

## H. Academy 831

### Chapter 831 192.3 - Archery Party ?

"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."

She turned to Adrian and Lilia, her smile widening as she gestured toward the far end of the training grounds, where a small, elevated platform had been set up. The structure was surrounded by various barriers and covers—wooden panels, metal shields, and even a few floating mana constructs. It looked like a chaotic battlefield condensed into a confined space.

"The rules are simple," Selene began, her voice carrying easily over the murmurs of the crowd. "Each of you will start on opposite ends of the platform. Your goal is to hit your opponent with an arrow. However," she added, her tone turning playful, "the barriers and covers on the platform aren't entirely reliable. They can be removed or repositioned at random intervals, so don't get too comfortable behind them."

The cadets murmured among themselves, the tension in the air growing as they processed the explanation. The setup was risky, designed to test not only accuracy but adaptability and strategy under pressure. It was a game that could easily turn chaotic—and Selene knew it.

Adrian chuckled lightly, his gaze flicking to Lilia. "I hope you're ready, Lilia," he said, his tone carrying just a hint of mockery. "This isn't like shooting at a stationary target."

Lilia met his gaze with a cool smile. "I wouldn't expect it to be," she replied evenly. "But I hope you're ready too, Adrian. After all, you wouldn't want to lose in front of everyone."

Her words drew a few chuckles from the surrounding cadets, though the tension between the two remained palpable. Adrian's smirk tightened slightly, but he quickly masked it, gesturing toward the platform.

"Shall we?" he said, his voice smooth as he began walking toward the setup.

Lilia followed, her posture straight and composed, though her mind raced with thoughts. This is exactly what they wanted, she realized. Selene and Adrian had turned the situation to their advantage, forcing her into a match that would test not only her skill but her ability to remain calm under pressure. And yet, she couldn't back down now. She wouldn't give them the satisfaction.

As they reached the platform, the cadets gathered around, forming a loose circle to watch. The atmosphere was electric with anticipation, whispers and murmurs filling the air as everyone speculated about the outcome.

Selene stepped forward once more, her gaze sweeping over the crowd before settling on Lilia and Adrian. "Take your positions," she said with a bright smile. "And remember, this is all in good fun. Let's give our audience something to remember."

Lilia climbed onto the platform, her crimson eyes scanning the setup as she assessed the barriers and their placements. She noted the unpredictable arrangement, the gaps between covers that left no truly safe positions.

'They planned this.'

There was no doubt in her mind. Adrian wouldn't allow a fair fight—not when his reputation was on the line. If Selene had orchestrated this match, then she had accounted for Lilia's abilities as well. They weren't just testing her accuracy; they were testing her ability to react to controlled chaos.

'The barriers aren't fixed. That means they'll be controlled remotely. Delays, repositioning, maybe even disappearing altogether.'

Her mind worked quickly, running through possible patterns. If she were the one rigging this, how would she do it? There were a few ways:

Timed Disruptions: The barriers could vanish the moment she took cover, forcing her into open space.

Pattern-Based Manipulation: If they had predicted her style, they would set the barriers to move in a way that funneled her into Adrian's line of fire.

Selective Targeting: The movement of barriers might only affect her side of the field, ensuring Adrian always had the advantage.

Lilia exhaled softly, steadying her breath.

'If I assume that's the case, then I can't rely on cover. I have to keep moving—never stopping long enough to be trapped. And I need to make them think I don't realize what's happening until I turn it against them.'

Across the platform, Adrian stretched lazily, his confident smirk barely concealed.

"Don't take too long thinking, Lilia," he called, his tone laced with amusement. "Wouldn't want you to freeze up."

She met his gaze, a small, knowing smile curving her lips.

"Thinking is exactly what separates us, Adrian," she replied smoothly. "But don't worry—I won't take too long. I'd hate for you to start feeling nervous."

A ripple of murmurs ran through the audience. Adrian's smirk twitched, but he masked it well.

Selene clapped her hands together, drawing attention back to the match. "Both competitors are ready! On my signal, the match begins!"

Lilia flexed her fingers, her mana already flowing subtly into her body. She wouldn't let them control the flow of this fight entirely. If they had set the stage to work against her, she would make sure they regretted it.

'Let's see what you've prepared for me, Adrian.'

The countdown began.

Three.

Two.

One.

"Begin!"

The match erupted into motion.

Lilia didn't waste time standing still. The moment the signal rang out, she shot forward in a fluid motion, weaving between the barriers as she notched an arrow.

Adrian, as expected, took a more composed approach—raising his bow with practiced ease, waiting for the perfect shot.

'You're expecting me to rush in, aren't you?'

She didn't. Instead, she feinted toward one of the barriers—then immediately changed directions the moment she saw it flicker.

'Just as I thought. It's reacting to me, not him.'

The barrier she had moved toward disappeared before she could use it, leaving her momentarily exposed—but only for an instant. Lilia twisted her body, shifting her weight in midair and landing behind a second barrier before it could react.

A sharp twang rang out as Adrian loosed an arrow. It shot straight toward where she would have been—where they wanted her to be.

A near miss.

Lilia smirked.

'Now, let's turn this into my game.'

She reached out with her mana, not just to enhance her movements, but to feel the field itself—the slight fluctuations in energy that signaled barrier shifts. This was something she had been refining over time. Others used mana in bursts, but for her? It was a natural extension of herself, an instinct woven into her very being.

She sensed it.

A pulse.

The next barrier shift.

'Got you.'

Lilia sprang into motion again, this time moving with the shifting barriers instead of against them. Where others saw obstacles, she saw an evolving path—a rhythm that she could step into like a perfectly timed dance.

Adrian narrowed his eyes as he adjusted his aim, realizing something was off.

"Too slow."

Lilia fired.

Her arrow zipped through a narrow gap in the moving barriers, aimed not directly at Adrian—but at the barrier he was using for cover.

CRACK!

The mana-infused shot struck its edge, causing it to destabilize and flicker uncontrollably.

For the first time in the match, Adrian was forced to move.

He clicked his tongue in irritation, darting to the side as his cover vanished. Lilia wasted no time. She was already adjusting, already predicting where the next opening would appear.

Another arrow left her bow—this one not aimed directly at him, but at the space where he would instinctively dodge.

Adrian barely managed to twist his body in time, the arrow grazing past his shoulder.

'Tch. I miscalculated the timing by a fraction.'

Even so, the tide had shifted.

She could feel it. The tempo of the battle was no longer dictated by the rigged environment. It was dictated by her.

'You thought I'd struggle with your tricks, but all you've done is give me a moving battlefield to dominate.'

Selene, watching from the sidelines, had an unreadable expression—but Lilia caught the briefest flicker of amusement in her gaze.

'You planned this too, didn't you?'

It didn't matter.

Because now, this game belonged to her.

Chapter 832 192.4 - Archery Party ?

The murmurs of the gathered cadets barely registered in my mind as my gaze remained fixed on the stage. Lilia stood at the center, her posture poised, her crimson eyes burning with determination. But it was clear—painfully clear—that she had walked straight into Selene's trap.

I sighed inwardly, resisting the urge to shake my head. This is exactly what happened in the game.

Lilia had made a mistake, and for someone as cunning as she was, it was a frustratingly careless one. She knew her sister. She knew how Selene operated. And yet, she had let herself be provoked, letting Selene dictate the terms of the encounter while thinking she was the one in control.

Predictable.

Lilia's mistake wasn't in challenging Selene—it was in thinking that she was the one leading the game. She should have seen it coming the moment she made her move. The way Selene had smoothly pivoted the situation, deflecting the challenge onto Adrian while keeping herself perfectly untouchable, was textbook manipulation.

And now, here we are.

Adrian stood nearby, his smirk practically radiating satisfaction. He wasn't just the opponent—he was the executioner. Selene had played the role of the gracious benefactor, setting up the match, while Adrian was here to humiliate Lilia. If things played out like the game, this match would end badly for her.

Not because Lilia lacked skill. In terms of pure talent, she was undoubtedly one of the best cadets in this academy. But Adrian was a senior after all.

He was stronger, he was faster, and in terms of physicality he was better. That is a given and there is no need to make this any different.

But at the same time, there was also something else that Adrian possessed.

He was smarter in these situations.

This wasn't a competition of pure archery skill—it was a staged event, carefully orchestrated to make sure the outcome fell in their favor.

I let out a slow breath, adjusting my posture as I leaned against one of the pillars, watching the scene unfold with detached interest. Lilia, you should have known better.

Her mistake wasn't in stepping forward—it was in thinking she could win this battle through brute force alone. That was never how Selene played. Selene never fought where she could be outmatched. She made sure the battlefield itself was hers before the fight even began.

And right now? This entire arena belonged to her.

I glanced briefly at Selene, who stood near the edge of the stage, her expression perfectly composed. Her brown eyes shimmered with something between amusement and satisfaction, her arms crossed in a way that suggested she already knew how this was going to play out.

Of course she does.

Adrian turned slightly, addressing the crowd with his usual effortless charm. "Now then," he said, his voice smooth, authoritative. "We'll be keeping things fair, of course. Standard rules—no external mana enhancement, no interference. A simple test of skill."

Lilia nodded once, firm, unwavering. But I could see the faintest flicker of tension in her jaw, the subtle tightening of her grip. She was angry. Not just at Adrian or Selene, but at herself.

She knew she had walked into this.

She knew she had slipped.

And now, she had to fight her way out.

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Lilia's breath remained steady despite the intensity of the fight. She had already figured out how to control the battlefield, how to manipulate the moving barriers to her advantage—but it wasn't enough.

Because Adrian wasn't relying solely on the environment anymore.

He was fast. Too fast.

The moment she forced him to move, he adapted. His raw physicality was superior; his footwork sharper, his dodges more refined. When it came to sheer speed and reflexes, he outclassed her.

Twack!

An arrow whizzed past her cheek, close enough that she felt the mana hum against her skin before it buried itself in the barrier behind her.

'Tch. That was close.'

Lilia pivoted, drawing another arrow, but Adrian was already repositioning. His shots came rapidly—precise, relentless, filled with power.

He's pushing me into a corner.

And worse—he knew exactly how to do it.

Lilia's mind worked frantically, analyzing every detail. Adrian wasn't just overwhelming her with brute strength; he was predicting her movements, countering her techniques before she could fully commit to them.

'How?'

She wasn't easy to read. Even the instructors would struggle to anticipate how she fought because she never fought the same way twice, yet alone the cadets.

But Adrian—he knew.

Every time she tried to maneuver into a better position, the barriers shifted in ways that worked against her.

Every time she attempted to mislead him with a feint, he ignored it, striking at the real point of weakness instead.

Every time she thought she had an opening, his arrows came faster, stronger—forcing her on the defensive, keeping her reactionary.

She gritted her teeth.

'This... isn't normal.'

She ducked behind a half-broken panel, pressing her back against it as another of Adrian's shots struck just above her shoulder. Her heartbeat was steady, but her irritation was growing.

She wasn't losing yet.

But she was being controlled.

Lilia's crimson eyes flickered, tracking Adrian as he took up a vantage point.

He was confident—too confident.

As if he had already figured out the best way to handle her.

As if...

'Selene.'

Lilia's grip tightened on her bow.

Of course.

Adrian wasn't this smart. He wasn't this precise.

But Selene was.

She exhaled sharply, resisting the urge to glare at the woman watching from the sidelines.

'She told him about me.'

Lilia had always known that her sister studied her. Selene was observant, intelligent—she liked to know things.

And now, that knowledge was in Adrian's hands.

'This is why he knows my tendencies. My weaknesses. My tells.'

Selene had fed him the perfect way to counter her.

Lilia's jaw clenched.

That was infuriating.

Not because Adrian was stronger.

Not because he had an advantage.

But because she knew that this wasn't entirely his doing.

Adrian was smug, arrogant—but he wasn't this meticulous. He couldn't have figured all of this out on his own.

Selene had helped him.

And that pissed her off.

Fine.

Lilia's mind sharpened, the growing frustration narrowing into focus. She knew what she had to do. If Adrian was confident—too confident—then she needed to make him overextend.

'You think you've got me figured out?'

Fine.

She moved, quick and calculated, her body twisting low as she darted toward the leftmost barrier. Her posture screamed desperation, her motion erratic. A deliberate mistake.

Adrian's eyes flickered.

He took the bait.

He loosed an arrow, aiming not for her directly—but for the spot he thought she would dodge to.

Predictable.

The moment his fingers left the string, Lilia abruptly changed course.

Twack!

The arrow buried itself into empty space as Lilia slid into her real position.

'Got you.'

Not wasting a second, she channeled mana into her bowstring, feeling the pulse of energy gather within the arrowhead.

[Sliding Curve]

This wasn't just any shot—this was one of her specialized skills, one that required precision, a controlled charge—

And then the cover before her vanished.

Her entire body froze for half a second.

'What—?!'

A flicker of mana surged through the air, unnatural, forced.

Lilia's eyes widened as she caught the slight ripple along the edges of the battlefield—the telltale sign of outside interference.

And Adrian, of course, took advantage of it.

His next shot was already in the air.

Lilia had no choice—she abandoned her skill, rolling to the side just as the mana-infused arrow slammed into the platform where she had been standing, leaving a scorched mark in its wake.

'That wasn't him. That was—'

Her thoughts snapped into clarity.

And, as if to make it less obvious, the same thing happened to Adrian moments later.

One of his barriers suddenly collapsed right as he began to reposition.

Lilia saw it. The hesitation in his step, the small delay in his draw. He had noticed it too.

But unlike her, he wasn't at risk.

His position was still solid. His shot was still viable.

She, on the other hand, had no choice but to dodge again—leaving her without an opening to fire back.

Lilia gritted her teeth as she landed behind a new cover, the unfairness of it all grating against her every instinct.

She already knew who was responsible.

And as she glanced toward the sidelines, her gaze met Selene's.

Her sister, standing perfectly composed.

Watching.

And smiling.

Lilia's fingers curled into a fist.



'You smug—'

She really wanted to show this sister of hers that smugness.

Chapter 833 - 193.1 - Selene

The match continued, but my focus wasn't entirely on it anymore.

Not because it wasn't interesting—on the contrary, it was playing out exactly as expected. Lilia had realized her mistake, figured out the interference, and was now seething at the obvious manipulation happening right in front of her. But what could she do? The battlefield had never belonged to her in the first place.

And Selene... Selene was enjoying it.

I knew that without even looking at her.

Still, I kept my gaze fixed on the match, my arms crossed loosely as I leaned against the pillar, observing the subtle shifts in the flow of the fight. But then—

"Do you think life is fair?"

The voice was smooth, lilting with casual amusement.

I didn't react.

Not immediately.

Because that was a stupid question.

Instead, I remained where I was, my gaze unmoving, uninterested. I wasn't obligated to answer something so blatantly baiting.

Selene, however, was not the type to tolerate being ignored.

"Isn't it a bit rude to ignore a lady when she's speaking?" she mused, her tone carrying just the faintest hint of mock offense.

My expression remained neutral. I tilted my head slightly, shifting my gaze only after a deliberate pause.

"Were you talking to me?" I asked, my voice calm, unreadable. "I thought it was someone else."

A soft chuckle. "Surely you jest," she murmured, her brown eyes gleaming with quiet amusement. "Do you sense anyone else near us?"

Of course not.

Selene knew exactly what she was doing. The space around us was clear—while the other cadets were absorbed in the match, she had positioned herself precisely so that only I would hear her.

She wanted this conversation.

And that meant she wanted something from me.

Selene Thornheart.

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I exhaled through my nose, finally shifting my full attention to her.

Selene Thornheart.

Up close, she was an entity of pure control. Every part of her was meticulously measured—the way her small frame carried itself, the way her shoulders barely moved when she breathed, the exact tilt of her chin as she maintained eye contact. She was deliberate. Every step, every glance, every faint twitch of her fingers—it all served a purpose.

And I saw it all.

My perception was sharp, honed by experience and something more, something instinctual. I caught the minute shifts in her weight as she stood, the barely-there flick of her fingertips as if adjusting invisible threads, the near-imperceptible rise and fall of her chest that never quite matched the rhythm of a truly relaxed person.

She was playing.

Not just with Lilia.

Not just with Adrian.

With everything.

With me.

"You're watching carefully," she noted, tilting her head slightly. Her voice was soft, but it carried weight. "What do you see?"

I didn't answer immediately. Instead, I observed a little longer.

Her balance was perfect—no unnecessary movements. Her pulse, as far as I could tell, was even. There was no stiffness in her shoulders, no hint of nervous energy in her fingers. She was comfortable.

That was dangerous.

Because comfort meant control.

And if she was this controlled while orchestrating a match that she had rigged from the start, then what else had she already accounted for?

Finally, I spoke. "I see someone with a lot of free time," I said evenly. "Enough to interfere in petty squabbles."

Her lips curved, pleased. "Oh, how unkind," she murmured, placing a hand against her chest in mock offense. "And here I thought I was simply showing support for my dear little sister."

I didn't respond to that.

Selene smiled again, shifting her gaze back to the match as if she were truly invested in the outcome. "But, of course," she continued, "I wouldn't expect you to believe such things. After all, you've been watching me just as much as I've been watching you."

She turned back to me, her brown eyes sharp with something unreadable.

"What do you think? This figure of mine, it is quite nice, isn't it?"

The moment Selene posed her question, something shifted.

It wasn't just her words—it was the subtle yet deliberate way she adjusted her stance, the barely noticeable tilt of her hips, the slow, measured breath that made her chest rise and fall in a way designed to draw attention. The way her fingers lightly brushed against her collarbone, as if absentmindedly tracing the curve of her skin.

And then, there was the mana.

My [Perceptive Insight] triggered almost instantly.

A pulse of energy, faint yet deliberate, radiated from her. It was controlled, refined, meant to be unnoticed by anyone who wasn't paying attention. But I was paying attention.

I always was.

This wasn't just body language—Selene was actively using mana to influence the atmosphere around her. And not in an aggressive or direct way. It was subtle, nearly imperceptible, designed to slip under someone's guard without them realizing it.

I exhaled slowly.

'Interesting...'

I let my senses sharpen further, attempting to trace the psionic nature of her mana flow. If this was a skill, it had to have a structure, an identifiable pattern. But the moment I tried to analyze it, the mana seemed to slip, as though avoiding my direct scrutiny.

Not by accident.

By design.

I narrowed my eyes slightly, but Selene only smiled in response, clearly enjoying the way I was reacting—or rather, the fact that I was reacting at all.

This wasn't the first time I had encountered something like this.

'Eleanor...'

She had a similar skill. Though hers was passive, an effect that came naturally with her presence. It wasn't something she intentionally wielded, but it existed nonetheless. A quiet, undeniable gravity that made people unconsciously aware of her.

Selene's, however, was different.

Hers was controlled.

Refined.

Weaponized.

She wasn't just influencing the atmosphere—she was directing it. Focused. Intentional. And she was using it on me.

Why?

I glanced at her wrist.

The smartwatch.

More specifically, the faint glow of her lens-connected interface, active just moments ago.

A quick background check.

The answer clicked into place almost immediately.

'She saw the reports about me and Irina.'

The recent media frenzy around Irina and me wasn't something I had particularly cared about, but it seemed others did. Selene, in particular, wouldn't have missed something like that—especially given her own talent for controlling narratives.

She had likely read into it. Considered what kind of relationship I had with Irina. And now?

She was testing me.

'To what end?' I wondered.

I kept my expression impassive, my stance unchanged. But inwardly, my mind was working through the possibilities. If Selene was trying to see how I reacted to this, it meant she was assessing something. Maybe my discipline. Maybe my usefulness.

Or maybe... she just wanted to see how much she could make me dance.

I exhaled slowly, tilting my head just slightly, meeting her gaze fully.

"This figure of yours is indeed quite nice," I said evenly, watching the flicker of amusement in Selene's brown eyes.

It wasn't a compliment. Not really. Just a simple acknowledgment, delivered with the same detached calm as everything else I said. But I knew Selene. I knew how she operated. And I knew exactly what response she was going to give me.

Sure enough, she stepped forward.

Just close enough.

Just enough to test boundaries.

Fine-tuned control, as always.

"Then," she murmured, her voice carrying a faint, playful lilt. "Fine things should be tasted, don't you think?"

Her brown eyes gleamed with something unreadable—something dangerous. A challenge. An invitation. A trap.

Predictable.

I tilted my head slightly, exhaling through my nose in quiet amusement. "Fine things should be tested," I corrected smoothly. "But one must first check if they are poisonous."

A brief pause.

Then, laughter.

Soft. Light. But carrying weight.

Selene placed a hand against her chest, her posture remaining effortless, the faintest shift in her expression betraying intrigue. "Poisonous?" she echoed, feigning surprise. "How cruel. Do I seem so dangerous to you, Astron?"

I met her gaze fully, allowing the silence to stretch just a second longer than necessary. "No," I said finally. "Danger can be obvious. You, on the other hand, prefer to work in ways that don't leave traces."

Another flicker in her eyes.

A moment of intrigue.

Then, another step.

Closer now.

A fraction too close for casual conversation.

Her presence was carefully controlled, her every movement measured. This wasn't just seduction—it was something more than that. Something deeper.

She was playing with possibilities.

She was seeing what I would do.

"Well," she said lightly, her voice a purr of amusement. "Poison can be pleasant in the right doses, can it not? Sometimes, it even makes life more exciting."

"That depends," I said smoothly. "Some poisons take effect immediately. Others linger, waiting for the perfect moment to strike."

Selene smiled.

A slow, knowing curve of her lips.

A pause.



Then—

"Ah, but isn't that what makes it fun?" she mused. "The uncertainty? The risk?" Her gaze flicked over me again, deliberate. "Tell me, Astron. Do you fear taking risks?"

"Everyone takes risks. Only those who are wise never take risks they don't control."

Chapter 834 - 193.2 - Selene

Selene's smile deepened at my response, the faint glow of amusement dancing in her brown eyes. "Are you a wise person then?" she asked, her voice smooth, almost indulgent.

I didn't answer immediately.

Instead, I met her gaze directly.

Silent.

Unwavering.

Cold.

"It is not that easy to find that out," I said finally, my tone steady, devoid of embellishment.

Selene's expression didn't waver, but I caught the small shifts—the way her pupils flickered slightly as she assessed me, the way her breathing remained measured, as if ensuring she was in complete control of every micro-expression. Her amusement hadn't faded, but something beneath it had sharpened.

She was searching.

Looking for something in me.

Something she couldn't quite place.

And I? I was watching her right back.

Selene was used to people reacting to her. That much was obvious. She was a master of control—of weaving tension and expectation into something tangible. But what happened when that control met something unmoving?

She was trying to feel me out.

Testing.

Calculating.

I knew that because I did the exact same thing.

Her gaze lingered, her body perfectly still, as if she were trying to peel back a layer that wasn't there.

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My presence was low. Erased, even. I had refined it to the point where people often overlooked me, their gazes sliding past without truly registering my existence. It allowed me to observe without being observed.

But Selene wasn't just anyone.

She was trained.

She noticed.

Her gaze lingered, her body perfectly still, as if she were trying to peel back a layer that wasn't there.

I let the silence stretch.

Her brown eyes bore into mine.

And then—

She laughed.

Soft.

Melodic.

But real.

"Interesting," she murmured, more to herself than to me.

She hadn't gotten what she wanted.

And that?

That intrigued her.

Intrigue.

A curious thing.

Attention from someone like Selene Thornheart wasn't something one simply dismissed. It carried weight—an implication that she saw something worth noticing. That could be dangerous. Or beneficial.

The answer depended.

Would her interest work against my goals? Possibly. Possibly not.

This was where the principle applied—Don't take risks you don't control.

The moment I had accepted Lilia's trade offer, it had already been set in motion. Walking in with her, aligning myself, however loosely, meant I would be noticed. And if Selene was truly as perceptive as I already knew her to be, she would have marked me regardless.

Then Irina.

It didn't matter that I wasn't actively involved in their game before. The fact that I was here—standing at Lilia's side, within her sphere of influence—meant Selene would have accounted for me in her calculations.

And if not Lilia?

Then Irina.

Selene had already seen the reports. She had already been looking. Even if I had kept my distance, her curiosity would have brought her to me eventually.

And if not Irina?

Then Adrian.

That one was inevitable. Selene had contacted him for a reason, and Adrian wasn't subtle about his grudges. I wasn't part of his world before, but now? Now, I was standing on a battlefield that he thought belonged to him.

One way or another, she would have come to me.

So, the choice wasn't whether I avoided her attention.

It was whether I let her form her own conclusions—or if I guided her toward the conclusions I wanted her to have.

Control.

That was the key.

I met her gaze once more, watching the way she studied me, amusement still curling at the edges of her lips.

She thought she was peeling back layers.

But the trick was simple.

You let them think they were seeing through you—while showing them only what you wanted them to see.

I let the silence stretch again, just enough to keep her waiting, to let her anticipation build before I finally spoke.

"Interesting?" I echoed, my tone unreadable. "Is that your way of saying you haven't figured me out yet?"

Her smile widened just a fraction, her brown eyes glinting with intrigue. "Oh, Astron," she murmured, tilting her head. "That would take more than a single conversation."

That was true—for her.

But not for me. After all.

'I had already figured you out.'

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Selene's brown eyes lingered on Astron as the match continued in the background, but she barely registered it now. The excitement of the audience, the shifting dynamics of the fight—none of it held her interest anymore.

No, her focus was entirely on the young man before her.

'Strange.'

That was the first word that came to mind. Not because of his demeanor, though that was certainly noteworthy. His calm, unwavering presence had been a rarity in itself, but that alone wouldn't have made her look twice.

No. It was something else. Something she couldn't quite place.

It wasn't his looks—though she could acknowledge, on a surface level, that he was handsome in an effortless, almost unfair way. It wasn't even the way he spoke—measured, composed, never giving more than he wanted to.

It was a feeling.

An offbeat vibration in the air. A subtle wrongness that wasn't inherently negative, just... different.

Selene prided herself on being able to read people. To get under their skin, to twist the subtleties of a conversation until they unraveled just enough for her to see what lay beneath. It was what made her dangerous. What made her effective.

Yet with Astron...

'He wasn't unraveling.'

He had remained exactly where he wanted to be. Still. Cold. Just out of reach, as if he existed in a place beyond her grasp.

And that was unusual.

Most people, when faced with her attention, fell into one of two categories—either they wanted it, or they feared it.

But Astron?

'He does neither.'

That made him interesting. That made her curious.

Selene tilted her head slightly, studying him as she let her thoughts wander back to earlier that evening.

She had ordered a background check, of course. Just a quick one, nothing invasive. She had expected basic information—academic performance, club affiliations, maybe a family name of note.

What she had found instead had been... unexpected.

Astron, an unassuming young man, was connected to someone she very much knew.

Irina Emberheart.

The fiery demoness herself.

Selene's fingers curled slightly at the thought.

'Now that is interesting.'

The Emberheart name carried weight, but it wasn't just prestige that made it significant. Irina wasn't merely a noble—she was an entity. A force of nature known for her ferocity, both in combat and in the political sphere. Her reputation preceded her, whispered in corridors with equal parts respect and wariness.

And this young man?

'Somehow, he's tied to her.'

That fact alone was enough to shift Selene's entire perception of him.

Astron hadn't reacted when she prodded him earlier, but she had seen it—the way he assessed her just as she assessed him. It hadn't been defensive. It had been calculated. Cold, yet precise.

The same kind of precision she had seen in Irina before.

'How close are they?'

That was the real question.

Selene's fingers tapped idly against her arm, her mind threading through the implications of the report she had received.

Irina Emberheart.

The reports had been vague, almost annoyingly so. She had expected more substantial details, but even a rushed inquiry had revealed something interesting.

Astron and Irina... a couple?

Selene's lips curved slightly, amusement flickering in her gaze.

'Now, isn't that something?'

At face value, it was almost absurd. Irina, who was known for her explosive temperament and overwhelming presence, bound to someone like Astron—silent, unassuming, the very definition of restrained control?

Opposites, in every way.

And yet, it wasn't impossible.



No, the more Selene thought about it, the more it made sense.

Irina had always been surrounded by bold, brash suitors—men who sought to conquer her, to stand beside her as equals or rivals. None of them had lasted long. They either burned out trying to match her flame or realized too late that Irina Emberheart was not the kind of woman to be had.

"Maybe this guy is different."

"Did you say something?"

"Did I?"

"...."

Selene's fingers curled slightly at the thought, a spark of intrigue settling in her chest.

'If that's the case, then this man is more valuable than I initially thought.'

Even if he wasn't the strongest, even if his rank within the academy wasn't the most outstanding, his connection alone made him a piece worth considering.

Because Irina was a force—an entity of chaos and destruction wrapped in nobility and prestige. And anyone tied to her, whether romantically or otherwise, carried influence by mere proximity.

Selene exhaled softly, her eyes narrowing ever so slightly as she regarded him.

'But is it really true?'

Reports could be wrong. Assumptions could be misleading. A few scattered accounts and observations did not confirm the depth of their relationship.

Were they truly a couple, or was there something more beneath the surface?

Was Irina protecting him? Guiding him? Using him?

Or was it the other way around?

Selene had seen many relationships of convenience in her time—alliances formed for power, connections leveraged for influence. If Astron had somehow positioned himself within Irina's sphere, then whether through skill, luck, or sheer circumstance, he had already elevated himself beyond the average cadet.

'And that makes you... useful.'

The word lingered in her mind, and she let it settle there.

Yes. Useful.

Even if he wasn't the best archer, even if his combat skills weren't as refined as others—if Irina Emberheart held him in regard, then he was someone to watch. Someone who could be leveraged.

And that meant he was no longer just a background figure.

Selene's smile deepened ever so slightly.

'Oh, Astron. You may have wanted to stay in the shadows, but I'm afraid you've stepped into the light now.'

Because now, she was watching.

Now, she was interested.

And she had every intention of finding out just how much of these rumors were true.

Chapter 835 193.3 - Selene

Selene's gaze remained steady on Astron, her interest deepening with every passing second. The crowd's murmurs around them were fading into a distant hum—background noise, irrelevant.

Her true focus was on the young man before her.

As she continued to observe him, a faint pulse flickered across the corner of her vision, subtle yet distinct—a confirmation that the data was still streaming.

Her lens was working as intended.

A recent prototype from ThornTech Industries, one of her family's more discreet tech divisions, the lens wasn't just for aesthetic enhancement. It allowed real-time analysis—minute fluctuations in facial expressions, micro-adjustments in posture, variations in pulse rate and thermal output. All of it, compiled and cross-referenced against behavioral databases.

And yet, despite all of that—

Astron's readings were... frustratingly stable.

Heart rate: Unchanged.

Body temperature: Within expected range.

Pupil dilation: Minimal reaction.

Microexpressions: Suppressed.

Selene's fingers tapped idly against her forearm.

'How interesting.'

Selene's fingers curled slightly, tapping against her arm in a slow, thoughtful rhythm.

Her lens was still active—its faint digital overlay shifting subtly in her vision, confirming that the data was still streaming.

And yet, the results were... peculiar.

'Is it malfunctioning?'

The thought crossed her mind, but she immediately dismissed it.

It was a prototype, still undergoing refinements, but she had tested it enough to know that even in its early stages, it was highly functional. It worked. It had worked flawlessly against trained individuals before—picking up the smallest signs of tension, subconscious tells, even physiological shifts people weren't aware of themselves.

Yet, as it continued analyzing Astron, the results remained frustratingly... neutral.

No stress indicators.

No fluctuations beyond the ordinary.

No discernible deception patterns.

'Impossible.'

Even the most composed individuals exhibited something under direct scrutiny. A flicker of uncertainty. A micro-adjustment in their stance. A pulse shift, however minor.

But Astron?

It was like he wasn't even here.

His presence was undeniable, but his body betrayed nothing.

Selene's lips curled slightly in amusement.

'If the device isn't broken, then you're the problem.'

That made him more interesting.

Selene tilted her head slightly, watching him with growing intrigue.

"Tell me, Astron," she said smoothly, her voice soft but deliberate. "What do you think of this match?"

A simple question.

An easy probe.

The data in her lens interface shifted instantly, recalibrating as it registered any change in his vitals.

Astron, however, simply glanced toward the match for a moment before answering, his tone as unreadable as ever.

"It's predictable."

Selene hummed lightly. "Predictable how?"

Astron's gaze remained steady. "The way it's been set up. The interference. The expected outcome."

A calm, objective response.

But Selene's lens detected something—faint, almost imperceptible.

Pupil constriction: 0.02 deviation from baseline.

Breathing shift: 0.03 variance detected.

It was minuscule. Nearly undetectable. Something even the human eye wouldn't have caught.

But it was there.

'Ah.'

So he was reacting.

It wasn't that he wasn't readable. It was that his reactions were so finely muted that the average analysis wouldn't pick them up.

But Selene's lens wasn't average.

'You're suppressing them, aren't you?'

A subtle skill. Passive or deliberate? That was the question.

Selene let the conversation flow naturally, but inwardly, she had already shifted her focus.

There were several possibilities.

He had a passive skill. Something that allowed his body to maintain an unshakable calm. There were abilities that granted physiological control, lowering heart rate, reducing outward tells—it wasn't unheard of. It was subconscious. Some individuals developed this kind of control naturally—through sheer habit, experience, or necessity. If Astron had spent his life learning to avoid attention, to remain unnoticed, then it made sense that his default state was unreadable.

Let's see what you will give away more.

Selene decided to press further, just enough to see where his limits were.

Her tone remained smooth, playful, yet laced with something sharper beneath.

"You're quite perceptive," she mused. "Most people wouldn't have noticed the interference so quickly."

Astron gave the smallest shrug. "It was obvious."

No change in his expression.

But her lens caught it again—the same minute fluctuations.

Pupil movement delay: 0.04 seconds.

Grip tension adjustment: 0.02 deviation.

Small, so small.

Not much. But it was there.

'So, this is something you enjoy.'

A realization settled in her mind as she watched him, noting how despite his unreadable exterior, his body subtly responded the moment the topic turned analytical.

'You like this, don't you? Discussing things like this. Picking things apart, breaking them down piece by piece.'

It wasn't just observation. He was engaged.

And that?

That was useful.

Selene's fingers tapped lightly against her forearm, her movements lazy, but her mind already shifting strategies.

This was exactly why she used this technology.

Most people thought reading someone was about their emotions—happiness, nervousness, attraction, anger. But control wasn't about emotions. It was about knowing what stimulated the mind.

And Astron's mind?

'It sharpens when things get analytical.'

That was his weakness.

And she had just confirmed it.

"Obvious, was it?"

Selene's voice remained smooth, playful—giving no indication that she had already shifted the conversation into a tool.

Astron remained calm, unreadable as ever. "Yes."

She let the silence stretch slightly, watching him—not just his face, but the minute shifts in his body.

Her lens flickered, adjusting to his response pattern.

Heart rate: Stable.

Body temperature: Stable.

But—

Eye movement tracking: Increased pattern focus.

Minor cognitive response delay: 0.05 seconds.

Selene's lips curled.

'You're thinking more now.'

So she leaned into it.

"I wonder," Selene mused, tilting her head slightly, "how far ahead did you predict it?"

Her tone remained casual, as if this were just an idle thought. But she knew what she was doing.

People loved to talk about things they were passionate about. If Astron enjoyed breaking things down, then letting him explain his process was the best way to pull more data.

Astron hesitated.

Not visibly. Not obviously.

But the lens caught it.

Cognitive delay: 0.07 seconds.

Selene's amusement grew.

'Ah, got you.'

Not hesitation because he was caught off-guard. Hesitation because he was debating how much to say.

He was measuring his response.

And that meant he had something worth hiding.

'Let's see how much you'll give me.'

"Not far," he finally said, voice neutral.

A simple answer.

But not a denial.

Selene immediately followed up. "So, just the barriers? Or the whole setup?"

Again, she framed it casually—as if it was just conversation. But she was forcing him to choose how much information he wanted to admit.

Astron's body remained composed.

But the lens picked it up.

Pupil dilation: 0.03 deviation.

Grip relaxation variance: 0.01.

Cognitive response delay: 0.08 seconds.

It was barely there.

But barely there was still there.

Selene had long since learned that humans were predictable machines.

Even those who tried to hide, even those who thought they were unreadable—if you knew what to look for, they would always reveal something.

And Astron, for all his control, was revealing something.

Not in his words.

Not in his expressions.

But in how he thought.

'Your mind moves too quickly to completely suppress reactions.'

Most people reacted emotionally first. That was what made them readable.

But people like Astron?

They processed logically first.

Which meant the delay was the key.

Not the response itself—

But the microsecond where his mind decided what he should say.

That was the opening.

'You suppress emotion. But logic? That, you can't stop.'

And now she knew where to aim.

Selene's voice remained perfectly smooth as she continued.

"Then tell me," she said, "what part of this did you find the most predictable?"

A broad question. Intentionally vague.

It forced him to analyze before answering.

And while he analyzed,

Her lens would be watching.

Astron's gaze remained steady, unfazed by the question. If he had noticed her subtle probing, he didn't show it.

But Selene knew better.

There was a delay—not hesitation, but calculation. A 0.09-second cognitive response gap, just slightly longer than his previous ones. He was considering something.

Then, he spoke.

"Because Adrian has done this before."

Selene's fingers stilled against her arm.

"And with you here, standing against Lilia, it became obvious."

His words were calm, straightforward—no unnecessary embellishments, no attempt to mislead or deflect.

Her lens flashed briefly.

Pulse rate: Stable.

Pupil dilation: No stress indicators.

Facial tension: No deception detected.

'So you're telling the truth.'

Selene's eyes narrowed ever so slightly.

She had anticipated a more intricate explanation—some unique insight, a deeper layer of reasoning that would separate him from the average observer.

But this?

This was... obvious.

She sighed inwardly.

Astron's reasoning was solid, yes. But it wasn't special.

People like Adrian were predictable to those who paid attention. His need for control, his reliance on staged scenarios, his ego-driven tactics—Selene had seen it all before. It wasn't difficult to anticipate.

And Astron?

For all his control, for all his almost-imperceptible mental calculations, he had simply followed logic.

There was no grand hidden intuition. No unseen depth to unravel.

Just casual and simple analysis.



And people like that?

They were rare, yes. But not rare enough to keep her interest.

Selene's fingers resumed tapping idly against her forearm, a slow rhythm of fading curiosity.

'Tch. So that's all it was.'

She had expected something more—something that would set him apart. But now that she had confirmed why he was able to predict the outcome, the mystery evaporated.

She had already met people like him a lot, and his abilities didn't seem to deep either.

'Disappointing.'

She found it disappointing at best. After all, she thought he was special.

'It appears that, it was just his face.'

It seems Irina Emberheart was not that good at choosing high quality men.

## Chapter 836 194.1 - Path

Lilia inhaled deeply, forcing her emotions down, letting the frustration settle into something sharper. Anger wouldn't help her now. No, she needed to focus.

Adrian was still pressing forward, his speed giving him the undeniable edge. The momentary interference had set her back, forcing her onto the defensive once again, while he advanced with the confidence of someone who believed he had already won.

Twack!

Another arrow shot toward her, fast and merciless. Lilia barely twisted out of the way, feeling the rush of mana as it passed just inches from her waist.

She moved, using the shifting barriers to her advantage—but Adrian was relentless.

He's not giving me space to recover.

He closed the distance between them, keeping her pinned, firing with relentless precision. His arrows carried weight—not just in power, but in strategy. He wasn't just shooting wildly. He was boxing her in, limiting her options.

She loosed an arrow, a quick retaliatory strike aimed not to hit, but to disrupt his positioning.

Adrian dodged with ease, his speed making him seem almost untouchable. And then—he struck again.

Thud!

An arrow buried itself into the barrier beside her, but it wasn't just any arrow.

Mana pulsed from it, expanding outward in a controlled burst.

Lilia's eyes widened. That's—!

The impact caused the barrier to collapse entirely, forcing her into the open.

She barely had time to react before another arrow was already flying toward her.

Lilia twisted her body, a hair's breadth from being struck, but Adrian was already preparing the next shot.

This was his domain now.

She wasn't just fighting him—she was fighting a battle of attrition.

His stamina, his speed, his raw physical advantages—they all added up.

He could keep this up.

Could she?

Her breaths came a little faster now, her body straining to keep up with his relentless onslaught.

Adrian smirked. "What's wrong, Lilia?" he called out, his voice laced with arrogance. "Getting tired?"

Lilia's breath steadied as she fully embraced the situation. She could no longer afford to fight Adrian on his terms. His speed, his stamina, his brute force—none of those were factors she could overpower. But control? That was something else entirely.

Her fingers tightened around the bowstring, mana pooling into the tip of her arrow. This wasn't like her earlier feints. This time, she was committing. She had to—because if she didn't, this fight would end in his favor.

Adrian was already closing in, his stance unwavering as he fired another shot. Lilia twisted to the side, barely avoiding the arrow as it embedded itself in the ground with a faint hum of residual energy. He was reading her reactions now, narrowing her escape routes one by one. The suffocating pressure of his assault was reaching its peak, and he knew it.

"Still holding on?" His voice was as smug as ever, but there was no arrogance in his movements. He was precise, methodical. He had no intention of making a mistake now—not when he had the upper hand.

Lilia didn't answer. Instead, she moved again, weaving between the remaining barriers. The shifting field made it difficult to rely on cover, but she wasn't using them for protection anymore. She was using them to create angles.

Her crimson eyes flickered toward the farthest barrier, measuring the distance, the openings, the flow of Adrian's attacks. He was fast, but even speed had its limitations. He still had to aim, still had to account for timing. If she could disrupt his rhythm even slightly, she could create the opening she needed.

Another arrow came—this one sharper, faster, laced with mana that crackled in the air. Lilia bent low, the wind of its passage brushing against her cheek as she slid into position. In the same motion, she raised her bow and loosed a shot of her own—not at Adrian, but at one of the moving barriers behind him.

The moment the arrow struck, the structure wobbled, shifting just enough to throw off his line of sight.

Lilia moved.

She sprinted, drawing another arrow, the glow at its tip intensifying as her mana control wove into the very core of the projectile. Piercing Bloom wasn't just a shot—it was an extension of herself, a technique designed to bend the very rules of conventional archery.

But before she could release it, the cover in front of her suddenly vanished.

Her instincts screamed at her, but it was already too late. The interference struck precisely at the moment she had committed to her attack, and Adrian was already in motion.

His arrow came like a killing blow.

She had no choice but to abandon her shot, throwing herself to the side just as the projectile slammed into the ground where she had been standing. Dust kicked up from the impact, a reminder of how close she had come to losing right then and there.

'Selene.'

The realization cut deeper than she expected. That timing—it wasn't natural. The barriers had been unpredictable before, but now? Now they were too precise. The instant she gained momentum, they collapsed. The moment Adrian needed an opening, he got it.

And as if to make it seem fair, the same thing happened to him a moment later.

One of his barriers flickered and dropped just as he prepared to reposition. Lilia saw his muscles tense, the slight falter in his movement. He had noticed it too.

But unlike her, it barely affected his standing.

He still had his shot.

She, on the other hand, had to keep moving, had to stay defensive. There was no opening for her, no moment where she could afford to return fire.

Lilia exhaled sharply, pushing herself toward another position as the weight of the manipulation pressed down on her. She wasn't just fighting Adrian—she was fighting Selene's game.

She turned her head slightly, just enough to see the woman standing at the sidelines.

Selene's expression was calm, her gaze unreadable. But there was a faint curve at the edge of her lips, a knowing satisfaction that made Lilia's blood run hot.

Her fingers curled into a fist before she forced them to relax. She had to be better than this. Letting anger dictate her next move would only feed into Selene's expectations.

Fine.

If they thought they could control her, then she would show them just how wrong they were.

Lilia darted forward, drawing another arrow. If she couldn't find an opening, then she would create one.

Lilia's movements became sharper, her mind cutting through the interference, the rigged battlefield, and the oppressive force of Selene's control. If she couldn't play by their rules, then she would play by hers.

Her fingers tightened around her bow as she channeled mana into her next arrow—not in the conventional way, not in a way that Adrian or even Selene would expect. She had been working on something, refining a technique that had yet to see battle. If Selene thought she had accounted for everything, then she was about to receive a rude awakening.

Lilia's breath steadied as she poured mana into her arrow, not just enhancing its power but weaving it into something far more intricate.

'This is still not complete but, let's test it.'

It was not like she would lose anything anyway.

This wasn't just about force or speed—it was about control.

[Phase Disruption]

The moment the name of her technique solidified in her mind, the mana surrounding her arrow shifted.

Instead of simply coating the projectile, the mana field around it expanded, distorting the air in a way that made the arrow appear slightly displaced—a ripple, a mirage within space itself. It wasn't just an illusion. The technique manipulated mana refraction and electromagnetic displacement, bending the very medium that governed magical energy.

Lilia understood the theory behind it well. Just as light bent when it passed through different densities of air or glass, mana did the same when subjected to rapid fluctuations in field strength. The key was controlled instability—forcing mana into an oscillating state so that, when fired, the arrow would shift through the battlefield unpredictably.

No more linear trajectories. No more predictable shots.

Adrian couldn't block what he couldn't track.

The moment she released the arrow, it didn't just fly forward—it vanished from normal sight for a fraction of a second. The light bent around it, the mana interference from the field barely registering it as a solid object. It was as if space itself had fragmented around her attack.

Adrian's reaction was immediate. His instincts were good, trained to dodge at the first sign of movement—but that was the problem. There was no clear movement.

His body twisted to the side, but he had no idea where the arrow actually was.

For the first time since the match started, he looked uncertain.

And Lilia pressed forward.

She wasn't just attacking—she was dismantling the very foundation of the fight.

Her movements accelerated, her presence like a shifting shadow in the battlefield as she loosed another arrow, then another, each one vanishing before reappearing inches away from its actual trajectory.

The audience gasped.

Selene's expression didn't change, but Lilia saw the smallest shift in her stance—the faintest tension in her fingers.

She had not predicted this.

Good.

Adrian struggled to adapt, his advantage in raw speed meaning nothing when he couldn't react in time. His arrows fired blindly now, his rhythm breaking as he attempted to track shots that didn't exist where they should have.

Then came the opening.

A brief, precious moment where Adrian faltered, where his footwork stuttered.

Lilia's crimson eyes gleamed.

Now.

She drew her final arrow, mana surging to its peak, the battlefield bending around her strike.

Victory was within reach.

But then—

The platform beneath her flickered.

Her stance wavered.

The very ground she had stabilized herself on collapsed.

Not a barrier. Not a piece of cover.

The battlefield itself.

And just like that, the shot that should have been her victory—

Missed.

Adrian recovered in an instant, his arrow already loosed before she could regain her footing.

Lilia twisted, tried to escape, but there was no time.

His shot struck clean.

The mana barrier flared upon impact, signaling the end.

The match was over.

Silence fell over the field.

The crowd barely processed what had happened before erupting into murmurs, shock and awe mingling in their voices. Some gasped at Lilia's near-victory, others at the impossible shift in the battlefield at the last second.

And standing at the edge of it all, her hands perfectly still, her expression calm and composed—

Selene smiled.

Lilia's fingers trembled around her bowstring, her breath steady but slow, controlled. The loss didn't sting because Adrian had won.

It stung because she had been robbed.

Because even when she had broken through Selene's predictions, her sister had still rigged the outcome in the end.

And that—

That was something she would not forget.

Chapter 837 194.2 - Path

Lilia exhaled slowly, forcing her grip on the bow to relax. Her fingers trembled slightly, a lingering remnant of the mana she had poured into her final shot—a shot that should have secured her victory. But instead, it had missed. Not because of a miscalculation. Not because Adrian had outmaneuvered her. But because of something—or rather, someone—far beyond her control.

Selene.

Even now, standing there with that perfectly composed smile, Lilia could see it—the satisfaction hidden behind the mask of gracious amusement. She planned for this. She made sure, no matter what happened, I wouldn't win.

A hand clapped against her shoulder, light but firm. "You fought well," Adrian said, his voice smooth and just a touch too self-satisfied. "But I guess your talent was up to this point, huh?"

Lilia's breath stilled, her fingers curling at her sides. A deep, burning urge swelled inside her—an impulse to turn and strike him, to wipe that smug expression off his face with a single punch. It would feel so satisfying.

But it would also be exactly what they wanted.

She clenched her jaw, inhaling sharply before stepping away from him, shaking his hand off like it was nothing more than dust on her sleeve. "Next time, you won't be so lucky," she said coolly, her voice unwavering despite the storm beneath her skin.

Adrian chuckled, tilting his head slightly. "Luck?" he mused. "Is that what you're calling it?" His eyes gleamed with amusement, but Lilia could see it—that same faint edge he had carried throughout the match. He knew. He knew that she had nearly won, that it had taken more than just his skill to secure his victory.

But he would never admit it.

Lilia didn't bother responding. There was nothing more to say. With controlled, measured steps, she turned and walked off the platform, her back straight, her chin held high. The murmurs of the cadets swirled around her—some murmuring admiration for how close the match had been, others whispering about the sudden shift in the battlefield.

None of it mattered.

The weight in her chest tightened as she moved past the gathered crowd, her body feeling strangely heavy. It wasn't just physical exhaustion, though her muscles ached from the relentless pace of the match. No, this was something else—something deeper.

'What is this feeling?'

Her footsteps carried her farther from the main platform, out of the direct spotlight of the event. The air felt slightly cooler here, less suffocating than the charged atmosphere of the gathering. And yet, despite putting distance between herself and them, the feeling remained.

She clenched her fists. Frustration? That was obvious. She should feel frustrated. Angry, even. But there was something else, something unfamiliar gnawing at the edges of her thoughts.

Disappointment?

The thought unsettled her.

Not at Adrian. Not at Selene. But at herself.

She had known. Deep down, she had known what she was stepping into. And yet, she had walked right into their game. She had let herself believe, if only for a moment, that she could play by their rules and still win.

'How foolish.'

The realization sat heavy in her chest, but she didn't let it show. Not now. Not when she knew eyes were still on her.

She reached a quieter part of the grounds, exhaling softly. Her heartbeat had slowed, but that weight remained.

The cool night air did little to soothe the fire burning beneath Lilia's skin. Her fingers twitched at her sides, her breath measured but tense. She had expected the loss to sting, but this? This hollow weight settling in her chest—it wasn't just frustration. It was something more bitter. Then, just as she was trying to center herself, she heard the one voice she didn't want to deal with right now.

"Sister."

The word was laced with amusement, smooth and deliberate.

Lilia's body tensed as she turned, her crimson eyes narrowing as Selene approached with her usual composed grace. The faint sound of clapping filled the air as Selene brought her hands together in slow, measured applause.

"You really fought well," she said, her voice as sweet as honey but carrying that unmistakable edge of mockery.

Lilia clenched her jaw, her expression neutral but her mind already working through the layers of meaning behind Selene's words. She knew her sister far too well. There were no real compliments between them—only carefully veiled barbs, traps hidden in silk.

Selene came to a stop just a few paces from her, tilting her head slightly as if studying Lilia. Her brown eyes gleamed with something unreadable, a quiet satisfaction woven into her features.

"I must say," she continued, placing a hand delicately on her hip, "for a moment, I truly thought you had it. The way you moved, the way you handled your mana—it was quite impressive."

Lilia said nothing, letting Selene speak, waiting for the inevitable turn in the conversation.

Selene's smile widened, her voice dipping into something softer, something almost conspiratorial. "But in the end... well." She let out a light, almost pitying sigh, her fingers brushing a stray lock of emerald hair behind her ear. "I suppose there are just some things that can't be overcome, aren't there?"

There it was.

Lilia's fingers curled slightly, but she forced herself to exhale, keeping her expression level. Don't react. Don't give her that satisfaction.

Instead, she let out a small, humorless chuckle. "You're right," she said smoothly. "Like the part where you manipulated the battlefield."

Selene blinked, then let out a soft laugh, shaking her head. "Manipulated? My dear Lilia, the barriers were shifting randomly from the start. I had nothing to do with it." Her voice was the picture of innocence, but the glint in her eyes told a different story.

Lilia tilted her head, feigning curiosity. "Oh? Is that so? How strange that the timing always worked in Adrian's favor, then. What impeccable luck."

Selene sighed, as if truly lamenting the accusation. "Luck is a fickle thing, isn't it? Sometimes, it's with us. Sometimes, it's against us. But surely, you wouldn't suggest that your loss was solely due to something so trivial? That would be rather... unbecoming."

Lilia's lips twitched. "Of course not." She met Selene's gaze evenly, her voice cool and unwavering. "But let's not pretend, Selene. You and I both know what happened tonight."

Selene's eyes gleamed, her smile never faltering. "Do we?"

They stood there, locked in silent battle, neither willing to look away. The air between them crackled, the weight of years of rivalry pressing down on both of them.

Then, Selene's gaze flickered downward for just a moment, and when she looked back up, her smile had shifted—just slightly. There was something sharper now, something more... amused.

"You seem tired, Lilia," she murmured. "You should get some rest. Losing takes a lot out of you, doesn't it?"

Lilia inhaled slowly, forcing herself to remain composed. "You'd know."

Selene let out another soft laugh, stepping back slightly. "Oh, little sister," she mused. "You make this so entertaining."

She turned smoothly, her hair catching the dim light as she walked away, leaving Lilia standing there, her fists clenched at her sides.

Lilia exhaled sharply through her nose. The exhaustion she had been holding at bay finally caught up with her, settling in her bones.

Selene's words echoed in her mind, blending with the bitter weight of disappointment.



Not in Selene.

Not in Adrian.

But in herself.

She had walked into this knowing the risks, knowing what they were capable of. And still, she had let herself get caught in their game.

Then she walked briskly, her mind still storming with the aftermath of the match, Selene's words echoing faintly in her head. The frustration gnawed at her, mingling with the weight of exhaustion pressing down on her limbs. She needed to be alone. She needed space to think.

But then—

"Leaving without me?"

The voice was cool, detached, yet somehow familiar. Lilia stopped mid-step, her breath steadying as her crimson eyes flicked to the side.

There, leaning casually against one of the trees near the edge of the training grounds, stood Astron. His arms were crossed, his dark purple eyes watching her with his usual unreadable expression. He looked completely at ease, as if the tension of the night had never touched him.

Lilia blinked. Had he been there this whole time?

She hadn't noticed him—not once. And for someone as naturally aware of her surroundings as she was, that realization irked her. I must be slipping.

Still, for reasons she didn't fully understand, she felt a small, almost reluctant sense of relief that he was still here.

She raised an eyebrow at him, tilting her head slightly. "I thought you left after the match." Her voice was even, betraying none of the turmoil still simmering inside her.

Astron shrugged. "Didn't feel like dealing with the crowd." He pushed off the tree, his posture relaxed as he stepped toward her. "Figured you'd do the same."

Lilia exhaled softly, shaking her head. "Not quite. I had... unfinished business."

Astron's gaze flickered slightly, as if he already knew exactly what—or who—that 'unfinished business' had been. He didn't press, though, instead eyeing her with a faint trace of curiosity. "So? How do you feel?"

Chapter 838 194.3 - Path

Lilia paused at his question, her crimson eyes locking onto his. Astron's expression remained unreadable, his voice as cool and detached as ever, but there was something beneath the surface—something subtle. His dark purple eyes, distant yet sharp, held a glint of curiosity, faint but present.

It made sense. Astron was observant, more so than most people gave him credit for. He must have noticed how she had carried herself throughout the night, how she had played the game differently than usual. And now, he was curious.

Lilia exhaled, tilting her head slightly. "You really do like watching people, don't you?" she mused, her voice quieter now, less guarded.

Astron didn't blink. "Observing," he corrected. "People are predictable if you pay attention."

A small smirk tugged at Lilia's lips. "And what? You think I wasn't acting like myself?"

Astron studied her for a moment before replying. "I think you were acting like someone who wanted to win."

Lilia stilled. It wasn't an incorrect statement, but coming from Astron, it felt oddly precise.

Wanted to win? She turned the words over in her mind. Did she really want to win, or did she just refuse to lose?

She let out a quiet sigh, glancing away toward the dimly lit training grounds in the distance. "I feel..." She hesitated, as if the answer itself was caught somewhere between her thoughts and her pride.

She considered lying—saying something light, something dismissive. But Astron wasn't the type to accept shallow answers. He'd only see through it.

So instead, she answered honestly.

"Frustrated. Tired." Her voice was steady, but she didn't hide the weight behind her words. "But more than that... disappointed."

Astron didn't react immediately, but she saw it—the way his gaze flickered slightly, as if processing her words with more care than expected.

"Disappointed in what?" he asked.

Lilia let out a soft chuckle, shaking her head. "Myself, mostly."

Astron raised an eyebrow slightly, but he didn't interrupt.

She turned back to him, her crimson eyes sharper now, not with anger, but with a more introspective intensity. "I knew what I was walking into. I knew how Selene and Adrian operate. And yet, I still let myself play their game."

She exhaled, her hands tightening slightly at her sides. "That was my mistake."

Astron was silent for a moment, then he nodded. "It was."

Lilia blinked, half expecting him to say something else. When he didn't, she let out a short laugh. "You're terrible at comforting people, you know that?"

"I'm not trying to comfort you."

"Yeah, I figured."

For a moment, there was only quiet between them. A strange, comfortable kind of quiet. Lilia had expected more from him—some comment, some analysis—but Astron just stood there, watching her, waiting.

And oddly enough, that was enough.

Lilia exhaled softly, the night air cool against her skin, her mind still running through the match, through Selene's schemes, through every move and counter-move that had played out tonight. And yet, just as she thought the conversation was winding down, Astron suddenly spoke.

"I sometimes wonder... why do you care about all this?"

Lilia blinked, her gaze snapping to him. His voice was the same as always—calm, measured—but there was something different about it this time. A faint curiosity that wasn't just about observation. He was actually asking.

Her brows furrowed slightly. "Care about what?"

Astron tilted his head slightly, his dark purple eyes cool and steady. "The guild. Olympus Vanguard. The succession battle. Why do you care so much about winning?"

Lilia's steps slowed for a moment. The question wasn't difficult, not on the surface. It was something she had been answering her entire life—to others, to herself. And yet, hearing it from Astron, spoken so plainly, so detached, made her pause in a way she hadn't expected.

Why did she care?

Her lips parted slightly, then pressed into a thin line. "That's an easy answer," she said finally, her voice smooth despite the momentary hesitation. "Because I want to be the one leading it. I want to be the one in power."

She glanced at him, gauging his reaction, but Astron remained as impassive as ever, merely listening.

Lilia continued, her voice growing sharper, more certain as she spoke. "The Olympus Vanguard isn't just a guild, Astron. It's one of the most powerful organizations in the world. Whoever controls it doesn't just lead a group of Awakened—they dictate alliances, control resources, influence entire nations." She exhaled, crossing her arms as her eyes flickered with determination. "That kind of power doesn't come easily. And if it's going to fall into anyone's hands, it should be mine."

Astron nodded slightly but didn't respond immediately. His silence stretched just long enough for her to feel the weight of her own words.

Lilia narrowed her eyes. "What?"

Astron shrugged lightly, his gaze unwavering. "It makes sense," he said. "You're ambitious. You want power. But is that really all?"

Lilia frowned slightly, his words catching her off guard. "What are you implying?"

Astron's expression didn't change, but there was a slight shift in his posture—something more calculating, more interested. "Ambition, control, leadership. Those are things you want. But why? Is it really just about power, or is it about something else?"

Lilia felt a flicker of irritation, though she wasn't sure if it was directed at him or at the fact that he was making her think about this in ways she hadn't before. "What else would it be?" she countered.

Astron studied her for a long moment before he spoke again. "Proving yourself," he said simply.

Lilia's breath hitched slightly, though her face remained composed.

Astron continued, his voice still calm, still unreadable. "To your family. To your father. To Selene." He tilted his head slightly. "And maybe even to yourself."

Lilia felt something tighten in her chest, an uncomfortable pressure she wasn't used to.

"I don't need to prove myself to anyone," she said automatically, her voice sharper than she intended.

Astron didn't flinch, didn't react, just kept looking at her with those damnable, unreadable eyes. "Don't you?"

Lilia stopped walking. Her fingers curled slightly at her sides as she inhaled deeply, forcing her composure to remain intact.

This is ridiculous. She knew why she fought. She knew why she wanted to win. It wasn't about proving anything. It was about control. It was about being the one in power. It was about securing her place so that no one—not Selene, not her father, not anyone—could dictate what she could or couldn't do.

But then... why did it feel like Astron had struck something deeper?

Her crimson eyes met his again, and for once, she wasn't entirely sure what expression she was wearing.

"What's your point?" she asked quietly.

Astron exhaled softly, his gaze still steady. "I just think it's interesting."

Lilia let out a short, humorless chuckle. "You think I'm interesting?"

Astron studied her for a moment longer before speaking again, his voice as detached as ever. "Indeed. You are an interesting subject."

His dark purple eyes turned slightly colder, a glint of something analytical crossing them as he continued. "You say you want to win the succession battle, but you also don't want to dirty your hands."

Lilia's expression stiffened slightly, but she said nothing, allowing him to continue.

"Take Adrian or Selene, for example. People like them—they play to win, no matter what it takes. They manipulate, they deceive, they set the board in their favor before the game even begins. Yet when you face those types of tactics, your response is always the same."

His voice shifted slightly, not in mockery, but in eerie accuracy, as though recalling the very words she had spoken before.

"I'd rather win with my own talent than resort to underhanded tactics."

Lilia's fingers twitched.

"I can win even without those methods. I am better than them."

She inhaled slowly. She did say things like that. Often.

And deep down, she believed them.

Astron observed her carefully, then added, "That's the way you approach things."

Lilia's lips pressed into a thin line. "And? You say that like it's a flaw."

Astron tilted his head slightly. "Not necessarily." Then his voice lowered, just slightly, his next words sharper. "But it's not entirely true either."

Lilia's crimson eyes narrowed. Something in the way he spoke made her pause.

"What?" she asked, her voice cool but laced with something more dangerous. "What do you mean by that?"

Astron met her gaze evenly. "I mean, that's the way you want to approach things."

He took a small step forward, not threatening, but deliberate. "Or at least, you make it seem like that's how you approach things."

Lilia's breath caught slightly, but she didn't react outwardly. She had faced countless people who tried to analyze her, break her down, tell her what kind of person she was. But something about the way Astron spoke—calm, detached, yet precise—unsettled her.

"Explain." Her voice came out sharper than she intended.

Astron's gaze didn't waver. "In reality, you just don't want to do things like that inherently." His words were smooth, cutting, yet delivered without an ounce of malice. "You don't have the necessary drive."

Chapter 839 194.4 - Path

"You don't have the necessary drive."

The moment the words left his mouth, something inside Lilia snapped.

Her body tensed, her fingers curling into fists. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?" she asked, her voice lower, colder.

Astron didn't blink. "It means you hesitate."

Lilia's glare sharpened, but he continued before she could interrupt. "You hesitate when it comes to doing things the way Adrian or Selene would. You hesitate when it comes to manipulation, when it comes to using everything at your disposal. You hesitate because, deep down, you don't want to be like them."

His tone remained infuriatingly steady. "And that's why you lost."

Lilia took a step forward before she even realized it, her crimson eyes burning with barely restrained anger.

"Are you saying I lost because I didn't cheat?"

Astron met her burning gaze without flinching, his dark purple eyes steady and unyielding.

"Cheating is when you go against the rules." His voice was calm, matter-of-fact. "But we both know that when it comes to politics, the rules are often written by those who win."

He tilted his head slightly, his expression unreadable. "There is no cheating. There is only what is allowed and what is enforced. And that—" his voice dipped, quieter but sharper, "is your fundamental flaw."

Lilia scoffed, her crimson eyes narrowing. "Cheating is cheating. If those in power can't uphold a certain standard, then what is to become of this world?"

Astron nodded slightly, acknowledging her words. "That's a valid point."

Then he exhaled, looking at her with something that wasn't quite condescension, but wasn't far from it either.

"But that is the duality of this world." His voice remained level, but there was something colder underneath it, something that suggested he had long since accepted this truth. "Those things that should be done are often harder..."

His gaze flickered, his next words cutting through the night air like a blade.

"...and those things that must be done are often crueler."

Silence.

Lilia's breath hitched slightly.

Her fingers twitched at her sides. She hated that—for just a second—those words struck something deep inside her.

Astron continued, his tone never wavering. "You're not wrong for wanting standards. For wanting a system that isn't ruled by deception." He took a step closer, his gaze unwavering. "But if you think that alone will win you the Olympus Vanguard, then you're either naïve... or lying to yourself."

Lilia's jaw clenched.

Astron simply looked at her, waiting.

And for the first time in a long time, she had no immediate response.

Astron didn't break eye contact, his expression as unreadable as ever. "And we both know that you're smarter than that. You're not naïve." His voice was even, devoid of condescension, but it carried a weight that pressed down on Lilia all the same. "Which means there's only one option left."

Lilia scoffed, crossing her arms. "Since when did you become a psychologist and a mind reader?"

Astron merely tilted his head, his dark purple eyes steady. "Truth is often laid bare for those who are talented enough to observe... and brave enough to look at it."

Lilia's lips twitched slightly. Does he even hear himself when he talks?

"You really sound narcissistic, you know that?" she muttered, shaking her head.

Astron's mouth moved—just slightly, barely enough to be called an expression. "Possibly."

Lilia exhaled, her crimson gaze sharp as she met his eyes once more. "And what makes you think you're better at seeing through me than I am myself?" Her voice carried a challenge, a flicker of irritation woven into her tone.

Astron simply shrugged, as if the answer was obvious. "A sailor often cannot sew their own clothes."

Lilia blinked, momentarily caught off guard by the random yet oddly fitting analogy.

She let out a short chuckle, shaking her head. "You'd make a good debater."

Astron tilted his head slightly. "I'd rather not argue just to argue. Besides, I only state what is evident."

Lilia rolled her eyes but found herself exhaling in something that almost resembled amusement. "Of course you do."

For a moment, the weight of the night, the frustration, and the lingering sting of disappointment felt... lighter. It wasn't gone, but at least, with Astron standing there with his unreadable gaze and effortless words, it didn't feel suffocating.

Lilia's fleeting amusement faded as a different feeling settled in. Something more rigid, more unsettling. She didn't like this. She didn't like how it felt as though Astron knew more about her than she had ever let anyone know.

Ethan, Lucas, Irina, Julia, Carl—none of them. Even those closest to her didn't see this part of her. The part where doubt crept in, where the weight of expectations pressed down. The part of her that questioned, even if only for a second, whether she was moving forward in the right direction.

But somehow, Astron had peeled it apart—piece by piece—like he had always known it was there.

And that wasn't good.

She turned her gaze back to him, her crimson eyes sharp and filled with suspicion. "You think you know me, don't you?" she muttered, folding her arms tightly.

Astron met her glare without hesitation, his expression unreadable.

Lilia scoffed, shifting her weight slightly. "You say I don't have the drive, but do you even know how much effort I've put into this? Since I was a child, I've been working for this. I've trained, I've studied, I've recruited people—built a foundation from nothing. I've spent years carving out my own influence, making sure people respect me, follow me. I don't sit back and let things happen. I make things happen. Can you really say I don't have drive?"

Her words were sharp, almost defensive. But she meant them.

Astron listened, as he always did, letting her words settle before responding. And when he did, his voice was calm. Unshaken.

"But is that really what you want?"

Lilia's breath hitched slightly. Her fingers twitched at her sides.

"What can you even know about what I want?" she countered, her voice colder now.

Astron exhaled softly, his gaze never wavering. "Simple." He tilted his head slightly, his tone steady. "Why do you work this hard right now? Why push yourself to achieve such a high rank in the Academy, for instance?"

Lilia frowned, her arms tightening around herself. "Because it matters. It contributes to my prestige, my reliability. It proves my talent. Do you think the position of the guild leader will just be handed over to me? No. My accomplishments matter. My rank shows that I am capable."

Astron nodded slightly. "That makes sense."

But then he tilted his head slightly again, his next words cutting deeper.

"It may improve how others see you. But does it improve enough to cover for the opportunity cost?"

Lilia's expression flickered, her lips pressing into a thin line.

Astron continued. "Achieving that rank, maintaining it—it's not easy, is it? You spend hours training, refining your technique, ensuring you're ahead of everyone else."

He paused, then spoke again, slower this time.

"But do you need it?"

Lilia clenched her jaw. "Of course I do."

"Do you?" Astron's voice remained infuriatingly steady. "Or have you simply decided that you do?"

Lilia's breath was slow, controlled, but her irritation was growing.

Astron studied her reaction, then shrugged slightly. "You could be using that time differently. Recruiting more people. Expanding your network. Strengthening alliances. If your goal is true power, then raw skill shouldn't be your priority. Influence should be."

Lilia knew he wasn't wrong.

But she hated that he had said it.

Her fingers curled slightly at her sides, but she didn't respond immediately.

Astron continued. "So, I'll ask again. Are you sure this is what you want?"

Her crimson eyes burned into his, but he didn't waver. He didn't look down at her like Selene. He didn't mock her like Adrian. He just... stood there. Watching. Waiting.

And for some reason, that infuriated her even more.

Chapter 840 194.5 - Path

The night was quiet as I walked through the academy grounds, the remnants of the party fading into silence behind me. The air was cool, crisp, carrying the faint scent of the trees lining the pathways. My steps were steady, unhurried, yet my mind was far from still.

Lilia.

I hadn't meant to analyze her this much, but it was inevitable.



She was one of the main cast. In the game, she had been Ethan's ally—a force in her own right, yet never fully in the spotlight. She was important, but not in the way party members were. She wasn't like Ethan, or Irina, or Julia.

She was something different.

An asset, not a constant.

And the reason for that was simple.

The developers hadn't designed her to be a frontline warrior, nor had they given her a role that would demand she be present in every battle. She wasn't a Hunter in the way Ethan was, in the way I was.

She was political.

A strong-willed businesswoman. A strategist. Someone who moved things from the outside.

And in that role, she thrived.

But not because she was great at it.

Because there was no one better.

That was the truth about Lilia. She wasn't incompetent—far from it. But she wasn't exceptional either. Not in management. Not in politics.

She was simply good enough to survive in that world.

Good enough to keep up.

Good enough to carve out her place.

But the thing about being "good enough" was that it wasn't secure.

It wasn't a guarantee.

Lilia wasn't a natural manipulator like Selene. She wasn't a natural leader like Ethan. She wasn't an indomitable force that demanded respect the moment she entered a room.

She worked for every inch of ground she gained.

And that?

That was her biggest flaw.

She still thought that working harder would be enough. That raw ability and determination could push her forward.

She was playing at politics with the mindset of a warrior.

And that was why she lost.

Not because she was weak.

Not because she wasn't smart.

But because she was playing the wrong game with the wrong approach.

I exhaled slowly, my steps carrying me further into the night.

If this were the game, I knew how it would go.

Lilia would continue down this path, facing struggle after struggle, slowly realizing that brute force wouldn't win her the Olympus Vanguard. She would learn, adapt, and eventually change her approach.

She would stop thinking like a fighter.

And start thinking like a ruler.

A ruler's mind.

That's what it took.

That's what Lilia needed.

But the ability to think like a ruler—it wasn't something that could be acquired simply by wanting it.

It wasn't something that could be earned through sheer effort alone.

It required talent.

And talent wasn't fair.

I stopped walking for a moment, glancing across the academy grounds. The lamplights flickered dimly, casting long shadows over the pathways. The distant hum of the city beyond the walls was barely audible, a reminder that the world kept moving even as this place remained frozen in its routines.

I knew how this world worked.

And I knew how Lilia worked.

Because I had seen it before.

In the game, there was an arc. A significant one.

The moment Lilia realized—too late—that she had chosen wrong.

Not that she was bad at being a guild leader. No, she was competent enough to survive, to push forward, to make her presence known. But competence was not the same as talent.

And the harshest truth?

Lilia was a Hunter.

She wasn't meant to be confined in meeting rooms, negotiating contracts, brokering deals like some politician desperate to cling to relevance.

She had talent. Skill.

A natural instinct that made her deadly with a bow.

A warrior's edge that made her dangerous when she fought.

And yet, she had put all of that aside.

Chasing an ideal. Chasing power. Chasing a throne that she thought would allow her to control her own fate.

But this world was past the point where politics alone could save anyone.

And in the game, she realized it.

Late.

Far too late.

The scene was burned into my memory—the moment she confessed it.

The moment she admitted, in a rare lapse of pride, that she regretted it all.

She had spent so much time maneuvering through the games of men, through the bureaucracy of power, that she had neglected the very thing that could have truly made a difference.

She had regretted not training harder.

Not honing her skill as a Hunter.

Not realizing that in the end, all the politics, all the backroom deals, all the alliances—they meant nothing when the true threats emerged.

Because when the world broke, when the monsters came, when the strongest of humanity had to stand and fight—

Politics didn't save people.

Power did.

I exhaled slowly.

That was her fate.

That was how her arc had played out.

But now?

Now, I was standing here.

And that meant the story had already begun to shift.

The only question was—

Would Lilia realize it this time?

Would she recognize the truth before it was too late?

Or would she once again waste her potential, chasing the illusion of control until the world forced her to understand?

I glanced at the empty sky, my expression unreadable.

The answer?

It wasn't up to me.

Not yet.

But at the same time, it was better for her to realize.

Better for her.

Better for the world.

There was no reason to lose talents like Lilia. No reason for her to waste herself in a losing game, pretending that the world still worked the way she wanted it to.

And more than that—

The things that would happen in the future...

They needed to change.

I resumed walking, my steps measured, my mind running through the possibilities. The game's plot was a tool, a guide—one that gave me insight into the grander picture. But that didn't mean it should be followed.

If anything, it shouldn't.

Because the setting of the game?

It was grim.

It wasn't a story about heroes winning a great victory. It wasn't a tale of righteousness triumphing over darkness.

It was survival.

It was sacrifice.

And it was about how much had to be lost before humanity could even have a chance at winning.

In the game, by the time Lilia realized the truth, she had already lost too much. Her allies, her resources, her position in Olympus Vanguard. Even her confidence.

She had been forced into a supporting role—not because she wasn't useful, but because by the time she was ready, the battle had already passed her by.

And that?

That was a waste.

Not just for her.

For everyone.

Lilia, at her core, was strong.

She had talent, skill, intelligence—everything that should have made her a true force in the world. But she had been misdirected, set on a path that had led to nowhere.

And if the game's plot continued as it had before, history would repeat itself.

Unless I changed it.

Unless I forced her to realize it sooner.

The thought settled in my mind like a cold certainty.

This wasn't just about Lilia's personal growth.

It was about preparing for what was coming.

Because when the worst began—when the real threats of this world emerged—

Politics wouldn't save anyone.

And if Lilia Thornheart wanted to stand at the top of Olympus Vanguard, if she truly wanted to be the leader she claimed to be—

Then she would have to understand.

Sooner, not later.

Because if she didn't?

She would be irrelevant in the battles to come.

And I would not let that happen.

"After all, everyone needs to have their own purpose, don't they?"