

H. Academy 221

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The training grounds were eerily quiet as I stepped into a secluded one-person training room belonging to the Archery Club. The familiar scent of wood and the twang of bowstrings greeted me.

"Not enough."

This place had been one of my favorite places to train my marksmanship skills.

Equipped with an assortment of weapons, the room allowed me to explore the full extent of my abilities. My focus shifted from daggers to the elegant curve of bows and the swift release of arrows.

With a bow in hand, I seamlessly moved around the room, shifting from cover to cover. Each shot was a testament to precision and control as the arrows found their mark with deadly accuracy.

THUD!

The targets, strategically placed to mimic unpredictable enemies, were punctuated with the thud of arrows embedding themselves into the surface.

'I need to be as swift as I can.'

The reason why I was here training my marksmanship was the fact that, with the weapons I had in my arsenal, thanks to Celestialith.

'I need to learn more weapons.'

To do that, I needed to perfect the five core weapon forms of Celestialith to make sure I could utilize it to its utmost potential.

I was good at using daggers and bows, but I knew for a fact that I didn't use chakrams and the grey threads to their full potential. I could do a lot better than what I was doing now.

'Especially the vastness of mana.'

This world wasn't only about skills or arts. Any exceptional Awakened who learned how to manipulate their mana would become a powerhouse. Not all the mages had a Trait or Skill related to being a mage, but they still held a lot of power. It was because they learned how to control mana properly and able to utilize it.

'I should integrate all those techniques into my combat as well.'

Limiting myself purely on my weapons and arts was not an ideal thing to do. Starting from [Mana Observation], there were countless different formulas like [Haste], [Compress], [Fusion] and [Diffusion]. Many of those actually referred to the physical interpretation of actions, but they were all basic and important since they formed the base for the further construction of the skills.

That was why, switching to throwing knives, I continued my dance, honing my accuracy with every swift and calculated throw. The metallic rings echoed through the room as the knives found their intended destinations. I reveled in the fluidity of movement and the seamless transition between ranged and close-quarters combat.

'I need to make use of chakrams as well.'

My control was yet to be precise enough, and there were countless possibilities I could make.

'Even utilizing wind and other psions becomes helpful.'

Chakrams, circular blades with deadly edges, became an extension of my will as I twirled and released them with expert precision.

'Maybe even the [Telekinesis] is a possible choice.'

Though it would take a while, the idea of using the telekinesis to control chakrams orbiting around me made sense.

'I will take a look at it later.

"Start the stage five."

[Understood, Student Astron. Access is given.]

The training room transformed as the stage five simulation commenced. Holographic images of various monsters materialized, simulating a dynamic battlefield. The monsters, each designed to test different aspects of combat, started to pour in.

And just like that, I lost myself in the training.

'He might be interesting.'

Lilia, who had been constantly working with her family's guild, thought about Astron. To be perfectly frank, she didn't have much interaction with him aside from that one time. Therefore, he naturally didn't take too much place in her thoughts.

Though, the others in the group didn't let it go like that. Julia, in an attempt to tease Ethan, always talked about Astron, and Irina's whining also didn't stop either. So, at the end of the day, she couldn't help but have at least one thought about him, and that thought would be annoying.

After all, she hated those who acted without any sense of responsibility, and those who were lazy were the people she hated the most. The ones who had the potential to be awakened but wasted that chance. In her eyes, Astron was such a student. He was at rock bottom; his attitude was not good, he always talked back to his teachers, and he lacked manners.

'Truly expected from a slacker,' she mused, her lips curving into a slight frown. 'I wonder if he even cares about his future. Some people are just too carefree for their own good.'

That was what she initially thought. However, because of both Ethan's and Carl's worlds, she couldn't help but change her evaluation a little bit more.

'Maybe....Just maybe...'

There was a chance that he might have changed, and if everything was just as Ethan and Carl said, things would certainly get interesting.

'I had already scored three deals with future prospects, and I have one more slot.'

As an executive of Olympus' Vanguard Guild, she was given the right to recruit four students.

Though different from how it looked, that right to recruit was actually a preparation for a clash between the factions inside the Guild. It was a tradition that was passed from generation to generation. To increase the creativity and strength of the guild, the family always believed that competition was essential and one's individual strength was different from one's management skills.

Therefore, rather than directly clashing with others physically, the heirs would clash using their factions.

Her father, who now held the head position of the guild, also became the head in the same manner, and that was also the main reason why she was in this academy instead of operating the guild.

For her, who viewed most of the things in the academy as child play, building connections was the most important, which was also another reason for her to join the archery club.

The club room was situated in a quiet corner of the academy, away from the hustle and bustle of the main building.

As Lilia walked toward the club room, her thoughts lingered on Astron. She couldn't escape the voices of Julia and Irina in her head, constantly pestering her about him.

"Ugh, that lazy guy. I can't believe he's even in the same academy as us."

"Don't talk to me."

Irina's opinions echoed in her mind, reinforcing her initial annoyance. Yet, a small part of her resisted jumping to conclusions. Ethan and Carl's perspectives had planted a seed of doubt, making her consider the possibility that Astron might have hidden depths.

'I'll judge for myself,' she decided, entering the Archery Club room with purpose.

As she pushed the door open, the rhythmic twang of bowstrings filled the air. The archers focused on their targets, each lost in their own world of concentration.

Indeed, the club was just the same as before.

"Ah, Miss Lilia."

Immediately, a student noticed her while training. She was a girl whom Lilia remembered as someone who had tried to impress her to join Olympus' Vanguard.

Lilia couldn't help but feel a hint of amusement at the familiar attempt to gain her favor, but at the same time, she felt a little bored.

It was always amusing to see young students trying to gain her favor by showing their skills.

The girl continued, undeterred. "Ah....I am glad." The smile on her face didn't even waver for a second, as if she had practiced it countless different times. "I was just thinking about how good it would be if a high-ranking student was here to show us how it's done."

Lilia nodded, acknowledging the well-rehearsed flattery. "I'm sure the club is doing just fine without me."

The girl's eyes widened, and she quickly added, "Oh, no, Miss Lilia, you misunderstand. With your guidance, the Archery Club could reach unprecedented heights. I've always admired your skills and leadership. Your presence here would be an inspiration to all of us."

Though Lilia liked getting compliments, she got annoyed when it came in the form of empty and excessive flattery.

'Tch. Pathetic.'

Her mood, which was alleviated for a second, became worse, and she got into the mood of destroying things for some reason.

Lilia's lips curved into a faint but cold smile, a mix of amusement and skepticism. "Flattery will get you nowhere. Archery is a skill honed through practice, not through someone watching over your shoulder. If we were looking for tongue warriors, we wouldn't hire from the 'Hunter' Academy."

The girl's smile remained intact, but there was a subtle shift in her demeanor. "Of course, Miss Lilia, you're absolutely right. I just thought having you here would be a tremendous privilege for the club members. We could learn so much from you."

Lilia decided to cut through the flattery. "What's your name?"

The girl's eyes were immediately lit by the mention of her name. She pretended to be hesitant for a moment but then replied, "It's Sophia Carter, Miss Lilia."

Lilia's eyes gleamed with a mischievous glint as she noticed it right away. "Sophia, right. I'll keep that in mind. Your enthusiasm for your career is duly noted."

Sophia beamed, thinking she had successfully won some favor.

'Really pathetic.'

Lilia, however, had other plans as she put her name into the corner of her mind.

"Then, if you allow me." She gestured to the girl that she wanted to leave.

Sophia's smile faltered for a moment, sensing a shift in the dynamics. Lilia, feeling somewhat satisfied with the small act of control, excused herself from the conversation.

As she walked away, she couldn't help but shake her head at the lengths some would go to gain recognition.

She opened her smartwatch as she walked through the corridors of the club room.

[Benedict, blacklist Sophia Carter. Also, look into her family background.]

[Benedict: Understood, Miss Lilia. Blacklisting has been initiated, and I will commence with the investigation.]

[Good.]

Lilia continued to walk, her thoughts swirling. Sophia's persistence in joining Olympus' Vanguard had set off a twinge of suspicion.

It was not uncommon for students to express interest in joining prestigious guilds, but Sophia's determination seemed peculiar, and she got a hunch that the girl had something hidden. And that hunch was something that made her one of the contenders of the guild despite being that young.

After walking for a little longer, she reached her destination inside the club territory. A special training room where she could train in isolation.

'Hmm?'

However, there she noticed certain someone training.

It was the student whom she decided to observe with her own eyes.

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Lilia put an end to her thoughts as she slowly made her way to the private training rooms. Normally, most of the high-ranking students liked hanging around each other in the dormitory, but she disliked the idea.

She felt suffocating whenever she was that close to such talented individuals. The way they trained was a lot different and their focus on their careers bothered her. She was also in the Arcadia Hunter

Academy, but her main focus wasn't being a combatant but taking control of her guild while forming her faction itself.

Therefore, she liked being with more generic students rather than being with the high-rankers.

However, as she entered the private training room, she found someone- Astron engrossed in his practice, his movements fluid and focused.

There was a dedication in the way he handled his equipment, a sharpness in his gaze that betrayed a level of skill she hadn't expected.

'This is bottom rank?'

Even just by looking at him for two seconds, her trained eyes were able to see how fluid his movements were and it certainly didn't belong to your average low-rank.

Lilia leaned against the doorframe, silently observing. She also concealed her presence out of habit unconsciously for some reason while covering herself with mana. Even if she wasn't specialized in combat, that didn't mean her rank, which was five, was a joke.

'Interesting.'

No one was here aside from her. Especially this room, which was on the corner side of the club room, was known for its slight malfunctioning and errors in the strength of the monsters. Thus, it wasn't much preferred by other students.

Her initial annoyance with Astron started to give way to a growing sense of curiosity. The hunch she had about him being more than he appeared seemed to gain weight with each practiced maneuver.

As she observed, Lilia took mental notes on Astron's movements, strengths, and weaknesses.

She watched with a critical eye, analyzing the precision of his strikes and the efficiency of his maneuvers.

The more she observed, the more she found herself intrigued by the disparity between Astron's skills and his apparent low rank.

'I understand he is getting held back by his body and probably stats, but even then....He shouldn't be such low rank.'

It was indeed weird, considering the fact that the progress he was displaying with his bow was not normal.

From time to time, Astron faced monsters with faulty strength in the training room. Some were weaker than expected, and others stronger. Despite the inconsistencies, Astron pressed on, his determination unwavering. Even when faced with tougher opponents that should have been too challenging for someone of his rank, he persevered.

'Stubborn.'

Lilia couldn't help but admire the tenacity Astron displayed. It was as if he was training not just for the sake of gaining ranks but for some deeper purpose that eluded her.

'Indeed, it is just as they told.'

Considering the comments that came from Ethan and Carl, Lilia nodded her head. This guy was certainly stubborn and had whatever it needed to take to become a hunter.

Even though it was just training, at such an age, Lilia was well aware of the criteria that a hunter needed to harbor. Her father was the one who taught her specifically and one by one.

Her father once said, "The true difference between an Awakened and a Hunter lies not only in their physical strength but in their mental fortitude. A Hunter's strength isn't just measured by their ability to defeat monsters; it's also about facing the challenges that life throws at them. Mental resilience is the hallmark of a true Hunter."

That was also the reason why, even from the start, she had never underestimated Ethan and had been investing in him. While he was awakened later, the moment he awakened, she herself knew that he would be great.

She always got this feeling from Ethan, and even though it was not exactly the same, Astron also had it.

'Really....I guess I behaved a little wrong.'

She thought, remembering their first encounter. She judged him from his rank and deemed him worthless; thus, she didn't show any mercy towards him.

When she bumped him at the door, she was annoyed to the max, and she hated that fact. Well, she still didn't regret doing that as she knew not all people deserved her time.

He was also not a person that deserved goodwill, but that was not the point.

'In any case, I may consider him as the part of my faction.'

She thought as she analyzed the pros and cons of having him. From what she knew, without conducting a direct investigation into his past, Astron was someone who didn't have a family, and he was from an orphanage. This was already a widely known fact in the school, thanks to rumors, though she didn't believe them.

[Benedict. Investigate Astron Natusalune.]

She once again immediately texted her assistant to investigate him, and the reply came immediately.

[Benedict: Understood, Miss Lilia. I will continue with the investigation.]

'Good.'

She thought, seeing the response. She was sure that Benedict would get the job done as it was her handpicked man from the streets.

"You shouldn't pry while other people are training."

But at that moment, she heard a voice coming right before her eyes.

FLINCH!

She immediately flinched as the unknown voice came very close. Closer than it was supposed to be.

Astron was standing right in front of her, and she hadn't even noticed. Her eyes widened, and instinctively, she got into a defensive position without even realizing it. In her startled state, she swung her fists in a quick attack to defend herself.

The air crackled with the swift movement, but Astron smoothly dodged her unexpected attack. He moved with an agility that surprised her, effortlessly avoiding her fists.

"You've got quick reflexes," he remarked casually.

Lilia, now more composed, withdrew her fists, her expression shifting from surprise to a mix of embarrassment and annoyance. She cleared her throat, attempting to regain her composure.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, her tone carrying a hint of irritation.

"What do you mean? Shouldn't I be the one to ask such a question?"

"You've got quick reflexes," he remarked casually.

Astron retorted, a hint of annoyance in his eyes. Lilia raised an eyebrow, realizing the irony of her question. It was indeed her who had intruded into the training room without any awareness of his presence.

'Yeah....What I did was rude.'

Even though she might be curious about someone, or she might want to observe, intruding on someone's privacy in broad daylight wasn't the best way to start a relationship, especially when she wanted to recruit him.

Lilia nodded, acknowledging his point. "Fair enough. I suppose I should have been more aware of my surroundings."

"It is not about being aware of your surroundings. It is about being aware of other people's boundaries."

As she looked into his eyes, she understood why she didn't like him even at the start and why Irina constantly whined about him. This guy never backed down.

Well, it was not like her ego was this fragile anyway.

"Yes...It is about other's boundaries. Sorry if I bothered you."

"You certainly did."

"..."

"What? If I were the one doing that, I would be labeled as a creep, you know?"

"Well, you shouldn't blame me for that. Blame your fellow men who destroyed your gender's reputation."

"You do have a point. But that doesn't negate my point either. Next time, I won't be this merciful."

"Ho? What are you going to do?"

"Do you want to try?"

"Look at this guy. Do you know who I am?"

"Who doesn't know the school goddess Irina?"

".....Cough..."

She normally didn't get embarrassed when she heard about her nickname, but for some reason, she did right now, though she hid it immediately.

"Though, if you are the goddess, I would probably be an atheist."

"...Was that supposed to hurt?"

"I expected a little annoyance."

"Too bad for you. I am not that fragile."

"That is good."

"Indeed."

Lilia's eyes reflected a mix of annoyance and amusement as she bantered with Astron. The guy didn't seem too bad when being looked at closely.

Astron raised an eyebrow, breaking the banter for a moment. "Why were you observing me without revealing yourself?"

Lilia, maintaining her composure, replied, "It was nothing. Just interested in how my fellow archers train. No specific reason."

Her expression remained neutral, not betraying her true intentions. Astron, still eyeing her with a hint of suspicion, shrugged. "Alright, suit yourself." His demeanor seemed to let it go, but his eyes said everything she needed to know.

'He knows.'

She knew he understood her reasons immediately, and it wasn't even hard for him.

'What a perceptive bastard.'

She disliked perceptive people like that, especially men since they were harder to control from her perspective. She wasn't a man, so putting herself into a man's shoes was a lot different from a woman's.

'Well, we will see about that.'

"I will be leaving."

"So, you will leave without paying me anything back."

"Why should I pay you back?"

"For watching me display a good play in front of you?"

"What makes him good?"

"The fact that you just watched for a very long time."

"You.....you were aware of it from the start."

"I was."

"....Interesting...Astron Natusalune."

A smirk played on Lilia's lips as she approached him confidently, a subtle allure in her gaze. She brought her face very close to his, the distance between them narrowing.

"What do you want, Astron?" she inquired, her voice laced with a mix of curiosity and a hint of challenge.

'I wonder how high you evaluate your performance.'

"Nothing much." He mumbled, his eyes locked. He didn't seem to be fazed by her behavior or antics, which were different from what she expected. "Next time, let me watch you how to train." His words were simple but serious.

"You want to watch me train?"

"Yes."

"Why do you think this trade is equal? Considering our ranks, shouldn't you give me something more?"

"It is for me to judge after watching you train."

"...How do I know you are not biased?"

"We will think about it after that."

"....."

She stopped for a second, pondering. Letting him watch her training meant she would be disclosing her method to him, and that wasn't something she preferred. Especially considering that it was her mother who taught her, and she didn't want to reveal that.

She looked at his eyes for a little more and saw he was not going to back down.

'It wouldn't much matter anyway. What can he even learn from one training session.'

With that thought, she accepted his offer with a smile.

"Okay."

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While I was training on my own, I felt someone's presence. Of course, this wasn't the first time I was around someone while training. However, this time, there was something different; it was as if someone was sneakily watching me.

And then I noticed the traces of the said person.

'Lilia.'

She was one of the main cast members- a girl with a weird personality who is both liked and not liked by the players at the same time.

I was on the more neutral side as she didn't strike me as someone who should be hated or loved. She was a character of her own with her own struggles and life choices.

However, that didn't mean I was going to let her go. Since she pried on my secret, that meant she was interested in me.

'Showing off to Carl paid off.'

That was my intention from the start, as I started thinking about how I should at least keep my relationship with the future main cast stable. I didn't need to be close to them, but at the very least, I needed to change my attitude.

Laying low is good, but there are times when showing sufficient strength is better. Especially knowing how the main cast operates. They are not some sort of teenage brat. Even though they sometimes behave like that, when it comes to serious things concerning both their lives and families, they value the people close to them.

I myself also operate in the same way; thus, putting myself into the position to use them seemed like a better idea to me.

And Lilia approaching me on her own was the first result of that. After catching Lilia off guard, the only thing I needed to do was to direct the conversation in a way that I could increase my affinity with her while also putting some emotions in her head.

The first step was to make her panic, then mock her state. After that, I needed to make sure what she did was a big deal for me, and considering my past actions, she was already inclined to believe that.

Thus, at the end of the day, I secured a slight favor from her.

'Learning from the future Bow Empress. Certainly, not a bad result.'

I thought while walking with Lilia.

While walking with Lilia, I decided to maintain a casual demeanor, in contrast to the intense training moments.

Observing her closely, I realized that Lilia was not the type to easily reveal her true intentions, and I had to be cautious in navigating the conversation.

Even though I had easily directed the conversation, that wouldn't be the case every time. There is even a chance that she may have already realized it.

Lilia tilted her head slightly, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Alright then, Astron. Prepare yourself for a show."

Whether she was excited or not, I wasn't sure. But one thing was certain.

'I need to make the most of this opportunity.'

Just like that, I focused on how she used her bow.

After saying that, Lilia moved to the center of the training room, creating a comfortable distance between them. With a swift motion, she summoned her bow, a beautifully crafted piece that seemed to emanate an ethereal glow. Lilia's fingers danced gracefully over the bowstring as if playing an intricate melody.

"Watch closely," she whispered, her voice carrying a certain authority.

Lilia's training routine began with a series of meticulous stretches, ensuring her muscles were warmed up and ready for action. Since she was proficient with utilizing mana, she even used it to speed up the process.

It wasn't something that was common and was hardly seen by other Hunters, but it was thanks to her special trait enabling it.

'Let's put on a good show.'

It would be good to impress this guy before him, as in that way, she could gain his respect and possibly recruit him more easily.

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

She focused on her breathing, inhaling deeply and exhaling slowly. Her movements were deliberate and controlled, each step a part of a well-choreographed routine.

"Start the eighth stage."

[Understood, Student Lilia.]

In a matter of minutes, she was ready with her preparations.

[Zone]

And then, instantly, her body lit up, covered by a special type of shell all around herself. This was a technique that made her family one of the strongest Hunters in the world. The ones with a good aptitude for it would be selected as the Hunter Head.

SWOOSH! SWOOSH!

Then, without warning, she unleashed a rapid flurry of arrows, each one hitting its mark with pinpoint accuracy. The targets she had set up around the room were pierced effortlessly, leaving no room for error. It was a mesmerizing display of skill and precision.

Her thoughts had already emptied her head, as all the things inside her head were the target before her and her mana.

Even the desire to show off disappeared, leaving only tranquility.

As Astron observed, he could feel the intensity in the air. Lilia's mana, invisible to the naked eye, began to weave around her like an intricate web.

'Interesting.'

His eyes, shining because of the mana amplified to its receptors, were locked on Lilia's body, even up to the smallest mimics. And what he was seeing was something different. It was something he had just recently thought, but the application of it was a little weird.

'Her mana control and purity of her mana is certainly top-

notch.'

Even in the game, Lilia was one of the powerhouses for a long time while not focusing on her career as a Hunter.

If not because of the calamity that had descended on the world in the later stages of the game, she would probably never pursue strength. However, the calamity brought every Awakened together, forcing her to take the role of missing Bow Empress.

She actually had the talent already, but she didn't have the time.

'Remembering how sad and regretful she looked in the game, it could be understood.' Astron thought.

A girl with a cold personality who made use of people. Even though she was such a girl, in the game, she still shed tears for those who died under her command. She actually held herself responsible for her decisions and the ones who died.

Though, because of her past actions, Lilia was both disliked and liked at the same time. Some blamed her; some defended her. In the end, it was a matter of perspective.

'But, looking how she moves....She didn't slack off.'

The players were still unaware of the reason why Lilia was that adamant about controlling her guild and being the one with the political power, and Astron was the same. His knowledge related to Lilia was limited in this case.

'Let's focus.' However, Astron immediately put a halt to his thoughts that were deviating from the main task before him.

She harnessed the mana, forming ethereal anchors that connected to her bow, enhancing its speed and agility.

The archer moved gracefully, almost dancing as she released arrows with unparalleled speed. The arrows seemed to teleport from her quiver to her bow, leaving a trail of shimmering mana behind. It was a sight to behold, an artistry in combat that transcended the conventional.

'What a speed.'

Astron's eyes narrowed a little, and he struggled to keep up with the rapid movements. It was also weird in his eyes. Lilia was certainly using his body to its maximum.

Lilia's training method was unlike anything he had ever seen. She was not just an archer; she was a mage who seamlessly integrated magic into her combat style.

His keen eyes remained fixed on Lilia as she continued her impressive display. His instincts as an awakened individual heightened his perception, allowing him to notice subtle details that eluded others.

'Interesting,' he thought, narrowing his focus on Lilia's movements. Her arms seemed to move independently of the arrows she released as if there was an invisible force manipulating the strings of her bow. It was a peculiar observation, and Astron couldn't shake off the feeling that there was more to her technique than met the eye.

His concentration deepened, and he activated his Mana Observation, a skill that allowed him to perceive the flow and intensity of mana in the environment. As he did, he noticed the intricate dance of mana around Lilia. The ethereal anchors connecting to her bow weren't just for show—they were the conduits of her mana manipulation.

'Is she controlling the arrows with mana strings?' he wondered, intrigued by the possibility.

The realization struck him that Lilia's control over mana was so refined that she could guide the arrows with precision, detached from the conventional physical limitations.

As Astron continued to observe, he decided to push his Mana Observation to a higher grade.

It was a risky move, as it required intense focus and concentration while also better mana control. However, he decided not to waste this opportunity and took the risk.

The air around him shimmered as he delved deeper into the mana currents within the training room.

Eyes of Hourglass.

Simultaneously, he activated his unique skill, the Eyes of Hourglass. Time seemed to slow down, giving him a momentary advantage to analyze Lilia's movements in greater detail.

In this heightened state of awareness, Astron noticed subtle shifts in the mana patterns around Lilia. The ethereal anchors, normally imperceptible, now revealed themselves as threads of mana weaving through the air. It was a mesmerizing display of magical finesse.

'This guy....He is keeping up with it?'

Lilia, sensing Astron's heightened focus, decided to challenge him further.

'Let's see if you are really looking or you are just watching it.'

She increased the speed of her arrows, pushing herself to the limit. The arrows now moved with such velocity that they left afterimages in their wake.

Astron's Eyes of Hourglass skill allowed him to perceive the intricacies of her movements even more clearly, but at the same time, he was actually putting a huge strain on his nerves, especially the nerves that connected his eyes to his brain.

The information that they were carrying started becoming too much for his own body limits.

He saw the mana threads reacting to Lilia's will, manipulating the trajectory of each arrow with unparalleled precision.

'Let's end this.'

With a final flourish, Lilia released a volley of arrows simultaneously, creating a dazzling display of lights as they streaked through the air.

The targets, now resembling pincushions, testified to the accuracy and speed she had achieved.

As the last arrow found its mark, Lilia turned to Astron with a satisfied smirk. "Impressive, isn't it? Now, what do you think?"

Astron, seemingly thoughtful, met her gaze. He paused for a moment before shaking his head slightly. "I couldn't see much," he admitted, his expression giving away a slight 'disappointment.'

Lilia's smirk faltered for an instant before she regained her composure. "Couldn't see much? You were using Mana

Observation. I thought it would give you an advantage."

Astron, closing his eyes as if contemplating, replied, "Even with Mana Observation, your movements were too fast. I couldn't keep up for more than a second. It's truly impressive, but I guess everything has its limits."

Lilia raised an eyebrow, considering his words. "So, is our little deal over?"

Astron nodded, a faint smile playing on his lips. "Even if I could see only a little, watching a high-ranker like you perform is effective."

With that, Lilia felt a mixture of pride and curiosity. Astron, the bottom-ranked student, seemed to hold more potential than she initially thought.

However, before she could think about anything more, a message came to both Astron and her watches, making her stop her thoughts.

[Adrian: Everyone, come to the Archery Club Center. We have an announcement to make.]

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'How interesting.'

That was what I thought the moment I saw Lilia training in front of me. She utilized her own mana to create anchors around her body, which acted as her second or third arms.

'Why did I miss such a thing?'

It was a slight damage to my ego, if I was completely honest, since the fact that she was able to come up with a thing that I couldn't make me feel a little inferior.

Of course, that was only for a second since I had taken control of such thoughts immediately. My head was hurting a little, and my eyes were about to bleed, but the pain wasn't unbearable like I had initially expected.

'This seems to be my limit for the time being.'

Everyone had a natural limit on their bodies. It was an inevitable occurrence, and I am no exception to that rule. One may even say I am the one especially subjected to it.

In any case, as I withdrew my mana from my eyes, my eyesight returned to a normal state, and the scene before my eyes brightened.

"Why do you think he called us?"

Lilia asked while using her mana to clean herself from the sweat.

"I don't know."

I answered though I knew the reason why Adrian had called us.

'It must be the time.'

Since the mid-terms had ended, it was about the time the club would start its activities.

"Is that so?"

Lilia said, squinting a little. It seemed she was not that convinced, though it was not like I needed to convince her.

After shrugging my shoulders, I made my way out of the training room. The memories of this time were already printed in my head, ready to reply every time, and that was enough for the time being.

"Sigh...."

I heard a small sigh coming from her mouth just as I left. However, she did follow me without saying anything at all.

As Astron made their way to the Archery Club Center, where other members of the club were already gathering, Lilia was pondering to herself.

'Was that my imagination?'

She was not sure for a fact, but she felt like she had seen Astron's eyes following her movements, even at the end when she showed her most complex skill.

'No, that can't be right.'

Her eyesight was something she was very proud of herself, especially her photographic memory. Thus, as she reviewed what had happened a second ago, she realized that was not the case.

'But....'

However, there was a feeling. A feeling that she didn't want to disperse as random but had no choice to do so.

'Sigh....'

In the end, she just took it to a shelf, saying she would investigate this matter more, as she lacked sufficient data to even make a comment.

Just as they both reached the meeting location, Adrian, a tall and imposing figure, stood at the front, waiting for everyone to assemble.

'Tch....'

It was this guy again. The one who held that unacceptable and daring gaze. She had been dealing with people because of her guild; thus, she was well aware of what that gaze meant.

It was greed.

"Why are you glaring daggers at him?"

At that moment, Astron asked.

'Hmm?'

From what she had observed, it was unusual for that guy to speak first to her.

"What do you mean?"

"Will you feign ignorance?"

As she looked at his relaxed reaction, she knew that guy was right on the point.

"You are pretty sharp."

"We marksmen need to be sharp."

"...."

There was no reply she could give aside from silence.

"He is quite daring, if I must say. To openly show such a gaze to the goddess Lilia."

His voice was filled with sarcasm, but Lilia didn't mind. After all, what he was pointing out was right. Adrian was basically saying he was not afraid of her with such a gaze.

"Indeed. Some people don't understand without someone showing them."

"I must agree on that."

"You speak like you have many experiences," Lilia said, looking at Astron for a reaction. If she were going to recruit him for the future, knowing about him would be optimal, and even small details like this could be detrimental.

"No comment."

"You are not fun."

"I hear that a lot."

"From who?"

"Does it matter?"

"Probably not. Since almost everyone you meet will give this reaction anyway."

"I don't meet a lot of people, so it is fine."

"Your kindness shows no bounds."

Just as they were talking to pass the time, suddenly, the place was filled with the members of the club. It seemed everyone was there, as Adrian also was ready to go.

"Cough!"

With a cough filled with mana, he gathered everyone's attention immediately. It was a good way to show his prowess, as the sound amplification with mana was actually quite a high-

ranking technique that not many students could master before the third year.

"It seems everyone is here."

Adrian's stern voice echoed around the club room, commanding attention with its authority. His sharp eyes scrutinized each student, evaluating their progress and dedication.

"As some of you may have noticed, the Archery Club is not just a casual gathering. It's a place of rigorous training and constant improvement," Adrian declared, emphasizing the gravity of their commitment.

He then began to delve into the specifics, highlighting the advancements made by certain members. "I've observed commendable progress from many of you. Your dedication to refining your skills has not gone unnoticed. The club facilities are here to assist you, and those who have utilized them have shown remarkable improvement."

Adrian's gaze shifted subtly, focusing on Astron and some other students who stood among the assembled students. "However," he continued, his tone becoming more pointed, "some of you seem to be lagging behind."

His words hung in the air, creating a moment of tension. The other students exchanged uneasy glances, curious about whom Adrian was referring to.

Astron maintained a calm exterior as he was already expecting such treatment. After all, even if he didn't play the game and did this sub-quest chain, the information that was given to him at the start of the club was sufficient.

Adrian's gaze swept over the students, his eyes narrowing as he continued his speech. "Let me make one thing clear. The Archery Club is not a charity. It is supported by the dedication and contributions of individuals who have dedicated their lives to the art of archery. Lagging behind will not be tolerated."

The weight of his words settled on the students, and a sense of urgency filled the room. Adrian's stern demeanor hinted at the high expectations he held for each member.

"Now, let's move on to an important tradition of our club," he announced, transitioning to another crucial aspect. "Archery Competitions."

A hushed murmur spread among the students as the mention of competitions always stirred a mixture of excitement and anxiety.

After all, many of those knew how notorious the club competition was, and this was one of the reasons why the Archery Club was viewed as too strict. Most clubs would just check the practical skills of the students and leave it like that, but this club was strict and kicked the members out if they were unworthy.

Adrian explained the significance of these competitions and how they served as a means to assess each member's progress and dedication.

"In the upcoming weekend, we will hold a series of competitions. These will not only test your archery skills but also your adaptability, precision, and the ability to perform under pressure," Adrian elaborated.

He cast a challenging gaze across the room. "These competitions will determine who remains in the Archery Club and who will be asked to leave. It's a harsh reality, but it ensures that only the most dedicated and skilled individuals continue to represent our esteemed club."

The tension in the room heightened as Adrian concluded, "Prepare yourselves, give your best in the upcoming competitions, and remember, excellence is not optional in the Archery Club. It's the standard we all must strive to achieve."

With those words hanging in the air, the students were left to contemplate the challenges ahead, knowing that the path to remaining in the Archery Club would be carved with fierce competition and unwavering dedication.

However, one person knew this would be the starting point of everything.

'I guess this starts the chain sub-quest.'

He thought inwardly while watching Adrian leave. After all, in the game, this competition was the point where Lilia's story of Bow Empress would start.

"What a bastard."

Lilia seemed ready too, as this time her daggered gaze was directed at the back of leaving Captain.

Sylvie had been feeling weird these days, especially after the events of that trip.

Things that she would never have expected happened that day. How Mason revealed his true colors as a demon contractor, and then how they ambushed them.

How Astron nearly died once again.

And how she had witnessed that masked person killing Mason right in front of her eyes.

None of those events once left her head, haunting her constantly. Even though she forcefully took some mana-

enhanced drugs to calm herself down.

But even then, she herself was able to deduce one thing from that day. She was weak.

'Both mentally and physically.'

She had powers. She instinctively knew that. But she didn't have the courage to use that at the start.

'Not anymore.'

However, she decided to spend her time training. To both escape that feeling of helplessness and those memories.

After she returned, she had been training her magic and stamina, even reducing her sleep to four hours. And even that was because of the sleeping pills she took.

She knew that wasn't healthy, but until she was able to adapt to this, she was going to pay any price.

"Huff...Huff....."

Just like how it is right now. After running for a whopping 1 hour, she closed her eyes while calming her breath. Her muscles were screaming at her, saying she needed to stop. Her lungs and her heart were no different.

"Haaaaa...Haaaaa...."

Her chest constantly rose and lowered.

"Heal."

However, she just closed her eyes and focused on her own body. Moving her mana in her own body was something that she was most comfortable with. There was a saying that the shoemaker's son always goes barefoot, but that wasn't the case for her.

As she always experimented with herself first. Thus, she healed all her fatigue using her powers. The pain in her muscles was gone, and her incredibly speeding heart slowed.

"Sylvie."

The unexpected voice cut through her concentration, causing Sylvie to open her eyes. Standing before her was Jasmine, clad in her training uniform, a worried expression etched across her face.

"Sylvie, you're pushing yourself too hard," Jasmine admonished, concern lacing her words.

Sylvie, however, dismissed the worry with a determined smile. "It's the price I need to pay. I can't afford to be weak."

Jasmine sighed, squatting down to be at eye level with Sylvie. "Being strong doesn't mean pushing yourself to the brink. You have to take care of yourself too."

She looked at her friend and how she was sweating.

'I had been lazy for long enough.'

She thought inwardly while standing up.

"I am fine, don't worry."

Saying that she slowly made her way to the closets to change her clothes. After all, now she was going to meet him to grant her request.

And Jasmine could only look worriedly at her friend.

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"I am fine, don't worry."

After hearing those words, neither Jasmine nor Sylvie said anything as she left.

She had been avoiding the reality of her powers for too long, and now, it was time to face them head-on.

She exited the training area, leaving Jasmine with a mix of concern and understanding.

Making her way to the agreed spot, Sylvie couldn't help but feel a knot of anticipation and nervousness in her stomach. The decision to seek Astron's help in learning to fight was a significant step for her. She needed to overcome not only her physical weaknesses but also the emotional scars left by that traumatic day.

Of course, it was a little scary, but she had already taken the first step. What else did she need to do?

'I can do it.'

Thinking like that, she reached the agreed meeting place.

Astron was already waiting for her at the designated location. He looked at her with a scrutinizing gaze as if assessing her readiness for what was to come. Sylvie squared her shoulders, meeting his gaze with determination.

"I'm ready to learn," she declared, the words carrying a weight of commitment.

Astron nodded, acknowledging her readiness. "That is good." His gaze was serious, but at the same time, it didn't hold the same fierceness as it normally would.

"You seem to be tired."

"I am fine," Sylvie replied. She knew he would see through her anyway, and it was not like she was hiding.

"Really?"

"Really."

"I see."

He didn't say much and just looked at her for a second as if he made up his mind. "Then, let us start."

Astron took a step back, assessing Sylvie's posture. His keen eyes focused on her stance, searching for any signs of imbalance or vulnerability. After a moment of silent observation, he began to speak.

"First, let's work on your stance. A proper stance is the foundation of defense. It helps you maintain balance and react swiftly to any threats." Astron demonstrated a basic defensive stance, feet shoulder-width apart, knees slightly bent, and weight evenly distributed.

Of course, this was something that was already taught in the theoretical lessons at the academy, and Sylvie most likely knew that.

However, things like these were mainly practical, and those who only knew the theory wouldn't be able to use them well if they were not practiced enough.

Thus, he was showing her how to do it physically.

"Try to emulate this," he instructed, encouraging Sylvie to adjust her stance. "It might feel awkward at first, but with practice, it becomes second nature."

Sylvie mirrored his stance, adjusting her footing as best as she could. Astron's purple eyes were locked on her stance, seizing every tiny detail she was showing.

'This is.....'

It was weirdly embarrassing to be subjected to his gaze while she was performing like a monkey in a circus. Of course, the goal was different, but she felt embarrassed, nevertheless.

'Focus, Sylvie. This is important.'

Attempting to shake off the fleeting embarrassment, she redirected her attention to the task at hand. However, Astron's discerning eyes caught the subtle signs of her distraction.

"You're not doing it quite right," he observed, his tone matter-

of-fact. "Your body lacks the conditioning for this stance. Let me show you again."

With a swift movement, Astron demonstrated the defensive stance once more, each detail executed with precision. His movements were fluid, a result of repetitive training that Sylvie couldn't hope to match immediately.

"Now, observe closely. Feel the balance, the distribution of weight. It's not just about the posture; it's about the connection between your body and the ground beneath you."

Sylvie watched attentively, absorbing every nuance of his demonstration. Astron's guidance was clear and patient, his experience evident in the meticulous way he conveyed each aspect of the stance.

"Your turn," he prompted, stepping back to give her space.

Taking a deep breath, Sylvie mimicked the movements once again, striving to capture the essence of the defensive stance. Astron's discerning eyes remained on her, offering feedback and correction where needed.

She closed her eyes, envisioned her body in her head, and tried to compare it with how Astron had done. This was a method she had been using with her healing skills, as she always guided herself according to her experiences with her own body.

However, that didn't seem to work in the reverse way.

"Hmm," Astron hummed, a sound of contemplation as he observed Sylvie's efforts. "So, that is her body type."

'I guess I am not doing it right.' She felt a little disappointed inside, as she felt like she didn't meet his expectations. She also didn't meet hers either.

However, before she could ask for further clarification or guidance, Astron stepped forward without warning.

PAT!

His hands gently grasped Sylvie's arms, guiding her posture into the correct alignment.

"Your arms need to position like this."

SHUDDER!

The unexpected contact sent a shiver down Sylvie's spine, but Astron's touch was firm yet gentle. His hand didn't hold much force as he simply guided her on how to do it.

"Feel the weight on the balls of your feet. Engage your core. It's not just about the stance; it's about the intention behind it. You're not just defending; you're claiming your space, ensuring your presence is felt."

His voice, though directive, held an undercurrent of encouragement. Sylvie, now in the corrected stance, could sense the difference.

'I see now.'

When he corrected her posture, she clearly felt a sensation she couldn't feel before. As if some of her dormant muscles had been activated randomly, and she made sure to bury that feeling in her head.

There was a newfound solidity, a connection between her body and the ground beneath her that she hadn't realized before.

"Not like that.... You need to do it like this."

However, her thoughts were abruptly disrupted as Astron stepped closer once again. His presence enveloped her, and the proximity made her acutely aware of his breath, warm and reassuring. The scent of lavender, the same fragrance she had noticed before, intensified as he drew near.

THUMP!

Her mind, which had been focused on combat training, suddenly ceased to function. Astron's proximity, his touch, and the familiar scent overwhelmed her senses.

'He smells good.'

Just as she felt at the library, the same scent of lavender entered her nose.

A subtle shiver ran down her spine, and her heart began to beat rapidly in response to the close proximity.

For a moment, Sylvie's thoughts scattered, and the heat rose to her face. The sensation was both thrilling and disorienting. She struggled to regain her composure, but the closeness and the scent of lavender lingered, leaving an indelible mark on the training session.

"It's not just about the stance; it's about having control over your entire body. You need to engage your core muscles for stability and maintain a relaxed yet alert state."

Astron continued to explain the nuances of the defensive stance, his hands moving through the air to emphasize certain points.

Sylvie, still reeling from the unexpected closeness, watched him intently, absorbing every detail. His pale skin seemed almost otherworldly in the soft light, and a strange desire welled up within her—a desire to feel the texture of his skin, to touch it.

'His hand felt good too.'

Unbeknownst to Sylvie, her hand moved of its own accord. It was a subtle, almost unconscious gesture guided by an impulse she didn't fully comprehend. She had been pushing herself for the past five days, and she wasn't able to relax....Until now.

As Astron spoke, her fingertips brushed against his cheek, a delicate touch that lingered for a brief moment.

"Feel the muscles.....Hmm?"

Astron, momentarily taken aback by the unexpected contact, paused in his explanation. His eyes met Sylvie's, a flicker of surprise and curiosity in his gaze.

"...."

Sylvie, realizing what she had done, quickly withdrew her hand, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment.

"I-I'm sorry," she stammered, her voice a mix of surprise and self-consciousness. "I didn't mean to..."

'What did I just do? What did I just do? What did I just do? What did I just do? What did I just do? What did I just do? What did I just do? What did I just do? What did I just do?'

Inwardly, she repeated the same sentence over and over again. She couldn't even raise her head, as she felt like the world was burning.

"It is fine," Astron mumbled as he touched his cheek.

'Again, it doesn't feel repulsive.' Thinking that Sylvie's powers were certainly overpowered, he shook his head.

Sylvie, still overcome with embarrassment, couldn't bring herself to look at him. The heat on her face intensified, and she wished the ground would just swallow her up.

'What have I done? I've never been so impulsive.'

Her mind raced with a chaotic blend of emotions. Astron's casual response did little to ease her mortification. If anything, it intensified the awkwardness of the situation.

Astron cleared his throat, redirecting the focus back to the training. "Let's continue. Focus on your stance, Sylvie," he instructed as if the unexpected moment hadn't occurred.

Sylvie, determined to regain her composure, nodded vigorously. 'Focus, Sylvie. Focus on the training.' Yet, the lingering embarrassment made it challenging to concentrate on anything other than the proximity and the strange feeling she got when he was this close.

And Astron also seemed to realize it as well, as he felt Sylvie's blood pressure rising from the tip of his fingers. She was showing signs of anxiety, and that wasn't an optimal situation to be in while training.

He slowly got away from her, giving her the space she needed, and Sylvie was very grateful for that fact. However, a small lingering feeling of regret remained in her heart.

'I will do it properly this time.'

Though, seemingly enough, his touch was effective as Sylvie, this time, took the stance correctly, almost without any mistakes at all.

"Feel the muscles here," he said, his voice steady and instructive. "This is your core. Engage it, but don't tense up too much. It's about finding the right balance."

Sylvie, still recovering from the unexpected proximity, tried her best to follow Astron's instructions. His guidance was precise, and she gradually became more aware of the specific muscles involved in maintaining the correct posture.

"Good, Sylvie. Now, let's move on to foot positioning. Remember, a stable foundation starts from the ground up."

Astron demonstrated the correct foot placement, explaining the importance of weight distribution and balance. Sylvie focused intently, determined to absorb every detail of the instruction.

As Astron continued his patient guidance, Sylvie found herself becoming more comfortable with the training. The initial embarrassment and distraction faded, replaced by a growing sense of self-awareness and determination.

Time passed as they worked on the fundamentals of self-

defense. Astron, while maintaining professionalism, couldn't help but notice the shift in Sylvie's demeanor.

'Good for a first step.'

Her initial nervousness gave way to a newfound confidence as she absorbed the instructions and applied them with increasing proficiency.

'She is learning quite fast as well.'

With each correction and explanation, Sylvie's movements became more fluid. Astron, sensing her progress, couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction.

He knew that mastering these basic skills was crucial for Sylvie's journey toward self-improvement and overcoming the trauma of her past.

As well as the future of this world....

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"This should be enough for today."

As time went on, Sylvie forgot how fast it passed. She felt like, in the blink of an eye, the time to train was finished, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

"Ah..." Sylvie couldn't help but feel a tinge of regret that the training was over, yet a profound sense of relief washed over her.

It was as if, in Astron's company, the weight of her worries had momentarily lifted. The comforting thought lingered in her mind, creating a sense of peace she hadn't felt in a long time.

'That's right.'

The memories that had been haunting her for the past few days weren't there as she was focused. She knew very well that focusing on something helped, and that was the reason why she was pushing herself that hard.

But even then, fundamentally, something was different. She didn't feel this comfortable and relaxed, just as before.

"You did well."

As his calm voice echoed in her head, she turned to look at him. His face was as stern as ever without much change. Someone who didn't know would probably think he was just offering empty praise. But she, who had been observing him for a while, knew for a fact that he was actually genuine.

That was even without checking his emotions with her talent. She instinctively knew.

"Thank you." She smiled and nodded her head. Her body was aching all around as Astron didn't spare her from his rigorous training.

These last two hours, after the initial embarrassment, were actually filled with an intense workout session.

As Sylvie attempted to stand and express her gratitude, her muscles protested vehemently. Every inch of her body ached, and the fatigue from the intense training manifested in the unsteady way she rose.

"Oof..." she muttered as she stumbled, momentarily losing her balance. It was as if her legs had forgotten their usual coordination, weakened by the strenuous exercises Astron had put her through. Despite the discomfort, a sense of accomplishment tinged with soreness settled within her.

"Easy there," Astron said, steadying her with a firm grip on her arm. His touch sent a shiver through her, a peculiar mix of warmth and grounding assurance.

Sylvie managed a sheepish smile, acknowledging both the physical strain and the subtle little thing she felt with Astron. "I guess I have some more practicing to do."

"You certainly do have," Astron replied as he slowly let her adjust her balance.

Of course, when her muscles were this stressed, it was normal for her body not to adjust to that feeling.

'I won't be able to walk at this rate.' She thought. 'But, this is not right.'

Knowing that she needed to train more, the state of her body wasn't acceptable. She refused to stay weak like that. Thus, she was going to train more now. And there was only one thing she could do about that.

Her eyes, filled with fierceness, were closed as she concentrated on her feelings of muscles and arms.

She was about to use her powers and mana to relieve the tension and the fatigue accumulated on her muscles, making them return to their optimal position, just as she had done before.

'He-'

"Stop." The single word uttered by Astron cut through Sylvie's concentration like a sharp blade. Startled, her eyes flew open, meeting his intense gaze. His hand rested gently on her forehead, and the sudden touch sent shivers down her spine.

"Hick-?" she began, caught off guard and a little embarrassed by the unexpected interruption. The proximity of his cold hand against her warm skin heightened her awareness of his touch.

'His hands are cold.'

She couldn't help but think about whether he was healthy, as his skin was also pale compared to others. His body was also cold the last time as well, and that brought the memories of that time in the dungeon.

"You were about to use your powers again," Astron explained calmly, withdrawing his hand. He was looking at her with a squinting gaze, but inside, there was something she was familiar with. It was as if he knew what she was doing.

"What do-" Sylvie wanted to ask what he meant by that, but her words were intercepted.

"I appreciate your enthusiasm, Sylvie, but pushing your limits too far can have consequences."

"I am not push-"

"Look at your eyes. You are deprived of your sleep. Your focus is lacking, and your response timings are a lot lower than it was before." His words were sharp and precise, and they were right on the mark.

'He reads me like a book.'

Sylvie lowered her head, a mixture of embarrassment and realization washing over her. Astron's sharp observations cut through her attempts to mask her fatigue and determination. It was as if he could see through her facade, exposing the vulnerabilities she tried to hide.

"I just wanted to train," she admitted, her voice slightly subdued. "I don't want to remain weak." As she blurted what she felt, she couldn't look him in the eye.

"....."

However, she couldn't help but raise her head as no response came from his side. And when she raised her head, she couldn't help but widen her eyes. Astron was looking at her with a slightly different expression.

"It must have been hard."

As if he knew how she felt.

"....."

"You couldn't sleep because you couldn't forget, right?" Astron's words echoed with a somber understanding as if he had also tasted the bitter fruit of sleepless nights and haunting memories.

Sylvie's eyes widened, a mix of surprise and vulnerability surfacing. Astron's perception seemed to reach beyond the physical, delving into the depths of her emotional struggles. It was a revelation that left her both exposed and seen.

"You know," he continued, his voice carrying a weight of shared experience, "pushing yourself to your limits while drawing in guilt is not the way to do it."

His words hung in the air, resonating with a wisdom born of personal trials. Sylvie felt a connection, a subtle bridge between their experiences, even though she knew Astron's past remained veiled in mystery.

"T-that...."

"I once knew a person like you," Astron continued, his voice carrying a weight of reminiscence. "Someone who overexerted themselves, pushing beyond their limits. At the end of it all, they almost lost control."

Sylvie's eyes widened at the revelation. The connection between Astron's words and her own struggles struck a chord within her. It was as if he was sharing a cautionary tale, a narrative that echoed the dangers of unchecked determination.

"That person," Astron continued, "they sought strength, just like you. But in their pursuit, they neglected the importance of balance and control. It almost cost them everything."

His words painted a vivid picture of the consequences of overextending oneself, a lesson that Sylvie found herself absorbing with a mix of gratitude and trepidation. The vulnerability in Astron's voice hinted at a personal investment in the tale, a shadow of his own past.

"So, you should be careful with your own self." He mumbled, looking at the bright sun. "That person didn't have any people to talk to."

He paused for a moment as if reflecting on the weight of isolation and the dangers it posed. Sylvie listened attentively, her own thoughts mingling with the somber tone of Astron's words.

"Because they couldn't talk to anyone," he continued, "they almost drowned themselves in self-loathing. It's a path that doesn't lead to anything good."

Astron's confession carried a sincerity that resonated with Sylvie. She felt a sense of urgency in his words as if he were imparting a crucial lesson drawn from personal experience.

"But you are different," he said, turning his gaze back to Sylvie. "You have people around you, friends, family. You don't need to tread such a path. There are many who would listen to you and support you. You are fine in your own way."

His words were a gentle reassurance, a reminder that seeking strength didn't have to be a solitary journey, but at the same time, Sylvie felt something.

His tone of voice felt a little.....Shaky? The emotions she could see in his color palette were also a little different.

The normally gray and indifferent area was now-

'Empty?'

As if something was missing.

'No. That is not the case.'

But as she looked further, she realized it wasn't a feeling of emptiness but a feeling of longing and loneliness. Underneath his words and the mask of poker face, she could see him longing for certain someone.

She both felt a little concern seeing the human side of this guy who seemingly behaved like a robot....

'Who is it?'

And she felt something heavy inside. It was a new feeling....A feeling that she wasn't particularly familiar with, yet she intuitively knew that feeling wasn't something good.

She felt annoyed at the fact that she was longing for someone while she was right in front.

"Then are you included in one of those?" She asked, looking at him with her eyes filled with fierceness, contrasting her demeanor just before.

"What?"

"I am just asking. Will you listen if I speak? If I tell you my worries, will you listen to me and give me comfort?"

Sylvie's inquiry cut through the air, and a brief moment of hesitation flickered across Astron's usually composed face.

"I have my own limitations," he began, his voice measured. "I'm not the most empathetic person, and I may not provide the comfort you seek."

Sylvie, undeterred, intensified her gaze, trying to discern the unspoken emotions behind Astron's words. "Why? Why do you think you are not the person? What makes you unsuited for that role?"

"....." He didn't respond, as he could only lower his head. For some reason, right now, in front of Sylvie, Astron felt like a little kid who had lost his light.

She knew his struggles. Even though it felt like it was a long time ago, in fact, it had been just three months since he had changed that much. She herself knew his struggles, so her annoyance grew at his words.

'You don't deserve it.'

"You...." She wanted to continue, but suddenly, Astron's demeanor changed. His color palette also changed drastically in a second, as if something had taken control of him.

"That is enough." Astron cut her off, standing from where he sat. His gaze returned to its initial coldness, the same calculating and unresponsive look.

Sylvie, though irritated by his sudden change, held back her words, sensing that something had shifted within him. Astron took a moment to compose himself before addressing her again.

"Using your healing powers on your body is not the solution," he said, his voice firm. "You need to remember how those muscles feel, even in fatigue. It's crucial for you to activate them correctly the next time."

Sylvie, now slightly taken aback by the intensity of his tone, nodded in understanding. Astron's words, though sharp, carried a weight of expertise, and she realized the importance of retaining the physical sensations to enhance her abilities.

"That is enough for today. See you next time."

Astron turned to leave, the air thick with a sudden tension.

However, Sylvie herself instinctively knew this opportunity would never come again, as she knew what kind of a person Astron was.

'I won't stay still.'

Sylvie, her curiosity piqued, couldn't let the opportunity slip away.

"Wait," she called after him, and Astron halted, glancing back at her.

"What happened to that person you were talking about?" she inquired, her eyes searching his for any glimpse of the untold story behind his cautionary tale.

For a moment, Astron's expression wavered, caught between openness and reservation, and Sylvie had noticed it.

Yet, as quickly as it appeared, the vulnerability vanished, replaced by the familiar impassiveness.

"That person," he cryptically replied, his voice devoid of emotion, "is still searching for their own path." With those words, he resumed his departure, leaving Sylvie with unanswered questions lingering in the air.

Chapter 227 Chapter 51.1 - Maya Evergreen

Amelia Mayer.

A sophomore-year Arcadia Hunter Academy student.

She was one of the people who knew Maya Evergreen the most, the first-ranked student of their year and the exceptional elemental mage.

Maya was basically the most famous person of their year as she was someone with both success and personality.

She was talented and beautiful, and it was easy for her to approach most people with the same traits. She didn't look down on others, and she didn't talk to people disrespectfully.

In contrast, she helped the students in need, those who wished to get better but couldn't do it with their own efforts.

Sometimes, she was even better than the supposed 'teachers' of the world's best academy. Countless different students had received her grace and her help.

Amelia was also one of those. At the start of her first year, Amelia wasn't having it easy. She was finding it very difficult to adapt to the environment and the heavy load on the backs of students.

That was especially the case since Amelia had awakened her trait, [Sword Follower]. It was a trait that was common, and it wasn't something special in the academy. But in the Hunter industry, her trait was actually respected since it was actually ranked quite high, being unique.

Her talent limit was also around 8. Thus, she was accepted to the academy despite her family not being rooted that deeply. Such talent limit was actually quite high; thus, everyone knew she would be successful.

However, of course, suddenly meeting with countless different gifted students, some talent-wise, some family-wise, and some both, she was overwhelmed. Her grades were not meeting both her expectations and her school.

The lessons were overwhelming, and she was having a hard time grasping both the theory and the practical implications of what they had learned.

Academic burdens, both in theory and practice, weighed heavily on Amelia. The lofty expectations, both self-imposed and those of the school, led her to a point where she felt like she was at the nadir of her life. The isolation during these tough times was palpable as she grappled with the complexities of both her academic and social life.

In her vulnerability, Amelia remained oblivious to the intricacies of the world around her. Unaware of the hidden pitfalls that awaited, her beauty became a magnet for male students seeking companionship.

Naively trusting in the inherent goodness of others, she opened herself up to friendships, unaware that some of these encounters would be more arduous than any lesson in the academy.

As Amelia, in her vulnerability, sought companionship among her male peers, little did she realize the harsh truths lurking behind their seemingly friendly advances.

Oblivious to the intricacies of their intentions, she found herself entangled in a web of deceptive camaraderie. Unbeknownst to her, her beauty had drawn in these male students, not for genuine friendships, but as vessels to satiate their desires.

As the illusion of friendship shattered, Amelia discovered that some had used her as a means to fulfill their fleeting emotional needs, leaving her feeling used and discarded.

The camaraderie she sought turned out to be a mirage, and she found herself questioning the sincerity of those who had once approached her.

This painful realization left an indelible mark on Amelia. The trusting innocence that once defined her interactions with men transformed into wariness.

Gradually, she began to view them as wolves in sheep's clothing, creatures adept at disguising their intentions until the opportune moment. The scars of these experiences deepened, fueling her skepticism toward the genuineness of male connections.

In the midst of Amelia's disillusionment with the insincerity of male connections, a moment of serendipity occurred. It was a time when she felt at her lowest, drowning in skepticism and wariness.

As if summoned by fate, Maya Evergreen, the beacon of grace and kindness, emerged into her world.

Maya's arrival was like a burst of light in Amelia's darkened reality. As she appeared before her, Maya's warm and genuine smile had an immediate impact.

"Amelia, right? What are you doing here alone?"

The memory of Maya's first words echoed in Amelia's mind. They were just casual words, nothing extraordinary. She had heard those words quite a lot, actually. However, different from how she had felt before, those words had resonated with sincerity and compassion this time. In that moment, a glimmer of hope sparked within Amelia's heart.

Maya, aware of Amelia's struggles, extended a helping hand with that same bright smile. In times of need, Maya's support became a guiding light, dispelling the shadows of doubt and mistrust that had clouded Amelia's perception of others.

Maya's actions spoke louder than any words, offering a genuine friendship that was based on understanding and kindness.

Amid Maya's unwavering support, Amelia found herself more drawn to the camaraderie of women.

The contrast between Maya's authenticity and the deceptive actions of certain male peers became stark. The scars of past betrayals started to heal, replaced by a newfound trust in the bonds she formed with women.

Maya's influence played a crucial role in reshaping Amelia's worldview. The once-wary young woman discovered that in the company of certain individuals like Maya, genuine connections could thrive.

As Amelia found solace and support in Maya's presence, the newfound friendship took root, gradually evolving into a source of strength for both women.

However, amidst the warmth and camaraderie, Amelia couldn't help but notice a disconcerting pattern.

'Those pigs.'

The wolves, those deceptive male peers who had once targeted her, now seemed to cast their attention towards Maya.

Despite Maya's cheerful and air-headed personality, she was blissfully unaware of the veiled intentions that lingered around her. As Amelia observed from the sidelines, a sense of protectiveness welled up within her.

'I won't let them approach her.'

Maya, with her genuine kindness and open heart, became a target for those who sought to exploit her naivety.

Determined not to let history repeat itself, Amelia made a silent vow to shield Maya from the wolves in sheep's clothing that circled around her. The scars of Amelia's past experiences fueled her commitment to safeguarding the authenticity and warmth that Maya unknowingly radiated.

She didn't want those wolves to prey on her. She hated that fact to the core.

'Right.'

As those memories of the past came crashing on her, Amelia couldn't help but smile. She turned to look at her deskmate and noticed her thinking about something.

Maya, with her beautiful purple-pinky hair, was pondering about something as she was focused. Her bright blue eyes were focused on the table as if she couldn't see anything else.

'She seems to be out of it nowadays.'

It wasn't that unusual for Maya to be in her own world, but recently, she had been doing this more frequently. That was especially the case after she came back.

'Something happened.'

She didn't know what happened as Maya refused to talk about it, but she knew something had changed inside Maya.

RING!

At that moment, the bell rang, signaling the end of the class. As the bell rang, a group of students seized the opportunity to approach Maya.

"Maya, how are you doing?"

The concern in their voices was evident, and Amelia observed from her desk, her protective instincts kicking in. She knew these students – the ones who often showed sudden interest in Maya whenever something unusual happened.

Maya looked up, her eyes shifting from the table to the group surrounding her. A small, polite smile appeared on her face.

"Oh, hi! I'm doing okay," Maya replied, her voice carrying the genuine warmth that drew people towards her.

"Really? You seem a little off nowadays." Maya was never the type to stay quiet in the classroom. She was especially known for her love for snacks, and everyone knew one must never refuse when she offered.

However, contrary to her habits, she hadn't been given any snacks, nor had she brought any to the classroom. Therefore, some of them naturally thought something was wrong with her.

"Ah...I am just fine."

Maya replied with a small smile.

The other students, sensing Maya's reluctance to delve into personal matters, decided not to persist. Instead, they exchanged casual goodbyes and left, leaving Maya with a moment of respite.

But, as the classroom emptied, a couple of students lingered behind, seizing what they saw as an opportunity.

"Hey, Maya, I know you're really good at [Material Theory for Hunters]. I'm struggling with some concepts. Would you mind helping me out?"

The boy who spoke wore a charming smile, and his request seemed innocent enough. Amelia, however, recognized the ulterior motive hidden behind the words. Maya, being the helpful person she was, often found herself in such situations.

Of course, most of the time, Amelia was the one who fended such situations. Thus, most boys disliked how she acted as a wall. Even now, none of them was aiming for her, different from the past, and their gaze was hostile.

'Sigh....They are at it again.'

She got ready to intercept once again, as she knew Maya wasn't a person to refuse. She already had some excuses in her mind ready in case such a situation occurred, and if it didn't work, she would just follow Maya with the boys, and that would be enough.

But, contrary to her expectations, Maya refused the boys with a smile, "Sorry...I need something to do."

It was the first time Maya had declined such a request, and it caught both the boys off guard.

The boy who had approached, let's call him Alex, felt a sudden awkwardness settle over him. His charming smile faltered, and he exchanged a quick, uncomfortable glance with his friend, Chris.

Alex's internal monologue raced with confusion and embarrassment.

'Did I say something wrong? Why did she refuse? Was it because of me? Was my face not enough?'

His confidence took a hit, and he stumbled over his words for a moment.

"Uh, no problem, Maya. Another time, maybe?" Alex's attempt at nonchalance couldn't completely mask the tinge of embarrassment in his voice.

'Heh, serves you right.'

Amelia couldn't help but smirk, seeing the guy's face crumble. He was visibly embarrassed, and that made her feel good.

Chris, observing the scene, raised an eyebrow. He had expected the usual compliant response from Maya, and her sudden refusal seemed to throw them both off balance.

"Come on, Alex. Let's not bother her." Chris chuckled, trying to downplay the situation. But there was a subtle undertone of amusement in his eyes, a silent acknowledgment that things hadn't gone as smoothly as they usually did. After all, he also disliked the ones who wanted to take advantage of Maya's kindness, and seeing Alex faltering also made him feel good.

'This will be a good lesson for you.'

After all, his friend was overly obsessed with his looks and thought only that mattered. So far, it worked with some girls, but he knew his friend needed a reality check, and now it came.

"Have a nice day."

Maya said as she stood up. She was already ready to leave the classroom with everything in her bag.

"Y-you too...."

Alex stuttered as he watched Maya leave, and Amelia also stood following her.

'Only I am allowed to be her side.'

Inwardly, she felt proud following Maya and the other boys getting the treatment they deserved.

"Maya, where are we going?"

She emphasized the word 'we' so that those guys would know their place.

Maya, however, stopped abruptly and turned to face Amelia. There was an uncharacteristic seriousness in her eyes.

"Amelia, can you please leave me alone for today?"

Amelia's world crumbled.....

Chapter 228 Chapter 51.2 - Maya Evergreen

"Amelia, can you please leave me alone for today?"

Amelia just stood there, her confident facade crumbling into confusion and hurt. The sudden request from Maya had caught her off guard, and she found herself at a loss for words.

'What?' It was the first time something like this happened, and she couldn't help but open her eyes wide.

Maya, sensing her friend's inner turmoil, offered a small, apologetic smile. "I'll catch up with you later, okay?"

"Wa-"

Before Amelia could formulate a response, Maya turned and left, hurrying away from the scene. The weight of confusion lingered in the air, and Amelia felt a sense of vulnerability she wasn't accustomed to.

'What just happened?' She thought, unable to comprehend. It was all too strange for her own good.

Alex and Chris observed the situation with a certain satisfaction, their smirks growing as they saw Amelia's haughty demeanor unravel.

"Looks like Miss High and Mighty got a reality check," Chris remarked, nudging Alex.

Alex, who had been embarrassed by Maya's rejection, managed a half-smile. "Yeah, maybe we should all remember that not everyone is at our beck and call."

"Humph!"

Of course, Amelia wasn't someone to just sit there and take those words. She wanted to hit these guys in the face and show who was the boss. She felt annoyed at the fact that she was left alone like that, and now these guys dared to speak to her like that.

'Let me smash you.'

But just as she was about to move, she stopped, seeing the small number on Chris' shirt. There, it read '29.' It was his ranking in his sophomore year.

As that realization hit her, she had no choice but to back down. She couldn't cause a scene as it was against the rules of the academy, and even if she had caused a scene, there weren't many people that she could use to her advantage.

'I need to check it out.'

And most importantly, she needed to check it out. She needed to see what happened to Maya with her own eyes.

Amelia swiftly gathered her belongings and followed the path that Maya had taken. The corridor echoed with the sound of her hurried footsteps as she navigated through the halls of Arcadia Hunter Academy. Her mind buzzed with a mix of confusion, hurt, and a burning determination to uncover the reason behind Maya's sudden request for solitude.

As she approached the exit of the academy building, she caught a glimpse of Maya disappearing around a corner.

The purple-pink strands of Maya's hair swayed with each step she took, and Amelia quickened her pace to keep up.

The halls were now emptier, with most students heading to their next classes or enjoying the end of their lessons since half of the academy no longer had classes from now on.

'Where is she going?'

She couldn't help but ask herself. Maya's direction seemed uncertain, but her steps were fast and hurried, as if she needed to be there as soon as possible.

The sense of mystery only fueled Amelia's curiosity. Was Maya upset about something? Was there a personal matter troubling her? Amelia's thoughts raced, searching for answers to the questions that lingered in the air.

'I need to know.'

She needed to know everything about Maya, what she was doing, where she was going, and who she was meeting. After all, it was her Maya.

After walking for a little longer, Maya reached the academy training grounds, which were notably empty around this time.

It wasn't the training ground she typically frequented for her magical practices, Elemental Chamber, but rather the area where students honed their close combat abilities.

'Why is she here?'

She couldn't help but wonder. From what she knew, Maya rarely visited the training rooms outside of the Elemental Chamber since she had a special [Passive] that let her increase her physical strength corresponding to her mana stats.

Amelia, maintaining a discreet distance, watched as Maya surveyed the sparring areas with a contemplative expression.

The training grounds were bathed in the soft hues of the setting sun, casting long shadows across the open space.

This place would soon be filled with students as many of them would come here after they had their meals and other things; however, right now, because it was the mid-day break, not many students were there.

"Did you need something student?"

However, her pursuit was disturbed by the personnel at the entrance.

"Ah, please don't mind me. I am just looking for a friend."

"Are you re-"

"Please. I don't need anything."

Turning down the friendly personnel, she slowly followed Maya while concealing her presence.

"Tch. Entitled students."

Even though she heard the personnel clicking their tongue, she didn't say anything and just ignored it.

'Where did she go?'

Because she was a little held back by the receptionist, she lost sight of Maya for a second.

'Ah, there she is.'

However, soon, she found Maya again, seeing her on the corner of the training grounds. Maya's eyes were focused on a lone figure at the far end of the training grounds.

A solitary silhouette engaged in a series of precise and calculated movements. As Maya approached, the identity of the solitary figure became clear – it was her fellow junior, the one who had stayed back with her, Astron Natusalune.

He was seemingly focused on his sparring as the daggers in his hands continuously flew to fight with the dummy around.

'Is he fighting with PhantomGlide Dummy?'

It wasn't your usual scene to see a first-year student fighting with the PhantomGlide Dummy. Even some sophomore or third-year students would mostly have a hard time sparring against it.

Astron continued his intricate dance with the PhantomGlide Dummy, each movement deliberate and precise. The whirling daggers in his hands painted an elegant picture of controlled chaos as he seamlessly anticipated and countered the dummy's attacks.

Maya and Amelia observed in silence, their eyes following him. Though Maya was focused on him, and Amelia was focused on Maya.

'Why is she looking for him?' Amelia questioned herself as she looked at how Maya was that focused on Astron. Even though she was a little far so that Maya couldn't sense her, she felt like Maya's whole focus was on him, and that feeling bothered her.

After a few more minutes of intense sparring, Astron finally slowed his movements, catching his breath. The PhantomGlide Dummy, seemingly satisfied with the training session, came to a halt, and the magical daggers vanished into thin air.

And after that, Maya approached him with a beautiful smile that Amelia had never seen before. It was something that was out of the world and genuine.

'What are they talking about?'

Amelia didn't know what they were talking about, but soon Astron stood up, and both of them started walking to deeper academy grounds.

Amelia trailed behind them as they entered the deeper grounds of the academy. The special sparring rooms, known for their soundproofing, were located in a secluded area, hidden away from the bustling activities of the main training grounds.

'They entered there?'

As Maya and Astron approached one of the rooms, Amelia concealed herself in the shadows, peering cautiously through the slightly ajar door.

She couldn't believe what she had just seen. The same Maya she had known all this time entering a sparring room alone with one of the male students?

It was something that was impossible. For all this time, she made sure that Maya never became close enough with any of the males around her, and her efforts were surely paying off. However, now things were a lot different.

'I need to know what is happening inside.'

She strained her ears, hoping to catch even the faintest whispers of their conversation.

To her dismay, the thick walls seemed to absorb any trace of sound, leaving her with nothing but a frustrating silence. Amelia pressed her ear against the door, attempting to glean any information about the mysterious discussion happening on the other side.

But it was futile. The room remained impervious to her eavesdropping attempts.

Frustration etched across her face, Amelia couldn't help but feel a sense of exclusion. The desire to understand the dynamics between Maya and Astron gnawed at her, intensifying the burning curiosity that had brought her to this point.

After a few more moments of strained listening, Amelia reluctantly withdrew from her position. Maya's privacy was evidently well-guarded within the confines of the soundproofed sparring room.

Left with no other choice, Amelia retreated from the area, her footsteps echoing softly against the academy's polished floors. The unanswered questions lingered, leaving her in a state of restless contemplation.

'What could be so important that they needed to discuss privately?' she wondered, her thoughts a whirlwind of uncertainty.

For now, the details of Maya's interactions with Astron remained shrouded in mystery, a puzzle that seemed to elude Amelia's grasp. As she walked away from the sparring rooms, she couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to Maya's world than met the eye.

Though she didn't know, there was another student who was watching everything from a lot far distance with his monocles.

There are times when we don't want to hear the words that we need to. Sometimes, the truth can hurt a little.

Sometimes, we just want to escape. However, for some, there aren't any places to do so.

'Tch.'

You will remember that certain thing wherever you go, whatever you do. And in the end, the only thing you can do is to lose yourself while overextending.

That is something I knew quite well.

'Certainly, using weight bracelets seems to be nice.'

After returning from the Western Uxbridge, I adjusted my training regimen according to my new skills. I had already been feeling that my training was taking a long time, and it was not intense enough science from the time I had acquired Celestalith.

Thus, I needed to increase the intensity, and I ordered some specific weight bracelets all around my body to help me with training.

It was a common training method to increase endurance as well as burst speed, and I knew that would be helpful.

And today, the instructor left us early from the lesson as he finished the class faster than usual. Therefore, I decided to challenge the PhantomGlide Dummy again to see my progress, and things were looking good.

Until I sensed two presences watching me. The first one was Senior Maya. She wasn't even trying to conceal herself.

As for the other one, I didn't know her exact identity, as she was quite far away, and her presence-concealing technique was quite proficient.

'At least a sophomore-year student.'

I thought. In any case, aside from the watchers, I just focused on PhantomGlide, though I wasn't able to beat it with my bracelets on.

'That was expected.' However, I could feel the increase in my progress even with the weighed bracelets. I was now entering the range of experts in terms of dagger skills.

"Junior, are you free?"

At that moment, Senior Maya came. It seemed she didn't want to wait any longer. With my eyes, I could see her restlessness, as if she was having a hard time. Her legs were shaking a little bit, and her mouth was salivating.

"Yes?"

"T-then....Can we talk privately a bit?"

The moment she said that with a face, I knew what she meant. Her gaze was locked on my neck after all, and my shivering skin was the proof of her intent.

"Okay."

And I decided to accept it without thinking, as this secret was something that would be revealed if Maya's instincts were known after all.

Chapter 229 Chapter 51.3 - Maya Evergreen

After the incident with the Vampire and the continuous investigation cases, Maya's days had been busy all along.

She didn't have any time to stop and take a breather. After all, she needed to be in control of her expressions and desires all the time.

Considering the fact that, for some reason, Maya was able to conceal the fact that she was a vampire alone made her different from the rest, and if possible, she wanted this to never be known to the real world.

The reason was simple. She didn't want to lose her friends or her family.....And her junior.

Therefore, she was trying her best to make that possible, and her efforts paid off. For all this time, she had been on guard, and just as they had planned with her Junior, nothing suspicious came out.

Her test results were good; her alimony was matching with the crime scene and how she had defeated the vampire.

However, as the responsibilities she had slowly were removed and her state of mind returned to its normal state, a piece that she had missed also started revealing itself.

'How did Junior beat that vampire?'

That was the first question she asked herself. How was it possible that her Junior, who was even that strong, managed to beat that vampire?

From what she had basically experienced, Vampire's level was on a completely different level than any other cadet could possibly be.

Its rank was even possibly higher than some of the active Hunters. For this case, she was sure at least a very high-ranking officer from the demonic-human bureau was necessary.

However, for some reason, Junior is able to defeat that vampire on his own. She was sure that there weren't any other humans nearby, and she knew that he hadn't gotten any help unless her junior had lied.

Therefore, that brought her to this question.

'Is he hiding his strength?'

If her Junior were hiding his strength, it would make sense. But only this situation would make sense.

Maya still remembered the time when she herself had taught Astron how to control mana itself, and referring to that time, she was sure that he didn't even know how to control mana.

His mana levels weren't that high either, and from how he looked, Maya judged he wasn't possibly that strong.

Therefore, unless he was incredibly talented at hiding his strength, which she refused to believe since she quite trusted her eyes, he must have never been able to defeat that vampire on his own with the strength of that time.

That could mean one thing.

He somehow got stronger in that short amount of time so that he could even meet the possible requirements to beat the vampire.

'It is incredible.'

And that itself was an achievement that one needed to respect.

'As expected, my eyes didn't mislead me. He really was that talented.'

After all, if that wasn't the case, who would give him such an expensive resource? She herself was very well aware of the fact that her Junior was exceptional, and she bet on that feeling.

And just as she expected, her feelings didn't betray her, and she was here now.

'But, why is he hiding his strength?'

There was no way a person capable of killing a vampire would refuse to get this acknowledgment. Just by imagining the resources and the recognition he would get if he were to reveal such information....

Even she couldn't help but be greedy.

'What reasons could he have?'

Maya wondered, her mind racing through various possibilities. Perhaps there was a personal code he followed, a mission he sought to accomplish without drawing unnecessary attention. Or maybe he simply wasn't interested in the fame and recognition that would come with revealing his true strength.

Regardless of the reasons, Maya decided that she would support him discreetly. In her eyes, he was more than just a junior – he was her savior. His timely intervention in the vampire incident had not only saved her life but also provided her with a renewed sense of purpose.

'I owe him my life.'

Maya acknowledged a deep sense of gratitude welling up within her. This debt became a driving force, compelling her to go above and beyond to repay it.

The realization that her junior had become an integral part of her life fueled her determination to ensure his success and safety.

Maya was willing to use her family's resources, connections, and influence to support her junior in honing his abilities.

'I will do whatever it takes to support you, Junior.'

If he chose to remain in the shadows, then she would be the silent force propelling him forward. She believed that everyone had their reasons, and her duty was to respect and protect those reasons.

'I'll make sure he reaches his full potential,' Maya resolved, a newfound purpose igniting within her.

Whether he sought acknowledgment or redemption or simply preferred the solitude of the background, Maya was determined to be the pillar of support he needed.

After all, she herself was quite aware of how distant this Junior was when he was left alone. He was a weird guy at the end. She had already ordered a bunch of special herbs and elixirs from her family, and they were already on the way.

Of course, that wasn't all that he was going to do; that was just the start. She was also searching for possible information about the vampires and what had happened to her.

Her Junior mentioned her becoming a completely different type of vampire because of her own feelings and evolution, but she wanted to know more about the details.

Thus, she had been looking for things, and she also commissioned her family to find something related to this herself.

After all, she wanted to revert back to her original self if she could, as she didn't want to cause any unnecessary harm.

'How can I revert back?'

Maya questioned, her mind spinning with potential solutions. The journey to reclaim her humanity seemed daunting, yet she remained resolute.

Her family's resources and connections would be crucial in uncovering the secrets behind her transformation and finding a way to reverse it.

GROWL!

As Maya delved into her own predicament inside her classroom, another pressing matter surfaced – her growing thirst for blood. Her 'stomach' growled, though it was more of a psychological effect than a clear hunger.

'Ah, it had been a while.'

It had been a while since she last fed, and the craving intensified. However, the repulsion towards the scent of other people's blood was overwhelming.

'It is disgusting.'

Inside the classroom filled with different humans, she didn't feel any desire to attack them all. In fact, she rather felt repulsed by their smell. She didn't know if that would change when she lost her control, but right now, she didn't have reason to be drawn into the smell of random strangers.

'It needs to be Junior.'

The dark allure of her junior's blood became an undeniable focal point. Maya's senses rejected the idea of feeding on anyone else, finding their blood repulsive. Yet, when she thought about her junior, the repulsion faded, replaced by an intense desire.

'I need his blood,' Maya admitted to herself, the realization both unsettling and compelling.

The conflicting emotions surrounding her need for blood mirrored the internal turmoil she experienced during her earlier encounter with the vampire.

But in the end, she couldn't refuse it. She knew she just wouldn't be able to. Even after all this time, whatever she had tasted as a normal meal felt bland.

In her mind, she felt like only his blood would taste good. She also stopped eating snacks, as she felt like she didn't even like eating them anymore.

'I need it.'

Thus, she decided to seek him out. She didn't even realize that her eyes turned crimson, and she was salivating a little herself.

'I can feel his smell.'

Since he had a unique scent of blood that was engraved in her mind, it wasn't even hard for her to find where he was. She just followed the trail of his scent, and not long after, she spotted him.

'He is training.'

He was training against the PhantomGlide Dummy, so she decided to let him watch.

'Now that I remember, this place was the first time I had seen him.'

At that time, she thought he was just a lost junior who didn't know what to do with his mana, so she just offered to help him out.

Who would have thought that the tables would turn this quickly, and now she would be the one getting help?

Her gaze focused on the present; Maya couldn't help but notice the significant transformation in her junior's fighting style. The movements that were once hesitant and uncertain had evolved into a precise dance of skill and efficiency. His strikes were faster, and his footwork displayed a newfound agility.

'He has improved so much,' Maya marveled silently. The training against the PhantomGlide Dummy became a testament to the dedication and hard work he had invested in honing his abilities. Each movement spoke of progress and a commitment to becoming stronger.

However, Maya's keen observation didn't stop there. Her eyes caught the glint of weighed bracelets adorning her junior's wrists.

A realization dawned upon her – he was deliberately limiting his own strength even in the midst of this training.

'Why would he do that? Isn't it a little risky?' Maya wondered, puzzled by the decision to place constraints on his abilities. After all, he could injure himself since PhantomGlide Dummy was not going to be merciful at all.

Her junior's actions raised questions about the depth of his hidden strength and the purpose behind such deliberate self-

restriction.

The conflict within Maya intensified as she wrestled with her own struggles and her growing desire for his blood. Watching him train, she realized that there was much more to her junior than met the eye.

'I need to learn more about him.'

The layers of mystery surrounding him only deepened, and Maya felt an increasing need to understand the complexities that defined his character.

As Maya grappled with her own internal conflicts and the desire for his blood, the training session took an unexpected turn.

A sudden, sharp sound echoed through the room as her junior's right arm bore the brunt of a cut. The PhantomGlide Dummy had landed a blow, leaving a visible mark on his otherwise agile and skillful form.

Maya's eyes widened, registering the reality of the situation. The first cut marked the beginning of a more challenging battle. Despite the injury, her junior pressed on, determination etched on his face. Another cut followed, drawing a fresh line of crimson across his arm. The fight continued, but Maya could sense the toll it was taking on him.

As the training session reached its climax, her junior stood, breathing heavily, his form now adorned with the evidence of the simulated combat. The PhantomGlide Dummy, though just a training construct, had pushed him to his limits.

Though he lost in the end, it was remarkable that he could even withstand it that long with injuries and restraints on himself.

'Blood.'

However, Maya's keen senses heightened as the scent of blood mingled with the musky aroma of sweat in the air.

The metallic tang of her junior's blood reached her, triggering a visceral reaction within her.

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

THUMP!

Her heart began to throb, and the controlled rhythm of her breathing wavered, becoming rough and uneven.

At that moment, Maya's focus shifted entirely to her junior's blood. The room seemed to fade away, leaving only the echo of his heartbeat resonating in her ears.

The evidence of his simulated combat, the fresh cuts on his arm, became a visual manifestation of the internal struggle she faced.

Her crimson eyes, clouded with an uncontrollable desire, fixated on the wounds. The scent of his blood intoxicated her senses, drowning out all other thoughts.

In the haze of her heightened emotions, Maya found it increasingly difficult to maintain control. Her breathing quickened, matching the erratic rhythm of her racing heart.

Maya's restless energy surged within her as she approached Junior, unable to wait any longer. Her eyes betrayed a sense of urgency, and her legs trembled slightly as if she was having a hard time containing her emotions. Unconsciously, her mouth began to salivate, a physical manifestation of the primal instincts that threatened to surface.

"Junior, are you free?" Maya inquired, her voice carrying a subtle quiver. The weight of the unspoken desire hung in the air, and her gaze, locked onto his neck, revealed the true intent behind her request. His shivering skin became the undeniable proof of her hunger.

"Yes?" Junior responded, meeting her gaze with a certain understanding. The unspoken connection between them transcended words, and he sensed the nature of the private conversation she sought.

"T-then... Can we talk privately a bit?" Maya stammered, the tension palpable in her voice. She wanted to discuss matters that required discretion, matters that were deeply entwined with her vampiric instincts.

"Okay," Junior agreed, recognizing the significance of their shared secret. He accepted the request without hesitation, understanding the delicate nature of the situation.

[Astron Natusalune, 1st year. Confirmed.]

[Maya Evergreen, 2nd year. Confirmed.]

[There is a high discrepancy between the estimated combat capabilities of the students. Do you still wish to proceed?]

"Yes."

After that, the two of them found themselves entering a sparring field.

"Sorry."

And Maya immediately jumped over him.

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"Sorry," Maya uttered, her voice carrying a mixture of emotions as she immediately leaped over him. The transition from the intensity of the training session to the private conversation was seamless.

"It is fine. You may go as you wish." He said while looking around for a little while. "But Senior Maya."

His voice stopped her for a second, looking at him from close. "Please cast a small barrier. Nobody should see us, right?"

There was a reason why Astron was always careful while training inside the rooms. He always checked if he was being watched or not since there were many demon spies inside both the academy and the government.

"Un....."

Closing her eyes briefly, Maya tapped into her proficiency with mana. She weaved a subtle barrier around them, ensuring their conversation would remain private and shielded from prying eyes.

Once the barrier was in place, she looked at Astron, seeking confirmation.

"Is this enough?" she asked, her crimson eyes meeting his.

The barrier would serve its purpose, allowing them the freedom to converse without the risk of unwanted observers.

"Yes, that is enough." Astron, after a moment's consideration, nodded in approval as he looked into her eyes. "You may go as you wish." His words were calm as if he was already expecting such a thing to happen anyway.

"T-then....Pardon my intrusion."

Without waiting for a response, Maya pushed him to the ground with a gentle yet deliberate force. She moved with a fluidity that belied her vampiric strength, effortlessly climbing over him. Of course, he didn't resist in any case, as if he had trusted her enough to let her move as she pleased.

The atmosphere within the small barrier intensified, charged with unspoken tension and anticipation. Maya's actions were a dance on the thread of her sanity and identity....As a vampire and as a human alone.

As she hovered over him, her crimson eyes fixated on the fresh wounds on his arm. Without hesitation, she leaned down, her tongue tracing the lines of the cut.

SLURP!

The intimate act held a strange mix of primal desire and an unspoken connection as Maya sought solace in the taste of his blood.

'It is tasty...This is it.....This is the one....'

She couldn't help but marvel at the taste. Even tasting a little blood flowing out of his veins was enough to make her intoxicated by the feeling.

'More.....More.....'

She finished licking the wound on his arm, savoring the last drops before raising her eyes. This time, her gaze moved upward, locking onto his neck. The pale skin under the sparring room's lighting looked enticing, and Maya felt herself losing control of the desire that gnawed at her.

"Your....." She mumbled as she opened her mouth.

"My?"

"Your neck is really pretty."

"..."

In an instant, driven by an insatiable thirst and a yearning she couldn't suppress, Maya bit into his neck.

"Urghk-"

A small groan left his mouth, a reaction out of small pain. His body twitched a little at the foreign intrusion, but after a second, he calmed himself down.

The room echoed with the sound of her actions, a delicate dance between vulnerability and desire.

GULP! GULP!

The crimson hue of her eyes intensified as the taste of his blood surged through her senses, momentarily drowning out the complexities of her existence.

However, this time, she wasn't as desperate as she was before. Rather than drinking like a madman, she savored the taste. She also didn't want to put too much of a strain on his body, as she felt like he was fragile enough to break under her force.

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

Yet, as the moments passed, she flinched, a sudden realization hitting her. She stopped, her fangs withdrawing from his neck, as she heard him breathing heavily.

'Wait....'

The sound snapped her back to the reality of the situation, her eyes widening as she assessed the state of her junior.

"Are you okay?" she asked, her voice a mixture of concern and guilt.

"It is fine; it wasn't that long this time." He answered as he touched the small scar on his neck. Since this time, Sylvie's blessing hasn't been there, and his physical attributes aren't strong enough to satisfy her body and demands.

"T-that..." Maya lowered her head as she looked at his body.

'Is he strong or weak?'

She couldn't discern the truth. Since they were this close and Maya could basically feel his skin, she could also see the strength he held, and undoubtedly, he was nowhere near enough to be stronger than her.

From this close, it was nearly impossible to conceal one's own rank unless that said person was a [Venerate].

But, it was impossible for him to be a [Venerate]. It was out of the question. Thus, she was left with one option.

"Do I smell?" His question took her by surprise, and for a moment, Maya was caught off guard.

"What?" she stammered, uncertain of how to respond.

"You had been..... smelling me."

"Oh, no. You don't smell bad at all," she assured him, realizing the confusion in his words. In fact, to her heightened senses, he had a rather pleasant scent, a mix of his own unique aroma and the lingering sweat from the training.

"I mean, you smell good," she murmured almost unintentionally, her gaze dropping for a moment.

He nodded, "Uh, well, good to hear, I guess. That was a bit embarrassing."

Maya shook her head, trying to divert her attention. Yet, the proximity, the scent, and the lingering thirst within her led her to a familiar path.

'I will ask them later.'

Without giving it much thought, she once again dove towards his neck, her fangs sinking into his flesh. This time, however, she fed more cautiously, savoring the taste until she felt her strength waning, and she withdrew reluctantly, a mix of satisfaction and guilt etched on her features.

"Sorry..."

"Don't be."

GULP! GULP!

After drinking his blood for a little longer, Maya finally felt satisfied enough as she withdrew from his neck. The intoxicating mix of satisfaction and guilt lingered within her, but for the moment, the immediate thirst had been sated.

However, as the rush of feeding subsided, she felt a peculiar weakness overtaking her. Her legs gave in, and she collapsed onto his body, her head resting against his chest. The position was unexpectedly intimate, and the silence that followed was filled with the sound of their combined heartbeats.

THUMP! THUMP!

His heart was beating really fast, possibly because to relieve the lack of blood in his veins.

"This....."

Maya, now in this vulnerable state, felt a surge of conflicting emotions. The crimson hue in her eyes faded as her gaze softened, and a sense of tranquility washed over her.

The realization of her actions and the consequences were momentarily forgotten, replaced by a peculiar closeness that seemed to defy the boundaries between predator and prey.

'If this is what I become after not drinking for five days, then how am I going to deal with it now?'

She couldn't help but question herself. How different was she from a monster that she hated and hunted in this academy? Was there any difference?

Those questions lingered in her heart, igniting the feelings that she had tried hard to bury.

However, as Astron's heartbeat echoed beneath her, a rhythmic lullaby seemed to soothe the turmoil within her temporarily.

'I should give this to him.'

At that moment, she remembered something. A gift that she had bought for him as a token of gratitude. She hated to be on the receiving end all the time. Her junior had saved her and was giving her his blood, and she needed to give her something back, too.

However, what could be a thing that could rival her life? Something that could be traded back against her life, something that was important and needed to be given back.

"Junior," she called him as she moved a little, her hands reaching her spatial bracelet. In a swift motion, she retrieved a small herb carefully stored within.

"This is for you." She presented him with the box, an incredibly expensive box that could easily be noticed just by looking at it.

"What is this?" Astron asked, but he also inwardly realized that the thing in front of him was far from normal.

"It is my gift to you."

"Your gift?"

"Yes. For everything that you have done for me and everything that you are still doing."

"You didn't need-"

"No." She knew he was about to downgrade what he did, but she didn't want him to do that. She knew his suspecting nature, as he also tended not to take her first investment.

"This is something you deserve. If I am the only one receiving it, I hate it." She denied his refusal adamantly and didn't let him do as he pleased.

Astron stopped for a second, looking at the things in his hand and Maya, who was looking at his eyes.

"Sigh....." And released a hearty sigh. "I understand."

Accepting her gift, he opened the box. And immediately, immense amounts of energy were released into the room.

"What?" Even Astron was taken aback by the energy the herb contained, and Maya couldn't help but smirk.

Maya couldn't help but smirk at Astron's surprised reaction to the released energy.

"You seem surprised, Junior. Don't tell me you don't know what it is?" she teased, enjoying the moment.

Astron, despite the unexpected surge of energy, composed himself immediately. "This is Starbloom Essence, isn't it? It's a special herb known for enhancing one's mana absorption and accelerating the growth rate of your body. It strengthens you physically and increases your talent limit."

Maya raised an eyebrow, impressed. "Sharp as always. Yes, it's Starbloom Essence. It is a rare find, and its effects are quite potent. Absorb it during your meditation or before training, and you'll experience a noticeable difference. Consider it a token of my gratitude for all you've done. Take care of yourself, Junior."

Astron examined the Starbloom Essence in his hands, a mix of gratitude and hesitation in his eyes. "This is too expensive for me to consume. Are you sure about this?"

Maya chuckled, shaking her head. "Don't worry about the cost. Consider it a worthy exchange for what you've done for me. Besides, your strength is an investment for both of us."

He raised an eyebrow, a hint of curiosity in his gaze. "An investment?"

Maya blushed slightly, realizing that she had voiced her thoughts rather than kept them to herself.

Then, with her words, a soft murmur like a mosquito's whisper. "You need to get stronger in the future, for me... so that I can... drink more of your blood." She cleared her throat, regaining composure. "It's for the best, trust me."

Astron understood that it would be rude if he continuously refused her favor. "Alright, if you say so. I'll make good use of it."

Maya smiled in return, a warmth in her eyes that spoke volumes. "Take care of yourself, Junior."

With that, the small barrier dissipated, and they found themselves back in the sparring field. The moment felt oddly serene, a quiet understanding lingering between them. Maya nodded, signaling the end of their private conversation. "Thank you," Astron said, holding the box of Starbloom Essence in his hand.

"No need to thank me," Maya replied, her crimson eyes reflecting a mixture of emotions. "You are sowing what you reap?"

"Senior.....You don't use that idiom for positive things."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"My bad then....."

Just like that, the two left the training room, each going their own way.....