

H. Academy 851

Chapter 851 - 197.3 - Mentor

"You're early."

Ethan scratched the back of his head, feeling a bit awkward at Eleanor's remark. He couldn't exactly admit that he came early out of fear of upsetting her, right? That wouldn't exactly help his image.

So, instead, he did what anyone would do in his situation—he made something up. "Well, you know," he said, forcing a casual grin, "figured it wouldn't hurt to get familiar with the place before we start."

Eleanor turned from the console, finally removing her sharp gaze from the screen to look at him directly. "That is a good attitude."

Ethan laughed awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck. Well, that worked better than I expected.

With Eleanor's gaze now off him, he let his attention wander back to the facility. The more he looked around, the more questions flooded his mind. This place wasn't just big—it was cutting-edge, packed with high-grade equipment that even the academy's standard training halls didn't have.

His curiosity won out. "Professor," he started, glancing back at her. "What is this place? I mean, I've been at Academy for a while now, and I've never even seen this building before."

Eleanor studied him for a moment before responding. "That's because it's not part of the standard curriculum."

Ethan raised an eyebrow. "So it's special, then?"

For a split second, Ethan could have sworn he saw a faint smile tug at the corners of Eleanor's lips—subtle, almost imperceptible, but there nonetheless.

"Indeed, it is a special place," Eleanor said, her tone composed yet carrying an edge of something unreadable. "It is quite durable."

Ethan blinked. "Durable?"

Eleanor didn't elaborate, simply turning back to the console and continuing her work as if that answer was sufficient.

And that was when Ethan felt it—a vague, creeping sense of unease. Why would she specifically mention durability? He had a bad premonition, like something very unfortunate was about to happen to him in this room.

He glanced around again, his hazel eyes sweeping over the high-tech combat arenas, the reinforced plating on the floors and walls, the faint hum of mana-infused machinery. Just how intense is this training going to be?

Still, pressing Eleanor for details felt like a bad idea. She's not going to explain anything unless she wants to. And if she wants to keep it a mystery, that means it's better for my sanity not to know.

So, instead of dwelling on it, he decided to pass the time with some safer questions.

"This whole mentorship thing," Ethan started, shoving his hands into his pockets. "It all feels kind of sudden, doesn't it? Like, one day we're just cadets, and then next thing we know, we're personally chosen by the Eleanor White."

Eleanor didn't look up from her console. "The Academy regularly selects cadets with potential for specialized training."

Ethan tilted his head. "Yeah, but normally, students apply for mentors. We weren't exactly given a choice here."

Eleanor glanced at him, her sharp gaze unreadable. "Does that bother you?"

Ethan paused, then grinned. "Nah, not really. Just curious. It's not every day someone gets thrown into an elite program without warning."

Eleanor didn't respond immediately, but there was something in her gaze—something measuring, as if she was deciding how much to say.

Finally, she replied, "Potential is wasted without guidance. Whether you applied or not, the decision was made because you and Astron showed results."

Ethan absorbed that, the weight of her words settling in. It wasn't just about recognition—it was about expectations. They weren't chosen because they were lucky. They were chosen because someone expected something from them.

Before he could respond, the heavy doors behind him slid open again.

Astron had arrived.

Ethan let out a small chuckle. "Took your time, huh?"

Astron ignored him, his sharp purple eyes scanning the facility just as Ethan had before. But unlike Ethan, he didn't ask questions. He simply observed, his expression calm but unreadable.

"This place," Astron said after a moment, his voice steady. "It's different from the other training halls."

Eleanor finally turned fully to face them both. "Because it is different," she confirmed. "You'll both come to understand that soon enough."

Ethan exchanged a glance with Astron before looking back at Eleanor. "Alright then, Professor. What exactly are we about to get ourselves into?"

Eleanor's slight smile returned—but this time, there was something undeniably dangerous about it.

"You're about to find out."

And for the first time since stepping into this place, Ethan felt his bad premonition solidify into real concern.

Eleanor's sharp gaze swept over the two cadets standing before her. Two different breeds of talent—one raw and instinctive, the other honed and calculating. Both had been chosen, not because of chance, but because they had shown results. Because they had potential that could be sharpened into something exceptional.

Her lips curled slightly, almost imperceptibly, as a flicker of anticipation passed through her. These two were different from the others. And soon, they would come to understand what that meant.

She exhaled slowly, then checked the time on her smartwatch.

The mentorship block had officially begun.

"Now," Eleanor said, her voice crisp and commanding.

Ethan tensed slightly, standing a little straighter. Astron remained composed, though Eleanor didn't miss the sharpness in his gaze, the way he was already trying to piece things together before they even started.

She locked eyes with them both, assessing, measuring. And then, she licked her lips slightly, a flicker of excitement barely restrained.

"Let's begin."

With a small motion, Eleanor tapped the console beside her, and immediately, the room came to life.

The lights dimmed, the hum of mana-infused technology growing stronger. The walls of the facility shifted, reinforced barriers rising from the floor, restructuring the space into something more fitting for combat. The polished floors, the faint shimmer of enchantments woven into the environment—this was a place built to withstand true power.

Ethan swallowed hard. That bad premonition he'd had before? Yeah, it was feeling very justified now.

Astron, for his part, remained still, his sharp gaze flicking between the shifting structures, already analyzing the space. Calculating.

Eleanor turned to face them fully, her presence towering, suffocating. "When you walk into this facility, you are not cadets," she stated, her voice cool but unwavering. "You are not students under the academy's protection. Here, there are no professors to shelter you, no structured lessons to guide you step by step."

She raised a single finger, and the mana in the air grew heavier, pressing down on them like an unseen force. Ethan clenched his jaw, instinctively adjusting his stance to brace himself against it. Astron merely narrowed his eyes, his fingers twitching slightly in reaction to the shift in atmosphere.

"In here," Eleanor continued, "you are warriors in training. You are stepping into a world where hesitation means failure. Where control over your abilities is not a matter of grades, but of survival."

Ethan let out a slow breath, trying to keep his composure. "Alright," he said, forcing a grin. "So... what's the first step? You gonna have us do drills? Some kind of mana-control exercise?"

Eleanor's eyes gleamed with something unreadable. Dangerous.

"No," she said simply.

Eleanor's sharp gaze flickered between the two cadets, analyzing every subtle shift in their posture, the way their muscles tensed, the way their expressions shifted ever so slightly in anticipation. Then, a slow, dangerous smile formed on her lips.

"We will first see your level," she said simply.

With a casual flick of her hand, something shot from the right side of the room, skimming the air in a smooth arc before sliding to a stop behind her. A small, unassuming box. Without breaking eye contact with them, Eleanor sat down on it, crossing one leg over the other with effortless ease.

Ethan blinked, momentarily thrown off by how relaxed she seemed. "Wait... you're just going to sit there?" he asked, wary.

Eleanor's expression didn't change.

"Just endure this for as long as you can."

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"Just endure this for as long as you can."

Before either of them could process the meaning of those words, it hit.

A force unlike anything they had felt before.

An unbearable weight crashed down upon them.

Ethan barely had time to react before his knees buckled under the sheer magnitude of it. His breath hitched, eyes widening as an unseen force crushed against his body, sending waves of pain through every fiber of his being.

"Urghk—!" A strangled gasp escaped his lips, his body instinctively fighting against it.

And then—cough!

Blood splattered onto the polished floor.

Ethan's body convulsed slightly as he hunched forward, his arms trembling as they barely held him upright. His vision blurred at the edges, the sheer pressure making his bones feel like they were grinding against each other.

What the hell is this?! his mind screamed. It wasn't just mana pressure—it was something else, something far more refined, far more controlled. It wasn't just an oppressive force—it was a scalpel, dissecting every weakness he had and pressing into them mercilessly.

Beside him, Astron was still standing—but just barely. His body was rigid, every muscle locked in place as if his sheer will alone was keeping him upright. His breathing was shallow, controlled, but Eleanor could see the faint quiver in his fingertips, the slight tremble of his jaw as he clenched his teeth to endure.

The difference between the two was clear.

Ethan, for all his instinct and adaptability, was still reacting. He was trying to resist the force like an external attack, as if it were something he could push back against.

Astron, on the other hand, was enduring. He wasn't wasting his energy fighting it head-on—he was adjusting, recalibrating, shifting his center of gravity in the smallest, most efficient ways possible. He was already trying to understand the force bearing down on him.

Eleanor rested her chin against her palm, observing them both with a calculating expression.

"Not bad," she murmured.

Ethan let out a low growl, forcing his head up to glare at her. "Not bad—? What the hell is this?!" he rasped, his voice strained.

Eleanor didn't answer right away. Instead, she leaned forward slightly, her golden eyes gleaming.

"This," she said slowly, "is gravity."

Ethan's eyes widened, realization dawning even as his body screamed in protest.

She was increasing the gravity in the room. Not in the usual way—this wasn't just some heavy weight being pushed down on them. No, this was precise. Tailored. Every part of their body was feeling a slightly different level of pressure, forcing them to compensate in ways that normal combat scenarios would never demand.

It was training at the most brutal level of control.

Astron, through gritted teeth, finally spoke. His voice, though strained, remained steady. "How much... is it?"

Eleanor tilted her head slightly. "Currently? Roughly 13 times standard gravity."

Ethan let out a choked laugh, part disbelief, part frustration. "Five—? Oh, great. Fantastic." His arms trembled violently as he struggled to push himself upright. No wonder it feels like my organs are about to burst.

Astron, despite his better endurance, was still visibly strained. His usual calm expression was lined with tension, his sharp purple eyes narrowed as he recalculated his breathing pattern.

Eleanor watched them both, gauging their limits. Five times gravity is already beyond what most cadets could withstand. But... how far can they really go?

She leaned back slightly, a faint, almost amused smile on her lips.

"Shall we go higher?" she asked.

Ethan's head snapped up, his eyes wild. "Wait, what—?!"

And then the pressure increased.

Eleanor tapped a single finger against her wrist, and the pressure surged.

Fifteen times standard gravity.

Ethan let out a strangled gasp as the crushing force intensified, his muscles screaming in protest. His hands slammed against the ground to brace himself, his entire body shaking violently under the weight. His vision blurred at the edges, his heartbeat pounding like a war drum in his ears.

Astron remained standing, but just barely. His stance shifted again, his breathing becoming more controlled—deeper, slower, deliberate. Even still, a faint tremor ran through his arms, a sign that even he was reaching his limit.

Eleanor, watching from her seat, was not impressed.

"I hope you're beginning to understand," she said, her voice cool and unwavering, completely detached from the suffering in front of her.

Ethan barely managed to lift his head, his hazel eyes glazed with pain. "Understand...?" he choked out, his voice strained.

Eleanor's golden eyes gleamed. "The force pressing down on you right now? It is gravity, yes. A physical force. And if it were only that, perhaps you could endure it with enough raw strength, enough physical fortitude."

Her fingers tapped against the console, and the pressure shifted again—not in weight, but in sensation.

Ethan and Astron both felt it immediately. The crushing weight no longer just pressed down on them—it began to bend, to twist around their bodies unnaturally, like invisible hands manipulating their very balance. Their equilibrium warped, their bodies refusing to move the way they expected.

Astron's breathing hitched for the first time.

Ethan's arms buckled further, his shoulders shaking violently. "Wh—What the hell now?" he rasped, trying and failing to keep the panic out of his voice.

Eleanor's expression remained impassive. "I told you before," she continued, "mana presence—this force you are feeling—is not just material."

She gestured around them, as if motioning to something unseen. "Gravity is a force, bound by the physical rules of this world. A measurable concept, one that physics can define and understand.

"Yet—" her golden eyes sharpened, her voice dropping slightly in tone, "—whenever you face a high-ranking Hunter, or a mana beast, or any being with an overwhelming mana presence, you should never think of it as just a physical force."

The weight pressing on them shifted again, subtly changing direction in pulses, forcing their bodies to adjust every fraction of a second.

Ethan's body spasmed from the unnatural sensation, the sheer unpredictability making it impossible for him to stabilize himself. His instincts, the very thing he always relied on, were being turned against him.

Astron, for all his composure, finally gritted his teeth. He was adapting—calculating, even—but Eleanor could see it now. The strain creeping into his expression. The moment-to-moment mental adjustments were beginning to tax him.

Eleanor's lips curled into the faintest smirk. Good.

"Mana itself is not bound by physical rules," she stated. "We have learned this for countless different times. In the classroom, in the lectures."

Eleanor's gaze flicked between the two cadets, her sharp golden eyes studying them both with analytical precision. Ethan was visibly struggling, his body trembling under the crushing force, while Astron—though also affected—was holding out significantly better.

She tilted her head slightly before speaking, her voice calm yet instructive. "Ethan."

Ethan gritted his teeth, barely managing to lift his head to meet her gaze.

"You have a stronger body than Astron," she stated plainly. "In terms of pure physical capability—if we were to compare raw strength, endurance, and overall body durability—you would win."

Ethan let out a strangled chuckle, wiping the small trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth.

"Well, that's... great to know, Professor. Doesn't really feel like it helps right now."

Eleanor ignored his sarcasm. "Yet, despite this advantage, he is resisting the pressure better than you."

At that, Ethan's eyes flicked toward Astron.

Indeed, Eleanor's words rang true. Astron was still standing. His body was taut, his fingers slightly trembling, his breath carefully measured—but he was holding. Enduring. While Ethan, for all his natural physical superiority, was barely keeping himself from collapsing.

"How...?" Ethan rasped, frustration creeping into his voice. "How the hell are you—?"

"You're asking yourself how," Eleanor interrupted, her voice smooth and knowing. "How is he resisting it better than you?"

Ethan didn't respond immediately, but the flicker of frustration in his hazel eyes made it clear—that was exactly what he was thinking.

Eleanor's lips curled slightly. "The answer lies in yourself."

Ethan's breath was ragged, but he managed a glare. "You wanna be a little less cryptic and just tell me?"

Eleanor leaned back slightly, resting one arm on her knee. "Use your mana."

Ethan blinked. For a second, his mind felt sluggish, but then realization hit him. Mana. Of course. His body wasn't just fighting against physical pressure. This was mana manipulation—a presence, a force beyond mere weight.

Gritting his teeth, he focused inward, drawing from the well of energy within him. His mana flared, a golden hue crackling around him, wrapping his body in raw power.

And yet—

Nothing changed.

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Use your mana."

Ethan blinked. For a second, his mind felt sluggish, but then realization hit him. Mana. Of course. His body wasn't just fighting against physical pressure. This was mana manipulation—a presence, a force beyond mere weight.

Gritting his teeth, he focused inward, drawing from the well of energy within him. His mana flared, a golden hue crackling around him, wrapping his body in raw power.

And yet—

Nothing changed.

Ethan's body still screamed under the weight. The pressure still crushed down on him just as much as before. His legs still wobbled, his muscles still burned, and his bones still felt like they were on the verge of snapping.

"What...?" Ethan choked out, sweat dripping down his face. "Why isn't it—?!"

Eleanor sighed.

A slow, unimpressed, exasperated sigh.

"Did you really think it would be that easy?" she asked, her tone edged with something almost disappointed. "Dumping mana into your body like a blunt instrument and expecting it to work?"

Ethan flinched at her words. "But you said—"

"I said to use your mana," Eleanor corrected sharply. "Not to waste it."

Her gaze sharpened as she gestured subtly towards Astron.

"Look at him."

Ethan glanced at Astron again—really looked this time.

Astron was using mana. But it wasn't radiating wildly around him. It wasn't flaring or being forcefully pumped into his limbs like Ethan's. It was controlled. Refined. His mana wasn't fighting the force—it was adapting to it.

And that was the difference.

Eleanor's voice carried across the room with finality. "Mana is not a shield. It is not just a weapon. It is part of you—an extension of yourself. Brute-forcing it will never work."

She leaned forward slightly, her golden eyes glinting. "Control it, or it will control you."

Ethan coughed violently, more blood splattering onto the polished floor beneath him. His arms trembled, his muscles burning like fire, but he forced himself to listen. He had no other choice—if he wanted to get rid of this hellish pressure, he had to work for it.

Taking a ragged breath, he obeyed.

This time, he didn't just dump his mana into his body. He didn't just force it to resist the weight pressing down on him. Instead, he tried to do what Astron was doing—control it.

His mana, instead of flaring wildly, began to flow.

And immediately, he felt it.

It wasn't like before. It wasn't a desperate push against Eleanor's overwhelming pressure. No, it was something else entirely. His body itself was countering the force, not through brute strength, but through a natural, instinctual flow of mana.

Like a river bending around a stone, his mana wasn't colliding with the pressure—it was guiding it away from his core.

The sensation startled him. The once unbearable weight shifted, as though his body had suddenly found a way to disperse it. He was still under immense strain—his muscles still ached, his lungs

still burned—but for the first time since Eleanor had unleashed this training on them, he could move.

Not easily. Not comfortably. But he could move.

His hazel eyes widened, his breath coming in slower, more measured gasps. "I..." He swallowed, barely able to speak. "I can feel it. It's... different."

Eleanor observed him, her golden eyes gleaming with quiet approval. "I am surprised," she mused, "that no one in your family taught you this."

Ethan blinked, still focusing on maintaining his control. He didn't look at her, but her words dug into his mind.

"But I suppose," Eleanor continued, her voice level, "they didn't feel the need to."

That made Ethan grit his teeth, but he didn't argue. Of course, they didn't. Though he had been subjected to the training with his Aunt, even Kaya Hartley herself didn't have an aura like Eleanor.

Something was fundamentally different.

Eleanor watched his expression carefully. "Just as you're beginning to feel it now, your body will adapt." Her voice was steady, instructive. "Sometimes, you don't need to actively give input for everything."

She gestured toward Astron, who was still maintaining his stance, though the faintest sheen of sweat now covered his skin.

"Most of the time, your body already knows what to do."

Ethan clenched his fists. He could feel it now. His body did know what to do. It wasn't about fighting the pressure—it was about allowing his mana to guide his reactions, about trusting in what was already inside him.

Ethan felt it—the shift.

The once unbearable pressure was still there, still pressing down on every fiber of his being, but... it was changing. Not because the force itself had lessened, but because his body had finally started adjusting.

His mana wasn't just a blunt force wrapping around his limbs—it was flowing with the pressure, redirecting it, countering it without resistance.

And for the first time since Eleanor had activated this test, his body wasn't on the verge of breaking. His breaths, though still heavy, weren't choked gasps. His muscles, though still burning, weren't screaming for relief.

It was getting... a little more comfortable.

Eleanor's golden eyes gleamed as she observed his progress. "Not bad."

Ethan exhaled slowly, shaking off the last remnants of his earlier struggle. His legs were still weak, but he was standing.

That was when Eleanor's voice rang out again—sharp, unwavering.

"Now, let's increase the intensity."

Ethan's stomach dropped.

Before he could react, Eleanor's mana surged. The weight pressing down on them doubled, then tripled, forcing both cadets to their limits once again.

Ethan hit the ground immediately.

Astron remained standing.

For a moment.

Even he staggered, his footing shifting slightly as the gravity warped again, the unpredictable shifts forcing his body into constant micro-adjustments.

Ethan clenched his teeth. Dammit—again?!

But he wasn't the only one struggling.

For the first time, even Astron was feeling it.

Yet, despite the overwhelming force, despite his trembling fingers and the tension lining his usually calm face—he was still adapting.

Faster. Always faster.

Ethan forced himself back up, struggling to match the pace—but Astron was always a step ahead.

"Why..." Ethan panted, his arms shaking, "why is he adjusting so fast?"

Eleanor answered with a questioning tone as well.

"That is also something that I am curious about. Care to elaborate, Astron?"

Ethan scowled but didn't argue. He could see it now. Astron wasn't just enduring—he was learning.

His adjustments weren't just reactionary—they were calculated.

Even through gritted teeth, Astron's voice finally came out. "It's... different now." His purple eyes narrowed slightly. "The weight isn't just pressing down—it's shifting unpredictably, making stability..." He sucked in a breath. "Impossible."

"Hmm? Not bad." Eleanor's smirk widened slightly. "Good. You're finally paying attention."

Astron's mind worked through the sensation. He was analyzing how the pressure moved, how it coiled, warped, pulsed in waves.

"There's a... rhythm to it," he muttered, shifting his stance slightly.

Ethan, still struggling, forced himself to listen, watching how Astron was reacting.

The moment he saw it, his instincts clicked.

It wasn't random. It only felt that way because he was trying to react without thinking.

Ethan exhaled sharply, shifting his stance just as Astron had.

The next wave of pressure came—and this time, he braced for it properly.

For a brief moment, both of them were enduring together.

And then—

They collapsed.

First Ethan. Then Astron, only seconds later.

Their bodies hit the ground, breathless, shaking, drained of everything they had.

The silence in the training hall was broken only by their ragged gasps.

Eleanor remained seated on her small crate, watching them with cold, precise eyes.

Then, she clapped her hands.

A single, deliberate motion.

"Now," she said smoothly, rising to her feet. "I see your level."

Her voice wasn't mocking. It wasn't disappointed.

It was evaluative.

Because now, she truly knew what she had to work with.

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"I see your level."

Eleanor let the silence settle over the room for a few moments, letting the weight of exhaustion fully sink into the two cadets sprawled on the floor. Their bodies trembled, their breaths were uneven, but they were still conscious. That, at least, was a good sign.

She tapped a few commands on the console beside her, and instantly, the immense gravitational pressure lifted. The suffocating weight that had been pressing down on them vanished, leaving behind only the echoes of its toll in their aching limbs and strained muscles.

Ethan let out a shuddering breath, his fingers flexing against the floor. It felt unnatural to move freely again, like stepping out of deep water after being submerged for too long. Astron remained still for a few seconds longer, before finally shifting his posture, pushing himself upright slowly, deliberately.

Eleanor watched them both with cool, analytical eyes before speaking.

"I'll give you a few minutes to recover," she said, her voice crisp yet carrying a note of finality.

"Then, we move on."

Neither of them responded, still too busy relearning how to breathe properly.

Eleanor turned away from them momentarily, pacing the room in slow, measured steps, giving them time to steady themselves. She had learned what she needed.

Now, it was time for feedback.

After a few moments, she finally turned back to them, her golden gaze locking onto theirs with piercing clarity.

"Both of you are talented," she began, her voice even. "That much is clear."

Ethan, still catching his breath, managed a weak grin. "Yeah? So I don't completely suck, then?"

Eleanor ignored the comment and continued.

"Ethan." Her gaze narrowed slightly, assessing. "Physically, you are strong. Very strong. I have seen countless cadets collapse in less than a minute under that pressure—but you held out. Your will to endure is not bad. And despite struggling, your body is already well-accustomed to operating under intense pressure."

She crossed her arms. "Most likely because it's you. Because you have already spent your life around powerful people. You have trained under conditions far beyond what most cadets can even imagine."

Ethan's jaw clenched slightly at that statement. She wasn't wrong. The Hartley name came with expectations, ones that had been drilled into him since childhood. His body had been forged under relentless training, pushed to limits far beyond normal.

"But." Eleanor's voice cut through his thoughts. "There are things you can improve."

Ethan huffed a breath, sitting up a little straighter. "Yeah? Hit me with it."

Eleanor's gaze sharpened. "You rely too much on brute force."

Ethan's expression stiffened slightly, but Eleanor pressed on.

"Your body is strong, yes, but you expect it to handle everything. Instead of using mana to assist you properly, you treated it like a secondary tool, something to be used only when your raw strength isn't enough."

Her eyes bored into his. "That's a waste. Your body and your mana should work in tandem—not separately. You relied too much on instinct to compensate for the gaps in your control. And instinct alone will never be enough against an opponent who is stronger, faster, and more precise than you."

Ethan's grin had faded completely now, replaced by something far more serious. He wiped the sweat from his brow, absorbing every word. It wasn't pleasant to hear—but it was right.

Eleanor continued, her tone unwavering. "You have the foundation for incredible growth. But unless you refine your mana control and stop treating it like a weapon separate from yourself, you will hit a limit."

Ethan didn't respond immediately, but something in his gaze had shifted. He understood.

Eleanor gave him a final glance before shifting her gaze to Astron.

"And you."

Astron's sharp purple eyes met hers, unwavering despite his exhaustion.

"You adapted faster than I expected," Eleanor admitted, tilting her head slightly. "Even when the pressure increased, you were always the first to adjust. Your ability to analyze, dissect, and react is impressive."

She stepped closer, watching him carefully. "You felt the shift before it happened. You could read the patterns of the mana pressure and adjust accordingly. That is rare."

Eleanor's golden eyes gleamed as she observed Astron, noting the way his breathing had already begun to stabilize despite the overwhelming strain from earlier. He had been through something like this before.

"You, like Ethan, have gotten used to strong presences," she noted, her voice measured.

"However..." She paused, tilting her head slightly. "You're different."

Astron's gaze remained steady, waiting for her elaboration.

"It appears that, along the way, you've developed habits. Subtle ones. Ones that let you fight against stronger enemies."

Ethan furrowed his brow, glancing at Astron. "Habits?"

Eleanor nodded. "They aren't necessarily bad. In fact, they are what allowed you to endure. You've trained yourself to react to superior forces—not by clashing with them, but by adapting before they even press down on you."

Astron didn't respond, but Eleanor could tell he understood exactly what she meant. His ability to adjust wasn't just talent—it was ingrained. It had been learned through experience, not merely natural instinct.

"But," Eleanor continued, her voice sharpening, "while these habits make you incredibly versatile, they also create limitations."

Astron's eyes narrowed slightly, but Eleanor didn't stop.

"Because you've learned to move around pressure rather than resist it, you've never fully tested your ability to withstand it."

She crossed her arms, her piercing gaze locked onto him. "If you don't set boundaries for how far you let those habits control your fighting style, you may find yourself unable to face an enemy who doesn't allow you to adapt."

Astron's fingers twitched slightly at the thought.

Ethan, still catching his breath, let out a weak laugh. "So what you're saying is, we're both kind of dumb in opposite ways."

Eleanor's eyes flicked toward him, unimpressed. "I wouldn't call it dumb," she said smoothly. "Just incomplete."

She straightened, her gaze shifting between the two as she rolled her shoulders slightly.

"In any case," she said, her tone shifting back to command, "for now, what you're going to do is simple."

She glanced around the massive training hall before gesturing toward the far end of the facility.

"You're going to run."

Ethan blinked. Astron's eyes flickered with faint recognition.

"You're going to run," Eleanor repeated, "until you get accustomed to this pressure."

Ethan groaned. "I knew she was going to say that."

Astron, predictably, didn't react, but there was a slight shift in his posture—as if he had also expected this.

Eleanor smirked slightly, then clapped her hands once.

The sound rang through the hall like a starting gun.

"Now, move."

Neither of them hesitated.

They ran.

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

Eleanor folded her arms, watching as Ethan and Astron moved through the training hall, their bodies straining under the crushing force that still weighed on them. Each step was a struggle, each motion carefully measured to conserve energy while fighting against the ever-present gravitational pressure.

She knew exactly what they were going through.

This was not a normal kind of pressure.

She had joked earlier about Ethan not learning it, but the truth was, even the strongest Hunters wouldn't be able to exert pressure in the same way she did. This wasn't just a raw, overwhelming force—it was precision, a presence she could tailor to target every individual's unique weaknesses.

There was a reason why she was called "The Invoker."

Her mastery of mana manipulation—of imposing her will upon the battlefield—was what set her apart from others. The ability to control, warp, and adjust not just the pressure, but the way it interacted with everything it touched.

She had used this countless times in real battles. Suppressing enemies. Weakening creatures. Breaking opponents before they could even fight back.

This wasn't just training. It was a lesson in survival.

As she observed them running, Eleanor's mind began to process her initial assessment.

Their bodies were already at an impressive level.

'Stronger than expected,' she mused internally, her golden eyes flicking between the two figures moving across the hall.

Ethan was built like a tank. His endurance, his strength, his ability to take damage and keep moving—it was all elite. Even now, despite the strain, despite the unnatural weight pressing against every part of his body, he still pushed forward. His instincts made up for his lack of refined control, but Eleanor could see how he was beginning to adjust, trying to trust his mana rather than just wield it like a blunt tool.

Then, there was Astron.

'The fact that he is managing to compete with Ethan...' Eleanor narrowed her eyes slightly, her mind working through the details.

It was impressive.

It was more than impressive.

But she wasn't entirely surprised.

She had already known that Astron was hiding his abilities. That much had been clear from the start. However, to see it in real-time—to see him endure pressure that should have left most cadets broken—was still something to take note of.

'His endurance isn't raw strength. It's efficiency.'

And that made all the difference.

Most Hunters at this level wouldn't be able to manage that, even if they understood what needed to be done.

'However, which one is it...'

Yet even now, she was still unable to find the question to her real answer.

Chapter 855 197.7 - Mentor

Ethan's boots hit the ground in steady, rhythmic strides as he ran, his breath controlled but labored under the lingering pressure Eleanor had set upon them. The weight had lessened, but not by much—it was still pressing down on his limbs, forcing every motion to be more deliberate, more precise. Each step required effort, each inhale a conscious act of control.

But despite the strain on his own body, his focus wasn't just on himself.

It was on Astron.

Ethan glanced sideways, his sharp eyes tracking the figure running beside him. Astron's pace was steady, his form measured and efficient—but for once, even his typically unreadable expression was beginning to crack under the pressure. A faint tightness in his jaw, the subtle tension around his eyes. He was feeling it.

Of course he was.

Eleanor wasn't the type to let them walk away unscathed. This wasn't just endurance training. This was about adaptation. It was about learning how to move under conditions where most people would crumble.

But Ethan couldn't shake a thought that kept resurfacing in his mind as he watched Astron push forward.

Learning to face stronger opponents...

Eleanor's words lingered in his head.

Ethan had sparred with countless people. His whole life had been built around being stronger, faster, more resilient. He'd fought against talented cadets, experienced hunters, and even his own family,

whose expectations had always been sky-high. He'd learned to power through most fights with a combination of sheer force and solid technique.

And yet.

Even when Astron was weaker—much weaker than he is now—he still beat me.

Not in some overwhelming, crushing defeat. Not because he was physically stronger. Not because he had some insane advantage.

But because of how he fought.

Even back then, when Ethan had first sparred with him in unarmed combat, Astron had moved in a way that was different from everyone else. He never met force with force. He didn't waste energy where he didn't need to. He had an eerie way of adjusting—of predicting—of slipping through the cracks of an opponent's approach.

And that was before whatever growth had happened to him recently.

Now? With his power increasing, with his body stronger, sharper, faster?

It made Ethan wonder.

How much stronger has he really gotten?

Ethan exhaled through his nose, refocusing on the path ahead. His legs burned, but he wasn't going to slow down. Not yet.

He saw Astron's shoulders tighten slightly, a rare sign of exertion.

That same thought repeated in Ethan's mind.

What the hell kind of training did this guy go through?

The more he watched, the more he understood what Eleanor had meant.

Astron wasn't the type to fight stronger enemies. He was the type to survive them.

Ethan exhaled through his mouth this time, the burning in his legs becoming a dull, persistent ache. The rhythm of his breathing matched the steady pounding of his boots against the ground. He could keep this up—he had to. Eleanor wasn't going to let them stop anytime soon.

But damn, was this boring.

Running under pressure was one thing. Running under pressure in complete silence? That was its own kind of torture.

He glanced sideways at Astron again. The guy was still locked in, expression mostly blank aside from the strain tightening his features. Not a single word, no complaint, no visible sign of frustration. Just running.

Ethan clicked his tongue. "You ever get bored of being quiet all the time?"

Astron didn't respond immediately, but his eyes shifted slightly in Ethan's direction before looking forward again.

Ethan took that as a maybe.

"Like, seriously," Ethan continued, adjusting his pace slightly, "you don't talk in class, you barely react when Julia or Lilia mess with you, and even now, you're just running like some silent assassin in training. Do you just not have random thoughts?"

Astron exhaled, but it was more out of exertion than exasperation. Still, Ethan took it as progress.

"I mean, look at us," Ethan went on, undeterred. "Sweating our asses off, running under whatever insane gravitational pressure Eleanor threw at us. At least throw me a bone here. Give me something to think about while I suffer."

Astron remained quiet for a moment longer, as if debating whether or not to indulge Ethan's nonsense.

Then, finally, he spoke.

"...I think you talk to distract yourself."

Ethan blinked. "Well, yeah."

Astron didn't argue.

Ethan smirked slightly. "That means it's working. So, come on—say something. Anything."

Silence stretched between them again, but then, Astron spoke in that same calm, even tone.

"This would be easier if you weren't wasting energy talking."

Ethan scoffed. "And this would be easier if you weren't acting like a damn ghost. C'mon, man. There's gotta be something you're thinking about while we're doing this."

Astron didn't respond immediately. But after another few strides, he said, "Calculating my threshold."

Ethan frowned. "Threshold?"

Astron nodded slightly. "The limit before my body fails. How much longer I can last before my movements become inefficient."

Ethan let out a breathy laugh, shaking his head. "Man, you're the type of guy most teachers would love to have as a student."

Astron glanced at him, his pace never faltering. "What does that mean?"

Ethan grinned. "What? Don't you just like learning?"

Astron didn't hesitate. "Yes. I do like learning."

Ethan shot him a knowing look. "See? That's the type everyone likes."

Astron, however, countered smoothly, "No. I disagree."

Ethan raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Oh? And what does that mean?"

Astron remained silent for a moment, as if carefully choosing his words before he spoke. Then, in his usual calm tone, he said, "Most of the time, to learn something new, you need to break something old. And oftentimes, those who teach... are the defenders of the old."

Ethan's steps faltered for just a fraction of a second before he corrected himself, his mind catching on Astron's words. He wasn't sure what he had been expecting, but that wasn't it.

"...Huh," Ethan muttered, processing. "That's... actually kind of deep."

Astron didn't respond, but Ethan could tell he wasn't just saying it to sound smart—he meant it.

And the more Ethan thought about it, the more it made sense.

Teachers, mentors, the academy itself—they existed to pass down knowledge, to refine skills already deemed valuable. But for something truly new to emerge, something that challenged the foundation? That usually meant tearing something apart first.

And people, especially those in positions of authority, didn't like that.

Ethan exhaled, shaking his head. "You know, sometimes you say stuff that makes it sound like you've lived three lifetimes."

Astron's gaze remained forward. "Experience teaches faster than instruction."

Ethan smirked. "Yeah? And what experience taught you that?"

For a moment, Astron didn't answer.

Then, without breaking stride, he simply said, "The kind you don't get in a classroom."

Ethan exhaled through his nose, shaking his head as they continued their grueling run. His legs burned, the gravitational pressure still making every step heavier than it should be, but he had long since adjusted to the discomfort. His mind, however, was caught on Astron's words.

"The kind you don't get in a classroom," huh?

Ethan frowned, glancing at the other boy. "Alright, but what kind of experience could you even get?" he asked, curiosity laced in his tone. "I don't mean to look down on you or anything, but we're the same age. What could you have possibly gone through that's that different?"

Astron didn't answer immediately. His pace remained steady, his breathing controlled. Then, after a few strides, he finally responded.

"There are countless different people who are the same age as us," he said calmly. "But they aren't Awakened. Do you think they experience the same life as we do?"

Ethan mulled over that for a second. "I mean, yeah, I get that," he admitted. "The gap between Awakened and non-Awakened is like night and day. But that's a completely different comparison." His eyes narrowed slightly. "I just feel like you're being a little elusive."

Astron's expression didn't change. "Even if I were," he said, unbothered, "you have nothing to do about it."

Ethan let out a short laugh. "That's true."

It wasn't like Astron owed him an explanation. Ethan could tell he was the type of guy who only revealed what he wanted, when he wanted. There was no point in trying to force something out of him.

But still... there was something about being around him that Ethan found entertaining.

Astron was a tough nut to crack, that much was obvious. But sometimes, in small moments, Ethan caught glimpses of reactions—subtle shifts, dry comments, or well-placed words that made conversations with him unexpectedly fun.

Ethan grinned to himself as they ran.

Yeah, he liked being around this guy. Even if he was a bit of an enigma, the challenge of getting any kind of reaction from him made it all worth it.

Chapter 856 197.8 - Mentor

The sound of their heavy, rhythmic footsteps filled the massive training hall, but by now, Ethan could barely hear it over the pounding of his own heartbeat. Every breath felt like dragging air through soaked cloth, his muscles were burning, and even though his body had long since adapted to brutal conditioning, this was something else entirely.

Finally, mercifully, the timer hit zero.

The artificial gravity pressure lifted, and in an instant, Ethan felt like he had just been released from an invisible cage.

"Oh, thank the gods—" he groaned before collapsing onto his back, arms sprawled out as he sucked in gulps of air. He didn't even care that he was lying flat on the training hall floor. "Two hours... that was two hours? Felt like ten."

Beside him, Astron, while far more composed, immediately moved toward the nearby water dispenser. He didn't say a word, just grabbed the bottle waiting for him, cracked it open, and drank in slow, controlled gulps. His posture remained mostly upright, but his breathing was heavier than usual—small signs of exhaustion he couldn't completely hide.

Eleanor, standing near the control panel, observed them with her usual unreadable expression. Her arms were crossed, her golden eyes sharp but satisfied.

"You'll keep doing this until I'm satisfied," she stated coolly, making it very clear that this was not a one-time ordeal. "But it shouldn't take too long."

Ethan let out a weak chuckle, still lying on the ground. "You say that, but somehow I don't believe you."

Eleanor ignored him, checking her tablet once before turning on her heel. "That's all for today. Rest up, recover, and be ready for the next session."

With that, she exited the training hall, leaving the two of them alone.

For a while, there was only silence.

Ethan, still sprawled out on the ground, tilted his head slightly to look at Astron, who was standing nearby, finishing the last of his water. His expression remained as composed as ever, but there was no denying that he was drained.

Ethan smirked. "So..." He exhaled, letting his limbs go completely slack. "How was it?"

Astron lowered the water bottle, glancing at him with a neutral expression. "How was what?"

Ethan let out a tired chuckle, still staring up at the ceiling. "I mean training, obviously."

Astron, who had finished his water, merely gave a short, matter-of-fact reply. "It was helpful."

Ethan groaned, rolling onto his side and propping his head up with his hand. "Damn, man, you give the bare minimum when it comes to answers."

Astron remained unfazed. "Training under Professor Eleanor's pressure isn't something that can be easily replicated."

That actually made Ethan pause. He blinked, then furrowed his brow. "Hmm?" He pushed himself up slightly. "What do you mean by that?"

Astron set his empty water bottle aside, leaning forward slightly as he rested his forearms on his knees. His gaze remained steady, his exhaustion well-hidden beneath his usual composure.

"Out of all people, you should understand that best," Astron said. "There's a reason why even you—someone who has spent their entire life around high-ranked Hunters—struggled under her pressure."

Ethan frowned slightly, listening.

"Your father. Your aunt. Your brother," Astron continued, his voice calm but deliberate. "They're all strong. But their strength is different from hers."

Ethan let out a slow breath, processing that. "I see... That's why."

He leaned back on his hands, looking toward the door Eleanor had exited from. It made sense. He had been around powerful people his whole life. He had trained under them, fought against them, learned from them. But Eleanor's pressure was something else entirely.

She wasn't just strong—she carried a kind of presence that made even the air around her feel heavier, a weight that demanded endurance and precision. And it wasn't just raw power—it was refined. Deliberate. Unrelenting.

Ethan exhaled sharply, shaking his head. "Yeah... makes sense why she's such a nightmare to train under."

Astron simply nodded. "It's not a type of pressure you adapt to easily."

Ethan glanced at him. "You're holding up pretty well."

Astron didn't respond immediately, then finally said, "I've had to learn how to adjust quickly."

Ethan's gaze lingered on Astron for a moment, his curiosity piqued. There was something in the way he had said that—calm, matter-of-fact, but carrying an underlying weight that Ethan couldn't ignore.

He wasn't usually one to pry too much, but something about Astron always made him want to push just a little further.

Leaning forward, Ethan rested his arms on his knees, tilting his head slightly. "Learn to adjust, huh?" he echoed. "That sounds like the kind of thing when you have learned it young."

Astron didn't react immediately. His posture remained steady, composed as ever, but Ethan could see the subtle shift in his body language—the slight tension in his shoulders, the way his fingers lightly tapped against his knee.

Ethan smirked. "You gonna leave me hanging, or...?"

Astron exhaled through his nose, as if debating whether or not to entertain Ethan's curiosity. Eventually, he spoke, his voice as even as ever.

"There's not much to say."

Ethan raised an eyebrow. "See, when people say that, it usually means there's a lot to say."

Astron didn't respond.

Ethan sighed, shaking his head. "Fine, fine. Let's try a different angle." He stretched his legs out in front of him, tapping his fingers against his thigh. "You said I should understand this better than anyone, right? Because of the people I've been around."

Astron nodded slightly.

Ethan tilted his head. "So what about you? You....you were...."

"Were what?"

Ethan hesitated for a moment, the words catching in his throat. He had been about to say family—but then he remembered.

Astron didn't have one.

At least, not in the way Ethan did.

So instead, he adjusted. "You... weren't around many high-ranking Hunters, right?"

Astron shook his head. "No. But a Hunter did teach me a lot."

Ethan's curiosity flared instantly. "A Hunter?" he echoed, leaning forward slightly. "Who—?"

But before he could finish, Astron was already moving.

The guy stood up in one fluid motion, picking up his empty water bottle as if the conversation had already ended in his mind.

Ethan frowned. "Oh, come on. You're gonna leave right now?"

Astron slung his bag over his shoulder, his tone as flat as ever. "I have things I need to do."

Ethan scoffed, still sitting on the floor. "Like what?"

Astron didn't even hesitate. "Training."

Ethan groaned, tilting his head back dramatically. "You training maniac! We just finished a brutal session under Eleanor, and you're still gonna go train?"

Astron was already walking toward the exit. "Yes."

Ethan sighed heavily, then smirked. "At least answer my damn question before you go."

"No."

Ethan let out an exaggerated groan, flopping onto his back. "You suck at conversations."

"...."

Ethan blinked.

Then, suddenly, he laughed—really laughed.

"This will be all for today."

The heavy wooden doors of the classroom swung open, and the bustling chatter of cadets filled the hallways. The first session with their mentors had concluded, and excitement and curiosity rippled through the air like an invisible current.

Maya stepped out of the room with practiced composure, her hands loosely clasped behind her back. Her gaze remained calm and unreadable, but inwardly, her mind was still processing the session.

Amelia Lake.

It wasn't surprising that Amelia had been chosen as the primary mentor for mages. She was a renowned sorceress, a prodigy of elemental magic, and her reputation alone had attracted nearly all the mage cadets to her guidance. Even Maya, with her usual high standards, had to acknowledge that Amelia's insight was valuable.

But that didn't mean she was satisfied.

Maya's gaze drifted to the side, her sharp eyes effortlessly picking up on the presence of two familiar figures amidst the sea of cadets.

Irina Emberheart.

Her fiery red hair stood out even in the crowded hallway, its vibrant hue reflecting the light as she spoke animatedly to the girl beside her. Confidence radiated from her posture, the way she stood effortlessly commanding attention.

And then, there was Seraphina Frostborne.

The silver-haired mage was quieter, her cold, calculating gaze scanning the crowd with the sharpness of a blade. Unlike Irina, whose presence was like fire—blazing, consuming—Seraphina was ice. Calm, composed, yet no less dangerous.

Maya didn't need to be reminded of their reputations.

Second and third.

Irina Emberheart, the combat mage who had made a name for herself through sheer talent and unshakable will. Seraphina Frostborne, the strategic prodigy whose precision in battle was nearly unmatched.

And her?

Maya Evergreen. First rank of sophomore cadets.

But right now, she wasn't feeling particularly victorious.

"That is the girl you need to bring down."

Chapter 857 198.1 - Desire

"That is the girl you need to bring down."

The voice inside her spoke.

Her eyes lingered on Irina for a moment longer than necessary before she tore her gaze away, a faint clench in her jaw betraying the irritation simmering beneath her composed exterior. She had more important things to concern herself with.

Yet, before she could take another step, a voice called out from the crowd.

"Maya!"

A fellow sophomore, a girl named Elaine, weaved her way through the bustling cadets to reach her. Elaine was friendly, competent, and someone Maya had worked with on multiple occasions. Normally, she wouldn't mind the company, but right now...

Elaine grinned, oblivious to the storm quietly brewing within Maya. "We're heading to the lounge for a bit. Want to come with us?"

Maya hesitated.

A few months ago, she wouldn't have thought twice about agreeing. Spending time with her classmates, strengthening relationships, maintaining a presence—that was the natural order of things.

But right now, her mind was elsewhere. The irritation from earlier still clung to her like an unwanted presence, the words she had overheard, the pictures she had seen—they refused to leave her thoughts.

Not to mention the faint whispers of her other self, lurking at the edges of her consciousness.

"Look at her."

"Standing there so confidently, so sure of herself."

"And you? You're here. Wasting time."

Maya's fingers curled slightly at her sides, her nails pressing faintly into her palms.

She didn't have the patience for this today.

"I'll pass," she said, her voice perfectly polite but carrying no room for argument.

Elaine blinked, clearly surprised. "Oh. Are you busy?"

Maya simply nodded. "Something I need to take care of."

Elaine didn't push further, sensing the finality in Maya's tone. "Alright, maybe next time." With that, she turned back to join the others, her excitement unbothered.

Maya exhaled slowly.

She needed to cool her head down.

The crisp evening air greeted Maya as she stepped onto the academy's expansive training grounds. The echoes of sparring cadets filled the space, the clashing of weapons and the occasional burst of mana-infused techniques blending into the rhythmic hum of combat.

She barely spared the others a glance as she moved with purpose, her path set toward the Elemental Chamber—her usual refuge.

"You should be doing something."

Her other self's voice slithered into her thoughts, smooth yet laced with impatience.

Maya exhaled sharply through her nose, her pace unwavering. "I am."

"No, you're distracting yourself. Again." The voice scoffed. "You saw her. You heard them. Irina Emberheart stands there like she's untouchable, and you're here, avoiding the inevitable."

Maya's jaw tightened, but she didn't deny it.

She had seen Irina's confidence—how she carried herself, how she seemed utterly unbothered by anything. Even after everything that had happened, after the rumors, after the whispers, Irina moved as though she was always in control.

That fact grated against Maya more than she was willing to admit.

And her other self knew it.

"You don't have the luxury of waiting anymore," the voice pressed, its tone sharper now. "I told you—she's the one standing in your way. If you don't move first, she'll take everything from you."

Maya's fingers twitched at her sides. She knew that.

But things had been moving too fast. She had barely had the time to think about how to act, how to strike properly.

Too much had happened—her realization about her other self, the confrontation with Irina at the infirmary, the storm of emotions that had been suffocating her since. And through it all, Astron's presence remained at the center.

She couldn't deny that he was a part of this equation.

Irina wasn't just standing tall on her own—she was standing beside him.

And that...

That bothered her.

"You agree with me, don't you?" her other self whispered, softer now, coaxing. "You know I'm right. You know what you need to do. So why aren't you acting?"

Maya stepped past the training rings, heading toward the isolated structure of the Elemental Chamber. The building shimmered faintly under the mana-infused lights, its crystalline walls humming with power.

She reached for the door and pushed it open. The familiar rush of concentrated mana filled her lungs as she stepped inside.

Silence.

Here, away from the noise of the academy, away from prying eyes, she could finally breathe.

Maya let her satchel slip from her shoulder, landing lightly against the smooth marble floor. She exhaled deeply, rolling her shoulders as she turned her thoughts inward.

"You're asking why I haven't acted?" she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

Her other self was silent for a moment, before responding, "Yes."

Maya closed her eyes, feeling the raw energy of the chamber pulse around her. "Because I need time."

A sharp, bitter laugh echoed in her mind. "Time? Time for what?"

"Time to think," she answered, her voice steady but laced with frustration. "I won't act impulsively."

Maya stood in the center of the Elemental Chamber, the air around her thick with latent mana. The ambient energy pulsed against her skin, like a silent reminder of her presence, of her control. But inside, her mind was anything but steady.

Her own words echoed back at her.

"I won't act impulsively."

Yet, the moment she said it, something felt... off.

She had been acting impulsively.

Time and time again, whenever Astron was involved, she had let herself act without thinking—stepping in, inserting herself into his business, demanding something that she never defined. And Astron, for all his patience, had tolerated it.

But did he like it?

Her breath hitched slightly at the thought. The answer was clear.

No.

Maya wasn't foolish enough to deny it. She had watched him carefully—studied his every move, his reactions, the way his gaze sometimes flickered with something unreadable whenever she spoke. He had never outright rejected her presence, but neither had he welcomed it.

He simply let it happen.

Her fingers curled slightly at her sides.

This was why she was controlling herself now. Why she wasn't storming forward like before. She needed to think. To understand.

She wouldn't make the mistake of pushing too far. Not again.

And yet—

Laughter echoed in her mind, dark and mocking.

"Ah, so that's it."

Maya's eyes narrowed.

"You're afraid."

She straightened, her spine stiffening. "That's not true."

Her other self hummed, amused. "No? Then what else would you call it? You've never hesitated before. You always went after what you wanted. But now? You're frozen. You tell yourself it's for control, but let's be honest, Maya—you're scared."

Maya clenched her jaw. "I'm being careful. That's different."

The laughter came again, softer this time, curling through her thoughts like smoke. "Careful? Or hesitant?"

Maya inhaled sharply, steadying herself. "I'm thinking. For once, I'm thinking before I act. Isn't that what I'm supposed to do?"

Her other self sighed, almost disappointed. "You're hesitating because you fear the answer. You fear that if you push too hard, he'll reject you. That if you stand your ground, if you stop dancing around your feelings, you'll lose him."

Maya's breath came slower now, measured and even.

It wasn't wrong.

But it wasn't right either.

She wasn't hesitating because she feared losing him. She was hesitating because she was trying to respect his boundaries, not just her own.

That was the difference.

"That's why you don't get it," Maya murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. "You don't understand what it means to care about someone outside of yourself."

"What did you say?"

But then once again her world turned crimson.

Chapter 858 198.2 - Desire

"What did you say?"

The crimson bled into her vision, slow at first, then all at once.

Like ink seeping through paper, the colors of the Elemental Chamber dulled, swallowed by an overwhelming shade of red. The pulsing mana that once hummed softly around her now roared like a storm in her ears, thick and suffocating.

Maya staggered.

Her breath hitched, her hands flying to her temples as the air around her turned heavy—dense, oppressive, crushing. Her body knew this feeling. The creeping, smoldering hunger curling at the edges of her mind. The sharp, almost intoxicating pulse that accompanied it.

Her other self was furious.

"You don't understand?" the voice whispered, low and venomous, curling around her like a viper. "You think I don't understand?"

The pressure in her skull spiked. A burning heat coiled in her chest, twisting through her veins, demanding to be felt, demanding to be acknowledged.

Then, laughter—dark and edged with something raw, something dangerous.

"You think this is about caring?" the voice sneered, echoing in the chamber like a chorus of ghosts. "You really are a fool, Maya. Caring? What a pathetic excuse. Do you want to know the truth?"

Maya's breath came in short, shallow gasps. Her vision swam, the red deepening, consuming everything. And beneath it all, something darker, something primal, unfurled its claws.

Hunger.

A terrible, aching thirst.

Her body locked up, heat burning through her limbs, her fingers twitching as if longing to reach for something—someone.

The unbearable pull.

Her lips parted slightly, her tongue dry against the roof of her mouth. The thought slithered through her mind like a whisper of temptation, like a forgotten instinct reawakening from the depths of her soul.

His blood.

Her nails pressed into her palms, hard enough to break skin.

"He was the only one."

The voice came softer this time—no longer mocking, but cold, distant.

"The only one I could feel in that darkness."

Maya's breath hitched as the words slithered through her mind, wrapping around her like chains. The crimson haze pulsed, suffocating in its intensity, and the weight pressing against her chest became unbearable.

Her other self wasn't just angry.

She was grieving.

"When I had nothing, when the world was silent, when even you faded away, he was there."

The voice wavered, but not with hesitation—with conviction.

"You, who have seen the world, who have walked through it, touched it, breathed it—you will never understand that feeling. Nor do you want to."

The words struck like a dagger, raw and dripping with something deeper than rage.

"So don't ever talk about 'caring' as if you've figured me out."

A violent pulse of mana erupted from Maya's core, cracking the air around her. The chamber quaked, its crystalline walls warping, the mana-infused lights above flickering as if suffocating under the weight of her emotions.

But Maya...

Maya held her ground.

She gritted her teeth, the sharp tang of iron in her mouth as she forced herself to breathe—to resist the overwhelming pull.

The room trembled, but she did not.

She would not.

Her eyes, still drowning in crimson, burned with defiance. The hunger clawed at her ribs, her instincts screaming at her to yield, to fall, to give in. But she fought it—fought the weight of her own emotions, fought against the darker self that threatened to consume her.

"You're wrong," Maya murmured, her voice steady despite the storm raging inside her.

A low, bitter chuckle. "Am I?"

Maya exhaled sharply, hands unfurling from their clenched state. She no longer trembled. She no longer recoiled.

"Yeah... that is just unhealthy."

Maya's voice cut through the storm of her mind, cold and certain.

Her other self hissed. "Unhealthy... coming from someone like you?"

Maya didn't flinch. Didn't engage.

Because this was pointless.

This argument, this cycle—it never ended. Her other self would always push, always claw, always try to pull her into that dark, suffocating abyss. And if she kept letting it consume her thoughts, she would never break free.

She exhaled, long and slow, and released the tension coiling in her shoulders.

Enough.

Without another word, she turned away, letting the lingering echoes of her other self's anger fizzle into the background. She ignored the way the crimson still pulsed faintly at the edges of her vision, ignored the phantom hunger that gnawed at the back of her mind.

She needed to focus.

Lowering herself onto the smooth floor of the Elemental Chamber, she crossed her legs into a lotus position, placing her hands lightly on her knees. The mana in the room still thrummed with unease, reacting to the storm she had just barely contained. But she had no intention of letting it linger.

Her breathing slowed.

Her pulse steadied.

Her thoughts narrowed into one purpose—control.

She let her mana flow, not forcefully, not recklessly, but with precision. The ambient energy around her bent to her will, forming into the familiar, delicate patterns she had practiced a thousand times before.

Slow. Measured. Exact.

She had done this countless times—calming her mind, pushing out distractions, sharpening herself into a perfect edge. It was methodical, something she could hold onto when everything else threatened to spiral out of control.

And yet—

Something shifted.

A flicker at the edge of her awareness.

A presence.

Not unfamiliar... but not entirely familiar either.

Her eyes snapped open.

"Hmm?"

She turned her head slightly, sensing the weight of a gaze lingering on her from the entrance of the chamber.

"Hello."

A voice. Low, even, and carefully controlled.

A young man stepped into the dim glow of the chamber's mana-infused light, his sharp blue eyes studying her with an expression that sent a faint ripple of irritation down her spine.

Trevor Philips.

Maya's expression remained unreadable as she regarded her classmate.

"Trevor."

She greeted him with a simple nod, keeping her voice neutral.

"What brings you here?"

Trevor didn't answer immediately. Instead, he just... looked at her.

That same look.

Maya's fingers twitched against her knee before she forced them to still.

She didn't like his gaze.

She hadn't liked it for a long time.

Even her other self, usually so consumed with its own obsessions, stirred in displeasure.

"Tch."

A faint noise echoed in her mind, a rare moment of agreement between them.

Trevor's eyes, sharp and unreadable, lingered on her for just a second too long.

Maya's jaw tensed.

She really disliked this gaze.

"Trevor?"

Her voice was sharper this time, cutting through the thick silence that had settled between them.

Trevor blinked, as if surfacing from deep thought. Then, almost too casually, he let out a short chuckle.

"Ahaha... sorry. I just spaced out."

Maya's lips pressed into a thin line.

He didn't look like someone who had just 'spaced out.'

His gaze lingered again—just a second longer than necessary. Not with open hostility, nor admiration, nor anything easily decipherable. Just that same unreadable, unwavering stare.

Maya's patience thinned.

Without a word, she shifted slightly, tilting her chin up just enough to signal the silent question hanging in the air.

Why are you here?

Her piercing blue eyes carried the same question as her voice when she finally spoke.

"Then? What brings you here?"

Trevor exhaled, rubbing the back of his neck, as if realizing that ignoring the question wasn't an option.

But he didn't answer immediately.

Instead, he just watched her again, his expression unreadable.

Maya's fingers twitched against her knee.

She had never liked this feeling—the way he looked at her, the way his presence always carried a weight she couldn't quite place.

And neither did her other self.

"This guy."

A muttered thought, low and sharp, curled in the back of her mind.

Maya ignored it, but her body remained still, waiting.

Trevor finally shifted his weight slightly, his posture loose but deliberate.

"Can we have a talk?"