

H. Academy 431

Chapter 431 98.3 - Duels [4]

The brilliance of the light was blinding, an all-encompassing radiance that seemed to erase the very shadows. The audience shielded their eyes, unable to look directly at the scene unfolding before them. For a moment, it felt as if time itself had stopped, the air filled with a sense of awe and wonder.

As the light began to fade, the arena slowly came back into focus. The dust settled, revealing Victor standing at the center, his sword still glowing with the residual white energy.

His body was tattered, clearly showing the signs of injuries. Blood was dripping from the blade he was holding in his hand.

Yet, just as he was standing there, his opponent stood before him as well. "What?"

"What happened?"

General Kyle was on one knee, his hammer planted in the ground for support, his expression one of astonishment and respect.

'What a sight.....'

He lamented inwardly. The expression on his face displayed the feelings of many experts facing the arena.

'It is so simple yet so beautiful.' Victor's final strike had been perfectly executed, a testament to his skill and determination. He had managed to withstand the might of General Kyle's hammer and counter with a precision that left everyone in awe.

The crowd erupted into thunderous applause, the sound echoing through the amphitheater. The duel had showcased not only the incredible power and skill of the two combatants but also their unwavering resolve and honor.

"What a way to end the fight," Irina commented, her voice filled with admiration.

Astron, standing beside her, nodded in agreement. "Victor showed incredible skill and precision. General Kyle's strength is formidable, but Victor's ability to adapt and counter was impressive."

Irina glanced at Astron, curious to hear more of his thoughts. "Did you expect Victor to be able to stand against General Kyle like that?"

Astron shook his head slightly. There was a weird expression on his face. An expression that was somehow serious and troubled.

"Not to this extent." The words that spilled from his mouth confirmed her thoughts. Yet he recovered instantly.

"General Kyle is a seasoned warrior with years of experience. Victor's performance was beyond what most would expect from an academy student. His control over his mana and his ability to read the battle were exceptional."

These words were nothing but an NPC repeating the same dialogue over and over again. She was sure she would hear this countless different times from other people.

"Don't give me the textbook answer," Irina mumbled. "I want to know what you truly think."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"I see." After stopping for a second, "Victor is truly exceptional," he started explaining, his tone thoughtful.

"His basic parameters are way above others in his generation. From the very start of the fight, it was clear that no one else in the freshmen year could withstand the attacks General Kyle sent. Even with his strength limited, the techniques were so advanced that the fight wouldn't last more than 15 seconds for anyone else."

Irina listened intently, her curiosity piqued by Astron's analysis. "Including me, Seraphina, Lilia, or anyone else?"

Astron nodded. "Yes. Even you or Seraphina, despite your exceptional skills, wouldn't have lasted long against those attacks. General Kyle is a seasoned warrior, and his experience, combined with his raw power, is overwhelming. But Victor... he not only withstood those attacks but countered them with precision and skill."

He continued, his eyes narrowing slightly as he recalled the key moments of the duel. "For such a thing to be possible, even as a swordsman, he would need to have at least 7, or maybe eight on some of his parameters."

"What? 8? Are you kidding?"

Irina couldn't believe what she was hearing.

Having a parameter of 8 at the age of 15-16. This was basically impossible. No one on the surface of this world had achieved such a thing.

If they were to....They would have left their marks in this world such a long time ago.

Yet, as she turned to face him, she saw how serious his face was. And then she remembered. This guy was not someone who lied.

He may have the ability to have his way with words, but he was more of a sophisticate than a liar.

"You are serious."

"I am."

"Then....This is insane."

She knew Victor was talented and strong. But the gap was just too big.

"Right?" Astron also somehow looked flabbergasted. This was the first time she had seen him this surprised.

But then, she read the lines between.

'He said, for Victor to withstand those attacks, he would at least need to have 8 in stat parameters. But, he didn't say Victor didn't have anything else.'

And just as she thought about that, Astron continued.

"What you thought just now was right. For Victor to win, more than mere parameters were necessary. Especially, there was one simple thing that made the difference in that fight."

Astron stopped talking, his gaze shifting to the arena as if lost in thought. Irina waited eagerly for him to continue, but as the silence stretched on, she grew impatient.

"Astron..." she began, her voice tinged with frustration.

He glanced at her, a hint of a tease playing on his lips.

'If you want to know more, you'll have to ask,' his eyes seemed to say.

Irina's curiosity got the better of her. She couldn't stand not knowing. With a light punch to his chest, she said, "Come on, Astron, don't leave me hanging. What made the difference?"

"It was the unique energy he was using."

"Energy?"

"Yes. That white beam that was surrounding his sword. Do you think it was simple?"

Irina pondered for a second, replaying the duel in her mind. Initially, she had assumed it was just normal mana since she hadn't been able to sense anything unusual. But as she focused on the details, she began to realize something peculiar.

At the moment when Victor's blade met General Kyle's hammer, something strange happened. The mana psions surrounding the general's hammer seemed to lose their energy, almost as if they were being neutralized.

"The mana psions... They somehow lost their energy," she whispered, her eyes widening in realization.

"Yes."

"But how?"

That was the question this time. How come such a thing could happen? What made it possible? She pondered about it for a while, yet she couldn't find the answer at all.

She turned to look at him, only to see that he also wore the same look on his face. It was evident that he didn't know the answer at all. Though knowing him, there was the possibility of him perfectly controlling his expression to lead her to think this; she knew if that were to be the case, it was better for her not to know about it at all.

Since she was sure, after the moment they shared yesterday, he wouldn't hide the things that weren't meant to be.

And somehow, as she remembered the yesterday night, her face got a bit hot.

'Sigh....How long will this go for.....'

In the end, she could only sigh to herself.....

General Kyle rose to his feet, his eyes locking onto Victor. "You've surpassed my expectations, young Blackthorn. You definitely deserve the title that you have been called with. The Strongest of the Golden Generation."

Victor nodded, lowering his sword as he took a deep breath. "Thank you, General. It was an honor to face you."

The crowd's applause grew louder, celebrating Victor's hard-earned victory. He had shown the academy, and everyone present that he was a force to be reckoned with, a true warrior worthy of respect.

As the applause continued, Victor and General Kyle shared a nod of mutual respect. The duel had been a test of their abilities, and both had proven their worth in the eyes of all who had witnessed it.

Yet, there were many people that were scheming from behind.

As Irina returned to her room, I found myself alone in the dimly lit space. She had somehow requested to leave, with her face slightly red.

Her heart was beating faster as well, and my senses picked up a slightly fishy smell that I didn't want to explain right now.

The events of the day played over in my mind, the duel between Victor and General Kyle standing out prominently.

'That fight.....Victor is just like Ethan....'

I couldn't shake the feeling of unease that had settled within me. Victor's prowess had been nothing short of extraordinary, far surpassing the abilities I had seen in the game.

I had already expected it, seeing Ethan's prowess. But even then, this was just too much.

Settling into my chair, I leaned back, staring at the ceiling. The room was quiet, and the only sound was the faint hum of the building's ventilation system.

I closed my eyes, replaying the duel in my mind. Each strike, each counter, the energy radiating from Victor's blade—it all painted a picture of a fighter who had grown immensely powerful.

I recalled the precision of his movements, the way his blade had neutralized General Kyle's attacks.

It wasn't just raw power; it was a mastery of technique and an understanding of combat that went beyond mere training.

His stats and parameters were impressive, but it was the unique energy he wielded that set him apart.

'The white energy...'

Victor was the epitome of the overpowered in the game. He was filled with countless cheats. His basic parameters were always just too strong, and the player would never be able to overpower him in terms of raw stats.

He also had many skills, equipment, runes, and body imprints on him, making him a versatile, annoying boss.

But, if there was one thing that was most important, it would be the energy he was using.

Even now, after the game had been released for more than five years, nobody was able to understand what that energy was.

And, witnessing it firsthand, I could understand it.

It was because it was something that didn't make sense.

Irina said the mana psions lost their energy. That was not wrong, but it was not completely right either.

What is the energy? When one asks this question, the answer is clear.

It is the ability to do work. Energy, by definition, is the ability to do work. It's what fuels our actions, drives our spells, and powers our abilities. But what if that fundamental ability to do work was somehow removed or nullified?

'Order,' I realized. 'That's what Victor's energy is about. It's not just neutralizing the psions; it's putting them in a state of perfect order, rendering them unable to do any work.'

Entropy is the natural tendency of the universe to move towards disorder, to increase chaos. It's a fundamental principle that governs everything.

But Victor's energy was the antithesis of that. It imposed order on the psions, stripping them of their chaotic potential and rendering them inert.

I could almost see it now, the way his blade cut through General Kyle's attacks, not just deflecting or absorbing them but fundamentally altering their nature.

The psions, stripped of their ability to do work, became harmless, unable to sustain the force or effect they were meant to carry.

'The ability to go against the first rule of the universe,' I thought. It was a chilling realization. Victor's power wasn't just about strength or skill; it was about altering the very fabric of reality, imposing an unnatural order on everything he touched.

Yet, at that moment, another scene came to my mind.

The memory of Lilia's performance lingered in my mind, the brilliance of her technique offering a glimmer of insight into my own predicament.

Victor's ability was undeniably powerful, and his prowess was far beyond what I had anticipated. The white energy he wielded disrupted the natural order, creating a formidable challenge.

'But even with such an ability, everything must have a counter.'

As I sat in the quiet of my room, I began to piece together the puzzle.

Lilia's technique, the way she manipulated mana to 'reflect' the spells to ignore them, sparked a concept in my mind.

If I could harness her principle and combine it with Victor's way.....

'Null Magic.'

The idea formed clearly in my mind a potential path to achieving complete "Nullification."

That is right.

At that moment, I found the way of Anti-Mana.

Chapter 432 99.1 - End of the semester

<Arcadia Hunter Academy, Saturday Evening>

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a warm golden glow over Arcadia Hunter Academy, the atmosphere buzzed with activity.

The last duel of the extended duel period had ended in an electrifying display of skill and power. Victor Blackthorn and General Kyle Braveheart had pushed each other to their limits, leaving the audience in awe of the spectacle they had witnessed.

Now, the academy staff moved swiftly to dismantle the preparations made for the duels. Workers bustled about, dismantling temporary structures, clearing the arena, and ensuring everything returned to its pristine state.

The sound of equipment being packed away and voices giving instructions filled the air.

In the courtyard, Headmaster Jonathan Verdict stood with a group of staff, overseeing the operations. His authoritative presence ensured everything proceeded efficiently and smoothly.

At designated points around the campus, academy staff handed out elegantly wrapped gift packages to the departing guests. Each package contained a selection of exquisite items, including enchanted trinkets, fine chocolates, and vouchers for future academy events.

The guests, though still slightly shaken from the previous day's attack, appreciated the gesture and the academy's efforts to ensure their well-being.

"Thank you for coming," a staff member said warmly, handing a gift package to a family. "We hope you enjoyed the duels despite the unfortunate incident. Please take these tokens of our appreciation."

In the crowd, Kaya Hartley watched as her daughter, Jane, eagerly accepted a gift package. Kaya smiled, grateful for the academy's thoughtful gesture.

At least that was the fact that she would need to show, being one of the most famous people in the world right now.

Nearby, a young man stood beside her.

"Quite the event, wasn't it?" Ethan mumbled. He somehow looked thoughtful and a bit tired. After the fight and the display that he showed, he fell into a peculiar state. The reason for that was evident.

He used something that his body couldn't withstand.

"Indeed, it was," Kaya said, looking at her daughter. And then she turned to face her niece. "You did well."

"....Thanks...." Ethan nodded, a smile creeping onto his lips. Though he had gotten used to getting praise, his aunt was not one of those who talked too much. She was quite an introvert, and she was busy most of the time. The praise that she got from him was really valuable.

Just then, Jane returned with a bright smile on her face, rushing towards Ethan. "Big brother Ethan, look what I have gotten!" she exclaimed, her excitement evident.

She held out a beautifully wrapped chocolate bar, her eyes shining with joy. "They gave me chocolates! Do you want to share?" she offered, holding the chocolate out to Ethan.

Ethan's smile widened at her enthusiasm. "You can eat it," he said, ruffling her hair affectionately. Surely, he was not someone who could easily take chocolate from a young child like her.

"No. I want big brother Ethan to try it as well." But seeing that she was this adamant about giving him the chocolates, he decided not to think about it.

"Sure, let's share it." He took the chocolate from her, carefully unwrapping it.

Jane beamed, clearly pleased with his response. "Big brother Ethan, your duel was so cool!" she exclaimed, her eyes wide with excitement. "I couldn't believe how powerful you were! The way you summoned that giant storm, it was like something out of a legend!"

Ethan chuckled, slightly embarrassed by her enthusiasm. "I'm glad you enjoyed it," he said, breaking off a piece of the chocolate and handing it back to Jane. "It was a tough fight, but I couldn't let myself back down."

Yet there was a part of himself that was doubtful.

'The thing that happened there.....Was it really me?'

He had been pondering about his question for a long while now. It was as if, at that moment, something else had possessed him, yet he didn't have any idea at all.

Jane took the piece of chocolate and nibbled on it, her expression turning thoughtful. "What was that thing you said before you attacked? It sounded like a poem."

'I would like to know as well.' He thought to himself. He sighed, unsure of how to explain. "Honestly, Jane, I don't know it either," he admitted, scratching the back of his head. "It just sort of... happened."

Jane pouted, clearly thinking he was just trying to hide it. "Come on, big brother Ethan, you can tell me! I promise I won't tell anyone else," she urged, her eyes wide with curiosity and determination.

Ethan felt a pang of helplessness. He was sincerely telling the truth, but he didn't know how to make her understand. "I swear, Jane, I really don't know. It was like something took over for a moment," he said earnestly, feeling at a loss.

Just as he was about to try and explain further, Jane's attention was suddenly drawn to something else. She turned her head to face her right side, her eyes lighting up with recognition.

Without a word, she rushed towards a figure passing by. "It's that mysterious brother!" she exclaimed, standing before him.

Ethan turned to see a young man with black hair dressed in dark clothing, moving casually. Yet it was always hard to sense him as that person's presence was almost ghostly.

And there was a certain person that fit this description.

"Astron," Ethan mumbled, recognizing him.

Astron, with his usual calm demeanor, looked at Jane and then at Ethan, giving a slight nod. "Hello, Ethan," he greeted, his voice steady and composed.

Ethan managed to smile, though he was still processing the sudden appearance. "I didn't expect to see you here. But, mysterious brother, do you know him, Jane?"

Jane tilted her head, her brow furrowing in thought. "I don't remember exactly, but I feel like I've seen this brother somewhere before," she replied, her gaze fixed on Astron.

Ethan looked at Astron, pondering for a moment. Astron simply shook his head, a calm expression on his face. "She must be mistaking me for someone else. Children tend to make such mistakes," he said quietly.

Jane pouted, her cheeks puffing out in indignation. "I'm not a child!" she protested, sulking slightly.

Astron glanced at Jane, a hint of amusement flickering in his eyes. "Oh? Then how old are you?" he asked, his tone gentle but curious.

Jane straightened up proudly. "I'm ten years old!" she declared, crossing her arms defiantly.

Astron nodded thoughtfully. "Ten years old. Then that means you are officially a child."

Jane's pout deepened, her indignation flaring. "I am not a child!" she insisted, her voice rising in frustration.

Astron, unfazed, continued in his usual calm tone, "According to facts and definitions, ten years old is still considered a child."

Jane's face turned red with anger, and she stamped her foot. "No, it doesn't! I'm almost grown up!"

Ethan, sensing the escalating tension, intervened. "Astron, maybe you could ease up a little? Jane's just a kid," he whispered, trying to mediate.

Unfortunately, Jane's sharp ears caught his words. She turned her ire towards Ethan, her eyes blazing. "Big brother, I'm not a kid!"

Astron, however, remained resolute. "It's always better to educate children at a young age so that they don't develop weird habits," he replied, his tone matter-of-fact.

At that moment, a voice came from behind them, dripping with irritation. "Are you really arguing with a child?" The voice was unmistakable—fiery. And there, Irina stood.

Astron turned to face her, his expression unchanging. "I am merely stating facts," he said calmly.

PINCH! "Really," Irina said while pinching him on his side.

"I am not a child, Bad Sister Irina," Jane mumbled and turned away as if she was about to cry.

Irina shot Astron a glare, her eyes blazing with irritation. "Astron, you need to learn how to talk to people, especially children," Her eyes seemed to say this.

"Hey, Jane, don't listen to him. You're definitely not a child in the way that matters. You're a young lady, okay?"

Jane's pout softened slightly, though she still looked upset. "Really?"

Irina nodded with a warm smile. "Really. Now, how about I show you something fun?"

Jane's eyes brightened at the prospect, and she quickly forgot her annoyance. "You will show me something fun?"

"Yep," Irina said while igniting a fire in her hand. But while doing that, she muttered under her breath, loud enough for Astron to hear. "Unlike someone hopeless, I am a really cool sister, right?"

Irina said, her tone dripping with sarcasm. She extended her hand, creating a small display of a phoenix on her fingertips. The fiery bird flapped its wings and soared into the air, its feathers leaving a trail of light as it flew around them.

Jane's eyes widened in amazement. "Wow! That's so cool, Sister Irina!" she exclaimed, her earlier frustration forgotten as she watched the phoenix with delight.

Astron, observing the scene with his usual calm demeanor, replied, "At least I'm not someone who seeks acknowledgment from a child."

Irina shot him a sideways glance, a smirk playing on her lips. "People who couldn't get what they want tend to make such excuses," she retorted, her tone playful yet pointed.

Jane, still entranced by the phoenix, didn't catch the exchange. She reached out, trying to touch the fiery bird as it circled around her. "Can I hold it, Sister Irina?" she asked, her voice filled with wonder.

Irina smiled warmly. "Sure, just be careful. It's made of fire, but it won't hurt you." She guided Jane's hand, allowing the phoenix to perch gently on her fingers. Jane giggled in delight, her eyes shining with joy.

As the phoenix perched on Jane's fingers, casting a warm glow, Kaya Hartley, who had been observing the interaction from the sidelines, stepped forward. Her presence, though unassuming, carried an air of authority and grace.

"Astron Natusalune, correct?" Kaya called out, her voice gentle but firm.

Astron turned to look at her, his eyes narrowing slightly. "That is correct. However, have we met before?" he asked, his tone cautious.

Kaya smiled a hint of mystery in her eyes. "I have an offer to make."

"Offer?"

Kaya nodded. "Yes, an offer. Would you like to work with our guild?"

"..."

Everyone around was speechless at that moment.

Since no one was expecting such a thing to come out like that.

Chapter 433 99.2 - End of the semester

"Yes, an offer. Would you like to work with our guild?"

The moment she heard this, Irina's eyes widened. As for the reason?

She had her own plans for him.

Yet, now, she was put into a peculiar situation.

Astron looked into Kaya's eyes, his expression unreadable. "And for what reason are you offering me a place in your guild?" he asked, his tone measured.

Kaya's smile remained calm and composed. "Your skills and potential are impressive. I have watched your fight. You've shown remarkable talent in both combat and strategy. Our guild values such abilities and seeks individuals who can contribute to our collective strength."

Astron studied her for a moment, his mind racing with possibilities. He knew Kaya Hartley's reputation and the influence of her guild. But he also knew she was not someone that gave such opportunities.

And considering the performance he had shown, even though his judgment might have looked good, there was no other thing that he had displayed as distinctive.

He made sure of that.

That was why, at least for him, this offer did not make sense.

'Something else must be going on.'

It was not that hard to conclude this, either.

'And considering the amount of interactions we had was very limited, it could be either because of Ethan or because of that time in the museum. The former can easily be objected to, as I am sure Kaya will consider Ethan as naïve, and she will be a lot more skeptical. She would need to run a background check on me, and she would see my past records, which eventually could become something that would make her realize Ethan was overpraising me. Therefore, this part doesn't make sense.

As for the latter, she could easily confirm from my past transactions and the footage that I was there when the attack happened. She could suspect that I could be related to the attack, but this would be ridiculous and illogical; thus, she must not have thought that. But, aside from that, there is only one other thing that could bring her attention to me. Jane Hartley.'

He thought, looking at the girl.

'For some reason, she just called me Mysterious Brother. It was as if she had known me, but I hadn't met her aside from that time when we were in the museum. Even then, our meeting was brief, and logically, there was no contact whatsoever for me to leave an impression of her. She wouldn't remember my face, as I am sure I hadn't faced her at that time.

That only leaves out one door. She was able to recognize me not because of my physical aspects but because of my energy or something unique to me.

And if this is the case, there is the possibility that she has an ability. In the game, she was dead. Therefore, I don't have any information about the abilities she possessed, but considering that the Hartleys are a unique family on their own, a child born with inherent abilities makes sense. This also supports why Kaya now approached me or why he was paying attention to my fight.' Astron maintained his calm exterior though his mind was a whirlwind of thoughts.

'The possibility of her suspecting me and trying to observe me is high. She can also reach the same conclusion as mine because of Jane's attention. Tch.'

Just as he thought, life was not something that always went as planned. Just because of the existence of a young girl and her unusual act, he somehow gathered attention from outside.

'What a pain.' In the end, he would need to act in a way that wouldn't gather much suspicion from Kaya. That was the only plausible act.

"I appreciate your offer, Lady Hartley," Astron said, his voice steady and polite. "However, I believe it would be prudent to consider all factors before making such a significant decision. Especially when I had already promised a place to work for now."

Kaya's eyes narrowed slightly, but her smile remained unchanged. "Of course. Take your time to consider. My offer stands whenever you're ready."

'Well, seeing him refuse my offer, either he is bound by a contract, or he values his promises. But, well, it was just an offer at the end.' She thought, looking at the young man. Aside from his ability to erase his presence, which was pretty good, there wasn't much outstanding about him.

But Jane's reaction and his being in the museum at that time and surviving needed to be investigated.

'From the registered data, he would have been required to have a hard time. Yet, no records of him being hospitalized were there. Interesting.'

Well, it's not like she would be losing much anyway. Seeing Astron under pressure and knowing he could be taken away, Irina decided to intervene for her own plans.

'This woman....How did she find out about him?'

She needed to change the topic and steer the conversation away from Astron's potential involvement with Kaya's guild. At the same time, she had to hide her close relationship with Astron from Kaya.

"Miss Kaya, your presence here means you had the chance to watch the duels," Irina began, her tone light and conversational. "Were you watching mine as well? If so, could you give me some pointers about mine? Getting opinions from someone like you could help a lot."

"...." Kaya turned her attention to Irina, who came beside her. To be frank, their families were allies, and Kaya had a slightly close relationship with the matriarch of the Emberheart family. "I did."

Thus, she was very well aware of what kind of person Irina was. Someone prideful and arrogant.

And such a person was now asking her for advice?

'Hmm....'

A particularly amusing thought came to her mind. Kaya smiled warmly, her gaze softening as she addressed Irina. "Of course, Irina. I would be happy to provide some pointers. But for that....You will need to pay a price."

"A price."

Somehow, Irina felt like something was not right.

"A price of entertainment." Kaya smiled and then gestured for her to follow. "Let's sit. We got some things to 'talk' after all."

For some reason, Irina felt like she was playing in tiger's palms.....

The duels had ended, and the academy was returning to its usual state of calm. Kaya and Jane were preparing to leave.

Irina and Ethan stood by, ready to bid their farewells.

Jane, holding a small, colorful bag of souvenirs, skipped over to Irina, her eyes shining with excitement.

"Bye, Sister Irina! I had so much fun today!" Jane said, her voice filled with genuine joy. "Thank you for everything!"

Irina smiled warmly, her earlier worries momentarily forgotten. "You're welcome, Jane. I'm glad you had a good time. Take care, and come visit us again soon."

Jane beamed at her, then ran back to Kaya's side. Kaya, who had been watching the exchange with a serene smile, stepped forward.

"Irina, I expect to hear from you soon. And remember, I'm looking forward to your advancements. Don't shy away from the challenges ahead."

Irina blushed, nodding her head. "I won't, Miss Kaya. I'll do my best and listen to your advice."

Ethan glanced between the two, his brow furrowing in confusion. He had no idea what they were talking about, but he sensed there was more to the conversation than met the eye.

Kaya's smile widened slightly, a knowing glint in her eyes. "Good. I'm sure you'll do great things, Irina."

With a final nod to Ethan and a warm smile at Irina, Kaya turned to leave, guiding Jane by the hand. As they walked away, Jane waved enthusiastically over her shoulder, her voice carrying back to them. "Bye, Sister Irina! Bye, big brother Ethan!"

Irina waved back, her smile lingering even as Kaya and Jane disappeared from sight. She turned to Ethan, who was still looking puzzled.

"What was that all about?" Ethan asked, curiosity evident in his voice.

"....It doesn't concern you." Irina coldly shut him down. Ethan shrugged, as it didn't concern him at all. "Alright, if you say so."

Irina glanced once more in the direction Kaya and Jane had gone, her mind racing with thoughts and plans.

'Adults.....They are really different....'

She felt like a new world was opened to her eyes.

<Wednesday, Morning, Arcadia Hunter Academy>

The cold and snowing weather created a shadow of tenseness across the world. The students of Eleanor's homeroom class sat at their desks, the air thick with anticipation and anxiety.

This was the final day of their academy life for this semester. Today, their grades for the final exams—both theoretical and practical—would be announced.

Whispers filled the room as students speculated about their results. Some tapped their fingers nervously on their desks, while others tried to maintain a calm facade. The atmosphere was a mix of excitement and tension, each student eager to know their fate.

"Do you think we'll pass?" whispered one student to his friend, his voice tinged with worry. "I barely managed to finish that last essay."

"I don't know," his friend replied, equally nervous. "The practical exams were tough, but I think I did okay in the duels. It's the written exams that worry me."

Nearby, a group of students huddled together, discussing their performances in hushed tones.

"I heard that the grading this year is going to be stricter than ever," one of them said, her eyes wide with concern. "Eleanor-sensei doesn't go easy on anyone."

"You anime freak. If you had studied instead of watching anime, you wouldn't be concerning yourself like that."

Meanwhile, Julia sat at her desk, her usual energy somewhat subdued by the weight of the moment. She glanced over at Ethan, who was leaning back in his chair with a relaxed expression, seemingly unfazed by the impending announcement.

"How can you be so calm?" she asked, her voice a mix of envy and irritation. "Aren't you at least a little bit nervous?"

Ethan shrugged, a faint smile playing on his lips. "I've done my best, and that's all I can do. Worrying won't change the results."

Lilia, seated next to them, nodded in agreement. "Ethan's right. Besides, stressing out now won't help us. Let's just wait and see."

Irina sat at her desk, her fiery red hair glowing as if the sunlight. She looked calm, but her fingers drummed an impatient rhythm.

It looked like there was something that she had been anticipating today.

As the conversations continued, the door to the classroom opened, and Eleanor-sensei entered, carrying a stack of papers. The room fell silent, and all eyes turned to her, the anticipation reaching its peak.

Eleanor glanced around the room, her expression serious but not unkind. "Good morning, everyone," she began, her voice carrying authority and a hint of warmth. "Today, we will be announcing your final grades for the semester. I want to commend each of you for your hard work and dedication. Regardless of the results, remember that this is just the beginning of your journey in this academy."

Eleanor raised her hand, her authoritative presence commanding the attention of every student in the room.

FLICK! With a subtle flick of her fingers, a soft chime echoed through the classroom as the students' smartwatches simultaneously lit up, signaling the arrival of their final grades.

A collective gasp filled the room as each student looked down at their wrist, eyes wide with anticipation and trepidation. The tension was almost palpable, the

silence thick as everyone processed the information displayed on their screens.

Julia's eyes scanned her grades quickly, a smile spreading across her face as she saw the results of her hard work. "Yes! I did it!" she exclaimed, pumping her fist in the air. "I passed with flying colors!"

Ethan, still leaning back in his chair, glanced at his grades and let out a satisfied sigh. "Not bad," he muttered to himself, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Lilia's face remained impassive as she reviewed her scores, but the slight nod of approval she gave herself indicated her satisfaction. "As expected of me," she said quietly.

Yet, Irina. She just looked into her watch.

There, the score wrote.

Chapter 434 99.3 - End of the semester

As the initial excitement of seeing their grades settled, the students began to compare their results with one another, filling the room with a renewed buzz of conversation.

Julia turned to Lilia, her eyes shining with pride. "I nailed the practical exams! All that extra training really paid off."

Lilia nodded, and a slight smile appeared on her lips. "Heh? What grade did you get? Just to remind you, since both of my duels were flawless wins, my practical score is full-marked." She said while flipping her hair around.

With her slight gesture, she looked really beautiful, as if the fragrance of nature spread across the place.

"Of course, I got full marks too. What do you think I would get anything else, huh?" Julia rose up from her seat, but it was evident that she was acting and was just being a tease.

Ethan, still leaning back casually, looked at his friends and chuckled. "You guys are making me feel like a slacker."

"..." As Ethan talked, the two girls just narrowed their eyes and stayed silent.

"Hey, hey.....What happened? Why are you looking at me like that?"

Julia playfully rolled her eyes. "You..... We all knew you were just as capable. You just liked to play it cool. But, who would have thought you were such a monster."

"That is coming from you." Ethan retorted, recalling what happened at Julia's duel.

"Indeed....."

"Lucas, did you say something?"

"Ah....I just said, you both did good."

"It is not like you performed badly? Your duel was kind of badass, too."

"Ah....Right....." Lucas shrugged, a faint smile on his lips. "I did okay, I guess. But seeing you two in action was pretty impressive."

Julia smirked, playfully nudging her brother. "Don't sell yourself short, Lucas. Your duel was awesome, especially that last move. Where did you even learn that?"

Lucas glanced away, his expression thoughtful. "Just something I picked up during training. I've been trying to incorporate more advanced techniques."

Lilia nodded, her eyes narrowing slightly. "It was more than just an advanced technique. That light manipulation was incredible."

"As expected, you saw it through right away."

"Well...There is a reason why I am ranked fourth now." Lilia smirked as she answered. There was a triumphant expression on her face.

"What?" Julia asked, her eyes widening in surprise. "You got rank four?"

Lilia nodded, a proud smile spreading across her face. "After beating the fourth-ranked student, it was evident that I would at least raise my rank by one. But, it seems I didn't quite make it to third."

Ethan raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Why not? You were amazing out there."

Lilia sighed, her expression turning more thoughtful. "The duel between these two mages, Seraphina and Irina, was on another level. They displayed techniques and mana control that were beyond what I had displayed. Not that I couldn't do the same. It is just the difference between the display."

At that moment, hearing this, everyone turned their attention to the girl who was keeping it quiet all the time.

"Ho.....So you are saying you can do better than Irina?" Julia mumbled with a teasing smile on her lips.

Irina, seemingly lost in her thoughts, didn't reply, her mind clearly elsewhere. Julia, always the one to stir things up, reached out and touched Irina on the side of her belly, making her flinch.

"Huh? What?" Irina snapped back to reality, her face turning slightly red with embarrassment. "Julia, what was that for?"

Julia grinned, enjoying the reaction. "Just making sure you're still with us. You seemed a bit out of it."

Irina narrowed her eyes at Julia, a mix of irritation and amusement on her face. "Well, I'm here now. And for the record, everyone can say they can do better, but it is the actions that speak. And the results say everything themselves, don't they?"

"..." Lilia's eyes were a bit narrowed, but she didn't refute. Well, more like she couldn't since Irina was right.

"Speaking of results, what did you get?"

ulia suddenly rushed over to Irina, curiosity getting the better of her. She quickly took a peek at Irina's grades on her smartwatch.

"What the—? Ninety-four in Introduction to Mana Theory?!" Julia's eyes widened in disbelief.

The group turned their attention to Irina's screen, their eyes widening in amazement as they saw her impressive score.

"Wow, Irina, that's incredible!" Ethan exclaimed, genuinely impressed.

Lucas nodded, a hint of admiration in his eyes. "You really outdid yourself. That's a remarkable grade."

Irina raised her eyes. "That is a good grade?" She asked as if she didn't believe what they were saying.

After all, for her whole life....These types of grades were never good enough. And she also thought the same. She was feeling down for a while because of it since she felt like she had lost the bet, as she hadn't gotten a perfect score.

The others protested immediately. "Of course, it's a good grade!" Ethan exclaimed. "Do you know how hard that exam was?"

Julia chimed in, "Seriously, Irina. I got a 45 on that exam, and I don't even care because I know how tough it was. Yours is like....Double of mine...."

Lucas nodded in agreement. "I got a 70, and I'm pretty happy with that, considering the difficulty."

Lilia, who had been quietly observing the conversation, added, "I got an 87, and I worked really hard for it. Your 94 is impressive, Irina."

Irina looked around at her friends, processing their words. "Really? I guess I didn't realize how challenging it was for everyone."

'That bastard....He said the exam was easy, so I thought it really was. I guess he was just messing with my head....'

'Of course, he was....Why did I not think of that? He was teasing me....There is no way I would get 94 on an exam that was easy....'

'And here I thought, I made some stupid mistakes. It turns out the exam was just hard... Bastard....you really played with me.'

She got really mad at both herself and him. Once again, she felt like she was played with.

Julia grinned, patting Irina on the back. "You're a perfectionist, Irina. You always push yourself to be better, and that's great, but sometimes you need to give yourself credit for your achievements."

Ethan nodded. "Yeah, don't be so hard on yourself. You did amazing, and we're proud of you."

Irina's face softened, a small smile forming on her lips. "I see..."

Yet, that smile somehow looked devious in others' eyes.

FLICK! At that moment, Eleanor flicked her fingers again, and the room fell silent. It was as if no sound could escape from their lips. She then addressed the class, her voice cutting through the tension.

"Now, everyone should be able to see their new ranks and their new grades. For those who have any problem with their grading or those who want to see their papers, you can check your academy page. Your exam papers were scanned and uploaded there. From there, you can object to your grades in the comment section."

The students nodded, absorbing the information. The initial excitement of seeing their grades had subsided, replaced by a more subdued contemplation.

"The deadline for any type of objection is Friday night. And if you want to oppose your practical exam grading, you will be required to stay in the academy. If you have already left and you have objected to your practical grade, your objection will be null."

The students nodded their heads, understanding what she said.

Some were already checking their academy pages; others were discussing their grades with friends.

Eleanor watched them for a moment, then continued, "This semester has been challenging, but you have all shown great progress. Use this break to rest and reflect on what you've learned. I expect even greater things from all of you next semester."

With that, she dismissed the class, allowing the students to leave at their own pace. The room slowly began to empty as students filed out, still buzzing with the aftermath of the grade announcements.

As Eleanor permitted the students to leave, Irina felt a surge of anticipation welling up inside her. She couldn't contain herself any longer; she had to know the result of the bet she had made with Astron. Inwardly, she felt confident. She was sure that Astron had tried to trick her because he hadn't done well on the exam.

'He must have tried to throw me off because he knew he didn't do well,' she thought, smirking to herself.

Her eyes scanned the room, searching for Astron. She spotted him silently slipping out of the classroom, not talking to anyone. Her smirk widened, feeling even more certain of her victory.

'There he goes, trying to make a quick exit,' she mused. 'He must know he lost. And you think I am going to escape like that? In your dreams.'

She thought, with a smirk on her face.

"What are you thinking about, smirking like that? It is a bit creepy." Julia remarked, seeing Irina's face.

"Nothing," Irina replied. And then, she rose up. "I need to leave."

With a newfound determination, Irina gathered her things and made her way towards the door, as well.

"Where? Hey! We are going to eat for one last time. Are you coming?"

Julia asked, yet she didn't receive any answer.

"...."

Since Irina was busy, her mind focused on confronting a certain someone. She wanted to see the look on his face when she revealed her grades and claimed her victory.

As she stepped out into the hallway, she spotted Astron a few paces ahead, walking calmly as if he had all the time in the world. Quickening her pace, she looked as if she was running, trying to catch him.

'He must have turned from here.' She thought and then turned sideways.

"Bam...."

Suddenly, something appeared right before her face. Something dark, as if of a black hand.

'Hiiiick!' Flinching and losing her balance, she was surprised; she stumbled, barely managing to catch herself. Her senses did not pick anything at all, and she was sure there was nothing there.

"You need to watch your step," a small voice said.

Irina raised her face and saw Astron standing before her. There was a very subtle smile on his face, just enough to be noticeable.

"You...!" Irina started, regaining her composure.

'Of course, it was him!' She thought.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, her tone a bit angrily.

"Waiting for certain someone, of course. Did you really think I would run away?"

Irina clenched her fists and pouted a little, her frustration evident. "Shut up," she snapped. "Show me your grade."

Astron raised an eyebrow, his subtle smile still in place. "So you did think I would run away?"

"Shut up," Irina repeated, her tone firmer. "Just show me your grade."

Astron shook his head, a hint of amusement in his eyes. "Are you really ready for this? There's no need to rush the inevitable."

"I couldn't be more ready," Irina insisted, her eyes burning with determination. "Let's get this over with."

With a slight nod, Astron held up his smartwatch, revealing his grade.

Introduction to Mana Theory Grade: 100//100

Irina's eyes widened after seeing the grade.

She turned to look at him, only to see something different in his eyes.

"I just said this before, but let me say it again."

He stopped walking over her a little.

"Never underestimate me just because I am going easy on others."

Chapter 435 99.4 - End of the semester

"Never underestimate me just because I am going easy on others."

His tone was calm but carried an underlying intensity that sent a shiver down her spine. There was something in his eyes. She wouldn't see him like this most of the time, but she saw this look before.

It was the look that he was giving to certain people at certain times. And she knew the reason why.

After all, she was very well aware of his goals and the reason why he was pushing himself this hard. Though they had just had a talk and he somehow opened himself to her, that didn't mean she knew everything about him from the start.

His very reason for being here was revenge.

To destroy.

And he only became serious when he had such reasons. He never cared about how other people viewed him, never cared about the recognition that he would get.

To be honest, this was just like him since even before that moment in his life, he was still such a person.

Aside from that, she rarely saw him competitive, but it seemed she was able to awaken another side of him.

For a different reason.

Not because of revenge or anything. He showed his best just to compete with her.

And seeing this, how could she just get angry?

Didn't this just mean she was special? This was another way to say she was the only one to evoke such feelings.

Was that why she was feeling a bit happy?

Yet, Irina knew this was just the beginning. She was very aware that keeping him attached to this world would require more than just one step.

"Young one, you carry a burden, and your path is intertwined with his. Take care of him; he walks on a thin thread, and he could fall at any time."

She still remembered the voice of the elderly soul that she had heard when the Phantom's Land was crumbling.

There would need to be many steps, many small victories, and moments of connection.

Even so, she couldn't deny the pang of regret that she had lost to him. She had promised a reward, never truly believing she would have to follow through. A bit of panic welled up inside her as she thought about what she would have to do now.

'What did I even promise him? I didn't think I would lose...' she thought, mentally kicking herself for her overconfidence.

Astron, noticing the shift in her expression, raised an eyebrow. "Regretting the bet already?" he asked a hint of amusement in his voice.

Irina crossed her arms, trying to maintain her composure. "Of course not. I always honor my promises," she replied, though her voice wavered slightly.

Astron's subtle smile widened just a bit. "Good. Then I'll be looking forward to it."

Irina felt a mixture of dread and curiosity. What exactly did he want? She had to know, and she had to be prepared for anything.

"So, what do you want as your reward?" she asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

Astron looked into her eyes, his face slightly facepalming. "How can I decide what I want without seeing what you have in your family's armory?" He asked. And then, he narrowed his eyes. "Don't tell me, you forgot what the other side of the bet was?"

"....."

And Irina couldn't reply.

"Really....." He shook his head. "Sometimes, I really admire your confidence."

It was evident that he assumed she never even considered him winning.

Irina pouted, trying to cover her embarrassment. "I would remember it if I thought about it. You just didn't give me time."

Astron waved his hand dismissively. "Yeah, yeah, for sure."

After that moment had passed, Irina felt regretful about losing. All her plans were now stagnant. She had wanted to have one week of his life and had planned quite a lot of things for that period of time. At that moment, she remembered the promise he made to her: she had one more request to make him grant a wish of hers. She decided to use it for her plans.

"Wait," she said suddenly, her tone shifting to one of determination. "You owe me one more favor, remember? I want to use it now."

Astron raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued. "Oh? And what is it that you want?"

"I want that week," Irina declared, her eyes fixed on him with unwavering resolve. "The one I would have had if I won the bet. I still want that time with you."

Astron looked at her, a mixture of surprise and curiosity in his eyes. He was silent for a moment, as if weighing her request. "You realize that I promised that request to be an equivalent to mine."

"Yes. Of course, I remember that."

"And you think the two requests are the same?"

"I do."

"Explain how my request to you to keep my involvement in Phantom's Land secret is the same as my act of giving up one week of my break."

Irina took a deep breath, her eyes narrowing as she prepared to argue her case. "Since the moment I took credit instead of you, I've had to deal with countless annoying things. Interviews, interrogations, posts about me online, government suspicions—it's been exhausting. I've had to answer questions, deal with skepticism, and constantly be on guard."

Astron nodded his head thoughtfully, considering her words. "That's right," he said finally. "You're starting to understand the value of what you have under your hands. The responsibility, the burden, and the effort it takes to maintain a facade. You need to show this same spirit to her as well."

Irina blinked, realizing he wasn't trying to make things harder for her but was actually trying to show her different ways of thinking. It was a lesson in responsibility and understanding the consequences of actions, a deeper lesson hidden within their interactions.

And she also knew what he meant with 'her.'

Of course, he would know. Even from the start, he was able to see through the face that she was putting on – the arrogance that she had always displayed to others. He knew that it was just a self-defense mechanism that she had created.

And he must also have known the reason for that.

"Why are you always like this?" she mumbled, her voice carrying a mix of frustration and admiration.

"Like what?" he asked, tilting his head slightly.

"It is nothing..." she looked down since she didn't want to show it – the expression she was most likely making.

"...."

For a moment, silence hung between them. Irina took a deep breath and composed her expression, looking back up at Astron with renewed determination.

"Does that mean you'll do it?" she asked, her voice steady.

Astron nodded. "Not like I have a choice since I promised to grant your request." He paused, a thoughtful expression crossing his face. "But there's a possibility I'll be busy during the break. I might not have the time."

Irina narrowed her eyes, suspicion creeping into her gaze. "Why didn't you make any time?"

Astron shook his head, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "Of course, because I was sure I wouldn't lose."

Seeing his haughty face, Irina felt a surge of irritation. She wanted to punch him because she knew she wasn't one to talk—she had done the same, after all.

"Well, even though you won, you should have still considered the possibility of me using my right to request," she retorted, her tone sharper than intended.

Astron shrugged. "That is mostly true. Though, not everything is always in my control."

At that time, she remembered the hunters that came to watch him. She remembered the energy they gave away and the talk they had.

"Nothing comes without a price." It was blatantly obvious that the hunter named Garrett had some control over him. Maybe it was a deal. At the very least, she didn't know.

"Anyway. You can contact me when you want to spend the week."

With that, he turned to leave. Irina watched him go, her mind racing with thoughts of how to make the most of the time they would spend together. This was her chance to show him a different side of life, to pull him away from his single-minded pursuit of revenge, even if just for a week.

And to entangle him with her to the greatest extent.

"Hey, Astron!" she called after him.

He turned slightly, raising an eyebrow.

"Don't forget, you promised," she reminded him, her tone softer.

He shook his head as if saying, 'Did you stop me just to say this?'

"I won't."

And then, he turned back to leave. But, just then, he stopped once again and turned back.

"Hey, Irina."

She paused, looking at him curiously. "What?"

"Congratulations on your new rank," he said, his voice sincere. "Rank 2. You've earned it."

Irina's eyes widened in surprise, and then a smile spread across her face, genuine and heartfelt. That guy, just as how he was usual, was perceptive of the details.

Though not that she was expecting anything like this, nor would it make her happy.

"It's not like this would make me happy," she replied, though her tone was light and playful.

Astron shook his head, a hint of amusement in his eyes. "Your expression looks far too happy for someone who says that," he remarked.

And with that, he turned and disappeared from her sight, leaving Irina standing there with a smile that she couldn't quite hide.

'Rank 2...' she thought, her heart swelling with pride. 'I did it.'

The day was still cold, and the world was covered in a blanket of snow, but Irina felt a warmth within her that chased away the chill.

She had made it this far, and there was still so much more to achieve.

Just like that, the semester of the academy ended for her.

It was a hectic academic semester.

A time of the year that she had never felt like this before.

Astron sat on the edge of his bed, the finality of the semester settling over him like a heavy cloak.

The results of the final exam had been posted, and despite his indifferent exterior, he had made sure to check.

Rank 1071. It was not exceptional, but certainly not disappointing, given his circumstances.

As if on cue, the watch began to vibrate softly, its screen lighting up with a notification.

He tapped the screen, and a message appeared:

"Congratulations, Astron Natusalune. Your rank of 1071 is noted. You have not disappointed."

'As expected. They have access to the information.' It was not something he hadn't expected, as the organization was pretty powerful and ran deep.

Though he had expected some form of communication, he hadn't expected it to be this quick. The message continued:

"Your next step awaits. Come to the location shown on the screen tonight at 8 P.M."

A map flickered into view, highlighting a secluded area on the outskirts of Arcadia City.

Astron rose from his bed, his mind already racing through the possibilities of what lay ahead.

'Let's see what I can get from them.' As equally oppressing, it was an opportunity after all.

CREAK!

With that, he left his room.

-----End of the volume 3-----

Many events happened in this volume, and it was mainly focused on the expansion of the world and the character development of the main cast while laying the background of how they became what they were.

Astron also had a huge character development, in my opinion. Though it may have looked like it has taken a lot of time, breaking down such walls and openly expressing himself is not something that is easy.

In the next volume, things will be a little different.

Stay intact.

Chapter 436 100.1 - Watchers of Arcane

<Human Domain, Northeast Entrance>

The northwest entrance to the human domain stood as a formidable barrier, its gates flanked by vigilant patrols. The thick forest and treacherous mountain paths surrounding it added to its impregnability.

The guards, clad in sturdy armor and armed with sharp spears, stood at attention, unaware of the approaching storm.

From the shadows of the dense foliage, the solitary figure emerged. His steps were silent, a predator moving through the night, every motion precise and deliberate. The same wind that swirled in the cave now whispered through the trees, heralding his approach.

With eyes that gleamed like molten gold, he fixed his gaze on the entrance. His presence alone was enough to send shivers down the spines of the patrols. One guard turned, his eyes widening in shock as he caught sight of the intruder.

RUMBLE!

"Intruder!" the guard shouted, raising his spear in alarm.

Before the sound could fully escape his lips, the figure moved. In a blur of motion, he closed the distance between them, his fist connecting with the guard's chest. The impact was cataclysmic, a single punch that shattered armor and bone alike. The guard crumpled to the ground, lifeless.

The other patrols rushed to intercept, but their efforts were futile. With each strike, the figure dispatched them with ease, their bodies falling like leaves in a storm. The once secure entrance was now a scene of chaos and death.

As the last guard fell, a new presence made itself known. Beside the figure, seemingly materializing from the very shadows, stood a young being.

Draped in an elegant robe that flowed like water, his movements were a dance; each step imbued with grace and purpose.

The young being's face was serene, almost ethereal, eyes reflecting an otherworldly intelligence. He regarded the carnage with a calm detachment, then turned his gaze to the figure beside him.

THUD!

In an instant, he knelt down, his eyes looking to the ground.

"Sir Cadmus."

Cadmus nodded once more. "Is the thing I asked for ready?"

The robed man replied, "Yes, your request is ready." With a fluid motion, he produced a hologram from within his robes.

The hologram depicted a scene where a young boy, whose eyes also turned vertically yellow, stood with an intense expression. The boy's voice echoed through the projection, filled with power and determination.

[By the will of my call, father of all,]

[Hear my cry through the storm's enthrall.]

[With the power of thunder in hand,]

[I summon the heavens to strike this land.]

As Cadmus heard this, an immense pressure surged through his body, a raw power that radiated outward. The air around them seemed to ripple, and the very ground beneath them trembled.

The pressure was so intense that it crushed the lifeless bodies of the fallen guards, turning them into mush.

His eyes were locked down onto the hologram.

"Einherjar."

He mumbled the name.

<Arcadia City, Wednesday Evening>

A cab pulled to a stop at the edge of Arcadia City, where the urban landscape gave way to more secluded surroundings.

Inside stood a young man as he paid the driver and stepped out, the sounds of the city fading as he walked down a narrow, dimly lit path leading into the outskirts.

The path was lined with tall, overgrown foliage, casting long shadows that danced in the moonlight.

"Choosing such a place...."

Out of all the places it could have been chosen, it was this place. A place where countless different crimes had been committed.

Even now, he could feel some gazes on him.

Astron's senses were on high alert, every rustle and whisper in the night air sharpening his focus.

'Though, they are most likely from the organization.'

There was a reason why he hadn't used his stealth abilities, especially his [Shadowborne]. Since he was sure he was being watched.

The smartwatch's map guided him deeper into the outskirts, leading him to an old, abandoned structure partially hidden by the overgrowth.

He checked the time—7:55 P.M. He was early, just as he intended. Taking a moment to survey the area, he noted the strategic advantages and potential exits, preparing himself for any unforeseen circumstances.

As the clock ticked closer to 8:00 P.M., the watch vibrated again. A new message appeared:

"Enter and follow the light."

A faint glow emanated from within the structure, casting eerie shadows against the crumbling walls.

—WROOM! Following that, a portal opened right before his face.

"..."

Yet, he hadn't entered, just looking at the portal itself. The reason for that?

'The portal is flawed. It is a trap.'

He was able to sense what was happening right before his face. The portal, though opened via spatial manipulation, was, in fact, not connected to anything.

What did this mean?

It meant that the place was a pocket space and unstable since pocket spaces were never meant to be stable to begin with.

Thus, he did what he needed to.

SWOOSH!

Threw a dagger right through the portal.

STAB!

Following that, his ears perked up, and the sound of something stabbed came from the portal.

In an instant, something rushed through the portal toward him. A monstrous creature, its face contorted in agony, its body bleeding from multiple wounds, lunged at him with ferocity.

The monster's claws were aimed directly at his face, moving with deadly speed. Astron remained calm, his mind working faster than his body.

Instead of focusing on the immediate threat of the claws, he raised his dagger to his right, anticipating a different danger.

CLANK!

The sound of metal clashing against metal echoed in the chamber. At the same moment, the monster's claws passed through his face, dissipating like smoke.

It was an illusion, a clever deception meant to distract him from the real threat.

Astron's dagger had blocked a hidden blade aimed at his side. A figure emerged right before him out of nowhere, retracting the blade and stepping back with a hiss.

"Impressive," the figure said, its voice a raspy whisper. "You sensed the illusion and the real attack. Not many can do that."

The figure seized him from head to toe.

~~whisper whisper whisper~~

At that moment, countless different whispers enveloped them, and then another figure revealed itself.

This time, the figure was a lot smaller compared to the first one who had shown himself.

"How did you find out?" the small figure asked, curiosity evident in their tone.

Astron took a deep breath, his gaze steady. "The sound of something getting stabbed came from the portal, but I had already withdrawn the blade once I threw it."

He raised his hand, revealing small grey strings attached to his fingers, leading back to the dagger he had thrown. "Since I had withdrawn the dagger, it wouldn't make sense for something to get hit. Yet, such a sound still came from the portal."

The childlike figure tilted its head, pondering Astron's explanation. They put their index finger to their lips in thought. "So, using such a trigger mechanism itself has a flaw... Next time, I need to change the conditions of the triggering."

Astron nodded slightly, appreciating the analytical approach. "Indeed. A different method might be more effective."

The first figure, still cloaked in shadows, chuckled. "You're not only perceptive but also unshaken. Impressive, indeed."

Astron glanced at the two figures. "Is this assessment over, or is there more you need from me?"

The childlike figure stepped forward, their eyes gleaming with a mix of curiosity and admiration. "I had my doubts since the new member was pretty young, but it seems my doubts were mistaken."

Before the childlike figure could say more, a presence materialized behind her. Reina stepped out of the shadows with a swift, silent grace. Her eyes locked onto the young figure, irritation clear in her gaze.

"Who gave you permission to conduct this test?" Reina's voice was sharp as she reached out and grabbed the young figure by the ear, causing the childlike figure to wince.

"I-I was just curious," the young figure stammered, trying to pull away, but Reina's grip was firm.

"Curiosity does not excuse unauthorized actions," Reina scolded. "You know better than to act without approval."

Astron watched the interaction, noting the dynamics between them. Reina, while stern, seemed more exasperated than truly angry as if this was a recurring issue with the young figure.

'I see. Either a unique mental condition because of a certain backstory, or a uniqueness stemming from a trait.'

He thought, analyzing the young figure. There were many powers that had affected the users, traits that limited the actions of the user itself.

From how it looked outside, it was evident that this young one had a special condition.

'And, I should stop viewing her as a young one. She is still using illusions to make her seem small. What a weird bunch.'

He thought.

Reina released the young figure's ear, giving her a final stern look before turning to Astron. "I apologize for this... unauthorized test. It was not part of your scheduled assessment."

Astron nodded, maintaining his calm demeanor. "There is no problem."

Reina's expression softened slightly as she addressed the young figure. "Return to your quarters and reflect on your actions. We will discuss this later."

The young figure nodded, casting a quick glance at Astron before scurrying away, leaving Reina and the shadowy figure alone with him.

Reina sighed, her composure returning. "Now, let's proceed with what we originally intended."

She stopped and then smirked.

"Are you ready to see something interesting?"

"..."

Before he could even answer, she flicked her fingers.

Suddenly, everything became blurry. Countless whispers overwhelmed him, and a torrent of information surged into his ears.

Astron felt like he was losing himself in an ocean of knowledge and sound. The sheer volume and intensity threatened to drown his very essence.

Yet, this time was different from the last.

On the last time, he was not able to keep himself away from the effects of the flow of information, yet he knew such a thing could happen.

And to deal with that, he remembered a certain moment when Lilia had used [Magnetism] as an anchor to show arrows without even touching them.

Anchor.

By creating an anchor, he would allow himself to stay away from the flow of the information, removing the risk.

Astron focused intently on his very conscience.

He visualized an anchor, a tether to the real world, something solid to cling to amidst the chaos.

'Focus...' he commanded himself, forming the anchor in his mind. It took the shape of a small, unyielding island in a stormy sea, a place where his consciousness could rest and remain grounded. He concentrated on this mental image, pouring his will into it.

Gradually, the chaos began to recede. The whispers grew fainter, and the deluge of information slowed to a manageable trickle. Astron felt his consciousness stabilizing, the anchor holding firm.

When his vision cleared, he found himself standing in a different room. It was vast and illuminated by a strange, ethereal light that seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere at once. Symbols and runes adorned the walls, pulsing with a faint, otherworldly glow.

Reina stood before him, a satisfied smile playing on her lips. "Impressive," she said. "Just by seeing it once, you were able to anchor yourself. Most wouldn't be able to do that. You truly are a promising recruit."

Astron took a deep breath, steadying himself. "What was that?"

"A test," Reina replied, her tone matter-of-fact. But after seeing the look Astron gave to her, she coughed. "It was a joke."

Reina continued her tone, now more serious. "We have crossed dimensions. This is not just another room."

Suddenly, as if a veil was removed, the walls around them began to dissolve into thin air, revealing an expansive, bustling space. Astron's eyes widened slightly as he took in the sight before him.

They stood on a raised platform overlooking a massive underground complex. The scale of it was staggering. People moved with purpose, some running from place to place, while others were deeply engaged with advanced technological equipment. Holographic screens floated in the air, displaying streams of data, maps, and tactical information.

Reina gestured broadly, a proud look on her face. "Welcome to the Arcadia Base."

Chapter 437 100.2 - Watchers of Arcane

In a world where mana exists, you are bound to see things that don't completely make sense on Earth or things that look like they came out straight out of the movie.

I mean, I myself, had seen the world go completely white, the skies rumble and thunder bow down, or someone making a complete nuke.

All of them were made by just young people at the age of 16. So, it is clear that this world is completely extreme on many ends.

But, even then.

'This is.....'

It was enormous.

The vast underground complex stretched out before me, its sheer scale taking me by surprise. It was a labyrinthine expanse of corridors, rooms, and open areas, all interconnected with a meticulous design that spoke of advanced planning and engineering.

The ceiling, far above, was lined with an intricate network of support beams and conduits, their surfaces gleaming under the ethereal light that seemed to permeate the entire space.

This light, though artificial, felt strangely natural, casting a soft, even glow over everything.

Directly below the platform where I stood with Reina, the complex teemed with activity. People move with purpose, and their actions are coordinated and efficient. Groups huddled around holographic displays, their faces illuminated by the glow of data streams and maps.

Countless different psions were flowing across the place, whose attributes didn't make sense to me.

My eyes that could see the psions themselves were getting overwhelmed by the raw information they were receiving.

Even when I was under the mine, where countless different mana veins were spread across the ground, the number of psions was not even close to this.

'Urghk!'

As the immense amount of headache struck me, I instantly forced myself to turn down [Perceptive Insight].

If I hadn't done that, I was sure my brain would turn itself off, and I would lose consciousness right here, right there.

'What was that?'

Yet, of course, I couldn't help but ask myself. How come such a dense amount of psions were spread across the place, and their attributes were unknown?

'Unknown...'

"Impressive, isn't it?" Reina's voice cut through the ambient noise, her tone laced with pride. "This is the heart of our operations. Every mission, every strategy is planned and executed from here."

I nodded, my mind still reeling from the sheer scale of the place. The maze of corridors, the bustling activity, the overwhelming density of psions—it was unlike anything I had ever encountered.

"You seem to have already figured out how to control your eyes," Reina said, turning to look at me with a knowing smile.

I narrowed my gaze at her, curiosity and suspicion mixing in my mind.

'Eyes....' It was evident what she was talking about, but it was still important to understand what she meant.

"What do you mean by that?"

Reina didn't answer immediately. Instead, she gestured towards the vast expanse of the base below us. "This whole place is a base for agents across the world. But how do you think they communicate?"

I furrowed my brow, thinking hard. That was what I had been thinking about as well. Since from the start, this place was another dimension. Thus, using something physical like electromagnetic waves would not be possible to transmit the information.

After all, even though electromagnetic waves can travel on the empty space, that doesn't mean they can just cross dimensions. For such a thing to happen, one would need something that can act as a bridge.

And what would that be?

The answer is evident.

Mana.

After all, if something can create a space rupture or a pocket space, why can't it pass through some space holes?

'I see.'

The sheer number of positions with unknown attributes that I had seen earlier began to make sense. I realized what those positions were.

"They are psions attributed by an [Authority]," I said, the pieces falling into place. "The Authority of Information."

Reina's smile widened, impressed by my deduction. "Very perceptive. Yes, these psions are indeed attributed by an Authority. They facilitate instant communication, data transfer, and real-time surveillance across the globe. They are the lifeblood of our operations."

I recalled bits and pieces of information I had come across before in the game. Those lore diggers had some hypotheses about this mysterious organization/

Some of them thought that the Watchers of Arcane had connections with a forgotten god, one who was said to have dominion over knowledge and information.

And if that were to be true, it could possibly explain how this worked.

"But why am I seeing these now? I've never encountered them in such density before," I asked, my curiosity piqued.

Reina nodded, acknowledging my question. "This base is a central hub, a nexus of information. The psions you saw are concentrated here to ensure seamless operations. It's rare to find such a density of them elsewhere."

"But isn't it dangerous to have such a concentration in one place?" I asked, thinking about the potential vulnerabilities.

"Indeed, it is," Reina admitted. "That's why we have multiple safeguards in place, both magical and technological. The security measures here are among the most advanced in the world. And as for why you're seeing them now, your unique ability allows you to perceive things others can't."

I took a deep breath, processing the information. The implications of this were vast. The sheer power and influence the Watchers of Arcane wielded through this network of psions were staggering.

However, aside from what she had shown and explained, there was one thing that needed to be addressed since she was trying to change the subject.

"But you still haven't answered my question."

I replied, looking at her.

"What did you mean by 'Eye'?"

Reina smiled, a knowing glint in her eye. "Why do you think the organization took note of you and decided to send you to one of the most prestigious academies in the world? What could make you different? How did we determine that? What is your connection to us? Haven't you thought about that before?"

"Of course, I've thought about it before," I said, my gaze steady.

I had been thinking about him for a while already. Even in the game, Astron must have been chosen by the Watchers of Arcane since that was the basic layout for him to be sent to the academy.

That made me think.

Was there something that they knew about Astron that I didn't? Even though he died before he could show himself to them.

That question was hard to answer since, in the game, Astron was just an extra, and I didn't know about the abilities he possessed at all.

As a boss, he was more of a demonic human than a normal hunter. Thus, his abilities as a normal human were unknown.

Therefore, referencing the game was basically impossible. Or at least it was harder compared to the other characters.

But, still, I remembered something.

'In the boss fight between Astron, his input reading was far too strong. Most of the players would have a hard time dealing with him since even if he was not a strong boss, he constantly interrupted the player, dodged the attacks, or blocked them. If not for the player being too strong than him, the fight could turn differently.'

Why was this important, one would say?

The answer lay somewhere else.

All people of this world, whether they belonged to high-ranking families or not, would always have one trait at the start when they awakened.

Yet, for me, it was different. At least, the moment when I somehow merged into one, I had more than one trait.

To explain this, I had always considered [Perceptive Insight] stemmed from my other part of the soul.

But was that possible?

Did I contain two souls in one body, or did I just complete my imperfect soul?

The answer was the latter. Then, why did I have two traits?

Was I special? Was it simply because of that?

Or was there another reason for such a thing happening?

For instance, an external factor?

What if I had initially just had one trait, [Lunar Enigma]?

'Perceptive Insight....What if....'

Yeah, what if there was some outside interference? What if something had affected me and had chosen me?

If that was the case, I could easily say that [Lunar Enigma] was something related to me since I knew that she also had powers of the moon.

Then where did this [Perceptive Insight] come from?

If [Perceptive Insight] came from an outsider's influence, that could also explain why this organization took an interest in me. They could have recognized their own energy.

After all, the Watchers of Arcane are oddly related to observing and interfering with things, just like my [Perceptive Insight] ability.

'That also explains how the game version Astron was able to see through the movements of the players that easily. He must also have his initial traits awakened....Because of the Demonic Energy that filled the missing parts of his soul temporarily.'

Slowly, the pieces were sitting together.

I had initially thought that they took me in because they knew something about [Lunar Enigma], but from the looks of it now, that may not be the case.

"Though, it is better to not be sure." I looked at Reina after finding the answer to my questions.

"Your perceptive abilities are not just a coincidence, Astron. They are the reason when you were found, we took an interest in you."

"I see." I nodded my head as she answered just as I had expected. However, I still showed a surprised face just to make her think I didn't speculate about it.

After all, my trait coming from them didn't mean I could trust them. And it is always better to downplay your capabilities a little just to make sure.

"So, does this answer satisfy you?"

"A little. Though I have many questions."

"You need to keep them to yourself. I will not answer any other questions. You will need to get them yourself after increasing your rank."

"....."

This was the usual way things worked in any type of organization, so I did not mind.

"Yet, let me tell you one thing," Reina said as she started walking, her tone carrying a hint of intrigue.

I followed her, curious about what she had to say.

"As you increase your rank and complete missions, you will be able to evolve your eyes more. The evolutions you had previously on your own are just the beginning."

It seemed that being here wouldn't be too bad.

"And also, there is no need to hide your capabilities here."

Chapter 438 100.3 - Watchers of Arcane

"And also, there is no need to hide your capabilities here."

The moment she said this, I noticed a change in her eyes. They transformed intricate patterns of interwoven lines and runes appearing within them, just like the ornate designs I had seen before.

They pulsed with a faint, otherworldly light, exuding an aura of power and knowledge.

The same wave of information had entered my head, and I kept myself in the same place after anchoring. Just as before, her eye level was clearly higher than mine.

"For you to evolve your eye, you need to have a significant achievement," Reina said, her voice steady. "And I can see the energy emanating from you. I can easily assess your overall mana strength, even if you try to conceal it."

I didn't panic, nor did I react overtly. This was something I had already anticipated. I was well aware that in this world, no one was truly omnipotent. There would always be someone who could see through your facade, no matter how well it was crafted.

At the end of the day, this was going to happen one way or another. That was why I was focusing on hiding my innate capabilities.

One doesn't need to have a strong amount of mana only to become strong. They need many other qualities. Fast thinking, good analysis. All those things are required. And you can't just 'see' those things with a simple eye.

It needs more than that since they are initial to one's very being. They are related to one's own character and how their minds work.

"I see," I replied, as if I was embarrassed. "It didn't work, huh?"

"It didn't."

"I understand." I bowed my head as if to show that I wouldn't do it anymore. "Then I will focus on proving my worth."

Reina's eyes returned to their normal state, the patterns and runes fading away. She nodded approvingly. "Good. Now, let's get you settled." She said. "For the time being, you will not be assigned to a mission immediately. First, your abilities will be tested, and you will meet other youngsters who are just as special as you. Though, you had already met two of them."

"Those two?" Recalling the two guys that had tried to test me at the start, I asked.

"Yes, them," Reina replied.

I followed her through the labyrinthine complex, my mind already strategizing and planning for the tasks ahead. This place, with its vast resources and advanced technology, could be a powerful ally—or a dangerous enemy.

It all depended on how I navigated the challenges and alliances within.

As we walked, I couldn't help but feel a sense of cautious optimism. The Watchers of Arcane had their own agenda, and so did I. If my abilities could evolve further under their guidance, it was a risk worth taking.

"Yes, them," Reina replied. "They are among the many recruits we have with unique abilities. Each one has its own strengths and specialties. It's crucial for you to understand who you'll be working with and against in the future."

I nodded, absorbing the information. "I see. And what exactly will these tests entail?"

Reina glanced at me, a small smile playing on her lips. "You'll find out soon enough. The tests are designed to push your limits and help us gauge your potential. They will cover a range of skills—combat, strategy, magic, and more."

"Understood," I said, keeping my tone neutral. "I'll be ready."

She led me through the labyrinthine corridors of the complex, explaining various aspects of the organization along the way. "The Watchers of Arcane are divided into several divisions, each focusing on different aspects of our mission. Intelligence gathering, combat operations, research

and development, and more. You'll be integrated into the division that best suits your skills after your evaluation."

We arrived at a large training facility filled with advanced equipment and various training zones.

"This is where you'll be spending a lot of your time initially," Reina said. "You'll train with other recruits, learn from seasoned operatives, and undergo a series of evaluations."

I observed the room, noting the intensity and focus of the recruits. They were all highly skilled, each displaying unique talents and capabilities. It was clear that the standards here were incredibly high.

'Feels similar.'

Remembering the certain memory of the past, I couldn't help but shake my head inwardly. This place was oddly similar, though there were also some differences between them.

'The expressions are a lot different.'

The difference was the faces of those who were training. They were not filled with tiredness and were instead filled with hope.

Contrary to those at that time.

It was a clear difference.

After the introductions, Reina turned to me. "For now, get settled in your quarters. Tomorrow, your training and evaluations will begin. Use this time to familiarize yourself with the facility and the other recruits."

I nodded. "Understood, Miss Reina."

Reina smiled, nodding her head. "Good. You can access the interior of the facility and everything you need from your watch. It works even here in the special areas. The other watches will not work in this area unless you're in designated zones."

She continued, "You can eat whenever you want from the cafeteria. We have special chefs preparing meals at all hours. You should be familiar with how things work from the academy, but if you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask."

I nodded again, appreciating the thorough explanation. "Thank you, Miss Reina. I'll make sure to make the most of the resources available."

Reina's expression softened slightly. "Astron, remember that you're not just here to prove yourself but to grow and learn. The Watchers of Arcane believe in nurturing talent, not just testing it. Take this opportunity seriously, but don't forget to build relationships with your fellow recruits. They will be your allies in the field."

Building connections is the most important thing in the world, especially if you are in the Hunter field.

'You can't fight the world on your own.'

That is indeed the case. I knew if, even though I refused to acknowledge it before.

"I'll keep that in mind," I replied, my tone sincere.

She gave a final nod before turning to leave. "Good. I'll see you tomorrow for your evaluations. Rest well, Nominee Astron."

As Reina walked away, I took a deep breath and glanced around the facility once more. It was time to explore and familiarize myself with my new surroundings. The training facility buzzed with activity, and the recruits engaged in various exercises and drills.

'Let's see what this place has to offer.'

I activated my watch, navigating through the interface to find a map of the facility. The detailed layout displayed various zones, including training areas, research labs, dormitories, and the cafeteria. The map also highlighted the locations of different divisions and special areas.

'Impressive.'

The efficiency and organization were evident, and I appreciated the thoughtfulness that went into designing the facility. I made a mental note of key areas to visit and decided to start with the cafeteria. It would be good to grab something to eat and observe the other recruits in a more relaxed environment.

'Well, it seems like that won't be the case now.'

I thought. And then, my hand instantly went to my dagger.

SWOOSH!

Because before me, something peculiar appeared.

A face that turned down. The eyeballs were empty, as if the eyes were gouged. Blood was flowing down from the head to the hair that was somehow entangled.

And most importantly, the mouth was missing its bottom, now top, half.

'It is pretty deceptive, isn't it?'

"You have a pretty annoying ability."

I remarked, sensing the presence.

"Eeeeh...You figured it out instantly," came the familiar voice.

The same small girl who had shown herself before made her appearance, followed by the same guy who had attacked me at that time. The girl looked small, like a young child, her features deceptively innocent. The boy, in contrast, was much larger, looking around 18. He was taller than me, his body chiseled and toned, with a lean but muscular build.

I analyzed his stance, noting the way he carried himself. His muscles were well-developed, indicating rigorous training. His left hand was slightly more prominent, suggesting he was left-handed. However, I recalled that the attack I had blocked earlier was right-handed, and even then, it had shaken me.

'This guy is strong,' I thought, my instincts sharpening.

The boy smirked, his eyes gleaming with a hint of challenge. "Looks like you're ready for round two," he said, his voice carrying a confident edge.

I didn't respond immediately. Instead, I focused on the girl. "You enjoy playing tricks, don't you?"

She giggled, the sound almost eerie in the dimly lit corridor. "It's fun to see how people react. But you're different. You don't get scared easily."

I kept my gaze steady. "What do you two want?"

"What do we want? We are just greeting our new roommate." The boy stepped forward, his movements fluid and controlled.

I raised an eyebrow. "Roommate?"

"Yes," the girl chimed in, a mischievous grin on her face. "This place doesn't have separate dorms for different sexes. We're all mixed together. Keeps things interesting."

"I see," I replied, maintaining my neutral expression.

The boy extended his hand. "I'm Kael, and this is my sister, Lyra. We've been here for a while now."

I shook his hand, noting the strength in his grip. "Astron."

Lyra gave a small curtsy, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "Nice to meet you... Astron. What a weird name....."

I nodded, releasing Kael's hand. "Likewise."

Since these guys would be my roommates from now on, it was important to have a fluid relationship and a good impression of each other.

I glanced between them, sensing a strong bond. "So, you test every new recruit?"

"Cough.....Th-"

"Not every recruit," Kael replied, his tone serious. "Just the ones we think are interesting."

"And you find me interesting?"

Lyra nodded eagerly. "Oh, absolutely. After all, you were recommended by Miss Reina here."

Lyra's eyes lit up, and she launched into an explanation. "Miss Reina is a very important person in the Watchers of Arcane. She's one of the highest-ranked members and has a significant influence in the organization. Her word carries a lot of weight."

Kael nodded in agreement. "She's not just high-ranked; she's also highly respected. If she recommended you, it means she sees great potential in you."

I absorbed this information, understanding the implications. "I see. So, her recommendation means I have big shoes to fill."

Lyra giggled. "Exactly! But don't worry. We're here to help you get up to speed."

Kael's expression turned more serious. "Reina's recommendation also means you'll be held to higher standards. But from what we've seen, you're more than capable."

I nodded, appreciating their honesty. "Thanks."

Lyra clapped her hands, her excitement palpable. "This is going to be so much fun! Come on, we'll show you around."

Kael nodded, a hint of a smile on his lips. "Yeah, let's get you settled in. There's a lot to see and learn."

Chapter 439 100.4 - Watchers of Arcane

As Kael and Lyra led me through the sprawling facility, showing me various training areas, research labs, and communal spaces, I couldn't help but think about why Reina seemed to be the one who recommended me.

When she first talked about the organization, she hadn't mentioned anything about finding me herself.

'It doesn't add up,' I thought. 'There's someone else behind the scenes, someone whose influence brought me here.'

I watched as Lyra pointed out the cafeteria, where recruits were eating meals prepared by specialized chefs.

Kael explained the different training regimens and the importance of honing our skills. They seemed genuinely enthusiastic about helping me get settled, but I couldn't shake the feeling that this was all another test.

'By making it seem like Reina was the one who recommended me, they're trying to see how I navigate through other recruits' views,' I speculated. 'If Reina's name carries such weight, it would make sense to use her as a proxy.'

I glanced at Kael and Lyra, who were engrossed in explaining the advanced combat simulations. They seemed earnest, but in a place like this, it was important to stay cautious.

'The likelihood of that certain someone's name being too much is also high,' I mused. 'If it were revealed that their involvement, it could draw too much attention and possibly antagonize others.'

As we continued our tour, I made sure to ask questions and show interest in the facility. "So, how are the training simulations different from what we do at the academy?" I asked Kael.

"Academy.....Right, you are from the academy. I forgot." He had a look of wondering on his head. But his reaction also gave away some information.

'It seems the cadets here are informed about each other, or is it just me? Or maybe there is a chance that those who are affiliated with something in the outside world may have viewed differently.'

Thinking that, I replied.

"Yes, Arcadia Hunter Academy."

"Hmm....." At first, he was thoughtful but then shook his head.

He smiled, clearly pleased with the question. "They're much more advanced. We use a combination of magic and technology to create realistic combat scenarios. You'll face opponents with a variety of abilities, forcing you to adapt and strategize in real-time."

"Seems like the textbook answer to me," I replied, trying to get something more.

'But, considering this place has basically a lot of information about the real world, there is a high chance that it is also used.....Maybe....'

Kael chuckled. "Fair point."

Lyra, always eager to contribute, quickly jumped in. "This place is filled with information from all over the world, different from your measly academy. There are countless different opponents you can face here, and they're not just monsters. The technology we use to create simulations might not be that different from the academy, except for one key thing."

She paused, tapping her head as if trying to remember the next part.

"The amounts of data used are a lot more, making it a lot more similar to the real thing," I finished for her.

Lyra's eyes lit up, and she nodded enthusiastically. "Exactly! That's what Miss Hellen said."

"Miss Hellen?" I asked, curiosity piqued.

Kael nodded. "She oversees the training of young recruits here. She's one of the best. You'll meet her soon enough."

"Great," I replied, noting the importance of getting on Miss Hellen's good side.

Kael led us into a training room, where recruits were sparring in pairs, using a mix of magic and physical combat. "See, this is what I mean," he said, pointing to a pair engaged in a fierce duel. "The level of realism here is unmatched."

Lyra added, "And the opponents you face in simulations are modeled after real threats. You'll encounter enemy combatants, rogue hunters, and even scenarios based on historical battles."

"Sounds intense," I said, genuinely impressed. After all, the number of things that can be done here and the implications of this were so great that I couldn't help but imagine things.

'Interesting....'

"It is," Kael confirmed. "But that's what makes it effective. You're not just training; you're preparing for real-world situations."

As we continued our tour, I couldn't help but feel a growing sense of anticipation. This place was a treasure trove of knowledge and training opportunities, maybe even more than the academy.

'Hmm.....From the looks of it, the simulation part may be a bit better than the academy, but for other things, especially for the guidance part....They are lacking....It makes sense; the academy instructors are all high-ranking Hunters. Even then, why did they admit me to the academy? Couldn't they simply keep me here? Is it just for connections? But for such a thing, weren't there any better candidates? I am not particularly the best person for such things....

Or do they know something that I don't? Something about future knowledge? Possible, but still, this is just too.....Hard to confirm, at least.' After showing me the training areas, we made our way to the cafeteria.

"At this point, it will be a little deserted since it is pretty late. Still, you can get any meal at any time of the day, as this place is always open." The aroma of various dishes filled the air, making my stomach growl. Despite the late hour, a few recruits and staff members were still scattered around, enjoying their meals.

Kael and Lyra led me to the food stations, where a variety of options were available. "You can order anything you like," Kael said. "The chefs here are amazing."

Lyra added, "But let's make it interesting. How about we all try something special?"

I nodded, curious about what they had in mind. "Sure, what do you suggest?"

Lyra's eyes twinkled with mischief. "How about the Spicy Inferno Special? It's a dish that's known for its intense heat. Only a few can handle it."

I could see through their playful attempt to prank me, but I decided to play along. Things like these were better for easing the atmosphere and getting closer to other people, after all.

"Sounds good to me. Let's try it."

Kael grinned, clearly pleased. "Alright, three Spicy Inferno Specials, please."

The chef behind the counter raised an eyebrow but nodded, quickly preparing our order. We found a table and sat down, waiting for the food to arrive.

When the dishes were brought to our table, the fiery aroma was almost overwhelming. The vibrant red sauce practically radiated heat, and I could see small peppers floating in the dish. It was clear they had ordered it with an extra kick.

"Here we go," Lyra said, a hint of anticipation in her voice. "Bon appétit!"

I took a bite, feeling the intense heat immediately.

'Indeed, it is not normal.'

The spice was potent, but there was something these two had mistaken. Most of the time, the monster meats and the meats filled with attributes are as hurting as these ones. Since most monster meats are tempered by being exposed to mana for a long time, they tend to develop special traits.

I ordered a lot of different food in the academy just to increase the recovery of my body and maximize my training. Naturally, ordering such foods while prioritizing efficiency and effectiveness has its own disadvantages.

Most of the food I had ordered would either burn my mouth, freeze it to death, make it paralyzed and convulse, or many other things.

Therefore, I can easily say that my mouth has become accustomed to many status effects, which is the reason why I remained unfazed, continuing to eat as if it were a regular meal.

Kael and Lyra watched closely, expecting a reaction. After a few moments, Lyra couldn't contain her curiosity. "So, how is it?" she asked, her eyes wide.

I looked up, keeping my expression neutral. "It's pretty good. Not too spicy."

Lyra blinked in surprise. "Really?"

I nodded, continuing to eat calmly. "Yes, it's fine. I've had spicier."

Kael exchanged a glance with Lyra, clearly impressed. "Wow, you're tougher than you look."

"Maybe."

"Sigh....."

We continued our meal, and the atmosphere was relaxed and friendly. It seemed like a good start in this place, it seemed.

After finishing our meal, Kael and Lyra led me to the sleeping quarters. The corridors we walked through were sleek and modern, the walls adorned with minimalistic designs that exuded a sense of calm and order.

"We're almost there," Kael said, gesturing ahead. "You'll find the dorms quite comfortable."

We arrived at a door with a keypad. Kael scanned his watch, and the door slid open with a soft hiss, revealing a small common area. The room was tastefully furnished with modern, minimalist decor.

A compact kitchen was tucked into one corner, complete with a sleek countertop and high-tech appliances. In the center of the room, a comfortable-looking sofa and a low table provided a cozy space for relaxing.

"This is our common area," Lyra explained. "It's where we can hang out, eat, or just relax when we're not training."

She pointed to three doors leading off from the common area. "Each of these leads to our individual rooms. Yours is the one on the right."

I nodded, appreciating the thoughtful design. "It looks great. Thanks for showing me around."

Kael smiled. "No problem. Let's check out your room."

I walked to the door on the right and opened it, stepping into my personal quarters. The room was minimalist and futuristic, with sleek lines and a monochromatic color scheme. A bed was neatly made against one wall, and a small desk with a built-in computer terminal occupied another corner. There was a door leading to a private bathroom, complete with a shower and toilet.

Lyra peered into the room, nodding approvingly. "Looks like you've got everything you need. The rooms are designed to be functional and comfortable. For a guy, at least."

"Yours is not much different."

"Humph. I am not like the rest of you. I am sm-"

"Cough.....She is just into a new series these days; please don't mind her."

"It is fine.

I set my bag down on the bed, taking in the details. The simplicity of the room was refreshing and free from unnecessary clutter. It was clear that the focus here was on efficiency and practicality.

Kael added, "If you need anything, just let us know. We will be happy to help."

"I understand."

"Then, have a good night. I am sure you have a lot to think about."

"Thank you.....And, Goodnight."

–WOOSH! As the two left the room, I waved my hand. And the door slid down.

'As expected, it works like this.'

I thought about the place while placing the layout on the map, and I formed it in my head.

As I lay down on the bed, I stared at the ceiling, my mind racing with thoughts and plans. The room was silent, save for the faint hum of the ventilation system.

It was the perfect environment to reflect on the day and strategize for the future.

'The Watchers of Arcane...'

I had to be careful about how much I revealed to them. While their resources and knowledge were invaluable, I couldn't afford to show all my cards just yet. Trust needed to be built gradually.

I thought about what they knew about me so far. They were aware of my perceptive abilities and had some idea of my combat skills from the brief encounter with Kael and Lyra, as well as Reina's observations from my duels.

They might suspect more, but they didn't know everything.

'What should I keep hidden?'

I mentally listed my abilities, weighing the pros and cons of revealing each one.

[Shadowborne]

This ability was tied to demonic energy. Given the nature of the Watchers of Arcane, it was too dangerous to reveal this now. They might see it as a threat or, worse, a reason to distrust me. I needed to keep this one under wraps until I gained enough trust and had a better understanding of their true intentions. [Celestalith]

This weapon was unique, and revealing it could attract unwanted attention. The green-colored mana and purple-colored mana it produced were distinctive. While I wouldn't hide the fact that I could use different types of mana, the specifics of [Celestalith] were better kept secret for now. [Weapon Master] Class

This was an asset I could leverage. The Watchers of Arcane had many experts, and learning from them could significantly enhance my skills. Revealing this class would show my willingness to improve and integrate into their training system. It was a strategic move that could pay off in the long run.

'Alright, that's decided.'

I needed to find a balance between revealing enough to be seen as an asset and keeping enough hidden to maintain an advantage.

Trust was a two-way street, and while I was willing to earn theirs, I couldn't be reckless.

After all, the time I had was already limited; thus, even if I had revealed everything, not all of it could be improved as rapidly as it seemed.

As I lay there, the exhaustion of the day finally caught up with me. My eyelids grew heavy, and despite the flurry of thoughts, I felt myself drifting off to sleep. Tomorrow would be another step in this journey, and I needed to be ready.

'For now, rest...'

With that final thought, I allowed myself to succumb to the pull of sleep, the quiet hum of the room lulling me into a deep, dreamless slumber.

Chapter 440 100.5 - Watchers of Arcane

The soft, ambient light of the room slowly increased in intensity, simulating the break of dawn. My eyes flickered open, instantly alert. The room's clock read 4:00 A.M., the perfect time to start my day.

I had always preferred the early hours for training, finding the solitude and silence ideal for focusing my mind and honing my skills.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and stood, stretching out the stiffness from the night's rest. My muscles responded with a familiar ache, a reminder of the previous day's activities.

After a quick shower, I dressed in my training gear: a simple, dark-colored outfit designed for ease of movement and durability.

It was the outfit that was really similar to the one that the academy gave and was also the reason why I was training here before the

Stepping out into the common area, I noticed the doors to Kael's and Lyra's rooms were still closed.

They were likely still asleep, as most people didn't share my habit of waking before dawn. I moved quietly without giving any sign.

The corridors were empty, and the facility was enveloped in a tranquil stillness.

The soft hum of machinery was the only sound, creating a rhythmic backdrop to my thoughts. I navigated my way to the training area, using the map on my watch to guide me.

Upon arriving, I found the expansive training hall deserted, just as I expected. Various sections were designated for different types of training: combat, strategy, magic, and more. I made my way to the combat section, where a variety of weapons and training dummies awaited.

'Time to get to work.'

I started with a series of stretches and warm-up exercises, loosening my muscles and preparing my body for the intense session ahead. Then, I walked to the combat place.

The machine was pretty much the same.

'It is sad that PhantomGlide Dummy is not here, but that is fine.'

One of the finest enemies that I had faced so far was that dummy, as it basically stat-checked me every time.

Whenever I did something, it did it faster and stronger, and it was always a challenge.

After finishing my warm-up exercises, I walked to the combat simulation room. The sleek, futuristic door slid open with a soft hiss, revealing a spacious area filled with advanced training equipment. The room was lined with various sensors and devices designed to analyze and respond to the user's abilities.

'Time to see what this place has to offer.'

I stepped inside, approaching the central console. A holographic display flickered to life, greeting me with a series of options and instructions. Normally, I would be hesitant to reveal my stats, but given my decision to use this opportunity to its fullest, I decided to let the system analyze me.

The console's voice, smooth and mechanical, echoed in the room. "Please stand still for a full analysis."

I positioned myself on the marked spot, feeling a slight hum as the sensors activated. A series of lights scanned my body, and I could sense the technology working, gathering data on my physical and magical capabilities.

After a few moments, the console beeped, signaling the completion of the scan. "Analysis complete. Strength of the user recorded."

The holographic display now showed a detailed breakdown of my stats, though it didn't specify the exact numbers publicly. It was a thorough evaluation, assessing my physical strength, agility, magical capacity, and combat proficiency.

"Please select your desired difficulty level," the console prompted.

Since I didn't want to overexert myself before the evaluations, I opted for a moderate challenge. "Default difficulty."

Also, I had something to check.

"Default difficulty selected. Generating opponent."

The room shifted as holographic projectors activated, creating a lifelike opponent in the center. The opponent materialized, taking the form of a well-built warrior with a sword.

It was a standard combatant designed to test my skills without pushing me to the limit.

'This should be good enough.'

The opponent moved with fluid grace, its eyes locking onto mine. I readied myself, adopting a combat stance and gripping my sword.

Indeed.

The sword.

I decided to develop my sword a little bit before returning to the academy.

While I was training against Irina, I realized something.

While I had been trying to develop the weapons for my Celestialith and my strengths, I had overlooked one thing.

'My class is limitless. And, to be able to achieve higher strength, it will be crucial for me to know more and more weapons.'

This was important, as my [Lethal Arsenal Ascendancy] combat art's progress had been halted. That was why a different approach was needed, and I decided to test these.

Also, by the end of this break, I need to finish that. The opportunity for that will come soon.

At the end of the day, I need to prove my worth here so that I will not be confined here all the time under the guise of training.

Which is another reason why I will not hold back here.

SWOOSH! Just as I was thinking about myself, suddenly, the opponent before me moved at a fluid and fast pace.

The sword training had started.

A woman walked through the central district, her movements precise and deliberate. The tight bodysuit uniform clung to her form, accentuating her well-trained physique.

Her posture was cold and rigid, a testament to her disciplined nature and the authority she wielded.

Dakota Hellen.

She was the supervisor for the trainees, and today, she was here to oversee the examination location before the tests began.

As she moved, the ambient light of the early morning glinted off the sleek material of her uniform. Her hips swayed subtly with each step, a graceful yet powerful stride that spoke of her confidence and capability.

Her face was set in a stern expression, eyes sharp and vigilant, taking in every detail of her surroundings.

The corridors of the facility were empty, the silence broken only by the soft hum of the machinery.

This was something that she was accustomed to. After all those years of staying on the frontlines, protecting the border, she liked how calm it was.

Dakota appreciated this tranquility, knowing it would soon be replaced by the bustle of trainees preparing for their examinations.

She made her way to the training area, her senses keenly attuned to the environment.

Approaching the training hall, she paused. Her sharp intuition told her something was amiss. Focusing, she sensed a presence within the expansive room. Someone was already there, engaged in a rigorous training session.

'Interesting. Someone is here knowing that an examination would be happening today.'

Curious and slightly perturbed by the early intrusion, Dakota quickened her pace, her steps barely making a sound on the polished floor.

'Who would it be, this cheeky trainee?' She was amused. Not many bold trainees like these were here.

The doors to the training hall slid open silently at her approach, and she stepped inside. Her eyes quickly scanned the area, zeroing in on the combat section where a lone figure was engaged in a simulated battle.

Dakota hadn't recognized the trainee. The face was unfamiliar. Even though the trainee was moving at a fast pace, she was still able to discern the facial features.

'Purple eyes, delicate nose with slightly revealed bone cheeks. Purple eyes, was there such a trainee?'

She thought, observing the fight.

The stance and the fluidity of his movements were impressive, but it was a bit lacking. From a trained eye like herself, she could easily see what he was lacking.

'A pretty impressive body control.....But, the sword movements are not on the same level.'

This could be observed by how the trainee had evaded the attacks of his opponent. Even though it is a hologram, with the special density of the data here, the enemies could all be mistaken for real people.

They acted as if they were organic, just like how they fought.

'Interesting,' she thought. 'That's the Federal Swordplay.'

The Federal Swordplay was a style used primarily by the military, known for its efficiency and practicality. It was rare to see it practiced outside of military academies and even rarer in a civilian context. This trainee's presence and skill suggested he might be from a Hunter Academy, a place where young, talented fighters were trained for various missions.

'Could he be the new trainee scheduled to arrive this week?' she pondered. Her curiosity piqued, Dakota reached into a pocket on her bodysuit and pulled out a small, sleek tablet. With a few taps, she accessed the file sent to her earlier.

The profile of the new trainee appeared on the screen, and Dakota's eyes narrowed as she compared the face in the file to the one before her.

Name: Astron Natusalune

Academy: Arcadia Hunter Academy

Rank: 1071

Weapons Specialization: Dagger and Bow

Potential: A

Dakota's eyes flicked between the trainee in the room and the details on the screen. His movements with the sword were rigid, a clear indication that it wasn't his primary weapon. This discrepancy made sense now. He was skilled with daggers and bows, not swords.

'So, it's him,' she thought, narrowing her eyes. 'He's already training hard before his official examination. That's dedication.'

She watched a few more moments as Astron continued his session, assessing his technique. Despite the rigidity, she could see the potential. His evasion skills were top-notch, likely honed through extensive training with more familiar weapons.

'He's adaptable,' Dakota mused. 'And willing to push himself out of his comfort zone.'

As the simulated opponent lunged at Astron, he parried the blow with a swift, precise movement, then followed up with a counterattack that, while not perfect, showed promise. Dakota decided it was time to introduce herself.

With measured steps, she approached the combat section, her presence commanding attention. The holographic opponent paused mid-strike, responding to her silent command to halt.

Astron turned to face her, his eyes alert and focused. He wiped the sweat from his brow, recognizing the authority in her stance.

"Good morning, trainee," Dakota said, her tone firm but not unkind. "You're up early."

"Good morning, ma'am," Astron replied, slightly out of breath. But then, his eyes seized her body at a quick speed.

'Quick eyes. Not bad.'

If not for her perceptiveness that she had honed after receiving such gazes countless times, she would have missed it.

'And it was not off of a desire but to check my identity.'

She could also see if a gaze contained carnal desire or not, as this was one of the goals of the suit. There was no need to hide it, as she liked getting such gazes.

It made her feel like a woman, but that is not the main topic right now.

"Astron Natusalune, correct?" Dakota asked, her eyes steady on him.

He nodded, "Yes, ma'am."

Dakota sized him up from top to bottom, taking in his stance, his build, and the determined look in his eyes. "You're the one Reina recommended, huh?"

Astron nodded again, "Yes, ma'am."

"You've got potential," she acknowledged. "But your main weapons seem to be daggers and bows. Why were you using a sword there?"

"My main weapons are indeed daggers and bows," Astron confirmed. "But the reason I was using a sword is because of my class."

"Your class?" Dakota asked, her interest piqued.

"It's because I am a [Weapon Master]," Astron explained.

Dakota's eyes widened slightly, but she quickly controlled her expression. Inwardly, she thought, 'This kid... is really interesting.'

She found a prospect she was interested in in a while...