

H. Academy 401

Chapter 401 91.9 - Duels [2]

<Arcadia Hunter Academy, Thursday, 3 P.M.>

The sun had already disappeared behind the clouds, some bits of snow falling down to the ground.

The amphitheater was packed with spectators eagerly awaiting the next highly anticipated duel. The energy in the air was electric, and the crowd buzzed with excitement.

"This is going to be a showdown for the ages," a scout whispered to his friend. "The Arkwright and Middleton families are both sword legends."

"Yeah, and after Lucas's performance earlier, everyone's expecting great things from Julia," his friend replied, leaning forward in anticipation.

The announcer's voice echoed through the amphitheater, calling for attention. "Ladies and gentlemen, our next duel features Julia Middleton, ranked 61, versus Damien Arkwright, ranked 21. Contestants, please step into the arena!"

The crowd erupted into applause as Julia Middleton stepped into the arena. She was a vision of grace and determination, her white hair flowing behind her and her blue eyes focused.

She carried herself with the confidence of someone who had trained tirelessly, her posture perfect and her movements precise. In her hand, she wielded a beautifully crafted sword, a symbol of the Middleton family's legacy.

But, inwardly, things were different.

'What is this feeling?'

For the first time in her life, Julia was feeling something that she had never felt.

Pressure.

It was as if an invisible pressure and sense of getting locked down in a prison had enveloped her.

She couldn't understand. For all of her life, she had never felt the need to bother over such things.

Sword, life, everything was easy. She trained and got results. That was it.

But what she had seen at Lucas' duel....She tried to do it on her own, but she wasn't able to.

As if she wasn't enough.

This feeling....

'This is the first time.'

And she didn't know how to deal with it. It was, somehow, disturbing.

'No. Focus.'

However, she couldn't afford to think about those things right now since she was here to fight.

Opposite her, Damien Arkwright entered the arena with an air of confidence and grace. His golden hair shimmered in the sunlight, and his striking features drew the admiration of many in the crowd.

Damien was renowned not only for his looks but also for his extraordinary achievements. At the age of 13, he had defeated a full-fledged hunter, a feat that had earned him widespread fame.

He was strong. Very strong. The reason why he was ranked 21 was not because he was lacking in combat.

It was just because he rather played in an unsportsmanlike manner. In the entrance exam, he tortured other people, stepped down on weak students, and trampled on their pride.

In a way, Damien was truly a villainous guy. Someone who liked tormenting others. With Middleton's intelligence, they knew what kind of person Damien was.

What kind of acts did he partake in? They were rather vile and hard to speak of.

Yet, not everyone in the world knew.

The Arkwright Family had a lot of influence in stopping it. And it was not like they were the only ones.

The corruption ran deep.

And that was partly the reason why she had chosen him. She was planning to choose Vincent, but Lucas chose him instead.

Lucas came to their friend's group, announcing that he would be challenging Vincent right before she could, and she couldn't refute it. It would be uncharacteristic of her, and it was not like she cared too much, either.

Therefore, her next choice was Damien.

Even though that guy was quite a strong opponent, and the result wouldn't be immediately evident, it was still worth taking the risk.

Since she wanted to erase the smile on his face, reveal his true nature, and finally trample on him like he did to others.

'Yes. That is all I need to do. I don't need anything else.'

As Damien looked into Julia's eyes, he smirked and asked, "Did you sleep well yesterday?"

Julia raised her head, her expression calm. "Of course. Why wouldn't I?"

Damien's smirk widened. "I couldn't sleep. I was too excited, thinking about trampling on an insolent girl who thinks she's on the same level as me."

Julia's eyes narrowed slightly, but she remained composed. This type of wording....She would normally be the one to make such jokes.

But somehow, today, she couldn't catch it, and this scratched her pride for some reason. It was, weirdly enough, irritating.

"We'll see who's left standing, you stupid fucker."

"Oh....Foul-mouthed as usual, are we."

"At least I am not filthy from the inside like you."

"Tu-tu-tu. Everyone who speaks about the beauty of the insides is, in general, the one who is ugly."

"Fitting for someone like you."

Damien chuckled, his voice dripping with mockery. "You really believe you can match me? How amusing. I can't wait to wipe that confident look off your face."

Julia tightened her grip on her sword, her resolve hardening. She had faced many challenges before, but this was different.

"Oh my gosh, Damien is so handsome!"

"Did you see his golden hair? He looks like a prince!"

"And he's so strong! I heard he defeated a full-fledged hunter when he was just 13. Can you believe that?"

Julia's irritation grew with each word. These girls had no idea who Damien really was, the cruelty he hid behind that charming facade.

To them, he was a hero, a prince. But Julia knew the truth. She knew the darkness that lurked within him, the way he enjoyed tormenting others, and the vile acts he committed when no one was looking.

"He's going to win for sure. Julia doesn't stand a chance against him," one of the girls said with a giggle.

This was personal.

She was determined to prove herself and expose Damien for what he truly was.

The announcer's voice called out once more, signaling the start of the duel. "Are both contestants ready?"

Julia and Damien nodded, their eyes locked onto each other.

"Begin!"

Damien moved first, his sword slicing through the air with incredible speed and precision. His golden hair fluttered as he advanced with a series of swift, graceful strikes.

Julia met his attacks head-on, her own sword movements equally fluid and powerful.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

The sound of clashing swords echoed through the amphitheater, a symphony of metal and determination. Julia Middleton and Damien Arkwright were locked in a dance of steel and strategy, each movement precise and calculated.

Damien's sword glinted in the dim light as he launched a series of complex, fluid strikes, his movements almost hypnotic.

The Arkwright Sword Style was like a dance, each swing designed to confuse and mislead his opponent. He moved with the grace of a ballerina, his attacks unpredictable and difficult to read.

"Haha....You seem to be having a hard time ."

That was the essence of the Arkwright Family's sword. The two families, Middleton and the Arkwright, were like a dipole.

Suppose one was suited for the raw strength. They fought like beasts, dealing with simple but efficient movements. This sword style. It was perfect for dealing with monsters.

The other one was suited for the illusions. That was why Julia was shaken by how Lucas used such a movement.

Since that style had contradicted their own family's style.

Since the Middleton family perfectly specialized in dealing with monsters, Arkwrights specialized in fighting against humanoid opponents with minds.

Of course, that was of the essence. From some point on, every swordsman had their own interpretation of the world and their own sword.

From the start, this fight was in a disadvantageous situation for her.

Julia, however, was not easily swayed.

"Tsk."

Her movements were sharp and aggressive, a stark contrast to Damien's elegance.

Since there was a reason why she confidently challenged Damien. A specialty that differed her from any normal human.

A specialty that she had noticed when she was a child.

Her motor capabilities and neurotic system were faster than others. When others would react, she could send for different signals from the same motor neuron.

In a way, the frequency with which her body worked was bigger than others. And this gave her an innate advantage in life.

Her innate motor capabilities allowed her to react with lightning speed, her body a blur of motion.

「Sword of Middleton. Harmony.」

Even though the technique meant to be calm, she rather wielded her sword with the ferocity of a beast, each strike a testament to her raw strength and refined skill.

This was her own implementation.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

Their swords met in a series of rapid collisions, sparks flying with each impact. Julia's attacks were relentless, her speed and power forcing Damien to stay on the defensive. She pushed forward with a series of powerful slashes, her blade a whirlwind of lethal intent.

「Arkwright's Grace.」

Damien countered with a graceful pirouette, his sword slicing through the air in a wide arc.

He aimed to disorient Julia, using the fluidity of his movements to mask his true intentions. But Julia's enhanced reflexes allowed her to see through his feints, her instincts guiding her blade to intercept his strikes.

"You think you can confuse me with your dance?" Julia taunted, her voice steady despite the exertion.

Damien smirked, his golden hair shimmering as he twisted away from her blade. "We'll see how long you can keep up, little girl."

Julia's eyes narrowed, her grip tightening on her sword. She knew she had to maintain her focus, to not let Damien's provocations distract her. She lunged forward with a burst of speed, her blade aiming for his midsection.

Damien sidestepped, his movements fluid and elegant, but Julia was relentless. She pressed her advantage, her attacks coming faster and harder. Her sword sliced through the air with deadly precision, forcing Damien to stay on his toes.

"Here, I thought you would be showing something, like your twin."

Suddenly, she heard Damien mumble something.

《 But, I guess I expected too much from you. 》

Before Julia could react, the world around her began to change. Her vision blurred, and the sounds of the crowd faded away. It was as if she had been transported to another realm. Countless mirrors materialized around her, each reflecting a distorted image of her opponent. The reflections multiplied, creating an endless maze of Damien's sneering visage.

《 Welcome to the Realm of Dreams. 》

Damien's voice echoed, coming from every direction. The disorienting effect was immediate. Julia spun around, trying to locate the real Damien, but it was impossible.

Each reflection moved in perfect synchronization, creating an overwhelming sense of confusion.

《 Not a pathetic display like that guy's, but a real illusion blade. 》

Chapter 402 Chapter 91.10 - Duels [2]

402 Chapter 91.10 - Duels [2]

Not a pathetic display like that guy's, but a real illusion blade.

In the world of Hunters, everything was possible. This was the first thing a parent taught them.

There could be some restrictions made by the world, but eventually, to know about those restrictions, one needs to have information.

That information was hard to come by. Especially the more one climbed over the ranks.

The stronger a Hunter was, the harder it became to get a hold of information over them. Those who know about that information would either die or reveal their own strengths.

This was the first thing that Julia and Lucas were taught. They both were made aware of the importance of this fact.

The disorienting effect of the illusions was immediate.

Julia spun around, doing her best to try to locate the real Damien, but it was impossible.

Each reflection moved in perfect synchronization, creating an overwhelming sense of confusion.

She tightened her grip on her sword, her breathing steady despite the disorienting illusion. "You think this will stop me?" she shouted, her voice defiant.

In a way, this was her own way of strengthening her own mentality. Someone's words didn't need to be directed to others.

–THUMP! But her bravado was met with silence, the only sound being her own heartbeat thundering in her ears.

–SWOOSH! Suddenly, a sharp pain erupted in her leg. She gasped, glancing down to see a thin line of blood seeping through her pants. The cut was shallow but precise, a testament to Damien's skill. He had struck without her even seeing him move.

"Did you feel that?" Damien's voice taunted from all around her. "In this realm, you won't see or hear me coming. Every step you take could be your last."

Julia gritted her teeth, the pain sharpening her focus. She had to stay calm and think strategically.

Something about you was always different, wasn't it? You always had a fast response. Is it related to your body?

Damien continued, his voice coming from all sides. He was smart. It was evident that he figured it out.

Well, that was natural. There were two times when they had faced each other before.

First, when they were 12 years old.

Sword Parade.

A tournament that she had won, beating Damien and Lucas.

At that time, she remembered how easy it was to beat Damien. Even Lucas was stronger than them.

But in the second one, when they were 13 years old.

The winner was Damien.

And that was the last time he had attended the Sword Parade. After that, he has continued to move forward with better achievements.

I hadn't forgotten about that loss.

Her enhanced reflexes were her greatest asset, but they were useless if she couldn't see her opponent.

It was evident that this move was solely created against people like her.

How is it? Do you like it?

Damien continued to taunt, his voice dripping with condescension.

Another cut, this time on her side. She winced, trying to block the attack, but her sword met only empty air again. She was getting frustrated, her anger bubbling beneath the surface.

"Damien!" she shouted, her voice filled with defiance and frustration. "You think these tricks will save you?"

At the end of the day, the Middleton family is only suited for the beasts. Beasts against beasts is certainly a fitting arrangement.

The words hit her like a physical blow. She had heard similar taunts before, people mocking her demeanor and her fierce attitude. But this was different. It was personal.

Realm of Dreams was indeed a perfect move against her, but she wasn't going to give up. Not now.

Suddenly, a searing pain ripped through her chest. Damien's blade had cut through her clothing, leaving a shallow but humiliating mark. The cold air stung against her bare skin, the cut a stark reminder of her vulnerability.

The crowd gasped, their shock palpable. Julia's vision blurred with rage, her mind flashing back to all the times she had been mocked as a beast. The memories of being treated as less than human, of being seen as nothing more than a wild animal, flooded her senses.

She hated it. She hated every bit of it.

A deep, primal roar echoed in her mind, awakening a trait she rarely acknowledged.

Her lineage, her bloodline, it was coursing through her blood. But at the same time, something differed her from others.

The weird trait she had always been something of a mystery,

But in moments like this, she felt it coursing through her veins.

[White Tiger*] – a trait that had appeared on her status window. Different from her family members, it was a weird trait that she had alongside her family's traits.

It heightened her senses, increased her strength, and gave her a ferocity that was unmatched. But it also brought with it a wildness of her own thoughts.

A double-edged blade.

She hated this trait more than anything else when she was a child since she acted differently. It came with a lot of need for care. She needed to quench her thirst for fighting randomly.

She felt the urge to fight and push herself, and it came at any time.

T-t-t-t-....You are really growling like a beast, aren't you?

As she was getting pushed by him and heard his words, Julia suddenly remembered something. While her wounds hurt, the pain in her chest made her remember a certain memory.

A memory of a time when a certain white-haired woman had cut the same place, and she spoke to her.

"Little sister. No matter what, you must never hate yourself. Only by accepting your own self can you move forward."

Those words came from the traitor, the person her family exiled. But she still remembered the smile she gave her. At that time, she didn't understand it, but now, as she felt her own emotions, Julia realized what she had meant back then.

'As if you knew I would come into this.'

As she realized, she thought about things differently. Why must she be like others? If this is how she was meant to be, why refuse it?

Seeing it like that, she realized the restrictions she was putting on herself.

What were senses? What did those mean? Did her trait [White Tiger*] only amplify her five senses, or was there something else?

Then she realized how narrow-minded she was.

This world contained more information than one's eyes, ears, nose, skin, or tongue could sense.

Mana imprints.

Intent.

Thoughts.

Concepts.

Aura.

Everything was included in this world. In such a place where these types of things existed, how narrowminded would it be if she only copied how a normal animal could feel the world?

If things were that simple, how could those monsters from dungeons be this threatening against all these hunters?

Wasn't there a reason why the Middleton Family was better at dealing with monsters and not the Arkwrights?

'Right. I was not even using it to the full extent.' Taking a deep breath, Julia closed her eyes and allowed herself to feel the power of the [White Tiger] fully.

She let go of her fear and embraced the wildness within her. She felt her senses expand, not just heightening her sight and hearing but also giving her an intuitive understanding of her surroundings.

It was as if she was connected to nature, to the world itself.

She could feel the vibrations in the ground, the shifts in the air, and the faintest hints of movement. Her mind was clear, her focus sharp.

Those things, which were mere illusions, felt like they couldn't disturb her senses.

She felt like a sphere was being formed around her. A sphere with a radius of five meters. And right at the surface of that sphere, she suddenly 'felt' something.

A presence.

'Here.'

She could sense it.

SWOOSH!

Damien moved to strike again, confident in his victory. But this time, Julia was ready. She sensed his approach and felt the minute changes in the air around her. She sidestepped his attack with fluid grace, her movements precise and calculated.

"You think you can mock me? Treat me like a beast?" Julia's voice was calm, but it held an edge of something fierce and untamed. "I'll show you the strength of a true Middleton."

Julia's newfound awareness of her surroundings gave her a brief advantage, allowing her to sidestep Damien's attack with fluid grace. She felt every shift in the air, every vibration in the ground, and knew exactly where her opponent was. But as the moments passed, she realized that relying solely on her [White Tiger] trait made her feel no different from a beast, a creature reacting to its environment.

She was more than that. She was a swordsman. She resonated with the sword and held it as an extension of herself.

A swordsman is what she was.

CLANK! Damien recovered quickly from his missed strike, his eyes narrowing as he realized Julia had adapted to his illusions. He swung his blade again, but Julia was ready, parrying the blow with a precision that left him momentarily off balance.

But she needed more. Just sensing her opponent wasn't enough. She needed to incorporate her heightened senses into her swordsmanship to create something uniquely her own.

As Damien pressed his attack, Julia's mind raced. She thought about her family's techniques, the principles behind them, and how she could merge them with her own abilities. She let go of the idea of copying others and instead focused on creating something new, something that belonged to her alone.

Damien's blade came at her again, and Julia met it with her own, their swords clashing with a resounding clang. But this time, she didn't just react; she anticipated. She could feel the intent behind his strikes and sense the rhythm of his movements. It was as if she was reading his mind through the connection of their swords.

Julia closed her eyes, drawing on the energy within her, letting it flow through her body and into her blade. She envisioned her technique, a synthesis of the Middleton Family's raw power and her own refined precision.

"Damien," she called out, her voice steady and confident. "You're about to witness something new."

Damien sneered, not understanding the shift in her demeanor. "Empty words won't save you, Middleton."

Julia smiled, a fierce determination lighting up her eyes. She took a deep breath, centering herself, and then she moved.

Her sword flashed in the dim light, moving faster than before, guided by an innate understanding of her surroundings and her opponent. She called upon the essence of the [White Tiger], but not just as a wild beast. She fused it with her swordsman's discipline, creating a harmony between instinct and skill.

「Sword of Middleton: Tiger's Resonance」

The technique was a blend of raw power and precise control; each strike was imbued with the ferocity of a tiger and the precision of a master swordsman. Julia's movements were fluid yet powerful, her blade cutting through the air with a grace that was both beautiful and deadly.

Damien's eyes widened as he struggled to keep up. Each time he thought he had a read on her attack, Julia's blade was already moving to the next position, guided by her heightened senses and her newfound technique.

"You can't keep up, can you?" Julia taunted, her confidence growing with each successful strike.

Damien's expression shifted, a smile creeping onto his lips despite the pressure he was under. "You're really strong, Middleton. A worthy opponent indeed. But it seems you've failed to measure your limits."

As he spoke, Julia's heart suddenly throbbed inside her chest, a sharp pain radiating through her body. She gasped, her confident demeanor faltering as she fell to one knee, struggling to fight against the pain.

Damien stepped back, his smile widening as he saw her distress. "You may be able to see everything and sense everything, but at the end of the day, a beast can never achieve more than what its body permits. This is what differentiates a beast from a human."

After all, she had forgotten one thing. Her body was not like a strong monster's. It was a human body, and it had limitations.

His words stung, but there was a certain glint in Damien's eyes, a flicker of fear masked by his taunts. He felt threatened by Julia's prowess, recognizing her potential despite his harsh words.

Julia gritted her teeth, her hand clutching her chest as she fought to stay upright. The pain was excruciating, but she refused to give in. She wouldn't let Damien's words break her spirit.

"You... don't understand..., " she panted, her voice strained. "I'm not... just a beast...."

Damien's smile faltered slightly as he saw the determination still burning in her eyes. He knew he had underestimated her resilience, and it made him uneasy.

"You can't win if your body fails you, Middleton," he sneered, but there was an edge of uncertainty in his voice. "Yield. At least while you can stand."

However, reality was often disappointing like this and there was nothing Julia could do about it.

"....."

Yet she didn't yield, only to fall unconscious.

THUD! At that exact moment, she failed to realize it, but there was one thing that changed inside her.

Her trait [White Tiger] had evolved into another one.

Chapter 403 91.11 - Duels [2]

As Julia collapsed to the ground, the amphitheater fell into a stunned silence. The spectators, who had been on the edge of their seats throughout the duel, now looked at the arena with wide eyes and open mouths. They had witnessed countless duels at Arcadia Hunter Academy, but this one was different. The level of skill and intensity displayed by both combatants was extraordinary.

The murmurs started slowly, then grew louder as the crowd processed what they had just seen. "Did you see that? Damien Arkwright's swordsmanship is on another level!"

"Yeah, the way he used the 「Realm of Dreams」 ... It's incredible. At this age, other heirs couldn't even deploy that, let alone in the middle of a fight."

"And his tactics, so precise. Every move had a purpose."

But amidst the admiration for Damien's prowess, there was a palpable respect for Julia's performance. Those who knew about the 「Realm of Dreams」 understood its terrifying nature. It was a technique designed to disrupt the senses of the opponent, making them vulnerable and disoriented. Many who faced it for the first time never survived.

"Julia Middleton... She held her own against the 「Realm of Dreams」," a seasoned scout remarked, his voice filled with awe. "Do you know how rare that is? Most people can't even fight back once they're caught in it."

Another scout nodded in agreement. "And she didn't just hold her own. She almost won. Her technique, her resilience... It was extraordinary."

"She adapted so quickly. It's like she has an innate understanding of her surroundings that goes beyond normal senses."

"She's not just relying on her family's techniques. She's developing something unique, something powerful."

In the stands, Ethan watched Julia with a mixture of happiness and concern.

He knew how hard she had trained, how much she had pushed herself. Her performance today had been nothing short of remarkable. She had faced one of the most challenging techniques and had nearly emerged victorious.

"Julia, you were amazing," he whispered, his eyes filled with admiration. "You'll get there. I know you will."

Though he couldn't spend too much time here. Since it would be his match soon.

Damien Arkwright stood in the arena, breathing heavily but triumphant. He glanced at Julia's unconscious form, a flicker of respect in his eyes. Despite his taunts and cruelty, he couldn't deny the strength and skill she had shown.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the announcer's voice echoed through the amphitheater, breaking the silence, "the winner of this duel is Damien Arkwright!"

The crowd erupted into applause, but there was a different tone to it. It wasn't just admiration for Damien's victory; it was also recognition of the incredible fight both combatants had delivered. Julia's ability to stand against the 「Realm of Dreams」 and her nearly victorious performance had left a lasting impression on everyone present.

As medics rushed to tend to Julia, Damien walked off the arena, his confidence unshaken.

At least that was how it looked, yet something was different.

'That bitch....She almost got me.'

The fact that a mere beast dared to bare his fangs at him. The fact that he almost lost.

He felt anger. He refused to acknowledge it. As the superior one from the start, how could he let a mere beast almost bite him?

It was unacceptable.

'At least no one was here to witness.'

He thought inwardly, yet a subtle smile crept on his lips. How would it feel if he were to break such a beast?

"I will look forward to the time when you crawl under my feet." He mumbled. "Julia Middleton."
With a crazed expression on his face.

<Arcadia Hunter Academy, Thursday, 4 P.M.>

As the arena was cleared and Julia was taken to the infirmary, the crowd buzzed with anticipation for the next and final duel of the day. The atmosphere was electric, charged with excitement and curiosity. This was the duel everyone had been waiting for: Ethan Hartley, the rising star with an impressive lineage, versus Kellan Stormrider, a higher-ranked student who had controversially chosen to challenge someone significantly lower in rank.

The amphitheater was filled to capacity, with students, faculty, and spectators eager to witness the showdown. Whispers and murmurs filled the air as people discussed the upcoming fight.

"I can't believe Kellan challenged Ethan. What was he thinking?"

"Yeah, it's a cowardly move. He's ranked 456, and Ethan is 970. It's not a fair match."

"Well, I've heard Ethan has been showing incredible progress lately. Maybe Kellan sees him as a real threat."

As the crowd settled, the announcer's voice boomed through the amphitheater. "Ladies and gentlemen, for our final duel of the day, we have Kellan Stormrider, ranked 456, versus Ethan Hartley, ranked 970. Contestants, please step into the arena!"

The crowd erupted into applause as Ethan Hartley stepped into the arena. His presence commanded immediate attention. His wavy blue hair and piercing hazel eyes, combined with his calm demeanor, made him a figure of intrigue and admiration. He held his spear confidently, a weapon that had become a symbol of his determination and skill.

Opposite him, Kellan Stormrider entered the arena, his expression stern and focused. He was a tall, muscular figure with dark hair and a determined gaze. Despite the frowns and murmurs from the audience, he maintained his composure, ready to face Ethan.

"Look at them. They're both so composed," a student whispered to her friend.

"Yeah, but Kellan's got the rank advantage. Ethan's going to have to pull something extraordinary to win this."

They both knew the fight between Ethan and Samuel. After all, Ethan was already a hot topic, and many people were observing his prowess.

The announcer's voice called out again, signaling the start of the duel. "Are both contestants ready?"

Ethan and Kellan nodded, their eyes locked onto each other. The tension was palpable.

"Begin!"

As the announcer's voice echoed through the amphitheater, the tension reached its peak. The crowd fell silent, their eyes glued to the two combatants.

Kellan Stormrider moved first, his greatsword glinting in the light as he charged forward. His muscles rippled with power, his attribute [Shock] adding a visible aura of energy around his weapon. With each step, the ground seemed to tremble slightly, a testament to his strength.

Ethan, however, remained calm. His spear crackled with lightning psions, the energy dancing along its length. He waited, his eyes focused and unflinching as Kellan closed the distance.

With a mighty swing, Kellan brought his greatsword down in a powerful arc, aiming to crush Ethan with sheer force. The air around the blade shimmered with the shockwave it generated, creating a wave of pressure that surged toward Ethan.

'He is fast!' Ethan reacted swiftly, his lightning-imbued spear meeting Kellan's greatsword in a clash of elemental forces. Even though Ethan trusted his speed and strength, Kellan had surpassed him in that regard.

If his lightning attribute wasn't increasing the speed of his motor reflexes and the strength of his muscles, he would be having a hard time even at the start.

CLANK! Sparks flew as the weapons collided, the shockwave from Kellan's attack dispersing into the ground with a resounding boom. The crowd gasped, the sheer power of the impact reverberating through the arena.

Ethan spun his spear, deflecting Kellan's follow-up strikes with precise, fluid movements.

Each clash sent shockwaves rippling through the air, but Ethan's agility and lightning-enhanced reflexes kept him one step ahead.

—Thunder Step

Ethan invoked his skill, his body flickering with speed as he sidestepped a particularly heavy blow from Kellan's greatsword. In an instant, he was behind his opponent, his spear crackling with energy.

Kellan, however, was no novice. He twisted his body with surprising speed, bringing his greatsword around in a wide arc. The blade caught Ethan's spear just in time, and the shockwave from the impact sent a tremor through the arena floor.

Ethan grinned, his eyes alight with the thrill of the duel.

"I still don't understand why you had chosen me as your opponent, but thank you for the opportunity."

Even the fact that Ethan was chosen by someone of a higher rank didn't bother him too much. No, rather, it strangely made him proud.

"Don't get carried away."

Kellan responded. It was quite irritating seeing Ethan deflecting his attacks like that.

'This guy is way above his rank.'

It was evident that his duel wasn't meant to be easy. But, well, he had no choice either.

"We will see about that."

Raising his spear high, Ethan called upon the storm. Dark clouds began to gather overhead, lightning crackling within them. The air buzzed with energy as he channeled his power into his weapon.

「Spear of Hartley: Exotic Form, Thunder God's Wrath!」

A massive bolt of lightning struck Ethan's spear, infusing it with an intense, crackling energy. The ground beneath him charred from the sheer power, and Ethan stood amidst the electric storm, his spear a beacon of thunderous might.

Kellan's eyes narrowed, but he stood his ground.

'It is the same move. Calling Thunder and Lightning.'

Channeling his own attribute, he surged with power, the shockwaves around him intensifying. His greatsword hummed with energy, ready to meet Ethan's assault.

「Seismic Shocks.」

With a burst of speed, Ethan closed the distance, his spear thrusting forward with the force of a lightning strike. Kellan met the attack head-on, his greatsword clashing against the spear in a blinding explosion of light and energy.

BOOM!

The shockwave from the collision rippled through the arena, sending dust and debris flying. The crowd shielded their eyes, the sheer force of the impact leaving them in awe.

Ethan pressed the attack, his movements a blur of lightning-fast strikes. His spear danced with electric energy, each thrust aimed at overwhelming Kellan's defenses. Kellan countered with powerful swings of his greatsword, the shockwaves from his attacks creating ripples in the air.

"This...."

'I need to use it.'

Kellan's expression hardened, and he decided it was time to employ a special technique he had honed over the years.

With a sudden shift, he slammed his greatsword into the ground, sending a series of shockwaves rippling through the arena floor. But these were no ordinary shockwaves; they were aimed to disrupt Ethan's equilibrium by targeting his inner ear, the primary organ responsible for balance.

Not many people were aware of this fact, and he had come to the realization of this while training on his own.

Shockwaves, especially the ones that were specifically manipulated, were rather rare to be seen, making people not aware of their aftereffects.

And Ethan was one of those.

「Shockwave Disruptor.」

The crowd watched in stunned silence as Ethan staggered, his balance momentarily thrown off by the disorienting effect of the shockwaves. Kellan didn't waste a second. He pressed his advantage, launching a relentless barrage of attacks. Each swing of his greatsword sent another disorienting shockwave, keeping Ethan off-balance.

Ethan gritted his teeth, feeling the ground beneath him tremble with each shockwave. His vision blurred slightly, and his footing became unstable. He tried to counterattack, but Kellan's precise use of shockwaves disrupted his movements.

"Not so easy, is it?"

Ethan's mind raced. He needed to find a way to regain his balance and counter Kellan's relentless assault. With each shockwave, he felt his control slipping further away. He knew he had to act quickly.

「Spear of Hartley. Thunder crash」

Summoning all his focus, Ethan channeled the power of his lightning psions into his legs, grounding himself with a surge of energy.

It was an offensive ability, but he decided to use it to strengthen his footing.

CRACKLE!

The lightning crackled around him, creating a stabilizing force field that counteracted the disruptive shockwaves.

"Nice trick," Ethan muttered, a determined smile on his face. "But it won't be enough."

After all, he found his footing once again.

With newfound stability, Ethan launched himself into the air, using his lightning attribute to propel him 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.

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

CRASH! And as if a volcano erupted, the ground was broken into shambles. There stood two figures.

One Ethan. Kneeling on the ground.

And the other one, Kellan, with his sword piercing the ground. He stood like a proud knight, looking down on his opponent.

"Yield."

Nobody saw what was happening, but in a second, suddenly, Ethan was on the ground.

Chapter 404 91.12 - Duels [2]

The crowd was abuzz with murmurs of confusion and disbelief. The abrupt end to the duel had left many spectators wondering what had transpired in that final, decisive moment. Ethan Hartley, the rising star, was on his knees, while Kellan Stormrider stood tall and proud, his greatsword piercing the ground.

"Yield," Kellan's voice echoed through the amphitheater, firm and commanding.

The crowd erupted into applause, but there was an undercurrent of confusion. Many had not fully understood what had happened in those final moments.

Kaya Hartley, seated in the VIP section with her daughter Jane, observed the scene with a critical eye. She had seen what many had missed.

"Mother, what happened? How did Brother Ethan lose so suddenly?" Jane asked, her eyes wide with curiosity.

Kaya leaned closer to her daughter, her voice calm and measured. "When Ethan utilized his Thunder-infused spear to strike Kellan, Kellan met the attack head-on with his greatsword. But he didn't just block the strike; he created a special type of shockwave field."

Jane's eyes widened in realization. "A shockwave field?"

Kaya nodded. "Yes. Most shockwaves are designed to push away or disrupt. However, Kellan reversed the propagation of the shockwave. Instead of pushing Ethan's spear away, it pulled it in. The force of the shockwave acted like a vacuum, drawing the spear toward the greatsword."

Jane's brow furrowed as she tried to visualize the mechanics. "So, when Kellan stabbed the ground with his greatsword..."

"The ground absorbed the shock from the attack," Kaya continued. "Especially for lightning, it acted as a grounding effect, nullifying all the energy at once. Kellan used the ground to dissipate the energy of Ethan's attack, rendering it harmless."

"And Brother Ethan?" Jane asked, her eyes focused on her mother.

"Ethan had directed his energy to ground himself, but when the energy was nullified so abruptly, he was momentarily left unbalanced," Kaya explained. "That's why he ended up kneeling. It was a brilliant and unconventional use of shockwaves and the environment."

Jane's expression shifted from confusion to admiration. "That's incredible. Kellan must have trained extensively to perfect that technique."

Kaya nodded, her eyes still on the arena. "Indeed. Kellan's mastery of shockwaves and his strategic use of the environment were impressive. As you can see, many talented individuals are at this academy."

They were talking as if the fight was over. And, in fact, it was supposed to be. Since it was evident that Ethan wouldn't be able to recover from this position, the energy he had spent and his posture were evidence that he had lost.

"So, you won't yield."

Kellan spoke suddenly. After all, no response was coming from Ethan, which meant the fight was yet to be over.

The crowd gasped at the spirit Ethan was showcasing, but in fact, the reason why Ethan wasn't talking was not because he refused to acknowledge that he lost. It was because his voice wasn't being transmitted to the outside. Kellan was interfering with the transmission of Ethan's voice, using his shockwaves to interrupt the sound waves at a perfect counter-propagation.

Kellan shook his head as if he didn't want what he was about to do. Inside, he was torn between his honor and the blackmail that forced his hand. He had to beat and humiliate Ethan to fulfill his end of a sinister deal.

'Sorry for doing this. But I have no other choice.' With a grim expression, Kellan coated his fists with shockwaves, enhancing their power.

SWOOSH! THUD! He stepped forward and, with a swift motion, punched Ethan in the face. The force of the blow, amplified by the shockwaves, sent Ethan sprawling across the ground.

The crowd erupted in shocked exclamations, many unable to comprehend the sudden and brutal escalation. Ethan lay on the ground, struggling to rise, but Kellan was relentless. He approached Ethan, his fists still crackling with energy.

"Yield!" Kellan demanded, but again, Ethan's voice couldn't be heard. He had already tried to yield, but Kellan's interference had silenced him.

Kellan's expression hardened further. He raised his fist and brought it down on Ethan again, the shockwaves creating a nauseating thud as they connected with Ethan's body. The brutal assault continued, each punch more forceful than the last.

"Yield!" Kellan repeated, his voice growing more desperate. He didn't want to continue, but the pressure on him was immense. He was being forced to go beyond his limits, his integrity being tested to the brink.

Ethan's body shook with each blow, but his spirit remained unbroken. He tried to muster his energy, but Kellan's relentless assault was taking its toll. The crowd's cheers had turned to horrified murmurs, the spectacle no longer one of admiration but of horror.

Jane's eyes filled with tears as she watched her cousin endure the brutal beating. "Mother, why is this happening? Why won't he stop?"

Kaya's expression was grim. She knew something was terribly wrong. "This.....There is more to this than it meets the eye."

She focused on Ethan, and then she saw his lips moving.

'He is speaking?' Then everything fell into its place.

'This kid! He is intentionally not letting him speak.'

Since shockwaves could also be used to nullify the sounds.

'You dare! To my nephew!'

Instantly, a weird pressure started being emitted from her. People all around her started having trouble breathing, let alone seeing anything.

It was as if death had descended on them. And that was normal.

Since they were facing the aura of Kaya Hartley, Three-digits-hunter, firsthand.

But then, suddenly, her eyes captured something.

'This....Hahaha....that is right. This is Ethan.'

The fact that something inside Ethan was changing.

'Haha....'

In an instant, she retracted her aura, letting other people breathe since there was no need for her to do anything else.

On the arena, as the beating continued, Ethan's resolve began to waver. He was reaching his limit, his vision blurring from the pain and fatigue. He knew he had to do something, anything, to end this.

'Why is this happening?'

Ethan thought, his mind a storm of confusion and pain. 'I was just having an honorable duel, fighting while putting everything on the line. Why is this happening to me?'

His thoughts swirled in a chaotic dance of pain and disbelief.

'Why am I being subjected to this? I just wanted to show my cool side to others, to shine like a hero. I wanted to be an inspiration to others. And now, why is this guy suddenly beating me?'

Each blow from Kellan felt like a hammer on his spirit.

'Why am I forced to feel this pain? What made this guy think he had the right to do this? Who gave this guy the right? Who does he think he is?'

And then, amidst the chaos and confusion, a new feeling began to emerge within Ethan. It started as a small spark, a flicker of something primal and fierce.

It was a feeling of indignation, of righteous anger.

'No...' Ethan's thoughts began to coalesce around this new feeling. 'No one has the right to do this to me. No one can take away my honor, my dignity. I won't let them.'

'It was the same at that time with Jane. The same with Emily. If not for that masked guy suddenly coming to help us, I would not be there. If not for the fact that those seniors decided to let me go, I would not be there. For all this time, I benefited from being Hartley. For all this time, I was known for being a Hartley, not for being Ethan.'

The spark grew into a flame, and the flame into an inferno.

'For just how long are you going to let yourself be stepped upon, Ethan? What do you think would he think if he were to see you?'

He asked himself.

'Pathetic.'

Then, as if to answer, a cold voice echoed in his head. A cold voice that didn't belong to the figure that he had always seen in his dreams but to the young boy with cold purple eyes.

Yet the effect was clear.

'That is right.' 'For my justice, I will stand up.'

Though battered and bruised, Ethan's body began to radiate a new kind of energy. It was not just the power of his lightning psions but something deeper, something born of his unyielding spirit.

'I am Ethan Hartley!' he thought fiercely. 'I am a hero, and I won't let this end here. I won't be defeated like this!'

With a sudden burst of strength, Ethan pushed himself off the ground, his eyes blazing with a newfound resolve.

–CRACKLE! His body crackled with lightning, but this time, it was different. It was as if the very essence of the storm had merged with his spirit.

–Trait, [??????' Might] is active. –The world responds to your will. –Thunder bows down in front of your presence. A bunch of voices echoed inside his head, but Ethan wasn't in the condition to listen to them. Kellan, who had been preparing for another punch, paused in shock. "What the...?"

Ethan's voice, now clear and powerful, rang out. "I don't know who made you do this. But for whatever reason you have, I will not let myself be stepped upon once again."

The crowd gasped as Ethan's aura flared, a tempest of lightning and fury. He stood tall, his spear glowing with an intensity that matched his resolve.

Kellan hesitated, a flicker of doubt crossing his face. But he couldn't back down now. He had to see this through.

"You should have yielded," Kellan muttered, his fists still crackling with shockwaves.

Ethan's eyes narrowed. "I will never yield to someone who fights without honor."

Ethan raised his spear high, his eyes now turning a vertical, glowing yellow. Thunder flashed within them as he stepped forward with purpose and power.

He mumbled, his voice resonating with the energy of the storm.

"By the will of my call, father of all, Hear my cry through the storm's enthrall. With the power of thunder in hand, I summon the heavens to strike this land."

RUMBLE! The moment he finished his words, the sky rumbled ominously. Dark clouds swirled above, and a silhouette of a giant figure began to form within them. The crowd watched in awe and fear, their eyes glued to the spectacle unfolding before them.

Ethan named the strike with a powerful voice that echoed across the arena, "Sunderer of Aesir."

–SWOOSH! With an explosive burst of energy, Ethan leaped into the sky, seeming to defy gravity.

—RUMBLE! His spear was held firmly in one hand, and he ascended with the grace and ferocity of a storm. As he reached the peak of his leap, the silhouette of the giant in the sky mirrored his movements.

Descending rapidly, Ethan aimed his spear directly at Kellan. The giant's spear in the sky followed suit, creating a breathtaking visual of an immense power converging upon a single point.

"Come!"

Kellan, bracing himself, raised his greatsword to meet the strike.

CRACKLE! BOOM!

The two spears—Ethan's and the giant's—met with Kellan's greatsword in a cataclysmic explosion of light and sound.

The impact created a shockwave that rippled through the arena, sending debris flying and forcing the spectators to shield their eyes from the blinding brilliance.

The ground beneath them shattered, creating a massive crater at the point of impact. The sheer force of the collision sent tremors through the entire structure of the amphitheater, shaking it to its core.

When the dust settled, the crowd was silent, holding their breath to see the outcome. In the center of the crater stood Ethan, his spear still crackling with residual lightning.

However, before him stood someone that no one had ever expected.

It was a bulky man with a slightly wrinkled face.

"Headmaster?"

Chapter 405 92.1 - Hidden Currents

What makes the main characters of any fiction distinct?

What makes them different from others? Why are they the main characters and not any random person that can be chosen from the world?

Why?

The answer is plain, simple, and obvious. It is because they possess something that others don't.

They are the chosen ones of the world.

Talent.

They are always talented regardless of what it is since, no matter how no one would love to listen to the story of those who fail, even after trying.

This is the reality of the world.

Some of them are genuinely kind. Heroic and selfless people.

Some of them are like me, who pursue the path of vengeance. The ones like me would do everything to reach the goal they set.

Then, what defines Ethan?

Is it genius?

That is not. Ethan is certainly talented. He may not be smart, but he inherently possesses a special understanding of combat.

Even without thinking, he does the most optimal things. He doesn't need to grasp the essence of everything.

But is this alone enough? Is only Ethan a genius?

No.

Julia is pretty similar to Ethan. She is good at combat and finding her way through awakenings.

Lilia is good at analyzing and understanding. She is good at understanding concepts and natural principles and commanding natural authority while only using mana.

Irina is smart. She is good at academics and good at understanding algorithms and magic.

Carl is strong, and while not exceptional at in-person combat, he is good at strategic combat. Victor.

He is a one-century genius who understands everything easily, absorbs mana easily, and controls mana as if he can control his breath.

Then, if such characters have all types of talents at the level of genius, what makes Ethan the main character?

When asking myself this question, the answer I came up with wasn't something that was scientific alone but satisfied the conditions.

He is the fated one.

Whatever happens, he has the ability to overcome the things that are thrown his way and get stronger with each opportunity.

His genius didn't rely on his efforts alone, nor his emotions.

His genius was simply affected by the world itself.

This was a special way of being blessed that no other person ever had.

Is this confirmed? It is not. After all, such a thing can not be confirmed since there is no distinct evidence.

But is it wrong to test it?

After all, if it is Ethan, he has the potential to become stronger than everyone in the world.

The future hero who saved humanity.

He is such a magnificent guy.

He will not falter in the face of hardship. Instead, he will awaken another one of his talents every time.

Since the storyline of the game had already been altered to the extent that it is nearly impossible to predict what will happen in the game, why not test if Ethan can face the difficulties?

The evidence was right before me since Ethan was able to defeat Kellan Stormrider, who was a future villain with strength that is parallel to the students ranking 200-100.

Even now, I am sure that if Kellan was allowed to challenge a higher-ranking student, he would win and increase his rank.

But that was no longer the case since I arranged everything in this way.

Kellan fell to his knees, breathing heavily, his eyes wide with disbelief.

The crowd erupted into cheers, their admiration for Ethan evident. It was a victory that defied logic, a result that made no sense given the disparity in their ranks.

But it was a victory nonetheless, and it confirmed my hypothesis.

As long as it is within a reasonable range, anything that seems illogical can be possible when Ethan is in the equation. He is the fated one, the hero destined to overcome any obstacle, no matter how insurmountable it may seem.

'He even awakened a part of his higher blood and used Sunderer of Aesir.' Ethan's triumph over Kellan was a testament to his unique genius, a confirmation that he possessed a special blessing that set him apart from everyone else.

'And now, the second seat will start showing interest.'

It was a reminder that in this unpredictable world, there are forces at play beyond our understanding.

But that was enough.

With a piece like Ethan, who can overcome everything, it wouldn't be wise not to use him.

'Grow more, Ethan. Grow more so that you will become a spear that destroys those who dared to take everything from me.'

As the dust settled and the brightness of the explosion faded, the crowd was left in stunned silence. In the center of the crater stood Ethan, his spear still crackling with residual lightning. But before him stood a figure that no one had expected.

It was an old man, slightly bulky with a wrinkled face, his presence commanding and authoritative.

"Headmaster?" someone from the crowd whispered, the shock evident in their voice.

The amphitheater erupted into a flurry of murmurs and gasps. The headmaster himself had intervened in the duel, and his presence was nothing short of monumental. Jonathan Verdict, one of the strongest individuals in the Human Federation, had personally attended the fight.

Jonathan looked down at Ethan, who had already collapsed to the ground, his body charred and trembling from the immense strain of his final attack. He crouched down, placing a gentle hand on Ethan's shoulder, his eyes filled with a mix of concern and admiration.

"Why push yourself this far, to the point it destroys your body?" Jonathan mumbled, his voice barely above a whisper. There was a profound understanding in his tone, a recognition of the drive and determination that had led Ethan to this point.

He then turned his gaze to Kellan, who was still standing but with a look of utter fear in his eyes. Kellan's breathing was rough, his chest heaving as if he had just escaped the jaws of death. His greatsword was still held loosely in his trembling hands.

Jonathan's eyes narrowed slightly as he observed Kellan's state. The boy was clearly traumatized, his mind reeling from the experience of near death.

It was an experience that left a lasting mark on those who lived through it—the knowledge that their life had been moments away from ending, with nothing they could do to stop it.

But that was the reality of the Hunter field. This was something these youngsters would experience countless times. Therefore, there was nothing he could do.

Those who could overcome this feeling would be successful hunters, while those who couldn't would be left behind.

Life itself was a test.

"I am.....I am alive," Kellan stammered, his voice shaking.

Jonathan nodded slowly. "Indeed. But it should not have come to this." His voice was firm, carrying the weight of authority and wisdom. "The purpose of these duels is to challenge and grow, not to break and destroy."

The crowd, now understanding the gravity of the situation, watched in respectful silence. The presence of the headmaster had shifted the atmosphere, filling it with a sense of solemnity and introspection.

Kaya Hartley, who had been ready to intervene, now watched with a mixture of relief and anger.

The headmaster's timely intervention saved both boys from what could have been a tragic outcome, but at the same time, it showed that he purposefully didn't bat an eye to what was happening here. But, of course, for Jonathan, it was different.

"....."

The announcer couldn't even say anything as he felt that he couldn't understand what was happening.

A giant appeared from the sky, split the thunder, and attacked the arena, and as if this was enough, the Headmaster personally intervened.

"The result of this duel is crystal clear. The victor is Ethan Hartley."

Headmaster announced.

"Do you have any problems with that kid?"

Seeing Kellan not even having any ounce of rebuttal, Jonathan nodded his head.

'At least you are not stupid enough to deny what happened before everyone.'

Though this kid's demeanor and his actions didn't match what happened in the arena, Jonathan couldn't think about those things right now.

Since, after all, this student was able to use the magic of higher beings.

'Firstly, that girl, and now this boy.'

Jonathan thought to himself.

Two students who would bring change to everything appeared in the academy. This attack just now.

If he hadn't interfered, the arena would be destroyed to the dust, and there would be nothing remaining from the student that he had just protected.

And that wouldn't be enough; even the onlookers would be massacred. That attack contained such high-ranking power that he noticed at the last second.

'First, the imprint of First Lord. And then the imprint of Dragons. What is happening to the world?'

Tides had been changing. He was constantly being reminded of this fact. But, still. It was the first time he had directly experienced what was about to come.

'The next generation is in the Golden Generation.'

Jonathan Verdict, his presence commanding the attention of everyone in the amphitheater, took a deep breath before making the final announcement. "This concludes the duels for today," he declared, his voice resonating through the arena. "All participants have shown remarkable skill and determination. Let today serve as a lesson in the balance of power and wisdom."

The crowd, still buzzing from the unexpected events, began to disperse, their minds filled with the extraordinary displays of strength and spirit they had witnessed. The headmaster turned his attention back to Ethan, who lay on the ground, his body still trembling from the aftereffects of his powerful attack.

Jonathan knelt beside Ethan, his expression softening. "Ethan Hartley," he said gently, his voice carrying a tone of admiration. "Your spirit is truly remarkable. Your desire to uphold the honor and fight with everything you have is commendable."

Ethan, struggling to stay conscious, managed to look up at the headmaster. His eyes, filled with a mix of pain and determination, met Jonathan's gaze. "Thank you, Headmaster," he whispered, his voice weak but resolute.

Jonathan placed a reassuring hand on Ethan's shoulder. "You have shown us all the true meaning of resilience and courage. But remember, there is a fine line between bravery and recklessness. Pushing yourself to the point of destruction is not the path to greatness. Learn to temper your strength with wisdom."

Ethan nodded slowly, his body aching but his spirit unbroken. "I understand, Headmaster. I will strive to become stronger but also wiser."

The headmaster smiled warmly. "That is the spirit of a true hunter. Continue to hone your skills, and you will achieve great things."

As medics arrived to attend to Ethan, Jonathan stood up, his gaze shifting to Kellan. The boy was still shaken, his eyes wide with fear and confusion. Jonathan approached him, his expression stern but not unkind.

"Kellan Stormrider," he said, his voice firm. "You have experienced the brink of death today. Let this be a lesson to you. The path of a hunter is fraught with danger, and understanding the gravity of your actions is crucial. Use this experience to grow stronger, both in body and mind."

Kellan nodded, his voice barely a whisper. "Yes, Headmaster."

Jonathan turned back to the crowd, his voice once again commanding their attention. "Let today serve as a reminder to all of you. Strength and power are important, but they must be balanced with wisdom and restraint. Only then can you truly become great hunters."

With that, Jonathan Verdict left the arena, his presence leaving a lasting impression on everyone present. The students and spectators slowly began to leave, their minds filled with the lessons and events of the day.

As Ethan was carried away by the medics, he looked up at the sky, the storm clouds slowly dispersing.

"....."

His thoughts unknown.

Chapter 406 92.2 - Hidden Currents

Everyone has their regrets.

Things that they wanted to do but weren't able to?

Wrong choices. Wrong time. Wrong acts.

In the end, it is always something that is wrong.

For some people, it is engraved in their lives.

For Lucas, who had lived his whole life under the shadow of other people, there were countless of those.

The moment when he first lost to Julia.

The moment when he collapsed from overworking and understood it was his limit.

The moment when he lost in the duel against Damien.

The moment he died for the sake of the other people and received nothing.

Those were all regrets.

He had seen all of his future regrets and promised himself he would change them.

To change the future that was awaiting him. To become the star of the light.

Yet, aside from those future regrets, there was always one thing that had been haunting him.

A person.

"Lucas."

White hair tied at the back of his neck.

Cold blue eyes piercing one's own existence.

A pressure that even breathing is hard before it.

A presence for which the world needs to show respect.

Fergus Middleton.

His father.

"Yes, father."

He was one of the strongest beings of his generation. Someone who reached the pinnacle of the world.

Someone who stood at the top of many monsters, many demons. Blade Demon.

Someone who earned such a nickname.

Yet, for Lucas, the existence of Fergus meant something different.

He was the reason Lucas was like this. From the moment he was born, Lucas was always subjected to the ideal of a perfect heir.

Julia was not that different.

The two were raised by constantly being compared to each other, someone else.

If one asked Lucas what his biggest regret was, that would be the fact that he had never once heard praise from Fergus' mouth.

Not even once.

No ounce of acceptance.

For Fergus, only results mattered, and Lucas wasn't able to show any good results at all. At least, the results he had shown had always fallen short compared to the ones that Julia had.

As a swordsman, Julia was superior. Her talent was slightly higher than his, and that slight difference was all that mattered.

At the end of the day, he never was able to get any sort of compliment.

Even when he died, he felt like Fergus was disappointed in him.

As Lucas stood before his father, Fergus Middleton, the weight of years of unspoken expectations hung heavy in the air. Fergus's presence alone demanded respect, his stature and cold blue eyes piercing through any facade.

Lucas swallowed his nerves, bracing himself for whatever words his father would impart.

Even now, he couldn't stand in his presence completely devoid of anything.

"Lucas," Fergus's voice was deep and commanding, cutting through the arena's lingering cheers. "You did well today, choosing the heir of 'those.' You've shown that Middletons are not to be trifled with."

Lucas inclined his head slightly, a mix of relief and pride swelling within him at his father's acknowledgment.

'Finally.'

It was a rare moment, and he savored it, hoping it marked a shift in their strained relationship.

For the first time in his life, things were starting to get in his way.

"And your swordsmanship," Fergus continued, his tone shifting subtly. "Combining the illusion blade of the Arkwrights with Middleton techniques. What prompted that choice?"

Lucas straightened, seizing the opportunity to explain his strategy, eager to demonstrate his thoughtfulness and skill. "Father, I thought—"

Before he could finish, an overwhelming pressure emanated from Fergus. It was as if the very air around them thickened, making breathing difficult. Lucas instinctively took a step back, his heart racing as he met his father's intense gaze.

"What made you think that we, as Middletons, would need to resort to the puny tactics of the Arkwrights?" Fergus's voice cut through the room, each word laden with disappointment and disapproval.

Lucas felt a pang of dread.

'Huh?' He had hoped for approval, for validation, yet here he stood, once again facing his father's unyielding standards.

'But, you didn't show the same reaction when Julia was the one that did it.' He couldn't understand.

What was this supposed to mean? Didn't he do a good thing by creating a new technique for himself?

Why?

"I... I thought it could add unpredictability," Lucas stammered, struggling to maintain composure under his father's scrutiny. Even after all this time, it seemed he was still not strong enough to go against his words.

"Since a straightforward sword won't help us facing human enemies." "So you are saying that our family's sword is weak?"

Lucas clenched his jaw, suppressing the urge to argue. He knew better than to challenge his father's beliefs, forged through years of battle and leadership.

Yet, the sting of disappointment cut deep, reigniting familiar doubts and regrets.

"T-that....That wasn't what I intended to imply." Lucas managed, his voice barely above a whisper. He bowed his head in deference, masking the turmoil within him.

Something. When he looked into Fergus' eyes, he could see something that he had always seen.

Disappointment.

'Why?'

"It is fine," Fergus muttered, his voice strong. And then, he waved his hand, opening the door.

Following that, another person revealed himself.

"Julia."

"Yes, father."

Hearing her father calling her, Julia entered the room.

As Julia entered the room at her father's summons, Lucas couldn't help but feel a mix of apprehension and curiosity.

Fergus's gaze shifted from Lucas to Julia, his expression inscrutable, devoid of any warmth or emotion. Julia stood tall and composed, meeting her father's intense scrutiny with unwavering composure.

For a long moment, silence filled the room, thickening with unspoken tension. Fergus seemed to be assessing Julia, his piercing gaze weighing her words and actions.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity to Lucas, Fergus nodded almost imperceptibly, a signal that he was ready to speak. His voice, when it came, was measured and commanding.

"Julia," Fergus began, his tone cutting through the air with authority. "Why did you challenge the heir of the Arkwrights?"

Julia met her father's gaze evenly, her own expression serene yet attentive. "Father, he was the only suitable opponent left to challenge. I wanted to test my skills against someone of worthy lineage."

Fergus nodded again, acknowledging her response. However, instead of easing the tension, a palpable pressure began emanating from Fergus once more. It was the same overwhelming force that had unsettled Lucas moments ago, now directed towards Julia.

'What? How?' Lucas watched in astonishment as Julia stood unaffected, her demeanor unchanged despite the invisible weight pressing down on her.

"Haaah....haaah...."

His own breaths grew shallow, his chest tightening under the oppressive force that seemed to distort reality around them.

Fergus intensified the pressure, sensing Julia's resilience, making it even harder for Lucas to endure. He felt as though the air itself had turned against him, squeezing him from all sides. The pain was physical and mental, threatening to overwhelm him.

As Lucas struggled, tears welled up in his eyes, his vision blurring with the sheer agony of the moment. The ringing in his ears drowned out any sound, leaving him gasping for air, desperate for relief.

And then, abruptly, as if snapping out of a trance, Fergus retracted his pressure. The oppressive force lifted, leaving Lucas panting and shaking. He looked around, bewildered by the intensity of the experience, and saw Julia standing composed as ever, seemingly unaffected by what had transpired.

'.....'

His thoughts were in turmoil. Sure, he had watched the fight between Julia and Damien and had seen Julia almost beat him.

But this was something different.

Inherently, something had changed inside Julia; he was sure of it.

Then Fergus opened his mouth.

"Then, why did you lose? Why did you challenge him despite knowing that the probability of you losing was high?"

His eyes peered through Julia as he asked this question.

That evoked something inside Lucas since this was the same question that his father asked him when he was the one challenging Damien.

Julia met her father's gaze with unwavering resolve. "Father, to retreat from a challenge simply because the odds were against me would mean I lack as a swordsman. A Middleton does not back down from a worthy opponent."

Fergus frowned slightly, his expression reflecting sternness. "As a hunter, it is your duty to retreat when the situation calls for it. What you did was reckless, even foolish."

Julia stood tall, her voice steady and unyielding. "A hunter may choose the most strategic option, but as a swordsman and as a noble of Middleton blood, I refuse to cower in the face of adversity. A friend once taught me that true strength comes from facing the strongest opponents, not from avoiding them."

It was clear who was the person Julia was implying.

After all, there was one clear guy who boldly announced that he wanted to be a hero.

Ethan Hartley.

"Heh....."

Lucas watched in astonishment as his father's expression softened ever so slightly. A rare smile bloomed on Fergus's face, a sight that stirred a mix of surprise and longing in Lucas's heart. It was a smile he rarely saw, one that hinted at approval and pride.

'Why? Why are you showing that smile? I said the same words, too...At that time, I said the same words too. But you didn't smile at me.' He couldn't comprehend. Yes, maybe he lost brutally against Damien at that time. Maybe he thought so highly of himself.

But so did Julia. She also lost against him, and she couldn't win.

Then why?

Why was the reaction different?

Why couldn't it be him?

"Well said," Fergus murmured, his voice carrying a hint of admiration. "No matter how formidable your adversary, a Middleton never bows before the strong."

He paused, his gaze completely focused on Julia.

"And what you displayed in that duel, challenging the [World of Dreams] of the Arkwrights, it was a testament to your spirit and determination. The fact that you were able to shatter it and go against it at this age."

Fergus stopped, looking at Julia.

"You are the greatest talent that I have ever seen."

CLICK! The moment Lucas heard these words, he felt like something inside him had snapped.

'I see....' Something...He came to the realization of something.

The visions of Julia brilliantly fighting against Damien started playing in his mind.

The way she had completely gone against him.

The fact that she would win if her body didn't hold her back.

And then it was another vision.

The memory of Ethan being able to use a skill that he would be using when he graduated from the academy.

The memory of Ethan going against Kellan Stormrider, who could even go against Lucas himself.

The memory of everyone chanting Ethan and everyone watching the scene with pride.

And then, the memory of the look his father gave him just now. 'No matter what I do, it won't be enough for you, will it?' It felt like everything was against him.

'No matter what I do, I will never be able to surpass you. Is that what you are saying?'

It felt like he would never be good enough.

'No matter what, this world will reject me until the end?'

Regardless of his efforts and the time he put into mastering that illusion blade, Julia could do better in just a matter of seconds.

This world was such a place.

'If this world is such a place. If this world is rejecting me, then what's the point of putting in all of this effort?'

What was the point when he was destined to achieve nothing?

At that moment, he felt something dark inside him awakening.

'Right. What is the point of this world existing if it is rejecting me?

This world... it doesn't deserve to be saved,

It deserves to be destroyed.'

Chapter 407 92.3 - Hidden Currents

What is the most dangerous thing that directly affects the trajectory of a human's actions?

Believe it or not, it is emotions.

Emotions are the things that make a human unpredictable, but also things that mostly lead to their downfall.

Every empire that had once ruled the world.

They are ruined by the emperors who couldn't satisfy the requirements of governing such an empire.

But what made those emperors particularly not befitting to such a role?

The answer was clear in the books of history.

While the victorious Emperors polished their skills on the battlefield, their offspring were slaves to their emotions and their desires.

They waged war not for political reasons but rather with their emotions, unable to see the evident outcome in their eyes.

Countless different examples of such emperors existed throughout human history, and it was also the reason why matriarchal societies tended to go to war more often than patriarchal societies.

At the end of the day, one thing was crystal clear.

Humans who couldn't control their emotions were weak, and it was a plausible opportunity to exploit such humans.

That was what the devil in the religions of Earth did.

Same as the demons of this world, as well as their followers.

"Such a fine piece."

Verian Drakos, who was the leader of the operation, mumbled to himself.

They infiltrated the Arcadia Hunter Academy after preparing for almost three years. The amount of resources and time that had been spent on this project was so high that it could cover at least five terrorist attacks in Arcadia City.

Solving and formulating the wards across the Academy. Bridging the sensors, the senses of the Hunters.

Creating new technologies so that they could catch everyone off guard and make them unable to respond.

All of these were done so that they could deal as much damage as they could to the Arcadia Hunter Academy and so that the trust in the government and the world's best Academy would be broken.

This operation was a start for everything that they had been preparing for. The plan was just set in stone.

Of course, while they were planning to deal as much damage as they could to the academy, they were also looking for possible students to corrupt.

Since the duel times were the best times for emotions to go into uproar and cause dissatisfaction.

But, even he wasn't expecting such a scene to occur.

The fluctuating emotions were clearly visible in his eyes. The dark emotions that could even grasp the entire world.

The hatred, disappointment, anger, envy, jealousy, sadness, and sorrow. Strongest emotions a human could possess.

Everything.

That kid had everything.

And, just a little bit of push.

Only a tiny bit of push was needed.

And he did.

Even if he was in the presence of an S-rank Hunter, one of the strongest beings in this world, he didn't hesitate.

Since they could even bypass the senses of the Headmaster Jonathan, why would he fear?

Even if it was risky, the risk was definitely the right choice since he had the possibility to change one of the most important heirs on his side.

Thus, he pushed the seed of corruption, which was covered with shadows.

And that seed of corruption did wonders.

He could see the hatred, anger, determination, and desire in the eyes of the target growing. And, in an instant, it passed the desired threshold.

'Indeed, it is a success. That kid is corrupted.'

The desire to destroy and the desire for entropy had been implemented in the target's mind. From this point onwards, the target would not feel any repulsion towards any demonic humans.

No.

They would rather feel close to them.

'Let's hear from him, shall we.'

Verian mumbled, following the kid under the night. The moment the S-rank Hunter, Fergus, left the room, the target left, not talking to his sister at all.

It was the best moment to have contact with him, the best moment to look.

Verian Drakos, leader of the covert operation within the Arcadia Hunter Academy, silently observed Lucas as he approached, his expression unreadable.

The shadows seemed to cling to Verian, enhancing his enigmatic presence as he stepped closer to Lucas, who stood calm and composed despite the darkness enveloping them.

As Verian reached out to Lucas, pulling him into the deeper shadows where they could speak without interruption, he noted the lack of fear or repulsion in Lucas's demeanor. It was as if Lucas was unaffected by the sinister aura that surrounded Verian, a sign that the corruption had taken root deeper than Verian had anticipated.

Before Verian could utter a word, Lucas spoke, his voice steady and tinged with an edge of curiosity and suspicion. "What is the meaning of this?"

Verian maintained his smile, a hint of amusement flickering in his eyes. "What do you think, Lucas Middleton?"

Lucas's gaze narrowed slightly, his mind racing with possibilities.

He had sensed something unsettling in the air, a shift that he couldn't quite grasp but knew was significant.

But before everything, this voice was something he knew.

'Final Exams. Shadow Attribute. This unsettling feeling and sense of eeriness.'

As he slowly put the pieces together in his head, he slowly understood what was happening.

'He is the demon contractor who led the attack on Final Exams.'

His memory wasn't pixel-perfect as he didn't perfectly remember the voice. But he still remembered the information.

'Fuck this world.' "Are you here to kill me?"

And since the adversary was a demon contractor, it was evident why he was here. After all, as the heir of the Middleton Family, he was one of the most important targets of the demons.

This was inevitable.

"Hahahahaha....."

Suddenly, he heard a laugh coming from his back.

Verian's laughter echoed softly in the dimly lit corridor, a sound that grated on Lucas's ears, unsettling him. The amusement in Verian's eyes seemed to intensify, his presence exuding a subtle yet undeniable aura of power.

Lucas cursed inwardly, feeling the weight of Verian's presence pressing down on him. "What's with everyone today trying to assert pressure," he thought bitterly, recognizing that Verian was indeed displaying his strength with just his laugh.

After a moment, Verian's laughter subsided, leaving a lingering tension in the air. He regarded Lucas with a knowing look, his expression unreadable yet calculating. "If I wanted you dead, Lucas Middleton," Verian began, his voice smooth and composed, "you would have met your end long before now."

Lucas nodded slowly, acknowledging the truth in Verian's words. "That's true," he admitted, his tone steady despite the undercurrent of apprehension. "But killing me wouldn't serve whatever purpose you have infiltrating the academy."

Verian's eyebrows lifted slightly, a flicker of surprise crossing his features before settling into a mask of intrigue. He opened his mouth as if to question how Lucas knew, but before he could speak, Lucas continued with a quiet determination.

"A demon contractor doesn't infiltrate the academy without reason," Lucas stated firmly, his gaze steady on Verian. "Your presence here and your reaction just now confirm that there's a mission at play. What do you seek to achieve?"

Of course, he was just acting. Though his logic made sense, the reason for his knowledge rather stemmed from his visions of a parallel world.

But there was no need for him to say, was it?

Verian regarded Lucas with renewed interest, his gaze narrowing slightly as he assessed the young heir of the Middleton Family. "You're sharper than I expected, Lucas Middleton," he remarked, a hint of admiration in his voice. "Indeed, I am here on a mission, one that involves more than mere infiltration."

But then, he showed a rather relaxed smile.

"However, this is not the reason why I am here right now," Verian mumbled as he looked into Lucas' eyes.

Verian's relaxed smile intrigued Lucas, stirring a mix of curiosity and wariness within him. The seed of corruption planted by Verian's influence gnawed at his thoughts, amplifying his disillusionment with his current path.

Lucas's gaze flickered with a hint of resignation as he met Verian's eyes. "What is it then?" he asked quietly, his voice betraying a weariness that had settled deep within him.

Verian leaned in slightly, his expression earnest yet shrouded in layers of intent. "Lucas Middleton," he began, his tone low and persuasive, "you have felt it, haven't you? The weight of expectations, the shadow of comparison that has followed you all your life."

Lucas's jaw tightened imperceptibly, a bitter taste lingering in his mouth. Verian's words struck a chord within him, resonating with the years of striving and falling short in the eyes of his father and others.

"I know what it's like to be overlooked, to have your sacrifices go unnoticed," Verian continued, his voice taking on a comforting cadence.

"But imagine a world where your strength and your decisions are recognized and respected. A world where you are not bound by the constraints of others' expectations. This wretched world, where no one notices you, never cares about you. Isn't it the time for you to show it what you are capable of?"

Lucas's gaze drifted, memories of disappointment and unfulfilled promises flashing before his eyes.

Those feelings he had just now.

'Indeed. Now that I think about it, why do I need to go against them? Aren't we quite similar, in fact? Why didn't I consider this before?' Verian's smile widened slightly, sensing Lucas's internal struggle. "Join us, Lucas," he urged softly, his words carrying a weight of promise. "Together, we can reshape the future. We can ensure that your talents are not wasted, that your potential is realized."

Verian's smile faltered for a moment, a flicker of uncertainty crossing his features as Lucas spoke with unexpected confidence. "Talking big for someone whose plans have been seen through," Lucas remarked calmly, his gaze steady on Verian.

Verian's expression shifted to one of surprise, a hint of concern shadowing his features. "Seen through?" he repeated, his voice tinged with curiosity and a touch of apprehension. "What do you mean, Lucas?"

Lucas shook his head slowly, a sigh escaping his lips. "I've seen them, Verian," he stated with quiet certainty. "The operatives you thought of were hidden, waiting to strike. They are being seen through. Look at this. Can you see who they are? "

"Callum and Amelia, former graduates of Arcadia Hunter Academy."

Verian's eyes narrowed, a calculating look replacing his initial surprise. "How... How did you come by this information?" he demanded, his tone sharper now, betraying his growing unease.

Lucas didn't flinch under Verian's scrutiny. Instead, he calmly pulled out his smartwatch and began typing, bringing up images of Callum and Amelia. "They're here undercover, waiting for your followers to reveal themselves," Lucas explained, his voice measured. "I've known about them for some time now."

Verian's expression tightened, his mind racing to assess the implications of Lucas's revelation. "If what you say is true," he began slowly, "then we are indeed facing a complication. To think they've been under our watch all this time..."

Lucas's smirk widened slightly, a glint of satisfaction in his eyes. "You're free to confirm it," he offered casually, though his tone carried an undeniable edge. "But time is not on your side."

Verian regarded Lucas silently for a moment, weighing his options. Finally, a smile tugged at the corners of his lips, a mix of admiration and amusement. "Very well, Lucas Middleton," he conceded, his voice carrying a note of respect. "I will consider this a confirmation of my proposal."

Lucas's smirk deepened, a dark intensity flickering in his eyes. "This is a gift of mine to you," he stated cryptically, his voice taking on a slightly ominous tone.

Verian's smile widened in response, understanding the unspoken implications. "Then let us begin," he declared, extending a hand towards Lucas. "Together, we shall reshape this world."

Lucas clasped Verian's hand firmly, a surge of anticipation and newfound purpose coursing through him. As their hands met, a subtle darkness seemed to envelop Lucas, a manifestation of the seed of corruption that had taken root within him.

"And so it begins," Lucas murmured, his gaze locked with Varian's. The shadows deepened around them, a harbinger of the dark alliance forged in that pivotal moment.

Chapter 408 92.4 - Hidden Currents

Verian Drakos, leader of the covert operation within the Arcadia Hunter Academy, watched Lucas Middleton walk away, the shadows lingering around him as a testament to his newfound allegiance.

Verian's satisfaction, however, was short-lived as he felt a faint vibration in his pocket. He retrieved his communication device and activated the secure channel to his superior.

"Verian," a cold, authoritative voice resonated through the device. "Report on the status of the operation."

Verian's expression turned serious as he responded. "The operation is progressing. We've successfully planted demonic seeds among the students, and I've secured a key target—Lucas Middleton. However, there's been an unexpected development."

"What kind of development?" the voice demanded, a hint of impatience seeping through.

"Lucas Middleton provided information indicating that our activities may have been compromised. Two operatives, Callum and Amelia, former graduates of Arcadia Hunter Academy, are here undercover, monitoring our movements."

"Is the information reliable?"

"I was just going to confirm that now."

"I see....."

The voice stopped for a second, but Verian knew it wouldn't end.

"I will be waiting for your confirmation."

"If we confirm the information had been leaked, what should we do?"

"...It will be hard to tell without seeing the details, but we will require a step down from the scene, most likely."

"...."

The fact that the operation that they had been working for three years would need to be abandoned alone made Verian suffocated. He wanted to curse, but he held it in."

"Understood."

"Contact me immediately once you finish your investigation."

"Roger."

BLINK!

With that, the call was over, but his job was not. He instantly contacted their insider within the academy.

Verian activated his secure communication device and spoke in a low, commanding tone. "R, I need you to check the surveillance footage. Focus on the crowd and identify any unusual patterns or the disguised individuals I am going to send some pictures of. Report back with your findings."

There was a reason why R was someone who could easily infiltrate the academy. His abilities were unparalleled.

After all, he had the special trait of [Web]. Once he had analyzed a pattern, he would understand everything clearly.

A few moments later, a voice crackled through the device, calm and efficient. "Understood, C. Accessing the footage now."

As Verian waited for the analysis, he reflected on the unexpected asset Lucas Middleton had proven to be. The information Lucas provided had already shifted the tide of their operation. If this new lead turned out to be accurate, Lucas's value would increase significantly.

Several minutes passed before R's voice came back over the line. "C, I've identified at least ten hunters in the crowd. Their disguises are sophisticated, but their behavior patterns are consistent with undercover operatives."

Verian's eyes narrowed, a mix of satisfaction and concern washing over him. "Excellent work, R. This confirms our suspicions. The academy has heavily fortified its defenses."

R's voice carried a note of curiosity. "C, how did we come by this information? It seems remarkably precise."

"It is not an information you can access."

Agent Zero was silent for a moment, processing the information. "Understood, C. What are your orders?"

"There is no need to do anything more. Lay low for the time being. When the necessary time comes, you are going to be contacted."

"Understood."

With that, the call was ended. However, the expression on the face of Verian wasn't good.

'We are going to lose another piece.'

The fact that there was an internal information leak meant there was a high chance that their undercover agent could be revealed.

And to leave no open endings, there was one thing that needed to be done.

Silencing.

This would most likely be the decision made by the higher-ups.

"Sigh...What a pain...."

He activated his secure communication device once more, contacting his superior.

"Verian," the cold, authoritative voice came through the device. "Do you have confirmation?"

"Yes," Verian replied, his tone grim. "Agent R has analyzed the surveillance footage. There are at least ten undercover hunters in the crowd. Their disguises are sophisticated, but their behavior patterns match those of trained operatives."

The voice on the other end remained silent for a moment, processing the information. "Understood. This confirms that our operation has been compromised. We need to take immediate action."

"What are your orders?" Verian asked, already anticipating the answer.

"All executive agents, including yourself, are to abandon the operation and leave the academy immediately," the voice commanded. "However, the lower-ranked members of our organization will continue with the planned attack. We need to cause a scene and make our presence known. The chaos will serve as a distraction and a message."

Verian nodded, accepting the directive. "Understood. I'll relay the orders to the executives. We will withdraw immediately."

"Do not rely on the information that the operation got leaked to anyone other than executives."

This was to ensure that the members would carry the operation with the faith that it would succeed.

At the end of the day, humans were humans. The moment they knew their efforts would only be futile, they would stop trying.

And faith. It was the strongest motivation.

"I will be careful about it."

"One more thing, Verian," the voice added, a hint of cold calculation seeping through. "Silence Codename R. We cannot risk any further leaks. Ensure there are no loose ends."

Verian's expression darkened, but he knew the necessity of the order. "Understood. Codename R will be silenced."

With that, the call ended, leaving Verian to carry out the directives. He took a deep breath, steeling himself for what needed to be done.

He swiftly contacted the other executives, issuing the command to withdraw.

<Arcadia Hunter Academy, Thursday Night>

The sun had long since set over Arcadia Hunter Academy, casting the sprawling campus into a quiet, shadowed repose. The amphitheater, once bustling with excitement and energy, now stood silent and still. The day's duels had ended, and the students and spectators had retired to their quarters, leaving only the echo of their cheers behind.

In a dimly lit room tucked away from the main buildings, Professor Eleanor White sat at a large wooden table, waiting. Her expression was a blend of calm and determination, her sharp eyes focused on the entrance. She didn't have to wait long.

The door opened, and two figures stepped inside. Callum and Amelia, dressed in their hunter uniforms, moved with quiet grace. Despite the fatigue evident in their disheveled appearances, their eyes were alert and watchful.

Eleanor rose to greet them, a warm smile breaking through her otherwise serious demeanor. "Callum, Amelia. It's good to see you both again."

Callum sighed, running a hand through his already messy hair. "You know, Eleanor, you have a knack for calling us at the most inconvenient times."

Eleanor didn't mind Callum's attitude. After all, she had been with this guy for quite a long time in the academy, and she was used to his attitude before.

Amelia chuckled softly, nudging Callum as she took a seat. "He's just grumpy because he's been sleep-deprived for weeks. But really, Eleanor, what's going on? We've been on edge all day."

Eleanor's smile widened slightly. "I appreciate you both coming, regardless of the inconvenience. Please, sit."

Callum and Amelia took their seats across from Eleanor. The room was filled with an air of familiarity and camaraderie but also a sense of urgency and gravity.

"So, what's the plan, Eleanor?" Callum asked, leaning back in his chair.

Amelia frowned, her concern evident. "Eleanor, going after high-ranking executives is extremely dangerous. We're talking about some of the most powerful and elusive members of Valkara. Are we really prepared for this? While using civilians as a decoy?"

Eleanor met Amelia's gaze steadily. "I understand the risks, Amelia. But this is a rare opportunity. If we can capture or neutralize these executives, we can deal a significant blow to Valkara's operations. It's a chance we can't afford to miss."

Callum rubbed his temples, considering Eleanor's words. "You're right; it's a golden opportunity if your source is correct."

"I had already confirmed its authenticity."

"Really? Are you %100 sure."

"I am sure enough to bet this much on it."

"....Sigh....It is annoying...." Callum shook his head, looking at Eleanor.

'She had changed.'

If it was before, she wouldn't behave like this. If it had been before, she wouldn't have risked the lives of civilians to catch just a random executive.

But she was different now.

'It is because of her, isn't it?'

Callum was there, too, when countless students had been massacred by a certain student at the graduation ceremony.

The face Eleanor made. The face when she witnessed her supposed best friend killing her comrades.

Callum's voice softened, tinged with both frustration and concern. "Eleanor, your hatred shouldn't dictate your actions. Not everyone is like 'her'—"

Before he could finish his words, he sensed the mana around them fluctuating. His eyes widened in surprise as the air around them seemed to hum with energy.

Eleanor's sharp gaze caught the change immediately. Callum raised his hand in a gesture of defeat. "Alright, I'll shut my mouth now."

"Good."

After saying that, Eleanor turned to look at them.

"You have already identified at least 20 different members, but none of them are executives. Those cockroaches won't reveal themselves easily."

Eleanor continued, putting pictures on the table. Each picture showed people secretly putting some 'seeds' into others.

"We still couldn't completely analyze the structure of these 'seeds.' They are new products, and their creation seems to be more complex compared to the previous ones."

Callum and Amelia leaned in, examining the pictures with serious expressions. Amelia furrowed her brow. "So, what's the plan, Eleanor?"

Eleanor's eyes were resolute as she laid out the strategy. "They will most likely carry out their attack when the most important duel happens, which is the last duel of Victor Blackthorn and a surprise opponent."

Callum raised an eyebrow. "A surprise opponent? Who could it be?"

Eleanor shook her head. "You don't need to know about that. But it's clear that this duel will draw the largest crowd and the most attention. That's when the Valkara executives will show themselves."

Amelia nodded slowly, understanding dawning in her eyes. "Pretty simple but efficient. But what if they carry it on a different duel?"

"If that is the case, it is better since the risks are a lot lower."

"I see. At the end, we need to be ready."

"Exactly," Eleanor affirmed. "We need to be ready for that moment. Our best chance to catch the executives is when they feel confident enough to execute their plan."

Callum crossed his arms, contemplating the situation. "Alright, so we set up a perimeter and monitor the crowd closely. We'll need eyes everywhere and a quick response team ready to act the moment the executives show themselves."

Eleanor nodded. "Yes, and we need to ensure that the students and spectators remain unaware of our presence until it's absolutely necessary. We can't afford to cause panic."

Amelia added, "We should also have a plan in place to evacuate the crowd safely if things go south."

"The academy personnel had already been trained for such cases. There won't be any problem regarding this."

Callum looked at the pictures once more, then back at Eleanor. "Alright. If that is what you wish, we will do our best to assist you."

"That is good to hear."

<Arcadia Hunter Academy, Friday 9 A.M>

The amphitheater was buzzing with anticipation as the final day of the duel period commenced. The crowd had grown even larger, with students, faculty, and spectators eager to witness the culmination of a week filled with extraordinary battles and displays of skill.

The headmaster, Jonathan Verdict, stood at the center of the arena, his presence commanding the attention of everyone present. The atmosphere was electric, charged with the excitement and tension of the upcoming duels.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Jonathan's voice boomed through the amphitheater, "welcome to the final day of our duel period. We have seen incredible displays of strength, skill, and determination over the past few days. Today, we will witness the finest of our academy's talents as they face off in the ultimate test of their abilities."

The crowd erupted into applause, the energy palpable. Jonathan raised his hand, signaling for silence as he continued.

"Our first duel of the day will feature two exceptional students...."

He stopped letting the crowd sink in. "Seraphina Frostborne and Irina Emberheart."

Chapter 409 93.1 - Duels [3]

"Seraphina Frostborne and Irina Emberheart."

Possibly the two most known students of the academy when their names are called together.

The reason?

It is evident from their surnames.

Frostborne.

Emberheart.

Two legendary families who command the elements of ice and fire.

Eternal Rivalry, one might even say.

After all, they possess two opposite attributes.

Ice and fire have always been compared to each other, being used against nullifying each other. When there is ice, one always calls fire elemental, and when there is fire, one calls ice.

However, is it simply related to the elements?

Just because one possessed opposing attributes didn't mean that they would be required to be enemies.

And, well....The reason for their rivalry and hostility lay in....Slightly complex issues, let's say.

But at the end of the day, one thing was clear.

There, in the arena that would be housing the final day of the duels...Two heirs of these families stood face to face.

On one side, a girl with clear silver hair, an icy demeanor, and a cold, calculating gaze stood. Seraphina Frostborne. Her presence was regal and commanding, and each step she took exuded confidence and grace. She wore a special dress adorned with intricate silver ornaments and embroidery, reflecting the Frostborne family's traditional attire. The gown shimmered in the light, the fabric seemingly woven with threads of ice, creating a breathtaking effect. The dress was not merely decorative; it symbolized the legacy and honor of the Frostborne family, a reminder of their storied history and unyielding resolve.

It was completely breathtaking.

"Wow."

Even if her reputation as the first-ranked student had already spread to the academy, that didn't mean everyone knew about her beauty.

And certainly, they were not expecting to see such a scene.

It was as if they had come to a beauty festival.

Her icy blue eyes surveyed the arena with a calm, detached intensity, calculating every possible move and counter. There was precision in her every movement, a testament to years of rigorous training and discipline. She was a true embodiment of her family's legacy, a beacon of the Frostborne's enduring strength and elegance.

—SWOOSH! Suddenly, the wind moved, taking their gaze from her to the other side.

Opposite her stood Irina Emberheart, a striking contrast with her fiery red hair and hazel eyes that seemed to blaze with an inner fire. Irina's presence was equally commanding, her confidence radiating in waves. She wore a dress that was a testament to the Emberheart family's proud heritage. The gown was a rich, deep crimson adorned with gold embroidery that flickered like flames in the light. It was a traditional Emberheart dress designed to symbolize the fierce passion and strength that defined their lineage.

Irina's gaze locked onto Seraphina, her eyes alight with a blend of determination and arrogance. A confident, almost smug smile played on her lips, befitting her usual demeanor. She stood with a poised readiness, every muscle coiled and prepared for the imminent clash.

But, inwardly, her eyes were looking across the stage, her mind thinking.

'Indeed, as I thought. She did such a trick.'

It was a move expected from Seraphina Frostborne. This whole rivalry had made them understand each other more, and Irina was certainly aware of the fact that Seraphina liked to resort to psychological tactics before fighting.

Thus, she matched her advances. By doing that, she somehow got praise from that woman.

Even though she hated doing what she desired from her, Irina wasn't stupid enough not to discern the priorities.

The amphitheater was buzzing with excitement as the crowd took in the sight of Seraphina Frostborne and Irina Emberheart. The sheer elegance and contrasting fiery presence of the two combatants captivated everyone.

"Wow," someone whispered in awe. "Seraphina is stunning. I had heard about her beauty, but seeing her in person..."

"She looks like a queen made of ice," another person added, their voice filled with admiration. "That dress is incredible. It's like something out of a fairy tale."

Even the girls in the crowd couldn't help but acknowledge Seraphina's ethereal beauty. "She's so elegant. It's almost intimidating," one girl admitted, her eyes wide with admiration.

But just as the praise for Seraphina reached its peak, eyes turned towards the fiery presence on the other side of the arena.

"Don't forget about Irina," another voice chimed in. "She's just as stunning in her own way. Look at her, standing there with that confident smile."

"Yeah, if Seraphina is a cold, elegant queen, then Irina is like a warrior princess. She looks like she could take on the world alone."

"Her dress is amazing, too," someone else noted. "The way it flickers like flames... It's a perfect representation of the Emberheart family."

'As expected, our miss is definitely improving.'

In the crowd stood a woman looking at Irina. She had a slightly proud expression on her face. After all, she was like a mother to this girl.

As the two combatants stood facing each other, the announcer's voice boomed through the amphitheater. "Ladies and gentlemen, the final day of the duel period begins now! Our first duel features Seraphina Frostborne versus Irina Emberheart. Let the duel begin!"

The crowd erupted into applause and cheers, the excitement reaching a fever pitch. The significance of this duel was not lost on anyone present. It was more than just a fight; it was a clash of legacies, a battle between two of the academy's most formidable freshmen mages.

Seraphina's icy blue eyes met Irina's fiery gaze. There was no need for words; their determination and rivalry spoke volumes.

The announcer's voice rang out, breaking the tension. "Ladies and gentlemen, the duel between Seraphina Frostborne and Irina Emberheart is about to begin! Are both contestants ready?"

Seraphina and Irina nodded, their eyes never leaving each other. The air around them seemed to crackle with the intensity of their rivalry.

"Begin!"

CREAK! In an instant, the arena was transformed into a battlefield of elemental forces. Seraphina moved first, her hands weaving intricate patterns in the air as she summoned her ice magic.

「Frostborne Shards」

SWOOSH! A flurry of ice shards materialized around her, glinting in the light as they shot toward Irina with deadly precision.

An innate skill of the Frostborne Family that each heir was taught the moment they learned how to use their mana. Even if not for heirs, every mage under the Frostborne family would master this spell. Fast conjuring and least taxing on the mana circuits made this spell incredibly efficient.

SWIRL! 「Flame Barrier」

Irina responded with a wave of her hand, conjuring a wall of flames that incinerated the ice shards on contact.

The heat from her flames created a shimmering barrier, protecting her from Seraphina's initial assault.

The arena seemed to transform into a battlefield of ice and fire, the contrasting elements clashing in a mesmerizing display of power and skill. Seraphina's icy demeanor contrasted sharply with Irina's fiery presence, each movement precise and calculated.

—CREAK! Seraphina continued her assault, her icy blue eyes focused and unwavering. She conjured an array of ice constructs, sending them hurtling toward Irina in a relentless barrage.

「School of Frostborne. Glacial Constructs」

Ice spears, shards, and even frozen winds swirled around her, each attack meticulously controlled.

—SWOOSH! Irina, however, was not easily overwhelmed. She matched Seraphina's aggression with her own fiery resolve, summoning flames to counter every ice attack. The arena was filled with the sizzle and crackle of ice meeting fire, the air thick with steam and energy.

Seraphina's precision was remarkable. She conserved her mana with expert efficiency, never wasting an ounce of energy. Every ice shard, every gust of freezing wind was perfectly calculated to keep Irina on the defensive.

Whenever Irina tried to launch an attack of her own, Seraphina was ready with a counter, her ice magic smothering the flames before they could take hold.

"Tch."

Irina clicked her tongue as she couldn't help but feel frustrated. It was always like this when she went against this bitch.

There was something that made Seraphina different from other mages. As if she could foresee the future, she always efficiently handled the defense without leaving any opening.

But even to this day, she was never able to understand how she did it.

The crowd watched in awe as Seraphina maintained her aggressive onslaught, her control over her magic flawless.

'No matter what, I won't lose here.' Irina, though struggling to break through, was not deterred. She met each challenge with fiery determination, her flames roaring in defiance.

"Haha...."

Irina took a deep breath, her hazel eyes blazing with intensity. She knew she had to turn the tide of the battle. With a powerful sweep of her arm, she conjured a massive wave of fire, aiming to engulf Seraphina in a fiery inferno.

「School of Emberheart. Draining Wave」

Seraphina's response was swift. She conjured a barrier of ice, the freezing temperatures countering the heat of Irina's flames.

「School of Frostborne. Frozen Bastion」

The clash of elements created a stunning display, the ice barrier shimmering as it absorbed the fiery onslaught.

Even though the barrier melted at the end, the amount was so accurate that almost no ice was left.

"Grr....".

Irina gritted her teeth.

'I need to change it.'

She knew she needed to change her strategy.

'I will move fast.' She began to weave her flames with more finesse, focusing on precise, targeted strikes rather than overwhelming force.

She aimed for Seraphina's defenses, seeking out weak points and exploiting them with pinpoint accuracy.

Seraphina, however, anticipated each move. Her ice magic was like a dance, each motion fluid and graceful. She deflected Irina's attacks with ease, her icy constructs moving with a life of their own.

Whenever Irina attempted to gain ground, Seraphina countered with a flurry of ice shards, keeping her at bay.

"She is not doing enough."

Irina was a strong student.

She was an excellent mage.

However, her opponent was strong as well.

'Seraphina.'

She had a special talent that was only mentioned in the game but not revealed. For the player who chose the Irina route and faced Seraphina, her patterns were a nightmare.

Since no matter what you do, her artificial intelligence is top-notch. She had almost the best input reading in the game.

Her patterns changed according to the movements you made, according to the spells you had chosen.

She was basically a cheat when it came to the mage one-on-ones. And, for the players who wanted to beat her, there was only one choice.

'Overpowering her with firepower.'

Irina was such a character. Rather than always thinking about the details, she innately controlled the fire. The fire was her servant, and it served her. That was it.

She would beat Seraphina by commanding the fire and using one of the strongest spells, just like Ethan did.

'But not the current one.' After all, she was bound to lose this fight from the start. This was not a changeable option in the game.

Since Irina doesn't have the power to empower Seraphina at this point in her life.

But does that mean she can't win?

'Show me if you really have changed.'

All the times we had spent together, after all those times, she became different.

She became someone who could apologize, who could listen to others, and who knew how to open herself up.

And most importantly.

She became someone who understood the importance of learning from everyone and that pride is useless if it is holding you back.

As I was thinking to myself, suddenly, I felt a presence beside me.

"What do you think?" A familiar voice that made me want to facepalm. However, her disguise was pretty good, so I held it back.

"Seraphina is pretty good, isn't she?" Lilia analyzed the fight, her eyes darting.

"She is."

"It seems Irina still can't beat her rival."

"I wouldn't be this sure."

"Hmm....Why? From how I see, Seraphina is never going to give Irina a chance."

Lilia's thoughts were correct. From how the fight was playing, it was evident that Irina wouldn't be able to overcome Seraphina.

"Wait and see."

"Haha....I can't wait to see."

With a smile, she turned to face the fight, and I did the same too.

And I slowly started understanding how Seraphina's special ability worked.

Chapter 410 93.2 - Duels [3]

Irina knew she had to break through Seraphina's defenses.

To do that, she did it the only way she had fought before.

'Burn.' Summoning all her strength, she conjured a pillar of flame, the heat intense enough to melt steel. She directed it at Seraphina with a fierce determination, hoping to overwhelm her opponent.

「School of Emberheart. Flame Pillar」

Seraphina's eyes narrowed. She channeled her mana into a powerful ice barrier, the air around her freezing instantly. The pillar of flame met the barrier with a tremendous explosion, sending shockwaves through the arena.

The crowd gasped as the two elements clashed in a spectacular display of power. For a moment, it seemed as if neither combatant would yield. The ice barrier held firm against the flames, the air crackling with energy.

Yet, this time, it was evident that Seraphina was also having a hard time. A bead of sweat fell down to the ground from all the heat and humidity in the air.

But suddenly, an enormous mana expanded from the tip of her fingers.

With a surge of mana, Seraphina pushed back. The ice barrier expanded, driving the flames back toward Irina.

「School of Frostborne. Expanding Glacial Shield」

Irina was forced to retreat, her eyes blazing with frustration.

'Got you.'

Seraphina seized the moment. She summoned a barrage of ice spears, each one aimed with deadly precision.

「School of Frostborne. Ice Spear Barrage」

Irina tried to counter with her flames, but the onslaught was too much. The ice spears broke through her defenses, striking with a force that sent her reeling.

Seraphina saw her opportunity and decided to exploit the opening she had created.

After all, once the pain entered one's mind, their thoughts would slow down, making it nearly not as fast as before.

And this was a detrimental fact for mages who needed to focus constantly to form their magic as fast as they could.

With Irina reeling from the force of the ice spear barrage, Seraphina pressed her advantage. She moved swiftly, her icy demeanor unwavering as she conjured more ice constructs to keep Irina off balance.

「School of Frostborne. Frostbite Strike」

Aiming to catch Irina while she was still recovering, Seraphina launched a series of rapid ice strikes. Each attack was precise, targeting Irina's defenses with the intent to overwhelm her completely.

SWIRL! However, she forgot one thing. No, she didn't forget but rather failed to account.

Irina had been training not only on her control of fire but also on her direct combat efficiency.

She had been facing the strongest monsters in the simulations and in dungeons.

And the pain was something she had already been accustomed to, while the way she had used her fire wasn't exactly like a normal mage's either. As the icy strikes bore down on Irina suddenly, flames began to swirl around her, forming a protective barrier.

「Flame. Protect me.」

The swirling flames fended off Seraphina's ice attacks, creating a temporary reprieve for Irina. The flames danced and flickered, their intensity growing as they absorbed the impact of the ice strikes.

Seraphina, undeterred, pushed forward. She knew that when a mage was in pain, their thoughts would slow down, making the formation of magic slower. She intended to capitalize on this, aiming to keep Irina on the defensive.

However, as Seraphina prepared to unleash another barrage, suddenly, the air around her intensified.

'Huh?'

The numbers rose rapidly, and she couldn't keep up.

'No!' A sudden, powerful explosion erupted right before her face.

「School of Emberheart. Inferno Blast」

The explosion was so fast and unexpected that even though Seraphina saw it coming, she couldn't completely defend herself in time. She conjured an ice barrier to shield herself, but the force of the explosion blasted her backward.

「School of Frostborne. Ice Wall」

Despite the ice wall absorbing much of the blast, the sheer power of the explosion sent Seraphina skidding across the arena floor. The crowd gasped as the two powerful mages clashed, their elemental magic creating a breathtaking spectacle.

Seraphina gritted her teeth as she regained her footing after creating a brick of ice behind her heels. She could feel the sting of the explosion, her eyes teary.

RING!

Her ears were also ringing as if to remind her that her body was shaken.

'What happened?'

Seraphina asked herself, her thoughts moving in every direction. How could such an explosion occur this fast without her knowledge?

She would have seen the numbers rising.

"Heh...."

However, her thoughts were stopped by a laugh as she turned to face the source.

Irina stood amidst the swirling flames, her hazel eyes blazing with renewed determination. The flames around her flickered and danced, a testament to her fierce spirit. Her eyes ablaze with fire, as if she was the empress of the flames.

"I see now...."

There was a crazed smile on her lips. Even though her clothes were burned thanks to her own fire.

Even though her bare skin could be seen from some of the holes in her clothes, even though she didn't retain her elegant presence....

She felt like a fierce Hunter who found her prey.

'No, it can't be.'

For a split second, Seraphina almost broke down her expression.

For a split second.

After that, she realized who she was against.

'No. There is no way.' Seraphina took a deep breath, her mind racing. She realized that Irina was playing for a psychological edge, trying to break her mentality and then exploit her.

Seraphina had seen enough of such scenarios in her life that she had already become accustomed to such tactics. After all, she had been fighting with other heirs of her family for years. Contrary to a certain person, she wasn't the sole heir, after all.

She straightened her posture, her icy blue eyes locking onto Irina's blazing gaze. "Now you're trying to mask your confidence with that smile of yours?" Seraphina called out, her voice steady and unwavering.

Irina narrowed her eyes, her expression turning serious. "Frostborne. I am not someone who will resort to such puny tricks, and you know that."

Seraphina's lips curled into a slight smile. "Perhaps. But you're certainly enjoying this more than usual."

Irina's flames flared up around her, the heat creating ripples in the air. "Because this time, I am sure." She smiled, her eyes burning. "I am going to win."

"Really? How many times it has been?"

"If I were you, I wouldn't smile." At Irina's words, a certain emotion awoke in Seraphina once again. She didn't know the reason why.

She couldn't completely understand why, but it was as if her instincts were informing her.

"...."

She still smiled, but her smile was stiff this time.

SWIRL!

She saw the numbers around Irina rising incredibly. The numbers indicated that a strong attack was coming.

""Come!""

With that, both mages prepared to unleash their full power. Seeing Irina's spell from the numbers, Seraphina instantly visualized what was about to come.

Her mind, innately gifted at calculations, could interpret the numbers to reality. And that reality showed her a bird.

'Heh.'

Thus, she created the counter magic to what Irina was using.

「School of Emberheart. Inferno Phoenix」

And just as she expected, Irina conjured a massive spell, calling forth a phoenix made of pure flame. The phoenix screeched, its fiery wings spreading wide as it soared towards Seraphina.

「School of Frostborne. Ice Dragon's Breath」

Seraphina responded with a summon of her own, conjuring a massive ice dragon, its breath a freezing gale that surged toward Irina. The dragon roared, its icy breath creating a path of frost in its wake.

The two elemental constructs clashed in midair, the ice dragon's breath meeting the phoenix's flames. The arena was filled with the sound of roaring fire and cracking ice, the sheer power of their magic creating shockwaves that rippled through the stands.

Seraphina and Irina stood their ground, each channeling their mana into their respective constructs. The ice dragon and the phoenix battled fiercely, neither willing to back down.

The crowd watched in awe, the tension in the arena palpable. It was a battle of wills as much as it was a battle of elements. Both mages pushed themselves to their limits, their determination unwavering.

Seraphina could see that Irina wasn't using any other magic. The numbers didn't reveal anything else, only showing changes around the Phoenix Bird.

"It is my win, little Emberheart."

However, she was different.

—Second Memory.

Since she had such a special ability to cheat.

Though her mana reserves were depleted, she had secured the win for herself. As the strongest and ultimate spell of her family was conjured. 「School of Frostborne. Pseudo Absolute Zero」

The world seemed to come to a halt before her as every particle slowed to the maximum. Though her spell was not the real one and the degraded version of the true Absolute Zero, it was still a level-7 spell. Everything in the arena froze.

The ice dragon. The flame phoenix. And Irina herself. Everything stopped; only Seraphina remained.

"Wow.....This is beautiful."

"To think we would live to witness such a duel."

"Though it is sad that it is over."

'No matter what you do, Irina Emberheart. You will never beat me.'

She stood there, looking at Irina with a cold smile of victory. The crowd held their breath, believing that Seraphina had won since Irina was not moving.

CRACK! "Huh?"

But suddenly, she heard a cracking sound. The ice around Irina's face began to break, and Irina turned to face her. Seraphina's eyes widened as she sensed a sudden rise in numbers once again.

At that exact moment, Irina mumbled with a smile, "Taste my own magic."

「School of Irina. Nuclear」

A blinding light erupted from Irina, shattering the ice that encased her. The intensity of the light and heat was overwhelming, and Seraphina's eyes widened in horror. The numbers were off the charts, far beyond anything she had calculated.

A massive explosion followed, the force of it obliterating the ice and creating a shockwave that rippled through the arena. The audience gasped, shielding their eyes from the blinding light and the sheer power of the explosion.

Seraphina tried to conjure another ice barrier, but the heat was too intense. The ice melted almost instantly, leaving her vulnerable to the blast. The force of the explosion sent her flying backward, crashing into the arena's edge.

When the dust settled, Irina stood in the center of the arena, her flames flickering around her.

She looked exhausted but victorious. Seraphina lay at the edge of the arena, battered and struggling to rise.

The crowd was silent, the tension thick in the air. They had just witnessed a clash of titans, and it was clear that both combatants had given everything they had.

Irina took a deep breath, her voice echoing through the now-silent arena. "This duel is over. Do you yield, Seraphina?"

Seraphina, struggling to her feet, nodded slowly. She had to admit defeat this time. "I yield," she said, her voice barely audible.

The crowd erupted into applause, the noise deafening. Irina had proven her strength and resolve, and Seraphina had shown her exceptional skill and control. Both mages had earned the respect of everyone present.

'You really did it, didn't you?' Looking at the girl whose first thought was to find me in the crowd, I nodded my head.

"Heh...."

I could imagine her making this expression right now, though she must be too tired to let out a sound.

"It seems this is my win."

As I mumbled, I turned to look at Lilia, who was focused on the arena alone.

"...."

Her expression was filled with surprise.

"Yeah, it is your win."

Sometimes life was like this.

One needed to put their faith in others.

Or their own efforts.

'You grew up.'

Just as I thought about that, suddenly, I sensed a disturbance around me.

Disturbance of mana.

'What? Now?' –BOOM!