

H. Academy 301

Chapter 301 Chapter 71.2 - Approaching Event

"Hmm... Things are looking good."

Sitting at her table, the girl with chestnut hair mumbled to herself. Everything seemed to be falling into place – her grades were on the rise, and her family's guild was navigating through smoother waters.

"Who is this? Isn't it my lovely daughter?"

At that moment, a lively but curt voice echoed from the doorway – a voice she had grown accustomed to, one that never failed to bring warmth to her heart.

"Father."

She mumbled softly, her gaze fixed on the robust figure standing before her. Her father looked healthier than ever, and the sight brought a subtle comfort to her soul.

"Don't look at me like that, Emily. You know, I had far long healed."

Her father spoke with a reassuring tone, but memories lingered in Emily's mind – memories of times when life had been unrelenting. The days when they had to tighten their belts, cutting expenses from clothes and various necessities. The time when her father, once formidable, was crippled and unable to move, and the doctors' steep demands for Valer just to cure him.

She could never erase those memories from her mind. The struggles and sacrifices were etched into her being.

'I shouldn't think like that. Thanks to Mister Ethan and his help, those days are far gone.'

As Emily gazed at her father, a flood of thoughts swirled within her. The tough times seemed like a distant past, as if they had overcome insurmountable challenges.

With a hopeful smile, she met her father's gaze and softly mumbled, "Okay."

'When the time comes, I will repay him with everything.'

Normally, she was already planning to pay Ethan back; however, recently, one of their biggest shareholders decided to sell their shares. Therefore, the guild's management underwent a slight change with newly appearing faces.

And, since it happened right after the Phantom's Land exploration, she was free to deal with her guild matters.

Initially, she thought it would be smooth sailing, but dealing with new faces proved more challenging than anticipated. Over the past two weeks, she and her father had been engrossed in procedural matters, legalities, and documentation. Unlike their previous mysterious investor, the newcomers were eager to be part of their guild.

Her father, sensing her contemplation, spoke up, "Emily, don't dwell on these matters too long. Focus on your grades; that's what matters most."

Her father always emphasized her grades in the academy and her progress as an Awakened. He said she shouldn't make the same mistake as him and shouldn't set her growth aside to manage the guild.

In this field, without sufficient strength, they could never do as they planned after all.

He gently patted her head, a familiar gesture that brought comfort. "I'm heading to a meeting soon. I need to go."

As her father prepared to leave, Emily nodded, understanding the responsibilities that awaited him.

The dynamics of the guild were changing, and the burden of managing the transition fell on their shoulders, yet she also needed to deal with the new curriculum.

'Well, we had already recovered enough, and our economic growth is almost tenfold. We are even in a better state compared to our start.'

Just as she thought about that past Azure Crest Guild, suddenly, she was reminded of that bastard who had destroyed everything.

'Tch. If not for him, we would probably be in a better condition, and we could even be promoted to the next rank.'

She couldn't help but glare at the wall as she remembered what happened in the past. If not for that traitor bastard, her father wouldn't be crippled, and their guild wouldn't lose their ranks this fast.

'But, just you wait. The moment I see you, I will make sure you die in my hands.'

She clenched her fists, yet then she relaxed herself.

'No. I shouldn't pressure myself. I need to keep my calm.'

Shaking off the unsettling thoughts, Emily refocused on the stack of formal documents before her. There was much to address in the guild's administrative affairs.

As she delved into her responsibilities, Emily's attention shifted to the upcoming dungeon explorations.

Glancing at the schedule, she noticed that Team-1, led by Sister Anya, was currently exploring a Rank-5 dungeon.

'Hmm....Noting important would happen there probably.'

A smile tugged at the corners of her lips, recognizing the progress Sister Anya had made and the successful recruitments made after the guild stabilized. After all, when they were at rock bottom, this team led by Anya somehow managed to defeat one of the most important dungeons underneath their control.

And once the news was spread, they were easily able to recruit many members.

"The advancements are promising," she murmured to herself, acknowledging the positive strides in the guild's exploration endeavors.

While she was focusing on her own training, she also didn't forget to observe the newcomers, and they were quite promising.

They may not be on the level of Arcadia Hunter Academy's cadets, but they were above the average mark in general industry.

She herself realized that the monsters in the Academy could never be compared to general people, even the lower-ranking ones.

'Yeah, I wonder what he is doing.'

At the mention of lower-ranking ones, she remembered Astron's name. Many had overlooked it when the second period of the semester started since Ethan's rank increased, but Emily still remembered the improvement Astron showed at the start.

The reason she paid attention to it was because they went into a dungeon exploration together, and she saw his talents. He may have looked weak, but Anya's and Hari's assessment of him in terms of combat was quite good.

'Well, what he does is not important. I have nothing to do with him.'

She thought as she remembered that the one that helped the most was Ethan, and if not for him, she wouldn't be here.

'I will be grateful forever.'

After reviewing the progress of Team-1, led by Sister Anya, Emily shifted her attention to the newly formed Team-2 under Hari's charge.

Anya's experience made her the ideal mentor for newcomers, but with the guild's rapid rise in ranks, the influx of new members necessitated the formation of additional teams. Hari, with her formidable combat prowess, was chosen to lead Team-2.

As Emily delved into the details of the results, she couldn't help but feel a sense of optimism.

'Sister Anya's nurturing had yielded positive results, evidenced by the influx of capable newcomers. But, Sister Hari's team, though newly formed, are flourishing under her leadership, given her exceptional combat skills.'

Hari was quite talented at combat, and she was in charge of educating newcomers in combat.

Those who had the brains but were inexperienced in combat were under her guidance.

Just as Emily was immersed in these thoughts, her smartwatch began to ring. Glancing at the caller ID, she saw 'Jacob,' one of their newly recruited members.

'Hmm? Why is he calling me?'

A slight frown creased her forehead as she wondered why he would be calling her, especially considering that Team-1, including Jacob, was currently supposed to be in the dungeon according to the schedule planned.

After all, clearing a Rank-5 dungeon wasn't easy, and it took days to prepare and days to explore.

'What could happen?'

Her mind raced with possibilities.

'Did something unexpected happen that forced them to exit the dungeon before completing it?'

An ominous feeling wrapped around her heart as she answered the call, anticipation and concern evident in her voice. For some reason, her heart was telling her that something happened, yet her brain said she shouldn't jump to conclusions without any evidence.

With a mixture of anticipation and concern, Emily accepted the call from Jacob. The moment the connection was established, her ears were assaulted by a cacophony of screams, urgent talk, and the unmistakable sound of panting.

–Get the first aid kit! We need to stop the bleeding!"

—Where the hell is the Association? We can't hold out much longer!"

—Has anyone contacted the Guild master? We need reinforcements!"

The chaotic exchange of urgent voices flooded Emily's ears, each plea and command heightening her sense of dread. She strained to discern the specific details amidst the turmoil.

"Jacob, what's happening? Are you all right?" Emily's voice cut through the chaos, trying to anchor Jacob's attention.

—We— we encountered unexpected resistance in the dungeon. There are injuries, and we're trying to stabilize everyone," Jacob replied, his voice strained.

In the background, a woman's panicked voice broke through, —We need help! The bleeding won't stop! Someone, get the Guild master!"

At the mention of the Guild master, Jacob hurriedly interjected, —Miss Emily, I called you. We need assistance, and we're trying to contact the Guild master, but the situation is dire."

Fear gripped Emily's heart as she listened to the unfolding crisis.

'Father is in the meeting, so he probably locked his smartwatch. He has the habit of closing it, and he never listens no matter how many times I say.'

She remembered what her father said and realized that things were not in a good situation. Without a moment's hesitation, Emily instantly rose from her seat, her mind racing with the urgency of the situation.

"I'll head to where Father is staying. I'll also contact the Association for immediate support. Hold on, Jacob, help is on the way," she reassured, her voice resolute.

With determined steps, Emily rushed towards the location where her Father was engaged in the meeting. She knew every second counted. As she approached the meeting room, she steeled herself to barge in and inform her father of the dire situation unfolding in the dungeon.

The meeting room door swung open abruptly, and Emily stepped in, her eyes determined and her expression urgent. Her father, Tom, glanced at her with narrowed eyes, a frown forming on his face.

"Emily, I've told you not to interrupt our meetings," he scolded, his tone firm.

"I know, Father, but it's urgent. Please come for a second." Saying that she called her father out.

"Sorry, gentlemen. Give me a minute." With that, her father stepped out of the room and closed the door. "You better give me a good reason Emily, this meeting is quite important."

"There's a crisis in the dungeon. Team-1 is facing unexpected resistance, and there are injuries. We need your immediate assistance," Emily explained hastily, her voice conveying the gravity of the situation.

Tom's stern expression softened as he absorbed the urgency in Emily's words. Without hesitation, Emily continued to inform him of the details. As Tom listened, the color drained from his face, and concern etched lines on his forehead.

"Cancel the meeting," he declared abruptly, entering the room once again and grabbing his coat.

One of the individuals inside the meeting room questioned, "For what reason, Mister Tom? Why are you canceling the meeting?"

Tom met their gaze with a serious expression. "Something urgent has come up, and I need to be there. We'll reschedule this meeting for later."

He offered no further explanation, leaving the room with Emily in tow, the urgency of the situation evident in his determined stride. The weight of responsibility hung in the air as they made their way towards the guild's command center, ready to address the crisis unfolding in the dungeon.

Yet, little did they know that this would only be the start.

Chapter 302 71.3 - Approaching Event

-CLANK! CLANK!

Inside the training room of the Academy, the sound of metal clashing with metal constantly ringed around. One weapon, coated with a vibrant blue aura, stabbed forward, generating wind, while the other one, adorned with a white-gray colored aura, constantly deflected it.

"Ha!"

–SWOOSH

The spear flashed, its long reach attempting to stab the person before her from the shoulder. Yet, before it could even meet its target, the agile figure swiftly tilted her body to the side. The weapon in her hands gleamed as it adjusted, changing the trajectory of the spear mid-swing.

However, the spear user, anticipating the move, retracted his weapon in a practiced movement, clenching his muscles with precision.

–WOOSH!

With a clean sweep, the spear user aimed for a low strike, targeting the sword user's foot. The blue-aura-coated weapon whizzed through the air, attempting to catch the agile opponent off guard. However, the sword user exhibited remarkable agility, swiftly lifting her foot to avoid the incoming attack.

"Not bad, Ethan," praised the sword user, a confident smile playing on her lips. "But, you still lost."

Julia, with her white hair and piercing blue eyes, grinned widely as she signaled her watch. "Your five-minute mark is finished, and you still couldn't land a clean hit on me."

Ethan, panting and slightly frustrated, looked at Julia. "You're a monster, Julia," he admitted, acknowledging her exceptional skill in combat once again.

"Well, it's not my fault you can't keep up," Julia teased, twirling her sword with a flourish. "Maybe you need more practice."

'Yeah, that's right. Though, I am doing my best.'

Ethan thought, yet he still couldn't help but chuckle at her playful taunts. Julia was not only his teammate but also a formidable sparring partner who pushed him to improve his combat skills.

Julia, with a triumphant grin, approached Ethan after their sparring session. "Well, well, Ethan. Since you lost the bet, you know what that means."

'This guy. What is this speed of improvement?'

However, while she was saying that, Julia was inwardly thinking of the prowess that Ethan had displayed. Considering the fact that Ethan hadn't even awakened just a year ago, the fact that he was able to push her to such length showed his abnormal, monstrous talent.

'You are the monster here.'

Ethan, catching his breath, raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, yeah. I know. I'll be the one paying for the meal today."

'If he progresses like that, it won't be too long before I start paying for the meals. I should squeeze him out as best as I can.'

"That's right!" Julia exclaimed, patting him on the back. "Consider it a reward for being such an entertaining sparring partner. You almost had me there."

Even though she may look and act like an airheaded person without any worries in her life, she has the awareness of a Hunter. It was just that she disliked acting rigidly all the time and making her life monotonous.

Ethan shook his head with a smile, accepting his fate. "Next time, Julia. I'll get you next time."

Julia laughed, teasingly adding, "Sure, sure. But for now, let's focus on the meal. I'm craving something extravagant, and your wallet will take care of it."

After their sparring session, Julia and Ethan left the high-ranking student training grounds. It was a secluded area reserved for the elite, accessible only to those who had proven themselves in various

aspects of their training. Julia, with her reputation as a skilled fighter as well as her high ranking, had brought Ethan to this exclusive space.

As they walked away from the training grounds, the atmosphere changed. The area was more spacious, with state-of-the-art equipment and advanced training facilities. The air felt fresher, and the surroundings were quieter compared to the general training grounds.

Julia, in high spirits from their lively sparring match, led the way with a confident stride. Ethan followed, still catching his breath but with a content smile on his face.

"So, where are we heading for this celebratory meal?" Ethan asked, curious about Julia's choice.

Julia chuckled, enjoying the moment. "There aren't many places we can go, you know. We will go with the usual one."

"The usual one."

Ethan muttered. Whenever Julia said the usual one, she meant the most expensive restaurant on the whole campus.

'Well, as expected from her, I guess.'

Since he had seen an incredible increase in his rank, Ethan's funds that he could get from his family also increased. The Hartleys mostly operated on merit, and the more potential you showed, the better opportunities you would get.

As they were about to leave the high-ranking student training grounds, their attention was drawn to a familiar figure. Lucas was engaged in intense combat with golems. He swung his sword with relentless determination, even though his body showed signs of exhaustion and injury.

Julia, observing from a distance, couldn't help but mumble to herself, "This dumb bastard is pushing himself too much."

Concern etched on her face, Julia turned to Ethan. "Did something happen? Lucas is usually not this reckless. We should check on him."

Ethan nodded, sharing Julia's worry. They approached Lucas, who seemed absorbed in his own battle. The golems, despite being artificial constructs for training, were putting up a formidable fight. Sweat dripped from Lucas's forehead, and his movements were becoming visibly strained.

"Lucas!" Julia called out, her voice cutting through the sounds of clashing metal. "What's going on? You're pushing yourself too hard."

Lucas, mid-swing, spared them a glance. "I'm fine. Just need to blow off some steam. Got a lot on my mind."

Julia sighed, not entirely convinced. "Blowing-" Just as she was about to nag him, Lucas suddenly turned his face, his blue eyes meeting with his twins'.

"Just leave me alone, you stupid fuck."

'You are one of those as well, just because you have it all. Look at this stupid smile of yours.'

The thoughts in his head were wandering around. After he had recently awakened, he had been having a very hard time controlling his feelings from time to time.

The past two weeks were all filled with countless times he spent thinking about what he needed to do while these guys just enjoyed themselves.

His demeanor was a little different, as well as the look in his eyes.

"What?" Julia immediately noticed it.

"This is.....'

She knew Lucas tended to do this when they were young.

'Something really happened.'

Though, she still knew Lucas wouldn't do it without a reason.

At that moment, someone stepped into the scene, the atmosphere turning cold with their presence. The newcomer was like a model, with his chestnut hair and piercing green eyes, but the pressure emanating from him was no joke.

Julia mumbled under her breath, "Victor, what are you doing here?"

Victor, the heir to the prestigious Blackthorn family, didn't say much. Instead, he fixed his gaze on Lucas with a stern expression.

"Lucas, you should apologize to her for being rude," Victor stated, his voice carrying authority and command.

"What?" Lucas said as he looked into Victor. "Who the hell are you to meddle with what I am doing?" His face contained a smirk, and he continued.

"Apologize to her."

"What if I don't?"

—SWOOSH!

In an instant, before Lucas could even say anything, Victor appeared right beside him, grabbing him by his neck.

"If you don't, then I will make it so."

"Grrr....."

Lucas tried to pry Victor's hand off his neck, his face contorted with a mix of frustration and defiance. However, Victor's grip proved to be unyielding, his strength surpassing Lucas's attempts to break free.

Just at that moment, Julia rushed to Victor's side, her eyes wide with shock and anger. "Victor, what are you doing?"

Victor met Julia's gaze with a calm demeanor. "Teaching him a lesson," he replied, his voice unwavering. "No one should disrespect you, Julia. It's a matter of principle."

The way he said it while his eyes were shining, some of the people watching him gasped. Especially the girls threw an envious gaze at Julia.

"What the fuck are you saying, you motherfucker?" Yet, the reaction that the girl gave was different from what they expected. "

"I don't need someone to protect my dignity for me," Julia asserted, her voice firm and defiant. She glared at Victor, making it clear that this matter didn't concern him. In an assertive move, she slapped Victor's hand away, breaking free from his grip.

Victor, for a brief moment, looked surprised by Julia's reaction. The onlookers, still processing the unexpected turn of events, exchanged puzzled glances.

"This matter doesn't concern you." She said, turning her head to Lucas. "And, you bastard. Come with me. We are going to have a talk."

Julia turned her fiery gaze to Lucas, who was still catching his breath after the encounter with Victor. Without hesitation, she grabbed him by his collar, a stern expression on her face. The onlookers, though unsure of the details, couldn't help but feel the intensity of the situation.

Throwing one last look at Victor, Julia bore into his eyes. "If you ever pull something like this again, things won't be resolved this simply."

With that, Julia led Lucas away, leaving a tense atmosphere behind them. The training room, once filled with the sounds of clashing weapons, now held a lingering silence as the onlookers processed the unexpected confrontation they had witnessed.

'Wow....This girl is really crazy when she is angry.'

Yet, Ethan couldn't help but flinch, seeing the rare case of Julia being angry.

However, none of the four had noticed the pair of amber eyes watching the scene unfolding before her.

'What?'

The girl who felt like the reaction she needed to give wasn't there, yet she could even say anything.

In the lavish office at the pinnacle of one of the towering structures in the Golden District, a man stood by the expansive glass windows, gazing down at the city below.

The sprawling metropolis extended beneath him, its intricate network of streets and buildings appearing like a miniature world. The man, impeccably dressed, exuded an air of authority and opulence.

—THUD!

As he silently surveyed the panorama, his butler entered the room, the door closing with a soft click behind him. The butler, ever attentive, waited patiently, anticipating his master's next move.

The man remained silent for a moment longer, absorbing the view. The city, with its bustling life, seemed insignificant from this vantage point. Finally, he spoke, his voice carrying a weight of contemplation.

"How little they appear from up here, like ants scurrying about. Weak, and their significance merely a product of their numbers," he mused, his eyes still fixed on the miniature world below. "Do you ever wonder, Butler, if this is how deities perceive humans?"

The butler, accustomed to his master's moments of reflection, maintained his poised composure. He waited for the man to delve deeper into his thoughts, ready to serve and engage in conversation as required.

The man continued with his contemplations, a subtle melancholy underlying his words.

"That's probably the case, isn't it, Butler?" he said, his gaze still fixed on the city below. "No matter how fervently one may scream for help, it often goes unanswered. It's only when one ascends the ladder of the Awakened that they seem to gain the power to shape their own destiny, to achieve what they desire."

He spoke with a touch of resignation as if acknowledging the harsh reality of the world. The butler, attuned to his master's musings, listened attentively, awaiting any further insights or directives.

"In their pursuit of power, humans willingly become pawns, seeking the favor of the Awakened. A hierarchical dance, where only those at the top can truly mold their fate," he continued, his eyes coldly looking at the scene.

After absorbing the view, he turned away from the window, facing his butler with a steely gaze.

"I assume you are here to brief me about the matter regarding the absorption of lower-ranking guilds. How are the preparations going?" he inquired, his tone a blend of expectation and authority.

The butler, now given the cue to speak, responded with his usual composed demeanor, "Everything is proceeding as planned, sir. Our branch guild, the Redcrushers, is executing the strategy seamlessly. According to our estimations, it won't be too long before they swallow the remaining competition."

A subtle smile crept across the man's face as he heard the reassuring report. "Excellent. It's time that the name Philips starts to be remembered within the same line as the seven renowned families."

Chapter 303 71.4 - Approaching Event

As the weekend drew to a close, Emily found herself alone in her academy room, surrounded by the comforting ambiance of her familiar space.

The weight of responsibilities bore down on her, evident in the furrowed lines on her forehead. She paced around the room, deep in thought, and began to mumble to herself.

"What do we need to do... how do we manage to get over this hurdle?" she whispered, the words escaping her lips in a soft murmur. Her eyes darted around the room as if seeking answers from the familiar surroundings.

"The members' morale is getting lower and lower....I need to do something...."

She paused, leaning against a desk, lost in contemplation. She needed to make a possible plan, yet she couldn't do it at all.

They were utterly crushed. All three teams under their guild, which were responsible for dungeon explorations, were somehow subjected to a unique dungeon phenomenon.

"And, there were even villains."

The appearance of villains, the increased pressure from the surrounding guilds, and the lack of support from the association....They weren't even allowed to touch get loans...It was like every door was closed for them, yet she couldn't do anything.

'Should I call for help again?'

She thought about contacting Ethan once again.

'No. I shouldn't do that. I can't burden others every time, and he is basically a stranger.'

As the weight of responsibility bore down on her, Emily couldn't shake the feeling of being trapped in a web of challenges with no clear way out. With a heavy sigh, she lowered her head, determined to find a solution but unsure of where to begin.

The room held her silent struggle, a battlefield of thoughts and emotions as she grappled with the daunting task of restoring the guild's morale and forging a path forward.

The tension from the training room carried over to the dining area, where Julia, Lucas, and Ethan found themselves sharing a table. The usually lively trio now sat in a somewhat awkward silence, the recent confrontation lingering in the air.

Julia, unable to contain her curiosity and concern, looked at Lucas with a stern gaze. "Alright, spill it. What was your problem back there?"

Lucas, initially resistant, felt the weight of Julia's gaze and sighed. He looked at both Julia and Ethan and after a moment, his angry expression softened a little.

"It's nothing," Lucas replied evasively, trying to downplay the situation.

Julia wasn't buying it. "Clearly, it's not nothing. You don't just snap like that for no reason."

Ethan, who had been silently observing the exchange, chimed in. "Lucas, you know we have known each other for almost our whole lives, right? If something's bothering you, you can talk to us."

Lucas hesitated, his gaze shifting between his twin and Ethan.

'Yeah....I have known you for my whole life.....Or, did I really?'

Lucas thought to himself inwardly, hearing Ethan's words. He wanted to chuckle right here, yet he was not that stupid.

'Tch. I need to control myself better. Else, they will understand.'

Lucas was by no means stupid; one could even say he was a lot more talented in terms of social skills. Yet, the visions that constantly bugged him in his dreams had shaken his composure and made it a lot harder for him to even act like usual.

Lucas looked at Julia for a moment, and then a defeated chuckle escaped his lips. "You're not making it easy for me, are you?"

"I'm precisely making it hard for you so that you can understand how it felt to just even try to talk to you," Julia retorted, her expression unyielding.

Lucas sighed, realizing he had to open up. "Fine, fine," he said, shaking his head. "You win."

Julia smirked in triumph. "So, you're finally going to spill the beans now? Took you long enough, you bastard."

"You really are not making it easy for me," Lucas replied, a hint of a smile playing on his lips. He looked at both Julia and Ethan before letting out another sigh. "Alright, alright. I had a reason to act like that."

Ethan raised an eyebrow. "Well, we're listening."

Lucas hesitated for a moment, glancing between his twin and Ethan. "You both remember what happened in the Phantom's Land, right?"

Julia and Ethan nodded in agreement.

"Well," Lucas began, his tone serious, "when we lost consciousness, I... I saw visions. Visions of the future, filled with destruction."

Julia's expression shifted, her general playful demeanor replaced by concern and squinty. "Destruction? What do you mean?"

'This should be enough to let them feel empathy.'

He thought inwardly as he remembered the memories that were transferred to him. At this point, Lucas was sure that all the things he had seen were the life that he was supposed to live in an alternate timeline.

He also remembered what Ethan had told him before when he was a child, the times when he talked about his dreams of a warrior facing an army of enemies.

He suspected that there was a meaning to his dreams now.

Lucas took a deep breath before continuing with his explanations, "I don't know the details, but it felt real. The world crumbling, chaos, and something ominous lurking. I can't shake off the feeling that whatever we saw there wasn't just some random illusion."

Ethan's frown deepened as he listened to Lucas's revelation. He glanced at Julia, and then his gaze returned to Lucas, a pondering expression on his face.

"Lucas," Ethan began, choosing his words carefully, "do you think what you saw in those visions has a chance of becoming real? I mean, is it something that might actually happen in the future?"

Lucas met Ethan's gaze, and after a moment's 'hesitation,' he nodded. "Yeah. It's been eating me up recently, thinking about the possibilities. It's like a constant weight on my shoulders, and I find it hard to shake off."

Julia leaned back in her chair, absorbing the seriousness of the situation. "So, you've been overworking yourself because of these visions?"

Lucas sighed. "Yeah. I can't get them out of my head, and the more I think about them, the more it feels like they're not just random dreams. It's like I've glimpsed into a possible future, and it's haunting me."

Ethan also sighed, a sense of worry etched on his face. "Well, I kind of understand that. You guys remember the times when I talked about my dreams, right?"

"The dreams you mentioned when we were kids? I thought you no longer saw them."

"Well, it is not that I no longer see them. It is just that I decided not to mention it since they seem rather childish. But, my dreams also make me feel anxious from time to time as well, so I can empathize with how Lucas feels."

Julia looked at both Lucas and Ethan, a playful smile appearing on her face. "Well, well, how did I end up between two dreamy bastards?" she teased in a light tone, trying to ease the tension in the air.

'I knew it; something was wrong with him since Phantom's Land.'

Ethan chuckled, appreciating Julia's attempt to lighten the mood. "Yeah, dreamy bastards unite."

Lucas managed a small grin, making himself look like he was feeling a bit relieved that his friends were taking the situation in stride. This is how he 'was supposed to act' after all.

Julia, however, quickly shifted her gaze back to Lucas, her playful expression turning stern.

"Jokes aside, Lucas, whether it's because of dreams or not, you better fix your attitude. You were never like the Lucas I knew at all."

As her words escaped her mouth, Lucas' eyes slightly widened, yet he managed to keep his expression.

'Yeah, the Lucas you knew.....It is like, you know nothing.'

However, he didn't show his thoughts on his face and simply nodded just as they were eating. "I will try my best."

"You better."

Just like that, the two continued to eat.

"You are doing well."

The training ground was bathed in the soft hues of the morning sun, casting long shadows across the open space. Sylvie stood at the center, her posture markedly different from three weeks ago.

The once uncertain stance had transformed into a solid foundation, a testament to the progress she had made under Astron's guidance.

'I am doing well....He really praised me.'

She couldn't help but be happy inwardly. After all, she knew this mentor of hers was quite strict with his praises as he rarely gave any insights to her.

Astron observed her with his usual demeanor, his sharp eyes scanning every movement with an approving nod. The subtle shifts in Sylvie's muscle memory and the newfound confidence in her stance spoke volumes about the intensity of their training.

"You've come a long way, Sylvie," Astron remarked, his voice measured but holding a rare note of satisfaction. "Your dedication to the training has yielded significant improvements."

Sylvie, breathing slightly heavier but with a happy gleam in her eyes, acknowledged his words with a nod. The past three weeks had been a rigorous routine of physical conditioning, combat drills, and Astron's meticulous guidance.

Her body had adapted, muscles growing stronger, and her reflexes becoming sharper. She had been pushing herself to the limits after everything that had happened in the Phantom's Land.

Though she didn't blame herself, she also experienced firsthand how hard it was to fight while protecting someone when she was carrying Jasmine to their bungalows. Thus, she now knew the importance of being able to trust the person that needed to be protected.

'In the future, I should make my teammates be able to fight with ease without thinking about me.'

This was what she thought.

As the warmth of satisfaction settled, Astron's gaze shifted subtly. "We can take this to the next stage," he announced, his voice carrying an air of challenge.

Sylvie, intrigued by his words, questioned, "Next stage?"

Astron turned to face her directly, standing at a short distance. "Now that you have a solid foundation and a good grasp of the basics, it's time to see how well you can adapt in actual combat scenarios."

Sylvie's eyes widened with a mix of excitement and apprehension. The notion of moving beyond the structured drills and applying her skills in dynamic situations intrigued her. She may have approached the physical training timidly at the start, but after the moment she took her first step, things changed rapidly, and she was enjoying every moment of this training.

"Combat scenarios?"

Astron nodded. "Yes. It's time to test your adaptability and decision-making under pressure. This is an essential step in becoming a proficient combatant."

He stepped backward, his eyes locking onto hers with a firm intensity. "Now, whenever you are ready, come at me."

Sylvie hesitated for a moment, considering the implications of the next stage. "Is it okay?" she asked, concern creasing her brow. "You don't have any defensive measures on you."

Astron's response was confident. "It's fine. You won't be able to land a hit." He said it in a manner that he was nonchalant.

Even though it scratched Sylvie's pride a little, she wasn't delusional enough to think he could be able to injure an Awakened specialized in combat like this.

'Then, I won't hold back.'

Encouraged by his assurance, Sylvie squared her shoulders and took a deep breath, preparing herself for the challenge ahead.

The training ground, once a space for drills and conditioning, now transformed into an arena for a different kind of test.

"Come at me," Astron gestured, his demeanor shifting into a stance of readiness.

"Un." She nodded, taking the stance he taught her when she needed to attack.

—SWOOSH!

With a rapid speed enhanced by her mana, she lunged herself forward, attempting to strike him from his chest.

Yet, before her strike could even land, she saw him tilting his body slightly.

–THUD!

And then, she felt the touch of his fingers on the right joint of her shoulder. Following that, her arm lost its strength.

–SWOOSH!

And then, she felt her legs no longer touching the ground and saw the world spinning.

–THUD!

"Tu, tu, tu...."

As she felt her back hitting the ground, the sensations of her body returned with the slight pain all around.

"It hurts...."

She mumbled as she turned to look at the source. He just stood there as if nothing happened and looked into her eyes.

"Get up."

It was the start of her hell.....

Chapter 304 Chapter 72.1 - Moving Pieces

Sylvie groaned, pushing herself up from the ground, her body aching from the impact. Astron's stern gaze remained fixed on her as he urged her to stand.

"Again," he said, his voice firm but unwavering. Sylvie nodded, determination flickering in her eyes despite the soreness in her muscles.

She readied herself for another assault, channeling her mana to enhance her speed and agility. With a renewed sense of focus, she lunged forward once more, aiming for a swift strike.

However, Astron's response was once again swift and precise. He deftly evaded her attack, his movements almost anticipatory. Before Sylvie could react, she felt the touch on her elbows, her arm directed to a different position.

–SWOOSH! –THUD!

Thrown to the ground once again, Sylvie grunted, her frustration mounting. Astron's words echoed in her mind – "Get up."

For the next ten minutes, the training ground became a relentless cycle of Sylvie attacking and Astron effortlessly countering. Each attempt, each strike met with calculated precision, resulting in Sylvie being tossed to the ground repeatedly.

Her body, fueled by determination, pushed through the pain. Each fall became a lesson, a painful reminder of the vast gap in their combat skills. Yet, Sylvie refused to yield.

–SWOOSH! –THUD! –SWOOSH! –THUD!

Her attacks became more varied, attempting kicks, feints, and grapples, but Astron's defense was impenetrable. He seemed to predict her every move, effortlessly nullifying her attempts.

As the ten minutes elapsed, Sylvie's body was covered in sweat, bruises, and aching muscles. But beneath the physical strain, a newfound resilience blossomed within her.

Astron finally called an end to the session. "That's enough for today."

Sylvie, breathing heavily, looked up at him. Despite the exhaustion, there was a glimmer of satisfaction in her eyes. She had faced a relentless challenge, and though she hadn't overcome it completely, she had persisted.

"Rest," Astron instructed, a hint of approval in his tone. "You've made progress, but there's still much to learn."

As Sylvie nodded and headed towards a bench to catch her breath, Astron observed her with an unreadable expression.

It was a grueling training session, but perhaps it was a necessary step for Sylvie to grasp the complexities of combat and continue her journey toward mastery.

"Can you tell me why you haven't been able to land a hit on me?" He suddenly asked, approaching her from the side.

Sylvie, still catching her breath on the bench, looked up as Astron approached. His question caught her off guard, and she blinked, processing the inquiry.

"Why haven't you been able to land a hit on me?" Astron repeated, his tone neutral.

Sylvie scratched her head awkwardly, her gaze flickering between Astron and the training ground. "Uh, well, you're faster and stronger, right?"

Astron shook his head, a hint of amusement in his eyes. "It's not just about speed and strength, Sylvie." With a subtle motion, he slid up the sleeves of his training attire, revealing two bracelets on each arm. "These weighted bracelets restrict my movements. There are also two on my ankles."

Sylvie's eyes widened as she finally noticed the hidden accessories. A mix of realization and embarrassment washed over her. "Oh, I... I didn't know you were wearing those."

As she said that, she averted her gaze as her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. "I didn't consider that. I just thought you were naturally that fast and strong."

'He had weighted bracelets on him all this time? And, I said faster, ignorantly. I must have looked like a dumb beginner.'

She threw a quick look at him, then realized his expression didn't change much.

'Well, he probably doesn't care.'

"Now, what is your answer?" Astron asked once again, looking at Sylvie.

"Um....I don't know how, but you were able to anticipate my movements every time, right?"

"Correct."

"Then, is it because I made them obvious?"

Astron nodded approvingly at Sylvie's quick realization. "You catch on fast," he reiterated.

Standing up, Astron resumed his calm and composed demeanor. "In combat, it's crucial to mask your intentions and read your opponent. That's why I had conducted today's training like this," he explained, gesturing to the weighted bracelets. "You need to learn not only to anticipate your opponent's moves but also to make your actions less predictable."

Sylvie listened attentively, absorbing the wisdom Astron shared. The complexity of combat strategy unfolded before her, and she felt a renewed sense of purpose.

Turning back to her, Astron looked down at Sylvie, who was still seated on the ground. "From now on, we'll focus on training your ability to read your opponent. It's an essential skill that goes beyond just physical strength. You need to understand their intentions, anticipate their actions, and react accordingly."

'Read their intentions, anticipate their actions, and react accordingly.' She repeated her words inwardly as she thought. 'I can see the emotional state of others. Then, if I can develop it, maybe I can even see their thoughts?'

She hadn't previously thought about her powers to be able to read the emotions of others, but after everything that happened in Phantom's Land, she knew she could develop herself further.

'Irina can fight, excel in theory, and even use magic a lot better than me. She is beautiful too....'

She didn't know why, but she was having an inward sense of rivalry after staying together for a while. They occasionally hung out together when Irina and Sylvie were free, and she really thought Irina was a good person and different from the initial impression she gave to others.

However, at the same time, she compared herself to her a little and was disappointed.

"Do you understand?"

Sylvie nodded, determined to grasp this new aspect of combat. "I'll do my best. Teach me how to read my opponent."

Astron's purple eyes met hers, and a flicker of approval crossed his expression. He seemed satisfied inwardly, too. "Good. Next time, we'll start with some exercises to sharpen your observational skills. Pay attention to your opponent's body language, subtle movements, and any patterns they might reveal. You can train with your friends if you wish, but don't take it overboard."

"Un."

"Then, I will take my leave."

As Astron turned to leave, Sylvie nodded and began gathering her things. However, just as she was about to head in the opposite direction, Astron's gaze shifted downward, focusing on her legs.

Feeling a bit self-conscious, Sylvie looked down at her legs and then back at Astron. "Did something matter?" she asked, a hint of curiosity in her voice.

Astron shook his head, a mysterious expression crossing his face. "Nothing. Just a minor observation."

With that, he turned away and walked off, leaving Sylvie slightly perplexed but trusting that there was a purpose behind Astron's scrutiny, though she had failed to notice the small dark energy oozing from the item that had far long disintegrated to her legs before. ((N1))

The vibrant chatter of students filled the air in the classroom, a lively hub of discussion during the lunch break. A group of five friends gathered around a table, their excitement evident as they delved into a recent show that had captivated their attention.

"Hey, did you all catch that new show that aired last night? The one about the group with superpowers in a world without Awakened?"

"Oh yeah! The action scenes were insane! The effects were top-notch. But, did anyone else feel like the main character was a bit off?"

"Totally. I mean, at first, he seemed like this hero, but as the episode progressed, he got darker and darker. It was unexpected."

"That's what made it interesting, though! I love it when shows throw in a curveball. But seriously, who saw that coming? The guy turned out to be a ruthless murderer, not the hero everyone thought."

"I had my suspicions from the start. There was something about his smile, you know? Like, it felt a bit too sinister."

"Really? I was completely blindsided. I thought he was going to be the savior of the world or something. But it turns out he's more like their worst nightmare."

Just as they were talking amongst themselves, suddenly, one of the girls spoke.

"Yeah....But, guys, have you seen Theresa?"

They exchanged glances, realizing they hadn't seen Theresa since last Saturday. Concern etched across their faces, one of them asked, "Didn't she mention where she was going?"

The girl who had brought up Theresa's absence shook her head. "I tried reaching out to her, but I couldn't get through. No calls, no texts. It's like she vanished. She had never done something like this before, you know? It feels suspicious."

Concern deepened in the group as they contemplated Theresa's mysterious disappearance. "Maybe we should ask the school if they've heard anything," someone suggested.

Just as they were pondering their next move, the door cracked open, and Instructor Eleanor entered the room.

"Good morning, Cadets."

The students talking immediately dispersed with Eleanor's appearance. At this point, many of the students were well aware of her temper and seriousness, and the group decided to postpone the report after the class.

–FLICK!

Eleanor, known for her exceptional mana manipulation skills, suddenly flicked her hands, and the air in the room seemed to ripple with energy.

The atmosphere became charged as small papers on her desk fluttered and levitated, then floated gracefully towards the students, landing one by one in front of each desk.

As the papers settled, Eleanor explained, "This, cadets, is going to be a part of your next practical assignment." She paused for effect, her gaze scanning the room. "I want you to write your names on these papers using only your mana."

The students exchanged puzzled glances, intrigued by the unusual assignment. Eleanor continued, "You may start now."

For the students of Arcadia Hunter Academy, where mana control had already progressed quite far, the assignment proved to be a breeze. In no more than five minutes, signatures and elegant script adorned the once-blank papers, showcasing the students' mastery over their mana.

–FLICK!

After seeing that everyone had finished, Eleanor, with another flick of her finger, effortlessly gathered the papers, returning them to her own table.

The cadets watched in anticipation as she placed the papers into a bowl and began mixing them with a slight rotation of her hand.

"Now, pay attention, cadets. The names you wrote with your mana are going to be crucial for the next part of the assignment," Eleanor announced.

She continued, "In this next phase, each of you will pick a paper from the bowl, and the name written on that paper will be your opponent in the upcoming exam. The challenge is not only to test your individual skills but also to assess how well you adapt to different opponents. Remember, this is a crucial aspect of being a successful Hunter."

The students exchanged glances, realizing that their opponents were determined by fate, or rather, by the papers drawn from the bowl.

Eleanor, with a commanding presence, started calling out the names, beginning from the bottom ranks of the academy. Each called cadet stepped forward, apprehensively picking a paper from the bowl. With bated breath, they unfolded the papers to reveal the names written on them.

"Cadet Timothy Grey," Eleanor called, and Timothy, who had been the first to inscribe his name, hesitated for a moment before revealing his opponent. The name on the paper was Leo Sparks.

"Oh..." He was a relatively lower-rank student in the range of middle ranks, so Timothy seemed a bit more relaxed.

The calling of names continued, and the tension in the room heightened with each revelation. However, Eleanor made it clear that the cadet whose name was revealed in the paper wouldn't participate in picking an opponent.

"Astron Natusalune." Astron stepped up as he pushed his hands into the bowl. The name shown here was simple.

Emily Anderson.

Chapter 305 Chapter 72.2 - Moving Pieces

"Emily Anderson."

As the sound of Eleanor echoed in the classroom, I turned my attention to the girl who was looking somehow lost on her desk.

Her eyes were unfocused, and she seemed to be absorbed in her thoughts. She wasn't even showing any signs of listening.

"Sigh...."

It seemed like Eleanor shared the same thoughts as me as she released a hearty sigh.

"Emily Anderson!" Eleanor called out once again, this time more assertively. Emily finally raised her head from her desk, her green eyes darting around the classroom as she seemed to be surprised by the attention.

"Ah...." Emily made a startled exclamation, realizing that she was the one Eleanor had been calling.

Eleanor, with a no-nonsense expression, informed her, "Your name has been picked. Now, pay attention. You'll be facing a fellow cadet in the upcoming exam."

Emily nodded, understanding as she looked at me. I noticed that she had stiffened a little as she looked at me.

'Just as I had expected.'

Seeing one of the people who knew about her guild must have made her remember the situation once again.

Eleanor continued, "Now, let's move on. The next student is..."

I returned to my desk without saying anything, acknowledging Emily's presence with a subtle nod.

As I settled into my seat, my mind began to work, thinking about the reason behind the seemingly elaborate assignment of writing names with mana and picking opponents.

The process struck me as more than just a creative way to pair cadets for the upcoming exam. It had a strategic element that hinted at the academy's intention to level the playing field for all students.

The academy may be ruthless, but at the same time, they needed to ensure fairness. Even though there were definitely structures in the academy because of the lineage of the students, at the very least, they needed to make sure that they were neutral.

Therefore, the order in which the cadets picked the papers was crucial. The bottom-ranked students were given the opportunity to choose their opponents first. It wasn't just a random draw; it was a tactical advantage for those who might lack combat prowess but possessed keen mana senses.

By having the lower-ranked students pick their opponents, the academy provided a chance for those with exceptional mana perception to leverage their skills.

They could observe the mana signatures of their desired opponents and track the corresponding papers.

This way, even if they were at a disadvantage in terms of raw power or combat experience, they had the opportunity to strategize and choose opponents based on their mana properties.

This was the reason why we were asked to write our names with solely our mana. That way, we would expose our mana properties onto the paper, making it easier to track. And if you were a low-ranked student because of your lack of combat prowess, then you could at least choose your opponent.

And if you are both weak and unable to sense your target's mana correctly, then it means you are at the bottom of the food chain.

The assignment was a clever way to introduce an element of fairness and strategy into the exam pairing process.

It ensured that students with different strengths and weaknesses had an equal opportunity to face opponents they believed they could handle, leveling the playing field and fostering a more diverse range of combat scenarios.

'And, I didn't think the opportunity would present itself like this.'

Since the school gave me the opportunity, why shouldn't I use it? After all, such an exam was perfect for my field, and it was quite easy for me to choose my 'target.'

'Now, I only need to encourage a little.'

With that thought, I sat at my desk, waiting for the practical test to start.

The students gathered in the newly constructed training grounds, a sense of anticipation lingering in the air. Eleanor, with her commanding presence, stood before them, ready to explain the upcoming duel.

"Now, Cadets," she began, her stern gaze scanning the assembled students. "We will start with the practical examination. You will be fighting a duel and will use your main weapons."

Eleanor pointed to the formation in the middle of the training grounds. "This formation is designed to prevent any sustained fatal injuries during the duels. However, we will be monitoring closely, and any excessive force will be immediately stopped."

The students exchanged glances, a mix of excitement and nervousness evident on their faces.

"Now, step into your assigned duel arenas and prepare to face your opponent," Eleanor commanded.

As the students dispersed to their respective dueling spaces, Emily found herself unfocused on the impending duel. Her mind was preoccupied with the challenges her guild faced, casting a shadow over the training session.

'Let's get this over with.'

She thought as she entered the ring. The familiar feeling of her sword on her waist.

'Also, why did I match with this guy?'

She couldn't help but think to herself. Maybe fate was playing with her somehow, as he was one of the two who had known about her previous guild situation.

'Well, it is not like that is important. I should just finish it fast.'

She thought inwardly. She was not in the mood to fight, let alone train. Subconsciously, she regarded Astron below her. It was the normal thought process, considering Astron was still on the lower side of the ranks.

Astron, on the other side of the ring, readied his daggers, determined to give his 'best' despite the ranking difference. He understood the unspoken hierarchy but saw the duel as an opportunity to prove his skills. At least, that was how it looked to Emily.

Eleanor's authoritative voice cut through the murmurs in the training ground, "Begin!"

—SWOOSH!

With that signal, Emily swiftly rushed forward, her sword gleaming in the sunlight.

As I looked at the girl in front of me, I gripped my daggers. Normally, the most optimal choice for me would be to utilize my bow from a distance, just like previously.

However, I decided not to do so since I knew about Emily's speed from the dungeon.

'Also, I wonder how far she has developed.'

It had been a while since I went to the dungeon exploration with her, so I wanted to see what the average student's growth was like.

"Begin."

As Eleanor's voice echoed from the speaker, I instantly sensed the upcoming ripple from my front.

–SWOOSH!

And in an instant, Emily was before me with her sword flashing.

–CLANG!

My daggers clashed with Emily's sword, the impact sending a jolt through my arms. It was a strong strike, and I couldn't help but feel my left arm going numb from the force.

'She's not holding back.'

I noticed the intensity in her eyes, a determination that hinted at her going all out from the very start. It seemed she wanted to get over this duel really fast.

"Hmm?" She made a surprised exclamation.

'But, looking down on your enemy is not good.'

In general, this type of attack would be done if you have prior information about your opponent. Since, in life and death, information is important. Generally, the fighters' first exchange of blows would serve as a measurement of their strength.

Yet, her just dispersing this step meant she thought I wouldn't be able to block it.

After our initial clash, instead of pausing, Emily seamlessly transitioned into another strike. This time, a diagonal slash was aimed at my midsection.

SWOOSH!

Thinking on my feet, I tilted my body to evade the incoming blade. Subtly shifting my foot, I managed to slide under Emily's arm, attempting to close the distance between us. Emily, quick to react, tried to maintain the space, but her explosive power lacked a bit, giving me the opportunity.

–SLASH!

With a swift motion, I closed the remaining gap and managed to cut her on her chest with my dagger.

"Urghk-"

She let out a small grunt of pain, yet she was able to conceal it.

SLASH!

Emily attempted a quick counter-attack, her sword flashing towards me.

'A donkey counterattack.'

However, I had already anticipated her move and swiftly deflected her slash with my two daggers. The added force from the mana injection in her strike made it necessary for me to use both hands to redirect the attack.

–THUD!

Following the deflection, I threw a quick kick to Emily's chest, targeting the same spot where I had slashed her moments ago.

The impact made her grunt in pain, a testament to the effectiveness of the strategy.

Yet, instead of pursuing the advantage, I took a step back, daggers still in hand, and eyed her carefully.

"What are you doing?" I called out, my tone measured. "Your mind seems elsewhere."

She shot me a fleeting glance, a mix of irritation and frustration in her eyes, both from the pain and probably from my words. "I don't need your concern. Let's just finish this," she retorted, readjusting her stance.

"Is that so?" I replied as I looked into her eyes.

–SWOOSH!

Without saying anything, she just rushed to me once again, this time at a faster speed.

'She is using her skill, huh?'

With my [Perceptive Insight], I could easily see the mana channeled on her legs. Seemingly enough, she was using her skill.

As she closed the distance, she suddenly slashed, even though her blade wouldn't physically reach me. It was a feint, a distraction.

In response, I quickly deflected the attack with my two daggers, anticipating her next move.

–ZAP!

A beam shot forward from her blade, aimed directly at me. However, I had already seen through her strategy. Using my enhanced reflexes, I adeptly deflected the beam with a precise movement of my daggers.

"You may not want to do it," I remarked, my tone composed. "Or you may hesitate to make your decision," I said as I looked into her eyes.

As Emily's beam attack was deflected with precision, she shot me a glare, her eyes narrowing in frustration. The duel continued, but the tension between us was palpable.

"What's with the commentary during the fight?" she snapped, frustration evident in her voice.

I met her gaze without flinching, my tone calm and measured. "I can sense hesitation in your blade. You may not want to admit it, or you may hesitate to make your decision," I said once again, my words intentional as I locked eyes with her. "But, what is bugging you will remain if you don't take action."

A fleeting moment of vulnerability crossed Emily's expression, and she stiffened for a second. Her irritation seemed to be fueled not only by the pain from the duel but also by the acknowledgment of her internal struggle.

'It is time to end this.'

I sensed the hesitation in Emily's demeanor, and I decided to capitalize on it. Suddenly, I flashed towards her with a burst of speed.

Seeing me approach, Emily tried to intercept my path, but her attack lacked the force and confidence it needed. It was evident that the internal struggle was affecting her combat abilities.

Swiftly, I forcefully twisted my body, testing the limits of my flexibility as I slid under her strike. Seizing the opportunity, I targeted Emily's pillar foot, disrupting her balance and causing her to lose control.

—THUD!

Emily stumbled and fell to the ground, her sword slipping from her hand. I moved quickly, putting one of my daggers to her neck, marking the end of the duel.

"I surrender."

I heard her confirmation as I stood up. Just as I turned to leave, I threw one last look at Emily.

"Pride is useless once the regret of not making one's decisions comes over," I spoke. "Doing what you know you need to do is the most important, regardless of how you may be perceived."

With those words, I left the ring.

'Now, it is up to you to do what you want.'

Chapter 306 Chapter 72.3 - Moving Pieces

Emily continued to sit in front of the changing room, her hands clasped together, lost in the echo of Astron's words. His advice had struck a chord within her, making her ponder the decisions she needed to make. The bustling sounds of students changing around her seemed distant as her thoughts consumed her.

"Pride is useless once the regret of not making one's decisions comes over. Doing what you know you need to do is the most important, regardless of how you may be perceived," she mumbled to herself, contemplating the weight behind those words. Astron's eyes, purple and piercing, held a depth she hadn't noticed before as if they harbored knowledge about something more.

Frustration built up within her.

"What does he know about me? Just because he somehow got his grades up or beat me, does he think he knows everything?" She mumbled.

For people like her who used to deal with things themselves, she was rather repulsed by such words.

"Who gives him the right to speak to me like that!?"

She mulled over these questions, her emotions a mix of irritation and curiosity.

As she continued to mumble to herself, one of the girls changing beside her glanced over. "Did you say something?" the girl asked, her voice cutting through Emily's introspection.

Caught off guard, Emily paused, realizing that her inner musings had spilled out unintentionally. She shook her head, offering a forced smile. "No, just thinking out loud. Pay no mind."

The girl shrugged and returned to changing, leaving Emily to confront the whirlwind of thoughts in her own mind.

—RING!

The moment was interrupted by a familiar ring from her smartwatch – a notification that sent a shiver of dread down her spine. As she opened the message, the situation inside the guild unfolded before her eyes. Another member was injured, resignations were looming, and the unsettling atmosphere within the guild painted a grim picture.

"Sigh....."

A heavy sigh escaped her lips. The weight of responsibility pressed down on her shoulders, and the clash of her internal turmoil with the harsh reality of the guild's struggles left her feeling overwhelmed.

"But, what is bugging you will remain if you don't take action."

Yet, the words that had just been spoken seemed to echo in her mind once again.

'.....If I don't take action....' Emily thought inwardly as she looked into the status of her guild.

No matter what she wanted to say, she knew the position they were in wouldn't be solved by their strength alone. She had been in a familiar situation before.

'I really don't want to do it, but if I don't do it, then what will be left after this.'

Even though she didn't want to look weak in front of the person she admired, life had never been lenient to such emotions, and Emily knew what.

"That is right."

With her resolve raised, she left the locker room and headed to her room while dialing a certain number.

Just as Astron had left the new sparring grounds, he was faced with the fiery girl who was waiting for him in front of the entrance alone.

"Yo."

Irina simply raised her head and greeted him.

"...." Astron just looked at her without saying anything; he just nodded.

"Just a note: I am not waiting for you," Irina remarked, trying to clear away any misunderstanding that could occur. "I just finished the fight early."

"I figured that much."

"But, I guess you finished yours early, too. That girl, Emily, was ranked quite high. Did she beat you up that fast?"

"..." At her snarky remark, Astron just looked at her, his face clearly saying, 'Are you serious?'

And Irina was able to see that as well. "I am joking, I am joking. Why so serious?"

"Your jokes aren't funny."

Astron's gaze remained unchanged, and Irina couldn't help but feel a mix of irritation and amusement at his stoic response.

"Funnier than yours."

"This one was a better joke."

"....." At first, Irina didn't understand, but as she grasped the meaning, she shot a glare towards him.

"You....." she began, her words trailing off with an exasperated sigh. "I don't know how Sylvie deals with you all the time."

"Sylvie is not like you," Astron replied, his expression remaining unreadable. "She doesn't make me feel annoyed."

"Well, you're lucky she's not here right now; she'd probably find some weird way to make you smile or something," Irina retorted, folding her arms.

"Is that something you'd want to see?" Astron's question was devoid of any teasing, delivered with a deadpan expression.

"Not really," Irina responded, though there was a hint of a smirk on her face. "I have no interest in your smile."

"Good. Saves us both the trouble."

"But I want to see you flustered at least once," Irina declared, looking at Astron with a competitive glint in her eyes.

Astron, unperturbed, responded, "You won't be able to do it."

"Oh, really?" Irina raised an eyebrow, her competitive spirit ignited. "Don't underestimate me. I can get anyone flustered if I want to."

"Feel free to try."

"Just so you know, making such remarks only makes me more determined," Irina shot back.

"As long as you're confident, you can try whatever you want."

Just as Astron and Irina continued their banter, the trio of Julia, Lilia, and Lucas exited the sparring grounds. Julia's sharp eyes immediately caught sight of the fiery exchange between Irina and Astron. With a mischievous smile, she approached the duo.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" Julia chimed in, her tone teasing. "Is this the famous Astron getting into a battle of wits with our fiery Irina?"

Irina shot a glance at Julia, her expression a mix of irritation and amusement. "He's just being his usual annoying self."

"His 'annoying' self, you say?" Yet, Julia instantly grasped one thing, and Irina knew what this girl was up to.

"Whatever you want to say, don't ever think of saying it." Irina glared at Julia.

"Hey, you shouldn't threaten people like that. I am just a poor observer."

"The first rule of observing. Don't put your nose into other people's matters."

"Really....What if I do that?"

"Do you want to be burned down to crisp?"

"Oh....Scary..."

Julia, undeterred by Irina's warnings, continued to tease with a playful smile. Meanwhile, Lilia joined the group, her attention shifting towards Astron.

"Hey there, Astron," Lilia greeted him with a friendly smile. "I heard you played a role in the Phantom's Land disappearance. Impressive stuff."

It was the smile she had used most of the time. After all, Lilia's beauty was something she was well aware of, and she had utilized it almost all the time.

Though, there wasn't a clear effect on Astron.

Astron nodded in response. "I did what I could, but most of the credit goes to Irina here. She was the one who had done most of the job."

"Really?"

"If not for her, we wouldn't be able to defeat the 'monster' at that time."

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

Irina shot a sidelong glance at Astron as if she was annoyed. "Don't make it sound like I enjoyed it. It was necessary."

'Bastard.....You really want to play it like that, huh? Also, why is she bringing it up now?'

She couldn't help but get irritated. Seeing how Lilia was interested in Astron. Of course, she knew what kind of girl Lilia was. Even though she may have looked friendly, most of the time, she was a calculating and cold girl.

Lilia, with her charming smile, turned her attention to Irina. "It does make sense..."

Irina, despite her irritation, managed to keep a neutral expression. However, something about Lilia's smile didn't sit right with her.

'This girl....'

A faint sense of doubt lingered in the air, but Irina chose to keep it to herself for now.

While interactions unfolded, Astron, ever observant, noticed Lucas's gaze directed at him. It wasn't a hostile look, but there was a peculiar intensity that caught Astron's attention. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but it left him feeling uneasy.

'What is this?'

It was like Lucas knew something about him. Astron had been familiar with Lucas' demeanor, as he was already paying a lot of attention to the main cast. He was familiar with the habits of Ethan, Julia, Lilia, Irina, Carl, and Lucas.

Therefore, he knew that Lucas was a bit different right now.

'His standing posture is different....It is like he is constantly vigilant.'

That was not something that most of the students in the academy did, aside from the likes of Carl and Astron. It was because they were rather inexperienced in the life-and-death battles.

Those who fought with their lives on the line would know how important it is to be vigilant all the time.

He had seen the illegal Hunters in Black Market, and the ones who had survived were like this.

Therefore, he could easily deduce that Lucas was subconsciously behaving like an experienced veteran.

'I will need to look into this matter.'

He thought, taking a note in the corner of his mind.

'Anyway, I should just leave.'

As Astron made his exit, Ethan emerged from the training rooms, his gaze fixed on his watch. Julia, noticing his arrival, called out to him with a playful tone, "Hey, Ethan! Finally finished your spar, huh? We're waiting for you."

Ethan, however, seemed preoccupied, raising his head to look at the group. His usual cheerful demeanor was replaced by a more serious expression. "Hey, guys. I... I need to go somewhere. Can't join you to eat."

Julia, Lucas, Irina, and Lilia exchanged puzzled glances, surprised by Ethan's unexpected change in plans. Julia, ever the curious one, couldn't help but ask, "Something urgent?"

Ethan hesitated for a moment, his eyes flickering with a hint of concern. "Yeah, something like that. I'll catch up with you later. Sorry about this."

Without waiting for further questions, Ethan swiftly headed in the opposite direction, leaving the group in a state of bewilderment, yet the guy with purple eyes easily saw the small name on Ethan's watch.

'I guess she mustered up her courage. Well, Ethan won't certainly refuse.'

Chapter 307 Chapter 72.4 - Moving Pieces

"Just as I thought."

While walking on the road to return to my room, I thought about Ethan's reaction. He was a very good-natured guy in terms of character. This was the developers' way of enabling the storyline and making him interlock with many different characters.

Therefore, I knew he would help Emily once she reached him.

'From now on, it is up to Ethan to how to deal with it, but it should help him improve himself quite a lot.'

With that thought, I continued my solitary walk on the road, contemplating Ethan's role in helping Emily. The evening sky painted hues of orange and pink as the sun dipped below the horizon.

—RING!

Lost in my musings, my smartwatch suddenly buzzed, breaking the silence of my thoughts.

Curious, I checked the screen and noticed a message notification from the History and Arts Club. The message detailed this week's meeting, scheduled for Saturday morning.

The club was gearing up for another engaging session, but I also noticed a change in the writing style.

'This doesn't certainly belong to Senior Maya.'

I asked myself. Seemingly enough, even though Senior Maya was also someone who cared about her image and grammar, the tone of her writing was rather cheery. This one was rather serious and monotone.

'It gives me the elderly vibes. Is it the instructor?'

Thinking about the recent events, it made sense that the observer of the club would no longer neglect her duties and would participate in the club. After all, what transpired during the last club trip was rather detrimental.

Maya could have lost her life; Sylvie was the same. Though it wasn't directly related to the Club's activities, it certainly made the academy put a lot more importance on this matter.

"Well, I'll see if this claim holds true or not in the upcoming meetings," I thought, deciding to investigate further at a later time. For now, my focus has shifted to preparing for my daily training routine.

Returning to my room, I gathered my training gear and mentally prepared for the rigorous exercises that awaited me.

The Academy Grounds – Just as the training finished

"Wow....Haaa....Haaa.....How did you improve this fast?"

On the academy grounds, the young man holding a sword mumbled between his heavy breaths. The young man's name was Talim, a middle-ranked student.

Ethan, humbly wiping sweat from his forehead, smiled at Talim. "It's thanks to people like you, Talim. Our matches help me learn and grow. You did well today. It was a good match."

Talim, catching his breath, smiled happily at the compliment and took the hand Ethan offered to help him up. They strolled away from the training grounds, discussing the finer points of their sparring session.

As they entered the locker room to change, Ethan noticed a message on his smartwatch. It was from Emily. Ethan vividly remembered her; she was the one who called for help when they were in a tight spot.

After that, Ethan liked the genuine atmosphere of the guild and wanted to make an investment in the guild. He also liked the guild members and recommended the whole business to his family.

'She hadn't contacted me after that.'

But, recently, a lot of things have happened around him, and he wasn't able to look into this matter in more detail. Thus, he wasn't in much contact with Emily either.

'I wonder what it is.'

Curiosity piqued, Ethan opened the message from Emily. The contents were short and to the point. She requested him to call her back after he finished his sparring session, mentioning that it was urgent. A hint of concern crept into Ethan's expression.

After changing in the locker room, he dialed Emily's number. As the call connected, her voice came through, and it sounded a bit more somber than usual.

"Hey, E-Ethan," Emily greeted, her voice carrying a sense of urgency. Even from her voice alone, Ethan could easily see that something wasn't right. After that, Emily briefly told Ethan about the guild's spot, yet Ethan knew this wasn't a topic that they could discuss over the phone.

"Let's talk about this in the PhD Café."

"Ah....Right, sorry...."

Ending the call, Ethan swiftly gathered his belongings and left the sparring grounds.

Ethan, driven by a sense of urgency, made his way to the designated cafe where he was supposed to meet Emily.

The casual ambiance of the cafe clashed with the weight of the situation Emily hinted at in her message. As he entered, he scanned the area, and his eyes soon fell on Emily, sitting at a corner table.

Ethan quickly made his way to Emily's corner table. The café's ambient noise seemed to fade away as he approached her. Emily looked up, her eyes conveying a mix of worry and gratitude as she acknowledged his presence.

"Ethan," she greeted, her voice carrying the weight of the guild's troubles. "Thanks for coming."

Ethan offered her a reassuring smile and took a seat across from her. "Of course, Emily. What's going on? You sounded quite concerned on the phone."

After all, even though he had things to do, none of those were as important as the one Emily talked about.

He was just going to hang out with his friends, train, and probably play some games.

Therefore, for him, helping others is of much more importance, especially if the said person is his acquaintance.

Emily took a deep breath, composing herself before delving into the detailed web of challenges appearing all around the guild.

"T-to be frank....I didn't want to call you here." Though at first, she wasn't able to directly delve into the topic. After all, even though she was determined to call for her, a part of her still didn't want to bother Ethan. "But I had no choice."

'It doesn't matter how I am perceived.'

She inwardly reminded herself and then raised her head to look at him.

"To start...."

After making her inner resolve once again, she spoke about injuries, resignations, and the looming turmoil within their ranks. Ethan listened intently, his expression reflecting a growing understanding of the gravity of the situation.

"I see...." As Emily concluded, Ethan's gaze was thoughtful.

'If what she said is true, there seems to be a deliberate attack on her guild.'

Ethan was by no means a stranger to how guilds operated now. Though it might have been like that at the start of the semester, now that he was awakened, he constantly entered the dungeons under his family's supervision.

He also had spent some time under his aunt, Kaya Hartley. There, he slightly observed the ruthlessness of the industry and knew such schemes weren't uncommon. Though the things he observed were just the tip of the iceberg, Ethan didn't know it.

'To think that even such a good-natured and honest guild is being targeted...According to what Emily is saying, they were even disenfranchised by the association.'

Thinking about that, Ethan's blood boiled. Emily was Ethan's friend. At least, he thought so. The Azure Crest Guild was also a guild that he personally decided to sponsor; therefore, the fact that a guild was targeting the guild made him quite angry.

Emily hesitated for a moment after sharing the tumultuous state of her guild, feeling a pang of shame for once again turning to Ethan for help.

'Why must it be like this?'

This was the second time she had reached out, and it weighed on her conscience. She knew Ethan had no obligation to assist her guild, and the sense of dependency gnawed at her.

As Ethan absorbed the situation, his thoughtful gaze didn't escape Emily's notice.

'Right...Of course, he wouldn't want to help. Who would want to help a useless person like me.'

"I understand if you can't help, Ethan," she admitted, her eyes momentarily avoiding his. "I'm sorry for burdening you again. It's just... things have become really difficult, and I didn't know who else to turn to."

Ethan's response surprised her. Instead of a refusal or a hint of annoyance, he smiled warmly. "Why feel ashamed for asking a friend for help?" he questioned, his tone gentle. Emily glanced at him, her brows furrowed in confusion.

"Friends?" she echoed, her mind questioning the nature of their relationship. Of course, she wanted to believe that she was at least close to Ethan, but hearing it solidly like this from Ethan's mouth gave her a different feeling.

'That....'

Ethan chuckled, his smile widening. "Of course, Emily. We've fought back to back in the dungeon and faced monsters together. You know we almost lost their lives there. If that doesn't make us close, I don't know what does."

Emily found herself at a loss for words as Ethan's response resonated in her mind. The sincerity in his hazel eyes was undeniable, and she couldn't refute his reasoning. Her attempt to downplay their connection, placing the burden on herself, was met with Ethan's steadfast perspective.

"B-but, it was my fault back then....You didn't have anything to gain from it, yet you risked your life," Emily stammered, a hint of self-blame lingering in her words.

Ethan's smile remained unwavering. "That is right. But, if I always do according to what I gain, what makes me different from a machine? It was not your fault, but my own decision to help you. It was also my own volition to stay with you, even though I knew your situation wasn't good. And, it is still the same."

Emily struggled to find a response. The logic in Ethan's words, coupled with his earnest gaze, left her silent. She realized that perhaps there was a genuine connection beyond the immediate gains and losses, something that transcended the transactional nature often associated with acquaintances.

"Why go to such lengths?" she finally managed to ask, her voice a mix of curiosity and confusion.

"Why go such lengths, huh? That is a good question." Ethan's smile softened, and he chuckled, almost as if sharing a secret. "I don't know."

"To satisfy my dreams and become someone like the figure in those dreams." The words were spoken almost under his breath, and Emily wasn't able to catch them.

"But, if there is one thing I know, it is that good and honest people deserve better in the world," Ethan continued, his words carrying a genuine warmth.

Emily felt a subtle flush on her face, a sensation of ease settling within her. The sincerity in Ethan's response resonated with her, and a soft smile tugged at the corners of her lips. As he turned to face her with that characteristic smile, Ethan added, "And for me, you are someone good and honest."

—THUMP!

A sudden thump echoed in Emily's chest, and she couldn't deny that something changed.

'Not now...'

She wanted to bury herself, but looking at Ethan, who was oblivious to the changes, she released a sigh of relief.

'Thank god he didn't see it.'

However, she would come to regret being happy over this fact in the future.

Chapter 308 73.1 - Two-Sides

Early Saturday Night— Academy

I had woken up fairly early in the day, just like any usual. It was 3.30 A.M., and I had left my room to train.

I didn't have much to think about since I preferred to shut my mind down in times like this. Yet, at the same time, it wasn't something that could be easily done.

There were times when my mind would refuse to shut down.

'With the recent events, the academy seems like they will keep the events simple for a while.'

Even if the Phantom's Land hadn't resulted in any deaths or losses, it showed enough danger to make the students and parents feel the tension. Therefore, the academy was rather laying low for the time being.

This could be seen in the recent two weeks when we only had light training sessions and theoretically centered topics.

As I navigated through the deserted campus in recent times, I decided to incorporate a new element into my training routine.

Weighted bracelets adorned my wrists as I began my run around the training grounds. The added resistance tested my endurance and pushed the limits of my physical capabilities. They were on my body most of the time.

With each lap, I could feel the strain on my muscles, the weighted bracelets serving as a constant reminder of the need for perseverance. The cool night air heightened my senses as I pushed myself. Further, the rhythmic thud of my footsteps echoed in the quiet surroundings.

After a considerable run, I entered the training grounds, the dim lighting creating an ambiance of solitude. Though there were people, it was way too little compared to the daytime.

Pausing for a moment, I removed the weighted bracelets, feeling the sudden release of resistance.

As I flexed my limbs, I couldn't help but sense a tangible improvement in my constitution and endurance.

It seemed that my speculations regarding the talent limit were correct. The consistent and dedicated training now proved to be important for the sake of my future.

'I guess the increase in my talent limit really corresponded to endurance and strength.'

In any case, after finishing Endurance Training 1, I started the second part, where I would be fighting with the golems created by the grounds.

Today's focus was on improving my mastery of [Umbral Steps]. After acquiring thanks to my trait [Shadowborne], I had been training to increase my mastery.

Though the skill was good, utilizing it in actual combat always required practice.

Choosing the fourth stage, I knew the golems here were more formidable and required a higher level of skill to overcome. As I entered the designated area, the towering golems stood motionless, awaiting my challenge.

I took a deep breath, focusing on the task at hand. My daggers and bow were securely strapped to my body, ready for action. The training ground was silent, amplifying the sound of my footsteps as I approached the first golem.

Activating [Umbral Steps], I vanished from my original spot, reappearing behind the massive figure of the golem. The darkened silhouette of its stone structure contrasted with the dim lighting of the training grounds.

–SLASH!

My daggers swiftly cut through the air, aiming for the designated weak points of the golem. The strikes were precise, exploiting the vulnerabilities I had identified through repeated encounters with these constructs.

–WHOOSH!

As I activated [Umbral Steps] once again, I quickly appeared behind one of the golems before it could react.

I continued this pattern, seamlessly moving from one golem to another, honing my agility and mastery of the shadows.

It was crucial to synchronize my movements with the shadows cast by the towering figures, allowing for a seamless transition.

As I trained, time seemed to blur, and the rhythmic pattern of [Umbral Steps] started to become second nature. In a sense, I was getting more immersed in my Trait, making me a lot better in terms of its usage.

The golems, formidable opponents in their own right in terms of defense, served as the perfect testing ground for this unique skill.

'I guess this makes it perfect for me to escape once I can utilize it. But, there is a distance limit as well as mana consumption. If I were to just simply teleport a short distance, I could use it 20 times in a row until I exhaust all my mana. But, that is in the assumption of me not using any other thing to consume mana, which will most likely not be the case.'

I have taken many things regarding this skill into note. The mana consumption of spatial leap was high. It made sense since I initially wasn't inclined to manipulate space.

A skill that is not compatible with the user would consume more mana and energy compared to the reverse.

'But, I can still enhance my body with shadows, increasing my speed. I also noticed that, in the absence of daylight, I feel smoother. Possibly, something about night is making me stronger.'

Those were all the things I had observed while training. Even though my spatial understanding was lacking, at least my enhancement understanding was higher, making the mana consumption less regarding this matter.

There was also a distance limit for the time being.

'I can at most teleport 1000 meters, but that would consume all of my mana. I need to increase my understanding.'

With all those in my head, I continued to train in the room.

Morning – History and Arts Club Meeting

The cold day of winter echoed in the academy grounds as the students made their way to their respective events.

Some of them were going to study, some of them were going to train, and some of them were going to associate themselves with the club activities.

That was the general way of the activities in the morning. Astron was also heading to the History and Arts club meeting.

'This time, it is indoors compared to outdoors. On top of that, we are meeting in the Multipurpose hall. It seems the overseer of the club has some ideas in her mind.'

Since most of the clubs didn't have their observer directly interfered with them aside from some marital ones, most of the time, the ones who were planning the events would be club presidents.

However, in some rare cases, the overseers would be required to be present for legal documentation, and in some rarer cases, those overseers would be directly involved.

Upon reaching the entrance, Astron noticed that the door was slightly ajar. Deciding to seize the opportunity, he made his way inside earlier than the designated time. The warmth of the hall enveloped him, a welcome relief from the biting cold outside.

As Astron stepped into the room, he spotted Senior Maya already present. She sat on the mat, shoes neatly arranged beside her. The sight intrigued Astron, and he approached her with a respectful nod.

"Good morning, Senior Maya," Astron greeted, acknowledging her presence.

Maya looked up with a warm smile, "Ah, Astron. Please, come in. Take your shoes off before joining me on the mat."

Following her instructions, Astron removed his shoes and joined Senior Maya on the mat. The ambiance of the Multipurpose Hall added a touch of solemnity to the meeting.

Maya's gaze shifted to Astron as he settled beside her on the mat. Her blue eyes held a mix of amusement and approval. "Astron, you're early as usual," she remarked, a playful smile gracing her lips.

Astron continued, "You are not that different in terms of this." His gaze met hers, noting the casual elegance in Maya's attire. The blouse accentuated her slender frame, and the open neckline added a subtle allure.

'Well, that is because I knew you would come early.'

Maya wanted to say but refrained from doing so. Her blue eyes sparkled with a mixture of amusement and warmth. "Well, I suppose we both understand the value of being prepared." She stretched her legs, extending them before her while slightly leaning towards Astron.

It was an unconscious act; at least, she did her best for it to be perceived like that while touching his arm with her shoulder.

'He had grown up once again.'

At first, she could meet the line of his shoulders, but that didn't seem to be the case now.

A momentary distraction overcame her as she played with her toes, a thoughtful expression crossing her face.

"Senior, I guess the overseer will now be more active in club affairs." He said without minding Maya's touch on his shoulders since no people were around.

The natural light filtering through the hall's windows highlighted the delicate features of Maya's face, casting a gentle glow.

Maya nodded in agreement, her gaze turning thoughtful. "That's true. Actually, the overseer was the one who sent that message about the indoor meeting today."

Astron, not entirely surprised, remarked, "I figured that much."

Maya arched an eyebrow, intrigued. "Oh? How did you figure it out?"

"It wasn't how Senior Maya would write normally. The tone and choice of words were a bit different."

Maya's eyes widened in amusement, a wide smile creeping onto her face as she looked at Astron. "So, you know how I write, huh?" she teased, a playful glint in her eyes.

"I am sure every member of our club already knows about it," Astron said indifferently.

"This.....I don't care if other people know about it or not, don't you understand?"

Maya couldn't believe his obliviousness. "Honestly, Junior! I guess my way of writing is obviously different and not normal," she declared, making a playful attempt to let him know he had missed the point.

Astron, seemingly unperturbed, just shrugged. "Well, yeah, that's true."

Maya's pout deepened, and she couldn't resist a small pinch on his arm. "You're impossible." With a facepalm, she clenched her fingers a little, turning her face to the side with a huff.

"Why are you angry, senior?"

"I am not angry."

"You are too tightly gripping for that."

"That's..."

—TOK!

Just as the two were talking, suddenly, they heard the sounds of someone approaching.

–SWOOSH!

In an instant, Astron widened the distance between him and Maya, making sure that no misunderstandings would occur. Maya also knew that, so she didn't make any noises and silently nodded.

'I wish it would last a little longer.' Though, inwardly, she regretted it a little.

As Astron and Maya subtly adjusted their positions, the sounds of footsteps grew closer. Suddenly, the door swung open, and Amelia, Maya's friend and a fellow member of the History and Arts Club, walked in. She carried a satchel slung over her shoulder, her eyes brightening as she entered.

"Good morning, Maya!" Amelia greeted cheerfully, taking off her shoes at the entrance. "I hope I'm not late."

Maya smiled, "Not at all, Amelia. You're right on time. Please, join us."

Amelia joined the duo on the mat, creating a friendly triangle as they settled into the Multipurpose Hall. The atmosphere seemed lightened by her presence, but the gaze she threw at Astron was a little different.

'This little thief is stealing Maya from me.'

That was what she was thinking. After all, even though she had acted like she had just come here, she was observing Maya and Astron from far away for a while already.

With her entrance, the room started being filled with students one by one.

Chapter 309 Chapter 73.2 - Two Sides

"Hello." Sylvie entered the room, her face looking a little more tired than usual.

"Hello." Astron greeted her back with a subtle nod, leaning to the wall. In his hands was the book he had recently brought from the library.

"What are you reading?" She asked while naturally sitting down beside him. Normally, she would be with the other club members, but right now, she wasn't in the mood to have loud talks with her friends.

"It is a book about Psychology and Mind Magic," Astron replied without raising his head from the book.

"Hmm?" Pondering about the previous times, she thought.

'When did he start showing interest in Psychology? I hadn't seen him studying it before.'

Just as she asked herself, she heard his voice. "I just recently started."

"Wh-"

"It is not that hard to notice what you think."

Sylvie leaned back against the wall, her eyes fixed on the cover of the book. "Mind Magic, huh? That sounds interesting. What made you decide to delve into psychology?"

Astron closed the book and set it aside, his piercing gaze meeting Sylvie's. "I've found that understanding the intricacies of the mind can be beneficial in various situations. It provides insight into human behavior and motivations, aiding in decision-making."

'Is it really, though?'

From the moment that Astron woke up in that Phantom's Land, Sylvie had noticed that she was no longer able to see his emotions underneath. Previously, she could still see some faltering emotions behind that grey barrier, but now it was completely grey.

Sylvie tilted her head, a curious expression on her face. "So, you're studying it for practical reasons?" She asked, looking for a possible clue.

Astron nodded. "Practicality is crucial. It allows one to navigate through the complexities of relationships and interactions more effectively."

But, she found none. Astron's expression was very hard to read, and an inexperienced person like her wasn't someone to see through him.

'It is a bit funny, though.'

Chuckling, she said, "Well, you've always been a practical person. But isn't psychology also about emotions and feelings?"

"That is right."

"Then, maybe I can also try to learn about it."

Now that he had mentioned it, Sylvie thought about her powers. She had been using them to see the emotions of the other parties before her, but rather than studying them, she instinctively used those powers.

It was like she knew how to interpret colors and which emotions they represented, but at the same time, she lacked the knowledge to observe what those emotions meant.

Astron glanced at Sylvie, his eyes narrowing slightly. "For which reason?"

Sylvie, caught off guard by the directness of his question, instinctively averted her gaze. "Oh, you know, it just seems interesting. Understanding why people feel the way they do could be useful, right?"

Astron's gaze lingered on her for a moment, his analytical mind likely processing the underlying motive behind her sudden interest.

'He didn't notice it, right?'

Sylvie felt a twinge of nervousness but maintained a composed exterior. At least she tried to. But from the eyes of a person like Astron, her attempts just looked childish. Even at first glance, he could see that she was trying to make up an excuse.

"It is indeed interesting," Astron acknowledged, feigning ignorance. "The intricacies of human emotions can be quite fascinating to explore."

Sylvie nodded, relieved that her excuse seemed to pass muster. "Exactly! And who knows, it might help me be more understanding in my interactions." She said, then mumbled. "And to be able to protect myself...."

Astron raised an eyebrow, hearing Sylvie mumbling. He thought, 'She is slowly understanding the world and her powers.'

Though Sylvie started as a naïve girl who always wanted to stay back and watch, slowly, she was taking the reins on her hands.

'That is good. The faster she is, the better. I don't know how long the academy will be stable like this.'

Sooner or later, the academy was bound to be drowned in chaos. Many powers were converging here; many interests were taking place. Though it may not have looked like that so far, the inner clashes between human factions were arguably more dangerous than the attacks of demons. Since the former didn't have that many restrictions in terms of domains.

Just as Sylvie and Astron were talking further, the door opened once again, and all eyes turned towards the entrance. The overseer of the History and Arts Club, Gloria Hull, made her entrance.

Gloria exuded an air of elegance as she stepped into the Multipurpose Hall. Her attire spoke of professionalism, and her confident demeanor resonated with authority. The club members quickly straightened up, acknowledging her presence.

"Good morning, everyone," Gloria greeted with a warm smile, her eyes scanning the room. "I hope you're all in good spirits today."

"Good morning, Overseer." the club members chorused in response, standing up as a sign of respect for the overseer they had never seen before.

'Interesting. Is this her passive skill?'

However, Astron noticed the change in the atmosphere instantly. The reactions the students gave weren't natural, especially to someone they were supposed to see for the first time.

It was evident that they instantly understood who this person entering was without her introducing herself clearly, and that wasn't something that naturally happened.

Gloria Hull acknowledged the nods from Maya and Amelia with a subtle smile before addressing the gathered members. Her eyes carried a depth of experience, and her voice commanded attention.

"I'm Overseer Gloria Hull, and I'm delighted to be here with all of you today." She said that, but her eyes held a little annoyance.

'I guess this is her way of saying you shouldn't have made such events so that the academy didn't need to make me interfere with the club works.' Astron thought.

"I've heard about the remarkable activities and discussions that take place within the History and Arts Club, and I must say, it's truly an honor to be a part of such a vibrant community."

'I have been made to hear about all those things you did in the Western Uxbridge and events that had taken place there. It is truly a waste of time to be a part of a bunch of children's play.'

The members listened intently, their initial awe gradually turning into curiosity. Gloria's presence seemed to evoke a sense of respect and intrigue.

"I've been following your endeavors closely, and it's evident that this club is filled with talented and passionate individuals. I believe in fostering an environment where creativity and intellectual curiosity can flourish," Gloria continued, her gaze sweeping across the room.

'Now, I am forced to follow your club's process closely, and it is evident that all of you are a bunch of troublemakers. And now, I became your babysitter this morning.'

Astron continued to interpret the true meaning of her words in his mind. Though, he also knew the overseer wasn't to blame for having such thoughts. Considering that most of the instructors were just overseers on paper, comparing herself to them, she was now wasting her weekend time overseeing the activities of a bunch of children.

After acknowledging the club's achievements, Gloria Hull's expression softened slightly as she transitioned to the reason for her presence.

"As I've observed your past activities, it's clear that the History and Arts Club has primarily focused on historical studies," Gloria remarked, her tone measured yet discerning. "While history is undoubtedly a rich tapestry of human experiences, I believe that exploring other forms of art can enrich our understanding even further. This is what the name 'Art' is for, right?"

Her words carried a subtle implication that the club's previous focus might have been too narrow.

'Next time, don't make the excuse of looking for historical things for me and sit down.'

Astron, attuned to the nuances of communication, recognized the underlying message.

"I propose that we broaden our horizons by incorporating discussions and activities related to various art forms," Gloria suggested, her gaze sweeping across the room to gauge the members' reactions. "Art, in its myriad forms, offers unique insights into culture, society, and human expression."

Astron could sense the shift in the club's dynamics as Gloria Hull outlined her vision. It was evident that she sought to challenge the status quo and encourage the members to explore a different part.

'Art....Is she somehow an expert in a form of art? That is possible.'

If the overseer was forced to intervene in the affairs of the club from now on, then it meant she would be spending her time. In that case, it was always better to do something she was good at or she loved to do.

"As an initial step, I suggest we delve into dancing," Gloria continued, her voice resonating with conviction. "Dance, like history, is a reflection of our collective heritage and individual creativity. By embracing this art form, we not only honor our past but also celebrate the diversity of human expression."

Her proposal hung in the air, awaiting the club members' response. Astron observed the room, noting the varying reactions among the members.

Maya raised her hand, a thoughtful expression on her face. Gloria Hull acknowledged her, and Maya spoke up, "Overseer Hull, while I appreciate the idea of incorporating various art forms, wouldn't delving into dancing be a bit too profound for our club? We've mostly focused on the historical aspects, and dancing seems like an entirely different realm. Additionally, we lack the expertise or a dedicated teacher for such a pursuit."

Gloria Hull's smile widened, displaying a subtle confidence. "An astute observation, President Maya." She said, emphasizing the word president.

'She is saying, if not for your lack of planning as a president, none of those would happen'.

Gloria continued her words. "However, I believe that students who constantly utilize their bodies for training and combat possess a unique advantage when it comes to dance. The coordination and discipline required in both areas share common ground. As for the lack of a dedicated teacher, fear not. I happen to be one of the most recognized dancers in the Human domain."

A murmur of surprise and intrigue rippled through the club members. They hadn't anticipated their overseer to have such credentials. Gloria's words carried weight, and her assurance addressed the concerns raised by Maya.

"Dance is a form of expression that transcends boundaries, and I am confident that with the right guidance, each one of you can discover the joy and significance it brings," Gloria continued. "Consider this not just an exploration of a new art form but an opportunity to unlock a different facet of your own capabilities."

Maya, nodding thoughtfully, seemed to absorb Gloria's words, but she could no longer refute them.

—CLAP!

Gloria Hull clapped her hands, the sharp sound cutting through the room. "Excellent observations and questions, everyone. Now, before we dive into this new venture, does anyone have further inquiries or concerns?"

The room remained silent, the members seeming to digest the information. No hands were raised, and it appeared Gloria had addressed their uncertainties adequately.

"Very well," Gloria said, standing up with grace. Her eyes surveyed the room with a warm smile. "Let's embark on this journey together. Shall we begin with the pairing of partners?"

Chapter 310 Chapter 73.3 - Two sides

Ethan looked at the scene before him with a deep frown etched across his face. Five individuals stood before him, their faces concealed by masks that bore clear hostility and a mocking demeanor. The fallen members of the Azure Crest Guild lay on the ground beside him, their bodies battered and torn.

In that tense moment, Ethan's mind raced with a mix of concern and anger. The guild members who had become close associates to him were now in a dire state, and the mysterious assailants seemed to revel in their malicious victory.

'Who are these people, and why would they attack the guild?'

After promising Emily to help, Ethan went to Emily's guild. Headquarters of Azure Crest Guild was a lot more deserted than it was supposed to be, and clearly, such a thing wasn't normal.

Many of the members had already resigned since their lives were under threat and on the line. Some of them were even recruited by the agents from the surrounding guilds, leaving them in a tight spot.

Therefore, Ethan decided to join the guild in the dungeon explorations for the time being since he was sure he could do a lot better now. After all, with the increase in his rank, stats, and his advancement in his family's art, he was a lot stronger compared to how he was before.

'But, I wasn't expecting to see such a thing. Those people, how did they manage to enter the dungeon? Was there an open-slot?'

The questions churned in Ethan's mind as he assessed the situation. The dungeon that was assigned to the Azure Crest Guild had become a battleground, and the ominous aura of danger hung thick in the air.

'The members are not in a good condition. They suffered from the surprise attack just now.'

He took a side glance at the members.

'But, they are neither Faye nor Hari. Both of them are trying their best in other dungeons that need to be covered. So, I don't think these masked guys are that strong.'

He judged with a cool head. After the Phantom's Land, he had been thinking about the changes in himself and realized that recently, he was able to keep calm and control his emotions better than before.

As Ethan prepared to confront the masked intruders and defend the fallen members of the Azure Crest Guild, a voice cut through the tension. One of the masked individuals, standing a bit ahead of the others, spoke with a scornful tone.

"Kid, I don't know who you are, but you should've looked at the rumors before joining a guild. Blame your own stupidity."

The leader of the masked assailants grinned, raising a pair of daggers in a mocking display. His eyes gleamed with a twisted satisfaction, seemingly reveling in the chaos and distress they had caused.

As the masked leader grinned and raised his daggers, another one of the assailants, a sinister-looking figure, licked his lips while fixing his gaze on Emily standing beside Ethan. His voice dripped with cruelty as he spoke, reveling in classic villain dialogues.

"After we're done with these fools, I think we'll have ourselves a feast. Especially that girl."

The ominous atmosphere thickened as the masked assailants signaled to each other, their sinister intentions clear.

"Tch." Emily clicked her tongue as she saw the gazes of those guys. However, she couldn't help but shiver a little since the killing intent they were releasing was quite strong.

“SWOOSH!

In an instant, the air crackled with tension as the masked assailants prepared to launch their attack. The first assailant's figure blurred for a second, and in the blink of an eye, he appeared before Ethan, slashing with his daggers.

“CLANK!

Ethan's vambrace intercepted the deadly strike, the clash of metal echoing through the dungeon. The force behind the attack reverberated through Ethan's arm, but his swift reflexes had saved him from the initial assault. Without wasting a moment, he widened the distance, creating space to better utilize his spear.

As the masked assailant recoiled from the deflection, Ethan assessed the situation with a calm focus. The masked leader and his companions eyed him with a mix of surprise and annoyance, clearly not expecting to face such a skilled opponent.

'Who is this guy? There wasn't such a guy in their ranks?'

The leader thought as he looked at Ethan.

"What's this? A brat who can actually fight?" the leader sneered, a hint of frustration evident in his voice.

Ethan remained silent, his eyes locked on the assailants. He felt Emily's presence beside him, and he could sense her apprehension. However, the newfound calmness within him helped him maintain his focus.

Without waiting for the masked assailants to regroup, Ethan took the initiative. With a swift motion, he lunged forward, spear in hand, aiming for the assailant who had attacked him first. The masked figure managed to dodge the initial thrust, but Ethan's movements were relentless.

"Don't stand there, do something."

The leader barked orders to his companions, urging them to coordinate their attacks. The second assailant, fixated on Emily, made a move to approach her. However, Emily, despite her shivers, clenched her sword, while taking her position.

Even though this was her first time facing a human opponent in such a matter, she needed to do her best.

'I can't afford to make a mistake here. I should give my all.'

With that thought, she clashed with the newcomer, her sword facing the daggers.

Meanwhile, Ethan continued his assault on the leader of the masked assailants. The leader, though initially caught off guard, adjusted to the relentless attacks, showcasing a proficiency in dodging and parrying. The clash between spear and daggers intensified, and Ethan's determination fueled his every move.

However, the fight took an unexpected turn as the other two assailants joined the fray, adding a layer of complexity to the battle.

“CLANK!

The leader, seizing the opportunity created by the distraction, managed to push Ethan back, breaking the rhythm he had established.

“SWOOSH!

The assailants wielding elemental powers took advantage of the chaos. The wind manipulator created cyclones, attempting to disorient Ethan and hinder his movements. Simultaneously, the earth user summoned stone spikes from the ground, forcing Ethan to dance around the hazardous terrain.

'This is not good.'

Ethan adapted swiftly, using his spear to maintain distance from the elemental attacks. With precise footwork, he dodged the stone spikes and weaved through the gusts of wind.

'I need to break through.'

However, the fire manipulator seized the opportunity to launch fiery projectiles, forcing Ethan to defend himself against multiple fronts.

As the intensity of the fight increased, Ethan knew he had to end it quickly. He looked at his hands and noticed that he was already bleeding in some areas. Though his sturdy body of Hartley's could resist such attacks, it was also true that he couldn't face the attacks for too long.

Spear of Hartley. Audacious Charge

With a decisive spin, he redirected the incoming wind toward the earth assailant, disrupting their coordination. In the brief confusion, he closed the distance on the masked leader.

His spear danced through the air with fluidity and speed, striking relentlessly. The leader, caught off guard by Ethan's sudden aggression, struggled to parry the onslaught.

"What?"

Before he could even say anything, the spear appeared right before his shoulder.

—SPURT!

And stabbed him from there, piercing through his body like he was some sort of model.

"Leader!"

The wind and earth assailants regrouped, launching a coordinated assault. Cyclones and stone spikes converged on Ethan, testing his agility.

[Temporal Warding]

Ethan responded, channeling his mana into his skill, creating a protective barrier that deflected the elemental onslaught.

Despite the fierce resistance, the fire manipulator seized an opening. Flames surrounded Ethan, forcing him to retreat momentarily.

"I got you!"

However, Emily, displaying remarkable composure, stepped in to cover Ethan's retreat, clashing blades with the assailant and extinguishing the flames.

"Thanks!"

Ethan, catching his breath, seized the opportunity to exploit the disarray among the assailants.

With a swift maneuver, he stabbed the leader once again, rendering him temporarily defenseless.

"No, you won't!"

The wind and earth assailants, undeterred by Ethan's successful strike on their leader, closed in in an instant.

The wind manipulator brandished a sword while the earth user wielded a formidable axe. They coordinated their movements, preparing to launch a synchronized assault.

Ethan, still catching his breath, faced the impending onslaught. The wind assailant dashed forward, slashing with precision. The earth assailant followed suit, swinging the heavy axe in a wide arc. Ethan, despite his fatigue, raised his spear to block the sword and skillfully dodged the axe strike.

The wind and earth assailants, however, were not easily thwarted. Simultaneously, they began a chanting ritual, their voices merging into a harmonious hum that resonated through the dungeon. A mystical energy enveloped the air as an artifact activated, causing a brief disruption in Ethan's focus.

The artifact's power made Ethan stagger for a moment, allowing the assailants to close the gap swiftly. The wind user, capitalizing on the opening, delivered rapid sword strikes, testing Ethan's defenses. The earth user, with the axe raised high, aimed to capitalize on Ethan's momentary vulnerability.

"Tch!"

Ethan, gritting his teeth, channeled his mana once again to fend off the relentless attacks.

He parried the sword strikes with his vambrace and sidestepped the axe swing with nimble footwork. Despite the overwhelming pressure, he managed to regain his composure and counter the assailants' advances.

Meanwhile, Emily found herself in a precarious situation as the dual-dagger user continued the lockdown. His swift and precise strikes left her with limited room to maneuver.

The fire elementalist seized the opportunity and launched a fiery assault, creating an additional layer of challenge for Emily.

"Emily, watch out!" Ethan called out as he continued to engage the wind and earth assailants.

With a quick glance, Emily understood the urgency of the situation. Channeling her focus, she skillfully deflected the dagger strikes, creating an opening to counter.

However, the fire manipulator persisted, forcing her to adopt a defensive stance to endure the scorching flames while doing her best to stall.

'If I can hold these two, Ethan can probably deal with the remaining three.'

This was her thought process. Though she was feeling guilty, she didn't know they would be attacked in the dungeon by five people, and they were even threatening their lives.

"You....."

Just at that moment, as Ethan was fighting with the two assailants, the voice of their leader reached his ears.

"Huh?" Ethan muttered, his attention momentarily diverted by the leader's voice.

"You...." The leader began, a wicked smirk playing on his lips, "I really didn't wish to use this, but I don't have a choice now."

A sense of foreboding washed over Ethan as he saw the eerie object the leader held in his hand. The aura surrounding it was disturbing, sending shivers down his spine.

'I need to stop him!'

Realizing that he needed to move, a Ethan tried to attack the leader.

"No, you won't!"

However, in an instant, his path was blocked by the sword.

—CLANK!

The leader chanted, "O mother, please grant me your presence once more and defeat the heretics standing in my way."

As the leader uttered those words, the disgusting lump of black flesh in his hand began to transform. The air thickened with malevolent energy as the lump twisted and contorted, taking on a grotesque appearance. A face emerged from the mass, constantly collapsing and reshaping itself in a horrifying dance.

Ethan, sensing the impending danger, tried to step back, but invisible tendrils seemed to emerge from the grotesque face, snaking their way around him. The dark energy gripped him tightly, restricting his movements.

"What is this?" Ethan growled, feeling the oppressive force constricting him.

The leader, with a malicious grin, explained, "This is the Gift of the Devoured. A forbidden art passed down through my bloodline. A communion with an otherworldly force that grants unimaginable power."

The grotesque face formed from the black flesh glared at Ethan with hollow eyes, exuding an aura of malevolence. It seemed to hunger for something beyond comprehension.

Ethan struggled against the invisible restraints, but the tendrils held him firm. He could feel the dark energy seeping into his very essence, probing his mind and body with an unsettling touch.

"And now, it is time for you to be his meal!"