

H. Academy 171

Chapter 171 Chapter 38.3 - Second Period

"Rank 970. Ethan Hartley."

The moment Eleanor revealed Ethan's rank, a stunned silence enveloped the room. Whispers that had been circulating about the surprising jumps in ranks ceased abruptly.

All eyes were on Ethan, who tried to maintain his serious expression but couldn't hide the subtle glint of pride in his hazel eyes.

"Ethan's in the top 1000? Seriously?"

"He climbed over 1000 ranks in just one semester?"

"How did he even—"

The small attention that students paid to Astron immediately disappeared. All of the attention was on Ethan.

This improvement in the ranks had never been seen before in the academy. This success was something that didn't even make any sense.

Whispers of disbelief and opposition echoed through the classroom as the reality of Ethan's jump in rankings sank in.

"This doesn't make any sense. How did he—"

"I call BS. You can't just climb a thousand ranks in one semester. They are probably making an exemption for Ethan because he is a Hartley."

Accusations and skepticism filled the air, creating a tense atmosphere. The disbelief in the room was palpable, and Ethan's quiet demeanor only fueled the suspicions.

Eleanor, sensing the unrest, raised her hand for silence. "Enough. The rankings are accurate, and accusations without evidence are baseless. Focus on your own progress and improvement instead of speculating about your peers."

As Eleanor quelled the rising dissent, a tense silence settled in the room. Most students heeded her advice, quieting their speculations and returning their attention to their own thoughts.

However, amidst the subdued atmosphere, a girl with a contemptuous gaze raised her hand. Eleanor, acknowledging her, nodded for her to speak.

The girl, her voice edged with skepticism, questioned, "Professor Eleanor, with all due respect, isn't there a protocol for such drastic rank changes? It's not about accusing anyone, but shouldn't we understand how someone jumped over a thousand ranks in one semester, especially in one mid-term? We all have been notified that we will be entering the dungeons, whose levels are adjusted according to our ranks. All of us here could get a high score if we had entered the low-level dungeon Ethan did. It's highly irregular, and we deserve an explanation."

Eleanor's eyes glinted for a moment, acknowledging the valid nature of the question. The skepticism in the girl's inquiry was not lost on her, and she understood the need for clarity.

"You bring up a valid point," Eleanor responded, her tone measured. "The Academy takes into account the adjusted difficulty of dungeon exploration based on the students' ranks. In Ethan's case, the dungeon assignment was indeed one with a lower difficulty level. However, his achievements went beyond the levels of the lower-rank dungeon on the first day."

She paused, ensuring she had the attention of the entire class. The skepticism in the room lingered, but Eleanor continued with a tone of authority.

"Given the perceived ease of the initial assignment, the Academy deemed it necessary to evaluate him under more challenging conditions. As a result, Ethan underwent an additional test where he entered the same dungeon as higher-ranking students. But because you had already taken the test, he went in alone, and you were not aware of that."

She observed the expressions in the room, gauging the impact of her words. The students, though still skeptical, now faced a more nuanced explanation. Eleanor's explanation shed light on the fact that Ethan's abilities were tested under varied circumstances, addressing the concerns about the apparent ease of his initial dungeon assignment.

"This decision was made to ensure a more accurate assessment of his capabilities," Eleanor added. "The Academy's priority is to provide a fair and thorough evaluation of each student's potential. Ethan's exceptional performance under these circumstances has led to his commendable rise in ranks."

She let the information settle before moving on to the next set of announcements.

"I see....So that was where you were at that time." Julia mumbled to herself. "You rascal, you were planning to give us a surprise, huh?"

"If he went under another test, then it makes sense."

"I knew the academy was fair anyway."

The students, though not entirely convinced, seemed more accepting of the explanation.

"Now, I am going to follow with the ranks. Are there any objections?"

Eleanor's gaze swept across the room, inviting any objections or comments before proceeding further. The silence hung briefly, broken only by the rustling of papers and the occasional creaking of chairs.

"No objections? Good."

She resumed announcing the rankings, moving through the list with methodical precision. The tension in the room gradually eased as students focused on their own names, discussing their positions in hushed tones.

"Sylvie Gracewind. Rank 971."

"Lucas Middleton. Rank 85."

"Julia Middleton. Rank 60."

"Carl Braveheart. Rank 42."

"Lilia Thornheart and Irina Emberheart share rank 3."

The revelation of shared ranks prompted a hushed buzz of curiosity. Eyes turned towards Lilia and Irina, recognizing their equal standings. However, none of the two seemed to be satisfied with the results they had gotten in their exams.

Lilia seemed unbothered, while Irina seemed angry as her hands were clenched.

"Victor Blackthorn and Seraphina Frostborne share rank 1."

The final announcement echoed through the room, cementing Victor's continued dominance at the pinnacle. The shared top rank of Seraphina Frostborne and Victor Blackthorn sparked conversations among the students about the age-old rivalry between the Frostborne and Emberheart families. Whispers spread like wildfire, speculating on the implications of this shift in dominance.

"This time, the Frostbornes won."

"Can't deny their power, huh?"

"Guess the Emberhearts have some catching up to do." However, as students continued to exchange words, they were met with an unexpected interruption.

FLINCH!

Irina Emberheart, her fiery gaze ablaze with indignation, snapped back at the presumptuous remarks while intentionally or unintentionally leaking her intent.

The students felt the suffocating aura of the second-best student in the academy, and they understood the mistake they made.

Eleanor, sensing the shift in the atmosphere, clapped her hands, drawing attention back to the front of the class.

CLAP!

The sharp sound echoed through the room, and she began addressing the students with her usual stern demeanor.

"Good. Now, let's focus on what's ahead. There have been some adjustments to the curriculum for the second period, so pay close attention."

The hologram of the human domain materialized before Eleanor, and she began explaining the adjustments made to the curriculum for the second period. As the three-dimensional representation of the human domain hovered in front of her, she highlighted various areas on the map.

"Attention, cadets. Over the break, the activities of monsters have shown a significant increase in several regions. The number of incidents has risen, necessitating changes in our curriculum to better prepare you for the challenges that lie ahead."

Eleanor pointed to different sections of the map, indicating areas with heightened monster activity.

"Normally, you would familiarize yourself with the academy more; however, according to the instructions from the Government, we need to take the necessary steps. From this point on, we will be focusing on tactical and strategic combat training, which will increase your skills in the real world."

Eleanor pointed towards the representation of the mana on the hologram, drawing the student's attention to the changes in the manasphere.

"As you can see, the fluctuations in the manasphere are becoming more pronounced. Understanding and harnessing mana is crucial for your survival. The upcoming semester will not only focus on honing your combat skills but also on mastering the intricacies of mana manipulation."

She paused, allowing the significance of her words to sink in.

"While you'll be refining your combat techniques, we'll introduce a specially designed curriculum. You will explore countless small skills that will contribute to your overall growth. Adaptability is

key in these changing times, and you must be prepared for the unexpected challenges that lie ahead."

Eleanor's stern expression intensified, her eyes scanning the room with unwavering seriousness.

"Let me make this abundantly clear. The resources are being invested in this academy, and they expect results. The coming challenges demand excellence from each of you. Falling behind is not an option. If any student fails to meet the standards set by the academy, they will be cut off directly. There will be no room for mediocrity in the face of the challenges that await you."

The moment those words hit the students, every one of them absorbed the information given to them. No sound escaped their mouths as they looked into their instructor.

"This year's curriculum will be a lot more draining and harder than before, but it will eventually make you the strongest version of yourself. Make sure to keep on improving."

As the weight of her expectations settled over the students, Eleanor shifted to the next point.

"Now, for your first assignment of the second period, you will undergo a test to assess your mana sense. The details of the test are classified, and you will form teams of three students each. The team assignments will be announced tomorrow. Make sure you are prepared."

As Eleanor's final words echoed in the room, the bell rang, signaling the end of the lesson. The students, released from the stern atmosphere, began to talk among themselves. The mood was a mix of apprehension and weariness.

"I can't believe how much harder it's going to get."

"Yeah, and we thought the first semester was tough."

"Mana sense test, huh? Wonder what that's going to be like." Teams of three students each added another layer of uncertainty to their discussions, but in the end, it was evident that things were no longer going to be the same as they had expected, making it a lot different than before.

"I heard the teams are crucial. If you get stuck with someone not pulling their weight, you're done for."

"I hope I get someone reliable on my team."

"Ugh, more tests and challenges. I'm already exhausted."

In the midst of the conversations, some students shared nervous glances while others tried to muster enthusiasm for the trials that lay ahead.

"What do you think?" Julia turned her attention to others as she digested the information.

"I was expecting such a thing to happen," Lilia answered without even bothering. "Father also mentioned things were going to change."

"Indeed, I heard the same from my father as well," Carl said as he stood up.

"Where are you going?"

"I need to visit the headmaster."

"Okay, let's go together."

Just like that, from the start, the first day of the second period was hectic for the students.

Chapter 172 39.1 - A small incident

"Things are going in a different way than I expected."

I was walking to the cafeteria while thinking about the changes in the academy.

'The curriculum was supposed to change after the first year ended.'

In the game, the second year would be a lot more hectic than the first year, both in terms of villains that appeared and in terms of academic events.

'But, it is different now.'

There were many variables that could have possibly affected the game's scenario and would have changed. Small things could alter bigger events, and this is a butterfly effect, but at the same time, not every small thing changes everything.

'If I needed to point out one thing, that would be Sylvie's awakening.'

To make such a big change occur, some triggers for those big events would be needed, and there was only one thing that came into my mind aside from myself.

'Sylvie's awakening being a trigger makes sense.'

In this world, there are powers that go well beyond the imagination of a person. Dragons, mythical beings, otherworlders, humans close to godhood, or maybe even gods.

And the power Sylvie held was one of those.

'First Lord's Authority.'

The moment it awakened, other beings and the [Venerates] must have already sensed the energy spread from the academy. The world had already started to change a long time ago, and the number of monsters is constantly increasing with each dimensional rift appearing.

The world is constantly striving to become chaotic, and the more chaotic it is, the more susceptible it is to change. The powers lying dormant in this world had long been plotting to become the best and strongest.

'The awakening of Sylvie just gave them the reason to act.'

It is highly probable that the academy wants to nurture students before things go awry, and knowing the headmaster's power and the position he held, it seemed he had already predicted things to some extent.

'But, this makes things a lot more riskier.'

The academy would certainly want to keep a hold of Sylvie's power and protect her from future dangers, but they also would know how important it is to nurture it. And they won't be able to lock her in the academy while she is growing.

'They would rather mix her in the academy students hiding her identity and let her grow in the chaos of nature.'

It was easy to see since this was exactly what happened in the game.

'But, if one thing concerns me, that would be her early awakening.'

With Sylvie awakening her dormant talent, she would be assigned to the newly rising star of the academy.

The player is Ethan Hartley.

At that time, we, as players, would have already acquired the top 10 ranks and would strive to be the best.

'Now, that is still not the case.'

However, right now, Ethan has yet to become that strong; neither does he have such a high ranking, and I doubt the headmaster would randomly assign Sylvie to Ethan.

That would practically mean the things concerning Sylvie are no longer the same as in the game. The personal dynamics and the people surrounding Sylvie will change, and that also means the events will possibly change.

'I need to be prepared.'

If Sylvie somehow gets kidnapped by the outside forces, that would make things a lot more hard. Even the government is very hard to trust, and if demons can get a hold of her....

'That would make everything almost impossible.'

My thoughts continued to wander off about the possible changes of the future.

As I approached the cafeteria, the familiar hum of student chatter gradually replaced the contemplative silence of my thoughts. The lively atmosphere, a stark contrast to the ponderous musings in my mind, signaled the bustling energy within.

The cafeteria doors swung open, and the lively symphony of voices enveloped me.

The clattering of trays, laughter, and animated discussions merged into a harmonious cacophony, echoing the vibrancy of academy life.

'It is the same as always.'

Looking at the students smiling without knowing the curriculum awaiting them, I shook my head.

Joining the queue, my eyes wandered across the diverse assembly of academy personnel.

The cafeteria staff worked diligently behind the counters, ensuring a smooth flow of meals to the hungry students. The rhythmic sounds of food being prepared blended seamlessly with the ongoing conversations.

Amidst the familiar faces, my gaze caught the absence of the woman I had frequently noticed in the bustling cafeteria.

Her absence immediately brought me back in my memory

—a woman who, despite her attempts to conceal it, bore the invisible scars of domestic violence only a discerning eye could see.

'I guess we won't be seeing her anymore.'

The world was such a cruel place. For those who were weak, nobody cared about the fate that awaited them.

Even for the authorities, such people were nothing but numbers in their reports.

It was the same for me. Neither did I have the time nor the desire.

Finding an empty table, I settled into a chair, the muted clatter of the cafeteria fading into the background as I focused on my meal filled with nutrients.

However, at that exact second, my senses picked up a presence behind me.

'Hmm?'

Mana was being used.

TAK!

Followed by the foot hitting something, the presence behind me stumbled clumsily, the contents of his plate cascading in a chaotic dance toward me.

'Should I play along?'

Since I had sensed what was happening beforehand, I had the time to evade. But I didn't since I needed to confirm something.

SPLASH!

The collision sent a splash of food onto my head, the sticky residue clinging to my hair and clothes.

As the remnants of the meal dripped down, the guy who stumbled approached his expression, a mix of surprise and guilt. "I-I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to—someone used magic, and I lost my balance," he stammered, genuine remorse evident in his eyes.

'I guess he wasn't one of them.'

My eyes didn't observe any traces of lying as each small muscle, which is generally used when a person lies, wasn't tense.

'He is from the magical engineering faculty,' I thought, recognizing the insignia on his uniform. Although not highly regarded in the academy, they were often looked down upon by the Hunter department, and drawing unnecessary attention to him would be futile.

Instead of reacting with hostility, I nodded, deciding to play along. "It's fine. Accidents happen," I replied, my tone neutral.

"T-thank you." He stammered and immediately left the place as if he had also sensed the presence of others behind.

"Heh...For an orphan, you sure have a talent for attracting trash."

The guy responsible for the spectacle, a figure with an air of arrogance, continued to revel in the amusement of his companions. "Look at him, trying to fit in. Pathetic," he sneered, his eyes gleaming with a malicious glint as if relishing the moment."

"Must be hard, huh? Being an orphan and all," one of them chimed in, a condescending smirk playing on his lips.

"Yeah, I heard he's so desperate for attention that he'd do anything," added another.

"He probably sells himself to make ends meet," the leader sneered, his malicious grin widening as he gauged my reaction.

But I simply didn't say anything and continued to stare at them to see their reactions.

'Whether they are being ordered by someone, or they are genuine.'

Things might not necessarily be how they looked. These people who were looking for a reaction from me might simply be targeting me out of amusement, and if this is the case, salvation is pretty easy.

You can just ignore them, or you can act just like them.

But, if someone else is behind them and they have another plan in their mind, then being cautious won't hurt.

Because if you just ignore them, they will intentionally target you differently, trying different ways, and if you act, they will use the evidence and political things against you.

"I guess he is so used to hearing that from his customers.....If I pay you, will you come with me too, like your mother?"

However, contrary to his sharp words, I could easily see the small change in his actions. His gaze wasn't as focused on me, and his hands were slightly clenched, evident from his forearm.

'Got you.'

At that moment, from the corner of my eye, I saw him looking elsewhere.

'So, it was really you.'

My gaze followed his, and there I met with the person I was expecting.

'Trevor Philips.'

He was watching everything from the corner while seemingly eating his meal with his friends.

My eyesight was sharp enough to see everything in detail, even from the corner of my eyes, and I also saw him nodding to the bully 1.

'This confirms it.'

The reason why I had played along with the bullies was to make sure the one behind those rumors was Trevor Philips. Acting purely based on the speculations wouldn't be logical after all, and I needed to make sure it was him.

"Tch. This bastard has ruined my mood."

As the bullies seemed to lose interest in their failed attempts to provoke me, Bully 1 abruptly stood up from his seat, shooting an imperceptible signal to his friends. The group moved with synchronized precision, following his lead.

I continued to sit calmly, feigning indifference, even as Bully 1 walked right past me.

'Now.'

In that fleeting moment, I sensed a malicious intent in the air. My instincts kicked in, warning me of an impending danger that I had been expecting.

TAK!

"Ah..."

Just as he was about to pass by, Bully 1 made a swift motion, attempting to stab me in my shoulder with a concealed object. His actions were deceptively casual as if it were a mere accident. However, I was already expecting this.

I leaned away, narrowly evading the concealed attack. The blade went past right before my arm, but I could see a small substance on the tip of the blade.

'Poison, huh?'

If I hadn't dodged it, I knew things would be different, and I would probably squirm in pain on the ground, and that would destroy my image more.

"You....I almost fell down because of you, you fucker ."

However, instead of walking away, the bullies decided to play a different card. Bully 1 turned around with a fabricated angry expression as he shouted.

"You! Watch where you're putting your feet, you moron. I almost tripped because of your clumsy ass!"

He walked toward me, his demeanor aggressive as he continued to hurl baseless accusations. "How dare you put your filthy feet on the path I was walking? You're just a piece of trash who doesn't know their place!"

Maintaining my calm, I met his fabricated anger with a composed expression. "I didn't put my feet anywhere near your path. You must be mistaken."

Now that the tables had turned, it seemed they were trying to make me the villain.

"Hey, did any of you see what this loser did?" Bully 1 called out to the onlookers, his voice filled with feigned indignation.

The onlookers exchanged uneasy glances, caught in the crossfire of a brewing conflict. But at that moment, the rumors surrounding me started playing their hand.

"He did look like he was up to something," one person murmured to another, their words carrying the weight of uncertainty.

"And, it is not like he is an angel. Isn't he the one that was the talk of the academy?"

"Yeah."

The bullies seized on the murmurs, using them as a semblance of validation for their accusations. "See, even they think you're guilty," Bully 1 sneered, a triumphant glint in his eyes.

'Certainly, a good way to pressure your opponent.'

This was a clear proof of how strong misdirected public perception could be.

'Sigh.....'

Things were getting bothersome, not because I couldn't do anything but because it was like a scene out of a movie.

Until a commanding voice echoed through the bustling space.

"That's enough!"

Chapter 173 39.2 - A small incident

The recent days had been peaceful for Maya Evergreen. She had been spending her time leisurely since the academy was in the middle of the resting.

She returned to her home and visited her family. Not many people knew about that, but since she came from a 'normal' family of farmers, she always had a hard time adapting to city life.

Rather than spending time in the newly emerging activities of the city, she preferred nature and old things.

That was also the reason why she became the president of the History and Arts Club. She was interested in Historical things, and art was also a welcomed topic.

In any case, because of her love for nature, the return to the academy was slightly tiring. Once again, she was in the domain of concrete buildings, where no traces of nature could be found.

'What do they find in these buildings, I wonder?'

She thought to herself. After she had returned to the academy, things were normal. There were some changes in her curriculum, but she didn't mind. She was already good at studying, so whatever changes happened, she was sure that she could easily keep her position.

This was both her pride as a first rank of the second year and as a mage. If she weren't at least this proud of herself, she wouldn't be in this position in any case.

'I wonder what Junior is doing. I hope he had used it well.'

She made a bold decision to invest in her junior, according to her hunch, and now she was curious about his changes.

'I hope he did well in mid-terms.'

She remembered the last year's mid-term exams she had taken and how easy it was.

'If it is him, I am sure he did.'

Knowing her junior's prowess and talents, she was sure he had at least risen 500 ranks.

'I guess we will meet soon.'

The next club meeting was this week, and she was curious to see how he did.

"This is enough."

SPLASH!

She mumbled as she put down the small water in her hands. It was a crazy display of control, considering her thoughts weren't even focused on manipulations of mana.

GROWL!

'Ah, I am hungry.'

Whenever she was inside the Elemental Chamber training her mana control, she always forgot the flow of the time.

'I guess I should get a meal.'

With those thoughts in her head, she slowly made her way out of the Elemental Chamber to the Cafeteria.

It was a familiar routine for Maya. Elemental Chamber, followed by a hearty meal at the cafeteria. It was during these moments that she could unwind and observe the dynamics of the academy and other students.

"Hmm?"

However, as she entered the room, she came across a scene she didn't expect. At that exact second, Maya Evergreen's keen senses picked up on the tension in the cafeteria. Her eyes, accustomed to observing the subtle movements of mana, immediately focused on a particular group of students.

In the midst of the bustling cafeteria, she saw a student, his hand discreetly reaching for a concealed object. It was a momentary gesture, camouflaged as casual, but Maya's dynamic vision and exceptional talent allowed her to discern the malevolent intent.

'Is he... trying to stab someone?'

Without a moment's hesitation, Maya assessed the situation. Her years of training and acute awareness of mana fluctuations made her adept at detecting irregularities. She could see the tension in the bully's movements, the subtle cues that hinted at an impending attack.

However, even though she had assessed it, that didn't mean she could do something about it. She was far away from the student, and it was already late.

'No!'

But contrary to her expectations, the student who was on the subject of the attack tilted his body to the side a little, dodging the attack.

And at that exact second, her eyes captured the student who evaded the stab.

'Junior?'

It was the same junior she had just been thinking about.

Determined and swift, Maya immediately came to her senses. Being ranked first in one of the best Academies of the Human Domain wasn't as easy as it seemed. Without wasting a second, she began making her way through the crowded cafeteria, her steps purposeful and efficient.

As she entered the cafeteria, navigating through the sea of students, she heard the sound of a student, "Maya! Hey, Maya, over here!"

It was a slightly familiar voice, probably one of her classmates, but she simply ignored him.

"....." She even missed the darkening in his expression. She had one thing in her mind, and that was to make sure to interfere with the commotion.

And she did as she wished. For the first time in a while, she was angry.

'We are all fellow students here....Why did he do such a thing?'

Attacking someone innocent from behind? What kind of student would do that? Even if it weren't her junior, it wouldn't matter. She would never tolerate such behavior.

But as if just to infuriate her more, she had the students who tried to stab her junior, shifting the blame to him.

"That's enough."

And that was the final straw.

Maya's commanding voice echoed through the bustling space, cutting through the tension like a blade, as her normally bright blue eyes locked coldly on the group of three.

"Tch. Who are you to order me? Didn't you see he almost made me trip over?"

The student before her clicked his tongue rudely as if he didn't show any respect.

"....." The onlookers swallowed their saliva as they

'Bad kids like him need to be punished.'

Her eyes narrowed as she heard the student.

"I saw everything, don't worry." Her cold voice echoed as she stood there.

"Then, why are you stopping us? Doesn't he need to be punished?"

Maya, undeterred by their protests, stood resolute. "Causing a disturbance in the cafeteria is everyone's business, especially when it involves potential harm to a fellow student."

With those words, Maya subtly manipulated the small vines that surrounded her, deftly reaching toward the hidden, poisoned needle concealed under the student's clothes.

"For instance, using hidden weapons." In a swift motion, Maya exposed the concealed needle, holding it delicately between her fingers.

Maya turned her gaze to the would-be assailant, the student who had attempted harm with a banned and poisonous weapon. "Why do you have such a thing underneath your clothes?" she asked, her tone firm and unwavering. "Weapons of this nature are strictly prohibited within the academy, especially those laced with poison. Care to explain yourself?"

Caught off guard by Maya's revelation and the sudden surge of her anger, the student stammered incoherently, his face turning paler by the second. Maya's aura, unintentionally leaking in her anger, surrounded her like an unyielding force, creating an oppressive atmosphere that left the student visibly shaken.

"I-I... it's not what you think!" he stammered, struggling to find a coherent answer. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead as he attempted to come up with a plausible explanation. But as he saw the looks around him, suddenly, he felt overwhelmed.

Not only was Maya pressuring him, but even the other students around them now turned their opinions with her arrival.

'This mission was supposed to be an easy one.'

He despaired. For a bunch of Valer, he only needed to make a life for weaklings like Astron hard; that was it. And, of course, since with that money, he could buy himself the resources he needed, he didn't even think of refusing for a second.

After all, his family was already in a rough condition after paying for the expenses of the academy, and his father was being pressured by other managers.

He needed to prove himself, but the life was hard. He realized how many talented and strong people were out there, and he himself was nothing in front of them. That left him with only one option.

To seek resources in other ways, even if it might hurt others. But, now, things seemed to be going further away than what he wished.

He looked at the person who ordered him to act in such a manner, but at that moment, that young man averted his eyes.

'Huh?'

As if he didn't care about what happened.

'I am abandoned.'

Like an abandoned dog, he realized he was left alone.

"I-I just did what I was orde-"

He wanted to defend himself by saying someone ordered him, but suddenly, before he could spill the beans to reveal the puppeteer orchestrating this scheme, a sudden interruption halted his words.

SMASH! CRACK!

A sudden, violent impact echoed through the cafeteria as the student found himself forcefully slammed face-first into the table. The audible gasps of the surrounding onlookers filled the space, a collective shiver of terror sweeping through the crowd.

"I am sorry.....I couldn't stand it any longer." The aggressor, with a menacing expression, leaned over the now subdued student, his grip on the collar unyielding. "You talk too much, and I don't have the patience for it."

Maya, with a stern expression, looked at the newcomer. It was someone she knew; after all, they were classmates.

"What was the meaning of that, Trevor? This is not how we resolve issues in the academy." However, that didn't mean she would approve of what he was doing here.

Trevor, wearing a slight smile, responded with relaxed words, "Oh, Maya, I was just ensuring that justice prevails. This troublemaker here was causing a disturbance, and I took the necessary steps to maintain order. You know how important it is to uphold the reputation of the academy, and as a senior, I couldn't help but set our Junior on the right path, isn't that right?"

Maya sighed, her eyes narrowing at Trevor's explanation. Before she could respond, Trevor stepped forward, his gaze fixed on Astron. "Are you a freshman?" he asked as he slowly extended his hand.

"I am Trevor Philips, Second year Hunter Department. Nice to meet you."

Astron also extended his hand to Trevor's in a handshake. The exchange was polite on the surface, but an undercurrent of tension lingered in the air as if their eyes spoke the truth underneath their words. "Astron Natusalune, first year Hunter Department. Nice to meet you," he replied, maintaining his usual expressionless face.

Trevor's handshake lingered for a moment longer than necessary, and his eyes seemed to convey a silent message as if speaking beneath the surface. "A first-year, huh?" he said with a small, seemingly friendly smile. "Just remember, junior, everyone has their place in this academy. Best not to overly approach people you don't deserve to be around, especially when you're new here."

Hearing this, Astron nodded his head without any change in his expression. "I will keep that in mind, Senior."

"I am especially good at fending salivating dogs, worry or not."

Chapter 174 Chapter 39.3 - No title

"I will keep that in mind, Senior," Astron said while still holding the hand.

"That's good." Trevor continued without leaving his hand alone as he looked at Astron with a slight smile. But both were well aware that it was artificial. "It is good for freshmen to have a desire to learn new things."

Maya intervened, her tone curt, "Trevor."

One word and look was enough for Trevor to understand what she meant. The other students were already looking at the scene, and some of them didn't have a welcoming expression.

After all, even though it was a good show, at the end of the day, the commotion had already taken too much time, and the appearance of Trevor and his brutality actually made the students uncomfortable.

Every one of them was well aware that even though Trevor was one of the most famous students because of his lineage, what he did was purely outrageous and disregarded the Academy's authority.

And Maya didn't like it either.

"Junior, come with me." She shot Astron a quick, concerned look before grabbing his arm and pulling him away from Trevor.

Astron's eyes, momentarily locked with Trevor's, could see the small shakiness inside them as if he wasn't even a bit happy about it.

FLINCH!

Even a little bit of a murderous intent was oozing from him, and it was directed to Astron. He was able to pick it with his strong senses.

"Where are you going?" Trevor attempted to follow, the same smile playing on his lips, though the intent leaking from him made it evident that his expression was different than what he had in his mind.

"!"

But a single glance from Maya, a glare that could freeze the fiercest flames, halted him in his tracks. The unspoken message in her eyes was clear: stay away.

Just like that, Astron was dragged away by Maya while other students only watched with their eyes wide open.

Senior Maya was a bit eccentric with her forceful attitude most of the time, but it was the first time they had seen her this forceful.

It was as if something was special about that Astron guy.

"Did you see that? What just happened?" whispered one student to another, their eyes still fixed on the retreating figures of Astron and Maya.

"Senior Maya usually keeps to herself. Something must be up with that first-year," another student replied, curiosity evident in their tone.

"Don't tell me-"

"You don't think the same?"

"Nah...Ain't no way...."

".....There is no way, right?"

"I hope so. Our precious Maya wouldn't be seduced by him, I don't believe it."

"He wasn't that handsome either."

"....."

"Well, maybe a little?"

"....."

"Okay, he was indeed handsome, but there are a lot more handsome students in this academy."

"You aren't wrong about that. And I don't think Senior Maya is that shallow."

As the students continued their speculative chatter, unaware of the unfolding drama in their midst, Trevor overheard their conversation. His jealousy, fueled by the unexpected turn of events, prompted him to approach the group.

"What are you all gossiping about?" Trevor grumbled, his usual arrogance tainted with a hint of irritation. The students exchanged uneasy glances, not expecting Trevor to be perturbed by their conversation.

"Well, we were just wondering what's going on with Senior Maya and that first year," one brave soul tentatively explained.

"Maya? She can handle herself. No need to waste your time on some insignificant junior," Trevor retorted, looking at the two. "You also shouldn't waste your time with such meaningless gossip either." His glare made it evident that he wasn't in a good mood.

'You just smashed a student because you couldn't stand him, and now you are talking about meaninglessness?'

The student wanted to retort, but he was well aware of who this guy was. So in the end, she shut her mouth and nodded her head.

'Astron Natusalune, Astron Natusalune. How dare you!'

Trevor was fuming inside as he was constantly reminded of the scene where her hand was touching him.

'How dare you touch her.'

He wanted to go and kill him right away, but he knew he couldn't do that inside the academy. If it was that easy, then every other male entering her sight would be dead already.

"Tch." He was about to leave as his appetite was ruined, but he couldn't.

"What happened here?" Just like the police, the instructor came quite late after everything was finished.

"...." And now he was going to be stuck while explaining whatever was transcribed here....

Meanwhile, Astron was uncomfortable with getting dragged by Maya outside of the academy cafeteria.

It was both because she was forceful and because she was famous.

Everyone's eyes were on him, and he disliked that fact. He already preferred life without any bothersome situations, but Maya wasn't making it easy for him.

"Senior."

"Not now."

However, Maya's determined pace made it clear she was adamant about dragging him off.

"Sigh...."

And her grip was weirdly strong, stronger than almost a close combatant.

'What is this strength?'

It was interesting for a mage to possess this amount of physical strength, but Astron didn't have time to question it right now.

"Should we stop now? We are already quite far away."

Maya halted abruptly and looked around. Just like he said, they were already far enough.

Releasing her grip on Astron's arm, Maya turned to face him, her expression a mix of concern and seriousness.

"Are you okay?" She asked as she looked into his arm. "That student was serious about attacking you."

"Isn't it a little bit late for that?" Astron mumbled.

However, Maya's eyes narrowed at his response, as if she didn't like how he talked.

"..."

'I am doing it again.'

Feeling that he was being rude, he slightly bowed his head. "My bad, senior. Yes, I am okay."

"Hmm....Good." Maya nodded her head as she waved her hands. Following her hand movements, small vines started moving, forming two chairs made by nature itself.

"Come sit."

It was an evident display of mana mastery, and she was using it for such a normal moment.

"Thank you." Deciding that it was better to welcome the hospitality Astron sat down.

As the two settled, Maya looked intently at Astron her angry and serious expression slowly returning to her normal state.

How was the mid-terms?" Maya inquired.

"Mid-terms?"

"Yes."

"It was good."

"Were you able to climb any ranks?"

"Well, I am now ranked 1729."

"Hmm... 1729 from the last rank. That is quite impressive."

"It is thanks to you. If not for your help that time, I wouldn't be able to improve this fast."

"Don't underestimate yourself. It was you who put that effort into your own training."

"Of course, that is true."

Maya observed Astron with a slight smile as if she were proud, her blue eyes reflecting genuine interest. She leaned back in her vine-crafted chair, seemingly at ease in the impromptu natural setting.

"Something changed about you." She said her eyes were boring right through Astron's.

"What do you mean?" Astron feigned ignorance, but inside, he was slightly surprised.

'She is sharp. I guess she isn't a prodigy for no reason.'

"...I am sensing something dormant inside you."

"You must be mistaken."

"Hmm?"

Without warning, Maya suddenly stood up, her slightly 'different' nature evident as she approached Astron. Unaware of the proximity, she leaned in closer, her eyes focused on his chest.

"What is it?" she mused, her fingers lightly tapping his chest. "There's something interesting here. I can feel it. Is it a magical artifact or maybe a hidden talent waiting to be discovered?"

Astron was taken aback by her boldness, the space between them shrinking without him realizing. He tried to maintain composure. "Senior, you're getting too close."

'Also, why is she so fast?'

His speed and senses were one of the strongest aspects of him, but he couldn't even escape back.

"Hmm? Oh, am I?" Maya finally registered the proximity, taking a small step back with a sheepish smile. "Sorry about that. I just got curious, you know? What's hiding in there, Astron?"

"Senior, I really think you are mistaking something; there is nothing here. Also, it is rude to probe other people's secrets."

"So you are admitting there is something there."

"No, I am not. I am just saying that even if there is something there, you shouldn't ask about it. That doesn't imply there is something there."

"Then, why are you trying to defend yourself."

".....Sigh...."

Astron sighed, a subtle display of frustration. Maya, on the other hand, smiled triumphantly, seemingly unfazed by Astron's attempt to maintain secrecy.

"Well, if there's really nothing to hide, why not share it with your dear senior?" Maya teased, her eyes gleaming with playful curiosity.

Astron, still maintaining his serious demeanor, couldn't help but feel the pressure of Maya's persistence.

He knew her airheaded charm was a facade for a sharp and determined mind; after all, he experienced firsthand how good she was with mana and good at controlling it.

'There is no way I will reveal it.'

Even if Maya had invested things in him and taught him how to control mana, that didn't mean he would disclose everything.

"Senior, some things are better left unknown," Astron replied, trying to end the conversation.

However, Maya's determination only seemed to grow, and she continued to press him with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

"Come on, Junior, I am your teacher, right? A student shouldn't keep secrets from her master."

"When did you become my master?"

"Hmm? Am I not your master? After all, I taught you how to control your mana."

"You did teach me how to control mana, and I am grateful for that. But that doesn't make you my master."

"Yes, it does."

"No, it doesn't."

"Sigh....You are so boring. This master was just curious."

"If I had answered everyone's questions, I wouldn't be there."

"Am I just everyone?"

"..."

"Right."

"But, still."

Maya couldn't contain her amusement any longer and burst into laughter after seeing Astron's expression. The sound echoed through the impromptu natural setting, drawing the attention of a few curious birds.

"You have that same exasperated look every time I try to pry something out of you," Maya said between laughs, her cheerful demeanor in full force.

Astron simply watched her, but he was a little bit annoyed.

"Why do I feel like I was played with?"

For some reason, he felt like he had lost, and it was quite a new feeling. Most of the time, he would win when it came to such talks, after all.

Maya stood up with a bright smile on her face, her innocence radiating like a beacon. "Well, that was fun! I'll be looking forward to our club meeting next time, Junior. We can have more talks and maybe unravel some of those mysterious secrets of yours!"

With that, she waved cheerfully and strolled away, leaving Astron behind with a weird feeling of longing and sadness.

"She really does resemble her a lot."

He was once again reminded of a certain girl.

"Astron! You should smile more!"

'I wouldn't be able to win against her either.'

He looked around the place with a sigh and stood up.

'At least it was refreshing.'

Chapter 175 Chapter 39.4 - No title

"Hmm....Certainly not bad."

I was now standing in the room I was assigned to. With the increase in my school ranking, I was now given a better room than my previous one.

If, at first, it was a simple room with only a small library and a table to study, now it was a lot bigger and fresher.

The facilities weren't that different, but even it being more spacious alone made it better than everything.

'But, that Trevor bastard. What is his goal?'

After Maya had left, I trained until evening. But something had been bothering me.

It was evident that Trevor was targeting me; I had confirmed it with my own eyes. But, the reason remained unknown.

'What could possibly have made him target me?'

Now, was there a need to understand why he was targeting me, you might ask? Of course, there wasn't. After all, the moment he decided to target me, he became my enemy.

And he was also a villain in the game, meaning he was already possibly inclined to be evil.

'He even leaked his intent.'

Killing intent or murderous intent of a Hunter would form eventually. After all, those who had wandered on the border of death would become accustomed to it naturally.

However, even then, there were different types of murderous intents, and from those types, one would be able to tell what kind of person the owner was.

For instance, those who had fought with monsters all the time would have had a more savage intent since it represented the enemies and foes they fought and killed.

But at the same time, those who had fought and killed humans would have a different type of intent.

It wouldn't be as savage but would be something more hideous.

'I could feel the difference even on myself.'

The moment I had killed a human, be it demonic or not, I knew something had changed inside me. Such a change had never occurred whenever I fought with monsters or killed them.

'Talk about hypocrisy.'

Just because they didn't talk in the same way as we did or looked in the same way, none of us felt the guilt of taking a life. Of course, that didn't mean what we did was wrong. This is a battle of survival, and nature never cares about how one feels.

In any case, at the end of the day, if a person kills humans, they change, and that becomes evident the more they do it.

You can argue that it takes a toll on their consciousness, or they lose their conscience slowly, but in the end, they change.

'And I am certain that Trevor is on the latter side.'

From his intent and dark aura oozing from him alone, I could easily say he killed people before.

'I even felt like I had sensed Demonic Energy from him.'

I wasn't sure about that, but something inside me was telling me that Trevor was already associated with Demonic Humans.

'If that is the case, should I just kill him?'

And, if he was associated with demons, that meant he needed to die.

'But, it won't be easy.'

He was inside the academy, and even though he wasn't the first rank, he was still a senior with a high ranking.

That meant his stats were probably above the normal. Adding the fact of the possible negative results that would come after I killed him, it wouldn't be a good idea right now.

'I need proof.'

If I had just killed someone just because they decided to spread bad rumors about me and targeted me for some reason, then I would become a random murderer out there.

A murderer who killed others out of his own pleasure. If possible, I wanted to avoid that the most since that wouldn't make me any different.

'Let's see what you are planning, Trevor Philips.'

What was going to happen with his life now depended on his future actions and my judgment.

'In any case, now is not the time to focus on this guy.'

After all, with the curriculum changing, everything became a mess, and the future became a lot harder to predict, which meant one simple thing.

'I need to be ready for any possible changes to the story.'

Just like that, I slowly left my room and made my way to the training grounds once again.

SWOOSH! BOOM!

Inside the place reserved for the academy cadets who wanted to train against monsters, a young girl could be seen blasting a bunch of artificial monsters.

Irate flames danced at the tips of Irina's fingers as she unleashed her anger upon the artificial monsters in the training room.

BOOM! SMASH!

The air crackled with the intensity of her magic, and each blast from her hands sent the mechanical creatures flying.

"Frustrating idiots!" Irina muttered through gritted teeth, her fiery hair swirling with each forceful motion. She attacked with a ferocity that seemed to defy the very nature of the training room, leaving behind a trail of scorched marks on the floor.

BOOM!

Another burst of flames erupted, reducing a group of monsters to smoldering debris. The training room echoed with the sounds of Irina's relentless assault, the artificial monsters unable to withstand the fury of her magical onslaught.

"How dare you post something like that?"

SMASH!

From the start of the day, her mood had been a worse one. After the rankings were announced, she learned she stayed on the same rank, so she decided to blow some steam off while hanging around with others.

The last week had already been suffocating enough, and she needed to relax. But, while they were hanging around, she looked at her watch and checked the school forums.

And now she wished she hadn't done that.

The comment on the school forums had struck a nerve, a raw nerve that had been building tension throughout the day.

In the dimly lit training room, her fiery hair swirled around her like a tempest as she continued to unleash her magical fury. The comparison to Seraphina Frostborne, her rival, felt like a personal affront. The shadows cast by her flames danced on the walls, mimicking the tumult within her.

The post had insinuated that Irina was somehow inferior because of her ranking and many other things. It was as if someone finally found the courage to speak badly about her and posted something like this.

"How dare you say I have a trash personality, huh?"

Another blast of flames erupted, disintegrating a group of artificial monsters, but it did little to assuage Irina's anger.

"If I find you, I will show you what it means to have a trash personality."

Of course, it wasn't only about personality. The post also said how Seraphina was a lot more beautiful with her long silver hair or how lady-like she was, and Irina looked more like a little child throwing tantrums every time.

It was evident that the post was made so that it could anger Irina, and she knew that as well. But she still couldn't help but get angry.

BOOM! BOOM!

As Irina continued her fiery onslaught on the artificial monsters, the door to the training room slid open.

WRR!

A figure entered, her presence exuding an air of serene elegance that contrasted sharply with the chaotic display of magic.

A lady with her long silver hair cascading down her back stepped into the room.

Her cold blue eyes surveyed the scene, taking in the remnants of destroyed monsters and the blazing inferno of Irina's magic. Unlike the fiery redhead, the newcomer seemed untouched by the commotion, her expression stoic and composed.

"Quite the spectacle," she remarked in a calm, measured tone, her gaze finally settling on Irina.

Her tranquil eyes locked on the fiery gaze, but a silent acknowledgment could be seen if looked at with caution.

Irina, in the midst of her blazing display, turned to face her rival. The flames that danced around her momentarily flickered as their eyes met. The contrast between their personalities was palpable—fire meeting ice.

"What brings you here, Seraphina?" Irina asked, her voice sharp with a mixture of anger and irritation. The tension in the room seemed to intensify as the two formidable mages of opposite elements faced each other in the training room.

Even though none of them were using any magic, the clash of their auras was enough to disturb the mana around them.

"Why wouldn't I be here?" Seraphina responded calmly, her gaze unwavering. "We both have the right to use the training chamber, given our rankings. It's not exclusive to fiery personalities alone."

Irina scowled, her frustration evident. The mention of their rankings added another layer to the simmering tension. The training room, designated for the top-ranked students, symbolized the competitive atmosphere that surrounded them.

Seraphina continued, her voice maintaining its composure. "I come here to train, not to engage in pointless comparisons. You should focus on mastering your magic rather than being bothered by online provocations."

"So, you have seen that post."

"I have."

"I thought you said you wouldn't waste your time with posts made by a bunch of random students. What made you change your mind?"

"I was arrogant back then. In the tapestry of the every day, hidden within the threads of routine, there are moments that sparkle like gems, reminding us that even in the ordinary, extraordinary beauty can be found."

Irina couldn't help but narrow her eyes at Seraphina's cryptic response. The contrast between their personalities seemed to extend even to their perspectives on the world.

"That post was just blabbering of a person with no future and drowning in the jealousy directed at people like us." Seraphina continued, her voice unwavering. "Besides, I find it amusing to witness your fiery rage in person. It's a rare sight."

'For some reason, this feels familiar.'

Irina didn't interact with Seraphina that much. Even though they shared the same dormitory and trained, most of the time, they both preferred using elemental chambers. However, now that they were talking, Irina felt like she had been having similar conversations with someone.

'Right, that guy talks like that, too.'

Remembering that this talk was going in the same direction, she felt like she knew what to say right now.

With her frustration bubbled to the surface, she couldn't resist a sarcastic retort. "Oh, how fortunate for you to find amusement in my moments of 'fiery rage.' It must be such a delight for you, the epitome of composure and calmness."

Seraphina's response was an arched eyebrow, an almost imperceptible smirk playing on her lips. The room crackled with the underlying tension, the clash of their personalities manifesting in their verbal sparring.

"But do enlighten me, Seraphina," Irina said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "What gems did you discover in the tapestry of your day that led you to grace this training room with your presence? Or was it merely a routine reminder of your unmatched skills?"

Seraphina shook her head ever so slightly as if dismissing a trivial thought. "I don't need confirmations from a bunch of lesser beings. I'm well aware of my own value, and I don't seek validation from online forums or meaningless comparisons."

Irina's eyes flashed with a mixture of irritation and defiance. "Well, forgive me for not reaching the heights of serenity and self-awareness that you have, Frostborne. Some of us are still navigating the tumultuous journey of personal growth."

A subtle smirk curved Seraphina's lips, and for a moment, her calm facade seemed to crack with the hint of amusement. "Indeed, Emberheart. The journey can be quite tumultuous, especially for those fueled by fire."

Irina's frustration reached its peak, and with a sharp exhale, she declared, "Well, I'm no longer in the mood for talking to ice queens." The flames around her flared for a moment, accentuating her retort. "Enjoy your serene journey, Frostborne."

Without waiting for a response, Irina turned on her heel, making her way toward the exit, leaving the girl alone in the training room.

CHUCKLE

A soft, melodic chuckle escaped Seraphina's lips as she watched Irina's retreating figure.

"Irina, the untamed flame," she mused to herself, her eyes thoughtful. "Curious... what might have caused this subtle change in the usual inferno of my rival? Maybe I should also look for that."

Chapter 176 40.1 - A test

The courtyard outside the academy echoed with the grumbles and yawns of students, all wearing various shades of disheveled uniforms. The early morning sun cast long shadows as they reluctantly assembled.

As the group grew, one by one, students arrived with tousled hair and bleary eyes. Some carried steaming cups of coffee, attempting to combat the persistent lethargy that clung to them. A particularly disgruntled student, Tessa, couldn't resist voicing her discontent.

"Why do we always need to gather this early?" she muttered, her voice laden with the weariness that still clung to her.

A nearby student, Aaron, yawned in agreement. "Right, I wish I knew that too."

A third voice, belonging to the ever-cynical Jake, chimed in, "Well, it is probably because they want to teach us how to be disciplined."

"Ho? We have a smart-ass here, huh?" mocked another student, Sarah, shooting Jake a teasing grin.

"What—"

"Bastard, do you think we don't know what? We just want to complain because we couldn't sleep enough," interrupted Mike, another student who shared the sentiment.

"Yeah. Of course, we know this is the right thing to do; it is just we hate it," added Lily, a normally cheerful student who seemed equally affected by the early hour.

The courtyard buzzed with grumbles and agreements, a collective sigh of discontent rising from the group.

Just as the disgruntled chorus reached its peak, a hushed silence fell over the courtyard as the students noticed a figure approaching.

Eleanor, the stern instructor known for her unwavering dedication to discipline, emerged from the shadows.

She walked with purpose, her gaze sweeping across the assembly of tired faces. The students straightened, attempting to shake off their morning grogginess and assume a semblance of alertness.

"Tch."

However, in the end, none of them could escape from the stern eyes of their insatiable professor.

"And these kids are supposed to be the saviors of the world," Eleanor grumbled as she took her position in front of them, her gaze continuing to assess everyone, one by one.

'But, there are still good ones in the batch.'

With the semester going forward and the cadets being tested every time, she now had enough data to assess most of the students.

Unsurprisingly, those from renowned families had already done well, and even then, some of them still surprised her.

Especially the blue-haired kid smiling in front of the rows.

Ethan Hartley.

He had already become the topic of the talk in the academy and in the Hunter Community, but as the professor who had been grading Ethan's notes from the start, she knew a lot better than everyone else how talented he was.

'That kid has that natural talent in him.'

When she was a student, she was also one of those 'natural' talents since she could feel a lot better than her peers all the time. Thus, she knew when she saw another monster.

According to her observations, Ethan's talent didn't lie in how good he was with mana or spear. It was his talent regarding combat.

Whenever he was against a strong enemy, even if he was overwhelmed, he had the possibility of winning.

'As if he was bound to overcome hardship.'

It was a weird feeling to see. The kid got stronger whenever he encountered someone strong. The more he fought, the stronger he got.

The more he fell into the pit, the stronger his desire to overcome it became, and that itself was a talent that was hard to come by.

'Adding this to his lineage...'

A monster that could never be stopped was about to be created, and she was witnessing it.

'I wonder if he is him?'

She asked herself once again. The possibility of the person she had been searching for all this time was Ethan.

-WRRR!

Just as she was lost in her thoughts, she suddenly felt a vibration on her watch and realized it was the time to speak now. With a calm yet authoritative demeanor, she stepped forward, redirecting the focus of the assembled trainees.

"Alright, everyone, gather around," Eleanor's voice carried through the training ground, commanding the attention of the young Hunters. The vast expanse of the practice area became a stage for honing skills, with eager eyes turning toward the instructor.

"As Hunters, it's crucial to understand that our strength goes beyond mere physical prowess. It requires a mastery of mana," Eleanor began, her gaze sweeping over the faces of the attentive trainees. "Mana is the life force that courses through every living thing. It's the wellspring of our power and the key to unlocking abilities that defy the natural order."

She stopped at that moment and looked at the cadets.

"These words are what you have been hearing all this time up to now." With that said, she waved her hand. "However, all those words are meaningless if you don't truly know how to control your mana like a true Awakened."

SWOOSH!

She extended her hand, weaving fingers through the air to conjure a small, luminescent wisp of mana. The ethereal light shimmered, captivating the trainees' attention.

"Most of you should be able to look what I had conjured with my hands...However, did you actually see it? This is the question that you need to ask yourselves."

Eleanor's eyes scanned the faces of the trainees, measuring their reactions and anticipation. The subtle glow of the mana wisp lingered, a tangible reminder of the intangible force they were dealing with.

"Seeing through mana is not just perceiving the physical manifestation of spells or conjurations. It's about understanding the essence, the energy that flows through all things," Eleanor continued, her voice carrying the weight of experience. "Mana is not merely a tool; it's a language that speaks of

the interconnectedness of the world. To truly see through mana, you must go beyond the surface and delve into the currents that bind everything together."

She walked among the trainees, each step deliberate, and stopped before one young Hunter.

"What did you see?" Eleanor asked, her eyes probing. The cadet hesitated, and Eleanor nodded knowingly.

"Mana is not just a visual spectacle; it's a sensory experience. You must feel it, understand its rhythm, and let it guide your perception. The mana wisp I conjured is a fraction of the vast energy that surrounds us. To be a true Hunter, you must not only see it but feel it coursing through your very being."

With her words lingering in the air, Eleanor shifted the focus to the upcoming practical test.

"Now, to put your understanding to the test," she announced, her eyes sweeping over the assembled trainees.

"We will release a variety of Mana Formulas into the sky. Each of these formulas contains different types of psions and constructions. These Mana Formulas will then infiltrate the Academy's Forest, manifesting as flowers, leaves, or trees. Your task is to 'acquire' these disguised magic formulas within the forest and unravel their formulas. According to your findings, you will write a report with your teammates, explaining your understanding of the Mana Formulas and possible ways to adapt them to your life as an Awakened."

FOOSH! FOOSH! The students exchanged determined glances as they dispersed into the forest, a sense of competition lingering beneath the surface.

After all, from the start, all the students understood that there wasn't anything saying that no student needed to find the formula.

They needed to 'acquire' it.

Eleanor, observing from a distance, subtly implied the unspoken challenge – the possibility of deciphering and perhaps adopting the formulas discovered by fellow students.

"The formulas will be helpful for your understanding of your mana," Eleanor declared, her tone cryptic. "Your ability to unravel them and make them your own will be a testament to your growth as Hunters."

With those words, she had signaled her watch with her arm raised.

"Your groups are already formed, and now you will get a message saying your party."

DING!

Following her words, all the students felt their watches vibrating.

"Now, good luck to you all."

With those words, she had left, leaving all the students alone in front of the huge forest of the academy.

I knew from the start that this period that things would be different from now on, and the events would be put forward.

'But, to think the first event would not be a game event.'

In the game, there weren't any events where we would explore the forest and look for mana formulas.

'Well, I guess that would be boring.'

In any case, it was obvious that the game wouldn't be able to cover all the tests or practical lessons in the academy, so it wasn't a hassle.

'The thing is....'

"Hello."

I was matched with two people that I would have expected.

"..."

The glaring girl and the timid girl.

'Certainly an impressive line-up.'

It was quite understandable that I had ended up with Irina since she was a high-ranker, and I still ranked low. But, I couldn't quite understand Sylvie.

'I thought the academy would look after her.'

I was expecting things regarding Sylvie to change, but I wasn't expecting her to be on the same team as me.

'I also refuse to believe that they put this girl as the high-ranker that would protect Sylvie.'

There was no way the academy thought Irina was a good choice to protect Sylvie from anything that would come her way.

If they really thought about that....Then, I have nothing to say.

In any case, now here we were.

"Great. How did I end up with him?" Irina mumbled to herself, the annoyance evident in her voice. Even then, she made sure I could hear her.

She seemed particularly in a bad mood today, as she was different from the time when she was on the train.

Not that I cared much.

"It is not like I wanted to be in the same team as you either." I also didn't back off and retorted back. I had been training the whole night and forgot the time, and I was quite sleepless right now, so I was also not in a good mood.

"Oh? Really?"

"Really."

"Then, I guess I will go alone then."

"....Are you stupid?"

"Hah?"

"If you could go alone, why do you think they put us in a team? Did you forget what happened in the first dungeon?"

".....I didn't."

"Then?"

"Tch.....I know...."

Just as I was bickering with Irina as usual, suddenly, I heard a sound coming from the side.

"S-Seriously, can we, um, focus on the a-a-assignment?"

Chapter 177 40.2 - A test

For Sylvie, life recently had been pretty different.

Things had changed inside her, and she was well aware of them.

'Child.'

She had been constantly dreaming about someone whenever she slept. There would always be a silhouette that had been appearing, and the silhouette would look [Divine].

Their voice would be holy, and Sylvie would be in a trance whenever they appeared.

There was also another change inside her. In her status window, Sylvie could see one of her [Traits] had changed.

A trait that had always been a mystery to her was now awakened.

[First Lord's Authority]

That was what it wrote on the status window, and she knew that power was related to this trait.

She intuitively knew the powers lying inside her. She could sense them. She was also well aware that her abilities were all enhanced.

If before she was having a hard time healing people and using her mana smoothly, now she didn't have a hard time.

Whenever she had wished for something, the wound would disappear. It was truly a miraculous scene. She could also see the feelings of people in a lot more detail now, and she could understand them a lot better as well.

At first, it was a little overwhelming to see all those different feelings and thoughts of people. Especially the first days had been tiring.

But after a week had passed, she no longer felt overwhelmed.

But that wasn't the end. She knew the powers inside her were meant to be different. She could sense instinctively that she had now become someone very important.

Of course, she didn't mention anything to anybody related to her powers and kept them inside since something was telling her that she should never trust people. Especially from the moment she had seen Danielle and the feelings she had harbored.

However, now she had a different problem than all of that before.

The two people bickering in front of her, her teammates.

One of them was Astron, the boy she somehow had the weirdest interactions and the other one was a girl she only knew outside.

Irina was a girl she never thought she would talk to, and she also never wished to. After all, she was well aware of how this girl's feelings suddenly erupted out of nowhere.

The fury and the hatred she possessed rivaled Astron's, but if one thing was different, then that would be the fact that she always showed it rather than hiding it like him.

And, in the midst of these two volcanos, she was trapped.

'Why am I with these two?'

She asked herself, but the answer didn't come.

"If you could go alone, why do you think they put us in a team? Did you forget what happened in the first dungeon?"

".....I didn't."

Seeing their bickering, she couldn't help but feel like this wouldn't go anywhere.

'I need to do something.'

She knew she needed to do something, but at the same time, she felt scared.

'No.'

However, she swore to herself that she wouldn't stay as her weak self anymore, not after what she had seen. Though, things were never as easy as they seemed.

"S-Seriously, can we, um, focus on the a-a-assignment?" She stammered, her voice barely audible amid the continued bickering of Irina and Astron.

!'

The moment she spoke, both Astron and Irina turned to look at her. Irina's fiery gaze clashed with Sylvie's anxious eyes while Astron's more indifferent expression bore into her.

"I don't need someone who can't even defend themselves properly," Irina scoffed.

"You are the one to talk. Did you forget who saved you last time?" Astron shot back.

"Tch. You don't need to rub it every time."

"It is not like I want to. It is just that someone seems to forget things quite often."

"Right....At least I am not escaping."

"Better than setting everything on fire when I get annoyed."

"....."

'What is this?'

As Sylvie observed their exchange, annoyance started to bubble within her.

'He is enjoying it?'

It was not just the bickering that bothered her but the fact that Astron seemed to be enjoying this banter with Irina.

'When I am trying my best to keep them together?'

It felt like she was standing there, invisible and unheard.

'Why can't they see I'm trying to help?' she thought, her frustration growing.

The frustration within Sylvie reached its peak, and with a sudden burst of courage, she interjected with a loud shout, "Enough!"

Both Irina and Astron turned their attention to Sylvie, surprised by the sudden outburst. Even the ambient mana in the room seemed to quiver momentarily as if to respond to her emotions.

Astron's eyes were especially wider than Irina's as if he had realized something different with Sylvie.

Irina also gave a surprised reaction as, being a mage that sensitive to mana, she could easily see the fluctuations that were happening around them.

'There was someone like this in the lower ranks?'

Irina was well aware of the powerhouses in the academy since she was forced to study them, but she had never heard about this girl.

'Sylvie Gracewind, huh? Interesting.'

"I-I mean, c-can't we just work together?" Sylvie continued, her voice wavering but determined. "We are a team, and arguing like this won't help us with the assignment. We need to cooperate."

However, at that second, she had returned to her usual state.

'Does she not know how to control it?' Irina thought, looking at Sylvie.

Sylvie's sudden burst of courage seemed to dissipate as quickly as it appeared, and a blush crept up her cheeks. The attention from both Irina and Astron made her feel self-conscious. It was evident that the stage she was in was just. Before was unnatural and came from her heart.

"I-I mean, um, sorry if I shouted. I just thought, you know, we should try to get along," Sylvie stammered, her gaze shifting nervously between her teammates.

'How amusing.'

For some reason, seeing the girl's innocence, Irina felt refreshed.

'It had been a while since I felt like this.'

It was a weird feeling that she got as if being in the presence of this girl made her heart calm. She turned to look at Astron, only to see him with his brows knitted.

'Sigh....This guy never takes a step back.'

Knowing this, she knew the more they bickered, the more things would be pointless. Contrary to this guy, she needed to get good grades in each assignment, and she needed to keep herself from trying to give an answer every time.

Even without herself knowing, slowly, she was becoming a different person with each interaction.

"Sigh....Let's calm down, as she said," Irina remarked, her voice adopting a more resigned tone. She glanced at Astron, her fiery gaze softening slightly. "We're stuck in the same team for now, and there's no changing that. Might as well make the best of it."

Astron, though still wearing a hint of irritation on his face, nodded in agreement. "Seems like someone finally got their act together."

'Tch...Bastard, you will never let me have the last word, won't you?'

Even though his words stung a little, she simply swallowed her pride and started walking towards the forest.

As they walked, Irina took a moment to explain the task at hand. "Our goal is to find Mana Formulas hidden within the forest, just as the instructor said. Do you know how to use Mana Observation?" Turning her head to the other two, she asked.

Sylvie and Astron exchanged a glance before shaking their heads in unison. The concept of Mana Observation was foreign to both of them.

For Sylvie, it was because she had never needed to use mana in this manner; neither had she had any desire to do so.

For Astron, it was mostly because he relied on his [Skill] rather than using the raw mana to enhance his vision and also because he partly came from another world, though Irina had no way of knowing that.

Irina sighed, recognizing the knowledge gap. "Mana Observation is a basic technique for a mage. As you've been learning spells and magic, you need to see the world through the eyes of mana."

'Is that why I was matched with these two?'

The Academy certainly had a way of doing things. She knew she didn't need any teammates from the start since she could find the magic formulas on her own. However, now she felt like she was slowly understanding the purpose of this test.

'Are they trying to make use of high-ranking students to teach others at the same time? It is quite clever.'

She laughed her chest with pride, knowing that the academy regarded her as a high-ranking member. After her last conversation with Seraphina, her confidence got a small hit, but with this, she returned to her usual self.

'Anyway, I should continue.'

She continued, explaining the intricacies of the technique. "It's not as simple as it seems. You need to infuse your mana into your eyes effectively. This enhances your neurons and the receptors that capture light, specifically attuning them to mana signals."

Irina glanced at Sylvie and Astron, gauging their understanding. "Magic Formulas are crafted from pure mana. Normally, our eyes are designed to receive information transmitted by light. That's why a regular person wouldn't see mana unless it turns itself into light. But when you apply mana specifically to your eyes, the receptors become receptive to mana signals, allowing you to perceive raw mana."

She took a deep breath, considering the significance of this information. "So, to find these Mana Formulas, we need to use Mana Observation. It's not optional; it's crucial for this task. Let me show you how to do it."

Irina slowed her pace, allowing the others to catch up. As they continued through the forest, she demonstrated the process of Mana Observation. "Focus on the mana around you. Picture it flowing through your surroundings, and then channel your own mana into your eyes. It's about attuning your senses to the mana wavelengths present in the forest. Try it. It might take some practice, but it's a fundamental skill for any Hunter, let alone a mage."

'Humph. You should thank the academy that for having me at the party instead of other high-ranking students specializing in close combat.' She thought with a smile.

"You don't need to be successful on the first try; it is okay to struggle. Even the mages would-"

She was about to elaborate that even though it sounded easy to make, in reality, it wasn't, but at that second, her whole belief shattered.

"Umm...Like this?"

The girl she thought to be cute and innocent appeared to be a hidden dragon.

'What?'

Chapter 178 Chapter 40.3 - A test

'What the hell?'

Irina turned to see Sylvie with her eyes subtly glowing, a faint aura of mana surrounding her. The timid healer had somehow managed to execute Mana Observation on her first attempt, and she couldn't help but open her eyes wide after seeing this.

'She did it instantly?'

It was really a surprising scene. Even she herself, one of the most gifted mages in this whole world, was able to use Mana Observation on the try.

'How come someone like this was missed?'

Even if it slightly scratched her pride, the thing concerning Sylvie wasn't her talent but how it went unnoticed by the eyes of others.

A person with such a talent meant to be someone who would shine amongst others, but Sylvie hadn't shone.

'Is she lying?'

In the end, she couldn't help but narrow her eyes. It was suspicious, a lot suspicious. There was no way the information forces of the Emberheart Family would have missed such a talent.

That meant it was highly likely that Sylvie was bluffing to get their attention.

'Does she think I would be impressed by this?'

As Irina subtly scrutinized her, Sylvie's demeanor shifted. The timid healer, sensing Irina's gaze, began to fidget nervously, her eyes avoiding direct contact.

"I-I'm sorry," Sylvie stuttered, her voice wavering. "I-it wasn't right, was it?"

Sylvie's self-esteem, already fragile, took a hit as she assumed Irina disapproved of her actions, but at the same time, her fragile look awakened something weird inside Irina.

'She doesn't seem to be lying, though. How can such an innocent girl lie?'

Her heart melted looking at fidgeting Sylvie, her previous assumptions getting pushed back at her mind.

In an unexpected turn, Irina reached out and gently patted Sylvie on the shoulder. "No, Sylvie, you did well. In fact, you surprised me. It's impressive that you managed to use Mana Observation on your first try."

However, while those two were interacting, a pair of purple eyes filled with mana noticed something different.

'As expected, Sylvie's power is really overpowered.'

In a world where countless different powers exist, every being that will hold special positions in the future is special.

The main cast of the game is especially included in this.

If Ethan is the hero that will save the future, then Sylvie is the one that will make him shine.

Future Saintess.

Such a position can't be held by someone who doesn't have the power to hold it.

[First Lord's Authority]

The special power that makes her shine.

It is such an overpowered trait that makes life for Sylvie easier and harder at the same time.

It is harder because she is now a contender for one of the world's biggest powers, and any other powerholder knows this will target her and will want to be in possession of such power.

It is easier because she is the contender for one of the world's biggest powers, which makes her special and above others. She can now understand mana as she wished and can make [Her Will Become True].

This is what [Authority] means.

It even has the power to affect other people's feelings and minds.

Just like how I can see right now.

'That small shiny aura must be her trait.'

With my eyes now amplified with mana, I could see the world differently. And that was also how I could see Sylvie's shiny aura now.

Of course, if I hadn't known about her powers beforehand, I would also possibly have been affected by them. After all, her aura makes others believe in her a lot more easily.

It is as if you instinctively know that she is an innocent being.

'Such a crazy power.'

Manipulating people's emotions in such a manner was indeed crazy and dangerous.

'She still doesn't know how to control her powers.'

Even in the game, it took a lot longer for her to understand her powers and their extent. And, considering it had just been a week for Sylvie, it was normal for her to be unaware of the powers she had possessed.

"What about you?"

While I was thinking about that, suddenly I heard Irina's voice addressing me. Turning my attention to her, I could see her eyes shining. "Were you able to grasp how Mana Observation works?"

She was looking at me with expectant eyes.

"No, it's not really clicking for me. I couldn't get it."

Of course, there was no way I was going to tell her that I got it on the first try. After all, I was already trying to lay low; there was no need to gather too much attention on me.

[Perceptive Insight] did work on the concepts and the soft skills as well. There were many things I could observe by just watching.

That was especially true with things like this.

Irina used Mana Observation while moving her mana around her eyes, which I was able to observe. Adding the knowledge she had provided beforehand, it was very easy for me to get a grasp of it.

'I just needed to move my mana into my eyes.'

Of course, I knew it was easier said than done, but at this point, I should also thank Senior Maya. Her way of teaching me how to control my mana innately made it very easy. While she was teaching me, she made sure to lay the foundations perfectly.

I had been constantly revising those memories from time to time to make sure that muscle memory was fetched in my body. Thus, moving my mana into very specific locations also didn't take too long, and this made me appreciate her teachings more and more.

'But, to think I had been missing this for so long.'

The game lacked when it came to the aspect of magic. Since Ethan wasn't a magician, there weren't many explanations regarding skills, and Mana Observation seems to be one of those that were forgotten. The academy also hasn't taught us many things, either, until now.

So, I was actually quite illiterate in this aspect, and that also made my creativity limited.

'I should research after returning to my room.'

It was important for me to broaden my horizons so that I would be able to utilize every little strength I could.

"Well, well, Astron. Having trouble seeing the invisible forces around us? Maybe you need a bit more magic in those eyes of yours."

'Huh?'

Hearing her words made me cringe. The choice of her words certainly made me remember that she came from a noble family, especially one with traditions.

'What is this girl talking about?'

Seeing Irina's smirk, I wanted to retort but held it in.

'It is a small price to pay.'

"Guess so."

Shrugging off, I replied in a nonchalant tone, the same as usual.

"...."

And the expression on Irina's face was something to take note of. She was probably expecting me to retort, but seeing me accepting that fact easily, her plans crumbled.

"Cough....It is good that you know your place."

"Yeah, yeah, miss Mage....So what is the plan?"

Since Sylvie was also able to use Mana Observation, Irina probably didn't want to spend much time waiting either. At this point, she also must have realized the purpose of this training and why she was paired with students like us.

Irina rolled her eyes but couldn't hide a small grin.

"We shouldn't waste any more time. Let's focus on finding those mana formulas in the forest. Remember what I showed you about Mana Observation. Since you have already figured out how to use it, Sylvie, you and I will look for the possible Mana Formulas around."

"I will do my best."

It seemed Sylvie was relatively weak to acknowledge, as her demeanor immediately changed after Irina spoke to her with a trusting tone.

'Maybe I should have used the same approach?'

It was just an assumption, but in the end, the past was in the past, and there was nothing I could change about it.

"And, since this useless guy over here still can't use Mana Observation, I will leave him the scouting. We need to be aware of the other students as well."

'Tch.'

I clicked my tongue inwardly, hearing her words.

'She changed.'

However, slowly but surely, she was improving. Irina's ability to understand how the groups worked and how to analyze situations was almost nonexistent at the start, but now she finally became someone who could make rational decisions and lead the group.

'At least, she satisfies the bare minimum for the leadership.'

Of course, it wasn't that easy to lead, and a good leader needed to possess a lot more characteristics; however, at the very least, she was at the starting point.

"Any problem with that?"

'Maybe I should take it back?' Looking at her crossed arms, the thought passed my head. I really wanted to see her haughty face crumble, but that was the case for a later time.

"No."

"Good, we can start moving then."

Just like that, the group started moving in the terrain.

After walking for a while, the forest began to reveal its secrets. Irina and Sylvie, using their Mana Observation, were looking at the forest from the eyes of mana and mages.

"So this is how it feels?" Sylvie mumbled, looking at the forest in awe. Everything was a lot different from what she had seen in the past.

Even the trees possessed a unique mana that made the forest more colorful than it had ever been.

"How is it?" Irina asked, a proud smile on her face. Even though it was Sylvie's talent that she learned this fast, at the very least, she could be considered as her teacher, right?

Sylvie, still marveling at the newfound perspective, nodded enthusiastically. "It's incredible, Irina. I never imagined the mana in the forest would be so vibrant and diverse. It's like seeing the world in a completely different light."

Irina chuckled, enjoying the genuine excitement in Sylvie's eyes. "That's the beauty of Mana for a mage. It allows you to perceive the world in ways others can't. You'll find that it's an invaluable skill, especially in our line of work."

Sylvie's eyes sparkled with curiosity. "Have you always been able to see mana like this, Irina?"

"Well, you can say that. I was taught how to use Mana Observation after the moment I awakened."

"Ah...Right." Sylvie remembered that Irina came from a renowned mage family, and she understood it was a pretty normal achievement for Irina. "It must have been great to learn something like this at such a young age."

It was an innocent remark coming from a girl who didn't know much about the world. However, for a second, Irina's expression faltered, and a shadow passed over her face.

'....'

The mention of her childhood and early training brought back memories she often tried to push aside. The expectations, the relentless training, the pressure to excel – all of it was etched into her past.

"Yeah, great," Irina replied, but her tone held a hint of bitterness. Of course, she instantly masked it with a forced smile. "But not everyone starts like this, so it is normal for you to learn it right now. I could even say you are pretty talented at this."

Sylvie noticed the subtle shift in Irina's demeanor, realizing she had unintentionally touched on a sensitive subject. After all, her eyes could see the feelings the person had, and the ones Irina held weren't certainly pleasant.

"Irina, I didn't mean to..." She wanted to express her concern but stopped after seeing Irina shaking her head.

"No, it's fine; you don't need to fret over it."

With those words, a momentary silence ensued, making the atmosphere awkward.

"Did you finish your empty talk?"

At least, until the guy on the back opened his mouth.

"What?"

Irina turned to look at Astron speaking, and she realized his purple eyes were shining with mana.

'Huh?'

"If you finished, should we capture the target in front of us?"

It seemed even if he wasn't a monster like Sylvie, this guy wasn't that bad after all.

Chapter 179 Chapter 40.4 - A test

Just like that, Irina and Sylvie, distracted by their conversation, turned their attention to where Astron was pointing.

To their surprise, a small squirrel made entirely of mana walked gracefully in front of them. The creature's form shimmered with ethereal light, and it seemed to follow a predetermined path through the forest.

"A Mana Formula disguised as a squirrel?" Irina mused, her eyes narrowing as she observed the magical creature. It was quite a sight to see such a complex life form was imitated by a magic formula, meaning they would get a lot more points just from capturing and defusing it.

Sylvie couldn't help but smile. "It's so cute! Can we catch it?"

'Hmm....She is weak to cute things.'

Irina mentally noted seeing Sylvie's reaction and chuckled at her enthusiasm.

"Of course, we can. Remember, the goal is to find these formulas and understand them. Let's work together and capture it without harm-"

SWOOSH!

Just as she was about to continue her words, suddenly, an arrow shining green went right past through her ears.

STAB!

And stabbed the pitiful squirrel from its legs, hindering its movements. However, instead of dissipating, the squirrel staggered, its movements hindered by the magical impact.

GASP!

Sylvie gasped, worried about the creature's well-being. "Did you have to do that?"

Irina, with a mixture of frustration and intrigue, turned her gaze to Astron. "What was the point of that? We were supposed to capture it unharmed!"

Astron, unfazed by their disapproving glares, calmly retrieved another arrow. "Relax. It's just a magic formula. We needed to see how it reacts to an attack, right?"

He looked composed for someone who had just shot a pitiful, innocent squirrel. "And, it is not like it is dead or anything. The formula is just fine; what you are seeing is nothing but an illusion."

Just as he said, the squirrel would have dissipated if the magic formula had been affected and destroyed. That itself showed that the arrow didn't cause any harm to their objective. It actually made their lives easier since the squirrel was bound to be different from other formulas.

Most likely, it would be able to escape rapidly.

"Still....."

However, even then, it was quite heartbreaking to see that cute squirrel squirm like that.

"For someone who burns monsters alive, you are quite sensitive about a little mana squirrel," Astron remarked, his tone as expressionless as ever.

Irina shot him a glare, her frustration mounting. The reason wasn't because he was wrong. It was because he was right since she had killed countless other monsters and took pleasure in the act of combat.

'But, I haven't fallen enough to shoot an innocent squirrel.' She wanted to retort, but she didn't hold her word. She knew he was just going to shrug it off anyway.'

"Sigh....Let me take a look."

With a hearty sigh, Irina approached the struggling squirrel. She extended her hand, palm glowing faintly with mana. The magical aura enveloped the wounded creature, and she carefully observed the reactions of the formula. It squirmed but showed no signs of dispersing.

"Remarkable," Irina murmured, her gaze fixed on the enchanted squirrel. "The formula has a resilient structure. The arrow impact seems to have altered its movements but hasn't disrupted the magical construct. Interesting."

She retrieved a small, intricate artifact provided by the academy for this exam. The device was designed to record and analyze mana formulas, an essential tool for investigators since awakeners would always leave traces in the form of Magic Formulas even if they had used skills.

Of course, this device they were provided was actually the lesser version of the real one, but it still did the job.

Placing it close to the mana squirrel, Irina initiated the recording process. A minute later, the squirrel disappeared, leaving no trace as the mana was absorbed by the artifact.

"It is over, let's go." And then, she continued leading the group into the forest.

On the way, none of the three talked. Sylvie was busy looking at the environment and controlling her eyes, and Irina was observing him.

'This guy....'

Looking at those shining purple eyes, Irina thought to herself.

'I knew it. He is quite smart.'

She still didn't know why he was ranked this low, but after being with him for a whole period and exploring dungeons, she admitted that Astron was someone who learned fast. He might not be a genius like her or this monstrous girl, but he was at least way above average.

The time it took him to learn the Mana Observation was a lot shorter than even most of the mages under their family, whom she had sparred when she was a child.

'Tch. I can't make fun of him anymore.'

Now that he finally got a grasp of how to use Mana Observation, she lost the small chance to make fun of him.

'Well, it might not be that bad.'

His reaction speed was insanely fast, and most importantly, the time for him to assess the situation and make decisions was almost nonexistent.

He didn't waste any second while making plans and acted instantly, just like he did with the squirrel.

'I hate to admit it, but he is a lot better in terms of this.'

Even though it might scratch her pride, in the end, she wasn't an asshole who refused to accept other people's achievements.

'Well, I might have been that asshole.'

Just like that, the group ventured into the forest, looking around for squirrels. Since all three of them were able to use Mana Observation, they swiftly found Mana Formulas disguised as parts of a forest.

Irina used her magic to trap the monsters where the magic formulas were attached.

Even though she was a fire mage mostly focusing on explosive elements, because this time it was a capture, she used other forms of magic as well. Even then, she proved why she was labeled as a genius, as her other forms of magic were also strong and swift.

Astron was Astron, as he simply used arrows, and as for Sylvie, she was the one that surprised the two the most, as she was somehow able to 'charm' the magic formulas, making them unable to move.

It was quite a weird scene to witness and clearly something Irina was seeing for the first time.

However, that peaceful time reached its end not long after...

'Something is not right.'

I thought, walking in the forest.

'The presence of other students is lessened considerably.'

In the past hour, we had been exploring the dungeon and recorded quite a lot of formulas on the device. And, of course, since many of the first-year students were also in the forest, normally, we were bound to encounter others, and a fight would occur, but our 'smart' leader came up with another good idea.

She released her aura intentionally, making other students aware of her presence.

'Certainly, something expected from Irina.'

Knowing what kind of person she was, it was evident that she would do something like this. Of course, what she did wasn't bad. Most of the other students would never want to go against her in this forest either since she was basically one of the strongest students in the academy.

It wasn't wise to make an enemy of her, and it seemed most students knew their place.

However, this method had a small disadvantage, something that might have been detrimental to us.

It was the existence of other possible high-ranking students who held the same amounts of authority and power as Irina—someone who could go against her toe-to-toe.

If someone like that were around us, they would be well aware of our location, and that would give them an advantage over us since they could conceal their presence.

Slowly approaching Irina, I whispered.

"Have you noticed it?"

"Not-"

"Sssh....."

Seeing my hand, she naturally lowered her voice and looked at me.

"Noticed what?"

".....Really?"

It seems this girl still held the same pride that made her this carefree. Releasing her aura intentionally while not paying attention....

'Do I really need to crush her pride?'

I thought but discarded the idea not long after. Even though she was flawed, this was what made Irina a strong individual.

"What are you talking about?"

However, she was still dumb when it came to picking things up.

"You really need to be more careful when you do such a thing."

"What do you me-"

Just as she was about to continue, she stopped her tracks. It seems she also finally realized what was missing. Of course, she should. Her stats must be much higher than mine, so there was no way she would miss what I had seen if she looked at it carefully with her high mana sensitivity as well.

Truly, I wish this arrogance of hers was at least a little limited to some extent. Maybe, then, she would be the strongest.

"Sylvie."

She immediately looked at Sylvie and then turned her attention to me.

"Cover her."

At the very least, she knew one of the core rules of a party.

Always protect the healer if there is one, and knowing that Sylvie wasn't someone who could protect herself, I immediately dashed towards to her, sensing the incoming projectiles.

"Wh-"

THUD!

As Sylvie looked at me in confusion, I quickly grabbed her, tackling her to the ground just in time.

SWOOSH! SWOOSH! SWOOSH!

Countless ice shards materialized on the ground where we had been standing, a deadly dance of frozen projectiles aimed at our group.

"Stay down," I muttered to Sylvie while already having taken cover from the boulder in front of us.

She didn't ask any questions either. It seems she got used to such situations in her past dungeon explorations in the first period.

'Good, she is not a liability, at least.'

Having someone in your team who panics is not good. I guess I should thank her first group for that.

BOOM! SWIRL!

In that split second, fire erupted around us. I glanced over to see Irina, her eyes ablaze with determination. She manipulated the flames expertly, creating a fiery barrier that intercepted the incoming ice shards.

"Wha-what's happening?" Sylvie asked, her eyes wide with surprise while looking at the flames and ice clashing.

'Well, this scene is certainly not normal.'

The amount of mana that had gathered around us wasn't normal, and there was no way Sylvie had missed that mana with her new powers as well. It was quite understandable that she was feeling overwhelmed, thanks to that amount.

"Stay low and quiet," I advised, my gaze fixed on the source of the attack.

After all, there was only one person who could confront our fiery mage.

"Ho....you are pretty good as usual."

Emerging from the shadows was another student, an incredibly beautiful girl with silver hair cascading towards her waist and eyes as blue as an icy winter sky.

"Seraphina."

The rival of Irina and one of the strongest future characters stood in front of our group.

Seraphina Frostborne.

Chapter 180 Chapter 40.5 - A Test

Emerging from the shadows was another student, an incredibly beautiful girl with silver hair cascading towards her waist and eyes as blue as an icy winter sky.

Her presence, which exuded an air of elegance and cold determination, would immediately capture the attention of everyone in the vicinity.

"Seraphina."

Irina met the eyes of the newcomer with a fiery gaze, her aura burning. It didn't take a genius to understand that her emotions were overflowing.

'Seraphina Frostborne.'

It was the girl's name, a character, and a future pillar in the game.

'Of course, it is going to be her.'

There was no way, other than Seraphina, that someone would intentionally target Irina like this.

'After all, they are rivals.'

Information that Seraphina was the rival of the Irina wasn't disclosed, and everyone knew about it. Even in the game, these two often clashed, creating problems for the player.

They were incompatible and almost impossible to put on the same party, and at some point, the player would need to make a decision as to which one to choose.

Each one of them came with its own storyline and its own problems, and choosing one would essentially make the other enemy.

Seraphina, unperturbed by Irina's fiery aura, regarded her with a calm demeanor. There were no traces of other students in her group.

'Are they spread?' I asked myself after seeing her alone. If it was Seraphina, that might be true since even under the cold exterior she had shown; she is also a mage with huge ego and arrogance.

'No, that wouldn't be the case.'

However, I dismissed the idea. Different from this fiery girl, Seraphina was someone who could easily control her arrogance and her feelings, and this was the reason why she was ranked higher than Irina in the school rankings.

"Isn't it a surprise to find you in our little territory, Irina?" Seraphina's voice was as composed as ever, her words carrying a subtle chill. "I was just having a discussion with my group about the prowess of Emberheart's best."

Irina's jaw clenched, and her fists tightened around her staff. She shot a glance around, noticing the absence of anyone accompanying Seraphina. "I don't see anyone around you."

Seraphina responded with an elegant smirk, her demeanor unwavering. "Indeed. After all, there is no one to talk about Emberheart's best since there is nothing to talk about. Unless, of course, you count fiery tantrums and misplaced arrogance."

Of course, while talking about her, I missed one thing.

'This girl really has a poisonous tongue.'

If there was one thing Irina lacked compared to Seraphina, it would be the fact that Seraphina knew how to speak.

Even from her childhood, she must have been pretty compatible with politics and higher society. After all, if a person doesn't know how to talk, they can't survive in such a place.

This is also the reason why Irina probably hates going home since it is the same for her own household.

"If you're here for a fight, Seraphina, you won't be disappointed."

Seraphina's lips curled into a slight smile, an expression that held a hint of amusement. "A test of skill among students is always enlightening, don't you think?"

CREAK!

With those words, the surrounding mana surged, forming crystals above her head. A sudden burst of frost emanated from her, and in an instant, the surroundings were transformed into a wintry landscape. The ground beneath their feet frosted over, and the air became biting cold.

SWOOSH! SWIRL!

The same went for Irina; unfazed, she conjured flames around her staff.

"Sigh, this is troublesome," I mumbled.

Knowing that the fight that was going to happen here would mean that we might also be swayed by the clashes.

The contrasting elements of fire and ice clashed as the two mages faced off.

'We need to get ready too.'

I observed the fight. Even though I really wanted to watch and see how the top two mages in the academy fought, I knew we wouldn't have the time.

Since Seraphina attacked us, that means she wanted something. That girl wouldn't do something that doesn't have any benefits to her. She might like messing with Irina a little bit, but essentially, she dislikes doing random things, and her showing herself after attacking without her group clearly indicates what she is after.

It was the device. Even though we had recorded the magic formulas on the device, we had yet to submit it to the teachers, and no rule indicated that a device belonged to a group alone.

That meant it was susceptible to stealing.

And, already aware of that from the start, I got the device from Irina.

'She probably thinks the device is on Irina.'

Seraphina knows Irina just like me, and she also knows how arrogant she is.

'This fight is pointless.'

She also knows that, no matter how much power they put in this fight, it won't end with a clear result.

After all, there are other predators out there, and she can't waste much time.

'So, she will aim for a clean victory.'

And that clear victory was getting the device, which basically meant our whole points.

"Sylvie, are you ready?"

I said, looking at her.

"What?"

She asked, slightly surprised.

!"

I was about to inform them that they were probably coming, but at that second, my senses screamed at me.

CLANK!

The sound of metal meeting metal echoed through the wintry landscape as I swiftly turned, raising one of my daggers to deflect the arrow coming from my back. The arrow clattered against the blade and fell harmlessly to the frosted ground.

Eyes of Hourglass.

Activating my skill, I immediately observed the direction the arrow came from.

'From the tree, huh?'

And my eyes immediately noticed another student on the tree. He tried to conceal his mana and presence as best as he could, but he was still not good at it enough.

'A low ranker.'

The teams were balanced. Thus, I knew he was the lower-ranked student.

'Then, this must be the other one.'

TAP! TAP!

Immediately before my eyes, a presence made itself known.

SWOOSH!

Dashing at me with a rapid speed, another student appeared with his sword aimed right at my chest.

CLANK!

However, I was ready from the start. Blocking the attack with my dagger, I redirected it to the ground, altering his balance.

THUD!

And then, with a smooth kick, I pushed him back, opening the distance.

"Kurgh...." The student grunted, stumbling backward from the force of my kick. He quickly regained his composure, a mix of frustration and determination on his face.

As he staggered back, I took a moment to assess the situation. The wintry battleground was now scattered with the clash of elements, the hiss of flames, and the crystalline coldness of frost.

'Archer first.'

Immediately grabbing my bow from my back, I knocked an arrow on the bow and channeled my mana.

SWOOSH!

Since I had done this same motion countless times and also trained while alternating between close combat and long range, it didn't even take me a second to shoot the arrow at the archer on the tree.

CLANK!

Of course, the guy who had just scattered noticed that I switched to the bow and then immediately dashed to me with his sword once again.

CLANK!

I blocked his attack once again with my daggers, but this time, I was the one pushed back. Switching back to dagger took a little time, and my posture wasn't perfect.

SWOOSH!

The guy continued attacking without any words, and I evaded and blocked the attacks utilizing my agility.

SLASH!

Even then, he was quite fast. His school rank was probably around the number 700 or something, and it was getting harder for me to simply fend off his attacks.

"Heh....I thought you were strong or something, but I guess I overestimated you."

As two wounds appeared on my body, the guy finally opened his mouth with clear contempt. I guess he was finally lowering his guard.

'Tch.....Humans are really simple.'

I clicked my tongue inwardly, seeing this guy. This happened quite frequently, even in the game, as most of the students would lower their guards. I knew they were still a bunch of young kids who didn't know much, but at the very least, they should have learned how tricky dungeons can be.

'This will be my lesson to you.'

Dash.

I activated my skill, feeling my speed increase.

SWOOSH!

And immediately dodged the guy's swing with a clean movement. I could see his eyes widening, clearly not expecting me to suddenly dodge. He was accustomed to my speed in this matter of seconds, and that was his mistake.

SLASH!

First, with a clean slash, I aimed right at his abdomen.

"Arghk-"

Severing the place where his nerves connected, I made him limp for a second.

SLASH!

And then, with another smooth slash, I severed the small connecting point behind his arms on his rear delt.

That place was where his arm tendons were connected, and he staggered, dropping his sword to the ground.

I was about to follow my attack with another, but at that second, I could see his eyes shine.

!'

And I immediately needed to back off.

CREACK! FOOSH!

From the ground I was standing, a small pillar made from earth appeared. If I were even a second late, I would probably be injured.

'As expected, he has a skill.'

Just like me, any other student is also bound to have skills and hidden cards.

As the fight went into stalemate, I took a moment to assess the situation.

The wintry battleground was now scattered with the clash of elements, the hiss of flames, and the crystalline coldness of frost, while the archer and this swordsman.

"Sylvie."

I immediately called Sylvie, who was looking at everything with surprised eyes. I knew from the start that it wouldn't be easy alone while not showing my full capabilities.

"...."

At first, no response came.

"SYLVIE!"

However, as I raised my voice, she immediately came to her senses.

"....S-sorry."

She apologized, but it was not the time to apologize.

"Can you cast me a buff?"

I didn't want to disclose my prowess to others, and I needed a reason to explain how I beat these two.

'I guess I will be drawing attention to Sylvie, but that is fine.'

She is already bound to get attention in any case since she has already shown how capable she is. The instructors observing her from a distance probably contacted the chairman already.

"I-I will try."

Sylvie nodded in understanding, her eyes regaining focus. She swiftly began to channel mana, her hands weaving through intricate patterns in the air as she invoked her supportive skill.

Most of the healers are very important, both because they can heal and because they can cast buffs, though I still don't know how they are related or how they obtain those skills.

'I guess it comes with their traits.' I thought, but I didn't have much time to analyze.

SWOOSH!

The guy before me realized Sylvie's occupation, and he immediately dashed towards me, trying not to let her buff me....