

H. Academy 121

Chapter 121 Chapter 29.4 - Banquet

-BOOM!

As the explosion rocked the banquet hall, the force of it sent shockwaves through the air.

CHINK!

The chandeliers above swayed wildly, and the elegant decor trembled under the impact.

"What is happening?"

Panic engulfed the guests, as everyone was surprised because of what was happening. They were shaken up, and some of the people here were non-awakened.

"I CAN'T SEE!"

The chaos ensued; the smoke covered everyone's vision, and most importantly, almost everyone was shaken by the impact. Some people were losing their balance while others were trying to regain it.

Amidst the chaos and billowing smoke, the six heirs acted quickly, their instincts and training kicking in.

Julia and Carl immediately started looking around. They had been in dungeons, and even though this was a fairly new situation for them, the instinct they had developed after fighting countless times was there.

-BOOM!

Not long after the first explosion, the second one appeared. This time, it was closer to the people.

-TAK!

However, the explosion was blocked by the barrier that had just appeared, covering every person who was leaning on the tables.

"This..."

As Lilia and others paid attention to the tables, they noticed none of them had been damaged.

"PLEASE CALM DOWN!"

A shout echoed between the debris and smoke rising. It was a voice filled with authority, and almost every person in this place knew the identity of the source.

The head butler was speaking to them.

"THOSE WHO ARE CLOSE TO TABLES, DON'T LEAVE YOUR POSITION."

-BOOM!

Of course, before the voice could explain further, another explosion occurred, interrupting his talk.

"Let's stick together. We don't have any weapons with us right now." Lilia said as she observed the barrier, though she knew it wasn't the time right now.

"And, Ethan. Make sure to stay between us." And, she commanded.

Even though Ethan was a member of the academy, in this place, she would be nothing but a small fry since he had recently awakened.

"Tch. You know I won't do that." Of course, for Ethan, such an act would be impossible. First, it was a matter of individual pride, and second, he was here as the representative of the Hartley family.

"MAGES!"

As the command ensued, suddenly, the surroundings started shaking, and a strong wind appeared.

WOOSH!

And, in a matter of seconds, the smoke that was covering everyone disappeared.

WROOM! WROOM! WROOM!

As the smoke dissipated, the room was flooded with a surreal sight. Countless shimmering portals materialized across the hall, their ethereal presence sending a wave of panic and confusion through the attendees.

"What in the world..." muttered Lucas, eyes widening as he took in the unusual spectacle. The others were equally baffled, their instincts on high alert.

A different sense of pressure was coming from the portals as if something evil was lurking there.

Suddenly, from the portals emerged sphere mechanisms, swiftly propelled into the air.

TAK! TAK!

"OPEN FIRE!"

The guards didn't even give any second, as the mages and archers deployed started attacking from away, targeting the spheres.

However, none of the attacks seemed to have any effect, as black energy covered the spheres protecting them.

DING!

Before anyone could react, these mechanisms emitted a sudden burst of energy, creating ripples in the surroundings—an unmistakable disturbance in the mana field.

WORM!

And following that, the barriers covering everyone suddenly disappeared.

"They're causing a mana disturbance!" Irina exclaimed, her voice tense with urgency. Only she could be in her perfect condition even without a weapon, but as she tried to draw fire-psions from the environment, she failed miserably.

The implications were dire since the mana disturbance meant the artifacts and formations wouldn't work as intended.

A mana disturbance could destabilize the psions around, making them unpredictable and potentially dangerous. This would affect the usage of skills and many other things.

SHACK! SHACK! SHACK!

And just as to prove that, the lighting that was illuminating the room suddenly turned off, leaving everyone in darkness.

"No."

-SWOOSH!

However, that wasn't enough at all.

Suddenly, from the rear of the Irina, the wind blew, and the sound of something flying through came.

SPURT!

Followed by the sound of liquid splashing.

PAT!

And some of them scattered through her face.

'What is this?'

She asked herself. Her head was shaking from the mana disturbance around her, and her brain wasn't working as it would normally be.

"Kurgh-!"

Before she could even respond, she heard the voice of someone coughing, and the sticky liquid on her forehead slowly reached her mouth.

The taste was something she was familiar with.

'Blood?'

SWOOSH! SWOOSH!

As the metallic taste of the liquid slowly registered in her brain, another bunch of attacks also came.

The darkness and the mana ripple around the environment were already affecting her mind. With her high sensitivity to mana as a mage, the disturbed psions were closing her senses, making her more vulnerable than ever.

"IRINA!"

Just at that second, she felt someone's presence.

THUD!

As she was tackled to the ground, behind the huge body of the person, she could see sharp black-colored tendrils piercing the empty air as they passed.

"Huh?"

"What are you doing?"

Her body was still shaking from the impact, and she wasn't in her right mind. It was as if something was directly affecting her body, making her stop functioning.

SLAP!

At that second, a sharp, stinging pain came from her cheeks. And with the pain, the world that was rotating slowly calmed down.

Clarity returned as her gaze regained her focus.

"Come to your senses, Irina."

Before her eyes stood blue hair.

"You almost died."

His green eyes were looking at her with clear anger.

"This isn't the Irina, I know."

"Ethan."

As she shook her head for a bunch of seconds, she could see the warm gaze returning to the boy before her.

As the sitting pain continued from her swollen cheek, annoyance also came. Annoyance at the fact that she was standing pathetically while others were clearly protecting her.

SLAP!

And another slap echoed.

"What was that for?" Ethan demanded, looking at Irina with a mix of concern and slight injustice.

"It's payback," Irina replied, her voice slightly shaky but regaining strength. "For hitting a lady."

Ethan blinked, momentarily taken aback, before a hint of realization dawned on him. "Oh," he responded, slightly sheepish. "That was... necessary, I suppose."

However, they couldn't continue their talk, as they could see the scenery around them.

Blood was spilling on the ground, and countless attackers with their faces covered with masks appeared from the portals one by one.

They exuded the pressure that didn't belong to any average person, as if they were some sort of predator. The color of blood and the intense smell of dread covered the room.

However, of course, the Blackthorn Family wasn't only in the name. Even though the attack was something that they weren't expecting, that didn't mean they weren't prepared.

"TAKE THE FORMATION!"

SWOOSH! SWOOSH!

With a loud shout, Hunters and the Awakened immediately entered the field.

Trained in combat and well-versed in dealing with such emergencies, they acted with swift precision.

Spells and skills were cast, blades were unsheathed, and the clash of magic and steel rang through the hall.

CLANK! CLANK!

And immediately, the place where the banquet was held turned into a battlefield. Blood continued to spill, and blades continued to clash.

The attackers were no amateurs either. Clad in dark garb, they moved with calculated coordination, their intent clear - to cause harm and chaos.

It was clear that the level of the guards was close to the level of the attackers, and that alone showed how dangerous the group was.

And amidst the chaos and the relentless assault of the tendrils, the Blackthorn guards found themselves overwhelmed. The tendrils seemed to strike from everywhere, making it challenging for them to mount a cohesive defense.

"Hold the line!" barked the leader of the guards, trying to steady his guards as they struggled against the onslaught.

Spells and arrows were launched in desperation, but the tendrils seemed to have a dark energy that deflected or absorbed their attacks.

In the end, only chaos remained.

"Snake."

Inside the place filled with pitch darkness, a hoarse voice echoed inside the room.

"Report."

The owner of the voice had a bulky build, and he was watching the scenes on his screen.

-WROOM!

The fans continued to rotate loudly as the huge room gave the impression of a basement.

"Reporting, this is Snake."

A voice came from the monitors. It was a soft voice, probably belonging to a woman. Even though the signal was disturbed, her voice was still clear.

"The information is correct. The package is here." The voice named Snake confirmed.

Hearing this report, the bulky man grinned.

"Good, you may continue with the operation."

"Roger."

As the channel was closed, the bulky man stood there looking at the screen.

"Did you hear this?"

And he spoke, turning his back. There stood a silhouette covered with a veil. From its hands, continuous darkness poured, shooting to the portals that were opened in the room.

"Yes."

The voice replied.

SWOOSH!

And following its reply, another black tendril flew, directly shooting to the portals.

"Then, will you speak now? We need to find the place of the item." The bulky man approached the figure with a grin.

SWOOSH!

However, his approach was stopped by the tendril that flew past his ear.

"I remember warning you not to approach me."

"Okay, okay...."

The bulky man took a step back, wary of the tendril's warning. The atmosphere was tense, thick with unspoken threats.

"As for my question-"

"Of course," the veiled figure replied calmly. "I will describe the location as you asked."

"then-"

"When you capture him."

As the veiled figure spoke, the bulky man nodded his head.

"Then, make sure you are ready. It won't take too long."

And he once again turned to screens opening the channel.

"Tiger, Lion. You are allowed."

<nulli>-TOK! TOK! TOK!

Inside the corridor illuminated by the dark light, a bunch of figures could be seen running around.

"What is the situation?"

A cold voice echoed inside the dark corridor. The voice didn't have the tone of an old man but rather was on the younger side.

"Our communication is getting jammed, Young Master."

Kaiser Blackthorn, the heir of the Blackthorn family, was escorted by a group of elite guards as he made his way through the winding corridors of the Blackthorn estate.

The guards, dressed in sleek black uniforms, moved with precision and purpose, creating a formidable wall of protection around Kaiser.

All of them had swords on their waists, and they looked trained enough not to lose anyone.

"Our communication is getting jammed, Young Master."

At the front of the group was Captain, a seasoned warrior with a strong presence as he spoke with a serious tone.

He had served the Blackthorn family for many years and was known for his unwavering dedication to their safety.

"However, according to information we have received and we had known beforehand, we are getting targeted by a new organization."

As they walked, Captain Alden began to brief Kaiser on the current situation.

"Any ways to identify?"

Kaiser asked, gritting his teeth. "Those bastards.... Don't they know about our family's power?"

Today was supposed to be the day he was the main character. As the leading heir of the family of Blackthorns, he was the face of almost every event.

He personally organized such things just to make sure the way the public viewed him was on the positive side.

His father, the Current Patriarch, was someone with an obsessiveness of perfection, so he was doing his best to meet his standards.

"I am sure they are aware of your power, young Master." Captain Alder replied. He purposefully emphasized the word 'your' to imply that he was already considering Kaiser as the next heir of the Blackthorns.

"Ho? Then, what do you think they are aiming for?"

Kaiser asked with a leisured smile on his face. The fact that Alder praised him put that smile on his face, and the annoyed look on his face had disappeared.

Captain Alden maintained his stern expression as he replied to Kaiser's inquiry. For him, who always served the Blackthorn Family, he knew none of the terrorist organizations could target them.

"My observation suggests that this new organization is not targeting the Blackthorn family directly. Instead, they appear to have been hired by a rival or an adversary. Their aim, it seems, is to tarnish your image, Young Master."

Hearing this, Kaiser also started pondering.

'This makes sense considering how organized they were.'

He imagined in his head what happened the moment the attack started.

First, it was bombs, and then it was smoke.

Following that was a bunch of portals, and that was when Alder immediately took action to save himself from the attack.

It was a common protocol that was repeated countless times in this mansion belonging to the Blackthorn family.

But, the thing was not about the protocol but how efficient their attack was. First, they caused mayhem, making the mages belonging to the guard group come forward since the time wasn't enough for close combatants to reach the victims.

And then, they blocked their vision to make sure the mages would need to use their [Mana Expanding] to sense what was happening inside.

And thanks to follow-up attacks, the artifacts inside the tables would be activated since the mages wouldn't have enough time to defend the people inside the banquet.

It was as if-

<nulli>-SCHLIK!

"Hmm?"

As Captain Alder scanned the card he was holding into the door they were in front of, he frowned at the fact that no response came from the door.

"What is happening, Captain Alder?"

Kaiser couldn't help but become increasingly aware that something was amiss.

Captain Alder's frustrated expression as he scanned the card to unlock the door confirmed Kaiser's suspicions. The door remained stubbornly closed, refusing to grant them access.

But it wasn't just the uncooperative door that troubled Kaiser. It was the mounting feeling of suffocation in the corridor, a distinct sign that the mana around them was indeed disturbed.

"Young Master!"

<nulli>SWOOSH!

Just at that exact second, Kaiser suddenly felt the huge body of Captain Alder tackling him.

<nulli>SWISH!

And following that, a projectile went past the place where he was just standing.

The corridor plunged into chaos as Captain Alden's swift action saved Kaiser from the incoming projectile.

The projectile, a gleaming bolt of magical energy, struck the wall with a deafening explosion.

<nulli>-BOOM!

"Take Formation 3!"

Following that, Alder immediately commanded the guards around them to move and protect the heir of Blackthorns.

"You are good, just as expected."

From the darkness, a smoky silhouette was revealed, gradually dispersing and revealing two figures stepping out from the shadows.

A man and a woman. Both were clad in sleek, black attire and bore an air of malevolence.

The woman's eyes, an icy blue, met Kaiser's with a chilling intensity. Her voice was as cold as her gaze, "We have met the target."

She spoke slightly, tapping on the small earbuds on her right ear.

"Understood."

As she conversed, the man beside her just stood there and watched how the guards were operating. His gaze was just as icy as the woman's, but his build made him look more intimidating than his partner alone.

"Who are you?"

Kaiser asked, sensing that the confrontation was inevitable and he was trying to buy time.

"...."

However, he met with silence as the response as the two dark-clad individuals exchanged glances.

"You don't need to know." The woman replied as she grabbed a bunch of daggers underneath her robe.

<nulli>SWOOSH!

As she fired the daggers, she immediately rushed to the group.

Seeing this, Alden also readied himself as he raised his sword. He was about to confront the woman, but suddenly, his senses started screaming at him.

"Let's test you, shall we."

<nulli>SWOOSH!

The dark-clad man immediately advanced toward Captain Alden, an eerie smile on his face. Alden stood his ground, his hand moving to unsheathe his sword, but as he did, he realized the oppressive lack of mana around him. He couldn't rely on his usual magic.

This fight would be decided by pure physical prowess.

Without another word, the man lunged, moving with uncanny speed.

<nulli>CLANK! CLANK! CLANK!

His fists landed with incredible force, and Alden struggled to block the blows. With each attack Alden confronted, he could feel the strength behind the blows. His sword was shaking from the momentum alone, and even though he was defending the blows with the sharp side of his sword, he couldn't see any wounds on the hands of the man.

'What is this strength!'

It was clear that the man's physical strength was remarkable, far beyond the captain's abilities.

<nulli>-THUD!

"Kurgh!"

As he felt the punch in his stomach connecting, blood rushed to his mouth. His insides were getting crushed. His composure was broken.

<nulli>SWOOSH!

In an attempt to defend himself, he counterattacked, ignoring the pain on his stomach. He forcibly
<nulli>CLANK!

10:34

And his enemy met his sword head-on with his fists. But that was his goal to begin with since the twisted the trajectory of his sword and completed his sword technique.

<nulli>CLANK!

And his enemy met his sword head-on with his fists. But that was his goal to begin with since the man in black was pushed back by the force of his attack.

"Kurgh-"

Of course, since he overexerted his strength, he felt blood pouring from his mouth.

'This is dangerous.'

He immediately judged. The enemy was a skilled fighter, and he was at a disadvantage. Because he was unable to use the mana psions in the environment as he wished, he was unable to exert even half of his power.

He was a magic swordsman who was proficient at mana and swordplay, but that also meant the reason he was at the top was that he was able to use both of them.

Whenever one had left the equation, the peak power he could exert would be nowhere to be seen. Moreover, his enemy seemed specifically specialized in body tempering, making him an extremely lethal opponent to face in such conditions.

<nulli>SWOOSH!

And his enemy was not going to let him recuperate. In almost a millisecond, the man appeared right before his eyes again with his fists ready to strike.

The battle raged on in the dim corridor, where the only source of light came from the flickering sconces on the walls.

Captain Alden's face contorted with pain and determination as he relentlessly clashed with the dark-clad man. The scene was a stark dance of steel against iron.

However, even though he was at a disadvantage, that didn't mean he was an opponent that would easily go down.

As Alden attacked, his sword moved in calculated arcs and thrusts, his years of combating and polishing in the art of swordsmanship evident in his every move.

The enigmatic man, on the other hand, relied on brute force and incredible speed, parrying Alden's strikes with his muscular arms and delivering punishing blows with precision.

<nulli>CLANK! CLANK! CLANK!

With each collision of steel against the flesh, sparks flew, casting eerie flashes of light that briefly illuminated the grim faces of the combatants.

The resounding clang of metal echoed through the corridor, drowning out even the chaos that had erupted in the Blackthorn estate.

Alden's strikes were fast and precise, aiming for the man's side or chest, trying to exploit a momentary opening.

However, the enigmatic man's agility was astonishing. He sidestepped, twisted, and deflected Alden's blade with a level of grace that belied his immense strength.

'An opportunity.'

But at that exact second, between the moments of despair, Alden saw an opportunity. His trait, making his senses incredibly sensitive, almost showed him the path he needed to take to strike down. In his mind, he could see what he needed to do as if the heavens were guiding him.

That one particular exchange was a breathtaking display of skill and power.

In a state-like trance, he immediately readied himself.

<nullb>'Severance.'

As Alden executed a horizontal slash, suddenly, he felt an ominous feeling for the second time in his life.

<nullb>'A smirk was plastered on the face of his opponent as if he knew what was about to happen.'

His opponent met the blade with his forearm shining with dark energy.

<nulli>-CLANK!

It was <nullb>Demonic Energy.

That fact made the result of the exchange clear.

"Kurgh-!"

The impact sent shivers down Alden's arm as he grunted in pain.

<nulli>---THUD!

At that very instant, the man's free hand clenched into a fist, and he delivered a powerful uppercut that sent Alden staggering backward.

"Hok!"

Momentarily, his breathing was disturbed, and he could see the world spinning. The<nullb> Demonic Energy invaded his body, making his superhuman regeneration disturbed.

However, that wasn't the end at all.

Alden's gaze frantically searched his surroundings, and what he saw was disheartening. The other guards, who had been valiantly protecting their young master, were incapacitated. They lay scattered and wounded, victims of the assailants' ruthless assault.

Blades filled with dark energy was the daggers around their body, the evidence of woman's work.

At that exact second, despair filled his heart as he desperately searched for the person he was supposed to protect.

"Target acquired."

And he found him at the shoulder of a woman walking.

Just at that second, he felt the familiar sensation he was missing for awhile.

'Mana.'

Mana was returned.

In the next heartbeat, Alden made his move. He immediately coated his blade and his body with the returned mana. The sword seemed to glow with a renewed intensity, and a sudden surge of power coursed through him.

"RAAA!"

<nulli>SWOOSH!

However, before his attack could even reach them, the two figures stepped into the portal that had just appeared.

Alden's blade cleaved through the space the figures had occupied only moments ago, but it met nothing but empty air.

<nulli>-TAK! TAK! TAK!

The lights returned one by one, but in the end, only one person was left in front of the door that would open to a particular basement.....

Chapter 123 Chapter 29.6 - Banquet

<nulli>-WROOM!

Countless sounds of whirling were echoing inside the room. There were screens illuminating the darkness, and before them stood the bulky man.

"They finished." He said as he looked at one particular screen.

<nulli>-TAK!

At that second, from one of the portals, two figures emerged, one holding the other on her shoulder.

"Job is done." One of the figures spoke.

<nulli>-THUD!

-And following that, the figure dropped the lump of flesh to the ground.

"Hmm...." The bulky man approached the body lying and lowered his gaze. Squinting, he observed the body for a little while; his eyes were shining with a color of blue.

"Good." He nodded his head in response. "He is not injured." As he said that, he turned his attention to the veiled figure at the center of the room with countless different black tendrils spreading.

The bulky man's eyes met the veiled figure's, and it was clear that he was the one seeking cooperation.

"Your assistance is invaluable," he began, his voice filled with a sense of urgency. "We don't have much time."

As the bulky man said, he signaled the young man underneath. "I have provided my part of the deal. Now, you need to do your own as well."

The moment the bulky man finished his words, the veiled figure moved slightly. Even though shadows covered their face, and it was impossible to discern any of their features, it was an act that showed they were in the conversation now.

"Yes. It is now my part."

As they said that, suddenly, a special construct made by darkness started forming in front of his body. Slowly and one by one, the details of the construction started taking shape, and in the end, they formed a building.

<nulli>FOOSH!

However, that wasn't the end.

The veiled figure extended a hand towards the miniature construct of the Blackthorn mansion. Slowly, details formed. Each wall, each window, and even the intricate designs of the building's architecture became vividly visible in the miniature replica.

"H-how?"

Suddenly, a voice came from the young man lying on the ground. He was now awake and looking at the miniature.

The veiled figure continued to shape the miniature, revealing inner chambers, secret passages, and hidden compartments. It was a flawless representation of the mansion, down to the smallest detail.

"There." The veiled figure pointed to a particular location within the model with a small arrow made by the darkness, a concealed chamber that was hidden from plain sight. "That's where they keep it."

The bulky man leaned in, his eyes narrowing as he examined the spot. "Good. Now tell me more about this item and the security surrounding it."

"There isn't much there." The veiled figure spoke. "You just need to take this." Following that, a small vial filled with blood was carried to the bulky man. "This will be enough for you to enter without any force."

The bulky man accepted the vial of blood, carefully storing it in a secure pocket on his uniform. He knew the significance of this small vial; it would serve as their ticket to access the Blackthorn mansion without triggering any alarms.

"You've been helpful so far," he stated in a businesslike tone, his blue eyes unwavering as he met the veiled figure's gaze. "But remember, this is a partnership of necessity. If anything goes wrong or if you double-cross us, you know what the consequences will be." With each of his words, immense amounts of pressure descended upon the figure.

However, the veiled figure didn't flinch. "You have your motives, and I have mine. This transaction is one of mutual benefit. Rest assured, as long as we achieve our respective goals, there will be no need for double-crossing."

"Good to know." As the bulky man said those words, he immediately turned his attention to the screens and tapped the microphone. "Team Fox, get ready."

The moment he finished his words, a huge amount of mana got sucked in, forming another portal behind the room. A group of black-clad individuals followed the portal and entered there without an ounce of hesitation.

"How can you know that?"

Kaiser Blackthorn was aware of the significance of what was happening. The fact that this person was aware of the location of 'that' was disturbing.

"You haven't understood it yet?" As the answer, a rather questioning tone came. "I always thought you were on the smart side."

However, the moment those words left their mouth, Kaiser's face lost its color.

"No...Y-you...Y-you should be dead."

A low, almost mocking chuckle emanated from beneath the veil. "Death, young Kaiser, is not always the end. There are ways to escape its clutches, to defy its finality. Let's just say I found a way to make a return, and here I stand before you."

As the veiled figure's cryptic words settled in, a chilling realization began to take hold of Kaiser. There was something undeniably familiar in the veiled figure's mannerisms, in the way they spoke, in the threads of their shared past that seemed to dangle before him.

Kaiser couldn't escape the sense of déjà vu, as if a ghost of his past was emerging from the shadows. The figure's words carried a weight of secrets and grievances, a hint of unfinished business that only deepened the mystery.

If this person was still alive, didn't that mean...

"I can't believe it," Kaiser stammered, unable to hide the tremor in his voice. "But why... How... You betrayed the family.....You were banished with them.....You....."

The veiled figure's voice remained as cold and distant as ever, but even then, a slight mocking could be sensed from his following actions.

"Heh....." The figure released a small mocking laugh. "The betrayal you spoke about.....Weren't you with father the ones who did that?"

Kaiser just shook on the ground, unable to keep his composure. "I-it...I-it was for the sake of family, you know that too."

The veiled figure's cold facade cracked for a moment, revealing a deep-seated anger. "You think this was about some family gains? About wealth and power?" His tone grew more intense, filled with a smoldering resentment. "<nullb>Her life was worth more than all of that combined. But you never understood, did you?"

The revelation hung heavy in the air, leaving a profound silence in its wake. Secrets and buried emotions were resurfacing, weaving a complex and conflicted history between Kaiser and the veiled figure.

"None of that matters anymore." The veiled figure simply raised their head and looked at the ceiling. "In the end, I will bring her to life, and I will do whatever it takes to achieve that."

Kaiser couldn't shake the ominous feeling that he was in the midst of something far more dangerous and more profound than he could grasp.

It was as if an intricate puzzle of the past was unraveling before him, revealing hidden connections and deep-seated emotions that had long been buried.

His disbelief was evident as he looked at the veiled figure, struggling to comprehend the figure's intentions. "What are you going to do?"

Just like any other human being, he also wanted to know about the fate waiting for him in the future. He wanted to know what was going to happen to him the most.

The veiled figure's gaze remained fixed on the ceiling as they spoke, their voice carrying an eerie sense of purpose. "I have found a way—a path guided by holy power and ancient prophecies. I will do whatever it takes to bring her back to life, even if it means confronting the strongest family that pushed me to this pit of hell."

As the veiled figure said that, they turned their attention to Kaiser.

"And you.....You will be the first piece in that path..." In their shadowy face, two green eyes shone at that exact second filled with emptiness. "And then it will be the 'Saintess' of prophecy. The chosen one of sun."

As his cold words echoed in the room filled with darkness, Kaiser could only gulp and wait for the future awaiting him.....

[Team Fox, Report.]

In the heart of the Blackthorn Mansion and narrow corridors, hidden beneath layers of powerful magical wards and guarded by immense quality artifacts, four figures could be seen walking.

Each of them had their body covered by a black cloth.

"Team Fox, reporting. We have arrived at the designed destination." The man standing in the front spoke with a serious tone as he reached a small door.

The door was shining, and countless different lasers could be seen behind it. Normally, they would use mana disturbance to destroy the artifacts, but this door was different.

Instead of working with the mana in the environment, these artifacts were supplied by the mana source underneath the mansion. A special technology that only the highest-ranking families had access to.

That was also the reason why they were unable to directly open a portal just before the vault, even though they knew the exact location of it since the walls were made of the world's most expensive material with [Mana Defiance] property.

[You have three minutes left.]

"Understood."

As the man replied, he reached into a concealed pocket and withdrew a vial of dark crimson liquid. With a practiced motion, he dropped a single drop of blood onto the small circle beneath the door.

The moment the droplet touched the circle, the intricate wards and laser defenses surrounding the door started to deactivate one by one.

[Deactivation in progress. Scanning...]

The mechanical voice in the room announced their progress.

The rest of Team Fox watched with bated breath as A continued to feed the circle drops of the blood.

They knew the importance of the bloodline recognition system. It was the Blackthorn family's last line of defense, a final safeguard to protect their most precious secrets. Even coming here alone showed

[Authorization confirmed. Access granted.]

<nulli>-TAK!

The moment those words resonated through the chamber, the towering doors swung open, revealing a pitch-black passage leading into the heart of the vault.

"Team Fox reporting. We have access to the vault now."

As A reported, he gestured to his members with his hands. Even though, according to the information they had received from the veiled figure, nothing must happen, they knew he wasn't trustworthy enough.

[Good. Make sure to secure the artifact, but don't lower your guard.]

With the command coming from the earphone, he immediately signaled his team to enter the vault.

<nulli>-THUD!

With fast steps, the members entered the vault rapidly without wasting any more time.

<nulli>SWOOSH

Though little did they know, behind them, a shadowy figure followed their steps.

Chapter 124 Chapter 29.7 - Banquet

<nulli>-TAK!

Team Fox moved in a coordinated manner, each of them knowing their roles and responsibilities well.

The Blackthorn family's vault was vast, with rows upon rows of display cases, shelves, and secure containers holding priceless artifacts, relics, and treasures.

A scanned the room, his eyes behind the mask analyzing the layout and figuring out where they should start searching.

Since they didn't have any information regarding the location of the 'item' they had been searching for, they needed to operate as fast as possible.

He whispered orders through the communication device in their ears, ensuring that they covered the most ground efficiently.

"Z, head for the eastern section. X, west. Y, take the central area. I'll go straight for the safe in the back," A commanded, his voice calm.

The team split up as they began examining the contents of the vault. The artifacts ranged from enchanted weapons to rare spellbooks and intricately crafted magical trinkets. Each one held immense value and power, but they were not here for them.

Even though they were all valuable, it was as if they were here to confuse those who didn't know much about the thing.

'And that is the goal.'

I thought, slowly moving in the shadows.

'As expected, they didn't send their strongest members.'

My eyes observed every bit of their movements, picking up the small details that were giving away their strength.

My trait [Perceptive Insight] was doing its work. The members were all fast and precise at analyzing, continuously looking for small details. But their posture and the weapons they held weren't strong.

It was because they were not focused on combat but rather originated as thieves. Professionals who stole artifacts from vaults.

The combat-oriented ones were probably focusing on the attack on the banquet hall right now to make it seem like this was just a terrorist attack, but in fact, it wasn't.

It will later be revealed that Kaiser was abducted, but that isn't my concern.

'I should start moving.'

I had been trailing them from the moment they made their appearance by the portal, and that was how I found the location of the vault.

I started moving in the shadows, masking my presence as much as I could.

The item they were looking for was something that would break the grounds of magic engineering and the ethics of higher-ranking families if it was known.

<nullb>The Project of Mana Nucleus.

In other words, the project of using human bodies as sources of energy.

Truly an inhuman act for power. But that wasn't even surprising. Which superpower in the world didn't have the ambition to be the absolute power?

The desire to become a god? Wasn't this the reason why we humans are waging wars on others?

So, those who are strong and the ones whose words count as history don't need to have the ethics we normal humans have.

And this applies to not only humans but also demons.

This is one of the reasons why I was here in this place.

'I will never let it go into the hands of demons.'

In the game, this moment marked the first appearance of him, even though it was implicit.

Even then, as one of the highest-ranking villains and one of the most dangerous ones, even his implicit appearance had a vast effect on the story of the game.

Because the moment the incomplete<nullb> Mana Nucleus was stolen with all the research materials, demons would get their hands on one of the most dangerous future weapons in the game.

Even though the research was stopped for the time being because of the lack of 'brains,' however the demons didn't have that problem at all as they did have the Mad Scientist on their side.

And, thanks to him, the research would be completed, which would lead to immense amounts of destruction.

"A, I think I have found something."

Just as I was thinking about that, suddenly, my ears perked up as I looked at the black-clad guy before me.

He was pointing to a peculiar display case with a subtle grin behind his mask. The case had an ornate design, just like the other containers in the room.

However, it was as if he knew something I didn't, as his hands immediately started moving precisely.

<nulli>-TAK!

And, in a matter of seconds, suddenly, the shelf started moving upwards.

Revealing a small corridor.

"This is it."

The leader and the strongest member of the group, A, immediately came to the location they had discovered.

'This is really it.'

The energy that was being released from the corridor was so enormous that I could feel my skin grazing.

'I guess that marks the wait.'

With that thought, I slowly reached for my gun stored in my bracelet and also grabbed my daggers, putting them on my belt.

Thanks to the fact that this bracelet had the unique property of not being detected, I could bring whatever weapons I needed, even as a waiter. And, I could also bring some necessary items I would need.

Like a jammer to block the signal going outside.

And that was the most crucial part of the plan.

"Let's go."

The leader, A, motioned for the other intruder to proceed. That was my cue.

<nullb>Eyes of Hourglass.

I activated my skill, Eyes of Hourglass, and time around me began to slow. The world moved at a languid pace as I assessed the situation.

'I shouldn't waste any more time.'

I recognized the weaker of the two intruders, the one who had found the hidden corridor. They were momentarily distracted, and I seized the perfect moment. With a deep breath, I aimed my gun with the silencer, steadied my hand while also putting my mana into the gun, and fired.

<nulli>-PIU!

A silenced gunshot echoed.

However, I was yet to be done.

<nulli>-PIU!

Immediately, I fired another bullet without wasting any time. Even though my body was also moving slowly, at the very least, I could process the information a lot faster thanks to my skill.

<nulli>-SPURT!

The moment I had deactivated my skill and time returned to its normal flow, the sound of blood splashing echoed, followed by a thud sound.

"Grrr..."

As the weaker intruder collapsed, a bullet wound in their chest, A gritted his teeth, feeling the wound in his shoulder.

The bullet found its mark, but it didn't infect too much of a wound since A was a higher-ranked Awakened.

'I knew that would be like that.'

He was the leader of the group that was sent to the vault; there was no way a bullet, even coated with mana, would be enough to pierce his skin.

<nulli>SWOOSH

Before A could react to the unexpected attack, I sprang into action, drawing my daggers.

With uncanny speed, I closed the distance between us. A turned to face me, his mask hiding his surprise.

<nullb>Eyes of Hourglass.

Time slowed down once again, as I could also see the weak points with my skill.

The skill allowed me to move with unparalleled speed and precision. I aimed for vital spots, seeking to incapacitate the opponent rapidly.

But it was only for a second, as mana consumption was high.

"Code D," A muttered into his earbuds as my first dagger descended towards him.

<nulli>CLANK!

In that instant, his sword rose to meet my attack, blocking it with precise timing. His training and experience were evident as he parried my assault, his mask concealing any expression.

'He is a professional.'

Even though his strength wasn't that high, the way he parried my blow showed he was at least on the level of academy cadet, and that itself was an achievement and danger.

<nulli>-SWOOSH!

However, I was still at an advantage.

'He is injured.'

Because he was injured.

I pressed that advantage, with my movements fluid and deliberate, as I aimed for his exposed areas.

<nulli>SWOOSH!

A tried to remain calm and composed.

He deftly dodged and blocked my strikes, his movements calculated and efficient. Each blow I delivered was met with a swift counter, as A used his sword both for defense and offense.

But then again, he wouldn't be able to keep that for too long.

<nulli>-CLANK

"Hkk...."

As he deflected another one of my attacks, he spilled blood from his mouth as the momentum of my attack put a strain on his body.

<nulli>SWOOSH!

At that exact second, I could feel a projectile coming from the sides. My highly developed [Intuition] parameter enabled me to sense the projectile.

<nulli>SWISH!

With a unique footwork, I immediately avoided the attack coming my way. It was a compressed lightning bolt.

<nulli>CIZZT!

As it went past my face, the bolt hit the wall.

"Tch."

I could see the other two had already reached this place.

<nulli>CRACKLE

'Lightning will be troublesome.'

One of them was using lightning psions around them, and the other one had his sword clad with mana.

They were here to reinforce their leader, A, but I had no intention of allowing that to happen.

With a swift, practiced motion, I retrieved a smoke bomb from my concealed bracelet and hurled it to the ground.

<nulli>PUFF!

The bomb burst with a hiss, releasing a thick cloud of smoke that quickly enveloped the vault.

A dense, obscuring fog now concealed the battlefield, blocking their vision and disorienting the intruders.

"What?"

"Be careful."

I could hear their voices, as my traits enabled me to see a lot better, even in the smoke.

Activating my [Shadowborne], I masked my presence and started moving rapidly, grabbing my gun again.

<nulli>-PIU! -PIU! -PIU!

Bullets tore through the hazy air, a barrage of surprise attacks. The intruders were forced to rely on their instincts, unable to see their assailant clearly.

And that was what exactly I was aiming for.

The sound of suppressed gunfire echoed in the vault, making it a terrifying battlefield for those who had ventured into my domain.

"Where is he?"

<nulli>CRACKLE!

The lightning wielder's powers crackled.

<nulli>SWOOSH!

However, before he could even move at any moment, I immediately dashed to his face and raised my gun.

<nulli>SPURT!

Quick and precise shots found their mark on his forehead before he could react.

"He is here!"

<nulli>SWOOSH!

The mana-clad sword user attempted to retaliate; however, with my eyes, I could already see the trajectory of the attack on the way.

With the smoke covering their sight and them being not good enough, I sidestepped the sword swing in a matter of seconds.

<nulli>STAB!

And then my dagger stabbed the man by the neck, and blood spurted from the wound.

<nulli>-THUD! -THUD!

The intruders crumpled to the ground, one by one, incapacitated by my calculated and unexpected assaults.

But the battle was not over yet. A had healed himself with a potion, and he was now closing in, his sword still radiating with dangerous mana. However, I had a final ace up my sleeve.

As he lunged toward me, we clashed once more. A's blade met my daggers, and we engaged in a swift and deadly dance of strikes and parries. But I knew that this battle wouldn't last long.

<nulli>SWOOSH!

Just to prove my point, the moment I swung my daggers coated with crimson mana, I could feel A stagger for a second.

<nulli>CLANK!

He managed to block my attack, but that made him lose his balance more.

<nulli>THUMP!

"Burgh-"

As suddenly blood spilled from his mouth, A fell to the ground.

"Hrrrrr....What did you do?"

He tried to stand up, but he found no strength in his body.

"Don't you know?"

With a simple tone, I slowly approached him, with my gun pointing at his head.

"It was poison, wasn't it?"

"It was."

<nulli>PIU!

Chapter 125 Chapter 29.8 - Banquet

"Team Fox! Team Fox! ANSWER ME!"

Inside the same space filled with portals opening all around, the bulky man was shedding sweat.

As the urgency in the bulky man's voice intensified, he repeatedly attempted to establish contact with Team Fox, his fingers frantically tapping the microphone. But there was nothing but silence as the signal remained frustratingly broken.

"Team Fox! Respond, dammit!" he barked into the microphone, his eyes darting between the screens that displayed the ominous darkness within the room where the veiled figure stood.

"Czzzt....."

However, only a broken and disturbed signal came as a response, as if to mock him. He wondered, how did this happen?

Was there a jammer that would block their communication?

His face turned to the veiled figure, his eyes bloodshot. Had he been betrayed? He asked himself.

"It is not the Blackthorn Family."

At that second, the veiled figure's voice came just to answer his question. "The mana-eating property of the walls wouldn't block the signal, and you know it."

"THEN WHO IS IT, DAMMIT!"

He shouted, his voice echoing in the darkness of the veiled figure's chamber while the screens and whirling sounds continued, though there was no response from Team Fox.

It was as if a shroud of secrecy had descended, separating them from the world outside.

And for them, the members of the most crucial part, that was something that couldn't be overlooked no matter what.

"DELTA!"

The bulky man immediately shouted, his face turning to one of the screens. There, he could see one of the attackers clashing with the forces of the Blackthorn Family.

[What is it, leader? CLANK!]

A composed voice came from the speaker as the man clashing with one of the guards stood up.

"Retreat from your position and return immediately."

[Are you sure, leader? The planned time hasn't come yet.]

"Yes, we don't have any choice."

[Understood.]

As the bulky man clenched his fists from one of the portals, a black-clad individual with blood splattered all around his body appeared. It was as if he butchered countless animals.

From the tip of his spear, blood was spilling to the ground.

"I need you to look for Team Fox."

"Team Fox? The ones entering the vault?"

"Yes. Something must have happened there."

"Tch. I knew those thief bastards wouldn't be able to do the job properly, didn't I-"

"SHUT UP! We don't have much time to waste."

"Understood."

Without even talking much, the man with the spear suddenly disappeared, leaving a gush of wind behind his back. It was a truly inhuman speed belonging to a high-ranking awakened.

<nulli>-WROOM!

In a matter of seconds, the man entered the portal, leaving everyone alone.

Delta, one of the black-clad individuals of the shadowy organization, obeyed the leader's orders without hesitation.

He retreated from his current position, leaving behind the chaos of battle in the Blackthorn Family's stronghold.

The plan had been to keep the guards, and the forces of the Blackthorn family occupied for a certain time, but the unexpected turn of events had forced a change of plans.

"Tch, that is why I said he should have sent me."

He was one of the strongest members of the organization and knew such an important task shouldn't have been left to random thieves.

As Delta passed through the portal and arrived at the vault's location before him stood a scene that he was very familiar with.

What lay before him was a gruesome scene of death and destruction. The lifeless bodies of Team Fox were strewn about, their blood pooling on the polished floors of the vault.

It was a classic tableau of violence that he himself lived all his life. He spread his senses with mana into the vault using his unique skill [Radar]; he could sense no life aside from himself.

Four lifeless bodies and a bunch of artifacts belonging to the vault.

He just stood there for a second, as he immediately realized they were too late.

Since the fact that the item they were searching for was not even there. The amount of energy that the <nullb>Mana Nucleus should have contained was something that he would never miss, no matter what happened.

"Tch."

He clicked his tongue as he lowered his hands. He started searching for the body of one of the dead Team Fox members.

Delta carefully inspected the lifeless bodies of Team Fox.

<nulli>CLICK!

With a click sound, he found the thing he was looking for.

His experienced eyes quickly discerned that the special device they had planned to use to conceal the energy of the Mana Nucleus was indeed missing from each of the fallen members.

"This?"

The moment he realized that fact, he immediately understood one thing. Whoever had orchestrated this last-minute disturbance was well-prepared and well-informed.

The fact that they knew the organization had the necessary equipment to secure the Mana Nucleus meant it was known to them.

"There was a rat."

He mumbled to himself as he realized that fact.

They knew the value of the Mana Nucleus and had taken the necessary steps to secure it.

The shadowy organization had not only failed in its mission but also lost a valuable asset.

[Delta.]

At that exact second, from the earbuds inside his head came the voice of the leader.

[What is the situation?]

Delta took a deep breath before responding.

"Leader, things went south. Team Fox is down, and the special concealment device for the Mana Nucleus is missing. Someone knew about our mission and our target."

A heavy silence followed his words. The leader knew the significance of the Mana Nucleus and the lengths they had gone to secure it. The failure of this operation was a significant setback for the shadowy organization, and there would undoubtedly be consequences.

[FUCK!]

Following that came the loud shouting of someone angry. It was the expected response; even Delta knew how important this mission was.

[Get out of there, Delta. We are done here.]

As the order came, Delta stood up once again. He wanted to look for more clues about who did it, but he knew he didn't have much time.

"Understood," Delta replied, his voice tinged with disappointment and frustration.

<nulli>THUD!

However, he wanted to vent his anger, and he did it by kicking the corpses of Team Fox.

"Useless bastards."

He mumbled, looking at the rolling body.

<nulli>TICK!

However, at that exact second, he found something shiny on the ground. It was a small object that was shining even in the dimly illuminated room.

"Bullet?"

He thought to himself as he grabbed the small object. For some reason, his intuition told him that he should take this piece with him as a clue.

And he did just that, putting the small metallic piece into his pocket.

<nulli>SWOOSH!

Then, he left as he entered without even wasting any more seconds. Just like the wind he came and the wind he left.

<nulli>RUSTLE!

Though because of that, he missed the silhouette that suddenly appeared out of the shadows, with an outfit whose golden engravings were shining.

Even the mask covering his face was unable to mask the purple eyes shining underneath.

"That was close."

I mumbled to myself, finally moving from the spot I was in.

"If not for this artifact, I would be dead."

There were two reasons why I came to this place and spent this much time and resources for today.

The first one was to disturb the plans of the demons and the organization.

And the second one was to make myself stronger.

How could I become stronger? When this question was asked, there were several answers that could come.

You could train and increase your stats by pushing yourself to the limits.

Or you could be born with a silver spoon.

And, now inside the vault of the Blackthorns, here I was, meeting the second requirement in my own way.

The moment I had killed the intruders, the first thing I did was to secure the Mana Nucleus. Since they came here knowing its properties, they already had the device to seal the energy coming out of it.

Of course, if they didn't know how to seal the energy being released, that would undoubtedly make them a target, as if to show others what they were doing.

Moreover, it was also impossible to put such unstable material energy-wise into the spatial bracelet without stabilizing it.

Those were the reasons why they would need a different device. And I knew what that device was.

Thus, grabbing the small higher technology suitcase, I immediately secured the Mana Nucleus and put it into my spatial bracelet.

However, that wasn't the end. I knew the fact that another member, probably one of the highest-ranking ones, would be sent to this place, and that alone was enough to threaten my life.

And, I was sure that my [Shadowborne] trait wouldn't be enough to conceal my energy from the eyes of high-ranking awakeners.

At that time, inside the Nexoria City Museum, the reason why Kaya wasn't able to find me was that she didn't have the direct opportunity to look for me. If she had the chance, she could easily find me and locate me.

However, that didn't mean I was hopeless.

I knew one of the things that I had been lacking was the fact that I needed armor. A suit that I could use to defend myself.

A special armor that needed to be flexible, enabling me to move stealthily, and also a good defense.

If there was such an armor, the Blackthorn Family would certainly have it, and in fact, they did.

[Unknown's Armor]

In the game, Victor gave one of his lackeys that armor later times.

A special armor that was found in one of the dungeons as loot and then later stored in the Blackthorn Family's Armory way in the past. Though the previous Blackthorn's did use it a little and enchanted it, it was still something that even most of the Blackthorns were not aware of since the item was left behind on the shelves and was already forgotten.

Considering the amount of things that the Blackthorn Family had and created, it was pretty normal that this armor was left to rot on shelves of one of the random vaults.

Also, most of the items here were actually things that Blackthorn's didn't care about or things they had abandoned as projects.

However, that didn't mean it was useless. It just didn't have the opportunity to shine.

The armor's innate ability was pretty simple but useful.

It had the ability to block the mana detection abilities, making it impossible to be located by mana sense. And, to add more, it also improved the stealth-related traits of the wearer.

I didn't know how the stealth improvement worked exactly, but the nerds of the game always advised the assassins to wear this armor in later stages as their main gear since it basically made the game a lot easier.

But that wasn't all there to it.

Thanks to the enchantments that were carved onto the armor by previous Blackthorns, the armor also had the ability to increase one's stats according to their limits when worn. Moreover, since it was a mana artifact, it had the ability to adjust its size and how it looked, just like most of the armor.

This was what made it a very suitable item for me and a good catch.

And there I was, eating the fruits of the armor hiding in the shadows. Thanks to the armor's unique ability, I was able to go undetected by his mana expansion, and that saved my life.

"Now, I have at most two minutes left."

I mumbled to myself, looking at the shelves.

"I guess this is the time to secure some good money....."

Chapter 126 Chapter 29.9 - Banquet

<nulli>CLANK! CLANK! CLANK!

Amid the chaos and battle in the banquet hall, the six youngsters fought bravely. It was not because the security of the Blackthorn's were lacking.

It was because the six disliked the idea of watching while a battle was unfolding before their eyes. Each of them had their own pride, and they refused to become a liability.

Being a member of high-ranking families came with talent, but it also brought the ego of their own.

"This is four." And it soon turned into a competition on its own.

<nulli>CLANK!

As another clash of weapons echoed, the young man with blue hair pushed back.

"Hey, Ethan. Are you okay?" "Julia shouted over the clash of steel of her own as she looked at her friend.

<nulli>SWOOSH!

Ethan parried an incoming blow and responded, "Huk! I am fine."

However, even though he replied by saying he was fine, blood was spilling from his hand holding his spear. It was clear that the blow he had just blocked put a strain on his body as if it was something that was above his league.

<nulli>SWOOSH! SLASH!

"It doesn't look like to me," Julia replied with her sword flashing, and instantly, the guy before him fell to the ground, blood spilling from his guts.

As she turned back to Ethan, a teasing smile played on her lips, even amidst the chaos. "Should I lend a hand?"

Even though she extended her sword, the slightly teasing smile on her lips scratched Ethan's pride. That pride wouldn't let him accept help so easily.

He shook his head, determination burning in his eyes, as he looked at the guy.

"I've got this, Julia. I don't need your help."

"Look at this guy, trying to act tough." At that second, another cheerful voice came looking at Ethan. The owner's white hair was dyed with crimson color, with his sword also having some of it.

<nulli>SWOOSH!

However, before the two could tease Ethan any further, suddenly, a bunch of black tendrils attacked them from the side.

<nulli>CLANK! CLANK!

"Tch!"

"These are too annoying."

As they deflected the tendrils, they were still pushed back.

Following that, before them stood a new group of adversaries. They were also shrouded in black, and the aura of demonic energy that radiated from them was unmistakable.

"DIE!"

<nulli>SCHLINK!

As one of them immediately jumped on Julia's face, a clear light flashed for a second.

<nulli>CLANK!

The demonic energy was confronted by the mana on the sword as sparks flew to the surroundings.

"We need to be careful," Lucas said while confronting the guy as well. "The demonic energy around us is thickening."

"Yes."

As the two twins continued their fight, Ethan was also fighting his own.

<nullb>'This is dangerous.'

He thought to himself, seeing the individual before him. Even though the man wasn't excluding the aura of an overwhelming fighter, the mana disturbance and the demonic energy were making it very difficult for him to deal with the enemies.

Also, his strength was still not sufficient, and now he was clearly feeling the disparity.

<nulli>SWOOSH!

As the black-cladded man before him closed the distance immediately, the sword in his hand flashed.

<nulli>CLANK!

However, the spear was still there to confront it directly.

"Kurgh!"

But even then, as the momentum of the attack was transmitted to Ethan, he couldn't help but be pushed back.

<nulli>CLANK! CLANK! CLANK!

The dark-cladded induvial was relentless, and most importantly, he was ruthless.

<nulli>SLASH!

Different from Ethan's past fights or spars, this time, he was directly fighting with someone who wished to kill him.

The enemy's sword wasn't honorable or anything. He was swinging his sword like he just wanted to kill him.

It's like he just wanted to spread despair.

Continuously, the man attacked, aiming at his vital points.

<nullb>'Should I look for help?'

Ethan thought, feeling the pain of the enemy's attacks.

<nulli>SLASH!

Wounds continued to accumulate on his body as the swordsman before him relentlessly attacked.

<nullb>'No. I won't.'

However, he refused. Even though he knew the enemy was stronger than him, he refused to seek help.

His pride didn't allow him to do so.

<nulli>SPURT!

"Huk-!"

Still, despite his determined demeanor, Ethan was pushed on the defensive by the relentless strikes from the black-clad swordsman.

The sword whirled and slashed with precision, and Ethan had to parry and dodge while being gradually forced back.

And for a fighter, Ethan knew the importance of the momentum. And now, it was on the enemy's side.

<nullb>'I need to do something.'

Ethan thought to himself. Even while he was in pain and was getting pushed back, he was still able to keep his head calm.

<nulli>SWOOSH!

The demonic energy on the sword of the enemy surged forward, aiming to injure him.

He tried to dodge, but he was unable to do so. The attack was too fast for him to dodge and evade.

<nulli>SLASH!

As the demonic energy-infused blade made contact with Ethan, he felt the piercing pain as it sliced through his defenses and cut across his chest.

<nulli>THUD!

Blood sprayed from the wound, and he staggered back, clutching the injury.

<nullb>'This is the power of the Devil.'

At that moment, the grim realization of the demonic humans' formidable strength hit him directly, and he knew that his pride might have led him into a dangerous predicament.

<nullb>'This is why brother always hated the demonic humans.'

He understood the difference in terms of strength. All those people taking the power of devil took the easy way to get stronger.

While people with humanity left were working hard to improve themselves, they sold themselves to the devil in exchange for power.

<nulli>TAP! TAP! TAP!

The steps of the demonic human approached with a chilling aura.

As Ethan staggered back, clutching his chest wound, he realized the dire situation he was in. The dark-clad enemy was unrelenting, displaying no sign of mercy or restraint.

<nullb>'I am going to die?'

He asked to himself, looking at the approaching figure.

The panic, fear, and countless other emotions threatened to overtake him, his eyes darting around the banquet hall.

His companions were engaged in fierce battles of their own; their youthful energy pitted against the demonic attackers.

But it was the sight of the attackers' swords piercing through some of the guests that struck him with a potent mixture of despair and anger.

He watched helplessly as innocent people were caught in the crossfire, falling to the ground in pain.

It was as if the time had been slowing down, as he could see the figure was approaching. But strangely, the fear and panic started leaving his heart.

<nullb>'What am I doing?'

Anger took its place. Anger towards those vicious bastards, slaughtering humans like they were some sort of pigs.

Anger towards himself, pathetically lying on this ground.

<nullb>'Who am I afraid of?'

He looked at the approaching figure. The demonic energy spreading from him was something that was sending shivers down his spine.

It was obvious that the murderous intent that had accumulated over countless murders was mixed into that energy.

He could see the smirk on the face of the man. As if to mock him in his face, the man was showing how he killed countless different people with his sword.

<nullb>'I am Ethan Hartley.'

He grabbed the spear lying on the ground.

<nulli>STAB!

Stabbed it onto the ground and held onto it.

<nullb>'I refuse to bow down to bastards like you.'

His eyes started shining, his blue hair slowly fluttering. The aura around him slowly changed.

At that exact moment, Ethan felt something inside him changing. The way he saw the world slowly changed.

"Bring it down, you bastard."

He stood up, blood spilling from the wound on his chest.

"Heh.....Little boy....Did you grow up now?"

The man before him talked for the first time, and the creepy smile on his face widened.

"It will be fun to gouge those eyes."

<nulli>SWOOSH!

That man rushed to him in a matter of seconds, his speed exceeding the one he showed before.

<nullb>'I can see it.'

However, in that crucial moment, as Ethan's anger and determination surged, something extraordinary occurred.

His perception shifted, and he found himself 'seeing' the enemy's movements in a way he had never experienced before.

The black-clad swordsman, with his demonic energy-infused sword, prepared to strike.

But Ethan, his blue hair now flowing gently around him, could 'see' the enemy's intent. It was as if the very air around the attacker revealed his next move.

It was a new thing for Ethan. Something that he was feeling for the first time.

<nullb>'So this is how they see things.'

Ethan thought, remembering his brother's words.

<nulli><nullb>"When you battle enough, at some point, your body will tell you what you need to do."

His brother's words echoed in his mind.

<nullb>'I can now understand, brother.'

With newfound clarity, Ethan moved his spear with swift precision. He parried the incoming strike, and his movements flowed effortlessly as if guided by some unseen force. The enemy's blade whirled harmlessly past him, missing its mark.

"Huh?"

The sinister grin on the attacker's face faded, replaced by a look of disbelief.

He couldn't comprehend how Ethan, who had been on the defensive just moments ago, was now not only holding his ground but counterattacking with unexpected precision.

"Is it fun?"

Ethan asked, dodging another strike aimed at his neck with a unique footwork. It was as if he was evolving while he was battling with his enemy.

"What?"

The man now looked annoyed, the creepy smile on his face no longer to be seen.

"Selling your soul to the devil, trampling over the weak. Slaughtering like they are some sort of animals."

<nulli>SWOOSH!

Ethan's eyes, shining with an intensity born from anger and newfound insight, continued to read the enemy's intentions. He sidestepped incoming slashes, deflected strikes, and countered with expertly aimed thrusts of his spear.

The demonic human, his attack thwarted by Ethan's newfound perception, laughed hysterically, his voice dripping with cruelty.

"Heh, you think you've become something, little boy? You're nothing compared to the power we possess. You humans are weak, and we are your reckoning."

Ethan's eyes remained fixed on his adversary, unwavering in his resolve. Slowly, the battle started turning, as Ethan was now pushing the man back.

"You call this power? I call it cowardice," Ethan retorted, his voice filled with conviction. "You've lost touch with your humanity, and in doing so, you've lost your soul. You are nothing but a monster."

The demonic human's twisted smile returned, but it held no warmth. "Humanity is a weakness, a disease. We've transcended it and embraced our true potential. I am simply cleansing the world from a disease, that's it."

As Ethan heard the demonic human's words, the anger in his eyes soared.

"You are simply cleansing the world from a disease..."

He wanted to say a lot of things, but those countless words got stuck in his mouth. Because he realized it was meaningless for him to try to understand this guy.

"It is sad...."

"What is?"

"That you are made to believe that bullshit from your heart."

As those words left Ethan's mouth, he took his position. The mana disturbance field was already losing its effect, and the mana was returning to its normal position finally.

<nulli><nullb>'Spear of Hartley. Dragon's Seal.'

"Yo-!"

Before the dark-clad man could refute it, he suddenly felt the mana surging to the tip of the enemy's spear.

A shiny yellow aura appeared on the tip.

<nulli>SWIRL!

"Wha!"

He concentrated his demonic energy on his body to meet the blow.

<nulli>SWOOSH!

However, it wasn't enough.

With a final, precise thrust, Ethan struck true, his spear piercing through the man's chest.

<nulli>THUD!

The demonic human's cruel laughter was silenced as he fell to the ground, defeated and broken.

"May you find peace in your next life."

With those words spoken, Ethan raised his spear and looked at the banquet hall. It was clear that the enemies had yet to be defeated, and he had much to do still.

Hope you liked this chapter. I want to make it so that, you can also see Ethan's progress at the same time.

Chapter 127 Chapter 29.10 - Banquet

"Huh....This was hard...."

After Ethan had his own awakening, the group of youngsters was able to deal with the enemies coming into them with a lot more space to spare. Adding the fact that the mana disturbance was also about to go down, the battle reached the point where demonic humans were losing.

Thanks to the Anti-Demon Team that also arrived as support, the situation was already under control.

And because of that, they now had the chance to look around. Since the enemy's strength wasn't something to scoff at, all of the members were busy themselves.

<nulli>SWOOSH! BOOM!

Though, there was a girl who now had the chance to show off.

"DIE! DIE! DIE!"

Irina, with her red hair fluttering between the ashes of her fire, was taking her anger out of the demonic humans, using her fire magic.

"She is mad," Ethan said as he looked into the figure of the girl.

<nulli>THUD!

"Yes, she is," Lucas added immediately, leaving himself on the table and lying there. His clothes were tattered, and there were some bleeding wounds, but even then, he looked fine. "She probably felt useless when the mana disturbance was around. Contrary to us, she is a mage, so without mana, she is quite a baggage."

"You know, you better not say it into her face, right?"

"Of course, man. Do you think I have a death wish or something?"

"Lucas, don't slack off." At that second, a man with a bulky build came. He was carrying a Warhammer in his hand.

"Yeah, yeah.... Just leave me alone, Carl."

"We can't stop now; the enemies are still there." Contrary to Lucas' dismissive tone, Carl didn't budge in. His serious expression and eyes were piercing through the young man lying on the table.

"Man, can't you see the battle is already over? Just cut me some slack."

Just as Carl said, there were still some sounds of fighting that could be heard, but most of the demonic humans were retreating back to portals, and those portals were closing one by one.

"DON'T LET THEM LEAVE! ATTACK!"

"ATTEND THE WOUNDED!"

Like a battlefield, some of the Blackthorn Family's forces were trying to pursue the retreating enemy, while clerics that were called were attending to the wounded.

"Yeah, we can afford to rest a little now." Julia also approached the group, in her hand, a broken sword.

"You broke your sword?" Ethan asked.

"It was just a random crap. Our family's swordsmanship can not be used with any normal sword." Julia replied, shrugging off.

Just as she said, both she and Lucas needed to change their swords frequently in this fight, and that almost cost them their lives.

15:17

"I guess that is true." Ethan nodded as he also watched the fight. His body was also tattered, and the injuries he had sustained were a lot more severe than others.

"You know, you need to get treatment," Julia said, looking at his wounds. "This is not something that you can ignore."

"Treatment?" Ethan looked clueless for a second, but as his eyes followed Julia's fingers, he finally realized the wounds he had accumulated.

"You were into fighting, weren't you? The fact that you are not even feeling the pain."

"..." Ethan didn't answer, but he only looked at the dead bodies that were carried by the personnel. He remembered the words that were spoken by the demonic human at that time.

<nullb>'Humanity is a weakness.'

The reason why he remembered those words was not because they were meaningful. It was because they conveyed how distorted these people were, if you could call them even people.

"You don't need to think about it too much." At that moment, Julia spoke. She was also looking at the same place.

"..."

"Demonic humans," Julia said, echoing Ethan's thoughts. "They're nothing more than monsters. People who've abandoned their humanity in exchange for power."

"....."

"So, you don't need to think of them as humans anymore. They are nothing but thrash that lost their own purpose in this life." She said as she slowly touched the metallic part of her blade. "This is the only thing they deserve."

"Yeah, you may be right," Ethan said, slowly standing. "But, I don't believe every evil in this world is irredeemable."

"Redeeming.....They won't ever want to redeem themselves, and you know it too."

"Yeah....But, it is the 'humanity' that makes us at least try, isn't it? Some people are just misunderstood or broken, and if we had just discarded them, this would make us no different than them."

As he said that, a certain gloomy boy came into his mind.

'What would he say if he was here, I wonder?'

Ethan thought as he started walking, with a slight smile lingering on his lips. For some reason, he wanted to exchange punches with him right now while talking. Those practical lessons were something he did enjoy.

'I guess I will talk to him when I return to the academy.'

However, right now, it was a little hard for him to do that since the pain in his wounds slowly started coming back.

"Please come here." Just as he was walking, a clerk came to him and immediately started attending to his wounds.

"Please drink this." First, she gave him a potion, and then she accelerated the healing process using her healing trait.

"You can leave now."

"Thank you."

With a nod of gratitude, he prepared to leave. However, as he turned, his attention was drawn to a commotion between the estate guards and the head butler.

The way they were talking to themselves and the way the head butler was looking angry was something that he couldn't ignore.

His intuition was telling him that he was about to hear something important.

"You can't contact young master Kaiser?"

"Yes. There is no reply coming from them."

The moment Head Butler heard that, suddenly, his eyes opened wide.

"Don't tell me!"

He knew the procedure that would be followed when one of the heirs was in danger, so he knew Kaiser was being escorted to the safe room.

<nulli>SWOOSH!

And immediately, the head-butler disappeared from space as he rushed to the location he had in his mind.

'This will make things quite complicated.'

Ethan thought as he started returning to where everyone was standing. After all, the fact that the heir of the Blackthorn family was missing would mean the Blackthorn family was going to look for revenge, and a possible annihilation was about to occur.

"Shocking News."

Inside my room, I was listening to the words of the news reporter while I was looking at the artifacts in my bracelet.

The news anchor on the television screen adjusted his tie and cleared his throat as he prepared to deliver the latest report. The headline read "The Heir of the Blackthorn Family Missing from Grand Banquet."

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," the anchor began, his voice filled with a mix of urgency and gravitas. "We bring you a breaking news story that has sent shockwaves throughout the city. The heir of the prestigious Blackthorn Family, Kaiser Blackthorn, has gone missing during the family's grand banquet, an event that was attended by the city's elite."

As I heard the news, I nodded my head.

'Just as I expected, this still happened.' The event of Kaiser Blackthorn's disappearance or abduction was something that would inevitably happen.

Since that person was the one who was hunting him down, it was something that would sooner or later happen and something that I wasn't even planning to interfere with.

After all, for me, Kaiser Blackthorn was just a random nobody, and it wasn't my responsibility to save him.

While I was thinking that, the camera shifted to show images of the opulent banquet hall, with a backdrop of the sprawling Blackthorn estate.

The hall had been transformed into a scene of chaos earlier in the evening, with reports of an organized attack by an unknown group of assailants.

"Earlier today, the Blackthorn Family's grand banquet was thrown into turmoil as a group of unidentified intruders launched an assault," the anchor continued. "The security forces and the estate guards were quick to respond, and the situation is now under control. However, in the midst of this chaotic event, the heir, Kaiser Blackthorn, has gone missing."

The screen displayed a striking image of Kaiser Blackthorn, his confident and poised demeanor contrasting sharply with the current crisis.

"The-"

Just as the news reporter was about to continue, I shut the channel down. From this point on, the words they would speak would be simply rubbish to control the public reaction, and that wouldn't be helpful at all.

"The Blackthorn's will be mad."

I mumbled as I looked at my loot.

The things that I had taken from the vault were things that were rare, but at the same time, they weren't extremely valuable.

The reason for that was to play it safe simply.

Considering the fact that the Blackthorn family had an immense amount of influence and they would be madly looking for clues about the attackers, I didn't have the luxury of looting everything down.

They will probably think that their belongings were stolen by the ones that had kidnapped Kaiser and attacked the banquet.

Because of that, they will also search the market using their resources since finding anything related to those items would possibly lead them to Kaiser.

This was the reason why I didn't take things that were incredibly rare and things I was not going to use.

Since the moment I sell those things, I am going to put myself in a position of danger. But this role doesn't apply to things that I will personally use or things that were hard to track by normal means.

[Armor of Unknown] was the first one. Since I am personally going to use it, I don't need to keep it safe.

"This is the second one." Mumbling like that, I grabbed the second thing that I would use for myself.

[Returning Blades]

A special type of blade that was designed in a specific Aerodynamical way and enhanced by the runes.

A bunch of throwable daggers that would return to their owner whenever called. That was their property. The connection between the daggers and the user won't go down unless the mana is being supplied.

This was a pretty sought item in the game since they opened a bright new way of playing the game.

Lastly, it is one of the most sought-after materials in the game.

A material that could be solely obtained by the Blackthorns and no one else.

[Morphium.]

The material which can open countless different possibilities for a weapon.

The material that would enable one's weapon to change its form.

Aside from those, the rest were nothing but a bunch of rubbish to me.

Thus, I did what was the best.

[Horde]

Contacted the special team that I hired....

Chapter 128 30.1 - Conversation

"Tch. Bastard."

"He still dares to show his face."

This has become a daily occurrence for me as I was walking in the corridors of the academy. The students were talking while looking at me with disgusted expressions.

After the incident related to the joint dungeon was solved, at least on the surface, the students had now returned to their original daily lives.

Of course, considering they are nothing but a bunch of youngsters who didn't know about life outside with the countless dangers awaiting them, their worries and the topics that they were talking about were also nothing but rubbish.

Even the fact that such rumors without any base whatsoever took ground in the academy and in their mouths showed how shallow humans or society are.

Just like a bunch of sheep that were being herded by the shepherds, most of their opinions and their thoughts were being manipulated by the environment around them, mostly stemming from the lack of critical thinking.

Though, for me, all those things or how I was being perceived didn't matter too much. From the moment I came to this academy...

No, from the moment she left, I had been alone in this world, and this probably won't change in the future.

So, for me, whatever people thought about me won't matter as long as something directly affecting my goals occurs.

THUD!

As I sat on the desk and put my books on the table, I started looking at today's lecture points. Even though I didn't care much about my notes, I also didn't want to drop out randomly, so I was putting in minimal effort.

Moreover, thanks to my traits, I was able to learn and understand the topics at a fast rate, which made it a lot easier for me to study before the class started.

[Introduction to Mana for Hunters]

This was the lesson of today.

[Study of Mana, 3rd edition, by. Alena Frostborne]

The book we were using was also written by a person who was pretty famous amongst the magic scholars.

'It was written in a clear way.'

I had been studying the subjects from this book for a while, but because I lacked the basics of mana before, I wasn't able to comprehend the complex investigation of mana shown in this book.

But that was no longer the case right now, thanks to Senior Maya's guidance. Because of that, I didn't have any difficulty studying this topic.

Just as I was reading the book, suddenly, I felt someone approaching me.

"Hey, Astron."

It was both the familiar and unfamiliar voice of the certain annoying guy.

". "

I didn't answer and just continued reading the book, just to convey that I wasn't interested in talking with him.

"Hey, I know you can hear me."

Of course, being the annoying guy he is, he didn't back down but rather approached me more.

"Hey. "

Not being able to ignore him anymore, I raised my head and looked at the guy now sitting in the empty seat beside me.

"What is it?" I asked, clearly with the intention of displaying that I didn't want to talk. Though, the innocent smile on his face was still there.

His fluttering blue hair was now cast to the right side, giving him a quite handsome look.

'Indeed, he is the main character.'

Just up from his shoulder, I could see some girls in the class casting glances at him rapidly. Of course, considering this guy's identity and his face, it made sense.

"What did you do on the weekend?" Ethan asked.

"Just usual."

"Usual what?"

"None of your business."

"Hmm....Hmm....You are the same as usual." Ethan said, looking at me.

His face did contain slight remorse as if he was thinking about something. He was playing with his thumb, and that was something he did whenever his mind was occupied with something.

Though, reading his body didn't mean I could read his mind. "What does that even mean?" As I asked what he meant, the answer I got was

"Nothing."

this....

"Tch....Just say what you want, and don't waste my time any longer." I said, looking at him with an irritated face.

"Okay, okay."

"So?"

"I wanted to ask if you are free after the lessons today."

Hearing his question, I thought about what I was going to do. Aside from training, there wasn't much to do for me for the time being.

"I will train; why did you ask?"

"Then, how about we have a spar."

"A spar?"

"Yeah. Just like in the lessons."

"Why not wait for the practical lesson?"

"Our partners are going to change from now on."

"...I see." I didn't know how he did, but it seemed he learned that our partners would change this week's training.

"So, what do you say?"

Hearing his question, I pondered about the idea for a little. The fight I had yesterday and my progress so far.

'It is a good opportunity.'

Without fighting with others, all the training I have done would be meaningless, and I know that I am developing a lot better when I am in a combat environment.

"Fine."

"Th-"

TAK!

Just as he was about to continue, the door of the classroom opened, and the professor of the lesson entered the room.

"ATTENTION!"

He was a serious professor with a non-giving temperament.

"I will call you after classes end."

Whispering like that, Ethan left my side and returned to his own seat as the class was about to start.

"Open your books."

And, with the words of the professor, the class started.

After the banquet was finished, Ethan returned to the academy. However, the events of that day still kept lingering in his mind.

His fight against the Demonic Human and how strong enemies were.

The fact that even the Blackthorns were targeted by them meant no one was actually safe.

And he also understood how weak he was when he finally met someone that strong. But he also knew he learned something new.

Something inside him did change while he was fighting with that man. And, because he knew that fact, he wanted to test the change he had.

"What are you pondering about?"

At that second, Lucas' voice came beside him with his usual laughter on his face.

"Nothing."

He replied.

Ethan could easily ask Lucas for a spar, or it could be Julia. However, he knew the difference between their stats was too much for the time being. Though he was sure, he could catch up to them sooner or later.

But then again, he wanted to test himself against an opponent that he was a lot more close to.

He wanted to compete against someone like himself.

"Yeah? Is it the usual 'nothing,' or is it really nothing?" Lucas asked with a clear smirk.

"..."

"Anyway, what are you going to do now that classes end? Do you want to grab a meal?"

"No. I want to train."

"Training, huh? Are you hyped up now that yesterday you were left behind?"

"Shut up."

"....Though, it might be a good idea to train. Should we do it together?"

"No. I already promised someone else."

"Ho? Who is that someone? Should I conjugate you now that you finally found your own way?"

As Ethan heard that, he sighed, trying to hide a faint smile. Lucas always had a way of pushing his buttons, and today was no exception.

"No, not a girl," Ethan replied, his voice tinged with exasperation. "I'll be sparring with a guy."

Lucas let out a low whistle. "It is him, isn't he?" His gaze was directed at the boy, who was slowly picking his things up.

"Yes."

"Why are you this interested in him anyway?"

When that question came, Ethan also thought about it for a second, and he immediately came up with an answer.

"He is good at fighting. You saw that too, didn't you? How he knocked that guy down at that time."

"I know it, but is it all? If you were only thinking about fighting prowess, there are quite strong people around you, right? Like this lord here."

"Yeah, I get it. You are strong. Don't make it cringe."

"So? Why him?"

"Well, talking with him is quite fun."

"From my side, it doesn't look like you are talking with him, though. It is more like you are trying to chase a lady that is not interested in you. Are you into such play?"

"...."

"You need to see your expression right now."

"You also need to think about what you are saying before actually saying them, you know?"

Lucas chuckled, thoroughly enjoying his friend's exasperation. "You're right. Sometimes, I can't resist getting a reaction out of you."

Ethan shook his head and turned his attention back to the conversation. "Anyway, it's not about any kind of 'play.' He's just an interesting guy. His way of thinking, his experiences... they're different from anyone else I've met here."

Lucas raised an eyebrow, genuinely intrigued this time. "Different, huh? In what way?"

"I don't know. It is just different. I felt challenged whenever I was with him."

"Fair enough," Lucas conceded, his teasing manner fading into genuine curiosity. "So, where is he now?" As he said, he looked at where the boy was picking his things up just now, and that place was now empty. "It seems he didn't wait for you, huh?"

As if just realizing that fact, Ethan immediately stood up and started packing his things up. "Tch... You talked too much."

"It was you who couldn't get up, no?"

"Sigh....I will see you later."

With those words, Ethan stood up and started walking rapidly to the outside of the room, leaving Lucas alone.

"I guess I should play around a little."

Just as Ethan left the lecture building, he immediately started looking around to see clues about Astron.

'Where did he go?'

Just now, he was inside the place, so it didn't make sense that he went further just in seconds.

"You are late."

At that moment, suddenly, he heard a voice coming from his back as well as a presence made itself known.

FLINCH!

And that made Ethan flinch.

'What?'

He wasn't even able to sense Astron approaching, let alone sense any movement. It was as if he appeared out of thin air just now.

"Were you waiting here?"

"I was."

Ethan turned to face Astron, still surprised by the sudden appearance. "You're... really good at sneaking up on people, aren't you?"

He just shrugged his shoulders as the response.

"Anyway, let's not waste any time, follow me."

With those words, the two started walking in the academy grounds.

Chapter 129 30.2 - Conversation

"Are you ready?"

In front of me stood the boy who would one day save the world. His wavy blue hair, toned muscles, and bright green eyes were all showing signs of eagerness as if he was looking forward to this moment.

"I am."

I still didn't know why Ethan purposefully wanted to spar with me, but this opportunity was something that wouldn't come often.

In my hands, I was holding the two daggers that I had been using all this time while fighting in close combat range --The daggers that the academy gave me.

'My stats should be enough to compete with him toe-to-toe for a while.'

I thought as I raised my daggers while Ethan grabbed his spear with his hands. We were now inside the academy's special training grounds.

I am saying special because not every student can enter here. Ethan's surname as Hartley would come in handy in such situations, even in the game. Though at first he refused to use this special building, it seems he had a change of heart.

'Probably in the banquet.'

I thought. I wasn't present while Ethan was fighting in the banquet hall, but it wasn't that hard to see what had happened at that time.

"Then, shall we start?"

With those words, Ethan took his position.

"Yes."

SWOOSH!

The moment he heard my confirmation, he immediately rushed to me with a clean movement, his muscles bulging.

However, I was ready for his attack. Immediately, tensing my muscles, I sidestepped the stab aimed at my shoulder.

SWOOSH!

The spear passed right through my arm.

"Hiss...."

I winced in pain as the blade nicked my skin, a shallow cut on my arm that stung.

It was clear that Ethan wasn't holding back. His strength and agility were impressive, and his skill with the spear was evident.

But I couldn't let the pain distract me.

'He is a lot better than before.'

This was my first impression as I saw the spear retreating back, and that meant I also be serious at my maximum level.

SWOOSH! SWOOSH!

Following the spear's retreat, countless other stabs came, each of them threatening me to get injured.

CLANK! CLANK!

However, this time, I was not going to get caught off guard. As my eyes continuously read his muscles and his spear's trajectory, I parried the attacks with my daggers.

CLANK!

Sparks flew with each confrontation, but I knew things wouldn't be like that for a long time. Even though I was able to parry his strikes and match his strength thanks to my improved stats, the thing I lacked was my constitution. Which meant, in the long run, I was going to lose eventually.

'I need to close the distance.'

And because the spear's length was longer than daggers, Ethan was in the safe zone, attacking me without risking himself.

CLENCH!

Seeing his muscles getting ready to attack, I also readied myself.

SWOOSH!

As the spear immediately flashed and attacked me from a distance, I could see it was aimed right at my side stomach.

THUD!

And that was what I was expecting him to do.

SWOOSH!

With a quick and calculated response, I lunged forward, my daggers aimed at his midsection. Since I didn't have any chance to use my speed even from the start of the spar, now was the time to move.

SLASH!

Immediately appearing right before his face, I slashed with my daggers.

"You have improved."

I could see Ethan mumbling. Since this was the first time we were exchanging blows after the time I had spent in the Chrono Groove, my speed was a lot faster than what he remembered.

SWOOSH!

However, as if it didn't matter, Ethan's eyes locked onto my movements, and with astonishing agility, he shifted his weight to the side, avoiding my strike by a hair's breadth. It was as if he had anticipated my attack, his reaction almost preternatural.

'What?'

I was initially surprised by how he easily evaded my attack, but I knew I had the momentum now.

I pressed on; my movements were fluid and aimed right at the places I determined in my head.

I launched a series of strikes, each targeting what I perceived as openings in Ethan's defense. However, he remained elusive, dodging and parrying with uncanny precision.

Something had been changed, and it was not only the way he was acting.

The way he fought and evaded was also a lot different from the past when we had sparred with each other at the practical lessons.

'This is weird.'

CLANK! CLANK!

I thought as I attacked with my daggers consecutively, trying to overwhelm him with the frequency advantage of my dual-wielding.

"I can see it."

I could again see him mumbling between his breaths as suddenly our eyes met.

STAB!

And the moment they did, Ethan's spear trajectory changed from trying to parry my attacks with his spear to attacking sweep.

'Fast.'

That was all I could say, as I could see the fast swing coming right to my feet. Since I was in the posture of attacking, I didn't have enough time to evade the attack while maintaining a good position.

SWOOSH!

And, to evade the attack, the only thing I could do was retreat back, giving up the advantage I got by closing the distance.

"Huff...."

My breathing was slightly ragged as I stood away, facing Ethan.

"Astron."

At that moment, I heard my name from his mouth.

"What?"

While catching up my breath, I raised my head and looked directly into his eyes.

"I want to ask something."

With his spear pointing to the sky, he was looking at me with a serious expression.

"....."

"Will you answer?"

"Depending on the question."

"Don't worry, it won't be that personal."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, it is."

"...."

"Then, what do you think about demon contractors?"

As those words left his mouth, I was left speechless for a second, not expecting such a question to come.

From the start of the spar, Ethan had been serious against Astron. After the exploration in the dungeon, it was the first time they would be exchanging blows, and he was looking forward to seeing his improvement.

And as he expected, Astron didn't disappoint him. He had improved a lot more than he was expecting him to do.

However, as their spar continued, the urge to talk to Astron grew bigger and bigger. For some reason, rather than talking with Lucas, Julia, or his other friends, he wanted to get Astron's opinion on the recent event.

"Then, what do you think about demon contractors?" As those words left his mouth, he could see Astron getting surprised for a second, definitely not expecting him to ask such a question.

However, following the initial reaction, Astron's frowns burrowed, his eyes seemingly getting darker for a second.

Seeing this, Ethan suddenly felt chills all over his body, as if he had made a mistake.

"Calm down." Ethan, spear at the ready, took a brief pause from their spar and started his inquiry. "I just want to know your opinion about demon contractors. Are they all evil?"

It was a question that was bothering him for a while.

Astron's demeanor remained stern and unsmiling as he responded, "Demon Contractors and evil." He mumbled as he raised his dagger, looking at the reflection of himself on the blade. "Why did you ask?"

Astron's response was another question, which caught Ethan by surprise. "Recently, I encountered some demon contractors...."

Astron urged him to continue with a simple, "And?"

"And, while I was exchanging blows with one, I got the opportunity to talk," Ethan explained.

"What did he say?"

Ethan chose his words carefully, "He said humanity is weakness, and they were transcending that weakness."

Astron's expression remained cold as he replied, "I see."

Ethan, undeterred by Astron's stern demeanor, continued the conversation. "I couldn't help but feel that some of these demon contractors have their worldviews manipulated, or perhaps they're driven to desperation. They end up making these contracts as a way to survive in a world that's often cruel to them."

It was what he had been thinking. What if those people were contracting demons as a last resort? What if they were good people who were taken to the edge?

Was it right to simply label them evil?

"Does it matter?" Astron's grip on his dagger tightened as he replied.

"What?"

"Does it matter what their past or what their conviction is? Does it matter if they were pushed to the edge by the world? Does it matter if they really believed they were doing something good?"

His words continued as his purple eyes shone. Ethan was taken aback by his words, not expecting such intense emotions to come from that mouth.

"What do you mean?"

"The thing we call evil. You asked if they were all evil, right?" Ethan could see Astron's hand clenching so strongly that the veins on his forearms were protruding.

"From the eyes of someone like you, who hadn't been directly harmed by the demons, you may try to sympathize with them, and it may be challenging to label them directly as evil. After all, you are the type of person who wants to be a hero, aren't you?"

Ethan felt as if he had been read like a book. Of course, if it was Astron, Ethan knew he had the capability to understand things.

"But, from the eyes of the people who lost someone dear to them at the hands of demons, this question you are asking as the one holding the power will be enough to anger them."

As Ethan heard those words, he remembered the people who were being slaughtered by demon contractors and his essential reaction and his anger as a stranger. But what could the people who were dear to those who died at that time have felt?

Anger? Despair? Hatred?

"At the end of the day," Astron continued, his voice low and unwavering, "what matters is not if they are evil or not."

"Then—" Ethan began.

Astron interrupted, determination etched in his features. "You asked me at the start what I think about the demon contractors, didn't you?"

Ethan nodded, silently urging him to continue.

At that second, Ethan could see Astron gritting his teeth, his expression changing into something he had seen for the first time in his life.

He could feel instinctively – the immense amount of hatred oozing from the guy before him.

"The answer is not that hard," Astron said, his grip on his weapon tight. "They are my enemy."

Ethan was taken aback by the stark declaration.

"And I will keep moving forward," Astron affirmed, his purple eyes shining in the, "until I exterminate the enemy."

"Until I get back everything for everything that had been done to me, done to her."

'Her?'

Ethan wanted to ask, but he couldn't as he could see Astron's face.

"So, shut the crap Ethan."

The weight of Astron's words hung heavy in the air, leaving Ethan with a profound sense of the darkness and determination that fueled his friend's actions.

"And grab your weapon; the talk is over."

Chapter 130 30.3 - Conversation

"And grab your weapon; the talk is over."

As those words left Astron's mouth, he raised his daggers once again. Ethan could see his face right now, and he understood the fact that he was no longer in the mood for talking.

The conversation they had was already enough, and Ethan learned quite a lot of things both about the boy before him and the questions in his head.

"As you wish."

And now it was time to continue the spar, just like any other cadet of the academy would do.

"Good."

With that, Astron immediately blasted himself off, approaching Ethan and closing the distance.

SWOOSH!

In a matter of milliseconds, Astron appeared right before Ethan's face with his daggers coated in the mana of grey color.

'I won't hold back either.' Seeing that, Ethan also decided to take the spar to another level by activating his mana and coating it with his spear with it.

'This feels incredible.' As if a pattern was being shown before his eyes, Ethan could feel the trajectory of the attack.

His senses were telling him to dodge to the right side, and in his head, his institution drew the trajectory.

CLANK!

The two young fighters clashed their weapons meeting in a flurry of sparks. Ethan's spear had the advantage of reach, and he was determined to use that to the maximum.

From the day he was born into the family of Hartleys, he was always one with the spear. He remembered the first 'toy' he held.

It was the spear of the first patriarch.

The Legendary Dragon Slayer.

The first toy he held was the weapon that belonged to the being that slayed Dragons.

And from that day onwards, his life was always filled with spears. Coupled with his father's and sibling's strict personalities, his basics were close to perfect.

Spear of Hartley. 「Seven Lines of Aggression」

It was a perfect example of basics and the reason why Hartley's always started learning spear at the age of five.

It was a special way of using the spear.

Even in this age, people always compared spears to swords. In essence, they were different, and the first patriarch of the Hartleys was the first one to put that into basics.

Rather than using a spear like a sword by using it as a flexible way, the way the patriarch used it was different.

'Spear is a one-directional weapon.'

A spear user was different from a swordsman. The leverage of their movement was different from that of swordsmen.

Swordsmen would be flexible and could attack all directions easily, but for Spearman, things were different.

They wouldn't be able to turn and defend themselves when an attack came from behind since, in essence, it was harder for them to turn their body 180 degrees, and slashing was harder for a spearman, adding to the first point.

Knowing that the first patriarch utilized a different concept. Rather than forcing the spearmen to be flexible, he decided to strengthen the direction spearmen faced.

To do that, he divided the space into seven different dimensions. If it were recent times, it would be known as the cardinal vectors, but at that time, there were no such terms, and the patriarch created it on his own.

Ethan was the one to master such a spear.

CLANK! CLANK!

And, now, he was reaping the benefits of his efforts. In front of the relentless assault of Astron with dual daggers, Ethan was continuously deflecting his attacks using his spear and the feeling he was getting.

CLANK! CLANK!

His spear moved with calculated precision, parrying Astron's relentless dagger strikes.

He could sense the flow of the battle, understanding the path of each attack before it came. The Seven Lines of Aggression, a unique spear technique passed down through the Hartley family, allowed Ethan to maintain his focus on the seven cardinal vectors.

"Ha!"

Astron's attacks were swift and deadly, and just like him, Astron also seemed to focus more on basics, but Ethan's spearplay was bound to be different.

With each clash, Ethan subconsciously analyzed his opponent's moves, looking for an opening. It was not something on an analytical level but more of an instinctual thing.

Something he did without knowing how he did.

'I can feel it.'

And right now, his instinct was telling him to attack. He felt an opening, a fraction of a second when Astron's right arm was exposed.

STAB!

Without hesitation, he struck. His spear lashed out with incredible speed, aiming directly at Astron's arm.

"Arghk!"

The spear tip connected, and Astron winced in pain as the sharp point pierced his arm while releasing a groan.

Blood welled up around the wound.

"It is not over yet."

STAB! STAB!

Ethan didn't let up after the initial strike; he pressed the attack, taking advantage of Astron's momentary vulnerability.

His spear became a blur, aiming for Astron's limbs and torso. Each precise thrust sought to maintain the upper hand in their spar.

Astron staggered backward, his injured arm causing him pain.

"Grr....."

Yet, he didn't yield. Instead, he clenched his teeth and raised his daggers to parry Ethan's rapid thrusts.

The two young fighters were locked in an intense battle, their skills and determination on full display.

Ethan's eyes gleamed with a fiery spirit. "You're good, Astron, but this won't be enough." He shouted as he continued his relentless assault.

He knew what Astron was capable of and the reason why he had chosen Astron as his sparring partner here, and now he wanted to see it.

"Come on, show me what you're really made of!"

The protagonist of the game shouted, showing his spirit for improving himself.

"Tch.....Bastard."

The only answer he got was a curse, but Ethan could feel Astron was getting angry. He could sense his demeanor changing.

CLANK! CLANK!

Parry after parry.

The spear met with the daggers as Ethan continued pressuring. The two young fighters continued their intense duel. Their movements were swift, and the sound of their weapons clashing filled the air.

Ethan's relentless attacks were driving Astron to his limits.

'This guy. He is not giving me any chance.'

Whenever Astron wanted to counterattack, as if what he wanted was read, Ethan would simply block his path, not letting him move as he wished.

'This injury doesn't help either.'

Adding the injury to Ethan's relentless assault, it was clear that he was going to be pushed back.

'I hate the smile on this bastard's face.'

For some reason, Astron was annoyed. He wanted to erase the smile on Ethan's face. Even though he would probably refuse to admit it, his pride didn't want him to be looked down on.

"Come on!"

With one other shout, Ethan rushed at Astron once again. He was getting bored. Even though the talk he had with Astron helped, the fight was rather underwhelming.

"Try to block this."

Spear of Hartley. 「Three fangs of snake.」

Ethan's spear moved just like a snake, stabbing three times in a second. His spear, coated with mana, left afterimages as if to confuse the enemy.

'Show me what you are made of, don't disappoint me.' Ethan thought to himself as his spear moved.

STAB!

The first stab landed safely, as Astron wasn't able to either evade or deflect.

STAB!

The second stab also landed, injuring Astron from his right shoulder.

With the two attacks landing, Ethan felt his disappointment rising.

FLINCH!

As he put his strength into the final and strongest attack of the special move, he suddenly felt something once again, as if his attack was not going to work. But it was late to stop the last attack.

Just as Ethan attempted the third strike, Astron's movements seemed to shift in an uncanny way, and his eyes followed Ethan's movements clearly.

Ethan could feel something was different now.

CLANK!

With almost perfect timing, Astron managed to deflect Ethan's final attack with one of his daggers. The two weapons clashed, and to Ethan's surprise, the spear's trajectory was nullified.

It was as if Astron could read his move perfectly, countering him with remarkable precision. As if he could also feel it.

THUD!

It was in such a manner that the spear's head was pointed upwards, breaking Ethan's posture.

It was the perfect time to counterattack.

GRIT!

Ethan could hear Astron gritting his teeth in pain, and he could also see the arm he used to deflect his attack lost his strength.

SWOOSH!

But, if Ethan knew one thing, that would be the fact that Astron's strength came from relying on countless different weapons.

Bows, daggers....

Barehand was one of those.

THUD!

As the palm coated with mana approached Ethan, he once again could feel the trajectory of the attack and where the attack would hit him.

His body guided him on its own as his left elbow was lowered, trying to block the strike.

However, the strike he was expecting didn't come, as well as the feeling he got disappeared.

"Huh?"

Ethan let out a surprised sound as something different happened.

"So, you were doing it in such a way." As he heard Astron mumbling to himself, he felt a cold feeling on his neck.

As if something was poking him.

Something deadly.

"What?"

It was Astron's dagger touching him on his neck. The arm he thought that became null was standing just like any standard arm.

"It is my win, Ethan."

As those words left Astron's mouth, Ethan was left dumbfounded, looking at the dagger alone.

"How?"

Was the only word he could utter.