

## H. Academy 181

Chapter 181 Chapter 40.6 - A test

"I-I will try."

Sylvie might not be the best person suited for such a field job in this world, but even then, she herself was chosen as the successor of the [First Lord's Authority].

Therefore, even with her initial hesitation, she was still able to cast the buff.

SWOOSH!

The moment the guy before me realized Sylvie's occupation, he immediately dashed toward me, this time with renewed vigor.

His movements were faster and more precise as if he had discarded any restraint.

'He is finally showing his full power.'

No sane person would start the fight with their full power while showing their cards; even though this kid before me might still be young, at the very least, he wasn't as stupid as he looked.

He finally seemed to understand that the fight wasn't going the way he wanted.

CLANK! CLANK!

His sword clashed against my daggers with increased intensity. Each strike carried more force than before, testing my defenses. The earth pillar he summoned earlier indicated that he wasn't holding back anymore and he was going to use his skills.

'I need to finish this quickly.'

With Sylvie casting a buff, I felt a surge of energy coursing through me. My movements became even swifter, and I could sense an enhancement in my overall capabilities.

"Ha!"

He shouted, as he immediately dashed to me. His sword was coated with his mana, and he was also utilizing his own trait, probably increasing his vitality.

SWOOSH!

Dodging one of his powerful swings, I countered with a quick series of strikes, aiming for vulnerable points.

TAK! TAK! TAK!

However, my attacks didn't cut his skin but rather were blocked by the small shell he made with his earthen skill.

'Earthification, huh?'

His ability to manipulate Earth to create defensive barriers added another layer of complexity to the fight. It became clear that he wasn't just relying on brute force; he had a strategic approach to combat.

"You really are like a cockroach!" he declared, gathering mana around him. Of course, I wasn't going to let him do as he pleased and immediately went to disturb him.

However, he seemed to expect this as he slammed his hands onto the wintry ground, causing a seismic tremor.

'Tch.'

I could see what he was about to do and immediately leaped backward.

CREAK!

The earth beneath me shook, and a wave of force erupted, blasting my body into the air.

WHOOSH!

I tumbled through the air, the world spinning around me. However, one of the things I had practiced while training was how to use acrobatic movements to make my aerial combat more efficient.

As I regained my composure mid-air, I realized what he intended to do. The ground in front of him cracked open, and a burst of fine dust and smoke filled the air.

'Smoke?'

It seemed this guy was on the smarter side; it was sad that he had chosen the wrong opponent for this.

'I guess you were able to rise ranks while not only relying on your overwhelming strength.'

Even without activating my skill, I knew where he would be and who they would target.

Eyes of Hourglass.

The moment my skill activated, I felt the time slowing down. My vision became more clear, and I could see the small movements in the smoke heading towards Sylvie.

'Not happening.'

SWOOSH! BOOM!

I immediately darted towards Sylvie, closing the distance rapidly.

"Thanks for the buff."

"Hmm....."

Putting her down in another place, I focused my attention on him again.

The guy probably thought he could take advantage of the chaos and grab Sylvie as a hostage to gain the upper hand. But he had underestimated the swiftness granted by Sylvie's buff.

I also felt like the wounds on my body were already healed, probably because of Sylvie's healing. I couldn't pay much attention to her, but it seemed she also made up her mind.

SLASH!

In a single motion, I intercepted his path, my daggers cutting through the air with precision. He attempted to grab Sylvie, but he found only empty space as I swiftly moved her out of harm's way.

"Nice try," I remarked, my voice cold and determined. For some reason, I was a little annoyed that he had targeted Sylvie, even though what the guy did was the right choice.

Without giving him a moment to recover, I immediately closed the gap between us. Sylvie had granted me not only swiftness but also a heightened sense of focus.

As I dashed towards him, I readied myself to use the new set of movements I had visualized while training my art.

'Bare Moon.'

SWOOSH!

In a rapid sequence, my daggers danced through the air, each movement calculated to disarm the opponent efficiently.

CLANK!

The first movement aimed to destabilize his grip on the weapon, forcing him to loosen his hold. To achieve that, I would specifically target the tip of his weapon from the side, making sure the weapon would shake as strongly as possible.

SWOOSH!

The second swiftly followed, exploiting the momentary imbalance to redirect the weapon's trajectory for an opening.

CLANK!

The third targeted the weapon itself, attempting to knock it out of his hand while making sure that he couldn't regain his balance within the time.

Finally, the fourth movement seized the opportunity to finish the unarmed enemy full of openings.

CLANK! CLANK! SWOOSH! CLANK!

The sequence unfolded seamlessly, and before he could react, his weapon lay on the wintry ground, and I stood before him with both daggers at the ready.

"What?"

The maneuvers not only disarmed him but also left him bewildered by the speed and precision of the actions.

This whole sequence was possible because of Sylvie's buff since I still wouldn't be able to exert enough power to make the weapon fall to the ground.

Before he could fully grasp the situation, I channeled my mana on my hand, and in one final, calculated movement, I aimed a swift strike at the back of his head with the hilt of one of my daggers.

THUD!

And with that one last strike, he fell to the ground, his consciousness leaving his body; I could see his breathing returning to normal, as well as other signs of losing consciousness, and confirmed that the fight was over.

'It worked as intended.'

As I stood over the fallen swordsman, satisfied that the immediate threat had been neutralized, I turned my attention to Sylvie, ready to ensure her safety.

'Hmm?'

To my surprise, the archer I had shot earlier had emerged from the shadows, now holding Sylvie as a hostage.

"Drop your weapons, or the healer gets hurt," the archer threatened, a forced smile playing on her lips.

"....."

I didn't say anything and simply looked at the archer girl and Sylvie.

"What?"

"You know you should have fled when you had the chance," I mumbled, looking at the girl.

"I won't warn you again."

She was looking at me with a clear annoyance, and she was also shaking a little bit as if she was scared and in pain.

'She still hadn't healed the wound.'

The wound I made from the first shot was still there and bleeding and it seemed something had been holding her back from fleeing.

'It must be Seraphina.'

If she had learned that the archer fled when she herself was fighting..... Then, this girl's future career would probably be over. This was probably also the reason why the swordsman fought with me even though I was buffed.

However, if you are going to take someone hostage, you need to be very cautious of your surroundings. Especially as a ranger since you are purposefully revealing yourself while not being proficient in close combat.

'Well, that is it.'

It was not like I needed to do anything. After all, the main goal of this test wasn't to eliminate other students but simply to make sure you have submitted magic formulas.

Thus, I simply sat there and watched, testing the girl's patience. I was also observing Sylvie while all of this was happening, and the small fear in her eyes showed that she was indeed caught unprepared.

'This should be a good lesson to her as well.'

The archer girl's impatience grew evident as I continued to stand my ground, refusing to comply with her demands. She gestured with her bow, a subtle threat in her eyes.

"Drop your weapons, or I'll make sure she suffers," she warned, tightening her grip on Sylvie.

I shook my head slowly, maintaining my calm demeanor. "I don't think you're in a position to make threats. If you harm her, you lose any leverage you think you have."

The archer girl's frustration boiled over, and she glared at me. "Don't play games! Are you so heartless that you don't care about the well-being of your comrades?"

".....Sigh..." I released a hearty sigh at her question and lowered my hand.

PULL!

And then, pulled the small strings of mana connected to the tip of my finger.

TOK! TOK!

Following my movement, the small daggers I had planted on the ground came back to my hands, one of them hitting the head of the girl from the back. ((N1))

"Huh?"

Dash.

She was initially surprised, stumbling forward as the daggers collided with her. Before she could react, I swiftly closed the distance, aiming to disarm her.

The daggers I had summoned moved with precision, knocking the bow out of her hands and sending it skidding across the frosted ground.

The archer girl fell to her knees, disarmed and bewildered, while the point of my dagger grazed through her neck. I simply looked at the girl as she looked at me with clear pain in her eyes, probably from the wound earlier.

"Now, do you surrender?"

"....Yes...."

"This will hurt a little."

THUD!

With those words, I knocked her down with the hilt of my dagger as well, leaving her on the ground.

And, as I turned my attention to Sylvie, my eyes were locked on her shining green eyes. I was annoyed at the fact that such a situation could easily happen in the real world, where the attacker was mainly targeting her life.

"This is the reason why I asked for you to learn close combat. Without a person to protect you, you are a liability."

And I was also mad at myself that I lowered my guard when I had beaten the swordsman guy. If this was a real case, I needed to be aware of the archer, but I initially trusted my first attack, thinking it would make the girl impossible to move.

'I should be more careful next time.'

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Sylvie was initially surprised seeing how things were unfolding right before her eyes. Suddenly, immense amounts of mana appeared in the environment, and seeing that blue and red mana clashing was an overwhelming sight.

It was as if a natural disaster was occurring, and even that might be an understatement.

"Stay low and quiet."

However, his words calmed her down. In a situation where she suddenly felt the abundant amounts of mana, his words brought her back to the real world.

'That's right.'

She gulped, trying to calm herself down.

'I shouldn't show weakness.'

She needed to become strong.... Stronger than she used to be. She didn't know why, but she could innately feel that she needed to change.

It started after her awakening. From the moment she had awakened that power, she knew the world would change, and a sense of urgency was always lying within her. She couldn't even sleep properly the rest of the week since she always dreamt about weird things whenever she fell asleep.

"Seraphina."

Hearing the cold voice of her leader, she turned her eyes towards the newcomer. It was a girl she didn't know; however, looking at the emotions welling inside Irina's heart, it was evident that they didn't share a good history.

Irina's anger and annoyance levels were rising with each second, and Sylvie could see that she was slowly becoming a volcano ready to erupt.

But the weird one wasn't Irina, but the girl right before her.

"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."

Even though her words were clearly poisonous and were targeted at Irina, the important thing was the feelings inside.

'She is clearly enjoying it.'

With each word the newcomer girl spoke, her joy grew as if she liked messing with Irina. Aside from that, under her cold face, a simple grey color covered her palette, suppressing her feelings, just like a certain someone.

"This is troublesome."

And that certain someone was now making an annoyed face.

"Sylvie, are you ready?"

"What?" She asked, looking at his face. What was going to happen anyway? They could see Seraphina around.

However, her question was soon answered.

CLANK!

The sudden metallic sound echoed through the tense atmosphere, cutting through the verbal sparring between Seraphina and Irina.

Sylvie's eyes widened as she followed the trajectory of the arrow that had been deflected with astonishing precision. The arrow clattered to the ground, leaving a momentary silence in its wake.

In that brief pause, Sylvie's gaze shifted to him beside her, the one who had skillfully intercepted the projectile.

His expression was focused, and the air around him seemed to ripple with an unspoken coldness. His purple eyes were locked on the trees around the place as if he were tracing back the arrow.

'There was another person.' At that moment, everything made sense. Since that girl was in this place, that meant she was here with her group, and there needed to be at least three people.

'Then the other one.....'

CLANK!

Before she could even think further, another sword-clashing sound echoed. The dagger met with the sword, creating sparks around the place.

This time, it was another student with a sword raised in his hands.

However, weirdly enough, in a matter of seconds, he deflected the swordsman back as if it was easy. And then, taking advantage of the brief second, he grabbed his bow and attacked the archer who had attacked them at the start.

'Wow.'

She couldn't help but look in awe. She couldn't tell if the arrow hit or not, but she could feel the energy it contained.

After that, the clash of metal against metal continued, creating a chaotic symphony in the clearing.

Sylvie watched the fight, as it was the first time she had witnessed a real fight between cadets. She had seen fights against monsters, but this was a new experience.

'Thrilling....'

And somehow, it was thrilling.

At first, it seemed like the swordsman had the upper hand. The rapid exchange of blows had the boy on the defensive, his movements graceful but defensive, like a skilled dancer evading an aggressive partner.

Sylvie's heart raced as she observed the intensity of the battle unfolding before her.

"Kurgh...." The frustrated grunt of the swordsman filled the air, determination, and annoyance etched across his face. Sylvie felt a strange mix of nervousness and excitement, unsure of what was unfolding before her.

'Is he okay? I should be ready to help if needed.'

His dagger clashed with the swordsman's blade once again, but this time, he was forced back. The transition back to his dagger seemed to take a moment, and Sylvie sensed a subtle imperfection in his posture.

'He's struggling. I need to be ready.'

SWOOSH!

He evaded with a dancer's grace, blocking and dodging with agility. Yet, the swordsman's speed seemed to increase, making it progressively difficult for him to fend off the strikes.

"I thought you were something, but I guess I was mistaken."

The words of the swordsman pierced the air with contempt, revealing a momentary vulnerability in his defenses.

'What do you even know about him?'

Weirdly enough, she found herself cursing the swordsman. She felt annoyed at the fact that the swordsman was openly disrespecting him. As a person who knew his struggles from the start, she knew what kind of things he had experienced.

[Tch.....Humans are really simple.]

At that second, she heard a bunch of words in her mind. The voice was also a bit familiar.

What?

It was as if she had heard his thoughts. As she focused more, Sylvie could see the struggle in his movements, but she also sensed an underlying confidence.

SWOOSH!

Suddenly, he activated a skill, a burst of speed that caught the swordsman off guard. The tables turned, and Sylvie couldn't help but feel a surge of relief.

Wow....

It was a clean move coming from him as she watched in a daze. She could see how he manipulated his mana around his body with her eyes. It was a new and weirdly enchanting experience as rather than seeing overwhelming amounts of mana, what she had seen was an experienced control.

"Sylvie."

However, at that moment, his urgent call snapped her back to reality. Their eyes met, and Sylvie could see that even underneath those purple eyes, there was a small trust in her skills. Of course, a little annoyance was also there.

He needs me. I have to do my part.

"....S-sorry."

She acknowledged his unspoken request, realizing the importance of her role in this fight.

'I need to concentrate. He's counting on me.'

It might be weird to say, but this was the first time in her life that she felt like someone was counting on her. In the dungeons before, even though her party members were healed by her, she inwardly knew none of them actually relied on her.

It was as if she was just there to fill the party, and she was even useless most of the time because of her trauma against fighting.

"I-I will try."

Her hands moved instinctively, weaving through the air to channel mana. The intricacies of her supportive skill flowed from her, enveloping him in a subtle glow.

SWOOSH!

As the opponent recognized Sylvie's supportive role, a renewed vigor surged within him. His movements became more fluid and precise, shedding any prior restraint.

'He's showing his full strength now.'

The clash of blades intensified, leaving Sylvie torn between anxiety and fascination. Each strike and parry tested the boy's defenses, and she found herself silently cheering for his success.

'He's so fast. Is he okay?'

The revelation of the opponent's ability to manipulate Earth for defense added a layer of complexity to the fight. Sylvie realized that it wasn't merely about brute force but also a strategic approach.

'This is getting dangerous.'

As the opponent gathered mana, Sylvie sensed an impending seismic attack. Reacting swiftly, the boy leaped backward, narrowly avoiding the eruption of force.

'He's quick on his feet.'

WHOOSH!

Tossed into the air by a forceful shockwave, the boy showcased acrobatic skills. Sylvie marveled at his ability to maneuver mid-air, realizing that his training extended beyond standard combat.

'He's more than just strong.'

It was a little cool to see him move in such a manner. She even momentarily thought that he could become a part of [Awakened Olympic Games].

However, at that momentarily distraction, she made a crucial mistake. She wasn't able to notice the ranger approaching behind her, and because of that, she ended up in a hostage situation.

"Drop your weapons, or the healer gets hurt," the archer threatened, a forced smile playing on her lips.

'This is.....'

The tension in the air heightened as the boy remained composed, refusing to comply with the archer's demands.

'This is just like him.'

Knowing the boy, she knew this was just kind of his response, and it even made it weirder.

"I won't warn you again."

In that moment of understanding, a strange calmness washed over Sylvie, if only for a fleeting second. The situation was still dire, but at least she sensed an absence of immediate harm.

'I hope he knows what he's doing.'

Just as the standoff reached its peak, Sylvie noticed a change in the boy's expression. His eyes, initially reflecting annoyance, seemed to intensify with a hint of anger. It was as if he was upset, not at the archer girl, but at Sylvie herself for letting this happen.

'Right.....'

It might have been a while, but she knew what he had advised her at the start.

Even though she herself was trying her best, she was avoiding one important thing. Her fear of pain was still holding her back, and she realized it just like that.

After that, just like in a second, she was rescued thanks to his actions. However, his words at the end just hit the nail at that very second.

The words he uttered, "Without a person to protect you, you are a liability," echoed in her mind.

'Liability.'

The word resonated deeply within her. It was a stark reminder of her vulnerability and the need to become stronger.

"If you're not willing to confront your weaknesses head-on, then perhaps you should reconsider being a part of the academy,"

At that moment, a subtle determination ignited within Sylvie.

If this is what you want, then I am going to do it.

I won't be a liability.

With that desire lit in heart, she looked at him with a fiery gaze.

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"Please, teach me how to fight."

That was what she said in the middle of the classroom.....

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"Please, teach me how to fight."

Standing before me was the girl whom I wasn't expecting, in the middle of the whole classroom.

'Sigh.....What a hassle.'

And I, who was now in the pinpoint of the whole classroom's attention, was looking at her with a deadpan expression.

'How it came to this?'

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'Interesting.'

The moment Astron knocked the archer girl down, the fight of the mages on the sideline also reached its end.

"This fight is now pointless," Seraphina declared calmly, her hand effortlessly dispelling the fiery onslaught Irina had unleashed. She eyed Irina with a cool detachment, assessing the situation.

'It didn't go the way I wanted.'

And immediately came to a conclusion.

SWOOSH!

Irina, however, was not ready to relent. The fire in her eyes burned brighter, and her stance remained defiant. "Pointless? You came into my group, provoked us, and now you want to back off? We're not finished."

SWIRL!

And, with those words, she also released another attack, pointed right at Seraphina.

"Was it him?"

However, the words that came out of Seraphina's mouth made them stop for a second.

"What?"

That brief second somehow was enough for Seraphina to understand what she was looking for.

'It is indeed him, how interesting....'

"Your reaction says it all," Seraphina remarked, her tone filled with a subtle amusement. She effortlessly sidestepped the incoming flames, her composure as graceful as ever. "It seems things will get interesting from now on."

However, Irina didn't seem to understand her words. "You foxlike bitch. Say what you want to say directly."

"Hmm~ It is up to you to understand what I am saying." She said with a teasing smile as she turned her back.

"You!" Irina wanted to attack once again, but Seraphina grabbed a small sphere object from her pocket.

"Here. It is your price for winning." And she put it on the ground. It was the device given by the academy to record the magic formulas, and her putting it down meant she accepted the defeat.

'Things I learned are far more valuable than a bunch of points.' She thought inwardly, looking at the two other members of Irina's team.

'Especially that girl.....As expected, the chairman really had a reason to test her. That guy is not normal either.'

After that, her attention naturally turned to two unconscious students.

'Another useless bunch.'

The small wave of a smile on her face and her eyes turned cold as she looked at her team for a second.

'Trash.'

Since her team was defeated, and she sensed it, she needed to concede. It wasn't because she was scared of Irina, but with the other three entering the equation, things might possibly get messy.

Irina's fiery gaze shifted from Seraphina to the small sphere on the ground. She hesitated for a moment, the remnants of her frustration still evident in her clenched fists. However, with a begrudging acknowledgment, she walked over to the device and picked it up.

"Fine," Irina muttered, her tone still holding a hint of irritation. She looked back at Seraphina, the tension between them lingering. "We're done for now."

"...." Seraphina looked at Irina for a second, and then she nodded her head.

'She changed.'

The Irina she knew wasn't someone to accept such an offer, and she would pursue what she wanted until the end, losing the profits she could possibly make. That was why she was known as Fiery Demoness in the upper society since she never backed down from any challenge.

However, now, her response was clearly logical and different. She passed the test Seraphina threw at her, and that was something Seraphina immediately took note of.

'As expected....I should investigate him.'

And there was only one person who was different in this girl's life after she entered the academy—a random guy who normally would never even be able to see such a figure.

Just like Irina had studied the important people in the academy, Seraphina was also constantly keeping tabs on those people's lives.

That was especially the case with her rival, Irina. Most of the time, whenever she did something, or she made some changes, Seraphina would be informed.

Bribing some of Irina's former teammates for information was not a hard thing to do, after all.

That was the way of an heir from a high-ranking mage family, and information was the key for such people.

And from such information, she knew this dynamic between the two was far from normal.

As Seraphina turned to leave, she threw one last glance back at the group. It seemed that the guy had also been looking at her since their eyes met.

Seraphina's icy gaze locked onto Astron's purple eyes, and then a faint smile graced her lips.

His aura was not strong, and her trait showed that his overall parameters were indeed weak. But even then, there was a small portion that her trait wasn't able to see, which rarely happened, and whenever it happened, she knew the said person was important.

'Maybe I should just take him away.'

Comparing Irina's unconscious reaction, she imagined how she could feel if she did such a thing.

'That would be interesting.'

She mused internally. Her curiosity about the seemingly unremarkable boy heightened. There was more to him than met the eye, and the fact that he played a role in changing Irina's approach intrigued Seraphina. She wondered how someone like him could influence a girl known for her fiery determination.

Just like that, she had left the place and made her way to the academy building to meet with the principal.

However, she hadn't noticed the pair of green eyes looking at her.

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The hushed whispers of surprise and curiosity filled the classroom as Sylvie stood in the spotlight, her request echoing through the air.

"Please, teach me how to fight."

As she locked eyes with me, I couldn't help but release a weary sigh. It wasn't the fact that she was seeking combat training that bothered me, but the unexpected attention it brought.

'What a hassle. First Seraphina, and now her.'

The eyes of every student in the room bore into us, and I maintained my deadpan expression, contemplating how we reached this point.

'How did it come to this?'

Of course, I knew why it came to this. It was my own actions that probably brought Sylvie in front of me. Considering the words I spoke, she must have finally decided on what she wanted to do. Also, my words were not necessarily encouraging.

When I am annoyed, I speak rather rudely, and I know it is not a good idea, but habits can't be changed instantly. This was especially the case with the words I had spoken yesterday.

'Well, this might not be that bad.'

I thought Sylvie would rather go to an instructor to learn close combat and know what the academy wanted; they would comply with her request. But, even then, not everyone in the academy could be trusted, especially from the teacher team.

'Well, no use of backing up now.'

Nevertheless, amid the sea of curious gazes, Sylvie stood her ground, determination etched on her face. It was a stark contrast to the Sylvie I first encountered, the one who initially recoiled at the thought of combat.

With a measured nod, I acknowledged Sylvie's request, deciding to accept the responsibility that seemed to have inadvertently fallen into my lap. I tried to keep my face straight, hiding any flicker of annoyance that lingered beneath the surface.

"Fine. I'll teach you," I conceded, my tone serious. "But understand, I won't go easy on you. Are you okay with that?"

If she came to me in order to learn, she would need to accept how I taught. That was my condition.

Sylvie met my gaze with unwavering determination, a stark contrast to the initial reluctance she displayed when combat was first mentioned. "I'll do whatever it takes to become stronger."

'We'll see about that.'

It was weird to see her in such an expression since it was my first time. But, since she looked determined, there was no reason to get annoyed.

"Good."

With that understanding, the decision was set. Sylvie smiled happily, a genuine expression that hadn't graced her face before. "Thank you, Astron."

"....."

Looking at her smile, I was speechless for a second. It made me wonder, 'Is this really something to be happy about?' But, I guess it must have taken a lot of courage for Sylvie to confront her fears.

Sylvie returned to her seat, the lingering attention of the classmates following her every move. As she sat on her seat, I could feel a piercing gaze from the side.

A pair of amber eyes locked onto mine from across the room. Irina was seemingly annoyed, but that wasn't something new for her, so I just shrugged my shoulders and focused on the upcoming lesson that was about to start.

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TAK! TAK! TAK!

The classroom fell silent as all the students felt the presence of their stern instructor

"Good evening, cadets."

Instructor Eleanor's voice echoed through the silent classroom as she entered, carrying the sphere objects that had been submitted by the students.

She moved purposefully through the rows of desks, returning the spheres to their respective owners of the groups.

Each student's creation was handled with care, and a nod of acknowledgment was given to them individually.

"As you've all completed the task of capturing and analyzing the Mana Formulas, it's time to move on to the next step," Eleanor began, her gaze sweeping across the attentive faces. "You will now be tasked with writing a comprehensive report about the magic formulas you encountered and captured in the forest."

Eleanor placed the spheres on her desk and clasped her hands behind her back. "Your reports should include detailed information about the composition of the Mana Formulas, any unique characteristics they exhibited, and your strategies for capture. Think of it as a reflection on what you've learned during this practical exercise."

As she stopped for a second, Eleanor's stern gaze intensified as she addressed the students. "Now, I want to make it clear that the academy has kept meticulous records of which magic formulas were submitted by each group. Plagiarism will not be tolerated in your reports. Each of you is expected to provide an individual and honest account of your findings. It's an integral part of your growth as Hunters to be able to analyze and articulate your experiences accurately."

After that, she slowly made her way out of the classroom.

"Today's class will serve as a report writing session. You are all free to leave. You may also contact me or the assistant if you encounter any problems with your reports. Good luck."

And just like that, the cadets were left alone in the classroom with their instructor's leave.

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"Let's go. We still have a report to write."

Irina approached the group of two. Now that the instructor has left the class to write their reports, they will need to group and analyze the magic formula together.

However, for some reason, she felt annoyed. Seraphina's words and her expression bothered her a little, but she was also quite mad at the scene that had just occurred in the classroom.

"Okay," Sylvie said as she gathered her things. "I will call you when we finish."

"K."

After she informed her friend, she immediately followed Irina. As for Astron, she was already ready to leave from the start.

But his gaze was narrowed at Irina, observing her actions.

"Since we have recorded quite a lot of different formulas, we will need to be fast to analyze all of them."

On the way, Irina briefed the two about how fast they needed to be, and none of them decided to go against her. Surprisingly or not, when it came to magic and theory, she was quite fond of studying them.

Just like that, they entered the library of the academy.

"Come with me; I rented a special room."

Upon entering, Irina guided Astron and Sylvie to a small soundproof section tucked away in a quiet corner. It was specifically designed so that students could work on their group projects.

The three found their seats, and with the privacy ensured by the soundproof walls, they could discuss and work on their assignment without disturbances.

"Now. We will all start with analyzing formulas. You both should know what kind of steps we need to use, correct? I assume none of you failed the [Introduction to Mana for Hunters] exam?"

"...."

"I didn't."

Looking at their reactions, Irina understood that the two at least passed the exam for this course. Now, the previous exam didn't specifically mean how well they would do at the end of the semester, but it was an indicator of their previous knowledge.

"Good," Irina said, a hint of satisfaction in her voice. "If you have any questions, feel free to ask. We need to be thorough."

With that, they delved into their respective tasks. The small soundproof section became a hub of focused concentration.

Irina meticulously examined the elemental compositions of the captured magic formulas while scrutinizing their structural integrity. Her keen eyes narrowed as she deciphered intricate patterns.

However, while she was looking for the formulas, her mind was elsewhere.

'What is the deal with these two?'

Causing a scene in the middle of the class was unnatural for Sylvie. If it were natural, she would have already heard her name. From her initial experience, she thought Sylvie was an innocent normal girl.

'Well, she still might be.'

Of course, just because she did one thing didn't mean she was a bad girl. But....Something was bothering her.

"This is how you will deal with this formula. You remember the pattern I showed you last time, right?"

'Last time? When did they?'

Looking at the two talking with each other fluently, she felt like they knew each other way before.

'Is there something I am not aware of?'

As if a knot appeared inside, she pushed her pen to the side.

"Yeah, I remember."

"You will need to use that method for this question."

"But, isn't this formula a third-order one?"

"It may seem like this, but you are using the wrong loop. You should use this one."

"Ah....."

The more she watched, the more she got annoyed. She especially felt like Sylvie was a bit too close while listening to him.

'Is there a need to get this close?'

She didn't even question why anyway and decided to act.

Acting on a whim, Irina joined the conversation, her voice cool and collected. "Oh, Sylvie, are you having trouble with this formula?"

Sylvie looked surprised by Irina's sudden intrusion. "Uh, well, not really. Astron was just helping me out."

Hearing this, she threw a small look at that guy and sneered, masking her annoyance. "No need to bother him. You can ask me if you have any questions. I doubt that guy can finish his own work, anyway."

"No, it is not like-" Sylvie wanted to say. They were doing just fine, but looking at Irina's emotions, she felt something was wrong.

'What is it?'

It was a new emotion.

"Why are you looking for a fight all of a sudden?"

"What do you mean? I am just stating the obvious."

".....You really are something...."

Astron sighed as he looked at Irina with a deadpan expression.

"If you really want to play the teacher that much, okay, go ahead." It was rare for him to take a step back, but it seemed he was tired of constant bickering.

"Good that you know."

After that, Irina sat at her table while signaling Sylvie to come beside her. And, even though uncomfortable, Sylvie had no choice but to comply with her leader's request.

Just like that, the two continued their study as hours passed.

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'What a weird assignment.'

While we were analyzing the magic formulas, that was what I had in my mind. Making calculations like a robot and understanding magic wasn't that hard, but doing it constantly started taking its toll.

'And I don't even understand what that is supposed to mean.'

The weird thing wasn't calculating. It was the results we got after going through all that. Normally, in the end, we would end up with a clear result of the name for magic, but this time, it was a bunch of patterns.

"Aaah....What the hell is this?"

It seemed Irina had the same opinion as I did.

"How are we supposed to put these results into the report and make comments."

I never thought I would agree with Irina, but she was right.

"I've never encountered anything like this before. Magic formulas are supposed to reveal something concrete, not leave us with a bunch of cryptic patterns." It was as if, after solving an equation, you ended up with another, and this loop continued.

"I don't get it. The more we analyze, the less it makes sense."

As Sylvie completed solving her last formula, a sense of fatigue settled over the group. She looked up, a mixture of exhaustion and confusion on her face.

While we were studying, I noticed that her talent wasn't limited to theoretical things. I don't want to mean she is dumb, but at least her intelligence hadn't suddenly improved after she awakened.

Seeing she was the same Sylvie as before at least made her seem like a human.

'Not that I am the one to complain.'

In any case, as I was pondering my thoughts, suddenly, something got my attention.

As Sylvie gathered her papers on top of each other, I noticed a subtle connection between the symbols, thanks to the shadowing from the light.

'Wait?'

It was as if a spark ignited in my mind; I turned my attention to my papers, comparing them with Sylvie's. And, something made a connection. Like when you remember the thing you see resembles something, but you can't name it; it was such a thing.

"Wait a moment," I said, leaning forward. "Sylvie, can you show me that last formula again?"

Trying to get the same connection, I gestured to Sylvie for a second.

Puzzled, Sylvie handed him the paper. "Sure, but I don't see what..."

"Wait for a second." Right now, what I needed was silence.

"....."

As I focused more on the formulas, I grabbed them and arranged the order while also mixing my own formulas in between.

And, slowly but surely, the more papers I put on top of each other, the more it became evident.

'Is this a land?'

The diagrams that appeared as the result of our analysis slowly formed a picture underneath.

"Irina, give me your papers."

"What? It is not like-"

"Just shut up for a second and give them to me."

"...Here."

As Irina reluctantly handed me her papers, I carefully arranged them on top of the pile Sylvie had provided.

The cryptic patterns and symbols on the pages seemed to align in a way that I couldn't quite comprehend. It felt like solving a puzzle, and with each additional paper, the picture became clearer.

As I placed Irina's papers in position, a sudden realization struck me like a bolt of lightning. The patterns were forming a map, a detailed depiction of a location we had studied in class—a place where the Mana Phenomenon occurred.

I leaned back in astonishment, my eyes fixed on the amalgamation of formulas that now revealed a hidden landscape. The lines and symbols intricately shaped the contours of a terrain, highlighting key landmarks and features.

'Phantom's Land.'

The moment the realization hit me, I finally understood what this test was supposed to do.

Why did they want us to capture as many magic formulas as possible, and why did they want us to analyze all of them?

Why the results weren't actually clear?

It made all sense.

After all, if you have a partial fraction of a map that you would need many other fractions to complete, that would mean your chances of finding what this test was about and what this land was would increase.

'It was good that I paid attention to the class at that time.'

Since my memory was good, especially things related to photography, I was able to connect the dots.

Sylvie and Irina, noticing my sudden shift in demeanor, exchanged puzzled glances.

"So....What is this about?" And after a second, Irina could no longer contain her excitement.

"Come here." I signaled them to come to my table while also opening the map of the Phantom Island.

"Don't these two seem familiar to you?"

Both Sylvie and Irina leaned in to scrutinize the map, their eyes scanning the intricate details. After a moment, Irina's face lit up with recognition.

"Wait, these patterns resemble the ones we've been analyzing in class... Don't tell me?"

"Yes."

"It is the map of Phantom's Land."

I nodded, confirming her observation. "Exactly. This entire assignment was a test to see if we could piece together the different magical formulas to create a comprehensive map of the Phantom's Land."

Sylvie's eyes widened as the realization dawned on her. "So, the cryptic patterns were like puzzle pieces, and when we put them together, they revealed the hidden landscape we've been studying."

"Yeah....."

"Then, what do we do know?" Irina asked, looking at me.

"Nothing much. We just need to include what we found in the report, and I am sure we will get bonus points for this."

Even though we found out what this test was about, I am sure that wouldn't be the case for all of the students. Most of them wouldn't be able to find it since, even with such a large number of formulas, it was hard for us to connect the dots.

That meant we would get a special reward.

'Let's see what it is.'

If it was about analytics, I didn't mind the attention much since I am sure most of the credit will go to Irina in this assignment.

"Hehehe....."

Though seeing her expression, I suddenly regretted revealing it.

#### Chapter 185 Chapter 41.3 - A Change of Heart

After a period of focused writing, Sylvie leaned back in her chair, stretching her arms. "Then, with this, we are finished, right?"

She was the one who wrote most the things, so it was understandable that she was tired.

Irina glanced over the report, a nod of approval following. "Yes, it looks comprehensive. We've covered the analysis, the discovery of the map, and the implications of our findings."

Though, at first, Irina wanted to write, both her and Astron's writing were almost impossible to read.

"Is it readable?" As Astron asked it, Sylvie looked at him with an expression saying, how dare you ask such a question with such a writing.

"....."

"Okay, okay. My bad." Astron waved his hand, as he also understood that his handwriting wasn't that good.

It wasn't bad, but Sylvie certainly had a neater writing. At least, that was what he thought, but Sylvie knew what kind of good she had done to assistants who would read those papers.

"Let's go submit this to the professor. We've covered everything necessary," Irina declared as she grabbed the report. However, the other two didn't move with her at the same time.

"? What are you waiting for?"

Astron raised an eyebrow at Irina's prompt to go submit the report. "Why do we all need to go? You can submit it on your own. Our names are already on the report," he suggested, his voice carrying a nonchalant tone.

"You! Are you going to leave me alone?"

"What are you, a child? Just go on your own. It is not like you need someone."

Irina considered his point, realizing the practicality of the suggestion. After a brief pause, she nodded in agreement. "Fine. I'll go on my own. I thought we could eat something after that, but I guess it was just me."

"It is fine. I will eat from the cafeteria anyway. And you don't come to the cafeteria most of the time."

"How do you know that?"

"Everyone knows you are a picky eater."

"....Really?"

"Yeah. Don't you remember what you did last time when someone offered food to you in the dungeon?"

"Ah..."

Irina's expression shifted, recalling the incident. She grumbled, "Well, I have specific tastes. That's all."

"I know; that was why I said it."

"What happened in the dungeon?" Sylvie asked with an innocent tone.

"Well, this girl ov-" Astron started, but Irina quickly cut him off, her face turning a shade of embarrassment.

"Nothing. Just some trivial incident. I'll go submit the report," Irina hastily interjected, standing up and leaving the small soundproof section of the library before Astron could spill any details.

And before she left, she threw a threatening look at him, and Astron simply shrugged his shoulders.

Sylvie, curious but not pressing the matter, looked at Astron, awaiting an explanation. "What happened there?"

"It is not my place to disclose this information."

"..."

At his stern reply, Sylvie just looked at him bewildered.

'It is not like this is a government secret.'

She wanted to say but held it in, as she knew he wouldn't say anything anyway. She was curious, but she also knew how uncomfortable it would be if she were to do something like this.

As the two of them were left alone, they also started preparing for the leave.

"Now that we have time, I wanted to ask."

"About teaching close combat?"

"Yes."

Astron considered for a second, and then he said, "Let me see your schedule first. We can figure out a time that works for both of us."

Sylvie opened her schedule from her watch, which was neatly organized with her classes, study sessions, and other commitments. She handed it to Astron without hesitation.

Seeing this, his eyes widened for a second. Everything was planned and written there, and he also understood how dangerous it might be if someone targeting her were to find out about this.

"You really shouldn't trust people this easily." He mumbled as he looked at the schedule while taking notes in his mind.

Of course, while he mumbled that, Sylvie could see his emotional palette. There, she saw a small concern.

Sylvie shrugged, "I don't trust everyone like that."

Astron raised an eyebrow, glancing at her. "Why did you show me this, then?"

"Because I trust you," Sylvie replied simply, her gaze meeting his. However, the moment her gaze met with his, she could see a small doubt in his heart.

And then she realized what she had said just now, and her face got crimson instantly.

"....."

His questioning gaze continued to bore through her eyes, and she realized she made a mistake.

There was no way she could say, 'I had been watching you all the time, and I can see what you feel. You are not someone to harm people randomly.'

So, she became more embarrassed and felt the need to push excuses.

"W-we're a team now, right? Shouldn't I trust you?"

'I feel safe with you.'

She also couldn't say those words since they were too embarrassing.

Astron's expression remained inscrutable, his doubt evident. Sylvie, feeling the need to provide more justification, stumbled through a series of excuses, "I-I mean, I couldn't ask anyone else, either."

As Sylvie uttered her explanations, Astron's gaze didn't waver.

'Aren't your friends are both close combatants?' He wanted to ask but didn't.

After a moment, he responded with a curt nod. "All right, no need to explain yourself so much; I get it."

After a time that felt like an eternity for Sylvie, he finally pushed her schedule.

After a moment that felt like an eternity for Sylvie, Astron finally pointed out the empty slots in her schedule. "I won't push you too hard, especially at the start. Let's train at this time," he said, indicating a couple of two-hour slots twice a week.

Sylvie nodded, appreciative of the consideration. "Thank you for doing this. I really want to get better at defending myself."

Astron nodded back, "It's nothing. But remember, training your body is equally important. Do some physical exercises when you have free time with your friends. If I remember correctly, both of them are close combat fighters, so they should know how to train themselves. You need to build strength and stamina along with combat skills. While we were walking, I noticed it, but you really neglected training your body."

Sylvie lowered her head at this, as she herself knew that was what she did. Danielle and Jasmine constantly called her to train together, but she refused since it reminded her of her trauma. But now that she decided to confront it head-on, she knew she needed to improve herself physically.

"Yeah, you're right," Sylvie admitted, her voice carrying a mix of determination and hesitation. "I'll work on that too. It's just... some things are hard for me."

"...." Since Astron was the first one to open that wound, he himself knew what Sylvie meant.

"It is fine. At least you took the first step. That is something itself."

"...Thanks."

"Good, then. I will see you tomorrow in the club."

"Ah, right....We had a meeting..."

She had completely forgotten about this.

As she saw him leaving, she waved her hand. "Take care."

"You too."

Just like that, the two went to their own dorm rooms....

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"Tch. Bastard."

Irina muttered under her breath as she left the room, irritated by Astron's nonchalant attitude.

She headed to the professor's office to submit the paper immediately, wanting to put some distance between herself and the archer who seemed to effortlessly get on her nerves.

As she walked towards her room, still fuming silently, her phone vibrated with an incoming message. Pulling it out, she saw a group chat notification.

[Julia: Hey, guys.... We're planning to meet up at the usual spot. Are you coming?]

Then, she added a couple of emojis, emphasizing the friendly nature of the invitation.

[Julia: ??? Uusla dirll - Burgers and game night. What do you say?]

Looking at the typos in the text, she couldn't help but shake her head.

[Lilia: I won't come, I am busy. Also, type correctly; it is annoying to read.]

[Julia: It is not like I am writing an essay.]

[Lilia: It doesn't matter. Write correctly.]

As she saw those messages, naturally, a small smile formed on her face. Since she came from the small holiday, she has been working hard on tests.

However, she disliked playing games most of the time since she couldn't do them in her home. Her mother didn't let her play....Thus, naturally, she wasn't fond of the idea.

[Julia: A new game has been released, and it is quite good. It's called "ChronoScape." It's connected to our smartwatches, and we can play it everywhere.]

[Julia: ??? Imagine an open-world game where you explore different realms, and the game adapts to your location. Plus, there are cool quests and challenges.]

Seeing the messages, she couldn't help but be intrigued. After all, it wasn't your daily game that you could find connected to your smartwatch.

[Ethan: Sounds interesting. But how do we play it?]

[Julia: Well, you need to order special equipment.]

[Ethan: You said we didn't need anything.]

[Julia: It is fine; I already ordered the equipment, and it is in my room.]

[Ethan: Hm, I'm not much of a gamer, but I could use a distraction. I'll come.]

[Julia: Anyone else?]

[Irina: I am coming.]

As she hummed a soft tune, Irina nodded her head in agreement, with a slight smile playing on her lips. She navigated through her smartwatch, fingers dancing across the screen as she searched for the "ChronoScape" game.

The prospect of exploring different realms and engaging in quests appealed to her, providing a welcome break from the academic rigors and recent frustrations.

She also had recently read an article that talked about how video games increased one's spatial awareness and motor reflexes, and it was something helpful. So, she was actually trying to improve herself at the same time.

"That's right."

Nodding at her perfect reasoning, she made her way to the academy grounds with a smile plastered on her face.

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"Haaaah...Haaaaah..."

TAP! TAP! TAP!

Under the sky that had darkened, a heavy breathing sound echoed.

"Don't come closer...."

Her desperate plea sliced through the eerie silence as her eyes darted in every direction, paranoia consuming her.

The dim light from the lampposts cast long, ominous shadows, amplifying the sense of dread.

"No, no, no...."

She tried to pull her leg, which was bleeding, but that seemed to be impossible.

She scanned the surroundings, her gaze flickering nervously from one shadow to another.

The rustling leaves seemed to mimic sinister whispers, heightening her anxiety. The chilling wind carried an otherworldly murmur, and the tapping sound persisted, echoing like a menacing heartbeat.

"Why? Why are you doing this-"

Just at that moment, as she frantically turned to escape, something lunged at her face, a dark, indistinct shape that blocked out what little light remained.

SCREECH!

Her vision was abruptly shrouded in darkness, and a blood-curdling scream tore through the night, the sound muffled by an unseen force.

"Gurghk!"

The lamplights flickered ominously as if responding to the terror that unfolded in the obscure corners of the night as the body convulsed underneath the sky.

"I need more, I want more...."

And amidst the chilly wind, a pair of crimson eyes opened, creating an eerie aura as the body turned limp.

Chapter 186 Chapter 42.1 - Trip

DING!

The bell rang as the students looked at their instructor.

"I guess we don't have much time." The instructor looked at his watch and shook his head. "I will see you on the next Sunday."

With those words, he concluded the class, prompting the students to start chatting among themselves.

In one corner, a group of students discussed the recent assignment, frustration evident on their faces.

One of them sighed, "I still couldn't figure out the last part of the formula. This report is going to be a disaster."

Another student tried to offer reassurance, "Well, at least they postponed the deadline. We have a bit more time to work on it."

"That's true," a third student chimed in.

"I needed that extension. I think we can manage if we focus this weekend." As the conversation continued, other groups of students shared their own experiences and strategies for tackling the challenging assignment.

In the midst of them, I simply walked through the classroom. Since we had finished writing the report on the first day and then submitted it, we didn't have much left to do.

'In any case, Senior Maya called us to the club today.'

Normally, our meetings would be on weekends, but today, Senior Maya called us for a meeting. It was quite unusual since she herself must have been busy with her responsibilities.

'Why did Senior Maya want to meet today?'

I mulled over the possibilities. Perhaps there were updates on upcoming events, changes in the club schedule, or additional assignments. Regardless, I decided to pass by.

'There is a chance that she will inform us about a possible trip.'

I thought, remembering the game. Even though this club was History and Art, there were times they traveled, even though it may sound odd.

Lost in thought, I felt a presence at my side, and when I turned, Sylvie was walking alongside me.

'Huh?'

It was weird for me to not sense her presence while she was approaching. However, soon, I realized the reason Sylvie's own aura made her blend in the crowd while making people around her comfortable with herself.

'Really, truly a broken ability.'

I thought. Her quiet demeanor and focused expression suggested she was contemplating something as well.

"Hey," seeing me noticing her, she greeted me with a small smile. "Any idea why Senior Maya called us today?"

I was going to talk about it but soon discarded the idea. It would be weird for me to know about it beforehand. So, I shook my head. "Not really. It's unusual for her to change our meeting day. Maybe there's something important she wants to discuss or announce."

Sylvie nodded thoughtfully. "Could be. I hope it's not another surprise assignment. I've had enough of magical formulas for a while."

"I doubt it. No matter how enthusiastic she is, she won't do such a thing."

"....I hope."

I knew Sylvie was quite afraid of Senior Maya, as she always tried to escape whenever she saw her, especially when Maya had snacks with herself.

As Sylvie and I continued our conversation, we made our way to the familiar club room. The halls were quieter now as it was the lunch break, and most students had dispersed to their respective destinations.

"We are here."

At that moment, upon reaching the club room, I felt it—a peculiar sensation, as if someone's gaze was fixed on me. It sent a shiver down my spine.

FLINCH!

I unintentionally flinched as my body immediately responded to the intent directed at me. But this time, I knew who the person behind the gaze was.

'Bastard.'

I cursed inwardly as I looked out the corner of my eye. There, I could see a guy watching me from a classroom while sitting in his seat surrounded by a bunch of students.

It was Trevor Philips. He had been quiet for a while now, but I was always alert to any possible plot he could pull.

As my body tensed from the unexpected gaze, Sylvie noticed my reaction and followed my gaze to Trevor Philips. She furrowed her brows in confusion. "What's wrong? Why are you looking like that?"

"It's nothing. Just thought I saw someone I knew." I said since I couldn't tell this about Sylvie, nor would she understand anyway.

"If you say so. Let's head inside."

She said and entered the classroom. Our club didn't have a special office for now, so Maya called us to a lecture hall.

As we entered the hall, Senior Maya was in the midst of wrapping up her conversation with the other student by the window.

"Ah, you're here,"

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Maya had been busy these days, as her assignments and many other things immediately crashed down.

Just like the first-year students, the second-year and others also had a change in their curriculum, and theirs were more severe.

However, at the very least, she still had free time to spare for her club activities. Of course, even though the history and the art might not seem related to the Hunter Academy, she wholeheartedly believed that it was important for her juniors to relax.

Though that itself was a tasking experience, as she was also helping others with when it came to practical exams.

Just when she thought she might be reaching her limit, a welcome surprise arrived in the form of a message from one of her sponsors.

"If you wish, you can take a look at the historical site we've reserved for research."

The offer seemed like a much-needed respite, a chance to escape the overwhelming demands of academia, and then decided to accept.

'We have nothing to lose anyway, and this could be a very good change of environment.'

Not aware of the changes in the curriculum for freshmen, she thought it would be a good idea to travel to a different place. It was also in the scope of their club, so their advisors wouldn't resist it that much either.

It was a win and win, and she decided to work with the idea. She sent a message to the club members and then called them with a smile.

"Ah, you are here." As the door opened, she saw two young freshmen entering.

'Hmm?'

She squinted her eyes, seeing the pair.

'I don't remember the two coming together before.'

Even though she looked slightly airheaded, Maya was a girl who would observe her surroundings a lot. And that was especially the case with the people she was familiar with.

"Senior."

Her Junior was the first one to speak. He seemed curious about why they were called here. She could easily tell from his expression alone.

"Welcome, junior."

Deciding not to think on this matter any longer, she gestured to the two to sit down beside her.

"Please wait a second; I will begin with the announcement soon."

"Okay."

The two sat down, but a small silence descended on the atmosphere, which was something Maya never liked.

And whenever this happened, she herself would always consult one small act.

"Here, have some chips."

The moment those words left her mouth, she noticed the girl beside her junior stiffening for a second.

'Ah, I guess she wants them so bad.'

Noticing that, she inwardly smiled. After all, there was no way anyone would dislike it when someone offered them a snack.

Sylvie, slightly flinched by the unexpected offer, hesitated for a moment before politely declining, "Oh, no, thank you, Senior. I'm not really hungry."

'Ah, she must be shy to accept it easily. I heard some people are not comfortable accepting it this fast, thinking they will look cheap.'

She thought how cute this junior was; being someone with values was hard nowadays. She somehow felt more comfortable around this girl now.

Undeterred, she grinned and insisted, "Come on, don't be shy. It's just a small snack. Chips make everything better. Astron, don't you think so?"

Both Sylvie and Maya turned their head to the young guy who was trying to conceal his presence, but it was too late.

Sylvie especially looked intently at him as if her eyes were saying, 'Save me.'

".....Cough....They are not bad."

Maya's eyes twinkled with amusement as she seized the opportunity. "See, Sylvie, even Astron agrees. It's settled, then. You can't say no to a unanimous decision." She handed the bag of chips to Sylvie with a bright smile.

As for Sylvie, she could only look at Astron with a betrayed face.

'I don't have a choice....Even I can't say anything against Senior Maya....'

And Astron also could only avert his gaze....

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"So that was why you called us here?" one of the senior students asked, curiosity evident in her expression.

"Yes, indeed," Maya replied with a smile, a sense of excitement gleaming in her eyes.

"Wouldn't it be better if we focused on our assignments? The deadlines are approaching, and we're already falling behind," another student, this time a junior, voiced their concern, eyebrows furrowed with worry.

Maya leaned back, her smile unwavering. "I understand your concerns, and I appreciate your dedication to your studies. However, sometimes, a change of environment can do wonders for creativity and productivity. Besides, this trip is not just for leisure. We have a unique opportunity to visit a historical site reserved for research. It aligns perfectly with our club's interests, and I believe it can provide a fresh perspective for our projects."

She had already explained the reason why she called everyone here.

"But, a trip is a little...."

Of course, she was well aware of what all students expected when they came into this club. Most of them probably thought they would chill while discussing the historical events, but Maya was never someone who was normal to begin with.

She disliked being normal, after all, and she also knew there would be someone agreeing with her idea as well.

"I think it is good." The voice came from Mason, one of the freshmen. His eyes sparkled with excitement, and the expression on his face seemed pleased. "I always wondered how it would feel to see a real historical site."

Seeing Mason raising his voice, the girl beside him also raised her hand, seemingly brightened, though she sent a bunch of glances to him, probably to see his reaction.

"I agree with Mason. I don't think we can get this opportunity once again."

It was evident that she was trying to impress the guy.

Maya smiled at Mason's enthusiasm, appreciating the fresh perspective he brought to the club. "I'm glad to hear that, Mason. This trip is indeed a unique opportunity for all of us."

With those words, she looked around the room.

"Then, it is settled. See you Saturday."

And just like that, the meeting met its end.

"Sylvie, are you free? How about we grab a drink? Others are coming as well."

After the meeting ended, Mason approached Sylvie as usual as before.

"Not interested."

Chapter 187 Chapter 42.2 - Trip

'So, this was what it was about.'

I thought as I listened to what Maya was saying. If a trip was about to happen, then it made sense that she wanted to inform us face-to-face to see our reaction as well.

If she had sent a message only, most students would probably not accept her opinion in any case.

'Well, I don't think it is bad personally.'

This was an event that wouldn't happen in the game since traveling was something that wasn't much related to this club. Even if the player joined it, most of the events were all in the academy.

But I was already expecting changes to happen, and this one didn't seem that bad either. If we could get a change of environment while observing a historical site, it would be fine by me. Especially since I could see what this world was about in more detail.

I knew this world was the same world as it was in the game, but even then, it didn't mean I knew everything. Thus, learning and observing more would be optimal.

That was why I thought, but hearing the next words of this guy made my decision firmer.

"I think it is good. I always wondered how it would feel to see a real historical site."

Since Mason was a demon contractor, I knew from the moment he approved this that he was already seeing the trip as an opportunity.

'That makes sense.'

Being outside of the academy while also being in the same space as Sylvie....There was no better option than this for him to act. Now that the academy and the government were also alert thanks to recent incidents, he probably saw this in a new light.

"Then, it is settled. See you Saturday." After Senior Maya finished the discussion, the students also turned their attention to their friends.

And, just like before, Mason approached Sylvie with a friendly smile, his eyes gleaming.

"Sylvie, are you free? How about we grab a drink? Others are coming as well."

FLINCH!

From my senses warning me, I was already aware that he was using his demonic skill. This was the way demonic humans worked, as they had countless different spells that affected the minds of their targets.

However, Sylvie's response was different this time. She looked at him, her expression neutral, and replied curtly, "Not interested."

'Hmm?'

Her expression and everything were a lot different than in previous ones. Previously, she would always join other students with a smile, but now she was looking at Mason with an uncomfortable gaze.

Mason's smile faltered for a moment, caught off guard by the unexpected response. He tried to recover, "Come on, it'll be fun. We can all relax and enjoy ourselves."

THUMP!

He was also using more demonic energy this time, possibly trying to shake off Sylvie's defenses.

However, Sylvie stood her ground, her neutral expression turning into a fierce and angry one. "I said I'm not interested. Leave me alone," Sylvie retorted, her voice carrying an edge of frustration. The intensity of her gaze bore into Mason, making it clear that she wasn't going to be swayed by any persuasive tactics.

'She really is different.'

I don't know what caused a change in her heart clearly, but it wasn't that hard to guess.

'She must be able to see that Mason has a demonic energy in his body.'

With her recent awakening, it seems Mason was no longer able to deceive her powers. Only this could explain why she was behaving like this.

"Come on, if she doesn't want to come, let her be." At that moment, the girl who was always with Mason pulled his shirt, glaring at Sylvie.

'She likes him, huh?'

That was plainly evident. After all, humans tend to get more aggressive with their demeanor when the person they are interested in shows an interest in another.

"It is her own decision to miss this chance after you offered him. You don't need to waste your time on someone who can't even appreciate that."

And her words proved that.

Mason, sensing the change in Sylvie's demeanor, finally took a step back, a forced smile on his face. "All right, all right. No need to get all worked up. If you change your mind, let me know." With a final attempt at nonchalance, he walked away. But, as he turned his face, I could see a slight change in his expression.

His smiling face disappeared for a second, turning his face into a more serious and hateful one.

'Showing your true colors....No need to get worked up, though; you will have your share soon.'

Once Mason was out of earshot, Sylvie turned her attention to me, her expression softening as she took a deep breath. "Should we leave now? I don't want to stay here longer."

"Okay." Seeing she was uncomfortable, I followed her request, and we started leaving as well.

As we left the classroom, the tension seemed to ease, but Sylvie seemed to be bothered by what she did.

"You must be surprised," she said, her voice shakier than usual. "I'm sorry you had to witness that."

"It's not a problem," I replied, "You don't need to apologize. If someone's bothering you, it's natural to stand up for yourself."

Sylvie was a soft girl, and she lived all her life like that. But from this moment on, this needed to change, and she must know it as well.

Sylvie paused for a moment, her eyes looking at mine. "You are not asking anything. Aren't you curious about why I changed my mind so suddenly?"

I stopped in my tracks as well. Of course, it wasn't bad to know the details of her thoughts, I could guess to some point.

"Do you need a reason?"

"What?"

"I mean, do you really always need a reason to act like you did back then?"

"You don't?"

"You don't. For me, you just said you didn't want to hang out; that was it."

"But it was out of the blue?"

"Maybe, but aren't you a human? You can sometimes feel angry out of nowhere, and no human is consistent. I can do something for five hours a day for a whole month without complaining, but randomly, out of nowhere, I may start hating it. Don't you feel that way too, sometimes?"

"I do."

"Then, it is the same."

Sylvie pondered on my words for a moment, and then a faint smile appeared on her face as if she had reached a realization.

"You have a point. Maybe I've been too hard on myself."

"Exactly. You don't have to explain yourself to everyone. It's okay to prioritize your own feelings."

This was my goal. With how low her self-esteem is, it is not hard to see that she will run into problems in the future, especially since she is surely going to achieve a high position.

She needs to learn how to stand up for herself.

She nodded, and as we resumed walking, I could see a subtle change in her demeanor. It seemed like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders, and she was beginning to embrace the idea that it was okay to assert herself without always providing a detailed explanation.

"Thanks," Sylvie said after a while as we got out of the building. "I think I am feeling better now."

"No problem."

"Then, have a nice day. I will meet with my friends."

With those words, she started moving away as she headed toward her group of friends, the two girls waving their hands.

One of them was glaring at me clearly with an annoyed expression, but I didn't sense any intent behind her gaze.

I watched her for a moment and then turned back.

'Now, let's start preparing.'

Since this trip wasn't an opportunity only for demon contractors.

'You are not the only one who is holding back because of the academy.'

After all, the moment we get out of the academy will be the moment where I can use my powers without hiding from those belonging to that safe ground.

'I can finally get rid of these dogs.'

\*\*\*\*\*

"What an opportunity."

That was what Mason thought the moment he heard that the club would be going on a trip. After all, he had been looking for an opportunity all this time. His superiors were getting restless as well.

"Who does she think she is anyway?"

He could see the girl he had charmed fuming already.

"Even though we are calling her to come with us, how dare she refuse you rudely like that?"

He had already wrapped her around his fingers, and this wasn't the first time. He had done this countless times, and she was just another one of his tools. Normally, he would just brush these complaints off.

"Calm down, Taylor."

However, now that he wasn't in a good mood, he couldn't bear it. After all, even though this was his mission, getting rejected in front of everyone like that made him quite angry.

"How can I calm down? She just embarrassed you and me in front of everyone! You deserve more respect than that," Taylor retorted, clearly not understanding the depth of Mason's vexation.

Mason's jaw tightened, and he clenched his fists, the frustration building into something more volatile. "ENOUGH! Do you think I don't know that, huh?" As he said those words, he grabbed her from her neck.

CLENCH!

"Kurghk-!" The girl struggled under his grip, but she couldn't do anything as his strength was something she couldn't resist.

"When I say something, listen well." His eyes shone red for a split second, and the girl slowly lost the strength she was using to resist.

"I-I am s-sorry."

TAP!

As her hands fell to the sides, Mason released his grip on Taylor, pushing her away with a force that sent her stumbling to the side.

His eyes still tinged with a faint red glow, reflected a mix of anger and frustration.

As Taylor mumbled an apology, Mason muttered under his breath, "That bitch's time will come soon enough. No one embarrasses me like that and gets away with it. You don't need to worry about it."

With a dismissive glance, he turned away, leaving Taylor to collect herself. However, suddenly, he stopped for a second as if he realized something while looking at the girl.

She was breathing heavily, but there was a strange glint in her eyes as if something wasn't right.

Mason's sudden change in demeanor was palpable. He seemed to have perceived something in Taylor's reaction, prompting him to alter his course. "Come here," he commanded, and Taylor, almost robotically, moved closer without a word.

"Sorry for that," Mason mumbled, his arms enveloping her in an oddly gentle manner. As he whispered under his breath, an otherworldly energy emanated from him, enveloping them both. The surroundings seemed to darken momentarily, creating an almost surreal atmosphere.

SMOOCH!

And then, in the darkness of the night, two lips pressed together, just like that, as the girl left herself in his arms.

Chapter 188 Chapter 42.3 - Trip

<Saturday Morning>

"Stubborn old man."

I thought as I looked at myself. While I was exploring the [Unknown's Armor], I noticed a special property of this clothing.

'I can change the shape.'

That old man really didn't send me without one final gift. He was really as stubborn as I thought.

'But, this was really a needed change.'

While I was using this armor, there were many things that made it slightly impractical. The first one was the fact that I would need to put it under my clothes, and the other one would be its enchantments being one-dimensional.

'But now that is not the case.'

I could change how it looked, and now I was using this as my casual clothes. It also had the property of adjusting the heat.

'A small rune is here.'

With the rune acting as the energy source, I could control the head inside. Also, adding the energy consumption of [Morphium], it was evident that this armor had now become a masterpiece.

After all, if everyone could make such armor, the Blackthorns would have already done that from the start and would have used the Morphium hidden in the vault.

'Now, everything is ready.'

Checking everything, I made my way out of my room.

As I made my way to the meeting area, adjusting the [Unknown's Armor] to its casual form, I encountered Sylvie in the hallway. She looked up from a small book she was reading and offered a warm smile.

"Good morning," she greeted, her eyes looking at me. "I thought you would come around this time."

It seemed she was waiting for me.

'Well, this is not that bad.'

"Morning," I replied, looking at her. With how she had clothed herself and how cheerful she looked, it seemed she was excited about the trip.

"Excited about the trip?"

Sylvie nodded. "Yes, it's a nice change of pace. I've never been on a trip like this before."

"Do you like traveling?"

"I do."

"Then, why didn't you join the Travelling Club?"

The club's name was actually Adventure and Exploration Club, but there was no need to use that fancy name.

"Well, I like traveling, but I don't like doing it frequently. It is tiring."

"Hmm....We don't go around that much, though?"

"We? You are in the Traveling Club, then."

"Yes."

"How often do you go out?"

"We just went out one time. After that, we didn't go out another time."

"One time? Isn't it a little bit low?"

"It is certainly low."

Now that Sylvie had mentioned it, I suddenly remembered the events that were supposed to happen in the Traveling Club. In the first period, one more trip was normally supposed to happen; however, it didn't.

It could have many reasons, but if I needed to point one, that would be the monsters appearing on the Nexoria City trip.

In the game, I didn't know such a thing happened, and it was itself a derivation from the start. This was probably the reason why another trip had not occurred. The Academy must have prevented it, thinking of students' safety.

'Though, now that they have let Maya this time, the club should also start being active once again.'

"In any case, do you know where we are going today?"

Sylvie's eyes lit up as she retrieved a folded paper from her bag. "Yes, Senior Maya gave us this map. We're headed to Western Uxbridge. It's known for its magical phenomena and ancient ruins."

"Western Uxbridge," I repeated, the name holding a hint of familiarity. After all, it was a place I knew quite a lot in the game.

It was a special location that hosted quite a lot of ancient ruins and a place where many researchers were gathered.

Sylvie smiled, seemingly pleased with my recognition. "Yes, exactly. It's known for its rich history and magical anomalies. Senior Maya mentioned that there might be hidden secrets waiting to be uncovered."

As we continued our conversation, we reached the meeting place where other club members were gathering. Senior Maya was already there, looking enthusiastic about the upcoming journey.

"Junior, you are here."

She immediately greeted me, with her friend, the vice president of the club, beside her.

"Good morning, senior."

With a mischievous gleam in her eyes. "Junior, are you excited about the trip?"

I nodded, my expression stoic. "I'm fine."

She chuckled. "Always the calm one, aren't you? Well, as long as you're ready for whatever Western Uxbridge has in store for us."

'It is not the Western Uxbridge that has store in store for us, but someone else.' I wanted to say but held it in. It was not like this was Maya's fault.

We waited for a little while, and soon the last members arrived.

Mason and his friends joined the group, their presence adding a different energy to the mix. Mason, as always, wore a 'charming' smile.

"Sorry for being late, we couldn't prepare in time." He said as he threw a look at the group.

'He really is good at managing his expression.'

If not for my [Perceptive Insight] and my sensitiveness against the demonic energy, I might have been fooled as well.

But, I could clearly see how geared he was and feel how the quality of his demonic energy changed. He upgraded himself for this mission clearly, and no one seemed to sense this.

'Except Sylvie.'

Her expression changed, her eyes narrowing a little while she also clenched the sleeves of her sweatshirt. Knowing her habits, this was something she did when she was frustrated and angry at something, and it wasn't that hard to see why.

I could also see Mason looking at Sylvie and me for a split second, and his gaze wasn't normal.

CLAP!

At that moment, a clap sound brought me back to reality.

"Now that everyone is here, we can start."

Maya smiled, her enthusiasm undiminished. "Let's make this trip memorable, everyone! We'll learn, explore, and maybe uncover some hidden mysteries. Now, let's hit the road!"

With that, Maya led the way; it was first a small bus that took us to the transfer gate of Arcadia City.

The atmosphere was a mix of excitement and anticipation as we approached the magical gateway that would transport us to Western Uxbridge.

"We have a reservation for the teleportation gate B128."

"Teleportation gate B128, please let me check for a second...Miss Maya, correct."

"Yes."

"Here, your reservation is confirmed. My friend here will guide you to the gate."

The process in the government was actually the same as in the Black Market. Just like the portals that would take you to the entrance of the dungeons, there were countless different ones around.

"Wow....." I had used this station before while reaching Nexoria City, but that didn't seem to be the case for Sylvie as she looked around like a country bumpkin.

"This is amazing. I've never seen anything like it before. The precision and scale of these teleportation gates are just incredible."

I nodded in agreement. "It's quite something. The advancements in magical transportation have made long-distance travel much more convenient. No more exhausting journeys on horseback or through rough terrains.....Only for the rich, though."

"....Yeah, that is right."

As we approached the designated teleportation gate, the guide ushered us forward, and one by one, we stepped into the portal.

The sensation of being enveloped in that vortex of pulsating energy surrounded us, and the scenery around us changed in an instant.

"Hello."

Before us, a guide appeared immediately.

"You are the group from the Arcadia Hunter Academy, correct?"

It seemed he was already waiting for us to come from the start.

"Yes, that is correct."

The guide greeted us with a warm smile. "Excellent! Welcome to Western Uxbridge. I'm here to assist you during your stay. If you follow me, I'll take you to the research site where Mister Jones is working. He is the one who informed me."

"Ah, I will pay him a visit later. Thank you for your attention."

"No problem."

As the guide and Senior Maya exchanged their greetings and a bunch of words, we started walking.

The teleportation hall was pretty small compared to other cities, and this was mostly because, in reality, Western Uxbridge wasn't actually a highly developed city. The sole reason there was a teleportation gate itself was because of the researchers who wished to share their experiences with the Magic Tower and the Government.

As we stepped out of the hall, the city unfolded before us, revealing a different vibe compared to the bustling capital. Western Uxbridge had an older, more reserved atmosphere. The cobblestone streets winded through the heart of the city, flanked by structures that seemed to whisper tales of a distant past.

Sylvie gazed around in wonder, her eyes taking in the ancient architecture and the faded beauty of the surroundings. The air carried a sense of tranquility, a stark contrast to the lively energy of the Arcadia City.

"Welcome to Western Uxbridge, a city frozen in time," the guide announced, gesturing towards the aged buildings and intricate carvings that adorned them.

"This place holds secrets untold, and today, you have the opportunity to witness some of its mysteries."

It was, indeed, as he said.

The city seemingly held the atmosphere of a frozen time. Of course, the time was itself not frozen, and it was flowing. However, thanks to the ancient ruins and the local traditions that were still maintained through time, the city was like its elder self.

"This place is so different from what I'm used to," Sylvie remarked, her voice filled with admiration.

I nodded in agreement. "It's like stepping into a living history book. Western Uxbridge has its charm, a different kind of beauty."

It felt quite nostalgic as I remembered my time on Earth. Most of the cities went into Modernization, but there were still some who preserved their uniqueness.

"Then, please follow me through the way."

Senior Maya and the guide led the way through the meandering streets, and as we walked deeper into the city, the ambient magic in the air became more pronounced.

And just like that, the trip had fully started while on the other side, a person was sharpening his sword.

#### Chapter 189 Chapter 42.4 - Trip

The group followed the guide through the charming streets of Western Uxbridge, eventually arriving at the research site where Mister Jones awaited them. The researcher, a middle-aged man with a mane of graying hair, greeted them with a warm smile.

"Welcome, Cadets of the Arcadia Hunter Academy! I'm Roman Jones, and it's a pleasure to have you here." He extended a hand, shaking hands with Maya and the rest of the group.

Maya reciprocated the gesture. "Thank you for having us, Mister Jones. We're excited to explore the historical site and learn more about your research. I heard a lot of things about you from my father."

"Ah....Mister Evergreen talked about me? It is quite an honor."

"Of course he did. He always mentions how diligent you are."

"Thank you. I will make sure to pay him a visit later."

"It would be good; I am sure he will welcome you."

"Ahahaha...."

After they had exchanged a bunch of greetings, Maya turned her attention to her fellow members.

"For those who don't know, this is Professor Roman Jones. He is one of the rare experts in the field of historical research and artifacts. His contributions have been pivotal in uncovering the mysteries of Western Uxbridge's past," Maya explained, her voice carrying a tone of genuine respect.

Roman Jones modestly nodded, "I'm just passionate about what I do. Now, shall we begin our exploration?"

Even though Roman Jones was a fairly important figure in this field, he seemed to open up for a short time for the sake of the group.

The group eagerly followed Mister Jones as he guided them through the various sections of the research site.

"You might not be able to see this in your lifetime. This is a special artifact that was used by the inhabitants of this place before the day of Nexus Convergence. It contains no changes made by mana."

"No changes made by mana? Does that mean this artifact is different from what we have been using?"

"This is indeed the case. From the moment mana entered our world, life took a huge change. The biggest change can be observed from the living beings as we all adapt to it, but even those who are not living are subjected to these changes."

"Ah...."

"And, the reason why we are working on these artifacts is to take their state as a reference point for many changes and observe how it was before the mana came to this world.

He provided insights into the significance of each artifact, unraveling tales of the city's history as they moved from one display to another.

"As we examine these artifacts, we uncover the untouched state of life before the influence of mana. Western Uxbridge, as you see it today, was once a thriving city without the pervasive energy we now know as mana. The artifacts here predate the day of Nexus Convergence, an era when magic wasn't an integral part of our existence," Mister Jones explained, his eyes gleaming with passion.

He led the group to a section displaying a map of Western Uxbridge with intricate markings. "These ancient ruins not only hold the city's history but also carry traces of an age where mana wasn't a defining force. We theorize that our world might have had latent mana long before the Nexus Convergence event."

One of the students asked, "So, you're suggesting that mana existed in our world even before the Nexus Convergence?"

Mister Jones nodded, "It's a fascinating possibility. These ruins and artifacts are like windows to a time when magic wasn't commonplace. If our theory holds, it could reshape our understanding of the very fabric of our world."

As they explored further, Mister Jones elaborated on the intricate connections between the ancient ruins and the potential existence of latent mana.

He pointed out markings, symbols, and structures that hinted at a magical influence preceding the day when mana flooded the world, and the buildings of the ancient ruins themselves were practically against the idea of a non-magical world.

"Even from the perspective of a physician, the idea of moving all these blocks or digging this amount of tunnels in such ancient times itself is contradictory to the flow of time."

Just as he said, he pointed to the huge ruins made of only steel.

"....."

Though the students all had their fair share of high buildings, seeing such an old one was definitely a different experience.

"However, there is one other aspect that supports our theory." At that moment, Jones stopped and raised his hand.

"I don't know if some of you have noticed, but the mana in this place is slightly different."

Jones extended his hand, and as if conjuring magic from the very air, a flicker of flame danced into existence in his palm.

The flames, however, were not the typical orange or red hues associated with fire. Instead, they swirled with an ethereal display of colors—shifting seamlessly from azure to emerald, then to amethyst.

"I myself am not that proficient in fire manipulation, but even then, you can see the result with your eyes alone. This is a small demonstration of the peculiar mana in this location. Unlike the mana we are accustomed to in our daily lives, the mana in these ancient ruins carries a distinct vibrancy and variance in its essence."

Jones explained the multicolored flames reflecting in his eyes. As the group watched in awe, he continued, "These unique mana fluctuations coincide with our theory that this city might have housed a different kind of magical energy before the Nexus Convergence. The artifacts and the very air in Western Uxbridge seem to echo the remnants of an era where magic manifested in diverse and unpredictable ways."

All of the students looked and watched in awe as he displayed the results. The notion that the mana here had its own unique characteristics heightened the mystery surrounding the ancient ruins.

"This is also the reason why this city is still not touched by the outside world and has preserved its uniqueness up to this point."

Maya finished his words herself. "To make sure that legacy still exists until you can find a relation."

Hearing this, Jones smiled. "Indeed."

CLAP!

And with a clap, he gathered everyone's attention once again. "Well, I've bored you enough with my theoretical explanations," Jones said with a good-natured chuckle. "Now, I believe it's time for you all to witness the wonders of Western Uxbridge with your own eyes. While we won't delve into the deepest parts of the research site today, wandering through the city itself holds its own historical significance."

He motioned toward the cityscape that lay beyond, ancient structures and cobblestone streets that whispered tales of a bygone era.

"Feel free to explore, ask questions, and immerse yourselves in the history that clings to every corner of this place. Take note of the architectural nuances, the remnants of a society that once thrived here."

Maya, the one who suggested this with her eyes, clapped her hands together. "All right, everyone! Let's spread out, but stay within the designated areas. Enjoy the experience, and if you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask. We will meet around the evening here and make sure that your alerts are on since I will contact you if something necessary comes up."

Just like that, the group dispersed, each member drawn to a different part of the city, eager to explore the different atmosphere that was very hard to come by in their lives.

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After everyone dispersed, Astron also made his way out of the research site.

'It is quite different from the game. Is it because, when we come here as a player, it would be later?'

Even though the city itself held its own values and traditions, the things Astron saw in the game were different from how the city looked.

'Something had changed this city.'

He looked into his memory, thinking for possible reasons, but eventually, he couldn't find anything there.

'We will see it for a later time.'

"Interesting, right?"

At that moment, Sylvie's words brought him back to reality. She naturally came to his side after everyone dispersed, and Astron didn't mind the idea either.

After all, if she didn't come to him, he was going to watch her from a distance to make sure he was ready for whatever was about to come.

"Yeah, it's captivating," Astron replied, casting another glance at the ancient architecture around them. "There's a certain charm to this place like it's holding onto stories that time forgot."

They had been walking for a while now, and they asked and conversed with the local people living in this place. They all seemed genuine, good people who liked talking, and most of them had smiles on their faces.

Sylvie nodded in agreement. "It's like a living history book, and each corner whispers tales of the past. I wonder what kind of people lived here and what their lives were like. Even the locals say they don't know much about the people of the past, and they are only trying to preserve the traditions left to them."

"Hmm....." Remembering the times of the Earth and the movies that told about the past, he shook his head. "It must be a lot different than how we lived."

"Different....Yeah, that would probably be. Nowadays, everyone is stuck in the same space. I guess time changes everything."

"Time changes everything; I don't think so."

"Why?"

"Initially, humans never change after all. The greed, the pride...It is all the same."

"What changes then?"

"If one thing changes within the time, it is the accumulation of knowledge and experience. We learn from the past when it comes to inventing new things, but in the end, we make the same mistakes we did."

"I don't think so," Sylvie said as she looked at the sky. "I think everyone can change."

Astron pondered Sylvie's words, his gaze fixed on the ancient structures surrounding them. His eyes shone purple for a second while he drew mana to there. "Expecting people to change can be a painful experience. More often than not, they don't."

Sylvie looked at him, her expression thoughtful. "But isn't it better to give them a chance? People might surprise you. Change is a gradual process, and sometimes, it takes a nudge or an opportunity to make it happen. Even the worst person might become a good one after they change their mind."

At this point, the two were in a slightly desolate place as they entered an alley. Subconsciously, Sylvie followed Astron while talking with him, and she didn't even notice the place they arrived became this desolate.

Astron raised his head and looked over Sylvie, sensing a small dark mana coming from there.

"No, it is not. Actions have consequences, and it is always better to strangle the snake before it can grow to bite you."

SWOOSH!

Following that, a mana converged into a point shot forward behind them.

CLANK!

Only to be deflected by the dagger.

## Chapter 190 Chapter 42.5 - Trip

"What an opportunity."

That was what Mason thought the moment he heard that the club would be going on a trip. After all, he had been looking for an opportunity all this time, and now was the time.

Inside the academy, it was almost impossible to harm a student unless they could lure them to desolate locations. And their target wasn't that dumb, at least.

He had tried countless different things to lure her at night, but none of them succeeded. He even used as much of his powers and many other demonic artifacts before Sylvie could make a name for herself and attract the academy's attention.

However, none of them worked, and according to his intel, the girl had already shown signs of awakening, and that made it even harder for him to act.

From how she acted before, it was clear that something wasn't right with her, and that gave him a clue that she possibly knew about his identity.

Therefore, the moment the destination of the trip was concluded, he immediately prepared a small squad for this opportunity.

He wanted to bring more personnel, but it was almost close to impossible. Western Uxbridge City was under the heavy surveillance of the government and magic tower because of the researchers; therefore, entering there without spending a bunch of resources was almost impossible.

And they didn't have much time to prepare for this case, making their choices limited.

Even then, it was fine. After all, there was no advisor who came on this trip since he seemed busy with his grades for the papers. There was a high chance that he thought nothing important would happen in such a safe place.

The only ones that could possibly pose him a threat were the seniors, especially Maya Evergreen, but if he were careful about that, that would be okay.

Just like that, Mason meticulously devised his plans to capitalize on the opportunity the trip presented. His motives, veiled in the shadows, were driven by a sinister agenda aimed at Sylvie. The secrecy surrounding his actions suggested a cunning and calculated approach.

As the group dispersed to explore Western Uxbridge City, Mason trailed Astron and Sylvie from a distance.

That annoying guy was also always with her, and for some reason, he got a weird vibe from him. It was as if he couldn't sense his presence at all, and he himself had forgotten that he existed sometimes.

He also felt that guy glaring at him from time to time, but whenever he checked, he never saw his eyes on him.

In any case, he was annoyed by the existence of that guy, and now that they were together, he smirked internally.

'Let's see if you can glare at me like that this time as well.'

His movements were stealthy, a product of both his demonic abilities and his experience in covert operations. His keen eyes followed the duo as they navigated through the city's narrow streets and winding alleys.

They wandered around for quite a while. Most of the time, it was almost impossible to capture her because of the public attention, and the time was reaching its end.

However, at that moment, suddenly, the two entered a desolate alley where no one could be seen.

'Heh....You stupid fuckers.'

He immediately put a smirk on his face as he realized this was the opportunity they were looking for.

[Target confirmed. Get ready to engage.]

From the earbuds, he signaled the team.

[Understood, First.]

And then, after the notification came, they were now ready to strike. The team surrounded the two as they slowly created a small barrier to block the sounds with their demonic energy.

After that, he condensed his demonic energy, and it was the start of the fight.

\*\*\*\*\*

CLANK!

As the initial demonic converged mana was deflected by the dagger, the assailants immediately followed with their attacks, all of them with good precision.

CLANK! CLANK! CLANK!

However, almost all of the attacks were deflected by Astron, holding his daggers.

CLANK!

As another one of the projectiles was deflected, Astron looked around with his eyes, counting the number of the assailants.

"Wha-?"

Sylvie was caught off-guard by the attack as she looked around. However, this time, different from the previous ones, she immediately gathered her attention.

"Stay close!" Astron shouted to Sylvie as they both faced their assailants. A group of hooded figures emerged from the shadows, their faces concealed, making it impossible to discern their intentions.

"Got it." Sylvie immediately took her position and started using her mana to give buffs to Astron. She had yet to understand how to fight, but even then, she knew her role well.

SWOOSH!

The hooded figures moved with uncanny speed, their weapons gleaming in the dim light.

Astron and Sylvie, standing back-to-back, faced the encroaching threat. The air crackled with tension as the assailants circled their prey.

Astron's instincts kicked in, and he swiftly moved to intercept the first attacker with his increased stats. Now that he got Sylvie's buffs, his firepower and strength were far above normal.

SLASH!

His dual daggers met the assailant's weapon in a clash of steel. The crimson aura around Astron intensified, lending an eerie glow to his movements.

Sylvie focused her mana, creating a protective barrier around them. The hooded figures, undeterred, continued their relentless assault.

CLANK! CLANK!

The rhythmic clashes of metal echoed through the air as Astron parried the attacks, his movements a deadly dance.

SWOOSH!

One of the assailants lunged at Sylvie, aiming to exploit her position. However, Astron intercepted the attack, pushing the assailant back with a powerful strike. The hooded figure stumbled, momentarily disrupted.

However, even then, that wasn't the end.

SWOOSH!

Just as Astron seemed to have the situation under control, a sudden surge of demonic mana erupted from one of the assailants. An unexpected attack that carried a formidable force.

CLANK!

Astron managed to intercept the attack, but the sheer power behind it caught him off guard. The force of the impact sent vibrations through his daggers, and for a split second, he lost his foothold.

STAB!

And that momentarily loss of foothold became detrimental in the fight against higher numbers.

A spear made from demonic energy pierced his shoulder.

"Grrr...."

He gritted his teeth as the pain flowed through.

"NOW!"

One of the assailants realized this was an opportunity created by the third one behind them, and he immediately followed the attack with another swing of his blade.

CLANK!

However, different from what he expected, his blade met with the dagger swing.

"How?"

His eyes opened wide as he realized the wound they had just made healed immediately. And then, he realized the reason for that was the girl.

'That must be the reason why they want her alive.'

Realizing that fact, he increased the distance from the two. The other one did the same.

"You are like a cockroach." He mumbled, his eyes locked on the boy before him.

[You don't need to keep others alive. You can kill him.]

At that moment, a small signal came from his earbuds.

[Really?]

[Yes. We only need the girl alive.]

The moment he confirmed, a smirk appeared on his face. Since their leader called it, he could only oblige.

'You can only blame yourself.'

He knew that Mason would not normally kill someone unnecessarily. It seemed this annoying guy got on his nerves.

The assailants, understanding that they no longer needed to hold back, intensified their assault. Astron, nursing the wound on his shoulder, prepared for the upcoming onslaught.

SWOOSH! SWOOSH! SWOOSH!

The three figures moved with synchronized precision; each strike imbued with dark mana. They aimed to overwhelm Astron and Sylvie through sheer force and coordination.

CLANK! CLANK! CLANK!

Astron, despite the small dislocation on his shoulder, expertly parried the attacks. The crimson aura surrounding him flared, signifying that he was using a lot more mana than usual.

Sylvie, on the other hand, focused her mana on healing Astron's injuries.

'This time, it will be different.'

Her eyes glowed with a soft, soothing light as she channeled her energy into closing the wounds caused by the attackers.

She had convinced herself and readied for such moments. And now, she was doing her best, with all her focus on Astron.

CLANK!

But, even then, there were times when conviction would not be enough.

STAB! SWOOSH!

One of the assailants lunged at Astron with a demonic spear, aiming for a vulnerable spot. Astron, anticipating the attack, sidestepped and retaliated with a swift dagger thrust. The assailant staggered back, momentarily disoriented.

However, the other two assailants seized the opportunity. One unleashed a barrage of strikes, while the other channeled a surge of demonic energy into a devastating attack.

SLASH! STAB!

And their slash met with the flesh. Astron's body was pierced by the demonic blade, and he let out a grunt of pain. Sylvie, desperately maintaining her healing efforts, felt a surge of fear.

"NO!" she cried out, her voice cracking with emotion.

Astron, despite the excruciating pain, refused to collapse. His sheer willpower kept him on his feet, even as the assailants raised their weapons for a finishing blow.

"Die, you cockroach bastard."

One of the attackers smirked as his dagger was about to hit.

"STOP!"

The assailants, momentarily taken aback, turned their attention to Sylvie. She had a determined look on her face, and her eyes glowed with a fierce light. In an unexpected move, she swiftly produced a dagger and pressed it against her own neck.

"Leave him alone, or I'll end myself right here," Sylvie declared, her voice unwavering.

The assailants, uncertain about how to react, exchanged glances. The threat Sylvie posed to herself introduced a new element to the situation. She was willing to risk her own life to protect Astron.

It was as if she had realized their intention and their goal was her. Even from the start, none of them aimed for her life as well.

Astron widened his eyes as if he wasn't expecting Sylvie to do such a thing. But he needed to act his part.

"D-don't, do it."

However, the one holding the dagger couldn't help but shake his head.

"Heh...." With a smirk widening on his face, he laughed.

"Ahahahahahahaha...."

The assailant holding the dagger looked at Sylvie with a cruel glint in his eyes. "Go ahead, do it. If it's that easy for someone to kill herself, then go ahead. You little girl....Do you really think you can take your life?"

Sylvie's eyes didn't change as she looked at the assailant.

"Leave him alone, or I will do it."

However, the one holding the dagger couldn't help but shake his head.

"Heh...." With a smirk widening on his face, he laughed.

"Ahahahahahahaha...."

The assailant, seeing Sylvie's unwavering determination, narrowed his eyes. He exchanged a brief, silent communication with his companions, who remained tense and ready for any sudden moves.

"Kid. Drop that dagger," the assailant finally said, a hint of irritation in his voice.

Sylvie, maintaining her steely gaze, hesitated for a moment. The dagger trembled in her hand, but she didn't lower it. The assailant's irritation grew, realizing Sylvie's resolve was genuine.

"Fine, have it your way. But if you try anything funny, remember, your friend pays the price," he warned, withdrawing his dagger slightly.

After that, they left Astron on the ground, with his body tattered.

"N-no...."

He tried to reach Sylvie, but he couldn't.

The assailants, having momentarily subdued Astron and achieved their primary goal of capturing Sylvie alive, decided to leave Astron on the ground. His injuries were severe, but the assailants paid him little attention as they focused on their captive.

"Move, girl. And don't try anything funny if you care about your own life," he sneered, guiding Sylvie away from the wounded Astron.

'At least I saved him.'

Sylvie thought as she looked at Astron, feeling slightly fulfilled. For once in her life, she wanted to become useful to someone, and she didn't want to repeat the same experience she had at the dungeon.

However, she missed one thing.

One of the assailants, fueled by cruelty, turned back with a sinister grin. He summoned a demonic spear, channeling malevolent energy into its deadly form.

Astron, battered and weakened, realized the impending danger but was 'powerless' to defend himself. He strained to move, to escape the inevitable, but his body betrayed him. Sylvie's desperate cries filled the air, echoing in the alley.

"NO! Don't! Please, don't!"

But even then, the demonic spear, fueled by dark energy, thrust forward mercilessly, finding its mark in Astron's defenseless body.

And that was the last thing she had seen.

However, none of the assailants had noticed green mana attached to their bodies, and neither did they notice the small thing eating the demonic energy they had left in this place.