

H. Academy 241

Chapter 241 Chapter 55.1 - Encounter

After Lilia's performance, the competition went smoothly. Though none of them were able to outshine Lilia.

"How was it?"

However, our masked goddess seemed to want my opinion on her performance.

"It was superb."

I replied to her question. The way she utilized new aspects and introduced such types of relations in theory to archery itself brought a different feeling to me. Even now, I am thinking about how to make myself better at such things.

The usage of mana anchors and reflective mana fields are both different ideas that only creative people could come up with, and that alone itself is insane, in my opinion.

"Superb.....That's it?"

"What do you want me to say more?"

"Maybe worship me?"

"Are you a goddess?"

"Am I not?"

"You might be."

"Then...."

"Then, I would be an atheist."

"I believe I have the power to convert an atheist to my believer."

"This answer is all you could come up with after thinking before the bed all the time?"

"So what?"

"It was cringe."

".....You don't seem to hear your own words."

"I do. Sometimes, I cringe at myself."

"Is this why you don't speak a lot?"

"..."

"Heh....It is my win this time."

As she smiled triumphantly over me, I shook my head. I was not even competing in any case, and I certainly did not feel annoyed at her smirk.

Certainly.

"So even you can make such a face?"

"What about my face?"

"You look annoyed."

"I am not annoyed."

"This is what an annoyed person would say?"

"....."

It seemed right now that my brain wasn't working on giving quick answers. Considering every person has their peaks and downs, it made sense for me to be the same.

'Next time, it won't be like that.'

My useless inner pride seemed to get hurt a little, but I consoled myself, thinking I would do better next time. And I have then redirected my own thoughts to upcoming events in the future.

"You are leaving already?"

Lilia asked, seeing me getting my things up.

"Yes. I have no reason to watch anymore."

"So, you were waiting for my performance."

"Of course."

"Are you that obsessed with me?"

"Do you want me to be?"

"Urghk- That would be creepy."

It seemed she had at least a little bit of common sense.

"Then, you shouldn't make jokes like that. It normalizes the idea itself."

"...I see....."

Lilia's acknowledgment was accompanied by a subtle shift in her demeanor. It seemed she also understood what I implied.

There were many examples of what I just said, as this idea was something that was used by politicians to control the masses. Even by making jokes about something that seemed out of the world, you introduce those things to the receiver's mind, and underneath the subconscious, you are making them familiar.

And, once you have made enough of this, this new familiarity results in less repulsion by the idea itself, making it a lot smoother to introduce it as a new normal.

These are the basics of the ruling, and Lilia must also be aware of my words.

"Do you have something to say?" I asked, looking at her gaze probing at me. Her bright red eyes seemed to shine a little more.

"I am really curious, you know." She said with a slight smile.

"About what?"

"About this person named Astron Natusalune."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"If you don't know, why are you telling me?"

"Just to let you know?"

".....This doesn't make sense."

"Does everything have to make sense?"

"If you are not making any sense, then it is named as being crazy."

"Once, Newton was named as crazy too. Look at it right now; his name is everywhere."

It seemed this conversation wasn't going anywhere. She may be curious about me, but I don't hold the responsibility to satisfy that curiosity.

"I am going to investigate you."

She suddenly mumbled, looking directly into my eyes.

"Why are you telling me that?"

"I want to hear from you if you have any objections."

"Will you listen to me if I have any?"

"Probably not."

"Then it is pointless for me to answer you."

"Why?"

"No matter what, you have the necessary manpower to investigate my background regardless of my will. I have absolutely zero impact on your results or your actions, meaning you are the only one responsible for what you do. That means my answer would be pointless."

Hearing my answer, she stopped for a second, seemingly thinking about it.

"You would be a good sophister."

Acknowledging the futility of further discussion, I gathered my belongings and stood up, ready to leave. Lilia's probing curiosity had offered a brief diversion, but it was time for me to focus on what truly mattered—my continuous pursuit of improvement.

"Where are you going now?"

"I'm going to train," I replied, not wanting to linger in a conversation that seemed to lead nowhere.

"Training, huh?" Lilia's eyes gleamed with interest. "Do you always train alone?"

"Yes," I replied, unfazed by her curiosity.

"That's quite boring. Don't you want someone to spar with or at least keep you company?"

What she said made sense. In a way, training without sparring with someone would offer nothing. It was like knowing everything in theory, but once you enter the practical field, that would be useless.

It was similar, but not the same. After all, while I was alone, training didn't mean I didn't spar with anyone. Training rooms were designed to match the students, after all.

"I prefer solitude."

She nodded, accepting my preference without further insistence. As I made my way towards the exit, she called out, "Good luck with your training."

With a nod, I left the place, walking to my own room.

Just as Astron had left, Lilia was left alone in the crowd, watching the competition. By this time, it was almost reaching its end since the archery club wasn't that large.

'Interesting fellow.'

Certainly, that guy's opinions were different from the people she met in general. He had a different way of interpreting things.

When she asked him if she wanted to investigate him, she was looking for any reaction that would come from his side. After all, there were times when the body spoke more volumes than the words themselves.

However, the answer she got wasn't relatable to anything she had in her mind—pure indifference and no reaction at all.

As if she was talking with a doll.

'I really can't predict him after all.'

No matter how she thought, he didn't seem to fit any type of pattern that she could think of. That made him a singularity.

Deciding to leave the archery competition early, Lilia discreetly slipped away from the crowd. She weaved through the dispersing spectators, skillfully avoiding any undue attention.

As she walked through the academy grounds, she pondered Astron's peculiar nature. The encounter had left her intrigued, and she found herself contemplating the unpredictability that seemed to shroud him. He was an enigma, a puzzle she couldn't quite solve with her usual analytical approach.

Meanwhile, Ethan and Julia, who were still observing the archery competition, received a message on their watches.

[Lilia: I've returned. Meet me at the usual spot.]

The cryptic nature of her message left room for speculation, but one thing was certain—it seemed like Lilia had something on her mind that she wanted to discuss privately.

"Why did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Don't kid with me, Adrian. I could see what you were doing?"

Elara was the person who had been in the Archery Club for a whole year, and she had been with Adrian for a long time as well.

Thus, she knew his nature and how he acted most of the time. In a way, she could easily predict what kind of things he was going to do in the competition.

But, this time, he crossed the line. In a sense, the archery competition itself was a tradition, but by rigging it, she basically crushed that tradition itself. Therefore, in her eyes, he was now in a position that should be reprimanded.

Even though she had been with him in this club for a whole year and she had overlooked many things he had done, it was now different.

Elara's eyes narrowed, her gaze piercing through Adrian's nonchalant demeanor. The tension in the air was palpable as they stood face to face in the quiet archery range, away from the prying eyes of other club members.

Adrian, the captain of the Archery Club, leaned against a nearby target, feigning innocence. "Elara, darling, I have no idea what you're talking about. I simply showcased how hard it is to acquire skills. It's not my fault the others couldn't keep up."

"Don't play games with me, Adrian," Elara snapped, her frustration evident in her tone. "I saw you tampering with the scoring system, manipulating the targets. You rigged the entire competition to make yourself look like the only competent archer. That's not showcasing skills; that's undermining the very essence of the competition we hold dear."

Adrian chuckled, a smug grin spreading across his face.

"Oh, Elara, you always take things so seriously. It was just a little fun, a way to remind everyone who the true talent is. Besides, it's not like anyone else could beat me anyway."

Elara's jaw clenched as she fought to contain her anger. "This is not a joke, Adrian. We're a team, and you've betrayed the trust of every member here. The archery competition is about camaraderie, about pushing each other to excel. By rigging it, you've tainted the spirit of our club."

Adrian pushed himself off the target and approached Elara, a condescending smirk on his face. "Camaraderie? Please, Elara, don't be so naive. In the end, it's every Awakened for themselves. I just made that reality a bit more transparent."

Unable to hold back any longer, Elara's hand shot forward, gripping Adrian's collar as she glared into his eyes. "You've let your arrogance blind you, Adrian. You're the captain, meant to lead and inspire. Instead, you've chosen to sow discord among us. I won't let you tarnish the reputation of our club any further."

Adrian felt the sudden grip on his collar, and for a moment, he allowed a flicker of surprise to cross his face before swiftly morphing it into a scowl. The nonchalant facade that adorned him moments ago vanished, replaced by a simmering aggression that emanated from his entire being.

Elara's words seemed to have triggered a dormant anger within him. His tone turned threatening, and his eyes, once indifferent, now held a dangerous glint. "You think you can lecture me, Elara? Touch me like that again, and you'll regret it."

Elara, undeterred by his change in demeanor, maintained her steely gaze. "Your actions demand accountability, Adrian. I won't let you drag the others down with your selfish ambitions."

Adrian's lips curled into a sneer, and he forcibly shrugged off Elara's hand from his collar. "You've been getting on my nerves for a while now, you little.... Always poking around where you don't belong. But this," he gestured dismissively towards the archery range, "this is none of your business. You're overstepping, and I won't tolerate it."

His tone was threatening, and his gaze was overbearing. But Elara had seen her fair share of such people in this industry. Even the place where she did her internship had such people.

"Then what? What are you going to do?" Her gaze met with his scowl. After all, the best response to such people was to show that she wasn't scared.

But, contrary to what she had experienced, Adrian was different. Unrelenting, he brought his face dangerously close, and Elara could feel the weight of his killing intent pressing down on her.

'What is this?'

The air became thick, and breathing seemed like an arduous task, as if she stood in front of a prowling lion.

His lips curled into a menacing smile. "If you're going to keep up this attitude, you might want to stop those shaking legs of yours first. Maybe then I could consider you as a possible threat."

THUD!

Adrian abruptly threw her away, and without another word, he turned on his heel, leaving Elara standing in the quiet archery range.

"Haaaah.....Haaaah....."

With her breaths heavier than usual.

"As expected, you are different."

However, at that moment, a person appeared right behind her.

Chapter 242 Chapter 55.2 - Encounter

"As expected, you are different."

Without a sound, Lilia Thornheart stepped into Elara's line of vision, her presence finally acknowledged.

"Hello, Senior Elara," Lilia greeted with a calm and composed demeanor, her emerald eyes glinting with a subtle amusement.

Elara caught off guard, spun around to face the unexpected presence. Her eyes widened as she registered Lilia's proximity, a mixture of surprise and realization crossing her features.

"Junior Lilia? When did you...?" Elara stammered, her usual composure momentarily shaken.

"I've been here for a while," Lilia replied with a faint smirk, savoring the surprise she had elicited. "You were too engrossed in your little confrontation with Adrian to notice."

Elara's gaze sharpened as she assessed Lilia's demeanor. There was a hint of curiosity and wariness in her eyes, realizing that the heir of Olympus' Vanguard had been a silent spectator to the altercation.

'She was here all the time?'

Elara couldn't help but widen her eyes. A first-year student escaping from her senses? That seemed unbelievable at first.

'Even if I was not vigilant....'

This fact was both a blow to her pride as a senior and a display of the progress of this Junior right before herself.

'Well, if it is her, it could make sense.'

Considering Lilia's prowess that she had seen in the competition, she inwardly justified this scene, though a small crumble of pride still remained in her heart.

"Why are you here?" Elara inquired, her tone neutral.

"I just happened to come to take my belongings and then witnessed the drama unfold," Lilia responded, her eyes gliding over the archery range. "It seems there's more to this competition than meets the eye. Adrian's actions were quite... theatrical, to say the least."

Hearing Lilia's words, Elara looked at the hour and noticed that it was a lot later than usual. Considering the competition and how the day unfolded, nobody would let their belongings stay in the club room for such a long time.

Realizing that Lilia was just presenting an excuse, she inwardly shook her head, not buying it. It was evident that she either followed Adrian or was waiting for something.

"So what? What do you want from me by revealing that?" Elara asked, her tone edged with a hint of skepticism as she crossed her arms defensively.

Lilia maintained her calm demeanor, a subtle smirk playing on her lips. The smirk was almost the same as Adrian's, a smirk that looked down on others. But then again, she didn't hold any hostility.

"Oh, nothing in particular, Senior Elara. I just thought it was interesting to see the dynamics at play within the Archery Club. And besides, I was also one of those subjected to Adrian's... creative scoring methods."

"You, too?" Elara said, her skepticism giving way to a shared understanding. "I thought you might not be affected by such trivial matters."

After all, the prowess she had shown made it seem like she wasn't even remotely affected by what Adrian had done.

Lilia chuckled softly, her gaze turning cold for a second. "Everyone has their limits, Senior. I don't take kindly to being underestimated or toyed with, especially by those who are clearly below me."

She looked at the targets and the club room for a second. "And considering your words and stance against him, you don't seem to particularly fond of the idea either."

Elara's eyes searched Lilia's face for any hint of deceit, finding only a genuine curiosity and a touch of determination. It seemed the heir of Olympus' Vanguard had a more intricate web of motivations and intentions than initially apparent.

"I'm not sure what you're plotting, Junior Lilia, but count me out if it involves unnecessary complications," Elara stated her guard still up.

Lilia's smirk widened. "Oh, Senior Elara, complications can sometimes be the spice of life. But worry not; I don't intend to drag you into anything against your will." She approached a little, offering her a hand.

"I merely find it amusing, seeing people like you think they stand a chance against people like Adrian."

Elara's eyes tightened, a spark of anger igniting within them as she perceived a subtle condescension in Lilia's words.

'Who do you think you are?'

The heir of Olympus' Vanguard was testing the waters, challenging the boundaries of their interaction.

"Amusing, you say?" Elara retorted, her voice sharp with indignation. "Don't mistake me for someone who's merely here for your amusement. I've worked hard to reach where I am, and I won't let anyone belittle my efforts, especially not someone who thinks they can gauge my capabilities in a single encounter."

Lilia's smirk persisted, her eyes gleaming with amusement. She extended her hand toward Elara, a gesture that seemed both casual and provocative. "I don't doubt your capabilities, Senior Elara. In fact, I find them intriguing. But your capabilities won't be enough against people like him."

Elara, her frustration building, slapped away Lilia's offered hand, her tone sharp and resolute. "It is still better than bowing to people like him."

In her eyes, Lilia seemed to be no different from Adrian, as both of them were using others to their own advantage.

"If you're here to challenge the status quo, do it without undermining the efforts of those who have worked hard to rise above it."

Her eyes were resolute, as if she would never expect her help.

Lilia, still holding her slightly stinging hand with a casual indifference, met Elara's resolute gaze. "It seems you are mistaking something, Senior Elara. I'm not cut from the same cloth as Adrian or the likes of him. I don't undermine others; I simply recognize the hierarchy of capabilities."

Elara's eyes narrowed at Lilia's words, a mixture of skepticism and irritation evident in her expression. "And what makes you so different? What sets you apart from those people like him?"

Lilia's smirk returned, a touch of arrogance lacing her words. "The difference, Senior Elara, is that I don't need to manipulate. I am just better, superior. In this world, those who are superior will always win. It's not a matter of playing games or using others; it's the natural order of things."

Elara's frustration deepened at Lilia's confident assertion of superiority. The notion that someone could so openly proclaim their dominance without reservation irked her.

'Just because you are the heir of the Olympus Vanguard....'

Inwardly, she cursed this girl before herself. After all, she was no different from Adrian in no way.

"You think being better gives you the right to dismiss the struggles of others? To look down on those who have fought tooth and nail to rise above their circumstances?"

Lilia shrugged nonchalantly. "I'm not dismissing anyone's struggles, Senior Elara. I'm merely stating a fact. In this world, strength is the currency of influence. Those who can't adapt to this reality will find themselves left behind."

As she said that, she turned to leave. "And Senior Elara. The moral values you hold....Unless you have the necessary 'currency' to back them up, they will always be buried underneath the pages of this world....You should never forget it."

As Lilia turned to leave, Elara's frustration simmered beneath the surface. The words lingered in the air, carrying an unsettling truth that Elara found hard to accept.

She watched Lilia's retreating figure, the heir of Olympus' Vanguard, walk away with an air of confidence and superiority.

However, she couldn't deny the fact that her words held some truth inside herself.

'This surprisingly went as it intended.'

After leaving the place, Lilia thought to herself. After all, while everything seemed to happen randomly, it was something she had planned.

She followed Adrian from behind and traced him secretly and then eavesdropped on the talk between the captain and vice-

captain.

That small dialogue alone was enough to analyze what kind of a person Elara was, and then formulating a way to put herself in her heart and brain was just as easy.

'You may not seem like you believe me....But, soon, it will change.'

Lilia pondered on those words. She understood the skepticism Elara harbored, the resistance against someone seemingly dismissive of the struggles of others.

It was a common sentiment among those who held strong moral values, and Lilia intended to challenge those convictions. After all, behind those moral values, most of the time, there is a trauma of the past.

'She is a good asset for the future.'

Elara's talent in archery and her commitment to moral principles made her a valuable potential addition to Lilia's network since it meant she would be easy to use.

The clash of ideals presented an opportunity—an opportunity for Lilia to showcase her own prowess, not just in archery but in navigating the intricate web of relationships and power dynamics within the academy, and this had a high chance of making another person indebted and dependent on her.

'Zero chance of betrayal.'

Loyalty was the most important yet hardest thing to acquire.

'I will get her no matter what.'

Underneath the dark sky, she returned to her room with a smile.

"Sigh....I can't focus at all...."

After the talk with Lilia, Elara shook her head while looking at the bow in her hand. She was training to empty her head, but that didn't seem to be working.

PAT! PAT!

At that moment, she heard the voice of something falling to the ground.

'Hmm?'

Turning her attention to the sound, she saw the personnel of the academy putting the targets that were shot by the students in the competition.

"I see..."

In their hand, a small object was shining. It was a special artifact that let the personnel take pictures, scan the targets, and record them in case of an objection to scores.

This was a way for them to confirm exams before an issue about this was raised. That method worked in these competitions as well, and even the pro-Awakened- leagues were using it as a verification system.

Curiosity piqued, Elara decided to approach the workers dealing with the targets and the special artifact.

As she neared the workers, she observed their meticulous process of handling the targets. Each arrow hole was carefully inspected, and the artifact they held seemed to be a crucial part of the verification process. Elara approached one of the personnel, a middle-aged man with a focused expression.

"Excuse me," Elara began, trying not to interrupt their work. "Can I watch you work?" Elara inquired politely, her interest evident as she observed the meticulous process of the workers.

The middle-aged man, though momentarily surprised by the request, welcomed her curiosity. "Ah, of course, of course. Feel free to observe."

Elara watched as they carefully examined each arrow hole, recording the results with the special artifact. As they moved through the targets, she couldn't help but appreciate the precision and thoroughness of the verification process. The technology involved in confirming the results fascinated her.

Lost in her thoughts, Elara's attention was suddenly drawn to a particular target. It was different from the others, with an arrow visibly piercing the side.

'What is this?'

Her eyes, trained to notice details, caught small signs of what seemed like blood scattered on the target. A sense of suspicion crept into her mind.

'Another cheating attempt?'

Approaching the peculiar target, Elara carefully examined it. The scattered marks did resemble blood, but upon closer inspection, she realized it wasn't what she initially thought. Instead, the arrow had managed to kill a small fly that had unknowingly landed on the target.

'A fly?'

After closely inspecting the target and realizing the harmless nature of the situation, Elara's curiosity persisted. She turned to the worker beside her, a question lingering on her lips.

"Whose target was this?" Elara inquired, gesturing toward the one with the inadvertently slain fly.

The worker, engrossed in his meticulous duties, glanced up briefly before consulting his list. His finger traced down the names until he found the relevant entry.

"Astron Natusalune," he replied, his voice matter-of-fact.

The name struck a chord in Elara's memory, recalling the encounter she had with the Astron during the archery competition.

'Wait.'

"Which target is this?"

A hint of intrigue crept into her thoughts as she wondered about her thoughts.

As she asked, the worker took another look at the list, and then he said, "The last one."

The moment those words left his mouth, Elara's eyes widened.

"That shot, don't tell me?"

At that moment, she felt like she realized something.

'This....'

Elara couldn't help but mark his name on the corner of her head.

Chapter 243 Chapter 56.1 - No title

"Ho....So this is how it works...."

Sitting in the library, I mumbled to myself. Right now, I am reading another book related to the concept of magic at night.

After the competition finished, I was left alone on the weekend. I wanted to implement the things I had learned while observing Lilia, but it was harder to put what I had in my head into reality itself.

Even though it may look like I had solved the problem, implementing it in practical situations didn't seem to work at all.

Therefore, I decided to study magic a little bit more so that I could understand that concept better.

In a sense, it was always better to get myself better with the basic concepts, as that would open a lot more doors to improvement.

Last time, with Irina's help and my study speed, I was able to get a grasp of how the basic blocks of magic worked, and the level 0 magic formulas were all engraved into my head.

And now, I think I have a good grasp of the basics.

「Wind」

Utilizing the first basic elemental block of wind, I was able to create a small current of wind. It felt a lot different from how it was compared to directly interfering with wind positions. It wasn't instinctive but like operating a machine.

You would give a command to your magic circuits, and that command would trigger a reaction. In a sense, you are just the supplier of the energy for the circuit, and it does everything else for you.

But that is the case if you are able to construct that circuit correctly. Each basic block individually needs to be designed specifically suitable for the formula you want to create, and they must not interfere with the other following blocks.

That enables the magician to think of them as separate blocks without looking at what is inside the books. It is quite similar to engineering in this aspect. Of course, some of those magicians, like Irina, possess the initial ability to control mana without even calculating everything.

Their ability to feel that to such a level makes them considered as genius since that itself is a barrier differing others from one. I don't know if I possess such talent, but after trying different methods to confirm that, it seemed I didn't have it.

[Introduction to Level 1 Magic – Utilizing Mana Formulas]

And now I was looking at the book right in front of my nose. It was the following book of the first one I had studied for the past week, and I liked the style of author and publisher. The editor seemed to do his job fine as well, so I decided to go with this.

The soft glow of the library's reading lamp provided a comforting ambiance as I continued my nighttime study.

The transition from Level 0 magic to Level 1 seemed like a significant step, and I anticipated that the complexity of the formulas would increase.

The book began by introducing the concept of mana formulas at a higher level, emphasizing the need for careful design and precision in constructing magical circuits.

I noted that, much like engineering, creating effective magical circuits required a deep understanding of the individual components and their interactions.

As I delved deeper into the text, I encountered examples of Level 1 magic formulas. The symbols and patterns seemed more intricate, and the equations became more complex.

The author stressed the importance of maintaining a balance between each component, ensuring that one block did not interfere with the others.

"Level 1 magic is like assembling a delicate clockwork mechanism," I murmured, drawing parallels between magical circuits and intricate machinery. The analogy resonated with me, providing a mental image that helped me grasp the essence of the advanced magical concepts.

The text guided me through various examples, explaining how different combinations of basic blocks could lead to the creation of more powerful and nuanced magical effects.

The level of detail required for successful implementation became evident, and I realized that precision was paramount in Level 1 magic.

For the Level 1 magic, the equations weren't as hard as they seemed, and considering what I had done to derive the mana wavelength of the dungeon at that time, it seemed nothing.

But at the same time, it was not.

「Generation: Wind」 :

「Create」 + - 「Wind」 > 「Rotate」 -= 「Curl」

The formula itself seemed simple, but it contained four distinct blocks interconnected in a precise sequence, each contributing to the final magical effect. The seamless integration of these blocks showcased the elegance required in Level 1 magic.

As I scrutinized the formula, I understood that the success of the spell hinged on the flawless execution of each individual block. The "Create" block initiated the process, followed by the controlled manipulation of wind represented by "- 「Wind」 ." The subsequent blocks, "Rotate" and "Curl," added nuances to the magical current, directing it with precision.

Of course, each operator between the blocks showed a different type of connection. Even if the blocks were the same, if the connection was different, the output would also be.

Considering you would never only want to randomly create a wind out of nowhere without knowing where it would go, the 「Rotate」 -= 「Curl」 this block actually represented where your wind would go. It was a way to ensure that your output would be stable.

'Even then, if it is like this, things will get a little interesting. Precision is the key, I suppose.'

Precision, I realized, was the hallmark of Level 1 magic. The intricate maneuvers of magical energy required a keen understanding of how each component influenced the overall outcome. It was like

orchestrating a symphony, where every instrument played a specific role to create a harmonious whole.

Just like that, I continued to spend my whole life studying level 1 magic alone.

<Monday 8 A.M>

It was the same day for the students, and most of them were having a difficult time due to the Monday syndrome. Most of them had dark circles under their eyes, seemingly unable to sleep yesterday, thanks to it being a weekend.

"Sigh....Man, I really don't want to study at all...."

"You think we want?"

".....Yaaaaawnnnn....You seem to..."

"Close your stinky mouth bastard....You are scaring girls...."

"Ha! Who are you calling stinky, you fucker? They are scared of your voice."

Laughter echoed in the room, a feeble attempt to break the monotony of Monday. The students found solace in shared misery, their banter a temporary escape from the impending lectures and assignments.

"Hey, did anyone catch that new movie over the weekend?"

A few heads turned as the topic shifted from Monday blues to weekend escapades.

"I did! It was awesome!"

"Really? I heard it was just okay."

"Well, you've got low standards then."

The banter continued, with movie reviews, weekend plans, and occasional sarcastic remarks flying around the room.

'They really have a lot of time to spare.'

Whether it was youth or not, seeing them not knowing the dangers lurking around made me wonder if these were the future generation Hunters. Of course, just looking at them from such a perspective was wrong, but we humans couldn't help but think anyway.

TAK! TAK! TAK!

Suddenly, the atmosphere shifted as the door creaked open, and the professor entered the room.

"Good Morning, students."

The students quickly settled into their seats, suppressing the last remnants of laughter, as they were rather scared of our teacher, Eleanor.

'She returned, huh?'

I didn't know why she was away, but now that she had returned, the atmosphere returned to the same as well.

She threw a look at me for a second, her eyes narrowing. It was a brief second, but I realized the meaning behind her gaze instantly.

'She was informed.'

It seems the events that happened on the trip wouldn't miss her ears, and considering her influence, that is quite a normal outcome.

THUD!

As she dropped her papers on her table with a loud sound, she turned her attention to us.

"As you all know, the practical test you've been preparing for involves more than just deciphering magic formulas. Today, I am here to shed light on the true nature of those formulas you've been analyzing in your reports." Eleanor's eyes scanned the room, her stern expression unwavering.

'So, she will finally reveal it.'

Even though these events were going in a direction that I didn't know at the start, thanks to us deciphering the formulas, I knew what the next practical training would be.

"What?"

"They meant something?"

"I thought they were just random scribbles?"

The students erupted into a loud voice as they were surprised. It was nothing unexpected, as the fact that they spent a lot of time trying to understand what they meant but failed still remained in their memory.

"These formulas," Eleanor continued, "are not just random configurations of mana. They are, in fact, special blocks of a map—a map that will guide you to the next location of the upcoming test." She paused, allowing the weight of her words to sink in.

Murmurs erupted among the students. "What? A map? That doesn't make any sense."

"Did anyone else know about this?"

"I thought we were just analyzing magic formulas!"

Some of the students were infuriated.

'They are now regretting not giving everything they had.'

This was a common occurrence when on Earth. When the objective of the assignments was clear, most of the students tended to do just the bare minimum to satisfy those objectives. This was especially the case when the grading rubric was revealed to the students.

They would just make sure that their assignments met those conditions stated in the rubric without actually trying to understand the concept and doing it fully.

But, once that assignment becomes something detrimental for another case, they would regret it, and this was exactly what they were experiencing right now.

Eleanor remained composed, her gaze piercing through the confusion. "The connection between magic formulas and maps might not be evident at first glance, but rest assured, this is a crucial element of the test."

The students exchanged puzzled glances, the room filled with whispers of disbelief and confusion. Eleanor, however, seemed unfazed, her gaze uninterested.

"Now, before you protest, understand this," Eleanor continued, "You've been given ample time to analyze and understand these formulas. Today, I reveal their true purpose. You have until Thursday to find the location indicated by these map blocks. The knowledge you've gained from the formulas will serve you in navigating the challenges that lie ahead."

A wave of unease swept through the room. "Thursday? That's not much time!" "How are we supposed to find a location from these formulas?" "This is insane!"

Eleanor raised her hand, silencing the room. "I assure you, this test is designed to challenge not just your intellectual abilities but also your resourcefulness. Consider it a real-world application of your skills as future Hunters." However, the tension in the room spiked when Eleanor dropped an unexpected bombshell. "

Also, there was already a group who had found out what this test was about even before they were informed."

A collective gasp swept through the room. Students exchanged bewildered glances, struggling to comprehend the magnitude of what they just heard.

"What? How is that even possible?"

"Did someone leak the information?"

"This is basically impossible!"

They were pathetically looking around, searching for possible people who could have done such a thing. Naturally, if it was known that it was our group that could cause quite a stir, I am thankful that at least she didn't mention the name of the leader.

Thinking like that, my eyes are met with Irina's amber eyes. She threw a quick look at me, and then she immediately turned her gaze to somewhere else.

However, I didn't miss the small smile that formed on her lips.

The students exchanged skeptical glances, but Eleanor continued without batting an eye.

"You are dismissed for the day. Use your free time wisely to unravel the mysteries within those formulas. Remember, plagiarism won't be tolerated. Each of you must find the location independently."

And just like that, with those words she left the room, leaving us all alone.

Chapter 244 Chapter 56.2 - No title

"Sigh.....What is this assignment now?"

Inside the room of a small coffee shop, three girls sat. Jasmine was the first one to open her mouth as she looked flustered.

"We didn't even catch that many magical formulas with us." She mumbled, grabbing her coffee.

"We are not that different," Danielle added. She had some black circles under her eyes, indicating her countless different sleepless nights. After all, that didn't contradict her ways since she was rather a gal type who went around at night and played with the boys.

"....."

However, one of them seemed to not enter the talk. Sylvie, who had been rather focused on something, was now thinking to herself.

"Hey....Look at her; she is not even here."

Jasmine chuckled at Sylvie's serious expression as she seemed lost in thought. She playfully nudged her friend's shoulder. "Sylvie, are you trying to solve the mysteries of the universe over there?"

Sylvie blinked, returning to the conversation at hand. "Huh? Oh, no, sorry. I was just thinking about something."

Danielle, leaning back in her chair, raised an eyebrow. "Something intriguing, I assume? Don't leave us in suspense. What's going on in that head of yours?"

Even though she said those words with a smile, Sylvie didn't miss that black color emanating from her. Nowadays, compared to the past, the color of black is getting stronger and stronger with each second.

Sylvie knew inwardly that Danielle was changing, and the direction wasn't on the good side.

'Should I talk to him? No. I need to do things on my own. I can't always rely on him.'

Sylvie gave a small smile, her thoughts lingering about whether she should mention this to him.

However, she instantly dismissed the idea.

"Just personal stuff, nothing major. Anyway, what were we talking about? The assignment?"

Jasmine nodded, her eyes gleaming with amusement. "Yeah, we're discussing our next assignment. Got any brilliant ideas, Sylvie?"

Hearing that, Sylvie remembered how they had solved the formulas themselves. Well, it was more like he solved it, but undoubtedly, they at least played a role.

'Though, I can't reveal it.'

After the lesson had ended, all of them were called to Professor Eleanor's office and were warned that they should never mention anything about the answer. If it was known, they would get zero marks from this assignment.

Sylvie thought for a moment before suggesting implicitly, "How about focusing on gathering intel about magical anomalies? We've been dealing with a lot of unexpected situations lately, and knowing more about them could be beneficial."

Jasmine and Danielle exchanged glances before nodding in agreement. "That sounds reasonable," Danielle remarked. "After all, there is no way the school would send us anywhere normal."

"Yeah, I agree. Do you have anything in your mind, though?" Jasmine looked at Sylvie and asked.

Sylvie hesitated for a moment, torn between not wanting to lie and the need to contribute to the discussion. "I... um, I don't have any specific ideas at the moment," she admitted. "We could maybe look into recent magical occurrences and see if there are any patterns or common factors."

Jasmine nodded, seemingly satisfied with the general direction. "Alright, that sounds like a plan. We'll need to gather information discreetly, maybe visit some of the areas where these anomalies occurred."

Danielle, still looking a bit drained, added, "And we should consider reaching out to any magical experts or professors who might have insights. They could provide valuable guidance."

Sylvie nodded along, trying to keep her expression neutral. She couldn't share the details about Astron's involvement without risking the consequences outlined by Professor Eleanor.

'Thanks to the lord that they didn't ask for anything more.'

As the conversation shifted to practicality, Sylvie found herself grateful that Jasmine and Danielle didn't press further on her vague suggestion.

'Hmm?'

At that moment, while the group continued their discussion, Sylvie's attention was momentarily drawn to the window.

There, she saw the familiar figures of a boy with black hair and purple eyes and a girl with pink hair and blue eyes. The girl seemed to be talking animatedly, her smile reaching from ear to ear, while the boy listened attentively without saying much.

'Astron and Senior Maya?'

She immediately realized the identity of the two. After all, one of them was the person that she had spent quite a time training, and the other one was her senior from the club whom she had searched for.

'When did they get this close?'

She asked herself. For a moment, she felt a strange twinge in her chest, an inexplicable sensation that made her slightly uncomfortable.

'What is this?'

As Sylvie observed them from afar, an unfamiliar feeling crept over her. It was as if something was suffocating her inside, a strange mix of restlessness and unease.

The sight of Maya's vibrant smile while talking to Astron stirred an odd discomfort within Sylvie, one she couldn't quite put into words.

There was also the fact that she was able to see the emotional palette of both Maya and Astron. In the case of Maya, there was a color that she hadn't seen before. And as for Astron, the fact that he didn't feel uncomfortable but rather liked being close to her....

'Why does it bother me?'

She tried to brush off the feeling, attributing it to mere curiosity about their sudden closeness. Yet, deep down, a subtle twinge of feeling that wouldn't belong to future Saintess lingered beneath the surface.

"Sylve, what are you looking at?" Danielle's words brought her back to reality immediately.

"Ah, it is nothing. I just thought I saw someone."

Sylvie quickly averted her gaze, refocusing on the discussion at hand, but the lingering unease remained like a subtle shadow in the recesses of her thoughts.

After the initial notice from Eleanor, all of the students were dispersed from the classroom. Since our group had already finished this part of the assignment, we didn't need to come together and study more, so I made my way to the training grounds once again.

'Nowadays, I feel like I am being watched quite a lot.'

However, while I was training, this subtle feeling of being watched never left me alone.

"Junior, what are you doing?"

And at the end, one of the people who was the reason for that feeling revealed herself. Though I was sure there were other people, at least one of them, Maya, brought some comfort.

"Senior, as you can see, I am training," I replied while signaling the sweat falling from my body.

"Cough....Cough..."

Maya's cheeks flushed with embarrassment as her eyes unintentionally lingered on the sweat-drenched state of my training attire. She coughed awkwardly, averted her gaze, and seemed momentarily flustered.

"Uh, sorry about that. It's just... you know, the sweat and all." She stammered, a faint blush coloring her cheeks.

Considering what she had said last time, it seemed my sweat and other things had an effect on her thirst for blood, and adding her personality, it was normal for her to feel shy.

"It is fine."

I waved my hand to show that I wasn't feeling uncomfortable.

Maya cleared her throat, attempting to regain composure. "Anyway, I was wondering if you're free right now. Maybe we could grab a meal together?"

The sudden invitation caught me off guard. "Meal?"

"Yes, a meal."

"Hmm?"

"Junior, don't tell me?"

"What?"

Maya's expression turned from a playful grin into a serious, grim one. "Junior, don't tell me you've never had a meal with anyone else here in the academy?"

I paused, reflecting on my time in the academy. Surprisingly, Maya's question struck a chord. Had I really never shared a meal with my fellow students before?

'Really?'

Now, seeing it from here, I had always been a loner. The previous Astron himself was already an outcast, and after that fateful day, I didn't put any effort into changing that fact.

"Well, I mean, not really," I admitted, realizing the truth in her statement. "I've been so focused on classes and training that I haven't really thought about it."

Maya's eyes widened, and the playful glint in her gaze softened into one of warmth and understanding as I confessed to my solitary routine, a mixture of sympathy and compassion reflected in her eyes.

"Junior," she began, her voice carrying a gentle tone, "you've been here all this time and never shared a meal with others? Never experienced those simple moments of camaraderie?"

Those words....It felt like they should have stung, but I didn't feel much in any case.

"You don't need to make it look grim. I just don't need people around me."

Maya's expression turned into one of empathy, and she immediately reached out, taking my hand.

I didn't know whether it was because I lowered my guard down or because she was fast, but it happened so quickly that I couldn't even react.

"Come on," she urged, her grip firm yet reassuring. "You should at least experience all those things when you can. The academy isn't just about classes and training. It's about the connections we build, the memories we create."

"..." I couldn't refute those words.

"Brother....You know, I want to live my life to its fullest when we grow up. I wonder, can we make any schoolmates like in those stories?"

Her words resonated something in my head as if it were a truth I had overlooked for far too long.

As Maya led me toward the cafeteria, her comforting presence reminded me of those times.

'Sigh.....I really can't win against you...'

I even wondered if those words were directed to her or Maya, but who could even now at the end....

Just as Maya and Astron walked, the ambiance changed from the lively buzz of the cafeteria to a quieter, more refined atmosphere; the smell of gourmet food wafted through the air, signaling that they were approaching a place not frequented by the average student.

Astron couldn't help but raise an eyebrow in surprise. "Senior, isn't this place usually for higher-ranking students?"

After all, he knew what this place was from the game. The place where Ethan would start to visit while making connections with the people of higher ranks.

Maya chuckled a hint of mischief in her eyes. "Well, you know, rules can be a bit flexible when you have the right connections and resources." She gestured subtly toward a discreet entrance, the charm of exclusivity radiating from it.

As they approached, the doors opened smoothly, revealing an elegant interior that was a far cry from the usual student hangouts.

Soft lighting, plush seating, and an air of sophistication greeted them. Maya led the way confidently, as if she owned the place, her blue eyes scanning the room.

"Consider it a perk of having a senior who knows her way around," she said with a sly grin. The restaurant staff, recognizing Maya, immediately guided them to a reserved table, offering a menu that boasted delicacies beyond the usual student fare.

Maya perused the menu with a thoughtful expression, her finger tracing the options. "You know, Junior, they have some special monster meats here that could do wonders for your physical

condition. I'll treat you today, and you can repay me later by getting even stronger. How does that sound?"

Astron hesitated, a faint furrow appearing on his forehead. "Senior, you've already done so much. You don't need to go this far."

No matter what happened, his initial nature couldn't be changed instantly. He was accustomed to doing things on his own all the time.

Maya leaned back, her gaze firm. "Consider it an investment in my junior's well-being."

'Sorry for being selfish....'

Inwardly, she apologized for her impure thoughts, but she couldn't help it. Even now, the reason she was able to enjoy these meals was because she had her fill not long ago.

'I need to suppress it....'

Astron couldn't argue further as Maya confidently placed their order. As they enjoyed the exquisite dishes, Maya couldn't help but observe him discreetly.

The subtle changes in his body and the newfound glow in his complexion didn't escape her notice.

'He really is looking more in shape.'

That couldn't be noticed immediately if not looked at directly, but Maya knew how he looked before. It seemed that Starbloom essence worked as it intended.

'Then....Should I introduce him to father...?'

Her mind wandered off...

Chapter 245 Chapter 57.1 - We do a little bit of 'shopping'

After the talk with Maya, there wasn't much I needed to do in terms of responsibilities. Until the practical assignment next time, I was basically free. Thus, I had spent the entire time training and honing my skills as well as progressing with learning magic.

Knowing that the location we were going to visit was Phantom's Land, I was getting ready to meet the possible situations that could occur right there.

After all, Phantom's Land was a place that was an enigma even in the game.

It was not a place that could be explained by the logic of physics or anything. It was a phenomenon itself, something directly related to the rules of the world.

It couldn't be contained by logic; neither one needed to do that. It had its own rules inside, its own existence, and its own order. Basically, that place is a world inside a world.

One can even say that it is a subspace underneath another, though that wouldn't quite fit the definition.

In any case, at the end of the day, the Phantom's land was something that needed preparations.

As players, we would explore that place in the second year of the academy, and by that time, many students would already be strong enough to deal with all those things.

However, right now, the timeline doesn't directly follow the game. We are first-year students, and this is just our first semester in the second quarter.

Therefore, it is almost impossible to predict what kind of situation awaits us since that place is an everchanging experience that doesn't follow the linear time flow.

'Well, everyone seems to be working on the assignments.'

I was pretty sure that, even if the people weren't able to find the location of the assignment, they would still be taken to the place. The theory part and the practical part are graded differently, after all.

'But, they will be a little late.'

Considering how hard the assignment was, I doubted most of the students would even be able to find the correct location in any case.

"Could it be Iron Mountain Range?"

"Why?"

"Well, these lines do match, don't they?"

"Hmm? I don't think so?"

Passing through some of the students, I overheard their conversation. They were in the wrong direction, and many others were like that as well.

Even in the forums, there weren't any clear answers in any case, and that alone shows the difficulty.

'Well, not that I care.'

I just needed to get ready myself. After all, even though that place was dangerous, there were also many things that could be gained from there if one looked close enough.

Thus, I needed to be as ready as possible.

There were two things that I would need to get myself.

First, materials that could help maintain consciousness and delay the onset of sleep are essential for navigating the unpredictable realm.

You will soon see the reason for that.

And the second one is....

A selection of holy scrolls and materials effective against ghosts and souls.

"I also need to get some clothes."

I normally disliked buying clothes from the academy shops since they were rather expensive, in my opinion, but recently, while training, some of my clothes were all torn down.

[Unknown's Armor] could actually be used in real life as well, but it can become highly suspicious if the clothes I wear are not in my wardrobe.

Also, changing clothes has a refreshing feeling psychologically, so it is good for my mental health.

However, upon reaching my room, I came across someone I wasn't expecting at all.

Irina's recent days had been quite simple, to be frank. She had been gaming, studying, and training all the time.

Thanks to them finishing the assignment before others, she also didn't need to work like other students, so in the end, she had much free time.

[Irina: Guys, anyone wants to play?]

She sent a message to the group looking for possible duos for the game since she was rather bored thanks to rising toxicity, but contrary to herself, others weren't free at all.

[Julia: We rea wrkoing fro asisgnemtns.]

[Lilia: I didn't finish the assignment as well.]

[Ethan: Same here.]

[Lilia: Did you finish yours, Irina]

Seeing her friends' messages, Irina couldn't help but think about how they could finish it that fast. It was mostly because of that guy, but even then, this achievement was remarkable enough to enter the eyes of the teachers.

Even the highest-ranking students were having a hard time because of that alone. Lilia didn't seem to complete it either.

'Sigh.....'

[Irina: We just scribbled something. I am not sure if it is correct.]

Thanks to the ultimatum from Eleanor, her hands were tied in this case.

'Should I buy some clothes?'

Thinking that she needed some time alone, she decided to buy some clothes. It had been a while since she had done that, and for some reason, her clothes seemed to look old in her eyes.

'Yes, I should do it.'

And in an instant, she made her decision, though getting out after preparing wasn't as easy as making the decision itself. Also, with how she was being constantly compared to Seraphina, she was certainly not having it easy on herself.

After spending almost an hour preparing, Irina finally left her room with a mask on her face, ready to venture out to the academy shopping center.

She chose a casual yet stylish outfit, pairing a comfortable hoodie with a pair of well-fitted jeans.

The Academy shopping center was a bustling hub of activity, with students browsing through various shops and boutiques.

The air was filled with a mix of laughter, conversations, and the occasional sound of bags rustling as new purchases were made.

Seniors were a little bit different from the first years, as their time for the assignment had yet to come.

'Hmm....'

Irina strolled through the center, browsing the displays of different stores with a mask on her face.

The vibrant colors and trendy designs caught her eye, and she found herself drawn to a boutique showcasing the latest fashion trends.

Entering the store, she was greeted by a friendly sales associate. The racks were filled with a variety of styles, from casual wear to more formal outfits.

Irina began exploring the options, pulling out a few pieces that piqued her interest.

As she browsed through the clothes, she couldn't help but think about the recent events in her life.

After some deliberation, Irina settled on a couple of outfits that reflected her style and added a touch of freshness to her wardrobe. The cashier rang up her purchases, and she left the store with a satisfied smile.

But just at that moment, she felt a subtle feeling.

FLINCH!

She couldn't shake the feeling of eyes on her. She discreetly glanced around, trying to identify the source, but a familiar figure soon caught her attention in the periphery of her vision.

Astron.

'That guy?'

Their eyes met briefly, and for a moment, Irina felt a jolt of surprise. Instinctively, she averted her gaze, not wanting to draw any attention.

'He doesn't know it is me, right?'

The idea of being spotted by Astron while shopping for clothes was mildly embarrassing. As she completed her purchase and headed toward the exit, she couldn't help but feel a sense of relief.

However, just as she thought she had successfully avoided any further interaction, she noticed that Astron had also averted his gaze. A strange tension lingered in the air, and Irina had a sudden inkling that he might have recognized her despite the mask.

'No, he knows!'

With a mix of curiosity and a desire to put an end to the unspoken acknowledgment, Irina decided to approach Astron. She adjusted her mask, trying to maintain a semblance of anonymity, and walked over to where he stood.

"Hey," she greeted casually, her mouth hidden behind the mask.

"..."

Astron, who had been leaning against a nearby pillar, glanced in her direction. His expression remained impassive, but there was a glint of recognition in his eyes.

Irina couldn't help but feel a bit exposed under his scrutiny, even with the mask covering part of her face.

"Hey," Astron responded in a calm tone, acknowledging her presence.

Irina decided to address the unspoken acknowledgment directly. "You do know it's me, right?" she asked, lifting an eyebrow inquisitively.

Astron's gaze lingered for a moment before he replied, "Of course."

Irina couldn't decide whether his nonchalant response irritated her or amused her. She crossed her arms, leaning against the same pillar he was using. "And here I thought I was being stealthy with this mask. You really have sharp eyes."

Astron tilted his head slightly. "Your fiery red hair is quite distinctive. Plus, your eyes give you away."

Irina smiled inwardly, for some reason feeling a bit relieved(?). "Fair enough. So, what brings you to the shopping center? Need a fashion upgrade?"

Astron's response was characteristically brief. "Just passing by."

Irina arched an eyebrow, not entirely convinced by his answer. "Really? Just passing by, and you happen to notice me shopping for clothes?"

"Coincidence, I suppose."

"Are you sure you are not stalking me?"

"I don't have that much free time."

"...Then why are you loitering around?"

"...."

"Right?"

"I am here to prepare for the upcoming trip."

"Trip? Ah...."

Considering they had already found the location, it made sense.

"Why, though?" She asked. Was there any reason?

"Did you not research anything?" But seeing his expression, it seemed she asked the wrong question.

"Did I need to?"

"Sometimes I don't know if you are smart or stupid."

"Hey! Who are you calling stupid?"

"You, of course."

Irina huffed, crossing her arms in mock offense. "I'll have you know I'm ranked third in this whole academy."

"If you really think intelligence is correlated with academic success, then I wish you good luck in the future."

Irina rolled her eyes. "Enough with the smart or stupid debate. Just tell me what I need to know."

"If you really want to know, I suggest you start researching," Astron replied, his tone not giving away much.

Irina frowned but decided to change the topic. "All right, fine. So, what are you doing now? Can I follow you around? I still need to buy some stuff."

Astron looked at her for a moment, considering. "Will you be fine covering your face with that mask?"

Irina nodded and then took off the mask, revealing her face while placing it inside her bag. "See? No mask. Now, can I follow you around?"

"Just make it quick. I don't have the patience for a long shopping spree."

Irina grinned. "Deal." She quickly put her purchased items into her spatial ring and gestured for Astron to lead the way.

However, what Astron didn't see coming his way would be the fact that on the first day, he would witness how dangerous a woman on a shopping spree could be.....

Chapter 246 Chapter 57.2 - We do a little bit of 'shopping'

"This one would look great on you!"

Inside one of the clothing shops of the academy, the red-haired girl exclaimed while holding up a sleek black shirt.

Astron eyed the shirt skeptically but took it from her, deciding to humor her.

He disappeared into the changing room and emerged a moment later, donning the black shirt. Irina examined him with a critical gaze, nodding approvingly.

"See? I told you! It suits you well," Irina said with a triumphant grin on her face.

Astron simply sighed, not bothering to argue. Irina was on a mission, and he had a feeling it wouldn't end anytime soon.

'Sigh....Why did I misspoke?'

He himself knew it was his own decision that brought them here. Well, saying that was a decision was actually wrong since, in reality, he just mumbled about buying clothes.

"You want to buy clothes!"

And Irina's response was immediate as she appeared right before his face. From that point on, he was on a shopping spree, going from one place to another.

Though most of the time, rather than him buying clothes for himself, it was Irina choosing clothes for him.

Undeterred by Astron's lack of enthusiasm, Irina continued her fashion assault. "Wait, you need more variety. Here, try this one," she declared, presenting a stylish graphic tee with a unique design.

Astron, feeling the weight of his compliance, took the shirt from her and retreated to the changing room. As he emerged once again, Irina's eyes widened in excitement. "Wow, that looks amazing on you! You should definitely get it."

Astron sighed, realizing that he had unwittingly entered a fashion battle with Irina. She continued her onslaught, bringing forth more shirts, each seemingly more expensive than the last. "This one is a limited edition, and it's on sale today. You can't pass up such a deal," Irina insisted, her persuasive skills coming to the forefront.

Astron found himself surrounded by a growing pile of shirts, each adding a different touch to his usually plain attire. "Irina, do I really need all of these?" he questioned, raising an eyebrow.

She looked at him with determination. "Absolutely! Trust me; you'll thank me for this later. You can't keep looking so plain and uninteresting all the time."

Astron crossed his arms, a hint of annoyance in his expression. "I don't dress to impress anyone."

Irina smirked, undeterred. "Well, maybe you should. A little style won't hurt, and who knows, it might even boost your confidence."

Astron gave her a skeptical look, but Irina wasn't finished. She rummaged through the racks, finding a particularly stylish jacket.

And then she continued to look at him from the side to gauge his physic.

'This may look good?'

In her mind, she pictured what this jacket would look like. She wanted to see Astron in white clothes, but that annoying guy never let her grab one of those.

He said the color white never suited him.

'What is even his deal anyway?'

That was suspicious, but she decided to brush it off.

After thinking about the jacket, she grabbed another T-shirt.

'If we tuck this t-shirt into his trousers, then....'

Immediately picturing the combine inside her mind, she decided to test it off. Grabbing the black trousers, black T-shirt, and jacket, Irina couldn't resist the temptation to experiment further with Astron's wardrobe.

"Hey, Astron, try this one."

Astron sighed, taking the clothes reluctantly. "This better be the last one. We've been at this for a while."

Irina grinned, not caring about his mild protest. "Trust me, this is the perfect combination. It'll be worth it."

As Astron headed to the changing room with the new set of clothes, Irina couldn't help but feel a sense of accomplishment.

She imagined the transformation she had orchestrated, eagerly awaiting Astron's reaction.

'It will definitely look awesome.'

While waiting for Astron to emerge from the changing room, Irina became aware of the curious gazes directed her way. The bustling store had become a stage for whispers and discreet glances from other students.

She overheard fragments of conversations among the students nearby.

"Isn't that Irina Amberheart?"

"Yeah, it is. What is she doing here?"

"I never knew Irina had a thing for shopping."

"Who's that guy with her? Is he her boyfriend?"

As the whispers and comments continued, Irina couldn't help but feel a twinge of embarrassment.

The attention, particularly the assumption about Astron being her boyfriend, made her slightly uneasy.

After all, knowing how her mother would react if such rumors were to go around...

SHIVER!

She shivered.

'Ah, I was careless....'

Lamenting at her carelessness, she couldn't help but think how stupid she was. She came here on a whim since she felt bored wandering alone, and the idea of hanging out with him felt a little fresh, to be honest.

And after hearing about him buying clothes, she.....

Unleashed the inner shopping maniac and forgot everything....

"He was quite a fine piece, though?"

"Was there a junior like him? Why hadn't I ever seen him before?"

The idea of Astron as a "fine piece" and the suggestion of getting his contact information added an unexpected layer of discomfort.

'These girls....'

For some reason, those words angered her?

Irina's irritation at the gossip reached a tipping point, and she shot a fierce glare at the girls who were discussing Astron. The sudden intensity in her gaze, combined with an almost imperceptible surge of her aura, made the girls stop talking immediately.

"...."

The red-haired girl, usually calm and composed, emanated an unexpected ferocity that commanded attention. The girls, though seniors, couldn't help but shrink under the pressure of Irina's unspoken warning.

"Let's leave...."

"Yeah...."

Their hushed conversation came to an abrupt halt as they felt the weight of Irina's disapproval.

CREAK!

Right at that moment, the changing room door creaked open, drawing Irina's attention. Astron stepped out, fully dressed in the new clothes Irina had picked out for him.

<Illustration>

'Huhhhhhhhh????????'

The sight caught her off guard, and for a moment, she forgot about everything else.

Astron, looking remarkably handsome in his updated attire, had an air of uninterested boredom about him. His bangs almost reached his eyes, adding a touch of mystery to his expression.

The pure black t-shirt emphasized his flawless skin and the tight fit showcased his lean build. As he stood there with an indifferent demeanor, Irina couldn't help but gasp, her eyes widening.

'What is this? Who the hell is he?'

A faint blush spread across her cheeks as she found herself momentarily breathless. She hadn't expected the transformation to be this impactful.

The new clothes accentuated Astron's features in a way that made her view him in a different light.

'This is....'

She even salivated a little (?) as she looked over him.

Astron, seemingly unaware of the reaction he had elicited, glanced at Irina. "What?"

Irina shook her head, trying to regain her composure. "Nothing. You just look... different."

He raised an eyebrow, uninterested. "Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

'Definitely a good thing,' she thought inwardly, looking away to hide her embarrassment.

"What? Give me an answer?"

After going to all this trouble to change, this was the reaction he had gotten from Irina, and that seemingly bothered him.

'If he goes around like this.....'

Realizing the monster she was about to release to the world, for some reason, she felt bothered. Whether or not she accepted, the words those girls had just spoken seemingly had taken effect.

Adding the fact that just recently, she had witnessed how close he was with Sylvie.

'No, he absolutely can not.'

The decision was made in an instant. There was absolutely no room for him to go around like that.

"It was not good," Irina stated abruptly, her tone firm.

"Ha!" Astron's eyebrows furrowed in mild irritation. "What do you mean, not good? We spent so much time picking these out."

Irina sighed, attempting to hide her true feelings. "Well, they looked better on the rack. Maybe it's the lighting in here."

Astron scowled, feeling a bit frustrated. "You dragged me into this, and now you're saying they're not good?"

"Look, it's just clothes. You can wear whatever you want," Irina replied dismissively, urging him to take off the clothes. "Let's just leave them. No need to waste any more time here."

Astron grumbled in annoyance, feeling like he had been played. However, sensing Irina's insistence, he reluctantly began removing the clothes and was about to return them to racks, but at that moment, Irina stopped him.

"Let's just leave them here; the employees will take them away anyway."

"...Tch..."

With a click of a tongue, he left the combine here and started walking to the cashier.

Astron walked towards the cashier, leaving the clothes behind as Irina called over another store employee. When the woman approached, Irina spoke up, a hint of embarrassment in her voice.

"Um, could you do me a favor? Can you reserve these clothes for a while? I'll come back to pick them up later."

The employee raised an eyebrow, giving Irina a knowing look. "Sure thing. We can keep them aside for you. Just come back when you're ready."

As the employee took the clothes to make the reservation, she couldn't resist making a subtle remark, "You've got a good eye. He looks quite handsome in those clothes. Smart move, keeping it to yourself."

Irina's face turned even redder, and she stammered, "I-I... it's not like that."

The employee chuckled knowingly and winked, "Whatever you say. Enjoy your day, you two."

Irina hurriedly followed Astron out of the store, still blushing at the unexpected turn of events.

Astron, seemingly oblivious to the exchange, continued walking with his usual indifferent expression while still muttering under his breath about the wasted time.

The episode added a new layer of awkwardness to their shopping adventure, though it was almost about to reach its end.

-----A/N-----

This is enough for fanservice chapters. I wasn't in the mood to write fighting scenes after my uncle passed away.

Anyway, now it's time to progress with the plot.

Chapter 247 Chapter 58.1 - Crossing Hearts

People tend to get comfortable when things start turning into monotonous ones. It is called comfort zone, and it is one of the traits we humans have developed over the course of evolution.

Whenever we find something or somewhere safe, we would stick to it to survive. But as the time passed, this type of evolution became something different.

It became a trait symbolizing laziness. After all, the more you get comfortable, the more you will get stagnant.

And being stagnant means being content with yourself.

And this is not something I can ever accept.

THUD! THUD! THUD!

Standing in front of the training dummy, different kinds of thoughts passed through my head.

"Huff....."

Sweat was pouring from my face. It was the usual routine for me at this point. I woke up after sleeping for around three and a half hours and then started to train instantly.

"This should be enough for now."

I mumbled, reaching out the towel utilizing the formula I had been working on.

「Telekinesis」

It was the name, though the definition itself is a lot more complex. First-ranked magic spell that enables the user to control the forces by creating fields.

As I left the training room, the chill of the winter night embraced me, and the darkness loomed overhead.

The academy's corridors were quiet, the only sound echoing being the soft tap of my footsteps against the cold tiles.

"Huff...."

'It had been a while, had it?'

It was exceptionally cold this time, contrary to last year. However, it was doubtful that I could even remember it correctly. Sometimes I wondered, was my memory even right?

'Whatever.'

Then, I decided that thinking like this was pointless.

I walked briskly through the empty roads, my breath visible in the frigid air.

The dimly lit pathways and the occasional gusts of wind rattling the windows – it was a stark contrast to the bustling activity during the day.

As I ventured outside, the silence of the night was broken by distant sounds.

THUD! GIGGLE!

Intrigued, I followed the noises, my steps muffled on the snow-covered ground. As I approached, I could discern hushed voices and occasional laughter.

Peering around the corner, I saw a group of students gathered in an open area.

'Hmm?'

They seemed engrossed in a clandestine activity. Curiosity getting the better of me, I silently moved closer to eavesdrop on their conversation.

It was unusual for any students to even be awake at this hour of time. Unless people are training maniacs like me, their motives would be shady.

That was my own analysis, though, as nothing was certain.

"I didn't do anything like that....Please...Why don't you believe me?"

However, as I had concealed my presence utilizing my trait [Shadowborne], I finally crossed enough distance to be able to hear everything I needed to know.

"Sob....Please....Sob...."

"Heh, look at this little thwart."

As I witnessed the disturbing scene unfolding before me, my brain looked for any information for the people in front.

The girls, with a malicious glint in their eyes, circled around another student, their laughter echoing in the cold night air.

The victimized girl, visibly distressed, tried to defend herself with a meek voice, denying the accusations hurled at her.

'I see....'

This was a common case that happened in the world. People tend to become cruel when they hold power.

After all, we are all beings with egos inside them, and that ego is something that continuously encourages us to become something.

'It is a human's desire to become a god, but that desire is what makes them sink.'

SLAP!

As the sound of a slap echoed around the place, giggles followed.

"Shut up, bitch. Who are you to lie before me!"

SLAP!

"Hick.....I didn't do it.....I didn't do it.....I didn't do it....."

"Oh, look who's denying everything! We have proof, you little tramp! Or should I say, Mia?"

At the mention of the name 'Mia' specifically, the girl flinched.

"You thought we didn't know, right? Nobody would notice, right? Our little M....I....A....."

"Nooo...."

The girl continued to shrink while grabbing her knees with her arms. It was a common response to trauma, especially when it was something that the mind recognized as a threat to life.

The gesture of fetal position is an instinct that almost all humans have the moment they are born.

"Look at her Emma....She can't even take it...." One of the other girls came forward while looking at 'Mia' like she was a bug.

My mind, devoid of empathy or guilt, continued its dispassionate analysis.

It recognized this pattern as a common manifestation of power dynamics among humans. The desire for dominance, for asserting one's ego, often led to the degradation of others.

In times like these, I always found myself different from any general people out there, as if something inside me was always missing itself.

Like I was a person that came here as a silent observer.

The torment of the bullied girl escalated as one of the girl's leaders grabbed her by her hair, cruelly forcing her to face the damning evidence on the smartwatch.

The screen is illuminated with compromising images, capturing moments of Mia's vulnerability.

"See this, Mia? This was you, wasn't it?" The girl named Emma taunted sadistically, her voice dripping with contempt. "Look how happy you were, sitting on the laps of those boys. Selling yourself like a cheap thrill."

'Mia,' now physically restrained and emotionally battered, struggled to comprehend the gravity of the situation. Tears streamed down her face as she vehemently denied the accusations, her voice reduced to desperate sobs.

"No... It's not me... I never..." Mia's words were choked by the vice-like grip on her hair.

No, it wasn't because of the grip. From her eyes and the small gestures of her body, it was evident.

'She gave up.'

Her tensed body suddenly relaxed as if she had already accepted her fate.

'.....'

For some reason, it reminded me of previous Astron and his interactions with other students when he entered. Even though he was no longer here completely, he was still a part of mine.

Something....

A feeling appeared inside me.

The other girls, reveling in the spectacle, intensified their verbal assault, feeding off the power they held over Mia.

"Pathetic liar!"

SLAP!

"You thought you could fool everyone, huh?"

SLAP!

"I hate bitches like you the most! Do you know Ken dumped me because of you? He said she no longer liked me, and when I asked him if he had someone in his mind, he looked at you."

The accusations and physical blows rained down on Mia, who was trapped in a nightmarish cycle of humiliation. The girls, fueled by a toxic blend of resentment and power, reveled in their role as tormentors.

"You are always getting on my nerves. Were you seducing guys with this hair? They call this silky?" one of the girls mocked, grabbing a handful of Mia's hair with malicious intent.

People tended to ignore this fact because of the general conception of male aggressiveness. However, the reality of the female world is a lot more cruel than you would ever expect.

A woman's grudge and methods to undermine others are not just limited to physical aspects. They not only destroy their enemy in physical form but also in social form.

They destroy the target's reputation with gossip and use mental tormenting methods to torture.

And this was the perfect example of this case.

The viciousness of the assault seemed boundless, an unrestrained manifestation of the darker facets of human nature.

As the vile spectacle unfolded, Emma, the orchestrator of this twisted drama, called forth another girl into the malevolent spotlight.

'Hmm?'

The timid figure with glasses and visible bruises on her body stumbled forward, casting furtive glances at the tormentors who had summoned her. It looked like she was another victim of a

"Look who we've got here! Our dear Mia's not as innocent as she pretends," Emma declared with a triumphant smirk. "This one here," she gestured toward the bruised girl, "is the result of Mia's little outburst when they were alone. Turns out our precious Mia has a darker side."

The revelation injected a different shade of complexity into the situation. Mia, the seemingly helpless victim, had a side that contributed to the cycle of violence.

After all, there was no need to doubt that the girl named Emma was lying since she had no reason to do so.

The bruises on the timid girl testified to a narrative of reciprocal harm, blurring the lines between perpetrator and victim.

"Now, Melanie, it's time to show Mia what she deserves," Emma goaded, addressing the timid girl with the bruises. "Don't let her get away with it. Give her a taste of her own medicine."

Melanie hesitated, torn between the fear instilled by her tormentors and a glimmer of reluctance. The pressure to conform to the cycle of violence weighed heavily on her fragile shoulders.

"Come on, Melanie! Don't let her off easy. Show her we won't tolerate her crap!" Emma's encouragement, laced with cruelty, pushed Melanie to the brink. With a hesitant resolve, she raised her hand, her palm trembling.

SLAP!

The sound echoed through the desolate night, mingling with the cold wind that whispered through the empty streets.

"How does it feel?" Emma taunted, her voice dripping with sadistic satisfaction. The air seemed to thicken with tension as Melanie, caught in the web of coercion, gazed at Mia with conflicted emotions.

Melanie's initial reluctance morphed into a grim determination. The smile that spread across her face, while unsettling, mirrored the twisted satisfaction Emma and the others derived from this macabre display.

On the cold winter night, under the indifferent gaze of the stars, Melanie raised her hand once again. The second and then third slaps landed with a resounding crack, the sound reverberating through the silent darkness.

SLAP!

Mia's anguish was palpable, and the cycle of violence continued unabated. Each blow inflicted seemed to further erode any semblance of humanity in this cruel tableau.

"Keep going, Melanie! Make her pay for what she did to you," Emma goaded, reveling in the power dynamics she orchestrated. Melanie, now fully succumbing to the dark currents around her, unleashed a barrage of slaps.

The once timid girl, now consumed by the perverse satisfaction of power, delivered each blow with a disturbing sense of satisfaction.

'Bully-turned-bully behavior.'

It was a typical case and a behavior that contributed to the problem itself. The cold wind carried the sounds of violence and sadistic laughter, creating an eerie symphony under the starlit sky.

Despite my detached demeanor, a subtle urge to intervene flickered within me. It was an instinct, perhaps a trace of normality, trying to resist the apathy that usually governed my actions. However, my rational mind swiftly overruled this impulse.

'No. It is pointless.'

This was humanity's own nature, and I was no saint. Intervening offered no tangible benefits.

'But....'

However, at that moment, from the corner of my eyes, something appeared in my vision from very far away.

'I guess this is the hero's job.'

It was the perfect tailored job for our hero, after all.

Chapter 248 Chapter 58.2 - Crossing Hearts

Recently, things had been going well for Ethan.

Since he had awakened, he had been working hard to make his stats better than before, and it seemed things were working.

Of course, if one knew about his talent limit and his newly awakened trait.....Then, they would surely understand how things were working for him.

'One last lap.'

And now here he was. Running around the academy for the first time in the morning. This became a daily occurrence for him since he was training with Julia all this time. Thanks to her 'unique' way of training in the form of beating the shit out of others, he sought for some alone time.

This running time was one of those.

"....."

Ethan's breath came out in visible puffs as he navigated the familiar paths of the academy grounds. The crisp morning air filled his lungs, invigorating him as he pushed his body to its limits. Each stride carried a determination born from the desire to surpass his previous self.

The sun had yet to rise, and the weather of night was cold, casting a wind over the academy's sprawling landscape.

Ethan's blue hair fluttered with each step, a streak of color amidst the serene surroundings.

As he ran, the rhythmic thud of his footsteps echoed through the quiet campus, harmonizing with the occasional bird's song.

He couldn't help but reflect on the recent changes in his life. The awakening had brought forth new possibilities, and his dedication to improving his skills had paid off.

The limitations that once hindered him were now mere obstacles to overcome.

'New assignment....I wonder where it is?'

Of course, his mind was also on the same assignment. His group wasn't able to find the location. Well, they did find some things, but they weren't sure any of them since it felt like they were just gibberish.

'Professor Eleanor said a group of students had already found the answer correctly. They should be really talented.'

This had already become his free-thinking time while running. He would go through the current events of his life, how the academy was going, how his studies were going, and how his relationships with people were going.

Naturally, with time passing, his thoughts progressed to their current topic of conversation.

The person that he was also intrigued with.

'Lilia also mentioned him being quite talented. I guess they are seeing it now.'

After Ethan improved his rankings, his interactions with Astron became increasingly rarer since they were no longer matched in combat classes, and neither of the two initiated any talk.

Well, considering Astron had never initiated before, it was mainly on Ethan's side. But he was also busy with his own things so that he couldn't do it.

'I wonder what he is doing now.'

Both he and Julia had seen him training early in the morning before, so they knew he was also a hard worker.

'Irina and him were in the same group. Well, I guess they wouldn't do too bad.'

At the thought of groups, he was suddenly reminded of Emily. The girl, both Astron and him, had helped with her guild and dungeon exploration.

'She said her guild was doing well.....I guess our help wasn't pointless.'

After the exploration, Ethan also decided to invest in Emily's guild since he liked how she approached her members as family. Her attitude wasn't bad either, so he didn't mind recommending her guild to the butler.

'It is good....'

As Ethan continued his morning run, his thoughts meandered to the cryptic conversation he had with Carl about Astron. The words echoed in his mind, and he couldn't shake off the feeling that there was more to Astron than met the eye.

'Carl was insistent but vague. Something about Astron not being what he seemed, giving a hidden feeling that goes beyond the looks,' Ethan pondered, his breath forming misty clouds in the chilly morning air.

'I am getting the same feeling.'

The first reason why he was interested in Astron was His intuition. Even at the start, he got a weird feeling from him. Was it something sinister or something pure?

What was it?

To this question, he could only answer with one thing.

'Detachment.'

It was as if Astron existed in a realm detached from the everyday concerns of the academy.

Ethan's contemplative mind delved into the observations he had made about Astron's behavior, forming a narrative of detachment that seemed to shroud the enigmatic figure.

He's detached from reality, living in his own world,' Ethan mused, his pace steady as he continued his morning run. 'Astron never seemed to care about the things that occupy most students – the banter, the laughter, the hobbies. Does he even have hobbies?'

The image of Astron in the combat classes resurfaced, his focus unwavering, his movements precise.

It was as if he approached every challenge with calculated precision, unaffected by the camaraderie and levity that often accompanied the students' interactions.

"Don't talk to me."

He was reminded of the time when he was rude. Regardless of the person, whether they were a teacher or a celebrity, his attitude never changed.

'He doesn't have fun, at least not in the way others do. No visible interests, no friendships that extend beyond necessity,' Ethan thought, his breath now matching the rhythm of his contemplation.

'But why?'

That one question that he could never answer, no matter how he thought. He just lacked the information.

"I won't stop until I exterminate the enemy."

Remembering his words of that time and the visible hatred he excluded.

'What enemies are you talking about?'

The notion of helping Astron, understanding the source of his intensity, and perhaps unraveling the enigma flickered in Ethan's mind. 'After all this time, it feels like we've somehow become close, even if in an unconventional way,' he acknowledged, realizing that Astron, despite his detached nature, had left an undeniable impact on him.

Lost in thought, Ethan's body carried him through the academy grounds, each step taking him deeper into the labyrinth of his musings. The rhythmic thud of his footsteps became a steady cadence to the questions that circled in his mind.

A sudden awareness of his surroundings jolted him from his contemplation. Ethan noticed that he had been running for quite a while, and a growing thirst made itself known. With a sigh, he decided it was time to quench his thirst and rehydrate.

Reaching for the water bottle he had tucked into his training gear, Ethan took a refreshing gulp. The cool liquid washed away the dryness in his throat, and he felt invigorated. As he closed the bottle, he made a decision.

"This will be my final lap," Ethan declared to himself, his voice somehow feeling calm.

Ethan resumed his run, the rhythmic thud of his footsteps now serving as a rhythmic beat to the cadence of his clear mind. The muddled thoughts that had consumed him earlier were momentarily set aside as he focused on the physical exertion and the crisp air that filled his lungs.

"CAW!"

SWOOSH!

However, the peaceful rhythm was abruptly shattered when, out of nowhere, a black figure swooped down towards him.

"Ouch!"

Instinctively, Ethan halted in his tracks, a mix of surprise and wariness etched across his features.

"What the?"

FLAP! FLAP!

The sudden assailant revealed itself to be a crow, its wings flapping menacingly.

'A crow?'

Ethan's eyes narrowed as he took in the crow's unusual appearance. Its feathers seemed darker than any crow he had ever seen, and its eyes glowed an eerie shade of purple.

The hollow gaze of those purple eyes sent a shiver down Ethan's spine, an inexplicable feeling of unease settling over him.

"Strange crow," Ethan muttered under his breath as his gaze followed the crow.

"Hmm? What?" But rather than seeing the crow, his gaze met with nothing but emptiness as if the crow hadn't even existed before.

"Where did it go?" he wondered aloud, scanning the darkened surroundings. The sun had yet to rise, casting shadows that seemed to dance with the lingering mystery of the encounter. The crisp air now carried a subtle chill, adding an extra layer of uncertainty to the atmosphere.

Ethan's breaths, once synchronized with the rhythm of his run, now hung in the still night air. He strained his senses, searching for any sign of the strange crow.

"Was it even real?" Ethan questioned, running a hand through his blue hair. The unease from the encounter lingered, leaving him with a sense of bewilderment. He considered the possibility that the crow might have been a figment of his imagination, a trick played by his fatigued mind.

"Wait?"

At that moment, he noticed a trail. Underneath the trees that were lit by the lighting of the academy, he noticed a small stain.

Intrigued, he approached cautiously, realizing that the stain wasn't just a mark on the path; it was blood.

His eyes widened, and a wave of concern washed over him.

'This is fresh.'

The blood felt fresh, and he couldn't dismiss the thought that someone might have been injured right there. The mystery deepened as he noticed that the trail led toward the backyards of the buildings in front of him.

A sense of urgency overcame Ethan as he followed the blood trail, his instincts guiding him through the shadows. The darkness seemed to thicken as he ventured deeper into the academy grounds, the crisp air now laden with a foreboding tension.

As he neared the backyards, the subtle sounds of movement reached his ears. Hesitating for a moment, Ethan strained to identify the source of the noise.

The subtle sounds of the movement grew more pronounced, and Ethan hesitated, straining to identify the source. The air seemed charged with an eerie energy, and suddenly, he caught snippets of voices – whispers and laughter, but they held a sinister edge.

SLAP!

The sound echoed through the darkness, freezing Ethan in his tracks. A knot tightened in his stomach as the voices became clearer.

"It is so fun... So much fun...."

SLAP!

"Will you spread your legs for us too? Should I pay you for that?"

'What is this?'

A mixture of anger and concern surged within Ethan as he followed the sounds to a secluded corner of the backyard. There, illuminated by faint moonlight, he came across a disturbing scene.

'Don't tell me?'

A girl, cornered and outnumbered, was being subjected to taunts and physical intimidation by a group of others.

The atmosphere was thick with hostility, and Ethan's gaze hardened as he witnessed the distressing display of bullying.

For the first time in a while, Ethan felt his blood boil after witnessing the girl lying on the ground with her gaze shallow.

He took a step forward, his expression determined, and his voice cut through the night with a stern command.

"Stop that right now!"

Chapter 249 Chapter 58.3 - Crossing Hearts

The moonlight cast a cold glow on the disturbing scene as Ethan stepped forward, looking at the girl lying on the ground.

She, once caught in the web of torment, appeared vulnerable and shattered. Her disheveled hair clung to her tear-streaked face, framing eyes that betrayed a mix of fear, humiliation, and a

lingering glimmer of defiance. The pallor of her skin, highlighted by the dim glow of the smartwatch's screen, accentuated the emotional turmoil etched on her features.

'She is a senior.'

From the corner of her arm, Ethan noticed the badge given to sophomore-year students. After looking at the other girls, he realized they also had the same badge on their arms.

'They are also sophomore year students.'

However, that was not the time to think of those details.

Ethan noticed the continuous slaps and hits seemed to etch lines of despair onto her countenance further, and her attempts to shield herself with folded arms mirrored a futile struggle against the overpowering tide of aggression.

'You!'

And that made his blood boil. After all, there was no way a person like him would expect such an occurrence to happen in front of his face.

"Stop that right now!" Ethan's voice reverberated through the secluded corner, disrupting the bullying scene. The bullies, caught off guard, quickly turned their attention to the source of the command.

"Who are you?" came a haughty voice, a tone that Ethan had grown accustomed to during his time at the academy.

The bully girls sneered, eyeing him with a mix of arrogance and disdain. One of them, seemingly the ringleader, stepped forward, her demeanor unapologetic. "What's it to you? This is none of your business."

Ethan's gaze remained steely, his determination unyielding. "When someone's in trouble, it becomes everyone's business. You don't get to torment someone just because you feel like it."

The leader of the bullies shot Ethan a mocking grin, her expression devoid of any remorse or guilt. It was as if what she was doing right now was something she had every right to, and the idea of rules was foreign to her.

"What's your hero complex, huh?" she sneered, her tone dripping with disdain. "This girl needs to learn her place. Maybe a little roughing up will teach her."

Ethan's jaw tightened at the callousness in her words. He felt the heat of anger rising within him, fueled by the blatant lack of empathy displayed by the bully. The moonlight seemed to accentuate the cold, unapologetic gleam in her eyes.

"You're not her savior, and this is none of your business," she continued, her grin widening. "Why don't you go back to whatever hole you crawled out of and leave us alone?"

The other girls snickered in agreement, a cruel chorus that echoed through the night.

'These girls.'

Despite Ethan's steely resolve, a sense of frustration and disbelief settled within him.

'How can a human do that to another?'

The darkness that shrouded the secluded corner seemed to mirror the moral void in the bully's heart from how she looked at the girl with a wide grin, how she licked her lips, and the blood dripping from the tip of her hands.

It looked like the girl was enjoying every bit of a second of what she was doing.

"This isn't something a human would do to another," Ethan stated firmly, refusing to turn away. "Right now, you're not being yourself."

This was what he genuinely believed. Even while he was confronting other demonic humans, he always thought something pushed them to become that way. He thought that in different conditions, nobody would turn that way.

The girl's smirk widened at his words, her tone mocking. "Oh, I'm pissed now," she hissed, her eyes glinting with malice.

SMASH!

Without warning, she raised her fist and delivered a brutal blow to the victim's face.

"AH!"

The sound of impact echoed through the night, followed by a gasp of pain.

"I am not being myself? What the hell?"

The bully girl mumbled. The moonlight played upon her features, casting eerie shadows that accentuated the malicious satisfaction etched on her face. Her enjoyment was palpable, a grotesque spectacle in the secluded corner of the backyard.

"Who do you think you are to say such a thing?"

Ethan felt a surge of anger and frustration, his empathy for the victim fueling his determination to intervene.

SMASH!

Ignoring his words, the girl raised her fist once again, delivering another brutal blow to her unconscious victim. The sickening sound of bones creaking echoed through the night, a chilling testament to the unbridled cruelty that seemed to consume her.

"You think you can change anything?" she scoffed, her tone laced with a twisted amusement. "People like you are all the same. Just weak, pathetic worms."

Ethan clenched his fists, his resolve unyielding despite the escalating brutality. The darkness that had enveloped the secluded corner seemed impenetrable, a stark contrast to the empathy and compassion he desperately tried to uphold.

In a final act of sadistic triumph, the girl loomed over her victim, her smirk widening with a perverse delight. "This is what happens to those who cross me. Those who act all and mighty in front of me while still being a whore."

The girl stood and turned her body fully to Ethan, looking at her with a smirk.

"Emma, haven't you gon-"

"Shut up."

One of her followers tucked her clothes, looking worried. After all, the target of her hits was now lying unconscious, with blood dripping from her head all over.

"Nothing will happen....Worms like these are resilient. Especially those who spread their legs like her."

"....Okay...."

After lecturing her friends, the girl named Emma slowly approached Ethan.

TAP! TAP!

Her luxurious boots made a sound with each step.

Standing right in front of him, Emma looked at Ethan with a condescending gaze. The moonlight revealed a cold certainty in her eyes, an arrogance that spoke of someone accustomed to exerting control.

"I know guys like you quite well," Emma said, her voice dripping with disdain. "Justice enforcers, obsessed with honor and purity. You're all the same."

She continued her approach, the tap of her boots creating an unsettling rhythm against the backdrop of the night. As she stood before Ethan, the moonlight revealed a cold certainty in her eyes, an arrogance born from wielding power over others.

"You all like virgins, those pure girls," Emma remarked with a cruel smirk. "Others, defiled. But for people like you, being a whore is a lot worse than being uneducated or stupid. Isn't this why you can never take it when you know the girl is better than you."

The weight of her words hung in the air, a challenge to Ethan's sense of justice. Emma's cruel satisfaction seemed to intensify, relishing in the discomfort she stirred.

"What if the girl you're so desperately trying to protect was a whore?" Emma continued, her voice laced with mockery. "What if she was really spreading her legs in front of anyone paying her? Would you still play the hero for someone so impure?"

She looked so sure of her words as if she knew him well. But, never once in front of the girl, Ethan wavered.

"No. I wouldn't."

Emma scoffed, dismissing his response with a mocking laugh. "You don't believe me, do you?" With a smug expression, she opened her smartwatch, displaying a series of photos. The images showed the same girl in various explicit situations with different guys, some of them explicit enough to be censored.

"There you go," Emma taunted, holding the smartwatch out for Ethan to see. "Your precious victim isn't as innocent as you thought. So much for your hero act. You really can't trust anyone these days, can you?"

The images on the smartwatch painted a damning picture, and Emma reveled in the shock she aimed to elicit from Ethan.

Ethan's eyes narrowed as he glanced at the photos on Emma's smartwatch. Disgust and disbelief painted his features, a tumultuous mix of emotions swirling within him.

Emma, sensing a crack in Ethan's unwavering facade, took it as a sign of her victory. A triumphant smirk played on her lips as she observed his reaction, interpreting his disgust as confirmation of her claims.

"Told you," Emma's triumphant smirk deepened as she continued her assault on Ethan's ideals. "All those heroes like you, they're the same," she sneered, gesturing dismissively. "Thinking they can save the day, be the shining knight for some pure, untouched damsel in distress. It's laughable."

"Pathetic."

"Huh?"

"It is just pathetic."

Contrary to how Emma thought, Ethan wasn't actually disgusted by the explicit pictures.

"Of course-"

"The fact that you keep talking as if everyone is the same."

Instead, he felt a deep sense of disappointment in himself, a realization that his own indecisiveness was why this girl could still stand in front of him and grin.

'She doesn't deserve to be saved.'

The images didn't disgust him; it was the manipulative use of them that fueled his frustration.

"Wh-"

"The fact that you feel entitled to torment others just because of some pictures is a lot more disgusting than those mere pictures," Ethan asserted, his voice cutting through Emma's attempts at mockery. "Even breathing the same air as such a vile woman like you is making me suffocate."

These words were Ethan's honest thoughts, a declaration of his disdain for Emma's cruel actions.

"Disgusting."

For the first time in his life, he felt this angry. If not for his impressive control of his emotions that were taught in his household and the values he held, he would smash this girl's face right here.

If that were a guy speaking such words, he would probably be in hospital right now.

SPIT!

He spat to the ground and went past Emma, ignoring the girl standing.

Emma's eyes widened at his actions; her gaze fixated on the spit staining her expensive boots. The audacity of his gesture seemed to strike a nerve, and her face turned crimson with anger. The twisted satisfaction that had adorned her features now morphed into a vindictive determination.

"You think you can walk away from this?" Emma's voice quivered with restrained fury. "Let's see how brave you are when others join in."

Her decision to show Ethan his place went beyond just herself; she intended to rally the support of the other girls involved.

Emma's cruel intentions simmered beneath the surface as she prepared to escalate the confrontation, fueled by the insult Ethan had dared to deliver.

'Thank god she is fine.'

However, Ethan just ignored her and checked the pulse of the girl lying on the ground. He felt responsible because he just watched what happened instead of intervening and was angry at himself.

Emma's frustration deepened at Ethan's disregard for her threats. Seething with anger, she raised her voice, ordering the other girls to attack him.

"Just get this bastard."

At the mention of these words, Ethan just smiled, feeling a fist covered with Aura approaching him.

'This will be my retribution.'

Even if he could lessen the burden on this girl a little bit, he was fine with it.

Chapter 250 Chapter 58.4 - Crossing Hearts

"People get hurt all the time, Ethan. This is how the world works."

"But, father. How can I ignore others' misfortunes if I call myself a good person?"

"Good person, huh?"

Remembering the conversation he had with his father, Ethan couldn't help but smile a little at the approaching fist.

Even though he said that he wouldn't ignore other people's misfortune, just right before, he acted indecisively and let someone other hurt.

'Pathetic.'

But, he was no longer going to do that. Whether someone else's past was strained, unless the said person had committed a crime and wasn't unpunished, it was not his room to judge.

Especially if that said, the past had concerns like this.

"Sorry, handsome guy....."

SWOOSH!

As the first girl lunged at him with a fist charged with Aura, Ethan's expression shifted from a passive smile to a focused determination.

SWOOSH!

His blue eyes locked onto the approaching threat, and with swift reflexes, he sidestepped the attack. The girl's punch missed its mark, and Ethan seized the opportunity to counter.

THUD!

His movements were calculated, his spear-like precision evident as he delivered a precise strike to the girl's side.

"Burghk-"

A surge of Aura accompanied the blow, sending her staggering back. The other two girls hesitated for a moment, surprised by Ethan's agility and counterattack.

"Rhonda!"

But they soon came to their senses as they realized that her friend was lying on the ground grabbing her stomach.

"You little jerk! How dare you!" one of the girls shouted, her fists clenched in fury. The anger in her eyes mirrored that of her companions, and they closed in on Ethan with a renewed sense of aggression.

SWOOSH!

A swift kick was aimed at Ethan's midsection, but he deftly evaded it, stepping back with nimble footwork.

The calculated movements showcased his trained combat skills, leaving the girls momentarily taken aback.

"Get him, Yvonne! Don't let him think he can just walk away!" another girl yelled, encouraging her companion to join the fray.

As Yvonne lunged forward, Ethan anticipated her move. With a quick sidestep, he avoided her attack and swiftly retaliated with a counterstrike, a precise jab to her shoulder.

THUD!

The forceful blow elicited a yelp of pain, and Yvonne staggered, momentarily thrown off balance. The other girl, fueled by a mix of anger and determination, lunged at Ethan from the side.

SWOOSH!

Ethan, however, was prepared. With a swift spin, he dodged the attack, leaving the third girl stumbling forward. Seizing the opportunity, Ethan delivered a sweeping kick, causing her to lose her balance and fall to the ground.

CRASH!

The clash of bodies echoed in the secluded corner, the tension escalating as the confrontation unfolded. The girls, now more enraged than before, were relentless in their pursuit of retribution.

The three girls, now more determined than ever, exchanged glances that conveyed a mix of frustration and acknowledgment. The realization that Ethan was no ordinary opponent had dawned upon them.

Well, considering how naïve he looked and his aura, they thought he was only a handsome guy with a hero complex, but it seemed he had the talent to back it up a little.

"You're not as pathetic as I thought," the girl named Rhonda grumbled, still recovering from the blow to her side. Her tone carried a begrudging respect for a fellow Awakened that she couldn't conceal.

"He's good," Yvonne added, rubbing her shoulder where Ethan's precise strike had landed. The sting of pain was accompanied by a newfound understanding of the challenge they faced.

The third girl, who had stumbled in her attempt to attack, struggled to stand up, but her eyes remained fixated on Ethan. A mix of frustration and admiration lingered in her gaze.

Ethan, on the other hand, maintained a focused demeanor, his blue eyes unwavering. He could sense a shift in their approach as they prepared for a more coordinated assault.

'This....'

He also knew that facing seniors like that wasn't optimal. Even if they were girls, the power of stats was the thing that was detrimental when fighting.

"Enough playing around," the first girl declared, her voice now devoid of mockery. "This had already taken too long."

She threw a quick look at Emma, looking at the fight with her arms crossed.

'This bitch doesn't help either.'

She was following her because she was one of the heirs of a high-standing corporation in the field, and she was strong as a mage. But, for some reason, this guy before him also felt familiar. Even though she couldn't put the exact name, it felt like he was famous as well.

"Leave this to me."

However, she was getting sick of it. She also didn't like Mia; no, she hated her, but this circus play had become way too long for her own good. Right now, things were getting a risky turn; she could feel it.

In fact, she had been getting a weird feeling of being watched for a while, even though she couldn't pinpoint where exactly. Knowing Emma's temper, she knew things would get out of control.

"B-"

"...."

With one last glare to Yvonne, she made her quiet. And then, she instantly channeled her aura onto her legs, taking her stance.

As a sophomore-year student, she was already familiar with how to coat herself with mana to the point where it was like breathing.

SWOOSH!

Then, with an instant kick, she followed. , wi

THUD!

'What?'

The speed of the kick was insanely fast, almost incomparable to what Ethan had encountered so far in his life.

Even when he was sparring with Julia or others, he never felt such a speed.

Ethan's world blurred as the sudden speed of the kick caught him off guard.

THUD! THUD! THUD!

The impact was relentless, a flurry of blows raining down on him with astonishing speed.

Each strike carried the weight of the senior's mana-coated limbs, making it nearly impossible for Ethan to predict or counter.

His instincts screamed at him to defend, but the onslaught was too overwhelming. The calculated precision that had served him well in previous exchanges was rendered useless against the relentless assault.

'It hurts.'

It hurt, but Ethan didn't mind. He had already taken into account that it would hurt before acting.

'It is fine.'

Again, he wasn't delusional enough to think that he could beat three seniors alone while he was without his weapon, where he could show the difference between lineages.

But then again, he at least thought he could put up some sort of fight and could at least stall for some time.

THUD! THUD! THUD!

The blows connected with merciless precision, each kick calculated to disarm and disable. In a matter of seconds, Ethan found himself disoriented and defenseless, unable to counter the onslaught.

THUD!

"Burghk!"

The final kick struck with devastating force, and Ethan spurted blood from his mouth as he crumpled to the ground. The world spun around him, his senses overwhelmed by the sudden and ruthless assault.

As he lay on the ground, battered and bloodied, Emma approached with a triumphant smirk. The moonlight cast eerie shadows on her face as she reveled in the moment.

"Looks like your shining knight act didn't last long," Emma taunted, her voice dripping with condescension. "Maybe next time, think twice before interfering in someone else's business."

'It is fine.'

However, he thought it was fine since he at least didn't ignore someone else's misfortune. This was the basics of being a human being in his mind.

However, his thoughts changed as Emma stepped on Ethan with her expensive boots, looking down at him with a triumphant glint in her eyes, and Ethan's face underwent a subtle transformation.

'What is this feeling?'

While he believed in the honor of looking out for others, he would not tolerate having his pride trampled upon, especially considering his status as a Hartley.

'I am on the right, but I am still being trampled upon.'

"Little Nephew. If the world worked in the right person's favor every time, then we wouldn't need the word 'justice' in our world."

He felt something was missing.

"Even the Justice always favors 'strong.' So be strong, Ethan. Be strong for your justice."

Remembering the words that had left the most impact in his mind, Ethan's face changed. He looked at the girl lying on the ground right beside him. Now, he was no longer in a different state.

He was also bruised and tattered.

'I couldn't change anything, huh?'

At that moment, Emma's victory was met with a sudden shift in Ethan's expression. His blue eyes, once clouded with pain and defeat, now bore a fiery determination.

'That's right. I need to be strong.'

The smirk that had adorned Emma's face began to fade as she sensed a change in the atmosphere.

TUCK!

Ethan's hand shot out, gripping the edge of Emma's boot with a firm grasp. The unexpected resistance caught her off guard, and her triumphant expression wavered for the first time.

Ethan smirked, his teeth stained with his own blood, a defiant glint in his eyes. "At the end of the day, you'll never win. Because next time, I'll be stronger."

Emma, for some inexplicable reason, flinched at his words. A sudden wave of discomfort washed over her, a feeling she couldn't quite comprehend.

There was a weird feeling...A weird aura covering Ethan. As if he was shining, not because he was a knight shining in armor but because he was someone who was a star.

'This....'

She couldn't put the feeling, but it made her bothered so much. She felt like insects were crawling upon her skin.

The smirk on her face faltered as an unsettling sensation gnawed at her confidence.

THUD!

Reacting instinctively, Emma kicked Ethan in the face one last time, the force of the blow causing him to lose consciousness. As he lay on the ground, the moonlight cast a pallor over his battered form, and Emma regained her composure.

"Learn your place, dog." She muttered, her voice laced with a mix of irritation and lingering unease. The other girls, still recovering from their encounter with Ethan, were observed in silence.

As Ethan lay unconscious on the ground, Emma, determined to erase any traces of their encounter, ordered the other girls to beat him further. The moonlight cast shadows that danced around the cold backyard as the girls hesitated, exchanging uneasy glances.

"Emma, isn't this too much?" Rhonda voiced her concern, eyeing Ethan's battered form. Yvonne and the third girl nodded in agreement, their unease mirroring Emma's own.

Emma, however, remained resolute, her irritation transforming into a steely resolve. "He needs to learn his place. Do it."

Reluctantly, the girls followed Emma's orders.

'Sorry....'

Even though it was not honorable to hit someone when they fell down, they had abandoned that 'honor' way long ago in their minds anyway. Though even they felt some sort of remorse for what they were about to do.

CREAK!

The sudden sound of creaking and approaching footsteps shattered the uneasy silence in the secluded backyard.

"Wait, someone is coming."

The girls, in the midst of carrying out Emma's ruthless order, froze as the reality of their situation sank in.

From the corner of the wall, they noticed who was coming.

"Guards."

Realizing the identity of the approaching guards, they immediately signaled Emma.

SWOOSH!

After the girls exchanged furtive glances, a collective realization that they had crossed a line and that consequences were imminent.

Without a word, they fled the scene, disappearing into the night like shadows seeking refuge from the approaching light.