

H. Academy 421

Chapter 421 96.1 - A slight misunderstanding

'That should do it,' she thought, satisfied. 'Now. Let's see if Irina Emberheart is really hiding her strength or if someone else was there.'

Zafira moved closer to Irina, her eyes narrowing as she scrutinized the unconscious student.

According to what she knew, either Irina Emberheart was hiding her strength, or she was not the one. By putting Irina into a dangerous position, she would be able to see her real strength.

In a way, this was quite a good move in her mind. Since either she would see Irina's part of strength or she would see her dying.

At the end of the day, though she wasn't as hostile to humans as other demons are, she was still their enemy.

'Yet. No matter how much it seems, I am really inclined to believe the latter option.' After all, the strength of the spell Irina had displayed at that moment was remarkable but not enough for that bastard Belthazor.

He would have easily escaped using his own spatial attribute like a cockroach he was just as before. The way Irina Emberheart fought was not suited for one-on-one. Sure, she had many tricks in her mind, and she successfully deceived Seraphina, but that would not work against Belthazor.

BOOM! Just as she thought about it, suddenly another explosion happened right around her, and another demon contractor appeared right beside her face.

She was not seen, thanks to her disguise and her concealment, but the thing she wanted to see appeared right before her eyes.

'Let's see.' As she thought about that, she stopped to observe.

The demon contractor, a hulking figure with glowing red eyes, advanced towards Irina and the other girl beside her. His presence exuded malevolence, and his intent was clear. He was trying to capture

them, most likely, since the killing intent was not there. Yet, as he was approaching, suddenly Irina woke up.

SWOOSH!

She tried to defend herself, but her attack wasn't strong enough for her to succeed. The demon contractor's attack hit her from her head, making her unconscious.

Irina remained motionless, showing no signs of waking up, even under the imminent threat.

'Is she really this good at acting?' Zafira mused, doubt creeping in. 'Or is it as I suspected, and she isn't hiding any significant power?'

The contractor just grabbed, and at that moment, a huge amount of attack came from the other side of the arena. It was so fast that if she hadn't used her special ability to move as fast as she could, she would have been dragged into the fire and most likely destroyed in the process.

Zafira's eyes narrowed. 'So, someone else is protecting her. Just as I thought.'

'Hmm.....This is not it. This woman is from Emberheart Household. And my location can be revealed.' In an instant, she had disappeared from where she was standing and then appeared somewhere else.

'If Irina isn't the one, then who is pulling the strings?'

She began to roam around the chaotic arena, her senses heightened. She needed to find the true culprit, the one with the power to defeat Belthazor.

Zafira moved through the shadows, her eyes scanning for any sign of unusual activity.

As she observed the other people, her attention was suddenly drawn to a faint but familiar energy signature. Her heart skipped a beat. It was the energy of Belthazor. She instantly started looking for its source, her eyes darting around the arena.

The energy was fleeting, appearing and disappearing in an instant, but it was enough to send a thrill of excitement through her. 'Belthazor's energy... here?'

She focused all her senses, trying to pinpoint the source. It was elusive, almost as if whoever possessed it was intentionally masking their presence. Zafira moved swiftly, her eyes scanning every face, every movement.

The energy signature flared again, stronger this time, and Zafira honed in on its location. But just as quickly as it had appeared, it vanished. She cursed under her breath, frustrated at the missed opportunity.

Despite her best efforts, she couldn't confirm the identity of the person who possessed Belthazor's energy

But still, it was a good day for her. She had been able to confirm that the killer of Belthazor was here. The thrill of the hunt surged through her veins. 'So, you are here,' she thought, a predatory smile creeping across her lips. 'I will find you, and when I do, you will face the consequences.'

Satisfied with her discovery, Zafira decided to retreat for now. She had gathered valuable information and had a new lead to follow.

"Sophia. You are here! Thank god!"

The game had just become more interesting, and she was determined to uncover the truth behind Belthazor's death.

"I thought something happened to you. Where did you just go?"

For her, this identity seemed to be still useful for a while.

The chaos that had erupted in the amphitheater and the surrounding areas was slowly being brought under control. Eleanor and her team, along with the faculty members, moved swiftly and efficiently to wipe out the remaining threats and restore order.

After it became clear that the executives were not going to appear, the decision was made to abandon the mission and focus on quelling the commotion. The faculty members, highly skilled and prepared for such emergencies, worked in unison with the hunters.

Eleanor stood at the center of the now-quiet amphitheater, directing the efforts to round up the last of the corrupted civilians and ensure the students' safety. Her expression was a mix of relief and exhaustion, but her mind remained sharp, taking in every detail.

Within half an hour, everything was resolved. The faculty and hunters had subdued the attackers, neutralized the threats, and begun tending to the wounded. The chaos had subsided, leaving behind a tense silence.

Amidst the cleanup, Headmaster Jonathan appeared, his face a mask of stern disapproval. He surveyed the scene, his eyes narrowing as they landed on Eleanor.

"We have things to talk about," Jonathan said, his voice carrying an edge of restrained anger. "Come to my office this evening."

Eleanor nodded her head, accepting the responsibility without protest. "Understood, Headmaster."

She knew that her actions and the decisions she had made needed to be accounted for, and she was prepared to face whatever consequences awaited her. The headmaster's displeasure was evident, and she understood the gravity of the situation.

From the eyes of the Headmaster Jonathan, everything would be evident. The existence of the Hunters hidden in the crowd and those people making their appearance later than it was supposed to be made it obvious that their goal was something else.

This was something she was already expecting. Yet, if there was one thing that she hadn't expected, that would be the fact that the operation failed.

As Jonathan walked away, Eleanor turned to her colleagues. Amelia and Callum approached her, concern etched on their faces.

"What did he say?" Amelia asked quietly.

Eleanor sighed, rubbing her temples. "He wants to talk this evening. I'll have to explain everything."

Callum frowned, but at the same time, he looked at her angrily.

"We also thought we were here for something. But I guess your intel wasn't good enough."

His words were sharp and pointing, but he was never someone who would hold his words back for the sake of not hurting others.

"Now we look like clowns. How are you going to explain this to the media?"

Amelia added, her voice tense, "We risked the lives of the civilians for no reason. We could have made our appearance faster and prevented so much chaos."

Eleanor's eyes turned serious and cold. She didn't answer immediately, her gaze distant as she processed the situation. Finally, she spoke, her voice steady and authoritative. "There was a traitor amongst us. No other explanation can be made."

Callum narrowed his eyes, his anger barely contained. "Are you shifting the blame now? Instead of doubting the intel, are you actually doubting our own people?"

Eleanor met his gaze with an unwavering stare, her mind made up. She didn't flinch under his intense scrutiny. "I'm not shifting blame. I'm stating a fact. The way this operation failed, the timing of the attacks, and the lack of executive appearance all point to inside information being leaked."

Callum's frustration boiled over. "So, you're saying one of us betrayed the mission? That's a serious accusation, Eleanor."

"It is not like this is the first time it happens, isn't it?"

As she said that, Callum's eyes were narrowed.

"Not everyone is like that woman."

"But everyone has the potential to become one."

"Your worldview is skewed."

"So what? Can you refute it?"

"..."

Amelia looked between them, her own worry and confusion evident. "Eleanor, if there's a traitor, we need to find out who it is, but this isn't the time for internal conflict. We need to be united."

Eleanor nodded slightly. "I understand, Amelia. But we can't ignore the signs. Someone knew our plans. Someone ensured the executives wouldn't show. And we need to find out who that someone is."

Callum's anger simmered, but he knew deep down that Eleanor might be right. Something wasn't adding up, and the failure of the operation had too many inconsistencies. "Fine," he said through gritted teeth. "But you need evidence. You can't go around accusing people without proof. I know what you are thinking, and you can't do that."

"....."

"Eleanor."

"Fine."

Still, the dangerous glint in her eyes didn't disappear. It was evident that she was also not happy with the fact that they lost this chance to deal with those.

As the chaos began to subside and the last of the explosions were quelled, the Headmaster, Jonathan Verdict, stepped onto the center of the devastated arena. His presence alone seemed to bring a sense of calm and order amidst the lingering smoke and debris.

"Ladies and gentlemen," his voice echoed through the amphitheater, amplified by a spell to reach every corner, "I deeply apologize for the terrible incident that has taken place today. The academy has been attacked, but rest assured, the threat has been neutralized thanks to the swift actions of our staff and students."

He paused, allowing his words to sink in. The crowd, though shaken and weary, listened intently. None of them raised their complaints, but many of them seemed to have negative opinions already.

"To those who have been injured or affected by this attack, we will ensure you receive the best medical care immediately. Our first priority is your safety and well-being."

Jonathan's gaze swept across the crowd, his expression grave but composed. "In light of this incident, we will be providing accommodations for everyone affected. You will have a safe place to stay tonight, and the academy will cover all expenses. Additionally, compensations will be provided to those who have suffered losses or injuries."

He raised a hand, calling for attention. "I must also announce that the remaining matches of the duel period will be postponed until tomorrow. This will give us time to ensure the safety and security of our students and spectators, as well as to allow everyone to recover from today's events."

There were murmurs of relief and understanding among the crowd. Many nodded, appreciating the headmaster's swift and thoughtful response.

"Please follow the academy staff, who will guide you to your accommodations," Jonathan continued. "We will work through the night to ensure that tomorrow's events proceed smoothly and safely. I thank you all for your patience and cooperation during this difficult time."

With that, he stepped down from the platform, his presence still commanding respect and attention. The academy staff began to organize the crowd, directing them to the provided accommodations.

"You are finally here."

And at nighttime, when the darkness prevailed.

Under the moon, the fiery-haired girl looked at the newcomer with her blazing eyes.

Chapter 422 96.2 - A slight misunderstanding

The night was cloaked in darkness, the only light coming from the faint glow of the moon and the occasional flicker of a distant lamp post.

Irina sat on a bench under the canopy of a large tree, the shadows providing a sense of privacy and seclusion. The cool night air brushed against her skin, but she barely felt it, her mind occupied with thoughts of recent events.

'That senior.....From when she was a vampire....'

No matter how much she had thought about it, she wouldn't have known. It didn't make any sense. No, it was not even close to making any sense. After all, there was no reason for it to make one.

How come a vampire could be here working in the academy?

And how come she was the top student right under their noses like that?

She had called Astron here, wanting answers about what she had witnessed earlier. The image of him with that senior, Maya Evergreen, was still fresh in her mind.

The way Maya had protected them, the concern she had shown, and how Astron had interacted with her—it all left Irina feeling a mix of confusion and jealousy.

After all, how could she not feel jealous?

For this whole time, she thought of herself as the sole person that Astron was close to. Sure, Sylvie was somehow different from other people, and Astron seemed to care about her, but after witnessing their dynamic firsthand, she had noticed something peculiar.

Astron was more like a teacher and a guide for Sylvie. And it made sense. Since Irina also knew the talent Sylvie possessed from the start, when she found out what Sylve was capable of, she thought the same thing.

Making connections with her and getting close to her. Since it was evident that she was bound to become a great person.

But, never once did she think of Sylvie as a threat. That was how she had seen it, or maybe her own heart, but she never harbored such feelings in her heart.

But that was different now.

'How much does that Senior know? How close they are?'

Irina's thoughts were a whirlwind, her emotions a tangled mess. She was furious, not just because of Maya, but because of the realization that Astron kept many secrets and there was nothing she knew about this. Secrets that she wasn't privy to despite their growing closeness. She clenched her fists, her anger simmering just beneath the surface.

Irina's thoughts swirled with a mixture of anger, jealousy, and confusion as she replayed the events of the past few weeks in her mind.

All those moments with Astron, all the times she had felt like she was someone special to him, now seemed tainted by the revelation of his secrets.

She recalled the countless times he had been there for her, guiding her through difficult situations, offering advice, and sharing moments that felt uniquely theirs.

The camaraderie and understanding that had developed between them felt genuine, but now, she couldn't help but question if it had all been a facade.

'Was it all meaningless?' Irina asked herself, the thought gnawing at her heart. 'Or was I the only one who thought about it as special?' The quiet conversations were where he listened to her fears and doubts, offering words of comfort and reassurance. The way he looked at her with intensity made her feel like she was the only person in the world who mattered.

'Yeah,' she thought, shaking her head slightly. 'Most likely.' It was a bitter smile playing on her lips. After all, looking back now, I see that he never made any type of advancement towards her. Most of

the time, his actions stemmed from logical reasons, and he wasn't someone who acted with emotions.

'Still. Doesn't he owe me an explanation at least?'

She thought. That was what she had deserved after all the things that they did together.

TAP! TAP! TAP! The sound of footsteps approaching broke her from her reverie.

'Ah...!' She looked up to see Astron emerging from the shadows, his expression as unreadable as ever. He moved with his usual grace, his presence almost blending into the night.

Though her mind was a mess, she couldn't help but think that he made these sounds intentionally to notify her about his presence. After all, with his skills, he could easily hide in the shadows and appear on her face suddenly without any explanation at all.

"You are here."

She said, looking at him with her eyes ablaze.

"I am here."

He replied, standing before her with his coat all over his body. The night was cold, being the coldest month of the year.

Though there was no snow and the weather was clear, it was frosty and cold.

Irina's gaze met Astron's, her eyes filled with a mixture of frustration and confusion. "I called you here because I need answers," she said, her voice unwavering despite the turmoil within her.

Astron nodded, his expression serious but calm. It was as if he was already expecting this to happen.

"I understand. Ask what you need to."

And this calm answer infuriated her more. It felt like everything was a game for him, and the same was true of her feelings.

Taking a deep breath, Irina began. "What were you doing with that senior, Maya Evergreen? And why didn't you tell me anything about it?"

"Do I have any obligation to tell you about what we are doing?"

The reply was cold and harsh. His voice was calm but distant.

"Is this how it is?"

And those words pierced her heart like a needle. After all that time, it felt like her efforts had been in vain all along.

"What did you expect?" Astron replied, looking directly into her eyes.

"I at least thought....."

"You at least thought?"

Irina's voice trembled with a mix of frustration and vulnerability as she spoke, her words laced with the sting of betrayal. "I thought... At least... We were close enough to share our secrets."

Astron's expression didn't change even slightly, his gaze boring through her eyes, remaining unwavering. And that made her somehow tense since he was always like that.

She expected the words coming out of his mouth to be something that would hurt for sure. Though she wanted to close her ears, she wasn't someone that would do such a thing.

"You were right. And you still are."

However, the words spilling from his mouth were different.

"Huh?" Irina was taken aback by Astron's unexpected response. She blinked, her anger momentarily giving way to confusion and a flicker of hope. "What do you mean by that?" she asked, her voice softer, tinged with curiosity.

Astron met her gaze. "What I mean is, you're right. I do trust you enough to share some of my secrets."

Irina's cheeks flushed a delicate shade of pink at his nonchalant but sincere words. His directness left her momentarily flustered, but she quickly regained her composure. Narrowing her eyes, she refused to let him off the hook so easily. "You only revealed your strength to me because you didn't have any choice. It wasn't because you wanted to. You were forced into it."

Astron shook his head slowly. "Do you really think so?" he asked, his tone challenging yet gentle.

Irina's silence was his cue to continue. "Think about it, Irina. There were numerous ways I could have avoided your attention. I could have downplayed my abilities, made excuses, or simply stayed out of your way. But I didn't."

He paused, allowing his words to sink in before continuing. "When we were in that dungeon, I could have let you fend for yourself. I could have chosen not to intervene when you were in danger. But I didn't. I showed you what I was capable of, even if it was risky."

Irina's mind raced back to those moments. The times Astron had stepped in to help, the subtle displays of his talent had gradually shifted her impression of him. She recalled how he had saved her in the dungeon, how he had led their team through difficult challenges with unwavering confidence.

'His words are right.'

He was hiding from the world, but one way or another, he made sure to let her know about his capabilities.

And now they were even competing.

"But what is with Senior Maya, then? Why didn't you tell me about her?" she asked.

"Because Senior Maya's situation is not for me to decide. She is the one who was put into that situation. It is not my secret, but hers. Unless she decides to talk about it, I have no right to speak to someone else. Regardless of who the person is."

He stopped slightly, raising his hand.

PAT! He patted her head suddenly.

THUMP!

Irina felt her heart beating suddenly at his touch. Her body was never cold because of the innate heat the Emberheart family possessed.

But, his hand was.

"Do you think I would talk about your situation to other people if you were in her position?"

Irina blinked, caught off guard by the gentle gesture. Her anger and confusion began to melt away, replaced by a warmth that spread through her chest. His touch was reassuring, a silent promise that he valued her trust and privacy.

"I... I see," she stammered, her voice softer now. "I didn't think about it that way."

Astron continued to pat her head, his touch steady and calming. "Irina, I trust you," he said firmly. "And I respect your privacy. Just as I respect Maya's. There are things we all have to keep to ourselves until we're ready to share them."

They had already thought about this before, and Irina knew his words carried some truth. After all, there were also many things that she had always kept to herself, not telling anyone.

And she knew there were things that Astron never talked about as well.

But she also couldn't help but suspect that he was redirecting the conversation.

"But why?" Irina's voice trembled as she tried to hold back her anger. Her fists clenched at her sides, and she struggled to keep her emotions in check. "Why did you intervene in my life if you have such a relationship with Maya?"

Astron's calm demeanor remained unshaken, his eyes steady as he looked at her. "What relationship?" he asked, his tone even.

"That...Aren't you a couple?"

At that moment, she saw him shake his head.

".....No. We are not."

And her world went white.

'Noooooooooooo! What did I just do!'

She made a big blunder.

Chapter 423 97.1 - Breaking Down

<Arcadia Hunter Academy, Headmaster Jonathan's Office, Evening>

Eleanor stood outside Headmaster Jonathan's office, taking a deep breath before knocking on the heavy wooden door. The weight of the day's events pressed heavily on her shoulders, but she knew she had to face the consequences and explain her actions.

"Come in," Jonathan's voice called from inside.

Eleanor pushed the door open and stepped into the office. The room was filled with bookshelves, various artifacts, and a large desk where Headmaster Jonathan sat, his expression stern and unreadable.

"Headmaster," Eleanor greeted, closing the door behind her. She walked to the desk and stood before him, her demeanor calm and professional despite the tension in the room.

"Sit down, Eleanor," Jonathan said, gesturing to the chair opposite him.

She took a seat, meeting his gaze directly. "Thank you, Headmaster."

Jonathan leaned back in his chair, his eyes never leaving her face. "You know why you're here. Explain yourself."

Eleanor nodded. "Yes, Headmaster. I understand your concerns. Allow me to explain the reasoning behind my actions and present the evidence I have gathered."

Jonathan's expression remained stern, but he nodded for her to continue.

Eleanor took a deep breath and began. "We received credible intelligence indicating that high-ranking members of the Valkara organization were planning an attack during the final exam duels. The intel suggested that they would use the chaos to insert themselves into the academy's defenses. This information came from a source we had verified on multiple occasions."

She paused, gauging his reaction before continuing. "Given the nature of the threat, we decided to have Hunters embedded within the crowd to monitor the situation and respond if necessary. The goal was to apprehend the Valkara executives and prevent their plan from succeeding."

Jonathan's eyes narrowed slightly, but he remained silent, letting her continue.

"However, during the operation, it became clear that something was wrong. The attacks began earlier than anticipated, and the Valkara executives never showed up. This deviation from the expected plan indicated that our operation had been compromised. We suspect that a traitor within our ranks leaked the information, allowing Valkara to adjust their strategy."

Eleanor reached into her bag and pulled out a folder, placing it on the desk. "Here is the evidence we have gathered so far. It includes intercepted communications, anomalies in the timeline of events, and reports from our operatives."

Jonathan opened the folder and began to review the documents. His expression remained stern, but his eyes showed signs of interest as he scanned the evidence.

"Professor Whitaker. So, he was one of the rats."

His fists were clenched as he looked into the picture. There was nothing that he could doubt about, since the other person was undoubtedly her.

"Alisha."

A face that he didn't want to see.

"I see why you did it." He turned to look at Eleanor. "I can see the logic behind your actions, even if I do not fully agree with the approach. You should have never risked the life of innocent civilians."

"That was a necessary risk."

"No. Eleanor." Jonathan's stern voice echoed in the room. "Your judgment was clouded. As your master, I know you enough."

"...."

"Therefore, next time. Don't act like a different person. Stay as yourself. Temper your mind. Else, how can you be a guide that you always speak of?"

"...I understand, Master."

"Good."

There are many times when we overthink things. That is the basic human inclination. Finding the answers to the questions in our head.

And the more questions that we have in our head, the harder it gets for us to answer all of them at the same time.

An answer to one question can change our perception of another, making the situation somehow entangled with many things.

Then, how about Astron from Irina's perspective?

How many questions does she have regarding him?

What happened to him in the past? What is the reason he pushes himself this far? What is his motivation? Why is he always so detached?

What are these somehow fragmented memories? Why is my head filled with thoughts related to him?

Who is Estelle?

Different questions that she didn't have any answer. When she has such questions, for a mage like Irina, life suddenly becomes weird.

That was always like that. She can't think about anything other than those questions, and she somehow becomes prone to effects from the outside world on her mind. This somehow made her suspect. More suspecting than she had ever been.

Somehow, when the person in question was him, she was prone to make assumptions for some reason. It was undoubtedly not a healthy thing, and she was aware of it as well.

But she couldn't help it.

'Noooooooooooo! What did I just do!' Her face turned bright red at the realization of her misunderstanding. She froze, her heart pounding in her chest, and felt like the ground might swallow her up at any moment.

She took a step back, lowering her head in embarrassment, unable to meet Astron's steady gaze.

Her mind spiraled into a whirlwind of self-doubt and anxiety. 'He must think I'm a liability now,' she thought, her heart sinking further. 'Like a baby that needs caretaking. He must see me as a chore, something he has to manage. This whole thing must be so annoying for him.'

Each thought stung more than the last, her inner turmoil intensifying with every passing second. The confidence she usually carried felt like it was crumbling away, leaving her feeling exposed and vulnerable.

'I've made such a fool of myself,' she berated herself silently. 'Why do I always mess things up when it comes to him? Why can't I just understand what he's thinking? Why does he have to be so distant, so hard to read?'

She glanced up at him briefly, only to see his calm and composed expression. It felt like a stark contrast to the storm raging inside her. She wanted to run, to hide from the humiliation she felt.

But instead, she stood her ground, her fists clenched at her sides, fighting the urge to flee. Despite the embarrassment, despite the anxiety, she knew she couldn't run away from this. She had to face it, no matter how difficult it was.

"I am sorry. I misunderstood." She said, her tone slightly louder than normal.

'Ah.....Another mistake.'

And there was no way that this could escape from his eyes. And as she expected, he instantly picked it up.

His calm expression remained unchanged, but there was a hint of amusement in his eyes. "It's alright. Misunderstandings happen."

"Urghk....."

His slightly proud tone and his looking down on her embarrassed her more. But at the same time, it increased the resentment.

'If not for the fact that you were doing shady acts behind everyone's back with that senior, I wouldn't have misunderstood.'

The fact that somehow the situation became more on her side. It was annoying as hell.

"You...." She opened her mouth, looking at him. "You are not a couple, then?"

"Do you have a problem with understanding things on the first try?"

"Tch. Annoying bastard. I just wanted to confirm." She wanted to sulk, but she didn't.

Instead, there was something else she suddenly realized.

'This guy?'

Suppose she were to put herself into her shoes. How would she answer when she was asked such a question?

If someone had accused her the way she had just accused Astron, she would have been angry and annoyed. She would have demanded to know why they were so interested, why it mattered to them. She would have turned the questions back on them, challenging their assumptions and questioning their motives.

But Astron... he wasn't reacting that way.

Instead of getting defensive or questioning her, he remained calm, his expression unreadable. It was as if he knew something she didn't, as if he had a reason for not reacting the way she expected.

'Why isn't he asking why I care?' Irina wondered. In the past, whenever he was inconvenienced, he would always talk back and always look for the reason behind someone's actions. He would always ask, "Why?"

Why wasn't he doing that now?

The realization hit her like a cold splash of water. He wasn't asking why because, on some level, he already knew. He understood why she cared, why she was asking these questions. He wasn't challenging her because he didn't need to; he had already figured out the answer.

'This....'

Suddenly, something flashed right in front of her eyes. The way he reads people is like a book.

Why did she not think of this until now? Why did she just assume that he didn't notice her feelings?

Why did she think that she could hide herself from his eyes?

Why did she do that?

'Of course. He already knew from the start, hadn't he?' After all the time they had spent together, the amount of subconscious signs that she had sent to him must have been immersed.

There was no way he would miss such signs. He was not such a guy after all.

'But, he hadn't responded in any way at all. All this time, he never showed that he knew about this as if everything was as normal as before.' Irina's thoughts continued to race. She analyzed Astron's behavior, replaying their interactions in her mind. The way he never connected with people more than necessary, always keeping a distance. The way he acted as if he could disappear at any moment, leaving no trace behind.

Then, suddenly, a blurry scene flashed before her eyes, causing a sharp pain to pierce through her head. She winced, clutching her temples as the memory forced its way to the surface.

A girl's chest was pierced by the claws of a demon. The young boy with black hair and purple eyes screamed in agony.

"ESTELLE! NO!"

'A demon?'

Irina asked herself, the memory sending waves of pain and confusion through her. She tried to focus on the scene, to make sense of it, but it remained hazy and fragmented.

The headache intensified, making her feel as though her skull was being split open. But despite the pain, the scene became clearer. The creatures with huge builds, their forms dark and menacing, surround the girl.

'The demons?' Irina thought, the realization hitting her like a ton of bricks. The memory was not just a figment of her imagination. It was real, a part of Astron's past that he had never shared with anyone.

At that moment, as the night sky was lit by the crescent moon, she realized. She realized what had happened to him.

His past actions, how he behaved, and these visions. Everything made sense.

She looked at Astron, her eyes wide with a mixture of shock and understanding.

"What? What happened?"

She looked into his eyes.

'Is this real? Is this really true?'

Questions gnawed in her heart. And she was hesitant to ask.

Since she knew.

The moment she would ask about this, things would never be the same. And a part of her....

Was scared.

'Me? Scared?' She asked herself. No, this wouldn't be the case. She had already promised herself that she would never shy away from anything regarding him.

She would not avoid the situations.

She would face things head-on.

That was the way of Irina Emberheart.

Thus, she stood facing him.

"Estelle."

And she uttered the name.

SHUDDER!

And in an instant, she felt a suffocating feeling that she had never felt before.

Death.

The feeling of death.

Chapter 424 97.2 - Breaking Down

"Estelle."

As the name "Estelle" left Irina's lips, the atmosphere shifted drastically. The calm night air turned heavy and oppressive, and a suffocating aura of death enveloped her.

Astron's demeanor changed in an instant. His eyes, which usually held a detached, calculating coldness, transformed into black voids, void of any warmth or light. His entire presence radiated a chilling, almost tangible malevolence. The pressure emanating from him was unlike anything Irina had ever felt, and she struggled to breathe, her vision beginning to blur as the weight of his killing intent bore through her body.

'This is.....'

It was an insane amount of killing intent. For this whole time that she had lived, this was the first time she was feeling such a thing.

'He really wants to kill me. Right here, right now!'

She shuddered, her body shaking uncontrollably. The world around her seemed to turn black as if Astron's very essence was consuming the light. Despite the terror coursing through her veins, she forced herself to stand her ground, refusing to back down.

"You..." Astron's voice was low and filled with a dangerous edge. "How do you know that name?"

The intensity of his gaze made Irina feel as though she was staring into the abyss itself. Her heart pounded in her chest, but she summoned every ounce of her courage to meet his gaze.

"I knew it," she said, her voice trembling but resolute. "Those were the events of the past."

Astron took a step closer, the pressure increasing. Irina felt as if her lungs were being crushed, but she refused to look away.

"You have no idea what you're talking about," he hissed, his voice barely more than a whisper yet filled with lethal intent.

"...Urghk....." It felt like he was strangling her down. With his hands covered on her neck. But she knew he was just standing still without moving. It was the result of his intent.

"Grrr....."

However, even if one had such a strong killing intent, that wouldn't mean they could kill everyone walking around. This world didn't work like that.

She started forcefully expelling her mana and strengthening her own aura. The fire in her chest burned, fighting against the intent.

She was once again regaining control of her body once again. She felt like breathing became easier, as did moving her mouth.

Now that it came down to this, she had no reason to back off. If she were to confront him, if she were to become his enemy, she didn't want to stay in darkness where she didn't know anything about him.

Just like a side heroine who just stood there as an accessory. She didn't want something like that.

"No. I know everything," she said, her voice growing stronger as she forced herself to stand tall. "Estelle was your sister. She was a good-natured, kind individual. A strong young girl who bore the responsibility of the village."

Astron's expression remained cold and unreadable, but Irina pressed on, drawing from the fragments of memories and visions she had pieced together.

"She was a strength to her younger brother, who was rather weak," Irina continued. "You grew up together, your bond unbreakable. You spent your nights together, sharing your dreams and fears, supporting each other through everything."

The intensity of Astron's killing intent began to waver, the pressure easing slightly as Irina's words struck a chord within him.

"But then, the demons came," Irina said, her voice trembling with the weight of the memories. "They took her from you. They took everything. And you were forced to watch it all happen, powerless to stop it."

Astron's eyes flickered with a mixture of pain and anger, the darkness within him shifting as the memories resurfaced. Irina could see the torment in his gaze, the agony of reliving those moments.

"She lost her life at the hands of those monsters," Irina said softly, her voice filled with empathy. "And you were left to bear the weight of that loss. The guilt, the anger, the pain—it has haunted you ever since."

For a moment, there was silence between them, the oppressive atmosphere lifting slightly as the truth hung in the air.

Irina took a step closer, her eyes never leaving Astron's.

"Yeah, you are right," Astron replied. But instead of feeling like reminiscing about the past or being in pain, his eyes were cold.

"All these were right." He said, his eyes turning cold once again. "You already know everything."

SCHLINK! Under the glowing moonlight, he drew the blades, getting them out of nowhere.

"That is why you already know what I am going to do." He mumbled.

Irina's heart raced as the realization struck her. He wasn't just angry—he was ready to kill her. The light flashed before her eyes as the blade approached her neck with terrifying speed.

She was caught off guard, unable to react in time. The swiftness of his attack left her no room to defend herself. The world seemed to slow down as the blade drew nearer, and at that moment, Irina felt a deep sense of regret. Not because she was about to die but because she couldn't help the person who had once helped her so much.

As the blade hovered millimeters from her neck, she sat there, her voice trembling with a mix of fear and determination. "Do you really think this is what Estelle would want you to do?"

The words hung in the air, and for a split second, everything stopped. The blade remained poised at her neck, but it did not move further.

Astron's eyes widened slightly, the cold void in them wavering. The question seemed to pierce through his rage, reaching a part of him that had been buried under layers of pain and anger.

And that was at that moment of exploitation that she had been waiting.

"That is right. No matter what, you are not an inhumane machine. You are a human, too." "Is this how she would want her brother to act if she were here? To remove anyone that comes close to him?" she pressed on, her voice gaining strength with each word. "Is this your way of coping with

your loss? Constantly training to no end, tiring yourself out? Constantly trying to detach yourself from the world, never having anything for yourself to do?"

Astron's grip on the blade tightened further, his eyes reflecting the turmoil within him. Irina's words were like arrows piercing through the armor he had built around his heart.

"Is this how you respect the life that was saved by the person you loved the most?" Irina continued, her tone filled with both challenge and compassion. "Is this the value you put into her efforts to make this life possible?"

"Do you think I wanted that!" Astron's voice broke through Irina's words, filled with anger and anguish. For the first time, his usually calm and emotionless face was contorted with raw emotion. "Do you think that was what I wanted? Do you think I wanted to live like this, huh?!"

Irina took a step back, her eyes wide as she watched the storm of emotions erupting from Astron. The intensity of his feelings was overwhelming, and she could feel the weight of his pain in every word.

"I never wanted this!" Astron continued, his voice trembling with rage and sorrow. "I never wanted to live in a world where I had to constantly train, constantly fight, constantly detach myself from everything and everyone. Do you think I enjoy this? Do you think this is what I chose?"

His grip on the blade tightened, his knuckles turning white. "I was supposed to be the one who died. It should have been me! Estelle was the one who deserved to live, not me! She was strong, kind, and everything I wasn't. She was the one who should have had a future, not me!"

Astron's eyes were cold as he continued, his voice cracking with emotion.

"But instead, everything was taken from her. Her life, her dreams, her future. And I was left here with nothing but guilt and pain. I don't deserve anything good in this life. I'm not someone who should have happiness or peace. I'm supposed to pay for my weakness and my inability to protect her."

He paused, his chest heaving as he struggled to catch his breath. "Do you know what it's like to feel that kind of guilt every day? To wake up every morning knowing that you're the reason someone else is dead? To know that no matter what you do, you can never make up for it?"

But the more she listened, the more she got angry. After all those things that they did together, this guy was doing the same thing to himself again and again.

The hatred he had towards himself.

She knew it all too well. She knew how this felt.

After all, she, too, lost someone, maybe not in the same manner as him, but in a similar way. At that time, she didn't know what he was going through or how he was having a hard time. And at the end of the day, he lost himself at the expectations thrown at him.

She still remembered the face that he made when he lost himself. That was why she couldn't tolerate it. She couldn't tolerate being in the same position once again.

To be the one who is unable to help. To just stand back and watch everything.

"I know."

Thus, she stood up.

"A certain someone told me that I was not the only person who lost someone in this world. As a reminder of my own actions."

She was getting angrier with each second.

'Who does this bastard think he is? Does he think the world revolves around him? Does he think just suffering alone will make everything right? Does he really think nobody wants to be on his side?'

The more she thought about it, the more she got angrier at him.

"But it seems that bastard has forgotten to say the same thing to himself."

Fire once again burned around her body, stemming from her heart.

"So let me tell him for his own sake."

She brought her face closer to him.

He got somehow taller, and he was now towering over her a little. But that didn't matter at that moment.

"You stupid bastard. You are not the only one who lost someone in this world. You are not the only one who is in pain."

"...."

Astron's eyes widened slightly, but he remained silent, absorbing her words.

"But you are certainly one thing," Irina continued, her voice unwavering. "You are a coward. A coward who is afraid of making any connections just because he is afraid to lose someone once again."

The accusation hung in the air, and Irina could see the impact it had on Astron. His expression tightened, but he didn't look away.

"And what an irony it is," Irina said with a bitter laugh, "that I fell for such a cowardly bastard."

Without giving him a chance to respond, Irina closed the distance between them, her heart pounding in her chest. She reached up and cupped his face with her hands, her eyes locked onto his.

Then, with a surge of emotion, she leaned in and pressed her lips to his.

Chapter 425 97.3 - Breaking Down

There are times when we are forced to do things that we do not want.

No matter how things happen, not everything can be accounted for. But even then, those who tend to overthink a lot think of many scenarios in their heads.

They think of all their memories of the time. And it is not a good thing to do. Not something that is good for your mental health.

Especially if it is paired with an insanely good memory.

The moment that you have one of the best memories in the world. You can't ever forget, no matter how hard you are trying to do.

No matter how many times pass, those memories will never be forgotten. You will find yourself looking at every bit of those details in your head. You will check the details ever and ever again. You will try to understand everything in your head, trying to make sense of everything.

You will eventually become more of a logical person.

Or maybe it is just me?

The answer is not clear, but one thing is certain. I knew something like this could happen.

From all the way Irina had acted, the way she looked at me, the way she constantly got migraines when she was with me since Phantom's Land.

Belthazor's attribute was psychic, and my memories somehow were hazy, as if an external influence had interfered with them.

Everything pointed out something that happened in Phantom's Land, and something somehow revealed my past to Irina.

What happened on that cursed day? What happened on that damned day. The reason why I am here is my initial and maybe the biggest weakness.

If someone were to learn about my past, there was only one thing that I could do. I had conditioned myself for the sake of such a thing happening.

To erase any variables that can occur.

I would destroy the evidence or the witness.

That was how it was supposed to be. That was exactly what I did at that time of fire.

To start a clear life, I sacrificed many people other than myself. However, undoubtedly, given the opportunity, they would do the same.

However, up to this point, I waited.

I waited because I didn't want to just remove an important character from the world. Because Irina is a crucial being in this world that is very important for the future.

A strength that no one can reach easily. She possesses insane amounts of talent destructively, so much so that even I won't be able to rival her at some point.

The future fire Archmage. I didn't want to remove her just because of mere speculations of mine. The damage that would be caused by this would weigh the gains more.

That was up to this point, at least.

"Estelle."

Since that name left her mouth. Since that would mean she had figured out many things that she was never supposed to.

That was why I can no longer hold myself back. She needs to be removed.

But still. I wanted to ask something.

I wanted to make sure that that name didn't come from her mouth for no reason.

"You..."

That was why I asked.

"How do you know that name?"

Because I wanted to learn if she had heard it from someone.

I wanted to learn if that certain someone who somehow messed with my plans ended up talking to Irina.

"....."

Of course, it seemed like she was having a hard time peaking. That was what I intended to do. After all, no matter what, shaking up your opponent's mental health is always good for revealing more about what they know.

But Irina wasn't backing down. She fought against my killing intent, her fiery spirit defying my overwhelming presence. I had to give her credit for that. Not many could withstand such pressure, let alone push back against it.

It was because I was already influencing my killing intent with a psych-attributed mana. It was a trump card that I had been developing for a while, and it seemed certain that it was a useful ability.

Her body should have been affected, and even breathing must have started becoming hard.

But it seemed this girl still had the willpower to go against it.

"No. I know everything," she said, her voice growing stronger as she forced herself to stand tall. "Estelle was your sister. She was a good-natured, kind individual. A strong young girl who bore the responsibility of the village."

Her words struck a chord within me. Memories of Estelle flooded my mind, and for a moment, my resolve wavered.

But I couldn't let that show. Not now.

"She was a strength to her younger brother, who was rather weak," Irina continued. "You grew up together, your bond unbreakable. You spent your nights together, sharing your dreams and fears, supporting each other through everything."

The intensity of my killing intent began to waver, the pressure easing slightly as Irina's words struck a chord within me.

Why?

I wondered. Out of all that time now, why were her words affecting me? What was the reason for that? I had already resolved myself for what was about to come and readied my dagger for everything.

But why was nothing happening now?

Why were my fingers clenched?

"But then, the demons came." The words continued, recounting the story that I didn't want to remember. "They took her from you. They took everything. And you were forced to watch it all happen, powerless to stop it."

'Should I just kill you? How dare you speak like you know everything.'

The emotions were somehow getting out of control once again. I made this evident with my intent as she stopped talking for a second.

"URghk-!....." But she didn't waver at all.

"She lost her life at the hands of those monsters. And you were left to bear the weight of that loss. The guilt, the anger, the pain—it has haunted you ever since."

'.....' For a moment, there was silence between us.

Irina took a step closer, her eyes never leaving mine. In those eyes, I saw resolution, but at the same time, she was relaxed.

It was as if she had trusted me enough that she was sure I wouldn't kill her.

'You really think I don't?'

And that was when I decided to do it even though something inside me was telling me otherwise.

Even though my hand that went to reach the dagger somehow hesitated, I was resolved.

"Yeah, you are right," I replied. But instead of feeling like reminiscing about the past or being in pain, my eyes were cold.

"All these were right," I said, my eyes turning cold once again. "You already know everything."

SCHLINK!

Under the glowing moonlight, I drew my blades. This same moonlight that became my companion on my journey somehow didn't light my blades this time.

As if it was protesting the thing that I was doing.

"That is why you already know what I am going to do," I mumbled.

And then, I went as I had practiced countless times – raising the dagger, clenching my legs, and suddenly dashing explosively.

My right hand is on behind to keep my balance while my left hand rotates with my whole body. A classic practiced movement that capitalizes on the enemy's surprise.

I could see her eyes widening as the realization struck her. I wasn't just angry—I was ready to kill her.

She was caught off guard, unable to react in time. The swiftness of my attack left her no room to defend herself.

As the blade hovered millimeters from her neck, she sat there, her voice trembling with a mix of fear and determination. "Do you really think this is what Estelle would want you to do?"

TANG! And that certain name and those words somehow struck something inside me. At that moment, it felt as if the world had stopped.

Sometimes, at the corner of my eyes, I felt like I had seen the light rising from my chest. It could have been my mistake, but just for a split second, it looked as if a crescent moon of color green shone right on my neck.

"Brother. Is this really what you want?"

And I heard a voice in my head.

A voice that is so familiar yet so distant. In a place that I can never reach, yet I can't help but long for.

"After all this time that you had spent together. Can you really kill this girl?" She talked as if she knew everything. To be frank, remembering the past, she was always like that. She always guided me when I acted immature. When I lost myself, she gave me a reason to live and showed me the path.

'I need to. You know I can't reveal anything to the world. Nobody should know I am here.' "Is this the reason you gave yourself? Just so that things become easier?" I wanted to refute this.

But I couldn't.

"Is this how she would want her brother to act if she were here? To remove anyone that comes close to him?"

"Of course not. I never wanted you to do anything like this, brother." It was as if she was answering Irina on my behalf. As if she was here to talk to me. As if she was here right on my side.

Somehow, under the dimly lit moonlight, I could see a faint silhouette on my side. Maybe I was going crazy.

Or maybe I was already crazy from the start?

"Is this your way of coping with your loss? Constantly training to no end, tiring yourself out? Constantly trying to detach yourself from the world, never having anything for yourself to do?"

My grip on the blade tightened further, my eyes reflecting the turmoil within me.

"Is this how you respect the life that was saved by the person you loved the most?" Irina continued, her tone filled with both challenge and compassion. "Is this the value you put into her efforts to make this life possible?"

I hated to hear anything from her right now. I hated how she looked like she knew everything about me.

I hated how I couldn't refute it, how I couldn't speak my way out like I always did.

I hated how I could just see her silhouette standing right behind Irina with a smile.

Chapter 426 97.4 - Breaking Down

I hated how I could just see her silhouette standing right behind Irina with a smile. That was why I couldn't keep it inside. This feeling that I had been keeping to myself they were ready to burst out.

"Do you think I wanted that!" My voice broke through Irina's words, filled with anger and anguish. For the first time, I found myself feeling such emotions. "Do you think that was what I wanted? Do you think I wanted to live like this, huh?!"

Irina took a step back, her eyes wide.

"I never wanted this!" Words spilled from my mouth without control. Maybe they were directed to Irina facing me.

Maybe they were directed to her silhouette.

Or maybe they were directed to somewhere else.

"I never wanted to live in a world where I had to constantly train, constantly fight, constantly detach myself from everything and everyone. Do you think I enjoy this? Do you think this is what I chose?"

My grip on the blade tightened, my knuckles turning white. "I was supposed to be the one who died. It should have been me!"

I never wanted to live in the first place. The life was already hard when we were young. Seeing the face that Mother and Father made when they saw me in contrast to you, seeing how we were trapped in a village and could never get out.

Seeing the disparity of treatments that we received. Such a life. I never wanted to continue doing that.

But you.

Weren't you different? Didn't you want to live to help other people?

I was not like that. I didn't want to live such a life. But for you, I was ready to do everything.

But where are you now?

Somewhere I can't reach?

Then, what is the point of living?

You were the one who was supposed to live.

So don't give me such a look.

"Estelle was the one who deserved to live, not me! She was strong, kind, and everything I wasn't. She was the one who should have had a future, not me!"

My eyes were cold as I continued, my voice cracking with emotion.

"But instead, everything was taken from her. Her life, her dreams, her future. And I was left here with nothing but guilt and pain."

The words that were directed to her.

The resentment that I had built up after all this time.

There was a saying that I once remembered.

'Death is tough for people that are left behind on Earth.'

At that time, I couldn't understand it, as my world was always filled with standing on top. But, seeing her leaving with a smile, I understood.

The pain.

It was just too much.

That was why I couldn't accept it.

'Why? Why did you smile as if you were doing something good? Why did you think I would be happy living such a life when you were not around?'

It was selfish.

It was selfish, unlike her.

For a person who had lived her whole life helping other people, her last moments were uncharacteristically selfish for her own good.

Never thinking about what the person left behind would do. How could they navigate their end?

She just selfishly left this world with a smile.

Without considering how that same smile would haunt me in my every dream.

So please tell me.

How can I not resent this sister of mine who became selfish when it came to me?

How can I not resent her when she is not letting me even now?

How can I not resent her when she is forcing me to face myself and my own actions?

And that is why, with my heart filled with resentment, I wanted to convey what the person who got left behind thought to the one who left.

Even if she was not real, I at least wanted her to know how I felt so that she would feel some guilt for her own actions.

So that she wouldn't do such a thing next time or maybe in some parallel world.

"I don't deserve anything good in this life. I'm not someone who should have happiness or peace. I'm supposed to pay for my weakness and my inability to protect her."

My breaths got rough for a split second, making it a lot harder for me to continue. It was as if the world was telling me to take a break.

Her eyes looking at me were somehow filled with sadness.

Were they Irina's eyes, or were they Estelle's? I wondered. But it didn't matter.

I would convey everything to her so that she would understand.

That stone-headed sister of mine was somehow hard to catch up, you see.

"Do you know what it's like to feel that kind of guilt every day? To wake up every morning knowing that you're the reason someone else is dead? To know that no matter what you do, you can never make up for it?"

As the words spilled from my mouth, I felt a sense of turmoil within me. It was as if the floodgates had opened, and all the emotions I had kept bottled up for so long were finally pouring out. But at the same time, there was a strange sense of relaxation, a release that I had never felt before.

For the first time, it felt like I was truly confronting my pain and anger, acknowledging the depth of my suffering.

But then, Irina's voice broke through the haze of my emotions, grounding me in the present moment.

"I know."

Somehow, it felt like her tone was filled with anger.

And turning my head to the side, I could see her eyes ablaze. The fire around her body was getting stronger with each second.

"A certain someone told me that I was not the only person who lost someone in this world. As a reminder of my own actions."

She was getting angrier with every second. I could see that. I knew her enough to understand that.

"But it seems that bastard has forgotten to say the same thing to himself."

Fire once again burned around her body, stemming from her heart.

"So let me tell him for his own sake."

She brought her face closer to mine.

'She somehow looks small.' Maybe I had released everything I had in my chest, and I was strangely calmer than I thought I was.

"You stupid bastard. You are not the only one who lost someone in this world. You are not the only one who is in pain."

My eyes widened slightly. This girl. She somehow looked like she knew everything.

And then, at that moment, I remembered.

How the game told her story. How the game showed flashbacks of him. The sole person that Irina could never forget.

There was such a thing.

"....."

But I remained silent, absorbing her words. It seemed like she had more things to say to me.

"But you are certainly one thing," Irina continued, her voice unwavering. "You are a coward. A coward who is afraid of making any connections just because he is afraid to lose someone once again."

The accusation hung in the air, and I didn't refute.

Because I already knew that was true. For the whole time, I was afraid of making connections. The way I had pushed Ethan back and got irritated when he pushed to know me more.

Even though there were countless different people who wanted to understand me, I pushed them all back.

The reason was.

I was afraid.

Because I knew I would never be able to get over it if I had lost someone once again.

It was a bit shameful that this girl somehow came to learn about this. But I didn't look away.

"And what an irony it is," Irina said with a bitter laugh, "that I fell for such a cowardly bastard."

Following that, she somehow brought her face closer to mine.

THUMP! Even if our bodies were far away, I could hear her heart beating fast under this moonlight, where no soul was around us; her heart and mine were the only sources of sound.

Her body moved.

PAT! She reached up and cupped my face with her hands, her eyes locked onto mine. In her eyes, I could see her hesitation. I could see how she was nervous as if she was not sure what she was even doing.

I had plenty of time to react.

If I wanted, I could easily reach for her hand to remove them from my cheeks.

I could stop her advances with a single motion. I knew my reaction times down to the millisecond, my speed of body perfectly honed from countless hours of training and combat.

But I didn't move.

Instead, I found myself remembering something Garrett had once told me when we were alone.

"Look, kid, know you're capable. You've already come a long way." "But you can't fight the entire world on your own."

His words echoed in my mind, mingling with the steady rhythm of Irina's heartbeat.

Maybe Garrett was right.

Maybe I didn't have to carry this burden by myself.

Maybe there were people who could help me, who wanted to help me.

Irina's hands on my cheeks were warm, grounding me in the present moment. I looked into her eyes and saw her determination, her resolve. She wasn't just acting on impulse; she had made a conscious decision to reach out to me, to break through the walls I had built around myself.

And so, I let her have her way, respecting her resolve.

Her face drew even closer, and I could feel her breath on my lips. There was a vulnerability in her eyes that mirrored my own.

Her lips met mine, and for a moment, everything else faded away.

The world narrowed down to just the two of us, standing under the moonlight, connected by something deeper than words.

Her kiss was soft and tentative, filled with a mixture of fear and hope.

And I couldn't help but feel my hands reaching out their way to her waist, pulling her closer.

The intensity of the moment was overwhelming, a mix of raw emotion and unspoken understanding passing between us.

For the first time, I thought.

'Maybe sometimes letting it go is not bad.'

Chapter 427 97.5 - Breaking Down

Irina was a girl who was a fast thinker. When she was alone and didn't have anything to keep herself busy with, she tended to imagine things.

Think about the past, remember what had happened.

She sometimes remembered some unpleasant memories of her childhood. The times when she was filled with helplessness against the world, thanks to the matriarch of the family.

That was how it went until recently.

From the moment she entered the academy, things changed. When she was free, she used to think about things that made her angry, but after a certain point, the things that annoyed her somehow changed.

And she knew the reason for that.

At the start, it started as a genuine annoyance.

Because she couldn't stand seeing him. Because it all reminded her of her childhood.

But then it slowly changed. Maybe it was because he had changed her perception of him rapidly, or maybe he was someone with whom she had good chemistry.

At some point, her head was filled with thoughts regarding him.

He had always answered her back, talking back. And she could never win a good argument against him. No matter what happened, he would always somehow become the winner and the one who got to say the last word.

And she hated that. She hated losing since she couldn't forget any loss.

Thus, she started playing those conversations in her head, finding answers she could possibly give him when she had the chance. At a certain point, it happened so frequently that she even forgot the unpleasant memories of her childhood. Most of her thoughts when she was free became related to him.

Over time, her perception of him began to change. She became conscious of how he looked, noticing his face, his eyes, his gaze, and the small gestures he subconsciously made. She paid attention to his way of talking, the tone of his voice, and even the way he dressed. Each detail fascinated her more than the last.

As her perception changed, strange and unexpected thoughts started to creep into her mind. It all began because of a certain post she had read online, a post that described how easily one could fall for someone they argued with frequently, someone who challenged them intellectually. The post claimed that such tension often masked deeper feelings.

"Because of that post, my thoughts are no longer normal," she muttered to herself at that time. She found herself fantasizing about him in ways she never had before.

One day, she became particularly conscious of his lips. It happened when they were arguing about something trivial, and she noticed how his lips moved when he spoke, how they curved into a subtle pose when he got the better of her in an argument.

That day, she found herself wondering what it would feel like to taste those lips. The thought was intrusive and persistent, making it hard for her to concentrate on anything else.

'How would it feel to kiss him?' She asked herself, again and again, the thought consuming her. It was a ridiculous notion, she told herself, but the idea wouldn't leave her mind. She found herself glancing at his lips whenever they talked, imagining the sensation, the warmth.

"And what an irony it is that I fell for such a cowardly bastard."

But, now, she had found how it felt. The taste of his lips, she now knew.

As her lips met him, Irina felt a rush of warmth and electricity surge through her. The world around her seemed to fade away, leaving only the two of them in a bubble of shared intimacy.

His lips were soft yet firm, a perfect balance that made her heart race. The taste was a mix of something indescribable yet familiar, a blend of emotions and sensations that she had longed to experience.

'Ah.....This is.....' She lost herself in the kiss, her mind blank as her senses focused entirely on the feel of him.

It was as if time had stopped, and nothing else mattered but this connection. She could feel the intensity of his emotions through the kiss, a depth that she hadn't expected from someone so seemingly detached.

SHIVER! Then, she felt his hand on her waist, pulling her closer to him. She flinched at the touch, a shiver running down her spine as she looked into his eyes.

'No.....'

The usual calm and emptiness were gone, replaced by a desire that took her breath away. His eyes, those deep, dark pools, were now filled with a longing that mirrored her own.

For a moment, they simply looked at each other, the air between them charged with unspoken words and emotions. Irina could see the vulnerability in his gaze, the silent plea for understanding and acceptance. It was a side of Astron she had never seen before, a side that made her heart ache with tenderness.

She reached up, her hand trembling slightly as she cupped his cheek, her thumb brushing over his skin.

'It is smooth....'

She thought at the feeling of his skin.

"My words.....Did they touch your heart?" She asked, lowering her hand to his heart. It was not beating as fast as she thought it would be.

At least compared to her own heart, it was definitely beating slower. And somehow, she was a little annoyed.

"It did." Yet, hearing his reply, she couldn't help but forget her annoyance.

"I am glad." She spoke. "Glad that you have accepted it."

His hand tightened on her waist, pulling her even closer. "Really?" His voice contained a slight sense of mischievousness. Though she was sure any outside person would not understand it, she could.

Because she already got used to it.

"Really." She replied, and then she raised her head. "Do you know what I do when I become happy?"

Astron's gaze softened. "What?"

Irina's smile broadened, her eyes twinkling with a mix of mischief and affection. "I become greedy when I'm happy."

Before Astron could respond, she cupped his cheeks, her touch gentle but firm. "Hope you wouldn't mind it. Not that you have a choice now."

With those words, she pulled him down, closing the distance between them once more.

Their lips met in a passionate kiss, filled with the emotions they had both kept hidden for so long.

This time, the kiss was deeper, more intense. Irina felt herself melt into it, losing herself in the warmth and the connection they shared.

She felt his hand move up to her back, pulling her even closer, their bodies pressed together. She did the same, raising her arms to entangle them on his nape.

The taste of his lips was intoxicating, a blend of sweetness and intensity that left her craving more. Somehow, she could feel that he had opened up.

He lowered the walls that he had built around his psyche. To defend himself from the world.

The kiss conveyed everything they couldn't put into words: a silent conversation of hearts and souls.

Irina's fingers tangled in his hair, pulling him even closer as if she couldn't get enough. She felt his breath mix with hers, their hearts beating in sync. It was a moment of pure, unadulterated connection, a moment where everything else faded away, leaving only the two of them.

When they finally broke apart, both of them were breathless, their foreheads resting against each other's. Irina's eyes fluttered open, meeting Astron's gaze. The vulnerability, the understanding, and the unspoken promises in his eyes made her heart swell with emotion.

"You seem to be getting ahead of yourself," Astron murmured, his voice low. Yet, contrary to his words, his tone felt different.

The tone that he had never made before.

He felt happy?

Unable to control herself, she looked into the expression he made.

And she had witnessed something for the first time.

A smile on his face.

A smile that was so small that it could be brushed as if a slight twist of expression. THUMP!

And it was detrimental to her heart.

It skipped a beat as she saw the slight smile on Astron's face.

It was a small, almost imperceptible twist of his lips, but it was there, and it was real.

For the first time, she saw a glimpse of the person beneath the stoic exterior, the person who had hidden his pain and emotions so well. She had never seen him smile before. His face had always been a blank canvas, void of any genuine emotion. He was distant, aloof, always keeping others at arm's length.

But now, at this moment, she saw a side of him that he had never shown to anyone who was still in this world.

A warmth spread through her chest, filling her with a sense of joy and hope. The small smile on his face was a testament to the connection they shared, the bond that had grown between them. It was a sign that, despite everything, he was beginning to let her in.

"You're smiling," she whispered, her voice filled with wonder. "I've never seen you smile before."

Astron's eyes widened.

"....."

And just like that. It was gone.

The warmth that had filled Irina's chest began to waver as she watched Astron's expression change. The small smile that had graced his lips vanished, replaced by the familiar coldness that she had grown accustomed to.

A sense of disappointment washed over her. It had been such a rare and precious moment, and now it was gone. For a brief second, she even questioned if she had seen it at all. Maybe she had imagined it, a figment of her desperate hope.

But then, something else caught her eye. A faint blush of crimson on his cheeks. Astron's skin was pale, and the color stood out, making it impossible for her to miss.

'He really smiled. It wasn't my imagination,' she thought, feeling a mix of relief and renewed affection. 'And it was so beautiful.' That smile. She could get addicted to it.

"You can hide your smile," Irina said softly, her voice tinged with amusement, "but you can't hide that blush."

She felt like she was winning it, having the upper hand.

Yet, that bastard recovered faster than she thought.

"It's coming from you," he retorted as he signaled towards her face. "Your face is way too red for you to be talking like that."

Irina blinked, taken aback by his quick comeback. She suddenly became acutely aware of the heat radiating from her own cheeks, the sweat beading on her forehead. Her skin felt hot, and she realized just how flustered she was.

"Tch," she clicked her tongue in annoyance, though the embarrassment in her voice was evident. "You just always have to get the last word, don't you?"

Astron's eyes were slowly curved, somehow turning into a teasing one. He slowly leaned forward, his mouth reaching for her ear.

And then, he whispered.

"If you want to beat me. You need to practice a lot."

SHUDDER! And Irina shuddered, standing like a frozen statue.

THUD! And then, Astron got up in an instant.

He started to walk away, the distance between them growing with each step. But just before he left, he stopped and turned back, his expression softened by the moonlight.

"Thank you. Thank you for making me face myself. You are the best," he said, a beautiful smile spreading across his face.

The moonlight lit up his presence, and at that moment, he looked like the purest thing in the world to Irina. She stood there, mesmerized by the sight, thinking, 'This is the smile I need to protect.'

As Astron turned and continued to walk away, Irina felt a surge of determination well up inside her. She knew she needed to protect him.

From the things that made him turn into a demon contractor and self-destruct.

She would do whatever it takes to keep that smile on his face.

Chapter 428 97.6 - Breaking Down

As I walked away from Irina, the night air felt cooler against my skin, a stark contrast to the warmth of her touch.

The moon hung high in the sky, casting a silvery glow over the academy grounds. Each step I took felt like a start of a different road.

I couldn't help but replay the moments in my mind—the anger, the anguish, and then the unexpected tenderness.

Irina's words had cut through my defenses, forcing me to confront the emotions I had buried for so long. Her determination, her fiery spirit, had reached a part of me I had thought was long dead.

'You are a coward. A coward who is afraid of making any connections just because he is afraid to lose someone once again.'

Her accusation echoed in my mind, each word a painful truth I had been avoiding. She was right. I had been running away, hiding behind my walls of detachment and cold logic.

And somehow, I found myself giving up the defenses.

'Ironic, isn't it? Thinking that she was just a bratty girl and then getting life lessons from someone like her.' I felt like laughing at myself. For the first time, I had allowed someone to break through those walls to see the person I truly was.

I stopped walking, looking up at the moon. The calm, serene light seemed to offer some solace, a reminder that the world was vast and full of possibilities. Garrett's words came back to me, blending with Irina's challenge.

'You don't have to carry the world on your own. There are people who can help you.'

Though it felt like a lot more time needed to pass for me to completely open up everything, taking this step was at least a start, wasn't it?

'I wonder how you would react if you were here?'

I thought, looking at my neck. At that time, when I was talking with Irina, I felt like something here had shone.

'This necklace. It is not simple, is it?'

I had never considered it before since I hadn't had any reason to. But, maybe, the fact that somehow, a part of myself was trapped here and was forced to watch everything.

It may not be a simple necklace, after all. But, well. There was nothing I could do to confirm it since I had already tried doing things like injecting mana into it.

I took a deep breath, feeling the weight of my past lighten just a little. It wouldn't be easy, and there were still many battles to fight, both within and without. But tonight, under the moonlight, I felt a small spark of determination.

'Maybe, maybe. Living may not be that bad.'

With a final glance at the moon, I raised my hand.

'Right, Estelle? You will be watching, won't you?'

And that night.

I slept without having a nightmare for the first time in a while.

Irina lay in her bed, the soft glow of the moon casting faint shadows across her room. She pulled the covers up to her chin, trying to settle into the familiar comfort of her bed. But no matter how she shifted or turned, sleep refused to come.

Her mind was racing, replaying the events of the evening over and over again. The kiss, the way Astron's lips had felt against hers, the intensity of his gaze, and the whispered words that sent shivers down her spine. Her heart fluttered at the memory, and she felt her cheeks heat up once more.

'Ugh, why can't I stop thinking about it?' she thought, burying her face in her pillow in an attempt to hide her blush from herself. She could still feel the warmth of his hand on her waist, the way he had pulled her close, and the look in his eyes that had left her breathless.

'This is so embarrassing,' she groaned inwardly. But despite her embarrassment, an undeniable feeling of joy bubbled up inside her.

'Why did I say all those things? Ugh, so cringy,' she thought, wincing at the memory. 'I can't believe I called him a coward and then kissed him. What was I thinking?'

She rolled onto her back, staring up at the ceiling as if it could offer her some answers. The words she had spoken played over in her mind, each one making her cringe more than the last.

"And what an irony it is that I fell for such a cowardly bastard." She covered her face with her hands, groaning. "Why did I say that? He must think I'm ridiculous."

Her heart continued to flutter despite her attempts to calm it down. She remembered the way he had responded to her, the way his eyes had softened, and the way he had kissed her back with such intensity.

"Does he really think this is what Estelle would want him to do?" She cringed again, her face burning with embarrassment. "Why did I bring up Estelle like that? I just sounded so dramatic."

Despite her self-criticism, she couldn't deny the happiness that lingered from their kiss. The way he had held her, the feel of his lips against hers—it was something she had dreamed about but never thought would actually happen.

'I probably looked like an idiot,' she thought, but then a small smile crept onto her face. 'But he kissed me back. He actually kissed me back.'

She sighed, rolling over onto her side and clutching her pillow to her chest. Her mind refused to quiet, replaying every moment of their evening together.

"I'm so stupid," she mumbled into her pillow, but the joy in her heart wouldn't be silenced. "But at least he knows how I feel now."

Her thoughts drifted back to the look in his eyes, the rare smile that had graced his lips.

She couldn't help but smile, remembering the slight blush on Astron's cheeks and the way he had teased her. It was a side of him she hadn't seen before, and she found herself wanting more of it.

'What have you done to me, Astron?' she wondered, her thoughts swirling. She reached out a hand, letting it hover in the air as if she could still feel his presence. 'I can't believe this happened. I can't believe we kissed.'

She sighed, rolling over again, her mind unable to settle. Despite the whirlwind of emotions, she felt a sense of contentment.

And then she suddenly got a question to ask.

'What are we now?'

A question that needed to be asked. After all, they had kissed, and the moment was a pretty intimate one too.

When she had revealed her feelings to him, a part of her was already anticipating the rejection from the start. Since this was how he had always acted, she could already see herself getting a cold shoulder and him leaving.

But at the same time, she wanted to take the shot.

The reason for that was clear. It was because she had faith in him. In those visions that she had seen when he was a young child before everything happened.

He was someone who smiled, albeit a bit rarely. He was someone who always acted well, trying never to hurt anyone.

He was someone who had a heart.

Thus, she believed in him before everything happened; maybe if she were to somehow get past the walls he had built around himself and reveal the real him that he was hiding.

If she were to do that.

Maybe, but maybe, she could see be with him. And she bet on this, and her attempt was successful.

No, not just successful. It was the best decision that she had made in her entire life. The decision was so good that she leaped through many steps and somehow reached a satisfying place.

But then, another question was raised.

So, what would happen to them from now on?

She pondered this question for a while, but no clear answer emerged. They had crossed a line, but where did that leave them? What was their relationship now? Were they just friends who had shared an intimate moment, or was it something more?

Irina tossed and turned, unable to find a comfortable position as her thoughts swirled. Eventually, she sat up and reached for her phone.

What was the best place for such questions when someone felt lost? Where could she learn more about the world?

"If there's one place that might have answers."

"It's the internet," she muttered to herself. She opened her browser and navigated to a forum where girls talked about their experiences. It was a place where she had often found advice and shared stories that resonated with her own experiences.

As she scrolled through the posts, her face turned red at some of the things she read. Girls discuss their first kisses, their relationships, the excitement, and the confusion. It was all there, laid bare for her to see.

The number of things that were written there was too unhinged for her own good.

One post caught her eye:

We did it our first time. What should I do now? -----

After waiting for the whole year, I finally confessed to my crush after getting him drunk. And it was so nice seeing him not refusing my advances.

At first, I was going to confess to him on the spot. But then, I saw him rejecting a girl, and it was so brutal....That was the moment all the courage I found was shattered.

But then a friend of mine said that guys become beasts when they are drunk. And apparently, it was true. The night was so good that I even felt my stomach fluttering about it when I imagined it.

However, now I feel lost. Since we did it our first time together and speaking, that means we are together, right? Some of my friends said it was better to put a name to it before thinking about everything on my own, but I couldn't find the answer.

Irina's eyes widened as she read the post. She couldn't register everything at once and scrolled down to see the comments. Some comments called the poster out for her actions, but many of them actually supported her, saying she did a good thing by finding her courage and taking the first step.

One of the first comments she read was harshly critical:

Comment 1: "What you did was incredibly wrong. You took advantage of him while he was drunk. That's not finding courage; that's manipulation."

Another comment expressed similar sentiments:

Comment 2: "You should have talked to him when he was sober. What you did could be considered assault. This is not okay."

However, many of the other comments were supportive:

Comment 3: "I'm glad you found the courage to make a move. Sometimes, we need a little push to take the first step. As long as you care for him and are honest going forward, it should be fine."

Comment 4: "Good for you! It can be so hard to confess your feelings. Now you just need to talk to him and make sure you're both on the same page."

Comment 5: "Don't listen to the haters. You did what you needed to do to get his attention. Now, just be honest with him, and things will work out."

Irina, however, found it creepy that the girl had made her crush drunk and taken advantage of him in such a state. "There are people in the world who do something devious like this to the person they like?" she thought, feeling a mix of disgust and confusion.

Yet she didn't know about the comment she was about to read.

Comment 6: "To be honest, I did something similar to you. I found out my husband's mothers about from social media and then learned that she was attending a club. After that, I became a member of the same club and then got closer to her friend group. I eventually learned about what kind of girl her mother wanted and then somehow hinted that I was looking for a boyfriend. At that time, her mother said that her son had a girlfriend. Of course, I already knew that he had a girlfriend, but I

was fine with that. I just sent some flowers to his home when he was with his girlfriend, along with some pictures that I had photoshopped. Eventually, it drove a wedge between him and his girlfriend, and they broke up. When he was feeling down, I approached him, offering him a shoulder to cry on. With his mother's favoritism working in my favor, I slowly became closer to him. It wasn't long before he started seeing me as someone he could rely on. We began dating shortly after, and now, he's my husband. Sometimes, you have to play a long game to get what you want. Persistence pays off."

Irina's jaw dropped as she read the comment. "This is insane," she thought, her heart pounding. The idea of manipulating someone's life so thoroughly just to get close to them felt wrong on so many levels.

"These people... they're willing to go to such lengths to get what they want. It's scary."

But at that moment, she remembered about a certain someone.

A certain someone that she witnessed drinking Astron's blood. She remembered the expression she made when she was close to him. That expression and the look in her eyes. It bothered her so much.

'That is right. Senior Maya's eyes.....I am pretty sure. She is the same as me.'

That look.

It was oddly similar to the one that she had seen from the reflection of his eyes.

'I won't hand him to anyone. Not after when I got this close to him.'

She was determined.

Chapter 429 98.1 - Duels [4]

<Arcadia Hunter Academy, Saturday Morning>

The morning sun had barely begun to rise, casting a soft, golden glow over the academy grounds. Irina was already up, her mind set on one goal: finding Astron.

Today's duels were crucial, and the attention they would receive would be immense.

'This is a good chance.' She didn't want to miss the chance to watch them with Astron and hear his commentary. Since he was good at observing things, in general, he was someone whose comments were helpful to listen to.

With a determined stride, she made her way through the quiet corridors; her thoughts focused on where he might be.

'Considering that he is a training maniac, there is no way he would miss his training.' And, remembering his training routine, she figured the combat training rooms were her best bet since he would be there at this hour.

As for how she knew about his training routine.

Let's not talk about it.

The academy was still waking up, the early morning light filtering through the windows, casting long shadows. The halls were mostly empty, and rarely few students were milling about, but the majority were still in their dorms, preparing for the last day of the exams.

As she approached the training area, the sound of clashing blades and heavy breathing grew louder. Irina quickened her pace, a sense of anticipation building within her. She knew Astron well enough to predict his habits, and her intuition was telling her she was on the right track.

Sure enough, as she entered the combat training rooms, she spotted him.

TAK! TAK! TAK! Astron was in the center of the room, moving with a fluid grace that belied the intensity of his training, facing the PhantomGlide Dummy. She had seen him fighting against it before, but it was still a feast on the eye. His focus was absolute, and each movement was precise and calculated. His body glistened with sweat, his muscles taut and defined as he executed a series of complex maneuvers with his dagger.

Irina paused for a moment, watching him. There was something mesmerizing about the way he moved, a perfect blend of power and elegance. She felt a surge of pride, knowing that this was the person she cared for so deeply.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped forward, her presence immediately catching his attention. Astron stopped mid-movement, his gaze shifting to her. For a moment, they simply looked at each other, a silent understanding passing between them.

"G-good morning...."

And since that bastard was someone who had never cared about such socializations, he didn't speak, forcing her to awkwardly greet him.

The embarrassment.

It was somehow there.

Astron, true to his nature, simply looked at her with the same calm, distant expression. "What brings you here?"

Irina wasn't surprised. She knew this was how he was from the start. "I wanted to find you before the duels start," she replied, her voice steady despite the lingering embarrassment.

"Why?"

"Why do you think?"

"...." He stood there for a second, contemplating. And then, he raised and asked. "You want to watch it with me?"

"Took you long enough, you bastard."

Astron wiped the sweat from his brow with the towel in his hand.

SWOOSH!

But then, without warning, he suddenly threw the towel at Irina's face.

"Huh?" Irina caught the towel, looking at him with a mixture of surprise and annoyance. "What was that for?"

"For insulting me," Astron replied nonchalantly.

A mischievous idea flashed across Irina's mind. Smirking, she buried her nose into the towel, sniffing it dramatically. "Thanks for the treat."

Since from the moment she decided to reveal her feelings, she no longer needed to hide them when they were together alone.

She could now do things like these without any concern.

'He really smells good.'

But, well. It was also embarrassing, but so what? Astron stared at her, speechless. "You are hopeless."

Irina laughed, the sound bright and cheerful. "I'll take that as a compliment. So, are you accepting my proposal?"

Astron sighed and shook his head, but Irina noticed a small twinkle in the corner of his eye. "Fine. It is not like I am going to do anything other than training anyway."

"Hehehehe...."

Irina was really happy.

The morning of the final day of the extended duel period dawned clear and bright. Despite the previous day's chaos, the academy grounds were abuzz with excitement and anticipation.

The staff had worked tirelessly through the night to ensure that everything was secure and ready for the remaining matches. The media, which had been normally viewing everything unfavorably regarding the Arcadia Hunter Academy, was also somehow persuaded.

Whether it was Headmaster Jonathan or other figures in the play was unknown, yet there was a clear change in the atmosphere of the articles regarding the academy.

Therefore, the incident was somehow covered quite well and coordinated despite the lives that were lost in the attack. The corruption of the demonic energy itself was pretty new, and before any type of cure was found, the people who were severely affected turned into complete monsters, eventually dying.

But, now, none of those news were important.

The amphitheater, now fully restored, was once again filled with students, faculty, and spectators eager to witness the culmination of the duel period.

As the crowd settled into their seats, the atmosphere was charged with a sense of renewed energy. The previous day's attack had only served to heighten the anticipation for the duels, and everyone was eager to see the academy's finest showcase their skills.

The announcer's voice rang out, clear and strong. "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the final day of the extended duel period at Arcadia Hunter Academy! We assure you that all necessary precautions have been taken, and the remaining matches will be conducted safely and swiftly."

The crowd erupted into applause, their excitement palpable. The first few matches proceeded smoothly, each duel showcasing the incredible talents and the strengths of the students that remained.

After all, only higher-ranking students were left to duel, and the duels between them were undoubtedly the best ones out of all that had happened.

The air was filled with cheers and gasped as each contestant gave their all, striving for victory and honor.

However, there was one duel that everyone was waiting for.

The most anticipated duel of this year.

The duel between the strongest young Hunter of this golden generation and a surprise opponent.

As the day progressed, the anticipation for the final match grew. Whispers and rumors spread through the crowd about who the surprise opponent might be. The tension was almost unbearable as the announcer finally called for the most anticipated duel of the day.

"And now, for the match, we've all been waiting for," the announcer's voice boomed, "the duel between our academy's strongest student, Victor Blackthorn, and a surprise opponent!"

The crowd fell into a hushed silence, their eyes fixed on the arena. Victor Blackthorn stepped into the ring, his presence commanding and confident.

He was a tall, imposing figure with chestnut hair and piercing green eyes.

The heir of the famous Blackthorn family, recently known for the scandals surrounding them.

His reputation as the academy's strongest student was well-earned, and his every movement exuded power and precision.

Victor raised their head as if in acknowledgment of the crowd's cheers by looking down on them with pride, but his expression remained cold. There was no ounce of hesitation on his face as if he was ready for everything.

The announcer's voice echoed once more, building the suspense. "And now, introducing Victor Blackthorn's opponent..."

The crowd held its breath as the figure of the surprise opponent stepped into the arena. The figure was cloaked in a hooded robe, obscuring their identity. Whispers of curiosity and speculation rippled through the audience.

As the figure reached the center of the arena, they slowly removed the hood, revealing their face. Gasps of shock and recognition spread through the crowd.

"It can't be..."

"Is that...?"

Standing before Victor, there stood a certain someone.

A huge build.

A face adorned with a huge scar down from the eyebrows.

A haircut that was sharp and short, making his face seem a lot sharper and more serious.

And most importantly, I experienced grey eyes that were focused on the enemy.

"General?"

Some people knew about him and his identity as the general of the military.

"The Black Bear."

Some of them knew about him because of the title given by the government.

"Sir Kyle Braveheart."

And some of them knew about him with his name.

But one thing was certain here.

The person is standing before Victor Blackthorn.

It was one of the strongest people alive in this federation.

"What is a general of the military doing here?"

The audience buzzed with shock and confusion. The idea of a military general facing a young student in a duel seemed absurd. How could someone of his caliber be an opponent in this context?

As the murmurs grew louder, the headmaster, Jonathan Verdict, appeared out of nowhere, his presence bringing an immediate hush to the crowd. He stepped forward, raising a hand to address the audience.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I understand your surprise and confusion," Jonathan began, his voice steady and authoritative. "Allow me to explain why General Kyle Braveheart is here today."

The crowd fell silent, all eyes fixed on the headmaster.

"General Kyle's son is a student at this academy, and as a father, he had expressed his wish to visit and witness his son's duel."

At that moment, many eyes were turned to the young man who was sitting in the front seat. He was also as bulky as the man in the arena, and the hair looked the same.

"Knowing this, we extended an invitation to the General to participate as a sparring partner for Victor Blackthorn. This was not a decision made lightly. We wanted to provide Victor with an opponent who could receive everything he would have desired to display while keeping everyone safe.

Jonathan paused, letting his words sink in. The audience listened intently, their initial shock giving way to understanding.

"General Kyle Braveheart graciously agreed to our request," Jonathan continued. "This duel is not just a competition; it is an opportunity for Victor to test his abilities against one of the strongest warriors in our federation. It is a rare honor and a testament to the high standards we uphold at Arcadia Hunter Academy."

The crowd murmured in agreement, their respect for both the academy and the participants growing.

This was an event that was the first in the history of the academy. Surely, there were many people who faced the Hunters, but no one did it in their first year of the academy.

It was simply an absurd concept.

And that substrate somehow made everything more and more interesting since no one was expecting such a thing to happen.

The significance of this duel had become clear.

Jonathan continued, "To ensure that this duel remains fair and effective, General Braveheart will be restraining himself. He will be wearing these specialized bracelets that suppress the mana of the wearer, lowering its quality and output."

At this, the headmaster gestured towards the gleaming silver bands on General Braveheart's wrists. The audience noticed the subtle glow emanating from the bracelets, indicating their active suppression of the general's formidable power.

"These bracelets are designed to limit General Braveheart's immense strength, making the duel more balanced and allowing Victor Blackthorn to demonstrate his full potential against a controlled but challenging opponent," Jonathan explained.

The crowd murmured in agreement, nodding as they processed this information. The respect for the headmaster's decision grew, and the excitement for the upcoming duel intensified.

Victor, unfazed by the revelation, stood tall and focused. He knew the challenge before him was immense, but it was also an opportunity to prove himself against an unparalleled opponent. His cold expression remained unchanged, showing his readiness for the duel.

General Kyle Braveheart, the "Black Bear," stepped forward, his gaze locked onto Victor. "Cadet Blackthorn. Are you ready?" he said, his voice a deep rumble of authority.

Victor nodded. "I'm ready."

The headmaster stepped back, giving the signal for the duel to begin. The amphitheater fell into a tense silence as the two combatants squared off, the air thick with anticipation. The clash between the academy's strongest student and a legendary general was about to unfold.

With a commanding presence, General Braveheart adopted a stance, his restrained power still palpable. Victor mirrored his opponent, his eyes never leaving the general's form. The crowd held its breath, knowing they were about to witness an extraordinary battle.

Chapter 430 98.2 - Duels [4]

Victor and General Kyle stood opposite each other, their gazes locked in a silent challenge. The contrast between them was striking: Victor with his sleek, refined movements and sharp, calculated precision, and General Kyle with his imposing presence, his every move exuding raw power and unyielding strength.

The headmaster's voice rang out. "Begin!"

SWOOSH! Victor was the first to move, his sword flashing in the dim light as he advanced with incredible speed and precision.

He aimed for the gaps in General Kyle's defense, seeking to exploit any weakness. His sword, a masterpiece of craftsmanship, moved like a blur, slicing through the air with lethal intent.

The speed at which he was moving was so fast that almost none of the freshmen were able to follow his strikes.

CLANK! CLANK! Yet, General Kyle stood his ground, his massive hammer held in one hand, the large shield in the other. He moved with surprising agility for someone of his size, the shield absorbing Victor's rapid strikes with resounding clangs.

The shield was lightened with a brown area covering it. It was the mana of the general, protecting the shield. His eyes never left Victor, his expression calm and focused.

Victor's blade danced around the general, each strike carefully calculated. He aimed for the joints in the armor, the weak points in the defense. But each time, Kyle's shield met his sword, deflecting the blows with ease.

"You're fast, Young Blackthorn," Kyle rumbled, his voice carrying across the amphitheater. "But speed alone won't win this duel."

That was indeed correct. Even though the duel had just started, and it was very hard to judge how it was going, it was practically impossible for Victor to leave a scratch on General Kyle, let alone win.

Victor's eyes narrowed, his focus intensifying. He already knew that from the start.

"Huf....."

Thus, he shifted his stance. His breathing changed, as did the flow of mana that was moving in his veins.

However, General Kyle was taking this fight seriously.

"Now, young Blackthorn. You must never reveal your weakness to your enemy."

CRACK!

With a loud crack, he flashed forward, with his hammer on his hand shining. The ground cracked from the sheer strength of the blast as Kyle pushed his huge weight.

—Vertical Smash.

He attacked with a powerful swing of his hammer, the swing even spreading the wind through the arena. The attack happened so fast that the onlookers weren't even able to register it.

Yet, something immense happened. In that split second, Victor's green eyes opened, and a force was shining in them.

The blade that he was holding was covered with a pure-white color, the energy covering it.

From the bottom of the ground, in a flash, Victor raised his blade.

「Sword of Order. Bloom.」

CLANK!

The blade was raised, meeting with the huge hammer. The force of the blow created a shockwave that pushed Victor back. The ground shook with the impact, a testament to the general's strength even while restrained.

「Recover.」 Yet, Victor hadn't stopped. He stood up in an instant as if the strike hadn't done anything to him.

「Sword of Order. Repeat.」 He launched a series of powerful thrusts, each one aimed at a critical point. The audience watched in awe as his swordsmanship was put on full display.

He launched a series of powerful thrusts, each one aimed at a critical point. The audience watched in awe as his swordsmanship was put on full display.

Victor's blade moved with a fluid grace, each thrust precise and controlled. The white energy surrounding his sword shimmered with intensity as he drove forward, seeking any opening in General Kyle's defenses.

Kyle's shield met each thrust with practiced ease, but Victor's relentless assault was starting to wear on him. The young Blackthorn's speed and precision were undeniable, and even the seasoned general had to put in effort to keep up, it seemed.

"Impressive," Kyle admitted, a glint in his eyes. "But let's see how you handle this."

Kyle's hammer began to glow with a deep, earthy hue, the mana within it resonating with the ground.

SWOOSH! He swung it horizontally this time, aiming to catch Victor off guard with the sheer width and power of the attack.

「Earthbreaker Swing.」 Victor's eyes widened, but he was ready. He leaped into the air, his sword held high as he channeled more of his mana into it.

「Sword of Order. Bloom.」

His blade met the hammer with a resounding clash, the white energy of his sword flaring brightly as it absorbed the impact. The ground beneath them cracked and shattered from the force of the collision, but Victor remained undeterred.

SWOOSH! As the dust settled, Victor used the momentum to spin around, his blade cutting through the air with lethal intent. He aimed for the general's side, hoping to catch him off balance.

But Kyle was not easily taken by surprise. He shifted his stance, bringing his shield up just in time to block the strike.

CLANK! The clash of metal echoed through the arena, the sheer force of the blow sending another shockwave through the stands.

However, the general was not finished. As if he was already expecting what Victor was going to do, he charged his shield with a different energy this time.

「Earth. Bend to my will.」

The energy that was already covering the shield suddenly took shape.

A bunch of rocks were formed out of nowhere.

BOOM!

And those compressed rocks that were rotating in the air instantly flew to Victor, who was recovering from the attack.

Victor, mid-air and vulnerable, had no time to evade the oncoming rocks. But in that split second, his mind raced, and he did something unthinkable.

His eyes focused intensely on his body, and with sheer will, he moved an immense amount of mana.

Suddenly, as if stepping on an invisible platform, Victor pushed himself into the air, creating an angular movement that defied logic. His movement was so fast that it created a vortex of air around him.

The approaching rocks were caught in the vortex, decimated as if they had entered a blender. Shards of rock scattered harmlessly to the ground below.

Victor did not stop. Channeling his energy into his sword, he used his rapid rotation to send a series of immensely fast sword slashes toward General Kyle. Each slash cut through the air with high frequency and deadly precision.

「Sword of Order. Symphony of Recursion.」

The arena was filled with the sound of Victor's blade slicing through the air, a symphony of steel and energy. The slashes moved too quickly for the eye to follow, a blur of motion aimed directly at General Kyle.

General Kyle braced himself, his shield and hammer at the ready. He knew he had to withstand the onslaught to turn the tide of the duel. His mana surged, reinforcing his defenses.

CLANK! CLANK! CLANK!

The slashes collided with Kyle's shield, each impact resounding through the amphitheater. The sheer force of the attacks pushed the general back, his feet digging into the ground as he struggled to hold his position.

Victor's relentless assault continued, his blade moving faster and faster. The vortex of air around him grew more intense, the pressure building with each passing second.

「Terra Aegis.」

The barrier formed just in time, absorbing the brunt of Victor's attack. The high-frequency slashes struck the barrier, causing cracks to appear but ultimately holding firm.

And General Kyle had already formed the counter to the strikes.

「Heart of the Brave. Command of Earth.」

There was a special reason why the Braveheart family was able to retain such a strong standing in the military despite them having one of the most balanced attributes, Earth attribute.

The reason for that was simple.

It was their ability to command even the slightest particles of Earth on the ground. Earthen mages or Earthen Psion users tended to be more direct and sloppy with their approach, most of the time lacking precise control. Since Earth elements were always together as one on the ground, partially commanding the particles of a huge rock would still move it enough to utilize.

Yet, the Braveheart family was different. They were born with a special usage of Earth attributes.

Just as it was being displayed in the arena.

General Kyle made some of the psionic particles rise from the ground, causing the density of the air to increase. As the air became denser, the friction resulting from the angular movement of Victor increased, making him slow. Victor's momentum faltered as he felt the increased resistance against his movements.

'What is this?'

Victor could feel his movements becoming sluggish, the friction in the air around him intensifying. It was as if the very air was conspiring against him, slowing his every action.

General Kyle didn't waste any time. He raised his hammer to the sky, channeling his mana into the weapon. The air around him seemed to hum with energy as he prepared for his next strike.

If the previous attacks were still within range for academy students, at least for third and fourth years, this strike would put pressure on a graduate. The mana levels were suppressed, yet everyone seemed to forget this fact.

"Is this even a duel for an academy student? This level is too high, no?"

Even the people who had witnessed the duel between Irina and Seraphina were flabbergasted. The reason for that was not because of the techniques used.

Sure, General Kyle was already on another level.

But, the important thing was Victor Blackthorn's ability to oppose those attacks. Even with his mana suppressed, General Kyle's attacks could make the rank-8 Hunters sweat, and Victor Blackthorn was flawlessly opposing those attacks.

"The duel is over now."

Yet everyone was now sure.

With this strike, the duel would be over.

「Hammer of Earth. Braveheart's Judgment.」

The hammer glowed with a fierce light, the earth psions swirling around it. Kyle's eyes locked onto Victor, his expression one of grim determination.

He brought the hammer down with a thunderous roar, the force of the strike sending shockwaves through the air.

Victor, struggling against the increased friction, saw the incoming attack.

"Pitu."

His mouth was already filled with dust.

"Huuuuu...."

He knew he had to act fast.

Channeling his remaining energy, he focused on his sword, the white light intensifying. One strike.

It came to one strike.

He stopped his movements as he was already aware of the energy that the hammer contained.

The light in his green eyes once again intensified.

「Sword of Order. *****」

The hammer met with the ground as they collided with an explosion of light and sound, the sheer power of the impact creating a massive shockwave that rippled through the arena.

The ground beneath them shattered, cracks spreading out like spiderwebs from the point of impact.

Yet that wasn't the end.

General Kyle raised the hammer from the ground, and with it raised, the ground erupted as if it were a volcano. The whole arena turned to dust, and everyone's eyes were focused on Victor.

In that split second, the white color of his blade flashed.

And the whole world went white.