

H. Academy 61

Chapter 61 Chapter 16.4 - Nexoria City Trip

"Ah...You finally revealed yourself."

The moment the demon contractor made his appearance, Kaya's eyes narrowed.

"It seems the information we got was not wrong." Following his words, it was something Kaya would never expect.

'Information?' She asked herself. 'There is a rat.' She concluded. But, it was not the important thing right now.

The man before her was strong. She could feel it. She had no time to think about what was happening here or how did he know about where she would be.

She needed to deal with the man first.

"Cat bit your tongue? Why are you not answering?" The demon contractor asked, looking at her with a grin. An Aura of impotence was being released from him, but he was not the only problem she had.

A monster was beside him on a leash, and a bunch of others were already terrorizing the place. It was evident that this was a coordinated attack, both from monsters and Demon Contractors.

"I have no words to answer heretics like you, who sold their soul." Finally, she opened her mouth as she looked at the man. "People like you are a disgrace to our society." As she said, she touched her licensed bracelet and took her weapon from there. It was a long spear, a spear with an ominous black-looking aura.

The demon contractor let out a mocking chuckle. "Oh, how graceful your words are, Kaya Hartley. I must admit, I'm quite excited to see you in action after all this time. Your reputation precedes you, after all. I wonder where your values will take you at the end of the road."

His grin widened, revealing teeth that seemed just a touch too sharp.

Kaya's grip tightened around her weapon, a sense of focus and determination settling over her. Her eyes met the demon contractor's, her own expression unyielding.

And then, as if the world had shifted, the museum became an arena of conflict. The clash of wills and strength reverberated through the air, the battle lines drawn between hunter and demon contractor.

The demon contractor seemed to watch for some reason, but she knew. The more time passed, the more people would die. She could see the security of the museum was already dealt with, certainly something that was planned. She was also sure that the information would not be leaked outside.

'I need to finish this fast.' She concluded. 'Jane is here as well.' She knew right now she was the only one that could defend herself and Jane, so she just did what she needed to do.

SWOOSH

She lunged towards the man with her spear in her hands. The spear was illuminated with a deep crimson mana, its aura pulsating with her determination and mana control.

CLANK

The demon contractor met her attack head-on, his movements fluid and precise. He brandished a wicked-looking sword, its blade infused with a dark energy that seemed to suck in the surrounding light.

With a deft swing, he deflected the thrust of her spear, their weapons clashing with a resounding clash.

CLANK CLANK

The demon contractor met her attack head-on, his movements fluid and eerily graceful. He wielded a sinister sword, its blade infused with a malevolent energy that seemed to swallow the surrounding light.

With an expert swing, he deflected her spear's thrust, the impact echoing in a resounding clash.

However, both she and the demon contractor could feel the difference in their power.

"Even after all this time, it seems I am far behind you." The Demon Contractor mumbled, but Kaya felt something familiar.

The man was someone she felt like she knew, but at the same time, since his face was covered, she had no idea who he was. His voice was also blurry, as if he was having a hard time breathing.

CLANK CLANK

Their engagement was a ballet of magic and steel. Kaya's spear gleamed with her mana, every strike calculated and precise. Her movements were an embodiment of her training and skill.

In contrast, the demon contractor executed his strikes with a lethal goal. His sword sliced through the air, each movement accompanied by demonic energy that tainted the atmosphere.

The black energy was making it hard to breathe, and Kaya needed to keep it under control.

'This heretic. He is trying to suck the life force of the people nearby.'

Because she could see his intentions, she knew she couldn't let him do as he pleased.

While locked in combat with the demon contractor, Kaya kept one eye on the monstrous creature at his side.

The creature's snarls and growls were eerie background music to their duel, a reminder of the two-pronged threat she faced.

'I need to deal with this creature first.' She thought. The monster was about to attack, as she could see from his muscles.

Even for her, fighting with a human and a monster at the same time would be hard. It would disclose the difference in power between her and the demon contractor, and she didn't want that.

In a burst of determination, Kaya spun, her spear arcing toward the monster. She aimed to eliminate the creature swiftly, aware that splitting her attention was risky.

'The House of Hartley. First Move. Spinning Hell.'

As she took her position, she attacked the monster, immediately disappearing from where she was.

SWISH

Her spear cut through the air, aiming for the creature's exposed flank.

SWOSH

But the demon contractor was no idle observer.

"Not on my watch!"

He seized the opportunity created by her diversion, lunging with his own swift strike, his sword a malevolent extension of his will.

Kaya's instincts kicked in, a surge of mana enhancing her reflexes. She shifted, barely avoiding the demon contractor's blade, the movement seamless and graceful. Yet, her evasion compromised her initial strike on the monster.

BOOM

The demon contractor's strike impacted the ground, sending shockwaves through the surroundings, and destroying the safeguard mechanism put in by the museum management.

PAT CREAK PAT CREAK PAT CREAK

One by one, the protective glasses that surrounded the exhibits broke as the shockwave passed through them. It was a strike with such force.

Kaya had evaded the worst, but the force of the strike threw her out of balance momentarily.

Without hesitation, she regained her stance, focusing anew on the battle at hand. She was not someone that would fall down from one single clash after all.

SWOOSH

Then, she lunged at the Demon Contractor once again, aiming at his abdomen.

CLANK

"I knew you would do that." the demon contractor remarked with a taunting grin. His voice carried an air of familiarity that sent a chill down Kaya's spine. But there was no time for contemplation. She had to remain focused on the fight.

GROWL

Before she could react further, a growl from the side caught her attention. The monstrous creature wounded but far from defeated, seized the opportunity presented by her distraction.

SWOOSH

With a burst of speed that belied its size, the creature lunged at Kaya once more, its maw gaping open.

CLANK

Kaya's instincts kicked in again, and her reflexes honed to perfection. She twisted her body in mid-motion, her spear slashing upward to intercept the creature's attack.

The clash was fierce, the creature's jaws mere inches from her face as she halted its advance.

"Tch."

A snarl of effort crossed Kaya's lips as she held the creature at bay, her strength matched by the sheer determination in her gaze. The creature's acidic breath wafted over her, a mixture of saliva and dark energy.

CRACK

The ground under her feet cracked because, for a moment that felt like an eternity, the two adversaries remained locked in a battle of strength and will. Kaya's muscles strained under pressure, her expression unwavering even as sweat trickled down her brow.

SWOOSH

With a final surge of effort, Kaya summoned her mana, infusing it into her spear. The weapon glowed with renewed energy, and with a powerful thrust, she managed to force the creature back.

'Now is the time!'

THUD

It stumbled, its momentum broken. Kaya didn't waste a moment. With a fluid motion, she lunged forward once again, her spear aimed at the creature's heart.

The creature roared, a mixture of pain and fury, as it sought to evade her strike. However, it was sure that it was not going to be able to evade the strike. His body was tattered after the effects of Kaya's mana; it was her special and precise way of using it, as she directly sent the momentum of the attack to the creature's wrists.

SWOOSH

However, the demon contractor once again appeared before her as if to mock her for her attack. It was like he knew exactly her course of action.

But that was something Kaya also knew right now.

'I knew it.'

As the demon contractor appeared before her with green, she could see the sword approaching her face.

The man's face was saying the game was over, but Kaya's movements were swift and precise.

"Heh."

SWOOSH

With a confident smirk, she sidestepped the demon contractor's attack with an agility that came from her superior physical prowess. The blade whizzed past her, missing its target.

STAB

With her evasive maneuver executed flawlessly, Kaya seized the opportunity.

"Kurghk-!"

Her spear found its mark, piercing the man's side with a sickening squelch. The man's scream turned into a pained howl, its form writhing in agony.

SPURT

Blood spurted from the mouth of the man.

As she dissected her weapon from where she stabbed the man, she could see the faint lingering mana traces left on the wound.

It was there to make sure that the man would heal at a lower speed, a technique she developed after confronting a lot of demon contractors.

She knew they tend to regenerate rapidly, so she countered it with her own technique.

She raised her spear once again, aiming to attack the man who was spurting blood from

ROOOAR!

However, the creature did not stay idle as it saw the commanding person was injured. The seal on his neck was activated, and immediately it lunged at Kaya with a loud roar.

SWOOSH

The monster's face filled with saliva right before her eyes.

STAB

However, after that decisive moment where she had dealt with the demon contractor, the monster was now a piece of cake for her that she could eat as an appetizer after a good meal.

Her decisive and fast spear found its mark as she stabbed the monster from the inside of its mouth, piercing it from the back of its throat and making the spear appear from its behind.

SPURT

Kaya's reaction was as swift as it was deadly. Her spear lashed out with practiced precision, aiming for the creature's weak point. In a matter of moments, her weapon found its mark, skewering the creature from the inside of its mouth, emerging triumphantly from its rear.

SPURT

Blood sprayed from the wound, the creature's movements growing weaker with each passing second.

THUD

As Kaya retracted her spear, the creature collapsed to the ground, defeated at last.

Kaya's eyes blazed with seriousness and pride as she wrenched her spear free, the dark blood of the creature staining the weapon's blade.

Her cold gaze swept over the battlefield, lingering on the defeated demon contractor and the fallen monster. Destruction surrounded her, but she remained resolute, unfazed by the chaos.

This scene was a familiar one for Kaya – a manifestation of steps she had taken, the life she had lived so far. It was a life filled with the blood of countless monsters and the exploration of countless dungeons.

It was a life filled with destruction from another perspective.

"Hahahahahahahaha....."

At that moment, laughter could be heard.

The Demon Contractor, who was lying on the ground with his injury still there, could be seen. His wound was not regenerating, but the demon contractor rather had a crazed smile on his face.

"After all, you are also a monster inside." He spoke, looking at Kaya.

'What is this guy saying?' She thought to herself. She didn't understand what his point was.

"You are wondering what I am saying right now, aren't you? Thinking that I am talking nonsense."

The smirk on his face widened.

"In the heat of the battle, you have already forgotten whom you came here with. Even though it is your own daughter."

The words struck like a physical blow, and Kaya's heart pounded in her chest. She spun around, dread tightening her chest, only to be met with a horrifying sight.

"No."

Before her, another demon contractor held her daughter, Jane, her small form squirming in his grip. A cloth gag muffled her cries, her eyes wide with fear.

"No. JANE!"

Her eyes were crying, and it was filled with fear. Kaya could see her daughter's struggle as she squirmed under the man's touch.

"Mmmmmffffff.....Mmmmmmmfffffffff..."

The muffled sounds of her supposed screams entered her ears as Kaya felt the world freeze.

It was such a weak presence that she had missed in the heat of the battle.

No, it wasn't that she missed.

It was simply that she ignored it, thinking it couldn't even damage her anyway. It was a subconscious action that she had made in the midst of the battle.

It was an action that stemmed from her thrill.

An unbearable wave of guilt crashed over her as she comprehended the danger her daughter was in.

"No. JANE!"

Kaya's voice cracked with anguish as her eyes filled with unshed tears. She reached out as if to touch her daughter, but the distance between them felt impossibly vast.

"Now, say goodbye to your daughter, you hypocrite. Maybe then you can feel how I felt. Though, I'm not sure you can even feel anything," the demon contractor taunted, his words like venom.

Desperation clawed at Kaya's heart, every fiber of her being screaming to save her daughter.

The man's dagger was drawing closer to Jane's neck, a hair's breadth away from ending her life.

'NO!'

BAM!

A gunshot shattered the air, the sound echoing through the museum like thunder. In the blink of an eye, the man holding Jane was struck, his skull pierced by a bullet.

SPURT

Blood erupted from the wound, staining Jane's small form in a horrifying hue of crimson.

THUD

And, the man crumpled to the ground, releasing Jane from his grip as he fell.

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SPURT

As the blood erupted from the wound, staining Jane's small form in a horrifying hue of crimson color, the man crumpled to the ground, releasing Jane from his grip.

THUD

The world seemed to hold its breath for a moment, and everyone was frozen in shock at the sudden turn of events.

Kaya, who was looking at what happened with her eyes wide open, was the first one to regain her composure.

"JANE!"

Kaya's heart raced, her chest heaving as she took in the sight before her. Jane stood there, tears streaming down her face, trembling but alive. Kaya's legs moved before her mind fully comprehended, carrying her to her daughter's side in an instant.

Kneeling down, Kaya gathered Jane into her arms, holding her tightly as if she would never let go. Tears streamed down her own face as relief flooded her, her body trembling with the release of pent-up fear.

"Jane, oh, my dear Jane," Kaya's voice trembled with a mix of emotions as she whispered soothingly into her daughter's hair. "You're safe now; you're safe."

"WAAAAAAAAA!"

Jane's sobs were wrenching, her small form shaking with the intensity of her fear and the overwhelming rush of relief. She clung to her mother as if her life depended on it, burying her face in Kaya's shoulder.

"Mother, I was so scared....It was so scary....WAAAAAAAA!"

Kaya rocked her gently, her hand moving in soothing circles on Jane's back. She held her daughter as if she could shield her from all the pain in the world.

"It's all right, sweetheart," Kaya's voice was a balm, a gentle melody meant to calm the storm in Jane's heart. "You're okay. You're here with me now."

However, as Kaya soothed her daughter, her eyes wandered around to see who was the one that fired the gunshot.

There her eyes landed on a young boy the age of her niece.

His face was covered with a hood, but his black hair could be seen from the tips of his hood. The presence he was giving was someone normal, so Kaya immediately disregarded the idea that it could be him.

However, just as she was about to turn her attention to another place, suddenly, her hazel eyes met with the boy's purple eyes.

Eyes that were indifferent, like a person who lost everything.

'Huh?' Kaya asked herself. Those eyes felt familiar for some reason, and then she remembered.

It looks like the eyes of that time.

However, right now, Kaya had no time to ponder about whose eyes were those. She looked around to see the assailant, but she couldn't find it.

'He might be here.' She thought.

It was an unknown assailant; even she hadn't sensed. Thus she needed to be careful.

She didn't want to risk her daughter anymore. Turning her attention to her daughter, she kept soothing her.

Jane's cries gradually subsided into sniffles, her small body gradually relaxing in her mother's embrace. She pulled back slightly, her teary eyes looking up at Kaya.

"M-mom," her voice trembled, a mixture of fear and relief still evident in her gaze. "I-I thought I was... I thought..."

Kaya's heart ached at the vulnerability in Jane's voice. She cupped her daughter's face in her hands, her own tears mingling with Jane's.

"You're strong, Jane. So strong," Kaya's voice was firm, carrying a fierce pride. "You never stopped fighting. And I was here; I was always going to protect you."

Jane nodded, her grip on Kaya's arms tightening as if she needed to anchor herself to this reality.

"I love you, Mom," Jane's voice was small, but it held a depth of emotion that words couldn't fully express.

Kaya's eyes shimmered with tears, her heart overflowing with love for her daughter. She leaned in, pressing a kiss to Jane's forehead.

"I love you more than anything, Jane. And I promise I'll always be here for you."

"...."

As she said those words, no reply came from the girl.

'No.' Kaya immediately looked at her daughter, thinking something had happened, but it was nothing much.

"Hmm.....Hmmm....."

The girl was simply sleeping in the arms of her mother. The small marks of her tears were still there as she was hiccupping from time to time.

Kaya slowly wiped her daughter's tears away, her heart a mixture of relief and concern.

"Tch!"

At that moment, a sharp sound of tongue clicking disrupted the atmosphere. Kaya's attention snapped to the injured demon contractor who had managed to stand.

The injured demon contractor slowly pushed himself up, his body trembling with the effort. Blood stained his clothes, but his eyes blazed with an unsettling intensity. Despite his wounds, there was an air of stubborn defiance about him as he struggled to his feet.

Kaya's instinct was to confront him, to make sure he posed no further threat. But the memory of the person that shot the gun made her hold back. The unknown assailant was still out there, possibly watching, waiting for the opportune moment. Her protective instincts flared anew, and she knew she couldn't risk Jane's safety.

As the demon contractor staggered upright, Kaya's grip on Jane tightened. Her hazel eyes locked onto the man, her expression a mix of wariness and determination. She was ready for anything.

"This is not the end," his voice, strained yet resolute, cut through the air like a blade.

His words hung there, pregnant with a threat she could feel in her bones. Kaya's heart clenched, a mixture of anger and fear bubbling within her. She wanted to demand answers, to make him pay for what he had done, but her priority was clear.

Watching the demon contractor closely, she noticed his gaze shifting, his eyes flickering as he assessed the situation. A knowing smile tugged at the corners of his lips, and Kaya understood – he was aware of her dilemma.

"You might want to focus on your next move, Kaya Hartley," he said, his voice dripping with a sinister satisfaction. "This little reunion has been enlightening. But remember, it's far from finished."

Kaya's jaw tightened, her nostrils flaring as she fought to rein in her anger. She knew she couldn't let him go unchecked, but the possibility of the assailant's next target being Jane lingered like a shadow in her mind. Her priority was Jane's safety, and confronting the demon contractor now could jeopardize that.

With a heavy sigh, Kaya made a decision. Her gaze never wavered from the demon contractor, but she didn't make a move toward him. Instead, she tightened her grip around Jane, her daughter still in her protective embrace.

"You're right," she said, her voice laced with a determination that matched his own. "This is far from over. But for now, I have more pressing matters to attend to."

The demon contractor's smile widened, his satisfaction evident. He knew he had struck a nerve, and he relished in it.

"As expected. You are nothing but a selfish bitch who only cares about those close to you."

His words echoed inside the museum, but Kaya just stood there, her expression not changing. Her arms were wrapped around her daughter as she just watched the demon contractor. She felt Jane's small form trembling in her embrace, a reminder of the stakes in this dangerous dance.

And following his words, the demon contractor started moving. Kaya's gaze turned in his direction, and there she could see a group of people, disoriented and injured but alive, trying to collect themselves amidst the chaos. They were the remaining witnesses to this nightmare, and they were vulnerable.

Kaya's cold gaze locked onto the group. She sensed the demon contractor's intention before it even happened.

"NO!"

"PLEASE MISS KAYA!"

"PLEASE HELP!"

Their pleas reached her ears, but she didn't move. She just stood there and watched.

"See....This is who you are, you selfish bitch. Even right now, you are abandoning all these people for the sake of your child, just like you always have done."

As his words sank, the demon contractor's hands reached out, his fingers emitting a sickly green light.

The moment his hands made contact with the wounded individuals, their expressions contorted in agony. Kaya's hazel eyes never once wavered as she watched.

Between the people she didn't know and her daughter, the one that came first was always going to be the little one.

The scene before her was a nightmare unfolding in slow motion. The demon contractor's power sapped the life force from the injured people, and his form rejuvenated as their vitality drained away.

"Never forget....The karma of your actions will come and find you in the future. I will make it so."

"Everyone will reap what they sow."

With those words, the demon contractor pushed the artifact in his hands as he disappeared from the place he was in, leaving a small trail of smoke from where he stood.

Kaya's expression remained cold, her heart never wavering with the weight of the choices she had made.

This was a cold world where strong ruled weak, and she had no regrets about choosing her child over the people she didn't know.

She was not a hero; neither was she a person who fought for justice. She was just a strong mother who wanted nothing but the best for her child.

TAK TAK TAK TAK TAK TAK

And then, at that moment, the sound of heavy footsteps echoed through the museum. A group of officials in uniform rushed into the scene, their expressions a mix of urgency and concern.

"Control everyone and check the situation first. If you spot anyone with critical condition, immediately perform the immediate aid."

They assessed the situation quickly, taking in the injured, the chaos, and the still form of Kaya with Jane in her arms.

One of the officials, a woman with an authoritative air, approached Kaya with a mix of sympathy and determination in her gaze. "Miss Kaya Evergreen, are you all right? What happened here?"

Kaya's gaze turned to her daughter, looking at her with a warm expression.

Seeing that she was sleeping soundly, she raised her head once again, her serious, businesslike expression on her face.

"The situation was dire when I arrived," Kaya began, her voice steady and composed. "Monsters and a demon contractor launched a coordinated attack on this location. The security was compromised swiftly, and chaos ensued."

She glanced around the scene, her eyes briefly resting on the injured and the destruction around them. "I took immediate action to protect my daughter and the people around me. I managed to create a barrier to shield Jane from danger. Once that was done, I coordinated with a few other capable individuals to help the wounded and guide them to safety."

Her words were succinct, focused on the facts and the actions taken rather than the emotions that had accompanied them. She kept her attention on the official, her demeanor professional as she recounted the events.

"We engaged the attackers and managed to repel them. However, the demon contractor used some sort of artifact to drain the life force of the injured individuals, replenishing his own strength. He made some remarks, disappeared, and left a trail of smoke behind."

As she spoke her words, Kaya never mentioned the choice she had made. She was already planning to make sure that whatever happened here would never reach the media or society.

"I will provide any necessary information and cooperate fully to ensure that these individuals are brought to justice." As she finished her words, she slowly hugged her child.

The official nodded, her gaze serious as she listened to Kaya's account. "Thank you, Miss Evergreen. Your efforts have undoubtedly saved lives today. We will give you the space you need for Miss Jane's treatment. If you wish to look for a quick check-up, you can visit our doctors. Even though they will be busy, I will make sure to arrange a space for Miss Jane."

As the official finished her words, she looked at the little girl in Kaya's arms.

"I am glad that nothing happened to little Hartley."

Hearing her words, Kaya nodded her head.

"Indeed. It is fortunate that nothing happened." Her head was filled with the unknown assailant. That person was the one who saved her daughter, but at the same time, he was a threat to her.

Someone that could escape from her senses, even while her whole senses were focused on her daughter and the other demon contractor.

'It seems I am still lacking in terms of my detection skills.' At this moment, Kaya swore to herself, trying to find the unknown assailant, not knowing he was right behind her.

However, seeing the official before her giving her this much attention, she naturally focused on her again.

"What is your name?" As she asked the name of the woman, she could see a faint smile creeping upon her face.

"My name is Kian Miller, the officer belonging to 15. Police Station of Nexoria."

"Understood, Miss Miller. I will make sure to remember your name."

SQUIRM

"Hmm....Mama...."

Seeing the little girl squirming in her arms, Kaya decided to leave this bloody place for good right now, knowing there was no need for her anymore.

Just like that, she left the place, making her way towards the outside....

Chapter 63 Chapter 16.6 - Nexoria City Trip

The moment Kaya Hartley made her appearance, I was already inside the shadows, observing the fight that was going to happen soon.

Since there was no way I could be any help, that was the best course of action.

However, the fight that was going to happen right before my eyes even made me watch in awe.

CLANK CLANK

Whenever their weapons clashed, the ripples and shockwaves that were sent to the environment were enough to make everyone back off.

There were even some who got their bones broken thanks to the aftermath of their fight.

It was such a bloody scene.

"Even after all this time, it seems I am far behind you."? I could hear the demon contractor's voice between their clashes, and it sounded familiar.

"This....Where did I hear this voice?" I asked myself. I felt like I should know the voice, but my memory didn't show any definite answer. It seems that was the same for Kaya as well since I could see a small twitch of her eyes, seemingly stemming from her annoyance.

The demon contractor was strong, and the monsters that were running rampant all around here were enough to show that they were prepared thoroughly.

As the demon contractor aimed to recover himself by sucking the life force of others, Kaya immediately noticed that and tried to intercept it.

But that was a bait that made her show an opening.

BOOM CRASH CRANK

With one strike of his full power, the demon contractor almost finished Kaya while destroying all of the protective glasses which was covering the exhibits.

The moment I saw the glasses crashing down, suddenly, an idea formed in my head.

'This is an opportunity.' It was an opportunity that would come once in a lifetime.

'Everyone's attention is on the fight, and someone broke the glass for me. The only thing that could affect me is cameras.'

Noticing that I looked around and, one by one, identified the location of the cameras.

'Every camera is already broken.'

There was no way a wave of the explosion that broke down the glasses that would protect the exhibits would not break a random camera after all.

The moment I saw that, taking advantage of that opportunity, I stealthily moved around the shadows and grabbed the <Moonstone> and some other materials around me, putting them on my bracelet.

It didn't take much time as I returned to my original position, where I could observe the fight.

The way Kaya Hartley used her mana and her weapon efficiently mesmerized me. Even the instructors of the academy would fall short against such a fierce woman in terms of fighting prowess.

I was trying to observe as best as I could, but even that was hard since the speed they were moving was something I could never properly perceive.

But one thing was sure, the fight was going in the favor of Kaya. She was overpowering the demon contractor and the monster with her skills.

'But, this doesn't make sense. With such thorough preparation, they would know the skills of Kaya Hartley. Something is wrong.' I thought.

'Their goal must be something else.'

And the moment I thought about that, my eyes fell on the girl who was hiding behind the wall, with her arms around her knees.

Jane Hartley, the dead niece of Ethan.

'No way.'

At that moment, I realized what their goal was. Everything made sense; at that moment, the last piece of the puzzle fell down.

This innocent kid, who was scared.

She was their goal.

THUMP

And at that moment, I felt a sudden thump in my heart as my heartbeat increased.

'A demon contractor is here.'

Following that, a man suddenly appeared behind the girl with a dagger in his hand.

"Humfff....Humfff...."

I could see the man grabbing the girl as she struggled to break down.

But there was no way she could; after all, she was just a little girl.

THUMP THUMP

My heartbeat increased, seeing the little girl who was looking at Kaya with teary eyes.

My eyes turned cold.

Hatred grew. The scene of that time enveloped me once again.

I could see myself watching everything unfold helplessly.

'Not again.' I swore to myself.

'I won't let you do as you please.'

Be it changing the storyline or changing this world.

I didn't care.

There was no way I would let someone that sold his soul to demons do as he pleased.

I am going to kill you.

I am going to erase you from this world.

Just like the demons, no one related to them will be spared.

TAK

I took my weapon from my bracelet and aimed at the guy.

I didn't know if the bullet could kill him normally, but at that moment, no thoughts other than anger and hatred were in my mind.

I instinctively imbued my mana on the weapon, and it took the color blue.

Die.

BANG!

And fired the gun.

"Please, can I have a talk with you?"

As I was about to leave the place, suddenly, the woman who talked with Kaya Hartley turned her attention to me.

"I would like to ask you a bunch of questions."

She approached me with a smile, but I could see a small scorn on her face.

'Smell of cigarette. It is not a high-quality brand. She is addicted to pure 'Glimmerleaf,' probably stemming from a childhood trauma. The lack of sleep is now showing her symptoms. She was probably on the watch from the night. She is single, lives alone, and has a bad diet. Eats heavily fat-oriented food and uses low-quality skincare and makeup. She has a cat in her home. No, two cats, one male, one female.'

Looking at the woman, I analyzed how she looked. Glimmerleaf was a drug that was developed to affect hunters who had a rather stronger body and mind. It has the effects of nicotine, and mostly addictive, and causes ADHD and many other negative effects.

"You can," I answered. Even if I refused here, she could just drag me down using her authority, and there was no need to make her suspicious of me.

I already got the unexpected harvest, so there is no need to make everything complicated.

The woman's expression remained polite, but I could sense an underlying edge to her demeanor. She gestured slightly, indicating that she wanted to move to a less crowded and quieter spot. We found a corner away from the chaos, and she turned her attention fully to me.

"Thank you for your cooperation," she began, her gaze steady. "I'm Inspector Miller, and I oversee cases involving demon contractors. I couldn't help but notice your presence during the events that unfolded here."

I inclined my head, acknowledging her introduction. "I'm just a witness," I said, my words carefully chosen. I had no intention of revealing too much about myself, especially considering my peculiar abilities.

Inspector Reyes studied me for a moment, her eyes sharp and assessing. "It's not often we have witnesses who can remain so calm during such chaotic situations." She spoke with scorn, clearly looking at me with a suspicious gaze.

"I am a cadet of Hunter Academy," I answered her gaze without losing my composure. This answer would be enough.

"You are an academy cadet? Please let me confirm it first. Do you have your identity with you?" As she asked me, I showed her my watch. The Arcadia Hunter Academy had the function of integrating one's ID card with their watch, and it was not something every academy had for some reason.

"Astron Natusalune. Cadet of Arcadia Hunter Academy." She read the information I had shown to her as she studied it for a second. "Arcadia Hunter Academy!" And then, the reaction that I was expecting came not long after.

"I see. If you are the cadet of that academy, it makes sense that you are able to calm yourself down. Then, I won't beat around the bush. Can you tell me what you saw here?" Her question was straightforward, but her gaze never left me. It was as if she was searching for something beyond my words, trying to gauge my reactions.

"I was here when everything had already started," I replied, keeping my tone even. "I saw the monsters and the demon contractor engaged in the attack. There was chaos, people fleeing, and then the confrontation between the woman you were talking to earlier and the demon contractor."

I left out any details that could reveal my unique abilities. It was important to appear as ordinary as possible. Since there was no way that I would say that I was the one that shot the gun, neither was I the one that grabbed the <Moonstone>.

"I see," Inspector Miller said, seemingly accepting my response. "Thank you for your cooperation."

She continued to study me, her gaze unrelenting. I could feel the weight of her suspicion, even though she didn't voice it explicitly. However, her next questions showed that she was digging deeper.

"Did you happen to witness any details that might be relevant?" she inquired, her tone casual yet focused. "Conversations, actions, or interactions that stood out to you?"

I paused, making myself seem like I was considering her question carefully. But in the end, I already knew about the words I was going to choose.

"I did overhear some snippets of conversation," I replied. "The demon contractor seemed to mock the woman, Kaya, for her priorities and actions. He mentioned something about karma and consequences." I answered. This answer would surely go into the ears of Kaya, and that woman will for sure silence me. But, she won't be easily able to touch the cadet of Arcadia Hunter Academy as an outsider, which will make her want to make a deal with me.

Inspector Miller's gaze remained fixed on me, and I couldn't help but feel like she was trying to read more from my expression than I was revealing. "Interesting," she mused. "And did you see if any of the attackers who aimed to grab the exhibits while the chaos was ensuing?" She asked.

I could see this question was one of those that was aimed at me, considering there were some materials I grabbed using my [Shadowborne] trait and the bracelet that couldn't be noticed.

I shook my head, maintaining an air of genuine ignorance. "No, I didn't notice anything like that. The situation was chaotic, and I was focused on ensuring my own safety." It was an answer that would satisfy the listeners who would analyze my tone from the recording.

Yes, recording. Right now, this woman is recording me, probably because of the introductions of Kaya Hartley.

She nodded as if considering my response; her lips pursed in thought. "And what about the gunshot that was fired? Did you witness that?"

This question was also aimed at me, but this time it was rather weaker. It seemed she didn't suspect that I was the one that fired the gunshot, and neither did Kaya.

After shooting the Demon Contractor, I quickly stashed the gun in my bracelet and stepped out of the shadows to reveal myself, which was an unconventional move for an attacker. Doing so allowed me to evade Kaya Hartley's heightened perception. She's not an ordinary person, and if she becomes suspicious of me as the shooter, it will pose a problem in the future.

I didn't hesitate even for a moment and answered. "I did hear a gunshot. But I couldn't identify where the gunshot came from even though I tried my best to. I thought my life would be in danger since an unknown assailant was lurking somewhere, but he was too skilled for my own."

Inspector Miller seemed to accept my answer, though her scrutiny didn't waver. "Thank you for your honesty," she said finally. "It's not often we encounter someone as composed as you in these situations."

I nodded in acknowledgment. "I've been trained to stay calm in tense situations. However, it was a pity that I was not any help." I answered, looking guilty. In fact, I was not.

She smiled back, though it didn't quite reach her eyes. "It's a valuable skill. Well, I won't take up any more of your time. If you remember or notice anything else that might be relevant to this case, please don't hesitate to contact me," she said, handing me a card with her contact details.

"Understood."

"We will send a request to Academy later if something relevant happens during the investigation. I would be very happy if you cooperate with us." As she spoke with a professional smile, she turned back.

But I still could see the small signs of doubt she was making. This woman was not that proficient when it came to hiding her feelings and thoughts about situations. But, in the end, nothing mattered about her suspicion; after all, they were going to be baseless.

"And, please wait for a second. We need to confirm that nothing from the museum is on you." As she said those words, she left.

Following that, a bunch of guys came and looked for spatial artifacts on me, and they found one, which was the one I put on for the sake of such things.

And after they confirmed that nothing was there, they left me alone.

Chapter 64 Chapter 16.7 - Nexoria City Trip

The moment I felt the place, I looked around to see what was happening around me.

No matter how planned they were, in order for help to arrive this late meant one simple thing.

'The monsters ran rampant.'

And the signs were evident.

SWOOSH CLANK

I could still see some Hunters fighting with monsters scattered around the city. It was evident that the scale of the monster attack was nothing but normal.

'I don't understand. How come such a thing never reached my ears?' I asked myself, seeing the hunters dealing with others. Since I didn't reveal that I had my weapon with me, I did not participate in the hunt.

But things were slightly different from what I thought.

'Even Kaya Hartley will have a hard time if she wants to hide what happened here.' It was an attack that was impossible to reach one's eyes, especially Ethan's.

'Either the game's contents have changed, or there is something I am missing.' I thought and racked my brain. But in the end, I couldn't come up with an answer aside from the Hartley family's power being higher than I expected.

SWOOSH BOOM BOOM

Suddenly I felt something hot around me.

No, saying around me was rather wrong. It was fire aimed at the monsters around.

"GET BACK! THIS LADY WILL HELP YOU!" It was an excited voice of a young girl whose hands were ignited with fire.

Her short, braided red hair fluttered as she moved in the middle of the battlefield, and her yellow eyes were burning like the sun.

SWOOSH BOOM SWOOSH BOOM

A group of monsters lunged at her from all sides, their snarls and roars a cacophony of chaos. But the girl met their attack head-on, her laughter ringing out like a battle cry. "Come on, you ugly creatures! Let's see who's the hottest in this fight!"

Her words were punctuated by bursts of flames, each strike calculated to take down her adversaries. The way she used mana was befitting of a mage I knew, and her personality shone through the battlefield.

As the monsters closed in, she twirled and spun, flames trailing in her wake like a fiery dance.

SWOOSH BOOM SWOOSH BOOM

The battle continued, each wave of her hand sending forth torrents of fire that incinerated the monsters in their path. Her laughter remained a constant, a testament to her enjoyment of the fight. "Burn, baby, burn!" she exclaimed, her enthusiasm infectious as she fought with an unwavering smile.

SWOOSH ROAR

Just as a monster lunged at her from behind, she molded the flames into intricate shapes, creating a wall of fire to shield herself from a particularly ferocious monster's attack.

With a confident grin, she quipped, "Keke...Did you think I would not notice? NOW BURN!"

SWOOSH BOOM

Her movements were a blur as she darted between monsters, her fire leaving trails of destruction in its wake.

And just like that, in a matter of seconds, all the monsters here were slaughtered, leaving none of them alive.

"Huff....It was hot..." As she raised her hand and swept her sweat away with a cool motion, she looked around. "But, it was for sure fun."

I could see the grin stemmed from her addiction to the thrill of the fight as she stepped on top of the corpses.

However, the aftermath of her fiery assault left its mark. The buildings and environment bore the scars of her magic, and the other hunters around her regarded her with squinting gazes. The destruction she had inadvertently caused was hard to ignore.

"HEY! Who are you?" A voice among the crowd broke through, drawing the attention of those around her. The onlookers were wary, their expressions mixed with curiosity and caution.

The reason was simple. She was the girl that came for help but did more damage to the properties in the process. That was something everyone here could do, but they didn't do it.

"Does it matter who I am? Besides, why are you asking me anyway? Didn't I just save you?" The girl answered with a scowl, clearly annoyed by the tone of the question.

'As expected. She is just a little brat.' I thought, looking at her banter. She was a little brat who liked to be the center of attention while doing. However, she wanted and not taking any responsibility for her actions.

Simple as that.

The hunter in charge was clearly unimpressed by her response; his arms crossed as he approached her. "Saving us doesn't give you a free pass to wreak havoc and cause destruction. We could have dealt with those monsters without turning this place into a disaster zone."

Irina's fiery demeanor only seemed to intensify as she shot back, "Oh, please! Like you would've done any better? I saw you guys struggling out here."

The hunter's expression remained stern, his voice laced with authority. "Our job is to protect the city while minimizing collateral damage. What you did here was reckless."

Irina's hands ignited with flames, her frustration evident in the way she clenched her fists. "Look, I don't need a lecture from you. I'm not some rookie mage who can't control her powers. I took care of those monsters, and if a few buildings got scorched in the process, tough luck."

A murmur of agreement seemed to ripple through the crowd, some hunters nodding in reluctant understanding. Others, however, continued to eye Irina with skepticism and disapproval.

Just as the argument seemed to escalate further, another voice cut through the tension. "Hold on a second, everyone."

All eyes turned toward the person who had spoken up. A newcomer stepped forward, a thoughtful expression on their face as they observed Irina. The newcomer's gaze seemed to hold a mixture of recognition and understanding.

"I think I know who she is," the person said, their tone calm yet carrying a sense of certainty.

The crowd's attention shifted, curiosity evident in their expressions. The atmosphere seemed to change as everyone awaited an explanation from the person who had spoken.

The newcomer turned to face Irina, a faint smile playing on their lips. "You're Irina Emberheart, aren't you? I've heard of your family's reputation for powerful fire magic."

The moment his word sank, everyone's eyes were wide open. Looking at the girl, it made sense that she was from that family. She also resembled that woman as well.

'I am fucked, aren't I?' I could see that expression on the face of the hunter who had just gone against the little heir of the Emberheart Family.

He, too, noticed something was amiss, but when he noticed that, things had already gotten out of his control.

He was a sad individual. He was right, but the opponent he was against didn't only require him to be right but also required him to have the strength to back his beliefs up.

This was such a world we were living in.

The right and wrong was defined by the strong.

At that moment, seeing the crowd's reaction, a smile unnaturally bloomed on Irina's face. She seemed genuinely happy that now she was getting the reactions she deserved.

"Tsk. What a brat." I mumbled in annoyance. If the world was going to be in the hands of such a girl, then the future was bleak, not that I cared too much.

Though, for some reason, seeing her smiling like that made me annoyed.

Turning my head, I was about to leave, but suddenly I heard another voice coming from the sides.

"What is happening here?"

It was a voice I knew from the game, which would bring the tamer of this fiery girl right here, right now.

Her short white hair was fluttering as the sword in her hand was filled with blood.

"I thought the monsters were running rampant here and hurried, but it seems we are not needed?" As she mumbled with a small tone, a smile was on her face. It was a smile that would make everyone would relax normally, but nobody here could do it.

Since everyone here knew who this girl was since she also came from a renowned family. Her white hair and blue eyes, coupled with her indescribable beauty, were enough to make everyone know where she was from.

"Julia Middleton."

Different from Irina's Emberheart family, who mostly dealt with magic, the Middleton family was a hunter family that raised the best hunters of each generation; thus, their reputation was a lot wider in the field of Monster Subjugation.

"Oh! Irina? You are here too?" Julia approached Irina with her usual amicable smile as she splashed the blood on her sword onto the road, getting rid of it.

Irina's own scowl seemed to ease slightly as she replied, "Yeah, well, I was bored wandering around. This city doesn't have anything entertaining. But thanks to these guys, I had some fun." As Irina spoke with a grin, the hunter's around her had their furrows burrowed.

After all, they were the ones that were struggling to fight with those monsters, but now this girl was here saying it was fun for her.

This damaged their pride, though the girl on the subject didn't care.

Julia chuckled softly, her smile unwavering. "Well, I can see that. Looks like you handled the situation quite well."

Irina shrugged nonchalantly, her flames flickering as she gestured to the defeated monsters. "Eh, it was a piece of cake. These creatures are nothing compared to what I usually deal with."

Julia's attention turned to the hunter in charge, and she offered a polite nod. "I apologize for the commotion. My friend here tends to have a flair for the dramatic."

The hunter's stern expression softened slightly under Julia's amiable demeanor. "No harm done. We appreciate the assistance, even if it came with a bit of...extra flair."

Irina rolled her eyes playfully. "Hey, if you want boring, go hire some stuffy mercenaries. But if you want a show, you call the Emberhearts. I even tried a new spell, was it to your liking?" her smile was still there, but I could see the small annoyance in the eyes of Hunter.

'This girl certainly has the perk of annoying people.' I thought.

Julia's laughter mingled with the murmurs of those around them. Her presence seemed to diffuse the tension even further, her reputation and charm working in her favor.

Julia chuckled softly. "A new spell, you say? It seems you're as spirited as ever. Here I thought there would be some fries left for me."

Irina's eyes sparkled with a mix of pride and mischief. "Don't you know, this lady here is known as Monster Frier?"

"Yes, yes. You are the monster frier, okay?" Julia answered, but Irina looked rather bored at the talk. It seems she had enough fun.

She just wanted to change the subject, as she looked around to see where this girl's partner was.

"Hey? Where is Victor?" She asked Julia. Since she and Victor were both partners, she thought they would be together. She even searched for them for a while, but she couldn't find them. "And, I called you. Why didn't you answer?" Irina looked at Julia with a squinting gaze.

"You did? I didn't even hear it." Julia answered while she was checking her watch. "Look, there aren't any calls here."

The moment Irina heard about this, she understood why it was; I could see her annoyance.

'It was for sure Victor's doing. He probably knew Irina would call them, so he put a jammer around them.'

It was something that the guy would do since he was strangely obsessed with Julia. But that was for another day.

Since the commotion here was calmed down, I was about to leave I heard something interesting.

"Victor left after he got a call just now."

"He left?" Irina looked really surprised. There was just no way Victor would leave the chance to wander together with Julia. It was something no one would do.

"Yes. He suddenly said something urgent came up and left. He looked troubled."

The moment I heard what Julia said, suddenly, I thought of something rather insolent.

'What if....'

It was a what-if theory that made everything set in stone, though I had no proof...

Chapter 65 Chapter 16.8 - Nexoria City Trip

"...ters and a demon contractor appeared at the Nexoria City Museum."

The girl opened her eyes, emerging from a troubled sleep. Her body felt exhausted, her muscles sore as if she had been through some ordeal. She felt as though she had been trapped in a nightmare, a disturbing dream that left her breathless.

The sensation of suffocation lingered in her mind. She remembered the hands that had covered her mouth, the sense of dread that had gripped her. And then, there was that metallic scent, a smell that had made her stomach churn with nausea.

Gradually, the sound of a television and a calm woman's voice reached her ears, pulling her back to reality.

"According to revealed information from the Government, twenty people lost their lives in the attack, and it is reported that the number of wounded people passed the mark of 500."

Confusion settled over the girl as she struggled to comprehend the situation. She found herself in an unfamiliar place, surrounded by white walls unlike the pink and girly decor of her own room.

"Mommy?"

The girl's voice trembled as she called out, seeking the comfort of a familiar presence.

"Jane?"

Her mother's soothing voice responded, an anchor in the midst of her confusion and fear.

"Mommy."

Jane's voice wavered as she clung to her mother, finding solace in her embrace.

"Are you okay, dear? You are not feeling uncomfortable, right?"

The mother's voice shook, revealing her own concern for her daughter's well-being.

"I-I am okay now, Mother. I am fine."

Jane tried to sound strong, to reassure her mother, but the tremor in her voice betrayed her true emotions.

But, of course, as a mother, how could she not know how her daughter was feeling? Kaya, seeing her daughter hugging her tightly, noticed that she was trying to put up a strong front.

'This...She is my daughter for sure.'

And she remembered what she herself would always do when she was young.

"It is fine, dear. You can cry now."

"Really?"

"Yes. I am with you."

As she said that, Kaya could feel a slight wetness in her bosom.

TAP TAP

She touched her daughter's body in a soothing manner, tapping her from her back. She knew her daughter was just a little girl that must have never been subjected to such an event.

TOK TOK

Just at that moment, a sound of knocking came from the door.

"Miss Kaya. Can I enter?" It was the voice of a serious woman who seemed to be in her early twenties. "The footage you have requested is ready."

Kaya's eyes wandered around her daughter, who was crying silently in her arms, as she heard the woman's words.

"Please wait for a while."

She answered, deciding to stay with her daughter for a while.

"Understood. I will be waiting."

Just like that, she just soothed her daughter like a mother would do, making her cry as much as she wanted.

CREAK

The door swung open with a soft creak, and a woman of serious demeanor stepped into the room. The shift from her composed exterior displayed outside to her current one was striking.

"Miss Kaya," the woman greeted, her tone carrying a respectful undertone as she entered. In her hands, she held a compact tablet, its screen glowing faintly.

Kaya rose from her seat, her expression expectant. There was a reason she had specifically requested this footage.

"You mentioned that the footage is ready, correct?" Kaya inquired, her gaze unwaveringly fixed on her secretary.

"Yes," the secretary confirmed. "As you requested, we managed to retrieve the available footage."

"Then, please, proceed to show me."

The secretary hesitated momentarily before speaking. "However, there is a complication. The camera that was operational at the time didn't capture much of value."

Kaya's brows furrowed in a mild display of frustration. She had held hopes that the footage would shed some much-needed light on the events that had transpired. It appeared that her expectations might not be met after all.

"What do you mean by 'not much of value'?" Kaya's tone carried a mixture of curiosity and a hint of exasperation. She disliked when things were handled with less than utmost diligence.

"Well," the secretary began, her voice measured, "the camera's view is obstructed for the majority of the recording. Shadows dominate the screen, and there's only a limited view of a figure moving within those shadows. We can't glean much from it."

Kaya's curiosity piqued. She was determined to understand the details despite the challenges.

"Can you clarify what you mean by 'shadows'?" Kaya probed further.

"Allow me to show you," the secretary responded, tapping the tablet's screen to initiate the playback. The footage started, and the quality was far from ideal. At first, the camera seemed to capture nothing more than a cluster of low-level crystals.

But then, the skirmish began. The tremors of combat could be sensed through the footage, yet the camera's angle provided little clarity.

In the midst of the action, however, the camera's already suboptimal view worsened. Shadows enshrouded the screen, blurring the vision. Amidst this obscurity, a figure moved within the shadows – a silhouette, small and seemingly of short stature.

Nothing about the figure could be discerned. No details of attire, hair, or even gender were discernible – just an enigmatic outline.

"Are there no other camera angles available?" Kaya inquired, her dissatisfaction palpable in her tone.

"No," the secretary responded. "The shockwave released during the attack destroyed all the other cameras except for this one."

Kaya's expression remained focused, her mind already working to make the most of the limited information available.

"We need to analyze that silhouette," Kaya stated firmly. "I want every available detail extracted from that footage. Enhance the shadows, isolate any distinguishing features, anything that could lead us to identify this figure."

The secretary nodded in understanding. "Of course, Miss Kaya. We'll do our best to enhance and extract any possible details."

Kaya's determination didn't waver. "I want a comprehensive analysis. Create a profile of this silhouette – estimate its height, leg length, build, anything that can give us an idea of who or what we're dealing with."

The secretary jotted down the instructions, her fingers tapping on the tablet. "Understood. We'll work on compiling as much information as we can from this footage."

Kaya's mind was set on uncovering the truth behind this mysterious figure. "Additionally, cross-reference this profile with any available records or databases. We may not have much to work with, but any lead could prove valuable."

As the secretary scribbled down the additional instructions, Kaya's gaze never wavered from the tablet's screen. Her fingers tightened around the edge of the desk, a testament to her unyielding determination.

"Once we have the profile ready, distribute it to the relevant departments. We need to get ahead of this, find out who was responsible for the attack and why."

The secretary's voice carried a note of reassurance. "We're on it, Miss Kaya. We'll use every resource available to us."

"Good. Then, you may leave."

As the woman left, Kaya was left alone with her own thoughts.

'That silhouette. For some reason, I have an intuition that he is young.'

The Demon Contractor and his voices were already recorded by her watch, which she had activated while fighting.

But this unknown assailant who shot the gun was the one brimming in the corner of her mind. For some reason, she couldn't take it out of her head.

'What was his goal? What if next time he will aim for Jane's life?'

There was no concrete proof that that person would aim for her daughter's life, but what if he did?

This question lingered in the corner of her head as she returned to her daughter's room.

After the chaos that ensued during the attack and the subsequent release of monsters, the originally planned orientation was abruptly cut short. We all returned to the Academy, the sense of unease lingering in the air like an unshakable shadow.

"I'm truly sorry that our first trip had to end in such a way," the club president's words carried a somber tone. His initial enthusiasm for the club had been dampened by the events of the day, leaving him visibly unsettled.

"Regardless, I'll keep you all informed about our next trip. Enjoy the rest of your Sunday," he added, his wave a mixture of farewell and dismissal. As the meeting dispersed, club members scattered in various directions. Amid the dispersing crowd, I found my way back to my room.

As I settled in, I couldn't help but contemplate my recent actions. The materials I had managed to pilfer from the Museum were securely tucked away in my bracelet.

<Moonstone.> <Luminarus.> <Celestial Blossom.> <Azure Scales.>

All valuable items were stolen directly from the Museum's collection. I had taken them while removing the moonstone, intentionally diverting attention from my true focus.

The rationale was simple: I didn't want to give the impression that the moonstone had been my sole objective. It was a calculated move to ensure that my motives remained obscure, even though I doubted anyone would pay it much mind.

In any case, with all those materials at my disposal, I entered my room and started reviewing what had happened in today's trip.

'To think that the fight between two high-ranking individuals was this different. As expected, the game can not hold a candle when it comes to making things look realistic.'

Observing the high-ranking individuals' confrontation, I couldn't help but muse on the disparity between their abilities. The experience was eye-opening, despite the fact that the visual quality was far from perfect.

'The game can't hold a candle to the realism of these battles,' I realized. Witnessing such high-level combat for the first time highlighted the limitations of the game's portrayal of reality.

'It's no wonder the Academy's internship program is so highly sought after.' The realization hit me. Facing such powerful individuals and seeing the gap between their strengths and mine, I understood that I was far from where I needed to be.

"I'm still too weak," the truth weighed heavily on my mind. While I had never been under the illusion that I was exceptionally strong, my lower ranking in the game had cultivated a certain pride within me. I had believed that rigorous training could bridge the gap.

'It is not enough. With this amount of training, how can I face her? How can I face those that I want to kill? What if the man happened to be there was a stronger person?'

However, it was not. Just like what happened in the museum, the story of the game couldn't cover every event that happened in this universe.

What would happen when I faced an enemy whose strength exceeded the game's predefined level? A sobering thought dawned on me. Arrogantly assuming invincibility just because I knew the game's future events was foolish.

"How naive of me," I chastised myself silently. My knowledge of the game's progression blinded me to the reality of my limitations. It was a stark reminder that I couldn't rely solely on my foreknowledge to overcome every obstacle.

"I need to work harder. The events of the story are also coming up. I don't have much time to waste."

The fight I had just witnessed constantly haunted me. I put myself in the position of Kaya Hartley and thought about what would happen if she was not there.

'I would be dead. All my ambitions, all the reason for my living.'

'It would be for naught.'

Standing up from where I was standing, I took the Moonstone from my bracelet and looked into it.

The strange connection remained, but I didn't know what I needed to do with this material.

'Should I use it for a weapon?'

The amount I had at my disposal was not that big, which meant I couldn't use it for a weapon right now.

'If it is so, then I should find more of this material.'

Remembering that villain in the game who used the mana of the moon, I raised my head.

'But, the weapon is the secondary thing.'

Releasing my mana from my hand, I tried to form a small thread on my hand. It was hard at first, but I am slowly getting better at my mana control.

'I need to improve my mana control and my magical power first. Without the power to use it, the weapon's strength won't matter.'

With that thought, I grabbed my training materials and headed to the training grounds.

It was time to grind.

Chapter 66 Chapter 17.1 - Normal Life

"Good...."

Lying on the ground, I looked around myself.

"I am getting better."

Before me were the scattered bodies of the worm crickets. A type of insect monster that had merged into one and became a weird-looking chimera.

"My speed of shooting is improving along with my mana control."

As I mumbled that, I raised my bow and imbued my mana into my arrow.

'This is the blue color I saw at that time.'

It was the color that appeared when I shot that bullet to the head of that demon contractor.

'Solar Eclipse. It felt like the way my mana exploded reminded me of the sun.'

The bullet of that attack was certainly strong, and I felt like the mana I imbued at that time was a lot harder to contain. It was like, from the start, the mana was about to explode.

'It is going with the same pattern as the book shows. Then, that means the last one will be that black-purple-colored one.'

'New moon.'

'I have yet to understand how I can change from one type of mana to another, but right now, just learning their properties is enough.'

It was progress, nevertheless. When it came to my mana and trait, everything was an Enigma, just like the name showed. It was truly hard, but that was also what made it a lot more rewarding to explore.

"In any case, let's return."

Looking at the clock, I saw it was nearing 3 AM. After what I had witnessed in the museum, there was no way I could be sleeping soundly instead of training.

And this was the first step, reducing sleep and training more. Just like that, I was about to leave the training rooms, but there I saw a young woman training with her bow.

Her black hair swung as her arrows flew one by one.

'Senior Elara.'

I thought to myself.

The marksmanship she was showing was something I would not forget. It was quite insightful and enabled me to integrate my technique even better.

Even though I was still in the progress of perfecting my aim, thanks to all those people around me, I could see myself improving slowly.

SWOOSH SWOOSH

As the two arrows flew, one of them was aimed at the ground while the other one was flying somewhere else.

CREAK

The first one to hit the ground made it freeze.

"Kik!"

And the hologram of the monster immediately noticed the frozen ground and changed its path, turning to sides.

SPURT

But that was exactly what Elara was aiming for, as the arrow immediately struck the monster's eye.

'A crafty way of using her elements.'

I mused. Her way of using her bow was elegant as ever, and today too, I learned another lesson.

'This must be enough.'

SWOOSH

Just as I was about to leave, suddenly, I felt something approaching.

THUD

As I slightly tilted my head to the side, I saw an arrow hitting the ground. Getting surprised by the sudden attack, I turned my face to the assailant.

"Senior, what is the meaning of this?"

I asked. This was something that would be considered very rude no matter where you were at. Be it an academy, outside world, or dungeon.

I could see Elara's slight smile on her face as she slowly approached. I didn't say anything and just stayed there waiting for her to come.

"Junior, don't you think it's a bit discourteous to observe your senior's training and depart without a proper greeting?" Elara's voice was light, and her playful tone indicated she was in an amicable mood.

"Someone might also think interrupting a senior's training just for the sake of greeting is a rude action. I think it is a matter of perspective." I answered, not backing off from her gaze.

Indeed I may have looked a bit rude to constantly watch her, but it was not like she was trying to hide her training either. She was using a normal training room where anyone could see.

"Heh...It seems you are good with your words." She answered. For some reason, it seemed her serious expression was gone, probably because she was tired.

I nodded in acknowledgment. This was something I was proud of, as I had the tendency to argue even for the smallest things I deemed I was right, at least if I was in the mood to do so.

In any case, for some reason, this woman was talking to me. I didn't remember any encounter I had with her after the first day, so it was a little weird to talk like that.

Elara's smile softened as she studied me. "You're a hardworking junior, it seems." As she said, she signaled the training grounds around us. "Only you and me are left here."

I inclined my head, acknowledging her words. "Thank you."

She seemed to sense my half-hearted gratitude. "Well, I won't keep you any longer. If you ever need pointers or advice, don't hesitate to ask."

Just like that, she left, but I was left slightly weirded at the sudden interaction I had with this woman who was normally serious.

'Is she drunk?' I even pondered about it but soon discarded this thought. There were no signs of her getting drunk, so that was just a random assumption.

Anyway, it wasn't like that was something big, so I just discarded my thoughts and reached my room.

"Elara, do you see this boy here?"

Elara Holden, the vice-captain of the Archery Club, recalled the opening day of the club when she and their club advisor, Instructor Ethan, greeted the incoming freshmen. She cast her mind back to that moment when they stood amidst the crowd.

"Which one?" Elara inquired, glancing at the sea of unfamiliar faces. The gathering was a mix of young boys eager to join the club.

"The one at the back," Instructor Ethan clarified.

"Ah... The one with purple eyes?"

"Yes."

"So, what's special about him?" Elara's voice held a trace of skepticism. She was wary of favoritism and was not inclined to pay special attention to any specific student.

"He's not special in the conventional sense," Instructor Ethan replied. His words caught Elara's interest, as she knew he was not the type to show undue favoritism.

"Then?"

"I'm the one who invited him to join."

"You invited him?" Elara raised an eyebrow, puzzled by the revelation.

"Yes."

"But why? He doesn't strike me as remarkable."

"In a superficial sense, no, he doesn't appear remarkable. And that's what you'll think when you see him training for the first time."

"Why are you so invested in him?"

Instructor Ethan's tone held a hint of intrigue. "He recently transitioned from using daggers to wielding a bow."

"He switched from daggers to a bow?"

"Yes. At first, I thought he might be a random student seeking attention, but after overseeing his weapon change exam, I can confidently say that he has natural talent. He passed stage 5 of the exam on his first attempt."

"Stage 5? Is that supposed to be impressive?"

"It might not be for someone who has trained their whole life with a bow, but especially if their specialization is close combat, how do you think they will do?"

Elara pieced together the information, asking, "So, what are you suggesting?"

"I believe he is awakened, probably with a trait specifically suited for archery. His accuracy was far too advanced for a beginner. You'll understand if you watch the training footage. This boy possesses an innate aptitude."

"If you're this adamant, I'll keep an eye on him for a while. But don't expect anything extraordinary."

"Good. I'll let you decide, and I won't impose."

"All right, then."

As Elara recalled the conversation, she chuckled softly, shaking her head at the memory.

'What an unexpected twist,' she thought, her smile fading. She had initially dismissed him as an ordinary student. She had even checked his name and past records, confirming his status as the lowest-ranked student in the academy with a reputation for being aloof.

Consequently, she dismissed Instructor Ethan's claims as an overestimation. Despite this, she had dutifully observed his training footage. And what she had seen had astounded her.

'How did he progress so rapidly?'

He seemed to absorb knowledge like a vortex, each piece adding to his skill set. His physical attributes might be lacking, but his rapid improvement was captivating.

'An intriguing case.'

As she watched him leave the training room at 3 AM, a mixture of curiosity and fascination welled up within her.

'Where are you headed when the confines of your body only hold you back? What is the place you are going to reach even in the presence of such weakness?'

As her thoughts trailed off, a crazed smile formed on her lips. She absently wiped away the drool that had escaped her mouth.

'I want to see it.'

Elara's grin turned slightly maniacal as she left the Archery Club, her excitement apparent in her demeanor.

As she too slowly made her way out of the Archery Club, she forgot to erase her smile.

Just like that, in the middle of the night, a crazed woman was walking inside the forest....

"Good morning, Cadets," Eleanor White's voice resonated as she entered the classroom, striding purposefully toward her desk.

"Today, you will be participating in Combat Training Against Monsters," Eleanor continued without delay. "Similar to last time, this will involve dungeon exploration."

She started to inform everyone about their training. It was her way of doing things; she disliked spending time talking about useless things and immediately broached the subject.

My keen senses allowed me to catch the quiet murmur that rippled through the classroom in response to her announcement. Some students exchanged excited glances, while others seemed apprehensive.

I heard a hushed conversation between two students nearby:

"I hope we won't run into anything too dangerous."

"Last time wasn't a walk in the park, that's for sure."

Hearing them like that, I couldn't help but shake my head.

'These kids will never learn, won't they?'

If someone with such low stats like me could hear what they were saying, then a seasoned Hunter who ranked three digits in the entire world would easily do so.

And just to prove that, as the whispering persisted, Eleanor's piercing gaze swept across the room. The room fell into silence as though responding to her unspoken command.

"Am I interrupting something?" she inquired, her tone unyielding.

The students quickly averted their eyes, realizing that their conversation had caught the attention of their instructor. Eleanor had a reputation for maintaining a no-nonsense classroom environment.

"Tch. I asked you a question, right?" For some reason, Eleanor looked slightly angry.

'This woman probably got out of the bed the wrong side.' I thought.

"No, Instructor White," one of the students replied, her voice slightly shaky. It was a girl that was sitting on the front side, and she was always loud in her conversations. It was her innate habit, as it didn't seem like she was doing it for attention. She was not someone that talked with boys anyway.

Eleanor's stern expression conveyed her expectations clearly.

"I suggest you focus on the training ahead rather than engaging in idle chatter."

"I am sorry, instructor."

"It is good that you know your faults, unlike someone."

As her piercing words echoed, naturally, everyone's eyes turned to me. At this point, they knew that she was talking to me since the confrontation between me and she was famous.

I eventually simply ignored her words and kept my gaze on her. I didn't think I did anything wrong; thus, I didn't answer.

"Anyway, let's start." Eleanor's gaze swept across the room, meeting the eyes of each cadet.

"Today's exercise will challenge your teamwork, communication, and adaptability. You will be exploring a simulated dungeon environment, working in teams just as you did during your first practical lesson."

She paused, allowing her words to sink in before continuing. "However, this time, your objective is different. You are not tasked with defeating a specific monster. Instead, your goal is to reach the endpoint of the dungeon. The path will be challenging, and there will be various obstacles in your way."

As she said that, her eyes pierced through me.

"And I suggest everyone participate in this dungeon. We are here to learn and improve ourselves, not to laze around."

Still not unbothered by her words, I simply sat there and watched her start the lesson. It was obvious that she was blatantly targeting me as an outlet for her emotions, but we were no longer kids.

In the end, mere words will never be enough to get a reaction from me after all.

Chapter 67 Chapter 17.2 - Normal Life

"Please meet with your groups. You will now enter the dungeon."

As the sound of the instructor came, every student, one by one, grouped with their group. It was the same for me since this practice was mandatory to attend.

Even though one's grades being low is not something to take disciplinary action on, if the students were to miss a practical training without an excuse, the case might even go up to the explosion, which is not something I want for the time being.

In any case, as I slowly walked, I immediately noticed the girl with amber hair and red eyes looking at me with an annoyed expression. Her demeanor hadn't even changed slightest.

'Irina is the same as usual.'

The other two were also there. Nora was looking at me with an awkward expression, clearly wanting to talk with me. She was not a girl that could easily ignore someone.

And Goerge was as usual. He looked intimidating and big, but his expression gave him away as he looked shy.

'He was such a guy.' I once again reminded myself.

As if on cue, Irina couldn't contain herself, and a scoff escaped her lips. "Great, the invisible guy again."

Her disdainful tone was uncannily reminiscent of our initial encounter, and it was clear that her attitude hadn't softened in the least. George shifted uncomfortably beside her while Nora's expression showed a mix of unease and sympathy.

"Is that so," I answered with an indifferent tone.

My indifference to her hostility probably baffled Irina, but it was better than letting it get under my skin.

"Tch." She clicked her tongue as she turned her attention to the boy whom she wanted attention from.

It was obvious who he was, so there was no need to explain.

The atmosphere got awkward. I could see Nora and Geroge wanted to talk, but Irina's picky behavior and her attention being elsewhere was making them hesitate.

Just like that, a little time passed until our number was announced.

"Team 13. Enter." As the instructor shouted, our group moved into the dungeon and entered. Since it was the academy mock dungeon, that uncomfortable feeling of teleporting was slightly reduced.

The moment we materialized within the dungeon, the atmosphere shifted dramatically. The ambient light dimmed, and a shroud of darkness seemed to envelop everything around us. It was a stark contrast to the previous classroom setting.

'As expected, there was a reason why they put the achieving condition to reach the end. There are probably a lot of traps in front of us.' I concluded.

This event was not detailly shown in the game since there weren't many things to show, but I guess real life was different.

"I will take the lead," Irina said with an annoyed expression. It seemed she disliked being in the dark, her hands igniting with flickering flames.

The firelight cast dancing shadows on the walls, revealing the outlines of the passageways before us. As our leader, she seemed more focused and determined than ever, her fiery magic acting as a beacon in the darkness.

But looking at her like that, I knew the thing she did was something everyone could do, and the instructors must have already prepared a specific response for such a thing.

'Acting before making a thorough assessment and plan. As expected, this girl doesn't have the qualities of being the leader.'

SWOOSH

The moment I thought about that, suddenly, the fire surging through the atmosphere diminished.

No, rather than saying it diminished, the true word would be slightly different. Its light diminished, and the warmth radiating from the fire was still there.

'This must be the environment of the dungeon.' I concluded. Dungeons were special environments where things that wouldn't be imaginable happened. Such a phenomenon happening was rather normal.

"What?" Irina asked with a dumbfounded tone. It was blatantly obvious that she had never expected that the light from her fire would dimmish like that. "What is happening?"

She tried to conjure another bunch of fire and illuminate the surroundings, but I could see a small veil surrounding us.

'Does it react to light and stay around it?' I thought, trying to understand its essence.

"Tsk." She clicked her tongue as she looked at her fire.

"Any of you got any idea?" She asked, turning her attention to Nora and Geroge.

"I don't."

"Me neither." The two responded real quickly.

"Sigh...." I could see Irina sighing as she looked into the road before, ignoring me completely.

'If you don't want the answer, then so be it.'

"Then, we need to go blindly; we can't afford to waste any more time. Be careful of your step."

As she answered, she started walking in the corridor, her senses alert. I could see the atmosphere was tense; after all, it was dark, and nothing could be seen.

At least, this was the case for them. Since I could easily see whatever was happening around me thanks to my traits. All of them were more suited for darkness. This was my territory.

Also, the fire Irina had ignited already showed us the path before the darkness sank, so they should also be aware of the path ahead up to some point.

'I now understand what this test wants from us.'

For the hunters, perception and reading of the environment were also very important, just like combat prowess. There are countless situations that can happen inside the dungeon, and it is essential to think and act fast.

This dungeon was to test such skills. When darkness descends, the first thing a human will think is illuminating the surroundings to activate their vision.

However, by putting a light following darkness veil into an equation, the instructors can test the students' interval sight.

'After walking for a while, Irina's fire will illuminate the surroundings for a second, probably. But, then, that veil of darkness will follow the light.'

It was a very good idea to test the students, as expected from the Academy.

With Irina taking the lead, the group ventured down the darkened corridor, the atmosphere heavy with caution. I trailed slightly behind, my heightened senses allowing me to perceive the danger lurking in the obscurity.

A trap was before us, and luckily none of the three had touched it. It was on my alignment, so I just slightly moved to the side and dodged the trap. I didn't know what it was, neither did I have any intention to learn.

"AH!"

At that moment, a sudden, sharp noise disrupted my thoughts. Irina's cry of pain mingled with the crackle of electricity. My attention snapped to her, and I could see her convulsing as she clutched her foot.

'Electric Trap.' I mentally noted to myself. I could see that she was in pain, but if someone didn't want to cooperate with me, I wouldn't do it either. I was just an observer in their world.

'What goes around comes around.' I thought.

"Irina!" As George saw Irina in pain, he immediately jumped to help. It was normal; after all, it was his role to tank normally.

But by doing so, he triggered another trap. A net fell from above, ensnaring him and hoisting him off the ground.

Following that, thanks to George's big build, by falling to the ground, he activated another trap that was pretty far away.

SWOOSH SWOOSH

This time, I could see and feel a bunch of arrows coming to our faces.

CLANK CLANK CLANK

"Hey!" Nora cried out with concern, skillfully deflecting arrows with her sword.

The environment was dark, but it seemed Nora had already quite adapted to it. She threw a look at me. It was a look for help, but I simply stood there and watched her.

Even though she feared Irina, if you are not going against injustice because of your fear of strong while ignoring your values, then you are selfish.

And if you are selfish, you have no right to demand any other person to behave according to your wishes since they can be selfish as they want as well.

It is not that I am condemning her. It is just how it is.

As Nora made her way towards the two, she first approached George and cut the net, covering his foot with her sword.

At that point, Irina had already taken care of herself as well. Aside from small twitches, it seems the trap had lost its effects.

However, it was evident that thanks to Irina's misjudgment and ego by marching forward as a leader on her own, the formation of the three was a mess.

'This is a bit embarrassing.' Considering these people would be the future best hunters, they had a rather long way to go. But it was not like they were not improving.

Their dynamics were shifting, adapting to the immediate challenges they faced. It was a test not just of their combat prowess but also their ability to work as a team under duress.

"George, take the front." Realizing her mistake, Irina threw a look at George and put him in front. "I will try to look for a solution to the darkness, and Nora will cover me."

SWOOSH

However, before they could reform the formation, a creature from the darkness had already leaped.

And its aim was me.

"Tch."

Clicking my tongue, I released the string I had drawn.

SWOOSH

As the arrow I had knocked with my mana traveled, it pierced the neck of the monster and made it fall to the ground.

'Now that I have revealed it let's not pretend any longer.'

SWOOSH SWOOSH SWOOSH

Firing at a rapid speed with my mana-imbued arrows, I shot three arrows at the monster flying in the air.

THUD THUD THUD

And with a smooth sound, all three of them fell to the ground.

"Huh?"

Both George and Nora were looking at me with surprised expressions. Even Irina had a small exclamation of surprise.

They probably didn't sense the monsters, and it was normal. If not for my good vision in the dark, I would not be able to sense them either.

The tension was palpable in the aftermath of the confrontation with the monsters. Irina, George, and Nora stood in a semi-circle, their eyes fixed on me. It was evident that the unexpected revelation of my abilities had caught them off guard.

"Huh, you've got quite the sharp aim," Irina remarked with a raised eyebrow, her tone dripping with arrogance. "Mind explaining why you didn't tell us you could see in the dark?"

I could see she was angry. It seemed her pride was hurt.

'I guess it is time to teach her a lesson and establish the hierarchy for future events. This was getting annoying too.'

With that thought, I raised my head and answered.

"No one asked."

Chapter 68 Chapter 17.3 - Normal Life

"Huh, you've got quite the sharp aim," Irina remarked with a raised eyebrow, her tone dripping with arrogance. "Mind explaining why you didn't tell us you could see in the dark?"

I met her gaze evenly; her question was hardly surprising. It was typical of her to demand answers, especially when it concerned something that could potentially benefit the group. It was expectable, but at the same time, it was annoying.

Be it her tone, her demeanor, it was all bratty, and this was a good opportunity for future explorations. For this whole semester, we were going to be a team, and establishing myself in the team would make it also easier for me.

At least, I would spend less time dealing with dungeons like this.

"No one asked."

I retorted coolly, my voice devoid of emotion. It was a simple and straightforward answer to her inquiry, also making sure that she was the one to blame for it.

Irina's eyes narrowed in response to my response. It was clear that she wasn't used to encountering people who didn't succumb to her authoritative presence. However, her ego was resilient, and she didn't back down.

"Don't play coy with me," she shot back, her annoyance evident. "In a team setting like this, information sharing is crucial. Your silence about your abilities jeopardizes our chances of success."

I weighed her words for a moment before responding, my expression neutral. "And you're right. In a team, information sharing is important. But it's a two-way street. If you had been open to input from the start, maybe we wouldn't have triggered those traps in the first place."

Irina's eyes flared with anger, her fiery disposition ignited by my words. She wasn't used to being challenged, especially not by someone who had been relatively silent until now. But I had no intention of backing down, not when I knew the truth of our situation.

"I may not have openly revealed my abilities, but that doesn't absolve you from your responsibilities as the leader," I continued, my tone unwavering. "As a team, it's your duty to consider the strengths and weaknesses of each member. Instead, you charged ahead without a thought for the consequences."

When it came to wordplay, I was confident in my ability. At the same time, it was also some sort of habit. And right now, I wanted to beat this girl's ego for some reason.

Nora and George exchanged uneasy glances, sensing the escalating tension between their leader and me. It was an uncomfortable situation for them, caught in the crossfire of a clash of personalities.

"Just like the previous dungeon exploration, it was your own fragile ego that made you lose your points, and this time too. If you are unable to utilize the strength of every person in your group as a leader because of your ego, then you are not suitable for being a leader. This is a dungeon exploration that is surveyed by the academy professors, but in real life, there won't be any surveillance, nor the traps here will be unlethal. As a leader, the life of your subordinates will be your responsibility. Can you handle when they lose their life because their leader, whose eyes were blinded by her pride, made poor decisions?"

"Looks like someone has a lot to say," Irina retorted, her voice dripping with sarcasm. She folded her arms across her chest, her fiery gaze fixed on me. "If you're so confident in your abilities, maybe you'd like to lead the way instead?"

Her challenge was clear, a way to put me on the spot and prove her own superiority. But I didn't let her provocations rattle me. Instead, I regarded her with an unflinching gaze.

"Maybe I would," I responded evenly, my tone showcasing none of the annoyance that had welled up inside me. "But you've already shown that you're not open to collaboration. A leader should inspire trust and cooperation, not arrogance."

Irina's eyes blazed with fury; her fists clenched at her sides. It was evident that my words were getting under her skin, and part of me reveled in that realization. She was used to being the center of attention, the one who called the shots, and I was disrupting that order.

"You think you're so smart, huh?" she shot back, her voice seething with anger. "Fine, let's see how well you can navigate this dungeon. Lead us then if you're so confident. But, if you fail, I will make sure you will experience hell next time."

I could see the challenge in her eyes, a dare to prove myself in a situation that I hadn't asked for. But my goal was never to become the leader; it was simply to point out the flaws in her approach.

In the first place, my position was not fit to be a leader. As a marksman and rearguard, leading the team would be possible, but considering I also need to act as a scout, things may get messy.

'But, this is a good opportunity to test myself.'

I met her challenge with a steady gaze, "Fine then. I will be the leader." I simply answered and turned my attention to the other two. "Are you both fine with that?"

"Yes."

"I have no problem."

Thanks to Irina's overbearing atmosphere, it was very easy for the other two to accept my proposal. And, just like that, I was left with the role of the leader.

"Now, I will make it short," I announced, my tone even. "I'll be at the front, and my focus will be on detecting and avoiding traps. You both will follow exactly in my steps. The formation will be a single line to minimize the risk of triggering traps. Irina, refrain from using your fire magic for now. I suspect that the veil of darkness reacts to light sources and might attract unwanted attention from monsters. We'll need to time our use of light carefully."

Irina's expression displayed a mixture of annoyance and reluctant agreement, but she didn't challenge my plan. It was clear that she wanted to regain her perceived control over the situation, but it was also necessary to show this girl that it was important to have a good plan.

"As we move forward," I continued, "there might be intersections or forks in the road. At those points, follow my lead and await my decision. I'll take responsibility for guiding us in the right direction. You need to obey my commands exactly and listen to them cautiously. Since everyone's sight is limited, I will be your eyes."

"Any questions?"

"...."

"Good. Let's, start."

Just like that, we started moving, and from this moment on, things got easier and easier.

I was in the front, avoiding all the traps, while the other three tried to follow me. Our speed was not top-notch, but it was remarkable enough. After all, there were groups that could tank all the damage and brute force their way to the front.

This was what the main cast did in the game. But, our formation is not suited for that, neither is George's strength.

Still, as we progressed, I could feel the tension in the group begin to ease. Irina's earlier bravado had given way to a begrudging acknowledgment of my role, while Nora and George seemed more at ease, knowing that someone with a watchful eye was leading them.

Of course, they tried to make it so that Irina didn't notice it, but at the end of the day, she did. After all, she was not that stupid either, even though she was prideful.

"Stop," I commanded at a crossroads where multiple paths diverged.

Activating my [Keen Eye], I surveyed the options before us, my mind processing the information quickly. "Left," I directed, and we continued down the chosen path.

It wasn't just about avoiding traps; it was also about utilizing each member's strengths. Since the confrontation was unavoidable, it was time to make the party return to normal formation.

I instructed George, "George, I need you at the front. Your size and strength will help us clear any obstacles in our way." He nodded in understanding and moved to the front, his hulking form leading the way.

Just like that, we faced our second share of enemies. When a group of creatures emerged from the darkness, I directed George to engage them, his massive form acting as an impenetrable wall. Nora took up her position by his side, her swordsmanship fluid and precise as she struck down our foes.

Irina's fire magic came into play once again as she targeted the enemies from a distance, her flames engulfing them with powerful bursts of heat. Our coordinated efforts ensured that none of us were overwhelmed, and we emerged unharmed from each encounter.

"George, halt," I called out as we approached a suspicious section of the path. He stopped, and I could see a faint line on the ground. "Careful, there's a pressure plate here. Nora, can you disarm it?" Nora stepped forward, her skilled hands deftly disarming the pressure plate with a small tool from her equipment. "All clear," she confirmed, and we continued on our way.

At another point, we encountered a narrow passage with protruding spikes. "Irina, your fire magic could be useful here," I suggested. Irina nodded, her demeanor more cooperative now. She conjured a controlled burst of flames, melting the spikes and creating a safe path for us.

And just like that, we kept moving forward.

'What is with this guy?' Irina thought to herself, seeing the irritating bastard leading the group. 'How is he so good?'

Even though she didn't want to admit it, the way he led the group, the way he instantly utilized his strengths of them and made quick judgments, were worthy of praise.

However, she was annoyed.

Annoyed by the fact that she was getting beaten by him. For some reason, whenever she spoke with him, she would get annoyed.

It was his attitude. The attitude of not showing any respect. As a girl who was born in one of the most famous households of her small country and the daughter of the current fire Archmage, she was someone that was always respected by others.

She was always the center of attention, so she naturally got used to it.

But now, nothing was going the way she had expected at all.

She couldn't help but feel a mixture of begrudging respect and annoyance at his cool demeanor. Who did he think he was, taking charge of their group so confidently? And yet, she had to admit that his leadership was effective. He had a methodical way of approaching each situation, giving clear instructions and making decisions without hesitation.

"Stop," he commanded, his voice breaking the silence. She halted her steps, her annoyance flaring as she waited for his direction.

"Something is weird." He continued. She could see his brows furrowed, and since they were sticking closer, his face was visible.

'He is not bad.' She thought. She couldn't help but compare his looks to Victor, the person she liked. Of course, for her, Victor was at the peak, and it was the same for most other people, but this irritating guy before him was quite handsome too.

'Though he needs to cut these bangs. He looks like an emo kid.' She visualized herself burning his hair down and making him bald, and satisfaction welled in her heart.

'I should definitely try it.' She kept deluding herself in her delusions, but it was a mistake.

Lost in her daydreams and the inner monologue about bangs and baldness, Irina's senses were momentarily dulled.

GROWL

Suddenly, a low growl echoed through the corridor, snapping her back to reality. Before she could react, a monstrous creature lunged at her from the shadows, its eyes gleaming with malevolence.

Instinct kicked in, and her body tensed to summon a burst of fire to defend herself, but Astron was quicker.

SWOOSH

His arrow whizzed through the air with deadly accuracy, piercing the monster's flank and diverting its attention away from her.

"KIEEK!"

The creature let out a howl of pain, its charge faltering as it stumbled to the side.

"What the hell are you doing?" Astron's voice was laced with frustration and anger as he swiftly knocked another arrow and fired at the monster approaching. "Use your fire magic. Their number is

enormous. Three on the three clockwise, four on eleven clockwise, and another three on eight clockwise."

His instructions were clear as his cold gaze penetrated the battlefield. For a second, Irina was caught off guard as she couldn't bring herself to say anything. He was close, extremely close for a second, but then he immediately took his position behind her and knocked another bunch of arrows.

"George, cover the left side using your skill and force them to group in the middle. Nora, confront them and keep them busy. With my command, you both will retreat."

The situation was urgent, and her initial lapse in attention was unforgivable. She watched as George and Nora followed Astron's orders, creating a coordinated defense against the encroaching creatures. It was a testament to his leadership and their willingness to trust his instructions.

"Kiek!"

The creatures attacked them with a fast ambush as she watched the three fight.

"Get ready your magic; you will sweep them off with my command."

But clarity returned to her head in a matter of seconds as Irina noted the directions Astron had given to her.

"Now."

And with his words, she simply released all of the emotions inside her heart, sweeping the monsters...

Chapter 69 Chapter 17.4 - Normal Life

"Huff....Just how many monsters have we cleared?" Nora asked, breathing heavily. She was the one I had utilized the strength of in this place.

The reason for not choosing Irina?

It was not because I was picky with her. Using fire magic meant depleting oxygen and increasing the temperature, as well as filling the place with smoke and carbon dioxide. This would mean the more we use it, the more we will feel suffocating.

That was the sole reason why I mostly refrained from using Irina's fire magic, but there were times when I deemed it good enough.

In any case, in such a manner, we reached the end of the exam after cleaning all the monsters.

Looking at the place like that, I could see a lot of people had already gathered, mostly them being high-ranking students.

The main cast was already there as well.

<Team 13. Time elapsed, 1 hour 48 minutes. 11/600>

As we heard our score, I nodded my head. The scores in the game were not given in detail, but looking at it from here, our ranking seems good enough.

With such people in my team and with this dungeon being compatible with me, this ranking was one of the best we could get right now.

And I am sure we could save at least 15 more minutes if I was the leader from the start, but it doesn't matter.

The important thing had already been accomplished. Irina learned her lesson for the future, so she will probably behave in a better way.

At the very least, she needs to learn how to cooperate. In the future, I don't want to deal with a brat who thinks she is high and might be all the time. At the very least, basic respect is essential while dealing with others.

Turning my head, I saw Irina looking at me with a slightly squinting gaze. She made her way toward me, her posture confident and her expression determined. I could sense that she had something to say, a challenge to throw my way.

"I could have done better leading this team," she stated, her voice tinged with an assertive tone. "Don't think for a moment that you're the only one capable of guiding us through."

I could see her pupils shaking slightly. She was pushing herself to put up a strong front, probably because of her pride.

"Is that so?" I simply answered, but for some reason, I was amused. Her shaking pupils and slightly flinching tone made me feel funny for some reason. "Just like last time?"

When I indirectly implied the last exam score, she scoffed, clearly not pleased with my response. Her pride was evident, but it was also clear that she was a bit taken aback by the comparison.

"Whatever," she muttered, her arms crossing over her chest as she averted her gaze. It was a classic Irina move, her tough exterior masking a mixture of irritation and reluctance.

And before I could say anything further, she turned to leave, her strides purposeful. It was clear that she didn't want to dwell on this conversation any longer, but just before she moved too far away, her voice reached my ears.

"Thanks," she muttered, almost under her breath. It was a fleeting moment of gratitude, a concession she probably didn't intend to give, but it was not something I was not expecting, nor did I want.

It was a pointless thank.

Thanking or apologizing is not something that should be expressed by words but rather by actions. By changing the things you deem lacking or by taking the consideration of the person you thank, you can actually fulfill the purpose of those words.

"Victor, how is your score?" I could hear Irina trying to talk with Victor, whose sole attention was on the girl with white hair.

"First."

"I see. You are the best as usual, huh?"

"What did you expect? Even though that trash did nothing, I alone am enough."

"Just like you."

Looking at the girl trying to get the attention of the boy she liked, I thought she might be slightly pitiful.

Just like that, the training reached its end.

<Combat Practice Lesson.>

THUD THUD THUD

A rapid succession of three slabs came to my face, all to get blocked by my hands.

Standing before me was our protagonist, who had a slightly downcast expression on his face. It seemed something was bothering him, and I knew what it was.

'It must be his niece, Jane.'

Remembering the little girl who almost died before my eyes, I could see where he was coming from.

In the game, that girl was dead, and we didn't have any scenes of Ethan with her, but I remember there were certain dialogues that would be triggered when Ethan was with Kaya.

But, again, this was a combat practice, not a place to think of anything else. I am not here to waste my time but get better at everything.

SWOOSH

With a smooth move, I bolted towards him, aiming at his lower abdomen. He lowered his right elbow to cover there, but it was a feint.

Since one's elbow is in the middle of the arms, to cover with the elbow, one needs to lean to the side. And this limits the movement.

THUD

With a smooth crochet, I blasted him from his jaw.

THUD THUD THUD

His body was natural, as his reflexes were honed by our spars, but that was not enough. With his brain on somewhere other, he couldn't stand my relentless assault.

THUD

"Burgh-"

As he felt a kick on his belly, he spurted saliva from his mouth.

THUD

And with a loud sound, he fell to the ground.

"It seems you are not in the mood to spar," I spoke, looking at the protagonist lying before me. His blue hair was wet with sweat, and so was mine. Considering that my body was a lot weaker than him, it was even a miracle that I had been coping with this training.

"I get that you have things on your mind, but if you're going to spar, you need to focus. Otherwise, you're just wasting both of our time."

It was annoying. If I wanted to deal with a mindless doll, I could do it every time inside the training grounds.

Ethan just sat there with his face looking at the ground. His hair was blocking my vision, but it was not that hard to understand what he was thinking.

"Sorry, I got something on my mind." he finally spoke, his voice tinged with a hint of resignation. Then he stood up, looking at me.

He didn't have his usual haughty expression on his face, and neither did he have his shiny aura.

"Tch." I clicked my tongue. "Come." Since we were trapped in this classroom in the pretense of sparring, there was nothing I could do.

Ethan let out a heavy sigh, his shoulders slumping as if he was carrying a weight. He took a few steps back to create some distance between us, his stance more subdued than usual. It was clear that he was still preoccupied with whatever was on his mind.

As we assumed our combat stances once more, the atmosphere was different. There was a palpable tension, not just from the physical engagement but from the underlying distraction that lingered between us.

SWOOSH

I launched myself forward, and this time, Ethan's response was sharp and focused. He blocked my strike with precision, his movements fluid and controlled.

THUD

I followed up with a series of calculated jabs, and Ethan countered each one with well-timed defenses. His reflexes were spot-on, and it was clear that his mind was in the right place.

THUD THUD

My strikes met his blocks, and I could see Ethan's determination in his eyes. He was fully engaged in the spar, his movements fluid and powerful.

THUD

Ethan deflected my kick with a swift motion; his balance was maintained as he countered with a quick punch aimed at my midsection. His strikes were accurate, and it was evident that he was back in the game.

Our exchange continued, each of us pushing ourselves to our limits. Ethan's focus was unwavering, and his movements were a testament to his combat prowess. We moved in a synchronized dance, a give-and-take of strikes and defenses.

I could feel myself improving, I was integrating my body into each of my movements. It was evident that I was a lot better than my last spar.

But then, I noticed a change.

Ethan's gaze flickered, his attention momentarily wavering. His movements became slightly hesitant as if he was losing his connection to the fight.

It seemed his thought started wandering around again.

'Tch. Do you have ADHD or something?'

SWOOSH

I took advantage of the opening, launching a well-timed hook towards his side. But Ethan managed to block it just in time, his defenses instinctual despite his distraction. In a way, even if I was better than him in terms of combat, naturally, as the protagonist, he had one of the best bodies in the world.

THUD

He retaliated with a rapid combination of strikes, his initial hesitation replaced by his auto mode. His body had already learned how to move.

He was a monster, and I was clearly seeing its effects.

His fists moved with precision, and I had to focus all my energy on defending against his assault.

But his focus continued to shift, and after all, even though he was talented, it was not to the point where he could win against me unconsciously.

I saw it in the way his eyes wandered for a split second, his mind clearly drifting away from our spar. His movements became more predictable, and I seized the opportunity.

SWOOSH

I sidestepped his punch and countered with a swift hook to his ribs. The impact landed solidly, and I could see Ethan's surprise at the successful strike.

THUD

Ethan staggered back, his breath coming out in a huff. He shook his head as if trying to clear his thoughts, but the distraction had already taken its toll.

"Annoying."

With that one last word, I dashed towards him, my elbow almost reaching his jab.

DING

At that moment, the sound of the bell rang, signaling the end of our spar. My elbow was one millimeter away from his body, as it was about to inject him quite a lot amount of pain.

"Tch."

We both stepped back, our chests heaving with exertion. I looked at Ethan, who looked downcast.

Thinking that today's lesson was a mess, I was about to leave the place, but at that moment, I sensed Ethan's movement. He let out a heavy sigh, his gaze fixed on the ground. "Astron, can I ask you something?"

I raised an eyebrow, surprised by the sudden change in topic. "What is it? I won't answer if it is something stupid like last time."

"Haha...It is not like that." He answered, a small smile tinging on his lips. But then, his expression turned serious. He hesitated for a moment before continuing. "How do you cope with the fear of losing someone you hold dear?"

I was taken aback by his question. It was unexpected, and it felt like a breach of the unspoken boundaries between us. After all, Ethan and I were not close. Aside from some sparring, we didn't talk much. But his earnest expression made it clear that he was grappling with something deeply personal.

However, at the same time, his words made me remember her.

The same vision, the same scene of her chest getting pierced by claws. The blood spilled from her mouth.

The twisted expression on that demon's mouth.

My arms were tied.

And the small smile she was making before she closed her eyes.

"There is no such person left."

Chapter 70 Chapter 17.5 - Normal Life

"There is no such person left."

Looking at him leaving, those words echoed in Ethan's head. His lonely figure and the emotions in his eyes at that moment remained on his head.

A mix of frustration and concern swirled within him. He knew Astron had his reasons for being closed off, for keeping his emotions hidden behind that stoic facade. But his response to that question... was a glimpse into something more.

'To be honest, I didn't even ask that question expecting an answer.'

Remembering that his niece was about to lose her life at that time, Ethan was slightly anxious. He had never felt the loss of someone he held dear, so he was scared of that feeling.

He wanted to be with his niece all the time, and he was sure her aunt felt the same.

'Is that what Astron feels? Has he lost someone dear to him?'

The thought lingered in his mind as he replayed their conversation in his head. There was a vulnerability in Astron's response, a rawness that hinted at a pain he was unwilling to share.

Why was he so guarded? What had happened to him? And what had prompted him to such a blunt and sad response to his question?

"Sigh...."

He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck, feeling a mix of frustration and determination.

"Astron is right about one thing – we were not close. Sigh....What a complicated fella."

Ethan sighed, his steps slow as he made his way back to the training area. He realized that he couldn't force Astron to open up, just as he couldn't force his own emotions to settle.

The fear of losing someone you care about was a heavy burden, one that he was only just beginning to understand.

He didn't even think that his assumptions might be wrong for a second, but at the same time, he was not wrong either.

Just as he was lost in his thoughts, a familiar voice called out to him. "Ethan! Hey, Ethan!"

Turning, he saw Lucas and Julia approaching with their characteristic eagerness. The twins, with their matching smiles, were at it again.

"It seems you're lost in your world again. We called your name four times already," Lucas said, a playful grin on his face.

Ethan smiled apologetically. "Sorry, guys. I guess I was lost in thought."

Julia raised an eyebrow. "About what? You've been acting a bit strange lately."

Ethan hesitated for a moment, then decided to share a bit. "Well..."

Lucas chimed in with an understanding tone. "I see. It's about Jane, isn't it? Is she okay?"

Ethan nodded, a mixture of relief and worry in his expression. "Kind of. She said she's fine, but I'm still worried."

Julia sighed dramatically, shaking her head. "Sigh... Being a worrywart won't work. You're not helping her by worrying like that."

"I know," Ethan admitted with a sheepish grin.

SMACK

A familiar rough hand smacked his back once again. The sting was familiar, but this time Ethan refrained from retorting.

"Let's grab something to eat. The meal's on me today," Julia declared, her voice cheerful. Her intentions were clear, and Ethan appreciated the gesture. "Maybe you can even talk about him, you know? That edgy mister?"

Ethan simply smiled at Julia's playful teasing and chose not to correct her. This camaraderie, the light-hearted banter, was exactly what he needed right now. He was content to let her think whatever she wanted.

And so, the trio headed off, leaving the training grounds behind. As they walked together, Ethan felt a sense of warmth, a reminder that he wasn't alone in this world.

"There is no such person left."

The one that heard those words was not Ethan only. There was another person who was there listening to the conversation Ethan and Astron were having.

'Is it related to his emotions?'

She was just leaving; since she was a healer, most of the time, her combat training ended before others since her 'body' couldn't keep up.

Just as she was about to leave, she couldn't help but hear the conversation, and her interest got piqued. Because the boy who always shone brightly was now looking slightly troubled, his emotions were a mess too.

It was intriguing because she had never seen Ethan this worried before. But the following words were something she didn't expect.

'There is no such person left, huh?' When she heard those words, she could see the emotions boiling inside Astron. The emotions that were eating him alive momentarily went past his barrier of indifference; she could see it.

'Something must have happened in the past.' She wondered what it was.

But at that moment, she heard a voice.

"Hey, Sylvie. What are you doing today?" Her friend asked, looking at him with a smile. "If you are free, want to hang out after the classes end?"

Looking at the offer, it didn't seem so bad, to be honest. For the past week, she was busy with her clubs and her assignments, so she didn't have much chance to hang out.

She was slowly getting tired, and she wanted to relieve her stress. "That sounds nice," Sylvie replied with a small smile, already feeling her fatigue catching up to her. "I could use a break."

However, the words that followed were something she didn't want to hear.

Her friend's eyes twinkled with excitement as she continued, "Great! You know, there's a mixer happening in the academy today. It's being hosted by the food club, and I heard they've prepared some amazing dishes. Plus, there will be some handsome seniors attending."

Sylvie didn't even hesitate for a moment. The thought of hanging out and unwinding was tempting, but the prospect of mingling with a group that included the boys wasn't exactly her idea of relaxation.

As a girl with a fairly good face and beauty, she was, of course, offered by some boys for a date. However, being a person that could see what others were feeling underneath, she could feel the hideous emotions underneath.

Rather, saying hideous would be wrong, but it was not her cup of tea. She knew the carnal desire those people hid, and she rather preferred a more romantic approach.

And for some reason, when she heard the word mixer, someone's face appeared before her eyes, making her more uncomfortable.

"Thanks for the offer," Sylvie replied, her tone polite yet cautious. "But you know how I feel about mixers and all that. I'm just not really into that kind of scene."

Her friend's smile faltered slightly, but she remained undeterred. "Come on, Sylvie; it could be fun! Plus, there will be some handsome seniors there, and who knows, you might find someone interesting."

For some reason, Sylvie felt like she had seen a dark color in her friend's feelings, but that just passed after a second.

She shook her head, her expression resolute. "I appreciate it, really. But I'm not looking to date anyone right now. And mixers just aren't my thing."

Her friend let out a sigh, clearly disappointed but still hopeful. "Well, if you change your mind, just let me know. We're all about having a good time, and you're welcome to join us."

With the understanding that Sylvie wasn't going to budge on her stance, her friend changed the subject and shared some other plans for the day.

"Then, let's study until evening, after the classes, is that okay?"

"Fine, fine. Let's study again...."

As their conversation continued, Sylvie's thoughts shifted from the earlier overheard discussion to her own preferences and priorities. In the end, she too was left alone with her thoughts...

"Tch," I muttered in frustration, my brows furrowing as I surveyed the training grounds before me.

The atmosphere was littered with signs of battle — the aftermath of my rigorous training session.

Arrows scattered the area, the residual traces of my mana hung in the air, and the ground bore the impact of my relentless practice. Despite the evidence of my efforts, I couldn't help but feel unsatisfied.

"I need to figure out how to use my mana more effectively," I grumbled to myself, my frustration growing.

The image of that demon contractor still haunted my thoughts, a constant reminder of my shortcomings. Even the conversation with Ethan earlier had managed to worm its way into my mind, making me question my own reactions.

"Why did I respond like that? Am I becoming childish?" I questioned, allowing a rare moment of vulnerability to creep in. The thought of reacting so impulsively was unusual for me, and it unsettled me.

THUD

My fist collided with the wall, a sharp jolt of pain coursing through my hand. "What the hell? Now I'm enjoying meaningless conversations?" I muttered with frustration, berating myself for allowing such thoughts to occupy my mind.

THUD

Another punch, a release of pent-up frustration that had nothing to do with the wall itself. "I have no right to indulge in such trivial matters," I reprimanded myself, my voice firm as I scolded my own weaknesses.

THUD

And yet another punch, each blow an attempt to quell the strange emotions that had been stirring within me. "Stop it, you fool. Get back to work and remember why you're here. How will you look at her face when you meet her," I reminded myself; the pain in my hand became a grounding force.

As the pain surged through me, I forced myself to rise, my grip tightening around my bow. I knocked an arrow, the familiar weight of the weapon comforting in its familiarity.

With the feelings in my heart, I launched into another round of training, focusing solely on the mechanics of the shot.

Closing my eyes, I envisioned myself as the enigmatic figure from that recurring dream. Each movement was precise, each shot deliberate, and the image of the dream seemed closer than ever.

This time, I felt like I was getting closer as to how that figure moved. Slowly but surely, I was making improvements. The specs of my art I was comprehending it slowly.

SWOOSH SWOOSH

Another arrow and another arrow. Today's training was not going to be solely focused on Archery, but rather, this time, I was going to try a more challenging type of combat.

A type of combat where I would be fighting while switching weapons. Because my occupation is [Weapon Master], I can specialize in a lot of weapons, and I need to use them to the maximum.

Even though my body is not that strong when it comes to close combat, I should still be able to use weapons to perfection, even if my body supports it or not.

As I continued my training, my senses heightened, my awareness expanding to the world around me.

The training grounds seemed to come alive with simulated monsters, each one a creation of the training system. These constructs were strong opponents, designed to challenge every student of the academy.

SWOOSH

Firing an arrow, I stabbed the bird-type monster in the back of its eye.

SLASH

Then, immediately changing to my dagger, I slashed the Greyhounds.

THUD THUD

As the two monsters fell to the ground, I looked at my performance.

'Using bow and dagger simultaneously is hard.'

It was hard. Thanks to the bow's unique structure, it was even harder to change it rapidly. If it was a gun, it was plausible, but a bow was hard.

'But still, I am improving.'

At the very least, this was training for me to prepare for future events.

Just like that, I shifted seamlessly from my bow to a short sword; my movements were not as fluid as I engaged with the monsters.

I was trying to make everything perfect like the figure did, and it was for sure hard.

Just like that, I trained until the very night, and when I was about to leave the training grounds, suddenly, I felt the presence of someone leaving the training grounds. Not one, but three people.

One with blue hair, one with red, and one with silver. I could see the main cast walking while smiling to themselves.

"Hey, come on. You are a lot better now, right?"

"Yeah, burning things must have been effective, haven't they?"

"Indeed. Thanks, guys."

"If you want to thank me, buy me the meal next time."

"Tch....Julia, you are stingy."

"I am not."

"Yes, yes."

Seeing them like that, I understood that Ethan was trying to relax himself.

'Not my job.'

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