

H. Academy 581

Chapter 581 128.3 - Sugar Mommy (?)

Astron couldn't help but shake his head with a small sigh. "I guess you're right, Senior," he replied, his voice calm and composed. "But can you blame me for doubting it? Starbloom Essence as a 'daily use' herb isn't exactly something most people would believe."

Maya crossed her arms and gave him a triumphant smirk. "Humph, Junior. When have I ever lied to you? You should know by now that I'm always serious about these things." She tilted her chin up slightly, clearly pleased with herself.

Astron couldn't argue with that. Maya was many things—enthusiastic, powerful, and at times, a bit airheaded—but she wasn't one to lie, especially about something like this. Still, the absurdity of it all made it hard to process. He'd grown accustomed to the rarities of the cultivation world, but the casualness with which she regarded such powerful ingredients was almost unreal.

He glanced back at the rows of plants, noting the gentle sway of the high-quality herbs under the soft breeze. It was clear to him now that Maya's family wasn't just powerful in name; they had deep resources, the kind of wealth and access that even the upper echelons of society couldn't match easily.

"Alright, alright," Astron finally said. "I'll take your word for it. But I have to admit, it's still hard to wrap my head around."

Maya's mischievous grin widened. "You'd better get used to it. Now that you're here, you'll be seeing a lot more of this."

She paused for a moment, her eyes gleaming with a playful glint. "Speaking of which, since the tour's almost over, I think it's about time, I order the maids to prepare something for you."

Astron raised an eyebrow, sensing something behind her words. "Something?" he repeated, clearly curious. "What kind of something?"

Maya smirked, a sly grin playing on her lips as she tilted her head slightly. "Oh, you'll see," she said cryptically. "It's a surprise, Junior. Just trust me."

Astron gave her a sidelong glance, feeling the weight of her teasing tone. Should he be concerned or intrigued?

The answer was a clear no. He was sure that she was not someone who would mean any harm to him as well, that is why he did not think much of it as they walked.

One thing was certain—Maya was enjoying keeping him in the dark.

As they walked further into the forest, the atmosphere shifted. The trees surrounding them were unlike any Astron had seen elsewhere. The air felt denser, charged with mana that seemed to hum beneath the surface, subtly altering the environment around them.

Maya's voice broke the silence. "Can you sense it, Junior?" she asked, her tone curious, but with that same playful edge. Her pink eyes gleamed with anticipation, waiting to see if he could pick up on the change.

Astron paused for a moment, scanning the area with his eyes and his heightened senses. At first, he'd only noticed the peculiar density of the mana, but now that Maya had mentioned it, he began to see more. The trees were ancient, their roots intertwined with the earth in a way that allowed them to absorb and channel mana, forming a natural array. It was subtle, but now that he focused, he could see the flow of mana converging around them, guided by the forest itself.

"These trees," Astron began, his purple eyes narrowing in focus, "they're not just any ordinary trees. The mana is flowing through them, almost like they're part of a larger network. It's like they're channeling it, converging the energy toward a specific point."

Maya's smirk grew wider, clearly impressed with his deduction. "You're absolutely right. This forest is special, Junior. Every tree here has been cultivated to enhance the flow of mana. It is part of my family's heritage."

"Hmm.....This place is where you train yourself, isn't it?"

Maya's expression softened as she nodded. "Yes, this is where I meditate and train my mana control. As you probably know, Junior, mastering mana control isn't easy. It's something that requires countless hours of practice, whether you're a mage or a close-combat fighter. For us Awakened, mana is everything."

Astron listened intently, his gaze still sweeping the forest. He understood her words well; mana control was a fundamental aspect of an Awakened's strength, and training it required more than just talent. However, something didn't add up in his mind. "But if this place is so important for your training, why are you attending Arcadia Hunter Academy? Wouldn't it be more beneficial for you to stay here and continue honing your skills in this environment?"

Maya glanced around the forest, her fingers brushing a nearby tree as if to draw comfort from its familiar presence. "From a pure training perspective, you're right. It would be efficient to stay here, but there's something more to it." She sighed softly, her eyes reflecting a mix of nostalgia and a deeper emotion. "The thing is, no matter how perfect this place is, the body and mind adapt over time. The more you use something, the more comfortable you become with it. At some point, it loses its effectiveness."

Astron nodded, understanding the logic. "I see. So, your body has already adapted to the mana flow in this forest, and it doesn't challenge you the same way anymore."

"Exactly," Maya agreed, her voice carrying a slight undertone of weariness. "It was an incredible place to train when I was younger, but now... I've reached a point where it's no longer enough to push me further. That's one of the reasons why I left and joined the academy."

Astron tilted his head slightly, sensing there was more to her decision. "But that's not the only reason, is it?"

Maya's expression shifted, and she let out a small, wistful laugh as she looked back at him. "No, it's not." And then she looked around. "The truth is... it gets lonely, Junior. Training here, alone, day after day... it wears on you. I wanted something more, something beyond just improving my skills. Being at the academy, around other people, even if it's for training—it makes a difference."

Looking at it from that perspective, Astron thought about his own experience. For him, training was just training. He had always spent nearly at least three hours a day training on his own and he rarely trained with someone else.

Most of the time that he was spending, he always did it alone.

For Astron, solitude had become second nature—a necessary companion to his thoughts, his focus, and his relentless pursuit of strength. He had grown so accustomed to the silence that filled the spaces between his training sessions, the quiet that allowed him to reflect on each step forward, every breath taken, and every obstacle overcome.

Before he also disliked being around people as he ostracized himself from the society, but there was also a certain clarity that came from being alone, away from distractions.

His mind could sharpen, honing in on the precision required to control mana with the level of mastery he sought.

It was in those moments of isolation that he felt most connected to the raw essence of his abilities, a time when the world narrowed to just him and the flow of energy within and around him.

'I've always been this way,' Astron thought, his gaze turning inward as he walked alongside Maya through the forest. 'Ever since I lost her... I've kept people at a distance. It's easier that way. Fewer distractions, fewer vulnerabilities.'

He had learned early on that relying on others could lead to disappointment, to loss, and the painful emptiness that followed. The only thing he could trust was his own strength, his own mind.

Every hour he spent training was a form of control, a way to keep the past from overwhelming him. Alone with his thoughts, he could process everything—his pain, his goals, his need for vengeance.

'But maybe,' he glanced over at Maya, 'maybe that's not enough.'

Slowly, she also came to another realization. After dealing with countless different people and getting newer experiences.

Maya had a point about isolation, the need to be around others, and finding something more than just the relentless pursuit of power.

Astron could feel the weight of her words settling in his mind. Maya had her own reasons for stepping out of her family's protective cocoon and facing the world, and for the first time, he wondered if he had been too rigid in his approach.

Was he missing something by always being alone? Was there more to growth than just sharpening the blade in solitude?

Astron glanced at Maya, his expression softening as he spoke. "That's understandable," he said, his tone thoughtful.

Maya raised an eyebrow at his response, surprised by his sudden shift in perspective. "Understandable?" she echoed, her voice filled with curiosity.

He nodded, his eyes still focused on the path ahead. "While I've always had a goal that pushed me forward—something to strive for, to keep me moving even in isolation—did you have the same thing when you were younger and training here?" His voice was gentle, yet there was a certain sharpness to the question, as though he was trying to uncover something deeper within her.

Maya fell silent, her steps slowing as his words settled over her. She hadn't considered it before, but Astron's question hit a chord. When she had been younger, training in the solitude of her family's land, there hadn't been any grand goal driving her. She hadn't been fighting for survival or seeking revenge like Astron had been. She had trained because it was expected of her, because it was part of her lineage and the role she was supposed to fulfill. But there hadn't been that same fire, that same singular purpose pushing her forward.

Astron continued, sensing her silence as an unspoken answer. "You most likely didn't have that kind of goal, yet you were still able to endure such intense training. That shows your willpower, your resilience. It's not wrong for you to seek something beyond that, to want a life that includes more than just endless training. It's natural to seek connections with others."

Maya's gaze softened as she looked at him, her earlier surprise shifting into quiet understanding. But then she thought of something.

Maya's steps slowed even more as she replayed Astron's words in her mind. His compliments and insight into her situation had made her feel understood, but something about the way he spoke, as if those ideas applied only to her, gnawed at her.

She looked at him, her gaze narrowing thoughtfully. "Junior," she began, her voice soft but insistent. "You said it's not wrong for me to seek something beyond training... to want connections with others. But doesn't that apply to you, too?"

Astron's stride faltered for a moment. He glanced at her, a brief flicker of surprise crossing his expression. He hadn't expected her to turn the conversation back on him. His eyes shifted, and for a moment, he seemed to be searching for the right words, the right explanation.

Maya pressed on, her tone gentle but firm. "You're always so focused on your goals, always pushing forward like nothing else matters. But doesn't what you said also apply to you? Isn't it okay for you to seek companionship too?"

Astron stopped in his tracks, his gaze dropping to the ground as he mulled over her words. His hand instinctively flexed at his side, as if trying to grasp something intangible. "Seeking companionship..." he mumbled, almost to himself, the words foreign on his tongue.

But then just as Astron mulled over Maya's words, the weight of the conversation settling into the air between them, a strange, high-pitched sound suddenly broke through the silence.

"Kyu!"

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"Kyu!"

A small, high-pitched sound cut through the air, breaking the heavy silence between Astron and Maya.

"Kyu!"

Astron's eyes snapped up, his senses immediately sharpening, while Maya's gaze followed the source of the noise. There, just a few paces ahead of them, a small creature appeared, stepping cautiously out from the shadows of the ancient trees. It was delicate and ethereal in appearance, with a coat of soft, luminescent white fur that seemed to shimmer faintly in the dappled light of the forest. Its frame was small and lithe, resembling a squirrel but with features that marked it as something far more mystical. Its large, expressive eyes blinked curiously at them, and a long, sleek tail swayed gently behind it.

Astron studied the creature for a moment, intrigued by its almost otherworldly presence. "What is that?" he asked, his voice low, though not in alarm.

Maya's eyes widened, a flash of recognition crossing her face. "You are that cutie."

She immediately remembered the creature that she had seen at that time. Her memory, while not as strong as a genius, was still particular. That is why she immediately realized that this was the creature that she had seen at that time.

"Senior?"

"Ah.....Maya mumbled as she realized that she had been rather keeping silent. "A Lunaphen," she whispered, her tone filled with awe. "I can't believe it."

"Lunaphen?" Astron repeated, his gaze still fixed on the creature.

Maya nodded, her voice hushed as if not to startle the creature. "They're incredibly rare and shy. A type of monster that's usually hidden deep within nature's most untouched places. They're highly sensitive to the presence of others, especially humans, and it's almost unheard of for them to willingly approach anyone."

The Lunaphen took a tentative step forward, its round, bright eyes never leaving the pair. Despite its apparent wariness, there was a sense of curiosity in the way it regarded them.

Maya couldn't help but smile at the sight. "Even I've only seen them a handful of times, and I grew up in this forest. They're creatures of the moon, linked to lunar mana flows, and they usually hide during the day. For one to come out and approach us like this... it's incredible."

"Lunar mana?"

Astron mumbled, remembering.

But just as the words left his lips, the small Lunaphen, with a sudden burst of energy, darted forward. Astron's eyes narrowed, instinctively sharpening, but he felt no hostility from the creature. It was fast, but its movement wasn't aggressive. Before he could react further, the Lunaphen leaped gracefully and landed lightly on his shoulder.

Astron remained still, his body tense but not alarmed. The creature, now perched on his shoulder, gazed up at him with wide, innocent eyes. It was as if the Lunaphen was studying him, its soft, luminescent fur glowing gently under the forest's filtered light. There was a strange sense of calm that radiated from it, an aura of purity and serenity, as though it were a living embodiment of nature itself.

The Lunaphen's long tail curled around Astron's neck as it looked directly into his eyes, its expression curious yet peaceful. For a moment, Astron felt an odd connection with the creature, like the Lunaphen was drawn to something within him, something beyond the surface.

Maya, standing nearby, watched the interaction with wide eyes. She had seen Lunaphens before, but never like this. It was rare enough to even spot one, let alone have one willingly approach and interact with a human. She couldn't help but smile wryly at the scene.

"They don't willingly approach humans, right?" Astron asked, still keeping his gaze on the Lunaphen as it settled comfortably on his shoulder. The creature seemed content, its large eyes reflecting the same soft glow of the moonlight.

"That's how it's supposed to be," Maya replied with a bemused smile. "But even I didn't expect this to happen. Lunaphens are known to be shy and avoid human contact, no matter how peaceful a person might be." She tilted her head slightly, her expression growing more thoughtful. "Unless you are like me."

"Like you."

"This little one had approached me before."

"Hmm?"

"At that time, I was just training to balance my vampiric side, meditating in this forest. This little one was the first Lunaphen that willingly approached me at that time."

Maya looked at Astron with a thoughtful expression, her eyes reflecting a sense of nostalgia. "This little one must have sensed something in you," she said softly, her voice filled with a mix of curiosity and certainty. "Otherwise, it wouldn't have approached you like this. They don't just interact with anyone."

Astron remained silent, staring at the Lunaphen, his mind swirling with thoughts. It seemed innocent and pure, but the creature clearly had a deeper connection with the world around it—something instinctual and beyond simple understanding. Maya's words hung in the air, and Astron couldn't help but wonder what exactly the Lunaphen saw in him.

The Lunaphen, sensing the attention on it, tilted its head at Astron and let out another soft "Kyu!" before it suddenly jumped from his shoulder, landing gracefully on the forest floor. Its long, elegant tail swayed back and forth as it turned its head to look back at them, its eyes gleaming with intent.

Astron watched as the creature swung its tail again, more deliberately this time, almost as if it were signaling something. "It's trying to tell us something," he muttered.

Maya, already picking up on the Lunaphen's movements, smiled knowingly. "Looks like it wants us to follow it."

The Lunaphen darted ahead, its movements quick and fluid, but it frequently stopped, turning its head back to ensure they were still following. Without hesitation, Maya and Astron began to walk after it, curious about where the little creature might lead them.

As they ventured deeper into the forest, the atmosphere grew even more otherworldly. The mana in the air became denser, almost palpable, as though it were pooling around them. Astron's sharp eyes caught the subtle shifts in the energy flow, but something else was nagging at his mind.

He turned to Maya, his voice calm but curious. "Is it possible that there are things in this forest you don't know about?"

Maya glanced at him, her expression thoughtful. "It is indeed possible," she admitted, her tone serious. "Even though this forest has been cultivated by my family for generations, I haven't explored every inch of it. There are secrets here, places even I haven't fully uncovered. The forest is alive in its own way, and it holds things beyond our understanding."

Astron nodded, taking in her words. It wasn't surprising that such a mystical place would have hidden depths, but hearing it from Maya only reinforced the sense of mystery that surrounded them. The Lunaphen, with its ethereal glow, seemed to be leading them toward one of those secrets.

They continued to walk in silence for a while longer, the forest around them growing thicker, the trees towering above like ancient sentinels guarding something sacred. The air was cooler here, the light filtering through the canopy in thin, pale shafts.

Then, up ahead, Astron noticed something—a faint shimmer in the air, like the reflection of light on water. As they approached, the shimmering grew brighter, and the trees seemed to part, revealing a small clearing bathed in soft, radiant light.

The Lunaphen darted ahead, leaping gracefully onto a low-hanging branch of a tree that stood at the center of the clearing. As it landed, the light intensified, and Astron realized that the glow wasn't just coming from the clearing itself—it was coming from a cluster of other Lunaphens, their soft white fur glowing like tiny moons scattered across the branches.

Astron's eyes narrowed slightly, focusing on the scene before him. "So, there are more of them," he murmured.

Maya, standing beside him, was in awe. "I've never seen so many gathered in one place," she whispered. "This is incredible. Lunaphens are usually solitary creatures... for them to gather like this, something must be special about this spot."

The Lunaphen that had led Astron and Maya to the clearing suddenly leaped back toward Astron, landing on his shoulder with a soft "Kyu!" It then began to make a series of intricate, almost playful movements with its tiny paws and tail, as if trying to communicate something.

Maya furrowed her brow, tilting her head slightly. "What is it doing?" she asked, her voice a mix of curiosity and confusion.

Astron's sharp eyes followed the creature's movements, analyzing them carefully. He had seen animals exhibit strange behaviors before, but this felt more deliberate, almost like the Lunaphen was trying to convey instructions. After a brief pause, his mind pieced together an idea.

"I think it's trying to show us something," Astron muttered under his breath, more to himself than to Maya. He extended his hand, the tip of his finger glowing faintly as he allowed a thin thread of mana to flow outward. The Lunaphen immediately reacted, letting out an excited "Kyu!" before bouncing around, its eyes gleaming with approval.

The creature pointed out various spots in the clearing with quick flicks of its tail and tiny jumps. Astron followed the Lunaphen's guidance, extending his mana threads to each spot it indicated. Slowly but surely, a strange pattern began to form in the air, as if the threads of mana were connecting invisible points, creating a symbol that shimmered in the air.

Maya watched with wide eyes as the threads aligned, reflecting the soft lunar light back down onto the ground in the center of the clearing. The light focused, converging into a single spot, revealing something hidden beneath the earth.

At first, it was small—barely noticeable—but as the light intensified, the object began to emerge. The ground parted slightly, as though something was being drawn up by the focused energy.

As the focused lunar light gathered, the ground in the center of the clearing shifted further, and from beneath the earth, something began to rise. At first, it looked like just a small bud pushing through the soil, but then, as if responding to the Lunaphen's guidance and the mana threads Astron had woven, the bud slowly unfurled, revealing a delicate, ethereal flower.

It was an orchid—but unlike any Astron or Maya had ever seen before. Its petals glowed faintly, shimmering with a natural beauty that seemed otherworldly. What truly stood out were the leaves, each one radiating its own distinct color. One leaf was a deep, vibrant red, while another shone a rich emerald green. The third was a brilliant blue, as if reflecting the clearest sky. The fourth leaf was a royal purple, and the fifth, at the bottom, was a muted grey, exuding an air of mystery.

"This.....Just what is this?"

It was the first time Maya had seen something like this, so she could not help but narrow her eyes.

On the other hand....As for Astron....

He looked at the Orchid as if he was in a trance.

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Astron stood frozen; his eyes locked onto the ethereal orchid, the vibrant colors of its leaves reflecting in his purple eyes. He wasn't just staring—he was entranced, completely absorbed by the sight of the strange flower. His expression, usually so calm and composed, had softened into something far more vulnerable as if the orchid held a meaning that only he could see.

"Junior?" Maya called out softly, her voice tinged with concern. She took a step toward him, but he didn't respond, his gaze still fixed on the flower. It was as if the world around him had faded, leaving only him and the orchid in a shared, silent connection.

Maya's heart skipped a beat. She had never seen Astron like this. No matter what situation they had faced before—whether in battle or during moments of deep strategy—Astron had always been in control, never showing any sign of being overwhelmed. But now, standing before this delicate orchid, it was as if something had broken through his usual defenses.

"Junior!" she tried again, more urgently this time.

Still no response.

Seeing that there was no response, Maya's worry deepened. She took another step forward, reaching out her hand to shake him out of his trance, but just as her fingers were about to touch Astron, the Lunaphen that had been guiding them suddenly leaped from its perch and landed right in front of her, its small body positioned protectively between her and Astron.

"Kyu!" the Lunaphen growled, a surprisingly fierce sound for such a tiny creature. Its large eyes narrowed, and its usually gentle demeanor had shifted into something more serious. The creature was warning her—don't disturb him.

Maya recoiled in surprise, her hand freezing midair as she looked at the Lunaphen. "What...?" she whispered, her brow furrowing in confusion. The Lunaphen was normally shy, and for it to act so defensively, something important was happening.

She hesitated, glancing between the small creature and Astron, who still stood as though he were frozen in time, his eyes locked on the radiant orchid. "But he's... trapped or something. I need to—"

"Kyu!" the Lunaphen repeated, more forcefully this time, its tail flicking sharply as it stood its ground.

Maya bit her lip, unsure of what to do. She had never seen Astron like this, and the idea of leaving him in such a vulnerable state did not sound well.

But she had nothing to do.

Just as Maya was about to step forward again, she froze, her breath catching in her throat as Astron began to move. His steps were slow and deliberate as if guided by something far beyond his conscious control. He walked toward the orchid, his movements unnaturally gentle, almost reverent.

Maya's eyes widened as she watched, her heart racing. "Junior...?"

But no words seemed able to reach him. His gaze was still fixed solely on the glowing orchid, and with one last step, he finally reached out, his fingers brushing against the delicate petals.

The moment his fingertips made contact with the flower, the clearing was bathed in a brilliant light. The orchid shone with an intensity that seemed to radiate from the very core of its being, its colors blending together in a vibrant display. Maya shielded her eyes against the sudden brightness, but her gaze remained locked on Astron.

She watched in awe as the orchid's light began to envelop Astron, wrapping around him like a cocoon of pure mana. The vibrant colors of the flower—red, green, blue, purple, grey—swirled around him, creating a dazzling spectacle that filled the air with an almost tangible energy. The mana pulsed and danced, each color representing a different essence, a different flow of life.

Maya's sharp senses kicked in, and she immediately began to analyze what was happening. The mana wasn't random—it was deliberate, focused. Each of the six distinct colors rose from the orchid in soft streams and entered Astron's body, one by one.

Red, Green, Blue, Grey, Purple and White.

"What... is this?" Maya whispered to herself, her mind racing to process the phenomenon unfolding before her. She had never seen anything like this, not in all her years studying mana or her family's ancient knowledge of the natural world.

Astron stood at the center of it all, still motionless, but Maya could sense the shift in his body as the mana flowed into him. It wasn't violent, nor did it seem to be harming him. Instead, it felt like the mana was harmonizing with him, merging with his essence as if the orchid had chosen him.

No, the orchid had chosen him was a wrong representation.

'It is as if the Orchid was waiting for someone like him.'

She could not help but feel that this Junior of hers was also not a normal kid. While he was filled with his revenge and his path was something that differed from his, there were also many mysterious things happening around him that she could not simply explain.

But at the same time, from how it looked, even her Junior himself did not seem to know about this at all.

'Just who are you?'

She asked while watching as the mana continued to enter Astron's body.

Suddenly, without warning, Astron's body collapsed. He fell to the ground, the radiant light fading away as his consciousness seemed to leave him in an instant.

"Astron!" Maya shouted, her voice filled with panic. Without thinking, she rushed to his side, her instincts kicking in before her mind could even process what was happening. She knelt down, her arms instinctively wrapping around his fallen form, pulling him close.

She must have known that as an Awakened, Astron shouldn't be vulnerable to something like this, but the sight of him lying there, unconscious and unmoving, sent a surge of fear through her.

Gently, she lowered him onto her lap, cradling his head as she knelt in the soft grass of the clearing. Her hands trembled slightly as she adjusted his position, making sure he was comfortable. She could feel the steady rise and fall of his chest—he was breathing, but the energy that had once radiated from him was now eerily still.

"Junior," she whispered softly, her fingers brushing against his cheek as she tried to wake him.

But well there was still no response.

'It is not finished, it seems.'

She thought as she felt that mana around the place was still hovering around the Junior. It seemed that this process would take a little bit longer, though seeing him like this, it seemed it was not something that would be painful or anything.

Maya looked down at Astron, lying peacefully in her lap, his face free of the usual tension and focus he carried when awake. In this moment, he seemed so different—defenseless, vulnerable, and strangely at ease. The energy that usually radiated from him, sharp and intense, had faded, leaving only a soft, quiet presence. She couldn't help but find it a little surreal to see him like this.

She raised a hand slowly, hesitating for a brief moment, before lightly poking his cheek. His skin was smooth, softer than she expected, and for a moment, the seriousness of the situation seemed to melt away. A small smile tugged at the corner of her lips as she continued to poke at his cheek.

'So different from how he usually is,' she thought, her fingers lingering for a moment as if she were trying to understand this side of him. Just earlier, they had shared a moment of connection, but she hadn't paid attention to how soft and boyish his features still were. For all his strength and control, there was a gentleness about him now that was hard to ignore.

Maya's heart softened as she looked down at him. "You really don't let your guard down much, do you, Junior?" she whispered, her voice barely audible.

Her fingers brushed his cheek once more before she sighed softly, letting her hand rest on his shoulder. She felt protective of him, though she knew he didn't need her protection.

'Even like this, you manage to surprise me,' she thought, her gaze lingering on his peaceful expression.

The Lunaphen that had been watching them from a nearby branch gave a soft "Kyu" as if reassuring her that everything was still proceeding as it should. Maya nodded quietly, content to wait for Astron to finish whatever process he was going through.

As Maya sat there, lost in her thoughts, a soft glow began to emerge around Astron's neck. At first, it was barely noticeable—a faint shimmer, like moonlight reflecting on water—but it gradually grew brighter, forming the delicate shape of a necklace. The pendant was a small crescent moon, ethereal in its glow, as though it had been crafted from the light of the stars themselves.

Maya's breath caught in her throat as she stared at the necklace, her heart racing. "What...?" she whispered, her eyes wide with shock. She had never seen anything like this before, not even with her extensive knowledge of mystical phenomena.

Before she could fully comprehend what was happening, a soft voice echoed in the clearing—a voice that sounded distant, otherworldly, and filled with emotion.

"Brother."

The single word was filled with warmth and sadness, spoken so softly that Maya wondered if she had imagined it. But then, from the glow of the crescent moon, a figure began to materialize. Slowly, the silhouette of a young girl appeared, her form delicate and translucent, as if she were woven from the very fabric of the moonlight surrounding them.

The girl was ethereal, her presence both calming and haunting. She seemed to hover just above the ground, her soft, pale features framed by long, flowing hair that shimmered with the same glow as the crescent necklace. Her eyes were wide and kind, filled with an ancient sadness that seemed far too deep for someone of her apparent age.

Maya instinctively tightened her grip on Astron, unsure of what to do. "Who... who are you?" she asked softly, her voice barely above a whisper.

The girl's head slowly turned, her translucent form now facing Maya. Her once soft and kind eyes narrowed, and the sudden shift in her expression sent an icy shiver down Maya's spine. The weight of the girl's gaze was suffocating, as if the very air around them had thickened, pressing down on her with an unseen force.

Maya's breath caught in her throat, her mouth opening slightly, but no words came out. The pressure from the girl's presence felt overwhelming, and for the first time, Maya found herself completely frozen, unable to muster her usual confidence.

"Parasite," the girl hissed, her voice no longer gentle but cold and sharp, like the edge of a blade. "Taking advantage of him."

Maya's eyes widened in shock, the accusation cutting deep. Her mind raced, trying to make sense of the girl's words, but she couldn't find her voice to respond. The weight of the girl's presence felt too oppressive, crushing any response before it could form.

"You don't deserve to be near him... Yet this is his wish, so I will respect it for now," the girl continued, her tone growing more venomous. "It is too early for you to know about me... too early for you to understand. So go to sleep."

Maya's body felt heavy, her eyelids growing impossibly heavy as if the girl's words were pulling her into unconsciousness. She fought against it, her instincts screaming at her to resist, but it was like an unstoppable tide pulling her under.

"And don't ever forget..." the girl's voice softened into a chilling whisper, though the malice remained. "I will be watching you. Always."

With that final warning, the ethereal figure raised her hand, and a soft pulse of light emanated from her, washing over Maya like a wave. The last thing Maya saw before her vision faded was the girl's piercing, cold eyes.

And then, darkness.

Chapter 584 129.3 - Weird Place

My dreams, they have been changing recently. If before, I would always see the scene where the demons' claws pierced her chest.

Though there were occasional different dreams as well, most of the time the context was like this.

Yet now, I had another dream.

In that dream, she was there again, smiling, her eyes filled with warmth and sadness. The kind of sadness that clings to your soul but never quite lets you feel at peace.

I could feel her presence, as if she was right there beside me, the air around her heavy with unspoken words. She didn't say much, though—she never did. Just smiled, that same bittersweet expression that always left me feeling empty when I woke up.

And just like that, the dream faded, slipping away like water through my fingers.

I slowly became aware of a weight on my body, something soft and warm pressing against me. My senses stirred, the last remnants of sleep clinging to my mind, but I opened my eyes, blinking as my vision cleared.

Senior Maya.

She was lying against me, her head resting gently on my chest, her eyes closed, and her face calm, almost peaceful. Her breathing was slow and steady, and for a moment, I just lay there, unsure of

what to make of the situation. Her purple hair cascaded over me like a delicate curtain, and there was a faint blush on her cheeks, though I couldn't tell if it was from sleep or something else.

I glanced around, my mind still hazy from whatever had just happened. The clearing, the orchid... the overwhelming light. It all came rushing back in flashes, but here I was now, with Maya asleep on top of me.

'What happened...?'

I tried to recall the last thing I remembered clearly—reaching for the orchid, feeling the mana surge through me, but after that... nothing. My body felt heavier like I had been drained of energy, but there was no pain. Just a strange sense of... peace.

'Or is it peace?'

I raised my head slightly, just enough to get a better look at how we were positioned. Maya was lying on her side, her head nestled against my chest, her arm draped loosely across my waist. Her body pressed softly against mine, and I could feel the gentle rise and fall of her breathing, rhythmic and calm.

From the way her legs were curled slightly to the side, and her hand resting so lightly on me, it seemed like she had been sitting beside me at first, then at some point, she must have laid down. Her posture wasn't forced, no signs of tension—just a natural stillness as if she'd settled there to watch over me and had fallen asleep in the process.

'Did she... stay here with me the whole time?'

I let my gaze drift to her face. The blush on her cheeks was still there, giving her an innocent, almost serene look. The contrast between her usual composed demeanor and this sleeping form made me pause.

'She must've been guarding me after I lost consciousness...' I thought, piecing it together. The way she was lying suggested she had tried to keep me close, maybe worried I wouldn't wake up. Her body seemed protective, even in sleep.

'But, still....How was she also forcefully put to sleep?'

The thought struck me with a sudden clarity. Maya wasn't just any normal human; she was Awakened, just like me. Her stamina and resilience far exceeded that of an ordinary person. She could go for days without rest if necessary. If she had been watching over me, there's no way she would have just drifted off to sleep like this unless something forced her into it.

'It might have been the orchid,' I thought. 'If the orchid had the power to affect me, it's possible that it did the same to her. But then... why did it take longer? Was she resistant? Did her vampiric blood give her more strength to fight it off?'

There were too many variables. The orchid, the mana, Maya's bloodline, my own involvement. It was like trying to connect pieces of a puzzle when I didn't have all the edges. I could speculate, but that wouldn't get me far. At the end of the day, there was only one way to know for sure, and that was to ask her directly when she woke up.

For now, I needed to focus on something I could control—myself.

Taking a slow breath, I spread my senses throughout my body, trying to get a better feel for what had changed. Something felt different, almost subtly so, but it was there. The moment I focused inward, I noticed it—an underlying energy that hadn't been there before. A steady hum, like a rhythm coursing through me, as if the mana from the orchid had integrated itself into me.

'Indeed. The flower was absorbed. I feel... stronger. Healthier' Whatever it is, something had changed, and whenever something like this happened the easiest way to check it was.

'Status.'

▶ Name: Astron Natusalune

▶ Occupation: Weapon Master (level 4)

▶ Talent Limit: 10.5 --> 12 ▶ Passives:

Vengeful Bane

Bloodline Resonance

Psychic Cognizance

▶ Attributes:

Variable Attributes:

Strength: 5.34 --> 5.50 (+0.16)

Dexterity: 5.64 --> 5.81 (+0.17)

Agility: 5.72 --> 5.89 (+0.17)

Constitution: 5.37 --> 5.53 (+0.16)

Intuition: 5.79 --> 5.96 (+0.17)

Magical Power: 6.17 --> 6.36 (+0.19)

Mana Capacity: 6.25 --> 6.44 (+0.19)

I blinked as the numbers and details unfolded before me. My talent limit had increased, not by a small margin either—another boost pushing me further beyond the original boundaries.

'From 10.5 to 12...' It was rare for something to affect my talent limit so significantly, especially considering how difficult it was to improve it under normal circumstances.

'This orchid...' I had never seen it before, not even in the game, and yet it had clearly played an important role in my development. The subtle yet noticeable increase in my attributes confirmed that this wasn't just any ordinary plant.

The increments weren't large, but they were consistent across all my variable attributes—strength, dexterity, agility, constitution, intuition, magical power, and mana capacity. The orchid had given me a comprehensive boost.

'Not just physical attributes either,' I mused as I glanced over the changes. My magical power and mana capacity had also grown, almost as if the orchid had refined me on a fundamental level, enhancing both my body and my magical capabilities. It wasn't just an energy boost; it was a deep-rooted improvement.

'Interesting.'

Whatever it is, it was a welcome improvement.

"Hmm....."

And just at that moment, I felt Senior Maya wriggling. It seemed she was about to wake up already.

Maya stirred against me, her body shifting slightly as she began to wake. Her movements were slow, almost hesitant, as if her mind was still caught in the haze of sleep. I stayed still, watching her carefully. After a moment, her eyes blinked open, their pink hue slightly dazed as they tried to focus on her surroundings.

"Hm... What happened?" she murmured, her voice soft and drowsy as she glanced around, clearly disoriented. She rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand, blinking a few more times as if trying to shake off the remnants of sleep.

I remained silent, waiting patiently for her to compose herself. There was no need to rush her—she had been through something as well, and I wanted to give her a moment to fully wake up.

It didn't take long. Maya's eyes cleared quickly, the fog of sleep disappearing as her sharp senses returned. Her gaze flickered around the clearing before landing on me. She blinked once more, her expression shifting as the realization of her position hit her.

"Junior..." she began, her voice steady, though there was a faint blush creeping into her cheeks as she sat up, adjusting herself. "How did this happen?"

Maya furrowed her brow as she sat up straighter, her eyes narrowing slightly as she seemed to search her memory. Her hand brushed absently against the grass as if grounding herself in the moment.

"I remember... placing your head on my lap," she said slowly, her voice laced with uncertainty. "But... everything after that is a blur."

She glanced at me, her expression a mixture of confusion and frustration. "It's strange. I don't fall asleep that easily, especially not while guarding someone. It feels like... something just made me sleep."

I nodded slightly, considering her words. I had been thinking the same thing. Given her strength and willpower, it was unlikely that she would simply fall asleep like that on her own. Something else must've been at play.

"Seems like the orchid had more of an effect than we realized," I said calmly, observing her as she tried to piece everything together.

Maya's hand came to her forehead, as if trying to massage the missing memories back. "It doesn't make sense... I felt fine until that point, then suddenly, nothing."

I stood up slowly, stretching out my limbs as the lingering effects of the orchid's energy seemed to settle in my body. "Let's not dwell on it any longer," I said, offering Maya a hand. "We've already spent enough time here, and the evening's approaching."

Maya looked up at me, still somewhat perplexed, but after a moment, she nodded and accepted my hand.

As I pulled her up, the last traces of frustration faded from her expression, replaced by a sense of calm acceptance.

As we walked back toward the mansion, the silence between us was comfortable but carried a subtle tension. Maya's usual calmness had returned, but I could still sense that faint nervousness lingering in her expression, almost like she was anticipating something.

The mansion loomed ahead, its elegant design standing in contrast to the fading light of the evening. The walk back felt shorter this time, though maybe it was because both of us were lost in our own thoughts.

When we arrived at the entrance, Maya paused for a moment, her hand resting on the door handle as if she were about to say something. But instead, she turned toward me with a gentle smile.

"I'll leave you to settle into your room," she said, her voice calm but holding a softness to it. "Take your time to rest. I'll check in later."

I nodded, appreciating the space she was giving me. "Thank you, Senior."

With that, Maya gave me a small nod and disappeared down one of the mansion's hallways, leaving me alone in the entranceway.

The silence settled in, and for the first time since arriving at the mansion, I felt a sense of stillness. Now, with Maya gone and no immediate tasks ahead of me, I could finally take a moment to think.

Chapter 585 130.1 - Sylvana's Essence

Maya walked down the hallway, her steps steady, though her mind was anything but calm. Her head felt strangely heavy as if a dull ache had settled behind her eyes, clouding her thoughts. She pressed her fingers to her temple, trying to ease the discomfort, but the sensation lingered, almost unnatural.

"What happened back there?" she wondered, replaying the events in her mind, yet she could not remember anything at all.

Maya let out a soft sigh as she neared her studio, hoping that the quiet solitude of her space would help her clear her mind. But just as her hand reached for the door, a familiar voice interrupted her.

"Lady Maya," Alfred's calm, composed tone cut through the fog in her mind.

Maya turned to see the butler standing just behind her, his expression as unreadable as ever. "Alfred," she greeted, though her voice was slightly strained from the headache. "What is it?"

"The dinner, my lady," Alfred reminded her, his eyes flickering with a hint of concern. "You may recall that your brother, the Lord, will be arriving soon. He is expecting you to join him."

Maya blinked, the realization slowly sinking in. 'Ah....Brother... is coming.' She had completely forgotten about this fact.

Maya sighed inwardly, pressing her fingers once more to her temple. How could she have forgotten something so important? Her brother, the Lord of the family, was coming, and he had specifically mentioned wanting to meet Astron. After everything that had happened that day, it completely slipped her mind.

'How could I make such a mistake?' she chastised herself. But then again, the events earlier had been overwhelming—Astron's strange connection to the orchid, the appearance of that girl, and the subsequent exhaustion that had washed over both of them. She could hardly blame herself for being distracted.

Still, her brother wasn't someone she could afford to keep waiting, especially since he had expressed an interest in Astron. She had to handle this delicately.

With another sigh, she turned back to Alfred, her voice more composed now. "Thank you for the reminder, Alfred. I'll prepare myself for the dinner."

Alfred gave her a small, respectful nod, but his eyes flickered briefly toward her as if he could sense the turmoil behind her calm facade. "If there's anything I can assist you with, Lady Maya, please don't hesitate to ask."

Maya smiled slightly, though it didn't quite reach her eyes. "I appreciate that, Alfred. I'll let you know if I need anything."

As the butler turned and left, Maya leaned against the door of her studio, gathering her thoughts. She would need to inform Astron about her brother's visit, but she couldn't do it just yet. He had been through enough already. The moment they had arrived at the mansion, she hadn't even given him a chance to rest or settle in.

'He deserves at least some time to relax,' she thought, her mind briefly drifting back to their earlier moments in the forest. Everything had happened so fast, and now they were heading into something even more serious. A meeting with her brother could bring complications, but at the same time, this was what she had wanted in the first place.

The moment she brought him here, he became entangled with her family, and that was all there was to it.

'Hmm.....'

Thinking about it, she remembered that she had promised him a special drink to be prepared.

'Yeah, that would be better.'

She could visit him while giving him the drink, and that seemed to be the normal excuse. And then she would inform him about her brother's visit.

'Indeed, that is how it should be.'

Thinking that she had pushed her mana into the small button right on the corner of her table, and then, following that, the button lit.

Maya sat down at her desk, waiting patiently as the soft hum of mana surged through the button, signaling the arrival of the maid. Moments later, a light knock echoed from the door, and a young maid entered, her head bowed respectfully.

"You summoned me, Lady Maya?" the maid asked, her voice polite and steady.

Maya gave a small nod, her mind already focused on the task at hand. "Yes, I need you to prepare a special drink. The Sylvara's Essence."

The maid's eyes widened slightly at the mention of the elixir, but she quickly composed herself, giving a respectful nod. "Sylvara's Essence, my lady? Understood." She bowed slightly, her face showing a subtle understanding of the significance of the drink.

This elixir wasn't just an ordinary drink. It was a rare, carefully crafted mixture of herbs passed down through the royal family of elves, said to have been created by Aelion himself—the first ruler of the Elven kingdom. The recipe was guarded closely, and only those with the highest connections to the Elven bloodline could access the ingredients needed for such a drink. The Starbloom Essence, Silverpetal Lotus, and Everglow Root were all part of its blend, each herb adding to the power and vitality of those who consumed it.

The maid remained calm and collected, though the gravity of the request was not lost on her. Preparing Sylvara's Essence was a task only entrusted to a select few in the Evergreen mansion. Each maid trained in the art of crafting this elixir had undergone a strict, sacred ritual—one that included a soul-binding oath. This binding was etched deep into their very being, ensuring they could never reveal the recipe or the process by any means, even under the most dire circumstances.

The elixir itself was a legacy of the Elven royalty, passed down through the generations. The knowledge of how to create it had been woven into the minds and souls of those deemed worthy, protecting it from falling into the wrong hands.

"Only the finest ingredients, of course," Maya continued, her voice steady, though her mind lingered on the significance of what she was requesting. "This is for someone special."

The maid nodded, her demeanor reflecting the utmost respect. "As you wish, Lady Maya. I will begin preparations immediately. It will take some time, but I will bring it to you as soon as it is ready."

A little while later, Maya stood near the entrance of Astron's room, holding a delicate tray with a single, intricately crafted glass containing Sylvara's Essence. The light from the hall reflected softly off the glass, illuminating the shimmering liquid inside—pale green, with faint swirls of gold and silver, a drink that seemed to pulse with life itself.

After gathering herself for a moment, Maya gently knocked on the door.

"Come in," came Astron's calm voice from the other side.

Maya opened the door and stepped inside, her eyes immediately finding him seated at a small table near the window. His posture was thoughtful, his eyes distant as if he were lost in deep contemplation. He didn't look up at first, seemingly absorbed in whatever thoughts occupied his

mind. The evening light cast a soft glow through the window, creating a peaceful atmosphere in the room.

She stood there for a moment, taking in the sight of him before speaking.

"Junior," she said softly, stepping closer and placing the tray on the table in front of him. Her voice brought him out of his reverie, and he blinked, his gaze slowly shifting to her.

He raised an eyebrow, his expression curious as he glanced at the glass in front of him. "Senior, what's this?"

Maya smiled slightly, her tone playful yet gentle. "I promised you something special, didn't I?" She gestured to the glass. "This is Sylvara's Essence, a very rare elixir. Only a select few have ever tasted it."

Astron looked down at the drink, studying the swirling colors within. His face looked calm as if he had not understood what this thing was, but in fact he knew.

'This.....It really is Sylvara's Essence.'

Astron stared at the swirling, ethereal liquid in the glass, the colors of gold and silver mingling in a way that was almost mesmerizing. He kept his expression neutral, but inside, his mind was racing.

'Sylvara's Essence...' he thought, recognizing it immediately from his knowledge of the game. This elixir wasn't just rare—it was an end-game item, one that held immense power and value. It was the kind of thing you could only obtain after spending countless hours building relationships with key figures in the world, especially the Elven Princess. The only way to get the formula for this elixir was to earn her trust, which was no small feat.

That Maya had access to something so rare wasn't necessarily surprising, given her background, but it did confirm one thing for Astron: her family's ties to the Elven royalty ran deeper than he had initially realized. Aeilon, the Elven Royalty that Maya had mentioned before, must have passed this knowledge down through their lineage.

Still, Astron wasn't going to let any of this show on his face. He had spent years perfecting the art of keeping his thoughts hidden, and now was no different.

'If she knew I recognized this, it might raise too many questions,' he thought, his gaze still fixed on the elixir.

"Seems fancy," Astron said, his voice casual, as though he were simply humoring her. He picked up the glass, swirling the liquid gently as if he were merely curious. "So, what makes this drink so special, Senior?"

Maya smiled, her pink eyes twinkling with the same playfulness that had been there earlier. "Hehe....You will see..... It's not something that many people get the chance to taste, and those who do..." She leaned in slightly, her voice dropping to a softer, almost conspiratorial tone, "...are considered very lucky."

Astron chuckled lightly, playing along with her tone. "Well, I must say, I do feel honored."

Maya's expression softened, and she took a seat across from him, watching him closely. She wasn't just sharing a rare drink; there was more weight to this gesture than simply offering him something special. Astron could sense it. This was her way of bringing him closer into her world, of showing him trust, and perhaps even testing his loyalty.

"You should try it," she said, her voice quieter now, the teasing edge replaced with something more genuine. "I want to know what you think."

Astron nodded slowly, lifting the glass to his lips.

After all, there was no reason for him to refuse.

Chapter 586 130.2 - Sylvana's Essence

In many leveling systems within games, players often focus on a select few attributes, honing their character's strengths for maximum efficiency. Whether it's increasing strength for melee fighters, dexterity for speed-based characters, or intelligence for spellcasters, the game's scaling mechanics encourage specialization.

Weapons, spells, and even equipment are often designed with a certain attribute scaling in mind, meaning the higher your stat in that area, the more powerful your character becomes.

The same thing could also be said for the game *Legacy of Shadows: The Hunter's Destiny*.

This method worked wonders in the mid-game. Players could breeze through enemies, dominating their opponents with tailored builds that emphasize their chosen strengths.

However, as the game progresses, this narrow focus often becomes a double-edged sword. In late-game content, when enemies are more versatile, diverse challenges arise that require well-rounded abilities. A character with one or two maxed attributes might find themselves lacking in critical areas, their once-dominant build now a liability against tougher, more unpredictable foes.

This was where Starbloom Essence came into play in *Legacy of Shadows: The Hunter's Destiny*. Unlike most consumables that offered short-term buffs or minor boosts to a single attribute, Starbloom Essence served a much deeper purpose. It acted as a sort of recalibration tool for a player's character, specifically designed to address the problem of lopsided builds. The essence worked by increasing the base values of a player's lacking stats, effectively allowing them to level up their weaker attributes without losing the progress they had already made in their strongest areas.

For players who had hyper-specialized their characters—dumping points into strength, dexterity, or Mana—Starbloom Essence was a godsend. As late-game content began to test every aspect of a player's build, those who had neglected their secondary stats found themselves exposed to the dangers of the game's diverse enemy types. The powerful foes in these final stages weren't just strong in one area; they required both offense and defense, as well as the flexibility to handle varied challenges, from speed to magic resistance.

In essence, the Starbloom Essence functioned as a remedy for the limitations of hyper-specialization. Its unique formula boosted the base stats that had fallen behind, effectively eliminating critical weaknesses.

'Interesting....' Astron lifted the glass, the shimmering liquid swirling in the pale green and silver hues that seemed to pulse with energy.

GULP!

Without further hesitation, he downed the elixir in a single gulp, the cool, almost refreshing taste spreading across his tongue. However, the moment the Sylvara's Essence hit his stomach, the true effect began.

A surge of warmth spread throughout his body, not unpleasant but intense as if every fiber of his being was being revitalized. His mana fibers felt like it was being reignited, the elixir spreading through his veins, filling him with power far greater than he anticipated. His muscles tensed, and he could feel his mana responding, swirling in response to the sudden influx of energy.

Maya, sensing the reaction immediately, leaned forward. "Astron, sit down. Take the lotus position. Now."

Astron, already aware of what was happening, nodded and quickly complied. He sat cross-legged on the floor, his back straight and his hands resting lightly on his knees. His breathing slowed as he focused inward, letting his mana flow freely through his body. It felt as though the Sylvara's Essence was amplifying his mana control, sharpening his senses and refining the energy inside him.

"Good," Maya said, her voice calm but with an undertone of excitement. "Now, circulate your mana slowly. Let it flow through every meridian, every muscle. Don't waste any of it. You need to absorb all the properties of the elixir."

Astron followed her instructions, directing his mana throughout his body, ensuring it reached every corner, every cell. He could feel the essence of the drink fusing with his own energy, enhancing his mana reserves, fortifying his physical strength, and sharpening his mental clarity.

"Urghk-!"

But aside from that, something different happened.

Astron's body tensed as a sharp jolt of pain shot through his muscles, causing his shoulders to twitch involuntarily. His hands gripped his knees tightly, knuckles turning white as he fought to maintain control. The initial warmth and strength from the Sylvara's Essence had been powerful, but now something else was happening—something unexpected.

"Urghk-!" Astron grunted once again, his facial muscles spasming as if they were being torn apart and rebuilt at the same time. The bones on his face also seemed to be changing.

Maya's eyes widened in shock as she watched him, her heart pounding. This wasn't the reaction she had anticipated. When she had consumed the Sylvara's Essence years ago, she had experienced a surge of strength, an increased sensitivity to mana, but nothing like this. There had been no spasms, no bone-deep pain. The essence had been smooth, empowering, and almost serene in its effects on her. But Astron...

Her first thought was that something had gone wrong with the elixir. Her mind raced through the possibilities, but she quickly shook her head, dismissing the idea. The maid who prepared it was highly trained, and mistakes with such a revered formula were nearly impossible. Besides, if there had been anything wrong with the elixir, she would have sensed it immediately.

But this... this was something else entirely.

And as if that was not enough, suddenly smoke started rising from Astron's body, making Maya's breath hitch in her throat. Her eyes narrowed as she took in the sight, the smoke swirling and thickening around him. It wasn't just ordinary smoke—it was laced with mana, shimmering faintly with the energy it carried. Maya's instincts flared, telling her that this was not just a byproduct of the Sylvara's Essence, but rather a unique reaction to Astron's body and mana.

'Mana excretion?' Maya thought, watching as the dense cloud continued to obscure her view of him. She had heard of such occurrences before, though they were rare. The body, under intense strain or transformation, would sometimes release impurities or excess energy in the form of smoke or mist. It was considered a part of the purification process, expelling what wasn't needed while strengthening what remained.

'Maybe this is part of his process,' she reasoned. After all, the Sylvara's Essence was known to affect each individual differently. The elixir was potent, its properties uniquely tailored to draw out and amplify a person's strengths, though how it manifested could vary wildly depending on the person. Maya herself had experienced a smoother, more empowering sensation when she drank it, but she couldn't ignore the possibility that Astron's transformation was far more intense due to his specific circumstances.

The smoke thickened, and Maya could feel the mana radiating from it. It pulsed with a strange rhythm, almost like a heartbeat, as though it was alive, reacting to Astron's body. She stepped back slightly, her eyes flickering with concern but also curiosity. She could sense the shift in mana, the way it twisted and coiled around him, like a cocoon.

'He's still in control,' she thought, reassured by the steady flow of mana she could sense coming from him. Whatever was happening, it wasn't harming him—not yet, at least. But the changes were profound, reshaping him in ways she couldn't fully comprehend.

As the smoke began to dissipate, Maya's vision cleared, and she caught her first glimpse of Astron. His body was still, his chest rising and falling in a controlled, rhythmic pattern.

"Huh?"

The moment the smoke fully cleared and Astron's face came into view, Maya couldn't help but gasp softly. Her breath quickened, her chest tightening with a sudden, unexpected reaction. She blinked, trying to process what she was seeing, but the sight of Astron's transformed appearance left her momentarily speechless.

'What...?' Her mind raced, trying to make sense of the situation. She hadn't anticipated this—none of her knowledge of the Sylvara's Essence had prepared her for this kind of reaction. But it wasn't just the physical transformation that struck her; it was the sheer intensity of Astron's presence.

Astron had always been above average in terms of face—objectively speaking, he was an 7.5-8/10, someone who could easily turn heads with his sharp features, his fair skin, and those striking purple eyes that set him apart.

But now, as he sat before her, his face slightly illuminated by the lingering glow of the elixir, there was something more—something almost ethereal. He exuded an overwhelming charm, a magnetic pull that made it difficult for her to look away.

His once-handsome features had sharpened into something even more captivating, as though every detail had been refined to perfection. His skin, now glowing faintly, had taken on an almost otherworldly quality, and his eyes—those same purple eyes—shone with a new intensity that was both mesmerizing and unsettling.

Maya's heart skipped a beat. 'This is... impossible,' she thought, still struggling to understand how such a transformation had occurred. Astron had always been composed, cold even, but now, there was an allure to him that felt... dangerous.

She swallowed hard, her mind racing. 'How could this happen? Was it the Sylvara's Essence? But I've never seen it do something like this.' Her thoughts tumbled over one another, trying to piece together the mystery. Had the elixir awakened something within him? Or had it merely amplified what had already been there, lying dormant?

And she was not wrong.

Sylvara's Essence.

It had a special ability that made it quite a good haul for a late-game item. Aside from the parameters that were lacking behind, there was also one thing that it affected.

Invariable Attributes

Certain types of attributes would not be developed by normal means, nor could they be measured by any type of means.

While making up for the lack of Variable attributes, Sylvara's Essence also affected the lack of invariable attributes.

In a way, if a player's character was lacking in terms of willpower, might, or other types of variable attributes, they would also be amplified.

And this was exactly what happened to Astron right at this moment.

"Huuuuh....."

With a long breath, Astron calmed himself down and finalized the process. But then he glanced at Maya, noticing her wide-eyed stare, and furrowed his brow slightly. "What is it?" he asked, his voice smooth and composed, though there was a subtle undertone of curiosity.

Maya blinked, realizing she had been staring for too long. She shook her head quickly, trying to snap herself out of the trance she had fallen into. "Junior.....Take a look."

She could only show what she was seeing so that he would understand.

Chapter 587 131.1 - Alden Evergreen

I took a deep breath, letting the residual energy settle within me as the effects of the Sylvara's Essence finally calmed. I felt... different. Lighter, stronger. It was as if my body had been revitalized from the inside out, filled with a new vitality that made every muscle feel more responsive, every movement smoother. The entire process had been painful—far more than I had expected—but the end result was worth it. I could feel the difference, not just in strength but in every fiber of my being.

'This... is quite the transformation,' I thought, flexing my fingers experimentally. My senses were heightened, sharper. Mana flowed through me with a clarity and ease that hadn't been there before. It was almost effortless now, as if the barriers that had once held me back had been stripped away.

"Junior..." Maya's voice pulled me from my thoughts, and I glanced over at her. Her eyes were wide, still locked onto me with a mix of shock and something else I couldn't quite place.

"What is it?" I asked, my voice smooth and composed, though a part of me was curious about her reaction. Something had clearly caught her off guard.

Maya shook her head, then gestured toward the small mirror by the side of the room. "Take a look for yourself."

I stood up slowly, feeling the newfound strength in my legs, and walked over to the mirror. As I caught sight of my reflection, I understood why Maya had been staring.

My face—while still recognizably mine—had changed. It was subtle but undeniable. My features had sharpened and refined to an almost ethereal level, giving me a striking, almost otherworldly appearance. My skin seemed to glow faintly with an inner light, and my purple eyes... they were more intense now, shining with a depth I hadn't seen before.

'I see.....'

I thought as I stared at my reflection. My appearance had never been something I gave much thought to. My focus had always been on strength, honing my abilities, and perfecting my skills. Superficial things like looks were secondary at best.

Yet, here I was, staring at someone who seemed... different. Sharper.

In the game, there was a hidden stat called Charisma. It wasn't something you could actively level up like strength or dexterity, and it didn't show up in the usual status window. Most players didn't even know it existed, but it had an effect—a subtle one. Charisma influenced how characters interacted with the world around them, how people perceived them, how easily they could sway others or command attention without saying a word. It wasn't tied to magic or combat prowess, but it could be just as powerful.

And now, with Sylvara's Essence, it felt like that hidden attribute had been touched.

'Status.'

As I called the status window in my head, the panel appeared right before my eyes.

▶ Name: Astron Natusalune

▶ Occupation: Weapon Master (level 4)

▶ Talent Limit: 12 --> 13 ▶ Passives:

Vengeful Bane

Bloodline Resonance

Psychic Cognizance

▶ Attributes:

Variable Attributes:

Strength: 5.50 --> 5.79

Dexterity: 5.81

Agility: 5.89

Constitution: 5.53 --> 5.80

Intuition: 5.96

Magical Power: 6.36

Mana Capacity: 6.44

Invariable Attributes

Charisma: 7.5 --> 11

Vitality: 7 --> 10

Charisma: 7.5 --> 11. Vitality: 7 --> 10.

'So, it really did affect those hidden stats,' I thought, staring at the numbers that hadn't been there before. Normally, you wouldn't even be able to see Charisma or Vitality on the status screen unless something external enhanced them, and now, Sylvara's Essence had done exactly that. It made sense why I felt this surge in both my body and my presence.

Charisma—a stat that could influence how people saw you, how easily you could sway them, command attention, or even intimidate without trying. It wasn't tied to physical strength or magical prowess, but it held its own kind of power. And now, mine had jumped significantly.

Vitality—not just physical endurance, but the very life force that ran through your body, the ability to survive and recover from damage, to persist in the face of overwhelming odds. This stat wasn't something you could train through normal means, but it dictated your survivability on a fundamental level. And mine had increased by a large margin as well.

'This explains the surge of energy I've been feeling,' I mused, flexing my fingers. 'I feel... healthier, more alive.'

The Sylvara's Essence had done more than just improve my visible stats. It had pushed me to a new level of existence, enhancing both my presence and my ability to endure whatever trials came next.

I glanced back at Maya, her expression still reflecting some awe at the transformation. She hadn't said much since she asked me to check the mirror, but I could see the gears turning in her head.

"Looks like the Essence worked better than expected," I said, my voice calm but carrying a slight undertone of satisfaction.

Maya blinked, then gave a soft smile. "I didn't think it would affect you like this. But... it suits you."

"Suits me?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

Maya coughed awkwardly, a faint blush creeping up her cheeks. She averted her eyes slightly, her usual composed demeanor slipping just a bit. "I-I mean... it's now a lot... harder to resist," she muttered under her breath, the words tumbling out in a way that seemed almost unintentional.

I heard her clearly, but I decided to pretend I hadn't. There was no point in pushing the issue, and from the way she was already looking flustered, it was clear this wasn't a topic she was comfortable elaborating on.

Instead, I turned my attention back to the mirror, observing the faint glow still lingering on my skin. "Well, I'll take that as a compliment," I said casually, letting the moment pass.

Maya quickly composed herself, brushing her hair behind her ear and regaining her calm. "Of course," she said softly, her voice returning to its usual steadiness, though there was still a hint of that earlier blush.

She stood there for a moment longer, her gaze lingering on me as if she was still processing the transformation. Then, almost as if shaking herself free from whatever thoughts had momentarily held her, she exhaled softly and straightened her posture.

"Now that you're done," she began, her voice returning to its usual composed tone, "there's something I need to tell you."

I nodded, keeping my expression neutral while subtly observing her body language. There was something different in the way she carried herself now—small, almost imperceptible signs of restlessness. The slight shift in her stance, the way her fingers brushed against her arm, her eyes flickering between mine and the floor.

Whatever she was about to say was clearly weighing on her.

"In the dinner," she continued after a moment's pause, her voice quieter than before, "my brother will be joining us. He... wants to meet you."

I didn't outwardly react, but inwardly, the statement clicked. That explained her unease. It wasn't just a casual dinner or a typical meeting. Maya's brother—whoever he was—seemed to hold a weight over her.

'Her brother...' I thought, piecing together. 'Considering the fact that not many people knew about the identity of the Evergreen Family, the fact that Maya alone brought me here must have gathered their attention. And it was not like my visit was unplanned, as I had informed her just a week ago. That means that one way or another, the word would get into their ears. And Senior Maya didn't seem to particularly hide it either, so it makes sense that they want to see the person that Maya brought.'

The fact that the Evergreen Family was of an Elven lineage alone would be enough to cause quite an uproar, which is why such a meeting was understandable.

'And I am also quite curious as to what kind of people these Evergreens are.'

Though Maya's body language told me more than her words, there was an unspoken tension in the way she held herself, almost like she was bracing for something. Did she expect things to go poorly? Or was it something else entirely?

I nodded slowly, keeping my expression neutral, as if I had already anticipated this. "I see," I said calmly, my voice steady.

Maya's shoulders noticeably relaxed at my response, and she let out a quiet sigh of relief. Just as I had intended, my calm demeanor must have reassured her that I wasn't caught off guard. She had been worried about how I would take the news, but now, seeing my composed reaction, her tension seemed to ease.

For a moment, she didn't speak, but the subtle shift in her posture and the faint softening of her expression told me everything. Maya had been concerned that the mention of her brother would

unsettle me, perhaps expecting hesitation or resistance. But my reaction must have given her the confidence that I understood the situation, that I was prepared.

She met my gaze again, her lips curving into a small, grateful smile. "Thank you," she murmured, the sincerity in her voice unmistakable.

"No need," I replied smoothly, keeping the air light. "It's understandable. I figured something like this might come up."

Maya nodded slightly as if silently acknowledging my foresight.... "That is expected of you...."

With that, she rose from her seat, her movements fluid and graceful as always. She turned toward the door, her composure back in place now that the weight of her earlier concern had lifted.

"The dinner is scheduled for later tonight," she said over her shoulder, her tone matter-of-fact. "I'll come fetch you when the time comes."

I gave a simple nod in response, watching as she stepped toward the door. There was no need for more words; we both understood the gravity of what was coming, and there was no point in dwelling on it any longer.

"You are here...."

And just not long after, in the dining room of the Evergreen Mansion, a strong presence ruled.

Chapter 588 131.2 - Alden Evergreen

Maya stood outside the dining room, taking a moment to compose herself before entering. The weight of what was about to unfold pressed against her chest, though she kept her face calm, masking the emotions swirling beneath the surface. Her family had always been a source of strength for her—a lineage filled with pride, duty, and unspoken responsibilities. Yet, they had also been a source of love, something many wouldn't have expected given the Evergreen family's prominence.

She let her mind drift for a moment, thinking about her parents, her upbringing, and her brother. It was strange, really—how the world saw them as distant, noble figures, yet behind the scenes, they had always shown her kindness and care, even if it had been cloaked in the weight of their duties.

Her parents had raised her in the mansion, surrounded by the ancient traditions of the Evergreen family. There had been love, yes, but it had always been tempered by the expectations placed upon her from a young age. They were leaders of their people, descendants of the Elven Royal Line, and that came with its own set of challenges. Her father, a stoic figure with a sharp mind, had always been busy managing the vast responsibilities of their household. Yet, whenever he had the chance, he'd find time to smile at her, to ruffle her hair, and remind her that despite everything, she was his little girl.

Her mother had been more affectionate, a gentle presence who guided her through the intricacies of their heritage. Maya remembered the way her mother's voice would soothe her when the weight of their responsibilities became too much, how she'd weave stories of their ancestors, of the strength that ran through their blood. Her mother had always spoken with warmth, but her eyes had always carried the same burden of duty.

Yet, despite the affection, there had been an unspoken distance as well. Their love had always come with conditions—expectations that Maya would uphold the Evergreen name and carry on the legacy without question.

And then, there was her brother.

"You are here."

The moment they entered the room, the familiar voice of her brother echoed in her ears. Though it had been a month since she last saw him, thanks to the fact that he was busy, the voice remained the same.

Elegant and calm.

And those words, though calm and elegantly spoken, carried with them a pressure that was unmistakable. Maya felt it immediately—the weight behind her brother's voice. It was subtle, but it was there, a constant reminder of who he was, of the responsibilities he carried. Alden had always been like that. Even in the most casual of moments, there was an unspoken authority in his presence, an intensity that never wavered. His words alone had the power to shift the entire atmosphere of a room.

Maya took a deep breath, steadying herself as she and Astron stepped into the dining room. The room itself was grand, with high ceilings and soft lighting, the Evergreen family crest prominently displayed on the far wall. But all of that faded into the background as her brother stood at the head of the table, his gaze locked on them.

Alden Evergreen. Tall and composed, his figure draped in the traditional dark green and gold robes of their family, the intricate Elven embroidery shining faintly under the light. His silver hair was neatly tied back, his sharp features framed by an expression that was calm yet unreadable.

His blue eyes—those same piercing eyes that had always seen through her—were focused on her now, studying her in the way only an older brother could. But beneath the surface, she could feel it—the weight of his expectations, the silent judgment that accompanied every interaction with him.

It had been a month since she'd last seen him, but that pressure was the same as ever. The kind that made her stand a little straighter, choose her words a little more carefully.

"Brother," Maya greeted, her voice calm, though she couldn't help but feel the subtle tightening in her chest as she met his gaze.

He nodded in acknowledgment, his eyes flicking briefly to Astron before returning to her. The scrutiny in that brief glance was palpable. Though he hadn't spoken a word to Astron yet, Maya could already sense that Alden was sizing him up, assessing his worth, his intentions. That was just the way he was—always watching, always calculating.

"You've brought a guest," Alden remarked, his tone even, though Maya knew him well enough to catch the undercurrent of curiosity mixed with caution. "I wasn't expecting that."

Maya smiled slightly, keeping her composure. "Yes. This is Astron, my Junior from the academy."

Alden's gaze shifted once more to Astron, this time lingering a moment longer. The air in the room seemed to grow heavier, the pressure more noticeable now. Maya could feel it in the way her brother's presence seemed to fill the space—his authority, his scrutiny.

"Astron. A unique name," Alden said, the name rolling off his tongue with the same calm elegance as everything else he did. "It is a rare occasion for Maya to bring someone from the outside into our home."

Astron remained composed, meeting Alden's gaze with his usual quiet confidence. "It's an honor to be here, Lord Evergreen," he replied, his voice steady.

The formal title seemed to amuse Alden, if only slightly, as a faint smile tugged at the corner of his lips. But the weight of his presence did not lessen. If anything, it intensified.

Maya felt a flicker of anxiety, though she kept it well hidden. This was the moment she had been bracing for—her brother's evaluation of Astron. Alden had always been protective of her, and though he wouldn't outright say it, she knew he wanted to ensure that anyone she brought into their lives was trustworthy. He wouldn't make it easy.

Her brother's gaze remained locked on Astron for a few moments longer, and Maya could feel the silent exchange between them, a test of sorts. Alden was measuring him, determining whether Astron was worthy of being here, in their home, beside his sister.

"Very well," Alden finally said, his voice soft but still carrying that underlying authority. "Let's sit."

As they moved to sit, Maya cast a discreet glance at Astron, observing him closely. Despite the palpable pressure emanating from her brother, Astron remained composed, his expression unreadable, his posture relaxed. It was clear that he wasn't fazed by Alden's quiet authority, and that brought a sense of relief and silent pride to Maya.

She had worried, perhaps more than she realized, about how Astron would react to her brother's intense presence. But as always, Astron held his ground, calm and unwavering.

Once they were seated, the room fell into a brief silence, filled only by the faint clinking of silverware as the servants began placing dishes on the table. Alden sat at the head, naturally commanding the space, while Maya and Astron took their places opposite one another. Maya could sense the tension in the air, though it wasn't hostile—just heavy with unspoken questions.

Alden leaned back in his chair, his gaze flickering between the two of them. "Maya has always been... selective about who she brings into our family's home," he began, his voice steady but filled with an unspoken undertone. "So I'm curious, Astron—what is it about you that convinced my sister to do so?"

The question was pointed, though Alden's tone remained polite. It was clear that, despite the civility, he wanted answers, and he wanted to see if Astron was truly worthy of Maya's trust. Maya stiffened slightly, but she didn't intervene. This was something Astron would have to handle on his own.

Astron met Alden's gaze head-on, his purple eyes reflecting that same quiet confidence. "I don't claim to know all the reasons, Lord Evergreen," Astron began, his voice composed and measured. "But Senior Maya and I have grown close through our time at the academy. We've faced challenges together, and I suppose that trust is mutual."

His words were indeed truth. The amount of things that Maya and him experienced could not be considered much, but the weight of each experience itself was quite high.

The fact that Astron had saved Maya from a vampire and then prior to that, the two somehow started a Senior and Junior, followed by the reveal of many secrets....All those things were quite heavy in terms of weight.

Alden raised an eyebrow, the slightest hint of intrigue flickering in his expression. "Challenges, you say? And what kind of challenges would make my sister trust you enough to bring you here?"

But the hard part of those challenges was the fact that none of them could be revealed.

Whether Maya turns into a vampire, her drinking the blood of Astron, or Maya's confession. Each of these things needed to be hidden.

Though Maya herself knew that at some point, these things would eventually be revealed.

Maya's heart raced as she listened to the exchange, feeling the weight of her brother's scrutiny. Every word that passed between Alden and Astron carried a deeper significance, and she knew that much of their shared history had to remain concealed. The challenges they had faced—her vampiric transformation, the blood bond, her confession—all those things were too dangerous, too intimate to reveal at this point.

Even though she trusted her brother deeply, Maya wasn't ready for him to know everything. Not yet. She needed time to regain full control over her vampiric state, to ensure that when she did reveal the truth, she could present it with strength rather than vulnerability.

For now, she had to tread carefully.

'It's time,' Maya thought, taking a steady breath. 'I have to step in.'

She straightened in her chair, her calm expression giving nothing away as she spoke with a confidence that she hadn't felt a moment ago. "He saved my life."

The words cut through the air like a blade, and for the first time, Alden's composure faltered. His piercing gaze narrowed, shifting to Maya as the atmosphere in the room shifted from probing curiosity to a deeper, more serious tone. His body tensed slightly, though he remained seated, his eyes now locked onto hers.

"He... saved your life?" Alden's voice was low, steady, but there was an undeniable edge to it now. His entire demeanor changed, from polite authority to something far more personal. He was no longer scrutinizing Astron—he was focused solely on his sister.

Maya met his gaze evenly, feeling the weight of the moment settle on her shoulders. "Yes. My life was in danger, and Astron saved me." Her voice remained steady, even as the memories of that night flickered in her mind—the vampire, the fear, the blood.

Alden's eyes darkened, the intensity behind them growing. "Your life was in danger?" His voice, while calm, carried a force that was hard to ignore.

"And I was not informed?"

Alden was angry at that moment.

Chapter 589 131.3 - Alden Evergreen

Alden's anger was palpable, though he kept it tightly controlled beneath his calm exterior. His piercing blue eyes locked onto Maya with an intensity that left no room for misunderstanding. He was not just upset—he was furious.

"You were in danger," Alden repeated, his voice now cold and authoritative, every word weighted with the gravity of the situation. "And I wasn't informed?"

Maya could feel the pressure building, the unspoken accusations hanging in the air. Alden had always been protective, and the idea that his sister's life had been in jeopardy without his knowledge

was a betrayal of the trust he placed in her. Maya had anticipated this reaction, but facing it now, under the weight of her brother's gaze, was more difficult than she had expected.

"I didn't want to worry you," Maya said carefully, maintaining her calm despite the storm brewing in her brother's eyes. "It was a... complicated situation, and I needed time to process what happened before bringing it to the family's attention."

Alden leaned forward, his fingers steepling as he rested his elbows on the table. His gaze remained unyielding. "Worry me? Maya, I am not some distant figure in your life to be kept in the dark. You are my sister. Your safety is my responsibility. How could you keep something like this from me?"

Maya held her ground, knowing she had to be measured in her response. "Brother. There was no need to inform you of the matter, as when the opportunity to inform you arose, the matter had already been dealt with."

Alden's gaze remained locked onto Maya, the weight of his concern and frustration clear in the intensity of his stare. His fingers drummed softly against the table, the only outward sign of his simmering anger. But even as the tension thickened between them, Maya could see that Alden was listening—truly listening.

He wasn't a fool. He understood the complexities of life and the dangers that came with their family's position. As much as he hated being left in the dark, he wasn't blind to the fact that he couldn't always protect his sister. But that didn't mean he would accept being shut out when she was in danger.

"I didn't need to inform you," Maya continued, her voice steady and resolute. "The situation was handled, and when the opportunity came to tell you, it was already over. There was no need to bring you into a matter that was resolved."

Alden's eyes narrowed slightly, and for a moment, it seemed like he might push back further. But then something shifted in his expression—a flicker of realization. He knew Maya wasn't reckless, and he knew she wouldn't have made the decision to keep this from him lightly. It was clear that this was her own choice, a deliberate one.

Even so, the anger still lingered beneath the surface. He let out a slow breath, his voice measured but carrying the weight of his unresolved frustration. "I understand you're capable, Maya, but that doesn't change the fact that I deserved to know. You faced a life-threatening situation, and you made the decision to keep it from me."

Maya met his gaze, unwavering. "Yes, I did. And it was my decision to make. I am not a child anymore, Alden."

The silence that followed was heavy, but it wasn't hostile. Alden leaned back in his chair, his sharp mind working through the implications of what Maya had said. He was still upset—there was no denying that—but he also recognized the truth in her words. As much as he wanted to protect her, he couldn't always be there. And perhaps... Maya had grown more than he realized.

But that didn't mean he would let it go easily.

"I still want to know what happened," Alden said, his tone firm.

Maya took a breath, knowing that now was the time to reveal part of the truth. She had already steeled herself for this conversation, and it was time to make Alden understand.

"Do you remember when I requested a visit to Western Uxbridge?" Maya asked, her voice calm and deliberate.

Alden frowned slightly, his mind turning over the memory. He didn't respond immediately, but after a moment, the realization dawned on him. He nodded slowly. "Yes, I remember. It was during your semester in the academy a few months ago. You wanted to attend a cultural exchange... or so you said."

Maya nodded. "Yes. While we were there, I was attacked. A vampire. It ambushed me when I was separated from the group."

Alden's expression darkened immediately, the tension returning to his posture. "A vampire? In Western Uxbridge?"

"None of us were aware of that. It all happened too quickly. I was attacked by the vampire, and because of my carelessness, I let myself be captured. It was my own fault."

"And following that, he saved you from the vampire?" Alden's voice was laced with a mixture of disbelief and lingering anger.

Before Maya could respond, Alden's gaze shifted sharply to Astron. Without warning, he reached out, his hand gripping Astron's shoulder with a force that belied his controlled demeanor. The room seemed to grow smaller, the air thick with unspoken tension as Alden scrutinized Astron intently.

Astron remained composed, his posture relaxed despite the sudden shift in the room's dynamics. However, Alden wasn't satisfied. He had always been perceptive, and something about Astron's presence now felt different—more calculated, more enigmatic.

"You say you saved her," Alden stated, his voice now carrying a commanding authority that silenced any further conversation. "Taking down a vampire is no small feat. Vampires are powerful, and even seasoned hunters struggle against them. How did you manage to defeat one?"

Astron met Alden's gaze with unwavering confidence. "The vampire was recovering from a long sleep," he explained, his voice steady. "Its powers were not at their peak. If it had been fully awakened and at full strength, the situation would have been vastly different."

Alden's eyes narrowed further, studying Astron's features. He could sense the calm assurance in Astron's demeanor, but something about him didn't add up. "Recovering from a long sleep?" Alden echoed, his tone skeptical. "That explains its diminished strength, but why wasn't this documented? Vampires don't just sleep for extended periods without leaving any trace."

Astron shrugged lightly. "The circumstances were chaotic. The vampire attacked without warning, and by the time we investigated, most of the evidence had been destroyed or concealed. It was an isolated incident."

Alden didn't relent, his protective instincts over Maya flaring anew. "And you? Were you prepared for this encounter? Do you have any training specifically for dealing with vampires?"

Maya watched the exchange with bated breath, her heart pounding in her chest. She knew that Alden's questions were probing deeper, trying to uncover any inconsistencies that might reveal Astron's true nature or the extent of the situation she had kept hidden.

Astron responded confidently, "No, I did not, and it was also not necessary. I don't need to train specifically for a vampire to kill it; I just need to identify the target. While vampires are formidable, proper preparation and strategy can neutralize their threat, especially if they're not operating at full capacity."

Alden remained silent for a moment, his piercing gaze never leaving Astron's face. The room was thick with tension, every second stretching longer as Alden weighed Astron's words against his own instincts.

Finally, Alden leaned back, his expression still stern but with a hint of grudging respect. "It seems you're more capable than I initially gave you credit for," he admitted. "But Maya, this doesn't change the fact that I should have been informed immediately. Your safety is my responsibility, and keeping me in the dark was unacceptable."

Maya felt a pang of guilt but stood her ground. "I understand, brother. It is just...."

"Sigh, I get it, I get it." Alden sighed, the rigidity in his posture softening just a fraction. "But, still. Next time, make sure to inform me about everything."

He released Astron's shoulder, allowing him to sit back down. The room's atmosphere had shifted, the initial anger now tempered by understanding, though a lingering edge of protectiveness remained in Alden's eyes.

As Alden sat down, he couldn't help but steal another glance at Astron, his eyes narrowing slightly in thought. The moment his hand had rested on Astron's shoulder, he had sensed something—something faint but unmistakable.

A subtle yet undeniable trace of intent, one that had momentarily set his instincts on edge. It had been so brief, so carefully concealed, that Alden wasn't entirely sure if it had been deliberate or a natural consequence of Astron's presence.

For someone like Alden, who had been trained to identify even the smallest shifts in energy and intent, feeling even the slightest threat was not something to be taken lightly.

And yet, this man before him—this junior from the academy who seemed so calm and composed—had managed to evoke that sensation, however fleeting. It was enough to make Alden pause, to reconsider his initial assessment of Astron.

He let his gaze travel over Astron again, this time with more scrutiny. On the surface, Astron appeared perfectly normal—calm, respectful, and unassuming. But beneath that exterior, Alden could sense layers of something deeper. Power, perhaps? Or maybe a tightly controlled strength that Astron had yet to fully reveal. It made Alden curious, more than he would ever openly admit.

'This man is not as simple as he appears,' Alden thought, his mind turning over the possibilities. 'And for him to make me feel... even the slightest hint of caution? That's no small feat.'

Astron, for his part, remained as composed as ever, his posture relaxed despite Alden's intense scrutiny. He appeared unfazed by the attention, which only served to deepen Alden's curiosity. Most people, under the weight of Alden's gaze, would have shown at least a flicker of discomfort. But Astron? Not a hint. It was as if he had anticipated this reaction and was prepared for it.

Maya, sensing the shift in her brother's demeanor, glanced between the two of them. Though Alden's anger had subsided, she could tell that his interest in Astron had only grown. He was no longer just evaluating him as a guest—he was analyzing him as a potential unknown, someone who had far more layers than Alden had initially considered.

The room fell into a brief silence as the tension slowly began to dissipate, though Alden's gaze never wavered from Astron. It wasn't until Alden finally leaned back in his chair, his expression softening into something more thoughtful, that the weight of the moment seemed to ease.

"You've certainly made an impression," Alden said at last, his voice measured. There was no longer the sharp edge of confrontation but rather the careful tone of someone weighing their next move. "Maya doesn't trust easily, and for her to bring you into our home... well, that speaks volumes."

Astron met Alden's gaze with a calm confidence. "Thank you for the compliment."

"But still....I am quite curious."

Alden was not satisfied enough.

Chapter 590 131.4 - Alden Evergreen

"But still....I am quite curious."

Alden turned to Maya, his sharp blue eyes softening just a touch, though the intensity of his curiosity remained. "Aside from the challenges you two have faced together, Maya... what makes him different from others?" His tone was calmer now, but the underlying seriousness in his words couldn't be ignored.

Maya hesitated for a moment, her thoughts racing. This was the question she had anticipated but had hoped to avoid for just a little longer. Alden wasn't simply asking out of curiosity—he wanted to understand the depth of her connection to Astron, to see beyond the surface.

She glanced at Astron, who remained composed, quietly watching the exchange unfold. He wasn't one to offer much unless asked directly, always calculating, always careful. That was one of the many things she admired about him. It was also one of the things that made him difficult to explain to her brother.

Taking a breath, Maya chose her words carefully. "Astron is... different because of the way he handles himself, brother. It's not just about his skills or the fact that he saved my life, though that in itself is significant. It's the way he approaches everything with a level head, the way he sees the world." She paused, her mind reaching for the right explanation. "He's unlike anyone else I've met. His actions are calculated, and his decisions are made with precision. He doesn't act rashly, nor does he let emotions cloud his judgment. In a world where many rely on brute strength or sheer power, Astron stands apart because of his mind."

"Ho?"

Alden's gaze remained fixed on her, his expression unreadable. He was listening intently, waiting for more.

"And," Maya continued, "there's something else. When I'm with him, I feel like I can rely on him—not just in combat but in understanding things that others might overlook. He... sees things differently, and that has made all the difference in how we've navigated the situations we've faced."

Alden raised an eyebrow, still skeptical but intrigued. "You speak highly of him. But trust, Maya, is not something to be given lightly. Do you believe he will continue to prove himself worthy of it?"

Maya nodded without hesitation. "I do. He's earned that trust, and I believe he will continue to do so."

"Interesting. You said he approaches everything differently, and he sees the world beyond what many see. Can you please elaborate?" Alden's curiosity was evident, though his tone remained calm and measured.

Maya paused, considering how best to explain it. "It's just as I said. Astron sees what many tend to overlook. Where most people might focus on the immediate problem, he's already thinking several

steps ahead, analyzing details that others would miss entirely. From where a normal person might draw one conclusion, he can draw three, or even more."

Alden's expression remained unreadable, but there was a flicker of interest in his eyes. "So, he's observant, then."

Maya nodded. "Indeed. He notices the little things—the subtleties in people's actions, the patterns in how they react. And he uses that understanding to make decisions that others might not even consider. It's not just about what's happening at the moment but how that moment fits into a larger picture. It's what's kept us safe more than once."

Alden leaned back, his eyes once again drifting toward Astron. "Being observant can be a powerful trait," he mused, his voice thoughtful. "It's rare to find someone who can see beyond the surface, who can calculate multiple possibilities with such precision. That's not a skill you simply pick up—it takes time, experience, and a particular mindset."

He folded his arms across his chest, studying Astron more closely. "If what my sister said is true, you may give me an example then?"

Astron's violet eyes narrowed ever so slightly as he met Alden's gaze. The room was quiet, the tension palpable as Alden leaned back, waiting for a response. Astron didn't flinch under the scrutiny, but rather embraced it, allowing the ambient mana to flow into his senses. His eyes, now shining faintly with mana, began to absorb the details that lay hidden beneath the surface. He focused on Alden, filtering through the layers of normal and special mana traces that clung to his clothes and form.

"A simple example?" Astron's voice was calm, but his eyes gleamed with insight as he began to speak. "Let me start with the most obvious—your attire, for instance. You recently attended a meeting, likely formal. The fold lines on your shirt and the slight stiffness at the collar tell me that much. However," he paused, his eyes flicking to a subtle mark on Alden's cuff, "the mana traces clinging to your clothes suggest that before that, you spent some time in a place where earth-metal attributed mana is abundant. Judging by the distinct concentration and type of mana, I'd wager a mine. You didn't linger long, but long enough for the traces to stick."

Alden's eyes darkened slightly, but he remained silent, allowing Astron to continue.

"Now, there's more," Astron said, his voice steady but his words sharp. "I see you're a perfectionist—everything about your appearance screams of precision. Your clothes, despite having traces of

that meeting and the mine, are immaculately kept. You make sure that no part of your attire is out of place, and your shoes are polished to a shine, though they've seen recent activity."

Astron's gaze briefly flicked to Maya, who watched silently, her expression unreadable, then back to Alden.

"And yet, there's a personal matter," Astron added, his tone still calm but the implications unmistakable. "The faint scent lingering on you, barely noticeable to most, is of someone else—a woman, to be precise. Judging by the distinct scent of high-altitude air and faint traces of her mana, I would say this occurred recently, possibly on an airship. Your secretary, perhaps? The connection is... intimate."

Alden's brow furrowed, but his expression remained otherwise impassive. Astron was not finished.

"And lastly," Astron's eyes narrowed, honing in on an almost invisible tremor in Alden's left hand, "you've developed a dependency on a certain substance. The specific residue on your fingers and the faint trembling are telltale signs. You likely consume it daily, in the morning. It's controlled enough that you function normally, but the signs are there."

Astron's eyes glinted with a deeper understanding as he took in the final layer of his deduction. His voice lowered, but the intensity in his words sharpened.

"The substance you've grown dependent on," Astron began slowly, "isn't just any common stimulant or recreational drug. No, it's far more sophisticated than that." His gaze flicked back to Alden's trembling hand, then up to meet his eyes again. "It's [Varexium], a high-end drug that's both rare and... dangerous. It's not something the average person can even access, let alone afford. Only those with the right connections can get their hands on it, and only a select few can endure its long-term use without severe side effects."

Alden's eyes narrowed slightly, though his face remained unreadable. His fingers unconsciously flexed as if testing the stability of his hand, the tremor now more evident in the stillness of the room. He didn't speak, but his silence was telling.

"You likely use it to enhance focus or endurance," Astron continued, his tone measured. "A drug meant to sharpen the mind, to keep you functioning at peak performance. However," his gaze flicked to the slight discoloration at the edges of Alden's fingernails, "even Varexium has its cost. It's addictive, and it leaves traces—not just on your body but in your behavior."

Maya's breath hitched slightly beside him, though she kept her composure, listening intently. Alden, however, remained stoic, the barest twitch at the corner of his mouth betraying his reaction to the revelation.

Astron pressed on, "You must have powerful contacts to source it. But no matter how controlled it may seem now, the dependency will only deepen with time. And the people who deal in this particular substance? Well, they're not the sort to let their clients walk away freely."

A heavy silence filled the room as Astron finished, his words lingering in the air like a subtle challenge. Alden's sharp blue eyes bore into Astron, their previous amusement now replaced with something far more calculating. He seemed to weigh the young man before him, assessing the accuracy of his words and the implications of what had just been revealed.

Finally, Alden spoke, his voice low and deliberate. "You know your substances well. I'd be curious to know how you came across such knowledge... but that's a conversation for another time." His tone was even, but there was an unmistakable edge to it. "It seems you've done more than just protect my sister. You've clearly learned how to navigate certain... circles."

Astron remained silent, simply meeting Alden's gaze without wavering, waiting to see what would come next.

Maya's gaze slowly shifted from Astron to Alden, her expression torn between disbelief and concern. She had known her brother to be secretive and, at times, indulgent in things most wouldn't dare touch, but this was different. "Brother... is that true?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

For a moment, Alden said nothing, his sharp blue eyes narrowing slightly as he met her gaze. Then, unexpectedly, he laughed—a low, amused chuckle that echoed through the room, breaking the tension. He leaned back in his chair, a wry smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

"Maya, dear," he began, his tone light but laced with something darker. "No matter how superhuman someone might appear, in the end, we all have our addictions. Our crutches. It's human nature, after all. Some are more obvious—some can be hidden behind polished exteriors and perfect performances—but they're always there. Mine just happens to be a bit... refined."

Maya's breath caught in her throat at his words. Her brother's nonchalance, his almost casual admission, felt like a slap to the face.

Her gaze drifted toward Astron, who was quietly sitting across from her, composed as always, silently eating his meal with the same meticulous care he applied to everything else in his life. Her heart tightened. There was her addiction, sitting right in front of her.

Alden smiled knowingly as he watched the subtle exchange between Maya and Astron. There was a quiet understanding in the way Maya's gaze lingered on Astron, and Alden, ever perceptive, didn't miss it. His earlier skepticism began to shift into something more nuanced—an appreciation, perhaps, for the weight of the bond between them.

Leaning back in his chair, Alden spoke, his voice carrying an amused edge, "Well if your combat capabilities are as sharp as your observational skills, I suppose I can't complain too much. Though it seems you're already proving yourself in ways I hadn't anticipated."

Astron, composed as ever, gave a slight nod. "Of course, Lord Evergreen. I am a student of Arcadia Hunter Academy for a reason, after all." His voice carried a quiet confidence, not boastful but assured.

But at the same time, it also served as a warning.

'You have tested me enough; now cease your constant reprimanding tone.' And Alden was someone who could read between the lines. It was the basic quality for a person who was now leading the family, after all.