

## H. Academy 591

### Chapter 591 131.5 - Alden Evergreen

Alden chuckled softly, shaking his head in mild amusement. "I should have expected as much. Arcadia doesn't produce anyone less than exceptional. I suppose I'll have to accept that Maya has chosen someone with more than just brains."

Maya, who had remained quiet throughout the exchange, finally allowed herself to relax, though her thoughts still lingered on the subtle tensions beneath the surface. There were layers to the evening that hadn't been fully uncovered, secrets that lay buried between the three of them. And yet, for now, there was a temporary reprieve. Alden's laughter had softened the atmosphere, easing the tension that had once thickened the air.

But Maya knew her brother well. His acceptance of Astron wasn't full or complete. There would be more questions and more tests, and Alden, in his own way, would continue to evaluate Astron—perhaps not as directly as before, but certainly with the same scrutiny.

"Let's finish dinner," Alden said, gesturing toward the meal laid out before them. "After all, I'd hate for good food to go to waste, especially after such an enlightening conversation." His smile remained, but Maya knew it was laced with the unspoken understanding that this was just the beginning.

As they returned to their meal, the room settled into a quieter rhythm, though the weight of Alden's earlier revelation still hung over them. Maya's mind wandered back to her brother's nonchalant admission of his own vices and, more disturbingly, to the realization that Astron's presence in her life had become an unspoken addiction of her own. She glanced at him, sitting calmly across from her, and felt that familiar tightening in her chest—the weight of something unspoken but undeniably present.

Alden's voice broke through her thoughts once more, his tone light but edged with curiosity. "You know, Astron, if you've mastered observation and combat, it wouldn't hurt to show me firsthand one day. I'd be interested to see what kind of hunter Arcadia has produced."

Astron met Alden's gaze with that same unwavering calm. "I'd be happy to demonstrate, should the opportunity arise."

Alden's smile widened, his curiosity deepening. "I'll hold you to that."

As the conversation shifted, Alden's intense gaze softened into something more conversational. His sharp features, once honed with the weight of scrutiny, now relaxed as he turned his attention to lighter topics. "So, Astron, tell me—how has life been at the academy? I imagine it's quite different from what most expect."

Astron, never one to miss a beat, nodded. "It's been challenging, as one would expect. The curriculum is rigorous, but it's designed to push students beyond their limits to prepare us for the real world. We've had our share of difficult moments, but that's the nature of a place like Arcadia."

Maya, listening quietly, felt a small sense of relief as the conversation moved away from the earlier tension. Yet, even as Astron spoke, she couldn't shake the lingering feeling that Alden was still assessing him, just from a different angle now.

Alden leaned forward slightly. "I've heard rumors about certain... incidents at the academy. Slip-ups that endangered the students." His voice had a more serious undertone now, though he kept his tone measured. "There was a time when I considered pulling Maya out of there. After all, when safety is compromised, it raises serious questions about the institution's credibility."

Maya stiffened slightly at her brother's words. She knew exactly what he was referring to—the near-disastrous incidents, the fights with creatures far too powerful for students to handle, and the academy's mishandling of certain situations that had put lives in jeopardy. Yet, despite it all, Maya had chosen to stay, determined to continue her journey.

Astron, noting the shift in the conversation, responded with his usual calm. "There have been challenges, yes. And it's true that the academy hasn't always handled things perfectly. But those incidents, as dangerous as they were, also taught us something critical: that the world outside the academy is even less forgiving. In a way, the academy's trials have hardened us, made us more prepared for the dangers that exist beyond its walls."

Alden didn't seem entirely satisfied with the answer, his brow furrowing slightly as he thought it over. "Hardened, yes. But at what cost?" His voice was low, carrying the weight of an older brother who had nearly lost his sister once and wasn't eager to let it happen again.

"It is definitely understandable. When a life is lost, it never comes back. I know that feeling well."

Hearing Astron's words, Alden fell silent for a moment, his sharp gaze softening slightly as if he understood the deeper weight behind Astron's statement. There was something unspoken in those

words, a shared experience of loss that needed no further explanation. Alden's eyes narrowed briefly, contemplating this new layer of Astron that had been revealed. The calm yet somber tone in his voice spoke of someone who had faced that irreversible pain—someone who had seen death and understood its cost all too well.

For a second, the room seemed to hold its breath. Maya, watching both men, could feel the gravity of the moment settling between them. Alden, though always quick to judge, was not blind to the nuances of those who had seen the world's darkest side.

Astron, remaining composed, did not rush to fill the silence. He knew better than to defend something that didn't deserve defense. "The academy's slip-ups," he continued, his voice steady but firm, "were their mistakes. Their own incompetence, and I won't make excuses for them. Those incidents were mishandled, and it cost people more than just their peace of mind. It's something that should never happen."

He paused, letting those words sink in before continuing. "But the truth, Lord Evergreen, is that the world outside the academy is becoming more dangerous with each passing second. I believe you're already aware of this. What's happening isn't confined to just one place. The threats are growing, and no one is truly safe, no matter how careful we try to be. To prepare future hunters for the upcoming danger, more risks need to be taken. Whether it's in the academy or beyond its walls, the reality is the same."

Alden's gaze didn't waver, but there was a flicker of something—perhaps recognition—behind his eyes. He had always prided himself on being cautious, on protecting those he cared about. But Astron's words rang with a truth that even Alden couldn't ignore. The world was changing, and the threats lurking within it were no longer things that could be avoided through sheer vigilance alone.

Finally, Alden spoke, his voice measured but carrying a note of reluctant agreement. "You're right. The world is shifting, and the dangers we face are only becoming more complex. I've seen it myself—more than I care to admit. The academy should do better, but I can't argue with the fact that nowhere is truly safe anymore."

Maya, who had been silent until now, felt a small knot of tension in her chest begin to unwind. Alden wasn't completely convinced, but at least he was listening—understanding the broader picture that Astron was painting.

Astron gave a respectful nod. "All we can do is be prepared. The academy is just a part of that preparation. But it's up to each of us to understand the dangers and face them head-on."

Alden's gaze lingered on Astron for a few more seconds before he finally leaned back in his chair, exhaling slowly. "It seems you've thought this through more than most would. Perhaps I've underestimated the academy's ability to produce more than just warriors."

'I wouldn't say I am a product of the academy.'

Astron thought inwardly, but did not say it out loud. Though certainly, from the second semester onwards, life in the academy would no longer be the same as the first semester. Things would get a lot busier and harder now.

The tension in the room, though still present, had shifted once more. Alden's wariness hadn't disappeared, but there was a quiet acknowledgment between him and Astron now—a subtle respect that hadn't existed before.

"Is this maybe the reason why you wanted to attend that banquet?" Alden asked, his gaze shifting to Maya, then back to Astron, watching carefully for their reactions.

Alden's question came as no surprise. Both Maya and Astron had been expecting it, knowing that Alden's sharp mind would piece together the broader context behind Maya's decision to attend the banquet.

It wasn't something she had taken lightly, and the connections she'd used to gain access had not gone unnoticed by her brother. The question hung in the air, waiting for an answer.

Maya remained composed, but Astron could sense the subtle tension that accompanied her silence. She knew as well as he did that Alden wasn't asking just out of curiosity—he wanted to understand their motives, to see if there was something more at play than just a passing interest in the event.

Astron, calm as ever, met Alden's gaze directly. His voice was steady, measured, as he responded. "Yes, that was part of the reason," he began, his tone even and thoughtful. "The banquet presented an opportunity—an important one. Given the growing dangers we've already discussed, it made sense to be present, to observe and learn. But," he added, pausing for a moment, "there was also a personal reason. Something separate from the broader dangers."

Alden's eyes narrowed slightly, his curiosity deepening. "A personal reason?" He echoed, clearly intrigued by the admission but not pressing further—at least not yet. He was a man who knew how to pick his battles, how to gather information without forcing a confrontation. He leaned forward, his fingers tapping lightly on the table. "And you won't elaborate on that, will you?"

Astron shook his head, his expression never wavering. "Not at this time. It's a matter I'm handling on my own. But I can assure you, it's nothing that would endanger your family."

Alden's lips twitched into a half-smile, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. "You seem to have a habit of keeping things close to the chest, Astron."

"It's sometimes necessary," Astron replied calmly, his tone neither defensive nor evasive. "Especially in uncertain times."

Maya glanced at her brother, sensing his rising curiosity but also knowing that Astron's measured response had earned a degree of respect from him. Alden was not one to push without reason, and while the vague answer might have left him unsatisfied, he understood when to back down.

Alden leaned back in his chair, exhaling softly. "Fair enough. You've made your point." His gaze flicked to Maya, his expression softening slightly. "I only ask because I need to ensure that my sister is safe, no matter what situations she finds herself in."

Astron, sensing the subtle shift in the conversation, leaned forward slightly, his voice calm and resolute. "Rest assured, Lord Evergreen," he began, meeting Alden's gaze with the same unwavering confidence that had carried him through the evening.

"It's the same for me. I won't endanger the people I hold close."

Chapter 592 131.6 - Alden Evergreen

"It's the same for me. I won't endanger the people I hold close."

For a brief moment, the room fell into a deep silence, Alden and Maya both caught off guard by Astron's words. Alden's blue eyes widened slightly, not from surprise at Astron's boldness but at the sincerity of his statement.

He had dealt with many people who wielded power and influence, but few were so direct about their intentions, especially when it came to someone as important to him as his sister.

Alden recovered quickly, his sharp gaze softening into something almost thoughtful, though the half-smile from earlier returned. "I see," he said slowly, nodding as if weighing Astron's words in his mind. "Direct, aren't you?"

Meanwhile, Maya felt a sudden warmth rush to her cheeks, her heart skipping a beat as Astron's words echoed in her mind. The people I hold close. She lowered her gaze for a second, her fingers tightening around her fork as she fought to regain her composure. A faint blush spread across her cheeks, though she hoped no one would notice. It wasn't that she was embarrassed by what he had said—it was more the realization of how much Astron's words meant to her. There was an intimacy in his statement that stirred something within her.

Alden noticed the faint shift in his sister's demeanor. His sharp eyes flicked between Maya and Astron, catching the subtle change in her expression. The blush on her cheeks did not go unnoticed. Though he said nothing, his curiosity deepened. There was clearly more between the two than just camaraderie.

'Heh....Little sister. I guess you are no longer a little child....'

He could not help but shake his head inwardly.

'But, this guy is not that bad.'

Alden sat back in his chair, letting the soft smile linger on his lips as he studied his sister and Astron more closely. He had always been protective of Maya, ensuring that the burdens of their family didn't crush her spirit. But now, watching the subtle, almost imperceptible exchange between the two, he understood something he had been reluctant to admit: Maya was no longer the little girl he had always sought to shield. She had grown into a capable woman, one who deserved the chance to experience life on her own terms—even if it meant opening herself up to risks he couldn't control.

Alden took a slow breath, allowing the realization to settle. His gaze softened as he turned his attention back to his sister, noticing the way her eyes flickered between him and Astron, a mixture of resolve and vulnerability in her expression. She had always been strong, but this was different. This wasn't just the strength born of duty or the need to uphold the Evergreen name. This was something deeper, something personal.

"Life and youth," Alden muttered under his breath, more to himself than anyone else. He had been so focused on protecting her that he had nearly forgotten that Maya, too, deserved to experience the joys, the heartbreaks, and the risks that came with living fully.

And perhaps, in Astron, she had found someone who understood her—not just as the sister of Alden Evergreen, but as Maya, an individual in her own right.

Alden shook his head slowly, the soft smile still lingering, though a hint of resignation touched his features. He could see the change in his sister, how much she had grown, and how much she had come to depend on Astron, not just as an ally but as something more. And while his protective instincts hadn't entirely faded, he knew that it was time to let go—at least a little.

Maya, sensing the shift in Alden's demeanor, composed herself. She straightened in her seat, carefully controlling her expression. Her face, once soft with emotion, returned to the calm and poised look she was known for. She had always been good at hiding her deeper feelings, especially around Alden. But now, she wasn't sure if she needed to hide as much. His acceptance, though subtle, was more than she had expected.

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Alden glanced between the two of them one last time, a flicker of curiosity still in his eyes. He had uncovered much tonight—more than he had intended—and while there were still questions, particularly about Astron and his true abilities, Alden knew when to press and when to step back. He wasn't done with Astron, not by a long shot, but for now, it was enough.

"Well," he said, his voice steady, "it seems we've talked quite a bit, and I've learned enough for the evening." He pushed his chair back and stood up, adjusting his robes with a deliberate motion. His eyes lingered on Astron for a moment longer, still assessing but less scrutinizing. "I'll leave you two to the rest of your evening."

Maya blinked, surprised by how suddenly her brother was ending the meal, though she quickly masked her reaction. "You're leaving already?" she asked, her voice calm but with a hint of concern.

Alden smiled warmly at her. "I've kept you long enough. And truth be told, I have matters to attend to in the morning. A good night's rest is what I need." He turned toward Astron, giving him a nod. "Though I'm still curious about what you're truly capable of, Astron, that will have to wait. You'll have to forgive me if I leave you with more questions than answers tonight."

Astron met Alden's gaze, his expression composed and respectful. "Of course, Lord Evergreen," he replied smoothly. "There will be plenty of opportunities to address those curiosities in the future."

Alden chuckled softly, appreciating Astron's tactful response. "I'm sure there will be," he said, his voice carrying a subtle weight that hinted at future encounters. "But for now, I'll bid you both good night."

With that, Alden offered one last smile to his sister before turning and making his way out of the room. His steps were steady, and though he seemed calm, there was a part of him that still carried the weight of the evening's revelations. But for now, he needed rest—and time to think.

As the door closed softly behind him, the room fell into a quiet stillness. Maya exhaled softly, a faint sense of relief washing over her now that her brother had left. She glanced across the table at Astron, her expression softening ever so slightly. There was still so much left unspoken between them, so much that had been left simmering beneath the surface throughout the evening.

"Finally," she muttered under her breath, her lips curving into a small, almost weary smile. "I thought he'd never leave."

Astron, ever composed, gave a small nod though there was a hint of amusement in his eyes. "He's thorough, your brother. But I'd say it went better than expected."

Maya couldn't help but laugh softly at that, shaking her head. "You don't know him like I do. This was just the beginning. He'll be watching closely, even if he doesn't say it." She paused for a moment, her gaze softening as she looked at Astron. "But... thank you. For handling him so well. I know it wasn't easy."

Astron's expression didn't change. "It wasn't difficult. Besides, he's only looking out for you."

Maya's heart tightened slightly at those words, but she nodded. "Still... I appreciate it."

Just as the atmosphere between them began to settle, the door creaked open slightly, and Alfred, the Evergreen family's head servant, entered the room with his usual composed demeanor. He gave a respectful bow, his expression polite yet unreadable, as always.



"Pardon the interruption," Alfred said smoothly, his voice low and respectful. "But I wished to inquire if there was anything else you required. Desserts and tea are prepared, should you wish to partake."

Maya glanced at Astron, a moment of silent communication passing between them. She could sense that the evening's discussions, while more relaxed now, were far from over. There were still things she needed to say, things she wanted to address without the shadow of her brother looming over them.

She gave a soft nod, her eyes flickering back to Alfred. "Yes, desserts would be lovely. Thank you, Alfred."

Maya stood up gracefully, smoothing her dress as she glanced back at Alfred. "Bring the desserts to the garden, please," she requested, her voice calm yet decisive.

Alfred bowed respectfully. "Of course, my lady. I will have them brought out shortly." Without missing a beat, he turned to carry out her instructions, his movements fluid and efficient.

As he left, Maya turned to Astron, her eyes soft but carrying the weight of unspoken thoughts. She gestured for him to follow her. "Let's take a walk," she said quietly, her voice now free from the formal tone she had used all evening.

Astron rose from his seat, his movements smooth and deliberate, as he followed her toward the large doors leading to the family's expansive garden. The cool evening air greeted them as they stepped outside, the soft glow of lanterns illuminating the path ahead. The garden was serene, a peaceful retreat from the intensity of the evening's conversation, with the subtle scent of jasmine and roses wafting through the air.

Maya led him down the path; her footsteps quiet against the stone. After a few moments of walking in silence, she finally spoke, her voice much softer now.

As they strolled through the garden, Maya finally broke the silence, her voice soft but carrying a hint of curiosity. "So, regarding the banquet... Is everything in order on your end?" she asked, casting a sideways glance at Astron. "You know it's this Wednesday."

Astron nodded calmly, his expression composed. "Nearly everything is ready," he said, his voice steady. "The final details are falling into place."

Maya smiled at his response but couldn't resist teasing him. "And your suit?" she asked, her tone light, but there was a knowing look in her eyes.

Without missing a beat, Astron reached into his storage ring and pulled out a neatly folded suit. It was sharp, sleek, and efficient—much like him. But as Maya looked at it, her smile turned into a small, amused shake of her head.

"This won't do," she said, her tone carrying a hint of playful disapproval.

Astron raised an eyebrow but remained silent for a moment as if weighing his next words carefully. Finally, he spoke with a faint sigh, "Is it too low in quality for someone attending as your aide?"

Maya nodded, a soft smile playing on her lips. "As expected, you didn't miss the point. Yes, it's not quite fitting for someone accompanying me." She glanced at the suit again, knowing Astron had probably chosen it for practicality and efficiency rather than appearances. "We'll need something more fitting for the occasion."

Astron didn't seem bothered by the critique. Instead, he simply nodded, his tone calm as always. "I understand. What do you suggest?"

"Tomorrow," Maya said, her smile widening, "we'll go to the city and visit our family's exclusive tailor. He'll create something custom for you. Something that matches the importance of this banquet."

Astron glanced at her, the moonlight casting a soft glow on his features as he thought it over. "A custom suit?" He wasn't one for extravagant displays, but he understood the importance of appearances, especially in a setting like this. "Very well. If that's what's needed."

Maya chuckled softly, appreciating his straightforwardness. "Trust me, it'll be worth it. And while we are at it, I might as well give a tour for you; wouldn't that be great?"

Chapter 593 132.1 - Picking up clothes ?

"Trust me, it'll be worth it. And while we are at it, I might as well give a tour for you; wouldn't that be great?"

Astron looked into Maya's eyes, and for a moment, he saw the flicker of anticipation there. The subtle way her gaze softened as she spoke, the slight lift in her tone—this wasn't just about the suit or the preparations for the banquet. It was about something more personal. He understood what she was really asking.

Though his original intent in coming here had been to utilize Maya's connections and the Evergreen family's influence for his own objectives, Astron wasn't blind to the nuances of their relationship.

Maya had been a constant.....— someone who had risked much to stand beside him, and this was her way of seeking something in return—a moment of closeness, a piece of time together that wasn't just about strategy or survival.

After a brief pause, he gave a small nod, his calm demeanor never wavering. "A tour sounds fitting," he said, his voice as measured as always. "I have no other pressing matters tomorrow."

Maya's smile brightened at his agreement, a subtle hint of relief washing over her features. "Good. It's settled then," she said lightly, but there was a deeper sense of contentment behind her words. "We'll visit the tailor first, and then I'll show you around the city. There's a lot you've yet to see."

Astron remained quiet, simply offering her a nod in response, but internally, he acknowledged the significance of what was happening. He had prepared for this banquet meticulously for over a week, ensuring every detail was accounted for and tomorrow was clear in his schedule.

Spending the day with Maya, though not part of his initial plan wasn't something he needed to refuse.

In fact, it seemed like a natural progression, a step in a relationship that was steadily becoming more complex.

As they settled down at one of the garden tables, the peaceful surroundings embraced them. The night air was cool, carrying the faint scent of jasmine, and soon after, Alfred appeared with a silver tray, carefully placing the desserts in front of them—a delicate arrangement of pastries, fruits, and rich cream.

Maya picked up a fork, taking a small bite of the dessert, her gaze drifting over to Astron, who had remained quiet. After a moment, she set the fork down and asked, her tone softer, more personal, "Are you always running around like this? All the time?"

Astron paused mid-bite, thinking over her question. He knew Maya had been observing him, seeing the way he moved through life with a constant sense of purpose and urgency. It was a fair question, one that held more depth than a simple inquiry. Finally, after a moment of reflection, he gave her a small nod. "That could be said, yeah."

Maya looked at him closely, her eyes searching his for a deeper understanding. She placed her fork down, leaning forward slightly. "Don't you ever get tired of it? Of always being on the move, always doing something?"

Astron met her gaze calmly, and his answer came without hesitation. "No." He set his own fork down, folding his hands together. "This is how I've lived for as long as I can remember. I don't think I'd know what to do if I wasn't running toward something or handling the next problem." His voice was steady, revealing nothing unusual, but the weight of his words made Maya realize how much this rhythm defined him.

She frowned slightly, her brow furrowing as she processed his answer. "That sounds exhausting, Astron. Don't you ever need to stop, to rest?"

Astron gave a small shrug. "It's more exhausting when I'm not doing anything. The stillness—it doesn't sit well with me." His violet eyes flickered with a brief hint of something unspoken, but he didn't elaborate. It wasn't so much that he avoided rest—it was that the quiet moments forced him to confront things he preferred to keep buried.

Maya leaned back in her chair, her expression thoughtful. "I suppose I can understand that," she said softly, though her eyes never left him. "But it's still hard for me to imagine. You make it seem so... effortless. Like you're always in control, always one step ahead."

Astron allowed a small, almost imperceptible smile to touch his lips. "Control is an illusion. Because of that, you always need to be prepared for everything, even the unknown."

Maya watched him quietly, knowing there was more to Astron than the calm, composed exterior he presented. There was a part of him she hadn't fully seen yet, but she was slowly beginning to understand just how deeply his experiences had shaped him.

Maya's thoughts drifted as she watched Astron, her expression softening with a mix of understanding and concern. 'Maybe he doesn't know how to stop,' she mused silently. 'Or maybe he

feels guilty when he's not doing something, always pushing forward because stopping means facing something else—something he's not ready for.'

The idea lingered in her mind, and she found herself wanting to change that, to show him that rest wasn't a weakness, that there was value in moments of peace. It wasn't just about getting him to slow down—it was about helping him see that there could be joy in those moments, too.

Her heart gave a small flutter of determination as she glanced at him again, seeing the weight he carried, even in his calm demeanor. 'Tomorrow,' she thought, a spark of resolve blooming within her. 'Maybe I can show him how to enjoy something simple, how to take a moment just for himself.'

A faint smile crept onto her lips, and inwardly, she cheered herself on. 'Let's do a good job of it tomorrow.'

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The next morning, as the first light of dawn filtered through the windows, Maya woke up with her usual discipline.

The soft glow of the early sun touched her room, casting a gentle warmth over the familiar space.

Without wasting a moment, she rose from bed, her body already moving in tune with the ingrained habits that had shaped her since childhood.

This was her time—early morning training was more than just a routine. It was a ritual, a moment of clarity before the world awoke.

Maya stepped out of the mansion, the crisp morning air filling her lungs as she prepared to start her usual meditation and elemental control exercises. Her magic, like a steady current within her, responded naturally as she focused her mind. Her connection to the elements was something she had cultivated from a young age, and these moments of quiet meditation always helped her refine that control.

The gentle hum of mana around her began to settle as she sat down in the garden, ready to begin. Her breathing was slow and rhythmic, the energy of the world around her slowly merging with her own as she meditated, feeling the earth beneath her and the flow of the wind against her skin. This was how she grounded herself, how she maintained the balance between her magic and her mind.

But as she began to slip deeper into her meditation, something else caught her attention.

A sudden, sharp movement.

Her senses, finely tuned to the natural flow of energy, picked up the disturbance—someone moving through the garden, fast and precise. She opened her eyes, focusing on the source of the movement, and quickly recognized the ferocious yet graceful speed of the figure darting between the trees.

It was Astron.

Maya couldn't help but smile to herself as the memory surfaced—her junior had a habit of training even earlier than she did. She had forgotten that amidst the chaos of yesterday's events. But now, seeing him in action, it was all too clear again. He moved with a singular focus, his body a blur of motion as he practiced his forms, each movement deliberate and sharp.

Astron, while quiet and often reserved in conversation, trained with an intensity that was hard to ignore. His strikes, though precise and controlled, carried a certain ferocity, as though he were fighting an invisible enemy, never letting his guard down. Every motion seemed like it had a purpose—an exact reason for existing in the flow of his routine.

Maya watched from a distance, her own meditation briefly forgotten as she observed him.

'Sigh...It is now getting quite harder to hold....'

She even kind of started regretting giving him Sylvana's Essence.

'And I feel like I will regret it a lot more....'

His face now became much more lethal than how it was before, and just by peeking at him training with his clothes sticking to his body....

It was really...

Maya quickly averted her gaze, her cheeks warming as she realized where her thoughts were drifting. Astron's intense focus, his movements fluid and sharp, paired with the subtle allure of his well-defined form—his clothes sticking to him from the effort of his training—were becoming more of a distraction than she'd anticipated. She felt a tug of frustration within herself, knowing that it wasn't just admiration for his skills that was stirring these feelings.

'Sigh... What have I done?' she thought, shaking her head, recalling how she'd given him Sylvana's Essence. That decision, made out of necessity at the time, now felt like a double-edged sword. His already lethal appearance had been sharpened further, and his aura seemed to exude an irresistible, dangerous charm.

'This... is getting out of hand,' she mused, feeling the heat rise in her face. The more she watched him, the more difficult it became to keep her thoughts in check. The raw energy he emitted, combined with his silent but intense demeanor, made it nearly impossible to focus on anything else.

'I need to stop... or I'll lose control,' she thought firmly, trying to calm herself.

With a deep breath, Maya closed her eyes, forcibly pulling herself away from the sight of Astron and his relentless training. She needed to regain her composure before her instincts, which she had been working so hard to keep in check, got the better of her. The last thing she wanted was to be caught off guard, especially by her own emotions.

'Focus. Meditation. Control,' she mentally repeated as a mantra, willing herself to return to her own routine.

Her body relaxed, and the familiar sensation of mana flowing through her brought a sense of calm. Slowly, she felt the temptation subside, replaced by the soothing energy of the elements around her. But despite her best efforts, the image of Astron still lingered in the back of her mind.

'This is... going to be a long morning,' she thought with a faint, exasperated sigh.

Chapter 594 132.2 - Picking up clothes ?

'This is... going to be a long morning.'

As Maya settled into her meditation, attempting to drown out the distracting thoughts, she realized that it was harder to focus than usual. Astron's presence nearby, along with the residual energy from their intense conversation the night before, had unsettled her in ways she hadn't expected.

'This won't do,' she thought, reluctantly accepting that concentration would not come easily today.

With a soft sigh, she rose from her seated position and decided to remedy the situation another way. Her family's heritage as part of the Elven lineage granted them access to rare and high-quality herbs—resources that, in many other parts of the world, would be considered luxuries. Here, however, such herbs were a common part of their daily life, used for everything from medicine to relaxation.

Maya gently pressed a small rune on her bracelet, connecting her to the mansion's communication system. "Please have a drink prepared for me," she requested, her voice calm and composed. "The usual mix: [Serenity Brew]." This specialized blend was something created specifically for her, using rare herbs that heightened clarity and balance, and it was a perfect drink to complement her training.

She paused, then added thoughtfully, "Also, prepare a rejuvenating drink for Astron. Use the [Vervain Vitalis]—the one made from the [Paraxial Rebirth Herbs]." The [Vervain Elixir] was an expensive, potent blend known for its invigorating and restorative properties, something designed for those who pushed their bodies to the limit.

Well.....Someone who is rich and pushes themselves to the limit would be more appropriate to say.

Normally, it would be a drink that not many people would even ever dream of drinking, but knowing Astron's tireless nature, Maya felt it was an appropriate gesture.

Also, she did not have any shortage of such things in their storage either. Instead of rotting them in there like that, wouldn't it be better for them to be used in such a manner?

Her maids would understand her orders perfectly. Their estate prided itself on blending refinement and practicality, and she trusted that both drinks would be ready soon.

As she waited, she glanced back at Astron, watching his movements again, though this time from a more relaxed perspective. Despite the earlier distractions, she couldn't help but admire his dedication.

'I wonder if he's ever had anything like the [Vervain Elixir],' she mused quietly. It wasn't something most people would encounter.



Maya couldn't help but indulge in the thought as she watched Astron, her lips curving into a small, amused smile. 'Even if my junior is as capable as he is,' she mused, 'surely he's never had anything like the [Vervain Elixir], right? It's not exactly something you come across easily—especially not in the circles outside our family's reach.'

The idea entertained her more than she expected, a lightness settling in her chest. For all of Astron's skills, his intellect, and the mysterious air he carried, there was still something about introducing him to these small luxuries that gave her a sense of satisfaction.

'Does that mean I've claimed another first from him?' The silly thought brought a bit more warmth to her smile, a playful feeling bubbling up inside her. It wasn't often she allowed herself such lighthearted indulgences, but the idea of showing Astron something new—something only she could give him—felt oddly significant.

Her gaze lingered on him as he continued his rigorous training, unaware of her internal musings. Despite the cool morning air and the early hour, there was a graceful intensity to his movements, a kind of controlled power that never ceased to impress her.

Still, the thought of sharing this small luxury with him—a gesture only she could offer—filled her with a sense of quiet pride.

While it is true that it was not she who had built this wealth, at the end of the day, this richness was also a quality that belonged to her, wasn't it?

As Maya's thoughts danced around the idea of claiming another small victory in her silent game with Astron, she was pulled from her reverie by the soft sound of footsteps approaching. Her maids had arrived, moving with their usual grace, carrying the carefully prepared drinks she had ordered. They placed her personalized mix down on the table before her, and one of the maids, with a respectful bow, held the tray with the [Vervain Elixir] intended for Astron.

"Shall I deliver this to the... Young Master?" the maid asked, her voice polite and measured.

At first, it seemed like an innocent question, one spoken in the line of duty. But something bothered her.

It was a slightly tingling feeling that made Maya narrow her eyes. Her senses were warning.

And as if to prove that, when Maya looked up, something about the maid's expression caught her attention—a faint blush coloring her cheeks as her eyes briefly flickered to Astron, who was still in the middle of his intense training. There was a softness in her gaze, a clear sign that the maid was not entirely unaffected by his presence.

Maya's lips tightened slightly, her eyes narrowing as she observed the subtle shift in the maid's demeanor. The realization hit her instantly. Even though Astron was focused solely on his training, it appeared that he had unknowingly charmed the maid, a feat that was no small thing. The Evergreen household was filled with those who possessed natural beauty, grace, and refinement thanks to their elven lineage, and the maids who served here were well-trained, disciplined, and not easily swayed by outward appearances.

Yet, somehow, Astron had managed to make an impression.

For a brief moment, Maya felt a pang of irritation flare in her chest. It was an irrational feeling, she knew, but it was there all the same. 'Of course,' she thought, her mind bristling with a possessive edge she hadn't expected. It wasn't just anyone who could hold her attention like this, and seeing someone else—even a maid—react to him in that way didn't sit well with her.

Her response was immediate and curt, her tone carrying a sharpness that surprised even her. "No," she said, her voice firm, leaving no room for argument. "I will bring it to him myself."

The maid blinked, clearly sensing the shift in her mistress's tone. The underlying warning was unmistakable, and the blush that had colored her cheeks vanished almost as quickly as it had appeared. She immediately bowed her head, realizing her mistake. "Of course, my lady. My apologies," she said softly, stepping back with a look of quiet submission.

Maya's gaze lingered on the maid for a moment longer, her message clear. Even if this was not her man, the result would not matter.

Because of her occupation, this maid was not allowed to feel things like this, regardless of who was before her.

'Let this be a reminder for you.'

She thought as she saw the maid's gaze. The maid had a job, and right now, she needed to be professional, and she seemed to understand her mistake well.

Because of that, she allowed the maid to leave. Though she was angry a little, taking her anger out of this poor one did not suit her well.

After the maid bowed and retreated, Maya took a deep breath, calming the lingering irritation that had surfaced so unexpectedly. She looked down at the tray in her hands, the [Vervain Elixir] resting elegantly on its polished surface. The rejuvenating herbs mixed into the drink shimmered faintly under the morning light, a reflection of its rare and potent properties.

With a final glance toward the door where the maid had exited, Maya turned and made her way toward Astron, her steps deliberate and composed. The cool morning air brushed against her as she walked through the expansive garden, the familiar scents of the surrounding flora mingling with the fresh dew.

As she drew closer, she could see Astron moving with his usual focus, each of his strikes precise and calculated, as though he were battling unseen opponents. His form was flawless, his movements fluid and powerful, a testament to his rigorous training. But the moment she entered a certain range, the subtle shift in the air seemed to alert him to her presence.

Without breaking his rhythm completely, Astron's movements gradually slowed, and finally, he came to a stop. He straightened, his sharp violet eyes turning toward her, immediately recognizing her approach. His expression remained calm, but there was a faint glint of curiosity in his gaze as he observed the tray she carried.

Maya met his gaze with a slight smile, though her earlier irritation still lingered just beneath the surface. "You've been at it for a while," she said lightly as she approached. "I thought you might need something to help you recover."

Astron's eyes flicked down to the drink she offered, and he gave a small nod, stepping forward to meet her. His demeanor was, as always, composed and unreadable, though there was a brief flicker of appreciation in his gaze as he accepted the drink from her.

"Thank you," he said simply, his voice as calm as ever.

Maya watched him carefully as he took the glass in his hand, her mind still mulling over the events from earlier. But for now, she pushed those thoughts aside.

Astron brought the glass to his lips, taking a slow, measured sip of the drink Maya had offered. The moment the liquid touched his tongue, he could feel the effects almost immediately—a rush of energy coursing through him, soothing the weariness from his training and leaving a rejuvenating warmth in its wake.

He paused, lowering the glass slightly as he glanced at Maya with a subtle frown. "This..." he began, clearly intrigued by the potency of the herbs in the drink. The sensation was unlike anything he had experienced before.

Maya's smile widened, amusement dancing in her eyes. "Can you guess what it is?" she asked playfully, folding her arms as she watched him, fully aware that it was no ordinary drink.

Astron's gaze narrowed slightly in concentration as he took another small sip, trying to discern the specific ingredients. But despite his sharp senses and extensive experience, the unique combination of herbs in the drink was entirely foreign to him. He gave a faint shake of his head, his expression shifting from curiosity to quiet acknowledgment. "I've never had anything like this before," he admitted. "It's... unfamiliar."

Maya chuckled softly, clearly enjoying the moment. "I thought so," she said, her tone light. "It's called the [Vervain Elixir], made from the rare [Paraxial Rebirth Herbs]. Only a few can get their hands on it, and even fewer have the chance to drink it."

Hearing the name, Astron raised an eyebrow. And at her casual explanation, he could only shake his head slightly with a faint sigh. "I wouldn't expect less from you," he replied, the meaning behind his words clear. The drink was a luxury reserved for the wealthiest of the wealthy, and yet she had offered it to him casually as if it were no big deal.

Maya's eyes sparkled with quiet pride. "Well, when you're training as hard as you are, it's only fair to give you the best. Besides, it's not doing much good; it's just sitting in storage."

"...Makes sense..." Astron took another sip, savoring the drink with newfound appreciation. "Though, I see why it's so rare," he murmured. "The effects are... immediate."

Maya smiled to herself, a quiet thought crossing her mind. 'If you were to stay with me, you can have access to this whenever you want.' But she quickly pushed the idea aside, knowing that now wasn't the time to bring up such things. There were more pressing matters to attend to, after all.

She glanced back at Astron, who seemed to be savoring the drink and decided to shift the conversation. "When will your training be over?" she asked lightly. "We should start getting ready to leave for the city soon. There are quite a few places I want to show you."

Astron took one last sip of the elixir before setting the glass down, nodding in response. "I've trained enough for today. If you're ready, we can head out."

Maya smiled, feeling a sense of excitement begin to build. She had been looking forward to showing him the city and giving him a glimpse of the world she knew so well. "Good," she said with a hint of anticipation in her voice. "I'll go get ready, and then we'll leave."

With that, she turned to head back inside, the subtle tension from earlier fading away as the day ahead promised new experiences, a tour of her world that she hoped would bring them even closer together.

Chapter 595 133.3 - Picking up clothes ?

"Hmm.....This is not bad."

Maya took one final look at herself in the mirror, her reflection staring back with quiet determination. She had carefully chosen her outfit—a soft cream-colored cropped sweater paired with a sleek black skirt, the simplicity of the look balanced by the subtle elegance of her accessories.

Her lavenderish purple hair framed her face perfectly, and her golden bracelets added just enough of a sparkle to catch the eye without being overbearing. It was an outfit that was both casual and refined, a deliberate choice as they were going out to the city.

But there was more to it than just dressing for the occasion—she wanted to impress him.

She smoothed out a wrinkle in her skirt, adjusting the small details as her thoughts briefly wandered to Astron. He had a way of staying composed, always focused and collected, but that didn't stop her from wanting to stand out in his eyes. A small smile tugged at the corners of her lips as she turned to leave the room, feeling both confident and a little nervous.

"My lady, you look beautiful enough," her attendant said softly, offering a gentle smile as she stood behind Maya.

Maya turned to face her, a playful glint in her eyes. "Really?" she asked, though she knew the answer already.

The attendant nodded with sincerity. "Absolutely, my lady. Everything is perfect, and I believe it would be hard for anyone to resist your charm now. Surely, he will be no different."

Maya chuckled softly, her nerves easing just a little. "I suppose we'll see, then," she said, the faintest trace of excitement in her voice. She took a final glance at herself in the mirror before gracefully turning on her heel and heading for the door. "Thank you," she added as she left, her heart fluttering with the anticipation of the day ahead.

As she made her way to the lounge, where Astron was waiting, her mind raced with thoughts of how the day would unfold. When she reached the entrance, she paused briefly, taking a calming breath before stepping into the room.

Astron was standing by the window, dressed casually yet managing to look effortlessly elegant. His usual calm, reserved demeanor was present, and while his clothes were simple, there was something about the way he carried himself that made him appear... dazzling. Or maybe it was just her perception of him. Either way, the sight of him caused her pulse to quicken just slightly.

"Did you wait for long?" she asked, her voice light and casual as she approached.

Astron turned his head toward her, his violet eyes briefly scanning her from head to toe. For the smallest fraction of a second, his normally stoic expression shifted—a flicker of something, maybe surprise or appreciation, crossed his face. But just as quickly, he composed himself, his features returning to their usual calm.

"No," he said, his voice steady. "I didn't wait long."

Maya smiled, feeling a bit of satisfaction at that brief reaction, however small. "Well, let's get going, then," she said, motioning toward the door. "There's so much to see in the city, and I have a few places I'm excited to show you."

Astron nodded, following her out of the lounge as they prepared for the day ahead.

As they made their way toward the airship hangar, the cool morning breeze carried a sense of excitement and anticipation. The towering trees of the Evergreen estate cast long shadows on the

path, their leaves rustling softly as Maya and Astron walked in comfortable silence. The faint hum of the airship's engine could already be heard in the distance, signaling that their ride was ready.

16:18

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When they arrived at the hangar, the sleek, elegant design of the Evergreen family's private airship stood out against the backdrop of the sky. It was a vessel befitting their status—polished to perfection with intricate patterns decorating its exterior.

The pilot, dressed in the distinguished uniform of the Evergreen household, was already standing by, waiting for them. He gave a respectful bow as they approached. "Everything is ready, my lady," he said formally, his voice carrying a hint of pride. "We can depart as soon as you're aboard."

Maya smiled and nodded. "Thank you. We'll board right away."

They stepped onto the airship, the interior just as refined as its exterior, with plush seats and soft lighting that created a sense of comfort and luxury. Astron followed her in, his gaze briefly scanning their surroundings, ever composed yet quietly observant.

As soon as they were seated, the pilot closed the hatch, and the airship began to hum louder, preparing for takeoff. Maya glanced out of the large windows, watching as the hangar slowly disappeared from view, replaced by the breathtaking sight of the sprawling forests and hills that surrounded their estate.

The airship rose gracefully into the sky, gliding higher with each passing second. The world below them became a patchwork of greenery and distant mountains, the horizon stretching endlessly before them. The gentle vibrations of the ship's engines created a peaceful ambiance as they ascended into the clear blue sky.

Maya and Astron both peered out of the large window, watching the land below shrink. The view from the ship was unlike any other—a panoramic scene of the vast forests, rivers, and fields that stretched as far as the eye could see. The early morning sunlight cast a soft glow over the landscape, making the world below seem peaceful and distant.

Astron broke the silence first, his voice calm but filled with a subtle curiosity. "Does every piece of land around here belong to your family?"

Maya nodded, a small smile playing at her lips. "Yes, most of it. While there are other families in the region, many of them rent their fields and lands from us. We rarely sell any of our land—it's part of the legacy that's been passed down through generations. The Evergreen family prefers to maintain control over our territories."

Astron's eyes swept over the vast expanse below, taking in the scope of what she had said. "It's like ruling an empire," he remarked, his tone thoughtful.

Maya chuckled softly. "In a way, yes. We have our own network of lands and tenants, each contributing to the overall prosperity of the estate. It's a careful balance of management, trade, and protection." She paused, glancing at Astron before continuing. "That's why learning how to govern these lands is a key part of my education. Even though I'm a mage, I've spent a lot of time studying the economics, the crops, and the various resources we have at our disposal."

As they looked down from the airship, Maya began pointing out specific areas below. "That field there," she said, gesturing toward a vast stretch of land, "is used for growing a rare medicinal herb that's highly sought after in the Federation. The soil here is rich in nutrients, making it the perfect place to cultivate plants that are difficult to grow elsewhere."

Astron listened intently, his gaze shifting to each area she indicated. Maya's knowledge of her lands was impressive, and her passion for managing them was evident. Despite her focus on magic, it was clear she had a deep understanding of the responsibilities that came with her family's legacy.

"And that river," Maya continued, pointing toward a silver ribbon winding through the hills, "runs through most of our territory. It's the main water source for many of the farmlands we rent out. My family has been careful to protect it, ensuring it stays clean and sustainable for future generations."

Astron gave a small nod, taking in the wealth of information. "You've learned all this despite being a mage?"

"Of course," Maya replied, her tone firm. "It's not just about magic. I have a duty to my family and to the people who live on our lands. Managing an estate like this requires more than just strength in battle. It requires knowledge, patience, and a willingness to understand how every piece fits



together." She paused, a hint of pride in her voice. "My parents made sure I was prepared for that responsibility, and I've never shied away from learning more."

Astron's eyes lingered on her for a moment before returning to the view outside. He admired her dedication, though he didn't say it out loud. The scope of the Evergreen family's influence was impressive, and the way Maya carried herself, balancing her mage duties with her responsibilities to her family, only deepened his respect for her.

As they continued to soar over the land, Maya's voice filled the space with descriptions of the various crops, forests, and resources below, detailing the intricate web of governance that kept everything running smoothly. Her knowledge was vast, and it was clear she had taken every lesson seriously, ensuring that she would be ready to lead when the time came.

Astron was not someone who shied away from learning new things either, which is why he let Maya run a rampage with her 'informing session.'

However, he was really impressed with the knowledge that Maya displayed. As they neared the city, the sprawling landscape gradually gave way to the bustling metropolis of Ardmont. The towering buildings stretched upward toward the sky, their gleaming facades catching the sunlight. The airship began its slow descent, and Maya's voice, which had been enthusiastically explaining every aspect of the Evergreen family's land and resources, finally trailed off as she realized just how much she had spoken.

She glanced at Astron, suddenly feeling a wave of embarrassment. "Ah... I'm sorry. I didn't realize I was talking so much. I guess I got a bit carried away..."

Astron shook his head with a calm expression, his violet eyes meeting hers. "It's fine. I enjoyed it."

Maya blinked, a bit surprised by his response, but her expression softened, and a small smile crept onto her lips. She knew Astron wasn't the type to say things just for the sake of being polite. If he said he enjoyed it, then he truly did. It was something she appreciated about him—his straightforwardness. Even so, she felt a flicker of warmth at his words.

"Thank you," she said softly, feeling more at ease.

The airship touched down smoothly, and the pilot signaled that they had arrived. As they stepped off the ship, a sleek car was already waiting for them. The driver, dressed immaculately in a black suit, opened the door for them, and they climbed inside.

Their destination? The most exclusive restaurant in all of Ardmont—located on the 80th floor of the Ardmont Tower. The restaurant was known for its luxurious ambiance and unmatched culinary experience, offering a panoramic view of the entire city from its top floor. It was a place where only the elite dined, a true symbol of wealth and power in the Federation.

As the car weaved through the busy streets, Maya couldn't help but feel a mixture of excitement and anticipation.

It wasn't just about the prestige of the restaurant but the fact that she was sharing this experience with Astron.

She glanced out of the window, watching the city's vibrant life unfold before them, though her thoughts kept drifting back to him.

When they arrived at the towering building, the sheer size of it was awe-inspiring. The Ardmont Tower loomed above them, its glass exterior gleaming in the morning light. The driver pulled up to the front entrance, and attendants swiftly opened the car doors for them.

As they entered the grand lobby, they were greeted by staff who led them to a private elevator, reserved only for the restaurant's elite guests. The ride up was smooth, and within moments, the doors slid open to reveal the breathtaking interior of the restaurant.

The décor was sleek and modern, with a sophisticated elegance that spoke of wealth and refinement. Soft music played in the background, and the large windows offered an unobstructed view of the city below, making it feel as if they were dining among the clouds.

A hostess approached them with a warm smile. "Welcome, Lady Evergreen and guest. Your table is ready."

They were led to a secluded corner of the restaurant, where the view was even more spectacular. The table was set with fine china and crystal glasses, the menu already prepared with a selection of the finest dishes the restaurant had to offer.

Maya settled into her seat, taking a moment to appreciate the luxurious atmosphere around them. She glanced at Astron, who, as usual, seemed unfazed by the opulence of the setting. Despite the

grandeur of their surroundings, he remained composed, his violet eyes calmly taking in the view before them.

'Well....This is good, since the banquet will have a similar concept.'

The reason why she chose such a high-end restaurant was to make sure that Astron would not draw unnecessary attention. Even though he was someone who paid attention to every bit of detail, everyone could make mistakes, and having a bit of a rehearsal would never do any harm.

And she couldn't help but smile to herself, seeing that even in a place like this how, he carried the same aura of quiet confidence, his attention focused yet seemingly unaffected by the luxury that surrounded them.

However, she also wanted to treat herself.

It was fine, wasn't it?

Chapter 596 132.4 - Picking up clothes ?

As they looked out over the city from their high vantage point, the sky stretched endlessly above them, and the hustle and bustle of the streets below seemed like a distant world. The ambiance was serene, almost dreamlike, and for a moment, Maya felt as though they were removed from the complexities of their lives, suspended in this peaceful space together.

The waiter approached with a bottle of the restaurant's finest wine, offering to pour them each a glass. Maya nodded, allowing the ritual to continue as she glanced back at Astron.

"This is quite the setting," she said softly, her voice light but with a touch of thoughtfulness. "I thought it would be a nice way to start the day."

Astron raised his glass slightly in acknowledgment, though his expression remained neutral. "You've chosen well."

Maya chuckled softly, her gaze lingering on him for a moment before she took a sip of her wine. She knew that while Astron appreciated precision and efficiency, there was something about

enjoying moments like this that he was still getting used to. It made her all the more determined to show him what life could be like beyond the constant focus on training and preparation.

As they waited for their meal to arrive, Maya found herself leaning slightly forward, resting her arms on the table as she looked at him more intently. "You know," she began, her tone playful yet sincere, "this is the first time I've come to such a place with a man."

Astron's violet eyes flicked to hers, his expression as composed as ever, but Maya didn't miss the brief pause in his movements. It was subtle, almost imperceptible, but it was there—a momentary shift in his usually controlled demeanor.

Her statement wasn't just an offhand remark; it was a quiet confession. Despite her upbringing, her status, and the many people she interacted with, Astron was the first person she had brought into her personal life in such a way. She had gone to different places with friends and even her close companion Amelia, but never had she ventured into such a space with a boy.

Astron remained quiet for a moment, his gaze steady but thoughtful as he processed her words. "I see," he said slowly, his tone as measured as always, but there was a certain weight to it now. He took a sip of his wine, glancing out at the panoramic view for a second before returning his gaze to her.

Maya's smile deepened, feeling a sense of satisfaction at having broken through his usually stoic facade, even if only slightly. "I'm not just saying that to flatter you," she added with a softer tone, her voice sincere. "It's the truth. You're the first person I've brought into this part of my world."

Astron's eyes softened for just a moment as he set down his glass. "Then I'll take that as an honor," he replied, his voice low but sincere.

There was no grand declaration or overly emotional response—just a quiet acknowledgment of the significance behind her words. But that was Astron, always understated yet profound.

"And....You are the first woman to take me on a dinner like this."

Maya's heart skipped a beat at his words, her eyes widening slightly in surprise. She hadn't expected that. Though Astron's tone was calm, his statement held a quiet weight that sent a ripple through her emotions. He had just matched her subtle confession with one of his own, and in his own understated way, it was just as meaningful.

For a moment, she was speechless, her usual composure faltering as she processed what he had said. She felt a warmth spread through her chest, and a soft blush crept up to her cheeks before she could stop it.

"Is that so?" she managed to say, her voice softer now, almost tentative. She felt a small flutter of excitement at the thought of being the first person to share such a moment with him. It made everything feel more significant, more intimate.

Astron nodded, his violet eyes meeting hers with that same quiet intensity. "Yes," he replied simply. There was no need for further explanation—the simplicity of his statement carried all the meaning that needed to be conveyed.

Maya's lips curled into a soft smile, a mix of playfulness and warmth. "Then I'll take that as an honor, too," she said, echoing his earlier words.

For a few moments, the air between them was filled with a comfortable silence, the kind that didn't need to be broken.

Well, at least that was the case for Astron.

For Maya...

Well, things were a little different.

The reason?

The people surrounding them and what they were talking about.

While Maya sat there, savoring the quiet moment with Astron, her heightened senses began to pick up on the conversations from the nearby tables.

At first, it was just snippets of idle chatter, the kind that filled the background of any high-end restaurant. Couples laughing softly, the occasional clink of glasses, and waiters moving gracefully

across the room. But soon, her ears honed in on something more specific—words that seemed to circle around one familiar subject.

Astron.

The tables filled with girls scattered across the restaurant were buzzing with hushed excitement. Though their voices were low, Maya could easily make out bits and pieces of what they were saying.

"Look at him. That guy over there... he's so handsome. Do you think he's from one of the noble families?"

"His eyes... I've never seen anything like them. He has to be someone important."

"He's probably not single. No way someone like him isn't already taken... but who's that girl with him?"

Maya's eyes narrowed ever so slightly as she picked up on the last comment, her possessiveness flaring to life once more. Her gaze flickered briefly toward the table of girls who were now casting subtle glances in Astron's direction. They were all clearly captivated, their interest barely masked behind quiet whispers and delicate gestures.

Astron, of course, seemed completely unaware—or perhaps simply unbothered—by the attention he was receiving. He remained as composed and focused as ever, casually sipping his drink as if nothing in the world could distract him.

But for Maya, it was a different story. She felt a sudden, unspoken need to assert herself, to silently remind everyone around them that Astron wasn't just any mysterious stranger—they were together. And while the curious stares from the men at other tables didn't bother her in the slightest, the attention being drawn to Astron... that was another matter entirely.

She shifted slightly in her seat, a small, almost imperceptible movement, but one that sent a clear message. Her body language became subtly possessive, her hand moving closer to Astron's side of the table as if to close the space between them.

'They can look all they want,' Maya thought, her smile never faltering. 'But he's here with me.'

Inwardly, she chastised herself for feeling so territorial. It wasn't like her to be so easily affected by others. But when it came to Astron, things seemed different—her emotions were different. She wanted him to notice her, to see her in ways he didn't see anyone else. And hearing those other girls talk about him, even in admiration, sparked something primal within her.

She leaned back slightly, her eyes briefly scanning the room before she turned her attention fully back to Astron. "You know," she said, her tone light but with a hidden edge, "it seems like you've become quite the subject of conversation."

Astron glanced up at her, his expression neutral. "In such a place, even I can't mask my presence all the time."

Maya couldn't help but chuckle softly at Astron's response. Of course, he had noticed. He was always so perceptive, always aware of his surroundings, even when it seemed like he wasn't paying attention.

It was one of the things that made him stand out, his sharp awareness of everything around him, and the way he remained unaffected by it.

But what struck her most was his calm acceptance of the situation. It was as if he had already come to terms with the attention—like it was just another part of his life now, something to be endured rather than acknowledged. And Maya knew that, from now on, this kind of attention would likely be something she would have to get used to as well.

She let her gaze wander around the room for a moment, noting the glances in their direction, both toward her and Astron. The attention wasn't exactly new to her—being the first-ranked student of the Arcadia Hunter Academy and her beautiful face had always come with a certain level of public scrutiny.

But something about this moment felt different. The way people were looking at her now wasn't just because of her talent or her elven beauty.

It was something else entirely.

The way she had dressed, her careful choice of clothing, had clearly paid off. She could feel the gazes on her, lingering longer than usual, a mix of admiration and curiosity following her every

move. And despite her earlier possessiveness regarding Astron, she couldn't deny that she was also enjoying the attention—at least a little.

With a quiet, almost imperceptible sigh, she leaned back in her chair, her eyes meeting Astron's again. "I suppose that makes two of us, then," she said, a small smile tugging at the corners of her lips. "It seems we're both drawing attention today."

Astron's gaze flickered briefly, his eyes scanning the room for a split second before returning to hers. "You must have already accustomed to this."

"You didn't?"

Astron gave a slight shrug, his gaze steady as he replied, "It doesn't bother me. I just don't care about the attention." His words were calm, devoid of any arrogance, just a simple truth.

Maya's smile lingered as she watched him. His nonchalance was both intriguing and admirable. There was something refreshing about the way he carried himself, unaffected by the opinions of others. It was part of what made him so different from anyone else she had ever known.

"I suppose that's another way to look at it," she said lightly, her tone playful, though there was a deeper truth behind her words. She leaned forward slightly, resting her chin on her hand as she studied him. "Maybe I should take a page from your book."

Astron glanced at her, his expression still calm but with a hint of curiosity. "And why's that?"

"Because," she began with a thoughtful smile, "being in the spotlight all the time can get tiring. It's nice to have someone who just... doesn't care about all that."

Astron's expression remained calm, though a faint flicker of something passed through his eyes as he recalled their first interactions. "Considering how you acted when we first met—ordering me to eat snacks, acting so free-spirited—I thought you didn't care about what others thought."

Maya's smile widened as she leaned back slightly, her eyes twinkling with amusement. "It's not that I don't care," she admitted with a soft laugh. "It's just... when I'm at the academy, it feels like all those other people are little hatchlings that need nurturing. I can't help but feel responsible for them in a way." Her tone was light, but there was an underlying sincerity to her words. She always had a way of balancing her carefree attitude with a deeper sense of duty.



Astron raised an eyebrow at that, a hint of curiosity flickering in his violet eyes. "So, am I also one of those little hatchlings you feel the need to nurture?"

Maya's smirk grew as she crossed her arms, leaning in with a playful glint in her eyes. "Of course," she teased, her voice carrying a hint of mischief. "You, Astron, are the adolescent hatchling who needs the most care. Always pushing yourself, always too focused on things you can't control. Someone has to keep you in check."

For the first time, Astron's usual stoic expression faltered, his eyebrows twitching ever so slightly. "Is that so?" His voice was calm, but there was a subtle challenge in his tone, as if he were silently debating the truth of her statement.

Maya couldn't help but chuckle at his reaction, clearly enjoying the rare moment of teasing him. "Yes, that's exactly how I see it," she replied, her tone playful yet firm. "You may think you're the one always in control, but even the strongest need a little guidance now and then."

Astron didn't respond immediately, his eyes narrowing slightly as he regarded her. There was a moment of silence, but rather than a verbal retort, he simply allowed a small, almost imperceptible smile to form on his lips—a rare sign of amusement, though fleeting.

It was Maya's victory.

Chapter 597 132.5 - Picking up clothes ?

After they finished their meal, Maya stood from the table, a graceful yet casual movement as she glanced around one last time before turning her attention back to Astron.

"Well, that was quite the start to our day," she said with a smile. "Now that we're done here, how about we explore the city a bit before heading to the tailor?"

Astron gave a small nod in response, adjusting his posture as he stood up as well. "Sounds fine to me," he said, his voice calm as always.

Maya's eyes sparkled with excitement, clearly looking forward to the day. "Great. I've got a few places in mind. There are some interesting spots I think you'd appreciate—bookstores, rare artifact shops, even a hidden tea garden that's been around for centuries. We'll have enough time to wander until noon before heading to the tailor for the measurements and clothing. What do you think?"

Astron looked at her with his usual composed expression, though he could see how much thought she had put into this. "I'm fine with it. Lead the way."

Maya smiled warmly, feeling a sense of satisfaction at his response. As they stepped out of the restaurant and into the bustling streets of Ardmont City, she took the lead, pointing out different landmarks and occasionally stopping to share tidbits of the city's history.

The city was alive with energy—people bustling about, street vendors calling out to passersby, and the smell of fresh pastries and roasted chestnuts lingering in the air. The towering buildings and intricate architectural designs reflected both modern and traditional influences, blending seamlessly into the lush greenery that adorned the streets and plazas.

As they walked, Maya would occasionally glance at Astron, observing how he took in his surroundings. He wasn't one for outward reactions, but she could tell by the way his eyes scanned everything that he was absorbing every detail, processing it all in his quiet, meticulous way.

"This part of the city is always busy," Maya commented as they passed through one of the central markets.

"Do you come to the city often? Considering the location of the mansion, that didn't seem to be the case to me," Astron asked, his voice calm as his eyes scanned the vibrant market around them.

Maya smiled, nodding as she took in the familiar sights of Ardmont City. "Well, while I spent most of my time training at the mansion, when I was younger, I would often take the airship and wander around the city," she explained. "It's something of a personal gift that I made sure to use well. I'd explore different parts of the city—some places you can't easily reach by foot—and I always enjoyed learning about the history here."

Astron, though typically unfazed by such revelations, could only shake his head inwardly. Maya's casual use of such luxuries, like the personal airship, was something he had come to expect. In her world, these things were normal and he had long since stopped being surprised by the ease with which she wielded her family's wealth.

As they continued through the bustling streets, Maya led him on a winding tour of the city's more historical and cultural spots. They passed by ancient buildings adorned with intricate carvings, their stone walls still standing strong despite the passage of time. She pointed out key landmarks,

including statues commemorating past rulers and plazas where pivotal events in the city's history had taken place.

"Ardmont City is one of the oldest in the Federation," Maya explained, her voice carrying a tone of pride as she gestured toward the grand architecture. "It's been overseen by the same family for centuries, which is my family, and you can see their influence everywhere—from the layout of the city to the preservation of historical sites."

Astron's gaze followed hers as they passed through a narrow street lined with stone buildings that had stood for generations. "It's well-maintained," he observed. "The preservation of the city's history is impressive."

Maya nodded. "When my ancestor came to this world, he had always been interested in the history here. Since it was very different from the humans of the other world with different traditions and cultures, that is why he had always respected the remains, and it is now a protocol for our family to follow."

Maya continued leading Astron through the bustling streets of Ardmont City, her steps guiding them toward some of the city's most revered historical sites. As they walked, she delved deeper into the rich history that her family had meticulously preserved.

"The previous human kingdom that governed over these lands was called the [Kingdom of Arenthia]," Maya explained, her voice steady with reverence. "Long before the Federation was established, Arenthia ruled this region with a strong hand. Their culture was very different from the Elven influences that came later, but we've taken great care to preserve the remnants of their legacy."

Maya nodded. "Yes. When my ancestor arrived in the human domain, the Arentthian Kingdom had already fallen. What we do know is that my ancestor respected the remnants of their kingdom. He believed that, even in conquest, there should be respect for the history and traditions that came before. That belief became a cornerstone of how we've governed ever since."

They arrived at a large, open plaza with towering stone pillars surrounding it. At the center stood a grand monument—the remains of an ancient Arentthian temple, its intricate carvings telling stories of the old kingdom's gods and heroes. The weathered stone still radiated a sense of strength and power, even after all these years.

"This is one of the last remaining structures from the Arentthian era," Maya said as they approached the monument. "My family has spent generations restoring and preserving it. The temple was

dedicated to their chief deity, Asteris, the God of Kings. They believed he blessed their rulers with wisdom and strength."

Astron took a moment to examine the carvings, his sharp eyes catching the detail in the worn stone. The figures depicted battles, rituals, and moments of peace—each one telling a piece of the larger story. "It's remarkable," he said quietly.

Maya smiled, pride evident in her expression. "We've always believed that preserving the past is essential to understanding our future. Without knowing where we came from, how can we truly know where we're going?"

Astron's gaze shifted back to her, and though his expression remained calm, there was a subtle shift in his demeanor, a silent acknowledgment of the significance of what she was sharing with him. "It's impressive," he said after a moment. "Not just the history, but your understanding of it. Most people only look forward, but you've found a way to bridge the past and the present."

Considering the fact that the history of the world no longer meant anything to the future, his words made sense. The fact that Mana and the other races stepped onto this world meant it could no longer be labeled as the same world as before.

They continued walking through the city, passing more historical sites—an ancient marketplace where Arenthian merchants once traded goods, a stone watchtower that had once stood guard over the kingdom's borders, and a series of old murals that depicted the aftermath of Arenthia's fall.

"There are even some murals showing the rise of the Valerion."

Maya led Astron to one of the larger murals, its detailed paintings still vibrant despite the passage of time. The mural depicted a man standing tall amidst a sea of warriors, his figure larger than life, radiating an aura of power. His eyes, fierce and determined, seemed to stare out from the stone wall, as though he were watching over the city even now. Surrounding him were images of battle—humans, elves, and other races clashing amidst the chaos of a world newly transformed by mana.

"This," Maya began, her voice taking on a more solemn tone, "is Valerion, the great hero who united humanity after the Nexus Convergence."

Astron studied the mural closely, his sharp gaze catching every detail. "A commoner from the Arenthian Kingdom," he stated, recalling the historical fragments he'd heard before. "But when mana entered the world, he rose to power."

Maya nodded, her eyes focused on the mural as if she could see the events unfolding before her. "Exactly. Valerion wasn't born into nobility, nor was he someone who had any particular status before the Convergence. He was a man of the people, a common soldier in the Arenthian army. But when the day of the Nexus Convergence arrived—when mana flooded our world and altered everything we knew—his latent talents bloomed."

The energy in her voice made it clear how much respect she had for Valerion, even though their family had never directly been part of his lineage.

"He was the first human to ascend as a hero," she continued, "and it wasn't just because of his newfound strength. He was a visionary. He saw what others could not—the need to unite in the face of the extinction."

Astron listened quietly as Maya continued to speak about Valerion, her voice filled with admiration for the legendary hero. But as her words trailed off, he remained silent, his thoughts drifting to the well-known history that every child in their world was taught. The story of Valerion, the great unifier of humanity, the first Awakened, was a lesson engraved in the minds of all who grew up in the Federation. It was a story of strength, leadership, and overcoming insurmountable odds.

And yet, for Astron, there was always a sense of detachment when it came to Valerion.

'Yes, Valerion was a hero,' he thought, 'but there were others, ones whose stories didn't make it into the history books. Though since he was the strongest, that is how the world works.' He had remembered the plot of the game and how the future would be unfolding.

'It is the same as that guy.' His mind wandered to that certain figure.

Certain naïve bastard who held the fate of the world in his own hands.

Valerian was the strongest human that this world had ever seen up to this point. Even the developers had admitted in the cards that they had created that Valerion's potential was rivaled by only one person.

A blue-haired guy.

As they walked, Maya glanced at Astron, noticing his silence. "You know, sometimes I wonder if people will still talk about him centuries from now with the same reverence." She smiled, though there was a thoughtful look in her eyes. "It makes me think about how history shapes our perception of strength."

Astron gave a small nod, his expression still calm. "History remembers what it chooses to remember. Power, however, is fleeting. What matters is what you do with it while you have it."

Maya blinked, slightly taken aback by the depth of his statement, but then she smiled, understanding the truth behind his words. "Spoken like someone who has already seen much more than most."

Astron's gaze shifted slightly, but he said nothing more.

They walked in companionable silence for a few moments before Maya straightened, as if shaking off the weight of their earlier conversation. "Well, I think that's enough history for today. It's time to focus on the present." She smiled brightly, her mood lightening. "Let's head to the tailor and get you properly fitted."

Astron nodded, allowing the transition in conversation. "Lead the way."

Chapter 598 132.6 - Picking up clothes ?

"Lead the way."

Maya led them through the streets of Ardmont, navigating effortlessly through the busy market squares and tree-lined avenues. As they approached the heart of the city, the buildings became taller, grander, reflecting the wealth and prestige of those who lived and worked there.

Finally, they reached the tailor—a grand building with large windows displaying the finest suits and dresses, all custom-tailored to perfection. The shop was nestled in the elegant district, a place where only the elite could afford to shop. Maya pushed open the door, the chime of a small bell announcing their arrival.

Inside, they were greeted by a man who looked every bit as refined as the shop itself. He was dressed impeccably in a suit that seemed tailored to within an inch of perfection, and his sharp eyes immediately recognized Maya. He bowed slightly, his voice smooth and polished. "Lady Evergreen."

Maya smiled warmly at the tailor and greeted him with a hint of familiarity. "It's good to see you again, Eliran," she said, her voice carrying the same elegance as the shop itself.

Eliran, the tailor, nodded respectfully. "The pleasure is mine, Lady Evergreen," he replied smoothly, his eyes flicking towards Astron with a glint of curiosity. "And this must be the gentleman you mentioned yesterday?"

Maya nodded, her smile brightening as she gestured towards Astron. "Yes, this is Astron Natusalune. He will need something custom tailored for the banquet," she said, introducing them both with a sense of pride. Then, turning to Astron, she added, "And Astron, this is Eliran Solos, one of the most renowned designers in the Federation. He's an Awakened himself and known for creating clothing that incorporates mana into its very fabric."

At the mention of Eliran's full name, Astron's expression shifted ever so slightly, a flicker of recognition in his eyes. Eliran Solos was a name known among certain circles—not only for his talent in fashion design but also for his mastery in weaving mana into fabrics, creating clothing that could enhance the wearer's abilities or offer unique protections.

Though being composed as he ever was, Astron just gave a small nod in acknowledgment. "I've heard of your work," he said calmly, his voice carrying a faint note of respect. "Your reputation precedes you."

Eliran smiled at the subtle praise, clearly pleased but not overly surprised. "I do what I can," he said, with a touch of humility that belied his fame. "But it's not every day I have the honor of working with someone of your... potential." His eyes sparkled with professional interest as he assessed Astron more closely.

"This young man.....Why have I never seen someone like him before? His looks can even rival the best of the best!" He thought.

Eliran's eyes lingered on Astron for a moment longer, absorbing every detail with a keen, professional gaze. His trained eye swept over the young man's face, noting the sharpness of his features—chiselled yet balanced. Astron's slightly pale skin had a subtle sheen, not sickly but almost luminous, as though it caught the light in just the right way. His purple eyes were particularly striking, deep, and enigmatic, hinting at layers of untold power and mystery.

'Those eyes... A shade so rare, so captivating.' The inner artist inside him was once again appearing in his mind. However, he suppressed the urge to ask more about the man standing before him. His composed demeanor only added to the intrigue. There was a quiet strength about Astron, something that spoke of control and precision—qualities Eliran wanted to emphasize in his design.

'Those eyes... A shade so rare, so captivating.' 'A tailored suit that complements this would need to be more than just fabric—it would need to accentuate his precision, his control, while also hinting at the untapped power within,' Eliran mused to himself, already envisioning the design.

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Without a word, Eliran gestured for Astron to step onto a small raised platform surrounded by mirrors. As he began taking measurements, his thoughts raced, assessing how best to bring out the unique attributes of Astron's appearance.

As Eliran moved subtly around Astron, taking in his lean yet defined build, he couldn't help but notice the confidence in the way Astron held himself.

'The suit should have a darker base—something like midnight blue or charcoal, to contrast with his pale complexion. But I'll need to integrate hints of silver and purple, perhaps in the lining or subtle embroidery, to draw attention to his eyes. It needs to be sharp, refined—something that projects both elegance and quiet dominance.'

He paused, examining Astron's posture from the side. 'The cut must be immaculate, perfectly fitted to his lean build, but with enough flexibility to allow for movement. He doesn't strike me as the type to wear anything too rigid.'

Astron remained still, his calm expression unchanging as Eliran worked. The tailor took note of his composed look—neither arrogant nor indifferent, but quietly focused, as though constantly evaluating the world around him.

'This is a man used to being in control,' Eliran thought. 'He'll need something that allows him to blend into any situation while still commanding attention when necessary.'



Eliran finished his measurements, straightening up with a satisfied smile. "I have a vision," he said, his voice calm but tinged with excitement. "Something subtle, yet powerful. I'll ensure it not only fits you perfectly, but also enhances your natural presence."

Though being someone who has been in this industry for a while, he had already gauged the undercurrents of the situation.

It wasn't just about crafting the perfect suit for Astron—it was about creating a moment. He could see the way Maya watched Astron with a certain intensity, and while Astron himself remained composed, Eliran knew the unspoken importance of this entire experience.

Maya clearly had her own hopes for how Astron would appear, and Eliran, being the seasoned artist that he was, had no intention of disappointing.

With a subtle smile, he turned to Maya. "Lady Evergreen, while I already have a strong vision for his final ensemble, I believe it would be worthwhile to explore a few options before we settle on the final design. Perhaps we can try some samples to ensure that everything meets both your and Mr. Natusalune's expectations?"

Maya's eyes brightened slightly at the suggestion, a hint of anticipation flickering in her gaze. "I'd like that," she said, her voice steady, but there was an unmistakable undercurrent of excitement.

Eliran, sensing her approval, gestured toward one of the back rooms. "I have a selection of tailored pieces that could help us better visualize the final look. Something close to what I have in mind, but with room to refine and adjust as needed."

Astron gave a slight nod of approval. He understood this process—if there was anything that could enhance his presence at the banquet, it was worth considering.

And the subtle glances Maya kept giving him weren't lost on him either. He could sense that this was as much about pleasing her as it was about the practicality of the clothing.

Eliran disappeared briefly into the back, leaving Maya and Astron alone in the elegant front room of the tailor's shop. As they waited, Maya's gaze lingered on him once again, her thoughts quietly stirring.

'I really want to see how he will look.'

Before she could think more, Eliran returned, arms laden with several options. He held up a few garments, each one exuding an air of meticulous craftsmanship.

"Here are a few examples," he began, laying them out in front of Astron and Maya. "Of course, none of these are final—they are just visual aids to give you an idea of the design elements we could incorporate."

Eliran first picked up a sleek, charcoal suit with a subtle sheen to the fabric, accented with silver embroidery along the cuffs and collar. "This one emphasizes refinement. It's understated but has an aura of quiet power," he explained, glancing at Maya for approval.

Maya studied it for a moment but didn't seem entirely satisfied. It was elegant, yes, but not quite what she had in mind for Astron.

Eliran quickly moved on, pulling out a midnight blue suit with violet lining and intricate mana-thread embroidery that shimmered subtly when the light hit it. "This is more bold, designed to draw attention to his eyes, but without overpowering his natural presence."

Astron's gaze lingered on the suit for a moment, appreciating the craftsmanship, but he made no comment. Maya, on the other hand, seemed intrigued but still hesitant. It was beautiful, but perhaps a little too flashy for someone like Astron.

Finally, Eliran unveiled the last suit—a pitch-black ensemble with subtle brown ornaments woven into the fabric. The brown accents were tastefully minimal, lining the edges of the jacket and the cuffs in a way that added just the right amount of contrast. The suit itself was tailored to perfection, with sharp lines and a cut that would emphasize Astron's lean, athletic build while still allowing him to move comfortably.

Maya's eyes lit up when she saw it. This was exactly what she had been looking for. The dark, refined tones suited Astron perfectly, giving him an air of elegance without overwhelming his quiet, powerful presence. It was simple yet sophisticated—just like him.

Astron, for the first time, showed a slight reaction, his hand briefly grazing the fabric as if testing its feel. He nodded subtly, his approval clear without words.

Eliran, sensing their silent agreement, smiled broadly. "I see we've found something that resonates." He stepped back slightly, allowing them to take it all in. "The pitch-black fabric, coupled with the brown ornaments, speaks of both subtlety and strength. It's a suit designed not just for appearances but for someone who commands attention effortlessly."

Maya gave Eliran an approving nod. "This is perfect," she said, her tone warm but resolute. "It's exactly what I was hoping for."

Astron, ever composed, merely nodded once more. "I'll leave the rest to you, then."

Eliran clapped his hands together, clearly pleased with the choice. "Excellent! I'll make the necessary adjustments and ensure it's ready for the banquet. Lady Evergreen, Astron, thank you for trusting me with this."

As they finished up, Maya cast a satisfied glance at Astron. The entire fitting process had gone better than she had hoped, and now that they had found the perfect suit, she couldn't wait to see him in it.

Chapter 599 133.1 - Kieran

As they stepped out of the clothing store, the bustle of the city streets greeted them once again, the energy of Ardmont pulsing around them. The sky was clear, the sun hanging high above as they made their way through the elegant district.

Astron glanced at Maya, his violet eyes catching the way the sunlight seemed to dance in her hair. "Will your dress for the banquet also be made by Eliran?"

Maya's lips curved into a smile as she met his gaze. "Of course," she replied. "Eliran has been designing my dresses for years. He understands my style better than anyone." Her smile widened slightly, a touch of playfulness in her tone as she added, "Though I'm sure you'll be more impressed with the final result when you see it at the banquet."

Astron raised an eyebrow, not entirely surprised by her confidence but intrigued by the hint of mystery in her words. "If his work for you is anything like the suit he's crafting for me, I'm sure it will be impressive."

Maya chuckled softly. She couldn't help but feel a flicker of excitement at the thought of seeing his reaction when she revealed her dress at the event.

As they walked through the streets, the energy of Ardmont pulsing around them, Maya glanced at Astron, her curiosity piqued.

"Do you have any other things that you want to buy?" she asked, her voice casual but with a note of genuine interest.

Astron shook his head, a small, almost imperceptible smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "No, I have everything covered," he replied, his tone composed as usual. "Besides, I'm not familiar enough with the structure of this city to wander around effectively for what I need."

Maya couldn't help but chuckle softly at his response, a glint of amusement in her eyes. "Well, now that I'm here, that part is covered," she said with a warm smile. She gestured ahead. "Come on, I'll take you to the Awakened City Center. It's where the elite gather, and they have everything an Awakened could need. You might find something interesting."

Astron gave a slight nod, his expression remaining calm, though there was a subtle shift in his demeanor as if he appreciated her guidance. He allowed Maya to lead the way again, the soft rhythm of their footsteps blending with the vibrant sounds of the city.

As they approached the Awakened City Center, the atmosphere began to change. The bustling market squares and tree-lined avenues gave way to towering buildings, sleek and modern, designed with an elegance that spoke of wealth and power. The streets here were wider, the air filled with a quiet hum of activity as Awakened individuals and merchants moved about, each with an aura of importance.

Then they stepped into the Awakened City Center and the atmosphere shifted even further. Inside, the grand halls were filled with rows of shops, each more extravagant than the last. Glittering displays of weapons, armor, and accessories, all imbued with mana, lined the walls, while high-end merchants conversed with customers in low, respectful tones. The air was cool, tinged with a faint energy that hummed through the place, making the mana in the atmosphere feel palpable.

Maya led the way, her steps confident as she navigated the bustling aisles. She glanced at Astron, her eyes catching the subtle glint of curiosity in his gaze as he took in the grandeur around them.

"This place brings back memories," Maya said, her tone light and nostalgic. "I bought my first piece of equipment here." She smiled, the memory clearly a fond one. "I even haggled a lot back then, hiding my identity the entire time."

Astron's eyebrow raised slightly at that, his expression calm but curious. "You did it for fun?" he asked, his voice carrying a note of subtle amusement.

Maya chuckled softly, her eyes gleaming. "Partly for fun, yes. But also to improve my skills at reading people. You'd be surprised how much you can learn about someone during a negotiation." She gave him a playful smile. "Besides, it was a way to keep myself sharp. When you're hiding who you are, you need to stay on your toes."

Astron nodded thoughtfully, his gaze scanning the surrounding shops. "I see. It sounds like you used the opportunity to train more than just your combat skills."

"Exactly," Maya agreed, her voice carrying a hint of pride. "Sometimes the most valuable lessons aren't about physical strength but learning to navigate situations and people. It's all part of surviving and thriving in a world like ours."

Astron gave a small nod, understanding her point. His eyes briefly lingered on a display of finely crafted swords, their edges gleaming with an ethereal light. The shopkeeper behind the counter glanced at them, clearly recognizing the prestige that surrounded the two Awakened, but Astron gave the swords only a passing glance before returning his attention to Maya.

They continued walking through the bustling Awakened City Center, the atmosphere alive with the hum of activity. The energy in the air was palpable, a mix of mana and ambition, as Awakened individuals from all walks of life moved between shops. Astron's gaze flicked from one storefront to another, taking in the wide variety of items on display—blades, armor, enchanted trinkets, all meticulously crafted and pulsing with mana. But despite the impressive array of weapons, his interest remained passive. He already had his weapon, one that had served him well.

Still, he remained observant, his sharp mind assessing the undercurrents of the market. He wasn't here for a weapon. His true purpose was to get a feel for the economy of Ardmont's Awakened society, to understand how its gears turned and what opportunities might be available to someone who paid close enough attention.

"Are you looking for anything specific?" Maya asked, her voice curious but light as they passed a blacksmith's shop. The rhythmic clang of metal being forged rang out, and the heat from the forge spilled into the streets. Inside, an Awakened blacksmith wielded his hammer with precise, practiced strikes, each blow imbued with mana that fused seamlessly into the steel.

Astron shook his head slightly, his violet eyes still scanning the shops with quiet interest. "No, I have my own weapon," he replied calmly. "I'm more interested in seeing how things work here—how the Awakened society in Ardmont operates. There's always something to learn when you observe the flow of a city's economy."

'He has his own weapon?' Maya thought to herself. While she had seen him training with daggers and bows, she had never seen him use a 'special' weapon.

'But if it is him....'

If it was him, then he must have gotten a suitable weapon already since he was not someone who would overlook such things.

'Even then....'

Maya stole a glance at Astron. There was always something about him—an air of mystery that clung to him, not in a way that was meant to charm or intrigue others intentionally, but more because he was so skilled at keeping his abilities, his true self, hidden.

It wasn't just a trait of an Awakened or a Hunter; it felt more personal, like Astron had mastered the art of concealing his strengths, always holding something back, always optimizing every aspect of himself.

She'd seen it in the way he fought, how he analyzed every situation, using misdirection and subtlety to his advantage. He didn't rely on brute strength or overwhelming power—his approach was different, more refined. If there was one thing Maya had come to understand about Astron, it was that he didn't leave anything to chance. Everything he did was calculated and precise.

'If that's the case... he must have a lot of tricks up his sleeve,' she concluded, her mind drifting back to how he moved in combat. He fought with intelligence, always using the environment, exploiting weaknesses, and turning every small detail to his advantage. Tricks and strategies were his weapons, and that made him dangerous in ways few people understood.

Breaking the silence between them, she turned to him with a playful smile. "I have a place in mind," she said, her tone light but with a hint of excitement. She gestured for him to follow her. "Come on, you'll like this."

Astron raised an eyebrow slightly, intrigued by the sudden shift in her demeanor, but he gave a small nod and fell into step beside her as they made their way deeper into the City Center. He didn't ask questions, but Maya could tell he was curious.

The streets around them grew quieter as they moved away from the bustling main square, the shops here more specialized, catering to a more discerning clientele. Maya led him through a side street that opened into a courtyard, where a small, unassuming shop sat nestled between two grander buildings. Its modest appearance stood in stark contrast to the elegant surroundings, but there was something about it—an air of authenticity—that drew the eye.

"This is the place," Maya said.

Astron's violet eyes carefully scanned the shop before him. Despite its central location in the heart of the Awakened City Center, the store appeared disorganized, almost haphazard in its presentation. Materials were scattered around without care, some half-buried under stacks of items, others leaning precariously against the walls. It was a stark contrast to the polished, pristine shops they had just passed. There was no thought put into the arrangement, no effort to make the shop visually appealing. It was as if the owner had little interest in appearances.

That, in itself, was odd.

Astron narrowed his eyes, lowering his body to get a closer look at some of the materials. His fingers brushed lightly against the surface of a metal bar, its texture cool and smooth beneath his touch. He turned it over, noting the weight and the faint, shimmering mana trails that clung to its edges.

'This isn't just scrap,' he thought to himself. He tilted the bar slightly, watching the way the light caught its surface. "This is no ordinary metal," he murmured, speaking aloud for Maya's benefit. "It's [Kalisium]," he continued, recognizing the distinctive mana signature. A high-grade material, not something that would normally be left lying around in such a disorderly fashion. Kalisium was used for crafting exceptional weapons and armor—its durability and ability to hold mana were unparalleled. Yet here it was, sitting among a pile of other items, as if it were no more valuable than common steel.

He stood, dusting off his hands, his sharp gaze returning to the rest of the shop. The more he looked, the more the disarray made sense. It wasn't that the owner didn't care about presentation—it was that they didn't need to.

The fact that they were able to command such materials alone made it evident that the owner of the store did not lack any money.

'Interesting.'

He thought. Considering the fact that the world was vast and there were many talented people he had yet to come to know about, meeting people and making acquaintances with them was always welcome.

Maya's gaze swept the shop as she casually stepped closer to Astron.

"Kieran!" she shouted as she called to the owner of the store.

But that name was a name that Astron knew about.

'Kieran?'

Since that name was a name of a character from the game.

Chapter 600 133.2 - Kieran

"Kieran!"

As Maya called the name, the sound of breaking glass followed, then a faint curse. Moments later, the door to the backroom swung open, and a young man with a short stature stumbled out, dusting off his hands.

His disheveled appearance contrasted sharply with the store's valuable contents. His messy brown hair and wide green eyes made him look a bit younger than he likely was, though there was something sharp and calculating about his gaze.

"Maya?" the young man, Kieran, exclaimed, his voice tinged with a combination of annoyance and disbelief. "Couldn't you have waited a second? I almost dropped an entire batch of... never mind."

Kieran straightened up, fixing his shirt and trying to appear more composed despite the evident chaos behind him. He was short—not much taller than Maya's shoulder—but there was a certain



confidence in his posture, as if he was fully aware of his own importance, regardless of appearances. His hands were still covered in what looked like glittering dust, likely the remnants of whatever experiment or work he had been conducting.

Maya grinned, ignoring his complaints. "It's been a while! And here I thought you were too busy to see me," she teased lightly before gesturing toward Astron. "This is Astron Natusalune."

At the mention of Astron's name, Kieran's eyes flicked toward him, narrowing slightly as if assessing him quickly. Then, something seemed to click, and his gaze sharpened with recognition. "Astron Natusalune..." he repeated slowly as if rolling the name around in his head. "What a fricking weird name."

Maya's grin faltered for a moment, her expression shifting to one of slight embarrassment as she quickly stepped forward and tried to cover Kieran's mouth with her hand. "How can you say it like that, Kieran?" she said, her voice laced with playful scolding, though there was an edge of seriousness in her tone.

Kieran simply shrugged, pulling her hand away from his face with a nonchalant grin. "What? I'm just saying what's on my mind," he replied, unbothered by her reaction. He shot a glance at Astron. "No offense, man, but you've got one of those names that sounds like it belongs in a mysterious prophecy or something. People must do double-takes when they hear it."

Astron, for his part, remained completely unfazed.

"None taken," Astron replied calmly, his violet eyes gleaming with a flicker of amusement. "I've heard stranger."

Maya gave an exasperated sigh, shaking her head, though she couldn't help but smile at the exchange. "You never change, Kieran," she said, glancing at him with a mixture of affection and frustration. She looked at Astron, who was clearly unbothered, and relaxed.

Kieran shrugged again, his confidence unshaken. "Why should I? Being straightforward keeps things simple."

Maya chuckled softly. "Simple isn't exactly your style, you know."

"Fair point," Kieran conceded with a smirk, his eyes gleaming mischievously as he ran a hand through his messy hair, still dusted with glittering particles from whatever he had been working on. "But that's why people like me. They know exactly what they're getting."

Astron observed the dynamic between the two with quiet interest. It was clear they had a long-standing familiarity, the kind that allowed for banter without taking offense.

Though Kieran's words were unfiltered, they lacked malice, and Astron could sense that Maya found his candid nature refreshing, even if it occasionally exasperated her.

'But....'

However inwardly there were many questions that were popping on his head.

'Kieran Valis... Could it be him?'

Astron's thoughts shifted inwardly as he recalled a specific NPC from the later stages of the game, a dwarf who bore the same name. In the chaotic period when wars raged across the world and factions were locked in brutal conflict, this dwarf appeared at a critical juncture. The plot at that point was intense, with the player tasked with capturing a demon stronghold that had been terrorizing nearby regions.

Once the stronghold fell, the player would discover a prison deep within its fortress. Among the captives was a bitter, angry dwarf. At first, the dwarf harbored intense hatred toward humans, cursing the player and treating them with open hostility.

The player would escort the dwarf to their own battlefield and then from there the dwarf would be sent to the dwarf camp.

And following that the player would come to learn the fact that the dwarf that they have saved named Kieran was actually a talented blacksmith and a magic engineer.

From that point on, some things in the store would also become available with new formulas as the shop would expand.

Though the NPC named Kieran's backstory would never be revealed and the players would be left in the dark.

Astron remained outwardly composed, but internally, his thoughts raced as he studied Kieran. 'Kieran Valis... could it really be him?' Though there wasn't enough evidence to make a definitive conclusion, the pieces gnawed at his mind, lingering like a half-formed idea.

Without drawing attention to himself, Astron focused inward, drawing mana into his eyes. His vision sharpened, shifting from the mundane to something far more intricate as he tuned into the flow of mana around Kieran. To the untrained eye, Kieran was just a short, messy blacksmith covered in glittering dust. But Astron's enhanced perception saw deeper.

The mana that moved through Kieran was unusual. It wasn't chaotic like most Awakened individuals, nor did it have the smooth, controlled flow of a human. Instead, it was compact and concentrated, as if his very form was made not to be used in combat but more for longer and stable consumption.

Even more telling were the faint biological markers Astron noticed—dense bone structure, slightly stouter limbs, and a resilience in his aura that hinted at the race.

'Indeed, a dwarf,' Astron concluded, the certainty is settling in his mind.

While Kieran's appearance might not fully match what most would expect of a dwarf, the clues were there. His mana structure and subtle physical traits were unmistakable to someone with Astron's level of perception.

But if Kieran was indeed a dwarf, what was he doing here, in the heart of Ardmont's Awakened City Center, running a shop that catered to Awakened? And why was there no indication of his heritage, no outward display of the pride dwarves typically took in their craft?

'Interesting.....First an elf and a dwarf....'

After the reveal of Maya's past, making the connection was not that hard.

'Maybe related to Aelion?'

While dwarfs and Elves hated each other, there was still a certain kinship that they felt being from the same planet and traveling somewhere else.

There could be many points where an elf met with a dwarf. Heck, Aelion might even have ties with a dwarf family of hard circumstances and could be hiding them there.

Or this matter could be completely unrelated to Maya, though seeing her like that, it did not seem to be the case.

As Astron pieced together the fragments of Kieran's past, his mind circled around the possibilities. The Kieran from the game had been bitter, almost consumed by his hatred for humans, and it made sense. If he had indeed been betrayed by those he once trusted, or even by humans who were supposed to protect him, that could explain why he ended up in the hands of the demons.

'But how did it all begin?' Astron wondered, his thoughts racing. Kieran wasn't the type to simply fall into a trap. For a dwarf of his skill—both in magic engineering and blacksmithing—he must have had enemies, people who saw his talents and wanted to exploit them. Perhaps someone had discovered his talents and made a move, or maybe his connection to Maya's family, or even to Aelion, had placed him in a precarious position.

The possibility that the Evergreen family had failed to protect him loomed large in Astron's mind. Maya's lineage, her connection to Aelion, and the tensions between different factions could have easily played a role. The fact that elves and dwarves, despite their historical enmity, were from the same planet and had ties that could surface at critical moments, only deepened Astron's suspicions. If Aelion had a connection to Kieran's family, that might explain why Kieran was here, hidden away in Ardmont's bustling market, quietly working under the radar.

But it didn't stop there. If Kieran had been betrayed by humans—perhaps even sold out by those who coveted his talents—his capture by demons could have been the result of such treachery. It would explain the deep, almost irrational hatred he harbored against humans in the game. And, if Maya's family had any involvement in trying to protect or hide him, it would also explain the complex dynamics Astron was witnessing now.

Still, these were just speculations—possibilities that lined up but lacked hard evidence. 'I need more proof,' Astron thought, keeping his demeanor calm despite the whirlwind of thoughts swirling in his head. He couldn't jump to conclusions, not yet. While everything seemed to connect on some level, he knew better than to rely solely on assumptions.

Astron kept these thoughts to himself, his expression remaining calm and unreadable.

If it was really him, Kieran could be a crucial figure in the future—someone whose talents would be needed when the chaos erupted.

'For now, let's see.' Just as Astron's mind processed all these thoughts in a matter of seconds, his violet eyes flicking briefly toward Kieran, Maya turned toward him with a curious look. She could always sense when Astron was deep in thought, even when he masked it perfectly on the surface.

"We're here to check out some of your products, Kieran," Maya explained, her voice returning to its usual casual warmth. "Astron is looking for something that might complement his abilities, and I thought your shop would be a good place to start."

Kieran's mischievous grin faded, his demeanor shifting into something far more serious as he entered "business mode." His eyes, still gleaming with curiosity, locked onto Astron's. "I see," Kieran said, his voice steady. "Looking for something in particular? A weapon, armor, or maybe a custom item? I don't stock the usual run-of-the-mill stuff here. Everything's got a little... extra."

Astron gave a small nod, still maintaining his composed exterior. "I have something in mind."

He said that he had grabbed something from his spatial storage.

CLANK!

And then spilled it to the ground.

'Let's test your capabilities first.'