

H. Academy 41

Chapter 41 Chapter 10.6 - First Dungeon

"Everything is set."

BANG!

The gunshot echoed through the clearing as I swiftly moved from my hidden spot, revealing myself to the Harmonic Chatterers.

"Keen Eye. Dash."

Activating both my skills at the same time, I could see the surprise and fear flickering in their eyes as they tried to comprehend the sudden appearance of another enemy.

However, my speed was amplified.

BANG, BANG, BANG!

In a flash, I fired my gun with deadly precision, taking down one Harmonic Chatterer after another. My shots were quick and accurate as I aimed for their vital spots, ensuring swift and clean kills.

After all, my [Keen Eye] enabled me to see the weak and vital spots of monsters, and my momentarily increased speed enabled me to change my aim at a more rapid rate.

The speed of the gun was also not a problem since when I tested it; I could see it was a semi-automatic gun.

THUD THUD THUD

The monsters fell to the ground one another, as all of them had at least one vital point pierced.

It was the strength of the guns.

No matter what, a firearm's attacking speed can not be matched, and if one can penetrate the skin of a monster, then nothing is stronger than a firearm.

That was especially the case right now.

The monsters' eerie melody was cut short as they fell to the ground, lifeless. They had been accustomed to the feeling of glory, and they were blinded by those hunters that were killed, and now they were paying the price for it.

'Comfort breeds weakness.'

With my enhanced senses and increased speed and agility, I moved at a rapid pace, making it nearly impossible for the remaining Harmonic Chatterers to pinpoint my exact location.

I shifted from one shadow to another, using the environment to my advantage. Even though I had rested, that didn't mean the sun had risen fully. It was starting to rise, but the leaves of the forest were blocking the sunlight from entering and illuminating since the sunlight was coming from an angle that was hard to penetrate the thick leaves.

BANG, BANG, BANG!

My gunshots continued to ring out, each shot finding its mark. The monsters tried to retaliate, but their attacks were futile as I remained elusive and out of their reach.

However, that didn't mean I was invincible.

No, that was far from being true.

"Huff.....Huff...."

I was getting tired again at a rapid pace as well as my mana was reaching the end of my reserves.

Since I was using my skills as well as my mana to enhance bullets, it was draining rapidly.

'I can last at most five seconds more. But this is enough to kill everyone here.'

The moment I concluded that I aimed my gun at the monsters flying over me.

SWOOSH

'One on the right.'

Turning my head to the right, I aimed at the monkeylike monster flying over me and fired the gun.

BANG!

'Another on the left.'

Firing another bullet while turning my head, I blasted his head.

BANG!"

'The last one on behind.'

With my senses, I turned back and pulled the trigger.

TICK!

'Hm?'

But the response I was expecting did not come. Rather than a loud sound of a gunshot and the pressure of recoil, it was a simple sound.

'!'

And my brain racked immediately.

SWOOSH

"SHRIEK!"

The monster, with its amplified sound, reached me.

TING

I quickly dodged to the side, narrowly avoiding the full force of the Harmonic Chatterer's attack. But even with my enhanced senses, the proximity to the monster's amplified sound still affected me.

"Argh!" I winced, clutching my ears as the tingling sensation intensified. The monster took advantage of my momentary distraction and lunged at me again.

THUD

I abandoned my gun, realizing that it would be useless in such close-quarters combat.

SCHLINK

Instead, I swiftly drew my daggers from their sheath, my grip tightening around the hilts.

"SHRIEK!"

SWOOSH

The Harmonic Chatterer attacked with its claws, aiming for my chest. I managed to sidestep the strike, but its sharp claws grazed my shoulder, drawing blood.

"Gah!" I gritted my teeth, feeling the pain surge through my body. The wound was not deep, but it stung, and I knew I had to end this quickly.

My movements were slowed as I knew the end of my mana reserves was approaching its end.

'Two seconds.'

With the timer in my head, I ignored the pain and imbued the last bit of my mana into my dagger.

The crimson color appeared once again as I felt the bloodthirstiness attacking.

SWOOSH

I could see the monster aiming at my chest as its claws approached. My ears were ringing, and I was nowhere in my peak condition.

But, at that moment, I calmed down.

'One second.' It was the leftover time until my mana reserves would deplete.

CLANK

My eyes were drawn to its moves as I parried its claws with one of my daggers.

STAB

Then, instantly, I stabbed the monster with another one while rotating my body and using my momentum as my strength.

"SHRIEK!"

I could feel the monster screaming loudly, but my ringing ears didn't perceive any sound.

Abandoning the dagger that stabbed the monster from its chest, I took the position of a slash.

SLASH

And following the stab, I slashed the monster's neck.

SPURT

The blood dyed the ground with the color of dead.

As the last of the Harmonic Chatterers fell, their eerie melody finally silenced; I took a deep breath to steady myself.

"Huff.....Hufff...."

The adrenaline rushed through my veins, and my heart pounded in my chest.

The once serene clearing was now littered with the lifeless bodies of the monsters. I had taken them down with ruthless efficiency, leaving no room for mercy.

As I looked around, I noticed the fallen bodies of the hunters nearby. Their faces were etched with pain and despair, a stark reminder of the harsh reality of this world. They fought bravely, but in the end, they couldn't withstand the onslaught of the Harmonic Chatterers.

And I was even sure that if I tried to help them by revealing myself, they would abandon me and leave.

It was a common occurrence even in the normal dungeons, let alone a dungeon managed by Black Market.

"Let's leave this place."

Checking the clock, I saw the time was nearing 6 AM. It was about time I left this place.

After all, even returning all the way back without encountering any monsters was going to take at least two hours. And this was even when I considered if there were no monsters.

Therefore, this was the most optimal choice.

After gulping a Stamina Potion to relieve my fatigue, I started grabbing the corpses of the monsters.

'10 Harmonic Chatterers, huh? That is quite a lot.'

After all, there was a reason why it was this hard to kill all those monsters.

After taking my Gun and putting another magazine in for future fights, I started leaving the place.

Though I didn't forget to fill all the space inside the magazines, in the end, the number of magazines was limited per weapon.

Just like that, I left the dungeon.

WUSH!

The moment I returned back, the same feeling of nausea came, but at this point, I was slightly familiar with it.

The first thing they were going to do was to check the monsters inside my spatial bracelet.

Since I needed to show them the haul and I didn't want to look suspicious, I bought another spatial bracelet for this sake.

The same man with the cigar was at the gate. He was smoking while he was waiting, and when he saw me, he put a smirk on his face.

"Yo, Edgy Little Kid. How was it?"? His annoying tone was still there, but I was quite tired of constant fighting, so I didn't bother with answering.

"Tch! Let me scan you." With that, he brought a device closer to me as he scanned for the spatial type of artifacts.

DING!

"Give me the bracelet."

He grumbled as he gestured for me to give him the bracelet. Then, after he took the bracelet, he started examining the things inside.

"Ho? Not bad.... You are better than I thought. 15 kobolds....That is quite a lot."

He said, nodding his head. Just as he said, I put 15 kobolds on the place and didn't put any Harmonic Chatters, as that would make them suspect that I was a person that had a hand in the massacre of another group.

"Okay, it is confirmed. You can leave now."

As he said those words, he tapped on his watch and mumbled something that I couldn't hear.

'It is truly a cheat item.'

Just as I had expected, he wasn't able to detect the spatial bracelet where I put my belongings.

"Wait a second."

And following that, after a minute, the same masked man came.

"Marcus." The gatekeeper greeted the man, but Markus simply ignored him, just like me.

"Tch! You two are a good match. You should go on a date or something."

Hearing his sarcastic remarks, none of us cared about it, and we both left the place not long after.

After passing the second gate, I made my way to the place where the [Wildcatters] bought the monsters from the customers.

"How can I help you?"

It was the same procedure as the woman, and I started the process.

"After taking the institute's share, the remaining points will be 13750 Valer."

Just as I had calculated, the woman presented me with the amount.

Just like that, I left the [Wildcatters], but that was nowhere close to the end of my day. After all, I needed to find a monster broker to sell the monster carcasses I had at my disposal.

Leaving the [Wildcatters], I navigated through the busy streets of the black market.

As I moved through the bustling crowd, I spotted a sign that read [Bestiary] with an arrow pointing down a narrow alleyway.

'Found you.'

It was a place that was pretty common for players to visit when they wanted to make use of the monster carcasses.

Since this place fetched the highest price when the carcass of the monsters was in good condition.

Pushing open the creaky door, I stepped inside a dimly lit room filled with an eclectic mix of individuals. The place had an air of secrecy, and I could sense that many illicit deals took place within these walls.

Approaching the counter, I met eyes with a man who seemed to be the monster broker. He had a sharp gaze and a no-nonsense demeanor.

'He looks sharp, and from his posture alone, it seems he is a spearman. His estimated strength should be around 9-10 stats on average.'

I judged the man as he judged me.

"How can I assist you, young hunter?" he inquired, his voice low and gravelly.

"I have some monster carcasses to sell," I replied. He looked quite intimidating, but knowing his reason for being here, I didn't bother at all.

His eyes narrowed as he examined me. "Let's see what you've got."

I carefully placed the monster carcasses on the counter. The broker inspected them one by one, his expert eyes sizing up their value. However, I could see his eyes shining.

After all, the condition of the carcasses was quite good. All of them had their body pierced by arrows at most, and almost none of them had neither burn marks, nor did they lose too much blood since I prevented them from doing so.

"These are quite the haul you've got here," he remarked, his voice tinged with a hint of admiration.

He named each monster and their respective ranks as he examined them. "A group of Kobolds, Harmonic Chatterers, and even a Kobold Chief... impressive."

"All of these will fetch around 30.000 Valer." And then he made his offer.

I observed the broker's reaction carefully as he appraised the monsters. His initial offer was 30,000 Valer, which was already a decent sum. However, I knew the true value of my haul, and I wasn't about to settle for less.

"I appreciate your offer, but I believe the value of these monsters is higher than that," I calmly replied, meeting his sharp gaze.

The broker raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued by my confidence. "Oh? And why is that?"

"These monsters are in excellent condition, and their ranks are quite high. I've taken great care in preserving them, ensuring that their quality remains top-notch," I explained.

The broker leaned back slightly, considering my words. "You have a point there, young hunter. But the market for these monsters is already quite saturated. I can't go higher than 40,000 Valer."

I knew he was trying to haggle, but I wasn't about to back down easily. After all, I knew he was in dire need of monsters with such conditions for his supplier with picky demands.

"These monsters are still rare and valuable. They would fetch a much higher price in the right hands. I'm willing to settle for 50,000 Valer, no less."

As I spoke, the broker's eyes narrowed more. "You drive a hard bargain, young hunter. But I can't give you more than that."

Hearing this, I knew he was playing his last card, but there was no way I was letting go.

"Is that so? Then I shall look for another monster broker."

With those words, I started picking up the carcasses and was about to leave the place.

"Wait."

Until the man stopped me.

After a few moments of tense silence, the broker finally nodded. "Very well. 50,000 Valer it is."

The moment I heard his voice, I nodded my head. Just as I expected, he couldn't back down.

Just like that, I sold everything under my disposal as I left the black market and returned to the academy.....

Chapter 42 Chapter 11.1 - Sylvie

After I sold everything at my disposal, the man there asked me if I wanted to make a deal with him.

"Your work is swift and splendid. If you bring more corpses in such good states, I will pay you more than the average amount."

He offered in such a manner, and I vaguely accepted the deal. I didn't write or sign a contract, but I still managed to enter his eyes, and that was enough for now.

When I returned to the academy, it was around 5 PM. Selling the monsters, cleaning myself inside an inn, and eating a hefty meal...All of them cost quite a long time as well as money, but it was good to reward myself from time to time.

The moment I returned to the academy, the same atmosphere of students walking and wandering around welcomed me.

Since the weekend was about to end, most students were returning from either their homes or their small ventures inside Aurora City.

"Oh, you are here."

The same worker that always sent me off welcomed me.

"Good that you are here before curfew."

I nodded in response to his words as I scanned the watch.

"Then, have a good week."

"Thanks."

Just like that, I was about to leave, but suddenly my ears perked up as I felt the familiar voice I had been hearing in the game.

"Yo, today's dungeon was pretty good, right?" It was a girl whose voice I knew pretty well.

"Indeed. I would have never thought your sword could be this sharp."

"Hehe....Do you think my family's arts are jokes, Victor?"

"It is not that. I didn't expect you to one-shot it."

"It was because I had fried his skin firsthand."

"Yeah. If it wasn't because of Irina, I am pretty sure I wouldn't have one-shotted it. As expected, working with a magician is the best."

A group of three students were walking together, and immediately surroundings attention was turned to them.

That was to be expected since all three of them had casual clothes on themselves, and they looked really good and aesthetically satisfying from an objective point of view.

A girl with red hair and a scruffy attitude, a girl with white hair and a tomboyish cut, and a boy with a cold demeanor.

Irene, Julia, Victor.

Looking at them, I remembered this event. In the game, according to the achievement and progress of those three characters at the start, Ethan might have also entered this dungeon with them.....

And the results would be abysmal for his character since he would see the disparity between him and his friends, making him work a lot harder than before. This event was one of the catalysts that would give players an experience points buff, which would let them advance at a faster rate.

'But from the looks of it, Ethan hadn't gone with them. Just as I heard at that time in the last class.'

As I saw the three walking together, without wanting to associate myself with them, I slowly walked away.

Though I felt a squinting gaze behind me.

"Irina, what is wrong?" As my sensitive senses picked the sound up, I heard Julia asking.

"Nothing. I just saw an annoying bastard; that's it."

"I see....Bad for him then...."

"Bad from him...."

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

'Status.'

?Name: Astron Natusalune

?Occupation: Weapon Master (level 1)

?Talent Limit: 6

?Passives:

-? Vengeful Bane

?Attributes:

Variable Attributes:

-? Strength: 1.6

-? Dexterity: 2.216

-? Agility: 2.12

-? Constitution: 1.524

-? Intuition: 2.3

-? Magical Power: 2.6

-? Mana Capacity: 1.84

After returning to my room, I once again checked my stats.

'My strength stat increased by 0.1, and the others also increased a lot.' I thought to myself.

It was evident that putting one's self into dangerous situations that required one to push their limits enabled one to have better improvement.

'After all, that was the setting in the game.'

Especially a newly designed complex setting was added to the game.

'Danger meter.'

A special type of system that measures the difficulty and the danger of the situations by considering a lot of factors.

The adaptability of situations, the overall strength of the enemy, the preparations that were made, the factor of unknown, etc.

Even though it was not a perfect design, it made the game interesting since the harder the foe you fought, the more experience points you would get.

That did not simply mean the level of the enemy was higher than the player; it also took into account the fact of compatibility.

For instance, a physical tank type of monster would easily be beaten by a mage build; thus, that would give less experience even if its level was higher, etc.

That made the game a lot harder since those that would abuse the weakness of the bosses and enemies would be rewarded less simply.....

That was the reason why the game was a git-gud type at the end.

After closing my status window, I started pondering about my future events on my way to the training grounds.

'After the club activities start, the interactions with demons will also start. I need to be present there no matter what.'

CLENCH

Clenching my fists, I gritted my teeth. Remembering the amount of demon influence and the djinns inside this academy made me want to puke.

'I will pluck every one of you, one by one. I won't spare those who wish to become dogs of demons either.'

Just like that, I reached the training grounds. Today I didn't want to do any more combat training, so I just focused on my body inside the gym.

And, of course, it was always the running that came first.....

RUSTLE CHATTER

As the morning of Monday came, all of the students made their way to their classrooms.

A round-looking amphitheater was filled with students since today; they would learn about their first dungeon exploration grades.

Everyone took their seats as they talked amongst themselves energetically.

"What do you think? Who will get the highest grade?"

"Yeah, there are some really skilled hunters in our group. It's hard to predict," another student replied.

"Did you see Victor during training? He's got this intense aura. As expected from Blackthorns," a curious student whispered.

"Really? That's pretty cool. I hope I did well in the dungeon," their friend responded.

Over in another corner, a group of friends discussed their favorites.

"I'm rooting for Lilia. She is our school goddess, I bet she nailed it," one of them said with a smile.

"Oh, and Julia. To be honest, I didn't expect them to get out this fast....I mean, they basically finished the whole training in 40 minutes."

"Yeah, I was in her group, and to be honest, that girl was crazy. Her sword just decimated the boss monster in a matter of seconds."

As the groups talked amongst themselves, behind the rows, a young man just sat there and kept reading the book in front of him.

Astron was someone that didn't have much interest in gossip that didn't benefit him. But, he still put his one ear to the conversations since there was a chance that good information might appear inside there.

After all, information was power, and rumors always contained such.

But, for now, it was meaningless.

CREAK

While the students were busy talking amongst themselves, suddenly, the door opened wide, and a person with a good amount of pressure entered the room.

The same woman with short yellow hair and clothes showcased that she was an instructor.

"Attention."

SILENCE

As she raised her voice, instantly, the students' chatter reached its end as well, as an eerie silence descended upon the classroom.

'She looks like she is in a bad mood.' Astron thought.

His eyes perceived the small gestures that were commonly made by those that were annoyed and angry.

Her brow was slightly furrowed, and her lips were pressed into a thin line. She tapped her fingers impatiently on the desk, a clear sign of her agitation. Her foot tapped rhythmically on the floor, a sure indication of her growing impatience.

Her crossed arms and the way she shifted her weight from one leg to the other showed her frustration. The way she stared at the class with a stern and unwavering gaze sent a message that she meant she was angry.

And the aura that was excluded from her added made the students think of themselves.

'What did we do wrong?'

All of them asked this question themselves, as they couldn't understand why Instructor White was angry.

"Today, before we start our class, I will announce your first Practical Assessment results." As she said those words, she squinted her eyes.

'And here comes the roast.' Astron thought.

He knew this even after all.

"It was pathetic," Eleanor said as her gaze wandered around the students. She looked at the students like they were bugs, and she crushed them with her aura.

"For starters, some of you displayed a complete lack of teamwork. It's as if you all forgot that hunting monsters is not a solo endeavor. We put the students that ranked higher into the teams for the sake of making them understand how helpful teamwork could be. You were supposed to work together, support each other, and strategize as a team. But what did I witness? Individuals acted like they were the stars of the show, ignoring their teammates and charging ahead recklessly. You were more interested in showing off your own skills rather than accomplishing the mission as a group."

With those words, her gaze wandered around the students in the front. Even though Eleanor knew this generation was named as Golden Generation, that didn't mean she would let them do as they wanted.

"Because you had charged on your own, your teammates had a hard time dealing with the remaining monsters. And, if this was a real dungeon, we could even see some monsters that got away thanks to your negligence. We are hunters, and it is our job to ensure that we clear the gates perfectly and protect our citizens from the monsters inside the gate."

Her gaze especially stayed on Irina for longer than others. That was because she watched her recording, and Irina was one of those that disappointed her the most.

"Understood!"

""""Yes. """"

Against the charisma of such a high-ranked hunter, none of the students could voice their thoughts as almost every one of them spoke.

Almost.

Since Astron kept silent, as he knew most students that had graduated from here were going to be selfish hunters in the future.

Like him.

So, there was no need to make empty promises here.

"And don't even get me started on the egos in this room," Eleanor continued, her tone becoming more impassioned. "Some of you acted as if you were invincible, disregarding the warnings and advice of your teammates. You thought you knew it all, and your arrogance led to poor decision-making and unnecessary risks. This is not a place for heroes. This is a place for smart and skilled hunters who know how to work together and make sound judgments."

She continued speaking as she didn't stop her roast. Her gaze was still around the people that sat in the front rows, and even the main cast couldn't help but lower their heads. This one was directed to Victor mostly since he was the one that disregarded others as trash and didn't listen to the ranger of his group, almost leading them into a trap.

"And let's not forget about those who were simply lazy," Eleanor said, her voice taking on a stern edge as her gaze slightly wandered at the back of the seats.

In the end, even if she was roasting those at the front seats with higher ranks, there were things she hated a lot more than those.

Especially people who were weak and lazy at the same time.

""Some of you were so lazy during the assessment, it's a wonder you even bothered to show up," she said.

"There were those who thought they could rely on their teammates to do all the work for them. Let me tell you, that's not how teamwork works," she added, her voice firm as she glanced in Astron's direction.

Her gaze penetrated Astron, that was sitting in the back rows. The way she glared at him showed that she was really angry.

Hearing this, Irina turned back with a smirk on her face. After all, she knew the person Eleanor's words attacked. The one that annoyed her the most for the time being.

'You reap what you sow; you low-ranked bastard.' She thought as she was happy with Astron getting the result he deserved.

It was not only her; almost everyone inside the classroom could see Eleanor's gaze directed at Astron.

"Looks like Astron is her favorite target today," someone remarked, glancing at the scene.

"I heard he was pretty lazy during the assessment," another student said with a knowing nod.

The students murmured amongst themselves as they looked at Eleanor and Astron. They were now happy that he was the target since the pressure on themselves was now shifted to him.

"And then we have those who seemed completely disinterested in the task at hand. It's as if they had better things to do than participate in dungeon exploration," she remarked, her eyes narrowing as she looked at Astron, who remained impassive.

Throughout Eleanor's criticisms, Astron maintained his calm demeanor, not showing any reaction to her words. He knew she was targeting him, but he didn't feel the need to defend himself. He was well aware of his shortcomings and didn't need Eleanor to point them out.

The other students couldn't help but notice the tension between Eleanor and Astron, and they exchanged knowing glances as they observed the scene.

"He's really getting under her skin," one student whispered to another.

"Yeah, she's definitely singling him out," the other replied with a nod.

As Eleanor's roasting continued, she emphasized the importance of taking the Practical Assessment seriously and putting in the effort to improve. Her words were meant to motivate the students, but Astron didn't seem fazed.

"He must have nerves of steel to remain so composed," someone whispered, impressed by Astron's unwavering demeanor.

That was partially true as physically Astron really had a hard time enduring Eleanor's pressure, but for the mental case, he didn't care.

In the end, Eleanor's criticisms didn't seem to affect Astron. He didn't care about his grades or what others thought of him.

After all, he had only one goal in his mind, and that didn't require him to have a good impression of others.

Just like that, the class continued as Eleanor kept spouting her strict remarks about their dungeon work.

'Why are they talking about him like that?'

Sylvie asked that question to herself as she looked at the class that was ongoing.

'Was Astron the only one that made a mistake?'

She was a girl that liked to help people in distress or people that was having a hard time. And naturally, Astron was one of those.

Especially, she hated that gloomy look on his face.

Growing up in a household that was bright with a doting mother, father, and brother, Sylvie was a girl that always showed kindness to others.

And when she first entered the academy, she was all alone. She didn't know about many people; she didn't know how people lived in this place.

Since the reputation of the Arcadia Hunter Academy was spread wide, she felt overwhelmed. She saw people that were celebrities all around the world.

She was even standing in the same room with those children who were the heirs of such celebrities.

Thus, as a girl that came from the countryside, she felt overwhelmed by everyone here. And since she was a healer, her interests were also different from others, as she belonged to a specific group of people that didn't participate in combat.

Healers were rare, but they were not that hard to find, so she needed to do her best to pass those classes.

Thus, at the start, thanks to her worries, she slightly ostracized herself and found the time to look at the class and learn about the people there.

It was at that moment she noticed Astron.

A young boy that sat on the back with his hood over his head. She couldn't directly see his features since he covered himself with his hood, but her special skill enabled her to see his emotions.

A turmoil of emotions that never changed.

A dark aura was oozing from him.

A deep dark aura mixed with the color of red, dark hues of blue and black.

It was her special trait. A trait that enabled Sylvie to see other people's emotions by the color shown on there.

She knew the color red. It was anger

She also knew about the color of dark blue. She knew about it since she saw it whenever she visited a person's funeral.

It was the feeling of sorrow.

However, there was one more thing that was there. And it covered almost everything.

It was the color of black.

The color that she had never seen this strong.

The color of Hatred.

When she looked at the boy covered with the hood, she could see an immense amount of hatred oozing from him.

It was so strong that whenever she looked around, she unconditionally directed her attention to him.

That was the reason why Sylvie always paid attention to Astron.

There was also another individual who took his attention. Ethan Hartley. A young man with a bright white aura of righteousness.

Whenever she looked at both, she could see the disparity.

A dark and sorrowful aura surrounded him, and a bright, inspiring aura surrounded Ethan.

And, as a person that wanted to help others, Sylvie naturally wanted to help Astron too. Thus, she wanted to approach him and decided to try her chances one day.

It was the day when she witnessed the cruelty of the world.

As Sylvie recounted the incident, her voice trembled with emotion. She recalled the day she witnessed three students bullying Astron, and her heart ached at the memory.

She saw three people surrounding him. They were mocking him, calling him names, and pushing him around. It was like they were feeding off his pain, enjoying his misery.

She wanted to step in and stop them, but fear held her back. She was just a new student, unfamiliar with this intimidating world of elite hunters. Also, she was a healer, so she knew she couldn't do anything.

She also knew about those three, as they were in the same class.

She couldn't understand why they were treating him like that. What had he done to deserve such cruelty?

She could still remember what they called him.

"Hey, look, it's the orphan loser."

"Did your mother die because she couldn't stand giving birth to a loser like you?"

"Nah....Probably it was because his father left them...Who would want a useless son and a whore mother?"

She still remembered those words.

But there was one more thing that made her feel more sorrow.

It was because whenever Astron tried to resist, he would be beaten more.

And at some point, he simply stopped trying and defending himself.

The colors that she could see intensified, and another shade of blue was added there.

She didn't know what it was, but she could see Astron was changing. He was being pushed at the corner.

She even wanted to inform the teachers, but none of them even cared. She could never forget what she heard at that time from a teacher she talked to.

"Tch...He is even too weak to stand for himself, but he wants to become a hunter. Useless bastard. Because of him, my niece wasn't accepted...."

It was what she heard. This was something she could never forget.

'How can you be this cruel? What are those people?'

She thought at that time, so she went to help Astron and heal his wounds whenever she could, using her healing art.

She was not proficient enough, but she still did her best and wanted to be a help to him.

The days went on as a month passed.

It was at that night suddenly things changed; Sylvie could see it.

The colors she could see on Astron had changed.

If before it was filled with black, red, and blue, now a color she had not seen in the people covered it.

It was the color of grey. She knew what that color represented.

Indifference.

It was indifference.

Whenever she looked at him, she could see his eyes were changed. Now, he always looked at people with dead eyes filled with no emotions.

He didn't care about what others were saying about him.

That was something Astron had done before as well, but Sylvie knew he was just putting a front. After all, she could see his emotions changing inside his heart whenever someone mocked him or said bad things about him, but now it was different.

Now, nothing has changed anymore.

The gray color covered him like a barrier, and nothing could penetrate him.

"Thank you for your help."

However, she remembered his words from before when she stayed with him at that time.

His words were sincere since she could feel the yellow aura of appreciation inside him. And that made her happy seeing the aura.

But soon, that was replaced by the color Dark Blue. She noticed whenever he seemed to be happy, a dark hue of blue would always replace it.

Sorrow never left him.

And whenever she had seen him like that, she felt that he was carrying a burden. But she could never bring herself to ask that, as she just watched him from a distance.

It was the same this time as well.

Sylvie watched as she listened to Eleanour's complaints to the students, but in the later parts, her words were only directed to Astron.

'Why is she only targeting him?' She asked herself.

Sylvie could never understand why Eleanor behaved like that.

I mean, she could see that Astron was not putting in the best effort, but insulting and humiliating others would not work, in her opinion.

Rather than doing that, wasn't it better for her to try to understand Astron's problems?

That was what she thought. But in the end, she was helpless as Eleanor was the one that was holding the title of instructor.

But it looked like Astron was unbothered by her insults, so Sylvie just sat there and watched him from a distance.

Just like that, today's classes reached their end.

"As today's classes come to an end, I have an important announcement to make," Instructor White said, her stern gaze sweeping across the students. "Starting the next day, we will be having a series of anti-human close combat lessons."

Murmurs and whispers spread among the students as they exchanged curious glances. Anti-human close combat was a crucial skill for hunters, especially when facing human adversaries. It involved hand-to-hand combat and weapon skills tailored for fighting other hunters or human enemies.

"We will be pairing up for these lessons, and I expect each one of you to take them seriously," Instructor White continued. "You will be tested on your close combat abilities, so make sure to practice and hone your skills."

As she finished her words, Eleanor White left the classroom and made her way over to her office.

'Ah....Close combat lessons...'

Sylvie's heart skipped a beat as she heard the announcement. She was a healer, not a combat specialist, and close combat was not her forte. However, she knew the importance of these lessons and the need to be prepared for any situation.

After all, even though she was not going to be graded for her participation in her class, she still needed to develop herself to the point where she could defend herself.

As the students began to pack up their belongings and head out of the classroom, Sylvie heard a voice coming from the door side.

"Hey, where do you think you are going to?"

It was a voice filled with scorn, and as she turned her face to the source of the commotion, she saw that one of her classmates was blocking Astron's path.

If she remembered correctly, he was a boy that ranked around one thousand.

'What was his name?' She couldn't remember his name since there were quite a lot of students there.

'He is filled with such malice.' She thought, seeing the darkness oozing from the boy. She could also see the feeling of pride and thrill from him. It appeared that the boy was thrilled to block his way.

"Hey? I am talking to you; where do you think you are going, you last-ranked bastard?"

Seeing no response was coming from Astron, he became agitated as he raised his voice.

"Don't talk to me."

But the reply he had gotten was something he was not expecting.

An indifferent voice came from the person before him.

His purple eyes were filled with indifference as his face didn't contain any type of reaction he had expected.

'This bastard! How dare he!'

The boy glanced at the girl that was sitting in the front seat, and seeing the uninterested look on her face; he got more agitated.

'What a primitive act.' Astron saw through his reasons from the start, but he wasn't bothered with this 'person' before him.

He simply ignored him and went his own way. However, that act made the boy more and more agitated.

The boy's face flushed with anger as Astron ignored him and continued walking towards the exit. "I said, don't ignore me!" he yelled, his voice laced with fury and humiliation.

But Astron remained unfazed. He didn't even spare a glance at the boy as he passed him by. It was as if the boy's existence was completely inconsequential to him.

In fact, it was. Astron had never seen this boy in the game, be it as a villain or a character. But he still remembered his name and his rank.

'Liam Wayne. Ranked 1025. Specializes in swords.' He recounted the information he knew about the boy.

He was someone that didn't benefit him in any way; thus, he wanted to use this boy before him to set an example here.

Enraged by the lack of response, the boy saw red and decided to take matters into his own hands. Without warning, he lunged at Astron from behind, aiming to tackle him to the ground.

Different from normal villains, he didn't even bother with shouting. He simply raised his fists and attacked.

SWOOSH

However, Astron's instincts kicked in, and he swiftly sidestepped the boy's attack. With a deft movement, he evaded the boy's grasp and turned to face him.

The boy stumbled forward, losing his balance due to the failed attack.

THUD

His pride wounded and his anger boiling over, he quickly got back on his feet and charged at Astron again.

'An overly charged attack from the right.'

SWOOSH

This time throwing a wild punch just as Astron expected, he aimed to injure him.

But Astron was no stranger to close combat. He was someone that learned how to combat unarmed in both his memories. On earth, he was interested in Martial Arts, and in this life, it was taught to him by Aaron.

SWOOSH

With a fluid motion, he dodged the punch once again, but he never raised his hand and tried to attack.

Rather, he simply tackled the boy as he disturbed his center of gravity.

THUD

Making the boy fall to the ground in response.

"I warned you," Astron said calmly, his voice devoid of any emotion. "Don't talk to me."

The rest of the students who had witnessed the confrontation watched in stunned silence. They had never seen Astron fight before, and they were surprised by his skill and composure. He was ranked last, and they knew he was weak, but none of them expected him to act in such a manner.

Something looked fundamentally different, but they ignored it not long after.

Only Sylvie and another girl with red hair were looking at the scene.

Sylvie rather wore a happy smile, seeing Astron finally holding his ground, and Irina....

She was doing her own thing....

Chapter 44 Chapter 11.3 - Sylvie

What is the thing most humans fundamentally possess? What is the feeling we are searching for?

Even though there may be some exceptions, most of the time, humans tend to feel like they are above others.

Pride and Ego.

We humans. No, rather, we sentient beings generally like to feel like we are better than most people.

The stupid person before me was an example of that.

I didn't know much about him aside from his name and his ranking inside the school since he was not a named character, but the way he was acting and his small little gestures indicated that he was trying to prove himself and improve his standing inside the classroom by showing off.

It was certainly a cliched tactic or way.

Since if you want to make something taller, either you will increase its length or you will decrease the comparison's length.

It is a small instinctual act that comes from one's subconscious. If you devalue others before the person you want to impress, you will think your value will increase.

A basic psychology of those mothers who roast their son/daughter before their friends.

And people like that were everywhere around; thus, when it came to dealing with such people, a simple way was most efficient.

'Showing that you are not an easy prey.'

Nature's most basic rule. If you are weak, you are going to get eaten.

'Liam Wayne. Ranked 1025. Specializes in swords.'

He was such a guy, but there was something I had observed in the dungeon exploration while watching my group fight.

Even though everyone was ranked high and talented, none of them were proficient in unarmed close combat. At least not enough.

Of course, it was something that was expected since, aside from Martial Artist, no one fights with their bare hands, but as a Hunter, one always needs to make sure that they are prepared.

It was the same for the guy before me.

When I ignored him, my senses picked up a flying fist coming towards me. I was already expecting such a reaction, so my body moved fast.

Thanks to my practicing martial arts on Earth, and the combat senses that were carved on the original Astron's body by Aaron, I moved quite swiftly and dodged his punch.

Then, when he tackled and lost his balance, the feeling he was going to get was humiliation. Even though falling down to the ground was rather an act that required aid, most of the time, people's reaction would be laughing at such a thing.

Thus, the belief that people laughing at them would make them feel humiliated, resulting in their emotions slipping over and making a hasty decision.

Like the one before me.

As a fist that was overflowing with force entered my senses, it was not hard for me to dodge the attack and tackle him to the ground with his arms locked down.

A simple technique of disarming your opponent.

Then as he was lying on the ground, I dealt the finishing blow. It was nothing that required disciplinary action but, at the same time, an action that gave a message.

"I warned you, don't talk to me."

With that, I left the classroom. To be honest, I was also slightly annoyed by the fact that he was blocking me since it disturbed my training, so I also satisfied myself by doing that.

Then, after leaving the classroom, my destination was once again the training grounds, as I had nothing else to do....

Tomorrow morning at the field of the academy grounds, a group of students gathered for the upcoming anti-human close combat lessons.

The sun had already risen, casting a soft golden light over the training area. However, not everyone seemed thrilled about the early start.

A small cluster of students stood together, their arms crossed and their expressions less than enthusiastic. They muttered complaints about the early hour, their voices filled with groans and yawns.

"Seriously, who thought it was a good idea to have these lessons at the crack of dawn?" one student grumbled.

"I can barely function this early in the morning," another chimed in, stifling a yawn.

"Just five more minutes of sleep would've been so nice," a third student added with a sigh.

Even though it was not that early in the morning, those students seemed they hadn't slept well enough.

And that was to be expected since they were playing a new VR game in their rooms for the whole night.

Their gripes continued until the sound of footsteps approached. Instructor White had arrived, her presence immediately commanding their attention. The students fell silent, their complaints fading as they shifted their focus to her.

"Good morning," Instructor White greeted, her tone firm yet composed. As she entered, no complaints were made any further as the students knew how picky this woman was.

"As I have talked about this before, close combat skills are mostly neglected since we hunters mostly rely on weapons. However, in the dungeon, sometimes an unforeseen scene might occur where you lose your weapon. Thus, as a hunter, one always needs to be prepared for such cases."

As Eleanor White continued her lecture about close combat lessons, she signaled the students with her hands.

"Thus, today, you will be paired up with your partners, and you will practice together. Note that your performance today will be graded."

As she spoke, the students exchanged knowing glances. They might have complained about the early hours, but they understood the importance of the training.

"Now, let's get started with your pairings."

As she said those words, she started matching the people according to their rankings and the assessments of their strengths she had made.

In a way, it was natural since the students must not have a huge difference between their strengths for this training to be efficient.

The matching was pretty simple, as they were mostly matched according to their ranks.

However, as the list went down and down, naturally, Eleanor stood before two people that was left alone.

One was a girl with a slightly down expression as if she was slightly scared, and the other one was an annoying student that always managed to get on her nerves.

Sylvie Gracewind.

Since she was a healer, her combat prowess was rather low; therefore, pairing her with even Ethan would make the training inefficient.

However, with this annoying student before her, everything was solved. Since he was ranked last inside the academy and her experienced eyes were saying that the boy's body was weak, he was basically the best partner for Sylvie.

"Sylvie Gracewind and Astron Natusalune. You can take your position."

As she gestured for the two to take their positions, she finished pairing everyone together and turned her attention to the classroom once again.

"Now, remember that the goal of these exercises is not to overpower your partner but to learn from each other. Pay attention to your techniques and be open to constructive feedback," Instructor White advised, her gaze sweeping over the students.

Sylvie stood before Astron, slightly feeling nervous as she remembered how he tackled that boy at that time.

'He looked like he was proficient in close combat.' She thought to herself as she looked at the boy before her.

Her art was activated as he could see his emotions.

It was simply grey as he indifferently looked at her.

"All right, begin!" Instructor White called out, and the field buzzed with activity as pairs started practicing their techniques.

However, Sylvie felt nervous as she had never been in a situation where she needed to fight. Though she knew she could not escape.

"Have you ever fought?" Astron's voice broke the silence between them. His gaze was direct, and his tone was not unkind, but it was not kind either.

SHAKE

She shook her head in response as she felt timid.

"I see. That was to be expected from a healer." Astron nodded to himself, hearing her.

'That is something that won't change until she learns how dangerous the dungeon is.' He thought as he looked into the girl. He remembered that she was the one that helped him heal his wounds at that time. 'I guess repaying her like this is not that bad.'

With that thought, Astron spoke once again.

"Let's start with the basics." He looked serious as his purple gaze penetrated Sylvie.

Sylvie didn't refuse. No, rather, she couldn't as, at that moment, Astron looked overbearing. Though it was mostly thanks to her always watching him from afar, at least in her eyes, she felt like she couldn't refuse him.

As Astron began to instruct her on basic stances and movements, Sylvie listened intently, determined to grasp what he was teaching. He showed her how to position her body for defense and how to pivot for a quick response. His instructions were clear, and he demonstrated each move with precision.

"Your stance needs to be wider for stability," Astron pointed out as he corrected her positioning. "And keep your arms closer to your body to protect your chest."

Sylvie followed his directions, feeling awkward and self-conscious as she tried to mimic his movements.

'This is so hard.' She thought as she felt her body aching.

However, Astron's gaze was focused on her, and while his demeanor was serious, she sensed a genuine intention to help. So, she felt like it would be unfair to him if she gave up right now.

"Let's try a basic block," Astron said, his voice calm. He demonstrated the movement, raising his forearm to shield his face and chest. "You want to use your forearm and the outer edge of your hand to absorb the impact."

Sylvie imitated the move, feeling a bit more confident now that she had clear instructions to follow. Astron watched her closely, his eyes assessing her form.

However, Astron's response was not what she expected. "No. This is not how you do it," he stated firmly, his tone showing his dissatisfaction with her execution.

Sylvie's heart sank at his words. She had been trying her best to follow his instructions, and yet she was falling short. She bit her lip, the frustration building up inside her.

Astron seemed to sense her emotions as he spoke again. "Now, let me show you why it is done this way." He adjusted his stance, his fists clenched, and Sylvie felt her anxiety spike.

"Hick!" A small, involuntary sound escaped Sylvie's lips as her nerves got the better of her. The tension in the air was palpable.

"Don't worry, I will limit my strength. I only want you to focus on how you feel," Astron reassured her. He raised his fists once again, his movements deliberate.

FLINCH

But despite his reassurance, Sylvie flinched, her anxiety intensifying. She closed her eyes; her mind flooded with fear and anticipation.

'It is going to hurt. It is going to hurt. It is going to hurt.'

She repeated the mantra in her mind, unable to shake off her apprehension.

Observing her reaction, Astron knew he had to approach this differently.

THUD

Astron's fists made contact, but it wasn't the pain Sylvie anticipated. Instead, she felt a slight discomfort on her elbow. Confusion swirled within her as she opened her eyes to see Astron's face mere inches away.

"Huh?" She stammered, her surprise evident in her voice. She remembered their previous encounter, and being this close to him brought a flood of memories and emotions.

"Calm down," Astron's voice was steady, his gaze unwavering. "Sylvie."

FLINCH

But even the sound of her name made her flinch. The proximity and the intensity in his voice were overwhelming her, bringing to the surface her deeply rooted fear of combat.

As Astron observed Sylvie's reaction, he knew he needed to be cruel right now.

"You need to get a grip on yourself," he stated firmly, his voice carrying an edge of strictness. "This level of fear will make you a liability, not just to yourself, but to your future party members. If you can't control your emotions in a combat situation, you'll be a burden, and that's dangerous."

His words were sharp, the truth behind them cutting through the air. Sylvie's anxiety and fear were obstacles that needed to be addressed, and Astron had no intention of sugarcoating it.

"You're acting pathetic," Astron continued, his tone unyielding. "If you continue like this, you're setting yourself up for failure. In a real combat scenario, there's no room for hesitation or panic. If you can't handle that, then you're in the wrong place."

He paused, his gaze steady on her. "If you're not willing to confront your weaknesses head-on, then perhaps you should reconsider being a part of the academy," he added, his words carrying a finality to them.

Sylvie felt the weight of his words and the truth behind them.

However, that didn't mean she welcomed the feeling without getting affected. No, rather, she felt frustrated.

Her eyes welled up with tears, a mix of frustration and disappointment.

Without another word, she turned and left the training grounds, her emotions overwhelming her. The reality of her fears and the harshness of her self-doubt was difficult to confront, but Astron's words had struck a chord within her.

"Student Sylvie! Where are you going?" She even ignored Instructor Eleanor's voice as she left instantly.

Chapter 45 Chapter 11.4 - Sylvie

"You need to get a grip on yourself."

'I am trying.'

"This level of fear will make you a liability, not just to yourself, but to your future party members. If you can't control your emotions in a combat situation, you'll be a burden, and that's dangerous."

'I know. I know it is dangerous. I know I will be a burden. But I am scared. I am scared that I can't do it.'

"You're acting pathetic,"

'What do you know? What do you know about me? Do you think it is easy?'

"If you continue like this, you're setting yourself up for failure. In a real combat scenario, there's no room for hesitation or panic. If you can't handle that, then you're in the wrong place."

'Why? Why are you speaking like that? How do you know me? What do you know about my circumstances?'

"If you're not willing to confront your weaknesses head-on, then perhaps you should reconsider being a part of the academy."

'Why? Why are you this cruel? What did I do to you?'

Those questions filled Sylvie's head as she ran back, leaving the training grounds.

She remembered the look Astron was giving her, the emotions that were inside.

'Why are you being this sincere while saying such harsh words? Why? Can't you see they are hurting me?'

She couldn't understand.

Just why? Why did he need to speak that harshly? Why did he need to remind her of those times? Why?

Just as she was finally about to forget about those times, forget about that memory that was haunting her all the time....

TINGLE

Her ears started tingling. It was a constant sound of ringing that constantly pressured his ears.

'Ah....Those memories are coming again...'

The memories she tried so hard to suppress were now revealing themselves once again.

TAK TAK TAK

She just ran. Ran and ran until she reached a place no one could be seen.

It was her place when she wanted to get away from the things that were bothering her and when she wanted to take a break from the heavy lessons of the academy.

THUD

"Huff...Huff....."

As she fell down and sat on the grass inside the forest, she started breathing heavily.

"Haaaaa.....Haaaaa....."

No matter how deep her breathing was, she felt like her lungs were being crashed....A knot was inside her chest....

She brought her knees to her chest and gripped them to the maximum.

"Hick!"

TAP

And a small tapping sound could be heard from the leaves, as the silent cry of the girl echoed inside the academy grounds....

In front of a situation where one sees their beloved in agony, not every person's response would be related to vengeance.

Not every person would be brimming with anger.

Everyone would have a different type of reaction to such a thing.

And Sylvie was one of those.

Even though Sylvie was a very good-natured kid that liked to help others, there was also another reason why she was feeling such a way and was living such a selfless life.

It was related to a memory of her childhood.

She lived in a borderline city that wasn't much developed. Her childhood was not that eventful as, just like any normal person; she played with the kids from her neighborhood.

Since she was a beautiful girl with a happy smile, most kids were happy to play with her, and she was also happy seeing others with smiles.

Her parents were doting on her; her brother always loved her, and her family was basically a happy family.

However, things had changed in one night.

One night in summer, she was playing with her friends. Since the weather was very hot, rather than playing in the morning, they preferred to play at night. They were enjoying themselves, laughing and chasing each other around in the dimly lit streets.

But then, the joyful atmosphere shattered when a sinister presence swept over the neighborhood. In a moment, everything changed. The air grew cold, and the sounds of laughter turned into cries of fear.

She still remembered the first words she had heard.

"Ah...Delicious...Human children are delicious..."

It was a monstrous voice that sent chills down her spine. It was not only her but other children as well.

A Demon had emerged from the shadows, its monstrous form casting terror into the hearts of all who saw it. Its eyes glowed with malevolence, and its twisted grin sent shivers down the spines of anyone who dared to look at it.

It was a creature that she had never seen before, but it was something that would never leave her alone in her dreams. She knew that.

Chaos ensued as people fled in panic, and Sylvie found herself frozen in place, her heart pounding in her chest. She watched in horror as the Demon's gaze fixated on her, its intent clear. The world around her seemed to blur as fear consumed her senses.

"Will you be my prey?"

She remembered the vicious-looking mouth that spilled saliva....The demon's teeth looked sharp...

It slowly approached the girl, that was frozen in fear. She wanted to move her body, but her mind went blank....

She wanted to call for help, but she couldn't....

"Ah.....Humans...."

That ruffly voice constantly entered her ears, making her shake in the feeling of fear as the demon approached.

"Stop."

But then, a figure appeared before her, standing tall between her and the monstrous creature. It was her brother, his eyes determined and his stance unwavering. He was armed with a simple sword, but his expression held a fierce determination that inspired Sylvie even in her terror.

"Grrr.....Don't get in my way!"

Sylvie always put her brother in high regard since he was an awakener. She wanted to be like him, fight like him.

With a cry, her brother charged at the Demon, engaging it in combat. The clash of metal against claws echoed through the night as they fought, and Sylvie could only watch in awe and fear, her emotions swirling into a chaotic whirlwind.

In the midst of the battle, her brother managed to strike the Demon, but in return, he was met with a brutal blow that sent him crashing to the ground. Sylvie's heart plummeted as she saw her brother's body lying there, wounded and vulnerable.

'It is scary....Fighting is scary....'

'But, I want to help brother.....'

'It is because of me....Because of me....Because of me....Because of me....Because of me.....'

'I want to help him....It is because of me....It is scary....I want to help him....It is scary....It is because of me....'

She could see her brother defeated the monster, but the wound on her chest looked heinous.

He was wriggling in pain while he was shedding blood.

She blamed herself, thinking that it was because of her. But at the same time, she was scared.

Scared of fighting.

The demon's teeth never left her away....

Its haunting voice was always there...

But she wanted to help him....She wanted to be any help to those that sacrificed themselves for the sake of people like her....

She wanted to help because she was feeling guilty....

In the end, her brother managed to drive the Demon away, but the memory of that night remained etched in Sylvie's mind. The image of her brother's wounded form haunted her, a reminder of the pain she had felt in the face of his suffering.

And now, as Astron's stern words reached her ears, a different kind of pain welled up within her. It wasn't just fear; it was the agony of feeling inadequate, of reliving the helplessness she had felt that night.

Her eyes brimmed with tears as she remembered her brother's sacrifice and her own inability to protect him.

She remembered that when Astron said he was going to attack her, she remembered what her brother looked like.

'I wish I was strong like you, brother....'

She pulled her legs closer as her tears kept falling down.

Even though she knew she could become a liability, she still wanted to believe that she was doing good...

However, then why was she that much triggered by Astron's words? Why was she get this upset and leave the training grounds?

'Why did I escape there?'

She asked that question herself, wondering why. Was it because she saw herself in him? Was it because she felt a sense of comradeship with him? Since both of them were assaulted by a demon.

She didn't know. But one thing was certain since she had been watching him for all this time; now, his words had more strength on her than other people.

'Was it because he was really sincere?'

It had already become a reflex for Sylvie to read others' emotions, so when she had heard Astron's harsh words, she subconsciously checked his emotions.

There she saw that he was really serious and had no ulterior motives for those words. And that made her sad and angry at the same time.

Since that meant he really meant all those words.

'It hurts...'

And she felt betrayed.

The sense of 'comradeship' she had felt when she was watching him now disappeared, and in its place was now a feeling of emptiness.

"Sylvie."

His words echoed inside her head once again.

"Why are you here? Why don't you leave me alone?" She mumbled. She didn't want to hear him, and neither did she want to remember those memories she was about to forget.

"You know, by behaving like this, you can never go anywhere."

However, his words didn't leave her head at all.

"I don't want to listen. I don't want to fight. Go away." She mumbled, trying to get rid of his voice inside her head.

But alas, that was not possible.

"You are escaping from your past."

"NO! WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT ME!" She shouted, getting irritated more thanks to his voice.

Amidst her frustration and sadness, tears began to stream down Sylvie's cheeks. She clenched her fists, her knuckles turning white as her emotions threatened to overwhelm her. She found herself standing in a secluded corner of the academy grounds, away from prying eyes, as she poured her feelings into the void.

"You don't know anything about me!" she cried out, her voice shaking with a mixture of anger and sorrow. "You don't know what I've been through or how hard I've tried to be strong. How dare you judge me?"

Her words were directed at Astron's voice, the voice that seemed to be haunting her even as he was nowhere in sight. She felt an intense need to defend herself, to make him understand the pain she had endured and the struggles she faced.

"I'm not a failure!" Sylvie's voice cracked as she shouted, her tears blurring her vision. "I've faced demons, I've watched people get hurt, and I've done everything I can to help. Just because I'm not as strong as you doesn't mean I'm pathetic!"

She wiped at her tears angrily, frustrated by her own vulnerability and the overwhelming flood of emotions that threatened to drown her. Her chest felt tight, her heart aching as memories of her brother's sacrifice and the countless times she had witnessed pain replayed in her mind.

"You don't understand how it feels to see someone you care about hurt and not be able to do anything about it," she whispered, her voice breaking. "You don't know how it feels to be terrified and powerless. So don't you ever dare call me weak?"

Sylvie's shoulders shook with the weight of her emotions, her tears falling freely as she let herself feel the pain she had been suppressing for so long. Now, in this moment of vulnerability, she allowed herself to acknowledge her own pain, her own fears, and her own struggles.

"I know I am weak....Sob...."

In the midst of her cries, she finally acknowledged.

"I know I am scared....But I am trying my best okay....Sob...."

And she took the first step for the path of change....

SWOOSH

And hearing her words, a shadow behind her tree moved, revealing a figure of a young man who was walking back to the academy.

"With this, I paid my debt back. It is now up to you how to change yourself."

Chapter 46 Chapter 11.5 - Sylvie

After Sylvie left the training grounds running with tears in her eyes, naturally, everyone's attention was drawn to me.

It was nothing unexpected, a simple response that humans tend to do.

But if there was one thing that made me surprised, then that would be the trauma of Sylvie being a lot deeper and stronger than I thought.

'I see. So, this is how it is.' I thought, looking at the running girl's back. As she was escaping, she was running at a speed that even I would have a hard time following.

"Student Astron." At that moment, Eleanor White's voice echoed. "Care to explain what happened?" As she asked, she came closer looking at me with a demanding expression.

"Yes. I was trying to correct Student Sylvie's form, but she said she didn't wish to fight."

"Is that all?"

"She had a fear of combat, and I did not adapt my methods to her level of comfort." As I explained what happened here, Eleanor White's gaze seemed to harden upon hearing my words.

Even though she didn't like me probably, she was still someone with a sense of duty and justice. She was a bit picky and irritating woman, but that didn't mean her values were not there.

"You didn't adopt your methods? You lacked empathy and pushed her too far, didn't you?"

"Empathy won't save a hunter inside a dungeon. This is what we always learn in this academy. Unless one doesn't have the courage to fight, then they shouldn't be here."

"Then, you should be? You have quiet words coming from the last ranked student of this academy."

"It doesn't matter what rank I am or what others feel about my words. The truth won't change."

I didn't know why I got slightly irritated when I noticed Sylvie escaping like that or why was I arguing with this woman before me, but after noticing what I was doing was pointless I closed my mouth.

"Sigh...." Eleanor White let out a sigh and shook her head. She made a pained expression as she looked at me, but I didn't understand what the problem was.

Considering the treatment I always got from the academy, isn't this how things worked?

"Go find Student Sylvie, and don't come until you solve her problems with her. You are dismissed from today's class, and I will ask you about this later."

Her words were firm, and I could sense the underlying disappointment in her voice. But I didn't care. In the first place, disappointment came from one's own expectations; it didn't concern me.

I could see the main cast of the game looking at me from the corner of my eyes.

Especially Ethan since he was pretty close to me, with him also being ranked one of the last ranks. He was looking at me with furious eyes, obviously coming from his heroic nature.

But I simply ignored him. He was the protagonist of the game with the good talent of whatever. In the first place, I was not looking for future connections that would help me in my life.

I was here to kill demons, and his heroic nature would certainly make things hard for me.

Julia had a stiff expression, Lilia was simply serious as always, and Julia was looking at me with a slight smirk, seemingly loving that everyone's opinions about me were bad. Well, humans were creatures with pride and petty nature, after all.

Then there were those that were friends with Sylvie, and they seemed furious. But again, it was not my business how I felt.

"Understood."

With a brief nod, I turned and left the training grounds, my steps purposeful. It didn't take long for me to find the traces Sylvie had left behind. Thanks to my trait [Perceptive Insight], I could see the faint signs of her hurried steps and the path she had taken.

Since she ran quite fast, the traces she had left was also quite deep, and her faint smell was also lingering since the weather was not that windy.

As I was walking on the grounds of the academy, I pondered about Sylvie. In the first year of the game, Sylvie was not a character that was helpful to the player.

Be it her healing magic, her personality, or her strengths, she was someone that was almost lacking in all types of aspects for a hunter.

Therefore her grades would drop naturally as time progressed. It was all thanks to her fear of combat, where she would face the monsters inside the gates. That would go like that until one day, she and the player would be left alone inside the dungeon thanks to a demon targeting her.

After all, there was a reason she was named as future Saintess in the game, and it was not because she had a simple healing skill....

It was something more, so she targeted my demons quite frequently, and this would get worse at the finals of the first year second term.

There, we, as a player, would save Sylvie, but she would still be a burden inside the gate, constantly being pessimistic and shaky. It was an annoying part of the game from the player's perspective, but it was also necessary. You also wouldn't leave Sylvie alone, since, if you did the game would be over.

That was because she was an essential character for completing the game.

In any case, in the dungeon, if the player had chosen to be harsh on Sylvie and speak some sense into her, she would later get a hold of herself and would start her path as a Saintess.

That was the reason why I spoke this harshly against her since she was someone that needed to be talked like that.

In a way, she was someone that escaped from her past, and it would be better if someone made some sense to her. And this was the way of my repaying debts.

Just like that, my steps took me to the forest of the academy, where everything had started for me.

SOB

"She is here," I mumbled, hearing a small sob coming from the trees. Looking at her from far away with my skill, I could see she was not in a condition to talk with me.

But, at the same time, her head was buried in her legs, which meant her sight was limited.

"I should clear the bet." With that mumble, I blended into the shadows using my trait, but I made sure nobody was around before I used it.

"Sylvie." And inside the shadows, I whispered to her. Just like that, my talk with her started, and until I got a reaffirmation from her that she would look into her past self.

The exclamation that she would move forward. Even though it was not a confirmation that would guarantee, at least I did push some sense into her head, and that was all I was going to do.

"I know I am weak....Sob....I know I am scared....But I am trying my best, okay....Sob...."

As I heard those words from her own mouth, it was time for me to leave this place.

"The debt has been paid. Now it is up to you how to change yourself."

Just like that, I left the place and made my way toward Eleanor's office in order to give a report about what I had observed there.

The Capital of the Human Federation, Arcadia City, was filled with high-rising buildings that towered to the skies.

These buildings were mainly the buildings for those that occupied quite a strength in the industry where everyone's eyes were on.

The guilds.

Aside from Renowned Families that produced Hunters, there were also Guilds that recruited the Cadets that graduated from the Academies around the Human Federation.

Every City had its branches, but to have one inside the capital, the guild needed to hold considerable amounts of power inside the industry.

Especially inside the Golden District was customized for the sake of higher-tiered guilds that was known all around the world. Here, the most powerful organizations in the world held their headquarters, their presence a constant reminder of their control over various industries. The district itself was a world of luxury and opulence, a place where only the elite could tread.

However, that was not the only place where the guilds had a place on them. After all, inside such a big world, there were countless guilds that were not that big enough to enter the Golden District.

And one of them was having a heated discussion right now.

Around a circular table in a dimly illuminated room, two individuals engaged in a heated exchange. Their faces bore a mixture of anger, frustration, and sorrow, masked by shadows.

"This situation is an utter disgrace," the man declared, his fingers forming tight fists on the table's surface. "Our child's fate was sealed due to that academy's negligence."

Across from him, the woman's eyes gleamed with fierce resolve as she leaned forward, her voice laced with determination. "They expect us to believe he was taken by some monster? I find that impossible to accept. We invested too much in his future for it to end like this."

A holographic projection in the room's center displayed the official report regarding their child's demise. The official version stated that their child had fallen victim to a creature whose name was unknown—a tragedy that occurred within the confines of the academy.

They said to them that their child was killed by a random monster that had never been seen and detected inside the academy, and now they wanted them to believe such nonsense.

It had been only a week, and they had both seen their child's corpses. It was obvious that it was the mark of a monster's attack since the wounds of claws were pretty deep. But still, in the midst of their anguish, they refused to believe that their son was simply a victim of a monster. They wanted to blame something, blame someone.

"Monsters don't infiltrate academies without reason," the woman hissed, her suspicion evident. "There are hidden truths we're not being told. There is no way a normal monster can pass through the wards of the academy."

Grimly, the man's eyes followed the details of the report. "This Astron Natusalune... the sole survivor of that incident. He is the last-ranked student inside the academy."

A holographic image of Astron appeared before them, stirring a wave of uncertainty. And then, following that, a bunch of information.

"An orphan that lost his home when he was thirteen years old, then later awakened as a Hunter," the woman added, her tone skeptical.

The man's features hardened. "Our sources indicate Astron was involved in a conflict with our child earlier. That connection can't be a coincidence. It doesn't make sense that the one that was ranked last in the academy was the one that survived. We both know Dylan; he is not a kid that would put himself in danger when something unexpected happened." The man spoke. "After all, this is what we taught him."

"You are correct." The woman responded. "There is something hidden in the midst of these documents provided by the academy. It doesn't make sense that that bastard was the one that lived from that situation alone."

A dark fire flickered in the woman's eyes as she leaned in, her voice a low murmur. "If the academy doesn't reveal the truth, we'll unearth it ourselves. For the sake of our child."

Agreement shone in the man's gaze as he met his partner's resolute stare. "We'll mobilize every resource to uncover the reality. If Astron Natusalune had a hand in our child's fate.... Then I will pluck his nails one by one until he shares the same pain my son felt."

As the two people that were sitting on top of the round table talked to themselves, a flickering feeling of anger was present.

This was the world of hunters, a cruel world where one could do whatever they had wanted.....

Chapter 47 Chapter 12.1 - Clubs

Just like that, the week passed without me doing anything else aside from my training. Since there was nothing that I could do for the time being and my strength was still insufficient, I needed to make sure I had practiced enough.

And today marked the end of the training mixture I had been using all this time. Since its effects would only be optimal for two weeks, at this point, using it more would damage me. Therefore, this was it.

"Huff....Huff..." Inside the training grounds of the academy, I was breathing heavily. I had just finished my physical workout, and since I had worked my body to its limits, everywhere around my body was aching.

'My strength certainly improved. It seems the Vitalium Essence was doing its work.'

With it increasing the limits of my bodily attributes, I could finally improve my strength and my endurance.

'Status.' I thought inside my head, and following that, a panel appeared.

?Attributes:

Variable Attributes:

-? Strength: 1.6 --> 1.71

-? Dexterity: 2.216 --> 2.32

-? Agility: 2.12 --> 2.23

-? Constitution: 1.524 --> 1.62

-? Intuition: 2.3 --> 2.4

-? Magical Power: 2.6

-? Mana Capacity: 1.8

As could be seen from the stats shown there, my attributes increased quite a lot. This was both because of my strict training but also because of the effects of Vitalium Essence.

Aside from increasing one's talent cap, it also increases the smoothness of one's attribute increase. In a way, that meant one could adapt strength faster, and they could integrate themselves better into training if it made sense.

"Hey. Can we talk a bit?"

Just as I was about to leave the training grounds, suddenly, I heard a familiar voice coming from my back. I had already sensed his presence, but I thought his intent was not directed at me.

Turning back, I saw the person who was looking at me with sharp hazel eyes. His wavy blue hair was filled with sweat, showing that he was also training there.

His spear was tucked behind his back. He was looking at me with an expression of seriousness.

It was Ethan, our main character in the game.

Looking at him like that, it was obvious why he would associate himself with me randomly. The reason was the events that had transpired at the close combat lesson.

"I don't think what you have done at that time was the right choice." He spoke, his gaze looking at me with a clear brightness. It made me want to vomit.

This guy here was still living in the bright world he was envisioning.

"You should have respected her choices. Are you happy now that she cried?" Ethan asked me, with his gaze concerned.

He certainly was not in the wrong since what he was saying was certainly a more humanistic approach.

"Couldn't you be a lit-"

But that didn't mean I needed to listen to other people lecturing me.

"Don't talk to me," I answered, cutting his words off. I did not believe that by being respectful and gentle, you could live in this world.

Since it reminded me of certain someone, the same picture flashed before my eyes as I remembered the claws that were piercing her chest.

CLENCH

Feeling the frustration growing in my heart, I knew it was not the time to be like that.

"What?"

"Don't talk to me again." With those words, I left the dumbfounded Ethan, making my way toward my room.

My body was already aching, and I was both tired mentally and physically. Thus, I did not want to deal with a knight in shining armor.

Just like that, I reached my room and immediately went to have a bath filled with the special herbs that I had bought with my money.

For now, the money I had on myself for the investment is enough. Right now, I could leave the academy and look for hunting, but I also needed to increase my training and make the most of the academy, so everything needed to be in balance.

After leaving the bath, I sat on my bed and started reading the book 'Moonstruck Convergence: A Tale of Celestial Mana.'

To be honest, even though the book had a fascinating name, I was not expecting much to find from the book. However, I was gravely mistaken.

The reason was not because the book taught me how to use my mana. Mana was not something that could easily be used and mastered. It was something complex, and it required a good amount of training and practice to master it.

However, the book gave me one invaluable insight into my mana – the ability to discern its colors. As you may already know, the moon had different phases, and much like the moon's phases, my mana resonated with varying shades and hues. It was as if the moon's influence was imprinted upon my very essence.

The book, its pages worn and ancient, described the unique colors of mana associated with each moon phase, unraveling the mysteries that tied my abilities to the celestial rhythms:

Blood Moon:

The Blood Moon, a harbinger of vitality and aggression, stirred within me a fierce bloodlust, a craving for action and conquest that resonated in both its name and the deep red color of its mana.

With each instance, the crimson energy appeared on my dagger; I found my very essence surging with the desire to battle. Strangely, I noticed that the more wounded I became, the more potent the red mana grew. It was as if the moon's call intensified as my own strength waned, granting me a surge of power when I needed it most.

Harvest Moon:

The Harvest Moon's gentle elegance embodied the culmination of effort and abundance, an essence reflected in the subdued gray-colored mana associated with it. Although I hadn't fully explored its potential, I sensed that this mana bestowed upon me swiftness, enhancing my speed with each successive attack. The true depths of this mana's abilities remained shrouded in mystery, waiting for me to uncover its secrets.

Crescent Moon:

Transition, potential, and the flow of energy were embodied by the Crescent Moon, its vibrant green hue a symbol of its power. Though I had yet to grasp the extent of its effects, I recalled the tendrils I had seen during its activation, tendrils colored in the same verdant shade. It was as though this mana resonated with a profound yet uncharted aspect of my abilities.

Those three were the ones that I had observed while using my mana so far, but there was two more other colored mana shown in the book.

New Moon:

The New Moon, a void of darkness, was aligned with the colors black and purple. Symbolic of mystery and the unknown, it invited me to delve into realms unseen. The power it held remained elusive, and while I never dared draw upon the sun's energy, I could only speculate about the potential locked within the black and purple mana. Its effects were a riddle, one I hoped to unravel in due time.

Solar Eclipse:

This page of the book was the one that didn't contain almost any information at all. Aside from the color of golden and blue, there was nothing else that could be seen. But, at the same time, it felt like something had erased what was written here.

However, the fact that this section was put in this book was enough to show that something about the sun was there.

'My mana is the mana of the moon, and I hadn't felt strong under the sunlight.' I thought to myself.

Since my affinity with the moon's influence meant I would never draw power from the sun, I thought it wouldn't be possible, but something was deep in my head. Despite this limitation, my mind wandered to what might be possible.

'Maybe it is the imitation of the sun's characteristics with the power of the moon?' I asked myself. Certainly, the sun was powerful and shone brightly.

From the moon's perspective, what would the sun look like?

'It must look like a fire.' I thought. Whenever I looked at the sun, I always thought it was related to flames.

"Still. It is too early to jump to conclusions." I mumbled. Since I had yet to understand how to use a specific type of mana, I couldn't confirm anything.

But at the very least, I knew I had an idea about what to do, and that was something.

Just like that, I closed the book and laid on my bed. It was time to rest since tomorrow was going to be the day of club applications.

Waking up early in the morning, the first thing I did was start running before breakfast.

And I was not the only one doing that, as I could see some seniors and first-years doing the same thing.

But I simply ignored them and started running while racking my brain.

Today would be the day when the clubs would be accessible to the freshmen. The clubs had a wide range of activities ranging from combat to art section.

And I was pondering about which one I needed to join.

Ethan was going to join the Spear Legacy Club and Adventure Explorers Club for sure.

Julia would also join this club since she was a girl that liked to wander around. And because of Julia, Victor would also join, and then following him, Irina would do the same.

That simply meant four people from the main cast would be there, which would certainly get more and more attention.

'Should I join or not?' I pondered. The reason why I wanted to was pretty simple. In the game, there were demon contractors appearing with each trip this group had taken. It was because the game developers used this club for the sake of describing the open world.

'I will.' However, since there were demon contractors constantly appearing in this club, they would eventually lead me to demons. There were even some that escaped from the hands of the player, which I would certainly not miss.

That was the first club I was going to join.

'The second one should definitely be the one that Sylvie joins.' I thought.

The reason was simple. Since the demons would constantly target the future Saintess thanks to her power, which meant Sylvie was a magnet that constantly attracted their attention.

In fact, in the game, the club that had the most side-story events was the one Sylvie had joined.

'History and Art Guild.' I thought.

The name had a guild in it, but it was nothing serious as they were simply a community that liked to talk about history. However, this guild, for some reason, also traveled quite frequently and wandered around the Valerian Federation, looking at the buildings of the past.

Their main goal was to explore the buildings that were left from the period when mana had nonexistent, basically the pre-mana period.

I didn't know why Sylvie joined that club, but I didn't need to know about that either.

'And the last one should be the Archery Club.' I thought.

As the name suggested, since I was an archer making some other connections would also help me since the instructor of that club, Mr. Ethan, was the one that had invited me.

He said he wanted to see my growth, and I was free to join the club if I wanted, and that offer was pretty good considering I was fairly new with the bow.

These three clubs were the ones that I wanted to join since the others didn't get my attention too much. I did not have time to simply waste on the clubs constantly; therefore, the fewer clubs I joined, the better it would be.

Just like that, I finished my run with those thoughts in my head and returned to my dorm. Today's first class was once again the class of that annoying woman, so I must not be late.....

Chapter 48 Chapter 12.2 - Clubs

As I entered the classroom early in the morning, for the first time in the Academy, I saw students being excited and happy.

Normally their eyes would be dead, and most of them would enter the classroom with coffees in their hands, but today seemed to be an exception.

The usual hushed tones were replaced by animated conversations, and the air was charged with contagious enthusiasm. It seemed the prospect of joining clubs had ignited a spark of curiosity and anticipation among my fellow cadets.

"Did you see the Elemental Mages Society on the list? I'm totally joining that!"

"Elemental magic is cool and all, but I'm thinking of going for the Alchemical Engineering Club. Imagine creating potions and elixirs! To be honest, I think I can nail the money from there."

A group of students huddled near the holographic display that showcased the clubs, their fingers pointing at different icons as they discussed their interests.

"I heard the Swordmaster's Guild is super intense. I wonder if I can handle it."

"Are you kidding? I'm all about the Beast Tamer Guild. Forming bonds with mystical creatures? Count me in!"

The classroom was abuzz with anticipation, the students bonding over shared aspirations and exchanging thoughts on the various club options. Amid the conversations, the holographic clock on the wall marked the approaching time for the morning assembly.

But, first and foremost, the main cast was there sitting on the front seats, talking with each other.

"Which one are you going to join?" Lucas asked, his gaze wandering around Ethan and Carl.

"I will join Martial Arts and Student Council," Carl replied with a serious tone.

"What? Student Council?" Lucas' eyes were wide open, and that made sense. Joining the Student Council was something pretty hard since the seniors were pretty picky about their members.

"Yes. They offered me a position inside the disciplinary committee."

"For some reason, I can easily imagine you inside there," Lucas answered. "Bleagh...Boring."

Turning his gaze to Ethan, he asked. "Ethan, which one are you going to join?"

"...."

"Ethan?"

"...."

"From Elysiuma to Ethan. Are you here?" As Lucas finally raised his voice, Ethan responded with a groan.

"Ah... Sorry, I was thinking about something. What did you say?" however, he seemed lost, slightly.

'He is probably wondering why I behaved like that.'

I thought since Ethan was looking at me from time to time with a look of wonder, trying to understand me.

However, seeing this behavior, Lucas immediately put a grin on his face. "Ho.... It seems our Ethan couldn't sleep well last night. Is it because of a girl?" As he teased Ethan, he poked his arms. "If you want advice, this Grandfather here shall give you one."

"Hey...What are you saying? This is not a Wuxia Novel."

"It is not like that.... Just got something in my head." Taking Lucas' words seriously, Ethan shook his head.

"Tch...Anyway, I asked which clubs were you going to join?" Lucas repeated his question as he signaled the holograms.

I put my ear into their conversation since I wanted to confirm which clubs Ethan would be joining. Since there was no player here, I needed to know.

"Hmm... I was planning to join Spear Legacy Club and Adventure Exploration Club." Ethan answered, confirming my speculations.

"Adventure Exploration? I am joining that too." At that moment, Julia dived into the topic with her usual loud voice and cheerful expression.

And following that, it was Victor and Irina.

With their words, I basically confirmed that they were going to join the same clubs in the game.

'This is good.' I thought. 'The fewer variables are there, the more efficient my hunt is going to be.'

Just like that, I was about to turn my attention to the book I was reading, but suddenly I felt a slight gaze on me.

'Hmm?' As my senses were picky, I turned my head to the side where the gaze came from, and there I could see the two girls looking at me.

Though, don't misunderstand. Rather than looking at me favorably, if gazes could kill, I would be murdered.

'Friends of Sylvie. Bunch of little kids.'

Scoffing at them in my head, I returned my head.

CREAK

At that moment, the door opened, revealing the same serious woman.

Eleanor White entered the classroom. Her presence commanded attention, and the students instinctively straightened their postures.

"Good morning, cadets," her voice resonated, her gaze sweeping across the room. The anticipation in the air seemed to amplify in her presence.

"I see that the prospect of joining clubs has generated quite the buzz among you," she continued, her tone measured. "Today, I will provide you with more information about the clubs available within our academy and the process for joining them."

A holographic display activated at the front of the room, projecting a list of clubs along with brief descriptions and icons representing each one.

"From the Swordmaster's Guild to the Alchemical Engineering Club, the options are varied to cater to your individual interests and strengths. Whether you're drawn to combat, magic, exploration, or the arts, there's a club that aligns with your passions."

Eleanor's gaze settled on the students, her stern expression softening slightly. "Participating in a club is not just about skill development. It's an opportunity to foster camaraderie, exchange knowledge, and grow as individuals. The friendships you form here may accompany you throughout your hunter journey. Therefore, as the instructors of the academy and the management, we highly recommend you join at least one of the clubs."

She paused, allowing her words to sink in before continuing. "For those interested in joining a club, there will be a Club Fair held today. Each club will showcase its activities, and you'll have the chance to interact with current members and learn more about their goals."

A holographic schedule appeared beside the list of clubs, indicating the timings and locations of the fair.

"During the fair, you'll be able to express your interest and sign up for the clubs you're most passionate about. Keep in mind that club capacities may be limited, so choose wisely."

Eleanor's gaze sharpened, her voice taking on a more authoritative tone. "I expect each of you to approach this opportunity with the same dedication and commitment you display in your studies and training. Your choices regarding clubs are integral to your development as future hunters."

With her message delivered, Eleanor stepped back, her gaze sweeping over the students once more.

"Your academy experience is shaped by the paths you choose to walk, cadets. Now, if you have any questions or concerns, feel free to approach me after this assembly. Today's Classes are canceled because of the Club Activities, but rest assured I will compensate this class in the future."

With those words, Eleanor exited the room, and as per her exit, murmurs of anticipation spread through the students. The classroom, once buzzing with excitement, now held a charged sense of purpose as the cadets contemplated the diverse array of clubs and the myriad paths that lay ahead.

Looking at the students like that, I decided to waste no time here.

Even though the clubs had their own factions inside the academy, the ones I was joining belonged to neither of them. Thus, there was no further consideration needed.

Just like that, I left the classroom with my hands and three forms of application. I also wanted to join first since I didn't want to look like I was stalking others. Since I don't want to attract too much attention now.

Even by saying a bunch of words to Sylvie, I got quite a lot of attention on me, so being careful didn't hurt.

As I walked through the bustling halls, I could feel the happy atmosphere. The Academy's atmosphere was charged with enthusiasm, and students hurriedly made their way to the club booths that were being set up around the campus.

Arriving at the first destination on my list, the Adventurer Exploration Club booth, I found a group of energetic students surrounding it. A senior with a friendly smile greeted me, his eyes twinkling with warmth.

From the way he clothed himself and the way he put some ornaments over himself, it was evident that he was someone that liked to show off.

In fact, he was a playboy and the reason why he joined this club and was for the sake of looking for women all around the world.

'What a weird guy.' I thought.

"Hey there! Interested in joining our club?" he asked, his tone inviting. His smile was wide as if he wanted to gather people.

"Yes." I simply nodded.

"Great! We're all about discovering the unknown, venturing into uncharted territories, and under " As he was about to start speaking like some sort of activist, I stopped his words as I gave him my submission paper.

For the whole time, I had been listening to people talking, and it started making me sick.

"Ah...Astron Natusalune..." Looking at my paper, he read my name. "Welcome to our club. It seems you don't like talking too much, so I will keep it short. I am this club's president James Indie. Nice to meet you." Saying that he gave me his hand, which I simply shook. Even though I disliked having contact with others, in the end, I also didn't want to seem too rude.

"Now, after the clubs finalize, a message will come to you via your academy watch, and it will inform you about our orientation. If you have any questions, you can contact me; here is my student ID."

Just like that, with the first application submitted, I moved on to the Archery Club booth.

Here, the atmosphere was a bit different. The students gathered around the booth seemed to be deeply engrossed in their conversations, their gazes shifting to me briefly before returning to their discussions.

In the game, I hadn't taken the route of a marksman, but from the small conversations, I remember them being prideful quite a lot.

I approached the booth and handed over my application form to the senior in charge. However, the reception I received was far from welcoming. The senior's eyes quickly scanned over my form, and a hint of disdain flashed across his face.

"Last-ranked student, huh? Are you sure you want to be here?" he remarked, his tone dripping with condescension.

'Just as expected,' I thought. It was the same response I was expecting.

"Yes," I replied calmly. Despite his tone with an overbearing attitude, I was here since the instructor that approved my decision called me here.

"Heh....It is crazy nowadays that you kids don't know your place...." A silent murmur entered my ears as the man before me clicked his tongue.

SWOOSH

And with fast speed, he threw a punch at me, aimed at my face.

Though, I dodged it simply by tilting my head to the side.

'If I were a second late at reading his movements, I would be injured.'

"Ho? You can dodge it?" He spoke, his gaze containing a slight intrigue. "Well, well, newbie. It's your choice, I suppose. But let me give you a reality check: in this club, we are aiming to be the best archers in the world. So, tell me. Why should I see someone like you would have any right to join our club."

As his words echoed, the people around us naturally had their attention turned on us.

"You don't need to see anything," I answered, looking at the name of the instructor shown on the badge.

"Ha? What did you say?"

"Instructor Ethan was the one who called me here. I am not here to prove myself to you, neither do I need to."

"Pfft.....Are you saying Instructor Ethan was the one that recommended you here?"

"Yes. You can ask him if you want."

"Ahhahaaahahahha.....Man, that was funny. That instructor Ethan? The one that we all know?" As he turned his attention to the people around, everyone had a mocking smile as well. "There is no way that strict man would recommend anyone."

"Indeed."

"Ahaha...Look at him, trying to play his last cards like that."

As the sounds of scolding came, I paid no mind to them as I looked at the senior before me.

"You can simply ask him later. I am going to leave my application here." With that, I left, heading to the last-place club that I wanted to join.

Chapter 49 Chapter 12.3 - Clubs

With my experience at the Archery Club booth still fresh in my mind, I made my way to the last club on my list: the History and Arts Club.

Unlike the previous clubs, this one didn't seem to draw as much attention. The students around the booth appeared to be engaged in calm conversations, their interests ranging from various forms of art to historical research.

As I approached the booth, I was greeted by a warm and inviting atmosphere that seemed to be filled with passion. The students there seemed genuinely excited about sharing their passion for history and the arts.

"Welcome, Mister Freshmen." At that moment, a cheerful voice echoed inside my ears, making me unconditionally turn to the source. "Do you want some chips?"

There stood a girl who had a bright smile on her face. Her hair was a unique shade of purple, a color that was both striking and elegant. Her eyes were a brilliant shade of blue, exuding a sense of curiosity and kindness. Her presence seemed to radiate a warm and happy aura, immediately putting me at ease.

She had an aura of comfort that made her approachable and friendly. Her entire demeanor seemed to suggest an open-minded and easygoing personality.

Her face was simply said to be beautiful, as well as her body. Combined with her innocent aura, she could probably take the hearts of many men around the academy, which she did.

Since she was a named character in the game.

The small chip crumbs around the corners of her mouth showed that she was eagerly eating chips.

"Hmm? Mister Freshmen? What is the matter?" As she spoke once again while looking at me, I was woken up from my thoughts.

"Nothing. I apologize if I seemed rude." I answered, slightly bowing my head. Looking at someone without answering while they were trying to talk to you was not good behavior.

"You don't need to be so stiff. It is fine....." She said, waving her hands. "But, do you want chips?" she added while passing the chips in her hands to me.

"No." But I refused. Since I didn't like chips too much, they contained too much fat in them.

"Why? Just take it." But, the girl before me persisted as she constantly approached me while shoving the pocket of chips to me.

"No. I don't want to."

"But why? Doesn't everyone love chips?" She looked genuinely surprised as she heard my answer.

"I don't."

"How? Everyone I gave chips to always took them." She took a moment to ponder with her fingers on her mouth. "Ah, right! It is because you haven't tried them yet." And the conclusion she made was this.

'I can't.' I really wanted to slap my forehead, but I held it in. The students around us were watching us with clear smiles on their faces, enjoying the scene.

"No, I tried them. But I don't want to eat."

"Just eat once. Please, just give it a chance." She instantly approached me, her blue eyes looking at me from slightly below. Since she was not that tall, she only came to my chest height.

"Sigh.....Thank you." Deciding that it would be too much if I refused, I grabbed the chips with a sigh.

Dealing with this girl was really hard.

"Nihihihi...." Hearing her chuckle, a small feeling of warmth appeared in my chest.

But, following that, the same memory of that time came, making me remember why I was here. The feelings of anger and hatred returned instantly.

"Hmm?" Seemingly surprised by my shift of expression, she asked. "Ah! Right, I forgot to introduce myself."

Turning back once again, she spoke with a cheerful tone.

"I am Maya Evergreen." Her eyes were shining, clearly expecting a reaction from me.

"Atron Natusalune," I answered, again bowing my head. "Pleased to meet you, Senior Maya. The first rank of the first-sophomore year."

Hearing my words, she clearly had a knowing expression as she nodded her head.

"Nihihihi...That's right....Everyone knows me." She mumbled to herself in a low tone, but I was able to hear it since she was a little too close.

Opening the distance a little bit, I grabbed the application form and handed it to Maya.

"Here, this is my application form. Can you help me with the application?" I didn't want to deal with this shiny girl more since her actions were a bit overly happy, for my own preference. I just wanted to get this over with and leave.

She took the form with a grin, seemingly unfazed by my lack of enthusiasm. "Of course! I'd be happy to help. We're always excited to welcome new members who share our passion."

As she filled out the necessary information, I watched her handwriting, neat and deliberate. It was a stark contrast to my own hurried and utilitarian style of writing.

That was to be expected since I didn't pay any attention to how I wrote.

"There you go," she said, handing the form back to me. "Now you just need to wait for the message about the orientation."

"Thank you," I acknowledged with a nod and was about to leave.

"So, what got you interested in the History and Arts Club?" Maya asked, curiosity evident in her tone.

"It seemed like a different perspective," I replied simply, not offering any more details. Conversations like these were not something I did care about since the reason I was here was widely different from what they were expecting.

"That's great!" Maya exclaimed, her eyes shining with genuine enthusiasm. "We explore various historical eras, engage in art projects, and even organize debates. It's a wonderful way to broaden your horizons and learn new things."

"I see," I replied, my tone remaining flat.

Maya's response was everything I had expected. Her excitement for the club was infectious, but I found it difficult to match her level of enthusiasm.

"If you have any questions about the club or anything else, feel free to ask me," Maya said, her smile unwavering.

"I will," I responded, offering a small nod.

"Well, I hope to see you at the orientation," she said cheerfully.

"Yes," I replied, feeling a mixture of relief and anticipation that our interaction was coming to an end.

'This woman is too uncomfortable to deal with.' With that, I left the club fair and made my way toward my dorm.

In the end, I needed to train, and that was it.

However, while I was leaving, I felt a squinting gaze coming from the sides as someone was glaring daggers at me.

Turning my head, I expected to see Irina there, but differently, it was not her. It was Sylvie.

'It seems she is still mad at my words.' I thought. 'Though, it doesn't matter.'

Just like that, I turned my gaze forwards and made my way to my room. However, that squinting gaze hadn't left me.

'What a strange person.'

Maya thought to herself, looking at the departing figure of the young freshmen. It was the first time she saw such a reaction from a person she had encountered.

And that was for a reason.

'Does he really not like chips?'

She thought. All the people that she offered chips accepted that without saying anything, so she thought everyone liked chips.

However, there was one thing Maya was forgetting, or rather, she had even no idea about.

It was the fact that she was one of the most people in this academy. Since she was the first seat of the second-year students as well as the renowned 'Most Beautiful' girl in the academy, she was naturally a goddess in most people's eyes.

That was the case regardless of gender since even the girls couldn't bring themselves to hate her, knowing her good character and helping personality.

But Maya was rather clueless about this, being the airheaded person she was.

'He looked gloomy... Did something happen to him?' She asked herself. That weird person just now looked extremely gloomy, like he was carrying extreme pain.

'Well, I can learn about it later. He said he wanted to join our club.' She thought happily.

At that moment, the voice of her friend came behind her.

"What was with this guy? Why did he need to be this rude?" It was her friend, Amelia, approaching her from behind.

"What do you mean?" Maya asked, not understanding. 'Was he rude?' She asked herself. He even apologized first, and she could see he was sincere.

Well, for her most, it was a common occurrence since the time people looked at her with a daze when they had met for the first time. She didn't think it was because of her beauty, but her friends knew.

"How dare he refuse the offer of my beloved Maya!" Amelia jumped over her, hugging her from behind. "Nobody has the right to refuse such a cutie!"

"Stop it~ It is embarrassing, Amelia."

Maya's words seemed to be lost on Amelia as she continued her playful antics. "Oh, come on, Maya! You're irresistible. Who could say no to you?" She pounced on Maya's cheeks with her index finger.

Maya blushed slightly, pushing Amelia away gently. "Please, Amelia, don't tease me like that."

Amelia laughed heartily, giving Maya a playful nudge. "Don't be so shy, cutie. Anyway, you've got a new member of your History and Arts Club. Lucky guy." She mumbled as she made a grumbling expression. "I will need to be careful.....Men are like wolves." She muttered to herself.

Maya blinked in confusion. "Lucky guy? What do you mean, Amelia?"

Amelia grinned mischievously. "Come on, Maya. You're the star of the academy. It's no wonder he wanted to join your club. I mean, who wouldn't?"

Maya's expression remained one of genuine bewilderment. "I don't understand, Amelia. What does that have to do with anything?"

Amelia's grin only widened. "You're so cute, Maya. Sometimes, I wonder if you're just acting like an airhead."

"Hey, don't call me like that! I am not an airhead!" Maya protested with a pout on her cheeks.

KYU!

"Sigh.....You really don't have an ounce of idea about your destructive power." Amelia mumbled with a sigh, trying to stop the blood pouring from her nose.

Just as they were about to continue talking further, they spotted a person that was coming towards them. It was a girl with Golden Blonde hair and green eyes. It was the first time they had seen this girl, but Amelia's radar immediately picked her up.

'This girl is a beauty.' Her eyes that she had perfected to pick up and choose beautiful girls immediately concluded. Even though the girl had glasses on her eyes, she still looked innocent.

At least until they saw the atmosphere surrounding her.

'Is she mad at something?'

The girl looked annoyed as she walked. Of course, being the perfect girl analyst she is, Amelia immediately picked the reason up.

'She must have had a fight with her boyfriend. Hehehe....The more cuties, the better my harem will get...It will be fun to steal her from the boyfriend, hihihihhi!'

She smirked under her breath as she saw the opportunity. She really wanted to scream to the gods and thank them for giving such an opportunity to her.

Though her senses picked one thing simply wrong, it was the fact that the girl had a boyfriend. But nobody was perfect after all.

Maya, on the other hand, didn't have Amelia's ulterior motives. She simply saw a fellow student and offered the girl a warm and friendly smile. "Hi there! Would you like some chips?" She held out a packet of chips to the girl with her usual cheerfulness.

The golden-haired girl looked at Maya with a slightly squinting gaze as if she was trying to assess something.

Maya tilted her head to the side, wondering why this girl was looking at her like that. "What's the matter?" Though she was also familiar with those gazes as well. "If these chips are not to your liking, I have spicy ones, chilly ones, more crispy ones." She immediately approached the girl, looking at her with sparkling eyes.

"Um... no, thank you," the girl replied, her tone a mix of surprise and bewilderment. She seemed slightly overwhelmed by Maya's cheerfulness as her annoyance and squinting gaze was long gone away.

Amelia tried her best to hide her amusement at the girl's reaction, not quite able to shake off her earlier assumptions. She glanced at Maya, wondering if the usually airheaded girl had sensed anything off about the situation.

Maya, however, simply tilted her head with a friendly smile, undeterred by the girl's response. "Come on, try some.... They are really delicious."

"Umm....I do-"

"Come. They are really good."

"Ple-"

It was the start of Sylvie's nightmare of Chips....

Today she had learned there were 300 different chip types in the world and dreamt about chips chasing her in her sleep....

Chapter 50 Chapter 13.1 - Main Characters

?

"I am sorry for behaving like that."

In front of the stall, a senior was bowing his head down to a freshman, and it was an unbelievable sight for most passersby.

Since they had never expected the members of the proud, if not egoist Archery Club would behave like that.

"It is fine," I answered, looking at the senior. He probably asked Instructor Ethan about me and then learned that he really invited me here.

"Thank you. I have already registered you as one of our members. Congratulations." He said with a smile, trying to look good to me.

"Is that so? I will be taking my leave then."

But I simply nodded and left. I knew what kind of person he was and what kind of role he was going to play. Thus there was no need for me to look at him with a favorable expression.

I could easily see the distorted expression on his face. He is probably mad at what I have just done. It was a simple and small act, but it was this easy to anger him.

Humans were creatures with fragile egos. Easy to control and shape as you want.

'I will make sure you take the same path in the game.....You will be the route for me to reach that demon and kill it.'

With that thought, I left.

To explain what happened, simply I was on my way back to the room, and I passed by the Archery Club's stall, and there this senior stopped me, and here we were.

In any case, since today's classes were canceled, I could use this time to train. The sense of urgency was also approaching since, with the start of clubs, the events of the story would also start, which meant I needed to be strong enough for those events.

The events did not only contain demons but also contained villains and humans at the same time.

As you must have already noticed, the students inside the academy were no angels. Some of them liked to bully others, some of them wanted to be better but were crushed and etc.

And the Academy's harsh types of approach made it a lot harder and easier for students to fall into the pit of despair, which made them vulnerable to whispers of demons and villains.

For now, things would be quiet as not many factions inside the academy would occur, which is until the first mid-term exams and the following festival.

In any case, now that I was free, I needed to make the most of my time.....

<Tuesday's first practical lesson.>

As I was standing before the boy, I couldn't help but shake my head.

"Your pairings have changed." Eleanor White said with her gaze looking at me. "Student Sylvie requested the change of partners."

It seemed Sylvie herself requested it. I was sure normally, instructors would not comply with such a request, especially Eleanor White, but it seemed she did it probably because she both didn't like me, and she also went a little easy on Sylvie.

"Ethan and Astron. You will train together from now on." And the one I was left with was this righteous protagonist.

The one that I didn't want to involve myself.

'It makes sense that she paired him with me.' I thought. Since Ethan's ranking was also low, it was normal for him to match with me.

"You can begin now. I will be watching, so no slacking off." With her serious tone, she spoke and left both of us looking at each other.

As Eleanor White's departure left Ethan and me facing each other, I couldn't help but feel a sense of apprehension. Ethan was the embodiment of the word protagonist, which I also didn't dislike personally—righteous, idealistic, and always eager to prove a point. He was not a bad guy but rather an innocent cub that would grow to be a hero.

However, him not being a bad person or being a good person did not mean I needed to be happy with this situation. There are things that heroes also lacked.

First and foremost, it is their beliefs. As players, readers, or viewers, we could tolerate how did they follow their beliefs to the end, but from a different perspective, what made their opinions better than others?

Why the opinions of heroes are the ones that should be followed? When such questions are asked, the answer will come on its own.

It is the strength.

If a hero doesn't have the strength to back up their own beliefs, then those beliefs are bound to be forgotten.

If they had the strength, then those beliefs would become the beliefs of those weaker....At least, that will be on the surface.

And now, thanks to Sylvie's intervention, we were thrust into a partnership neither of us seemed thrilled about.

Ethan cleared his throat, his gaze fixing on mine. "You know, Astron, I can see you're not too pleased about this arrangement. But I believe there's some merit in working together."

It seemed he wanted to change his approach. My attitude of last time seemed to remember in his head, which was good.

I exhaled audibly, my patience wearing thin. "I don't see how being paired up with you benefits either of us."

In a way, Ethan was the protagonist; I would benefit from sparring with him for sure. But why did he think so was the question in my mind.

Ethan's tone remained calm, undeterred by my lack of enthusiasm. "We might have different approaches, but that doesn't mean we can't learn from each other."

He started speaking with the same tone, and I once again remembered the game and why I liked playing it.

"Strength isn't just about physical prowess. It's about understanding, adaptability, and using your power responsibly."

It was because his beliefs would change as time went on, and he would graduate from being a bright and righteous brat to a person who had seen countless things in his life.

This was one of the things that made me like the game.

Though right now, he was sure irritating.

I shook my head, the frustration bubbling up within me. "Look, Ethan, I respect your perspective, but don't waste your time on me. Our world doesn't work the way you think it does."

For some reason, I wanted to speak those words and show him my standing, which I would not normally do. It was probably because this nature of his made me irritated.

Though hearing me, Ethan's lips curved into a small smile, one that reflected his unwavering belief in the inherent goodness of people. "Maybe I won't change your mind today, but I won't stop trying. And who knows, maybe we'll find some common ground."

I could see he was excited about this, and that made me more and more irritated.

'Nobody cares about your beliefs...' I wanted to say, but I closed my eyes and calmed the slight annoyance inside me.

'What are you doing, Astron?' I asked myself. 'Why are you wasting your time pointlessly?' With that question, I raised my head and looked at him.

"Let's start. I don't want to discuss philosophy right now."

Ethan's persistence shone through his smile. "Is that so? But I will never give up, you know?"

I dismissed his statement with a simple response. "I don't care about your determination. Let's focus on the task at hand."

"Okay." As he nodded, he also took his stance with a serious expression on his face.

Right now, we both entered our combat mode waiting for each other. We circled each other, the tension between us palpable. Despite my irritation, there was a hint of curiosity about how this would unfold.

I wanted to see where did I stand in terms of close combat and my physical prospects.

SWOOSH

Ethan initiated the exchange with a quick jab aimed at my abdomen. His posture was not of a veteran, but it was enough to say for an amateur.

THUD

I parried with a swift block, and the impact resonated through my arm, and it slightly pained me.

'He is strong. As expected.'

Ethan's strength was apparent even in his unarmed strikes, a testament to his training and status parameters. That was expected since even if he was recently awakened, his talent showed no bounds at all.

But I wasn't about to let that deter me.

SWOOSH

I retaliated with a calculated hook to his ribs, testing his defenses.

THUD

He deflected it with practiced ease, showcasing his ability to read and respond to my movements.

SWOOSH

I followed up with a roundhouse kick, which he ducked under, showing his stance as a spear user's effectiveness, closing the distance between us.

SWISH

Ethan's fist shot forward in a straight punch. I leaned back, narrowly avoiding the blow. His knuckles grazed my chin, a reminder of his talent at combat, even if he was not experienced in unarmed combat.

It was not his basic strength but rather his talent at simply general combat. I could see why he was the protagonist, as he seemingly moved instinctually and made incredibly precise decisions, probably without even knowing how he did do it.

But that also gave me an opportunity to learn and improve myself. By observing how he did those natural moves and picking up his special talent, I could simply improve myself.

I focused on his stance, the subtle shifts in his weight, and the tension in his muscles. It was as if time slowed down, allowing me to perceive the minute details of his movements. My brain worked rapidly, registering every bit of information into my brain.

'I see. So, he uses his body in such a manner to put more strength onto his core, making it a lot easier to recover from his attacks.' I thought.

SWOOSH

As he followed up with a left hook, I sidestepped and countered with a swift elbow strike to his side.

THUD

"Kurgh-!"

His grunt of pain was evidence that my technique was effective. Our sparring intensified, a dance of dodges, blocks, and strikes.

Ethan's determination was evident in his eyes, and despite my initial annoyance, I found myself drawn to this sense of fighting and improving myself.

For some reason, it felt a lot better than practicing with random dummies. It felt like I was improving myself faster with that now.

As we exchanged blows, I could feel his energy and dedication driving him forward. His punches were becoming more controlled, his movements more deliberate.

His natural way of learning was showing itself as he was moving in a more refined way. Of course, just one session of fighting and sparring didn't make him an expert, but he was still improving rapidly.

Ethan's inexperience in unarmed combat was evident, but his willingness to learn was undeniable. He wasn't just throwing punches; he was studying my movements, adapting, and evolving with each exchange.

But I was also doing that.

Simply put, in turn, I was also benefiting from our sparring. My [Perceptive Insight] allowed me to identify flaws in my technique, areas where I could improve. The feedback loop between us was unexpected but effective.

I adapted my strategy, using my agility to my advantage. I weaved around his attacks, exploiting openings in his defenses.

But each time I landed a hit, he countered with renewed vigor. Our clash was a symphony of grunts, impacts, and the rustling of leaves beneath our feet.

And amidst the physical exertion, Ethan spoke.

"You know, I wanted to ask you this for a while, but why are you still ranked last? With your skills, you can rank higher." It seemed he was curious about why I was still ranked last. He must be aware of my nonarmed combat skills now, though it didn't matter.

"None of your business." I cut him off as I threw a quick uppercut to the right side of the navel.

THUD

Though, he blocked his with his elbow, which was something I was expecting him to do. It was his natural reflex to do it, after all.

"Heh....I am really intere-"

THUD

As he was about to speak, suddenly, a fast crochet that I had masked with my uppercut appeared before his eyes and knocked him out from the spar, making him lose his balance and fall to the ground.

SPIT

As he spit the blood in his mouth, he raised his head and looked at me.

"You really are ruthless."

"Shut it."

DING

Just as Ethan was about to stand up, the sound of a bell ringing was heard, and following that was the announcement of the finish.

"STOP!" Eleanor said with her hands raised, making everyone stop in their tracks. Her mana was covering everyone, showing her precise mana control, befitting to her title "Invoker."

"The class is finished. You are dismissed now." With those words, everyone stopped what they were doing.

"You have a cranky personality, but you are still good. I will look forward to our next spars." With those words, Ethan stood up and made his way toward his group....