

H. Academy 231

Chapter 231 Chapter 52.1 - 'Reaping what you sow'

"Kindness does always return back, huh?"

I mumbled as I walked back from the training room. After all, the thing that I was holding in my hands was something that I wouldn't even dream of getting.

'Starbloom Essence, huh?'

It was a specific item that was very hard to get. It wasn't even an easter egg but an item for those pay-to-win players.

After all, what could be a better game for such players to become interested in? Not many people were talented enough to play the game Legacy of Shadows: The Hunter's Destiny. Therefore, there were many players who decided to take the overpowered path and finished the game with overwhelming stats.

To satisfy such players, there were many items that boosted the growth rate of the player, and Starbloom Essence was almost at the peak of one of those.

'To think Senior Maya would possess this item....'

Of course, I already knew what my weakness was. So, I have been searching for ways to increase my physical aspects and my physical talent limit.

My low endurance alone is already making things difficult for me; thus, I need something to cover it up.

However, this world doesn't work just like the game, and neither do I, the main character. I don't possess Ethan's background; therefore, I can't easily acquire such materials.

Especially considering even the lowest ranked ones cost around 100.000 Valer each.

'And they are not even that effective.'

Players could convert their real money to in-game currencies, so those prices in the game didn't matter that much for players.

But when that game becomes your reality, it suddenly becomes detrimental, and I have been suffering from that.

'Even though I had made quite a lot of money already, this is still not enough.'

In any case, the money problem would soon be solved, as the time for me to sell the stocks of Emily's guild is approaching.

'In any case, I should return back and consume the Starbloom Essence first.'

I thought. Senior Maya was incredibly generous with what she gave to me. Even now, if the students around me knew I possessed this herb, they would all attack me without hesitation and may even kill me.

After all, this herb cost around 10.000.000 Valer alone.

'I wonder what her background is.'

Since she didn't have an exceptional role in the game aside from being a nice senior and a good mentor with a tragic ending, she didn't have much of a role.

Thus, her background was actually not explained very well, and I also had no knowledge about it.

But from how she had easily handed me a Feywild Dreamplum and now Starbloom Essence, it was evident that her background was also far from being normal.

'Evergreen, huh? Why did I never hear about that name?'

It was weird. If such a huge family did exist, it was bound to create a name for themselves, but that didn't seem to be the case.

'I should message Horde for that.'

Things considering such general knowledge was Horde's job, but I also knew that trusting such people was not optimal. Especially considering the amount of information they would hold concerning me.

In any case, with those thoughts in my head, I reached my first location—the Arcadia Academy Store.

It was the place where I had bought the scrolls last time to hunt the MistWraith down. Normally, I disliked buying from this place as the prices here were too high compared to the Black Market, but I didn't want to wait right now.

"How can I help you?"

"I will buy some herbs."

"You may go to the right section of the store. On the fifth row, you will see Alchemy products."

"Thank you."

After entering the Arcadia Academy Store, I quickly made my way through the aisles, glancing at various items on display. The shelves were neatly organized, showcasing a variety of magical herbs, potions, and other mystical items.

Spotting the herb section, I selected two additional herbs that were ranked lower but were affordable – Whispering Willow Bark and Emberleaf Petals. I wanted to complement the effects of the Starbloom Essence, addressing both my low endurance and the need for enhanced mana absorption. These lower-ranked herbs would serve as catalysts in the preparation process.

Exiting the store with my purchases, I headed back to my room. The anticipation of using the Starbloom Essence was building up, and I was eager to implement my own method to maximize its effects.

Upon reaching my room, I meticulously prepared the herbs, crushing them to extract their essence.

"This method is still unknown to the world."

Normally, one would directly consume such herbs without even crushing them or boiling them. After all, any external effect could possibly cause a mismatch in the product, making it defective. This was especially true of mana herbs with high ranking, as their sensitivity and evolution would make them more specific.

The more one evolves, the more specific they become, which means they are also more prone to changes in the environment.

In any case, the method I was about to use was different from the general consumption method right now.

Rather than eating it directly and then meditating in a lotus position to absorb the effects, I was going to use a different approach.

The two herbs that I had bought from the store would perform now.

The Whispering Willow Bark would serve to open my mana pores, while the Emberleaf Petals would be crucial in closing them later. The combination of these herbs with the Starbloom Essence was my own concoction, a method that was known to make the enhancement process more effective.

The main idea was to make the Starbloom Essence directly anchored to your own body from the inside while using a specific bath heated to a specific temperature. When those specific conditions are met, the Starbloom Essence fragments to its most basic particles, and then it disintegrates into the water of the bath.

After that, if the person who consumed the Whispering Willow Bark entered the bath, those small particles disintegrated in the water would enter the body from the open pores.

However, there was a catch here. Since the Starbloom Essence was basically something that came out of the world and wasn't something that the body was accustomed to, it would be refused.

And the key part lay there. One needed to make sure that they were able to keep all the Essence entered in their pores while absorbing the remaining ones utilizing their mana to the maximum.

That was the catch.

Once you finished absorbing everything into your body, you would consume the Emberleaf Petals to close your pores, trapping the Essence into your own body to integrate it directly into yourself.

"Now, let's start," I muttered to myself.

The bath was already prepared, and its temperature was set to the specific conditions required for the disintegration of the Starbloom Essence.

Taking the Whispering Willow Bark in my hands, I carefully crushed it, releasing its essence into my mouth.

GULP!

The aroma was both soothing and invigorating, a stark contrast to the impending process. After all, what this herb did was make sure that your pores would open by exciting your body.

SHIVER!

I could feel my body shivering because of the sensations overlapping me.

With the crushed bark left on the ground, I stepped into the bath, the warmth enveloping me.

The pain was about to begin.

As I immersed myself in the water, I could feel the particles of the disintegrated Starbloom Essence reacting to the conditions. The water around me shimmered with a faint, ethereal glow.

"The Whispering Willow Bark should open the mana pores now." I reminded myself, focusing on the task at hand. The essence from the bark began its work, causing a tingling sensation as my mana pores started to open gradually.

The process wasn't without discomfort. The combination of the warm bath and the effects of the Whispering Willow Bark made my body feel unusually sensitive. It was as if every pore was awakening, ready to absorb the upcoming infusion of the Starbloom Essence.

As the mana pores opened, I felt a subtle connection forming between my body and the water. The essence in the bath and the essence within the Whispering Willow Bark were slowly aligning, creating a bridge for the next phase.

"Now, the Starbloom Essence."

With the mana pores open, I carefully poured the Starbloom Essence into the bath. The essence, freed from its physical form, mingled with the water. It was a breathtaking sight as the water transformed, pulsating with magical energy.

The pain surged, more intense than before. It felt like a thousand needles were simultaneously piercing every inch of my body. A searing heat enveloped me, and I could feel my consciousness waver as if teetering on the edge of a precipice.

"Grrrrr...." I barely suppressed the agonized scream that tore through my lips.

The pain was beyond anything that could be classified as normal. It wasn't just physical; it felt as if the very essence of my being was being unraveled. Though, it wasn't my first time feeling pain in any case.

I bit my lips until they bled, desperate to ground myself in some form of reality. The metallic taste of blood mingled with the magical energies in the air, creating a surreal sensation. My muscles tensed involuntarily, and my vision blurred with each passing moment.

The process continued, the water around me becoming a conduit for the essence to enter my body. Every inch of my skin tingled with energy as I absorbed the powerful essence through my open mana pores.

'Not yet.'

The bathwater seemed to churn with otherworldly energy, responding to the tumultuous transformation taking place within me.

'Endure it.'

I clutched the sides of the bath, my knuckles turning white as the pain escalated to a crescendo.

'Endure it.'

For a moment, I felt like I was losing control. The room spun, and I could sense my insides turning out.

'You are still weak, endure it.'

Every nerve screamed in protest, and I wondered if I had underestimated the price of such enhancement.

'This pain is nothing....This pain is nothing compared to that time....'

But deep within the chaos, a stubborn resolve anchored me. I had come this far, enduring the pain for the promise of strength.

The benefits, I reminded myself, outweighed the momentary suffering. To make those who had taken the world from my pay, such endurance was necessary.

'Until the end, I will endure every pain that is necessary.'

As the seconds stretched into an eternity, the pain reached a zenith, threatening to engulf me entirely.

'DON'T FUCKING LOSE YOUR CONSCIOUSNESS ON ME!'

I gritted my teeth, determined not to succumb to the overwhelming torment. It was a battle between my will and the relentless onslaught of the Starbloom Essence. But I knew that the more I endured, the more I absorbed, the stronger I would get.

Some people may have been born with the talent.

Some people may have been born with good backgrounds.

Some of them might be the main characters of the game....

The child of the plane....

The chosen ones....

For me, I didn't care about any of those. Even if those things weren't handed to me, so what?

Even if my body was lacking and weak, so what?

Even if my talent limit was lower, so what?

None of those matter. For me, there is one goal that is in front of me, and I am going to achieve it no matter what.

A surge of strength coursed through me, and I endured a little more.

Then, as if the universe itself acknowledged my tenacity, the water in the bath lost its vibrant color. The essence, once vivid and pulsating, had been completely absorbed.

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

Gasping for breath, I clung to the edges of the bath, trembling with exhaustion. The pain, while still present, began to recede. I could feel the essence integrated into every fiber of my being.

GULP!

As I gulped the essence of the Emberleaf Petals to close my pores, I could feel the anchors inside my body.

The pain was still ongoing, but at this point, I no longer needed to retain my consciousness.

'Isn't that enough.....'

Just like that, I closed my eyes.....

Chapter 232 Chapter 52.2 - 'Reaping what you sow'

As Astron's consciousness faded into the depths of the transformative ritual, a soft, ethereal glow emanated from the necklace around his neck. The silhouette of a young girl materialized, gently rising from the pendant with a luminous presence.

Her voice, like a gentle whisper, echoed within the confines of Astron's mind.

"Why, brother? Why do you endure such pain?" she cried, her voice carrying a mixture of concern and sorrow. "I wish I could take away all your suffering, heal every wound, and shield you from the burdens you willingly bear."

Tears sparkled in her otherworldly eyes as she extended her incorporeal hands towards Astron's unconscious form. The green glow from the necklace intensified as if responding to her emotions. She gently caressed his face, her touch ethereal and filled with a deep, affectionate love.

"I have always been with you, and yet you persist in facing these trials alone," she murmured her voice a soothing melody. "Your strength is commendable, but I wish you would let me share the weight of your struggles."

As Astron lay there, vulnerable in the afterglow of the intense magical infusion, his sister continued to express her heartfelt sentiments.

"I know you seek power, but at what cost? Your pain resonates with me, and I long to ease it. You're not alone in this journey, brother. Let me be your solace."

The ambient magic within the room responded to her emotional plea, creating gentle ripples in the atmosphere.

The tears that had fallen from her eyes transformed into shimmering droplets of healing energy, each one carrying a desire to alleviate Astron's burdens.

The blood that was spilled from his mouth, the convulsing muscles, and many other scars....For each one of those scars, she shed a tear....

Her bright, ethereal eyes seemed to contain intense sorrow, but as she turned to face him, she couldn't help but smile gently.

With a soft sob, she whispered, "If only my essence could truly heal you, protect you from the harshness of this path you've chosen. But I am bound to this necklace, limited by the magical constraints that govern our existence."

She slowly hovered all around his body and then stood right in front of his face. She slowly pushed her forehead into his as she cupped his cheeks with her gentle hands.

As Astron's sister gently pressed her forehead against his, a final tear escaped her ethereal eyes. The tear, infused with a profound desire to heal, glided down her translucent cheek and dripped onto Astron's forehead. At that moment, a remarkable and unexpected event unfolded.

As the tear touched Astron's skin, a radiant pattern emerged on both of their foreheads. Astron's forehead glowed with an intricate pattern of a black crescent moon, while his sister's forehead shimmered with a pure white crescent moon. The celestial symbols seemed to intertwine, creating a connection that transcended the magical barriers separating them.

Astron's body, still immersed in the magical bath, responded to this enchanting phenomenon. The pain that had gripped him began to subside, replaced by a soothing warmth. The convulsing muscles relaxed, and the scars on his body started to glow faintly as if touched by the healing essence of the crescent moons.

His sister's eyes widened with surprise and awe, realizing that an unforeseen magic was at play. The gentle smile on her face widened, reflecting a glimmer of hope.

The magical glow on their foreheads pulsed in harmony, resonating with the essence of the tears shed and the shared connection between the two. It was as if the celestial symbols were weaving a bond that transcended their physical separation.

As the glow intensified, Astron's sister leaned in and softly whispered, "I will always be with you, brother," she vowed, her voice a gentle breeze. "In your dreams, in your moments of solitude, I will be by your side. May you find the strength you seek, and may the pain you endure lead you to a brighter future."

With those words, she closed her eyes, and one last tear rolled down her ethereal cheek. This tear, unlike the others, held a profound sense of tranquility and resolution.

As it fell, the magical glow on their foreheads reached its zenith, casting a gentle radiance throughout the room.

And then, just as it had started, her sister suddenly left his place without saying another word.

Leaving her young brother alone once again.

"....."

I slowly regained consciousness, the sensation of being submerged in the bath lingering. The water, once alive with vibrant magical energy, now cradled me in a calm and soothing embrace.

"Urghk-!"

Blinking, I felt disoriented, my body experiencing a strange refreshment. The intense pain that had engulfed me during the process had dissipated, replaced by a subtle warmth that permeated my being. No longer did my muscles tense involuntarily.

"Haaah....."

Taking a deep breath, I tried to piece together the recent events. And then soon, everything came into the place. I felt like my mind started working as intended immediately.

'So, it is finished.'

As the pieces of information were revealed one by one, I lowered my eyes to check my condition first.

'Good.'

And it was good. My body, which had always been my weakness, seemed to get better, even just by looks.

'My tone of skin also got a little brighter.'

My normally pale skin now was a little more colorful, as if the light had returned to me. Though it was still almost pure white, at the very least, I now looked like a healthy person just from the outside.

I cautiously attempted to stand, the renewed strength in my body catching me by surprise. As I rose from the bath, I could feel a newfound vitality coursing through me. The subtle warmth that enveloped my being hinted at the transformative effects of the ritual.

"Huh, this is... unexpected," I muttered to myself, testing the stability of my legs. The room seemed different, as if the walls themselves were pulsating with residual magical energy.

'No, wait?'

It didn't make sense for the room to suddenly change. Now that I had looked at it, I felt like I could perceive the world around me a little differently.

'What happened?'

Something was inherently different, and I could sense it.

"Ooops...."

Taking a step forward, I almost lost my balance. The surge in strength was more pronounced than I had anticipated.

"Hmm...."

My legs, accustomed to a certain level of endurance, struggled to adjust to this sudden enhancement. I quickly reached out to steady myself, my hands gripping the edge of the bath.

THUD!

And with one fast move, I exited the bath, getting rid of the water. As the cold air hit me, I shivered a little from the sensation. My already sensitive senses seemed to get a lot better now.

'So this is the effect, huh?'

There was a reason why Starbloom Essence was this expensive, and it would get a lot more expensive in the future considering the method.

Feeling a bit dirty from the magical bath, I decided to take a quick shower to clean myself. As the water cascaded down, I couldn't help but notice the changes in my body.

My muscles felt a little different, more potent than before. The enhanced strength was evident, and I couldn't help but flex my arms experimentally. The subtle changes were both fascinating and unsettling.

'This is definitely beyond what I expected.'

It was something that I couldn't expect even after considering the effect of the method. In my head, I had already made an approximate calculation as to what kind of strength I would get, but now it seemed a lot more than that.

'Something I didn't know was in the equation.'

And nothing happens without a cause. Actually, I somehow could guess the reason for that.

'It is about this body.'

Something....This body was different than others. Even though the status window didn't show it, I knew for a fact that there was something inherently different in this body.

No matter what, even Ethan wouldn't have such an increase in strength with his talent.

'Let's check the status window first.'

After covering myself with a towel and getting out of the shower, I sat on my bed, looking at the panel in front of me.

?Name: Astron Natusalune

?Occupation: Weapon Master (level 1 --> 2)

?Talent Limit: 6 --> 7.5

?Passives:

Vengeful Bane

Bloodline Resonance

?Attributes:

? Variable Attributes:

? Strength: 3.00 --> 3.25

? Dexterity: 3.60 --> 3.90

? Agility: 3.90 --> 4.20

? Constitution: 2.85 --> 3.25

? Intuition: 4.05 --> 4.35

? Magical Power: 4.35 --> 4.65

? Mana Capacity: 3.25 --> 3.65

?Traits:

Perceptive Insight (Epic)(Unchanging)

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

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

?Arts:

Lethal Arsenal Ascendancy (????)(%22)

?Skills:

Dash

Eyes of Hourglass

?Body Imprints:

?Bonds:

Aurora Raven (Rare)(Growth Type)

Celestialith, The Transcendent Eclipse

As I carefully scrutinized the changes in my attributes, a sense of astonishment washed over me. The increase in strength far exceeded my initial calculations.

The variable attributes, especially agility and magical power, had undergone a more substantial enhancement than I had anticipated.

But even then, the most significant change was on the constitution part.

'It is no longer lagging behind compared to strength.'

I was not a type of strength; thus, it was acceptable for me to have a lower strength stat. But the constitution being that low wasn't something that was normal. Therefore, it was pulling me back.

But now, that was no longer the case.

'Finally.'

That meant my specific talent limit at my constitution stat had been increased differently, which corresponded to the fact that I could increase my constitution a lot more easily now. Seeing the talent limit increasing from six to seven point five, that seemed to be the case.

'But....As expected, this is not normal.'

It wasn't merely the effect of the Starbloom Essence; there was an additional factor at play, a mysterious element tied to the uniqueness of my own body.

However, that wasn't the end. There were two other very important changes.

'My Weapon Master class is increased to level 2.'

This meant my understanding of weapons increased, and I would get a lot better results while training with them.

Considering the fact that my class basically covered almost every weapon but lacked in growth speed, it was a very important and welcome fact.

After all, rather than focusing on one thing and mastering general, it had its own disadvantages. Else, it would be too overpowered.

In any case, the biggest and most important change wasn't the Weapon Master occupation but something else.

'Perceptive Insight is ranked up.'

It's a grade on the system window that went from Unique to Epic. And that was a very rare case since traits were very hard to improve if they were not a growth type.

'How come?'

Unless a very special and rare occurrence occurred, those traits would remain the same until one leaves this world, and that was like that in the game.

Trait: Perceptive Insight

Grade: Epic

Description:

The Perceptive Insight trait has evolved to Epic, further enhancing the individual's heightened ability to observe and comprehend their surroundings with exceptional clarity and depth. Those possessing this trait now exhibit an even more acute sense of perception, allowing them to notice subtle details, patterns, and hidden aspects that often go unnoticed by others.

This evolved talent extends beyond mere observation; it grants the user an intricate understanding of the gathered information. The individual can decipher the intricate dance of mana with unparalleled precision, perceiving its subtle currents and resonances. Concepts entwined with mana once shrouded in complexity, unfold effortlessly before the user's discerning gaze.

The moment I looked at the panel and read the details, I couldn't help but notice the reason for my increased perception of the world was actually related to my trait after all.

'Now, this is getting interesting.'

The moment mana entered the equation and my trait, I knew one thing for a fact.

'I can absorb everything.'

The knowledge is a meal for me from now on.

Chapter 233 Chapter 53.1 - A Night Walk

The room was filled with many luxurious ornaments.

Having already finished her daily tasks and training, Irina was lying on her comfortable sofa while playing the ChronoScape.

Now, she was already accustomed to playing that game and was using it as a passing time. After all, she also needed to have something to let her stress out of the game.

However, she was not as violent as Julia was compared to how she played.

"JUST BLOCK THE HOOK!"

Well, even she had the times when she couldn't even stand it.

"Just block the hook, man; I will heal you anyway."

After her initial defeat against Lilia on the weekend, she felt humiliated. Becoming a laughing stock for them made her feel the shame of being quite bad at the game.

However, she needed to acknowledge her weaknesses. When it came to this game, her mechanics weren't as good as others.

'But I am smart.'

However, she was smart, so she started playing in a different class.

'Support is the best.'

Leaving the crying to carry on the lane alone, she started wandering around the map, helping her other teammates. After all, that guy didn't block the hook? Why should she help him?

'DEFEAT'

Irina clenched her jaw as the defeat screen flashed across the ChronoScape. The words "Defeat" in bold red letters felt like a slap to her pride. She couldn't believe she had lost again, especially after she had switched to the support class, thinking it would be the solution to her gaming woes.

Her teammates had disappointed her, failing to meet her expectations. She could feel the irritation building up as she prepared to unleash her frustration on the carry who, in her eyes, failed to dodge that crucial hook and got one shot.

"Seriously? Can't you see a hook coming a mile away? I was healing you for crying out loud!" Irina vented her frustration in the in-game chat. The words flowed from her fingers in a heated blur as she criticized the carry for what she perceived as a glaring mistake.

As the flame war ignited in the chat, Irina's stress level only seemed to rise. The exchange of words became more intense, and soon, the defeat seemed less about the game and more about her need to assert herself.

The virtual battlefield transformed into a battleground of words, and Irina was determined not to back down.

"You bastard, who are you calling a pus*y, huh?"

"How dare you call me goth e-girl? Which point of me is a goth?"

"Fat, ugly basement rat? What the hell?"

"Go 0/1, IRL?"

The words stung, and Irina's initial attempt to defend herself turned into a futile struggle against the rising tide of toxicity. It was as if these people weren't even considering her human at all.

"Why do people get this rude over a game?" Irina wondered aloud, frustration lingering as she stared at the now-closed application.

"Sigh...I don't even want to play anymore."

With a sigh, she leaned back in her chair, contemplating the absurdity of the situation. In the grand scheme of things, it was just a game, and yet the words had cut deep. Irina shook her head, realizing the toxicity had taken a toll on her mood.

"I will just sleep."

Deciding that sleep might be the remedy for her frayed nerves, Irina attempted to lie down and close her eyes. However, the echoes of the virtual battlefield lingered, preventing her from finding solace in the quiet of her room.

"Again, huh?"

Restlessness settled in, and Irina found herself drawn to an old habit she had developed to escape her strict mother's watchful eye at home — taking a solitary walk at night. It was something she had been doing even from childhood.

Some may say it was just an entitled act of brattiness, but at the very least, she felt like she was free when she was walking alone, escaping the duties that were enforced to her by her mother.

The cool breeze and the solitude of the campus at 3 a.m. beckoned her, promising a temporary escape from the chaos of both the digital and real worlds.

Slipping into a pair of sneakers and grabbing a jacket, Irina quietly left her room.

SWOOSH!

The night air greeted her, crisp and refreshing. As she strolled through the deserted pathways, the weight of the online toxicity slowly lifted.

She felt herself cooling down. Her normally high body temperature because of her trait was also a little calmer now because of her cold. She wouldn't even need to take a jacket with her, but she just liked looking like an adult and a normal student.

The moonlight cast a soft glow on the empty roads, and the occasional rustle of leaves added to the serene atmosphere.

'I guess it is not just me.'

As she strolled, Irina couldn't help but notice the few students who lingered around at this late hour. Some were engaged in hushed conversations, while others were taking solitary walks like her.

After all, this was the Arcadia Hunter Academy. Awakened students with high talents gathered here; thus, they could go without sleep for at least two days.

The dimly lit corners revealed scattered groups of friends chatting away, their laughter echoing in the stillness of the night.

SLURP!

"Calm down...."

"You know, I can't..."

Amid the quiet ambiance, Irina's eyes caught glimpses of couples sharing intimate moments under the moonlight.

'What the hell are they doing?'

She asked herself, her cheeks getting a little red. Even though she was quite far away, their sounds still reached her eyes.

She felt the shame they didn't feel but at the same time...

'I wonder how it would feel?'

A pang of envy tugged at her as she observed them, feeling a sense of longing for the connection and warmth they seemed to share.

'No, what am I thinking?'

But what was more shameful was not the fact that she was thinking about those things, but the someone that came into her mind.

However, feeling ashamed of her actions, she decided to bury everything deep into her consciousness and hurried her steps, walking absentmindedly.

MEOW!

Suddenly, she noticed a pitch-black cat with rare purple eyes sitting in the middle of the path.

The feline's mysterious appearance struck a chord with Irina, reminiscent of that 'certain someone' she had tried to bury in her thoughts.

'That....'

She liked cats. Not only cats but cute little things in general. And this one before her looked cute as well, though she normally didn't like the color black.

Intrigued, she approached the cat with a cautious smile.

"Hey there, little one. You're quite the unique cat, aren't you?" Irina whispered, extending her hand to pet the mysterious creature.

"Meow!"

However, as she tried to make contact, the cat swiftly darted away, evading her touch with a graceful leap.

Surprised, Irina chuckled at the playful feline. "Well, aren't you a feisty one?" She continued to follow the cat, attempting to get closer. The rare purple eyes stared back at her, and for a moment, Irina couldn't help but compare those eyes.

"Well, you certainly look like him."

'A feisty cat.....Certainly suits him.'

The mysterious black cat, with its rare purple eyes, continued to elude Irina's attempts at closeness.

Despite its swift retreat, the feline didn't go too far and remained within her vision range. Intrigued and with a faint smile, Irina decided to follow the cat's whims, her earlier worries momentarily forgotten.

"Well, you're not getting away that easily," she teased, her tone light as she continued to stroll after the playful creature.

The moonlight cast gentle shadows on the deserted pathways, creating an ethereal ambiance as the cat led Irina in a smooth way.

As Irina followed the whims of the mysterious cat, they meandered through the moonlit pathways of the academy campus.

The cat's rare purple eyes were intriguing, so Irina kept following it until they reached the library. She watched as the cat gracefully entered through the open doors, curious as to what it was doing.

As Irina entered the library, the automatic doors whispered shut behind her, enclosing her in the hushed ambiance of the vast space.

"Huh, where did he go?"

The cat suddenly disappeared, leaving Irina standing alone in the quiet library.

"I want to play with it a little bit, though."

A tinge of disappointment washed over her as she looked around, wondering where the mysterious feline had vanished.

"Hmm?"

However, the fleeting sense of loss was quickly replaced by another discovery. Across the room, amidst the hallowed aisles, she spotted a figure hunched over a table.

As she drew closer, the dim light revealed the features of that 'certain someone' she had been trying to bury in her thoughts.

'What? Why is he here?'

Black hair framed his face, and his deep purple eyes were focused intently on the book in front of him. Long eyelashes cast delicate shadows on his cheeks as he immersed himself in whatever he was studying.

'What is he even doing here this late?'

As Irina observed the familiar figure engrossed in his studies, a mix of emotions surged within her. She hesitated, contemplating whether to approach him or maintain her distance.

'Should I just leave?' Irina thought, feeling a sudden pang of awkwardness. She wasn't accustomed to seeing this side of Astron – the focused and diligent student. It was a stark contrast to their usual banter and bickering.

Astron, immersed in his studies, suddenly looked up from his book, his gaze fixed on Irina. A small change of expression could be seen, and Irina flinched inwardly, realizing that he had already noticed her presence.

"Instead of just standing there," he said, his voice calm but carrying a hint of amusement, "you could come and sit."

'Tch.'

Caught off guard, Irina hesitated for a moment before nodding and taking the chair he gestured to. She couldn't quite meet his eyes, feeling a bit exposed under his perceptive gaze.

As she settled into the chair, Astron resumed his studies, and the atmosphere shifted into a comfortable silence. Irina stole glances at him, her mind racing with thoughts.

'This guy....Was he always this diligent?'

Of course, she knew he was good at studying, but if he was someone who would study this late, his grades would have been a lot better.

'He is not dumb either.'

And he was certainly not someone that was bad at studying. He was the one who found the special point, and his speed in solving formulas wasn't something to ignore. So, Irina firmly believed that Astron wasn't bad at studying.

That left a question in her mind. Why were his grades this low compared to others?

As Irina observed Astron engrossed in his studies, her eyes wandered to the scattered books around his desk.

The titles and covers hinted at an intense focus on mana manipulation and advanced techniques for hunters. The realization dawned on her that his commitment to understanding these complex magical concepts was profound.

'Mana manipulation... Advanced techniques...' she thought, scanning the titles. 'This is not just for show.'

The numerous bookmarks sticking out from the pages indicated that he wasn't merely skimming through the content.

Astron was diving deep into the intricacies of magical theory, absorbing knowledge with diligence that contradicted his outward demeanor.

But as a mage herself, she knew all those books were actually the general knowledge for mages. But Astron was not a mage.

He was an archer, a marksman, though he was also skilled at daggers. In any case, Irina thought his specification wasn't actually magic, so why was he studying it now?

Unable to contain her curiosity any longer, Irina finally mustered the courage to voice her question. "You," she began tentatively, "I can't help but wonder... Why are you studying magic? I mean, you're not a mage, and your specialization is in archery and daggers. What's the deal with all these mana manipulation books?"

Astron glanced up from his notes, meeting her inquisitive gaze.

He leaned back in his chair, a thoughtful expression crossing his face. "Good question," he replied. "You already know, being a Hunter isn't just about mastering your weapon. Magic is intertwined with everything we do."

Irina frowned, not entirely convinced. "But you've never shown any interest in magic before. Why the sudden change?"

"Sometimes it is just a change of heart that opens our eyes."

Chapter 234 Chapter 53.2 - A Night Walk

"Sometimes it is just a change of heart that opens our eyes."

"I see."

Irina answered and nodded her head knowingly, but she couldn't help but curse inside. What the hell is just a change of heart supposed to mean anyway?

It was not like people randomly started doing things out of nowhere. Something needed to happen for that.

And magic wasn't a subject that one could easily touch and then get a grasp of it. Even though that girl Sylvie may be a little different, that doesn't mean everyone could be like her.

No, in reality, people who were talented at magic were a lot rarer than people who were talented at combat.

After all, one needed to be very good at calculating, have good spatial awareness, and be knowledgeable enough to use spells.

In most cases, all those traits combined were very hard to find, making the mages a very valuable asset.

Of course, that came with its own arrogance, but that was fine for Irina. In any case, because she refused to believe a composed guy like him would actually make a decision like that randomly.

As Astron continued to immerse himself in his studies, Irina's curiosity got the better of her. She couldn't resist the temptation to peek into the books scattered around his desk. To her surprise, the pages were filled with the basic blocks of magic, the very foundation of what she, as a mage, found second nature.

Her eyebrows furrowed in thought. 'Basic blocks of magic? Why is he starting from scratch?'

The basic blocks of magic were the theory for the starters, though most mages would rather skip it.

It is like the basics of swordsmanship, but most people tend to avoid those boring basics and want to start with the flashy techniques.

'He really is serious.'

And seeing him studying basic blocks was enough to convince that, this guy was really adamant on learning magic.

'Wait.'

At that moment, an idea came into her head. Something that she could use at this right moment.

Her gaze shifted from the books to Astron, and an idea began to take shape in her mind. A mischievous smile played on her lips as she considered the opportunity that lay before her.

"Hey, Astron," she interrupted her voice casual but carrying a hint of excitement.

He glanced up from his studies, meeting her gaze. "What's up?"

"I couldn't help but notice you're delving into the basics of magic," she said, feigning nonchalance. "Funny thing is, right now, you are standing right beside an expert in terms of basics. If you're interested, I could teach you a thing or two about controlling those basic blocks."

Astron raised an eyebrow, surprised by her offer. "You'd do that?"

Irina shrugged, suppressing a smirk. "Why not? We're comrades in this academy, and it seems like you could use some guidance in this magical realm. Besides, it might come in handy in your Hunter career, right?"

Astron considered her proposition, his usual calm demeanor masking any inner thoughts. "Why do you want to help?"

Of course, his first question was one filled with suspicion. This was him being himself, after all.

"Why not?"

"This is not a valid argument. Things don't need a reason not to exist. They need a reason to exist. One is the prerequisite of another, and it is not the other way around."

"....."

"So, give me the reason why you may want to help me?"

"Again, you and your reasons. Is it that weird for me to want to help my teammate?"

Hearing her mention, the teammate seemed to hold his thoughts as he stopped for a second.

'Heh, got you.'

From all these continuous interactions with Astron, Irina knew one thing for a fact. It was, if you give him enough a logical reason, he would always let you close, and if not, then he would close himself in his walls.

This had happened way often, so she was sure about it.

Finally, he nodded. "Alright, teach me."

Irina's smile widened, realizing that what she thought about him was correct. She inwardly felt a little happy at the fact that she could now turn the tables and make him indebted to her.

From the start of the academy, this guy had been the one holding the reigns and leading all the time, and she was getting tired of that a little bit.

And now she got the chance, and she was surely not going to miss it.

'Heh, you are playing in my palm.'

She smirked inwardly as she approached him, pulling her seat closer.

As Irina pulled her chair closer, she was ready to start. The books laid out the foundation of [Level 0] magic, the simplest form of magical manipulation.

Before delving into the practical aspect of teaching, Irina paused, looking at Astron with a thoughtful expression.

"Astron, do you know the fundamental difference between how a mage controls mana and how a regular Hunter does?"

Astron raised an eyebrow, intrigued by the question. "Enlighten me."

"Mages deploy everything according to formulas. It's a systematic approach, following predetermined rules and calculations. But for general Hunters like you, it's more about instinct and training, isn't it?"

Astron nodded in agreement. "True. We don't cast spells; we rely on our skills, instincts, and, of course, the weapons we've mastered."

That was how the Hunters and Awakened, in general, worked. They followed the guidance of their traits and skills, coupled with their arts.

In general, most hunters were not even flexible since they wouldn't learn the concept but rather memorize things.

Irina continued, "That's where these basic blocks come in handy. They're not formulas; they're like the building blocks of a language. You assemble them as needed and adapt them to your situation. It's more fluid and adaptable, which can complement your style as a Mage."

Astron absorbed the information. This was what he also already knew, but he didn't want to disturb Irina's flow by interrupting.

She clearly has her own way of delivery. Thus, he let her do as she pleased.

'It amusing to see her like that.'

He was also amused a little, though he would never admit.

"Let's start with something simple, then," Irina said, flipping to the first page of the [Level 0] magic section.

Many different words were written there.

「Create」

「Haste」

「Rotate」

「Anchor」

「Delay」

「Spread」

There were many others as well, but those were the ones listed on top of the page.

Irina pointed to the various words on the page. "These are the basic blocks for [Level 0] magic. Each one has a specific effect, but it's how you combine and deploy them that creates the actual magic. Think of it like constructing a sentence in a language only mages understand."

Astron observed the words, recognizing them from his previous encounters with magical theory. The simplicity of the blocks appealed to his pragmatic mindset.

"To make these blocks work," Irina explained, "you first need a base—a material infused with concentrated mana psions of elements. This becomes the canvas on which you'll paint your magic. The raw mana alone won't do much; it needs direction, a path. That's where these basic blocks come in."

Irina produced a small sphere of concentrated fire mana psions, each flickering with elemental energy. "This is your base. Now, pick a basic block and try combining it. Let's start with something easy, like 'Rotate.' Imagine what would happen if you apply this to the mana base."

Astron studied the vial and the word 'Rotate' on the page. He focused mentally, picturing the concept of rotation and its application to the raw mana.

The book was already clearly explaining to him how to control the mana psions that were created. How to create those pathways using the circuits in his body.

Irina noticed the genuine focus in Astron's eyes as he concentrated on the concept of rotation. "Now, let's try it practically. Use 'Rotate' on this pen," she suggested, pointing to a pen resting on the library table.

Without hesitation, Astron extended his hand towards the pen. His mind swiftly deployed the mental formula he had envisioned, and a subtle hum of energy surrounded the pen. Slowly, the pen started to rotate on its own accord, turning in a precise circle.

Irina's eyes widened slightly, impressed by the immediate success. "Well, you catch on fast. That's the essence of these basic blocks—they respond to your intent. The clearer your visualization, the more precise and effective the magic becomes."

Astron nodded, his calm demeanor undisturbed. "It's efficient."

"Exactly!" Irina grinned.

'It is just the basics, though.'

The basics of magic were actually something that would be taught at the academy in the second year already since it was something that was crucial in the future, but Astron didn't want to waste his talent.

However, the [level 0] magic was quite easy to master, so Irina didn't put much thought into it. A mage's talent wasn't solely on the part of calculation or knowledge, but also in their comprehension and their innate mana talents and potency of their magical power.

For instance, Irina wasn't necessarily the best calculator out there, but she was one of the strongest in her generation. That was because of her traits, her lineage, and her attributes, which all assisted her in that form.

Of course, she also had the instinct to control the magic in her flowing state of mind; thus, she was exceptional.

"Now, let's explore another one. Pick any from the list and try it on a different material. Experimentation is key to mastering these basics."

As Astron delved into trying various combinations, Irina shared small tips and tricks she had developed over her own studies.

Surprisingly, Astron not only grasped these insights immediately but also incorporated them seamlessly into his practice. His innate talent for quick comprehension and application became evident as he effortlessly picked up on the finer points of mana control.

Irina couldn't help but be impressed. "You catch on faster than I expected. Most struggle with these subtleties, but you seem to have an intuitive understanding."

Astron simply nodded, focusing on refining his control further. The library, once silent, now resonated with the hum of magic as the two delved deeper into the intricacies of [Level 0] magic.

As the night progressed, the moonlight filtering through the library windows gradually gave way to the soft hues of dawn.

Irina and Astron continued their study session in the quiet chemistry between the two growing with each second.

Eventually, the first rays of sunlight pierced through the windows, casting a warm glow on the books and the now- empty library. Irina stretched, feeling a sense of accomplishment. "Well, look at that. We've pulled an all-nighter."

Astron, while maintaining his calm demeanor, looked at the final result. "It was productive, at least."

Irina chuckled, feeling a newfound connection with her teammate. "Who would have thought we'd end up studying magic together in the library at the crack of dawn? You owe me one, don't forget."

"I won't," he replied, nodding his head. "If you need anything from me, just call. I will be there."

"....." hearing his serious reply, Irina's smile widened. "I will use it well."

As they gathered their belongings and left the library, the campus had come alive with the activities of a new day. The solitude of the early morning was replaced by the bustling energy of students preparing for classes.

Chapter 235 Chapter 54.1 - Archery Competition

"That certainly works well."

I mumbled after leaving the library. After seeing the improvements in my trait [Perceptive Insight], the first thing I did was, of course, to test it.

After all, things related to mana and magic weren't that easy to understand and absorb as knowledge and put into practice.

Thus, I was just occasionally practicing them, especially the things that I found normally useful to myself.

However, now that I had such an ability, I knew things would get smoother from now on.

'Not a full mage, but not completely neglectful either.'

Not everyone could become a mage, and I knew for a fact that my talent didn't lie in there. None of my traits were directed towards that occupation, as my class is mainly Weapon Master. Thus, I am someone who needs to utilize weapons in combat.

But that doesn't mean learning spells are unnecessary. Contrary to what people think in general, magic doesn't necessarily mean high damage output all the time.

It is such a vast topic that countless different sub-areas are formed underneath it.

"Utility," I muttered, a thoughtful expression on my face. "That's where the real power lies."

As I continued my stroll through the academy corridors, the magical essence in the air felt different to me now, as if I had gained a heightened awareness of its intricacies. Even the walls felt a little different.

'Certainly, the academy would use enhanced walls.'

Even though it was not common, there were times when the academy was actually under attack. At first, before Arcadia Hunter Academy was even established, some of the first academies in the human domain were wiped out because they were on the edge of the domain.

Their first thought was to make students counter as much of the experience as they could; thus, by putting them on the border of the wilderness, the students would actually be closer to the battlefield.

However, that came with its own disadvantage since those academics were also more prone to attacks. None of them survived, aside from a few, and now those academies are included among the most prestigious academies in the human domain.

'This is more than just a boost in perception. It's like seeing the world through a different lens.'

Returning to my room to take a shower, I couldn't help but consider the utility of magic in a combat scenario.

"Imagine," I thought, "augmenting the bullets with [Haste] and [Rotate]."

After all, in essence, the reason why the bullets were a lot more destructive than other weapons was not because of the innate speed they possessed but actually their rotation.

The angular momentum is quite a force itself, and the design of the bullets utilizes that aspect. After all, the preservation of momentum is the most important rule of physics in the case of collisions.

Of course, temporary body enhancements, [Reverse], [Clear], [Compress], [Spread], [Preserve]....

There were many others in the book, and now all of those are in my head. That alone itself is sufficient for the time being.

Just like that, I returned to my room.....

"It seems you have gotten a good rest."

In the same place that they met just three days ago, Sylvie once again stood before Astron.

"I did."

After the talk she had with Astron, she decided to take his advice seriously and talked with Jasmine about what had transpired in the Western Uxbridge.

Even though she felt something weird from Danielle, that wasn't the case for Jasmine. Even with her own powers, she couldn't feel any ill intent from her. Thus, her trust in Jasmine was deeper.

After her conversation with Astron, Sylvie heeded his advice and spoke with Jasmine about the events in Western Uxbridge. Jasmine's response and support brought a profound sense of relief. As Sylvie stood before Astron once again in the familiar setting, she felt like a burden had been lifted from her shoulders.

"That is good to hear," Astron replied, acknowledging Sylvie's presence. His gaze, as usual, was penetrating, but Sylvie sensed a subtle shift. It wasn't the same stern scrutiny; instead, there was a quiet understanding that seemed to have developed between them.

"That talk with Jasmine helped a lot," Sylvie confessed, a genuine smile gracing her lips. "I feel like I can move forward now without carrying the weight of everything alone." The vulnerability she had shown during their training seemed to have forged a connection, an unspoken understanding that lingered between them.

'I wished you talked a little bit more though. Wouldn't that help you as well?'

She couldn't help but think deeply. She also wanted to listen to him, she wanted to know more about him and why he was holding such pain underneath.

'I will do it when it is the time.'

But she couldn't ask, as the walls surrounding him were too thick. So she was waiting for the right moment. She also didn't have the courage to ask right now anyway.

Astron nodded the slightest hint of approval in his expression. "If that is the case, I assume you are ready with the training today."

Sylvie nodded with a newfound determination, her eyes reflecting a seriousness that echoed her commitment to the training.

"Yes, I'm ready. Let's continue," she affirmed, her voice carrying a resilience that hadn't been present before.

Acknowledging Sylvie's readiness, Astron moved beside her, standing in a calm and composed manner. He demonstrated the basic stance once again, his movements fluid and deliberate. Sylvie observed closely, absorbing the details.

"Start with your feet," he began, guiding her gaze downward. "Shoulder-width apart, remember? And the knees are slightly bent. This provides a stable foundation, crucial for balance and mobility."

Sylvie adjusted her stance, mirroring Astron's posture. This time, there was a noticeable improvement in her confidence. Astron stood beside her, his presence providing a subtle reassurance.

"Good," he acknowledged. "Now, the upper body. Keep your hands up, close to your face. Elbows tucked in. Imagine creating a protective barrier. This is your first line of defense."

As Sylvie followed the instructions, Astron observed her with a discerning eye. He could sense a growing familiarity in her movements, a more intuitive response to his guidance.

"Now, let's focus on relaxation," Astron continued, addressing the residual tension he had sensed before. "Being firm doesn't mean being rigid. Find that balance between readiness and ease. You're not just defending; you're also prepared to counter."

Sylvie, absorbing his advice, consciously allowed her body to relax while maintaining the defensive stance. Astron could see a gradual transformation as if her body was beginning to integrate the teachings.

Astron stood beside her, making occasional adjustments with a gentle touch. His keen awareness allowed him to detect weaknesses and areas that needed attention.

This time, Sylvie was determined to not make any sound and not give any reaction. The last time, she was so embarrassed that she wanted to bury herself in a hole.

In Astron's mind, he sketched a mental map of Sylvie's physique, noting the muscles that required strengthening.

He planned to tailor the training to address these specific needs, ensuring a holistic approach to her physical development.

"You have been training your body, right?" As the training reached its end, Astron asked.

"Yes. I had been running and doing some cardio training to increase my stamina."

Astron nodded in acknowledgment of Sylvie's efforts. "Good. Stamina is crucial, but for what we're working on, we'll need to target specific muscle groups as well."

He proceeded to outline a detailed training regimen tailored to address the weaknesses he had observed during their sessions. Sylvie listened attentively, her determination evident in her eyes.

"For your legs," Astron began, "we need to strengthen your quadriceps and hamstrings. Squats and lunges will be beneficial. Start with bodyweight exercises and gradually add resistance as you progress."

He continued to provide detailed instructions for each exercise, explaining the importance of maintaining proper form to avoid unnecessary strain. As Sylvie absorbed the information, Astron could see her commitment to the training.

"Now, for your core," he continued, "planks and leg raises will help. Strengthening your core is fundamental; it's the center of your balance and stability."

Astron's guidance extended to upper body exercises as well, focusing on the muscles involved in maintaining a defensive stance. He emphasized the importance of a balanced approach, ensuring that no muscle group was neglected.

"As you follow this regimen," Astron advised, "pay attention to your body. If you feel any discomfort beyond the usual fatigue, don't hesitate to modify or skip certain exercises. Consistency is key, but so is listening to your body."

After all, even though he created this regimen using his observations, that didn't mean his eyes always showed the truth.

There were many times one would make a mistake thinking everybody's muscles worked in the same manner. Even though in the molecular part, they were close, when countless blocks formed a complex structure, that would no longer be the case.

Sylvie nodded, absorbing the information and feeling a sense of gratitude for Astron's dedication to her training.

'He did all that for me.'

The realization that he invested effort into creating a personalized regimen for her sparked a flicker of happiness within her.

"Thank you," she expressed genuinely, a smile forming on her face. "I appreciate the time and thought you put into this."

Astron nodded. "It's essential to address weaknesses systematically. If you follow this regimen diligently, you should see improvements."

Encouraged by his words, Sylvie hesitated for a moment before asking, "If I have questions or need help with the exercises, can I come to you?"

Astron considered her request for a moment before responding, "Certainly. I'll help when I'm available."

"Hehehe...."

A small, sheepish laugh left her mouth as she couldn't help but feel happy.

"...."

"Cough...I will leave now."

However, that soon turned into embarrassment as she left the place with hurried steps.

The weekend of the time soon came. The classes had already ended for the week, and the students were enjoying their campus lives.

However, not everyone shared that same sentiment and experience, as some of the students were busy preparing for something.

After all, for the Archery Club students, this weekend was something that was going to be detrimental to their future there.

Lilia, in particular, left her room with an air of annoyance on her face. The burden of the upcoming competition seemed to add a layer of irritation to her usual composed demeanor. As she walked through the campus, her mind was preoccupied with thoughts of the challenges that lay ahead.

'This is such a hassle.'

The Archery Club's stringent standards and the looming threat of elimination were not sitting well with her. As the leader of Olympus' Vanguard, she was accustomed to being in control, but the impending competition introduced an element of unpredictability that she found irksome.

'Why did I even agree to join this club?'

The question lingered in her mind, but deep down, she knew the answer. It was an opportunity to observe and potentially recruit talented individuals. However, the inconvenience of adhering to the club's rules grated on her nerves.

'Whatever. I'll get through this.'

As Lilia was about to leave her room, she coincidentally met Julia and Ethan in the dorm hallway. They exchanged greetings as Julia's vibrant energy contrasted with Lilia's visible annoyance.

"Hey, Lilia! Where are you off to?" Julia asked, her tone lighthearted.

Lilia sighed, rolling her eyes a bit before responding, "I have to go through some testing nonsense at the Archery Club. Apparently, they want to evaluate our skills or something. Such a bother."

"Well, it's part of being in a club, right? Just think of it as a chance to showcase your skills."

"I suppose. But I have more important things to do than prove my archery prowess to a bunch of people."

Julia grinned, teasingly nudging Lilia's side. "Come on, it might be fun! Plus, we get to show off how awesome Olympus' Vanguard is."

"I'm not sure outsiders are allowed to watch these evaluations."

Julia raised an eyebrow, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Well, if they are, imagine the spectacle it could be! The mighty leader of Olympus' Vanguard showcases her skills. It could be inspiring for others."

Lilia tried to dismiss the idea. "I'm not here to inspire anyone. I just want to get this done with minimal fuss."

Ethan, with a chuckle, added, "But it won't hurt to have some fun while doing it, right?"

"Exactly! We'll make it entertaining. Trust me; it'll be a blast!"

Lilia, feeling a bit outnumbered, sighed in resignation. "Fine, but don't expect anything extraordinary. This is just a formality."

"Yeah, yeah....Sure...."

Chapter 236 Chapter 54.2 - Archery Competition

As I walked towards the Archer Club grounds, the hum of excited chatter among students filled the air.

"Did you hear? They say Lilia from Olympus' Vanguard is here for the evaluations."

"Seriously? That's going to be a show. I wonder if she can live up to the hype."

"Archery Club evaluations always draw attention. Last time, we had some surprising talents join."

"I hope they don't make us shoot from too far. My aim isn't the best."

"I heard they're introducing some new targets. It's going to be challenging."

"I just hope they finish quickly. I have some other plans for the weekend."

"Look at those targets, all set up for precision shots. This is nerve-wracking."

The rumors about Lilia's presence were spreading like wildfire, and it wasn't surprising. Her beauty alone had made her one of the most famous students in the academy, second only to Victor, the first rank. The popularity gap between them was explained by Victor's unique charisma, making him the ideal protagonist in this world of weak-to-strong dynamics.

"In a sense, Victor is the perfect protagonist of the world," I thought to myself, acknowledging the inherent nature of this world as a game where characters grow stronger over time. Victor, with his established strength and charisma, didn't fit the mold of a character who evolves and improves throughout the story.

"Though, it is sad that this world is a weak-to-strong type of game," I mused, recognizing the limitations of Victor's character in the context of the narrative structure.

As I approached the Archer Club grounds, the anticipation in the air intensified. The sounds of students discussing the upcoming archery evaluations hinted at the excitement and curiosity surrounding the event.

"Who knows, maybe he is the main character of another book," I considered, entertaining the idea that in some alternate timeline or parallel world, Victor might be the central figure in a different narrative. However, such theories remained unproven and speculative.

Upon reaching the Archer Club grounds, I found a spot to wait for the competition to begin. The atmosphere buzzed with a mix of nervous energy and eagerness.

The prospect of witnessing Lilia's skills in the archery evaluations added an extra layer of anticipation to the air.

I settled into a quiet corner, observing the surroundings and wondering how the competition would unfold.

'There will be many talents here and possibly many eyes as well.'

Normally, people from the outside world wouldn't be allowed to enter the academy. However, Adrian will actually utilize his family's resources to make some people close to him enter. They will be the scouts from guilds that are looking for talents.

In a sense, this was a pretty good move to increase his influence inside the upper echelons of the guild managers.

However, that move will result in a different way, as he won't expect that Lilia will outshine himself in the past.

The people he had called as scouts would witness how brilliant Lilia was, and in the end, he would realize what he had attempted worked in Lilia's favor more.

The anticipation in the air grew as the time for the archery evaluations approached. The mixture of nervous energy and eagerness enveloped the atmosphere, creating an electric buzz that hinted at the significance of the event.

As I observed my surroundings, contemplating the unfolding competition, the hushed voices of students nearby caught my attention.

"Did you see? Lilia's here for the evaluations. She's from Olympus' Vanguard!"

"I heard she's unbelievably skilled. Can't wait to see her in action."

"Look at her; she's like a goddess with that green hair and red eyes."

Curiosity piqued, I turned my attention to the entrance of the Archer Club grounds. Three figures walked in, drawing the admiration and fawning whispers of the surrounding students.

The first, a young man with wavy blue hair and an incredibly handsome face, caught the eyes of many. It was Ethan with his usual and natural smile.

'So, Ethan is here too.'

Outsiders weren't prohibited from watching.

The second, Julia, a girl with distinctive white bob-cut hair, carried an air of confidence that demanded attention. She was still the same as well.

And then, the third figure, Lilia from Olympus' Vanguard, with her striking green hair and red eyes, commanded a different level of awe.

The students couldn't help but fawn over her, comparing her to a goddess.

'I guess she encountered them on the way.'

Seeing the expression she was making, it seemed she hadn't called them here. Well, knowing Julia's personality and how playful she is, Lilia would most likely find her bothersome.

'With Ethan being here, I guess he will also be entangled with this.'

If Ethan was here, that meant things highly likely would play just as they did in the game since Ethan would also realize Adrian's gaze on Lilia.

As the trio settled into the Archer Club grounds, the reactions from the students around me became more apparent. Some girls began to fan over Ethan, captivated by his charm and appearance.

"Did you see him? Ethan's just... wow, he's so hot!"

"Seriously! I heard he's the most rapidly improving student in the Academy. That's Ethan, right?"

The comments, filled with awe and fascination, echoed through the air. Ethan's charismatic presence seemed to cast a spell on those around him, creating a magnetic allure that was hard to ignore.

"He's like a living legend or something."

"Nah, Victor is better man. Are you crazy?"

"Bullshit. Do you think your Victor could improve this much after just awakening months ago, huh? Even I could become the world's best if I were the son of Blackthorn's."

"So what? In the end, Victor is the first ranked. And his cold demeanor is the best."

"..."

The students continued to share their impressions of Ethan, their words painting a vivid picture of his skills and charm, though comparisons of him to Victor spread wildly at the same time.

'So, it started.'

As recognition spread, the atmosphere became charged with a mix of admiration and eagerness to witness his prowess during the club evaluations next time. After all, many students wanted to see the spear skills of the well-known Hartley family.

FLINCH!

Just as I was contemplating the upcoming evaluations and the potential showcase of the Hartley family's skills, a sudden flinch seized me. It was as if an invisible force had startled me, and for a moment, my focus wavered.

'This.....'

I quickly realized that it wasn't a random occurrence but rather my passive ability, [Vengeful Bane], at play.

'Demonic Energy.'

The sensation lingered, and a realization dawned on me—there was a presence of a demon contractor nearby.

Since my body had already improved quite a lot, I was a lot better than sensing mana. And it seemed that was also the case with demonic energy.

I scanned the surroundings, trying to locate the source, but it eluded my senses. The mysterious presence remained elusive, shrouded in mystery.

'This guy is quite good.'

The demonic energy disappeared as it appeared. So, I didn't have much choice.

'But this changes things a little.'

There was one reason for a demonic human to be there.

'To see the talents and assassinate the ones that could pose a threat.'

I guessed they were also possibly the ones that would later contact Adrian, as from how skilled they looked, they seemed to be more on the higher-ranking side.

'Then, I guess I should show enough strength.'

I was already planning to downgrade myself as I didn't want to be Adrian's target, but with this, my choice solidified.

TOK!

Just at that moment, I heard a sound of knocking from the sides.

'Well, I guess we are starting....'

As Lilia, Julia, and Ethan entered the archery grounds, they immediately attracted attention. Lilia, revered as a goddess in the academy due to her beauty and status, naturally drew eyes wherever she went.

The presence of Julia, energetic and vibrant, and Ethan, who carried an air of strength, only added to the spectacle.

Whispers and hushed conversations spread through the crowd as the students noticed the arrival of Olympus' Vanguard.

The archery competitions were not only a test of skill but also an opportunity for students to witness the prowess of high-

ranking individuals in the academy.

'Tch....Annoying....'

Lilia, aware of the attention, maintained her composed demeanor, though her annoyance lingered beneath the surface.

She didn't dislike it when she was praised, but not everyone was praising her. There were some annoying gazes of audacious students who didn't know their place and looked at her with those disgusting gazes.

Ethan, who had experienced his fair share of admiring gazes from girls, couldn't help but ask, "Isn't it a bit uncomfortable, though? I know I get weird looks from some girls, and it's not the most pleasant feeling."

Lilia, brushing aside a strand of her hair with a hint of annoyance, replied, "It comes with the territory. When you're in the limelight, people will look, and not everyone is going to offer admiration. Some will harbor envy, others fascination. It's an inevitable occurrence for celebrities like us. We just need to endure it."

Julia interjected, "But isn't it better to enjoy it? I mean, we're here to make an impact, right?"

Lilia sighed, "There's a fine line between enjoying the attention and being bothered by it. I'd rather focus on the task at hand and get through this competition without unnecessary distractions."

"That is so like your answer." Ethan admired this about her, as he couldn't do the same. When he first came to school after mid-terms, the attention he got was so intense that he felt suffocated.

Even he, as a member of Hartley's, felt that bothered, and he couldn't help but think Lilia's case was more severe.

TOK!

Just as they arrived in the middle of the center, a sudden sound of something hitting echoed around the place, and everyone's attention was gathered there.

Adrian's presence demanded attention as he confidently stepped forward, acknowledging the students gathered for the competition.

"Hello," he greeted, his voice resonating through the archery grounds. "I am Adrian, the captain of the Arcadia Archery Club. I trust you are all ready for today's evaluations."

Adrian continued with a short but impactful introduction about the club's dedication to perfection in the art of archery. He spoke of their commitment to excellence and how the archery competitions were a tradition that had been upheld for years, separating the dedicated from the mediocre.

"As members of the Archery Club, we are expected to embody precision, adaptability, and unwavering dedication. Today's competitions will test our member's skills under various conditions, and we will determine who remains and who must leave the club," he announced with a firm resolve.

Adrian wasted no time and immediately began organizing the students for the competitions. Targets were set, and the atmosphere grew tense as the first participants stepped forward.

"Then, let the competition begin...."

Chapter 237 Chapter 54.3 - Archery Competition

"Then, let the competition begin...."

The air was charged with anticipation as the first student, a slender figure with a quiet demeanor and glasses, was called forward.

As my gaze focused on him, I couldn't help but notice a slight nervousness in his stance.

'Indeed, he is really nervous.'

His slender body seemed to carry the weight of expectation, and his glasses added a touch of vulnerability.

One would normally think he was someone who wasn't perfectly specialized in the art of archery, but the small muscles underneath his clothes were saying otherwise. Though, without a keen eye, one wouldn't see it, thanks to the fact that his clothes were baggy.

'Let's see how he will fare.'

Observing him closely, I wondered how he would fare in the archery evaluations and if he would be able to showcase the precision and adaptability that Adrian had emphasized.

'This will also act as a good way to see the general level.'

It was good that I wasn't called first, as that would make things a little more uncomfortable.

Adrian, with his authoritative presence, stepped forward, suggesting to the nervous student that he should start. He explained how this part of the competition would work, revealing that each participant would be given ten different arrows and a common bow to ensure fairness.

"After that," Adrian continued, "I will signal the target placement, and the environment between the target and archer will change constantly. Your ability to adapt will be crucial."

He gestured toward the second-year mages, indicating that they would be responsible for altering the environment during the competition.

"Keep in mind that precision and adaptability are key. Let's see how you handle it."

Hearing those, I nodded inwardly. This was the type of test both me and others were expecting, so we weren't much surprised. However, of course, those who could see the truth would fare a little.

'He indirectly said the environment is in the control of mages he called.'

In a sense, he held the power to control the difficulty of the test.

'Well, not that it matters much.'

Adrian signaled to the young man, prompting him to step forward and take his place on the archery grounds.

With a determined nod, the student grabbed his bow, his focused expression betraying a hint of nervous anticipation.

"He is pretty good."

As he carefully notched his first arrow, a subtle yet skillful manipulation of mana began to emanate from him. From how he handled things, in my eyes, he was better than my last group.

'Well, I guess we are starting with a good piece.'

The air around him seemed to respond to his command, creating a subtle shimmer that hinted at his proficiency in mana manipulation.

The spectators also observed in silence, captivated by the young man's display of skill.

"He's not just a novice; look at how he manipulates mana."

"Did you see that? The way he controlled the arrow's trajectory with his mana?"

It was evident that he was not just a novice; his controlled mana manipulation spoke volumes about his training and dedication.

SWOOSH!

With a steady breath, he released the arrow. It soared through the air, navigating the changing environment that the second-year mages manipulated.

The tension in the air reached its peak as the arrow approached the target, and a collective breath was held.

THUNK!

The arrow struck the target with precision, earning a murmur of approval from the onlookers.

"Well done."

"He did hit this time."

The young man's expression remained focused, a mix of determination and relief evident in his eyes as he didn't stop.

After he hit the first target, it immediately disappeared, and another appeared, this time in a distance farther away.

SWOOSH!

He released another arrow once again at a speed that was commendable. This time, his arms were holding the bow, and the bow itself was charged with mana as the range of the attack was no longer in the normal physical range.

It was a pretty general technique widely used to increase the speed of the arrow.

THUD!

His attack once again hit the target, but this time, it was slightly off the mark.

SWIRL

It was because of the small change in the air between the target and himself. With my eyes, I could see the wind positions being manipulated.

'Mage has started.'

The amount wasn't seemingly huge, but the mage skillfully enough to control it precisely to generate a force of wind enough to disturb the path of the attack.

"Tch."

The guy clicked his tongue as he also realized that the mage was disturbing him.

'He is using his skill.'

Undeterred, the archer decided to employ a skill. His body emitted a faint glow as he activated a particular ability.

It wasn't a good choice to reveal one's skill that early, in my opinion, and most of the experienced audience seemed to think the same.

'After all, the mage will also realize.'

This was a test. A test to see one's adaptability to different conditions. Immediately using your skill rather than finding your own solutions first meant you were reliant on your skill and weren't creative enough to finish on your own, and that was a minus point.

With newfound confidence, he fired another shot. However, the distance to the target had increased, and this time, the mage added a new challenge by creating a swirling wind that veiled the target.

The arrow sailed through the air, skillfully navigating the wind disturbance, but the added difficulty was evident.

THUNK!

The arrow hit the target, though not as cleanly, just as before.

As the competition progressed, the targets continued to appear at greater distances, and the mage cleverly introduced various environmental challenges. Rain poured down, fog enveloped the area, and gusts of wind altered the trajectory of each arrow.

At the end of the three shots, the archer was decided to be challenged further.

Moving targets emerged from the fog, and, undeterred by the obscured visibility, he aimed and fired. Two arrows found their mark, hitting the moving targets with impressive accuracy, but the third one missed.

Adrian stepped forward, signaling the conclusion of the test.

"Well done. Your adaptability and marksmanship have been tested thoroughly today. You may return to the group."

As the archer returned, the audience exchanged murmurs of analysis and opinions, contemplating the strengths and weaknesses displayed during the test.

"I think he relied too much on his skill. Not a good move in my book."

"True, but did you see how he adapted to the changing conditions? That takes skill." "I agree, adaptability is crucial. But using the skill so early might show a lack of confidence in his own abilities."

"His marksmanship is commendable, though. Those moving targets in the fog—impressive!"

My ears picked some of the words from the ones taking notes to check him, and just as they had said, his performance wasn't bad.

He clearly showed how it needed to be done, though it wasn't anything impressive. But what was more important was the expression on Adrian's face.

'Let's wait a little longer.'

As the anticipation lingered, another contestant was called forward.

This time, a boy with a handsome face and a confident smile stepped into the center. Some of the students recognized him as the ace of a particular class, murmuring his name in recognition.

"Isn't that Alex? Was he on this club?"

"You know him?"

"Yes. He's the ace of Class HC101!"

"Really?"

"Yeah, I heard he's got some serious archery skills from my girlfriend there. Let's see if he lives up to the hype."

Alex confidently took his place, and Adrian nodded, signaling the commencement of the test.

'This will show the difference.'

In a sense, this scene would show what was going to happen with the test now. If what I had in my mind was correct, then things would be different from the student before.

Adrian's signal prompted Alex to grab his bow, his confident smile undeterred. As he prepared for his first shot, I couldn't help but notice a subtle glance he threw towards the mage.

'Interesting.'

Alex commenced with the test, and his first three shots were smooth, hitting the targets with impressive precision.

However, as the test progressed, the atmosphere shifted. The mage subtly manipulated the environment, creating changes that were too unnatural but subtle enough not to draw attention.

'He's making it difficult without making it obvious.'

The audience, including Alex, seemed oblivious to the subtle manipulations. His next shots, though accurate, lacked the smoothness of the initial ones.

It was evident that the changing conditions were affecting his performance, and the challenges were becoming more pronounced.

THUD!

As the last arrow hit the final target, Alex released a heavy sigh.

'Why couldn't I do it just in the training?'

It seems he had thought like that. This was the reality of this sad world. It was never meant to be a fair competition from the start, and Adrian was just proving that.

After all, even though he had called many other sponsors and the ones he was close to, he also didn't want to make the talents shine too much. In a sense, this was his goal.

This shatters the confidence of possible future contenders for the Bow Emperor title and blocks their paths.

The world was such a place.

"That bastard....This is rigged...."

At that moment, I heard a voice coming from my side. Turning there, I noticed a girl with red hair and bright green eyes looking at me, though her face was covered with a mask and a hoodie. It seemed she didn't want all that attention until she competed.

"When did she come here?"

I asked myself. It was highly likely that I had lost myself in the observation and hadn't noticed her approaching.

"Sneaking upon people from behind is not good," I mumbled.

"I didn't sneak upon you. It was just that you didn't notice."

"Really?"

There was no way I wouldn't notice a random person approaching me unless they hadn't hidden their presence. However, I wasn't in the mood to bicker right now.

"Yes."

"If you say so."

"But, what do you think about this competition," Lilia asked, her bright eyes looking for a reaction.

Knowing her character and how she thinks, I knew right now she was testing me.

"What do you mean?"

"....You really don't know?"

"Don't know what?"

"...Never mind."

I didn't dislike talking with Lilia or her presence. Even though at first she was a little annoying, people with highly competitive spaces tend to cultivate such traits to survive, so I didn't mind.

But I also don't like revealing everything instantly.

'Let's see how long her talent goes.'

Testing one's limits of talents is also important, especially considering Lilia is an important figure in the future. This will also give me a good idea about the general level of the main cast.

"But, how do you think you will fare?"

"Me? I don't know. I think I will do enough."

"Enough? What is enough for you?"

"Enough to not get expelled from the club?"

"Is it your criteria?"

"Why? Is it bad?"

"Those who don't fare to be the best will never improve."

Hearing this, I nodded in acknowledgment. In a sense, this was true, especially for those who did everything with pure passion and abhorred strong egos.

"True, but not everyone seeks the same path. Some see these types of things merely as tools, stepping stones for their goals."

At the end of the day, I never wanted to be the best Archer in the world, nor did I want to be on the top. All those were meaningless for me anyway.

'I am just here to take my revenge.'

It was nothing much and nothing less.

Lilia raised an eyebrow, seemingly intrigued by my response, but before she could continue, Adrian's voice cut through the conversation.

"Astron Natusalune. Come forward."

It seemed my time had come.

Chapter 238 Chapter 54.4 - Archery Competition

Once, a wise man said to fear those who keep their composure even in front of nothingness as they are the ones who can adapt the most.

That was one of my favorite quotes. For some reason, as I walked to the stage where I would perform my archery, that quote came to my mind regardless of whether it fit the situation or not.

'Sigh.....'

Inwardly, I sighed, seeing all those eyes on me. Some of them were discerning, some of them happy. I even saw some young students looking at me intently.

'Why, though?'

I wondered but couldn't find the reason in my head, though neither did I have to. After all, it was just a random thought from my side.

'I see....'

After a second, the reason came instantly. They had been quiet for a while, but I guess the words that stuck upon me were still there.

As I reached the stage, I took a moment to look around, scanning the faces of those gathered on the Archer Club grounds.

The buzz of anticipation and curiosity surrounded me, and I could feel the eyes of others on me as well.

'Let's see how this goes.'

This wasn't the first time I was at the center of attention since the rumors that were spread about me before did the same. So, I was quite proud of my mental fortitude as I had been rather experienced in this aspect.

With a calm demeanor, I walked forward, the bow slung across my back, feeling familiar and comforting. I reached the center of the grounds, where Adrian awaited, his gaze assessing and expectant.

'Well, you might see what you expect.'

After all, what he wanted was an asset that he could use but, at the same time, an asset that would never be able to outshine him.

Show us what you've got, Astron Natusalune," he said, his tone neutral yet carrying an underlying challenge.

Nodding in acknowledgment, I unslung the bow from my back and felt the familiar weight in my hands. The sleek design and the smooth touch brought back memories of countless training sessions.

I hadn't been focusing on using my compound bow for a while now since I used Celestalith most of the time. But that didn't mean I neglected my archery training.

To train my archery skills only, I had no choice but to use my first bow as Celestalith's bow form is a lot destructive for its own good.

'This should be interesting.'

My eyes subtly scanned the surroundings, gauging the positioning of the mages who would be manipulating the environment during the evaluation.

I couldn't pinpoint their exact locations, but I was prepared for the challenges they might throw my way.

It was not like my target was them either, so that didn't matter that much.

'Let's make this quick.'

Taking a quick breath, I calmed myself down to the utmost perfection. My eyes were focused on my body at its peak for marksmanship.

Adrian's gaze lingered on me for a moment longer, and then he raised his hand, giving the signal for the competition to begin. The atmosphere tensed, and my focus intensified.

As the competition started, two targets materialized before my eyes, strategically placed to test precision and reaction speed. My dynamic vision allowed me to immediately perceive their appearance.

'Well, well, they're not wasting any time.'

However, I chose not to act immediately.

Instead, I held back, downplaying my abilities. I didn't want to reveal the full extent of my skills from the outset.

'Considering the reaction Adrian had shown to previous contestants, this should be enough.'

After all, getting the spotlight would make things a little harder, so I analyzed Adrian's mimics and signs.

The key was to strike a balance between showcasing competence and leaving room for improvement, so in my head, I immediately formed a threshold performance I would show to optimize my thoughts.

'Let's keep it simple for now.'

I smoothly drew an arrow from my quiver and nocked it onto the bowstring, taking aim at one of the targets. The audience watched in anticipation, waiting for the release of the arrow.

'Don't make it too obvious.'

SWOOSH!

With a controlled release, the arrow sailed through the air and hit the target dead center.

THUD!

The onlookers reacted with a subtle mix of surprise and approval, but I maintained a slightly shaky expression, subtly downplaying the accomplishment to make it seem like I was nervous.

From the corner of my eye, I could see the reaction of the onlookers, and just as I had intended, aside from some of those, not many were directly impressed.

'One down.'

SWOOSH!

I turned my attention to the second target, repeating the process. The arrow found its mark, hitting with precision, and I allowed a subtle satisfaction to flicker in my eyes.

Yet, I refrained from showing too much as if I had at least the calmness of a marksman. Not getting the focus of Adrian didn't mean just getting expelled from the club.

Adrian signaled for more targets, and this time, the stakes were raised. The new targets appeared at a greater distance, and to add to the challenge, they started moving.

My eyes analyzed the situation, and I couldn't help but shake my head at the increased difficulty level.

'This is not even that hard.'

From outside, this may be hard, but for me, who had been training in the dungeons and with my newly increased stats, it wasn't as challenging as it seemed.

'Though it is not about the stats.'

The dynamic nature of this evaluation demanded not only precision but also adaptability. My gaze tracked the moving targets as I contemplated the best approach.

'Let's keep it interesting a little.'

I smoothly retrieved two arrows from my quiver, nocking them onto the bowstring. I felt like the tension in the air grew as the audience anticipated my next move, though it may have been my own delusion.

SWOOSH!

With a swift motion, I released the arrows. They sailed through the air, following calculated trajectories to intercept the moving targets.

'Not bad.'

The arrows hit the targets as they were close, and I could see some of the audience talking amongst themselves. Even some scouts had their eyes on me.

"He is quite good?"

"Not on the level of Alex, but he is certainly not bad."

"What did you say his name was?"

"Astron Natusalune."

"Let's keep tabs on him."

Hearing them proved that I was in the right direction as well.

'This level should be enough.'

Even though I didn't release them fast enough or put much force, at the very least, my technique wasn't bad, and that was my goal to show.

'I have some potential, but I am not that strong enough...'

This was the impression I wanted to convey.

SWOOSH!

After that, I fired two more arrows rapidly at new appearing targets, but this time, they were slightly off the mark.

However, my eyes didn't miss the small wind psions moving around the field. I was already well aware of that from the start, though I didn't do anything about it.

"Well, at least he could hit the targets."

"Yeah....."

This lowered my evaluation a little bit, but that was fine. It was the way Adrian checked on me, as he was the one who directed magicians so that my evaluation would lower.

"Tch."

I clicked my tongue as if to show that I wasn't expecting the arrow to miss while standing in frustration. It was an act, and I could see Adrian's change of expression, albeit it was little.

As the evaluation continued, the difficulty level escalated. The targets appeared again, but this time, the conditions changed. A strong wind swept through the archery grounds, bringing a noticeable drop in temperature.

'Nature conditions, huh?'

I felt the chill in the air, and my eyes scanned the environment. The wind, combined with the lowered temperature, added an extra layer of complexity to the test.

'This is getting interesting.'

Without hesitation, I retrieved an arrow from my quiver, my movements deliberate and focused. The audience observed, curious to see how I would handle the new challenges.

With a steady aim, I released the arrow. It sailed through the air, battling against the strong wind. However, it didn't hit smoothly compared to previous ones.

'Adapt.'

Thinking about showing a little about how I learned quickly, I adjusted my stance, compensating for the wind's influence.

SWOOSH! THUD!

The second arrow followed suit, hitting the target with improved precision. The audience murmured in response, recognizing the adaptability required for such conditions.

'Let's see how they react to this.'

The environment continued to change, keeping me on my toes. The temperature dropped even more, and the wind intensified.

'This is a true test of adaptability.'

As I faced the changing elements, my every move was observed closely by Adrian, the audience, and the potential scouts.

The evaluation wasn't just about hitting targets; it was about showcasing resilience and the ability to perform under diverse circumstances.

As if nature itself conspired against me, the conditions became even harsher. Rain joined the mix, adding an unpredictable element to the test.

The targets, now moving erratically, posed a greater challenge, and the wind intensified to a level that tested the limits of my archery skills.

'This is quite the show Adrian is putting on.'

The raindrops fell heavily, creating a dynamic and challenging atmosphere. I adjusted my strategy, considering the changing factors. The audience watched, some with fascination, while others analyzed my every move.

"I can do this."

With a 'determined' focus, I aimed at the moving targets, calculating their trajectories amidst the rain and wind.

The arrows left my bow with precision, hitting some targets with admirable accuracy. However, the erratic movements of both targets and arrows revealed the difficulty of the task.

'Let's finish with this one.'

In any case, even though I wasn't showing everything, this was also proving a good training stage for me. In front of the eyes of many people with these changing conditions.

However, rather than aiming for the target's best locations, my goal was a point I had set in my head, and I was testing myself to see if I could hit that point.

In many ways, this was a much harder task.

'Hmm?'

At that moment, a small moving object right in front of the last target caught my eye.

'This?'

It was a small insect that was even hard to see from my location with my eyes, and I doubted the others would be able to see it.

'.....'

For some reason, the desire to hit that fly passed through my head.

The wind howled, rain poured, and the moving targets danced in a chaotic display, and in that split second, the decision was made.

'My progress should be enough.'

I could use my [Eyes of Hourglass], but I wanted to see the extent of my natural capabilities without relying on skills.

"Huff....."

Closing my eyes and steadying my breath, I focused on the sensation in my hand while covering myself with mana.

Opening my eyes, I felt a heightened sense of focus. It was as if the world had slowed down, and I could perceive every little movement around me with startling clarity.

The raindrops hanging in the air, the swaying branches, and, most importantly, the small, elusive insect right in front of the last target.

The archery grounds, now transformed into a tempestuous arena, became the backdrop for this unique feat. The audience and even Adrian seemed momentarily unaware of this micro-

challenge within the larger evaluation.

With a determined focus, I released the arrow, aiming not for the target's center but for the small insect in motion.

THUD!

The arrow sailed through the air with remarkable speed and accuracy, hitting the fly with pinpoint precision.

'Got it.'

And at the end of my eyes, I could see I hit the fly, though for the target wise this was a good enough point.

'I am satisfied.'

For the first time in a while, I felt satisfied with myself.

Chapter 239 Chapter 54.5 - Archery Competition

Adrian's brows furrowed slightly as he observed the deviation from the expected course of action. The onlookers, including the scouting guild members and fellow participants, exchanged puzzled glances.

[Did you do something?]

From the small artifact on his ears, he asked the magicians under his command.

[No. We did just the usual.]

[I see.]

From how it looked just before, Adrian thought Astron Natusalune would be able to hit the target efficiently in the last part.

This was his own way of showing his consolation, as he thought he was also a threat. Thinking that he disturbed him unfairly (?) he decided to let him have his way, but that wasn't the case.

"Sigh, I couldn't do it in the end." Seeing the frustration etched on his face, Adrian shook his head.

'I misjudged him.'

He thought this guy was different from the rumors as he trained relatively hard, but it seemed he wasn't that special.

'Not that it matters.'

In a split second, he dismissed the idea of him being a possible target, and from the looks of the eyes belonging to scouts he invited, it seemed they thought the same as him.

As the arrow struck the target's side, missing the center, the onlookers exchanged perplexed glances. Whispers of confusion and speculation permeated the air.

"What just happened?"

"He missed the center completely."

"I thought he was good, but maybe he's not as skilled as we thought."

"That was a strange choice."

The intricacies of the micro-challenge, the attempt to hit the tiny insect amidst the rain and wind, went unnoticed by everyone in the audience. To them, it appeared as if I had simply miscalculated, casting a shadow on the previous commendable performance.

Adrian, on the other hand, continued to observe with his usual stoicism. His analytical gaze seemed to delve into the layers of the unexpected choice, looking for something beyond the surface.

"Sigh, I couldn't hit it at the end."

So I decided to completely relieve him from his worries, as I showed a rather uninteresting sight. Humans tend to operate on their first impressions as it is a defense mechanism they developed.

'This will work to my advantage.'

Allowing the misconception to linger will create an underestimation that would be advantageous in the long run since the first impression Adrian held for me is now getting control of his own thoughts.

"Why did you do it like that?"

Just as I had returned to my own location, there I had seen the same girl with the mask standing there.

"Like what?"

"You...." Lilia was seemingly displeased at my performance, and I could see she herself was doubting her own assessment. "You could have done better."

"Yeah, I know."

"Then why?"

"I don't know. For some reason, when I was shooting, my arrows didn't move as I thought."

"...That...." Lilia understood the meaning behind my words. Well, that was to be expected since she was well aware of how Adrian had rigged the competition.

"This bastard...." She glared at Adrian with an infuriated gaze. Surprisingly, she had this weird side when she couldn't stand the injustice.

She was truly a weird girl who constantly contradicted herself. Sometimes cold and businesslike individual and sometimes a follower of justice.

Not that I could say anything about that, as I was not that different. It wasn't like I was a person who always pursued justice anyway.

"He's been pulling off these kinds of things lately. Especially if he can't find any useful talent, he pulls this kind of trickery to lower the ones who can compete against him in the future."

Lilia voiced her thoughts, seeing what he was doing right away. In the game, she was aware of that as well.

"But this is the first time I had seen someone do this kind of thing for such a small test. Why would he?" I asked, wanting to see her reaction."

"Well, he is probably expecting a lot from these tests. After all, he would want to find the gems that weren't that noticeable until now. These people will be his hidden trumps in the future, especially in the league where the rules don't limit anything."

The league she mentioned was a different type of field where Awakeners competed against each other for fights.

It was like the UFC on Earth, but with the mana and traits involved, each category had its own weapon.

"Leagues, huh?"

"Indeed."

"I see." I nodded my head, looking at her reaction. "But that doesn't mean you have to lower others for it."

"No, that's where you are wrong. The political and influential world isn't that clean. After all, there are people who value their ego and reputation more than anything."

She seemed rather calm when talking about that.

'Well, she is well integrated in the high society.'

In the future, she would be manipulating many people to gain control, and essentially, she became no different than them.

".....You have a point, but isn't this overdoing it?"

"....Even you know he can do whatever it takes to get what he wants, even if he has to lower you."

I agreed with her viewpoints. Different people had different methods, and nobody had a direct relation to prove which method was right.

After all, the definition of 'right' itself belonged to the subject, and we humans tended to reason ourselves for each act we would do regardless of how bad it looked.

I myself is no different either.

As the conversation between us concluded, Adrian's voice echoed through the archery grounds once again.

"Next participant, Vivian Johanson."

I turned my attention back to the ongoing evaluations, and the newcomer confidently stepped forward.

She wore a smirk that exuded confidence, and as she grabbed her bow, her demeanor was akin to a predator eyeing its prey. "

What are you going to do about it?" I asked Lilia, genuinely curious about her approach to dealing with Adrian and his manipulations.

She smirked cockily, a glint of determination in her bright eyes. "Deal with these types of people? Crush them in their own field. Always."

I couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at her response. It seemed Lilia had her own strategy to navigate the intricate web of influence and manipulation within the academy.

"How will you do that exactly?" I asked, intrigued even though I knew the answer. Seeing her speaking about her methods was a little interesting; it was as if the scene of the game was playing right in front of my eyes.

Lilia tilted her head, her green hair flowing slightly as she met my gaze.

"Simple. I'll become the best archer in this academy. Adrian can manipulate and scheme all he wants, but if I'm at the top, he won't have a choice but to acknowledge it."

Her confident tone carried a hint of ambition. Lilia wasn't the type to be easily deterred by obstacles; instead, she embraced challenges head-on.

"You're going to do it by being the best archer?" I raised an eyebrow, somewhat surprised at her straightforward approach.

"Of course. Why settle for less? The archery world is just another battleground, and I plan to dominate it." Her eyes sparkled with determination, reflecting her unwavering resolve.

It reminded me of Irina a little as she also had this look in her eyes, although in Lilia's case, it was different.

From how Irina did things, I always thought she wasn't actually arrogant, but she was forcing herself to be one.

'As if to gather attention.'

It was my own analysis, though I wasn't that sure. One thing, though, was that she was annoying whenever she did that.

However, Lilia genuinely believed she was better than others; it was her own evaluation of herself. So, I was sure she was really going to do it right now here.

"Certainly something you would say."

"If you settle for less, then you can never improve."

"Yeah, yeah...." I rolled my eyes at her squinting look. She was implying my previous response with that look, though I didn't care much.

"Sigh.....I won't say anything more."

"You better."

"..."

CLAP! CLAP!

Just at that moment, we heard the sound of clapping from the scene as we both turned our attention to the scene.

"It seems she has finished her performance."

"Indeed...."

We saw the girl leaving the scene with a smile on her face. It seemed her performance was rather outstanding as the onlookers also followed her movements.

Well, considering what Adrian was doing, there was a chance that she was his acquaintance.

In any case, I leaned on the wall while looking at the people watching the event. I still hadn't forgotten the feeling I got at the start: someone who was acquainted with demons was in this place.

With my eyes, I constantly looked for possible individuals, but I found none. It was to be expected, as demon followers were always like cockroaches.

They knew how to hide themselves well.

'Though I will crush you no matter what.'

At the end of the day, they were bound to make a mistake. I recorded some suspicious faces in my head to search for them at a later time. Even if I couldn't find them now, it didn't mean I wouldn't be able to find them later time.

Once I found them, they could prove to be a good way to enter the web of demon followers.

"Next contestant, Lilia Thornheart." While lost in my thoughts, I suddenly heard Adrian's voice echoing through the place.

The name "Lilia Thornheart" resonated through the archery grounds, drawing attention from the spectators.

As the spotlight shifted to her, Lilia flashed a confident smirk, her green hair shimmering ethereally. She carried herself with an otherworldly beauty, capturing the admiration of those around her.

"Watch closely, Astron," she said with a playful glint in her eyes, clearly reveling in the attention. "I will show you how it is done."

"I never wanted to learn?"

"You will be after watching me."

"Is that so?"

"It is. Just don't be captivated by me." Saying that, Lilia elegantly moved toward the center of the stage, every step exuding a self-assured grace.

Her confident posture and the air of someone completely at ease with their abilities spoke volumes. It was apparent that she intended to make a statement with her performance.

As she prepared to showcase her archery skills, I couldn't help but notice the subtle yet powerful energy emanating from her. Lilia Thornheart was no ordinary student; she held the potential to redefine the standards within the academy.

'I guess it will be a good show to witness the future Bow Empress in serious action.'

After all, thanks to my now improved [Perceptive Insight], I was a lot better when observing, and Lilia was going to show her abilities to a much larger extent.

'Let's enjoy the meal.'

Chapter 240 Chapter 54.6 - Archery Competition [Interlude]

As Lilia stepped onto the stage, a hushed murmur swept through the crowd. Whispers and exchanged glances conveyed the unspoken acknowledgment of her status—the heir of Olympus' Vanguard, a figure synonymous with power and influence.

"Isn't that Lilia Thornheart? The one from Olympus' Vanguard?"

"I heard she's the heir. No wonder she has that aura."

"She looks like a goddess... Look at her, so confident."

The spectators were captivated by the spectacle before them. Lilia, with an air of regality, seemed to effortlessly command attention. The emerald green hair cascaded down her back, catching the sunlight and shimmering like a halo. Her poised and confident demeanor left an indelible impression on everyone present.

The way she carried herself and her ethereal beauty itself was a force alone; combined with her background, she captivated everyone's attention in a second.

"You are here."

She heard Adrian's voice, albeit it was a little hushed.

"I am."

Adrian had a squinting gaze as if he didn't like how she immediately monopolized the attention, but at the same time, he had a subtle smirk.

'Let's see how long you can laugh like that. That is probably what he thinks.'

Lilia also thought inwardly. The way Adrian approached things was not bad or rather smart, and she would also do it if she were in his shoes.

However, that didn't mean she would do just the same as he was doing. After all, once a powerful individual like her appeared, using the same trick would rather be disadvantageous.

'Though I must thank you for presenting me this opportunity.'

Looking around, she noticed even some secret reporters were recording her. They were here because of Adrian.

'This will be on the news.'

And that would be a good opportunity to increase her fame with her public image and undoubtedly strengthen her faction.

As she notched an arrow onto her bowstring, her eyes met with Astron's.

'Interesting guy.'

She thought.

'He makes me want to show off a little.'

For an unknown reason, she felt competitive around him, even though she couldn't name the feeling exactly. It was like she felt the need to prove something to his indifferent gaze.

Turning to the other side, she saw Ethan and Julia and smirked.

There was a playful yet challenging glint in her gaze. It was clear that she aimed not only for precision in archery but also for dominance in the eyes of those watching.

As Lilia prepared to demonstrate her archery prowess, a subtle tension hung in the air. Adrian, the captain of the Archery Club, had a smirk on his face—a smirk that hinted at a plan unfolding beneath the surface.

"Start," he commanded, setting the stage for Lilia's performance. Unbeknownst to her, a group of mages stationed on the stage subtly manipulated the magical barriers surrounding the targets.

The normally precise and straightforward archery range suddenly became a challenging maze.

Invisible barriers, controlled by the mages under Adrian's orders, shifted unpredictably, creating obstacles between Lilia and her targets.

'I see.'

As I looked at Lilia walking to the stage, I nodded my head inwardly. There was a weird confidence oozing from her as if she was ready to take any challenge.

The onlookers were also observing her every bit of movement, and they seemed to have rather high expectations.

"Hush....She is starting."

"I know, I know."

"What a sight....."

When she raised her bow to get a good posture, her clothes slightly revealed the skin underneath. It was as white as snow and seemingly was completing her other body features.

"Gasp."

The guy beside me held his breath and gasped.

SMACK!

And his girlfriend smacked his back with a loud noise.

"Where are you looking at?"

"Cough..."

It seemed like a long nagging session was about to follow the boyfriend, as seen from the girl's expression.

'Well, you sow what you reap.'

Certainly, there were times when people couldn't control their own actions and were directed by their primal desires.

'Let's focus.'

Thinking that my thoughts were wandering around randomly, I decided to cut myself from the crowd and focus on the upcoming scene.

As Lilia aimed her bow at the first target that appeared in front of her, the crowd's focus immediately turned to the stage.

With each draw of her bowstring, I couldn't help but notice the subtle disturbances in the air orchestrated by Adrian's unseen mages.

'As expected, he is doing it from the start.'

Different from how he treated any other archer, it seemed even from the start, Adrian recognized Lilia as a threat.

The challenges hidden within the shifting magical barriers seemed to be part of a game, a contest within the archery evaluation. But in reality, none of them were fair from the start.

Lilia, however, seemed undeterred.

THUD!

Her first arrow struck the target with precision, and the crowd erupted into applause. The whispers of admiration swirled around her like a gentle breeze.

I watched closely, my eyes trained on her form. The magical barriers created disturbances in the airflow, aiming to disrupt her aim. Yet, she displayed an exceptional ability to adapt. Her shot hit its mark flawlessly, and her composure remained unshaken.

'Hmm?'

The small air currents created by the stage between were actually active, and I thought she would aim while calculating how the air current changed.

'But that wasn't the case.'

Weirdly enough, that didn't seem to be the case. The direction where the bow pointed was just as normal as if the environmental changes between her and the targets didn't matter at all.

THUD! THUD!

As another and another shot followed, my question wasn't answered. Without giving anyone time, Lilia was shooting rapidly as if to show her skills. It was quite a sight to see, but my brain was rather focused on how she was bypassing the conditions in such an easy way.

That seemed to be the case for Adrian as well, as he looked infuriated.

That commonly wouldn't be noticed unless one was looking at him, but I could see. He was getting mad.

THUD! THUD!

As the evaluation progressed, it became evident that Lilia's performance was drawing a different kind of attention.

"Huh? What is this?"

At that exact moment, unlike the previous contestants, Lilia faced a barrage of targets, and the space between her and the targets seemed to ripple with heat as if the air itself was agitated.

"Is this even fair?"

"I don't know. But, I guess they are trying to test her limits?"

"Who can even shoot in such conditions?"

A sandstorm swept across the stage, creating an additional layer of difficulty. The audience gasped in surprise, the atmosphere thick with tension.

Lilia, however, stood tall and composed. She raised her bow, and to everyone's surprise, numerous ethereal mana anchors materialized around her body.

'Mana anchors?' I thought, realizing that she was using her special technique. After the talk with her, I was also trying to use the mana in the same way as her, and though it was proving to be a challenge, I progressed quite a lot.

And certainly, it was something that helped a lot while shooting since mana wasn't bound by the physical rules of this world and the strength of one's arms.

The sandstorm obscured the vision, making it challenging for others to follow her movements.

'Let's see how she does that.'

However, Lilia seemed unaffected. With incredible speed, she rapidly pulled her bow, firing arrows in quick succession. The mana anchors aided her, providing stability and precision even in the midst of the chaotic environment.

"This is incredible! I've never seen anything like it!"

"How is she not affected by the sandstorm?"

The onlookers were mesmerized by the display of skill and technique. Lilia Thornheart, the heiress of Olympus' Vanguard, was turning the challenging conditions to her advantage.

THUD! THUD! THUD!

Her arrows found their marks, hitting the numerous targets with remarkable accuracy. The sandstorm seemed to dance around her, almost as if it recognized her dominance over the element. Adrian's frustration became more apparent, a scowl etched on his face.

'She's not just overcoming the challenges; she's using them to showcase her strength, just like as it was supposed to.'

That certainly played like how I expected from the game, but my focus was how she dealt with the environment.

'Something weird was covering the arrow itself.'

When I looked closer at the arrow that was shot, I realized that a type of mana was intercepting the mage's mana, nullifying it.

'Hmm?'

Then, I remembered a certain lecture when I was a college student.

'I see now.'

It was as if almost all the mana that came to the arrow was being refracted. When looked closely, one could see the mana fields around the arrow flying. At first, I wasn't able to see how, but after looking and observing another five samples, I was sure.

The phenomenon I observed with Lilia's arrows seemed akin to electromagnetic refraction in oblique incidence.

In the realm of physics, when electromagnetic waves pass through a medium at an angle, they undergo refraction, bending as they traverse from one substance to another. However, Lilia's mana manipulation displayed a unique twist to this concept.

As her arrows cut through the air, the mana surrounding them acted like a barrier. It refracted the incoming magical disturbances from the environment, redirecting and nullifying them with finesse as high as possible.

It was as if the arrows created a protective envelope that shielded them from external interference.

The mana fields around the arrows exhibited a refractive index, a physical property that determined the speed of magical disturbances within them. The way to control it was to change the mana-tic coefficient of the space.

This was something that I had seen in the books I was reading as a side note since this concept was quite advanced.

Lilia manipulated this index with precision, allowing her to control how much the incoming mana refracted.

The sandstorm, which would typically disrupt the trajectory of arrows and interfere with magical precision, now seemed to dance around Lilia's projectiles.

The refracted mana fields acted as a barrier, preventing the sand particles from influencing the arrows' paths.

'This is really a genius way.'

In a sense, this would only be applicable to a low-density mana field since even with a high refraction rate, when the power of the magic used is high, that small percentage that is transversing through the fields is still high in magnitude.

But then again, even the idea itself was something that was hard to produce results, yet Lilia was doing it. This showed that even though she was not a mage and wasn't that inversed with spells, she was a genius at controlling the raw mana itself.

The scene was a captivating blend of magical finesse and intellectual curiosity, bringing countless different ideas into my head that could be used. Though, I knew I had a long way to go.

CLAP! CLAP! CLAP!

Lilia's performance concluded with a resounding success.

The applause from the audience echoed through the arena. She lowered her bow, the mana anchors dissipating, and a satisfied smile played on her lips.

As the crowd voiced their admiration, the comments were overwhelmingly positive.

"Did you see that? Not a single miss! She's incredible!"

"The sandstorm didn't faze her at all. That was like watching a master at work."

"Her form is impeccable, and she looks stunning. The next Bow Empress might have just appeared!"

The spectators were enthralled not only by Lilia's accuracy but also by the aesthetic quality of her performance. The combination of her ethereal beauty, confident demeanor, and unparalleled skill in archery left an indelible mark on everyone present.

I couldn't help but acknowledge the truth in their words. Lilia Thornheart had showcased a level of talent that transcended the ordinary. Her prowess with the bow and her unique mana manipulation technique set her apart as a formidable force in the world of archery.

The whispers and discussions among the audience members painted a vivid picture of the impact she had made in just a brief moment.

It was evident that Lilia's name would linger in their minds, and her performance would become a topic of conversation for days to come.

Adrian, despite his earlier frustrations, wore a composed expression. At least he tried to, though I could see the fire in his eyes.

'This is the beginning of everything.'

It seemed Lilia's part of the quest would start soon.