

H. Academy 821

Chapter 821 189.7 - Mentorship

"However, the two of you will be different."

Ethan's curiosity piqued again, his hazel eyes lighting up with interest. Astron, as always, remained composed, though his sharp gaze remained fixed on Eleanor.

"You two will have mentorship sessions with me directly," Eleanor stated, her tone leaving no room for argument. "Twice a week—each Saturday and Tuesday—for two hours per session."

Ethan blinked in surprise. "Wait, so... four hours a week?" he asked, doing the quick mental math. "That's—"

"Significantly more than what the others will receive," Eleanor finished for him, her tone matter-of-fact. "And with one of the best Hunters in the entire Human Domain nevertheless."

Astron's sharp purple eyes flicked toward Eleanor. "You really are humble, Professor," he said, his voice calm but carrying a dry undertone.

Eleanor's expression shifted into the faintest of smiles, her sharp gaze steady as she regarded him. "When you reach my age, Astron," she replied smoothly, "you'll understand your worth more. And being humble, in some cases, is simply a way of lying about yourself."

Ethan chuckled lightly at the exchange, leaning back in his chair, clearly entertained by the rare banter. "That's one way to put it," he muttered under his breath.

But Eleanor's smile faded almost imperceptibly as her demeanor turned serious. She straightened in her chair, folding her hands in front of her as her sharp gaze swept over both cadets. "But I need you to brace yourselves."

The weight in her tone immediately shifted the atmosphere in the room. Ethan sat up a little straighter, and even Astron's calm expression seemed to sharpen slightly, his full attention now locked on her.

Eleanor raised one hand, and a faint hum filled the air as she channeled a small, concentrated flow of her mana. The room seemed to shift subtly under the pressure, the temperature dropping just enough to be noticeable, and the edges of the light flickered faintly. Though the mana was controlled and restrained, its intensity was unmistakable—a fraction of what Eleanor was capable of, but still a stark reminder of the power she wielded.

"When we are together in those two hours," she began, her voice steady but carrying an undeniable edge, "I will not be your professor. I will not be Eleanor White, the instructor of the Arcadia Hunter Academy."

The pressure in the room grew slightly, the faint hum of her mana reverberating through the air. Ethan swallowed hard, his usual grin completely gone as he felt the weight of her presence. Astron remained composed, though his sharp eyes glinted with a faint hint of focus, the only indication that he, too, felt the shift.

"In those sessions," Eleanor continued, her tone unwavering, "I will be the Professional Hunter Eleanor. One of the top Hunters in the Human Domain. And I will hold you to the standards of that world—not the world of cadets, not the world of training. The standards of reality. Do you understand?"

Ethan nodded quickly, his hazel eyes wide but resolute. "Yes, Professor."

Astron inclined his head slightly, his voice calm but firm. "Understood."

Eleanor let her mana dissipate slowly, the oppressive weight lifting from the room as the faint hum faded. The silence that followed was heavy, but not with tension—with understanding. She had made her expectations clear, and both cadets knew that this would be no ordinary mentorship.

"Good," Eleanor said finally, her tone returning to its usual calm authority. "Then prepare yourselves. This is an opportunity, yes, but it is also a challenge. You will be pushed harder than you've ever been before. And if you can't rise to meet those expectations—"

"..."

"Well, let's hope that doesn't happen."

Ethan let out a small exhale as the weight of Eleanor's presence fully dissipated, the air in the room returning to its usual stillness. He glanced at Astron, who stood as calm and composed as ever, then back at Eleanor.

"Well," Ethan said lightly, though his voice was edged with genuine respect, "I guess we'll see you on Saturday."

Eleanor gave a slight nod, her sharp gaze shifting briefly between the two cadets. "You will."

Taking that as their dismissal, Ethan turned and made his way toward the door, his steps lighter now that the tension had lifted. Astron followed silently, his posture precise and measured, as always. As the door clicked shut behind them, Eleanor leaned back in her chair, her gaze lingering for a moment on the space they had vacated.

Outside the office, the hallway stretched long and quiet, the echoes of their footsteps fading into the distance. Ethan stretched his arms over his head, letting out a low whistle. "Well, that was... something," he muttered, glancing at Astron out of the corner of his eye. "She really knows how to set the tone, huh?"

Astron didn't immediately respond, his sharp purple eyes fixed ahead as he walked. Finally, he spoke, his voice calm but thoughtful. "She made her expectations clear."

Ethan smirked, stuffing his hands into his pockets. "Yeah, no kidding. Standards of reality, huh? Sounds fun."

Astron's gaze flicked briefly toward him. "I don't think she's aiming for 'fun.'"

Ethan chuckled softly, his hazel eyes glinting with a mix of amusement and determination. "Maybe not, but it'll be interesting. Besides," he added with a grin, "I'd rather have her pushing us than some random mentor who doesn't care."

Astron didn't respond, his expression remaining unreadable as they continued down the hallway. But his silence didn't bother Ethan. If anything, he'd grown used to it—comfortable, even.

The two walked in silence for a while, their strides falling into an unspoken rhythm. Finally, Ethan broke it with a quiet laugh. "Hey, you think she meant it when she said she'd hold us to the standards of a top Hunter?"

Astron's voice was calm, almost detached. "She doesn't seem like the type to say things she doesn't mean."

Ethan let out another low whistle, shaking his head with a grin. "Guess we're in for it, then."

As they reached the end of the corridor, the faint hum of other cadets' chatter began to filter through the air. Ethan turned to Astron, his grin softening into something more genuine. "Well, see you Saturday, partner."

Astron's sharp purple eyes flicked to Ethan, narrowing slightly as he replied in his usual calm but clipped tone. "I am not your partner."

Ethan stopped mid-step, turning to face Astron with an exaggerated look of mock offense. "Heeeh... Why not? It's just the two of us, isn't it?"

"It's just the two of us who have been forcefully called by Eleanor," Astron corrected flatly, his tone as precise as ever. "We are not partners. We are just two people who happen to occupy the same space."

Ethan grinned, a mischievous glint in his hazel eyes. "Are you... tsundere?"

Astron's brows furrowed, and he turned his head slightly, giving Ethan a sharp look. "Tsundere?" he repeated, his tone laced with suspicion. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Ethan burst into laughter, shaking his head. "Never mind. Of course, you wouldn't know. Forget I said anything."

Astron's gaze didn't waver, but after a moment of assessing Ethan's amused expression, he simply turned and resumed walking, muttering under his breath, "Pointless noise."

Ethan was about to retort when his smartwatch buzzed, interrupting his thoughts. He glanced down at the screen, his playful grin softening into something more reserved when he saw the caller ID.

Jane.

Ethan coughed lightly, his hand instinctively moving to adjust the strap of his bag. "Uh, I should get this," he said, his tone shifting to something less teasing and more genuine. "I, uh, need to meet someone."

Astron glanced at him briefly, his expression unreadable. "Fine," he said simply, his tone dismissive as he continued walking ahead without another word.

Ethan watched him for a moment, a small smile tugging at his lips. "See you around, 'not partner,'" he called out, but Astron didn't bother looking back.

With a quiet laugh, Ethan answered the call, his voice softening as he brought the smartwatch closer. "Hey, Jane. What's up?" His steps quickened as he moved toward a quieter corner, already shifting his focus from the sharp-edged banter with Astron to the warm familiarity of Jane's voice.

Eleanor sat back in her chair, the soft hum of the room returning to its usual stillness. The sharp, focused exchange with Ethan and Astron lingered in her mind, playing back in fragments. Astron's calm composure, Ethan's intuitive curiosity—both of them were compelling in their own ways, and she couldn't deny the faint flicker of anticipation she felt for the mentorship sessions to come.

But as the room settled into silence, her smartwatch vibrated softly against her wrist. Glancing down, her sharp eyes caught the name that appeared on the screen:

Esme.

Her brows lifted slightly, her expression sharpening. Esme Abigail—the appointed nanny and trusted representative of the Emberheart family. Seeing her name was enough to tell Eleanor that this message wouldn't be casual.

Tapping the screen, she opened the message. The text was brief, formal, and straight to the point, but the weight of its implications settled heavily in her chest as she read.

To Professor Eleanor White,

This message is sent at the behest of Matriarch Emberheart.

As per her directive, we request your discretion and oversight regarding Irina Emberheart's relationship with Astron Natusalune. The Matriarch believes that close monitoring of this dynamic will be beneficial to ensure that both individuals maintain their focus and that no unfavorable outcomes arise. Your expertise in these matters is, of course, trusted completely.

We appreciate your attention to this matter and will await your observations.

Sincerely,

Esme Abigail

Seeing the message, Eleanor just shook his head.

'You really have not changed.'

This was directed to both the matriarch and a certain maid with whom she was friends in the academy.

Chapter 822 190.1 - No title

'You really have not changed.'

Eleanor's eyes narrowed slightly as she reread the message, her lips pressing into a thin line. It was just like the Matriarch to interfere in such a subtle but deliberate way. Irina's position as the heir to the Emberheart family carried with it expectations and obligations, and Astron—enigmatic and unorthodox as he was—was clearly viewed as a potential variable worth scrutinizing.

'Astron Natusalune,' she thought, leaning back in her chair. It wasn't surprising that he had drawn the Matriarch's attention.

His unique demeanor, his hidden strength, and the way he often avoided the spotlight made him an anomaly even among the exceptional cadets of HA25.

And Irina... Irina's fiery determination and strong-willed nature were unmistakable, but Eleanor had also noticed her recent interactions with Astron. Their dynamic, though not overtly close, carried a subtle charge that might warrant the Matriarch's concern—or interest.

'But at the same time....'

Eleanor leaned back in her chair, her sharp eyes lingering on the faint glow of her smartwatch's screen. The message from Esme wasn't just a request; it was layered with subtext, a veiled warning wrapped in the guise of formality. Her lips pressed into a thin line as her thoughts raced.

She knew all too well how people like the Matriarch operated. The Emberheart family didn't issue direct requests unless it suited their purpose, and they certainly didn't involve outsiders in matters they deemed insignificant. If this were a normal occasion, they would have dealt with Astron quietly, without the academy ever catching wind of it.

That this message had even reached her desk was telling.

'This isn't just oversight,' Eleanor thought, her sharp gaze narrowing. The Matriarch had acknowledged Astron Natusalune—enough to involve her directly. The underlying implication of the message became clear as she dissected it further.

'This cadet now holds my family's interest,' Eleanor mused, imagining the Matriarch's voice in her mind. 'Make sure to treat him well.'

Eleanor's lips curled into a faint smile. "Interesting," she murmured. Gaining the attention of the Emberheart family—let alone the approval of its Matriarch—was no small feat. If Astron had managed that, it spoke volumes about his strength and potential. The Matriarch didn't waste her time on cadets who weren't worth her attention.

But somehow...

Eleanor's smile faded slightly as another thought surfaced, one that nagged at the edges of her mind. This wasn't entirely about Astron's benefit. She knew how the powerful played their games, and this felt like more than a mere endorsement.

'If they truly cared about him and his interests,' she thought, her mind racing, 'they would have helped him hide his strength better. They would have ensured that even someone like me couldn't see through him.'

And yet, Astron remained an open secret, his potential visible enough to draw Eleanor's attention and now the Matriarch's intervention. It was deliberate—too deliberate.

'The Matriarch has other intentions,' Eleanor concluded. Whether it was to test Astron, to manipulate him, or to simply observe how he navigated the challenges ahead, she couldn't be certain. But one thing was clear: Astron wasn't just a cadet in this equation—he was a piece on the board, and the Matriarch had just made her first move.

Eleanor tapped her fingers lightly on the desk, her sharp mind processing the implications. She wasn't one to shy away from complex games like this; in fact, she relished them. But this added another layer to her role as an instructor—and as a mentor to Astron.

"In any case..." she murmured, her gaze drifting back to the message, "this will be an opportunity to see just how far you can go, Astron Natusalune."

<Emberheart Estate, Matriarch's Chambers>

The room was quiet, the faint crackle of the fireplace casting a warm glow across the elegant furnishings. The Matriarch of the Emberheart family sat near the window, her figure silhouetted against the moonlight streaming in. In her hand, a crystal glass of deep crimson wine swirled lazily as she lifted it to her lips, savoring the sharp, velvety taste.

Her amber eyes reflected in the glassy surface of the window, watching the faint outlines of her sprawling estate. A faint smile played on her lips, one that held no warmth—only an icy amusement.

"Now," she murmured, her voice soft and edged with quiet menace. "Let's see how you will hide your strength, Astron Natusalune."

She raised the glass to her lips once more, taking a slow sip as her eyes lingered on the reflection.

Behind her, Esme stood in the shadows, her posture composed but her gaze flickering with silent concern. "Matriarch," she began cautiously, her voice quiet but firm, "was this necessary?"

The Matriarch's smile didn't falter, though her gaze shifted slightly in the reflection, capturing Esme's form behind her. Her tone turned sharp, cutting through the stillness like a blade. "Since when have you started questioning what I do, Esme?"

Esme's lips pressed into a thin line, and she lowered her head respectfully. "I would never question your decisions, Matriarch," she said softly, though her thoughts churned beneath the surface.

The room fell silent once more, save for the faint hum of the fire and the clink of the Matriarch's glass as she set it down on the side table. Esme remained motionless, waiting for any further words from her mistress, but none came.

Inwardly, Esme's thoughts stirred uneasily. A woman's vengeance... she thought, her sharp instincts reminding her of the delicate line she walked. She knew the Matriarch well, had served her long enough to see the patterns of her mind and the ruthlessness with which she pursued her goals.

Esme couldn't forget the tension at the dinner table two weeks ago. The Matriarch had remained calm, her exterior flawless, but Esme had caught the faintest flicker of something else—irritation, perhaps even insult. Astron's words, true or not, had stung her pride.

The boy is clever, Esme thought silently, keeping her expression neutral. But cleverness can be dangerous in a room like this.

The Matriarch picked up her glass again, the faint sound pulling Esme from her thoughts. "Astron," the Matriarch said, her voice thoughtful, almost musing. "He is an anomaly. One who doesn't bow. One who doesn't cower." She chuckled softly, the sound devoid of humor. "That boy thought he could challenge me with words alone."

Esme remained silent, though her mind churned with unease. The Matriarch's pride was not something to be trifled with.

Really, anyone who dared to do such a thing had met quite of her wrath.

Emma reclined on her lavish chair, the dim lighting of her room casting shadows across her sharp features. The faint hum of the academy grounds buzzed faintly through her window, but her attention was fully on the phone pressed to her ear.

"Are you sure you could get the mentor that she will choose?" Emma asked, her tone clipped but laced with curiosity.

A deep, measured voice responded on the other end of the line. [Yes. I will. You don't have to worry about that part.]

Emma leaned back, her lips curling into a faint smirk. "If that is the case, I accept."

[Good,] the voice replied. [I'll let you know which mentor she chooses. But, Emma, you need to ensure you satisfy your end of the deal as well.]

She rolled her eyes, the impatience clear in her voice. "Yes, yes. I will. You'll get what you need. Just make sure this works."

With that, she ended the call, the faint beep of the disconnected line echoing in the quiet room. Emma stared at the phone in her hand for a moment, her smirk deepening into something more sinister.

Standing up, she walked over to the window, her gaze fixed on the dorms in the distance. The faint silhouette of activity caught her eye, but her focus was elsewhere—on her plan, on Taylor.

'Since you refuse to drop out, I have no choice but to do this, you know,' she thought to herself, a cruel smile spreading across her lips.

Her reflection in the glass seemed to mirror her thoughts, the shadows in her room making her look more imposing than ever. She let out a soft chuckle and turned away from the window, already envisioning the scene.

The faint hum of the lights overhead filled the silence in my room as I leaned back against the chair, my gaze fixed on the ceiling. Eleanor's words replayed in my mind, each one as deliberate and sharp as the woman who'd spoken them.

'Apparently, I still gave some signs away,' I thought, letting out a quiet sigh.

I had anticipated that my movements would eventually attract attention, but not from her—not so soon, at least. Eleanor White wasn't someone who acted impulsively....

Most of the time at least.

The decisions she would make in general would be calculated, and grounded in logic and observation. For her to single me out meant that, despite my efforts, I'd revealed more than I'd intended.

I tapped my fingers lightly against the armrest, my thoughts spiraling deeper. It wasn't that her decision changed anything for me—after all, I'd known that standing out was inevitable. Still, Eleanor's sharp gaze and incisive remarks felt like a quiet reminder: You can't stay hidden forever.

Chapter 823 190.2 - No Title

'Still.....she pays more attention than I thought,' I mused, narrowing my eyes slightly. Not that it mattered in the long run. Eleanor was safe. She was someone who understood the weight of secrets and the value of silence. If there was anyone in the academy who wouldn't let a slip of knowledge become a weapon, it was her.

Even so, her move had consequences. Being placed under her direct mentorship would shift the spotlight in my direction, however subtly.

'This will bring some eyes on me,' I thought, though the corner of my lips twitched faintly at the irony. 'Not that it matters. Irina's already doing a fantastic job of that.'

The image of her flashed briefly in my mind—her amber gaze with her usual fiery hair.

'I am sure she was even happy with those pictures spreading out.'

That was so like Irina after all, and I didn't mind it. In fact, it gave me somehow another cover to use, if I utilized it cleverly.

'A boytoy....Doesn't sound good and honorable, but will be effective nonetheless.' I let out another breath, leaning forward and resting my elbows on the desk. The faint glow of my desk lamp illuminated the scattered notes and reports I'd been working on earlier, though my focus wasn't on them now. My mind was elsewhere, sorting through the implications of Eleanor's decision.

She'd called it mentorship. But what it really was—a test. A challenge. A deliberate move to push me out of my shadows and into the light.

'She's curious,' I realized, my fingers steepling as I rested my chin against them. 'She wants to see what I'm hiding.'

Not that I blamed her. If our positions were reversed, I would've done the same. Eleanor wasn't someone who overlooked potential, and she wasn't someone who ignored anomalies. And I... well, I wasn't exactly the most transparent cadet in the academy.

The question was: how far would she go to see through me?

'Curiosity,' I thought again, letting the idea roll around in my mind as I stared at the faint glow of my desk lamp. My fingers tapped lightly against the wood of the desk, a rhythm that mirrored my spiraling thoughts. Eleanor wasn't just curious for curiosity's sake—she wanted to see how far she could push me, to measure me against whatever expectations she had.

The question wasn't why she'd decided to mentor me. That was clear enough. No, the real question was: how much could I gain from this?

I leaned back in my chair, the weight of that thought settling over me. If it were before, I wouldn't have hesitated to refuse the offer outright. The idea of revealing too much, of stepping into the spotlight, went against everything I'd built. Staying in the shadows, moving unseen, had been my strategy from the start. And it worked.

I leaned back in my chair, the weight of that thought settling over me. If it were before, I wouldn't have hesitated to refuse the offer outright. The idea of revealing too much, of stepping into the

spotlight, went against everything I'd built. Staying in the shadows, moving unseen, had been my strategy from the start. And it worked.

But that was before.

Before I'd tasted the rapid growth that came with real guidance. Back in the organization, it had been the same. I'd fought against it at first, convinced that my talent alone was enough. But under the right mentorship—strategic, methodical guidance—I'd grown faster than I could have imagined. Concepts that would have taken weeks, maybe even months to master on my own had become clear in days.

And Eleanor White wasn't just any mentor. She was one of the most talented Hunters in the history of the Human Domain. Her insight, her precision, her methods—these weren't things you could replicate on your own.

'If I let her push me,' I mused, my fingers stilling against the desk. 'If I let her challenge me, teach me, and refine me...'

The potential was undeniable. My talent was a weapon, sharp and lethal, but raw in places. With Eleanor's guidance, that weapon could be honed to perfection.

'It'll be risky,' I thought, my eyes narrowing slightly. 'But worth it.'

I let out a slow breath, my decision settling in my mind. 'Let's see it, then, shall we?'

Pushing myself up from the chair, I walked over to the small bookshelf by the corner of the room, pulling out one of the thick volumes I'd been studying. The weight of it felt grounding, a reminder that no matter how far I'd come, there was still more to learn.

Just as I was about to return to my desk, my smartwatch vibrated against my wrist, the soft buzz breaking the quiet. I glanced down, tapping the screen to bring up the notification.

Archery Club Notification

Meeting scheduled: Tomorrow at 14:00

All members are required to attend. Please confirm your availability.

I raised an eyebrow as I stared at the notification on my smartwatch.

'I see... So Lilia's plot will start acting,' I mused.

But then, my eyes flicked toward the corner of the display where the date was neatly printed.

'That's earlier than it should be.'

According to the game, the Archery Club meeting that triggered this chain of events wasn't supposed to happen until the latter half of the semester. It had been a key moment—carefully timed and perfectly placed to align with the unfolding narrative. Yet, here it was, thrown forward into the semester as if someone had shuffled the pieces of the timeline without regard for where they landed.

Not that this was the first time I'd seen discrepancies. From the moment I arrived here, the game's timeline had been anything but stable. Events that should have happened weeks apart occurred side by side, while others that were meant to be monumental barely rippled the surface.

'Well, it was obvious already,' I thought, letting out a quiet breath. The unpredictability of this world had been a constant since the beginning, scattering what I knew and forcing me to adapt. And so far, I had.

Still, this particular shift made me pause.

'Selene Thornheart...' Her name surfaced in my thoughts, and my fingers drummed lightly against the edge of my desk. She was supposed to make her first appearance during this meeting—an enigmatic, razor-sharp presence that would cast a shadow over the rest of the Archery Club's arc.

'Let's see if she really shows up this time.'

After all, this plot would be important to Lilia's development.

Quite a lot.

The dim glow of the holographic projector illuminated Trevor's room, casting pale blue light across his sharp features. He sat rigid in his chair, his purple eyes locked onto the flickering figure before him. The hologram was of a tall man, his posture commanding, his expression stern. His presence alone filled the room with a palpable weight, a mix of authority and cold calculation.

This was Trevor's father.

The man's tailored suit fit perfectly, his broad shoulders and chiseled features making him appear more like a carved statue than a living being. His silver-streaked black hair was slicked back, his sharp, calculating eyes mirroring Trevor's but darker, colder. When he spoke, his voice was deep, deliberate, each word heavy with intent.

"The Hartley family is proving more troublesome than anticipated," his father said, his tone measured but laced with irritation. "Their alliances grow stronger, and their influence is spreading faster than we projected. But this war... this war will end soon."

Trevor nodded, though his hands were clenched tightly in his lap. "Father, what should I do?"

The hologram shifted slightly as his father adjusted his stance, his expression unwavering. "You," he said, pointing directly at Trevor, "will continue creating chaos within the academy."

Trevor hesitated for a moment, though inwardly he was smirking. "But the academy..."

His father's eyes narrowed, cutting him off. "You don't need to fear the academy," he said sharply. "Their strength is a façade, Trevor. Once we win this war—once the Hartley family is crushed and their influence eradicated—the academy will bow like everyone else. They will not be able to touch you."

Trevor swallowed hard, his jaw tightening. "Are you sure?"

The question hung in the air for a moment, and the temperature in the room seemed to drop. His father's lips curled into a slight sneer, a mixture of disdain and disappointment.

"Do you doubt me, Trevor?" he asked, his voice cold and dangerous.

Trevor immediately shook his head, his voice hurried. "No... No, Father. I don't doubt you."

"Good....Make sure that you satisfy their demands, got it?" "Yes."

As the hologram fizzled out, the faint blue light receding into darkness, Trevor sat back in his chair. The room was silent, but his mind was alive with schemes, plans, and a burning sense of satisfaction. His father's words echoed in his ears—"You don't need to fear the academy. Once we win this war, they will not be able to touch you."

A slow, deliberate smile spread across his lips. His confidence had always been a weapon, but now, with the backing he had secured, it felt more like armor—impenetrable and unyielding. He could afford to act aggressively because he wasn't acting alone anymore. This was no longer just his game; it was a much larger battlefield, and he had powerful hands guiding his moves.

Trevor's fingers drummed against the armrest of his chair, a rhythmic tap that matched the cold calculation brewing in his mind. "Leverage," he muttered to himself, his smile growing sharper. "I can turn this mess into something much greater."

His gaze drifted toward the far wall of his room, where pictures hung in shadowy prominence. They weren't chaotic like the collage he'd dedicated to another. These were deliberate, framed and organized like a hunter cataloging his prey.

Two faces dominated the collection.

The first was a young woman with fiery red hair cascading down her shoulders, her amber eyes bright with determination. A face he knew all too well—Irina Emberheart. The second, in stark contrast, was that of a young man with black hair and piercing purple eyes. The very same cockroach who had somehow survived his every attempt to crush him—Astron.

Trevor's smile faltered, his jaw tightening. His teeth clenched as a flash of rage flickered in his purple eyes. "Last time, you got out of my hand," he muttered under his breath, his voice low and venomous. "But not this time."

He stood, his movements slow and deliberate as he walked toward the wall. His fingers brushed against the edge of Irina's photo. There was a softness in his expression, but it was twisted, warped by the possessiveness that burned beneath the surface.

"How dare you," he growled, his voice trembling with suppressed fury. "You already have someone in your life. That's obvious enough. And yet, you still... you still dare to look at her."

This time his gaze was on a girl with purple hair cascading down to her waist.

Chapter 824 191.1 - Sponsor ?

Lilia stepped off the training grounds of her private dormitory, a thin sheen of sweat glistening on her fair skin. Her breathing was steady despite the grueling drills she had just completed. The crimson of her eyes seemed sharper in the morning sunlight filtering through the window panes, glinting with a quiet intensity. Even after hours of training, her movements carried a grace that belied the fatigue tightening her muscles.

Sliding the door to her room shut behind her, Lilia paused in the center of the spacious quarters, rolling her shoulders to loosen the tension there. She slipped the bowstring guard off her wrist, her fingers running over the soft leather absently.

Her reflection in the mirror caught her attention—a stark contrast to how she felt. Her emerald hair, slightly damp from the sweat, fell over her shoulders like a shimmering cascade, and her flawless skin seemed to glow faintly under the light. Yet beneath the composed exterior, she felt the weight of everything she had been shouldering.

"Haaah..." The sigh escaped her lips as she unpinned her training cloak, letting it slide off her shoulders and pool around her feet. She began to undress methodically, shedding her sleeveless tunic and leggings with practiced ease. Her body moved on autopilot as if ritualizing this part of her day helped her manage the chaos encroaching on every other corner of her life.

Stepping into the bathroom, she turned on the shower, watching the steam rise as hot water began to cascade. Her mind, however, lingered on other matters.

Recently, the pressure had been mounting—not just from the academy's increasingly rigorous schedules but from her family's expectations as well. Her father had made it clear during their last exchange: as the heir to Olympus' Vanguard, she couldn't afford even the slightest misstep. Every evaluation, every competition, every interaction with her peers carried the weight of her name.

The upcoming Archery Club meeting loomed in her thoughts. Lilia had already noticed the growing support Adrian was rallying within the club. His ambition to consolidate control wasn't subtle, and it frustrated her to no end. Yet, she knew she couldn't afford to act recklessly. Her moves needed to be deliberate—calculated.

'One misstep, and he'll take everything I've worked for,' she thought, the water running over her skin offering a fleeting respite from the storm brewing inside her.

Then there was the succession competition within her family guild. Her cousins were growing more aggressive, their eyes set firmly on the position that should have been hers by right. Every report she received from her informants painted a grim picture of alliances forming behind her back. It wasn't paranoia—Olympus' Vanguard had no room for the weak, and she knew better than anyone what failure meant in their world.

And yet, it wasn't just external pressures that weighed on her. The mentor-mentee program, the escalating course loads, and the academy's competitive environment left her with little room to breathe. She hadn't had a moment to herself in weeks. Even now, standing under the hot water, the tension in her body refused to fully dissipate.

Her hand brushed against the pendant she still wore around her neck—a simple token from her childhood, one of the few reminders of a time when life had felt less complicated. She closed her eyes, letting her head rest against the tiled wall.

'I can't afford to fall apart,' she thought, exhaling slowly. Her mind replayed the words she had once told herself, a mantra forged from years of pushing through exhaustion. 'Weakness is a luxury I don't have.'

The shower ran for a little longer before she turned it off, the room now thick with steam. Lilia stepped out, wrapping herself in a towel as she moved to the full-length mirror. Wiping the condensation away, she stared at her reflection, her crimson eyes locking onto her own.

"Let's go."

By the time she dressed in the academy uniform and prepared to face the day ahead, the mask of composure was firmly in place. Whatever frustrations or fears she felt, they would remain buried. The Archery Club meeting would be the next battlefield, and on that stage, she couldn't allow even the faintest crack to show.

With one last glance at her smartwatch, she noted the meeting reminder and stepped out of her dormitory, her expression calm and determined. The day had only just begun, but Lilia Thornheart was already ready for war.

Lilia stepped out of her dormitory, her polished academy uniform impeccable and her emerald hair cascading in soft waves over her shoulders. The crisp morning air greeted her, but so did the gazes. It wasn't anything new. She had long since grown accustomed to the attention she drew wherever she went.

As she strode down the pathway toward the Archery Club building, her heels clicking faintly against the stone, conversations began to ripple in her wake. Whispers, glances, and even outright stares seemed to follow her, no matter how much she pretended not to notice.

"Isn't she the school goddess?" one student murmured, his voice tinged with awe. "I haven't seen her before, but she really looks beautiful."

His companion, a girl with a sharp glare, didn't miss a beat. "Where are you looking at?" she snapped, nudging him hard with her elbow. "Focus."

Lilia didn't even flinch as the exchange reached her ears. Her stride remained steady, her expression as poised as ever. These kinds of comments were as common to her as breathing. From the moment she was a child, she had known she was beautiful.

It wasn't vanity—it was just a fact. Agencies had approached her for modeling since she was young, offering her countless contracts and opportunities. Even in her earliest memories, the attention she received always seemed a little more intense than what others experienced. But it wasn't just her looks. Lilia had a natural talent for carrying herself with grace and elegance, an innate sense of presence that set her apart from others.

In a way, she knew this wasn't solely about her appearance. It was the way she walked, the way her crimson eyes held a spark of unwavering confidence, and the way her expression exuded a quiet but commanding strength. She wasn't just seen—she was remembered.

Ahead of her, a group of first-years stopped mid-conversation, their eyes widening as she passed. One of the boys elbowed his friend sharply, whispering something inaudible, and the two of them tried to look as though they weren't staring. Lilia noticed, of course, but she didn't let it show. A faint flicker of amusement danced in her eyes, but her demeanor remained composed.

'It's always the same,' she thought, a subtle smile tugging at her lips. Being surrounded by girls like Irina and Julia, who were breathtaking in their own right, might have made it easy for someone else to blend into the background. But Lilia had always stood just a little ahead of them. Even in a crowd of beautiful people, she was the one who seemed to shine the brightest.

As Lilia continued walking, her thoughts drifted from the wide-eyed stares of the first-years to something—or rather, someone—far more intriguing. Irina.

For a moment, she envisioned the striking presence of the Fiery Demoness herself, her crimson flames flaring to life in battle, her sharp eyes alight with an unyielding will. Irina Emberheart was a force to be reckoned with, both on and off the battlefield. As one of the academy's most fiery personalities, she demanded respect through sheer power and a personality that burned just as fiercely.

Yet, despite her relentless strength and untouchable demeanor, there was one person who seemed to have slipped past her walls.

'Astron...' Lilia's lips quirked into a small, bemused smile at the thought.

To think that he had managed to capture Irina's trust. Not just trust—something deeper than that. It was clear in the way Irina carried herself when Astron's name was mentioned. She didn't need to say much; her actions spoke volumes. The fiery, untamed Demoness of Olympus' Vanguard had let her guard down around him—a feat Lilia could only describe as miraculous.

'He got her in the bag,' Lilia mused, shaking her head lightly. The thought was both surprising and, in some strange way, impressive. Dealing with Irina wasn't just a challenge; it was like walking a tightrope over a pit of flames. Say the wrong thing, move too suddenly, and you'd get burned.

'To pull that off...' Her respect for Astron grew, albeit grudgingly. It wasn't that she disliked him—but it was just...

'I don't understand him...even now.'

That thought was not something that she liked.

Lilia's gaze turned toward the sky as her thoughts lingered on Astron, her expression a mix of curiosity and mild frustration. She had spoken to him on several occasions—whether it was during Archery Club meetings, casual encounters around the academy, or even the few moments they had shared in passing. And yet, despite those interactions, Astron remained a puzzle.

He was... odd, to say the least. Conversations with him were anything but predictable.

He had this frustrating habit of cutting people off mid-sentence, as if their words were wasting his time. It wasn't rude, exactly—just abrupt, as if his mind had already leapt ahead to the conclusion before you even finished your thought. Then there was his tone: always calm, detached, and carrying a weight that felt far older than his years. It wasn't uncommon for Lilia to feel like she was talking to someone twice their age rather than a fellow student.

And then there was his maddening ability to win arguments.

Every. Single. Time.

"You don't seriously believe we can adjust the schedule without impacting the freshmen's progress," she had said, crossing her arms as she addressed him in the club's meeting hall.

Astron, leaning back in his chair, had tilted his head slightly, his expression unreadable as always. "If the current schedule was truly optimal, the results would reflect it. But they don't."

"And what's your solution, then?" she had shot back, raising a brow.

He had shrugged, his response maddeningly nonchalant. "Adaptability. Train them in conditions that force them to think, not just repeat."

The conversation had spiraled from there, but by the end of it, she had found herself reluctantly conceding. It wasn't that his ideas were always revolutionary—it was how he presented them, with a cool confidence that made it hard to refute.

Still, there was something about him that unsettled her.

'He's not normal.'

And well, that was somehow his quality.

Chapter 825 191.2 - Sponsor ?

'He's not normal.'

She had dug into his background, pulling every string and tapping into every source she could think of. Yet every investigation came back the same: nothing. No detailed history, no noteworthy lineage, no significant ties to powerful families or organizations. It was as if he had appeared out of nowhere, a blank slate that defied her ability to pin him down.

It made no sense. Someone with his level of talent—his precision in archery, his mastery over mana, his sharp mind—shouldn't be a nobody. But that's exactly what he seemed to be, at least on paper.

The lack of information only made her more curious, more determined to figure him out.

And yet, for all the enigma surrounding him, there was one thing Lilia was certain of: Astron was talented. Exceptionally so. She had seen it firsthand, whether it was his flawless execution during club drills or his sharp insights into strategy. He had the kind of potential that was impossible to ignore.

'Which is why I wanted him under me in the first place,' she thought, her steps slowing as the Archery Club building came into view. But now, with Irina involved, things were far more complicated. Irina's presence wasn't just a shield for Astron—it was a declaration. Whatever he had done to earn her trust, it had solidified his position beyond Lilia's reach.

'For now,' Lilia reminded herself, her jaw tightening slightly. She wasn't one to give up easily, and she certainly wasn't going to let Irina's involvement deter her. If anything, it only made her more curious about Astron.

What had he done to gain Irina's trust? And, more importantly, was he truly deserving of it?

Lilia's gaze sharpened as she reached the doors to the Archery Club, her hand pausing on the handle. There was more to Astron than met the eye—of that, she was certain. And while she didn't have the answers yet, she was confident she would find them eventually.

'One way or another,' she thought, stepping inside with her usual composed air. 'I'll figure you out, Astron.'

Lilia's thoughts came to an abrupt halt as she finally reached the Archery Club training grounds. Her crimson eyes blinked, momentarily adjusting to the sight before her.

The grounds had undergone a dramatic transformation.

What had once been a somewhat utilitarian space, functional but uninspiring, was now sleek and polished. The entire area gleamed with a newness that seemed to reflect the academy's recent structural overhauls. Rows of pristine targets lined the far end of the range, their surfaces freshly painted, while the reinforced platforms beneath the cadets' feet seemed designed to withstand even the most forceful of mana-infused shots.

The vending machines, previously limited to a few scattered, outdated units, had multiplied. Shiny, modern machines stood strategically placed along the edges of the training grounds, offering a variety of refreshments and snacks. Even a small canteen had been added near the entrance, its tables and chairs neatly arranged under a sleek awning. The faint aroma of freshly brewed coffee and pastries wafted through the air, mingling with the crispness of the morning breeze.

Lilia's gaze swept across the area, taking in the improvements.

'They've certainly been busy,' she thought, the faintest flicker of approval crossing her features. The changes weren't just cosmetic—they reflected a deeper investment in the cadets' experience, something she could respect. After all, the Archery Club was more than just a gathering place; it was a proving ground for those who sought excellence in a discipline that demanded precision, patience, and control.

As she walked further inside, she noticed a few cadets already warming up at the targets. Some were stretching, others testing their bows with quiet focus. The faint hum of conversation and the rhythmic sound of arrows slicing through the air filled the space, creating an atmosphere of quiet determination.

Her attention flicked briefly to a group of juniors huddled near one of the vending machines, their excited chatter barely audible over the ambient noise.

"Look at this place," one of them said, gesturing toward the new canteen. "It's like they're preparing us for a real tournament or something."

"Maybe they are," another replied. "I heard there's talk of some interclub competitions later this semester."

The mention of competitions piqued Lilia's interest, but she didn't pause to listen further. Instead, she continued toward the center of the grounds, her steps confident and unhurried. Her presence, as always, drew the attention of those around her. Conversations dimmed momentarily, heads turned, and more than one cadet paused mid-action to watch her pass.

Lilia ignored the stares, her focus fixed on the larger picture. The improvements to the club were impressive, but they also underscored the growing expectations placed on its members. With the academy pouring resources into these upgrades, it was clear that mediocrity wouldn't be tolerated. The stakes were rising, and everyone here would be expected to rise with them.

'This will make things even more interesting,' she thought, a faint smile tugging at her lips. The heightened standards would undoubtedly push her peers to excel, but it would also make her own rise to dominance that much more satisfying.

As she neared the main archery platform, she spotted Adrian standing near the edge of the range, speaking with a few sophomores. His posture was as casual as ever, but there was a sharpness in his expression that Lilia didn't miss. Whatever he was discussing, it was clear he was already strategizing, already positioning himself as the center of influence within the club.

Her lips pressed into a thin line. Adrian was a problem, one she couldn't ignore. His control over the sophomores, his subtle but effective manipulations, and his knack for turning the club's environment to his advantage were all factors she needed to address. Yet, even as she acknowledged his presence, she felt no hesitation, no fear. If anything, the sight of him only strengthened her resolve.

Just as Lilia's gaze briefly lingered on Adrian, his sharp eyes turned toward her, catching her presence immediately. A sly smile spread across his face, the kind that was calculated rather than warm. It was the smile of someone who enjoyed the game as much as the competition.

"Well, well," Adrian called out, his voice carrying easily across the training grounds. "Look who we have here."

His words drew the attention of the sophomores and freshmen gathered around him. Conversations stilled as heads turned to follow his gaze, all eyes locking onto Lilia as she approached. The faint murmurs of the crowd returned, whispers of admiration and curiosity rippling through the air.

Lilia slowed her steps slightly, tilting her head just enough to meet Adrian's gaze. A smile of her own began to form, equally calculated but far more composed. This wasn't her first time facing such a confrontation. She'd had her fair share of encounters like this during her tenure as a guild manager, and this type of verbal sparring had become second nature to her.

"Adrian," she greeted smoothly, her voice carrying a hint of warmth that was undercut by the sharp undertone of her words. "Still busy surrounding yourself with your loyal entourage, I see."

Her crimson eyes flicked briefly to the cadets around him, taking in their expressions—some wary, some admiring, others carefully neutral. Adrian had clearly cemented his influence among this group, though it was just as obvious to Lilia that some of them were caught in his web more out of necessity than choice.

Adrian's smirk widened as he leaned casually against the railing of the range, his bow resting at his side. "What can I say? It's good to keep the club lively," he said, spreading his arms theatrically. "Besides, we can't all be as elusive as you, Thornheart. It's nice to see you gracing us with your presence for a change."

Lilia's smile didn't falter. If anything, it grew sharper. "Oh, I'm always around, Adrian," she replied, her tone as smooth as polished glass. "I just don't feel the need to announce it to the world every time I step into the club."

A few quiet chuckles from the surrounding cadets punctuated her words, and Adrian's smirk twitched slightly. He recovered quickly, though, his demeanor never losing its calculated edge.

"Touché," he said with a chuckle, his tone light but his eyes narrowing ever so slightly. "But it's a shame you don't make yourself more available. After all, we could use someone with your talents to help... elevate the club."

Lilia's eyes locked onto his, her smile unwavering. "Elevate? Is that what you're doing, Adrian? Because from where I stand, it looks more like you're building your own little empire."

Her words hung in the air, a challenge that didn't go unnoticed by the cadets around them. Some exchanged uneasy glances, while others leaned in slightly, their attention riveted on the subtle but unmistakable tension between the two.

Adrian's smirk only deepened at Lilia's words, his sharp eyes glinting with amusement. He leaned forward slightly, as if savoring the moment, and then spoke with an unsettling calmness.

"Empire..." he repeated, letting the word hang in the air. "It's quite a nice word you say."

He straightened and gestured casually to the side, his tone almost conversational. "But indeed, you are partially right. It may not be my empire, but there is someone who wants to let us create one."

Lilia's crimson eyes narrowed, her sharp senses immediately picking up on the weight behind his words. A cold, sinking feeling settled in her chest, though her outward composure remained unbroken. She knew Adrian well enough to recognize when he was laying groundwork for something significant. And this? This wasn't just idle posturing.

'This is not good...'

Chapter 826 191.3 - Sponsor ?

Lilia's crimson eyes narrowed, her sharp senses immediately picking up on the weight behind his words. A cold, sinking feeling settled in her chest, though her outward composure remained unbroken. She knew Adrian well enough to recognize when he was laying groundwork for something significant. And this? This wasn't just idle posturing.

Her voice was calm but laced with suspicion. "What are you talking about, Adrian?"

Adrian didn't answer immediately. Instead, he glanced down at his smartwatch, the faint glow of the screen reflecting in his eyes as he checked the time. His smirk widened.

"Everyone should be around here by now," he said smoothly, his gaze lifting to scan the training grounds.

And he was right. Cadets filled the area, gathering in clusters around the canteen, the vending machines, and the various platforms. The hum of conversation had grown louder as more members trickled in, the atmosphere charged with a sense of anticipation. It was almost the exact time the notification had stated, and from the look on Adrian's face, this was no coincidence.

Lilia's unease deepened. Whatever Adrian was planning, it wasn't something minor. Her instincts, honed from years of navigating both guild politics and battlefield strategy, were screaming at her that this moment was pivotal.

Adrian clapped his hands together, drawing the attention of the club members. The noise settled almost instantly, the cadets falling silent as all eyes turned to him. He had a commanding presence, and he knew how to use it.

"Thank you all for coming," Adrian began, his voice carrying effortlessly across the grounds. "As you may have noticed, the Archery Club has seen some remarkable improvements recently. New facilities, new equipment—investments that reflect the academy's belief in us as one of its most promising organizations."

His words were met with a murmur of agreement and scattered applause. Lilia remained silent, her sharp gaze fixed on him as he continued.

"But," Adrian added, raising a hand to quiet the noise, "these improvements didn't come from nowhere. They were made possible by a very generous benefactor—someone who believes in the potential of this club and its members. And today, I'm honored to announce that this benefactor has officially agreed to sponsor the Archery Club."

The murmurs started again, this time louder and more excited. A sponsor? That was no small matter. Sponsorship often meant additional funding, exclusive opportunities, and connections that could elevate the club to unprecedented heights.

But Lilia wasn't focused on the applause or the chatter. Her mind was racing, piecing together the implications of Adrian's words. A benefactor... no, a sponsor? She clenched her fists at her sides, a sinking feeling settling in her stomach as a terrible suspicion began to form.

Adrian's smirk grew as he stepped to the side, gesturing toward the entrance of the training grounds. "And without further ado, let me introduce her to you."

The silence that followed was deafening as every head turned toward the entrance.

And then she appeared.

"Huh?"

Someone that she had not been expecting at all.

The silence in the training grounds stretched thin as every head turned toward the entrance. Lilia, still as a statue, felt her chest tighten as the figure stepped into view.

Her emerald-green hair cascaded in soft waves, catching the sunlight with an effortless shimmer. The way she moved—graceful, deliberate, and captivating—was almost a mirror image of Lilia herself. Her slim waist, poised demeanor, and the subtle, seductive sway in her step commanded attention with the ease of someone who had long mastered the art of presence.

And yet, there was a difference.

Her eyes.

They weren't crimson like Lilia's; instead, they were a deep, rich brown, warm yet piercing in a way that seemed to strip away layers with a single glance. Those eyes held a calm confidence, an undeniable authority that sent a ripple through the gathered cadets.

"Hello," the woman greeted, her voice smooth as silk, carrying just enough weight to command attention without raising it.

The reaction was immediate. Cadets shifted uneasily, their whispers low but not quiet enough to go unnoticed. Awe, curiosity, even a tinge of lust painted their expressions, though most tried to mask

it under the veneer of composure befitting their high-ranking family backgrounds. Still, the atmosphere was charged, the energy palpable.

"Who is she?"

"She looks just like... no, but her eyes are different..."

"She's gorgeous."

"She has to be someone important."

The silence stretched taut as Selene Thornheart, Lilia's step-sister, stood at the entrance, effortlessly commanding the room without uttering another word. Her emerald hair shimmered in the sunlight, and her brown eyes scanned the training grounds with a piercing calmness, carrying a subtle mockery that didn't need to be spoken aloud.

Lilia's crimson eyes locked onto her, and for a split second, the air between them crackled with unspoken tension. Selene's lips curved into a faint smile, one that was more a challenge than a greeting. It was the kind of expression that could light a fire in Lilia's chest, and it did.

"This bitch..." Lilia mumbled under her breath, her words almost drowned out by the hum of whispers from the cadets around her. Her hands clenched into fists at her sides, but her face betrayed nothing beyond a calm exterior. Years of practice kept her expression neutral, but inside, her frustration burned white-hot.

Selene Thornheart.

The name alone was enough to set Lilia's teeth on edge. Selene wasn't just a sister from another mother—she was a thorn in Lilia's side, the constant obstacle standing between her and her goals. Her father's second wife had birthed Selene, and ever since the day the two sisters had met, it had been a battle.

Selene's very existence seemed designed to antagonize her. She was cunning.

Really cunning, even though outwardly she looked like a really nice person.

Worse, she wielded her influence like a weapon, subtly undermining Lilia at every turn while maintaining her polished, untouchable image.

'Hindrance is an understatement,' Lilia thought bitterly, her nails digging into her palms. 'She's been blocking every opportunity I've worked for, sabotaging my progression without ever getting her hands dirty.'

Selene's gaze flicked to her for just a moment, their eyes meeting in a silent clash. Her brown eyes gleamed with amusement, and her smile deepened, as though she could see every ounce of Lilia's frustration and was savoring it. It was infuriatingly familiar—that mocking, superior look that always seemed to say, You'll never win.

Lilia exhaled slowly, forcing herself to remain composed. This wasn't the place to lose her temper. Selene was good at goading people into making mistakes, and Lilia had no intention of giving her the satisfaction.

As Selene stepped further into the training grounds, the whispers grew louder.

"Wait, isn't that Selene Thornheart? The daughter of the second wife of the Guild Master?"

"She's that Selene? No wonder she looks so... regal."

"I heard she's a major contender for the Thornheart family's succession."

"And now she's sponsoring the Archery Club? That's huge."

The murmurs grated on Lilia's nerves, but she kept her focus sharp, her eyes never leaving Selene. This wasn't just a casual visit. Selene didn't do casual. If she was here, it was for a reason, and Lilia doubted it was anything good.

Adrian, ever the opportunist, stepped forward with a bright smile. "Miss Thornheart," he said, his voice practically dripping with admiration, "thank you again for joining us. Your presence is truly an honor for the Archery Club."

Selene inclined her head slightly, her smile never faltering. "The pleasure is mine," she replied smoothly. Her voice, calm and deliberate, carried an air of authority that made even Adrian's inflated ego seem smaller by comparison.

"I've been following the club's progress for some time," Selene continued, addressing the cadets. "And I must say, I'm impressed by what I've seen. The potential here is undeniable, and I look forward to supporting all of you as we take this club to even greater heights."

Applause rippled through the crowd, though it was hesitant in places, as some cadets seemed unsure how to react to the sudden announcement.

Lilia stood frozen, her eyes narrowing further as she analyzed every word Selene said.

'Supporting all of you,' she thought with a scoff. What a joke.

After all, she herself knew what kind of woman Selene was.

Of course, she herself was not too different, but she had a bottom line that she would not cross. And Selene never hesitated to cross that line.

The truer words would be....

She did not have any bottom line.

his wasn't about the Archery Club. It was about power, influence, and finding yet another way to outmaneuver Lilia.

Adrian, clearly emboldened by Selene's presence, turned his attention back to the crowd. "With Miss Thornheart's sponsorship, the Archery Club will finally have the resources to compete on a level that rivals the best organizations in the academy." His gaze flicked to Lilia for a brief second, his smirk returning. "This is an incredible opportunity for all of us."

The implication wasn't lost on her. This wasn't just a move to elevate the club—it was a direct challenge to her position, her influence, and everything she had worked for within the academy.

Selene's gaze returned to Lilia, her smile widening ever so slightly. "I trust you'll do your part as well, Lilia," she said, her tone light but her words razor-sharp.

Lilia's jaw tightened, but she composed herself.

'Whatever.'

After all, she knew she couldn't let anything out for now.

"I trust you'll do your part as well, Lilia."

Lilia drew a deep breath, forcing her composure to remain intact. She straightened her posture, lifting her chin slightly as her crimson eyes met Selene's piercing brown gaze. There was no hesitation in her movements, only a calculated grace that reflected years of navigating power games like this one.

Her lips curved into a smile—polished, diplomatic, and unyielding.

"Of course," she replied smoothly, her voice carrying just enough warmth to veil the undercurrent of defiance in her tone. "It's always a pleasure to contribute to the club's success."

Selene's smile widened, though it was anything but kind. Her eyes gleamed with amusement, as if she could see right through Lilia's mask. She inclined her head slightly, an almost patronizing gesture that set Lilia's teeth on edge.

"Wonderful," Selene said, her tone light and melodic, but with a sharpness that cut through the air. "I have no doubt you'll rise to the occasion, as always."

The exchange was brief, but the tension lingered, thick and unspoken. Lilia refused to break eye contact, even as Selene's gaze eventually shifted back to the crowd. Whatever game her sister thought she was playing, Lilia wasn't about to let herself be outmaneuvered—at least, not publicly.

Adrian, sensing the moment had run its course, stepped forward with a clap of his hands, drawing the attention of the cadets once more. His confident smirk was firmly in place as he addressed the crowd.

"To celebrate Miss Thornheart's generous sponsorship," Adrian began, his voice carrying with ease, "we've arranged a small party to mark the occasion. There will be appetizers, drinks—within the academy's regulations, of course—and even a few games to keep things lively."

A ripple of surprise ran through the gathered cadets. The suddenness of the announcement caught many off guard, but few seemed inclined to protest. After all, Adrian's confident delivery left little room for argument, and the promise of food and entertainment was enough to win most of them over.

Lilia, however, was less impressed.

'A party?' she thought, her mind already working through the implications. It wasn't just about celebration—it was about control. Adrian and Selene were solidifying their influence over the club, framing their actions as generosity while subtly shifting the power dynamics in their favor.

Around her, the cadets were already murmuring their approval, their initial surprise giving way to anticipation. And, of course, many of their gazes lingered on Selene, who remained the center of attention.

Selene's choice of attire only heightened the effect. Her fitted dress, elegant and understated but designed to draw just the right amount of attention, accentuated her graceful figure. The subtle shimmer of the fabric caught the light as she moved, adding to the almost magnetic pull she seemed to exert on the crowd.

"She really is stunning," someone whispered, just loud enough for Lilia to catch.

"Yeah... I can't believe she's related to Lilia, though. They're so different."

'Of course, we are. I am not a....'

She was about to comment, but refrained from doing so. Since it was not needed.

Adrian clapped his hands again, silencing the whispers. "The party will start shortly," he announced. "Please feel free to enjoy yourselves and make the most of the new facilities. After all, this is just the beginning of what's to come for the Archery Club."

The cadets began to disperse, some heading toward the canteen where the first trays of appetizers were already being laid out, while others gravitated toward the vending machines and seating areas. Lilia remained where she was, her sharp eyes following Selene as she moved through the crowd with effortless ease, her every step calculated to draw attention without appearing deliberate.

As the cadets began to disperse, laughter and chatter filling the air as they moved toward the refreshments and games, Lilia remained in her spot, her sharp eyes fixed on Selene. She knew it was coming—Selene never let an opportunity pass without twisting the knife just a little deeper.

And she was right.

Selene's graceful figure wove through the crowd with practiced ease, her fitted dress catching just enough light to draw attention as she passed. Slowly but deliberately, she approached Lilia, her smile as serene as ever. But there was no mistaking the cold glint in her brown eyes, a gleam that made Lilia's jaw tighten instinctively.

When Selene finally reached her, she stopped just a step too close—an unspoken act of dominance. Her smile widened ever so slightly as she tilted her head, her eyes gazing down at Lilia with the kind of condescension that made Lilia's blood simmer.

"How is it, little sister?" Selene began, her voice as smooth as velvet but laced with mockery. "Do you like my new playground?"

The words hit like a subtle jab, not loud enough for anyone else to notice but sharp enough to sting. Lilia's crimson eyes narrowed, the tension between them thick and palpable. She forced herself to take a deep breath before responding.

"Playground?" Lilia repeated, her tone deceptively calm as she locked eyes with Selene. "Is this all this place is to you?"

Selene's smile didn't falter, but the glint in her eyes grew colder. "What else?" she asked, her tone light, as though she were speaking to a child. "Do you think a tiny club like this is worthy of being called anything else?" She leaned in slightly, her voice dropping just enough to ensure only Lilia could hear her next words. "You should know better, shouldn't you?"

The implication was unmistakable, and Lilia's fists clenched at her sides. Selene wasn't just talking about the Archery Club. She was digging at something deeper, something far more personal—their shared history and the ruthless power games of the Olympus Vanguard.

Selene straightened, her expression turning even more smug.

As if her brown eyes were saying "Did you really think such a small, pathetic place could be one of your operating points?" - "You know I could dismantle it like this."

Lilia's glare sharpened, her crimson eyes blazing with quiet fury as she met Selene's gaze head-on. She knew exactly what Selene was doing. Her sister had always been good at this—tearing her down with a few carefully chosen words, all while keeping that infuriatingly calm, superior demeanor.

For a fleeting moment, a dangerous thought crossed her mind—she wanted nothing more than to wipe that smug expression off Selene's face, to crush her beneath the weight of her own arrogance.

'No,' she reminded herself, forcing her composure to remain intact. Acting on impulse would only give Selene the upper hand, and Lilia refused to hand her that satisfaction.

Instead, she forced her expression to soften, schooling her features into a faint smile that masked the storm raging inside her. "Tiny, you say?" she replied, her tone calm and deceptively light. "A club isn't defined by its size. It's a place where people meet for their shared interests and grow together."

Her smile widened, though her words carried a sharpness Selene couldn't miss. "And just because you've thrown some money at it, Selene, doesn't mean you're one of them, does it?"

Selene's expression faltered for the briefest of moments, her brown eyes narrowing slightly at Lilia's remark. But she quickly recovered, her smile returning with a cold elegance.

Lilia didn't wait for her sister's response. Turning on her heel, she let her hair cascade over her shoulder as she strode toward the exit with purposeful steps. She didn't look back, even as she felt the weight of Selene's gaze lingering on her.

'If I stay another second, I'll end up doing something I'll regret,' she thought bitterly, pushing open the doors to the training grounds and stepping outside. The cool air hit her face, doing little to quell the fire simmering in her chest.

As she took a deep breath, trying to calm herself, movement in the corner of her vision caught her attention. Someone else was leaving the grounds, their quiet steps cutting through the faint hum of distant voices.

Lilia turned slightly, her crimson eyes narrowing in curiosity. "Hmm..."

It was Astron.

He moved with his usual aloof demeanor, his gait measured and his expression unreadable. His dark eyes, as cold and distant as ever, gave him an aura of untouchable calm. Despite his quiet presence, he always seemed to carry an unspoken weight, a subtle intensity that set him apart from everyone else.

For the first time in what felt like hours, Lilia felt her tension ease slightly. Astron was someone she could talk to—not because he was warm or comforting, but because his detached, pragmatic nature had a way of grounding her when everything else felt chaotic.

She stepped toward him, her voice cutting through the stillness. "Astron."

He stopped, turning his head slightly to glance at her, his expression as stoic as always. "Lilia," he replied simply, his tone neutral but not dismissive.

She approached him fully, her pace slowing as she considered her next words. "Leaving already?" she asked, her voice lighter than it had been moments ago.

Astron shrugged, his gaze drifting past her toward the horizon. "Not much for parties."

Astron's nonchalant response lingered in the air, and for a moment, Lilia simply studied him. His calm detachment was almost enviable, a sharp contrast to the roiling storm of frustration and resentment she had just endured inside. Seeing him leaving, walking away as if none of it mattered, made her face harden slightly.

Inwardly, she debated. Should I do the same? The idea was tempting—walking away from the suffocating games Selene played, from the crowd that hung on her every word, from the endless dance of power and pretense. But Lilia knew better. If she left now, it would be interpreted as weakness, as retreating in the face of Selene's presence. That was something she couldn't afford.

No, she decided, exhaling quietly. I have to stay. If I walk away, she wins.

Yet, staying didn't mean enduring it alone. Her crimson eyes flicked back to Astron, who seemed wholly unbothered by the tension she carried. His detached nature, his refusal to be swept up in the politics of the academy, was something she found oddly refreshing. In a way, she envied him—how he could exist outside the web of expectations that bound people like her. But more than that, she was curious.

'And I was curious about his prowess,' she admitted to herself, her gaze sharpening slightly as she regarded him. This man, Astron, was an enigma. Quiet, aloof, and infuriatingly hard to read, yet undeniably skilled. She had seen glimpses of his precision and control during training, and it intrigued her. What drives someone like him? What is he hiding behind that stoic mask?

With that thought, she made up her mind. She stepped closer, her tone calm but firm.

"Don't leave yet."

Chapter 828 191.5 - Sponsor ?

"Don't leave yet."

Astron raised an eyebrow at Lilia's firm request, his dark purple eyes flicking to her face with mild curiosity. "Why?" he asked, his tone straightforward but carrying enough weight to make the single word feel heavier than it should have.

The question hung in the air, simple yet disarming, and for a brief moment, Lilia found herself at a loss. Why did I say that? she thought, her lips pressing into a thin line. She wasn't close to Astron, not really. Sure, they had shared a few conversations—discussions about archery techniques, mana control, and other intellectual topics that he seemed to excel at—but their relationship was surface-level at best. Nothing about it was personal.

And it wasn't as though she found him attractive. That wasn't even a consideration. Lilia had no time for such frivolities—her life was already tangled in enough complications. Astron was intriguing, sure, but only in the sense that he was an enigma. A puzzle she couldn't yet solve. That was all.

Then why had she asked him to stay?

The answer came to her in fragments, piecing itself together in the silence. Because I need someone. Someone I know, even just a little. Someone who doesn't look at me the way Selene does, or the way those cadets inside do. Someone who isn't playing a game.

It was a selfish reason, she realized. But it was also the truth.

Lilia exhaled softly, her gaze steady as she met Astron's questioning eyes. "Because..." she started, carefully choosing her words.

But well, she didn't have any.

"Because?"

Lilia met Astron's gaze, her crimson eyes steady as she searched for the right words. But none came immediately. His simple "Because?" echoed in her mind, disarming her more than she cared to admit. She wasn't used to being questioned like this—at least, not by someone who genuinely didn't seem to care about her status or reputation.

So, she did what she was best at: she pivoted.

"I need allies," she said finally, her tone quieter, more honest than she intended. She gestured back toward the training grounds, where the faint hum of voices and laughter spilled into the night air. "You must have seen them—Selene, Adrian. They're... problematic, to say the least. And right now, I could use someone who's not on their side."

Astron raised an eyebrow at her, his expression unreadable. "Allies?" he repeated, his tone skeptical. "You're asking me to pick a side."

Lilia pursed her lips, her composure faltering for a moment. "I'm asking you to stand by me," she clarified. "That's all."

Astron tilted his head slightly, his dark purple eyes narrowing as he considered her. "And why should I do that?" he asked, his voice calm but carrying a subtle challenge. "If I stick with you, won't Adrian and Selene target me too? I don't exactly blend in, Lilia."

Her jaw tightened at his words, and she crossed her arms, feeling a twinge of frustration. He wasn't wrong. By involving him, she'd be dragging him into her mess—a mess he had no reason to care about. If their roles were reversed, she might have refused outright.

Still, she couldn't afford to let this chance slip away. She needed someone like him, someone who could see through the layers of politics and games and help her hold her ground. And if he needed a reason, she'd give him one.

"I'll pay you," she said abruptly, the words leaving her mouth before she could fully think them through.

Astron blinked, his expression shifting to one of faint amusement. "Pay me?" he echoed. "Hmm... That's an interesting offer."

Lilia huffed, her frustration bubbling beneath the surface. "Yes, pay you. Money, resources, training opportunities—whatever you want. Name it."

Astron tilted his head, considering her with that infuriatingly calm demeanor. "So you want to hire me as your bodyguard?" he asked, his tone neutral but carrying a faint edge of mockery.

"No!" Lilia shot back, her voice a little sharper than she intended. She took a deep breath, forcing herself to calm down. "I'm not asking you to guard me. I'm asking you to stand with me. There's a difference."

"Is there?" Astron asked, raising an eyebrow. "Because it sounds like you want someone to absorb the heat while you navigate your family drama."

Lilia's glare sharpened, but she bit back her retort, knowing he wasn't entirely wrong. "Look," she said, her tone more measured now, "I'm not asking you to throw yourself into the fire. I just need... someone who isn't playing their games. Someone I can trust to keep things grounded."

Astron crossed his arms, his expression still unreadable. "And you think I'm that person?"

"Yes," Lilia said firmly, her voice unwavering. "You're not like them, Astron. You don't care about posturing or politics. You see things clearly, and that's exactly what I need."

Astron stared at her for a moment, his gaze calculating. Then, to her annoyance, he shook his head.

"Did you really think that some money would sway me? Is this how you operate?"

Lilia blinked at Astron's blunt refusal, her crimson eyes narrowing as she prepared to counter him. But before she could speak, Astron raised his index finger, his expression calm yet firm.

"One," he said simply.

Lilia tilted her head, frowning. "One what?"

"One favor," Astron replied, his tone unchanging. "You'll owe me one favor."

Her breath caught for a moment as she processed his words. Her narrowed eyes studied him intently, searching for any hint of ulterior motive in his expression. But, as always, his face was unreadable, his dark purple eyes steady and unwavering.

"...A favor," she repeated slowly, her voice skeptical. "What kind of favor?"

Astron shrugged lightly, his gaze never leaving hers. "Nothing ridiculous. Nothing dangerous. Just a favor, when I need it."

Lilia's lips pressed into a thin line, her mind already racing as she weighed the risks. A favor owed to someone like Astron was not a decision to take lightly. He wasn't the type to exploit it frivolously, but he also wasn't predictable. Whatever he wanted in the future, she had no way of knowing until the time came.

But at the same time, she knew she couldn't afford to let him walk away. The value of having someone like Astron standing beside her—someone unaffected by Selene's games and Adrian's schemes—far outweighed the uncertainty of what he might ask for later.

She sighed softly, her gaze steady as she nodded. Should be fine, she thought, calculating the risks. "As long as it's within reasonable limits, I don't mind."

"Good. Then we're good to go?"

"Yes," Lilia said firmly, extending her hand toward him.

For a moment, Astron regarded her hand with his usual calm detachment before finally taking it in his own. His grip was steady, neither overly firm nor hesitant, and the brief contact was enough to seal the unspoken agreement between them.

Lilia's lips curved into a small, triumphant smile. "I'm glad we could come to an understanding."

"Me too," Astron replied, his voice carrying the faintest hint of dry humor.

With their agreement settled, the two turned and walked toward the entrance of the training grounds. The muffled sound of laughter and conversation grew louder as they approached, the glow of the lights spilling out into the cool evening air.

Lilia glanced at Astron as they neared the party, her smile still lingering. For all his aloofness and sharp remarks, he was someone she could rely on—even if only temporarily. And for now, that was enough.

As they stepped into the lively atmosphere of the party, the hum of voices and clinking glasses surrounded them. Cadets mingled, the faint scent of appetizers wafting through the air.

Adrian's grin was as wide and confident as ever, his arms gesturing animatedly as he recounted some story that had the crowd chuckling. Beside him, Selene laughed lightly, her polished tone as effortlessly charming as her appearance.

"They're always the life of the party, aren't they?"

Lilia let out a soft, humorless chuckle. "If you call it that," she replied, her crimson eyes narrowing slightly. "It's all just a performance."

"He seems to enjoy the spotlight."

"Oh, he does," Lilia muttered. "Adrian thrives on attention. And Selene... she knows how to use it."

"Not subtle, are they?"

"Subtlety isn't their style," Lilia replied, her voice carrying a trace of bitterness. "But it works for them."

As they stood at the edge of the room, Lilia's gaze lingered on Selene, who was currently laughing at something Adrian had said. The two of them looked perfectly at ease, radiating confidence and control in a way that made Lilia's frustration simmer beneath her composed exterior.

Just as she was about to suggest moving further into the room, Selene's sharp brown eyes flicked toward her—and immediately locked onto Astron at her side. A subtle shift in her expression betrayed her interest, her lips curving into an almost predatory smile.

"Well, well," Selene called out, her voice carrying effortlessly over the chatter of the room. "Look who decided to join the fun."

The surrounding cadets turned at her words, their conversations halting as their attention shifted to Lilia and Astron. Adrian, too, glanced over, his expression flickering with surprise before settling into his usual smug grin.

"Lilia," Selene continued, her tone light but laced with mockery. Though then her face turned to Astron.

"And....who is this?"

Chapter 829 - Archery Party ?

"And....who is this?"

Lilia immediately noticed the subtle shift in Selene's demeanor as her sister's sharp brown eyes lingered on Astron. The glint in Selene's gaze was unmistakable, and it made Lilia's stomach churn with irritation. She knew that look all too well—a gleam of interest, curiosity, and something else that could only be described as thirsty. Selene had worn that same expression countless times before when she found someone—or something—she wanted to toy with.

'Of course,' Lilia thought bitterly, her lips pressing into a thin line. She would.

Astron, on the other hand, seemed completely unaffected. His expression was as unreadable as ever, his dark purple eyes calm and detached as he met Selene's gaze without so much as a flicker of emotion.

"And... who is this?" Selene repeated, her smile widening ever so slightly as she stepped forward, her movements deliberate and graceful. She tilted her head, her gaze sweeping over Astron with thinly veiled interest.

Astron's eyes shifted briefly to Lilia before returning to Selene. His face remained impassive, his tone neutral as he introduced himself. "Astron," he said simply. No elaboration, no flourish—just his name, delivered with the same calm detachment that defined him.

Selene's smile didn't falter, but the gleam in her eyes grew sharper. "Astron," she repeated, letting the name roll off her tongue as though testing it. "A pleasure to meet you."

Astron didn't respond immediately, his gaze steady but uninterested as he looked at her. "Likewise," he said finally, though his tone suggested he was saying it more out of politeness than sincerity.

The surrounding cadets, who had been watching the interaction with growing curiosity, exchanged glances. It was rare to see someone remain so unaffected in Selene's presence—she had a way of commanding attention and charming those around her without much effort. But Astron... Astron was different.

Selene, of course, noticed. Her smile deepened, and she took another small step closer, her posture relaxed but calculated. "You don't seem like the type to frequent parties," she remarked, her tone light but probing. "What brings you here, Astron?"

Astron raised an eyebrow slightly at Selene's probing question, his expression remaining calm and composed. "What do you mean?" he asked, his tone as neutral as ever. "I'm here because I'm a member of the Archery Club."

Selene's eyebrows lifted in surprise, the faintest flicker of intrigue crossing her face. "A member, you say?" she repeated, her voice lilting with curiosity. She let her gaze sweep over him again, more deliberate this time, as though sizing him up. "I would not have missed... someone like you."

Her eyes lingered a moment longer before she smiled, her tone almost teasing as she added, "A face like this. I suppose you must have just arrived."

"It appears you're mistaken," Astron replied, his voice calm but firm. "I've been here from the start."

Selene tilted her head slightly, her smile deepening as though she found his unflinching demeanor amusing. "Really?" she asked, her tone feigning surprise.

"Yes," Astron said simply, his gaze meeting hers without hesitation.

The tension between them was palpable, though Astron's calm refusal to engage in Selene's subtle game only seemed to draw more attention. The surrounding cadets, who had been quietly observing the exchange, watched with growing curiosity, their whispers muted but noticeable.

Before Selene could respond, another voice cut through the conversation.

"Well, this is interesting," Adrian said smoothly, stepping into their line of sight with his usual confident stride. His gaze landed on Astron, and though his expression was polite, there was a faint edge to his tone that didn't go unnoticed. "Junior Astron... It seems you've changed quite a bit."

Astron turned his head slightly, his dark purple eyes meeting Adrian's gaze with the same detached calm he had shown Selene. "Changed?" he echoed, his tone even. "What kind of change we are talking about?"

Adrian's smile widened, though it didn't reach his eyes. There was a sharpness to his gaze as he looked at Astron, his tone light but carrying an undercurrent of challenge. "The kind of change that makes people curious," he said smoothly. "You weren't like this before."

Astron tilted his head slightly, his calm expression unchanging. "Like what?" he asked, his tone clipped but polite.

Adrian chuckled softly, though there was a faint edge to the sound. "Let's say... you weren't this handsome?" His gaze swept over Astron deliberately, his smile turning almost mocking. "Your face has clearly improved."

Lilia stiffened slightly at the remark, her crimson eyes narrowing as she glanced at Astron. But, as always, Astron seemed unfazed. He met Adrian's gaze with the same detached calm, his voice steady as he replied, "Thank you. And you're correct. It certainly improved."

The subtle emphasis in his tone didn't go unnoticed, and a few cadets nearby exchanged glances, sensing the growing tension. Adrian's smile tightened ever so slightly, the faintest flicker of irritation crossing his face. It wasn't the words themselves that bothered him—it was the tone. Astron's response, while polite on the surface, carried a subtle air of indifference, almost as if he were brushing Adrian off entirely.

Adrian's eyes narrowed just a fraction, though his composure remained intact. "Confidence suits you," he said, his tone carrying a faint edge. "But I have to admit, your demeanor is... different. It's almost as though you've forgotten the usual etiquette between juniors and seniors."

Astron raised an eyebrow slightly, his expression still calm. "Etiquette?" he echoed, his tone neutral. "I wasn't aware I'd broken any."

The quiet statement was simple, but it landed like a challenge, the underlying implication clear: If you have a problem, say it outright.

Adrian's smile faltered for the briefest moment before he recovered, his gaze flicking briefly to Lilia, who was watching the exchange with thinly veiled amusement. The tension between sophomores and freshmen had been simmering for weeks, a byproduct of shifting dynamics and competitive rivalries within the academy. Adrian, as one of the more prominent sophomores, was clearly accustomed to deference from underclassmen—and Astron's calm defiance clearly irked him.

"Let's just say," Adrian continued, his tone regaining its smoothness, "you've become... more noticeable than I remember."

Astron nodded slightly, his expression betraying nothing. "Noted," he replied simply, his tone making it clear that he wasn't particularly interested in Adrian's observations.

The air between them grew heavier, the subtle clash of personalities drawing the attention of those nearby. Selene, who had been watching the interaction with quiet amusement, decided to intervene.

"Now, now," she said, her voice light and disarming as she stepped slightly closer to Adrian. "Let's not turn this into a debate. Junior Astron is clearly... unique." Her gaze lingered on Astron for a moment, the glint of curiosity and intrigue still present in her eyes. "And I, for one, find it refreshing."

Adrian chuckled softly, though the sound lacked genuine humor. "Of course," he said smoothly, his gaze returning to Astron. "I'm sure we'll all be keeping an eye on you, Junior. After all, someone as... 'unique' as you tends to leave an impression."

Astron remained silent, his dark purple eyes steady as he regarded Adrian. There was no flinch, no shift in his expression—just the same calm, unyielding demeanor that seemed to quietly assert itself without need for words.

The tension in the air thickened as Adrian's polite yet faintly hostile words lingered. Before he could continue his subtle provocations, Lilia's voice cut through the moment like a blade.

"Are you sure you're just going to keep an 'eye' on him?" she said smoothly, her crimson eyes narrowing ever so slightly as she fixed her gaze on Adrian. "Because, if I remember correctly, you've done a lot more than just keeping an eye in the past."

The sudden shift in the conversation drew attention, murmurs rippling through the surrounding cadets as they sensed the sharp undercurrent in her tone. Adrian raised an eyebrow, his smile tightening slightly as he turned to her.

"What do you mean by that, Lilia?" he asked, his tone measured but laced with curiosity—and a faint edge of warning.

Lilia's lips curved into a smile, one that didn't quite reach her eyes. "What do I mean? That's up to you, isn't it?" she replied, her voice carrying a practiced air of innocence that only made her words more pointed.

Adrian chuckled softly, though the sound lacked humor. "No, no," he said, shaking his head slightly. "You've already started. You should finish what you're saying."

Selene's eyes flicked between the two, her amusement growing as she sensed the brewing storm. She made no effort to interrupt, instead folding her arms and watching the exchange with the same curiosity that had lingered in her gaze all evening.

Lilia's smile widened, her tone turning sharper. "Like how you tampered with the conditions of the competitions," she said, her words cutting through the room with precision.

A ripple of gasps and murmurs spread through the crowd, the cadets exchanging glances as they processed her accusation. Adrian's smile faltered for the briefest moment before he recovered, his expression smoothing out as he met her gaze.

"I'm not sure what you're referring to," he said lightly, though there was a faint tension in his tone now. "You'll have to be more specific."

"Do I"

She just accepted in hospital

Chapter 830 192.2 - Archery Party ?

Lilia's sharp words hung in the air, drawing more whispers from the gathered cadets as she stared Adrian down. Her crimson eyes gleamed with calculated resolve as she noted the faint tension in Adrian's otherwise composed expression. His attempt to deflect her accusation had been expected, but she wasn't here to simply let him off the hook.

"Do I?" she repeated coolly, her tone carrying a subtle edge. Her words weren't a challenge—they were a declaration. She wasn't afraid of Adrian, and she wanted everyone in the room to know it.

Selene's gaze remained fixed on the two of them, her amusement evident as she folded her arms, leaning slightly against a nearby pillar. Her silence was strategic, Lilia realized. Selene wasn't intervening because she didn't need to—this was her way of letting Adrian and Lilia clash, watching for weaknesses she could exploit later.

But Lilia wasn't about to let Selene's little game rattle her. She had a plan.

While it was true that Selene and Adrian were likely colluding, Lilia knew their alliance wasn't built to last. Both of them were too ambitious, too self-serving to maintain a partnership for long. Sooner or later, cracks would form—and Lilia intended to make sure they did.

For now, though, she couldn't afford to let them have free reign. If she stayed passive, allowing Adrian to dominate the Archery Club and Selene to expand her influence, her position would only weaken. And in a place like this, weakness was unacceptable.

Her gaze swept briefly over the room, noting the cadets who were watching the exchange with a mix of curiosity and unease. Among the freshmen, she had managed to win over a good number—partly thanks to her Olarion family name and partly due to her rank as one of the academy's top students. Being the 4th-ranked freshman carried weight, but it wasn't enough to bridge the gap between her and Adrian's entrenched influence.

Many of the younger cadets still hesitated to openly align with her, intimidated by the sophomores and third-years under Adrian's thumb. And Adrian knew this. He thrived on the fear and respect he commanded, using it to consolidate his position within the club.

So far, I've managed to persuade Elara, Lilia thought, glancing briefly at her vice president, who was standing nearby, observing the scene with a measured expression. Elara had been a valuable ally, but even with her support, the balance of power within the club wasn't in Lilia's favor—not yet.

But that could change.

Lilia returned her focus to Adrian, her expression calm but her mind racing with strategy. "You know, Adrian," she began, her tone light but carrying an unmistakable sharpness, "for someone who values control so much, you seem oddly defensive tonight."

Adrian's eyes narrowed slightly, though his polite smile remained in place. "Defensive?" he echoed, his tone laced with mock surprise. "I'd say I'm just... intrigued by your sudden boldness."

"Boldness?" Lilia repeated with a faint smirk. "It's not boldness—it's just practicality. After all, the Archery Club deserves better than whispered deals and tampered competitions, don't you think?"

The murmurs among the cadets grew louder, a ripple of unease spreading through the crowd. Lilia knew her words were stirring doubt, planting seeds of skepticism about Adrian's methods. It wasn't enough to dismantle his influence outright, but it was a start.

Selene finally decided to interject, her voice smooth as silk as she stepped forward. "Now, Lilia," she said, her smile radiant but her eyes cold, "let's not get too carried away. Adrian has done a remarkable job leading this club. You wouldn't want to tarnish its reputation, would you?"

Lilia turned her gaze to Selene, her smile never faltering. "Oh, I'm not tarnishing anything," she said evenly. "I'm just reminding everyone that transparency is important—especially when it comes to leadership."

Selene's smile tightened slightly, though she quickly recovered, her tone turning almost playful. "Of course. Transparency is such a noble goal. But I do wonder, little sister, if you're ready for the weight of true leadership."

Lilia's jaw tightened briefly, but she refused to let Selene's bait affect her. "I think that's for the members of the club to decide," she said, her tone cool. "Not you."

"AHAHAHA..."

Selene's laugh rang through the room, light and melodic but carrying a sharpness that couldn't be ignored. Her brown eyes gleamed with amusement as she straightened her posture, brushing a strand of emerald hair behind her ear.

"Oh, Lilia," she said, her tone both condescending and playful. "I'm afraid it doesn't work quite like that. As the sponsor of this club, my involvement goes far beyond mere observation. While I may not be a member per se, I wouldn't waste my time—or my resources—on something I wasn't genuinely interested in."

Lilia's lips curved into a small, knowing smile. Perfect, she thought, her crimson eyes glinting as she seized the opportunity she had been waiting for.

"Then why don't you display that interest?" Lilia said smoothly, her voice cutting through the murmurs of the cadets. The crowd's attention snapped back to her, their curiosity piqued as she took a deliberate step forward. "After all, if you're truly invested in archery, why not show everyone just how deep that interest goes?"

Selene's smile froze for a fraction of a second before returning in full force, though there was a flicker of something behind her eyes—surprise, perhaps, or annoyance. She hadn't expected Lilia to flip the conversation so suddenly, and that hesitation didn't go unnoticed by the crowd.

Adrian's expression darkened ever so slightly, his polite mask slipping for just a moment as he realized the trap Lilia had laid. He opened his mouth to interject, but Selene raised a hand, silencing him with a gesture. Her confidence quickly returned, and she let out a soft chuckle, her gaze locking with Lilia's.

"A display?" Selene said, tilting her head slightly, her tone feigning curiosity. "What exactly are you suggesting, little sister?"

Lilia's smile widened, her voice calm but laced with challenge. "A quick match. Right here, right now. No planning, no preparation. Just you and me."

The room fell into a hushed silence, the weight of her words settling over the gathered cadets. Whispers began to ripple through the crowd, a mix of excitement and disbelief at Lilia's bold proposal.

Selene's eyes narrowed slightly, though her smile didn't waver. "A match?" she repeated, her tone slow and deliberate. "How intriguing. But wouldn't that be... unfair? After all, I'm not officially part of the club."

Selene's smile grew sharper, her amusement glinting in her brown eyes. "A match between us?" she repeated, her tone laced with mock thoughtfulness. "Hmm... that does sound tempting, but wouldn't it be more appropriate to challenge someone who's already proven their standing in this club?" She tilted her head, her expression perfectly serene. "How about our dear club leader? He did mention to me that you've faced him before."

Lilia's expression hardened for a split second before she schooled her features back into composure. Had they foreseen this? The thought crossed her mind, her instincts on high alert. It wasn't impossible. Selene and Adrian were both cunning, and the timing of everything tonight felt far too convenient.

Lilia's smile didn't falter, though her crimson eyes gleamed with renewed determination. "I'm sure he wouldn't mind," she replied smoothly, her voice steady. Inside, however, her thoughts raced.

Selene's counter had been calculated, redirecting the attention away from herself and placing Lilia in the spotlight instead. Typical Selene—always finding a way to twist a situation to her advantage.

"Splendid," Selene said, clapping her hands together lightly. The sound was crisp, drawing the attention of the gathered cadets. "We had already prepared some games for this party, but who would have thought we'd have a contestant this early?" Her voice carried just enough enthusiasm to rile up the crowd, and murmurs of excitement rippled through the room.

Lilia's expression hardened for a split second before she schooled her features back into composure. Had they foreseen this? The thought crossed her mind, her instincts on high alert. It wasn't impossible. Selene and Adrian were both cunning, and the timing of everything tonight felt far too convenient.

No, Lilia reassured herself. There's no way they could've anticipated this. Right?

And yet, the unease in her chest didn't dissipate. Something about Selene's effortless control over the situation—and Adrian's smug silence—made her skin crawl. But there was no turning back now. She had already committed, and hesitation wasn't an option.

Adrian stepped forward with a confident stride, his ever-present smirk firmly in place as he addressed the crowd, his gaze lingering on Lilia with a faintly mocking glint. "Well, Lilia," he began, his voice smooth and steady, "since you've made such bold accusations, I assume you wouldn't mind proving your skill in a proper match. After all, actions speak louder than words, don't they?"

Lilia held his gaze, her smile unwavering. "Of course," she replied smoothly, her tone calm. "I wouldn't dream of disappointing our esteemed club president."

Inwardly, though, her instincts were screaming. Something was off. The way Adrian and Selene seemed perfectly in sync, as if they had anticipated every move she might make, left her uneasy. Had they prepared for this? She couldn't shake the feeling that this was more than just a coincidence.

Selene, ever the picture of poise, clapped her hands lightly, drawing the attention of the gathered cadets. "Splendid!" she said, her tone warm and engaging. "Now that we've settled on our competitors, allow me to explain the game. It's a bit unconventional, but I think you'll find it... exhilarating."