

## H. Academy 111

Chapter 111 Chapter 27.2 - Dungeon of Eldertine Spires

"Nathan Lake....."

I mumbled to myself, standing before a shining tree.

"I guess I was lucky then."

He was an NPC in the game that appeared randomly in the Eldertine Spires. He was a Rune Searcher, but at the same time, he was someone with a slightly evil alignment. He would attack the player, and with that, we would beat him up. After all, as a student of the Arcadia Hunter Academy, even though Ethan was ranked last, he was stronger than most other people.

And Nathan's role was small.

It was simply show where the dungeon was located.

He would tell the player the location of this tree, which would take us to the dungeon.

And now, I was standing before the tree; I was once again reminded of the fact that the visuals in the game could never hold a candle to the real world.

The tree stood tall and proud, distinguished from the others in the forest by the way it shimmered, even in the dim light filtering through the canopy.

Its leaves were a brilliant shade of ethereal silver, catching the scant light and reflecting it like a thousand tiny stars. The trunk glowed with a soft, pulsating light that seemed to emanate from within, casting intricate patterns on the ground around it.

The roots of the tree spread out like a network of veins, pulsing with a gentle energy that seemed to breathe life into the very earth it touched. Each root was a mesmerizing display of an intricate pattern intertwined and connected in a mysterious way of engravement.

It was as if the roots held the history of the land, etched into the very fabric of the forest floor.

And indeed, that was the case.

The reason why this tree was different from others was because it had been absorbing a different type of mana -- the mana that was released from the dungeon underneath its roots.

And to enter this dungeon, one thing needs to be done.

Reaching before the pulsating part of the trunk, I grabbed my dagger.

'Stabbing the heart of the pulsating tree, huh?'

It was a weird symbolism, but things needed to be done to achieve results.

STAB

With a swing of my dagger, I simply stabbed the shining part. I didn't use mana since using that would make things slightly complicated.

FUSH!

And following that, a small smoke started spreading from the cut I had made. The surroundings started to get shrouded.

CRACK!

The intricate patterns etched by the roots on the ground began to shift and writhe, their pulsating energy responding to the disturbance in the tree.

The once steady rhythm of their movement turned chaotic, a whirlwind of patterns and lights dancing in a mesmerizing display.

CRACKLE!

The air felt charged, a bit like when a storm is about to hit. The smoke formed a twisting whirlpool of mist. It spread, covering the area in a mysterious fog.

The ground shook as if it was waking up. The patterns on the ground rearranged themselves, forming a hidden passage. The ground, which had seemed lifeless, suddenly seemed alive and moving.

A low rumbling sound filled the air as the passage slowly opened up, revealing a way down into darkness.

'I guess this is it.'

This was the entrance to the dungeon.

Looking at it like that, it indeed gave the surreal vibe enough to make the one watching the scene mesmerized.

'Though, the inside of the dungeon won't even resemble something this beautiful.'

Without thinking much, I simply entered the passage.

WROOM!

And got sucked by the gate.

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THUD!

As I fell to the ground, the scene before me was something that completely contrasted with the scene before.

SHRIEK! SHRIEK! SHRIEK! SHRIEK!

Countless number of screams echoed all around the place.

Darkness surrounded the space without even an ounce of light.

An eerie fog was covering my vision, and I could see nothing around me.

There was no sun shining, but only the moon that was trying to illuminate the darkness but failing to do so, thanks to the fog.

No signs of life, no trees, no plants, no grass.

It was a complete place filled with only land to walk on, some rocks that made the surface not flat alone.

"SHRIEK!"

However, the screams were still there, coming from every direction.

And most importantly, a sense of smell covered the entire space.

'The smell of blood and rotten corpses.'

Of course, I hadn't seen a rotten corpse in my life, but it was easy to associate the smell since I knew the reason for it from the game.

"SHRIEEEEEEK!"

CRACK!

'Just at time.'

With a scream coming from behind, the ground cracked, and something appeared from there.

A corpse with its whole body turned into a grotesque shape. The color grey covered the whole skin, and it was shedding like a mutt.

SWOOSH!

The monster rushed at me with its mouth wide open, a drenched smell coming from there.

"Ghouls."

I mumbled the name as I grabbed my gun. They were low-rank three monsters, with their speed and regenerative property having a higher part of their rank, so I didn't have much chance to directly confront the monster from the start.

BANG!

As I fired the gun, the bullet pierced through its head.

THUD!

The monster fell to the ground thanks to the bullet's momentum. However, I knew that wouldn't end like this.

I equipped my daggers with the bracelets.

DRIP!

A small liquid was dripping from the dagger.

SWOOSH!

Dashing forward, I first slashed the monster from its chest, and then, with the other one, I stabbed it from the small opening inside his navel.

Without much resistance, the dagger cut through the monster's body.

PUFF!

And following that, the monster slowly started disintegrating, slowly losing its material body.

The materials of the body turned to mud and mixed with the land, leaving me standing in this eerie space once again.

Looking at the yellow-colored liquid pouring from the tip of my daggers, I recalled the name.

'Holy Water.'

A simple name befitting its properties. It is called Holy water because it has the attributes of purification, and it is specifically good against cursed beings.

Like Ghouls - monsters which were born from the cursed corpses and essentially a type of undead.

When the term Undead is used, most of the time, people's minds would directly link them with Necromancers, but the undead can be born even without a necromancer.

The resentment filling the space and the unfulfilled dying wishes of a person can also produce undead or essentially cursed beings.

The important thing is a link from the dead soul to the material world. With that link, the soul won't be able to leave the place and will be trapped for a while.

This is how the game explained things, and Ghouls were more like lower-ranked ones.

'So essentially, I am saving you.'

As I looked at the small smoke rising from the place where the ghoul disintegrated, I thought.

'I guess this counts as good?'

What Holy Water does is pretty simple. It simply counters the Ghouls' regeneration, which is one of the things they are strong at. And by countering that regeneration, the Ghouls will become essentially nothing but a bunch of corpses mindlessly attacking.

That is the reason why I can't use my gun that much since it will take too much time to imbue my bullets with holy water, and it is not as efficient as well.

Thus, I need to use my daggers while confronting the ghouls, which I don't mind that much.

With that thought, I continued to walk.

As I ventured further into the darkness, the wretched screams grew louder, and the smell of decay became more suffocating.

The eerie atmosphere heightened my senses, and I knew more ghouls were lurking, waiting to pounce.

"SHRIEK!"

Another ghoul emerged from the shadows, its grotesque form charging toward me.

SWOOSH!

I deftly evaded its attack and swiftly countered, plunging my dagger into its putrid chest.

PUFF!

The ghoul disintegrated, reduced to a muddy substance by the holy water. But there was no time to pause; more ghouls were closing in.

'The number is around fifteen.'

It was quite a high number, but ghouls were essentially one of the monsters with the lowest intelligence. Rather than evolving in nature, they were beings created by resentment.

In my head, I immediately created a combat formula. The way I would move, it was kind of like a sketch of fight.

And, with practiced precision, I engaged them one by one. Some I shot with my gun, buying myself a momentary advantage. Even though I knew they would regenerate, the time I bought served well.

Others, I engaged in close combat, my daggers dancing in the darkness. To not spill the Holy Water from the daggers, I was using my mana to enhance the daggers and cover it.

BANG! BANG!

The gunshots echoed in the desolate space as I picked off the approaching ghouls. The holy water on my daggers ensured their final demise as I slashed and stabbed, each strike turning them into sludge.

The eerie land became a battlefield, and I was the lone warrior fighting against the cursed.

The moon above witnessed this clash of life and death, casting an occasional eerie glow on the surreal battlefield, also supplying my mana.

I felt as if the moon itself was watching me, and that feeling was something that drove me forward in a way.

"SHRIEK!"

Another ghoul lunged at me, teeth gnashing. I sidestepped and drove my dagger into its side.

"SWOOSH!"



The creature dissolved into mud, leaving a foul odor in the air.

SHRIEK! SCREEECH!

I pressed on through the desolate landscape, the unsettling symphony of screams pushing me forward. There were some sounds of birds screeching as well, as I felt a dark shadowy being was also watching me together with the moon.

'Certainly, this place touches one's nerves.'

No matter how strong-willed and minded you are, in a place that smelled like nothing but death, it was very hard to keep your sanity while walking without seeing anything. There was no path that you could follow, no path that you could determine to take.

You would need to mindlessly wander around until you would reach the reason for this space, which was something mentally taxing.

And to negate that fact, I was purposefully distracting myself.

TOK! TOK! TOK!

The ground crackled beneath my steps, the only sound that wasn't a scream. Even though it may serve as a call for monsters, it wasn't that important.

This place's test was not about the body's strength but rather about how strong one's mind was and how much you could resist this eerie feeling.

'Let's see how long you want to keep this test.'

I thought as I kept walking, mindlessly wandering around.

Chapter 112 Chapter 27.3 - Dungeon of Eldertine Spires

"Huff....."

THUD

As the last monster fell to the ground, I finally had the time to pick my breath up.

It had been nearly five hours of relentless fighting, and exhaustion was catching up with me. Even though this place was not a test of my body, I still had been fighting almost non-stop while also walking.

The ghoul-filled landscape seemed to stretch on endlessly, each step feeling heavier as the hours blurred together.

"Hisss..."

The small wounds around my body were also aching. They were the ones made by the ghouls.

GULP!

Grabbing another potion from my bracelet, I gulped it. Immediately, I felt my body getting lighter as well, and a faint sense of comfort filled me.

'It is no time to relax.'

The moon above had shifted its position, casting an even more eerie glow over the desolate battlefield.

The symphony of screeches and screams had dulled my senses, and I needed respite. My body was still aching from the unhealed wounds, my mind weary from the constant vigilance against the ghoulish onslaught.

TOK! TOK! TOK!

I continued to move while making noises beneath my tired steps, a constant reminder of the unforgiving environment and that I was the real and alive person here.

But then, something caught my eye—a faint flickering light in the distance, barely visible amidst the suffocating darkness.

It was for a brief second, but I still could see a small light inside the fog and darkness.

Eyes of Hourglass.

Activating my skill, I focused my vision on the fog, and there, I could see a small landscape that was different from the fog.

'A cave?'

It was as if a cave was inside a small mountain.

'I guess I finally reached here.'

Seeing that scene, I finally recalled the memories from the game. This would mark the end of the walk underneath the fog since I had already reached the boss monster's location.

With renewed body and senses, I trudged towards the distant flickering light, the cave entrance becoming more defined as I drew near.

SCREEECH!

The screams seemed to grow louder, a cacophony of tortured souls begging for my company. It was unsettling, but I forced myself to focus on the task at hand.

'Why don't you be with us, my child?'

'Aren't you tired?'

'Please, I want a friend.'

'Son, Mother will give you a hug; come here.'

Suddenly, the moment I got closer to the cave, I started hearing whispers entering directly into my ears. It was as if I was surrounded by people from everywhere around.

And as I stepped into the mouth of the cave, the voices became more pronounced, echoing off the walls and reverberating in my mind. Each step deeper into the cave felt like a descent into madness.

'Join us...'

'Stay with us...'

'We can end your suffering...'

The darkness within seemed to writhe and twist as if alive with some sinister purpose. At this point, even the moon's light was not able to enter the cave, let alone illuminate it.

It was complete darkness surrounding me, though that darkness was something I was not uncomfortable with.

After all, even though I couldn't use my Shadow Abilities in this place effectively, I could still see well in the dark thanks to my trait.

The walls were damp and covered in a slick, slimy substance as if those ghouls I had killed were all gathered in this place.

'Don't fight it...'

'Embrace the darkness...'

'We're waiting for you...'

The whispers were incessant, an unending assault on my mind.

I could feel their cold, bony fingers attempting to claw their way into my thoughts, trying to make me one of them.

But I pushed back. Even though it was sweet, I had a purpose for being here.

"Tch.....Death is not something to be mocked like this."

I mumbled, looking directly into the darkness inside the cave.

CAW! CAW! CAW!

And as if to respond to my words, around me, I suddenly heard a bunch of caws coming from all around the place.

However, the distance didn't match.

Turning my eyes to the side, I could see the walls around me were now all gone, as if they hadn't even existed to begin with.

Now, I was inside a forest. A forest filled with trees. The moonlight reappeared again, illuminating the surroundings. The fog was nowhere to be seen, but instead, the branches were doing its job.

The black-colored trees had no leaves on them, as if their whole life force was sucked.

In this eerie forest, the air was heavy with the scent of decay.

The ground felt soft and uneven beneath my feet as if it was soaked with blood. The crimson eyes of the crows bore into me, their gaze unnerving and haunting.

There were countless of them perched on the skeletal branches, watching my every move.

'Join us...'

'Stay with us...'

'Embrace the end...'

The whispers continued, their voices intermingling with the caws of the crows. It felt like the forest itself was alive with malevolence, urging me to surrender to the abyss.

"...."

However, I simply moved forward without even a word. After all, they didn't even need a word from me.

Those were the voices of the death.

With each step, the forest seemed to shift and change while small memories entered my head.

A woman holding a boy from his hand....

A young man holding a small box in his hand while sitting on his knees....

A little girl who was looking at the little candy that other children had....

An old woman who was watching her grandchildren run around....

Some memories were happy, while others were sad and disturbing.

'DON'T COME CLOSER!'

From the eyes of a woman, a man was approaching her in the darkness, disgusting saliva leaking from his mouth.....

'JUST WHY DID YOU DO IT?'

From the eyes of a man at the entrance of the room, two people in the same bed, one his wife....

'Come here little boy....'

From the eyes of a little kid, a woman holding a rolling pin in her hands.....

Countless different memories came into my head, and every time one came, the feelings and emotions also came.

Fear, hatred, anger, sadness, betrayal, pain....

Happiness, joy, exhilaration, nostalgia, excitement.....

The contrast of the two types made it even more distinct to feel all those grueling feelings.

CRACK! CAW!

In the midst of those memories, the trees twisted and contorted, their branches reaching out like skeletal claws. The moonlight cast its own light and elongated shadows that danced menacingly around me.

The crows remained perched on the branches, their eyes unblinking and fixed on me. It was as if they were guardians of this dark realm, observing a trespasser in their domain.

I could feel all those little feelings of people, but then again, in this world, no one would be happy all the time.

Whenever there are people living in luxury, there will always be people living in slums.

This is by the nature of humans and this world.

Just like not everyone is born with the same talent at mana; they also aren't born in the same environment.

This is an undeniable fact, and this is what makes this world how it is. Whenever there is a light, there will always be darkness.

Without the darkness, we can't say something about the dark at all.

'I see...'

At that exact moment, I heard the voice of something.

A voice filled with malice.

FLAP! FLAP! FLAP! FLAP! FLAP!

Countless crows burst from the branches, encircling me in a whirlwind of feathers and darkness.

CAW! CAW! CAW!

They cawed in unison, creating a chaotic symphony that drowned out the whispers of the memories.

The forest floor seemed to tremble, and then it began. Blood seeped from the ground, swirling and coalescing, forming a grotesque silhouette of a thing.

It was a formless, shifting mass, a conglomeration of nightmares.

'Understanding the world, are you?' the abomination hissed, its voice a cacophony of tortured souls.

I could barely make out its shape amidst the flurry of crows and the swirling blood, but its presence was suffocating.

The malice and hatred filled the atmosphere, and a feeling of nausea came from the deepest parts of my stomach.

"I don't understand anything." I replied to the thing.'



The abomination chuckled, a sound that sent shivers down my spine. "We shall see, little mortal. Let us test the strength of your mind."

In a whirl of movement, the creature began to morph and change, showing me gruesome images in rapid succession. Scenes of death, betrayal, agony, and despair flickered before my eyes.

A woman, her eyes wide with horror as she fell from a great height.

A soldier, his face twisted in pain as a blade pierced his chest.

A child, crying in the darkness, lost and alone.

'Can you endure the suffering of this world?' the abomination taunted.

"Do I need to?" I replied.

"....A good answer that you gave." The creature chuckled once again. "But, you, who can't even endure his own suffering and escape from his past, shouldn't answer like that."

As the creature spoke those words, suddenly, the scenery changed.

There stood a little girl purely made from blood and a claw piercing her chest. Her eyes didn't contain her usual light inside, but rather they were empty.

Filled with pitch black.

No words were spoken.

She, with eyes filled with just black, stared at me.

It was as if she was saying why did you leave me alone.

Why didn't you help me?

TAP!

A small tear made from blood poured from those black eyes, tapping the ground.

'You were able to come here because of your talent. But, when your talent is not enough, will you be able to move forward?'

The grotesque figure spoke with its voice taking the form of malice once again. It was as if he was mocking me for coming here.

'A mortal who tries to forget his past has no right to come into my presence.'

"What did you say?" I replied. I knew this bastard would speak like this, but it was still getting on my nerves.

All those deaths and those gruesome scenes can be accepted, but saying I was trying to forget?

"I will never forget," I declared. "And I never forgive."

With those words, I finally let out one of the feelings I had been suppressing for a while. The things I imagined in my head, the countless scenarios where I killed that demon, I ripped him into pieces, I pushed a bullet into its throat.

Countless scenarios I was able to save her at that time also lingered in those imaginations, but I knew they were all pointless.

'Ho....You are interesting....'

Finally, the figure spoke, its gruesome hands slowly approaching me.

'You have an aura befitting of coming here.'

In eerie silence, the doppelgänger stepped closer, and I could feel its cold, bony fingers on my forehead. It was a touch that sent a chill down my spine, a touch that seemed to probe my very soul.

Even though I had already prepared myself before coming here, the malice contained in that touch was enough to almost destroy my soul.

'You do deserve to take what I shall offer.'

With that declaration, the figure withdrew its hand, and as it did, a small raven materialized on my shoulder. Its eyes were a deep purple, mirroring mine.

'Then, take your companion,' the figure spoke as its form started disappearing. And following that, I felt something sucking me in....

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THUD

As I fell to the ground after the encounter with the thing, I stood there for a second to calm myself down.

The illuminating light around the tree had long lost its energy, and now it was no longer different from any other tree around me.

'I really want to throw up.'

The feeling of nausea and the gastric acid from my stomach continuously came to my throat, but I swallowed the feeling.

Even for me, who witnessed a massacre before my eyes, it was still mentally taxing to see all those memories of people.

Though I didn't have any lingering attachment to them, I was still a human at the end.

"Huuuuuuuu..."

Taking a deep breath, I calmed myself down.

And as I calmed myself, I felt the presence of something inside me. Not physically, but like something that was bound to me.

'It should be there.'

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?Name: Astron Natusalune

?Occupation: Weapon Master (level 1)

?Talent Limit: 6

?Passives:

-?Vengeful Bane

?Attributes:

Variable Attributes:

-?Strength: 2.36

-?Dexterity: 2.85

-?Agility: 2.89

-?Constitution: 2.12

-?Intuition: 2.93

-?Magical Power: 3.04

-?Mana Capacity: 2.5

?Traits:

-?Perceptive Insight (Unique)(Unchanging)

-?Lunar Enigma (????) (Growth Type) (Stage 0)

-?Shadowborne (Legendary) (Growth Type)(Stage 1)

?Arts:

-?Lethal Arsenal Ascendancy (????)(%13)

?Skills:

-?Dash

-?Eyes of Hourglass

?Body Imprints:

?Bonds:

-?Aurora Raven (Rare)(Growth Type)

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Looking at the status window before me, I could now see a different section here. All of the parameters had grown a little, probably because of the trial I had just gone through.

'Bond section also appeared.'

As the word easily suggests, Bond meant beings that were connected to your very being. Basically, you are their master.

This was how it was described in the game, and that was also why I came to this dungeon in the first place.

Clicking on the Aurora Raven, I started reading what was written there.

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Bond: Aurora Raven

Rarity: Rare (Growth-Type)

Description: Aurora Raven, initially a rare-grade bond bestowed by ?????.

It takes on the unique characteristic of a growth-type familiar. It materializes a mystical raven creature crafted entirely from mana, as the user wished to call the bonded familiar.

As the user channels more mana and deepens their bond, the Aurora Raven's potential expands, evolving in both form and abilities.

The user can command the bonded familiar according to their wishes.

Vision Share: Host can now share their own vision with their bond, seeing the world from its eyes.

Output: Evolves in form and abilities based on the bond strength and mana infusion.

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'This is good.'

Looking at the panel before me, I thought.

Thanks to the bond now, I could easily fulfill my lack of scouting, and that was something I had been keeping in my mind for a while.

Aurora Raven

As I called the name in my head, I used my mana instinctively, and a raven materialized before me.

It had the complete color of black, devoid of anything, and purple eyes resembling mine. Just like the panel explained, the raven didn't have a physical body but rather made from pure mana itself.

FLAP! FLAP! FLAP! FLAP!

As I wished the raven to move, it started moving with its wings flapping just like any other bird. If one thing was different, then that would be the fact that my mana was slowly getting sucked with each movement it was making.

However, the consumption wasn't that high, probably because of my magic power stat being high.

In the game, the more magic power you had, the more output you would exert with the same amount of mana used. That also meant products or bonds like this raven would also be affected by it.

'Though, still, I won't be able to use it for long.'

I thought as I felt the connection between me and the raven slowly getting weaker as the distance increased.

'The more distance we have, the more mana it consumes.'

Of course, that made sense since, on the way, mana would lose its normal energy, and this would make the signal getting weak. Even though mana was an ethereal form, it was still an energy, and there was friction in this world.

'Let's test the vision share.'

As I thought about that, suddenly, I felt like the world around me was changing. The scenery changed from the trunks of the trees to their peaks.

'It is very good.'

Seeing things from a bird's-eye view was quite an experience. It was a little weird since the eye lenses were probably different.

Since it was a raven, the eyesight was good. I didn't know how it would compare to an eagle's, but it was pretty enough to see everything in detail.

'The Perceptive Insight is also working.'

And when I saw my characteristic information coming from my trait, I understood that I could use my skills even when I was sharing my vision with the bird.

That was a pretty good detail since ravens' eyesight is not that strong at dark, but with my own traits, I can easily see.

'This should be enough.'

Even though I wanted to explore more, I was quite tired mentally from all that constant walking.

Now, some of you may be wondering what was that dungeon and who that thing was.

And to be frank, even I don't know the name of that being.



In the game, the dungeon of Eldertine Spires was different from other types of dungeons. This one is actually not a dungeon but is more like a fragmented legacy.

Fragmented Legacies are a type of sub-spaces created by very strong and high-ranking beings who wanted to leave their mark on the world. Or they were created by beings that were hunted and hated.

Both were cases where the dungeons were more like a live test rather than a linear dungeon experience. Things wouldn't be determined from the start as the space would actually be changed constantly by the being conducting the test, though the starting parts would be the same mostly.

In the game, this dungeon was the first accessible Fragmented Legacy.

The moment the player steps in, the first type of enemies will be ghouls, and that won't change.

That was the reason why I already prepared a Holy Water before coming here.

However, the hard part of the test wasn't how good you were at dealing with the monsters. It was the test of your vitality, endurance, and [willpower] stat.

Since willpower stat was a hidden stat and was hard to improve in the game, most players wouldn't prefer clearing this dungeon. After all, to improve willpower, you need to train your character.

And training meant doing the same thing over and over again, even while controlling the character, and as a player, that was something boring for others.

Of course, not everyone was lazy like that.

In any case, if the first part would test the [willpower], the second part would test the [focus].

That was not a named stat, but it was a test where, while listening to those countless creepy voices, the player would need to walk forward.

Though no monster would appear there.

The last stage would be where countless different scenes would be presented to players, and they would be asked a question.

"Why do we need to suffer?"

It was a simple question, and depending on the answer you gave, the test would result in different outcomes.

But, just as I expected, the reality was different from the game. The answer I gave wasn't one of the ones in the game. At that time, I just said what I wanted to, and I got what I wanted.

Bonded Familiar.

Even though I didn't gain anything that would make money, the fact that I got something that could improve my prowess was enough to show that my efforts paid off and that was enough.

With that thought, I stood up and started walking back all the way.

'I guess it is still too early for me to look for runes.'

This mountain range contained quite a lot of runes, but the part was every one of them was actually already consumed by a monster, and the only way to take them off by simply killing it.

'Which is impossible for me.'

The lowest ranked of them would be on the border of rank-6 to rank-7. Right now, even just to reach them, the amount of distance I need to cover and the monsters I would encounter on the way would be enough to kill me.

In the end, the only thing I could do was to return to the academy.....

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As Astron stumbled out of the cave, leaving behind the nightmarish visions and the grotesque abomination, the figure made of darkness chuckled to itself.

"Hahahaha.....It really has been a while...."

The eerie laugh echoed within the confines of the cave, a symphony of malevolent amusement.

'An intriguing soul, indeed,' it mused, its voice a chilling whisper that reverberated in the air.

The shadowy presence shifted and swirled within the depths of the cave, its form amorphous and enigmatic.

It seemed to be both a part of the cave and separate from it, a manifestation of darkness and torment.

Following that, the cave slowly started crumbling.

'I guess this is the end of mine.'

Looking at its own form of crumbling, the figure mumbled.

'I really would like to watch what kind of things he would bring in the future, but I guess I will leave for my other selves.'

In the end, it was nothing but a fragment that was left by its real body before leaving this world.

'Though he was one of those guys, huh? Considering those heretics revering the sun, I guess their counterparts also came to this world.'

The figure felt a pang of regret. It had followed a being, a supposed ally in the realm of light.

The being was once formidable, but it had discarded the figure, leaving it to wither and fragment.

'To think I followed that bastard only to be cast aside like that,' the figure mumbled to itself, bitterness coloring its tone. 'Once a being of immense power, they cast me aside like a useless relic.'

In its last moments, the figure contorted and shifted, taking the form of a three-legged crow.

Chapter 114 Chapter 28.1 - Good natured

After I returned to the academy, the time was already reaching the nighttime almost. I wanted to rest, but the leave I got was only for a day, so I didn't have the time to do so.

In fact, I was not expecting this dungeon to take that huge amount of time, so this could be seen as unpreparedness.

In any case, the moment I reached my room, I immediately went to rest for a little while to get rid of this feeling of nausea.

After that, I woke up very early and started training to fill my empty time with training.

Since I was getting quite a lot of hostility from the people whenever they were present, and they were blatantly trying to make it hard for me, this was actually a good schedule.

After all, most students would be sleeping around 3 AM.....Especially those with little jobs putting their noses into other people's affairs.

My training went on until I got a message from the History and Art Club.

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Subject: Club Meeting

Since the academy had postponed the classes this time, we decided to conduct this week's meeting on the weekdays.

The decided time is Thursday at 1 p.m.

Please contact me if you have anything clashing with the meeting at that time. We will try to adjust accordingly.

Your President, Maya

-----

It was a message befitting of Senior Maya's character, and this act was something I respected about her.

She was diligent and organized, ensuring that the club's affairs ran smoothly even though she was a weird type of character who liked to babble about snacks quite a lot of times.

I replied simply, saying I would be able to join the meeting.

The meeting wouldn't be canceled in the game, and this would also be one of the times when the player would start observing the progress of Sylvie's quest.

'Mason will try to raise his favorability.'

Since the eyes are on demon followers, they can't make direct attempts on Sylvie for the time being; thus, they are trying to play it safe.

After that, as I continued my daily routine, the sun slowly approached the ground.

'125.'

THUD!

As I jumped down from the rope I had been climbing, I looked at my drenched body with sweat.

I had been training my body strength for the whole day, and now the fatigue was starting to kick in.

After taking a quick shower, I headed to the academy's cafeteria, my stomach grumbling in hunger after an intense training session.

As I entered, the usual buzz of students greeted me, though something was a little different.

I made my way to the food counter, ignoring the sidelong glances and hushed conversations that seemed to follow me.

A group of students, engrossed in their own conversation, suddenly fell silent as I passed by. Their eyes bore into me, filled with a mix of curiosity and disdain.

"Isn't that him?" I heard one of them whisper.

"Yeah, the one they say assaulted quite a number of women," another responded, not bothering to lower their voice.

Though, at this point, these types of acts became natural. In fact, since someone was purposefully instigating things like that to happen, I was already prepared for even second, maybe third years to know about this.

'And, this didn't disappoint me. Whoever this is, they can even influence seniors.'

This meant the said person was highly likely also belonged to senior year.

A senior influencing a freshman was a lot easier than a freshman influencing a senior.

In any case, as I sat at my table and started munching my food, I spotted someone I knew.

Yellow silky hair and a smile that makes me uncomfortable, reminding her.

Sylvie and her friends entered the cafeteria. They were chatting animatedly amongst themselves, seemingly caught up in their own conversations.

The two people besides were all people I was familiar with in the game. One of them was a good girl who wanted nothing but the best for her friend.

But the other one was not like that.

'Danielle.'

She was a girl whose true intentions never matched her face at all. After all, she had already made a contract with a demon way before the academy even started.

Her past was briefly mentioned, but it was easy to say that she was jealous of Sylvie. Not specifically Sylvie, but girls with beautiful figures and good talents.

She was also linked to the approaching incident that was about to start happening in two weeks.

'The disappearance of female cadets.'

She would be the main culprit of this incident, and this would also mark the start of the countless demon-related incidents inside the academy since, with this, the academy would start conducting more thorough tests related to demonic energy, and this would force the hands of the demons a lot more.

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As the three sat at their table, they immediately started talking.

Sylvie, the more innocent and reserved among her friends, just started munching her food as her companions animatedly discussed the latest romantic gossip circulating around the academy.

"Have you heard about Professor Alaric and Professor Lorraine? I swear, the chemistry between them is undeniable," one of her friends exclaimed, leaning in with excitement.

Sylvie widened her eyes in surprise. "Oh, really? I had no idea." She replied like that, but in fact, she didn't have any interest in such gossip at all.

She didn't like the idea of continuously discussing other people's love affairs.

"Absolutely! They were seen together at the Red Phoenix Inn last weekend. It's practically a date!" another friend chimed in, delighted to share the scoop.

"Wow, I had no clue," Sylvie replied, trying to keep up with the intrigue.

"And what about Thomas and Lily? It seems like they had a massive argument in the library," a different friend added, intrigued by the drama.

Danielle tilted her head, appearing a bit lost in the conversation. "Thomas and Lily? I didn't know they were having problems."

As the conversation flowed and meandered through the academy's romantic grapevine, the subject naturally turned to the most recent dungeon incident.

"Did you hear about Mark and Evelyn? Apparently, that dungeon incident brought them together," Danielle mentioned with a grin, her eyes glinting mischievously.

Sylvie, who had been quiet during the gossip session, blushed slightly at the mention of the incident.

Since she was reminded of the small memories of those times.

"I will cover you, Sylvie."

She remembered the way he protected her, and it happened over and over again in that dungeon. She also remembered his way of encouraging her.

"You can do it. I believe in you."

Her friends quickly caught the telltale sign of her bashfulness.



"Ooooh," Jasmine teased, leaning in with a playful nudge. "Is there something you're not telling us, Sylvie?"

Sylvie stammered, attempting to downplay the situation. "N-no, it's not like that. It was just a... challenging experience, that's all."

Danielle joined in the teasing, her eyes dancing with amusement. "Oh, come on, Sylvie. A challenging experience, or perhaps a budding romance in the depths of danger?"

Sylvie playfully swatted Danielle's arm, her cheeks now a deeper shade of pink. "Danielle, stop it! It's not like that."

Her friends laughed, the good-natured teasing creating a light-hearted atmosphere. However, in fact, Danielle slightly smiled underneath her face.

"Is it Mason? You said he was in the same team as yours, and you also attended the same club." She knew Sylvie wouldn't normally mention the name of an opposite gender unless that person was someone who caught her attention.

Thus, she deliberately pushed in, and the results were just as she expected.

Sylvie felt her blush deepen, desperately trying to come up with a response. "I-It's not about Mason. Really."

Danielle leaned back, her grin widening. "Oh, come on, Sylvie. You don't just mention someone's name casually like that. Spill the tea!"

Sylvie shook her head, giggling despite herself. "It's really not like that. I just... I thought we worked well together during the dungeon incident."

Jasmine chimed in, adding fuel to the teasing fire. "Working well together, huh? I didn't hear anything about that Mason guy; let me ask a bunch of people first."

Before Sylvie could respond, a voice interrupted their banter. "What's this about me?"

They turned to see a guy with brown hair and an easygoing expression standing behind them, a curious expression on his face.

Sylvie's cheeks flushed even deeper, her face getting crimson from the feeling of shame, and seeing this, Danielle immediately understood who this guy was.

'He is that Mason guy.'?((N1))

She had been trying to crack Sylvie's shell for a while, and she understood now might have been one of the chances.

Danielle winked at Sylvie, her mischievous smile unyielding. "Oh, Sylvie here was just sharing her thoughts on teamwork and dungeons. You know, typical school talk."

Sylvie felt her face heat up further, but Mason just chuckled, playing along. "Ah, I see. Well, teamwork is important in the dungeons, that's for sure. I also liked working with Sylvie quite a lot."

And then he grinned and turned his attention to Sylvie. "Mind if I join you all?"

Danielle, with a playful twinkle in her eye, extended her hand dramatically towards an empty chair. "Why, of course, Mister Protector. Please, be our guest."

Sylvie, despite her embarrassment, managed a shy smile. "Yeah, feel free to sit."

Mason pulled the chair back and sat down, leaning back casually. "Thanks. It was going to be really boring to sit alone." He said, however, he didn't forget to throw a small glance at the group of boys looking at him from a table behind, and they nodded their heads.

Just at the moment Sylvie sat on the table, suddenly she felt the gaze of someone coming from the sides.

'Hmm?'

Turning her head to the source of the gaze, she met with a pair of purple eyes boring through her face. They were the same pair of purple eyes she knew.

However, with her trait, she could see.

The hostile feelings inside the person's heart. And that hostility was so severe that she could almost see it was hatred.

He immediately averted his gaze the moment she met with him, but even then, it was absurd.

'What?'

She asked herself. It was the first time he was showing such emotions, and Sylvie knew they were not normal.

'Why?'

She thought.

'Who is the subject of those emotions?'

Just as she was pondering about that, suddenly, Jasmine remarked.

She had already followed Sylvie's gaze and noticed the purple-haired guy, Astron, looking in their direction.

She frowned, her instincts tingling with unease. Astron was known for his edgy demeanor and the peculiar rumors that seemed to follow him, and she didn't like his attitude at all.

"What's his deal?" Jasmine muttered, shooting a suspicious glance at Astron.

"I don't know." Sylvie didn't want to talk about him here. After all, she still remembered the talk they had and how uncomfortable she was for the whole week after that.

However, Jasmine didn't want to. "Maybe he likes you. Didn't he also pick a fight with you at that time? Maybe he wanted to get your attention."

Sylvie's eyes widened, her face turning even redder. "Hey, it's not like that."

She could see with her trait, and she knew Astron didn't think about her like that.

Jasmine folded her arms, her wariness growing. "You never know. Guys like him can be unpredictable. And you are quite beautiful."

Hearing her words, Sylvie thought about the past and how he had shown that green color. It was not the love, but his feelings were twisted from the beginning.

For her, who knew how different reactions he gave, her friend's explanation sounded plausible.

'No, it can't be like that.'

She wanted to dismiss the idea, but in the end, a small seed of doubt had already been planted in her heart....

Chapter 115 Chapter 28.2 - Good Natured

Be it the game or the real world, there are countless people who are annoying to just watch.

For me, Mason Kent was one of those.

A worm that needs to be stepped on, a bastard whose head needs to be cut and fed to dogs.

For me, he was such an existence.

However, even though seeing those characters is annoying, there are times when we don't have any choice.

In the game, you wouldn't be able to touch Mason Kent without enough preparation and a good location since he was an NPC of the future quests; the developers put quite a lot of effort into protecting him.

But do I have the same restrictions in the real world?

The answer is no. I can kill him right here, right now.

Just an overcharged bullet into his head would be enough.

But that doesn't mean it is something I should do. In the end, killing someone is not something that can easily be done in front of people's eyes unless you have an influential surname at the end of your identity card.

And only killing him also doesn't benefit me.

Thus, the only thing I can do right now is wait and prepare myself when everything aligns itself.

Then, it will be my time.

With those thoughts, I stood up from the table I was sitting at and walked to the exit.

"You guys are all going to the banquet, right."

When I was putting the plates I was using, I heard a familiar voice.

"Yeah.....Father said I needed to attend it."

The group of four individuals entered the cafeteria at the same time. It wasn't something that I would usually pay attention to, but the word banquet got my attention.

'Is it that banquet?'

I asked myself and started listening to them talking.

"Same here. Mine also said I needed to work on my social standing."

"Sigh....It will be the same boring talk all over again."

"Right, I know. At least, last time, something interesting happened."

"Well, since Victor is here, it will probably be interesting."

"That guy could just invite us all. Why did he send formal invitations anyway?"

"Well, he is like that. He probably doesn't want to show favoritism."

"Yeah.....Of course, he is not showing any favoritism by only inviting Julia."

"Tch."

Hearing Victor's name was enough.

Those from renowned families or people with high standing continuously gathered and talked business; thus, it wasn't a surprise that the main characters of the game also went on such banquets.

However, the one that the Blackthorn Family gave was a special event in the game where the first serious interaction with demons was made.

Which was basically the first main event of the game.

'I shouldn't miss this. He will also come, after all.'

In the end, wherever a demon appeared, I would be there; this one was given.

Just like that, I left the grounds of the cafeteria and reached my room.

\*\*\*\*\*

RUSTLE RUSTLE

"Huuuuh...."

Walking on the fallen leaves of the academy's forest, I breathed the slightly chilly air into my lungs. The smell of nature and autumn entered my nose.

'It is getting cold.'

As we progressed with the days of the semester, the winter approached. And now it was just the season interchange times.

"Oh, Junior, you are here."

Just as I was walking, I heard a loud voice.

Standing before me was the purple-haired girl with a wide smile.

"Good afternoon."

Maya immediately appeared before me with her usual cheerfulness.

"Good afternoon, Senior Maya."

I respectfully bowed my head. For me, this person is kind of a master who made me improve so much in that short amount of time, so she deserves respect.

"Hmm....Hmm.....Good....." She nodded her head, humming. I didn't understand why she was looking at me like that, but I decided to brush it off. I had already gotten used to attracting all those gazes from around, and one another wouldn't hurt.

"You are always the first one to come here, junior." She gestured for me to follow as she walked to the meeting place.

"I dislike being late." This was one of my habits. Changing locations and entering a different place always takes time to adapt, and by coming a little early, I am spending my free time adapting if it makes sense.

"It is a good habit."

"Thank you."

"Do you want snacks? Today, I have some rare ones."

Of course, whenever Maya Evergreen enters the equation, the snacks also come with her. And, if I had learned one thing from all these times, refusing her snacks would be pointless.

She never accepts any refusal and forces her way over every time.

"I can take a little."

With my acceptance, she grabbed a bunch of things from her bag. Two balls that had a spectrum of colors. They certainly looked outstanding and different.

'Hmm?'

However, it wasn't only the looks. The smell coming from them was also different a lot.

"Senior, this....."

It reminded me of an incredibly rare item from the game. Even though its taste and smell were something I had never felt, at the very least, I knew how it looked.

"Yeah, you are correct. They are Feywild Dreamplum."

Feywild Dreamplum. It is a special fruit that is very rare to find, not only because it tastes incredibly well but also because it has an incredibly good effect on the mana of the person eating.



Therefore, they are highly sought after and very hard to find.

"Senior....If you know what they are, then why are you giving them to me?" I asked. It was an action that I couldn't quite grasp.

"Why am I giving them to you? Because I am your teacher."

"Teacher?"

"Yep. I am your teacher."

"I don't understand. Even though you are my teacher, isn't it better if you consume them or sell them?"

"Ah, you meant this....." Maya chuckled, twirling a strand of her violet hair. "You are right. As a mage, I would certainly benefit from these fruits." She replied as she held the two balls.

"Then."

"But you see, I have an abundant supply of these Dreamplums back home. I've grown quite resistant to their effects, so they don't offer much to me anymore. But for someone like you, they could be truly beneficial." She replied with a playful grin.

I knew how one could simply grow some resistance to those fruits. After all, in the game, there were those who played the game by making themselves rich and buying every bit of small resources in the game and consuming them. But, of course, the more you consumed the same thing, the less effective it would be.

That was also the reason why naturally developing one's own stats at the early game is more beneficial in the long run.

"So, you can take them without any resistance."

As she said that, she put the fruit on my hand. I didn't know why she was going to this many lengths for me, but she didn't have any ulterior motives. I could read her body and assume that easily. My special trait [Perceptive Insight] wasn't there only for decoration.

"I see. Then, I won't refuse."

Without saying anything more, I simply started munching the fruit. The moment my teeth pierced the peel of it, an incredible taste entered my mouth.

'This is incredible.'

The taste, the way it poured from my throat, everything was picture perfect.

It was by far the best thing I had eaten in this world. And that wasn't all. I could feel the mana inside my body reacting to the fruit. As I consumed the contents, I started feeling my mana sensitivity increasing. It wasn't too much of an increase, but it was still a noticeable change.

I could also feel my mana capacity expanding, and this one was also one of the desired effects.

"How is it?"

I heard Senior Maya's voice coming from the side.

"It was incredible."

"Then, I am glad."

I finished the Dreamplum, still savoring the lingering taste. "Thank you, Senior. I'm really grateful."

"You're welcome, Junior," Maya said, her eyes gleaming with a mix of pride and excitement. "Consider it an investment for the future."

"Investment for the future, you say."

In the game, even though Maya was a named character, we, as the player, didn't know much about her past or her family. So, it was hard for me to understand her intentions.

"Yes, investment for the future."

RUSTLE RUSLTE RUSTLE

Just as I was about to ask what she meant, suddenly, I heard the sound of leaves being crushed.

'Three people.'

Three people were approaching, and from the sounds, I could say that two of them were women while one of them was a male.

"Welcome, Juniors."

Maya also seemed to realize that fact as she immediately jumped from where she was standing while throwing me a wink.

"Hello, Senior."

"Hello."

Two girls greeted her while the boy simply lowered his gaze. He was one of those who tried to ask her out at that time, and it seemed he was still embarrassed about his actions.

"Hello, you too, junior." However, Maya wasn't the one to let that slide, and in the end, the poor guy was dragged with her antics.

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"Hello, everyone," Maya greeted the newcomers cheerfully. "We're just in time for our meeting. Let's gather and get started."

The club members assembled, each finding a spot around a cluster of logs that served as makeshift seating.

"As you all know, today we were going to start with presentations. Anyone wants to start?"

With Amelia's instructions, a girl with good make-up and clothes raised her hand. She seemed eager to start.

"You may go, junior."

"Thank you."

With those words, she stood up and took her position.

"Hello, I-I am Hermione Kline." she began, her voice initially hesitant and trembling slightly. Her hands clutched a notebook, her lifeline to the prepared words she had carefully written.

It was clear that even though she carefully prepared herself, it was her first time giving a presentation. Her voice was a little awkward as she stuttered.

"I wanted to talk about... about the influence of Mana and Otherworldly arts on modern... uh, art." She stumbled over her words, her eyes darting nervously across the faces of the club members.

However, with each of her words, she got better and better.

"In conclusion," she continued, "the presence of otherworlders and their own culture was a factor that shaped the course of art, influencing artists across centuries. It taught us to appreciate the beauty of our own past form, the wonders of the natural world, and the power of mana on aesthetics."

And in the end, she was able to finish her words with a smile.

CLAP! CLAP! CLAP!

With everyone clapping.

Just like that, everyone kept going with their presentations until it was my turn.

Chapter 116 Chapter 28.3 - Good Natured

If one asked what kind of person Astron Natusalune was, Maya would answer a closed individual.

He was a closed and reserved individual who liked to live in his own world without meddling with the affairs of other people.

That was how she would answer, and it was also something that she admired quite well.

The fact that this boy had the ability to simply ignore what other people were saying about himself, the fact that he never leaned on someone or took someone's favor for granted.

Even though Maya wasn't aware of how she looked or how many boys viewed her, at the very least, she knew how humans could be.

When they were in front of a person with high standing, they would always seek favors, and when their relationship slightly developed, they would start asking things.

She knew that since she lived her life in such a manner.

When she was just a child, and she had awakened her talent, most of the time, people came to her and wanted her 'help'.

And she didn't have the ability to say no to things since that was how she was taught, and even now, she was having a hard time doing that.

That was the reason why she also took it for granted for others to accept her help.

When she wanted to give snacks, she thought it was a help. And she always assumed that nobody would refuse it.

"Next up, we have Astron Natusalune. Astron, whenever you're ready." As her friend, Amelia, spoke, she gestured to the boy sitting in the farthest position.

If one looked at him for the first time, one would say he is a gloomy, quiet kid who stutters when he is in front of many people. His clothes and the hood covering his face gave that impression.

However, as Astron stood up, his demeanor was stoic and composed, devoid of emotion, that would have changed.

He had an air of confidence about him different from the impression he gave at first glance, like someone well-versed in the subject of presenting.

"Thank you, Senior Amelia," he acknowledged with a nod, "and thank you all for having me today. My name is Astron Natusalune, and I will discuss the topic of the art of combat and its transformation due to mana."

His voice was clear, without any ounce of awkwardness. His purple eyes swept through the small crowd. Even though almost everyone here was looking at him with squinting gazes, he didn't avert his eyes and responded back.

Maya also knew the rumors surrounding him. After all, quite a lot of people in her class were talking about that. It was a little strange, considering a normal freshman became a topic of the sophomore cadets' attention. After all, they had their own difficulties in school.

But in any case, she knew about the rumors, though she didn't believe them. It was because it didn't make any sense at all.

"In ancient times, fighting was viewed as a means of survival or conquest. With the discovery and harnessing of mana, the essence of combat changed. Mana, a fundamental force of our magical world, intertwines with the practice of fighting, altering it into an art form."

As she listened to his speech, her thoughts continued.

If this boy was such a person, he would be like others, always trying to take advantage of her. However, he didn't.

Rather than receiving her help like it was granted, he asked all the time.

He questioned.

He asked why.

The way he looked at her with eyes saying he couldn't understand at all. And that was one of the things that drew her to him a little.

'Why?'

She also asked this question to herself while listening to his presentation with half attention.

'Why do I want to help him? Why do I want to help others?'

'Do I even want to help them?'

She didn't know the answer herself.

Why did she give him the Feywild Dreamplum?

"Mana adds complexity to movements, allowing practitioners to incorporate the unseen forces surrounding us. It offers fighters the ability to cast spells, channel energy, and create visually impressive displays of power. Each movement, each strike becomes a calculated expression on the canvas of battle. The practitioner manipulates their environment and skills, following a structured pattern."

Was it because she wanted to see him in the future? Was it because she was looking forward to his reaction?

What was the reason?

'I don't know.'

Astron's eyes remained steady as he continued.

"The control of mana infuses style into combat. Similar to an artist choosing a palette, a warrior selects spells and techniques, creating a structured display of skill and power. The flow of mana through a fighter's being guides their movements, adding a rhythmic pattern to the chaos of battle."

At that exact moment, his words reminded her of the time when she was teaching him how to use mana. It was an exciting experience for her since she felt like she was giving shape to a raw material that hadn't been processed before.

And it was a

'Thrilling experience.'

That time, she was not doing something because it was asked of her. Even if at first it started because of the same reason, now it was different.

"In conclusion," Astron stated, "with the appearance of mana, now even swinging the sword with the intent to harm something can become an art itself. The aesthetic sense that mana can add to it makes it an art, and the one who harnesses the mana becomes an artist."

He paused momentarily, allowing the weight of his words to resonate. Then, he nodded slightly, signaling the end of his presentation.

"Thank you for your attention."

SILENCE!

At first, there was a silence as if to protest him. Nobody even moved their hand. Maya also didn't notice that was happening since she was lost in her thoughts.

CLAP!

Then, a first clap sound echoed. It was Sylvie, looking at everyone with a clearly annoyed and angry gaze.



CLAP! CLAP!

And then, everyone started clapping, and Maya did the same.

'I see now.' Maya thought while her hands were hitting each other.

'I want to understand why he is this closed.'

Her eyes followed around the young man returning to his own sitting place.

'What made him approach like that? Then, I can answer these questions in my head.'

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As the presentations concluded and applause filled the air, the club members began to gather, exchanging thoughts and compliments on each other's topics.

Among them were Mason and Sylvie, who found themselves at the center of attention.

It was especially Sylvie, since just like many others, she was also having a hard time speaking in front of people, but she was rather on the shy side.

Amelia, the vice president of the club and a dedicated appreciator of Yuri art, chimed in with an encouraging smile. "Great presentations, everyone. This club is truly flourishing with diverse insights and knowledge."

With her words finished, she subtly raised her glasses with her middle finger and flashed a sly smile. Not every presentation was as enlightening, but she acknowledged that this platform was a slow preparation for the club members to develop their social skills.

'But it's not enough.'

As an art club, they had grander plans. Many artistic pursuits were waiting, and to achieve them, each member needed to master the necessary skills.

'They're not ready for the real artistic journey yet.'

"Now, everyone, please lend an ear for a moment."

As she gathered everyone's attention, she glanced at the plan they had devised.

"Next time, we're delving into ancient civilizations and lost languages after the day of Nexus Convergence. However, rather than fixate on the academic aspect, we'll explore how art evolved and what artistic movements were prominent during that era. We've arranged a special guest for that session, so make sure to mark your calendars and attend."

Amelia scanned the place, noting the nods of approval from the club members. It was a good sign, a sign of the collective excitement for the upcoming exploration of art through the lens of history.

"Thank you for your enthusiasm," Amelia continued her glasses back in their rightful place.

As the club members exchanged glances, absorbing the importance of their next venture, Amelia wrapped up the meeting.

"That's all for today. Feel free to linger, discuss ideas, or simply enjoy each other's company. Let's reconvene for our next meeting with fresh perspectives and a thirst for artistic knowledge. Goodbye for now!"

With her words, the members began to disperse; some of them were chatting about the presentations, while others were simply talking about what they were going to do.

Mason was also one of them as he took a step closer to Sylvie, his friendly smile evident.

"Hey, Sylvie," he started, "a few of us are planning to gather later and study in the library. Would you like to join us?"

Sylvie pondered for a moment, considering the offer. She was always a bit hesitant about such gatherings, but then some of the other girls chimed in with encouraging comments.

"Sylvie, it's a great opportunity to bond with everyone. And we also want to know you better, you know, you are the only healer in this club," one said.

"And Mason's quite the helper when it comes to studies," another added.

Feeling a bit more at ease, Sylvie smiled and nodded. "Sure, I'd love to. Thank you for inviting me."

Mason grinned, pleased with her acceptance. "Awesome! We'll be in the library around four. Looking forward to seeing you there."

With his words finished, Mason left the place, and Sylvie also started gathering her things. Since it was her first presentation today, she brought quite a lot of materials with her, though she forgot to use them.

With Mason gone and Sylvie starting to gather her things, she noticed the persistent gaze from the figure with purple eyes. They were like icy crystals, devoid of emotion yet carrying a tinge of annoyance.

'Why is he looking at me again?' Sylvie wondered, feeling a bit self-conscious under that unwavering scrutiny, as if to remind her of the words of her friend.

The thought made her blush slightly. Thanks to her friend's words, she couldn't help but ponder about that a little.

"What is the matter?" she ventured, her voice betraying a hint of shyness.

Astron, maintaining his aloof demeanor, responded with another question, "Should there be something?"

"You don't look at someone without any reason, right?" Sylvie asked, trying to understand the attention.

"It depends," he replied curtly.

"How?" Sylvie pressed further.

"Sometimes, you just want to look at them," he answered.

Sylvie misinterpreted his words, her face now a shade redder, assuming a meaning beyond his intention. Her heart fluttered momentarily, thinking perhaps he was expressing an interest.

"Ah, well..." Sylvie stumbled over her words, attempting to regain her composure. "I-I thought... I mean, maybe the person you're looking at is uncomfortable with your gaze?"

Astron blinked, still unable to grasp her implication. "Uncomfortable?"

'Did I stare too much?' He thought in his head. Thanks to Mason, he was a bit annoyed, and even his intent was a bit leaking.

Sylvie could feel her face growing hotter with every passing second. "Y-yes, like, uneasy or... bothered?"

Astron's brows furrowed as he processed what she was saying. "Bothered by a gaze?"

Sylvie nodded, feeling her embarrassment mount. "Y-yes, some people don't like being stared at."

He considered this for a moment. "I see." And nodded his head. "I didn't intend to make you uncomfortable, but if my gaze bothered you, then I will be more careful in the future."

He didn't say anything else and simply grabbed his belongings. He also used quite a lot of visual materials for his presentation, but different from her, he used them well.

"See you later."

And just like that, he disappeared.

Leaving a flustered and weirded Sylvie.

"I really don't understand you at all...."

Chapter 117 Chapter 28.4 - Good Natured

[Horde: Sir, the fake identity you have requested is ready.]

[Good. Send me all of the related documents.]

[Horde: They are already sent with the message. The card will also arrive soon with the cargo.]

Sitting on my bed, I was looking at the message that had just come. It was not just the text; the message also had a special picture on the attachments.

"They are quite fast."

I thought to myself.

One of the reasons why I had invested this amount of money in a criminal group called 'Horde' was, of course, their work quality.

They operated fast, and they were mostly safe unless the job that was given contained too many risks.

I opened the image and found the fake identity card bearing the name "Leonard Blackwood." The quality was undeniably impressive, replicating a genuine card down to the finest details.

Leonard Blackwood, a persona crafted to seamlessly blend in, would be my guise to enter the exclusive Blackthorn Family banquet. A gathering reserved for the elite, attendance required an impeccable facade.

"Considering the banquet will happen this weekend, it looks like they want to please me."

Now, the Blackthorn family is one of the most famous and high-ranked families in the Valerian Federation. Therefore, the banquet they are giving can only be attended by people of the same status.

And, since the banquet of the Blackthorn Family was something that not all people could easily access, I needed a fake identity.

A fake identity that would let me enter the banquet but also comes with low risks.

The picture on the identity card showcased a composed and unassuming face—Leonard Blackwood—captured in a moment of professionalism.

It was a face that belonged to a waiter, a person whose purpose was to serve discreetly while being a mere background figure in the opulent event.

He wasn't handsome, and he didn't have any distinct qualities. His hair was black, his eyes were brown, and his body was slightly on the slim side, just like me.

He had graduated from a 2-year course that was given to future waiters who would work in such banquets, and of course, he wasn't an Awakened.

After he finished his course, he was immediately recruited by a fairly well-known agency, and this was his first work in the place.

He was born in the south of the continent, close to the border, and his family had left this world not long after, and now he came the capital to work.

That was basically the background information of our virtual Leonard Blackwood.

KNOCK!

As I continued to scrutinize the identity card, a knock sounded at my dorm room door.

'It must be the cargo mentioned.'

Though the arrival was sudden, it was expected. I swiftly opened the door to find a cargo container containing the materials needed to complete the false identity: a waiter's uniform, a tray, a couple of lenses, small face changers, and other relevant accessories, all carefully packaged to maintain the illusion.

'Everything is thoroughly prepared.'

Of course, I was not expecting such good work, considering they were only known hackers. But, they probably utilized another group in the Darkweb just to make it work.

Even then, it was something that could be easily managed.

'Then, all there is left is preparing for my act.'

Opening my laptop, I opened [MyTube] and started watching a bunch of videos about being a waiter and what the job looked like.

[Perceptive Insight] worked even in things that I wanted to learn from videos; it didn't necessarily have to be something I needed to witness virtually.

This was something that I had overlooked while training and just figured out while watching a video of the course materials.

And now, I was applying this property of my trait into action by doing this.

Open a video, perceive the core points of it, and absorb it into your mind, making it your habit.

That was my goal just now.

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MUSIC

Inside a café that had countless ornaments on the wall and a high-class appearance, six figures were sitting talking to each other.

They looked young and fresh, and every one of them had the appearance to attract the attention of the bystanders just by existing there.

"Aren't they....."

"Yes, they are the new generation nobles."

Even though the term noble had been abolished officially, it was still slang that was used by the people.

After all, there was a distinct difference between some people just by being born. And that was the same with the two people talking to themselves.

"To think that we would see the heirs of five different families here."

"It is my first time as well."

"But, they are just as said. I wish I was born into such a family, too."

"Yeah.....They look good, they have money, they are awakened...Just what more you can want....."

As the two men sent envious gazes to the group, suddenly, a waiter approached them.

"Sirs, may I get your attention."

The waiter's voice was polite but carried a clear warning tone. The two men turned their attention to the waiter, a little startled by the sudden interruption.

"You might want to be discreet with your gazes," the waiter advised, nodding towards the group of six. "They are from prominent families. It's best not to draw too much attention."



Just as the waiter had said, a girl with blazing eyes looked at them like they were bugs. It was clear that she was annoyed.

Realizing their fault, the men quickly averted their gazes and muttered apologies. The waiter, satisfied with their response, returned to his duties.

Meanwhile, at the 'distinguished' group's table, Ethan and the others were engrossed in their conversation about the upcoming banquet and the secret auction.

"I can't believe the Blackthorn Family is putting up those rare materials for auction. It's like they're flaunting their wealth."

Julia said as she looked at the small document sent to her by her father. The others also had the same, so it wasn't much of a secret between the group anyway.

"I mean, this is how they operate, after all," Lucas replied. "It is not like they are lying either."

As he said, the Blackthorn family was one of the strongest families in the Valerian Federation, and this was not just because they had strong and talented hunters.

In fact, their strength came rather from the materials they were mining from dungeons.

Dungeon Mining.

They could acquire special materials that didn't exist in the world before and could only be accessed by dungeons, and they would manage their circulation.

This was one of the strengths of the Blackthorn Family, and at the recent banquet, it was said that they were going to announce their new project and its details.

"Of course, we all know that." Irina chimed in. She looked annoyed a little as she was biting the pitiful cake. "But that doesn't mean it is not annoying."

"Yeah, I agree. They are quite annoying, but I guess that is how they are." Ethan said as he sipped from his milkshake.

The banana flavor was his favorite, and he seemed to be in a good mood.

"Then, did your family instruct you to buy anything?"

The reason why this group of six had gathered here was to discuss the banquet. They were all 'allies' and belonged to the same faction, even from childhood, so they would do it every time.

Whenever their interests clashed, they would find a way from one way to another.

"From the catalog alone, no," Lilia replied, her hands tapping the keyboard of her watch. Even while speaking, she was still working.

"Anyone else?"

"Same."

"Same."

"As expected. Then, does anyone have any information about what they are going to sell as a surprise?"

There was a tradition inside the Blackthorn Family. Whenever they hosted a banquet, they would auction the items, and they would do it in two different ways.

The first auction would be accessible to everyone invited, and the second one would only be accessible to special guests with special invite cards.

"Surprise auctions are always tricky," Lilia continued, glancing at her notes. "They're usually unique, high-demand items that could really make a difference." Considering that she was managing a guild, she was the one who knew how valuable the items sold were.

Ethan leaned forward, his interest piqued. "Any leads on what these surprise items might be?"

There wasn't anything that was requested by his family, but he was looking for an artifact that would be beneficial for his growth since he was still in the early stages of it.

Irina tapped her watch, scrolling through some messages. "I've heard whispers about a rare enchanted gemstone. It's supposed to have unparalleled properties for enhancing magical abilities."

Since she was from a family that was known for their thirst for magic, she was ordered to buy whenever something magic-related appeared with an infinite budget.

Julia nodded. "That would explain why some of the magic-centric families are showing particular interest. The bidding for something like that could be intense."

"True," Lucas agreed, swirling his drink absently. "We need to be prepared for intense bidding wars."

Carl, who had been relatively quiet, finally spoke up. "I've got intel on a unique artifact—a weapon infused with a rare crystal. Rumor has it, it has the ability to disrupt energy-based attacks." He didn't talk much, but when he talked, it was always something important.

Ethan raised an eyebrow. "Now that's interesting. A disruptive weapon can fetch a high price, especially among fighters and hunters."

"In the first appearance, it may look like that, but I don't think the demand will be high."

"Why?"

"It is a Warhammer."

"Ah..."

Just as Carl said, Warhammers were not a type of weapon that was preferred commonly because it required quite a lot of strength to use.

"Then, I assume you will be taking it for yourself."

"I will try."

"Understood. I have no intention of getting a Warhammer anyway."

Lilia, still focused on her work, added, "I'll do some more digging. The more we know, the better our strategy. I will send everyone a detailed report after everything is concluded."

The group nodded in agreement, recognizing the importance of being well informed about the upcoming auctions. They continued discussing potential strategies, possible competitors, and how to navigate the banquet to their advantage.

After talking a little more, the first one to leave was Lilia, as usual.

"You are leaving already?"

"Yeah. I have a meeting in fifteen minutes."

"As busy as ever."

"I will see you at the banquet. Don't forget to check your e-mails."

"Yes, yes....."

And the moment Lilia left, the main motive of the group met its end.

"Then, shall we do something fun...."

Only leaving a bunch of youngsters that wished to have fun.

Chapter 118 Chapter 29.1 - Banquet

In the opulent hall where the Blackthorn Family banquet was to take place, a sizable crowd of staff members had gathered.

-CHATTER!

The buzz of conversation and nervous whispers filled the air. They were to be inspected and instructed for their roles in the grand event.

The head butler, a man of wide stature and an air of authority, stood at the front of the room. His monocle was shining with his white mustache flowing through the corners of his mouth.

His eyes contained cruelty and arrogance as he looked down on countless different people who were gathered here.

Everyone was specifically selected from the agencies that made a name in the sector, but even then, he had complete pride over the fact that he was the worker of world's one of the strongest families.

"Ohom!"

He cleared his throat, and the chatter began to die down.

"Listen up, all of you," the head butler began, his voice firm and commanding. "This is an important occasion for the Blackthorn Family, and your conduct must be impeccable. Any lapse in service or decorum will not be tolerated."

His words may have looked a little tame, but his gaze and the expression of the guards surrounding the crowd were evident.

The lack of toleration meant the end of someone's life....And most people here already knew about whose life it will be....

"This is nerve-wracking," whispered one of the staff members to a colleague. "I hope I don't mess up."

"Me too," the colleague replied, fidgeting with the edge of their apron. "I heard the Blackthorn Family is especially cruel when it comes to small mistakes."

Between the hushed voices, the butler glanced sternly at the assembled staff, emphasizing the seriousness of his words. "First and foremost, we will conduct a spatial-storage artifact inspection. Surrender any such items for inspection immediately. Those found with unauthorized artifacts will be dealt with accordingly."

Even though spatial storage might be a little bit expensive, the workers here were people who would be able to afford the lowest ranks, and the easiness they provided made them worth it.

And even the smallest storage artifact may contain the tools for terrorism, and that was something that always needed to be taken care of by big figures.

The staff members exchanged nervous glances and began removing their spatial storage artifacts, placing them on designated tables for inspection.

Nearby, another staff member eyed the inspection table apprehensively. "I hope they don't find anything wrong with my spatial-storage artifact."

"They're very strict about these things," replied a fellow staff member, their face etched with worry. "I just hope my assignment isn't too challenging."

As the staff members got into the line and their spatial artifacts started one by one, the head butler's gaze didn't leave them.

"Once the inspections are complete, you will be assigned your respective tasks. Serving, guiding guests, and maintaining the decorum of the event are your primary duties. Make sure you do them with precision and grace," the head butler continued.

As the inspections proceeded and the staff members awaited their assignments, the hall grew tense with anticipation.

After all, this moment had the chance to change their lives, and this was something they didn't want to mess up.

However, of course, whenever such huge amounts of people were present, there were bound to be people who were out of the ordinary.

At the inspection table, a stern-looking inspector was scrutinizing the artifacts. "You there? Is this all you have?" His gaze was on the young man with no distinct features.

Black hair and brown eyes, with a slightly slim body. His clothes were clean and ironed, without anything to pick on.

The young man hesitated, then nodded nervously. "Y-Yes, sir. Just a small artifact for carrying my belongings."

However, the inspector was someone who dealt with such things frequently, and he knew a lot of people who thought they were smart would bring another spatial artifact to steal things from the banquet hall.

Even the smallest decoration here would fetch quite a prize, after all.

The inspector didn't seem convinced. He narrowed his eyes, suspicions deepening. "Your ID, then."

The young man fumbled, retrieving his identification card from his pocket and handing it over. The inspector scrutinized it, then glanced up at the nervous young man.

"Leonard Blackwood... Servant staff. Hm," the inspector mumbled, looking at Leonard with suspicion. "Don't think being staff means you can get away with stealing."

Of course, it wasn't that the inspector had already had an opinion about the young man. He was actually using him to set an example for all the people here, and with his gaze, he was also checking if his ID matched with the ones in the database.

The monocle on his left eye was working as an artifact and analyzing the small facial features of the young man and was showing his name.

'It is matching.'

Even though he had already confirmed the young man's background, he still needed to continue with his act.

Seemingly looking like he wasn't convinced, he signaled to a couple of guards nearby. "Search him thoroughly. We can't afford any thefts during this banquet."

Two guards approached Leonard and began a detailed search. A small artifact was in their hands, and they swept his whole body off with the artifact.

DING!

"Nothing is here, sir."

The guard said as he looked at the small stick-like artifact. However, for some reason, the inspector's gaze lingered on the small bracelet on his arm.

"What is this bracelet?"

Since bracelets were the type of spatial artifacts, it was a normal question. Also, he was getting a feeling that the bracelet wasn't something normal. Its black color and silver ornaments gave it a unique look.

"Ah.....This...It is nothing much, just a family heirloom." The young man replied, as his tone slowly lowered at the end. He looked a little nostalgic, and a faint smile appeared on his face.

The inspector's eyes flickered with a hint of sympathy at the mention of a family heirloom. He knew that sometimes, even the toughest of folks could have their soft spots when it came to family. "A family heirloom, you say?" he inquired, his voice less stern.

Leonard nodded, his gaze dropping to the bracelet. It was a simple, delicate piece passed down from generation. "Yes, sir. My mother gave it to me before she... passed away." His voice wavered slightly, a hint of sadness in his eyes.

The guards, sensing the emotional weight of the situation, looked at each other and then back at the inspector. They both knew that sometimes, these searches could become very personal and sensitive.

'What a bright young man.'



He was reminded of the times when he was also the same, and he remembered how he felt. A small feeling of empathy arose deep inside his heart. And since the bracelet didn't give any warning from the searching artifact, he knew he didn't need to be overly conscious.

The inspector took a moment to evaluate the situation. He was stern when it came to security, but he also had a compassionate side. "I understand the sentimental value of a family heirloom," he said, finally. "It seems you're clean. Carry on with your duties, Mr. Blackwood."

A clear relief washed over Leonard's face, and he nodded gratefully. "Thank you, sir. I appreciate your understanding."

As Leonard walked away, the inspector couldn't help but feel a twinge of sympathy. Sometimes, enforcing security meant balancing protocol with compassion. He continued his inspection, his gaze now softer, understanding the weight of emotions even a small artifact could hold.

But, no one noticed the brief second change in the walking young man's expression.

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The evening had arrived, and the grand banquet hall of the Blackthorn Estate was ablaze with opulence.

Chandeliers hung from high ceilings, cascading light in shimmering patterns across the room. The air was a mixture of floral fragrances and the anticipation of a distinguished event.

No personnel could be seen there, as the only ones that would be standing were people attending the banquet.

And just like that, the guests, dressed in their finest attire, began to arrive.

The head butler, a tall man named Reginald, stood at the entrance, exuding an air of poise and efficiency. As each guest approached, he greeted them with a welcoming smile.

"Good evening, sir/madam," he would say, extending his hand in a gesture of warm welcome. "We are honored to have you with us tonight. Your presence adds to the grace of this gathering."

"Thank you."

"May I please look at the invitation card?"

It was the same process that happened even at the beginning of the governing world. If a person was someone who wasn't known to the social world of higher profile people, they would show their invitation cards.

This was not because of the Blackthorn Family workers were lacking, but it was rather a show of authority and acknowledgment.

"Good evening, Lord Harrington. Your presence elevates our event," Reginald greeted a distinguished guest, exchanging a firm handshake.

"Thank you, Reginald. The pleasure is mine," Lord Harrington replied graciously.

People who were like Lord Harrington were already recognized by the head butler of the Blackthorn Family, and this was the disparity.

Even these small actions actually gave a message to the bystanders.

Just like that, one by one, the guests were welcomed with either acknowledgment or an identity check mixed with courteous remarks.

They were of varied backgrounds, from fellow noble families to esteemed colleagues, all here to witness the marvels the Blackthorn Family had to unveil.

THUD!

And just at that second, the grand doors of the banquet hall swung open, revealing a group of distinguished individuals entering in unison, gathering everyone's attention on them....

-THUD!

The moment the door swung wide open, it revealed six young individuals who immediately gathered every bit of attention to themselves.

Each had a presence that commanded attention and respect since every one of them was one of the high-ranking members of the society.

A young man with his wavy blue hair and sharp hazel eyes stood tall with a smile. He had an amicable expression and looked easily approachable.

Beside him stood two young men.

One, a handsome figure with white hair and cold blue eyes. His usual smiling face was nowhere to be seen, and his gaze was piercing.

On the other side, a small giant followed, with his disciplined posture and the aura of a warrior. His buzzcut hair and posture alone showed he was a descendant of a soldier.

The three boys had similar clothing, and their suits looked like they were tailored specifically for each of them, and the brand Mythweave on the suits.

A special brand that made clothes for high-ranking young men and was famous all around the world. They were shining brightly, complimenting the incredibly handsome features of the three, making them the center of attention.

"These features....Isn't he from the Hartley Family?"

A young woman spoke, looking at the newcomers. She was a journalist who was waiting at the entrance to take photos of the celebrities.

"Yes. He is the youngest member of Hartleys, Ethan."

Her question was answered by her colleague.

"Hmm? Ethan Hartley?" However, she didn't know much about the young man whose name was mentioned. It was pretty normal since Ethan's reputation had yet to bloom in the sector of paparazzi.

"He is not that known yet since he is a rather late bloomer."

But, the word 'late bloomer' was enough to make her understand. The sources belonging to their agency had obtained the information from the Hartley family, and they knew the one heir that the patriarch was disappointed with.

"Ah.....He is the Scapegoat of Hartleys, right?"

"Ssh....Lower your voice."

"Hick! Right!"

Of course, mentioning him like that would bring disaster to their agency. What they were talking about was Hartleys, after all, a family that had a lot of influence as well.

"The Middletons are here too? That's Lucas Middleton, right? So striking."

"Is that Carl Braveheart? Just as it was said, the blood of giants runs in his veins!"

Then, just on the right side of the three young boys were another three girls.

One was an ethereal beauty with white hair and striking blue eyes. Her hair was a bob-cut, and she was curiously looking around. Her facial structures were similar to the young man beside her, just as if they shared the same blood.

"That girl with white hair... she must be Julia Middleton. Such elegance. Just like her twin, her looks shouldn't even be compared to those so-called models."

"Don't ever think she is just someone beautiful, or you will miss the most important thing."

"What?"

"She is a hunter just like her father, you know. I heard she had already mastered the Fifth Style of the Middleton Family."

"That Fifth-Style? At the age of 15?"

"Yes."

And then, just to make it contrast, the one beside her had a blazing feature. She gave a fierce and arrogant aura as if the world belonged to herself as if she was the one commanding everyone here. The fiery mage with red hair and yellow eyes made her entrance with a flicker of magic in her presence.

"Irina Emberheart, the fire mage, they say she's vying for the title of Archmage after her mother."

"But, the rumors surrounding her is a bit...."

"We both know who they are competing with, right?"

"I know."

And lastly, the stunning beauty whose elegance exceeded even the previous empresses. Green hair floating like the wind and red eyes burning crimson.

The way she carried herself, the dress she had chosen, and her small gestures.....All captured the attention of the young man present.

Women sent envious glances while their partners were in a trance.

"The Thornheart heir, Lilia... she's captivating, isn't she? A vision."

"Yeah.....She is.....Isn't she operating the guild her father gave her?"

"Yes."

"Wow, she is doing that while also maintaining her grades in the academy....Certainly, a genius blessed by heavens."

"If it exists."

"If it doesn't, then I don't know what to call her anymore."

"True."

Cameras clicked and flashed as the journalists tried to capture the essence of the gathering. The anticipation and excitement in the air were palpable.

These young individuals, heirs to renowned families and possessors of extraordinary abilities, were a spectacle in their own right. The atmosphere buzzed with intrigue, and guests leaned closer to each other, exchanging snippets of information.

Amidst the murmurs and commotion, a dignified personage strode through the gathering with piercing eyes and a formal manner.

Reginald, the head-butler of the Blackthorn family and the main organizer of the event, had arrived to welcome his guests.

He approached the group with a warm smile, a practiced grace in his movements. "Ah, the esteemed representatives of renowned families," he greeted, offering a respectful bow.

Ethan and others stepped forward, each giving a polite bow or a firm handshake. Their upbringing in noble families had prepared them for such formalities.

"Mr. Reginald, it's an honor to be here," Lilia expressed with her usual elegance and her business-like polite tone. Even though the person was the butler of the Blackthorn family, that didn't mean he was someone to take lightly.

In fact, he was one of the most dangerous individuals to put an eye on.

"Indeed, the honor is mine," Reginald replied, his eyes subtly assessing the young individuals before him. "It warms my heart to see the future leaders of our society gathered in one place."

He then gestured towards the grand banquet hall. "Please allow me to escort you to the hall, where the festivities will soon begin."

As the group followed him into the hall, whispers continued to follow their wake, speculating on the interactions and connections between these young luminaries and the illustrious Blackthorn family.

After all, the six of them entering the banquet just like they had always done before meant one thing.

The alliance between the five families.

The Pentagon.

The five families, each having their own strength, complete themselves like a star.

The group entered the grand banquet hall, its opulence leaving them momentarily speechless. The room was a symphony of elegance adorned with shimmering chandeliers, intricately carved woodwork, and luxurious tapestries that narrated the Blackthorn family's legacy.

Soon after, various attendees, dressed in their finest attire, began to approach them. Some were curious onlookers eager to catch a glimpse of the future leaders, while others were keen on striking up conversations.

A middle-aged man adorned in a tailored suit with an air of affluence approached Lucas.

"Ah, Mr. Middleton, I've been following your family's sword techniques for years. Your skills are unparalleled."

Lucas answered with a professional smile that was different from the usual one. "Thank you, sir. It's an honor."

Just like this one, others were immediately surrounded by countless people.

Julia was engaged by a fellow swordswoman, eager to discuss technique and styles. Their conversation quickly delved into the intricacies of their art, while Irina found herself amidst a group of mages who all wished to be part of Magic Tower in her country, passionately discussing the potential of their magical abilities.

Lilia, with her grace and beauty, attracted a number of admirers, both male and female, who sought to strike up conversations or gain her favor. She handled their attention with poise and charm, a skill honed through years of social interactions.

Through the evening, the group navigated through an array of conversations, exchanging pleasantries and thoughts while the buzz around them continued to grow. It was clear that their presence had ignited a spark of anticipation and excitement among the guests.

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"Ah! Really....I would really be happy to become the face of your new brand."

"What about me?"

"Of course, Shelly. You will be included as well."

"I will look forward to it."

"Then, we will meet later."

"Okay."

"Have a good banquet, Miss Lilia."

"Tch...They finally left." Lilia mumbled to herself as she looked at the departing figures of the three young girls. They all had beautiful clothes covering themselves, and all of them had good postures like models. It was evident that they were rich people.



She couldn't just ignore them since the Thornheart family had a close business relationship with each of their families, and they were essential figures for the future she envisioned for her guild.

Though, she disliked the way they spoke and talked. Most of the talk was about gossip and how some random guy broke up with some random girl.

It had been a long time since she started ignoring all those types of 'information' since it wasn't even worth her little time.

'Bunch of plastics.'

As she thought that, she slowly turned her attention to her group. She was dragged away to have a conversation, but now she had finally finished all the people she wanted to talk to so she could have a real talk with her friends.

There, she saw the other five in the same position as her, and she immediately joined them.

"Oh, Lilia. You are here too." Julia immediately welcomed her as she took a sip from her drink. She looked unconcerned like she had always been.

"The talk is finally over?"

"Yeah....."

Following her words, Lucas let out a mock, exasperated sigh, ruffling his hair. "Phew, can we just talk about how utterly exhausting this whole 'being heirs' thing is?"

Julia grinned, rolling her eyes. "Tell me about it. I felt like a trophy for most of the evening."

Lucas continued, mimicking a formal tone, "Ah, yes, you're the future of the family, delightful to meet you. I lost count of how many times I heard that."

Irina leaned against the wall, arms crossed. "And the constant small talk? I'm more interested in magic theory than the weather."

Julia, with a mascot act, added, "Don't forget the endless comparisons to our legendary ancestors. 'Your grandfather did this,' 'Your great aunt was that.' It's a broken record."

Of course, even though it was annoying, Lilia knew the importance of being the main topic of gossip.

"Well, at least they think highly of us. Being the subject of gossip isn't all bad." And she added.

Lucas laughed, the weariness of the evening momentarily forgotten. "True. The paparazzi might have a field day tomorrow."

Just as the group continued their light talk, suddenly, Lilia noticed something.

A person to be exact.

'Hmm?'

She had a habit of continuously looking around while talking with people. It was an act that she developed to be on guard all the time.

A simple waiter was serving the drinks to the people attending the banquet.

Normally, such things would never take her attention, but being an archer, her gaze was detailed.

Black hair and brown eyes were completely ordinary. His demeanor was ordinary, and his facial features were also ordinary.

'Something is off about this guy.'

Everything about him was normal aside from one thing. His face would twitch unnaturally from time to time.

As if it was artificial or something that was tempered.

Something criminals used.

Of course, it was just a hunch.

So, she was about to activate her skill just to check, but at that second, suddenly, the lights of the banquet went down as the classical music ringing out turned off.

"Ladies and gentlemen. May I get your attention, please?"

Chapter 120 Chapter 29.3 - Banquet

"Ladies and gentlemen. May I get your attention, please?"

As the sound of the young man echoed inside the room, the lights dimmed, and the room hushed.

Focusing on the stage, there stood a young man with lights focusing solely on him. It was as if he was the main character of this event; he was smiling broadly while looking at the crowd before him.

His attire consisted of the most famous and expensive brand in the world, and his shining green eyes were like a snake.

The dark chestnut hair and incredibly handsome features raised his charisma to another level, coupled with the faint pressure he was releasing.

He was a person that Irina was quite familiar with.

A person who was close to the boy she liked. His older brother.

Kaiser Blackthorn.

The current face of the Blackthorn family and the person who is said to have the highest chance of winning the inheritance.

'His features are certainly like him.'

Irina thought as her eyes wandered around to see her 'crush.' However, she couldn't find him at the end.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Kaiser began, his voice resonant and engaging. "It's an honor to have you all here tonight. As many of you know, the Blackthorn family has always been at the forefront of innovation, particularly in the field of dungeon mining."

As the young man spoke his words, suddenly, a special phenomenon made from pure mana occurred on the stage.

A holographic presentation appeared. There could be seen a special structure that looked like a three-dimensional print of a surface.

"This is a special type of dungeon that is under the supervision of our family." He stated as he looked at the structure of the dungeon. "And, today, I will unveil the latest technology that our team has been working tirelessly on."

He went on to explain the new technology they had developed, a cutting-edge method to extract stones and ores from the dungeons with increased efficiency and precision. The room listened intently, impressed by the advancements in this age-old industry.

It was the same with Lilia and Irina. They were both engaged in the industry of dungeon mining since their families also owned some small companies. Thus, they were able to see how effective this new method was.

"It is crazy, right? If they are telling the truth." Irina mumbled to Lilia as she looked at the figures shown.

The fact that the Blackthorn Family claimed at least a %12 increase in efficiency itself was groundbreaking and something that every power in the world needed to be aware of.

"Indeed, though that is if they are telling the truth." Lilia agreed, though she looked skeptical.

"But tonight, I bring you even more exciting news," Kaiser continued, his eyes shining with enthusiasm. "Through our latest efforts, we have uncovered a new, mysterious ore within the dungeons. This particular one holds immense potential and could revolutionize various sectors of our world."

-CHATTER!

The crowd erupted into murmurs and whispers, the excitement palpable. Lilia, her curiosity piqued, leaned closer to her friends, her eyes fixed on Kaiser.

Kaiser's gaze swept across the audience. "This one, which we've named 'Nexirium,' possesses unique properties. It is not only stronger and more durable than most known materials, but it also has exceptional magical conductivity. We believe it holds the key to groundbreaking advancements in both technology and magic."

His eyes were shining as the small module of the Nexirium appeared on the hologram. It was a material that had a silver-white color shining.

Everyone's eyes lit up at the mention of magical conductivity.

The stabilization and durability of the material were important, but nothing could go past the magical conductivity.

For Awakened people, having a weapon that enabled them to use mana was a lot more important.

"Our researchers are tirelessly studying Nexirium to unlock its full potential," Kaiser continued. "We anticipate its utilization in forging stronger weapons, more durable armor, and even as a catalyst for advanced magical spells."

CLAP! CLAP! CLAP!

As the applause for Kaiser's presentation subsided, he concluded, "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your attention. We are truly excited about the future that Nexirium promises. Now, as a token of our appreciation for your support, we are pleased to announce the usual ending event for tonight—the Blackthorn Family Auction."

The room buzzed with anticipation as the attendees settled into their seats, eager for what was to come. The Blackthorn Family Auction was known for offering unique and valuable artifacts and materials, and one of the things that people were drawn to this banquet.

"It is finally here."

Irina mumbled. Even though the presentation was good and Kaiser's unique halo was effective, in the end, she got bored since half of the talks were actually praising their product and word plays. And she hated those wordplays. It made her want to puke.

Kaiser gestured to a set of assistants who wheeled in display cases showcasing the auction items. "We have an array of remarkable items for you to bid on, all sourced and crafted with great care by our family. From enchanted jewelry to rare magical artifacts, you'll find something that piques your interest."

Ethan, Lucas, Julia, Carl, Irina, and Lilia had already examined the catalogs and discussed the potential acquisitions. So for them, they were already prepared, but that wasn't the case for all the people here.

As Kaiser gestured towards the display cases where the items were kept, hidden behind the glass, some of the attendees exchanged eager glances and leaned forward, anticipating a closer look at the items that would soon go up for auction.

"The auction will commence shortly," Kaiser announced a tinge of excitement in his voice. "But first, we'll need to distribute the bidding numbers. Our esteemed waitstaff will be assisting with this."

Attendees began to murmur amongst themselves, their excitement growing as they anticipated the items that were about to be revealed. The anticipation was palpable, the air buzzing with excitement and intrigue.

As the waiters began to move through the audience, distributing the bidding numbers, each attendee received a small plate with a unique number inscribed upon it.

The bidding numbers were essential for participating in the auction, allowing everyone to place their bids.

While everyone was getting their numbers, Irina was busy looking around to see any remnants of Victor.

He specifically invited Julia, and even though this made her blood boil, it also made her sure that he would appear here.

And just as she was looking around, suddenly, she felt a stinging pain in her arm.

"Hmm?"

Looking at the front, she saw the waiter who would give her number before her eyes and was looking down.

"Ah, I am sorry."

The waiter said with an apologetic tone.

Irina understood he probably mistakenly touched her skin with the sharp part of the envelopes.

"It is fine."

Normally, she would get angry and reprimanded, but seeing the guy bowing his head immediately, she decided it would be a waste of time.

However, as she dismissed the waiter, she noticed that Lilia's gaze was on him.

Irina's curiosity was piqued by Lilia's sudden interest in the waiter. She knew her well enough to sense when something was amiss.

"Hey, can you look for a second?" Lilia asked, her eyes narrowing slightly.

The waiter, startled, looked up, meeting Lilia's inquisitive gaze. He seemed a bit nervous under the scrutiny.

"What's your name?" Lilia asked, her tone polite but direct.

"Uh, it's Leonard," the waiter stammered, glancing nervously between the two.

"Do you mind showing us your identification as proof?" Lilia continued, her observant eyes now fixated on the young man.

Leonard hesitated for a moment, then nodded. He reached into his pocket and carefully retrieved his identification card, offering it for inspection.

Irina also leaned closer to get a better look at the ID. As she did, thanks to the small lighting, her eyes caught sight of a small black bracelet on his wrist.

It was a thin, unassuming accessory, but for some reason, she felt familiar with the bracelet.

'Where did I see this?'

She asked herself. The bracelet didn't look too showy, but it still had its own charm and uniqueness.

'Whatever.'

However, she immediately brushed it off.

For a random waiter to occupy even this amount of place in her mind was something he should be grateful for.

-THACK!

Just as Lilia was about to say something, suddenly, the lights were once again focused on the stage as the first item of the auction was being displayed.

"You can go."



Seeing this, Lilia also dispersed her thoughts and decided to let it be since the chatter had long subsided, and causing a scene in the Blackthorns' banquet had the chance to provoke them, which wasn't something she preferred.

At that exact second, a woman appeared on the scene.

Kaiser's assistant, a poised young woman in a sleek black dress, stepped forward onto the stage. The anticipation in the room was almost tangible as she began to introduce the first item up for auction.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we begin tonight's auction with an extraordinary piece—an Enchanted Sapphire Pendant," the assistant announced, unveiling the delicate jewelry in a glass display.

As the bidding started, the room was filled with the hum of voices, the excitement growing as attendees placed their bids with their unique bidding numbers.

Not everyone here was people with renowned families. There were some who didn't make any name or someone who was just talented; thus, they were also trying to enter the world of rich people in such works.

Meanwhile, the waiter also seized the opportunity to slip away quietly.

He had completed his task of distributing the bidding numbers and didn't want to draw any unnecessary attention to himself.

His departure went unnoticed in the bustling atmosphere of the auction.

Irina, though still slightly intrigued by the bracelet and the fleeting memory it had stirred, refocused her attention on the auction. The bidding continued, each item presenting a new wave of excitement and competitive offers.

One by one, the items were presented—a set of enchanted rings, a rare spellbook as the loot of a dungeon, and a pair of mana-engineered boots.

The bidding grew more intense with each item, and the auction hall was abuzz with both the fervor of competition and the anticipation of what would come next.

Until, suddenly, the banquet room that was slightly dark shone for a millisecond.

-BOOM!

Followed by the sound of an explosion.