

H. Academy 601

Chapter 601 133.3 - Kieran

CLANK!

The sound of metal hitting the floor echoed through the room as Astron pulled a set of daggers from his spatial storage and casually spilled them onto the ground before Kieran. The gleaming blades lay in a neat array, catching the light with a faint, ethereal glow.

Kieran's brow furrowed slightly as he looked down at the daggers. His initial surprise quickly shifted to a professional curiosity, and his sharp gaze immediately began assessing the weapons before him. "What do you want me to do with these?" he asked, his tone carrying a hint of intrigue.

Astron met his gaze calmly, his expression as composed as ever. "Take a look at them," he said simply, giving no further instructions.

Kieran raised an eyebrow but didn't question it further. He crouched down and picked up one of the daggers, his fingers expertly running along the edge of the blade. His eyes narrowed as he turned the weapon over in his hand, examining every detail with the precision of a seasoned craftsman.

"These are... interesting," Kieran muttered, more to himself than anyone else, as he continued his inspection. He pressed his thumb lightly along the engraved runes, his eyes flickering with recognition. "Mana-infused, obviously. The enchantment on these is quite advanced. I can feel the energy flow through the metal... and these runes..."

He paused, his mind clearly racing as he pieced together the magic within the daggers. He tested the balance, flipping the dagger expertly in his hand before finally tossing it lightly into the air. The dagger seemed to almost hum with energy as if responding to his touch.

"A type of a blade that can be pulled back?" Kieran asked, his gaze now fully focused on Astron.

Astron nodded, the faintest hint of a smile tugging at his lips. "That's right. They can be retracted and returned to me after a command."

Kieran smirked, impressed. "You don't see enchantments like this every day. Whoever made these knew what they were doing, and the mana flow is impeccable—no disruption, no delays in the return mechanism. The enchantment is seamless."

He picked up another dagger, testing its weight and balance just as he had with the first. After a few moments of silent observation, he glanced back at Astron. "And I can tell you've used these a lot."

Kieran stood up, holding both daggers now, and continued his analysis aloud. "The way these work... they're built for efficiency. Fast strikes, easy recall, and perfect for someone who needs versatility in combat. It's not just the retractable feature; they were designed with precision in mind."

He tossed one of the daggers lightly toward Astron, who caught it effortlessly. Kieran's expression shifted slightly, his curiosity deepening as he added, "So, what exactly are you looking for, Astron? Do you need these enhanced, or are you planning on integrating something new into them?"

Without a word, Astron reached into his spatial storage once again, this time withdrawing a pair of sleek daggers and a finely crafted bow. He placed them on the table in front of Kieran with the same quiet composure as before.

"These as well," Astron said calmly, gesturing toward the weapons.

Kieran's eyes lit up with a spark of curiosity as he carefully picked up the daggers first. The moment his fingers touched the cold metal, his brows furrowed slightly in recognition. He ran a thumb along the blade, feeling the faint energy coursing through it. His sharp eyes caught the faint green glow that shimmered along the edges, hinting at the weapon's venomous properties.

"These are... interesting," Kieran mused aloud. "The enchantment is good. Venomous Edge, right? This will stack venom over time. Not bad." He gave a nod of approval, though his expression remained focused. "The paralysis effect after the third hit is a nice touch—perfect for taking down enemies quickly."

He tested the balance of the blades, flipping one in his hand before continuing his assessment. "And Serpent's Reflex... I can see how it would enhance agility, especially in close-quarters combat. It's a solid weapon, but..."

Kieran paused, turning the blades over in his hands before looking back at Astron with a measured gaze. "These are at most [Unique] Grade artifacts," he said matter-of-factly. "Not bad, but there's room for improvement. Whoever made these didn't push the enchantments to their full potential."

Satisfied with his analysis, he placed the daggers back down and moved on to the bow. The moment he lifted the Starpiercer Arc, Kieran's eyes gleamed with appreciation for its craftsmanship. He ran a hand along the smooth wood, tracing the runes etched into the frame, feeling the latent power within the weapon.

"Now this... this is a beauty," Kieran remarked, his tone carrying a hint of admiration. "Piercing Shot, I'm guessing? Allows the arrow to travel through multiple targets while increasing in force as it goes."

He strung the bow lightly, testing the tension with a practiced hand. "It's well-balanced and strong, and the magic is woven seamlessly into the bow. But again, like the daggers, it's only at [Unique] Grade." Kieran's voice was calm but firm, giving an honest critique. "There's definitely potential to bring these weapons up a notch if you're willing to invest the time and resources."

Astron gave a small nod, his expression unchanged. "I expected as much."

The reason why Astron revealed those weapons was just to test if this guy before him was the one from the game or not.

'And it is indeed the one from the game.'

Kieran from the game had the ability to see through the effects of the weapons thanks to his trait, and that way, he could identify what the weapons did.

His talent stemmed from the fact that, thanks to the effects of the weapons, he could fasten his experiments regarding weapons, and this played a huge role in his career as a magic engineer.

Astron's eyes flicked between the weapons laid out on the table before him, his mind already calculating the possibilities. The fact that Kieran had identified the abilities of each weapon without hesitation confirmed Astron's suspicions. This Kieran was, without a doubt, the same one from the game, possessing the unique trait that allowed him to see through the effects of artifacts and weapons alike.

'He's exactly as I expected.'

With that thought in mind, Astron decided to push the boundaries of what Kieran could do. He looked up from the weapons, his violet eyes meeting Kieran's sharp, expectant gaze.

"Can you combine their abilities?" Astron asked, his voice calm and measured.

Kieran's expression immediately shifted into a wide grin, the kind of smile that told Astron this was exactly the kind of challenge Kieran had been hoping for. "Now, that's the kind of question I like to hear," Kieran said, his tone filled with excitement. He stepped forward, picking up the daggers and the bow again, his eyes gleaming with possibility.

He spun one of the daggers in his hand before turning back to Astron, his grin widening. "Combining their abilities... it's not easy, but it's definitely possible."

Kieran's grin widened as he continued, clearly energized by the challenge. "Here's the thing," he said, his voice brimming with enthusiasm. "I can craft the throwable daggers with all these properties. Imagine it—venomous strikes, enhanced reflexes for quick reaction times, and the precision you get from a bow, all compacted into a set of throwing blades. I can even fine-tune the aerodynamics to make them faster and more efficient mid-flight."

He twirled one of the daggers in his hand again, eyes gleaming as he considered the possibilities. "The current material is decent, but if we're going all out, I'll use something stronger—higher-grade metals that can hold the enchantments better and increase durability. That way, you won't have to worry about the blades losing their edge or breaking during combat, no matter how intense the fight gets."

Kieran set the daggers and the bow back down, his excitement palpable. "And the aerodynamics? I'll refine the design to make the flight smoother, reducing drag and increasing the speed at which they return to you. The key is balance—if we get it just right, they'll fly faster, hit harder, and retain all their enchantments. It's a lot of work, but I can do it."

Astron remained calm as ever, though he felt a flicker of satisfaction at Kieran's response. This was exactly what he had hoped for—an upgrade.

The reason?

'If he can combine and can show his talent more, maybe I can even show him [Celestalith].'

He had never shown his weapon to anyone before since he did not have any need to, as well as he liked hiding his trump cards.

Kieran leaned in slightly, his grin never fading. "By the time I'm done, these daggers will be something else entirely. They'll be your go-to for both close and ranged combat, with all the power you need wrapped up in a sleek, deadly package."

Astron nodded, his mind already envisioning the potential these refined weapons would bring to his combat strategy. "I'll leave it in your hands, then," he said, his voice calm but firm. "I expect nothing less than perfection."

Kieran's grin widened even more if that was possible. "Oh, don't worry," he said, already gathering the daggers and bowing back into his hands. "You're going to get more than you bargained for."

As Kieran walked toward his workshop, the challenge set before him, Maya glanced at Astron. "It will be on me."

Just as Astron was about to respond, Maya shook her head firmly, her expression unwavering. "No, I won't take no as an answer," she said with a knowing smile, her tone leaving no room for argument.

Astron, ever composed, raised an eyebrow slightly, though he knew there was little point in trying to persuade her otherwise. Maya had made up her mind, and when she did, there was no changing it.

As Kieran walked toward his workshop, his mind already racing with ideas for the modifications, Maya turned her attention fully to Astron. "It'll be on me," she said, her voice soft but resolute.

Astron gave her a steady look, the hint of a frown tugging at his lips. He wasn't used to relying on others, especially for something as personal as his weapons, but Maya's determination was evident. She wasn't offering; she was deciding.

Astron fell silent for a moment, considering her words. He knew she meant well, and while he wasn't one to accept help easily, he respected her insistence. Finally, with a subtle nod, he relented. "All right," he said, his voice measured. "But only this time."

Maya chuckled softly, clearly pleased with his response. "You say that now," she teased lightly, "but we both know you're not getting rid of me that easily."

"Fair enough," Astron conceded, knowing well that Maya wasn't someone who could be brushed off so easily.

With the matter settled, Maya glanced toward the backroom where Kieran had disappeared, her confidence unwavering. "He's going to do great work," she said, her tone filled with certainty. "You'll see."

Astron simply nodded, though his mind briefly drifted back to the thought of his own hidden weapon, Celestalith. If Kieran proved himself capable, perhaps—just perhaps—he would consider revealing that trump card for further enhancement. But for now, he would wait and see.

"Though I am curious. How did the two of you meet?"

Still, before everything happened, Astron needed to clarify some things.

Chapter 602 133.4 - Kieran

"Though I am curious. How did the two of you meet?"

As Astron asked his question, Maya's expression softened, and she glanced in the direction Kieran had disappeared. "It was thanks to my brother that Kieran and I met," she explained, her voice tinged with a hint of nostalgia.

Astron raised an eyebrow slightly, his curiosity piqued. "Your brother?"

Maya nodded, her gaze returning to Astron. "Yes, Alden. He introduced Kieran to me a few years ago. Back then, my brother was already working on a few projects of his own. He would not be at home for a long time. But then suddenly, he took me out one day, and then he brought me here."

"Here?"

"Yes. Even when I was a young child, Kieran was in this place working over some things on his own. And then brother brought me here and that's how we met. Kieran's been a trusted ally ever since."

Astron's thoughts churned as he processed the information. It made sense that Alden, with his sharp and methodical nature, would have seen Kieran's potential early on. In all likelihood, Alden had discovered Kieran, recognized his talents, and provided the necessary resources for him to flourish. Perhaps it was even through their family's influence or financial backing that Kieran had managed to establish himself here.

'Alden likely funded him,' Astron speculated, his mind piecing together the potential dynamic. 'It's possible that Kieran's success was in part due to the resources provided by the Evergreen family. But Maya... she doesn't seem to know the full extent of it.'

It was evident from her earlier words, the way she spoke fondly of her brother but with a sense of detachment from the deeper machinations that might have been at play. While she understood the connection, Maya didn't seem to be aware of the full scope of what Alden's involvement might have been.

Astron glanced at her, his calm expression betraying none of his internal thoughts. He knew that the real answers wouldn't lie with Maya but with Alden himself. Whatever arrangements or agreements had been made between Alden and Kieran, Maya was likely kept in the dark or at least unaware of the finer details.

"You didn't ask about the specifics?" Astron inquired, his voice measured.

Maya shook her head lightly, her smile soft but carrying a hint of mystery. "No, Alden never really told me much about it. He's always been like that—keeping certain things to himself. I was young then, and I didn't question it." She paused for a moment, then added, "But I trust him. Whatever arrangement they had, it worked."

Astron nodded slowly, his suspicions confirmed. The true depth of Kieran's connection to the Evergreen family—and the role Alden played in it—was something only Alden could clarify. For now, though, Astron kept his thoughts to himself, knowing that digging further would have to wait.

"I see," Astron said, his voice calm.

With the lingering questions now tucked away in the back of his mind, Astron glanced toward the door and made a silent decision. They had spent enough time here, and the longer they stayed, the more unnecessary details might emerge. He had other priorities to focus on, especially with the upcoming banquet tomorrow—a time that would demand his full attention and meticulous preparation.

"I think that's enough for now," Astron said, his voice calm but resolute. He turned to Maya, his violet eyes meeting hers with a silent understanding. "We've already spent quite a bit of time here, and I need to make some final preparations before the banquet tomorrow."

Maya's expression shifted, a small smile tugging at her lips as she nodded in agreement. "You're right. We should get going." She gave a brief glance toward the backroom, where Kieran was already hard at work, before turning back to Astron. "He'll be busy for a while anyway."

Without further words, the two made their way toward the exit of the shop, the soft chime of the bell marking their departure. The energy of the city streets greeted them once again, bustling with life as they stepped outside.

Just like that, they returned to the mansion.

Sitting in the quiet of my room, I opened the thick file folder from [Horde] and spread its contents across the air using the projection of the smartwatch.

Now that today is the final day before the banquet, the people attending there will be finalized. And it is better to be prepared about who would be attending so that I would not let any slip ups. Too many eyes would be watching, and any misstep could lead to suspicion.

I leaned back slightly, flipping through the profiles of those who would be attending the event. High-ranking officials, influential nobles, a few guild masters... all names that carried weight. I couldn't allow myself to be caught off guard by anyone.

"These people aren't just here for pleasantries. Each one of them has an agenda, and I need to know exactly what I'm walking into."

I scanned the first profile. Argen Delvora, a name that was prominent in political circles, known for his ruthless ambition and close ties to the Valerian Federation. His wealth was built on mining operations, but his true strength lay in his connections with various influential figures in the capital.

I moved to the next file. Vivienne Althea, a renowned socialite with a reputation for her wit and charm. She was the center of gossip, a woman who could control the flow of rumors with a single word.

'Not to be underestimated. She'll notice any small slip in behavior or etiquette.'

Now, why were these people important?

It was because they also had businesses that were showing contacts with demons and shady deals, and it was highly likely that they were here to make a deal tonight.

I turned the page to the next profile, my gaze narrowing as the host's name came into view: Cox Family—more specifically, Gerald Cox, the head of the family. The name had been cropping up a lot recently, and it was a small family that had gained sudden influence in the southern territories. Their recent rise was swift, almost unnaturally so. They had formed alliances with several local merchant groups, and their business ventures had seen unexpected success.

Too much success.

'The Cox family... their business rivals didn't just lose. They were taken down, one by one. Silently, without public scandal, without a trace. This kind of precision suggests something is at work.'

I scanned through the history of the family's growth, noting the suspicious patterns. Rivals collapsed under strange circumstances, contracts mysteriously voided, and deals fell apart just when the Cox family needed them to. Everything pointed to something operating in the shadows. No one in the Federation would admit it, but I had seen this kind of pattern before.

'Demonic influence.'

The thought brought a deeper understanding of why this banquet was so important. The Cox family was clearly looking to cement their newfound status, but I couldn't shake the feeling that this event was also a way for them to showcase their connections.

Since they were involved with demons, then this would be the perfect time to bring those underworld figures into their fold.

'That is also why Silas is showing himself in this banquet.'

The other two names are on the top. Vivienne and Argen. Most likely, they were there to conduct a business deal that regarded the two when it was safest.

While hosting a banquet just for this reason would not be efficient, it was also a good cover for them to meet, most likely requested by Silas himself.

I leaned back in my chair, the faint glow from the projection casting shadows across the room as I continued to piece everything together. Now that I had a clear understanding of the players at the banquet, the next step was to decide how I would present myself. The right persona could either mask my true intentions or create an opening to gather more information.

'First, I need to consider the circumstances,' I thought. 'Maya is attending, and her presence changes everything.'

Silas would undoubtedly take note of her attendance. The young lady of the Evergreen family, known for staying out of political affairs, suddenly appearing at such a significant event would raise flags. If I were Silas, the possibilities would be clear: either the Evergreens had suspicions about something, or they were trying to ease Maya into the political scene, using this banquet as an opportunity.

'But, there is no reason for them to think the first one since if Evergreens were suspicious, they would have sent someone else and not their own inexperienced daughter, who is still attending the academy. Therefore, most likely, they will think of it as the second reason.'

Considering that this would be the case, it meant one other thing.

'Which means my presence has already been noted as well,' I mused.

My connection with Maya wouldn't be ignored.

'Maybe an attendee or a person who is entrusted by the Evergreens to watch over Maya?'

This would most likely be what they would think. There was no way that Maya, who had been sent there to learn more about the political world and such gatherings, would be left alone.

From a logical viewpoint, this would be how it looked.

'And it is the perfect cover.' I thought, a slight smile tugging at the corner of my lips. My connection with Maya, coupled with the assumption that I was entrusted to watch over her, provided a solid pretext. No one would suspect my true intentions as long as I maintained the facade.

Now that I had a clear plan, it was time to finalize the details and ensure that Maya understood her role as well. After all, her behavior tonight would be just as important as mine. If we weren't on the same page, it could raise suspicion.

I made my way toward the door, my footsteps steady as I left the room to find Maya.

It didn't take long to locate her. She was standing near the balcony of the guest wing, gazing out at the view beyond, her expression thoughtful. The soft breeze stirred her hair, and for a moment, I considered the weight she must be carrying tonight.

"Senior," I called out softly, approaching her. She turned at the sound of my voice, her eyes meeting mine with a flicker of curiosity.

"Junior," she responded, her tone calm but with a hint of expectation. "Is everything ready?"

I nodded. "Almost. But before we go, we need to discuss how you'll present yourself at the banquet."

She raised an eyebrow, though there was no surprise in her expression. "You mean how I should act in front of them? I've been thinking about that, too."

"Good," I replied, stepping closer. "Since you are from the Evergreen Family. They'll be watching your every move, and Silas will be particularly interested in your presence. We need to make sure that what he sees matches the image we want to project."

Maya's gaze shifted slightly, her composure unshaken, but her lips pressed into a thin line. "And what image should I project, exactly?"

"The one that makes the most sense," I said. "You're here to learn, to familiarize yourself with the political landscape. They need to see you as someone stepping into this world for the first time—curious, but cautious. You're observing, not engaging too deeply. Don't try to assert yourself too much tonight. Let them underestimate you."

Maya's expression softened, and she gave a small nod of understanding. "So, act like a student, eager to learn but still inexperienced?"

"Exactly," I confirmed. "That's the narrative they'll expect, and it's the one that will allow us to operate without drawing too much attention. If they think you're here purely to gain experience, they won't scrutinize you as much."

Maya's lips curved into a small, knowing smile. "And what about you? What role will you be playing tonight?"

"I'll be the one they expect—a guardian of sorts, sent by the Evergreens to watch over you. Someone who's close enough to ensure your safety but far enough removed to avoid drawing too much attention. I'll be there, but I won't overshadow you."

Maya's smile widened, a trace of amusement flickering in her eyes. "You've thought this through."

"It is necessary. That way, Silas will also think of you as a small fish and will most likely approach you with his guard lowered."

She nodded, her gaze steady and resolute. "I understand. I'll do my part."

Everything was ready now.

Chapter 603 135.1 - The Banquet

As Maya lay in her bed, the room darkened by the soft glow of moonlight filtering through the curtains, her mind wandered back to the events of the day. The memory of their stroll through the

city, visiting the tailor, and even their quiet moments at the restaurant lingered in her thoughts. She had enjoyed the day more than she had expected, and that was largely because of Astron.

'Today...' she thought, smiling faintly as she recalled their exchanges. Today felt different. A subtle shift had occurred, something she couldn't quite put into words, but she felt it nonetheless. The way he spoke to her, the way he listened, and even his willingness to join her on the trip to the city all felt like a step forward in their growing connection.

And then there was the banquet.

The thought of tomorrow's event sobered her, the weight of responsibility pressing down on her once again. It wasn't just another social gathering.

There were deeper currents flowing beneath the surface—dangers and secrets that both she and Astron would have to navigate carefully. His words replayed in her mind, reminding her of her role in the night ahead.

'Curious but cautious,' she repeated to herself silently. She knew how important it was to play her part perfectly, to let them underestimate her. It was a game of masks. But Astron had given her a clear path to follow, and she trusted his judgment. He was always calculating.

The instructions Astron had given her were simple enough: play the role of a curious, cautious newcomer—someone inexperienced in the art of politics but eager to learn. She knew that image would lower the guards of people like Silas, but the problem was that Maya wasn't someone who easily felt nervous or unsure of herself. She had been raised in the Evergreen family and trained to be poised and confident in any situation. Nervousness wasn't something that came naturally to her.

'Curious but cautious,' she repeated once again in her mind. Her role demanded a delicate balance, something that didn't come naturally to her. Normally, when she was in social settings, she carried herself with ease. Her status and the respect her family commanded in the Federation meant that she had little need to worry about how others perceived her. Most people either admired or feared the Evergreen name.

'But this time, it's different.' She sat up slowly, her mind focusing on the challenge ahead. She had to be careful and act like she was stepping into this world for the first time—timid, maybe a little unsure, but determined. It would be a complete contrast to the way she usually presented herself. Could she really pull it off?

She frowned slightly, her fingers tracing the soft fabric of her blanket. "How hard can it be?" she murmured to herself, her voice barely above a whisper. "It's just an act."

And she was no stranger to playing roles, after all. Growing up in a family like hers, she had to learn when to put on a mask, when to show strength, and when to step back. She just needed to tap into a different part of herself—one that she had rarely shown anyone.

'I'll have to look hesitant, maybe even ask questions that seem basic, just to throw them off,' she mused.

Just like that, her night continued as she went to sleep.

Much later.

Maya stood before the large, ornate mirror in her room, the atmosphere around her buzzing with activity as her maids prepared her for the banquet. They moved quickly, their hands steady and precise as they applied makeup, styled her hair, and helped her slip into the gown that had been carefully tailored for the event.

She just stood still as the maids worked silently around her, their movements quick and efficient, each one focused on their task. The soft rustle of fabric and the quiet clinking of makeup brushes filled the room, creating a gentle hum of preparation.

Her face remained calm and serene, a mask of composure she had perfected over the years. Yet beneath that calm exterior, a faint flutter of excitement stirred in her chest. She couldn't deny it. Tonight, she wanted to impress not just the people at the banquet but him—Astron. She had imagined what he might think when he saw her in the dress, and though she knew he was always composed, part of her hoped to catch a flicker of something in his gaze.

As the maids continued to work, one of them approached her with a set of makeup brushes in hand. "Lady Evergreen, how would you like your makeup tonight?" she asked, her voice respectful and deferential.

Maya glanced at the array of products laid out before her. She didn't need much—her features were naturally striking, and too much makeup would only distract from her elegance. "Something subtle," she said softly, her tone measured. "Accentuate my eyes, but keep the rest soft."

The maid nodded and quickly set to work, her hands light and precise as she brushed a soft hue over Maya's eyelids, adding just enough shimmer to make her pink eyes stand out without being overpowering. The rest of her makeup was kept understated, enhancing her natural beauty without drawing too much attention.

As she sat there, watching her reflection, Maya felt that pang of anticipation grow stronger. It wasn't just about the dress or the makeup—it was the entire evening ahead. She was stepping into a role, a carefully crafted persona that would help her navigate the banquet and the political games to come. But there was also a more personal layer to her excitement.

'How will he look?' she wondered silently, her mind briefly drifting to Astron. He would be dressed in the suit Eliran had crafted, and she couldn't help but imagine how sharp he'd appear, how composed and controlled, as always. But maybe, just maybe, tonight she would see a hint of something more—a reaction, even if just a subtle one.

"Does this look to your liking, Lady Evergreen?" another maid asked, stepping back slightly to let Maya view the final touches in the mirror.

Maya took a slow breath, her eyes sweeping over her reflection. The soft glow of her makeup, combined with the elegance of her gown, created a look that was both powerful and graceful. It was exactly what she had envisioned.

"Yes," she said, her voice steady but carrying an undercurrent of excitement. "It's perfect."

The maids bowed slightly, continuing their work in quiet efficiency as they adjusted the last few details of her attire—fastening delicate jewelry around her neck and wrists, ensuring every piece was flawless.

As they finished, Maya took one final look at herself in the mirror, her heart beating a little faster. She was ready—not just for the banquet but for everything it would entail. And most of all, she was ready to step into the role she needed to play tonight.

Her thoughts lingered on Astron once more as the maids quietly stepped back, giving her space. 'I wonder if he's ready,' she mused, the faintest smile playing at her lips.

Maya stood up, her gown flowing elegantly with her movements, every step as graceful as the quiet hum of magic embedded within the fabric. The dress was not only beautiful but practical—enchanted with protection and durability, ensuring that neither her makeup nor her attire would falter throughout the night. There was no need to worry about smudges or wear; every detail had been crafted with care and designed to last.

She moved toward the door, her heart steady but carrying that subtle thrill of anticipation. The banquet was more than just an event—it was a stage, and tonight, she would play her part perfectly. Her mind was focused, but a part of her was undeniably eager to see Astron, to observe how he carried himself in the suit they had tailored just for him.

As she stepped into the lounge, her breath caught instantly.

Astron was already there, waiting for her. And he was a vision.

'Huh?' He wore a sleek, perfectly fitted black suit, the fabric rich and luxurious, shimmering subtly under the warm lights of the room. The intricate silver and gold detailing on his jacket and the chain draped elegantly across his chest caught her eye, accentuating his tall, lean frame.

But it was the way he wore it—with that quiet, effortless confidence—that took her breath away.

His posture was relaxed, one hand in his pocket, while the other adjusted the collar of his jacket with the slightest touch of precision.

His dark hair, tousled just enough to seem natural yet intentional, framed his chiseled face, and his purple eyes glowed like the rarest of gems, deep and enigmatic. The way the suit was crafted—sharp, refined, with hints of starlight in its design—gave him an aura of power, as if the very fabric held a trace of the cosmos within it.

Maya couldn't help but stare for a moment, her heart skipping a beat. It wasn't just the suit that made him look so striking—it was him. The calm, composed strength that he exuded, the quiet control that defined every movement, every glance.

Her thoughts stilled, the playful remarks she had considered saying slipping away as she simply stood there, absorbing the sight of him. For a moment, she wasn't the poised, practiced Lady Evergreen. She was just... captivated.

Astron turned toward her, his gaze meeting hers with a calm intensity that sent a shiver down her spine. He said nothing at first, simply observing her, his eyes lingering on her dress and her face, before settling back on her eyes. His expression remained composed, but there was something in the way he looked at her—something almost imperceptible, a flicker of approval perhaps, or admiration.

For a moment, the lounge was quiet, the weight of their mutual acknowledgment filling the space between them. Maya felt her heartbeat quicken again, but she masked it with a small, graceful smile as she stepped closer to him.

"You're... ready," she said softly, her voice calm, though the faintest trace of awe slipped through.

Astron gave a slight nod, his eyes still fixed on her. "As are you," he replied, his voice low and steady.

Maya felt the corner of her lips lift slightly. "You look..." she paused, choosing her words carefully. "You look impressive."

There was a small, almost imperceptible shift in Astron's expression—just the faintest twitch of his lips, a subtle acknowledgment of her words. "Thank you," he said, his voice as composed as ever. "You look... perfect."

And he did mean it without any lies.

The way she looked tonight, dressed in the black gown that hugged her figure so elegantly, her violet eyes glowing under the soft light, her long, dark hair cascading down her shoulders—Astron couldn't help but be taken aback. Her beauty was undeniable, but there was something more to it tonight, something that stirred within him.

Maya also noticed the faint shift in Astron's expression, the way his gaze lingered just a little longer on her as if taking in every detail. It wasn't the first time they had shared a moment like this, but tonight, it felt different—deeper.

But at the same time, it was embarrassing.

Both for him and for her, but one of them was not used to getting embarrassed.

"Shall we?" Astron said finally, his voice steady once more as he extended a hand toward her, though Maya knew that was a façade.

Maya glanced down at his hand, a faint smile tugging at her lips. She hesitated for only a moment before reaching out, her fingers brushing against his as she took his hand.

"Let's."

The banquet started.

Chapter 604 135.2 - The Banquet

Cox family had recently risen in power in the southern parts of the Federation.

But even then, their roots as a low-ranking family had always been a chore in their eyes, and they needed to carefully cultivate their newfound status.

Today's banquet was a pivotal moment in solidifying their influence, a display of power and prestige for high-ranking officials and nobles alike.

Every detail mattered, from the shimmering chandeliers to the perfectly arranged floral displays. Everything had to reflect the image they wished to project: a family worthy of their position among the Federation's elite.

At the grand entrance of the Cox estate, the butler, Mr. Malford, stood straight-backed and stoic, his graying hair combed impeccably. Dressed in a black-tailored suit that exuded professionalism, his sharp eyes scanned the driveway for the arriving guests. The estate's wide marble steps were flanked by two stone lions, symbols of power recently added to the mansion's façade, though Malford himself had always thought them a bit too ostentatious.

As the first car approached, he adjusted his white gloves, the subtle leather stretching only noticeable to those who knew the art of etiquette. The car halted smoothly, and Mr. Malford stepped forward with practiced grace, his every movement deliberate and respectful. He opened the door and bowed slightly as the first guest descended.

"Welcome, Lady Halcross," Malford greeted in his polished tone. His eyes briefly met hers, the deep brown of a woman who had seen her share of political games. "The Cox family is most honored by your presence this evening."

Lady Halcross, draped in a rich navy gown, nodded coolly. She was a woman of considerable influence, and Malford knew that her attendance alone was a significant achievement for the Cox family. "Thank you, Malford. I trust tonight will be... enlightening," she said, her voice dripping with an unspoken challenge.

Malford only offered a gracious smile, bowing as she passed, escorted by a footman towards the brightly lit hall.

As Mr. Malford continued to receive the guests with his impeccable manners, bowing and offering polite greetings, his mind couldn't help but drift toward the unexpected development that weighed heavily on his thoughts: the sudden appearance of Lady Evergreen.

The Evergreen family was a force unlike any other in the Federation, their influence and power spanning far beyond what the Cox family could currently dream of. Their mere presence at an event such as this turned heads and stirred whispers.

Malford was proud to serve the Cox family; he had been with them since their early days when they had barely clawed their way out of obscurity. But despite the pride he felt for their rapid ascent, the Evergreens were in an entirely different league.

The Cox family, for all their ambition and newfound prestige, were still learning to navigate the intricate web of high society. And now, with Lady Evergreen gracing the banquet unannounced, everything had changed.

As the next guest stepped out of their vehicle, Malford executed his well-practiced bow. "Welcome, Lord Harrington," he greeted in his usual polished tone, though his mind still lingered on the arrival of Lady Evergreen.

Lady Evergreen had been a surprise. The Cox family hadn't expected her, and in the world of politics and power, uninvited guests, especially of her stature, carried with them either immense opportunity or catastrophic risk.

He worried for Lord Cox. This banquet had been carefully orchestrated to boost their standing and cement their position as rising elites within the Federation.

Yet, amidst his worry, Malford also saw the potential. This could elevate the Cox family's reputation far beyond what tonight's banquet had originally intended.

The Evergreens were feared and respected in equal measure, and the fact that one of them had chosen to attend this banquet, uninvited or not, could transform the night into something monumental.

People would remember this evening not only as a showcase of the Cox family's ascent but also as the moment they rubbed shoulders with true power.

As the stream of guests continued, Malford caught a glimpse of Lord Cox standing by the entrance of the ballroom, wearing his finest suit and offering a charming smile to those who approached.

Cars continued to arrive one after another, each more opulent than the last, the gleaming exteriors reflecting the soft lights from the grand estate. Malford remained steadfast, bowing and offering polished greetings to every guest, yet his mind raced with the anticipation that hung over the evening.

But before he could dwell too much on Evergreen, the distant hum of an engine pulled his attention sharply.

—WROOM!

A new car approached the estate, one unlike the others. Sleek, polished, and unmistakably luxurious, the highest-end model that even the wealthiest in the Federation could only dream of possessing. Malford's pulse quickened. He recognized the vehicle immediately. This wasn't just any guest—this was him.

The car glided to a stop, its engine emitting a low, refined growl before falling into silence. Malford instinctively straightened his posture and adjusted his gloves. The moment had come, and his master's most important guest was finally here.

The door of the luxurious car opened, and a man stepped out with graceful precision. Silas Vayne, the man everyone had been waiting for. He appeared to be in his thirties, yet his smooth, unblemished skin hinted at something more—a telltale sign of his Awakened status. His dark hair

was slicked back, and his sharp, calculating eyes seemed to absorb everything around him in an instant.

Malford's heart raced as an aftereffect of his presence. The subconscious effect of his oppression was, though Malford maintained his composure.

He knew this was the guest his master had personally instructed him to show the utmost respect. Not even Lady Evergreen, for all her unanticipated arrival and the shockwaves it had sent through the evening, carried the weight that Silas Vayne did. This entire banquet, all the lavish displays, the carefully curated guest list—it had all been orchestrated for him.

"Welcome, Mr. Vayne," Malford greeted, bowing lower than he had for anyone that night. His tone was reverent and respectful in a way that left no room for misinterpretation. "The Cox family is deeply honored by your presence."

Silas didn't reply immediately. He took a moment to adjust the cufflinks on his immaculate suit, his gaze sweeping over the grand estate before settling on Malford. His expression was unreadable, but the intensity of his presence was undeniable.

Finally, he gave a small nod, acknowledging the butler's greeting. "Thank you, Malford," Silas said, his voice smooth and composed. "I trust everything is in order?"

Malford suppressed the nervous flutter in his chest and gave a confident nod. "Yes, Mr. Vayne. Every detail has been prepared to your specifications. My Lord eagerly awaits your arrival inside."

Silas gave another nod, satisfied. Without another word, he walked towards the grand entrance, his steps silent but carrying the weight of someone who knew the power they wielded.

As Silas entered the brightly lit hall, Malford exhaled slowly, allowing himself a brief moment of relief.

'What an oppressive Aura.' He thought. Being a butler was not easy, especially for a family like Cox. He was someone who had dealt with countless shady people, and countless different deals.

Being a demon contractor himself, he thought that he had seen the world already.

'My Lord....' Yet, now he was not sure anymore.

'My Lord... what have you gotten us into?' he mused silently, though he kept his expression calm and professional.

Before he could dwell further on the unsettling thoughts, the next car arrived, snapping him back to the present. This was another pair of guests that Lord Cox had emphasized as critical to the evening's success.

The vehicle pulled up smoothly, and Malford immediately recognized the emblem on its side—Argen Delvora's company. A formidable businessman and political strategist, Argen was known for his ruthlessness and brilliance in negotiation. He was not a man to cross, and his influence could sway entire sectors of the Federation's economy. Malford straightened his posture and stepped forward to open the door.

Argen Delvora emerged from the car, his sharp, calculating eyes hidden behind round spectacles. His salt-and-pepper hair gave him an air of wisdom, and his tailored suit exuded wealth and authority. He glanced at Malford briefly, offering no words, only a slight nod of acknowledgment.

"Welcome, Mr. Delvora," Malford greeted respectfully. "The Cox family is deeply honored by your presence tonight."

Argen gave no reply, merely adjusting his gloves as he strode towards the grand entrance with the quiet confidence of a man used to wielding power. Malford watched him go, noting how the other guests already inside would be keeping a close eye on him. Delvora's reputation preceded him, and his presence was sure to add another layer of intrigue to the evening.

Barely a moment had passed before the next car pulled up, this one carrying a more striking presence. The emblem of the Althea family gleamed on the car door, and Malford knew this guest would draw even more attention.

Vivienne Althea, draped in a flowing crimson gown, stepped out with a grace that commanded attention. Her auburn hair cascaded over her shoulders, and her bright green eyes glinted with both beauty and cunning. Vivienne was a socialite with deep connections in the Federation's political sphere, but more than that, she was known for her charm and manipulation. She could turn any room in her favor with little more than a smile.

"Lady Althea, it is an honor," Malford greeted her with a respectful bow. He could feel the weight of her gaze as she examined him for just a moment.

"Thank you, Malford," she said, her voice smooth, yet carrying an edge of amusement. "I trust tonight will be... interesting."

He nodded, holding her gaze briefly before lowering his eyes in deference. As she walked past, her entrance into the hall was bound to cause a stir. The combination of Argen Delvora and Vivienne Althea in one room was a potent mix, and Malford could only imagine the delicate negotiations and veiled threats that would take place tonight.

RING!

Just then, he had received a call from his smartwatch connected to his earbuds.

[Lady Evergreen will be arriving soon.]

And hearing this, he composed himself swiftly, preparing mentally for the next pivotal moment of the evening. This was more than just a guest; this was a critical figure whose every move was carefully watched, especially by his master, Lord Cox.

A luxurious car arrived, sleek and glimmering under the estate's grand chandeliers, signaling her arrival. The vehicle came to a smooth halt, and the air seemed to grow heavier with anticipation. Malford took a deep breath as the doors of the car opened.

Stepping out first was a striking man, his aura as powerful as the night itself. He appeared no older than twenty, yet there was something timeless about him—his pale skin, smooth as if untouched by age, and his wavy black hair accentuating his sharp purple eyes.

His tailored black suit adorned with intricate details exuded authority. This was no ordinary man. Malford knew without a doubt who he was—another Awakened, perhaps someone close to Lady Evergreen.

Then, from the other side of the car, she stepped out. Lady Evergreen herself.

She was radiant, her long flowing purple hair shimmering under the mansion's lights, and her elegant black gown draped over her figure like it was spun from the night sky itself. Her eyes, deep blue and captivating, commanded the attention of all who looked her way.

As she moved gracefully beside the man, there was no question—this pair was a force to be reckoned with.

Malford, well-trained and ever composed, bowed low as they approached. "Lady Evergreen, welcome to the Cox Estate," he said, his voice carrying the weight of respect and awe. "The evening is honored by your presence."ue

Chapter 605 135.3 - The Banquet

"Lady Evergreen, welcome to the Cox Estate. The evening is honored by your presence."

As she stepped forward, her posture poised and regal, the weight of her family's name already rippling through the air around her, Maya felt the subtle tension pressing down on her.

Yet, beneath the calm exterior, she was carefully crafting her role for the evening—a delicate balancing act that required her to appear not as the powerful figure she truly was but as the curious and nervous young lady she needed to portray.

Astron remained a step behind her, his presence calm and steady, a silent guardian watching over her every move. His sharp eyes swept over the scene, taking in the way the guests reacted to Maya's arrival. He noted how some gazes lingered on her with curiosity while others whispered quietly among themselves, likely speculating about her sudden presence at the event.

Maya could feel the eyes on her, but she pretended not to notice. Instead, she allowed her steps to falter slightly, her fingers twitching ever so faintly as though she were unsure of herself. It was all part of the act—a carefully constructed facade that would let her slip into the evening unnoticed by those who might otherwise see her as a threat.

Her lips pressed into a thin line as her eyes darted quickly around the room, taking in the opulence of the Cox Estate and the grand ballroom beyond. The chandeliers above sparkled like starlight, and the hum of quiet conversation and clinking glasses filled the air. It was a room filled with power, influence, and hidden agendas, yet Maya's task was to appear as if she were stepping into this world for the first time—cautious, unsure, but eager to learn.

As they approached the entrance to the ballroom, Malford, the Cox family butler, greeted them with a low bow. "Lady Evergreen, welcome to the Cox Estate. The evening is honored by your presence."

Maya gave a small, almost timid smile in response, her voice soft and measured. "Thank you... Mr. Malford, was it?" She added the faintest hesitation in her tone as if trying to remember his name, a calculated move to make her appear less confident in her surroundings.

Malford, ever professional, responded with a respectful nod. "Yes, Lady Evergreen. If there is anything you require this evening, do not hesitate to ask."

Maya nodded, her eyes briefly flicking to the ballroom doors, then back to Malford. "I... I will, thank you."

As they entered the grand ballroom, the murmurs around them grew louder. Maya could feel the weight of the room's collective gaze shifting toward her, though she kept her own eyes lowered for a moment, as though uncertain. She took a breath and allowed herself to hesitate slightly before stepping fully into the room, giving the impression of someone not quite used to being in such grand company.

Astron, watching her closely, was impressed with how seamlessly she had stepped into the role.

'She did indeed have such a talent as I had thought.....'

The faint uncertainty in her movements, the careful way she held herself—it was all perfectly executed. No one here would suspect that Lady Evergreen was anything but a nervous young woman, stepping into the political world for the first time.

The moment they crossed the threshold into the ballroom, Maya turned her head slightly toward Astron, her eyes catching him for a brief moment. It was a subtle signal, a silent acknowledgment that she was ready to proceed. Astron gave a slight nod, his expression unreadable, but Maya could sense the approval in his gaze.

The two moved further into the room, and Maya kept her gaze moving, her expression one of awe and curiosity as if she were taking in the grandeur for the first time. She allowed herself to glance at the powerful figures in the room—Argen Delvora, Vivienne Althea, and, of course, Silas Vayne—without lingering too long, as though she were too intimidated to hold their gaze.

Her hand tightened ever so slightly around the delicate fan she carried, a subtle gesture of nervousness that did not go unnoticed by those watching her. Silas Vayne, in particular, observed her with a calculating gaze, though his expression remained calm. Maya knew that he was already assessing her, trying to gauge her significance at the event.

As Maya and Astron moved through the grand ballroom, it became impossible for them to go unnoticed.

Eyes followed their every step, and whispers began to ripple across the room. The pair drew attention not only for the powerful family Maya represented but also for their striking appearance. Astron, clad in a perfectly tailored black suit, looked like a figure straight out of a painting.

His cold purple eyes, chiseled face, and dark hair made him stand out like a model in an elite fashion magazine. Several of the ladies in the room could hardly keep their gazes off him, his silent yet commanding presence only heightening the allure.

Maya, no less captivating, stood at his side, her beauty enhanced by her flowing black gown that shimmered with every movement. Her long purple hair cascaded down her back, and her blue eyes sparkled under the ballroom's bright chandeliers.

Together, they created a striking contrast—him with his cold, calculating gaze, and her with her composed yet timid appearance. They were a pair that seemed to belong in a world of legends rather than a mere banquet.

As they passed by, more than a few heads turned, and many of the women in the room exchanged curious glances. The men, too, took notice, their expressions ranging from admiration to speculation. Whispers circulated, many of them wondering who the mysterious man accompanying Lady Evergreen was.

Among those particularly intrigued was Vivienne Althea. Her green eyes, sharp and observant, lingered on Astron as Maya exchanged pleasantries with the gathered guests.

Vivienne leaned slightly forward, her gaze unwavering as she took in every detail of the young man's appearance, his presence undeniable even though he remained largely silent, watching the room with those cold purple eyes.

And Maya did not miss that as well.

"Senior, you may go to her table."

Hearing Astron's words confirmed what she thought.

'I thought the same.'

With that she moved towards her table. Reaching there, Maya gave a small, hesitant smile and dipped her head in greeting. "Good evening," she said softly, her voice just loud enough to be heard but with a hint of shyness that fit the image she was portraying.

The men and women around the table offered polite smiles in return, their gazes curious but unthreatening. Vivienne Althea, in particular, gave Maya an appraising look, her green eyes gleaming with interest. "Lady Evergreen, how wonderful to see you here," Vivienne said smoothly. "I must admit, I did not expect to see someone of your standing at this event."

Maya smiled nervously, her eyes briefly meeting Vivienne's before she looked away. "Oh, I... I'm just here to learn," she replied softly. "My family thought it would be a good opportunity for me to observe."

Vivienne's smile widened slightly, her eyes flicking toward Astron for a moment before returning to Maya. "How wise of them," she said. "These events can be quite... informative."

Vivienne's gaze, sharp and calculating, shifted once more toward Astron, her curiosity evident. The way he stood just behind Maya, composed yet commanding in his silence, had clearly piqued her interest. His cold purple eyes, as unreadable as ever, seemed to study the room, but he remained a quiet enigma in the midst of the gathering. Vivienne's green eyes lingered on him for a moment longer before she spoke again.

"And who might this handsome young man be?" Vivienne asked, her tone smooth but laced with intrigue. "I don't believe I've had the pleasure of meeting him before. Could you introduce him, Lady Evergreen?"

Maya felt the slight shift in attention as the other guests around the table subtly leaned in, curious to hear her response. She offered Vivienne a small, polite smile, her expression still reflecting the careful blend of timidity and poise she had been maintaining all evening.

"This is Astron," Maya said softly, her voice warm but understated, as though hesitant to draw too much attention. "He's my partner for tonight."

There was a subtle flicker of something in Vivienne's eyes—perhaps surprise, or even admiration. She looked Astron up and down once more, clearly intrigued by the fact that such a striking figure was with Lady Evergreen. The word partner seemed to hang in the air for a moment, and Vivienne's smile widened just a touch, though she hid her deeper thoughts behind a veneer of politeness.

"Well, Lady Evergreen, you certainly have good taste," Vivienne said, her tone light but with an undercurrent of interest. "I must say, it's not every day we see such an impressive young man accompanying a lady of your status. It's quite the statement."

Maya's smile faltered ever so slightly, just enough to fit the nervous persona she was projecting. "I'm grateful for his company tonight," she said softly, her fingers lightly adjusting the fan in her hand. "It's a bit overwhelming to be here, and he has been a steady presence."

Astron, ever composed, remained quiet, giving Vivienne a respectful nod. His presence spoke volumes without needing to say much, and Maya could feel the eyes of the other guests lingering on them both, assessing the dynamic between them.

Vivienne's gaze, still lingering on Astron, softened just a little. "You're very fortunate, Lady Evergreen," she said with a knowing smile while licking her lips.

'You fox bitch.' And thanks to the fact that her gaze was on Astron, Vivienne missed a small expression that Maya showed just at that moment.

How her eyes turned red, and they were narrowed, even though it was just for a split second.

Vivienne's smile remained sharp, though it softened ever so slightly as she steered the conversation into more familiar waters. "It must be quite an adjustment for you, Lady Evergreen," she began smoothly, her eyes finally shifting back to Maya. "Attending such events, especially considering the weight of your family's reputation. I imagine there's a lot of expectation riding on your shoulders."

Maya allowed her smile to return, though it was tinged with just the right amount of nervousness. "Y-Yes, it can be a bit overwhelming," she admitted, lowering her gaze momentarily, playing her part with subtle mastery. "There's so much to learn... and so many people to meet." Her fingers

fidgeted delicately with her fan, the perfect picture of a young woman trying to navigate her way through a world she was only beginning to understand.

Vivienne's gaze remained fixed on her, clearly entertained by Maya's seemingly vulnerable demeanor. "I'm sure you'll do just fine," she teased, a playful glint in her green eyes. "Though I must admit, I've never expected to see you this.....timid."

At those words, Maya's eyes perked up a little as she slightly tensed.

'This woman.....'

She realized Vivienne was not that easy to fool.

Chapter 606 135.4 - The Banquet

'This woman.....'

Maya felt the subtle shift in Vivienne's tone and the sharpness in her words. It was clear now—Vivienne wasn't just making idle conversation, she was testing her. A woman like Vivienne, who had navigated the upper echelons of power for years, would never let down her guard so easily. She was probing, assessing whether the young Lady Evergreen was as fragile as she appeared or if there was something more beneath the surface.

Maya's fingers tightened briefly around the stem of her glass as she took in the realization. Of course, Vivienne would push harder—it was the nature of the game. And Maya was already prepared for such challenges. She had anticipated that her persona of the timid, inexperienced noblewoman wouldn't be enough to fool everyone. Women like Vivienne had sharpened their instincts in political circles filled with deceit and ambition. Maya knew she had to step carefully.

Letting her shoulders relax slightly, she allowed the faintest flicker of nervousness to cross her features, just enough for Vivienne to catch it. She held the glass in her hand, taking a small sip of the wine, her fingers deliberately trembling as she set it down.

Her hand slipped just slightly, and the glass wobbled precariously before tumbling from her fingers.

"Oh!" Maya gasped, stepping back in surprise, her eyes wide with embarrassment. The glass lay in pieces at her feet, and she could already feel the attention of the nearby guests turning toward her.

She bit her lip, her expression a perfect mixture of shock and humiliation as she clasped her hands together in front of her chest. "I-I'm so sorry," she stammered softly, casting her gaze down as if utterly mortified by the mistake.

Vivienne's eyes flashed with amusement, but behind her smile was something more. She watched closely, clearly evaluating whether this nervous display was genuine or another carefully calculated move. Maya could sense Vivienne's enjoyment at seeing her so flustered, but she made sure to maintain her facade, giving Vivienne exactly what she wanted to see: an unsure, overwhelmed young woman out of her depth.

"Don't worry, Lady Evergreen," Vivienne said with a teasing lilt in her voice, her eyes gleaming with a hint of predatory satisfaction. "It happens to the best of us." She leaned in slightly, her smile widening.

At this point, many people's attention was directed toward that place as they saw how the glass had shattered there.

Just as Maya was about to respond to Vivienne's teasing remark, the sound of footsteps approached swiftly. An attendant, impeccably dressed in the Cox family's colors, arrived with a small, discreet broom and cloth to clean up the shattered glass. His movements were quick yet unobtrusive, expertly clearing the broken shards without drawing too much attention. Maya cast a fleeting glance at him, grateful for his professionalism, but something else caught her attention.

The timing.

The crowd's murmurs quieted as the doors at the far end of the ballroom opened, and the host of the evening, Gerald Cox, entered the room.

He walked with an air of importance that demanded respect, yet his face held a pleasant, welcoming smile. The sudden shift in focus from Maya's moment of clumsiness to the host's grand entrance felt almost deliberate.

'Not bad.' Maya couldn't help but notice the impeccable timing of his appearance. Whether intentional or not, it provided her with the opportunity to gracefully step away from the spotlight.

'Most likely to save me some face.' She briefly wondered if it had been orchestrated as a subtle gesture of support. After all, the Cox family had everything riding on this banquet, and letting a

high-profile guest like Lady Evergreen suffer unnecessary embarrassment wouldn't be beneficial to anyone.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the voice of one of the Cox family's attendants announced, drawing the attention of the room. "Our esteemed host, Lord Gerald Cox."

Gerald paused at the center of the ballroom, a commanding figure now standing at the heart of everyone's attention. With a subtle wave of his hand, the hum of conversation dwindled to a quiet hush. He surveyed the room for a moment, his gaze passing over Maya and Astron for a brief second before settling on the larger group of guests.

"Welcome, friends and esteemed guests," Gerald began, his voice smooth and practiced, carrying through the grand hall with ease. "It brings me great pleasure to have you all here tonight. This evening is not only a celebration of our shared successes but also a chance to strengthen the bonds of friendship and collaboration between our families and our future endeavors."

There was a soft murmur of approval from the guests, the gathered crowd clearly impressed with Gerald's poised and confident demeanor. His words were carefully chosen, not only welcoming the attendees but also hinting at the underlying purpose of the banquet—strengthening alliances and fortifying the Cox family's newfound position of power.

Gerald's eyes swept the room once more, offering a reassuring smile to his guests. "Please, enjoy the evening. We've prepared the finest refreshments and entertainment, and we hope this will be a night to remember for all."

As the polite applause began to fade and guests resumed their conversations, Gerald Cox made his way through the gathered crowd with purpose. His eyes flicked briefly to various important figures in the room, but it was clear where his destination lay. With measured, confident steps, he moved toward Maya and Astron.

Maya noticed his approach immediately. Despite the bustling atmosphere of the room, the subtle shift in attention toward her was impossible to miss. She adjusted her posture, ensuring she maintained a composed yet slightly timid demeanor.

As Gerald reached their side, he inclined his head slightly in a gesture of respect, his smile warm and polite. "Lady Evergreen," he greeted, his voice smooth and respectful. "It is a true honor to have you here with us tonight. Your presence elevates the evening."

Maya offered a small, graceful smile in return, her eyes flicking up to meet his briefly before she lowered them, playing the part of the demure young noblewoman. "Thank you, Lord Cox. I'm grateful for your hospitality," she replied softly, her voice carrying just the right amount of humility.

Gerald's gaze shifted briefly to Astron, acknowledging his presence with a nod before returning his attention to Maya. "I trust everything has been to your satisfaction thus far?" he asked, his tone indicating genuine interest in ensuring that the evening had met her expectations.

Maya nodded slightly, her fingers lightly touching the fan she held as she replied. "Yes, everything has been wonderful. The banquet is... quite grand."

Gerald smiled wider, clearly pleased with her response. "I'm glad to hear it. If there is anything you need throughout the evening, please do not hesitate to ask. We aim to ensure all our guests feel comfortable."

Gerald, still standing before Maya with that pleasant smile on his face, seemed to hesitate for a brief moment before he spoke again. "And how is your brother, Mister Alden?" he asked casually, though there was a subtle undertone to the question. "I understand he's been quite busy lately, taking on more responsibilities within the Evergreen family."

Maya's fingers tightened ever so slightly on the handle of her fan, but she kept her expression perfectly composed, offering a soft, thoughtful nod. Gerald's question wasn't surprising—Alden was a well-known figure within their circles, and it made sense that Gerald would inquire after him. But Maya wasn't naive; she could sense the true intent behind the question. Gerald wasn't simply making polite conversation—he was probing, trying to understand if there were deeper reasons for her presence tonight.

Smiling gently, Maya tilted her head slightly in a gesture of mild thoughtfulness. "Alden is doing well, thank you for asking, Lord Cox. As you mentioned, he's been quite busy lately, overseeing much of the family's work. I'm sure he would have liked to attend tonight, but... certain matters required his attention."

Gerald nodded, his expression remaining pleasant, but Maya could see the gears turning behind his calm demeanor. He was undoubtedly weighing her words, trying to determine if her brother's absence held any significance beyond what she had offered.

Maya, of course, had no intention of giving away more than necessary. Her presence at the banquet was already creating enough curiosity—there was no need to draw further attention to the Evergreen family's internal affairs.

"I see," Gerald replied, his tone measured. "A shame that Mister Alden could not join us, but I'm sure the family's affairs are in capable hands."

Maya smiled politely, her eyes lowering just slightly. "Yes, he is more than capable," she said softly, her voice carrying the perfect blend of familial pride and deference. "He's always been very dedicated."

Gerald's eyes shifted from Maya to Astron, his gaze subtly appraising the young man's poised yet silent presence. There was a momentary flicker of curiosity in his expression before he spoke again, his tone still pleasant but with a hint of inquiry. "And this gentleman is?"

Maya, maintaining her composed facade, gave a soft smile and gestured toward Astron. "This is Astron," she replied, her voice light but confident. "He is my partner for the evening."

Gerald's eyes flickered with understanding, but internally, he was already processing the deeper meaning behind the introduction. 'Partner, is it? A curious choice of words... but fitting, given the nature of these events.' His gaze lingered on Astron, noting his calm, unwavering demeanor. There was something about the way Astron carried himself—controlled, watchful, and entirely unbothered by the scrutiny of the room. Gerald had seen this type before. He had no doubt that Astron was more than just a simple companion.

'A protector, perhaps? Or an aide, here to ensure Lady Evergreen's safety and to fend off any... complications,' Gerald mused. The presence of such a composed figure beside Maya seemed to imply that the Evergreens were not leaving anything to chance tonight. This young man, with his sharp, focused eyes and chiseled features, was clearly someone used to handling tense situations, someone who could diffuse potential issues before they even arose.

Gerald gave Astron a nod, one filled with respect. "I see. It's a pleasure to meet you, Mister Astron," he said and extended his hand toward Astron, his smile warm but with that same underlying note of respect.

Astron, ever composed, reached out and accepted the gesture, shaking Gerald's hand with a firm but controlled grip. It was the kind of handshake that conveyed both confidence and professionalism, traits that Gerald had already come to associate with him.

"Likewise," Astron said simply, his tone steady. The exchange, while brief, spoke volumes to Gerald.

As Gerald shook Astron's hand, something unexpected stirred within him. It wasn't something tangible, nor was it anything he could immediately identify, but a vague sense of unease crept up from deep within his instincts.

Astron's grip was firm, confident, and professional—everything Gerald expected from a man in his position. But there was an underlying current, a subtle shift in the air that Gerald couldn't ignore.

For a brief moment, Gerald's eyes lingered on Astron, his smile still in place, but something inside him was quietly sounding an alarm. 'What is it about him?' Gerald thought, his mind trying to grasp at the fleeting sensation. There was nothing overtly threatening in Astron's demeanor—he was composed, polite, and entirely in control. Yet, beneath that calm exterior, Gerald sensed something... other.

It was as if there was a layer of depth to Astron that remained concealed, something powerful and potentially dangerous, though expertly hidden behind his stoic expression. 'Strange,' Gerald mused internally. 'He's not just a simple aide... there's more to him, something I can't quite place.'

Still, Gerald pushed the feeling aside, knowing that, for now, it would remain nothing more than a whisper at the back of his mind.

There was no concrete reason to question Astron further—only the nagging sense that this man, quiet and unassuming as he appeared, was someone worth watching.

"Then, I hope you have a nice night."

With that, he took his leave politely, as he had other matters to attend to.

Chapter 607 135.5 - The Banquet

As the evening progressed, the buzz of the banquet increased, and the attention around Maya and Astron grew steadily. It wasn't surprising—Maya, with her elegant demeanor and her ties to the powerful Evergreen family, was naturally a magnet for those looking to strengthen their economic and political standing. Meanwhile, Astron's striking presence—his chiseled features, cold purple eyes, and composed aura—drew the eyes of more than a few of the women in attendance, many of whom were eager to find an excuse to approach him.

Vivienne, always aware of the undercurrents at play, remained nearby, subtly guiding the conversation with Maya, though her eyes often flicked toward Astron as well. "It seems you've caught the attention of many tonight, Lady Evergreen," Vivienne remarked with a knowing smile, her gaze sweeping over the guests that had gathered nearby. "You and your companion have certainly made quite the impression."

Maya, ever aware of the subtle games in motion, gave a modest smile. "It seems that way," she replied softly, her voice carefully measured. "But I'm sure the atmosphere of your wonderful event brings everyone together."

Vivienne chuckled lightly, her sharp green eyes gleaming with amusement. "How gracious of you to say, though I suspect it's more than just the atmosphere." Her eyes lingered on Astron, whose calm expression remained unreadable as he listened to their exchange. "Tell me, Mister Astron, do you enjoy these kinds of gatherings? You seem quite... composed amidst all the attention."

Before Astron could respond, another group of guests, two elegantly dressed women, and a well-groomed man, approached them with warm smiles, their interest clear. The ladies' eyes flicked to Astron almost immediately, their smiles widening as they took in his appearance.

"Oh, Lady Evergreen," one of the women began, her voice light and friendly.

They had chatted a little bit more with some pleasantries, but then her attention quickly shifted to Astron. "It's such a pleasure to meet you, but I must say, your companion is... quite the striking figure."

Maya, noticing the subtle flirtation in their gazes, maintained her own calm. 'They're trying to draw him in,' she thought, recognizing the social maneuvering at play. She had no intention of letting these flirtatious interactions derail the evening or undermine the facade she and Astron were maintaining.

The other woman leaned in slightly, her tone playful. "You must be quite the man to keep company with Lady Evergreen. Tell us, what brings you to such events? Surely, you have many stories to share."

"I'm here to ensure Lady Evergreen enjoys the evening," he replied, sidestepping the flirtation with ease.

The women giggled lightly at his answer, clearly intrigued by his quiet charm.

And to that, Maya felt a surge of frustration bubbling beneath her calm exterior as the women giggled and continued their light flirtation with Astron.

Inside, she was fuming. 'Do they really think I'm just going to stand here while they try to pull him in?' Her anger simmered, but she knew she had to maintain the role she had crafted for the evening—timid, unsure, and polite.

However, it was getting harder by the second to keep the mask in place. Her fingers tightened ever so slightly on her fan, and she could feel her expression twitch, a subtle sign of the growing tension inside her.

'I can't let them see me like this.'

Maya inhaled softly, forcing herself to remain composed even though the frustration gnawed at her. It was clear that the situation wasn't going to improve if she stayed, so she decided on her next course of action.

"I... I think I need a moment," she said softly, her voice still measured though there was a hint of strain in it. Without waiting for a response, she gave the women a brief, polite nod and turned toward the nearest exit. But as she walked away, she made sure to throw a side glance at Astron—just a flicker of her gaze that conveyed everything he needed to know.

'Follow me.'

Astron caught the look immediately. His expression remained neutral, but he understood what was happening. Without missing a beat, he smoothly excused himself from the conversation. "If you'll excuse me," he said politely, his tone giving no indication of anything amiss. The women looked slightly disappointed, but they nodded in understanding, allowing him to depart without question.

As they left the main hall, the hum of conversation and the clinking of glasses faded into the background, replaced by the quiet stillness of the dimly lit corridors.

The elegant marble floors gleamed softly beneath the glow of sconces lining the walls, casting long shadows that danced as they walked. Maya's footsteps echoed lightly in the silence, her back straight, her movements graceful but carrying an undertone of tension.

Astron followed her, his steps silent and composed, his expression as unreadable as ever. He had sensed the growing tension in Maya as they navigated the social intricacies of the banquet, but he had remained calm, playing his role perfectly.

Now, however, he could feel the weight of her emotions pressing down, simmering just beneath the surface.

Maya suddenly stopped in her tracks, her posture still poised, though the quiet energy around her had shifted.

She spread her senses, the mana within her reaching out subtly, scanning the empty corridor for any sign of onlookers or eavesdroppers.

Satisfied that they were alone, she turned on her heel with a sharp, fluid motion and walked straight toward him, her eyes locked on his with a fire that burned beneath the surface.

Her breath was soft but heavy, brushing against his skin as she came to a stop just inches away from him, close enough that their faces nearly touched. Her pink eyes, usually so calm and composed, now blazed with restrained anger.

Astron, standing his ground, looked down at her with the same collected expression, though his gaze sharpened slightly, recognizing the intensity of her emotions.

Maya's voice, when she spoke, was low but brimming with frustration. "What exactly were you doing back there?" she asked, her tone quiet but biting. "Standing there like nothing was happening while those women..." She trailed off, her breath hitching slightly as she clenched her fists at her sides.

"You just let them flirt with you," she continued, her voice trembling slightly with the effort of maintaining her composure. "Did you enjoy it?"

Astron remained calm, his expression unwavering as he met Maya's fiery gaze. Her frustration was palpable, her words laced with the tension that had been building all evening. He could feel the weight of her emotions pressing against him, but he didn't flinch. Instead, he looked at her with the same composed intensity he always carried.

"It's not about enjoyment," he replied evenly, his voice steady, measured. "I acted the way I needed to, nothing more."

Maya's blue eyes narrowed, and despite knowing the logic behind his words, she still wasn't satisfied. Her breath hitched again as she stared up at him, her fists trembling slightly at her sides. "But did you enjoy it?" she repeated, her voice quieter but more insistent this time.

Astron's eyes flicked over her face, the fire in her gaze unmistakable. "No. I didn't."

The tension in Maya's body seemed to relax just slightly at his response, but the simmering emotions beneath her composed exterior didn't fade entirely. She nodded once, slowly, as if accepting his answer, though there was something else in her expression—something unresolved.

And then, without warning, she moved.

In a swift, fluid motion, Maya leaned in closer, standing on her tiptoes as she closed the final inches between them, her fangs sinking into the soft skin just above his collarbone.

He remained still, his body tense but composed. Maya's grip tightened slightly, her fingers pressing into his chest as she held herself against him, her lips lingering at the point where her fangs had made contact.

Maya's breath was ragged as she pulled back slightly, her lips brushing against his skin as she whispered, "I needed to remind you..."

Astron's purple eyes darkened slightly, but he remained steady, his breathing calm despite the rush of sensations that came with her bite. He understood the message she was sending—this was her way of asserting control, of grounding herself after the tumultuous emotions of the evening.

And though he didn't speak, his silence was answer enough.

Maya stepped back, her eyes flicking up to meet his again. Her anger had faded, replaced by something else—something quieter, more intense. Her lips were stained with a hint of his blood, and she wiped them with a quick sweep of her tongue.

Astron held her gaze, his expression calm, though there was a faint glimmer of something darker in his eyes as he spoke, his voice low and steady. "Satisfied?"

Maya smiled a slow, quiet smile, the intensity from before now replaced by something softer, more controlled. She gave a small nod, the corners of her lips still carrying a hint of mischief. "For now," she replied her tone light but with an undercurrent of meaning that only the two of them would understand.

Without another word, she turned, her movements fluid and graceful as she composed herself once more. Astron followed suit, his demeanor as composed as ever, though the tension from their private moment lingered faintly in the air between them. Together, they made their way back toward the banquet hall, the soft echo of their footsteps the only sound in the quiet corridor.

As they stepped back into the bustling banquet hall, the hum of conversation and laughter welcomed them once more, the vibrant energy of the evening wrapping around them like a cloak. Vivienne, ever observant, was one of the first to notice their return. Her sharp green eyes gleamed with amusement as she approached, her lips curving into a knowing smile.

"Well, that was quick," Vivienne remarked, her tone teasing as she glanced between the two of them. "I was starting to think you might have gotten lost."

Maya, ever poised, smiled softly, her expression smooth and serene. "I just needed a moment," she replied lightly, her voice carrying the perfect balance of warmth and nonchalance. "It can get a bit overwhelming with so many people around."

Vivienne chuckled softly, clearly satisfied with the answer, though there was a glint in her eyes that suggested she wasn't entirely convinced. But she didn't press further, simply nodding in understanding. "Of course," she said with a smile. "The evening can certainly be exhausting."

As Vivienne finished her sentence, the atmosphere around them seemed to shift subtly. Maya noticed it immediately—the soft murmur of conversation near them quieted, and the energy in the room felt more charged, almost as if the very air had thickened.

'This.'

The vampiric instinct inside him was reacting.

She turned slightly, her instincts already alert, and that's when she saw the reason why such a thing was happening.

Silas Vayne.

The target finally took the bait.

Chapter 608 135.6 - The Banquet

Silas Vayne—no, Zharokath—moved through the grand ballroom with the calm, measured grace that was expected of a man of his stature. His sharp, calculating gaze swept over the lavish surroundings, noting the opulence of the Cox estate, the glittering chandeliers, the polished marble floors, and the carefully curated gathering of influential figures. He observed it all with mild interest, but beneath the mask of composure, he felt nothing but disdain.

'Humans and their need to display wealth and power, as if it means anything,' he mused, his thoughts laced with contempt. 'These creatures believe that money and influence elevate them, make them important. How foolish.'

In his guise as Silas Vayne, Zharokath had spent years infiltrating human society, meticulously building connections and manipulating those around him to further his own agenda. He had cultivated the perfect identity—one that was respected, feared, and above all, trusted. But to him, this facade was nothing more than a convenient tool, a means to an end.

'If only they knew what truly lurks beneath the surface of their fragile little world,' he thought, a faint smirk threatening to tug at the corners of his lips. 'They prance about like kings and queens, but they are nothing more than insects—easily crushed underfoot.'

The Cox family, in particular, amused him. Gerald Cox had risen to power with unnatural speed, thanks in no small part to the quiet manipulations Zharokath had orchestrated behind the scenes. But the man, like so many others, had no idea that he was merely a pawn. Even now, as Gerald played host to some of the most influential figures in the Federation, he was blissfully unaware of the demon who stood among his guests.

'Every time they think they are in control,' Zharokath mused, his eyes flicking briefly toward the host. 'He believes he has secured powerful allies, that tonight will solidify his position among the elite. How amusing. He does not realize that his every step is guided by my hand.'

As Zharokath glided through the room, his attention shifted to the other key players in tonight's event. Argen Delvora, the ruthless businessman whose wealth and political influence extended far beyond the Federation, stood in conversation with Vivienne Althea, the cunning socialite who controlled the flow of information and rumors with a mere whisper. Both were important pieces in the game he was playing.

'They serve their purpose well enough,' he thought, eyeing them from a distance. Argen, with his ambition, and Vivienne, with her ability to manipulate.

'But like all humans, they are short-sighted. They believe they are making deals for wealth and power, but they cannot see the true nature of the bargain they are striking.'

The deal Zharokath was here to conclude tonight was of far greater importance than any human could comprehend. It wasn't simply about money or influence—it was about control. Control over the humans who would unknowingly serve his clan's greater purpose, control over the Federation's political landscape, and control over the demonic forces already creeping into their world.

And yet, Zharokath knew he had to be cautious. He was not so arrogant as to believe that he could flaunt his true nature openly.

The Void Clan, to which he belonged, needed to operate in the shadows since, from the moment their biggest strength had been injured, and needed to reincarnate and create a new body for himself.

'Tch...To be looked down and forced to come to this place....'

Because there were many other clans that were hunting his clan, he was forced to come to this human domain.

Zharokath had no intention of becoming one of their trophies.

And for that to happen, he needed to recover his strength as well as the strength of the great one.

As Zharokath's gaze flickered across the room, it briefly settled on the small, ornate necklace hanging from his neck. Its dull, unremarkable appearance masked the immense significance it carried—within the necklace, a fragment of the Void Clan's greatest power lay dormant, waiting to

be revived. He reached up, fingers brushing against the cool metal, and his lips curled into a faint sneer of contempt.

'Great one, it will not take long. Don't worry,' he mumbled under his breath, the words barely audible, but laced with reverence. 'Soon, we will recover our strength. And once we do, no one will dare hunt us again.'

The thought filled him with a surge of dark satisfaction, but his arrogance was tempered by the weight of caution. The Void Clan had once ruled over realms far beyond this insignificant human world. But now, they were hunted, forced to hide in the shadows, their greatest strength injured and scattered. Zharokath had taken it upon himself to ensure their survival, to rebuild what had been lost. That was why he had come to this human domain—an exile of sorts, but a necessary one.

His eyes shifted again, drawn to a particular corner of the grand ballroom where most of tonight's attention seemed to gather. There she was—Maya Evergreen, the young lady of the powerful Evergreen family, standing amidst the crowd.

Zharokath's eyes narrowed as he studied her. Maya Evergreen... He had not expected her to attend this banquet. It was, after all, hosted by a lower-ranked noble family, a far cry from the kind of gatherings her status usually demanded. For a moment, her presence seemed out of place, almost suspicious.

But then, as he glanced over her file in his mind, the pieces began to fall into place.

'Of course,' he thought, his arrogance briefly giving way to a calculated understanding. 'The Evergreens are preparing her, easing her into environments like these to adapt. To observe.'

Zharokath continued to watch Maya Evergreen's every detail of her appearance, her movements, and the way she interacted with the people around her. From the nervousness in her posture to the slight tremor in her voice, she appeared every bit the young noblewoman stepping into unfamiliar territory, trying to find her footing in a world dominated by seasoned players.

Her gaze flickered to and from the guests, her smile wavering as she fumbled through small talk. Her hands, though gracefully clasped in front of her, occasionally betrayed her by fidgeting with the delicate fabric of her gown. Zharokath could see it all—each slip, each hesitation.

'A fish that has yet to grow,' he mused, a faint smirk tugging at his lips. 'She is still small, still inexperienced. A girl sent into the ocean without fully understanding the depths she's navigating.'

His initial assessment of her seemed accurate—she was not a threat. The Evergreens had sent her here not as a player, but as an observer, allowing her to grow accustomed to the political undercurrents that defined such gatherings. They were grooming her, teaching her to swim with the sharks without realizing the true danger that lurked beneath.

Zharokath almost dismissed her entirely as he prepared to refocus his attention on the more significant matters at hand. But then, something stopped him. A flicker of energy, faint yet unmistakable, brushed against his senses. He paused, his gaze narrowing as he focused more intently on the girl standing across the ballroom.

'What is this...?'

The sensation was subtle, barely noticeable to anyone without his keen perception. But to Zharokath, it was undeniable—a faint resonance of demonic energy, something that stirred within him the moment his gaze lingered on her for too long.

His smile faded, replaced by a deepening frown. The energy wasn't strong, not enough to suggest she was a demon herself, but it was there. A whisper of something familiar, something dark. It tugged at his awareness, an echo of his own power resonating from the girl.

'This is... unexpected.' Zharokath's mind raced as he searched for an explanation. The resonance was not something he had anticipated, and it left him with more questions than answers. Was it possible that Maya Evergreen had come into contact with something—someone—demonic?

'No, this is more than just contact,' he thought, his sharp eyes narrowing further. 'There's something inside her, something that responds to my presence.'

He watched her more closely now, his attention no longer casual but focused, predatory.

'Or had someone of our kind already planning to use her?'

The longer he observed her, the clearer the sensation became. It was faint, yes, but undeniably there—a thread of demonic energy woven deep within her being.

Zharokath's eyes gleamed with a newfound hunger as the realization settled in. There was something inside Maya Evergreen—a thread of demonic energy woven into her very being. A spark of dark potential, waiting to be manipulated. His frown faded, replaced by a slow, predatory smile. This unexpected development had turned the evening into something far more intriguing than he had anticipated.

'Heh... What a surprise this is,' he thought, his mind already whirling with the possibilities. 'If there's a demonic presence within her, then influencing her will be far easier than I thought. Someone has already done the groundwork for me.'

The idea of bending the girl to his will filled him with dark satisfaction. Maya Evergreen—naïve, inexperienced, and apparently carrying a demonic connection—was now a target he couldn't afford to ignore. And the best part? She didn't seem to be aware of it. That made her even more vulnerable.

Zharokath licked his lips, the taste of opportunity tantalizing him. His fingers brushed the surface of the table beside him, feeling the cool glass as his gaze stayed locked on Maya, who was still conversing with a small group of nobles, unaware of the predator in the room.

'Such a pleasant opportunity,' he mused, his smile growing darker. 'How could I possibly let it go now?'

With the calculated ease of a seasoned manipulator, Zharokath straightened his posture and adjusted the cufflinks on his immaculately tailored suit. There was still some time left before his meeting with Gerald Cox—time he could use to introduce himself to the girl. After all, this wasn't just a social gathering anymore; it had become a hunt.

He began to move, his steps deliberate, gliding across the room with an effortless grace that masked his true nature. To any observer, he was merely the influential Silas Vayne, a man of power and refinement. But beneath the surface, Zharokath was already plotting how to ensnare Maya in his web.

As he approached the group Maya was standing with, he caught the faintest edge of her voice—a careful, soft tone that fit the image of a young lady eager to learn but out of her depth. Her nervousness was palpable, her eyes darting between the guests around her, and Zharokath couldn't help but find it amusing.

'She really is a beautiful piece,' he thought. 'But soon, she'll be playing my game.'

As he neared, the guests parted slightly, noticing his approach. Zharokath flashed a charming smile, the kind that made people lower their guard, and inclined his head toward Maya and her companions.

"Lady Evergreen," he began, his voice smooth, exuding warmth and respect, "I don't believe we've had the pleasure of meeting yet."

Chapter 609 135.7 - The Banquet

"Lady Evergreen. I don't believe we've had the pleasure of meeting yet."

Maya turned toward him, her expression momentarily surprised before she composed herself. Her blue eyes flicked up to meet his gaze, and Zharokath could sense the faint tension in her posture.

"Mr. Vayne," she replied softly, clearly aware of who he was. Her voice was calm, but there was an underlying thread of nervousness she couldn't quite hide.

Zharokath offered a polite nod to the others in the group before focusing his attention entirely on Maya, his smile never wavering. "It is truly an honor to meet a member of the esteemed Evergreen family. Your reputation precedes you."

Maya blinked, a slight 'blush' creeping into her cheeks at the compliment.

She glanced briefly at Astron, who stood silently a step behind her, his watchful gaze never leaving Zharokath. But Zharokath wasn't concerned about him—not yet, at least.

Why would he be?

After all, how could a mere bodyguard sense what he was doing? Though that guy certainly looked really handsome, there was nothing else that gave an impression of him.

Most likely, he was a boy's toy prepared for Maya to use, as most of the high-ranking families had such traditions.

"Thank you," she replied with a faint smile, her tone modest. "I'm only here to learn."

Zharokath's smile widened ever so slightly. "Ah, but learning is the first step to greatness, is it not? And I'm certain you will make quite an impression here tonight."

Her blush deepened, and she looked down briefly, clearly still adjusting to the attention. Zharokath found it endearing in a way, though more than that, he saw it as an opening—a way to slip past her defenses.

'She's unguarded,' he thought, his predatory instincts sharpening. 'This will be easier than I thought.'

Zharokath continued his conversation with ease, allowing the words to flow smoothly, each one carefully chosen to keep Maya engaged while subtly planting seeds of influence. His smile remained calm and inviting, the perfect mask of a gentleman, but beneath that facade, his mind was working, calculating how best to manipulate the situation to his advantage.

"Experience is everything," he said, his voice smooth and measured. "The art of ruling, of managing people, is not something one simply learns from books or tutors. It must be lived, experienced firsthand." He gave Maya a knowing look. "Your presence here tonight is already a step in that direction. Soon, you will understand the subtleties of power—the way it ebbs and flows, and how it can be wielded to shape the future."

Maya nodded, still playing the role of the eager but modest learner. "I have much to learn, Mr. Vayne. But I hope to understand it all in time."

Zharokath's smile widened slightly as he shifted the conversation toward himself. "I was much like you once—an observer in the world of politics and influence. But as time went on, I learned that true power lies not just in commanding others, but in knowing when to influence from the shadows, when to let people believe they are in control."

As he spoke, he began to subtly release a thin stream of his demonic energy, letting it weave through the air toward Maya. The energy was faint, barely perceptible, but it carried with it a familiar resonance that would reach out to the dormant power within her.

Zharokath watched closely, sensing for any reaction from the demonic energy within her. His aim wasn't to fully control her—not yet. It was a test, an experiment to see if he could stir something within her, perhaps even command a part of her, as demons held an innate ability to influence their lesser kin. He doubted Maya was fully aware of the energy lying within her, which made her even more susceptible to his influence.

As the demonic energy reached her, he noticed a slight shift in her posture—a momentary flicker in her expression. Her eyes, though still focused on him, seemed to darken briefly, as if something stirred within her.

'There it is,' Zharokath thought, satisfaction blooming within him. The connection was faint, but it was there, responding to his energy. 'This will work.'

He didn't need her to fall under his control immediately. What he sought was more subtle—an influence that would slowly make her view him more favorably, perhaps even develop a sense of trust or admiration. It was a method he had used many times before, gradually bending people's perceptions in his favor without them ever realizing it.

"Of course," Zharokath continued, his voice softening slightly, as if sharing something personal, "I have learned that true leadership is not about force. It's about understanding the desires and fears of others and using that knowledge to guide them. People are often drawn to those who seem to understand them, who make them feel seen."

As he spoke, he sent another pulse of demonic energy toward her, just enough to nudge the dormant power inside her, to see if he could push it further. Maya's breath seemed to catch for a moment, and she blinked, her eyes briefly clouded with confusion before she quickly composed herself.

'Interesting,' Zharokath mused, watching her closely. He could feel the stirrings of the demonic energy within her reacting, though it wasn't strong enough for him to fully command yet. Still, the fact that it responded at all meant that, over time, he could nurture it, slowly coax it to the surface until she became more susceptible to his control.

Maya, meanwhile, seemed unaware of the subtle manipulation at play. Her expression remained calm, though Zharokath could sense a faint unease within her, as if she were trying to shake off a strange sensation she couldn't quite identify.

"Do you ever feel," Zharokath asked, his tone now more intimate, "that there's something more waiting for you? Something beyond what you've been taught or what your family expects of you?"

Maya hesitated for a moment, clearly caught off guard by the question. "I... I suppose," she replied, her voice quieter. "But I've always followed my family's guidance."

But this time, her hesitation was real.

It was because she was really feeling uncomfortable, as if something inside her was burning. Even though Astron had warned her beforehand that such a thing would happen and she had prepared herself for these types of sensations, she still did not expect it to be like this.

She really was having a hard time holding herself from breaking down.

Zharokath's smile softened, almost as if he were sympathizing with her. "It's natural to follow, but there comes a time when we must step beyond the expectations of others and seek our own path. I sense that within you—a potential for greatness, for something more."

He sent another wave of demonic energy toward her, this time even subtler, designed to stir feelings of admiration, to make him appear more favorable in her eyes. It was a delicate balance—too much, and she might sense something was wrong. But Zharokath had mastered this method, and he knew how to play the long game.

Maya's mind, already clouded with discomfort, began to unravel under Zharokath's subtle manipulation. The burning sensation inside her intensified, and despite all her preparation, she hadn't expected it to be this overwhelming. She felt her control slipping, her thoughts muddled and sluggish. Zharokath's words rang in her ears, soothing and inviting, as if pulling her closer into his grasp.

'This...'

Without realizing it, her lips curled into a soft smile. "Thank you, Mr. Vayne. Your words mean a great deal."

For a brief moment, everything blurred. Her vision darkened at the edges, and the voice inside her, the one that knew something was wrong, seemed to fade away. She couldn't think clearly, couldn't resist the strange warmth overtaking her senses.

But then, suddenly, a sharp sting pierced the base of her spine, cutting through the fog like a blade. It wasn't painful, just a quick, precise sensation, but it was enough to jolt her from the creeping influence of Zharokath's demonic energy.

Her body shuddered ever so slightly, and in that instant, the world around her snapped back into focus. The dark haze lifted from her mind, and the burning sensation inside her cooled, though a residual discomfort remained.

Astron.

Maya didn't need to look to know who had caused that sting—it was Astron.

She could feel his presence behind her, his silent support steady as ever. He had warned her about this, about the potential for demonic influence and how it could overwhelm her. She had known this was coming, had prepared herself, and yet she hadn't been able to stop it.

Fear coursed through her, sharp and cold, mingling with the realization of just how easily she had been affected. The subtlety of Zharokath's control, the way he had so effortlessly slipped into her mind without her even noticing—it was terrifying. If it weren't for Astron's intervention, she might have fallen completely under the demon's influence.

But there was no time to dwell on it now. She had to act. Maya knew that her sudden clarity, her return to control, could raise suspicion if she didn't handle it properly.

She let her body relax into the lingering effects of the demonic energy, pretending to still be under its sway. With a soft sigh, she allowed herself to stagger slightly, her steps faltering as if she were suddenly lightheaded.

'...Indeed, it worked.'

Zharokath's eyes gleamed with satisfaction, clearly believing that his influence had taken hold. Maya felt a flicker of revulsion as she saw the pleased look on his face, but she forced herself to remain composed.

"I'm... feeling a bit unwell," she said quietly, her voice trembling just enough to sound convincing. She brought a hand to her forehead, feigning dizziness. "Would it be alright if I excused myself for a moment, Mr. Vayne? I think I need some air."

Zharokath's smile remained in place, but she could see the triumph hidden behind his polite expression. He believed this was his doing and that the influence of his demonic energy had

overwhelmed her. Of course, he would let her leave—after all, he thought his hold over her was secure.

"Of course, Lady Evergreen," Zharokath replied smoothly, his voice dripping with false concern. "Take all the time you need. The evening can be quite overwhelming, especially for someone as attuned as yourself."

Maya offered him a small, strained smile. "Thank you," she murmured, and with a slight bow, she turned and started walking.

As Maya made her way toward the exit, her steps carefully controlled to seem unsteady, she could feel the weight of Zharokath's gaze on her back. Each step took effort as she maintained the illusion of being under his sway, the discomfort still burning faintly inside her. But her focus was sharp—every action had to be perfectly calculated to keep Zharokath from suspecting anything.

But just as she drew near Zharokath, right as she was passing by his side, something unexpected happened.

Her balance faltered.

A sudden wave of dizziness hit her, and for a moment, the world tilted. Maya lost control of her footing, her body lurching forward as if she were going to fall directly into Zharokath. Her breath caught, and panic flared in her chest. 'No...'

Before she could collide with him, a hand shot out with lightning speed, catching her just as she began to fall. The touch was steady, firm, and familiar.

It was Astron.

He had appeared between them in an instant, his arm wrapping around Maya's waist to support her, his other hand gently steadying her. The sharp contrast between the cool composure of Astron's presence and the chaotic surge of demonic energy that had briefly flared in Maya was unmistakable. To Zharokath, it must have appeared as if her internal conflict with the demonic energy had momentarily overwhelmed her.

Zharokath raised an eyebrow but remained calm, his smile still lingering on his lips. 'It seems the energy within her is more volatile than I thought,' he mused, but the smirk in his eyes didn't fade. In his mind, this was only further proof that Maya was slowly succumbing to his influence.

"Careful, Lady Evergreen," Zharokath said, his voice smooth as silk, though his eyes glinted with a hint of amusement. "It seems the evening is taking more of a toll on you than you realized."

Maya, still in Astron's arms, managed to offer a weak smile, playing along with the act. "I'm terribly sorry," she murmured, her voice breathy and fragile. "It just... caught me off guard."

Zharokath nodded graciously, completely oblivious to the deeper meaning behind her stumble. In his eyes, the brief lapse in control was nothing more than the demonic energy inside her reacting to his influence—a momentary display of power that she couldn't yet manage.

Astron, however, showed no outward reaction. He merely stood protectively beside her, his expression calm as ever, though there was a subtle tension in his stance that only Maya could sense. His timing had been flawless, and the danger had passed without Zharokath suspecting anything.

Or so it seemed.

Since when Zharokath was observing the demonic energy in Maya, something small and deliberate happened in the blink of an eye.

Chapter 610 135.8 - The Banquet

"Let me escort you outside for some air," Astron said quietly, his voice steady but laced with the protective tone that suited his role, but at the same time, it also felt genuine to Maya.

He gently guided Maya toward the exit; his arm still wrapped protectively around her waist. Their departure was graceful, calm, and without any hint of the underlying tension that had nearly overtaken the situation moments ago.

To anyone watching, it appeared as if Maya, overcome by the intensity of the evening, needed fresh air, and her ever-dutiful escort was simply helping her along.

Zharokath's gaze followed them for a brief moment longer, his smirk still in place, satisfaction gleaming in his eyes. He believed the situation was under control, that Maya was slowly falling into

his grasp. The demon was completely oblivious to the fact that, in the blink of an eye, something had been done to him—something subtle, something he wouldn't notice.

Astron's movements had been flawless. With the precision of a master, he had slipped a small, barely perceptible object onto Zharokath's clothes. It was nothing overt, nothing that would draw suspicion immediately, but its purpose would soon reveal itself in time.

As they passed through the grand ballroom, the eyes of various guests briefly flicked toward them, but there was no suspicion in their gazes—only polite curiosity. Lady Evergreen, the esteemed guest, was simply unwell, and her guardian was assisting her. It was a perfectly reasonable sight, one that fit the roles they were playing to perfection.

However, on the side of Maya things were a little different. She leaned into his support, but it wasn't just for the act anymore. Her head began to spin, the grandeur of the ballroom fading into a hazy blur, and her breathing became shallow, each breath feeling heavier than the last. She could feel an intense heat rising within her, her senses sharpening painfully, and beneath it all, the gnawing hunger—something darker, more primal—began clawing at her insides.

Her vampiric tendencies, usually under her control, were flaring up in a way she hadn't experienced in a long time. The urge for blood was almost overwhelming.

She clenched her teeth, fighting the feeling, but her fangs began to press painfully against her lips. It was more than just the usual hunger. This was something deeper, something darker—her demonic side.

'No... Not here. Not now,' Maya thought desperately, her steps faltering as her legs felt weaker. The hunger was unlike anything she had felt before—it wasn't just a need, it was a demand, a raw, consuming force that screamed for blood.

Her body was heating up, every nerve on fire, and she could feel the demonic energy coursing through her, amplifying the hunger tenfold.

Astron felt her weight shift, her body sagging slightly against him, and his expression, though calm, flickered with concern. He leaned closer, his voice low and steady. "Senior..... Is it?

Maya couldn't find her voice. Her throat felt tight, and every word she tried to form died before it left her lips. She clutched at his arm, her fingers tightening around the fabric of his jacket as she fought to keep herself together.

"I see...." Astron's arm tightened around her, sensing the growing unease. He guided her out of the ballroom, their exit still graceful but now filled with more urgency. As they reached the open air of the garden outside, the cool breeze hit Maya's heated skin, but it did little to quell the storm inside her.

"Senior," Astron said again, his voice more insistent but still calm, "look at me."

Maya's mind was a swirling storm of fear and hunger, the intensity of it all threatening to pull her under.

But beneath that hunger, a darker fear took root. The fear that her control, which she had fought so hard to maintain, was far weaker than she had ever realized.

If Zharokath had been able to affect her so easily, to stir the demonic energy within her so effortlessly, what did that mean for her future?

'I'm not ready,' she thought, panic creeping into the edges of her mind. 'I thought I had control, but...'

It was a wake-up call and, at the same time, a reminder of how dangerous a real demon was. Even just without not showing his powers fully and barely sending demonic energy into her, she was feeling this much effect.

The realization hit her harder than the hunger itself. It wasn't just that she was a vampire struggling with her natural instincts—it was that the demonic energy inside her was something she barely understood. Something she hadn't mastered. The idea that someone could so easily manipulate that part of her made her feel exposed and vulnerable.

Astron's voice cut through the haze, sharp and steady, grounding her for a moment. "Senior," he said again, his calm yet insistent tone breaking through the chaos. "Look at me."

Maya forced her eyes to focus on him, though it was difficult. Her vision wavered, and the world around them seemed to pulse with her frantic heartbeat. She could see the concern in his violet eyes, but also something more—trust. He wasn't afraid of her, even though she could feel herself slipping. He was right there, steady as ever.

Astron, I—"

"Don't be sorry. This time, it is because of me."

Astron's words were spoken quietly, almost as if he was mulling them over for himself. His tone was calm, but beneath it, there was a weight that Maya had never quite heard from him before.

"This time, it's because of me," he said, his violet eyes flickering with a subtle, internal conflict. "I should have handled this alone."

Maya's breath hitched as she caught the faint guilt in his voice, her fingers tightening against his jacket. His words hit her harder than she expected, and the growing storm inside her shifted, not because of Zharokath's influence, but because of Astron's.

"No," Maya snapped, her voice firmer than she intended. She straightened, though her body still trembled from the lingering effects of the demonic energy.

Her eyes, still glowing faintly with hunger and frustration, locked onto Astron's, her expression fierce. "This isn't on you. I chose to be here. I wanted to be here."

Astron's gaze remained steady, but there was a flicker of something—perhaps doubt, perhaps resolve—as he listened.

Maya could see the gears turning in his mind, calculating, always planning his next move. But this time, his cold logic felt wrong to her, and the idea that he thought he should bear this burden alone only stoked the fire inside her further.

"I'm not some helpless bystander," she continued, her voice growing softer but no less determined. "I knew what I was getting into when I came with you. I'm not here because you made a mistake or because you needed help. I'm here because I chose to be."

She took a step closer to him, her eyes searching his face for any sign of hesitation. "I didn't come here to watch you do everything on your own. You don't need to carry this alone."

Astron's eyes narrowed slightly, the weight of her words sinking in. He remained silent, his mind clearly turning over her argument, but his expression stayed unreadable, his features calm, his breathing controlled.

Yet Maya knew him well enough to sense the subtle conflict beneath the surface. He had always been the one to take on the heavier burdens, to make sure others were shielded from the worst of what they faced. It was how he had survived, how he had kept control over the chaos of his life.

But Maya wasn't going to let him use that same mindset with her. Not now.

"Sigh...." Astron let out a long sigh as he mumbled. "I guess so."

Just as his words hung in the air, pushing through the silence between them, the quiet sound of footsteps approached. Astron's eyes flicked to the side, catching sight of the butler as he stepped forward, his demeanor polite and professional.

"Excuse me, sir, Lady Evergreen," the butler began with a respectful nod. "I couldn't help but notice that you were heading toward the exit. May I ask if you are leaving for the evening?"

Astron's expression didn't change, his calm mask still in place as he glanced briefly at Maya before addressing the butler. "Yes, we are," he replied smoothly. "Lady Evergreen isn't feeling well. It would be best for us to leave."

The butler's brow furrowed slightly, concern flashing across his face, though his professionalism never faltered. "I see. I do hope it's nothing too serious. If you wish, I could have one of our healers bring a potion. We have a variety of remedies for such situations."

Astron shook his head, his voice calm but firm. "That won't be necessary. It's nothing urgent, but I believe it's best we take our leave."

The butler nodded, understanding in his eyes. "Of course, sir. I'll inform the staff of your departure. Please, don't hesitate to let us know if you need anything further."

With that, the butler offered a polite bow and stepped back, leaving them alone once more. As he disappeared into the distance, Maya glanced at Astron, her eyes reflecting a mix of exhaustion and determination.

Astron's demeanor remained collected, but Maya could sense the subtle tension in him, the weight of the situation still lingering. Without a word, he reached into his pocket, tapping his smartwatch.

He had already summoned the driver earlier, anticipating their exit, and as expected, the sleek black car was now waiting just outside the estate's grand entrance.

Astron gave a slight nod toward the car, his gaze briefly meeting hers. "The car is ready," he said quietly. "Let's go."

Maya let out a small breath, steadying herself as she followed his lead. The cold night air hit her skin as they stepped outside, the towering estate looming behind them. She could feel her strength returning little by little, but the weight of everything that had just happened still clung to her mind.

As they approached the car, the driver opened the door for them, and without another word, Maya slid into the backseat, followed closely by Astron. The door closed behind them with a soft thud, sealing them inside the quiet, dimly lit interior.

The engine purred to life, and as the car pulled away from the estate and inside, Maya jumped onto him immediately with her fangs as she could no longer hold it in.

She did not care about the driver since there was a barrier preventing any sound or vision from escaping.

As the final moments of the banquet wound down, Zharokath—still wearing the guise of Silas Wayne—concluded his business with Gerald Cox, Argen Delvora, and Vivienne Althea. The deal had gone smoothly, and the exchange had been flawless. Their cooperation would serve his purposes well in the human domain, each of them unwitting pawns in the larger scheme. Now that his goal for the night had been achieved, there was no reason for him to linger any longer.

'Humans,' Zharokath mused, his lip curling slightly in the privacy of his thoughts. 'This little one is just driven by Lust while the other one is a slave to his pride.'

He offered one last polite nod to Gerald and the others, his expression still that of a gracious businessman as he excused himself from the gathering.

With careful precision, he maintained his demeanor—charming and poised—until he stepped through the large doors of the banquet hall and into the cool night air.

The driver, stationed by the luxurious car Zharokath had rented for the evening, straightened and immediately moved to open the door. Zharokath nodded appreciatively, slipping into the backseat of the vehicle with practiced grace.

The door clicked shut, and as the car pulled away from the estate, Zharokath allowed himself a brief moment of stillness. His expression relaxed, the mask of politeness falling away, replaced by the calm, calculating demeanor that truly defined him. His sharp eyes flickered as he glanced out the window, watching the lights of the estate grow distant.

The driver navigated the vehicle expertly through the darkened streets, but Zharokath wasn't concerned with their destination. This car and the driver were all just for show—a necessary illusion to maintain his facade. His true method of departure was far more efficient, far more secure.

Zharokath's hand brushed against a pendant hidden beneath his shirt—a dark, ancient artifact bound to his very essence. He murmured a few words under his breath, and the pendant responded, pulsing faintly with demonic energy.

The air around him shimmered subtly, a faint ripple of power that only he could perceive. His eyes briefly glowed with the energy, and in the blink of an eye, the scenery outside the car shifted. One moment, he was in the rented vehicle, driving through the streets.

The next, he found himself standing in the privacy of his personal quarters in Ardmont City, the teleportation completed without so much as a sound.

Zharokath stepped forward, his boots clicking softly on the polished marble floor of his residence. The room was dimly lit, draped in shadow—just as he preferred it.

Yet he did not know that something was glowing on his clothes.