

## H. Academy 91

Chapter 91 Chapter 22.1 - The Chrono Grove

THUD

As the body of Fred fell to the ground, I was left alone inside the forest with my gun in my hand.

"....."

TAP TAP TAP

The sound of rain falling to the ground could be heard, and before me was the body of the dead half-demon.

The metallic feeling of my gun was in my hand.

I just stood there and looked at what I had done without making any sound.

My clothes were slightly getting wet, but at that moment, I didn't care.

'So, this is how it feels, huh? Hunting someone down....'

A weird feeling enveloped me as I had finally achieved something after coming here.

The anger in my heart still existed, as the figure before me made me remember the scene where her chest was pierced by the claws of that demon.

"Because of you....."

And this made the emotions inside me boil more. While I was dealing with Fred, I forced myself to calm down, to think with my logic, and to ignore my emotions.

But there was no need to do that anymore.

"Because of dogs like you...."

My voice grew colder as I raised my dagger, fixing my gaze upon the wretched creature before me.

STAB STAB.

With each thrust of the blade, I channeled all the rage and sorrow that had festered within me. The world seemed to blur as I repeatedly drove the dagger into his lifeless form.

"BECAUSE OF FUCKING YOU!"

STAB STAB STAB STAB STAB STAB.

This savage act marked the end of my catharsis, leaving me with a haunting sense of emptiness. The anger the grief, all had dissipated, leaving behind a desolate vacuum.

I continued to stab the bastard, letting out everything; however, slowly, the feeling turned into nothingness.

And then, as abruptly as it had begun, I halted.

PAT PAT PAT PAT

The rain soaked through my clothes, chilling me to the bone.

"Haah....Haaah...."

My own ragged breathing filled the silence, no longer drowned out by the rhythmic stabs.

I lowered the dagger, its blade slick with rain and blood, and took a faltering step back.

My gaze once filled with fury, now carried a haunting vacancy as I stared down at the mangled body of those belonging to my nemesis.

The forest, the rain, and the body before me bore witness to the complicated emotions that had now given way to a profound sense of emptiness.

'This is not enough.'

In the midst of this surreal scene, I finally began to process the void that had replaced my earlier turmoil, a void that demanded acknowledgment and introspection.

'This is not the end.'

The rain continued to fall, unrelenting and indifferent, as I stood there, a complex mix of emotions replaced by an unsettling void, searching for meaning amidst the aftermath of my vengeance.

'I still have yet to finish.....No....I have yet to start properly....'

Looking at the body, I slowly lowered my hand and started searching for it, my hands roaming around.

The first thing I noticed was his bracelet; it was a bracelet that had a bigger space than normal bracelets.

Aside from that, he also had a small watch.

A watch that was slightly different than others.

'This is a tempered smartwatch, one that could be accessed by only those who contracted with demons.'

It was an item that was untraceable and was used by demons to contact their followers.

'However, I guess he is still at the starting phase.'

Opening up the watch, I started looking for its contents.

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[Messages(6)] [Calls(1)] [Mails(23)]

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At first, the opening style was the same, but on the side of the watch, a small needle was there.

'I guess he was too confident that he wouldn't be caught.'

As I slowly pushed the needle, this time, the interface had changed. The color got more and more darker as a bunch of tabs popped off.

It was the tab of villain society, mainly called the InfernalCovenant.

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[...]

[...]

[...]

[Missions]

[Currency]

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The first three tabs were inaccessible. However, I knew what they were for.

'Announcements, Bounties and Contacts:'

However, they would only appear after one passed a certain threshold of trust and got recruited under a senior villain and when they get enough currency.

Just like any other society, Villains also had a hierarchy, even though their goals were different.

After looking at the watch for a little longer, I saw the amount of money he had in his account.

'50k, huh? Certainly covers my losses.'

This was his money in his normal bank account as the hunter Fred Nilsen. However, he also had another currency as points.

'DeValer.'

Of course, when talking about a villain society, the first thing that would come into one's mind would be the idea of anti-government, which could be seen here. From the name alone, it is obvious.

Of course, the one that founded the society is a hateful villain itself, but whatever.

There was a lot to explore, but right now, I didn't have much time.

'I need to find the hidden stage before they clear the boss.'

Since Fred was dead, and I didn't have much else to do, the only thing that was left for me to do was simply leave this place and reach the place where the hidden stage was located.

'However, I shouldn't leave any evidence.'

At this point, my head was cooler than before, and I could finally think like any normal person was supposed to.

Rather, how I would be supposed to do.

I stored Fred's body and any other thing in my spatial storage and then left the place.

'The rain and the dungeon will already repair itself.'

There was not much time left for me to stay here and erase the traces of fighting, neither did I have any intention to. It is the characteristics of dungeons that any outside influence would be dispersed.

This is the reason why the environment in some dungeons is widely used to train people or work people inside, even erasing murders.

'It is convenient, at least.'

With that thought, I left and started running to where the hidden stage was located.

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Hidden Stage.

As the name suggests, this only appears in staged dungeons, and even then, it is a rare occurrence.

'Right now, most of them are not even known.'

There are quite a lot of dungeons with hidden stages, but none of them are discovered, and even the ones that are discovered are mostly hidden by the discoverers since they are impossible to identify with the technology of the current world.

This is how humans work. If you find something, rather than sharing it first, you should take a look at it and discern if it is something useful to you.

And this is a logical thing, which I am also doing right now.

As I reached the same scene I had seen in the game after walking for a little while, I stopped before the rock.

SCREECH

From time to time, I could hear the loud sounds of monsters screaming. It seemed because of Fred's skill, even the monsters in not close vicinity went berserk.

After reaching the rock, I looked at the thing belonging to me.

"Everything is ready."

After confirming that my preparations were complete, I closed my eyes and drew my mana from my trait.

My moon mana shone radiantly in my dark world with my eyes closed. The feeling of using mana is hard to explain. It feels like you have another organ you are moving, but at the same time, it is not.

It's truly a surreal feeling.

And the moment I drew my mana and started expelling it, suddenly, I felt something pressing on me.

A pressure descended upon me like it was sucking me in. Different from the gates I had used, this one felt like a black hole.

SWOOSH

Relaxing myself, I let the pressure drag me in, not resisting. And, soon, the same feeling of my insides turning out enveloped me.

THUD

Followed by a simple, almost anticlimactic thud, I arrived at my destination.

The sensation of falling was unmistakable, even though I had not physically moved an inch. I opened my eyes to a realm of utter enchantment, a place that defied the laws of time and space.

'The Chrono Grove.'

Those words would be emblazoned on the screen if I were playing the game now, a cryptic gateway to a future landscape that Ethan was destined to explore.

A place where common sense didn't exist and time, space, and rules of physics were tempered.

Thanks to the occurring mana phenomena everywhere around.

Before me stretched the Chrono Grove, a pocket dimension hidden within the Raining Forest dungeon extending to a realm that was inaccessible.

Time here flowed at a breathtaking rate, a staggering thirty times faster than in the outside world. I stood at the boundary between the ordinary forest and this surreal realm, feeling a tingling sensation in my skin as I acclimated to the distorted temporal flow.

The grove was an intricate tapestry of climates and landscapes, ever-changing in response to the altered time.

The sun hung high in the sky, casting a searing heat upon the land, only to be abruptly replaced by dark, ominous clouds and torrential rain.

It was a place of constant transformation, a training ground like no other. If one side was raining, it was bound to be replaced by the scorching sun, or freezing cold.

But what truly set the Chrono Grove apart was its mana density and the wavelength of mana here.



Here, mana was thicker and denser at the same time, resonance with more frequency and a lot more energy, challenging my every attempt to harness it.

As I closed my eyes once more, I tried to feel the mana psions around me, and even that proved to be a challenge.

'As expected, this place is the best to train.

A place that was surreal and incomprehensible.

A true mana phenomenon came from the depths of the beginning of time to the end of it.

"Hmm?"

However, at that precise moment, something extraordinary occurred. The Lunar Energy within me began to surge with unparalleled intensity, radiating like a pillar amidst the chaotic energies of this realm.

"What is this?" I murmured, my senses overwhelmed by the sudden influx of power. It was not the first time my trait [Lunar Enigma] was acting on its own, but this one was more intense.

Then, as if in response to my bewildered reaction, the Lunar mana that coursed through my veins began to manifest of its own accord.

It surged around my body like an ethereal shroud, shimmering with celestial radiance.

This was a phenomenon unlike any I had ever experienced: an uncontrolled display of Lunar Energy.

"Ah-!"

But as the mana surged and pulsed around me, a sharp, stabbing pain suddenly assaulted my senses.

My vision blurred, and I suddenly felt like the surrounding landscape was changing. Everything was vivid and dreamy, but I could feel my body and everything, as it was not a dream at the same time.

In this dreamlike state, I saw a scene of a young, skilled fighter engaged in fierce combat.

I couldn't quite make out his face, but his combat prowess was undeniable.

He wielded an array of ever-changing weapons—a bow, a strange ethereal rifle, a flamethrower, a crimson dagger, and more—all with astonishing agility.

'Ah, it is him.'

At that exact moment, I understood who it was. The person in my dreams as I acquired my art related to my trait in the library.

This mysterious warrior was battling a multitude of adversaries, switching weapons seamlessly as he dispatched each opponent.

His moves were more advanced this time, and I could feel and understand everything better.

It was as if the man before me was not moving to teach me but rather fighting for his life.

'Is this real? A scene of the past?'

I asked myself. The scene still reminded me of Chrono Grove, but at the same time, the small details were different.

The forest was burning, and the chaos surrounded everything.

As I watched this captivating spectacle, I tried to discern the warrior's identity, but he remained elusive, hidden in a shroud of mystery.

Despite this, the images of his battle were etched in my mind, leaving me in awe of his extraordinary abilities. Despite this, even though his face was shrouded in mystery, I could see one thing. His mana changed its color.

Just like me.

However, before I could even think anything more and analyze the scene, I was forcefully returned to reality as my vision also returned to normal.

'Just what was this?'

Only more and more questions remained.

Chapter 92 Chapter 22.2 - The Chrono Grove

Returning to the physical realm, I found myself standing on the boundary of the Chrono Grove, its surreal landscape stretching out before me.

The afterglow of the enigmatic vision lingered in my thoughts, but I knew that now was not the time for introspection. This place was a hidden stage of the dungeon, but at the same time, it contained a special environment.

In this world, dungeons are places that are mostly associated with monsters and destruction. Therefore, there is a certain view of them being thought of as a place that needs to be left immediately.

A place of danger and hazard alone.

But, this was not necessarily true.

Dungeons are essentially sub-spaces that each have their own environment. Therefore, they can also be described as <little worlds with different rules> in other words.

And not everything in the world is dangerous. There are things that are beneficial as well. It is one's own responsibility to discern what is beneficial to them and what is not.

Even though this space is limited, there is still a lot to explore in this place.

And most importantly, this place is the ideal space to train.

'After all, the time flows faster here.'

Thirty days of time here is equal to 1 day of the outside world, which means one simple thing.

'I have exactly thirty days to train myself fully here and get out.'

In the game, if you couldn't conquer the dungeon after thirty days inside or one day after the boss was slain outside, you would be forcefully teleported outside of the dungeon since the sustained mana core would have disappeared.

'But, I need that reward.'

And, since I was going to need that reward, I couldn't simply sit and train. I also need to conquer the dungeon here, and it is not an easy task.

'The boss monster here is an intermediate-third-rank monster.'

"For Ethan, this task is not that challenging. But, for me, it is."

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?Name: Astron Natusalune

?Occupation: Weapon Master (level 1)

?Talent Limit: 6

?Passives:

-? Vengeful Bane

?Attributes:

Variable Attributes:

-? Strength: 1.92

-? Dexterity: 2.32

-? Agility: 2.30

-? Constitution: 1.73

-? Intuition: 2.51

-? Magical Power: 2.7

-? Mana Capacity: 1.9

?Traits:

-? Perceptive Insight (Unique)(Unchanging)

-? Lunar Enigma (????) (Growth Type) (Stage 0)

-? Shadowborne (Legendary) (Growth Type)(Stage 1)

?Arts:

-? Lethal Arsenal Ascendancy (????)(%13)

?Skills:

-? Dash

-? Keen Eye

?Body Imprints:

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My stats are right now on the border of 2, which is not enough. For an intermediate third-rank monster, I need to have at least 3 in my stats to confront it directly without any problems, but I don't have such aside from one stat that is getting closer to it.

'Magic Power.'

However, right now, I am still unable to use my power to the maximum. And, because of that, necessary preparation and training should be done.

And this is my goal here.

With cautious steps, I began to wander through the Chrono Grove; my senses alert to the ever-shifting climates and landscapes.

SWOOSH-!

The bizarre changes in weather and terrain were as disorienting as they were fascinating, creating a sense of constant exploration in this confined space.

SWIRL-!

However, my movements were soon restricted by an invisible barrier of mana that enveloped the area.

It was an impenetrable wall, preventing me from venturing beyond its boundaries, just like in the first stage of the dungeon.

'Indeed, as expected, the barrier is still there.'

This was a mana barrier as well, but this one was not powered by the mana core of the dungeon but rather by a source outside of this place.

Therefore, it was impossible to break it from the inside, and I had no intention to do that as well.

'I would die the moment I stepped there.'

Since that place is filled with literal 'monsters.' Not only in terms of appearance but also in terms of strength.

In any case, since I am 'restricted' to this place, as well as 'protected,' I continued my walk.

As I continued to explore, I finally reached the place with relatively higher ground.

'Yes, this is the place.'

This stage was not that big, and thanks to my good memory, I remembered this spot easily since this was a good place to scout the small and chaotic landscape of the dungeon.

'Keen Eye.'

Activating my skill [Keen Eye], I started observing the place. And there, I caught sight of the Time Guardian, the enigmatic being that inhabited this realm.

It moved gracefully through the grove, its spectral form shifting in and out of focus as it manipulated time itself. I observed its movements from a safe distance using my [Keen Eye], not daring to provoke its attention.

After all, this was the boss monster of this stage, and fighting him right now was meaningless.

The distance was quite long, so the mana consumption of my skill was high, but that was worth it. I confirmed that the location of the boss was the same as normal, in the midst of space.

Alongside the Time Guardian, my gaze also encountered the Temporal Shifters and Eon Specters, the otherworldly inhabitants or 'monsters' of this surreal realm.

'High-rank-2 monsters. Temporal Shifters.'

The Temporal Shifters were monsters evolved by the mana of time.

They were good at time manipulation, capable of speeding up or slowing down their movements at will. Their forms appeared distorted and fragmented, making them challenging to target.

Even their mass would change with their attacks, making the momentum and impact increase.

'Relativity, huh? Developers certainly went crazy with this design.'

The Eon Specters, on the other hand, were spectral beings that phased in and out of existence, rendering them partially intangible.

They could move through solid objects and were known for their haunting, echoing cries.

'High-rank-2, Phantom Class monsters. Eon Specters.'

They are not known to the world now, but later, there will be an event where they will appear and haunt people, and at that time, they will make themselves known.

They are not that strong if you know their weakness and have the necessary equipment.

'Mana Bell.'

The bell that is in my Spatial Bracelet. When you ring the bell, it will momentarily disturb the mana around the environment. This will result in the Eon Specters having a physical form since Eon



Specters are beings who are putting their physical forms into a different dimension using spatial magic.

That was the reason why they couldn't be attacked when they wanted, and they could attack when they wanted.

Though, if you don't have the bell, dealing with them is quite tricky.

In any case, from my vantage point, I continued to observe the space and identify the monsters around, where they were located, and which patterns they were moving.

'This should be sufficient enough.'

After locating everything and gathering enough information about the place, I closed my eyes and started mapping everything in the 3D map I created in my head. Since the place wasn't that big, it didn't take too long for me to finish mapping.

'Good. Let's start the schedule now.'

With the layout of the Chrono Grove clear in my mind, I set to work on my camp.

I carefully selected a suitable location, taking into account both safety and strategic positioning.

The items I had purchased came in handy at this point.

The tent was made of high-quality material that even contained showers inside. The heating was also clearly impressive to the point where I was sure I would never get even when it snowed.

Once my camp was established, I began placing a series of traps and alarms designed to detect any approaching monsters.

This extra layer of security would provide me with an early warning system, ensuring that I could react swiftly to any potential threats.

With my defenses in place, I turned my attention to the primary reason I had ventured into the Chrono Grove—training my mana control and my body at the same time.

This unique environment, with its fluctuating mana density and the presence of the monsters when necessary, provided me with the perfect opportunity to hone my skills.

I started putting the necessary equipment down – simple clothing to sit on and a bunch of dummies when I would want to train—then continued with making the efficiency-increasing potions.

'After all, the second stage of tempering my body, mixed substance – Korion.'

A special type of elixir whose formula was inspired by a secretion from a monster of a special place. It was a monster that tempered its own body using the mana in the atmosphere, making itself a lot stronger.

And what could be a better place than here –a place filled with dense mana?

Since it was already half-ready, I only mixed it and gulped it.

Feeling the slight sensation of my pores widening, I closed my eyes and started trying to draw my mana from the start. However, that proved to be impossible right at the beginning.

In a sense, the mana I had been using came from my trait, but how exactly it happened?

This was the perfect place to investigate how my mana worked.

I was going to investigate and learn about every color of my mana and their characteristics here. I even brought the book 'Moonstruck Convergence: A Tale of Celestial Mana' with me to study its contents more.

Before, my time was limited, and there were countless things I needed to think about, but that wasn't the case here.

I had never questioned my trait before, and now I was just again using it mindlessly, but this time, it felt like trying to swim inside a swamp.

The density of mana was too high, and thanks to the unique nature of space, it was hard to even move the raw mana particles.

'But this is a lot more interesting.'

The harder doing something means, the better you can see the difference between each color of mana and their traits.

In the end, what I was left alone was my own talent and what Senior Maya had shown me at that time.

"Don't try only to feel mana; circulate it in your body. You need to find your own harmony with it."

Just like that, one by one recounting what she said and what I observed, I started my training.

## Chapter 93 Chapter 22.3 - The Chrono Grove

### First Week of the Training:

During the first week, I found myself grappling with the peculiarities of Chrono Grove's mana. The dense and fluctuating mana density made it challenging to control and harness.

My initial focus was on acclimatization and building the foundational elements of mana control into a much better stage, as well as increasing my understanding of [Lunar Enigma].

However, I often felt frustrated and overwhelmed as I grappled with the unfamiliar mana environment.

My progress was slow, marked by erratic bursts of energy followed by periods of depletion; the fact that the environment and the mana were constantly changing made it almost impossible for me to get used to it.

This made it incredibly more challenging since that meant I needed to start from scratch whenever the density of mana psions changed.

I reduced my sleep up to four hours alone, and the remaining 18 hours were filled with training. Since my mana was depleting when I used my trait, I needed to improve my physic as well.

It was frustrating, filled with failures. I couldn't even feel mana at first.

However, small improvements began to emerge. I noticed that my mana circuits became steadier and more coherent, a sign of my growing control over both the unique mana here and my own Lunar Mana.

Second Week of the Training:

In the second week, I shifted my attention to combat training.

I faced off against the Temporal Shifters and Eon Specters, using their unpredictable movements to refine my combat skills and adaptability.

Even though I knew both of the monster's weaknesses from the game, I didn't utilize any; I simply fought with my body and mana alone to improve my combat-related skills.

Initially, the creatures posed significant challenges, often catching me off guard with their erratic movements. Thanks to the time-related affinity of Temporal Shifters, I needed to be on guard, and my reflexes needed to be quick. But, I injured quite a lot of time while fighting them, though thanks to the potions I brought with me, I was fine.

However, with each encounter, I gained a better understanding of their patterns and mine as well. My reflexes sharpened, and I became adept at predicting their attacks.

While I was fighting in the dungeons and hunting monsters, I realized one thing.

I didn't know how every monster fought since the game couldn't possibly cover the countless possible life forms in the world. Therefore, my knowledge was bound to be limited.

And when I looked back, I realized whenever I fought, I utilized my knowledge quite a lot. So far, most of the time, the foes I had faced were in my knowledge, but what if, in the future, I would need to fight with something I didn't know about?

Leaning on my knowledge of the game was a double-edged sword, and it was necessary to nullify the part that would wound me.

Which is what I am doing by developing my combat sense and my body. Not relying on my knowledge, but rather finding my own ways to deal with the monsters, observing other weaknesses, their small patterns, every minor detail.

This newfound confidence marked a significant milestone in my training.

Third Week of the Training:

The third week was dedicated to meditation and introspection.

I aimed to deepen my understanding of the connections between Chrono Grove and the environment. How this phenomenon occurred, and what is the principle behind it?

Even though it may look advanced and odd while I was observing the nature and rules of this place, I felt like I was able to understand the principles in a much better way.

[Perceptive Insight]

The trait that is not directly usable in combat, but at the same time, the trait that is what makes me who I am along with [Lunar Enigma]. Thanks to [Perceptive Insight], my understanding of the place increased, and I reached a conclusion.

<Relativity and Four-Dimensional Theory>

Four-dimensional theory was a theory that was represented by the physicists on Earth, a theory saying Time and Space are related and can't be severed, and relativity is a term that the rules of physics can change according to [Frame] one belongs.

In this space, thanks to time-psions surrounding the space, the constants of each equation representing the relations are changing.

I took notes of my observations and what I have understood from this space; I might need it in the future, and I might even sell this to the mages.

Also, I focused on my Lunar Energy and the enigmatic warrior from my vision. Even though I had been training my art the whole time, thanks to the help of Senior Maya and my own efforts, my understanding of my mana increased, which made me understand better how the figure moved.

It was as if before, it felt like watching a college professor teaching while still being at the level of middle school; now, I am at the level of a high-school student.

At the very least, I can pick up some concepts.

During meditation, I also experienced moments of déjà vu, leaving me with a lingering sense of connection to the Chrono Grove and the warrior. I also discovered quite a lot of symbols that I had no knowledge of.

Those cryptic symbols I discovered while exploring added to my sense of intrigue.

These moments were brief but profound, suggesting that there was more to uncover.

Final Week of the Training:

In the final week of my month, I refined his combat skills further, with an emphasis on precision and efficiency.

I also continued my exploration.

To be honest, filling my whole day with training was a lot more tiring than one would think. My body and my mind would sometimes crumble; after all, tempering my body was something painful and uncomfortable, and I was cycling it with my mana control training and my aim.

Therefore, it actually made me need to relax my mind, and I did this by wandering around using my shadows and masking my presence.

I discovered a lot of different symbols, each having a different type of inscription. It felt ancient and ethereal. Considering how this space looked, it made sense as well.

My battles against the creatures became more controlled and strategic. I no longer relied solely on prediction and my knowledge but incorporated calculated maneuvers into my combat style.

My accuracy and timing improved significantly, and I could anticipate and counter the creatures' attacks with greater confidence. It was mostly thanks to the changing rules of the space.

We humans are adapting creatures. Whenever a change occurs, we would adapt to it and make the new situation our home.

However, this everchanging place, with its rules constantly changing in quantum space, made this specific property of ours challenged.

And once something is challenged, it is bound to improve.

The gravity, the acceleration constant, the air friction, the mass of each material, the volume, density, etc....

Every physical property here is changing. Therefore, I needed to make myself better every time.

My connection to the Lunar Energy deepened, creating a sense of resonance with the grove's temporal energies.

Throughout this training, I experienced a rollercoaster of emotions, from frustration and confusion in the early days to feelings of improvement and curiosity as I made progress.

And just like that, the 28 days of my stay in this place reached its end.

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"Haaah...How hot this is...."

In front of the dummies, I put the place I created under the scorching sun; I was breathing heavily while looking at the sweat I was pouring from my body.

Just yesterday, it was snowing, and now it feels like I am inside a desert.

"Certainly, a crazy place."

My breaths came out in heavy pants as I surveyed the results of my month-long training.

The dummies before me bore the brunt of my efforts, their special wooden frames marred with countless marks and mana traces from my precise strikes and mana-infused attacks.

'Status.'

I spoke in my mind, calling the status window I hadn't even opened once in this whole month. I wanted to wait and see my collective progress of whole month.

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?Name: Astron Natusalune

?Occupation: Weapon Master (level 1)

?Talent Limit: 6

?Passives:

-? Vengeful Bane

?Attributes:

Variable Attributes:



-? Strength: 1.92 --> 2.33

-? Dexterity: 2.32 --> 2.79

-? Agility: 2.30 --> 2.73

-? Constitution: 1.73 --> 2.09

-? Intuition: 2.51 --> 2.91

-? Magical Power: 2.7 --> 3.02

-? Mana Capacity: 1.9 --> 2.3

?Traits:

-? Perceptive Insight (Unique)(Unchanging)

-? Lunar Enigma (????) (Growth Type) (Stage 0)

-? Shadowborne (Legendary) (Growth Type)(Stage 1)

?Arts:

-? Lethal Arsenal Ascendancy (????)(%19)

?Skills:

-? Dash

-? Keen Eye

?Body Imprints:

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"Hmm....Certainly not bad."

Looking at my stats before me, I released a sound of acceptance.

Certainly, dedicating my whole month to training myself paid off—not more than I expected, but it was still good.

Finally, one of my stats reached the parameter of 3, and it was my magic power.

In fact, in the last month, the most improvement I acquired was in my [Lunar Enigma] and my archery.

I grabbed my arrow from my bracelet and knocked an arrow into the string.

"Huff...."

Releasing a small breath, I focused on my eyes and my mana on the arrow.

The blue-golden-colored mana covered the arrow, and I felt my mana sucked in.

SWOOSH

The moment I released the string, the arrow flew towards the dummy.

BOOM

And the moment the arrow met with the dummy, it exploded, destroying the weakly attached dummy and making it fall to the ground.

"Indeed, the firepower of blue-colored mana is strong."

In fact, this was the characteristic of the blue-colored mana I observed. Incredibly high firepower. An area of effect attack that spreads when it hits a target.

However, there was also a disadvantage: its range is short.

The moment I imbue my arrows with this attribute, the arrows would become unstable, making it very hard to control their trajectory unless it's at close range.

I also tried to imbue bullets with blue color, but since the bullets are small, it is very hard to compress the energy into such.

At the very least, the medium needs to be slightly big, like an arrow.

Just like this color, I experimented with all of them and got their own characteristics.

I became almost incredibly proficient at handling my mana and imbuing it on my arrows and bullets, if possible, and made a sketch of each one's characteristics.

Green – Lets me lock to a target I attacked with this mana marking them. This color is most consistent on the long-range, and it mostly doesn't affect the trajectory of the attacks. This is the mana that I am using with my bow most of the time since it is a fairly consistent and non-risky color.

Blue/Gold – Mana contains a lot of destructive energy, making it very hard for it to use in a long range. However, the firepower is very high. Basically a high-risk firepower type of mana.

Red – This mana is mostly suited for my daggers and my close combat style. Whenever I imbue my dagger and my body with this color, I can feel my power increasing proportionally to the amount of injury I have.

It also lets me sustain my wounds the more I attack, basically a life-stealing mana.

White – I am still experimenting with this type of mana, but from what I figured, whenever I imbue this color, my precision of attacks and my attack speed increase the closer I am to the target.

If I am away from the target, this mana is practically useless, but if I am close to it, it becomes deadly.

However, I have yet to find a suitable weapon for this mana since none of my weapons are suitable for it.

Purple/Black – This color is the latest color I discovered, and it also has a weird characteristic. This one doesn't provide a damage-related effect but rather provides a utility effect.

Crowd Control.

Whenever I attack someone using this mana, I can manipulate this mana to increase the gravity that person feels, making them slower and even making them stop for a second. However, the mana consumption is fairly high, and it is even harder to control the output.

This is the basic template of my mana, and it is fairly complex; even now, I am sure I have yet to explore the whole extent of things.

This is not even the first stage of my trait.

In any case, aside from this, I also used [Shadowborne] quite a lot. Since my focus was on [Lunar Enigma], it didn't improve much.

And now, my stay is about to reach its end.

"Let's start preparing to face the boss; the month is about to finish."

With those words, I started getting ready to leave this place....

Chapter 94 Chapter 23.1 - Time Guardian

"I am ready now."

Looking at the small peak I had spent my whole month on, I mumbled.

I had already finished preparing for the raid of the boss and removing the camp.

"Time Guardian, huh? Certainly a tricky opponent."

A monster of a low rank-3 strength, physically. But, strange enough, its real strength didn't lie on his body but its time-related affinity. After all, even though most of the time, boss monsters' strength was determined by their mana wavelength and body, there were some special ones that were ranked higher thanks to their unique characteristics.

Time Guardian was one of them. If ranked according to the orthodox methods, it would be a low rank-three monster, but because of its uniqueness, it was ranked as low rank-4.

'Then, again. If you are prepared enough, nothing can stand in your way.'

Looking at the small pebbles that I had gathered while walking around and the arrowheads I made from those pebbles, I started checking everything one last time.

I double-checked my gear, making sure everything was set. The artifacts, potions, and supplies were all vital for what lay ahead. I thought about how far I'd come since I first arrived here. It felt like a different time.

My body was also all rested, and I had even taken a shower to feel refreshed. Everything was set in stone, and the only thing was left to confront the boss.

Stepping out into the grove, I blended in shadows, activating [Shadowborne].

Today was a cloudy and rainy day, even though just yesterday it was scorching hot. And according to my observations, it would stay like that for one more day.

With cautious steps, I moved deeper into the grove, alert to everything around me. The tension was high, knowing the final trial was approaching.

'There shouldn't be many monsters left.'

While training for the whole last month, my only object was not only to improve myself but also to trim the monsters in this place one by one.

I dragged the exploration, and since I am very good at stealth and range attacks, it was not that hard for me to trim their numbers, even when I was alone.

Therefore, I was sure that no monsters would stand in my way while I would be confronting the Time Guardian.

RUSTLE

As I ventured deeper, the shadows seemed to cling to me, providing a sense of concealment that was comforting.

And, just as I expected, eventually, I arrived at the heart of the Groove, where the boss monster awaited without encountering any other monsters inside the place.

FLINCH

The eerie presence of the boss sent shivers down my spine. Its flickering form made it hard to pin down a target, emphasizing its nature of time manipulation.

"Let's get this done."

TAP TAP TAP TAP

The rain continued to fall, setting a somber mood, fitting for the showdown ahead.

I carefully stepped forward, ready to confront the Time Guardian.

My senses heightened, every muscle prepared for the inevitable battle that would decide my fate within the Chrono Grove.

'The first stage should be relatively easy.'

I thought to myself, readying my bow as I looked at the boss monster before me.

The Time Guardian stood before me, a creature that defied conventional expectations.

Its form flickered and shifted, the spiritually-looking visage showcasing its affinity with the manipulation of time.

The boss resembled an ancient and mystical entity, its outlines blurred and the edges seeming to dissipate into the surrounding air. It was hard to pin down a specific shape as if it was in a perpetual state of transition.

In fact, it was later revealed that the Time Guardian was the ancestor of the [Eon Specters] and [Temporal Shifters]; both of them are the monsters habiting this place.

And because of that fact, the Time Guardian had the characteristics of both of them.

The creature's colors were a spectrum of blues of Eon Specters and silvers of Temporal Shifters, mirroring the shifting nature of time itself.

The hues swirled and mixed, resembling a whirlpool that drew the eye into its depths.

The Time Guardian emanated a subtle glow as the small sunlight passed through the clouds and refracted through a crystal, setting the atmosphere.

"Certainly, an incredible scene."

I muttered to myself, admiring its form while preparing for the impending clash. However, everything would meet its end in one way or another.

'Keen Eye.'

Activating my skill, I felt the mana moving into my eyes as my vision tunneled into the boss before me.

Even though the skill was supposed to show the weakness of the boss, since it was a low-rank skill, it wasn't doing its job properly. Even then, my eyes wandered around the boss, my trait [Perceptive Insight] doing its work.

I observed the monster and combined the information from the game with my observations.

I was still in the shadows, hiding from the boss, and the boss monster didn't make any move.

"Hooo...."

With a deep breath, I pulled an arrow from my quiver and nocked it onto my bowstring, eyes never leaving the flickering form of the Time Guardian.

'The pattern is like this.'

My heartbeat calmed down as the moment of confrontation approached. I was a hunter, not a warrior, and a hunter would never lose his cool.

I aimed carefully, judging the distorted figure of the boss, and released the arrow.

SWISH

It soared through the air, finding its mark as it collided with the Time Guardian's form.

However, instead of a satisfying thud, the arrow seemed to slow down, the boss's manipulation of time altering its trajectory.

The arrow lost speed, allowing the Time Guardian to shift its form just enough to let the arrow harmlessly pass through.

"This won't be easy,"



I muttered to myself, quickly moving to my next arrow, preparing to fire again.

'The time manipulation itself is changing the acceleration and its vectorial position.'

I adjusted my aim, predicting the time manipulation aspect of the boss's abilities. I needed to anticipate where it would be, not where it was.

The boss monster had yet to even awaken from its slumber; even its natural form was hard to attack.

Applying my green-colored mana to the arrow, I supplied the arrow with the mana. Since Green colored mana was the most stable one, it was my best bet.

SWISH THUD

Releasing the arrow, it hurtled towards the Time Guardian, and this time, I saw a slight waver in its form, a successful hit.

With my eyes, I could see the green tendrils forming in front of me, connecting my vision to the boss.

ROAR

But before I could celebrate, the boss retaliated, a ripple of distorted time lashing out in my direction. The speed of the attack was high, as it instantly accelerated right before my eyes.

'Dash.'

SWOOSH

I activated my skill, and I swiftly dodged, feeling the disturbance in the air as the ripple missed me by inches.

The Time Guardian's powers were formidable, and I couldn't afford to underestimate them. It was a battle of precision and timing.

However, the first arrow was the most important one. While I was training with [Temporal Shifters], I was trying to find ways to counter its form change, and I found one.

My green-colored mana countered the monster, marking its 'real' part that hadn't disconnected from this dimension.

Thanks to that, from the moment my first arrow landed, the following was going to be easy.

SWISH SWISH

I continued to fire arrows, each shot a careful calculation of the boss's probable position and its time-altering abilities.

My eyes constantly wandered around the space, observing every bit of little ripples in the environment.

It was a habit I had acquired while spending my time in this ever-changing space, and I learned one thing.

'Never make sure of something; always be ready for something to change.'

At this point, the shadows were practically useless, and I was expecting that. The boss monsters have a higher sensitivity to mana; thus, from the moment I started attacking using my mana, it was going to locate me easily.

Therefore, rather than moving in between shadows, I moved alongside the groove with my skill [Dash] active, constantly changing my location.

TAP TAP TAP

The sound of rain and my steps amongst the mud echoed in my ears,

The battle had just begun, and this was only the initial dance, a dance of ranged attacks and evasive maneuvers.

ROAR!

With a loud shout, the Time Guardian started throwing a bunch of rocks to me. However, if one thing was different, then it was the speed of the rocks.

SWOOSH SWOOSH, BOOM! BOOM!

Thanks to its ability to manipulate time, in fact, the Time Guardian has the ability to narrow the interval of time where the rock would reach a certain speed. And, thanks to that, the rock would have a higher acceleration, resulting in a narrower interval for me to dodge.

'Dash.'

However, my skill [Dash] came in handy as my body moved around the place, dodging the rocks thrown at me.

THUD CRACK

"Arghk....."

Even then,? it was impossible to dodge every attack. A rock hit me from my leg, and a groan left my mouth, my body shaking in pain as I staggered.

'My bone is broken.'

I immediately assessed the wound.

CRUNCH

And, without wasting any second, I instantly crunched the pill I hid in my mouth for the sake of such situations.

HEAL

Feeling the potion entering my mouth, I forced myself to move, as I could feel another bunch of arrows coming my way.

Just like I was adapting myself, Time Guardian was also adapting itself to my attacks, and thanks to its unique eye, he could see my movements clearly.

Then, again, this was within my expectations.

'It should be happening soon.'

Just at that moment, as the Time Guardian seemed to be growing accustomed to my strategy, the environment threw in a new variable.

'There it is.'

Gravity, already erratic in this place, seemed to shift suddenly, altering the trajectory of both the raindrops and my arrows, as well as the rocks thrown at me.

As the raindrops defied gravity, falling sideways or upwards, I took a moment to observe and adapt. I had been studying this place and preparing for the raid, and now I was getting the results of it.

I adjusted my aim, taking advantage of the odd gravity to fire my arrows at unconventional angles.

In my head, I simply imagined the trajectory of the arrows according to my observations and modeled the fight.

SWISH

The arrows curved and twisted, following the bizarre paths set by the distorted gravity.

And because of that, the Time Guardian struggled to anticipate and evade these unpredictable shots.

'This is why you are a mindless beast.'

SWISH SWISH

My arrows found their marks, and the Time Guardian roared in pain, its form destabilizing. Each hit weakened the creature, green-colored liquid dripping from the wounds.

However, just like every other type of monster, this one also had its own trump card.

ROAR

In frustration, the Time Guardian released a huge roar, its effects sending ripples through the space.

SWOOSH

I was thrown out as an aftereffect, as I felt my body getting pushed, as well as a weird-looking barrier covering the place where the time guardian was.

'The second stage starts.'

Chapter 95 Chapter 23.2 - Time Guardian

When the word 'boss' is mentioned, if you are a gamer who was immersed in the world of games, the first thing that would appear in your mind would be the long huge HP bar that fills a part of the screen.

However, if you are a person who sought the path of 'git-gud,' then you would know every boss monster has the potential to be reborn or enter a new phase.

Either their HP bar would be filled, or their attacks would take a new form. And, the way they do it would mostly be a cutscene.

We, as a player, would see a cutscene where the boss monster would either power up, scream, roar, or speak some words.

This was the same with the Time Guardian.

Considering the game Legacy of Shadows: The Hunter's Destiny was inspired by the souls-like games, it was no wonder that was the case.

The second phase would start with a loud roar, where the monster would release a scream filled with time attribute mana.

However, this roar had a special attribute, as with that huge roar, a zone would be formed by the Boss, trapping the player and empowering itself.

But that was not the only thing that zone did.

The borders of the zone had a small property.

The attacks coming out of that zone would be nullified since the time and space mana would disturb the attack and render the kinetic energy to zero.

How does it do that, some of you may ask?

The idea is simple and could only be explained thanks to the term 'mana.'

Basically, what it does is increase the amount of time the projectile takes to travel from outside of the zone to inside.

The distance between the outside of the zone and the inside of the zone may look thin, but the time it takes for an arrow or any other projectile to travel that distance is widened thanks to the effects of time mana inside.

This is what makes it impossible to attack the monster from outside of the barrier since the projectiles would lose their kinetic energy, which means losing their strength to attack.

This is the way the boss monster would force the range players to approach the monster, and that was the reason why I was saying if I were Ethan, I would be able to beat it without batting an eye.

Since, for close-range combatants, it isn't much.

However, no matter what it is, those who played the soul-like games would know every boss monster would at least have a way to get cheesed.

The developers of Legacy of Shadows: The Hunter's Destiny liked putting easter eggs and small details into their games.

And they did it for this part as well.

'Time-immune stones.'

While I was playing the game, I wondered, in this place where time mana is frequent and dense, how come the trees and the environment are not directly affected, like the climate?

The corrosion rate should have been high as the chaos ensued in this place, but the rocks, earth, and dirt weren't directly affected by it, different from the equipment I had used here.

The cups and plates I used to eat were all eroded over the course of one month, which should have taken at least two years, and that was also the case in the game.

This showed the time mana was affecting the materials, but how come it wasn't affecting me, monsters, or this place itself directly?

The answer was simple.

This place was constructed with materials that are immune to the time mana. Because of this fact, I came up with the idea of using the stones in this place to craft stone-headed arrows and use them against the Time Guardian.

And, now, here we were.

'Keen Eye.'

My eyes, filled with mana, were observing the monster inside with wounds around its body.

"You think you are safe now?"

The monster was also looking at me from inside the barrier as if saying that I wouldn't be able to attack him from a distance no more.

"Let's see how long you can keep that up."

Knocking the arrow, I started measuring the distance.

'The distance from here to Boss Monster is around 100 meters.'

And then, I referred to my results while I was firing my arrows.

'This arrow will fly around the speed of 100 km/h, which means it will travel 27 meters in one second. It will cover a distance of around 3.7 seconds. This should be sufficient enough.'

The average speed of my arrows was around 150 km/h. However, the arrow I was going to use is not the perfect arrow designed for aerodynamics but something I crafted on my own.

And, because the arrow was not the perfect arrow, it was going to be very hard for the arrow to damage the boss.

Normally.

Pulling the string, I relaxed my breath and focused on my senses, my eyes locked on the monster.

My mana moved like tendrils entering the small segment of the arrow on its body. That part was where a surprise was waiting for the monster.

'This amount of mana is perfect.'



SWISH

With that thought, I released the arrow, watching it pierce through the barrier, defying the time-altering properties.

'And then....'

'Bam.'

BOOM!

The moment the arrow connected with the Time Guardian, it triggered a concealed explosive mechanism within the arrowhead, a property I had embedded using my mana.

The explosion rippled through the boss, causing severe damage and leaving a visible mark of victory.

I knew the head made from a stone wouldn't pierce its skin, and it wasn't even my intention. I bought several bodies of explosive arrows without heads for this purpose alone.

The moment the arrow appeared in front of the monster, it exploded since the mana supplying the mechanism was depleted, making the trigger activated.

Since the monster wasn't expecting an attack to come from outside, it was in a state with its guard lowered, and this was going to cost him his life.

And just as I intended, the explosion erupted within the Time Guardian, leaving it reeling from the unexpected assault.

SWISH SWISH SWISH

The force of the blast threw the monster off balance, and I seized this opportunity to fire more arrows, each finding its mark and causing further damage.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

The unique arrowheads I had crafted were not only explosive but also infused with a poison that was going to bleed the boss from the inside.

It was not a high-quality poison, but it was something that would work, and that was all I needed. After all, the boss monster can't go anywhere, and I have enough time.

ROAR!

The boss let out a resounding roar of agony, struggling to regain control and retaliate.

My continuous onslaught didn't give it a moment's respite. The poison was working its way through the monster's body, sapping its strength and causing its movements to slow down.

SWISH SWISH SWISH

As the boss weakened, I pushed forward, moving closer to the barrier the Time Guardian had set up.

The zone was a double-edged sword, protecting the monster but also restricting its movement. In this world, nothing came without a price, and utilizing the zone meant he was compressing his powers inside the barrier.

Even though the Time Guardian changed the trajectory of the arrows from time to time, even then, the explosions were still close enough to it.

It was desperate, confined to a smaller space, unable to fully utilize its time manipulation powers.

ROAR!

He tried to protect his body by changing dimensions, but by doing so, he used a lot more mana.

Also the poison was building up its effects one by one, making the monster more desperate to attack me.

SWISH

'This is the last one.'

Of course, my supply of arrows was also limited, and at some point, it was bound to reach its end.

But that didn't mean I didn't have any other weapon.

I did two more and a bunch of supporting.

GULP

Grabbing a potion from my inventory, I gulped it immediately and felt the strength returning to my body.

GULP

Gulping another one, I felt my mana refilled.

CRUNCH

And gulping the last pill, I felt my heart throbbing. The strength coursed through my body as I felt pumped up.

SWOOSH

With confidence surging through me, I took a deep breath, activating my skill [Dash], and sprinted towards the monster.

TAP! TAP! TAP!

My feet splashed through the muddy ground as I closed the distance, my eyes fixed on the weakened boss.

Sweat mixed with rain dripped down my forehead, my heartbeat drumming loudly in my ears. Adrenaline coursed through my veins as I prepared for the final stage of the battle.

ROAR!

The Time Guardian roared loudly as it also rushed at me, with its form turning blank and phantom from time to time.

It unleashed a desperate attack, but my reflexes were honed, and I dodged the attack by a hair's breadth thanks to the pill I had taken.

I leaped into the air, high above the boss, and with all my might, my gun was pointing at the monster from above.

At that moment, time seemed to slow down as I could see the boss monster form slowly turning transparent, just like the [Temporal Shifters].

'I won't let you.'

I immediately reached for the bell on my belt. My movements felt slowed, probably thanks to the monster, but it was not enough.

RING!

As I rang the bell, I could feel the mana around us getting disturbed as the transparent form of the monster returned to normal.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

As I pulled the trigger rapidly three times in one second, three bullets left the gun.

THUD! THUD! THUD!

And that was what marked my leap in the air, as my mana-imbued bullets pierced right through his head.

SPURT

Blood spurted from its head as the monster's skull was cracked open.

ROAR!

However, the monster was yet to die, as a heaven-defying roar echoed around the surroundings.

-CRASH!

I was blasted off by the roar as I crashed the rock before me.

"Kurgh-!"

Blood poured from my body as I felt my bones and rib cage were broken.

"Grr....."

However, I needed to press through right now. I knew the monster wouldn't die from bullets alone.

Pulling my daggers from my belt, I imbued my crimson-colored mana into them.

My vision turned crimson as I felt like I was slowly losing my sanity.

My eyes locked on the monster before me.

SWOOSH

I dashed to the monster, in my eyes, the same figure of my dreams playing.

Onslaught of the Crimson Moon.

It was time to end this fight.

Chapter 96 Chapter 23.3 - Time Guardian

Onslaught of the Crimson Moon.

As I recited the movements of that figure, I remembered the sensations of that time while I was training against PhantomGlide Dummy.

ROAR!

The beast released another painful roar as my bullets had just pierced its eyes, the organ that it was using and was mostly reliant on.

Its body was filled with poison, and wounds were now taking a toll on it. The pain it was feeling seemed to be unbearable, and I was going to use that fact to my own advantage.

My mana surged forward as I felt like the patterns of attack I needed to do replayed before my eyes.

Where I needed to attack, where I needed to move, where I needed to slash.

The boss became a simple object for me to perform surgery on, and I was the surgeon now.

SWOOSH!

With a primal and unrelenting fury, I assaulted the Time Guardian, my crimson mana-infused daggers slashing through the air with relentless precision.

The taste of bloodlust coursed through me, fueling each strike; my sanity slipped in with each attack.

My attacks were ferocious and murderous, targeting the boss monster's every vulnerable point.

SLASH!

My daggers danced in a blur of motion, creating a lethal storm of strikes.

SLASH!

The monster attempted to defend itself, but the frenzied onslaught of mine left little room for its time manipulation tricks to be effective.

SLASH!

A feeling that I got while sparring against the PhantomGlide Dummy drove me forward, carving through the monster's form with unstoppable feelings—Anger and Bloodlust.

Slash after slash, the monster weakened.

Its once mountain-like build started to crumble under my onslaught.

SPURT!

Blood splattered and mixed with the rain, painting a gruesome tableau of battle.

ROAR!

The roars of the Time Guardian filled the air, even though no word left my mouth. The monster was now my target, and I felt like I couldn't stop until it was dead.

'This is the end.'

As I could feel my mana tendrils and the mana prints I had left while slashing around the boss were complete, I could finally finish this fight.

There were several wounds I got while ignoring its attacks, but even then, I wasn't feeling any pain at all.

There was only one thought in my head, and that was to kill the beast before me.

SWISH!

With a smooth move, I rushed backward, increasing the distance.

CLENCH!

And clenched my hand.

Cage of the Crimson Moon.

With my gesture, the tendrils of crimson mana imprints I had on the monster slowly closed down.

-ROAR!

Like a beast inside the cage, the monster roared, feeling one of the most primal feelings any living being feels.

The fear of death.

For it, death was approaching, and the monster could feel it.

SPURT!



As the threads closed down, they started piercing the monster from all around its body. I clenched my hand harder as I supplied more and more mana into tendrils.

CLENCH!

And with one last clench of my hand, I pushed the last remaining mana I had into the tendrils.

TAP TAP

The boss monster shuddered, its form destabilizing. The rain seemed to weep for it, mixing with its final cries.

"ROAAAAAAAR!"

SPURT! SPLASH!

The monster let out a desperate roar, a last defiant breath, and then it shattered into fragments of flesh as the threads finally closed down.

The battle was won, as the keeper of this place had reached its demise.

DRIP

In the aftermath of the battle, I stood amidst the rain-soaked battlefield, my daggers still dripping with the monster's ichor.

PAT! PAT! PAT!

The rain continued its relentless fall, washing away the remnants of the fight.

The silence that followed was deafening, a stark contrast to the ferocious battle cries that had echoed moments before.

"Haaaaaah... Haaah...."

As the adrenaline slowly eased, I could feel my sanity slowly returning, with the clear aftereffects of the fight.

The red haze that had clouded my mind during the battle began to dissipate, leaving me feeling a mix of exhaustion and a strange sense of clarity. My body, which was once again pushed to its limits by simply being forced to eat all those potions, was now returned to its normal state.

"Grit....."

The pain from the wounds I got while fighting the time guardian slowly crept up as I gritted my teeth.

And then, suddenly, a gentle light washed over me, emanating from the shattered remains of the Time Guardian.

It was a soothing glow, warm and comforting. The light seemed to seep into my very being, infusing me with a sense of accomplishment and triumph.

I felt a surge of energy, and a new sensation blossomed within me—a skill awakening in response to my victory.

'It is finally here.'

It was the main reason why I went to this extent, entering this place and fighting with monsters way stronger than me.

[Timegaze]

A rush of emotions and memories surged through my mind as the knowledge of this newfound skill unfolded before me; just like the times of the past, the way to use this skill was imprinted on my mind.

The contents of the skill seemed like they were the same as it was in the game.

However, as the memory of the skill came into my head one by one, I could feel its contents changing from the game, as there were some things that were different.

It was a skill that allowed the player to perceive and interact with the time-altering energies, practically making the time flow slower. It would enable players to simply dodge the attacks better while giving them a little more time to make decisions.

However, it was now different. From my memory alone, I could now gaze into the flow of time, granting me insights and advantages in combat and exploration.

And the reason for that was simple.

"The skill [Timegaze] must have been merged with [Keen Eye]."

In the game, there was a mechanic that enabled players to merge similar types of skills to create a stronger and higher-ranked skill. It was mostly because it would be hard to assign special keys to each skill and use them unless such a thing existed.

As the realization of what I had achieved in this grueling trial began to sink in, the name also came to my mind.

[Eyes of Hourglass]

The name of the skill was as such. Though this skill was not in the game, the name was evident.

'Status.'

I called the status in my head, and immediately I could see the panel before me.

There, the skill [Eyes of Hourglass] was registered in the section of <Skills>, replacing the [Keen Eye].

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Skill: Eyes of Hourglass

Rarity: Rare

Description: A rare-grade skill that provides the user with an extraordinary perception of time and their environment. By infusing mana, the user can manipulate their time perception, making events appear to unfold at a slower pace relative to their actions and thoughts.

Output: Depending on the mana supplied for the skill

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As the tab appeared before me, I could see the effects of the skill, and just as I had expected, the rarity had increased.

The rarity of the skill meant its grade. Just like materials, the higher the grade a skill was and the stronger it was, the rarer it would get.

This logic applied to the skills as well.

"It was worth all the effort."

To explain the skills briefly, the [Eyes of Hourglass] skill is a rare-grade ability that offers the user an unparalleled perception of time and their surroundings, as well as an increased range of sight.

When mana is channeled into this skill, it enables the individual to effectively control their perception of time, making it seem as if events are happening at a significantly slower pace compared to their own actions and thoughts while also, according to their wishes, the user can also increase the range of their sights.

This temporal manipulation becomes more pronounced with increased mana input. This part comes from the skill [Timegaze].

On the other hand, in essence, the user also gains the ability to stretch fleeting moments, giving them a heightened awareness of their environment and the events taking place within it while also increasing the range of the environment they could observe. This comes from the skill [Keen Eye].

This enhanced perception of time facilitates precise decision-making and allows the user to react swiftly and with great accuracy.

'A tailor-tailed skill for a ranger like me.'

People who played the shooter games would know the term 'Bullet Time.' From the start of the Wild West stories, the idea of bullet time was something every player had at least dreamed of once.

'Now, I have such a skill in my arsenal.'

Now that I have such a skill, this increased my overall combat capability quite a lot. No matter how fast a person could think, the process of sending the signals to your body and getting recognition from it would still be delayed, thanks to the small stamps of time.

But, with this skill, I could now fire a lot of bullets rapidly.

With that, as the exhilaration of victory settled within me, I realized my body bore the marks of battle.

The adrenaline finally ceased to exist, giving way to aching muscles and fatigue. It was time to tend to my wounds and recover.

I reached for my spatial bracelet, where I held a collection of healing potions.

GULP!

Swiftly, I uncorked a few vials and downed the contents, feeling the soothing effects spread through my body. The potions worked their magic, mending my wounds and rejuvenating my energy.

With a sigh of relief, I began to make my way out of the battlefield, intending to find a safe spot to rest and recuperate. But just as I took a few steps, I felt a strange sensation, as if the ground beneath me was shifting.

WOOSH! WROOM!

Before I could react, the ground seemed to give way, and I was pulled into a swirling vortex. It was a sensation akin to being sucked into a whirlpool, disorienting and unsettling.

Everything around me blurred and twisted, the rain and the grove fading away. In the midst of this disorienting whirl, I could only brace myself for what was to come.

The sensation of movement was surreal, like being caught in a maelstrom. My surroundings shifted and twisted, colors blending into a kaleidoscope of nausea. Even then, it was a feeling I was familiar with.

And following that, just as abruptly as it began, the movement ceased.

THUD

I stumbled forward, disoriented and slightly off balance, trying to regain my balance.

I found myself standing in an unfamiliar place, the Chrono Grove and the Time Guardian seemingly left far behind. The surroundings were alien, a stark contrast to the eerie familiarity of the dungeon.

Before me lay an open plain, bathed in the soft light of a setting sun. It was a tranquil and serene landscape, a far cry from the trials I had just faced.

The realization hit me— I had been transported out of the dungeon, out of the Chrono Grove, no, out of the [Rain Forest].

"For me, it had been 30 days, but right here, just a day must have passed."

I mumbled as I looked at the landscape before me.

Though before I could speak any further, suddenly, I heard a voice.

"Someone just got out....."

Chapter 97 Chapter 24.1 - Afterwards

While Astron was far away doing his own thing, the life inside the dungeon wasn't that easy for the rest of the party.

The party was able to overcome the Putrid Embertree Spirit and the Sylvans, but they almost lost their lives in the process.

It was thanks to the fact that Fred wasn't healing that but rather disturbing their conditions and setting debuffs to the party.

Because of all those small acts, the raid, which was supposed to go smoothly, didn't go as expected.

SWOOSH SPURT

"This is the last one."

As with the one last slash, the monster's head fell to the ground; the party was finally able to take a breather.

"Haaaaah.....You all fought well....." The captain of the party, Anya, spoke between heavy breaths. Her clothes and armor were ragged, wounds were all around her body, as well as some pieces of her skin turned slightly dark.

"Captain, are you okay?" Coming near to her, Hari asked, looking at her captain and the one she fought alongside. In this fight, the one who took the most damage and endured the most pain was undoubtedly Anya, as even with her shield down, she put her body first.

"I am fine, I am fine....You don't need to worry."

"Really?"

"Yes. Thanks to someone, we were able to turn this situation off."

"Right? I wasn't expecting him to be this strong either. Certainly, the Hartley Family lives up to their name."

The reason why the party was able to complete the raid swiftly without any injuries was because of a certain rising star in the party.

"Ethan."

The boy with blue hair had blood splattered all around his body. But that blood wasn't his own but rather the monsters he had just massacred.

"Ethan, can you hear me?" Standing beside her was a young girl with brown hair. "You need to rest; you have been overworking yourself." She said, looking at Ethan.

"Haah....We need to find him...." However, the boy's eyes were elsewhere as he was looking into the fog.

As the party caught their breath and tended to their injuries, the urgency to find Astron weighed heavy on their minds. They knew time was of the essence.

Anya wiped the sweat off her brow, her eyes scanning the vicinity. "Ethan, we'll find him. But we need to regroup and ensure everyone is in a condition to move."

Ethan nodded, albeit reluctantly. He understood the practicality of the situation, even if his heart urged him to rush in search of Astron.

Even though they had cleared the dungeon, there was a possibility of other monsters still residing there, and most importantly, Fred might have done something on the path.

He knew that just by rushing, he wouldn't do any good.



"Understood." Ethan nodded his head as he reached his own spatial artifact, his watch. Grabbing a high-grade stamina potion and a healing potion from there, he gulped them immediately.

As the party rested while tending their wounds, Ethan was the first to finish regaining his strength.

"I will look after him now. We shouldn't waste any more time." For him, the time was tickling, and he didn't want to waste any more time. Ethan knew even though Astron must have had a potion of his own; he wasn't strong enough to go against all those monsters wandering around the place.

Also, thanks to what Fred did, the monsters must have also started rampaging, and this would make it even harder for a weak hunter like Astron to resist.

"Sigh....Okay....We are finished as well." With those words, Anya also stood up. Since her strength and rank were higher than others, and she was a tanker, she had a regenerative skill in her arsenal; she also gathered her strength fast.

"Let's go, everyone...." With a wave of her hand, the rest of the party members started looking for the clues around the dungeon, trying to find where the Astron was.

They first passed the second stage but couldn't find any clues about Astron. On the way, they killed a bunch of rampaging Sylvans, but it was no longer hard for them.

Then they reached the first stage, where the fog was not around, and the rain was pouring down endlessly.

Since the first stage covered a slightly bigger area, they decided to split up and look for clues.

As Ethan was walking around in the direction of the entrance, suddenly, he smelled something.

"This.....Blood?"

He sensed something ominous. His intuition, which was something he was proud of, was now screaming at him at the fact that something had happened here.

The air felt slightly scruffy and evil.

"Demonic Energy."

He easily identified the source. Hartley Family was known for their martial prowess, but they were also good at killing those who sold themselves to demons.

"Frey."

There was only one person in this dungeon who could have utilized the demonic energy, and that person was the bastard he swore to take his vengeance.

"Don't tell me?"

As he approached the scene, he could see the blood splattered all around. The ear in Ethan's eyes grew. His mind was racing, and every possible scenario played out before him. He couldn't shake the dread that had settled deep within him.

"Astron... no..." he whispered to himself, the words heavy with anguish.

He examined the scene carefully, fear gripping his heart as he found Astron's blood scattered on the ground. "No, this can't be," he thought, his mind unable to comprehend the possibility. "Astron was talented, but he's not as strong as Fred. Did he fall here?"

In his mind, even though Astron was a talented Hunter, he was still weak. He himself had witnessed his strength firsthand countless times, and he knew how fragile Astron was.

"What is this?"

However, as he wandered around a little bit more, he came across a small little metal piece.

"Bullet?"

It was a bullet from a gun. He was not an expert in terms of bullets, but that one was slightly eroded as if it was subjected to an energy.

His brain racked a little while, but he couldn't comprehend where this bullet came from.

'This might be Fred.'

He thought it belonged to Fred since he didn't think Astron had the gun. Guns with mana-enhanced bullets were expensive and hard to manufacture, and Ethan knew Astron wasn't that rich. He was an orphan with no parents; how could he afford to use that expensive weapon?

Just as he was about to walk a little more and wander around, suddenly, he felt walky-talky vibrating.

"Hmm?"

It was a simple device to communicate inside the dungeon. Since the dungeon was a different dimension and space, it was impossible to use smartwatches and phones where the signal should be sent to a satellite and antenna in a different world.

Therefore, most of the hunters used mana frequencies to communicate inside the dungeon, and this walkie-talkie did so.

"What is it?" he asked as he looked at the space.

"Come to the entrance of the dungeon now." He heard Anya's voice from the other side, taken aback in response.

"Why?"

"We need to talk."

"What happened?"

"You will see."

As he heard this, even though he wanted to look around a little more, Ethan knew he had found as many clues as he could find right now.

There were no traces of bodies, and aside from blood and some bullets, there was nothing much. So, in the end, he gave up and walked to the side of the entrance after putting the bullets into his pockets.

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"What do you mean by that captain?"

"I mean what I said."

In front of the entrance of the dungeon, the five members of the party stood up, looking at each other.

Anya gestured to the gate that would take them to the dungeon and started speaking. "The moment we finished this raid, we should have been spitted out by the dungeon, and the dungeon gate should be closed."

This was a fact that is known by almost every Hunter in the industry, and Anya was also familiar with that fact. Even though she had forgotten it in the heat of the moment at the start, after some time had passed, she realized this and called everyone immediately.

"However, it didn't happen," Hari added as she also looked at the dungeon.

"Indeed, it didn't happen." Anya continued. "This is out of the norm and should not have happened."

As she spoke, her face got more serious. "This means either this dungeon is not supposed to close or-

"Or something is blocking it." Ethan completed her sentence as he also looked into the gate. "You are saying someone had tempered the gate."

"Yes."

"Then, it must be Fred."

"Indeed. It must be him. He probably did it in order to safely escape from the dungeon without killing the boss. It should have been his intention from the start."

"I see." Ethan looked downwards as he started pondering. "Then, this means staying inside the dungeon is also dangerous."

"That is correct. We can't predict what is going to happen inside the dungeon anymore since that bastard had played with the gate."

"....." Just as Anya said, everything made sense. The concept of gates and dungeons was still an enigma to humans; therefore, Ethan easily understood her decision, but at the same time, he didn't want to understand it.

Because it simply meant abandoning him inside there, and he was against that idea.

"I know you don't want to leave him there, but Ethan, you need to understand that we already looked everywhere and couldn't find anything about him. No traces, nobody. Nothing. I don't want to say it, but either he has already left, or he is-"

"Don't say it."

Refusing to hear what Anya was about to say, Ethan raised his head and looked at the gate.

"Okay....." Anya realized Ethan refused to accept that as she looked into the rest of the party. "I had already contacted the association. They will soon send a team to investigate this issue. The officer said we should stay here for a while and secure the gate for the possibility of any dungeon leak."

With those words, everyone started waiting. The wait for the investigation team felt like an eternity for the party as they still couldn't relax. For Emily and her guild members, this exploration was a very important one since the future of their guild was related to it, but for Ethan he was mostly concerned about Astron.

WROOM!

Finally, the hum of approaching vehicles broke the tension in the air. The Hunter Association's team arrived, a group of professionals equipped to handle mysterious dungeon occurrences.

"Azure Crest Guild?"

"Yes. I am Anya Guzzman; here is my license." After confirming the identity of the members one by one, they immediately set to work, analyzing the gate and the surrounding area.

Anya briefed the team about their raid, Astron's disappearance, and the suspicion surrounding Fred's involvement. The investigators scoured the dungeon entrance, meticulously examining the gate and its mechanisms for any tampering.

Hours passed, and the investigators concluded their examination, shaking their heads. "There's no doubt. The gate was intentionally tampered with. Someone wanted it to stay open," one of them reported to Anya.

She nodded, her face grave. "Is there any way to fix it?"

"There is no need to fix anything. The mana seal used in order to keep the dungeon open will soon deplete. The dungeon will close itself immediately."

Ethan overheard the conversation as he approached the investigator. "What if someone is still inside there? What is going to happen, then?"

"If someone is still inside there, then it is very hard to predict what may happen there. Either they are going to be forced to get out of the dungeon, or they will be trapped inside."

"....."

Ethan clenched his fists, frustration welling up within him.

"However, you are not allowed to go inside there."

"What? Why?"

"This dungeon is currently under investigation and will be regulated according to the rules outlined in the 3rd section of the 9th article of the dungeon law. No other Hunter will be allowed to enter this dungeon aside from those permitted by the association."

"But-"

"I'm sorry, but I can't allow you to reenter the dungeon," the lead investigator reiterated, maintaining a firm stance.

Ethan felt a surge of frustration and desperation. "You don't understand. My friend is in there, and time is running out. If we don't act quickly, we might lose him."

"I sympathize with your situation, but going back into a dungeon that's been compromised is against protocol and the law. It's too dangerous, not just for you but potentially for everyone involved," the investigator explained, her tone unwavering.

Anya stepped forward, attempting to mediate. "Is there nothing we can do? Surely there's an exception for situations like this."

The investigator sighed, understanding the gravity of the situation. "I wish there were, but we can't bend the rules on this. We'll work on sealing the dungeon as soon as possible, and in the meantime, we'll start a thorough search inside."

Hearing this, Ethan clenched his fists as he looked at the dungeon gate.

In the end, Ethan was left with only one option.

Waiting for the dungeon to force Astron out if he was there instead of trapping him....

And just like that, the members of the party were dismissed from the gate in the presence of the investigation scene.....

Chapter 98 Chapter 24.2 - Afterwards

THUD

"Someone just got out of the gate....."

As I heard the voice of the person right before me, I felt the cold breeze of the night.

"Hey!" The man who approached me was dressed in a crisp uniform with the emblem of the Hunter's Association emblazoned on it. His stern expression and steely eyes gave off an aura of authority. He looked me up and down, assessing me.

"State your name and Hunter ID," he demanded, a notepad in hand.

I took a moment to collect my thoughts before responding.

'He must be from the association. I guess others have already left, and this place is being referred to as the crime scene.'

Remembering the familiar scene from the game, I collected my thoughts.

"I'm Astron Natusalune, a student of the Arcadia Hunter Academy. Here you can see my ID."

He jotted down the information, then looked at me expectantly. "Cadet of Arcadia Hunter Academy, huh?" He seemed to have confirmed my identity as his gaze turned from squinting to understanding.

"You were inside the dungeon for quite some time. We need to debrief you regarding your experience."

As they escorted me to a waiting area, I started recounting what happened inside this place, starting from the betrayal of Fred and how I got swept off by the attack of the boss monster of the dungeon.

And then, I explained how I was suddenly sucked into another gate randomly and trapped in a different space than the environment of the dungeon, possibly giving them the definitions of the hidden stages.



Since that fact wasn't much known at this point in time, I didn't use the term 'Hidden Stage' but simply counted my experience inside.

The official listened intently, scribbling notes as I spoke. "Your encounter with the Time Guardian is quite unusual. The initial investigation teams have reported no signs of such a creature. We'll need to conduct a thorough analysis of the area."

Even though I could see him trying to cover it as an abnormality, I knew he was aware of the fact that this was a hidden stage.

"Then, what about Fred Niels? Have you encountered him inside there?"

Of course, I wasn't going to announce that I killed Fred there. I needed him to stay alive in the records of government for now. After all, giving my name would do more harm than good for now.

"No, I haven't. The moment I was swept off by the Embertree Spirit's attack, I hadn't encountered anything else."

The investigator leaned back, folding his hands in contemplation. His poker face was hard to read, giving away nothing of his thoughts. I could tell he was assessing my story, looking for any inconsistencies or signs of deceit.

"Your experience is indeed unique and raises some questions. We will thoroughly investigate this matter," he finally responded, his voice neutral.

I nodded simply without showing any signs of doubt or nervousness. "I'm willing to cooperate in any way I can to aid your investigation. I believe what I encountered in that dungeon is a significant deviation from the norm."

He nodded in acknowledgment. "Your cooperation is vital. We will conduct further inquiries and may need to debrief you again as the investigation progresses. For now, you are free to leave but remain available for further questioning."

"Understood," I replied, acknowledging his instructions. After all, for those who were in power, the thing they like the most is always seeing easily agreeing people.

As I left the waiting area of the investigation, a cab came and grabbed me, taking me to the academy.

Since we entered the dungeon Saturday and a whole day had passed in this world, now it was Sunday evening.

'I don't have much time.'

Just like that, I left the place and returned to the academy not long after, as the cab took me to the place.

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In the dimly lit office, the two officers exchanged a wary glance as Astron Natusalune exited the room.

"What do you make of this?" Officer A broke the silence.

"I'm not sure," replied Officer B. "The story is plausible, but something feels off."

Officer A activated a concealed device, tapping into an unusual ability. It glowed softly, processing the data from Astron's recent statements.

"He's not lying," Officer A announced, a perplexed frown marring his face. "Every indicator shows truthfulness."

Officer B frowned, leaning back in his chair. "Perhaps he's just a skilled liar, someone trained to deceive such devices."

Officer A shook his head, scrutinizing the data once more. "I've honed my abilities for years. It's highly unlikely for a cadet to fool me this easily."

"Regardless," Officer B said, "we need to report this to our superiors. And what about Fred Niels?"

Officer A sighed, tapping his fingers on the desk. "Fred's gone off the radar. We've searched every known location, but it's like he's vanished."

"Notify the higher-ups that his whereabouts are unknown," Officer B suggested. "They'll have a plan in motion. As for the kid, we'll keep an eye on him. Something about his story doesn't sit right with me."

Officer A nodded in agreement, sending the encrypted message to their superiors. "Indeed, I feel the same. I am getting a weird vibe from that kid, something shadowed. That kid is even weirder than the ones inside the jails."

The tangled web of events had only grown more complex, and they needed to stay ahead of the game. The war between the Hunter Association and Demon Contractors was getting more and more intense with each passing time.

As for Officer B, he slowly tapped on his watch, pushed a small needle onto it, and started writing a message to his 'higher-ups.'

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After returning to the academy, the first thing I did was, of course, immediately reach out to my room and feel the place I had been missing for 30 days.

Since I spent a whole month inside the Chrono Groove, I felt like I was looking like a nomad. Even though I constantly cleaned myself and used the high-quality tent, nothing beat the feeling of being inside the home.

After taking a long and hot bath, I was left alone in my room, looking at my smartwatch.

No, especially the messages sent to me. A new and special entry was there, a person that I hadn't talked to before.

[Ethan: Astron, are you okay?"]

[Ethan: Hey, I am getting worried. Hey, are you okay?]

[Ethan: Please, Astron, respond. I'm starting to fear the worst.]

[Ethan: I should've been there with you. This is my fault.]

[Ethan: Maybe if I had been stronger, faster, I could've prevented all this.]

Looking at the messages, I couldn't help but feel that this guy was really suited to become a protagonist. Even though I was just a random person he knew from the academy, he still showed concern about me.

This fact was alone enough to show that this guy had the qualities to become a hero. Of course, just by simply looking at one's feelings, I can't determine if they are a hero or not, but at least he fulfilled one requirement for it.

But, even then, these messages were cringe.

'What the hell are you even writing? Are you a little kid?'

Slowly tapping on the keyboard, I started writing.

[Astron: I'm fine. Don't overthink it.]

Almost immediately, Ethan's reply popped up.

[Ethan: I'm just glad you're okay. If you need anything or want to talk...]

I didn't want to prolong the conversation, so I cut him off.

[Astron: I'm busy. Don't talk to me.]

It felt harsh, but it was not like I cared much. Even though Ethan showed kindness to people, that doesn't mean I need to let him enter my space.

Ethan didn't know me well enough to understand that, and I didn't have either the energy or the desire to explain.

[Ethan: Alright, if you need me...]

I put my phone away, cutting off any further messages. This message would be enough, as Ethan would soon contact the remaining party members, as well as Emily. I would get my payment for the raid and exploration, and I would also get a small entry to put on my profile.

The Hunter IDs and the site worked like CV and job opportunities, and putting your previous dungeon experiences into your Hunter Profiles would let people see it and would also increase your overall score inside the Hunter rankings.

This was how Hunters were ranked globally, as it was mostly related to their achievements rather than their individual strengths.

After posting the message and chilling in bed for a little longer, I went to sleep not long after, as I was already tired from all that constant fighting with the Time Guardian....

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After sleeping and resting, I woke up very early in the morning. Calling it morning would be wrong, in fact, since it was more like midnight. Since the sun had yet to rise up, there weren't many people around, so I just reached the training grounds and started my daily routine as usual.

Thanks to this last month, my muscles and my body were a lot more refined, though it cost me a lot, considering I was buying my own food all this time in the absence of Academy Cafeteria.

After training with my body and my archery inside the club rooms, I finished my morning routine as I returned to my room, getting ready for the classes of the day. If I remember correctly, soon, another dungeon exploration would happen, and it would be on Monday. Thus, it was better to be prepared.

After eating a good, hefty meal inside the academy cafeteria for breakfast, I headed to my first class.

However, this time, the hallways seemed different—whispers echoing louder than usual. It was as if the air carried a strange weight, and most importantly, I felt a lot of gazes on me while I was walking.

'What is this?'

In fact, I had been feeling a weird gaze for a while, but now the number of gazes seemed to increase. Since I was actually sensitive to the gazes of people around me, I knew something was not right.

As I approached my classroom, the usual hum of conversation grew louder. I couldn't ignore the whispers, more intense than usual. Gossip flowed freely, distorted, and twisted like a modern-day game of telephone.

"He's a criminal, for sure."

"I heard he was involved in some really shady stuff."

"...an adulterer, can you believe it?"

Their words contained quite a lot of exclamations about me, and to be honest, it was weird.

'Why is this happening all of a sudden?'

Of course, it wasn't that hard to understand that someone was spreading rumors about me. This was a pretty common tactic for bullying. People would always utilize this trait of general humans.

We are curious, jealous, egoist, attention-seeking, prideful, entertainment-chasing beings. Therefore, such things as dramas would always get the attention of people, especially those in the age of socializing.

"Heard he has a criminal record from a different city."

"...involved with some shady underworld organizations."

"...he's got connections; that's why nothing's happened to him yet."

"Of course, how can an orphan bastard join this academy unless he has connections."

The rumors spun out of control, crafting a narrative of deceit and danger around me. I heard them and their talks, but at this point, I couldn't do anything.

'Considering the way they are talking and the tone of their words, it was clear that most people had already taken a side.'

It was pretty normal since most people didn't have the required reasoning to confirm facts before believing something.

"He's dangerous, for real. I heard he threatened a fellow student once."

"...manipulating people to get his way."

"...cheated on every test since he came here."

I approached my desk and took my seat, greeted by a few sidelong glances and hushed conversations.

However, it was not my first time dealing with rumors or gazes. I was pretty familiar with this topic, and right now, the best course of action would be ignoring those, as an attempt to clarify them would backfire.

'The person who is targeting me won't stay idle when I try to clarify myself. I first need to find their identity.'

For now, the person responsible for all these rumors is unknown, and dealing with an unknown enemy is one of the hardest things.

Thus, I simply focused on preparing for the upcoming class, the rumors fading into the background like a distant storm.

## Chapter 99 Chapter 25.1 - Joint Dungeon

TOK TOK! TOK!

As the whispers continued to flutter around the classroom, Professor Eleanor walked into the room. Her presence commanded attention as she purposefully made noise with her high heels, and gradually, the chatter died down.

"Good morning," she greeted in a firm, no-nonsense tone. "Today marks the beginning of a critical week for all of you. We'll be having a joint dungeon exploration."

CHATTER MURMUR!

Hearing this, murmurs and chatters filled the classroom for a second as the cadets' focus immediately turned to their friends. Joint explorations were a rare event, an opportunity for students from various classes to work together, showcasing their skills and knowledge while also bootlicking some high-ranking students.

'Joint Dungeon Exploration, huh?'

This was one of the big events in the game for Ethan since he would be subjected to ridicule and contempt from the high-ranking students from other classes.

Even though the Hartley Family was a high-ranking family with a good image, they also had a lot of enemies, and quite a fair amount of those enemies had their heirs in this academy.

And one of those heirs from a rival family would be in the same group as Ethan, and he would be the leader.

This was the first event when Ethan would directly confront a human with animosity towards him, though it wasn't that fatal.

However, it was not only about Ethan but also another character.

'Sylvie was on the same team with Mason.'



He was the one who would target Sylvie in this academy, as he also joined the History and Arts club. He will try to sabotage Sylvie, though he won't be successful.

'But, every one of his attempts were actually close passes.' Considering this fact, even a small butterfly effect could have changed the things, and it was better to be careful from the start.

"We've arranged groups with a mix of students from different classes, providing a collaborative learning experience. Remember, diversity fosters creativity and understanding," Professor Eleanor emphasized.

She projected the group assignments onto the screen at the front of the room, and I scanned the list briefly. Our dungeon group wouldn't change, but we would see the group we paired with from another class.

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Class HA213: Team Irina Emberheart

Class HA219: Team Byron Ward

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It was a class that I didn't have much idea about, and the names of the cadets didn't seem very familiar either, aside from Byron Ward.

He was also an extra in the game who didn't have any screen time and only appeared as the background character for a little while.

As I was checking the list, suddenly, I felt a sharp gaze on me.

'Hmm?'

This gaze contained a lot more pressure, and it was evident that it came from a person with strong emotions.

Turning my attention, I came across a pair of blazing blue eyes and crimson red hair.

'Irina.'

Her eyes contained strong emotions, and it was clear she was angry. At first, I didn't understand why she was angry since, for me, one month had passed while others had just a day.

And then, I realized why she was looking at me like that.

'It must be because of the last mock dungeon class.'

Considering the words I spoke, it was understandable that the prideful Irina would act like this.

'Not that I care.'

Turning my head to the front once again, I focused on the class that was about to start ignoring her gaze.

"Make sure to understand each other's strengths and weaknesses," she continued, her eyes scanning the room. "You will be a new team, and cooperation will be vital as usual."

The joint exploration was designed to mimic the dynamics of real-world scenarios.

Different classes brought unique abilities to the table, and this collaboration allowed us to learn how to complement each other effectively.

This was also a good way to test the cooperativeness of the leader of each group, though I doubt that Irina was a good cooperative guy.

"Your expedition will begin in the afternoon," Professor Eleanor concluded. "Prepare yourselves accordingly, and good luck. Remember, this is a learning experience as much as it is an exploration."

With that, the class resumed, and Eleanor started explaining the theory of combat as usual....

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"Alright, everyone," Professor Eleanor continued, "please head to the dungeon's entrance now, where your fellow teammates from Class HA219 will be waiting."

As Eleanor finished the lesson, students immediately started packing their things up. Since Arcadia Hunter Academy liked surprising the students and making them feel unprepared, after the lesson ended, we were immediately taken to the dungeon entrance.

I also did the same. To be honest, I was quite eager to test my new skill in actual combat. I had tested it on the dummies this morning, but I was still slightly unfamiliar with the skill.

However, as I walked to the dungeon on the way, I still felt gazes on me, especially from those in my class. However, it was now less, thanks to the upcoming dungeon exploration.

When I reached there, I saw everyone was already there.

Byron Ward, a young man with neatly combed hair and a perpetually ingratiating smile, was doing his best to captivate Irina's attention.

He was a known bootlicker in the player's community, always striving to stay in the good graces of high-ranking individuals.

This was how his character worked in the game, as he was just a random bootlicker to make some other characters shine more.

That was why I called him an extra; after all, those extras were what acted as the decorative for the real scene.

"You must be Irina Emberheart....Nice to meet you." He immediately started a conversation, scratching his head. "We have heard a lot about you."

And the first thing he did was to compliment Irina.

"I see." However, she rather seemed disinterested in him, and that was to be expected. After all, this was the Irina I knew, a girl with a hot temper.

"Truly a person befitting the name of the Emberheart Family. I heard you defeated the last boss monster on your own in your first dungeon exploration."? Byron continued talking with an excited tone, clearly trying to win her favor.

However, his fawning words only seemed to annoy Irina further.

"Yes."

She acknowledged him with a brief nod but remained mostly silent, her gaze fixated on me, which, to Byron's dismay, was more than enough to unsettle him.

In fact, she had been looking at me this whole time with clear hostility, but I still couldn't understand why.

Turning my attention to Nora and George, I wanted to ask them if they knew something, but just as I was about to approach them, they turned their faces to the sides.

'Hmm?'

And that was surprising.

'I thought I made up with these guys.'

At first, I referred to the last dungeon exploration, but then the reason sank.

'Rumors.'

Of course, it was rumors. Considering my abilities and the way I acted were shrouded in mystery, even my teammates would find it easy to believe those rumors.

Seeing this, I also realized why Irina was looking at me like that. If it is Irina, it is understandable that she would believe the rumors.

Byron, seemingly catching on that flattery alone wouldn't earn him any brownie points, decided to change his approach. He introduced his team members, attempting to demonstrate their competence.

"These are my teammates," Byron said, pointing to each of them. "Meet Erika, our adept mage; Leon, a skilled archer; and Jake, a proficient tank."

Erika gave a small wave and a friendly smile, Leon nodded in acknowledgment, and Jake offered a firm handshake, showing genuine interest in fostering good teamwork. It seemed their party was balanced, even though I heard those names for the first time today.

Irina, despite her earlier annoyance, remained professional as she introduced her team. "This is Nora, our swordsman; George, our tank. And this guy is our marksman."

'I guess the talk we had at that time worked, huh?'

Even though she would probably deny that fact, Irina had already started changing on her own, and that was in a good direction. However, when she pointed at me, she didn't even mention my name at all. It was a clear act of annoyance, and Byron didn't miss that part.

"What is your name?" He immediately came to me and asked, his eyes containing a cold glint.

"Astron."

The moment my name reached their eyes, all of the four immediately seemed to recognize me.

"Aren't you the last rank guy in the academy?"

Immediately, Byron spoke with a clear tone of ridicule. His eyes were saying, how dare you take the attention of her. It seemed the way Irina looked at me made him feel angry.

"I am."

However, what he said was certainly a fact. Thus, I had no reason to deny his words.

"To think you really did exist." The guy who was introduced as the other member's archer chimed in, looking at me like I was some sort of a genuine pig.

"If I didn't, someone else would be the last rank. Are you primal enough not to understand that small fact?"

"Ha?"

"Don't bother with him, Leon; he is just a low-rank bastard. He is not worthy of your attention."

Being the bootlicker and strong against the weak type of character he is, Byron immediately jumped into conversation again.

Clearly relishing the opportunity to belittle someone, he continued his taunts. He had already seen Irina look hostile to me, and it seemed he had changed his strategy.

"A low-rank burden, huh? You should be thanking Irina; she's done a commendable job of carrying such a heavy load."

Irina remained silent, not objecting to Byron's words. Nora and George, my supposed teammates, also seemed indifferent, as if this was none of their business. The reason could be related to rumors, but even then, seeing how easy it was to change someone's perspective over others reminded me of how this world worked once again.

The atmosphere grew increasingly hostile, and I could feel the weight of their judgmental gazes.

"Aren't you upset, Astron?" Byron prodded, attempting to provoke a reaction. "If I were you, I would just drop out of the academy."

I maintained my composure, refusing to let his words get under my skin. "I'm here to complete the mission, not to engage in pointless arguments."

"Of course," Byron sneered, "easier to play the victim and shy away, isn't it?"

Before I could respond, Irina spoke, her voice laced with irritation. "Enough. This isn't the time for this nonsense. Let's focus on the task at hand."

She threw a gaze of annoyance at me but also at Byron.

"You may enter."

And just before the situation could escalate any further, suddenly, the voice of the instructor entered our ears as our team entered the dungeon.

As Irina entered, I followed her steps.

## Chapter 100 Chapter 25.2 - Joint Dungeon

The terrain of this dungeon was a cave at the start. It had a similar type of construction to the labyrinth type we had explored last time.

However, different from the labyrinth, the terrain of this dungeon was going to change. Since this was an artificial dungeon, this practical session involved adapting different scenarios. It was not like a staged dungeon, but it also wasn't a normal one either.

However, if you asked the management why they put such a test, the answer you get would be simply, 'We can never know if such a dungeon might exist in the future. It is better to be prepared rather than not knowing anything.'

In any case, the eight of the party walked through the cave, with everyone being alert. The formation was a classic one, with warriors on the front as vanguards, the mages and supporters in the middle, and lastly, we rangers at the back.

The Leon guy threw me some gazes from time to time, clearly annoyed at my attitude at the start. His eyes contained a distinct sense of superiority and contempt.

'His muscles are not well developed, and he is showing symptoms of potion overuse. He is taking supplementary elements, mostly in order to stay in this academy and cope with the expectations.

His clothes are clean and neat, but he lacks the sensitivity to keep them in such a manner, so it is safe to assume that he visits his home every week. From his gears alone, it seems he comes from a middle-grade family, probably a child of a low-mid-rank guild member.'

Finishing my analysis in a matter of seconds, I turned my attention to the front. Since he was not a named character and his rank wasn't that high, he probably wasn't an important figure in the game. Thus, there wasn't any need to waste more time.

We arrived at a fork in the path, and a brief pause settled among us as we assessed our options.

Four paths diverged, each hinting at a potentially different challenge or surprise. This was also quite expected, and each path had its own difficulties. Of course, there was a path that was quite a lot easier than others, and with my eyes, I could see which path it was quite easily.

Thanks to the [Shadowborne], my eyes were not affected by the darkness at all.

After analyzing the options, I turned to face Irina. While she didn't voice her thoughts, her eyes bore a clear sense of expectation. It seemed she wanted to see if I had the judgment and decisiveness to lead us in the right direction.

Of course, she had the expected eyes, but she didn't say anything. And, since she didn't say anything to me as the captain, I didn't say anything either.

"Leon, what do you think?" Byron came to our side and asked his ranger. Since we were supposed to have a good perception, it was a common thing to ask rangers to act as scouts.

"I don't know."

Though, most of the rangers can't see the way I am seeing in this place. The training I had been doing inside the Chrono Groove and my own skills make me pretty exceptional, differing me from others.

"I see," Byron replied, nodding his head, and then turned his attention to Irina. "Do you have any idea, Irina? We can follow your lead if you have one."



By saying that, he was innately implying that Irina was the leader and she would be the one bearing the responsibility.

Though the said person's eyes were still on me, she was still looking at me with an expectant gaze. But I still didn't say anything, refusing it until she asked me on her own.

The staring contest between Irina and me persisted for a few more moments, the atmosphere growing slightly tense. I could sense her irritation, but I held my ground, refusing to acquiesce to her unspoken expectation.

I knew she wanted me to take the lead, but the slight arrogance in her demeanor made me not want to do it.

Finally, unable to bear the silence any longer, she spoke, her tone grumpier than I had anticipated. "What do you think? Can your eyes see in the dark, or do they only work on women?"

Her words had an undercurrent of sarcasm coloring them, referring to those rumors. Since there were some rumors about me going to brothels when I had free time, it seemed she heard one of those.

It was clear she was annoyed by me and didn't appreciate being kept waiting, but this world didn't work according to people's feelings but rather worked differently.

"They won't work unless there is a woman worthy. I suggest you bring one if you want them to work ." I had no intention of backing down. Just because of a random rumor thing, we were back to square one now, and it was annoying.

Byron also seemed to sense the tension as he looked at me with a clear smirk.

"What can you even expect from a last ranker anyway? Trash is just trash."

Byron's attempt to undermine me and curry favor with Irina was as transparent as it was expected. He seized the opportunity to belittle my capabilities, using the last-ranker label as a means to assert his superiority.

"If you guys still don't know, I think it is better to choose the right path."

Irina, caught in this battle of egos, seemed to waver for a moment. She looked at me, then at Byron. I could see she was hesitating to follow his lead and wanted me to find the way, but her pride wouldn't allow that.

'This will be your last chance.'

I looked at her and waited for her decision. Is she going to put her pride, or will she choose an easy path?

It was a pivotal moment when I was going to adjust my opinion about her for the future.

"We will listen to you," she said, her tone tinged with frustration, evidently trying to end the brewing conflict. "Lead the way."

And in the end, she chose the wrong one.

Byron didn't waste a moment, puffing out his chest with pride and confidently choosing the path on the right. "Of course, Irina. Trust me; I have a good feeling about this route. Follow me, everyone."

'You wasted it. Don't beg me later.'

Just like that, we started the walk again, and I could see the victorious smirk on Byron's face as if he had achieved something.

'To think he chose the least optimal one, certainly, you can never leave the decision to an extra.'

I shook my head and started following the team without saying anything. After all, with the way I am right now, I certainly have the ability to deal with the monsters inside this place, even though it will be a little hard.

As we ventured down the right path, Byron continued his attempts to impress Irina. He'd share exaggerated stories of his exploits and victories, each tale aimed at capturing her attention and admiration.

Irina, however, seemed disinterested and unimpressed, her mind likely preoccupied with the task at hand.

Lizard-type monsters occupied this path; though slippery, they were not that hard to deal with. Since they were low-ranked mobs, the eight-person party didn't have a hard time. I didn't even move since everyone did my job for me.

Since Byron and his team were trying to impress Irina, they didn't leave much for me.

However, as we advanced down the path, the oppressive atmosphere of the dungeon seemed to thicken while encountering monsters every time.

PAT! PAT! PAT!

The walls appeared to close in on us, and a heavy silence enveloped the group. The occasional dripping of water echoed ominously, amplifying the tension that hung in the air.

In fact, it was not only psychologically. The consternation of the oxygen and the mana around us were different.

'A fire-type environment.'

Thanks to my increased mana sensitivity and my magical power, I could feel the different mana around us more clearly now, and it was easy to understand.

Byron, still attempting to maintain an air of confidence, was also growing uneasy.

His exaggerated tales had lost their luster, the bravado fading with each step deeper into the dungeon.

Irina remained silent as well, as she also probably felt the concentrated mana ahead.

With my eyes, I could see the color of red dancing around the front.

'The first challenging monster is here.'

Since the type of monsters we encountered were lizards, and the environment was a fire type, it wasn't hard to refer to what monster lay ahead even without directly seeing it.

'Lesser Magma Wurm.'

It was a monster of a low-rank 4 level and quite a strong one at that. It was probably the trigger that would make the artificial dungeons change the atmosphere.

Triggers were random things appearing in the dungeon that would make the landscapes change. It was controlled by the dungeon administrators who controlled and monitored this space, and they were special only to the artificial dungeons.

Even though they were supposed to be random, considering the amount of time we had walked and traveled, it was easy to assume that after facing the monster, the dungeon would change since this is the pattern the exams worked.

"This pressure....." Irina mumbled, looking slightly irritated. For her, a fire mage, she must have understood being in an environment filled with fire mana.

Most might think when an environment has the same attributes as the Hunter mastered, it would be good, but that is not necessarily the case.

The monsters in that place would also be evolved according to that mana, which meant they would be actually resilient.

For instance, Time Guardian wouldn't be affected by the Time-related skills that much since it itself evolved from that mana.

This rule is one of the most common ones in dungeons; it applies to monsters with strong defenses. Of course, if the monster is rather an offense type, this won't be too negative, but it is very hard to find monsters with low defenses.

Of course, right now, I can easily inform the party, but why should I?

I gave this girl quite a lot of chances, but she refused to take it. I won't do it once again. I hate it when I feel like all the effort I had put in suddenly became in vain. I really should just find that bastard who spread rumors about me and teach him/her a lesson.

The air grew hotter and thicker as we pressed forward, the fiery aura signaling our proximity to the Lesser Magma Wyrms. I continued to keep my observations to myself, allowing the tension in the party to mount. Irina's irritation was palpable, but I remained steadfast in my resolve not to engage. Since she was a fire-specialized mage, she was also resilient to the fire, making her not sweat as much.

"This is so fucking hot!"

But that wasn't the case for the other cadets. The members of Byron's team were also sweating and losing a lot of water from their bodies.

'They even started showing the signs of dehydration.'

You may think it should not be that easy for a Hunter who has superhuman strength to dehydrate this easily, but the faster or stronger you are, the more calories and water you will burn.

"Fuck this, why is this so hot?"

Same with the people using mana to fight. Thus, Hunters actually need to take care of their meals and water quite frequently, just like any other people.

"Guys, calm down."

Seeing the state of the team, Byron tried to take the lead, attempting to mask his own growing unease.

He constantly looked at Irina, looking for her reaction. Since he was the one to lead us to that place, he naturally knew he was going to be responsible for whatever was going to happen. And I could see his face getting paler when he saw Irina's irritated expression.

"What is this place?"

And finally, we were able to reach the place where the Lesser Magma Wyrms resided.

The corridor opened up into a large chamber, and the intense heat hit us like a wave.

"Get ready for the battle."

It was the time to fight.