

H. Academy 311

Chapter 311 Chapter 73.4 - Two-sides

"Shall we begin with the pairing of partners?"

The students nodded in unison since there were no downsides to the offer. Gloria Hull, with a confident stride, began pairing the members.

She would normally take into consideration various factors, creating partnerships that seemed to align with compatibility, but she didn't have any data for that for the time being. She needed to observe for a while; thus, she took a direct approach.

As Gloria assigned partners, the students observed the pairings with a mix of curiosity and excitement.

Friends found themselves dancing together, and some were matched with those they hadn't interacted with much before. The Multipurpose Hall buzzed with whispers and exchanged glances.

Though the History and Arts Club wasn't that big compared to the clubs related to combat, they still had fairly enough members. This mostly stemmed from the academy being rather crowded.

'She is pairing everyone with their closest ones.'

Realizing that was the case, Maya caught Astron's eye and attempted to subtly approach him among the shifting pairs.

'This is a good chance!'

After all, she would never miss this chance. For the past two weeks, thanks to Phantom's Land exploration and her own practical evaluations, she hasn't had many chances to interact with Astron.

However, her advance was intercepted by Amelia, who seemed determined to partner with her.

"Maya, where are you off to?" Amelia asked casually, taking Maya's arm as if to guide her. However, there was a subtle, firm grip, preventing Maya from easily slipping away.

Maya, caught off guard by Amelia's firm grip, struggled to come up with a convincing excuse. "Oh, t-that's...I just wanted to," she stammered, her attempt at nonchalance faltering. The subtle yet firm hold on her arm made it clear that Amelia wasn't inclined to let her slip away easily.

"You just wanted to?" Amelia's smile remained, but there was a distinct edge to her words. It was as if she could sense Maya's inner conflict and was determined to keep her attention elsewhere.

Before Maya could formulate any more excuses or attempt to free herself, her gaze involuntarily shifted toward Gloria Hull, who was in the process of pairing the remaining members. To her surprise, she saw Astron being paired with Sylvie.

Astron and Sylvie exchanged nods, seemingly comfortable with the arrangement. Since Astron had been training Sylvie for the past month, they had already been accustomed to their accompany to a certain extent.

However, Maya had no way of knowing that, as Astron had never mentioned it. He felt like something terrible would happen if he were to.

'Noooooo...'

The realization hit Maya like a sudden jolt. Her chance to dance with Astron had slipped away.

Gloria Hull took a little look at Maya and noticed her gaze. "Hmm~" She smiled a little, looking at the adolescent girl before her. "For our final pairing, Maya and Amelia, you'll be each other's dance partners."

Since there weren't any male students left, the last three pairs were actually girl-girl pairs. Most of the time, male students preferred joining combat-related courses, and though in the Hunter Academy, that difference wasn't as distinct as any other institutes.

Maya managed a strained smile, attempting to conceal her disappointment. 'I couldn't get him.' She inwardly thought.

"It is good that we matched, right?" Amelia said, with a smile on her own. But Maya couldn't help but feel a little resentment at the sight of Amelia looking at her like that. After all, it was her fault that she didn't end up with Astron; at least, that was what she wanted to believe.

"Yeah...." Her reply was also brief and filled with disappointment.

Gloria Hull, sensing Maya's disappointment, offered a sympathetic smile before transitioning into the practical aspects of the dance lesson. "Now, let's not dwell too much on the pairings. Dancing is about synergy, connection, and most importantly, enjoying the moment with your partner."

She kept her lecture brief, emphasizing the importance of communication through movement and expressing emotions through dance. Then, she gestured towards the designated dance floor, inviting the pairs to join her.

As the club members gathered on the dance floor, Gloria began to demonstrate the basic steps. Each movement was executed with grace and precision, showcasing her expertise in the art of dance. The members watched attentively, absorbing the fundamentals.

Amelia seemed enthusiastic, quickly catching onto the steps, while Maya, though trying to focus, couldn't help stealing glances at Astron and Sylvie. The pair moved seamlessly, their familiarity evident in every step.

A curious student raised her hand, "But Overseer Hull, how can you demonstrate a couple's dance without a partner?"

Gloria Hull responded with a confident smile as if she was expecting this question to be raised. She raised her hand, and with a subtle manipulation of pure mana, she created a small silhouette of a dancing man beside her. The ethereal figure mirrored her movements, illustrating the steps of a couple's dance.

"This is a simple visualization technique to guide you through the motions. Remember, dancing is about connection and understanding your partner's movements." She explained.

"Wow...." The students looked at her with awe, realizing what she had just displayed. Though it wasn't widely known, there was a special type of dance competition that only Awakened people could perform.

[Solo Enchanté: Mana Mirage Waltz]

This was the name of the event, as it was named after one of the ruins from the Fallen Kingdoms before the Nexus Convergence.

'I see....That is why she chose the dance. If she were to perform such an advanced dance technique, that means she is a lot more talented than I initially thought.'

Astron thought inwardly, raising Gloria's evaluation in his hand higher. Though he wasn't well-versed in dancing, he could at least appreciate the sight he was witnessing. The way Gloria was moving was so beautiful and elegant that even his picky tastes were satisfied.

"Now, let's start with some basic forms of dance," Gloria Hull announced, her movements transitioning into simple, elegant steps. The small silhouette beside her continued to mimic her, creating a visual guide for the students.

Gloria demonstrated the foundational dance postures, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a connection with the partner. She moved gracefully across the floor, her steps fluid and deliberate.

"Now, it's your turn. Don't be shy; feel the rhythm and connect with your partner," she encouraged, her gaze sweeping across the room.

As the grotesque face approached Ethan, its hollow eyes fixated on him with an insatiable hunger. The tendrils held him tightly, and the oppressive force intensified, probing deeper into his mind and body.

The leader, with a sadistic grin, declared, "And now, it is time for you to be his meal!"

Ethan gritted his teeth, his struggle against the invisible restraints growing more desperate. The malevolent aura surrounding the grotesque face seemed to reach a fever pitch, ready to consume him entirely.

Just as the grotesque face loomed over Ethan, about to engulf him, a sudden brilliant light emanated from the ring on Ethan's hand.

–SCREECH!

The intense glow filled the dungeon, causing the grotesque face to let out a blood-curdling scream. The tendrils holding Ethan began to melt away, releasing him from their grip.

"What?"

Emily, locked in her own battle, glanced over at the unexpected turn of events. She watched as the grotesque face recoiled from the radiant light, its form beginning to dissolve into grotesque tendrils of darkness.

The other assailants were no different. None of them were expecting such a turn of events as they looked at the shining light.

"This is...." They didn't even have the time to be surprised.

–SWOOSH!

With newfound freedom, Ethan's hazel eyes slightly turned a vertical yellow as he seized the opportunity. In an instant, he appeared before the leader of the assailants, spear in hand. The grotesque face screamed in agony, unable to comprehend the unexpected turn of events. Even the connection that was letting it use the power of an entity outside the world was slowly being severed. The cursed artifact was slowly losing its effects and power.

Without hesitation, Ethan drove the spear through the leader's heart. The leader convulsed, his malevolent aura dissipating as the grotesque face disintegrated into nothingness.

"Burghk-!"

The leader coughed blood as the bridge of connection was severed. He no longer wielded the power of a cursed artifact.

"So....this is how my end comes....cough-!"

As he spoke his last words, Ethan twisted the spear in the masked guy's heart, ending his life.

"Leader....."

The remaining assailants, witnessing their leader's demise, faltered in their attacks, momentarily taken aback. They didn't even scream, as the aura that was being released from Ethan was too oppressive at that second.

Ethan, though liberated from the Devouring, felt a surge of unfamiliar power coursing through him, but that power disappeared after a second.

Ethan's hazel eyes, now returned to their normal state, surveyed the remaining assailants with a cold, unwavering gaze. The oppressive aura that had briefly surrounded him had dissipated, leaving behind an unsettling stillness in the dungeon.

"How many corpses did you collect to supply such an artifact?" Ethan's voice was firm, demanding answers from the masked assailants.

The assailants, momentarily silent, exchanged uneasy glances. The revelation that their leader had lost control of the cursed artifact left them on edge; however, as they realized that Ethan was no longer in the same transformed state, a smirk gradually formed on their faces.

Unveiling the truth, one of the assailants spoke with a sinister satisfaction, "We collected one human every day, sometimes sacrificing Hunters. With each life taken, the power of the Devouring grew stronger. We will even get stronger after killing you and the guy here."

Ethan, his gaze shifting to the ground and his spear, absorbed the grim reality of their actions. The dungeon had become a hunting ground, and innocent lives had been sacrificed to empower the cursed artifact.

"I see," Ethan muttered, his voice filled with a somber understanding.

As the two remaining assailants, fueled by newfound confidence, lunged toward Ethan, he calmly raised his hand and uttered words that cut through the tension like a blade. "People like you shouldn't be in this world."

In an instant, Ethan's spear became an extension of his will. With precise movements, he fended off the assailants' attacks, countering with calculated strikes. The dungeon echoed with the clash of metal, but this time, Ethan's movements were fluid and controlled.

Though he was also tired from the constant clashing, now he didn't care about any of those at all.

"People like you don't deserve an honorable death."

「Spear of Hartley. Three stabs of basic.」

Ethan's spear, the Spear of Hartley, flashed three times in rapid succession. The assailants, fueled by overconfidence, found themselves on the receiving end of Ethan's calculated strikes.

The first stab was aimed at the earth manipulator, who hastily raised a small pillar of earth to defend himself. However, the second consecutive strike defied the makeshift barricade, piercing through and finding its mark on the assailant's neck. A gurgled gasp escaped his lips as he staggered, realizing the situation.

Before the first assailant could comprehend the unfolding events, Ethan smoothly transitioned to the third stab. The spear found its mark on the chest of the remaining assailant, who recoiled from the sudden and precise assault.

Both assailants, now wounded and disoriented, struggled to maintain their footing. The dungeon echoed with the clash of metal and the pained groans of the assailants as they faced the consequences of their malevolent actions.

In a strained voice, the first assailant managed to ask, "How... How can you still move? We poisoned you!"

Ethan, undeterred, retorted with a cold resolve, "You don't deserve to know." Yet, this was a question he himself had yet to answer.

'Poison? I was poisoned?'

At that moment, Ethan realized something inside him had changed.

Chapter 312 73.5 - Two-sides

"Now, it's your turn. Don't be shy; feel the rhythm and connect with your partner." As she said those words, the students, though initially hesitant, began to follow Gloria's lead.

Some stumbled over the steps, while others found a surprising ease in the dance. The atmosphere in the Multipurpose Hall transformed as laughter and the gentle sound of steps filled the air.

Maya and Amelia attempted to navigate the dance floor, their movements echoing the guidance they received. Though the dance that Gloria was presenting them was performed by one male and one female, both Maya, and Amelia had the necessary strength and physical aspects of a male already, being awakened.

Thus, despite the initial awkwardness, they gradually found a rhythm. Yet, Maya couldn't help but continuously steal glances at the sides as her gaze wandered at the couple on the corner.

Though the two didn't get much attention, recently, Astron has been slightly getting more recognition from the students around the school. His name was strangely known, but for a reason that was very different from normal.

There were weird rumors around him at the start, and his attitude made him seem to believe those rumors were true. However, now, his name was mentioned alongside Irina and Sylvie in the Phantom's Land case.

And that brought the attention of some curious students to his rank change. There, they saw him jumping around 700 ranks. That was quite an impressive jump, to be honest, and those who had seen it started to think of him a little differently.

He was talked about in the students' forums, and Maya also knew about those talks as well. That did make her a bit happy about him at the start, but somehow, as she continued to read some comments, she started getting a weird feeling.

A weird feeling that was the same as what she was getting right now. A feeling that made it hard to breathe. She didn't want to look, but she also couldn't retract her gaze.

As Maya's gaze continued to wander towards Astron and Sylvie, Amelia's voice broke through her reverie. "Maya, why do you keep looking in that direction?" Amelia inquired, her tone a little angry.

Maya flinched slightly, caught off guard by the question. She hesitated, unsure of how to respond without revealing too much. "Oh, it's nothing, really," Maya attempted to brush it off, offering a strained smile, just as she did before.

However, Amelia, this time, was no longer going to tolerate such a response.

'Why? My Maya....Why?'

At this moment, she needed to accept all those things she tried to overlook. No matter how much she hated it, she knew at this point that not acknowledging it would just be a coping mechanism.

Amelia's anger simmered beneath the surface as she stared at Maya, her frustration palpable. "Maya, you can't keep pretending like nothing's wrong. Why do you keep staring at him?" Amelia's voice was tinged with jealousy, her emotions raw and unfiltered.

Maya's cheeks flushed with embarrassment as she stuttered, unable to form a coherent response. Memories of her interactions with Astron flooded her mind, causing her heart to race uncomfortably. Yet, she couldn't bring herself to articulate the complexity of her feelings.

"I-I..." Maya's voice faltered, her gaze flickering away from Amelia's probing eyes. She struggled to find the right words, grappling with the weight of unspoken emotions.

Amelia's jealousy flared at Maya's hesitation, her frustration mounting with each passing moment.

'She never shown such a side to me.....This is the first time.....'

There were many emotions that Amelia had never seen on Maya's face before, which she saw when Maya was with Astron. While she was trailing them when they ate and spoke casually, Amelia saw the expression on Maya's face, and she knew they were not something that Maya would ever show to her.

"Why him, Maya? What makes him so special?" Amelia's voice quivered with a mixture of hurt and indignation. "He's just a low-rank freshman who doesn't deserve someone like you."

Her words were something that she wanted to ask for a very long time. She wanted to speak those words, yet she never had the time. But, now, she could no longer hold it in. She wanted to know; she needed to.

As Maya heard Amelia's questioning words, a subtle shift occurred in her expression. The uncertainty and embarrassment that clouded her features instantly gave way to a slight smile. But, for Amelia, that slight smile felt foreign.

'Just a low-rank freshman? Is he all that in your eyes, Amelia? The person who saved my life when you were sitting in your room doing nothing. The only person in this world who can give me the taste....The person who never refuses to stay by my side....You are saying he is just a low-rank freshman?'

The normally gentle look Maya would have wasn't there. Her eyes strangely contained a cold glint. The aura she could feel from Maya also changed in that split second.

"Certainly, from outside, he may be perceived like that," Maya responded, her voice soft yet resolute. Her gaze met Amelia's, conveying a depth of emotion that she had never shown.

"R-right? Isn't it? There is no way-" Amelia replied, this time stuttering. The Maya before her felt somehow unfamiliar, and she couldn't keep her bearings.

"But...." Maya shut her words off, her gaze bearing into Amelia's, a glint of defiance shimmering in her eyes. "By what right do you think you can judge other people's preferences, Amelia?" Maya's voice held a firmness that Amelia had never heard before, her words cutting through the air with precision. "Is everything about rankings in your eyes?"

Amelia's eyes widened in astonishment at Maya's sudden interruption. This was the first time she had seen Maya speak with such assertiveness, challenging her beliefs without hesitation. The Maya before her seemed transformed, shedding her usual gentle demeanor for a newfound one.

"I-I didn't mean it like that," Amelia stammered, taken aback by Maya's unexpected reaction. "It is just....I want the best for my friend....And I don't want to see you sad."

Maya's smile softened as she regarded Amelia, her eyes reflecting a mixture of affection and determination. "What if I told you I love him, Amelia?" Maya's words hung in the air, laden with a weight that Amelia could hardly comprehend. "Would you support me in my feelings? Don't your words mean just that?"

Amelia's already wide eyes widened further, a flicker of disbelief crossing her features. Tears welled in her eyes as she struggled to process Maya's confession. "Love? Do you really love him?" Amelia's voice trembled with uncertainty, her emotions in turmoil.

Maya turned to take a look at the side, and there she saw him dancing with Sylvie. Her eyes containing the same cold glint, she mumbled. "Yeah.....I guess this is what I am feeling....Yet, I have been hesitant to show it for a long time....But, I won't let this be any longer...."

She said, lowering her gaze. "Only I should be close to him."

As Maya's words sank in, Amelia's tears flowed freely, her heart heavy with the weight of Maya's revelation. She realized at that moment that there was no turning back from Maya's feelings, and her friend was already determined to pursue what her heart desired, no matter the cost.

"I-I see... I guess this is how it is?" Amelia choked out, her voice trembling with emotion. She attempted to laugh lightly, but it came out as a strained sound, a reflection of the turmoil raging within her.

'She is gone...There is no turning back for her now....What should I do? What do I need to do now? What am I going to do now, after knowing everything?'

With a shaky smile, Amelia turned to Maya, her eyes brimming with unshed tears. "Would it be okay if I went to the restroom quickly?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Maya nodded understandingly, a 'gentle' expression on her face. "Of course, take your time," she replied, giving Amelia's hand a reassuring squeeze.

Feeling overwhelmed, Amelia hastily wiped away her tears and turned to leave, her footsteps echoing softly as she made her way to the restroom. Once inside, she let out a shaky breath, allowing herself a moment to compose her emotions.

But try as she might, she couldn't shake the feeling of heartache that threatened to consume her. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she leaned against the sink, grappling with the realization that Maya's feelings had irreversibly altered the future that she had envisioned. She knew that she no longer could make attempts, as they wouldn't result in anything.

On the other hand, Maya, now left alone, just watched Astron and Sylvie while lost in thought.

'I will no longer stay indecisively.'

Her gaze was looking at him, and she pledged inwardly, accepting the emotion inside her heart as her own. Her eyes turned red for a split second, showing the intensity of her emotions.

<Unknown Mountain, Elven Domain>

In the heart of an unknown mountain, hidden deep within the labyrinthine passages of a vast cave system, a solitary figure sits in quiet contemplation. His body, chiseled and muscular, exudes an aura of strength and resilience. With each steady breath, the cavern seems to pulse in harmony with his presence.

Long hair cascades down his shoulders, framing a face weathered by time and adorned with a rugged beard and mustache. He appeared as a wanderer, a nomad of the mountains, attuned to the rhythms of the earth.

–SWOOSH!

Suddenly, as if stirred from a deep slumber, the figure's eyes snap open. A gust of wind rushed through the cavern, swirling around him like a tempest in the night. His gaze, fierce and penetrating, bore into the darkness with eyes of yellow, vertically slit as if they could pierce through the veil of reality itself.

"Finally, he appeared," the figure murmured, his voice a low rumble that reverberated through the cavern. At that moment, a sense of purpose filled the air, as if the very mountain itself awaited the unfolding of a long-awaited hunt.

"The one I will need to hunt."

His gaze was locked into the place, bearing through the mountains, looking at the exact domain that belonged to Humans.

Chapter 313 73.6 - Two-Sides

"Am I doing well?"

Sylvie asked, looking at Astron. Her face was flushed a little, both from the constant movements of dancing and being in his constant proximity.

"You are doing fine."

As Sylvie and Astron moved in tandem on the dance floor, Sylvie couldn't help but feel acutely aware of his presence. With each step, she felt the heat radiating from his body, his proximity sending a flurry of emotions coursing through her veins.

Her breaths grew rough, her heart beating faster with every moment they shared.

'Is he feeling the same?'

She thought maybe it wasn't just her feeling like this. But as she took a peek, she saw Astron ever composed as usual. His demeanor slapped the answer on her face as a complete NO.

'Right.....'

A slight disappointment of how he didn't even care, as well as the feeling of shame for her feelings, appeared.

Though he just guided Sylvie through the dance with ease, his movements were more fluid and precise compared to her without even saying anything.

Despite the intricate steps, he maintained a steady rhythm, his touch gentle yet firm as he led her across the floor.

Sylvie's cheeks flushed a deeper shade of crimson as she struggled to maintain her composure. She dared not meet Astron's gaze, her eyes fixed on their intertwined feet as they moved in harmony.

The sensation of his hand against hers sent shivers down her spine, igniting a warmth she couldn't ignore.

'He is good at moving his body....I wonder if he ever got an education on this? Maybe when he was young? No, that can't be. He was an orphan. Then, is this his innate talent?'

Lost in the moment, Sylvie's mind began to wander, her thoughts consumed by the intoxicating dance and the enigmatic man before her.

'That is right. He is good at fighting, so it is no wonder that he is good at dancing, too. I somehow want to think fighting is somehow an act of dancing. Aside from the deadly part, aren't the fighters in the cage similar to a dancer on the scene?'

Her thoughts wandered as she tried to get rid of her shame.

In her distraction, she failed to anticipate the next step, her foot landing squarely on Astron's toes with a soft thud.

Sylvie flinched at the soft thud, her face turning even redder with embarrassment. Slowly, she raised her head to meet Astron's gaze, expecting to see annoyance or frustration in his eyes.

But to her surprise, Astron's expression remained calm and composed, his gaze steady as he looked back at her. There was no hint of irritation or disappointment, only a silent understanding.

"I-I'm so sorry, Astron," Sylvie stammered, her voice barely above a whisper. "I didn't mean to step on your toes. I was just... I got distracted, and..."

Astron simply nodded, his face neutral. "It's alright," he said calmly. "I know you didn't mean to. It is just your usual clumsiness."

Sylvie couldn't help but flinch at the words "usual clumsiness." Though she knew Astron meant no harm by it, hearing him say it so casually stung a little. It was a reminder of her own shortcomings, her tendency to let her thoughts wander and lose focus at the most inconvenient times.

"Yeah, my usual clumsiness," she echoed softly, forcing a small, self-deprecating smile. "Sorry for being such a klutz."

Deep down, a part of her felt a twinge of resentment at Astron's nonchalant response. She wished he would show a little more concern or understanding, even if it was just a small gesture. But she knew better than to expect anything different from him. Astron had always been reserved and composed, his emotions carefully guarded behind a stoic facade.

—FLINCH!

Suddenly, her body shivered as if insects were crawling on her skin.

'What is this, a gaze?'

She felt like someone was looking at her with intense feelings. She knew from the lectures as well as her own experiences that an Awakened person's strong feelings could form an intent and could affect the environment as well as the target's senses. It was described by the notion of Awakened people altered by mana.

Sylvie's instincts kicked in, urging her to find the source of the intense gaze that made her skin crawl. Ignoring the discomfort, she turned her head slightly, scanning the room until her eyes locked with a pair of piercing red ones.

For a brief moment, time seemed to stand still as Sylvie found herself captivated by the striking gaze. The eyes belonged to Maya, the gentle, cheery, snack-loving, but somehow scary senior, who was watching her with an intensity that sent a shiver down Sylvie's spine.

'Why is she looking at me like that? Senior, you are really being scary.'

As their gazes met, Sylvie noticed the subtle look of coldness in Maya's eyes.

'I am sorry. Did I do something wrong? But I didn't even do anything!'

She inwardly protested as she couldn't find the reason why Maya was angry at her.

'Also, what is with this scary aura? Are you going to kill me?'

With a quick tilt of her head, Sylvie studied Maya's features, taking in the vibrant purple hair and the graceful figure that seemed to exude confidence and poise. After a second of looking, Maya's partner, Senior Amelia, came, and that marked the end of Maya's gaze.

'What was this just now?'

Yet, Sylvie couldn't help but think that there was more to Maya than met the eye.

'Did he notice?'

She threw a look at Astron, and there she saw him looking in the same direction as well.

—CLAP! CLAP! CLAP!

Just as Sylvie was about to voice her question to Astron, the sound of applause filled the air, drawing her attention back to the front of the room. Gloria Hull stood before them, her hands clapping together in a rhythmic pattern.

"Bravo, everyone!" Gloria exclaimed, her voice carrying a note of satisfaction. "I believe we've made excellent progress today. However, I think it's time to conclude our dancing session for now."

Relief washed over Sylvie as she realized that the intense moment with Maya had passed, at least for the time being. She redirected her focus to Gloria, listening attentively as the overseer continued to address the club members.

"I'm proud of the dedication and enthusiasm each of you has shown today," Gloria continued, her gaze sweeping across the room. "Remember, dancing is not just about mastering the steps; it's about expressing yourself and connecting with your partner on a deeper level."

Sylvie nodded in agreement, feeling a sense of accomplishment despite the brief distraction. She had managed to navigate through the dance session with Astron despite her momentary lapse in focus. And although Maya's intense gaze had unnerved her, she was determined not to let it affect her.

With a final nod of approval, Gloria signaled the end of the session. "That will be all for today. Thank you all for your participation. I look forward to seeing you at our next meeting."

<Arcadia City, Golden District, Sunday Morning>

"A call just came from the young master, sir."

Inside an office of a fairly high building, a man seemingly with the clothes of a butler spoke, lowering his head.

"A call?" The man on the table raised his head, looking at his butler with his characteristic hazel eyes. His dark blue hair fluttered, his smooth skin seemingly better than any model's.

"Who was it from, Ray?" Marc Hartley asked, his voice tinged with curiosity as he leaned back in his chair, his gaze fixed on his butler.

Ray cleared his throat before responding, "It was Young Master Ethan, sir. He mentioned something about an urgent matter that requires your attention."

Marc Hartley's hazel eyes widened in surprise at the mention of his son's name. Ethan's late awakening had been a source of concern in the past years for Marc, who had anxiously awaited the manifestation of his son's abilities.

"Ethan? What urgent matter does he have again?" Marc muttered to himself, a furrow forming between his brows as he considered the implications of his son's unexpected call.

'Did he somehow entangled with a mess again?'

He knew this son of his was different from his other children. The heirs of the direct family line all had the coldness and the necessary survival skills in this industry.

But Ethan was different. That child had dreams he had always had. When he was young, he came to him and listened to the stories of heroes. He always criticized people for acting selfishly and showed his discontent.

At first, Marc took it as childish innocence, but Ethan had never changed. Over the course of his teenage years, even though he was not awakened and was no different from a normal person, he never backed down in front of injustice.

He always spoke his mind whenever he discovered it. However, thankfully, this idiot son of him didn't have a good perception in terms of such things. Though he would speak if he saw injustice, he wasn't that good at spotting it when it happened, and he was deeply thankful from his heart as he knew the troubles that would cause.

Ray cleared his throat, breaking Marc's train of thought. "He said he was attacked by a group of people in the dungeon when he was exploring it with his friend."

Marc's expression shifted from surprise to concern in an instant. "Attacked? Is Ethan alright?" he asked, his voice laced with worry.

Ray nodded reassuringly. "Nothing serious happened, sir. They managed to escape without any major injuries. However, they confirmed that Ethan had to use the artifact he was carrying for protection."

A flicker of rage flashed across Marc's features, his hazel eyes narrowing into dangerous slits. "Someone dared to attack a Hartley? Especially someone from the direct line? And with a strength so formidable that Ethan had to resort to using the artifact?" he growled, his voice low and menacing.

Ray swallowed nervously, recognizing the storm brewing within his employer. "Yes, sir. It appears that the attackers were quite formidable. According to Ethan, they had a cursed artifact."

At the mention of 'Cursed Artifact,' Marc's anger soared. "Villains...." Marc muttered through gritted teeth, his anger simmering beneath the surface like a volcano about to erupt, his brain remembering the memories of a certain time.

Ray, knowing his master's feelings at the mention of the word, kept his calm and silently waited for the tremor to pass.

After a moment of silent contemplation, Marc's hazel eyes hardened with resolve. "Ray, does Ethan still have that cursed artifact with him?"

Ray nodded in affirmation. "Yes, sir. Ethan mentioned that he still has it in his possession."

"Bring that artifact to the headquarters immediately. I want one of the research and development teams to analyze it thoroughly. We need to know everything about it, including its origins and capabilities."

"I had already done that, sir. Young Master Ethan had already anticipated that and called a [Tingler] to bring it to the company."

"Good." Marc nodded, his expression turning slightly more composed now that the necessary steps were being taken to analyze the cursed artifact.

As Ray observed his employer's demeanor, he waited for Marc to speak further.

"If villains capable of using cursed artifacts are involved, then this matter may not be as simple as it seems," Marc remarked, his tone grave.

Ray nodded in agreement. "Indeed, sir. And as you may recall, Ethan has been involved with the affairs of a low-rank guild."

"Ah, the Azure Crest Guild, was it?" Marc asked, remembering the name.

"Yes, sir. That's correct," Ray confirmed.

Marc's brow furrowed in thought. "I had initially dismissed it as child's play, but if Ethan's encounter with the cursed artifact is connected to the guild's activities, then this matter may be more complex than we anticipated."

With a determined expression, Marc turned his gaze back to Ray. "I want you to delve deeper into this matter, Ray. Especially focus on any recent activities surrounding the Azure Crest Guild. We need to uncover any connections that may shed light on Ethan's situation."

Ray nodded, understanding the gravity of the situation. "Understood, sir. I'll get right on it."

With that, Ray hurried off to carry out Marc's instructions, leaving Marc to ponder the implications of his son's involvement with the cursed artifact and the Azure Crest Guild.

Chapter 314 74.1 - Suspicions

<Sunday Morning, Arcadia Hunter Academy>

Waking up early and starting training at midnight, I started my daily routine. First, I was running around the academy campus with weighted bracelets to increase my endurance.

And then, it was polishing my art and combat skills, increasing my understanding of [Lunar Enigma] as well as [Shadowborne]. That was normally the case. However, I planned a change now.

With the restrictions of my body raised, I started eating a lot more.

Gaining some muscle and weight was necessary for the future, though gaining too much would not be optimal. Thus, I started lifting weights and doing full-body workouts in my program.

Though I was already doing it, my focus was shifted a little more to that.

In any case, things were going in the same direction until it was noon. Around 12.30, I left the general combat area to get the second meal of the day. There, I met someone I was not expecting.

"Yo....."

The wavy blue hair, slightly bulky body, insanely handsome face, innocent smile revealing the teeth, and clear hazel eyes. Looking from the side, you could see his broad shoulders, clearly resulting from intense training. His body was a little sweaty, indicating that he had just come out from an intense session. His t-shirt was tucked in, slightly showing his defined abs.

"What do you want?"

Yet, none of those gave me the reason for him to be there.

"Cold as usual." He replied, widening his smile. It seemed that he had somehow already gotten used to my attitude. Well, even a turtle would end up adapting to the environment, so no wonder he was able to do too.

My stomach was already bulging, urging me to eat something to fill the calories the body desperately needed. And now, I was stopped by this guy before me, so I couldn't help but get a bit angry.

"Don't waste my time." The words came out instantly, showing how I felt. But I already knew that this guy was too slow in taking hints like these.

"I know, I know. How about we grab lunch together? It had been a while since we talked."

"Why do you have the impression that we are close?"

"We are not?"

"Of course not."

".....Hmm.....Then, if I say it is on me?"

Hearing him saying that he was going to buy the lunch, the bulging stomach growled, reminding me of how delicious eating a free meal right now would be.

"Just to remind. I have high standards." I deliberately made the expression, showing that eating with me wouldn't be cheap. If a guy wants to ask me out, he needs to satisfy some conditions!

"Haha....I am already used to those high standards...."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, so you are coming?"

"I won't refuse your grace."

As Ethan and I walked towards the most opulent restaurant on campus, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of irritation at his persistent invitation.

Nevertheless, I begrudgingly accepted, knowing that declining a free meal would be foolish, especially considering my heightened calorie intake for training purposes.

"How are the things going on your side recently?"

As we were walking, he suddenly tried to strike up a conversation, albeit more awkwardly than the silence itself.

"It's none of your business."

Ethan simply chuckled in response, his easygoing demeanor contrasting sharply with my own aloofness. "Ah, figured you'd say something like that," he remarked casually, undeterred by my dismissive attitude.

'I guess this is his strength?' Considering how he had been behaving in the past, Ethan certainly possessed the necessary lack of pride against such answers.

In a sense, this was what made him Ethan. Well, if he were to be going to become the game's protagonist, those kinds of traits were necessary.

"Well, you are probably wondering why I called you out of nowhere, right?"

"I figured you would be spilling the beans while eating."

"Yeah, I guess so."

As we entered the grandiose restaurant, the opulent decor and elegant ambiance enveloped us, creating an atmosphere of sophistication and luxury.

"This reminds me of that time. I guess I should ask Senior Maya out next time.'

Returning the grace received is something that was necessary for interpersonal relationships, and I disliked the idea of constantly receiving help from Senior Maya one-sidedly.

Seated comfortably, I looked around and noticed Ethan and the others seemed right at home, his easy smile never faltering as he scanned the menu.

Before we could delve into the conversation, the waiter approached our table, his polished demeanor exuding professionalism. As he greeted us, his eyes lit up with recognition upon seeing Ethan.

"Ah, Mister Ethan Hartley! It's a pleasure to have you dine with us again," the waiter exclaimed with genuine enthusiasm as he approached our table.

Ethan's smile widened in response to the waiter's recognition. "Good to see you too," he replied warmly, his easy demeanor never faltering.

'Well, the name Hartley alone should be enough to stir an enthusiasm. I guess he is trying to impress Ethan, knowing his good-natured personality. Out of all the people coming here, Ethan certainly has the highest possibility of talking about a random waiter.'

"Please take a look at our menu. As you know, once you determine the order, you may press the keys right beside the food you choose, and we will receive your order. You may customize it if you wish on the box that will appear here."

Saying that the waiter had shown us the integrated menu.

'Interesting. They assigned some mana circuits to the menu and used it as an interactive ordering device. Last time we came here, this thing wasn't here; I guess it is a new product.'

I thought, looking at the menu.

"Of course, if you don't wish to use the menu, you may directly call me as well. I will happily take your order."

The waiter nodded in acknowledgment, his expression grateful for Ethan's generosity. With a bow of respect, he excused himself, leaving Ethan and me to peruse the interactive menu.

"As I promised, you can order whatever you want," Ethan said with a smile directed at me, fulfilling his earlier commitment to treat me to lunch.

'Let me empty your pockets.'

Though I knew Ethan was the heir of a high-ranking family like the Hartleys, money was still money.

Taking a moment to familiarize myself with the enchanted device, I scanned through the array of tantalizing options available. Each dish was described in intricate detail, highlighting the exotic ingredients and elaborate cooking techniques used to create them.

After a brief moment of consideration, I made my selections, customizing each dish to my liking with the touch of a button.

As I pressed the third dish, I saw Ethan's mouth twitching.

"Do you wish to say something?" I asked, knowing that he didn't have the personality to tell me what he thought.

"No, no. Nothing."

With the press of a key, my order was submitted, and I handed the menu back to the waiter as he returned to our table.

With a gracious smile, the waiter accepted the menu and bowed once again before disappearing into the bustling kitchen. Meanwhile, Ethan leaned back in his chair, his easy smile slightly turning stiff, yet after a bunch of seconds, it returned to normal. It seemed like he had already strengthened his resolve.

True to form, the waiter returned shortly thereafter, carrying a tray laden with four exquisite dishes. Each plate was a masterpiece in its own right, showcasing the culinary prowess of the chefs who had crafted them.

As I dug into my meal, savoring the delectable flavors and unique textures, I couldn't help but marvel at the ingenuity of this fantasy world. In this realm, even the simplest of meals were transformed into extraordinary culinary experiences, thanks to the use of mutated animals and enchanted ingredients.

"How is it?"

"It is certainly on the top of the spectrum."

"Isn't it? The chefs here are all Awakened people."

"I know."

"I see."

As we were eating, I noticed that Ethan was having a little hard time asking what was on his mind.

"Now, what did you want to talk about?"

Since we were now in the restaurant, I decided to not beat the bush no longer and asked directly.

"Actually, I wanted your opinion on something," Ethan replied, his expression turning serious as he raised his head to meet my gaze.

Intrigued by his sudden change in demeanor, I set down my fork and gave him my full attention. "Elaborate," I prompted, eager to hear what was on his mind.

Ethan cleared his throat, his hazel eyes clouded with uncertainty as he began to speak. "Imagine you're in a situation where you want to help someone. At first, it seems like a simple matter, something you can handle without much trouble. But as you get involved, you realize it's not as straightforward as you thought. Suddenly, you're caught in a web of complications and uncertainties, unsure of how to proceed."

I nodded, understanding what he meant by that.

'I guess he noticed that Emily's situation is not as simple as it was before.'

"Go on," I urged.

Ethan hesitated for a moment, his gaze flickering away before returning to meet mine. "You try to do what you believe is right, but at every turn, you're faced with obstacles and dilemmas. And no matter how hard you try to untangle yourself from the mess, it only seems to grow more tangled."

"It sounds like you're facing quite the challenge," I remarked, my tone sympathetic.

Ethan nodded, a weary sigh escaping his lips. "Yeah, you could say that. It's like... no matter what I do, I can't seem to find a solution that could solve the case. And now, I'm stuck in a position where I don't know what the right thing to do is."

At that moment, he stopped looking at me clearly. "I wonder, how would you deal with such situations?" Then he asked.

This whole progress wasn't in my mind before, as I didn't expect Ethan to consult me directly on the matter regarding Emily. But it is also understandable that he feels lost. After all, Ethan, no matter how talented he is, is still a naïve guy who has yet to see how the world works.

'But you will see it soon. Your father won't be able to stay idle any longer, as he can't tolerate any threat made to his family.'

"I see." Leaning forward slightly, I met Ethan's gaze. "Though from your words, it is difficult to infer the exact situation you're facing, in general, there is a clear way to deal with such cases," I began, speaking with conviction.

"When you find yourself entangled in a web from all sides, what you just need to do is to burn those webs," I advised, drawing on a metaphorical analogy to illustrate my point. "And if you find yourself unable to deal with the spider that is weaving those webs, then you simply need to bring a bigger one."

Ethan listened intently to my words, his brow furrowing slightly as he processed my advice.

"Sometimes, you won't be able to deal with the enemy alone. In those times, you will need your allies, someone you can trust."

After a moment of contemplation, he nodded in understanding, a sense of determination flickering in his hazel eyes.

"I see what you mean," he replied, his voice tinged with newfound resolve. "But, can I take you as one of those allies too?"

"Allies to trust?"

"Yeah."

Hearing this, I shook my head inwardly. He was still too naïve, but gaining the trust of the protagonist would never be bad.

This was precisely why I had directed this conversation like this, after all.

"As long as you pay me enough, you can expect my trust."

".....Certainly, an answer like this is expected from you...." He said, his face a bit deadpanned. Yet, he seemed more reassured.

"But....Thanks...I feel a lot more at ease now."

"Is that so?"

Just like that, we continued to eat, but suddenly something bugged me.

'Considering Lucas is Ethan's best friend, it is weird that he came to me. Is there a reason for him not to look for Lucas?'

I thought and decided to ask.

"But, why did you not ask Lucas this? Aren't you guys best friends?"

"Ah....About that....I don't know why, but something about Lucas is off recently...."

Chapter 315 Chapter 74.2 - Suspicions

The game Legacy of Shadows: The Hunter's Destiny had a lot of different plot elements. Different villains with good backstories, cruel ones, people with whom you could sympathize.

It contained elements of betrayal as well. Ethan's journey was filled with countless different trials, ranging from one to another.

Lucas' betrayal and his turn into a dark side were one of them. It held quite an important point since it was important for Ethan's character development and stimulated the feelings of the players.

The results of Lucas' betrayal were a lot more detrimental than any player would expect. While playing games or reading books with a young targeted audience, authors generally tend not to make the storyline filled with deaths, thus resulting in the lack of detrimentality for the actions.

But Legacy of Shadows: The Hunter's Destiny didn't do that. There were a lot of deaths and scenes that made the players feel the dread and how vile the villains, in reality, were.

"Ah....About that....I don't know why, but something about Lucas is off recently...."

Therefore, hearing this, my eyes perked up immediately. Remembering the gaze I had felt from Lucas, I knew that something about him felt off to me as well.

As Ethan continued to speak, he revealed that Lucas had been behaving a little oddly ever since returning from the Phantom's Land. "Sometimes he just dozes off randomly, and he's stopped making the jokes he usually does," Ethan explained, his brow furrowing with worry. "He's been training a lot more recently, too, which isn't necessarily a bad thing, but... I don't know; something just feels off about him."

I listened intently to Ethan's words, noting the genuine concern in his voice. It was clear that he was worried about his friend. But that precise mentality of him is what makes the difference.

'His instincts are warning him, but he doesn't want to interpret them as danger since Lucas is his friend. That would make sense.'

My thoughts wandered to the game. If there was one thing Ethan was good at aside from his combat talent, it was his instincts and the ability to sense the possible danger. That might also stem from him being a protagonist, but his hunch was strong.

There were many small instances where Ethan would mumble something while riding the mounts, and that mumble would actually be related to something in the future.

'But, Phantom's Land...How is it related to Lucas' change?'

If there was one annoying thing about the things regarding Lucas in the game, why he changed sides weren't clearly explained. Though his motives clearly stemmed from his inferiority complex, there was something else. There needed to be since Lucas' change was rather drastic and sharp.

'Checking it now, I remember Lucas' turn into a demon was in the second semester of the second year. Was there something common?'

Thinking about it, I started visiting my memory palace, checking everything related to the game. There needed to be a clue left there.

'Lucas would start showing the symptoms after the raid in the dungeon as a party....The first raid of the main party, including Sylvie....There, the enemy was Belthazor.'

'Belthazor....Is it related to him?'

I was lost in my thoughts, but my spree came to an abrupt halt after seeing the hand waving before me.

"Astron, are you there?" Ethan's voice broke through my reverie, pulling me back to the present moment.

I blinked, refocusing my attention on Ethan, who was now looking at me with a concerned expression. "Sorry, I was lost in my thoughts for a moment there."

Ethan waved off my apology with a dismissive gesture. "It's fine," he reassured me. "But, did something happen? Did you know something about Lucas?"

His question was in my expectations, and I didn't reveal anything on my face, masking my thoughts behind a carefully neutral expression. "I was just thinking about it, but I couldn't find anything," I replied smoothly, my tone casual.

Though my mind was still reeling with questions and suspicions about Lucas's behavior, I knew better than to reveal my thoughts to Ethan.

'First and foremost, I need to find the reason for his change. It may not be related to his turn into a villain. Second, even if I revealed everything, Ethan wouldn't believe me like this. Lucas has been his friend for a long time. Therefore, such an explanation would certainly be met with an aggressive response, considering Ethan's personality. Also, this would certainly evoke suspicions from Lucas, making him more aware of the fact that I was a threat to him. Things would get messy from that point on.'

"Yeah....I think he is just a bit shaken from everything that happened in the Phantom's Land. It was hard for everyone."

"Indeed. It is better for you to support him, and you can contact me anytime if you have any questions to ask. I will do my best to help you."

'In times like this, it is always better to leave the door slightly open. I can't always look for Lucas and observe him. It would be better if Ethan reported to me on his own. Making use of his hunch would also be possible this way.'

As I said those words, Ethan released a smile. "...Somehow, those words feel reassuring."

"It is good if you trust me. But, you will need to pay for the help you want to receive."

"...Aren't we friends?"

"Do we seem like one?"

"We don't?"

"We don't."

".....I guess that is what only I thought."

"That is right."

As we finished our meal and prepared to leave the restaurant, on the way, this guy continued to engage in a casual talk.

"You know, recently, a new game appeared."

"A new game?"

"Yeah."

Though playing games was my hobby previously, now I don't have the time to spend on those things, and I am not that interested in them.

"It is a pretty good game. You can play it from your watch, and it uses mana to connect you to the virtual reality."

The mention of mana piqued my interest, causing me to pause and consider his words more carefully. While I had little interest in gaming these days, the idea of using mana to connect to virtual reality intrigued me. After all, mana was a fundamental force in this world, and its applications were virtually limitless.

"How does it use mana to connect to virtual reality?" I inquired, genuinely curious about the mechanics behind the game.

Before Ethan could respond, his expression suddenly shifted, his gaze darting across the crowded corridor. "Oh, sorry, Astron, I just spotted someone I need to talk to. Thanks for today!" he exclaimed hastily, already starting to move away.

Looking at the direction of his gaze, I saw the reason for him to leave this fast.

'I see. That is why, huh?'

I thought, seeing the girl.

'I guess they are somehow more close now. As expected, I can move forward with the second part now.'

With those thoughts, I started making my way.

—FLAP!

Though not without letting the black raven made from pure mana fly into the air.

After separating from Astron, Ethan immediately went towards the girl waiting for him. After all, this was the promised time for them to meet.

"Ah....Ethan."

She met his eyes, revealing a small smile.

"You are here." The faint blush on her cheeks and her innocent expression somehow pushed a little thump to his heart, making Ethan avert his gaze.

"Senior Jane," Ethan said, looking at the girl.

"You know, I don't want to be called Senior," Jane said, narrowing her eyes a little. "I feel ashamed if you address me like that."

"Why?"

"Because what kind of Senior would receive such help pathetically from their Junior? Also, it rather feels distant."

"Really? Then, how should I call you?"

"Just call me Jane."

"Ah....."

Ethan shifted uncomfortably under Jane's gaze, feeling a rush of embarrassment flood his cheeks. Her earnest and innocent eyes seemed to pierce through him, making him feel exposed in a way he couldn't quite explain.

"O-okay," he stammered, averting his gaze to the ground. "Jane."

Jane's smile widened at his response, her eyes softening with warmth. "Thank you, Ethan."

Ethan nodded awkwardly, feeling a strange mixture of happiness and embarrassment swirling inside him. He couldn't quite understand why such a simple exchange had affected him so deeply, but he found himself unable to tear his gaze away from Jane's radiant smile.

"Shall we go?" Jane asked, breaking the momentary silence.

Ethan nodded eagerly, grateful for the distraction. "Yeah, let's go."

Together, they set off, their steps falling into sync as they walked side by side. Ethan couldn't shake the feeling of warmth that lingered in his chest, a feeling that seemed to grow stronger with each passing moment.

"But, who was the person that was right beside you just now?" Suddenly, Jane asked. It was just an act of starting the conversation since the silence was killing her inwardly.

'It is soooo embarrassing....Why is he not talking?' She was thinking inwardly, yet she took the first step.

Ethan blinked in surprise at Jane's sudden question, feeling a slight pang of guilt for not engaging in conversation sooner. "Oh, uh, who?"

"The one that was just right beside you."

"Ah....Astron..."

Jane tilted her head, her curiosity evident in her expression. "Astron? Is he your friend?"

"He is....." But he couldn't find the right words to answer that.

"We don't." He still remembered how nonchalantly Astron dismissed the idea of being a friend; thus, he couldn't say they were friends directly.

"He is? " Seeing Jane's curious gaze, Ethan spoke, trying to find the right words to describe Astron. "Yeah, he's...unique. He's not quite a friend, but he's more than just an acquaintance, you know?"

"Is that so? I had seen him quite a lot in the library recently."

"Ah....So that's why you asked."

"Yep. He works quite hard, you know. He rarely wastes any time when he is studying."

"He got your attention then?"

"Well, it was not only me. Many girls in the library are looking at him, too. Somehow, he is starting to get quite a reputation. They are calling him 'Silent Prince.' Though it is somehow edgy, I think it suits him well."

"Hmm?"

Ethan's brows furrowed slightly at Jane's words, a strange pang of jealousy stirring in his chest at the mention of Astron's newfound reputation.

"I guess she is into that type," Ethan muttered under his breath, unable to shake the feeling of unease that settled over him.

Jane's eyes widened in realization, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment as she hurriedly tried to backtrack. "No, no, it's not like that! I mean, I wasn't...I didn't mean... It wasn't like I wanted to look at him....The girls were just causing a commotion, so I couldn't help but listen. I-I didn't even care about him before..."

Ethan's heart skipped a beat at the sight of Jane's flustered state, and he couldn't help but smile as he saw how adorable she was. "Okay, okay....I got it."

He tried to ignore the lingering sense of jealousy that lingered in the back of his mind as they continued on their way, focusing instead on the warmth of the sun on his skin and the sound of Jane's laughter drifting through the air.

Yet, the purple eyes raven watched them from the sky....

Chapter 316 74.3 - Suspicions

"Well, I guess this is where we part ways," Ethan said, a hint of reluctance in his voice.

Jane nodded, a small smile playing on her lips. "Yeah. Thank you for spending time with me, Ethan. I really enjoyed it."

Ethan returned her smile, feeling a warmth spread through him at her words. "No, thank you, Jane. I had a great time, too."

They stood there for a moment, simply enjoying each other's presence before Ethan cleared his throat awkwardly.

"I guess I'll see you around then," he said, taking a step back.

Jane nodded, her smile widening. "Definitely. Take care, Ethan."

With one final wave, Ethan turned and walked away, his heart feeling lighter than it had in a long time. As he walked, he couldn't help but feel grateful for the unexpected friendship he had found in Jane, and he silently vowed to cherish it always.

And as he disappeared around the corner, Jane watched him go, a soft smile lingering on her lips.

'He really is different, isn't he? I had never heard someone like him from them.'

Though she didn't have that much experience with men directly, she knew how to read and surf the internet. She chatted with countless different girls online, learning from their lives. Thus, she knew people like Ethan were very rare.

'But, is this okay?'

Yet, this was the reason why she was finding it very hard to get closer to him. After all, with how things were going on her side, she knew it would be better if Ethan wasn't entangled with this mess and was focused on his own life.

'Yeah....I should keep my distance...'

Keeping the knot in her heart, she started walking, her gaze on the ground. She pulled over her hood, covering her face. There was a chance that those girls would be looking for her, so she didn't want to risk it. 'Besides, the weather is cold, so this should be fine.'

Consoling herself like that, her steps followed naturally.

As Jane walked, she made sure to stick to well-lit paths and areas with plenty of security cameras. She couldn't afford to take any risks, especially with the possibility of those girls looking for her.

Her destination was the library, her sanctuary within the academy. It was a place where she felt safe and at ease, surrounded by the familiar scent of old books and the comforting hush of whispered conversations.

As she walked, her thoughts inevitably drifted back to Ethan. Despite her efforts to keep her distance, she couldn't help but think about how sweet and genuine he was. It was rare to find someone like him, someone who made her feel understood and appreciated.

Lost in her thoughts, Jane rounded a corner and collided with someone, nearly stumbling backward from the impact.

"Oof! Sorry about that," a voice exclaimed, and Jane looked up to see a face that she was unfamiliar with.

'Hmm....'

But after a second, her gaze met with purple eyes looking at her as she remembered the moment at the entrance of the library.

'It is him...'

It was Astron, the same guy she had been talking about with Ethan earlier. He looked surprised to see her, his expression unreadable.

Jane's heart skipped a beat as she quickly composed herself, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment. "N-no, it's my fault. I wasn't paying attention."

It was too embarrassing for her since this was the second time this had happened. She wasn't accustomed to such things, especially being in close proximity to others.

Astron nodded, his gaze lingering on her for a moment longer than necessary. "It is alright. But you seem to be tripping out quite a lot."

Jane lowered her gaze, feeling a pang of self-consciousness at Astron's observation. "I-I'm not usually like this," she mumbled, her cheeks burning with embarrassment.

Astron looked at her curiously, his expression still unreadable. "Is that so?" he replied casually.

Jane bristled at his response, interpreting it as a mocking tone. "Y-yes, it is! I mean, I'm usually posed. It's just been a bit of a hectic day, that's all."

She mentally cursed herself for stumbling over her words, feeling flustered under Astron's scrutiny. She couldn't shake the feeling that he was seeing right through her, peeling back the layers of her carefully constructed facade.

'Is that why Ethan said he is unique? He definitely feels different. What is with this gaze? It is empty!'

Astron raised an eyebrow, his purple eyes glinting with 'amusement.' "Hectic day, huh? Well, I hope it gets better for you."

'Well, maybe not.' Somehow, seeing him casually like that, she thought he may not be that bad. 'Now that looked closer, he doesn't look that scary.'

"But you are Senior Jane, right?"

Hearing her name from Astron's mouth sent a shiver down Jane's spine.

'He knows me?'

She glanced up at him, her eyes wide with surprise. "Y-yes, I'm Jane," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

'How does he know me? Does he know about 'that,' too? No, it can't be. He is close to Ethan....'

Astron nodded, his expression serious. "I thought so. I saw you earlier when you and Ethan entered the infirmary."

'Ah....He saw it at that time....'

Jane's heart skipped a beat at his mention of Ethan. "You did?" she asked, her voice trembling slightly.

Astron nodded again, his gaze somehow empathetic. "Yes. You were...tattered and bruised at that time. I may not know the details, but I know what those bruises meant."

'Huh? He saw the bruises, and he knows?'

Jane's eyes widened in shock as she processed his words. "W-what do you mean?" she asked, her voice barely audible.

Astron sighed with a hint of sadness in his eyes. "I mean, I'm familiar with the signs of bullying. And it was clear to me that you had been a victim."

Jane felt a lump form in her throat as she remembered the painful memories of that night. She had tried so hard to forget, to bury those memories deep within herself.

'He knows....'

But now, standing face to face with Astron, it felt like all her walls were crumbling down.

"I..." Jane struggled to find the right words, her voice choked with emotion. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Astron studied her for a moment, his expression unreadable, but after a second, he shook his head. "You don't need to feign ignorance. I won't do something that would cause harm to you. I just wanted to show empathy to a fellow victim."

'Fellow victim?'

Hearing Astron's words, Jane felt a mix of confusion and curiosity swirling inside her. "Fellow victim?" she echoed, her voice barely above a whisper.

Astron nodded solemnly. "Yes. I've been through similar experiences myself, so I know how it feels."

Jane's mind raced as she tried to process his words. She remembered the rumors surrounding Astron and how most people harbored hostility towards him. She recalled the scene in the cafeteria, witnessing firsthand the bullying and harassment he endured.

Suddenly, everything clicked into place. Astron wasn't just sympathizing with her out of pity; he truly understood what she had gone through.

Realizing this, Jane felt a surge of empathy and camaraderie towards Astron. The walls she had put up around herself began to crumble as she saw him in a new light. Somehow, he didn't seem that scary anymore.

"I...I didn't know," she murmured, her voice filled with genuine emotion. "I'm sorry."

"It is fine, don't worry." He waved his hand, looking at her hood covering her face. "I am not sure what your relationship with Ethan is."

"Eh?"

"But, since he seems to value you, you should take care of yourself more."

"Ehhhhhh?"

Jane's ears reddened at the mention of Ethan, her heart skipping a beat at the thought of him. "H-how did you know about...that?" she stammered, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Before meeting with you, I was with him. And I saw his gaze directed at you."

Jane's mouth opened in surprise, but no words came out. She couldn't believe that Ethan had been thinking about her, let alone showing such a gaze.

"What if other people noticed it as well?"

Yet, at the same time, she remembered that the two were certainly together before Ethan met her, so his words were correct.

Unable to find a response, Jane remained silent, her thoughts racing as she processed Astron's words.

Seeing her hesitation, Astron reached for his smartwatch, opening a panel that displayed information about contacts. "If you ever have problems, feel free to reach out. I know how hard it can be for people like us to contact strangers."

Jane stiffened at his offer, her initial instinct to refuse. But as she thought about it, she realized that Astron's words made sense. After all, he had somehow managed to describe how she felt exactly as if he had experienced it himself.

After a moment of hesitation, Jane nodded slowly, a sense of gratitude swelling inside her. "T-thank you," she murmured, her voice filled with genuine appreciation.

Astron gave her a small nod before turning and walking away. And as Jane watched him go, she couldn't help but feel a sense of comfort knowing that she wasn't alone in her struggles.

<Arcadia Hunter Academy: First Dorm>

As Lucas sat alone in his room, the weight of his thoughts bore down on him like an invisible burden.

'Things are a lot different.'

He had spent countless hours replaying the visions that had haunted his dreams, comparing them to the reality he lived in the academy.

There were discrepancies and inconsistencies that gnawed at his mind, but amidst the uncertainty, one name stood out like a beacon in the darkness: Astron Natusalune.

Astron Natusalune—a name that had appeared in his visions, a figure shrouded in mystery and insignificance. He was just another student among many, blending into the background with an unremarkable presence. Then, he somehow becomes entangled with the villain organization, attacking the academy in the final exams and then losing his life at the hands of Ethan.

However, the reality was different. Somehow, different from what he had seen, Astron had been behaving differently. Though Lucas wasn't sure, he knew Astron needed to be the gloomy student who was silently ignored and didn't participate in anything. Top of Form

Yet, now, he was entangled in Ethan's life, Irina's life, and even Saintess' life. The strength he displayed was not normal either.

"Sigh...."

Lucas leaned back in his chair, the weight of his thoughts pressing down on him like a heavy blanket. Astron Natusalune. The name echoed in his mind, stirring up a sense of unease and suspicion.

'Something about him feels off....Even from the start of the school, it had been bothering me, but recently, it was even stronger.'

There was something about Astron that didn't quite add up, something that felt eerily familiar yet unsettlingly different.

'Is it my trait? That can't be.'

As Lucas reflected on Astron's recent actions, he couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to him than met the eye. How had Astron gone from being a background figure to somehow a player in the academy's turmoil? And why did his behavior deviate so drastically from the visions Lucas had seen?

It was clear that Astron warranted further investigation. If he posed a threat to Lucas's goals, then he would need to be dealt with accordingly. Lucas wasn't one to hesitate when it came to removing obstacles in his path, and Astron would be no exception.

But as he contemplated his next move, Lucas couldn't help but feel a strange sense of kinship with Astron.

It was as if they were two sides of the same coin, both harboring secrets and hidden motives beneath their seemingly ordinary facades.

'And the one who finds out the secret first will win.'

Chapter 317 Chapter 75.1 - Not perfect

<Sunday Evening, Arcadia Hunter Academy, Archery Club Training Grounds>

As the Monday approached, it signaled the start of the academic week. Therefore, some students utilized the last moment of their weekend while others were training on their training grounds.

'I hadn't been able to train much recently.' Lilia thought to herself, remembering what she had done in recent weeks. She had her own fair share of competitions in her family's guild, so she needed to focus on that for the time being.

However, there were many assignments as well, thus making it harder for her to focus on her training. Though, now that she had found the chance, she was not going to waste it.

As Lilia entered the Archery Club building, she immediately sensed a change in the atmosphere. The usual tranquility of the training grounds was replaced by a palpable tension, and the space seemed more crowded than usual.

'That is the expected outcome, isn't it? After all, rather than hearing about the results of falling behind, seeing it directly will be a lot different.'

She thought. Seeing the consequences of something directly would be a lot more convincing than hearing them, and she was now witnessing that clearly.

'But, I guess it will no longer be peaceful as before.'

Despite her initial intention to train quietly, she couldn't help but notice the curious glances directed her way as she made her way towards the archery range.

After swiftly changing into her training attire, Lilia stepped onto the range, bow in hand, ready to focus on honing her skills. However, her concentration was shattered when she caught sight of Adrian leaning casually against a nearby pillar with a smirk playing on his lips.

"Well, well, if it isn't Lilia Thornheart gracing us with her presence," Adrian remarked, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "I must say, it's a rare treat to see you here. Have you finally decided to grace us with your superior archery prowess?"

'Tch...This bastard...'

Though expecting it, she couldn't help but get angry. Her jaw clenched slightly at his taunting tone, but she remained outwardly composed. She was all too familiar with these penchants for provocation, but she had hoped for a moment of respite from Adrian's antics. She had already been dealing with such things in the guild.

Ignoring Adrian's jibe, Lilia raised her bow and prepared to take her first shot.

"Well, as expected. It is better for you to show respect to your seniors, isn't it?" Adrian smiled slightly as he took the court just right beside Lilia.

–SWOOSH! THUD!

As Lilia released the arrow, once again ignoring his words, the arrow flew and stabbed the target from the midsection, showing Lilia's skills.

"A splendid shot," Adrian remarked, looking at the target and the arrow. Following that, he turned to face Lilia with a smile while raising his bow.

–SWOOSH!

But, just in that instant, Adrian released the arrow while still looking at Lilia's face. The arrow glided in the air.

–THUD! CRACK!

And in an instant, it stabbed. However, a rather unfamiliar sound came from the arrow range.

"What?"

"This is?"

The arrow that Adrian had shot wasn't targeted at the target before him but rather the target before Lilia! It smashed the arrow Lilia shot, tearing it into pieces.

"Wow....Captain Adrian is really skilled."

As Lilia raised her head to assess the damage, her eyes narrowed in frustration. The shattered remnants of her arrow lay scattered on the ground, a stark reminder of Adrian's calculated interference.

'Calm down...He is doing this on purpose.'

Anger simmered beneath the surface of her composed facade, but she forced herself to remain calm, unwilling to give Adrian the satisfaction of seeing her lose her cool.

Adrian's smirk widened as he observed Lilia's reaction, clearly relishing in her momentary discomposure. "My apologies, Junior Thornheart," he said with faux innocence, his tone dripping with sarcasm. "Seems like my aim was a bit off. But I suppose accidents happen, don't they?"

Lilia clenched her jaw, struggling to suppress the urge to lash out at Adrian. She knew this game all too well; he was trying to goad her into a reaction, to throw her off balance and assert his dominance.

But she refused to give him the satisfaction. This was the common psychological type of warfare, and she had her fair share of these when she was managing her guild.

"Indeed, accidents happen. Especially for someone like you, whose skills still need a lot more polishing." She replied with a calm smile, gracefully turning to face Adrian.

"Hmm....My skills need polishing, you say? How come? From this side, you are the one who needs that 'polishing'?"

Yet, this whole thing was bound to take a toll on her precisely because she was already mentally exhausted.

Lilia's lips twitched with restrained frustration as Adrian continued to needle her with his thinly veiled insults. She could feel the eyes of the other club members on them, their murmurs of interest growing louder as the tension between the two leaders escalated.

"Perhaps you're right, Senior Adrian," Lilia replied coolly, her voice tinged with sarcasm. "After all, it takes real skill to aim for someone else's target instead of your own."

Following that, she walked into a different court and raised her bow with one hand while still looking at Adrian.

—SWOOSH! CRACK! THUD!

And then shot the arrow without breaking eye contact. The arrow flew and then stabbed the same arrow that Adrian had shot, breaking it into pieces.

Lilia's sneer spoke volumes as she observed the shattered remnants of Adrian's arrow. "However, if that's the extent of your skills, Senior Adrian," she remarked, her voice laced with disdain, "then I fear for the future of the Archery Club under your leadership. After all, it takes more than petty tricks to maintain your position."

Adrian's smirk faltered slightly at her words, a flicker of annoyance crossing his features before he composed himself once more with a smirk. "Touché, Junior Lilia," he replied smoothly, his tone masking his irritation. "But words mean nothing without action to back them up."

With a swift motion, he retrieved another arrow from his quiver, his eyes gleaming with determination. "How about we settle this the only way that matters?" he proposed, a challenging glint in his gaze. "A competition between the two of us?"

The murmurs among the gathered club members grew louder at Adrian's suggestion, their excitement evident. The prospect of seeing the esteemed captain of the club face off against a talented newcomer like Lilia was too enticing to resist.

'And now you are challenging me? You certainly trust your skills, huh?'

Lilia's lips curved into a smirk of her own as she accepted Adrian's challenge, her confidence unshakeable. "I wouldn't have it any other way, Senior Adrian," she replied, her tone dripping with bravado. "Prepare yourself, for you're about to witness the true extent of my skills."

As the stage was set for their impending showdown, the tension between Lilia and Adrian crackled in the air, fueling the anticipation of the onlookers.

Elara, the vice-captain of the Archery Club, was talking with the club overseer, Instructor Ethan.

"Did you check up on the matter I had entrusted to you?" Instructor Ethan asked, looking at the sophomore student before her.

"Yes, instructor."

"Then, whom do you think we should choose for the interclub competitions?"

Generally speaking, the people who would participate in the events are determined by the club captain. But Ethan knew Adrian did some shady things behind the scenes; thus, there was a high chance that the participants that he would present wouldn't necessarily be that good.

"Regarding the interclub competitions, Instructor Ethan, I've been considering a few candidates," Elara replied, her mind already assessing the strengths and weaknesses of various club members.

Though there was still a long time for the interclub competitions, since it was in the second semester, Elara did her observations well.

"First, as you know, we have Lilia Thornheart. She is already known for her talents, and I believe that she has the most potential to represent our club effectively."

Before she could continue listing other potential candidates, both Elara and Instructor Ethan were interrupted by a sudden commotion emanating from the club training grounds.

The sound of arrows flying through the air and the murmurs of excited voices caught their attention, prompting them to exchange a curious glance.

"What's going on?" Instructor Ethan questioned, his brow furrowing with concern as they made their way towards the source of the commotion.

Elara followed closely behind, her curiosity piqued by the unexpected disturbance.

As they approached the training grounds, they were met with the sight of Lilia Thornheart, and Adrian locked in a heated competition. Their bows were drawn, and arrows were flying with precision toward their respective targets.

Elara's eyes widened in surprise at the unexpected turn of events, her thoughts momentarily forgotten as she watched the intense showdown unfolding before her.

It seemed that their quiet training session had escalated into a high-stakes duel between the two leaders of the Archery Club.

However, as she observed the competition more closely, she couldn't help but notice a distinct pattern emerging.

'This.....'

It wasn't just a test of archery skills; it was a battle of strengths.

The targets were strategically placed behind various obstacles, requiring not only accuracy but also sheer power to penetrate through them.

'This type of competition is not even fair.' She lamented, knowing what 'strength' meant.

The design of the obstacles left little room for flexibility or finesse, favoring those who could deliver powerful shots with unwavering force.

And in that aspect, Adrian held a clear advantage. As a sophomore-year student, he had likely developed greater strength, muscle power, and mana levels compared to Lilia, who was still a first-

year. His arrows soared through the air with formidable speed and force, effortlessly piercing through the obstacles to strike the targets beyond.

On the other hand, Lilia's shots, while accurate and skillful, seemed to lack the same level of raw power. Despite her precision and technique, her arrows struggled to penetrate through the obstacles with the same force as Adrian's.

Elara's brow furrowed with concern as she observed the disparity between the two competitors. It was clear that the competition heavily favored Adrian's strengths, leaving Lilia at a disadvantage. As the duel continued, she couldn't help but feel a sense of frustration at the unfairness of the situation.

'But, that is not all.'

She also noticed one other thing. The number of sophomore-

year students on the sides of Adrian. It was like they were openly trying to pressure Lilia without backing up.

'This club....He already has a lot of control.....I didn't know it was this much.'

Initially, Elara was well aware of how Adrian managed the club. There were clear signs of that, and even she herself was affected by his attitude. But she didn't expect it to run this deep. From how it looked, she was sure at some point, Adrian could have all the students under his wing.

As for what his purpose was, she didn't know, nor did she need to.

Just at that moment, she remembered the words Lilia had spoken.

–In this world, strength is the currency of influence. Those who can't adapt to this reality will find themselves left behind."

'So, she could already see that before me, at that time.....From how she listened to the interaction between me and Adrian, she was able to find out that I wouldn't let that happen deliberately contact me....But, she didn't do anything up to this point....So, she was waiting for me to contact her first

before I realized the issue. She knows if I don't join Adrian, sooner or later, I will be left out of the club ... This may even be her test. What a scary girl.'

She thought inwardly, realizing Lilia's intentions.

Instructor Ethan, sensing Elara's growing unease, cast her a knowing glance. "It seems Adrian has found a way to stack the odds in his favor," he remarked, his voice tinged with a hint of amusement. "But let's not jump to conclusions just yet. Let's see how Lilia responds to this challenge."

"I understand, instructor." She turned to face the instructor and mumbled, nodding her head. But while facing him, she noticed a newcomer entering the club.

'It is him....'

He was the person she wanted to talk to but didn't have the time before. It was Astron, whom she suspected of hiding his abilities.

'He seemed close to Lilia last time....Yes, I should definitely talk to him.'

She moved slightly, swiftly moving from the crowd, and then stood beside him, who was also watching the spectacle.

"Quite a scene, huh?"

Chapter 318 Chapter 75.2 - Not perfect

Elara cleared her throat before addressing Astron, her voice calm and composed despite the chaos unfolding in front of them.

"Quite a scene, huh?" she remarked, her gaze focused on the intense competition between Lilia and Adrian.

Astron turned his attention towards Elara, his expression unreadable, and he responded in a monotone voice, "Indeed. It seems tensions are running high within the club."

Though she had approached him, Elara didn't know what to say.

'Hmm....How should I converse? Should I just imply that I know something is wrong with him....No....This junior is somehow close to Lilia, so getting his opinion on her would be better.'

Instantly, she made the conclusion in her head as she nodded in agreement, noting the understated observation in Astron's words. She glanced at him briefly before continuing, "You seem to have a keen eye for detail, Junior Astron. Have you noticed anything particularly interesting about the competition?"

She first decided to test the waters, especially his observation skills. His awareness would be the indicator of how well he knew Lilia.

Astron's gaze remained fixed on the intense competition unfolding in front of them. After a second of careful observation, he turned his attention back to Elara, his expression thoughtful.

"It's quite evident that the competition heavily favors Adrian," he replied, his tone measured. "The obstacles are designed in a way that requires sheer strength and power to overcome rather than skill or finesse. And in that aspect, Adrian clearly has the upper hand."

Elara nodded in agreement, impressed by Astron's astute observation. It seemed that his keen eye for detail extended beyond just the physical aspects of the competition.

"Indeed," she concurred, her gaze returning to the arena where Lilia and Adrian continued to face off. "It's a clever strategy on Adrian's part, but it puts Lilia at a significant disadvantage."

"That is right." Astron nodded. He already knew from the game that Adrian was going to use this method, though the exact date wasn't clear.

Elara glanced at Astron; her curiosity piqued a little. She wanted to test this junior a little bit more. She knew that there was more to this competition than just a simple display of skill, and she was eager to hear Astron's thoughts on the matter.

"So, what do you think is Adrian's reason for setting up this kind of competition?" she inquired, her voice laced with intrigue as she turned to face him.

Astron paused for a moment, considering Elara's question carefully. He already knew that Adrian's actions were driven by more than just a desire for competition. However, instead of providing a direct answer, Astron posed a question of his own.

"From your first impression, what would you say is the most likely reason for Adrian to orchestrate this kind of competition?" he asked, his gaze steady as he awaited Elara's response.

"Why do you think it wasn't Lilia who had instigated this whole event?" Elara replied with her own question.

"She is not that stupid. She will never enter a competition where she will be disadvantaged, especially when it concerns such a crowd."

Astron's words made sense. In a way, he knew Lilia more than anyone else in this school since he had seen her character in the game.

'Though a real human is incomparable to a game character, one can still obtain the characteristics of the said person if it is consistent with the source of the information.'

He thought inwardly, watching the game.

"That makes sense," Elara remarked, nodding in agreement with Astron's assessment of Lilia's character. It was true that she wouldn't willingly enter a competition where she knew she would be at a disadvantage, especially in front of such a crowd. From the small interactions she had with Lilia Thornheart, Elara was well aware of her somehow 'thorny but hearty' personality.

"Then, senior, what do you think about my question?"

As Astron prompted her to answer his question, Elara considered her response carefully. After a moment of contemplation, she replied, "Well, from the first impression, it seems that Adrian's reason for orchestrating this competition is to show his superiority as a senior. He wants to assert his dominance and reinforce his position as the leader of the Archery Club."

Astron nodded at her response, acknowledging the validity of her analysis. "That is most likely what most people will think," he concurred, his gaze still fixed on the intense competition unfolding before them. "But, senior, that's precisely why his goal is different."

"Why do you think his goal is different?" Elara inquired, intrigued by Astron's perspective.

Astron turned to face Elara, his expression serious. "Because people are not stupid, especially not the students of Arcadia Hunter Academy," he explained calmly. "They can see that this competition heavily favors Adrian. It's not a valid comparison point for showcasing their skills. Therefore, this whole ordeal is essentially useless in terms of determining who the better archer is."

'Hmm... Interesting, I never thought about this from this perspective.' Elara thought to herself, furrowing her brows and considering Astron's words carefully. "Then why would Adrian go through all this trouble?" she asked, puzzled by his motives.

Astron glanced back at the competition, his gaze scanning the crowd of club members. "Can't you see the cheers for Adrian?" he remarked, gesturing subtly toward the spectators. "Many of the members openly ignore the unfairness of this competition and support him regardless. What Adrian wants isn't just to give the impression that he's stronger than Lilia. He wants to give the impression that he's already in control of the club."

Elara's eyes widened in realization as she processed Astron's explanation.

'I see, this was his goal from the start....I also immediately sensed it and was intimidated by his acts.....Considering Junior Lilia is now in the center of that pressure, he is actually trying to mentally suppress her, making her submit.'

It was true that Adrian seemed to command a considerable amount of influence over the club members, and this competition was just another display of his authority.

It wasn't about proving his skills; it was about asserting his dominance and solidifying his position as the leader of the Archery Club!

'And, he was able to see through this in an instant....As expected, this Junior is definitely not normal either.....'

At that point, Elara had already confirmed Astron's skills inside her mind. His observation and deduction skills passed her test.

'I should be able to ask it now.'

Turning her attention back to Astron, Elara decided to delve deeper into his insights. "What do you think about Lilia Thornheart?" she asked, her tone curious as she studied his reaction.

Astron paused for a moment, considering Elara's question carefully. "Could you elaborate on what specifically you'd like to know about my thoughts on her?" he responded, his expression unreadable.

Elara furrowed her brow, pondering her question before providing clarification. "What are your thoughts on Lilia as a person? Her skills, her character, her potential?" she clarified, hoping to gain more insight into Astron's perspective on the talented first-year student.

Astron nodded in understanding, his gaze thoughtful as he considered his response. "Lilia Thornheart is certainly a remarkable individual," he began, his tone measured. "Her skills as an archer are evident, but what truly sets her apart is not her archery skills alone. Her creativeness in the usage of mana and arts is what truly sets her apart. But aside from that, she is a calculative and profit-oriented logical person with a lot of pride. Though she dislikes trusting other people, she also seeks ultimate trust. She is talented at leading, and her pride will never allow her to bend down to others."

Elara listened intently, impressed by Astron's thoughtful analysis. It seemed that he had a keen understanding of Lilia's character and admired her qualities as a person.

"A person who seeks the ultimate trust, huh? That doesn't seem to be the case to me." Elara mumbled as she remembered the certain interaction she had with Lilia. How that cheeky Junior approached her, looked down on her with a clear pride and smirk.

"Not everyone is how they look from the outside. You should already know that senior." Astron replied.

As his words entered his ears, Elara couldn't help but chuckle a little. "Indeed, that is right..." She replied, a smile on her face. She looked into the Junior beside her, amusement and curiosity in her eyes. "Isn't that also the case for you, Junior?" She asked.

"Of course," Astron replied without any hesitation. "I am no different to that."

"Indeed.....I wonder, for what reason you are hiding your abilities?"

Astron maintained his composed demeanor, his expression unchanged as Elara posed her question. "Hiding my abilities? I'm not sure what you mean, senior," he replied smoothly, his tone neutral.

Elara studied Astron's reaction carefully, noting the lack of any visible reaction to her inquiry.

'No signs of frustration.....Am I wrong? Was that just a coincidence?'

She thought. Astron's reaction was clearly not showing any signs of getting caught. That meant either he was adept at concealing his true thoughts masterfully, or he wasn't hiding his abilities.

'No.... There is no way it can be a coincidence.'

Elara decided to press further, choosing to address a specific incident she had observed earlier. "I was watching while the targets were being recorded for official documents for the tournament," she began, her tone calm but probing. "And I noticed something peculiar. There was an arrow that appeared to have stabbed a mosquito instead of the target. What are your thoughts on this matter, Junior Astron? Do you think it's possible that this was merely a coincidence?"

Astron maintained his composed facade, his expression unchanged as he listened to Elara's question. Though, he inwardly knew what she was implying. After a brief pause, he replied with his usual measured tone, "It's certainly an interesting observation, senior. It is definitely a very low-

probability event."

"Right? So, what would you think if you were in my shoes?"

'Hehe...Let's see how you play this, Junior....'

"If I were in your shoes, senior, I would consider two possibilities," he began. "Firstly, if the person coincidentally hit the mosquito, then it's simply a stroke of luck, and there's no need to pursue the matter further. However, if the person intentionally hits the mosquito, it suggests a high level of skill and precision. In that case, the person must be rather famous for their talent."

Elara nodded, understanding Astron's reasoning. "But since I'm not sure of their identity, that would mean this talented person prefers not to show their talent for various reasons," she concluded, echoing Astron's assessment.

Astron nodded in agreement. "Precisely," he confirmed. "In such a scenario, there are a couple of approaches you could take. Firstly, you could try to understand the reasons behind their decision to hide their abilities and exploit this weakness. However, this method would likely antagonize the said party. Alternatively, you could simply take note of their talent and attempt to befriend them, entering into a more amicable relationship with lower risk."

Elara smiled at Astron's words, clearly amused by how he clearly defined how he would act.

'It is clear that he is aware that I know about him....Is he saying if I wanted to befriend him, he would be open to it....This Junior is clearly different from rumors and how he looks...

Conversing with him is kind of smooth.'

Elara thought inwardly as she turned to watch the scene. "Then, I guess there is no need for me to antagonize you, right, Junior?"

"That would be better for yourself."

"You are cheeky."

"I hear that a lot."

"Makes sense."

Just as the two were conversing, suddenly, the arena fell silent.

"What?"

In the midst of there, the blocks before Lilia were all in shambles....

Chapter 319 75.3 - Not perfect

While Elara and Astron were talking, the competition between Lilia and Adrian continued.

It was apparent that Adrian held the upper hand in terms of raw strength. His shots were powerful and precise, hitting their targets with unerring accuracy, while Lilia struggled to keep pace, destroying the targets.

No matter how good her technique was, in the end, in the face of such competition, she was having a hard time.

'Tch....I guess I will use it.'

Though, initially, she accepted the competition, thinking she could win with her own efforts, she now saw Adrian's prowess.

'I need to show something so that the freshmen won't be swayed by him.'

She was very well aware of how sophomore-year students were mainly supporting Adrian. Thus, if she wanted to clash with him, forming her own faction was necessary.

"How is it? You seem quiet now?"

Adrian said as he looked into Lilia.

"There is no need to talk."

"Of course, there is. I like how you shut your mouth now."

While engaging in psychological warfare with Adrian, she quickly spread her presence around.

–SWOOSH! THUD!

The arrow she shot hit the target, but the effect was severely lacking. But she didn't mind. Her focus was on what she was about to do now.

With a quick glance around to ensure no one was watching, Lilia discreetly activated a hidden artifact strapped to her leg. A small hoop shimmered with a faint light as she triggered its power, the mana within her surging to life in response.

Suddenly, a surge of energy coursed through her veins, imbuing her arrows with an unprecedented type of energy.

'This should suffice.'

The energy she was using right now wouldn't possibly be sensed by the normal Awakened since this artifact was a pretty special one, even in her family. An ancient artifact that was rotting in her family's vault.

But even when she was a child, she had rather felt close to it, and as she grabbed the artifact, she sensed her mana changing to a different type of energy that other people weren't able to sense.

'Ring of Forge.'

She didn't know why her family had never found how this artifact worked, but it was perfect for her. This artifact made her impress many types of people, increasing her standing.

With such energy, Lilia took aim and released her shot, the arrow flying true and striking the target with explosive force.

However, different from the previous shots, this time, her arrow swirled with a clearly different force.

SWIRL!

The arrow struck the target with unprecedented force, obliterating every bit of the obstacles in its path in a dazzling display of power.

"What?"

Gasps of amazement echoed through the training grounds as the spectators watched in stunned silence.

"How did she do it? She has that much control over her muscles?"

"This is impossible. She is just a freshman, and yet she can destroy the Stone of Hardness?"

"I don't want to believe it as well, but the result is right before our eyes."

Many of the freshmen looked at Lilia with newfound respect and admiration, their mouths agape in disbelief at the sheer magnitude of her feat.

'Heh.....This is really a cheat.'

With a triumphant smirk, Lilia turned to face Adrian, her eyes glittering with satisfaction. "Well, Senior Adrian," she said, her voice dripping with mock sweetness, "Did you enjoy my little present?"

Adrian's expression flickered with a mixture of anger and disbelief, his facade of superiority crumbling in the face of Lilia's undeniable talent.

'How can she do it? Her stats had already passed the mark of 7. That can't be possible...Even with my trait, I can only amplify my strength to 7 at most, and according to intel provided by 'them,' Lilia should not possess such a skill or trait.'

For a moment, he struggled to maintain his composure, his jaw clenched tightly as he fought to control his emotions. Nothing was going as planned. He was about to lose his control since the madness inside him was slowly revealing itself. He knew this was the side-effect of getting that power, but knowing it didn't make it better.

CLENCH!

'No, I should calm down. I should downplay it as much as I can.'

He clenched his teeth, letting the pain make him return to normal as much as possible.

And then, with a forced smile, Adrian conceded defeat. "Impressive, Junior Thornheart," he said through gritted teeth, his tone laced with begrudging admiration. "You truly have a remarkable talent."

Without another word, Adrian turned on his heel and strode off the training grounds, his departure signaling the end of their confrontation. As the tension dissipated, Lilia allowed herself a satisfied smile, knowing that she had emerged victorious not only in the competition but also in asserting her dominance within the Archery Club.

After the competition, Lilia entered the individual training room. At least that section, but just as she was about to enter, suddenly, she sensed someone's presence.

She knew who this was without even looking. A strong presence but at the same time without any sounds produced.

With a smile, she turned to face Elara and asked, "Did you need something, Vice-Captain Elara?"

Elara nodded her head, her expression thoughtful. "I must say, that was quite a show out there," she remarked, her voice filled with genuine admiration.

Lilia shrugged nonchalantly, trying to 'downplay' her achievement. "It was nothing, just a little demonstration of my skills," she replied 'modestly.' Though, inwardly, who knew what she was thinking?

Elara regarded her for a moment before speaking again, her tone more serious this time. "You certainly have your ways of making others understand," she observed cryptically, her eyes searching Lilia's face for a reaction.

Lilia understood the underlying meaning behind Elara's words. She had succeeded in asserting her dominance within the Archery Club and making her presence known. With a slight smile, she responded, "Then can I take this as an acceptance of my offer?"

Elara just looked into Lilia's eyes without an answer. Even before coming here, she had already made up her mind after talking to Astron. Though the matters regarding him were a little shrouded, what he said about Lilia played the role of pushing her true feelings. She herself knew that she was already inclined to support Lilia.

After seconds of quietness, Elara broke the silence. "That is right."

"I see... That is good, then."

"But, don't forget. I will just work with you; I am not your subordinate."

Lilia smirked confidently, her expression unwavering. "I understand," she replied assuredly. "And don't worry, I know how to navigate within boundaries."

She had already dealt with such people before, and she knew how they worked. Especially in the initial parts of these types of partnerships, gaining the faith of the other party was important. And, for Lilia, Elara was a very important asset.

Elara nodded in acknowledgment, acknowledging Lilia's assurance. "Good," she said simply, her tone leaving no room for doubt.

Then, after a moment of silent understanding, Lilia extended her hand in a gesture of mutual respect. "Shall we seal this alliance, then?" she proposed with a smirk.

Elara considered her offer for a moment before accepting it, clasping Lilia's hand firmly in a handshake. "Agreed," she affirmed, her voice firm.

This was the beginning of the new alliance, which would shape a lot of things in the future.

Sitting in my room, I was looking at the watch, whose background was pitch black. It was the smartwatch that I had gotten from Fred.

[...]

[...]

[...]

[Missions][!]

[Currency]

The panel had appeared before me. But this time, there was a small sign in front of the [Mission] tab.

I had been in possession of this watch for a long time, but because Fred wasn't a high-ranking member of the Villain society, I wasn't able to do much from there.

InfernalCovenant had a hierarchy, and Fred wasn't able to progress that much in terms of that said hierarchy. But even then, he was still a member of it.

Normally, this item would destroy itself from the moment its owner died. However, I had already paid quite a hefty sum of 150k Valer to an Artisan from the Black Market to temper the circuits inside it while also paying another hefty sum of 75k Valer to a villain insider to create a new profile.

Though the [Horde] was a very competent hacker organization, they were still at the beginning of their progress, and they wouldn't accept an offer from me to infiltrate the InfernalCovenant to create a new account.

I also didn't want to completely rely on them for everything, as the more they knew about me, the more power they could exert on me.

No human can be trusted completely as, at some point, there is always a chance of betrayal, especially when it comes from a relationship that started with money.

In any case, as I saw the panels, I navigated to the [Mission] tab, curious to see what new opportunities might await me. To my surprise, there were two notices at the top of the list, each more ominous than the last.

The first notice caught my attention immediately. It was a recruitment request for a dungeon sabotaging team, promising substantial rewards for those willing to participate.

The idea of sabotaging a dungeon was not new to me; in fact, it was a common practice among certain factions to disrupt the operations of rival guilds.

And I knew why this notice came on top.

'They are trying to increase the forces. I guess the Hartleys started moving.'

It had just been a day, but from the moment Ethan's life was threatened, Hartley's were bound to move.

'Now, the guilds around the lower district will become warzone....A battlefield of two tycoons.... '

Such a cold war would take a lot of resources from both sides while bringing the attention of villains to the capital.

While pondering about these, I checked the second notice. It was an assassination request, and the target was none other than Emily.

'Hmm....Interesting...'

The request was accompanied by a hefty sum of currency, tempting any would-be assassin with the promise of wealth and power. However, the implications of such a task were far more grave than any dungeon sabotage mission.

'This should suffice....'

I was already expecting this, but Emily's guild was just the start of the trigger. But then again, she didn't need to die.

'Well, then, how should I convey this information to Ethan.'

After all, Emily still had her use.

Chapter 320 Chapter 76.1 - No title

<Sunday Evening, Arcadia Dominion, Frostborne Mansion>

In the office without many ornaments, a lone figure sat in front of the desk. Any type of silk did not cover her slender pale arms, yet her clothes resembled a young lady's from slightly retro times.

As Mistress Miriam delicately moved her slender fingers across the desk, tiny sprinkles of frost formed and danced around her fingertips, reflecting the dim light filtering through the room. Her expression was a mixture of gloom and serenity; her thoughts were weighed down by a burden unseen to others.

"It is getting worse," she murmured to herself, her voice barely audible above the soft rustle of frost.

Just then, the door swung open, breaking the quiet of the room. A young maid, dressed in the customary attire of the household, entered with a sense of urgency.

"Mistress Miriam," the maid announced, her voice carrying a note of 'concern,' "a special envelope with your signature has arrived at the mansion."

Miriam raised an eyebrow at the unexpected interruption, her curiosity piqued by the mention of the envelope.

'I guess my daughter is working hard.'

With a graceful gesture, she motioned for the maid to bring it to her.

The maid approached, carrying the envelope with care, before placing it delicately on the desk in front of Miriam. With a nod of acknowledgment, Miriam dismissed the maid, who quickly exited the room, leaving her alone once more with the mysterious envelope.

Though the maid or the other people didn't know much about it, this envelope itself is, in fact, an artifact.

An artifact that could only be opened by the mana signature of the person that was meant to send. Thanks to her unique condition and her standing in the mansion, she needed to resort to such methods to even be able to contact her daughter.

With a sense of anticipation mingled with trepidation, Miriam reached out and picked up the envelope, her fingers tracing the elegant curves of her signature, and the frost-attributed mana covered the signature; the seal was removed.

Miriam's heart skipped a beat as she saw the familiar handwriting adorning the parchment within the envelope. It was unmistakably her daughter, Seraphina. With a mixture of relief and longing, she eagerly unfolded the letter, her eyes scanning the words penned by her beloved child.

"My Dearest Mother,

I hope this letter finds you in good health and spirits. As for myself, I am doing well despite the challenges that come with attending the Academy. I am grateful for the opportunity to pursue my studies, even though 'that woman' clearly attempted to hinder my aspirations."

Miriam's brows furrowed slightly at the mention of 'that woman,' a pang of resentment stirring within her.

She knew all too well the obstacles her daughter had faced, but she admired Seraphina's resilience and determination to overcome them.

"However, none of those matters as I am in the academy. I am not sure if the news has reached you, but now I am the second-ranking student in the academy, one place away from reaching my deserved spot."

Hearing this, a smile bloomed on her face. A smile contrasting to the demeanor of gloominess inside the room.

"My dear, you really deserve it."

She mumbled.

"But, mother. These are not important to me. Reaching the first rank is just the way to trample on 'that woman' and 'that man' who abandoned you looking for 'that woman.' I will never forget the moments of that time when your dresses were trampled, your pride, and, most importantly, your core were damaged intentionally. I will prove to everyone who did all those despicable things to you. Once I return to the family, it will be the day I get control of it, and the day I will make every day hell for them.

I am working hard to achieve it, and there are many potential candidates for me here. Many hidden talents had yet to bloom, but with my special eyes, I can see.

However, the mother. I still need you here. I wish for you to use your eyes to see. Though I know it may be painful, I can't afford to waste my resources right now, as 'that woman' is still constantly keeping tabs on me.

Behind this letter, you will see another small paper, which contains the list of the people I deemed as potential. Please check if they would be helpful to me or not.

And for those who you deem to be useful, I will leave the decision to you, as I know you have the necessary channels to reach me and them.

I miss you dearly, Mother; please stay safe.

Your daughter

Seraphina."

As Miriam read through the heartfelt words of her daughter, a mixture of emotions washed over her. Pride swelled within her at Seraphina's achievements and determination, yet sadness tugged at her heartstrings as she sensed the growing distance between them.

"She is getting farther and farther away, becoming like them..." Miriam whispered to herself, her voice heavy with melancholy. She couldn't help but reminisce about the innocent smiles of Seraphina's childhood, contrasting sharply with the calculated determination evident in her daughter's words.

With a heavy sigh, Miriam acknowledged the path that Seraphina had chosen, understanding the weight of her daughter's ambitions and the sacrifices she was willing to make to achieve them.

"My daughter, if that is what you wish for, then I can only support your will," Miriam murmured softly to herself, her gaze lingering on the letter in her hand. Though she longed for Seraphina's happiness and peace, she knew that her daughter's journey was her own to walk, filled with challenges and choices that only she could make.

With a sense of resolve, Miriam turned her attention to the small paper enclosed with the letter, her thoughts already drifting towards the task ahead. As she scanned the list of names, her silver eyes turned pitch white and filled with complete brightness.

With a sense of solemn purpose, she began to mumble the names on the paper, her voice resonating with a power that seemed to transcend mortal boundaries.

As each name passed her lips, a profound energy surged forth, causing the ink on the paper to shimmer and fade away.

In its place, the same names began to emerge, but this time written not in ordinary ink but in symbols of power and destiny.

Some names appeared as if etched in the holy light of yellow, excluding the feeling of being helpful.

Others manifested as if forged from flames, their fiery script dancing with an intensity that spoke of being hard to control.

Miriam's hands moved with a grace that seemed guided by unseen forces, her fingers tracing the contours of each newly inscribed name with reverence and purpose.

—PAT!

However, what she did wasn't without a price, as blood dripped from her nose and eyes, the corners of her fingers getting more and more frosty with each second.

She felt the pain all across her body, yet she knew this was the necessary price.

As Miriam's fingers passed through the last name on the list, her voice faltered slightly as she read it.

"Astron Natusalune!"

At that moment, a sudden surge of power emanated from the paper, causing it to burst into flames. The fiery inferno consumed the parchment, engulfing Astron Natusalune's name in a swirling vortex of pitch-obsidian and purple hues.

Miriam staggered back in shock as the intense heat washed over her, her body trembling with the strain of channeling such potent energies.

Blood dripped from her nose and eyes, staining the pristine surface of the desk below. The frost on her fingertips spread, creeping up her arms with each passing second, a chilling reminder of the toll her actions had taken on her body.

THUD!

With a strangled gasp, Miriam collapsed to the ground, coughing up mouthfuls of blood that splattered onto the floor below. The room spun around her, the air thick with the scent of burning paper and the acrid tang of her own blood.

Just as the room seemed to be fading into silence, the envelope containing the letter and the now-destroyed list of names began to close on its own accord.

Miriam lay on the ground unconscious as the envelope transformed into particles of light, shimmering and dancing in the air before disappearing into nothingness, leaving her alone in the silence of the room.

<Monday Morning, Arcadia Hunter Academy.>

The past two weeks had been rather uneventful for Irina in terms of the academy. She had been training, studying, and playing games, but the academy had been rather quiet with the assignments. But that didn't mean those days were easy.

In fact, it was the opposite. Though the academy was quiet, there were many reporters whom she needed to entertain after the announcement of Phantom's Land. Many news channels thought it was rather untruthful to explain the situation.

Thus, they were trying really hard to get something from her, but in the end, they couldn't, as Irina had preserved it well.

But that made her psychologically exhausted, resulting in her playing video games all night. The VR game was somehow addicting, and she couldn't help but grind it rank. The sense of feeling I achieved something by ranking up was just too alluring.

Yet, now she was feeling the repercussions of it.

"Yaaawn.....I am so sleepy..."

As Irina stirred from her slumber, she couldn't shake off the lingering heaviness of sleep that weighed on her eyelids. With a tired yawn, she staggered to wakefulness, rubbing her eyes as she tried to adjust to the morning light filtering through her window.

"Nooooo....."

Glancing at the hour on her smartwatch, she groaned inwardly. It was still early in the morning, much earlier than she would have preferred to wake up. Two hours of sleep just wasn't enough to replenish her energy reserves.

"Haaaah... Only two hours..." she muttered to herself, resigned to the fact that she wouldn't be able to catch any more rest. With another weary yawn, she dragged herself out of bed, her feet shuffling across the floor as she made her way to the kitchen.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the air as Irina prepared herself a strong cup to help shake off the grogginess. As she sipped on the hot beverage, she scrolled through the latest trends on social media, catching up on the news and gossip circulating around the academy.

'Interesting....There are this many seniors dating with the freshmen....I don't understand; what do they even find in those seniors anyway?'

The sky outside was beginning to lighten with the promise of a new day, and Irina felt a sudden urge to embrace the fresh morning air.

'Should just run a little bit? I don't think my head is clear enough.'

Setting down her empty mug, she slipped on her running shoes and headed out the door, determined to clear her mind with a brisk run around the campus grounds.

Today, there will be another assignment according to the schedule posted by the academy. Therefore, she needed to be clearheaded but not tired at the same time. Thus, she went with a light jogging session that wouldn't tire her that much.

As Irina jogged along the campus grounds, she couldn't help but notice a group of girls up ahead, also engaged in a morning run. They jogged together in a tight-knit formation, their laughter and lively chatter filling the air around them.

'Campus Ladies, huh?'

Irina thought to herself, recognizing the group as one of the newer clubs that had recently formed on campus.

She had been invited to join them, but the thought of spending time with those girls didn't quite appeal to her.

They seemed more interested in gossip and frivolous activities than in anything of substance. Though this type of act to get rid of stress made sense, she had the pride of a lion, thinking she didn't need to resort to such tactics. There was no way the academy could stress her after all!

Just as Irina was about to speed up to pass them, her curiosity was piqued by one of the girls' voices.

"Guys, did you see the new boys ranking?"