

H. Academy 281

Chapter 281 Chapter 66.2 - Grave

Being the way the game is, there were bound to be opponents that didn't directly challenge the protagonist physically but had used different methods.

This was to make sure that the developers could add a mystery element to the game. However, at this point, I doubt that it was simply a game.

Even now, something inside me feels different. From the moment I woke up, I felt like something inside me was a lot more complete.

Whether the way I think or the way I feel....It is hard to pinpoint. But, even then, the feeling inside me, you can call it a hunch, is saying that I think the world is not that simple, and there are many things that I have yet to know about it.

In any case, now that hunch needs to be taken to the shelf for the time being, as I need an object to focus on.

'The mana flow.....'

From what I could see from the environment, the direction of the mana, and the continuous energy supply somewhere, what Irina and Sylvie had said all pointed at one thing.

When every piece of information was revealed right before us, there weren't many things that we could do.

"You...."

At that moment, Irina's voice entered my head. "Were you able to deduce anything?"

She asked with her eyes sparkling. It seemed that even though the fog of her dream-like state was lingering in her head, she was still able to act rationally.

It was also easy to understand why she was depending on me for the answer. In her eyes right now, my previous two achievements regarding theoretical things should be on the front, and they are giving her a high evaluation.

Her thoughts were not necessarily wrong either.

But at the same time, there are many questions regarding this. If it was that demon, how was Irina able to wake me up?

Even in the game, the sole reason Ethan was able to defeat it was because of the powers he had awakened in the later times of the second year's first semester. Just like Sylvie, Ethan was also immune to the changes in his psyche.

The spell the demon used wasn't effective on him; therefore, Sylvie and Ethan both embarked on the small journey to bring it down.

It was also the event where the two got closer, and Sylvie started becoming a part of the main cast. However, Ethan was not there now, and only Sylvie was awake.

After she had woken Irina up, which was probably the rightest choice she could make in that situation, Irina decided to test the waters.

But from that point on, everything is blank.

What did she do when she entered into my consciousness using 「Phantasmal Transfer」 spell? I knew what that spell did, and certainly, she must be in my dream.

Another important question.

What did she see?

Did she see about my past? The past that was about her and about Earth? Because if that is the case...

I didn't want to do what I needed to do.

'From her reaction, that doesn't seem to be the case.'

I could see with my eyes. Unless Irina is the world's best actor who can control even the micromovements of her body, any reaction would never be missed by my eyes. Therefore, it is safe to assume that whatever she had seen, there was something that she couldn't directly remember.

'This also corresponds to what I had experienced, so everything is fine.'

At least it should be fine. If my existence here is in danger, I need to take extreme measures, which I have never wished to do.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Irina asked, seemingly uncomfortable with my gaze. At her reaction, I understood that I had been looking at her with my thoughts wandering around for a while.

"My bad....I was lost in thoughts." I replied.

".....It is fine....I am a bit shaken as well."

It seemed she connected my behavior to the fact that I had just woken up from that state and was bombarded with huge amounts of information. Certainly, if that was any other normal human out there, her assumption would be correct.

But sadly for her, it was not true in this case, though this assumption is something I will gladly accept.

"So..." She continued. "What do you think?"

As she asked once again, I decided to answer with a mix of truth and lies. Revealing that I knew too much about this could make her suspicious since the source of my information is something that is almost impossible to reveal.

"First and foremost, I agree with your hypothesis. The entity we are looking for is the sole reason why Phantom's Land was formed." I said, pointing out the data. "I can assure you that you haven't made any mistakes in your calculations."

That was the truth. After going through her calculations in almost an instant, I was sure that she hadn't made any mistake.

Irina looked relieved by my words, a hint of satisfaction in her eyes. "I'm glad to hear that. But there's still so much we don't know. What's the next step, Astron?"

This point was important.

'If I want to confront this demon, no matter what, I can't do it alone right now.'

Even if that entity is not at its peak right now, it is still a formidable enemy, especially against something like me.

'Since it has almost a whole army underneath.'

Considering the fact that, in the game, it was able to control all those souls as he wished.....It was a type of enemy that wasn't compatible with me.

'Phantoms are not that hard to deal with if they are alone, but once they are much higher in numbers, things will get very hard.'

I needed someone to come with me. A person who could both act as a decoy and could face an army on their own.

"We need to focus on locating the source of this entity's influence within Phantom's Land. The mana flow indicates a central point, and that's where we'll find answers."

I replied, directing the conversation just as I wished.

Sylvie, who had been silently observing the conversation, spoke up, "But how do we confront this entity? And what about the others who are still trapped in this dream-like state?"

Sylvie's words made sense. When she was able to keep herself calm, she could become someone valuable. I guess the future Saintess can not be just a dumb girl, either.

Well, I already knew she would ask this anyway.

"First, we need to pinpoint the entity's location," I replied while making eye contact with Irina. Hearing my answer, she lowered her head for a second and then widened her eyes.

"The mana..." It seems she was also able to realize what I meant. Her reaction showed that she wasn't paying attention to the environment for the time being, thanks to her being a bit shaken, and with my indication, she realized what was happening around us.

"You can feel it as well, right?" I asked.

"Yes." She nodded her head. "The flow of energy." The words she had spoken also made Sylvie realize. After all, Sylvie also possessed the ability to sense any extraordinary energy.

"Oh, my lord...." She gasped after looking at the amount of energy that was sucked. "This is...."

Irina looked at Sylvie with a serious expression. "The amount of energy is so high that it could maybe even rival my mother's energy." Her words conveyed the gravity of the situation, emphasizing the formidable power emanating from the entity's influence within Phantom's Land.

Sylvie's eyes widened in realization, understanding the immense challenge we were about to face.

The comparison to Irina's mother, someone undoubtedly powerful in terms of magical energy, heightened the sense of urgency.

"We need to act swiftly and cautiously," Irina continued, her gaze shifting between Sylvie and me. "The enemy is formidable, and we must be prepared for any challenges it might throw our way."

Hearing from her, I thought this was how the main cast of the game needed to be. She may be arrogant and a bit annoying sometimes, but Irina has the necessary features to be the main character of a game.

Even now, instead of thinking of running away, she is trying to look for possible ways to beat the enemy.

I could see from her eyes, her body language, and her small shakiness of words that she was nervous and scared. She probably thinks the chances of us doing something is not very high, but at the same time, she also probably knows that we don't have any other choice.

So, in the face of the only option, which is highly likely to lead us to death, she still doesn't escape from it.

'Well, this should be fine.'

And I wanted to see how much she could improve, for how long she could go.

"What do you think we should do, Astron?" Irina asked her question, carrying both urgency and anticipation.

I turned to Sylvie first. "Sylvie, how much of your power remains?"

Sylvie lowered her head. "I used the last of my power to open the path for Irina. There isn't much left."

I could already see that with my eyes. The power Sylvie is using is heavily related to her trait [First Lord's Authority], and it is not exactly mana. It is a Divine Power that could be used both for healing someone and dealing with someone.

But, since she had just recently awakened, she had yet to get any opportunity to cultivate that power enough to use excessively like this, so this was already within my expectations.

A moment of silence followed as Irina absorbed the weight of Sylvie's words. The challenges ahead seemed even more daunting with our limited resources; at least, this will be what she will be perceiving.

'This is not bad either.'

I thought. The fact that Sylvie didn't have any power left meant she wouldn't be able to join the fight, and that was better.

'Considering that with her, I can't show my full power.'

If I could, I wanted to avoid her finding out about my true identity for the time being, so this situation worked in my favor anyway.

'Also, she has her own job.'

Raising my hand, I gently patted Sylvie on her head. She looked a little down, probably feeling useless with her depleted powers.

"No time to be down," I said. "You have your own job to do as well."

Sylvie raised her head, looking at me curiously. "Really? What can I do now?"

"Someone needs to block the flow of energy."

Sylvie's eyes widened with realization. "And how can I do that?"

I pointed to the herbs we had brought with us. Even though I hadn't foreseen such things to happen, I at least prepared for some cases where Phantoms went out of control, and now it was time for them to be used.

"Use those. If you spread them on the bodies of those lying around, the souls will be forced to attach to the bodies, making them impossible to move freely."

Sylvie nodded, understanding her role in the upcoming challenge.

It was a simple yet crucial task, and I knew Sylvie had the capability to handle it. Even with a little bit of her remaining powers, she may discover how to recover that on her own.

Well, even if she couldn't do it, that was fine, but this would certainly make things a little bit easier for us since the phantoms wouldn't join us in the fight.

"And as for our case...." I turned my attention to Irina. "We will confront the enemy."

But it seemed she still needed a bit of encouragement.

'If that is what you need, it won't be hard.'

After all, I knew what could drive Irina hardest, the reason for her arrogant behavior and anything.

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"And as for our case....

We will confront the enemy."

As those words left Aston's mouth, Irina's eyes widened at his decisive statement. Even if she had known that this was what they needed to do, she wanted him to at least have a different idea from herself.

'Maybe....just maybe....'

She thought there was a chance that he was able to come up with a plan that wasn't as dangerous as what they were doing now. She didn't know what to say at that time, but now that it was just the two of them preparing for the fight with Sylvie already left, she couldn't help but want to ask.

The weight of the impending confrontation was evident in her expression as she opened her mouth.

"Confront the enemy, but how? We don't even know what kind of entity we're dealing with."

That was what she thought about the most. The feeling of dread inside her mind didn't go away, as if she felt like she had seen what this thing was trying to do.

'It is probably something I had seen in that dream.'

Irina thought to herself. Whatever it was, she had no way of proving that anyway, either.

"That's true," Astron mumbled. However, suddenly, his face turned different as his purple eyes seemed to be filled with an unknown aura of emptiness. As if he had now become a completely different person right before her eyes. He looked deep into Irina's eyes and spoke.

"Just when the Irina Emberheart had ever considered who was the enemy."

Confused by the sudden change in Astron's demeanor, Irina took an instinctive step back. His clear eyes bore into hers, and for a moment, she felt exposed and vulnerable. Astron continued, his voice steady.

"The Irina I know has never wavered in front of anything."

Irina's mind raced, attempting to comprehend the meaning behind Astron's words.

'What? What is this?'

The sudden shift in his tone and demeanor caught her off guard, making her wonder if she truly knew the person standing before her.

Astron continued to advance slowly towards Irina, who instinctively took another step back. His eyes bore into hers with an intensity that seemed to unravel layers of thoughts and emotions. The atmosphere between them grew tense as he spoke.

"The Irina I know was strong," Astron's voice echoed in the room, "and arrogant. Always believing she was better than others."

Irina's brows furrowed, a mixture of confusion and concern playing on her face. The words cut through her with an unexpected precision, making her question the image Astron held of her.

"Even though," he continued, "it made you annoying at times, that strength and arrogance were what made you yourself. You should never lose it."

His face stood right in front of her as she leaned on the wall. She felt trapped in front of his eyes for a second, as she couldn't look directly into those purple pupils.

Even if she wanted to escape, there was no way for her to leave this place, as the wall and his body prevented her from leaving.

"Therefore...." he stopped for a second as he grabbed the dagger from his belt.

–SWOOSH!

The dagger flew, directly penetrating the phantom that had just formed right behind himself.

Astron's sudden and swift action caught Irina off guard. The phantom that materialized behind him was instantly struck by his dagger, dissipating into an ethereal mist. The surprise on her face lingered as she processed the speed and precision of his movement.

Yet, what truly held her captive were Astron's words, spoken with an intensity that resonated in the close quarters between them. The challenge in his voice reverberated through the room.

"Show me, Irina. Show me and the world that you are not a person who wavered before any adversity."

Irina felt his presence too close, the warmth of his breath, and his scent that lingered in the air.

'That's right. I am Irina Emberheart.'

A part of her instinctively wanted to avert her eyes, but a fierce determination welled within her.

'There is no way I will escape.'

Raising her head, she met Astron's eyes, locking onto the depths of his purple pupils. He was looking down at her from above as if he was superior.

In that moment, she saw her reflection within his eyes, a version of herself that seemed pitiful.

'There is no way I am scared in front of something that operates secretly like this.'

Irina smirked, her amber eyes shining with newfound resolve.

'And, there is no way I can lose this bastard.'

The challenge laid before her fueled a fire within, and she refused to back down.

For some reason, his words seemed to resonate a lot deeper than she had thought initially, and she didn't want to linger too much on that since it made her think she had lost.

'You better not think you are better.'

Irina felt a surge of anger coursing through her veins. With a smirk, she reached out and grabbed Astron by the collar of his attire, pulling him closer to her. Her amber eyes bore into his, a mixture of defiance and fire dancing within them.

"Who are you to say such things to me?" she questioned, her grip on his collar tightening slightly. The room felt charged with an unspoken tension as she held onto him, her fingers gripping the fabric of his clothing.

Even the fire psions around them seemed to move thanks to Irina's thoughts and feelings.

—THUD!

Astron, however, seemed unfazed by her display of assertiveness. In a swift motion, he caught her wrists, his grip strong but not restricting. His purple eyes met hers, his expression not changing.

But Irina couldn't even take action before she felt her hand releasing their hold on his collar.

"It seems you've come to your senses," he remarked, releasing her wrists from his grasp.

The sudden shift in his demeanor, as well as eyes, left Irina momentarily stunned. From that intensity to his normal face....

It felt a bit otherworldly and abnormal.

His words lingered in the air, and the room seemed to echo with the unspoken intensity of their exchange.

"Then, should I take it as a sign that you are ready?"

As his words left his mouth, he was about to leave the bungalow. But Irina swiftly grabbed the hem of his clothes using her 「Telekinesis」, the fire in her eyes now replaced with a more composed determination.

"Wait," Irina said, her voice firm yet composed. Astron turned to look at her, his expression unchanged. Without uttering a word, Irina released her grip on his clothes and reached up to fix his collar that she had wrinkled in her assertive hold.

For some reason, she felt like she needed to do this. It was an action that she couldn't quite make sense of both as her feelings and for many other things.

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"What are you doing?" He asked, his face a bit surprised. The action seemed to have surprised him a little.

"I hate seeing things unorderedly."

"It is pointless. After all, these clothes will eventually get damaged in a close while."

"But it is not bad to start everything composed, isn't it?"

".....That might be true...."

As Astron stood there, slightly surprised by Irina's unexpected attention to detail, she continued adjusting his collar with a focused expression. Her movements were precise, and she seemed determined to restore the order she had momentarily disrupted.

Astron, still puzzled by her sudden change in demeanor, watched her silently.

Once satisfied with her impromptu adjustments, Irina stepped back, giving Astron's appearance an appraising look. Her amber eyes met his, a newfound sense of determination shining within them.

"There," she said with a satisfied nod, "now you look presentable. Let's face whatever is out there in style."

Astron raised an eyebrow, a hint of amusement in his eyes that Irina could pinpoint. "Is style really necessary for this?"

Irina smirked, "Always. It adds a flair of confidence, and confidence is key."

"It seems to me that you are the one who needs confidence, though."

Astron's teasing remark prompted Irina to shoot him a glare. "Coming from someone who just threw daggers at phantoms in a bungalow, you're one to talk about confidence."

"At least I don't need a fashion intervention to boost my confidence."

Irina's cheeks flushed slightly, and her voice wavered as she responded, "Shut up. You have no right to talk about it."

"Why is that?"

"Just because I said so."

"You are being unreasonable."

"Just shut up, bastard."

"Yeah, yeah."

Seemingly enough, as Irina returned to her usual attitude, Astron's amused eyes faced the flow of mana while turning serious and cold instantly without making Irina alert.

As they pressed further into Phantom's Land, the thick fog shrouded them in an otherworldly silence, broken only by the haunting moans of trapped souls.

Irina was able to sense the direction of the mana flow; therefore, she led the way from the front. And even though Astron was also the same, he let Irina do as she wished.

Irina, being the formidable fire mage she is, led the way with flames dancing at her fingertips. Her eyes glowed with an unwavering determination, casting an eerie light in the mist.

Phantoms emerged from the fog, their ghastly forms swirling with malevolent energy. Irina wasted no time, unleashing controlled torrents of fire that engulfed the spectral beings.

The phantoms, caught in the searing flames, dissipated into nothingness.

"Come on now! Don't make me laugh!"

She was smirking while using her mana as she wished. That was only possible because she was Irina Emberheart, the Fiery Demoness.

Astron knew there was no other person who could do this like her aside from another mage.

When it came to dealing with a huge number of enemies, the fire in her hands was one of the most dangerous weapons.

However, that didn't mean Astron didn't do anything. As a skilled archer, he took a more strategic position supporting Irina.

With bow in hand, he aimed with precision, his arrows finding their marks among the approaching phantoms that Irina missed, making her move as comfortably as she could.

As they moved deeper into the mist, the phantoms seemed to multiply, as if the very fabric of Phantom's Land conspired against them. However, Irina and Astron moved with a synchronized dance, skillfully dispatching every phantom that dared to cross their path.

Astron's arrows flew with deadly accuracy, hitting the phantoms' weak points and disrupting their ethereal forms. Meanwhile, Irina's flames danced with grace, consuming the malevolent entities in controlled bursts.

The foggy battlefield became a canvas for their expertise, a display of fire and precision. Irina's smirk persisted, her confidence unwavering, while Astron's calm and calculated movements added a layer of strategy to their offensive.

As the last of the phantoms dissipated into the mist, Irina turned to Astron with a grin.

"Not bad. Your aim is quite impressive."

Astron nodded, acknowledging her compliment. Yet, they didn't have time to stop, as suddenly, right before them, two different phantoms appeared seemingly weirder than before.

"Grrrrr..."

"What the?"

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"Grrr....."

Standing in front of the two phantoms, seemingly different than before I nodded my head inwardly.

'Indeed, just as I had suspected.'

The moment I had seen their forms, my suspicions were immediately corrected.

"What are they?"

Irina asked as she looked into their face. Even if now that she had returned to how she used to be, it seemed she also understood the monsters before her weren't the same.

—SCREECH!

Yet, they are not the only ones that were out there looking for us. Behind, countless different sounds of screeches echoed around the place.

'They are here.'

The number of presences I could sense was immensely high. All of these patterns indicated that the enemy was what I knew.

"WHAT! What are we going to do now!" Irina shouted, looking at the sounds.

—GRRR!

The sounds of the two phantoms before us also started as the two monsters approached.

"Cover behind," I mumbled while raising my bow.

"What? You are going to face them alone?" Her face, while asking this, was quite a sight to see, but it wasn't the time for that.

"Yes. We don't have a choice." I replied while pointing at the two. "They are not as strong as you think."

This was an honest statement. Contrary to what one may think after seeing them, at the end of the day, they were phantoms and had a clear weakness. People tend to get the first impression of them

being different from other phantoms thanks to them being the souls of high-ranking monsters, but in the end, they were nothing but simple phantoms.

"...." She was speechless at my statement, but after looking into my eyes for a second, she scoffed. "Humph....I trust you..." She said while turning her body backward.

—SWIRL!

The fire started swirling around her head as she faced the horde of phantoms approaching us from where we came.

"..."?She didn't say much as she walked back, but stopped for a second and threw a look at me. "You...Don't ever think of dying." Her eyes, her mimics, and everything was genuine. At that moment, she wholeheartedly believed and wanted what she had said.

"Don't worry," I said as the response while starting to walk forward. "I had yet to attain the right to die."

"Humph....Who is worried about you?"

—TAP! TAP!

I wanted to retort but let her do as she pleased, walking forward.

'Now.....'

It was time to face the enemy.

'Using [Shadowborne] is pointless.'

I deduced immediately. Now that my location had already been revealed, Shadowborne was basically nullified for the time being, though that wouldn't be the case for the next enemies.

But it was not like I needed it anyway.

"ROOAR!"

As the first enemy immediately leaped towards me, I calmed myself down, both my body as well as my mind.

"Haaaaah....."

Taking a deep breath, I drew my bow, channeling it with my mana. I no longer needed to hold back, as Irina was also busy dealing with other phantoms.

–SWOOSH!

As I released the arrow, it flew with an incredible speed. The wolf that was flying in the sky seemed to widen its eyes as it could sense the energy of the arrow it contained.

However, contrary to what it had expected, the arrow went right past it and immediately headed backward.

–BOOM!

And following that, the arrow exploded from the place where the other phantom was residing.

As the explosion resonated through the air, I swiftly transitioned to the next phase of my plan.

The dark elf phantom, engulfed in the aftermath of the explosion, had likely taken a significant hit. Now was the perfect moment to deal with the soul of Raksha, the wolf-type monster.

I manipulated my mana, transforming my [Celestialith] from the bow into its dual dagger form. The celestial energy infused within the blades glimmered with a faint, ethereal glow.

Gripping the daggers tightly, I focused on the incoming wolf phantom.

–SWOOSH!

The wolf, seemingly confused by the unexpected explosion, regained its composure and lunged at me with ferocious speed.

'What a speed.'

Even in its phantom form, its speed was insane. Considering the fact that it was stronger than many of the other phantoms, it seemed even the souls had their rankings.

'But, not enough.'

I sidestepped its attack, narrowly avoiding its sharp claws. With a quick motion, I slashed at its flank with [Celestalith], leaving a glowing trail in the air.

—SLASH!

Raksha recoiled from the strike, its ghostly form showing signs of damage. However, the phantom was resilient and quickly countered with a series of agile maneuvers.

Dodging its attacks required precision and anticipation, yet I adapted to its movements with each passing moment. After all, I still remember the moment when I faced it in the game.

Its attack patterns were carved in my head, but I could also observe its body at the same time.

Meanwhile, the dark elf phantom emerged from the remnants of the explosion, weakened but not defeated. It raised its hand, preparing to unleash a barrage of magical attacks.

'I need to deal with this fast.'

Before its dark magic became a significant threat, I needed to deal with the Raksha.

—SWOOSH!

The wolf immediately lunged forward once again, its fangs glowing. From the looks, it was using one of the special skills it obtained after becoming a phantom.

I raised my daggers and channeled mana into them as the wolf approached. The Raksha opened its mouth, aiming to bite me from my shoulder, yet just at the last second, it disappeared from where it was.

–WRR!

And in an instant, it reappeared right behind me. It was its newly obtained skill 「Space Leap」 thanks to being a phantom. After all, that demon had the Spatial Mana Manipulation and was able to manipulate space.

Yet, there are always things that such mindless creatures lack. They are unable to think and are just a bunch of lesser beings.

That is how it works.

「Dash」

–STAB!

As I immediately increased my speed and rotated my body with an incredible speed, I stabbed the Phantom of the monster that had just appeared right behind me.

My eyes were already focused on its weak point, the place where its mana was connected to the hive of the demon.

Where the phantom's core was located.

–FUSH!

As my dagger stabbed the core of the phantom, it instantly turned into a bunch of particles.

After dealing with the Raksha, I swiftly turned my attention towards the dark elf phantom. Transforming [Celestalith] back into its bow form, I focused on the approaching threat. The moon energy within the bow I pushed pulsed with power as I drew an arrow infused with mana.

The dark elf, recovering from the aftermath of the explosion, prepared to unleash its magical onslaught. It was going to be detrimental since if it could do that, both Irina and I would be put into a tricky situation.

With a rapid motion, I released the arrow towards the phantom. However, the dark elf was not about to be an easy target.

–SWOOSH!

The arrow sailed through the air, aiming for the dark elf's essence. Yet, just before the arrow could make contact, the dark elf employed its spatial manipulation abilities and teleported, evading the impending strike.

'Tricky little creature.'

Yet, I knew it would do that. Once one of that guy's family members had done the same, the others were bound to do the same.

Anticipating its teleportation, I tracked the dark elf's movements with my enhanced perception, thanks to [Perceptive Insight].

As the dark elf reappeared in a new location, I swiftly adjusted my aim. Spatial fluctuations gave away its next position, and I released another arrow in that direction.

–THUD!

The arrow hit its mark, and a resonating explosion engulfed the dark elf. The force of the blast disrupted its magical concentration, causing it to dissipate into fading shadows.

With both the Raksha and the dark elf phantoms defeated, a momentary calm settled over the battlefield.

"Huuuuhhh....."

I took a deep breath, feeling the strain of the intense confrontation. Glancing back, I saw Irina still engaged in combat with the remaining phantoms.

'I guess she is doing fine on her own.'

Seeing that she was burning the horde of Phantoms on her own, I started walking to the entrance of the location where the demon resided.

As Irina turned to face the approaching horde of phantoms, her fire magic swirling around her hand, she couldn't shake off the nagging worry about Astron.

His decision to face the two seemingly unique phantoms alone puzzled her, and she couldn't help but question his strategy.

'I know he is stronger than he looks, but....'

As the first wave of phantoms descended upon her, Irina unleashed controlled torrents of fire, engulfing the malevolent entities in a dance of flames. The heat radiated from her attacks, creating a protective barrier around her, but the horde seemed endless.

'How can he fight those monsters alone?'

Irina wondered, her concentration divided between her own battle and the unseen threat Astron faced.

'No. If he trusted me enough to let me have his back, then I should do the same.'

She thought. The fact that he hadn't even looked at her way once after before was the proof of that.

'I need to do my part too.'

Despite her formidable abilities, facing a horde of phantoms wasn't an easy task. Her mind raced with concerns, but she pushed them aside, focusing on the immediate threat before her, yet she couldn't help but smile.

'Bastard.....Making me do the groundwork while you are having all the fun.....You owe me another....'

She raised her hand as she started building her magic in her head.

"Should I show you the imitation of a real hell?"

For the first time in a while, she could go all out. Who wouldn't want to do that? Especially the girl who liked to destroy things as a hobby.

"Burn....Under my guidance."

「Inferno」

The flames started taking control.

After I had entered the core, things started getting different.

THUMP!

With each step I had taken, the beating of my heart intensified. The demonic energy in the air, as well as the mana, started thickening.

'Certainly, no joke.'

I thought, feeling the amount of the mana around. There was no doubt that this guy I was going to face was something that I needed to keep my calm.

'Yet, it is impossible.'

Even if I try to calm myself down forcefully, these soaring emotions inside me can not go down. But this time, I felt like I no longer needed to refuse those feelings. I felt like I could accept both the hatred and the logic as mine.

—WROOM!

Just at that moment, I felt like the presence of a spatial vortex.

It seemed I had finally reached the place of my desire.

Chapter 284 Chapter 67.1 - Bury

What is the type of enemies that is the most disgusting in games?

Everyone has different answers to such questions. However, I am sure that there is one type of enemy that many would agree to be annoying.

The enemy that can travel in space.

One of the special types of hybrid demons was born with the ability to manipulate both spatial mana and psychic mana.

It was a type of demon that was the descendant of two primordial demons. In the game, it was an enemy that was so annoying to deal with that most players would at least break one keyboard against it.

Yet, now he was standing before me, looking at the special spatial slit that he was trying to expand.

His hands were open wide as he tried to control all the energy supplied right to him. He clearly seemed to be doing his best to manipulate every bit of energy inside.

The reason for that was highly likely simple.

'Is he trying to call one of his ancestors?'

After all, even though Belthazor was one of the high-ranking demons and descendants of Primordial demons, he was not on the level of the primordial demon itself.

And demons had a much cleaner hierarchy than humans. A demon's life belonged to the clan they belonged to, and that was it.

'I see.'

This should be what Irina must have felt. As I remembered the words she spoke about one of the most dangerous entities she had felt, it seemed in her dream-type state; she was able to feel the disturbance between space and time.

If that was the case, it was safe to assume that she was in a place where she could perceive space freely, but it was better not to dwell on that topic for the time being.

'If the first thing he did after awakening was calling for its leader, then....'

It was safe to assume that he wouldn't be in his best condition.

'Certainly, he still hadn't noticed me.'

Realizing that my [Shadowborne] was working just as I had intended, I slowly approached the place. If he had just recently awakened and was arrogantly moving, it would make sense.

Even in the game, he was somehow an arrogant one and operated as he wished. He didn't think anybody would be free from its spell and would be trapped in their parallel worlds.

After that, he would be attacked by Sylvie and Ethan, and then we, as the player, would defeat it.

But now, there was neither Sylvie nor Ethan.

It was me alone.

'Yet, I alone will be enough.'

My blood started to boil. In front of me stood one of the enemies that I wanted to kill the most. After all, Belthazor was one of the most disgusting demons out there.

"Oh' father....Grace me with your presence once more....This foolish son of yours has devoted his life to you once more...."

I could hear his disgusting voice even from this distance. It was the demonic voice that even now sent shivers down my spine.

Not out of fear but out of hatred.

I stood away and took my position, changing [Celestalith] into its rifle form.

The weapon had taken its unique rifle form. The feeling of cold metal in both my hands would normally be calming to me, yet at this moment, I rather felt my emotions amplified.

'You need to calm down, Astron.'

I closed my eyes for a second, calling myself out. I knew getting controlled by my emotions right at the start wouldn't be a good idea.

Right now, I needed to act as a hunter. I could feel the strength inside me rising, thanks to [Vengeful Bane].

'That is right. You are the hunter now.'

After that, I opened my eyes.

I aimed the rifle at the demon, who was engrossed in his ritual near the slowly opening portal. Taking a moment to concentrate, I infused the weapon with my green mana. The energy hummed within the rifle, ready to be unleashed.

With a controlled exhale, I squeezed the trigger.

—PIU!

The condensed magic bullet surged forward, piercing through the air with deadly accuracy. It struck the demon's head, eliciting a sudden, crazed shout of pain.

"AAAAAH!"

The demon staggered, but to my dismay, it didn't fall. Instead, it quickly became alert, sensing the threat that had breached its concentration.

However, I wouldn't let it move freely.

With a swift motion, I unleashed another series of attacks. This time, arrows imbued with explosive power were at the ready. I fired them with precise intent, each arrow streaking toward the demon with the potential for devastating impact.

—SWOOSH! SWOOSH! SWOOSH!

The explosive arrows found their marks, creating a series of fiery eruptions around the demon. The cavern echoed with the sounds of destruction as the explosive force rocked the space around him.

"RAAAAAAAA!"

The demon's enraged roar echoed through the cavern, a mixture of anger and frustration evident in its otherworldly voice.

"Who dares to disturb my sacred ritual!?" the lesser being bellowed, the cavern walls seemingly trembling in response to its wrath.

The demonic energy in the air intensified, swirling around the angered demon like a tempest.

—SWOOSH!

I was ready to attack it more, but I knew what was going to happen soon.

As the demon's fury grew, its eyes scanned the surroundings, searching for the source of the intrusion. The fiery explosions from the explosive arrows had obscured its vision momentarily, and now it sought retribution.

'He is coming.'

In that brief respite, I swiftly changed [Celestalith] back into its dual dagger form, preparing for the impending confrontation.

The demon's eyes locked onto my location, its gaze piercing through the haze of smoke and magic. If he had been careful from the start, I wouldn't have gotten this close using only [Shadowborne], yet he was arrogant anyway, resulting in me getting the first bunch of attacks.

—WROOM!

With a sudden burst of energy, the demon utilized its spatial manipulation abilities. In an instant, it appeared right before me, a malevolent grin etched across its monstrous face.

The spatial teleportation left behind an eerie distortion in the air, showcasing the demon's mastery over space.

"You are here, you rat!"

The demonic creature, driven by rage, prepared to strike. Its monstrous hand reached out, aiming to crush me with its overwhelming strength.

Yet, I reacted swiftly, meeting the demon's malevolent gaze with my face devoid of anything.

–SHING!

I parried the incoming strike with [Celestalith], the celestial blades clashing against the demon's immense force.

The impact sent shockwaves through the cavern, and I struggled to maintain my stance against the relentless assault.

The demon, smirking with arrogance, spoke in a voice that echoed through the cavern,

"It hasn't been a while since I awakened from my slumber, and yet an annoying fly makes its appearance, disturbing my plans."

I remained silent, focusing on the imminent clash. The demon continued, its voice dripping with disdain, "You think you can defy my will? I am Belthazor, descendant of the primordial demons! Your presence here is inconsequential. Prepare to be crushed beneath my might!"

With a maniacal laugh, the demon unleashed a barrage of strikes, each blow fueled by its centuries-old grudge and newfound fury.

It seemed, just like me, that it also didn't like it when its plans were disturbed. That was the natural consequence. Nobody liked their plans disturbed anyway, aside from some.

After all, that would be all too boring if everything played according to one's plans either. There needed to be some spice.

–CLANK!

I countered the demon's strikes with precision, my dual daggers meeting the demonic onslaught.

Even if he was strong and fast, his raw physical abilities weren't the strongest part. Now, if he had just woken up just as he said, that would make sense that he had yet to gather his full strength.

–CLANK!

I continued to meet his attacks with my own.

'One from right.'

My eyes immediately captured the small movement on the right side of his open waist. His left leg was also clenched, signaling a high likely right swing of his claws.

—SLASH!

And just as I had anticipated, he threw me a fast diagonal top-

to-bottom slash. Yet, because I had anticipated his moves, it was very easy for me to side-step his movements.

With a clean footwork of shift, I slightly changed my pillar foot and then followed it with a fast sweep of my left dagger.

—SLASH!

The celestial dagger glided through the air with precision, slicing across the demon's open waist. The cavern echoed with the demonic roar as my attack landed, opening a clean cut on the demon's midsection.

"AAAARGHK!"

The demon, momentarily staggered by the unexpected strike, let out another scream of pain. Yet, there was no pause in the relentless dance between us. I capitalized on the moment, swiftly transitioning to the next move.

—SLASH!

My left dagger followed in a seamless motion, aiming for the connecting muscles of the demon's right wing. The celestial red blade cut through the ethereal form of the demon, leaving behind a glowing trail. The cavern resonated with the demon's anguished cries as my attack found its mark.

The spatial energy crackled around us, but I remained focused, exploiting the weaknesses in the demon's movements. The clean cuts disrupted the fluidity of its attacks, and the demon struggled to regain control.

"You, human!"

The demon shouted as he staggered in front of me. The cut on its wings must have been painful, yet that wasn't the end.

–SWOOSH!

In an instant, I changed [Celestalith]'s form into its chakrams. The blades glowed in a faint grey light as I threw them rapidly to the demon.

–SWOOSH!

The chakrams, infused with celestial energy, whirled through the air with trained precision.

–CUT! CUT!

They sliced through the demon's arms and shoulders as they rapidly approached, leaving glowing trails in their wake.

"GRAAAHHH!" The demon roared, its pain echoing through the cavern. The celestial blades had inflicted significant damage, further disrupting the demon's ability to retaliate.

As the chakrams began their return journey, I seized the opportunity for another targeted strike. With a swift and calculated motion, I utilized the white tendrils connecting me to chakrams, directing the blades toward the demon's tail.

–SWOOSH!

The chakrams cut through the ethereal form of the tail, leaving another glowing trail of celestial energy.

"AAAARGHK!"

The demon's roar intensified a hearty and strong cry that seemed to express its inability to withstand the pain.

The spatial energy crackled around the wounded demon, and it seemed to reach a breaking point.

In a desperate attempt to escape the relentless assault, the demon utilized its spatial mana, teleporting away from my immediate vicinity.

Yet, I knew it would do that.

I changed [Celestalith] into its bow form and aimed right at where he was going to appear.

–SWOOSH!

Yet, just as I had fired the arrow, suddenly, its trajectory changed randomly.

"You arrogant human...."

The demon started speaking while standing in front of the place where the energy was supplied.

"I will bury you here alive...."

It mumbled as the energy flow changed from the slit to itself. It seemed, even its changed version at least had two phases....

Chapter 285 Chapter 67.2 - Bury

The cavern resonated with the demonic muttering as the wounded Belthazor stood before the energy source.

With an ominous energy flow, the demon began absorbing the essence, attempting to regain some of its peak form.

"You arrogant human... I will bury you here alive," the demon mumbled, its voice dripping with malice as it harnessed the power flowing from the spatial slit.

'Tch.'

I clicked my tongue, realizing that the battle was about to take a more challenging turn.

The demon, fueled by the absorbed energy, would undoubtedly become a more formidable opponent.

As the demon completed its absorption, a surge of power emanated from its form. The cavern seemed to tremble as Belthazor stood, rejuvenated and more menacing than before.

–SWOOSH!

I readied [Celestalith] in its bow form, determined to continue the assault. However, as I released an arrow towards the demon, I witnessed a distortion in the space around it.

'I knew it.'

The demon was manipulating the spatial energy, nullifying the trajectory of my attacks. That was also the reason why my first attack didn't hit. I had followed its movements cleanly, yet the attack had missed.

As I realized that the demon's newfound control over space made direct attacks almost futile, I started racking my brain.

I needed to reassess my strategy, finding a way to exploit weaknesses and disrupt its concentration.

'Even if the start of the time is different, Balthazor is still Belthazor.'

It seemed I had underestimated it a little since it had just awakened. Though, it won't change that much.

"You cannot escape your fate, human. I control the very fabric of space around me. Your feeble attempts to harm me are in vain," the demon taunted, its voice resonating with newfound confidence.

'We will see about that.'

I thought, grabbing [Celestalith] with its form turned to daggers. Since then, I have known what it was going to do.

–SWOOSH!

I adjusted my strategy, holding [Celestalith] with its form turned to daggers. The demon's taunts echoed through the cavern as it reveled in its newfound power.

However, I knew that despite its mastery over spatial manipulation, every entity had its limits. I needed to find a way to exploit those limits and turn the tide in my favor.

–WRRR!

Before I could formulate a plan, the cavern once again crackled with spatial energy. Belthazor, now moving at an even faster speed, instantly appeared right before me. The acceleration in its spatial movements caught me off guard.

"Prepare to be crushed, insignificant being!" the demon declared, its claws covered in spatial energy.

With a burst of supernatural speed, Belthazor launched a rapid assault. Its punches distorted the space around me, creating a challenging environment for me to navigate.

-Eyes of Hourglass.

Dash.

The demon's attacks came relentlessly, and I struggled to evade the blows as each strike threatened to disrupt my concentration.

I needed to activate my two skills to match the speed of its attacks. The time around me slowed as my brain registered the information as fast as it could.

I also felt the increase in my speed as my mana started being supplied to my body.

Yet, I knew using it too much wouldn't help much, and I needed to conserve my mana. From what I could see, there was one more trick that Baltazor could still use.

He still seemed relaxed.

I continued to fight with him, utilizing every possible aspect of my arsenal. I was reading its body movements and everything to predict where his attacks were going to come from. If I had wasted any time trying to use my reaction speed, things would get quite messy after all.

—CLANK!

I blocked the incoming claw with my daggers from the right side. The spatial energy crackled around us, and each clash sent shockwaves through the cavern. Belthazor, fueled by its rage and newfound strength, relentlessly pressed the assault.

His claws, infused with spatial energy, had an unpredictable nature, making it difficult to anticipate the trajectory of each strike.

—CLANK! CLANK!

As the demon continued its assault, I focused on blocking and evading its blows. Each clash of our weapons resonated in the cavern, the spatial distortions adding an extra layer of complexity to our duel.

—CLANK! —CLANK!

I maintained my defense, the daggers absorbing the impact of the demon's relentless attacks. However, the force behind each strike threatened to push me back. The spatial movements accompanying Belthazor's punches were disorienting, and I struggled to maintain my footing.

"Where is your initial confidence, huh?"

He continued to speak, but I knew it was still not the time. I needed to wait for the perfect moment.

'An attack from the left.'

I read his body and readied my daggers for a spatial swing.

CLANK!

And just as I had thought, he slashed the empty space with his claws. But, because he was able to bend the space, in reality, he actually slashed just my right side.

"Ho?"

—CLANK!

But, to not give me any time, he followed his slash with another one, but this time appearing before me. I also read his movements once again and deflected the attack at that exact moment.

"Arghk—"

But, my posture of deflection wasn't optimal, and I had injured my wrist a little in the process.

"Heh...Your end is here."

He mumbled as he raised his other claw. Even though my wrists were hurting, it didn't matter at this moment.

Yet, the more I got injured, the better it was.

The crimson color of my mana started covering my vision once again, as I started feeling the familiar feeling of bloodthirst.

It wasn't to the extreme yet, but I could feel the increase in my physical attributes, and that was it.

–SWOOSH!

I readied my daggers to counter Belthazor's next attack.

The demon, fueled by its arrogance, launched another assault. Each strike was swift and filled with the power of spatial manipulation.

–CLANK! –CLANK!

I deflected the attacks with my celestial daggers, but the spatial energy accompanying each strike left small injuries one by one.

The pain only fueled my determination. I couldn't afford to falter now.

'Soon, it is soon. Just a little more.'

Belthazor continued his relentless assault, exploiting every opportunity to strike. I focused on reading the muscles on his body, predicting the trajectory of his claws. As the battle unfolded, I could feel the familiar surge of bloodthirst coursing through my veins.

The crimson hue of my mana enveloped my vision, enhancing my physical attributes. The pain in my wrists became secondary to the increasing strength and speed I gained. I welcomed the bloodthirst, using it to my advantage.

–CLANK! –CLANK!

I deflected another series of attacks, but this time, I noticed a pattern in Belthazor's movements. His right leg, right wrist, and left shoulder were slightly clenched. I could also see the spatial manipulations bending the space between his right hand and me.

'A right spatial swing again.'

I thought, readying myself.

However, before I could adjust my defense, the demon vanished from my immediate vision.

I sensed a disturbance in the space behind me too late. Belthazor, utilizing his spatial movement, appeared right behind me.

The realization struck me – a feint.

–STAB!

"Burghk!"

In that split second, I felt the claws pierce through my chest. I turned to deflect the attack, yet the strength I could muster at that split second was not enough to ward off the assault, and I could sense the spatial energy enveloping his attack.

"Burghl!"

I could feel the blood rising from my stomach to my mouth. My breathing got haggard as my consciousness tended to waver for a second.

"Did you think I don't understand what you are doing?"

I could hear his voice coming from my back.

"A pathetic human like you thinks he can read me? Though your abilities are certainly commendable, you are two hundred years early to beat me."

–THUD!

Belthazor's cruel laughter echoed as he kicked me from behind. My body flew across the cavern, slamming against the rocky surface at the far end.

–TINGLE!

The impact reverberated through my entire being, and I could feel the sharp pain in my head as it hit the hard surface.

"Grr..."

Blood dripped from my wounds, and my vision blurred as I lay on the verge of losing consciousness. Yet, I knew it was close.

The time for the end was close. Even though my body was begging me to stop, even though the brain wanted to shut itself down, I had far long grown past the point of being controlled by mere instincts.

For me, walking on the bridge called life and death was something normal at this point.

'Soon.....He will do it soon....'

Belthazor's voice reached me from a distance, his arrogant words echoing through the cavern.

"You humans, elves or dwarves.....Whatever....You have all tried to suppress my race once before.....Yet, you are this pathetic, can't even raise your heads..."

I struggled to move, my body resisting every attempt to regain my footing. Belthazor's taunts continued as he reveled in his apparent victory.

"You fought well, but you should get what you deserve for disturbing my plans and wasting my time with your pathetic presence."

As his words echoed, I could see the energy converging into two points in the cavern.

"Now, you shall bear witness to the difference in power between us!"

From where I lay, I could see the demon rise into the air. His right arm shone red, and his left arm glowed with a deep blue radiance.

"This is one of my favorite techniques," Belthazor declared with a malicious grin, channeling the energy between his two arms. As he stood confidently in the air, he seemed assured of his imminent victory.

The energy between his hands intensified, and he took the opportunity to explain the nature of his technique. His words reached me from a distance, my weakened state allowing only fragmented comprehension.

"This technique involves the special mix of two different particle spins, one reverse and one direct." He explained, with his grin intensifying.

His disgusting face and teeth made me want to puke, yet I tried my best to hold myself. I knew now wasn't the time.

My eyes continued to watch his every movement.

"Once the two spins are combined, there will be no traces of you remaining in this world. You will become a part of the complete void, leaving nothing behind. Everything you have done, the fight you gave, will be meaningless, empty. Nothing will remain of you. This is your punishment for disturbing me."

Belthazor's laughter echoed through the cavern as he reveled in his anticipated triumph. He mocked me further, questioning what thoughts raced through my mind as I faced the impending oblivion.

"What do you think before you die, insignificant being? Your struggles and resistance were futile. Now, embrace the void that awaits you!"

At that moment, he had already finished channeling the two energies and was about to start mixing.

"Heh....."

And the moment he started doing that, I could no longer control the grin that formed on my face....

Chapter 286 Chapter 67.3 - Bury

Arrogance.

An overwhelming possession of a very important trait, self-awareness.

Those who are arrogant tend to overestimate themselves. That doesn't mean every one of them will lose control, but most of them will.

That is how that tendency works.?And for the case of Belthazor....He was one of those that has an overly exaggerated feeling of individuality.

"Heh..." A small, faint laugh escaped my lips as Belthazor began the process of mixing the two energies. The sinister resonance of his technique echoed through the cavern, creating an ominous atmosphere, yet for me, that didn't seem threatening at all.

Belthazor, momentarily puzzled, furrowed his brows, questioning, "Hah? Has this guy gone insane?"

The truth was, my seemingly erratic laughter wasn't a sign of madness. Instead, it was a manifestation of something far more dangerous – something that would end him.

"Hahahahahahaa...Maaan....."

I couldn't control it. How could I? At this point in time, he just acted as I had wanted him to be, as I had predicted him to be. The moment he used his strongest spell to showcase his capabilities while erasing his spatial barrier....

"You never let down others, don't you?"

I mumbled, looking at the demon flying in my front. He was already half in the process of merging his favorite spell, yet the expression on his face didn't even seem to be happy at all.

Belthazor, still immersed in his spellcasting, shot me a bewildered glance. His eyes, filled with the remnants of arrogance, now held a glimmer of uncertainty.

"What's so funny, mortal? Your impending doom, or perhaps your feeble attempts at resistance?" Belthazor sneered, trying to mask the growing unease beneath his demonic demeanor. I could feel it....From his eyes, I could see....Slowly but surely, something was growing.

I knew one thing for a fact. This guy before me could instinctively sense what was about to come. It was not a thought he had with his logical reasoning. It was purely out of his own instincts.

"Heh... You just don't get it, do you?" I smirked, my laughter intensifying. The crimson hue of my mana enveloped my vision, casting a blood-red tint on the world around me.

"I don't get it....?" He raised his eyebrow. "Your body is battered, and your insides are sticking out. You can't even move your body? What can you even do?"

His words were grounded in the tangible reality of the situation. I, a mere mortal, lay broken and bloodied before a powerful demon like him. Logically, it made no sense for me to find amusement in my current state. But logic, in the face of the unpredictable, often faltered.

"What even am I doing?" Belthazor mumbled to himself. "Why am I even bothering with this pathetic creature?"

Following that, he almost finished merging two spheres, yet just at that point, he made a crucial mistake.

「Mother Moon's Guidance: Incessant 」

—SWOOSH!

Suddenly, chakrams materialized beneath him, swiftly launching toward the demon. Before Belthazor could comprehend the threat, the chakrams sliced through the air with incredible speed.

"Hu-"

He couldn't even finish his exclamation. The chakrams moved with such swiftness that he couldn't pinpoint their origin. The razor-sharp edges cut through the air, homing in on their target.

—SLASH! SLASH!

Just as Belthazor was about to unleash his devastating spell, the chakrams struck with precision. They cut through his demonic form countless times, each strike precise and lethal. The demon let out a guttural scream, his body shredded by the onslaught.

"AAAAAAH!"

—CRACK!

The pain, unexpected and severe, made Belthazor lose control. The beam of energy he held in his hand surged wildly, cutting through the cavern's ceiling.

—RUMBLE!

The once ominous atmosphere now turned chaotic as the unleashed power wreaked havoc.

'Not enough.'

I knew it was not enough, both for me and for Belthazor. The inferior demon might have been just awakened, but even then, they tended to be like cockroaches. Escaping and coming back.

They are nothing but insects that you need to crush at once, or else they will get more in numbers and will bite you back.

Especially a cockroach bastard who can manipulate space.

The crimson glow of my mana intensified, casting an eerie hue upon the chaotic aftermath of his failed spell.

"AAARGH!"

The cavern echoed with the remnants of his guttural screams and the destructive energy unleashed during his moment of lost control.

"Hahahahahahahahaha....."

In the midst of the swirling chaos, I couldn't suppress the eerie laughter that escaped my lips. The sound echoed through the cavern, a chilling accompaniment to the spectacle before me.

Belthazor, still momentarily dazed and questioning, looked up with a mixture of confusion and pain.

"Heh..." I chuckled, the laughter taking on an unsettling tone. "You demons are always so sure of yourselves, so arrogant in your perceived superiority."

–TAP! TAP!

The sinister resonance of my laughter hung in the air as I began walking toward Belthazor. Each step carried an eerie rhythm, synchronized with the pulsating crimson glow that surrounded me.

The tattered wings of the demon twitched in futile attempts to rise, but the damage inflicted upon them hindered any escape.

Belthazor's gaze, now clouded with both physical pain and a growing sense of dread, followed my approach. His attempts at defiance turned into feeble snarls as he struggled to rise from the cavern floor.

"You think this is the end?" he spat, his voice strained with both hatred and wounded pride. "You're nothing but a pesky insect. I'll crush you, even if it's the last thing I do."

He still seemed to hold a fighting spirit inside his head.

'Yes. That is how it should be. Fight me more.....You need to hope...You need to keep thinking that you can win...'

I felt like the corners of my mouth were crawled up so much that it was unnatural for my rigid muscles.

'It won't be fun otherwise. It won't help me extinguish this fire, otherwise.'

I allowed a sinister smile to play on my lips as I responded, "Oh, I do hope you try your best, Belthazor. Give it your all. Show me the extent of your inferior demonic strength."

Belthazor, despite his injuries, mustered a defiant glare. "You won't escape my wrath. I'll tear you apart, limb by limb."

I stopped my slow advance, savoring the anticipation in the air. "Do your best, Belthazor. Struggle, fight, resist."

「Dash」

—BOOM!

With a fast movement, I immediately dashed towards his face, my daggers in my hand. The pain from my injuries flared up as I tried to inflict more damage while pushing myself, yet the crimson hue around my body seemed to react in the opposite way, making me stronger.

I knew it was going to turn like this.

—SLASH!

I first attacked his right arm with a quick slash. My daggers were imbued with mana, yet I felt there was something more to that.

I knew, there was something more.

–FUSH! SPURT!

And, just as I thought about it, the slash of my dagger didn't stop with only physical attack. The crimson aura surrounding the dagger continued to move, like a wave of an attack.

"Burghk-"

Belthazor spurted a mouthful of blood as my dagger cut through his right arm. The crimson aura surrounding the weapon continued its relentless assault, seemingly reaching deeper than a mere physical wound.

The demon, now more infuriated than ever, tried to defend himself, summoning what remained of his tattered wings. However, the pulsating glow around my daggers defied his attempts at a counterattack.

–FUSH! SPURT!

I followed up with another swift strike, this time aiming for his right kidney. The dagger pierced through, causing Belthazor to let out another pained roar.

"Arggh! You... you insignificant insect!" he spat, his voice laced with both agony and rage.

I pulled back my daggers, the ethereal glow of the crimson aura dancing around the blades. Belthazor, weakened and wounded, struggled to maintain his defiance, his eyes were shaking.

'Let me give you a moment.'

"Do you know why you are in such state?"

I asked him, while raising my hands, concealing my [Celestialith].

「Aura Strike」

SMASH!

My mana-infused hands collided with Belthazor's face, and I repeated the brutal assault. The demon, weakened and disoriented, struggled against the relentless blows.

"Argh! What... what trickery is this?" Belthazor groaned, blood now streaming down his face.

I continued the barrage of strikes, each blow fueled by my determination and the crimson aura that enveloped my hands.

SMASH! SMASH! SMASH!

"Tell me, Belthazor," I demanded between strikes, "do you understand why you're losing? Do you grasp the reason for your imminent defeat?"

The demon, unable to form coherent words, managed only guttural sounds of pain and frustration. I seized the opportunity to drive my point home.

SMASH! SMASH!

"The reason is simple," I declared, "you are just an inferior demon destined to die, yet you dared to underestimate me, underestimate the power of a mere 'insignificant insect.'"

As I raised my hand, I looked deep into his eyes.

"Do you know what makes me feel like smiling in this world? The only thing that gives me pleasure? Do you know why my heart is throbbing so much right now?"

I paused for a moment, lifting my hand to gaze into his eyes. The crimson aura surrounding me intensified, and my expression twisted into a manic smile.

"Do you know what brings me joy in this world, Belthazor?" I asked, my voice low and filled with malice. "It's seeing the fear in the eyes of the likes of you."

–SMASH!

My hand continued to smash him to the ground.

"It's witnessing you feel the terror of death, feeling the pain 'she' experienced. It's watching the life that she was supposed to live being snatched away from the likes of you."

I could see with my eyes that he was shivering underneath me. He was feeling it, yet that was still not enough.

Even though he was feeling fear, he was still yet to experience the true despair. The feeling of not being able to escape.

He needed to experience that, but that wasn't the time right now.

Right now, in front of me, he still thinks he can escape. I could see it within his eyes.

–SMASH! CREAK!

"Burghk!"

He let out another mouthful of blood, as I had smashed him from his chest. My hands were already bloody enough from all the beating I gave to him, my body being fragile.

Yet, at that moment, I could see Belthazor's eyes shining grey for a second.

–WARP!

And in the blink of an eye, Belthazor reappeared from a very far away place, reaching the location where he was absorbing the energy of the Phantoms.

His tattered form and disheveled wings spoke of the intense beating he had endured, yet his gaze burned with undying hatred.

"You think this changes anything, insect?" Belthazor spat, his voice a mix of pain and resentment. "I will kill you, and I won't ever forget what happened here."

Despite his battered appearance, the demon smirked in arrogance, proclaiming, "Next time, when I regain my full power, I'll make sure to finish what we started. You won't escape then."

—WARP!

With those words, he began to utilize his spatial mana to teleport away, leaving a lingering threat in the air.

Yet, just as he initiated the teleportation, something unexpected happened.

Chapter 287 67.4 - Bury

There was once a theory on earth.

A theory about a specific type of force.

It was a theory that was widely discussed by many different scientists in the world, yet the most prominent thing about it was the existence of a movie.

Its existence is in a movie that was directed by one of the best, maybe the best, directors in this world.

An undoubted genius in the film sector.

In that theory, it was displayed that gravity was the force that could pass through space and dimensions.

Was that true?

It seemed that was the case.

"You think this changes anything, insect?" Belthazor spoke, his voice a mix of pain and resentment. "I will kill you, and I won't ever forget what happened here."

His words seemed to contain a deep hatred, yet he still seemed to think he could get away from here.

Still, in this position, he seemed to think he had the leverage to speak to me like that. That was his main mistake....The reason why he was bound to be inferior forever.

His arrogance will always blind him, and that will be the case.

He still can't understand who is the hunter here and who is the prey. He still thinks he is in a favorable position, but he still can't understand it at all.

Despite all the facts before him, he still dared to smirk in arrogance, proclaiming, "Next time, when I regain my full power, I'll make sure to finish what we started. You won't escape then."

—WARP!

And following that, he tried to use his teleportation, distorting the space once again and appearing in a far away place.

Yet, just as he initiated the teleportation, something unexpected happened. Something unexpected for him but expected for me.

—Umbralith

I called upon the final form of [Celestalith], and in an instant, the celestial weapon transformed into Umbralith, my fingers now filled with the rings.

I could feel the unstable energy in my hand, directly focused on right above my palm, forming a sphere.

A surge of dark energy emanated from the sphere, and the gravitational force around me intensified.

Yet, I knew that wouldn't be enough. Belthazor was now in a faraway place, which meant a specific connection was needed.

And I could do it right here. After all, this was my initial plan from the start. Even though he teleported far away, I could now see where he was.

Where he stood, what he was doing.

Everything was right before my eyes. That was thanks to the green tendrils connecting me to him.

The Green form of [Celestalith] always let me see the targets I had once marked. Yet, right now, the moment after I had woken up, I instinctively knew a way to specifically control those marks.

Seemingly, something inside me had changed, though I hadn't had the opportunity to check it back.

Utilizing those tendrils, I connected the gravitational field to him.

Belthazor, still mid-teleportation and unaware of the changed circumstances, found himself ensnared by a gravitational pull.

With a focused intent, I manipulated the gravity field around him, using Umbralith's power to its fullest. The distorted space resisted his attempt to escape, and he was forcibly pulled back from his intended destination.

–WRRRR!

"What?"

The demon let out a surprised roar as the gravitational force took hold, making him unable to escape my grasp.

–THUD!

He had fallen to the ground, seemingly unable to move from where he was at all.

"No matter how many dimensions you try to traverse, you won't escape," I declared, my smirk widening. Belthazor, on the ground and seemingly unable to move, looked at me with widened eyes, a mix of surprise and despair.

"Impossible!" he roared, his voice echoing through the cavern. With a desperate attempt, he tried to initiate his teleportation once again, distorting the space around him.

Yet, just as he initiated the teleportation, the gravitational force linked to the green marks connected to Umbralith acted like an unbreakable tether. Belthazor was pulled back once more, violently crashing to the ground.

—THUD!

His struggles became evident, but the force that held him was unyielding. His pathetic head slowly started realizing what was in front of him.

The demon's eyes widened in despair as he realized the futility of his attempts to escape. Even if his ego didn't want to escape, the inferior demonic heart inside him realized.

His instincts were probably screaming at him to leave, screaming at him to do something about this situation.

Yet, his inferior mind will not be able to think anything. This is his fate. The fate awaiting him, the fate awaiting every one of his kin.

TAP! TAP! TAP!

I slowly approached Belthazor with a predatory stride, no longer being able to contain the laughter trying to escape.

The gravitational force linked to Umbralith's power kept him firmly anchored to the ground, thwarting his attempts to escape.

"How does it feel, Belthazor?" I taunted, my voice dripping with malice. "How does it feel to be trapped, to be unable to leave where you are? To see all the ways for you to escape blocked?"

Belthazor's eyes, wide with a mix of surprise and despair, met mine. He struggled against the relentless force that held him, but it was apparent that escape was futile.

"Impossible!" he roared, frustration and rage evident in his voice. With a desperate attempt, he tried once again to initiate his teleportation, distorting the space around him.

Yet, the gravitational force remained unyielding, denying him any chance of escape. Belthazor crashed to the ground once more, the impact reverberating through the cavern.

—THUD!

I stood over the fallen demon, my gaze piercing through his defiant exterior. "You demons are so sure of your superiority, so certain of your invincibility. But look at you now, trapped and helpless."

The pulsating purple glow of Umbralith intensified, casting an eerie light on the scene. Belthazor's struggles only fueled my satisfaction, and I relished every moment of his despair.

"Tell me, Belthazor," I continued, my voice low and menacing, "do you still think you can win? Do you still believe you hold any power in this situation?"

I continued to walk towards Belthazor, the malevolent satisfaction evident in my every step. The echoing tap of my footsteps resonated in the cavern, underscoring his helplessness.

"Tell me, Belthazor," I hissed, my voice low and taunting. "What do you feel now? Do you feel despair? Do you sense that you can no longer do anything? Is your heart pounding so fast that it feels like it will jump from your body?"

Belthazor's face turned ashen as he struggled to rise from the ground, his attempts at defiance replaced by a realization of his dire situation.

"I'll give you credit for one thing," I sneered, "You demons certainly know how to put up a facade of strength. But deep down, you're all just pitiful creatures clinging to delusions of grandeur."

As I approached him, the gravitational force maintained its firm grip on Belthazor, preventing him from standing upright. He glared at me with a mix of hatred and desperation.

"You won't escape," he spat, his voice a strained growl. "I'll break free from this, and when I do, you'll regret ever crossing paths with me."

I chuckled at his futile attempts at bravado, the pulsating purple glow of Umbralith casting an ominous hue over the scene. "Ahahahahahahaha...." It was so funny that I felt like I could die from laughter here.

Or not.

In a last-ditch effort, Belthazor summoned all his remaining strength and attempted to teleport away once more. The distortion of space began, and he strained against the gravitational force, determination etched on his face.

Yet, as he initiated the teleportation, the unyielding gravitational pull linked to Umbralith's power acted like an invisible chain. Belthazor was forcibly pulled back, crashing to the ground on top of his knees.

–THUD!

"Arghk–"

He groaned, the intense gravitational pull exerting an unbearable pressure on his body. It was evident that he was experiencing the relentless force linked to Umbralith's power, making any attempt to move an agonizing struggle.

I loomed over him, the chilling glow of Umbralith intensifying the darkness surrounding us. "Y–you...." he stuttered, his widened eyes locking onto mine.

"Isn't this kind of ironic?" I mocked, relishing the moment. "The almighty Belthazor is now kneeling before me? Kneeling before the being that you once thought of as inferior?"

In a futile attempt to move, Belthazor strained against the unseen force binding him. He tried to summon his demonic strength, but it was clear that the relentless gravitational pull had drained him of any remaining energy.

"You thought you could break free," I taunted, "but look at you now. Your own arrogance has become your shackles."

Belthazor's face twisted in frustration as he struggled against the gravitational restraint. However, the more he resisted, the tighter the Umbralith-bound force constricted around him.

"Ahahaha, you know, it's almost pitiful to watch you struggle," I chuckled, savoring the sight of his futile attempts. "You wasted your mana pointlessly just to show that you are superior to me. Do you know the reason why you are in this state right now?"

I asked, looking at him. The more he knelt before me, the more I relished this feeling. I felt like I was taking my vengeance properly.

The demon who had attacked our village probably was not even here, yet it was probably an insignificant being.

"It is because you wanted to use that spell of yours to prove that you are strong. Why? Were you preparing that spell so that you could showcase that to your ancestors? To your kin that once looked down on you? Was your childhood kind of rough?"

Belthazor's eyes widened in shock, and for a moment, the mask of his defiance slipped. It seemed like I had touched upon a sore spot, revealing a vulnerability he tried to hide. Well, knowing him from the game, I was well aware of his pathetic backstory.

"How do you know about that?" he shouted, his voice laced with despair. "How can you possibly know?"

I couldn't help but smile at his desperation. "Does it matter, Belthazor? In the end, you find yourself in the same position as before. Your past, your struggles, none of it changes the fact that you are at my mercy."

"Why? Why is this happening?" he cried out, his voice breaking. Tears of blood welled up in his eyes, a manifestation of his shattered spirit.

The once-mighty demon now knelt before me, broken and defeated. The taste of vengeance was sweet, and I reveled in the poetic justice of his downfall.

I didn't know how I looked right now, but it sure wasn't something any normal person would want to see.

I raised my fingers, coating them with the Level 1 spell 「Ethereic Claws」 .

"Why, you ask?" I said, my voice filled with a mixture of bitterness and hatred. "Why? That was a good question."

I laughed, but there was no joy in it. Instead, my face turned grim as the memories flooded back.

"Why did those demons attack our village? Why did they kill everyone? Why was I the only one who survived? Why....why....why....why....the same fucking question that no one can answer."

I brought my face inches away from Belthazor's, locking my gaze with his. The intensity of my hatred burned in my eyes.

"Why did she die before my eyes? Why wasn't it me? The same fucking question that I ask myself every day."

The pulsating purple glow of Umbralith reflected the darkness in my heart.

"It was because demons like you decided to kill everyone, and that was it," I declared with a cold determination. "So, you should understand why I'm going to do this, right?"

With those words, I brought my mana-coated claws dangerously close to Belthazor's eyes.

"N-no...." His fighting spirit was broken; he was no longer in a state to fight, yet that wasn't enough.

He needed to feel the pain she felt. Every one of them needed to.

"AAAAAAARGHK!"

Just like that, screams started echoing in the cavern.....as the Phantom's Land started crumbling.

Chapter 288 68.1 - Another perspective

While Astron was fighting with the demon inside the cavern, Irina was not staying idle either. Facing off the entirety of the Phantom Horde that was continuously pouring down, she raised her hand.

"Burn."

The flames at her fingertips danced with a ferocity matching her determination. The heat emanating from her attacks formed a protective barrier, creating a zone of controlled chaos where the phantoms were met with an inferno.

—SWIRL!

The relentless onslaught of phantoms, however, seemed to be never-ending.

Irina fought with unyielding vigor, her movements becoming a whirlwind of destruction. Torrents of fire erupted from her hands; each controlled burst aimed at engulfing the malevolent entities in searing flames.

'Why are they not stopping? Where does this energy come from?'

She couldn't help but ask herself as she was continuously faced with phantoms. The amount of phantoms was certainly abnormal, and there were many of them that weren't simply in the form of humans.

There were some animals, some monsters, and even some hybrids. It was as if there was something that didn't add up.

Yet, she didn't have the time to ponder about all those things.

–SCREECH!

She had yet to end the fight, as the pouring phantoms constantly pressured her. As one of them attacked her right behind her head, she tilted it to the side, evading the attack. Even as an heir of a mage family, when she was a young child, she was educated in close combat. She could even use a sword, though she found it rather vulgar than elegant.

Though she was sure talented at it, at least, that was what she thought.

–SCREECH!

Amidst the fiery dance, a sudden screech signaled the appearance of another phantom right behind her. Reacting with ingrained combat instincts, Irina bent her body to the side, narrowly evading the claws of the attacking phantom. Her irritation grew at the constant barrage of foes.

"Enough of this!" she muttered to herself, her annoyance fueling her determination. Suddenly, another phantom materialized behind her, throwing its claws in a swift attack. Without thinking, Irina instinctively used her telekinesis.

"Die."

The phantom froze in mid-air as Irina's telekinetic grip took hold. With a focused expression, she crushed the ethereal core of the phantom, dissipating it into nothingness. A surge of satisfaction washed over her as she marveled at the unexpected development.

Yet, following that second, she couldn't help but think of herself.

"When did I get this proficient at telekinesis?" she wondered, a momentary lapse in her thoughts. The answer eluded her, lost in the chaotic nature of Phantom's Land and the mysteries it held.

'Well, I can't ponder about that for now.'

She thought as she threw a wave of fire to her right side.

–SWIRL!

After all, even if she was used to multitasking, it wasn't an efficient way of defending. For some reason, that guy was taking a bit long inside, and she had a hunch that keeping her mana for a while would be a lot more important.

Pushing aside the confusion, Irina seamlessly transitioned back to her relentless assault.

'But, this.....Should I combine them?'

It was a simple question, yet she thought of it. Whether it was because she felt like she could use her 「Telekinesis」 like her other limb or another reason, she wanted to utilize it more in combat.

SWIRL!

Deciding to test the idea, she closed her eyes and focused on the upcoming phantoms. With her mana sense, she was able to visualize where they were, and imagining another limb formed by her telekinesis, she grabbed them and brought them together.

—BOOM!

Following that, she immediately blasted the area where she had forcefully gathered the enemies.

'Ho? Would you look at that?'

She couldn't help but marvel at the process. Even in the initial stages of her thoughts, she was able to display this amount of power and what would happen if she were to master such a combat strategy.

Flames and telekinetic force intertwined as she faced the phantoms with a combination of fiery magic and unseen psychic prowess. Her movements became a spectacle of both elegance and power, a testament to her prowess as the Fiery Demoness.

'I am allowed to have a little fun, as well, right? I hope so!'

Thinking that, she smiled. Whatever happened inside that place, like a cave, she had full faith in him. Where did this faith come from? She did not know. Maybe it was not that she wholeheartedly believed in him, but rather, she wanted to believe.

From the moment she woke up, she herself had been rather strange. A bunch of strange emotions occupied her heart, as well as those thoughts that she could partially recover.

"NOOO! NOOO!"

Especially the part where a young voice continuously screamed.

"I am going to kill you! I am going to kill you no matter what!"

The scream came from the heart so much that, even now, she could feel the shivers on her spine. Yet, she had yet to think about those partial fractures in her head, though she was incredibly curious.

'Was it Astron? Was this his memories? Did we even enter a dream?'

There was also a small fracture where she was mumbling a 'parallel world.' What did it mean? She still couldn't find it.

–SCREECH! ROAR!

Just as another screeching sound echoed, coupled with the sound of a roar, Irina's attention returned to reality.

'Now, let's not think about all those things.'

She thought to herself and looked at the source of the roar. There, she could see another monster and a phantom different from a human.

'Raksha and Dark Elf.'

They were the ones that Astron had fought at the start. It seemed the definition of phantoms not being able to be extinguished was true. Even if she had smashed or burned their cores, they were returning back.

–SWOOSH!

Focusing on the immediate threats, Irina found herself challenged by the combination of Raksha's agility and Dark Elf's magical abilities.

The agile phantom eluded her attacks while the Dark Elf, a formidable mage, protected Raksha and posed a significant threat.

Amidst the chaos, an idea sparked in Irina's mind. The relentless assault from the monsters pushed her to think creatively. Also, she was kind of utilizing the theories that they had thought before. Now that her head kind of returned to its normal, she was working it at full capacity.

–BOOM!

Despite the challenges, Irina stood her ground, determination burning in her amber eyes.

'That guy was able to beat them. Then, there is no way I can't.'

Even in her eyes, Astron was a capable fighter; she still thought that she was stronger in terms of fighting, especially with her high firepower.

'Tch. I can't hit.'

Yet, she also realized that as long as she was not able to hit the enemy, having high power meant nothing. Of course, she was rather well-trained in this aspect as well, yet the small spatial warps that those guys were able to do make things quite harder than normal.

The battle against Raksha and Dark Elf intensified as she continued to face the relentless assault. The agile phantom and the magical prowess of the Dark Elf posed a formidable challenge.

–SCREECH! ROAR!

Just as Irina was having a challenging time, a surge of inspiration struck.

'Why hadn't I thought of that?'

The force Telekinesis was a force that affected everything, creating a field around the desired location according to the type of psions gathered around it.

But could it somehow pass through space and time? Was it possible?

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When she asked this question to herself, for some reason, she knew it could. She was sure of it, and without a doubt, she possible?

When she asked this question to herself, for some reason, she started implementing her idea.

Closing her eyes, she focused on the spatial warps created by Raksha and Dark Elf. Visualizing the Psion fields surrounding the desired locations, she extended her Telekinesis beyond the physical realm.

The force of Telekinesis reached through the spatial warps, disrupting the duo's attempts at spatial transportation. Irina's mind became a conduit, pulling them out of their portals and into another dimension within the grasp of her unseen force.

The unexpected twist left Raksha and Dark Elf momentarily disoriented. The spatial transportation that had once been their advantage was turned against them, and Irina seized the opportunity to unleash a torrent of flames.

「Household of Emberheart; Ember Calamity」

It was the spell of her household. A flame formula that went beyond the general concept, becoming something that was only for weaponry.

Even though she hated her household, she could never give up the fire-spells she had learned there. Those were the only things that she liked about her household after all.

–SWIRL! BOOM!

The fiery magic engulfed the once-elusive duo. The controlled chaos of flames swirled around them, creating an inferno that left no room for escape.

Yet, the relentless power of Ember Calamity extended beyond its initial targets, reaching every other phantom within Irina's field. The ferocious flames danced with an unrestrained intensity, consuming the spectral entities that dared to approach. Trees and foliage caught fire in the process, turning the battlefield into a sea of roaring flames.

Irina's 'mastery' over her abilities was on full display as she went a bit overboard, exterminating every phantom within her vicinity.

"Hehehe.....That is what you get for opposing me."

Though, her mastery over her self-awareness didn't seem to be that good.

The relentless onslaught left no room for the malevolent entities to regroup or counterattack. Her amber eyes glowed with the intensity of the flames, a mixture of triumph and a touch of wild exhilaration.

–CRACK! THUD!

As one of the old trees fell to the ground with a loud noise, Irina couldn't help but flinch.

"Cough...Cough...."

With an awkward cough, she looked at the result of her own flames.

"I guess I went a bit overboard."

She exclaimed. Well, that wasn't certainly her first time doing that, so she was more of a professional at dealing with the aftermath of her actions.

Turning back to survey the area behind her, Irina found a moment of respite.

"AAAARGHK!"

Yet, in that silence, a hearty scream pierced the air, a rough voice distinct from Astron's.

"Huh? What was that?"

The urgency and unfamiliarity of the voice sent a chill down her spine.

'That wasn't Astron, right? Right?'

Concern etched on her face. The fact that such a scream came from that side and the feeling of the enemy's power....Irina couldn't help but think of some extreme scenarios in her head.

'No, no, no. There is no way. He said nothing would happen.'

In an instant, Irina sprinted towards the source of the scream.

The worry for Astron flashed in her mind, but the distinct pinch of the voice hinted at something different. Regardless, she couldn't ignore the uneasy feeling that gripped her heart.

Rushing through the cavern, Irina's heart pounded in her chest, anxiety gripping her as she rounded a corner. The sight that awaited her was beyond anything she could have expected. There, in the dimly lit cavern, stood Astron, his face smeared with blood, surrounded by an incredibly foreign aura.

"Astron! What happened?" she exclaimed, her voice edged with concern.

—SPURT!

Before she could comprehend the situation fully, the humanoid monster's body, the demon, shone on the ground. Its body exploded with an otherworldly sound, and at that moment, the entire Phantom's Land began to crumble.

The once foreboding atmosphere dissipated, and the fog that shrouded the surroundings lifted. Irina stared in shock at the unfolding scene before her, unable to grasp the sudden turn of events.

"Ah...."

As Astron turned to face her, Irina noticed he seemed to be rather shaky.

"Cough....I guess I pushed myself a lot....."

Saying that he staggered.

–THUD!

Though before he could fall to the ground, Irina managed to hold him.

"You did well; you can rest now."

Chapter 289 Chapter 68.2 - Another Perspective

"Cough....I guess I pushed myself a lot....."

Saying that, he staggered.

–THUD!

Though before he could fall to the ground, Irina managed to hold him.

"You did well; you can rest now."

Irina cradled Astron in her arms as the remnants of Phantom's Land slowly dissipated. Even though she was tired from the constant fighting, she still conserved some of her strength. And, it was not like Astron was too heavy, either.

'Looking close like this....'

She couldn't help but think a little. Even though his skin had now become a lot healthier and shinier than before, she still remembered the first times she had seen him.

There were times when he looked kind of fragile.

'Well, his sleeping face is really innocent.'

It really felt somehow familiar, as if she kind of remembered him as someone innocent. Considering their past relationship and how they interacted, these feelings didn't make sense, yet deep down in some place, she somehow found herself remembering something.

"Good morning, mother. Should I help you?"

It was a faint memory—a faint memory of a young child smiling at his mother. It was short, yet it felt like this memory affected her quite a lot.

'Who is this child?'

She couldn't help but ask herself. Who was this child, and why was she now remembering it? Even after this entity had died or Astron killed it somehow, it felt like it was still affecting her mind.

Yet, the faint memories continued to come forward. It was as if something that had been blocking her was released now, and she could freely think.

"You're never going to leave me, right?"

"No matter what happens, Estelle, I promise I'll never leave you. Even if the world breaks down, as long as I am still breathing, I will always stay with you."

It was another memory. A memory where two youngsters were talking-

"Argh-!"

Before she could even ponder about the details of the memory more, an immense amount of pain assaulted Irina's head. Releasing a groan, she clenched her hands, trying to withstand the pain.

However, at the same time, even though she could no longer see it, her mind continued to rack.

'Who is Estelle?'

A question that she asked herself. Who was the girl named Estelle? What were those memories?

'Are they related to Astron?'

Turning her head to him, she saw his sleeping face. For the first time in her life, she had seen him this defenseless. Even before, he had never once let his guard down in front of anyone. Irina was no fool. She could always see Astron with his guard up. No matter which situation occurred, he was always ready for something on his way.

That was how it always was. But right now, it was the complete opposite.

Irina hesitated for a moment, torn between the intriguing memories flooding her mind and the peaceful sight of Astron resting in her arms.

The desire to touch his cheeks grew stronger, an impulse she couldn't entirely resist. She scolded herself internally, muttering, "I shouldn't... I shouldn't..."

Yet, as if drawn by an irresistible force, her fingers gently brushed against his skin. The sensation was soft, almost ethereal.

A strange warmth surged within her as she traced the contours of his cheek, feeling the vulnerability that he seldom revealed.

"He's just a person," she whispered to herself as if trying to convince her racing thoughts. "Nothing more, nothing less."

However, the touch persisted, and the more she explored the tenderness of his features, the more she felt a peculiar connection. It was as if he existed in a realm beyond her comprehension, a ghost from a distant reality.

'Maybe I think this way because he always looks so detached from everything.'

Remembering the day she followed (stalked) him a little, she couldn't help but think how his day was always filled with training.

It was dull, monotone, and simple.

No hobbies, not anything for fun. His room was empty and dull as well....Well, she secretly checked it once, bribing a certain personnel.

'It is soft.'

While thinking about all those, her fingers continued to trace his cheeks.

'What if he one day vanishes?'

The softness of his skin seemed almost otherworldly, and for a moment, Irina entertained the notion that Astron could vanish like a fleeting apparition. For some reason, she felt like this was a possibility.

This person lying in her arms never tried to connect with anyone and always kept his distance from people.

As her mind ventured further, a memory surfaced— an article written by a famous psychic mage that she had come across. The article warned about individuals who perpetually maintained detachment from others and the world, emphasizing the need to handle them with care.

It suggested that such individuals might be at a higher risk of choosing an irreversible path, especially if they subjected themselves to excessive self-torment.

–SHIVER!

The realization sent a shiver down Irina's spine.

'No, he won't do that, right? He is not that kind of person; he is not that weak.'

Irina thought, desperately attempting to dispel the unsettling notion that had crossed her mind.

'What am I thinking?'

Yet, even as she tried to reassure herself, the haunting words from another article resurfaced in her memory. The article discussed the intricate stages and complexities associated with the act of killing oneself.

'It is not even a weakness.'

It emphasized that it was not a sign of weakness but rather a result of immense internal struggles that might go unnoticed by others.

'Why do I even think about it now?'

She wondered why all those thoughts started to surface in her mind. For which reason why? Yet, she couldn't find an answer. At the end of the day, she was left on her own.

Just as she was thinking to herself, suddenly, something different happened around the environment.

"Huh?"

She could feel the mana around changing rapidly as the psions started revolving around a certain space.

The once eerie landscape transformed into a more familiar environment, and the lingering fog dispersed into the air.

–PUFF!

As the last vestiges of the otherworldly realm faded away, a sudden burst of spatial disturbances caught her attention.

"What?"

From the place where the anomalies had occurred, a multitude of phantoms emerged.

"Phantoms?"

In an instant, she tried to get ready for the combat, yet she felt something different from the newcomers.

However, unlike the malevolent entities they had faced before, these phantoms carried an aura of gratitude and ethereal warmth.

'They are different.'

The phantoms circled around both Astron and Irina, their ghostly forms moving gracefully in the air. Each phantom emanated a soft, echoing voice filled with gratitude.

"Thank you," they spoke in unison, their voices blending into an ethereal chorus. "You have freed us from the torment of this realm. We are grateful for your sacrifice and courage."

Irina stared in awe at the spectacle unfolding before her. The phantoms' voices echoed with a sense of release and peace, their spectral forms glowing with a serene light.

As the phantoms continued to orbit around them, one of them broke away from the group and approached Irina. Its form shimmered with a faint glow, revealing the visage of an elderly soul.

"Young one," the elderly soul whispered, its voice carrying the weight of wisdom, "you carry a burden, and your path is intertwined with his. Take care of him; he walks on a thin thread, and he could fall at any time."

Confusion and concern knitted Irina's brows as she tried to comprehend the cryptic message.

"What do-?" She opened her mouth, yet before she could even say anything more, the elderly soul gently touched her forehead, imparting a sense of reassurance.

As if responding to an unseen call, the phantoms converged, forming a luminous portal.

One by one, the phantoms entered the portal, the elderly soul lingering for a moment longer. "Take care," it whispered to Irina before joining the others. The portal shimmered, and with a final ethereal glow, it closed, leaving the once eerie landscape transformed into a more familiar environment.

Irina remained still, a mixture of awe and confusion swirling within her. The words of the elderly soul echoed in her mind, adding an unforeseen layer of complexity to the mysteries surrounding Astron.

'What did he mean by that?'

Many, many, many questions were in her head, yet she couldn't find any answers to them. But just as she was about to ponder about it more, suddenly her eyes met with a pair of purple ones.

From those clear purple eyes, she could see her own reflection of eyes. Yet, maybe because her mind was still on the questions, she hadn't realized what this implied.

However, it didn't take long for realization to dawn on her. Astron was awake.

Astron, with his usual calm demeanor, raised an eyebrow. "Can you please remove your hand from my cheek?"

As the awareness settled in, a faint blush touched Irina's cheeks. She noticed that her hand was still delicately cupping Astron's cheek. Embarrassment flickered across her expression, and she swiftly withdrew her hand, avoiding eye contact.

Irina's blush deepened as she stammered an apology. "Cough...

I-I didn't realize you were awake. Sorry about that."

"No need to be sorry. I'm used to waking up to strange situations. Now, what happened after I passed out?"

Even though he seemed nonchalant about it, for some reason, Irina got a feeling that he was acting a little differently. But she somehow managed to hide her initial embarrassment as she looked into his eyes.

'That's right. I won't be swayed by him. This guy challenged me.'

She still remembered the words she had spoken at that time, so she could no longer back down from them.

"Not much." She straightened her posture, maintaining eye contact. "The Phantom's Land had already started collapsing."

"I can see that," Astron replied, his eyes scanning around the place.

"But....." Irina hesitated for a second but still asked anyway. "What happened here?"

Astron's gaze swept across the surroundings as Irina questioned him about the events that transpired while he was unconscious. His expression turned more serious as he began to explain.

"The culprit was a demon," Astron stated matter-of-factly. "It recently awakened from its slumber. I caught it off-guard in the middle of a ritual and managed to defeat it. However, once it lost control of the portal here, it exploded on its own."

Irina's eyes widened slightly at the revelation. Demons were formidable adversaries, and the fact that Astron faced one and emerged victorious showcased the extent of his capabilities.

'As expected, he is strong.'

She couldn't help but feel a surge of pride in their combined strength. That explosion was the scene she had witnessed, so things matched up quite well.

"But, what was that scream?"

"It was nothing. Once I caught it off guard, the battle was already in favor of me."

"I see."

'Well, it certainly didn't sound like his scream either. I now kind of feel like an idiot rushing over in panic.'

She thought to herself.

"Then, now...." Just as she was about to speak more, suddenly, Astron interrupted her.

"I have a favor to ask you."

"What is it?" she inquired, her curiosity piqued, yet she never expected the words that would come out of his mouth.

"I want you to take the credit for this incident. Especially for the fight with the demon."

"What?"

It was an unreasonable request.

Chapter 290 68.3 - Another Perspective

"I want you to take the credit for this incident. Especially for the fight with the demon."

The moment Irina heard his words, a cold feeling washed over her.

"What?" Irina's eyes widened in disbelief at Astron's unexpected request. It was an unreasonable proposition, and the audacity of it angered her.

It was a natural reaction. After all, what that guy had just said touched a place that she would never remember. There was no way that she would take it normally and scoff it off.

"Let me repeat. I want you to take the credit for this incident." And as if he didn't even notice her words, he repeated the same thing without any disturbance. He talked as if this was something natural.

"You...." And, Irina was not going to take it well.

–SWOOSH!

With a fast rush, she grabbed him by his collar once again. At least she tried to. Yet, this time, things didn't go as she wanted, as Astron slightly tilted his body backward, evading her grip.

"Calm down." He said, his voice monotone.

"Calm down? You want me to fucking calm down after hearing what you said?"

"What was wrong with what I said? Also, don't swear in front of me."

"What was wrong? Ahahahaha...." Irina raised her hand to her face after hearing his words, letting out a small laugh. "And you want me to not swear after saying all these things....This is beyond funny." Her face once again turned serious, as fire psions started to correspond to her emotional state.

"What do you take me for?" Irina's voice carried a mix of frustration and anger. "Someone who steals other people's achievements for the sake of her own success?"

Astron remained composed, seemingly unfazed by her outburst. It was as if he had already been expecting what she was going to say. "It's not about stealing." He started as he looked into her fiery eyes directly. "It's about keeping certain things hidden. There are matters that are better left in the shadows."

"....." Irina didn't respond immediately. She just kept looking into his eyes, her fiery gaze meeting his with an intensity that mirrored her building frustration.

'Here I thought his sleeping face was innocent. This annoying bastard...What does he think I am?'

After a brief silence, she finally spoke, her voice sharp and filled with indignation.

"Did I seem like a joke to you?" Irina's words cut through the tension, each syllable carrying the weight of her growing frustration. "Someone you can control and manipulate as you wish?"

Astron maintained his composure, his expression unreadable. "It's not about control or manipulation. I just proposed my wish to you. I am not controlling anything."

Irina's frustration flared, and she retorted, "If this is not controlling, then what is it? Proposing your wish? What kind of twisted way of asking for a favor is that?"

Astron has furrowed his brows at her words, seemingly thinking about them. It was as if he was saying internally, 'I should have been more considerate. I guess I underestimated her pride.'

While he might not have admitted it openly, Astron had been already trying to make Irina way more agreeable while diminishing her overly prideful demeanor. After all, she needed such a development.

'Well, the mask that one has been wearing for too long becomes a part of their real face, isn't it?'

He thought inwardly and raised his hand in a conceding manner. "Irina, my words were inconsiderate and too insinuating. It's my fault," Astron admitted, his tone more 'apologetic' than before.

Well, at least, this was what Irina wanted to believe, yet inwardly, she knew this guy's apology wasn't from his heart at all.

'At least, this should be fine for now.'

Yet, before he finished, Astron couldn't help but add one remark. "However, you should stop jumping to conclusions without listening to everything in detail."

And hearing it didn't make it better for Irina; otherwise, it might have made it worse.

'My bad, it is not fine.'

"You.....Are you looking for a beating?" She raised her hand, a small wave of fire swirling around her fists.

"Resorting to physical methods doesn't make you right; it just proves you don't have a valid point to respond." Hearing his words and seeing his relaxed posture, she could feel that he didn't even consider that she would hit him even for a second.

'Should I just do it?'

She wanted to hit his annoying, calm face so bad.....But she couldn't. After all, if she had attacked him right now when he was tired, it would mean both that she didn't have a valid point, as he said, and that she could only fight him when he was tired.

"Tch. Annoying bastard." She scoffed, turning her head to the side since she had no more answer to give.

"So, can I speak now?"

"It won't matter even if I say no, will it?"

"If you don't want to listen, I don't have any measures to make you do so."

"We both know I can no longer leave without hearing what you want to say."

"You can't?"

"Don't act like you don't know it."

"..." At this point, the conversation wasn't going to go anywhere, so Astron just stood and signaled her to do the same.

"Let's talk while we walk. The scenery is going back to normal, and I'm sure you have a lot of questions."

Without waiting for her response, Astron began to walk through the remnants of the cavern, and Irina, after a moment of hesitation, followed suit. The quiet atmosphere persisted, with both of them lost in their thoughts.

After a while, Astron took a breath and started explaining his perspective,

"Irina, the reason I want you to take credit for this incident, especially the fight with the demon, is not about stealing achievements or controlling you," Astron began, his tone more earnest. "It's about the practical aspects of our positions here."

He paused, choosing his words carefully. "First and foremost, my rank is relatively low. This incident, considering its scale and complexity, is beyond what a low-rank student like me should be able to handle. If the truth were to come out, there are a few possibilities."

Astron's eyes met Irina's, his gaze unwavering. "Firstly, people might doubt my rank and start investigating my strength."

'That makes sense.'

His words certainly made quite sense. After all, Irina was well aware that he was hiding his abilities to some extent. It was evident from the moment where she had requested his footage of the joint dungeon. She also could see how easily he managed to direct their party in the practical dungeons and many other cases.

His way of thinking didn't also belong to such a lower rank as well, as he was rather well-versed in terms of theory and calculations.

'As for why he is doing this, I don't know.' She thought as she continued to listen.

"Secondly, they might question whether you're lying and were somehow coerced by me or Sylvie into saying such things. But considering the rumors that had been going around regarding me, most people would be inclined to think that it was me." Astron made his second point.

This also made sense; after all, Irina also had her fair share of rumors, and she was also subjected to prejudice. She was also at first inclined to think Astron was quite like rumors, so she understood how it would be for any normal stranger student.

"However, the most dangerous one is this." He said, signaling the slowly disappearing mist. "There's the risk that they could think I was somehow entangled with the perpetrator of this incident."

'What?'

Hearing this, she couldn't help but ask herself.

'Isn't he being too paranoid?'

After all, who would link him to the perpetrator of this case?

"You may think I may be being too careful, but considering the number of things that demon-followers have done this semester, the academy needs to be careful about the events surrounding it. The public opinion is getting a little shaky as well. Therefore, demand on the investigation would highly likely occur."

Irina took a moment to mull over his words. While initially skeptical, she started seeing the logic behind Astron's request.

'I can see that....'

It wasn't about manipulating or controlling her; it was about mitigating the potential fallout from a situation that had escalated beyond what was expected.

"All of these things would make things hard for me," Astron admitted, his expression serious. "So, I wish for you to take credit for the incident, especially the fight with the demon, since only you could have done it."

Hearing the phrase 'only you,' Irina felt her heart throb a little, and she hated that fact.

'...'

She nodded slowly, understanding the weight of his reasoning. The situation was indeed delicate, and Astron's concerns were not unfounded. She could see the practicality behind his request.

Yet, that didn't mean she was obliged to help him.

"I see your point." She said while raising. "However, you know you should not-"

"I should not expect you to go against your own standards just to help me." He cut her words and completed them on his own. "This was what you were about to say, right?" He met her gaze with a calm determination that left Irina momentarily dumbfounded.

"Exactly," she finally managed to nod her head in agreement.

"This is the reason I'm requesting it from you," Astron continued, providing insight into his perspective. "I know it goes against your principles, and I am willing to pay the corresponding price."

Irina's eyes narrowed slightly. "What could you possibly do?"

"I will grant you one request equal to this one. Consider it a transaction. You take credit for the incident, and in return, I fulfill a request of your choosing."

Irina tilted her head, studying Astron for a moment. The offer intrigued her, and yet, she couldn't help but feel a sense of caution. Considering the fact that he had also promised her to another one when she was teaching him the basics of magic, she thought he might be scamming. After a brief pause, she asked, "Anything?"

Astron nodded. "Within my capabilities and within the boundaries of reason. I won't compromise my values too much of an extent either, and we both should deem it equal to what you are doing right now."

His words made sense as she studied his expression.

'Well, he certainly is not the type to go against his own words.'

Considering the fact that he was rather obsessed with being true all the time, Irina was sure his pride was also quite great.

Irina crossed her arms, considering the proposition. The exchange seemed fair, and the idea of having Astron owe her a favor was already satisfying.

'Should I make him bark like a dog?'

He imagined the scene in her head, yet she was unsuccessful in even forming it.

'Yeah, there is no way he would do that. But.....'

After a moment of contemplation, while her mind wandered to countless different scenarios that she 'could' think of, she smirked.

"Fine, deal," she said, extending her hand for a handshake to seal the agreement. Astron reached out, and they shook hands, their unspoken pact binding them in a curious alliance amid the aftermath of the mysterious incident.

'What should I ask him about this?'

As she was thinking about the future when she was in the position of control, she couldn't help but smile.

Yet, in a place where many different things were happening, one boy opened his eyes.

"No....."