

## H. Academy 631

### Chapter 631 139.1 - Prepare

After closing the status window, I glanced back at the kid. His plate was empty, and at some point, he had fallen to the side, his small body curled up on the bed, fast asleep. I nodded to myself, satisfied with the outcome. This had been my intention all along.

The kid had witnessed far too much today—things no one his age should ever have to endure. Even though he hadn't shown any outward signs of distress, I knew better. He had likely been in a state of shock the entire time. Mentally, he was fragile, his mind struggling to process the horrors he had seen and experienced.

That's why I had slipped a tasteless sleeping powder into his meal. A simple concoction, one that would ease him into sleep without his body even realizing it. He wouldn't have to wrestle with nightmares or the anxiety clawing at his mind, at least for tonight.

'Rest is what he needs most,' I thought, watching his peaceful form for a moment. The deep rise and fall of his breathing indicated the powder had taken full effect, and his body had finally succumbed to the exhaustion.

With him safely asleep, I let my mind settle. He was no longer my concern—not directly, at least.

But for now, he could sleep. And in this brief moment, there was no more fear, no more danger lurking around him.

RING! The sharp tone of my smartwatch cut through the quiet room, drawing my attention. I glanced down at the device, noting the familiar frequency—the organization. Without hesitation, I tapped the screen, the holographic interface lighting up as I answered the call.

Reina's face appeared on the display, her expression calm but focused, as usual. There was always a certain sharpness in her gaze like she was already calculating her next move, even while speaking.

"Astron," she began, her voice cool and professional. "I've sent someone to your location. They'll be arriving shortly to retrieve the boy—and you. They'll also take care of the hotel, including the cameras and any other security measures that need erasing."

I nodded, unsurprised. The organization's efficiency in covering their tracks was well known, and they had protocols for these kinds of operations. Still, I was mildly impressed that she had mobilized a team so quickly.

"You'll be able to leave without raising any suspicion," she continued, her tone practical. "Everything will be handled."

"Understood," I replied evenly. "I expected as much."

Reina paused for a moment, her eyes narrowing slightly as she shifted the conversation. "I have to say, though, I wasn't expecting you to travel all the way to Ardmont City out of nowhere. You didn't mention it in any of your previous updates."

There it was—the subtle probe. Reina had always had a way of trying to slip in questions, testing the waters to see how much I was willing to reveal. But we both knew the deal we had in place, and that included keeping certain aspects of my personal decisions off-limits.

"It was my intention," I said, keeping my voice calm but firm. "Nothing more than a personal matter."

The implication was clear enough—she didn't need to meddle in my choices or question my movements. That had been part of the agreement from the beginning.

Since the organization got what they needed from me, they didn't pry into my life more than necessary.

Reina's gaze remained steady, but I could tell she understood the unspoken boundary. She didn't press further, simply nodding in acknowledgment.

"Very well," she said, her voice cool but accepting. "As long as you are unharmed and bring no damage to the organization."

"I am," I replied, keeping the conversation short. There was no need to dwell on the specifics.

"Good," she said, her tone shifting back to its usual professionalism. "Expect the retrieval team soon. You'll be notified when they arrive."

With that, she ended the call, the holographic screen fading from view. I stared at the now-dark smartwatch for a moment, then turned my attention back to the room.

The boy was still sleeping peacefully, oblivious to everything happening around him. Soon, he would be in the organization's hands.

But for now, I waited, letting the silence settle around me once more.

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After waiting for a little longer, the familiar vibration of my smartwatch alerted me. A small notification appeared on the screen, confirming that the area was secure and I could move freely. The retrieval team had done their job, just as Reina had promised.

I stood up immediately, crossing the room in a few strides. The boy was still fast asleep, his small frame curled up on the bed, breathing steadily under the effects of the sleeping powder. I reached down and carefully lifted him into my arms, his body limp and unresponsive, still deep in slumber. Without a word, I turned and made my way toward the door.

The elevator ride down was silent, just the quiet hum of the machinery accompanying us. The boy didn't stir, and I kept my focus ahead, knowing the next step was just as crucial. As we descended, I could already sense a shift in the atmosphere—things had been put into motion while I waited.

The elevator doors slid open smoothly, and I stepped out into the lobby. My eyes immediately caught the sight of the receptionist and the guards stationed by the entrance. They were still there, but something was off. Their expressions were blank, their eyes unfocused, as if they were looking straight ahead without truly seeing anything. They didn't even acknowledge me or the boy as we passed by.

'So that's how they did it.'

I looked around more closely, my senses picking up faint traces of mana lingering in the air, almost like a subtle mist. It was spread thin but effective, most likely from some sort of magically engineered device. The organization was really precise, and it seemed they'd used a controlled spell to create a temporary memory block or a distraction, allowing me to exit unnoticed.

Satisfied that everything was going as planned, I stepped outside into the cool night air. A sleek black car was waiting at the entrance, its engine humming softly. The tinted windows and unmarked exterior made it clear that this was the team sent to retrieve us.

Without hesitation, I approached the car. The back door opened as I neared, and I stepped inside, gently settling the boy down beside me. The interior was dark, but comfortable, with an air of professionalism. A man was seated in the driver's seat, his eyes scanning a device on the dashboard. He turned his head slightly as I entered.

"Adept Astron?" the man asked, his tone respectful but businesslike.

I nodded once in confirmation, and at that moment, my smartwatch gave a brief, faint glow. The man seemed to register the signal, giving him the go-ahead. Without another word, the car's engine roared softly to life, and we began to move.

As the car smoothly navigated through the quiet streets, the driver broke the silence. "From here on, I'll be responsible for the kid," he explained, his tone professional. "You won't need to worry about his transfer. Another agent is already handling everything at the hotel, including the cleanup of the security systems, as per your request."

I nodded in acknowledgment, not surprised by the efficiency. The organization moved like clockwork when it came to covering all angles. It was how they maintained their influence so discreetly.

The driver continued, glancing briefly at me through the rearview mirror. "A room has also been arranged for you to spend the night. It's one of the last reserved quarters for agents in this district, specifically for these types of situations. You'll have everything you need there."

"Understood," I replied calmly, appreciating the foresight. Even though I had never required such accommodations, it seemed the organization had a broader reach in cities like Ardmont, and it made sense.

Their network here was clearly more expansive than in the smaller towns I operated in.

The car rolled to a stop in front of a sleek, modern building, its exterior blending into the cityscape, almost inconspicuously. The driver turned to face me, giving a respectful nod. "This is your stop. The boy will be taken care of shortly."

I glanced at the boy, who was still fast asleep, unaware of everything happening around him. With a final nod to the driver, I opened the door and stepped out, feeling the cool night air against my face. The door closed softly behind me, and the car pulled away, disappearing into the city.

I stood in front of the sleek, modern building for a moment, letting the car's disappearance sink in.

Turning to the entrance, I stepped forward and raised my wrist, scanning my smartwatch against the small panel by the door. There was a soft beep, followed by a low mechanical click, and the door slid open smoothly, granting me access.

As I stepped inside, I was greeted by a room that was as practical as it was spacious. The decor was minimal—no unnecessary ornaments or personal touches, just clean lines and neutral colors. It was designed for function, not comfort, but there was something refreshing about that simplicity. The space felt open and uncluttered, giving off a calming energy that I hadn't expected.

I closed the door behind me and took a brief moment to survey the room. The essentials were all there—a large bed neatly made, a desk with standard-issue communication equipment, and a small living area. The lighting was dim but adjustable, casting a soft, ambient glow that kept the space from feeling too sterile.

Without wasting any time, I made my way toward the bathroom. The fight with Zharokath had left its mark, and though I wasn't physically dirty, there was something about cleaning myself off that was necessary. It was less about hygiene and more about clearing the mental residue of battle.

The bathroom was much like the rest of the room—simple, practical, and spotless.

I removed my clothes, leaving them in a pile, and stepped into the shower. The water came on immediately, hot and steady, cascading over me as I stood there, letting the warmth seep into my muscles.

'This is better,' I thought as the steam filled the space around me. The psychological effect of the water was more powerful than I had anticipated. It wasn't about washing off the dirt, but about letting the tension and the memories of the fight with Zharokath slip away.

After a few minutes, I turned off the water and stepped out of the shower, feeling refreshed. I dried off quickly, my mind already starting to reengage with the reality of my situation.

There was always more to do, more to plan for. But for now, I was clean, both physically and mentally. It was enough.

I put on the fresh clothes laid out for me and stepped back into the main room, to sleep and rest.

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The sound of my alarm cut through the quiet stillness of the room, a sharp reminder that it was 5 a.m. Normally, I would have already been awake for hours, ready to face the day long before the sun crept over the horizon. But the exhaustion from yesterday's fight had weighed heavily on me, demanding a rare concession: rest.

I sat up slowly, feeling the lingering fatigue in my muscles. My body had needed time to recover from the strain. Physical exhaustion wasn't something I succumbed to often, but the battles had pushed me beyond what I could maintain indefinitely.

'A momentary lapse,' I mused, already brushing it aside.

Slipping out of bed, I stretched, loosening the stiffness in my limbs before retrieving a small vial from my spatial bracelet. It contained a shake—one I'd prepared earlier, optimized for quick recovery and sustenance. I added a few drops of enchanted caffeine into the mix, stirring the liquid.

The brew wasn't about the caffeine itself—an Awakened like me would hardly notice such trivial effects—but this variant served a more specific purpose.

Enchanted and engineered in mana genetics, it worked deeper, accelerating blood flow and sharpening the body's functions without the jittery side effects common to stimulants.

I drank it in one smooth motion, the cool liquid sliding down my throat. Already, I could feel its effect spreading, revitalizing the muscles and clearing the faint haze from my mind. I glanced outside, noting the faint hint of light on the horizon.

'This will suffice.'

As the [Everchanging Glyph] took effect, I could already feel the weariness ebbing away, replaced by the steady hum of strength coursing through my body. My muscles, which had been sluggish

only moments ago, now pulsed with renewed energy. Three hours—that's all it took. The glyph had always been efficient, adapting my body to overcome fatigue far quicker than any normal recovery method.

I rolled my shoulders, feeling the stiffness dissolve completely. The dull ache from the prior day's battle had vanished, leaving behind only the keen awareness of my surroundings. My thoughts sharpened, no longer clouded by the remnants of exhaustion.

'Ready,' I thought, satisfied with how quickly my body had adjusted.

I glanced toward my desk, where the necklace I had taken from Zharokath rested under the dim light. Its dark metal links seemed ordinary at first glance, but I knew better. I reached for it, the cold weight in my palm.

Holding the necklace closer, I examined the intricate engravings along its surface. Each line, each curve, was deliberate—part of a larger design meant to conceal its true purpose.

I narrowed my gaze, activating my [Eyes] to see the underlying mana flow within the necklace. The world shifted as the familiar sight of mana trails appeared before me, each thread shimmering with varying intensity.

I focused on the engravings, tracing the lines of mana that ran through the necklace's structure.

The patterns were meticulous, modern magical engineering intertwined with something far older, far more powerful—Ancient craft.

'A really detailed magical engineering but at the same time filled with Ancient craft,' I thought, the contrast between the two clear. The modern elements were designed to suppress the deeper, more primal forces embedded within the necklace. Layers of mana suppression had been woven into the design, each one carefully crafted to conceal the artifact's true nature.

I shifted my focus deeper, allowing my [Eyes] to see beyond the surface mana. The intricate mana lines of the necklace connected to an ancient source, one that resonated with the void.

And well, I had factually confirmed that the knowledge from the game was once again correct. This was an artifact from the Void Clan, bound to a hidden space.

The Void Clan was known for its manipulation of space, using artifacts like this to maintain access to dimensions unknown to most.

As the ancient mana thrummed beneath the suppressions, I nodded.

The artifact wasn't just valuable—it was essential to the Void Clan. Zharokath couldn't allow anyone else to see it, yet he could never part with it.

'Now, let's get ready.'

Now that everything was finally confirmed to be true, it was my time to get ready for the hunt.

'The primordial, isn't it?'

Contrary to what most people may think, not all primordials are as invincible as the legends claim. Sure, they possess immense raw power, but many lack the intellect necessary to wield it effectively. They are primal, driven by instinct rather than strategy. That's where the demons of intellect came in, seizing control of these ancient beings, twisting their strength for their own ends.

Most of the primordials never developed an intellect of their own. Their sheer power alone could fuel their clans, but when faced with entities that could strategize, plan, and grow in number, they eventually fell. Forced into hiding, they became relics of their former selves, scattered and hunted by those with the cunning to exploit their weaknesses.

I knew this all too well. The MistWraith, the primordial of shadows, had been one such being.

When I faced it, what I killed was a shadow of its former glory—raw power without the cunning or intellect to back it up.

It had hidden itself away, weakened by years of evasion and depletion, until it became little more than a beast. It had been difficult, yes, but far from the challenge a primordial in its prime would pose.

'That is why this hunt will be possible.' I thought, recalling the plot of the game.



In the original timeline, the Void Dragon wouldn't even make its appearance until much later, after the academy had ended. It was part of an arc aptly titled 《After Academy Arc 3, Subjugation of Void Dragon》.

I can easily remember the details clearly.

As the world continued its downward spiral toward destruction, the frequency of gates increased, bringing stronger monsters with each breach. Humanity's forces would grow desperate, and in an effort to bolster their ranks, the qualifications to become a hunter would be lowered.

But numbers alone wouldn't be enough. The challenges would overwhelm them, despite the surge of new hunters.

In the scenario of the Subjugation of the Void Dragon, it all started with a terrorist attack on the sixth largest city in the human domain—an event that turned the West into a war zone. Demonic humans—those corrupted by the influence of demons—unleashed chaos, and the city became a battlefield, with human hunters pitted against them. Amid the turmoil, a specific dungeon appeared, one that changed everything.

That dungeon was the key. Its sudden emergence was tied to the Void Dragon, and from its entrance appeared the Void Dragon who had been lying dormant all this time.

From the moment the Void Dragon emerged from that dungeon, it wasn't just another boss battle—it was a turning point in the game's narrative. The Void Dragon would make its appearance in the real world, fully fledged and devastating in its power. It wasn't some half-formed creature that could be stopped easily; it was an apex predator, a beast capable of bending space and void energy to its will.

The entire region where the dungeon appeared would fall under the control of the demonic humans. The once-thriving city and the surrounding territories became a war zone, entirely dominated by chaos. The destruction didn't stop there. Over time, the corruption spread like a plague, creating a perimeter of devastation around the city. Anything caught in that radius was either annihilated or transformed by the dark influence of the Void Clan and their dragon.

For a long time, the Federation had no way of breaking through the demonic forces holding the region. The military campaigns they launched to retake the city failed repeatedly. Resources bled away, soldiers were lost, and hunters—both seasoned veterans and inexperienced recruits—were

sent into the meat grinder, only to be decimated by the forces they faced. The whole Federation was stretched thin, and the situation became more desperate with each passing day.

That's where the player would come in. At that point in the game, the Federation would be forced to invest massive resources and send their strongest forces to deal with the Void Dragon. The player's task was to spearhead the campaign to retake the region, facing down demonic humans, powerful monsters, and ultimately, the Void Dragon itself.

In the game, the player as the Main Character Ethan would eventually lead the charge to retake the region alongside the main cast: Julia, Carl, Sylvie, Lilia, Lucas, and either Irina or Seraphine. Each of them brought their unique skills to the battlefield, working in tandem to push back the demonic humans and monsters that had overrun the area. Their teamwork was crucial, with S-rank hunters lending their strength to ensure that the land was reclaimed.

It was a grueling campaign, but eventually, they pushed the demons back. The Void Dragon was defeated in a climactic battle, its body collapsing into the void from which it came, and the land was freed from the grip of the demonic humans. The victory, however, was bittersweet. While the region had been reclaimed, the damage was done—the Federation's resources were stretched to their limits, and the victory came at a great cost.

This victory also signaled something far worse: the weakening of the borders of the human domain. The Federation, having expended so much to defeat the Void Dragon and reclaim the lands, was now more vulnerable than ever. Sensing the opportunity, the demons didn't hesitate. They launched a frontal assault on the Federation, striking at the weakened defenses.

It was the next stage in the game's descent into chaos—one that forced the player and the main cast to face not just the scattered forces of demonic humans but an organized and brutal invasion from the demonic armies. The war for humanity's survival had only just begun.

'But the main focus is not the invasion of demons.' I reminded myself, bringing my thoughts back to the real reason I wanted to hunt the Void Dragon.

In the game, killing the Void Dragon wasn't just about retaking territory or defeating a powerful enemy. It was about the reward—the Primordial Essence that dropped the moment the Void Dragon was killed. This essence was no ordinary loot.

It contained a piece of the demon's power, offering the player something incredibly rare: a trait known as

[Voidborne]

## Chapter 633 139.3 - Prepare

### Power of the Void.

A concept so elusive, yet foundational. I couldn't help but ponder it as I traced the intricate lines of the necklace again.

Void isn't like space or time—two concepts bound by linearity and dimensional constraints. Space can be bent, stretched, and manipulated, and time is a flow we either travel with or attempt to bend backward. But Void? Void is different.

Void, by its very nature, is emptiness. It's nothing. A vacuum devoid of form, substance, or existence. But that's what makes Void power so unique, so dangerous. In the game, the concept was executed in a way that elevated it beyond the usual metaphysical ideas. Void wasn't just emptiness; it was the power of nullifying.

### Nullifying everything.

Void power could erase an attack before it even reached you. It could nullify defenses, rendering even the most impenetrable barriers meaningless. It didn't matter what form it took—be it a trait, an ability, a skill, or a passive—it could be undone, negated, swallowed by the Void's endless hunger. The concept itself was boundless. A formless power that could assume any shape, any function, and then... remove it.

In a way, Void power wasn't about what it was—it was about what it wasn't. It didn't create or destroy; it simply removed the existence of whatever stood before it. And that's why it was so terrifying. It wasn't bound by the limitations of the physical or magical world. It could nullify a sword mid-swing, erasing its edge and leaving nothing but a handle. It could cancel out the most complex spell formations, reducing them to nothingness in an instant.

Endless. Infinite. And entirely without form.

The very idea of Void power was that it could be anything or nothing. That was the paradox—an endless concept capable of turning anything into a void of non-existence. No matter how strong an enemy was, or how complex their abilities were, the Void could always find a way to nullify them.

That was why I needed to kill the Void Dragon ahead of the timeline. Acquiring [Voidborne] wasn't just about obtaining an overwhelming power—it was about having the time to cultivate and refine it. Even with the ability to control the void, traits like [Voidborne] were not instantaneous sources of strength. They were growth-type abilities, just like my existing [Shadowborne].

Traits, by their very definition, required cultivation. They weren't passive gifts bestowed upon the wielder, but abilities that needed to be honed, trained, and expanded over time. Proficiency wasn't immediate; it had to be earned. And the earlier you acquired a trait, the more time you had to increase your mastery over it. The sooner I obtained [Voidborne], the sooner I could begin that process of refinement.

Just as [Shadowborne] had grown alongside me—allowing me to manipulate shadows, move unseen, and blend into the darkness—[Voidborne] would need the same careful attention. Mastering the power of void wasn't something that could be rushed. It was a concept that required discipline, control, and understanding.

The more time I had to develop the trait, the stronger it would become.

'And there's also this,' I thought, recalling a critical concept in my mind—the ability to freely command Void-attributed mana. That was the cornerstone of this entire plan, the reason I was willing to take all the risks combined. Commanding void mana was key to opposing whatever lay ahead, and with the world already diverging from the original timeline, I needed a power that would let me adapt.

'With how the world is shifting, there's no guarantee that whatever happens next will remain within my grasp.' The plot of the game was accelerating faster than expected, and there were already signs that events could spiral out of control. If something emerged that was beyond my current abilities, something nearly invincible, I needed to be prepared. I needed something that could match and surpass it—something like Void power.

Victor's powers. The thought of him....

In the game, he had been one of the rivals of the main character and the most dangerous villain, a force of destruction that had left scars on both the world and the main cast. He wasn't alone, either. Many others, villains like Victor, had wielded abilities that threatened to upend everything. Each time, the player barely scraped by. That was why I needed [Voidborne], why I needed a power capable of countering threats like him.

But I wasn't blind to the risks. Even if the Void Dragon was still in its growth phase, not yet fully developed, it was still a dragon. The power it held, even in a weakened state, was nothing to take lightly. One wrong move, and I could end up as nothing more than a footnote in the dragon's path to full strength.

With my current abilities, going against a primordial dragon was still a gamble. Even with the strategic advantage of striking early, the risk was undeniable. But that was exactly why I couldn't wait.

'It is hard to describe this exact feeling, but I feel like things will no longer be the same from the second semester.'

And since that would be the case.

'The risks are worth it,' I reminded myself. I needed to strike before it became fully awakened. If I succeeded, the power of the void would be mine. If I failed... Well, failure wasn't an option.

That was why I had laid everything out before me. Five rare herbs, scattered around in a calculated pattern on the table. Each one had been difficult to acquire, but the preparation was worth it. Their potency, when combined, would give me an edge against the Void Dragon.

I glanced over the herbs, naming them silently as I assessed their quality:

Celial Nightshade – A plant said to bloom only under the light of a blue moon, its toxic essence potent enough to disrupt mana flow in any creature.

Voidroot – Dark as the void itself, a root that grows deep in desolate wastelands, known for its ability to absorb and nullify surrounding mana.

Hernetgrass – A shimmering, silver plant that resonates with dimensional magic, often used in spells that distort or fold space.

Dokebloom – A rare flower found in dragon territories, its petals imbued with a faint essence of dragon's blood, effective against draconic creatures.

Rostglow Moss – A cold, blue moss that thrives in the harshest conditions, its chilling effects capable of slowing down even the strongest regenerative abilities.

Why were they scattered here in front of me?

Because combining all these herbs using just a small amount of Drakenvenom, a highly volatile liquid known for its mana-reactive properties, would create a concoction—one that could pierce through the defenses of a Void Dragon.

In the game, this concoction was called Void's Bane. It wasn't something easily stumbled upon. Players who completed a specific side mission—one tied to the history of the Void Clan—would discover it. The side mission revolved around an ancient alchemist, a man whose life had been consumed by his desire for revenge against the Void Clan after they wiped out his family. His final creation was this poison, specifically designed to weaken the Void Clan's most powerful creatures.

The note found during the mission had always stuck with me. The alchemist had written, "For every ounce of suffering they inflicted, I will return it tenfold. Let this be my final strike against the darkness that devoured my world."

I had managed to acquire all the ingredients and the Rakenvenom, knowing full well that it would give me the edge I needed.

I had already tested a lesser version of this poison against Zharokath. That had been the real reason why he couldn't expel it from his body or even sense it was there. The principle behind the concoction—its ability to nullify mana at a fundamental level—was what made it so dangerous. And Zharokath, weak as he was compared to the fully awakened Void Dragon, didn't stand a chance once it took hold.

Now, looking over the rare herbs before me, I carefully checked their conditions one final time. The Celial Nightshade's dark petals were intact, the Voidroot still held its dense, mana-absorbing properties, and the Dokebloom's draconic essence was potent as ever. Each herb was in the precise condition I needed them to be.

Satisfied, I began placing the ingredients back into my spatial bracelet. I didn't have the necessary equipment to brew the concoction yet—that part would come later today, once I reached the right facility. For now, the materials were safe, and the plan was coming together.

I glanced at the other item I had prepared for this mission. A small, unassuming pill. But the cost of that pill was anything but insignificant—5 million Valer. Expensive, but necessary.

#### [Overdriving Pill]

This pill was designed to boost an Awakened's stats by a staggering 35% for about three minutes. In a battle against something as dangerous as the Void Dragon, every second mattered, and that kind of boost could tip the scales. However, there was a price to pay for such power. Once the effects wore off, the body would suffer from intense strain, leaving the user weakened and vulnerable.

I turned the pill over in my fingers, feeling its weight.

I'd only use it as a last resort. In a fight where timing and precision meant everything, it was a gamble—but one I couldn't afford not to have on hand.

'Everything has a cost,' I reminded myself, placing the pill carefully into my supplies. The battle with the Void Dragon wouldn't just be about strength; it would be about how much I was willing to risk.

I had also considered contacting Sylvie. Her blessing, far superior to any temporary enhancements like the [Overdriving Pill], offered a significant boost without any of the drawbacks. It lasted for over two hours, and when it ended, there were no side effects—just pure, sustained power. It was a gift she could bestow with ease, one that could potentially turn the tide in a battle against the Void Dragon.

But then, almost immediately, I dismissed the thought. It was a stupid idea.

Relying on Sylvie would mean more than just asking for her help. Besides, I couldn't afford to become dependent on her power. The risks I was taking were mine to bear, and this fight was something I had to handle on my own terms.

'No,' I decided, shaking the thought away.

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I had also prepared several talismans, orbs, and scrolls—each one carefully selected and costing me a small fortune. These weren't simple trinkets; they were specialized, high-tier items designed for

combat scenarios just like the one I was about to face. In total, I had spent around 1 million Valer to acquire them, a hefty price but one that would give me every possible advantage.

The talismans were crafted from rare materials and imbued with powerful enchantments. Each one had a specific purpose—barrier creation, mana amplification, or negating certain elemental effects. The orbs were focused tools of destruction, capable of unleashing devastating amounts of condensed energy. As for the scrolls, they were last-resort items, containing single-use spells that could either turn the tide of battle or create an escape route if things went south.

I spread them out briefly on the table, double-checking their integrity. These were precision tools, each designed for maximum effectiveness against something as dangerous as the Void Dragon.

'Expensive, but necessary,' I thought, recalling the long negotiations I'd gone through to procure them. Spending this much was a calculated risk, but it was worth every Valer if it gave me even a slight edge.

Once satisfied with the condition of the items, I carefully placed them back into my spatial bracelet. They were ready when I needed them, and when it came time to face the Void Dragon, I'd need every one of them.

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The morning sun bathed the horizon in hues of soft gold and warm orange as Maya stood at the window of her private airship, her eyes fixed on the vast city of Ardmont sprawled beneath her. It was around 8 a.m., and the airship was sailing smoothly through the skies, cutting through the clouds with graceful precision.

The steady hum of the ship's engines was a constant, calming presence, but Maya's mind was elsewhere. She had been up early, preparing herself for this meeting with Astron. Though her expression remained calm and composed, as it often was, there was a quiet anticipation in her chest that she couldn't quite shake.

The morning air was cool, and the ship's large, elegant windows allowed her an unobstructed view of the sprawling city below, slowly coming to life as the first streams of sunlight hit the streets and buildings. Ardmont was a city she had visited countless times, though right now it was a little different.



She wore her usual attire—elegant but practical—tailored perfectly for her standing. A long, flowing coat adorned with subtle mana-infused embroidery that shimmered faintly in the daylight, and boots that were light but sturdy enough for swift movement.

Her hair, neatly tied back, moved gently in the breeze from the airship's motion, though her eyes remained focused ahead, a sense of purpose in her gaze.

The soft hum of the engines and the whisper of the wind were the only sounds as she leaned slightly against the edge of the window, her thoughts drifting to Astron. After last night's call, there was a part of her that was eager to see him again, to make sure, with her own eyes, that he was truly fine.

'He said he's okay,' she thought to herself. 'And now that what he desires here is complete...'

Maya's thoughts trailed off as she leaned against the window, her mind racing.

She knew why Astron had come to her state. Silas Vayne had been his target from the beginning. He had moved with precision and determination, never straying from his goal, and now that the hunt was over, Maya was certain he would be leaving soon—just like he always did.

Astron wasn't the type to linger. Once his task was finished, he would disappear again, moving on to the next thing. His practicality was something she admired, but it also left her feeling... untethered. She did not like the thought of watching him walk away, knowing that this might be the last time she'd see him until the second semester of the academy began.

Her fingers brushed against the smooth surface of the window as the realization settled over her. The thought weighed heavy in her chest, but she kept her expression composed, refusing to let the ache of his inevitable departure show. She had already resolved to be stronger, to stand on her own without relying so heavily on him. This was just another test of that resolve.

Still, it didn't make the prospect of saying goodbye any easier.

'He'll leave soon,' she thought, her eyes narrowing slightly as she focused on the approaching cityscape. 'And I won't see him again for two weeks. I knew this would happen, but...'

Maya exhaled softly, shaking off the lingering thoughts of his departure. She couldn't afford to dwell on it, not now. Last night's realization was still fresh in her mind—her dependency, her need to lean on Astron more than she should have. That was something she needed to control, to exercise

discipline over. She was a mage, a genius, and if she couldn't master her own emotions, how could she master the challenges ahead of her?

'This is fine,' she told herself, her fingers tightening briefly before she let her hand fall away from the window. 'It's how things are supposed to be. We can't always be together, and that should be fine.'

She took a deep breath, straightening her posture as the airship gently swayed in the sky, descending toward the bustling city below. Her eyes followed the streets as they slowly came into focus, the people moving about their morning routines, unaware of the inner conflict she was pushing aside.

Maya knew she had to savor this moment, to enjoy the time she had with Astron without clinging too tightly to it. It wasn't fair to him, and it wasn't healthy for her. He had his path, and she had hers. And while those paths crossed, she couldn't expect them to always be the same.

The realization settled over her like a quiet resolve. She could do this. She could be stronger. And when the time came for him to leave, she would let him go, with grace and understanding.

'Just savor the moment,' she reminded herself, her heart steadying as the airship descended toward its landing. The city of Ardmont stretched out beneath her, vibrant and alive with the pulse of morning activity. But her thoughts remained focused on what lay ahead—on the brief time she had left with Astron.

"Lady Evergreen," a voice called from behind her, interrupting her thoughts.

Maya turned to see the airship's captain standing respectfully at the entrance to the cabin. "We'll be landing in Ardmont shortly. Should we proceed to your scheduled destination?"

Maya gave a small nod, her expression calm but carrying the quiet determination she always held when focused. "Yes, proceed."

The airship descended smoothly, the engines humming softly as it approached the outskirts of Ardmont. Maya could already see the familiar landing platform below, a large hangar area designated for the private and specialized airships that frequented the city. The sun was still low in the sky, casting long shadows over the gleaming metal structures of the hangar as they touched down with precision.

Once the airship had landed, Maya stepped off with her usual grace, her boots clicking softly against the smooth surface of the platform. The cool morning air greeted her, crisp and refreshing, as the bustle of activity from the airship staff worked around her, though they were quiet and efficient, ensuring a seamless transition from sky to ground.

Not long after, a sleek, black car pulled up to the hangar, its driver already waiting. Maya stepped inside, the door closing softly behind her as the driver offered a polite nod.

"Where to, Lady Evergreen?" the driver asked, his tone professional and measured.

"To the city center," Maya replied, settling into the leather seat. The car began to move smoothly along the road, the city coming into clearer view as they made their way through the outskirts and into the heart of Ardmont.

As they drove, Maya reached for her smartwatch, her thoughts turning to Astron once again. She had already decided that today was about savoring the moment, and though she felt that familiar pang of anticipation, she kept her mind focused and calm. She dialed Astron's number, and after a few rings, he picked up.

"Senior," came his familiar, steady voice.

"Junior," she greeted, her tone light. "Where are you right now?"

There was a brief pause before Astron responded. "I'm in the city center. At a café called Morning Brew."

Maya smiled slightly, recognizing the name. "I see. I'll meet you there shortly."

"I'll be here," he replied simply, and with that, the call ended.

Maya leaned back in her seat, her eyes drifting toward the city outside the window as they passed through the bustling streets. The familiar sights of Ardmont flickered by, but her thoughts remained focused on what lay ahead. She wasn't sure how long this meeting would last or what exactly they would talk about, but for now, that didn't matter.

She would savor the moment.

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The café door chimed softly as Maya entered, the warm scent of coffee and freshly baked pastries greeting her. Morning Dew was a cozy place, the kind that invited long conversations over steaming cups of tea, but as Maya stepped inside, she immediately felt the subtle shift in the atmosphere.

Heads turned, and hushed whispers filled the air. She gathered the attention of many people, their curious gazes lingering on her as she walked through the café.

She had grown used to this by now. Being a member of the Evergreen family, not to mention her presence as the top mage in her class, naturally drew attention wherever she went.

Her reputation may not be that known, but the elegance with which she carried herself only added to the allure. Still, it wasn't something that fazed her anymore; her expression remained composed, her focus fixed on the task at hand.

Her eyes scanned the café, and it didn't take her long to spot Astron. He was seated in a corner by the window, his posture relaxed, his gaze turned outward as if he was lost in thought, watching the city streets beyond. The sunlight streamed in through the window, casting a soft glow across his figure, highlighting his sharp features and the casual, composed air he always carried.

Maya's lips curved into a small, almost imperceptible smile.

As much as she was used to gathering attention, it was evident that Astron would no longer be a stranger to it either—though perhaps unknowingly.

She could see the subtle glances from a few of the other patrons, their eyes flicking toward him from time to time. Some were curious, others intrigued, but it was clear that his presence, much like hers, wasn't something that went unnoticed.

'Of course,' Maya thought with a shake of her head, helplessly amused. It was her fault after all.

With a small sigh, she moved toward him, weaving through the tables with effortless grace, the faint murmur of conversation surrounding her. She kept her eyes fixed on Astron, her expression calm as she made her way across the café.

As she approached his table, he turned, his violet eyes locking onto hers with a quiet greeting.

"Senior."

Chapter 635 139.5 - Prepare

"Senior."

"Junior," Maya greeted back with a soft smile as she reached the table. She slid her coat off smoothly and draped it over the back of her chair before sitting across from Astron, their usual quiet understanding filling the space between them.

Astron's eyes flicked over her for a brief second before he spoke again, his tone calm, as usual. "Have you had breakfast yet?"

Maya shook her head lightly, a knowing look passing between them. "Not really," she admitted. "I had a morning shake, but nothing more substantial." Her lips curved slightly as she continued, "I thought we might eat together, and it seems I was right."

Astron nodded, a faint smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "I was waiting for you."

Maya settled into her seat more comfortably, appreciating the way their interactions always seemed to flow effortlessly. There was never any need for grand gestures or drawn-out conversations. It was the simplicity of their companionship that often brought her the most comfort—especially now, knowing that soon enough, they would part ways again.

She glanced at the menu on the table, but her attention was still partly on him, noting the way he seemed more relaxed than usual. Perhaps it was the calm of the morning, or maybe it was the small reprieve they were sharing before the inevitable departure. Whatever it was, Maya found herself savoring the moment, just as she had promised herself she would.

"Any recommendations?" she asked, raising an eyebrow slightly as she looked at the menu. Though she frequented Ardmont, she had never been to this particular café before. It had a cozy charm to it and judging by the inviting aromas wafting through the air, it seemed the food would live up to its ambiance.

Maya glanced up from the menu to see Astron staring at her with a blank expression, his head tilted ever so slightly, as if to say, Shouldn't you know this? Isn't this the city where you grew up?

She blinked, taken aback for a split second, and then a soft laugh escaped her, a sound that was as much an attempt to cover her amusement as it was at her own slight oversight. "Right, right," she said with a small grin, shaking her head. "I should be the one making the recommendations, shouldn't I?"

Astron didn't say anything, but the faintest hint of a curve tugged at the corner of his lips, his violet eyes holding that quiet, knowing look she had come to recognize. Of course, he didn't need to say a word to get his point across—it was all there, in the way he looked at her, in the subtle shift of his posture.

She cleared her throat, trying to regain her composure, and focused back on the menu. "Alright, let's see..." she murmured, scanning the local delicacies that filled the page.

The café offered a variety of dishes typical of Ardmont's eastern region—a mix of hearty breakfast platters with fresh ingredients, artisan breads, and a selection of pastries infused with local spices. Her eyes wandered over a few familiar items until they landed on something she hadn't had in a while: a traditional breakfast spread with smoked fish, eggs, freshly baked bread, and a side of seasoned vegetables.

"This looks good," she said, mostly to herself but loud enough for Astron to hear. "Smoked fish and fresh bread. It's simple, but I think it's exactly what I need this morning."

She glanced up again, meeting Astron's gaze. "What about you? Or are you just going to copy my choice since I know this city better than you?" she teased, the playfulness returning to her voice now that she had settled back into the rhythm of their banter.

Astron gave a small shrug, his expression neutral but with a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. "Maybe I will," he said, his tone calm, as always. "You seem to know what you're doing."

Maya chuckled softly, shaking her head. "Well, I'll take that as a compliment."

She placed her menu down and leaned back slightly in her chair, feeling the comfort of the moment settle in around them. The smell of coffee and freshly baked goods filled the air, and outside, the city of Ardmont was beginning to stir more as the day fully set in.

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Their order arrived promptly, the aroma of freshly baked bread and smoked fish filling the space between them as the server placed the plates in front of them. Maya took a moment to appreciate the simplicity of the meal—something familiar, and comforting. She picked up her fork, cutting into the soft bread, and glanced across the table at Astron, who had already begun to eat with his usual calm, methodical demeanor.

For a while, they ate in comfortable silence, the sounds of the café and the distant hum of the city outside providing a soothing backdrop. Maya let herself savor the moment, the taste of the food and the warmth of the quiet morning settling around them.

But eventually, the question she had been holding back surfaced in her mind, and she couldn't ignore it any longer.

She set her fork down gently, looking across the table at Astron, her expression soft but serious. "So..." she began, her voice casual, though there was an unmistakable note of curiosity beneath it. "Now that everything is taken care of, what's next for you? What are you planning to do?"

Astron didn't stop eating immediately, but she could tell her question had his attention. He swallowed his bite of food, then placed his fork down as well, his violet eyes meeting hers with that same calm, unreadable expression.

After a brief pause, he answered, "I've completed what I came here for. Silas Vayne is no longer a problem."

Maya nodded, already knowing as much but waiting for the part she wasn't sure of—the part where he would tell her his next steps and plans.

She knew him well enough to understand that he never stayed in one place longer than necessary, and now that his mission was over, she wondered where he would go next.

Astron glanced out the window for a moment, as if contemplating how much to share. "I'll be heading out soon," he said, his tone as steady as ever. "There are other things I need to take care of before the second semester begins. I'll be moving around for a while."

Maya felt the weight of those words settle in her chest, but she had already expected them. She knew how practical Astron was—how focused he remained on his goals. Still, hearing him confirm that he would be leaving soon brought a quiet pang of sadness.

But instead of dwelling on it, she gave a small, knowing smile. "Of course you will," she said softly. "That is so like you."

Astron didn't respond to that, but there was a faint shift in his expression, something almost thoughtful as if he understood the meaning behind her words.

Maya leaned back, her hands resting in her lap, her expression calm, but beneath the surface, her thoughts stirred with a quiet resentment she couldn't quite shake. She knew Astron leaving was normal—expected, even. He was always on the move, and always focused on his goals with unwavering determination. It was something she admired about him, something she had come to accept as a part of who he was.

But still... was it too selfish to want him to feel even a hint of regret? Shouldn't he feel some reluctance after everything they talked about, after all the time they'd spent together?

The thought lingered in her mind, bringing with it a pang of frustration that she struggled to suppress.

'Maybe I'm being foolish,' she thought, her gaze dropping to her hands. But despite herself, the feeling remained an ache that sat uncomfortably within her.

As if sensing her inner turmoil, Astron turned his gaze toward her, his violet eyes meeting hers with a quiet intensity that made her pause. His expression was calm but resolute, as though he understood the thoughts she hadn't spoken aloud.

"Senior," he said, his voice steady, "there's only a week and a half left until the semester starts."

Maya's breath caught slightly, her resentment faltering as his words cut through the silence between them. He continued, his tone as even as ever but with a hint of urgency, she wasn't used to hearing from him.

"The things you experienced at the banquet... while they weren't comfortable, they're things you need to understand," he said, his gaze unwavering. "The fact that someone like Silas Vayne—a



demon—was able to influence your vampiric side, to push you out of your own control... it shows that there's still a lot you need to work on if you want to live comfortably with what you are."

His words struck her deeply, and she felt her initial frustration and resentment dissipate, replaced by a quieter, more profound understanding. She knew he was right. The banquet had been a wake-up call, a reminder that she still had a long way to go if she wanted to truly stand on her own.

Her dependency on Astron, her inability to resist Silas's influence—it had all been a sign that there was more she needed to learn, more she needed to master.

Maya swallowed, her gaze softening as she looked back at him. "You're... right," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. "I suppose I let myself get too comfortable. I thought I had more control than I actually did."

Astron gave a small nod, his expression thoughtful. "The powers you possess are not a weakness, Senior," he said calmly. "It's just something you have to work through. If you're going to keep walking this path... you need to understand what that means."

His words, though practical, held a quiet weight, a sense of care that he rarely showed so openly. And as Maya sat there, absorbing his advice, she felt a renewed sense of determination settle over her. She would work harder, she would become stronger—not just for herself, but to prove that she could stand beside him as an equal, without needing to rely on him so much.

"Then..." Maya began, her voice steady but filled with curiosity as she prepared to ask him what path she should follow, what steps she should take to master the powers she struggled to control.

But before she could finish, Astron's hand moved smoothly, almost casually, as he slid something across the table.

"Please take a look at this."

Chapter 636 - 136.6 - Prepare

"Please take a look at this."

Maya's gaze drifted downward, settling on the small object Astron had slid across the table. It was delicate but intricately crafted, a charm or amulet of sorts, made from some dark metal that glinted in the morning light.

Its surface was etched with fine, twisting lines, forming patterns that seemed to ripple across the metal like waves. There were symbols too, unfamiliar and complex, carved with such precision that they seemed almost alive, shifting subtly as she examined them.

Her brow furrowed slightly as she tilted the object, taking in the faint traces of energy pulsing through it.

Despite her extensive knowledge, she couldn't fully decipher its purpose. It felt old, ancient even, as if it had been crafted long ago by hands that understood magic in ways she hadn't yet explored.

"What is it?" she asked, her voice soft with intrigue, her gaze lifting to meet his.

Astron watched her for a moment, his expression unreadable, before he began. "It's a construct that I had requested to be made after studying [Psychic] magic and its core principles," he said, his tone measured, as though this explanation had been forming in his mind for some time.

Maya felt her heart quicken, and though she kept her face composed, a quiet warmth bloomed within her. He had studied psychic magic, her magic.

It wasn't something he would have had much use for on his own—his talents lay elsewhere. A thought crept into her mind, unspoken but vivid: he had done this for her.

He had delved into unfamiliar territory, expending time and energy, to understand something she struggled with. It was such a small thing, yet it felt monumental.

Astron continued, unaware of the shift in her thoughts. "In my free time, I looked into the theory behind it. Psychic magic is different from other forms and more personal. It relies on control and a clear mind, and it can be difficult to manage because of how easily emotions can bleed into the magic itself."

Maya nodded, absorbing his words. She knew all too well the dangers of psychic magic as this was a piece of common knowledge amongst the Awakened community.

For most people, Psychic magic was a very dangerous tool, as resisting it was not something that one could improve just by advancing their strengths.

Willpower, mind power, and many other things would need to be taken into consideration which was not something the Awakened community liked.

Though she listened, it was rare to hear him speak about magic in this way, his tone contemplative yet focused. There was a quiet understanding in his voice, one that seemed to bridge the gap between her struggles and his own experience.

"As I was researching," he went on, his gaze drifting slightly, "I found references to an old tradition, something used by mages in ancient times."

Astron's gaze grew distant, as though reaching through layers of thought to pull together the words. "In some traditions," he began quietly, "they called it the [Inner Demon]—others, [Split Subconscious], or even [Hidden Face]. It was thought to be a shadow within the mind, a construct that would allow mages to work through dangerous emotions by separating them from their core selves, channeling the intensity without letting it interfere with their rationality."

Maya felt herself drawn in further, sensing that this was something beyond mere theory, something connected to her struggle. She remained silent, allowing him the space to continue.

"When your evolution to a vampire failed," he continued, his tone careful yet unwavering, "your body was left in a state that isn't fully human, nor fully vampire... and even still not quite elf. The incompleteness isn't just in your physical self but extends into your psyche." His violet eyes held her gaze with steady focus. "Most of the time magic requires a singular mind, a clarity of self. But your thoughts... your emotions—they're constantly at odds."

Maya absorbed his words, a quiet acknowledgment blooming within her. She had always felt the duality within her, that faint disconnect—a lingering war between rationality and instinct. The part of her that craved control, and clarity, and the part that, since the failed evolution, felt darker, more volatile.

Astron gestured to the amulet. "This charm," he explained, "is made to help you confront and control that duality. It's a construct meant to channel your psychic energy separately from your emotions, letting you keep them distinct." He paused, his gaze steady. "The challenge is to balance

it, to face those parts of yourself that are hard to control—acknowledge them without letting them consume you."

Maya's fingers brushed over the delicate amulet again, her thoughts stirring. The [Inner Demon], the part of her that she struggled to contain, could it be tempered through this?

She could feel its latent power—a carefully designed construct that resonated with the complexity of her own mind. Finding someone who could craft something of this caliber wasn't just uncommon; it was nearly impossible.

The blend of psychic magic with a method for channeling conflicting emotions was rare knowledge, practically ancient, and yet... here it was, right in her hands.

This wasn't something Astron could have come up with overnight.

She realized that he must have spent hours, maybe days, contemplating her situation, researching psychic principles that had nothing to do with his own abilities, pushing his understanding to find a way to help her.

'Indeed....it wouldn't be that easy.'

A quiet sense of gratitude crept into her, though she kept it contained, a steady warmth that settled in her chest.

Finally, she looked up at him, meeting his unwavering gaze. "How does it work?" she asked, her voice soft but carrying a subtle intensity. "How do I use it... and will it really keep the... other part of me in check?"

Astron nodded slightly. "It's a start," he replied. "The amulet works in stages. Its function is to hold your psyche apart from emotional influence, allowing you to observe those impulses objectively. Each time you wear it and focus, it should make you more aware of those shifts within yourself. Over time, you'll learn to recognize when that darker side is trying to take control."

He paused, his gaze shifting slightly as though choosing his words carefully. "But it won't suppress it entirely, and it shouldn't. Confronting those parts of yourself—recognizing them without letting them rule you—is part of the process."

Maya nodded, absorbing his words. She had always tried to shut out that part of herself, to bury it under logic and discipline. But this amulet... it wasn't about suppression; it was about acceptance, about balance. The very thought was daunting, yet somehow, with Astron's guidance, it felt possible.

"What about the specifics?" she asked, looking back down at the amulet, her fingers still trailing over the etchings. "Will it require constant use, or is it something I activate as needed?"

Astron's gaze held steady as he continued, watching her fingers trace the amulet's intricate patterns. "Once you activate it," he began, his tone deliberate, "the amulet will allow the other side of you—a more instinctual, less restrained part of yourself—to become a voice within your consciousness."

He paused, his eyes sharp as he gauged her reaction. "It won't take over or alter your actions, but it will exist as a presence you can communicate with. Think of it as a bridge between your rational self and this... darker side. This way, you'll have a clearer sense of what it wants, why it reacts the way it does, and how to balance it with your other instincts."

Maya felt her heartbeat quicken slightly, though she kept her expression composed. The idea was unsettling yet somehow... intriguing. The thought of giving that shadowy part of her a voice, a presence, meant no longer burying it under layers of control. It meant meeting it face-to-face.

"Will it feel like... me?" she asked, her voice softer now, almost hesitant.

Astron nodded. "It's still part of you, but separated enough that you can observe it as a distinct presence. That's why it's a construct—it provides that distance, that division, so you're not just reacting to it. Instead, you'll be interacting with it, understanding it, even working with it. Over time, this dialogue can bring that other side into alignment with who you are as a whole."

Maya absorbed his words, her gaze drifting back to the amulet. It would mean facing things she had suppressed, parts of herself she had denied since the failed evolution. But perhaps, if she could give it a voice, and understand its desires, she might find the peace she'd been missing.

Astron's voice cut into her thoughts. "This won't be easy, Senior. The charm only facilitates the connection—it's your resolve and self-awareness that will make it effective. Think of it as a guide, not a cure."

Maya felt the weight of his words settling over her, each one a quiet reminder that this journey would require more than just a charm; it would demand an unflinching look inward. Her fingers tightened around the amulet as if drawing strength from its intricate form. There was a part of her that felt both anxious and strangely eager, the thought of facing herself in such a raw, unfiltered way stirring emotions she couldn't quite name.

She lifted her gaze back to Astron, her voice steady but holding a glint of determination. "I understand," she said. "It's a chance to finally see that part of me as it truly is, to stop denying it."

Astron's expression softened slightly, an almost imperceptible nod acknowledging her resolve. "Yes," he replied, "and when you're ready to use it, remember—it's not about forcing control. It's about inviting understanding. Take your time and approach it without judgment."

The words resonated deeply, like a whisper of calm. This wasn't about power or strength alone. It was about integration, about finding a way to exist with all of herself.

'That is right. I need to face it myself.' With a final, grateful look, she tucked the amulet safely away, the anticipation within her mingling with a newfound resolve.

"Thank you, Junior," she said quietly. "I won't waste this."

#### Chapter 637 - 140.1 - Concocting

Maya leaned back in her chair, her gaze fixed on the amulet resting in her hands as the weight of Astron's words settled over her. She let herself sink deeper into the chair, feeling the smooth wood beneath her back as her thoughts spun.

'This charm... it will allow me to confront the other part of myself.'

The concept wasn't foreign to her, not entirely. She had been aware, in her own way, of that shadow lingering within her. How many times had she woken from a nightmare, hearing a voice, her own voice, yet different—harsher, filled with a desire she couldn't quite understand?

It had been unsettling, those nights when she'd lie awake afterward, dismissing it as some lingering memory of the failed evolution.

'But was it really just a dream? Or was it something more?'

Her fingers brushed over the delicate carvings, feeling a faint warmth from the charm as if it held a life of its own, quietly awaiting activation. And yet, now that Astron had given her a name for it—a method to face it—she felt a weight lift, even as a new gravity took its place.

'This other self... I've tried to bury it. Suppress it. But all that's done is make it stronger, hasn't it?'

The thought sent a shiver through her, but she kept her face composed, her breathing steady. She was beginning to see the truth in Astron's words, that accepting this side of her wasn't a weakness—it was part of her path forward.

'If I want to understand myself... to have the control I need, then I can't keep denying it. I need to hear it, let it speak, learn why it wants what it does.'

As she lifted her gaze to Astron, a quiet resolve settled within her, mingling with a hint of vulnerability. He had gone to lengths she hadn't anticipated, researching unfamiliar, ancient practices to help her bridge the gap she had been too afraid to cross alone.

'Indeed....if he had spent all that effort, from now on I should do it on my own. He had already done so much.' Maya's gaze lingered on the charm for a moment longer before she exhaled softly, a subtle but steadying sigh as she clenched her fists beneath the table, feeling the cool edge of resolve settle within her.

'He's already done so much,' she thought, her fingers tightening slightly. 'From here on, it's up to me.'

If she wanted to be able to wield her power as both a mage and a vampire, she needed to embrace the duality within her—without fear of losing herself to one side or the other. She'd kept the two separated, thinking it would protect her from slipping into something uncontrollable. But this... this was a chance to unify her strengths. A way to bring balance.

Her eyes lifted once more, finding Astron's steady gaze, and she felt a quiet resolve settling deeper within her. This path he walked, with his unyielding determination, his goals, and his vengeance... wasn't an easy one. And she knew that he would face challenges she might never fully understand.

'If he's already willing to put this much thought into helping me... I won't be a burden,' she vowed silently. 'I'll become someone he can rely on.'

The weight of that commitment was tangible, pressing into her chest like a slow, steady pulse, and she welcomed it. She wasn't simply a student following a mentor's lead—she wanted to be an ally, someone he could trust, someone who wouldn't fall apart the moment he wasn't there.

Maya straightened in her seat, holding that newfound resolve close, feeling it settle into her like a quiet, stabilizing presence. She had spent so much time thinking of herself as incomplete, of her instincts as dangerous impulses to suppress.

But now, as she considered the balance she would need to strike, she realized she was on the edge of something more—a unity within herself that would let her truly wield her strength. The amulet, still warm in her hand, felt less like a tool and more like a bridge toward that goal.

She glanced at Astron, a soft but firm expression in her eyes, and remembered what else she'd meant to tell him before they parted. She felt a flicker of excitement at the thought, mingling with her newfound purpose.

"Astron," she began, her voice calm but carrying a hint of eagerness, "there's something I meant to mention before you leave."

He raised an eyebrow, his violet gaze attentive as always, waiting for her to continue.

"Kieran contacted me yesterday," she explained, watching his reaction as she continued. "He said the weapon you requested is ready. He mentioned that we could come by whenever you're free to take a look."

Astron's gaze shifted slightly, a subtle glint of interest passing over his usually composed expression. "Good," he replied, his tone calm.

"Then, should we take a look at it right now?"

Maya felt a quiet warmth blossom inside her as she saw the subtle interest flash in Astron's gaze. She knew him well enough by now to recognize the meaning behind his calm expression; this wasn't just a visit to pick up a weapon. Astron had been testing Kieran's capabilities with this request, gauging not only the quality of his craftsmanship but also his trustworthiness and potential as an ally. The thought brought a smile to her lips—Kieran would finally have a chance to show just



how skilled he truly was, something she'd always known but had rarely seen acknowledged by others with Astron's level of scrutiny.

"Yes, let's," she replied, her voice steady but carrying a hint of eagerness.

As they stood, she felt her anticipation grow, knowing how much this meeting meant not only to Astron but to Kieran as well.

As they walked through the bustling city streets, Maya's thoughts lingered on Kieran. If he could meet Astron's expectations, there was a chance he'd gain a trusted place in Astron's world—a world she was quickly realizing was far more complex and dangerous than most people understood.

And if Kieran were to become someone Astron trusted, it would mean Astron might visit them more often. She felt a quiet thrill at that thought, knowing how much it would mean to her to have him around, to be able to help him in whatever small ways she could.

As they arrived at Kieran's shop, she shot a quick glance at Astron, catching the hint of anticipation in his violet gaze.

She felt a surge of pride for her friend, confident that he would rise to the occasion. The shop, tucked between more opulent storefronts, appeared modest from the outside, with its slightly cluttered displays and unpolished charm.

Yet, to Maya, it was a place filled with the essence of Kieran's brilliance, and now, she hoped Astron would see it that way too.

Pushing the door open, they entered to find Kieran already at his workbench, his focused expression shifting to one of delight when he saw them. "Ah, just in time!" he greeted, gesturing to a covered table where something rested beneath a cloth.

Astron stepped forward, his gaze steady as he regarded Kieran with that familiar, quiet intensity. Maya took her place beside him, feeling a flicker of excitement. She knew this was Kieran's moment, and she felt a subtle pride knowing her friend was about to shine.

Kieran pulled back the cloth with a flourish, revealing the weapon he'd crafted. The blade gleamed under the shop's light, every edge honed with precision. It was more than just a weapon; it was a

testament to Kieran's skill, and Maya couldn't help but feel a rush of happiness, knowing Astron was finally seeing it firsthand.

"Go on," Kieran said, his voice laced with a hint of pride. "I think you'll find it meets your specifications—and then some."

Astron studied the weapon, his expression composed as he took it in, testing its balance and feeling the energy flowing through it. Maya watched closely, noting the way his eyes narrowed slightly, his scrutiny intense. She held her breath, hoping her friend's work would be enough to impress him.

After a long, quiet moment, Astron nodded approvingly, a barely perceptible smile touching his lips. "You've done well," he said simply, his voice carrying a weight of sincerity.

But someone was not happy with the wording it seemed.

Kieran raised his eyebrows, crossing his arms with a wry grin. "That's all? You've done well?" he echoed, disbelief lacing his voice. "Do you think you'll find something like this anywhere else?"

Astron's calm gaze flicked to Kieran, intrigued but silent, as Kieran stepped forward, his fingers closing around the handle of the blade with a practiced ease. He lifted it, turning it under the light so it gleamed with a faint, ethereal shimmer, and gestured for Astron to pay attention.

"Let me show you what these beauties can actually do," Kieran continued, his voice now carrying a touch of pride. "First off, I've nearly perfected the aerodynamic design on these blades. You won't hear a thing when they fly—completely silent."

He threw the blade lightly into the air, and it cut through the air without even the faintest whisper, landing perfectly back into his hand. Astron's eyes narrowed in appreciation, but he said nothing, watching as Kieran spun the blade around his fingers, demonstrating its balance.

"Each of them is enchanted with an armor-penetration attribute," Kieran explained, his green eyes gleaming with excitement. "%35 Armor Penetration, by the way." He spoke.

"No ordinary shield or defense will stop these. The enchantment lets the blade pierce through even the toughest metals, making them ideal for any encounter."

He glanced at Astron, the faintest hint of a smug grin on his lips, and continued, "Their durability's enhanced too. The metal I used isn't just strong; it's resilient. It'll hold every strike, every impact, without sacrificing agility." Kieran gave the blade another casual spin, his hand moving with the confidence of someone who knew exactly how his creation worked. "And before you ask—no, they're not heavy. All the strength, none of the bulk."

Astron's gaze was fixed on the weapon, his violet eyes glinting as he absorbed each detail. But Kieran wasn't done yet.

"Now, the best part," he said, a flicker of excitement crossing his face. "The true edge these blades hold isn't just in their silence or their piercing power. No..." Kieran swung the blade effortlessly around his fingers, letting it settle into his hand as if it were an extension of himself. "This is where the magic really happens."

With a quick flick of his wrist, he activated the enchantment, and the blade began to glow faintly, a pulsing energy tracing along the edges.

"You can change the type of poison that you want to enchant your weapon."

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"Now, the best part. The true edge these blades hold isn't just in their silence or their piercing power. No.....This is where the magic really happens."

With a swift motion of his wrist, Kieran activated the enchantment, causing the blade to emit a soft glow, with a pulsing energy tracing along its edges.

"You can change the type of poison that you want to enchant your weapon."

Kieran's eyes sparkled as he continued, his tone dropping to a hushed but excited whisper, "Here's the true edge. For most weapons that carry poison, you're limited to a single type—paralytic, venomous, maybe corrosive. But this one... this blade doesn't settle for just one." He gave the blade a final, expert twirl, then held it aloft, the edges faintly pulsing with energy.

Astron's eyes sharpened, his interest piqued as he listened.

"With this enchantment, you can change the type of poison the blade holds. Venom, paralysis, decay—you choose," Kieran said, his tone filled with pride. "I developed a unique layering process that lets you switch between poison types on command. You won't need a new blade for every situation. Just activate the enchantment, and the weapon adjusts accordingly."

To demonstrate, Kieran flicked his wrist, and the blade's glow shifted from a deep emerald to a sickly purple, indicating a change in the poison's nature. He moved it once more, and the purple hue turned a faint, smoky gray, each color representing a different toxin within the blade.

"Think of it as flexibility for the user," Kieran explained, glancing at Astron with a knowing look. "I figured someone like you, with the arsenal I've seen you carry, would put this to good use. Adaptability in a single weapon, so you're not tied down by equipment or constantly switching tools. It's all in one place."

Astron couldn't hide the glint of admiration that crossed his expression. The concept was something he'd considered in the past—having weapons tailored to match his strategic adaptability. However, he hadn't had the time, nor the resources, to fully develop it.

"You've exceeded expectations," Astron murmured, taking the blade from Kieran's hand to feel the subtle, pulsing energy coursing through it. The enchantment responded to his touch, and he could sense the ease with which he could shift its attributes—venom for a prolonged fight, paralysis for quick subduing, and even decay for disabling tougher opponents.

Kieran smirked, his voice holding a trace of satisfaction. "I thought that might impress you," he said, crossing his arms. "It wasn't easy to make, but I knew someone like you would see the value."

Astron gave a final nod, respect evident in his gaze. "I see now that, Senior Maya's words regarding you were true."

Maya's lips curled into a playful smile as she glanced at Astron. "Did you not believe me?" she teased, her tone light but her eyes gleaming with mischief.

Astron turned to her, his expression calm but with a glint of honesty in his gaze. "It wasn't that I didn't believe you," he replied. "I just wanted to see it with my own eyes."

Maya chuckled, clearly unbothered by his response. She knew that Astron's thoroughness was just part of who he was; he always preferred to judge things for himself, especially when it came to

matters that affected his safety and strategy. The satisfaction of seeing Kieran's talent acknowledged only deepened her pride.

Kieran, watching the exchange with a grin, cleared his throat and stepped forward. "Alright, so let me show you how to record poisons into the blade's enchantment," he said, holding the weapon out to Astron.

He continued, "I've already loaded a few poisons for testing—potent stuff, but I'm no poison expert, so they may not be exactly what you'd want. This is just a starting point." Kieran's fingers traced along the runes engraved on the hilt, and the blade shifted colors as he cycled through the different poison types. "Now, if you want to add your own, it's easy enough."

He flipped the blade over and pointed to a small, rune-inscribed chamber near the hilt. "This chamber here," he explained, "is where you place the poison of your choice. The enchantment will absorb it, and then you can store that type for future use. Just focus your mana while holding it, and the enchantment will learn the properties of the poison."

Kieran demonstrated, reaching for a small vial of poison he had on hand. Pouring a drop into the chamber, he activated the enchantment. The blade glowed as the new poison integrated, shifting to a faint green hue as the weapon accepted it.

"Now, that poison type is available in the rotation," he said, handing the blade back to Astron. "Just cycle through and use it as you see fit. It'll retain the poisons you store unless you overwrite them with something new."

Astron took the blade, absorbing each instruction carefully, already considering how to tailor it for different combat scenarios. Kieran's innovation and craftsmanship had surpassed his expectations, and he was quietly impressed by the attention to detail.

"Thank you, Mister Kieran," Astron said, his tone sincere, as he glanced at Maya, who looked pleased beyond words.

Kieran couldn't resist a triumphant grin as he folded his arms. "See, it's your own fault for doubting me from the start," he declared, his voice tinged with a playful boastfulness. He looked entirely satisfied, basking in the well-deserved praise for his craft.

Astron watched him calmly, his expression as steady as ever, though there was a flicker of amusement in his eyes at Kieran's enthusiasm. Just as Kieran seemed to be getting carried away, Maya laughed softly, cutting through his reverie and bringing him back to the present.

"Alright, alright," she said, her eyes shining with amusement. "We get it, Kieran—you're a genius."

Kieran chuckled, giving a little shrug as he turned to Astron, still smiling. "So, anything else you need?" he asked, a hint of pride still lingering in his tone.

Astron paused, his gaze drifting for a moment as he weighed his thoughts, inwardly considering whether he should mention the idea he'd been mulling over. The weapon in his hand was exceptional, and Kieran had more than proven his skills, but this request was... different.

After a brief silence, he decided to ask. "There is one more thing," he began, meeting Kieran's expectant gaze. "It's something I've been thinking about for a while—a problem I've been trying to solve."

Kieran raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Go on."

"Transportation," Astron said, the word alone carrying a sense of purpose. "I need a vehicle. Something fast, efficient, and compact—ideally something I can carry with me. I want the option to return to where I leave it without being weighed down."

Kieran's eyes widened slightly, and he stroked his chin thoughtfully, clearly fascinated by the challenge. "So, you're talking about something you can summon or assemble on the spot, something that wouldn't interfere with your mobility otherwise?"

"Exactly," Astron replied. "It needs to be reliable, but also unobtrusive."

Kieran nodded slowly, his mind clearly racing with ideas. "That's... quite the request," he admitted, though a spark of excitement was unmistakable in his expression. "But it's doable. I'd have to look into specialized materials for durability and lightness, probably something that can fold or collapse into a smaller form. And a way to remotely summon it... yes, that could work." His gaze sharpened with inspiration, and he flashed a quick grin at Astron. "I like it. Give me some time, and I'll see what I can come up with."

Maya, watching the exchange, felt a surge of excitement at the thought. She could already picture Kieran throwing himself into the project with all his skill and enthusiasm. Astron's confidence in her friend made her feel quietly proud, knowing he trusted both of them enough to share this need.

Kieran watched Astron thoughtfully, the gears in his mind already turning over the possibilities for this new project. There was something about Astron—something he couldn't quite put his finger on. For someone who kept so much hidden behind a calm exterior, Astron seemed unusually sharp, like he could grasp the nuances of a concept even before Kieran fully explained it. It was a rare trait, one that Kieran, a self-proclaimed genius, held in high regard. And the more he observed Astron, the more he felt that this wasn't someone he'd get bored talking shop with.

He cleared his throat, shifting his attention from his thoughts. "All right," he said, a spark of interest glinting in his eyes. "If I'm going to work on this, I'll need a way to contact you directly. I get the feeling I might have some questions—or ideas—that'll pop up as I go."

Astron looked at him, his expression as steady as ever. With a small nod, he produced code from his smartwatch. He handed it over to Kieran, who accepted it with his own smartwatch and then the smartwatch registered the contact.

As Kieran's smartwatch registered Astron's contact, he nodded, satisfaction clear in his expression. "Good. I'll reach out if there are any updates or, well, any sudden flashes of brilliance," he said with a smirk. He tilted his head thoughtfully, adding, "Just a heads up, though—the sum may end up a bit higher than these daggers. Working with specialized materials and adding custom summoning functions isn't exactly a bargain."

Astron opened his mouth to respond, but before he could say a word, Maya stepped in, her tone light but firm. "I'll be the one covering this. No need to worry about the cost," she declared, her smile unwavering as she glanced between the two.

Astron's gaze shifted to her, his voice calm but with a note of insistence. "Senior, I appreciate it, but there's no need for you to—"

Maya shook her head, cutting him off with a warm but unyielding expression. "I'm not taking no for an answer, Astron. This isn't up for debate." Her voice softened, though her resolve didn't waver. "You've done a lot for me. Let me handle this."

Astron sighed quietly, recognizing the look in her eyes and knowing it was pointless to argue. He gave her a slight nod of acceptance, though his gaze lingered as if silently acknowledging her support.

Kieran watched the exchange with a grin, chuckling as he crossed his arms. "Well, then, it looks like we've got everything sorted. I'll get started right away. Should be... interesting," he added with a glint of excitement.

With that, the deal was sealed, and as Astron and Maya left the shop.

#### Chapter 639 140.3 - Concocting

As they stepped out of Kieran's shop, the cool air of the bustling city swept over them, stirring the quiet between them. Maya felt a lightness within her as she walked beside Astron, the energy of the exchange lingering in her thoughts. Kieran had outdone himself, and it filled her with pride knowing she had introduced her junior to someone so capable.

After a moment, she glanced sideways at Astron, her voice casual but carrying a hint of curiosity. "So, what do you think of Kieran now?"

Astron's gaze remained forward, but there was a faint glint of respect in his violet eyes. "He is, without question, the most talented Magic Engineer I've encountered." He paused, his voice even but carrying a quiet weight. "You truly have a genius friend, Senior."

Maya's lips curved into a pleased smile, warmth blooming in her chest at the words. She had always known Kieran's brilliance, but hearing Astron acknowledge it like this felt like a victory of sorts, for both her and her friend.

"I knew you'd come to see it," she replied, her tone lightly teasing but with an unmistakable pride. "Kieran might be eccentric, but when it comes to his craft, there's no one more dedicated."

"It's a rare trait," he admitted. "His confidence is earned. And with his skill... he'll be an asset."

Maya nodded in agreement, feeling a surge of satisfaction as they continued down the busy streets of the city.

The anticipation of what lay ahead mingled with a newfound resolve within her. She would continue to grow, master her strengths, and support Astron with everything she had.



They walked in quiet companionship, the sounds of the city a gentle hum around them as they made their way through the bustling streets.

Maya could feel the weight of what was left unsaid between them, a silent acknowledgment that this moment, like many before it, would soon be a memory.

The time for Astron to depart was approaching, and she had her own responsibilities to attend to, tasks that would occupy her time in his absence.

'It's just part of it,' she thought, her gaze drifting to him. 'We both have our own paths, things to accomplish before we cross paths again.'

A faint pang of regret lingered beneath her calm exterior, though she refused to let it show. She had resolved not to cling to these moments, to respect the quiet understanding they shared. Knowing he would be leaving felt different this time; rather than feeling untethered, she felt a steady resolve, as if their connection, however brief, had fortified her own purpose.

Finally, as they reached the edge of the marketplace, she turned to him, a calm smile on her lips. "So, I suppose you'll be heading off soon," she said, her tone light but carrying a quiet undertone of acceptance.

Astron met her gaze, his expression as composed as ever but with a flicker of understanding. "Yes," he replied, a hint of softness in his voice.

Astron's acknowledgment settled between them, as quiet as the city's early evening hum.

Maya's heart beat a little faster, the thought that this might be one of their last moments together and she wouldn't see him for a little while flickering insistently in her mind. She took a quiet breath, searching for the right words to let him know she wanted just one more thing.

Steeling herself, she glanced up at him, feeling the flush of warmth already spreading across her cheeks. "Junior..." she began her voice barely a whisper, her blue eyes shimmering with a hint of crimson. "Would it be all right if I... drink, just once more?"

He met her gaze, understanding dawning in his violet eyes, and for a moment, he simply looked at her.

She felt the intensity of his gaze, his silence conveying more than any words could have. Then, with a brief glance around, he nodded slightly and gestured to a narrow, quiet alley nearby.

She followed her steps lightly yet purposefully.

Once they were out of sight, Maya turned to him, her heartbeat echoing loudly in her ears. She hesitated only a moment before stepping forward, her hands reaching up to rest lightly against his chest. And in one swift motion, she pressed him back against the cool stone wall, her breath catching as she looked up into his eyes. In the dim, quiet space, the tension between them felt almost palpable.

Her gaze lingered on him, her hands sliding to his shoulders as her fangs emerged, and she could feel the primal side of her stirring.

"Go." Astron's voice was low, calm.

With that, she leaned in, her lips grazing his neck before her fangs pierced his skin, releasing the rush of warmth she craved.

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As they stepped out of the narrow alley, Maya felt the lingering warmth spread through her, her cheeks flushed despite her best efforts to appear composed. The soft hum of the city had returned, but the taste of his blood still lingered on her tongue, a reminder of the moment they'd just shared. The "post-drink clarity," as she'd come to call it in private, settled over her in full force, pulling her mind back into focus with a mix of exhilaration and acute self-awareness.

'What am I doing?' she thought, mortified but unable to suppress the quiet thrill. Every time she'd drunk from him, she'd felt it—this delicate line between the control she struggled to maintain and the raw instinct that surged up within her.

Next to her, Astron remained steady and calm, his expression unchanged as he walked, a picture of composure that only deepened her embarrassment. She could still feel the way his heartbeat had pulsed against her lips, the steady rhythm unflinching even as she drank. He made it seem like nothing at all, while she struggled to keep her own reaction in check.

'Get a grip, Maya,' she scolded herself, though her pulse quickened again as she remembered his calm command, the trust he'd placed in her even in her most vulnerable state.

Trying to ground herself, she cast a sideways glance at him. "I, uh..." she stammered, searching for the right words to break the silence. "Thank you."

He looked over at her, his expression as composed as ever, though there was a slight raise of his brow as if amused by her flustered state. "It's not a problem," he replied simply as if he hadn't just allowed her to indulge in something so deeply personal.

Her cheeks reddened further, and she let out a soft, nervous laugh. 'How can he be so unaffected?' she wondered, though his calm grounded her in a way she hadn't expected.

The rush of warmth and satisfaction in her chest was slowly giving way to a deeper insight, an understanding she hadn't fully grasped before. Each time she'd drunk from him, she'd been reminded of the power that lay within her, a force she had always kept tightly controlled.

And yet, it was through him, through the quiet trust he placed in her, that she was learning not just to control it, but to embrace it without fear.

'This isn't just hunger,' she realized, her gaze lingering on him as they continued to walk. 'It's a connection... a part of me that doesn't have to be hidden or suppressed.'

As the clarity settled within her, she felt a renewed sense of purpose. She wanted to become stronger—not simply to hold her powers in check, but to wield them fully, to trust herself as he did.

And when the time came, she wanted to stand beside him, not as someone needing to be grounded, but as someone he could rely on without question.

Astron's gaze flicked her way, catching her introspective expression, and he nodded slightly as if he already knew the thoughts stirring in her mind. His calm steadiness only solidified her resolve, and though her heart still beat faster at the memory of her lips grazing his neck, she felt a quiet, steady strength fill her.

'Next time,' she promised herself, 'I'll be even stronger.'

Maya took a steadying breath, feeling the last traces of warmth settle within her as she glanced over at Astron, her curiosity piqued. She opened her mouth, trying to keep her voice calm. "Is it... time?"

He met her gaze, his expression composed but carrying a hint of something unreadable. "Not quite," he replied, a flicker of anticipation in his eyes. "There's one thing left."

Her brows lifted slightly as she waited, intrigued until he continued. "Can you recommend a good place for alchemical purposes?"

Maya tilted her head, momentarily surprised. "Alchemical purposes?" she echoed, a faint smile tugging at her lips.

Astron nodded, his expression unwavering. "Yes. I need to brew a particular concoction. It's important, and I want to ensure it's done properly." His tone was steady, but she could sense the underlying seriousness, an unspoken weight in his words.

She considered his request, tapping a finger thoughtfully against her chin. "A concoction," she repeated, her intrigue only growing. "Well, if you're looking for a quality place, I know of a few options. One is a little out of the way, but their ingredients are some of the finest, and they keep everything organized by region, potency, and magical alignment."

Astron shook his head slightly, his expression still calm. "I don't need ingredients. What I need is quality equipment."

Maya's eyebrows lifted in surprise as the realization dawned on her. "You're the one brewing it?"

He gave a small nod as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "Yes. I've been practicing for a while."

She tilted her head, a glint of curiosity sparking in her eyes. "You know how to brew concoctions?"

A faint, almost imperceptible smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "It's a useful skill," he replied. "There are some things only I can make correctly, especially when it comes to preparations needed for... particular situations."

Maya let out a soft chuckle, unable to hide her admiration. "You never cease to surprise me, Junior." She gestured ahead, the intrigue deepening in her gaze. "Well, then, I think this place will suit your needs perfectly. They have the finest equipment, and their setups are kept in meticulous condition."

As they continued through the city, she cast a sidelong glance at him, curiosity bubbling up. "May I?"

"You may, Senior. You may."

Maya was happy.

#### Chapter 640 140.4 - Concocting

Maya gestured down the street, her voice light and slightly playful. "May I?"

Astron gave her a brief, knowing nod. "You may, Senior. You may."

A pleased smile crossed her lips as she took the lead, guiding him through the lively streets and weaving through smaller alleyways until they arrived at a polished building tucked just out of sight of the busier market paths. The shop was unassuming from the outside, its sign discreet, but the faint scent of rare herbs and the hum of magic in the air marked it as a place of exceptional quality.

Inside, the shop was immaculate, with shelves organized by alchemical category and equipment displayed in neat rows, each piece crafted with precision. Glass containers of rare ingredients lined the walls, and well-lit workstations showcased an array of finely honed alchemical tools, each one gleaming under carefully placed lights.

As they stepped in, a few staff members glanced over, their expressions shifting from polite professionalism to recognition as they spotted Maya. One of the shopkeepers, a tall, poised woman with silver hair, stepped forward and offered a courteous bow.

"Lady Evergreen," she greeted with a respectful smile. "It's an honor to have you here again. How may we assist you?"

Maya returned the smile, her presence calm yet carrying an unmistakable authority. "Thank you, Selenia. My friend here needs access to some of your finest equipment—a workspace with quality instruments for brewing."

The shopkeeper's gaze flickered over to Astron, assessing him briefly before nodding. "Of course, Lady Evergreen. We have a few private setups available in the back, equipped with our highest-grade apparatus. You're welcome to inspect them first."

She gestured for them to follow, and Maya led Astron through the rows of pristine equipment, her quiet pride in the shop evident. As they reached a secluded workspace outfitted with the most precise tools and enchanted instruments, she glanced at him, a glimmer of satisfaction in her eyes.

"Will this do?" she asked, tilting her head slightly, her tone light.

Astron stepped forward, his gaze sweeping over the equipment before giving a small nod of approval. "It's perfect," he said, a subtle weight to his words as he met her gaze.

Maya felt a quiet thrill of satisfaction knowing she had guided him to exactly what he needed. And as they settled in, the familiar scent of potent herbs and the hum of magical energy in the air reminded her of the influence and resources she possessed—an advantage she was more than willing to share with him.

The attendant looked to Astron, her expression polite and professional. "Do you require any materials, sir? We can supply almost anything within immediate reach. However, if it's a rare item, we may need to place an order from the storehouse."

Astron turned to her, his gaze steady. "I only need high-quality Aetherial Water."

The attendant's eyes lit up with understanding. Aetherial Water was widely used by alchemists to boil concoctions, favored for its stable magical conductivity and purity, which allowed ingredients to meld seamlessly without destabilizing the mixture. While it wasn't the rarest of items, the high demand meant it was usually stored with priority.

With a respectful bow, the attendant replied, "Of course, sir. I will bring the Aetherial Water shortly." She paused, then inclined her head further. "Was there anything else you required?"

Astron shook his head, his voice calm. "No, that will be enough."

The attendant nodded with a courteous smile, disappearing from the workspace to retrieve the water. As they waited, Maya observed Astron with quiet admiration, noting the calm precision with which he prepared the workspace, each movement as deliberate as if he'd done this a thousand times.

In this rare moment, she felt she was glimpsing a side of him few others had the privilege to see.

Maya watched as Astron moved around the alchemy lab, his steps unhurried yet purposeful. The room was a blend of ancient magic and modern science, each piece of equipment meticulously arranged on counters that hummed with a faint arcane glow. Glass beakers and crystal vials lined the shelves, enchanted burners beneath them pulsing with magical energy instead of flames. Above the central workspace, a shimmering crystal panel displayed an overlay of the ambient mana levels in the room, adjusting automatically to maintain balance—a feature Maya had only heard about.

Astron slipped a hand into his spatial storage and began withdrawing a series of small containers, each holding rare ingredients with potency that Maya could sense even at a distance. A few were marked with the sigils of distant lands, and one, a faintly glowing herb, radiated an energy she couldn't quite place. He arranged them on the table with practiced ease, his attention sharp, his every movement as precise as if he were on a battlefield.

Unable to resist her curiosity, she leaned in, her voice light yet inquisitive. "What exactly are you planning to make, Junior?"

Astron's gaze didn't waver as he began sorting through the ingredients, his violet eyes reflecting the faint, otherworldly glow of the equipment.

"It's a specially created concoction targeted a certain enemy," he said, his tone matter-of-fact.

Maya's curiosity sharpened as she watched Astron arrange the ingredients, her gaze lingering on the rare plants and roots. His response had been cryptic enough to stir her intrigue, so she leaned in slightly, unable to resist asking, "What kind of enemy are you targeting with this?"

Astron's gaze shifted briefly to her, his expression unreadable. "An adversary that requires... particular preparations," he replied, his tone distant, as if he were weighing how much to reveal.

The words hung in the air, leaving her with more questions than answers. But as she observed his unchanging expression, she understood that it wasn't a subject he wanted to delve into. Respecting

his privacy, she offered him a slight nod and turned her attention back to the array of ingredients spread across the table.

Her gaze fell upon the plants, her eyes widening slightly in recognition as she picked out two of them. "Celial Nightshade..." she murmured, her fingers brushing just above its dark petals without touching. "And Voidroot... I didn't think anyone could get these so easily."

Both plants were nearly impossible to acquire, even for her family, whose reach extended across the continent. The Celial Nightshade, a striking bloom known to appear only under the rare light of a blue moon, possessed an essence potent enough to disrupt mana flow in any creature. Voidroot, on the other hand, was a dense, dark root that grew deep in desolate wastelands, its nature capable of absorbing and nullifying surrounding mana. The presence of these rare specimens hinted at an enemy of considerable power.

As she moved her gaze to the remaining three, her curiosity deepened. The plants were unfamiliar, their properties unknown to her.

She glanced up at him, her tone soft but filled with awe. "These ingredients... I've only ever seen two of them, even in my family's reserves. The others..." she trailed off, a mix of admiration and bewilderment flickering in her eyes. "I don't even recognize them."

Astron's gaze remained steady as he looked at the ingredients, each rare component laid out with purpose. He turned to Maya, his voice calm but carrying a depth of knowledge that caught her full attention.

"Hernetgrass," he began, gesturing to the shimmering silver plant, "resonates with dimensional magic. It's a catalyst for spells that distort or fold space. In this mixture, it will amplify the radius of any effect without weakening it. Useful for handling evasive or multi-dimensional foes."

Maya's eyes widened slightly as she nodded, absorbing the information with interest.

He moved to the next plant, his fingers brushing near the Dokebloom. "This one's called Dokebloom. Its petals contain faint traces of dragon's blood, making it especially potent against draconic creatures and any beings with scaled resilience. It heightens the mixture's potency and penetrative power, breaking through tougher defenses."



Her eyes lingered on the vibrant petals, marveling at the subtle glow within. This was beyond anything she'd encountered in her family's collections, a realm of expertise that spoke to battles far beyond the usual.

Finally, he gestured toward the blue moss, its cold aura almost palpable in the alchemy lab's warm atmosphere. "Rostglow Moss," he said, his tone as cool as the moss itself. "It's able to slow down regenerative abilities—most effective against creatures that heal unnaturally fast. In the right doses, it can suppress healing without harming the host body itself, allowing the other ingredients to work effectively."

She felt a ripple of awe as she listened, each ingredient unveiling the precision of his intentions, tailored for an enemy unlike any she could imagine. This concoction was a weapon in its own right.

Just as he finished, the door opened quietly, and the attendant stepped in, carrying a carefully sealed bottle filled with Aetherial Water. She approached Astron with a respectful bow, holding out the bottle.

"Here is the Aetherial Water, sir," she said, her voice courteous. "Is there anything else you need?"

Astron accepted the bottle with a nod. "No, this is sufficient. Thank you."

The attendant offered another brief bow before leaving them alone once more. Astron uncorked the bottle, carefully pouring the water into the beaker. As the liquid settled

Astron adjusted the burner beneath the beaker, his focus sharpening as he carefully raised the temperature. The Aetherial Water shimmered, its surface rippling with a faint, silvery glow as it began to heat up. Maya watched, noting how the liquid maintained its stability, adapting to the precise adjustments he made.

She recalled that Aetherial Water was highly valued not just for its purity, but because it buffered errors—ensuring that if an ingredient was added at the wrong moment, its properties wouldn't degrade, preserving the potency and essence of each element.

Astron's gaze remained steady on the beaker, his hands moving with calm precision as he reached for the Celial Nightshade first. His expression was completely focused, his normally composed demeanor taking on a fierce intensity as he worked.

Each of his movements was deliberate as he added the Nightshade with a controlled pour, watching as it melted seamlessly into the shimmering liquid, turning it a shade darker.

Maya felt her pulse quicken, mesmerized by the shift in his expression. She had seen him calm and composed many times before, yet this focus was different—unyielding as if he were holding each second in his control, ready to confront whatever enemy awaited.

The sharp lines of his face, highlighted by the light above, seemed more defined, his features taking on a lethal edge that sent a subtle shiver through her.

'Sigh.....It really is something now....' she wondered, unable to look away. There was a strength in his expression that felt almost tangible, a force she could sense even from where she stood.

He continued, adding the Voidroot with the same exacting care, the liquid deepening to a murky.

And well....The glow of the burner cast shadows across his face, emphasizing the intensity of his gaze.

Making her forget the purpose of the concoction altogether, lost in the dangerous allure of his focus.

His face, hardened by purpose, looked as though he belonged on a battlefield—yet here he was, wielding knowledge and precision like a weapon, crafting something as deadly as any blade.

And in that quiet space, as the concoction continued to take shape, Maya felt herself drawn deeper into this unexpected side of Astron.