

H. Academy 341

Chapter 341 79.3 - Commotion

<Inside the cafe, within the academy grounds>

"What do you think you're doing, attacking a senior with mana?"

"I didn't—"

Without warning, the senior punched Ethan swiftly in the face, causing him to stumble back onto the table. The impact was so forceful that his cheek turned red instantly.

"Cough...."

Ethan coughed blood from his nose, his vision blurring. The force behind the punch wasn't simple at all, and he knew the strength of the senior couldn't be underestimated.

"How dare you?"

Emma's face contorted in feigned fear and indignation as she watched Ethan struggle to right himself on the table, his nose bleeding profusely.

The cafe was steeped in stunned silence, the only sound of Ethan's labored breathing and the murmur of hushed whispers from the onlookers.

"Why did you attack me?" Emma's voice crescendoed into a shrill accusation, her eyes darting around the room to gather the support of the shocked audience. "Is this how you treat your seniors? You're a menace!"

Ethan, wincing in pain, tried to interject once again, this time his voice hoarse. "I didn't—"

But Emma wasn't about to let him speak. After all, if she were to let him do as he pleased, this whole ordeal would be meaningless.

Not every time physical power was the solution. The power of the crowd was a lot bigger than that, and she was well aware of that fact.

She interrupted swiftly, a crescendo of outrage building in her voice. "And to think you were even associating with a whore! Such a bully—"

Her next words were cut short, however, as a palpable shift in the room's atmosphere stopped her cold. Her eyes widened slightly, sensing the approach of a potent energy. 'Someone with a strong aura is coming,' she thought, her heart rate spiking not from fear but from the awareness of a new, unexpected element in the unfolding drama.

SWOOSH!

At that precise moment, Julia burst into the scene. Her presence was like a shockwave, her aura palpable and intimidating even to those who weren't sensitive to such energies.

Her eyes scanned the scene, immediately focusing on the chaos around Ethan. She hadn't seen what led up to this moment but was drawn to the obvious distress of a fellow student and the aggressive stance of the senior.

"What's happening here?" Julia demanded, her voice carrying a commanding tone that mirrored her strong aura. Her gaze briefly landed on the badge on Emma's uniform, identifying her as a senior. Her expression hardened as she tried to piece together the situation from the scattered whispers and Emma's outraged shouts.

Emma, momentarily taken aback by Julia's sudden entrance, tried to regain her momentum. Though her white hair and blue eyes, as well as her aura, somehow made her exceptional, Emma didn't think much of it.

"This girl, did I know her from somewhere?" She thought but knew it wasn't the time to stop.

"This student attacked me unprovoked!" she exclaimed, pointing an accusatory finger at Ethan, who was still trying to steady himself.

Julia's eyes narrowed skeptically. She looked around, seeking any corroborating testimony from the crowd. She didn't believe that Ethan would do such a thing.

"There is no way he would do such a thing." She replied, raising her head. "There is clearly something wrong with this."

Even if Ethan were to do something like this, that meant there was reason for him to do so.

"Hmm?" Noticing that the newcomer had already taken her stance, Emma's gaze was narrowed.

'This girl....'

She instantly noticed that she was this guy's friend, a possible accomplice.

'Tch...This makes it a lot more complicated.'

After all, the more people get involved in this, the more dangerous it is. 'What have I gotten myself into?' Starting with blackmail, now turning to another.

Lilia and Irina had just entered the cafe behind her, both equally alert and prepared to support their friend.

Lilia stepped forward, her gaze analytical. "Is there anyone who saw the start of this altercation?" she asked the room. Her voice, although calm, carried an authoritative weight that prompted a few in the crowd to exchange nervous glances.

One timid voice spoke up from the back, "He didn't start-"

'No, you won't!'

Emma sensed her control of the narrative slipping as a timid voice began to contradict her version of events. In a quick attempt to regain the upper hand, she raised her voice, cutting across the quiet murmur of the cafe.

"Are we now siding with the attacker, even though he was clearly in the wrong? Have the freshmen always been so presumptuous? Thinking they can act however they wish?" Her tone was laden with disdain, attempting to sway the crowd by casting doubt on the freshmen's behavior.

Julia, Lilia, and Irina exchanged quick glances, their eyes narrowing in response to Emma's tactics. Julia spoke up firmly, "We are not condemning anyone without hearing the full story. It's important to listen to both sides before making any judgments." Her statement was clear and unbiased, reinforcing the need for fairness and due process in resolving the conflict.

Behind Emma, a senior with a sharp, calculating look and a wide smirk intervened. "We acted out of self-defense," he asserted confidently. "As seniors, we're here to guide and take care of the juniors. Why would we harm them without a good reason?" His words flowed smoothly, a hint of charisma weaving through his speech. But then, his smirk briefly curled his lips before his expression turned cold and serious. He added, "Or are you implying something else? That's a serious claim."

The cafe's atmosphere thickened with tension as his last sentence hung in the air. The senior's words carried an unusual weight, his presence seeming to swell with a subtle but unmistakable power. Lilia's eyebrows rose in realization.

'This....This is not normal...'

She could sense something amiss with how the senior's words resonated. Quickly turning into her mana sensitivity, she recognized the telltale signs of a manipulation skill at work—his mana subtly enhancing his speech to influence the emotions and perceptions of those listening, making him appear more credible and persuasive.

'As expected, this guy has a special skill.'

Reacting swiftly, Lilia stepped slightly forward, her voice calm yet carrying a hint of urgency. "Everyone, please remain calm and focused. It's crucial that we assess this situation objectively."

Turning her attention briefly to Julia and Irina, Lilia communicated through a quick, meaningful look that they needed to counteract the senior's influence. Irina nodded subtly, understanding the need to stabilize the situation and keep the crowd from being swayed by mana-enhanced rhetoric.

Yet, that wasn't the case for Julia. She wasn't a girl who was good at such politics, after all, and she was someone who was hot-headed. Different from Irina, Julia's was more innate, and in such situations where things would get more complex, she wouldn't be the one to step back.

"Sigh...." She released a hearty sigh deep from her lungs.

'!' '!' Both Irina and Lilia instantly had their body hairs rose.

"St-"

As they realized what was about to happen. They knew their friend, what kind of person she was, and how she would act.

Julia, unable to contain her frustration and anger any longer, As they realized what was about to happen. They knew their friend, what kind of person she was, and how she would act.

acted on impulse. Her mana surged as she drew back her fist, the energy swirling around it with a visible intensity.

–THUD! Without a moment's hesitation, she swung, her punch cutting through the air directly towards Emma.

The blow landed squarely on Emma's face, the force amplified by Julia's mana. Emma was sent reeling back, her form staggering as the guy behind her caught her mid-flight, steadying her before she could hit the ground.

"Urgh!"

A groan of pain escaped Emma as she clutched her face, shock, and anger mingling on her features.

The senior who had just spoken, now holding Emma, looked up sharply at Julia, his expression a mixture of disbelief and anger. "What was the meaning of this?" he demanded, his voice thick with accusation.

Julia, standing firm with her feet planted and fists still clenched, met his gaze unflinchingly. "Speaking isn't my forte, nor is playing these games," she retorted, her voice hard as steel. "I wanted to end things peacefully without resorting to this, but you clearly had no intention of letting that happen. If you think you can bully our friend, it doesn't matter whether you are a senior or not."

Her eyes glinted fiercely, a crazed smirk playing at the corners of her mouth as she continued, her tone mocking and challenging. "I've been annoyed by your words for a while now. How about I sweep that smirk from your face?"

The cafe erupted into a cacophony of murmurs and exclamations. The other students watched, some with shock and others with a growing sense of excitement, as tensions escalated. Irina and Lilia, though initially taken aback by Julia's actions, quickly positioned themselves beside her, ready to support their friend.

They knew well that Julia's actions, though rash, stemmed from a deep sense of loyalty and protection towards their group.

The senior, holding Emma, tightened his grip, his eyes scanning Julia and her friends. He recognized the threat they posed, not just physically but in challenging the unspoken hierarchy within the academy.

His next move was already evident to maintain his and Emma's position of power.

"Is that so?" He replied, raising his face. "It seems this year's freshmen don't know any manners." He looked around. "Then, as seniors, we should teach them how to behave."

—SWOOSH! Following that, the girl who had tripped her drink on Jane's head rushed forward. Her name was Yvonne, and she was one of those who were in the part of the bullying scene.

—THUD! Her mana-augmented kick targeted right at Julia's face, aiming to injure her. However, before Julia could even move, Yvonne's kick was blocked by a hand, being grabbed in the air.

"Huh?"

It was a young man whose mouth was slightly bloody. His blue hair was now messed up, and his clothes were stained with blood. His hazel eyes were coldly locked on the girl.

"I remember you," Ethan said as the memories of that time flashed in front of his eyes.

SWOOSH! SMASH! Following that, he grabbed her by her leg, pulled her to himself, and then smashed her on the table, crashing plates and everything.

After all, he wouldn't even be able to cool himself down in such a situation.

As the cafe devolved into chaos, each participant chose their stance in the rapidly escalating conflict. The senior who had been holding Emma surveyed the scene with a cold, calculating look. His smirk grew as he dashed toward Lilia, believing he could intimidate or perhaps sway one of Julia's closest allies.

Lilia, however, was no stranger to conflict. As the senior approached, her posture remained calm and collected, prepared for whatever maneuver he might attempt.

Meanwhile, Emma, still reeling from Julia's powerful punch, wiped the blood from her nose. Her eyes, filled with a mix of rage and determination, locked onto Julia. "You don't know who you're messing with," she spat out, her voice thick with anger and pain.

Julia, unfazed and still smirking, replied coolly, "Oh? And who might that be?" Her tone was mocking, almost goading Emma further.

With a fierce glare, Emma retorted, "You're about to find out." Without further warning, she surged forward, her mana flaring up as she aimed a swift and powerful attack at Julia.

"Stop."

Suddenly a voice echoed in the café.

Chapter 342 79.4 - Commotion

"Stop."

As the voice echoed through the cafe, commanding and authoritative, an unseen force seemed to grip everyone present.

The air crackled with intense energy, and the mana that had been swirling around the combatants suddenly felt heavy and oppressive, as if it were pushing down on them, restricting their movements.

Each person in the cafe felt the weight of this invisible pressure, unable to move freely as they had before. It was as if the very atmosphere had turned against them, refusing to allow any further violence or chaos to unfold.

Amidst this stifling aura, all eyes turned toward the source of the commanding voice.

Standing at the center of the mana, her blonde hair cascading around her, was a woman whose presence demanded respect and obedience.

It was Eleanor White, the renowned hunter ranked 210 in the federation ranking and known by the title of 'Invoker.' Her reputation as an instructor at the academy preceded her, with tales of her stern demeanor and unwavering dedication to maintaining order.

Her eyes shone with a stern glare as she surveyed the scene before her, her expression conveying both annoyance and disappointment at the chaos that had erupted in her domain.

For a moment, the cafe fell into a hushed silence, the weight of Eleanor's presence casting a pall over the room. It was clear to everyone present that further disobedience or defiance would not be tolerated.

With a single glance, Eleanor made it known that she was in control and that any further disruptions would be met with swift and severe consequences.

"Is this how the students of Arcadia Hunter Academy were supposed to behave?" She asked, her tone demanding. "Hadn't I noticed the commotion and stopped in advance? What were you planning to do?"

As Eleanor slowly approached the students, her gaze piercing and commanding, she began to address them with a stern tone that brooked no argument.

"Emma Carver," she stated, her voice firm as she locked eyes with the senior student. "Yvonne Anderson. Jerry Potts."

Her words hung heavily in the air, each name carrying the weight of responsibility and accountability for their actions. Eleanor's expression remained impassive as she addressed each senior, and her disapproval was evident in the subtle curl of her lip.

"It's truly commendable," she continued, her tone dripping with sarcasm, "to see senior students setting such a fine example for their juniors."

With a pointed glance, she made it clear that their behavior was far from acceptable and that they would be held accountable for their actions.

Turning her attention to the group of juniors, Eleanor's demeanor softened slightly as she addressed them.

"Julia Middleton," she began, her voice slightly less severe as she acknowledged the freshman. "Ethan Hartley. Lilia Thornheart. Irina Emberheart."

Each name was pronounced with a measured tone, conveying both recognition and expectation. Eleanor's gaze swept over the group, her expression unreadable as she assessed their reactions.

Consecutively, as she recounted the names of the freshmen, the expressions on the faces of three seniors got uglier with each name.

'Ethan Hartley, Julia Middleton, Lilia Thornheart, Irina Emberheart?'

Emma, with her eyes widened, repeated inwardly. 'What did I do?' At that exact moment, she realized who the freshmen before her were. 'I thought they were familiar, to think they were the heirs of Pentagon.' The alliance between the five families was very well known. They each held a lot of positions in government, making them crucial members of the federation.

And this made her realize that, whoever the person sending her photo was, they weren't simple at all.

"It seems," Eleanor remarked at that moment, her voice carrying a note of disappointment, "that even our newest students are not immune to the temptations of disobedience."

With a heavy sigh, Eleanor made it clear that she expected better from all of her students, regardless of their rank or status within the academy. She also released the students from their restraints.

As Eleanor released the students from their restraints, Lilia was quick to speak up, eager to defend her friends. However, before she could say more, Eleanor raised her hand, silencing her.

"I don't care who is in the right or not," Eleanor stated firmly, her voice echoing through the room. "What matters is that you have disturbed the environment of learning for others."

Her disapproving gaze swept over the students, each one feeling the weight of her judgment. It was clear that Eleanor expected better from them and that their actions would not go unpunished.

With a final admonishing glance, Eleanor announced that the academy would deal with the matter and dismissed the students.

As each group left the cafe, Eleanor remained behind, her gaze fixed on the window. Suddenly, her eyes met with those of a dark raven perched outside.

For a moment, the two locked eyes, and then, as quickly as it had appeared, the raven vanished into the skies.

The matters in high society had never been simple from the start. Relations, alliances, and many other things have never been simple.

Many acts that could easily be solved would get complicated. At the same time, seemingly one step would be able to solve anything; that one step would turn into a thousand ones in a thousand different directions.

This was what Emma Carver was feeling right now.

'Fuck, fuck, fuck...To think that that guy was Ethan Hartley! Fuck! How did I miss that?'

She was eating her nails practically. After all, she couldn't believe she had missed the fact that Ethan Hartley was the freshman that she had stepped on and beaten down. It was a grave oversight, one that could have far-reaching consequences.

"What do we do now?"

Sitting in a wide room, the voice of a young man came from the side. It was Jerry, the guy she had brought with her.

Though he wasn't completely relevant to the previous case or was he in the photo, Emma held his weakness, forcing him to do as she wished.

'This bitch....Look what you have done.'

Jerry hated this fact, and there was nothing he could do about it. Now, with the stupid decision that Emma had made, he was also brought into this matter.

Emma clenched her fists, frustration evident in her expression. "I don't know," she replied tersely, her mind racing with the implications of their actions.

"We need to apologize, or else we won't be able to do anything else."

As Jerry spoke up, acknowledging the seriousness of their situation, Emma's jaw tightened. She knew he was right. Apologizing to Ethan and the other three heirs of the Pentagon was their best course of action, even if it meant swallowing their pride.

Yvonne's suggestion echoed Jerry's sentiments, and Emma nodded in reluctant agreement.

'This bitch Jane.....She had been entangling herself with Ethan Hartley all the time!'

At that moment, she realized why Jane wasn't showing up. If it were to get under Ethan, it would make complete sense. With this, she would also get protection from him.

"Fine," she muttered, her tone resigned. "We'll apologize. But this better not come back to haunt us."

With a heavy sigh, Emma realized that their actions had set off a chain of events that they might not be able to fully control. All they could do now was try to mitigate the damage and hope that their apology would be enough to appease the heirs of the Pentagon.

'If not, I don't know what to do.' There was also the matter of this blackmailer who forced her to do all these acts. Of course, if she were to know this matter would escalate to such lengths or it was Ethan Hartley from the start, she wouldn't do such a thing. She would let them spread those photos since, essentially, those photos could only put her in trouble with the academy, possibly making her get a suspension at most.

It was far better than offending high-ranking families.

RING! Just at that moment when they made their decisions, suddenly, her smartwatch rang.

Emma's eyes widened as she scrolled through the messages flooding her smartwatch. A sense of dread settled in the pit of her stomach as she opened the A-Talk app and saw the flurry of notifications.

[Emma, check the forum ASAP.]

[What the hell did you do?]

[Hey, why is there a video?]

[You bitch!]

With trembling fingers, she navigated to the academy forums, her heart pounding in her chest.

As she clicked on the provocative post, her worst fears were confirmed.

Emma's heart raced as she tapped the notification, pulling up the provocative forum post on her smartwatch. The title, "Seniors Overstepping Boundaries with Freshmen – A Pattern of Abuse?" hit

like a punch to the gut. Below it, two videos played in succession, exposing the confrontations that had just unfolded in the cafe.

The first video shows Jerry's forceful strike against Ethan, which is swiftly followed by clips of Emma and her group clashing with Julia and her friends. It made it seem like the Seniors were attacking only, with the starting points of the clip being cut as well as it being cut right at the moment when Eleanor made her entrance.

Below the footage, the text read, "Are seniors at Arcadia using their status to oppress the new blood? Witness the unchecked aggression in these disturbing scenes."

But it was the second video that turned Emma's fear into outright panic. This one featured Ethan, visibly distressed, surrounded and kicked by a group of senior girls flaunting their badges.

It was the video of them bullying Ethan. The video that she didn't want to be spread.

The accompanying text questioned, "Ethan Hartley among victims? Should freshmen accept being targets, or is it time to challenge the status quo?"

The post concluded with a call to action, urging those who had suffered or witnessed similar abuses to come forward, stating, "Enough is enough. It's time for a change. Let's hear your voices! Those who were suppressed by Seniors, let this post be your voice!"

Emma felt her phone vibrating incessantly with messages from fellow students and friends, reacting to the explosive content now circulating.

The realization hit her hard: the situation was no longer just about a misunderstanding or a personal grudge—it had ignited a potential uprising within the academy.

"....."

DRIP!

She clenched her hand so hard that a small drop of blood fell to the ground.

"You!" She growled as she knew the matter had far long escalated to the point where it wouldn't be contained.

Looking at her smartwatch, she opened the message from the unknown number.

"I WILL FUCKING KILL YOU!"

She realized that she had been played with.....

But it was too late at this point.

"Oh, you must be Taylor. You look more beautiful in person."

"Thank you."

In the academy, in one of the cafes, a group of five girls and five boys had just met. It was a special gathering where the students would hang out, living their youth.

As the group settled into the cozy ambiance of the cafe, light laughter and the clinking of cups filled the air. Taylor, radiant as ever in the glow of the cafe lights, led the conversation with her usual charm and poise.

Around her, friends exchanged stories and plans, the casual meet-up buzzing with the vibrancy of youthful exuberance.

Unnoticed by any of the ten, a small shadow darted between the tables with feline grace. The figure, hooded and barely perceptible against the cafe's dim lighting, appeared in Taylor's chair from behind, and the space rippled for a split second.

With a deft hand, the shadow slipped a small, box into the side pocket of Taylor's stylish bag.

The artifact, intricate and seemingly innocuous, vanished into the confines of her belongings without a trace.

As quickly as it had appeared, the shadow receded, melting back into the surrounding darkness.

"You may not know it, but, recently, our Jackson Family....."

"Hahahaha...Now, you got my attention."

The group remained oblivious to the subtle intrusion, their attention captured by the laughter and lively discussions of their gathering.

Chapter 343 80.1 - Polarization

In the confines of the campus, as the four freshmen were released from Eleanor's grasp, Jane instantly bid them farewell.

Ethan wanted to chase after her, saying it was not her fault, but she was held back by Julia, saying it looked like she needed some alone time.

Then, Ethan, Julia, Irina, and Lilia walked away from the bustling crowd, finding a quieter spot where they could talk freely.

Ethan, still visibly shaken from the altercation, wiped the blood from his face with a handkerchief.

His injuries had already healed to a certain degree; therefore, the blood wasn't even much.

However, on his face, his usually cheerful demeanor was replaced with a somber expression as he processed the events that had just unfolded.

"That was... intense," he remarked, his voice slightly hoarse from the earlier confrontation. "I never expected things to escalate like that."

Julia, her adrenaline still coursing through her veins, couldn't help but feel a sense of exhilaration. "Yeah, no kidding," she replied, her voice tinged with a mix of excitement and disbelief. "I mean, who knew there were people like that?"

"Is this the first time you are encountering someone like this?" Lilia threw a quick gaze at Julia. "There are a lot of them in this place." Her gaze contained annoyance, and her tone was thorny.

"Ho? It seems you are experienced?" Julia raised an eyebrow with a slight mock. She wasn't in a good mood since she wasn't able to beat those seniors up, and now Lilia's attitude somehow irked her.

"Of course." Lilia scoffed. "Contrary to certain blockhead who only knows how to swing swords and play games, I am quite proficient in dealing with matters regarding such cases."

Lilia's words stung, hitting a nerve that Julia didn't even realize was sensitive. She bristled at the implication that she was somehow less capable or experienced than Lilia, her temper flaring at the insinuation.

"Oh, so now you're saying I don't know how to handle myself?" Julia retorted, her voice sharp with frustration. "Just because I don't spend all my time buried in books and studying tactics doesn't mean I'm incompetent."

Lilia's expression hardened, her eyes narrowing as she met Julia's gaze head-on. "I never said you were incompetent," she replied coolly, her tone measured. "But there's a difference between acting recklessly and acting strategically. And in situations like these, strategy can mean the difference between life and death."

Julia scoffed, crossing her arms over her chest defiantly. "Oh, please," she shot back, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "I don't need a lecture from Miss Perfect Thorn about how to handle myself. When my friends are in danger, I'll do whatever it takes to protect them, even if it means getting my hands dirty."

Lilia's eyes flashed with irritation at Julia's dismissive tone. "And what if your reckless actions end up putting your friends in even more danger?" she countered, her voice tinged with frustration. "What then? Will you still be so quick to act without thinking?"

The tension between them crackled in the air, both girls refusing to back down from their positions.

Irina, sensing the escalating argument, raised her head. Her thoughts had been wandering around a certain someone, and she dozed off. But now her attention was grasped; she exchanged glances with Ethan.

After seeing him shake his head, she stepped in, her voice calm and diplomatic.

"Guys, let's not fight," she interjected, her tone soothing. "We're all on the same side here, remember? We should focus on what happened there."

"...."

"...."

Her words seemed to momentarily diffuse the tension between Julia and Lilia, their expressions softening as they exchanged hesitant glances. After a moment of silence, Julia let out a frustrated sigh.

"You're right," she conceded.

"My bad." Lilia also took a step back. Though she was angry at Irina, she knew better than anyone else that she should never let her emotions cloud her judgment.

"So." Turning her head to Ethan, she locked her eyes with him. "How about you spill the beans?"

At this point, with Jane's appearance at the café, Lilia knew she was the girl Ethan had somehow gotten closer to. She saw his gaze. But then again, she couldn't understand how Ethan met with Jane. It was not normal for a senior to meet freshmen unless a circumstance happened. Especially for Jane, since she doesn't seem to have any common points with Ethan.

That made Lilia think that there was another point that she wasn't aware of, and after seeing the scene, Lilia had a bold guess.

'Ethan attacked Emma. At least that was what Emma said, but this shouldn't be the case, as I know Ethan. He is not someone to randomly attack others, especially a senior.

That means Emma was lying, but to fabricate such a lie, there needs to be certain truth. The people around are not stupid.

For instance, Ethan needs to have a reason to act in such a manner in the public eye. That means she somehow wanted to provoke Ethan.

Why would she do that? We don't know her clearly, and she shouldn't be someone with whom Ethan is enemies. Therefore, her target was that senior, but Ethan was swept by it because he was on the periphery of that Senior.

This also aligns with what I saw. Her clothes and hair had traces of coffee. They spilled some coffee on her head?

Her gaze was also constantly on the ground. Her self-esteem is definitely low. Is this a result of bullying?

Maybe Ethan came across her when she was injured?

Hmm...that is possible.

That means that Senior and Ethan could possibly be met in such a manner, and Ethan knows about her situation. That is why she doesn't refuse him?

As she concluded her analysis, Lilia locked her gaze into Ethan.

Ethan released a heavy sigh, his shoulders sagging slightly as he prepared to recount the events involving Jane.

"It all started a month ago," he began, his voice tinged with a mixture of frustration and concern. "I saw her getting bullied by a group of seniors, and I couldn't just stand by and do nothing. So, I intervened and helped her out."

As he spoke, Ethan's gaze drifted off, his mind replaying the scenes of Jane's distress and the way she had looked at him with a mixture of gratitude and vulnerability.

"After that, we started talking more often," he continued, his tone softening as he recalled the moments they had shared. "Though she still hasn't opened up to me about what was going on, I could sense that her life was hard."

A flicker of anger flashed in Ethan's eyes as he recounted Jane's struggles, his fists clenching involuntarily at the thought of someone deliberately causing her pain.

"Today, we were supposed to meet up again," he went on, his voice tinged with frustration. "But then Emma and her friends showed up and ruined everything. They started accusing me of attacking her, even though I never laid a finger on her. It's like they were trying to frame me or something."

As Ethan spoke, Lilia's expression shifted, her thoughts aligning with some of the conclusions she had drawn earlier. It seemed that her initial assessment of the situation had been mostly accurate, though there were still some details she hadn't anticipated.

'This guy actually dared to oppose five seniors? I don't know if he is really dumb or a zealot. Well, this is just like Ethan.'

She threw a look at Julia, who had been listening to Ethan.

'These two are really alike. They act even without thinking.' Just as Ethan finished speaking, Irina's voice cut through the tension, drawing their attention to the forums.

"Guys, we should check the forums," she called out, her voice urgent. "There's a post there that you need to see."

With a sense of foreboding, the group gathered around Irina, their curiosity piqued by her words. Whatever was waiting for them on the forums, it seemed that it was something they couldn't afford to ignore.

"Huh? This...."

At that moment, Ethan's mouth was agape. After all, the person in the video was him.

"You...." Lilia and Julia couldn't help but exclaim in surprise. "They really beat you up."

Each one of the groups knew that this matter would escalate from now on.

However, for some reason, Julia's gaze was narrowed....

"Wow, did you see the post?"

"Of course I did. Who didn't? The seniors? What the hell are they doing?"

"Right? Right? Is this how this academy works? I thought resorting to violence in the academy was against the rules, and everyone was equal here?"

"Are you dumb? Where did you hear such a thing?"

The students in the classroom continued their animated discussion, voices rising and falling as they exchanged opinions and shared their thoughts on the controversial post.

"I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw that video," one student remarked, shaking their head in disbelief. "I mean, I knew the seniors could be tough, but I never thought they'd go this far."

Another student nodded in agreement, adding, "Yeah, I've heard stories about them being strict, but I didn't think they'd resort to violence. It's like they think they can do whatever they want just because they're seniors."

A third student chimed in, sharing their own experience, "I once saw them cornering a freshman in the hallway. It was like they were trying to intimidate them or something. I didn't think much of it at the time, but now, seeing this post, it makes me wonder..."

The murmurs of agreement grew louder as more students joined in, sharing similar anecdotes and expressing their surprise at the seniors' behavior.

"But what can we do about it?" one student asked, their tone filled with frustration. "It's not like we can confront them directly. They have the power here."

CREAK! As the discussion among the students in the classroom grew heated, voices overlapping with fervor, suddenly, the door opened.

—SILENCE

Eleanor's entrance brought an abrupt halt to the chatter. The room fell into a hushed silence as all eyes turned towards the instructor, anticipation and apprehension mingling in the air.

Eleanor's gaze swept across the room, her expression unreadable but commanding respect.

The tension in the room seemed to intensify as she fixed her eyes on each student in turn, as if silently assessing their reactions to the recent events.

Finally, she spoke, her voice calm yet firm, cutting through the quiet tension like a blade. "I trust you're all aware of the recent developments circulating within the academy."

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the room, confirming that, indeed, everyone was well aware of the controversy unfolding. But her eyes were locked on Ethan, who somehow once again became the main character along with some other seniors.

"It's crucial," Eleanor continued, her tone unwavering, "that we maintain composure and focus on our studies despite external distractions."

A few students shifted uncomfortably in their seats, as some of them blatantly hated on seniors on the internet, thanks to their 'experiences'.

"In any case, let's start our lesson. Today, we will talk about [Swords]."

Chapter 344 Chapter 80.2 - Polarization

In general, what weapon comes to one's mind when the term cold-weapon is mentioned?

Those who were in the military or those types of organizations would be reminded of knives.

Especially the military knife, since they directly complement the hot weapons and support them.

However, in the fantasy world where the mana and magic elements exist, the weapon that is most commonly used is different.

[Sword]

Though in general, in the medieval era, Earth, the most common weapon used by the masses was a spear, that was because it had a rather low-skill floor. The required skill to effectively utilize a spear was rather low compared to the effect it could have in the war.

An average soldier had a higher chance of success with a spear. But that was on Earth, and this place is different.

There is an existence called mana and Awakened. They are superhumans who have far surpassed the human-body limit. Therefore, things can no longer be compared to the earth.

"Everyone here knows what a sword is."

Eleanor continued with her lecture after warning everyone about the recent post. Certainly, the results of the post were particular, as it stirred some tension among the students.

Of course, that would be the case. The contents of the video were quite brutal, after all. But then again, for such types of events to be escalated, there needs to be something more than that.

I could easily predict that the fire that ignited would be quickly calmed down.

"But, even if you know what a sword is, it is still better to hear from your peers." Eleanor raised her head, locking her eyes with the students. "For what reason are swords important to us [Hunters], and why are we specifically discussing it in this class?"

As she asked the question, she seized the class. In Eleanor's style, rather than letting whoever wants to answer, she chooses the students who were meant to answer on her own sometimes.

And most students already know her habit. If she is not saying that, she expects an answer with words like "anyone who wants to answer?" That means she will either answer the question on her own or ask a student.

Following that, we can reach the conclusion that Eleanor's mood is not good. She does this whenever she is angry at the students in general, mostly when something she dislikes happens.

As an instructor with high expectations from the students, this is how she works.

And I knew her gaze would land on me.

"Astron Natusalune. Please answer," she said, her tone expecting. But, with the recent events happening around me, from the looks of it, her impression of me had improved.

Considering that she wasn't targeting me specifically anymore and her attention was on some other problematic students, that seemed to be the case.

Of course, if she wanted to target me, I wouldn't back down from a challenge.

"Swords hold profound significance for us Hunters," I started. "Because they are the most common weapon used by Awakened and the weapon with the deepest history."

It was the textbook answer. The answer lacked depth, but I couldn't be bothered.

"That is correct." Eleanor nodded.

However, seeing me answering in such a shallow manner, it seemed like she was dissatisfied. "But, are there any other reasons? For instance, why were swords the most common weapons? What makes them special compared to others?"

As she looked at me expectantly, I shook my head.

"There must have been several discussions about this, but the most basic answer I can think of is its compatibility with mana," I replied. Though, I already knew she was about to ask more.

"Interesting." At the mention of that, Eleanor's mouth was curled up. "Why do you think so?"

At this point, I decided to get this over with. It wasn't like revealing this would make it hard for me.

"If this weren't the case, once the supernatural elements are combined, other weapons would overpower the sword, and because of natural selection, those who used swords as their main weapons wouldn't be able to continue their legacy, making them lost in the history of the world. Therefore, just by looking at it now, with the number of sword families compared to other weapons, it can be concluded that the sword is far more grounded than the other weapons."

My answer was true but at the same time it wasn't completely true. There can be several more factors that could affect the development of legacies and the world, but unless something extreme had happened in the past, this reasoning would be correct.

"Good. Well done."

Eleanor nodded at my answer, satisfied. She praised me for my answer and then continued with the lecture. It was quite rare for him to praise me, and it seemed the others thought the same, as they were looking at me with surprised faces.

The beef between Eleanor and me was quite known to others. Even the redhead at the front turned back and looked at me suspiciously.

Her eyes were saying, 'Did you do something?' though the answer was laid before her already. The incident in the mine must have called her attention.

"Just as Student Astron explained, the reason for swords being the most common weapon was with their compatibility with mana," Eleanor stated. She then delved into historical records, mentioning that with the existence of mana.

"Five out of 12 First-Generation-Heroes had used swords. Each one of them had their own styles and their own legacies, now known as five sword families."

At the mention of this, Eleanor turned her attention to the two white-haired students, saying, "Julia Middleton and Lucas Middleton."

"The Second Sword Family, Middleton Family," she added, acknowledging their heritage. This was also explained in the game, as the five-sword families held quite an importance in the plot.

'There was a whole arc regarding them, after all.'

Though it can be concluded that the world would no longer follow the plot of the game exactly, the important events should rather be kept.

"From now on, we will be talking about swords in this lecture and their practices to make you familiar with the most general weapon used by the world."

Eleanor then began with the fundamentals of swordsmanship, explaining the various types of swords, their designs, and their historical significance.

As she spoke, I noticed that many students couldn't help but feel a surge of excitement.

Well, despite our usual clashes, there was no denying that Eleanor was a captivating teacher when it came to subjects like this.

Even I felt like she was more amicable now.

<Saturday Evening, Arcadia Hunter Academy>

With the recent post, there were countless messages coming to him, but the most important ones were from his family.

Especially his mother.

'She is angry.'

Her mother had been doting on him a lot, and since Ethan was a non-awakened before, she did things that Ethan felt complex feelings about.

'I really wonder who posted such a thing.....Sigh...

Everything became more troublesome now.'

The footage shows only Ethan getting beaten. She wasn't sure if this was good or bad. It was good since the part where Jane was getting bullied wasn't shown, so not many people still knew her. But at the same time, it felt like this post was clearly made to stir something.

'Not like I can do anything now.'

He shook his head, walking forward.

"What are you thinking about now?" At that point, a familiar voice came.

"Nothing." Replying to Lucas, he dismissed.

"It wouldn't be nothing. You are not the type to make such an expression. Is it about the post?"

"Yeah, it's about that," he admitted reluctantly.

Lucas grinned mischievously, nudging Ethan playfully with his elbow. "Ah, I see. Looks like even the great Ethan Hartley has had his heart captured by a girl at the end."

Ethan rolled his eyes, trying to suppress his embarrassment. "Come on, it's not like that," he protested weakly.

But Lucas wasn't about to let him off the hook that easily. He leaned in closer, his expression teasing. "Oh, come on, Ethan. You can't fool me. I've known you long enough to recognize that look on your face."

But then Lucas's playful demeanor faded, replaced by a serious expression. He looked at Ethan with a mixture of disappointment and frustration. "Ethan, we're friends, aren't we? If something like this happens, you should let us know. We're here to help each other out."

Ethan's shoulders slumped, feeling the weight of Lucas's words. "I know, I know," he said, his voice tinged with remorse. "I just... I didn't want to make a big deal out of it, you know?"

But Lucas wasn't having it. His tone turned firm, bordering on anger. "Ignoring the misfortune of a friend doesn't make it go away, Ethan. If we're going to call ourselves friends, we need to be there for each other, no matter what."

"You're right, Lucas. I'm sorry. Next time something like this happens, I'll make sure to inform you right away."

Lucas's expression softened, a small smile returning to his face. "Good. That's all I ask. Next time, don't forget that."

"Yeah."

"Then, I will be leaving. I need to attend a meeting."

"Meeting? Ah..."

"Yeah, one of those." Lucas winked at Ethan with his classic grin. "I will have fun for you as well." With those words, he left as quickly as he came.

"Sigh....." Ethan sighed but was a little happy seeing Lucas returning to his normal. However, his words echoed in his head.

"Telling others, huh?"

He quietly thought.

–TAK!

Suddenly, he felt like someone had hit him on his shoulder.

"Sigh...."

He could only sigh at how rude this person was as he walked to the training grounds.

As Ethan reached the training grounds and began changing into his workout clothes, he noticed a piece of paper fluttering to the ground. Curious, he picked it up and unfolded it, revealing a hastily written note.

His brow furrowed as he read the message: "Emily Anderson's life is in danger; she is being targeted by assassins. Location 7th Street, Lactarian District."

The words sent a chill down Ethan's spine, and he couldn't help but wonder about the validity of the information.

'No, it makes sense if they want to target Emily.'

But Ethan was quick to put the pieces together as he realized that the opposing factions of Emily's guild had already been entangled.

"....."

And in an instant, he made the decision, rushing to the location, not even thinking about his family's strength.....

Chapter 345 80.3 - Polarization

–Arcadia Hunter Academy, Training Grounds, Sunday Night

As the three sophomore students emerged from the training rooms of the Arcadia Hunter Academy, the evening air felt charged with Mana.

Aria, Doran, and Helia stepped outside, their faces filled with exertion and tiredness. They had been training in the grounds reserved for seniors for quite a time already.

Aria Johnson, a slightly tall girl with brown hair bouncing with each step, led the trio with an infectious energy. "That was exhilarating, wasn't it?" she exclaimed, her emerald eyes sparkling with adrenaline. "I swear, I almost had you with that last Mana blast, Doran!"

Doran Johson, the tall and composed brother of Aria, offered a faint smile in response. "You were improving, Aria," he remarked, his voice steady and measured. "But remember, control is just as important as power."

Though Doran was one year older than Aria, they both entered the academy at the same time. It was because, when Doran was at the age of entering, his family's situation didn't allow him to enter while his talent was lacking as well.

But, as in the case of Aria, she was a lot more talented than him. Therefore, she was easily accepted to the academy. And because she was accepted, the academy decided to take Doran in as well, though they needed to pay a sufficient fee.

At that time, their family's finances were improved thanks to a certain opportunity, and they even entered society a little. Therefore, they could easily afford the tuition fees, which made Doran enter the academy.

This wasn't a common case, but it was also not uncommon either. There were some cases where the students would be admitted later than their peers, but the academy cared more about their talents and their current strengths than their age.

Helia, walking quietly beside them, nodded in agreement. "Doran's right," she chimed in softly, her eyes focused ahead. "Precision and finesse are key to mastering Mana manipulation."

She was a mage with a relatively high ranking. They met in the course project design during the second semester of the first year, and they have been friends ever since. Helia and Doran were even dating at this point.

Aria rolled her eyes playfully. "Oh, come on, you two! Where's the fun in being so serious all the time?" she teased, nudging Doran with her elbow. "We're young hunters-in-training! We should be embracing the thrill of the unknown! Just because you are dating doesn't mean you should give up the delicacies of life. "

Doran smiled at Aria's words, wrapping his arms around Helia's shoulders. "Maybe we should savor it a bit," he said, planting a kiss on Helia's cheek.

Helia's serious demeanor crumbled in an instant as a faint blush appeared on her face. "Doran, your sister is looking," she said shyly.

Doran shrugged, unconcerned. "She can leave if she wants."

Aria harrumphed, seeing the two lovebirds, and then declared she should leave them alone. With a huff, she turned and walked away.

Doran shouted after her, "We're going to have fun for your sake too!"

Aria just pointed her middle finger back at him before continuing on her way to the library.

As Aria walked briskly towards the library, a pang of jealousy gnawed at her heart as she observed her brother and Helia. They seemed so at ease with each other so in love. She couldn't help but wonder when she would find someone like that for herself.

"When will it be my turn?" she muttered under her breath, her steps quickening with determination. "Maybe my standards are a bit too much..."

She paused for a moment, mentally recounting her list of criteria for a potential boyfriend. Each requirement seemed more absurd than the last.

"He needs to be tall, strong, and humble," she muttered to herself, ticking off the qualities on her fingers. "Obsessed with me but not too clingy, lenient but not meddling, respectful, loving me for who I am and not just my body, smart, quiet but knows how to talk..."

As she listed out her impossible standards, a sense of frustration washed over her. "Is it really this hard to find such a man?" she wondered aloud, feeling a twinge of self-doubt creeping in.

"No, he definitely exists, and I will find him." With a smile, she discarded the idea.

"You won't, and it is a pity." Suddenly, her smirk widened, turning a bit creepy and inhumane while she uttered those words from her own mouth. Her steps also altered, moving in a different direction, the direction of the backyard.

But as she stepped into the dimly lit backyard, she was suddenly jolted out of her reverie by a strange sensation. "Huh?" she exclaimed, releasing a surprised sound as her eyes darted around the unfamiliar surroundings.

The backyard was shrouded in darkness, the only illumination coming from the soft glow of the moon and the twinkling stars above. Aria felt a shiver run down her spine, her senses heightened by the eerie atmosphere.

SWOOSH!

Suddenly, something hit her from the back of her head, making her blast off.

CRASH!

She crashed to the wall, blood flowing from her body.

"ARGHK!"

A scream of pain echoed as Aria felt the pain in her head.

"Who- who are you!"

She screamed in pain as her vision blurred. For some reason, the strength of the attack was a lot more compared to what she could endure, and she felt as if she couldn't draw any power from her mana at all.

"Me?" The silhouette before she walked forward. "I am simply paying back what you did. As Seniors, you shouldn't bully your juniors next time."

SMASH!

As those words sank in, it was what she heard last before she lost consciousness.

SMASH! SMASH!

In the eerie darkness, the stick rose and down, hitting the unconscious girl on the ground.

And somehow, there was an eerie smile on the assaulter's face.

"Kekeke....I don't know who it was, but I should thank you for giving us this opportunity. Who would have thought the opportunity to mix things before the final exams would arrive this fast and this well."

With a smile, the figure smashed the stick once again.

"Kekekekkee..... 'He' will really be happy."

Under the darkness, the badge on the assaulter's shoulder shone.

It was the badge belonging to the fourth-year student, a Senior.

—Arcadia City, Azure Crest Guild, Sunday Evening

Emily stood before the entrance of the guild hall, her gaze fixed on the emblem hanging above the door. The familiar symbol of Azure Crest Guild seemed to hold a weight of memories, both bitter and sweet.

'Sigh.....We somehow recovered to some extent....'

She couldn't help but reflect on the journey they had undertaken, from the devastating blow that almost shattered them to the gradual resurgence they had managed to achieve.

'I really did well, father did well too....'

Despite the setbacks and challenges, they somehow managed to recover a little bit after the initial loss.

'Yet, if not for Ethan....We wouldn't be there.'

Emily knew that it wouldn't have been possible without the help of an individual like Ethan, who had offered their support without expecting anything in return. For the first time in her life, she saw that, in this world, there were things that couldn't be achieved by every person.

Not everyone could do as they pleased, nor could they reach the place they wished to. The strength required was too much, and there were many big shots.

After dealing with this matter for a long time, she noticed that the events that were happening to her guild and to the guilds in the corresponding area were all thanks to a bigger fish.

Someone was moving the pieces from their seats above, and they were nothing but pawns to be crushed.

Therefore, she silently thanked Ethan in her thoughts, acknowledging the pivotal role he had played in their guild's journey toward redemption.

"Well, should I treat myself something after this long?"

She had been walking for a while now, and she had already reached halfway through her destination.

FLINCH! But then suddenly, a sudden chill ran down her spine!

'What is this?' She felt as though a veil of darkness had descended upon her surroundings.

The once-familiar sights and sounds of the guild district now seemed distorted and unnatural, as if she was disconnected from reality.

–SWOOSH! CRACK!

Before she could process the strange sensation, a sharp pain erupted in her shoulder, accompanied by the sound of something whizzing through the air.

"Argh!"

Instinctively, Emily stumbled backward, clutching her injured shoulder as she scanned her surroundings for the source of the attack. With her already trained body and instincts, her body naturally followed the trajectory of the attack without even thinking.

"Huh?"

In the distance, she caught a glimpse of shadowy figures lurking in the shadows, their presence ominous and foreboding.

SWOOSH! Panic surged through her veins as she realized that she was under attack, but before she could make a more detailed assessment, another projectile hurtled towards her with alarming speed.

CLANK!

Yet this time, she was ready and aware. She drew her sword in an instant and then slashed the projectile, deflecting it.

SPURT!

However, contrary to what she had experienced previously while clashing against rangers, this time, the projectile somehow contained a liquid. It sprayed on her face and her clothes.

"Argh!"

This made her vision blur, and a burning sensation covered her face. She felt her face burning.

'It hurts!'

She wanted to shout. However, the instincts she had developed in the dungeon and the clashes against academy students made her hold back.

The muscle memory imprinted on her body instantly took control, as her senses became overly sensitive.

SLASH! CLANK!

She slashed the arrows entering her sense of range, defending herself.

However, Emily, despite her valiant efforts, found herself pushed back by the relentless barrage of attacks. The shadowy figures lurking in the darkness seemed to have the upper hand, their movements calculated and precise.

With each deflected projectile, Emily's strength waned, the burning sensation on her face intensifying with each passing moment.

The liquid sprayed by the projectiles seeped into her wounds, causing agony to ripple through her body.

'I need to break through this. I can't keep being passive like this.' 'Right, I can do that!' Yet, despite the pain and disorientation, Emily refused to yield. Drawing upon her training and determination, she continued to fend off the assailants' attacks with a fierce resolve.

CLANG! SWISH!

She was looking for an opportunity to attack, as she knew this was her one chance.

"Hufff...."

BOOM! She forcefully expelled the acid burning her body, using her skill, [Breth Resonance].

It was a skill that enabled her to expel mana from her lungs through the pores of her skin. Normally, she would utilize this to create an explosive field interrupting her enemies, but she found another use just now.

SWOOSH! Following that, she pushed the mana into her legs, concentrating her strength around there.

CRACK!

With each stride, she closed the distance between herself and her assailants, her sword held tightly in her grip.

As she reached the spot where the shadowy figures had been lurking, she was met with an unsettling sight. There was no one there, only faint imprints of mana lingering in the air like a haunting echo of their presence.

'Huh? Where are-' Confusion gripped Emily as she scanned her surroundings, searching for any sign of her elusive attackers.

But before she could make sense of the situation, a whisper brushed against her ears, sending shivers down her spine.

"Such determination... Such resolve... But it will not be enough..."

In an instant, Emily, from the corner of her eyes, saw the silver glint of the dagger approaching to her face.....

Yet, at that moment, the assassin suddenly tensed.

"Tch."

He clicked his tongue while leaping back with afterimages left.

SWOOSH! Following that, a flying spear pierced through the location where he was standing just now. The spear was burning with flames.

"The note was really true."

Before Emily, there stood a man with a familiar broad back.

"You don't need to worry anymore now that I am here."

It was the familiar smile as well.

Chapter 346 81.1 - Close

The moment he saw the note, even without considering if it was true or if he was being lured into a trap, with his heart pounding in his chest, Ethan wasted no time as he hastily gathered his belongings and sprinted towards the location mentioned in the note.

With each step, his mind raced with thoughts of Emily's safety and the implications of the information he held.

The urgency of the situation spurred him on, his training instincts kicking in as he navigated to the streets of the Lactarian District.

Though Ethan wasn't that familiar with the address, the technology was.

'Assassin....I hope I am not late.'

The night air was crisp and cold, but Ethan barely registered the chill as adrenaline-fueled his movements.

As he neared 7th Street, Ethan's senses sharpened, scanning his surroundings for any signs of danger. His muscles tensed, prepared for whatever awaited him at the designated location.

Arriving at the street, Ethan slowed his pace, keeping to the shadows as he surveyed the area.

His keen eyes searched for any suspicious figures or unusual activity, his mind calculating the best course of action to ensure Emily's safety.

And then suddenly, he sensed something amiss. In front of his eyes, there were stores that had yet to close. Some people were looking at him as he suddenly appeared out of nowhere and stopped.

Though many people were awakened in this world, not all of them had the necessary strength to reach such speeds, and seeing them was rare.

But what bothered Ethan wasn't that. Somehow, from the second store and onwards, there was something amiss with the stores.

'Dark?'

It was a little darker, and he felt like his senses weren't able to pass through that space.

'A barrier of veil!'

And Ethan instantly remembered the contents of the lecture. At one time, Eleanor mentioned that there were a lot of skills that could obstruct one's senses. They were mainly used by stealth users, and this situation especially fit that description.

He knew he had to tread carefully, for the presence of a barrier of veil suggested that someone was deliberately hiding their actions from prying eyes.

With a silent curse under his breath, Ethan weighed his options. He could charge ahead recklessly, risking a potential ambush, or he could take a more cautious approach and gather information before confronting the source of the barrier.

Of course, assessing the situation would be better. Even if he had acted somehow impulsively, Ethan was at least a seasoned Hunter to some extent.

He entered the veil while concealing his presence, but the moment he entered, his senses picked up something amiss.

A blade and killing intent.

An assassin releasing its killing intent meant one thing! The target was already on the brink of finishing.

'Not good!'

In an instant, he spread his senses, and then two figures materialized in his brain.

SWOOSH!

Grabbing his spear, he channeled his mana into it.

「Spear of Hartley, Thunder Javelin.」

The spear sparkled with energy as he channeled the mana; following that, Ethan threw the spear.

And then he followed the strike. Appearing before the assassin, Ethan stood there looking at the assailant.

"The note was really true."

He saw Emily there with his body injured.

"You don't need to worry anymore now that I am here."

From now on, he would deal with this bastard before his face.

"....."

The assassin didn't say anything, looking closely at Ethan. Even though his face was veiled and his eyes looked blurry from the outside, Ethan was able to sense that the assassin was clearly annoyed.

At the same time, Emily just silently looked into Ethan's back as crackles of electricity slowly deformed from his body.

'...He is here....'

Her voice mumbled inwardly, yet there was something missing. She knew she was saved just now, but there was something missing inside her heart.

"Who are you?"

Ethan mumbled, pondering.

Yet before he could even fully process the situation, the assailant's response came in the form of a swift attack.

SWOOSH!

With a fluid motion, the assassin launched a dagger towards Ethan, aiming for his chest.

CLANK!

Reacting on instinct, Ethan deflected the dagger with his spear, the metallic clang echoing through the street.

The speed of the dagger was just too fast, something that Ethan had a hard time reacting to.

'This power.....'

From the clash itself, Ethan realized that the enemy's strength wasn't clearly low.

But before he could fully recover from the initial strike, the assailant closed the distance with alarming speed, daggers flashing in the moonlight.

As the assassin pressed the attack, Ethan focused on defending himself, his movements fueled by adrenaline and training.

Each strike was met with a calculated block or parry, but the assailant's relentless assault kept him on the defensive.

Amidst the flurry of blows, the assailant's voice cut through the chaos, dripping with disdain. "Is this important?" he sneered, the daggers flashing dangerously as he lunged forward. "Who I am matters little in the grand scheme of things. What matters is that your meddling ends here."

FLICK!

Suddenly, the assassin flicked his fingers.

SPURT!

Following that, blood spurted from Ethan's body. His arms, his wrists, and many of his veins were split open.

'Blood manipulation?'

Ethan was caught off guard as he was unable to sense the attack. His body started hurting inwardly. His head started spinning from the constant loss of blood.

SLASH! Following that, the assassin attacked with his daggers flashing. The daggers were shining bright, with countless different symbols on them. The color of orange lit up as the daggers started burning.

The dagger with fire approached Ethan. The assassin clearly wanted to eliminate this person before him.

CLANK! However, contrary to its expectations, the dagger didn't slash the body but was intercepted by the shining spear.

"Hmm!"

Assassin's eyes were narrowed as he seized his enemy. The effects of his skill shouldn't have been nullified this fast.

'Something is not right.'

He thought. Following that, his eyes met with the enemy with a spear. There, he saw the young man's eyes, which had turned vertically yellow and shining.

The enemy had already escaped his initial [Blood Ailment.]

Yes. The moment the assassin had seen Ethan's attack and dodged the initial strike, how could he not know that this person before him was an enemy? The attack clearly had an intent behind it, making him react to it.

Therefore, while Ethan was somehow talking to Emily, the assassin had already stated that he was using his ailment, covering his daggers and the air itself.

And while clashing with Ethan, he sped up the injection time, yet now it wasn't even effective for 2 seconds.

SWOOSH! In an instant, the young man with the spear's figure blurred. Assassin's instincts warned him as he tensed his body.

Using his high agility and flexibility, he tilted his waist in a rather abnormal manner, evading the thrust.

As Ethan's yellow eyes continued to gleam with intensity, he pressed the attack, his movements fluid and precise despite the pain coursing through his body. He was already recovering at a fast rate as the pain was fading away.

With each strike of his spear, he aimed to exploit the slightest opening in the assassin's defenses, his focus unwavering.

However, the assassin, recognizing the imminent threat posed by Ethan's relentless assault, called upon another skill to enhance his agility.

[Dash]

It was a common skill that wasn't rare to find at all. Most of the agility type awakened had this skill.

With a surge of speed, he dodged Ethan's strikes with remarkable precision, his movements becoming almost imperceptible to the naked eye. Emily, who was watching the battle unfold, was having a hard time noticing everything. She was lacking in terms of this aspect.

Of course, being an awakened and someone from the Hartley family, Ethan's vision of such things was pretty developed compared to the normal students of the academy. After all, he had fought someone stronger and faster than this assassin – a certain white-haired monster.

Sensing the shift in the assassin's speed, Ethan remained vigilant but still adjusted his stance to maintain his offensive pressure.

SWOOSH! But before he could close in for another strike, the assassin widened the distance between them, leaping back with impressive agility.

As the assassin retreated, he seized the opportunity to launch a surprise attack, hurling a dagger toward Ethan with deadly accuracy.

Emily instantly had flashbacks. She realized what had happened before Ethan came. She was already sure that the assassin was going to utilize the same tactic.

"Car-"

She wanted to inform Ethan, but she felt like she couldn't speak at all.

Her voice was concealed! CLANK! Reacting with lightning-fast reflexes, Ethan deflected the dagger with his spear.

However, suddenly, behind the dagger, another projectile appeared.

A triumphant smirk crossed the assassin's lips, thinking that he had successfully ensnared Ethan in his trap. The distance between them was too narrow to evade the poison flask, and he knew that a direct hit could prove fatal.

The person needed to deflect the dagger, but then they would most likely be in a bad posture, making it a lot harder to react.

"Heh...."

But suddenly, Assassin saw Ethan smile. Following that, the Assassin saw the flask flying back!

「Spear of Hartley. First Move. Spinning Hell」

In a split-second decision, Ethan summoned his mana and twirled his spear in a swift motion, generating a small whirlwind around him! Therefore, without actually making contact with the poison flask, he safely defended himself.

It was a very fast decision, and that left Assassin's mouth agape.

"You are not the first one to think that."

Ethan mumbled with his smile, remembering that someone had pulled this trick on him.

CRACK! The assassin immediately crashed the flask with his dagger as it was now approaching him. And then he landed on the ground.

CRACKLE! But Ethan wasn't going to give the assassin the time. He knew he had the chance now!

Lighting surged through his body as Ethan's legs started channeling his energy. Once an assassin's tricks or first strike was avoided, it was a lot easier to deal with them!

「Spear of Hartley. Tiger's Thrust. 」

SWOOSH! With a rapid speed, he stabbed his spear, aiming right at the assassin's heart.

THUD! But, before he could even do anything, suddenly, he felt something amiss. The world turned dark for a split second, and he found himself standing still while a figure appeared before him.

No, there were two figures.

"....."

One was someone with a cloak, his dagger almost on his heart. And the other one was a girl with her sword intercepting the dagger.

"ETHAN! WAKE UP!"

At that moment, Ethan realized something.

He almost lost his life.

Chapter 347 Chapter 81.2 - Close

What is the fate?

What is the strength?

Emily, who had been watching the fight unfold before her eyes, asked herself this question countless times.

Ethan, with his spear facing the enemy that had targeted her, and the assassin clashed with him using his daggers – two of them were in their own world.

And here she was, just standing there watching the fight.

She knew she needed to feel grateful for Ethan. She needed to thank him for saving her in such a situation.

But something inside her didn't do as she wished.

There was something missing.

And as she watched the fight, she started realizing what that emptiness meant. Where it came from, or why she was feeling it.

'I am feeling useless.'

Seeing the two figures continuously clashing, Emily thought. The reason why she was feeling this empty.

It was because she was always on the receiving end of things. From the start, she never once gave anything meaningful to Ethan.

She was always saved.

And that was something she found undoubtedly unacceptable. She didn't want to be a liability. She refused to do so.

Why was this the case?

She couldn't answer, and neither did she need to. She just knew that this was her wish. From the bottom of her heart, she desired such a thing.

But the reality often disappointed the person. After all, she lacked the strength, and strength wasn't something that came from wishing so.

Gritting her teeth, she watched the scene.

Ethan somehow successfully managed to overpower the assassin. There was a faint pressure emanating from him, something that she couldn't put a name on but instinctively knew it was from a higher existence.

Something that was above her in the natural order. It easily suppressed her feelings and aura.

And as expected, Ethan managed to overpower the assassin and cornered him.

But then Emily witnessed the assassin throwing a dagger, and she wanted to warn Ethan. But not to her avail, as her voice was suppressed.

Emily felt like the aura that she initially felt when she entered the place somehow converged on her, covering her mouth.

However, Ethan managed to deflect the vial, and at that moment, Emily saw lighting surging from Ethan's body.

It was the first time she had seen him using lightning, but she somehow felt it was suited to him.

But then, just as Ethan was about to finish the assassin, suddenly, he stopped. He didn't move. Somehow, his eyes turned full black, and the concealment around Emily, this time converged on Ethan.

Then suddenly, someone appeared right before him. It was another assassin, and this one gave goosebumps to Emily!

As if they were of a higher rank. She felt suffocating just by being in the presence of the assassin. The aura and the killing intent suppressed her clearly.

The darkness around them also pressured her constantly, making it harder for her to even breathe.

Then, Emily saw the dagger in the assassin's hand approaching Ethan, but Ethan showed no signs of realizing that. It was as if his consciousness was from far away.

Emily didn't know what was happening, but she knew Ethan's life was in danger. Just like before, something was happening again, and it was because of her.

'No!'

Because of her, Ethan was this close to dying.

'NO!'

She gritted her teeth, trying to channel mana into her heart. Into her body.

As Emily focused her mind, channeling her mana with all her strength, a sudden tremor rippled through the darkness surrounding her. In that fleeting moment, she felt a small thread of energy entering her body from her spinal bulb, and her mana underwent a rapid transformation.

'Urghk! It hurts!'

It was not a phenomenon that could be foreseen, nor was it something that she was expecting. But no matter what, Emily's mana went under a qualitative change.

But that change brought pain inwardly.

With that change, she forced herself to move. And since her body was undergoing a change, her condition wasn't stable. With blood pouring from her eyes, Emily channeled her now darkened mana.

Then she felt the restrictions binding her dissipate, allowing her to move freely once more.

With a determined resolve, she pushed herself forward, propelling her body towards Ethan with all her strength.

In an instant, Emily materialized before the assassin, her sword poised to deflect the incoming dagger. With a forceful shout, she cried out to Ethan, "ETHAN, WAKE UP!"

Her voice echoed through the darkness as she intercepted the assassin's attack, her movements fueled by a mixture of desperation and determination.

And in that crucial moment, she felt Ethan twitching beside her, a sign that her words had reached him.

With lightning-fast reflexes, Ethan sprang into action, his spear lashing out toward the newly appearing assassin with incredible speed and precision. It was an instinctive act since Ethan's eyes were still wide open.

–SWOOSH!

"Tch."

The assassin, taken aback by Ethan's sudden resurgence, clicked his tongue in frustration, swiftly distancing himself from Ethan.

"You really are weird." The newly arrived assassin spoke, looking at Ethan.

"Master! Why did you reveal yourself?" The other assassin addressed the newly arrived assassin, feeling surprised by the sudden events happening.

It was apparently his master.

Realizing the choice of words, Ethan and Emily's bodies tensed. The assassin before them may not even be simple at all.

"Sigh...." The Master released a sigh of frustration. "Do you think you would still be alive if I hadn't done so?"

"That...."

"I clearly gave you every advantage that assassin needs, yet you still have failed the initial strike."

"But, master... That guy appeared out of nowhere."

"It is your job to ensure that the target is eliminated before any type of interference happens. Anything else is just an excuse." The Master spoke, looking at the young assassin. "But you are partly right; this guy is not simple."

The Master mumbled, looking at Ethan.

'Even though I used the [Dream Substituion], its effects were reduced by more than half.'

The Master Assassin analyzed. From the moment Ethan attacked his discipline, he knew he needed to interfere. Thus, he, in fact, pulled Ethan into a dream. In the real world, Ethan stopped in his tracks.

That was one of the skills he got after advancing the trait he acquired after making a contract with a demon, [Nocturnal]. He had never seen his skill fail him this much in his life.

That was one of the skills he got after advancing the trait he acquired after making a contract with a demon, [Nocturnal]. He From the moment Ethan made his appearance, this mission was no longer something that he could use to train this disciple of him.

"Well, it seems the warning given by the upper ranks was right. There was really someone strong involved with his girl." Master spoke and then locked his eyes with Ethan.

"Though, he is just a kid."

With those words, the assassin appeared right before Ethan, his body leaving an afterimage even in Ethan's eyes.

CLANK!

With his incredibly fast reflexes, Ethan was able to deflect the attack at the last split second using his spear.

As the Master Assassin closed in on Ethan with blinding speed, his dagger flashed like lightning, slashing with relentless ferocity. Ethan, caught off guard by the sudden onslaught, struggled to keep up, his spear deflecting some but not all of the attacks.

With each slash, Ethan felt the pressure mounting, his body straining against the overwhelming speed and precision of his opponent.

Despite his best efforts, he couldn't deflect even half of the strike, and rather deep cuts began to mar his skin, drawing blood with each passing moment.

Meanwhile, Emily found herself locked in a fierce clash with the young assassin, their swords clashing with a metallic ring that echoed through the darkness.

Though she initially struggled to stabilize herself, at this point, Emily refused to be a liability, drawing upon her resolve to defend herself against her assailant's relentless assault.

With each clash of steel, Emily's movements became more fluid, her instincts guiding her sword as she deflected the assassin's attacks with growing confidence. Emily could feel like something inside her had evolved. She could see the assassin's movements, which she previously struggled to grasp, and this gave her the advantage she needed.

On the other side, Ethan and the assassin clashed with each other, and the air cracked with tension.

'This is not good!' Ethan, feeling the weight of each strike, knew he had to find a way to break through the barrage of attacks.

'I am going to die at this rate!' With a quick judgment, he focused his mind, activating his skill, [Temporal Warding].

A shimmering barrier materialized around Ethan, momentarily deflecting the assassin's relentless assault.

CLANK!

For a fleeting moment, Ethan felt a surge of hope as he managed to fend off the incoming strikes.

However, the assassin sneered, disdain evident in his voice. "Futile tricks," he remarked, his confidence unwavering.

With a swift motion, he unleashed his own skill, [Lizard's Fang], a technique specifically designed to break through barriers. After all, as an assassin, how could he not have such a skill?

Most of important people who would be subjected to assassination requests would carry special artifacts with them to defend themselves regardless of whether they were Awakened or not. After all, this world didn't lack danger with demons and monsters around already.

The barrier created by Ethan's [Temporal Warding] shattered like glass upon impact, leaving him vulnerable once more.

Ethan gritted his teeth, realizing that his opponent was not to be underestimated. No, the strength of his enemy was beyond his scope.

He was releasing his [????'s Might], but the enemy was not being affected compared to the assailants previously.

Even with his 5.69 strength, he was unable to completely deflect his attacks. His speed was a lot more lacking. Ethan now knew he was not in a good situation at all, and he acted impulsively by coming here this fast.

As if to compound Ethan's predicament, the assassin intensified his pressure, exerting his dominance over the battlefield.

'Huh?'

Suddenly, Ethan's movements began to falter, and his thoughts grew sluggish, as if his mind was under drugs.

And that was the case!

The assassin had already used another skill, [Dream Ailment], from his trait [Nocturnal], as he knew that the artifact that created this concealment was starting to run out of energy, and they needed to leave.

The spear in Ethan's hands gave him a weird feeling, and for some reason, the assassin felt like Ethan was improving himself as he battled. Though the assassin was still in an overwhelming advantage, he knew he needed to trust his gut.

The effects of the assassin's 'Dream Ailment' began to take hold, clouding Ethan's mind and sapping his strength. Despite his best efforts to resist, Ethan found himself struggling to maintain his focus, his movements becoming increasingly sluggish with each passing moment.

SLASH! And the master assassin slashed.

Chapter 348 Chapter 81.3 - Close

The moment Ethan's thoughts turned sluggish, Assassin immediately attempted to strike Ethan with his daggers.

He wanted to end things fast.

BOOM!

But then suddenly, the mana exploded from his right side. Emily used her skill [Breath Resonance], but this time, her skill was slightly different.

Rather than just releasing a spherical shockwave without a clear direction, this time, she released a small crescent wave to Ethan's direction and distorted the Assassin's attacks.

Somehow, her wave had gained the distortion ability of the assassin!

"Tch!"

Master assassin, seeing his attack distorted, threw a look with annoyance at Emily. At this point, he thought these two were just futilely resisting.

They were already dead in his eyes.

Ethan managed to get rid of his sluggish thoughts as his mind started working properly again. He knew this was his last chance, as Emily had given him the space. The assassin was momentarily disturbed.

Utilizing his trait, he instantly channeled his mana into his spear. Lightning crackled around the spear as Ethan took his position.

[Transmeate]

Using his spear's special property, he drew the mana inside him more than he could. His skin started deteriorating as blood started dripping from his nose. His eyes were bloodshot as he even consumed his life force.

His strength far surpassed his body's limits momentarily, reaching almost the barrier of 7.

「Spear of Hartley. Heavenly Shura」

RUMBLE!

The sky rumbled as lightning swept through Ethan.

In an instant, Ethan struck through the master assassin with his spear.

"!"

The assassin felt alarmed, as the aura behind the strike was clearly something that could be fatal to him.

And, but then, the only thing he needed to do was to evade.

Just as he attempted to do so, suddenly, the assassin felt the gravitational force increasing over his body, a sensation he hadn't anticipated. His movements became sluggish, his agility hindered by the unexpected force acting upon him. In that split second of his movements trapped, he realized his fatal mistake.

Around him, somehow, a new type of mana had appeared, but he wasn't even aware of that!

Ethan, seizing the opportunity afforded by Emily's intervention and the momentary stop caused by the unknown force, launched himself forward with unparalleled speed and precision. His spear, crackling with lightning, surged toward the master assassin with unstoppable force.

With a gasp of realization, the assassin attempted to evade, but it was too late. The gravitational pull held him in place, leaving him vulnerable to Ethan's decisive strike.

SWOOSH! RUMBLE!

In a swift and fluid motion, Ethan's spear pierced through the assassin's defenses, driving deep into his body with relentless determination.

"RAAAA!"

STAB!

The master assassin's eyes widened in shock and agony as he felt the searing pain of Ethan's attack tearing through him.

Despite his best efforts to resist, he could do nothing to prevent the inevitable. Everything happened in a split second.

"Argh!"

With a final, guttural cry, the assassin refused to succumb to Ethan's overwhelming power, grabbing the spear stabbed in his chest.

SPURT!

He channeled his mana into his arms, enhancing his strength. And then he pulled the spear out of his chest, with blood spurting from the wound.

Ethan had already reached his limit by that time, and he was no longer able to hold his spear, making him unable to resist the Master Assassin's pull.

"You!"

The Master Assassin growled, his voice filled with hatred for the first time. The wound on his chest was not closing at all, and it was rather deep. Even though he wasn't defeated and the wound wasn't something fatal, it still hurt.

The hatred in his eyes was clear as he covered the wound with mana, making the blood stop.

Even with Ethan's strongest attack connecting, the Master Assassin had yet to fall down.

THUD!

And Ethan, who had used even the last bit of his strength and some of his life force, fell to the ground. His body was in tatters, with his veins burst open thanks to the amount of energy they needed to withstand.

Many internal injuries had accumulated, and his inner organs were not functioning.

"Burghk!"

His breathing was hoarse, and from time to time, he coughed blood. He was no longer in a condition to fight.

"Die."

The Master Assassin raised his dagger, this time clearly with the intent to finish Ethan.

—CLANK!

But just as the assassin was about to strike, a sudden burst of energy disrupted the scene. With lightning-fast reflexes, the assassin deflected a strike aimed at him with his dagger. It was a bullet of energy directed towards him with pinpoint accuracy.

Before he could comprehend what was happening, more bullets of energy began raining down upon him, each strike aimed with deadly precision.

"Tch!"

The assassin growled in frustration, realizing that he was under attack from an unknown assailant.

The rapid onslaught of energy bullets forced the assassin to take evasive maneuvers, dodging and weaving to avoid being hit. Despite his agility, he couldn't escape the relentless barrage of attacks.

Realizing that he needed to deal with this new threat first, the master assassin activated the power of the artifact of concealment. It was the artifact that he had brought with him, sealing this whole space.

A thick curtain of darkness enveloped him, shielding him from view and providing temporary cover from the relentless assault as he moved from his space.

'Now you can't see me.'

He realized that this person might have been in this place for a long time, but he was unable to sense them. Even as an executive of the organization [Dark Watch], he was unable to sense the enemy.

His condition was also not good, as his strength was slowly deteriorating.

SWOSOH! But, suddenly, as he was thinking rapidly, his senses had warmed him. A projectile approached him at a rapid speed.

It was an arrow!

An arrow filled with an immense amount of energy. Under the darkness of night, the arrow shone bright blue.

'He can see me!'

In an instant, the assassin realized that his location had been revealed, and he didn't have much time to evade it.

Thus, he attempted to deflect the arrow, throwing a dagger.

BOOM! But to his surprise, the arrow exploded upon contact with the dagger, unleashing a powerful blast of energy that sent him hurtling through the air.

CRASH! With a grunt of pain, the assassin was thrown backward, his body spinning uncontrollably as he struggled to regain his balance. The force of the explosion was immense, causing him to crash into the wall of the building with a bone-jarring impact.

As he coughed up blood, his senses reeled from the shock of the explosion. But even in his dazed state, his eyes locked onto the figure standing on the roof of the building, hidden in the shadows.

The assailant was clad in pitch-black armor, their features obscured by a dark cloak. In their hand, they held a massive blue bow crackling with potent energy.

Because of their concealment, the assassin was unable to sense the strength of the enemy clearly, but the arrows clearly contained a lot of energy.

'This....'

But then again, the Master Assassin had a lot of experience. Thus, he immediately made his decision decisively.

Grabbing a small rectangle thing from his spatial storage, he crushed it. It was an expendable charm, something that was made by the alchemist of [Dark Watch.]

Charm of Black Flame. It had the ability to directly activate the spell belonging to the Fire and Darkness Domain.[Black Flame], and the strength of the spell was level-6. Even a higher-ranking hunter would have a hard time dealing with this flame.

In an instant, the surrounding area of the assailant erupted into chaos as the Charm of Black Flame was activated. Swirling tendrils of black flames engulfed the target destination, their intense heat and darkness burning and corroding everything in their path.

The master assassin watched with a mixture of satisfaction and bitterness as the flames raged, knowing that he had unleashed a powerful force that would make even the most formidable Hunters

think twice before confronting. But at the same time, he couldn't help but feel a twinge of regret at having to use such a valuable and costly item.

As the flames consumed the area, the assassin's gaze remained fixed on the assailant, his mind racing with possibilities and strategies.

But then, just as he was preparing to strike again, his senses tingled with a warning. From his right side, shadows blurred and shifted, and before he could react, the assailant emerged from the darkness unscathed.

The assassin's eyes narrowed as he realized that the assailant possessed a spatial leap ability, allowing them to evade his attack and reappear unharmed.

It was a clever maneuver, one that showcased the assailant's skill and resourcefulness.

However, he wasn't discouraged. He knew that he had gained a brief respite, a moment to compose himself and get ready to clash. Top of Form

He was already ready to use his trait's next move.

「Nocturnal. Manifesting Javelin.」

In an instant, his mana was spread forward, manifesting a javelin he had conjured in his mind. It was one of the abilities of his traits, making him able to manifest a skill of his dreams.

SWOOSH!

The spears flew through the assailant at a rapid speed, but they lacked their usual strength. His condition was undoubtedly affecting the Master Assassin already.

But the assailant was quick to react, grabbing a bunch of silvery-colored chakrams from god knows where.

With remarkable agility and precision, they athletically deflected the javelins while evading some of them, their movements fluid and graceful.

Shadows swirled around the assailant's legs, enhancing their speed as they darted around the battlefield with unparalleled agility.

The master assassin gritted his teeth, realizing that his opponent was no ordinary adversary. However, even then, the assailant wasn't able to completely fend off his every strike. Some of the javelins passed through his skin, creating shallow cuts.

"This bastard.....If I was in my top condition!" Desperate to gain the upper hand, the Master Assassin attempted to distort the trajectory of the chakrams utilizing the ring on his fingers, freezing them in mid-air for a split second.

SWOOSH! But to his surprise, the assailant seemed to anticipate his move, already leaping into the shadows and appearing right behind him in the blink of an eye.

As the chakrams hung frozen in the air, the assailant wasted no time, seizing the opportunity to reclaim their weapons. With a swift motion, he seemed to pull a bunch of illusory threads, and the chakrams came to life, instantly flying back into the assailant's hands.

And on the trajectory, the Master Assassin was there, and he was about to be attacked.

However, being a high-ranking executive of an organization, his trump cards weren't even finished yet.

BOOM! In an instant, an energy of darkness erupted from his body, releasing a shockwave similar to Emily's.

And the shockwave blasted the assailant behind him off.

CRASH!

The assailant crashed into walls, widening the distance.

As the shockwave blasted the assailant off, the Master Assassin seized the opportunity to act. With lightning speed, he unleashed a 'Dream Ailment' on the assailant, hoping to slow their thoughts and gain a momentary advantage, and then he threw another dagger at his enemy.

But his relief was short-lived, as he felt the effects of his own injuries taking their toll. With his mana reserves nearly depleted and his condition worsening by the second, the Master Assassin knew he couldn't afford to linger in the battle any longer.

Utilizing the momentary pause caused by the 'Dream Ailment,' the master assassin made a split-second decision to flee, his survival instincts kicking into overdrive.

However, as he reached for the ring on his finger to activate the artifact, a sudden realization struck him like a bolt of lightning.

His whole hand was missing, severed cleanly at the wrist.

"Urghk-!"

As he coughed blood, his vision blurred.

Chapter 349 Chapter 81.4 - Close

In this world, how do you catch a fish bigger than you? No, it is not necessarily confined to this world.

In any world, how does one defeat the thing that is above them in terms of natural order? Can a cat hunt a lion? Can a normal jellyfish hunt a shark? Can a deer hunt a bear?

Are there any examples of such a thing happening in the world?

The answer is obvious.

The humans, we, are the prime example of that. From the moment we are born, do you think we have the necessary physical aspects to deal with a bear or any type of predator?

No, we do not.

But we are still in this world, living around for countless centuries or even millennia.

That alone is an example.

Then how did we do it? At first, we were overwhelmed, but then we started adapting and getting crafty. We started utilizing the most important thing in this world.

Being able to think and plan.

The key to catching a bigger fish is here. To outsmart them, to plan your actions.

You first throw the bait.

Someone will bite it eventually.

The reason why I had made Ethan connect with Emily was for this purpose. After all, Emily was the main character of one of the side-quests, and her questline was long.

Therefore, there needed to be certain key elements that wouldn't change even now. And that was the case. As the guild conflicts over Azure Crest Guild's area intensified, people were bound to be sent by the demon contractors.

After all, the mobs can no longer deal with Emily and the area since the Hartleys are now looking over this district. Though Hartley's, in general, are a lot better compared to other families, this is not the case when you try to harm their descendants.

Especially Ethan, who has been doted on thanks to his lack of strength. Ethan's mother and father still dote on him, and they can never overlook such a matter.

Thus, they were bound to get desperate. And, just as I had thought, an assassination request had been sent via InfernalCovenant.

And then, utilizing Fred's smartwatch and identity, I was easily able to infiltrate as an assassin. After all, Fred was kind of a freelancer. Thus, he lacked conditions when I had first hunted him.

Therefore, his death was overlooked, and nobody cared, thinking he just disappeared after failing to achieve his mission.

Also, the InfernalCovenant had yet to develop a method of self-destructiveness. Therefore, their smartwatches can be used for a long time.

It also doesn't always connect to the central server only when it is initiated from the smartwatch.

Therefore, they still lack in terms of this, though they are developing.

In any case, by pretending to be an assassin, I followed the notice, seemingly interested in the job, and checked the developments.

After that, it wasn't hard to learn the narrowed time to a certain extent since the employer seemed to be restless and wanted to achieve the result clearly.

It seemed they didn't trust the ones taking the job and wanted to guarantee it. Therefore, after getting the information, it wasn't hard to inform Ethan and track Emily using Horde.

Though I spent some money to invest in Horde, that was fine since they are doing their job clearly well, and also, I am frankly a lot richer compared to how I was before.

In any case, Horde tracked Emily with their newly bought equipment, and then they informed her that someone was indeed trailing her.

From that point on, I confirmed Emily would be attacked and informed Ethan.

Then, after he left, I followed him. Thanks to my improved endurance and the distance being relatively close to the Academy, it wasn't hard for me to follow Ethan without completely tiring myself out.

My speed does not lack compared to Ethan's.

As I watched Ethan approach the scene, my senses tingled with a faint disturbance in the air. It was subtle but unmistakable—a telltale sign of an artifact at work, weaving its veil of concealment around the area.

My specialized vision allowed me to perceive the subtle distortions in the surroundings, indicating the presence of the enchantment. The darkness cloaked the area, making it difficult to discern what lay beyond.

With Ethan drawing closer, I knew he needed to proceed with caution. The concealed area could be a trap, a haven for unseen dangers lurking in the shadows.

But Ethan would press on, driven by determination and purpose.

As he stepped into the shrouded space, I also readied myself.

It was imperative for me to mask my appearance and blend seamlessly into the darkness. With a quick invocation of my skill, [Shadow Leap], I vanished into the shadows, utilizing the small crack that appeared in the curtain of concealment thanks to Ethan's entrance. After all, that small crack connected the space inside and outside for a split second, making me able to utilize my skill.

As I materialized within the concealed area, my senses heightened, alert to the unfolding danger. Ahead, I saw Ethan engaged in a fierce clash with a cloaked figure—a skilled assassin, no doubt. He fought with determination, driven by the need to protect Emily from harm. It was in his character.

'No doubt that he is improving rapidly.'

I thought, looking at his prowess. This was also a good chance to observe the protagonist and see his speed of improvement.

'However, there is no way they only sent one assassin.'

Sure enough, as if on cue, a palpable pressure surged from the shadows, signaling the arrival of another assassin. The pressure emanating from it was a lot stronger than from the former, and from the ripples of mana across, I could see that that guy's strength was even on the level of Count Charles, the vampire.

He was probably an intermediate-rank 7 Awakened.

They really sent someone with a higher rank. The big fish was here.

'He is at least an executive. As expected, the organization must have noticed that the previous mobs couldn't be dealt with by normal guys. That means someone is behind Emily.'

In a sudden burst of movement, the second assailant emerged from the darkness, poised to join the fray. The dagger approached Ethan, who was pulled into a momentary dream.

Though, I know if I were to reveal myself here, that would be the end of us since we wouldn't be able to deal with the assassin. However, I didn't need to either.

Emily, previously a bystander in the conflict, began to undergo a transformation. The mana of the dark curtain converged around her, mingling with her own energy in a display of raw power.

'So this was her talent...'

It was then that I realized the true extent of Emily's talent from the game since it wasn't clearly revealed. However, I knew from one conversation that it was thanks to a demon contractor she clashed with. It seemed that using her was the right choice.

'Digestion and Absorption.'

The mana converged to her and assimilated into her mana, mutating. There needed to be certain triggers, and it seemed the first one was darkness-attributed psions.

Emily intervened to save Ethan from a fatal strike, and she was successful.

Then, with renewed determination, Ethan engaged the second assailant in a fierce clash, his every move a testament to his resolve.

But despite his best efforts, Ethan's skills alone were not enough to match the power of his adversary. His stats fell short, and it seemed as though defeat was inevitable.

However, I knew Ethan better than anyone. I knew that he was not one to go down without a fight.

And just as I had expected, Ethan reached deep within himself, tapping into his strongest technique and the skill of spear—the very limit of his current abilities.

'Heavenly Shura.'

A skill that enabled him to even clash with the higher ranking enemies. The leverage of the main character.

'And now it is my time.'

With a surge of energy, I also activated his [Celestalith], transforming it into [Umbralith].

Since Ethan's decision was a bold move, a last-ditch effort to turn the tide of battle in his favor, I needed to utilize this strike, which was on the border of the 6-rank well.

And then, I activated the gravity pull around the second assailant, and then, from that moment on, the rest was history.

As the shockwave blasted the assailant off, the Master Assassin seized the opportunity to act. With lightning speed, he unleashed a 'Dream Ailment' on the assailant, hoping to slow their thoughts and gain a momentary advantage, and then he threw another dagger at his enemy.

But his relief was short-lived, as he felt the effects of his own injuries taking their toll. With his mana reserves nearly depleted and his condition worsening by the second, the Master Assassin knew he couldn't afford to linger in the battle any longer.

Utilizing the momentary pause caused by the 'Dream Ailment,' the master assassin made a split-second decision to flee, his survival instincts kicking into overdrive.

However, as he reached for the ring on his finger to activate the artifact, a sudden realization struck him like a bolt of lightning.

His whole hand was missing, severed cleanly at the wrist.

"Urghk-!"

As he coughed blood, his vision blurred.

Turning his head, the master assassin's eyes widened in horror as he saw the assailant manipulating the chakrams connected to him with silvery threads.

It dawned on him that the assailant had not been affected by his 'Dream Ailment' at all, and he had fallen into a trap of his own making.

There were two people who were strong against his dream attacks!

First, this blue-haired bastard, and now this newly arriving guy.

"Burghk-!"

He coughed another mouthful of blood as he struggled to stand. His body was on the verge of collapsing.

"Grrrr....."

Slowly, the emotions he suppressed to think logically started getting out of control.

As the assassin struggled to stand, his body wracked with pain and his vision growing dimmer with each passing moment, a wave of intense hatred washed over him.

'It is because of you!' He realized that he could no longer escape without finishing this bastard, without avenging himself against those who dared to defy him.

"Grrrr..."

With a growl of fury, the assassin's mind was consumed by thoughts of revenge. He knew that he was facing two formidable foes, but he refused to go down without a fight. If he was going to die, he would take them with him.

With a hateful glare directed at the newly arriving adversary, the assassin made a desperate move.

Ignoring the pain coursing through his body, he attempted to bite down on the small capsule hidden in his teeth, a last resort that he had kept as a failsafe.

–SWOOSH!

But before he could even sink his teeth into the capsule, the assailant appeared right before his face as if materializing from the shadows.

In a blur of motion, the assailant slashed at his mouth with the chakrams, moving with such speed that the assassin could barely react. It was as if his thoughts had been read.

–CRACK! The chakrams sliced through the air with deadly precision, cutting into the assassin's flesh with a sickening sound. Blood sprayed from the wound as the assassin's mouth was torn open, his scream of agony muffled by the onslaught.

But that wasn't the end, as the assailant attempted to grab the capsule inside his mouth as if he knew the exact location.

And then, the assailant grabbed the capsule.

However, the Master Assassin's eyes shone bright for a split second.

'You dared to come close to me!'

In an instant, the assassin channeled every bit of his remaining mana and even his life force. It was the same technique Ethan had used, but Assassin did it to the extreme that he would be dead one hundred percent after using it.

A crimson aura erupted from his body, a bloodlust aura of his peak strength, enveloping the assailant before him. And just as he expected, the assailant wasn't able to resist his full aura, meaning he was weak.

'DIE!'

Because his mouth was ripped open, Assassin could only scream inwardly. He channeled his aura into his arms, creating a blade.

STAB! And then he stabbed the black-cloaked assailant in his chest, his arm passing through the assailant's body.

'Hehehehe...Now, due to the poison, you bastard.'

On the tip of his nails, he hid poison after all.

SLASH!

But this was his last thought as his neck was severed. The last scene he saw was the assailant, whose chest now had a hole in it.

Chapter 350 Chapter 81.5 - Close

The moment Ethan used his last strike, his vision turned blurry. Breathing was hard; his body was in tatters. He was on the verge of losing consciousness. However, his body forced him to stay awake.

It was because of the intent that was being released from the newly appearing figure, as well as the explosion that had just happened. After all, such an explosion would force everyone to wake up.

Clad in pitch darkness, the figure emanated such a strong killing intent and hatred that Ethan couldn't help but feel scared.

'Who is this?'

Ethan asked himself. Where did this person come from? Was there always there? He hadn't noticed at all.

However, what was more impressive was the fact that the flying chakrams around the space. The newly arrived dark figure dealt with the assassin, who was injured thanks to his attack.

The figure's moves were clean and practiced. The way they utilized the chakrams and the mana surrounding them showed their expertise.

However, it was evident that Master Assassin was still able to deal with the assailant to a certain degree.

After a bunch of blow exchanges, the fight between the two finally met their end.

THUD!

The head, belonging to the master assassin, fell to the ground. However, the dark-clad assailant also suffered some losses from the clash as now there was a hole in their chest.

Blood was dripping from the injury as the flesh corresponding to the surface was being devoured and deteriorated by the position disgustingly.

"Burghk-!"

The dark-clad assailant coughed blood, their body injured and shaking.

At that exact second, the disciple who had been locked in combat with Emily realized the fate that awaited him if he didn't act swiftly.

CLANK!

With lightning-fast reflexes, he deflected Emily's sword attack, his movements fluid and precise.

But instead of pressing his advantage against Emily, the disciple's attention was drawn to his fallen master.

With a solemn expression, he checked the body and realized that his master was no longer her. Then, his gaze fixed on the severed hand that still clutched something tightly.

'FUCK!'

Realizing that he was no longer in a position to complete the mission safely, his mind started working.

SWOOSH!

With a quick slash, he threw a crescent blood wave to Emily, who was breathing heavily from the constant fighting.

Even though her mana had undergone a change, she didn't have the necessary time to accommodate the feeling; thus, she was unable to use her potential to the max.

And the Assassin that she was facing was not an easy opponent as well. His speed and his abilities were quite troublesome to deal with, thanks to his blood magic.

CLANK!

However, she forced herself to stand up just to give Ethan the free time. Though the appearance of the dark-clad assailant caught her off guard, she knew her job hadn't changed.

CLANK! CLANK!

She deflected the rapidly approaching crescent blood waves while also constantly reminding herself to check her body so that no ailments were spread inside. She was once struck by the ailment, and that almost cost her life.

On the other side, utilizing his blood manipulation abilities, the disciple reached out with his own blood, manipulating the severed hand that once belonged to his master.

From the blood and flesh that corresponded to the severed surface, a bunch of threads began to form, weaving together to create a makeshift connection.

—SWOOSH!

With careful precision, the disciple manipulated the threads, guiding the severed hand to himself. And as the hand drew near, he reached out and plucked the ring from his master's finger, his actions swift and deliberate.

With the ring in hand, the disciple's expression hardened as he looked at the people responsible for the death of his master.

With that, while gritting his teeth, he channeled his mana into the ring and followed.

Emily realized what was happening, and in an instant, she attempted to leap and shorten the distance.

"You are not going anywhere!"

However, she was too late, as the spatial mana around the assassin fluctuated. Following that, the guy was slowly sucked into the portal appearing.

But at that exact second, that portal also removed his mask and his cloak, revealing the face of the assassin.

It was a young man with his head shaved.

His dark-tanned skin contrasted sharply with the intricate tattoos that adorned his body, each one telling a story of its own.

Upon his shaved head, countless tattoos covered his scalp, depicting various symbols and images in a ritualistic manner. Serpents intertwined with worms, forming a mesmerizing yet eerie pattern. But it was the tattoo on his forehead that drew the most attention—a star with five-pointed edges, with a man depicted hanging from a cross within its center.

The details of the tattoo were chilling, as if the man hanging from the cross was reaching out to the young man, his hands elongated and stretching towards the young man's eyes. It was a disturbing image that sent shivers down Ethan's spine.

The young man's gaze was intense, his eyes reflecting a mixture of anger and determination. He clenched his fists tightly, his resolve evident as he faced Ethan and Emily with unwavering determination.

"You.....You are all going to pay for everything...I will make sure of it....." his voice was low and menacing, filled with an air of vengeance. His brown eyes shone red for a split second as blood poured from his eyes.

"We never forget our promises."

Following that, with a surge of spatial mana, the young man was slowly pulled into the portal, disappearing from view.

And in that fleeting moment, Ethan caught a glimpse of the young man's expression—a distorted expression that even he could not help but flinch.

It was a haunting sight that would stay with Ethan long after the young man had disappeared into the unknown.

But things didn't end here, and Ethan knew that. At that moment, Ethan's attention was forced to be drawn to the figure whose face was obscured by a mask. Despite the mask, Ethan could sense the intense gaze directed at him, causing him to flinch involuntarily. The intent emanating from the assailant was palpable, filling the air with an ominous presence.

However, in a split second, the direction of the assailant's intent shifted, letting Ethan relax without the pressure.

"ETHAN!"

Just as Emily shouted a warning, believing the assailant was targeting Ethan, the gravity around her suddenly intensified, rendering her unable to move.

She was trapped, immobilized by the oppressive force exerted by the assailant. The dark-clad figure's hand was now shining black-purple.

With a raised hand, the dark-clad figure demonstrated their mastery over telekinesis, causing the blood that had spilled from their own wounds to rise from the ground and vanish into thin air.

"Grrrr...."

Emily gritted her teeth and tried to move her body, but gravity did not let her do so. Yet, she didn't give up and tried her best.

Ethan finally managed to gather a bit of his strength managed to utter.

"W-who are you?" His internal injuries made it very hard for him to speak, but he still forced himself.

"....." The dark-clad assailant didn't say anything as the shadows swirled around them.

SWOOSH! And following that split second, the assailant disappeared, leaving the two.

RING!

At that second, the sound of a police car siren rang in both Ethan's and Emily's ears. The curtain that disconnected them from the outer world was now lifted, letting them finally have their way.

"Kughk-!"

As Ethan coughed a little bit more blood from his mouth, Emily came to his side and grabbed him from his cheeks, letting his head rest on his thighs.

"Here, drink this."

She slowly poured the potion into his mouth, letting him digest it without damaging herself.

At that moment, the people on the street, who could now see the destruction caused by the fight, gathered around both Ethan and Emily with their mouths agape.

Right before their eyes, such a fight occurred, yet none of them felt anything, and this made them understand the dangers of their world once again.

As for Ethan, his mind was a mess with thoughts about the dark-clad assailant and the assassins.

Yet he knew one thing, and that was the fact that he had grown from this fight.

"Hrrrrr..."

My voice is now hoarse. It was something that could be expected from my body. After all, there is a complete hole on the right side of the belly. My liver is possibly fractured, as well as the ribs that were covering it.

'I really didn't think they would already have those capsules.'

There was a slight miscalculation on my side. The fact that the assassin held the [Destruction] capsule in his mouth was something that I momentarily overlooked.

'Or maybe his Dream Ailment caused it.'

That was possibly the case. There was a chance that I could still be affected by the mind-type attacks, although I am pretty confident in my mental strength.

External influences are not always something that one can deal with just by having a high mental strength.

"Cough-!"

Blood continued to threaten my mouth to spill out, but I was not going to let it do so. My world was shaking, and the potion I had just taken didn't seem to have any effects.

Of course, with the poison that is constantly dripping inside my body, that would be the case. There is nothing I can do about that.

THUD! Leaning on the walls of the building that was in the process of being built, I could only try to get my energy. I came here after dealing with the assassin since the police and officers were already on the way.

This place was already covered by the mana of concealment, the artifact that I had taken from the assassins.

'It went as I planned, but the hunt was still hard.'

No matter how hard I tried, the speed of my improvement was still lacking. I already knew the answer, but just by training, I could not get strong fast enough.

The increased limit of talent is just as much, and it is not enough.

'But, no need to think about these right now.'

As my trembling hand gripped the dagger, I focused on channeling my remaining strength into steady precision.

With a slow, deliberate movement, I poured the narcotic liquid onto the affected area, feeling the numbing sensation begin to spread.

"Huff....huffff....huffff...."

Despite the agony raging through my body, I suppressed the urge to cry out, determined to endure.

"Haaaaaaah...Haaaaaaah...."

With a sharp intake of breath, I positioned the dagger over the infected site, the blade glinting in the dim light.

The right side of my liver, weakened and battered, awaited my desperate attempt at salvation.

The moment I noticed that the assassin's attack contained poison, I forcefully created a barricade of my own mana to momentarily stop the spread. But that was only a temporary solution since that also meant my body wasn't getting supplied with energy. Even now, some of my muscles are protesting against me.

Steeling myself against the searing pain that awaited, I pressed the blade against my flesh and began to cut.

"Grrrrrr....."

The sensation was overwhelming, a wave of agony crashing over me as I sliced through the tissue tainted by poison.

Every nerve screamed in protest, but I clenched my jaw tightly, refusing to let even a whimper escape my lips.

Blood welled up from the wound, dark and viscous, but I pushed through, my vision swimming with tears, showing my body's protest to my own actions.

But there was nothing I could do. I needed to deal with this before returning to the academy, or I would already be dead by that time.

With a trembling hand, I grasped the torn tissue and pulled it free, my muscles trembling with exertion. Despite the blinding pain, I forced myself to maintain a steady grip, my breath coming in ragged gasps as I fought to stay conscious.

With the infected tissue removed, I wasted no time in administering the high-ranking potion directly to the raw, exposed wound—the liquid seared against my flesh, a fiery agony that threatened to consume me whole.

But I gritted my teeth and endured, pouring every ounce of my willpower into sealing the wound and purging the poison from my body.

As the potion took effect, I felt a surge of renewed strength coursing through my veins, the pain gradually subsiding to a dull ache.

"Haaaah...."

With a shaky exhale, I leaned back against the wall, my body trembling with exhaustion.

'I hunted an executive.'