

H. Academy 361

Chapter 361 83.4 - Damsel?

Irina's eyes widened as she turned her gaze towards the figure who had just entered the room.

His presence seemed to fill the space with an aura of danger, and Irina couldn't help but feel a shiver run down her spine.

The newcomer's black hair fluttered in the dim light, his pale skin illuminated by the faint glow of the candles.

'He is here...'

But it was his eyes that drew Irina's attention the most—icy purple orbs that seemed to pierce through the darkness with a cold, calculating gaze.

'But, what is this suffocating feeling.'

But it wasn't just his appearance that sent a chill down Irina's spine. It was the palpable sense of menace and hatred that seemed to radiate from him, an unmistakable aura of danger that made her heart race with fear even before she could think.

It was not something that she could control. After all, even before her mother's presence, she had never felt this much threat. It wasn't because this presence was stronger than her mother, but the raw intent that was released by him warned her instincts.

It was as if she was now before a monster.

"Who are you!"

The girl whose name she had yet to know spoke, her voice filled with pain. How could she not be? After all, her hand had just been sliced down.

"...." Yet, no answer came. Under the dimly lit room, he looked at the girl.

SWOOSH!

The grey tendrils suddenly flashed, and then the blade that had just been thrown returned to his hands once more. Irina, with her strong mana vision, was able to see the grey tendrils.

CLANK!

"Tsk."

But this time, the girl was prepared. Growing her nails, she deflected the circular disc with her hand.

"It is you."

It seemed like the girl was able to recognize the intruder.

"Astron Natusalune." She muttered his name, locking into his eyes. "To think that out of all people, you would come here."

Then, Irina somehow remembered the girl before her. After all, she had seen this girl in their classroom before, the girl that was around Sylvie.

'What was her name?'

Yet she was unable to remember her name. Of course, her name wasn't that important in this predicament that she was in, considering that she could lose her life right at that moment.

Yet there was something strange. For someone who was on the verge of losing everything she had, she didn't feel fearful.

The sadness and anger that she had felt also vanished for some reason. Rather, it was replaced with a weird feeling.

She had a weird feeling that she didn't know why it was there. She felt happy.

'He really came.'

Even if she didn't want to make herself believe it, she knew inwardly that she wanted him to come. It was with such hope that she sent that message to him, even if that message was undoubtedly too lacking. Even if she knew that it was too unreasonable to expect him to come, she just expected it.

'That means I am safe, isn't it? Even if this girl is a demon-contractor, he was able to kill a demon on his own after all.'

SWOOSH!

The girl dashed from where she was standing, her body swirling with a dark energy. Her eyes gleamed crimson for a split second, her lost hand already regenerated.

It was undoubtedly the power of a demon. The girl, being a demon contractor, was making use of her powers.

—CLANK!

With swift and precise movements, he deflected the girl's claws with his shining-red dual daggers, the metal clashing against each other in a symphony of battle.

—CLANK!

Despite the ferocity of her attack, Astron maintained his stance, his movements fluid and controlled as he countered each strike with precision.

There was a gracefulness to his movements, a deadly elegance that belied the danger he posed to his adversary. His eyes didn't leave his enemy's face even for a split second.

Irina could see strange emotions in his eyes, emotions of such intensity that she had never seen before.

"I WILL KILL YOU! I WILL KILL YOU NO MATTER WHAT! I WILL KILL EVERY ONE OF YOU!"

But somehow, at that moment, she felt like a voice echoed in her ears. It was a voice that was both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. Irina felt like she had heard this voice before, but she couldn't say when.

As if she had lost that part of her memory. But she couldn't think about that now.

As the clash continued, the girl spoke. "You're not bad, Astron Natusalune," she remarked, her crimson eyes gleaming with intrigue. "Seems like you really earned your raise in rankings."

–SWOOSH!

"But, your mere strength won't be enough!"

Following that, she instantly appeared right behind him, seemingly teleported, her body leaving after images.

Her speed was so fast that even Irina was surprised. The strength of this girl could even match the students with a relatively higher ranking. She was no different than a prodigy if she displayed this prowess.

Her claws, filled with demonic energy, struck him rapidly as if to penetrate him right from his chest.

SWOOSH!

But, contrary to what both Irina and Danielle expected, her claws met with only air alone.

SLASH!

Because Astron had already twisted his body to the side, moving at a rapid speed, and slashed Danielle's legs.

THUD!

And then, without giving her any time to react, he kicked her from her feet, knocking her out of balance for a split second.

As Danielle fell to the ground, Astron wasted no time in following up with another attack. With lethal precision, he aimed to slash her neck, intending to incapacitate her before she could regain her footing. But before his blade could make contact, something unexpected occurred.

BOOM!

An explosion erupted from the ground beneath them, sending shockwaves rippling through the air and forcing Astron to leap back to avoid the blast.

Smoke billowed up, obscuring his vision and momentarily disorienting him.

THUD!

And Irina, who was defenseless without her mana, could only be blasted off. Her body hit the wall with a speed that almost made her cough blood. Her vision slightly blurred with the world constantly swirling around.

She was having a hard time holding her consciousness.

'It is okay now, right?' Yet she didn't resist. Even though she was incredibly curious about the prowess of this guy, right now, she didn't have the necessary strength to cling to her consciousness. She was tired of all these constant emotional turmoils she had today.

'It should be okay....He will take care of the rest.'

Now that he was here, inwardly, she trusted him and closed her eyes, letting herself succumb to the sleep.

When the smoke cleared, Astron's eyes narrowed as he scanned the area, searching for any sign of his opponent. But before doing so, he saw Irina with her consciousness lost.

'Now, I can go all out.'

With his constraints gone, he could now fight with all his power. As he scanned the room, he saw Danielle had managed to put some distance between him, her bloodied legs bearing witness to the intensity of their battle.

With a quick leap, Danielle landed gracefully a few meters away from Astron; her eyes narrowed in determination as she locked onto him once more.

Despite the pain and injuries she had sustained, there was a fierce resolve in her gaze, and with that, her injuries rapidly healed.

"You really are not bad," Danielle remarked, her voice tinged with both admiration and defiance. "I didn't expect you to be this skilled."

"...."

"Cat got your tongue; why are you not talking?" Danielle looked at him with a smirk.

".....I had been waiting." Suddenly, a voice came from him, his purple eyes looking at Danielle.

"You have been waiting?"

"Yes. Waiting for an opportunity to kill you. And now it came before me; don't even think of leaving his place alive." His words held certain emotions, immense hatred.

"Hmm?" Danielle hummed, somehow feeling intrigued.

"This guy thinks he can kill me? With his measly abilities?" She couldn't help but smile. What could she do? After all, the guy who was the last ranked student of the academy just two months ago thought he could kill her as a demon contractor.

Where did this arrogance come from?

"Ahaha...." A faint laugh escaped her lips. "AHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!" She couldn't contain her laugh at all... "Ahahahahaha.... This is so hilarious....Ahahahahaha....I can't, I really can't..."

As Danielle threw a depreciatory look towards Astron and narrowed her eyes, she couldn't help but laugh. The idea that someone as seemingly insignificant as him could pose a threat to her was utterly ludicrous in her mind.

"To think that you are someone this stupid enough to think you can beat me with your measly strength," Danielle chuckled, her laughter echoing through the room with a mix of amusement and disdain. "You really are something else, aren't you?"

Her words dripped with sarcasm as she continued to mock Astron's audacity. Despite his confident demeanor, she saw through his facade and found his arrogance amusing.

"And here I was, expecting more after hearing so much from 'Sylvie,'" Danielle remarked, her tone laced with disappointment. "But I guess th-"

SWOOSH! But before she can even speak further, Astron's figure blurred. He was blended into shadows, and after a millisecond, he appeared right before Danielle.

SLASH! His red dagger flashed under the dimly lit room, slicing through the air with lethal precision. Danielle barely had time to register his movement before she felt a searing pain erupt from her right abdomen as the dagger made contact.

"Ugh!" Danielle gasped, staggering back as blood seeped from the wound, her eyes widening in shock and disbelief.

But before she could fully comprehend what had just happened, Astron's dagger plunged into her chest with brutal force. Agony ripped through her body as she coughed up blood, her senses reeling from the sudden attack.

Her reflexes kicked in, and she instinctively slashed out towards Astron, hoping to fend him off. But to her dismay, he effortlessly evaded her strike, once again disappearing into the shadows before reappearing on her other side.

SLASH! STAB! He once again slashed her abdomen, this time from the other side, and then he stabbed her in her chest.

"Urkh-!"

She coughed blood once again, her vision getting blurry. She once again sustained another internal injury.

'He is moving so fast! Is he teleporting?' He was seemingly teleporting, but Danielle wasn't able to keep up with his ability to move.

'Tsk! I didn't really want to use it, but I guess I have no choice.'

With that thought, she narrowed her eyes, biting her tongue.

"RAAAAAA!"

BOOM!

With her scream, a sudden explosion occurred, blasting everything around them off. It was a much stronger explosion than the one before since Danielle didn't want to destroy the ritual before.

But now she had no choice.

That explosion also removed the remaining candles that Danielle had put herself, drowning everything in the darkness.

And with her transformed state, she looked into the darkness, searching for his enemy.

After all, she revealed her 'Rakshasa Form.'

Chapter 362 83.5 - Damsel?

Rakshasa Form.

Rakshasa itself is a type of demon, and those who borrowed the power from demons could use it to some extent.

And now, standing before me, Danielle had utilized this, turning herself into a half-demon. It seemed she belonged to a branch of demons who had yet to establish a strong influence in the human domain.

"Grrr...."

She growled, looking at me. Her face now transformed, with her nails getting slightly wider and stronger.

'Inferior bitch. You, who can't achieve anything, can only borrow from low-life demons.'

My hatred ran deep. At that moment, I was hardly able to contain myself.

"Where are you?"

Yet, there was one thing that no one knew about me. The power that I had gotten from the very primordial of the race that she had relied on. It was ironic that this power was the very thing that had assisted me so far when it came to erasing its whole race.

Thanks to it, in the darkness, I reigned supreme. When there was no light, when it was night, I could reveal my true strength.

With my presence concealed thanks to [Shadowborne], I watched the inferior demon-contractor looking around, her teeth growling.

Now that she had activated her state, it must be getting hard for her to control herself. This state was only temporary, after all.

But, well, dealing with low lives is nothing hard for me, but at the same time, it is the only time that I can find solace in these feelings drowning me.

With a silent leap, I emerged from the shadows, my daggers poised for a deadly strike. The darkness cloaked my movements, concealing my presence until the very last moment.

SLASH!

My blades sliced through the air with lethal precision, aiming directly for Danielle's chest. The sudden attack caught her off guard, her growl turning into a gasp of pain as the daggers pierced through her flesh.

"Urgh!" Danielle's voice wavered with agony as blood spurted from the wound, staining her demonic form.

Her eyes widened in shock and disbelief, realization dawning upon her that she had underestimated me.

This was why I was waiting all the time.

To see this expression on her face.

To see surprise.

The demon contractors had one thing in common. They lacked strength and the necessary talent. They compensated for this by making a deal with demons, but at the end of the day, their inferiority remained the same.

This ate them inside, knowing that they would never be enough.

This woman was no different.

Since she was a demon contractor, since she made a deal with a demon, she was naturally bound to become inferior.

"It is interesting, isn't it?"

I mumbled.

"Come here!"

SWOOSH!

A slash of claws came from my side. Its speed was fast, probably faster than the current Ethan.

Shadow Leap.

But, I had once again blended into the shadows, erasing my presence.

SWOOSH!

Seeing her attack missing, the girl, who now became a lesser being, couldn't help but shout in frustration.

"Show yourself!"

SLASH! SLASH! SLASH!

She continuously attacked the empty air around her with her claws, and blades of aura flew all across the space.

Yet, the only thing I needed to do was to read the trajectory of the attacks and then evade them. It wasn't even hard for me with my [Perceptive Insight].

As her rampage attack ended, I readied myself.

SWOOSH!

I once again leaped out of the shadows with my daggers ready.

STAB!

The first stab was aimed right at her chest.

"Kurghk-!"

I intentionally revealed myself right before her face so that I could see the expression on her face.

TWIST!

As I twisted the dagger I stabbed, more and more blood poured from her mouth.

"How is it?" The question left my mouth. It was natural, as I was relishing this feeling. "Do I look stupid now?"

At first, I found it hard to understand. Why did people like these demon contractors always have this misconception that what is being revealed always needed to be true? Why did they put this importance on rankings?

Why couldn't they be careful about the fact that there could be someone who hid their strength? Was it that hard to understand?

But then, after observing people more, I came to the realization of why they thought so. People worked for recognition. They wanted the world to know that they were better. They deserved what they had; they deserved to be looked upon.

People wanted to feel like they were above others. Ironically, to achieve that feeling, they were dependent on the same people they wanted to feel like they were better than them.

Therefore, they thought everybody was like them. Everybody sought recognition like them. Thus, the idea of someone refusing that recognition despite having the capability couldn't cross their head.

This is what differentiates me from them and others. I don't live to see the recognition from people.

What I live for is something simple. It is for my revenge.

I live for my vengeance.

That vengeance is what drives me forward, what fuels me. Even if it also kills me inside, it also keeps me alive.

I love to see the despair on the face of my enemies. I want them to experience the same thing she felt. I want them to understand how it feels to be done the same thing.

I want their world to crumble right before their eyes as well.

"Urghk-!"

Danielle continued to cough blood with my dagger twisted.

THUD! But of course, being the cockroach inferior dogs they are, she couldn't help but grab me from my hand. The desire to live was evident in her eyes, but slowly but surely, something that hadn't been there before was making its appearance.

With a surge of demonic strength from her Rakshasa form, she managed to wrench the dagger out of her chest, the bloodied blade gleaming in the dim light.

I watched with a cold gaze as she lunged towards me, her claws extended and infused with dark energy. Threads of darkness snaked around her, manipulated by her demonic power, aiming to ensnare me in their grasp.

Yet, I easily detected her movements with my [Perceptive Insight], evading each attack with calculated precision. Her frustration grew evident as her strikes missed their mark, the threads of darkness dissipating into the air.

"Is that all you've got?" I taunted, my voice laced with disdain. "Pathetic."

Danielle's eyes burned with a mix of pain and fury as she realized her attacks were futile. With a primal snarl, she launched herself at me once again, desperation driving her movements.

But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't overcome the gap in strength between us.

I danced around her attacks effortlessly, my movements fluid and graceful, like a predator toying with its prey.

"Maybe I expected much from you. I even gave you the time to prepare yourself to get stronger, but you somehow even messed this up?"

I couldn't help but look at her with pity. If she hadn't targeted Irina, I was going to let her gain more influence in the demon-

contractor community so that I could get more information from her, but being inferior, being they are, she couldn't even do one thing properly.

Danielle's frustration reached its boiling point as she continued to face my relentless attacks. With each futile strike, her desperation grew, and the realization that nothing she did was working began to dawn on her. Bloodied and battered, she could feel the weight of impending death looming over her.

This is how the world worked. In the face of death, people who had things they needed to prove became weak.

It was the biggest fear of the living.

The death.

We all know we can't escape from it, we all know that at the end of the day, it will find us, yet we all live to prolong it as much as we can.

And once people like them face death, the fear in them will grow. They will look at you with fear, with despair.

Their eyes will show everything.

Same for Danielle.

"No!"

SLASH!

It attempted to attack me with a berserk strike, yet the only thing I needed to do was to hide in the shadows.

"Show yourself! Show yourself to me!"

It screamed, looking around with fear.

SLASH! It tried to find me, using everything she had. However, at the end of the day, just like every living being, when witnessing that everything was lost, it also fell into despair.

It fell onto her knees, its Rakshasa form disappearing.

Now, only her real body returned.

"Why? Why won't anything work?" she screamed, her voice filled with a mix of anguish and rage. "Why does it have to be me?"

I paused for a moment, my cold gaze meeting her desperate eyes. Despite the pain and fear evident in her expression, there was something else there—something deeper, something vulnerable.

"Why you?" I echoed, my voice dripping with contempt. "Because you're weak. Because you're inferior."

"Because you made a deal with 'demons.'"

Danielle's hands shook as she struggled to maintain her composure. The facade of confidence she had worn as a demon contractor was crumbling, revealing the terrified girl beneath.

"But... but I had a deal," she stammered, her voice trembling. "I had power."

"Heh..."

I chuckled darkly, the sound echoing in the dimly lit space. "Power? Do you call that power? Borrowing strength from demons, clinging to their scraps like a desperate animal. That's not power, Danielle. That's weakness."

Her eyes widened in disbelief, tears welling up as the harsh truth sank in. "No... no, it can't be. I... I'm not weak."

"No, you are. Both you and me. We are not that different."

I took a step closer, my daggers gleaming in the dim light.

"Do you know what is the real strength? The real strength is being able to fight even though the defeat is prominent so that the people you hold dear can live their lives. The real strength is such that you can sacrifice yourself so that the people you hold dear can see the next sunlight. The real strength is being able to smile even in the face of death, even if you fear, just so that the one you want to protect wouldn't feel burdened."

"This is the real strength."

"And beings like you are the ones who took such a strong person from me."

As Danielle's desperation reached its peak, she frantically scanned her surroundings, searching for anything that could save her from the inevitable.

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she grasped at straws, her mind racing with fear and desperation.

But then, out of the corner of her eye, she spotted something—

the unconscious body of a girl with red hair lying on the ground.

Recognition flashed in Danielle's eyes as she pieced together the puzzle.

I had come here to save that girl, to protect her from whatever danger she was in. In her eyes, that was the case.

With a desperate glimmer of hope, Danielle latched onto the only lifeline she could see. She stumbled towards the girl's body, her hands trembling as she reached out to grasp her, intending to use her as a hostage, as leverage to save herself from certain death.

"You lot are such pitiful creatures, after all."

But before she could even lay a hand on the unconscious girl, I had already seen through her desperate ploy. With swift and decisive action, I closed the distance between us in an instant, my hand piercing through Danielle's chest with deadly precision.

"Urghk-!"

Her eyes widened in shock and agony as she felt the searing pain of my hand tearing through her flesh, reaching for the core of her being.

"NOOOO!"

With a guttural scream of anguish, she realized the futility of her actions, the hopelessness of her situation.

"It is such a pity....But don't worry, you will make a fine meal for dogs."

I stared into her eyes with cold detachment, my grip tightening around her core as I crushed it mercilessly.

"AAAAAAARGHK!"

Her screams echoed through the darkness, a symphony of pain and despair as her life force ebbed away.

And then, in an instant, it was over. Danielle's lifeless body slumped to the ground, her eyes vacant and empty, her screams silenced forever.

As I stood over, I couldn't help but feel the emotions inside me calming down. Even though the aftertaste was empty, I now extinguished this fire for a while.

"Hmm...Astron?"

Yet, seemingly enough, a voice made me return to reality.

Chapter 363 84.1 - Acceptance

As the girl who kidnapped Irina was fighting with Astron and keeping her life on the line, naturally, she wasn't able to keep the restrictions that sealed Irina's mana.

And because of that, even while Irina was unconscious, her body gradually recovered the mana it lacked. After all, before everything, Irina was a member of the Emberheart Household, and she was a prominent mage.

Her body had the innate abilities that were related to mana. Starting from mana recovery to mana integration, everything was engraved in her genes to some point.

Therefore, she easily recovered from the state of mana exhaustion, and her body returned to its supernatural nature.

And because of her fast recovery speed, Irina was able to wake up from her unconscious state thanks to the loud voices of things exploding and clashing.

After all, even though she was yet to be completely aware, she was in the fighting stage.

"It is such a pity....But don't worry, you will make a fine meal for dogs."

Then she heard a chilly, cold voice entering her ears. The voice was familiar, a voice that she had heard a lot of times after entering the academy. The voice that she somehow grew fond of, even if she wanted to refuse.

–SPURT!

"AAAAAAARGHK!"

However, that same voice was accompanied by a voice of something exploding, seemingly a fleshy texture. Though Irina was not a close combatant and she rather burned things, she had witnessed different students fighting with monsters. Thus, her brain naturally registered the voice as flesh exploding.

However, she was still feeling a little stiff. It was like her brain wasn't completely awake, which was to be expected from her previous state since her body was deprived of mana for a while, and she was about to be subjected to a ritual.

"Hmm....Astron?"

Thus, with effort, Irina tried to rise from her prone position, but her muscles felt heavy and unresponsive. But as she struggled to push herself up, her body betrayed her, and she staggered, her limbs trembling with exhaustion.

THUD!

"Ouch!"

The room spun around her, and she felt herself losing her balance. With a cry of frustration, Irina collapsed back onto the ground, her breath coming in ragged gasps as she fought to overcome the weakness that threatened to consume her.

At that moment, a slightly metallic smell entered her nose. A metallic smell that she had already accustomed to. She had been forced to become accustomed to what would be a correct evaluation.

"Blood?"

Then, her eyes were opened wide from the instant stimuli. Her body and mind, as she had been trained in the Hunter Academy, instantly responded to the situation. The smell of blood, as well as the previous situation she was in, made her alert.

Though it was a bit late for a possibly fatal situation, she couldn't help it since her mind was still disoriented.

With a surge of adrenaline, Irina forced herself to stand despite the weakness coursing through her body. The metallic scent of blood lingered in the air, heightening her senses and sharpening her focus.

Panic gnawed at her insides as she frantically searched for any sign of Astron.

"Astron!" she called out, her voice trembling with urgency. But to her dismay, there was no response. Dread crept into her heart as she considered the possibility that something had happened to him in the midst of the chaos.

Before she could dwell on her fears, a voice suddenly spoke from the shadows, cutting through the tension like a knife.

"Why are you shouting out of nowhere?" the same familiar voice said, its tone flat but somehow sounding warm now.

Irina's head snapped in the direction of the voice, her eyes widening in surprise and then returning to their normal state.

As Irina's gaze darted toward the source of the voice, her eyes caught sight of Astron standing in the shadows; his figure illuminated faintly by the dim light filtering into the room. He leaned casually against the wall, his posture relaxed but his eyes sharp and alert, fixed on her with his characteristic gaze.

For a moment, time seemed to stand still as Irina took in the sight of Astron, his presence both reassuring and disconcerting at the same time. Despite the chaos and danger that had just been surrounding them, he remained calm and composed, exuding an air of quiet confidence that Irina found oddly comforting.

'So, he finished her already.'

It was evident that, with how leisurely he was acting, the blood didn't belong to him, and that meant the fight was over.

'That was expected from him, I guess? But, still this bastard.....He is getting on my nerves with this look.'

Yet she was annoyed. Even if he came to her when she needed him or even if she dealt with whoever this demon contractor was, she was annoyed with him.

The things he said were still lingering in her head after all, and she had no intention of forgetting them.

"It seems thinking about your safety was wrong, my bad," Irina retorted, her voice tinged with bitterness. "Next time, I won't care about you."

Her words carried a sharp edge laced with a hint of resentment. Despite her attempt to mask her true feelings, she couldn't help but let her frustration seep through.

After all, Astron's cavalier attitude and dismissive remarks had left a bitter taste in her mouth, and she was not about to let him off the hook so easily.

Astron's gaze remained steady as he met Irina's defiant stare, his expression unreadable as he listened to her biting retort. Despite her attempt to mask her frustration, Astron could sense the underlying tension in her words, the bitterness that lingered beneath the surface.

"Perhaps you should worry less about me and focus on your own safety," Astron countered, his voice calm but tinged with a hint of mockery. "After all, it was you who got captured by a demon follower and sent a rescue signal, not me."

His words hung in the air, carrying a weight of truth that Irina couldn't deny. Astron's pointed reminder served as a stark reminder of her own vulnerability, a fact that she was reluctant to acknowledge.

Irina fell silent at Astron's words, her retort dying on her lips as she grappled with the uncomfortable truth they contained.

'He....He is right...' Despite her pride and stubbornness, she couldn't deny the validity of Astron's words. He was right—she had been reckless, and it had nearly cost her dearly.

'I shouldn't have been careless.' For a moment, Irina wrestled with her pride and her desire to save face, but ultimately, she knew that Astron's words held merit.

She really knew that she needed to concede defeat, yet she didn't want to.

'Even if that is the case, it was because I was angry at this bastard. If not for him, I wouldn't do such a thing.'

Even though she knew she was being unreasonable, so what? Who was he to tell her that she was in the wrong? After all, wasn't she, in his eyes, someone who acted rashly without any thought? Why would he care?

"Whose fault do you think that is?" she shot back, her tone laced with a mixture of frustration and resignation.

Without missing a beat, Astron replied, his tone matter-of-fact. "Of course, it's your own fault," he stated bluntly, his words carrying a hint of reproach. "You got beaten by a rat demon contractor, and then you were captured."

"Ha? If not for the fact that I had exhausted my mana to the maximum, that bitch wouldn't even be able to raise her hand before me. There is no way I would lose."

"See, you are proving exactly my point. You were careless and got yourself captured by a rat demon contractor. There's no one else to blame but yourself."

"Grr..."

In the face of absolute logic, Irina couldn't help but shrink back. She felt like she had been played by him once again. But this time, there was something different. She would normally swayed by this conversation, and then she would lose herself in it, constantly talking.

Even now, she was just about to do that. Considering that she was ready to retort. But, this time, she didn't want to be swayed by him.

Since the knot in her heart grew more and more in his presence. Another thought wormed its way into her mind—a memory she had tried to push aside, but one that now resurfaced with startling clarity.

It was the conversation she had overheard between Astron and Seraphine, the words they had exchanged ringing in her ears like an unwelcome echo.

'He just approached me because I'm the heir of the Emberheart Family, and he is no different than others. It was the stupid me who thought otherwise.' She thought inwardly, and she couldn't help but feel resentful. This guy, whom she thought knew about her well, was the same as others.

"Why do you care?" So she couldn't contain the anger inside her heart.

"What?"

"I said, why do you care?" Irina repeated the question, her voice slightly shaky. "I am reckless, impulsive, and often act without considering the consequences. My arrogance knows no bounds, and I am quick to dismiss others' opinions if they don't align with my own. Wasn't that true?"

She repeated the same things that he had said to Seraphina about her. At this point, she didn't even want to hide the fact that she was listening to a conversation between him and Seraphina at all.

"Aren't you just looking after me so that you can just keep an eye on me? Wasn't that the reason you approached me?"

At this point, her mana was twirling around her, thanks to her emotions. The penthouse that had just witnessed an intense fight between an academy student and a demon follower was now witnessing the emotional turmoil of one of the strongest freshmen.

With her fists clenched at her sides, Irina approached Astron, her gaze fixed on him with a mixture of defiance and vulnerability. She felt exposed and laid bare before him as she confronted him with her deepest fears and insecurities.

"For you, wasn't I just the heir of Emberhearts, just like for everybody else?" she demanded, her voice trembling with suppressed emotion. "Someone you can use?"

As she appeared right before his face, she looked into his eyes. The same purple eyes that always felt like they contained the skies.

The tranquility of the morning sky, sometimes the fieriness of the dawn, and most of the time, the emptiness of the night sky.

She always thought those eyes resembled the cosmos, yet now, as she looked into those eyes, she was unable to get the reaction she had wanted.

"Isn't t-that....true?" Her voice shook in his presence, with her fists slightly reaching down to his chest, pounding it lightly. She didn't know why, yet she couldn't muster any strength at all.

"So what?"

Chapter 364 84.2 - Acceptance

There are times when a person may not remember their actions as they were supposed to be. And there is a really simple explanation for that.

We judge other people by their actions, but we judge ourselves with our intentions.

After all, a person would have no way of knowing what their counterpart is thinking since, in general, they don't possess the powers of mind reading. Therefore, they can only see their actions as reference material.

But is it the same for themselves? What does one think when looking at themselves? How do we judge ourselves? The answer to this question itself is a revelation to the human psyche. Most of the criminals don't think they are criminals at all.

A child who is hungry and only wants to fill their stomach wouldn't necessarily think that their actions are stealing when they or they secretly grabs bread from a bakery and runs away. However, in the eyes of an objective observer, those actions are nothing but stealing, even if the world forces them to do the deed.

Therefore, it had always been pretty easy for humans to ignore their own actions and deem themselves as right.

"For you, wasn't I just the heir of Emberhearts, just like for everybody else?"

As Irina asked him this question, those thoughts passed through Astron's head in a split second.

"Someone you can use?"

"Isn't t-that....true?"

Irina was punching his chest, and even if there was no force behind her fists, it was an act of silent protest. She was pouring the resentment she had felt for the whole day; the accumulated feelings needed something to go away.

"So what?"

After a moment of silence, Astron spoke. Somehow, his words contained a slight anger.

"Huh?"

"So what if it was true? What if I had approached you with the intention of using you? Is it wrong?"

The words suddenly spilled out of his mouth, and Irina couldn't raise her head. His eyes now contained a strange emotion that she had never felt from him.

"T-that...."

"Are you any different? Do you remember the first time we entered a dungeon? The time when I was ranked last."

Hearing that, the memory fragments of that time suddenly appeared. Though it wasn't too long ago, somehow, in this short time, she felt like countless different things happened.

"....."

"The time when you thought that I was the weakest, someone who didn't deserve to be on your team? Hadn't you ignored me back then when I showed the intention to talk to you?"

Then, Irina remembered the time when she first saw him.

'Ah...I did that....'

At that time, Irina was a lot more different than now. She got irritated more easily, and she was a lot more fiery than she is now. She also thought highly of herself, thinking that the world needed to serve her. She disliked weak people around her, thinking that they would drag her down.

"Did you not judge me based on the value I would present at that time? Seeing my rank, you just chose to ignore me."

"...."

Irina couldn't retort back against his words, as they were all true. At that time, she really thought he was useless and deemed him not worthy of her attention. This was her own justification since nobody said she needed to talk to him.

"And then, somehow, your perception of me changed because I revealed my talents slowly. You saw how I was able to see in the dark, how I could see the weakness of the monsters. And then, you saw I had a talent for leading. Because I revealed my strength, you didn't have any choice but to acknowledge me."

The more she spoke, the more Irina remembered the past. At that time, she knew she made a mistake while leading, and her decision-making skills weren't enough to be a leader. She was acting rashly and rather moved with her emotions.

Since she had always been strong, she never had the need to think about strategies against enemies, but Salamander was the first time that her strength failed, and she understood the importance of cooperation as a team.

And this guy was the one to show that to her.

'I can't refute him.'

"After that, we did many assignments together, and at the end of the day, you saw my merits more and were moved by that."

Astron said, looking deep into Irina's eyes.

"Do you think we would still be here together if I didn't do all these things? Or, if I didn't have all those talents with me? Do you think you would be talking to me like this right now, or would I be another stranger to you?"

Astron's words hung heavy in the air, each one piercing Irina's defenses and laying bare the truth she had been reluctant to confront. As he spoke, memories of their past interactions flooded her mind, each one a testament to the evolution of their relationship from indifference to reluctant respect.

She couldn't deny the validity of his words, nor could she find any rebuttal to his accusations.

Everything he said was true, and each admission only served to deepen the knot of guilt and shame that twisted within her.

"In any case, I don't want to talk anymore. You can think whatever you want." Astron mumbled as he raised his hand, channeling his mana. Now that he had killed Danielle, things had a chance to get ugly, and Astron would rather prefer that this accident was buried in history.

Thus, he was about to clean the scene.

Unable to meet his gaze, Irina shrank back before his presence, her fists unclenching as the weight of his words pressed down upon her. At that moment, she felt small and insignificant, dwarfed by the magnitude of her own shortcomings.

For the first time, she saw herself through Astron's eyes, and the reflection she saw was not one she was proud of.

She had judged him based on his perceived weaknesses, dismissed him without a second thought, and only deigned to acknowledge him once he had proven his worth.

Though that was her past actions, and she had changed considerably compared to that same past, couldn't he say the same thing?

'He could.'

Maybe he approached her since she was an Emberheart, but now, wasn't he the one who somehow understood her? Who somehow was on her side when she needed it?

'He was.'

When her life was in danger, who came to her side?

'He did. Not once but twice.'

What did he gain from all these things? Even if he approached her because she was the heir of Emberheart, wasn't he different from all other people who did the same?

'He is different.' Didn't people who approached them with those intentions weren't able to tolerate her personality, and all left her for better people while he didn't do the same?

'He stayed while others left.' When she was unsure of what she needed to do, who did she think of? Who did she think as an example? Who was the person in the question 'What would he do if he were me?'?

'It was him.'

When they bickered, didn't she enjoy it?

'I did, and I still do.' When he was hurt, didn't she somehow get agitated? When they did things together, didn't she like his presence? Didn't she find comfort when she was on his side?

'I do. I like to be in his presence. I like to listen to him, and I enjoy it when he somehow speaks in a manner that makes me think he is a philosopher.' Why did she need to think about the reason why

he approached her? Had he once ever shown her that the reason he approached her was because she was an Emberheart?

'He didn't. Even if I didn't hear the words he spoke at that time, I would have never known.' Irina knew the answer to all those questions that she had asked herself.

But then, another important question suddenly appeared in her mind.

Would all these moments they had spent can be thrown off just by mere words? Could she really do it? Did she have the right to do so? Wouldn't it be unfair?

"You must never judge people based on their words, but based on their actions. Actions always speak louder than mere words." Even if she hated 'that woman,' Irina knew there was wisdom in her words. As she looked at him efficiently cleaning the penthouse with his 「Telekinesis」, her heart tightened.

At that moment, after asking all these questions to herself, Irina knew one thing.

'I like him. I like this bastard...' There was no coming back from that.

'No matter what, I can't let go of him at all.'

She knew why her heart tightened this much, even at the thought of letting him go. She knew why his words hurt so much to the extent that she couldn't even breathe.

'Inwardly, I feared that he would really go to Seraphina. Inwardly, I thought she was better than me, and I was scared that I would lose another one once again.'

As she looked at his back, she couldn't help but realize she needed to act.

After all this time they had spent together, Irina was very well aware of what kind of person he was.

Even if there was a possibility that he was using her and he had ulterior motives, to Irina, he had already become an existence that couldn't be given up.

'That is right.'

And, if she knew her well, once he left, things would never return to being the same. Knowing him, he would put the distance between them.

He would get away like a scared cat.

Even if these things hadn't happened, Irina somehow felt like so.

Therefore, Irina knew there was only one thing she needed to do.

TUCK!

Her hand moved in the dimly lit darkness of the penthouse.

With trembling hands, Irina reached out, her fingers brushing against the fabric of his clothes as she summoned the courage to speak. Her voice was barely a whisper, a mere echo in the vast emptiness of the room.

"I-I am sorry," she mumbled, her words barely audible even to herself. "I was stupid and rash... I judged you based on... things I shouldn't have."

Her apology was late. Far later than how it should have been. But it was an apology.

At that moment, Irina felt small and vulnerable; her pride was stripped away by the raw honesty of her confession.

TIGHTEN! Her hands, grabbing his clothes, tightened.

For a brief moment, there was silence between them, broken only by the sound of Astron's telekinetic abilities at work. Irina's heart pounded in her chest as she waited for his response. Her breath caught in her throat, and she braced herself for whatever came next.

But then, something unexpected happened. Astron paused in his task, turning to face her with an unreadable expression in his eyes. There was a flicker of surprise in his gaze as if he hadn't expected her to apologize.

"You...." He mumbled. "I never thought the Irina Emberheart would do that."

Irina continued to look deep into his eyes, feeling a little lost in them.

"The Irina of the past wouldn't do that. But, I did change."

'You changed me. It was all thanks to you, all because of you who showed me my own shortcomings, who understood me more than my own family, my own friends.' Hearing this, Astron nodded.

"You really did."

There was a serenity in his eyes. Somehow, his words sent a shiver down her spine as her face turned red. Yet, Irina, who was feeling like this for the first time in her life, didn't know what to do.

"It is not like I did this because of you or anything."

She could only act like how she always did.

Chapter 365 84.3 - Acceptance

"You really did."

As soon as the words left his lips, Irina felt a surge of embarrassment wash over her.

It was as if a veil had been lifted, and she suddenly found herself exposed, her vulnerability laid bare for Astron to see.

Quickly regaining her composure, Irina straightened her posture and smoothed out the creases in her clothes. She couldn't afford to appear weak or vulnerable, not now, not in front of him.

"It's not like I did this because of you or anything," she muttered, her tone defensive as she retreated back into her usual confident facade.

But even as she spoke, Irina couldn't shake the feeling of discomfort that lingered in the pit of her stomach. It was as if a seed had been planted, one that threatened to take root and grow into something much larger.

"...You really are something...." Astron mumbled, shaking his head.

'It is just like Irina's thing to say.' He muttered inwardly.

With a sudden clarity of moment, Irina remembered the words Astron had spoken to Seraphina about her, the doubts and insecurities he had voiced.

-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.

'You bastard...Do you think you can keep an eye on me with your skills? This punk thinks I am some sort of pushover because he is smart? Do you think I am the same as those other people you see across the academy, huh?'

This time, instead of feeling hurt or betrayed by his words, Irina felt something else stir within her—a sense of determination and a desire to prove him wrong.

Whether this was because she had already resolved the insecurities in her heart or because she had resolved this feeling inside her, she didn't know the answer. But one thing was clear.

From now on, she will need to be active. She couldn't keep getting pushed around by him.

'And that time with Sylvie....'

Remembering the time when they were doing the assignment together, Irina narrowed her eyes.

With renewed purpose, Irina met Astron's gaze head-on, her eyes flashing with a newfound determination. She may have apologized for her past actions, but she refused to let them define her any longer.

"Hey."

"What?"

"Do you remember what you said?"

"What do you mean?"

"The fact that you are looking after me like I am some sort of a child?"

"Isn't it what I exactly do? Aren't you basically a problem child who wants to burn everything?"

"Tsk. Do you think you have the capabilities to say that?"

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"I mean what I said, you punk. What makes you think that you have the capability to look after me like I am a child?"

"...."

As Astron fell silent, Irina's words hung in the air like a challenge, daring him to respond. She could feel the tension crackling between them, a silent battle of wills playing out in the dimly lit penthouse.

For a moment, Astron seemed taken aback by her boldness, his expression unreadable as he processed her words. But then, a flicker of amusement danced in his eyes. Irina, with her family with him, could differentiate that little spark since this guy never revealed excessive facial expressions.

"Are you questioning my capabilities, Irina Emberheart?" he retorted, his voice tinged with mock offense. "Last time I checked, I've managed to keep you out of trouble, haven't I?"

Irina's eyes narrowed at his response, a defiant spark igniting within her. She refused to back down, not now, not ever.

"Keeping me out of trouble?" she scoffed, her tone dripping with sarcasm. "More like getting in the way of my plans and slowing me down."

Astron scoffed, his gaze never leaving hers as they engaged in their familiar banter.

Despite the tension between them, there was a sense of camaraderie underlying their verbal sparring, a mutual understanding that transcended their differences.

"Do you think I am holding you back?"

"You are not?"

"Do you have a fish memory or something? Did you forget that I was the one who brought us the extra point in the Phantom's Land assignment?"

"I do. But I could do it without you; it was just that you found it earlier than me, so I didn't have the chance to do so."

To be frank, Irina was very well aware that it was thanks to him that they were able to find the location, but she would most likely have been unable to find the correct answer. But, whatever the case was, right now, she wanted to pick upon him.

After all, even if she had sorted her thoughts, the resentment of him talking behind her back like that still lingered.

Astron narrowed his eyes at Irina's retort, a hint of exasperation creeping into his expression. "You're delusional," he stated bluntly, his voice tinged with annoyance.

Irina's jaw clenched at his words, her frustration simmering beneath the surface. She refused to let him dismiss her so easily. "Delusional or not, we have no way of confirming it," she shot back, her tone defiant. "So, it's just your opinion against mine."

Astron nodded. "Funny how most people with delusions tend to use that argument a lot," he remarked. "Several people claim that if they were given the opportunity of the best, they would be the best as well. Yet, with such mentality, they forget they will never be."

Irina bristled at his comment, her cheeks flushing with indignation. "I am not delusional!" she insisted, her voice rising slightly. "I just refuse to accept your narrow-minded perspective."

"If you think I am narrow-minded, you really must have never seen the real world." Astron retorted but then nodded his head. "Well, considering you were raised like a princess, I guess that is the case?"

His mockery was evident, but the conversation had gone in the direction that Irina wanted. Even though, in the corner of her mind, Irina felt like Astron was knowingly going along with it, she didn't have the desire to lose this opportunity.

"Then, should we prove it?"

"Ho? Prove it?"

Irina's eyes gleamed with determination as she met Astron's gaze head-on. "Yes, let's prove it," she declared, her voice steady despite the simmering tension between them. "Let's see who can get a better grade in the finals."

"You want to measure who is better by checking the grades?"

"Yes. Why? Are you scared?"

"....." Astron stopped his movements as his eyes met with Irina.

Seeing that, Irina's heart skipped a beat. Those eyes that she felt like she could lose herself within them had never felt this vast before.

"Do you think I care what you think about me?"

"It is funny how scared people tend to say that a lot," Irina smirked, somehow feeling like she had won using his own words against him.

"....You really don't believe I am scared, do you?"

"From how it looks from here, you seem so?"

"...."

Astron's gaze lingered on Irina for a moment longer before he turned away, his movements fluid and controlled. "You're free to think whatever you want," he replied nonchalantly as he began to walk away.

But Irina wasn't ready to let the conversation end just yet. "Wait," she called out, her voice firm. "Let's make a bet."

Knowing him, Irina was already aware that he wouldn't care about a mere opinion. Therefore, he could only be swayed by materialistic things.

Astron paused, glancing back at her with a curious expression. "A bet?"

Irina nodded, her confidence unwavering. "Yes, a bet. If I get a better grade than you in the finals, you have to comply with my request."

Irina was already aware that the request right she had gotten from him was used when she faced the demon contractor. Even if there was no verbal verification, inside her head it was already used. Her pride wouldn't allow her life to be saved freely.

"What is that request?"

"You are going to follow me for one whole week. You will be my escort."

This was her intention from the start. The moment she had confirmed her feelings, she already knew that she needed to be more proactive, or this guy could get stolen by someone.

Astron's lips twitched hearing this. "And if I get a better grade than you?" he asked, his tone laced with amusement. "It better be equal to one week of my time. I am not a cheap person to hire."

Irina's smirk widened. "I will let you enter our family's armory and get an artifact from there once. And, I will swear that I will never talk about secret matters regarding you, no matter what."

She had already no intention of talking about Astron's secrets. But, knowing him, he would never refuse such a guarantee with his cautious personality.

Therefore, Irina used this to increase his chances of accepting it.

Astron raised an eyebrow, his gaze narrowing slightly as he studied Irina's expression. "Are you telling the truth?" he asked, his voice betraying a hint of skepticism.

Irina met his gaze head-on, her eyes shining with determination. "Of course, I'm telling the truth," she replied, her voice steady. "Do you think being the heir of the family is a joke? I have the authority to enter the family's armory, of course."

Astron raised his head. "You must be really sure that you'll win to propose such a deal," he remarked, a hint of 'admiration' in his tone.

Irina smirked confidently. "Of course," she replied, her voice dripping with confidence.

Astron shook his head, a mixture of amusement and exasperation crossing his features. "Some people really don't know the world," he muttered under his breath.

Taking a step towards Irina, Astron loomed over her slightly, his presence overwhelming.

Despite the difference in their heights, Irina refused to back down, meeting his gaze with unwavering determination.

"Just because I am going easy on others, you seem to think I am weak."

"Everyone can say they are going easy on others. Swindlers do that all the time."

"Then how do you plan to proceed? You should already know that I don't want to stand out too much."

"I know."

"Then?"

"It is pretty simple and sound." Irina looked into his eyes. "Since you were that good last time, we should compete in the hardest test, right? [Introduction to Mana Theory]."

"Deal."

"Heh."

Irina was happy.

Chapter 366 84.4 - Acceptance

Everything in this world needs to follow a tradition of reason. But, there are times when one loses that, and then it eventually becomes something that could bite them out.

As Astron had accepted Irina's proposal of competition, the atmosphere returned to normal. Irina, who had just been saved by him, looked at the penthouse.

Because of the explosions that Danielle caused, several things inside the penthouse were blasted off across the place.

Seeing those traces, suddenly Irina realized something.

'Explosions? The academy should be alerted?'

Even though Irina had no idea where they were, she knew that the explosions would alert the authorities. The reason for that?

Because of the death of the girl who kidnapped her, the artifacts that were concealing their presence would also be removed. That was the basic premise. And if that were the case, wouldn't the academy that would be monitoring everything inside be aware of it?

They would. But, well, since they didn't do anything wrong, they wouldn't be accused of something.

"By the way, where are we?" Irina asked, looking around.

As Irina surveyed the place, her eyes fell upon the scattered remnants of the cleaning equipment, now broken and abandoned amidst the aftermath of the chaos. Puddles of spilled liquids shimmered on the floor, evidence of the recent struggle that had taken place.

"We're in the penthouse," Astron replied, his voice echoing faintly in the silent space.

Of course, it was easy to see with the evidence, but she wasn't asking him the obvious.

"Penthouse? Penthouse of which building?"

"Girl's dormitory."

However, she felt like she heard something wrong.

"....Huh? What did you say?"

"It is one of the girl's dormitory building's penthouse."

This guy said that this place belonged to the girl's dormitories. That meant the demon contractor girl was hiding her acts under the academy's nose.

'How did she manage to even hide everything?'

Irina questioned, but then she remembered another thing.

This bastard was a man. A guy. And if the authorities were alerted, then they would be coming here.

"You! What are you doing, hurry up and leave." Irina shouted, signaling him.

"Why?"

"Because this is a girl's dormitory. Do you want to be labeled as a pervert?"

"...."

Astron fell silent for a second, hearing Irina's words. But then he shook his head with a sigh. "Don't you think it is kind of stupid to say after saying all those things to me and wasting my time here?"

Irina was momentarily left speechless by Astron's response, her mind reeling from his blunt words. But as his reasoning sank in, a surge of frustration coursed through her veins.

"This is exactly why you need to hurry up and leave!" she exclaimed, her voice tinged with irritation. "You don't have much time left before someone comes!"

Astron regarded her with a calm expression, his demeanor unwavering despite her agitation. "You're still inexperienced, aren't you?" he remarked, his tone gentle yet firm. "Do you think the academy would respond this late if they were alerted? If they knew, they would have been here already."

Irina's eyes widened as his words struck home, realization dawning upon her like a bolt of lightning. She had been so caught up in her own panic that she had failed to consider the possibility that the academy might not have been aware of the situation at all.

And it was very highly likely that this guy was already prepared for such a case. There was no way he wouldn't after all. He was such a cautious guy.

'But, he could have just told me.'

Feeling a mix of embarrassment and resentment, Irina glanced away, unable to meet Astron's gaze.

"Why not just tell me?"

"I thought you could easily understand this. Aren't you the great Irina Emberheart?"

"You! Wait the next time! I will get you!"

"Yeah, yeah."

Astron waved his hand and then slowly moved toward the place that caught his attention. There was a small black dot on the wall,

As Astron approached the small black dot on the wall, he felt a sense of unease wash over him. Though the dot remained motionless, its presence seemed to emanate an eerie energy that made his heart beat faster, albeit faintly.

He hesitated for a moment, his instincts urging him to tread carefully. Whatever this dot was, it was clear that it held some significance, and Astron couldn't shake the feeling that it was somehow connected to the demon contractor.

With a cautious hand, Astron reached out and lightly touched the dot, his fingers brushing against the smooth surface of the wall. But as he made contact, a chill ran down his spine, sending shivers through his body.

"What are you doing?"

"Wait."

"This definitely contains demonic energy. There is no doubt about that. Then, maybe?"

The dot didn't move or react in any way, but Astron knew the method for that.

With a quick judgment, Astron made his way over to where Danielle's lifeless body lay, his mind racing with possibilities. He knew that whatever secrets lay hidden within the penthouse were somehow connected to her, and he knew that she was using this place as an operation base.

SLASH!

Ruthlessly, he drew his dagger and swiftly cut off Danielle's index finger, ignoring the gruesome task at hand. Gripping the severed digit tightly, he returned to the mysterious dot on the wall.

With a steady hand, Astron pushed Danielle's finger into the dot, expecting some kind of reaction. But to his dismay, the dot remained motionless as if mocking his efforts.

But then Astron realized his mistake.

'Yeah, I should have checked better.' The finger he had chosen was too thin, and he had overlooked the angle of the previous touch. He activated his [Perceptive Insight] and saw the surface of the dot a little better, realizing that the dot was touching the thumb of his left hand.

Without hesitation, Astron returned to Danielle's body and severed her thumb from her other hand, his movements swift and decisive. Clutching the severed digit tightly, he made his way back to the wall, his determination unyielding.

This time, as Astron pushed Danielle's thumb into the dot, he felt a surge of energy coursing through his veins. The dot quivered slightly as if awakening from a slumber before suddenly enveloping Danielle's hand in a pulsating mass of flesh.

Astron watched as the dot expanded, spreading across the entire wall like a living organism.

With a silent roar, the wall crumbled into a lump of flesh on the ground, revealing a hidden segment of the room that had been concealed from view.

"What?" Irina was the first one to react. She had been watching everything from the side, wondering what this guy was doing now. But never had she expected something to happen. She hadn't even noticed the black dot on the wall.

She, Irina Emberheart, the third-ranked student of the academy, a prominent fire mage with strong mana senses, failed to notice that dot. That meant its stealth skills were quite high.

To see that he easily saw this from that distance was remarkable, and Irina once again witnessed how he could find these types of things easily.

It was like he was a living scanner. But aside from that, the fact that he easily found the method of entrance to that was a lot more interesting, though it looked abruptly simple.

"This is...."

However, the scene that had just appeared right before her eyes somehow made her want to vomit.

As the hidden segment of the penthouse revealed itself, the sight that greeted Astron and Irina was nothing short of horrifying. The interior scene was disturbing beyond imagination.

Lumps of flesh were scattered around the room, each one pinned to the wall in a grotesque display. The wall was categorized, with one segment featuring arms, another leg, and so on. It was as if the room itself was a macabre gallery of human anatomy.

Every body part was thin and pale-skinned, unmistakably belonging to girls. The realization sent a shiver down Irina's spine, the gravity of the situation sinking in.

'I would be in the same condition if he hadn't come.'

But the most disturbing sight of all was the heads that hung from the ceiling, suspended by chains. Each head was missing its eyes, the empty sockets staring blankly into the room, devoid of life.

Irina's hand flew to her mouth in horror as she took in the gruesome scene before her. The stench of decay hung heavy in the air, mingling with the metallic tang of blood.

"What...what is this?" she whispered, her voice barely above a horrified whisper.

Astron remained silent, his gaze fixed on the macabre display. His mind raced, and after looking at the heads, he put the pieces together in an instant.

At least, he had acted like he made so since Irina was looking at her. However, he was way too long aware of what had happened there.

Slowly, he turned to Irina, his expression grave. "Considering that most demon contractors are twisted individuals, this is not surprising." He mumbled. "They all should be Danielle's previous victims."

'Danielle? Ah, right? This girl was familiar, so it was her.'

Irina found the name unfamiliar at first, but then she remembered who it was. But the main focus wasn't on her identity.

The fact that, there were at least five students whose heads were hanging down from the ceiling made it very disturbing. And what was more disturbing was how easily this demon contractor operated in the academy.

She even had a special operating room on her own, right in the noses of the academy.

"Aliya Shaw."

At that moment, Irina heard Astron mumbling as his gaze was locked on the girl who was missing her eyes now.

"Do you know her?"

"I partially do. She was one of my sparring partners first."

His gaze, looking at the lifeless head, was cold without any emotion. He somehow looked 'used' to it, though Irina dismissed that idea, thinking that her mentality was on the verge of collapsing.

"At the end, we need to report this to the academy."

Astron said, looking at Irina.

"Ah...Right."

And she understood the assignment. After all, this guy wanted to lay low; thus, only she could report what happened here, and naturally, she would be the one who had defeated the demon contractor.

"You should burn the corpse until nothing remains."

"That...."

Even though the act itself felt disturbing to Irina, after seeing the heads hanging from the ceiling and the body parts that were dismantled, she narrowed her eyes.

"I will do it."

After all, if not for Astron, who came to rescue her, she would be sharing the same fate.

'These kinds of people....They don't even deserve a proper burial. They will rather pollute the earth.' She thought, slowly moving.

FOOSH! And in the penthouse, the flames swirled.

Chapter 367 84.5 - Acceptance [Interlude]

<Arcadia Hunter Academy, Instructor Building>

Irina stood before Eleanor, her amber eyes meeting the instructor's gaze with a calm demeanor. Despite the weight of the recent events bearing down on her, she remained composed, ready to navigate the delicate conversation ahead.

Eleanor's piercing gaze seemed to scrutinize Irina, searching for any signs of deception or evasion. The instructor was known for her keen intuition, and Irina knew she had to tread carefully to maintain her facade.

"You seem to be associated with a lot of events recently," Eleanor remarked, her tone measured yet probing.

Irina nodded subtly, acknowledging the observation. "Yes, there have been... unforeseen circumstances that required my attention."

Eleanor raised an eyebrow, a hint of skepticism evident in her expression. "Unforeseen circumstances?" she repeated, her voice tinged with curiosity. "Irina, I trust you understand the importance of transparency, especially in matters concerning the safety of our academy and its students."

With the recent events that had already shaken the trust in the academy, the policies for the students had been changed.

The students were no longer allowed to leave the campus until the end of the semester, and the curfew times were more stricter now.

Previously, there were some students who would train at night, but this was no longer applicable since the attacks at night.

The entertainment locations were all shut down as well.

Irina maintained her calm exterior, offering a reassuring smile. "Of course, Instructor Eleanor. Allow me to clarify."

With careful precision, Irina began to recount the events that had transpired in the penthouse or the things before that, carefully omitting any mention of Astron's involvement.

She first explained that she had trained herself too hard and put herself into a mana-exhausted state. Then, upon leaving the training grounds, she was captured by the demon contractor and was unable to resist her thanks to the state she was in.

After that, she described how the demon contractor had taken her to a room and attempted to perform a ritual on her, trying to steal her powers. However, the girl overlooked an artifact that was hidden on her body, and by utilizing that artifact, Irina was able to escape the imprisonment of the demon contractor and gain access to her mana once again; she had defeated the demon contractor.

This was the story that she came up with since the academy would clearly see the signs of her getting captured if they checked the footage. Therefore, her story needed to meet the real proofs as well.

After that, she described how she had stumbled upon the hidden segment of the room and discovered the gruesome scene within.

"It was a harrowing experience," Irina admitted, her voice steady. "But I knew I had to act swiftly to ensure the safety of our fellow students, as well as myself."

Eleanor listened intently, her expression unreadable as she absorbed Irina's account. The instructor was known for her astuteness, and Irina could sense the weight of her scrutiny.

"And you were able to handle the situation on your own?" Eleanor inquired, her tone neutral yet probing. She seemed still suspect that Irina was able to escape the state of imprisonment on her own.

After all, according to the story she told, the demon contractor made a grave mistake by not checking her properly, which somehow contradicted how they had never found the traces of that girl.

However, Irina was already expecting that as well, and there was a special card she could play in times like this.

Irina nodded, her confidence unwavering. "Of course, instructor. Do you take the Emberheart Family lightly? I can deal with hundreds of such demon contractors alone."

The card was her lineage, of course. No matter how strong Eleanor was, at the end of the day, in the face of the Emberheart Family, she would need to concede.

Eleanor regarded Irina for a moment longer, her gaze lingering thoughtfully. "Very well, Student Irina. I commend your bravery and resourcefulness in the face of danger. It is clear that you are a credit to our academy."

A sense of relief washed over Irina, grateful that her explanation had been accepted without suspicion.

She offered a respectful nod to Eleanor, masking any lingering unease beneath a facade of gratitude.

"Thank you, Instructor Eleanor," Irina replied earnestly. "I am honored to serve our academy in any way I can."

"...." Eleanor didn't reply for a little while, and then she gestured to Irina that everything was finished. "You are dismissed. The academy will contact you back once we finish our investigations."

"Understood, instructor."

As Irina left the office, she smiled heartily as if things had gone smoothly.

TAK!

As the door closed, Eleanor, who had been watching her retreating figure, narrowed her eyes.

"This feeling." She mumbled to herself, looking at the submitted report. "Even though student Irina had said it was thanks to her artifact, we have no records of an artifact that helps one recover from their mana-exhausted state. And most importantly, the fact that she was able to find the hidden segment..."

She muttered to herself, yet she leaned on her back, raising her gaze to the ceiling.

"Sigh....Regardless of how it is, the academy will most likely seal the case with this. Since further doubting the report has the possibility of angering Emberheart, the academy can't afford to lose the support of one of the Pentagon."

Thinking to herself, she closed the hem of the report and dialed a number from her smartwatch.

"Headmaster."

In any case, the consolidation of the parents of the victims was the headmaster's problem, at least.

And she also needed to interrogate the close friends of the culprit. After all, there was a chance that they were also related to demon contractors.

Looking at the two girls shown on the list, she shook her head.

<Arcadia Hunter Academy, Cafeteria>

Sylvie and Jasmine had just left the presence of their stern instructor, Eleanor. But what they never expected was the news that they had just heard.

"It is insane," Jasmine mumbled to herself, her eyes still wide with disbelief. "To think that Danielle was a demon contractor all this time."

Sylvie was no different. Her mind also reeled as she tried to process the shocking revelation about Danielle. She glanced at Jasmine, noticing the disbelief etched on her friend's face mirrored her own feelings.

"Yeah....Danielle....Demon Contractor?" Sylvie whispered, her voice barely audible above the hum of the cafeteria.

Even though Sylvie had been getting negative vibes from Danielle for a while since she had awakened her talent, she didn't expect that Danielle was a demon contractor all this time.

A demon contractor and the culprit behind the disappearance of the five girls.

Jasmine shook her head, her expression a mix of confusion and disbelief. "I can't believe it. We've known her for all semester, and she's been hiding something like this all along?"

Sylvie nodded slowly, her thoughts racing. "But how? And why?"

"I don't know," Jasmine replied, her voice tinged with frustration. "But it explains a lot. Her sudden disappearances, the mysterious meetings... it all makes sense now."

Looking back at it, Danielle had many times invited Jasmine and Sylvie to different places, and somehow, something warned her whenever that happened.

It was an instinctual reaction for her to refuse, but maybe her dormant powers were already warning her from the start.

Sylvie's brow furrowed as she considered the implications of Danielle's secret. "Do you think she was involved in the recent attacks?"

Maybe there was a chance that Danielle was the masked person behind the attacks on Seniors. With her strength as a demon contractor, it looked possible for her to do such a thing.

"It's possible," Jasmine admitted, her tone grim. "But we can't jump to conclusions. We need to find out more before we can assume such a thing. Though, I doubt we can find anything more since she is dead."

Sylvie nodded in agreement, her mind hardly accepting that Danielle was no longer in this world. She had already seen too much for the whole semester, but this was a whole different thing.

After all, she still remembered all the talks they had, all the moments they spent together. Even though Danielle was a bit different, her presence somehow lightened the mood around her.

As Sylvie and Jasmine processed the shocking news about Danielle, a heavy silence settled between them. The weight of the revelation hung in the air, overshadowing their usual banter and camaraderie.

"Yeah... it's hard to believe," Sylvie murmured, her gaze distant as she grappled with the truth.

Jasmine sighed, running a hand through her hair in frustration. "I guess we'll never really know what was going on in her mind."

The realization that Danielle was no longer alive added another layer of complexity to the situation. It was as if a door had been closed, leaving behind unanswered questions and unresolved emotions.

But despite the turmoil swirling within them, Sylvie and Jasmine knew they couldn't afford to dwell on the matter any longer. With final exams looming on the horizon, they needed to focus on their studies and prepare themselves for the challenges ahead.

"We should get back to studying," Jasmine said, her voice firm and determined. "We can't let this distract us. You know the finals are approaching, and not much time is left."

Sylvie nodded in agreement, pushing aside her thoughts about Danielle for the time being. "You're right. Let's head to the library and make the most out of our study session."

As they gathered their belongings and prepared to leave the cafeteria, Jasmine suddenly raised her head, a curious glint in her eyes.

"Hey, Sylvie," she began, her voice tinged with mischief. "Are you going to meet 'him' today as well?"

Sylvie's cheeks flushed a little at the mention of 'him,' her mind racing to catch up with Jasmine's implication. But then, it had returned to its normal state. After all, she had been accustomed to it already.

Today was indeed the day of the week they had planned to train together. Sylvie didn't hide this from her friends either since there was no reason for her to do so.

And somehow, his teaching her close combat proved to be effective; she was even finding it easier to understand the combat-related courses.

With a shared understanding, Sylvie and Jasmine left the cafeteria behind, their thoughts lingering on the events of the day.

"Today will be our last training session."

The academy's and, in general, the human domain's stance on how healers were to protect themselves was as such—leaving the responsibility to the combatants and making their jobs as easy as possible.

The healers didn't need to fight since they were not suited to do so. It was very rare for a healer to possess an offensive skill, and that made them unsuited for combat, and the Hunter Association didn't want to risk such rare individuals.

However, Sylvie was different.

She wasn't a normal healer. She was the future Saintess; therefore, her job and fate were a lot more different from a normal healer. She was bound to be pursued by countless different people thanks to her powers, and it was very hard for her to trust anyone other than herself or maybe him.

She had been thinking about this for the whole day since Danielle came out to be a demon contractor. The person that she thought was her friend was, in fact, a demon contractor and a murderer. This made her no longer trust how people look.

The more she remembered the times they had spent, the more she realized how countless different times could be picked up that Danielle was a demon contractor. She just didn't look at it that way, and if she were to suspect, if she were to look into the matter more, maybe she could have saved all those students who had died in Danielle's hands.

Sylvie may have hated her powers since they always showed the ugly side in people, but for the first time in her life, she was feeling responsible. The fact that she had the ability to prevent all those deaths but didn't do so because of her lack of judgment and commitment made her feel guilty.

"Sylvie, never forget. Great power comes with great responsibility."

'Yet, where is my responsibility? What did I even do with this power, aside from hiding?'

Even if she would be in danger, did it justify the lives that are lost?

'No, it doesn't.'

Sylvie knew the answer well since she also remembered the time when she was powerless. Therefore, she could empathize with those who lost their lives.

'Right. I need to get stronger as fast as I can so that I no longer need to hide.'

But the blood had been spilled, and there was nothing she could do. Even though she felt responsible, she also knew the reason why she didn't go to the academy to get opportunities from them was because she couldn't trust anyone. It made sense since there were countless different factions in the academy, and Sylvie had witnessed the corruption.

Either she had been targeted by insiders, or she saw people getting targeted. Mason was a demon contractor, and that almost cost her and his life.

He was targeted in the mid-terms and almost lost his life. If Sylvie had not been there, he would most likely no longer be there.

And now Danielle.

She didn't even know just how many more were in this academy or even in the government. She knew she wasn't safe. He had emphasized this a lot of times, and she knew that her hiding was the most logical one.

'But is it the right thing to do?'

Yet, this question constantly gnawed at her inside.

Those thoughts were on her mind as she approached the place that was determined by him for the training.

It was the sparring grounds that she had rented exclusively, thanks to her privilege as a healer. As for whether the academy was suspicious about her training or not, she had been trying to improve her physical aspects for the whole half of the semester now, and the other healers already knew that.

The instructor at that time made a knowing gesture since she was well aware of the trauma Sylvie had. Thus, she even encouraged her to take a step forward.

[Sylvie Gracewind. Rank, Healer, 12.]

With the recent changes, the academy decided that healers were no longer included in the general ranking list since it didn't make sense to do that.

As she entered the lounge, she saw him waiting on the sides. Normally, she would feel enthusiastic seeing him since she liked the training and the feeling of improvement, as well as something else.

But today, she felt like she wasn't doing it.

"Have you been waiting? Sorry." She walked to Astron and said.

"It is fine. I just came here five minutes forty-two seconds ago."

"Ah....."

"Let's not waste any more time."

As Sylvie followed Astron into the sparring rooms of the academy, she couldn't help but notice the stark contrast between this environment and the makeshift training grounds she had grown accustomed to.

Here, everything exuded a sense of luxury and sophistication, from the polished floors to the state-of-the-art equipment lining the walls.

The air hummed with the anticipation of rigorous training, and Sylvie couldn't shake off the feeling of being out of place amidst such opulence. She glanced around, taking in the gleaming weapons racks and the meticulously maintained practice dummies, feeling a mixture of awe and intimidation.

Astron, however, seemed unfazed by the grandeur surrounding them, his focus solely on the task at hand.

"Today will be our last training session," he announced, his voice cutting through the silence of the room.

'What?'

Sylvie, who heard his voice, suddenly stopped in her tracks.

"What?" She asked, her voice surprised. How could it not be? She wasn't even sure of herself or her training. She still felt like she had a lot more room to improve, and she was not even at the level of a beginner.

Astron turned to face Sylvie, his expression calm and composed. "Our goal for these training sessions was never to make you the best close combat fighter," he began, his voice measured. "It was to equip you with the necessary skills to defend yourself and understand how to utilize your strength in close-range combat."

Sylvie listened intently, her brow furrowing in confusion. She couldn't understand why Astron would consider ending their training when she still felt like there was so much more she needed to learn.

Or was it something else? She didn't want to answer, nor want to think about it.

"We've accomplished what we set out to do," Astron continued, his tone unwavering. "You've shown remarkable progress in a short amount of time, and you now possess the knowledge and skills to defend yourself effectively in close quarters."

Sylvie opened her mouth to protest, but Astron raised a hand to silence her. "Listen, Sylvie," he said firmly. "You are not a fighter. You are a healer. Your primary role is to support and protect others, not to engage in combat yourself."

'With my powers, I can fight too!' She wanted to protest. She wanted to shout out that, with her newly awakened trait [First Lord's Authority], she could deal with people. But then, she remembered she needed to keep her powers to herself.

And knowing that the person saying those was him, he must have already thought about these matters before bringing them up. Thus, she saw no reason for her to object.

"Your strength lies in your ability to heal and nurture," Astron continued, his gaze softening. "That is where you will make the greatest impact."

Sylvie nodded, "You are right."

In this world, nothing is everlasting.

The meal you eat is bound to end. The drink you are having is bound to finish. The youth you take for granted is bound to diminish away.

When people think that they have the time to get to the world, reality slaps them really hard. That is just how it goes and how it has always been.

The flow of time never stops, and nothing can go against it. You can buy time by increasing your rank and your life span, but at the end of the day, it still ends.

"Then, why do we take everything for granted?"

Sylvie asked herself while looking at him.

"Now, let's start."

He stood there with his presence faint. When they started training together, Sylvie had always thought that he was kind of a mountain. It wasn't that he was big or anything; it was just that his presence seemed like it would never have been shaken.

But then, as she progressed, she realized it was because of her own shortcomings. The reason why she thought like that was because she didn't know how to judge her opponents.

In fact, the academy had been teaching this to the students from the start of the academic year, but since Sylvie was not a combatant but a healer, the academy's focus for her education was not how to fight but rather how to deal with the injuries efficiently while taking a good position in parties since this was their stance.

As she progressed, she realized that he was not like a mountain but like a swift wind. His presence was faint, as if he could always disappear from one's eyes if they were not paying attention.

And he was swift. His attacks didn't contain huge amounts of force but rather concentrated on attacking weak points quickly. He never let himself get over his head and always acted cautiously.

That was most likely in his nature.

Someone who could always disappear from one's life. Someone who always felt close but not at the same time. Regardless of the time and the location, Sylvie always felt like there would be a time when she would never see him again.

It was a random thought, close to instinct. It was like something had been warning him.

SWOOSH! THUD! Yet, those thoughts in her head were interrupted by the swift motion that had appeared right before her face.

It was the start of their last training session.

Chapter 369 85.2 - Things sometimes end

—THUD! The moment Sylvie's focus turned to the combat that she was in, a body swift was slightly leaned to the side, and a quick punch instantly landed on her liver.

'That place!'

As Sylvie staggered back from the blow, she felt a surge of frustration and determination coursing through her veins.

She knew she had to focus, to anticipate Astron's next move before he could land another hit. She had already seen his tricks a lot of times.

'Come on, Sylvie, remember how he does it!' Her already toned body moved instinctively, the combat movements engrained into her cells. Even while Astron was teaching Sylvie mainly how to defend herself, he also taught her that in times when the opportunity arises, the best defense is offense.

–SWOOSH! With his retreating figure, Sylvie instantly moved forward, attempting to target his balance.

But Astron was already several steps ahead, his movements fluid and graceful as he seamlessly transitioned from defense to offense.

With each strike, he seemed to be teaching her a lesson, guiding her with his actions and his words.

'That.' "Keep your guard up, Sylvie," he instructed, his voice calm but firm. "You can't afford to let your focus waver, not even for a moment."

The words that she had heard countless times while training. And at the repetition of those words, they somehow became annoying to her, even if they were true. It was like a trigger.

"I know." Sylvie nodded curtly, her muscles tensing as she prepared to counter.

She knew she had to be faster and more decisive if she wanted to stand a chance against him. She couldn't hesitate.

With renewed determination, she launched herself forward, her movements precise and calculated. She focused on reading Astron's subtle cues, anticipating his next move before it even happened.

Slowly but surely, she began to hold her own against him, blocking his strikes and delivering counterattacks of her own.

With each exchange, she felt herself growing stronger and more confident.

She was getting momentum, and that was how it needed to be. She was able to defend herself from his strikes.

She could see when he would attack.

'He is coming.' As Sylvie focused intently on Astron's movements, her muscles tensed, ready to respond to his next attack. She was prepared for his swift motions, or so she thought.

But just as she braced herself for his next strike, Astron's speed increased suddenly, catching Sylvie off guard.

'Hu-' Despite her anticipation, the sudden burst of velocity was beyond what she had prepared for. Even her thoughts were interrupted.

SWOOSH!

Before she could fully react, Astron's fist connected with her chest, the impact sending shockwaves through her body. The force of the blow knocked the air out of her lungs, leaving her gasping for breath.

THUD!

Sylvie stumbled backward, her chest burning with pain as she struggled to regain her footing. She clutched at her chest, feeling the throbbing ache radiating from the point of impact.

For a moment, everything seemed to blur as Sylvie fought to regain her composure. She hadn't expected Astron to increase his speed so suddenly, and the unexpectedness of the attack left her reeling.

As she tried to shake off the pain and refocus her attention, she could hear Astron's voice cutting through the haze.

"Didn't I tell you before?" He said, his purple eyes looking into her eyes. "Never get your confidence above your rationality. Blind confidence will get you killed, especially for a healer like you. Never forget who you are and what your position is."

Because of his attack, there were tears in her eyes. It was not because of the pain since she had already become accustomed to it from all these spars.

'He once again attacked a weak spot.'

It was because of her own body. Astron countless times demonstrated that a reaction on some side of the body could be evoked by just a tap on another place.

"Urghk-! Sorry." Sylvie nodded weakly, her breaths coming in short, ragged gasps. She knew she had to push through the pain and stay focused if she wanted to continue the fight.

With a determined grit, she forced herself to stand tall, pushing aside the pain and fatigue. She locked eyes with Astron, a steely determination burning in her gaze.

"Again."

"Yes."

There was a weird feeling slowly rising deep into her heart. A small sense of emptiness, maybe? She couldn't quite name it.

"Good."

Whether it was because she was accustomed to his harsh evaluations, his cold face, or not, she was somehow entangled with that word 'last.'

But he didn't give her the time to contemplate those things.

—SWOOSH! As Astron advanced once more, Sylvie felt a sense of trepidation creeping in. She knew she had to be prepared for anything, especially after his previous unexpected attack. As his movements quickened, Sylvie braced herself, ready to defend against whatever came her way.

But despite her best efforts to anticipate his next move, Astron's speed was beyond anything she had faced before. Before she could react, his fist was upon her again, striking with precision and force.

THUD!

The impact sent shockwaves through Sylvie's body, leaving her staggering once more.

"Again."

She felt a surge of frustration and anger rising within her, seeing his nonchalant gaze, but she had already learned and knew she couldn't let her emotions cloud her judgment.

SWOOSH! As he attacked once more, Sylvie's mind raced with memories of their training sessions.

'You are not an honorable duelist. You don't need the stupid pride of beating your opponent solely in combat. Don't let pride blind your judgment.'

It was one of the times when they were sparring. At that time, Astron had limited his whole body with weighted bracelets and made himself like any ordinary, non-awakened.

Thus, Sylvie thought she could easily win, but then Astron suddenly used his mana, this time in the fight, and then beat her up.

'Pride will not save you in the face of death. Use your mana whenever you deem necessary.'

She recalled Astron's stern voice echoing in her mind, reminding her of the importance of using her mana to defend herself when necessary. He strongly emphasized that the decision and judgment to make that call was important.

With determination coursing through her veins, Sylvie tapped into her mana reserves once again, surrounding her body with a protective barrier. She focused all her energy on strengthening the barrier, preparing herself for Astron's next onslaught.

Since Astron's speed increased, Sylvie knew it was the correct judgment.

THUD! This time, instead of his punch hitting her on her defenseless place, it hit her elbow in the defensive posture.

SWOOSH! SWOOSH! She evaded his subsequent attacks as well. With mana entering her body and enhancing her, she could see his movements more clearly now.

"Good judgment." Astron nodded with a curt compliment.

But that wasn't the end. Even though Sylvie didn't tell other people, she had been learning how to control her new powers and how to make use of her innate understanding. After the Phantom's Land, she realized one thing. There was a strange energy in her body, a strange power that was different than mana itself.

It felt fundamentally different. A yellow energy that felt holy. Even though she felt cringe when she said this loudly, that was the feeling she got whenever she came in touch with that power.

However, because she didn't know what this power did or how she could use it, she just used it like a mana. Thus, she experimented with this power as if it were mana, and there, she came across another usage of it.

[Eyes of Yellow.]

Whenever she imbued this power into her eyes, her world would undergo a change. She could see things differently, as if from a filter. She could discern living things from non-living, and most importantly, she could see something inside in every living thing.

An energy that was flowing in them like a river. That energy would spread through their bodies.

At first, she couldn't understand what it was, and it was hard for her to even receive that much information. But then, as she looked more, she realized that she could see the insides of living beings even from far away and that flowing energy was their 'vitality.' And wherever there was a lack of vitality in people's bodies, that would mean that that location was injured.

It was a very efficient way of finding out the injuries and symptoms for a healer, but that wasn't the end. She also found out that, whenever living beings were moving, their vitality would show some changes from a dormant state as if the muscles that are activated would be charged with vitality.

Basically, the vitality would flow through the body to those muscles. That made her develop a new sense.

By observing the vitality, she could see the movements that her opponent would make.

Just like she was doing now.

As Astron launched his attack, Sylvie braced herself, her enhanced senses allowing her to perceive his movements with heightened clarity. She watched as his fist came hurtling towards her, but this time, she was prepared.

THUD!

Instead of landing on a vulnerable spot, Astron's punch collided with Sylvie's defensive posture, the impact absorbed by the barrier of mana surrounding her.

SWOOSH! SWOOSH!

As Astron followed up with successive strikes, Sylvie evaded each one with ease, her ability to sense vitality guiding her movements.

She could see the flow of energy within Astron's body, predicting his next move before he even made it.

Inside her mind, Sylvie analyzed Astron's vitality, observing the subtle shifts and fluctuations that signaled his intentions. She anticipated his attacks, moving with precision to block or evade each strike.

'He's shifting his weight to the left,' Sylvie thought inwardly as she sidestepped a punch aimed at her midsection. 'And now he's going for a low kick.'

With a swift movement, Sylvie blocked Astron's kick, her mana-infused limbs moving effortlessly to deflect the blow. As Astron recoiled from the failed attack, Sylvie saw her opening.

'An opening.'

From the start, it was emphasized that she must never miss a chance in combat, especially if she was sure that she could land a huge blow.

But, now, as she looked into the opening, she hesitated.

"Why didn't you attack?"

And someone was not happy with that.

Chapter 370 85.3 - Things sometimes end

"Why didn't you attack?" Astron's voice broke the silence, his eyes searching Sylvie's face for an answer.

Sylvie hesitated, her mind racing as she tried to find the words to explain her hesitation. She knew she had the opportunity to strike, to seize the advantage and turn the tide of the battle in her favor.

But something held her back; something deep within her psyche told her that.

"This will be our last training."

Those words somehow continued to echo in her head.

"I... I didn't think I could do it...."

She said that as an excuse. Yet, she forgot one important detail.

"That is not the reason." Astron cut her words, looking into her eyes. "You seem to forget that I was the one who taught you. You would have done it normally, but you didn't. Why?"

Astron was the one who taught her how to spar and fight from the start. Thus, with his meticulous observing skills, it wasn't that unusual for him to understand Sylvie.

Yet, at his words, Sylvie couldn't answer at all. She couldn't even think anything, let alone speak.

"T-that...."

Astron maintained his steady gaze, his eyes penetrating into Sylvie's as if searching for the truth buried within her. "That...?" he prompted, his voice insistent but somehow gentle(?).

After spending some time with him, she somehow figured out what his different flat tones meant.

But she still Sylvie struggled to form a coherent response, her thoughts tangled in a web of confusion and doubt. She couldn't pinpoint the exact reason for her hesitation, couldn't unravel the knot of emotions that held her back.

But before she could gather her thoughts, Astron spoke again, his tone soft but firm. "Even if the end wasn't satisfactory," he said, "the spar showed enough of how you've improved. You've grown stronger in certain aspects and overcome some of your weaknesses."

Sylvie blinked, taken aback by his words. She hadn't expected him to offer reassurance, to acknowledge her progress despite her perceived failure.

"You've learned to anticipate your opponent's movements, to react quickly and decisively," Astron continued, his voice carrying a note of acknowledgment. "You've become more adept at defending yourself, at utilizing your strengths in combat."

As he spoke, rather than feeling satisfactory, Sylvie felt something different. The words he spoke were signaling something, something that she already knew.

"With this," Astron's voice took on a serious tone, "you've finally grasped the basics and everything I taught you."

Sylvie's heart skipped a beat as the weight of his words settled over her. She knew this moment would come eventually, but she hadn't expected it to feel so... final.

"From this moment on," Astron continued, his gaze unwavering, "you'll be able to handle the training and everything else on your own. You've come a long way, Sylvie, and I have no doubt that you'll continue to grow stronger."

Then she understood the reason why she was feeling this uncomfortable—the reason why she didn't attack it at that time.

It was because she didn't want this time to end.

"...."

Sylvie nodded, her throat tight with emotion, her mouth closed with no words.

She knew she should feel proud and should feel grateful for all that Astron had taught her.

And yet, there was a sense of sadness lingering beneath the surface, a reluctance to let go of the mentor who had guided her every step of the way.

"This marks the end of our training together," Astron said, his voice echoing with finality. There was no space for an objection. He had already made his decision, and Sylvie, seeing his state, knew that very well.

"...."

Thus, she just shut her mouth and listened without saying anything.

What could she say anyway? Was there anything she could say, or she was supposed to?

There was a sense of unease gnawing at her, a feeling that she didn't have the right to ask for more.

After all, Astron had already given her so much—his time, his knowledge, his guidance. What more could she possibly ask for?

So, she stood there in silence, her mind a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. Part of her wanted to beg him to stay and continue their training together indefinitely. But another part knew that it would be unrealistic and entitled.

"Th...." Yet, she still forced herself to speak. Since it was about to end, she needed to at least show her gratitude.

Astron, seeing that, didn't move away either and stopped for a second, letting Sylvie form those words.

"Thank you."

As Sylvie spoke, the words felt heavy on her tongue, weighed down by the weight of everything that had transpired between them. She couldn't find the right words to express the depth of her gratitude, couldn't convey the mixture of emotions churning within her.

"No need for that, as for you have saved my life before."

But Astron's simple response was enough to ease some of the tension that had settled over her. Even though she didn't save him expecting something out of it at that time, she was reminded of the fact that at least she wasn't only on the receiving end.

"Then maybe...."

"I-if...." Sylvie hesitated, her voice faltering as she struggled to find the right words to express her request.

"If... if I ever need help in training in the future, or if I feel lost... can I come to you?" she finally managed to ask, her voice barely above a whisper.

Astron regarded her for a moment, his expression unreadable. Sylvie braced herself for rejection, for a refusal that would confirm her fears of overstepping boundaries.

"...I once said this to you, but I am not the right person to guide someone in their lives."

"That is fine."

"My ways wouldn't suit you, nor my advice."

"That is fine, too."

'I had already learned a lot from you, so why can't I learn more? With Mason at that time, you were already aware of his identity to some extent, even though I couldn't see it. It must have been the same with Danielle, too. There is still much to learn.' Sylvie thought inwardly. Yet, there was a faint glint in her eyes.

"If that is the case, you may come to me, though I can not promise I will do a good job."

"Thank you."

With a nod of acceptance, Sylvie watched as Astron turned to leave, his figure receding into the distance until he was nothing more than a silhouette against the backdrop of the training grounds.

A sense of solitude settled over her, accompanied by a twinge of sadness at the realization that their time together had come to an end. But, still, her mind continued to linger on something.

'Why does it feel like you never want to leave any loose ends? It is as if you can disappear at any time. As if you never want to form any connections. As if you want to keep every relationship as a professional give and take.' Before, she was busy with her training, and the events of the past continued to haunt her. Thus, she didn't have the empty space to think of other things.

But now that their training reached its end, Sylvie was once again reminded of the times of the past.

'I can't ask you, as I know that you will never talk. But, it is frustrating knowing that something had happened to you in the past, and it still does haunt you today, yet not knowing what it is.' The abnormal hatred and anger she had seen before in Astron's emotional palette. Even if she was now unable to see it for some reason, Sylvie knew one thing.

Such emotions and such a state were not normal, and it wouldn't be treated this fast. Those emotions must still be there.

After getting help from him all this time, she had yet to show any help.

'I need to learn what happened; I must learn it so that I can be any help to you.'

Sylvie thought to herself, finding her resolve.

"Though, I don't know how."

But it was just a stupid thought.

<Wednesday Morning, Arcadia Hunter Academy>FiNd *updates* on n(o)/velbin(.)com

The spacious training hall echoed with the sound of eager chatter as students gathered for their first swordsmanship training session.

The air buzzed with anticipation, a mix of excitement and nervousness palpable among the group.

"Hey."

Yet, everywhere, there were people whose purpose was different from others.

"Hey, I am talking to you."

A girl was trying to talk to the young boy leaning on the wall.

"What?"

The girl, Yuki, approached Astron with determined strides, her eyes ablaze with anger and frustration.

Her once pristine appearance is now marred by signs of tears, her disheveled hair mirroring the turmoil within her.

"It was you, right?" she demanded, her voice trembling with emotion as she confronted him amidst the bustling training hall.

Astron, leaning against a nearby pillar with his usual nonchalant demeanor, glanced at her with mild curiosity. His expression remained impassive, betraying little of the turmoil swirling within Yuki.

"What do you mean?" he replied casually, his tone betraying none of the intensity coursing through Yuki's veins.

Yuki's fists clenched at her sides as she struggled to contain her rising emotions. "Don't play dumb with me," she spat, her voice trembling with a mix of anger and hurt. "You know exactly what I'm talking about."

"I really don't have any idea what you are talking about." Astron arched an eyebrow, but that was it.

"You....I am talking about Aliya!"

She shouted, gathering everyone's attention. After all, many of the students knew Aliya, one of their fellow classmates who stopped attending the academy.

"Aliya?" Yet, Astron showed no reaction at all, as if it was his first time hearing this.

"Yes!" But then, seeing other people's gazes, Yuki calmed herself down since this information was confidential and must never be spread.

"They said she was dead, but they gave no explanation. And you are the last person she interacted with."

"....She is dead?"

"Don't play dumb."

"...." Astron sighed, running a hand through his unruly hair as he regarded Yuki with a hint of exasperation. "Look, I get that you're upset about Aliya or whatever, but I barely knew her. Our interaction was nothing more than a routine training session. After that, she disappeared, and I haven't seen or heard from her since."

Yuki's eyes narrowed with suspicion, her fists tightening at her sides once more. "Disappeared? Just like that?" she questioned, her voice tinged with accusation. "And you expect me to believe that it's just a coincidence?"

Astron's expression hardened, frustration evident in his features. "Believe what you will," he replied tersely. "But it's unreasonable to accuse me of something so serious based on mere speculation. And even the need for me to refute your claim itself is stupid."

Yuki's anger flared, her resolve strengthening as she prepared to confront Astron further. But before she could make a move, the door to the training hall swung open, and Instructor Eleanor entered, her presence commanding the attention of the entire room.

Eleanor stood at the front of the room, her presence commanding attention as she prepared to lead the session. Dressed in her usual practical attire, she exuded an aura of authority and expertise.

"Welcome, everyone," she began, her voice carrying easily across the room. "Today marks the beginning of our first practical swordsmanship session."