

H. Academy 161

Chapter 161 36.3 - The forge

"Oh my.....This will take a while...."

As those words spilled from the mouth of Vorgvir, he couldn't help but shake his head. Even for him, who had been one of the best legendary blacksmiths in the entire universe, the things he had seen in the vision were hard to make.

'A weapon that contains different forms?'

When one thought about making weapons, the first important element would be the blacksmith that would make it.

But the other one would be materials.

'How can I find the materials to make such an item?'

Knowing that he had been away from the eyes of the world, it was clear that he didn't have enough materials in his inventory.

"What is the problem?" At that moment, the young man opened his eyes, standing up. His gaze met with Vorgvir's.

"Sigh...." A hearty sigh left Vorgvir's mouth as he proceeded to explain the things about the weapon he had seen.

"The weapon I had seen in your essence....It will be very hard to make." He said, turning back to the workshop.

"Is it because there isn't actually one weapon, but many were there?" the young man probed, his eyes darting around the place, looking for the remnants of the vial.

"Indeed. In a sense, one can only hold one weapon connected to their essence, and it is almost unseen for one to connect with more than one weapon."

"And I am not one of them."

"Yes. And because of that, the vision I had seen simply means the weapon you will connect with needs to contain many forms, not one."

"Hmm....."

"Creating such a weapon is no simple task. The essence you've witnessed requires rare and powerful materials, some of which are not easily found in this realm. We'll need to embark on a journey to gather these components from various corners of the world."

"What kind of materials will you need?" However, the young man seemed rather relaxed even against this revelation.

"..." Hearing this, Vorgvir fell into silence for a second, sorting his thoughts. His mind had already formed a clear direction to follow in his mind for the weapon that needed to be made. "First and foremost, your powers...."

Before he could continue, the young man nodded his head. "Moonstone."

Hearing this, Vorgvir's eyes widened for a second.

"This kid...Does he know his origins?"

He looked at the young man talking.

'No, he probably doesn't.'

Looking at him, it was evident that he was just a cheeky and a bit edgy young kid who didn't know much about the world, but it also seemed he researched about himself.

"We will need [Moonstone]."

"Yes. We will need [Moonstone] as the conductor of your source of powers." Vorgvir replied, nodding his head.

'It is sad that I can't tell you about anything.....Tch, that contract.' Inwardly, Vorgvir clicked his tongue. Even though the kid had the right to know, there were things out of his control here.

Vorgvir gestured toward the array of weapons displayed in the workshop, each possessing distinctive forms derived from the inherent qualities of the materials used. A small flame danced in his hand as he illustrated the interplay between material and form.

"All of the weapons we made tend to have at least a special form," Vorgvir explained. "Every material has specific characteristics that contribute to the final shape and function of the weapon. However, there are instances when the desired result won't take a special form due to constraints, much like the weapon you seek."

The young man nodded in understanding, prompting him to pose a crucial question. "So, we need a suitable material for this characteristic, is that correct?"

"Indeed, it is," Vorgvir affirmed. "A material that defies a specific form—a rarity so profound that discovering it is nearly impossible due to its elusive nature—[Morphium]. This substance harmonizes with the ebb and flow of your essence, granting the weapon the ability to shift and adapt."

As Vorgvir concluded his explanation, he fixed a discerning gaze on the young man. "However, acquiring both [Moonstone] and [Morphium] will be an arduous task. These materials are exceptionally scarce, and their unique characteristics make them challenging to locate. The journey ahead is bound to be fraught with trials and dangers. Of course, from—"

TAK!

Just as he was about to continue, a sudden and unexpected sound interrupted him.

"Are you talking about these?"

Vorgvir turned, his eyes widening at the sight before him. There, on the ground just before the kid, lay the two materials he had just described—[Moonstone] and [Morphium].

"...."

Vorgvir was momentarily taken aback, not anticipating to see these elusive materials appear before them at that exact moment. The air in the cavern seemed charged with an unexpected energy as the blacksmith processed the uncanny turn of events.

"....You...." He was speechless.

'How does he have those materials?'

The young man whom he took as a kid suddenly brought up one of the rarest materials in the world.

"How do you have these?"

At the end of the day, he couldn't help but ask. How did this kid have both of them? He didn't look particularly strong either.

"Does it matter?" However, the young man simply shrugged it off.

"....Well, it doesn't."

"Right."

Vorgvir's eyes shifted to the materials on the ground, examining them with a mix of astonishment and curiosity. The [Moonstone] emitted a soft, ethereal glow, casting a gentle luminescence that seemed to dance along its surface. Its translucent nature revealed intricate patterns within, reminiscent of the moon's mesmerizing play of shadows.

Besides it, the [Morphium] presented an entirely different appearance. Its form was elusive, a liquid-like substance encapsulated within a crystalline container. The substance shimmered, taking on ever-changing hues as if adapting to the ambient energies surrounding it. The essence of adaptability and transformation was vividly captured within its enigmatic structure.

But the weirdest thing is both of these materials were covered with a weird type of container. It was a design he had never seen before.

'Is this what human blacksmiths do nowadays? It works quite well.'

As if an old man who had met with the technology for the first time he looked at the container, analyzing it.

"It's quite an interesting way of using mana fields. Is this the work of some contemporary blacksmiths?" Vorgvir asked, expecting the answer to reveal the ingenuity of a fellow blacksmith.

The young man shook his head. "Not blacksmiths, but magic engineers. They've found a way to enhance and protect these materials using advanced mana fields. It's a blend of craftsmanship and magic, creating containers that not only preserve but augment the properties of the materials within."

"Magic engineers? What is that?" However, Vorgvir, not aware of the change in the outside world, didn't know about the term.

The young man explained, "Magic engineers are individuals who specialize in combining traditional craftsmanship with magical principles. They integrate mana manipulation techniques into their creations, producing items that possess both physical and magical attributes. These containers are a testament to their ability to harmonize the two disciplines."

Vorgvir scratched his beard, intrigued by the advancements in craftsmanship. "Times have indeed changed. I was unaware of such developments during my seclusion."

The young man nodded. "The world has evolved, and new methods have emerged. These containers not only protect the materials but also enhance their properties, making them more effective for forging."

"Interesting....Rather than relying on the skills of the creator, they are more likely to rely on methods, it seems..."

"Yes. That's right."

The young man leaned forward, his eyes focusing on the materials. "Vorgvir, when can we start the forging process?"

Vorgvir, however, shook his head as he looked at the materials. "There is one thing we are missing from your weapon." He said as he approached the Morphium.

The young man frowned at the response. "I thought we had everything we needed here; what else do we need?"

Vorgvir shook his head solemnly. "There's a vital component."

"The essence of purpose?" the young man questioned.

Vorgvir nodded, "Indeed, it is an important one, but there's another crucial factor. The missing component is the energy supply."

The young man's confusion deepened. "Energy supply? What do you mean?"

Vorgvir sighed, "Morphium, despite its incredible potential, has a drawback that's kept it from widespread use. To control and confine Morphium into the desired material form in the free space where the mana is rampant, a substantial and sustained energy supply is required. It's not just about forging it into a shape but maintaining that shape and manipulating it as needed during the forging process. That's the challenge with Morphium."

He signaled the container and the Morphium there.

"The container is making use of the mana fields inside it to make sure the Morphium is subjected to a special type of mana continuously, and because of that, we can see it in a special form, but that won't be the case in the real world where you will need to use the mana around."

Understanding dawned on the young man's face as if, this time, he wasn't expecting such a conclusion to be drawn.

"So, we need a considerable energy source to wield Morphium effectively in crafting the weapon."

Vorgvir nodded, "Precisely. This energy supply is what will allow us to harness the transformative abilities of Morphium and mold it into the weapon you seek. Without it, our efforts would be in vain, and Morphium's potential would remain untapped."

As those words sank, the young man fell into contemplation, thinking about the words that left Vorgvir's mouth.

Vorgvir gazed at the young man, understanding the weight of his concern. "Such a power supply is not a common commodity. However, there is a solution."

The young man's eyes sparked with curiosity. "What solution?"

Vorgvir began explaining, "In the depths of high-ranking monsters lies a potent source of energy called Mana Cores. These cores are concentrated manifestations of a creature's magical essence. If we can obtain the Mana Core of a powerful monster, I can fashion a special compressed mana cube from it. This cube will serve as the energy supply needed to wield Morphium effectively."

The moment he said those words, young man's eyes widened as if a realization dawned upon him.

"For a power supply, would this suffice...."

With those words, he grabbed something from the spatial space under his control.

"This!"

Widening Vorgvir's eyes.....

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"For a power supply, would this suffice...."

The moment the young man dropped the thing he took out from his spatial storage, immense amounts of energy started spreading to the environment.

"This....."

In this scene, Vorgvir's eyes widened in sheer surprise.

"Don't tell me...This is?"

His widened eyes turned from surprise to horror in a very second as he immediately understood what this was.

For a being who had seen countless things in his whole long life, if one asked what was the most disgusting memory he could ever forget, the thing in front of him would be one of them.

"Kid." Vorgvir's voice dropped, taking on a grave tone. The once-goofy blacksmith revealed the essence of a seasoned warrior and elder. The flames flickering around him mirrored the turbulent emotions stirring within.

"You have three seconds to explain how you possess this thing." The demand cut through the air like a blade, emphasizing the gravity of the situation. The cavern seemed to hold its breath, awaiting the young man's response amidst the ominous revelation.

The young man maintained his stoic expression even though he knew the weight of what he had just unveiled.

He met the eyes of the demon elder before him without backing off. In front of the overwhelming intent of the hundreds of years old being, he simply stood still.

"I stole it."

And spoke three words.

Three simple words hung in the air, carrying a weight that resonated through the cavern. Vorgvir's eyes, bearing the weight of centuries, pierced through the young man before him.

"You stole it." Vorgvir's voice echoed with a mixture of disbelief and scrutiny. He knew the severity of what the young man had just confessed to, and he also knew it was very unlikely.

However, he was experienced in terms of reading people, and he instinctively knew the young man wasn't lying.

"How? Whom did you steal it from?" The questions flowed from Vorgvir's lips, each one a demand for answers that could unravel the mysterious circumstances surrounding the object.

"And do you even know what this is?" Vorgvir's gaze intensified, seeking the truth in the eyes of the young man. The flames in the cavern flickered as if echoing the tension that had gripped the once seemingly routine forging session.

"Even if I told you whom I stole this from, would you even know it, old man?" The young man didn't back off as he spoke. Vorgvir could see he was getting irritated....Possibly from the pressure he was emitting.

'Sigh...What am I doing?'

Realizing the tension he had created, Vorgvir took a deep breath, allowing the flames around him to subside. The ancient blacksmith eased the intensity in his eyes, acknowledging the youthful defiance before him.

"Kid, just tell me. Do you know what this is?" He asked once more, looking at the boy's eyes.

"It is a Mana Nucleus." The boy replied, looking at the thing on the ground. His eyes didn't feel any emotion neither did they feel any remorse.

'Does he now know what this thing is made from?'

Vorgvir thought to himself, looking at his reaction.

"It seems you know what this is. Then, do you know what this was made from?" Vorgvir continued with his questions as he looked into the young man's eyes.

The young man met Vorgvir's gaze, his expression unwavering. "Yes, I know what it's made from. A Mana Nucleus is essentially crafted from the bodies of humans with special mana characteristics. It's an inhumane act, a perversion of life turned into a source of power."

Vorgvir's eyes narrowed as he processed the admission while watching the kid's reaction at the mention of such an inhumane act.

However, contrary to what he was expecting, the kid didn't seem bothered by what he was saying.

"Then, even though you knew the origin of this thing, why are you proposing it to use as a material for your weapon?"

The young man's gaze remained steadfast, unyielding under the scrutiny. "I know its origin, and I won't deny the darkness it carries, as well as how inhumane it is. If I were given the chance, I would never create such a thing."

The boy said as he lowered his gaze, looking at his hands.

The young man's words cut through the air, each syllable a declaration of his unwavering purpose. "But, I won't simply ignore the opportunity presented to me. I am neither an angel nor a hero, just as I said before. My weapon is not something I want to use out of kindness for others; it is a tool for my revenge."

Raising his head defiantly, he locked eyes with Vorgvir. "If I had the values a hero held, do you think I would come to this place seeking for you? Did you forget the words I just spoke here? Even if I hold the most cursed weapon in this world, even if it is the most disgusting thing, if I can achieve my vengeance, it won't matter in the end. I will do whatever it takes to do it."

Vorgvir's gaze lingered on the young man, a mixture of understanding and contemplation in his ancient eyes. The air in the cavern felt charged, the conflicting energies of vengeance and the eerie workshop's ambiance creating an atmosphere heavy with purpose.

"Very well," Vorgvir spoke, his voice carrying the weight of acknowledgment. "I won't question your motives any further. If this is the path you choose, then we shall proceed. However, kid, remember this. Playing with the souls and the dead won't ever bring you any good."

The young man's response was delivered with a cold resolve. "It is even better if it does that. I had never been delusional enough to think I deserve anything good in this world."

The eyes of the kid speaking those words seemed to contain intense emotions and self-hatred that even Vorgvir was taken aback.

'Now, I see.'

At that second, he understood what this kid was doing.

'You are punishing yourself, aren't you, kid? Trying to put out the fire inside you by hating yourself.....'

At that exact moment, in his eyes, the young man became a kid, even for a second.

"If that is what you wish." Vorgvir nodded solemnly, recognizing the depth of the young man's conviction, even if it led down a dark and perilous path.

He grabbed the Mana Nucleus in the ground, as well as the other two materials.

Of course, there were other materials that he would need to use, but he didn't bother telling him since he had all those other three in any case.

"Then, young man." He reached his workshop as he called the young man. "This will take a while, so make yourself comfortable around here if you can even do that."

At this point, he could no longer afford to lose his concentration even for a second; neither could he be disturbed since the weapon he was going to make might not be the strongest or highest rank, but it was certainly going to be the most complex one he had ever made.

"Understood, I will be waiting for you."

The young man nodded his head respectfully as he slowly started walking out of the place. There were no signs of prior anger he had in his eyes as the same emotionless expression returned to his eyes.

TAK!

As the door of the workshop closed, Vorgvir was left alone with the occupation he had his whole life.

His hands slowly reached the hammer he held as he leaned on the stall.

"Old friend.....Are you ready?"

The dim light in Vorgvir's workshop flickered as he spoke to the inanimate companion of his solitude—the hammer that had been his steadfast companion through countless creations.

"What a pitiful kid, wasn't he?" Vorgvir mused aloud, his eyes fixed on the materials spread across his workbench. The hammer, with its worn handle and battle-tested head, seemed to echo the weight of his words in the silent workshop.

The blacksmith's hands gripped the handle of the hammer, its familiarity offering a comforting reassurance. For a moment, he allowed the memories to wash over him—centuries of forging, stories etched into every strike of the hammer against the anvil.

CLANK!

"He carries the burden of revenge," Vorgvir continued, his voice a low murmur. "A path filled with darkness and anguish. But who am I to judge? I've seen the world crumble under the weight of its own sins."

CLANK!

As if in response, the hammer seemed to resonate with the weight of untold tales. The cavern embraced their conversation, the only witnesses to the silent exchange between the legendary blacksmith and his faithful tool.

CLANK!

"His weapon will be a reflection of his turmoil," Vorgvir stated a hint of both resignation and acceptance in his tone. "A manifestation of vengeance and a journey into the depths of his soul. I wonder, old friend, what tales will this forge unfold?"

CLANK!

The hammer, silent yet deeply understood, bore the marks of countless conversations. In the quietude of the workshop, Vorgvir's hands began their intricate dance—the dance of creation and redemption, a dance that echoed through the annals of time.

SWOOSH!

The forge roared to life, its flames casting dancing shadows on the walls.

CLANK!

Vorgvir, lost in the rhythm of his craft, poured centuries of skill and emotion into every strike. The workshop became a sanctuary where steel and magic entwined, and the past and future converged in the creation of a weapon that defied conventional boundaries.

CLANK!

Time seemed to lose its grip as Vorgvir delved into the heart of the forging process. Hours turned into moments, and the weapon gradually took shape under the master blacksmith's skilled hands.

From time to time, he breathed fire from his mouth, reigniting the forge.

And continued his rhythmic strikes on the glowing metal, a low, melodic chant escaped his lips—a whisper carried by the flames and woven into the very fabric of the forge's song.

"By the anvil's hymn, the steel shall sing, In shadows danced, creation takes wing. Through the fire's breath and hammer's grace, Crafted divine, a weapon to embrace."

? The Divinity of Forgery?

「 Call of the Forge God. 」

CLANK!

The chant echoed in the cavern, a mystical undertone to the relentless cadence of the hammer's blows. Vorgvir's voice, weathered by time, carried the weight of centuries as he invoked the Divinity of Forgery—a prayer to the forge god, a plea for guidance in the creation of a weapon that transcended mortal understanding.

CLANK!

The flames responded to the enchanting cadence, dancing with renewed vigor. The very air seemed to hum with ethereal energy as if the forge itself acknowledged the call of its devoted blacksmith.

CLANK!

As Vorgvir mumbled the sacred words, his movements became more fluid, more instinctual. The Divinity of Forgery, a legacy he created on his own, resonated in every stroke. Each strike brought the weapon closer to completion, an instrument of both creation and destiny.

CLANK!

As the last strike echoed through the cavern, Vorgvir stood back, his chest heaving from exertion.

Before him lay a weapon of enigmatic beauty and ominous power—

an embodiment of the young man's journey into darkness.

With a weary yet satisfied smile, Vorgvir whispered to his hammer, "Another tale etched into the forge of time."

The weapon, gleaming with an aura as if it was alive, awaited the young man's return—a conduit for his vengeance and a testament to the enduring artistry of the legendary blacksmith.

"Countless souls.....Living inside the weapon itself...."

Vorgvir mumbled.

"Will it be a cursed weapon...Or will it be a weapon devoted on its owner..."

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TOK! TOK! TOK!

No matter where you are, if you ever want to get a specialized product for yourself, you will need to wait.

That is the basic procedure.

This is especially true when the thing you are getting is something that is not common.

"Sigh...It is taking a lot longer than I had expected."

That was the reason why I was waiting in this place, spending time looking for the crafts that were made or training.

'The Great Vorgvir, huh?'

The game [Legacy of Shadows: The Hunter's Destiny] contained quite a lot of twists. That was especially the case with this dungeon.

In the slightly later parts of the game, when Ethan was on the verge of finishing the academy and graduating, he would come to this place for a mission.

At that point, the internship and the field lessons would take a huge proportion of the student's curriculum, and the assignments would also start becoming more like real Hunters.

As one of the assignments, Ethan would come to this place to investigate a report.

In that report, it would be said the environment and the mountains observed a clear change, where there were parts of the ground erupted from time to time.

When the player came here, we would start an investigation, and soon, it would be discovered that a sealed dungeon underneath the mountains was leaking its mana.

It was a pretty normal thing since even if it is a legendary blacksmith, no product can function eternally.

And because the seal was not functioning, the dungeon would start affecting the outside world.

After that would come the dungeon exploration, fighting in the field of fire and eruptions. However, in the end, rather than finding a boss monster to fight, we would find a disturbed and regretful elder demon who had fled from his past.

The player would fight with the old man first since he was a demon. But then, we would lose the fight since the strength he held wasn't only limited to physicality.

But, there, Vorgvir's experienced eyes would notice Ethan's identity and the secret he held that even he himself didn't know.

From that point on, we would get our weapon...The weapon we would use to bring the world piece – Holy Weapon.

In any case, because of this, Vorgvir actually held quite a value in the game, and his position as a character was really important.

However, that doesn't matter much. For the weapon I would use, I knew only a handful of blacksmiths in this whole universe would satisfy the conditions, and the easiest one to approach was Vorgvir because I completed the game %100 and also finished the small side-quest related to him.

Since I knew the seal had already started malfunctioning, I looked for the changes related to mana around the mountain.

To predict the tsunami, we could look for the tremors underneath the sea, or to predict future weather; we can look for the positions of the clouds, etc.

The same applies to mana since, in a sense, it is also one of the fundamental pillars related to the environment.

This property was precisely what I had used to track the location of the dungeon. The mountain range is wide, and this place is quite a high level for a game. Therefore, it was nearly impossible for me to look for every nook and cranny to find the entrance.

And now I was here, waiting for my weapon to complete.

CLANK! FUSH!

From time to time, I could hear the sounds of the hammer clashing with metal and flames rising. The reason why Vorgvir is the legendary blacksmith is because he is the Ancient Demon of Fire.

The fire basically commands his will, and he has chosen to use it for forging.

FUSH!

'Was that the right thing to do?'

I asked myself. Remembering how the Mana Nucleus was created, I knew countless people died in anguish.

BOOM!

Looking at the fire continuously rising, a scene came into my eyes suddenly.

"Astron, look, look...Fireflies....They are beautiful, right?"

The scene of the past, a small place we made after mother and father passed away.

'At that time, I wanted to be like those fireflies....'

"Yeah, they are beautiful."

"What happened? Why are you looking like that?"

"I want to be like them."

"Like them?"

"Yes, like them. They can go wherever they want, unrestricted by anything."

"Freedom, huh? They might have wings, but we have our own kind of freedom, Astron. We can help others, making our world better...We can learn and dream."

"But they can fly."

"...."

"Imagine soaring through the sky, visiting places no one has ever been."

"True, they have the sky, but we have each other, and that's a unique kind of freedom. Besides, who knows, maybe one day we'll find our own wings."

"Can we really find our wings?"

"Why? Do you want to leave me alone and explore the world? This sister is hurt."

"You know, I will never leave you alone in this world."

"I know."

'At that time, you, who were illuminating my world, looked more pure than anything else under the moon.'

For some reason, thoughts and memories came crashing here.

'But, you couldn't find your wings at the end.'

CLENCH!

Clenching my fists, I looked at the small shiny mana particles around my hand.

'They were taken from you.'

And once again, with the memories that crashed back, I stood up and took out the training materials I brought with me.

'And, I swear, I will take them back.'

Inside the forge, Vorgvir's hands, calloused from centuries of forging, gently traced the contours of the weapon.

It pulsed with a latent power, a reflection of the young man's vengeance and the blacksmith's commitment to his craft.

"Old friend," Vorgvir whispered to the hammer at his side, "we have birthed something unique today."

With a profound sigh, he placed the weapon on the cooling rack. The workshop, once ablaze with the fervor of creation, now settled into a reverent silence.

Vorgvir turned towards the door, his steps resonating with the weight of his centuries-long journey.

As he pushed the door open, immediately, a wave of air hit his head. The workshop was closed for a long time, and the refreshing air of the cave entered his lungs.

At first, he couldn't find any traces of the young man around.

"I thought he would be waiting for me here."

He mumbled.

"Hmm?"

His senses picked up a presence on the side.

PISH!

Turning his head to the side, he noticed a very unusual scene.

The young man stood right before the lava flow, his posture serene, as if in a deep meditative state. The scorching heat from the molten rock seemed to have no effect on him.

"Hmm, not the usual place for meditation," Vorgvir muttered to himself, intrigued by the peculiar sight. As he approached, he realized the young man's skin was continuously burning, yet he remained unperturbed as if drawing strength from the intense heat.

The pale skin was already showing signs of getting wounded, and the scene seemed disturbing.

"Kid, what in the realms are you doing?" Vorgvir asked, a mix of confusion and concern in his voice. The young man slowly opened his eyes.

"I am waiting for you."

The young man replied as he took a small potion from his spatial bracelet.

GULP!

And gulped.

In an instant, the wounds of scorching disappeared from his body as if it was trying to fight against the scorching heat.

The young man stood up, his movements fluid despite the ordeal he had just subjected himself to. The wounds that once marked his pale skin were now gone, the healing potion having worked its magic. He turned to face Vorgvir, his purple eyes steady and determined.

"The weapon is ready," Vorgvir stated, gauging the young man's reaction.

"Good." The young man's response was curt, his gaze fixed on the legendary blacksmith. "What's next?"

Vorgvir nodded, recognizing the impatience in the young man's demeanor. "The weapon needs to be tempered in the essence of the divine forge, and it needs to be connected to your very being. Follow me."

As they entered the workshop, Vorgvir carefully placed the weapon into the forge's flames. The air crackled with the mingling of magic and steel, and the weapon started to glow with an otherworldly radiance.

"Now, this is the final step," Vorgvir explained. "The divine essence will infuse the weapon, and it will become a true extension of your being. But be warned, this process will never be easy as the weapon contains Mana Nucleus. The forge god demands respect."

The final touch is yours," Vorgvir said, his eyes fixed on the young man. "To forge a true connection with the weapon, you must offer a part of yourself. Your blood will bind the divine essence to your very being."

The young man didn't even hesitate for a second. Without uttering a word, he drew a small blade from his belt and made a deliberate cut on his palm. Blood welled up, and he held his hand over the weapon.

"Let your essence flow into the weapon," Vorgvir instructed, his voice carrying the weight of centuries of wisdom. "Forge the connection that will make it an extension of your soul."

As the young man's blood dripped onto the weapon, the divine essence reacted, enveloping the crimson droplets in a mesmerizing dance of light. The cavern seemed to respond to the sacred act, the flames flickering with a newfound intensity.

"Now, prepare yourself," Vorgvir warned. "The infusion begins."

As the divine essence fused with the young man's blood and the weapon, an otherworldly symphony of screams erupted within the forge.

"You promised..." A voice filled with betrayal and despair whispered, seeking a pledge unfulfilled.

"Why did you abandon us?" Another voice, laden with bitterness, accused and lamented a forsaken companionship.

"Vengeance... endless vengeance..." A spectral murmur yearned for a purpose, a thirst for retribution that seemed unquenchable.

The chorus of souls became a tragic narrative, each voice a tale of unfulfilled promises, broken bonds, and insatiable yearning.

The words, saturated with pain and regret, painted a vivid tapestry of the lives once intertwined within the Mana Nucleus project, those who had a clear future ahead of them taken.

They were now seeking the life they had missed, becoming a being fed from souls.

The young man stood in the midst of this scene, accepting everything thrown at him.

"Grr..."

He clenched his fists.

The energy from the Mana Nucleus was slowly overwhelming him, and with each passing second, the voices of the anguish got louder and louder.

The energy emanating from the Mana Nucleus surged through the young man's veins like a torrential storm. His body convulsed involuntarily, wracked by the burning intensity of the divine infusion. The anguished voices of the trapped souls reverberated through the cavern, creating an oppressive symphony of suffering.

With gritted teeth, the young man endured the searing pain, feeling as though every fiber of his being was on the brink of unraveling. The air around him shimmered with the glow of the divine essence, casting shadows that danced in tandem with his silent struggle.

-PAT!

Blood dripped from his bitten lips, a testament to the silent endurance he imposed upon himself.

The forge god's infusion demanded not only a connection to the divine weapon but also a toll on the very essence of the one who sought its power.

Vorgvir observed with a stoic expression, recognizing the profound sacrifice the young man willingly embraced. The process was relentless, an unyielding trial that merged steel, magic, and the essence of countless lost souls.

"Why?"

"Why it was me?"

"What did you want from me?"

As the pain reached its zenith, the voices crescendoed into an almost unbearable cacophony, pushing the limits of the young man's endurance.

THUD!

However, even with his strong willpower, in the end, the young man was weak. His body could no longer handle the pressure bestowed.

With a silent thud, he fell to the ground.

"Arghk!"

His eyes became blurry as both him and Vorgvir could sense the connection holding him to life was weakening.

Just at that exact second, a small, ethereal mist emerged from the necklace around his neck.

The mist coalesced into the delicate silhouette of a girl; her features shrouded in a comforting aura.

"Brother, I am with you, I am with you, I am with you, I am with you."

The ethereal whispers reverberated through the cavern, a comforting mantra that seemed to permeate the very air.

"Gurghk-!"

The young man, still on the ground, listened to the words while groaning in pain.

In his eyes, the silhouette of the girl was the manifestation of the thing he regretted the most.

As the misty figure continued her reassurances, a gentle warmth emanated from her presence as she caressed the cheek of the young man.

"Remember," she whispered, "even in the darkest moments, you are not alone. The echoes are your strength, and I am your guide."

With those words, the misty figure began to dissipate, merging back into the small necklace she came from.

SHINE!

As the young man started shining under the cavern, the weapon, which didn't hold any form, slowly moved towards him.

And with one last movement, the weapon entered the young man's chest.

Chapter 164 Chapter 36.6 - The Forge

"Interesting,"

Vorgvir, standing nearby, observed the ethereal encounter with a seasoned eye.

The ancient blacksmith had witnessed many extraordinary events in his long life, but the communion between the young man and the spectral figure was a sight even he found intriguing.

"To think such a bond exists," Vorgvir remarked, his gruff voice carrying a note of respect.

"Two young kids, one is a guide and the other one carrying the burden, huh?" He slowly approached the young man lying on the ground after passing out.

His breath was small, as if he was on the verge of being no longer alive....The shiny aura covering his skin had long disappeared, leaving his original color.

"Sigh.....What a pain..." It had been a long time since he had taken any person under his wing.

In the dimly lit chamber adjacent to the forge, Vorgvir carefully laid the young man on a makeshift bed.

The ancient blacksmith's expression, usually stern and weathered, softened as he looked upon the unconscious figure.

'He really resembles him.'

In the end, he couldn't shake this suffocating feeling in his heart. Looking at the young man made him remember his son.

"Kids and their recklessness," he muttered to himself, shaking his head.

Vorgvir gathered a few herbs and potions, remnants of his past dealings with injuries, both mundane and magical. It had been a while since he used those over someone, but his skillful hands remembered the muscle memory.

Carefully, he spilled the contents of the small mixture over the burns on the young man's skin, the remnants of the intense forging ritual.

The young man's upper body was already half naked since the forging process required it to do so.

"Hmm?" At that second, his attention was drawn to the small armor on the corner. As a blacksmith who couldn't control his curiosity, he slowly approached the armor, and the moment he took it into his hands, he could tell it was something extraordinary.

"Black armor, huh?" he murmured, feeling the cool touch of the dark material. The craftsmanship was meticulous, and the black hue seemed to absorb the very essence of light around it. "You got yourself quite a piece here, kid."

Vorgvir examined the armor, his experienced hands exploring the intricate details. The surface bore subtle engravings, a testament to the skill and artistry that went into its creation and something that no ordinary people could see.

"This isn't your ordinary gear. The quality suggests a masterful blacksmith worked on it. Must have cost a fortune."

Vorgvir continued his examination of the armor, his fingers tracing over the fine engravings.

As he delved deeper into the craftsmanship, his keen eyes discerned the armor's intended purpose.

"Hmm, stealth gear, I see," Vorgvir muttered, nodding in acknowledgment. The material choices and meticulous design indicated that the armor prioritized agility and concealment. However, as a seasoned blacksmith, he couldn't help but notice a crucial flaw.

"The defense properties are commendable, but it lacks practicality," he commented, a critical edge to his tone. "You can't wear this without drawing attention. It's like shouting, 'I'm a warrior!' in the middle of a crowded market."

He mulled over the armor's design, his mind already formulating improvements. "What this needs is a touch of Morphium."

After using the Morphium the young man brought, there were still some leftovers. However, one thing was missing. "Using Morphium on armor, huh?"

He caressed his beard, thinking of a way to activate the Morphium.

"I can do that..." Then, he mumbled as if he had already found the way. "Different from the weapon, the armor doesn't need to contain the properties of the changed form. A Rune should suffice."

Approaching his armory, his hands reached a small button hidden behind the crafts. As he pushed it, a small space was embedded in the wall.

The chamber held an array of small, radiant objects, each adorned with ancient symbols that seemed to whisper forgotten secrets.

Vorgvir's fingers navigated through the assortment until he found the one he sought—a small, intricately carved energy rune.

The energy rune shimmered with a small glow, resonating with the latent power waiting to be harnessed.

Vorgvir carefully extracted the rune, cradling it in his hands. The design on the rune seemed to dance with a soft luminescence, an indication of the energy it contained while taking the mana from the space around.

"Perfect," Vorgvir muttered to himself. Holding the energy rune, he made his way back to the armor.

"This should be enough for a gift," Vorgvir muttered, a gruff tenderness in his voice.

"Cough...Cough...." Just as he was about to raise his hammer, suddenly, a hearty cough left his mouth from deep inside his lungs.

Putting his hand on his mouth, he breathed deeply for a second.

"Did I push myself?" He mumbled, looking at his body. Creating a weapon with such a potent energy and soul wasn't easy. Using Divinity of Forge and one of the highest ranks [Calls] was now taking its toll on his body.

"Tch....I am getting old." But in the end, being the stubborn man he was, he grabbed his hammer once again after composing himself.

CLANK!

The cavern echoed with a quiet ambiance as Vorgvir worked, the flames in the forge casting a flickering light that danced on the walls.

The young man, now resting in the dim glow, bore the marks of his journey—the weapon, now dormant inside him.

"Ah...." A short groan left my mouth as I opened my eyes. The familiar scorching heat I had been subjected to was immediately captured by my senses, as well as the tiredness and aching of my body.

"You are awake." Vorgvir's gruff voice cut through the air, revealing his presence nearby. I attempted to sit up, only to feel a momentary dizziness that forced me to lie back down.

'What is this?'

This feeling was foreign, as if something unnatural was inside my body.

"Easy there," Vorgvir advised, his tone as blunt as ever. "You went through quite the ordeal. The forging process is no walk in the park, especially with the likes of Morphium involved."

As I adjusted to my surroundings, Vorgvir continued, "But, I must say, the results are impressive. The weapon you wished for was created successfully. It awaits your inspection."

Hearing his words, the events before I had lost my consciousness came crashing down. The voices of those anguished and the amounts of energy I had felt in my body.

'Brother, I am with you, I am with you.'

I even saw her while coping with the pain. It was a weird feeling, as if I had regained the strength to resist the pain when I heard her voice.

'I guess this was how the characters of the shows felt when they saw flashbacks of their past.'

In any case, just as Vorgvir mentioned, the weapon's forgery was successful since before I closed my eyes, I felt the foreign energy entering my body.

"Take a look at your weapon," Vorgvir grunted, pointing towards my body where a small engraving appeared. Looking there, I could see a small, shiny, crescent moon tattoo on my chest, right in the middle.

"This...." I knew what it was, and I was expecting this result already. Even then, seeing it firsthand and feeling it felt certainly weird.

"It's not your usual weapon. This one is bonded to your essence. You'll need to call it for it to manifest properly. Just focus on it."

Hearing his remarks, I closed my eyes. The bonded weapon, by essence, meant the same thing as learning an [Art].

You would instinctually know the path you needed to take if you wanted to use the weapon, but at the same time, you would also have room to improve.

With my eyes closed, I focused on the weapon, contemplating the image I wanted it to take.

It was an intriguing process, akin to shaping a mental sculpture. As I delved into my mind, a series of images flashed before my closed eyes. They were like glimpses into alternate forms, each representing a different aspect of the weapon's potential.

As I continued my mental exploration, the images became clearer, as if the path to each form unfolded before me. I could sense the distinct essence of each weapon waiting to be harnessed.

The first image that surfaced was the Green Moon.

With a conscious thought, the cavern around me seemed to shift. The moon cast a green glow, and the energy rifle emerged. I could almost feel the weight of the weapon in my hands, the cool touch of its metallic surface.

Transitioning to the second form, the scene shifted again. Now, the moon burned with a blue-gold flame, illuminating a vast landscape. I stood holding a bow of Blue Moon, each shot creating explosive bursts upon impact.

The intricate details of the bow materialized vividly, a testament to the clarity of the mental image.

The third form took shape, with the moon casting a crimson light. This time, I wielded Twin Blades of Red Moon, and as the blades slashed through the air, the crimson energy left a trail of withering destruction. The precision and deadliness of the blades felt palpable in my mind.

The fourth image revealed a silver-colored sky, and in my hands were the Chakrams of Silver Moon. As the chakrams spun and danced through the air, connected by threads of silver energy, their graceful movement was mesmerizing.

Finally, the scene transformed into a dark purple-black sky. I now held a series of Rings of Black Moon, manipulating dark forces to crush the very ground beneath. The overwhelming power of gravitational control resonated in the intricate design of the rings.

The moment everything in my head was finished, I instinctively knew the name of the weapon in my head.

It wasn't something I decided, nor something I talked about with Vorgvir.

"Celestalith, the Transcendent Eclipse."

Was the name of the weapon itself.

I was pulled back to the reality of the cavern when Vorgvir's voice echoed through the space. "Done figuring out your masterpiece?" he grumbled with a hint of curiosity.

"Yeah, I think so," I responded, still grappling with the awe-inspiring experience.

"Then, I suggest you open your eyes." Vorgvir then instructed me to look in front of myself.

As I opened my eyes, I was met with the surreal sight of Celestalith, the weapon I had just envisioned, materialized right before me.

The intricate details, the ethereal glow, and the weight in my hands were not mere figments of imagination; they were tangible, real.

It was an overwhelming realization that the weapon that was bonded to one's very essence could be this different.

The energy I could feel from the weapon and the feeling I got the moment I touched it felt as if it was another limb of mine.

Vorgvir observed my reaction with a stoic expression, the grizzled features of his face betraying little emotion. "Well, it seems you've got what you wanted. If there's nothing else, you better leave. The cavern isn't a place for lingering."

Even then, I could easily tell his gruff words carried a subtle undertone of acknowledgment. That was expected since we made one of the most dangerous things in the world in this place.

But, before leaving, I needed to check one other thing.

'Status.'

It was the changes in my body and my skills since I knew something definitely had changed.

Chapter 165 36.7 - The Forge [Interlude]

'Status.'

?Name: Astron Natusalune

?Occupation: Weapon Master (level 1)

?Talent Limit: 6

?Passives:

- Vengeful Bane

?Attributes:

Variable Attributes:

- Strength: 2.36 --> 2.80

- Dexterity: 2.85 --> 3.45

- Agility: 2.89 --> 3.76

- Constitution: 2.12 --> 2.75

- Intuition: 3.01 --> 3.95

- Magical Power: 3.15 --> 4.2

- Mana Capacity: 2.79 --> 3.13

?Traits:

- Perceptive Insight (Unique)(Unchanging)

- Lunar Enigma (????) (Growth Type) (Stage 1)

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

?Arts:

- Lethal Arsenal Ascendancy (????)(%13 --> 20)

?Skills:

- Dash

- Eyes of Hourglass

?Body Imprints:

?Bonds:

- Aurora Raven (Rare)(Growth Type)

- Celestialith, the Transcendent Eclipse (????)(Growth Type)(Stage 1)

Looking at the panel shown right before my eyes, I nodded my head.

'As expected, my stats increased quite a lot.'

It wasn't for only one reason that I came to this place and went through this process. One reason was to get a weapon, but the other one was to improve my stats.

Generally speaking, the moment the player finds their bonded weapon, their stats will increase. This was how it was in the game, and seeing the results in front of my eyes, I knew that was true for the general case as well.

'But, there are a lot of changes other than stats.'

There were countless changes and messages coming from the status window with explanations. I wanted to explore everything, but Vorgvir's impatient cough broke my concentration. "Enough staring at your reflection, kid. If you've got what you need, leave. The cavern isn't a place to admire your newfound powers."

He had a point. With Celestalith in hand and a transformed status, I nodded in acknowledgment. But of course, that didn't mean it wasn't annoying.

'Sigh....Stubborn old man.'

I knew why he was doing this. He was a guy who disliked showing weakness to others, and that seemed to include me. After all, I could easily see the signs of tiredness on his body. His shoulders, his posture, and most importantly, his mana circulation were a mess.

"Thank you, Vorgvir. I won't forget what you've done for me." But that didn't mean I wasn't grateful. Even if I had stimulated his feelings and opened the past wounds he buried, at the end of the day, it was his choice to create such a weapon using his own divinity.

He was the giver, and I was the receiver.

Standing up, I locked my eyes with him.

"Your revenge....I will get it for you with the weapon you made."

Vorgvir met my gaze with a gruff nod. "Do as you will," then averted his gaze, a silent acknowledgment of my resolve. With a gesture, he urged me to leave the workshop, and I decided to leave as well.

The time I had spent in this place was already long, and the week had already passed. Today was Sunday, and I needed to be in the academy before it was too late.

As I turned to leave, the echoes of my footsteps resonating in the cavern, a sudden voice broke the silence.

"Wait, kid. What is your name?"

Surprised, I pivoted to find Vorgvir addressing me. I hadn't realized he didn't know my name.

'I guess I forgot to introduce myself.'

It was weird, knowing I had spent a week in this place, but never once he asked my name.

"It is Astron."

Vorgvir grunted in acknowledgment. "Astron, huh? Well, take care of that weapon. It's a reflection of your choices."

With those words, I left, masking my presence once again. At that moment, suddenly, I felt a weird feeling.

The moment I activated [Shadowborne] to mask my presence, something unexpected happened.

As if something inside the [Unknown's Armor] changed, it sucked mana from me for a second, and following that it merged with my clothes.

I would normally wear the armor underneath my clothes, but it was quite uncomfortable. However, now it seemed different as if the armor blended within my clothes.

'The heat disappeared?'

Turning my eyes to my clothes to check the armor, I saw it had disappeared.

'Hmm?'

No, my Perceptive Insight picked the small traces of mana around. Then I realized the armor didn't disappear but changed its form. From the looks of it, the armor was enchanted, and some daily life easers to itself.

'Old man.'

It was evident whose work this was, and I couldn't shake my head in the response.

'I guess I need to use it well.'

With those thoughts, I left the dungeon.

WOOO!

In the slowly moving train, I was sitting in my seat.

'It is fairly empty.'

Since it was fairly late and the Hikama Mountain range wasn't a place for frequent visitors, not many people were there.

And that worked for me better as well since I needed some time to look at my stats and the changes in other things. There were many things that needed to be looked at, but one thing came before others.

'The bond section.'

The weapon appeared in the bond section defining.

?Bonds:

Type)(Stage 1)

'The grade part is missing, again.'

It was the same as my trait [Lunar Enigma]. The part where the grades normally showed up was now filled with question marks.

'As if they are related.'

Opening the description of the weapon, I started reading its contents.

? Celestalith, the Transcendent Eclipse ?

Type: Weapon

Grade: ????? (Growth Type - Stage 1)

Description: Celestalith is a unique, ethereal weapon created through the masterful craftsmanship of Vorgvir, the legendary blacksmith. It is a manifestation of the bond between the wielder, Astron Natusalune, and the essence, infused with the essence of Forbidden Mana Nucleus.

The weapon has five different forms, each form containing a different ability, outline, and type of mana that is used by Astron Natusalune.

Each mana type has its corresponding weapon outline specialized in the form of utilizing the effects to the maximum.

Celestalith is the epitome of the weapons precisely crafted for Astron Natusalune, and it is highly related to the user's traits.

Properties:

Nocturnis, the Twilight Gaze (Green Moon): A ranged form that condenses energy into bullets, allowing precise and powerful long-range attacks.

Solstice, the Solar Ignition (Blue Moon): Transforms into a bow, creating explosive bursts with each arrow shot, suitable for versatile mid-range combat.

Lunaris, the Moon's Embrace (Red Moon): Dual blades that slash through the air, leaving a trail of crimson energy capable of withering anything in its path.

Astra, the Celestial Discs (Silver Moon): A pair of spinning discs connected by threads of silver energy, displaying graceful and mesmerizing movements for both offense and defense.

Umbralith, the Darkened Nebula (Black Moon): Utilizes a set of rings to control dark forces and crush the surroundings, demonstrating overwhelming gravitational power.

Celestalith is the epitome of the weapons precisely crafted for Astron Natusalune, and it is highly related to his trait [Lunar Enigma]. Since it is the manifestation of the user's inner essence, the growth of the weapon is linked to the growth of the user to a large extent.

Every time user experiences growth related to their traits, the weapon Celestalith will also experience growth.

Current Stage: Stage 1

As I delved into the detailed properties of Celestalith, the Transcendent Eclipse, a sense of fulfillment washed over me. 'It is not a bonded weapon for a reason.'

Each form of the weapon seemed intricately connected to a specific aspect of my being, and the description unveiled a depth of connection between the weapon and my traits.

This was what I was expecting while making the weapon itself since bonded weapons were directly connected to the player's essence, the route, and the stats allocated; everything would affect the weapon manifesting.

Of course, I needed to test the weapon first to see its effects, but that would need to wait for a while.

'Aside from that.....'

Aside from the weapon, there was one other major change in my stats.

'My trait's stage has increased.'

?Traits:

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

Finally, after all this time, I saw a change in my traits.

'Is it related to moonstone?'

I pondered. Aside from that, I couldn't see any other thing I did differently. I trained with mana and tried to master it as much as I could, but I had never seen any changes inside me.

However, now it was different, as if I had passed a certain milestone.

'Even without looking at the changes, I can feel them.'

SHINE!

As I slowly drew mana into my hands, I felt the energy compressing over there. It looked the same as before, but there was one thing that was significantly different.

If before I could only cover my hands, now the energy felt as if it could manifest around me.

'As if it is materializing.'

If it was before, I could only cover the projectiles with my mana and enhance them in the process, but now things seemed to be different.

'Let's see the effects.'

SWOOSH!

The moment I threw the mana to the seat before me, as if like a small needle, the mana pierced through the seat.

'Indeed it is as I felt.'

Opening the panel, I started reading the changes on my trait.

Trait: Lunar Enigma

Description: Lunar Enigma gives the user the ability to harness the powers of the moon, granting the user enhanced lunar-themed abilities and effects.

It is a growth type of trait, and with each stage it develops, the trait will unlock more abilities.

Requires a medium to use lunar skills and lunar enhancement.

Stage 0 Gives the user the ability to enhance the projectiles and imbue them with the power of the moon.

Stage 1

The enhancement capabilities of Lunar Enigma have evolved, allowing the user to go beyond mere augmentation of projectiles.

Now, the trait offers the ability to materialize and control lunar energy more tangibly. The moon's influence extends beyond mere enhancement, enabling the user to manifest lunar-themed constructs.

It was just as it was explained in the panel, and I knew I had finally reached the point for the start.

'It now begins.'

Finally, I obtained the strength I needed for the sake of my revenge.

"It is time to start."

Chapter 166 37.1 - Small talk on the train

"Miss, I am sorry for this."

There were times when life didn't go the way we wanted, no matter how powerful we were. This is the undeniable truth of this world.

Even the noble families who had established themselves years ago aren't excluded from this rule.

"Can you repair it?"

And now, the girl standing in front of the car was feeling this reality exactly from the first perspective.

The sleek, modern car sat forlornly on the side of the road, its engine emitting an occasional pathetic sputter.

Irina, with her fiery red hair and an air of aristocratic impatience, scowled at the unfortunate vehicle. Her expectations for the day had not included a breakdown on her way to the prestigious academy.

"Really, of all the days for this to happen," she muttered to herself, her frustration evident in the creased lines on her forehead. "First, the dimensional travel is disturbed, and now this."

If it was one disturbance, things wouldn't be so bad, but it was two.

Her chauffeur, Thomas, approached her with an apologetic expression. "Miss Irina, I deeply apologize for the inconvenience. It seems the car has decided to betray us today."

Irina shot him a glare, her piercing blue eyes ablaze. "Betrayal is a human emotion, Thomas. This is just an inconvenience. Now, can you fix it, or do I need to find someone who can?"

Thomas swallowed nervously. "I'll do my best, Miss."

While Thomas delved under the hood with an uncertain look on his face, Irina waited impatiently while creating a small fire from her hands to protect herself from the cold. "Sigh...." Another hearty sigh followed. The last few days had been hard, as the pressure her mother had pushed on her was overwhelming.

'I really want to return to the academy.'

It had just been a week, but she was already missing the atmosphere in the academy. Hanging around with others, fighting and sparring....It was quite a fun experience, different from the dullness she had felt in her home.

While she was thinking about the academy, suddenly she remembered a certain guy.

'Right....There was that too....'

Since she was busy with her responsibilities, she forgot what was reported to her.

'Trevor Philips....'

The name wasn't something unfamiliar. After all, Irina had been attending the higher society of the Valerian Human Federation since the moment she passed a certain age.

From all the banquets, she knew the name Philips as they were one of the high-ranking families in the Human Domain, thanks to their overwhelming influence in the Hunter Association and the economy of Hunters.

Naturally, as Irina attended the meetings, she came to know the heirs of such families, and Trevor Philips was one of them.

'If I remember correctly, he wasn't an attention-seeking guy.'

Irina hadn't interacted with him a lot, but from what she knew, he wasn't someone who stood particularly as an individual with a bad personality.

There were countless heirs who acted all-mighty, but Trevor wasn't one of them.

'He usually looked shadowed.'

Shadowed by his siblings would be the right term as Irina analyzed the past.

He was a talented kid, as he was one of the early awakeners. However, his talent fell short compared to his siblings. That particularly stood out when he entered the Arcadia Hunter Academy last year.

While his siblings attained a higher rank, he couldn't project the same progress and, in the end, was rather ranked in the middle ranks.

How did she know this?

It was due to the studies her mother forced her to do. She was forced to memorize every bit of information about the students before entering the academy.

'In any case...I still don't understand why he did such a thing?'

It was unusual.

Even if he felt inferior to his siblings, why would he randomly order the bullying of the last-ranked junior who had nothing to do with him? If it was a high-ranking student that reminded him of his inferiority, she could understand a little.

But this was way too out of the ordinary.

'Do they share some sort of past? Did something happen between them that I don't know?'

Questions after questions came. The revelation of the person behind those rumors didn't bring any sort of satisfaction but brought more questions.

"Tch....This pisses me off."

In the end, she couldn't help but swear to herself.

"I hate it when I can't reach an answer."

Whenever things were related to that guy, they would always end up with more questions.

"I will ask him when I see him in the academy."

-WRRR!

Irina, lost in her contemplation about Trevor Philips and the bullying incident, was abruptly pulled back to reality by the sound of her car's engine. The chauffeur, looking defeated, shook his head.

"Miss Irina, I'm afraid the issue is beyond my capabilities. I've tried my best, but the car is beyond immediate repair," he explained, a hint of frustration in his voice.

Irina's irritation flared up again. "You can't be serious. What did you say to my mother?"

The chauffeur hesitated before replying, "I contacted the Madam and explained the situation. However, her response was unexpected. She said you should find your own way out of this predicament."

Irina's eyes widened in disbelief. "What? Find my own way? Is she joking?"

The chauffeur sighed, realizing the predicament. "I'm afraid not, Miss. The Madam seemed quite adamant. It seems she's occupied with matters of greater importance."

Irina clenched her fists, frustration boiling within her. "This is absurd! I can't believe she'd leave me stranded like this."

The chauffeur nodded sympathetically. "I share your sentiments, Miss. I'll continue to try and fix the car, but for now, we might need to explore alternative options."

Irina, fuming with anger, stepped out of the car and glanced around. The unfamiliar surroundings heightened her sense of helplessness.

"Ugh, this is infuriating," she muttered to herself. "I can't believe I have to deal with this nonsense....." She was about to complain a lot more, but she calmed herself down.

"It was expected from her anyway."

She knew her mother and knew what kind of person she was.

'She probably arranged this knowingly.'

As she cooled, she understood that there was no way the car of the Emberheart family, which cost millions of Valer, would break like this randomly. That meant the entire thing was rigged, and possibly the driver was involved, too.

"I shouldn't get angry."

If it was before, she would get angry and fume, but right now, strangely, she was calm. Even though she didn't know it, due to the influence of her friends and someone else, she was becoming different.

Irina, deciding to take matters into her own hands, opened her smartwatch. The holographic display illuminated, and she navigated to the map application. As she zoomed in, she studied the unfamiliar surroundings, trying to pinpoint her location.

"Let's see what options we have," she muttered, her frustration transforming into determination.

Her eyes scanned the holographic map, and she noticed a small town and a railway mark not far from her current location. A glimmer of light flickered in her eyes. "A train station," she murmured.

'Heh...'

At that exact second, a plan came into her mind, and the corners of her mouth curled up.

"Hey, driver," Irina called out to the chauffeur, her tone oddly composed.

The chauffeur turned towards her, expecting another complaint or inquiry. Instead, he was met with a smirk playing on Irina's lips. Her eyes glinted with a mischievous light that took him aback.

"You know, I was just thinking," Irina began, her voice holding a hint of mockery. "It's quite a coincidence that the Emberheart family's esteemed car breaks down like this, isn't it? I mean, what are the odds?"

The chauffeur stammered, his expression shifting from confusion to discomfort. "I assure you, Miss, it's just a mechanical failure. These things happen."

Irina chuckled, her eyes narrowing. "Oh, I'm sure they do. But you see, I'm not as naïve as I might appear. I have a feeling this wasn't just a random mishap. Someone might have arranged for this little inconvenience, don't you think?"

The chauffeur avoided her gaze, fumbling for words. "Of course, not miss. There is no way such a thing would happen." But in the end, he didn't give in.

"Right....I guess I am mistaken. You see, the cold is getting on my nerves." Irina continued, her smirk widening with each second.

"Ehm...." The chauffeur coughed slightly as the response.

"So, you wouldn't mind if I heat things a little, right?"

Irina, however, was already a step ahead. She didn't wait for his response. Instead, she activated her fire magic, a skill she had honed during her lifetime.

BOOM!

In a burst of flames, Irina propelled herself into the air.

"Y-young miss...."

The chauffeur watched in astonishment as his young mistress defied gravity, flames trailing behind her like a phoenix taking flight.

"Good luck dealing with them."

Those words were her last words as Irina controlled the combustion with precise bursts, steering herself toward the small town she had spotted on the holographic map, while the sound she made attracted the monsters all around.

BOOM! BOOM!

The wind rushed past her, and the world blurred as she soared through the sky. The townsfolk below would witness an unexpected spectacle – the heiress of the Emberheart family flying over their town with flames dancing around her.

As she descended towards the outskirts of the town, Irina's flames extinguished. She landed gracefully; her arrival met with a mix of awe and confusion from the onlookers.

"Wow...."

"Is she an awakened?"

"How beautiful?"

Brushing off her clothes, Irina couldn't help but feel a sense of liberation. "Well, that's one way to handle things," she mused, a triumphant smile playing on her lips. She finally felt like she won against her mother in a long time.

Entering the station, Irina approached the ticket counter with a confident stride. The attendant, still recovering from the shock of witnessing her arrival, greeted her with a mix of curiosity and admiration.

"Good evening, my lady. How may I assist you?" the attendant inquired, adjusting their uniform.

Irina, with a composed demeanor, replied, "I need a ticket for the next train to the Capital, Arcadia. When is it departing?"

The attendant consulted the schedule.

-HORN!

And just as they were about to answer, the distant sound of an approaching train echoed through the station.

"I believe the next train to Arcadia is arriving shortly," the attendant said, a hint of urgency in their voice. "You might want to hurry; this is the last one for the day."

Irina's eyes widened slightly at the revelation, and without wasting a moment, she hurriedly purchased a ticket. "Have a pleasant trip," the attendant wished, handing over the ticket with a polite nod.

With a ticket in hand, Irina dashed towards the platform, guided by the ever-growing sound of the approaching train. The station's announcements echoed in the air, a cacophony of instructions and reminders.

"Train to Arcadia arriving on Platform 3. All aboard, please!"

The urgency in the announcements matched the pounding of Irina's heart as she reached the platform just in time to witness the train pulling in. The doors began to close, and the attendant at the entrance signaled her to hurry.

Irina sprinted the last few meters, the horns of the train blaring as if urging her to make it in time.

With a burst of speed, she reached the closing doors and slid into the train just as they sealed shut behind her. The announcement chime played, signaling the train's imminent departure.

"Thank you for choosing Valerian Railways. We hope you have a comfortable journey to Arcadia."

As Irina caught her breath and settled into her seat, the conductor of the train, dressed in a neat uniform, made his way down the aisle. The hum of the train and the rhythmic clatter of the tracks provided a backdrop to the subdued murmur of conversations among the passengers.

"Ticket, please," the conductor said, extending his hand toward Irina.

Irina, initially proud of her independence, handed her ticket to the conductor, who inspected it with a practiced eye. As he reached her assigned seat, he paused, then addressed her with a polite tone.

"Excuse me, Lady Irina," the conductor said, leaning over the back of the seat. "It seems there might be a mistake. Your assigned seat is in compartment C, seat 12. Could you please move to your designated spot?"

Irina furrowed her brows in confusion, genuinely clueless about the concept of assigned seats on the train. "Why does it matter where I sit? I thought we could choose any seat."

The conductor, maintaining his composure, explained, "Train tickets usually have designated seats to ensure a smooth and organized boarding process. It helps us manage passenger flow and maintain order on the train. If you could please move to your assigned seat, Lady Irina."

Irina felt a sudden flush of embarrassment as the passengers around her exchanged knowing glances. She nodded, realizing her mistake. "Of course, I apologize for the confusion. I'll move right away."

As she was about to relocate to her assigned seat in compartment C, seat 12, Irina suddenly saw someone she didn't expect to see.

"Huh?"

The same person she was just thinking about was sitting on the seat right before her with his eyes locked into hers.

"You...."

Chapter 167 Chapter 37.2 - Small talk on the train

As Irina was about to relocate to her assigned seat in compartment C, seat 12, she was taken aback by an unexpected sight.

A familiar face, one she didn't expect to see on this train, was sitting in the seat right before her. The young boy with purple eyes and black hair, Astron.

"Huh?" Irina uttered in surprise, her eyes locking onto his.

Astron, maintaining his usual serious demeanor, slowly lifted his gaze to meet Irina's. The exchange of glances created a momentary pause, and the passengers nearby observed the unexpected encounter.

After all, Irina's presence immediately gathered attention from the surroundings the moment she entered the train. Her clothes and her demeanor alone suggested that she was someone with a high standing, and her beauty was enough to attract everyone.

"You..." Irina started, caught off guard by Astron's presence.

Astron looked at the girl standing right before him as he mumbled. "I should have expected it."

Irina, her annoyance growing, glared at Astron. "Expected what?"

Astron, unfazed by her glare, calmly responded, "I heard explosions even from inside the train. I should have known it was you."

Irina's eyes widened in disbelief. "What? How did you...?"

Astron pointed towards the direction they were heading. "Look outside. The signs of combustion are quite evident. And, there aren't many people in this world that use transportation methods like you. You left quite an impression even before getting on the train."

Irina, realizing that her attempt to escape her mother's schemes hadn't gone unnoticed, felt a mix of frustration and embarrassment.

Especially since the one realizing was this annoying guy.

"Sigh...."

She sighed and decided to take a seat, gesturing towards the empty spot across from her. But as she sat down, suddenly she realized something.

'What is he doing here?'

That guy, what he was doing here? Her curiosity grew as she looked at him. His clothes were casual, and he looked the same as usual, but there was something different about him that she could sense.

'Something has changed?'

Her curiosity grew. This annoying guy had been occupying a part of her mind recently, and most of the things about him were questions that weren't answered.

"Since you're here, you might as well tell me what you're doing on this train."

Astron, without a change in expression, took the offered seat. "I have my reasons. Business, you could say."

Irina raised an eyebrow, skeptical. "Business? On a train to Arcadia? What kind of business?"

Astron simply replied, "The kind that doesn't concern you."

"....."

Irina rolled her eyes, already regretting the fact that Astron had become an unexpected companion on her journey.

'Annoying bastard.'

His aloof demeanor and the way he spoke was getting on her nerves.

"I don't care anyway."

"You don't care? Then why did you ask?"

"...No reason."

"No reason?"

"Yep."

"And you want me to believe that."

"Believe what you want."

"I always believe what I want; you don't need to say it out."

"You.....Tch."

Whenever she argued with this guy, things always ended like this. He acted proud and retorted back whenever they talked.

It was like....

'He always needs to be the one that says the last line.'

She realized from their past talks that whenever it ended, she would end up feeling like she had lost.

'I can't stand it.'

"You know, your attitude really grates on my nerves," Irina remarked, shooting Astron an annoyed look.

"Likewise," Astron responded calmly, his eyes fixed on the passing scenery outside the train.

Irina huffed, crossing her arms. "Why are you even here? It's not like we're friends or anything."

Astron shrugged. "What do you mean? You are the one that came here after me."

"I didn't come here knowing you were sitting here. If I knew, rather than sitting on the same wagon as you, I would sit on the roof of the train."

"You would freeze on there?"

"Better than sitting with you."

"Then why are you not doing it?"

Irina rolled her eyes. "Because, annoyingly enough, I still want to get to Arcadia in one piece."

Astron turned his attention to Irina from the window. His expression didn't change, but Irina could swear that she had seen a small sneer in his eyes.

'How beaut-'

For a second, she almost got enchanted by them.

"You don't have to admit that you want my company."

Almost... as once again, the annoyance grew.

"Don't get ahead of yourself. It's more about not freezing to death than enjoying your company."

"Sure, sure. Keep telling yourself that." Astron's tone remained calm, and Irina couldn't help but wonder if he was secretly enjoying their banter.

'He seems to be in a good mood.'

At first, she wasn't sure, but as she talked with him more, she realized his words were a little different than normal.

Normally, he would speak harshly while shutting down others, but this time, it felt like he was contributing to the talk quite differently.

'Should I ask?'

There were things that she wanted to ask—the questions in her mind.

'If not, then what else?'

The information she had was limited, and she didn't want to wait for another investigation as well. Since she got the change, why not use it?

"By the way, Astron," Irina began cautiously, "do you happen to know someone named Trevor Philips?"

Astron raised an eyebrow at the unexpected question, but his reaction wasn't something that much different. "Trevor Philips? Yeah, I've heard the name. Why do you ask?"

'He doesn't know him directly?'

Irina had dealt with countless people while reading their reactions, and she could at least say Astron didn't have anything in common with Trevor Philips.

Irina hesitated for a moment, choosing her words carefully. "It is nothing." But in the end, she didn't say much.

However, that reaction didn't go unnoticed by Astron's eyes. He leaned back in his seat, studying Irina with a discerning gaze. "Nothing, huh? You wouldn't bring it up for no reason. Spit it out. What's going on with Trevor Philips?"

Irina sighed inwardly, acknowledging that she might have unintentionally sparked Astron's interest. However, she was determined not to provide him with a straightforward answer, still holding onto the lingering annoyance from their earlier banter.

"I won't tell you," Irina asserted, meeting Astron's gaze with a defiant tilt of her head.

Astron, unfazed by her response, raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"So, even you can get surprised?" Irina teased a hint of mischief in her eyes.

"Everyone would get surprised if they talk to you," Astron deadpanned.

"Yeah, yeah," Irina replied dismissively, waving off his comment. "You really won't tell me?" Astron inquired once more.

"I won't," Irina affirmed, crossing her arms and maintaining a stubborn stance.

"Okay then," Astron conceded, leaning back in his seat as if he didn't even care. Just like that, the two fell silent as the train continued to move forward.

However, Irina's thoughts didn't leave her mind, as she couldn't help but question what Trevor Philip's goal was.

There was this feeling that she was getting from Astron, and she was still curious about it. However, she couldn't help but bury those feelings since she knew if she asked what happened, the answer she would get would annoy her more.

-WROOM!

As the train moved forward, the cozy atmosphere of the winter and the silence lingering in the environment slowly brought tiredness that had accumulated over the past week.

In the time she was supposed to be resting in her home, she had been running from one place to another, meeting her mother's demands as the family's heir.

Her eyes, heavy with exhaustion, blinked slower and slower until they eventually closed. The hum of the train's engine became a distant lullaby, and the passing landscapes outside the window formed a blurry backdrop to her drifting consciousness.

Irina succumbed to the weariness, her head gently resting against the cushioned seat, and her breathing gradually steadying into the rhythmic pattern of slumber. The train continued its journey, carrying its passengers, including the fiery noble heiress, into the embrace of dreams and respite from the demanding reality they left behind.

"She really fell asleep here."

Looking at the red-haired girl in front of me, I couldn't help but get surprised.

'Irina and using trains....This is surely a non-matching couple.'

I really didn't expect our mighty Irina-sama to use a common train. She was a noble and belonged to one of the highest-ranking families. Thus, one naturally would expect her to travel with a dimensional gate.

Even though they were expensive, her family could easily afford it different from me.

'But, why did she talk about Trevor Philips?'

As I watched her sleep soundly, I couldn't help but remember what she talked about.

Trevor Philips.

I knew him. He was a named character in the game....A bastard villain who made deals with demons and became one of the insiders in the academy and the human domain.

Philips Family was a high-ranking family. The head was the Vice-president of the Hunter Association, and he was also the 10th in the overall Hunter ranking, belonging to the council.

'She didn't mention it directly, but she shouldn't have any relations with him.'

Checking the things from the game, I knew Irina didn't have a relationship with Philips; neither was she interested.

'Then why did she ask?'

However, it was unnaturally for Irina to ask me about someone, considering most of the time, whenever we talked, we would bicker randomly.

'She looked serious.'

The way she spoke and her small mimics when she talked were all pointed in one direction.

'It is about me.'

I knew from our time in the dungeon, and when I observed her, that she had a small habit of pressing her thumb on her middle finger whenever she hid something.

And adding the way she looked at me while saying she wouldn't tell me as if I was in a loss meant it was about me.

'But what is it?'

I pondered. What did Trevor Philips have to do with me?

He was a senior in the academy and a villain, but there was no particular reason for him to be related to me.

If Irina knew he was a villain, then she wouldn't talk to me about it.

'Maybe she would, but it wouldn't be here at least.'

And since he was a senior, it also didn't make sense that he was interested in me.

'Wait.'

Just at that moment, as I continued to think about the possible reasons, a thought occurred in my head.

'If it was him....

One possible reason that he would be related to me.

'It even seemed to be spread in the senior classes and between seniors.....'

Slowly, everything started to make sense as my thoughts continued to wander.

'If it was him, then he would have the power to do such a thing.'

However, in the end, everything was my speculation, and I didn't have any proof.

'Why?'

His reasons were also unknown.

'Let's see if I was right.'

Looking at the girl sleeping soundly, I decided to ask her when she woke up.

Chapter 168 Chapter 37.3 - Small talk in the train

"Irina. It is fine, don't worry."

A small landscape and a familiar scene.

Sunlight entering the confines of the room....

"B-but....I-it is broken...."

A shaky voice of a young child.

The boy kneeling beside the broken vase, his hands gentle yet skilled. With a meticulous touch, he began the process of piecing the fragments back together.

"Don't worry, I will fix it," he reassured her, his voice a soothing balm to the young Irina's distress.

With a serene focus, the young child skillfully manipulated his mana, creating a phenomenon that was out of the norm.

Irina's eyes widened in awe as she witnessed the magical threads weaving through the air. The fragments of the broken vase levitated, drawn together by an unseen force.

It was a delicate symphony of mana, a manifestation of the boy's innate talent.

Just as the enchanting display reached its peak, the room's atmosphere shifted. The warm sunlight streaming through the windows seemed to waver as a woman entered, her gaze cold and piercing. Fiery red hair framed her stern face, and her eyes, a cold shade of yellow, locked onto the boy and the magically restored vase.

"What happened here?" the woman inquired, her tone cutting through the residual magic in the air.

The boy hesitated for a moment, his eyes flickering nervously. "It's nothing, Madam Emberheart. We were just playing."

However, the woman's sharp perception didn't miss the lingering traces of magic that had just unfolded in the room. Her cold gaze intensified as she scrutinized the scene. "Just playing, you say?" Her voice held an undertone of suspicion.

She approached the restored vase with measured steps, her eyes narrowing as she scrutinized the magical reconstruction. Without uttering a word, she extended her hand toward the vase.

With a wave of her hand, the atmosphere in the room seemed to shift. A strange force enveloped the restored vase, and, to Young Irina's astonishment, the intricate magic that had pieced it together began to unravel.

The vase returned to its shattered state, fragments scattered once more across the room.

Fear immediately enveloped her heart as she lowered her gaze. Even as a younger child, she knew what it meant to lie to her mother.

Madam Emberheart's eyes bore into the shattered vase, her silence amplifying the tension in the room. The air grew heavy with an unspoken weight as she finally broke the silence, her voice cold and measured.

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded, her gaze shifting from the vase to the young boy.

The young boy, seemingly aware of the gravity of the situation, met Madam Emberheart's gaze without flinching. "I'm sorry, Madam. It was my fault. We were playing, and I accidentally knocked the vase over."

Madam Emberheart's gaze remained unwavering as she heard the confession. "Is that so?" she replied, her tone betraying no emotion.

"Yes," came the simple affirmation.

"Good. Bring me your hand," Madam Emberheart commanded with an air of authority.

Without hesitation, the person extended their hand toward her.

WOOSH!

Madam Emberheart's palm glowed with an ominous flame, and with a swift motion, she placed her fiery hand on theirs, leaving a searing mark on their palm.

"Argh-!"

A subdued groan of pain escaped the unnamed person's lips as he bit them hard. Slight tears enveloped the corners of his eyes as he tried to bear the pain he felt.

Madam Emberheart then turned her attention to young Irina, her expression unyielding. "This is what happens when one doesn't obey."

-?- - -

At that second, a jolt shook through Irina's body, and her eyes snapped open.

"Haaah..."

She found herself back in the present, the gentle rocking of the train replacing the vivid yet haunting dream.

"Haaaah..."

Her breaths gradually steadied as she scanned her surroundings, the remnants of the dream still lingering in her mind.

'It is the same dream again.'

When she looked up, she noticed Astron's eyes fixed on her, his usual impassive expression not giving away any indication of what he might have observed.

"Did you have a nightmare or something?" Astron asked, his tone neutral yet with a faint hint of curiosity.

'Was it about him?'

As a player who played the game, of course, he knew about the things related to him since he was the most important factor in Irina's route.

"No, just a weird dream," Irina replied, avoiding eye contact as she tried to shake off the residual unease from the dream. "It's nothing to worry about."

Astron continued to regard her with an unreadable expression. "Dreams can reveal more than we think. They're a reflection of our subconscious thoughts."

Irina sighed, still feeling the echoes of the unsettling dream. "Well, it was just a memory. Nothing important."

"Memories...." At the mention of that word, his eyes turned slightly different, something that she couldn't quite point out. "I guess they shape who we are?"

Irina shot him a skeptical look. "You sound like one of those philosophers."

Astron shrugged. "Maybe I am. I just like to think a lot. If that makes me a philosopher, why should I complain?"

"I didn't say it, so you can complain."

"It surely sounded like you wanted, though."

Astron leaned back in his seat, his gaze shifting from the passing scenery outside to Irina. "You know, memories have a way of resurfacing when you least expect them. They're like fragments of our past, constantly influencing our present."

Irina raised an eyebrow. "And what makes you an expert on memories?"

Astron's expression remained neutral, yet Irina detected a subtle shift. "I observe. It's a habit of mine. People reveal more about themselves than they realize."

Irina felt a twinge of annoyance. "You observe, huh? What do you see in me?"

Astron's gaze locked onto hers. "Do you really want to hear the truth?"

Irina hesitated but eventually nodded. "I guess."

Astron's voice remained calm. "You are a spirited, strong-willed, and sometimes obnoxious woman. But beneath that exterior, there's a vulnerability you try to conceal. You think that by being loud and showing strength, you can escape from the things you wish to avoid."

Irina's irritation deepened as her eyes widened while she gritted her teeth.

"This guy thinks he knows me? First, it is that dream, and now this guy!"

Once again, she was pissed off, and this time she wasn't going to hold back as if a volcano was about to erupt.

"Oh really, Mr. Observer? Let's talk about you then. You act all cold and edgy, because you don't have a family, do you? You lost them, and now you're this lone wolf with a chip on his shoulder, observing everyone like you're some wise sage."

Astron's expression remained impassive. At least it tried to, but one could see his clenched hands and widened gaze as if he wasn't expecting such words to come out of her mouth like that.

A subtle tension lingered in the air. Irina's words had touched a nerve, and she continued, pressing her point without noticing the change in his expression.

"Isn't that why you're always so serious and distant? Are you trying to detach yourself from any connection so you won't have to feel the pain of loss again? Observing others is just a way to keep people at arm's length, huh, you punk?"

She continued to pour the words she held in for too long, not noticing those words were not even targeted at him.

"...."

The words hung in the air, and for a moment, a profound silence enveloped them.

Irina finally stopped, her gaze meeting Astron's face. It was then that she noticed the change in his expression, the vulnerability that had surfaced.

"Wait, I didn't mean—"

She was about to continue her words but stopped as she saw Astron raising his hand.

His eyes, usually distant and composed, now revealed a rawness that Irina hadn't anticipated. The weight of her words settled in the air, and she found herself at a loss for what to say.

After a moment, Astron spoke, his voice calm but carrying an undercurrent of emotions she hadn't seen before, as if he was reminiscing about his past actions.

"You're right, in a way. Loss does change people. But it doesn't give me the right to act as if I know others better than they know themselves."

Irina swallowed hard, the weight of her unintentional accusation sinking in. She wanted to take back her words, to rewind the conversation, but the momentary vulnerability in Astron's eyes held her in place.

"Apologies," Astron said, his tone slightly more distant than before as if it had returned to its normal coldness. "I shouldn't have intruded."

The abrupt return to his usual composure only accentuated the awkwardness in the air. Irina cleared her throat, attempting to find the right words to mend the unexpected breach in their conversation.

But she couldn't say anything.

Should she apologize for her words, which might have been a little hurtful?

As she saw his usual coldness returning, she understood that there was no need for any apologies, as he seemed like he wasn't expecting any.

'Did he lose someone?'

She asked herself.

'What did he experience in the past?'

She looked at him, looking out of the window with a distant gaze and thought.

As Astron gazed out of the window with a distant expression, the rhythmic clattering of the train on the tracks providing a backdrop to their silent contemplation, he broke the silence with a question that cut through the air.

"Was Trevor Philips the one that spread those rumors in the academy?"

Irina's eyes widened slightly, caught off guard by the unexpected shift in the conversation. She didn't anticipate Astron connecting the dots back to Trevor Philips in such a short amount of time.

She hesitated for a moment before responding, "Yes, it was Trevor. I had my men investigate, and they confirmed he was behind those rumors in the academy."

Astron's eyes, still fixed on the passing landscape, narrowed slightly. The revelation seemed to have stirred something within him, though his expression remained composed.

"Why did you do it?" He asked. "I didn't ask for such a thing from you."

Irina took a deep breath before responding, "I don't like being indebted to others. The money I paid you didn't feel like enough for what you did for me. So, I decided to help you in return. It's a matter of principle for me."

Astron's eyes flickered for a moment before he returned his gaze to the passing scenery. "I guess we don't have any debts, then?"

"Yeah," Irina nodded, a subtle sense of understanding passing between them.

"Good."

Just like that, the train continued to move forward under the dark sky.

-----A/W-----

In this volume, I plan to focus on the interactions between MC and the other characters a little more.

I have reread the novel and noticed that the interactions in the first volume weren't written well. There were a lot of forced dialogues that looked plain stupid, and even I cringed when I read them.

I need to leave a review to remind the readers of the chapters in the first volume so that they can be aware of what is to come. I might rewrite them, but with the recent changes in the Authors' Policy, I may not be allowed to; we will see about that.

In any case, I hope you liked these chapters. I will put a lot more thought into writing the dialogues between the characters and will try to make the dialogues smoother.

You can give me feedback about them as well; I will look at the comments and try to get your opinions.

Chapter 169 38.1 - Second Period

[Astron Natusalune, Cadet Rank 2450, approved.]

WOOSH!

As the door opened after my identity was confirmed, I slowly stepped into the training rooms inside the academy.

"Sigh...."

I needed to remove those thoughts from my head while also testing my new weapon, and that was the reason why I was here.

"You act all cold and edgy because you don't have a family, do you?" The talk we had on the train was different from the past ones. I didn't know when it began, but strangely, I was comfortable when it came to talking with Irina, even though it was mostly bickering.

"You lost them, and now you're this lone wolf with a chip on his shoulder, observing everyone like you're some wise sage."

And the words that spilled from her mouth stung for some reason.

'She was right, though.'

Observing is a habit of mine. Watching other people, learning their weaknesses, and storing them in my head for future use.

This wasn't something bad; at least, I don't think it is. However, looking at the past and what I did, it is quite easy to say that I didn't behave well and acted like I knew everything.

I also acted edgy and cold towards other people, and I was rude.

'Some of them deserved it, but then some of them didn't.'

This was especially the case with Sylvie.

'Now that I felt how those words feel like, I guess I was being an asshole.'

Whether she needed to get stronger or confront her past... There were better ways to do that, but rather than doing those, I spoke what I had in mind without thinking how it would make the other party feel.

"Well....I can't change the past, and it is not like what I did was wrong."

Of course, being an asshole and speaking harshly doesn't necessarily mean it is something bad.

The other party may feel angry, but feelings are temporary, and nobody cares about how you feel. If it gets you to the results you want, then feeling bad is not important.

I could approach the topic a lot more gently, but it would take a lot more time and effort, which I didn't have. I couldn't invest such a large amount of time into that and went with the most optimal decision from my point of view.

"At least I won't hold this moral superiority from now on."

In the future, I might change the way I speak or the way I act, or I might not change it. At the very least, I am acknowledging what I did wrong, and this is the first step to improving.

"Anyway, enough with the useless thoughts."

Mumbling like that, I readied myself. Right now, what was important was to familiarize myself with my weapon and understand its capabilities.

Reaching out to the empty shooting range, I readied myself.

'I guess the cadets are all resting.'

This was a common occurrence. Since the mid-terms had just ended and the cadets came from their break, nobody was here training, and I was here all alone.

[Which stage you wish to set?]

"Stage 3."

[Understood.]

The stages for shooting range were not much different from combat training rooms. It was just that the targets wouldn't attack you, and you could solely focus on your skills.

[3.]

I instinctively knew how to use the weapon in my head. Just like how it felt to draw different colors of my mana, the process was similar.

[2.]

'I should thank Senior Maya when I have a chance.'

It was largely because of her that I was able to learn how to control my mana precisely.

[1.]

'Let's start.'

As I drew my green mana and supplied it to my weapon, the rifle manifested in my hand, an ethereal creation with intricate designs glowing softly. Just as I had seen in my head, the design was the same.

It didn't seem like a normal modern rifle that shot bullets but rather a fantasy weapon with a futuristic design. [The training starts.]

With the voice of the training room voice assistant, the dummy targets appeared on the shooting range one by one.

WR!

A low hum resonated as I channeled mana through the rifle. Orbs of condensed energy danced on its surface.

'Deep breath.'

Relaxing myself, I focused on the feeling of the weapon. The mana I had channeled was like an extension of my energy, and now I was feeling how it felt to condense it on the tip.

'Aim.'

The energized bullets formed a vortex at the rifle's muzzle as my eyes observed the movements of the dummies.

'Certainly, the increase in my stats is evident.'

I was able to feel the movements of the targets a lot better than before, thanks to the increase in my intuition parameter.

SWOOSH!

Countdown reaching '1', I squeezed the trigger.

Energy erupted, bullets speeding toward holographic targets.

PAT! PAT! PAT!

Each shot found its mark, the targets shattering one by one.

'The power is a lot more than before.'

This change in the power output was something that was incomparable to the previous times.

'I knew the Moonstone would help.'

Just as I had expected and speculated before, my power output was limited because of the medium I had been using. And, now that it was Moonstone, the power of the moon was flowing a lot more swiftly than before.

'I need to experiment with the power a lot more, but I don't think it will fall short against the rank-4 or maybe rank-5 awakened.'

It was very hard to measure the limits of my new power in this short amount of time, but I was not in a hurry in any case.'

SWOOSH! TAP!

But, aside from the power output, there was one other important thing.

'The characteristic of the green-colored mana is still preserved.'

Just like before, whenever the condensed energy of green-mana hit the enemy, it left a trail. A small thread that connected me to the target that was shot revealed the target's location and guided a possible trajectory.

'This will come in handy.'

As the last target vanished, I lowered the rifle, a mix of satisfaction and concentration on my face. The hum faded, and the weapon returned to its dormant state.

"Sufficient," I muttered, recognizing the successful integration of the rifle's capabilities. The exploration didn't meet its end, but there were many things I needed to check more.

"Change the formation."

I called the voice assistant.

[Which form do you wish to set?]

"Unmoving."

[Understood.]

The shooting range shifted, adapting to my new command. This time, the targets weren't going to stand still. I drew out the green mana within the weapon, this time channeling blue-colored mana to initiate the transformation. The ethereal rifle morphed seamlessly into a dazzling longbow, bathed in a vibrant, fiery blue hue as if ignited by celestial flames.

'It is pretty shiny.'

It was probably because of the intrinsic characteristics of the blue mana.

The radiant weapon felt weightless yet potent in my hands. I marveled at its new form, the azure glow casting an ethereal light across the training room.

[3.]

A familiar countdown resonated through the room.

[2.]

'Senior Maya's training will pay off with this too.'

[1.]

The azure longbow pulsed with energy, ready to unleash its devastating power.

'Let's see what you can do.'

I notched an arrow infused with violent blue moon energy, the room darkening with anticipation.

SWOOSH!

The arrow released, soaring through the air with unparalleled speed.

BOOM

As it hit the first dummy, a resounding explosion echoed, the force of the impact reverberating through the room.

'Incredible power.'

Each subsequent shot created a symphony of explosions, the room filled with the sound of destruction. The azure arrows left trails of sizzling energy in their wake, painting a mesmerizing spectacle against the holographic targets.

'This is a game-changer.'

The high firepower of the longbow was unparalleled. The room transformed into a battlefield of simulated chaos, arrows striking with precision and leaving nothing but remnants of the holographic dummies.

'I've never felt this level of power before. I think this power output can rival the ones of the first 100 students.'

The power was this high.

'However, again. It is very hard to control.'

The energy was very hard to direct for a ranged attack. The power output might go head-to-head with a high-ranking student's power, but the lack of consistency was its disadvantage.

'I will need to spend a lot of time mastering it.'

What I had the advantage of wasn't head-on confrontation but stealth. This was the basics of a ranger, and I needed to master this form to the extent that I should be able to use it consistently.

'Then, again, it is still better compared to before.'

There wasn't much time I needed to spend to channel energy, and I also didn't need to use strong and expensive arrows as a medium. I was just compressing the raw energy in the form of arrows and firing it, and this was what made it hard to control.

But it also meant the more I improved my control and mastered the weapon, the more freedom I would have.

'The skill ceiling got higher.'

That was the end of the test for the first two forms. Aside from these two, the others were mostly related to close combat; thus, I would need to go to another location to test my strength.

Finishing the training with the longbow, I left the shooting range and entered the general training grounds, where I would normally be training for my close combat fights.

Of course, on the way, I also removed the weapon by drawing out all the mana I had supplied. The weapon's dormant state was basically invisible and it was In my chest.

'This place is not that empty.'

Different from the shooting range, there were some people who were still training on the general training grounds.

CLANK!

Sounds of metal clashing came to my ear from time to time. Paying no attention to those sounds, I made my way to the individual training rooms and entered one of them.

There, I drew upon the red color within me to initiate the transformation once again. The weapon instantly took its form.

Dual daggers of crimson color appeared in my hands, both of them shining.

'The feeling is familiar.'

They didn't look fancy and looked simple but lethal.

"Set the training stage to stage five."

[Understood.]

The room responded, plunging into darkness before gradually illuminating.

TOK! TOK!

The familiar Iron Golems materialized, their imposing figures standing tall in the dimly lit training room.

'Time to put these crimson daggers to the test.'

With swift movements, I engaged the Iron Golems.

CLANK! CLANK!

The clash of metal on metal echoed through the room as I danced around the formidable adversaries.

The crimson daggers moved with an almost innate precision, finding openings in the Golems' defenses while also leaving cut marks on them.

'Certainly, before I wasn't able to leave even a mark on them.'

Stage five meant the golems would have the defense of rank-5 monsters, and before, I was helpless against those.

'Now, my attacks can leave a mark.'

However, these dagger's strength didn't simply lie in the close quarters.

'After my attacks, a wave of energy slashes through the trajectory.'

The daggers demonstrated a unique capability, releasing a residual wave of energy after each strike. It was a technique common among close combat damage dealers, known by different names such as aura or compressed intent.

'In the end, what matters is the impact beyond the physical strike.'

This added range to my attacks, creating a dual threat in both close and mid-range combat. The versatility of the crimson daggers had surpassed my initial expectations, making them a formidable weapon in various scenarios.

'And, now, with the last one.'

Feeling the need for further exploration, I drew upon the gray color within me to initiate the transformation once again.

The crimson daggers dissipated, replaced by two silent but deadly gray chakrams. Connected to me by green-colored threads, they floated in the air, ready for action.

'Chakrams, a less familiar territory.'

The chakrams held an air of mystery, and I hesitated before sending them whirling through the air. I was slightly familiar with what kind of weapon they were, at least theoretically, but I didn't have any practical experience.

Therefore, their movements were less controlled compared to the daggers, showing my initial lack of proficiency with this form.

SWOOSH!

'This will take some getting used to.'

I threw the chakrams towards the Iron Golems, the silent energy they emitted leaving a trail in the air.

CLANK! CLANK!

The speed was insanely fast. The weapons clashed with the Iron Golems, but they didn't leave a scratch.

However, things were hard at the start, as I didn't know how to get them back.

Retrieving them proved challenging at first, but with practice, I began to understand the nuances of calling them back.

'Gray thread, a connection.'

The gray-colored threads connected the chakrams to me, allowing for a seamless recall.

It was a dance of precision and control, and the room echoed with the sounds of the silent but deadly chakrams.

'Different, but potential.'

While less familiar, the chakrams hinted at untapped potential. It was clear that mastering this form would require time and practice, but the prospect of expanding my arsenal was too intriguing to ignore since the speed of the weapons was insanely high.

Just like that, I continued my training as the time ticked.

Chapter 170 38.2 - Second Period

-CHATTER!

What is the shortest thing in the world?

For students, the answer would be simple.

Holidays.

Sitting in the classroom, students had gathered for the second period of the first semester after a one-week break and were talking amongst themselves.

"How was your holiday man?"

"Oh, you know, the usual. Tried to catch up on sleep but ended up binge-watching shows."

"Same! I had big plans, but my bed was too cozy to leave."

"I went hiking. Almost got lost, but it was worth it."

Amidst the exchange of holiday stories, one student looked particularly contemplative.

"What's up with you, Jake? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Jake sighed, leaning back in his chair. "I had a weird dream. Like, it's super weird. Can't shake it off."

His friends leaned in, curious expressions on their faces.

"Spill it! What happened in the dream?"

"I was in a surreal forest, and there were these glowing orbs floating around. Each one had a different symbol. And then, there was this voice..."

The others exchanged glances, intrigued by Jake's description.

"Maybe you're secretly a fantasy novel protagonist," someone teased.

"Or maybe too many late-night snacks before bed," another chimed in.

"Nah... You probably forgot to take your pills before going to bed... Didn't you say you were an anime-girl hunter last time?"

"You bastard.... You know I said it as a joke."

"It didn't seem like a joke, though. You were pretty serious."

"Tch."

TAK!

The banter in the classroom ceased as the door swung open, and all eyes turned toward the newcomer.

"Ah, he is here."

One of the students exclaimed, looking at the figure entering.

Ethan Hartley, with a tall build and sharp hazel eyes, entered the room. His presence commanded attention, and the hushed murmurs of the students quieted as he walked to his usual desk.

Normally, his presence wouldn't gain much attention from the students since he was rather on the lower ranks, even though he was Hartley.

But, because of the performance he had displayed in the mid-terms, those who had witnessed it wrote articles about him on the school forums.

The students exchanged glances, and one of them whispered, "Isn't that Ethan Hartley, the mid-terms star?"

"I heard he's got some crazy grades."

"Yeah. You know, I was there. He slaughtered all monsters like they were nothing."

"I guess he is a Hartley for a reason?"

Even for the students, witnessing such usual growth firsthand was a unique experience. The student who said to awaken just right before the academy started surpassed them in terms of strength.

And they couldn't do anything about it because he was from one of the most renowned families.

"Ah, Ethan, you are here." Just at that moment, two students made their presence in the room.

Julia, with her tomboyish charm and short white hair, grinned at Ethan. "Hope you had a good holiday, big guy."

Lucas, the teasing brother, nudged Ethan playfully. "Any monsters give you trouble over the break?"

Ethan said seriously, without any change in expression, "Not anything worth mentioning."

"....." Lucas' expression deadpanned for a second, and then he nodded to himself. "As expected, no one can surpass you in terms of denseness."

"Hah? What did you say?"

"I said what I said."

"....." Not being able to refute Lucas' claims, Ethan averted his gaze.

Amidst the lighthearted banter, Julia shifted the conversation to more serious matters. "Speaking of, have you seen the mid-term results, Ethan?"

Lucas chimed in, "The whole academy is buzzing about your scores. They're calling you the prodigy of the mid-terms."

Ethan's expression remained stoic, but there was a subtle twitch at the corner of his lips. "It's just grades. Nothing to make a fuss about."

Julia laughed, a teasing glint in her eyes. "Come on, Ethan, don't downplay it. You're like the hero of the academy. We're just regular students in your presence."

Lucas joined in the teasing. "Yeah, we should probably start calling you Sir Ethan of the Honor Roll."

Ethan sighed, feigning exasperation. "You two never change."

THUMP!

The laughter and banter were interrupted by a sudden thump as Julia slammed her hand on Ethan's back, creating a loud sound that echoed in the classroom.

"Hey, big guy, how about a little spar after the class to celebrate your genius moment?" Julia suggested with a mischievous grin. "I want to see if you're as tough as those grades of yours suggest."

Lucas joined in, throwing a challenging smirk on Ethan's way. "Come on, Sir Ethan of the Honor Roll, show us your moves. Or are you afraid your grades won't hold up in a real fight?"

Ethan's serious facade crumbled at the sight of his friends laughing. With a glint of competitiveness sparkling in his hazel eyes, he answered. "Fine, if you insist. But don't say I didn't warn you."

After all, the last week wasn't something ordinary for him. He returned to his home, but rather than resting, he had been honing his family's technique all this time. 'Hehe, it is finally payback time.'

The elixirs and resources he had consumed also increased his stats, and overall, he had already reached the strength of the first 1000 in terms of ranking.

And, he had yet to completely absorb the effects of the elixir on his body, leaving room for another rapid improvement.

As the trio playfully bantered among themselves, the door swung open, and in walked Irina. Her vibrant personality and fiery spirit added an extra layer of energy to the room.

"Yo!" Irina greeted with a wave, making her way toward Ethan and the twins. She pulled up a chair and sat down beside them, her eyes filled with curiosity.

"What's all this excitement about? Did I miss something?" Irina asked, looking at each of them in turn.

Julia and Lucas exchanged amused glances before filling her in on the playful banter about Ethan's recent achievements.

"We are just here to greet Mister Honor Roll here."

Irina chuckled. "Ah, Sir Ethan of the Honor Roll, huh?"

'Ah, I missed this.'

Finally, away from her family's suffocating atmosphere, Irina was free to speak what she had in her mind.

"So? What did you do in the holiday?" Julia focused her attention on Irina this time, looking at her with a smile.

Not being able to say what she was doing all the time, Irina went with a slightly awkward tone. "Well.....Homework, I guess."

"Homework? Did we have one?"

"Hmm? I don't remember."

"Is it because you are a mage?"

"You can say that." Feeling stiff, she averted the conversation. "Anyway, today, they will announce our new rankings, right?"

Ethan nodded with a slightly expectant smile. "Yes, they'll announce the new rankings today. Let's see if there are any changes."

CREAK!

At the opening of the door, another important figure made his entrance. The young man had an incredibly handsome face and a commanding presence that gathered everyone's attention.

"Maybe someone will dethrone him this time," Julia mumbled, looking at the newcomer. The guy was immediately approached by another two of his lackeys.

Lucas chuckled. "Dethroning Sir Victor? That's a tall order."

Julia grinned. "I'd pay to see that."

Irina, who had been quietly observing the friendly banter, couldn't help but feel a little uncomfortable at the mention of Victor.

'Where is that guy?'

For some reason, her eyes looked for another person in the classroom. The moment they left the train, he disappeared, leaving her alone. Of course, he didn't have any responsibility to stay with her, but

'He could at least say a goodbye.'

Of course, she knew she was at fault, but that guy was also not the brightest either.

Her eyes gazed around on the backseats where that guy would usually sit, but he couldn't find any traces of him.

"Humph, whatever."

She huffed and turned her head to the conversation they were having.

Just then, the classroom door opened once more, and Professor Eleanor, a figure of authority, made her entrance.

-SILENCE!

As Professor Eleanor entered, a hush fell over the classroom. Her stern demeanor and no-nonsense attitude commanded respect, and the students quickly settled into their seats, the air of casual conversation dissipating.

Eleanor's sharp gaze surveyed the room, ensuring that everyone was in their assigned place.

"Good." She mumbled to herself. She thought the students would lose their discipline after coming back from the holiday, but that didn't seem to be the case.

The students, aware of her reputation for punctuality, cast occasional glances at the clock. There were only two minutes left before the class officially started, and Eleanor was known for her strict policy of not allowing latecomers.

"Hmm...."

-CREAK!

At that moment, the door opened, and another student made his appearance. He had a bulky body with a military haircut.

NOD

He simply nodded his head without saying anything and made his way to his desk.

As Carl took his seat right behind Ethan, he gave a friendly nod to the others. The trio - Ethan, Julia, and Lucas - greeted him with a mix of nods and casual gestures. Carl, with his military-style haircut and solid build, exuded a disciplined aura.

'Where is that guy? Is he planning to ditch the first class?'

Irina thought. She was well aware of Professor Eleanor's habits and how she didn't let any students come late.

"Huh?"

However, as she looked back once again, she couldn't help but be surprised.

'He was here?'

The guy she was looking for was sitting on his usual seat with his head on the desk. Even though his face was covered, Irina could easily see who he was.

TAP!

Before she could think anything, though, a sound echoed in the front side of the classroom.

Professor Eleanor wasted no time. "Good morning, cadets. I trust you all had a restful holiday. Now, let's get straight to business." She began addressing the students immediately.

Professor Eleanor, standing at the front of the class, pulled out a stack of papers from her bag. The room fell silent as she began the announcements of the new rankings. The students' eyes were fixed on her, and the air was thick with anticipation.

"In the mid-term rankings, we have some notable changes compared to last year's," Eleanor stated, her gaze sweeping across the room. "As expected, Student Victor retains his position at the top, showcasing exceptional proficiency in both theory and combat. However, we have a new name in the top rank."

Eleanor paused for effect, allowing the curiosity to simmer among the students. Julia exchanged a quick glance with Lucas, both intrigued by the prospect of someone challenging Victor's reign.

The student from class HA217, Seraphina Frostborne, is now another occupier of the first rank." Eleanor's voice echoed through the classroom, the revelation hanging in the air.

CRACK!

The sudden, sharp sound of a pen breaking cut through the brief silence. All eyes turned towards Irina, who sat frozen with the remnants of her broken pen in hand. A mixture of surprise and frustration crossed her face, realizing the unexpected reaction.

"Eyes on me, Irina," Eleanor's stern voice cut through the room, and Irina reluctantly met her gaze.
"Control your reactions. This is a place of discipline and focus."

The announcement of Seraphina's name had stirred something within Irina as she knew the possible reactions coming from her household.

'Tch.'

She clicked her tongue, but she calmed her feelings down.

"....Understood, Professor."

"Good." Eleanor nodded in satisfaction at Irina's answer. She was one of the fiery characters that Eleanor knew she needed to take care of.

While analyzing and grading her past dungeon explorations, she came across that habit of hers.

'I guess she is calmer now, good.'

"Now, I will start announcing your new ranks." She said as she grabbed the list from her desk.

"Rank 2419, Timothy Grey."

.

"Rank 2256, Mia Anderson."

.

"Rank 2121, Oliver Park."

The names continued to be called, each student's rank announced with precision. The room remained mostly quiet, with occasional shuffling as students checked where their peers stood in the hierarchy.

"Rank 1729, Astron Natusalune."

At the mention of this name, some of the students turned their attention to him.

"Wasn't he ranked last?"

"Yeah, he jumped 700 ranks?"

Of course, not many were interested in lower ranks. It was pretty common for students of the lower ranks to jump ranks at a higher rate since the numbers would be piled up more on the lower scores.

"Rank 1555....."

"Rank 1401....."

Eleanor continued to announce the names of the students.

"Rank 970. Ethan Hartley."

Until she mentioned Ethan's rank.

"What?"

At that exact moment, the room fell silent, with nobody giving any reactions.....