

H. Academy 131

Chapter 131 Chapter 30.4 - Conversation

In this world, there are things that are given to us from the start that are very important in our lives and hold significant value.

However, most of the time, we wouldn't be able to learn how to use all those things in the most efficient way.

A person can be strong, but they may not necessarily be able to utilize that strength in the best way.

But, as we live our lives and age, by our nature, we develop and evolve. And, as we evolve, we gradually get better at utilizing things that are gifted to us from the start.

This was the same as my [Perceptive Insight].

The trait that enabled me to grasp the essence of the 'things' that I had 'observed' and I had 'studied' faster than normal.

I had been training with my dagger, with my bow skills, and with my mana control, utilizing this trait while observing how other people did, but as I used the trait more and more, I realized that my trait wasn't limited to things like swinging weapons or combat.

I could get better at things related to daily life or utility. Like how to run in the most optimal posture, how to make a meal without giving up a huge amount of time, how to sleep in the wilderness with your guard up, how to scan the terrain to get a better position, how to stretch and train my muscles for optimal body...

The examples could go on like that, but essentially, my trait's only limit was actually my own thoughts and myself.

And, while I was training with Ethan and sparring with him, I realized one thing. He was actually reading my moves in such a way that his body was moving on its own.

As if, rather than thinking about how he needed to move to evade or deflect my attack, something else was doing it for him.

'He is a real protagonist.'

It was something that I had never encountered before and something that differed Ethan from other people in this world.

If he was the protagonist of this world, then he was bound to be different, and that was now showing itself.

He had the talent in combat that could be easily seen. But what was that talent, I asked myself.

The answer that I came up with was the thing that people in this world called 'Mirage.'

It was not something that was known worldwide but something only a handful of close combatants knew.

Those who had the talent to 'feel' their weapon instinctively.

As if they knew what to do even before they could see or sense. If this were a video game, people would call it script.

But identifying something and understanding how it worked were two different things, especially when it came to things that I couldn't directly see with my eyes.

Things that were more like a 'concept.'

However, while continuously parrying his attacks and getting hit, suddenly, a thought came into my head.

'What if I can perceive how he does it?'

That what-if question was the tiny spark that ignited the idea in my head.

If I could get how Ethan was able to do it somehow, that meant I could also do it like Ethan did, and more importantly, I could create something to counter it.

And thus, for me, the second phase of the spar started.

As I was pushed back by his spear, at first, nothing came into my mind, as if what I was doing was pointless.

However, as I continued to fight with him and tried to attack, gradually, things started appearing in my mind.

As if something was telling me to defend in this state.....

Or it was a thread that appeared randomly and stated when I should have attacked. But even then, it was not complete.

I wasn't able to keep up with Ethan's way of doing that and the way his spear moved.

But, at that one strike, when his spear stabbed me three times.

At the third stab, I was able to 'feel' it. And, my dagger moved on its own to parry the attack. I was able to glance at that Mirage even for one second.

However, was that enough?

If I and Ethan had the same thing, then he would surely be able to counter the attack I was going to follow with.

Then, another 'feeling' appeared in my mind, different from the previous one. And, as if to showcase that feeling, this time, I moved my body. First, it was a palm, and then it was a dagger strike.

But I instinctively knew Ethan wouldn't be able to sense it, let alone understand it because it was my own interpretation of countering the Mirage.

"You should never stop doubting Ethan."

I said as I retracted my dagger from Ethan's neck.

'It hurts.'

My arm was hurting, and it was shaking. My body was tired from the continuous spar, and my low constitution was now showing its deficiency.

"I should never stop doubting, huh?" Ethan mumbled as he grabbed his spear, pointing to the ground. "You are right." He had a slight smile on his face as he said that. "I guess nothing is indomitable in this world."

Different from me, Ethan wasn't that tired, and neither was he injured that much. I was able to land a bunch of hits on him, but none of them went past his skin and were strong enough.

"Then, should we call it a day?" Ethan asked, looking at my arm.

"We should," I answered. I could grab a potion and heal myself, but I needed some things to think about, and I didn't want to talk any longer.

"See you later then." As Ethan said those words, I grabbed my bag and left the room with my arm in pain, walking to my own room.

"What a crazy guy," Ethan mumbled after Astron left. "But, it was an eye-opener."

For him, who had just recently discovered how it 'felt,' he was excited like a child finding a new toy.

But, now, that excitement was cooled down.

"They are your enemy, huh?"

He raised his spear once again as he mumbled while opening a certain app on his watch.

"I really wonder what happened to you."

The curiosity grew, but Ethan wasn't someone to disrespect other people's boundaries just because he was curious.

"Let's wait until you open yourself."

[Single Training Mode activated. Stage 5. 10 seconds to start.]

With those words, he activated the training mode of the room as golems appeared in front of him.

Just like the guy who left, Ethan was apparently a training maniac as well.

[Horde: Sir, the items you have requested us to sell have been sold.]

Sitting in my room, I was looking at the message that came from the special hacker group I had hired.

[Good. Were there any obstacles or any way to trace back?]

[Horde: No, sir. We are sure there wasn't anything that could be suspected. As you requested, we made it so that the dungeon materials you had sent were sold under the name of Blackthorns, and we are sure even their own employees can differentiate it.]

[Well done. Keep the money in that account; I will contact you when I need cash.]

[Horde: Understood.]

As I closed the message, I looked at the gun in my hand.

"The money is slowly flowing."

I sent some of the items to Horde, as they were rather easy to find, and opted them to sell those.

"But, two hundred thousand Valer, huh?"

Considering the fact that Irina was able to simply give me 150k Valer without getting stingy, it was clear that this amount of money was not that much.

However, it was enough to invest.

"Adding the money that will soon come from Emily's guild, it should be enough to play with the stocks for a while."

As I had said, my [Perceptive Insight] enabled me to understand things faster, and that also applied the analysis of the stock market.

Even though it was rather a gamble and contained a lot of risks, as I studied the stocks, I gradually got better at it.

"At the end of this semester, I will be rich enough."

With that thought, I started wandering in the stock market as the time to go to sleep approached.

<Wednesday Morning>

Inside the bustling grounds of the academy grounds, the site of the practical lessons was filled with students.

Some had sleepy expressions, while others had excited ones.

As they gathered, whispers and conversations swirled among the students, particularly about their recent joint dungeon practice.

"Ugh, I got the lowest grade in the last joint dungeon. I hope this one goes better," one student confessed, a hint of concern in their voice.

Another student chimed in, "I heard the grading was pretty harsh last time. I don't want another bad score."

A third student held a hint of pride, saying, "I did decently, but this time, I'm aiming for a perfect score. We need all the points we can get."

As they discussed their past performances and aspirations for the upcoming practical lesson, there was a mix of determination and trepidation in the students' voices.

One drowsy student interjected, "What's even the point of striving for high grades? They don't measure our true talents."

A fellow student teasingly responded, "Coming from someone ranked 87th, Julia, it doesn't carry much weight."

Julia let out a nonchalant yawn. "I don't need to convince anyone. I just want to sleep."

Her peer inquired, "What kept you up last night?"

Julia chuckled, "I was playing that new game."

"New game? Tell me more."

"The one where you can fight to your heart's content."

Amid the students' chatter, a commanding presence suddenly made itself known.

"Attention."

It was their stern instructor, Professor Eleanor, who had silenced the discussions.

"As you all know, mid-terms are approaching, and we are about to enter the second half of our semester." Professor Eleanor's words carried the weight of responsibility, anchoring the students' focus on the academic journey ahead.

"As we progress into the second half of our semester," Professor Eleanor continued, her gaze sweeping across the assembled students, "there will be some adjustments to your sparring partners. This change is designed to enhance your training and provide you with a broader perspective on combat."

A murmur of curiosity and excitement rippled through the students. The prospect of encountering new sparring partners brought a sense of anticipation.

"I encourage all of you to use this opportunity to challenge yourselves," Professor Eleanor urged, her stern expression softening slightly. "Embrace new perspectives and strategies. It's through such diversity that we grow and improve."

She paused for a moment before delivering a stern reminder. "However, this doesn't mean you should neglect your studies. Mid-term exams are approaching, and your academic performance is just as important. Do not underestimate the value of knowledge in becoming well-rounded warriors."

With her final words of encouragement, Professor Eleanor raised the paper in her hand.

"And now, I am going to announce everyone's sparring partner for today."

Chapter 132 Chapter 31.1 - Before Mid-terms

"The last one."

As Eleanor said that, her gaze turned to the student whom she had one of the least favorable impressions.

"Astron Natusalune and Aliyah Shaw."

The boy with pitch-black hair was sitting at the back of the place. He didn't have anyone sitting close to him as if he was some sort of plague.

And considering the rumors surrounding him, that made sense. Even as an instructor, she had heard about all those rumors, and certainly, they were quite disturbing.

However, different from the youngsters who didn't know about the world, she was well aware that all those rumors couldn't be true at the same time. Even if Astron had a criminal history, something that exaggerated wouldn't be the case.

However, even then, it didn't change the fact that he was someone who was hard to be on equal grounds and with the attitude of a teen.

"Get ready for your positions."

But, remembering what she had seen at the joint dungeon examination and the examination before that, she couldn't help but think something had changed about him.

'Still, he can't be the one.'

But, in the end, she disregarded the small thought she had for a brief second.

"We will start soon."

And, she returned to her usual stern tone.

"Hey, bastard."

A crooked voice came before me as I reached the spot where I would have my spar. There stood a girl with tanned skin and yellow eyes looking at me with a clear blaze.

"....."

She was the sparring partner I would have for a while, Aliyah Shaw. Another minor extra-like character that didn't have much screen time. She was a girl who liked to joke loudly in class and, most of the time, acted like a boy.

Her short-cut hair and usage of words all belonged to a category that was called 'tomboy.'

Though sadly different from Julia, she was not a main character. Thus, she would always be soon forgotten by the players.

"Hey, bastard, are you deaf?"

But then again, in this real world, there was no such thing as screen time. Every person has their own life, and time also flows for them.

And now, I need to spar with the girl before me. Even though she seemed to have a bad impression of me, I couldn't do much about it for the time being.

"I can hear you just fine."

To respond, she sneered, her yellow eyes narrowing. "I've heard all kinds of stories about you, like you being a womanizer and hitting a girl."

'Again, with those rumors.' I thought as I readied myself for the spar while grabbing my weapons. Since I was now officially registered as a bowman and a Daggerist, I needed to use both of them while being graded.

"So what?" I answered. At this point, reacting to those allegations was too bothersome for me.

"So what?? Don't you have anything to say for yourself?"

"I don't. You are allowed to believe whatever you want."

"Ah, of course.....I wouldn't expect less from a bastard like you."

Most of the time, people who thought they were some sort of moral police would demand an apology from the other party.

This is also known as political correctness.

People who get 'offended' by other people's actions who don't directly affect them. Just like this girl before me.

Even though I had never talked with her before, nor had I done something to her, she still got offended by my imaginary actions and now wants to bring the 'justice' she deemed yourself.

"Get your weapon; I am going to crush you." The ferocious expression on her face was the proof of that.

"Is that so?"

"It is."

SMASH!

She smashed her gauntlets, scrubbing them into each other as she revealed a predatory smile.

Apparently, she was a martial artist who trained her body and became a living weapon on her own using her fists. Of course, while observing all the students inside the class, I also gathered information about her and knew she was using fists and ranked around 1k digits.

"Make sure you get some painkillers ready. Because it will fucking hurt." With those words, she started walking to her own position of sparring, the other end of the ring.

Since I was a bowman, to make it fair, the area we were sparring was wider than the one before.

DING!

As the bell rang, the sign for our spar to start was given.

I quickly reached for my bow, nocking an arrow and drawing the string taut.

CRACK!

She immediately blasted herself off the moment the bell rang.

My eyes remained fixed on Aliya, who wasted no time closing the distance between us, her fists enveloped in the special mana-coating technique that enhanced her strength and speed.

SWISH!

I released my first arrow, watching it soar toward Aliya.

DANG!

Her enhanced reflexes allowed her to react swiftly, deflecting the arrow with a well-timed punch, sending it off course. Even though the arrow was coated with my mana, it didn't have any effect on her fist that clashed with it.

'As expected.'

Since the time I had at my disposal was limited, I couldn't perfectly enhance the arrow, making it strong enough to damage. Also, with my location known, it was a lot harder to hit someone like her.

SWOOSH!

Undeterred, I notched another arrow and maintained my distance, focusing on precision and aim. Aliya's relentless pursuit and high physical awareness allowed her to dodge most of the arrows, or she deflected them with her bare fists.

As I continued to kite her down while trying to maintain my distance, I could hear her mumbling.

"Pussy."

Of course, that was expected, given her personality.

"Come here, you fucker."

She was continuously pursuing me, as I was continuously running away.

SWISH! SWISH!

I continued to fire arrows, supplying them with mana. My goal wasn't to show off my bow skills and my mana control but actually to wear her off.

As the spar continued, Aliya's skillful dodges and impressive deflections demonstrated her martial arts expertise.

SWOOSH!

But, as the last arrow flew in the air, I could see her eyes widening. It was because she was not in a position to dodge. I had been dragging her in a way that, when this attack came, she would be blocked by the boundary of the ring.

SPURT!

In the end, the arrow pierced her on her shoulder, making her wince in pain.

I managed to accomplish my goal by landing a few hits with my arrows, making it clear that I had proficiency with the bow.

"YOU!"

And angering her.

"If you are going to play it like that, so be it." She said as the aura surrounding her changed. "I wanted to crush you without using this, but I didn't expect you to be a rat."

'She is going to use it.'

There was a reason why martial artists were able to compete with Hunters using weapons. It was the fact that their body was the real weapon, and they knew how to preach their limits.

「Martial Spirit」

And now she was going to use the fundamental technique that made it such.

'Using the bow will be pointless.'

At this point, I knew I couldn't use my bow. The moment she had activated her Martial Spirit, my attacks wouldn't be able to deal any damage to her until it wore off because of the special mana disturbing property.

But that didn't mean I was completely helpless. After all, I had my daggers in my hand.

"Here I come."

BOOM! SWOOSH!

With those words, she immediately dashed to me, her movements blurry. As if a new leg was added to her body, she closed the distance instantly.

BOOM!

Her first strike came with explosive force, her mana-enhanced fists striking out in a series of rapid punches. I managed to evade the first few blows, deflecting them with my dual daggers, but the sheer power behind each punch was overwhelming. I could feel the impact reverberate through my arms.

'It is crazy how different she is now.'

I thought as my eyes darted around her body, looking for every bit of sign I could see.

'A kick.'

SWOOSH!

Just as I had anticipated, her follow-up attack was a spinning kick that I barely managed to dodge by leaping backward.

The wind from the kick brushed against my chest, and I realized that any direct hit from those enhanced strikes would be devastating.

"You are good at escaping, aren't you? Like a little rat." She said as she pressed on.

SWOOSH!

Another fist followed me, just aimed at my right abdomen.

'I can't dodge it.'

Dash.

Immediately concluding that fact, I activated my skill, enhancing my speed. And thanks to that, I was able to avoid the punch at the last second by steeping to the side.

And because it was a desperate move, I wasn't able to regain my footing instantly. Just at that second, I could see another fist approaching me rapidly, coated with aura.

I knew if I got hit by that, my face would be smashed, and I would be on the verge of losing consciousness.

But I felt it. The small window of parrying appeared in front of me.

CLANK!

The dagger moved on its own and parried the punch. The aftermath nulled my right arm, and my senses closed for a second, but I was able to fend off the attack.

SLASH!

Following that, I slashed with my left arm, aiming at the conjecture point where her arm connected to her chest.

"Arghk!"

She winced in pain as my dagger slid through her arm and threw a roundhouse kick to fend me off.

But I was already expecting it from her body movements. This time the feeling was not there, but my trait was.

SWOOSH!

Lowering my body, I crouched as the kick went past my head.

SLASH!

And slashed the ankle tendons of her pillar foot.

THUD!

Which made her fall to the ground, as she lost control of her ankle momentarily. And that momentary loss of control determined the end of the spar as my dagger stood right before her neck.

DING!

"Everyone, the spars are finished."

Chapter 133 31.2 - Before Mid-terms

"We are getting out. Do you want us to wait for you?"

Inside the locker room of the girls, the last group was about to get out.

"No, I will stay here for a little while."

However, one girl didn't follow her friends but just stood there in front of her locker.

"Okay. Call me when you are free."

"Bye."

As her friends left, the girl was left alone inside the room.

"How dare he?"

And as they left, the emotions she had suppressed started coming out one by one.

She was fuming to herself as she touched the small cuts on her ankles and her rear delt. The marks of the wounds had already been healed to the point it was hard to discern them.

TAK!

Her fist hit the locker, creating a small crater on it, and the hand that punched the metal didn't seem bothered by it.

"Why?"

She sat down on the stool and lowered her head. The room, which would normally be filled with students, was now empty, reminding her of that time.

SHIVER!

Her body shivered as she remembered the disgusting touch of that old man. The memories started crashing down once again.

"Haaaah...Haaaaaah....."

Her heart fastened as her breath started getting ragged. Even though her toned body had fought countless times to train, there was one thing that she was still weak at.

The scene of that hideous-looking thing approaching her, the creepy smile on his face, the hand that was locking hers from above, the disparity between strength and the muffled screams that never came out.

"Burghk!"

The nausea started coming up, and she couldn't hold it in, so she rushed to the toilet.

"Burghk!"

After emptying everything she had consumed recently, she finally started feeling a little better, but even then, her rapidly beating heart was still there.

CLENCH!

"Calm down."

She clenched her fists as she tried to calm herself down.

"You need to get over it."

Her hand started losing its color, as her incredibly tightened fists showed her knuckles' shape.

"This time, they were just lucky."

'It was because of luck. You are no longer that weak girl anymore; you can defend yourself against them.'

She repeated the same thing over and over again, trying to calm herself down. And it was proving to be effective.

Clarity returned to her head as her ferocious-looking yellow eyes slowly opened. There was a clear hatred amongst them.

"Astron Natusalune."

She mumbled the name of the person she had just seen before coming here.

"Next time, I will show you."

She mumbled, imagining herself sitting on top of that bastard, claiming herself as the victor.

"Yes, this is how it should be? How it needs to be?"

In the locker room where no people resided, the girl repeated the same words and imagined the same scene over and over again, though inwardly, she knew all of this was to overcome that one feeling.

Without even knowing the fate that was awaiting her.

SCRUB! SILENCE!

Inside the library, the normally bustling Arcadia Hunter Academy, students had already filled the tables.

Everyone had a pile of books on their tables as they studied for the upcoming exams.

"Hey, Sylvie. Should we take a break?"

And, at one of the tables, two girls were whispering to each other.

"Break? I don't know, Jasmine."

"Come on. If this goes on, I will fall asleep soon after. I need to have a fresh breath. It has already been two hours since we sat here."

"Sigh....Okay."

As the two girls whispered to each other, they silently stood up while being careful not to make others uncomfortable.

"We need to make it quick."

"Yeah. The library is already filled with students."

Since it was the mid-term period, almost every student was cramming for the lessons until it was midnight.

Sylvie and Jasmine exited the library, finding a little relief from the stifling atmosphere inside.

The library's courtyard, bathed in the soft glow of the mana-engineered lights, offered a welcome change of scenery and a slightly exotic environment.

The two friends stretched and took deep breaths. "Ah, that's better," Jasmine sighed.

Sylvie nodded in agreement. "You're right; it's stuffy in there."

They walked towards the entrance, away from the intense concentration of the studying crowd. A gentle breeze rustled the leaves of the trees nearby, carrying with it the distant chatter of students enjoying their own break.

As they stood there, Sylvie glanced at Jasmine and said, "Mid-terms are always so stressful. It feels like the exams are right around the corner."

Jasmine nodded. "I know. But we'll get through it, just like always."

"But where is Danielle?" Sylvie asked, looking at her friend. "She needs to study too. I know her grades are not top-notch."

As Sylvie said, Danielle was rather on the lazy side of the students. Most of the time, she went to parties and gatherings at night, and she had quite a bit of a name amongst the freshmen.

"Ah, Danielle," Jasmine said, looking at the sky. "She said she was going to meet with someone."

"Someone....Who is she?" Sylvie asked, her curiosity picked.

"It is a boy."

Sylvie's eyes widened at this revelation, and a light blush crept up on her cheeks. She knew the implications of meeting a guy at this time of the day. "A guy? Who? Do you know him?"

'I can use this to get back at her.'

Sylvie thought. She had been feeling a little resentful after her friend's countless teasing, and now she thought a way to get back at her.

Jasmine chuckled at Sylvie's reaction. "I'm not sure. She didn't say much about him, just that she was going to meet him for a bit."

However, all those plans crumbled as she heard.

"I see....." Sylvie tried to appear nonchalant, but the blush on her cheeks persisted. "Well, I hope she has a nice time."

Jasmine grinned at her friend. "Nice time? I wonder what 'nice' you are talking about?" She approached the yellow-haired girl. "And, who are you imagining in your head?"

Hearing this, Sylvie's blush deepened, and she stammered, "N-No, it's not like that. I'm just... curious, that's all."

Jasmine laughed heartily. "Curious, huh? Sure, Sylvie, whatever you say."

SILENCE!

But, just at that second, suddenly, the people surrounding them went silent for a second.

"Hmm?" feeling something was amiss, Jasmine was the first one to notice that. As she turned her head back, she saw another student that she remembered—the certain boy who was sometimes the subject of their talk.

He was walking in the corridors of the library with quite a lot of books in his arms. Some of the students recognized him and threw him a bunch of glances. Of course, no one caused a scene, but even then, the silence and the pressure from the gazes were enough to make people uncomfortable.

"Astron?"

Sylvie also noticed him as he walked.

"I guess even he doesn't want to get expelled from the academy," Jasmine said as she watched him enter. Her impression of him wasn't good as both the rumors surrounding him and the attitude he had shown so far played a part in it.

"You are right," Sylvie replied, her curiosity temporarily diverted.

Jasmine stretched her arms and yawned. "Well, break time is over. We should head back to the library. I want to make the most out of this study session."

Sylvie nodded, the topic of Danielle and her mystery meeting with a guy now temporarily forgotten. "You're right. Let's get back to studying." They turned and walked back to the library, ready to tackle their mid-term preparations with renewed focus.

When Sylvie and Jasmine returned to the library and reached their vacant seats, they were ready to resume their study session. However, as they reached their chosen table, they realized that the seats at the table beside them were no longer occupied by the same seniors as before.

Instead, someone different is sitting there. The very person who had just entered the library.

Astron was sitting there, a stack of books and notes spread out in front of him.

[Study of Mana, 3rd edition, by. Alena Frostborne]

[Dungeon Theory, 1st edition, by. Brian Jake]

[Biology for Hunters 1, by. Magic Tower of Arcadia Dominion]

.

.

He seemed deeply engrossed in his studies, and the aura around him made it clear that he had no intention of being disturbed, just as usual when he was in the classroom.

Jasmine glanced at Sylvie, raising an eyebrow. "Well, it looks like we have some 'company' here."

Sylvie, who had been momentarily distracted by Astron's presence, nodded slightly and whispered, "It seems like it."

Though Jasmine's impression of him wasn't good because Sylvie didn't say bad things about him, she also didn't want to be an asshole and randomly make an enemy out of him.

Also, seeing the books in front of him and all of them being the study materials of their curriculum, she understood that he was serious, so she just let him be.

"Let's sit down. It doesn't matter who sits beside us, right?" Sylvie whispered, sitting down at their own table. Though, knowing her, Jasmine understood she was trying to distract herself from him.

"You are right." Jasmine agreed as she also sat down and started studying.

Just like that, Sylvie and Jasmine decided to focus on their studies despite Astron's presence.

They opened their textbooks and notes, diving into the world of academia they 'liked' so much.

The library's atmosphere was filled with the rustling of pages, the quiet tapping of fingers on keyboards, and the occasional whispers of students seeking clarification on their studies.

With such an atmosphere, two girls and many other students started working towards their goals....

Chapter 134 31.3 - Before Mid-terms

Sylvie and Jasmine studied diligently throughout the evening, making the most of their time in the library. They continued to exchange notes and discuss various subjects, doing their best to prepare for the upcoming mid-term exams.

As the day wore on, the library's atmosphere remained focused and studious.

They exchanged notes and discussed topics they found challenging, making the most of their time in the library.

Because this was something that they had been doing frequently, they knew how to cooperate well.

But while Sylvie was engrossed in her books and notes, she couldn't help but cast occasional glances at Astron, who was still sitting at the table beside them.

'I thought he wasn't good at studying.' She thought to herself. Considering his rank and the attitude he always took at the lessons, she had initially assumed he was not particularly academically inclined.

However, the more she observed him, the more she found herself surprised.

'How can he solve them this fast?'

Astron, despite his last-place ranking, seemed to have an innate understanding of the subjects they were studying.

He effortlessly solved complex problems and answered difficult questions. His pen moved smoothly across the pages, jotting down notes and annotations that indicated a deep understanding of the material.

It was as if he had actually been studying all those things from the start, but that didn't make sense.

'Did he just learn everything here?'

She thought. She knew Astron was an orphan, and he mustn't have received a good education before coming to this academy, just like her.

Since she was a girl growing up in a village, she didn't go to prestigious pre-academy schools like most of the students here.

This was why she knew precisely how hard it was for someone to learn all those things from scratch.

And, now, she was flabbergasted by his proficiency. She had expected his academic performance to be mediocre at best, but it was evident that he was highly capable.

It left her wondering about the circumstances that led to his low ranking, and the result she came up with was obvious.

'It must be because of his low stats.'

She knew how weak he was at first, as she witnessed those painful times of him.

And knowing this, she couldn't help but respect his dedication and abilities. Just at that time, Sylvie felt her friend poking her arm with her finger.

"Hmm?" Turning her attention to Jasmine, Sylvie could see her holding a book.

She opened her textbook and pointed to a particularly challenging question related to [Dungeon Theory.] This subject was Sylvie's weakest, and she often struggled with it.

"Hey, Sylvie, check this out," Jasmine said, directing Sylvie's attention to the question.

Sylvie glanced at the problem and felt a wave of uncertainty wash over her.

It was a difficult question, one she had struggled with in the past and failed to solve. She was actually planning to join the professor's office hours just to ask about those questions.

And now, her friend was asking her this question, and that made it impossible for her to answer.

Just when Sylvie was on the verge of giving up, she remembered something.

'He was studying this topic just now.'

She looked at Jasmine, her expression a mixture of realization and surprise. "Wait a minute," Sylvie whispered, her eyes lighting up. "Astron was studying 'Dungeon Theory' just now. He might know how to solve this."

Jasmine raised an eyebrow in curiosity. "Astron? Are you sure he'd help us?" She herself knew how uncooperative he was with others, and his attitude made her doubt him.

"I think he will," Sylvie said.

"If you think so." Giving him a chance, Jasmine said.

Sylvie, taking a breath, decided to seek Astron's help with the challenging [Dungeon Theory] question.

She stood up, gathered her study materials, and approached Astron, who was diligently working at the neighboring table.

Until this hour, he never stood up even once and simply studied after entering here. She could see the scattered books and notes around.

Her footsteps were cautious, but her resolve was unwavering. As she reached Astron's table, she cleared her throat to get his attention. "Excuse me, Astron," she began, her voice polite and respectful.

Astron, who was engrossed in his studies, looked up, his eyes meeting Sylvie's. His expression was as stern as ever, and he didn't show much emotion, as his color palette were no different than usual.

The color of grey covered the palette, symbolizing indifference.

As his purple shiny eyes met with Sylvie's, the urge to lower her gaze came up. Whenever she stood before him, those eyes made her remember the words he had spoken to her at that time, and she was uncomfortable.

'A lot of time had passed now, Sylvie.'

But she controlled herself, masking her nervousness, and she continued. "I noticed you were studying 'Dungeon Theory,' and there's this question I've been struggling with. I was wondering if you could help me understand it."

For a moment, Astron's piercing gaze seemed to bore into her, and she couldn't help but feel a bit intimidated.

She waited for his response, hoping that he would agree to assist her with the problem. The silence between them grew, and it felt like an eternity before he finally replied.

"I can help." Astron's voice was monotone, his response brief. He pushed the stack of books he was studying aside to make room for Sylvie's question.

'Ah....Thank goodness he accepted it. It was so embarrassing.' Sylvie thought to herself as she sat.

Her relief was palpable, but she tried to maintain her composure. "Thank you, Astron. I appreciate it."

She carefully showed him the question she was struggling with, and Astron began to analyze it, flipping through pages and making notes.

It was a question about analyzing the dungeon's inner diagram and finding the related mana levels in each marked branch and node of that diagram.

From the outside, it may have looked easy, but knowing there were several branches and nodes inside, it was quite hard for her to find the right path to solve.

"Hmm...." She could hear him humming as he looked at the question for a second. "This is certainly a hard one." His pen started moving rapidly. Equations, numbers, and diagrams appeared one by one, and in a matter of minutes, the whole page was filled with calculations.

'His handwriting is different.' Sylvie thought, watching him scribble.

She always took care of her writing and wanted her paper to look good, and because of that, she was a slightly slow writer. But the neatness that came from it made it worth it.

However, clearly, Astron was different. His writing was small, and he wrote almost 1.5 times faster than her. It wasn't as beautiful as her writing, but clearly, there was a weird feeling of attraction when she looked at the filled paper.

At that moment, she heard his voice coming from the side. "Here," he said, sliding the paper over to Sylvie.

'Ah, he already finished.'

When she was watching him solving the equations like that, he had already finished.

'What is this?'

But, when she looked at the page, her excitement mixed with a tinge of confusion.

Astron's solution seemed like an intricate web of symbols and numbers, and it was difficult for Sylvie to decipher it at first.

Even though she could understand the numbers and could see the calculations were correct, she didn't understand where some of the equations came from.

"Um, I'm sorry, but I don't quite understand," she admitted, her brows furrowing. "It looks really complex."

"Hmm...." Hearing this, Astron hummed for a second as he looked at his own paper. "Have you tried to solve this question first?" And he asked.

"Of course I did."

"Good. Do you have your calculations with you?"

"My calculations? Why?"

"I want to see how you thought when you were looking at this problem. And, the best way is to see your solution."

Hearing this, Sylvie was slightly surprised. She certainly wasn't expecting him to say such a thing.

"They should be in my bag; let me check it." Sylvie nodded and reached into her bag, retrieving her own calculations for the question.

She handed over the sheets of paper to Astron, who took them and began to examine her work.

As he studied her solution, Sylvie couldn't help but feel a bit self-conscious. It was like having her homework reviewed by the sternest of teachers.

Her gaze shifted between the page in Astron's hands and his serious expression. Just as usual, his gaze didn't contain any emotions whatsoever. She couldn't tell whether he was impressed, critical, or both.

"I see now." He mumbled as he slightly slid the paper in front of her. "The approach you have used in this question was the same as the one we used in the previous section." He said, pointing to the paper. However, because the paper was in front of her, without noticing, he came up to her with his arm touching hers.

Sylvie felt herself getting distracted as Astron leaned closer to explain her mistake. It was hard not to be aware of his presence; she could see his sharp eyes intently studying the paper as he explained the intricacies of the problem.

And then she noticed the details of his appearance up close. His pale skin had a certain ethereal quality to it. His slightly long black hair framed his face, adding a mysterious allure.

For a moment, she couldn't help but be drawn to the fine details of his features, his sharp jawline, and his full lips that rarely talked with others but now explaining to her the question.

'He smells good.'

His scent, a combination of a mild cologne and something unique to him, wafted towards her.

It was a fragrance that was both inviting and unfamiliar, making her all the more aware of his proximity. She blushed slightly, feeling a warmth in her cheeks.

'I shouldn't do this.'

But she quickly shook her head to refocus. This wasn't the time to be getting lost in such thoughts. Astron was trying to help her, and she needed to take advantage of this opportunity to learn.

"In these types of questions, you need to make use of this formula here..."

Just like that, Astron kept explaining to her the questions as he referred to his own notes from time to time.

And because Sylvie was using her every bit of willpower to not get distracted, she missed the small change on the color palette only her eyes could see.

Though on the side, the girl who was watching them couldn't help but think....

'They really look good together, and she looks more relaxed around him compared to other boys.....Oh, boy....This is going to be troublesome.'

As she looked at the boy explaining things, her brows furrowed.

'If you make her sad, I am going to beat you up.'

Just like that, the night went on.

Chapter 135 32.1 - Mid-terms

"Thank you for your time."

Sylvie said as she stood up. At this point, the library had already been emptied to the point where only a handful of people were left.

"No problem." Hearing his curt reply, Sylvie was once again reminded of the fact of what kind of a person this guy was.

"T-then, I will take my leave."

With those words, she returned to her own table. However, when she glanced back at her table, she noticed something amiss.

Jasmine was sound asleep, her head resting on her arms, which were spread out on the table. Papers and notes were scattered around her in a haphazard manner.

"Jasmine?" Sylvie whispered, gently shaking her friend's shoulder.

Jasmine stirred, her eyes fluttering open as she groggily looked around. "Huh? What? How long was I out?"

Sylvie couldn't help but smile. "It looks like you needed a break more than any of us."

Jasmine yawned and stretched. "You're right about that. Thanks for studying with me, Sylvie."

"No problem," Sylvie said, her gaze shifting briefly to Astron, who was still deep in his studies.

'I guess he won't be leaving here for a while.' She thought, looking at his concentrated face. ' But, he is quite good at teaching.'

She never thought he would be this good at explaining things, especially when it came to her mistakes.

The surprising thing wasn't the fact that he was able to solve the questions; the difference was that he was able to dissolve and analyze her own thought process when she was solving on her own.

It was as if he was able to understand her better than herself. Truly weird.

Hmm?" Sylvie noticed Jasmine looking at her with squinting eyes as if she were suspicious of something.

Sylvie couldn't help but feel a little uneasy under her friend's scrutiny. "Jasmine, why are you looking at me like that?"

Jasmine blinked and then shrugged. "It's nothing..." She said, her eyes going back and forth between Astro and Sylvie as if she was implying something.

Sylvie chuckled nervously. "An interesting conversation? Well, we did discuss a challenging problem from 'Dungeon Theory,' and Astron helped me understand it better."

"Is that so?" Jasmine still seemed unconvinced, but she didn't press the matter further.

"Yep. It was really helpful. He's more knowledgeable than I thought," Sylvie admitted.

Jasmine yawned again. "Well, it sounds like you had quite a productive evening. I'm just glad we took that break; I really needed it. Shall we call it a night? Mid-terms are going to be a handful."

Sylvie nodded, and the two friends gathered their belongings. They quietly left the library, leaving Astron to his studies, and headed back to their dorms to rest up for the upcoming exams.

Different from what one would expect, the mid-term period of the academy didn't have any events related to demons or demon contractors.

This was mostly because they needed to lay low after the recent incident they had caused. Of course, there were those individual demon contractors working for their own cause inside the academy, but at this period, nothing big would happen.

Though, that didn't mean the game missed this part.

In the Arcadia Hunter Academy, the exams were separated into two parts. One was a written and theoretical exam, and the other one was a practical exam.

The theoretical exams were mostly skipped in the game since no player wanted to look at a bunch of papers while playing. After all, the target audience of this game mostly played it in order to distract themselves from the stress of school.

However, this is not the case in the real world. You can not skip the theoretical exams like you did in the game, and there was a certain score average requirement not to get expelled from the academy.

When it comes to prestigious schools where the supposed 'manpower' of humanity attended, they were very strict with their examinations and student performances.

Therefore, I needed to meet at least the basic requirements. That was the reason why I went to the library that day.

Though I wasn't expecting to meet Sylvie at that time, even then, the encounter still helped me.

While teaching her, I was also learning and grasping things a lot faster than usual, and in the end, when my study session met its end, I was able to finish all the subjects I needed to study.

Of course, there was also a practical exam as well, and that was the thing I needed to pay the most attention to. After all, it was one of the game events where Ethan would start showing the world his talents as well as gathering the attention of some groups on himself.

To showcase his talent, he needed to overcome difficulties, and the difficulty of the second act was [Mid-Term Dungeons].

And just like that, the week had passed in a second, and now it was the mid-terms.

<On Mid-Terms Day>

In the hushed halls of Arcadia Hunter Academy, students began to gather for their mid-term exams. It was a day of tension and anxiety, a moment of reckoning for all their efforts throughout the semester.

As they waited for the exams to begin, clusters of students could be heard discussing their preparations. Some expressed nervousness about the challenging curriculum, while others were anxious about not having covered all the material.

"I can't believe how hard [Advanced Mana Control] was. I couldn't get through half the textbook in time," one student complained to their friend.

He was a senior of the academy, taking an advanced course in terms of mana manipulation. [Advanced Mana Control] was one of the continuing courses of the [Introduction to Mana for Hunters] for freshmen.

Another student chimed in, "I know what you mean. [Demonology and Dark Arts] was no joke either. There was so much to learn, and I feel like I barely scratched the surface."

Both of them were seniors, but even those who had been in this school for a long time were still finding it hard to cover all the curriculum.

But, as one progressed in the corridors and reached the freshmen classes, they would see a slightly different atmosphere.

Even if the seniors were complaining about the exams, they were veterans who had already survived this hellish exam period at least thrice.

But that wasn't the case for the freshmen.

In the freshmen classes, the atmosphere was notably more nervous. These students were facing their first mid-term exams, and they were feeling the pressure keenly. While they talked amongst themselves, many couldn't help but anxiously review their notes one last time.

"Guys, I'm so nervous about [Introduction to Mana for Hunters]," a wide-eyed freshman exclaimed. "I stayed up all night trying to cover everything, but there's just so much!"

Another student nodded in agreement, their hands trembling slightly as they held their notes. "Tell me about it! [Dungeon Theory] is the bane of my existence. I'm not even sure if I remember what I ate for breakfast, let alone these complicated diagrams."

As the clock ticked closer to the exam time, a few students were still flipping through their textbooks and hurriedly scribbling down last-minute notes.

"I just can't believe we have to take the exam so early in the morning," one student muttered, rubbing their eyes as if trying to ward off fatigue. "My brain's not even fully awake yet!"

The anxiety in the air was palpable as the freshmen grappled with the intensity of their first mid-term exams, desperately reviewing their notes and praying they'd remember everything when the tests began.

All of them knew the importance of the theoretical exams, not because of their implication in real life but because of their implication on their notes.

'Why are we learning this even though we will never calculate the mana of dungeons?'

Even though every one of them had this thought in the corner of their heads, they didn't voice it loud because they knew nothing would change anyway.

Of course, not every student was like them. There were some of those who had already studied enough from the start. Those were composed, sitting on their seats and waiting for the papers to arrive.

And one of them was....

"Irina."

The girl with blazing red hair was sitting at the front desk.

"What?"

As her desk mate, the white-haired girl, sat beside her, she threw her an annoyed gaze before closing her eyes again.

"What are you doing?"

"I am sorting the information."

"Huh? What does that mean?"

"You don't need to know."

Even though most people didn't know, mages of high-ranking families had access to certain special magic skills that enabled them to sort their information in an organized manner using mana.

'Mind Storage.'

And, now, Irina was sorting all the information that she had stored there.

"Yo, Ethan. How are you doing?"

Seeing Irina was not going to entertain her as she wished, Julia turned her attention to the boys sitting behind her.

"I am checking my notes." Ethan was a serious type to study, but he had one little weakness. He was bad at solving analytical questions and calculative topics.

That was why he was still trying to study.

"I am sleepy," Lucas added as he leaned on his left arm.

"Tch...." Seeing this, Julia clicked her tongue. Because she knew this twin of hers was good at exams and he was smart.

"Why are you clicking your tongue? Mad at you got the short end of genes?"

"Shut up, bastard. At least I don't have a small stick."

"HA! You bitch, what are you saying?"

The bickering between Julia and Lucas continued to escalate as they exchanged insults and jabs at each other.

Lucas couldn't resist the opportunity to provoke Julia further. "Maybe if you didn't look like a boy, you'd actually have a boyfriend by now."

Julia's eyes blazed with anger. "You've really crossed the line now, Lucas. You're such an arrogant know-it-all."

TOK!

But, before she could even say anything more, suddenly, the door opened wide open, and the instructor entered the room.

"Get rid of your notes; we are starting with the bell."

SILENCE!

Everyone fell silent, and a palpable tension hung in the air as they turned their attention to the instructor, the same stern woman who guided them.

The mid-terms were about to start.

Chapter 136 32.2 - Mid-terms

'This reminds me of the college times.'

I thought, looking at the exam paper before me. The me from Earth had been admitted to one of the best national colleges in his country.

Therefore, he had his fair share of exams, both before admission and after starting as an undergraduate.

The questions on the exam paper had a certain familiarity to them, just like the engineering courses I had taken back on Earth. It was almost like a flashback to my college days when I'd spend my time preparing for similar tests.

The first question on the page seemed like a nod to classical physics. It read, 'Calculate the maximum velocity a hunter can achieve when applying a continuous force of 500 Newtons to a mana-propelled vehicle weighing 300 kilograms with 2.7 M density. Assume negligible air resistance and conductivity $c=10$.'

It was a straightforward problem involving Newton's second law of motion and required applying concepts I had learned in my college days. Of course, there were some weird things that wouldn't normally make sense.

Firstly, the name of Newton. In this world, rather than being a simple physicist, he was actually a mage who rose the ranks in the mage tower in the past.

'Developers were lazy.' I thought, jotting down the formula, and started working through the math.

The first exam was [Introduction to Mana for Hunters], and this course wasn't that hard from my point of view since it was just an introduction and the formulas used weren't that hard.

I was already familiar with the concept of last week's cramming and solving the past exam questions, and because I didn't neglect my weekly reviews after the lessons, I was able to keep the knowledge in my head.

Adding my trait into the equation, these written exams were nothing but a simple maze in which I knew the path to reach the end.

Just like that, the exams continued, and in two days, everything was finished. Normally, it was something inhumane, but because the academy was growing Awakened Humans who had both supernatural body and mind, they didn't regard their mental health.

Five exams in two days was like hell for most of the students.

Day 1: [Introduction to Mana for Hunters] – [Bestiary 1]

Day 2: [Dungeon Theory] – [History of Continent 1] – [Understanding of Combat]

The schedule was in such a manner, and at the end of the day, almost all of the students were left exhausted at their desks.

Some of them were sleeping, and some of them were just trying to clear their heads.

And, of course, there were bound to be people who always talked about the exam questions after it finished.

"Hey, could you solve the second question?"

"The one with spear trajectory?"

"Yeah, that one."

"I don't know, man. I skipped the spear section, thinking they wouldn't ask about it, but they asked. How unlucky I am?"

Listening to the students talking like that, Sylvie felt a touch on her left arm.

"How were your exams?" It was Jasmine.

"It could be said fine."

"Fine?"

Sylvie looked at Jasmine, her face expressing a mixture of exhaustion and surprise. "Well, some of the questions were quite challenging, but I think I managed to solve them thanks to... some help."

Jasmine raised an eyebrow. "Help?" At first, she slightly questioned, but as her exam-fried brain worked, she understood what she was talking about. "Ah...."

After all, she was there watching when they were studying together.

"Was it really thanks to him?" Jasmine asked.

"Yes. The exact question he solved was in the exam."

"Ah, that one...."

"Don't tell me you forgot?"

"Cough....."

Seeing Jasmine lowering her gaze, Sylvie couldn't help but shake her head. Her friend was weird sometimes. She was the sole reason she asked Astron, but she didn't even listen to her.

What kind of setup was this?

"Sigh... You really need to be careful about your notes."

"Yeah, yeah."

'Stupid Jasmine.' Sylvie thought, wanting to punish this girl, but she refrained.

"Ho, girls, you are here." With Danielle's appearance, the trio gathered once again.

"Let's hang out today; I am so tired."

SWOOSH! SWOOSH! SWOOSH!

In the training rooms of the academy, I was standing, firing arrows continuously.

"My speed has improved."

As the written exams met their end, the only thing that was left was the practical exam. Of course, when the name practical exam is mentioned, what comes into one's mind would be dungeons or sparring.

This was what we have been doing so far, and that would be the case in this one as well.

'Solo dungeon raid.'

We were expected to raid a dungeon all alone. Since the academy did have specially crafted artificial dungeons, they could adjust the strength terrain of the dungeon accordingly.

According to one's rank, they would be assigned to a specific dungeon that was adjusted to their strength, and then they would be ranked according to their performance.

Of course, the word 'Solo' didn't mean you needed to complete the dungeon all alone. It was just there weren't any predetermined teams while entering, different from the practical lessons before.

Therefore, in the game, there were quite a lot of students who ganged upon others by simply grouping together and having a momentary truce.

Though, in the end, when it came to scores, those momentary truces would be broken.

"Let's see which dungeon I will be assigned to," I mumbled as I grabbed my bow for another training session.

DING!

Just at that moment, I was startled by the sound of a notification, and my bowstring slipped from my fingers. I turned my attention to the holographic interface that appeared before me from my watch, displaying the academy's emblem and a message that held my future:

[Academy Notification: Solo Dungeon Assignment]

[Assigned Dungeon: B-3]

The Arcadia City was the capital of the Human Federation, Valerian. It had countless towering buildings that reached the sky.

Guilds flocked to those buildings, and lower-ranking ones were left with normal buildings.

Inside one of those small buildings, a young woman was sitting at the table looking at the picture of a young kid.

"Don't worry, son; mother will avenge you soon."

The image she held was that of a young boy, a cheeky smile on her face, a stark contrast to the solemn room, and the hatred in the woman's eyes. "They think they can just take you from me and get away with it. They don't care about your life, about the pain you suffered."

Her fists clenched, and a trembling anger gripped him. "The authorities, the so-called protectors of the people, they couldn't care less. They brushed it under the rug, called it a 'tragic accident,' and moved on. But I won't move on."

The woman's fists were squeezed to the point where they were fully white. The hatred in her eyes was clear.

The young woman's hands shook as she pulled out a small report and a set of documents from a hidden drawer. The room was dimly lit, and the only sound was the heavy thumping of her heart.

As she leafed through the documents, she saw the details of the incident that had taken her son and two other children. Her vision blurred as she read the chilling account of that fateful day, and the pain washed over her once again.

"The authorities did nothing... They just let this happen," she muttered through gritted teeth. "And the survivor, Astron Natusalune... He's the one who took you from me."

The hatred in her eyes burned even brighter as she read Astron's name.

She didn't know who had provided her with these documents as suddenly they appeared in her office with a small note.

"Don't you want to know why your son died?"

That was what they had written in that note, and without even thinking, she opened the document.

And there, she found what they had been searching for this long. The details of the incident. She read the lines over and over again.

"All three cadets had died because of the claw marks of the Unclassified Monster."

This was what they knew as well. But, the shocking things were what came afterward.

"In the scene when we arrived, the three students were already dead. We could see the dead body of the monster and one cadet, later his name was confirmed as Astron Natusalune, injured while his dagger was stabbing the monster."

When she read this, she couldn't understand. The sole survivor was the last ranked student, who had overwhelmingly lower strength than other cadets.

But, things revealed themselves as she read further.

"After the autopsy and investigation of the crime scene, it was concluded that the monster died after the students were already gravely injured. There were traces of Holy Mana and Lightning attributed to mana in the environment. It was found that the mana came from none of the students but the one-time usage consumables, Holy-Radiance Scroll and Thunderstrike Orb, purchased by Astron Natusalune in the same week.

According to the DNA and Mana analysis, it was found that the monster used the Shadow attribute and contained demonic energy comparable to a rank-10 demon. From the experiments, it was later revealed that the monster is weak to both Holy and Lightning mana when used at the correct time.

It is being suspected that the monster was a demon without humanoid properties, but further investigation is needed."

As she read the report, she understood one thing.

'My son was set up.'

The material Astron Natusalune coincidentally bought this week turned out to be the weakness of the monster in the forest. Any sane person would easily understand the link between the two.

The woman's hands trembled as she continued to read the report, each word fueling her rage. The realization that her son had been set up, that he was the victim of a cruel scheme, sent her into a fit of anger.

CREAK!

With a furious, almost animalistic growl, she seized the pen she had been holding and snapped it in half, the sound of it cracking echoing through the dimly lit room. She felt a deep, seething hatred for Astron Natusalune, the one she believed responsible for the death of her son.

"I will make him pay," she hissed to herself, her voice filled with venom. "He'll pay for what he did to my boy."

TOK!

Just as her mind swirled with thoughts of revenge, the door to her office swung open. The woman turned to see the person she had been expecting, a sinister smile creeping across her face.

'He said we shouldn't do something reckless, but I can't wait anymore.' She thought.

The newcomer was the person that was sent by them. From the moment her son died and the authorities didn't do anything about it, she knew where she would be standing at this point.

His eyes held a dark and ominous glint, and he seemed unfazed by the hatred that radiated from the woman.

"Madam, it seems you've found what you were looking for," he said, his voice dripping with a malevolent undertone.

The woman nodded, her eyes locked on the demon contractor. "Yes, and I want you to help me make sure Astron Natusalune doesn't make it through another day in this world. I want him dead."

The demon contractor grinned, revealing sharp, predatory teeth. "Understood, madam, you can leave him to us, though you do know how we are getting paid, don't you?"

The woman nodded, her eyes unwavering as she gazed at the sinister demon contractor. "I am aware of your payment, and I have already made arrangements."

The woman stood for a second.

"The orphanage you requested is complete."

Chapter 137Chapter 32.3 - Mid-terms

-WROOM!

Walking in front of the place filled with a bunch of gates, I was looking for my dungeon.

'This is similar to Black Market dungeons.'

Even though the academy didn't have access to that many gates, there were still sufficient gates to test the students.

Today was the day of the practical exam, where we would be left alone inside a dungeon and be expected to explore it on our own.

[B-3]

As I stood in front of the dungeon, the professor in charge made his appearance. He wasn't someone I knew, probably someone who was lecturing in another class. Considering the academy had 2400 students each freshman year, the number of lecturers was also high.

"Kuhm."

The professor cleared his throat, gathering our attention.

"Good morning, cadets. Today, you will be taking the practical exam in this dungeon. The academy has carefully selected dungeons of varying difficulty levels to match your skills and ranks."

He gestured to the gates behind him, each one representing a unique challenge. "Your task is simple: navigate through the dungeon, overcome any obstacles, and retrieve the artifact that was assigned to your name at the end. You will be assessed on your problem-solving abilities, adaptability, and your capacity to work independently."

'Yeah, there was such a thing.'

Most of the time, when thinking about dungeons, the condition for dungeons to be cleared would be killing the boss monster.

However, in this exam, we would be without a party, and cooperating with others to kill the boss monster wasn't what we expected from us.

In the case when the dungeon wasn't related to the boss monster, the trigger was reaching the end and taking the artifact that was linked to it.

This exam was the parallel of that in a sense. By reaching the end and taking the assigned artifact, we were basically completing the dungeon's linked quest.

While I was thinking to myself, the professor's gaze scanned the crowd, his voice firm and commanding. "Remember, the practical exam is not just about survival; it's about demonstrating your ability to thrive in unpredictable situations. You will face unknown creatures, traps, and puzzles within. Some of you may even encounter your fellow students. In such cases, alliances are permitted, but competition is inevitable."

He paused, letting the weight of his words sink in. "Once you enter the gate, the timer begins. You will have four hours to complete the assigned task and return. Failure to do so will result in an automatic fail and presumably taking the note of NA."

"You will be able to request help from the faculty members, but note that doing so will also result in NA, and your exam will be negated. Therefore, I would suggest you hold it as much as possible."

Knowing what kind of things were waiting for us inside the dungeon, I knew why he said that. Most of the time, working with a team would be a lot different than working without one, and the students were about to experience this firsthand.

The professor's expression was still scrutinized. "Stay vigilant, trust your training, and rely on your instincts that you have developed after entering this academy. You have been polishing your skills with sweat and blood, and now this exam is your chance to prove your worth."

As he said those words, his eyes wandered around.

"Best of luck, and may you return victorious."

With those words, he stepped to the side, leaving all the students in the line, and went to inform the other students.

"Everyone entering the B-3 dungeon, get ready," a faculty member responsible for dungeon [B-3] announced, calling our attention.

The line of students quickly began readying themselves, ensuring they had their equipment, identifying bracelets, and other essential items for the exam.

One by one, students stepped forward, offering our identification bracelets for inspection by the faculty member.

"Alex Rodriguez, Rank 1800."

Of course, with each student coming forward, the faculty member read their name loudly to make sure every student could hear it with their ranks attached to it.

"Emily Sullivan, Rank 1950."

And this was actually a very cruel method. Because I could clearly see each name coming up, the students' eyes started forming targets.

'Targets to take their possessions.'

After all, humans were greedy creatures, and Hunter Academy knew how hard the real dungeon environment was.

"Tom Anderson. Rank 2100."

.

.

As the instructor called me with his eyes as the last one, I stood up and made my way there.

"Here."

Grabbing my card, the instructor loudly announced my name and my rank.

"Astron Natusalune. Rank 2450."

The moment my name and my rank were announced, I could feel everyone's gazes turning to me.

At that exact second, I knew I became the target they would think easy. My name was known thanks to rumors, and my low rank would make it pretty easy for others to target me.

However, that didn't mean much. After all, they would probably just pursue me while gathering together all those people; therefore, I would highly be pursued by those who were left behind.

"Everyone's ID is confirmed. Get ready, you are entering."

Before anyone could form a strategy in their minds, the member gestured for us to follow as everyone made their way to the dungeon entrance.

However, while I was waking, I felt something was amiss. Between the gazes directed at me, there was a feeling.

The feeling that I got when I was in the dungeon.

FLINCH! The instinct that I had developed was alarming me as if something was going to happen.

'What is this?'

I thought to myself.

From what I remembered, nothing would happen in the mid-term exams; therefore, this didn't make any sense.

Looking at back, my gaze met with countless pairs of eyes looking in my direction. There were at least ten pairs targeting me, but I couldn't notice anything different.

'Am I overreacting?'

In the end, I couldn't do anything. Leaving the exam was out of option at this point, and aside from entering the dungeon, there wasn't anything else to do.

-WROOM!

As we reached the entrance of the dungeon, the dimensional gate's voice entered our ears.

"You may enter."

With the confirmation coming from the faculty member, everyone entered the dungeon one by one.

-THUD!

As I entered the dungeon and stepped inside, the natural feeling of nausea came right after.

However, at this point, I was already familiar with this feeling. Countless dungeon explorations of the Black Market made me very familiar with the mix of my insides. I presume even my body had adapted to it, as the feeling disappeared right after.

Therefore, I didn't even bat an eye and calmly looked around.

"Burgh!"

Still, there were some students throwing everything they had eaten outside as if this was the first time they were entering the dungeon.

However, I guess the practical lessons related to dungeons weren't that frequent for other students since this scene was more frequent than I had expected initially.

But my attention wasn't supposed to be on the students.

HOWL!

The wind blew as the coldness of the air grazed my skin. The terrain of the dungeon wasn't something that you would expect from the term 'dungeon.'

In front of me stood an open asphalt road and a bunch of destroyed buildings. Moss and vines could be seen around the walls, indicating that all these buildings had never been taken care of before.

No signs of life could be seen as if everything was destroyed in this world. However, this suffocating feeling was still there, as if something sinister was lurking there.

'Like an Apocalypse.'

It was an apocalyptic world, probably a projection of a design inspired by another destroyed world.

'They really put a lot of effort.'

I thought to myself.

Each dungeon had its own difficulty adjusted according to the average rank of the students entering. And, the dungeons with the B- letter in their name were the ones for lower rank ones.

'Ethan is probably in the {B-1} dungeon.' I thought. Since Ethan's rank was also on the lower side, he was assigned to B-rank dungeons as well. However, I wasn't sure which one it was since a small butterfly effect might have changed which dungeon he was assigned.

"Waaa....How different?"

"Right?"

I could hear some students exclaiming with their eyes wide open as if they were surprised. Of course, them being surprised wasn't something I didn't expect since those guys were lower ranked for a reason.

Their attention was on the things that wouldn't benefit them most of the time.

'Let's move.'

On my watch, I could see the remaining time I had left before completing the dungeon, and I needed to find my way inside. Even though the dungeon wasn't probably that long, this weird feeling I was getting made me on alert and want to leave this place as soon as possible.

With that thought in my mind, I readied my weapons as I made my way into the town.

TOK! TOK! TOK!

I could feel my boots hitting the thick asphalt as I walked forward. There was a deadly silence in the town as if no life existed.

I was calling town since even though most of the buildings were destroyed, there were still some signboards showing this place was once a place filled with stores and many other things.

Just at that moment, I felt someone's presence approaching. No, it wasn't someone. A lot of students were approaching at the same time.

SWOOSH!

"I don't have much time, move."

As one of them went past me with a high-speed running, the other one followed him. They were running on the asphalt road as if this was some sort of race.

'What a pity.'

I thought.

After all, whenever there was a dungeon, there were bound to be monsters.

"Grrrrr..."

The small presences appearing from the buildings were the proof of that....

There are certain times when people's rationality gets blocked out by different reasons. One of them is when they are desperate.

Students who are at the bottom of the rank chain were in such a mindset while participating in the mid-term exams.

The Arcadia Hunter Academy was ruthless, and they would cut down those who failed to meet their expectations.

Who were the ones that failed?

That would be the ones that fell behind.

Therefore, they were desperate to get good notes in this exam, improving their ranks. However, desperation had never been something that cooperated with rationality.

And staying rational and calm is the most important thing when you are putting your life in danger.

As the students rushed past me, moving at high speed, their focus was solely on getting ahead.

It was a typical sight – desperate students in a rush, eager to explore and conquer the dungeon.

But as they raced forward, they triggered something I had suspected from the moment I entered. Growls and snarls echoed from the dilapidated buildings, and dark, menacing figures began emerging.

"Grrrrr..."

From the darkened doorways and broken windows, grotesque creatures emerged. They had monstrous appearances, a mix of decaying flesh and misshapen limbs. These were the dungeon's denizens, the challenges that awaited us in this place.

'Ruinscreechers.'

It was a monster between rank-2 to rank 3, depending on their evolutions. From the moment we entered the dungeon, I knew the monsters we would encounter here could be found in our curriculum. After all, the academy may be ruthless, but they were fair to students.

At least to those who fulfilled their responsibilities.

SWOOSH!

As one of the monsters immediately jumped from the stores, the weapons were drawn.

CLANK! "Hold your ground!" one student shouted as the monsters drew nearer, with his weapon clashing the claws of the monster.

The real battle had begun. Some students frantically wielded their weapons, and their combat skills varied.

It was a fight for survival, but I couldn't help but shake my head at the chaos.

'This is why parties are important.'

Without a scout and proper party formation, the sloppy parties wouldn't be able to live against the overwhelming monsters of dungeons.

This mid-term exam was actually serving as an example at the same time as the lessons. It was to show why teamwork was this important to those arrogant Hunters.

The reason why humanity was able to survive against the huge numbers of monsters, otherworlders, and demons.

In a sense, this was also a lecture.

'I should move as well. Thanks for making the way.'

With that thought, I climbed on top of the abandoned buildings and started walking while masking my presence, thanks to the fight happening underneath.

Even though hunting monsters also contributed to our notes, I had never been stupid enough to confront this amount of enemies alone and waste such an opportunity presented to me.

The chaotic battle in the ruined town continued to unfold beneath the abandoned buildings. The desperate students were forced to fight for their lives against the menacing Ruinscreechers.

"Arghh!" A student's cry pierced the air as he swung his weapon at one of the monsters.

THUD!

His strike was met with a sickening thud as he landed a blow on the creature's decaying flesh.

"SCREEECH!"

The Ruinscreecher retaliated with a swipe of its misshapen claw, leaving deep gashes on the student's arm.

The once-silent town was now filled with the sounds of battle.

Desperate students clashed with the grotesque Ruinscreechers, each strike and swing accompanied by grunts and shouts.

"Look out, behind you!" one student cried out as he spotted a Ruinscreecher approaching another from the rear.

The warning allowed his fellow student to narrowly evade the surprise attack, rolling to the side and narrowly avoiding the creature's claws.

Two students wielding swords moved in tandem, their blades flashing through the air.

They exchanged quick glances before one called out, "I am counting on you."

"Yeah."

They lunged at a Ruinscreecher together, delivering a synchronized attack that cut through the monster's flesh.

However, not all interactions were as coordinated. Two students with staff-like weapons were trying to fend off a Ruinscreecher. Their movements were hesitant and uncoordinated. "Get its attention!" one yelled to the other.

The second student attempted to distract the monster with a feint, and it worked momentarily. But the Ruinscreecher quickly refocused its attention and lunged at the first student, forcing him to parry with his staff.

In the midst of the battle, a conversation could be heard between two students who had luckily known each other before entering this dungeon.

"We should stick together, Sam!" a female student exclaimed as she defended herself from an approaching Ruinscreecher with her bow in her hand.

Sam nodded and replied, "Agreed, Emily. I'll cover your back." He stood guard behind her, ensuring no monster could get the drop on her.

Of course, while such positive scenes were happening all around the place, not every student was in a good condition.

Despite their best efforts, some of them couldn't avoid fatal strikes.

"SCREEECH!"

SWOOSH! SPURT!

When a Ruinscreecher's claws struck home, leaving a grievous wound, the injured students would fall, cries of pain escaping their lips.

"AAAAAAH! IT HURTS!"

One by one, the students who had been fatally wounded disappeared in a flash of light.

They would be resummoned to the entrance of the dungeon, saving them from the fatal wounds. This was the countermeasure for the past events where the students almost lost their lives thanks to the interference of demon contractors.

As the battle raged on and the wounded students were resummoned to safety, a group of students watched the chaos from a distance.

They huddled together behind a crumbling building, their eyes fixed on the ongoing fight.

A young woman with a serious expression turned to her companions. "Is everything in place? We can't afford any mistakes this time. All the eyes on the academy right now."

A tall, lanky student, twirling a dagger in his hand, nodded. "Yeah, everything's set. We just need him to get isolated enough."

"I still think we shouldn't have taken this mission." Even though the man looked relaxed, that wasn't the case for the girl. She was still not sure about the mission they had, it seemed.

"You know we don't have much choice, right? They will cut us down if we don't prove we are useful."

"...Yeah....Anyway, can we locate where he is?"

"We can, here." As the young man raised the watch in his hand, there they could see a small dot moving.

"Then, we should start moving. I am not sure why, but I feel like he is a lot better than what we know. We should be more careful."

"Really?" At that moment, the third member of their group, a girl with a sly grin, joined the conversation. "Then, won't it be more fun?" she had a crazy smile on her face as she licked her lips. "Maybe he can entertain me more."

The leader emphasized the seriousness of their mission. "Indeed, this is an assignment, not child's play."

The enthusiastic girl couldn't resist adding a playful comment, "But what's life without a little excitement?"

The leader concluded, "Regardless, our primary objective remains to ensure this mission appears as an accident or a monster attack. We can't afford any suspicion of foul play or any traceback. If such a thing happens, we both know what is going to happen to us, don't we?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now, let's start moving."

Just like that, the group started moving in the terrain of the dungeon, slowly approaching the dot shown on the map while slaying monsters on the way, just like any other student was doing.

When it comes to dungeons, the monsters never meant to leave you alone. This is basically how it is.

"Grrrr...."

Looking at the monsters obscuring my path, I slowly counted their numbers.

"10, huh?"

While the students took the aggro, thanks to their stupidity, I was walking in the dungeon, masking my presence.

Since this was not a cave but rather an open field, scouting was needed to find where my mid-term artifact was.

However, not every time my presence masking was going to work without using my [Shadowborne] trait.

I knew at some point I would encounter monsters, and here we were.

I reached for my bow, smoothly drawing an arrow and taking aim at the closest Ruinscreecher.

"Hufff....."

SWISH!

With a focused breath, I released the arrow, and it struck true, dropping the creature in its tracks.

"SCREEEECH!"

The monsters reacted quickly, letting out a cacophony of screeches and growls. They were already aware of my presence and charged towards me.

SWISH! SWISH!

I continued to fire arrows rapidly, targeting the approaching Ruinscreechers, aiming to thin their numbers.

Since the academy and many other guilds were watching me right now, I didn't want to use many different mana attributes. After all, I don't want to give them enough data to work on.

Using only green-colored mana to improve the trajectory of my arrows, I slowly reduced their numbers.

'9'

SWOOSH! THUD!

One was down.

'8'

So was another.

SWOOSH! SWOOSH! SWOOSH!

Firing three arrows at the same time, I targeted two Ruinscreechers.

"SCREEECH!"

The power of the arrows wasn't strong enough to kill three at the same time. But that didn't matter.

Eyes of Hourglass.

With the time slowing down and the mana tendrils connecting the monsters, I once again knocked three arrows at the same time.

Imbuing them with the mana of green color, I intuitively connected the tendrils marking each monster to the arrows.

'Bam'

SWOOSH! SWOOSH! SWOOSH!

With that, I released the string, and at that exact one second, the arrows flew to the monsters. However, this time, their trajectory wasn't as sloppy as the former wave.

THUD! THUD! THUD!

'5.'

All of them hit the Ruinscreechers from their necks, and three monsters died at the same time.

WOOSH! "SCREEECH!

'They are close.'

However, the enemy's number was still high.

As the monsters drew nearer, I knew it was time to switch to my dual daggers.

'This should be enough display for the sake of my bow skills.'

Having two weapons as a major meant I would be subjected to a different type of grading, and it would be harder to pass the grade. Thus, I was doing this right now.

With my daggers in my hand, I stood facing the monsters.

'Bring it on.'

Chapter 139 32.5 - Mid-terms

The group of high-ranking individuals sat in a luxurious observation room; their attention focused on the live feed of the mid-term exam's practical test taking place in the dungeon. Their discussions were muted, reserved for their privileged circle.

"They do seem promising," one of them remarked, her eyes fixed on the various students in the dungeon. "Victor Blackthorn is truly remarkable. His control over mana is unmatched."

Looking at the individual holding the longsword, the woman spoke. He was all alone in the open field of sand.

No student stood beside him, but the monsters had shown no signs of stopping. Countless types of monsters came: [Crystal Mantis], [Black Worm], [Thunder Scorpion].

All of them were at least rank-4 monsters, and some even were classified as peak rank-5.

However, none left his presence alive. His long sword, shining with compressed plasmatic aura, butchered every living being in his presence one by one without sparing anything. "Certainly. There is a reason he is known as the century's biggest genius and the new face of the Blackthorn's now."

"It seems the recent events hadn't been able to shake him down."

"You are talking about the Blackthorn Family. They never show any weakness."

"Though, he is not the only one shining."

Another individual nodded in agreement. "Yes, and the Middleton twins, Lucas and Julia, are showing impressive teamwork and adaptability. They've always been a dynamic pair."

Even though the twins always bickered with each other whenever they were outside, or they were in the presence of many people, when it came to fighting, they showed incredible talents.

Julia wasn't a smart one to make plans, but she had a good field vision to control her group, and the innate talent she had on the battlefield made her fill the blanks easily.

Lucas was more of a brain as she led her twin while also dynamically completing her empty points.

A man leaned forward, studying the screens more closely. "Carl Braveheart is also displaying remarkable leadership skills, guiding his team effectively. He's destined for greatness."

As they continued to discuss the students, their conversations revealed the pride and interest they held in the academy's talented individuals. They were well aware that these students might shape the future of the Human Federation.

Most of the people's eyes were on the higher-ranking dungeons since most talented students fought there.

However, even then, there were some who were watching the lower-ranked ones for one simple person who had the 'name' to attract their attention.

"Ethan Hartley."

The man holding the spear.

The late-bloomer heir of the Hartley family.

He had just recently awakened and was registered as a Hunter just before coming to the academy.

According to the norm, he shouldn't have had enough time to compensate for the times he had lost compared to others.

But, the norm didn't apply to the name of Hartley.

And they were now witnessing that.

He stormed through waves of monsters with remarkable prowess, his spear moving like an extension of his own body. The astonished gasps from the onlookers in the observation room were a testament to his remarkable performance.

"How brilliant," the woman who had earlier praised Victor Blackthorn whispered as she watched Ethan's exceptional display of skill.

Ethan Hartley was a true anomaly. While others in his ranking might have struggled, he fought with the grace and power of a seasoned Hunter. His late awakening had no apparent effect on his combat abilities.

He was someone who had just recently entered the world of the Hunters and was a simple citizen beforehand.

He should have struggled against such monsters classified as rank 3 to rank-4. All of them would be the demise of newbie hunters like him.

But that wasn't the case. Rather, it was as if he was more comfortable on the battlefield; with a slight smile on his lips, he stormed into the battlefield, making his own way himself.

And even while he was fighting with monsters, he didn't overlook other injured students' situations and helped them to escape.

Another observer couldn't help but comment, "The Hartley name is indeed something else. He's advancing faster than any of us expected."

As they continued to watch, it was evident that Ethan Hartley had quickly become a standout among the lower-ranked students, proving what the name 'genius' really stood for.

But even then, when most people were watching the students who were already known to some extent, there was one woman whose attention was on a different person.

Her black eyes continued to stare at the screen almost no one was paying attention to. There, she could see a student facing a bunch of monsters with a bow.

The scene wasn't as amazing as it was when being watched by the others, but the woman could feel it.

The talent she had developed on her own to survive in the harsh world of rich families was now tingling just like it tingled with other high-ranking students.

She could feel this was a special gem, different from others.

A gem that could be beneficial to her.

"S-so, who's that... individual?" the woman inquired, her voice trembling slightly. When she talked, the others turned their attention to her for a second, but they discarded her after another one with disdain.

Her assistant, a man standing beside her, responded, "Let me check it."

As the man was checking the youngster's name, the woman licked her lips as she saw the unique purple eyes.

'I should get him under me.'

Those eyes were filled with desire.

"SCREECH!"

As the Ruinscreechers closed in, their screeches echoing, I remained calm, focused, and ready for close combat, with my hands holding my dual daggers.

It was time to showcase my proficiency with these weapons.

The monsters lunged towards me with their grotesque forms, and I began to analyze their movements. My brain worked rapidly with my trait complementing it. With my training and experience, I had developed a formula in my head for such battles.

'First open with a sidestep to counterbalance.'

My first move was to sidestep a charging Ruinscreecher, allowing its momentum to carry it past me.

'Now, time to slash.'

SLASH!

As it stumbled forward, I delivered a swift, precise strike with my left dagger, targeting the monster's exposed neck. It collapsed with a screech.

"1 down."

My developed instinctual senses allowed me to perceive time at a slightly slower pace, giving me an advantage in reacting to their movements.

The Ruinscreechers were relentless, but my head was clear.

'Brainless monsters.'

I feinted an attack to my right, drawing the attention of two Ruinscreechers. As they lunged at me, I swiftly parried their claws with my right dagger, then spun to face the one on my left. With a single, well-aimed strike, I dispatched it, reducing their numbers.

"2 down."

The remaining Ruinscreecher retaliated, lunging at me with a ferocious strike. I dodged to the side, but my body wasn't able to correspond to what I had in my mind, allowing the monster's claws to graze my shoulder armor.

"Tch."

The pain was a reminder of the danger, but it didn't deter me. The lack of stability, when it came to endurance, was once again showing its effects right here, though it wasn't something detrimental.

"SCREECH!"

As if to avenge his fallen comrades, the Ruinscreecher lunged at me with a scream, a dreadful aura enveloping it.

SWOOSH!

It was using dark mana to absorb the souls of his fallen comrades, and that was why they were essentially undead type creatures.

His speed was faster than before, and in the blink of an eye, the monster almost reached me.

Dash.

Enduring the pain in my right shoulder, I activated my skill as I felt my speed increase.

Tilting my body to side briefly, the monster's claw went right before my face, the tip slightly grazing my skin.

The wound got hot instantly thanks to the corrosive dark mana of the monster.

But the failed attack also gave me the opportunity to strike.

STAB!

"SCREECH!"

I saw an opening in its defense and drove my left dagger into its side, ending its threat with a final screech.

"3 down."

But the battle had yet to reach the end, as the last two monsters now stood before me. They were exuding a different aura as if they were stronger than the rest. And, in fact, that was the case since I could see the mark that would appear on the rank-4 Ruinscreechers on their forehead.

A special gem was shining there, and that was the container of the dark energy they would use.

After dealing with these two, I would probably have enough points to pass the mark enough to not fail. Thus, I was just going to look for my goal artifact.

'I should heal myself.'

Since we were going to explore the dungeon on our own, all students were given five potions to use, and we couldn't bring any other artifact with us.

Trying to take advantage of the momentary pause of the fight, I reached for my spatial bracelet and immediately took out the potion supplied by the academy.

FLINCH!

As I was just about to drink it, my senses suddenly screamed at me, warning me of impending danger.

'Something-'

SWOOSH! CRASH!

Before I could react, something whizzed through the air and into my hands, smashing the potion vial into pieces. The veil containing the healing liquid shattered, leaving me stunned and vulnerable.

SWOOSH! However, the momentary stun immediately left my body as my instincts kicked into overdrive.

Dash.

Eyes of Hourglass.

Activating both of my skills at the same time, the time slowed while I felt my speed increase. And there, I could see a small projectile flying to me.

A special dagger imbued by mana, completely bypassing my senses.

Throwing my body to the side, I immediately tried to put myself into a safer position, but the dagger's speed was still so fast that it cut my right arm.

THUD!

As the skill deactivated after I fell to the ground, the pain also registered in my brain.

"Grrrr...." The wound on my shoulder, on my arm and on my face was burning, but the one on my shoulder was different.

I could feel it.

"Ho? You have dodged it."

At that exact second, I heard the sound of another student as three presences made themselves known.

Chapter 140 32.6 - Mid-terms

"Grrrr...."

Gritting my teeth, I endured the pain surging through my body. My head spun, and my mana felt disrupted with each passing second. The dagger wound on my arm throbbed relentlessly.

"Ho? You've managed to dodge it."

As the pain from the dagger wound seared through my arm, I clenched my teeth and tried to regain my composure.

THUMP!

My heart was beating rapidly, and my body heat was increasing.

'Calm down.'

My instincts had saved me from the full brunt of the attack, but I had been injured, and the danger wasn't over.

I forcefully calmed myself down, applying mana to my veins and heart, slowing the circulation of blood.

Swiftly, I scanned my surroundings, assessing the situation. My eyes locked onto the three approaching students, their faces set with malice.

One of them, a tall and imposing figure, spoke with a hint of satisfaction. "You are quite good, aren't you?"

He was one of those who entered the dungeon with me, but I hadn't sensed anything from him, let alone any attention.

'This is not good.'

My brain worked rapidly, processing the information I had gathered. I didn't know why they were targeting me, but it was evident that I was not in a favorable position.

'My senses aren't working.'

Something was amiss about those guys. Even though my stats weren't as high as high-ranking students, at the very least, my [Intuition] parameter should have been enough to sense their presence, considering they belonged to the lower ranks of the academy.

That meant one thing.

'They are hiding their strength.'

If they were able to trespass my senses and sneak attack me, that meant they were hiding their strengths. I am pretty confident that I should be able to sense any intent directed at me unless the enemy is a high-ranking person.

'Or, there is something fishy.'

Before I could analyze the situation further, the guy before me made his move.

And as he stepped forward, something unexpected happened. From his hand, black-crimson energy started coming out, directly linked to the body of the remaining monsters.

"SCREECH!"

The two remaining Ruinscreechers, still alive, suddenly started oozing a dark aura from their bodies as they went berserk.

Their growls turned into enraged screeches, and their eyes glowed with an eerie light. The dark energy within them surged, making them even more powerful.

THUMP!

Coupled with my heart beating. My body was responding to the energy that started surrounding me.

It was repulsing....The same thing that I had felt whenever I was in the presence of my enemy.

"Demonic Energy."

CLAP! CLAP! CLAP!

As I mumbled to myself, another student before me started clapping her hands. This time it was the girl with a hood covering her face.

"You are really, really good."

Even though most of her facial structures weren't visible, I was able to see the crazed smile on her face.

"Give me a good show, won't you?"

Following her words, immediately, the Ruinscreechers, now infused with demonic energy, charged at me with even greater ferocity.

Their movements were faster and more erratic, and the aura of malevolence that surrounded them was overwhelming. I was struggling to maintain my focus, as the pain on my body was making it harder for me to move.

SWOOSH! Even then, I dodged a vicious swipe from one of the monsters but narrowly avoided the claws that came dangerously close to my throat.

CLANG!

The other Ruinscreecher lunged at me, its fangs snapping perilously close to my arm. At the last second, thanks to the feeling, I was able to block the monster's attack with my daggers, but my posture wasn't the perfect one.

I wasn't able to properly estimate the enhanced strength granted by the dark energy, and my dual daggers struggled to keep up with the accelerated movements of the Ruinscreechers.

"Focus, Astron," I reminded myself, drawing on my experience and all the training I did. I couldn't afford to falter now.

Even the pain was enveloping my thoughts; even though my body was holding me back, I couldn't falter now.

Because, in front of me, were demonic humans.

'I need to see their faces at least.'

The fight became an intense dance of death.

SWOOSH!

At that exact second, the Ruinscreecher blasted itself to me, leaving a trail of dark energy on its path.

It was so fast that I wasn't able to react. No, it was as if something was disturbing my senses that the intuition I developed wasn't working. I couldn't even activate my skill [Eyes of Hourglass], let alone [Dash].

STAB!

The monster's claws went past through my chest, and from three points, I was penetrated. My insides were burning, and the monster's dark mana entered my body, disturbing its functions.

"Burghk!"

I couldn't help but feel the blood rushing through my mouth as I vomited a mouthful of that.

'It is too fast.'

My head was spinning, and I couldn't think properly. My consciousness was on the verge of losing.

"SCREECH!"

With a screech, the other monster also rushed at me and bit me with its fangs.

'At least I can return back.'

Since this was a Mid-term exam, the watch provided by the academy had the function of returning any student with a health risk.

But as the second passed, and I felt the connection between my consciousness and me was slipping away, nothing like a spatial mana psions moved around me.

'Huh?'

As if what was supposed to happen wasn't happening.

"SCREECH!"

Between the monster's screams, I was able to take a look at the watch provided by the academy for the mid-terms.

It was supposed to show the number of monsters killed by each student by connecting the server.

'Don't tell me.'

The moment my eyes darted to the watch, I saw nothing on the screen. 'They are blocking the mana connection to the watch.'

"Did you realize it?"

At that exact second, the same voice of the tall student reached my ears.

PULL!

"Burghk!"

His voice was followed by the monster's retreat as the first one pulled its claws out. And, because of the absence of its claws, the wounds were opened, and blood started pouring out from there.

"The connection between the academy and this space is blocked." He continued. I could see a clear mocking in his eyes, as if I was nothing but a mere insect to him. "No one's going to save you, you know. You will die here, alone."

THUD!

From the dizziness and the loss of blood, I could no longer sustain my body as it fell to the ground.

"It is pathetic." The girl with a hood watching me from the side spoke; the smile on her now vanished. "End it, Reiner." And she sentenced me to death.

"Tch, don't order me." The tall boy said, waving his hands. "I am going to do it anyway."

"SCREECH!"

With the wave of his hands, the monsters started screaming once again as if going berserk. More and more demonic energy was being supplied to the monsters as their aura got stronger with each second.

"Heh...." However, as they were talking, I couldn't no longer hold it in. I could no longer hold the feelings in my head.

"Hahahahaha....." The laughter I had been suppressing for a long time, I was finally able to let it out.

"What?"

Amid the dire situation, their expressions transformed from mockery to confusion. The boy, Reiner, showed a puzzled look, his arrogance faltering. "What's so funny, huh?"

I couldn't stop the laughter that bubbled up. After all, if the connection to the outside was now broken down, didn't that mean I could go all out here?

Didn't that mean I could use everything in my arsenal? Since the cameras watching me are probably not working either.

"Man.....It is flipped once again...."

As I started supplying myself with crimson mana, I could once again feel the world around me turning to crimson.

My thoughts, my vision, my feelings....Everything started transforming.....

The wounds on my body, the pain, the blood loss....Everything turned into one simple thing.

"I want blood."

At that exact second, on the cliff of death, I was having my best time.

"He's gone mad!" Reiner declared, taking a step back. His companions shared alarmed glances.

'Yes.....This is how it should be.....You should fear me more....'

The girl with the hood, however, maintained a twisted smile. "No, he's not mad. He's something else."

I was pretty sure I was making the same expression as her right now.

"JUST DIE YOU FUCKER!" The guy named Reiner shouted as he pointed his finger at me.

At that exact moment, the monsters rushed at me.

SWOOSH! SWOOSH!

The Ruinscreechers, fueled by the dark energy, were faster and more relentless than before. Their movements now had a different pattern, and they attacked with a savage ferocity that made it difficult to anticipate their strikes.

CLANK!

But I didn't need to anticipate.

I could simply feel it.

On the verge of death, when the afterlife was this close, I slowly transformed into something.

Something animalistic.

'Two Fangs of Blood Moon.'

SWOOSH!

At that exact moment, my body shot forward....