

H. Academy 211

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'What is this?'

She opened her eyes into the same darkness again.

Everything felt cold; the world was cold.

'I am the same.'

She wanted to believe that; she wanted to keep that belief.

'I am hungry.'

However, both her emotions and her feelings betrayed her at the same time. The moment she felt the intense hunger and thirst for the first time, she inwardly knew things would never be the same ever again.

The darkness enveloped her senses, and Maya found herself in a world of cold shadows. An unsettling calm settled over her, and for a brief moment, she clung to the belief that she remained unchanged.

Yet, that illusion crumbled swiftly.

A gnawing hunger clawed at her insides, a sensation alien to her human self. It echoed through her newfound existence, an insatiable thirst that betrayed the semblance of normalcy she desperately clung to.

As that bastard's blood coursed through her veins, a metamorphosis unfolded.

Each drop seemed to rewrite the very fabric of her being, the essence of vampirism taking root within her. Her senses heightened, and the cold darkness became a canvas painted with vivid details.

The hunger intensified with every passing moment, a ravenous force that threatened to consume her humanity.

Deep down, Maya understood that the course of her existence had been irreversibly altered by the forbidden communion with the ancient vampire.

'Those bodies....'

The memory of the hanging bodies in the dim chamber resurfaced, but this time, Maya's reaction was different.

'I want to drink their blood.....I need blood...'

The revulsion that had initially accompanied the gruesome sight seemed to wane, replaced by an unsettling curiosity. The hunger within her whispered macabre suggestions, urging her to consider those lifeless forms as a potential source of sustenance.

'Why? Why do I think this way?'

A conflicted turmoil brewed within her. The very thought of consuming another being, especially one of her own kind, sent a wave of self-disgust through her. Yet, the hunger persisted as a relentless force that demanded satisfaction.

'But, I am hungry.'

In this newfound state of existence, the lines between humanity and monstrosity blurred, and Maya grappled with the unsettling realization that she was no longer the person she once knew.

'This is wrong.'

The darkness that embraced her was both an external reality and an internal transformation, each passing moment eroding the remnants of her humanity.

'But I am hungry.'

As the vampire continued to supply her with blood, Maya felt her hunger being sated.

'It feels good.'

The repulsion she initially felt toward the taste of the crimson liquid seemed to dissipate, replaced by an odd satisfaction.

'You are disgusting.'

Even though an inner voice recoiled at the thought, she couldn't deny the strange allure of the blood.

'But, it is delicious.'

It was as if the essence of her being craved it, adapting to the macabre sustenance provided by her newfound vampiric nature.

'You are pathetic to like it.'

The internal conflict persisted—a battle between the remnants of her human morality and the emerging instincts of the creature she was becoming.

'You are no different than those demons.'

Maya struggled to reconcile the repulsion with the undeniable satisfaction the blood brought, a dichotomy that echoed the complexity of her transformed existence.

'Huh?'

However, at that exact moment, suddenly, as if a veil had been abruptly lifted, Maya felt the supply of blood ceases.

'Where did it go?'

The crimson lifeline that had sustained her through the transformative process vanished, leaving her in a state of profound disarray.

Withdrawal effects surged through her like a torrent. It wasn't just the physical hunger that clawed at her insides; it was an overwhelming psychological craving that threatened to unravel the fragile threads of her sanity.

'Bring it back. Bring it back. Bring it back. Bring it back. Bring it back. Bring it back. Bring it back. Bring it back. Bring it back. Bring it back. Bring it back. Bring it back. Bring it back.'

As the blood supply abruptly halted, Maya felt the ground beneath her shatter. The lifeline that had sustained her transformation vanished, leaving her suspended in a limbo between what she was and what she was becoming.

The hunger, once a dull ache, erupted into a tempest within her. It wasn't merely the physical sensation of an empty stomach but a psychological abyss that beckoned her toward the edge. The shadows in the dim chamber took on a sinister quality, dancing with a malevolence that mirrored the turmoil within.

The abrupt cessation of the blood supply intensified the internal conflict, and Maya found herself teetering on the precipice of a profound abyss.

Every fiber of her being screamed for the crimson nectar that had become both sustenance and torment. The air, heavy with the scent of blood, teased her senses, heightening the desperation that clawed at her sanity.

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

The metallic scent of blood lingered in the air, a tantalizing reminder of the sustenance she craved but was now denied.

Maya gritted her teeth, a futile attempt to stave off the insatiable hunger that threatened to consume her. The echoing mantra of "Bring it back" reverberated through her mind, each repetition driving her deeper into the clutches of a maddening craving.

'I need it back. I can't lose control.' The struggle was intense; an internal battle waged against the withdrawal effects that clawed at her psyche. Her attempts to rationalize, to assert her human will over the burgeoning vampiric instincts, felt like a feeble whisper against the rising tempest.

The dim chamber bore witness to the silent war within her. Shadows danced as Maya wrestled with the visceral yearning, her form contorting as if trying to escape the confines of her own skin.

'I am not a demon. I am not a demon.' The mantra clashed against the growing whispers that taunted her with the allure of surrender.

'I need it. I need it. I need it. I need it. I need it. I need it. I need it. I need it.'

Every fiber of her being strained against the temptation was a testament to the strength of her dwindling humanity.

As if breaking through a haze, Maya managed to open her eyes, if only partially.

In the dimness, a scene unfolded that pierced through the fog of her disarray. A young man stood before the vampire, an unlikely defender in this macabre tableau.

'Junior?'

Before she could comprehend the intricacies of the situation, the serenity was shattered.

CRUNCH!

The piercing sound reverberated through the chamber as the vampire's claws impaled the young man's chest.

'What?'

She wasn't expecting him. For some reason, she felt like he was the last person that she wanted to be seen by. It was a cruel twist, an unexpected collision of worlds that she couldn't reconcile.

Yet, even as her mind grappled with the unfolding scene, another wave of torment surged through her. In the absence of the sustaining blood, every fiber of her being rebelled against the transformation.

'IT HURTS SO MUCH!'

Pain, sharp and unrelenting, twisted through her, warping the very fabric of her existence.

Her vision took on a crimson hue, an internal tempest that mirrored the external chaos. Maya clung to her fraying control, a desperate attempt to resist the descent into the abyss of agony.

'Hold on. Hold on. Hold on.' The mantra echoed in her mind, a feeble plea against the overwhelming onslaught of pain.

'Junior is here, hold on.' She wanted to keep her control, getting power from the presence of someone she knew. But slowly, inexorably, the grip of control slipped through her fingers.

The crimson tide swallowed her senses, and Maya felt like she was losing herself in the searing embrace of suffering.

In the throes of relentless agony, Maya questioned the cruel hand fate had dealt her. Each wave of pain felt like an affront to her very existence, an unwarranted torment that twisted her perception of reality.

As the relentless torment consumed her, a seed of resentment sprouted within Maya.

'WHY ME!'

Why was she the vessel for this excruciating transformation? The world, once a place of wonder, now seemed a malevolent force conspiring against her.

'I hate this world. I hate the pain. I hate everything.' Emotions, distorted and intensified, took hold of her psyche. The tendrils of hatred twisted through her thoughts, a manifestation of the turmoil that raged within.

In that moment of weakness, as hatred and agony intertwined within her, a haunting voice whispered through the tumult of her mind.

'Embrace me.'

The voice, a haunting echo of her own, resonated with the darker recesses of her consciousness—the part she had fought to suppress. It was a call from the depths of her own turmoil, an invitation to surrender to the torrent of emotions that threatened to consume her.

'No. I can't.' The feeble resistance flickered within her, a last stand against the encroaching darkness. The voice, however, persisted, its cadence both seductive and menacing.

'Embrace me.'

In the throes of pain and thirst, the boundaries between herself and the shadow within blurred.

'We will be able to drink our beloved blood; just embrace me.'

As if responding to the call, an intense fragrance wafted through the air—a scent so delicious, so tantalizing, that it intoxicated her senses.

The aroma was different from the metallic tang of blood she had become accustomed to; it was an alluring fragrance that beckoned her, promising relief from the insatiable thirst.

'Embrace me.'

Maya, caught in the dizzying whirlpool of sensations, found herself unable to resist any longer. The line between her own will and the haunting voice dissolved, and with a reluctant surrender, she embraced the shadow within.

The turmoil, once a tempest threatening to tear her apart, now became a sinister ally, guiding her toward an ominous unity.

'Yes. Let us embrace.'

The transformation was somehow complete, and the once tumultuous turmoil now harmonized with her essence.

The world, a canvas of darkness, started unveiling its true colors as the change settled in. Her vibrant blue eyes slowly morphed into a deep, captivating crimson.

'Ah...'

With the unveiling of her new reality, a surge of desires welled within her—cravings that were both unfamiliar and insatiable. Foremost among them was an overwhelming thirst for blood.

'Blood...'

Driven by an instinct that transcended her human past, Maya followed the tantalizing fragrance that teased her senses.

SWOOSH!

Her body moved with a swiftness and grace that defied her former self, a predatory elegance that spoke of her newfound nature.

'There it is.'

In an instant, her body shot forward, guided solely by the intoxicating scent. The source awaited—a body bathed in shadows, vulnerable to her predatory instincts.

The crimson hunger within her intensified a force that demanded satisfaction as she neared her prey.

BITE!

Her fangs immediately bit the pale skin in front of her.

"Ah...."

The voice, now familiar, resonated in her ears. A part of her recognized it, but in the throes of ecstasy, she dismissed rational thought. The delicate blood that filled her mouth was a revelation—a stark contrast to the vampire's offering.

The richness of this blood was a symphony of flavors; each drop an exquisite delicacy that quenched her thirst in ways she hadn't imagined.

'Aaaah....So good....'

It was intoxicating, a sensation that surpassed the mere sustenance the vampire had provided earlier.

Lost in the depths of this newfound pleasure, Maya surrendered to the ecstasy, allowing the delicious blood to envelop her senses.

The world faded away as the crimson nectar became her sole focus, and the boundaries between predator and prey dissolved in the intoxicating embrace of the feast.

"Senior....Calm down...."

Until she heard the voice more clearly this time.....

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As the blood realm crumbled, the once-vibrant landscape of torment dissolved into nothingness.

The crimson hues faded, leaving only a void of emptiness in its wake. The vampire's tortured screams echoed in the empty space, haunting in their absence.

In the aftermath, as the echoes of suffering subsided, I stood alone amidst the ruins of the collapsed blood realm. My surroundings were devoid of life, the silence accentuating the emptiness that now enveloped me.

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

Breathless and spent, I gazed upon the remnants of the vampire, a mere lump of flesh that was once a creature of the night.

'It is over....'

I felt something different inside me. As the vampire met its end, I saw something red entering me and enveloping me.

However, at that moment, intoxicated by that madness, I didn't care about what it was.

'It is empty.'

And now the madness that had fueled my actions waned, replaced by a sense of hollowness. The storm within me had abated, leaving behind a desolate calm.

"Huuuuuu...."

I took a deep breath, the air heavy with the scent of blood and decay. The battle, both physical and emotional, had taken its toll.

As I surveyed the scene, the weight of my actions settled upon my shoulders, and the reality of what transpired seeped in.

But that weight wasn't something feeble like guilt. Contrary to how a human is supposed to be, there wasn't even an ounce of guilt that could be felt. My heart was empty, and the only weight I felt was how to deal with the repercussions.

'Didn't I come here for something?'

And as those turbulent feelings slowly left my heart, I asked myself this question. Following that, amidst the fading echoes of the vampire's demise, a sudden realization struck me like a jolt.

The purpose that had brought me into the depths of the tunnels surged back into focus.

'Senior Maya!'

As if awakening from a trance, I shook off the remnants of the battle's intensity. The initial quest to save Senior Maya had taken a backseat during the tumultuous fight. My hatred and feelings of vengeance clouded my judgment.

'Where is-'

SWOOSH!

Just as I was about to look around, suddenly, my senses had picked up something. An incredibly fast projectile was approaching me at a rapid speed.

'!'

THUD!

But it happened so fast that even before my reflexes could react, I felt a weight upon me.

The impact knocked me off balance, and before I could fully comprehend what had happened, a searing pain radiated from my shoulders. It was accompanied by the sound of tearing fabric and a guttural growl.

'What...?'

My heart pounded as I struggled to turn and face whatever had latched onto me. There, clinging to my shoulders with a fierce grip, was a creature with bloodshot eyes and elongated fangs.

'Another vampire?'

My mind raced as I grappled with the assailant.

The creature's strength was astonishing, even much higher than the original vampire, its fangs sinking deeper into my flesh.

No, it was not. While fighting with the vampire count, I always had the upper hand. Even from the start, I was actually using the vampire's initial arrogance to slowly inject vampire-

disturbing oil into its body.

However, right now, I couldn't wander with those thoughts.

BITE!

As the vampire's fangs entered my shoulder, a sensation unlike pain surged through me.

"Ah...."

It was an odd mix of pleasure and discomfort, a disconcerting experience that left me momentarily paralyzed. I even released a groan without my control.

'What... is this?'

Rather than draining my strength, the vampire's bite seemed to draw me into a bizarre trance. The pleasure-pain sensation lingered, and with each passing second, I felt an inexplicable connection to the vampire.

GULP! GULP!

The sound of the vampire gulping constantly entered my head. I could feel my strength leaving my body with each second. I was also getting comfortable at the place.

'No.'

However, I refused to stay like that in the presence of a demon. I slowly manipulated my mana and focused on my arms.

'I need to break free.'

Summoning every ounce of willpower, I pushed against the creature, determined to escape its grasp. The pleasure-

drenched pain intensified, making it challenging to focus.

'Hmm?'

However, at that moment, amidst the disorienting sensations, a familiar scent wafted through the air, cutting through the lingering aroma of blood.

'Is that...?'

Even amidst the chaotic mix of scents, I recognized it. It was a scent ingrained in my memory, a fragrance that made me bring back to reality.

With a surge of realization, I looked at the head of the vampire who had buried herself in my shoulder.

'Purple hair...'

Despite the vampiric transformation and the bloodstains, I saw it – the familiar cascade of purple hair flowing down to her waist. The familiar slender body, a slightly soft feeling on my chest. Then, as I looked at her fingernails, even though they were slightly worn off and ragged, they were the same familiar ones.

The delicate fingers that were now touching my chest and possibly my back were also the same. Her skin, even though a little paler, gave the same feeling.

'Senior Maya...'

The vampire before me, now feeding on my essence, was none other than Senior Maya.

'She became a vampire?'

At that moment, my thoughts came to an abrupt.

GULP! GULP!

She continued to drink my blood, and I also started losing consciousness. If not for Sylvie's [Blessing], I think I would have already lost my consciousness from the start.

However, I knew for a fact that this couldn't go like this for a long time. After all, even now, I was on the verge of anemia, and the more this went on, the more critical my condition would become.

'But...'

However, at the same time, I also didn't want to use force. I didn't want to kill her.

Right now, from the state she was in, I knew if I wanted to stop her, I would need to use vampire oil, but that would make her most likely die.

'That....'

GULP! GULP!

She continued to drink my blood, and I knew I needed to act. With my now free right hand, I grabbed the dagger imbued by the vampire oil.

'I am sorry....'

I raised my hand, the dagger pointing at Maya's back. The gravity of the situation and the reality that I might need to harm Senior Maya, who was nothing but an innocent person, weighed heavily on me.

But as I lowered the dagger, my hand came to an abrupt.

"Astron."

Maya's face began to overlap with another face, a face that I had never once forgotten– the face of someone who had once spoken to me with a warm smile.

"You're not a selfish person."

In that fleeting moment, I was transported back to a conversation with her.

'Why...?'

As the memories flashed before my eyes, my hand holding the dagger began to shake involuntarily.

'Just do it.'

I wanted to lower the dagger. I still had so much to do. I had yet to achieve my goals. The revenge I had sworn to take.....The filth that needed to be cleansed in this world.

"No matter what you tell yourself, you will always be my good brother; you are not someone to hurt innocent, are you?"

That smile.

CLANK!

"Please always stay like this.....Stay as my innocent brother."

I couldn't overcome that smile....Neither in the past nor in the present.

I couldn't lower the dagger, neither could I hold it.

As the dagger fell to the ground, I turned to face Senior.

There I saw it. Senior Maya's eyes, while still a deep crimson, held an unmistakable glint of tears—the crimson droplets mixed with the blood she was consuming, creating a surreal scene.

The tears fell, leaving a trail down her cheeks, lost in the darkness of the cavern.

'Yeah....'

It was a paradoxical sight—the act of feeding on my blood while shedding tears of sorrow. At that moment, the reality of Maya's torment became painfully evident.

Her transformation into a vampire was not a choice she willingly made but a fate forced upon her.

'She's suffering...'

The realization hit me like a tidal wave. I couldn't bring myself to harm her, not just physically but also emotionally.

'Wait.'

At that second, I realized that if she wanted to drink blood, she also could have gone to the vampire. But, instead, she came to me.

'Maybe...'

There was a chance that she wanted to drink my blood.

'Then....'

I decided to try something. I put my mana into my hand and patted her from the back of her neck.

I couldn't put much strength into my hands, nor much mana. But, even then, it was fine.

"Senior...Calm down."

FLINCH!

The moment my hands touched her back, the reaction was immediate. I felt her flinch and squirm against my touch.

Her face remained buried in my shoulder, but for a moment, the act of drinking my blood paused. It was as if my touch had disrupted the trance she was in.

'Why is she flinching?'

I couldn't help but wonder about her reaction. Was it a reflex from her vampiric state, or did my touch stir something within her?

"Senior Maya, it's me, Astron," I whispered softly, my hand patting her back a little more. Since she had stopped drinking my blood, I felt like life was returning to me.

FLINCH!

She continued to flinch and squirm.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

Then, I started hearing a small mumble. The voice was too small that any normal person wouldn't hear it.

Her words were a whispered mantra, a lament that echoed through the cavern.

'Even now, she is trying her best.'

It was evident that she wanted to drink more blood. I could feel from her body shaking that she was still in an abnormal state. I also wasn't getting the same feeling I got from the original vampire, as if she wasn't a complete vampire yet.

'Yeah...She is not a bad person...'

With a gentle yet firm grip, I reached for Senior Maya's face, gently pulling her away from the crook of my shoulder.

Her blue eyes, normally so warm and familiar, were now clouded with inner turmoil. Her lips quivered, and a silent battle waged within her.

'She should live.'

"Senior Maya," I spoke softly, meeting her tearful gaze. "It's fine. Everything will be fine."

Tears shimmered in her eyes, reflecting the dim light of the cavern. The struggle was evident, and I could sense the internal conflict tearing at her.

"It's okay. You can drink if you need to," I reassured her. "I'm here for you."

"B-but.....I will h-hu-"

Her hesitation lingered for a moment, a flicker of uncertainty in her crimson eyes.

"I am okay now."

However, after a gentle pat on her back, she yielded, and her eyes turned the vivid hue of a vampire.

"S-sorry...."

BITE!

She dove into my body once again, this time attacking me from my neck.

"..."

I didn't make any sounds this time as her fangs buried in my neck.

As Senior Maya continued to drink my blood, I felt a strange sensation welling up within me.

It wasn't pain; instead, it was a peculiar warmth, a weird connection that seemed to be deepening with each passing moment.

The cavernous silence enveloped us as Maya fed, the rhythmic sound of her gul

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Maya's world was a tempest of conflicting emotions. As she drank from that neck, the rich taste of his blood flooded her senses, creating a strange dichotomy of pleasure and turmoil.

"Senior..... calm down."

But the moment Maya heard that voice, her movements came to a stop.

'Junior?'

The person whom she had just seen his body getting pierced by the claws...It was his voice. Then she realized the person whose blood she had been drinking was actually her Junior all the time.

Tears mingled with the crimson droplets, lost in the shadows of the cavern, a paradoxical scene of sorrow and sustenance.

'Why am I doing this?' The question echoed in Maya's mind, her heart torn between the thirst for blood and the agony of her transformation.

She felt a profound sadness, not just for herself but for the person she was feeding on. She could sense his pain, not just physical but emotional.

'Why am I here?'

Her crimson eyes, clouded with inner turmoil, met Junior's gaze. His touch disrupted the trance she was in, and for a moment, the act of feeding ceased. His gentle patting, his attempts to soothe her, sparked a flicker of warmth within her.

She could only convey her apologies to him. While he fought with the vampire, while he was injured from the fight, while he probably came here for her....

What was she doing?

Just like the same beast he had fought and trapped her, she was drinking his blood in ecstasy. She didn't even care about how he might have felt.

'Why is he doing this?'

As Junior reached for her face, gently pulling her away from his shoulder, Maya's lips quivered with unspoken words. She wanted to convey the conflict within, the battle between her vampiric instincts and the remnants of her humanity.

'He should hate me.'

She knew what she did was a betrayal. Betrayal to his trust...

Betrayal to his efforts. She knew she was a bad person for harming the very person who came to save her.

"It is okay."

However, despite her fears, Junior reassured her.

His words, soft and comforting, cut through the darkness that threatened to consume her. He encouraged her to drink if she needed to, assuring her that he was there for her.

'But, what if I turn into a monster just like them.'

She remembered the voice inside. She remembered how she disregarded everything and gave in to that feeling.

"It's okay. You can drink if you need to," He reassured her. "I'm here for you."

'No, don't stay that. If you say that.....'

She wanted him to hate her. She wanted him to despise her so that she could find the strength to hate herself. She wanted him to give her a reason to hate her....

She wanted to hate herself.

"B-but.....I will h-hu-"

"I am okay now."

But as his words conveyed otherwise, she couldn't find the strength to refute. As his cold hands, probably because of the lack of blood, caressed her flushed cheeks, she couldn't do it.

'I can't resist.'

Yielding to the gentle pat on her back, Maya's hesitation crumbled, and her eyes transformed into the vivid hue of a vampire.

"S-sorry....."

With a whispered apology, she plunged back into feeding, this time from his neck.

'His blood... it's different.'

Maya's inner turmoil persisted, but the warmth she felt was not just physical. Something, an energy that was inside him....it was different.

The rhythmic sounds of her gulping merged with the cavernous silence, and despite the unusual circumstances, a strange calmness settled within her.

'I like his blood.'

She finally admitted it.

The admission, unspoken, resonated in Maya's conflicted heart. The taste of Junior's blood was a revelation, a strange comfort amidst the chaos of her transformation.

The guilt and sorrow battled with the undeniable satisfaction, leaving her torn inside as she continued to drink from the person she never wanted to harm.

'But, no other blood can satisfy me.'

She didn't know why, but in this place filled with the blood of the vampire count and his victims, she felt repulsed by their smell.

The smell of blood emanating from them was supposed to make her feel the desire. But she felt the complete opposite. She felt repulsed by their existence.

However, that wasn't the case for him.

Maya's crimson eyes wandered around Junior's body as she fed. The torn and tattered clothes revealed glimpses of his bare skin. Though not overly muscular, his body bore the dense strength of rigorous training.

'He's been through so much.'

Her gaze traced the scars and marks on his body, a testament to the struggles he endured. Despite the hardships etched into his flesh, there was an undeniable resilience.

In this moment of vulnerability, as she drank from him, Maya couldn't help but acknowledge the strength that lay beneath the surface.

The repulsion she felt for the blood of the vampire count and any other human intensified. In contrast, the scent of Junior's blood, intertwined with the echoes of his struggles, held a strange allure that defied the vampiric instincts within her.

As she looked at his body, she unknowingly wanted to look at his face. She also needed to take a breather, so she stopped drinking for a second and raised her head.

'Ah....'

As her eyes met Junior's, a sudden awareness struck her. The crimson hue of her vampire's eyes locked onto him, and in that moment, a realization cut through the fog of her thirst.

'His cheeks are flushed.'

Junior's normally pale skin bore a flush, a subtle but noticeable change that accentuated the physical toll he endured.

"Haaaah.....haaaah....."

His breathing, usually steady, was haggard, mirroring the strain etched across his features.

'He's vulnerable too.'

In this shared vulnerability, the dynamics of the feeding shifted. The acknowledgment of his struggles became a tangible connection, bridging the gap between predator and prey.

"Finished?" He asked. His face was still the same, as he did not show much emotion. But inwardly, she knew he was showing concern for her right now, even though he was in pain himself. His eyes also looked tired, both physically and mentally.

The allure of his blood, now intricately woven with the echoes of his pain, transcended the primal instincts that drove her.

As the realization of Junior's vulnerability dawned on her, Maya couldn't help but feel a twinge of embarrassment.

The connection forged through this intimate act seemed to intensify, and she found herself averting her gaze, burying her face once again in the crook of his shoulder.

'I shouldn't be looking like this.' The deep purple hue of his eyes, tinged with fatigue, held a depth that made her uneasy.

It was an intimacy she hadn't anticipated, a vulnerability that transcended the act of feeding.

'It is so embarrassing.'

Hiding her face from his gaze, Maya lowered her head, seeking refuge at his long and white neck.

But as she inhaled, she lost herself in the unique scent that enveloped him—an amalgamation of his blood, sweat, and the earthy undertones of the cavern.

'No.....'

The combination, though unconventional, carried an undeniable allure, grounding her in the shared reality of their entwined destinies.

'There is nowhere to escape.'

In this place where the two stayed, she didn't have anywhere to escape from him.

His smell was different; his body was different. Everything slowly changed in her eyes. In a world filled with darkness, only he remained.

The embarrassment she felt at the intimacy began to mingle with a different emotion—one she hadn't anticipated.

'He is different. So different from everyone else.'

She knew this was different. This wasn't a feeling she got from anyone else. It felt so good. As she buried herself in his neck, she felt butterflies in her stomach.

"I can't lose you..."

The confession, though soft and barely audible, escaped her lips in a whisper.

"I won't lose you..."

The realization, woven into the very fabric of her being, anchored her to the unique scent enveloping her senses.

The cavern, with its echoes and shadows, became a witness to her silent musings. The unconventional combination of his blood, sweat, and the earthy undertones of the cavern held an undeniable allure that resonated with the transformation unfolding within her.

'I won't let this feeling go away...'

PAT!

At that moment, she felt a pat on her shoulder, as if he was calling her to look at him. Slowly, she raised her head, meeting the gaze of Junior, whose eyes were on the verge of closing.

"Are you finished?" His tired voice carried a sense of concern.

A shy nod was her response. The thirst that had tormented her seemed to have finally abated. The strange warmth of his blood lingered within her, replacing the void left by the vampire's offering.

His weary eyes met hers, and with an exhaustion etched on his features, he asked, "Is it okay if I rest a little?"

Widening her eyes, she noticed the toll his actions had taken on him. The concern in her eyes reflected the realization that he had pushed himself beyond his limits.

"It is okay," she uttered softly with a little guilt in her heart.

"Then...."

Following that, he closed his eyes.

THUD!

And his head fell onto her shoulders.

As he rested his head on her shoulders, she felt the weight of his weariness. The rhythmic rise and fall of his chest, once labored, gradually stabilized. However, with a gentle touch, she realized that his hand, which had been caressing her back, now fell limp.

"He lost consciousness," she whispered to the silent cavern, her voice a soft acknowledgment of the vulnerability that enveloped them both.

With care, Maya slowly rose from her seated position, cradling his head in her hands. A newfound energy surged through her, fueled by the satisfaction of her thirst being quenched.

"Sorry...."

Yet, intertwined with that vitality was a burgeoning sense of responsibility for his unconscious state.

As she gently held his head, she sat down with her knees bent. Then, she put his head on top of her thighs, making him comfortable.

'It said to do like this, right?'

She had never experienced a situation like this in her life before. But, she knew from the books she read that it was comforting when people lay like this.

As Junior lay unconscious on her thighs, Maya observed his pale features, the subtle rise, and fall of his chest with each breath.

'He is like a kid.'

Her fingers traced gentle patterns across his face, a tender caress that mirrored the softness of his sleeping form. In the dim light of the cavern, a delicate smile graced her lips—a quiet expression of the complex emotions churning within.

"I never thought I'd find myself in such a situation," she murmured to the slumbering Junior, her voice a soft whisper in the stillness of the cavern.

The moment of vulnerability and newfound strength marked a turning point in her existence.

As Maya gazed at him, a sense of protectiveness welled up, weaving an unspoken promise to safeguard the person who had unwittingly become an integral part of her transformed world.

"It is fine if I stay like this a little, right?"

Chapter 214 Chapter 47.5 - Her Change

214 Chapter 47.5 - Her Change

It had been a little while since I felt comfortable.

'Comfortable.'

That word alone made me immediately feel something was different. The sensation at the back of my head was both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.

It was something that I hadn't felt for a long time.

"You are awake."

The voice reached me, and as I opened my eyes, the sight that greeted me was one of unexpected serenity. There, looking down at me with a gentle smile, was Senior Maya.

Her delicate features were bathed in soft light, her skin radiant and gleaming. Her once-crimson eyes had reverted to their familiar shade of blue, and a sense of tranquility emanated from her presence.

It was a different atmosphere she gave compared to how she had been just before. It was like she became herself, but at the same time, she changed a little.

'This....'

I didn't want to stand like this. I felt uncomfortable lying in this position. It was not because I remembered things I didn't want to....Definitely.

"How long I had been asleep?" I asked while trying to stand.

PAT!

However, her hand on my forehead blocked me, not letting me do as I wanted. And, for some reason, the force behind that hand wasn't something I could go against.

'What?'

I also felt a little weak. No, it wasn't that I felt weak; it was just I couldn't feel the same strength coursing through me, probably because Sylvie's [Blessing] had disappeared, which meant my stats must have returned to their original parameters.

"Junior, you are still tired."

Senior Maya smiled warmly as she tapped on my forehead with a gentle touch. The force she used to pin me was nowhere to be seen.

Her smile was a smile that spoke of relief, as if a burden had been lifted. Her eyes, now clear and filled with kindness, reflected the genuine concern she felt.

But I still didn't want to stay in this position. I also didn't feel that much tired either.

"I am no-"

"You are. Why don't you listen to your elders?" However, my words were interrupted.

"....."

"Right. This is how you should behave?"

Seeing the smile, I was annoyed.

".....Just a moment before, you weren't behaving like an elder, though."

"What did you say?"

I couldn't resist when an opportunity like this presented itself as I pointed out, "Just a moment ago, you weren't behaving like an elder, Senior. You were acting more like a child who just got what they wanted."

Maya's eyes widened, and a faint blush tinted her cheeks. She stammered for a moment, seemingly caught off guard. "I-I wasn't! I was just... uh, thirsty. Yes, thirsty!"

For some reason, I wanted to tease her a little further. "Thirsty, huh? You drank my blood like a little kid enjoying a drink."

"Th-that's not true! I was just... ugh!" Her face flushed even more, and she covered her eyes with her hands as if trying to hide herself from the world. But then, she slightly opened her fingers, revealing her clear blue eyes.

"S-sorry...." An apology was the only thing she could utter at that moment. It seemed she still couldn't get over how she behaved.

Her innocence remained the same.

"It is fine," I mumbled. "I did it on my own accord."

"But it must have hurt, right?" Maya's concern was evident in her voice as she continued, her gaze fixed on me. "I know your body was not in the best condition, and I must have put a strain on you. I didn't mean to... I just couldn't control myself."

However, as she mentioned about hurting, I remember the sensations I had felt. When she pushed her fangs into my body, rather than feeling pain, I felt a different sensation.

'It was a pleasure.'

The place she bit was filled with pleasure, and at the same time, I felt a little numb. It wasn't simply the pain. Thus, I knew one thing for a fact.

'She is a little different from other vampires.'

I didn't know why it was in detail, but if her evolution were interrupted at the half because of me, then she would be in an unpredictable state.

'Did she finish her own evolution?'

That seemed plausible. Even though it was probably an extremely rare case, if it was Senior Maya, it would make sense since she wouldn't want to hurt anyone.

'Such an evolution probably resulted because of her own feelings and how she limited herself.'

It was truly a remarkable achievement. Even in the face of such an adversary, she still retained a characteristic of herself.

It was something worthy of respect, not something that needs to be apologized for.

"You shouldn't apologize." So, I couldn't help but utter.

"What?"

"You shouldn't apologize," I repeated, looking directly into her eyes. The surprise on her face was evident, and I felt the need to reassure her. "It didn't hurt, Senior Maya. In fact, it felt... different."

"D-different?" Her eyes widened, and a deeper shade of pink spread across her cheeks.

I nodded, opting for honesty. "It felt good in a strange way. Not the pain I expected, but more like a peculiar sensation. It's hard to explain."

Maya's embarrassment escalated. She fidgeted with her fingers, her eyes avoiding mine. "U-uh, I didn't mean to... um, well, I'm glad it didn't hurt?"

"You should be."

"But junior, are you really that type?"

"That type? What do you mean?"

"Well, I heard once from my friend. She was talking about her senior who loved feeling pain, and it felt pleasurable for him. So, I thought maybe you are also like that."

"Huh?" The moment I heard that, I looked at Maya with disbelief. But, it seemed my eyes gave the wrong signal to her.

"I-if you really like such a thing, I wouldn't mi-" However, the more she continued to speak, even I started feeling embarrassed.

SWOOSH!

And I immediately stood up, not being able to sit on those thighs any longer. It was so embarrassing already, and those words hit the mark.

"Wh-" She seemed surprised at my sudden movement, but her eyes followed my every movement.

"I think you are gravely misunderstanding something," I said, looking at her clueless face. "I'm not into that. It was just a unique sensation, probably because of your... condition."

At the mention of that, she nodded her head. "Oh....I see..." She didn't even feel embarrassed at what she just said. "I am sorry if I assumed wrong."

Even though she uttered apologies, it was more like a sorry for not understanding, not because she was embarrassed.

'Innocence is a bliss....'

I realized then that she probably didn't mean anything sexual by enjoying pain. She probably didn't even know much about such things.

"Seriously, you are such a mood killer." I couldn't help but mumble.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. Let's just leave."

"Okay....."

It seemed she was regretful a little, but what could I say?

It was her own fault.

'Blame your innocence....Or, blame the fact that I knew...'

Just like that, we stood up and started getting ready to leave.

The moment Astron and Maya had left those tunnels, the first thing they did was return to the hotel.

Though Astron came by himself, and Maya came later all alone.

And Amelia and Sylvie were the first two to welcome Maya.

"Maya!" Amelia exclaimed, her eyes wide with a mix of relief and worry. She rushed forward and enveloped Maya in a tight embrace, her pent-up emotions bubbling to the surface. Tears welled up in her eyes, a testament to the concern she had been harboring during Maya's absence.

"Where were you? We were so worried!" Amelia's voice wavered, a combination of joy at seeing Maya safe and the residual anxiety of the unknown.

Maya, too, felt the weight of the moment. She returned the hug, her own eyes moist with unspoken emotions. "I'm sorry, Amelia. It's... it's a little long story....."

Sylvie, standing beside them, watched the reunion with a soft smile. The tension that had gripped both her and Senior Amelia seemed to dissipate as Maya returned to them.

But her eyes turned to the person beside her. He, who was looking at the scene with his normal cold purple eyes, felt a little different. She had already called him the moment she was notified that Maya had returned.

"Are you okay?" Sylvie asked, looking at him.

"Yeah. Thanks to you."

Sylvie smiled, a genuine warmth in her eyes. "It was nothing. I'm just glad I could be of any help, and you're both safe now."

"Yeah." He nodded his head.

'But, something feels different.' Sylvie thought inwardly. It wasn't just a simple vibe change. For some reason, the aura that she could sense from Astron came as different.

"Junior Sylvie." At that moment, Maya's voice came from the sides.

Sylvie turned towards Maya, who had a genuine smile on her face. "Thank you, Sylvie. For staying with Amelia and helping out. I appreciate it."

Sylvie smiled back, feeling a warmth in her heart. "It was okay, Senior. I'm just glad everything worked out."

Maya's eyes, however, held a subtle change. There was something otherworldly about her, something Sylvie couldn't quite put her finger on. It was as if Maya had brought back a piece of the unknown with her.

Sylvie's instincts tingled; it was a little eerie, but she dismissed it, attributing it to the lingering tension of the recent events.

'I am probably misunderstanding.'

She wanted to say that, but at this point, she had learned to trust her senses. The change she felt from Astron was a lot more drastic when it came to Maya.

"Now, we need to report to authorities."

However, in this group, there was someone who knew the importance. As Astron said that, Maya also nodded her head.

"You are right. I should report it."

"Let me contact the academy and the officers first," Amelia said and turned his head to Astron.
"Also, while you were away, another bunch of officials came."

"Another bunch of officials?"

"Yes. They said they were from the Demonic Human Bureau. They wanted to talk to you." Hearing this, Astron turned to face Sylvie.

"Yes. They already asked me about what happened, and they also want to talk to you." Sylvie also nodded and confirmed. However, she seemed a little scared by the mention of the Demonic Human Bureau, and Astron knew why.

"Okay. I will contact them soon."

After all, they were one of the ones that betrayed the humanity....

Chapter 215 Chapter 47.6 - Her Change

215 Chapter 47.6 - Her Change

Maya found herself in a small, dimly lit room, facing the two officers from the Local Awakened Security, Harlan and Margareta.

The atmosphere was tense, and Maya could sense their scrutiny as they prepared to question her.

Harlan leaned forward, his stern gaze fixed on Maya. "Miss Maya, we've been informed of the recent events. We need you to provide a detailed account of what transpired."

Maya took a deep breath and began recounting the harrowing experience. She described how she was ambushed and kidnapped by a vampire and the terror she felt as she realized the danger she was in.

Her eyes flickered with a mixture of 'fear' and 'determination' as she continued, revealing how she managed to turn the tables.

"I had an artifact hidden as a trump card," Maya explained. "It was a powerful enchanted weapon that allowed me to get rid of the vampire's restraints. And then, with its help, I was able to escape and, ultimately, eliminate the threat."

She had already returned to her usual demeanor now that the events transpired had become far, long away.

Margareta raised an eyebrow. "An enchanted weapon? You were well-prepared, Miss Maya."

"It is all thanks to our academy."

"Yes. We know you are a senior from the Arcadia Hunter Academy."

Maya nodded in acknowledgment. "Yes, my training at the Arcadia Hunter Academy has been invaluable."

Harlan's stern expression softened slightly with a slight respect. "We understand the importance of being well-

prepared, especially for someone of your caliber."

Margareta interjected, "Miss Maya, we've dispatched an investigation team to the tunnels you mentioned. They'll assess the situation and gather any additional evidence. We've also notified the families of the kidnapped victims about the developments."

Maya felt a sense of relief that the authorities were taking swift action. "Thank you for your prompt response. I hope the investigation yields useful information."

Harlan then revisited Maya's earlier testimony. "You mentioned witnessing other victims in the tunnels—people the vampire had killed. Can you provide any more details about what you saw?"

Maya hesitated for a moment, the memory still vivid in her mind. "The victims were suspended from the ceiling, lifeless. It was a gruesome scene. The vampire seemed to revel in displaying the aftermath of its action."

Harlan and Margareta exchanged glances, their expressions growing grave. After all, they knew a vampire was something that was normal. Hunter could face alone, and they knew what kind of danger this girl before them had defeated.

After a moment of contemplative silence, Harlan spoke with a newfound respect in his voice, "Miss Maya, facing a vampire is no small feat. It's a challenge that even seasoned hunters approach with caution. What you've accomplished here is beyond commendable."

Margareta chimed in, her expression reflecting the admiration they both felt, "Indeed, it's not every day we witness a young hunter confronting and overcoming such a formidable adversary. You've not only saved yourself but potentially prevented further tragedies. Your bravery won't go unnoticed."

Maya nodded, but her expression didn't move, as if she wasn't happy with the compliments.

In fact, she wasn't since she wasn't the one who achieved this feat but was here because of his request.

"Thank you. I did what I had to do to survive and protect others. But there's still much to uncover about the events in those tunnels."

However, she still acted her part, explaining the truth as if she was the one who had done that.

Harlan's tone shifted to a more serious note. "Miss Maya, I understand the gravity of the situation, and your actions are commendable. However, given the nature of your encounter with a vampire, we need to ensure there are no signs of infection or any lingering effects. It's a precautionary measure, considering the potential risks involved."

Maya's eyes flickered with a hint of discomfort, but she nodded in understanding. After all, he had also informed her about this, but he said trust was the most important.

According to what he said, this incident had already become too big, and if they had learned this from another source, it would have been a lot worse. They would probably target her.

"I know. It's necessary to be sure."

Margareta gestured towards the door. "If you could follow us to the medical bay, we'll conduct a thorough examination. It won't take long, and it's a standard procedure after encounters with demons." Even though there weren't many records of vampires, encountering a demon and staying alive meant two things.

Either the said person was on the demon's side, or they were a spy; thus, an investigation was needed.

Maya stood up, her resolve evident. "Lead the way."

Maya followed Harlan and Margareta to the medical bay, the sterile environment contrasting with the recent chaos in the tunnels. As she settled onto the examination bed, she couldn't help but feel a sense of unease.

The gravity of the situation weighed on her, knowing that this examination wasn't just a routine check-up. He also informed her about this procedure on the way in the tunnels while they planned how much they would reveal.

"Please start the check-up."

Harlan and Margareta watched as the personnel began the examination, their movements professional and precise.

Various magical detection tools were used to scan Maya's aura, searching for any traces of demonic energy. Despite the hidden goals of the acts, the procedure seemed like a routine medical examination.

Maya tried to remain calm, but the tension in the room was palpable.

Her mind raced with thoughts of trust, secrecy, and the delicate balance they were trying to maintain.

'Everything will be okay. It will be even better if you act like you don't know why this had happened to you.'

She recalled what he said to her and remembered the importance of her 'honest' act.

As the examination progressed, Harlan and Margareta exchanged subtle glances. They were seasoned officers, so they knew there was a high chance that Maya was affected by that demon.

However, to their surprise, the results showed no signs of demonic energy in Maya.

Harlan, maintaining his professional demeanor, couldn't help but express his surprise. "This is..."

"Thank god." Margareta sighed and smiled. She somehow felt quite fond of this girl since she was the one who fought with the vampire. She sincerely wanted this girl to be as normal and honest as she looked, and her expectations didn't disappoint her.

"Wh-"

But the most surprising one was Maya.

'He said they would detect that I was a vampire.'

After all, she herself drank his blood, and she knew sooner or later she would be found. So, she decided to reveal this to authorities, even though she knew the road would be thorny.

But this was different from what they expected, and it was a welcomed one.

Harlan smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry, Miss Maya. It seems whatever you faced didn't leave a lasting mark on you. You're in the clear."

Margareta added, "You've been through a lot, and we appreciate your cooperation. We'll continue our investigation, and if you remember anything else, don't hesitate to contact us."

Just like that, Maya, somehow feeling relieved, left the room.

"Astron Natusalune, correct?"

The man standing before me had an air of authority that radiated from his very being. His hair, once likely a dark shade, was now a pristine white, and wrinkles etched the map of time on his face.

Despite the aging signs, there was an undeniable strength in his presence, an overwhelming vibe that demanded respect.

But I knew for one fact that this guy before me wasn't someone worthy of respect.

'Benjamin!'

A traitor bastard who sold the information of the hunters and acted as a spy. He was a rat, a rat I wanted to choke with my bare hands.

"Yes, I'm Astron Natusalune," I replied, meeting his gaze directly.

"I am Director Benjamin, an investigator under the Demonic Human Bureau," he introduced himself with a firm tone, and his piercing gaze bore into mine.

This guy was a demonic human who knew how to hide himself very well.

At this exact moment, I imagined killing him, cutting his face, stabbing his chest countless times, dismembering his organs, and displaying them to the world.

However, I didn't have the strength. After all, he was at least a mid-rank-10 hunter who couldn't even be compared to the academy students right now.

Thus, I kept my cool, my face unchanging.

"You were called here in order to move with the investigation related to the demonic human attack that had targeted student Sylvie."

As Director Benjamin opened his mouth, my mind worked swiftly to conduct a visual analysis of the investigator before me.

His appearance spoke volumes about the recent events that had unfolded in his life.

Firstly, his eyes revealed a weariness that couldn't be concealed. Dark circles clung to the lower lids, and the subtle twitch in his right eye suggested a lack of sleep. It was evident that he had been pushing himself beyond normal limits, possibly fueled by the urgency of the investigation.

The faint scent of cigarette smoke lingered in the air around him, confirming my suspicion that he had recently indulged in the habit.

A crumpled pack of cigarettes protruded from the inner pocket of his suit, its presence hinting at moments of contemplation amidst the chaos.

The cuff of his left sleeve bore a faint smudge of dirt, perhaps remnants of an explosive situation or a scuffle.

The well-polished shoes hinted at recent visits to places less pristine than an investigator's office, possibly a scene with explosives.

His smartphone, a device for government officials, barely visible in the inner pocket, emitted a faint glow.

A brief glance told me that he had just concluded a call with his superiors, a conversation that likely contained critical information or directives related to our current investigation.

The hem of his overcoat bore a dampness that hadn't fully dissipated, and a lingering chill seemed to emanate from his very presence.

The city had experienced an unusually cold night just last night, and the dampness on his coat suggested exposure to the chilly air. The fact that he had entered the city during such weather conditions spoke volumes about the urgency and immediacy of the situation.

All of them made me understand that he had just recently come to this city, possibly at night.

'The investigation team most likely transferred the case to the Demonic Human Bureau, and he just came to the city last night with the order from higher-ups.'

If that was the case, it was even impressive that he came to the conclusion that I was a suspect, most likely from a former case.

'Fred's disappearance.'

The last time Fred was seen was when he entered the same dungeon as us, and he must have remembered the list and my name.

'Makes sense.'

I knew for a fact that Sylvie was also called before me, and she was also questioned. Of course, she was asked some questions about the event and the identity of the demonic humans that had attacked her and me.

"Yes, Sir Benjamin."

I bent my pride and paid my respects.

"I won't keep you here for a long time." He said, his eyes looking at me. "Do you know anything about the masked attacker that had targeted the Demonic Humans and killed them?"

I maintained a calm demeanor as I met Director Benjamin's scrutinizing gaze. The questions he posed were direct, and I could sense the undercurrent of suspicion in his words.

Even though he was a professional and almost had perfect control over his body, the small hints that he gave couldn't escape my eyes.

"Masked attacker targeting Demonic Humans? Even though I had been informed by Sylvie and Officer Margaret, I'm afraid I don't have any information on that," I replied, feigning ignorance with a touch of sincerity.

It was a delicate dance, a careful balance between appearing cooperative and deflecting suspicion.

The answer to that question wasn't the important thing. What he was looking for wasn't the oral answer but actually the response given by my body, and I knew that well.

Benjamin's eyes narrowed slightly, his gaze intense. I knew he was trying to gauge my reactions, searching for any sign of deception.

'You won't find one.'

One of the first things I had trained aside from my body was my poker face. Even with [Perceptive Insight] assisting me, I didn't get lazy and paid the utmost importance to being able to control every little detail of my body.

The mask I wore was one of composure and innocence, concealing the turbulent thoughts beneath.

"Is that so?"

And it seemed he concluded that I wasn't someone that needed to be suspected. After all, I made sure of that. It was not that hard.

"Thank you for your cooperation. You are free to leave."

Especially if you knew of that bastard's skill....

Chapter 216 Chapter 47.7 - Her Change [Interlude]

216 Chapter 47.7 - Her Change [Interlude]

"Is it over now?"

Meeting in front of the same hotel room, Maya asked.

"Yes. It is."

I replied as I stepped into the room.

Once inside, I turned to Maya. "How did yours go?" I asked, curious about the details of her encounter with the officers.

After all, this part was one of the most crucial parts after the incident.

Maya hesitated for a moment before responding. "It was... different from what we planned."

"What do you mean different?" Hearing this, my mind immediately started going around everywhere.

After all, revealing the information to the government itself was a risky move, but it was better than hiding it.

'Hiding it is not optimal.'

Things related to demons have the utmost ability to control public opinion about a person, and the moment Maya became affiliated with such a thing, it would be impossible to hide.

Even though she can somehow not look like a vampire, her blood levels and her biology have changed. She probably also contains the demonic energy factor in her body. Thus, it will be very hard to hide in the academy unless she is cooperating with the demons themselves.

But she can't do that. Neither will I allow it, nor will she prefer. Thus, in the end, this binds our hands and limits our choices. Therefore, the choice I made was something that contained a lot of risks.

She was prone to being captured by the government or magic towers, but there, I trusted the academy and the headmaster.

There were also extremists like me who were determined to kill all the demons; thus, not knowing Maya, they would probably target her at the same time.

Thus, we were walking on a tightrope.

'Did they already contact the academy, or are they taking her? Did I miscalculate?'

Those types of questions filled my head. After all, I didn't save Maya so that she could be subjected to the experiments. That would be an even worse destiny than death itself.

"Yes." Maya nodded her head, looking at my eyes.

"How?"

"The thing is," Maya began, her expression a mix of relief and uncertainty, "they didn't find any demonic energy inside me."

My eyes widened in surprise, processing the implications of her words. "What do you mean? Are you saying they just let you go?"

Maya nodded. "Yes, exactly. They asked me questions about what happened and the vampire incident, but when they examined me for demonic energy, they found nothing. It's like I'm completely human."

I couldn't hide my astonishment. If the officers couldn't detect any demonic energy within Maya, it meant that she had successfully concealed her true nature from their scrutiny. It was a revelation that carried both relief and complexity.

'Is she not a vampire?'

That was not even a question. The amount of blood she had drunk from me would have killed me. If not for Sylvie's [Blessing]. So, there was no way a completely normal human could drink such a thing.

So, it was very hard to believe.

'Were they bluffing?' I thought. 'No, they didn't seem to be that capable.'

From my interactions with Margareta, I knew she wasn't that talented of an officer. This was also probably why she was rotting in a city like this and why all those cases were neglected.

"Did they say anything else? Any hints about why you might be different?" I probed, my mind racing to make sense of the situation.

Maya shook her head. "No, they didn't give any specific reasons. They just concluded that I was clear of demonic energy and released me. It's like they didn't know what to make of it."

Hearing Maya confirm, I decided to believe in her judgment.

'If that is the case, she is a vampire without demonic energy?'

That question lingered in my head.

"This changes things," I murmured, contemplating the newfound dynamics. "If they couldn't detect anything, it gives us more leeway, but it also raises questions about why you're different."

'How can this even happen?'

Did that even make sense? How can one be a vampire without having demonic energy?

'Her mutation....'

At that moment, I thought of something.

'If her evolution was incomplete....'

Then it would make sense. When I attacked the vampire, she must have been going through with the evolution of it, but since I had attacked the vampire, it was interrupted by my attack.

And then, since I killed the vampire, the process didn't have a direction.

'So does that mean she completed her own evolution on her own?'

Turning my head to Maya, I hadn't gotten any feeling of Demonic Energy as well, even with vengeful bane.

At the start, I thought it was because she was tired and a new vampire, but now that I looked at it, even after all this time, she still didn't have it inside.

The pieces of the puzzle began to align in my mind. Maya's unique situation seemed to be a result of her interrupted evolution, shaped by her own values and willpower. It was as if her own resentment toward becoming a complete vampire had steered the course of her transformation.

'Maya resisted the essence of the vampire,' I contemplated. 'She must have rejected it as best as she could and, in doing so, retained her humanity without succumbing to demonic energy.'

It was a remarkable feat—one that defied the natural order of vampire evolution.

Maya's actions, fueled by her own values and the strength of her will, had forged a path that diverged from the norm.

She created her own identity as a vampire,' I mused. 'An identity that doesn't conform to the usual characteristics of a demonic being.'

While this revelation brought a sense of relief, it also added layers of complexity to Maya's existence.

'Yeah, she is definitely worthy of respect.'

As she faced the challenges ahead, I couldn't help but admire the strength she exhibited in retaining her humanity against the odds.

"Senior Maya...." I mumbled.

"What?"

"It must have been hard to resist it."

"....."

Maya's expression softened at my words, and she offered a small smile in acknowledgment while lowering her head.

"I couldn't resist it in the end."

And mumbled in a small whisper, but I heard it. Seeing she was still guilty about everything, I couldn't help but shake my head. She really was hard on herself.

"It is fine. You did well."

KNOCK!

Just as my hand was about to move unconsciously, I suddenly heard a knock coming from out of the room.

"Astron, are you there?"

It was Amelia.

"Yes."

"Did you see Maya? I have been looking for her but couldn't find her."

"She is here."

"Huh?"

"You can come in, by the way. The door is open; you don't need to wait outside."

Amelia entered the room, casting a curious glance between Maya and me.

"What are you two doing in here?" she asked, her eyes alternating between us.

"We're just talking," I replied, keeping my expression neutral. Even though Amelia wasn't a bad person or friend, it was always better to keep Maya's situation secret since the opportunity presented itself.

Amelia raised an eyebrow with a playful suspicion on her face. "Discussing matters, huh? I wonder what matters they are. Maya care to explain?"

Maya's face flushed with embarrassment. "T-that... we were just talking about recent events."

Amelia grinned mischievously, teasing, "Sure, just talking? If you say so."

Maya shot me a quick glance, silently pleading for support, though she chose the wrong person to ask for help.

After all, no person could put me in between two girls of such a dynamic. I got my lesson for that.

I maintained a stoic expression, not giving away any details.

But then, Amelia's expression softened. "Well, whatever it is, I'm just glad to see you back, Maya." The corner of her eyes was a little wet. "It worried us when you disappeared like that."

Maya's embarrassment faded into a warm smile. "I missed you too, Amelia. It's good to be back."

They looked at each other for a second, and I couldn't help but think I was the one that was a thumb here.

"Cough...Anyway." Amelia cleared her throat, composing her expression. And then, she said, "We should leave. It is getting late, and the instructor is waiting for us."

Just like that, we left the room, making our way back to the others. Sylvie, who had been waiting patiently, joined us, and we headed back to the academy.

'This is....'

When I returned to the academy, the first thing I did was immediately go into my room and lie down. Since I had been awake for a very long time and hadn't rested that well, my body was tired.

But, as I lay on the bed, I sensed something. I change inside myself.

'What the hell is this?'

It was a subtle feeling, as if something foreign was inside me, but at the same time, this feeling felt somehow familiar.

'Don't tell me....'

It was the same feeling I had gotten when I first got the [Shadowborne] when I first killed the MistWraith.

At that moment, I immediately called my status window.

'Status.'

?Name: Astron Natusalune

?Occupation: Weapon Master (level 1)

?Talent Limit: 6

?Passives:

-Vengeful Bane

-Bloodline Resonance

?Attributes:

Variable Attributes:

Strength: 2.80 ? 3.00

Dexterity: 3.45 ? 3.60

Agility: 3.76 ? 3.90

Constitution: 2.75 ? 2.85

Intuition: 3.95 ? 4.05

Magical Power: 4.20 ? 4.35

Mana Capacity: 3.13 ? 3.25

?Traits:

-Perceptive Insight (Unique)(Unchanging)

-Lunar Enigma (????) (Growth Type) (Stage 1)

-Shadowborne (Legendary) (Growth Type)(Stage 1)

?Arts:

-Lethal Arsenal Ascendancy (????)(%22)

?Skills:

-Dash

-Eyes of Hourglass

?Body Imprints:

?Bonds:

-Aurora Raven (Rare)(Growth Type)

-Celestalith, The Transcendent Eclipse

As I called up my status window, the familiar interface appeared before me.

However, this time, it wasn't the usual array of stats and abilities. Something new had emerged, something related to the recent events.

The new addition, Bloodline Resonance, caught my attention. Its description revealed everything I needed to know.

Passive: Bloodline Resonance

Description: Upon defeating a target infused with demonic energy, the user taps into the essence of the demonic bloodline, absorbing a fraction of its power to enhance both physical and magical attributes. The effectiveness of this skill escalates with the potency of the demonic energy within the slain target. By resonating with the bloodline of demons, the user gains a unique form of empowerment, marking a symbiotic connection with the very forces they combat.

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"YOU BASTARD! WHAT ARE YOU DOING!"

Sitting in the middle of her room, Julia was fuming. Even her aura was shining while she was grabbing the handle of her bad.

"Just calm down."

Irina entered the room at that moment.

"How can I calm down? This bastard is clearly doing this on purpose."

Julia shot up from her chair, her eyes ablaze with frustration as she pointed at the holographic display projected above her desk. On the screen, her character in the "ChronoScape" game seemed to be in the midst of a perilous situation.

"Look at this! He just stole my quest item, and now he's flaunting it in front of me! I can't believe it!"

There, a guy without any ounce of clothing was dancing right in front of her. Let alone his non-existent clothing, the design of his character, and the stick he was holding alone made him recognizable.

Irina sighed, a mixture of amusement and exasperation playing on her features. She walked over to Julia and peered at the screen.

"Julia, it's just a game. Relax." She mumbled, but the smile on her face was clear. She knew what would trigger this girl the most.

"It's not just a game!" Julia huffed, crossing her arms. "It's a matter of principle. He's intentionally messing with me."

Irina chuckled softly, shaking her head. "Well, it seems like you've found a rival in the game. Isn't that part of the fun?"

"No, it's not fun! This is personal now."

As the two friends bantered about the virtual world, Ethan, who had been quietly observing the scene, finally spoke up.

"Are you two always like this when playing games?"

Julia and Irina turned to him simultaneously, a shared expression of determination on their faces.

"Yes."

"Yes."

Though Irina's face was rather masking her true feelings, after all, this was the first time she was playing games with her friends in such a manner. Thanks to her mother.....

Ethan shrugged, deciding it might be best to leave them to their passionate gaming rivalry. He also didn't play many games since he didn't see them suited for a Hunter, a person with a responsibility to protect others.

After all, for him, such a responsibility was obliged to be taken more seriously.

Meanwhile, Lilia, who had been watching from a corner, interjected with a sarcastic tone, "And here I thought you were going to improve your spatial awareness and motor reflexes, Irina."

Irina shot her a playful glare. "I am. Dealing with Julia's competitive spirit is an excellent exercise for that."

"Yeah, I can see that," Lilia mumbled as she approached. "You dealt with it really 'well'."

Lilia, with a mischievous glint in her eyes, continued her sarcastic banter.

"Honestly, Irina, I can't believe you're subjecting yourself to such a challenging game to improve your skills. I mean, with the way you handle those controls, I'm surprised you haven't leveled down yet."

Irina's playful glare turned into a determined smirk. "Oh, you think so? Well, let's see how well you fare against me then. How about a little duel, Lilia?"

Lilia raised an eyebrow, surprised by the sudden challenge. "A duel? Are you sure about that? I don't want to make you cry when you realize how untalented you are in this game."

Irina laughed a competitive fire in her eyes. "We'll see about that. Prepare yourself, Lilia."

The two friends set up their characters for a one-on-one duel within the virtual world of "ChronoScape." As the holographic arena materialized, complete with a cheering virtual crowd, the anticipation in the room grew.

Ethan and Julia watched with amused expressions, putting their own virtual squabbles on hold to witness the showdown.

"Wanna bet?" Julia asked, holding her drink.

Ethan shook his head, his attention still focused on the unfolding virtual duel. "Nah, I'm not much of a betting guy. I'd rather just enjoy the show."

Julia, determined to stir things up, grinned mischievously. "Come on, Ethan, where's your sense of adventure? A little bet could make things more interesting."

Ethan hesitated but ultimately stuck to his decision. "I'll pass. I just want to see how this duel turns out."

Julia, never one to back down, decided to take matters into her own hands. With a swift motion, she reached behind Ethan, attempting to give him a playful jab. A tomboyish grin spread across her face.

"You need to man up, Ethan! Spice things up a bit."

Ethan, this time not getting caught off guard by Julia's sudden attack, managed to dodge just in time.

"Not again." He smiled triumphantly. After all the time he had been subjected to the act of 'friendship' by Julia's terms, he was no longer caught off guard by such things.

"Wow, our little Ethan finally grew up," Julia smirked, but she held a little surprise as well. Even though Ethan's climb in ranks became the topic of the academy, she wasn't expecting such a rapid improvement.

Ethan chuckled, appreciating Julia's attempt to spice up the atmosphere. "Nice try, Julia. But I've been through your 'friendship training' enough times to see it coming."

Julia feigned disappointment. "Oh, come on! Where's the fun in that if you're always prepared?"

Ethan raised an eyebrow teasingly. "The fun is in not getting ambushed every time I turn around."

Julia, undeterred, leaned in with a challenging glint in her eyes. "Alright, Ethan, let's make this interesting. How about a little bet on the outcome of the duel?"

Ethan sighed, knowing Julia's competitive streak too well. "Julia, I already said I'm not into betting."

But Julia persisted, her nagging reaching a new level. "Come on, Ethan, it's just a friendly wager. No harm in a little competition among friends. Besides, it'll make the duel even more exciting."

Ethan rolled his eyes, realizing that Julia wouldn't let it go easily. "Fine, fine. What's the bet then?"

Julia grinned triumphantly. "If Lilia wins, you owe me a weekend of being your sparring partner, no complaints. But if Irina wins, I'll take over your kitchen for a week and cook whatever you want."

Ethan hesitated for a moment, contemplating the consequences of the bet. Julia's sparring sessions were known for being intense. As one of those who had been subjected to that treatment for a long time, he himself knew that fact quite well.

But he was confident in Irina's abilities, and the price was too good to refuse. He imagined how Julia would look in an apron while serving him, which made him smile. This girl had been the one that teased him almost all the time, so now he could let this resentment go.

Who wouldn't be? After all, there was no way a newbie who had just started playing the game would be able to beat the person who had spent her whole weekend time playing.

Deal," Ethan agreed, a competitive glint now matching Julia's. "But let's be clear, no holding back. I want those meals to be worth it."

As the agreement settled, Julia and Ethan shook hands, sealing the deal for their friendly wager. The virtual duel between Irina and Lilia continued on the holographic display, the stakes now elevated by the impending consequences of the bet.

Julia couldn't help but revel in her victory, confident in Lilia's potential. "Get ready, Ethan. You're in for the sparring session of your life. Lilia might be a beginner, but she's got some serious talent."

Ethan, unfazed, chuckled. "We'll see about that. Don't say I didn't warn you, though."

The holographic arena was alive with the clash of swords, each swing and parry echoing through the room.

Irina, with her virtual assassin character, moved like a shadow, quick and elusive. Lilia, on the other hand, controlled a warrior, her movements powerful and deliberate.

"Why did you even choose assassin?" Lilia asked, looking at Irina. "You are a mage."

"Then, why did you choose warrior? You are a ranger." Irina retorted.

"I chose it because I know it is the best class for beginners."

"How do you know that?"

"....I researched a little."

"So you were researching? Didn't you say you disliked playing games?"

"It is not relevant."

"Heh...."

As the verbal exchange continued, the virtual clash intensified. Irina's assassin, relying on speed and stealth, attempted to exploit openings in Lilia's defense.

Lilia, however, anticipated some of the moves, countering with powerful strikes that echoed in the holographic arena.

But then, she still couldn't block everything and had already lost half of her HP from the start.

'It is my win.'

Irina thought as she saw how low Lilia's HP was.

'Let me all in!'

With a sudden burst of speed, Irina unleashed her character's ultimate skill, a flurry of devastating strikes that seemed almost impossible to evade.

Even the holographic crowd gasped as Lilia's warrior character struggled to fend off the relentless assault.

In the midst of the intense exchange, it seemed like Irina had the upper hand. Lilia's HP dropped to a critical condition, the virtual arena reflecting the imminent defeat.

'Just a little more, and victory is mine.'

Irina's confidence swelled as her character continued the relentless assault.

However, at that critical moment, Lilia, undeterred by the dire situation, unleashed her own ultimate skill.

"JUSTICE!"

The character shouted as the holographic arena erupted with a blinding display of power. Lilia's warrior character executed a dazzling attack that exploded the entire screen.

"Huh?"

Irina was surprised as she saw half of her character's HP disappearing from that one strike while her screen turned grey.

"How?"

She landed all her skills, used her ultimate, and made the perfect combo she had seen pro players using. But she was the one who was killed.

"THAT DOESN'T MAKE SENSE, HOW DOES IT KILL ME?"

Irina's frustration echoed through the room as she couldn't comprehend the sudden turn of events. She stared at the grey screen in disbelief, her character lying defeated on the virtual battlefield.

Lilia, still caught in the excitement of her unexpected victory, grinned. "Looks like Justice prevailed in the end."

Irina, unwilling to accept defeat, pointed an accusatory finger at Lilia. "Your character is broken! There's no way it should have that much power. It's unbalanced!"

Lilia laughed, brushing off the complaints. "Oh, come on, Irina. It's just a game. Maybe you need to reconsider your strategy next time."

Irina, determined to salvage her pride, continued to voice her grievances. "No, it's not about strategy. Your character is clearly overpowered. I should have won that!"

Ethan interjected with a bemused but a little scared expression, "Irina, it's just a friendly match. No need to get worked up about it."

But Irina, fueled by her competitive spirit, wasn't ready to let it go. "No, this is unfair. I demand a rematch. Your character is just too broken. She clearly had chosen it to counter me."

"Then, you should have chosen a different class? It is not like assassins are the only class in the game."

"But they are cool."

"....You...."

Julia, overhearing the ongoing dispute, looked at Ethan with a mischievous grin. "Ethan, you might want to be prepared. Looks like I won't be going easy on you this week."

Ethan, with a cold sweat forming on his back, stammered, "Wait, what? Julia, we're just training, right?"

"Of course, we are just 'training.' It is not like I won't get back at you for your delusions."

"Cough....What delusions are you talking about?"

"I didn't miss that gaze of yours when I talked about preparing a meal."

"...."

At that moment, Ethan realized his fate was sealed.

"Guys, did you hear about the new gathering this weekend?" Lilia interjected while leaning back on the couch.

"What gathering?"

"Well....Apparently, the Blackthorn family is calling for an upper circle gathering. This time, Victor will be the main representative."

Victor Blackthorn, heir to the prestigious Blackthorn family, was a well-known figure in the upper circles of society.

"Victor, huh? That guy is always in the spotlight," Julia remarked, feigning disinterest. After all, he had been the rank one student, getting all the attention. She wasn't jealous of him, but it always became annoying when the seat in front of her became noisy whenever he left.

There were countless fangirls of him in the school. Also, that guy was surely persistent.

"Yeah." Irina also mumbled subconsciously while still thinking about her defeat. She looks dead inside.

Lilia raised an eyebrow, sensing something was different with Irina. "It is Victor, you know?" She asked. After all, she knew whom Irina had feelings for.

"So what? It's just another gathering of the upper circles. Not like I care."

"..." Everyone except Julia looked at Irina with a surprised look.

"Hmm?" Irina slowly came to herself and realized what she had just said.

'What?'

For some reason, the enthusiasm she felt about Victor wasn't there.

'That...'

But someone else.

Irina felt an unexpected pang in her chest, a twinge of annoyance that caught her off guard. As the conversation about Victor Blackthorn continued, her thoughts involuntarily drifted to someone else – someone she hadn't expected to think about at a time like this.

'Why am I even thinking about him?' she scolded herself internally.

The image of a particular guy with unruly dark hair and a cold face flashed in her mind. It was a face that had occupied her thoughts more than she cared to admit.

"Humph."

Chapter 218 Chapter 48.2 - Unmovable Mountain

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Late in the evening, Professor Eleanor sat in her cluttered office, surrounded by stacks of reports submitted by students for the recent test. Her desk lamp cast a warm glow over the papers as she sighed, preparing for the seemingly endless task of grading.

The grading criteria were clear:

-Demonstration of Formula Principles: Showcase an understanding of the core principles discussed in class for 1 point.

-Practical Application: Apply the principles to a real-world scenario in the report for 1.5 points.

-Creativity: Inject original ideas or innovative approaches for 1 point.

-Clarity and Structure: Ensure the report is well-

organized and easy to follow for 0.5 points.

-Adherence to Submission Guidelines: Follow the specified format and length requirements for 1 point.

Each report had to be meticulously evaluated, but Professor Eleanor prided herself on her efficiency.

She swiftly skimmed through the first batch of reports submitted by Lila Thornheart and Victor Blackthorn, the top students in the class.

"Lilia Thornheart's Group | Alchemical Principles: 1 | Practical Application: 1.5 | Creativity: 1 | Clarity and Structure: 0.5 | Adherence: 1 | Total: 5"

"Victor Blackthorn's Group | Alchemical Principles: 1 | Practical Application: 1.5 | Creativity: 1 | Clarity and Structure: 0.5 | Adherence: 1 | Total: 5"

Professor Eleanor observed the subtle differences in their approaches and noted them with precision. As she reached the second batch of reports, she couldn't help but admire the students' dedication to their craft.

However, there was one group that she wasn't able to check. A student that was possibly the best when it came to mana manipulation, and the other two students that she needed to pay attention to.

"Irina Emberheart's group | Alchemical Principles: 1 | Practical Application: 1 | Creativity: 0.5 | Clarity and Structure: 0.5 | Adherence: 1 | Total: 5"

Just as she graded the papers, she suddenly noticed a paragraph written in there.

'This magic formula's purpose is to find the location represented when each of them is combined. Even though individually none of them seems to hold any knowledge, in fact, all of them are part of a picture showing us the map of a special place.'

Intrigued by this unexpected depth, Professor Eleanor pondered the implications of the paragraph as she unknowingly smiled.

'To think someone would find what we hid for the second test.'

After all, the Phantom's Land was the location of the new test, and the students were going to travel there themselves.

"Interesting."

She mumbled as she grabbed her pen and put a tick on the rear of the row.

"Irina Emberheart's group | Alchemical Principles: 1 | Practical Application: 1 | Creativity: 0.5 | Clarity and Structure: 0.5 | Adherence: 1 | Bonus: 2 Total: 6"

"Let's see what the principal will say about this."

After all, even though she had given them bonus points, it wasn't enough to satisfy herself. None of the people in the academy expected such results from a group of students; thus, there was no distinct price for that.

[Eleanor: Sir, may I please take your time.]

She sent the message.

"Another day again."

"Yeah....We had been trying to write the report the whole weekend."

"Same....Man....why was it even that hard to begin with...."

As the students lamented the challenges of their weekend tasks, the academy bell rang, signaling the beginning of a new week. The hallways filled with the shuffle of students heading to their first classes.

"Ugh, and it's Monday," groaned one of them.

"At least it's a fresh start, right?" replied another optimistically.

"True, but I wish it started with a bit more sleep and a lot less homework," someone chimed in.

TOK!

Just at that moment, the door of the classroom opened as the instructor entered the room.

"Hmm?"

Most of the students gave a surprised gaze. After all, this instructor was a new face that they didn't see that much.

"Hello, cadets."

The instructor stood at the front of the class, a rugged figure with a demeanor that spoke of experience and battles long fought. His eyes scanned the room, locking gazes with curious students.

"Good morning, cadets. My name is Captain Kellan Thorne, retired hunter." He spoke with a deep, resonant voice that echoed authority and a wealth of knowledge. "I've faced creatures of the dark, conquered the wild, and survived battles that would make the bravest shudder. Now, I'm here to share my insights with you."

It was a cringe speech that made the students deadpan their expressions. But none of them had said anything, as the aura coming out of this instructor was far from normal in any case.

"Today. I'll be overseeing the spars, taking the place of your usual instructor, Eleanor. Consider it a change of pace, a taste of how different it could be with different instructors." His eyes gleamed with a spark of enthusiasm, revealing his genuine passion for the subject.

The students exchanged glances, a mix of curiosity and anticipation filling the room, curious about what could have possibly happened to Eleanor.

The prospect of having a retired hunter guiding their sparring sessions was both exciting and slightly intimidating as well.

"Then let the sparring begin."

Just like that, he started the lesson.

"Where is your partner?"

Inside the room for the sparring, I was standing alone. Instructor Kellan came to me since he saw me alone in the room. He was a name that I didn't know from the game, but I brushed it off.

'It is another deviation.'

After all, things had already been a lot different from the original, so I didn't need to keep myself on the edge.

"I don't know," I replied, looking at his stern face. The girl from the last time wasn't here this time. Even though she was quite annoying and fierce, she wasn't a bad sparring partner overall.

'She also didn't seem to be the type to miss such classes.'

I thought. From how serious she was, she seemed to be a model student, and her missing this lesson didn't make any sense.

'Not that it concerns me.'

Since she was a complete stranger, it was her own problem, not mine.

"Wait for a moment," Instructor Kellan said, his stern gaze fixed on me. He left the room briefly, and I stood there, wondering what was going on. A moment later, he returned with another student in tow.

"Here, I have found a partner for you. He also reported that his partner didn't come this time."

The moment I turned my attention to see who was before me, I couldn't help but stiffen a little.

'Sigh...'

It was a presence that I didn't want to associate myself with. Especially considering this guy's personality.

"Hello." The huge, towering man said as he looked at me with a serious expression. "I am Carl."

He was one of the people from the main cast, the one with the most stern and serious demeanor.

"Hello," I responded to Carl's greeting.

His imposing figure and disciplined demeanor were hard to ignore. It was evident that he came from a military family or background, and his posture and expression reflected the discipline ingrained in soldiers.

'Braveheart family....'

They were a family that held a formidable position in the military, and countless civil servants and inspectors were from them. They trained like soldiers and put bravery and noblesse oblige to the very essence of their family.

Carl's physique was impressive, with bulging muscles that hinted at extensive physical training. Even without my eyes, it could easily be observed that he was a tank type.

'As expected, he is using a hammer and shield this time as well.'

His eyes held a seriousness that went beyond the typical student demeanor. I couldn't help but feel a sense of reservation as I considered what kind of sparring partner he might be.

"Astron Natusalune," I introduced myself, keeping my tone neutral.

"I know about you."

Carl nodded in acknowledgment.

"You knew about me?"

"Yes. Ethan mentioned before."

"What did he say?"

"He said you were different from how you looked."

"How I looked?"

"Yeah. You look weak, but he said you are the complete opposite."

Carl's admission that he knew about me, coupled with Ethan's description, made me curious about what kind of reputation I had among my fellow main cast of the game.

Nevertheless, I didn't dwell on it for too long.

"I am flattered that you think of me that way," I responded, attempting to diffuse the seriousness in the air.

"It's not flattery," Carl asserted with a stern expression. "That is why I will take this sparring seriously."

I nodded, appreciating the commitment to a focused training session even though he was one of the strongest students in the academy.

'This will be hard.'

Carl was a student who had ranked in the first 100 in the academy; thus, it was a little concerning spar. But even then, I knew for a fact that this was going to become a useful one.

As he retrieved his hammer and shield, I mirrored his actions by unsheathing my daggers, as well as readying my bow. After all, this spar was going to be an important one.

The weight of the weapons felt familiar in my hands, and I assumed a defensive stance, ready for the impending clash.

"Start."

With the signal, I immediately started the fight with my bow.

'Let me test the waters a little bit.'

I maintained a calculated distance, my bowstring taut as I rained arrows upon him.

-SWOOSH!

The projectiles whizzed through the air, each aimed with precision, testing Carl's defensive capabilities.

Carl, true to his reputation, activated his aura, a visible manifestation of his defensive prowess. The ethereal shield surrounded him, deflecting the arrows with ease. His stoic expression remained unchanged as he weathered the storm of projectiles, determined to showcase the strength he possessed.

'This doesn't even push him to the maximum.'

Despite the relentless assault, I could sense that Carl wasn't exerting himself to the fullest.

'Of course, it was expected a little, but....'

Even though I knew for a fact that a tank like Carl with his aura activated was a force that I wouldn't face with such sloppy attacks, it scratched my pride a little.

I wasn't even using Celestalith, but I at least wanted to damage him.

I decided to escalate the challenge. With a subtle infusion of energy, I channeled my focus into a single arrow.

The air crackled with the intensity of the impending attack as I drew back the bowstring.

"Ho?"

I could hear him making a surprised face as he also lowered his body a little, infusing more energy into the hammer. The hammer started to shake a little, sending resonances to the circle around it.

'He is using it.'

It was one of his defensive skills. It seemed he also realized that this attack wasn't something to ignore.

SWOOSH!

I released the string of the bow, releasing the arrow charged with explosive blue moon energy.

BOOM!

The projectile streaked through the air, leaving a fiery trail in its wake. The explosive force upon impact created a burst of flames, testing the limits of Carl's defensive aura.

"Impressive."

Just as I had expected, Carl skillfully adjusted his defensive stance. The aura around him absorbed the fiery impact, leaving him relatively unscathed.

His disciplined demeanor remained unwavering as he quelled the flames with a wave of his shield.

'Not bad.'

I thought to myself.

'If it is him, then it should be okay.'

"Should we start real this time?"

I guess Carl thought the same.

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As the flames subsided and a brief acknowledgment passed between us, it became evident that the time for measured exchanges had come to an end. Carl's imposing figure, clad in the shimmering aura, betrayed a newfound intensity.

The disciplined soldier within him discarded restraint as he took an aggressive stance, abandoning the purely defensive posture he had maintained.

"Should we start for real this time?" Carl's question echoed the unspoken agreement to elevate the intensity of our sparring session.

'He is coming.'

From the small but not small muscle movements on his body, I could foresee that he was going to attack.

CRACK!

A low, ominous crack reverberated through the training ground as Carl made his move. The ground beneath him seemed to shudder as if protesting the force about to be unleashed.

SWOOSH!

In a surprising display of speed, especially for someone with a tank-like build, Carl charged toward me with a speed that defied his apparent role.

'So, he's not just a simple tank,' I thought, thinking about his stats. Carl was a tanker in the game for the party, but he wasn't a playable character. Thus, his details were not as clear as the players'.

The route he chose could also be changed, and it seemed right now the one before me was a bruiser/tank type.

Carl's charge was more akin to a powerful offensive maneuver, but I was already ready.

Even if my attacks didn't have the power to penetrate his defense, at the very least, I was faster than him.

SWOOSH!

With a swift, well-timed movement, I evaded Carl's charging attack. His momentum carried him forward, leaving an opening that I seized upon.

THUD!

As he passed by, I planted my foot on his open shoulder, using it as a springboard to propel myself backward with graceful agility.

The distance between us increased, giving me a brief respite to reassess the situation. Exploiting an opponent's momentary vulnerability is always a crucial strategy, and I intended to employ the same principle here.

Drawing my bow, I focused on the strings of mana that connected me to the arrows.

Each arrow is an extension of my intent, awaiting release. Carl, having halted his charge, readied himself for the next phase of our clash.

-THWACK! THWACK! THWACK!

Rapidly firing arrows, I sought to maintain a safe distance while testing Carl's defensive capabilities.

The idea here wasn't to beat him but to improve. Even though my attacks weren't going to penetrate him, even the motion of attacking while maintaining my distance itself was training.

Also, I knew that my arrows might not breach his defenses entirely, but I wanted to observe how he adapted to the evolving dynamics of our confrontation.

The interplay of attack and defense unfolded as Carl, true to his disciplined nature, adjusted his stance, deflecting the arrows with the aura-clad shield.

CRACK!

The rhythmic sound of arrows impacting Carl's shield echoed through the training ground.

"You are definitely good."

The disciplined tank, however, didn't merely stay on the defensive.

With each step, he closed the distance, chasing after me while skillfully fending off the projectiles.

SWOOSH!

He swung his hammer from a distance, and a wave of an attack followed.

'A sound wave.'

It was one of the unique skills of the Braveheart family, where they would use sound attacks to attack. That was also what he used to disturb the energy of my blue arrow at the start.

'Vibrations to counter match the energy wave.'

I evaded the attack at one last moment with a burst of speed to the side.

RING!

But the balance disturbance was still there.

"You are open!"

And he didn't miss that momentary opening.

CRASH!

Swinging his hammer down, he hit the ground. He knew the distance was far away, and his attack wouldn't reach me.

SWOOSH!

The rock particles hurtled through the air, a chaotic barrage aimed at exploiting the temporary imbalance caused by Carl's skill.

'Focus.'

Despite the unexpected turn of events, I remained composed, relying on my agility to navigate the incoming storm.

With a series of swift movements, I brandished my daggers, each stroke cutting through the oncoming projectiles.

TAK! TAK!

The metallic clang of blades meeting rock resonated in the training ground as I parried and deflected the rocky onslaught. The precise choreography of the blade against stone showcased the fluidity and precision of my movements.

Even in the face of a surprise attack, the training and combat instincts honed through countless encounters allowed me to maintain control. Also, I was very precise with my daggers.

As the last remnants of the rock projectiles were dispersed, Carl seized the opportunity to close the distance.

With a determined expression, he unleashed his skill, [Charge of Bull], embodying the unstoppable force of a charging bull.

RUMBLE!

The ground beneath him trembled as he propelled himself forward with astonishing speed. The charge was characterized by its sheer power, a direct and forceful approach that aimed to overpower opponents in its path.

'He is using his skill.'

However, I had no intention of engaging in a direct confrontation with such a formidable offensive.

Dash.

I also didn't stay idle and activated my skills.

Eyes of Hourglass.

Both his movements were slowed, and I felt an increase in my speed.

SWOOSH!

In a flash, I moved with accelerated speed, gracefully evading the path of Carl's charging assault. The precision of my movements allowed me to sidestep the charging force, leaving Carl to surge past me, the momentum of his charge unchecked.

"Crumbling Mountains."

As Carl continued his charge with unwavering determination, he seamlessly transitioned into another skill.

'What?'

The ground beneath him trembled, and with calculated precision, he disturbed the earth, creating small mines. It was a skill that I had no knowledge of, and Carl possessed it.

The mines scattered across the training ground, strategically placed to anticipate my movements.

'He predicted it?'

It was a testament to Carl's ability to predict and counteract his opponent's actions. The mines, designed to restrict movement, created a challenging obstacle for me to navigate.

'It is too late.'

In the midst of my evasive maneuvers, I found myself inadvertently caught in the explosive range of one of the mines.

THUD!

The detonation disrupted my movement, causing a brief pause and inflicting some minor injuries. The surprise at Carl's ability to predict my trajectory left me momentarily off-guard.

"Grrr...."

My ankles were hurting, and I felt my movements restrained.

"You did well."

Carl also stopped his charge and was about to attack me. Even his charge was a bluff, now that I rethought about that. Countless different things passed through my head at that second.

'He is really good.'

It wasn't just about overwhelming strength but also combat talent. He possessed good judgment and made a clear plan.

'It was my mistake.'

After all these fights with monsters, it was the first time I had been trapped like this.

"You got me."

I answered his words as I saw him slowly approaching me.

'Though, that doesn't mean I am going to give up.'

I thought as I slowly activated the grey tendrils that I had put around Carl's body. It was a new idea that I had developed.

The ethereal threads extended and coiled around him, forming a connection bridge between us for me to use.

SWOOSH!

Using them as a grappling device, I pulled myself towards Carl, a swift and calculated movement that took advantage of the unexpected twist in our spar.

Simultaneously, I harnessed wind psions beneath me, allowing me to elevate slightly from the ground.

The combination of the tendrils and the controlled levitation helped me maneuver deftly, avoiding the remaining mines that might have hindered my progress.

"?"

I could see Carl's surprised face at my idea of approaching him rather than escaping, and he was caught off guard.

Eyes of Hourglass.

Noticing that he wouldn't be able to use his shield while I was approaching him rapidly, he activated his aura in an instant, covering his body.

SWOOSH!

In this unexpected aerial dance, I closed the distance between Carl and me with my daggers imbued in the same grey tendrils. The way to control such a movement was incredibly hard, and even with the time slowed in my eyes, I still wasn't able to control it perfectly.

SLASH!

Even then, I managed to slash Carl's body using the momentum I had gained with flight. With a spin movement, I aimed right through his shoulder.

The daggers, guided by the grey tendrils, cut through the air with precision. The blades passed through Carl's aura, which shimmered like a protective barrier around him.

"Hmm?"

I could feel the resistance against the incorporeal shield, but my attack managed to breach through, making contact with Carl's sturdy skin.

SLASH!

The sensation of the blades slicing through the air and grazing his shoulder was palpable, a testament to the success of my calculated maneuver.

Despite the resistance of his defensive aura, the attack left a mark on Carl, a visible testament to the effectiveness of the unexpected tactic.

THUD!

Then, I landed on the ground after my movement was finished. I was also surprised by the attack that had landed on his shoulder, as I didn't think I had the necessary strength.

"You. Why did you lower the strength of your aura?"

I met his gaze, realizing that he had intentionally adjusted the level of the spar. The surprise in my successful attack was partly due to Carl intentionally lowering his aura's strength, allowing me to land a blow.

"To adjust the level of the spar," Carl said, his tone firm. "The purpose of sparring is not to flaunt one's strength but to improve ourselves. We learn more in a real fight than in a one-

sided display of power."

I couldn't help but respect the attitude he showed. After all, he was not afraid of the pain but instead tried to get used to it.

'So the reason why he didn't move at the start was to adjust the power of his aura, huh? What a weirdo.'

It seemed we had another training maniac here.

'Good.'

"Don't hold back and come at me." He said, grabbing his hammer once again. "Show me what you got."

His words ignited my competitive spirit as I grabbed my daggers.

"Okay."

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"Haaah.....Haaaah....."

Standing in the middle of the sparring field, I was breathing heavily as Carl stood in front of me. The sparring continued without sparring, and as my competitive spirit was ignited, I didn't hold back my attacks at all, exerting myself to the limits.

"You did well."

As I caught my breath, beads of sweat rolling down my forehead, I couldn't help but marvel at Carl's stamina. The relentless sparring had taken a toll on me, but the man standing before me seemed almost unaffected.

'What a monster.'

I thought, acknowledging the vast difference in our physical capabilities. As I observed Carl's minor wounds, I realized the sparring had become a test not just of skills but also of endurance and recovery. It was a stark reminder of the diverse strengths present among the students in the academy.

'It was the first time I have gone against such an enemy.'

Carl was like an unmovable mountain. The more I attacked, the more I became aware of how desperate I would be against him.

Envisioning the fact that an enemy like Carl would stand before me immediately sent shivers down my spine.

'No chance of winning.'

It was the perfect display of the difference between one's stats. Looking at him and how he fought, Carl didn't seem to be engrossed in perfecting his hammer style or his magic.

'He just relies on overwhelming strength.'

It was like a stat-checker type of character from the game. I am a person who basically relies on exploiting the weakness of the enemies by creating favorable situations for myself. My main strength relies on my swiftness and high damage output in favorable times, but that is not the case for Carl.

He almost doesn't have a physical weakness aside from his 'low' speed, which is not even that low. Of course, against an Awakened of the same caliber as himself, his lack of technique training will become something negative, but amongst his peers, finding such people will be incredibly hard.

"Thanks."

I nodded my head against his words. Even though he may look stern, it felt like his compliments were genuine.

Carl nodded in response, but the air between us remained thick with unspoken words. It wasn't the first time I felt like this, as it reminded me of the military.

'Yeah, that guy is the direct representative of the military.'

From the corner of my eye, I noticed him glancing at me intermittently as if contemplating whether to say something.

'What does he want to talk about?' I wondered, my curiosity piqued. The awkward silence seemed to be hinting at an underlying conversation waiting to unfold.

"If you have something to say, just say it."

I decided to open my mouth first as it didn't seem like he was going to talk.

Carl turned his gaze toward me, his stern expression unchanged. There was a momentary hesitation before he spoke, "Where did you learn to fight like that?"

The question caught me off guard, and I studied Carl for a moment before responding. My response would be important.

'I guess I already gained his attention.'

"I've had my fair share of experiences. Learned along the way, I suppose."

"...." He didn't seem to believe me as he continued to stare at me. "You are different...." Then he mumbled.

"What do you mean?"

"You are different from the normal students," Carl began, his voice measured. "The way you wield those daggers, the precision in your movements, it's not like someone who just learned along the way. It's like you've fought to the death before."

His observation was sharp, and I didn't bother denying it. Instead, I met his gaze directly. "You're perceptive."

Carl nodded, a solemn expression on his face. "I come from a military family. Trained from a young age. I can tell when someone is a fighter, not just a student practicing moves."

'He is definitely good.'

It was said that sometimes, to get to know a man, exchanging blows with him is the best choice. I guess that is quite true.

A person who trained to be on the battlefield and who had been in a situation that made him seem more like an adult than a teenager. That was the feeling I got when I clashed with him, and it seemed he got the same.

"I can't shake the feeling that you've seen more than most students here," Carl remarked, his eyes narrowing slightly.

"You should shake your feelings from time to time," I mumbled as I looked at the approaching guys. It seemed everyone had finished their spars now.

"..." Carl looked at me for a second before standing up like a tall mountain. "My father had always said...."

"In the chaos of battle, a soldier's only safety measure is their instinct. He used to tell me that if your instincts are sharp, you'll come home. His never failed him, and I've held onto that advice."
Top of Form

"Is that so?" He seemed quite sure about me, but that was it. From what I knew about him, he wouldn't say much about me in any case.

".....Next time we meet....I will be expecting much more...."

"I won't disappoint you then."

"That would be better."

Carl's departure was as stoic as his arrival, and I watched as he made his way toward a group of the main cast.

'Well, I guess that was a good reality check.'

With the strength I had underneath me, I thought I could at least go against some high-ranking individuals, but I should also be prepared in case someone like Carl appeared.

'After all, many of the bosses from the game are actually stat checkers.'

My previous fights had been all swift, thanks to the preparations I did, but that won't be the case every time I fight.

'Let's train more.'

With that thought, I slowly made myself out of the sparring grounds.

As Carl left Astron, he met with his fellow group. Ethan, Julia, Lilia, and Lucas were already talking with each other sitting.

"Oh, Carl is here. You finished?" Julia asked.

"I did," Carl replied, taking a seat among the group. However, after he sat, the others continued talking about the game.

"How was your last session? Any exciting battles or unexpected twists?"

"You won't believe what happened. I encountered this high-

level boss unexpectedly, and the battle turned into complete chaos. I barely managed to survive."

"Boss battles are the best part! Did you get any rare loot or weapons?"

"Funny you mention that. I got a legendary sword drop. It's a game-changer, I tell you."

Irina, who had been quietly observing the conversation, couldn't resist joining in. Even though she had just started, she wanted to explore the game more, "It sounds like you had quite the adventure. Maybe we should plan a group expedition sometime."

Julia, with her competitive spirit, added, "Yeah, and we can see who gets the most epic loot. I'm always up for a 'friendly' competition."

"Cough...."

At the mention of friendly competition, Ethan couldn't help but cough a little. He had bruises all around his body as well as his face. The sword marks and the cuts added salt to the wound.

"Ethan knows it well, right?"

"You should have gone more easy on me."

"I already did, you know. If I put a little more strength, your arm would go off...."

"It felt like it did."

Julia, noticing the change in topic, turned to Carl. "Hey, Carl, speaking of partners, what happened to your usual sparring partner, Chris? Haven't seen him around lately."

Chris was the guy that was matched with Carl. He was also one of the top prospects of the academy and from an upper circle. Though he was a bit lazy and had a weird tendencies, Carl didn't mind if he did his job as a student.

But, now, he was failing to do so. Carl's expression darkened slightly. "Chris is on a leave of absence. Personal matters, he said."

"Then, what happened to this practical session."

"I got matched with another student."

"Hmm? Who was he?"

"Astron Natusalune."

At the mention of Astron, Irina flinched a little, and Ethan couldn't help but smile. In the group, Astron was known as an edgy, rude, yet interesting individual, leaving an indelible mark on everyone who crossed paths with him.

"Tch."

Of course, a girl who was once subjected to his demeanor disliked him. She still, didn't forget that time.

"You are still fretting over it?" Julia asked, her eyes filled with a slight spark.

"Of course," Lilia replied. "Those coming from random backgrounds don't know the etiquette of nobles. I can't stand rude people like that."

Ethan couldn't help but reminisce a little. He was also a primary subject to his demeanor, so he knew it firsthand.

"You know, Astron's not all bad. He just has his own way of doing things." However, he liked how straightforward and blunt he was with his words.

Lilia raised an eyebrow. "His own way? It's more like a complete lack of manners. Nobility is about refinement and grace, not being rude and edgy. Don't you think so, Irina? You don't like him too, right?"

Lilia knew what Irina said about him, so she naturally knew she would take her side.

Irina stammered a little, caught off guard by the sudden attention. She hesitated, unsure of how to respond for some reason.

'Yes, he is annoying....But.'

There was a but in her thoughts. She did feel indeed uncomfortable about Astron, but expressing that discomfort seemed challenging for some reason.

"Irina?"

But as she noticed everyone looking at him, she couldn't help but speak.

"Yeah. He is indeed rude."

"Hmm.....Maybe." Julia nodded her head as she turned to look at Carl. "So? How was he?" And she asked. "Is he that good, just as Ethan mentioned?"

Carl nodded his head, offering his perspective on Astron. "He wasn't as weak as Ethan talked about him."

Even though Ethan praised Astron, he always mentioned that he was weak physically. But that didn't seem to be the case with Carl.

"And he also gave off a different vibe. It's hard to describe, but he's not someone you can underestimate. His fighting style is unconventional, and he has this intensity that makes you think twice before crossing blades with him."

Ethan smirked, pleased that someone else acknowledged Astron's prowess. "Told you he's not as bad as he seems. He's got a unique way of handling things, and in a fight, that can make all the difference."

He also got the same vibe from him, and seeing Carl relating to him made him feel even better than before.

"Hmm?"

And those words piqued Lilia's interest. After all, gaining the recognition of Carl wasn't something everyone could do at all.

'He might be useful.'

She took on a note in the corner of her mind to observe him more.