

## H. Academy 371

### Chapter 371 86.1 - Sword and the Guide

"Today marks the beginning of our first practical swordsmanship session."

With those words, Eleanor seized the students. Though the semester was about to end and the other weapons would be left for the second semester, the academy decided to let the students get familiar with the most widely used weapon.

"We'll start with the basics," Eleanor continued, pacing back and forth at the front of the room. "Of course, footwork, posture, and grip are essential foundations upon which all else is built. However, different from the swordsmanship dojos and the families, the academy's curriculum of swords will be vastly different, as you already know from the theoretical explanations."

With those words, Eleanor flicked her fingers, and a hologram appeared right before her face. There stood a figure of a young man with white hair standing. His posture is solid as if he could take the mountains all by himself.

On his hand stood a simple sword. A slightly long sword that could be found everywhere.

"This is footage of the second-previous generation hero, Linhelm Middleton."

Saying that Eleanor looked at Lucas and Julia. It made sense since he was their great-great-grandfather who lost his life on one of the most legendary battlefields that this world had seen.

'Defense of Linkeln.'

Remembering the lore from the game, I couldn't help but appreciate the person in the footage. If the stories about him were correct, he was a very noble person and one of the biggest reasons why the human domain could still be protected up to this point.

"This footage," Eleanor continued, her tone solemn, "is one of the biggest reasons that humanity can now hold themselves against the Demons and the other races in terms of military strength."

With a flick of her hand, the hologram came to life, displaying Linhelm in action. The students watched in awe as he effortlessly cut through hordes of flooding monsters, his movements fluid and precise.

But just as the tension in the room reached its peak, Eleanor halted the video, her gaze sweeping over the expectant faces of the students.

"Now, can any of you tell me what this is?" she asked, her voice cutting through the silence.

Several students hesitated, exchanging uncertain glances before one finally spoke up.

"That's the swordsmanship of the Federation," a voice called out from the back of the room. "The first stage of Federal Swordplay." It was Irina who was the best student in terms of academics in the classroom.

Eleanor nodded in approval, acknowledging the correct response.

"That's correct, Student Irina," she confirmed. "The Federation's swordsmanship techniques have been refined over centuries of warfare, and they form the backbone of our military strength. And this footage is the first display of the technique that was formed by General Linhelm Middleton."

With that, she resumed the video, allowing the students to continue watching in rapt attention as Linhelm Middleton's legacy unfolded before their eyes.

CLICK!

After finishing the display, Eleanor looked at the students.

"As you already know, the Federal Swordplay has a different view towards swordsmanship than the sword families or swordsmen who pursue the peak of swordsmanship.

The whole centuries of humans being forced back by other races who had access to mana from the start had changed the view of the government. Since we didn't have the luxury to pursue greatness while facing the threat of being extinct, the government could only prioritize efficiency.

And the Federal Swordplay does just that. It pursues systematic and efficiency at its core. Since every Awakened has an affinity with different elements, to make sure that every Awakened could use the most basic weapon effectively, the swordplay is formed as attributeless and enchantment on its core."

Eleanor described and then conjured a simple sword in her hand. It was a clear display of mana proficiency, fitting to the person who had the nickname Invoker.

"And, now we will start with the most basic unit of Federal Swordplay."

SWOOSH!

Saying that, she slashed the space right before her face. It was a simple slash, something that didn't contain any attribute of mana at all. It was just that the sword was coated with mana, and that was it.

PUFF!

However, the air was split into two, and some ripples were formed in the air.

"The most basic unit of the Federal Swordplay. 'Stripe.'"

Once again, she held the sword before her, its blade gleaming under the artificial lights of the classroom.

SWOOSH!

With a swift motion, she slashed through the air, leaving behind nothing but a faint trail of mana.

"The stripe is formed by two factors," Eleanor explained, her tone authoritative yet measured. "First, the physical force behind the swing, and second, the coated raw mana."

As she spoke, she gestured towards the invisible line that hung in the air, its presence palpable despite its intangibility.

"The physical force provides the momentum needed to cut through the air, while the coated mana adds an additional layer of power and stability to the strike," she continued. "Together, they form the foundation of the Federal Swordplay, allowing even the most inexperienced Awakened to wield a sword with deadly precision."

Eleanor's gaze swept over the students, ensuring that each one was following along with her explanation.

And then, she clenched her hand on the sword. Following that, three flashes of strikes appeared in the air, cutting the space right before her once again.

Even without my special eyes activated, I could see the strikes forming a (I).

SWOOSH! SWOOSH! SWOOSH!

And then, contrary to the previous strikes, this one looked a little bit different. The air, which was cut in the motion of (I), suddenly compressed and then was shot forward.

'Ho? Would you look at that?'

With just three strikes, the raw mana trail that was left by the strikes suddenly formed a reaction and then made the air shoot forward like a compressed blade.

'Utilizing the compression of air and the differential pressure. It is sure scientific.' With that, she looked into the students once again.

"Throughout the coming weeks, we will delve deeper into the intricacies of the Federal Swordplay, exploring its various techniques and applications," she announced. "But for now, let us focus on mastering the basics."

As Eleanor finished her demonstration of the advanced technique, the room fell into a momentary silence, broken only by the soft hum of the holographic display.

Then, a curious voice piped up from the midst of the students.

"What did you just do, Instructor Eleanor?"

Eleanor didn't smile, but she still looked pleased that someone had picked up on the subtleties of her technique. "What you witnessed was a technique containing three 'Stripes' executed in quick succession," she explained. "The interaction between these 'Stripes' created a reaction, compressing the air and propelling it forward."

She could see understanding dawning on some of the students' faces, particularly those who had a deeper grasp of magical principles.

For them, the significance of her demonstration went beyond mere physical movement as they could form the connection of the basic blocks of magic formulas as well.

"Now, I want each of you to practice the 'Stripe,'" Eleanor instructed, gesturing to the students to begin. "My two assistant instructors and I will be circulating to observe your training and provide feedback when necessary."

With that, she stepped back, allowing the students to start their own training.

The training grounds prepared for the Federal Swordsmanship were a little different from the other ones.

The footage of the swordplay and 'Stripe' was shown as a hologram right before each student's dummy, and the students were guided to hit the dummy on their own.

'Now, what to do.'

Looking at the sword in my hand and the dummy before me, I started pondering.

To be honest, I had considered using the sword before, but I had never done so. After all, there was no reason for me to do it.

I had myself busy with practicing daggers, marksmanship, and mana control. Thus, I didn't have the time. I also didn't focus on the classes that much recently with all these things happening around the academy; thus, I didn't have much practice with the sword.

'Though, I shouldn't give Eleanor the material to pick upon me.'

Since that woman was rather annoying to deal with when she wanted to, I grabbed the sword and observed the movements shown in the figure.

'Also, my occupation is a weapon master. There is no way a sword is not included in all those weapons, so it is not a completely bad thing.'

After all, at the end of the day, one way or another, I was going to learn how to use swords.

As I observed the holographic display showing the technique of the 'Stripe,' I couldn't help but feel a bit apprehensive.

Sure, I had some experience with other weapons like daggers, but swordsmanship was a whole different ball game.

However, Eleanor's piercing gaze sweeping over the room reminded me that there was no room for hesitation. With a determined nod to myself, I tightened my grip on the sword and stepped forward towards the dummy.

Taking a deep breath to steady my nerves, I mirrored the movements I had just witnessed in the hologram.

SLASH! The first strike felt awkward, lacking the fluidity and precision I had seen in Eleanor's demonstration.

'Hmm...The feeling of the sword is a lot different than chakrams or daggers. The center of gravity is drastically different.'

My body had already been trained with daggers, and my muscles were most likely adapted to them optimally. Therefore, using a slightly longer weapon proved to be a little challenging at first.

But, well....[Perceptive Insight] was clearly a cheat.

Focusing on the physical force behind each swing and coating the blade with mana as instructed, I slashed once again.

THUD! The mana rippled around the space as the sword moved. And then, it struck the dummy, slashing it down.

'That is passable.'

It was more satisfactory than the previous one. I was grasping the basics of it rapidly, and I could see the progress with my own eyes.

Yet, before I could think any further, suddenly, I sensed a presence.

"Student Astron."

It was Eleanor.

## Chapter 372 86.2 - Sword and the Guide

Everyone has those times when they doubt their decisions until this point. It is inevitable as long as you are not a complete narcissist who thinks of yourself as always right.

Doubting is human nature, and every human has doubts at some point.

Eleanor was no different than that.

She rose up in the ranks as a Hunter, trying to improve herself for the upcoming future and for her role.

After all, without knowing the path, how could she guide?

But even then, improving as an Awakened and a hunter had never been an easy task. It was taxing, and it took a lot of things from the person itself.

The more battles one encountered, the more fights one had with monsters, the more they would realize how cruel this world was, and to fit the world, one would need to become cruel as well.

And Eleanor was no exception. Being a genius hunter, she faced countless trials and countless betrayals.

In the end, seeing the real human nature, she became cold and stiff. She couldn't maintain that zealousness when she was young.

That was how it was.

And honestly, she had never regretted her actions or how she behaved. Sure, she had been evaluating the students and the cadets according to their talents, but she didn't see anything wrong with that.

After all, when she was a hunter, she had seen a lot of her colleagues who thought highly of themselves because of the flattery of their peers.

And none of them met a good ending. Thus, for Eleanor, overly flattering someone in this line of work was no different than sending them to death marching.

Thus, she was harsh on students so that they wouldn't push themselves to death.

At least, that was what she thought so.

However, there was one big problem that needed to be questioned in this part. Sure, it was better for the Awakened with low talent to know their limits.

But who gave her the right to judge who was talented or not? What made her judgment better than others? Was it because she was the 'Invoker'? Was it because she was in the top 100 of Hunter's ranking?

Which one of those was the answer?

And most importantly – could she guarantee that her judgment was always correct?



For the first time, Eleanor was questioning herself.

'I might have made a mistake.'

She thought inwardly, observing the students who were training with their swords. Everyone was practicing, trying to refine the most basic techniques.

In fact, the whole purpose of this training was to give an idea about the general level of mana control among the freshmen and how good they were at understanding the Federal Swordplay.

After all, the Federal Swordplay was developed so that even the most basic non-trained Awakened would be able to learn it fast enough and would move as a unit in the military.

Amidst the flurry of activity in the training room, Eleanor's gaze settled on a figure standing apart from the others.

It was Astron Natusalune, one of the students who had recently caught her attention for reasons she couldn't quite articulate.

In the past, Astron had been something of a troublemaker, often not paying attention in class and prone to challenging authority at every turn.

His behavior had irked Eleanor, especially since Eleanor thought he was not even trying at his classes. It was like he didn't care about the grades at all. Thus, Eleanor was sure that this student would be expelled for his low grades and assumed that paying attention to him would be pointless.

However, she needed to make an example of him so that she could better control other students. Thus, she picked upon him from time to time. After all, students needed to know that going on her bad side is not something desirable.

But in recent weeks, she had noticed a change in him. But it was so subtle that she would have missed it if she had not paid attention. His presence was a lot less, as if something like a [Trait] was letting him conceal himself constantly.

And then, it was the events surrounding him. Though each one of them had their own main characters, somehow he was in every one of them. And considering that each of those events was somehow dangerous, even the fact that he survived showed that he was different from his past self.

Eleanor couldn't deny that she was intrigued by this change in Astron and knew that she needed to confirm it.

As she watched him practicing with his sword, Eleanor found herself wondering about the true nature of talent and potential. Could someone like Astron, who had once been dismissed as a troublemaker, possess hidden depths that even she had overlooked?

'This is quite possible. I am not omnipotent after all, and I can certainly make mistakes.'

Eleanor knew she was prideful, but she was also not stupid.

As Eleanor continued to observe Astron, her trained eyes honed in on the subtle nuances of his movements.

From the way he held the 'weapon' to the precision of his footwork, she could discern a level of control over his body that belied his previous reputation as a troublemaker.

There was a fluidity to his motions that spoke of dedication and practice.

However, despite his evident improvement, Eleanor couldn't shake the feeling that there were still areas where Astron fell short.

For instance, his control over 'weapons' in general was good. But, if it was evaluated as a 'sword,' it fell short. This was expected since he was not a sword user.

'For a dagger and a marksman, his performance is still better than expected.'

Looking at his scores and the information registered in the academy database, she thought.

'His mana control can also check for improvement.' With her exceptional mana sensitivity, she could detect the subtle fluctuations in his mana control, the slight inconsistencies that marred his otherwise impressive performance.

It was clear to Eleanor that while Astron had made strides in mastering the basics of body control, there were still fundamental aspects of mana manipulation that he had yet to grasp fully.

'...But, still...It feels like he has overcome those small details with his overall understanding. I am even sure that he didn't notice the mistakes he was making because they became a habit, and they are working. This is the behavior of a self-

taught Awakened.' His lack of understanding of certain techniques and principles was evident in the way he executed his strikes, revealing a gap in his knowledge that could prove to be a hindrance in the long run.

'Of course, the personalized training programs and individual guidance are scheduled for the next semester, so this is something that is not normally that important. But, this is a good opportunity.'

The way the academy worked was pretty simple. In the first semester, the students would be mostly welcomed to life as Hunters. Thus, most of the courses were actually easy and free. At least, that is how it looked from the outside, but in reality, it was different.

In essence, the whole first semester was itself a test to see the raw talents and observe them without any outside interference.

It was the second semester where the specialized guidance would take place. Therefore, normally, the academy wouldn't interfere with the students too much right now.

But Eleanor decided to make an exception to that rule.

'Though it may be a little selfish, it is fine for me since the headmaster can't possibly care.'

After all, this was how the world worked. Strong was exceptional, and exceptional had special rights.

Approaching him, she created a small barrier around them to isolate the space and their talk.

CLANK! As the sword of the academy hit the dummy, she called his name.

"Student Astron."

The body of the student came to a halt. And then, Astron turned his face to Eleanor, locking his eyes with her.

"Instructor Eleanor," Astron greeted, his expression unreadable as he awaited her next words.

Eleanor studied him for a moment, noting the intensity in his gaze and the poised readiness in his stance. She couldn't help but feel a sense of curiosity once again as she questioned herself.

'Is this his usual demeanor? He looks sharp, that is befitting of a cadet.'

"Student Astron," she began, her tone firm yet devoid of warmth. "I've been observing your progress during these training sessions, and I must say, I've noticed some remarkable improvements."

Astron's eyebrows lifted slightly in surprise, but he remained silent, waiting for Eleanor to continue.

"You've shown a commendable level of dedication and discipline," Eleanor continued, her gaze unwavering. "Your control over your body and your mana has improved significantly since the beginning of the semester."

Astron's expression didn't change as he nodded his head. "Thank you for your words."

"However," Eleanor added, her voice taking on a more serious tone, "there are still areas where you can refine your skills further."

She paused, allowing her words to sink in before elaborating.

"For instance," Eleanor continued, her grip firm on the sword, "the way you infuse your mana into your blade."

With a practiced motion, she demonstrated, channeling her mana into the sword. Astron watched intently as the blade seemed to shimmer with an ethereal glow, a testament to Eleanor's meticulous mana control.

"Notice how the mana flows seamlessly along the surface of the blade," Eleanor explained, her voice steady. "This ensures maximum efficiency and enhances the cutting power of the weapon."

Astron nodded, his gaze focused on the demonstration before him.

"However," Eleanor continued, her tone becoming more pointed, "I've observed that in your technique, the mana is not distributed evenly. Instead, it seems to gather in pockets along the interior of the blade."

She paused, allowing her words to sink in before continuing.

"This creates inefficiencies in your mana usage," she explained, her expression serious. "As the mana pools within the blade, it cancels out the tension on the surface, reducing the effectiveness of your strikes."

Astron's brow furrowed in concentration as he processed her words, realizing the implications of what she was saying. His eyes shone for a split second, and then they were slightly widened in understanding.

"While this may not be immediately apparent in shorter weapons or projectiles," Eleanor added, "it becomes more pronounced in longer blades, where the distribution of mana is crucial for maintaining the integrity of the weapon."

She gestured towards the sword in her hand, indicating the importance of proper mana control in maximizing its potential as a weapon of choice for Hunters.

"It's a subtle detail," Eleanor concluded, "but mastering this aspect of your technique will greatly enhance your effectiveness in combat."

Astron nodded, a determined glint in his eyes as he absorbed Eleanor's feedback. It was clear that he understood the importance of refining his technique and mastering the intricacies of mana manipulation.

"Thank you, Instructor Eleanor," he said, his voice resolute. "I'll make sure to focus on improving my mana control moving forward."

'Hmm....His attitude....My approach was really wrong...'

Realizing this, Eleanor couldn't help but curse herself inwardly.

"Now, please demonstrate. I will check upon it and will give you feedback."

Thus, she could only compensate for her past self since it would only be fair to do so.

#### Chapter 373 86.3 - Sword and the Guide [Interlude

The world of students would be in a weird state, if it was compared to the world of professionalism.

The adults who are working are in constant competition. The money, fame, power, and a lot of other things.

All of them are important in the world of adults, and most of them tend to become slaves for all those things.

It is also the same for students. The adolescent youngsters who were slowly learning the value of money, power, and fame would also seek that.

The competition would be fierce, and everyone would seek the opportunities that would be thrown at them.

That was especially the case for the students of the Hunter Academies since, contrary to other occupations, their strength was directly related to their prowess.

Therefore, every ounce of opportunity was very important for these students.

And amongst those opportunities, there was one that even the heirs of high-ranking families would never refuse.

Guidance from the Invoker, Eleanor White.

A certain Hunter who had stormed through the ranks in the past ten years. The genius Hunter was able to control her mana so well that the title Invoker was given to her.

And now, the students get the chance to get guidance from such a figure. Thus, they were doing their best to show their presence.

Taylor was no different from others. Even if her family was rich and was a behemoth in the media industry, the amount of instructors that her family could hire was limited.

Today, however, something unexpected caught Taylor's attention. As she was doing her best to show her talent, she saw some students pointing at someone.

Curiosity piqued, she approached, only to witness a sight that made her blood boil.

Standing there, Astron was engaged in what seemed like an intense conversation with Eleanor White. The same guy she had dismissed as talentless and beneath her. Eleanor was directly talking to him, her expression serious and focused. Taylor couldn't hear what they were saying; Eleanor had erected a sound barrier around them, ensuring privacy.

Taylor's fists clenched at her sides, her nails digging into her palms. It was one thing to be ignored, but to see someone she considered unworthy receiving the guidance she so desperately sought was infuriating.

She could see the intensity in Eleanor's eyes as she spoke to Astron and the attentive look on his face as he listened.

'How could this be happening?' Taylor thought, struggling to contain her emotions. 'What could she possibly see in him?'

The scene played out in front of her, a silent tableau of instruction and learning, with Astron at the center. Taylor's mind raced, plotting her next move.

'I was about to let this guy go, but I guess I loosened his leash way too much.' She couldn't let this slight go unanswered. After all, in the place of her, that guy was there, with his worthless presence.

If he was gaining favor with Eleanor White, she needed to find a way to either match his progress or sabotage it.

But for now, all she could do was watch, seething with envy and frustration, as the sound barrier kept her from knowing the secrets being shared just a few feet away.

As for the inside of the barrier, Eleanor was observing Astron and was about to give him feedback.

"Now, please demonstrate. I will check up on it and give you feedback," Eleanor instructed, her tone authoritative yet encouraging.

Astron nodded and took a deep breath, focusing his mana on the blade as Eleanor had shown. The sword began to glow, though not as uniformly as Eleanor's demonstration. Eleanor's sharp eyes immediately caught the subtle flaws in his technique.

"Stop," she commanded softly. "Let's correct those errors."

She stepped closer, placing her hand over his to guide him. "Feel the flow of mana," she instructed. "You're allowing it to pool here and here," she pointed to the specific spots on the blade, "which disrupts the overall tension. Now, focus on spreading it evenly along the surface."

Her words were sharp, and her demeanor was also sharp. There was no ounce of hesitation in her movements nor any type of shyness or shame. 'Still, not bad.' Astron closed his eyes and concentrated, feeling the flow of mana as Eleanor had described. He adjusted his control, trying to spread the energy more evenly along the blade.

"Good, now try again," Eleanor encouraged, stepping back to observe.

Astron infused the sword with mana once more. This time, the glow was more consistent, though still not perfect.



"Better," Eleanor acknowledged with a nod. "But you're still concentrating too much mana at the hilt. Distribute it evenly from the hilt to the tip."

Astron adjusted his technique again, taking Eleanor's feedback into account. He focused intensely, ensuring that the mana flowed smoothly from the hilt to the tip of the blade. The sword glowed with a uniform light, indicating a more efficient distribution of energy.

"Excellent," Eleanor praised, a hint of satisfaction in her voice. Her eyes shone with a strange glint. It was like the eyes of a person who had found a new satisfying toy. Seeing the raw talent and the youth, she somehow entered a strange mood. She wanted to mold this raw talent.

"You're improving rapidly. Now, let's refine it further."

They repeated the process several times; each time, Eleanor pinpointed minor adjustments, and Astron corrected them swiftly. He learned with remarkable efficiency, not making the same mistake twice. Eleanor could see the focus and adaptability in his eyes.

He didn't speak or say anything. He just did as he told.

'Still, he adjusts the things I am saying to himself. He is not directly copying everything. This kid has a knack for learning. He absorbs everything like a vortex.'

Eleanor disliked unnecessary flattery and words, and that was the best course of attitude since she liked those who focused on the things that benefitted them.

As they continued, the glow of the sword became steadier and more vibrant, a clear sign of Astron's progress.

"Very good," Eleanor said finally, a rare smile touching her lips. "You've made significant strides in a short amount of time. Keep practicing this technique, and it will become second nature to you."

"Understood, Instructor Eleanor."

Eleanor nodded in acknowledgment, but she also felt like she understood his attitude a lot more now.

'Mirroring principle, isn't it? He is behaving like how he is being treated. At the start of the semester, he was a bit different, but his rebellious attitude was probably an attempt to show that he could also treat me the same. Is this his way of protecting his own borders? That may be the case.'

She felt like she was remembering the time two months ago a lot more now, but she knew it couldn't be helped. She was an adult, so she knew how children behaved.

'Since I can not change my past actions, I should change how I behave now. Let's see if my observations are correct.'

With that thought, she waved her hand, and the sound barrier was dispersed. But, at that moment, she noticed a lot of students looking at her and Astron. And the gazes directed at him weren't specifically well intended.

'Ho? Would you look at that?'

She smiled inwardly, seeing the reactions from the cadets.

'They are quite envious.'

She threw a slight gaze at Astron and thought.

'Let's see how you deal with this. It will be a good test for you.'

With that, she left his presence with a nod, returned to her own location, and continued to observe the students.

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I stood still for a moment after Eleanor returned to her position, processing everything she had taught me.

'Really, the title Invoker is a no joke.' The subtle adjustments she pointed out had made a significant difference, and I could feel the improvement in my technique.

You need to remember that I learned how to control mana thanks to Senior Maya, but even then, it seemed my control wasn't complete. After all, Senior Maya taught me for only a little while, and I filled in the blanks on my own. And considering that, at that time, I was a complete beginner, it is not surprising that I made some mistakes at certain points.

'But this....' I glanced around and noticed the other students' envious gazes directed at me. Shrugging it off, I focused instead on my progress. It is not like they were different than before, anyway.

Turning back to my practice dummy, I took a deep breath and infused my blade with mana once more, applying Eleanor's corrections. The sword glowed with a consistent, even light, signaling a proper distribution of energy from hilt to tip. I swung the blade in a series of practiced motions, feeling the smooth flow of power with each strike.

SWOOSH!

The air parted cleanly with each swing, and the blade left behind faint trails of mana, just as Eleanor had demonstrated.

'Indeed, the feeling is different. So that's what I was doing wrong,' I thought, reflecting on Eleanor's feedback about my mana pooling in the blade.

I had been unconsciously allowing my energy to gather in my pockets, which disrupted the tension and reduced the effectiveness of my strikes. Now, with the mana flowing evenly, my strikes felt more powerful and precise.

As I continued practicing, I felt a newfound feeling in my swordsmanship, but I knew that it wasn't limited only to that.

'This can be utilized a lot more with Celestalith as well. It even opens up new possibilities for the rifle form since I found a better way to utilize compressed bullets now.'

Lost in my practice, I was suddenly interrupted by a voice behind me.

"You....I thought you were trying to lay low."

It was a voice that was familiar but not expected. After all, Irina, in general, didn't interact with me too much in the classes.

"I was."

"Then, what was that commotion?"

"I don't remember a commotion happening."

"Even if you don't consider it as a commotion, everyone's gazes are on you now."

"Let them be. They won't be able to do anything."

"But, won't this go against your intentions?"

"I can't control what Eleanor does, so this was inevitable. I can only opt according to the situation."

"I guess this is just like you."

"It is."

"But well, in any case, now that you gathered everyone's attention, you gave me a reason to compete with you as well."

"Compete?"

At the mention of competition, a smirk appeared on Irina's face.

"Yes, compete." Saying that, she raised her sword.

"Let's spar."

And pointed it to me.

Chapter 374 87.1 - No title but a quick spar

Being a noble is not as easy as everyone thinks. Irina had experienced this firsthand with her progress-obsessed mother.

From an early age, she learned how to use magic, how read, how write, how dance, how move elegantly, and how behave according to the noble antique.

Even though the world got more modern and the practices of the past were mostly abandoned by the general public, the high society was different.

Because they needed to uphold a certain image and the high society had its own way of operating, the Emberheart Family naturally followed those rules as well.

It was not like that would damage them or anything.

Therefore, from a young age, Irina learned how to use the sword. Even though it was evident that the heir of the Emberheart family was bound to be a mage and have a trait related to magic, she still learned how to use the sword.

It was because using a sword wasn't only related to combat, but it was also viewed as an aristocratic way of displaying elegance.

The weapon that was so widely used that it had already been deeply integrated into human culture.

Adding to her mother's obsession with Irina's success and education, Irina practiced her sword countless times at the end of the day. She was taught by many famous sword instructors how to use the sword, and she even learned some fire magic that was compatible with swords.

As a result, weirdly enough, Irina could be counted as the person with a huge amount of knowledge on swords.

Though she hated all those times that she was forced to train the weapon she never liked, at the end of the day, as a child, she could never go against the head of the family, and she could only comply with the training.

'Let's see what expression you will make when you see this.'

And now, for the first time in her life, she thought that it was good that she had learned how to use the sword.

Because she could teach this arrogant guy a lesson and see the expression he would make. After all, she had lost to him in the past, even if it was not directly stated.

Normally, she didn't interact with him in the classroom with everyone present since, at first, she didn't have any reason nor any desire to. Though the 'desire' part changed over time, with the classroom positions already being formed as the semester had started, she couldn't change her seat, neither could she change his.

Thus, at the end of the day, she couldn't interact with him as she wanted without any reason, thanks to the societal chains that bound her.

Though, now, that reason had presented itself. After all, with Eleanor personally teaching him, he had become the center of attention for a short amount of time, and people knew Irina as someone who was hotheaded and liked challenges.

Thus, it would be reasonable for Irina Emberheart and others to challenge this guy who suddenly became the center of attention.

And Irina wouldn't miss such an opportunity.

"Let's spar."

As she announced, Astron stared at the sword, then met her gaze. "Is this even allowed?" he asked, a hint of skepticism in his voice.

Irina tilted her head slightly, considering his question. "Technically, no. But since when have you ever followed the rules to the letter? Besides, no one will object if it's just a friendly spar."

"Your words can be counted as slander. I had never broken any school rules before." Astron retorted back. That guy was as annoying as he was ever, but at this point, Irina had become so used to it that she even felt comfortable with such a response.

"Then, does that mean you are planning to do so in the future?"

"I did not say such a thing."

"But, you implied it."

"Whether I implied or not depends on how you perceive. It is your problem if you want to think that way."

"Tsk. Annoying bastard."

"....."

"Anyway, since it is a friendly spar, I am sure no one will say anything. And it feels like instructor Eleanor's goal was exactly that, don't you think?"

"Friendly? I doubt it." Astron said, looking at the students whose attention was on him and her talking. There was a fierce glint in their eyes, and it seemed they wanted to know what made Eleanor personally help him.

"As friendly as it can get," Irina retorted, her eyes glinting with challenge.

"Alright," he agreed, drawing his own sword. "If that is what you want, I will entertain you a little." Though his words were flat and emotionless from the outside, Irina could see that he was somehow enthusiastic about using a sword.

'Just as they say, Sword is every man's romance.'

She thought proudly and then raised her sword.

They squared off, the air around them thick with anticipation. Students began to gather around, their whispers filling the air as they realized a duel was about to take place.

Irina's stance was impeccable, a testament to her rigorous training of before. Even if she was a mage, it was evident that she could use a sword to some extent when necessary.

Astron mirrored her, feeling the weight of the sword in his hand.

"I will limit my speed and strength to match yours."

"You don't need to."

"No. I don't want to beat you because I am a close combatant."

"You really are sure you can beat me, aren't you?"

"...." Astron shrugged his shoulders as he took his position as well.

"Ready?" she asked, her voice steady.

"Always," he replied.

SWOOSH! Irina moved first, her sword slicing through the air with precision.

It was a quick 'Stripe.' The same basic unit that all other students were supposed to practice. She was intentionally using this basic unit so that this guy wouldn't have the right to complain to her when he lost.

'Even though this is not how I had been taught, it is pretty similar to the Magic Blocks.' She thought as her sword rushed to the Astron.



CLANK!

Astron parried, their blades clashing with a resonant ring. She was fast, her movements fluid and graceful, a stark contrast to the aggression in her eyes.

SWOOSH! SWOOSH! Irina launched a series of rapid strikes, each one a testament to her rigorous training. Her blade moved with a fluidity that only years of practice could achieve, each 'Stripe' executed with an incredibly swift form.

CLANK! CLANK! Astron blocked each strike, his movements less refined but equally determined. His eyes never left hers, reading her intentions, adapting to her rhythm.

'This guy....But, I won't let you.'

Irina pressed her advantage, her strikes coming faster and harder. She used the footwork and techniques she had drilled into her body, her attacks a blend of precision and power. She aimed to overwhelm Astron, to show him that her knowledge and experience with the sword were not something that he could expect.

After all, how could he, since she was a mage? Not many people knew that high-ranking families were supposed to learn how to use swords either.

CLANK! CLANK! SWOOSH! But contrary to what she expected, he somehow responded with a combination of blocks and parries, with his own strikes emerging as counterattacks.

'This is really!'

While his technique lacked the finesse of Irina's, there was an undeniable rawness to his movements, a growing understanding of the 'Stripe' and its applications.

'Did he use a sword before? But, he previously said, he didn't, and he wouldn't lie for things like this.' His strikes were experimental, formed on the spot, each one a testament to his quick learning and adaptability.

"You really are not normal," Irina acknowledged between strikes, her voice steady. "But you're still lacking."

"We'll see about that," Astron replied, his tone calm and focused.

Irina moved with a swift, elegant strike aimed at his side.

SWOOSH! Astron blocked, his blade meeting hers with a loud clash. He stepped back, using the momentum to create space, then lunged forward with a strike of his own.

CLANK! Irina parried, their blades locked for a brief moment. She could see the cold focus in his eyes, the silent challenge that he posed.

'This time, you won't.'

It fueled her own resolve, pushing her to move faster and strike harder.

SWOOSH! SWOOSH! CLANK! CLANK! Their swords danced in the air, a flurry of strikes and parries that left the other students in awe. Irina's advantage was evident; her previous knowledge and experience gave her the upper hand.

Yet, Astron was closing the gap, his movements becoming more precise, his understanding of the 'Stripe' growing with each exchange.

Astron shifted his stance, his eyes narrowing as he prepared for the next attack. He struck with a powerful 'Stripe,' putting all his strength and mana into the blow.

CLANK! Irina blocked, but the force of the strike pushed her back slightly. She adjusted her grip, her eyes narrowing in determination. "Not bad," she admitted, a hint of a smile playing on her lips.

"...."

Astron pressed his advantage, launching a series of rapid strikes. His movements were still raw, but there was a growing goal in his attacks as if he was already forming a strategy.

SWOOSH! SWOOSH! CLANK! Irina deflected each strike, her movements becoming more defensive as she assessed his growth.

She could see the potential in his technique, the promise of a possibly strong swordsman in the making.

'But, let's see if you can deal with this.'

Yet, Irina wasn't someone who could be neglected. After all, she also formed her own strategy.

Imagining a formation of magic in her head, she somehow tried to construct it inside her mind. Rather than using Basic Blocks, she imagined the spell with 'Stripes.'

The slashes of a sword and the trails of mana formed a technique in her head, and she visualized it in a split second.

It wasn't something that could be explained by purely logic, as it was close to intuition for her.

SWIRL! Her mana swirled as it coated the sword. Then, she raised her sword and started to implement the technique she had visualized.

SWIRL! Irina's mana swirled as it coated her sword. She raised her blade, her eyes locked on Astron, and began to implement the technique she had visualized in her mind.

SWOOSH! SWOOSH! SWOOSH! The first three 'Stripes' formed a triangle in the air, each slash precise and deliberate. These corresponded to the magic block 'Generate,' creating a stable framework of mana that hung in the air, glowing faintly.

Astron moved to counter, his blade intercepting hers with a series of quick parries.

CLANK! CLANK! CLANK! He could feel the intensity of her strikes and the added complexity in her movements, but he was holding his ground.

SWOOSH! SWOOSH! SWOOSH! The next three 'Stripes' connected the corners of the triangle with quick, tangent lines. These corresponded to the magic block 'Rotate,' causing the mana to swirl and shift, creating a vortex of energy around the initial structure.

Astron adjusted his stance, his eyes narrowing as he read her movements. He could sense the change in her technique, the way her mana flowed and twisted with each strike. He moved with purpose, his own blade slashing through the air to meet hers.

CLANK! CLANK! CLANK! His counters were less about pure strength and more about precision, matching her strikes with calculated deflections.

'He is good...' Irina thought, feeling the pressure of his defenses. But she was determined to see this through. She raised her sword for the final strike.

SWOOSH! The last 'Stripe' was a curved line, corresponding to the magic block 'Compress.' The mana compressed into a tight, focused blade of energy, creating a spell that resembled 'Torrent.'

Astron's eyes widened slightly as he saw the final strike coming. He moved to intercept it, his blade moving with swift precision.

CLANK! CLANK! He dealt with the first six strikes, his counters almost instinctual now, but the final, curved strike caught him off guard.

SWOOSH! The compressed mana blade hit its mark. Astron tried to deflect it, but the force of the attack was too much. The blade struck him on the side, sending him stumbling back.

The duel was over.

Chapter 375 87.2 - No title

"Wow."

"That was crazy? Irina Emberheart can use a sword like that?"

Witnessing the display of the swordsmanship of a mage right before their eyes, the students could no longer be proud of themselves at all.

After all, Irina was a mage, and the display she had shown was enough to make them feel like they wouldn't last even for a second.

"But that guy was pretty good as well, right? His sword skills are not bad." One of the guys said while observing the young man who had just faced Irina Emberheart and who had been the subject of Eleanor's attention.

"Yeah....I kind of get why Eleanor guided him personally. Though, I am still envious."

"I mean...He kind of got what he deserved, no? Irina struck him really hard with the last one."

"He did get what he deserved, but I never knew we had someone like him in our class. What even is his occupation?"

"He uses a dagger and a bow as his main weapons, and his eyesight is pretty good," she said, her voice carrying a hint of admiration.

"How do you know that Nora?" another student asked, curious about her knowledge.

"I was on his team for the dungeon exploration in the first half of the semester," Nora explained.

"He was our scout. His ability to spot traps and hidden passages was impressive, and his precision with the bow saved us more than once. He's a lot more skilled than he lets on."

Nora remembered the time when they faced the Fire Salamander. At that time, Irina, the strongest member of their team, and their basic carry were rendered useless against the salamander because of its fire resistance.

There, if not for Astron's quick way of thinking and good assessment of the situation, they wouldn't be able to pass through that monster.

Nora, who later was on another team in Phantom's Land, understood the value he presented to the team a lot better.

"Wait, he was a scout?" one of the students echoed, surprised. "So, he's good with both close combat and ranged weapons?"

"Exactly," Nora confirmed. "And from what I've seen, his dagger skills are just as sharp as his swordplay. He's versatile, which makes him a valuable team member in any situation. Though his overall power was lacking, he compensated it with his skills."

The students exchanged glances, a newfound respect for Astron growing among them. His multifaceted abilities and the fact that he had caught Eleanor's attention painted a picture of someone with great potential.

"Maybe we underestimated him," one of the students admitted. "He might not stand out much, but he's definitely got skills."

"Yeah," another agreed. "I guess he didn't get Eleanor's guidance out of nothing. She must have seen his skills in the dungeon while grading."

"Makes sense, makes sense."

As the murmurs of conversation continued, Eleanor observed from a distance, a slight smile on her lips.

'I guess this is one way of solving it? However, I didn't certainly expect Irina Emberheart to suddenly step up. I guess they somehow became close after all the assignments they did together?' She thought.

On the other side, as the duel was over, Irina lowered her sword, breathing heavily but with a triumphant glint in her eyes. "Looks like I win," she said, a hint of a smile on her lips.

Astron steadied himself, his expression unreadable. He glanced at the spot where her final strike had hit, then met her gaze. "You did," he acknowledged a note of respect in his voice. "That was impressive."

"Do you get how mighty I am now? Even as a mage, I can beat you with swords. Do you feel nervous now?"

"Not really," Astron replied, shrugging. "Contrary to that, if I were you, I would get more anxious."

"Why?"

"Because you gave me another good idea," Astron said as he slashed the air with his sword. "You may have forgotten it, but I have good eyes."

"...." At the mention of that, Irina remembered how the duel progressed. From their previous interactions, Irina could easily say that he learned quite fast. Just like in magic theory, there was no doubt that this guy would master everything rapidly.

"Tsk."

In the end, she could only click her tongue, feeling like her victory didn't mean anything for some reason.

At that moment, Eleanor stepped forward, her gaze sweeping over the gathered students who were watching in silence. "Well done, both of you," she said. "This duel has shown the importance of creativity and adaptability in swordplay. Irina, your use of mana and technique was commendable. Astron, your ability to adapt and counter was equally impressive."

She looked at the other students. "I hope you've all learned something from this. Remember, the 'Stripe' is just the beginning. As you continue to train, you'll discover new ways to integrate your mana and techniques, just as Irina and Astron have demonstrated."

With that, she dismissed the class, leaving the students to reflect on the duel they had just witnessed.

"You really displayed a good show."

Of course, as the class was dismissed, in an instant, the group of friends gathered together.

"Hey, Astron. How about we spar? I feel like it will be fun." Julia, who had just witnessed the swordplay between Irina and Astron, felt her competitive spirit rising.

"...." Astron just looked at Julia for a second and then shook his head. "Do you, an heir of the Middleton Family, think that sparring with me will be beneficial?"

"Yes, I do."

"Why?"

"Hmm? Just an intuition?"

"Intuition?"

"Yep, a swordsman's intuition."

Astron shook his head at Julia's offer. "I guess thanks, Julia Middleton? But I refuse. Going against you in a sparring match would probably cost me an arm. I'm no match for you in swordplay."

Julia frowned, not quite ready to let it go. "Come on, Astron, it won't be that bad. Just a friendly match."

Astron met her gaze, his expression serious. "Friendly or not, you and I both know the difference in our skills. I'd rather keep my limbs intact."

Julia was about to argue further when Ethan approached, sensing the need to diffuse the situation. "Julia, maybe it's best if you find another sparring partner," he suggested, his tone light-hearted. "Not everyone can handle a bear like you."

Julia's eyes narrowed, her frown deepening. "Bear?" she repeated, her voice low and dangerous.

Ethan realized his mistake too late, his eyes widening as he tried to backtrack. "I didn't mean it like that, Julia, I just meant—"

But Julia cut him off, her tone indignant. "So, you think I'm like a bear, huh? Let me show you how a bear fights!"

With a growl, she lunged at Ethan, who yelped and tried to dodge her playful yet forceful swipes.

The others of the group watched, some laughing and others shaking their heads at the antics.



Irina, watching the scene unfold, couldn't help but smile. "Looks like things never change," she muttered to herself, amused by the familiar dynamic.

As Julia chased Ethan around, Astron turned to leave, but not before getting caught.

"You....I didn't know you used a sword as well." Lilia, who had been watching on the sidelines, approached him.

'You really misunderstood him, didn't you?' Irina thought, hearing Lilia's words. After all she knew, Lilia misunderstood Astron.

"...." As for the said person, he didn't even try to clear the misunderstanding. "I don't need to tell you."

"...I guess that's right? But, I never seen you using a sword, so I assumed you only used a dagger."

"And there were any records of me using a sword?"

"That's righ-...." Lilia stopped, raising her eyebrows. And then she smiled. "So, you knew."

"It wasn't hard to guess."

"That's true."

After that, Astron turned to take his leave. Though, with the corner of his eyes, he spotted a pair of blue eyes locked onto him, observing him from a distance.

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In the heart of the city, a high-rise building pierced the skies, its sleek, glass exterior reflecting the bustling metropolis below.

This architectural marvel housed one of the most prominent Hunter Guilds in the region, a hub of activity where adventurers and mercenaries converged.

At the building's entrance, a sprawling lounge stretched out, filled with a constant stream of people entering and exiting. The space buzzed with energy, a cacophony of conversations and hurried footsteps echoing through the air.

Countless screens and holograms displayed mission details, news updates, and rankings, casting a vibrant glow over the bustling crowd. Desks lined the periphery, where personnel engaged in animated discussions with hunters, processing their requests and documentation.

Amidst the sea of faces, a bulky man with broad shoulders made his way toward one of the desks. His presence commanded attention, not only due to his imposing stature but also the air of confidence he exuded. He navigated the crowd with ease, his movements deliberate and purposeful.

Reaching the desk, he produced his ID, handing it over to the receptionist with a nod. The receptionist, a young woman with a keen eye, scanned the ID and confirmed his identity. "Rank-7 Hunter Garrett," she announced, her voice carrying a note of respect.

Garrett nodded in acknowledgment before placing a sturdy box on the counter. "I've finished the dungeon exploration," he said, his voice deep and resonant. "These are the hauls and proof."

The receptionist opened the box, meticulously inspecting its contents. Inside were various artifacts, rare materials, and a crystalline core, each item attesting to the dangers Garrett had faced and overcome. After a thorough examination, she looked up and gave a satisfied nod.

"Everything is in order, Hunter Garrett," she confirmed, entering the details into the system. "Your mission is officially complete. Your account will be credited with the rewards shortly."

Garrett offered a rare smile, a fleeting expression that hinted at his satisfaction. "Thank you," he replied, taking his ID back.

With his mission complete and rewards secured, he turned and began making his way through the crowd once more and then left the building.

TICK! PUFF!

Upon leaving the building, he lit up a quick cigarette and leaned on the wall.

"I wonder, what that kid is up to? It had been a while since I talked to him, and I heard that the academy semester is about to end soon."

Suddenly, a figure appeared beside him, moving with an almost ghostly silence. "Who is 'the kid'?" she asked.

Garrett narrowed his eyes, annoyed but not entirely surprised. "Haven't I told you not to approach me stealthily, Reina?"

Reina shrugged her shoulders with a smirk. "Skill issue," she replied nonchalantly.

Garrett sighed, shaking his head. "You're hopeless, Reina."

Reina repeated her question, this time with genuine curiosity. "So, who is this kid? Is he the one you've been talking about?"

Garrett nodded, taking another drag from his cigarette. "Yeah, I was just thinking about him. The academy semester is ending soon."

Reina made a thoughtful expression. "Are you going to watch the finals?"

Garrett frowned, looking puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Reina raised an eyebrow. "Don't you know? The Arcadia Hunter Academy's first semester finals always have the same format: one-on-one fighting. The relatives of the students are allowed to watch the fights."

Garrett's eyes narrowed further, his expression darkening slightly. "I didn't know that. That hopeless kid never informed me about this either."

Reina chuckled softly. "Seems like you need to have a word with him. Watching the finals could be interesting, especially if he's participating."

Garrett took a final drag of his cigarette before flicking it away. "I suppose I should pay a visit. It's about time I saw what he's been up to with my own eyes."

"Hmm....Maybe I should come as well."

Chapter 376 87.3 - No title

"Hmm....Maybe I should come as well."

Hearing this, Garrett raised his head.

"What?"

With his bulky build and his stern facial properties, one most likely wouldn't expect him to show such an expression, yet Reina was able to see his serious face crumbling.

"What did you say?"

"Do you have hearing problems? I said I wanted to come as well."

Garrett's brows furrowed. "For what reason?"

Reina shrugged. "I'm just curious. You talk about that kid a lot."

Garrett scoffed. "Even if you're curious, what makes you think you can come? You're not his relative or anything, so you don't have any type of legal permit."

Reina nodded, acknowledging his point. "That's right." Then her face turned serious. "But don't forget the reason why that kid was even allowed to attend the most prestigious academy."

Garrett fell silent, her words striking a chord. He knew all too well the strings that had been pulled. After all, there was no logical reason for a random orphan with measly talent to even enter the Arcadia Hunter Academy.

That was an impossible task, even for Garrett, who had become a rank-7 Hunter of the association.

'Ah, right...She led me into this conversation, didn't she?'

Suddenly, Garrett realized. After all, Reina opened the conversation about the Arcadia Hunter Academy's final exams.

She was also the one who belonged to the agency, which was the reason that the kid entered the academy.

'Do they want to check his progress? What do they even want?'

Garrett wanted to ask, but he knew he wouldn't get any answers. That was how they worked, after all.

Reina's voice softened but held a firm edge. "You do know the agency has a stake in this, Garrett. Thus, the higher-ups need to see how he's progressing. It's not just about curiosity."

Garrett exhaled heavily, the weight of her words sinking in. "Fine. We'll go together. But remember, this isn't a social visit. We're there to observe."

Reina's smirk returned, and her eyes lost their seriousness in an instant. "Oh? Is that a date invitation? You are quite bold."

Garrett rolled his eyes at Reina's teasing. "Hardly a date invitation," he muttered, taking another drag from his cigarette. "More like a work assignment. Don't get your hopes up."

Reina chuckled, leaning against the wall beside him. "You know, for someone who saved my life back in the Elvara Ruins, you sure know how to ruin a moment."

Garrett smirked, the memory of that mission flashing through his mind. "If I recall, it was you who got us into that mess in the first place. Charging ahead without backup, almost getting crushed by a collapsing cavern. Some might call that reckless."

Reina rolled her eyes playfully. "Some might call it efficient. And if you hadn't been dragging your feet, we wouldn't have been in that situation."

"Dragging my feet?" Garrett raised an eyebrow. "You were the one who tripped the ancient trap mechanisms."

Reina shrugged with a mischievous grin. "Details, details. What's important is that we made it out alive and with the artifact, didn't we?"

"Yeah, and a week's worth of bed rest for me," Garrett replied, his tone both exasperated and amused.

They stood in companionable silence for a moment, the bustling city life around them contrasting with their quiet reminiscence. It was clear they had a history filled with missions that had forged a bond of mutual respect and understanding.

"Still, can't believe you talked me into this," Garrett finally said, his voice gruff but lacking any real bite.

"Talked you into what? Going to watch over the kid or admitting that you care?" Reina's eyes sparkled with mischief.

"Both, probably," Garrett replied, flicking the ash from his cigarette. "But mostly about the academy. There are literal monsters there, like Victor Blackthorn and the two magic heirs. And, I know that kid will never be a match for them since I myself had trained him."

Reina's expression grew more serious. "You know as well as I do that the kid's progress is crucial. If he fails....Well.....They won't let their money go to waste, at least."

Garrett sighed, nodding. "Yeah, I get it. That doesn't mean I have to like it."

"Nobody said you had to," Reina said, her voice softening again. "But well, even if he fails, I will do my best. Though, don't raise your hopes up."

Garrett glanced at her. "If he fails, then there is nothing we can do. This world is such a wretched place after all."

".....That...I can't refute."

They shared a look, an unspoken understanding passing between them.

"Alright," Garrett said, pushing off the wall. "Let's get ready. We've got a kid to watch over."

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The end of the semester has always been one of the most busy times of any type of educational institute.

After all, with many assignments coming, the projects that need to be finished, and the final exams that need to be passed, the students who need to overcome all of those at once would face difficulties.

The main reasons for that were the lack of consistency and procrastination.

Even though all of them know that the exams are coming and they won't have much time between the exams, most of the students still refuse to study for the upcoming finals and would let themselves be crushed by their weight.

That was how it would happen all the time, and the students of the Arcadia Hunter Academy were not that different.

Though many of them had their talents, there were still many who lacked consistency. To deal with such cases, the academy did its best to spread many assignments and homework every week and keep the students busy with the curriculum, but that also brought plagiarism and the lack of personnel since reading all those papers itself was hard as well.

It was something that was hard to balance.

"Yawn....I am so tired...." One student's exaggerated yawn echoed through the classroom, mirroring the sentiment of many.

"I didn't sleep at all last night," another complained, dark circles under their eyes. "I was up trying to finish the project for [Dungeon Theory 1]."

"Same here," a third chimed in. "I still have to study for Mana Control, and I haven't even touched the Federal Swordplay notes of the [Combat theory 1]."

The room was abuzz with groans and murmurs of discontent; students slouched over their desks, barely able to keep their eyes open. The exhaustion was palpable, and it was clear that most were not in any condition to absorb new material.

Just then, the door to the classroom swung open, and Eleanor strode in with her usual stern demeanor. The students immediately fell silent, sitting up straighter as they sensed her presence.

"Good morning, cadets," Eleanor greeted them, her tone firm. She paused, letting her gaze sweep across the room, taking in the tired faces and slumped postures. It was evident that the exhaustion was widespread, and pushing forward with the regular curriculum would be futile.

"Given the current state of affairs and this being the last week of the semester," she began, her voice carrying a note of understanding despite its firmness, "it would be pointless to proceed with today's lesson. Therefore, I will not conduct any classes today."

"What?"

"Thank god...."

A collective sigh of relief swept through the room.

TAK! But it was quickly stifled as Eleanor continued.

"Instead, I will provide you with important information regarding the final exams, which will commence next week."

The students perked up slightly, their attention focused on Eleanor.



"The final exams will be divided into two categories: Theoretical exams and Practical exams," she announced. "The Theoretical exams will consist of written exams and oral exams."

Murmurs of concern rippled through the room, but Eleanor silenced them with a raised hand.

"The written exams will cover all subjects we have studied this semester. You are expected to demonstrate a thorough understanding of the material. The oral exams will test your ability to articulate your knowledge and apply theoretical concepts in practical scenarios."

She paused, allowing the students to digest the information before continuing.

"As for the Practical exams, they will be conducted in the usual format: Duels. You will be paired with classmates, and your performance in combat will be assessed based on technique, strategy, and mana control."

The room fell silent as the weight of Eleanor's words sank in. The prospect of duels was daunting, but it was a standard part of their training as Hunters, especially for the cadets of Arcadia Hunter Academy, since this was one of the most well-known traditions.

Almost every student knew about duels, and they called their families to the academy. Many scouts from high-ranking government institutions, as well as the guilds, would attend these final exams as well.

"Use the remaining time wisely," Eleanor advised, her gaze steady. "Prepare yourselves thoroughly for both the theoretical and practical exams. Remember, consistency and discipline are key to your success."

With that, she dismissed the class, leaving the students to reflect on the upcoming challenges. As they gathered their belongings and filed out of the room, the exhaustion in their eyes was now mixed with a renewed sense of purpose. The final exams loomed ahead, and they knew that the real test was yet to come.

As Eleanor left the classroom, the room remained silent for a few moments.

Julia turned around in her seat, a wide smile spreading across her face. Her eyes sparkled with excitement as she looked at her friends. "Finally, some action!" she exclaimed, her voice filled with

enthusiasm. "We've been trapped in this academy for the last month with nothing but theory and assignments. I can't wait for the duels."

Ethan chuckled, shaking his head. "Only you would get excited about having to fight your classmates," he said, a hint of admiration in his voice. "But I have to admit, it's a nice change from all the studying."

Irina, who had been quietly packing her things, looked up and smiled as well. "It will be interesting to see how everyone has improved," she said, throwing a quick glance at certain someone.

Lilia, who was sitting beside Irina, nodded in agreement. "And it's not just about the duels. The written and oral exams are just as important. You need to make sure you're prepared for everything."

"Hell nah....I don't care about those oral exams or something...I am here to fight." She smirked, rising up from her seat.

"You are leaving?"

"I will train," Julia answered Ethan's question. "What are you doing?" However, as she was about to leave the classroom, she turned back.

"I am chilling? Why?"

"What do you mean why? You are coming with me."

"...."

It was at that moment that Ethan realized his fate.

\*\*\*\*\*

Emma paced back and forth in her room, her mind racing as she awaited updates from the people she had entrusted with tracking down her blackmailer.

The tension had been mounting ever since the incident in the cafe, and she knew that even if many times had passed, people still remembered her actions.

RING!

Her smartwatch buzzed, signaling an incoming message. Emma quickly glanced at the screen and saw a notification from the team she'd hired. With a deep breath, she tapped on the message and began to read:

[Miss Emma, we have some progress on tracking the blackmailer. The messages were sent from a highly secure device, making it difficult to trace. However, we managed to trace it back after the month's work. That is why, it took this long. We've sent you the app link and access credentials and the location of the device. Be cautious.]

Emma's heart raced as she processed the information. She quickly downloaded the app and logged in using the provided credentials.

A map appeared on her screen, with a blinking dot indicating the exact location of the device. Without wasting another moment, she grabbed her coat and headed out of her room.

'This place....It is the freshmen's dormitory....And, it is girl's?'

She realized this from the location.

'To think that a freshman girl dared to blackmail me...Tsk.' With quick steps, she reached the dormitory block 3. Since it was finals time, many of the students entered and exited the dorms; therefore, who entered wasn't checked too much.

Following the app's directions, she finally reached the door of the room that contained the device.

There, a name was written.

[Taylor Bowman].

With the final exam period almost starting, the students were busy studying and training. The same could be said for Sylvie as well.

Even if she had been training hard to improve herself, that didn't mean it aligned with what the academy wanted from her.

That was especially the case since she was a healer, and she focused more on close combat and magic. She didn't want to reveal her powers to the world because of her intuition warning her, but that also meant that she needed to act like a healer.

And now she was suffering from that choice.

"Body autonomy, Mana Vein's practice... And I am yet to start studying for the general courses... I am done, aren't I?" Sylvie muttered, rubbing her temples in frustration. The weight of her neglected studies was pressing down on her, threatening to crush her under its immense burden.

"You know, this is what you get for neglecting your studies," Jasmine chimed in, her voice carrying a hint of teasing but also genuine concern. She leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed. "I warned you about this, didn't I?"

Sylvie sighed, glancing up at Jasmine with a sheepish smile. "I know, I know. I just got so caught up in my training that I let everything else slip."

Jasmine shook her head, a wry smile on her lips. "Training is important, but so is keeping up with your coursework. You can't exactly heal someone with punches and kicks."

"I guess you're right," Sylvie admitted, a sense of resignation in her voice. "But it's so hard to balance everything. Sometimes, it feels like there's just not enough time in the day."

Jasmine walked over and sat down beside Sylvie, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I get it. We all have our struggles. But maybe we can find a way to make this a bit easier. How about we change the location? Sometimes, a change of scenery can help clear your mind."

Sylvie looked at Jasmine, her eyes lighting up with hope. "You think that would help?"

"Absolutely," Jasmine replied with a nod. "How about the library? It's quiet, and we can focus better there. Plus, it has all the resources we need."

'I don't think it will be quiet as usual since it must be crowded now. But, well, I really feel suffocated.'

Sylvie considered the suggestion for a moment, then nodded. "The library sounds like a good idea. Let's go."

Sylvie gathered her study materials, and the two friends made their way to the library. As they walked, they chatted about their upcoming exams and shared tips on how to tackle the various subjects.

The library was a vast, quiet space filled with shelves upon shelves of books, scrolls, and various artifacts.

'Ah....The mana flow changed a little.'

Sylvie, who had become more and more sensitive towards the mana with each time she had trained, could now see the discrepancies in the environments that she had previously been in.

'Do they use wards? I guess the academy doesn't want students to break down.'

The scent of aged paper and the soft hum of mana wards created an atmosphere conducive to focus and study.

"This place is good, right?"

"Yeah."

Sylvie and Jasmine found a secluded corner, setting up their books and notes.

"Alright, let's get to work," Jasmine said, giving Sylvie an encouraging smile. "Alright, let's get to work," Jasmine said, giving Sylvie an encouraging smile. But then, as she was about to continue, her gaze shifted, catching sight of someone entering the library.

Sylvie followed Jasmine's line of sight and saw him—Astron. His presence was faint yet familiar, his face serious and cold as usual, with eyes clear and focused. He moved with silent steps, almost like a ghost, and none of the other students seemed to notice his presence.

He wore a long black coat, its elegant cut, and somber color setting him apart from the average students his age. Strangely, Sylvie felt that it suited him perfectly, complementing his demeanor.

Astron didn't spare a single glance at his surroundings, his attention unwavering as he made his way to one of the most secluded tables in the corner of the library. Sylvie's eyes followed his path; curiosity piqued when she saw that the table was already occupied by someone familiar.

The girl at the table had striking purple hair and a vibrant smile that seemed out of place in the solemn quiet of the library. Sylvie recognized her immediately—Senior Maya, one of the brightest and most cheerful seniors, as well as a reason for her trauma.

She always seemed to carry a lightness with her, a stark contrast to Astron's composed and often distant demeanor.

Maya looked up as Astron approached, her smile widening as she greeted him.

Astron nodded in response as he took a seat across from her.

The sight of them together, engaged in what seemed to be a comfortable and friendly conversation, sent a wave of mixed emotions through Sylvie.

Just like previously and now, this made it the second time that she had seen them together.

"Who is she? Do you know her?" Jasmine asked, her voice a silent whisper.

"She is Senior Maya."

"That Senior Maya? Maya Evergreen? First-ranked sophomore student?"

"Yes."

"What are they doing together?" Jasmine whispered, her curiosity mirroring Sylvie's.

Sylvie shook her head, unsure how to respond. She couldn't help but feel a pang of something—was it jealousy? Or perhaps a sense of loss? The end of their training sessions had left a void, and seeing Astron with someone else only magnified that emptiness.

"They must be studying," Sylvie suggested, trying to keep her voice neutral.

"Could be," Jasmine agreed, though her tone was skeptical. "But it's still interesting to see them together like this."

Sylvie forced herself to look away, focusing back on her notes. She couldn't afford to let herself get distracted, not with the exams looming so close.

But the image of Astron and Maya, so comfortable in each other's presence, lingered in her mind, adding another layer of complexity to her already tumultuous emotions.

"Let's get started," Sylvie said, more to herself than to Jasmine, and she delved into her studies with renewed determination.

She had to push through had to focus on what she could control—her own progress and preparation.

She needed to get better grades, better than ever before.

She felt competitive.

As for the reason for that fuel?

She didn't know, or maybe she didn't want to admit.

And Jasmine, who was watching her friend, could only display a helpless smile.

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The contents of the curriculum are vastly different for the Sophomore year students and the freshmen. That is especially the case for the first semester since the first semester is mostly about the courses that gave freedom to the cadets.

For sophomore-year students, their exams are a lot harder, with countless different theorems included in them.

For Arcadia Hunter Academy, the curriculum was so wide that even some magic schools would fail in comparison. And the students were even expected to know this much in countless different subjects.

But for Maya Evergreen, who was the first-ranked student in both practical score and theoretical scores, that was not the case.

Since she was talented and hardworking at the same time, she revised the topics daily, practiced, and didn't waste much time on the things that didn't benefit her.

She didn't attend parties or stupid things like that, she didn't like playing video games, and she wasn't a particular reader either.

She also tried to read books and novels, but she somehow found most of them rather shallow. Since almost all the books contained smut, she disliked reading such things. Though that perception of hers was recently changing, she was still finding it hard.

Thus, she only had one thing that she could call a hobby.

Being with Junior and feeling his presence. She was sure that many people would say that hobbies were not such a thing, but for her, that wasn't the case.

After all, weren't hobbies things that would bring joy to the doer?

Then, this did fit the criteria, didn't it?



Maya watched Astron as he immersed himself in his studies, his focus unwavering. His serious demeanor and the way he dedicated himself to his work fascinated her.

It wasn't just his abilities that impressed her but also his relentless drive and commitment. She admired these qualities deeply, finding them to be rare and precious.

She found herself studying him, noting the intensity in his eyes as he pored over his books and notes. There was something mesmerizing about the way he worked, a quiet determination that resonated with her own drive to excel.

The library, with its hushed ambiance and the soft hum of mana wards, provided the perfect backdrop for their study session.

Maya also remembered the time when she was studying for the courses in her freshmen year.

The book before him was the [Introduction to Mana Theory, Seventh Edition]. Probably the hardest course of the semester coupled with [Dungeon Theory 1].

And he was now solving the problems prepared in the book.

'I guess I was like that? Though now, these subjects feel like a child's play.' As she observed him, Maya's thoughts drifted to their past interactions. She recalled the times she had helped him learn to control his mana and the way he had diligently practiced under her guidance.

Those moments had forged a bond between them, a connection that she held dear. Now, seeing him excel on his own, she felt a surge of pride.

'He's come so far,' she thought, a smile tugging at her lips. 'I knew he would.'

Astron, seemingly oblivious to her gaze, continued his studies with unwavering concentration. Maya admired his dedication, but she also knew that he was not someone who paid importance to his grades.

'I mean, if he was someone like that, he wouldn't be last-

ranked, wouldn't he?'

That meant something different was at play, and he had a reason. Knowing him, he wouldn't randomly have a change of heart, so he was either trying to impress someone which would never be the case with his character, or....

'In a competition? A bet?'

She leaned forward slightly, breaking the comfortable silence between them.

"Junior," she called softly, her voice gentle yet firm. "Who is the person you are competing with?"

"....." Astron raised his gaze and looked at Maya for a second. "You are sharp, Senior."

"That is why I am your senior, Junior."

"That seems to be true."

"So, who is this person?"

"It is confidential."

"....."

Hearing this, Maya pouted.

'This cheeky Junior dares!'

But then, something inside woke. It was a warning, an intuition.

'Is that a girl?'

Astron looked at Maya, his expression unreadable, but there was a glint of curiosity in his eyes.

Maya couldn't help but feel a pang of jealousy.

The idea of Astron competing with another girl unsettled her. She tried to mask her feelings, but her eyes narrowed as she pressed further.

"It's a girl, isn't it?" she asked her tone light but with an edge of suspicion.

Astron didn't respond verbally, but the slight change in his expression confirmed her suspicion. Maya felt a mix of emotions swirling within her—annoyance, curiosity, and a strange possessiveness she couldn't quite shake.

"Come here for a second, Junior," she said, her tone suddenly playful.

Astron raised an eyebrow, his curiosity piqued. "What is this about?"

"Just come over. I want to show you something," she insisted, her smile hiding her true intentions.

With a hint of reluctance, Astron rose from his seat and walked over to where Maya sat. He leaned forward slightly, trying to gauge what she was up to.

BITE!

Yet, even he didn't expect Maya to be this bold.

## Chapter 378 88.1 - Final Exams

There are certain moments when Maya feels like it is impossible to control herself. From time to time, it happens, and she needs to vent her feelings.

She always thinks that it is because of her half-mutation over being a vampire. After all the research she did, she knows things like these happen from time to time.

But this time, it is different since she knows that what she did just now was not something she did because of her vampire instincts but because of her own desires.

BITE!

In one swift motion, Maya leaned in and sank her fangs into his neck. The suddenness of the action caught Astron off guard, and he inhaled sharply, a mix of surprise and a fleeting moment of vulnerability passing over his features.

The library seemed to hold its breath as Maya drank from Astron, her grip firm but gentle. The warmth of his blood filled her senses, grounding her in the moment. For Astron, it was a familiar sensation, yet the intensity of it never failed to affect him. He steadied himself, his hand resting lightly on Maya's shoulder as she fed.

Maya's mind was a whirl of emotions. She had intended to remind Astron of their unique bond, to assert her place in his life amidst the unspoken competition. As she drank, she felt the familiar rush, the intoxicating mix of power and connection.

After a moment, Maya pulled back, her lips slightly stained with his blood. She looked into Astron's eyes, searching for a reaction. His expression was calm, but there was a depth in his gaze that told her he understood her motives.

"Senior," he said, his voice steady despite the suddenness of her actions. "What was that for?"

Maya wiped her lips, a playful smirk appearing. "Just a reminder, Junior. Don't get too caught up with anyone else."

But, for Astron, her actions meant something different. "What you did just now....It was plain stupidity." His words were in contrast to her own demeanor. There was no playfulness in it.

"What?" And Maya was not expecting it.

"Senior," Astron said, looking at her directly in her eyes.

"What?" Maya was not expecting his reaction. People looked at her for a second as she raised her voice, but then they turned to what they were doing.

"Senior," Astron said, looking directly into her eyes. "You need to hide your identity as a vampire from the world. You need to know how to control your desires. Everything has a place and time, and we need to be careful."

His words made sense, but Maya couldn't help but feel like she was being treated unfairly. She narrowed her eyes, her voice lowering to a whisper. "I know that, but why are you acting like this?"

Astron leaned in closer, his voice barely above a whisper, but the intensity in his words was unmistakable. "What if someone saw you? What if they got suspicious? In a place filled with countless people, how can you act like that and risk everything we've done so far?"

Maya's eyes flashed with a mixture of frustration and hurt. "I was just... I didn't think. I felt..."

Astron interrupted, his tone softening slightly but still firm. "We can't afford not to think, Senior Maya. One mistake, one slip, and everything we've worked for could be jeopardized."

Maya clenched her fists, her whispers heated. "You think I don't know that? It's just..."

Astron sighed, his expression softening as he placed a hand on her shoulder. "I understand, Senior. But please, be more careful. We can't afford any risks."

The tension between them lingered, a mix of concern and unspoken emotions. Maya knew Astron was right, but it still stung to be reprimanded. She nodded slowly, her eyes meeting his with a silent promise to be more cautious.

"Fine," she whispered, her voice softening. "I'll be more careful. But you need to understand, sometimes... it's hard."

Astron's expression didn't change. "It can be hard, but If I know one thing, the world never sees what is hard or not. It only cares if you act according to your circumstances."

For some reason, it made Maya feel like she was getting lectured, but she couldn't refute it.

"...."

They sat in silence for a moment, the weight of their conversation settling between them.

SILENCE!

The library, once again, seemed to hold its breath, the whispered exchange a stark reminder of the delicate balance they had to maintain.

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SCRIBBLE!

Inside a room, the sound of a pen touching the paper echoed. The room was dimly lit and the atmosphere was somehow solemn.

"Haaah..."

A girl with silver hair cascading over her shoulders leaned back on her chair, releasing a heavy sigh.

"Mother, why are you not replying back?"

Her expression was.....different from usual. The typical seriousness and confidence were absent, replaced by a deep concern etched across her features. She had always prided herself on being composed and unshakeable, but the lack of communication from her mother had unsettled her profoundly.

For days, she had tried reaching out, sending letters, and using every means available to her within the academy's strict confines. But no response came. The silence was maddening, especially given the gravity of the last message she had received.

Her mother's warning about that guy had been cryptic yet urgent, leaving her with more questions than answers.

With the academy's stringent restrictions over the cadets, she was also unable to leave the grounds to seek answers herself.

The isolation only deepened her worry. She knew her mother was capable, yet the lack of contact gnawed at her, filling her mind with worst-case scenarios.

The weight of her thoughts pressed down on her, but then a realization struck. Wasting her time fretting and waiting for a reply would do her no good. She needed to focus on what she could control and continue her mission. Her mother had always taught her to be resilient, to adapt, and to overcome obstacles.

Sitting up straighter, Seraphina steeled her resolve.

"The other plan seems to have failed."

As she looked at the photographs that were sent to her, she couldn't help but shake her head.

"Maybe I overestimated their relationship or underestimated?"

Whatever the case was, she was unable to get the reaction she wanted from him or Irina.

"And that guy didn't contact me from then. I guess I should take this as his answer."

If that was what he wanted, then she could only comply. It was not like she needed to force him right there right now.

Even though he was the name, her mother directly mentioned, if she needed to sacrifice too much to get him, it wouldn't be worth it.

If a rose was filled with too many thorns, it was bound to stay alone.

"Well, we will see about that. There is another star appearing as well. And this star seems to be the one with the ability to shake the world."

Looking at the blue-haired student, Seraphina smiled. After all, in this world, there were always many options.

And some of them could be shaped a lot more easily.

\*\*\*\*\*

In Arcadia Hunter Academy, there were exactly four courses that were theoretically tested by the academy. At least, this was the case for the freshmen.

The written exams and the oral exams for each course would take from Monday to Thursday.

The schedule was as follows:

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Monday – Dungeon Theory 1

Tuesday – History of the Valerian Federation

Wednesday – Combat Theory

Thursday – Introduction to Mana

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And, whether the academy did this entirely or not, the first and the last practical exams were the hardest.

It was not a subjective opinion but mostly a collective opinion of the students.

And now it was Monday morning, just before the first exam started.

The classroom was silent, without any sound being made. The students who were forced to wake up early had bags under their eyes.



Some of them were filled with emptiness, while some of them were calmly waiting for the papers to be distributed.

TOK! TOK! TOK! At that moment, the classroom door swung open, and the sound of high heels striking the ground echoed through the silent room.

A woman with a somehow commanding but seductive presence entered, her posture straight and her gaze cool.

The students' heads turned almost in unison to see a new Instructor, whose nameplate read Rachel make her way to the front of the class.

It seemed she had a habit of chewing gum, which she did now with a deliberate, almost rhythmic motion.

As she reached the front of the classroom, she took a moment to survey the students, her eyes lingering on each one just long enough to make them feel slightly uneasy.

The room was filled with tense anticipation. Rachel had a reputation for being tough but fair, and the students knew that whatever she had planned for them would be challenging.

"Good morning, class HA-213," Rachel began, her voice clear and unwavering. "I trust you're all ready for the first exam of the week—Dungeon Theory 1. I will be in charge of your overseeing today."

She reached into the briefcase she had set on the desk and then flicked her hands.

Suddenly, a bunch of silhouettes appeared right beside her. They looked human, but at the same time, they lacked subsistence.

As if they were robots, rhythmically, they grabbed the papers and then started distributing them onto the tables of students.

As for the students, the ones who could spare some of their attention were watching that with awe.

After all, right now, they were witnessing one of the rarest forms of talent.

[Manifestation].

"Good luck," she said, a slight smirk playing on her lips as she handed the last paper to a student in the back row. "You're going to need it."

Rachel made the manifested humans return to the front of the classroom and leaned against the desk, crossing her arms as she continued to chew her gum. "You have exactly three hours. Begin."

With that, the students turned their attention to the papers in front of them. The exam had begun.

Ethan, seated near the middle of the classroom, glanced down at his paper. He took a deep breath and started reading through the questions.

As expected, they were designed to test not just rote memorization but a deep understanding of the subject matter and its practical applications.

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Question 1: Describe the key differences between the primary dungeon classifications and provide examples of creatures that inhabit each type.

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Ethan's mind raced as he began to formulate his response. He had spent countless hours studying for this moment, and despite the initial wave of nervousness, he felt a sense of determination.

This was the second step towards his goal of breaking into the top 100, and he was determined not to let it slip away.

Time ticked by as the students scribbled furiously on their papers. Rachel's presence at the front of the room was a constant reminder of the high standards they were expected to meet.

Occasionally, she would glance at the clock, her expression never changing, maintaining the pressure.

As the minutes turned into hours, the initial panic some students felt began to fade, replaced by a focused drive to complete the exam to the best of their abilities. The room was filled with the sounds of writing, the occasional cough, and the steady ticking of the clock.

Finally, Rachel called out, "Time's up. Pens down."

A collective sigh of relief swept through the room as the students put down their pens. Rachel moved through the aisles once more, collecting the papers with the same deliberate pace she had shown earlier.

"Remember, this is just the beginning," she said as she gathered the last of the exams. "You have three more days of this, so make sure you're prepared. Dismissed."

As the students filed out of the classroom, Ethan felt a mix of exhaustion and accomplishment.

One exam down, three to go. He knew the hardest part was still ahead, but for now, he allowed himself a moment of relief.

However, he had a lot of questions to ask his friends.

Especially the girl who was sitting right before him, Irina.

"Hey, ho-"

But before he could ask her, Irina stood up and left the room. Though before leaving, she threw a look at some of the seats back.

Chapter 379 Chapter 88.2 - Final Exams

Irina stepped out of the restroom, her expression composed despite the whirlwind of thoughts in her mind. The air outside was crisp, a stark contrast to the tense atmosphere inside the classroom.

She scanned the hallway, her eyes landing on Astron, who was leaning against the wall, waiting for her.

'Well, I knew he would get the sign.'

He looked calm, as always, his demeanor unruffled by the exam they had just completed.

As she approached him, he straightened, meeting her gaze with an unreadable expression. Irina, ever the competitor, couldn't resist the urge to probe his performance, even though this wasn't the exam they had bet on.

"How did you do?" she asked, her tone casual but with a hint of curiosity.

Astron shrugged slightly, his eyes reflecting a calm confidence. "It went well enough," he replied. "And you?"

Irina narrowed her eyes, searching for any sign of uncertainty on his face. "I did fine," she said, her voice steady. "I just wanted to see if you were feeling the pressure yet."

Astron mumbled. "Pressure? From Dungeon Theory 1?" And then he looked into her eyes. "Hardly. But it's always interesting to see who's paying attention in class."

Her lips twitched into a smile, acknowledging his point. "You seem very sure of yourself," she noted, crossing her arms. "But we'll see how you handle the rest of the week."

"Indeed we will," Astron agreed, his tone light. "Though, I suppose the real test will be on Thursday."

"Introduction to Mana," Irina said, a glint of determination in her eyes. "The hardest one, and the one that I am going to crush you on."

Astron shook his head. "I wouldn't be so sure."

"If I am not sure, how can I show my best?"

"Interesting approach. Is this your way of trying to put pressure on me? Or do you want to soothe yourself by appearing strong before my eyes? Which one of these is true, I wonder."

The calm confidence in Astron's voice and the penetrating gaze he fixed on her made Irina shudder internally. It felt as though he could see through her, reading even the deepest parts of her thoughts. But she refused to let any sign of doubt show on her face. Instead, she met his eyes with a smirk.

"You think you've got me all figured out," she said, stepping closer to him. Her body leaned slightly forward, bringing her face closer to his. The proximity allowed her to catch a subtle whiff of his scent, something clean and faintly woody. She focused, not letting it distract her.

Lowering her voice to a whisper, she said in his ear, "If I put something into my mind, I can achieve it, no matter what."

With that, she pulled back and turned on her heel, leaving him with a lingering sense of her presence.

Her steps were quick and purposeful, her heart pounding not from fear but from the thrill of the challenge.

Yeah, because of the thrill of the challenge.

Surely.

However, for Astron, who was able to notice the redness in her ear, her words didn't mean anything.

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The second half of the theoretical exams are oral exams. It is being conducted like an interview.

The students will sit in their halls, and once their name is called, they will enter the room in which they will perform their oral explanations.

In the game, it was shown as a cutscene, but the real world was, of course, different.

I walked into the room shown on my table.

Contrary to written exams, oral exams were to be conducted in random rooms. As for the reason why?

I have no idea.

Not that it is important anyway.

Entering the room for my oral exam, I immediately noticed that a few students were already waiting there.

I quickly scanned the room, checking for the familiar faces, which was zero.

There was a palpable tension in the air for the students, though, an extension of the written exam in the morning.

I made my way to an empty seat by the window in the third row.

The students in the room were talking quietly among themselves. I listened in, catching snippets of their conversations.

"I can't believe how tough that Dungeon Theory exam was," one student muttered, running a hand through their hair in frustration. "I thought I was prepared, but some of those questions were insane."

Another student nodded in agreement. "Yeah, especially that last question about the mana flow variations in different dungeon environments. I totally blanked out. If I don't nail this oral exam, I'm screwed."

I couldn't help but nod inwardly.

The exam questions had indeed been challenging, but I believed that those who had put in the effort could manage them.

The difficulty lay in the complexity of the calculations and the need to grasp a systematic approach to dungeon theory. In essence, the academy had already provided the methods to solve certain problems, and it was the student's job to implement those techniques to their own methods.

"It was tough but not impossible," a student with glasses interjected, drawing the attention of the students around him. He had a confident aura around him. "If you understood the core principles and how to apply them, it was doable. The key was to stay calm and think through the problems methodically."

It seemed he was one of those who figured out the method to get better grades from the academy. But, well, the academy has the oral exams for this reason.

And him acting like all-knowing made me think.

'I wonder if he is the first type or the second type.'

The first type was those who acted like this because they had already internalized the concept in their minds and could implement it with utmost proficiency. This type is the one that pushes any industry further and develops it.

The second type is those who act like this not because they internalize the concept but because of the problem-solving algorithm. This type can only shine in the academy and only knows how to copy from others. These are the ones that regulate the industry.

They got the methods from the first type and then implemented them in their works and repeatedly created things.

However, the second type has a weakness. They don't develop their creativity and are only bound to other's ideas. And when faced with situations that they have never seen before, they can not achieve anything.

CREAK!

Just at that moment, while I was thinking about this, someone entered the room, and all the eyes were drawn towards her. Considering her beauty and presence, it made sense.

Lilia, with her red eyes, looked around for a second and then noticed me. Seeing the smile appearing on her face, I knew what she was about to do.

"Sigh..."

"Why are you sighing?"

"You are drawing attention to me."

"Isn't that good?"

"It is not."

"Why?"

"Because it is bothersome."

"Not really."

Seeing the smirk on her face, I somehow wanted to erase it for a split second but then took control of the feeling instantly.

"Is that so?"

I then turned my attention to the window once again, ignoring her. Even if she wants a reaction from me, not giving her is the best way of revenge.

"Hey, don't sulk. I was just joking."

"I am not sulking."

"You are."



"I am not."

"You are."

"I am not."

"Stubborn."

"You are no different."

"Well, I guess that is right," Lilia mumbled. But then, seemingly getting bored from this recurring conversation, she decided to change the topic.

"How was the exam?"

I glanced at her, noting the genuine curiosity in her eyes. "It was challenging but manageable if you prepared properly. Some of the questions were definitely designed to test our deep understanding and application skills."

Lilia nodded thoughtfully. "I found it tough, too. The question about mana flow variations was a real brain-teaser."

"Yeah, that one caught a lot of people off guard. But it's all about how well you've internalized the concepts. If you understand the principles, you can work through the complexity."

She smiled, a hint of admiration in her eyes. At least that is how it looked, but knowing Lilia, I knew she was trying to win me over.

"You always seem so composed, Astron. It's like nothing ever fazes you."

I shrugged. "It's all about focus. Panicking doesn't help anyone. Just take it one step at a time. Also, this is coming from you."

"T-"

Before Lilia could respond, the proctor entered the room, clipboard in hand. "Alright, everyone," she announced, "we'll be starting the oral exams shortly. When I call your name, please follow me to the examination room. Remember, this is your chance to demonstrate your understanding and analytical skills. Good luck."

We nodded, and the room fell silent as we waited for our names to be called.

But I could see some students' faces contorting. And the reason for that was obvious. They got the tough luck to draw.

The blonde hair and the stern expression on the instructor's face were famous already.

"Really, it really needed to be Eleanor."

Lilia whispered.

After all, Eleanor was known as the Interviewee Butcherer in the academy.

"Tough luck."

I can only respond like that.

One by one, the students were led into the examination rooms. Finally, I heard my name.

"Astron Natusalune."

I stood up, fixing my posture.

"Good luck." I heard Lilia, and with a nod, I followed the proctor out of the waiting room

Entering the examination room, I was greeted by a panel of instructors seated behind a long desk. Eleanor was among them, her presence as commanding as ever.

'She is the one in charge of this session.' They all looked up as I approached, and I felt a brief but intense scrutiny.

"Student Natusalune, please take a seat," Eleanor said, gesturing to the chair in front of the desk. "We'll begin with your explanation of the primary dungeon classifications and the creatures that inhabit them. You have thirty seconds to prepare yourself and two minutes to talk."

I nodded, taking my seat and focusing my thoughts. The room fell silent as I gathered my thoughts, the ticking of a clock in the background marking the passing seconds. When the time was up, I took a deep breath and began.

"There are three primary dungeon classifications: Natural, Artificial, and Anomalous. Natural dungeons form naturally over time, often in areas with high concentrations of mana. Creatures in these dungeons are typically adapted to the mana-rich environment. Examples include the Mana Wolves and the Crystal Spiders, which have evolved unique abilities to harness ambient mana."

I paused for a moment, making sure to maintain eye contact with the panel. Eleanor's gaze was intense, but I remained composed.

"Artificial dungeons, on the other hand, are created by human intervention, often for training or research purposes. The creatures here are usually placed intentionally, such as the Iron Golems and the Training Drones, designed to challenge specific skill sets."

I could see a flicker of interest in Eleanor's eyes. I continued, "Lastly, Anomalous dungeons are the most unpredictable. These dungeons form under rare and often chaotic conditions, leading to a variety of unusual and often dangerous creatures. Examples include the Shadow Fiends and the Chaos Serpents, which thrive in the unstable environments of these dungeons."

As I finished, I noted the instructors watching me closely. Eleanor leaned forward, her expression stern but with a spark of expectation in her eyes.

"Very well, Mr. Natusalune. Now, consider this situation: You are leading a team through an Anomalous dungeon when you encounter a Mana Rift, a phenomenon where mana flows erratically and can disrupt magical abilities. Your healer's spells are failing, and your tank is struggling to maintain defenses. How would you handle this situation to ensure the safety of your team?"

I took a moment to think, recalling the details from our lessons on handling unexpected dungeon phenomena.

Eleanor's question was crafted to test not just my memory but my ability to apply knowledge in a practical scenario. This question made me understand why she was called Interviewee Butcherer. After all, the question was really hard.

There was a certain glint in her eyes, though. It felt like she was expecting something.

'First in the Sword Practice, and now this. I guess she changed my evaluation.'

There were pros and cons for her to change her assessment of me, but at that point, I didn't care too much. Since theoretical knowledge and skill were rather different.

'I will satisfy you this time, but you better show me good results for that.'

With that thought I began.

"To handle a Mana Rift, the first priority is to stabilize the team. I would instruct everyone to fall back to a safer zone away from the Rift's immediate influence. Next, I would have our mage attempt to use mana-dampening spells to reduce the Rift's impact, something we've practiced in our drills."

I noticed a slight nod from one of the other instructors, encouraging me to continue.

"With the Rift's influence mitigated, I would then focus on reorganizing our formation. The healer should switch to using physical remedies, like potions, to sustain the team temporarily. Meanwhile, our tank would be reinforced with physical barriers, such as enchanted shields or barricades, to hold the line until the Rift stabilizes or we can move around it."

Eleanor's stern expression softened slightly, a hint of approval in her eyes. I pressed on, "Finally, constant communication is key. Keeping everyone informed of their roles and the situation ensures that no one panics and that we can adapt swiftly to any changes."

Eleanor leaned back, a thoughtful look on her face. "Very well, Mr. Natusalune. Your approach is thorough and shows a clear understanding of dungeon dynamics and team management."

She stopped, revealing a slight smile.

"Well done."

#### Chapter 380 Chapter 88.3 - Final Exams

After the last students had finished their oral examination, Eleanor and the other instructors gathered in a small conference room adjacent to the examination hall.

The room was quiet, a stark contrast to the nervous energy that had filled the examination spaces earlier. Eleanor sat at the head of the table, her usual stern expression softened by the end of the rigorous session.

"Let's start with Lila Thornheart," Eleanor began, glancing at her notes. "Ranked fifth among the freshmen."

One of the instructors, Professor Whitaker, who was a slightly elderly man with a grown beard, nodded. "Lila's performance was impeccable. Her responses were pixel-perfect as if she had everything memorized down to the last detail. She navigated through the dungeon scenarios with confidence and precision."

"She even handled the theoretical aspects with ease," added Professor Moreau. "Her understanding of mana fluctuations in dungeons was particularly impressive. She's clearly put in a lot of effort to maintain her rank."

Eleanor nodded in agreement. "Yes, Lila's preparation and execution were flawless. It's no surprise given her ranking."

The discussion continued, moving through various students who had performed well and those who had struggled. The atmosphere was collegial but focused, with each instructor providing insights and observations.

Then, Professor Sterling leaned forward, a curious look on her face. "There was one student who caught me off-guard," she said, glancing at her notes. "Astron Natusalune, ranked 1729."

There was a brief silence as the other instructors took in the information.

Eleanor raised an eyebrow. "Student Astron Natusalune? His rank is quite low. What stood out about his performance?"

Though her question sounded like she didn't care, it was all an act. She was doing this because she wouldn't be perceived as showing a favor to the cadet of her homeroom classroom.

She also didn't want unnecessary entanglement since she was still in the process of testing him.

Sterling nodded. "His grades have shown significant improvement recently, as you must be already aware."

"I wouldn't consider it as a significant improvement, but you may continue," Eleanor interjected.

"Ah, yes." Knowing that this was how Eleanor was, Professor Sterling didn't mind. "During his oral exam, he provided a well-rounded answer to your question about handling a Mana Rift in an Anomalous dungeon. He stayed calm and articulated his strategy clearly, without any hesitation. Unlike many of the other cadets, he didn't flinch under pressure."

Professor Whitaker added, "I noticed the same. His understanding of the dungeon dynamics and team management was solid. It's clear he's put in a lot of effort. His response was not just a regurgitation of facts, but showed real analytical thinking."

Eleanor looked thoughtful. "It's good to hear that."

"Don't worry, instructor Eleanor. We won't think you are showing a favor."

"....Even if you think that this will never be the case. I never give special treatment to anyone."

"Ahaha....I guess that's right. Forgive this old man talking so impudently."

"I don't mind."

"Thank you." As Whitaker smiled warmly at Eleanor like a grandfather, he showed his rubric.

"For me, he gets full marks."

Inwardly, Eleanor smiled.

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<Tuesday Morning, Arcadia City>

In the bustling heart of Arcadia City, the Valerian Federation's capital, a young man with a white robe walked through the crowded streets with purpose.

The sun cast long shadows as it dipped toward the horizon, bathing the city in a warm, golden light.

He clutched the silver necklace tightly, its crescent moon pendant gleaming with a faint, mysterious glow.

Yet, he swiftly entered one of the back alleys, and from there, he entered the tavern.

In the dimly lit corner of a bustling tavern, Leonard sat with a hood drawn over his head, blending into the shadows.

The air was thick with the scent of ale and the murmur of hushed conversations. This was the kind of place where secrets were traded as freely as coin—an ideal location for gathering information.

Leonard's eyes scanned the room, settling on a woman seated across from him. She had a sharp, calculating gaze and an air of mystery about her. Her slanted eye showed that she was from the east.

Known among the informants as Shina, she was a well-respected broker of knowledge, adept at navigating the undercurrents of Arcadia City's darker side.

"Any progress from your side?" Leonard began, his voice low and steady.

Shina leaned back, a faint smile playing on her lips. "It was a curious matter indeed. Someone from your place is looking for a person with such uncertain criteria." Yet, seeing Leonard not revealing anything with his face and the tranquility remaining, she decided not to beat around the bush. "There isn't any progress yet. My men searched the whole city and back alleys, but we have yet to find anyone with the characteristics you mentioned."

"I see." Leonard was not expecting much from it in any case. After all, finding a single person in this whole city was like trying to find the needle in a haystack. "If that is the case, I will take my leave."

Just as Leonard was about to leave his place, Shina called out, her voice cutting through the murmur of the tavern. "Wait a moment. Will you be attending the Arcadia Hunter Academy's final exams?"

Leonard turned back, his expression curious but guarded. "What do you mean by that?"

Shina leaned forward, her eyes gleaming with intrigue. "I've heard that you have a sister who attends the Arcadia Hunter Academy. They will have duels starting next week's Monday, and the relatives of the cadets will be allowed to enter."

For a brief moment, a genuine smile tugged at Leonard's lips, though his eyes remained sharp and unwavering. "How did you come by this information?"

Shina shrugged lightly, her demeanor nonchalant. "I have my ways. Information is my trade, after all."

Leonard's eyes remained cold, but he knew this was how their business worked.

"No need to thank me. Take this information as a token of my gratitude. And you don't need to be wary. Not everyone can learn such information."

"I see," Leonard mumbled, turned his back, and left.

"Hah...." Leaving Shina breathing heavily. "What an intent..." She could only mumble.

On the outside, Leonard talked to himself. "Maybe I should give her a little surprise."



After all, even if his duty was important, he still had a bit of free time.

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<Thursday Morning, Arcadia Hunter Academy>

"Finally. It's the last day."

"Final boss is here."

The students, who had been continuously examined throughout the week, murmured amongst themselves in hushed tones. The exhaustion was palpable, yet there was a glimmer of relief in their eyes. The last exam of the week was upon them: Introduction to Mana 1.

"This one's supposed to be tough," one student whispered, nervously adjusting their glasses.

"Yeah, I heard from one of the assistants that this time the exam was going to be really hard." another replied, their voice tinged with apprehension.

"Great, just what we need," a third student muttered sarcastically, slumping in their chair.

The classroom fell silent as the door opened with a creak; in strode instructor, a bulky man with a stern face that looked as though it had been chiseled from stone.

His nameplate read Ethan.

His presence commanded immediate attention, and the students straightened in their seats. He had the air of someone who had come straight out of the military, his movements precise and mechanical.

Without a word, he began distributing the exam papers, his large hands moving methodically. Each paper was placed on the desks with a firm, almost rhythmic motion. The students watched in a mixture of awe and trepidation as he made his way down the rows.

As he reached the front of the room again, Instructor Ethan turned to face the class, his expression unyielding. "Good morning," he said, his voice deep and resonant. "This is your final exam for the week: Introduction to Mana 1. You will have two hours to complete the test. Ensure you answer every question to the best of your ability."

He paused, his sharp eyes scanning the room. "Exam duration will be three hours. Good luck."

With that, he took a step back and signaled for the students to begin. The sound of rustling papers and scribbling pens filled the room almost immediately.

Irina looked at the paper before her, feeling confident. She had studied hard for this moment, and her preparation had been thorough. Taking a deep breath, she began to read the questions.

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#### Introduction to Mana 1 - Final Exam

Question 1: Describe the primary methods of mana channeling and their applications in spellcasting.

Question 2: Explain the differences between elemental mana types and how they interact in a mana-rich environment.

Question 3: Discuss the historical significance of mana wells and their impact on modern magical theory.

Question 4:

Part a: Provide an overview of the various techniques used in mana reinforcement for physical combat.

Part b: Given the boundary conditions below, obtain the series form of the solution for the Mana Wavelength Equation.

Part c: Calculate the Mana Wavelength emitted by the Hunter, whose body is shown in Figure 1, using the series form you obtained in Part B. (Note: Any form of solution obtained by using another method won't be accepted.)

Question 5: Analyze the role of mana flow in healing spells, including the potential risks and benefits. Calculate the average unit mana consumption for four different forms of injuries.

Question 6: A mage finds themselves in a dungeon where mana density fluctuates rapidly due to an ancient artifact's influence. The artifact causes the ambient mana to alternate between extreme concentrations and near-depletion every ten minutes. Formulate a strategy for the mage to stabilize their mana flow and maintain spellcasting efficiency while navigating the dungeon and neutralizing the artifact. Include calculations for mana consumption and regeneration under these conditions.

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Irina's eyes lit up as she read through the first five questions. She knew these answers well and quickly began to write.

For Question 1, she detailed the primary methods of mana channeling, emphasizing their practical applications. Her pen moved swiftly as she explained the nuances of direct channeling, flow channeling, and ambient channeling, each with relevant examples from her studies.

Question 2 was straightforward for her. She elaborated on the differences between elemental mana types—fire, water, earth, and air—and their interactions in mana-rich environments, such as creating combined elemental effects and their potential volatility.

Of course, she needed to include diagrams, basic blocks, and many other examples in her answer, but for her, it was like a child's play.

Question 3 was easy, discussing the discovery of mana wells and their transformative effect on magical theory and practice.

'This question....I guess they don't want many students to fail the course.'

It was a classic move. Putting such an easy question in the exam so that students would at least get a passing grade.

She included key historical figures and events that highlighted the importance of these wells. And that was it.

For Question 4, she outlined various techniques used in mana reinforcement for physical combat, from basic mana infusion into weapons to advanced techniques like mana armoring and enhancing physical attributes through mana flow control.

This part was where things started getting a bit harder since she needed to be quick with her solution steps, but at the same time, she also needed to make sure she didn't make any mistakes.

But her mind was fast with the calculations as always.

Question 5 had her exploring the complexities of healing spells.

She discussed the delicate balance required to avoid overcharging or undercharging a healing spell, the dangers of mana feedback, and the critical role of controlled mana flow.

And then, she showed her calculations.

Then, she reached Question 6.

Irina paused, her brow furrowing as she read the problem. The scenario presented was challenging, requiring not only a deep understanding of mana mechanics but also the ability to apply that knowledge in a high-stress, dynamic environment.

She took a deep breath and started outlining her thoughts. The key would be to stabilize mana flow despite the fluctuating environment. She began by calculating the mage's average mana consumption per spell and their natural mana regeneration rate.

Irina wrote:

Mana Consumption per Spell: 50 mana units

Mana Regeneration Rate: 10 mana units per minute

With the mana density fluctuating every ten minutes, she had to consider both extremes: a high concentration where mana regeneration might temporarily increase and near-depletion where regeneration could halt entirely.

She continued:

High Concentration Phase: Mana regeneration might increase to 20 units per minute.

Near-Depletion Phase:

- Mana regeneration could drop to 0 units per minute.

- Irina sketched out a strategy:

1. During High Concentration Phases:

- Cast high-mana spells to utilize the surplus.

- Store excess mana in mana crystals for later use.

2. During Near-Depletion Phases:

- Conserve mana by casting only essential spells.

- Use stored mana from crystals to maintain necessary spellcasting.

She calculated the optimal use of mana during these cycles:

High Concentration:

- Regenerate 200 mana units in 10 minutes.

-Use 100 units for spellcasting and store 100 units.

Near-Depletion:

-Consume stored mana at a rate of 10 units per minute, maintaining minimal spellcasting activities.

Irina's pen moved more slowly as she worked through the details, ensuring her strategy was viable. She included diagrams to illustrate the mana flow and graphs to represent the fluctuations and her planned mana usage.

Finally, she concluded with a summary of how the mage could neutralize the artifact by synchronizing their actions with the mana fluctuations, using stored mana strategically to maintain stability.

Irina leaned back in her chair, reviewing her work. The last question had taken considerable effort, but she felt confident in her solution.

She glanced at the clock, noting she had used her time well.

Instructor Ethan's voice broke the silence. "Time's up. Pens down."

Irina set her pen aside, a sense of accomplishment washing over her. The week had been grueling, but she had faced the final boss and given it her best.