win against, they would need to call for help.

"This can't be the end... Not like this... Why is this happening? Wasn't the academy supposed to protect us?"

SWOOSH!

However, just as he was about to lose consciousness, suddenly, he saw a bunch of arrows flying all over the place.

"Tch.....That is why you were an extra, and you will always stay like that....."

And a click of the tongue with a voice filled with annoyance was the last thing he had heard before losing his consciousness.....

Chapter 106 Chapter 25.8 - Joint Dungeon

"Urghk.....My head....."

Irina opened her eyes, and immediately, a wave of pain assaulted her. It felt as though her head was pounding, and her body ached all over.

"Ughk!"

She tried to move, but the effort was excruciating. Her limbs felt heavy like they were encased in lead.

Gradually, her surroundings came into focus—she was lying in the snow, the cold seeping through her clothes.

"Oh, right... the Yeti," she mumbled, memories of the battle flooding back.

"Yeah, the Yeti...."

Just at that exact moment, she heard someone's voice coming from the sides. It was the annoying voice of the guy she didn't want to associate with.

"What?" She mumbled with surprise as she turned her head to the side, looking at where the voice came from.

"What, what?"

It was the same annoying guy. His cold purple eyes were looking down at her from the rock he was simply sitting on.

"W-what, urgh...are you doing here?"

Despite the pain, she forced herself to sit up, assessing her injuries.

Bruises and cuts adorned her arms and legs, souvenirs of the fierce attack. Her clothes were torn in places, and she could see a few spots where blood had seeped through.

That surprise attack and her crash probably injured her both internally and on the surface.

"Can't you see?" he replied, gesturing around them. Countless wolves were lying on the ground, each with arrows lodged in them.

Irina's eyes widened with realization. "You did this?"

He didn't answer, but his cold and confident demeanor spoke volumes. It was Astron, the same guy she had been trying to avoid, the one she thought was a bastard.

In her current state of pain and confusion, she couldn't shake off the unease that gripped her whenever she was near this man. The rumors and the stories she had just read were still fresh in her mind.

BOOM!

At that exact second, she felt the tremors underneath the ground, followed by the sound of explosions.

"The Yeti!" She shouted as she realized the monster had yet to die. If the monster didn't die, that meant Julia was also in danger.

"Krugh-"

She tried to stand, but the pain was overwhelming.

"Why are you not helping them?"

She asked as she looked at the bastard sitting on the rocks leisurely.

"Even if I go there, I can't do anything." However, he simply shrugged in response.

'Ah....He is injured....'

Now that Irina looked into his clothes closely, she saw the coat he was wearing had torn marks all over. His pants, shirt, and everything was tattered, and from some of the wounds, blood was dripping.

Also, she could see his mana was almost exhausted. Being sensitive to the mana from birth, she could feel the amount of mana lingering around.

It was clear that a very dangerous fight had just occurred in this place.

"Also, someone needs to take care of these frenzied monsters."

"Frenzied monsters?"

"I thought you had noticed it earlier." His words were sarcastic as if he was mocking her. But his expression never changed, even for a second.

However, when she looked at it back, the Yeti should have died after the attack she had done. There was no way a monster of rank four could withstand one of her strongest attacks. It was mathematically impossible.

"So, that's why?"

She could also see why that Snow Squirrel didn't die at that time.

"It took you long enough."

"..." She had no words to say anymore as she realized she was in no position to reprimand him. In fact, what he was doing was one of the most crucial things.

He understood that he didn't have enough strength to confront the boss monster. Even the arrow he had shot at the Lesser Magma Wyrms wouldn't be strong enough to damage the Yeti's skin.

So, instead of wasting his time trying to show off, he did what was best. Covering the rear part of the group from the sides.

Not everyone in the academy could simply push their pride and stay on the backlines while letting others gain all the credit.

'How come such a thorough guy did such a thing?'

At that moment, she asked herself. Considering the way he was thoughtful, it didn't make sense that he was someone who would force himself on others. Such people would seek attention all the time.

However, this wasn't the time to think about such matters anymore. The more she felt the tremors coming from the boss' side, the more her worries got stronger.

"Urgh!"

She stood up, ignoring the pain in her ribs.

"Where are you going?" He asked, his gaze looking at where her hands were clenching.

"I will help them."

"Do you think you will offer anything with that condition?"

She was annoyed at the fact that this bastard was looking at him with such eyes like he was saying, 'Are you stupid.'

".....It is better than sitting on the back...."

"....Yeah, this is something you would say."

She got chills when she heard him say that. As she tried to leave, she stumbled and almost fell.

It was clear she wasn't in a condition to rush into another battle. However, that determination in her eyes couldn't be overlooked. Julia was there, and from the way she saw that, the Yeti was pushing her back.

She might even be in a critical condition right now.

SWOOSH!

"Take this."

Just at that moment, a vial flew towards her face.

THUD!

She grabbed the vial in the air and looked at its contents.

'A mid-rank potion? How did he find such a thing?'

She was well aware of the fact that Astron was an orphan. And mid-rank potions were quite rare, as well as they were expensive. Therefore, her suspicions soared when she saw the vial in her hand.

"I won't take something you got with dirty money." She frowned and threw the potion back.

"What are you talking about?"

"Tch....Don't play dumb."

As she frowned, he finally understood what she meant.

".....You really are stupid."

"Ha! What are you saying!"

"Does your pride have more importance to you than your friend?"

"....."

"Whether I took this potion with dirty money or not, does it matter? In the situation you are in, do you really have any choice?"

"....Still...."

"That's why you are naive.... Listen, little princess... The world we live in is not always just and fair..." Astron's voice was cold, his eyes reflecting a harsh reality. There was a clear hatred in his voice as if he was speaking to someone different.

"Sometimes, the path that appears evil or questionable is the only choice. Survival isn't about adhering to moral standards; it's about doing what you must to live another day. Not everyone in this world has the privilege of luxury and righteousness."

His eyes looked slightly sorrowful for a second, but then they returned to normal immediately.

She could feel his words were genuine, and this made it even weirder. Just what kind of life did this bastard live all this time to speak with such clear hatred?

Just what happened in the past.

At that moment, he threw the potion once again.

SWOOSH!

"Take it and help Julia. Only you can deal with that monster right now."

THUD!

As she grabbed the potion once again, she looked at the transparent liquid in the veil.

"...I will pay this one back."

She said, trying to cling to the last bit of her pride.

"It was never meant to be free. I will get my payment....But, it won't be interest-free."

"Tch."

GULP!

She gulped the potion, with her heart filled with annoyance. It was her own fault that she didn't bring any potions with her since she thought she wouldn't need them.

And now she had to bow her head to this bastard and swallow what she wanted to say.

'Next time, I won't ever make such a mistake.'

She swore to herself as she felt the strength returning to her body. Her mana had already been filled to the maximum, and now that her injuries were healed, there was nothing that was holding her back any longer.

BOOM!

With a strong force, she blasted herself and rushed to where the monster was standing.

And this was what marked the end of the fight for the frenzied Yeti. From the moment Irina jumped to the fight, its fate was sealed.

\*\*\*\*\*

After Irina's arrival, the fight took a drastic turn.

The Yeti was a monster that was resilient against ice psions and the cold; however, at the same time, that meant it was weak against fire.

Thanks to that, the fight ended in just a matter of minutes, and now the students were being evacuated by the instructors.

"Everyone follow me. This dungeon will be closed for a while."

Since the dungeon wasn't functioning just as it was supposed to, naturally, it was going to be under surveillance for a while. After the arrival of instructors, the frenzied monsters were subdued immediately, and the students were taken to the infirmary to check up.

"Sylvie, are you okay?" Mason asked, 'concern' in his eyes as he approached her after the intense battle with the Yeti.

He had made sure to cover her whenever danger approached during the fight, and Sylvie was already considering him a reliable ally.

Sylvie nodded, managing a small smile despite her lingering fear. "Yes, thanks to you and everyone else. You were all amazing in battle."

Mason grinned, a little sheepish. "Well, we make a good team, right?"

She nodded again, feeling a sense of camaraderie with her fellow teammates.

The bond they had forged in battle was something she hadn't expected when she first entered the dungeon.

Julia walked over, her face showing a mix of relief and exhaustion. "We did it. Good job, team. Now, let's head back and get some rest." Her clothes were tattered, and the wounds on her were the most severe.

However, thanks to the immediate treatment from the academy personnel, all of her wounds were covered. Even though they were aching from time to time, she was healing rapidly.

"Though, I doubt we would survive if not for you." Julia turned her head to the fiery orange-haired girl, whose attention was elsewhere.

"Yeah...If not for Miss Irina, things would be more severe." Barry said with gratitude. Their team was in a rough position thanks to the avalanche at that time, but with Irina's strength, they were quite literally saved.

"It was nothing much." She simply mumbled while still looking at someone. Following her gaze, Julia saw where it was headed.

A black-haired boy was speaking with the yellow-haired instructor. No, rather than speaking, it was more like a one-sided questioning.

"What are they talking about?" She asked.

"Professor Eleanor called him the moment she entered."

"It was this urgent?"

"I don't know. But from the looks of it, she is quite mad."

Everyone knew Professor Eleanor would get angry whenever this guy mentioned, so they didn't mind. However, that wasn't the case for those from different classes.

"I guess it is about those rumors," Mason said as he also looked into the two.

"Maybe."

"What rumors?" Sylvie asked. She didn't have the habit of checking social media accounts, so she had no idea about what was happening in those forums.

"You don't know?" Mason spoke, feigning surprise. He saw this as an opportunity to further his own agenda, and unfortunately, it involved spreading false rumors about Astron.

"Well," he continued, leaning in closer as if to share a secret, "there have been all sorts of rumors circulating about him. Some say he's a criminal, involved in all kinds of nefarious activities, like theft, assault, and worse."

However the response he got was something he was not expecting. Instead of believing him, Sylvie rather frowned. "No, these can't be true. Astron is not such a person."

She defended him with a serious face. In fact, for her, there wasn't even a tiny bit of a possibility that Astron was a bad guy.

Barry chimed in, adding fuel to the fire. "You can't always judge someone by what you see. People can hide their true selves well."

However, one person simply finished the discussion.

Julia looked at the group her gaze frowning. "If you can't judge someone by what you see, then how come you can judge them by what you have heard?" His eyes exceptionally bore through Barry.

"I-I....."

"We, as Hunters, shouldn't jump to conclusions without any concrete evidence. Rumors can be incredibly damaging."

"You are right." In the end, in front of the heir of the Middleton family, Barry simply shut his mouth without saying anything.

But Mason was relentless in his storytelling, painting an even darker picture. "Oh, it's not just that. The article says he's a master manipulator, a womanizer, and heavily involved in drug abuse. The authorities have been looking into him for a while."

However, even then, Sylvie simply shook her head. "I don't believe none of those."

She had been watching him from the start, and if he was a criminal, she would see from his emotions. If he was a womanizer, she would know the lust. If he was a drug addict, she would see it as the form of an 'addiction.'

However, she never saw such emotions inside him, aside from anger, sorrow, and hatred. Therefore, she didn't believe Astron was a criminal since her trust in her skill was top-notch.

Hearing Irina's and Julia's refusal, the orange-haired girl shook her head and didn't say anything more as the group advanced in the academy....

## Chapter 107 Chapter 25.9 - Joint Dungeon

"You may leave now, student Astron," Professor Eleanor White said, her gaze piercing and stern. I had been under her scrutiny for what felt like an eternity, her questions probing into every aspect of my actions and intentions.

It was something I had been expecting anyway the moment I had heard about the rumors, so I just answered the questions she had asked.

I stood up, trying to maintain an air of composure despite the discomfort of the situation. I had dealt with similar interrogations before, so I knew how to handle them. "Thank you for your understanding, professor."

Since this was a fairly new event, she didn't make it too long. Nowadays, her attitude has changed from overbearing to slightly normal.

Even though she still had that squinting gaze whenever she looked at me.

She fixed me with a sharp gaze, her voice cold and cautious. "Your assurance is noted, but let me make this clear. My eyes will be on you. Be cautious in your actions and associations."

She said as her eyes bore into me. However, I could see, under her eyes, there was a clear annoyance at the fact that she was wasting her time. It seemed she lightly given up on me.

'This was what I wanted anyway.'

As an instructor, she was not a bad person.....If you were talented. If you were not talented, you had no value in her eyes. Even if you were someone hardworking, you would probably hardly enter her eyes.

Therefore, such a woman also didn't deserve anything from me. If you are looking for merits while dealing with people, you should also expect the same.

If Eleanor White was a woman who determined someone's values according to her own, I can do the same.

I nodded 'respectfully,' acknowledging her caution. "Understood, Professor."

With that, she allowed me to leave the place.

As I walked out, I remembered Mason's gaze as she looked into Sylvie. While the group was leaving, I was observing them from afar, talking with Eleanor White at the same time.

'He will be acting soon.'

In the game, Mason acted quite carefully while he was around Sylvie. It may not look like that, but the academy is putting quite a lot of importance on healers, so they were protecting Sylvie.

If something happened to her, the academy would immediately act and track those who harmed her down. Healers were a rare type of Hunters, and they were hard to find and raise. Therefore, they were valuable.

That was the reason why Mason was acting carefully.

'He must have already gained quite a bit of trust.'

Adding the dungeon and the people surrounding Sylvie, it wouldn't be hard for demon followers to gain her trust.

This was their plan.

'Let's see what will happen.'

No matter what, to harm Sylvie, they would need to isolate her from the academy, and this would be the tricky part.

Inside the academy, they wouldn't be able to act this freely since they had already used their shot. With the investigations occurring here, for now, they need to lay low.

Just like that, I reached my room and immediately took a shower. And following that, I simply left for the training rooms.

\*\*\*\*\*

In a room filled with a lot of luxury ornaments, a girl with blazing red hair sat on her wide bed, holding her watch.

[Dog1: Young Miss. The footage you requested has been sent. You can check it in the attachments.]

[Why is it this late?]

[Dog1: The academy put up a strong front at first. This case seems to be sensitive. But, rest assured, no problems will occur, Young Miss.]

[Good. Have you got anything from the case I requested.]

[Dog 1: For now, we have yet to make any advances. We are currently digging Astron Natusalune's past as you have ordered.]

[I see. Make sure that this doesn't reach the mother's ears. I don't want to deal with that for now.]

[Dog1: Rest assured, I won't talk about this matter to anyone; Matriarch is included as well.]

[Good.]

Looking at the messages sent by one of the people she had picked, she opened the attachments section.

There stood a video file. It was a special footage where the minutes of her unconscious version were recorded.

Even though she didn't feel like he did something inappropriate, she wanted to make sure. But, more importantly, one thing had been bothering her for a while now.

'How did he beat all those Snow Wolves? Weren't they berserk?'

She remembered the Snow Squirrel got quite a lot stronger after it went berserk. Then, wouldn't the same imply to Snow Wolves? If so, according to the last time they explored dungeons together, his strength shouldn't have been enough to deal with all those monsters.

"Tch....Annoying bastard...."

That was the reason why she had requested this footage using her family's name.

And in the end, she was able to get it. Even though Arcadia Hunter Academy boasted its strong reputation, the Emberheart Family also had their own influence, and by using their daughter's life to get threatened, they acquired this footage easily.

Opening the footage, the first thing she noticed was herself lying on the ground. She was unconscious, with blood pouring from her nose and her ears. It was clear that she was quite injured.

'I was careless back then.'

She inwardly cringed seeing herself this pathetic and gritted her teeth. This was a mistake that stemmed from her arrogance.

"Grrr..."

At that moment, the wolves made their appearance on the scene. At first, their number wasn't that high; only five of them were present.

For her, that number would be nothing, but now that she was unconscious, she would die under the attack of monsters.

"Raaaarr..."

SWOOSH!

As one of the wolves lunged forward, seeing the unconscious prey, suddenly something flew. It was an arrow.

Following that was a complete massacre.

"This?"

All of the arrows hit the monsters from only vital spots. They were shining in the color of green, and from the looks of it, the strength of the arrows wasn't that high.

"What a precise aim."

She acknowledged. She was observing Astron on this trip, and naturally, she also observed Leon since the two were in the same position.

Thus, she knew how difficult what Astron did was.

"Now that I think about it, he also completely timed his attack at that time."

She knew Astron wasn't this strong before; neither was he this proficient at handling bows.? Right now, those five wolves simply died in a matter of four seconds.

"Just what happened this week to make him stronger this much."

She mumbled to herself, comparing his past self and his current one. To be honest, she herself didn't know why she was this engrossed in analyzing him, but she had a hunch that this guy was hiding quite a lot of things.

She hated to admit it even to herself, but she was intrigued. This guy was a mystery, and she was getting sucked into it one by one with each interaction.

[Ding!]

While she was thinking about that, suddenly, a notification sound came from her smartwatch.

<Apexium>

This was the group chat her friends created.

[Julia: Hey Ethan, how was the dungeon this weekend?]

[Lucas: Yeah, why didn't you talk about it yesterday?]

'What is this dungeon thing?'

She thought as her fingers moved rapidly.

[Irina: What is this dungeon thing about?]

[Jula: Heh. You may not know it, but Ethan went on a date with a fellow classmate in the dungeon.]

"Pfffttt.....Date in dungeon....."

[Irina: Who the hell goes on a date in the dungeon?]

[Lucas: Apparently, our blockhead Ethan does.]

[Irina: '^-/^-']

[Ethan: It was a serious exploration, not a date. We almost died, you know?]

[Julia: Hah? You almost died? You are joking, right?]

[Ethan: No, I am not. A demon contractor was at the party, and he betrayed us.]

[Lucas: Demon Contractor? Really?]

[Ethan: Yes. Astron was there too.]

'Astron was there too.'

With Astron's name being mentioned, she curiously started staring at the screen. She wanted to type, but she also didn't want to look too much intrigued. She knew these guys would naturally speak about this before Victor just to joke, and she could see what would happen later.

[Julia: Oh? Astron was with you guys? How did it go?]

[Ethan: He was quite good. I am not sure how, but even though he doesn't look strong, he contributed quite well to the exploration.]

[Irina: That's surprising. I never thought Astron would be that skilled.]

She wanted to see their opinion on that guy. What Julia, Ethan, and Lucas thought about him.

[Lucas: Yeah, he always seemed more like the quiet type. But hey, people surprise you.]

[Julia: But, I guess this confirms that this dungeon exploration was a date ???).]

[Ethan: Not again. How many times do I need to tell you about this?]

[Julia: Okay, man. Chill. Anyway, did you get to talk to him?]

[Ethan: Not much, really. You know he is not the type to talk much. But he seemed different. More focused, I guess.]

Hearing Ethan calling him different; she thought she got a clue.

[Irina: Different? How?]

[Ethan: To be honest, he almost died after the boss monster attacked him just after we were betrayed by that Demon Contractor. It was quite a blow, and I am sure it must have taken quite a lot of time to heal. After we defeated the boss, we looked around everywhere in the dungeon, but we couldn't find any traces of him afterward. I really thought he was dead.]

[Julia. What? It is crazy. Do you know what happened to him, then?]

[Ethan: Well, apparently, he was sucked by the hidden stage.]

[Lucas: Hidden Stage? Are you sure?]

[Ethan: Yes. I asked my butler to look into this case. According to his testimony and the data obtained by the association, it seems he really entered the hidden stage.]

Hidden Stage.

Irina was familiar with that word; after all, that was the place where he was being kept.

[Irina: Do you know what kind of hidden stage it was?]

If it was a hidden stage, that may explain why he got this strong in such short amounts of time.

[Ethan: Sadly, no. The data obtained was limited since the dungeon was unstable.]

[Irina: I see. But, guys. What do you think about that guy and those rumors?]

She finally came to the point. The people she was talking to were all people with high standing, and naturally, they were bound to be people with good judgment.

[Ethan: Honestly, I don't think much of those rumors. Astron strikes me as someone focused on his training. He's always at the training grounds whenever he's free.]

[Julia: I agree. I've seen him training diligently whenever I pass by. We sometimes came across while running in the morning, and he would be returning when I would just leave my room. So, I think those rumors seem baseless and unfounded.]

Hearing the opinion of the two, Irina thought about that for a while.

'I might have judged quite fast.'

Just yesterday, she had visited him, so she was in a bad mood.

At that moment, she remembered what he said.

"This prejudice of yours.....One day, it may bite; you should be careful."

'Prejudice.....'

She thought about it for a little, and she understood that she was indeed acting a little bratty. Maybe it was because she thought Astron was someone below; she always wanted him to act as she wanted, but he never did so.

No matter how overwhelming she was, he stood up and said whatever he wanted and acted however he wanted. This reminded her of him, and she was not happy with that fact.

[Irina: But, there are testimonies of people he assaulted in the forums.]

[Julia: Come on. We both know how easy it is to create such testimonies, right? Wasn't there an article about you just recently, saying you burned someone alive in Nexoria City?]

'...'

[Ethan: You are right; it is easy to create such testimonies. But the question is, why someone is targeting him?]

Seeing this, it also made sense that someone was intentionally targeting Astron by spreading rumors about him.

Considering this was a pattern she often encountered, she understood that he probably offended someone with high standing.

But who could it be?

'I guess this is how I should pay you?'

She thought as she changed the chat rooms.

<Dog2>

[I have a job for you.]

Chapter 108 Chapter 30.1 - Small Time

After the incident inside the dungeon occurred, the classes were canceled for the whole week.

Considering quite a lot of cadets almost lost their lives, the academy was bound to make explanations to the furious parents.

Also, the powers out there that wanted to control the growing influence of Arcadia Hutner Academy wouldn't stay idle either.

Therefore, the management team of the academy needed to put some results, and they were investigating for such cause right now. This time, demon followers shot their bullet, and now they lost their momentum because of this investigation.

Of course, from the game, I know the fact that this investigation won't reveal much. The real perpetrators of this incident will stay hidden since the ones that would be found sabotaging were nothing but tools.

This was how the demon followers operated. Blackmailing, kidnapping, impersonating....In the end, the academy and the government would stab themselves back.

Of course, the small circle of demon followers on top of the management team were also working quite hard to hinder the investigation, and the demeanor the academy decided to take was going to help them in the future.

Just as you know, Arcadia Hunter Academy is an institute that is directly connected to the government; however, even then, this place is a proud establishment. Therefore, that pride refuses to let them accept any external investigation since that would mean the academy would no longer be managed by itself.

This was also the reason why they masked the MistWraith Incident and didn't release the details of it to the media, and that was pretty helpful.

In any case, since the classes were canceled, I had pretty much free time.

'Should I visit that dungeon?'

I asked myself, looking at my stats. I was finally now on the level of a lower-rank academy cadet.

As you may have seen, top rankers like Irina, Lilia, or Julia can confront a peak rank-4 monster on their own. No, Yeti's stats were a lot higher than rank four since it was going berserk thanks to the effects of Demon Followers' disturbance.

Thus, it is safe to assume that Irina alone can confront a low-rank-5 monster. This should give you enough reference to judge how strong academy cadets are and where I would stand against them.

This was why this game was a weak to strong game. Ethan's starting point was very, very weak. Even now, if 10 Ethan confronted Victor alone, Victor would win without getting attacked even once.

Anyway, since I had the free time, I could either train or I could use this chance to explore another dungeon I had in my mind.

'A familiar would be helpful.'

I thought as I slowly made my way out of training rooms. I had been training non-stop after resting in my room, and now it was slowly approaching the night.

Though, of course, just as I was walking away, I felt the presence of someone. I had been feeling the eyes of people on me for a while, but none of them had made any move before, though that seemed to be changed now.

But, I guess this was something expected.

After I got out of the joint dungeon exploration, I was being bombarded with the harassing messages on my smartwatch. I even needed to turn my watch's calling and messaging functionality off since it was getting annoying to block countless numbers of different numbers.

However, because of the harassment, I was able to see the article on the forums of the academy posted about me.

'Whoever this is, he is really putting in quite a lot of effort.'

I don't know who I offended to make them target me this much, but they have quite a good influence since they could put an article about me while also bringing this amount of false evidence.

They even brought three girls to give some false testimony.

'This might have been the reason why Irina looked this angry at that time.'

Of course, normal people are expected to believe those things since most people don't have enough reasoning to judge what is right and what is wrong.

But, I expected Irina to have a better judgment since she must have also been subjected to such rumors before.

'I guess that was too much to ask for from a little brat.'

Just as I thought about that, suddenly, I felt the presence of those behind me.

"Hey, you bastard."

I turned to face the source of the voice, and there stood a group of three individuals, sneering and exuding arrogance. One of them, a guy with slicked-back hair, pointed at me derisively.

"You think you're some hotshot just because you made it to this academy? You're nothing but a wimp. You don't deserve to be here."

The guy stood there and smirked.

'I guess he read the article.'

I didn't say anything and just ignored him. Unless I would deal with these sources of rumors, it was pointless to fight with these mobs.

Of course, direct confrontation might also not be a good idea since they seemed quite strong.

"Heh, look at this guy trying to act all high and mighty," another one chimed in, nudging his companion. "He's just scared to fight, that's all."

They were laughing and sneering, and at that moment, memories of the past came.

'If it were the original Astron, I wonder what he would do?'

I thought to myself.

"He thinks he's too good for us, huh? Must be trying to make up for being a disappointment to his family," one of them jeered.

"Probably couldn't handle the pressure, so he's trying to act all tough here," another added, his voice dripping with malice.

"He's got that look, you know," the one with slicked-back hair sneered. "That look of desperation, like he's trying too hard to prove something. Probably trying to fill his family's shoes by forcing himself on women."

If it was the original Astron, rather than getting mad at the people like this, he would probably get angry at himself, thinking he was weak.

That was partially true but also wrong. He was doing his best, and this world is cruel. It never cares about how you feel at all.

"Hey, bastard! Are you ignoring me right now?"

Of course, there is one common thing when it comes to bullies. It is the fact that they are doing this act to satisfy themselves.

I still didn't respond and continued walking.

SWOOSH

Until one of the three on the back blocked my path, appearing in front of me.

"Bastard....I asked you a question."

"...Move."

Looking at the bastard and seizing him from head to toe, I immediately observed some points.

'Right feet unconsciously on the back, slightly humpy posture, strong trapezes, and rear delts. He is a right-handed spear user.? Clothes devoid of any sweat and dirt, he didn't train today. Eyes that are constantly checking his watch mean he is somehow connected to the instigator.'

"Why don't you show some respect when someone's talking to you?" the guy snarled, his anger escalating. His companions were circling behind me, attempting to make me feel trapped.

"Move," I repeated calmly, refusing to let their aggression affect me.

"Think you're tough, huh? Think you can just ignore us?"

His words were just a facade for his insecurity. He was itching for a fight, probably to prove himself to the one who was paying him to do.

SWOOSH!

Before I could react, he lunged at me with a punch. His technique was sloppy and predictable.

The motion of his body and the intention in his eyes were easy to read. I leaned back, dodging the punch with ease. He was faster than most people I had encountered, but he was probably underestimating me.

"Huh?" he stammered in surprise, momentarily taken aback by my dodge. "You!" he exclaimed, anger flaring in his eyes.

Before he could attack again, a commanding voice resonated through the corridor.

"That's enough."

Turning our attention to the source, we saw Irina approaching. Her presence was overwhelming, radiating authority and strength.

'Finally...' I thought, looking at her. She had been there for a while now, and she didn't do anything and watched while trying to mask her presence. Of course, even without her, I could deal with these bastards, but I would need to get quite beaten to make the best out of it.

"Are you okay?" she asked, her gaze focused on me.

"I'm fine," I replied, standing my ground.

"Report them to the faculty," she advised, her eyes piercing through the bullies. "Don't let them get away with this."

The bullies, now aware that their intimidation had failed, exchanged uneasy glances. Irina's reputation was enough to make them think twice about pushing the situation further.

"We'll remember this," the leader spat, trying to save face.

Irina remained unfazed, her posture emanating confidence. "I suggest you think carefully before you do anything foolish. I dislike bugs trying to eat more than they can chew."

The bullies hesitated but then reluctantly turned and walked away, their bravado melting in the face of Irina's presence. The fact that she was the third rank of the academy and a member of the Emberheart Family was enough to make them escape with their tails between their legs.

"I guess I should thank you?" Turning my attention to her once again, I asked. Even though she was quite an irritating woman, she was the one who helped me in the end.

"It was the right thing to do. I didn't do it particularly for you."

"Is that so?"

"I guess with this, our debt is cleared." She said with a haughty tone, reminding me of her from the game.

In the game, Irina was such a character, always going in her own momentum. But, of course, against me, this didn't work.

"Of course not," I replied, refusing to let her do as she pleased.

"What?"

"This wasn't something I had requested from you. Also, you just said you didn't do it, particularly for me. Doesn't that mean you expected nothing from me in return?"

She clicked her tongue in irritation, caught off guard by my logic.

"Don't click your tongue like that. It was you who said those words," I pointed out, crossing my arms.

"I know that...."

Saying that she started staring at me like she wanted to ask something.

"What? If you have something to ask, just do it."

"...Why are you not fighting back?"

"What?"

"I mean against those rumors.....Why are you not trying to clear your name?"

"So you are believing me now."

"..."

"I guess you have a brain."

"Tch.....If you are going to talk rudely like that, I am going away....." She threw an irritated gaze at me and started walking away.

"You can't blame me for thinking like that, can you? What would you think about yourself if you were in my shoes?"

But, of course, this attitude was something she deserved.

"...."

"Right?"

"Sigh...." With a hearty sigh, she turned back and came closer, standing before me. "So? What do you want from me?"

"What do I want from you, huh?"

"Don't request something illogical." She said, slowly covering her body as if trying to refer to those rumors.

"What do you take me for?"

"Hmm...Arrogant, rude, selfish....."

"Aren't you describing yourself?"

"Tch."

"Anyway, I wouldn't request your body even if you are the last person in this world, don't worry."

"Oh yeah? We are on the same page then."

"Good to know."

"So? What do you want from me?" She repeated again, her arms crossed.

I have been thinking about this for a while, and the best thing I can request from her is simply-

"Give me money."

Money.

"How much?"

"100 thousand Valer."

"HA! 100 thousand Valer? Are you joking right now?"

"I am not."

"If you are not, then why are you asking for such a huge amount?"

"Because that's the price for saving your life," I retorted, referencing the incident when she was unconscious and I protected her from the Snow Wolves and Snow Squirrels.

"This....."

She was left speechless. Of course, we both knew that there was a possibility of her not dying there even if I hadn't protected her. But again, that was just a 'possibility,' and my defending her would be a 'fact.'

Of course, she could apply the same logic I had used just at the start of the conversation here, but she wasn't good enough for that for now.

"Anyway...Here, this is my bank account." I opened my watch and showed a small QR code on there. "You can deposit any amount you deem equal to your life; I won't complain about it."

"Tch. I really hate you." She said while slowly scanning the code and tapping on her keyboard.

"Is that so?"

I replied and started walking away. At this point, I didn't need to spend any more time here.

"Yes, it is so."

DING!

Following that, a notification came.

Chapter 109 Chapter 26.2 - Small Time

"This guy."

Irina mumbled to herself as she looked at the departing figure of Astron.

"How irritating."

Whenever she talked to him, he always managed to touch her nerves, no matter what happened.

'Just wait, I will get back to you.'

She hated when she would be left speechless. She hated it when she couldn't refute his words. She hated it when he simply looked at him with a face devoid of any expression.

Mostly, she hated it whenever she was with him.

DING!

At that moment, the sound of notifications came from her bracelet.

[Julia: Guys, you know this weekend Victor's family is giving a banquet, right?]

It was a message from the group chat.

'Banquet? What?'

She thought. She didn't remember Victor mentioning the banquet at all.

[Ethan: This is the first time I am hearing about it.]

[Lucas. Same here. I didn't know about it either.]

Looking at the messages, it seemed Victor didn't invite any of them either.

[Julia: What? I thought he invited everyone.]

"Tssk!"

Looking at the message, she clicked her tongue. She knew why Victor directly invited only Julia. Everyone knew about that, even the said one who was feigning ignorance intentionally.

"What is good about her?"

She couldn't understand at all. Why was he this obsessed with this girl? What was even this good about her?

'Should I cut my hair, as well?'

Touching her braided hair, she thought. Maybe she was missing the tomboyish hair?

'No. I am not going to become someone else.'

However, there was no way Irina Emberheart would copy someone else. Her pride wouldn't allow that, even for the person she liked.

In the end, she cursed the bastard inside her heart as she walked in the way while messaging in the group chat....

\*\*\*\*\*

After the encounter with Irina, I returned to my room. Now, some of you may think, why didn't I ask for something different from money?

The reason is, for rich people like her, money is something they will never care about unless it is an astronomical amount.

Even some of the equipment Irina is using is actually ten times more expensive than what I had requested, like her earrings.

So, getting money to invest in stocks and future things would be a lot better.

Also, if I had requested a skill, she wouldn't refuse if it was a low rank, but at the same time, she wouldn't be willing enough.

She would feel like she had lost something, and this would damage her pride and ego more than I wanted. As a result, I would lose the connection I built with her.

Believe it or not, even though that girl is annoying and irritating, she is a formidable figure in the future; it is better to keep her under check.

As for equipment, I don't even know what I should use right now, and until I figure that out, I won't try to find any equipment.

In any case, that was the reason why I didn't request any skill or any equipment instead of money.

And it is not like I don't have any use for money either.

Opening my laptop, I started checking my emails in my room while also looking for stocks. Lately, I had been engrossing myself with the stock market and guilds so that I could maybe infer and link some of the events from the game.

Even though I hadn't used the stock system in the game, there were certain small events that I was aware of, and I had been waiting for them to create an opportunity for me.

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Darkweb: Launching

Connecting to Server

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Of course, since I had already been affiliated with the black market before, thanks to the card I got from there, I was able to create an account in the Darkweb, which was basically the side of the internet where everything buried underground was there.

After opening the site, I could see countless pictures, small advertisements, and inhumane things there.

But what I wanted right now was not to check those things.

<Horde>

Clicking on the tab, a small line appeared before me.

"From hacking to brokerage, everything you want to find virtually is here."

It was a simple line created by ever-changing codes. This was a special site that had yet to make its name known right now. This small organization is filled with hackers whose gifts are related to computing and small mana frequency manipulation. Even though they were a small organization right now, they would be a formidable one in the future by taking down the current best hacker ones.

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Subscribe ----?One-time request

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For these types of organizations, there were subscriptions and one-time requests, and I was planning to get the highest-tier subscription just to make sure I was connecting myself here.

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TAP! TAP! TAP!

Slowly negating myself on the site, I immediately connected my account to the site and then started the transaction.

-----

Do you wish to proceed with the God Level Subscription?

YES?NO

-----

After clicking on the yes button immediately, I could see my money disappearing from my account.

'Just like that, 100k Valer disappeared. Though it is a worth investment.'

The 100k Valer for a simple subscription may look weird, but in the future, this subscription would be so expensive that it would be at least 100 million Valer alone.

And the fact that I was one of the first ones to do that would mean the organization would treat me a lot more special than others.

DING!

[A message request had been sent from Horde.]

And, I got my results immediately.....

\*\*\*\*\*

In a dimly lit, underground hideout hidden beneath the bustling city, the air was thick with the scent of stale coffee and the hum of multiple computer screens.

Wires snaked across the room, connecting terminals and monitors, each displaying lines of code and encrypted messages.

The walls were adorned with neon-lit posters of digital art, a stark contrast to the shadowy corners where the hackers huddled.

The members of the small hacker organization known as "Horde" sat in clusters, their faces illuminated by the glow of monitors.

The atmosphere was tense, as everyone was constantly tapping on their computers without even talking.

Jen, a woman with braided hair and a quick-witted hacker with a penchant for mischief, lounged in her chair, her eyes scanning the stream of data on her screen. Suddenly, a notification popped up on her monitor. "Hey, what's this?" she mumbled, seemingly dismissing it as inconsequential at first.

Alex, the tech genius and encryption virtuoso, raised an eyebrow. "Probably just a reminder for rent or utilities. Ignore it for now."

However, as the members continued their work, Mark, known for his adeptness in evading security measures, noticed the notification again. Curiosity piqued, he opened the message, and his eyes widened in disbelief.

"Guys, hold up! This is no regular notification. It's a God Level Subscription to the Darkweb," Mark exclaimed, the gravity of the revelation sinking in.

SILENCE

The room fell momentarily silent, the weight of the revelation settling on them.

"Someone just bought a God-Level Subscription? It is not even funny."

Of course, at first, nobody believed. After all, while putting in that subscription option, none of them were expecting someone to buy that in any case.

"Yeah....Which crazy motherfucker would spend 100k on a random site like ours." Another young man with his hood on said as he simply inhaled from the weed he was holding.

Amidst the stunned silence that gripped the room, Mark's face turned serious as he once again called everyone.

"You guys. Do you think I would joke about this out of nowhere?"

Hearing this, moments later, the members of the Horde gathered around Mark's screen.

"Heh....Fine, let's see it."

Jen, Alex, and the others stared in disbelief at the confirmation of the God Level Subscription. The reality sank in as they realized the implications of this unexpected acquisition.

"Someone just spent 100k Valer on this," Mark said, his voice a mix of awe and realization.

"It's not a joke; this is for real," Alex said, still trying to process the enormity of the situation.

"Yeah, but why us?" Jen asked, her mind racing with the potential and risks that lay ahead.

The room erupted into a whirlwind of discussions, ideas, and plans. They realized that this windfall could be a game-changer for them—a chance to upgrade their technology, improve their workspace, and bolster their skills. The 100k Valer was a lifeline, an opportunity to elevate their status in the hacking world.

For Hunters, this amount of money might be something they would spend on a whim, but for some ordinary people who did nothing but stay in this room for the whole day, it was an amount that they had never seen before.

"It's an unexpected blessing, guys. Let's make the most of it," Mark declared, breaking through the chatter.

The group quickly formulated a plan. They would allocate a portion of the funds to purchase new top-of-the-line computers and software to rejuvenate their working space. Another portion would be dedicated to enhancing their cybersecurity measures, ensuring their anonymity and safety in the ever-watchful eyes of the government.

"And, make this guy, Shadow of the Moon, the highest rank member, and give him a special treatment. He is the first person that trusted us this much; we better pay him back."

In the end, even though they were a group that operated in the Darkweb and underworld, they were people with their own values.

\*\*\*\*\*

Now, why did I spend this amount of money on this organization? Firstly, the God Level subscription was effective for an infinite amount of time until the owner of the account passed away.

Secondly, from this moment on, I will never need to pay for any type of service, regardless of the difficulty.

Thirdly, whenever I need to request something, my request will always be first in the order unless some other God-Level subscription is there.

Finally, this organization is filled with talents in terms of hacking, and they will never fail any request they have taken, and this will bring them a huge amount of reputation in the future.

So, it was a win and win for me, both financially and efficiently.

[Horde: If you have anything to request from us, feel free to do so. We will arrange everything as best as we can.]

As I looked at the message before me, I started typing.

[I want you to buy the stocks of the guild I am going to link to you. Purchase them anonymously.]

[Horde: How much money should we deposit?]

[100k Valer would be enough. I will send the amount to you.]

[Horde: Understood. Do you wish anything else?]

[No.]

[Horde: Understood. We will be waiting for you.]

As I finished chatting, I sent them the link to Emily's guild and deposited 100k Valer onto their account.

'With this, the money problem will soon be solved.'

A week later, Emily's guild will probably regain their strength since, with this amount of money, she would be able to cure her father from his injury.

And from that moment, their rise will start, and after two months, it will reach its peak.

'Until they are targeted by the Demons once again.'

In the end, once targeted, it will always be targeted.

Just like that, I finished my business and started preparing myself to explore that dungeon. After all, I had no time to waste.

## Chapter 110 Chapter 27.1 - Dungeon of Eldertine Spires

Eldertine Spires.

This was one of the biggest mountain ranges in the south of the Valerian Federation. A place filled with high and pure mana density and countless different life forms that had yet to be registered in the database.

A place that was perfect for those who wished for entertainment and mystery. This place attracted countless people who had such tendencies.

But, of course, its rich and pure mana density also made this place famous enough for people who sought to improve themselves and get stronger. Hunters, Mercenaries, trainees inspired to become martial masters, mages who sought to join the mage tower...Countless people with such titles came as well.

Also, with the high and pure mana compressed on the mountains, there were also natural treasures formed in this place.

Therefore, this place was also frequently explored by treasure hunters who wished to change and improve their lives by the encounter of luck.

Of course, the nature of the world had already changed from the day of Nexus Convergence when the mana came to the world. So, those natural treasures had countless different forms.

Some of them were in the form of evolved herbs, some of them were in the form of Alchemical materials, and some of them were mana-compressed ores for blacksmithing.

Among these were a special type of occupation known as Rune Searchers.

A Rune Searcher was someone who traveled to places with special mana density to find runes.

What are the runes, one might ask.

Runes are special types of mana products that can be assimilated directly within the body or soul to give the receiver special effects.

It can be in the form of strengthening skills, it can be in the form of strengthening body imprints, it can be in the form of increasing one's visible stats, it can be in the form of increasing one's innate abilities, it can be in the form of strengthening traits, or it can be in the form of increasing one's hidden stats.

Runes were such special natural products that were rare enough to be sold for at least one million Valer.

Therefore, it was easy to say that finding even one rune would turn a normal person's life upside down and would make them live without needing to work until they died.

This was the sole reason why there were people who devoted their lives to finding such an amazing thing.

Nathan Lake was also one of those who wished to become rich by just finding a one rune.

His special trait enabled him to see the special mana properties of things around him. Even though his trait wasn't that strong and high ranked, it was something that came in handy in his job.

He traversed the rugged terrain of the Eldertine Spires, his eyes scanning the surroundings for any unusual mana disturbances that could signal the presence of runes. @@novelbin@@

The air was thick with the scent of adventure and the promise of potential wealth.

However, suddenly, amidst the trees, he noticed a figure in the distance, a young man with a hood obscuring most of his face. The cut of his clothes, the quality of his boots, and his overall demeanor suggested he was a fellow Rune Searcher.

After all, he knew the rune searchers often climbed mountains and places filled with extraordinary mana, so they needed strong clothes for special situations.

'He must be a newbie.'

However, the young man's clothes looked new and unused; thus, Nathan immediately assumed he was a newbie.

'I guess I found a fine piece.'

He smiled inwardly. In this place filled with no surveillance whatsoever, people were never as innocent as they seemed.

Especially those who didn't have a stable income like Rune Searchers.

"Hey there!" Nathan called out as he approached. "Are you a Rune Searcher too? Out here looking for runes like me?"

The young man turned towards him, revealing a glimpse of a slightly handsome profile beneath the hood. He looked somewhat frail; his face looked pale with whiteness. He looked even younger than he thought.

However, glowing purple eyes felt like they were boring through his existence like they could see everything.

Feeling those eyes on himself, Nathan felt weird and slightly uncomfortable. However, he immediately shook his initial uncomfortable feeling.

'This might be because it has been a while.'

The hooded figure looked frail and young; it was the perfect target for Nathan's usual scare tactics. His hand discreetly moved towards the dagger at his side—a perfectly practiced gesture that didn't show what he was doing.

"Finding runes can be quite the lucrative venture," Nathan continued, feigning enthusiasm. "But you see, this place is not for the faint-hearted. Dangerous creatures and treacherous terrain await the uninitiated."

His words were meant to scare the person before him to make them uncomfortable and panicked. It was a practiced act he had done countless times before.

Yet, the young man remained stoic, his purple eyes seemingly piercing through Nathan's facade. It unsettled Nathan, making him second-guess his approach.

The unease grew, but the allure of asserting dominance pushed him forward. From his clothes and his equipment alone, he knew this guy had quite a good money on him.

Inching closer, Nathan prepared to execute his usual scheme, aiming to threaten and intimidate the newcomer. He would assert his supposed superiority and perhaps even convince the young man to leave the territory.

However, as his fingers brushed against the hilt of his dagger, doubt gnawed at him.

The trait that enabled him to see the special mana attributes of other things to a certain extent was activated, and now he could see the reason why.

'What the hell is this?'

The young man's aura felt strangely powerful, a far cry from what Nathan had anticipated. The color of black and the constantly changing color from white to green and red to blue showed that this guy was not normal at all.

His hand hesitated, uncertain of whether this newcomer was truly the easy prey he had presumed.

And at that second, suddenly, he felt like small tendrils of dark shadows moving at him.

'Hiiii!'

And the fear enveloped him.

"Look," Nathan stammered, struggling to maintain his confident facade, "if you're not cut out for this, it's better to turn back. The Eldertine Spires are unforgiving to those unprepared."

The young man didn't even move for a second, but Nathan had already started backing away cautiously.

He couldn't shake off the sense that this encounter was not what it seemed. The young man's gaze bore into him, making Nathan question the tables he had intended to turn. The darkness of his intentions clashed with the mysterious aura of the newcomer, creating an atmosphere charged with uncertainty.

The young man finally spoke, his voice calm and collected despite Nathan's obvious unease. "Have you noticed a tree in this area that gives off a different vibe than the others?"

The question struck Nathan with both surprise and trepidation. How could this young man be aware of the specific tree that he had sensed earlier? Panic surged within him as he realized that this person seemed to know about his unique ability, the trait that let him see the special types of mana.

"I... I don't know what you're talking about," Nathan stammered, attempting to mask his growing fear.

He didn't want to show that tree. He understood that it was a special place with his trait. Even though he didn't see any runes in there while searching, he knew there existed something different there, so he wanted to hide it as much as possible.

The young man's gaze remained fixed on Nathan, unwavering and intense. It felt like he could see through the facades and lies that Nathan tried to construct.

"Are you sure?"

It was a simple question the young man asked. His tone and eyes didn't contain any emotion, neither rage nor greed. It was as if he was looking at emptiness, and this scared him more and more.

Each passing moment filled Nathan with an increasing sense of dread, a belief that this young man was someone he should not have crossed.

No, this young man was someone he shouldn't have even come close by.

In a trembling voice, he finally let slip, "Alright, there's a tree not far from here that feels different, okay? It's not like the others—it's... unique. But I don't know why, I swear!"

The young man's gaze lingered on him for a few more moments, scrutinizing him as if assessing the depths of his fear and truthfulness. Then, he finally spoke, "Where is this tree?"

Nathan, his fear compelling him to be compliant, described in great detail, "It's to the southwest from here, near the edge of the cliff, past a small clearing. The trunk is thick and gnarled, and the roots form an intricate pattern on the ground, like veins pulsing with energy."

The young man nodded, absorbing the information. Nathan could feel his heart racing, anxiety clawing at him as he wondered about the intentions of this enigmatic figure.

"Thank you," the young man said simply, turning to leave. It was abrupt, leaving Nathan bewildered.

"Wait!" Nathan blurted out, his fear getting the better of him. "Who are you?"

The young man glanced back, his hood still partially shrouding his face. "Does it matter who I am?"

"Ahahaa.....Right...."

"Let me give you a piece of advice," the young man began, his voice steady and measured. "Avoid the northeast exit of the Eldertine Spires for the next three days."

"Northeast Exit? Why?"

"Blood will be spilled. It's in your best interest to not go anywhere near there."

Nathan felt a chill run down his spine at the gravity in the young man's words. He nodded vigorously, swallowing his fear. "Of course, I'll keep that in mind. Thank you for the advice."

SWOOSH!

Without another word, the young man disappeared into the shadows, leaving Nathan alone with his thoughts and the sounds of birds chirping.

'What a weird young man.'

The weird feeling in his heart disappeared the moment the young man left his presence, and he finally relaxed his breath.

'I guess I should avoid that place.'

And started walking toward his next destination.