

H. Academy 71

Chapter 71 Chapter 17.6 - Normal Life

"This will be it for today's lesson," the history professor's voice resonated through the classroom once again, signaling the end of yet another class. A collective sigh of relief rippled through the students, signaling the end of their academic obligations for the week.

"You don't have any assignments for this week. Have fun on the weekend," he announced before making his exit, leaving the classroom in a state of jubilation. As the door closed behind him, a chorus of enthusiastic exclamations erupted from the students.

"Woo-hoo! No assignments!"

"Finally, a break!"

"I can't believe we lucked out this week!"

The atmosphere in the room shifted from one of concentration to one of elation. Desks were pushed back, and the rustling of backpacks being packed signaled the beginning of the weekend exodus. Smiles and laughter replaced furrowed brows and focused expressions.

"So, who's up for some relaxation this weekend?" one student suggested with a grin.

"Count me in! I need to recharge after all this studying," another chimed in.

"I heard there's a movie night in the common room on Saturday. Let's go!"

The energy in the room was infectious as plans were made, invitations were extended, and excitement filled the air. The prospect of a weekend without looming assignments or looming exams was enough to lift the spirits of even the most diligent students.

In fact, since the academy's student spectrum was people of young age, of course, they were bound to interact and socialize with each other. And knowing that most of them came from a good background, the most plausible event for the weekend would be spending money with each other.

Following that, I also started packing my things up. Since it was a weekend without any assignments and there were no club meetings for me, I was planning to go for another dungeon exploration to make some money.

Just as I was about to leave, suddenly, I saw something that I had been waiting for.

"Ethan, can I talk to you later?"

It was a girl with chestnut hair, and blue eyes approached our protagonist, who was also packing his things up slowly.

Her face looked tired, and her clothes looked slightly neglected. Her hands, filled with calluses, now had some wounds on them. Her complexion was slightly white; dark circles were under her eyes. A faint smell of potions that boosted one's performance could be felt, and not being alone, I could see the faint traces of aftereffects stemming from an unbalanced diet.

Overall, the girl was basically showing signs of exhaustion and poverty.

"Umm....Do I know you?" Being the good-natured protagonist he is, Ethan asked the girl, looking at her with a surprised face. It was pretty normal. She was not a person Ethan had ever talked about before.

"Ah....Sorry....Please, can we talk somewhere private?" But Emily seemed rather uncomfortable to speak while some people were looking at them.

At this point, Ethan's reputation was not still that high since he was one of the last-ranked people in the academy, even though his family was famous.

So, aside from some mischievous glances from Julia and Lucas, nobody minded what Ethan was doing.

"Umm....." But that did not mean he was not embarrassed. After all, a girl or a boy saying such a thing to a person from the opposite gender could easily be misunderstood.

"Please, it is important." But, looking at Emily, who even forgot to introduce herself, Ethan could no longer refuse her and nodded his head.

With her request acknowledged, she finally exhaled, her relief evident. "Thank you."

Just like that, the two left the classroom, but I could see Lucas and Julia looking at him with a mischievous gaze.

'It seems his fate is sealed.'

Remembering the dialogues from the game, I knew Ethan would be teased for a very long time because of this event.

'Then, I should prepare for this as well.'

With that thought, I left the classroom and made my way towards my room.

When I entered my room, the first thing I did was enter the Hunter community website using my Cadet identity.

I started surfing the bulletin board for the dungeon exploration recruitments. As you all already know, this world has dungeons and guilds.

And, of course, thanks to the constant appearance of dungeons, the guilds that are managing them sometimes will have a hard time, or maybe even sometimes a dungeon won't be affiliated with a guild and will be bought by a group or individual that wanted to expand its business into Hunter Field.

Therefore, there was a community for Hunters to search for party recruitment for dungeons. It had a similar system to Black Market, where you would be ranked according to your performance and the amount of money you made.

But, if there was one thing different, that would be the strict regulation of information. You would register with your ID card, and your skills and the type of weapon you used would be recorded.

And from there, according to that, tracking villains with supernatural abilities would be easier. Of course, the tax and other things were also there, but the most important thing was being transparent.

Aside from that, since dungeons that are discovered are always regulated by either guilds or associations, it is very hard to enter a dungeon solo.

This was the reason why I went to the Black Market and explored the dungeons there because I would prefer going solo over going with a party of Hunters. After all, there were countless people out there that is hard to control, and my skills were also not bad for going solo.

Even though I don't have overwhelming power, I do have one thing. It is flexibility. Since I can enhance the bullets on my gun, I could put a lot stronger damage output, and the rate of attack is also high because of the gun's characteristics.

With my [Shadowborne] trait, I could also move stealthily, which makes me very flexible at kiting and surprise attacks.

But all those things are something I want to hide as much as possible. Especially my [Shadowborne] trait and my usage of guns since I am pretty sure Kaya Hartley did see shadows moving at that time, and with the gunshot sound, if she ever learns about that, connecting dots won't be hard.

And, if she connects the dots, she will come after my life.

The reason?

I am a danger to her. Even though I saved her daughter, her thought progress will be, 'What if my daughter was the target? Could I save her?'

And, as per our human nature, if we encounter something we can't fathom or understand, we just destroy it. This is how we operate, after all.

In this scenario, I will be targeted by Kaya Hartley, which, in the end, will put me in danger.

That was the sole reason why I didn't want to explore the dungeon, but with my bow abilities right now, I should be at least in a plausible position.

In any case, after surfing around the forums and bulletin board for a while, I finally came across the notice I wanted to see.

Guild: Azure Crest

Mission: Urgent Dungeon Exploration

Objective: Clearing the dungeon and obtaining the core of the boss monster

We, the members of the Azure Crest guild, are in dire need of assistance for an urgent dungeon exploration. The recent economic downturn and unforeseen expenses have left us in a financial crisis, and failure to procure valuable artifacts could potentially lead to our downfall.

Requirements:

Archery Specialist: A skilled marksman with precision and versatility in ranged combat. The ideal candidate should be well-versed in tactical positioning and trap detection.

Healing Expert: A proficient healer capable of supporting the team with curative spells and providing vital assistance in dire situations. Knowledge of defensive magic is a plus.

We are offering a substantial reward for your services. The mission details will be disclosed upon agreement.

If you believe you possess the necessary skills and are willing to aid us in our time of need, please contact us immediately.

Contact: Guild Master Lorraine --> Contact by messaging us on the platform

Location: Azure Crest Guild Hall, Arcadia City/3. District Guild Street No 351

Deadline: Next Saturday

The moment I looked at the notice coming from there, I was surprised. Of course, in the game, the player was directly contacted by Emily. Therefore, I didn't look at the guild notices at all.

'I see....They wanted a healer.'

Of course, finding a healer is by no means an easy task, especially if you are short on money. This was a crucial mistake that would mostly be made by people that was new to this sector. Of course, it also might be because they were desperate, but it was what it was.

'And the healer was a demon contractor.'

This will be a pretty common pattern in the future. The demons will see that the lack of healers is a very crucial point, and they will utilize this by impersonating healers. And this will result in a very high amount of hunter parties wiping out.

This was one of the reasons why I wanted to join this dungeon exploration. The healer they had hired for the job was a demon contractor, and this almost resulted in the party's wipeout.

Of course, since, as a player, we were there, the party was able to deal with the bastard. But that can never be sure. With just the appearance of mine, things may change, and the butterfly effect might ensure.

Though inside, I know these are all justifications.

'I am going to kill him.'

It was because that demon contractor was going to leave the dungeon alive and escape. Even though Ethan will be able to deal with his sabotaging, the demon contractor is crafty thanks to his ability.

'I won't let him escape.'

And the second reason is the dungeon does actually have a hidden stage.

Indeed, a hidden stage I had discovered while doing this side-quest. And it was not a coincidence. Since I had always paid attention to every bit of detail, I noticed that the mana around a place was different. My character was not drawing the mana as it was supposed to be, and it was proof that there was a mana disturbance there.

With this suspicion, I walked there and did some random things to see what it was, and when I used my mana just before the small boulder, I got sucked into a space portal and entered the hidden stage.

'Then, since it is next week, then this leaves me a good amount of time to prepare.'

Since, in the end, the last missing seat was not filled by any type of people, that means they won't refuse me either.

'But, I will still wait and see until I am sure.'

With that thought, I closed the site and started preparing myself for another dungeon exploration.

The work was never going to end after all.....

Chapter 72 Chapter 18.1 - Small but not small help

"Yo... Mister Playboy..." When Ethan reentered the room after his conversation with the girl named Emily, his two friends, Lucas and Julia, welcomed him with grins that held a hint of mischief.

Rolling his eyes at their predictable antics, he braced himself for the upcoming teasing session. It wasn't the first time they had jumped at the chance to rib him about anything remotely related to romance or relationships.

"How was your little chat with the mysterious girl?" Julia's tone dripped with sweetness, but her twinkling eyes betrayed her true intentions.

Ethan let out an exasperated sigh, deciding to humor them. "Just a conversation, you guys. Nothing to write home about."

Lucas arched an eyebrow, his grin widening. "Oh, come on, Ethan. 'Just a conversation'? You've never been one to strike up random conversations with strangers, especially not attractive ones like her."

Running a hand through his hair, Ethan felt his cheeks warm under their playful gazes. "Well, she needed to discuss something with me. Not a big deal."

Julia's smirk turned into a knowing one. "Something, huh? Care to share?"

Shaking his head, Ethan refused to give them more ammunition. "I hate to break it to you, but there's really nothing juicy to spill."

Hearing this, the smile on Lucas' face widened. "It seems our Ethan finally managed to break free from that little edgy guy?"

"Tch....How much am I going to tell you that it is not like that?" Seeing that the point was once again turning into that, Ethan clicked his tongue. These two twins were talented at making everything into a joke.

"Ho? So, how is it like that, then? Whenever I see you, I feel like you are talking about him?"

"It is just how you feel."

"Yes, yes." Lounging back in his chair, Lucas let out an exaggerated sigh. "And here I thought our Ethan was finally stepping out of his hermit shell. Talking to mysterious girls—next thing you know, you'll be exchanging love letters."

Ethan shot him a mock glare, amusement slowly overtaking his embarrassment. "You guys are relentless."

Julia shrugged nonchalantly, her smirk unrepentant. "Just making sure our friend's social life gets some action."

"You make it sound like I am not talking with anyone?"

"But, you aren't right? Aside from us, whom are you talking with?"

When Ethan heard about this, he started thinking about his life in the academy. When it looked at this aspect, they were right. Ethan was someone who didn't spend time with others aside from his friend circle.

"But, is that even a bad thing?" He asked in response. He was no stupid guy, and he knew that if not for his surname, he would get rough treatment from everyone around him thanks to his rank.

"Well.....It is not that bad, but you should really meet someone, you know." Julia answered. It was true that having low amounts of friends was not that bad, but she also wanted Ethan to explore the life of youngsters like her.

"Look at me....For example, I am meeting with someone."

"HA! Who are you meeting with?"

"None of your business."

"Tch. Of course, it is my business; I am your brother."

"So?"

"At least, tell me. I am curious."

"No."

"Sigh....."

While those two were bickering amongst themselves, Ethan's thoughts turned to what he should do about Emily's offer.

He had no reason to accept such an offer out of nowhere, but part of him was feeling pitiful after seeing Emily's appearance. As Ethan could see, it was obvious that Emily's family was having a hard time, as she explained, and he wanted to help her.

"Hey, guys. Do you know about Emily's Family?" Ethan asked, diverting the conversation to a different topic.

Lucas waggled his eyebrows playfully. "Oh, is this another one of your 'casual conversations'?"

Ethan sighed, used to their teasing by now. "Just answer the question."

Julia leaned forward, her tone faux-serious. "Well, well. Our Ethan, showing interest in someone's family matters? I'm shocked."

Rolling his eyes, Ethan ignored their antics. "Come on, just tell me if you know anything."

Lucas leaned back, putting on an exaggerated thinking expression. "Hmmm, let me think... Nope, don't know anything."

Julia nodded in agreement. "Yeah, Ethan. We're just your friends, not your personal investigators."

Ethan shot them a mock glare. "You two are impossible."

Lucas chuckled. "Alright, alright. Fine, we do know a bit. Emily's family is in a bit of a tough spot, financially speaking."

Julia nodded. "Yeah, she doesn't talk about it much, but she's been trying to find ways to help out."

Ethan frowned. "What do you mean, find ways to help out?"

Julia shrugged. "I've heard that she spends most of her weekends outside of the academy. Apparently, she's been exploring dungeons to make some extra money."

Ethan's eyebrows shot up. "Exploring dungeons? That's risky business for a cadet, no?"

Lucas nodded. "Yeah, but from what I've gathered, she's pretty skilled. She's been doing it for a while, I think."

Looking at it like that, it seems what Emily said was not a lie. Of course, Ethan wanted to believe her, but in the end, he also needed to confirm those things.

"Then it makes sense."

"What makes sense?"

"Nothing."

Just like that, Ethan's investigation concluded as his judgment on the matter. Just like a hero would do, he immediately judged that he should help a person in need....

"I wish to use the PhantomGlide Dummy," I declared, standing in the midst of the academy's training grounds. My gaze was focused on a particular area, which was fairly empty at this hour of the day.

The academy personnel, a trainer overseeing the training activities, raised an eyebrow at my request. "Are you certain about that?"

My answer left no room for doubt. "Yes. I want to use my remaining ticket for it."

A faint smile curved the trainer's lips. "Very well, then. PhantomGlide Dummy it is."

The PhantomGlide Dummy wasn't your run-of-the-mill training tool. It catered to close combatants like me who aimed to enhance their skills in fast-paced engagements. What set it apart was its ability to move rapidly and unpredictably, simulating the agility and tactics of a real opponent. It demanded quick reflexes and adaptability, pushing trainees to their limits.

However, mastering the PhantomGlide Dummy wasn't child's play, especially for a first-year student like me.

At least for normal ones.

It required a high level of skill and a deep understanding of combat techniques. Only those well-versed in fighting principles and possessing a keen self-awareness could truly benefit from its challenging training.

'Considering that I observed most improvement while directly sparring with Ethan, this should help me.'

While fighting with monsters and hunting them, I also improved, but I noticed that the more I sparred with an intelligent opponent, the more I could observe both mine and their faults and erase them one by one.

'[Perceptive Insight] is truly a strong trait, isn't it?'

"Alright, Astron. A quick reminder," the trainer's tone turned serious. "PhantomGlide Dummy is generally not recommended for first-year students due to its complexity and skill requirements."

"I'm well aware, and I'm ready to take it on." It was not a lie.

The trainer nodded approvingly. "Good. Just remember that initial frustration is normal, but every encounter with the PhantomGlide Dummy teaches valuable lessons. Don't let setbacks discourage you."

"I won't."

It was far away, waiting for me. The sun made long shadows, and there was a little breeze that smelled like grass.

I took out my two daggers and took a deep breath. The cold metal felt good in my hands. I got into a good position and looked at the PhantomGlide Dummy.

It was fairly early in the morning, so the training grounds were mostly empty. Aside from weirdos like me, nobody was here.

My feet shifted, a subtle adjustment in stance that was both instinctive and deliberate.

My eyes locked onto the PhantomGlide Dummy, its form appearing almost ethereal in the morning light.

It stood there, an inanimate object brought to life by the magic coursing through it. I flexed my fingers, the leather of my gloves creaking softly as I tightened my grip on the daggers. My heartbeat sounded calm, not matching the anticipation.

SWOOSH SWOOSH

I launched myself forward. The world around me blurred as I closed the distance to the dummy in seconds. The wind brushed against my skin, carrying a whisper of the challenges to come.

SWISH SWISH

The PhantomGlide Dummy didn't waste any time. It came to life with unnatural swiftness, its movements a dance of agility and precision.

CLANK

My first strike was aimed at its side, but it sidestepped effortlessly, the air barely ruffling its form. I spun on my heel, my second dagger arcing toward its exposed back.

CLANK

Again, it eluded the blow, a mere shimmer as it glided to safety. I couldn't help but be impressed by its speed, a true testament to its reputation.

But I wasn't disheartened. Instead, I felt a rush of exhilaration. Each dodge, each evasion, was a lesson in itself. It was like a conversation, a silent exchange of tactics and techniques.

My eyes were observing every bit of his movements while fighting. The dagger in my hand felt like it was my limb.

Of course, that was an exaggeration, but the sensation was a lot different from how it felt before.

CLINK CLINK

I attacked again, a rapid combination of strikes that were met with equally swift counters from the dummy. It blocked with fluid grace, its movements almost mesmerizing. It was like dancing with a phantom, a dance of blades and agility.

CLANK CLANK

The rhythm of the battle intensified. I blocked its strikes, parrying with my daggers as I sought openings in its defenses. It was a test of my reflexes and adaptability—a challenge that I was going to win.

CLANK SWOOSH THUD

Every tenth attack I launched was met with a sudden burst of movement from the dummy.

It retaliated, striking back with uncanny accuracy. I had to be ready to block, to evade, to respond in kind.

This was one of the reasons why this dummy was not that sought after. It had an incredibly fast speed thanks to the special design, it had an incredibly good reading of the enemy's movements, and when it attacked, its momentum was strong.

"Kurghk-"

I released a mouthful of saliva from my mouth as I felt the aftereffects of its attack. My body was tingling, but it was a rather refreshing feeling.

SWOOSH SWOOSH

This time, I started attacking while imbuing my mana on my daggers. Even though my mana control was still not that swift, at the very least, I could feel myself getting better at it.

It was awkward, but it was what it was.

The sweat began to bead on my forehead, my breath coming in measured huffs as the battle raged on. It was a dance of precision, a symphony of steel meeting steel. The training grounds seemed to fade away, leaving only me and the PhantomGlide Dummy.

CLANK CLANK

My focus sharpened, each movement calculated as I struck and parried.

But amidst the intensity of the battle, something changed. A fleeting vision, a mirage that shouldn't be there amidst the PhantomGlide Dummy's movements.

As I lunged forward to strike, I caught a glimpse of a figure in my peripheral vision.

The enigmatic figure from my recurring dreams stood at the edge of the training ground, just beyond my line of sight. The same figure that had shown me which art was suited for me was now taunting me with its mastery.

And amongst his taunts, my daggers moved as if guided by an unseen force, their trajectory shifting slightly.

CLANK CLANK

The PhantomGlide Dummy's responses seemed different, almost as if it was adjusting to my new approach.

And at that moment, I saw the movements the enigmatic figure made. My world turned crimson as I observed the figure, understanding the essence of his moves.

The name of the skill appeared before my eyes.

'Onslaught of Crimson Moon.'

Chapter 73 Chapter 18.2 - Small but not small help

It was early morning, the sun still tucked behind the horizon, casting a gentle golden hue across the academy grounds. The cool breeze played with the strands of Maya Evergreen's hair as she strolled along, a handful of chip packets clutched in her hand. With each step, she crunched on the chips contentedly, a carefree smile lighting up her face.

"Hmm... Hmm..."

Her humming mingled with the sound of her snack, creating a strangely harmonious melody that only the morning birds and the occasional early riser could hear. Her enjoyment was evident as if she had found the secret to perfect mornings: chips and solitude.

As she walked, she glanced around, her sharp eyes taking in the tranquil scene. The campus was quiet, most students still wrapped in slumber. Maya's leisurely pace continued until a thought crossed her mind.

"As expected, waking up early is the best... Especially with chips..."

She nodded to herself, convinced of this newfound wisdom. After all, she had the world to herself at this hour, and the chips were an unexpected yet delightful companion.

With her chips in tow, Maya wandered the academy grounds, her steps carrying her toward the training area. The empty paths welcomed her, and she reveled in the peacefulness. Her munching seemed to blend in with the rustling leaves, becoming just another note in the morning symphony.

"I should train today. Yesterday, I slept for the whole day," Maya murmured, her words punctuated by the sound of her chips. Just like most of the students, Maya was a girl with a weird sleeping schedule. Sometimes, she wouldn't sleep for the whole day, and sometimes she would sleep for.

"It is Elemental Chamber today, then."

The training grounds loomed before her, and Maya's eyes brightened with determination. The Elemental Chamber awaited her, a place where her skills would be put to the test. With a final crunch, she finished the last of her chips and discarded the empty packets into a nearby bin.

As Maya stepped onto the training grounds, she noticed a few academy personnel already bustling about, setting up for the day's activities. She flashed a grin at a passing instructor, who nodded in acknowledgment. Maya's reputation as the first-ranked student in the second-year class had preceded her.

The instructor paused in her preparations, looking at Maya thoughtfully before accepting the offered chips. "Thank you," she replied appreciatively.

Maya's grin widened, pleased by the instructor's response. "You're welcome! I find that starting the day with a bit of energy from chips is quite refreshing."

The instructor chuckled, munching on a chip. "I can see the appeal. So, Maya, where are you planning to head this morning?"

Maya tilted her head, her expression playful. "I'll be heading to the Elemental Chamber. It's where I feel most at home."

The instructor smiled in understanding. "You certainly have a strong connection with that place. Always striving to master your elemental magic."

Maya's eyes sparkled with determination. "Absolutely. It's the perfect environment to challenge myself and make progress. After all, I am the world's best nature mage."

The instructor nodded in agreement. "You sure are always up for a challenge. The Elemental Chamber is all yours, given your ranking as the top student. Your dedication to improvement is commendable."

Maya's expression turned thoughtful. "Thank you. I also want to set a good example for the juniors."

The instructor's smile grew fond. "You truly are a dedicated student. Your enthusiasm and commitment are truly inspiring."

A faint blush colored Maya's cheeks at the compliment, but she maintained her cheerful demeanor. "I appreciate that. I genuinely enjoy the process of learning and growing."

As they conversed, Maya's attention was drawn to a series of clashing sounds coming from a distance. She turned her head, curiosity evident on her face.

"Do you hear that?" she wondered aloud, her gaze directed toward the source of the noise. She felt like she knew where the sound was coming from, but she couldn't put her mind to where it was.

"Ah...It is the PhantomGlide Dummy." The instructor replied, looking at the source of the sound. "A freshman student just came before you and said he wanted to challenge the PhantomGlide Dummy."

Recognition dawned on Maya's face, and she nodded in understanding. "Of course, the PhantomGlide Dummy. Someone must be engaging in rigorous training with it."

The instructor's eyes twinkled with a touch of admiration. "Indeed. It's rather impressive to witness such dedication from a freshman, especially this early in the morning."

Maya's lips curved into a pleased smile. "Early mornings often reveal the true enthusiasts of self-improvement."

As they drew closer to the source of the sounds, the instructor's gaze remained focused on the training area. "It appears the freshman is taking on quite the challenge," she observed.

Maya's curiosity deepened, and a hint of intrigue laced her words. "I wonder who that freshman might be and how they're faring against the PhantomGlide Dummy."

The instructor's expression turned thoughtful. "While I appreciate their enthusiasm, it's important for individuals to recognize battles that might not be in their favor."

Maya's brows furrowed slightly, a touch of dissent in her voice. "But isn't the academy about pushing our limits and striving for growth?"

The instructor nodded, acknowledging Maya's perspective. "Indeed, it is. However, there's a fine line between growth and setting oneself up for an insurmountable challenge. Not every battle is worth pursuing."

Maya's gaze held a glimmer of determination. "I believe that perseverance and determination can overcome even the most daunting odds."

The instructor's lips curved into a gentle smile. "While that's true, sometimes knowing when to step back is a valuable skill as well. Wisdom lies in recognizing which battles are truly worth fighting."

Maya's stance stiffened momentarily, a flash of disagreement crossing her face. "But if we always shy away from challenges, how can we ever achieve greatness?"

The instructor's gaze held a mix of understanding and wisdom. "It's not about shying away, Maya. It's about choosing battles that align with your strengths and have a realistic chance of success. Taking on battles that are overwhelmingly stacked against you might lead to unnecessary setbacks."

However, this was not something that Maya liked to talk about because it reminded her of the times of the past.

'The true warrior is the one that never steps back even in front of the battle they can't win.'

Feeling that she didn't want to talk with the instructor any longer, she waved her hands and made her way toward the Elemental Chamber.

CLANK! CLANK! CLANK!

However, with each step she had taken, the sounds of clashing echoed louder and louder.

If it was the normal time, Maya would simply step back and ignore the sounds since sounds would fill every corner of the training grounds.

But that was not the case right now since the only sound she was hearing was the sound of clashing that was coming from the PhantomGlide Dummy area.

And this made her curious. Adding the fact that the one that was going against the PhantomGlide Dummy was a freshman, she couldn't help but get more and more curious.

Who was this freshman, she wondered.

CLANK! CRUNCH CLANK! CRUNCH

The sound of chips crunching in her mouth mixed with the sounds of the clashing, and she slowly made her way to the area.

There, amidst the flurry of movements and the sound of metal meeting metal, she saw him – the freshman who had caught his attention during her time in the club.

His name was Astron. She recalled the club meeting where his name had been called out as a new member, along with his casual, gloomy aura around him.

To be honest, he was a freshman, which intrigued him since it was the first time she was being challenged like that, and it was not a bad feeling. She was a girl with a good nature, so she was always welcomed by other students.

In any case, before her, Astron was putting up a determined fight against the PhantomGlide Dummy, his movements swift and precise.

Despite the intense challenge posed by the dummy's agility, he didn't seem deterred. Every dodge, every strike, reflected his earnest effort to best the formidable opponent.

There was a reason why PhantomGlide Dummy was always considered one of the hardest challenges for students.

It was because the dummy had the innate trait to adjust its physical aspects to a little more than his enemy no matter what. And because of this, it was impossible to overpower the dummy using physical strength alone.

And because the academy was filled with rich students who consumed a lot of resources to improve their bodies, when they couldn't use this to their advantage, they would be left with technique alone. This is why freshmen were not advised to go against it, since their technique would be mostly lacking.

Maya's lips curved into a faint smile as she watched him. His tenacity was commendable, and it reminded her of her own determination when she faced various challenges in her magical journey.

CRUNCH CRUNCH

Her reputation as the top student in the second-year class wasn't just handed to her; it was the result of countless hours of hard work and determination. Only she herself did know how hard it was to put such an effort in this early in the morning.

CLANK! CLANK! CLANK!

As she observed Astron's battle, she noticed his movements evolving. It was as if he was adapting to the PhantomGlide Dummy's patterns, learning from every interaction. It was like while he was fighting with the PhantomGlide Dummy, he was not only attacking but also observing and absorbing the knowledge.

Maya's experience as a skilled nature mage gave her an acute sense of observation, allowing her to discern the subtle shifts in his tactics.

'He is like a black hole, absorbing everything.'

Unbeknownst to Astron, Maya's presence was not just a silent spectatorship. Her gaze was analytical, and with each clash, she assessed his strengths and weaknesses.

'But, his physical aspects are holding him off.'

She could easily see the battle, and she could discern that the ideas that he had formed in his mind were actually being held back by his body. Even though the speed of the Dummy was adjusted to him, he still couldn't display his techniques.

"Hufff.....Hufff...."

She could hear his ragged breath and the sweat forming on his forehead.

'Isn't he a bit too weak for an academy student?'

It was her second year inside the academy, and it was the first time she had seen such a weak student.

'It looks like it is because of his body that he is the last rank.'

Since she was the club president, she naturally knew about his rank.

But what was even more apparent was his lack of mana finesse. It was as if he was unaware of how to manipulate his mana effectively.

Maya's brows furrowed slightly, concern mingling with her curiosity. She had seen her fair share of students struggling with mana control, but Astron's situation seemed different.

It was as if he was grappling with a fundamental understanding of mana manipulation.

'Like he had never used mana before.'

Her mind raced, considering the possible reasons behind his predicament. Could it be a lack of proper training? Or perhaps he hadn't received the guidance he needed to develop his mana control skills?

Whatever the reason, Maya couldn't help but feel a twinge of empathy. Mana control was a vital aspect of a mage's arsenal, and struggling with it could hinder one's progress significantly. But that didn't mean this was not the case for normal Hunters.

No. This was also the case for the normal Hunters since they also needed to have good mana control. After all, most techniques, be it swords, spears, bows, or any other, needed mana.

'With this, he won't survive at all.'

As Astron's battle continued, Maya's analytical gaze remained fixed on him. She could almost sense his frustration, the determination to break through the barriers that held him back.

But frustration alone wouldn't suffice; he needed guidance, support, and perhaps even a mentor to help him navigate the intricacies of mana manipulation.

'Should I help him?'

Her lips pressed into a thoughtful line as she continued to watch. She debated whether she should step in and offer her insights, but a part of her hesitated.

After all, they were both students on their respective paths, and unsolicited advice might not always be welcomed.

But at that moment, the aura surrounding him changed.

Chapter 74 Chapter 18.3 - Small but not small help

At that moment, she felt like the aura surrounding him suddenly changed. Mana of the crimson color surrounded him like he was a demon.

'Blood Magic?'

Maya asked herself. It was not a common sight to see such color of mana elsewhere. But, it was not only the color of his mana but the feeling it gave.

She felt the bloodthirstiness that came from the exact moment.

Following that was a sight she was not expecting in her life.

The boy she thought was weak suddenly bolted towards the dummy at a rapid speed incomparable to before.

SWOOSH SWOOSH SWOOSH SWOOSH

And he started attacking the dummy rapidly.

The daggers spun in his hands, creating a crimson crescent that sliced through the air.

THUD THUD THUD

The attack was relentless, an unyielding storm of blades that sought to overwhelm the PhantomGlide Dummy.

Consistently, a crescent crimson blade formed of crimson mana tried to pierce through the dummy, and even if it didn't touch the dummy, the blades of crimson color went past it and smashed the walls behind like a wave of wind.

The dummy's defenses faltered, unable to keep up with the sudden assault. It was a fierce dance of steel and shadows, a battle between will and mechanism.

He looked like he poured his essence into every strike, each movement a testament to his growth.

'What?'

Maya was surprised. It was an incredible sight, a sight that made her blood boil in excitement.

'You can do it.'

CHUMP CHUMP CHUMP

Unbeknownst to her, she started eating her chips rapidly like she was at the climax of a movie.

'His attacks are trapping its movement.'

The purple eyes of the boy turned slightly crimson, his irises shining.

'You can do it!' She silently cheered, her heart swelling with a mix of excitement and admiration.

After all, he was putting his everything on the line.

'He is getting injured.'

She couldn't ignore the strain on his body. Veins bulged on his muscles, a testament to the physical toll his relentless assault was taking on him. But he pressed on, his resilience shining through even in the face of adversity.

'His mana control is still immature, but it is like he instinctively knows how to use it. It must be either his [Trait] or his [Skill].'

Maya's insight as a skilled mage allowed her to see beyond the surface. While Astron's mana control still showed signs of immaturity, there was an instinctive quality to his manipulation. It was as if his [Trait] or [Skill] granted him an innate understanding of mana, compensating for his lack of formal training.

It was a dance of blades.

The dance of blades continued each strike a calculated move to surprise and overwhelm the dummy. Astron's attacks were relentless, each movement a reflection of his determination to succeed.

'He is trying to overwhelm it with his technique.'

SWOOSH SWOOSH

In the midst of his rapid assault, a particular strike caught Maya's attention. It was a slash of different speed and trajectory, a deliberate attempt to catch the dummy off guard. The dummy, accustomed to its pattern, barely managed to evade the strike, showcasing its waning defenses.

SWOOSH

Then, following it was another slash from the reverse side, aimed at the dummy's lower side.

SWOOSH

But the dummy once again evaded his strike.

'Another one.'

However, Maya could see that Astron had already predicted the parry.

Another strike aimed at the reverse side was approaching.

SWOOSH

And the dummy responded in the last second, evading the strike.

None of his strikes hit, but they were not blocked either because the dummy couldn't keep up with the speed.

'Huh? Another attack? But, it is too late?'

Maya immediately saw another attack aimed right at the core of the dummy, but the dummy was already about to dodge the attack.

'Huh?'

But it didn't.

Rather, it couldn't.

Because surrounding it were a bunch of red threads formed all around its body.

'This is?'

Even she herself didn't realize the little amounts of crimson-colored mana left on the air like threads. She was far too focused on his attacks that even as an outsider, she forgot.

CLANK TOK

And then, it happened.

A triumphant clash – the sound of his daggers meeting the dummy's defense one final time.

The Phantom Glide Dummy couldn't evade the strike, and neither could it parry it since the attack came too fast.

The crimson-colored dagger pierced through its defenses, but at the same time, the threads of crimson above the dummy immediately descended, closing the cage.

PUFF

The PhantomGlide Dummy faltered, its form flickering before dispersing into nothingness to be repaired by the magical engineers.

"He actually did it."

Maya's heart swelled with exhilaration as she witnessed Astron's victory. The intense battle had been won, not through brute force, but through strategy, determination, and the unyielding will to succeed. It was a testament to his growth, his potential, and his unshakable spirit.

But at the same time, it was a feeling that she had forgotten in a while.

The thrill of battle, the sense of challenging one's own limits.

Just as before coming here, she had talked with the instructor about how she challenged her limits constantly, but that couldn't be more wrong.

In fact, rather than challenging herself, she was simply doing what she was comfortable with.

As a Nature Mage with good Elemental abilities, she always felt comfortable inside the Elemental Chamber rather than challenging herself. She felt like she was in her home while training there using her nature magic.

And since the Elemental Chamber was a place that was always thought of as hard, everyone thought she easily endured it because she was a genius.

That was true, but it was not because she was a genius but because she was a nature mage. From the first moment she stepped there, she never felt uncomfortable at all.

"Ah....."

And, now witnessing such a thing happening before her eyes, she couldn't help but feel exhilarated. It was like getting simply inspired and hyped.

'What was I doing?'

But that didn't mean she never pushed herself. No, she did. Before coming to the academy or in the first months of her education, she pushed herself.

A triumphant smile graced her lips as she watched Astron's form, his chest heaving from the exertion of the battle. It was a moment that resonated with her own memories of pushing her limits, a reminder of the thrill she used to find in challenging herself.

But as the adrenaline began to ebb away, Maya's awareness shifted to Astron's condition. She noticed a telltale sign – his staggering steps and the faint waver in his stance.

It was clear that the intense battle had taken a toll on him, depleting his energy and leaving him on the brink of exhaustion.

THUD

Following that, he collapsed on the ground, not being able to stand anymore.

Without a moment's hesitation, Maya closed the distance between them, her concern overriding any remaining barriers. Her steps were swift and purposeful, her heart now filled with a different kind of empathy.

"Are you all right?" she asked gently, her voice laced with genuine concern as she reached out a supportive hand towards him.

"Huff...Huff...."

Astron's breath was labored, his shoulders rising and falling rapidly as he struggled to catch his breath. He gave a faint nod, his expression a mix of exhaustion and a hint of pride.

"Wow! That was incredible!" Maya exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. "I've never seen anyone take down the PhantomGlide Dummy like that before. Your technique and determination were amazing!"

Astron grumbled softly, his voice barely audible. "It was nothing..."

Maya's grin widened, undeterred by his modesty. "No, seriously, you were like a whirlwind out there. Your moves were so precise, and that final strike was just... wow!"

Astron's gaze remained fixed on the ground, his exhaustion evident. He was clearly not used to receiving praise, especially not from someone as energetic as Maya.

"I mean, not many students can even land a hit on that dummy, let alone defeat it," Maya continued, her excitement contagious. "You really know your stuff!"

Astron's response was a barely decipherable grumble, but Maya wasn't discouraged. She was on a roll and determined to make him see his accomplishment.

"And that thread technique you used to trap the dummy – that was so smart!" Maya's eyes shone with admiration. "I've never seen anything like it. It was like you had the dummy dancing to your tune!"

"Tch." However, the response she received was a click of the tongue. Astron's lips pressed into a thin line, his exhaustion and discomfort evident.

He disliked when other people learned about his skills and meddled with his affairs.

"You should be really proud of yourself, Junior," Maya continued, her voice filled with genuine enthusiasm. "You faced a tough challenge and came out victorious. That takes real skill and determination." Her hand was on her chest as she spoke like a general on the battlefield.

In fact, she even imagined herself in such a manner.

But Astron could no longer tolerate the girl's rambling. His gaze finally lifted, meeting Maya's earnest blue eyes. He couldn't deny that her words held a sincerity that was hard to ignore, but he also didn't want to admit it.

"How long have you been watching?" He asked, with a silent protest. It was like he was trying to say it is rude to watch other people's techniques.

Pondering about his question for a second, she realized she had been watching him for quite a while. "Hmm? Probably from the start?"

"Tch? Don't you know it is rude to watch other people's skills?"

"Hmm? Is it rude?"

"It is."

"I see....But, then, why are you training on the open field if you don't want to show your skills?"

"That...." Astron hesitated. Even with him being very good with words, her point also made sense. Also, he didn't want to argue.

Seeing him not answering her words, Maya put a proud expression on her face.

"Nihihhi...." Followed by a hearty laugh.

"What is so funny?"

"Nothing..."

"Tch."

"Anyway, Junior," Maya addressed him with a mixture of warmth and respect, sticking to the playful term she had chosen earlier. "You are really skilled. It is my first time seeing a freshman landing a hit on the PhantomGlide Dummy."

Astron's annoyance was momentarily replaced by a flicker of surprise. It was clear that Maya's praise held a genuine quality that he hadn't anticipated.

"However..." Maya's expression shifted to one of thoughtful analysis. "There's room for improvement."

"You've got great technique and instincts," Maya began, her tone focused. "But there's a certain finesse you're missing. It's like you're commanding your body to move, but your body is unable to follow your commands."

She slowly lowered her gaze into his body, observing the leanness. Even though he looked weak, she could see the developing muscles underneath the clothes.

"But the last technique you used. You just learned it, right?" Maya just nailed the point, her eyes piercing through him.

"....."

"It was obvious, you know. When you were facing off against the PhantomGlide Dummy," Maya continued, her gaze intense, "you were using your mana without any control. It was powerful, no doubt, but raw. You've got to learn to shape and guide your mana like a sculptor creating a masterpiece. But at that moment, while using that movement, you did it on your own."

"Senior Maya, you are really something."

Maya offered a light chuckle at his remark. "Of course, this lady here is the first rank."

"Sigh...."

"Hey, if you're interested, I can help you with your mana control skills," Maya suggested with a friendly smile.

Astron's brows furrowed as he regarded her with skepticism. "Why would you want to do that?"

He didn't believe in helping others without benefits. Everyone had an agenda of their own in his eyes.

Maya's smile didn't waver, but her eyes held a mixture of sincerity and determination. "Consider it a repayment, Junior."

Astron blinked, confusion crossing his features. "Repayment? For what?"

Maya's gaze softened as she looked at him. "For reawakening something in me – the desire to challenge myself, to push beyond my comfort zone. You see, it's easy to get caught up in routine, to stick to what's familiar. But seeing you face that challenge head-on, with no fear or hesitation, it reminded me of what it's like to truly test your limits."

Astron's expression remained neutral, though her words did make him pause for a moment. He had never really thought about how his actions could impact someone else, especially someone as accomplished as Maya.

"I've been too comfortable, too complacent," Maya continued, her voice tinged with a hint of self-reflection. "But watching you today, it struck me that I've been holding back, just like you were against that dummy."

Astron's gaze remained locked with Maya's as he absorbed her words.

"So, if you let me, I'd like to help you refine your mana control," Maya said, her tone resolute. "And in return, you'll be helping me challenge myself again, just like you did today."

Astron's expression remained neutral, his thoughts racing. The idea of helping someone else challenge themselves appeared out of the blue, and it was not certainly a normal idea.

"Think about it," Maya said, her smile returning. "No pressure, Junior. If you're not interested, that's okay too."

But, for Astron, this was an opportunity that would never come back in the century again.

"No, there is no need to think. If it is you, senior, I accept it."

Chapter 75 Chapter 18.4 - Small but not small help

Now, in this world, there are things we can control, and there are things we cannot.

This is an undeniable fact.

And no matter what, a person can not be on guard most of the time while doing whatever they want.

Sometimes, we would need to focus, we would need to put everything into one place, and that time would be our most defenseless state in a sense.

These were my thoughts the moment I sensed someone's presence before me after I collapsed.

The cheerful, annoying girl, our club president, and strong senior. Those would be the words that would define her from my eyes.

However, undoubtedly, she was one of the most talented people in this world. Being the first rank of the second year and achieving it overwhelmingly was something that was not very easy to do.

Even with talent alone, you can't do that; you need to put in work as well.

However, the idea of someone watching me while training is something that will, of course, make me uncomfortable. After all, I am a person who dislikes being around others, which also means others being around me.

Therefore, at first, I was slightly angry that she was watching me.

"I see....But, then, why are you training on the open field if you don't want to show your skills?"

Hearing those words, I couldn't refute it. I also didn't have the energy to do so. After all, constantly sparring with a dummy for at least 3 hours straight was something hard.

My body was tattered, my muscles were screaming at me, there were some veins that protruded up, and my breathing was ragged.

But, while I was talking with Maya, even if the topic was slightly soft, I learned that when she got serious, she was really someone to take note of.

She was experienced, and she was smart enough to make use of her experience. The way she gave me feedback was certainly true.

"Hey, if you're interested, I can help you with your mana control skills,"

But, it was those words that made me surprised. Helping someone out of the blue was not something any person would normally do.

Therefore, like any logical person would do, I thought she was looking for something from me. Nobody would be without anything to gain, especially for a task that requires this much time.

But then, when I asked it, the answer I got was something I was not expecting.

"Consider it a repayment, Junior."

"So, if you let me, I'd like to help you refine your mana control. And in return, you'll be helping me challenge myself again, just like you did today."

She was talking about challenging herself and her drive, and this was not something that was in the game.

Senior Maya didn't have much screen time, so I didn't know her character aside from the surface she had put on.

But, this was not a game, so everyone had their own life and own experiences.

'This is not an opportunity I can miss.'

This was all I could think of. In the end, the biggest thing I was lacking was my mana control; therefore, learning from the best the academy could offer was something I could not refuse.

So, I just accepted the offer.

Maya Evergreen.

A girl with a slightly different common sense than others.

But even then, she was not a girl with a bad nature. Rather, considering her actions, one could even say that she is a good person.

Her existence is someone who lightens everyone around her with her own shine.

Therefore, she was undoubtedly one of the most influential students in the academy. It was not because of her family, nor was it because of her rank.

It was because of a good personality and good interpersonal communication.

"So, this is the Elemental Chamber," Astron mumbled as both he and Maya entered there.

The Elemental Chamber lay before them, its entrance marked by an intricately carved archway that seemed to pulse with a faint glow.

It was like LED lights illuminating the surroundings, but in fact, they were all mana psions that had taken the attribute of the special element.

It was a place reserved only for high-ranking students of the academy, a privilege earned through hard work and dedication to their studies.

Maya stepped into the Elemental Chamber with an excited grin, her blue eyes lighting up with a mixture of anticipation and familiarity.

She turned to Astron and spoke with a touch of enthusiasm in her voice, "Yep, this is the Elemental Chamber! It's one of the gems of the academy. Not many students get the chance to access this place."

This place was like her own home since she spent most of her time here, improving her mana and practicing her magic.

Astron glanced around, taking in the ethereal atmosphere of the chamber. The walls seemed to pulse with a soft, ever-changing light, and the air felt charged with energy. He was clearly intrigued, though he maintained his usual calm exterior.

Even though he used this place in the game, most of the time, the process of training was skipped with a cutscene, so he didn't pay much attention to it. But now that he was here, his senses could pick up the clear and pure mana around here.

"Exactly," Maya continued, noticing Astron's curiosity. "This place is special because of the mana psions that fill the air. These are no ordinary mana particles; they're infused with the essence of different elements – fire, water, earth, wind, and more. It's like being surrounded by a symphony of mana."

She extended her hand towards the glowing archway, her fingers nearly brushing the intricate carvings. "The Elemental Chamber is where students with advanced mana control come to refine their skills further. The dense and diverse mana here challenges us to adapt and enhance our control."

Astron's interest was piqued. "So, being exposed to these dense mana psions helps improve our control?"

Maya nodded, her expression becoming more serious as she explained, "Exactly. When you practice your techniques in an environment with higher mana density, it's like trying to walk against a

stronger current. It forces you to adjust and refine your control, making your manipulation of mana even more precise."

Hearing this, Astron nodded his head. "This makes sense." Also, considering the time Demon King descended on the world, he knew mana was bound to get denser and denser on the planet.

The way Developers explained this was that all mana from different dimensions would flow through there just like the time of Nexus Convergence, thus resulting in a higher mana density. But that is for the future.

But, one thing bothered his mind. "Why is this place called Elemental Chamber if it is filled with a dense amount of mana? Can't they simply call it Mana Chamber?"

It was a question that made sense. After all, not all types of mana were elemental. There were types of unique mana psions like Sylvie's light, darkness, void, space, time, telekinesis, and many others. Skills were diverse, traits were diverse, not specifically limited to elemental types alone, and still, they consumed mana.

"You are right, but only if this place only had dense mana."

"So, you mean this place has more to offer?"

"Exactly." Maya chuckled at Astron's question, clearly anticipating it. "You've got a sharp mind, Astron. And you're right; this place isn't just about general mana density. It's called the Elemental Chamber because, within this chamber, there are specific rooms dedicated to the different elements. Each of these rooms is infused with a much higher concentration of specific elemental mana."

Astron's eyebrows raised in curiosity. "So, there are rooms where the density of a certain elemental mana is even higher?"

Maya nodded, her excitement evident. "Exactly! Let's say you want to focus on enhancing your control over fire mana. You'd step into the Fire Chamber. The air there is practically crackling with intense fire mana. This allows you to immerse yourself in the nuances of that element, adjusting your control and techniques accordingly."

Astron's expression became contemplative. "So, it's like targeted training for specific elemental skills."

Maya clapped her hands together in approval. "You've got it! For mages who specialize in specific elements, these chambers are a godsend. They're like a controlled environment where you can fine-tune your abilities, test new techniques, and refine your understanding of that particular element."

Astron's eyes glinted with understanding. "And I'm assuming each of these chambers has its own unique challenges and obstacles to overcome."

Maya's smile widened. "Exactly! Water currents in the Water Chamber, shifting earth formations in the Earth Chamber, gusts of air in the Air Chamber—you name it. Each room replicates specific scenarios that you might face in real battles. It's not just about control, but about adapting your skills to real-world situations."

Hearing all those things, Astron could easily see why Arcadia Hunter Academy revered this highly. This amount of preparation was not something that was easily done, and it certainly required appreciation.

"They certainly considered quite a lot of things, aren't they?" Astron mumbled, looking at the glowing walls. He was already feeling the dense amount of mana around the atmosphere, and this was slowly starting to pressure him.

"They did indeed. Now, do you see why this place is this sought after?"

"I do. After all, it is not simply refining your control over a simple element. You can also prepare yourself for specific situations where a dungeon is filled with one type of mana psions alone."

Maya's eyes sparkled with approval as Astron grasped the significance of the Elemental Chamber's design. "You've got it exactly, Astron. It's not just about mastering elements in isolation. It's about becoming a versatile mage who can excel in diverse scenarios. And you're spot-on about dungeons – there are places where a specific type of mana psions dominates the environment due to a unique dungeon's characteristics."

Maya continued. "So, let's say there's a dungeon with dense darkness mana. A mage who has trained extensively in the Darkness Chamber here would have a significant advantage in that dungeon, as they're already accustomed to working with such mana."

As they continued their conversation, Maya led Astron through the various chambers, explaining the intricacies of each one.

To be honest, even Astron was tempted to raise his rank inside the academy after seeing all those facilities here.

He knew the dorm rooms also had a lot better functions as the rank of the students increased, but he didn't know the Elemental Chamber had such a wide range of functionality.

It was truly a good experience.

"Now, let's stop with this and waste no more time," Maya replied. Since she used her own card and her first-ranked student privilege to enter this place while it was empty, she didn't want to waste any more time. "You have already composed yourself, right?"

The reason why Maya didn't start training with Astron immediately was not because she wanted to waste time touring. It was because Astron was both mentally and physically tired, so she wanted to give him some time to prepare.

"Yes, I am ready." And Astron also knew this. After all, he was an expert at reading others, and Maya didn't hide it either.

"Then, come with me." With those words, Maya slowly made her way toward the place she mostly occupied. "We will start from the very basics."

While her aura suddenly changed from easygoing to ferocious.

"I won't go easy on you, so make sure you are listening to me well."

It was the first time Astron would see how different a person could be.....

Chapter 76 Chapter 18.5 - Small but not small help

Maya's demeanor shifted noticeably as she led Astron to a particular spot within the high-tech training facility. Her previously easygoing nature gave way to an aura of focused determination. It was as if a different person had emerged, a more serious and authoritative side of Maya.

"Stand here," Maya commanded, pointing to a designated spot on the training floor. "We'll start with the very basics of mana control."

Astron obeyed, positioning himself where Maya indicated. His curiosity was piqued by the sudden shift in Maya's demeanor, and he was eager to learn from her.

Maya took a deep breath, her gaze locked onto Astron. "Mana is the essence of all things supernatural. It's the energy that flows through our world, and as Hunters, we harness it to perform incredible feats. In this facility, you can see small particles of mana essence scattered everywhere." She gestured to the faint, shimmering particles that seemed to dance in the air around them.

"In normal circumstances, a mix of various mana types is present in the environment," Maya continued. "These mana particles respond to our own supernatural energy, and Hunters can manipulate them using their specialized [Skill] or through direct comprehension."

Astron nodded, absorbing her words. He watched as Maya extended her hand toward the particles, and they seemed to gravitate towards her, forming a swirling cluster around her palm.

[Skill] are pre-designed techniques that manipulate mana in specific ways," Maya demonstrated, her voice confident. "If you possess the right [Skill], you can channel mana through it and perform feats without worrying too much about the fine control. The [Skill] does the work for you."

Astron's analytical gaze was fixed on the display. He observed how the mana essence responded to Maya's control, forming patterns and shapes at her command.

Maya's hand motion shifted, and the mana essence dispersed into the air once again. "But what if someone doesn't have the appropriate [Skill]?"

Maya's lips curved into a knowing smile. "Ah, that's where true mana control comes into play. Without [Skill], Hunters need to learn how to manipulate mana directly. It's like shaping a high-tech gadget with your hands. You need to understand the nuances of different types of mana, their flow, and how they interact."

Astron's gaze sharpened further as he focused on Maya's explanation.

Maya's expression turned serious again. "No, it's not easy. It requires a deep connection to the supernatural elements, an innate sense of the mana's rhythm, and the ability to guide and shape it with precision."

Astron watched as Maya's hand extended again, this time with a different gesture. The mana essence responded, swirling around her fingers in intricate patterns.

'What a precise control.'

Astron's expression shifted into a mixture of understanding and determination as he continued to observe.

Maya glanced at Astron before continuing her explanation. "And that's not all. [Traits] like space control or specific elemental affinities give Hunters a natural edge in controlling mana. But for those without such [Traits], it's a challenging but rewarding journey."

"I see....." Astron nodded his head. He was absorbing the knowledge as he was absorbing the demonstration Maya was making.

"But, it is not every time traits are blessings." Maya continued her words. "There are certain times when developing a trait is a lot harder than simply controlling mana, or there are certain traits that make people unable to comprehend and use other types of mana as well."

Maya's words intrigued Astron. He listened intently, his analytical mind processing the information.

"For example," Maya continued, "there are [Traits] that grant individuals enhanced physical attributes – strength, speed, durability – but they may come at the cost of being unable to manipulate external mana effectively. Their bodies become a conduit for raw power, but they lack the finesse for complex magical manipulation."

Indeed, this was the case, as Astron knew a bunch of such characters with such abilities. There was a certain madman who went around the world and constantly challenged other people to make sure that he was the strongest.

"On the other hand, there are [Traits] that enable individuals to tap into specific types of mana that they wouldn't be able to use otherwise. Take healing magic or light mana, for instance. These [Traits] give unique access to mana that's generally inaccessible to most Hunters."

Astron's eyes narrowed slightly.

'That's why I couldn't use fire mana to imbue my arrows.'

This was the reason why he was unable to use the environmental mana to simply generate a fireball or imbue his arrows with natural elements like other people could do, and that was why he was having such a hard time.

"These types of traits are the ones that mostly make people have a hard time since the type of mana they are using are mostly different; they can't instinctively learn how to control their mana. I assume that was the case for you as well."

Looking at her like that, Astron easily saw why Maya was the first-ranked student. Even though all that knowledge was actually general knowledge, for Maya, it should not have been important. But she still remembered all those details, which meant her memory was exceptionally good.

Her analysis was spot on, and she did it from just one fight.

'She is quite good at observing as well.' Astron nodded his head in response.

"As expected, that red-colored mana was not a type I could use; that means it should be your trait."

Maya's lips curled into a pleased smile, knowing that she was having a chance to guide someone from the zero.

'It is as if teaching a newborn baby how to walk. It is too much fun.'

Maya couldn't help but notice how attentively Astron was listening to her. His focus never once wavered. The gloomy aura surrounding him was slightly dispersed as if he genuinely enjoyed listening to her words.

'What a weird guy you are, Junior.' She shook her head inwardly and shifted her focus back to their training, ready to guide him through the next steps.

"We'll begin with the basics of mana control," Maya started, her voice steady. "Since you're unable to sense other types of mana naturally, I'll show you how to manipulate raw mana without attributes. You will first learn how to condense your mana."

Astron watched closely as Maya's expression became focused. She extended her hand, and a faint shimmering aura began to form in her palm. It was a beginner's manifestation, lacking the refined control Maya usually displayed.

"See this?" Maya said, her voice calm as she manipulated the raw mana. "This is unattributed mana, the foundation of all magical energy. It's like the canvas before the painting."

Astron nodded, his eyes working as his trait [Perceptive Insight] was peering through the essence of her manipulation.

"Now, watch as I condense the mana," Maya continued. The shimmering aura began to gather and concentrate, forming a denser, more tangible form. "With practice, you can shape and direct the mana just like you would mold clay."

Astron's gaze remained focused on the shifting energy in Maya's palm.

Maya's next move demonstrated her control over the mana even further. She manipulated it to form a thin thread-like structure that extended from her palm. The thread wavered in the air, a testament to Maya's skill in controlling the mana's shape.

"Now, manipulating magical power is about finesse," Maya explained. "You can use it to remove objects, grab things, or even affect the environment around you. It's like having an invisible extension of yourself. Swordsmen use this as an extension of their Sword Aura to form ranged attacks, or they will simply condense the energy on themselves. From the looks of it, you know how to clad yourself in a mana and improve your weapon, correct?"

"Indeed."

"But, the way you are doing is immature. You are doing what you are doing without a clear goal, nor do you know the necessary procedures."

Astron nodded, absorbing her assessment. He recognized that while he had been able to manipulate mana in certain ways, there was a lack of refinement in his control.

That was what he was trying to improve so hard, after all, and that was proving to be hard without clear guidance.

"Now, give it a try," Maya instructed, her gaze encouraging him.

Astron closed his eyes and focused on his inner mana essence. He tried to shape it without any specific goal in mind, just as he had done before.

However, this time, he was met with frustration. The mana seemed elusive, slipping through his attempts to control it.

'This is a lot harder than I thought.'

He understood the reason why people were this jealous of geniuses when it came to mana sense. After all, the former Astron was someone who didn't have access to any mana, and the one from Earth came from a world without mana.

Therefore, it was natural for him to not understand and grasp it on the first attempt.

Maya's observation was keen, and she could see Astron's struggle. She stepped closer, her expression open and unguarded. "Astron, watch closely."

With a fluid motion, Maya extended her hand towards a nearby object, a small stone on the ground. Her mana surged and condensed around her fingertips, forming a subtle but visible aura. The aura reached out and gently enveloped the stone, lifting it from the ground.

"See this?" Maya's voice was calm, her movements controlled. "I'm setting a clear intention and guiding the mana with purpose. It's not about forcing it, but about understanding its flow."

The stone floated in the air, suspended by Maya's manipulation of mana.

"Now, I want you to try it," Maya encouraged, taking a step back to give Astron space.

Astron took a deep breath and focused once more. He pictured the stone in his mind, visualizing his mana extending towards it. Slowly, he tried to guide his mana towards the stone.

But again, his efforts fell short. The stone remained unmoved, and Astron's brow furrowed in concentration.

Maya stepped closer again, this time moving even closer to Astron. She extended her hand, reaching out to touch his arm from behind.

FLINCH

Astron flinched slightly at the unexpected contact.

'What is this woman doing?' He immediately thought. No matter what, in his mind, Maya was not someone who would touch others carelessly, and he was also 'uncomfortable.'

However, Maya was in her serious mode, focused on guiding him. Ignoring his initial reaction, she applied more pressure, her touch firm as she guided his arm.

"Astron, feel the mana's flow. Let it become an extension of your intent."

Despite his discomfort, Astron felt a faint, tingling sensation where Maya's hand touched him. Her touch seemed to guide his focus, helping him attune to the mana's energy.

'Tch....What the hell am I thinking?' Seeing that Maya was dead serious about helping him, Astron felt ashamed a little. The fact that he was judging her actions while she was trying to help him was not something he deemed good.

"Focus on the stone," Maya's voice was insistent. "Feel the mana responding to your will. Guide it like an artist crafting a masterpiece."

Following her words, Astron also didn't care about the distractions around him and did as he always has done.

He closed his eyes and focused his senses once again. With Maya's strong and unwavering guidance this time, he could feel the faint pull of mana, like a gentle current tugging at his senses. He focused his intent on the stone, picturing the mana flowing towards it.

And then, it happened. The stone trembled slightly, lifting a fraction of an inch off the ground.

Maya's serious grip on his arm loosened as she put a smile on her face, seeing the thread of mana connecting him to his stone. Her smile was 'warm' and 'encouraging,' which was constantly twitching.

"That's it, Astron. You're starting to connect with the mana's flow. You are finally taking the first step."

Chapter 77 Chapter 18.6 - Small but not small help

We humans are, by nature, creatures with masks, no matter what. There are a lot of times when a person's feelings are a lot different from how they appear on the outside.

This was exactly the same for Maya.

'What do I do?'

Just now, Maya did something she had never thought she would do before. She touched Astron on his arm, and feeling his body flinching, she realized what she had done.

'This is not a girl, he is a boy.'

It was not the first time, Maya helped others to improve their mana control, but it was the first time it was a boy.

'Don't falter! You are simply trying to teach him!'

She realized that it would be rude to get embarrassed right now.

She was simply trying to teach him, and that's it!

"Astron, feel the mana's flow. Let it become an extension of your intent."

So, she did as most people have done. Ignoring his initial reaction and her own feelings, she pushed forward, grabbing him more tightly and getting closer to him.

She put her mana into his body and let it guide him just like she had done with her friends.

"Focus on the stone. Feel the mana responding to your will. Guide it like an artist crafting a masterpiece."

And he was able to do it in the end. Seeing the mana thread he made, she clearly felt the satisfaction of being able to teach someone.

But one thing was different this time.

'So close.'

Her smile was about to falter as she could feel his low body heat. She was feeling very uncomfortable and conscious of him, so she chose to retreat.

"That's it, Astron. You're starting to connect with the mana's flow. You are finally taking the first step."

After that, she took a small step back, and she started observing him.

'Why did I touch him like that?'

Maya was a girl that has never had any relationship with a member of the opposite sex before. No, rather than saying relationship, she had never been close to males.

If her friend were there, she would say it was not because Maya didn't have the qualifications for it but rather because she was an airhead.

That was certainly true since, for Maya, from the moment she awakened as a child, her whole world was magic.

Not because she loved it at first but because it was her family that forced her, and in the end, she developed herself in the place of magic rather than opening up to a social world of young couples.

Therefore, she didn't know how to progress a relationship with people romantically. Of course, she had friends, but none of them were male.

She also acquired the habit of losing her control when she was excited about something, which she was most of the time.

And all these led to the situation she was in.

The junior she wanted to help since he made her regain her drive.

'He is certainly working hard.'

Looking at him from the sides with his eyes closed, she thought. His hard work was evident. Even right now, she clearly felt that he was uncomfortable with her touch, but he didn't say anything and only focused on improving.

'Just as I expected. Nobody has ever taught him how to use mana before.'

Thinking like this, an innate sadness filled her heart. She thought he was being discriminated against because of his low rank, even though he was working this hard. That was something that she could never accept.

Even if Maya was an airhead, strangely, she could see how other people looked at others. Her airheadedness was something only concerned herself.

Because of that, she could see the gazes others had thrown at him. Some of them contained scorn, some of them were derogatory and insulting.

But she didn't feel such a vibe from him. Certainly, he was someone who was rude and straightforward, but he had never put his nose into other's business, nor did he randomly antagonize others.

'Let's make him a good Hunter and rub it their faces.'

Seeing him clearly trying to improve, she felt it was unfair to treat him in such a way, and a fire ignited in her heart.

A fire to make him improve.

But, for Astron, it was the start of misery, since when Maya gets excited about something, she would lose her control.

For the next few hours, Maya guided Astron through various exercises she designed to refine his manipulation of mana.

She demonstrated different techniques, showing him how to condense mana into threads, shape it into specific forms, and even disperse it back into the environment.

"For this next exercise," Maya instructed her voice firm, "I want you to condense the mana into a small sphere and then expand it gradually. Focus on maintaining control throughout the process."

Astron nodded and closed his eyes, visualizing the mana as he had been taught, and then began the process. At first, his efforts were shaky, the mana sphere flickering in and out of existence.

"Steady your focus, Junior," Maya advised. "Feel the mana's energy in your mind and guide it with intention."

With Maya's guidance, his control improved.

The mana sphere stabilized, and he started to expand it slowly, like a growing bubble. He could feel the energy responding to his thoughts.

'I am getting the hang of it.'

He was already in a position where he could manipulate his mana in a much more refined way. It was not to the extent that he mastered it, but he could finally feel the difference between his past approach and this one.

The mana he was using before was clearly in the meditation of his trait [Lunar Enigma]. The moon mana he was using stemmed from his trait and his initial instinct.

But, right now, rather than simply making use of his trait, he was doing what every hunter could do—manipulating the raw mana and using it.

This may seem pointless since he already had his trait, but this was going to help him in the end. It was like learning Calculus in college and making use of it in your Major as an engineer. Without knowing fundamentals, the road ahead would be hard to progress.

As the training session continued, Maya observed his progress with a keen eye. She could see the moments when he struggled and the moments when he found his rhythm. Her feedback was constructive, and he absorbed every word, adjusting his technique accordingly.

"Your mana threads are getting more refined," Maya commented a hint of approval in her voice. "Keep practicing the expansion exercise, and soon, you'll be able to control larger volumes of mana with precision."

Astron was fully engaged, pushing himself to improve rapidly. With each exercise, he felt himself becoming more attuned to the mana's flow, more adept at guiding its energy.

Maya was showing him no mercy. She was constantly pressuring him, shoving him mana, and even sometimes making him spar with her.

Though Maya's surprise was evident as she watched his progress. "Junior, you're picking this up faster than I anticipated."

Astron's fatigue was still present, but there was a sense of accomplishment that surpassed it. "Thank you, Senior. Your guidance is making a real difference."

It was his genuine appreciation since, without Maya, he would never have been able to improve himself.

Maya's smile was warm, reflecting her pride in his achievements. "You're the one putting in the hard work, Junior. I'm just here to steer you in the right direction."

Of course, this was also true.

For the past five hours, Maya was constantly working with him without giving him any breaks.

However, just like any other thing, everything in this world has its ends this session had, too.

CHATTER CHATTER

Looking at the slowly getting crowded Elemental Room, Astron could see things would be troublesome if they kept going any longer.

He was here thanks to Maya's favor, but also because this place was empty in the morning. No matter what, even if it was Maya, it was very hard for her to keep an unqualified student inside in front of this many people's gazes.

Therefore, he was about to talk to Maya about it, but she beat him.

"It looks like our session needs to come to an end for now," Maya said, her voice carrying a note of regret. She glanced around at the growing number of students in the room.

Astron nodded in agreement. "Yeah, it's getting a bit crowded. I shouldn't be here any longer."

Maya's smile returned. "Exactly. But don't worry, Junior. We've made substantial progress today."

Astron bowed his head with a clear gratitude. "Thank you, Senior. I really appreciate your guidance."

Maya's smile widened, and her excitement could be felt. "You're welcome. But remember, we're not done yet. We'll continue tomorrow."

Maya's smile widened, and her excitement was palpable. Suddenly, she took a step closer to him, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. "You know, I had a lot of fun teaching you today. Seeing your progress and improvement—it's genuinely exciting! So, I hope you're ready for another round tomorrow. Same time, same place?"

Astron's brow furrowed in surprise. "Tomorrow?"

Maya's excitement was infectious as she practically bounced on her feet. "Absolutely! I can't wait to continue. And I have a feeling you're going to improve even more!"

Astron hesitated, his reluctance evident. "I'm not sure if this is necessary. Tomorrow, we will have classes."

Of course, this help was good, but he was still slightly uncomfortable with Maya around him. Even though her teaching skills were certainly good, and her guidance helped him improve, it was clear that the more he associated himself with her, the more things might get messy.

However, Maya's grin was infectious. "That's the spirit! Get a good rest tonight and be ready to tackle another session bright and early tomorrow morning. We've got a lot more to cover!"

It was as if she didn't hear what he was saying; she simply pushed what they were going to do tomorrow.

"Senior, didn't you hear me? I said we have classes tomorrow."

"So?"

"So, we won't have much more time to train."

"Then? Junior, now that you have accepted this lady's offer, you can't escape, right?"

"....."

"Right?"

"...."

"Right?"

"....."

"Right?"

"....Sigh...." Her enthusiasm seemed to break through his initial resistance. Astron let out a resigned sigh. "Alright, I'll be there."

Maya's smile practically lit up the room. "Great! You won't regret it, I promise. Rest well, Junior. Tomorrow is going to be another exciting day of progress!"

With that, Astron stood up and left the Elemental Room.

But, still, even under his cold face, there was a small feeling of satisfaction there.

The feeling of improving himself....

Chapter 78 Chapter 18.7 - Small but not small help

"This is really crazy," I mumbled to myself, looking at my hand. "Just as I thought, learning from her is the best choice I made."

SWOOSH

Looking at the mana threads in my hand, I could easily say this. It was as if I could finally feel the mana around me without the intervention of my [Lunar Enigma] trait.

Of course, this was just the basics, but even this was a good improvement considering how Astron was before.

I came from a world without mana, and the previous Astron also never felt mana, even if he was an awakened person; thus, this prowess was good.

"Then, I should continue my training."

With those thoughts, I grabbed my bow and started training once again.

"Activate Stage Two."

<Understood.>

As the Artificial Intelligence of the academy training room replied, I raised my bow.

SWOOSH

And began.

Emily sat in her small, dimly lit room, her chestnut hair cascading untamed over her shoulders.

Her tired, sapphire eyes were fixed on the laptop screen before her, its soft glow casting fleeting shadows in the otherwise simple and sparsely furnished space.

She was looking at the notice she put on the bulletin board.

"Still no replies, huh?"

She mumbled to herself. Of course, she also knew how bad their situation was and how unpromising it looked from the notice. But she didn't have a choice.

RING

At that moment, a call came from her bracelet. Opening up, she saw it was a call from her father.

With a weary sigh, she accepted the call with her father, whose anxious voice echoed from the device. He was probably calling her after the message she left yesterday. She knew he was busy too, so she didn't say anything.

<Emily. How is it? Could you find any suitable hunters?>

"Yes, father. I asked a friend from the Academy, and he accepted my request."

<Is he any good?>

"His rank is not that high, but I saw his talent with my own eyes. I think if I fought with him right now, he would beat me."

<He is this good?>

"Yes. He is a Hartley."

<Hartley? That Hartley Family? Hey, Emily! Are you crazy?>

"Why?"

<Don't you know that calling a member of the Hartley Family is risky for a small guild like us? What are you going to do if something happens to him there?>

"Father, of course, I know all of those. But do you think I can find someone like him when his reputation has yet to bloom once again? And he is a good person. I am certain that he won't make a big issue out of it."

<Emily. You know there isn't any good person in this world.>

"I know. But we are desperate, and you know it as well. The dungeon we are challenging is impossible for us to clear right now since your-"

<.....>

"Since that time. So, we need every manpower we get, or we will lose the right to own this last dungeon. You know local guilds are already pressuring us; this is our last chance. You know, the money we got from selling our stocks is already spent on equipment for our guild members."

<You are right....I really wonder who this person is. They suddenly bought half of our stocks and invested in us, a falling guild.>

"I don't know who it is, but I am very grateful to them for giving us this last chance. Even if we can't make it, I will quit the academy and repay them back."

<Sigh....I am sorry that you need to shoulder this responsibility. I am a fai->

"Don't say that, father. It wasn't your fault. It is all because of that traitorous bastard."

<.....>

"I swear, once I get a hold of him, I am going to kill him."

<Okay, okay, calm down, dear.>

".....I am calm.....Anyway, Father, take care of yourself."

<You should rest a little.>

"I will after everything is finished."

<Then, take care.>

<DING. DING. DING.>

As Emily ended the call, she closed her bracelet and threw herself onto her bed.

"This is our last chance. I need to make sure everything is okay."

And with a determined expression, she opened her laptop and started working on the dungeon and planning.

It was her and her father's guild's last chance, and she was not going to miss it.

"Junior, you are doing a lot better than yesterday."

I was inside the Elemental Chamber, looking at the senior who became my mentor on just a random day.

"I see," I replied. Certainly, after training with my bow and dagger without using my traits, I can say that my mana control improved.

And yesterday, I also realized one more thing. The reason why Firearms were not that well-received inside the Hunter community.

While I was training with my bow, I also tried to use my gun for a second. Since my bracelet wasn't detectable, I could carry my gun wherever I went, which is normally prohibited.

I tried to coat my gun and my bullets with mana in order to improve their efficiency like I did while using [Lunar Enigma].

And there, I realized it was impossible to do that.

Neither was I able to improve the efficiency of the gun by coating it with mana or the bullets. The moment the bullet was fired, the enhancement disappeared, and the gun worked as it normally would.

This was the difference between [Lunar Enigma] and using normal mana, and this also shows the importance of the [Traits].

"Your mana control had already reached a certain threshold. At this point, I can easily say that you finally met the requirements of being a hunter."

Those words were slightly cruel, but they are simply true. I was now on the same track with other people.

But I could see a faint smile on Maya's face as if she rather enjoyed me being on a low level. But it might also be a misunderstanding, though I doubt it.

"Anyway, the important thing is you're on the right track now, Junior. But remember, raw mana control is not the only thing important for us hunters."

With that, she guided me to the next phase of my 'training.' "We can now start one of the most important things for us—manipulation of elemental attributes." She stopped for a second and looked into my eyes.

"As you know, not everyone can use every element. It depends on one's aptitude and affinity. It is like a talent. For instance, some people are bad at mathematics, some people are bad at memorizing, etc. Elemental mana is the same; some people may be good at manipulating and feeling the fire, while others may not be able to do that."

She explained.

That was also how it was explained in the game. Even though no one has limitations on what element they can use, in the game, unless you increase your affinity with certain elements, the skills you would be able to use would be limited.

For instance, at that time, Senior Elara was using a bow while training, and she fired a wind arrow. This is a basic skill for archers, but without being good at using wind mana, you can't be fast enough to coat your arrow, and this will render the skill useless.

"For me, as a nature mage, I can work with all elements, but you might have a natural affinity for one or two." She paused for a moment before continuing, "Let's start with the basics. Watch closely."

CREAK

Maya extended her hand, her palm glowing with a warm, earthy light. Slowly, the ambient mana in the chamber seemed to respond, coalescing around her hand. The man took on an earthy texture, like clumps of rich soil.

THUD

The time she spent using earthen mana was low, as if it was natural for her. This was the idea behind the affinity.

"See this? This is earth mana," she explained as she gently tossed a small clump of it into the air. It hovered for a moment before dissipating.

Maya continued her demonstration, showcasing her mastery over each elemental attribute one by one. With a fluid grace, she manipulated the mana around her to take on the characteristics of different elements.

SWOOSH SWIRL

"This is fire, mana," she said as flames danced around her fingertips, casting a warm, fiery glow. The flames flickered and crackled, giving off heat that could be felt even from a distance.

SWISH

Next was wind mana, as she conjured a gentle breeze that ruffled her hair and caused the surrounding mana to sway like tall grass in a meadow.

SPLASH

Then came water mana, and she formed a delicate sphere of liquid mana that glistened and sparkled, resembling a perfectly rounded droplet of water.

After each display, Maya encouraged me to give it a try. However, as hard as I tried to mimic her techniques, nothing happened.

My mana remained formless and undifferentiated. It was clear that I lacked any natural affinity for these elements.

"I see...." I could see her nodding her head. "Junior, we are going to repeat the same thing as yesterday."

With those words, she came to me and grabbed me by my arm once again.

FLINCH

Resulting in me flinching. Her speed was fast even for a mage; this alone showed how strong she was compared to me.

'Sigh....It is still uncomfortable.'

Certainly, it was uncomfortable for other people to touch me, but since Senior Maya was not bothered by it and it was for my own good, I also didn't mind and endured the feeling.

"Now, try to feel it."

Maya's touch brought an immediate change. As she infused her elemental mana into my body, I could feel a distinct shift in the ambient mana within me. It was like a subtle, internal transformation that I hadn't experienced before.

When she did this for the first time yesterday, it made me feel the mana firsthand, and certainly, that helped me. Mana was not something that could be controlled by simply observing how others did it. I first needed to know how to feel it.

It was like watching the people playing football but without knowing how to move your legs. To learn it, you need first to feel your legs, and your brain needs to register those nerves, and then you can replicate how footballers moved.

This was the same.

"I will start with Earthen Mana."

First came the earth mana, and I felt a grounding sensation as if I were connected to the solid foundation of the world.

"Can you feel the difference between yesterday and now?"

"Yes."

"Good."

Next was the fire mana, and I sensed an inner warmth and energy, like a flickering flame deep within me.

Then came the water mana, and I experienced a slight fluidity, but at the same time, a sense of balance was there.

After that was the wind mana, and my mana became ethereal and light. It felt as if I could move it effortlessly, mirroring the element of air. It was swift, light but uncontainable, just like wind.

And lastly, it was a weird type of feeling.

"This must be your special mana, Senior," I spoke, feeling the soothing but destructive, calm but explosive mana inside.

"Indeed. But how did you know?" She asked, looking a bit surprised.

"Senior, everyone knows about you inside this academy. The Genius of Nature." Considering Maya's reputation and her special affinity, I knew from the game, guessing this wasn't that hard.

"T-this is a bit embarrassing."

"I see. I won't say it again then."

"N-no, it is not like that."

"Then?"

"J-just don't say too frequently."

"Okay."

"Anyway, Junior! Don't get distracted." Maya released her hold on me and increased the distance.

"Now, try to replicate the sensations of your mana just like yesterday." She said, looking at me with clear anticipation.

"Understood."

Closing my eyes, I focused on the sensation I just got. First, I tried to replicate the sensation of fire inside me, and I could feel my mana changing.

'Hmm? This?'

And it felt familiar.

Opening my eyes, I could see a faint color of red mana tendrils released from my fingers.

"This?"

"Wait, Senior Maya."

And then, changing the sensation from fire mana to water mana, I repeated the same thing.

'This?'

And this time, the color changed, from red to green....

'So, this is how I can change the color of my mana.....'

It was at that moment I finally managed to comprehend how to use different colors....

Chapter 79 Chapter 19.1 - Before the dungeon

"What is this, Junior?"

Seeing the mana appearing in my hand being different from what she had expected, Maya gave a surprised exclamation.

Instead of manifesting the traditional elemental attributes, my mana began to take on a unique form. It wasn't earth, fire, water, wind, or light mana, but something different entirely.

It was indeed a normal response since the mana in my hand was something I had been using for the last two weeks.

'Mana of Moon.'

"It's... something different," I replied cryptically, not yet ready to reveal the true nature of my trait. Even though Senior was a good person, I don't want to reveal that this is my trait simply.

Though I think she will figure this out on her own, there is nothing I can do about this.

Maya furrowed her brow, clearly intrigued and puzzled. "Different? I've never seen anything like this before. It is your trait, isn't it? Just like at that time while you were sparing with PhantomGlide Dummy."

"Nothing escapes your eyes."

For the moment, I decided to play with it a bit more, manipulating the silvery mana into intricate patterns that danced around my fingers, but I also tried to repeat the sensations.

This was no longer a game where you would push some buttons, and your character would move. This was the real world, so the sensations were in it as well.

And, after a matter of a second, I understood.

After realizing how the color of my mana changed and how I could use it on my own, I understood one another thing.

'I can't access other types of mana.'

I didn't know why it was, but there is a high chance it was because of [Lunar Enigma].

The only mana I can use is either raw mana or moon mana, but this is not something to get discouraged.

'The moon mana itself is versatile.'

I witnessed it with my own eyes.

'And, the colors shown here followed the pattern in the book.'

That meant one thing. The contents of the book were true, at least up to some point. Well, since I just read the book to pass the time before sleeping, I didn't believe its contents, nor did I take it as absolute.

In my head, there was room for it to be wrong, but after all those things laid before me, it was clear that the book contained good information.

'Arcane Arts, huh? Now I understand why they are not covered at all. Even manipulating mana is hard; how hard will it be when it comes to magic?'

Thinking that, I turned to the Senior.? "Thank you for your guidance, Senior Maya." I bowed my head to the girl looking at me with a slightly surprised expression.

"I didn't do anything. It was your hard work." While she answered, she clearly had an expression of wanting to ask questions.

"No. No matter how hard I worked, I wasn't able to feel mana even once before. It was thanks to your help and your talent at teaching."

It seems my words have affected her slightly as her face turned red.

"...."

"I will repay you for your help in the future."

"A-ah.....You don't need to do anything; it was my own decision to help you train."

"Still, you helped me progress. It is something I won't overlook. Whenever you need help, I will try my best." Bowing my head one last time, I decided not to be a burden anymore. "Then, I will take my leave. I have my classes early today."

With those words, I turned back and started leaving the elemental chamber. Today's lesson was not that long, but it was a lot more impactful than yesterday's, and it was a very important step for the future.

"What a mysterious kid you are, Junior."

After Astron left, Maya was looking at the place where they had trained. Small lingering mana of silver color was left, and Maya couldn't help but see its uniqueness.

Considering his rank and the aura she could sense from him, Maya knew Astron was weak. It was her special ability thanks to her trait [Mother of Nature].

She could see and estimate the strength of a person from the possible danger they possessed, and she knew Astron was not that strong.

However, at that time, when he was fighting with PhantomGlide Dummy, she could see his aura changing. That crimson aura was dangerous; she herself felt the danger it possessed.

That was the second reason why she decided to train his mana control. She wondered if he was some sort of demon or an evil person. She even thought someone possessed him at that time.

'But, thank god he is the same junior.' She thought to himself after looking at his mana control. If someone possessed him, their signature mana would change since mana is something related to the soul, but his didn't change.

That meant he was the same Junior as ever. However, while training with him, she discovered something else.

"The fact that he was able to learn how to control mana in just one day....Junior....I wonder where you will reach."

CRUNCH

With a smile, she grabbed her chips and started munching them. Normally, it was prohibited to bring meals into the training rooms, but nobody cared when it came to Maya. She was the best of the sophomore year, and her good nature made people overlook those small details.

However, a certain senior witnessed the whole training, and he was not happy about it at all.

From not far away, a young man was watching the two people talking inside the Elemental Chamber, training together.

"Who the hell is this kid?" The young man's voice trembled as he muttered to himself, his eyes locked onto the two figures training inside the Elemental Chamber. His gaze was unwavering, burning with intense jealousy.

It was by no means a special occasion normally. It was actually pretty common for people to come to the Elemental Chamber with their friends and train together while occasionally getting feedback.

For Maya, that was also the case. She came with her friends from time to time.

How did he know?

He was watching her, of course, though only from sides.

But this time, it was different. This time, it was a young man with Maya, and that ignited a blazing fire of jealousy within the observer.

He had been secretly infatuated with Maya for a long time, admiring her skills and pure heart from a distance. He knew Maya was not someone who would spend time with members of the opposite sex for this long amount of time.

As he watched Astron and Maya interact, a deep sense of envy gnawed at him. He couldn't bear the thought of someone else getting close to the person he had admired for so long.

"How dare you? How dare you get close to my goddess?" He hissed through clenched teeth, his voice a hoarse whisper.

He knew Maya would come to Elemental Chamber very early in the day. He even adjusted his training schedule to fit Maya, to watch her from sides.

The young man's eyes grew wild, and a wicked grin twisted his face as he concocted a sinister plan. He had been lurking in the shadows for far too long, and now he believed it was time to take action.

"I won't let him take her away from me," he muttered, his voice a sinister hiss. His obsession with Maya had reached a point of no return, and he himself had already misunderstood the relationship between them.

Since he was far away in order to escape their senses, he couldn't hear what they were talking about, but the fact that she was talking with him alone made him jealous as hell.

The Maya he knew had never talked with males for this long; in his mind, it was clear that something was going on.

He knew that he had to eliminate that boy to remove this obstacle from his path to Maya.

The young man was convinced that he alone was worthy of her affection and attention, and he couldn't bear the thought of her being with anyone else.

After the training with Senior Maya, nothing else happened in the academy until Friday.

"-know that the reason why the Valerian Kingdom was founded after merging all human nations."

DING

Just as the professor was explaining the history of the Valerian Federation, suddenly, the sound of a bell ringing echoed inside the classroom.

"I guess we should end with this today." With those words, he pushed his glasses up with his middle finger and looked at the students.

'Sigh....He is going to give another assignment again.'

It was his habit that whenever he gave an assignment, he always pushed his glasses first.

Then, with a small smile, he continued, "Now, your assignment for this week is quite simple. I want each of you to research and prepare a presentation on a significant event or figure from the founding era of the Valerian Federation."

Groans and murmurs filled the room, but the professor paid them no mind. He was used to this reaction.

"Please remember," he emphasized, "the Valerian Federation's history is a tapestry woven with the stories of many nations and individuals. Your presentations should shed light on the factors that led to the founding of this great Federation. I expect well-researched, informative, and engaging presentations."

He then projected a list of topics on the screen at the front of the classroom, ranging from the Treaty of Unity to the contributions of notable leaders.

"You may choose your topics, but I encourage you to select subjects that resonate with you," Professor Armstrong said. "Presentations will be due next Friday, so make good use of your time. And remember, knowledge is the key to understanding our world. Dismissed."

As the students began to gather their belongings and head out, the classroom buzzed with conversations about who would choose which topic and how much research would be needed to complete the assignment.

I also picked my things up immediately and started leaving the classroom, since today we were going to have a joint training with Archery Club.

Even though the last week didn't have any club activities, this week we had. The schedule was getting tighter and tighter with assignments and coming up with other aspects as well. Therefore, I needed not to waste any time.

I could hear the main cast talking amongst themselves while I was preparing myself.

"Ethan, what are you going to do?"

"Well, I am going to train as usual."

"Don't you have any club activities?"

"Well, we had one last week. The spear club does joint training every two weeks."

"I see. Then, want to spar with me? It had been a while since we clashed weapons, don't you think?"

"I can't."

"Huh?"

"I will go to a dungeon tomorrow; I need to be in my best condition."

"So what? We can train now, no?"

"Sigh, Julia. Whenever we spar, it never ends without blood spilling."

"This is the way of warrior? Are you chickening now?"

"Tch. Julia, you know it's not about being a man or not. It's about not wanting to deal with your relentless teasing when I have to explain yet another injury to my mom."

"Oh, come on, Ethan. You're no fun. Besides, it's not like I go all out on you. Well, not all the time."

"Not all the time, she says. Remember that time you chipped my tooth during a friendly spar? I needed to spend my whole monthly allowance on a potion. I was hungry for all month."

Julia shrugged, a playful grin on her face. "Details, details. It was just a tiny chip."

Ethan shook his head, still smiling. "You're impossible, Julia. But seriously, I need to conserve my energy for tomorrow's dungeon dive. You understand, right?"

Julia sighed dramatically. "I suppose I can't argue with that. Fine, go and prepare for your dungeon dive. But don't think you're getting away from our next sparring session, Ethan."

Ethan chuckled. "Wouldn't dream of it, Julia. Take care, and I'll see you soon."

From the way he talked, he was mentioning the dungeon dive Emilia requested. Well, in the game, Emilia explained it as not an easy dungeon, but it was something normally beyond the scope of their guild, thanks to her father's injury.

Well, it was reasonable that she trusted Ethan since it seemed she had warned him beforehand. She was such a character, after all; she paid everything back to those who helped her.

After packing my things up, I also left the room, following Ethan, and headed towards the Archery Club area.

FLINCH

However, for some reason, on the way, I felt something, a gaze on me as if someone hostile was watching me from afar.

This had been happening for a whole week, and I had yet to find the source of the gaze.

'Tch.' Clicking my tongue at my helplessness, I walked further, reaching the club room.

Chapter 80 Chapter 19.2 - Before the dungeon

"Everyone is here. Then we can start." Captain Adrian said, looking at us gathered around here.

Since today was going to be the first training session with the Archery Club, every member was gathered here.

Of course, it was not mandatory to attend the training sessions, but considering this club's budget and the people attending the club here, naturally, everyone was eager to come.

After all, even getting small tips from such seniors is pretty helpful for those who seek improvement.

'Well, this is mostly because of the excitement of the first day. Not anything else.' I thought, since from the first day afterward, freshmen would drop one by one.

"Today will be our first training session. I assume you are all ready." Captain Adrian began, his voice carrying the weight of experience. His sharp eyes scanned the assembly, making each member feel like they were the sole focus of his attention.

"As you all know, archery is a discipline that demands precision, focus, and dedication. It's not about how strong you are, but how well you can control your body and your mind," he continued. "Today, we'll start with the fundamentals. Even though I know everyone here had already learned archery in one way or another. However, in the pre-academy schools, only the textbook positions are taught."

With practiced ease, Captain Adrian picked up a bow and arrow, demonstrating the correct posture and technique.

"In the field, everything does constantly change. No matter how talented you are or how many times you practiced your basic archery, there will be times when you won't be able to use your perfect posture. Here, it is important to know that, as an archer, you need to change your posture constantly according to your position and situation."

SWOOSH

He drew the string, his movements fluid and graceful, and released the arrow with a soft twang.

THUD

The arrow flew straight and true, hitting the target with pinpoint accuracy.

"This is what you have heard from the hunters that you have known or from the hunters on the internet. Probably most of you here think the textbook examples and the theory are useless when it comes to practice." Captain Adrian continued. "But let me tell you, understanding the theory and mastering the basics makes it easier to adapt to any situation. It's like having a solid foundation upon which you can build your skills."

Looking at his words and the reactions from the club members, I could see Adrian was suited to be a leader. His voice was filled with authority, and when you listened to him, you would feel like he was making a point.

The reactions of freshmen were an example of that. The club members were nodding their heads in understanding as if they realized that theory and practice were not at odds but rather complemented each other.

'If someone other said these, they would simply boo them.'

They were eager to learn more because of the momentary emotion of excitement and hype, which won't last long.

"Now, let's get started with today's training," Captain Adrian said, picking up his bow again. "I'll show you the basic posture that I've made my own over the years and the textbook one. I want each of you to derive your own variations based on your body type and comfort. This will be your first task as an Archery Club member. We want you to make your own posture and present it to us with its advantages with a report."

Those words caused quite a shock for the newcomers.

"What is this?"

"How can we make our own posture?"

"Do they really expect us to be able to do something like that?"

'Where is your excitement now.'

They were clearly not expecting such a task from the first day. That was indeed hard; even in the game, this task took the whole first semester or the year, depending on the affinity of the character.

However, this club was not a charity. As they said, they wanted the members to contribute to the Archery field, and this was one way of doing that. By presenting different types of ideas, you could contribute to the field.

Of course, this didn't mean it was simply one way of getting things. You could ask seniors for pointers, and you could learn from them basically.

With that, he demonstrated his preferred stance; his body relaxed yet poised for action.

His every movement was deliberate, and he encouraged the members to pay attention to the key points of balance, alignment, and flexibility.

'This explains why he was able to get the captain position.' The way he positioned himself was almost perfect for his body, and his talent at bows was showing itself.

"Now, I want each of you to give it a try. Don't be afraid to experiment, find what works best for you, and ask questions to your seniors. I will be wandering around and will look for those who want to learn for pointers."

With those words, everyone started practicing with their bows, and I did the same.

As I began practicing with my compound bow, I couldn't help but notice the gazes of some students around me. The looks they cast my way were far from friendly; in fact, they seemed to hold a touch of scorn.

"He's using a compound bow? Seriously?" one student whispered to another, their words barely concealing their mockery.

"Yeah, I heard those are for hunters who can't handle a proper recurve bow," the other replied with a snicker.

"Isn't he like the lowest-ranked student here? Figures he'd need a crutch like that."

There were a lot of classes inside the academy. Therefore, not everyone knew my face. However, it seemed my reputation as the weakest was spread quite a lot.

However, I kept my focus on my practice. It was not like this was something new anyway, and just like that, the session went on.

"Oh, Student Astron. You are here."

As I was immersed in my training, suddenly I heard the voice of certain someone I had been waiting for. It was Instructor Ethan.

"Instructor Ethan," I responded, lowering my bow. By this time, it had been an hour after the start, and most of the freshmen had already left the training grounds.

"As expected, my eyes weren't wrong." He nodded his head with a smile. The clothes on him were his casual ones, and there were traces of small pieces of dust and soil on his sleeves. The faint smell of burnt soil was also there, coupled with the smell of blood.

'He just came from a dungeon.'

It seemed a certain dungeon appeared in close proximity to the academy.

"What do you mean?"

"Come with me." He gestured for me to come, and I didn't waste any second and followed him.

Bringing me in front of a small door, he looked into my eyes.

"I had been watching your practice."

"You were?"

"Indeed. For a person who started using bow recently, you are progressing very fast."

FOOSH

After he scanned his bracelet, the door opened, and the scene before me made me think of those sci-fi movies on Earth.

The room was filled with LED lights, but the lightning was still a bit on the darker side. There were some screens and holograms showing things around. It looked like a shooting range, but it was a little different.

"What is this place? You might be wondering about this." He said, approaching the device. "Here," pointing his fingers towards the range, he continued. "I want you to continue your training there for a little while."

"I see," I replied. From the screens and holograms, it wasn't that hard to understand what this place was. "You want to analyze my body, correct?"

"Yes. While I was watching you, I could see you already have something in your mind about your bow. But, your body is yet to develop for it."

Showing the screens where a part of the body was shown, he continued his words.

"Since you have yet to develop your specific muscles, I want you to use this room for a better analysis. With the results, I will be able to give you a specific method of training. Suited for your body. What do you think?"

"I have no reason to refuse."

After I came to this world and awakened myself, I had been training non-stop, but that didn't mean my training was effective. In the academy, you could consult professors for this, but my homeroom professor was Eleanor White, and I didn't want to deal with that woman.

This opportunity was quite good, and this was one of the reasons why I joined the Archery Club.

Different from other clubs related to weapons, Archery Club had a rather modern approach in terms of training.

The Spear Legacy Club was filled with blockheads who preferred ancient training methods left from the first generation of hunters, and the Sword Masters Club was the same.

This was mostly because of the representatives of each weapon. Sword Emperor and Spear Emperor were both from renowned families, and they represented those weapons in a way that resembled an old-school way.

However, the Bow Empress was different. She had a new approach to things, and she was someone who was modeling for magazines as well.

This was the reason why the Archery Club, who idolized and were supplied by the current Bow Empress, had the modern approach, and this room was one of the results of it. Of course, the academy also provides such rooms, but they require students to be of a higher rank, which I am not right now, and won't be enough until the mid-terms.

Therefore, this was something I had been aiming for, but honestly, I didn't expect things to progress this fast. I was rather expecting this to happen after I slapped some of the arrogant-faced freshmen, but I guess that wasn't necessary.

Instructor Ethan led me further into the room, and I couldn't help but feel a mix of anticipation and excitement as I took in my surroundings. This state-of-the-art facility seemed designed for serious training and improvement.

"We'll start with some basic assessments," Instructor Ethan explained. "I want you to fire a few arrows at those holographic targets over there."

Just like that, the session started with stagnant targets to moving targets, moving lands, and even shooting in the river.....

"Good, I will send you your regime later. Your results will be up tomorrow. Is that okay with you?" Instructor Ethan asked after the training.

"No problem."

"Then, you can leave."

"Thank you for the help," I replied, bowing my head.

In the last week, I feel like I received quite a lot of help from other people, and certainly, it was not a bad feeling.

"It is my duty." Instructor Ethan waved his hands, and I left the place not long after, making my way to my room.

To be honest, today's training was not that bad. I'd been able to test my archery skills in a dynamic and challenging environment, but that was not alone. I also had feedback from Instructor Ethan, and that was really helpful.

He gave some pointers I had overlooked while training, for instance, how to manipulate my mana while pulling the strings of the bow, how to increase the speed of the arrow by putting mana on the tip of it, destroying the wind resistance, and a lot more.

It was clear that my reflexes and adaptability were good, but it was in my head. I needed to work on my body a lot more, and I looked forward to receiving the specialized training regimen that Instructor Ethan promised to send me.

'Now, all that is left is this.'

DING

Just as I was walking to my room, I heard the sound of a notification coming from my watch.

"As expected, they couldn't refuse it."

Looking at the message, I thought.