

H. Academy 331

Chapter 331 77.8 - Mine

As Carl fought against the skeletons, his hammer smashing through their bones with relentless force, he gradually culled their numbers, reducing their ranks by half. The ground trembled as his attacks reverberated through the cavern, the echoes mingling with the eerie laughter that still echoed in the darkness.

—SMASH!

As the hammer smashed the ground while Carl was fending off the monsters, the earth rumbled for a split second.

CRACK!

The ground moved, creating a weird circular formation that was centered around Carl.

"Stumble."

Carl's eyes shone brown for a second as he mumbled, activating a part of his trait mixed with the magic of 2nd order.

「Unraveling Earth」

But then, just as the skeletons were preparing to launch another attack, the circular formation he had laid on the ground suddenly exploded.

It was as if the skeletons had unknowingly triggered a trap, each step setting off a hidden mine of stone.

BOOM!

The explosion rippled through the cavern, causing the skeletons to stumble and collapse to the ground, their undead forms crumbling into pieces.

Carl stood amidst the chaos as he watched the scene unfold before him. This was already a usual occurrence on the battlefield, both against monsters and against other species on the border.

Even though he didn't participate in the deadliest battles, the ones he participated in had shown more deaths than any average student of the academy would see.

TOK! TOK! TOK!

But, just as he was reminiscing these feelings, he suddenly felt a strange wind passing through him.

Following that, the remaining skeletons fell to the ground, crumbling as if the force that was supporting them no longer existed.

"So, he finished."

There, he understood the reason for why. After all, the reason why these skeletons moved was not natural but because of the evil spirit.

—SCREECH!

Then, a loud screech echoed from the tunnel Astron entered. However, its screams disappeared as it appeared. In a matter of seconds, the screams were finished.

Carl had already trusted Astron in this matter, letting him enter. It was both to measure his overall capabilities and evaluate him as well as to see if he was trustworthy or not.

I wanted to see if he was someone who could put his back and lean on or not, and from the looks of it, things seemed to be right for the time being.

CRACK! RUMBLE!

Just at that moment, he sensed the presence of the two people approaching from above!

The ceiling was shaking as well, and with his Earthen affinity and trait, he was able to sense the source. Closing his eyes, he focused on his trait and the waves that were used to receive the information. A picture started forming in his mind.

Two silhouettes appeared.

One appeared to be a young man, his silhouette outlined against the dim light filtering through the cavern. Though Carl couldn't discern colors, he could sense the determined energy emanating from the figure in the front. The other person was a young girl positioned slightly behind the man.

In the mental image, the young man led the way with a swirling force in front of him, seemingly clearing a path through the earth. A barrier of repulsive force surrounded them, deflecting any rocks or debris that might have obstructed their progress. Within moments, they would breach the cavern from above.

Recognizing the newcomers, Carl remained composed, knowing there was no need to take a defensive stance. He awaited their arrival, ready to greet them as they descended into the cavern.

CRACK!

Following that, after around a minute, the cavern cracked, and the two people made their appearance.

SWOOSH!

But since they appeared from the ceiling, the two people didn't immediately connect to the world.

The young man, with his chestnut fluttering, fell, but as if a force underneath him was repulsing, he silently landed on the ground without any sort of inconvenience.

As for the girl, she needed to adjust her position and then activate a special magical spell.

「Air Current」

The wind blew underneath her body, and as if she had been blessed by it, she slowly landed.

"Tch."

Yet, she couldn't help but click her tongue, her amber eyes looking at the guy before her with annoyance.

"This is not how you treat a lady." She mumbled. Yet, she didn't hide her words, neither did her voice as if to say that she didn't care if he heard it or not.

The young man before her didn't even respond and looked at Carl, who was sitting there with his hammer in his hand.

"Victor."

Carl mumbled his name, looking at the incredibly handsome young man. Yet, no matter how handsome he was, the situation right now differed from normal, making him appear with a rather cold aura.

Without answering, Victor first looked around the place, his eyes observing everything coldly. No matter what, he was a Blackthorn and the heir of the family that owned this mine.

Thus, this situation was under both his responsibility and authority. That was what he thought, at least.

"What happened here?"

Victor coldly asked, locking his eyes with Carl.

Carl met Victor's cold gaze with an unwavering expression, his own demeanor calm but firm. He didn't respond immediately to Victor's question, taking a moment to process the young man's overbearing attitude.

The lack of acknowledgment upon arrival and the dismissive demeanor irked Carl, especially considering his own standing as a member of the Braveheart family. It was unacceptable for Victor to treat him with such disrespect.

However, Victor didn't seem to have any intention of backing down either. Why would he? In the place of Blackthorn, he had the authority, and he was also the strongest youngster of this generation. Therefore, there was no need for him to look up to others. Victor

"I asked a question."

Victor asked once again, this time leaking a bit of his intent.

"!"

Carl was alarmed, not expecting such a reaction. From his past experiences and the times he met with Victor, this guy was someone who was a lot more amicable and understanding. He was cold, but he at least shared the basic courtesy.

But now, it looked different.

'He changed.'

Now, the Victor before him was not the same. But that didn't matter. Slowly leaking his own intent at the same time, he faced Victor's, matching it.

Victor's intent and Carl's clashed as the two looked into each other's eyes.

Amidst the tense standoff between Carl and Victor, Irina remained largely disinterested in their power plays. This wasn't her first encounter with displays of authority and dominance, especially within the confines of the academy and its surrounding territories. Instead, her attention wandered elsewhere, her senses attuned to the subtle shifts in the environment.

Suddenly, a familiar presence caught her attention, drawing her focus to one of the nearby tunnels. Concentrating her senses, Irina honed in on the source of familiarity, her curiosity piqued.

As she observed, Astron emerged from the tunnel with a leisurely pace, his movements calm and deliberate. In his hand, he held something, though, from her vantage point, Irina couldn't discern

what it was. Nevertheless, she watched intently as Astron approached, his gaze scanning the cavern until it locked onto hers.

At that moment, a chill ran down Irina's spine as she felt the weight of Astron's stare. It was as if he had sensed her prying eyes and directed his attention squarely upon her.

'He probably did....But why should I feel tense? So, what if I am looking at him?'

Feeling like he didn't need to feel this tense, Irina shrugged. She knew he would be able to see her anyway. She even had the urge to stick out her tongue at him to mock him, but she thought that would be way too childish.

Unnerved but determined not to show any sign of weakness, Irina met Astron's stare head-on, her expression cool and composed.

On the other side, sensing the impasse between them, Victor eventually retracted his gaze, realizing that his attempts to assert dominance over Carl were futile. Despite his position as a member of the Blackthorn family and his formidable combat abilities, he understood that Carl was not one to be easily intimidated.

For a brief moment, Victor contemplated the idea of engaging in a direct confrontation with Carl. However, he quickly dismissed the thought, recognizing the futility of such a clash.

Carl was like a mountain, steadfast and unyielding, and any attempt to overpower him would likely result in a prolonged struggle.

In terms of pure combat prowess and battlefield experience, Victor knew that Carl ranked among the top fighters, perhaps even within the top three, despite his occasional absence from academic pursuits due to military engagements.

His reputation as a skilled and formidable warrior preceded him, and Victor understood the risks of engaging in a physical confrontation. Just because he wanted to reign over him didn't mean he was stupid enough to make an enemy of Carl.

With a subtle shift in his demeanor, Victor recalibrated his approach, opting for a more diplomatic stance. Though he still harbored a sense of frustration at Carl's defiance, he recognized the importance of maintaining a semblance of composure in the face of adversity.

As the tension between them eased slightly, Victor redirected his focus to the broader situation at hand, acknowledging that their immediate priority was to address the disturbances within the mine.

"Carl."

With a curt nod, he gestured for Carl to proceed with his explanation, signaling his willingness to cooperate, albeit begrudgingly.

And, since now Carl was acknowledged, just like in a military, he explained.

"After falling down, we encountered the suspected culprit, an entity resembling an evil spirit. It led us to this place," Carl stated evenly, his voice unwavering despite the lingering tension in the air.

Victor's interest was piqued. "Who is 'we'?" he inquired, his gaze scanning the cavern for any sign of additional presence.

As he looked, he noticed a figure approaching, its presence faint and almost imperceptible. With his superhuman vision, Victor discerned that it was a young man with purple eyes and black hair clutching something in his hand.

!"

A sense of urgency gripped Victor as he immediately dashed towards the approaching figure, appearing before him in an instant, his demeanor intense and cold.

"Where did you find this?"

He asked with his hand on the young man's neck.

Chapter 332 77.9 - Mine

"Where did you find this?"

The chilly and cold voice echoed in the underground cavern as Victor held Astron from his neck.

The aura surrounding Victor was overwhelming as it overlapped Astron's body. His eyes were fierce as the mana around him surged.

"Kurghk-!"

Astron wasn't able to reply, let alone react. In a matter of a second, Victor appeared right before him with an insane speed. Even if he had activated his skills, he wouldn't be able to evade the attack.

Victor's basic speed was just that overwhelming. Even Carl was seemingly taken aback by that, as he noticed that Victor wasn't even going all out when they were clashing their auras. That was within his expectations, but what he didn't expect was him suddenly attacking Astron like that.

"Where did you find this?" Victor's voice, icy and sharp, reverberated through the cavern once again, heightening the tension.

His grip tightened around Astron's neck, lifting him from the ground. The overwhelming aura emanating from Victor enshrouded Astron, rendering him unable to speak or react.

Astron's usual calm demeanor faced the storm of Victor's mana, his eyes empty yet unwavering, staring back into the depths of Victor's fierce gaze.

"Answer me," Victor demanded, his voice echoing as he peered deeply into Astron's eyes, searching for a flicker of fear or hesitation.

But Astron remained impassive, his body not betraying any signs of distress or desperation, an unsettling calmness in the face of Victor's escalating threats.

Victor, not receiving the reaction he anticipated, increased the intensity of his grip and created a force field around Astron's right arm, bending it to the breaking point. The atmosphere thickened with Victor's frustration and the growing danger enveloping Astron.

The thing that Astron held was something this much of an importance to him.

Suddenly, Victor's senses were engulfed by an enormous surge of mana, far surpassing the normal limits, wrapping around him in a tight cocoon.

SWIRL!

Sensing an imminent threat, he released Astron, propelling him aside as he narrowly dodged a towering pillar of fire that erupted from the ground where he stood moments before.

As Victor regained his footing, his gaze shifted towards the source of the attack, meeting two amber eyes filled with unmistakable anger and intent. Irina stood there, her posture radiating a powerful aura, her voice cutting through the tension, "Get your hands off him."

"Cough.....Cough....."

And at the time that Irina had seized, Carl had already appeared before Astron, who was regaining his breath and crossing the path between him and Victor.

It was an attempt to protect him. After all, what Victor was doing right now was attacking an innocent person, and Carl upheld the principles of Noblesse as well as heroism.

He was not someone to ignore other people's misfortune.

"What is the meaning of this?" Carl asked, probing at Victor.

"....." Victor didn't answer but only kept looking at the thing in Astron's hand. "Where did you find it?"

Astron, regaining his composure amid the volatile atmosphere, lifted his head to lock eyes with Victor. His gaze was devoid of fear or emotion, betraying none of the turmoil that had just transpired.

With a deliberate motion, he raised his hand, revealing the object that had precipitated the confrontation—a small, pitch-black sphere. The sphere itself seemed to absorb the light around it, making it a focal point of darkness in the dimly lit cavern.

Atop the sphere, a peculiar symbol was etched, drawing immediate attention. It depicted a hand appearing to rise from the ground, its form partially obscured by white bandages that seemed to writhe around it. Above this hand, a purple light shimmered, casting an eerie glow that seemed almost alive. Within this glow, a small tree was visible, its branches stretching out as if reaching for something unseen.

Carl, observing Victor, followed his gaze, and there he felt a chill as he noticed the object in Astron's hand. There was something deeply unsettling about it, something that made his instincts scream that this was far from ordinary. His gaze shifted between the sphere and Victor, trying to gauge the significance of the moment.

Astron, breaking the silence, addressed Victor directly, "I obtained this after dealing with the evil spirit." His voice was steady, carrying a hint of inquiry, "Do you know something about this?"

The question hung in the air.

"It is none of your concern, neither something you are capable of dealing with." Victor's voice echoed coldly in the cavern.

"Is that so?" Astron mumbled. And then, he suddenly threw the seemingly dark sphere.

Victor's eyes widened as he saw the sphere flying.

"This Lunatic!"

THUD!

In an instant, he rushed and grabbed the sphere, flying. And then he looked at Astron, his eyes filled with intent once again.

Yet he saw no remorse. Astron also looked into his eyes and opened his mouth.

"This is your payback for what you did." He hinted at his neck, implying that he hadn't forgotten what Victor had done.

Looking at the interaction between the two, Irina couldn't help but somehow release a sigh. She knew she had reacted a bit harshly, as she attacked Victor Blackthorn, but this guy was more reckless!

'Well, this is just like him.'

Knowing that this was how he treated her at the start, she knew Astron wasn't someone who feared people with high standing.

"You..." Victor noticed that Astron didn't hold any fear towards him, seemingly thinking that they were equal. "Where does your confidence stem from?" He asked. He was genuinely curious about what ants like this guy thought.

In the future, it would be very beneficial for him to know how these ants thought about managing his subordinates and the family.

"Confidence?" Astron returned with another question.

"I can kill you right here, right now," Victor said, releasing a bit of his aura. "What makes you think that you can leave after offending me."

"...." At first, Astron didn't answer, but then he shook his head. "If you want to kill me, you are welcome to try. Regardless of the reason, if you have the strength, you can do the act. I have no authority over your actions. If you kill me, it is not because I did something to offend you but because you decided to do so. I have no say in this matter."

Victor narrowed his eyes. This guy's way of thinking was sophisticated. It may be correct, but he didn't believe so. Even if he didn't have control over his actions, Astron could easily reduce the risk of such an outcome by emotionally influencing him.

'Hmm?'

Then, coming to such a conclusion, Victor noticed something. While thinking about this, he had already neglected the idea of dealing with Astron. It was as if what he thought was also thought by Astron.

Trapped in this web of thoughts, Victor decided to let this matter go. He acknowledged that he had been acting rashly in recent times, as this was the result of the things he had been dealing with over the past months after his brother died and he became the next possible heir.

Astron, with a deliberate stride, approached the tunnel from which Victor and Irina had emerged. His eyes narrowed as he measured the distance, his focus unwavering. With a precise movement, he extended his hand and released a shot of mana, testing or signaling something known only to him.

Irina, observing Astron's actions, couldn't help but approach him. Her presence, usually so full of poise and confidence, seemed slightly softened in this moment. "Are you okay?" she asked, her gaze drifting to his arm, which hung at an awkward, perhaps painful, angle.

"It's nothing," Astron assured, his voice carrying a nonchalant tone. "I've already taken a potion." His demeanor suggested a mix of annoyance and dismissiveness towards his own injury, a clear indication of his reluctance to show any signs of weakness.

Knowing that this was his usual way of doing it, Irina didn't mind. Somehow, she compared this attitude towards Victor and his way of speaking, and Irina felt this was a lot better.

She, standing beside him, felt an unexpected wave of relief wash over her. After spending an extended period navigating the tunnels with Victor, Astron's familiar presence brought her a sense of comfort she hadn't realized she was missing.

However, her instincts told her not to take his word at face value. "Show me," she demanded. She needed to see for herself that he was truly alright, unwilling to simply accept his assurance.

Astron, meeting her gaze, offered no such satisfaction. "No," he replied flatly, a clear refusal to comply with her request. His expression remained unreadable, giving nothing away.

Irina clicked her tongue in frustration, not surprised by his response but disappointed nonetheless. She had expected as much, knowing Astron, in general, didn't like to comply with any type of request concerning him.

"Then, what happened here?"

She asked, changing the question. Astron looked at his healing arm and then opened his mouth. Since Irina had saved him just now, he knew it was better for him to pay that favor back.

If Irina hadn't attacked, things would get tricky. Of course, he showed himself knowing that, but then again, he disliked owing things.

"I dealt with the evil spirit."

"I know this much. I am asking for the details." Irina said with an annoyed face.

"It will take a bit long. Will you be able to listen?"

"Heh.....Do you think I can't? I am really patient, you know."

".....You are patient? This joke is not funny."

THUD!

Seeing Astron's nonchalant demeanor and his dismissive remark about her patience, Irina couldn't help but let out a small huff of annoyance. Her response was swift; she threw a light punch at Astron's arm, a physical manifestation of her protest. "I can listen until the authorities arrive, thank you very much," she retorted, her tone a mix of irritation and challenge.

Astron, feeling the impact, looked at her and then nodded, conceding to her point. "That would be okay. The authorities will take at least twenty minutes to get here," he admitted, acknowledging her willingness to listen and also revealing a bit about his awareness of their situation.

"Did you measure how deep we are?" Irina asked, her curiosity piqued by his assessment of the time it would take for the authorities to arrive.

Astron simply nodded in response, confirming her suspicion.

"Impressive," she conceded with a hint of admiration. Then, without further comment, she walked over to one of the large pillars that supported the cavernous space. She sat down in front of it, leaning her back against the cold stone, signaling her readiness to listen to his story.

Astron followed her steps and sat right beside her. On the way, he checked Victor's reaction and saw that he was immersed in the orb.

'Let's see what Blackthorn's can do with this....'

He thought inwardly.

'After all, I had already recorded the structure in my head.'

Chapter 333 77.10 - Mine [Interlude]

In the mine, two pairs of arms rose and went down constantly. Each pair of hands controls an amount of mana to mine the stones.

Lilia, who had encountered Lucas' group, was now in the same place as him, mining. This place was where some high-quality stones were gathered. Thus, only the strongest of the group could mine them.

Lilia and Lucas came to a tacit agreement, and they mined it together. The one who mined more would get more; it was akin to a competition.

"You seem to have grasped how to do it now," Lilia spoke while focusing on mining.

"....." Lucas didn't say anything.

Because Lilia was better at controlling her mana, she had a head start, making her a lot faster compared to Lucas.

Though Lucas was a high-ranking student, he was good at using swords more. That was the reason for his initial stumble. But then, he was smart, and he got his experiences from a parallel world.

It was strange, but because he had also 'experienced' another timeline, he somehow inherited the skills and abilities that were integrated into his very being at some point. And now, he was able to go on par with Lilia because of that.

As they continued, Lilia threw a casual question over her shoulder, "What happened to you and Ethan? I haven't seen you guys together recently. Did something happen?"

Lucas paused for a moment before responding, "I've been busy with something, and Ethan has been busy as well. We just didn't have time." His answer was vague, intentionally skirting around.

'Hmm....'

Lilia hummed thoughtfully, glancing over at Lucas with a scrutinizing eye. "Ethan's improvement was quite fast. It would be better for us to make him adapt to his newfound strength as much as we can."

Hearing this, Lucas' body stiffened a little. It was a small reaction, something that he immediately took control of.

Lilia was known for her perceptiveness, and her ability to read between the lines often led her to insights that others missed; thus, he needed to be careful.

Lilia, still focused on the vein of stone before her, didn't miss the slight change in Lucas's posture. Her next words, carefully chosen, were meant to probe further, perhaps to understand more or to push Lucas in a way only she knew how.

"It's impressive, really. Ethan's natural talent and the speed at which he's adapting remind me a lot of Julia. They both have this... innate ability to just understand and connect with mana on a level that few can match." Lilia paused, her tool momentarily stilling against the stone. "It's a rare gift to see such rapid progression. Not everyone has that kind of talent. Some people are bound to illuminate the world, while others are bound to stay underneath their shadow, I suppose."

The word "shadow" struck Lucas like a physical blow, reigniting the flames of an inferiority complex he had long battled with. In his mind, the word echoed, morphing into a cacophony of doubts and self-criticism.

To Lucas, "shadow" was a chasm that separated him from Ethan and Julia, as he was someone who was never able to pass through that "shadow."

Lucas forced himself to keep mining, though his movements became slightly more mechanical.

He was well aware of his own strengths, but Lilia's words, especially her comparison to Julia, brought forth the insecurities he had worked hard to keep at bay.

Ethan and Julia, both blessed with what seemed like effortless mastery and understanding of mana, represented everything Lucas knew he was not.

Attempting to mask his internal turmoil, Lucas replied, his voice steady but colder than he intended, "Yes, talent is a gift. It is undoubtedly true that Ethan is an abnormal one."

"That is right." Lilia nodded and turned. On her side, all of the high-ranked stones were mined, showing her insane talent.

"Though, he will never surpass me." And with a confident grin, he went past Lucas while slightly patting his shoulder. As she passed through, she threw a quick look at the high-ranking mana stones on Lucas' side and then extended a trail of mana there.

SWOOSH!

And then, with a smooth move, she grabbed the Magic stone, putting it into her loot. It was an act akin to show how easy this was for her to do.

As Lilia departed with a confident stride, Lucas found himself slightly trembling, her figure etching a deep imprint in his mind.

The curl of her mouth, meant as a grin, morphed into something far more sinister in Lucas's perception—an insult, a degradation of his very being.

The moment Lilia's mana swept through the space, effortlessly claiming what he had worked hard to uncover, Lucas felt a coldness seeping into his very bones. It wasn't just the loss of the stone that stung; it was the ease and confidence with which Lilia operated, her abilities overshadowing his.

To Lucas, her actions spoke louder than any words could; they whispered of a superiority he feared he could never challenge despite his every effort.

"...."

In the darkness, Lucas' blue eyes were locked on the departing figure of Lilia, yet subtle darkness spread in the background.

As the group of three, including Ethan, Julia, and Emily, traversed through the underground caverns, they stumbled upon a formation of mid-rank mana stones shimmering in the dim light.

Excited at the discovery, they wasted no time in setting up their mining equipment and getting to work.

However, as they mined away, the monotony of the task began to weigh on them. Julia, feeling particularly restless, threw herself to the ground with an exasperated sigh. "Ugh, this is so boring! We've been at this for over an hour already."

Ethan, ever the pragmatist, chimed in with a practical suggestion. "Well, we don't have anything better to do right now. We might as well use this time to improve our grades for the assignment until a rescue team comes."

But Julia, feeling mischievous, saw an opportunity for some playful teasing. With a smirk on her face, she seized Ethan from top to bottom and suddenly leaped up, wrapping him in a headlock. "Or," she teased, tightening her grip playfully, "I could just do this until the rescue team arrives."

"You! Release me!" Ethan shouted, trying to escape Julia's grip. Yet, as if he was against a boulder, he wasn't able to move at all.

"Hehehe.... What can you do if I don't?" Julia smiled sheepishly, feeling the power as she pressed Ethan into her body.

"Mmmf...." Ethan growled, his mouth releasing a muffled sound, yet he felt something over his head touching.

'What is this? It feels soft?'

As he looked around, he saw a white peak covering his vision as well as a feminine scent. He now noticed where he was, as his ears, as well as his face, turned crimson with a blush.

"You can't answer, huh?" She said, keeping him locked. Somehow, his wavy hair looked orderly, and she wanted to mess with it.

As Julia playfully ruffled Ethan's blue hair, she felt a sudden shift in the atmosphere. Sensing someone's gaze, she turned to see Emily staring at them, her expression strangely stiff.

Caught off guard by Emily's unexpected gaze, Julia quickly released Ethan from the headlock, her cheeks flushing a little with embarrassment. "Cough," she coughed, trying to act nonchalant despite the awkward situation.

But Emily's response was not what Julia had expected. Instead of returning the greeting with her usual warmth, Emily simply nodded curtly, her expression remaining impassive, her eyes somehow looking cold.

And, somewhere in Julia, an intuition made her flinch against Emily's gaze, making them feel uncomfortable.

Yet, Julia wasn't someone to back down, as she just smiled and faced Emily's gaze head-on.

"We are sorry for the inconvenience," announced one of the mine managers, addressing the group of students who had gathered at the main entrance of the Mana Stone Mine.

The students, buzzing with the excitement of having completed their unique assignment, quieted down to listen to the manager's solemn tone.

"There was an unexpected incident today. Due to an earthen spirit's influence, a small quake struck the western wing of the mine. This resulted in some of the tunnels collapsing," he explained, his voice steady but filled with a hint of regret. "Thankfully, the situation has been resolved, and no one was harmed. However, we understand that some of you have lost progress in your work due to this incident."

A murmur of concern spread among the students, some exchanging worried glances about how this unforeseen event might affect their grades. Before the unrest could grow, Eleanor stepped forward, her presence commanding silence.

"I want to assure everyone that those affected by today's incident will be compensated," Eleanor declared, her voice firm, reassuring the students of the fairness of their evaluation. "We will take into account the work you have already submitted, and adjustments will be made to ensure that no one is unfairly penalized for the situation that was beyond anyone's control."

The students visibly relaxed, nodding in understanding and gratitude for the fair resolution proposed by their instructor.

"Your safety and education are our top priorities. We appreciate your understanding and cooperation," Eleanor added, her gaze sweeping over the students to ensure her message was received. With a final nod of satisfaction at their calm demeanor, she gestured towards the buses. "Now, we are to head back. The report submission deadline is today at midnight; keep that in mind."

With those words, she had walked to leave the place.

Just as Eleanor was about to leave, her gaze swept over the crowd of students one last time. Among them, standing at the back of the group, was a particular student who seemed to catch her attention.

"Astron Natusalune."

There was something about this student that sparked a flicker of recognition in Eleanor's mind.

Despite being an incredibly annoying person, this student had always found himself at the center of various incidents and cases.

At first, her evaluation of this student was really low. Specifically, he was a student who didn't pay attention to classes and had an arrogant demeanor.

His grades were low as well, thus making him not have a bit of a likable trait.

However, this was changing now. Though his demeanor didn't change, this student was involved with way too many cases.

'First mid-terms and him being targeted by traitors, then Student Sylvie's abduction attempt. Following that, Phantom's Land and now this case of remnant-spirit. He was at the center of all these events.'

As his gaze seized him from top to bottom, Eleanor somehow felt like this whole ordeal was not a coincidence.

'In the place where strong fates gather, a place filled with wisdom....'

'Don't tell me....'

Somehow, something inside her told her that she needed to reevaluate her decisions.

Chapter 334 78.1 - Crossing Table

In the office adorned by many expensive ornaments, four people could be seen talking. Their expressions didn't reveal much, but from their serious looks, it was evident that the discussion was something that they hadn't much expected.

"This sphere....It is related to "them," isn't it?"

The man sitting on the right side opened his mouth first. On his clothes, an indicator of his name could be seen.

It read – Director Noah Blackthorn.

He was a direct descendant of the Blackthorns, being able to carry the surname in his nameplate. His standing in the family didn't seem to be something low in any case.

His clothes were made of the most expensive fabric. He looked handsome with his lean body as well as his chestnut hair. Yet his green eyes hold a certain coldness underneath, showing that he wasn't someone who should only be judged by his good looks.

"That is what we suspect."

Following that, the woman in front of him answered his question. She had a rather refined and slender figure. Her body looked to be taken care of, as she seemed to know her strengths from the way she carried herself.

On her nameplate, it read – Assistant Director Sonia Hall.

She wasn't from the direct line of the family, yet she was able to attend this meeting and get the highest rank one could attain without being a direct descendant.

It was because of her own merits as well as talents that brought her here.

Noah Blackthorn leaned forward, his eyes fixed on the small, pitch-black sphere that lay on the table between them. Its presence seemed to weigh heavily on the atmosphere of the room, casting a shadow over their discussion.

"It's unnerving to think that this sphere could be linked to 'them,'" Director Blackthorn remarked, his voice tinged with concern. "The Order of Euthanasia is not to be trifled with. Our ancestor's pact with them... it's shrouded in mystery, but we cannot ignore its significance."

Assistant Director Hall nodded solemnly, her gaze also locked onto the sphere. "Indeed. The symbols etched upon it, the aura it emits... everything about this artifact suggests a connection to the other world, to the Order. We must tread carefully."

And then, they had turned their attention to the young man who hadn't spoken. After throwing a quick look at him, Noah continued his words.

"From what we can see, this artifact was found in the mines. According to the analysis, it can be observed that this sphere has the ability to corrupt souls. Especially for the non-awakened, being subjected to its aura is akin to losing their rationality. They will seek the artifact, and to possess it, they will do everything."

Sonia looked at the sphere, her eyes probing deep into it. Even though she could be regarded as one of the most informed people in terms of artifacts, even she wasn't able to completely analyze its properties.

The artifact was unfathomable, making it almost impossible to see what lay beyond.

"Its characteristics match the description of the student who had hunted the evil spirit. According to his words, the evil spirit was formed because of this artifact. The miners massacred each other, and the energy of death, coupled with the concentrated mana of magic stones, resulted in a mutation."

She finished her words.

'However, there is a certain part that is not clear. How did this evil spirit lay under the ground all this time, and yet it hadn't attacked the mines before? It wasn't until the students came that it attacked. Was it waiting for something? Maybe someone triggered?'

This part wasn't clear, as Sonia couldn't completely grasp the reason, yet he didn't speak further, looking at other members' suggestions.

As the discussion continued, the figure at the head of the table, the current head of the Blackthorn family, remained silent, his cold eyes piercing through the object in front of him. Finally, he spoke, his voice carrying the weight of authority and experience.

"The reason for the mine in the Northeast Arcadia State was because my grandfather decided to proceed without consulting his advisors," he began, his tone grave. "Many thought his decision was reckless, a waste of resources. Yet, against all odds, he achieved unprecedented success with that mine."

He paused, his gaze never leaving the sphere. "However, his success was short-lived. Not long after, he lost his life under mysterious circumstances."

There was a solemn silence in the room as everyone absorbed the gravity of his words.

"It seems that this artifact's origins are not something that can be evaluated rashly," the head of the Blackthorn family continued. "Regardless of the past, you shall study this artifact under Area-04."

He looked into Sonia as he signaled. "However, the information shall be confidential. Any test subjects used shall be dealt with. Is that clear?"

"Clear."

"Then, this meeting shall be over."

After the meeting concluded, Sonia rose from her seat and left the room, her mind already buzzing with plans for studying the artifact under the strict confidentiality of Area-04. Noah Blackthorn exchanged a glance with his father, the head of the Blackthorn family, before rising from his seat as well.

"Father," Noah began, addressing the head of the family with respect.

The head of the family nodded, dismissing his son with a wave of his hand. "You may go, Noah."

Noah nodded and left the room, leaving only his father and the young man, Victor, alone together.

The head of the family regarded Victor with a piercing gaze, his expression unreadable. "What do you make of this matter, Victor?" he asked, his voice low and serious.

Victor shifted uncomfortably under the intense scrutiny of the head of the family. From the moment his brother got kidnapped, he hadn't seen his father much, only from time to time.

"...I suspect that this artifact is deliberately arranged by the Order, and great-father had been cued."

"Interesting."

Victor continued to look at the sphere as if he could feel something coming out of it. Something was calling him; however, Victor didn't know if this was something special to him or not.

He didn't want to risk it, knowing his father's way of thinking. If he were to be deemed a danger to his family, he would be eliminated.

This feeling had been there for a long time, and he also suspected that this was the reason why he acted that rashly in the mine at that time.

The head of the family regarded Victor with a thoughtful expression, weighing his words carefully. "Your suspicion is not unfounded," he replied, his tone grave. "The Order of Euthanasia has always been a shadowy presence, manipulating events from the shadows. It wouldn't be surprising if they were behind the appearance of this artifact."

Victor nodded.

"Be cautious, Victor," the head of the family cautioned, his gaze penetrating. "Trust nothing, even yourself."

"I understand, Father," Victor replied, his voice steady despite the unease churning in his gut.

With a final nod, the head of the family dismissed Victor, signaling the end of their conversation. Victor turned to leave, his mind swirling with thoughts and suspicions.

After a comprehensive lecture on the intricacies of magical artifacts and their significance in terms of combat, Professor Eleanor, homeroom teacher, placed her notes aside.

The room, filled with students of varying degrees of attentiveness, fell into a hushed anticipation as they saw her gesture. After all, they had been with this professor for the whole semester, and they now had gotten used to the way she dealt with the things.

Clearing her throat, Professor Eleanor addressed the class with her usual poised demeanor.

"Before we conclude today's session, I have an important announcement regarding your last assignment. The grades are out."

She paused for a moment, letting the weight of her words sink in. The students exchanged anxious glances, the air thick with anticipation and a hint of nervousness. Eleanor, well aware of the tension her words had conjured, continued.

"I must say, the overall performance was commendable. However, as always, there's room for improvement for some. I encourage everyone to review the feedback provided carefully. Use it as a stepping stone to refine your understanding and application of the concepts we've discussed."

She then sent the grades to the students via smartwatches, ensuring each student could see their performance.

The classroom buzzed with a mix of reactions—some students nodded in satisfaction, others whispered in disappointment, and a few vowed silently to themselves to do better next time.

"If you have any objection to your grades, you shall find me in my office to check your papers."

With those words, Eleanor left the classroom without saying anything else.

Taylor's gaze lingered on her smartwatch, her eyes narrowing at the 8.7/10 score displayed. It was a good grade by most standards but not by hers. She expected perfection, or at least something close to it, especially in a team effort where she was the de facto leader.

Her eyes flicked to Asher, a mix of annoyance and accusation hidden in her glance. 'This bastard's report was lacking. It dragged my score down,' she thought bitterly, her disdain for mediocrity bubbling up inside her.

Yet, as her gaze shifted away from Asher, it landed on Astron—

the so-called gloomy bastard of their class. He always seemed detached, indifferent to the social hierarchies and dramas that unfolded around him. She had already marked him thanks to his way of behaving.

'Once you are marked, you are finished.' Taylor expected him to have fared poorly, eager to see his dismay, to witness a crack in his stoic facade.

Driven by a mischievous impulse, she decided to take a peek at his score. Muttering under her breath, she conjured a specialized spell—a trick she had mastered for moments just like this. Her vision subtly shifted, granting her a bird's-eye view of Astron's smartwatch.

To her utter shock and disbelief, the display read 11/10.

Her heart skipped a beat, and her eyes widened in an uncharacteristic display of emotion. 'How? How is that even possible?' she thought, her mind racing. Anger and confusion swirled within her, a tumultuous storm that clouded her judgment.

Taylor couldn't fathom how Astron, of all people, could achieve such a score, surpassing not only her but the constraints of the grading system itself.

'Did something happen? Did he bribe someone? No, that can't be the case. The academy can't make such a blatant mistake. Then, did he achieve something?'

As Taylor asked herself, she remembered the words spoken by the managers.

'The evil spirit...If he played a part in dealing with them, it makes sense that the academy rewards him with extra points.'

She then realized the reason why he got such a high grade. Yet, of course, it didn't mean she accepted it. No, it was rather the opposite. She hated the fact that she somehow played a part in this.

'Tch.' It was highly likely that because they had buried him there, he was able to encounter the evil spirit. He had been just lucky.

However, for a person like Taylor, whether he deserved his grade or not didn't matter. She squinted her eyes and plotted her next move.

Chapter 335 78.2 - Crossing Table

Mind and Psyche.

Certainly an interesting concept. Something that every person needs to care about. Whether it is related to the desire for knowledge or not,

'One needs to take care of one's own mind first so that one can live clearly in this world.'

'Certainly an interesting phrase. The author is quite intelligent in this aspect.'

Looking at the book and reading its context, that was what I thought. As a person born from a supernatural merging, I knew from the start that my state was not normal.

My psyche and the way I think is twisted. There are two sides that are extreme. One that only operates like a robot devoid of any emotion and the other whose sole fuel is emotions.

Thus, I am still in the process of learning. This was the assessment that I gave to myself.

While dealing with the Mind and Psychic Magic, one needs to be very well aware of one's own mental state. The reason for that was that the more one dove into this magic, the more they would get further away from themselves. In essence, mind magic is about reading other people's minds, memories, and characters.

But, the more you read other people, the more you need to know yourself, or else you will lose your identity. Losing one's identity often results in many mental health problems.

In any case, this assistant, Professor Mitchell Brady, seems to be a very good author in Psychic Mage. The fact that his theory about manipulating the Cognitive Process alone is worth taking note of.

And now that I am in chapter 2, I can easily say that I am allowed to use stage-1 Psychic Magic to some extent without messing up.

For instance, this one is one of those. I can read the memories of other people by connecting their Collective Subconscious to mine. Of course, it is on the Surface level because those memories are not integrated deep into the subconscious, making them easily accessible.

To read deeper memories, I need to have a more profound understanding of Psyche, which is making it a lot harder for me now.

DING!

However, my concentration was abruptly interrupted by the ringing of my smartwatch. With a slight frown, I glanced at the device, noting the notification from the app I had developed to connect with the other smartwatch.

'Hmm? A notification came up from Fred's smartwatch?'

Curious about the reason for the notification, I closed the book and stood up, my mind already racing with possibilities. The app I had created allowed me to constantly monitor the other smartwatch, providing me with real-time updates and notifications.

After all, I certainly wouldn't be able to check the smartwatch constantly, but I also couldn't bring it outside all the time as well. Considering it belonged to a Demon Contractor, even the fact that I own something like this was discovered, that would spell trouble.

Therefore, I created such an app. Since my Moon Mana was unique, there wouldn't be many people who could observe it, making it a good intermediary to connect them.

Quickly making my way back to my room, I settled in front of my desk and activated the app. A holographic display flickered to life, revealing the notification from the other watch.

[...]

[...]

[...]

[Missions][1]

[Currency]

There, I could see a mission issued.

'Hmm....A mission that was assigned to Fred....No, that wouldn't be the case since I hadn't contacted anyone about this watch. Therefore, they must have assumed that Fred is dead. If that is the case, this is a general mission issued by someone with a relatively high rank.'

I thought. If this was the case, then it would make sense.

With a sense of intrigue, I tapped on the mission tab, my curiosity piqued by the exclamation mark that indicated a new and urgent task. As the mission details unfolded before me, I couldn't help but raise an eyebrow.

Mission: Gather Information on Ethan Hartley, Hartley Family, and Arcadia Hunter Academy

Type: Non-combat

Description: This mission requires the gathering of comprehensive information regarding Ethan Hartley, his family, and the activities within Arcadia Hunter Academy. Focus on obtaining details such as Ethan Hartley's daily routine, places he frequents, the strength of his allies and associates, any notable aides or companions, as well as any significant events or incidents involving him or Hartley's family.

Objective: Provide detailed intelligence reports on Ethan Hartley, the Hartley Family, and Arcadia Hunter Academy to the employer.

Reward: Generous compensation upon successful completion of the mission.

As I read through the mission brief, a wave of unease washed over me.

The task at hand was no simple matter—it required delving into Ethan's personal affairs.

'Who could be behind this mission, and what are their intentions?' I pondered, my mind racing with possibilities. 'An enemy of Hartleys? No, that wouldn't be the case. There is no reason for someone

to directly target Ethan if they are aiming at Ethan....Hmm...Is it because he is now showing potential? Certainly, his prowess is not normal, but isn't it still too early? For some reason, this doesn't feel like a mission issued by another family.'

I thought, yet because of the lack of information, I couldn't say much. In any case, one thing was clear from this mission alone.

'Things will get troublesome from now on.'

With such attention being gathered on Ethan earlier than usual, the already messed up storyline would be messed up further.

As the winter morning chilled the air and snow petals fell to the ground, a figure could be spotted running. On his wrists and ankles, there were unseen bracelets limiting his movements.

With each breath he let out, the white steam rushed out of his mouth, showing how cold the weather was.

Yet, even though the weather was cold, the figure was constantly sweating. His breaths were rough as if he was pushing himself. And in fact, he was doing exactly that right.

Since it was way too early in the morning, Astron was trying to train his endurance.

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

Yet, at the same time, he was also training his lung capacity and breathing.

'Perceptive Insight is really limitless. Just by observing Eleanor's video from her past as a trainee, I had improved this much.'

With his form and breathing improved more, he now even mixed mana into this. Subconsciously, he was trying to circulate his mana while also running.

It was called Consecutive Mana breathing, and it was a more advanced concept for Hunters.

As Astron continued his early morning run, his senses heightened from his training; he suddenly sensed two familiar presences approaching rapidly. Not slowing his pace even slightly, he turned his head to see Ethan and Julia swiftly closing in on him.

Ethan was the first to greet him with a warm smile. "Morning, Astron," he said, his breath visible in the chilly air.

Astron nodded in response, acknowledging Ethan's greeting without a word.

Of course, Ethan wasn't alone.

Julia, always full of energy, joined in with a cheerful wave. "Hey there, Astron! Training hard as usual, I see?"

Astron looked at Julia for a second. "As you can see."

"Hmm...But it is a bit cold, right?"

"A bit? Not everyone is thick-skinned like you." Julia said with a smile on her face. Yet, as the two were talking, suddenly they noticed something.

He was missing!

"That guy...." Julia sighed, seeing Astron running without waiting for them.

"Cough....It was my fault, thinking he would stop."

"Well, he is certainly not the type. But, this makes me want to bother him more?" Julia smirked, seeing Astron already running away. Though that guy was somehow cold because Ethan constantly pursued him, she was also somehow getting closer to him as well.

As Julia felt the mischievous urge rising within her, she channeled her mana and propelled herself forward with a burst of energy, closing the distance between her and Astron in a flash.

Ethan shook his head, knowing all too well the antics Julia was capable of.

With determination in her eyes and a playful grin on her face, Julia matched Astron's pace effortlessly, her footsteps light on the snow-covered ground.

Ethan, trailing behind, chuckled to himself as he watched the scene unfold. He knew firsthand how difficult it could be to keep up with Julia once she set her mind to something, and he couldn't help but somehow feel happy that he wasn't the target of her antics.

As they ran side by side, Julia began bombarding Astron with questions about his personal life, his study habits, and his training routines.

She was relentless in her inquiries, firing off one question after another with her trademark enthusiasm.

"How do you study Astron? Do you have a strict schedule, or do you just wing it?" Julia asked, her voice filled with curiosity.

Astron remained silent, his expression stoic as he focused on his running.

"And why do you always train so hard? Is it fun to act all edgy and mysterious all the time?" Julia continued, undeterred by Astron's lack of response.

Still, Astron remained silent, his attention fixed on the path ahead.

"Come on, Astron, don't be so quiet! Is this just your natural demeanor, or are you intentionally being this way?" Julia persisted, her questions coming one after another.

"Is it fun to be edgy?"

"Do you like being rude to others?"

"How do you make your hair?"

"Why is your skin this pale?"

"Do you play games?"

"Do you have any hobbies?"

"Is there anyone you like?"

She continuously bombarded him with questions.

Yet, despite Julia's efforts to engage him in conversation, Astron remained silent, his expression unreadable.

But Julia, undeterred by his lack of response, assumed that he was simply getting irritated, even though he showed no signs of it on his face. This was how she had usually dealt with others, the people she wanted to annoy.

She would usually do this to Lucas, annoying him. But because he had been acting somehow differently, she couldn't do it anymore, and doing such things to Ethan had been way too easy for some reason.

"Come on, don't you see, he is not responding."

Even Ethan was tired of her questions. 'What a mental strength....' And he couldn't help but feel that Astron's mental strength was way too strong. 'If I were him, I would have answered them already.' Of course, Ethan already knew Julia wasn't that interested in Astron. She didn't even want to know the answer to these questions. She just wanted to annoy someone.

Also, it wasn't that Astron didn't want to get away from Julia. It was just that whenever he tried, Julia would effortlessly close the distance.

After all, being a high ranker wasn't a joke, and she was a physical type on top of that. And this made her a lot harder to shake off.

Just as Julia was about to fire off another round of questions, a sudden shift in the atmosphere caught her attention. A chill ran down her spine as she sensed the presence of another person approaching.

A figure emerged before them, exuding a strong aura that commanded attention. Her purple hair cascaded down to her shoulders, framing her elegant features as she looked at them with a serene smile.

"Junior," she greeted Astron with a nod, her voice gentle, yet the eyes looking at Julia were somehow cold. "Who is this?"

"Senior Maya."

Chapter 336 Chapter 78.3 - Crossing Tables

Recently, Maya has been feeling troubled a lot. For some reason, the scenes she had heard at that time didn't leave her mind.

She had never considered herself an old-fashioned or conservative person. She was very open to ideas; she didn't dislike other people out of nowhere.

She was against those negative emotions. After all, she had grown up while receiving her kind-hearted parents' love. The values that were instilled in her when she was a child had never been something that she wanted to discard.

"Temperance against hardship is the way of nature and the way of Evergreens."

She still remembered her mother's words. Though her relationship with her father was close, her father had shown a bit too much of a love for her, and it was her mother who had taken the position of teaching her in general.

But, now, something appeared. Something that had disturbed her peaceful life. Something that went against those values.

Her inner turmoil grew with each passing day, her mind consumed by the scenes that replayed in her head relentlessly. She couldn't shake the image of Astron and Sylvie dancing together, their movements graceful yet unsettling to her.

Despite her logical understanding as a mage and her past experiences telling her that there was nothing inherently wrong with their dance, something deep within her heart felt conflicted.

Her feelings towards Astron had always been complex, a mixture of admiration, friendship, and something deeper that she couldn't quite put into words. Yet, seeing him with Sylvie had stirred up emotions she hadn't anticipated.

She felt a knot – a knot that refused to move down.

She felt something inside her rising – a feeling she wanted to suppress no matter what, something that she knew wasn't good for her image.

'There is no need to get angry.'

She tried to rationalize her emotions, reminding herself that the dance was just a dance devoid of any deeper meaning or significance.

She wanted to think that the junior she knew wasn't someone like this. He wouldn't randomly get close to other people.

'There is nothing wrong with being dance partners. Yes....There is nothing wrong with him touching other girls or being that close...'

However, her inner struggle was compounded by the realization that she couldn't easily dismiss those thoughts. Despite her best efforts to suppress them, they continued to simmer beneath the surface, refusing to be ignored.

And she wanted to talk to him, to get rid of these feelings. However, sadly, the academy had a new assignment for them, a practical project that required her to leave the academy. When she returned, she learned that her first years went to a mine, thus making it impossible for her to contact Astron.

However, she knew one thing.

'Junior always works out very early in the day.'

Therefore, she decided to look for him in his workout times. Waking up very early at 3 A.M., she even put a lot of effort into her looks, making herself look presentable.

Of course, though Maya was a girl who was innocent in terms of girly things, she had always received praise for her good looks, and this still didn't change.

And apparently, being a vampire was something that gave her a weird charm. Her already white skin got a lot whiter, and her figure became more seductive. Even the way she had walked had changed, with her body undergoing a transformation.

That was something that was apparently innate to vampires. Even her physical attributes increased, rivaling her mana and magic power stats.

Somehow, she became a strong-bodied mage.

In any case, under the snow, she was looking for her Junior. Of course, it was never hard for her to find him since she was always able to feel his smell of blood. It was as if she was connected to her somehow.

Somehow, this made her feel special in a way as well.

However, as she drew closer, her eyes widened in surprise. There, running beside Astron, was a girl she didn't recognize. Her short white hair fluttered in the wind, and a radiant smile graced her lips as she chatted animatedly with Astron.

Of course, from her side, she wasn't able to see Astron's mouth, only the girl's, but it was evident that they were talking.

'Who is she?'

Somehow, a weird feeling enveloped her heart. The same feeling of her insides burning, but a weird chill coursing through.

She felt cold. Her thoughts turned cold.

She couldn't tear her eyes away from the sight.

Lost in her thoughts and consumed by her emotions, Maya approached them without even noticing the presence of another boy beside the girl.

"Junior," Maya greeted Astron, her tone unfamiliar.

'Why is my voice like this?'

Even she was unable to understand how such a voice came out of her mouth.

"Who is this?" She asked, turning her gaze to the girl.

"Senior Maya." His voice was as calm as usual, without any feelings in them. But somehow, she could tell that Astron was relieved to see her. It was a subtle feeling that couldn't be put into logical reasoning. She just knew.

"Senior Maya..." The girl before her mumbled as if to contemplate Astron's choice of words. And then, suddenly, she raised her head, locking her eyes with Maya. "Are you, by any chance, Maya Evergreen?" And then she asked.

Maya locked her eyes with the girl before her, her expression unreadable as she processed Astron's acknowledgment. When the girl addressed her by name, Maya's demeanor shifted subtly, her tone turning chilly as she replied, "Yes."

The girl, Julia Middleton, smirked in response, finding the situation amusing.

'Hehehehe....Look at what he we have here...'

She couldn't help but smile. Her intuition as a gossip as well as a woman was telling her something. Something that she would never miss.

Maya observed her closely, her guard still up despite Julia's seemingly harmless demeanor.

"I am Julia Middleton, a freshman."

As Julia extended her hand in the introduction, Maya didn't do the same. Though she knew she was being rude, at that moment, she didn't care.

However, before Maya could refuse the gesture, Julia spoke reassuringly.

"I am not a threat to you, don't worry."

Maya paused at hearing her words, studying Julia's eyes intently, searching for any hint. To her surprise, Maya found herself not experiencing the same discomfort she felt when she saw Astron with Sylvie.

There was something lacking in Julia.

'What am I doing?'

Then, she realized her actions. The pressure she was emitting. With the corner of her eyes, she saw Astron slightly frowning as if he was trying to resist something.

'I am releasing my aura.'

Instantly, Maya accepted Julia's hand. "Nice to meet you too, Junior Julia." A hearty smile bloomed on her face instantly.

And seeing this, Julia was more amused than ever.

"Huuuuu..."

Then, from the side, a breath of relaxation echoed. Turning her head to the side, Maya saw another boy beside the girl. His wavy blue hair was slightly sweaty.

"Cough..." Realizing that Maya was looking at him, Ethan coughed slightly, tensing. He had never thought Seniors would be this oppressive!

'What the hell was that? I felt like she was about to drown me; I couldn't even breathe at first. Thank god, I have this trait.'

Thanks to his trait, he was able to resist such an oppressive aura, or else he would already be dead in that dungeon at that time.

"Ethan Hartley. Nice to meet you, Senior."

"Nice to meet you too, Junior Ethan."

Yet somehow, the demeanor of that scary senior changed out of nowhere.

'What did she mean by a threat? How did she change this senior's mood this fast?'

He threw a look at Julia, who faced the brunt of Senior, and somehow, a new form of respect appeared.

'I guess it is a women's thing.'

After exchanging introductions with Julia and Ethan, Maya turned her attention back to Astron, her expression softening slightly. "Astron, it's been a while. How have you been?" she asked, her tone gentle.

Astron nodded in response. "I've been fine, Senior," he replied, his voice calm and composed. "Things have been okay."

Julia and Ethan observed the interaction from the sidelines, both intrigued by the dynamics at play between Astron and Maya.

Ethan couldn't help but feel surprised by Astron's docile demeanor in Maya's presence while Julia watched with an amused grin, her curiosity piqued.

Somehow, in both Ethan's eyes and Julia's eyes, Astron looked like a tamed cat.

As she saw this, Julia's mind wandered to a certain redhead who had spoken about Astron subconsciously. She shook her head with a slight smile.

'My friend....Your competition is really strong....Your road will be thorny....' Meanwhile, Ethan, ever the blunt one when it came to these matters, turned to Maya with a curious expression. "Senior Maya. How do you know Astron?" he asked, his tone straightforward.

Before Maya could answer, Astron spoke up, his voice carrying a hint of respect. "She's the one who taught me how to use mana," he explained, his words filled with respect. "In a way, she's my master."

"..." Ethan's mouth was left wide agape. He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

'Is this the same Astron I know?' The fact that Astron was showing such respect to someone itself was a first.

"Junior, you are exaggerating."

"No. If not for you, I may not even be able to use mana now."

"Sigh...It was thanks to your own talent that you were able to grasp it that fast. I didn't even do much."

Feeling Julia's grip on his arm, Ethan flinched slightly and turned his head to look at her, a questioning expression on his face. "What?" he whispered, curious about the reason for her sudden action.

Julia leaned in closer, her voice barely above a whisper. "Do you realize what this means?" she asked, excitement evident in her tone.

Ethan furrowed his brow, trying to decipher Julia's cryptic message. "What are you talking about?" he whispered back, feeling slightly lost.

"You are hopeless...." Yet, Julia just rolled her eyes.

"What is it?"

"I won't tell you. Find it on your own."

"You....."

Julia threw one last glance at Maya and Astron, a mischievous smile playing on her lips as she observed their interaction. With a satisfied nod, she made a decision.

"Let's leave them to their conversation," she whispered to Ethan, gently tugging on his arm.

Ethan nodded in agreement, still slightly perplexed by Julia's earlier excitement but trusting her judgment nonetheless. He also got the same feeling, as if he didn't belong here now.

"Yeah, sure," he whispered back, allowing Julia to lead him away.

Julia, who was leaving rapidly, turned to look at Senior Maya, who threw a quick gaze at her, and then winked.

'You owe me one.

Chapter 337 Chapter 78.4 - Crossing Tables

As Julia and Ethan retreated, their figures blending into the distance, the atmosphere around Maya and Astron subtly shifted, now stripped of its earlier tension and curiosity. Maya glanced around, ensuring they were indeed alone, before her gaze settled back on Astron. She noticed how the departure of the others seemed to bring a more serene calm to their surroundings, a private bubble in the vastness of the campus.

"What are your plans?" Maya asked, her voice pondering.

"I am planning to resume my training."

"I see...."

Taking a small step forward, reducing the physical gap between them, Maya ventured, "Junior, if you don't mind... would you like to train together?" Her voice was a mix of hopeful and uncertain, an unusual tone for someone who usually exuded confidence.

Astron looked surprised for a moment, raising his eyebrows, but his expression quickly smoothed. "I don't mind at all, Senior Maya. It would be my pleasure." His response, delivered with genuine amiability, hid none of the respect he felt for her. "But....No, never mind..."

Just as Astron was about to ask her if she was going to be okay since she was a mage, he remembered that Maya was also a vampire. Her physical attributes were no longer something that could be measured by a human standard.

Maya felt a wave of relief wash over her, accompanied by a flutter of happiness. The prospect of spending time with Astron, without the distractions of others, made her heart light.

She had always found his presence comforting, and the opportunity to share a simple activity like running seemed suddenly invaluable. It was a chance to reconnect, to understand how the days had stretched into months since they last spoke earnestly.

"Then, let's start?" Maya suggested, already moving towards the track, that her posture be relaxed. Astron nodded, falling into step beside her.

As they began their run, the rhythm of their footsteps became a sort of quiet conversation. The early discomfort that had hovered around Maya dissipated with each stride, replaced by a growing sense of ease.

There was a lot she wanted to ask, to say, but for the moment, the shared silence was comfortable, speaking volumes of their mutual respect and understanding.

Astron matched her pace effortlessly, his presence a steady constant by her side. Maya found herself glancing at him occasionally, appreciating the way he seemed genuinely content to be there with her.

'It makes me feel somehow nostalgic.'

It reminded her of their earlier days, the simplicity of their interactions, and how much she had missed this. It hadn't even been half a year, but she still remembered the times when she had taught Astron how to control mana.

'He doesn't seem to have any intention of hiding it.'

Initially, she thought Astron would hide what he had learned from her, as not knowing how to control mana itself was an abnormality. But on the contrary, he didn't. Whether it was because he didn't care or he trusted the two, she wasn't sure.

'Or maybe he wants to show it, like me? No, no, no...That is not the case, right?'

However, as they ran, the silence started bothering her. At first, it was fine, but even for her, such silence was bound to be uncomfortable, especially for her heart, which had started beating a lot faster for some reason now.

"Cough...." She was about to open her mouth to start a conversation, but suddenly, she felt her saliva stuck in her throat, making her reflexively cough. "Cough, cough, cough...." And, somehow, she wasn't even able to fix it immediately.

"Cough....Cough...."

"....."

Seeing her struggling, Astron stopped in his tracks as well, and he slightly approached her and gently tapped her neck.

"Hick." With a hiccup, Maya felt the obstacle returning to its desired place once again.

Embarrassment washed over Maya in waves, her cheeks burning hotter than the exertion from their run could account for.

The simple act of Astron tapping her neck to alleviate her discomfort felt intensely personal, leaving her flustered in a way she hadn't anticipated.

His concern, however natural, pierced through the casual facade she tried to maintain, highlighting a moment of vulnerability she wasn't prepared to show.

'No.'

It also ignited something; the hunger she was trying to suppress appeared more and more.

Astron, noticing her struggle, suggested, "We can take a breather if you want," his eyes flicked briefly to her mouth, which was salivating more now.

'It had been a while, hadn't it?'

He also realized the reason for Maya's situation.

Maya, desperately trying to regain her composure, shook her head, the redness of her cheeks betraying her embarrassment. "No, no, it's fine. We can continue," she managed to say, her voice steadier than she felt.

She didn't want to seem fragile or weak in front of Astron, so she forced herself to snap out of it and keep going.

Eager to divert the conversation away from her embarrassing hiccup incident, Maya found herself grasping for a topic that would put some distance between her current state and their conversation. "So, I heard something unusual happened in the recent mine exploration. Were you affected?" she asked, her curiosity genuine.

The mine explorations were not common, as, in general, they were hard to access. Thus, abnormally, when the freshmen went there, she naturally heard about it. It was mainly because of Amelia, who had been attending more meetings.

Maya knew she had rejected Amelia, but she always wanted to be honest about such things.

Astron nodded, a flash of memory crossing his face as he recalled the event. "Yes, an evil spirit appeared, and some of the tunnels collapsed. But it wasn't much; the situation was dealt with easily," he explained, his tone casual, as if recounting a minor inconvenience rather than a potentially life-threatening scenario.

Maya couldn't help but smile at his response, her embarrassment momentarily forgotten. The pride she felt for Astron swelled within her, reinforcing her belief in his capabilities. "Of course, for you, such a thing shouldn't be hard," she said, her tone laced with pride.

In her mind, Astron was exceptional, someone who could handle any challenge thrown his way since he had been hiding his power.

Of course, Astron also knew about this perception Maya had over him, and she wasn't particularly wrong either especially since she had witnessed his prowess firsthand.

As they resumed their run, Maya felt a sense of satisfaction. The hiccup incident had passed, and they were back to sharing a moment of connection, albeit through a conversation about their experiences.

The conversation flowed more easily now, the awkward silence banished by their exchange. Maya listened intently as Astron shared more details about the mine exploration, the strategies he employed, and his thoughts on how to improve safety for future expeditions.

Her heart swelled with pride with each word, affirming her belief that her junior, Astron, was indeed someone amazing.

"But, Junior. It seems you have made some friends?"

"Friends?"

Seeing Astron raising his eyebrows, Maya also got curious.

"Weren't they your friends?"

After all, she had never seen Astron with other students. He never hung out. Whenever she saw her, he was either training or studying.

"Those two...." Astron mumbled. "I wouldn't say friends." For him, Julia and Ethan were people from the main cast, someone he needed to look out for.

The world revolved around them; in a way, they were blessed. They all were future pillars of the world and, in the end, were people who would undoubtedly play a part in his revenge.

He wasn't delusional enough to think that he could erase all the demons on his own. He would need manpower eventually.

And they were such people.

Maya nodded, a faint "I see" escaping her lips as she processed Astron's words. A part of her, one she didn't fully acknowledge, hummed with quiet happiness at the thought of him not having close connections with others as he did with her.

This unique bond they shared was something she treasured more than she let on, a beacon of light in the often competitive and solitary environment of their academy.

As they completed their final lap and approached the academy's training grounds, an unexpected sensation overtook Maya.

'Huh?' The scent of Astron, a mix of sweat from their run and his unique personal fragrance, enveloped her senses like a spell. She found herself inexplicably drawn to him, her heart racing as she looked into his eyes. The world around her seemed to blur, her focus narrowing to the man before her.

"Haaaah...."

Her breathing became labored, and a dizzy spell caused her to stagger slightly. Maya's vision tinged with crimson, a sign she recognized all too well—her vampiric nature coming to the fore, urged on by her heightened emotions and the allure of Astron's presence.

Instinctively, her fangs elongated, a reaction she couldn't control.

With a soft thud, she found herself leaning heavily into Astron's arms, seeking support as she struggled to contain the surge of her vampiric instincts.

Her head buried in the crook of his arm, she took deep, shuddering breaths, trying to calm the storm within her.

Astron, ever observant, quickly scanned their surroundings. The training grounds were sparsely populated, with about ten other individuals deeply engrossed in their own routines. None seemed to pay them any heed, wrapped up in their training.

Yet, Astron knew better than to take chances, especially with Maya in such a vulnerable state.

"We shouldn't do this here," he mumbled a note of urgency in his voice. Turning to Maya, he said, "Can you conjure a barrier? Just to cover the CCTV."

Maya, despite her compromised state, nodded slightly and mustered the concentration required to weave a magical barrier. With a flicker of mana, an imperceptible shield enveloped them, obscuring the view of any prying eyes or surveillance equipment.

Once assured of their privacy, Astron activated his [Umbral Leap], a skill that allowed him to bend the shadows to his will, creating a portal of sorts. In the blink of an eye, they were transported from the training grounds to the seclusion of the nearby forest.

The forest offered them a sanctuary, a place away from the judgmental eyes of the world where Maya could regain control without fear.

"Haaah....I can't hold it in any longer..."

"It is fine now." Grabbing the hem of his shirt, Astron pulled it over, opening his neck. At that moment, Maya could see the bulging veins underneath his skin. It was as if she had a vision specifically showing the blood underneath.

"Then...." With her gasping breaths, Maya looked over him and then stabbed her fangs into his long white neck.

In the secluded embrace of the forest, shielded from the prying eyes of the world, Maya succumbed to the overwhelming urge that had been building within her. With Astron's consent, she leaned in, her fangs piercing the soft skin of his neck.

The contact sent a jolt through them both, a connection far deeper than the physical act it entailed.

Astron, though accustomed to this exchange by now, couldn't suppress a moan that escaped his lips as Maya drank deeply. The sound was a testament to the strange blend of pain and pleasure, a sensation uniquely tied to their bond.

Maya, intoxicated by the taste and warmth of his blood, found herself biting deeper, her embrace tightening as she sought solace in the closeness of their bodies.

Astron's blood was invigorating, richer, and more potent than she remembered. It coursed through her, a wave of warmth that pushed back the cold edge of her vampiric nature.

Each gulp was like a balm to her frayed senses, a grounding force that pulled her back from the brink.

As she drank, Maya's hands roamed involuntarily over Astron's chest, feeling the contours of his muscles under her fingertips. His skin was smooth, the heat emanating from him enveloping her in a comforting embrace.

Her fingers traced the lines of his arms, exploring the strength and vulnerability of the person who had become her anchor in a tumultuous world.

Eventually, Maya pulled back, gasping for air. Her thirst was sated, but her heart was full. The act, though born of necessity, had been a reaffirmation of their trust and reliance on each other.

"Senior Maya, I have a gift for you."

At that moment, his voice echoed in her ears....

Chapter 338 Chapter 78.5 - Crossing Tables

"Senior Maya, I have a gift for you."

Astron reached into the ether of his spatial ring, his movements deliberate, and when his hand reemerged, it clasped a small, unassuming box.

Maya, her senses still heightened from their intimate exchange, watched with curiosity and an unexpected flutter in her heart.

The taste of Astron's blood lingered on her lips, a vivid reminder of the depth of their connection.

"A gift?" she echoed, her voice tinged with surprise and something akin to wonder. Astron nodded, his gaze earnest.

"It's nothing as extraordinary as Starbloom Essence," he admitted, "but I believe it will be beneficial to you." His humility and the thoughtfulness behind the gesture only served to deepen Maya's appreciation for her junior.

A warm smile spread across her face, reflecting her gratitude and the special bond they shared.

Taking the box from Astron's hands, she carefully lifted the lid, revealing a bracelet nestled within. It was a simple design, yet there was an elegance to its simplicity.

The bracelet was black, its surface smooth and unadorned, save for subtle, intricate patterns that seemed to absorb the light around it, giving it an almost ethereal quality.

"This is beautiful," Maya whispered, genuinely touched. The bracelet, while unassuming, held a weight of significance. Her intuition whispered of its value, not in material terms, but in the protection and advantage it could offer her.

"But, I can't accept-"

However, she knew this junior of hers was someone with a relatively hard condition. Of course, how could she haven't checked his past after all this time? From the start, she knew about his situation as an orphan, and she knew his savings wouldn't be much.

Thus, she didn't want this to financially burden him. For her, spending money may not be an issue, but that didn't mean she didn't know about the money itself. If this happened one year ago, she might have been seen as ignorant, but that wasn't the case now.

"Senior." However, his voice made her stop her thoughts.

"Ah..." Looking into his eyes, she remembered the times when she gave him the Starbloom Essence.

'He initially refused as well, yet then he accepted it. I remember how it feels for one's gift to be rejected, yet why am I doing it now?'

Realizing that her act of 'looking after him' would only hurt him more, she decided to drop the act.

"Sorry. I was being inconsiderate."

"It is fine." Astron waved his hand as Maya looked at the bracelet.

"It's a special artifact," Astron explained, watching her reaction closely. "It's highly resistant to magical energies and can protect the wearer from certain status effects, especially those related to internal changes. I thought it might come in handy, considering your... unique circumstances."

Astron's explanation shed further light on the bracelet's unique properties. "In the future, should there be an instance where you might lose control or feel overwhelmed by your nature, this artifact will help suppress those urges to a certain extent," he said, his tone serious yet gentle. It was clear he had thought deeply about what would truly benefit Maya, considering her unique challenges.

Maya was taken aback by the specificity of the gift. It was as if the bracelet had been crafted with her in mind, addressing a fear that lingered in the back of her consciousness—the fear of losing control.

The realization that Astron had gone to such lengths to find something so profoundly suited to her needs touched her deeply. She looked up at him, a mixture of gratitude and wonder in her eyes.

"How long have you been searching for something like this?" she asked, her voice soft with emotion.

Astron met her gaze, his own eyes reflecting a sincerity that was rare in the competitive environment in which they thrived. "I dislike being in debt to others, especially when it involves favors," he confessed. "So, from the moment you gave me the Starbloom Essence, I began searching for something that could be of equal value to you."

His words resonated with Maya. The idea that Astron had spent so much time and effort, possibly even since the moment he received her gift, in finding something so thoughtful for her amplified the significance of the bracelet.

It wasn't just a protective artifact; it was a symbol of Astron's dedication and gratitude.

Maya felt a warmth spread through her heart, a feeling that went beyond the usual camaraderie expected between seniors and juniors.

Astron's gesture was a clear indication of his respect and care for her, qualities that were often overshadowed by the competitive and sometimes ruthless nature of their world.

"Thank you, Astron," she said, her voice laced with genuine appreciation. "I will treasure it."

As she fastened the bracelet around her wrist, she felt a subtle shift, a sense of feeling that she hadn't felt before.

'It is getting a lot harder for me to hold it in. Did you know it, Junior?'

She thought inwardly. Whether it was intentional or not, Astron's even small gestures and his habits looked good in Maya's eyes.

She looked into his eyes, a small fire being lit in her eyes.

'I want to do it....'

She gathered her conviction.

'Why am I waiting?'

Was there a reason for her to wait? Why was she prolonging it? At the end of the day, weren't her feelings crystal clear now?

"Y-you know, junior." She stuttered, trying to gather her words.

Maya's resolve, a fiery determination ignited by her feelings and the intimate moment they shared, propelled her forward. The world around them seemed to blur, the forest's ambient sounds fading into a distant echo.

Every step she took towards Astron felt like a testament to the emotions she had been wrestling with, emotions that now surged with an intensity she could no longer contain.

Astron's gaze, steady and unyielding, met hers. There was no pushback and no signs of withdrawal. Yet, as she positioned herself closer, a breath away from the culmination of her desires, a stark image shattered her courage.

Her mind conjured a vivid scenario of a harsh rejection from Astron, questioning her audacity to assume their relationship could evolve.

This sudden, intrusive thought jolted Maya back to a harsh reality. The warmth that had enveloped her moments ago receded as if it were a tide pulling away from the shore, leaving her stranded in a sea of doubt and fear.

'No...I can't....' The possibility of losing what they already had, the companionship, the silent understanding, and the mutual respect became a tangible threat.

Trembling, Maya retreated, her movements hesitant and unsure. The fear of rejection, of misinterpreting the depth and nature of their relationship, overshadowed her desires.

'I can't afford to lose this.' She wasn't ready to gamble the connection they shared, not on uncertainty, not on a whim that could just as easily be her heart misleading her.

"I... I'm sorry, Junior. I think... I got carried away," she managed to stammer, her voice a mix of embarrassment and a deep-

seated fear of having crossed a line that couldn't be uncrossed.

"No, it is fine." Astron once again didn't seem to mind. In any case, she hadn't realized it at this moment, but Astron was already considering her act of drinking blood as something intimate, so what she did right now didn't hold any meaning.

After all, she had stepped back at the last second.

"T-then....should we leave."

"Okay."

With that, the two left, one going to the training grounds and the other going to the Elemental Chamber.

Emma Thompson was lying in her room doing her nails. After all, she needed to present herself better for today's meeting.

With the sophomore-year students finishing their assignment just yesterday, they finally had the time to interact socially with each other.

And she had a boy to impress. Frank Tower, a mage from her class, got her attention. His looks were fine, and he had quite an impressive smile.

RING!

Just at that moment, her smartwatch rang.

"Hmm?"

She quickly threw a look at the screen and saw a message from an unknown number.

Continue as the message will be the pictures of her bullying a girl on the ground. Her face will be clearly seen. After she sees the picture

Emma's heart skipped a beat as she stared at the image that flashed on her smartwatch screen. It was a picture of her, unmistakably her, towering over a girl cowering on the ground. The memory flooded back with vivid clarity, a moment of weakness and cruelty she had hoped to bury deep in her past.

Her breath caught in her throat as she realized the severity of the situation. This wasn't just a random threat; it was a damning piece of evidence that could shatter the carefully crafted facade she had built for herself.

With trembling fingers, Emma typed a response, her mind racing with panic and desperation. [Who is this? What do you want?] she demanded, her voice echoing her inner turmoil.

The reply came swiftly, cutting through the silence like a knife. [We need you to do something,] it read, the words carrying an ominous weight that sent a chill down Emma's spine.

Emma's initial instinct was to deny the authenticity of the photo, to bluff her way out of the situation with false bravado. [This photo is fake,] she typed, hoping against hope that her bluff would hold.

But the response she received shattered her fragile facade of denial. [We can check if you want,] it said, a simple statement that pierced through Emma's defenses like a dagger to the heart.

Emma's resolve crumbled in an instant, the weight of the situation bearing down on her like a heavy burden. With a resigned sigh, she conceded defeat, her fingers moving almost mechanically as she typed out her next question. [What do you want?] she asked, her voice barely a whisper in the suffocating silence of her room.

As Emma stared at the photo of the two people eating, recognition dawned upon her.

[You just need to do what you always did.]

Chapter 339 79.1 - Commotion

[You just need to do what you always did.]

Emma's gaze hardened as she studied the photo more closely, her eyes narrowing at the sight of Jane--Mia to some--who sat laughing, seemingly carefree with a boy across from her at a small diner.

'It is him!'

The boy was none other than the very one who had stepped in last time when Emma had gotten overly aggressive with Jane.

That boy had become a thorn in her side, his defiance an irritation. Thus, she had taught him a lesson. She still remembered how she had stepped on him; it was truly an ethereal feeling. Being in power in such situations was really something addicting, after all.

'Heh, this is why I hate such bigots. They can't ascertain the type of girls that would be fit for them.'

Then, another realization stung. Jane, who had been keeping a low profile in class, wasn't actually stepping back as Emma had thought. Instead, she was redirecting her social energies, possibly growing closer to that guy, something Emma couldn't tolerate.

'You bitch....Now that you have learned your lesson, you are trying to entice other guys, huh? Do you think you can do as you please, away from my eyes? After being a whore before, now you are trying to spread your legs to others?'

Her jealousy and anger flared anew, fueled by the image before her and the coercive nudge from her anonymous blackmailer.

Her hands trembled slightly as she typed a response. [What exactly do you want me to do?] Emma's mind raced, already dreading the answer she might receive but knowing full well that her options were limited.

She was caught in a web of her own past actions, each thread pulling tighter around her with every passing second.

The reply came quickly, chilling in its brevity. [Ensure the time they are spending now is messed up. Scare them enough to avoid each other. You know how. Also, make sure that the results are satisfying. You don't have much time.]

Emma's thoughts swirled with a mix of resentment and begrudging understanding as she pieced together the intentions behind the anonymous demand. "They must be jealous... Want to see them fall apart," she muttered under her breath, a small smirk playing at the corner of her lips.

It wasn't uncommon in her social circles to sabotage others out of envy or spite, and in a twisted way, she felt a connection to the mysterious figure pulling her strings.

'Whoever are those bastards, they are definitely familiar to me. But, I doubt that they want Jane...Well, if they want her to resort to such methods, then it will not be good for her at all. After all, they didn't even help her when she was in need.'

If disrupting Jane and the guy's burgeoning relationship was the goal, then it was a task Emma found distastefully familiar but entirely within her wheelhouse.

Though she hadn't noticed it, she was already addressing the blackmailers as "them" since the message mostly contained "we." And, since the picture came, it meant that the blackmailer was directly related to that time, being a possible witness, yet they just watched.

With a renewed sense of purpose, albeit marred by the coercion hanging over her, Emma picked up her phone and began sending out messages to her gang. "Meeting, 20 minutes, usual spot," she texted, her fingers moving swiftly over the screen.

As her plans began to take shape, her demeanor hardened; the earlier unease at being manipulated transitioned into a cold determination to execute the task effectively and regain some semblance of control over her situation.

As her friends confirmed one by one, Emma outlined her strategy. They would need to be subtle yet impactful, instilling just enough fear and discomfort to drive a wedge between Jane and Ethan without drawing undue attention to themselves. Emma knew the balance well; it was a game she had played too many times before.

"Heh, just watch." Then, with a smile, she left her room.

Today was a beautiful day for Jane. After all, she met with 'him' early in the morning, and they had been spending time together.

Though she had tried to push the distance and let 'him' go so that he wouldn't entangled with other things, he refused. Even though he was an airhead on his own and somehow 'innocent' in this world, he was able to see through what she was doing.

It was undoubtedly a weird way of showing this, but she wasn't able to refuse his words at some point. She couldn't bring herself up to block him.

All the time, they had texted each other late at night or whenever they were free; those times were really nice, and she somehow wasn't feeling lonely when she was doing so.

Of course, since they were both busy with their lives and their academy schedule, they weren't able to meet each other physically.

That was why they were here right now.

"Is the food to your liking?" 'He' asked.

His face was turned towards her, a gentle curiosity in his sharp hazel eyes, which seemed to reflect not just the light but the depths of his genuine concern for her. Jane admired those eyes; they always seemed to pierce right through to the heart of things, yet they did so with such warmth and kindness.

"Ethan, it's wonderful, thank you," Jane replied, her gaze lingering a moment longer than necessary on his features. Ethan's wavy blue hair caught the sunlight filtering through the café window, highlighting various shades of azure and teal that reminded her of the ocean on a sunny day.

His hair always looked like it carried secrets of the deep sea, effortlessly tousled as if he'd just come back from a windswept beach.

His smile, when he grinned in response to her approval of the food, was another feature she found endlessly endearing. It was the sort of smile that reached his eyes, crinkling them at the corners and lighting up his entire face.

There was an infectious joy in his smile that made it impossible for Jane not to smile back despite the swarm of butterflies she felt fluttering in her stomach.

And then there were the little things, like the way he tilted his head when he was listening intently or the thoughtful furrow between his brows when he was concerned. Each gesture, each expression, added layers to his simple, undeniable charm that Jane found herself increasingly drawn to.

As she sat across from him, savoring not just the meal but the entire scene, she was struck by how natural it felt to be with him, how every moment seemed to confirm that her feelings were deepening, entangling more with each laugh they shared and every look they exchanged.

"!"

Just as Jane felt the weight of her own smile reflecting back Ethan's, her gaze drifted past his shoulder to a familiar and unsettling sight.

'No!'

There, in the corner of the café, stood a group of her schoolmates, their faces an ensemble of poorly concealed malevolence.

'Why are you here?'

Her heart sank as her eyes met Emma's—the leader of the pack and her most fervent tormentor. The smile that curled Emma's lips was nothing short of sinister, and it sent a cold shiver down Jane's spine, marring the perfect afternoon.

Jane's reaction did not go unnoticed by Ethan, whose attentive eyes picked up on her sudden shift. His expression turned from one of contentment to concern in an instant. "What is the matter?" he asked gently, following her gaze to the disturbing assembly.

Before Jane could muster an explanation, or perhaps a dismissal to ease Ethan's worry, a voice sliced through the buzz of café chatter; it was loud, brash, and unmistakably Emma's.

"Look what we have here, the lovebirds!" Emma called out, her voice dripping with mock affection and scorn. She strode towards their table, her gang trailing behind like shadows echoing her every step.

Ethan turned to face the oncoming group, his expression hardening as he took in the situation. He might have been described by Jane as somewhat airheaded and innocent, but there was a palpable shift in his demeanor now—a protective edge that seemed to surface naturally in response to the threat.

After all, he had once been subjected to this senior's attitude. He still remembered the memories of that time when he had been stepped on and beaten without much effort. Though, at that time, he faced them as a group, Ethan was very well aware that he wouldn't be able to beat them even if they weren't a group.

Emma stopped just short of their table, her smirk broadening as she sized up the scene. "Enjoying a little date, are we?" she sneered, her eyes flicking between Jane and Ethan. "Must be nice, living in your little bubble. Let me guess, planning your future together? Or just pretending things are normal for a change?"

Jane felt her cheeks flush with a mix of embarrassment and anger. She wanted to retort, to defend their moment of peace, but the words stuck in her throat.

'I can't....' After all, Emma knew about those times somehow.

It was Ethan who spoke, his voice 'calm' yet firm. "Is there a reason you're interrupting us, Senior?" he asked, standing his ground against her invasive presence. Of course, there was a wave of anger rising inside him, as no matter how good he was, even he wouldn't be able to forgive those who tormented the person he adored.

Emma's response to Ethan's query was laced with condescension. "I'm just doing someone a favor by showing him what kind of girl he's getting involved with." She turned her attention to Jane, her tone dripping with mockery. "Isn't that right, ~Mia?"

At the mention of 'Mia,' Jane recoiled as if struck, her expression crumbling into one of distress. The use of the name, one tied to painful memories and a past Emma had exploited for her own gain,

visibly shook her. She hunched over slightly, unable to meet anyone's gaze, her body trembling lightly in her seat.

Ethan's patience snapped. He'd had enough of the veiled threats and the overt bullying. "That's enough," he said sharply, his voice rising a bit with a protective fervor. "It's none of your business what kind of person is Jane to me. You should mind your own affairs."

Emma scoffed, casting a disdainful glance at Ethan. "People like you just don't get it, do—" she started, but was cut off as one of her gang members 'accidentally' stumbled, sending a splash of her cold drink cascading over Jane's head. "Oops, my bad," the girl snickered, not bothering to hide her amusement.

The sight of Jane, drenched and humiliated, was the last straw for Ethan. His features twisted in anger as he reached out, his intention clear—to confront Emma directly. But before his hand could meet her arm, another hand clamped down on his wrist, stopping him mid-motion.

A boy from Emma's group, larger and clearly older, stepped forward, his grip iron-tight on Ethan's arm. "What do you think you're doing, attacking a senior with mana?" he hissed, his voice low and threatening.

Ethan tried to pull free, his voice tense as he argued, "I didn't

—"

He was cut off by a swift punch to the face from the boy, which sent him staggering back onto the table, his cheek reddening instantly from the impact. The café, until now buzzing with subdued whispers and curious glances, fell into a shocked silence at the violence.

Jane, still recovering from the shock and humiliation of the drink, looked up with a mix of fear and desperation. Tears welled in her eyes as she reached out to Ethan, who was now cradling his face, his expression one of pain and confusion.

Around them, the mood had shifted dramatically; what had started as a simple meal had spiraled into a scene of bullying and aggression, leaving both Jane and Ethan vulnerable and publicly shamed.

On the academy grounds, while the snow was falling, rare footage of three girls who had the fate of being exceptional in the future could be seen.

"Hey, do you have something?"

Julia raised her head, looking at the other two.

"Do I have what?"

Irina asked, seemingly perturbed. Her mind seemed to be elsewhere, completely unconnected to the present.

"Of course, something to talk about? I am really bored, you know."

Julia replied. Since they had been training and studying from the morning, she had already reached her limit, and her ADHD was kicking in, especially with her addiction to gossip and entertainment.

"Ah...." Irina shook her head. "I don't have..."

"You?" Seeing that she wouldn't be able to get anything from Irina, Julia turned her attention to Lilia, who had already expected what was about to come.

"Hmm..." Lilia put her finger to her lips to give the impression that there was something. Julia, seeing that, slightly twitched the corner of her mouth.

'She is doing it again.' Inwardly cringing, she maintained her expression, as she knew this was what Lilia liked to do.

Lilia finally smiled, her eyes lighting up with the kind of insider knowledge that only someone deeply embedded in the politics of high society would possess. "Actually, there is something," she began, her voice lowering to a conspiratorial whisper. Julia leaned in, her interest clearly piqued, while even Irina seemed to momentarily snap back to reality, her ears perked up at the mention of something potentially juicy.

Lilia's eyes darted around to ensure no one else was within earshot before she continued. "The Blackthorn family is considering entering an alliance with the Harringtons," she disclosed, her voice barely a whisper. Julia's eyes widened; such news was exactly the kind of thing she loved to sink her teeth into.

"There are rumors," Lilia added, pausing for effect, "that they might merge their businesses on the archaeology front."

Julia's mind raced at the implications, and she couldn't help but raise her eyebrows.

The Blackthorns and the Harringtons were two of the most influential families within their respective fields, while the latter was in the slightly lower ranks compared to the former.

A partnership between them could shift power dynamics not only in the academy but perhaps even in broader society.

However, while saying that, Lilia didn't forget to check Irina's reactions, and she saw nothing as if Irina didn't even care.

'Did she not understand what this implies, or does she really not care?'

There were two types of merging for noble families. One of them was a clear business contract where that was solely in the form of companies. The other one was to clearly manage families by entering an arranged marriage.

The latter would be the way of showing the world that the contract was a lot deeper and the alliance was a lot stronger as well.

Of course, being the heirs of such families, all three girls were very well aware of such topics, as arranged marriages were the fate awaiting those who lacked behind compared to their other siblings.

That was why Lilia was slightly surprised, as she knew Irina had long liked Victor and that he was the most likely candidate for the marriage.

"Why archaeology, though?" Julia mused aloud. "Both families have their fingers in so many pies. What's so special about archaeology all of a sudden?"

Irina, who had been quiet, chimed in, her tone thoughtful. "There's been a lot of talk about new discoveries and untouched sites that promise immense historical value. Maybe it's about securing first access to these places before anyone else."

It really looked like she didn't care, and Lilia trusted her judgment.

'So she is finally over it....' Feeling happy for her friend, Lilia smiled. And then she nodded in agreement to Irina's words. "Exactly. And with both families combining their resources and influence, they could potentially dominate the field, controlling major discoveries and the narrative around them."

Julia nodded, processing the information. The implications were vast, and the potential for exclusive stories or insider information could be invaluable. "This could be big," she whispered, already thinking about the various angles from which she could approach the topic in her next gossip round.

"However, there are some other rumors as well," Lilia whispered.

"What is it?"

Lilia leaned closer, her voice dropping even lower as she added another layer to their discussion. "You know, the Harringtons have a history of researching relics from the pre-Nexus Convergence. And there are whispers that they're particularly well-versed in ancient artifacts and ancient energies. Maybe there's some connection there."

Irina and Julia raised their eyebrows, intrigued by this deeper level of speculation but also aware of their limited access to the inner workings of such high-level dealings. They knew their role wasn't to pry too deeply with their current information but to keep ears open for more tangible leads.

After all, though they would be the future heads of their families, right now, they were in the academy and the things that they knew would already be known by their parents and the heads of the families.

As they mulled over these revelations, musing about the potential implications, Irina's gaze drifted across the academy grounds. Her eyes landed on a lone figure walking by himself – it was Astron. A smile tugged at her lips, and she began to straighten up, preparing to call out to him.

However, before she could utter a word, Julia reached out, placing a finger to her own lips with a mischievous glint in her eye. "Sshhh," she hissed softly, signaling Irina to remain silent.

Puzzled but intrigued by Julia's sudden secretive demeanor, Irina leaned in, whispering, "What? Why?"

Julia's eyes sparkled with the thrill of the moment. "Let's just watch for a bit," she whispered back, her gaze fixed on Astron. "Sometimes, you learn more by observing than interacting. You never know what—or who—you might discover."

'Hehehehe....I wonder if he will be meeting with that Senior. And I wonder what Irina's reaction would be to see her? It would certainly be interesting to watch.'

She thought smirking. Of course, this act may be seen as her looking for her friend's demise for entertainment, but in fact, she was actually looking after her friend.

Without knowing what type of connection that guy had with that senior, if Irina were to connect too much, she would be way more heartbroken. In times like these, knowing it earlier would certainly help, even though it may hurt.

Irina, though slightly disappointed at her advance stopped, couldn't help but get drawn into Julia's playful scheme.

'Does she know something?' As she knew, Julia wasn't a girl who acted without any clear goal.

"I am in." Lilia also nodded, somehow wanting to see what this guy was up to. Though they may not be close, Astron was someone she considered with the potential to be able to work under her; thus, grasping his weaknesses would mean a lot.

The trio huddled closer together, their attention now split between the unfolding dynamics of their families and the solitary figure of Astron as he moved through the snowy landscape, unaware of the watchful eyes upon him.

As they trailed Astron through the snowy academy grounds, their curiosity deepened with every step he took.

Entering the northeastern district, an area buzzing with the intellectual energy of students and researchers seemed to confirm their suspicions that Astron was meeting someone.

The district, known for its cozy cafes and proximity to the research center, was a common gathering place for those looking to relax or engage in informal study sessions.

'Who is he meeting? Is there someone I don't know?'

Irina's thoughts raced, imagining who Astron could be meeting, while Julia's smile widened, pleased with the intrigue they were uncovering. The fun of the chase had fully caught them now.

—SWOOSH!

However, their focus shifted abruptly as a wave of energy pulsed through the air.

"!"

The distinctive ripple of mana was unmistakable, indicating a disturbance nearby. Both Lilia and Irina, sensitive to such fluctuations, recognized it instantly as signs of a conflict or brawl—a rarity but not unheard of among the academy's passionate and sometimes hot-headed students.

"Someone is fighting." Not knowing why they were still speaking with whispers, Irina informed others.

"Yeah, I know."

Turning towards the source of the disturbance, Lilia's enhanced vision, honed from her training as a ranger, caught sight of a troubling scene within one of the cafes.

Ethan, with his face bloodied, was sprawled across a table, surrounded by a group of unknown individuals. It was clear from his posture and the tension around him that he was either in the middle of a confrontation or had just suffered the worst end of one.

Lilia's instincts as a protector kicked in, and she whispered urgently to her companions, "That's Ethan—he's in trouble."

"What?"

"Ethan is in trouble?"

Without hesitation, the trio's earlier mission of following Astron was put on hold. It was an unconscious act.

The importance of family alliances and camaraderie among their circle, especially those of notable houses, dictated their next actions.

Quickly and quietly, they approached the cafe, their minds shifting from curiosity about Astron's activities to concern for Ethan's well-being.

After all, the former was something they did just for entertainment.

—SWOOSH!

Without even wasting for a second, Julia, being the hot-

blooded girl she is, instantly dashed through the café.

"Hey!"

Lilia and Irina tried to calm her down to assess the situation first, but Julia was already far away.

"Sigh...." With a sigh, Lilia followed Julia, noticing that standing there wouldn't help.

"Wa-"

Irina was left alone for a second, being late in judgment. She threw a gaze at where Astron was but only to see that he was no longer there.

"Tch."

With a click of her tongue, she also followed her friends' tracks, instantly rushing to the café.