

H. Academy 351

Chapter 351 Chapter 81.6 - Close [Interlude]

The academy was in an uproar as students gathered in small groups, their voices a cacophony of shock and disbelief.

"What is this?" one student exclaimed, their eyes wide with horror as they scrolled through the disturbing videos on their phone.

"What the hell?" another muttered, shaking their head in disbelief. "This is... this is disturbing..."

The academy was in an uproar as many students were talking amongst themselves. After all, how could they not be?

First, it was the post that showed that a group of seniors were bullying a bunch of juniors. Of course, it got a response, but that wasn't enough to stir that much of an effect.

Mostly, people found out the identities of the attackers and demanded an apology as well as a punishment.

Nobody had correlated their actions with seniors. But then something else happened.

There are a bunch of videos of sophomore-year students getting beaten by a masked assailant.

The assailants showed no mercy even though the sophomore students didn't even do anything. They didn't fight. They were just getting beaten.

And at the end of all of the videos, the attackers said the same thing.

"This is payback for what seniors were doing to us."

"I can't believe this is happening," a sophomore whispered, their voice trembling with emotion. "I saw so many students in the infirmary... they were badly injured..."

"Open the path!"

Suddenly, they saw a man rushing to the infirmary.

"Hey!"

"What are you doing?"

Some of the students who were getting shoulder-pushed by that student threw an annoyed look.

"Shut up."

But the student didn't seem to care as his eyes filled with anger turned to look at the students for a second. "Leave before I lose myself."

"Hick!"

Because of the pressure, none of the students could withstand what happened here as they left.

Dorian's heart pounded in his chest as he raced towards the infirmary, his mind filled with a jumble of emotions. Helia, running alongside him, reached out to grasp his arm, her voice urgent as she tried to calm him down.

"Dorian, please," she pleaded, her eyes wide with concern. "You need to stay calm. We don't know what's going on yet."

But Dorian shook his head, his eyes burning with anger and fear. "How can I stay calm after seeing that video?" he demanded, his voice choked with emotion. "You know Aria was there as well...."

"I know....Sigh....."

As they reached the infirmary, Dorian's worst fears were realized. The room was filled with injured students, their groans of pain echoing off the walls. Most of them had friends hovering anxiously beside them, their faces drawn with worry.

Scanning the crowd, Dorian's heart lurched in his chest as he spotted his sister among them. Without hesitation, he pushed through the crowd, his steps quickening as he rushed to her side.

"Aria!" he called out, his voice trembling with emotion as he knelt beside her. "Are you okay? What happened?"

Aria looked up at her brother, her eyes filled with pain and exhaustion but also fear. "Dorian..." she mumbled. "I am fine, don't worry...."

Her injuries were already stated to heal to some extent, but because she was found early in the morning after the video came up and didn't get the treatment for the whole night, it took a little longer for her to heal up.

But Dorian could see through her brave facade, the bruises and cuts that had yet to be healed marring her skin, telling a different story.

"How did this happen?"

He asked, though he inwardly knew the answer.

"I-I don't know..." Aria mumbled. "On the way to the library, I was attacked suddenly...And then..." Yet, Aria couldn't answer more. The corner of her eyes shook, and she lowered her head slightly, gambling with the tip of her middle finger.

She would do it when she was anxious; it had already become a habit.

Dorian, hearing his sister's words, wanted to urge her to talk more, but then suddenly, his hands were grabbed by something warm.

Turning his head, he saw Helia looking at him while shaking her head. He realized that Aria must have already been having a hard time and that what he was just about to do was something stupid.

CLENCH!

Anger boiled within him as he clenched his fists, his gaze sweeping the room as he vowed to himself that he would find whoever was responsible for hurting his sister and make them pay.

"If they want a war, we will let them have it. Nobody can get away after doing something."

His eyes met with the other seniors, and all of them had the same idea in their heads.

The academy was changing already...

<Unknown Location>

DING! DING! In the heart of a grand chamber adorned with intricate golden ornaments and embellishments, a figure stood upon a raised platform. The room exuded an aura of solemnity and reverence, its pristine white walls gleaming under the soft glow of ethereal torches. Pillars adorned with intricate carvings reached towards the vaulted ceiling, their golden accents catching the light in a mesmerizing display.

As the figure stood in the center of the platform, bathed in the golden hue of the chamber, a hushed silence filled the air, echoing off the polished marble floors. Their presence seemed to command attention, their posture poised and dignified amidst the grandeur of their surroundings.

Suddenly, from a sleek device nestled within the folds of their robes, a flicker of light emerged, coalescing into the form of a holographic figure.

This apparition bore the likeness of another being, one with horns protruding from its head, a symbol of power and authority.

The holographic figure's expression was unreadable, their features obscured by shadows cast by the flickering torchlight.

Yet, there was an undeniable air of intensity and gravitas about them, as if they held secrets and knowledge beyond mortal comprehension.

As the hologram hovered before the figure on the platform, the atmosphere in the chamber seemed to shift as if the very air became sour and clashing.

The encounter between these two figures held the promise of profound significance, their meeting set against the backdrop of a sacred and holy place, where whispers of ancient mysteries lingered in the air.

"Villon," the man murmured, his gaze steady as he regarded the demon before him.

The man in the white robe's expression remained calm, his demeanor unwavering despite the demon's hostility.

"You should already know the answer," he replied, his tone measured yet firm as he met Villon's gaze.

Feigning ignorance, Villon shook his head, his holographic form shimmering in the golden glow of the chamber.

"I know nothing of what you speak," he retorted, his voice dripping with disdain.

A slight smile tugged at the corners of the man's lips, his expression gentle and soothing in contrast to the demon's hostility. It was as if he radiated an aura of purity and serenity amidst the tumultuous atmosphere of the chamber.

With a wave of his hand, the man in the white robe spoke with quiet authority, his words carrying a weight that seemed to resonate throughout the chamber.

"If you have no intention to fulfill your side of the deal, then do not expect us to uphold ours," he said, his voice echoing with finality. "The fate intertwining the kin of moon and us is still there."

With that, he turned away from the holographic figure of Villon as if this was a normal conversation. He reached for the engraving on the walls and the murals depicted in those engravings. He gently caressed the sun shining.

On the other side, Villon, one of the demon generals, couldn't help but frown.

'They already know it....Of course, the Lord had already warned us, but to think that it would be this fast.'

"From now on, the deal between our predecessors will be null; you shall convey this to "Him." You are dismissed." With a wave of his hand, the man released a surge of mana, and then the hologram dispersed, leaving the man alone.

"Leonard."

The white-robed man called, and in an instant, someone appeared from his side. It was a young man with yellow hair and yellow eyes.

His face was chiseled, his white robe exuding the same sense of holiness.

"Your Holiness." The newly appearing young man bowed his head.

"Prepare yourself. You are to head over to the Valerian Federation. Arcadia City. I sense the moon from there."

Leonard nodded, ready to carry out his orders without hesitation.

"And take this," the man continued, reaching into the folds of his robe and producing a small, intricately crafted necklace of silver color. In the middle of the necklace, there was a crescent moon with engravings similar to the ones on the murals.

"This artifact will shine in the presence of the 'Kin of the moon.' And it will converge to its other half. Use it to fulfill your mission."

With a sense of purpose, Leonard accepted the artifact, the weight of his task settling upon his shoulders as he prepared to embark on his journey to the Valerian Federation in search of the elusive 'Kin of the Moon.'

"However, this is not your only task," the white-robed man continued, his gaze fixed on Leonard with a solemn intensity.

"As the promise has been broken, the line of information connected to them regarding the Saintess no longer needs to be maintained. From now on, you are authorized to retrieve the Saintess and to interfere with her affairs as necessary," he declared, his voice carrying a weight of authority.

Leonard's eyes widened slightly at the revelation, the implications of the directive sinking in.

It was a significant departure from their previous protocols, indicating a shift in strategy and priorities.

"As you wish, Your Holiness," Leonard replied, his tone respectful but tinged with a hint of determination. He understood the gravity of his new assignment and was prepared to carry it out with unwavering resolve.

With a nod of acknowledgment, the white-robed man watched as Leonard prepared to depart on his mission.

As for Leonard, he couldn't help but smile.

'Finally, I wonder how my little sister is doing?'

After all, it had been years since he last visited his home and his sister.

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

Slowly but surely, we will start revealing the mysteries.

Hope you liked this small arc. I wanted to show how important the difference between the strengths was. Even though Astron had injured the master Assassin beforehand severely, he was still unable to deal with him as cleanly as he should have been.

In this world, strong people have their own trump cards, or else they can never be strong enough.

Chapter 352 Chapter 82.1 - What the heart sees

"This bath....It helps a lot...."

Sitting in the bath filled with the recovery herbs, I thought to myself. After the battle, I had returned to my room. At that time, the method I had deployed was correct, and it definitely worked well.

"But, to think that they would go over the case in such a brutal way....It suits their style..."

On the academy forums, there was a post with a bunch of videos. In those videos, sophomore-year students were getting beaten, and the assailant was saying the sophomores were getting whatever they deserved.

From the first look, it was an act of revenge, but after looking at it a little bit more detail, it was evident that this post's main goal was to sow discord.

'Eleven out of fourteen victims were women. And in general, they were the weaker students.'

It made sense for the freshmen to target weaker sophomore-year students since their strengths wouldn't qualify to deal with the high-ranking students. Even if they somehow dealt with them, this would narrow down the investigation range.

This left no loophole.

Also, the fact that women were chosen more was also something that was effective in stirring the emotions of the public. Even though in this world, women were not necessarily weaker than men with the existence of mana and the status window, the idea of courtesy for women was still there.

The reality of this world just worked like that, and it seemed the instigator aimed to use this, too.

'Well, slowly but surely, you will reveal yourself. Then, I will be there to hunt you down.'

With that thought, I stood up from the bath. Of course, to do such a thing, I needed the necessary strength.

"Status."

As I called the status window, the panel appeared.

a-?Name: Astron Natusalune

a-?Occupation: Weapon Master (level 3)

a-?Talent Limit: 9

a-?Passives:

Vengeful Bane Bloodline Resonance Psychic Cognizance

a-?Attributes:

Variable Attributes:

Strength: 3.57 -- > 3.87Dexterity: 4.17 -- > 4.3Agility: 4.49 -- > 4.64Constitution: 3.57 -- > 3.89Intuition: 4.64 -- > 4.70Magical Power: 4.97 -- > 5.01Mana Capacity: 3.90 -- > 4.02

a-?Traits:

Perceptive Insight (Epic)(Unchanging) Lunar Enigma (????) (Growth Type) (Stage 1) Shadowborne (Legendary) (Growth Type)(Stage 2)

a-?Arts:

Lethal Arsenal Ascendancy (????)(%32)

a-?Skills:

Eyes of Hourglass

a-?Body Imprints:

a-?Bonds:

Aurora Raven (Rare)(Growth Type) Celestialith, The Transcendent Eclipse

'My endurance and strength stat has started to catch up.'

I thought to myself. With the constant training with weighted bracelets, it seemed like my stats would return to normal after a while.

That was a good thing since I needed to cover my weaknesses.

'But dealing with an executive is most likely why my stats grew this much.'

Considering my growth speed with training alone, that would make sense. The last time I checked my stats, my growth was still below what I expected, but now it seems like I'm catching up.

'From the looks of it, unless I am dealing with a real demon, I won't get a skill or passive from Bloodline Resonance. I can only absorb some of the energy from the Demon Contractors, and this shows in an increase in my stats.'

I thought inwardly. This reasoning was most likely correct.

Of course, it wasn't the end. I also had gotten an artifact, a pretty special one.

-[Curtain of Darkness]

It was a special artifact that isolated the space from the outside. The sounds and energies would be sealed, making whatever it was that someone was doing, they could do it without being disturbed. Though, I didn't have the necessary time to check for its other abilities.

"Well, it is time for training again."

With my thoughts, I stepped out of the bath and dried myself off. The recovery herbs had worked wonders, soothing my aching muscles and rejuvenating my body after the intense training.

I left my room and went to the training grounds.

"We need to talk."

But before I could reach my destination, a voice stopped my tracks.

A silvery-haired girl stood before me with a certain smile.

<Arcadia City, Golden District>

In a high-altitude office perched atop a towering skyscraper, darkness enveloped the sleek and modern space. The only illumination came from the ambient glow of the city lights filtering through the panoramic windows.

Amidst the dimly lit surroundings, a lone figure sat at his desk, his silhouette outlined against the backdrop of the bustling city skyline. His gaze was fixed on the rain cascading down the windowpane, the rhythmic pattern echoing through the room.

Yet, his eyes were not focused on the rain itself but rather on a vision that played out in his mind's eye.

"I see." The man mumbled.

Now, in his eyes, there stood a young man holding a spear. He clashed with the owner of the eyes.

"Ethan Hartley...." The man named the young man. "So this is who you are entangling yourself with. Emily Anderson." The man immediately connected the dots.

Why did the first team that was sent to sabotage Azure Crest Guild fail? How was such a small guild able to get up once again? What made them recover this fast?

Each of the questions was answered with one identity. If it was a Hartley, it would make sense that they weren't captured by the surveillance.

Most of the high-ranking families had such artifacts to let their heirs or important people get away from the public eye.

"But this makes things rather troublesome..." The corner of the man's eyes twitched after analyzing everything. "Now, Philips will need to bear the brunt of their wrath."

As the rain continued to fall outside, its gentle cadence providing a backdrop to his contemplation, the man remained lost in his reverie.

"But, the fact that Ethan Hartley almost lost his life there....It seems we got what we wanted."

The man said as he called someone.

"Send this footage to the 'him.' This should be enough for him to form a plan."

After all, there was someone who wanted to hunt this boy named Ethan for some reason, and that person was rather someone he couldn't refuse.

<Arcadia City, Golden District>

"Another one!"

In the office belonging to Marc Hartley, a loud voice echoed.

"I am sorry, father..."

"What the hell are you doing, Ethan? We thought you were dead! Why did you use that technique? What the hell were you planning!"

The man stormed on the call, looking at the hologram in front of him. It was a young man with incredibly handsome features, and that young man resembled Marc himself.

Ethan bowed his head, his expression filled with remorse. "I have no excuses, Father," he murmured softly.

Marc's frustration reached its peak as he struggled to contain his emotions. "YOU!" he exclaimed, his voice filled with a mixture of fury and concern.

But before Marc could unleash another wave of reprimands, Ethan raised his head and met his father's gaze with unwavering determination. "I am ready for whatever punishment you deem fit, father," he said firmly. "But I don't regret what I did. To save a friend, I would do it again."

Marc's anger faltered, replaced by a deep sense of pride mingled with worry. Despite Ethan's stubbornness and impulsiveness, there was a fierce loyalty and bravery within him that Marc couldn't help but admire.

'This kid.....He really doesn't change....' With a heavy sigh, Marc relented, knowing that there was no changing Ethan's mind once he had made it up. "Tch...I know no punishment will change your mind, but Just promise me, Ethan, that you'll be more careful in the future," he said, his voice softer now, tinged with parental concern.

Ethan nodded solemnly, his eyes reflecting his sincerity. "I promise, father," he vowed.

"Sigh... You won't be able to leave the academy until the semester ends."Top of Form

"But fat-"

"This is something that won't only apply to you," Marc said, looking at Ethan. "Many parents are showing their dissatisfaction already, and I am just using that."

Since his son was refusing to stay safe, Marc could only force him to do so. But knowing Ethan, it was not right for him to stay locked up while other kids could do as they wished. Therefore, he slightly pressured the academy from all sides.

".....I see...." Ethan mumbled. There was nothing he could do as his father was one of the most influential figures in the whole federation.

"Also, I got some news about violence inside the academy."

As Marc mentioned the violence within the academy, Ethan's eyes widened slightly, a flicker of realization crossing his features.

"Father," Ethan began tentatively, his voice laced with concern....

"Of course, we won't overlook such a thing happening, Ethan. Even if you don't want to cause trouble, you should think of the Hartley Family's name."

"....."

"I had already contacted the related families. They will send their apologies soon."

"I-I.....I see...."

"Then, see you later."

With those words, Marc ended the connection, leaving himself alone.

After ending the call with Ethan, Marc sighed heavily, feeling the weight of his responsibilities as a father and a prominent figure in the federation. He knew that he had to take action to ensure his son's safety, even if it meant exerting pressure on the academy.

As he pondered his next move, a knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. "Come in," Marc called out, straightening up in his chair.

Ray entered the room, a folder in hand, his expression grave. "Sir, I have the report regarding the situation with the Azure Crest Guild," he said, his voice serious.

Marc's eyes narrowed as he took the folder from Ray, his mind already racing with possibilities. As he read through the report, his suspicions were confirmed: the Philips Family was behind both incidents.

A cold fury ignited within Marc as he realized the extent of the Philips Family's influence and their willingness to resort to violence to achieve their goals. Of course, such things were not uncommon, but what was disturbing was the fact that the methods they used involved Demonic Humans in them.

They also targeted his son, Ethan, even if it was not clearly their intention.

'This is not good.'

Without hesitation, he made a decision.

"Ray, we are cutting all business dealings with the Philips Family immediately," Marc ordered his voice firm. "Furthermore, I want us to start making deals with their rival family instead. We will also begin resisting the Philips Family's advancements over the area."

Roy's eyes widened for a second, but then he relaxed himself. Knowing his master, such a decision, even if decisive, was his style.

'It feels like him when he was young.'

Though Marc had not been showing his side to others, Ray knew how he was like that before things got calm.

Ray nodded with a smile, his loyalty unwavering. "Yes, sir. I will see to it personally."

"And one more thing," Marc added, his voice tinged with determination. "We will offer the Azure Crest Guild the opportunity to come under our protection and work from our territory. They will have our support in exchange for their loyalty. That kid.....He will keep endangering himself if I don't do that."

Ray's smile widened at the bold move, but he nodded in agreement. "Understood, sir. I will convey your orders to the appropriate parties."

Just like that, the battle of the top dogs in the industry started.

The battle that would shake the future dearly.

Chapter 353 82.2 - What the heart sees

"We need to talk."

Just as I was about to enter the training grounds, I sensed someone's presence before me. The voice wasn't exactly familiar, but it was a voice that I still remembered.

"...."

Turning my head to the side, I saw silvery hair first – a silvery long hair. And then, my attention was captured by the beautiful face structure, with slightly long eyelashes and slim lips.

"It is rude to look at someone like that." The voice continued its words.

"Is that so?" Words came out of my mouth naturally, looking at her bright blue eyes. There was a sharp glint in those eyes, unique to someone who had the innate coldness inside themselves.

"It is."

She was the student who shared the first rank with Victor. A future powerhouse of ice if nurtured well.

Seraphina Frostborne.

"I see," I replied and shrugged it off. Whoever the person before me, I did not care too much. Whether something was rude or not depended on the person affected, and I had no control over it.

This argument somehow sounded hypocritical, but there was no one to reprimand me for that fact, so I was all safe.

As I was just about to walk further, in the corner of my vision, I saw Seraphina's mouth twitching. It seemed she disliked being ignored.

"Didn't you hear me?" She asked, her voice a little bit grumpier now.

"I did. That is why I had reacted, hadn't I?" I replied as I walked further away.

"Do you call it reacting?" She somehow sounded furious. Her words contained certain emotions, and they reminded me a little bit of Irina. But then again, Seraphina was someone who didn't act as rashly as her counterpart. She instantly took control of her emotions.

Not bothering to look back at her, I said: "Well, what would you call it then? Seems like a reaction to me."

Seraphina's cold gaze bore into me for a moment longer before she sighed, the frustration evident in her voice. "We need to talk."

"Why?" I asked. I already knew what kind of person this girl was. Even though she may act high and almighty as a noble should, she wasn't someone to let go of things. This was the typical way of acting for nobles, and she was not an objection to that rule.

"You will understand when we talk."

"I will understand when we talk. Why should I do that, if I don't know the reason?"

At my question, she made a surprised exclamation. Her face showed clear signs of a lack of understanding of this matter.

"Because I am coming to you?" It seemed like in her world, if she came to someone, they must accept talking to her. That made sense, considering how it should have been for her in the past.

The heir of Frostborne family. One of the strongest magic noble families in Arcadia Dominion, one of the six pillars.

An incredibly beautiful girl that would make the person feel like their eyes are feasting.

Facing such a person, it was understandable why people never refused the offer to talk.

But for me, these qualities didn't matter. If I had wanted to entangle myself with this bothersome woman, I would have already done so from the moment I came to the academy. I had plenty of opportunities to do so.

But I didn't, since she was a rather troublesome person to deal with. Just like Victor and Lilia.

"So?"

As I raised my eyebrows, her stupefied face was worthy of taking a picture.

'It is a pity that she would freeze me to death if I were to do such a thing.'

Sadly, even now, with all the things I have under my arsenal, direct confrontation with Seraphina is impossible. A monster is a monster, after all.

"You....." She released a sigh. "I knew you would be different, but who would have thought that you would be this edgy."

"You are free to think whatever you want."

"I see." Seraphina raised her head, seemingly realizing something. From the look inside her eyes, it seemed she made her choice. "If you are going to act like that, don't blame me for being rude."

"Hmm?" Somehow, her words triggered a response in me. It was an instinct I knew, the instinct when things weren't about to go as I wished.

"Should I just reveal your strength to the academy?"

The moment her words left her mouth, I raised my eyebrow. I am already quite an expert at giving these types of reactions, and I am pretty confident in the control of my body. There was just zero possibility that I would give a hint about my reactions.

"I don't know what you are talking about," I replied.

"Ahahaha..." A faint laugh left her mouth, somehow feeling 'amused?' by my response. "Why are you hiding your strength, I wonder?"

I maintained my composure, refusing to show any sign of concern at her threat. "I'm afraid you've lost me. What strength are you talking about?"

She regarded me with a skeptical gaze, clearly unconvinced by my feigned ignorance. "Don't play dumb, Astron Natusalune. You know exactly what I'm talking about."

I shrugged nonchalantly. "If you say so. But I assure you, I have no idea what you're getting at."

Her lips formed a thin line, betraying her frustration. "Fine, if you want to play that game, be my guest. But just know that I'm certain about my assessment, and there's no room for mistakes. I will report this matter to the headmaster, and let's see if you can stay hidden even after that."

I watched her carefully, noting the determination in her stance and the unwavering conviction in her eyes. It was clear that she believed she had me figured out, and there was little I could do to sway her opinion.

'Headmaster, huh? Well, considering that she is one of the strongest people in the academy and the most talented, she could meet with the Headmaster easily. And, somehow, she sounds certain, regardless of my reactions. There is zero doubt about that opinion of hers, which sounds like the channel she confirmed this information doesn't make any mistakes and could be trusted to the maximum. If that is the case, is it her [Trait], [Unique Skill], or the word from someone she is close to?'

This speculation formed in my head first because she was sure of this information. If she were to hear my strength from someone, she would first need to confirm with her eyes since Seraphina is not someone to trust others blindly. But, I am sure I hid my actions well without any surveillance to point out to me; thus, this option is invalid. Then, it meant that she found this information without observing me in combat, and this case was similar to Irina and Senior Maya.

Since both of them didn't see me fighting but saw the results and were able to infer my strength from there. But Seraphina didn't have the luxury of that since I am sure that neither Irina nor Senior Maya would reveal anything, and she also didn't know about my achievements.

This brought me to the [Trait] case. If she was able to see my strength, that would satisfy everything, and this would also answer some of the questions I had in my head about the game. There were several instances where Seraphina judged the strength of the enemy correctly in the game when she was in the player's party.

Thus, I believed that it was because of a [Trait] or a [Unique Skill]. After all, there were many weird skills and traits in this world, and the scope was very large. Why wouldn't there be a talent that showed the strength of a people?

'Always assume bold and broad. You can always confirm it later. It is better than being unprepared and not thoughtful about something.'

It is one of the most important mottos for a street person to live where there are many enemies around. Of course, this can also backfire, but with enough knowledge, it worked well most of the time.

'But it seems she came with a plan in her mind, and she had already observed my attitude and inferred some things about me. This is the reason why this girl is troublesome to deal with.' 'If I were to deny this further, there is no doubt that she would hold on to her promise. And listening to her shouldn't be that bad. Even if she is troublesome to deal with, right now, the most logical act would be complying with her request.'

After a moment of tense silence, I relented, realizing that further resistance would be futile. "Alright, fine. Where do you want to talk?"

Seraphina's expression softened slightly, a hint of satisfaction flickering across her features. Her face revealed a smirk as if she had won. "It is good that you know when to back off. Follow me. I have a good place in my mind."

For some reason, I had a bad feeling about this, but sometimes things wouldn't go the way we wished.

No one can control everything about the world around them, not even their own lives.

As I followed Seraphina through the roads of the academy, her silvery hair swayed gracefully with each step she took.

Despite my initial reluctance, I somehow couldn't help but admire her poise and confidence, traits that seemed to come naturally to her.

As we walked, Seraphina broke the silence with a seemingly casual remark. "Isn't it quite interesting, Astron?"

I raised an eyebrow, curious about her sudden shift in topic. "What do you mean?"

She glanced sideways at me, her gaze piercing yet thoughtful. "The whole academy is bustling with students striving to excel in their studies and grades, to prove themselves worthy of their place here. Yet, there's someone among us who seems to be indifferent to all of it."

"There is nothing interesting about it. That person most likely is just lazy to deal with everything."

"Lazy to deal with everything? Maybe they find these types of things troublesome?"

"It is good that you know how they feel. Maybe you should consider their feelings as well."

"Sadly, one's feelings are not that important in the adult world."

"Somehow, you entered the adult world now?"

"I never left it."

"That is what a child would say."

"Your assessment seems wrong; you should correct it."

"I doubt that."

"Maybe. But, you see, Mister Astron," she continued, her tone contemplative, "it's fascinating how some individuals can exist on the fringes of our society, untouched by the expectations and pressures that weigh down the rest of us."

I considered her words carefully. "And what do you make of such individuals?"

A small smile tugged at the corners of her lips. "I suppose it depends on the individual. Some may see them as rebels, defying the norms of society. Others may view them with envy, wishing they had the courage to break free from the constraints placed upon them."

We reached our destination, a secluded café corner of the garden terrace overlooking the tranquil scenery below.

A place for the high-ranking students.

Seraphina gestured for me to take a seat on one of the stone benches, and I obliged, settling myself down as she joined me.

"But in the end, everyone had a secret or two. And once you grasp them, no one can escape your hand."

"....."

"So, let's talk about our main topic, shall we." She said while sliding through the menu. "You wouldn't mind if I choose it for you?"

"It would be an honor to drink what mighty Seraphina Frostborne chosen for me."

"Your humor seems good."

"It was supposed to be sarcastic."

"For me, it looked rather humorous."

"It seems so."

As Seraphina smiled at my words, she naturally had chosen one of the options from the menu. Though I wasn't able to see what she had chosen, it didn't matter in any case.

"Now, let me ask you a question first," Seraphina said, locking her eyes with me.

"Why are you hiding your strength?"

Chapter 354 Chapter 82.3 - What the heart sees

"Why are you hiding your strength?"

Faced with the things that are out of the norm, what is the basic response humans tend to give?

It is to try to understand it.

After all, only by understanding it can we categorize, and categorizing is one of our most basic desires since it creates a sense of belonging.

That is why I was expecting such a question from Seraphina.

"Why do you think?"

I asked against her. If you are in a conversation in which you don't want to reveal much information, the best way to deal with it is to answer the questions with another question. By doing

that, you can lead the conversation in the way you want while also learning about the thoughts of the person before you.

"I don't know."

Yet, for people like Seraphina, these types of situations must be pretty common. She instantly said she didn't have any thoughts on this matter to hide her cards.

"You don't know? I thought you would already form an opinion. After all, aren't you the mighty Seraphina Frostborne?"

To deal with such responses, one can attempt to provoke another person. If the person can be swayed by their momentary impulses, they can get the answer they want.

"I know it must be disappointing, but sadly, I don't really have any idea."

However, for that to even work, you need to know the weakness of the other party, and right now was not the time for me to reveal it.

"So, please kindly answer my question. Why are you hiding your abilities?"

As Seraphina once again asked that question, she very well thought that I couldn't use the sophisticated methods to slip away from it.

"Is it important?"

"It is."

"Why?"

"Because it will help me formulate my future actions. Only by understanding your reasons that I can judge if you are a person suited for me or not."

"Suited for you? Is this supposed to be a test?"

"Life itself is a test."

"It is a sophisticated view."

"That is coming from you....But, seemingly enough, you have no intention of revealing your reasons it seems."

Dealing with smart people is efficient because of this. They can understand and read between the lines, which makes communication easier.

Of course, some may think that this is an act of immaturity, and directly saying what you want to say is better than beating around the bush, but where is the fun with that?

If everything in this world was as efficient as it needed to be, then we wouldn't have the things called art in the first place.

"It is good that you understand." I nodded at her response.

"But, do you think you should show some leverage to me? After all, I now hold your secret in my hands."

"Somehow, I feel like I keep repeating these words, but I have no control over your actions. From how you speak, you certainly have the necessary means to talk with the headmaster and make him believe in you, even without any proof. Therefore, regardless of whether I comply with your requests or not, you can always talk with the headmaster and inform him. And that makes you the one in control and not me. No matter what I do, the result can only be determined by you."

"Interesting. You really have the ability to do sophistry. Maybe you can work with politicians."

"I have no interest in such matters."

'I only have one goal. To get my revenge, that's it.'

I thought inwardly. Somehow, having such a conversation with Seraphina made me reminisce about the past, albeit it was a little.

I would talk with her a lot like this as well.

Seraphina's gaze lingered on me for a moment, her expression unreadable. "Your words make sense if the mana contracts didn't exist."

Her statement caught me off guard, and I raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Are you suggesting...?"

"That I'm willing to make a contract over such a small matter?" she finished my sentence, her lips quirking into a wry smile. "Perhaps."

I leaned back in my seat, considering her words carefully. Mana contracts were powerful agreements that bound individuals to certain terms and conditions, often exchanging favors or services in return for mutual benefits.

They were not to be taken lightly, as breaking a contract could have dire consequences.

"Are you proposing a contract between us?" I asked, intrigued by the possibility.

Seraphina nodded, her eyes gleaming with a newfound intensity. "Indeed. If you're unwilling to share your reasons willingly, perhaps a contract will ensure your compliance."

"For you to bring out the topic of mana contracts, you must want to gain my trust."

"I do."

"But why? What do you need from me? Even if you are certain that I am hiding my strength, I don't see any other reason for you to approach me."

This was the thing that was bugging me. Seraphina might be certain that I was hiding my strength, but there shouldn't be any clear reason for her to approach me.

After all, there were plenty of powerhouses in the academy, and there was even a monster like Ethan who was improving at a rate that would shake the mountains.

I didn't see any value for her unless she thought that I was on par with her in terms of strength.

At my words, a certain smile bloomed on her face. A certain smile that somehow sent a slight shiver down my spine.

Somehow, my intuition was warning me that this talk's result wouldn't be anything good.

However, at that moment, even if I wanted to just leave this table, if I did, I would antagonize this future Archmage a lot more severely than just acting edgy.

"Let's say I want to steal my rivals' assets."

Her words contained a certain meaning, and her eyes were looking at someplace behind.

'Hmm?'

I also sensed something, but before I could put a finger on it, I felt my senses being veiled by something else.

It was Seraphina's mana that had covered my body, isolating me from the space.

'This....She had already achieved such control over her mana?' This woman somehow managed to manipulate her raw mana to disrupt my senses as if to show off to me. It gave the message that, even if I wanted to leave, I wouldn't do it unscathed.

"Well, in any case, let me ask you another question," Seraphina mumbled, looking at me with a clear interest. "What do you think about Irina?"

"Irina?"

Hearing her asking about Irina, I understood what she was trying to understand.

'So, this was what it was about.' Thinking about it from Seraphina's perspective, Irina and I certainly had a weird relationship. Even in the game, Seraphina constantly monitored people that she deemed important so she would know about my past interactions with Irina. From there, she may have certainly formed some conclusions in her head.

Considering that she now thought that I was hiding my strength and that I was close to Irina, in her mind, I could become an obstacle to her in the future since Irina was eventually her rival.

"Yes." Seraphina nodded, confirming her question.

"Asking such a question out of the blue," I mumbled to give the impression that I was bothered.

"Irina is... complicated," I began, choosing my words carefully. "She's certainly talented, there's no denying that. But her attitude leaves much to be desired."

Seraphina's gaze remained fixed on me, her expression unreadable. "Go on."

"She's reckless, impulsive, and often acts without considering the consequences," I continued, my tone tinged with frustration. "Her arrogance knows no bounds, and she's quick to dismiss others' opinions if they don't align with her own."

'Though this part has changed a lot, it is not like you need to hear it from me, Seraphina Frostborne.'

There was no need to reveal everything, nor a need for me to speak the truth with my every word.

A flicker of recognition flashed in Seraphina's eyes, but she remained silent, urging me to continue.

"She's driven by her own ambition, and she'll stop at nothing to achieve her goals," I added, my voice growing colder. "But her lack of restraint and disregard for those around her make her a liability sometimes."

'This part also changed a lot.' Seraphina nodded slowly, absorbing my words. "And yet, you maintain a close relationship with her?"

I paused, weighing my response. "Irina and I have a history, but that doesn't mean I condone her actions. Sometimes, it's easier to keep someone close to keep an eye on them rather than risk them causing trouble elsewhere."

A hint of satisfaction flickered in Seraphina's eyes as if my answer had confirmed her suspicions. "I see."

"Why the sudden interest in my relationship with Irina?" I asked, shifting the focus back to her. "Is she causing trouble again?"

Seraphina's smile was cryptic. "Perhaps. But let's just say that I'm curious about the dynamics between you two."

I narrowed my eyes, sensing that there was more to her inquiry than she was letting on. "And what do you hope to gain from understanding our dynamics?"

"Knowledge is power," Seraphina replied simply. "And understanding the relationships between key players can be advantageous."

With that, she waved her hand. The temperature was lowered for a split second, and the table froze. I could feel my senses warning me since it was getting into a relatively dangerous border.

CREAK!

On the table, two small figures were constructed from the ice. One was a queen on the chessboard, and the other was the king.

'And here it comes.'

"It is hard to clearly understand what makes you work with her." She mumbled, turning her eyes to me. "But, whatever it is, I am confident that I can give you better in every aspect."

Seraphina's words made me nod inwardly. She was offering me an alternative to working with Irina, one that seemed to come with promises of greater rewards and benefits.

I remained silent for a moment, carefully considering my response. Seraphina's offer was tempting; there was no denying that. She was a formidable ally, and aligning myself with her could undoubtedly bring advantages.

But at the same time, I couldn't ignore the warning signs that her proposition carried. These types of actions were what made her different from Lilia after all.

"And what exactly do you expect in return for your... assistance?" I asked cautiously, my voice 'betraying' none of the uncertainty swirling within me.

Seraphina's smile widened, revealing a glint of satisfaction in her eyes. "Simply your loyalty and allegiance. With your skills and abilities, you could be a valuable asset to me, Mister Astron. After all, I am way better than Irina, aren't I? Smarter, easier to talk to, better personality, more beautiful, and most importantly, stronger."

Hearing her words, I nodded my head. There was no need to deny her words. "You certainly are smarter, and you seem to have a better personality," I replied while observing her smile widening.

Somehow, I sensed the mana around me change, as if the curtain completely overlapping me.

'This....'

"But I have no intention of working under someone, regardless of who it is."

Seraphina didn't even falter for a brief moment as if she was already expecting such an answer. "I understand. But remember, Astron, alliances can shift, and loyalties can change. Think carefully about where your allegiances lie."

With that, she waved her hand, dispelling the ice figures on the table, and the temperature returned to normal. I couldn't help but feel a sense of relief as the tension in the air dissipated, but I knew that my encounter with Seraphina was far from over.

As I rose from my seat, she turned to me once more, her gaze piercing and intense. "But, you should still consider my offer, Astron Natusalune. I have a feeling that our paths will cross again soon."

Somehow, she looked like she got what she wanted, which increased the unease in my heart.

"I will."

With those words, I turned to leave, but at that moment, I noticed a familiar mana coming from one of the tables.

There, the table was burning with flames, and it seemed like someone had smashed it.

'Sigh.....'

Apparently, there was someone else here.

Chapter 355 82.4 - What the heart sees

Humans were such strange creatures.

They held stupid expectations regarding others without knowing that those expectations would end up hurting them.

'Why?'

A question echoed inside the young adolescent girl's heart. A question that made her heartthrob, a question that made her feel like needles were stabbing into her heart.

'Why am I feeling like this?'

It was a feeling that she was unable to identify. Why was she feeling it in such a way?

Why did it feel like she couldn't breathe? This was the first time such a thing had happened.

'Why am I letting those thoughts get over my head?' She continuously questioned herself. The world looked blurry, different from how it was all the time. Somehow, she wasn't able to clearly sense as it had been.

Her developed senses were now betraying her, making her the part of the world she didn't want to be in right now.

At this moment, she wanted to shut herself down. Just like a computer whose electric supply was shut down, she wanted to turn herself off.

She just wanted to close her eyes, lean somewhere, and put an end to these thoughts.

'Really.....Why did I even listen to her suggestion back then.....'

Everything had started this morning.

-Hey....Fiery Demoness...

That annoying girl had approached her in the morning. There was a clear smirk on her face, a smirk that somehow irked her whenever she had seen it.

-Seraphine.

-Do you mind if I take him?

She somehow came to her side and then talked about 'him' out of nowhere. Even though there was no mention of his name, the moment Seraphina looked at her like that and spoke in such a manner, she knew who it was about from the start.

-What did you say?

-I said, what I said? Do you mind if I take him?

Her question was insolent, but there was a certain look in her eyes. A look that she knew very well.

Seraphina was looking for her weakness. She was looking for something that she could use in the future.

And Irina knew about that fact. She was very well aware of such acts since she had witnessed a lot of them and even saw her mother plotting.

She had a lot of demonstrations already, even though those acts made her want to puke. She hated the dishonesty of people and how they always wore masks.

-Do whatever you want. Thus, she knew she needed to come out strong. She acted nonchalant, even though she had been bothered by it.

-That is good, then. I will talk to him now. Do you want to listen? But somehow, Seraphina seemed to already have a plan. That made sense, as Irina knew that she wasn't someone to act without preparing thoroughly. In that aspect, she was familiar with him to a certain extent.

-Why would I listen to your talk?

-Aren't you curious? Don't you want to know who he is going to choose?

-I don't need an answer or anything. -Oh? Are you scared?

-You! Who is scared of who? Come on then, let's see it! She couldn't control her impulses. This was how it had been. But she was also curious, and she knew that Seraphina was giving her just the excuse to act. Though it looked like exactly what Seraphina had planned, Irina accepted it and played it into her hand.

And then, as Seraphina settled into the café just as she said, she couldn't help but perk her ears. Of course, at first, she was unable to listen since Seraphina was laying down her mana to cover the atmosphere.

It was a technique that was used by mages in general. She could also do it by precisely manipulating her mana, but she didn't have any reason to use that before. By laying the mana into the surroundings, one could block the senses of Awakened, turning them into normal humans.

-What do you think about Irina? But then, she could finally start hearing the conversation. After meddling with 'his' senses, Seraphina slightly dispelled the curtain so that Irina could bypass her senses into the conversation and listen to it.

-Irina?

-Irina is... complicated. She's certainly talented; there's no denying that. But her attitude leaves much to be desired.

-Go on.

-She's reckless, impulsive, and often acts without considering the consequences. Her arrogance knows no bounds, and she's quick to dismiss others' opinions if they don't align with her own.

-She's driven by her own ambition, and she'll stop at nothing to achieve her goal. However, her lack of restraint and disregard for those around her sometimes make her a liability.

-And yet, you maintain a close relationship with her?

-Irina and I have a history, but that doesn't mean I condone her actions. Sometimes, it's easier to keep someone close to keep an eye on them rather than risk them causing trouble elsewhere.

As the conversation unfolded before her, Irina felt a pang of hurt deep within her chest. It was as if a sharp dagger had pierced through her defenses, exposing vulnerabilities she had buried deep inside.

She had always known that he was quite cunning and cold, always plotting and scheming, but hearing him speak so candidly about her like that cut deeper than she initially thought.

The words echoed in her mind, each one a painful reminder of her shortcomings.

Talented but reckless. Ambitious but arrogant. A liability to those around her.

The realization that someone she considered close could see her in such a light shook Irina to her core.

She had trusted him, confided in him, and believed that he understood her better than anyone else. Yet, behind her back, he had been discussing her flaws with another.

The sense of betrayal was overwhelming, crushing her spirit with its weight. It was a bitter pill to swallow, knowing that the person she had thought of as a friend could so easily disregard her feelings and expose her vulnerabilities.

-It is hard to clearly understand what makes you work with her. But, whatever it is, I am confident that I can give you better in every aspect.

-After all, I am way better than Irina, aren't I? Smarter, easier to talk to, better personality, more beautiful, and most importantly, stronger.

-You certainly are smarter, and you seem to have a better personality.

And these words hit the mark. After all, the connection was lost from that point, as she could no longer hear what they were even talking about.

But was there a reason for her to do so?

Did she really need to hear more? Wasn't everything clear?

'I am just a liability, after all. Isn't it normal for him to accept her conditions? She is smarter, stronger, and she has a better personality?'

There was an intrinsic anger soaring from deep inside her heart at that point. She punched one of the tables and left.

And then, I started wandering around the academy grounds. The weather was still cold, with it being in the later stages of winter.

Tears threatened to spill from her eyes as she struggled to process the flood of emotions raging within her.

Anger hurt, and a profound sense of loneliness washed over her like a tidal wave, threatening to engulf her completely.

'So, he thought me like that....'

At that moment, she felt more alone than ever before. The realization that even those closest to her could betray her trust left her feeling adrift, lost in a sea of uncertainty.

'This is not good....'

She knew she had entered a state where she constantly thought about the past and their actions together.

Somehow, all those things looked fake to her right now. Even though something inside her told her that, she was playing into the Seraphine's ploy and she needed to act with a lot more cool head, she couldn't do that.

Right now, she needed something to vent these feelings inside.

And she knew what it was.

'I need to burn something.'

Whenever her head got complicated, she would always do one thing after all.

Burning things until she burned her thoughts.

Seraphina, who saw Astron leaving, was satisfied.

'After all, I got what I wanted.'

From the start, her goal was never to recruit the enigma named Astron Natusalune. After all, she had observed him for a while and noticed that he was a cautious individual.

Therefore, it was impossible for him to be swayed by her in such a short time.

From the reports she got and the information she knew, Astron Natusalune was somehow close to Irina, and that made it even harder for her to get what she wanted.

Normally, even though she was unable to see Astron Natusalune's stats with her trait, she still didn't hold him in high regard. After all, Ethan Hartley, Victor Blackthorn, and many other talented people existed in the academy.

This was a place of monsters. Thus, she thought it was just a unique trait of him, just like hers.

But this evaluation changed when she got her mother's letter. And in there, it wrote, be aware of Astron Natusalune.

Knowing her mother's powers and the situation she was in, Seraphina knew her mother wouldn't joke about such matters. That made her interested in this person known as Astron Natusalune, and she devised a plan for that. Her plan had to be meticulous, calculated, and, above all, subtle.

As she pondered her next move, Seraphina's mind raced with possibilities. She had to find a way to exploit Astron's connection to Irina without arousing suspicion. It was a delicate balancing act, one that required finesse and precision.

But Seraphina was not one to shy away from a challenge. She rather liked it.

With determination in her heart and a plan forming in her mind, she set out to unravel the mysteries surrounding Astron Natusalune, knowing that the key to her success lay in understanding what made him this important in her mother's eyes.

Her plan was in process.

She had created a rift between him and Irina. Now, it was time to see how he would react to this situation and analyze his psyche more.

Would he abandon Irina and no longer interact with her, or would he chase after her?

By understanding his character and his decisions, she would then evaluate him.

After all, if he was evil and he would pose a threat to her in the future...

The best decision would be to remove him from this world.

Chapter 356 82.5 - What the heart sees

As Irina wandered the academy grounds, her mind consumed by anger and hurt, she found herself drawn to the training grounds.

It was a familiar place, a sanctuary where she could unleash the full extent of her powers without fear of judgment or reprisal.

The air was crisp with the chill of winter, but Irina hardly noticed as she entered the expansive training grounds.

Her footsteps echoed against the stone pathways, the sound a steady rhythm that matched the pounding of her heart.

Normally, she would train in the place dedicated to the high-ranking students in their dorms. However, right now, she didn't want to return to her room.

She didn't want to face the people she knew. She didn't want to deal with any type of those things.

She just wanted to burn these thoughts, and the normal training grounds were okay for that.

[Identity confirmed. Irina Emberheart. Freshmen, rank 3.]

She entered the individual training lounge.

Her eyes scanned the area, taking in the rows of golems standing at attention, waiting for their next challenger.

These golems, imbued with powerful magic, were designed to test the skills of even the most seasoned mages.

[Which stage do you wish to set?]

"Set it to stage 7."

[Stage 7. Are you sure? This stage is not advised for freshmen.]

"Yes. Proceed."

Her voice was chilly, yet she knew getting angry at the artificial intelligence of the training grounds wouldn't help with anything.

It would rather make her look more stupid than ever.

[Understood. Stage 7 is being activated.]

RUMBLE!

As the training grounds shook beneath her feet, Irina felt a surge of anticipation coursing through her veins.

The familiar sensation of fire and fury welled up inside her, fueling her resolve as the walls of the lounge began to shift and groan.

CREAK!

From the depths of the room, golems emerged one by one, their metallic forms gleaming in the dim light. Each one stood tall and imposing, a formidable opponent that would test even the most seasoned mage.

But Irina was undeterred. With a flick of her wrist, flames erupted from her fingertips, dancing in the air like angry spirits eager for battle. Her eyes blazed with determination as she locked onto the approaching golems, her heart pounding with adrenaline-fueled fervor.

"Come on then," she growled, her voice a low rumble that echoed through the room. "Let's see what you've got."

As the first golem stepped forward, Irina launched herself into action. Fire trailed behind her as she moved, a fiery aura enveloping her form like a protective cloak. With lightning-fast reflexes, she dodged the golem's initial attack, retaliating with a powerful blast of flames that sent it staggering backward.

One by one, the golems advanced, their movements precise and calculated. But Irina met each challenge head-on, her fists blazing with the intensity of her emotions.

With every strike, she poured more and more mana into her attacks, pushing herself to the brink of exhaustion in her quest for release.

The temperature in the room soared as Irina's aura grew stronger, the flames swirling around her like a tempest unleashed.

Sweat dripped from her brow, mingling with the heat of her fiery energy as she fought with a ferocity born of desperation.

But even as the golems closed in, Irina refused to back down. She was a force to be reckoned with, a tempest of fire and fury that would not be extinguished.

As she faced down her opponents, slowly but surely, she thought the things that were bothering her would go away.

But they didn't. Contrary to what she expected, her mind didn't shut down. She still continued to remember everything.

"This is not enough, give me more!"

She knew this was because she was yet to be tired.

And so, with a fierce determination that bordered on recklessness, Irina forced herself to fight on. She challenged stage 7 again and again, each time pushing herself to her limits and beyond.

[Stage 7 Completed. New record. Elapsed Time, 12 minutes 48 seconds.]

[Stage 7 Completed. Elapsed Time, 12 minutes 58 seconds.]

[Stage 7 Completed. Elapsed Time, 13 minutes 45 seconds.]

[Stage 7 Completed. Elapsed Time, 13 minutes 40 seconds.]

"JUST DIE!"

—SWIRL

But eventually, her mana reached its breaking point. With a final burst of energy, she unleashed one last wave of flames, the fire burning bright and hot before flickering out into nothingness.

[Stage 7 Completed. Elapsed Time, 14 minutes 57 seconds.]

"Haaaah.....Haaaaah...."

As the last embers faded away, Irina leaned heavily against the walls of the training grounds, her breath coming in ragged gasps as she fought to catch her breath. Her eyelids felt heavy with fatigue, her body trembling from the exertion of battle.

But despite the physical exhaustion that threatened to consume her, the weight of her emotions remained. As she stood there, breathing heavily in the aftermath of her fight, she knew that the battle within herself was far from over.

However, at the very least, she was able to slightly extinguish the fire in her heart.

The thoughts that completely clashed in her heart finally came to an abrupt end. After all, right now, she is experiencing one of the most dangerous phenomena for mages.

Mana Exhaustion.

She forcefully used all of her mana so that she could achieve this drunken state. Her thoughts were sluggish.

This was not something she did a lot, but when her life became something that she couldn't stand, she did it. It was akin to someone drinking until they were drunk.

"Haaah...."

[Please Empty the Induvial Training Lounge if you don't wish to use it any further. There are students in the queue.]

However, since she had chosen to come to the general training grounds, she could no longer stay there on her own.

"Maaaaan...It is annoying...."

With a heavy sigh, Irina pushed herself away from the wall, her limbs feeling like lead as she gathered her belongings. The world seemed to blur around her, the edges of her vision hazy as she made her way out of the training grounds.

As she stumbled through the corridors of the academy, her head swimming with exhaustion, she couldn't shake the feeling of nausea that gnawed at her stomach. With each step, the urge to vomit grew stronger, threatening to overwhelm her senses.

But then, a realization dawned on her. She hadn't eaten anything all day. The queasiness she felt wasn't from sickness but from sheer exhaustion and mana depletion.

"Mmm...", she muttered under her breath, her voice slurred and sluggish as she made her way to her room. The journey felt like an eternity, the world spinning around her as she fought to keep her balance.

And at the end, she couldn't do it or maintain it.

THUD! She fell down on the side of the track.

But even as she lay there, the darkness of night enveloping her, she couldn't escape the chill that seeped into her bones. It was a strange sensation, one she hadn't felt in a while, but it was quickly replaced by the familiar warmth of her intrinsic body heat.

With a shiver, Irina forced herself to her feet, wrapping her arms around herself in a feeble attempt to ward off the cold. The night air was crisp and biting, a stark contrast to the warmth of the training grounds.

But as she stood there, her breath misting in the cold air, Irina felt a strange sense of clarity wash over her.

Different from other people, Irina was an Emberheart. She had the blood of ancient mages. Her body had already recovered to some extent.

The intrinsic characteristics of her body started showing its effects as the heat gradually overlapped the coldness, removing it.

"Ahh....It is over...."

Though her mana reserves had yet to be started filled, at the very least, her basal mana reserves were filled. Now, her body was operating just as it should.

"Ho.....What do we have here?"

Suddenly, she heard an unfamiliar voice from the side. It was the voice of a girl.

"To think that I would find the great Irina Emberheart in such a state.....Even as a non-believer, I can't help but think this is a play of fate."

SHIVER! Irina's body shivered. Not because of the cold this time but because of the chilliness and intent behind the voice.

As the unfamiliar voice pierced the silence of the night, Irina's instincts kicked in, and she tilted her head to the side to check who it was. Her muscles tensed, ready to react at a moment's notice.

But as she tried to summon her fire magic, she felt a sudden emptiness wash over her. Her mana reserves, depleted from her intense training session, left her unable to tap into her powers.

Panic flickered in her chest as she realized her vulnerability, her heart pounding in her ears as she turned her attention to the girl before her. The stranger revealed a smile, but to Irina, it looked sinister, sending a shiver down her spine.

The aura emanating from the girl was suffocating, a palpable sense of darkness that made Irina's stomach churn. She knew all too well what this aura meant - the unmistakable presence of a demon.

'A demon contractor!' In that moment, realization dawned on her like a bolt of lightning. The girl before her was not just any ordinary stranger; she was a demon contractor, someone who had made a pact with demons for power.

Despite the fear coursing through her veins, Irina forced herself to stand her ground, her eyes narrowing as she met the demon contractor's gaze. She may have been weakened, but she refused to show any sign of weakness in the face of this threat.

"What do you want?" Irina demanded, her voice trembling slightly as she spoke. She couldn't let this demon sense her fear, couldn't let it know just how vulnerable she truly was in this moment.

"What do I want?" The girl smirked, revealing her teeth. "Nothing much. I just want your everything."

The girl said as she started releasing an aura of the demon. A dark smoke slightly started dissipating, and in an instant, it started approaching Irina.

'This!'

Realizing what was about to happen, Irina's mind rapidly worked, trying to find something.

GRAB!

The smoke first swallowed her whole arms and legs, restraining her and preventing her from moving.

"Since such a fine gift was given to me right at the moment I needed it, I will not refuse it."

The girl said as her smoke penetrated Irina's pores, infiltrating her body. And following that, Irina felt the connection between her mana and her consciousness lost.

Her mana was sealed.

"Well, have a good sleep, Miss Irina. Since it will be your last one."

THUD!

With that, the last thing Irina saw was the hand approaching 02:15

her face. And then she lost her consciousness.

"Now, I should move quickly."

With that, the girl grabbed Irina and started moving in the shadows hurriedly.

Yet, she hadn't noticed a certain smartwatch on the ground, with its screen shining to Mother Earth.

Chapter 357 82.6 - What the heart sees

There are certain times when we can not foresee everything that will happen in our lives.

That is the basic premise of living as a human being. No matter how smart you are, at the end of the day, you will never be able to know everything.

There will be certain things that are out of your knowledge, and those certain things will render you unable to fathom everything clearly.

At the end of the day, we are all humans. Even if we somehow become supernatural, there is a certain aspect of humanity remaining. Well, this may not be the case for everyone, though let's assume this is the general truth.

Therefore, the moment I saw the burning table and the familiar mana important, I knew what had happened there.

'This sense of uneasiness, it came from that, isn't it?'

I pondered to myself. After all, Seraphina was certainly trying to test my nerves there, obscuring my senses and observing how I reacted.

She was taking a proactive approach, but that wasn't her clear style. She didn't do things in a rather bothersome way, and she would hate wasting resources. Therefore, I kind of expected that she would try to gain something else from this conversation, but I wasn't expecting such an outcome.

If Irina had been listening to the conversation, then she would definitely be uncomfortable. Regardless of who it is, nobody would like their rival to become an acquaintance with their teammates. And for Irina, with her temper, she wouldn't tolerate it.

Therefore, it makes sense that she is somehow angry right now.

'Hmm....Considering my words, she may as well feel a bit hateful towards me. I was being a bit harsh after all.'

Though my words didn't contain my true thoughts since I wanted to deceive Seraphina, this somehow bit me back right now. In a way, if Irina had heard exactly what I was saying, she would most likely have thought that her efforts didn't do anything up to this time.

She would think I was an ungrateful, despicable bastard. I could even envision her cursing at me when she was leaving.

Her aura must have been leaking as well.

'Sigh, she is not even answering my calls.'

I had been trying to contact her after seeing the traces, but as I had just expected, she was not answering my calls.

'So, what is she going to do now?'

Therefore, I was left alone with my thoughts.

Irina's personality was like a double-edged sword—sharp, unpredictable, and capable of cutting through any obstacle in her path. While her fiery determination and fierce ambition were admirable traits, they also made her prone to impulsiveness and recklessness.

In moments of anger or frustration, Irina was known to act without considering the consequences, often resorting to drastic measures to vent her emotions.

Burning things to alleviate her stress was such a quintessentially Irina-like thing to do, and I knew her well enough to recognize the signs.

'So, she is most likely looking for targets now.'

As I mulled over the situation, I couldn't help but feel somehow irritated.

Despite our differences and the complexities of our relationship, Irina was one of the most important people in this world. She belongs to the main cast and is a member of the Emberheart Family, the future Archmage of Fire.

Against the threats that would emerge sooner or later, she was undoubtedly one of the most important assets. Therefore, maintaining a slightly stable relationship with her was a must.

'Hmm....This....'

It seemed I was changing this whole time as well. I went from having no contact with the main cast to having an amicable relationship with them.

Seraphina undoubtedly tried to destroy my relationship with Irina. By doing what she just did, Irina would antagonize me, and if I was strong enough, I could brush her off and would not care.

And, if I wasn't strong enough to deal with Irina, Seraphina wouldn't consider me strong enough, so I would escape her radar.

In the end, she didn't lose anything since she only weakened her rival's faction.

But something inside me had been bothering me. It was as if there was another motive that Seraphina was moving with. Something that just didn't make sense only by thinking with logic.

'Her actions were a bit too strong for an amicable test. Hmm....Maybe because the academy was thrown into the chaos with the sophomore-freshmen clash, she is planning to act. That could be true.'

It seems there were certain interesting things were going to happen in the future, but for the time being, my focus needed to be on Irina.

Now that I knew what she would do, I decided to seek her out. If Irina was indeed upset or angry, she would most likely be at the high-rankers' dormitory, where she spent most of her time training and honing her skills.

Making my way through the corridors of the academy, I observed the surroundings.

There was a certain hostility in the air, even without anyone clashing. People were glaring daggers at each other, and each side was differed by one important thing.

It was the crests on the arms of the uniforms.

The crests symbolized the year of the students.

Freshmen growled at the sophomore-year students, feeling the pressure emanating from them. After all, even if they were both academy students, the one-year seniority made a huge difference when the Awakeners were still in the process of reaching the wall.

Almost every Awakened followed a somehow logarithmic curve of improvement. At the start of their careers, they would improve rapidly, increasing their stats. However, as they approached the talent limit that had been defined in their status window, their growth would stagnate.

This is the basic knowledge for every student...No, for every awakened. Therefore, for the students who are still in the beginning/middle parts of their growth, the change between one year was high. It was even more so for the students of Arcadia Hunter Academy, who had been accepted with the highest average talent limit rate.

However, the academy was now being doubted for its credibility due to recent events.

In any case, sophomore-year students easily overpowered freshmen because of the reasons stated above.

They angrily looked at the freshmen, observing their every bit of movement.

"Tch. Weaklings."

"Grr....What did you say?"

"I said weaklings, did you not hear? You can't even speak without gritting your teeth."

The tension in the corridor escalated as the freshmen students bristled at the insults hurled their way. Anger simmered beneath their surface, fueled by the frustration of being belittled and looked down upon by the sophomore-year seniors, whom they most likely deem as annoying oppressors in their heads.

'This is not good.' Some of the freshmen clenched their fists, their resolve hardening as they fought against the pressure weighing down on them. They refused to be intimidated, unwilling to back down in the face of adversity.

'A fight will erupt now.' But as the tension reached its boiling point, one of the freshmen students snapped.

It seemed I was unlucky with the path I had taken now. I erased my presence, trying to shake away the fight.

With a furious roar, my fellow freshmen channeled his mana, unleashing a burst of energy directed at the senior standing before him.

—CRACKLE

The air crackled with electricity as the mana surged, casting a blinding light that illuminated the corridor.

"Ho, you are finally using your mana! Do you know what that means?"

"Of course!"

The senior's eyes were narrowed, but there was a certain glint in his eyes. How could he not expect the barbarian freshmen to attack abruptly? After all, they were the ones who silently attacked at night and beat the unconscious students.

Chaos erupted in the corridor as other freshmen students followed suit, channeling their mana in a display of defiance against their oppressors.

Spells and elemental attacks flew through the air, creating a cacophony of noise and chaos.

I had already moved quite a lot from the location of the fight since I didn't want to be entangled with any of those.

After all, this fight wouldn't take us anywhere.

"STOP!"

But alas, the world once again didn't move as I wished. I even pondered if there was somehow a force that was acting against me today. I was a lot more unluckier than usual.

A mountain-like pressure descended upon every student of the academy in the area with a loud shout. It belonged to the instructor, a man with a bulky build and a soldier-like demeanor. His stern gaze swept across the chaos, quelling the unrest with his imposing presence alone.

As the instructor stepped forward, his expression was stern, his eyes sharp as he assessed the situation before him. He seemed to squint at each student individually, his gaze piercing and unyielding.

"Enough!" His voice boomed, cutting through the noise like a blade. "This behavior is unacceptable. You are all students of Arcadia Hunter Academy, and you will conduct yourselves accordingly."

His words were firm, leaving no room for argument. The students fell silent, cowed by the authority radiating from the instructor.

"Now, listen closely," he continued, his voice commanding attention. "Each and every one of you will follow me. We will not tolerate any further disruptions."

With that, he turned on his heel, his gaze sweeping over the assembled students. "Move out," he ordered, his tone brooking no disobedience.

Reluctantly, the students began to fall into line, their heads bowed as they followed the instructor out of the corridor. It was clear that his word was law, and none dared to defy him.

I was watching everything from a distance, seemingly not perturbed.

'Well, I guess the academy will deploy the instructors on the field. It makes sense, considering the videos on the forums. They must have noticed that they had been too negligent with the students, and giving too much freedom actually made them rather behave monkey-like. But well, I am not one of them, so I should be free.'

"You! Why are you waiting for?" Suddenly, my ears perked up, and a voice was registered in my brain. It was the instructor. I guess some students refused to comply with his request.

"...."

"You, freshmen with black hair. You are to follow as well."

Alas, that person was me.

'I am really being unreasonably unlucky today. Well, this may be called karma for participating in the instigation?' I could only follow the instructor to the room.

After a whole one-hour lecture on how one shouldn't fight and the disciplinary investigation, it was found that I was actually innocent and didn't participate in the brawls.

Why did it take one hour?

Because of the sheer number of students who were sent by the instructors, this alone showed the state of the academy now. At this point, the sky was already dark enough.

In any case, after being released, I walked to the top-rankers' dormitory.

But upon reaching there, I was met with the news of something I was not expecting.

"Student Irina hadn't returned to her dormitory."

An ominous feeling arose from my heart at that moment.

Chapter 358 83.1 - Damsel?

"Student Irina hadn't returned to her dormitory."

Normally, such words shouldn't have made me feel in such a manner. After all, no matter what, it was normal for a student like Irina to have some business outside her dorms.

But, her state was not normal. She was in a possibly enraged state, and she was looking for a fight with something or someone. This was something I was sure of.

Therefore, if she hadn't returned to her dorms, that meant she found the thing she was looking for outside.

Considering the fact that the conflict between Sophomore years and freshmen was this easy to escalate, the possibility of a senior messing with Irina with some sort of insults and her reacting severely to that was high.

I could easily form such a scene in my head, and visualizing the results of these seniors being burnt to the crips by Irina's flames, I somehow trailed the results.

'She would most likely be reprimanded by the academy, and I don't think that that woman will take it well. This is not something that is beneficial at all.'

In the end, Irina needed to be found and then be talked with. If she needed to vent her anger, I hoped that it would be the training dummies, not your fellow humans.

'But, let's believe in her a little bit....I should check the general training grounds and other locations where she could train. Maybe she didn't return here not to face Seraphina? That is also a possibility as well.'

With that thought, I started moving.

My first stop was the combat training facility, a sprawling arena where students honed their combat skills under the watchful eyes of instructors for any possible case of conflict. I scanned the area, searching for any sign of Irina among the sparring students.

But she was nowhere to be found.

Next, I headed to the elemental training grounds, where students practiced harnessing and controlling the elements. The air crackled with energy as students unleashed bursts of fire, water, and lightning in their training exercises.

Again, there was no sign of Irina.

Feeling like this time, I would find it, I made my way to the third and final training facility: the advanced combat arena. This was where the academy's students sparred and trained, pushing themselves to their limits in pursuit of greatness, and the place that I had frequently visited. After all, this place was where you could personally combat against the golems.

However, I doubted they could hold against Irina as they would compared to the training golems in her dorms.

As I entered, I saw that many of the students had already occupied the rooms. Well, that was to be expected since the second semester was slowly reaching its end, and the final exams were approaching.

In any case, after seizing the place and checking if there were any familiar traces of mana, I turned my attention to the place where I could possibly find my answer.

Approaching the receptionist's desk, I inquired if Irina had been seen in the vicinity.

The receptionist, a young woman with a friendly demeanor, nodded in response.

"Ah....You are talking about the girl with the fiery red hair, right? Yes, she was here earlier," she confirmed, her voice tinged with both concern and a slight fear. "But she left not too long ago. She seemed...disturbed and somehow drunk. She was emanating a strong pressure, and it even made me burn a little."

It seemed like Irina had left an impression on the receptionist woman.

'But, drunk? What does that mean?'

Somehow, that word made me narrow my eyes.

"And to think that first-ranked student would come here to train....It is my first time seeing such a thing."

The receptionist said. It also seemed like she had checked the name of the student from the database. Well, it was to be expected that she would be curious.

"Thank you for your answer. I will check up on her now."

After taking my thanks, the receptionist revealed a smile. But somehow, I could sense a slight pity in her eyes. It seemed she pitied me, thinking it would be a hassle to deal with Irina.

And she was probably right.

However, the word drunk. It rose the ominous feeling in my heart.

'It can be Mana Exhaustion...But, Irina wouldn't be that careless....No, she definitely can be.'

I would like to request the footage of Irina leaving, but my request would mostly be met with a bunch of suspicions.

'And she is still not answering any of my calls.'

None of my calls were being responded to. In any case, since she hadn't left long before, I wanted to attempt to trace her steps.

But, there was one thing that was hindering me from doing that. It was because Irina's mana was exhausted. The phenomenon of Mana Exhaustion occurred when even the basal mana that was required for an Awakened body to operate inhumanly was used.

Naturally, that also meant that the mana imprint was lost, and it was nearly impossible for me to trail her mana even with [Perceptive Insight].

—RING!

But right at that moment, I got a message notification on my smartwatch.

[Irina: D.]

The message notification on my smartwatch pulled me out of my thoughts, and I quickly glanced at the screen. My eyes narrowed as I read the single letter displayed: D.

"D?"

I muttered to myself, furrowing my brow in confusion. What could Irina possibly mean by sending just a single letter?

At first, I entertained the idea that it might be some sort of prank or joke on her part. Irina was known for her weirdly mischievous nature, and sending a cryptic message like this could be her way of teasing me or joking with me.

But then, I shook my head, dismissing the notion. Knowing Irina's character, if she wanted to get back at me, she would send a barrage of insults or some cleverly crafted message designed to rile me up.

So, what did the letter "D" signify?

My mind raced with possibilities, my brain working at a rapid speed. In that instant, I thought of countless different scenarios and formulated them in my head.

There could be many things, like when she was messaging, she fell asleep from fatigue, or she was caught up in a fight.

'And, if she caught up in a fight with her Mana Exhausted state....That can be dangerous....But, knowing her strength, I am sure she must have already recovered to some extent. According to the receptionist, it had already been half an hour after she left. That means she should be conscious by now, so the drunken state doesn't make sense. Then, while she was trying to convey a message to me, she was interrupted. And with her being weak, she wasn't able to defend herself. This is possible. But why the letter D? What starts with the D, and why did she send it to me?'

At that moment, I started considering our past interactions and the recent events from Irina's eyes. And then, I noticed why she did so.

'Evil Spirit and a Demon. Only she knows I dealt with Belthazor.....And D....This is possible.'

The moment I considered this, I came to a conclusion.

'I don't want it to be true, but it can be very well that she was in this suction because of a demon-follower.'

The moment I reached this conclusion, I immediately started typing. Entering the site that I had been frequently using, I messaged my hacker group.

[Find me the location of this number. It is urgent.]

I sent the message to the Horde. [Horde: Understood. I will start investigating it.]

Of course, knowing that Irina was an Emberheart, her smartwatch was bound to be interfered with. It would be hard to track her by normal means, but Horde was a cheat when it came to that.

They were the best hacking organization in the world, and with the investments I had made in them, they very well had the equipment.

Of course, while they were doing that, I also didn't wait either. I instantly left the training grounds and slowly hid myself. I did it so that any situation like that in the noon wouldn't happen.

It was my own lack of consideration that such a thing happened in the noon, and the results were dangerous. Though it was not my clear responsibility, my blood was boiling a little.

After waiting in the shadows for a little while, another message notification appeared on my smartwatch, indicating a response from the Horde.

I quickly read the message, my eyes scanning the screen for any information about Irina's whereabouts.

The message displayed the location of Irina's smartwatch, pinpointing it to a specific area.

However, what caught my attention was the additional note from the Horde, warning me that they might be tracked back and wouldn't be able to respond for a while.

I nodded to myself, acknowledging the risk. It was to be expected, considering the nature of their work as well as the target being an Emberheart. The headquarters most likely knew about the attempt to trace her position. They might even be alerted as well.

With a quick reply, assuring them that it was okay and thanking them for their assistance, I turned my focus back to the task at hand.

Checking the location provided by the Horde, I noted that it was slightly off from the main road, nestled among the surrounding greenery, though it was subtle.

'That location is not even that far off.....Hmm?'

SWOOSH! Without wasting any time, I made my way there, moving swiftly and silently through the shadows.

Arriving at the vicinity of the designated spot, I activated my [Aurora Raven], summoning the ethereal bird to scout ahead for me.

From its vantage point, I could see the smartwatch lying on the ground, its screen turned to the ground. But there were no traces of someone else being there at that moment.

THUMP!

But, my heart clenched with a sense of dread as I approached, my senses on high alert.

I knew what this feeling meant, and it basically confirmed my suspicions. After all, there were the remnants of demonic energy there, and that was activating my passive.

And if there were remnants of demonic energy but no one, that meant only one thing.

'Irina is captured.'

"Tsk."

I could only click my tongue seeing this place. After all, from the remnant traces on the ground, I could already form the scene in my head.

As I examined the traces on the ground, a scene began to form in my mind, pieced together from the evidence before me.

In my mind's eye, I saw a girl lying on the ground, her hair sprawled out around her like a halo of flames. She seemed weakened since she pushed her weight onto the ground, her movements restricted by some unseen force, her body not moving as freely as it should.

Despite her struggle, she attempted to rise, and her determination was evident even in her weakened state.

The traces of her struggle were on the ground laid bare.

Standing over her was another figure, their presence looming ominously in the scene. But her presence was faint since the depth of her footmarks wasn't as deep as it would be. It seemed she was putting effort into concealing her traces as best as she could, but my eyes were special.

She seemed to emanate a dark energy, her intentions clear as they gazed down at the girl with a cold, calculating stare. With a swift motion, Irina was lifted, and then she disappeared.

'But, well, I am the best tracker in this academy.'

Chapter 359 83.2 - Damsel?

"Hmm....."

As Irina slowly regained consciousness, she found herself engulfed in darkness.

'Where am I?'

Panic surged through her as she struggled to make sense of her surroundings, her heart pounding in her chest.

For what felt like an eternity, all she could perceive was the suffocating darkness that enveloped her. But gradually, her vision began to clear, and she realized that she was in a dimly lit room.

'A room?'

Faint candlelight flickered across the walls, casting eerie shadows that danced around her. The air was thick with a musky scent that made her nose wrinkle in discomfort, and she found it difficult to draw in a breath.

Fear gripped her as she realized the gravity of her situation. She was trapped in this dark, unfamiliar place, with no idea how she had gotten there or what awaited her.

Struggling against the restraints that bound her, Irina attempted to free herself, but her efforts were met with little success. The bindings held firm, leaving her feeling helpless and vulnerable.

'Mana....I can't feel my mana.'

Then, slowly, everything came crashing. Her memory was recovered.

She had been abducted by that girl whom she had seen before but couldn't remember her face. However, as her memory came back, she also noticed someone in the shadows.

Since her access to mana was limited, she was no longer any different from a non-awakened. After all, she was a mage, and even her senses were trained by mana, and without it, she was hopeless.

That was the reason why it took her this long just to recover.

In any case, as she gradually recovered, she looked at the scene before her. The silhouette was doing something on the ground right before her. Her arm was moving constantly as if she was drawing something onto the ground.

"You are finally awake."

But then the voice turned her head to her. Even in the darkness, Irina could see the dark brown eyes. It was a subconscious feeling transmitted to her by the source. With her experience, Irina could tell such things.

Her brain was warning her instinctually.

Irina's heart raced as she struggled against her restraints, the gravity of her situation sinking in. But she knew that she had to remain calm, to find a way to reason with her captor.

After all, this was not the first time she had been abducted. She needed to cool her heart down.

"Release me," Irina began, her voice feeling arrogant. " Whatever your reasons for bringing me here, I can assure you that I mean no harm to you. If you let me go, I promise that I will act as though this never happened."

Her words were sincere, but she didn't speak them with the hope that the girl would believe in her.

They were true; after all, making an enemy out of an Emberheart was a grave mistake, one that could have dire consequences, but at the same time, the girl would know that she had already made an enemy out of the Emberheart.

This was to instill the idea of the fact that she was just a naïve, arrogant girl in her head so that she could lower her guard.

"Heh..." And just as she expected, a snicker left the girl's mouth. Looking at her with a somehow hateful gaze, the girl continued. "Do you think I will be fooled by such words? The moment I release you, you will burn me alive. I know at least this much about you."

Somehow, the girl's words made Irina a bit proud, even though it was stupid to feel like that in such a situation. After all, it implied that even people like this girl feared her prowess and character.

"You are so stupid that you got caught in such a situation," the girl continued, her voice laced with disdain. "And then you still rely on your household. I hate people like you, who have everything from the start just by being born."

Irina gritted her teeth at the girl's words, feeling a mix of frustration and resentment welling up inside her. How dare this girl speak to her in such a manner?

'I had everything just by being born?'

Of course, from the outside, everything looked like she was born lucky, with the talent to be the strongest fire user and the resources of a noble family like Emberheart.

Who wouldn't want it, right?

"You were born beautiful, born with talent, born with the resources. You had everything under you as if the world was ready to give you the red carpet treatment."

But as the girl spoke, Irina's attention was drawn to the faint smell of metal that permeated the air. It was a scent she knew all too well--the unmistakable odor of blood.

Her gaze narrowed as she surveyed the room, her eyes falling upon the intricate symbols that the girl had been drawing on the ground.

With a sinking feeling in her stomach, Irina realized the true extent of her predicament.

'A ritual.'

What this girl was doing was clearly evident from her actions. She was preparing for a ritual. Even though Irina didn't know many details about the ritualistic magic since it was rather disgusting and was used by evil people, she had the basic knowledge.

And she knew most of them used blood as the conjunction point.

As for what this ritual meant or what those symbols meant, she wasn't completely well-versed in that topic.

But, it was obvious that the ritual was up to no good. After all, the girl before her was a demon-contractor. The demonic energy she felt was real.

And, if there was a demon contractor, they could never be up to any good. This was the basic knowledge for the students of the Arcadia Hunter Academy as well as a member of the Emberheart Family.

Irina forced herself to remain calm, pushing aside the surge of panic that threatened to overwhelm her.

'What to do now?' She knew that getting worked up in this situation wouldn't do her any good—she needed to think rationally and find a way out of this predicament.

Her mind raced as she considered her options. She couldn't rely on her mana in her current state, and attempting to overpower the girl physically would likely end in disaster. No, she needed to find a more subtle approach.

No matter which angle she looked from, the escape was impossible. She would eventually confront this demon. She had also left her smartwatch so that 'he' could track it down.

Recalling the message she had sent before she was kidnapped, Irina felt a glimmer of hope. If 'he' received her message, there was a chance that he would come looking for her.

And if he did, she needed to be ready to seize the opportunity. However, she doubted she would need it.

But this was under the prediction that he would come.

-Irina and I have a history, but that doesn't mean I condone her actions. Sometimes, it's easier to keep someone close to keep an eye on them rather than risk them causing trouble elsewhere.

Recalling his words, her heart somehow felt clenched. Would he really come? After all, wasn't she just a bother in his eyes? Someone he would need to look after and be close to so that he can keep an eye on her?

Wasn't this how he viewed her? Why would he bother with coming here? In the first place, would he even get her message?

'He would. There is no way he wouldn't understand something is amiss.' He was smart and had a weird way of logically thinking about everything. Putting up the clues together was one of his forte. She still remembered how he managed to find the location of the Phantom's Land from all these fragments of paper.

Therefore, Irina was very well aware of the fact that he was talented. A talent that she didn't deserve?

-After all, I am way better than Irina, aren't I? Smarter, easier to talk to, better personality, more beautiful, and most importantly, stronger.

-You certainly are smarter, and you seem to have a better personality.

She recalled the end of the conversation. At this point, she wasn't particularly stuck around the comparison. However, now that her mind was clear as she got rid of her 'Mana Exhausted' state, she could think about his words and clear her resolve.

'At the end of the day, isn't it always the same thing? People will approach me with the intent to get something from me as an Emberheart, just like that woman. Everyone is like her, who only views me as the heir of the Emberheart Family.'

'I thought he was different, but I guess he was the same. It was my own fault for trusting someone like him. But why do I feel this bitter? Why does this make me so angry and suffocated? Why do I still remember the times we constantly bicker with each other? Why do I remember how we fought back to back in Phantom's Land, how he led in the practical dungeon?' She couldn't reason at all. Even now, she didn't know the answer. Yet, in the end, she had resolved herself.

Even if it hurt and she felt suffocated, she needed to accept the reality. She was alone now, and she needed to do it herself.

'That is right, I will do it myself.'

She needed to buy herself some time. With that in mind, Irina decided to play along with the girl's intentions, at least for now.

If she could keep the girl distracted, she might be able to find a way to escape.

"Fine," Irina said, her voice steady despite the fear that gnawed at her insides. "If you don't release me, then at least tell me what you plan to do with me. What is this ritual you're preparing?"

The girl's smirk sent a chill down Irina's spine, confirming her worst fears. It seemed her captor not only understood her intentions but relished in the knowledge that Irina was powerless to stop her.

"Ah, you want to know what this ritual is for? How amusing. Well, let me enlighten you, dear Irina Emberheart. This ritual is a dark and twisted practice. It's designed to transfer and absorb the powers of the target into the caster. And let me tell you, it's quite effective. Not only will I gain your precious abilities, but I'll also inherit a portion of your fate as a negative consequence."

As the girl spoke, Irina's blood ran cold. The implications of what she was saying sent shivers down her spine.

"But that's not all. Once I've taken everything from you, I plan to end your miserable existence. There's no better sensation than stealing everything from someone like you, who has everything handed to them on a silver platter."

The girl's smile was so twisted that Irina couldn't help but feel the urge to puke.

"Of course, I was not normally going to do it this fast. But this whole senior-freshmen confrontation made it incredibly hard for me to wander at night. But well, thanks to the Lord, I was able to come across you because of that. I guess this is what one calls fate?"

Irina's eyes widened in horror as the girl suddenly approached her with a dagger in hand, the glint of metal reflecting the dim candlelight.

"You see, even if you wanted to gain some time, it would be pointless," the girl taunted, her voice dripping with malice. "Your mana is completely sealed, and nobody could find this place. I've ensured that with powerful artifacts, and I would sense if anyone had entered."

Irina's breath caught in her throat as the girl raised the dagger, the blade glinting menacingly in the dim light. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest as she braced herself for what was to come.

Without warning, the girl made a swift movement, cutting Irina's cheeks with the dagger and drawing blood. Irina winced in pain, feeling the sting of the cut as warm blood trickled down her face.

"Therefore, we will be all alone until I get everything from you," the girl continued, her voice cold and devoid of emotion.

"And once I am done with everything, I will feed your body to dogs. You will serve a fine meal."

SWOOSH!

But, just as the girl was about to drip Irina's blood onto the circle she had drawn, something flew at a rapid speed.

SLASH! Slashing the hand that held the blade.

Someone made their entrance.

Chapter 360 83.3 - Damsel?

Everyone has something they excel at. This is a lot more prominent in this world, where people's talents are being determined by something that they don't have complete control over.

After all, the existence of the status window itself makes the people limited to only one path.

The [Trait]s that are given to you is what you need to follow. That is a predetermined path. And I am no exception to that rule.

My first trait, [Perceptive Insight], is the thing that showed my future path for the first time.

Tracking, acting as a ranger or scout, etc. It was evident that my talent relied on observation, and that was still the same now.

It improved, but its essence remained the same. I was an observer and reader of traces. And this trait amplified was something another.

It was my passive, [Vengeful Bane]. It amplified my senses and strength against a demon, but the trigger to that was mainly demonic energy.

If I was in the presence of demonic energy, I would get a notice. This made me a demonic human detector in some ways.

THUMP!

And now, as my heart was beating this fast, this trait came alive. Demonic Energy was present, and there was a faint struggle of fighting. The situation suggested that Irina was captured by a demonic human.

'It is very hard to assess the strength of the demon contractor from these traces since the struggle wasn't even that long, but it feels like the demon contractor didn't want to waste too much time. It was in a hurry. If that is the case, then it may not have the necessary strength.'

I assessed while looking for any possible traces that could take me to my destination.

Activating my [Perceptive Insight], I focused my senses, allowing the world around me to take on a new clarity. With this heightened perception, I could see the flow of mana across the atmosphere, like threads of light weaving through the air.

Of course, that wasn't the end. I was not wasting my time while learning magic all this time. Even though I recently shifted my focus to mind magic, there was also a certain field that I was interested in.

Visionary.

A special field that was reliant on the reading of the world. Basically, it is a field that looks at things beyond norms, and it includes mana as well. It is a field that also produced the basic required skill 「Mana Observation」. After all, even if it was a basic skill, it stemmed from an analytical approach.

While studying magic, I looked for theories that could help me strengthen my [Perceptive Insight]. Even if compensating for your weaknesses is good, you should never look over the parts of your strengths that are lacking.

And there, I came across a special theory of magic just at the start of this week.

The theory indicated that every manipulation attempt of mana was basically an entry. Utilizing a spell and using it as an entry to a certain mechanism that was directly related to reality.

Skills and traits were also predetermined algorithms that would just ease the production of these entries.

It was a weird concept, like something that came out of a machine, a logical operator. The world of binary codes may certainly look like that, but how can the real world be like this?

But, somehow, I thought about a way to utilize this theory. After all, I was a lot different from the general researchers since I could see the world differently with [Perceptive Insight.]

Have you heard of Murphy's Law? Most people would know about it. If one thought of something, at the end of the day, that thought would manifest and become a part of one's reality.

And this law was observed by many people to be true. But how come this could happen? How could we manifest our thoughts? Was there such a power?

Scientists and psychologists have given an answer to this. When we thought of something and accepted that in our lives, then our brains would look for clues to support this thought. Those who thought the world was against them would look for clues to support this claim. Whenever something bad happened, our brain took this as if it were possible evidence of our thoughts.

In essence, Murphy's Law indicates that our thoughts are related to how we perceive the world. And that was my only limitation.

[Perspective Insight] was such an ability that it was not limited to the things that could be seen in the real world. It was related to my thoughts. I could grasp everything if only I could think from different perspectives.

I asked myself, what if I looked for entries? What if I assumed that they were real and they really existed, and I wanted to grasp their meaning? If so, would I be able to see things?

The answer wasn't clear. I tried it many times, but I wasn't able to reach a clear conclusion. Maybe my approach was wrong, or maybe the tools underneath me were wrong.

But right now, my thoughts bore fruit.

'They are really there.'

As I scanned the surroundings, I noticed the intricate dance of psions, their vibrant colors swirling and intermingling in a delicate balance.

But amidst this harmony, there were disruptions and anomalies in the natural flow of mana.

In certain areas, the psionic harmony was slightly distorted, as if a discordant note had been struck in an otherwise perfect symphony. These distortions were the telltale signs of Demonic Energy, their presence clashing with the natural psion distribution of the human domain.

They were not natural, a clear attempt to manipulate and change the world itself.

'So, it is related to the Demonic Energy. Of course, it is.' Realization dawned upon me as I observed the disturbances in the flow of mana. My efforts to find entries, to see beyond the norms of magic, had borne fruit. I could see the attempts of demonic energy to manipulate and change the world around me.

From this point on, I didn't need to do anything else. With this newfound clarity, I followed the trails of demonic energy manipulations, each distortion in the psionic harmony guiding me closer to my destination.

I moved with purpose but without urgency, keeping myself calm and focused as I tracked the source of Irina's captivity.

Step by step, I followed the subtle clues left behind by the demonic energy, my senses attuned to the faintest disturbances in the atmosphere. With each passing moment, I drew closer to the epicenter of the disturbance.

'The penthouse of the girl's dormitory. The fifteenth dormitory, huh? Interesting. So, she had been hiding right before their noses.'

I remembered a certain demonic human who would later wreak havoc in the academy secretly and then leave.

'Danielle. I guess her time did come.'

Normally, she was supposed to last a lot longer, but it seemed she was getting reckless. It was most likely because of this whole stir I caused.

While this worked well for certain demons, and it was bait, those like Danielle without faction would find it hard to operate.

Slipping into the shadows, I observed the slight "curtain of darkness" that seemed to shroud the penthouse of the girl's dormitory.

To the untrained eye, it would have appeared as nothing more than a trick of the light, but with my heightened sensitivity to demonic energy, I could sense that there was something concealed there, something sinister lurking just beyond the veil.

With a silent resolve, I quickly bypassed the small fences that covered the dormitory grounds, moving with the agility and grace of a practiced acrobat. My movements were fluid and deliberate, each step calculated to minimize noise and avoid detection.

After all, for a person like me, stealth was one of the most important aspects, and I could never let it go. I had already trained myself to climb on walls and trees and fall down from heights.

As I approached the penthouse, I concealed my presence even further, blending seamlessly into the shadows as I prepared to enter.

WARP! With a deft flick of my wrist, I bypassed the wards and alarms set by Danielle that guarded the entrance, slipping inside unnoticed.

The spatial leap of short distance worked wonders.

What greeted me inside was a scene straight out of a nightmare. Irina lay unconscious in the center of a complex symbol etched into the floor; her features contorted in pain as dark tendrils of energy coiled around her body.

Instantly, I recognized the symbol for what it was—a ritualistic magic designed to transfer the strength of the target to the caster.

Since I saw this same circle in the game, it has already been recorded in my memory once.

It was a vile and insidious spell, one that drained the life force of its victim to empower the one who wielded it.

And it seemed the ritual was almost completed since Danielle, with her blade, slit Irina's face.

"And once I am done with everything, I will feed your body to dogs. You will serve a fine meal."

THUMP!

With the presence of the demonic human before me, my heart started beating fast. Already, I could feel my passive taking effect.

The hatred inside me was slowly making its appearance.

Danielle took the blood from Irina's cheek, and she was about to drop it into the circle.

SWOOSH! But I was already having a hard time holding it in. I channeled my mana into the chakram I was holding.

[Celestalith] had already been brought out and was ready to strike.

"Huh?"

Danielle's hand was thrown to the ground outside of the circle with the blade it was holding.