

H. Academy 561

Chapter 561 125.2 - Finally Free (?)

In the room where intricate engravings resembling the beauty of nature adorned the walls, a girl with purple hair cascading down to her waist sat at her desk, sipping her tea. The room was a masterful blend of elegance and luxury, the engravings capturing the essence of flourishing forests and serene rivers, each detail carved into the wood with painstaking precision.

The subtle glow from the chandelier overhead cast a warm light across the room, highlighting the richness of the engravings, which seemed to pulse with life as if the forest itself had been brought indoors.

Expensive furniture made of rare woods and adorned with fine craftsmanship filled the space, with shelves lined with books and documents. The air was filled with the faint scent of lavender, a calming presence that matched the serenity of the surroundings. The girl was sitting at her desk, a delicate teacup resting in her hand as she glanced over the documents in front of her.

Among those documents was the invitation to the banquet—a key piece that she had secured just as Astron had desired. It hadn't been difficult. Her family name alone held enough influence in the Southern side of the Valerian Federation to open doors, and acquiring an invitation was as simple as mentioning who she was. The weight of her family's name made things run smoothly in this part of the world, and that power was something she wielded with subtlety and precision.

As she scanned the papers, her eyes narrowing in thought, a soft knock at the door pulled her from her concentration.

The door creaked open, and Alfred, ever composed and elegant, stepped inside.

"Alfred."

The girl said, looking at the man entering.

His sharp, formal appearance contrasted with the calm, natural atmosphere of the room. With a polite bow, he addressed her.

"My Lady," Alfred began, his tone measured and respectful. "The dress you requested for the banquet has been prepared and delivered. It is ready whenever you wish to try it on."

Maya placed her teacup down on the saucer with a soft clink, a smile gracing her lips. "Ah, wonderful. Thank you, Alfred."

Maya rose gracefully from her chair, smoothing her hands over the delicate fabric of her gown as she stood. Her movements were as fluid as ever, but there was a subtle shift in her demeanor—something even Alfred, her ever-watchful butler, couldn't quite place. The excitement she held for this banquet was unlike the usual demeanor of the members of the family that he had been serving.

Typically, such affairs had little appeal to her nor the Lord of the family.

Alfred's sharp mind noticed the change, though his face remained as impassive as always. It wasn't in his nature to question his Lady's choices, but this particular situation had piqued his curiosity.

"My Lady," Alfred ventured cautiously, "forgive my inquiry, but I must admit that I find it unusual for you to take such an interest in this banquet. I know the significance of the guests attending, but our family has rarely concerned itself with these gatherings. Might I ask what has piqued your interest in this one?"

Maya paused for a brief moment, her fingers brushing over the stack of documents she had been reviewing. Her blue eyes flickered with an unreadable expression before she smiled, though it didn't quite reach her eyes.

"You've always been observant, Alfred," she acknowledged, her tone light yet laced with something deeper. "But there's no need for concern. This is a personal matter." She turned to face him fully, her smile growing more genuine. "Let's just say there's someone I'd like to help."

Alfred gave a small nod, though the answer only fueled his curiosity further. It was rare for Maya to place personal importance on something outside her usual circle, even more so when it involved the affairs of others. The Lady had always been independent, self-reliant, and somewhat distant from the power games played in the higher circles of society.

Still, it wasn't his place to press further.

"As you wish, My Lady," Alfred replied, his voice unwavering. "The dress is in your private fitting room. Shall I escort you?"

Maya nodded, gesturing for him to lead the way. As they walked, Alfred couldn't help but think of the exquisite gown that had been specially commissioned for the event. It was a masterpiece created by the finest tailors using the most luxurious silks and materials from distant lands. The craftsmanship was impeccable, and no detail had been spared to ensure it was worthy of someone of Maya's stature.

The gown itself was a blend of deep, regal hues—rich purples and blues intertwined with silver accents that seemed to shimmer in the light. It had been designed to capture attention without being ostentatious, an elegant display of refinement and power. It was a dress meant for someone who could command a room with presence alone, and Maya certainly fit that description.

Upon entering the fitting room, Maya approached the dress, running her fingers over the soft silk fabric. Alfred watched silently as she examined the gown, his curiosity still gnawing at him.

Who could she be helping? And why now?

As if sensing his unspoken thoughts, Maya turned slightly, her smile returning. "Alfred, sometimes things require a little... personal touch. This banquet will be important for several reasons, but mostly, it's a chance to support someone who has helped me in ways they might not even realize."

Alfred's brow furrowed slightly. His Lady rarely showed such vulnerability, especially when it came to matters of personal connection.

"I see," he said after a beat.

Alfred, ever cautious and deliberate with his words, observed his Lady closely, his mind whirring with the puzzle pieces she had subtly laid before him. There was a lingering question that had been tugging at him since the recent preparations began. He took a measured breath, then spoke carefully.

"My Lady, if I may inquire... is this person you intend to support the same individual you ordered to be received by the airship?"

Maya paused for a moment, her fingers still tracing the elegant gown before her. She glanced at Alfred with a slightly amused expression, impressed as always by his perceptiveness. Of course,

someone like Alfred would notice even the smallest details—after all, the way people arrived at their estate was no simple affair.

The Evergreen family was not like other noble families of the Valerian Federation. While many rulers governed their lands with visible authority, overseeing bustling cities and villages, the Evergreen family operated differently. Their vast estate, located deep within secluded lands, was rarely visited by outsiders. The city below their jurisdiction saw very little of the Evergreen family, and their presence in the greater political landscape was equally understated. Their mansion, perched in a desolate location away from the prying eyes of society, was often seen as a place of mystery.

Rarely would the Lord of the family, or even its members, appear in public. Invitations to their estate were even rarer, typically reserved for only the most essential of guests, and even then, the protocols for arriving at the mansion were meticulous. Visitors were brought by airship, as Maya had arranged for a certain guest, further emphasizing the secrecy and isolation surrounding her family.

Maya gave Alfred a small nod, acknowledging his sharpness. "Yes, Alfred. The one I had ordered to be received is indeed the person I'm supporting. He's... special."

The butler inclined his head, his expression remaining neutral despite the newfound information. His curiosity deepened, but he knew better than to pry further without invitation.

Alfred cleared his throat softly, maintaining his respectful tone. "I see, My Lady. That does explain the special arrangements. I assumed as much, given that our visitors are few and far between."

Maya let out a soft chuckle. "It's not often that we bring someone to the estate, especially not with such care. But... he's worth it."

Alfred remained silent, letting his Lady's words settle in the air. There was a weight behind them that he didn't miss, though he couldn't entirely discern the nature of her connection with this individual. The fact that she had arranged such precise details, going so far as to have this person arrive via airship to their secluded mansion, suggested this was no ordinary relationship.

It was also unusual for Maya to show such personal involvement. Despite her kind nature, she typically kept a professional distance, especially regarding anything linked to her family's affairs.

"You've always been careful about who you associate with, My Lady," Alfred ventured. "This must be a person of considerable importance to you."

Maya met his eyes briefly, a fleeting vulnerability crossing her features before her usual composed smile returned. "He is," she admitted softly. "More than he knows."

The butler gave a respectful bow. "As always, my Lady, I trust your judgment."

Alfred's brow furrowed slightly, though his voice remained as composed as ever. "While I trust your judgment completely, My Lady," he began carefully, "I must inform you that Lord Evergreen will be returning to the estate tomorrow evening. Have you considered how you will introduce this individual to him?"

Maya's expression didn't falter. She remained seated at her desk, her fingers lightly tracing the edges of the documents before her. Through the window, the vast expanse of the forest stretched out, its trees swaying gently in the breeze. There was a glint in her eyes as she took in the view.

"The Lord will likely be curious," Alfred continued, his tone respectful but pointed. "He may wish to know why you've chosen to attend this banquet, something you have rarely shown interest in, and why you've taken the step of inviting someone to our estate."

Maya smiled, the gesture serene yet purposeful. Her eyes, now focused out the window, reflected both calm and a hint of mischief. "Oh, I expected nothing less from him," she mused. "He's always been thorough when it comes to family matters, hasn't he?"

Her tone was light, but there was an undeniable firmness to it as if she had already anticipated this moment and had made her peace with the scrutiny she would face. She stood from her chair, her movements graceful, and took a few steps closer to the window.

"Truth be told, I've been intending to introduce him to the family for some time now," Maya said, her voice soft but resolute.

"And..... Isn't it better to keep things open for the person you hold dear? So that they can never leave your side."

Alfred could not help but widen his eyes since there was a crazed smile on his lady's face.

And a certain crimson glint in her eyes.

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Alfred felt a chill run down his spine as he caught the gleam in Maya's eyes. It was the same crimson hue that had unnerved him during the airship encounter. That brief moment when her composed demeanor had slipped, revealing something far darker, something lurking beneath the surface.

Her smile, wide and unsettling, only amplified the unease. He hadn't seen her like this in quite some time. The way her words lingered in the air, laced with obsession, made him question how far his Lady was willing to go to ensure this individual remained by her side.

For the first time in years, Alfred, the ever-composed butler, felt a flicker of intimidation from the girl he had watched grow into a refined woman.

"Isn't it better to keep things open for the person you hold dear?" Her voice was still smooth and gentle, but the undercurrent was unmistakable. "So that they can never leave your side."

He didn't answer immediately, his mind processing the shift in her tone. That glint in her eyes—he had hoped it was something fleeting, a phase, but it had resurfaced. And now, with the banquet and this unknown figure, it seemed to have gained strength. Could she be losing control of herself again?

Just as quickly as the unsettling moment had arrived, it vanished. Maya's expression softened, her usual serene smile returning as if nothing had happened. She exuded calm, but Alfred wasn't fooled. He had seen the darkness lurking beneath that composed exterior.

"You should take a rest, Alfred," she said, her voice returning to its usual gentle cadence. "You've done more than enough for today."

Alfred, ever dutiful, gave a slight bow though his eyes lingered on her for a moment longer. "Very well, My Lady. I shall retire for the evening. If you require anything, do not hesitate to call upon me."

Maya turned back toward the window, her hands clasped behind her as she gazed out at the forest once more, her thoughts seemingly elsewhere. "Of course, Alfred. Rest well."

With a final glance, Alfred exited the room, his mind troubled. The young woman he served with unwavering loyalty was slipping into something dangerous. And though his duty was to serve, he couldn't help but wonder how long he could watch over her like this without intervention.

As Alfred's footsteps faded from the room, Maya continued to gaze out at the vast expanse of the sky. The twilight was settling in, casting hues of purple and gold over the horizon, a serene contrast to the storm brewing within her heart.

"It's time," she whispered to herself, her voice barely audible. "Time to introduce him to the family."

She had been considering this idea for a while already, but she did not have any opportunity to do so. She couldn't find the correct time interval or reason to call him to her household.

While her relationship with her Junior was different from a usual relationship, the things that she knew about him were still limited to quite an extent. And she felt that if she were to call him to her household, that would be akin to some sort of forcing him, which at that time she did not like.

SLEAK!

Her fingers delicately traced the edge of the window, and for a moment, her eyes softened, her expression one of pure, almost childlike joy. But beneath that purity was something else—something darker, fueled by a desire that had grown stronger with each passing day.

'It's a pity that Father and Mother aren't here,' she thought, her smile faltering slightly. The absence of her parents made things more complicated. Though she could understand it given the reasons....

But her brother—yes, he would be here. He would understand, and he would see what she saw in Astron.

Her gaze darkened, filled with longing and obsession. 'At the very least, presenting him to my brother should be fine. He'll come to accept him... once he sees how important he is to me.'

Maya's smile, though radiant, was now tainted with a possessive desire. She felt her heart throb with anticipation, excitement coursing through her veins at the thought of finally bringing Astron into her world.

With a slow, deliberate movement, she reached for her smartwatch. The sleek device responded immediately, lighting up in her hand as she navigated through the contacts. She found his name—Junior—and, without hesitation, initiated the call.

As the device rang, she could already imagine his calm, composed voice answering her. She wanted to hear him, to feel the connection that only he could provide. It was time to bring him closer, closer to her, to the life she had carefully crafted for him—whether he realized it or not.

The call connected, and a soft click echoed in the quiet room. "Senior Maya," Astron's voice came through, steady and calm as always.

Maya's smile widened. "Junior. I hope I didn't catch you at a bad time."

"No, you didn't."

Maya leaned back in her chair, her fingers lightly tapping against the surface of her desk as Astron's steady voice filled the room.

"Are you ready to come here, Junior?" she asked, her tone soft but carrying an air of expectation.

"I am," came Astron's calm reply.

Maya's smile deepened. "Good, then. Everything is ready from my end. It should be smooth once you arrive."

"Thank you, Senior," Astron said, his voice steady but sincere. "If not for your help, things would be much more difficult."

A soft chuckle escaped her lips. "You don't need to thank me, Junior. I don't mind. In fact," she paused, a playful lilt entering her voice, "I've been feeling rather bored and..."

"Your blood bags are almost used up, right?" Astron completed the sentence for her, his tone matter-of-fact, as if this were a normal conversation.

Maya's eyes twinkled with amusement. "That's right," she admitted, her smile widening. "I've been trying to save them, thinking I could stall until the academy starts again. I didn't want to trouble you too much, Junior."

There was a brief silence on the other end, the weight of their connection hanging in the air.

"You don't have to worry about that," Astron said evenly, his voice lacking the playfulness of hers but still carrying a certain level of reassurance. "I'll be there soon, and you won't have to wait long."

Maya's heart fluttered at his words, though she kept her voice composed. "I'll be waiting, then. Don't keep me waiting too long, Junior."

"....." There was a brief silence on his end. "Understood, Senior," but then came his calm reply, and with that, the line disconnected.

Maya placed the smartwatch down, her eyes lingering on it for a moment. The anticipation of his arrival sent a thrill through her. She couldn't help but imagine the moment he would step into her world, finally brought into the life she had been building for him—slowly, carefully, and with purpose.

'Soon,' she thought, her eyes narrowing with a sense of both longing and satisfaction. 'Very soon.'

I woke up early, the familiar hum of the city vibrating in the background—the rented hotel room.

Today marked the start of something new—a necessary trip to the biggest Awakened Market in the Federation. My goal was simple: gather the tools needed for the next phase. But before that, I had some thoughts to sort through.

As I stepped outside, the crisp morning air greeted me, refreshing compared to the recycled atmosphere of my hotel. I made my way to the public transport station, blending into the stream of people. As I boarded, the transport quietly hummed to life, and I found a seat near the back, my mind already wandering.

Being a student at the Arcadia Hunter Academy had its perks, and days like these, they were hard to ignore. The moment people saw that crest, it was like a pass to anything and everything. Discounts, special offers, access to restricted areas—it was more than just a name. It was leverage. The Academy had groomed us for success, and the world knew it. Whether it was high-end weapons from private forges or limited-run alchemy products, I could always get the best of the best.

And let's not forget the alchemy stores. Some of the most sought-after products were barely available to the public. The only reason I had a steady supply was because of the Academy's connections. It was almost amusing how many doors opened just by wearing the Academy tracks. I guess that's what happens when you belong to an institution known for churning out the best hunters.

The transport slid through the city streets, weaving past high-rise buildings and bustling marketplaces. As I glanced out the window, I couldn't help but think about the ridiculous discounts that were always thrown my way. Ten percent here, twenty percent there—sometimes even more if the seller was particularly eager to impress. They knew that the students of Arcadia had buying power and, more importantly, that we were valuable customers.

'A little over the top, isn't it?' I mused, leaning back in my seat. But who was I to complain?

'Rather, I should buy everything before leaving.'

Since I will be going to meet with Senior Maya, I will not have any other opportunity to come to the biggest market in the entire Hunter world.

'If I want to finish my hunt successfully, I need to be fully prepared.' At the end of the day, whether it is a grown, fully-fetched dragon or not, hunting a dragon is something that is never easy.

That is why everything needs to be in place.

'Zhakorath.....That guy must not be alerted until it is the time to end him.'

The transport moved smoothly through the city, and I tapped my fingers on the window's edge, watching the world blur by. High-rise buildings towered above the streets, casting long shadows over the bustling marketplaces below. My mind, however, was preoccupied with more pressing concerns.

'Ten percent here, twenty percent there...' The discounts flashed through my mind, but I pushed the thought aside. I wasn't here for a shopping spree. I was here to prepare. Senior Maya wouldn't wait forever, and once I met with her, returning to the market wouldn't be an option for a while. If I was going to face Zhakorath, I needed to be ready. Completely ready.

'I should buy everything I might need before leaving,' I decided, leaning back in my seat. Zhakorath, a demon disguised as a human, had managed to slip through the cracks of the world for too long. Hunting a dragon, whether fully matured or not, was never a task to be taken lightly. But demons, especially those infiltrated into the human world? They were in a league of their own.

If there was one thing demons were particularly good at, it was being slippery. That's why Zhakorath hadn't been caught yet. Every time someone came close to pinning him down, he'd vanish, slipping into the shadows like smoke, only to resurface somewhere else. That's how they operated—always a step ahead, always calculating.

But this time would be different. This time, I'd make sure he wouldn't see it coming.

'The banquet...' I mused.

'It will mark your grave.'

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After gathering everything I needed from the Awakened Market, I packed the newly acquired gear into my dimensional storage—a handy tool for a hunter, especially one in my line of work. Alchemy products, specialized weapons, and some anti-demon runes. Everything was in place. There was no room for error now.

The streets of Nexoria City stretched out before me as I made my way to the Warp Gate Hall, a sprawling complex near the heart of the city.

The towering gates of the Warp Gate Hall loomed ahead, and I made my way toward the entrance. The place was bustling with activity, various travelers and hunters moving to and from the many destinations across the Federation. But the moment I approached, the security personnel stationed at the entrance straightened up.

I reached into my pocket and retrieved my Arcadia Hunter Academy ID card—a symbol of my status. The official standing guard took it, his eyes scanning the embedded runes and verifying the authenticity of the credentials. For a brief moment, he glanced at me, then back at the card, as the faint glow from his verification device flickered.

"Everything checks out, Mr. Natusalune," the guard said, his tone professional but respectful. He handed the card back to me. "You're cleared for travel. Please proceed."

Another staff member, a young woman dressed in the uniform of the Federation Transport Authority, approached swiftly. She nodded to the guard before turning to me. "I'll escort you to your gate, sir. This way."

I followed her through the bustling halls of the Warp Gate section, passing rows of active gates, each one shimmering with the magic of long-distance transportation. The hum of mana echoed in the air, and the faint buzz of voices from other travelers surrounded us.

As we approached the gate assigned for Ardmont, the glow of the portal became more pronounced. It flickered with energy, signaling that it was fully operational. The attendant turned to me with a polite smile. "Your gate is ready, Mr. Natusalune. You should arrive in Ardmont shortly."

I nodded in acknowledgment. "Thank you," I replied, adjusting the strap of my pack. With everything now in order, the next step of the journey was clear. The preparations were finished, and now it was time to put them into action.

I stepped toward the gate, feeling the familiar hum of energy as I crossed the threshold. The portal shimmered, and in an instant, Nexoria City faded away, replaced by the sprawling metropolis of Ardmont.

As I stepped out of the Warp Gate, the air around me changed. The faint scent of freshly tilled earth mixed with the crispness of the countryside—a sharp contrast to the industrial tones of Nexoria. Before I could take in the surroundings of Ardmont's Warp Gate Hall, a figure approached swiftly.

"Mr. Natusalune, welcome to Ardmont," a well-dressed man greeted me, his voice professional yet warm. He held out a small silver tray that bore a couple of neatly wrapped items. "Please, a quick refreshment for the journey. It's customary here for our distinguished guests."

I glanced at the treats—a soft, fruit-filled pastry that seemed to be a local specialty and a small flask of herbal tea. "Thank you," I replied, accepting the offer.

The man gestured politely, indicating that he would lead the way. "I'll escort you to the main square. The city has been bustling with activity lately, but we've ensured a smooth passage for your exit."

As we walked through the halls, I noticed how different the Warp Gate Hall in Ardmont was compared to Nexoria. Here, the atmosphere felt calmer, more grounded. The walls were lined with rustic decor, and many of the travelers I passed wore the practical clothing of workers, not hunters. The city was unmistakably a hub for agriculture.

When we reached the exit of the Warp Gate Hall, the man left with a polite nod as I looked into the scenery.

The city of Ardmont unfolded before me, its sprawling streets lined with vibrant greenery, a seamless blend of metropolis and nature. Even though the city buzzed with life and activity, it felt different from Nexoria—softer, calmer. Trees lined the roads, their leaves rustling gently in the breeze. Flowers, vibrant and fragrant, adorned the walkways, adding a splash of color against the stone buildings. It wasn't just a city; it was a sanctuary—a metropolis wrapped in nature's embrace, earning its nickname, "The Metropolis of Nature."

Despite the crowds, there was an air of serenity, a reminder of the city's deep connection to the earth. People moved about with purpose, yet the pace was never rushed. The surrounding greenery seemed to slow time itself, inviting the passerby to linger and appreciate the beauty around them.

As I walked, observing the fusion of urban life and nature, my thoughts began to wander. The tranquility of Ardmont was a stark contrast to the constant tension I had grown accustomed to. And in that quiet moment, my mind slipped to Maya.

Even though I had known from the game that Maya was talented, remarkably so, there was something off about her family. There was no mention of the Evergreens in the game—no references to their influence, no record of them being players in the capital's politics. And yet, the talent Maya displayed, the sheer amount of resources she had access to, couldn't have come from nowhere. It was clear that her family wasn't ordinary.

'It doesn't make sense,' I thought, frowning slightly as I walked past a vendor selling fresh produce, the scent of herbs and flowers drifting through the air. 'How can someone with that much power and backing fly so far under the radar?'

I had been searching for records of the Evergreen family for a while now, trying to piece together their story, but it wasn't easy. Most noble families left traces, even if they tried to remain discreet.

Their influence could be seen in politics, commerce, or even military movements. But the Evergreens? It was like trying to find the ghost of a family—whispers, at best, with no real substance to follow.

'No mention in the capital's circles, no participation in the major power plays, and yet Maya carries herself like someone who knows exactly where she stands in the world,' I mused, my steps slowing as I passed by a cluster of trees. The sunlight filtering through the branches reminded me of the calm that always seemed to surround Maya, a calm that hid something far more formidable beneath the surface.

And then there were the resources. The rare alchemical products, the mana-enhancing artifacts, and even the access to training that most people could only dream of—these weren't things that came without influence. The Evergreen family must be hiding something, keeping themselves away from the political theater of the capital for a reason.

'But why?' I questioned, frustration bubbling up as I turned a corner, the vibrant greenery around me doing little to calm the storm in my mind. 'What are they hiding?'

These questions.

They were the reason why I had let Senior Maya take the opportunity to attend the banquet. While it was indeed true that I would need to prepare a lot more, it was not something that I wouldn't be able to do without Senior Maya's help.

Eventually, one way or another, I would be in that banquet.

However, letting Senior Maya help me would also give me an opportunity to visit her household and possibly understand what was going on there.

Of course, there was also the fact that I needed to check up on her progress regarding her vampire situation, and in the end, I had many reasons to get her involved.

'The Evergreen family must hold a certain standing if they have access to such resources,' I thought as I continued walking, the gentle breeze tugging at my cloak. 'And if they aren't involved in the politics of the capital, that can only mean one thing: the government is allowing them to remain in the shadows. Which raises the question—why?'

If the Evergreens had enough influence and power to stay out of the political scene without consequence, it meant one of two things: either they were strong enough to make the government fear them, or there was some other reason keeping them protected. Perhaps alliances, hidden deals, or something even more complicated. Either way, the fact that they were allowed to stay out of sight despite their clear influence was unsettling.

And now, as I prepared to make my way deeper into this mystery, there was the matter of the airship. The fact that I would be taken from this city by airship and that it was arranged by Senior Maya spoke volumes. Airships weren't something everyone possessed. They were rare, expensive, and usually reserved for the elite, military, or the most influential families. Certainly, not something one could command at will.

The Evergreen family clearly had more resources than I had realized, and it only deepened the enigma surrounding them. I had to figure out why they were so far under the radar yet powerful enough to move like this without attracting attention.

Just as my thoughts were spiraling further into the complexity of the Evergreen family's influence, my smartwatch buzzed softly, pulling me back to the present.

I glanced down, and a single name appeared on the screen: [Senior Maya].

The holographic display projected slightly above my wrist, and her face appeared calm yet focused.

"Senior Maya," I greeted her, my voice steady, though my mind was still buzzing with everything I had been piecing together.

"Astron," she said, her voice carrying that same gentle confidence I had come to associate with her. "Have you arrived Ardmont?"

"Just arrived," I replied.

Hearing that I had arrived, Maya's expression softened, and a slight smile played on her lips. "Good. Send me your location," she said, her voice smooth. "Someone is already there, waiting to take you to the airship center."

I nodded, quickly sending my coordinates. "Understood,"

Maya's smile deepened, though there was a certain knowing glint in her eyes. "I'll be waiting," she said, her voice carrying a certain warmth that I wasn't used to. The hologram flickered, and with that, the call ended, leaving me standing amidst the bustle of Ardmont once again.

I stood still for a moment, letting the cool breeze rustle through the trees as I waited for my transport. Maya had always been calm and confident, but there was something in her tone just now that made me wonder how much more she knew about me than I had assumed. The thought settled uneasily in my mind, but I pushed it aside for the moment.

Within a few minutes, the sound of a car approaching caught my attention. It wasn't a flashy, high-end vehicle like the ones I'd seen parked outside the halls in Nexoria. Instead, it was a simple, unassuming car—modest yet efficient, blending in with the surroundings. The driver stepped out, dressed in a sharp, well-fitted uniform, his posture impeccable.

He approached me with a bow of his head. "Mr. Astron Natusalune?" His voice was polite and professional, with a slight hint of deference.

I nodded in response. "That's me."

The driver straightened up, a respectful look on his face. "I am at your service, sir. Lady Maya has arranged for your transport to the airship center. I apologize that we did not prepare a more luxurious vehicle, but Lady Maya insisted that you preferred something more discreet."

I glanced at the car and gave a small nod of approval. "She's right. I don't need anything flashy."

The driver smiled faintly, bowing his head once more. "It seems Lady Maya knows you well, sir."

'Well, she indeed knows me well.'

In one way or another, we have spent quite a lot of time together, after all.

'Though, why do I feel chilly? This time as well.....'

Once again, my instincts were warning me.

Chapter 564 126.1 - Evergreen

The car glided smoothly through the streets of Ardmont, heading toward the outskirts of the city. As the scenery shifted from the vibrant greenery and bustling crowds of the metropolis to the more open, expansive fields beyond, I settled into the quiet, letting the stillness take over.

The driver, true to his professional demeanor, didn't speak, and I didn't feel the need to break the silence. Instead, I focused on the passing landscape. The soft hum of the car's engine became background noise as I gazed out of the window, observing the transition from city to countryside.

As the car continued through the scenic roads of Ardmont, I caught sight of several people bustling around the trade centers. These buildings were sleek, and their designs were a blend of modern architecture and the earthy tones of nature. Towering structures of glass and steel were softened by lush green terraces and walls covered in climbing plants, giving the impression that they were almost grown from the earth itself rather than built upon it.

Workers and traders moved fluidly between the buildings, their actions efficient but with a sense of ease that was rare in the more industrialized cities. Stalls and marketplaces were neatly set up alongside advanced transportation hubs, where hovering carts and drones carried supplies from one side of the centers to the other. Despite the advanced technology, it felt like the technology served the environment, not the other way around.

'Ardmont really is something else,' I thought as I observed the fusion of human innovation and natural beauty. In Nexoria, it was all about efficiency and power, but here, it was about balance and harmony. The people seemed content, and even the trade had a rhythm to it that didn't feel rushed or pressured. The air was cleaner, too, as if the city's layout naturally filtered out the chaos of daily life.

After about thirty minutes of this quiet drive through the countryside, the car slowed down as we approached a more secluded area. Ahead, I could see a series of high, sleek gates surrounding a large private airship port. The port itself was an impressive sight—its metallic platforms shimmered under the sun, but like everything else in Ardmont, it had a touch of nature integrated into the design. Vines and greenery lined the walkways, and small trees stood in perfect symmetry along the entrance.

"Here."

"A minute."

The driver presented his ID to the personnel at the gate, who nodded without hesitation, allowing us to pass through. As the car rolled forward, I took a moment to absorb my surroundings. I couldn't help but feel a slight sense of amazement at the luxury of the place. It wasn't ostentatious in the traditional sense, but there was an understated elegance to everything—the perfectly maintained grounds, the smooth operations of the airships being prepped for departure, and the personnel who moved with a quiet, professional efficiency.

Even for someone who had seen countless different scenes in the game, this level of subtle opulence caught me off guard.

'This doesn't fall short of the wealth of the Blackthorns or any other high-ranking families.'

As we came to a stop near one of the private hangars, the driver stepped out and opened the door for me. "We've arrived, Mr. Natusalune," he said, gesturing toward the entrance. I stepped out of the car, nodding to him as I took in the sight of the private airship waiting for me.

'I guess Senior Maya didn't hold back on this,' I thought, my curiosity piqued.

The airship before me was impressive, to say the least. Its sleek exterior, crafted from a shimmering alloy that reflected the sunlight in subtle hues of silver and blue, exuded both sophistication and durability.

It was enormous, though its design was refined enough to make it seem almost modest. The engines were silent, a testament to the advanced technology that powered the vessel. No loud hum or clattering of mechanical parts—just a low, constant pulse of energy.

As I neared the airship, the details of its construction became clearer. The shimmering alloy that coated its hull wasn't just for show. 'That's Mithrinium—lightweight, but incredibly strong. Resistant to most forms of magical interference.' It was rare to see a ship outfitted with it, especially for personal use. Maya certainly spared no expense.

I glanced along the sides, noting the faint outlines of hidden panels. 'Those aren't just storage compartments... reinforced plating and a concealed weapon system.' My eyes picked out a few key features. 'Mana-siphon turrets, perhaps? Compact, but deadly in close-quarter aerial skirmishes.' They were subtle, almost unnoticeable to the untrained eye, but their positioning was strategic—no angle left undefended.

As I moved closer, I caught sight of the symbols etched subtly into the airship's hull, nearly blending with the design. 'Runic engravings... that's Aetherweave. Perfect for amplifying protective barriers and enhancing the ship's stealth capabilities.' No doubt, it allowed the airship to pass through areas undetected while ensuring its occupants remained safe from magical threats.

The engines were tucked beneath the sleek frame, almost hidden, but I recognized the faint glow of crystallized mana energy. 'Crystalis Core Engines. Silent, efficient, and able to sustain long flights without refueling. With those, this ship could cross half the continent in a single trip.'

I stepped back, taking in the full view once more. 'This isn't just for travel. It's for defense, stealth, and speed. A personal fortress in the sky.'

As I stepped onto the ramp, a butler appeared at the entrance, his posture impeccable, dressed in a uniform that exuded professionalism. He bowed slightly before speaking. "Welcome aboard, Mr. Natusalune. Lady Maya has instructed me to escort you to the main cabin. Please, follow me."

I nodded in acknowledgment, but my attention was still focused on the details around me. The interior of the airship was as impressive as the exterior—polished floors, intricate woodwork along the walls, and soft lighting that gave the space a serene ambiance. Yet, there was something else. Subtle signs that suggested the airship had seen some use, but not recently.

'The furniture, while pristine, shows slight wear in the usual spots,' I noted as I walked. The faint creases in the upholstery where someone might sit frequently, but no signs of recent occupancy. 'This airship is used, but not often. Maybe once in a while, but it's clear it's kept in excellent condition.'

The butler led me through the narrow corridors, and I took in more of the surroundings. Each room we passed was meticulously arranged, but nothing felt personal. 'It's well-maintained,' I thought, 'but there's a difference between regular cleaning and daily use.' The air was fresh, too fresh for a ship that had seen frequent travel. Maintenance was routine, but not much more than that.

As we approached the main cabin, I glanced at the subtle details—art pieces carefully selected to reflect a refined taste, minimalist yet elegant. 'This is definitely Maya's ship. It has her touch all over it. Reserved, understated, and refined. And considering she's been at the academy for over a year and a half, it makes sense why this airship hasn't been used much recently.'

The butler stopped in front of a large, polished door and opened it, revealing the main cabin. "Please, make yourself comfortable," he said, gesturing toward the seating area.

I stepped into the seating area, immediately noticing the soft, plush chairs arranged around a low table. The upholstery was crafted from high-end materials, blending comfort with elegance. Each piece of furniture was carefully placed, giving the space an air of intimacy while still maintaining the feel of a luxury airship. The room itself was quiet, save for the faint hum of the ship's systems, and the lighting was soft, casting a warm glow across the cabin.

"Mr. Natusalune," the butler spoke again, his tone polite, "the airship will board shortly. If you have any questions or require anything during the flight, please don't hesitate to ask."

I glanced toward the butler, considering for a moment. "How long will the ride take?"

"It will be approximately one hour, sir," he replied smoothly, folding his hands in front of him. "Lady Maya has arranged everything to ensure a comfortable journey."

I nodded, acknowledging the information. "Thank you. That will be all for now."

The butler gave a small bow before excusing himself from the room, leaving me alone in the quiet, luxurious cabin. I leaned back into one of the chairs, the softness immediately providing comfort.

Moments later, I felt the subtle shift beneath my feet as the airship began its ascent. The smoothness of the takeoff was barely noticeable, save for the faint change in pressure.

As the airship leveled off, it didn't ascend too high, keeping a close connection to the landscape below. I moved closer to one of the large windows, my eyes drawn to the changing view. The city of Ardmont grew smaller with each passing moment, the towering buildings and streets gradually fading into the distance. But as we rose higher, the full scope of the land surrounding the city became more visible, stretching far beyond what most would be able to perceive.

'A perk of the eyes,' I thought as my vision adjusted, focusing on the details far below. Even from this height, I could make out the sprawling agricultural lands that extended in all directions, a vast tapestry of fields and crops spread across the region. It was impressive—countless fields, all tended by various machines and workers who moved with purpose, their actions synchronized in a strange harmony with the land itself.

The more I looked, the more details revealed themselves. I could see how magic was woven into the very fabric of the land. Massive formations, faintly glowing with a soft energy, were scattered

across the fields, clearly designed to regulate the weather and soil conditions. 'So that's how they maintain consistency,' I mused, noting the subtle shifts in the air and the flow of mana. Some areas had a light drizzle, while others basked in warm sunlight—all directed by the formations that controlled each zone's environment to optimize the crops.

Machinery of all kinds moved efficiently between the fields—hovering drones inspecting crops, large automated plows tilling the earth, and irrigation systems that distributed water with precision. Yet, it wasn't just machines at work. I could see workers, both human and otherwise, moving across the land. They were spaced far apart, yet each group seemed to know exactly what needed to be done, their coordination a testament to the careful balance that defined this region.

'The integration of magic here is far beyond what I've seen in most human lands,' I noted. In other places, magic was often treated as an afterthought or luxury, but here it was a foundational tool used to enhance every aspect of life. Agriculture, technology, and mana flowed seamlessly together, allowing for a level of efficiency that was rare to find. Forests bordered the farmlands, thick with trees that seemed untouched by the hand of industry. Even here, I could see formations keeping the natural balance in check, ensuring the forest remained healthy.

The combination of technology and nature, so perfectly in sync, was fascinating. It was clear that Ardmont, despite its agricultural focus, had a deep understanding of how to use mana to benefit both the land and the people.

'So different from the usual human lands,' I thought, the contrast between what I saw here and what I had known elsewhere striking me.

The airship continued its smooth journey, and I stayed by the window, observing the intricate workings of the land below. It was as if the entire region was alive with a rhythm dictated by both magic and nature, a balance that most places could only dream of achieving.

'A world within itself,' I mused, letting the thought linger as the airship glided effortlessly above the vast, enchanted fields.

Exactly 57 minutes later, as I continued to observe the landscape below, something caught my eye.

'The mana....'

It changed.

Chapter 565 126.2 - Evergreen

Mana.

When we think about what mana is, most people tend to imagine it as just another resource—something to be harnessed, controlled, and expanded. But in truth, mana is much more than that. It's not just the lifeblood of magic, but the essence of the world itself. It flows through everything—living beings, the land, the air. Every part of the environment is a reflection of the mana coursing through it, and how that mana interacts with the world tells you more than just its surface appearance.

Mana isn't simply raw energy; it's a language. One that, if you understand it, reveals far more than what the naked eye can perceive. When mana is abundant, the land flourishes, teeming with life. When it's disrupted or drained, everything suffers—the soil dries, plants wither, and even the air grows heavy with stagnation.

It's everywhere, integrated into every aspect of existence. In the way crops grow, how the wind shifts, and even how people interact with their surroundings. By reading the mana in an environment, you can infer the health of the land and the stability of the climate or even detect hidden threats before they become visible.

And with the right eyes, like mine, that's exactly what I can do. My vision doesn't just let me see farther—it lets me read the currents of mana, like tracing the flow of a river.

I've done it more times than I can count. In battle, it's second nature to scan for disruptions in mana flow, giving me an edge. In unfamiliar environments, I use it to understand the balance of the land.

And now.

Mana is, in many ways, like electromagnetic waves. It has properties—frequency, intensity, and flow—that can be read, analyzed, and understood by those attuned to it. And just like waves, mana interacts with everything in its path, influencing the environment, living beings, and even objects. By analyzing those properties, you can learn not just about the surface level of things but the deeper truths that lie beneath.

That's what I've been doing all this time, unconsciously. Reading the shifts in mana around me, letting it inform my understanding of the world. Whether in battle or in unfamiliar environments,

it's become second nature to perceive mana and break it down in my mind. A constant stream of information flowing through my senses.

'This place is different.'

In front of me, the special properties of mana were different.

The mana here wasn't following the same rules. It felt heavier, denser. From my eyes, I could see it—an intricate weave of energy swirling beneath the surface, not chaotic, but tightly controlled in its own way.

As I focused, I began dismantling the mana in my head, breaking it down piece by piece. The flow, the intensity—it was far richer than anything I had encountered thus far on this journey. The patterns it formed were unfamiliar, almost foreign. It wasn't just that there was more mana here; it was the way it behaved, the way it interacted with the environment.

'This is...' I let the thought hang as I visualized it. In my mind's eye, the mana took shape, forming an intricate network of currents and streams, each one more vibrant than the last. It was like a living organism, pulsing and breathing with its own rhythm.

And then I saw it. A barrier.

It wasn't visible to the naked eye, but my senses picked it up clearly. The mana shifted abruptly as if I had just crossed an invisible threshold. 'A sphere,' I thought, watching as the energy curved around the land in a protective dome, enveloping the entire region in its embrace.

It wasn't just a barrier in the traditional sense, though. It wasn't designed to keep things out—it was more like a self-contained ecosystem, preserving the natural balance within. The mana inside the barrier was of a different quality entirely, almost as if it had been purified, refined by some 'ancient' process.

Indeed, it felt ancient.

Most of the time, mana felt like a living thing, still actively integrating itself into the environment, shaping and influencing the world ever since the day of Nexus Convergence 500 years ago. That event changed everything, flooding the world with mana and starting a process that is still ongoing to this day.

But here, the mana felt... complete.

'Contrary to how it is with the rest of the world where mana continues to integrate itself with the environment, this place... it's as if mana has already become one with the land,' I thought, my mind working to break down the significance of what I was sensing.

Mana, in most places, still carried the raw, untamed energy of its arrival. It was vibrant but incomplete, as if it was still learning to settle into its new home, altering ecosystems and human structures alike. But here, the mana wasn't raw—it was refined, natural in a way that felt... ancient. It had already reached full integration, as if it had been part of this place for far longer than the 500 years the rest of the world had experienced.

This couldn't be a coincidence. The difference wasn't just in the mana—it was in how the environment interacted with it. The land wasn't merely affected by mana; it was shaped by it, as though the two were symbiotic. And then it struck me.

Senior Maya.

Her talents, her abilities—they were too extraordinary to be mere coincidence. I had always sensed there was something more to her, something beyond the training and experience we all had at the academy. But now, seeing this place, I had no doubt. This level of mana refinement wasn't normal, not in the slightest.

'Indeed.'

It was really intriguing.

The fact that there were many things that I still didn't know even if I had completely played the game.

Just as my thoughts continued to spiral deeper into the realization of how little I still knew, despite having played through the game entirely, there was a knock at the door. The sound was polite yet firm, pulling me back into the present moment. The door opened, and the butler stepped inside, bowing slightly before speaking.

"I hope the ride has been comfortable, Mr. Natusalune," he said, his tone respectful and calm. "We have just arrived at our destination."

I nodded in acknowledgment, the weight of my earlier thoughts still lingering in the back of my mind. I stood from the comfortable seat and moved toward the window, curious to see where we were about to land.

The scene that greeted me was nothing short of impressive. Outside, nestled between thick forests and towering trees, stood a massive mansion. It was elegant and grand and radiated an air of quiet authority. The structure seemed perfectly integrated with the surrounding nature, almost as if the land had shaped itself to accommodate the mansion's presence rather than the other way around.

The butler cleared his throat softly, drawing my attention away from the window. "We will be landing shortly, Mr. Natusalune," he informed me with the same composed tone. "If there is anything else you require, please do not hesitate to ask." He bowed again before excusing himself, leaving me alone once more with my thoughts.

I returned my gaze to the mansion and the surrounding forest, the weight of the place settling over me. Everything about it was designed with precision and care, from the trees lining the estate to the way the structure harmonized with the environment. It was a seamless blend of power and nature.

Moments later, the airship began to slow, gently adjusting its course as it prepared to land. I could feel the smooth alignment as the ship descended gracefully toward a special hangar just beyond the mansion. The hangar was well-concealed, but its design was unmistakably for personal use. It was clear that this landing site had been built with the airship in mind, reserved for its frequent—though not recent—visits.

The ship touched down with hardly a sound, the engines powering down with the same quiet efficiency that had carried us through the journey. The hangar itself was sleek, built into the landscape to avoid disturbing the natural beauty of the surroundings.

The moment the door to the airship opened, a rush of mana flooded my senses, assaulting me with an intensity I hadn't anticipated. It wasn't just the air that was different—it was as if the very pressure of the atmosphere had shifted.

'Ooof....'

My head spun for a brief moment, the weight of the refined, ancient mana nearly overwhelming. But within seconds, I regained control, steadying myself as I took a slow breath.

"Haaah...."

The air outside was cool, carrying with it the scent of nature—fresh, earthy, and untouched by the industrial rhythms of the world. It was a refreshing change from the more structured environment I'd just left behind. A gentle breeze drifted in, wrapping around me like a soft embrace. But amidst the natural smells, one distinct fragrance stood out. Familiar. Inviting.

It was subtle at first, but as I focused, the scent became unmistakable—a fragrance I had come to associate with a certain someone. Natural, delicate, and distinctly her.

I raised my head, and there she stood.

Senior Maya.

Her purple hair cascaded effortlessly down to her waist, glimmering in the light as if it had been spun from silk. Her pink eyes, sharp yet soft, were locked onto mine, radiating a quiet strength that only she could possess.

"Junior," her voice came, calm and warm, carrying an undercurrent of familiarity that immediately grounded me in the moment.

In the blink of an eye, she was before me, her presence commanding yet serene.

Maya stood before me, just as I had always seen her—serene, kind, and radiating a purity that seemed almost at odds with the power she carried. Despite the subtle shift in the air around her, she remained composed, her gaze never wavering as she took me in.

"Senior," I replied, my voice calm but watchful. I took a moment to observe her more closely. At first glance, she seemed the same—lively, her complexion bright and full of life. But there was something else, something faint yet undeniable. A red glint in her eyes, subtle but present, hinted at a tension she was holding back. It wasn't just the usual calmness she exuded; this time, it felt like she was keeping herself in check.

I noticed the faint blush on her cheeks and how she briefly wet her lips with nothing but saliva. The small gestures, though seemingly insignificant, told me enough.

'She is trying to suppress herself.' She was trying to suppress her vampiric urges—urges that had clearly grown stronger.

Chapter 566 126.3 - Evergreen

In the dimly lit room, soft candlelight flickered along the walls, casting gentle shadows over the intricate engravings and elegant décor that adorned the space. Maya sat cross-legged on a plush mat in the center of her room, her posture serene and composed. Her eyes were closed, and her hands rested lightly on her knees, fingers curled inward in a meditative pose.

For most of the Awakened, meditation might not be a necessity, but for someone like Maya, a mage who cultivated her mind and needed balance over her abilities, it was crucial. The very act of centering her mind allowed her to control the natural energies around her and, more importantly, to keep her vampiric urges at bay.

As she inhaled deeply, drawing in the ambient mana around her, her body seemed to still further, her presence becoming attuned to the room's energies. The forest-like engravings on the walls almost shimmered in response, as if acknowledging her connection to the natural world.

'Focus,' she told herself. The more she could align her mind with the peaceful flow of mana, the more she could stave off the dangerous pull of her vampiric nature. The hunger had been building steadily, especially as she pushed herself to rely less and less on the blood bags. It was a conscious choice, an effort to maintain her humanity without succumbing too deeply to her vampiric cravings.

But it wasn't easy.

Even now, as she breathed slowly, she could feel the stirrings of that dark part of her—the part that craved blood, that wanted to overwhelm her with the pure, animalistic need for sustenance. She gritted her teeth for a moment, feeling the fangs in her mouth slightly extend before she caught herself.

'Not now,' she thought, calming her inner turmoil.

The mana flowed more freely now, soothing her mind and quieting the relentless pull of her vampiric urges. In moments like these, it was as if two parts of her were constantly at war—the

refined, controlled mage who sought balance and the primal, bloodthirsty predator that her vampiric nature threatened to unleash.

Her breath steadied as she slowly found a rhythm, each inhalation drawing in calming energy, each exhalation pushing out the remnants of her hunger. The deeper she meditated, the more control she regained. For Maya, this balance was everything—without it, she risked losing herself.

'I'm not a slave to it. I control it.'

She repeated this mantra in her mind, letting the words become part of the flow of energy, strengthening her resolve. Slowly, the hunger receded to the edges of her consciousness, like a distant echo.

The gentle flow of mana did its part, calming her immediate urges, but it couldn't quell the deeper, more insidious feeling that had been gnawing at her for weeks now: loneliness.

The mansion was vast, grand, and filled with loyal staff ready to attend to her every need. Yet, despite their constant presence, Maya felt a profound emptiness.

The academy had offered distractions, challenges, and—most importantly—a connection to others, particularly to Astron. But now, with the semester paused and the academy life distant, time had become her biggest enemy.

'Time...' she thought, her eyelids fluttering as she took another measured breath. It was time that stretched on endlessly now, leaving her in this limbo between moments of fleeting control and the overwhelming hunger that lurked beneath the surface. She repeated the mantra again, but this time, it felt hollow, more out of habit than conviction.

'I'm not a slave to it. I control it.'

She opened her eyes slowly, staring at the delicate patterns of light filtering through the curtains.

KNOCK!

The soft knock at the door echoed through the stillness of the room. Maya, having already sensed Alfred's approach, exhaled slowly, her breath mingling with the fading remnants of her mantra. "Enter," she said, her voice calm but laced with anticipation.

Alfred stepped in quietly, his ever-present composure intact. His eyes briefly scanned the room before settling on Maya, who had just begun to rise from her meditative pose. "My Lady," he began with his usual formality, "I apologize for interrupting your session, but I thought it best to inform you that the airship will be arriving in just a few minutes."

Maya's eyes sparkled, her heart quickening with excitement.

'Finally.'

The thought filled her with a surge of warmth, banishing the hollow feeling that had plagued her for days. She had arranged everything perfectly—her airship sent to collect him, the preparation of the estate. And now, after waiting and preparing, the moment was near.

"Thank you, Alfred," she replied, standing gracefully from her position. Her tone was calm, but the subtle joy in her expression betrayed her emotions. "I'm going to welcome him."

Alfred bowed slightly, acknowledging her decision. "Very well, My Lady. Shall I accompany you?"

Maya smiled at her loyal butler, her expression soft. "No need. I'll greet him alone. You've already done more than enough."

"As you wish," Alfred replied, bowing deeper this time as Maya moved past him with purpose, her footsteps light but filled with intent.

As Maya moved through the halls of the mansion, her steps were light but filled with anticipation. The elegant interior of the estate passed by in a blur, her focus solely on the moment she would see him again. Each step felt like it was carrying her closer to something she had long been waiting for.

The grand entrance of the mansion loomed ahead, and beyond that, the airship was just beginning to descend, its sleek form casting a shadow over the landing platform.

As the airship gracefully touched down, Maya's gaze was fixed on its descending form. She had been waiting for this moment, her heart quickening as she sensed the familiar mana signature. Though her face remained composed, inside, she was brimming with anticipation.

The forest around her whispered with life, its energy blending with the natural mana that permeated the estate. But today, none of that mattered—her focus was solely on him.

HISS!

The doors to the airship opened with a soft hiss, and there he was—Astron. He emerged from the ship, his form silhouetted against the interior light for a brief moment before stepping into the open air. His presence, calm and collected, seemed to fill the space.

The breeze carried a subtle mix of scents, the fragrance of nature and the earth mingling with the unique, familiar scent that Maya had come to associate with him. She breathed it in deeply, savoring the moment as she watched him take in his surroundings.

'He's here.'

"Junior," she greeted, her voice soft but carrying with it a warmth that was reserved only for him. She kept her tone calm and collected, though her heart beat faster with every second he stood before her.

Maya took a step forward, her movements as graceful as ever, closing the distance between them effortlessly. Her purple hair, catching the light, shimmered as she moved, and her pink eyes locked onto his—eyes that usually held so much power, but now, they were focused only on him.

And the moment she stepped closer to Astron, the familiar, intoxicating scent of his blood reached her senses. Her breath hitched, and for a brief moment, her vision swam in crimson. The world around her—the grand estate, the soft breeze, the natural energy flowing from the forest—blurred into the background as her instincts sharpened on him. His presence, his scent, and the sight of his neck, where his skin was exposed just enough under his neatly arranged clothes, sent her urges spiraling.

He looked healthier than she remembered, his body having grown stronger since their last meeting. The subtle shift in his demeanor, his sharpened focus, and the sheer vitality emanating from him seemed to amplify the temptation. The veins in his neck, pulsing with life, drew her in like a magnet.

'No...' she thought, her heart pounding. The hunger gnawed at her, more powerful than ever before. It was as if her body craved what it knew it could have, what it had tasted before. But this time, she had promised herself she wouldn't give in.

Her fangs itched, extending slightly before she caught herself. She clenched her fists, her nails digging into her palms as she fought against the primal desire that threatened to overwhelm her. For weeks, she had trained, practiced, and meditated, all in the hopes of gaining control over this part of herself. She didn't want to be a burden to him. She didn't want to be the one always taking from him.

'He's been through enough,' she reminded herself, forcing her eyes away from his neck and meeting his gaze instead. His calm expression showed no sign that he was aware of the inner battle raging inside her, but she couldn't let herself slip. Not now. Not in front of him.

With a deep breath, she centered herself, repeating the mantras she had used during her meditation. 'Control it. You are not a slave to this.' Her vision slowly cleared, the crimson receding, but the ache remained, buried beneath layers of discipline she had painstakingly built.

She smiled, though it was strained, and spoke again, her voice steady but carrying the weight of her struggle. "I hope the journey wasn't too tiring for you, Junior."

Astron nodded, his eyes scanning the estate briefly before settling back on her. "It was fine, Senior," he replied, his tone neutral, though there was a warmth in his gaze that grounded her.

Maya forced herself to relax, letting go of the tension in her body. "Good," she said softly. "Everything is ready. Shall we go inside?"

As they began to walk toward the mansion, Maya remained hyper-aware of the distance between them. Her instincts were still on high alert, but she had made a decision—a promise to herself. She would not let her desires control her, not now.

At the very least, Maya wanted to show him that she was not a parasite that needed to be looked after, as if she were a fragile thing. She had always prided herself on being strong, on being someone who could carry her own weight, and now, more than ever, she wanted to prove that to Astron.

'I'm not a burden. I'm not just someone who takes.'

With every step toward the mansion, she reaffirmed that thought. She had spent countless hours training, meditating, and suppressing her vampiric urges to gain control, not just for her own sake but for his as well. She wanted to be someone who could stand beside him, not just someone who relied on him.

As they walked, the natural energy of the estate seemed to hum around them, and the mansion loomed larger with every step. Despite her internal struggle, Maya carried herself with grace, her movements fluid and confident. She had mastered the art of maintaining her composure even when turmoil brewed beneath the surface.

"Thank you for having me here, Senior."

And well, this felt kind of like a reward as well.

Chapter 567 126.4 - Evergreen

As we walked toward the mansion, the closer I got, the larger it appeared. From a distance, it had already seemed grand, but now, up close, it felt even more imposing. Its sheer size was impressive, but it wasn't just the scale that caught my attention. There was something about the architecture, the way it blended into the landscape while still standing out with an almost regal presence.

I found myself observing the details more carefully, letting my eyes take in the craftsmanship. The stone walls were smooth, polished, and adorned with intricate carvings and symbols. There was a subtle elegance to the design—delicate embroideries and patterns that wove their way along the edges of the mansion, almost hidden unless you were looking closely. These details weren't ostentatious, but they carried meaning, something beyond mere decoration.

'The style is distinct,' I thought, my curiosity piqued. I wasn't particularly interested in art or architecture, but I was observant by nature. Having been to many different locations, I'd developed a habit of paying attention to the surroundings. And here, I could tell there was something unique about this place.

The design didn't follow the typical patterns I had seen in other estates. The angles, the lines—it all felt purposeful like it had been built with more than just aesthetics in mind. There was a subtle flow to the way the mansion was constructed, almost as if the building itself was part of the land's mana rather than something that had been forced upon it.

As we walked, I found myself tracing the lines of the carvings with my eyes. There were ancient symbols woven into the stone, not obvious, but present enough to catch the attention of someone who knew how to look. They weren't just decorative—they meant something, though I couldn't quite place what.

'This is relatively similar to how things were in the Organization's base, but not exactly the same.'

I thought as I continued to observe the mansion's intricate design. The carvings, the symbols, the subtle integration of mana into the structure—there was an air of something ancient here, something that ran deeper than the surface.

The organization had roots stretching back centuries, filled with ancient knowledge and mysteries. Their base had always carried that weight, a sense of history and hidden power lingering in every corner. But this place, while not identical, had a similar feeling—a connection to something older than what most people could perceive.

"Your home.....It is impressive."

I decided to test the waters. One way or another, I would learn about this more.

'And looking at her like that, I am sure if I just ask, she will reveal things.'

Senior Maya might be someone who knows how to carry herself, but at the same time, she relies on me a lot.

Though I do not want to take advantage of her like that, if there are things that are important to this world that I need to know about, it can't be helped.

Maya turned her head, a smile tugging at the corners of her lips. Her pink eyes, though still carrying that subtle tension, softened as she regarded me. "I expected you'd notice," she said, her voice warm but knowing. "It's part of why I wanted you to come here."

I raised an eyebrow, curious. "Oh? And what exactly did you expect me to see?"

Her smile deepened, and she paused for a moment before responding. "Why do you think it's impressive, Junior?"

I took a breath, knowing that this was my opportunity to explain what I had observed. "For one, the architecture," I began, gesturing to the carvings and symbols embedded in the stone walls. "It's not just decorative. The structure itself is deeply integrated with the land's mana. It feels as if the building is part of the environment rather than imposed upon it. That's rare."

Maya's eyes flickered with something—interest, perhaps, or recognition. She stayed quiet, allowing me to continue.

"The carvings," I went on, tracing the lines with my eyes again. "They're ancient not just in age, but in purpose. They serve a function beyond aesthetics, though I'm not entirely sure what yet. And the flow of mana... It's more refined here. It's not like the mana in most places, which is still in the process of integrating with the world. Here, it feels... complete."

Maya's smile didn't fade, but I noticed a shift in her posture. She was listening carefully now, her focus entirely on me.

"And then there's the connection to the land," I added. "It's subtle, but the entire estate seems to be in harmony with the natural world. It reminds me of the organization's base, though this is different in some ways. The patterns and the flow of mana all make it feel like it's been here for much longer than the world has had mana, to begin with."

Maya's smile deepened as she met my gaze, her pink eyes shimmering with an almost playful glint. "Just as I expected," she said softly, her voice carrying a warmth that felt almost too natural. "You're quite talented when it comes to sensing mana and understanding its flow. More so than most."

I wasn't surprised by her praise. After all, Maya had been the first person to teach me how to sense mana and control it. My awareness of its presence and how to navigate it in battle or the environment came directly from her. Still, there was something about the way she spoke now, a subtle pride in her tone, as if she had known I would notice these things.

She took a step closer, her smile never fading. "Go on, Junior. Aside from the mana flow, what else have you observed?"

I paused for a moment, gathering my thoughts before continuing. "The architecture," I began, gesturing toward the carvings and the overall design of the mansion. "It feels ancient, but it's not something I've seen widely among humans. The patterns, the symbols—this style belongs to

something older, something outside the typical history books. It's as if this place is part of a different lineage entirely, one that hasn't been touched by modern human influence."

Maya's eyes didn't waver, but I could tell she was pleased with the direction of my thoughts. She didn't interrupt, letting me continue.

"Even the aesthetic," I added, "it's distinct. I've been to many cities and seen a variety of architectural styles, but nothing quite like this. Take Western Uxbridge, for example." I glanced at her, reminding her of the city we had visited together not long ago. "That city had a traditional human aesthetic, rigid and functional. The buildings were designed to serve a purpose, but there was little connection to the mana in the land. Here, it's the opposite. This estate isn't just built on the land; it's built with it."

I paused, reflecting on the fundamental differences. "Like how Uxbridge was built with an emphasis on control and expansion. Everything about it was designed to dominate the environment. But here... everything flows in harmony. It's as if the estate was meant to be a part of this place, not an imposition."

Maya tilted her head slightly, a thoughtful expression crossing her face. "I hadn't considered it from that perspective before," she admitted, her voice calm and contemplative. "But hearing it like this... it makes sense. It's interesting, actually."

She didn't elaborate further.

The silence between us was comfortable as we continued walking through the estate, the air filled with the soft rustle of leaves and the subtle hum of mana flowing through the environment.

Soon, we reached the inner garden of the mansion. The place was lush, filled with an array of plants, some of which I had never seen before. The garden was beautiful, vibrant with life, and yet it didn't feel overly manicured. Like the mansion itself, it seemed as if the plants had been allowed to grow in harmony with the mana of the land, rather than being forced into specific shapes or patterns.

Maya gestured toward a gazebo at the center of the garden, its elegant structure surrounded by tall flowers and leafy vines. Without a word, she led me toward it, and we walked silently, the quiet only broken by the occasional chirp of a bird or the gentle breeze that swept through the area.

As we neared the gazebo, a man suddenly appeared, stepping out from the shadows so quietly that I almost didn't notice him until he was fully in view.

—FLINCH!

'This.....' He was a butler, though something about him immediately caught my attention.

As the man stood before me, I couldn't help but let my gaze sweep over him, picking apart every detail. The first thing I noticed was his uniform—immaculate, as if it had just come from the tailor. Not a single wrinkle or thread out of place. Too neat. Too perfect.

'He's meticulous, almost obsessively so. No ordinary servant would care this much about appearances unless it was part of their discipline.'

His posture was another giveaway. Straight, shoulders back, but not stiff. There was an ease in how he held himself, the kind that came from long years of training.

'Perfectly balanced... not just for appearances. This man knows how to move silently, without drawing attention. Presence erasing. A hidden aide, perhaps?'

My eyes moved to his hands—clean, unnaturally so, with no roughness or scars. No calluses on the palms or fingers.

'Not a fighter. At least, not with weapons. A mage, then. His hands are too pristine for someone who has ever swung a sword or handled a bow. Magic leaves no visible marks. Smart... keeps himself unassuming.'

The sharpness in his eyes, though, was unmistakable. They flicked over me, quick but controlled, as if measuring me up. The subtle tension in his jaw betrayed his awareness, his readiness.

'This man is no mere butler. He's trained. Disciplined. Everything about him speaks of precision, from his appearance to his demeanor. Combat-ready but not through physical force. That focus... his diet is balanced, his physique lean but powerful, tuned for endurance, not bulk.'

A breeze ruffled the leaves overhead, and I noticed he didn't so much as flinch. He stood rooted, unwavering, yet somehow almost invisible, blending into the serene environment of the garden.

'He's skilled in blending with his surroundings. No wasted movement, no unnecessary action. This is someone who knows how to stay hidden, even in plain sight. A perfect shadow, prepared to strike if necessary.'

I looked into his eyes again, and for the briefest moment, I saw something—a flicker of calculation.

'He's watching me just as much as I'm watching him. Calculating. Gauging if I'm a threat. Every breath, every subtle shift, he's analyzing.'

As I continued to observe the butler, a faint sense of tension settled between us. His posture, his sharp gaze—everything about him exuded an air of quiet intimidation. It wasn't overt, not enough to be obvious, but it was there. I could feel the subtle pressure, the way his eyes flicked over me, calculating. Testing.

'So that's how it is,' I thought, a small part of me amused by the situation. The man wasn't just analyzing me—he was pushing back, trying to gauge how I would react. His ability to slip past my senses earlier wasn't just skill; it was a clear indicator of the gap between us. The fact that I hadn't noticed him right away meant that this man's stats were far beyond mine. And considering how attuned I was to mana and my surroundings, that wasn't a small feat.

But I wasn't surprised. High-ranking families often had people like this—hidden aides, skilled in combat or magic, trained to be both servants and protectors. It was normal. What caught my attention, though, was the faint feeling of hostility. It wasn't personal, but there was an undercurrent of disapproval in the way he regarded me. As if he didn't entirely favor my presence here.

'He's strong, but intimidation won't work on me,' I thought, keeping my expression neutral. This was a test. A way to see how I would respond. And I wasn't about to give him anything to work with. I simply continued observing him, noting his stance, his presence, the way he controlled his breathing. He was sharp, no doubt, but I had seen enough to know when to stay silent.

After a few moments, the silence between us was broken by a familiar voice.

"Alfred," Maya called softly.

The butler—Alfred—immediately turned toward her, his demeanor shifting in an instant. The tension that had lingered in the air dissipated as he bowed slightly in acknowledgment, his face becoming a mask of perfect professionalism once again.

It was clear who held the power here. And with just one word from Maya, the subtle contest between Alfred and me came to an abrupt end.

Chapter 568 126.5 - Evergreen

Maya's gaze shifted from me to Alfred, her expression soft but laced with a hint of questioning. "Alfred," she said, her voice steady and calm, "what exactly are you doing?"

Alfred, in response, bowed his head slightly. "I apologize, Lady Maya if I came across as offensive." His tone was respectful, but I could see through the formality. It was more of an obligatory apology than a genuine one, delivered with the same polished precision that defined everything about him.

Senior Maya looked at him for a moment, her eyes lingering on his figure. The silence stretched, and for a brief second, I wondered if she would push further. But then, she sighed—a quiet, resigned sound. "It's fine," she said, though the softness in her voice hinted at a weariness with Alfred's behavior. "Just... prepare tea and snacks for us."

Alfred straightened immediately, his face an impassive mask of obedience. "As you wish, Lady Maya." But even as he acknowledged her command, I could see it—his eyes held no real remorse. It was subtle, hidden behind the veneer of professionalism, but it was clear to me. He understood that he had overstepped his boundaries, but there wasn't the slightest trace of regret in his demeanor.

'He's not used to being questioned,' I thought, watching the interaction closely. The apology, the bow, the compliance—it was all part of his role, a script he followed. But beneath it, there was a quiet defiance, an unspoken assertion of his own position. He hadn't backed down because he felt he was wrong; he had backed down because Senior Maya had spoken.

Maya turned her gaze to me after Alfred left, a gentle sigh escaping her lips. "I'm sorry about Alfred," she said softly, her tone carrying a quiet apology. "He tends to be... protective. More than necessary, sometimes."

I shook my head slightly, offering her a small nod of understanding. "I understand. It's not uncommon for people like him to behave that way, especially with someone like you to protect, Senior."

Maya's smile returned, softer now but with a glint of curiosity in her eyes. "Where were we? Ah, yes," she said, her voice smooth as she looked at me expectantly. "Now that you've made all these observations, what do you think, Junior?"

I paused for a moment, considering her question. I looked into her eyes, those calm yet sharp pink irises that seemed to hold so many secrets. I hesitated, wondering if it was really safe to speak what I was about to say. There was a chance someone could be listening, and what I was thinking... might sound outrageous. Dangerous, even.

"Are you sure you're okay with me saying this?" I asked, my voice low. "What I'm about to say might not be... safe. And if there are people listening, it could be risky."

Maya's smile deepened, and with a simple, graceful gesture of her hand, she urged me to continue. There was no hesitation in her demeanor, no sign of fear. It was as if she had expected this.

'Well.....The fact that she had brought me here and the reaction that Butler had shown alone also encourages this.'

And since she was showing me such a reaction, that would mean that there was no need for me to hold back.

"You are....of Elven Origins."

The moment the words left my lips, Maya's smile widened, a glint of satisfaction dancing in her eyes. It was as if she had been waiting for me to uncover this truth, the slight curve of her lips revealing more than mere amusement. I had struck at the heart of something deeper.

'So, I was right.'

I held her gaze, letting my thoughts swirl as I pieced together everything that had led me to this conclusion. The mana in this place was the first clue. It felt ancient, older than anything I had encountered in human domains, something that resonated with the earth itself. The connection between the mana and the surrounding nature was seamless, intertwined in a way that human magic simply couldn't replicate. Humans may wield mana, but this... this felt alive, as though it had been nurtured by centuries of uninterrupted growth.

'Elven magic. No human could harness mana like this. The balance between life and mana here is too precise, too natural.'

The barrier around the estate was another subtle but undeniable sign. I'd sensed it the moment I entered the grounds. Most barriers were crude in comparison—forceful constructs meant to block or repel intruders. But this one? It blended into the very air, almost invisible to the untrained eye, quietly woven into the land itself, just like Elven wards designed to protect without disturbing nature.

But that alone wasn't enough to pinpoint the truth.

'The architecture here... it's familiar.'

The design of the mansion struck me from the moment we entered. It wasn't the ostentatious, towering structures that humans favored, nor did it have the blocky efficiency of dwarven designs. No, this was something else—sleek, elegant, every line flowing as though the building itself was shaped by the wind and earth. The curves, the open spaces, the harmony with the surrounding garden. It all felt too similar to the cities I had explored in the game's Elven domain. My photographic memory replayed those scenes vividly. There was no mistaking it—this estate mirrored the architecture of Elven cities almost exactly.

'There's no way this is a coincidence. It's too deliberate. The design, the mana, the very air around this place... it's all Elven.'

And then there was Maya herself. The more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Her becoming a half-vampire while resisting a full transformation wasn't something any normal human could achieve. If she were entirely human, her evolution would have been completed—she would have become a full vampire. But she hadn't. She had fought it, maintained her humanity, or at least a part of it. That feat alone made her lineage stand out.

'Her other lineage couldn't possibly be normal. The strength to fight off a vampiric transformation like that... it's not human resilience. It's something more. Something ancient.'

It all clicked into place. The mana of the land, the architecture, and the strange nature of her bloodline. Everything pointed to one conclusion.

I didn't voice these thoughts aloud. There was no need. Maya's reaction had already confirmed the truth.

'Elven origins...'

I watched her closely, noting the way she seemed almost pleased with my deduction. Perhaps she had been waiting for me to reach this conclusion, or maybe she had always known that I would. Either way, the truth hung between us, unspoken but acknowledged.

Maya's eyes, normally calm and serene, sparkled with a rare happiness as they locked onto mine. There was no more need for pretense, no reason to hold back now that the truth had been uncovered. Her pink eyes seemed to brighten, as though relieved to finally share something that had been hidden for so long.

"You're right," she said, her voice soft but carrying a note of satisfaction. "I knew you would see it, Junior."

I held her gaze, letting her words sink in. My mind was still piecing together the implications of what I had uncovered, but one question gnawed at me. Why? Why had she allowed me to see this? Why had she revealed something so deeply tied to her identity?

I stayed silent for a while, letting the quiet stretch between us. Finally, I asked the question that had been forming in my mind. "Why?" My voice was calm, though my curiosity was palpable. "Why did you reveal this to me? Why tell me now?"

Maya didn't answer immediately. Instead, her smile deepened, and I noticed a shift in her eyes. The soft pink hue that usually defined her irises began to change, turning a shade darker—crimson, as if the part of her that she had fought to keep hidden was surfacing.

"To the person who saved my life," she began, her voice carrying a weight of gratitude that I hadn't expected, "and who even covered for me when no one else would..." She paused, her gaze never leaving mine. "Hiding something like this would be hypocritical, wouldn't it?"

The sincerity in her voice was undeniable. Her smile, though still calm, carried a depth of emotion that made it harder and harder to ignore.

'Right... This is what kind of person she is,' I thought as I looked into Senior Maya's eyes.

She wasn't someone who played games or toyed with people's emotions. Maya had always been upfront and sincere about everything she did. Whether it was teaching me how to control mana or stepping in when I had no one to turn to, she had never once asked for anything in return. Her kindness was never transactional; it was genuine.

She was the first person who saw something in me when no one else did. The one who extended her hand without hesitation when I was still fumbling, trying to understand the world of mana and magic. I couldn't forget that moment—the way she'd calmly walked up to me and offered her help when she had no obligation to do so. It was who she was. Always looking out for others, even when she herself carried burdens she never spoke of.

'She's always been like this,' I thought, remembering the countless moments she'd quietly covered for me. Whether it was during training or in the missions we'd shared, she'd always been the one to shield me from the things I couldn't handle, never expecting recognition or thanks.

And now, here she was, baring a part of herself she had kept hidden for so long—because she thought I deserved to know.

'Seeing someone else in others....It is not a healthy thing....' I had been running away for a long time already since it always felt uncomfortable being around her.

Since I had always been reminded of 'her' whenever I was close to Senior.

'Right...'

And this was what I had realized while talking with Dakota at that time. How ungrateful and disgusting to do something like this to the person in front of you.

While they are trying to help you, you are just seeing someone else in them....This fact alone is really....

No one deserved such a thing.

"Senior."

Just as I was about to speak any further, suddenly, I sensed someone's presence.

"Lady. Your tea is ready."

Chapter 569 126.6 - Evergreen

As Maya stood before Astron, her heart beat steadily in her chest, but there was a subtle tension coiling beneath the surface. She had always prided herself on maintaining her composure, serene smile, calm demeanor, and mask, which she wore so well. But today, that mask felt fragile.

When she heard Astron's voice—steady, calm, yet inquisitive—she couldn't help but feel a tinge of satisfaction. He had uncovered a truth she had kept hidden, a part of her that few people knew. His perceptiveness, his ability to piece together the smallest clues, had always impressed her. But this time, it went beyond mere admiration.

"You're right," she said softly, her voice carrying a weight of relief and satisfaction. "I knew you would see it, Junior."

Maya had known this moment would come eventually. She had prepared herself for the day when Astron, with his sharp mind and keen instincts, would uncover her secret. Her family's connection to the Elves had always been something they guarded closely, and she had inherited that same carefulness. But for Astron, she had decided to make an exception.

As he stood before her, she couldn't help but feel a wave of gratitude wash over her. There had been so many moments when Astron had proven himself, not just as a capable mage, but as someone she could trust with the most guarded parts of herself. He had saved her, stood by her, and never once demanded anything in return.

Maya's pink eyes, usually so gentle, darkened ever so slightly with the intensity of the moment. It wasn't just the weight of her elven heritage that she had kept hidden—it was also the growing vampiric nature within her. She had worked tirelessly to suppress it, to remain in control, but every time she was near Astron, it became harder to keep at bay.

'He must know the truth,' she thought, her gaze lingering on him. 'He's done so much for me, and I've always kept parts of myself hidden. But not anymore.'

Maya's thoughts twisted and turned as she stood before Astron, her calm exterior barely masking the turmoil inside. She had always been in control, always the one who kept her emotions in check, but now—now everything felt fragile.

'Is this selfish?' she wondered. It wasn't like her to act purely on emotion, yet here she was, baring one of her most guarded secrets to tie him closer to her. The moment Astron knew about her family's Elven heritage, he would be bound to her in a way that no one else could be. There would be no going back. Her family, too, would ensure that. She had been deliberate and calculated, but there was an undeniable weight in what she had just done.

'I won't give him to anyone,' she thought with a fierce intensity. The image of Irina Emberheart flickered in her mind, along with other potential threats, real or imagined. No one would take him from her.

But even as she clung to this thought, there was a flicker of doubt—a creeping sense of fear. She looked into Astron's eyes, those deep purple eyes that always held a sharp, calculating edge. This time, however, something was different. His eyes, which usually assessed every situation with cold precision, were now filled with something unfamiliar: emotion. It was subtle, but there was a softness there, a hesitation.

Maya felt her pulse quicken. 'What is he thinking?' The usual certainty she relied on slipped away, replaced by a growing sense of unease. This wasn't part of her plan.

She had expected Astron to accept her revelation, to understand the depth of her feelings and, perhaps, even share them. But now, seeing the conflict in his eyes, she wasn't so sure.

Her chest tightened with a surge of insecurity. 'What if I was wrong? What if he doesn't feel the same way? What if this pushes him away instead of drawing him closer?' The thought gnawed at her, sending a wave of panic through her mind.

Her grip on her composure faltered. For the first time, Maya wasn't entirely sure of her actions. She had never miscalculated like this before, and the fear of rejection—of losing Astron—loomed over her like a shadow.

Just as the tension between them threatened to swallow her whole, a familiar voice interrupted the moment.

"Lady Maya," Alfred's calm tone called out as he entered the gazebo. "I've brought the tea."

The sudden intrusion was a welcome distraction, yet it did little to calm the storm brewing within her. Maya's gaze shifted to Alfred, but her mind was still reeling. She had acted hastily, hadn't she? She had revealed too much too soon.

Maya forced a smile, but inside, she was unraveling. The uncertainty, the fear—it all mingled with the possessiveness she couldn't deny. She had thought this would secure Astron's place by her side, but now, she wasn't sure if she had just made everything more complicated.

As Alfred set the tray down, Maya's eyes darted back to Astron, searching for any hint of reassurance. But his expression remained unreadable, and that only made her anxiety grow.

'I've come too far to turn back now,' she thought, trying to steady herself.

Maya took a steadying breath, but it did little to ease the tension winding tighter in her chest. Alfred's presence was a temporary reprieve, but the suffocating feeling of uncertainty still loomed heavy in the air. Her gaze flickered to Astron, whose unreadable expression only intensified her unease.

She couldn't let this continue. Not here, not now. The longer she waited, the worse it would become.

"Thank you, Alfred," she said, her voice calm but clipped, the forced smile still on her face. "You may leave us now. There are things we need to discuss privately."

Alfred, ever composed, gave a respectful bow. "As you wish, My Lady." He hesitated for the briefest moment, his gaze lingering on her as if sensing the unease she was trying so hard to mask. But he said nothing, and after another polite bow, he turned and left the gazebo, disappearing from view.

The moment Alfred was out of sight, Maya felt a surge of urgency. She couldn't leave this unresolved. Not with the uncertainty gnawing at her insides like a living thing. She needed to see this through—to either find reassurance or face whatever consequences her actions had brought.

With a swift, practiced motion, Maya raised her hand, her fingers tracing a complex symbol in the air. A soft hum of magic filled the space as the ancient formation around the gazebo activated, creating an invisible barrier that shimmered faintly for just a moment before settling into place. The protective formation was something only members of her family had access to—a powerful shield that ensured no one outside could hear or see what happened within its confines.

The air inside the gazebo grew still, the sounds of the surrounding forest muted as if they had been cut off from the rest of the world. It was just the two of them now—Maya and Astron—trapped in the intensity of the moment she had created.

Maya turned to face Astron fully, her heart pounding in her chest.

'Calm down....'

She needed to calm down.

Her heart was racing, her thoughts spiraling with uncertainty, but she couldn't let her emotions take control. She had already set this moment in motion, and now she needed to see it through with the composure that defined her.

With a soft exhale, she turned her focus to the tea set before her, the delicate porcelain gleaming under the soft light filtering through the gazebo. She poured the tea with practiced grace, the familiar motions grounding her, helping to steady the whirlwind of emotions.

The gentle sound of tea filling the cups was the only noise in the enclosed space. Maya picked up one of the cups and handed it to Astron, her fingers brushing lightly against his as he accepted it. She felt a jolt at the contact but quickly masked it with a smile.

Taking her own cup, she sipped the tea, though the usual warmth and flavor seemed muted. The tea, normally so calming, couldn't compete with the freshness of his scent, the subtle allure that he carried without realizing. Her vampiric urges stirred faintly, but she pushed them back down, focusing on the task at hand. The tea served as a momentary distraction, a pause she desperately needed.

After a few sips, Maya set her cup down gently and looked directly into Astron's eyes. There was a calmness in his gaze, the same steadiness that had always drawn her to him. But now, she needed to know if that calm extended to how he saw her—after everything she had revealed.

"Junior," she began softly, her voice carrying the weight of the question that had been lingering in her mind. "If I were to talk about my family... would you listen?"

For a moment, there was silence. Maya watched him carefully, her heart once again picking up its pace, but she kept her expression neutral. She needed to hear his response, needed to know if he would accept this part of her without turning away.

Astron's gaze remained steady, and after a beat, he nodded. "I would listen, Senior," he said, his tone calm but carrying a sincerity that resonated with her.

"Because it's you. I'll always listen."

Maya's heart skipped a beat when she heard his words. The sincerity in his tone, the calm assurance—it all hit her harder than she had anticipated. For a brief moment, she found herself lost in his gaze, her breath catching in her throat.

—THUMP!

Her heart pounded, loud and insistent, as if trying to remind her of the weight of the moment. She could feel it, the rush of emotions stirring within her, her usually steady composure cracking ever so slightly. She was always in control—except when it came to him. There was something about Astron that made her feel vulnerable and exposed in ways she wasn't used to.

He wasn't like others. He never wavered, never faltered, and his unwavering nature drew her closer and made her want to trust him with everything. And now, hearing him say that he would always listen to her... it was more than she had dared hope for.

Maya took a deep breath, trying to calm the storm within her. She needed to stay composed, to keep herself steady, but her heart raced on. The intensity of her emotions was overwhelming, and for a moment, she wasn't sure if she could hold back everything she was feeling. She met his gaze again, seeing that same calm sincerity, and her resolve wavered.

'He really means it...'

She bit her lip, her hands trembling slightly as they rested on her lap. How could he say it so easily? The warmth of his presence, his unshakable trust—it made her feel things she had long kept buried.

Thus, she started speaking.

"Do you know anything about the Elves?"

Chapter 570 126.7 - Evergreen

The moment Maya asked, "Do you know anything about the Elves?" my mind began to sift through everything I knew about them—elves—one of the most well-known races to inhabit this world. Everyone was familiar with their existence, their deep connection to nature, and the legendary World Tree that bound their fate. They were a race blessed with long lives, ageless beauty, and smooth skin, their features always drawing admiration and envy from other races.

Though there was more to them than just their appearance.

They weren't native to this world, not like humans. They had come here from another realm, one tied to the essence of nature itself, during the Nexus Convergence. The day when mana had flooded into this world and when countless races from other planes had appeared, seemingly out of nowhere.

The Elves had arrived alongside other beings, beings of magic and mystery, claiming lands that had once belonged solely to humans. The Nexus Convergence had changed everything. Cities were lost, new territories claimed, and the balance of power had shifted forever. The Elves, with their natural affinity for mana, quickly established themselves as one of the dominant races.

And yet, despite their long lives and wisdom, they remained a mystery in many ways. Their culture, their magic, their rituals—these were things that weren't easily understood by humans. The Elves guarded their secrets closely, and only a few were ever truly allowed into their inner sanctums. The World Tree, their source of life and power, was said to be the very heart of their world, the place from which all their magic flowed.

These were the things everyone knew, the stories taught in schools, passed down through generations.

But I knew a lot more compared to what an average human of this world knew. After all, there were countless different times when the Elven realm was shown in the game.

That was also the reason why I was able to refer to Maya's lineage of elves.

I knew more than what was commonly taught about the Elves, especially compared to the average human in this world. My knowledge extended beyond the surface-level stories, primarily because of

what I had seen in the game. In countless different instances, the Elven realm had been shown, revealing much more than the history books ever could.

Elves were ruled by royalty, and beneath that royalty, there was a council—an assembly of Elders who held great power and influence over their people. These Elders weren't just figureheads; they were the ones who upheld the ancient traditions, those steeped in magic and nature, and were responsible for guiding the Elven race through the chaotic times after the Nexus Convergence.

One of the most well-known aspects of the Elves was their natural affinity for mana. Their connection to magic was almost instinctive, woven into the very fabric of their existence. But it wasn't just about power—there was something primal about their relationship with the world. The Elves didn't live like humans, with their reliance on complex technology or advanced societies. They lived more in tune with the natural order of things, letting magic fill the gaps where technology might have in human lands.

The Elves' natural affinity for mana wasn't just a cultural or philosophical strength; it was a biological advantage. Their bodies were inherently more attuned to the flow of magic in the world, giving them a physical and magical superiority over many other races. This was why they were able to expand so aggressively after the Nexus Convergence, pushing back humans and claiming vast territories for themselves.

More than a quarter of the world's lands fell under Elven rule.

And they didn't just conquer; they enslaved. Humans were killed, their lands taken, and those who were captured were used as labor or worse. The Elves didn't just defeat their enemies—they bent them to their will, enforcing their dominance over the new world they had claimed.

They occupied the western side of the continent under the name Sylvanreach Enclave. That place is a lot different from the normal lands as Elves brought the most important things in their lives with them.

Seeds of the World Tree.

The World Tree of their world has fallen, corrupted, and died. And that is why they were forced to leave their own world.

And they recreated the World Tree.

But for the Elves to recreate their beloved World Tree, they had to reshape the land itself. The Sylvanreach Enclave, their domain on the western side of the continent, was nothing like the human lands surrounding it.

Simply planting the seeds wasn't enough. The World Tree didn't grow in just any environment. The Elves had to recreate the conditions of their homeland, transforming the land to suit the magic of the World Tree. It was a monumental task, requiring not just power but the careful cultivation of mana over centuries.

I knew from the game that the Elves had established powerful barriers along the borders of the Sylvanreach Enclave—barriers designed to separate their land from the human domains. These barriers weren't just physical; they were magical, preventing the carefully cultivated mana within the Elven domain from escaping. Without that control, the World Tree's magic would be diluted, and its influence weakened. The barriers ensured that the flow of mana within the Enclave remained steady, feeding the World Tree and allowing it to grow strong once more.

These barriers also served another purpose. They isolated the Elven lands, keeping outsiders from disturbing the delicate balance of magic the Elves had nurtured. It was a closed ecosystem, one that allowed the World Tree to flourish and the Elves to regain the power they had lost when their original tree was corrupted.

'But of course....It is hard for me to tell any of those to anyone.'

The fact that this knowledge came from a game from another world alone is impossible to explain. There is no person who can understand this concept.

Of course, if I were to say this to people who are close to me, they may somehow believe me, but I doubt they would completely accept this whole thing in their hearts.

In a way, while outwardly they would accept, that doubt would continue to be here. And it is not like I have any intention to talk about any of those things either, as there is no need for me to.

So instead, I simply gave Maya a small shake of my head. "I don't know much beyond the surface level," I said, keeping my tone casual. "Just the general things people are taught."

Maya nodded, her expression calm and understanding. "I see," she replied softly before beginning to explain, her voice carrying the weight of someone sharing a piece of themselves.

As Maya began to speak, I noticed something subtle in her words, a nuance that stood out as she explained the history of her people. She spoke of the Elves' realm—the one they had come from—but she never once referred to it as her home world. That detail struck me immediately.

"The Elves crossed into this world when the Nexus Convergence happened," she began, her voice steady but carrying a quiet gravity. "That world... it wasn't the same after the corruption began. The World Tree that once sustained life withered under the weight of that corruption. The land itself began to decay, and the magic that had once given us life became our undoing. That is why Elves had no choice but to leave."

She paused for a moment, her eyes distant, as though she were remembering something far beyond our current surroundings. But she never called it home. Not once.

Maya continued, explaining how the Elves had found this world, bringing with them the remnants of their ancient civilization, the Seeds of the World Tree. They had recreated their existence here, building new cities and shaping the land with their magic.

Maya continued her explanation, and as she did, her tone shifted slightly, becoming more personal, as if she was about to reveal something deeper than just the history of her people. "There's a reason why my family isn't in the Elven Domain, Junior," she said quietly, her gaze focusing on the garden before us.

"My family... we were once tied to the Elven royalty. The Elves are ruled by the Verdantweave royal family, and when we first came into this world, they were the ones who led us." Maya's voice grew firmer as she spoke, recounting the tale as if it were ingrained in her very being. "The Verdantweaves conquered the western side of this world, enslaving many humans in the process."

That was something that I already knew since there is a part in the game where the Player comes into contact with the Elven Royal family and the Elven Queen.

Her expression softened, a trace of something deeper passing through her eyes as she continued, "My ancestor, Aelion Verdantweave, was a member of that royal family. He wasn't just any member—he was the Crown Prince, the strongest of the young generation, with unmatched talent in manipulating all elements. He was expected to be the next King of the Elves, a symbol of their future."

'Aelion.'

That was a name that I had never heard being mentioned in the game. Never, not even once.

'This is.....'

And something was telling me that this story was not simply a normal one.

I remained silent, listening closely as Maya's voice lowered, taking on a more somber tone. "As they continued their conquest of human lands, something unexpected happened. He fell in love... with a human slave."

Her words hung in the air, the weight of that revelation sinking in. It wasn't just any love—this was a forbidden love, one that crossed the rigid boundaries between Elves and humans.

"He kept it a secret," she went on, "from everyone. His family, his people. He coveted her in the shadows, and despite the dangers, they had a child. A child that no one was supposed to know about."

Maya's eyes darkened as she recalled what came next. "When Aelion's father—the King—found out, he was furious. For an Elf of royal blood to mingle with a human was unthinkable, a stain on their legacy. The King ordered the child to be killed. It was an act of pure fury, an attempt to erase what he saw as an unforgivable betrayal."

Maya's voice carried a heavy weight as she continued, revealing more of the story that had never been told. "Of course, Aelion knew that this wouldn't stay hidden forever. As Crown Prince, he wasn't foolish. He understood the politics of the Elven court better than anyone. Secrets, no matter how well-guarded, eventually surface."

She paused for a moment, her gaze distant, as if seeing a time long past. "He anticipated the King's reaction, knew that something like this would inevitably lead to violence and death. So, before the secret could be fully exposed, he made a deal."

'A deal...' I thought, already piecing together the next part of the story. This was something I had never heard in the game—a story that remained hidden even in the lore.

"He sought out Valerion," Maya said softly, "the rising hero of humanity. At the time, humans were in a desperate position, struggling to fight back against the other races that had arrived after the Nexus Convergence. They were fractured, with no unified defense. Valerion was the one who had begun gathering humanity together, creating a resistance."

The name...Valerion. A figure deeply woven into the history of the human struggle for survival, known for his strength and leadership. But in the game, there had been no mention of a connection between him and the Elves, least of all the Crown Prince.

"Aelion saw an opportunity," Maya continued, her voice steady. "He offered Valerion something invaluable—his support. With the Elves already dominant and humanity on the brink, Aelion promised to help. In return, Valerion agreed to grant him and his family a place within the Human Domain. A place where they wouldn't be under the scrutiny of the Elven King or any other eyes that might meddle in their affairs. A place where they could live in peace, hidden."

Her eyes turned toward me, her expression unreadable. "That's how my family came to be here, in the Human Domain. We were given land, a place to exist quietly, out of the Elven Kingdom's sight."