

## H. Academy 391

Chapter 391 90.4 - Underneath

Sylvie turned towards the source of the voice, her heart skipping a beat.

Since that was the voice that she hadn't heard for a long time, if there was a certain person who had been plugging her mind into her thoughts, this person was the one who had been in her mind for years.

Standing before her was a man with a serene expression, a light smile playing on his lips. He was tall and dressed in casual clothes that somehow radiated an air of purity and holiness. His yellow hair was slightly long but didn't quite reach his ears, framing his crystal-clear blue eyes and tender features.

"Brother..." Sylvie whispered, barely able to believe her eyes. Her brother, whom she hadn't seen in years, was standing right in front of her.

Even though his facial features had changed slightly, even though he looked bigger and taller, the expression and everything...

She instantly knew that it was him.

"My sister really grew up to be a fine lady," he said warmly, his smile widening as he looked at her.

The room seemed to pause as everyone took notice of this newcomer. His handsome features and calm demeanor drew the attention of everyone around them, some even staring with open admiration.

"Leo... what are you doing here?" Sylvie managed to ask, her voice a mixture of surprise and joy.

Leonard chuckled softly, stepping closer. "I heard about the final exams and thought I'd come to see how my little sister is doing. Seems like you're handling things quite well."

Sylvie's initial shock began to give way to a rush of emotions. Seeing her brother after so many years brought back a flood of memories.

'He is back...He is really back...'

It was such a sudden thing that even her trait and the other things were closed. She was solely focused on this very moment, something she wouldn't do very often.

"Come here."

Seeing him spreading his arms like it was used to, a blush of shame spread through her cheeks. She was embarrassed, feeling like he was treating her like a kid.

She also didn't want to fold immediately. Since he suddenly disappeared at that time with only a note.

Yet, at the same time, she couldn't overcome the desire to hug him since it had been so long.

"Come on."

Thus, she stepped forward and hugged him tightly, feeling a sense of comfort and familiarity she had missed for so long.

"I'm so glad to see you," she said, her voice muffled against his chest.

Leonard gently patted her back, his smile never fading. "I've missed you too, Sylvie. It's been too long."

As they broke the embrace, Sylvie couldn't help but notice the awestruck expressions on the faces of the other students and healers in the room. Leonard's presence was undeniably captivating, and for such a person to be the brother of Sylvie.

It was evident that there would be many people bothering her in the future. At that moment, Sylvie couldn't help but activate her trait once again. It was not because of her own volition but because of the emotions that the surrounding students were feeling.

And just as she expected, many feelings were surging through the students.

For the boys, it was mainly respect. The aura that was spreading from Leonard was so noble and awestriking that the male healers didn't even have any time to get jealous of him. Of course, there were still some that had harbored some envy and jealousy, yet they lacked in numbers compared to others.

Things were a bit different for their female counterparts.

Sylvie's trait allowed her to see the emotions swirling around her brother like a vivid aura. The girls' feelings were more complex, layered with admiration and something more primal: lust and envy.

She could see the way their eyes followed Leonard, and their admiration tinged with a deeper desire. Some of the girls looked at him with open longing, their expressions betraying the attraction they felt. But beneath the admiration, there was also a palpable undercurrent of envy, especially directed at Sylvie.

The envy was almost palpable, so intense in some that it nearly covered their entire color palette. Sylvie could sense the jealousy radiating from them, their thoughts likely consumed with questions of why someone so extraordinary belonged to her family and why she had the privilege of his affection and attention.

Sylvie felt a pang of discomfort but pushed it aside. She was used to the envy and the misunderstandings it could bring. Her whole childhood was filled with such things, after all.

Leonard's return, however, was a blessing. She wouldn't let these emotions taint her.

"Brother," she said, regaining her composure. "Please."

"Why? It has been so long since I saw my little lamb. Why can't I enjoy it?"

"It is embarrassing."

'All those emotions are annoying.'

"Haha...Are you feeling shy?"

"....."

Hearing how her brother didn't seem to care, Sylvie pouted and pinched his arm.

"Okay, okay. Don't sulk."

Leonard chuckled, rubbing his arm where she had pinched him. "I missed this," he said softly. "Even your little pinches."

Sylvie couldn't help but smile, her heart swelling with affection for her brother. "I've missed you too," she admitted, her voice tender.

"Alright, I'll let you get back to work," Leonard said, stepping back but not before giving her one last affectionate pat on the head. "But let's catch up properly later. I want to hear everything."

"Promise?" Sylvie asked, looking up at him with hopeful eyes.

"Promise," Leonard confirmed, his smile reassuring.

As Leonard turned to leave, Sylvie felt a renewed sense of determination and warmth. There were a lot of things that she needed to ask him.

'Why did you disappear so suddenly without saying anything?'

'Why have you not contacted me in all these years?'

'What did you do all these times?'

Many questions needed to be asked, yet, in the end, she knew this moment wasn't for that. At least, she needed to have a more calm time.

Since she had also booked her break to watch a certain someone's match, she needed to work for a while now.

With a deep breath, she refocused on her work, calling out for the next patient amongst the gazes of all these students.

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<Arcadia Hunter Academy, Monday Evening>

The sun was setting over Arcadia Hunter Academy, casting long shadows across the dueling grounds. The day had been a whirlwind of activity, with duel after duel taking place as students demonstrated their skills and resolve.

Eleanor stood in the observation tower, a vantage point that allowed her to oversee multiple matches at once. She held a tablet in her hand, ready to grade the students she had missed earlier in the day.

Eleanor's sharp eyes moved from one duel to the next, evaluating each student's performance with meticulous attention.

The lower-ranked students were fighting today, and she noted their techniques, mana control, and strategic decisions.

Each duel was an opportunity for her to gauge their progress and potential. And for her, who had already been accustomed to observing and grading the students, the process was just like another one of her own fights.

Mira Sullivan vs. Gregor White

Mira's agility and quick thinking allowed her to outpace and outsmart Gregor. Her victory was swift, highlighting her strategic prowess.

Clara Rivers vs. Edwin Moore

Clara's duel was a showcase of raw power. She overwhelmed Edwin with sheer strength, earning a decisive victory.

Nora Flint vs. Jasper Reed

Nora displayed a balanced approach, combining offense and defense effectively. Her victory was hard-fought, but it showed her growing competence.

Just like that, she had finished her grading process. Since there were many instructors, the students were spread around to reduce the workload on them.

In any case, with how she had finished her grading process, now it was time for her to check on how her students did.

Even if she wouldn't grade them, she still could watch the records of every duel.

Astron Natusalune vs. Wilfred Gibbs

And there was one particular student that she wanted to check for today. Since the other important duels would happen later, there was only one that she deemed important.

"Challenger, Astron Natusalune, Ranked 1729."

"Challenged, Wilfred Gibbs. Ranked 1589."

With that, the recording started, and Eleanor watched the fight. Until everything was over, she watched like a true instructor trying to analyze her students.

"Yield," Astron commanded, his voice steady.

Wilfred, recognizing his defeat, bowed his head. "I yield," he said softly.

And this was the end of the recording.

"Not bad." She mumbled.

Eleanor's analysis was thorough:

Adaptability: Astron's ability to switch between ranged and close combat effectively was impressive. He used the element of surprise and his opponent's underestimation to his advantage.

Tactical Awareness: Astron's strategic use of feints and psychological tactics disrupted Wilfred's focus, showcasing his understanding of combat psychology.

Skill Development: Despite his lower rank, Astron demonstrated significant growth and proficiency in both dagger and bow techniques. His agility and precision were notable.

The fighting style that was displayed was slightly bizarre. Not many hunters fought in such a manner.

Yet, Eleanor knew one thing.

'He resembles her.'

There was one certain someone who fought like this as well. And that certain someone was now.....

Her nemesis.

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Later that evening, Sylvie met Leonard at one of the cozy cafes on campus. The setting sun casts a warm glow over the cafe's patio, creating a serene atmosphere that contrasts with the bustling activity of the day.

The cafe was a popular spot, and many students were present, their curious eyes following Leonard and Sylvie as they took a seat by the window.

'Let them stare,' Sylvie thought, dismissing the envious glances and whispers that followed them. She was determined to enjoy this time with her brother, no matter what.

"Thank you for making time to meet," Sylvie said, smiling warmly as she settled into her seat.

"Of course," Leonard replied, his own smile mirroring hers. "I've missed you, Sylvie. It's good to see you in such high spirits."

As they waited for their drinks, Sylvie took a moment to study her brother. Despite the years that had passed, he still exuded the same calm and reassuring presence. Yet, there was a maturity in his eyes that hinted at the experiences he had gone through during their time apart.

"So," Leonard began, leaning forward slightly, "tell me everything. How have you been? What have you been up to?"

Sylvie took a deep breath, deciding to start with the lighter topics. "I've been training hard, focusing on my....Skills." She decided to hide her awakening for the time being since she didn't want her brother to worry for now. For some reason, she also felt like it would be disastrous to talk about him right now.

"The final exams have been intense, but I think I'm managing well."

Leonard nodded, listening intently. "I heard about your progress. I'm proud of you, Sylvie. You've grown so much."

"Thank you," she said, feeling a warm glow of pride at his words. "But... there are things I need to ask you too."

Leonard's expression grew serious, and he nodded again, understanding the importance of her unspoken questions to his sister. "Go ahead."

"Why did you disappear so suddenly without saying anything? Why have you not contacted me in all these years? What did you do all this time?"

Sylvie took a deep breath, steadying herself. "Why did you leave so suddenly, brother? And why didn't you contact me? I... I was worried to death about you."



Leonard sighed, his gaze softening. "I owe you an explanation, Sylvie."

"The reason I had left—"

Just as Leonard was about to speak more, suddenly, something tingled on his neck.

It was the artifact that would show him his target.

'Kin of the Moon!'

Chapter 392 90.5 - Underneath

For the whole month, Leonard had been searching for the 'Kin of the Moon.' Since the prophecy had long predicted that the Kin of the Moon would have their fate interlocked with the 'Stars' of the world, Leonard started from Arcadia City.

Though he was taking a break now, his mind was still occupied with his mission after all. He was having a good time talking to his sister and learning about her life, yet part of his mind was still tense.

"The reason I left—"

And just as he began, he suddenly flinched, his gaze snapping away from Sylvie and toward the cafe's entrance.

His eyes briefly shone with a vivid yellow light, and an intense, almost predatory intent seemed to radiate from him.

Though he was adept at controlling his aura, making it invisible to ordinary people, Sylvie's unique powers allowed her to sense the shift.

Her eyes widened, and she gasped softly, but she quickly regained control of her emotions, masking her reaction. She watched Leonard closely, her mind racing with questions and concerns.

"Brother?" she asked softly, trying to keep her voice steady. "Is everything alright?"

Leonard didn't immediately respond, his focus entirely on something—or someone—outside the cafe. The artifact around his neck had tingled, alerting him to the presence of his target. 'Kin of the Moon,' the thought echoed in his mind, heightening his senses and making him hyper-aware of his surroundings.

Without turning back to Sylvie, he spoke in a low, urgent tone. "Sylvie, I need to step outside for a moment. There's a call that I need to take."

THUMP!

Sylvie's heart pounded in her chest. Since this was the first time she had seen something like this.

No. It was not the first time.

There was once a time when she felt the same thing. The time when she witnessed someone getting brutally murdered.

That brutal murderer who killed Demonic Human Mason had the same type of intent. Such a type of intent, similar to a murderer, was coming from her brother. How could she stay completely calm?

'This is.....No, Sylvie. Calm down.'

But eventually, she nodded, forcing a smile. Since this was how she was supposed to act if she wanted to learn more, she needed to keep her calm and act logically, not letting her emotions get the better of her.

Since this was what she learned.

"Of course. It is completely fine."

Leonard gave her a reassuring nod, his expression softening momentarily. "I'll be right back. Stay here."

Leonard stepped out of the cafe, his demeanor shifting from relaxed to hyper-focused. Once outside, he quickly checked his surroundings before pulling out the artifact hanging around his neck.

The 'Kin of the Moon'—a target he had been hunting for some time—was near. He injected his mana into the necklace, enhancing its influence to trace the target more precisely.

As the mana flowed through the artifact, Leonard began to sense the mana imprints of everyone around him.

Each person had a unique signature, a distinct energy pattern that the artifact could detect. He scanned the area meticulously, his senses heightened to pick up even the faintest trace of his target.

However, no matter how much he searched, he couldn't pinpoint the exact location of the 'Kin of the Moon.'

"Annoying. Or should I say, as expected from the world's best academy?"

The academy's wards and protective artifacts were causing interference, disrupting the resonance of his mana with the artifact.

The intricate magical barriers designed to safeguard students and faculty were inadvertently shielding his target from detection.

Leonard's eyes narrowed in frustration as he continued to scan the area. He could sense the presence of powerful wards, their energies mingling and creating a complex web that made it nearly impossible to isolate a single mana imprint.

'No, this will not work no matter what.'

After almost a minute of fruitless searching, Leonard realized that he would have to get closer to his target without relying solely on the artifact. He would need to employ a more direct approach to uncover the identity and location of the 'Kin of the Moon.'

'But still.....I have finally gotten something. It seems the lord is on my side.'

Despite the setback, a smile tugged at Leonard's lips. The fact that his target was somehow affiliated with the academy—either as a student or a relative—meant he was on the right track. The proximity of his target gave him hope that he was closing in, and it was only a matter of time before he uncovered the truth.

With a final, calming breath, Leonard turned and re-entered the cafe. Sylvie was waiting for him, her expression calm, but her eyes filled with concern and curiosity. Leonard's demeanor softened as he approached her, masking the intensity of his recent focus.

"Sorry about that," he said, sitting back down. "Had to take care of something urgent."

"It's alright. Everything okay?"

"Yes, everything's fine," Leonard reassured her, his smile gentle. "Now, where were we?"

Sylvie forced herself to relax, deciding to continue their conversation and gather more information when the time was right. "You were about to tell me why you left so suddenly," she reminded him, her voice steady.

Leonard's expression grew serious again as he nodded. "Right." He smiled slightly. No matter what, he knew he couldn't escape his fate.

Sylvie raised her eyebrows in surprise. "Purpose?"

Leonard's smile widened. "It's fine if you don't understand everything completely right now. When the time comes, you'll understand."

Sylvie narrowed her eyes, feeling a mix of curiosity and frustration. "And the right time isn't now?"

Leonard shook his head. "No, not yet. But I'll give you a hint."

Sylvie leaned in, intrigued. "A hint?"

Leonard's eyes twinkled with a secretive light. "Do you think our family is a simple family?"

Sylvie stood in silence, pondering his question. She had always felt there was more to their family, especially with the abilities she and Leonard possessed as well as she herself possessed, but she had never delved too deeply into those thoughts. Her mind raced with realizations, trying to piece together the fragments of what Leonard was implying.

"Leonard, what do you mean?" she finally asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Leonard smiled and put a finger to his lips. "Shh. Not the time."

Sylvie sighed, realizing that she wouldn't be able to get any more information from him. He was always like this, after all. If he didn't want to talk, he would evade the topics like this. Despite her frustration, she knew pushing further wouldn't yield any results.

"Alright, I'll wait," she said reluctantly. "But you have to promise to tell me when the time is right."

Leonard nodded. "I promise. Just trust me for now."

Sylvie looked into his eyes, searching for any hint of deception, but all she found was sincerity. Normally, she wouldn't even have the urge to check her family's emotional palette since she trusted them deeply. But right now, she couldn't forget the intent that Leonard had displayed just now.

The fact that he resembled that murderer alone made her feel a suffocating feeling inside.

'How do you expect me to trust you?'

She thought inwardly. Yet, she knew she could only answer in one way. With a deep breath, she decided to let it go for the moment.

"Okay," she said, forcing a smile. "I trust you."

Leonard's expression softened. "That is my sister." And then, suddenly, he smiled mischievously. "So, it seems my sister is a bit popular now?"

And he asked a question that was so out of nowhere that Sylvie couldn't help but give a surprise exclamation.

"Huh?"

"You know," Leonard continued, leaning in with a teasing grin. "The one who asked you out at the infirmary. I saw the whole thing. Is there a person you like? Is that why you rejected him?"

Sylvie felt her cheeks heat up and crossed her arms with a huff. "There's no such person."

Leonard released a thoughtful "Hmm?" as he leaned back, a glint in his eyes.

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'What was that?'

As I was walking across the academy grounds, I suddenly sensed a presence. It was not a presence of someone, but rather a presence that was incredibly similar to the Logo that the woman named Reina had shown.

It was spreading a weird type of energy that wasn't exactly mana, but at the same time, it was something I was a bit familiar with.

'Divine Power. It is similar to the energy Sylvie emits from time to time.'

Sylvie learned to control her energy a lot more while we were training in close combat, but that also exposed me to her energy.

'Someone from Aurora Sanctum is here.'

Regardless of who they were, the important thing was something else.

'I felt threatened.' That was the important thing. The energy. Somehow, the moment I felt exposed to it, my senses started screaming at me.

It was such a warning that I almost felt suffocated. Even in the presence of a high-ranking demon, I didn't feel such a threat.

Therefore, my first instinct was to run away. I even used [Shadowborne] to mask my presence. It was a bit risky, but that was necessary.

And thankfully, after getting away from the crowd, the threatening presence left. It seemed I had successfully escaped.

'That is not normal.' Something was happening.

I didn't know who this person was or what their intentions were. But, if they were to exclude such a dangerous presence from everyone in the academy, there was no way they wouldn't be spotted.

Even if my [Intuition] parameter is quite high, it is still not higher than the instructors. Therefore, the fact that that person wasn't even recognized means one thing.

'I was the target, or I was in the desired target group.'

Something had triggered. There was a special distinction that the person from the Aurora Sanctum was looking for.

'What makes me different from any other student?'

The question has several answers, but there are three of them that can be detected.

'My Trait [Shadowborne] is related to the Primordial Demon of Shadows.' The first one was the existence of my trait. If it was detected, it could possibly display a link to demons, and I could be misunderstood as if I were affiliated with them.

And if it was the Aurora Sanctum, the land of holiness, that was possible.

'Just because I had sent the documents to Eleanor, she called an expert related to demons this quick?'

If it was Eleanor's influence, it slightly made sense that such a thing was possible. Since I had informed her that a possible attack would happen in the final exams and the demon contractors were planning something. It made sense that she called an expert.

But something inside me doubted it. Since the Aurora Sanctum wasn't that easily accessed and contacted.

'The second thing is, my special soul situation.'

The fact that my soul was somehow dismantled and transported from another dimension itself was a special occurrence. If it was detected, I could see it resembling the 'possession' of evil spirits.

This was possible since the Aurora Sanctum was known for its holiness, and that power was known for its purification properties.

As for the last one.

'It is because of my trait [Lunar Enigma.]'

Since the other representation of the Aurora Sanctum was 'Sun's Land.'

Chapter 393 91.1 - Duels [2]

<Wednesday, 13.45, Arcadia Hunter Academy>

Two days of the duels had already passed, and the third day had already come. With the event being in the middle, slowly, the academy started being more and more crowded, with the duels becoming more and more important.

And, right now, a rare duel was about to happen.

The amphitheater was filled to capacity with students and spectators, many of whom were there to support their relatives or friends. The buzz of conversation echoed through the stands, but the focus was on the arena where two students stood poised to face each other.



Just as usual, two students were about to face each other, yet there was one thing that was slightly different.

The difference between the ranks.

Liam Wayne, ranked 1279, stood confidently on one side, his expression focused. There was a faint glint in his eyes while he was looking at his opponent.

Opposite him was Astron Natusalune, ranked 1729. The difference in their ranks was significant, and it was this disparity that had drawn the crowd's attention.

It was evident from the ranks and Liam's demeanor that he had intentionally chosen Astron as an opponent.

Whispers and murmurs filled the air as the spectators discussed the upcoming duel.

"Can you believe Liam challenged someone so much lower in rank?" a student remarked, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Yeah, it's not exactly a fair fight," another replied. "He should be aiming higher if he wants to prove himself."

"It's a cowardly move," a third student said loudly enough for others around to hear. "Challenging someone 500 ranks below him? What's he trying to prove?"

The criticism was open and harsh. Liam's decision to challenge Astron was frowned upon by many, as it was seen as an act of weakness and poor sportsmanship. The academy's culture valued challenging oneself against stronger opponents, and Liam's choice was perceived as a violation of this principle.

In the stands, a group of faculty members watched closely. Eleanor, among them, observed the scene with a keen eye, her expression neutral but her thoughts racing.

She was curious to see how Astron, despite his lower rank, would handle the situation. The first duel was a pretty good surprise, but it was still within her expectations. At least, she could understand it.

Yet this time.

'Maybe you will show me a miracle?'

It was just a thought to entertain. She didn't even think about it for more than a second.

On another corner, there was another student there. With her fiery red hair, she was watching the duel unfold.

"Considering his attitude, I can understand why this Liam guy got annoyed with him." She mumbled to herself. After all, knowing his attitude, which was cold, edgy, and rude, she couldn't even keep herself up at the start.

'But, still. Not everyone can simply use their duels and their chance to prove themselves like this.'

It was evident that something else was at play.

If this Liam guy was stupid enough to waste his chance like this, then her thoughts would be proven wrong, but that would mean it was safe.

But, if he was compensated. Then, that would mean someone was targeting Astron.

'At that time, too.'

Remembering the time when he was surrounded by rumors about him, she came to a realization.

'Most likely Trevor Philips.'

That senior, for some reason, was targeting Astron. Even up to this point, she had still yet to find any reason for him to be targeted, but something inside her was telling her that he most likely knew about it.

'Still. I am pretty sure he won't lose. Well, not really. He will probably lose, but it won't be humiliating, at least.'

From all of their interactions, Irina noticed one thing.

'Since he always pays things back.'

No matter what, Astron always got back to the people who wronged him.

At that moment, just as she was lost in her thoughts, the announcer's voice boomed through the amphitheater.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the next duel is between Liam Wayne and Astron Natusalune."

RING!

"Are both contestants ready?"

With his question, two small holograms appeared right before the two students. Both of them pressed the tick button, and the moment they did, a countdown started.

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"Let the duel begin!"

As the countdown reached zero, the amphitheater fell silent, the anticipation in the air palpable. Liam and Astron faced each other, the intensity of the moment reflected in their stances.

'Liam Wayne.'

Eleanor recited the name of the student holding the sword.

'Pathetic.'

Regardless of whether someone had proposed him a deal or not. The fact that she was seeing an utter display of someone abusing their power and showing a disgraceful act alone was enough to make her put this student at the bottom of the list.

People like him tend to become obstacles or dogs for demons.

Still, at the end of the day, things were happening within the frame of rules, and she couldn't do anything.

Liam's sword gleamed under the lights; his posture looked relaxed but ready. He was an agility type with a wind attribute, which meant he could move swiftly and strike with the precision of a gale.

Astron, using the same strategy from his previous duel, decided to start with his bow once again.

He seemed to know that Liam would be faster and more skilled than Wilfred, but he also must have understood that he needed to utilize his strengths thoroughly.

The duel began with a blur of motion. Liam, using his wind attribute, dashed forward with incredible speed. The air around him seemed to ripple as he closed the distance, his sword poised to strike.

SWOOSH!

Astron, anticipating the swift approach, fired an arrow directly at Liam. The arrow, enhanced with wind psions for speed and precision, cut through the air toward its target.

"You're going to have to do better than that," Liam taunted, his voice calm and confident. "But, a dog orphan like you wouldn't be able to do anything, most likely."

Yet, there was a beaming sinisterness in his voice. Deep inside, it was evident that he was bearing a personal grudge against Astron.

"...."

Yet he didn't get any answer.

Astron's expression didn't change, paralleling his own character.

He nocked another arrow, this time aiming for Liam's legs to disrupt his movement. The arrow flew with a whistle, but Liam was already in motion.

CLANG!

Liam deflected the arrow with a swift slash of his sword, the force of the deflection sending the arrow spinning harmlessly away. He then surged forward, closing the distance between them in a heartbeat.

Seemingly enough, Astron barely had time to react as Liam's blade came down in a lightning-fast strike. He managed to parry with his dagger, but the force of the blow sent him skidding backward.

"What?"

The crowd gasped, the sheer speed and power of Liam's attack impressing even the most skeptical observers. Of course, the reason why it felt impressive was due to the difference between the stats of the two students.

It was evident that Astron didn't have enough physical attributes to compete with Liam face-to-face.

Liam's eyes gleamed with a mixture of satisfaction and malice as he watched Astron struggle to regain his footing.

He relished the idea of humiliating Astron in front of the crowd, feeding off the audience's reaction to his display of power.

'This will teach you, you arrogant orphan,' Liam thought, his grip tightening on his sword.

The memory of their past interactions fueled his determination to make Astron suffer.

Liam couldn't forget the way Astron had always carried himself despite his lower status and lack of connections.

The way he talked back to everyone regarding his status. He never seemed bothered by everyone, as if he was completely uninterested.

He insulted and acted edgy and rude. Contrary to himself, who needed to carry on with everything he was doing so that his family wouldn't be targeted, he could act freely.

And that was utterly infuriating. Adding the humiliation he felt when he was in the classroom at that time.

He couldn't help but think that Astron's resilience was an affront to the natural order.

SWOOSH! He dashed forward again, his wind attribute making his movements almost ethereal. His sword lashed out with deadly grace; each strike intended not just to defeat but to belittle Astron.

"You're nothing," Liam sneered, his voice dripping with contempt. "You think you can stand on the same stage as me? Pathetic."

CLANG! CLANG!

Astron parried the blows with his dagger, but it was 'evident' that he could feel the strain. Liam's attacks were relentless, each one heavier and faster than the last.

The difference in their physical attributes was glaringly evident, and Astron seemed to know that he had to find another way to turn the tide.

'Let's see what you are going to do.'

For the many observers, the fight looked in the favor of Liam. Of course, that was the logical conclusion that they could reach with the information they had been presented with.

But that wasn't the case for Irina and some others who knew him.

'Show me something good.'

At that split second, Astron's eyes gleamed. It was abrupt, something that wouldn't be seen easily. Irina knew what it meant.

'Here it comes.'

Liam's muscles tensed as he channeled his mana into his sword and his shoulder joints.

'Wind's grace.'

He activated a wind spell. Though the students mostly learned about the magic after the first semester, some of them went ahead and learned it beforehand. Some of them even learned it before coming to the academy.

And Liam was the latter.

In an instant, wind psions covered his body. It was a spell that acted like a buff. Normally, these types of spells were rare to see with a warrior, but it suited Liam's style since he was a speed type.

'Path of Sword. Double Slash.'

He needed to make himself somewhat exceptional since his traits were common. The fact that he was admitted to the Arcadia Hunter Academy while having the [Swordsman] trait, one of the most common ones, showed that he excelled in something else.

And it was the utilization of spells.

SWOOSH! Liam's first strike came down with blinding speed. Astron's instincts took over. He coated his body with his mana, a soft white energy enveloping him. It wasn't as dramatic as Liam's wind-enhanced form, but it provided him with the edge he needed.

CLANG!

Astron crossed his daggers in an X-shape, intercepting Liam's blade just in time. The force of the blow was immense, and despite his reinforced stance, Astron was pushed back, his feet skidding on the ground. He gritted his teeth, the strain evident on his face.

'He's stronger than I thought. That kid Liam is not bad, either. Seemingly enough, he was able to master the Dual Slash.'

Eleanor thought.

For a trained eye like Eleanor, even before the second slash came, she could see the trails of mana across the atmosphere and infer the spell. She was not named 'Invoker' for no reason after all.

'Still, those eyes. Did they read?' Yet, Eleanor trusted her instincts. Astron's eyes somehow looked calm and focused. I did not panic at all.

'Come on.' On the other side of the arena, Sylvie, who was watching the fight, cheered. She came here after using her break time.

But before Astron could recover, Liam's second strike was already in motion.

It was as if a silhouette of Liam, a ghostly clone, was following the same path, mirroring his movements with uncanny precision.

SWOOSH!

The crowd gasped, recognizing the advanced skill [Double Slash]. It was an impressive feat, especially for someone with the common [Swordsman] trait. The skill allowed Liam to execute a rapid follow-up strike, and in this case, the target was not a vital area but Astron's right leg.



'He's toying with him,' Irina realized, anger flashing in her eyes. 'He wants to drag this out.'

The logical conclusion for most observers was that Astron wouldn't be able to avoid or block this second, unexpected strike, given his disrupted posture. Liam's intention was clear: to incapacitate, not to kill and end the fight.

But.....

CLANK! "What?"

"He blocked it?"

Astron was ready.

With a swift, fluid motion, he adjusted his stance. His eyes seemed to predict the path of Liam's blade as if he had foreseen it all along.

Astron deflected the second strike, his dagger catching Liam's blade at the perfect angle. The force of the impact reverberated through his arm, but he held his ground, his white energy flaring with the effort.

The crowd erupted in surprised murmurs, their previous expectations shattered. They had anticipated Astron's defeat, but his unexpected deflection left them in surprise.

Liam's eyes widened in shock and anger. He had been so certain of his success, his overconfidence blinding him to the possibility that Astron could counter his advanced skill.

"You're full of surprises, aren't you? Like a cockroach." Liam spat, his voice tinged with anger. "Still, you won't be able to defend it next time."

Astron didn't respond to Liam's words.

Instead, he raised his hand.

"I surrender."

After all, he had shown enough to receive what he wanted.

'Any more than that is pointless.'

Chapter 394 91.2 - Duels [2]

The amphitheater erupted in surprise and confusion as Astron's calm declaration echoed through the arena.

"I surrender."

The audience had been on the edge of their seats, expecting the duel to continue, especially after Astron's impressive deflection of Liam's advanced skill. Whispers and murmurs filled the air as the spectators tried to make sense of what had just happened.

"What? He surrendered?"

"Why would he give up now?"

"He was doing so well. I thought he had a chance!"

Liam stood frozen, his expression a mix of disbelief and anger. He had expected a drawn-out fight, but Astron's sudden surrender had caught him completely off guard. His blade wavered, the tension in his stance dissipating as he lowered his weapon.

In the stands, the more experienced observers nodded in understanding, recognizing the strategic brilliance of Astron's decision. Among them, Eleanor stood with her lips curved into a small, approving smile.

'Not bad.' She thought.

"He's smart," she murmured to herself. "He knew exactly when to bow out."

But that alone wasn't enough to put a smile on her face. There were several students with such qualities.

What made him stand out at that moment was...

'He particularly read Liam Wayne's intentions.'

There was a reason why he was able to block the second slash this perfectly, even while he was still at a disadvantage in a direct physical confrontation.

'From the start, those responses can not be with reflexes alone. He understood his opponent's feelings. What Liam did wasn't something that the majority would do. If the past me were in his shoes, I would definitely defend myself from getting knocked down, yet he risked it.'

And the fact that he realized Liam was targeting him for petty revenge and trying to humiliate him, and he surrendered to not give him what he wanted.

'This kid....He really resembles her.'

The same decisiveness and the shrewdness.

Something inside her warned Eleanor. She shouldn't make the same mistake again.

'Right.' With that thought, she turned back, walking back to her office. After all, she would be grading a lot of students in the afternoon.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Wow....That was cool."

While Eleanor was leaving the arena, a couple of people were watching the event.

"Really? I am glad you liked it."

A woman with a smile stood there, looking at her daughter. They were conversing normally, yet many people were paying attention to them.

The reason? Probably was their distinct blue hair and hazel eyes. Adding the fact that the two looked really beautiful, like a model, it was evident that they would draw attention.

But, aside from that, the biggest reason was their names.

Particularly their family name.

"But, mother. Why did he surrender just now?"

The girl asked, her eyes twinkling. She looked curious, ready to absorb any knowledge.

The woman knelt to be at eye level with her daughter, her expression gentle and thoughtful. "He surrendered because it was the smartest thing to do in that situation," she began, her voice calm and measured.

"That student knew that continuing the fight wouldn't benefit him. He had already demonstrated his skills and resilience by holding his ground against a much higher-ranked opponent."

The girl tilted her head, her brows furrowed in concentration. "But he was doing well. Why not keep fighting?"

"Because, sometimes, knowing when to stop is just as important as knowing when to fight," the mother explained. "Astron showed everyone that he could stand his ground, and by surrendering when he did, he avoided unnecessary injury or a humiliating defeat. It's a sign of maturity and intelligence to recognize when you've achieved your goal and to step back."

The girl nodded slowly, taking in her mother's words. "So, it wasn't about winning the duel, but showing he was strong?"

"Exactly," the mother replied, her smile widening. "In this world, no one can always guarantee that they can win. There are certain moments when one's life will be in danger. In those times, it is

always important to realize that and save their life. That student had what it takes to think strategically, which is just as important as being able to fight."

The girl's eyes sparkled with understanding. "I get it now. He's really smart."

The mother nodded. "Yes, he is. And you, my dear, should remember this lesson. Strength is not just about power; it's also about wisdom and knowing when to use it."

"Un..." She said that the girl hugged her mother and looked at the student departing from the Arena. "But, mother. It feels like I had seen him before."

"Hmm?"

But her words awoke a reaction from her mother. The woman's eyes were narrowed, looking at the student.

"You had seen him? Why do you think so?"

"....Just....I don't know. I just feel like it."

Normally, any mother would naturally brush such words off. After all, it was quite possible and common for a child to mistake someone they had seen. Some even mistook their own parents.

But.

That wasn't the case for Jane Hartley.

The kid who had the lineage of the Hartleys. The blood flowing through her veins was filled with countless powers, and one of the most important ones was intuition.

Jane, of course, didn't remember everyone she encountered. Contrary to that, the fact that she remembered someone unfamiliar meant that the encounter wasn't something normal. It was evident that it left a print in Jane's consciousness. Therefore, Kaya's eyes were narrowed. The student had already left the arena and returned to the changing room. She replayed the fight to see any possible clues.

'Dagger and bow. There wasn't anything else interesting either.....Maybe that mana?'

She pondered a bit, trying to find a connection. Yet, she failed.

Determined to get more information, Kaya took out her phone and quickly sent a message to her assistant. "Do a quick check on the student Astron Natusalune, Rank 1729. I need details."

As she sent the message, a notice came from the announcer, drawing the crowd's attention.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the next duel will feature Ethan Hartley, ranked 970, versus Samuel Greaves, ranked 740."

Kaya's expression softened slightly, a hint of pride appearing. "Jane, look. Your cousin Ethan is up next."

Jane's eyes lit up with excitement. "Big brother Ethan is going to fight? Finally! I can't wait to see him!"

Kaya and Jane found their seats, ready to watch the duel.

Ethan Hartley, Kaya's nephew and Jane's cousin, stepped into the arena with his characteristic confidence. The crowd murmured in anticipation, recognizing the Hartley name and expecting a display of skill.

After all, Ethan carried the name Hartley, and he was undoubtedly the biggest rising star of the year.

With his new awakening, low entrance score, suddenly increasing strength as well as his lineage....

The characteristic blue hair of the Hartley Family and his incredibly handsome looks grasped the attention of the onlookers in an instant.

After all, the reason why this arena was filled with this many people was simply because of the name Ethan.

Leaning on his spear, Ethan flashed a smile to the audience. As he scanned the crowd, he saw Kaya and Jane and waved his hand.

On the side stood opposite Samuel Greaves, a formidable opponent ranked higher. He had a bulky body, oozing strength.

His eyes were sharp brown, focused on his opponent. The fact that he was appointed by the famous Ethan Hartley was something that he was happy about.

After all, he now had the chance to show off his talent to a huge audience.

'This is a chance.'

He thought.

'And I won't waste it.'

With that thought, he grabbed his huge weapon.

A halberd.

Not a popular weapon, but if utilized correctly....It had a reputation as one of the most dangerous weapons.

The arena buzzed with energy as the two combatants prepared for the duel.

The announcer's voice boomed through the arena. "Ladies and gentlemen, the next duel is between Ethan Hartley, ranked 970, and Samuel Greaves, ranked 740. Are both contestants ready?"

Both Ethan and Samuel nodded, their expressions focused. The tension in the arena was palpable as the countdown began.

2

1

"Begin!"

The moment the duel started, Samuel charged forward, his halberd swinging with immense power.

Earthen Charge.

It was a skill that was pretty common among Earth users. Most of them were reliant on their strength, and they needed movement skills to cover for their lack of mobility.

The ground beneath him seemed to tremble as he infused his attacks with earth psions. The sheer force of his strikes aimed to overwhelm Ethan from the start.

CRACKLE! Ethan, however, was unfazed. His spear crackled with lightning psions, the energy dancing along the weapon's length. With a swift, graceful movement, he sidestepped Samuel's initial assault, the halberd striking the ground where he had just been standing.

SWOOSH!

Ethan countered with a quick thrust of his spear, aiming for Samuel's midsection. The lightning-enhanced attack was fast, but Samuel's earth-enhanced body allowed him to bring his halberd up in time to block the blow and face it head-on.

CLANG!

The impact sent sparks flying, and the crowd erupted in cheers. The duel was off to an intense start, with both combatants showcasing their skills and attributes.

"Wow."



The audience gasped. The previous duel was good. However, this one was on a different level.

It had been just a second, yet the audience felt the chills.

SWOOSH! Samuel pressed the attack, his halberd swinging in wide arcs. Each strike was powerful, intended to keep Ethan on the defensive.

Since Halberd was also a long weapon, the spear's long length wasn't particularly effective.

「Ground Cleave.」 The ground beneath them seemed to shift with each of Samuel's movements, a testament to his mastery of the earth's attributes.

「Thunder Step.」 Ethan, however, moved with the fluidity of lightning. His spear danced in his hands, deflecting Samuel's powerful blows with precision. He waited for the right moment, his eyes keenly observing Samuel's patterns.

'He's strong,' Ethan thought, a smile playing on his lips. 'But, as expected.....This level is not enough.' A thought process that was only available to the main character of the world. The one blessed by the heavens.

The fact that he started as a ranker of 2239 and then, in one semester, had the thoughts of easily overpowering a rank 700 student.

"Hey."

Suddenly, he called his opponent.

"Let's get serious now."

Different from others, he wanted an honorable fight.

"..."

Samule was flabbergasted. After all, this situation didn't make any sense. Yet, somehow he smiled.

"I see." He nodded and channeled his mana into his body.

"I hope you can keep it up."

「Knighthood of Mother Earth. Armature of the Land.」

As he muttered those words, his body changed, being covered by the earthen psions.

His muscles bulged, and veins popped over his body.

"Don't worry."

Ethan also smiled, seeing his opponent taking him seriously.

Chapter 395 91.3 - Duels [2]

In the world of magic, there are infinitely many types of usages of mana. Some people used it to attack from the range, while some others used it to coat themselves.

Attributes, compatibility, strategic thinking. All of those played a part in what a certain someone would be able to use.

From the start, the status window was a very crucial aspect of society, yet no one knew where it came from.

Still, the fact that one would get all their powers from there alone was an undeniable fact. This applied to Ethan, who was the rising star and his enemy.

At the end of the day, there was only one thing one could do.

Understanding the talent that was assigned to them and then improving it to its maximum.

A special type of talent was revealed to Samuel. When he was a child, he was weak. Somehow, it was really hard for him to gain weight and get stronger physically.

Though he didn't completely hate it, he didn't particularly like it either since there were many times when strength was needed, and he was lacking.

Yet, the moment he got his trait, [Mother Earth's Knight], things changed.

There, he was able to witness how important that 'status window' was and how much of a part it took in the lives of people.

Since he turned into a bulky tank from a slim kid, but was it easy?

No.

Since he constantly trained until his body was full of sweat all the time, he sometimes ate more than eight meals a day. To be able to afford those meals, he even worked part-time jobs when he was young.

Since his family wasn't particularly well off compared to other students at Arcadia Hunter Academy, he knew he needed to prove himself.

Attaining the rank of 740 was really good for someone like him, but he still wanted to do more since he couldn't afford to waste this opportunity.

He needed to get better and get stronger so that he could at least be someone that his family was proud of.

"YOU CAN DO IT!"

Looking at the two people watching him like that, he couldn't help but smile. His father was still at work, so he was not here. But his mother and his younger sister were here, at least.

'That kid....' He thought.

'She shouldn't experience the same.'

Shaking his head, he focused on his opponent.

'Ethan Hartley....This won't be easy.'

Of course, he wanted to use every bit of this opportunity. But that didn't mean he was going to play dirty or something.

Since it would go against his values, rather than winning while losing his own values, he would lose here but keep himself pure.

"I hope you can keep it up."

But still, he wanted to look cool in front of his family's eyes. This much selfishness must be allowed, right?

「Knighthood of Mother Earth. Armature of the Land.」

It was a skill derived from his trait. A skill that he was not particularly hiding but also didn't find the chance to display either.

Since this skill was something he had gotten when he advanced his trait to its third stage, he knew it was an outstanding achievement. The reason?

His trait was unique, not something easily seen. Thus, advancing it was a lot harder as well, with not much previous knowledge known about it.

Yet, at this age, he still advanced to stage three.

Samuel's body transformed as he channeled his mana, earthen psions enveloping him in protective armor. His muscles bulged, veins popping under the strain of the powerful magic. The ground beneath his feet seemed to tremble in response to the immense energy he was drawing from it.

"Don't worry."

But before his thoughts could wander any longer, he heard his opponent's voice coming from the other side.

Ethan, witnessing this transformation, responded with a smile. He relished the challenge and welcomed the opportunity to prove his strength.

"Let's see if you can handle this," Ethan declared, his voice echoing through the amphitheater.

Raising his spear high, Ethan called upon his own elemental power.

RUMBLE! Thunder rumbled in the sky, dark clouds forming overhead as if answering his call. Lightning crackled and danced around him, the energy building to a crescendo.

「Spear of Hartley. Exotic Form. Thunder God's Wrath.」

The sky seemed to split open as a massive bolt of lightning struck Ethan's spear, infusing it with an intense, crackling energy. The ground beneath him was charred from the sheer power, and Ethan stood amidst the electric storm, thunderstrikes flowing through his body.

The audience gasped in awe at the sight, their eyes wide with anticipation. The arena was alive with energy, and both combatants were now fully empowered and ready to clash with their full might.

At this point, the duel suddenly turned into something nostalgic. People who were watching it thought, 'It feels like a Knights' Duel.'

This custom had been long forgotten since the concept of knights had been abolished, and the kingdoms had been overthrown in the past.

Still, it was a pleasant sight to see since something rare, such as Knight's Duel, was happening before their eyes.

"Here I come, then!"

SWOOSH! Samuel took the initiative, charging forward with his enhanced strength. His halberd swung in a powerful arc, aimed to cleave through Ethan's defenses. The ground trembled with each step he took, his earthen powers amplifying his every move.

Ethan met the charge head-on, his spear glowing with the energy of the storm. The two weapons clashed with a deafening boom, sending shockwaves through the arena. Sparks flew as lightning met Earth, the sheer force of the collision sending ripples through the air.

CLANG! BOOM!

Ethan parried Samuel's halberd, the lightning-infused spear deflecting the massive weapon with precision.

He countered with a quick thrust, aiming to penetrate Samuel's earthen armor.

The lightning strike was met with resistance, the earthen powers hardening Samuel's defenses to withstand the electrifying assault.

'This speed!' But Ethan was relentless. He spun his spear with incredible speed, the lightning crackling along its length. Each strike was precise, aimed at finding the weak points in Samuel's armor.

It was as if a tidal wave of thunder was enveloping him. From all sides, he was getting overwhelmed.

But still.

Samuel was equally determined.

He countered with powerful swings of his halberd.

"Earth. Come under me!"

His movements were calculated, using his earth attribute to absorb the impact and retaliate with devastating force.

The crowd was on the edge of their seats, mesmerized by the intensity of the duel.

For the first time after the duels had started, they were seeing such intense duels. The reputation of Ethan Hartley seemed more solid now.

The air was thick with tension, the clashing of their weapons creating a symphony of power and skill.

"You are wide open!"

**SWOOSH! CRACKLE!**

Ethan saw an opening and took it. He launched himself into the air, using his lightning attribute to propel himself higher.

As he descended, he channeled the full power of the storm into his spear, aiming for a decisive strike.

**CRACKLE! BOOM!**

The spear came down with a thunderous roar, a massive bolt of lightning accompanying the attack.

Samuel braced himself, his halberd raised to meet the incoming blow. The impact was monumental, the ground beneath them shattering from the sheer force.

For a moment, it seemed as if the arena itself was about to give way. The audience held their breath, waiting to see the outcome of the clash.

When the dust settled, both combatants were still standing, though clearly battered. Samuel's earthen armor had cracks running through it, and his breathing was labored.

Ethan's spear still crackled with residual lightning; his eyes locked onto Samuel with a smile on his mouth.

He looked like he was genuinely enjoying the fight.

"You're tough," Samuel admitted, his voice strained but respectful. "But I'm not done yet."

Ethan nodded, a smile playing on his lips. "That is pretty nice." His words contained respect. Ethan was like that, after all. "But, if you push yourself too hard, it won't end well for you. So, I am going to end this now."

His eyes were somehow gentle, and his expression said he knew everything.

"..."

Samuel was speechless. The fact that his internal injuries were seen through this well. He thought he was hiding it well, but it seemed his opponent saw it clearly.

"Try to block this much as you can."

Ethan raised his spear high, the lightning around him intensifying as he called upon the storm once more. The sky above darkened further, the clouds swirling as if responding to his will. Thunder rumbled, and the energy in the air was palpable.

「Spear of Hartley. Call of the Storm.」

With a flash of lightning, Ethan surged forward at incredible speed. The arena seemed to blur as he closed the distance between him and Samuel in an instant. His spear crackled with thunderous energy, the air around it shimmering with power.

Samuel braced himself, his halberd held firmly. He knew this was going to be a decisive moment. His earthen psions flared, reinforcing his defenses as he prepared to meet Ethan's attack head-on.

CRACKLE! BOOM!



Ethan's lightning-infused spear collided with Samuel's halberd, the impact sending shockwaves through the arena. The ground beneath them shattered from the force, debris flying in all directions. The audience gasped, the sheer power of the clash leaving them in awe.

"COME!"

「Knighthood of Mother Earth. Shield of the Land」

Samuel invoked his skill; his body was enveloped in a protective barrier of earth psions. The energy of the land surged through him, reinforcing his strength and resilience.

The halberd, reinforced by the earth's power, held firm against Ethan's spear. The lightning crackled fiercely, but Samuel's shield absorbed much of the impact, the earthen barrier glowing with an intense light.

Ethan pressed forward, his spear crackling with relentless energy.

The lightning surged through his body, enhancing his speed and power. His strikes were precise, each one aimed at breaking through Samuel's defenses.

"You won't break me!" Samuel roared, his voice filled with determination.

He countered with powerful swings of his halberd, the earth psions amplifying his attacks. The ground trembled with each strike, the force reverberating through the arena.

Ethan, undeterred, continued his assault. His spear danced with lightning, each strike faster and more powerful than the last. He moved with the fluidity of the storm, and his every motion was a testament to his mastery of the spear and his attributes.

The audience watched with rapt attention, and the intensity of the duel left them breathless. Each clash of weapons sent sparks flying, the sheer power of the combatants on full display.

Ethan saw his opportunity. With a burst of speed, he feinted to the left, drawing Samuel's attention. Then, with a swift, fluid motion, he redirected his strike to the right, aiming for the weak point in Samuel's armor.

THUD!

The spear struck true, piercing through the weakened barrier. Samuel staggered, his defenses finally giving way. The lightning surged through him, the energy overwhelming his earthen shield.

"Argh!" Samuel grunted in pain, his body trembling from the impact. He struggled to stay on his feet, his halberd falling to the ground.

Ethan stepped back, his spear still crackling with residual lightning. He looked at Samuel with respect, his expression calm but determined.

"This is the end," Ethan declared, his voice steady. "Your body won't be able to withstand it any longer."

Samuel, breathing heavily, nodded. He knew he had given his all, but Ethan's strength and skill were undeniable.

Even now, his body was protesting against him. He was holding the blood rising to his throat with all of his remaining will not to show a moment of weakness.

"Yes," Samuel said, his voice filled with respect for his opponent.

"You did well."

The crowd erupted into applause, the arena filled with cheers and admiration for the display of skill and determination. Ethan stood tall, his spear still crackling with the remnants of the storm, his expression one of calm triumph.

In the stands, Kaya and Jane watched with pride, their hearts swelling with admiration for Ethan's performance.

"Brother Ethan is too cool...."

#### Chapter 396 91.4 - Duels [2]

CLAP! CLAP! CLAP! The crowd erupted into applause, the arena filled with cheers and admiration for the display of skill and determination. Ethan stood tall, his spear still crackling with the remnants of the storm, his expression one of calm triumph.

In the stands, Kaya and Jane watched with pride, their hearts swelling with admiration for Ethan's performance. "Brother Ethan is too cool..." Jane whispered, her eyes wide with awe.

"Indeed he is," Kaya agreed, her voice filled with rare warmth. It was rare to witness such a fight, even in her experienced life.

Honor, pride, dignity....

These types of values had been far long lost in the Hunter Society where everything became about money and selfishness.

Seeing these youngsters who still had those values, one of them being her nephew....

She couldn't help but smile, knowing how much effort and dedication Ethan had put into his training.

Around them, people were letting out satisfied exclamations.

"That was incredible!"

"I've never seen such control over lightning before. Ethan Hartley is truly a prodigy."

"The way he moved, it was like watching a storm in human form."

The judges and scouts in the audience were equally impressed. They exchanged glances, nodding in approval of Ethan's exceptional display of talent.

"He's remarkable," one scout murmured. "If only he didn't have the Hartley name attached to him. It's unfortunate that we can't touch that talent."

Another judge nodded in agreement. "The Hartleys are untouchable. But if we could find someone with his skills without the prestigious surname, it would be a dream come true."

As the applause continued, Ethan and Samuel left the arena, both looking weary but satisfied with their performance. They made their way toward the backstage area, where they could catch their breath and reflect on the duel.

Samuel had already been treated by the healing department. His inner injuries were no longer present, and he was finally able to relax.

However, his expression wasn't that good. After all, he had lost. Even though he put in his all, he was surpassed.

It left a bitter taste in his mouth.

The fact that all of his efforts were stamped upon by another person....A person of a lower rank is on top of that.

He couldn't help but feel a pang of jealousy.

'Maybe I had this kind of talent....'

He couldn't help but think.

Ethan glanced at Samuel, a genuine smile on his face. "You fought well, Samuel. You should be proud of yourself."

Samuel, still catching his breath, managed to nod and express a slight smile. "Thanks. You were incredible out there. I gave it my all, but you're on a different level."

Ethan shook his head modestly. "We both have our strengths. You showed a lot of heart out there. Keep pushing yourself, and you'll reach new heights."

'Easy to say as a winner, isn't it?' A pang of resentment, strangely uncharacteristic of him. Somehow, he didn't notice, but his feelings were slowly swinging to a darker side.

Samuel's eyes shone with determination as well as with a smile. "I will. I'll keep training hard...." But then, he stopped abruptly, as if to want to say something.

'I want to know. How did he know?'

Ethan noticed the hesitation and raised an eyebrow. "What is it, Samuel?"

Samuel took a deep breath, then asked, "How did you know?"

Ethan looked confused. "Know what?"

"About my internal injuries," Samuel clarified. "You don't strike me as someone who's just good at observing things like that."

Ethan beamed a smile, understanding what Samuel meant. "Ah, that. It's because I've experienced them firsthand."

Samuel's eyes widened in surprise. "You've experienced them?"

Ethan laughed, a bit embarrassed. "Talking about things like these is a bit embarrassing, but yes. When I was younger, I pushed myself too hard during training and ended up with some pretty serious internal injuries. It took me a while to recover, and during that time, I learned a lot about the signs and symptoms. At that time....Well, I wasn't strong like this."

Samuel listened intently, his respect for Ethan growing even more. Suddenly, he remembered something he had read about Ethan. He took everyone seriously, regardless of their rank. Thus, he studied Ethan before the duel. For him, that was the basic respect that needed to be shown to his opponents and fellow academy students.

While he was researching Ethan, he came across some articles written about him.

Hartley's Dark Horse.

Hartley's Scapegoat.

Many different names were given to him purely because he was non-awakened. At that time, he brushed it off since they were not logical. He assumed that the news was made up by the enemy families.

But, sometimes, exchanging blows with a man told more than mere words, and Samuel experienced it firsthand.

'What was I even doing? I even felt a bit jealous.'

The fact that he even felt such emotions to such a good guy....It made him feel guilty about his own thoughts. He felt disgusted by himself.

"I thought your talent was purely because of your Hartley lineage. But hearing this, I realize there's so much more to it."

A blush spread across Ethan's cheeks. "I think you're overreacting a bit. I just did what anyone would do."

His expressions were pure, and his smile was genuine. "Still....Thanks. That means a lot."

At that moment, two voices echoed through the backstage area.

"Brother!" one called.

"Big Brother Ethan!" the other cried.

Samuel's sister, Sonya, and Jane, Ethan's niece, rushed toward them. Samuel's sister had a look of relief and admiration on her face while Jane's eyes sparkled with excitement.

Ethan turned to the two girls, his smile widening. "Hey there, you two! Enjoy the duel?" Though he didn't know the other girl, he still didn't want things to be awkward.

After all, Samuel and he were just opponents, not enemies. There was no reason to keep things antagonistic.

Jane nodded vigorously. "You were amazing, Big Brother Ethan! I knew you would win!"

Samuel's sister looked into her brother's eyes. "You were incredible, too, brother. You did well."

"I see...."

Seeing their children talking, the two adults on the corner smiled. Samuel's mother, Abigail, and Kaya stood side by side.

Though Abigail was in the presence of a renowned Hunter like Kaya, she didn't feel intimidated at all. Right now, Kaya was not in her Hunter mode but rather in her parenting mode.

There was a direct distinction between her demeanor and the way she carried herself.

"You raised him well," Kaya said, breaking the silence.

Abigail nodded a proud smile on her face. "He's my son, yeah. But it wasn't just me. It's a family effort. And you've raised such a good kid like Ethan. It's rare to find such kids these days."

Kaya's gaze softened as she watched Ethan and Samuel interact with Jane and Sonya. "Thank you. Ethan has worked hard to get where he is. He's always been determined to do his best, and it's heartening to see his efforts pay off."

Abigail's eyes followed Kaya's line of sight to Samuel, who was now laughing with Jane and Sonya. "Samuel has always been determined too. Sometimes, I worry he pushes himself too hard, but he's got a good heart."

Kaya turned back to Abigail, a thoughtful expression on her face. "You know, if your son ever wants to, he can apply to work under the Hartleys in the future. We always welcome talent and dedication."

Abigail's eyes widened slightly in surprise and gratitude. "Really? That's an incredible offer. Thank you."

Kaya reached into her pocket and pulled out a sleek card, handing it to Abigail. "Here's my card. If Samuel ever decides he wants to explore that option, just reach out. We'd be happy to have someone with his drive and potential."

Abigail took the card with a grateful expression. It meant a lot since someone like Hartley reached them.

It was an unbelievable opportunity.

"Thank you, Miss Kaya. This means a lot. I'll make sure he knows about this opportunity."

Kaya nodded, her expression warm. "I believe in fostering the next generation. Kids like Ethan and Samuel are the future, and if we adults don't give them the chance they need, how can they grow up?"

"You are right."

Just as they were talking, Kaya's senses picked up something. It was unnatural for her senses to be activated randomly. She slightly tilted her head to the side, and from the corner of her eye, she saw someone leaving. It was the student she had wanted to investigate beforehand.

'Astron Natusalune, was it? Hadn't it been a while since his duel ended?' She narrowed her eyes since he was supposed to have already left the changing room, not stayed here.

'Maybe he watched Ethan's fight? Plausible. He wasn't injured too much for him to require resting.' At that moment, as if noticing her gaze, he turned to look at her. His expression was blank, his eyes empty. But for a moment, it felt as if he was looking at the kids behind her. After that, without anything else, he just left.



Kaya's eyes followed Astron as he departed. "Interesting," she murmured to herself. She made a mental note to follow up on the investigation about Astron Natusalune.

His presence here, lingering longer than expected, intrigued her. There was something about him that warranted closer attention.

Aside from Jane, Ethan didn't even notice him leaving.

That alone made things more weird.

'To be able to naturally erase his presence this well. He may not be a talent at direct confrontation, but his talent is still pretty rare.' She thought but then dismissed it as a corner note in her mind. She didn't need to focus on this matter right now since she didn't come here as a Hunter but as a parent.

## Chapter 397 91.5 - Duels [2]

Sometimes, we think about life. It is the basic human thought process. Even though we are engulfed in this river called life, there are times when it flows at a slightly slower pace, leaving us enough room to think about ourselves.

But is it beneficial?

One might ask that, but the answer to this mostly depends on the person.

Since some people would rather be occupied with something else than think, sometimes, thinking about things or remembering them is more hurtful than anything else.

After my fight with Liam and surrendering, the atmosphere in the amphitheater was charged with mixed emotions. Liam's face contorted with fury when I uttered the words, "I surrender."

It was clear he had hoped to drag the duel out, to inflict more humiliation upon me. His eyes bore into mine, filled with contempt.

"You're nothing but trash, Astron," he spat, his voice dripping with disdain. "You can't even man up and stand on your own."

I remained silent, my expression unchanging. There was no point in responding to his taunts. I had achieved what I needed. Any further conflict was unnecessary and would only serve to satisfy his ego.

Liam glared at me for a moment longer, then turned on his heel and stormed out of the arena, muttering insults under his breath. The crowd's murmurs filled the air, but I paid them no mind.

I had my own reasons for surrendering, reasons that were far more important than their opinions.

With Liam gone, I stayed behind, my eyes fixed on the arena. I wanted to see Ethan's duel and witness his prowess firsthand.

Since he was the main character of this world, it was important to see his progress. After all, he will be a crucial point against the threats in the future.

His progress is important.

The amphitheater buzzed with anticipation as Ethan Hartley stepped into the arena, his spear gleaming under the lights.

His opponent, Samuel, stood across from him, determination etched into his features. He was one of the characters that were appointed as the duel fighter in the game. According to the choice of the player, the rewards would change.

Samuel was one of the hardest enemies that players would face.

The duel began, and it was immediately clear why Ethan was so highly regarded. His movements were fluid and precise, and his control over lightning was impressive. Each strike of his spear crackled with energy, a storm in human form.

Despite Samuel's best efforts, Ethan dominated the duel with a combination of skill and raw power.

The crowd erupted into applause, their admiration for Ethan evident. I watched closely, analyzing his technique and strategies. He was undoubtedly a prodigy, and his performance only solidified that reputation.

In the stands, I noticed Kaya and Jane watching Ethan with pride. Kaya's eyes had been directed at me at some point in my duel. I was able to sense it.

It seemed she had noticed my presence and was intrigued by my actions. Though the reason was mostly related to the Hartley family's strong instincts, it was fine for me.

Since there wasn't any distinction that she could identify me.

As Ethan and Samuel left the arena, I also followed them.

There was a clear reason for me to do that.

'Demonic Energy.'

The sinister energy was spread through the locker rooms.

'They are finally moving.'

The fact that the demonic humans were moving alone made it clear. The attack on the final exams was going to happen.

'They are trying to spread demonic seeds.'

The reason why demons are hated this much is mostly because of a special attribute that they possess, which other races rarely do.

Corrosion.

This ability may seem innocent at first. But, when it comes to the corrosion of mind, soul, and thoughts, it becomes way more dangerous than it has ever been.

The moment one's own mind corrodes, one becomes a slave to one's emotions; at that moment, one goes berserk and becomes dangerous.

A desperate father who is trying his best to feed his family...Once he loses himself to despair or anger, that family can no longer be happy.

Domestic violence.

This is the same for the young woman who looks at her peers, seeing their beauty and competing with them.

The standards of life can not be met with her efforts, making her feel trapped. The reality may not be like that, but as long as that is what she feels, the possibility of an emotional stir appears.

And from now on, that person will no longer become themselves, losing their own identity.

That is the power of demons, the way they work.

In the duel time, with the feelings of joy, superiority, and pride on the one hand while the feelings of despair, inferiority, envy, sadness, and disappointment on the other hand, the perfect opportunity for demons to work appears.

Even if it was subtle, I was able to confirm the demonic energy. Though that made me feel suffocated and tense a little, it was not completely unbearable.

While looking for the traces in the locker rooms, I also somehow observed the interactions between them and their families.

There was a warmth and camaraderie that was almost foreign to me. At least, at this point, it became foreign.

However, somehow, seeing Ethan and Jane, or Samuel and his sister, made me remember the past again.

It was a bitter feeling, once again making my heart cold. Since the moment I remembered Estelle, it always ended in me remembering her death.

Those claws.

'They will haunt me until the end, won't they?'

A question that didn't contain any emotions.

In any case, since I didn't belong to this place, there was no need for me to stand here and waste any more time.

I need to be ready for the attack so that I can hunt as many demonic humans as I can.

That is all I can do for her, at least.

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<Wednesday, Evening, Arcadia Hunter Academy>

The sun was setting over Arcadia Hunter Academy, casting a golden hue across the sprawling campus.

Eleanor walked back to her office, her mind occupied with the day's events.

The amphitheater had been abuzz with excitement as the duels continued, showcasing the talents and determination of the students.

Once she was settled in her office, Eleanor began to recount the fights she had watched that day. She thought about Astron Natusalune's duel with Liam Wayne.

Despite the significant difference in their ranks, Astron had managed to hold his own and strategically surrendered at the right moment. It was a smart move, demonstrating his ability to read his opponent and the situation accurately.

But it was Ethan Hartley's duel that had truly captivated her. His battle with Samuel Greaves was nothing short of spectacular.

Ethan's mastery over lightning psions and his skill with the spear was impressive, to say the least.

'That is just as expected. At this point, it is one hundred percent that he is one of the candidates.' She replayed the key moments of the duel in her mind. Ethan's [Thunder God's Wrath] was a sight to behold, the sheer power of the lightning-infused spear striking awe into the spectators.

His strategic use of [Thunder Step] and the precision with which he countered Samuel's earthen-enhanced attacks showcased his growth and potential.

Eleanor knew the distinct difference between a genius and a talented individual in terms of combat.

Those who are gifted in combat possess something called 'internalization.' Without any logical explanations, they were able to grasp the hardest skills on their own.

Eleanor knew that because she, too, was the same. The moment she started wielding mana, it submitted to her. She was just naturally gifted.

In the academy, she stormed through every student; none were able to rival her. And as one of those, she recognized a fellow genius.

'A natural.'

Ethan's improvement was itself not something that had ever been seen. Since those who improved their stats needed to adapt their strength, and in fights, even the smallest lack of control would be detrimental.

Then, what happens if one improves like Ethan? Constantly increasing their strength?

They need to adapt to those changes almost constantly so that they can once again improve. To do that, the cognitive ability to grasp the essence of movements is the most important thing.

Seemingly enough, this alone made

"Ethan Hartley," Eleanor mused, her eyes reflecting her thoughts. "His prowess is exceptional, even considering his lineage. The way he controls his mana and uses his spear... it's clear he's not just riding on his family's name. He's genuinely a skilled genius."

From that moment on, she would observe his every improvement and guide him thoroughly since such a talent was almost equal to 1000 talented hunters.

'Mentor program.'

As she finished her notes, Eleanor's thoughts shifted to a more pressing concern. The anonymous email she had received, the photos implicating Professor Whitaker, and the potential attack during the final exams by demon contractors weighed heavily on her mind.

"An attack during the final exams..." she muttered, her expression darkening. "It is a thin thread."

She had already made sufficient preparations in her mind. At least she was sure that she would capture many of the attackers.

'Even maybe that bitch.'

Anger rose in her heart, but she calmed herself down.

Taking a deep breath, she leaned back in her chair, her mind already working through various scenarios and contingency plans.

"Tomorrow will be another long day," she thought, standing up to prepare for the meeting with the administration.

Since Thursday would be the start of the most important duels that were about to come.

From that point on, the high-ranking students' duels would commence.

'Ethan Hartley. Show me your talent.' She thought inwardly.

\*\*\*\*\*

In his room, Lucas sat alone, watching the video of Ethan's duel on his holo-screen. The footage captured the intense clash between Ethan Hartley and Samuel Greaves, showcasing Ethan's lightning-infused spear techniques.

As Lucas observed Ethan's movements, his expression grew thoughtful.

"He's really grown," Lucas murmured to himself, eyes fixed on the screen. "His progress is incredible."

Throughout the duel, Ethan displayed not only skill but also a deep understanding of his elemental attributes. His lightning techniques were precise and powerful, overwhelming even a higher-ranked opponent like Samuel.

Lucas couldn't help but feel a twinge of inferiority. He had known Ethan for years and had witnessed his growth firsthand, yet seeing it in action now, in such a dramatic and skilled display, made Lucas reflect on his own journey.

"He's on a completely different level," Lucas muttered, running a hand through his hair. "And here I am, still struggling to master basic techniques."

Lucas closed his eyes briefly, recalling the vision he had experienced months ago, where Ethan's potential had been hinted at.

In that vision, he had seen flashes of Ethan's future prowess, but witnessing it now, in real time, was a stark reminder of the gap between them.

"...No...he is a lot stronger than compared to that time. He is improving at a faster rate..."

'How? How is this possible?'

The question lingered in his mind as he continued to watch, absorbing every detail of Ethan's victory.



'Always.'

As the video concluded and the cheers of the crowd faded, Lucas leaned back in his chair, deep in thought.

In another timeline, he had resolved himself to redouble his training efforts, push himself harder, and strive for improvement, inspired by Ethan's example.

And what did he achieve doing that?

Nothing.

A complete shadow of someone.

'This time, it will be different.' He thought.

'This time, I will be in the spotlight.'

Chapter 398 Chapter 91.6 - Duels [2]

<Thursday Morning, Arcadia Hunter Academy>

The sun rose over Arcadia Hunter Academy, casting a golden hue across the sprawling campus. The amphitheater buzzed with excitement as students and spectators alike gathered for the highly anticipated duels of the day.

Today, the spotlight would be on the higher-ranked students, those with ranks of 500 and above. These duels were expected to be more intense and skillful, showcasing the best of the best.

The stands filled quickly, the air thick with anticipation. Families, friends, and mentors found their seats, eager to witness the prowess of the academy's elite. The buzz of conversation filled the air as people discussed the upcoming matches and their predictions.

"Today's matches are going to be incredible," one student remarked to his friend, excitement evident in his voice.

"Absolutely. I've been waiting to see the top students in action," his friend replied. "There's a lot of hype around these duels."

At precisely 9:00 AM, the Headmaster's voice echoed through the amphitheater, calling for attention. "Welcome, everyone, to the fourth day of our Final Exam duels! Today, we will witness the skill and determination of our higher-ranked students. Let the duels begin!"

The audience erupted into applause, the energy palpable as the first duel was announced.

"Our first duel of the day is between Rank 500, Leona Jackey, and Rank 480, Darius Gerken. Contestants, please step into the arena!"

Leona, a tall and agile student with flowing silver hair, stepped into the arena with a confident stride. She wielded a pair of slender, enchanted daggers that gleamed under the morning sun.

Opposite her, Darius, a robust young man with fiery red hair, brandished a large broadsword engulfed in flames. The contrast between the two fighters was striking, both in appearance and fighting style.

The crowd watched in hushed anticipation as the two combatants took their positions. The announcer's voice rang out again. "Are both contestants ready?"

Leona and Darius nodded, their eyes locked onto each other with focus and pride.

"Begin!"

As the duel commenced, the shadows within the amphitheater stirred. A group of individuals cloaked in a simple attire moved with practiced stealth, their presence unnoticed by the excited spectators.

This fact was almost understandable. Since there were many simultaneous duels happening at the same time, many onlookers felt the need to travel from one arena to another, making this a common occurrence.

Yet their goals were a bit different.

Since they were agents of an organization named Valkara, they were tasked with a dual mission: to identify potential candidates for corruption and to plant demonic seeds.

These seeds, imbued with a new type of magic that emitted incredibly low wavelengths of mana, were untraceable. They resonated with the emotional fluctuations of the students in the duels, making them vulnerable to corruption.

They have been planning this operation even before the start of the semester since they were very well aware of the big shots in the world and their heirs.

The fact that many different heirs would be attending the Arcadia Hunter Academy this year and the academy's traditional duels were widely known.

From this point on, it wasn't hard to infer that this event would be widely known. But, in fact, even before that, he had already informed them about this operation.

He reveled; they listened.

The head of the group, a tall figure with piercing eyes, scanned the crowd and the arena, his gaze sharp and calculating.

The first three days. They were not doing anything, only observing the academy. Just in case a variable can occur, they were making sure.

It was also not efficient enough to attack in those days since the damage wouldn't be enough. The risk of being caught was also higher, making it an obvious choice.

'As expected, the number is quite high right now. They prepared well, but it is also all according to the intel.'

Such an operation would never have been possible without an insider, after all.

Under the eyes of one of the strongest beings in the world, deceiving it was almost impossible.

[Spread out and begin the operation,] he commanded in a hushed tone.

His first group of subordinates nodded and dispersed, blending seamlessly into the throng of spectators.

They moved with purpose, discreetly slipping the demonic seeds into the pockets and bags of unsuspecting onlookers. The seeds were small, barely noticeable, yet their effects would be profound. This group had been active from the first day of the duels since these demonic seeds were newly produced products and almost impossible to detect.

Meanwhile, the leader focused on the second phase of their mission.

He discreetly signaled to another group, who began to mingle with the crowd, subtly implanting organic transplants into the onlookers. These transplants were a precursor to the attack they planned to carry out, ensuring that when the time came, chaos and panic would spread rapidly.

Yet, they hadn't realized one thing.

There were certain people watching them. People who were already informed that something would happen.

And those certain people were tracing them from the start.

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<Thursday Afternoon, Arcadia Hunter Academy>

The amphitheater was abuzz with excitement as the next highly anticipated duel was announced.

This match promised not only a display of exceptional skill but also a clash between two prominent guild heirs.

"Our next duel features Lucas Middleton, ranked 85, versus Vincent Hale, ranked 54. Contestants, please step into the arena!"

The crowd's murmurs of excitement grew louder as Lucas Middleton stepped into the arena. His white hair shimmered under the sunlight, and his striking blue eyes held a steely determination.

He was incredibly handsome, with a slender but toned physique. In his hand, he held a sword of extraordinary craftsmanship, a special artifact of the Middleton Household, rarely seen by even the most esteemed guests.

Opposite him, Vincent Hale strode confidently into the arena. With his muscular build and intense gaze, he exuded an air of power and readiness.

Vincent, the heir to the Tasty Gods guild, a rival of the Middletons, carried a formidable double-edged axe, a weapon that symbolized his guild's strength and resilience.

Though he used a rare weapon, this particular heir of the Tasty Gods was known for his bloodthirstiness and berserk skills.

He was rumored to be the slaughterer of the monsters in the dungeons.

The crowd could feel the tension between the two combatants, knowing that this duel was more than just a test of skill; it was a battle of pride and legacy between two powerful families.

After all, this was the reason why Lucas had chosen Vincent. Normally, he was supposed to be Julia's opponent on the other timeline, and Lucas had seen the fight beforehand.

Julia easily bashed Vincent, destroying him. The fight wasn't even close. And the fact that there was a rivalry between the two made it more popular, increasing Julia's fame.

But this time, things were bound to be different since he had chosen Vincent instead, stealing the opportunity.

'If she can do it, I can easily do better.'

Essentially, the victory was simply on his hands. Since, from the parallel world, he already knew Vincent's style and the way he fought. Though even if he didn't know, he was pretty confident that he would end it faster.

Rather than fighting with brute force, Lucas' style was different.

He threw a quick look at the person sitting in the front lounge.

A person that was sitting as if the world was serving him. Sharp like a blade, as if he can cut everything. A demeanor of seriousness and mightiness.

Fergus Middleton.

His father.

The person whose words still haunted him to that day. The very person who made this hole in his heart was the reason he never felt satisfied with himself.

'Just watch. I am going to show you the true heir.'

Even at this age, he was still unable to forget those looks that were given to him.

"Are both contestants ready?" the announcer's voice boomed, disrupting his thoughts.

'What are you doing, Lucas? Focus.' Lucas and Vincent nodded, their eyes locked onto each other.

"Begin!"

The moment the signal was given, Vincent charged forward, his axe raised high. Lucas, displaying remarkable agility, sidestepped the initial attack, his sword gleaming as he countered with a swift strike aimed at Vincent's side.

CLANG!

Vincent's axe met Lucas' sword with a resounding clang, the force of the collision sending sparks flying. The crowd erupted in cheers and gasps, their excitement palpable as the duel began in earnest.

Vincent, known for his brute strength and aggressive fighting style, swung his double-edged axe with relentless power. Each strike aimed to overpower Lucas and force him onto the defensive. His muscles bulged with every swing, his movements precise and calculated.

"I still have not forgotten that time."

Vincent was the first one to open his mouth, his eyes locked on Lucas. There was a clear smirk on his face, but his eyes were serious.

"Me neither."

After all, while their families were rivals, these two were also the same.

"That is good. Because, you are going to pay back for what you did."

At that time, when Tasty Gods were expanding their business, they had assigned the area to Cale Vale, Vincent's brother.

And they were allies with the Middleton Family.

"We didn't do anything."

"Lies. It was your family's sword. Everyone knows about it."

And Cale Vale was killed by someone from the Middleton family.

SWOOSH! The axe was once again swung. The speed of the axe was so fast that the onlookers were having a hard time sensing it.

But more importantly, the strength behind the strike even split the air across the blade, sending a shockwave enhanced by mana.

CLANK! Lucas, however, was prepared. His style was one of agility and precision, using his opponent's strength against them. He deftly dodged Vincent's powerful swings, his movements fluid and graceful.

CLANG! SWOOSH! CLANG!

His sword flashed in the sunlight as he parried and countered, each strike aimed to exploit the gaps in Vincent's defense.

"She is punished for it."

The murderer was easily found. After all, there was a handful of people who could kill the young prodigy Cale, especially cleanly.

It was his friend.

Sarah Middleton, Lucas' half-sibling from another mother.

A genius of the sword.

And the traitor of the family.

"Her head should be rolling down, just like my brothers."

But she wasn't executed. She escaped from her punishment officially.

"It was supposed to be, but she escaped."

"You let her escape."



And, of course, the Vale family could never escape such a result since the fact that their son died while the perpetrator escaped.

From that point on, the rivalry began.

"We did not."

"Lies."

"Nothing will be able to convince you."

"There is only one thing that can convince me. It is the head of that bitch."

As Vincent's words echoed through the arena, Lucas maintained his focused expression, meeting his opponent's gaze without flinching.

The tension between them was palpable, fueled by their families' bitter history and personal animosities. Yet, behind Lucas's steely exterior, thoughts churned.

'He still remembers,' Lucas thought, recalling the history between their families and the tragedy that had sparked their rivalry.

He knew Vincent harbored deep resentment, justified in his own way by the loss he had suffered. Sarah Middleton's actions had forever changed the course of their families' relations, casting a shadow over their interactions.

But still, that didn't mean they were supposed to be enemies. In fact, it was the reverse.

'Hero Butcherer.'

Since in the future that he had seen, Vincent became a major villain, almost killing Ethan.

Chapter 399 Chapter 91.7 - Duels [2]

From the moment he got the memories of his parallel self, Lucas understood one simple thing.

This world was not a fair place.

One could put everything they had into one thing, yet they might still never reach the heights that those who didn't even put half of the effort into the same thing.

It was not rewarding.

Not fair.

Justice didn't exist.

It was a place where only the strong ate the weak. If you were the winner, no matter what, your traces would remain.

No one would remember the losers.

That was what he realized.

'Hero Butcherer.'

Therefore, he didn't care if the person before him was bound to become a villain or not. People had reasons, and from his perspective, Vincent had the right to become one.

Even after learning what happened to his brother, the world still sided with Middleton's.

In the end, it was Vincent's family that perished in the confrontation.

Just like himself.

Just like himself, who lost his life trying to protect Ethan, the only person who could save everyone, to protect the world.

He fought bravely, without any selfishness, and perished in the end like a hero.

Yet, what happened afterward? Did his legacy remain?

That demon showed him. And the answer was clear.

A built statue in the middle of a street. A small place in a museum. In some books, writing history.

But, in those same books, every time, he was never remembered since the people on the front were not him.

Ethan, Julia, Victor, Sylvie, Irina.....The list went on since they were the final party that defeated the last threat.

But what about him?

No one.

The June 22nd was dedicated to him as the hero. Yet, what happened afterward?

In just five years, the whole month itself was declared for another group. A newly emerging group who had migrated from their hometown to the Human Domain.

Demi humans.

With their mitigation to society, the whole month of June was dedicated to the hardships they had encountered, as well as the discrimination that they faced.

To celebrate the rights that they painstakingly got from human society. Everyone

Or was what truly how it was?

Yet, eventually, nobody remembered those who made the peace possible in the end. Those who bravely fought.

Their names were forgotten.

The respect, the honor....It was no longer there.

That was then, Lucas himself realized. It was all pointless.

As long as you don't win. As long as people don't directly engrave themselves into the books of history, they will not be remembered. They would just live and then die. That was it.

Thus, he made a pledge to himself. This time, things wouldn't be the same.

SWOOSH!

Lucas felt the ground tremble as Vincent's axe descended with incredible force.

'Yeah, it seems I am not allowed to think for now.'

Even if he could beat Vincent easily, for the sake of the performance he wanted to show, he decided to cut his own thoughts off.

'Earth's Cry.'

He muttered the name of the attack.

He had seen this move before, and he knew exactly how to counter it. With a swift movement, Lucas shifted his stance and executed the [Sword of Middleton. 4th stage. Phantom Step,] a technique that allowed him to dodge the attack with a blur of motion.

It was something that was hardly achieved, something that not everyone could achieve. He was sure that Julia hadn't achieved the first stage yet.

!

Vincent's eyes were wide open at the blur of movements since he knew the essence of it.

The axe slammed into the ground, creating a shockwave that rippled through the arena. Dust and debris flew into the air, momentarily obscuring the view. But Lucas was already moving, his sword gleaming as he unleashed [Sword of Middleton. 4th stage. Mirror Blades].

The blade seemed to multiply, creating afterimages that confused Vincent's senses.

Vincent roared in frustration, swinging his axe wildly in an attempt to hit one of the elusive images. Lucas used this opportunity to close the distance, his eyes locked on Vincent's exposed side. He launched [Blade's Impetus], a rapid thrust aimed at Vincent's ribs.

CLANG!

Vincent managed to bring his axe around just in time to block the attack, but the force of the collision sent him stumbling backward. Lucas pressed his advantage, transitioning seamlessly into [Whirlwind Slash]. His sword spun in a deadly arc, aiming to overwhelm Vincent with speed and precision.

CLANK! CLANK!

Vincent gritted his teeth and dug his heels into the ground, his muscles straining as he blocked each strike. His eyes blazed with anger and determination.

"Tsk."

He hated this to the core. The way Middleton's fought. They always tried to distract the enemy and focused on speed.

It was nauseating since he remembered the amount of sword strikes that was left on his brother's body.

"You think you can defeat me with those flashy moves?" he growled, summoning his mana and channeling it into his axe.

With a roar, Vincent unleashed the skill he had developed on his own. Maybe his family wasn't something as big as Middleton's, but that didn't mean his rank was a joke.

[Berserker's Wrath] – a powerful combination of swings that was imbued with raw energy. The axe cleaved through the air with terrifying speed, aimed directly at Lucas's head.

The crowd gasped and cheered, their excitement growing with each exchange. The duel had become a spectacle of skill and power, a testament to the prowess of both combatants.

Vincent's rage-fueled his movements as he swung his axe with relentless power. Each strike carried the force of his mana, making it almost impossible for anyone to withstand for long.

Of course, from the outside, it would look like Vincent was on the losing end since he used his berserk skill this early. But in fact, there was something that not many people knew about Vincent.

The reason why he was able to hunt such strong monsters, or how he attained his rank in the entrance exam.

The reason why he could go against a rank-5 or rank-6 boss while being two ranks lower than them.

It was because of his strongest skill, the trump card, that nobody would expect.

[Guillotine of Blood].

This skill. Once he stacked five strikes on his enemy, he would be able to control the enemy's bleeding. With the resonating bleeding, his strength would double.

And the conditions for the execution would appear.

Complete Execution.

He was determined to unleash this special skill and end the fight decisively.

Lucas, however, was calm and composed. He had seen Vincent's techniques before and knew exactly what he was planning.

Each strike aimed at him was carefully calculated to build up the [Hemorrhage] stacks required for Vincent's devastating finishing move.

In a way, Vincent's kit of abilities made him such a formidable opponent, even though his stats were lower than those of his enemies.

Since the [Berserker's Wrath] was a couple of buffed attacks that would easily amplify [Hemorrhage] to his opponent while also hiding his intentions more easily.

SWOOSH! Vincent's first strike came crashing down, and Lucas sidestepped, allowing the blade to graze his arm. Blood trickled from the shallow cut, and the first stack of [Hemorrhage] was applied.

'One.' The second strike was a sweeping horizontal slash. Lucas deflected it with his sword but allowed it to nick his side, adding a second stack.

'Two.' Vincent's eyes gleamed with anticipation. He could feel the momentum shifting in his favor. His third strike was a diagonal slash that Lucas narrowly avoided, but not without earning another cut and a third stack.

'Three.' Lucas was fully aware of what Vincent was doing. He was letting Vincent believe he was gaining the upper hand, all while conserving his own strength and waiting for the perfect moment to strike back.

The fourth strike came with even more ferocity. Vincent aimed for Lucas's legs, hoping to cripple him. Lucas let the blade scrape against his thigh, adding the fourth stack. The crowd gasped at the blood now staining Lucas's clothes, unaware of the strategy at play.

'Four.' Vincent's confidence soared. He raised his axe high, ready to deliver the fifth and final strike needed to activate [Guillotine of Blood].

"Heh....It seems you are nothing after all."

His eyes were filled with the certainty of his imminent victory.

It was the same as the crowd.

"Lucas Middleton is losing?"

"Wasn't he pushing Vincent? How come the tables have turned?"

"It seems the Middletons are going to lose this time. What a pity. I am pretty sure Julia Middleton would win against him."

"Of course, Julia would win. Did you not see how she fought in the Blackthorn's Banquet?"

"Right, she was there at that time."

The opinion of the crowds changed, but one thing was clear. Everyone clearly thought that Lucas was losing and that he was being a disgrace.

SWOOSH! However, contrary to what the logical conclusion was, those who knew Lucas and the real Middletons felt differently.

'Lucas. You have improved.'

Especially in the case of the white-haired man watching the fight.

'You even stepped into the Illusion Realm.' Just as the axe descended, Lucas's body suddenly blurred. Vincent's axe cleaved through the air, hitting nothing but an afterimage. The Lucas he had been targeting shattered like glass, disappearing before his eyes.

SWOOSH! "What?"

Vincent's eyes widened in shock. He barely had time to register what was happening before he felt a sharp pain in his legs.



SLASH! THUD! Lucas's blade had already found its mark, slashing through Vincent's leg joints with precise strikes. Vincent cried out in pain as his legs gave way, and he fell to his knees.

Before Vincent could react, Lucas's blade was at his throat. The cold steel pressed against his skin, and he realized with a sinking feeling that he had been thoroughly outplayed. Lucas had seen through his intentions from the very beginning and had manipulated the fight to this moment.

The crowd watched in stunned silence as the once-mighty Vincent Hale knelt before Lucas Middleton, defeated. The duel had been a masterful display of strategy and skill, and Lucas's victory was undeniable.

"Yield."

Vincent, breathing heavily and with pain etched across his face, looked hatefully into Lucas' eyes.

But there was nothing he could do. Instead of acting like a crybaby, it was always better to accept the result like a man.

"I yield."

Chapter 400 91.8 - Duels [2]

As the words left Vincent's lips, the amphitheater erupted into a cacophony of surprised exclamations. The audience, who had been convinced of Lucas's impending defeat just moments ago, was now grappling with the sheer skill and strategy they had witnessed.

"Unbelievable!"

"Did you see that? He played him like a fiddle!"

"Lucas Middleton is a genius. That was a masterclass in swordsmanship."

The fact that Lucas had completely dominated the duel and won in a mere five minutes was a considerable achievement. Typically, duels between berserkers and speed types dragged on, each

combatant exploiting their respective strengths. But this time, it was as if Lucas had been several steps ahead of Vincent from the start.

In the stands, the reactions were varied. The vassals and the allies of the Middleton family turned all their attention to the person whose opinion was most valuable. The white-haired man, Lucas's father, nodded approvingly. "You've truly grown, Lucas. Stepping into the Illusion Realm... impressive."

Meanwhile, the Hale family members were left in shock and disappointment. Vincent's father, head of the Tasty Gods guild, clenched his fists, a mixture of anger and grudging respect on his face. "That boy... he's a formidable opponent."

In the crowd, students whispered among themselves, their respect for Lucas skyrocketing. Though not many people dared to say it, everyone who witnessed the twins fighting knew that Julia's talent at sword was incomparable.

"I never knew he was this good," one said, awe in his voice. "It's like he was reading Vincent's mind."

"Lucas wasn't just fighting; he was orchestrating the entire duel. Every move was calculated."

"Still....What was that last move? Even I felt my senses being deceived."

The students were talking amongst themselves, yet there was a certain group of people watching the fight.

In the stands, Lilia, Ethan, Irina, and Julia watched the scene unfold, their expressions a mix of awe and curiosity.

Ethan, unable to contain his amazement, turned to his friends. "When did Lucas become this good?" he asked, his voice filled with genuine surprise.

Julia, still processing what she had just witnessed, shook her head slowly. "I honestly don't know," she admitted. "I knew he was training hard, but I had no idea he had reached this level." There was a hint of confusion in her voice as if she was struggling to reconcile this new image of her twin with the one she had known all her life.

Lilia, intrigued by the intricacies of the duel, looked to Julia for answers. "What was that last move?" she asked. "It seemed... complex. Like he was manipulating reality itself."

Julia sighed, a faint frown creasing her brow. "I wish I could tell you," she replied. "But I don't know. It feels like there's a rift between us now. A part of him that I don't understand." The realization left a strange aftertaste, a sense of unfamiliarity with her own twin.

Irina, who had been quietly analyzing the fight, spoke up. "I am not sure exactly what he did. But, from what I could see, he utilized a special Light spell, 「Refractive Array」," she explained. "It's a rare and advanced spell that allows the user to disturb the light that was reflected from the object itself and change the location that was perceived by the opponent. Only a handful of people can master it, and it requires an extraordinary level of precision and control."

"Refractive Array? This... When did he learn that?" Julia asked herself. Something. Something was weird about this. From the start, she knew Lucas was smart, and he had already immersed himself in tactics.

If Julia was the brute force type, then Lucas would be the mindful type. He would plan things and think before acting. That was why she thought, as twins, they complemented each other.

But she had never seen Lucas studying magic before, let alone such an advanced Light magic. It was particularly hard to control the light particles since they contained higher raw energy than other particles.

But the thing that puzzled her was.

'This idea....I also had it.' She had been trying to develop a new style for herself for a long time, trying to upgrade her combat style.

But rather than memorizing some random spells, she preferred testing things while 'feeling' them.

Lilia raised an eyebrow, "But how was he able to obstruct the other senses? Especially the mana sense? Considering that, even from here, we weren't able to sense anything, and that seems to be the case for higher-ranking Hunters watching the fight, either?" she asked.

Irina paused, considering Lilia's question. "I can't say for certain how he was able to obstruct the other senses, especially the mana sense," she admitted. "But if my observations are correct, it likely involves a combination of sword [Stripe]s and magic blocks. It's something highly complex and not easy to analyze in a short time."

Julia, still deep in thought, muttered to herself, "How did he manage to combine such techniques so seamlessly?"

Irina shrugged. "It's a rare skill, and it's possible he's been working on it in secret. Lucas has always been methodical and strategic, so it wouldn't surprise me if he's been honing this technique for a while."

Ethan, still processing the information, nodded slowly. "Lucas has always been a step ahead, but this... This is something else entirely."

Lilia crossed her arms, a thoughtful expression on her face. "It's impressive, no doubt. But it also means he's been keeping a lot to himself."

Julia's frown deepened. 'It just feels... strange. Like there's a part of him I don't know anymore.'

Something had been bothering her. It was a certainly foreign feeling that she felt for the first time.

She threw a quick look at the man sitting on the lounge.

'What does father think?'

The person she respected the most in the world. His opinion was certainly valuable, more than everyone else's.

'He is smiling....'

And she saw his smile.

At that moment, something inside her was stirred.

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Irina, looking at Julia like that, somehow felt like she could understand Julia's thoughts and views. But at the same time, she thought to herself.

'This oddly feels familiar. Phantom's Land.....After that, whatever it is, things changed.'

Her partial memories, the things that she couldn't understand, made her feel like she must understand.

'Is he there?'

Suddenly, she felt the urge to talk to him. Since her match was tomorrow, she had some free time. Though, she would start stretching her senses not long after.

After his match yesterday, he suddenly disappeared, and she wasn't able to contact him even once.

She looked around the place, but she couldn't find any trace of him.

None at all.

Irina scanned the amphitheater, her eyes coated with mana as she activated her [Mana Observation].

Her gaze swept across the crowd, students and families alike, all still buzzing with excitement from the duel. Amidst the sea of mana signatures, one stood out.

'Here!' It was a familiar trace, the distinct pattern of Astron's mana. Her eyes locked onto it immediately.

He was standing near the back, partially hidden by a pillar. His eyes were focused on the scene before him, specifically on the crowd. Irina could see the intensity in his gaze, as if he was discerning everything, taking in every detail.

But then, just as she was about to make her way towards him, Astron moved. He turned and started to leave, his movements swift and purposeful.

'Come on, where are you going?' Irina's heart quickened as she hurried to follow him.

She pushed through the crowd, trying to keep his retreating figure in sight. But despite her best efforts, Astron's skillful evasion techniques made it difficult to track him. He weaved through the throngs of people with practiced ease, and soon, he disappeared from her view.

"Tsk. Just stay where you are, bastard."

Irina cursed under her breath, frustrated by how easily she had lost him. She continued to move through the crowd, hoping to catch another glimpse of him. But as the minutes ticked by, it became clear that Astron had effectively vanished.

"Sigh...."

At the end of the day, she missed him again.

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<Thursday Afternoon, Arcadia Hunter Academy>

The sun was supposed to hang high in the sky, casting a warm glow over the bustling amphitheater. Yet, with winter already coming, the scene was shrouded by the clouds formed across the place.

The duels were in full swing, and the excitement in the air was palpable.

Students and spectators alike were engrossed in the spectacle, their cheers and gasps echoing through the arena.

In contrast to the jubilant crowd, Callum stood at the edge of the amphitheater, his expression a mix of weariness and annoyance. His disheveled hair and the dark bags under his eyes made it clear he had not rested well.

He scanned the crowd with a sharp, vigilant gaze, though he looked as if he would rather be anywhere else.

"I can't believe Eleanor called me in for this," he muttered under his breath. "As if I have nothing better to do than play babysitter."

A woman standing nearby, dressed in the same hunter's uniform, rolled her eyes and smirked.

"Oh, come on, Callum. You're exaggerating. It's not like you were doing anything critical. You were just catching up on sleep."

Callum shot her an irritated glance. "Amelia, do you have any idea how much work I've got piling up? Reports, training schedules, actual hunts. But no, I'm here, watching a bunch of kids spar."

These two were schoolmates as Eleanor, graduating at the same time. And both of them worked for the government.

Agents of Demonic Human Bureau.

Their faces were not clearly known to the world, yet they were both important Awakened. Though, those who knew them from the academy, could possibly recognize their faces.

Thus, they were still in their disguises.

Amelia chuckled softly. "Relax, Callum. It's not just about the duels. Eleanor thinks something's up. And if she's worried, we should be too."

Callum sighed, rubbing his temples. "I know, I know. It is the Eleanor we are talking about. There is no way she would call us for something random."

He said, slowly scratching his neck.

"But it's still a pain. We've got real threats out there, and we're stuck here babysitting."

Amelia's expression grew more serious. "Speaking of threats, have you noticed anything unusual?"

Callum shook his head, scanning the crowd again. "I did notice quite a lot of things," Callum said, looking across the arena.

"Really? Why did you-"

Before Amelia could even ask him, Callum replied.

"It was Eleanor's decision."

"What? Don't tell me." As Amelia's eyes widened, Callum nodded his head.

"Yes. She wants to catch the executive."

Eleanor was already looking far ahead from the start.