

H. Academy 381

Chapter 381 Chapter 88.4 - Final Exams

As the students filed out of the classroom, the atmosphere was a mix of relief and exhaustion. Their faces were filled with joy.

They had faced their final challenge of the week, and now all that was left was to await their results.

"Finally, freedom."

Julia mumbled, raising her arms to stretch her body. There was a wide smile on her face.

"We still have an oral exam, you know." Yet, Lucas didn't let her have her way, reminding her of what was to come.

"Tsk. Why did you have to interrupt my mood?"

"It is not like I said anything wrong."

"So what? You don't need to say the truth all the time."

"I can say whatever you want."

"Yeah? Then, should I beat you up, saying I can do whatever you want?"

"Why don't you try?"

"Come on then!"

These two had been fighting more frequently than before. Even though they were twins, Lucas had always played the role of neutralizer of Julia in the past. But that was no longer the case, as he seemed to not hold back either.

"Hey, calm down."

"Don't interfere."

"Indeed."

Ethan, who tried to interject, was refused helplessly. He could only look at the two with a sigh.

"Noisy."

At that moment, Lilia mumbled.

"What did you say?" Julia, who had been irritated by Lucas, narrowed her eyes.

"We just finished a long three-hour exam. Sorry, but I can't bear your voice right now."

What she said was indeed how she was feeling. Normally, she didn't mind Julia's antics and rather felt amused by them. But that wasn't the case right now. The reason for that was...

'I fucked up the last question.'

She realized that her answer to the sixth question was wrong, and that realization hit her at the exact last moment when Instructor Hartley was collecting the papers.

Julia's eyes flared with irritation as she glared at Lilia. "If you can't bear my voice, you're free to leave then," she snapped, her tone sharp and challenging.

Lilia met her gaze, unfazed. "I'll do exactly that," she replied coolly. Without another word, she stood up and began to gather her things.

The rest of the group watched in surprise as Lilia made her way to the door. The suddenness of her departure left a palpable tension in the air. Irina, who had been quietly observing, also stood up.

"Where are you going?" Ethan asked, concern evident in his voice.

Irina smiled at him, a hint of mischief in her eyes. "I need to take care of something," she said, her tone lighter than usual. With that, she followed Lilia out of the room.

'She really is in a good mood.'

Irina walked with a confident stride, a smirk playing on her lips. She was sure she had aced the exam. Her preparation had paid off, and she was eager to see where she stood among her peers.

Outside, the cold winter air felt refreshing after the stifling atmosphere of the exam room.

Irina scanned the crowd of students, her eyes landing on Astron, who was leaning casually against a tree.

He seemed as calm and composed as ever, his face betraying no signs of stress or exhaustion.

Irina approached him, her smirk widening. "So, how did it go?" she asked, her voice tinged with a hint of smugness.

Astron looked up, meeting her gaze with his usual calm demeanor. "It went well," he replied simply, his expression unreadable.

Irina tilted her head slightly, studying him. "Just well? Not nervous about the results?"

He shook his head. "No, I think I did what was needed."

This time, Irina wasn't to falter. After all, she was going to win and would make this serious face crumble.

For a moment, they stood in silence, the bustling sounds of other students fading into the background. It was a strange feeling but not an unwelcome one.

"I have to admit," Irina said, breaking the silence, "that last question was tough. But I think I nailed it."

"It was indeed harder. Question 6 and Question 4 are the ones that were harder than others."

"Question 4. I don't think it was hard."

"Hmm...." Astron's eyes were narrowed for a split second.

'Why?'

An uncomfortable feeling appeared inside Irina's mind.

"If that is how you think." Astron shrugged off,

Irina felt a twinge of doubt. Had she missed something in Question 4? But she quickly pushed the thought aside. No, she was confident in her answers. She had prepared thoroughly and executed her strategy well.

"Well," she said, leaning in slightly, "we'll see soon enough, won't we?"

Astron met her gaze, his calm demeanor unwavering. "Yes, we will."

There was a moment of silence again, filled with an unspoken challenge. Irina's competitive spirit flared, but she also felt a strange sense of camaraderie. Despite their rivalry, there was a respect that ran deeper than mere competition.

"You know," Irina said, breaking the silence once more, "I almost admire your calmness. Almost."

"And I almost admire your determination. Almost."

"Ahahaha...." Irina laughed, the sound light and genuine.

"What is so funny?"

"I don't know, I just feel like laughing."

'With him, it feels strangely fun.'

"I see...."

"Not everything needs to be able to be explained, you know." Irina smiled.

"Not everything needs to be able to be explained...." Astron repeated her words. "I guess that is one way to say it."

"One way to say what?"

"Surrender."

"I am not surrendering."

"You are giving up upon finding a reason. What else is it other than surrendering?"

"You and your sophistry. Though, I think sometimes surrendering is the better option." Saying those words, she looked into his purple eyes. "It is better than getting drowned in despair and struggling for something impossible."

As for why she was saying those words, she didn't know. Something, a slightly veiled memory, was urging her, it felt like.

For a split second, Astron's eyes widened. It was an insanely quick reaction, something that many students would miss. But Irina, being the high-ranking student she was and knowing him better than almost everyone else, caught his reaction.

Then, after that fleeting moment, Astron regained control of his expression, his face once again a mask of calm and composure.

Irina's heart raced slightly. She had seen it—a glimpse of something buried deep within him. Her words had struck a chord, however briefly.

"Interesting," Astron finally said, his voice as steady as ever. "I didn't expect you to be the type to consider surrender an option."

'I didn't expect myself to say such a thing either.'

Irina thought inwardly. But, while she was saying those things, she didn't feel any type of denial at all. As if someone, something, genuinely believed that.

"Sometimes it's not about surrendering," Irina replied, her tone softer. "It's about knowing when to change your approach. When to adapt. Isn't that right? Just like how people look different from the outside, the things we have experienced may make us drift farther away from the truth, making us disillusioned."

'You were the one who showed me how my own judgment can blind my own eyes. But you....'

At that moment, a voice echoed in her head.

—Even after trying to achieve my revenge in the pursuit of the very beings that made my life hell, I learned the enemy I deemed had never been the ones I sought." —It was then I realized it's not the weak's fault for being trampled, nor the strong's fault for using their power. It's this world's fault for giving power to the wrong people."

"Urghk-!"

Her temples ached, and her vision blurred for a split second.

Something....

She was seeing something.

It was a veiled vision, but there, she saw a spear piercing someone's chest: familiar black hair and pale skin.

—I am sorry.....for failing everything and seeing such a person turning in this way...."

Another familiar face with blue hair. Both of them were people she knew, the voices she knew.

—May the Lord bless your soul....."

A question lingered deep in her consciousness as her vision gradually returned to normal.

'Why did you lose your own self....?'

Facing the same purple eyes....

She felt like there was a familiar shallowness inside.

But, compared to how she had seen previously...

'Previously? When?'

Now, they didn't look as shallow and dead. At least, there was a partial clarity in his eyes now.

"Are you okay?"

Astron's voice rang in her ears.

'Ah....'

She was still shaken, her head hurting. But his voice brought her to reality. She could see his eyes narrowed, and he was looking at her.

Irina knew what that gaze meant. He was analyzing her deeply like he did every time. Checking reactions, looking for things so that he could know.

"I am fine." She replied, yet even her voice felt like it didn't belong to her.

"...I see..." Astron didn't look convinced, but he also didn't overstep the boundaries. He simply nodded his head.

"Hey."

Astron stopped, his gaze flickering back to her.

"One day, when you finish what you are chasing, what are you going to do?" Irina asked, her voice laced with genuine curiosity. She needed to know the answer to that.

'So that you don't repeat the same ending.'

She needed to know if he needed to be saved. She needed to know if he would end up like the same.

Astron paused, his expression hardening. His eyes turned cold, a chill sweeping over his features.

"When that happens....."

And then a wave of sadness washed over his eyes...As well as guilt.

"It will be my time to serve my sentence," he said, his voice low.

Irina felt a shiver run down her spine at his words, the gravity of his statement sinking in. She had touched a nerve, but she couldn't bring herself to regret it.

This glimpse into his hidden depths only fueled her determination to understand him better.

'Your sentence....' Irina mumbled inwardly.

---The enemy was never what you knew.

What if....She asked....

The memories were faint, and countless pieces spread into her consciousness. Yet, slowly but surely, she was awakening them.

And she knew....

'Once I remember everything....I will get the answers to my questions....'

Astron turned away, leaving Irina standing there, her mind a whirl of thoughts and unanswered questions.

As he walked away, she couldn't help but feel that she could no longer disperse their paths.

Whether or not she became entangled with him so much that...

'I will not give up on him.' She could get away no more.

And with that realization came a resolve to uncover the truth behind the enigmatic boy with the purple eyes.

Chapter 382 Chapter 88.5 - Final Exams

<Arcadia Hunter Academy, Friday Morning>

The theoretical exams were finally over, and the academy granted a three-day break to allow the students to recover and prepare for the upcoming practical exams. These duels were more than just tests; they were a showcase of the freshmen's talent and potential, a long-standing tradition of the academy.

In her office, Eleanor took a moment to savor her morning coffee. This wasn't just any coffee; it was a high-concentrated filtered brew made from a special leaf nurtured in a specific mana zone.

The leaf was a rare commodity, hardly accessible to anyone, even high-ranking government officials. She had it ordered specifically for herself, a small indulgence that she permitted amidst her demanding responsibilities.

"....."

Eleanor lifted the cup to her lips, her expression remaining stoic as she relished the rich, robust flavor.

"The taste is the best, as usual." She commented.

The coffee's unique aroma filled the room, providing a brief moment of calm before the day's work began. Setting the cup down, she began to prepare for another day, her mind already shifting gears to focus on the tasks ahead.

"Then, let's start."

As she organized her desk, her eyes fell on a document resting in the corner. With a slight wave of her hand, she used her 「Telekinesis」 to bring the document to her. It was the file containing the details of the relatives of each student in her homeroom class.

Curious and meticulous by nature, Eleanor began to go through the names one by one. After all, in this event, people from the outside world would be allowed to enter, and that is by far one of the most risky decisions.

Considering the recent events that were surrounding the academy, she knew being cautious was important.

Also, she believed that understanding her students' backgrounds could provide valuable insights into their behavior, motivations, and potential challenges.

She flipped open the file and started reading.

Irina Emberheart

Relative: Esme Abigail (Appointed by Matriarch Emberheart)(Nanny)

Eleanor raised an eyebrow. The Emberheart family was known for their strict control and high expectations. Since they were a rather high-ranking mage family, it was no surprise that the matriarch wouldn't directly attend.

Though it may look like an utter disregard, Matriarch Emberheart was known to be like that, so Eleanor didn't find it surprising.

Lilia Thornheart

Relative: James Thornheart (Father)

Yet, for another cadet, the case was different. After all, Lilia's father was attending to the event.

'James Thornheart. Previous S-rank Hunter, Global Ranking 24.'

5-6. Julia and Lucas Middleton

Relative: Fergus Middleton(Father)

A man who is the patriarch of the current Middleton Family, one of the Five Sword Families.

And a current S-rank hunter. He was still active on the field and one of the most dangerous people in the entire continent.

Carl Braveheart

Relative: General Kyle Braveheart (Father)

The general of the military. Someone who had been on the frontlines for years and had been awarded with the metals.

Ethan Hartley
Relatives: Aunt Kaya Hartley and Niece Jane Hartley

'Kaya....'

The moment Eleanor saw the name on the list, for the first time in the day, her eyes shook. After all, the woman was familiar, someone she was acquainted with before.

'So, you are the one coming with your child.'

Remembering a certain person in her head, she smiled. It was a helpless smile.

"I guess you are poking your victory into my eyes."

A faint whisper escaped her mouth. Yet, it was just a brief moment. For her, those were the memories of the past, something that she had long forgotten.

Turning her attention to the list once again, she continued to go through the names.

Astron Natusalune

Relatives: Garrett Baxter and Reina Bond (Foster Father and Foster Mother)

The moment Eleanor saw the names Garrett Baxter and Reina Bond, her eyes narrowed. She knew Reina Bond well, a name not easily forgotten.

'That organization....'

At that moment, she slowly started putting the pieces into the puzzle. It explained how a kid like Astron could enter one of the best, possibly best, academies without any help.

'So, they are the ones behind him.'

Eleanor's eyes were narrowed. If that organization played a role in Astron's administration, there was a very high chance that things would not be as simple as they looked.

As Eleanor recalled Astron's performance during the dungeon exams, his attitude, and his prowess in the oral exams, a pattern began to emerge. His rude attitude and low scores seemed deliberate as if designed to lower her expectations. His sudden request for weapons mid-semester and the numerous incidents surrounding him started to make sense in a new light.

'Maybe he's been laying low intentionally. Maybe, from the start, he's been faking it all.'

The more Eleanor considered this, the more she saw a potential strategy behind his actions. His behavior could have been a calculated effort to remain invisible in her eyes. His sudden improvement and involvement in dangerous events suggested hidden depths and capabilities.

'It's possible the organization messed with his talent assessment to lower his entrance score,' she thought, considering the implications.

Eleanor's gaze hardened. If Astron was connected to such an organization and had been manipulating his performance all along, it meant that there was a possibility that he was far more capable and dangerous than she had previously thought.

This realization demanded a reassessment of her approach towards him.

This was something that she had already been doing, but that name, Reina, evoked another perspective. Things that she had never considered previously were now starting to come to light.

And at the end of the day, she could only do one thing.

'Observe and understand. My role here is to guide.'

After all, even if he is from that organization, it wasn't like he was a threat or anything. She could just observe him closely.

'Closely....Right, let's see it in the future.'

With that thought, she stamped over the document.

<Arcadia Hunter Academy, Friday Night>

Dorian, Helia, and Aria sat together in the dimly lit common room, the glow of the tablet casting eerie shadows across their faces. They had gathered to watch a popular video that had surfaced, hoping to glean some insight into the recent string of attacks.

The video showed Emma, a well-known sophomore, and her group mercilessly beating a freshman named Ethan and a girl beside him. The scene was brutal, yet Dorian's face didn't change.

"That's Emma," Helia muttered, her eyes narrowing in recognition. "What is she doing?"

Aria winced, her injuries still fresh. "This is horrible. Why would they do this?"

Dorian remained silent, his mind racing as he connected the dots. The pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place, and a dark realization settled over him.

"Ethan Hartley," he murmured, his eyes narrowing as he replayed the video in his mind. "The chances of him being connected to your assailant are highly possible... a plot of revenge."

"That...was it really him? What if he wasn't connected to anything at all?" Aria asked. Even though her injuries and the beating she received remained in her memory, she still didn't want to act blindly.

"We can't be sure. After all, even the academy was unable to find anything regarding the assailant." Dorian answered. Yet, his eyes were ferocious. "But, so what? Even if he wasn't connected, at the end of the day, they started the war, and we will only continue it."

Helia looked at him, concern etched on her face. "What are you thinking, Dorian?"

Dorian pulled out his phone and quickly dialed a number. "I have a plan," he said, his voice steady. "I know a freshman who owes me a favor. I'll ask him to deal with Ethan in the Final Exam duels."

Helia's eyes widened in surprise. "You mean... take him down during the exams?"

Dorian nodded, his gaze steely. "Exactly. We need to hit him where it hurts and show him that we won't stand for this. If he's responsible for what happened to Aria, he needs to pay."

"B-but...."

"Shut up, Aria. Did you forget what they did to you?"

"N-no."

"Right. Me neither."

"But, that freshmen....Will he accept it? Since everything is happening between us and freshmen, why would he take it?" Helia asked. Her words made sense.

"Well, he doesn't have any choice but to do so." Dorian just smiled and dialed the number.

On the other side of the academy, another deal between a freshman and a sophomore-year student was going.

Trevor Philips stood leaning against the brick wall near the academy's training grounds, his dark eyes scanning the crowd for his target.

The buzz of students mingling and the clatter of training equipment filled the air, but his focus was singular. He spotted Liam Wayne, a freshman with a determined stride and a steely glint in his eye, making his way through the throng.

As Liam approached, Trevor pushed off the wall and stepped into his path. Liam halted, looking up at the sophomore, who was a good head taller than him.

"Hey, Wayne," Trevor began, his voice low and steady. "You ready to deal with that bastard?"

Liam's jaw clenched, his eyes narrowing at the mention of his target. He nodded firmly. "Yes," he said, his voice carrying a quiet intensity. "I haven't forgotten what he did. The humiliation he put me through..."

Trevor's lips curled into a knowing smirk. "Good. Because the final exam duels are coming up fast, this is your chance to trample over him, show everyone what you're made of, and you will have your reward."

Liam's eyes burned with resolve. "I will," he replied, his fists clenching at his sides. "I'll make sure he regrets ever crossing me."

Trevor nodded approvingly. "That's the spirit. Remember, it's not just about winning—it's about making a statement. You crush him, and you crush his reputation. Everyone will remember that kid as a failure."

Liam's expression hardened, a mixture of anger and determination fueling his resolve. "I won't let him get away with it. I'll make sure he feels every bit of the shame he made me feel."

"Good," Trevor said, clapping a hand on Liam's shoulder. "When the time comes, unleash everything you've got. We'll be watching."

"I will not disappoint you," Liam said, looking at his smartwatch. There was his target.

-----A/N-----

Liam Wayne is the kid that Astron had humiliated in the classroom at the start of the story. He was the one who tried to punch him and was beaten instead.

Chapter 383 Chapter 88.6 - Final Exams

Arcadia Hunter Academy was a huge institute. There are several different buildings inside the campus, and a lot of students are accommodated all the time.

Each year, over two thousand freshmen apply to the academy. Therefore, the academy needs to be very systematic with their explanations.

The tradition of the duels for the freshmen students is also a taxing event. But at the same time, it is something that is widely funded by the government.

After all, in a way, it is an opportunity for the future Hunter candidates to market themselves. Though not everyone is able to watch the duels, those who are allowed to do so can already cover the expenses.

In any case, since each student needs to duel at least once, the sheer amounts of duels that need to be processed is huge, considering the number of students reaching 2400.

And that is also the reason why the whole week is dedicated to these duels. After all, there will be over a thousand deals that need to be processed.

The duels were structured to encourage students to challenge themselves and demonstrate their abilities. Each student was required to participate in at least one duel. The rules encouraged challenging higher-ranked opponents while discouraging challenging lower-ranked ones. This was because challenging a lower-ranked student was seen as an act of a weak-minded individual, both by the community and the scouts.

The academy set the default grade for each student at zero. Their grade would increase based on the prowess and skill they demonstrated during their duel.

As a result, it was strategically unwise for students to challenge those ranked below them, as it would not contribute significantly to their grades.

Each student only had one right to appoint a duel, and no student could appoint more than one person.

After all, if this limitation wasn't included in the rules, then it would be nearly impossible for the academy to conduct such an important event.

To facilitate the organization of these duels, students needed to appoint the individuals they wanted to challenge by Saturday. This allowed the academy sufficient time to adjust the schedule accordingly and ensure that each duel was conducted smoothly.

Relatives and a select few outsiders were allowed to attend the duels, adding an element of pressure and motivation for the students. Their presence served as both support and scrutiny, pushing the students to perform at their best.

As the weekend approached, the academy buzzed with anticipation. Students were busy strategizing, consulting with mentors, and finalizing their choices.

Meanwhile, the administration worked tirelessly to ensure everything was in place for the grand event.

The way to ensure one's challenge was simple.

On the academy website, students search for the person they want to challenge, and then they choose from there. And once the appointment is made and approved by the academy, then a mail would be sent to both the challenger and the challenged so that they could both be prepared.

It was an easy process.

Yet, there was always a person who would have a hard time making such a decision.

"Sigh....."

Kellan Stormrider sat at his desk, the glow of his computer screen illuminating his frustrated expression.

The academy's website displayed profiles of his peers, but his attention was fixed on one in particular: Ethan Hartley. Ethan was renowned for his prowess and talent, one of the most promising students in their year.

Kellan sighed heavily, running a hand through his hair. "Why me?" he muttered under his breath. "These bastards are forcing me to do unnecessary stupid things."

He had received the message from Dorian earlier that day, a request that felt more like a command. Dorian had helped him out once, and now he was calling in that favor. Kellan couldn't refuse, not without facing serious consequences.

"Just great," he grumbled. His eyes flicked back to Ethan's profile. This guy probably didn't deserve this, but Kellan's hands were tied.

Dorian had made it clear: deal with Ethan during the Final Exam duels or else his brother....

Kellan's finger hovered over the mouse, a moment of hesitation creeping in. "Damn it," he cursed softly, frustration bubbling up inside him. He didn't want to be part of this mess, but he had no

choice, especially since clearly targeting the heir of Hartleys was a blatant act of stupidity, but there was nothing he could do.

With a resigned sigh, he moved the cursor over the "Challenge" button next to Ethan's name. "Here goes nothing," he muttered, pressing the button.

A confirmation screen popped up, asking him to verify his choice. It was red as if to say the decision he was making was stupid. Yet, he clicked "Yes," and a moment later, a notification appeared, confirming that his duel appointment had been approved. Both he and Ethan would receive emails shortly, notifying them of the challenge.

Kellan leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling. "What a mess," he said to himself. "All I wanted was to get through this semester without any drama."

He knew the duels were a big deal, an opportunity for students to showcase their skills and attract attention from scouts. But this felt different, tainted by ulterior motives and personal vendettas.

"Sorry, Ethan Hartley," he whispered, feeling a pang of guilt. "I hope you understand."

<Arcadia Hunter Academy, Saturday Night>

Eleanor sat in her dimly lit office, a cup of her high-concentrated, specially ordered coffee on the desk beside her. The aroma of the rare mana-infused leaf used in the brew filled the room, providing a brief moment of solace before she dove into the tasks at hand.

The end of the semester was always a whirlwind of activity, and the Final Exam duels added an extra layer of complexity. She picked up the stack of duel appointments submitted by her homeroom students, ready to review their choices and ensure everything was in order.

She began with Irina Emberheart's challenge.

Irina Emberheart (Rank 3) - Seraphina Frostborne (Rank 1)

Eleanor nodded approvingly. Seraphina was a strong opponent, and this duel would undoubtedly push Irina to her limits. The rivalry between the two families would never diminish. And she expected no less from the Emberheart prodigy.

Julia Middleton (Rank 61) - Damien Arkwright (Rank 21)

'Rank 21? Interesting.'

Raising an eyebrow, Eleanor considered this choice. Julia's rank was around 60, but Eleanor knew that Julia was much stronger than her rank indicated. Her poor academic performance often masked her true potential.

'That kid is probably one of the strongest in my class in terms of pure combat capability. Though, she is still a gem that needs to be polished.'

Nodding, Eleanor moved on, confident that Julia would rise to the occasion.

Lilia Thornheart (Rank 5) - Adam Rotschwen (Rank 4)

A slight smile played on Eleanor's lips. Lilia was fearless, always ready to challenge the best. This duel would be a significant test, but Eleanor believed in Lilia's capabilities.

Lucas Middleton - Vincent Hale (Rank 54)

'Lucas had chosen wisely,' Eleanor thought. Vincent Hale was a balanced fighter, and this duel would be a good measure of Lucas's progress. It was a pretty safe choice, something that didn't contain many risks.

After all, challenging a too-strong opponent would rather make it hard for the student to display their capabilities since the opponents would, in general, not leave them many options.

Carl Braveheart - Fiona Winter (Rank 82)

A solid choice. Carl was methodical and precise, and Fiona Winter was known for her strategic prowess. This duel promised to be an interesting clash of styles.

When she reached Ethan Hartley's appointment, her eyes narrowed.

Kellan Stormrider (Rank 456) - Ethan Hartley(Rank 970) 'This.....'

Eleanor's expression darkened. Kellan, ranked 456, challenging Ethan, who was ranked 970, was suspicious. It was unusual for a higher-ranked student to challenge someone so much lower.

After all, there were many discouraging points for such a decision.

She pondered the motives behind this choice. Was it a personal vendetta, or was Kellan trying to make a name for himself by defeating someone well-known like Ethan?

'Making use of the fact that Ehtan Hartley is famous is a good idea but it can backfire strongly as well. But we will see about that.' The Hartley family's prominence meant this duel would attract significant attention, making it a potential strategy for Kellan to boost his reputation.

'It will be interesting to watch.'

Eleanor smiled. After all, she herself witnessed Ethan's growth over the year since she was the one grading his work.

And she knew what kind of a monster Ethan was and currently is.

After reading a little more, she reached Astron Natusalune's appointment.

Liam Wayne (Rank 1279) - Astron Natusalune(Rank 1729) There was another such case. This time, she was in her own Directly support the authors on WebNovel!

class. Both Liam Wayne and Astron Natusalune were her own students, and in her own case, such a situation was occurring.

"Sigh...."

But, well. It wasn't her job to intervene with every decision the students made. She could only oversee them and pinpoint their mistakes afterward since the youngsters needed to experience the consequences of their actions.

'And, I am certain. With everything I had seen, this duel will be a good indicator.'

Though she would not interfere even if she wanted to, she didn't even want to do so.

Both for Ethan and for Astron.

Since both of them were possible candidates in her eyes, she needed to test them until the end.

'Though hypocritical, it is necessary.'

This was how she comforted herself.

As she was about to move on to the next task, her computer pinged with a new email notification. Glancing at the screen, she noticed something unusual—the sender field was blank. Her eyes narrowed. It was practically impossible for a sender to be blank since the domain of the sender was directly linked to the device's mana imprint.

Curiosity piqued, she opened the email. It contained only one line:

"Look at your window frame."

A chill ran down Eleanor's spine. She immediately spread her senses, scanning for any threats. Finding none, she cautiously approached the window, her hand hovering near her sword just in case. When she reached the window, she noticed a small, inconspicuous pocket placed on the ledge.

She carefully picked it up, opening it to find a stack of photos made by mana—a technique used to capture images in the mana world. As she flipped through them, her eyes widened, and her breath caught in her throat.

The first few images showed Professor Whitaker, a respected colleague, engaged in a conversation with a woman Eleanor recognized all too well: Alisha Virgo, known as the Mad Puppeteer.

"Alisha....."

The sight of her nemesis sent a wave of anger and dread through Eleanor.

Alisha Virgo was a criminal Eleanor despised deeply, responsible for numerous atrocities and manipulations using her twisted control over mana puppets.

"You are still out there...."

Seeing her in these photos, conversing with someone from within the academy, was both shocking and infuriating.

The final photo in the stack had a brief note scrawled at the bottom:

"There will be an attack during the final exams."

Eleanor's grip tightened on the photos, her mind racing. The pressure in the room intensified as her mana flared in response to her anger and concern. She took a deep breath, forcing herself to remain calm and think clearly.

The implications of this information were dire. An attack during the final exams could endanger the lives of her students and undermine the very fabric of the academy. She had to act swiftly and discreetly.

"But it is also a good opportunity."

One traitor wouldn't alone be able to organize such an attack.

And this whole situation would be a good opportunity to find those traitors, even though things could get risky at the end.

Chapter 384 Chapter 88.7 - Final Exams

<Arcadia Hunter Academy, Saturday Morning>

The sun was barely peeking over the horizon, casting a soft, golden light across the academy grounds. Eleanor walked briskly to her office, her mind still reeling from the revelations of the previous night.

After seeing the document, she, of course, didn't believe it immediately and started a special investigation. And, some of the things she had found...

They all matched the previous events that had transpired in the academy. Though it wasn't much, it was enough to increase the possibility of that being true.

She had spent hours contemplating her next moves, ensuring that the academy's final exams would proceed without incident despite the looming threat.

After she entered her office and settled, she was greeted by a knock on the door.

—CREAK!

Eleanor's eyes flicked up to see a young man standing there. He had incredibly handsome features; his green eyes and brown hair almost perfectly matched.

His demeanor was refined and calm, a stark contrast to the cold and wild student he had been at the start of the semester.

"Come in, Student Victor," Eleanor called, gesturing for him to take a seat. He stepped inside, moving with a grace that suggested he was fully aware of his surroundings and his own capabilities.

Eleanor watched him closely as he sat down. "Student Victor, I noticed you haven't appointed anyone for the duel," she began, her tone inquisitive but firm. "Explain the reason why."

Victor looked directly into her eyes, holding her gaze for a few moments longer than was comfortable.

A subtle but unmistakable surge of energy emanated from him, a controlled and deliberate display of his power. In Eleanor's experienced eyes, it was child's play compared to her own abilities, but it was impressive for a student.

After a pause, Victor spoke, his voice calm and measured. "I've come to realize that appointing a duel against a student for the sake of showing off my prowess is not possible for me." He stopped.

Eleanor could easily see where he was going with this.

"After all, no one in this year can pose a challenge enough to display my prowess. Not even Seraphina Frostborne or Irina Emberheart."

Eleanor narrowed her eyes. "That's an arrogant statement, Victor."

Victor remained unfazed, his demeanor steady. "It is not arrogance to know your worth, Instructor. I dislike wasting my time."

Eleanor regarded him for a moment, considering his words. "That's indeed a good quality," she acknowledged, nodding her head. "So, what do you want, then?"

Victor's eyes gleamed with a determination that Eleanor hadn't seen in him before. "I propose a duel with either a senior student or an instructor. I believe that only they can provide a challenge worthy of my abilities and truly test my limits."

Eleanor raised an eyebrow, intrigued but cautious. "You understand that this is highly irregular? The duels are designed to be between peers, to ensure fairness and appropriate levels of challenge."

Victor nodded. "I understand, but I also believe that exceptions can be made for the sake of genuine progress. I don't seek to undermine the system; I seek to push myself beyond its confines."

Eleanor leaned back in her chair, pondering his request. It was bold, certainly, and could set a precedent that might be difficult to manage. The reputation of the academy could also be affected by this decision, yet Eleanor knew it was already in shambles to a certain extent.

There was also a logic to his argument that she couldn't entirely dismiss. "Who do you have in mind?" she asked, curious about how far Victor's ambition extended.

"The best of the seniors or one of the more experienced instructors. Someone who can truly push me to my limits and beyond," Victor replied, his voice steady and resolute. "I do not care about winning or losing."

Eleanor considered his proposal carefully. Allowing such a duel could indeed provide valuable insights into Victor's abilities and could be beneficial for the academy's reputation if handled correctly. It was a double-edged sword at the end.

"Very well," she said finally. "I'll discuss this with the academy's board. If they approve, you'll get your chance."

"I won't disappoint."

"You are dismissed."

With that, Victor left the room, leaving Eleanor alone.

"Interesting, batch. Isn't it?"

She could see that her decision was correct.

"The ones with heavy destinies gather. This is indeed that place."

For the first time in a while, I saw that the Training Grounds of the academy were filled to the extreme.

It made sense, considering that the final exams were just around the corner.

Yet, it was also not logical behavior. After all, there was no way one could improve themselves enough to match their opponents in just a week.

Physical improvement didn't work like that. But, well, it was not like I cared about how the other students did anyway.

Many of the people here would lose themselves in the crowd of Hunters as time passes. Yet, even if they are part of the masses, each individual, in the end, would be important for the whole picture.

There were many dangerous events that were waiting in this world, and each of them would be a hassle on their own. At the end of the day, even those who lazed around will be forced to show their potential.

'Hard obstacles create strong individuals.'

In any case, I didn't particularly care about the whole final exam, especially the practical ones. After all, though for many, this was a good opportunity to show off their talents, I didn't care about any of those.

That was also the reason why I had appointed a random student from the list who was ranked 1550. It was enough to show that I had improved while also showing that my talent was only subpar.

'Yet, this is annoying.'

Because there was another random who suddenly appointed me.

'Liam Wayne.'

I knew him. He was from the class HA213. He was the same guy who acted impulsively. He had the tendency to lose over his emotions and had the signs of dealing with a childhood trauma.

He had some cognitive patterns that corresponded to the possible PTSD. From the way he formed sentences, my assumption was a child molestation.

'It was highly likely that he still is suffering from certain PTSD.'

In any case, his mental state wasn't normal, and even though he was able to blend into the normal life very well, there were certain points that his mind would show cracks.

Liam Wayne. His right arm was his strong arm, a typical trait of someone specializing in swordsmanship from the beginning.

His stance and grip showed the refined discipline of a swordsman, albeit tinged with an underlying tension, likely stemming from his unresolved trauma.

His rank was 1050 at the start of the semester but then dropped to 1279 in the mid-terms.

Such a drop in rank suggested more than just a lack of skill or effort. It hinted at deeper, more personal issues disrupting his focus and performance. His impulsive nature and emotional instability would inevitably affect his combat abilities and decision-making skills.

That is most likely the reason why Academy lowered his grades. Eleanor wouldn't miss such acts; neither Irina nor I were not an exception to that either.

But then the question was, why did he appoint me?

It was not logical for a higher-ranking student to challenge a lower-ranker, much less someone from the same class.

This challenge was rather personal. Seeking revenge for the previous situation seemed plausible.

But Liam wasn't lowly enough to operate solely on that emotion alone. Even if he was impulsive and emotionally unstable, he was still a student at Arcadia Hunter Academy. There had to be another reason.

Perhaps he saw this as an opportunity to regain his lost confidence or to prove something to himself. Maybe he believed that defeating me, someone he perceived as an obstacle or reminder of his past failures, would help him overcome his inner demons.

This was an act that I knew from the previous Astron. The reason why he allowed me to fuse with him.

'Fuse?'

The word got my attention. Did we completely fuse? This was something I had been pondering about for a while. After a certain point, Phantom's Land, I had been feeling more stable, be it my emotions or my state of mind. Those swings of thoughts and emotions were long gone.

'From my state of mind alone, it can be easily concluded that something related to souls happened in Phantom's Land. Yet, no one knows anything.'

'No, not no one.'

I thought.

'Irina knows something.'

There was someone who knew. After all, there was no way she could escape from my eyes. Her reactions after the Phantom's Land and her certain emotional swings from time to time.

'Yet, she is suffering the same thing. Her memory is hazy; something is blocking it.'

I need to get the answers related to those memories as well as see if Irina was someone that needed to be taken care of.

I needed to keep her close.

But for now, nothing seemed to me dangerous.

'In any case, it is highly likely that Liam Wayne is being instigated by someone.'

There was certain someone in my mind, someone that would make sense.

'But well, in the end, does it matter?'

Since the person appointed didn't pass a certain range of rank, at the end of the day, acting like I wasn't top-notch would be a lot easier for someone like him, who was controlled by his emotions.

Also, since I had confirmed that once again, Ethan and Victor would take the spotlight.

'As well as the duel between Irina and Seraphina.'

Eyes would be on other people, after all.

<Monday Morning, Arcadia Hunter Academy>

The campus was buzzing with energy as the sun rose over Arcadia Hunter Academy. The anticipation for the week-long duels was palpable, filling the air with excitement and nervous tension.

Students hurried through the corridors, some exchanging last-minute words of encouragement with friends, others lost in their thoughts, mentally preparing for the challenges ahead.

By 8:45 A.M., the grand arenas where the duels would take place were already filling up.

Relatives, mentors, and a few select outsiders who had been granted permission to watch the duels took their seats, chatting animatedly.

The arena itself was a marvel of magical engineering, with a central arena that could shift and adapt to various combat scenarios, surrounded by tiered seating that offered everyone a clear view of the action.

RING!

At precisely 9:00 A.M., a loud gong resonated through the amphitheater, signaling the official start of the event.

And the moment it did, a hologram appeared right in the middle of every arena.

"Welcome to the Final Exam - Duels," the Headmaster announced, his voice amplified by a subtle use of mana.

"This is a time-honored tradition of our academy, where students demonstrate their skills, bravery, and determination. Each duel is a testament to their hard work and dedication. We wish all participants the best of luck."

The audience erupted in applause, the sound echoing through the amphitheater. As it died down, the Headmaster continued, "Our first duels of the day will begin shortly. Participants, please make your way to the staging area."

Backstage, the atmosphere was charged with a mix of excitement and tension. Students were lined up, waiting for their turn.

Just like that, the duel period had started.

Chapter 385 Chapter 89.1 - Duels

No matter whether it is an academic institute or not, everything has a special point for something to work optimally. That is the basic qualification of getting better at something.

Knowing how to optimize the work you are outputting. That was the same for Arcadia Hunter Academy.

While considering the wellness of the students who would be dueling, the academy also needed to consider the existence of the audience and how to grasp their interest.

At the end of the day, one week was a huge time period for the people who would be coming to the academy to watch the duels, and they could not possibly watch every fight.

The schedule needed to be arranged in such a way that even those on tight times would force themselves to create the time to watch the deals.

The excitement needed to be preserved. Therefore, in a way, the academy would check for the importance of the duels, and the ones that were deemed as the most anticipated ones would be pushed to the end of the duel week.

That was so that the anticipation would be top-notch at the start. However, that didn't mean the academy was empty at the start of the week since the relatives of the lower-rank, middle-rank students would still be there.

Of course, there were also countless different stalls that were opened in this time period by the students and the clubs who finished their finals. Sophomore(second) and Junior(third) year students would already have finished their semester finals as well as their projects, and they would be free to roam on the campus.

Many used this chance to make their own money or experience how it felt to work, though the money wasn't needed for most of them. After all, a student with poor economic status is rarely admitted to the academy, though they certainly did exist.

As Garrett and Reina entered the bustling grounds of the Arcadia Hunter Academy, they were immediately engulfed by the electric atmosphere. The sprawling campus was alive with activity, students and visitors alike moving about with palpable excitement.

Stalls lined the walkways, offering everything from enchanted trinkets to exotic snacks, manned by enterprising upperclassmen eager to showcase their wares.

Garrett, with his imposing build and stern expression, cut a formidable figure amidst the crowd. Reina, walking beside him with an air of confident grace, drew her own share of curious glances.

"This place is really something," Reina remarked, her eyes scanning the lively scene. "Hard to believe all this is for a bunch of student duels."

Garrett nodded, his gaze sweeping over the various booths and the throngs of people. "The Academy surely knows how to put on a show. Keeps the relatives entertained and the students motivated."

They walked further, passing by a group of sophomores enthusiastically demonstrating a new combat spell to a small crowd. The air was filled with laughter, chatter, and the occasional burst of magic.

"So, where do you think he is?" Reina asked, glancing at Garrett.

"Probably getting ready backstage," Garrett replied, his eyes narrowing as he scanned the crowd. "I'd like to see how he's holding up before his match."

They approached the arena where he would fight, the grand structure looming impressively with its high walls and tiered seating. The excitement here was even more intense, the noise of the crowd a constant hum in the background.

Reina nudged Garrett with her elbow. "You seem nervous. Worried about your protégé?"

"...No..."

"You are not worried?"

"From the announcement, he seems to have chosen a student of his caliber. Though, I didn't expect him to be ranked 1729."

That was certainly a surprising element of Garrett. Being the person who trained that kid, he knew about his prowess. In the industry, the kid certainly held the potential to become someone valuable.

But, in this place filled with monsters and kids backed by behemoths, the potential to become someone valuable turned into someone who could be easily cast away.

That was the cold reality of the world; thus, he didn't have many expectations even before coming here.

Yet, he got a valuable surprise.

"Indeed, that is surprising," Reina stated, her eyes narrowing. "The organization didn't send any help to him, yet he managed to do this on his own. Interesting."

Garrett kept his expression neutral, though his mind was racing. "He's resourceful. Always has been. But this place... it's a different kind of battlefield."

"Indeed. But, even if it is still a child's play." Reina mumbled.

"I doubt that. A lot of these kids do have the strength of an average hunter just at this age."

"No. Considering the real Hunter world, this place is nothing. Though they certainly have strength, they won't survive if they are left there now." Reina said, looking at the arenas across the place.

Many students were dueling with each other, displaying their prowess. Each one of them had their own strength. Some were fast, some were strong. Their capabilities were superhuman, but that didn't change anything at all.

"But well, that kid needs to do it at least."

Garrett's eyes remained sharp. "You think he's ready for that?"

"He has to be," Reina said firmly. "There's no other option. And you know it."

The crowd erupted in applause as the first match concluded, drawing their attention back to the arena. The next participants were already making their way to the stage, their faces set with determination.

There, Garrett's superhuman eyes, he easily saw the person he was looking for. But, the moment his eyes met with his figure, Garrett's eyes were narrowed.

'That kid....He looks a bit different.'

Something about him told Garrett that the kid had changed. The way he carried himself....

'Not bad.'

And that somehow made Garrett proud. Knowing the kid that he trained and looked over was doing this well.

It was not like he had too much share in his prowess, but he felt proud nevertheless.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Garrett replied, his tone leaving no room for argument. "For now, we focus on what's in front of us."

Reina sighed, her gaze drifting to the arena. "You always were good at taking things one step at a time."

"It's kept me alive this long," Garrett said with a smile. For now, he really didn't want to overly complicate things.

"Right." Reina smiled and then turned her focus to the stage.

One of the stage lights focused on a young student making his way to the center.

His slightly long black hair with bangs framed his face, and he wore the academy uniform with an ease that belied the tension of the moment.

His build was lean, not particularly muscular, but there was a certain fluidity to his movements, a hint of precision and control. Something that Reina could see with her trained eyes.

His presence was faint, almost blending into the background if not for the light washing over him.

Reina observed him intently. "So, that is him."

Garrett's eyes never left the student as he nodded. "Yes."

"He's a dagger user, correct?" Reina asked though the question was more rhetorical, given her knowledge over the kids past. After all, she came from that organization.

Garrett nodded again. "Yes, he is."

"Not bad," Reina commented, her tone appraising. "He passes."

Garrett narrowed his eyes, his gaze shifting to Reina. "You mean his prowess, right? Not other things?"

Reina's lips curled into a slight smirk. "Of course. His affinity as a scout. What else would I be evaluating?"

"....." Garrett didn't say anything, but his gaze said everything.

At that moment, on the screen, two names appeared, and a monotone robotic voice read the names.

"Challenger, Astron Natusalune, Ranked 1729."

"Challenged, Wilfred Gibbs. Ranked 1589."

The two students stood on the opposite side of the arena.

"His opponent is a swordsman," Reina remarked, looking at the student named Wilfred, who was looking at Astron with a focused gaze.

There was a certain aura in his gaze that even Reina could sense from that distance.

'He is being underestimated.'

It was a common occurrence. The students of this academy tend to be prideful, after all.

"Then, let the duel commerce."

SWOOSH! The moment the voice echoed across the arena, the swordsman rushed towards Astron with his body coated with mana.

SWOOSH! SWOOSH!

Yet his advances were cut short. After all, instantly, a bunch of arrows came right before him, limiting his movements.

"Tsk."

Seeing the mana coated on these arrows, the swordsman named Wilbers clicked his tongue. Even though he knew it was not completely logical, the fact that he was appointed by someone lower than him as a target scratched his pride, and he was planning to end this as quickly as possible.

Yet, it seemed like his opponent wasn't someone simple after all.

CLANK! SWOOSH!

Some of the arrows passed through him, while some of the arrows were deflected by his sword.

"Didn't you say he was a dagger user?" Reina asked, watching the spectacle unfold. This kid suddenly brought out a bow from his spatial storage, surprising both his opponent and the overlookers.

"...." Garrett didn't answer, but his face told everything. Even he was surprised to see the kid using arrows against his opponent.

'Pretty crafty, aren't you? Did you do this considering the possibility of your opponent underestimating you because your rank is lower and you are not checking your weapons? Interesting.' Reina analyzed, assuming his thought process.

"Well, he is quite good. But that won't be enough to beat that kid."

His prowess with the bow certainly looked good, considering he must have switched it after being admitted to the academy. The amount of time he could train with it was four months at most, and that was even assuming he changed weapons right at the start of the semester.

But still, his prowess wasn't as strong as a natural swordsman.

At the end of the day, Wilbers had the skills required for a swordsman underneath.

"Come on, brother! You can do it!" A young voice echoed from the side. It was a little boy with his fists clenched. "Show him!"

He was cheering on his brother with a smile.

"Huf...."

Letting out a long breath, Wilbers emptied his lungs with a smile on his face.

After all, he had a brother to impress.

Chapter 386 89.2 - Duels

"Huf...."

Letting out a long breath, Wilbers emptied his lungs.

And then, feeling the familiar surge of energy from his skill, tightened his grip on his sword.

The air around him shimmered as his mana concentrated, ready to propel him forward with devastating speed and power.

Blade Charge.

Astron, noticing the subtle shift in Wilfred's stance and the gathering of mana, swiftly drew another arrow from his quiver. With a practiced motion, he nocked the arrow and aimed, his eyes narrowing as he noticed that his enemy was charging for his skill.

SWOOSH!

The arrow flew straight and true, aimed directly at Wilfred's chest.

However, Wilfred had anticipated this move. He had faced enough archers to know their tactics, and he was well aware of this particular vulnerability in his skill's activation.

'Not this time.'

He quickened his skill's activation, his body blurring as the mana surged through him. At the last possible second, he deflected the incoming arrow with a swift flick of his sword, sending it spiraling off course.

CRASH!

With an explosive burst of speed, Wilfred charged forward, leaving a trail of afterimages in his wake. The ground beneath his feet cracked from the sheer force of his launch, sending debris flying. Astron's eyes widened in surprise as Wilfred closed the distance between them in an instant.

Wilfred's blade gleamed as he swung it down, aiming for Astron's midsection. The speed and precision of the attack left little room for error.

CLANG!

Yet, Astron managed to draw his dagger just in time, deflecting the blow with a desperate parry.

The force of the impact sent shockwaves through his arm. His body shook a little.

'Ho...He withstood that.'

Reina was impressed, seeing he didn't fall down immediately. It was a natural response; after all, in general, most dagger users relied on agility.

CLANK! SLASH!

Wilfred's relentless assault continued, each strike faster and more powerful than the last. From Reina's eyes, it was evident that he had the upper hand.

'So, he realized he was not a match against him in terms of strength. And now he is using his speed, and pretty effectively at that.'

He weaved and dodged, narrowly avoiding each lethal strike, looking for an opening.

'He's fast, that he must be thinking now. Yet, his eyes are analyzing for a weakness.'

Wilfred pressed his advantage, his blade a blur of motion. Each swing was aimed to overwhelm and incapacitate, his technique refined through countless battles.

Yet, despite his fury, Astron managed to stay just a step ahead, his instincts and training guiding his movements.

Then, Astron saw it—a brief hesitation in Wilfred's movements, a momentary lapse in his relentless assault. It was barely noticeable, but to Astron, it was enough.

SLASH!

Seizing the opportunity, Astron feinted to the right, drawing Wilfred's attention. Then, with a swift, fluid motion, he switched directions and lunged to the left, his dagger aimed at Wilfred's unprotected side.

'Nice feint.'

Wilfred, caught off guard by the sudden change in direction, attempted to recover, but it was too late. Astron's dagger found its mark, slicing through the fabric of Wilfred's uniform and drawing a thin line of blood.

"Urgh!" Wilfred grunted in pain, stumbling back.

The crowd erupted in a mix of gasps and cheers, their excitement palpable as the duel reached its peak.

Astron took a quick, steadying breath, his eyes locked onto Wilfred.

'Now, what will you do?'

Wilfred, clutching his side, glared at Astron with renewed determination. The pain only seemed to fuel his resolve, and he quickly adjusted his stance, preparing for another assault.

"You won't get lucky twice," Wilfred growled, his voice filled with both anger from pain and respect for his opponent's skill. However, he still maintained his cool, his eyes focused.

Astron didn't respond verbally; instead, he maintained his focus. And then, he instantly switched to his bow.

'Huh?'

Wilfred was momentarily surprised, as they had been clashing blows in close quarters for a while now.

SWOOSH!

The arrow instantly flashed, aiming right towards his face.

'Wind psions for swift and precise attack? If you were capable of doing this, why did you let him charge with his skill?'

The arrow was faster than it was supposed to be. Something that Wilfred couldn't react to.

Double Register.

Even though he had used his skill [Double Register], which was a common rank skill that enabled him to increase the speed of his skill's activation.

He hadn't used it previously since he didn't feel the need to.

It took a lot of mana to use, after all, and most of the time, he did it to surprise his enemy and finish them. He was planning to do the same now as well.

That was why he was a tad bit late using his skill even if he had activated his skill and then utilized his trat.

Circular Blade.

SWOOSH! THUD!

The arrow went past through the circular blade formation that had just formed, and then, in an instant, it pierced through his shoulder.

"Argh-!"

With his right shoulder dislocated, blood splattered everywhere across.

"Gasp! Brother!"

"Wilhelm."

His family, who was watching him, gasped, especially his little brother, with his eyes wide open.

SWOOSH!

Astron instantly appeared right before Wilhelm, his dagger shining.

'No! I must not lose!'

Yet, Wilhelm refused to lose his family in front of him. Even if he was ranked 1500 across and it was middle, he still had the ambition to be better than now.

And he couldn't afford to lower his rank.

Blade's Fury.

Thus, he activated the strongest ability he could use. The ability that originated from his trait [Blade's Attachment].

Stage 3 of his trait. He had just recently stepped into the territory of stage 3, and his control over it was still lacking.

Yet, Wilhelm knew he couldn't afford to think about those things right now. The mana surged through his body, psions enhancing his fibers. He felt like even his cells were feeling angry, and the blade in his arm was shaking.

Despite the pain in his shoulder, he refused to back down.

Astron, unfazed by the sudden increase in Wilfred's power, launched into a relentless onslaught. His movements were fluid and precise, each strike of his dagger aimed with deadly intent.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

Wilfred's sword met Astron's dagger with a series of rapid, powerful clashes. The sound of metal striking metal echoed through the arena, the audience on the edge of their seats.

Each time Astron pressed the attack, Wilfred countered with a forceful parry, his blade movements enhanced by his trait.

Seeing it, Reina realized.

"So, that was why. You knew about his skill. Talk about being cautious." Reina mumbled. As she was watching the kid's prowess, she started liking him more. Not because he was strong or anything but because he felt like a professional.

Someone committed to his occupation and serious about everything. There weren't any childish movements in his fighting style.

"....." She threw a quick look at Garrett to gauge his reaction, only to witness that he was frowning with a serious face. Though, there was a small smile in his eyes.

"But well, I guess it will end now." In front of her trained eyes, what Astron was doing was obvious.

On the scene, Astron weaved and dodged, narrowly avoiding each lethal strike, looking for an opening.

Wilfred pressed his advantage, his blade a blur of motion.

'Only thirty seconds is left.' Each swing was aimed to overwhelm and incapacitate, and his technique was refined through training.

Yet, despite his fury of attacks, his opponent didn't fudge at all.

'Why? Why can't I hit him?'

He was doing his best, yet he couldn't hit his opponent, not even once, as if his attacks were being read effortlessly.

'Come on, focus. He is lower than you. You mustn't lose your calm.'

Yet, over the course of the semester, if there was one thing he learned, it was to keep his cool no matter what. However, that was proving to be harder than ever before, with adrenaline rushing through his body and his trait affecting him.

'Analyze.' As he analyzed his enemy's posture, he saw it.

'An opening.' His left shoulder was open when he attacked, even though it wasn't easily visible.

Seeing the opening, he didn't miss the chance. He couldn't. After all, he knew things were bound to get troublesome if he did.

SWOOSH!

He attacked instantly.

'Huh?'

Yet his attack met with nothing. Instead, something else happened.

It was a faint! Once again!

Astron feinted to the left, drawing Wilfred's attention, then quickly spun to the right, aiming for Wilfred's exposed side.

'I knew it.' Yet this time, Wilfred anticipated the feint, bringing his sword up just in time to block the dagger. The force of the block sent shockwaves through both of their arms, but neither combatant wavered.

SWOOSH! "You're good," Astron admitted, his voice calm and measured. "But not good enough." For the first time today, he was speaking.

'He is even utilizing psychological attacks.'

Reina could see where he wanted to go with this.

'What a crafty kid.' Then, with a sudden burst of speed, Astron dropped low, aiming a sweeping kick at Wilfred's legs.

Wilfred jumped to avoid the kick, but Astron was already moving, using the momentum to propel himself upwards, his dagger flashing towards Wilfred's midsection.

Wilfred twisted in mid-air, using his enhanced agility to narrowly avoid the strike. He landed awkwardly, his wounded shoulder protesting the movement, but he didn't let it slow him down. He charged forward, his blade blazing with energy, and launched a powerful overhead strike at Astron.

Astron sidestepped the blow, his dagger coming up to deflect the sword. The impact sent sparks flying, the force of the collision momentarily pushing both fighters back.

That was how it was supposed to play, yet Astron did something unexpected. Utilizing his flexibility, he twisted his ankles, pushing his mana into his legs. Then, he rotated his body, using it as an anchor to the ground, and he used the force of the sword as the torque.

Wilfred's eyes widened.

SWOOSH! Because, suddenly, an attack occurred from his side!

'Another dagger?' His eyes had been tracing the dagger Astron held in his hand, yet that made him miss the other dagger.

'When?'

Wilfred noticed this too late, and his reflexes kicked in. In an instant, his sword was on his right side, aiming to deflect the attack.

Yet it was too late.

Wilferd didn't manage to pick his posture up to the utmost efficiency.

THUD!

That particularly forceful strike from Astron sent Wilfred stumbling back, his grip on his sword faltering.

Astron seized the opportunity, lunging forward with his dagger aimed at Wilfred's heart. Wilfred, using the last of his strength, brought his sword up in a desperate block.

CLANG!

The force of Astron's blow sent Wilfred's sword flying from his hand, the blade skittering across the arena floor. Wilfred fell to one knee, clutching his dislocated shoulder, his breathing labored. Astron stood over him, his dagger poised for the final strike.

"Yield," Astron commanded, his voice steady.

Wilfred looked up, his eyes filled with a mixture of defiance and resignation. He knew he was beaten, but he refused to let the fight end without dignity. With a slow, deliberate movement, he bowed his head.

"I yield," he said, his voice barely audible.

The arena fell silent for a moment, the tension thick in the air.

[Winner, Astron Natusalune.]

Then, the crowd erupted into applause, their cheers a mixture of relief and admiration for the combatants' skills.

For the first time today, they witnessed such a good fight. None of the other ones could compare to that since most of them ended rather quickly.

Only this one was this toe-to-toe.

Astron stepped back, his expression calm as he lowered his dagger.

Garrett and Reina watched from the stands, their expressions thoughtful. Garrett's eyes shone with a mixture of pride and concern as he observed his protégé.

"He's grown stronger," Garrett said, his voice tinged with approval.

Reina nodded, her gaze still fixed on Astron. "Indeed."

And then she touched the necklace on her chest.

[The record has been sent.]

After hearing the notification, she turned his head to Garrett.

"Then, should we go greet him?"

"....Indeed, we should...."

Chapter 387 Chapter 89.3 - Duels

Every student in the academy needed to do at least one duel. The number could go more than that; everyone had at least one.

Though, on average, the number was two duels for each student, there were rare cases in which the two people appointed each other as the duel application.

This was exactly how it was for Irina. After all, from the moment the finals started, both Seraphina and she were adamant about appointing each other.

Otherwise, it would be a clear act of disregard. No matter how hot-blooded Irina was or how annoying and scheming Seraphina was, at the end of the day, both of them couldn't afford to make such claims with their own actions.

Therefore, both of them appointed each other.

And, because of the importance of their duel, it was postponed until the end of the week, which left Irina with a lot of free time.

She only needed to train. One would think she would train for the duel specifically, but there wasn't any reason for that.

Since the moment she was born, she had always been in a rivalry with Seraphina Frostborne, and she had already trained for such cases.

For these reasons, Irina decided to use her free time to do something she had been curious about for a while: watching a certain someone duel.

With her rivalry with Seraphina postponed until the end of the week, she had ample time to observe Astron's abilities firsthand.

And since the academy directly announced when each fight would take place, she didn't have a hard time finding Astron's either.

It was on Monday, 10.15 AM.

At the time of Astron's duel, she made her way to the arena where the lower-ranked students were scheduled to fight.

She could see that these duels didn't attract large crowds, aside from some family members and a few scouts, which meant the arena would be relatively empty.

She didn't want to attract unnecessary attention or spark any rumors, so she donned a simple disguise—an overwhelming make-up, black wig, brown eye lenses, and casual clothes. With her disguise, nobody would suspect her to be Irina Emberheart.

This was not her first time doing this in any case, so she was confident.

As she found a seat with a clear view of the arena, she noticed the atmosphere was indeed much calmer than she had expected.

The absence of a bustling crowd allowed her to focus entirely on the upcoming duel. She settled into her seat, adjusting her disguise to ensure her anonymity, and waited patiently for the match to begin.

The duel between Astron and Wilfred began with a palpable tension. Irina watched intently as Astron drew his bow, his movements precise and calculated.

She observed how Wilfred countered, and his skill and determination were evident in every motion.

When the duel intensified, she leaned forward, her heart racing with excitement.

Astron's strategic maneuvers and Wilfred's relentless attacks were a passable display of skill and tenacity.

The clash of their weapons echoed through the arena, each strike filled with intent and power.

'That guy.....He really is good at acting.'

Irina couldn't help but think to herself. The fact that he was being pushed by such a student was mind-blowing to her since she herself knew that Astron was capable of dealing with a much stronger demon contractor, as well as a demon itself.

But aside from that, his fighting style hadn't changed. Even from the start of the semester, Astron had always fought with his techniques and strategy focused. Even now, rather than relying on his mana or skills, he only displayed his weapon prowess.

'This alone shows his talent. And it also makes sense that he lacks skills with his background.'

Everything perfectly fit into a story fabricated, and Irina knew if she didn't know beforehand, she would easily be fooled. Even after knowing that she had almost been fooled since Astron's acting was pixel-perfect.

[Winner, Astron Natusalune.]

The announcement of the winner was met with applause from the small audience. Irina remained seated, her eyes fixed on Astron as he stood over his fallen opponent, his expression calm and composed.

She watched as he stepped back, his dagger lowered.

But then, just like how it was supposed to be, the crowd returned to normal not long after. Since several other cadets appeared in the arena, and nobody knew him enough to care too much.

Some scouts were taking notes, but many of them were unimpressed.

'Well, that was interesting, at least.'

Irina smiled inwardly. She didn't come here expecting much, but strangely enough, she felt herself immersed in the fight. Albeit lower rank, it was somehow filled with twists.

'Well, I am just making excuses, aren't I?'

Thinking about that, she stood over her seat. Now that she had given her time to watch this guy and come here, it was now his job to do the same, wasn't that right?

After all, she had a plan in mind.

With one last glance at Astron, who was exiting the arena, she turned and made her way toward the exit as well. After all, she needed to catch him there.

Irina made her way toward the backstage area of the arena, her steps purposeful. She wanted to catch Astron before he left to gauge his reaction....yeah, his reaction.

As she approached, she saw his lone figure packing his things into a locker. He had already changed into his regular clothes, but the signs of the intense duel were no longer seen.

"Brother, brother...Are you okay? Does it hurt a lot? It was really scary! Is this what you always do?"

On the other side of the room, Wilhelm was surrounded by his family. His little brother stood close by, his eyes wide with worry as he asked if Wilhelm was okay.

"Come on, Rain. Don't you see your brother is completely fine? Something like that won't hurt me, don't worry."

"Liar. I saw you were almost crying just now."

"Hey! I was not crying...It was just I got dirt in my eye for a second."

"Really?"

"Really. When did you ever see your brother cry?"

"Never."

"That is how it should be," Wilhelm said with a smile. Though from the outsider's perspective, it was evident that he was trying to mask his feelings underneath.

But then suddenly, the woman beside the two ruffled the little brother's hair.

"Rain, your brother is tired. How about you check how other brothers and sisters are doing."

"Other brothers and sisters? Really!"

"Yes. Don't you want to watch them?"

"Yes! Thank you, Mommy." With a beaming smile, the little brother rushed out of the backstage, shooting forward like a bullet.

Then, the woman turned to face Wilhelm, looking at her son with pride, and reassured him. "You really improved yourself," she said, her voice filled with warmth.

Wilhelm, though visibly disappointed by his loss, seemed to find some comfort in his mother's words. She caressed his head, saying, "You did well."

Watching this tender scene, Irina felt a pang of conflicting emotions.

A shudder ran through her as she averted her gaze, unable to bear the sight any longer. It was really uncomfortable; she hated seeing this.

She hated it.

Memories of her own past resurfaced.

–Young miss, you still have yet to finish this week's goal. You are not allowed to go to bed."

"But-"

"There are no buts. Matriarch ordered me to watch over you. Until you finish using stage-1 magic without looking at the description, you won't leave this place." A scene from the time when she first started learning fire magic.

–Is this all you can do?"

"...."

"Answer me."

"N-no."

"Then, why are you wasting your time?"

"...I understand, mother."

A scene from the time.

The memories were slowly taking over her mind, even though it wasn't the place for that. She didn't even notice the fact that her fists were clenched.

[Winner, Jacob Rahel.]

Yet, the announcer's loud voice woke her up from her memories. And the moment her

Irina snapped back to the present, her memories dissolving as she focused on the scene before her. Astron was quietly readying himself to leave, his movements efficient and deliberate.

There was no one beside him, no one to greet him. He was alone, just like she often was.

Irina remembered the fact that he was an orphan without any family. The arena, which had been bustling with activity for moments, seemed to isolate him further. Aside from her, there seemed to be no one else present for him. He was completely alone.

Yet, Astron carried himself as if this solitude was normal. He exuded a quiet resilience that intrigued her. Irina found herself smiling, mumbling to herself, "What am I doing?"

Was she the only one in this world with a situation like this? Weren't there many people with conditions worse, yet they still fared better?

How did this suit Irina Emberheart?

She prepared to walk towards him, her footsteps echoing slightly in the otherwise empty space.

Just as she was about to approach, she sensed two presences entering the backstage area. One was a bulky man with a huge build, his presence commanding and intimidating. The other was a woman with a mature aura, and her demeanor was composed and confident.

Astron looked up, his eyes narrowing slightly as he recognized one of the newcomers. His gaze was locked on the bulky man for a second, and then he turned to the woman beside him.

"...."

He assessed the woman for a while, his eyes narrowed. Knowing him, Irina could easily say that the woman was someone he had never seen before, and like a feral cat, he was now baring his fangs.

A thing that he did to every stranger he met.

"Kid."

Yet, the voice of the bulky man took Astron's attention back to himself.

"...."

"...."

The two continued to look at each other without speaking.

Irina couldn't make any sense of what was happening here. Who were these people, and what was happening? Why was nobody talking?

Finally, the mature woman spoke, her voice calm and measured. "So, you really found each other." She glanced at the bulky man, a hint of amusement in her eyes, and then turned her face to Astron again. "I didn't expect to see Garrett 2 here. It is really interesting."

Garrett, the bulky man, looked over the woman.

Reina turned her gaze back to Astron, her expression thoughtful. "You've grown since I last saw you, Astron. Garrett has been speaking highly of you."

Astron glanced between the two of them for a second.

"Do I know you?"

To Irina, it felt like a play was happening right before her eyes.

Yet, she hadn't noticed that two people other than her were also watching this spectacle.

Chapter 388 Chapter 90.1 - Underneath

For upperclassmen, there were several things to do in the duel period of freshmen. They could return to their homes or choose to stay in the academy.

They were free to choose either of them. However, many of the students chose to stay in the academy since this period was also a way for them to contact the scouts and their possible future partners.

Especially since they needed to consider their summer internship, which would start in their sophomore year, many of the guilds would be willing to take the students of the Arcadia Hunter Academy, but the competition was still fierce.

Thus, Sophomore year students would use their tents for this purpose.

Yet, not everyone was like this. Especially people who had already secured these types of things from the start of the academy.

Maya belonged to those.

Since she was the top student in her whole year and had a talent that one would very hardly come across.

From the moment her grades were announced, almost all of the guilds had sent an offer to her for an internship. The progress would normally be reversed, but for Maya, things had been slightly altered.

In any case, for these reasons, she had a lot of free time under her disposal, and she wanted to use the things she wanted, and she was doing just that exactly.

Since there was no way that she would miss her Junior's duel, she was both curious and expectant for this duel.

She wanted to see how much power her Junior would display or what kind of attitude he would take. Would he be different from how he is compared to other things?

'To be frank, I kind of like it when he is focused.'

She thought, reminiscing.

She wanted to see this part of him, and she got what she wanted. A serious, focused, and unbothered.

The duel may have looked like a fair fight with both contestants being on the same level, but for Maya, who had a special vision and who had seen Astron's progress firsthand, the fight wasn't even close.

There was no way someone who could defeat such a strong vampire was not holding back. Astron hadn't used any special technique either, especially the move that she had witnessed.

Since he hadn't even revealed any of his cards, Maya naturally thought like that. But in essence, the duel was fun, and that was all she needed.

Since she had disguised herself perfectly, she had no doubt that no one would be able to see her. This was her pride as the strongest mage of her year and an Evergreen. She came from no simple background, after all.

Yet, as she was watching the fight, she noticed something.

Precisely some people.

Some people were watching the fight. Normally, this would be no issue. Yet, different from normal, one of these people was under a disguise, albeit a bit sloppier than hers.

And the other two.....

They were abnormal.

A presence she had seen fairly frequently.

'Professional Hunters....And higher rank on top of that.'

One bulky man who gave her the sense of not being able to be beaten....

And a woman with a mature figure who felt like a....Serpent..... A venomous serpent that would entangle one.

Maya's instincts, which she had developed over the countless different interactions in the Hunter field, were warning her. Though she had doubted her instincts at the time when she was attacked by the vampire, after that, they had never failed her.

And those same instincts showed her that her Junior was being watched.

'It should feel nice to see him getting the recognition...But I wonder why? What is the reason for this uncomfortable feeling?'

Yet something inside her felt different.

'Why?'

As if she didn't want others to take notice of him.

'A superb feeling indeed.'

Was all she could say as she followed him through the backstage, and there she had witnessed a scene out of a play.

"Do I know you?"

The moment those words left Astron's mouth, Irina almost spurted the contents in her mouth loudly.

The way he gave the response wasn't any different, yet the response itself was so humiliating that Irina couldn't help but cringe.

'This is not how one must answer, yet this is so like him.'

Hearing Astron's question, Reina shook her head with a smile. "No, you probably don't know me directly, as this is the first time we've met face-to-face. But that doesn't mean I haven't been keeping an eye on you."

Astron raised his eyebrows at her response, processing her words. He blinked his eyes, a gesture that Irina had come to recognize. It was something he did when he realized something significant.

'Did he really not know her? No, he wouldn't talk this way if he did. Then, does he recognize her from something else?'

After a brief moment of contemplation, Astron turned to Garrett. "Nothing comes without a price, right?" he asked, his tone wary.

Garrett nodded, his expression serious. "That's right. Everything has a cost, and nothing is truly free."

Irina watched the exchange with growing curiosity. The dynamics between these three were intriguing, and she felt like an outsider witnessing an important moment. Her gaze flicked over to Astron, who seemed to be piecing things together.

"Right," Astron said, turning to face Reina once again.

Reina's smile widened, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "You are pretty sharp. Not bad," she remarked. "I would have loved to talk more, but first, we need to deal with some people who lack manners. After all, it is bad to eavesdrop when someone else is talking, right?"

Reina's gaze shifted to the right, piercing directly through Irina's eyes. Following her lead, Astron and Garrett also turned their attention toward Irina. Irina felt her heart race, imagining the possible humiliation that might come next. The intensity of their stares made her feel exposed and vulnerable.

Before Reina could say anything, Astron raised his hand, stopping her. "I'll deal with this later," he said firmly. "There's no need for you to be involved."

His words were a clear way of setting boundaries and limiting Reina's intervention in his personal life. Reina's eyes narrowed for a second, but before she could respond, Garrett stepped in.

"Leave the kid be," Garrett said, his tone authoritative.

Reina scoffed, clearly displeased but willing to comply. "Fine. But you better compensate me for this," she said, turning to Astron and Garrett. "Let's go."

With that, she turned and walked away, her demeanor still composed and confident. Garrett nodded to Astron, then followed after her, leaving Irina and Astron alone.

Irina took a deep breath, trying to steady her nerves. She was grateful for Astron's intervention, but at the same time, she felt like her disguise had been seen through.

Yet, right now, she knew she needed to address the issue.

"I-I...." She stuttered, uncharacteristically of herself. "I-I didn't mean to eavesdrop." For some reason, she felt like a snake had squirmed through her neck, wrapping her and choking her.

'That woman!'

It was evident that the reactions she was showing weren't normal and were artificially affected by someone.

"It is fine." Yet, his voice was calm. There were no hinges of anger or any other emotions. Same dull and composed voice.

Yet, that same voice calmed her down. Using her mana, she scanned her body in a millisecond and identified the external mana trace on one of her mana pressure points.

'.....'

After burning the foreign mana to its psions, she locked her eyes with him.

"You already knew, didn't you?"

"Guess?"

"....."

"Next time, if you are going to do something like this, make sure to pay attention more." Saying that he seized her from top to bottom. His eyes....

They somehow felt mocked.

"What does that mean?" Irina mumbled, looking over her clothes.

"...."

Yet, as she turned to look at him, he was no longer there. Instead, he was just leaving the backstage.

"Hey! I asked something!"

"...."

She raised her voice, yet no answer came. Instead, only gazes came across all sides.

"Come on.....What did he mean? Is it really that bad?"

Irina whispered to herself, looking at her attire. For the first time in a while, she doubted her skills in something.

Astron made his way through the bustling corridors of the academy, weaving through groups of students and spectators who were still abuzz with excitement from the duels.

His mind, however, was focused on the meeting ahead. He needed answers, and he knew exactly where to get them.

He soon reached a secluded area behind one of the academy's grand buildings, a place shielded from prying eyes and ears.

Garrett and Reina were already there, having set up a barrier to ensure their conversation remained private. The shimmering energy of the barrier hummed softly, a testament to its effectiveness.

As Astron approached, Garrett gave him a nod, a silent acknowledgment of his arrival. Reina, standing with her arms crossed, watched him with a calculating gaze.

"Good, you're here," Reina said, her tone brisk. "Let's get into it."

Astron remained silent, his eyes flicking between the two of them.

"You did well in your duel," Garrett began, breaking the silence. "Your prowess was certainly beyond my expectations. Amongst monsters like these, you certainly paved your way out."

It was an honest statement.

"....."

Astron continued to stay silent.

"Now, coming to the questions you want to ask. Who am I, and why am I here?" Reina raised her index finger, pointing to the sky.

"These are the questions that you wanted to ask, aren't they?"

"Correct."

Even though Astron had already formed some theories in his head and had some guesses about the identity of the person before himself, he didn't show any of those outside. The reason for that was clear.

He had already shown enough. By already confirming that he could sense Irina's eavesdropping, he had shown his capabilities. Adding the duel on top of that, what he had shown was enough.

Reina smiled, hearing his response. "Good."

With a flick of her hand, something in her eyes changed. They shimmered, and an intricate logo appeared, glowing faintly with a mystical light.

It was a circular emblem with a central symbol resembling an eye, representing hidden knowledge and vigilance. Surrounding the eye was an ornate pattern of intertwining lines and runes, symbolizing the interconnectedness and secrecy of the organization.

The outer edge of the circle was adorned with ancient script, glowing faintly, hinting at the magical nature of the emblem. In the center of the eye, a small, glowing gemstone shimmered with changing colors, adding an element of enchantment.

Astron observed the emblem intently, recognizing it instantly.

'This is....Watchers of the Arcane....' A name instantly came into his mind. A name from the game.

'After all, there was no way Astron's past would be simple.'

Chapter 389 90.2 - Underneath

There were countless different things that could be included in a fantasy game. It all comes into the imagination of the developers as well as their budget for the project.

In this case, one could easily say that <Legacy of Shadows: Hunter's Destiny> was a game that had a huge budget.

The game was vast and contained huge elements of things in the world. Most importantly, all of these elements were in the third-person view.

Contrary to many games with such rich worlds, the game gave the players the chance to taste the combat from a very close perspective.

That alone made the game a top-notch one.

'Yet, now that I think about it, it has always been a strange thing that such a game could be developed in such details with rare loopholes.'

Being in the game world and living as one of the characters....All those things made me think about that.

Especially seeing the woman before me, with the symbol appearing right in her eyes.

'To think that I would see this right now.'

A lot of things happened after I fused with Astron, yet even then, the time passing here wasn't that big. Considering the fact that, right now, in terms of the game's scenario, we would still have been in the first arc.

At this point, it was nearly impossible for the player to come across a person belonging to them, let alone see the logo exactly.

'Since they are rather a group operating deeply and secretly.'

Even at the end of the game, their purpose was not revealed completely. They were an organization that simply existed and did some things with Ethan.

Sometimes, it appears right when the Player feels lost or when the story can no longer move forward.

They were a mysterious organization that was engrained deep into the world. Their motives and leader were unknown.

Their structure and headquarters were unknown. Rarely something was known about them, and there were almost zero clues about them in the game as well.

'Just their name....Only their name...'

One only knew their name....Even that was because there was an event where a member was captured by the InfernalCovenant, and using [Psychic Magic], the name was purged from the consciousness.

But that was only the name.

While those thoughts were wandering in my head, my eyes were locked into the emblem in the woman, Reina's eyes.

It stirred some emotions in me and deeply affected my head. I felt the world spinning just by looking at it as if I was looking at something I shouldn't be.

Countless different threads and voices entered my head in that split second, countless images forming in my head.

It was as if the information was constantly being poured into my head, with overwhelming amounts on top of that.

In general, there was this idea of knowledge being the strongest weapon in the world. While that was certainly true, the same knowledge could also be the tightest rope that one could hang themselves with.

Since, sometimes, it was better to remain unknown.

The information entering my head wasn't something that was fundamentally helpful to me, either. It was rather harmful since it constantly bugged my head, messing with my thoughts.

Yet, who was I?

A mere information is not something that can defile my head.

'Slow down.'

While researching the [Psychic Magic], I came to the realization that mana could be used not only in spells but also in the mind itself. Though it was just a thought, I tried something.

'Mind Palace.'

Creating a palace of memories and sorting them according to a specific order. A mental institute is one that one creates so that one can use one's brain with the utmost efficiency.

It was a psychological technique without any supernatural forces involved. But then what would happen if mana was involved?

The result was clear.

'The information is being sorted out.'

Like a digital algorithm storing the data, analyzing it, and then filtering the necessary ones, my mind palace was doing the exact thing.

And in that split second, that wave of information was turned into a dam, only for me to utilize it.

The mystery of the eye was deflected, making me relax.

"It seems you had already understood that your admission to this academy was not simple," And then a voice entered my head.

It was from the woman, Reina.

She had been gauging my reaction for a while now. This was probably another assessment as to how I would react.

Since the way one would react to that Symbol itself would give an insight into their characteristic. Though this knowledge is one of those rarest clues, one could get into this organization.

I only gave a reaction according to the character I wanted to be visualized in Reina's eyes.

".....Yes....." Giving a slightly dazed response to show that I was in awe and confusion was the first step.

Reina continued, her tone measured and deliberate. A quite professional, yet I could say she was not that adept in using the logo.

'Let's not jump to any conclusion.'

"Your admission to this academy was orchestrated because of your potential. 'They' saw something in you, something that could not be wasted."

She threw a quick glance at Garrett, who remained silent but watchful. "The organization recognized your unique abilities and wanted to cultivate them. They believe that you have the potential to become a significant asset."

That made sense. Even from the start, things related to Astron's admission didn't make the connection. Arcadia Hunter Academy wouldn't accept a person with such a talent, especially when there were countless people waiting to join.

Even though Astron's talent limit was quite high, it wouldn't be enough. Thus, I naturally looked over the past Astron's memories, yet there weren't many clues.

Even during my time on his necklace, I couldn't see anything related to that, not even from my investigations. Hence, I stopped thinking about these things at that time, but now things are starting to reveal themselves.

I nodded, maintaining my facade of awe and confusion. "What do you want from me?" I asked, my voice tinged with the right amount of uncertainty.

Reina's gaze softened slightly, though her expression remained guarded. "Since they saw something inside you, they naturally want you to reach your full potential. And, now that I have directly witnessed your prowess, I can easily say that you have passed the first test."

"Test...."

"Yes. A test. Since they wanted to make sure."

"I see...."

My mind raced as I processed her words. This was an opportunity, albeit a dangerous one.

The organization, with its unknown motives and immense power, saw something in me, or the previous Astron, that they deemed valuable.

'Potential...Fate...Demon's Massacre of village....Her death....'

My head was suddenly overwhelmed.

For a split second, my vision was blurred. The information that I had previously sorted out was now flowing out of the palace as if something inside the palace had opened the gates.

'Urghk-!'

The pain overwhelmed my head for a split second, and then the world turned dark. My vision blurred, and I felt myself slipping away from reality.

In the darkness, a small light began to illuminate the void. It was a crescent moon hanging in the sky, casting a faint glow over everything. As my eyes adjusted, I realized that the ground beneath me was covered in a shallow layer of water, shimmering with bioluminescent noctiluca. The ethereal light of the moon reflected off the water's surface, creating a mesmerizing, almost surreal landscape.

Right under the moon, I saw a faint silhouette of a person. The figure stood still, almost blending with the darkness around it. I squinted, trying to make out any details, but the figure remained elusive, shrouded in mystery.

Before I could make any sense of what I was seeing, a voice echoed in my head. It was ethereal and soothing, yet it felt distant like a whisper carried on the wind.

"....st....k...th...nsw...i.....u....ho....."

The words were cryptic and blurry, their meaning eluding me. I tried to grasp their significance, but the voice faded away, leaving me with more questions than answers.

The figure under the moon remained still, its presence both comforting and unsettling. I felt a strange connection to it as if it held the key to understanding the mysteries that plagued my mind.

Suddenly, the darkness began to lift, and I found myself back in the penthouse, the pain in my head subsiding.

Reina was still standing before me, her expression unreadable, and Garrett remained watchful.

I shook my head slightly, trying to clear the lingering fog from my mind. The cryptic message echoed in my thoughts, but I pushed it aside for now. There were more immediate concerns to address.

"Are you alright?" Reina asked, her tone measured.

"Yes," I replied, regaining my composure. "Just a momentary lapse."

Reina nodded, seemingly satisfied with my response. "Don't worry, it is just a side-effect."

"Side-effect?"

"Oops, I didn't mean to say that."

Seeing a grown woman like her acting like that, I could only roll my eyes.

"..."

"In any case, since you have passed the initial test, I can inform you of what is to come." Turning back into her usual serious face, Reina continued.

"In any case, since you have passed the initial test, I can inform you of what is to come." Turning back to her usual serious demeanor, Reina continued. "After your semester ends, you will be expected to come into the organization during the one-

month holiday. You will start as a trainee."

"What if I refuse?"

"If you refuse.....You will face the consequences." The moment she said that an immense amount of pressure overwhelmed me. She was releasing a strong killing intent.

'For her to have such a strong intent....She is not simple, it seems.'

The woman named Reina.....I will remember it.

"Understood." Since I have no intention of organizing such an organization, I played along.

"Good."

She then reached into her coat and threw a small box toward me. I caught it effortlessly, feeling its weight and shape in my hands.

"That box contains a smartwatch. We will contact you via that, so you should start wearing it from now on," Reina explained.

I opened the box, revealing the watch inside. Its design was... unusual, to say the least. It was a bulky, metallic piece with an overly intricate design that seemed more ornamental than functional. My eyebrows shot up as I examined it.

"Why did you choose this outlook for the watch?" I asked, holding it up.

Reina narrowed her eyes and looked at Garrett, who had been silent the whole time. "It was his choice," she said, her tone carrying a hint of annoyance.

Garrett could only avert his gaze, looking somewhat sheepish. "I thought it looked... good. Isn't this how youngsters like to wear these days?" He mumbled.

'This guy.....Aren't you my guardian? At least remember what kind of things I like....'

I sighed inwardly but decided not to press the issue further. "Alright, I'll wear it," I said, slipping the watch onto my wrist. Despite its cumbersome design, it fits comfortably.

"But I will change the design; it is fine, right?"

"No problem."

Reina gave a curt nod. "Good. Remember, this is just the beginning. Prove yourself, and you will gain access to greater knowledge and power."

She said, slowly leaving.

"But, don't ever disappoint..."

And then she left, leaving me and Garrett alone.

Chapter 390 90.3 - Underneath

As Reina's footsteps faded into the distance, Garrett and I were left alone in the room. The silence that followed was heavy, filled with unspoken words and memories of a shared past.

Garrett, my guardian. The man who had sent me to the orphanage after everything happened, the same person who had personally trained me with daggers, now stood before me with an expression that was hard to read.

To be frank, I didn't know much about this Hunter. When we first met, he was someone who was sent to the exploration team for the village. At that time, I wasn't thinking right.

The things that happened had already been overwhelming to the extent that I couldn't even think. I could only see the claws piercing her chest; that was all I could think.

Yet, even then, from the pieces of those memories, I can easily say that Garrett wasn't as strong as he was at that time.

He was stern and serious, a character fitting for a hunter. He didn't talk much, even while he was training me. And since I myself am not much of a talker either, in the end, our relationship was somehow awkward all the time.

I am pretty confident that this guy didn't know how to deal with a child, let alone a kid like me.

In any case, things seem to have changed a lot over the years. Garrett had changed. He got stronger, and his presence became a lot more refined.

From the aura he is exuding, it is evident that he is a lot more experienced and calm. His demeanor, his posture, and the way he approaches things also suggest that he has experienced many life-and-death situations.

Since I can see one when I check, but aside from my observations, there is nothing I know about him. There are some miscellaneous things, but none of them are important.

"Well, that was...interesting," Garrett finally said, breaking the silence. His tone was casual, but I could sense the underlying tension. This guy...He somehow feels awkward around that woman, Reina.

'Interesting.'

I had never seen such a side of him since he was always calm.

I glanced at the bulky smartwatch on my wrist, its intricate design catching the light. "You know, Mister Garrett, you could have picked something a bit more...subtle."

"I thought you would like it."

"Really?"

"Yes."

But, seemingly enough, with Reina leaving our presence, his usual demeanor slowly returned.

"Kid." This was his way of addressing me. Even before, he had never called me by my name.

Maybe he thought calling me by my name alone would make me feel uncomfortable, or maybe he himself felt uncomfortable calling my name.

I didn't know the reason for that, nor did I care. It was just a realization after remembering our past interactions.

"I know this is pretty sudden. Being dragged into this organization and dealing with their threats...."

"I know this is pretty sudden. Being dragged into this organization and dealing with their threats...." Garrett's voice trailed off, his expression thoughtful.

"But," he continued, "it's not necessarily a bad thing. This is also an opportunity for you, kid. Being alone without any backer in the Hunter field is hard. No matter what drives you forward, no matter your motivations, if you remain a lone insect, it will only be a matter of time before you get crushed."

I listened, my gaze fixed on him. Garrett's words carried the weight of experience, of lessons learned through harsh realities.

He was right; the Hunter world was ruthless. I had seen it firsthand. The backers, I knew it as well. But at the end of the day,

"You need allies, resources, and training that you can't get on your own," Garrett went on. "They saw potential in you. They're offering you a path, a way to get stronger. And you'll need that strength to survive and achieve whatever it is you're aiming for."

I nodded slowly. Garrett didn't know all the details about her death.

"Look, kid," Garrett said, his tone softening a bit, "I know you're capable. You've already come a long way. But you can't fight the entire world on your own. Use this opportunity. Learn what you can from them, and grow stronger. Then, when the time is right, you can make your own decisions about your future."

I appreciated his honesty. Yet, some of his words bugged me.

'You can't fight the world on your own....'

In this world, is there ever someone who would fight the world just for a person like me? Do I have any right to request such a thing from them?

For me, who couldn't even protect the only person I needed to protect? What right do I have to request such a thing from someone else?

'Right....'

The demons, her death. There were many questions that still needed to be answered.

There are still many mysteries and many holes that I need to uncover.

Something inside me keeps telling me that once I come to learn the truth, things will never remain the same.

But even without that, the sole reason that I exist....

Isn't that revenge something that will eventually come to destroy me?

Maybe that is what I am hoping for, maybe not. At the end of the day, I have no right to drag others into this.

I am not that selfish. If the world does not permit me to take my revenge on my own, it is not because of the world but because I am lacking.

That is it. I don't need anyone's help.

One part of me came to this world alone, and the other part of me was left alone.

'Future?'

My future? Wasn't that obvious what I was going to do? After leaving this academy? Ending the ones who took her from me. This is what I am living for.

'But....'

Yet, somehow, when these thoughts overlapped my head, a subtle feeling emerged. A subtle feeling of what?

'Regret?'

A feeling that I thought I would never feel for other reasons since my biggest regret has always accompanied me in my dreams and still accompanies me.

I was lost in thought, the weight of Garrett's words, and my own unresolved emotions pressing down on me. My mind wandered through memories and unanswered questions, doubts, and regrets, weaving a complex web.

Just as I was about to delve deeper into my reminiscences, I suddenly felt a hand on my shoulder.

—FLINCH!

Instinctively, I flinched, maybe for the first time in years, unaccustomed to the sensation and surprised that my senses had missed Garrett reaching out to me. I realized there were too many thoughts in my head, too many distractions.

Garrett's eyes met mine, steady and sincere. "You've done well, Kid. There's no need to overdo it. I know you well enough to see when you're tired."

I stayed silent, the words catching in my throat. There was something in his presence...Something that somehow made me unable to respond.

Was it those words? Maybe it reminded me of something.

Was it that hand? Maybe it reminded me of something.

It felt unnaturally deep, resonating inside.

One thing was obvious. I was like a stone statue at that moment.

His grip on my shoulder was firm, a grounding moment amidst the turmoil in my mind.

He stayed like that for a while. It was silent since neither of us was speaking. The silence was heavy, something I hadn't felt since before.

I generally loved being in silence since it felt like nothing would remind me of those times. But, somehow, right now, not being able to respond made me feel suffocated.

And it seemed Garrett was not that different.

After a moment, he coughed awkwardly and said, "I guess I overstepped my boundaries." He retracted his hand, but not before giving my shoulder a pat.

"If ever something happens, you can count on me. I may not be your father, but I can at least act like a guardian."

"..."

The sincerity in his voice struck a chord within me. Despite the fact that he was nothing more than a mere hunter who had found a lost kid like me, Garrett showed genuine care in his actions.

It was a simple, unspoken promise of support and guidance.

'Why?' This made me wonder if he was this good at hiding that, it felt like he was genuine. Since it didn't make sense for him to show this care for someone like me. I was unable to comprehend it since never once had I offered him something valuable, and he didn't have much to gain from this.

No, I did understand, and that was the problem. I had seen it before. I knew what happened to those who showed goodwill for no reason.

'She was just like this, as well.' They perish for the sake of others. This world was harsh, and those who extended a hand often paid the price.

I stayed silent, wrestling with the conflicting emotions inside me. Garrett just smiled, sensing my turmoil. "Enjoy your school life a bit more," he said, his tone light. "You'll miss these days once it ends."

With that, he gave me one last pat on the shoulder and turned to leave.

Somehow, I didn't feel like training today.

The final exam period was different for those who were non-

combatants, especially for healers. While the combatant students were tested in duels and physical trials, the healers were evaluated on their ability to mend wounds and manage crises.

Their talents couldn't be showcased in the same dramatic fashion, but their importance was no less significant.

Sylvie found herself in the bustling infirmary, the atmosphere charged with a mix of tension and urgency. Students filed in with injuries sustained from their duels, and it was the healers' job to patch them up and ensure they could continue their examinations.

This was their test to demonstrate their skills under pressure and prove their worth as indispensable members of the academy.

Sylvie moved from one injured student to the next, her hands glowing with a soft, soothing light as she channeled her healing mana. Cuts closed, bruises faded, and bones mended under her touch. Her sensitivity to mana had grown significantly through her training, allowing her to detect even the faintest disturbances in the students' energy flows.

"Next," she called, her voice steady despite the constant stream of patients. A student with a gash on his arm stepped forward, grimacing in pain.

Sylvie placed her hands over the wound, her mana flowing into the injury, knitting the tissue back together with practiced precision.

"You're good to go," she said with a reassuring smile as the student flexed his now-healed arm, relief washing over his face.

"Thank you," he replied. "This is the first time I feel this smooth after a treatment."

"You flatter me."

"No, really," he insisted, his gaze right on her eyes. There was a sincerity in his eyes that caught Sylvie off guard. As he continued to look at her, a faint blush spread across his cheeks, and he suddenly seemed a bit flustered.

"Um, I mean... you're really good at what you do, Sylvie," he stuttered, struggling to maintain his composure. "And, uh... I was wondering if you'd like to go out with me sometime. For a drink or something?"

Sylvie was caught off guard for a split second.

"Eh?"

But as those words reached out to her ears, she somehow felt....

Cold.

Maybe a bit angry?

"That, I was just asking-"

"I appreciate the compliment and the offer. But, no."

Maybe it was a bit unfair. But she felt angry and didn't want to continue this conversation. Even explaining herself felt bothersome at that moment.

Not against this boy, but against someone else.

The boy's blush deepened, and he lowered his head, clearly embarrassed. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make things awkward," he mumbled. "Thank you again for the healing. I'll get out of your way now."

"It's okay," Sylvie reassured him, maintaining her gentle demeanor. "Good luck with the rest of your exams."

As the boy hurried off, Sylvie took a moment to steady herself.

"Sigh...."

Taking a deep breath, she tried to fend off these thoughts since they wouldn't help.

"Look at what we have here."

Yet, a familiar voice came from the side.

A voice she hadn't heard for years, yet she hadn't forgotten even once.

"My sister really grew up to be a fine lady."