

H. Academy 491

Chapter 491 112.1 - Don't see him within me

<Sunday, Third-week of the break, 7 A.M.>

"You've done it. You've mastered the [Cyclone Stance]. I never thought I'd say this, but you're on par with me now—at least when it comes to the [Tempest Fang]. But don't think this is the end."

I wiped the sweat from my brow, my chest heaving as I tried to steady my breathing. The sting of fatigue was present, but there was also a sense of accomplishment coursing through me. Dakota's words rang in my ears—words I'd been striving to hear for weeks now.

But I knew better than to let my guard down, even after such praise.

"I know this isn't the end," I said. "This is just the beginning. There's still so much more to learn, to master."

After all, while I had mastered the [Tempest Fang], it was most likely the beginning stages of an art. Or at least, the art was not of a higher grade.

That was to be expected. After all, if not, it would not be easy to master such an art in just three weeks.

"You brat.....Don't be serious all the time."

SWOOSH! Her hand approached me at a rapid speed, trying to slap me from my back. But there was no way I would let her hit me like this.

'It hurts like hell.'

Since it hurt.

Dakota grinned as she watched me dodge her attempted slap. "You're getting quicker," she said with a smirk. "But don't get too cocky. I'll let it slide for today since you've graduated for the time being."

I gave a small nod, still catching my breath. Despite the exhaustion, there was a sense of satisfaction in knowing I had reached this milestone.

Dakota glanced at her watch, noting the time. "It's 7:24 A.M.," she said thoughtfully. "We've been at it for hours. I think it's time to rest a little."

I raised an eyebrow. "Rest?"

She chuckled. "You've earned it. How about we hit the baths? You could use a good soak after all that training."

I blinked, slightly taken aback. "Bath?"

"Indeed," Dakota confirmed with a grin. "There's a specialized bath for Wardens. It's designed for comfort. Consider it a reward."

Dakota was a warden, so it made sense that she would be awarded specifically for her achievements and her contributions.

It seems a special bath was one of those.

"You do know, you are basically inviting me to your home, right?"

"I do. But so what?"

"Is there a problem?" Dakota asked, her expression genuinely puzzled.

I studied her face and body language, realizing she truly didn't have a clue about the implications of her words. There was no teasing or ulterior motive behind her invitation—it was just a straightforward offer from someone who didn't overthink such things.

I inwardly sighed, wondering if Dakota was really this much of a blockhead because she hadn't socialized much or if she hadn't socialized much because she was a blockhead. The answer seemed nearly impossible to find.

Shaking my head, I decided not to dwell on it. "No problem," I said, somehow feeling like my lips were twitching. "Let's go."

Dakota nodded, satisfied with my response, and continued leading the way. As we walked, I couldn't help but think about how someone as strong and skilled as her could also be so oblivious at times. It was oddly endearing in its own way.

Dakota led me to her quarters, and as we stepped inside, it was immediately clear that her living space was a far cry from the trainee rooms. While not excessively luxurious, it was certainly more spacious and refined. The furniture was sleek, the decor minimalist yet stylish, and the overall atmosphere was one of quiet strength—a reflection of Dakota herself.

"Welcome to my place," she said casually, as if inviting people over was a regular occurrence for her. Somehow, I doubted that.

I took a moment to look around. The room had a different dimension, yet it was cool in its simplicity. It was clear that Dakota valued functionality over extravagance, but there was still a certain elegance to it.

"This is where you live?" I asked, more out of curiosity than anything else.

"Yep," she replied, walking over to a sleek console. "It's not much, but it's comfortable. Here, let me show you around."

She gave me a quick tour, pointing out the various rooms and features. The place was well-equipped, with everything she needed for both work and relaxation. It had an air of professionalism mixed with a hint of personal taste, though I could tell that Dakota hadn't spent too much time fussing over the details.

After the tour, she led me to the bath area. It was larger and more elaborate than I expected, with a calming ambiance created by soft lighting and the gentle sound of flowing water. The bath itself was a spacious, sunken pool filled with clear, inviting water that seemed to shimmer slightly with a faint energy.

"Make yourself comfortable," Dakota said as she accessed a panel on the wall. "I'll order some food. You've earned it."

I watched as she tapped a few commands into the panel, using her credits to order what I assumed were special dishes. It was strange seeing her in this domestic setting, but I couldn't deny the appeal of a good meal and a relaxing bath after our intense training.

Once she finished placing the order, she turned back to me with a grin. "You ready?"

Before I could answer, she stepped into the bath, her clothes shimmering and retracting into a bracelet on her wrist. I followed suit, my own clothes following the same transformation as I entered the warm water.

Despite the practical nature of our attire, it was still a bit surreal to be sharing a bath with Dakota. The water was soothing, and I could feel the tension in my muscles starting to ease. It was a rare moment of calm, something I hadn't experienced in a while.

Dakota settled into the water, leaning back against the edge with a contented sigh. "This is the life," she said, closing her eyes. "Training hard, then relaxing like this. Can't ask for much more."

I couldn't help but agree. "It's definitely a nice change of pace."

She opened one eye, looking at me with a smirk. "So, what do you think? Not bad, right?"

"Not bad at all," I admitted, feeling the warmth of the water seep into my bones. "Thanks for inviting me."

She waved off my thanks as if it was no big deal. "You've earned it, Astron. Plus, it's nice to have some company for once."

"You seem lonely when you speak like that."

Dakota chuckled softly at my remark, her eyes reflecting a hint of wistfulness. "You're not wrong. It has been a while since I've had company like this. Missions are different, you know? Everything is

professional and focused. You're surrounded by people, but it's not the same as having someone you can just... relax with."

I tilted my head slightly, considering her words. "Someone like me? Don't you go on missions with other teams? I figured you'd have plenty of opportunities to connect with others."

She nodded, her expression thoughtful. "I do, but it's not the same. When I'm on a mission, it's all about the objective. The units change frequently, and everyone's focused on the job. There's no time for anything personal. But here..." She gestured to the bath and the cozy setting of her quarters. "Here, it's different. We've been training together every morning for three weeks. It's not just about the mission; it's about growth, about pushing each other to be better."

I understood what she meant. The intensity of our training sessions had created a bond, a sense of camaraderie that was hard to find in the impersonal environment of missions.

"So, you're saying I should prepare myself for that when I start going on missions?"

She smiled, but there was a hint of sadness in her eyes. "Yeah. Missions are tough. You'll work with people you might never see again. You'll be in high-stress situations where you can't afford to let your guard down. It's not like this, where you have the time to build connections."

The idea of constantly changing teams and the lack of stability wasn't entirely surprising, but hearing it from Dakota made it feel more real. "Sounds like a lonely life."

"It can be," she admitted, her voice softer now. "But it's also necessary. We do what we have to do to keep the world safe. But when you do find those rare moments of connection like this, you learn to appreciate them."

I leaned back in the water, letting her words sink in.

'There are people with all those different goals in life...!' Somehow, looking at her like that, I once again was reminded of my reasons. With all this constant training I had over these past three weeks, I had forgotten about it a little.

At least, it was safe to say that I was able to get rid of my thoughts.

I had lived all my life for the sake of revenge, at least up to this point. But, recently, I was feeling a little different...

It was hard to put into words.

"Do you miss it? Having more consistent connections, I mean?" I asked, curious about how she truly felt.

Dakota was quiet for a moment, her gaze fixed on the ceiling as if searching for the right words. "Sometimes," she said finally. "But I made my choice a long time ago. I chose to dedicate myself to this life, to this cause. And I don't regret it. But yeah, there are times when I miss the simplicity of just... being with people. Not as comrades or teammates but as friends."

Her eyes somehow contained a sadness as she looked into my eyes. And then, she suddenly stood up, spilling the water around the bath.

As Dakota stood up from the water, her movements slow and deliberate, I could see the water glistening on her skin, highlighting the defined muscles earned from years of intense training. There was something in her gaze, something ignited—a mix of desire, longing, and perhaps a trace of something deeper, something unresolved.

I'd seen that look before. It wasn't unfamiliar to me. It was the gaze of someone searching for something they'd lost, something they were trying to find in another person.

Dakota stepped closer, the distance between us shrinking. Her bracelet should have activated, covering her body as it had done before, but it didn't. It was as if she was doing it on purpose, letting her guard down in a way I hadn't expected.

The naked body was laid bare right before me as if to tempt me. It was, indeed, tempting as her body was sculpted by an artist.

At least, that would be for a normal person.

Her approach was slow, almost hesitant, as if testing the waters—both literally and figuratively. Her eyes, though intense, carried a sadness, a desire for connection, for something more than the life she had chosen.

But as she neared me, something inside me told me to stop her, not out of discomfort or fear but because I could see the truth in her eyes. This wasn't about me; it was about someone else, someone she was trying to find in me.

"Stop," I said.

She paused, her eyes widening slightly as if surprised by my words.

I didn't let my gaze waver, keeping my eyes locked on hers, refusing to let them drift to her exposed form.

"I don't know who that person is," I continued, my tone steady. "But you should stop seeing him in me. You should let it go."

Those words were for both her and me.

'I should stop seeing her in other people as well.'

Chapter 492 Chapter 112.2 - Don't see him within me

Whenever I looked at people in the past or became closer to them, I felt a subtle feeling. It was as if, when such things happened, that scene would always come and haunt me.

Since, in kindness, I was reminded of her.

In happiness, I was reminded of her....

In friendship and bonds, I was reminded of her....

Losing someone was not an easy thing; I knew that very well. For all that time, those memories had constantly haunted me.

That was why, to forget that, to forget my weakness, to forget how useless I was at that time, I devoted myself to my training.

No, being devoted was not the right choice of words. I got obsessed with training, and I still am. Since, when my mind is free, I could not help but remember how it was.

I still dream about those times....But, recently, it was a little different. The reason is evident. I finally came to accept that there were people surrounding me.

At the very least, some people showed concern. For a certain someone, we started on a bad footing, and for another certain someone, I received unrequited favors.

That person did not expect anything from me, yet helped me.

How did I repay?

I did my best, but at the same time, I was not honest.

Since I saw 'her' in that certain person.

That was why, from the start, I knew there was something that had happened in Dakota's past. She had likely lost someone dear to her, and the pain of that loss still lingered just beneath the surface. I could see it in the way her expression had changed when I first revealed my [Weapon Master] occupation. It was just three weeks ago, during our first encounter.

I remember the way her eyes had flickered, a brief but unmistakable flash of something—pain, longing, maybe even regret. It was a subtle change, but being as observant as I am, I didn't miss it. Her body language told me what I needed to know. Her shoulders tensed, and for just a fraction of a second, she seemed to be somewhere else entirely, lost in a memory.

That fleeting moment was enough to reveal the truth. There was a story there, something buried deep in her past that she hadn't let go of. I didn't push her about it, of course. It wasn't my place, and we were just getting to know each other. But the signs were clear—she had lost someone, someone who might have shared the same path as me, someone who had been a [Weapon Master] as well.

As our training progressed, I kept those observations in mind. I saw how she pushed me, how she seemed almost desperate to mold me, to see me succeed. It was more than just a mentor guiding a disciple. It was as if she was trying to make up for something, to fill a void left by that person she lost.

And now, as she stood before me, her vulnerability laid bare; it all made sense. She wasn't seeing me for who I truly was. She was seeing the ghost of someone else, projecting her unresolved feelings onto me.

"Stop," I had said, not just for her sake but for mine as well.

I couldn't let her see that person in me, just as I couldn't keep seeing 'her' in others. It wasn't fair to the person that was being projected.

Not only was it fair, but it was also disgusting. Now that I am in that same position, I can easily say that it is not a good feeling.

Dakota's eyes widened at my words, and I could see the realization dawning on her. She paused, the intense expression in her eyes softening as if she, too, was beginning to understand.

For a moment, the only sound was the gentle ripple of the water around us. Dakota's gaze dropped, and she took a step back as if the weight of my words had finally sunk in.

"You're right," she whispered, her voice barely audible. "I... I am so-"

I shook my head slightly, not needing an apology. "There's nothing to apologize for. But whatever you're holding onto... it's time to let it go."

She nodded slowly, the sadness in her eyes giving way to a quiet acceptance. She was starting to see it, starting to understand that clinging to the past was not something that she should do.

But, well, it was not that easy to deal with things like these alone. I had noticed it myself after all this time.

You can even say it took me long enough.

I watched as Dakota's expression shifted, the realization of what she had been doing settling in. Her posture, once confident and commanding, now seemed smaller, more vulnerable. It was clear she was struggling to process everything that had just happened.

"You know," I began, keeping my tone gentle but direct, "maybe it would help if you found another way to release your pent-up desires. Especially considering how tense you look right now."

Dakota blinked, her brows furrowing slightly in confusion. "What do you mean?" she asked, her voice still soft, uncertain.

I didn't say anything at first, just let my eyes drop to her body—a subtle but clear enough indication of what I meant. Her gaze followed mine, and it was as if a light bulb went off in her head. A flush of red crept up her neck and cheeks as she quickly pushed her body back into the bath, the water splashing around her as she tried to hide herself.

She buried her face in her hands, clearly embarrassed by the realization of what she had been doing. "I... I didn't mean... I wasn't thinking," she stammered, her voice muffled by her hands.

I couldn't help but remember a certain girl who put up such a strong front but would embarrass herself instantly.

"It's fine. But yeah, it's a bit creepy, considering I'm younger. A lot younger."

If I had not understood what kind of situation she was in and the amount of effort that she had spent for me, I would have cut her most likely.

But there is no need to have such thoughts for now.

Dakota groaned in embarrassment, sinking deeper into the water as if she could disappear entirely. "I can't believe I did that," she muttered, clearly reprimanding herself.

Seeing her like this was a strange contrast to the strong, composed figure she usually presented. It reminded me that even someone as tough as Dakota had her own vulnerabilities and moments of weakness.

"Hey," I said, my tone softer now, "we all have moments where we lose our heads. Don't beat yourself up over it."

Dakota lifted her head slightly, just enough to peek at me with one eye, still red-faced. "Yeah, well... still, I should've known better."

"Maybe," I agreed. "But it happens. Just... try to find a healthier outlet next time."

"A better outlet?"

"Yes, a better one. With how you look, you can find it easily."

"That...."

It seems there really was a reason why she had invited me here. Looking at how she looked red, I could easily see that she indeed did not know the relationships between man and woman.

Dakota's face turned a deep shade of red as the realization hit her, her embarrassment only intensifying. She was clearly struggling to process everything, and her usual confident demeanor was nowhere to be found.

"You really didn't know, did you?" I asked, my tone both amused and a bit sympathetic.

She buried her face in her hands, clearly mortified. "I honestly didn't realize... I just thought..."

Dakota's eyes widened as she connected the dots, her earlier confusion now replaced with shock. "That's what you meant when you asked if it was okay... Oh, no wonder you looked at me like that!"

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I couldn't help but chuckle, shaking my head slightly. "Next time you invite someone to your place for a bath, you might want to be a bit more careful. Most people would take it... differently."

Dakota's eyes widened as she connected the dots, her earlier confusion now replaced with shock. "That's what you meant when you asked if it was okay... Oh, no wonder you looked at me like that!"

I nodded. "Yeah. I figured you didn't mean anything by it, but still... you might want to be more mindful."

She groaned again, her face practically glowing with embarrassment. "I'm such an idiot..."

"Not an idiot," I corrected. "Just... a bit naive about some things. But that's okay. We all have our blind spots."

Dakota slowly lowered her hands, her face still flushed but a bit calmer now. "I've never been good with... this kind of stuff. Relationships, I mean. My life's been about training, missions, and duty. The rest... I guess I never really thought about it."

"Which is fine," I reassured her. "But just remember, not everyone you meet will be as understanding. You don't want to send the wrong signals."

She nodded, clearly taking my words to heart. "I'll be more careful from now on. Thanks, Astron. For... everything."

For some reason, I felt like the master and the disciple had changed at that moment, but well, that was fine.

RING!

And thankfully, just at that moment, the meal arrived, breaking this weird atmosphere.

After the awkward moment with Dakota and the subsequent talk, I found myself with some free time. The weight of the past few weeks of training was still lingering on me, but it felt good to have made so much progress.

Having completed my training in the Axe, Spear, and Greatsword, I couldn't say I had mastered these weapons, but I had definitely grasped the basics. I knew how to control my body to adapt to them, which was the most important part, especially with the Everchanging Glyph working to optimize my form for each weapon.

I leaned back in my room, scrolling through some magic-related documents on my device. My interest in magic had always been there, but it wasn't something I focused on as much as my combat skills. Now that I had a bit of time, it seemed like a good opportunity to broaden my understanding.

As I flipped through pages on various spells and their applications, a notification popped up on my screen. It was a message from Reina.

[Reina: Meet me in this place. We need to talk.]

The message was brief, and Reina's tone was serious, even through the text. I knew better than to ignore such a request.

Closing the documents, I stood up, stretching a bit to shake off the slight fatigue that was settling in.

Whatever Reina wanted to discuss, it was likely important.

I left my room and made my way toward the northern courtyard. The corridors were quiet, the usual hustle and bustle of the facility replaced by a more subdued atmosphere. Well, at this hour, most of the trainees were still in training. It was Sunday, but there were no moments to rest.

The place was a wide-open space, dimly lit by the ambient lights that lined the edges. Reina was already there, her posture relaxed but her gaze sharp as she watched me approach.

"You are here."

She said, looking at me. She looked like she came from outside.

"The things that you had requested are here."

When I first came here, Reina had called me to say that I had a special [Eye], and that was the reason why the organization was interested in me.

That was why I came here with anticipation and, at some point, was expecting things related to my abilities. With how Reina taught me and everything, I knew the groundwork was getting laid constantly.

As I approached Reina, I noticed the slight chill in the air, confirming my suspicion that she had just come from outside. Her expression was calm, but there was an edge to it, something purposeful.

"You are here," she said, her voice steady as she glanced at me. "The things that you requested are here."

I nodded, recalling the information I had been given about the rewards system within the organization.

After completing each stage in the [Chamber of Deception], I was told that I would receive rewards based on my performance. It was a way for the organization to assess and rank trainees, determining their potential and growth.

Apparently, the [Chamber of Deception] wasn't just a training ground—it was a place where the true capabilities of an eye user could be understood and discerned. That place was where the organization would train Wardens and others.

'A place with the special [Authority].'

Even the area where Reina had trained me with Psion lines didn't come close to the level of the [Chamber of Deception]. That place wasn't just about physical or mental training—it was about unlocking the deeper potential within those who possessed special abilities, like my [Eyes].

I had been sent there because Reina accepted it, something that made her believe I was ready to face the challenges within.

Her judgment was validated when I completed the first five stages in just two weeks. But when I wanted to push forward and challenge the sixth stage, I learned that the chamber wasn't just a linear progression.

Each set of five stages formed a block, with a significant increase in difficulty after each fifth stage. These blocks weren't just milestones—they were gateways to a higher level of understanding and ability.

Reina didn't let me challenge the sixth stage, not because she doubted my ability but because she knew that rushing into it without proper preparation could be disastrous.

In any case, the organization had promised rewards for those who succeeded in the chamber. For the first four stages, which were considered minor stages, I received credits and the opportunity to make a special request. These were valuable in their own right, but they were nothing compared to what was promised for completing a major stage.

The fifth stage, a major stage, was different. It tested not just my physical and mental limits but also the very essence of my [Eyes]. It was a stage where my understanding of reality, perception, and the underlying structures of the world were pushed to their breaking points.

And for that, the reward was equally significant.

But I am curious. Why have you requested a [Moonstone]?" Reina asked, her eyes narrowing slightly as she studied me.

I knew this question would come. The [Moonstone] wasn't just an ordinary resource; it was rare, valuable, and held properties that most in the organization wouldn't fully understand.

"The [Moonstone] is important to me," I replied, keeping my tone even and measured.

Reina raised an eyebrow, clearly expecting more of an explanation. But I wasn't ready to reveal everything just yet. Some things were better kept to myself, especially considering the unique nature of my abilities and the visions I had been experiencing.

In truth, the request for [Moonstone] stemmed from a recent realization, one that tied directly to the vision I had seen during my training. The figure that had appeared to me, bathed in the ethereal glow, was a clue—a message from my subconscious or perhaps from something deeper.

His hands and legs had been covered in something that shone with a familiar, almost mystical light. At first, I had assumed it was just an extension of his mana, but upon further reflection, I understood it to be more.

It was the [Celestalith], my weapon and companion, in a different form.

As I delved deeper into my [Lunar Mana] and its intricate workings, I already knew that the energy within me was potent, but without a proper medium, its efficiency was vastly reduced.

The [Moonstone], known for its affinity with lunar energy, would act as the perfect catalyst for harnessing and amplifying my [Lunar Mana]. This wasn't just about using it as a weapon; it was about integrating it into my martial arts, enhancing my abilities to their fullest potential.

While I had awakened to the power within me, it was still raw, untamed in many ways. The [Moonstone] would help channel that power, allowing me to focus and direct it with greater precision and impact. Without it, I would be wasting a significant portion of my mana, losing the efficiency that could make the difference between success and failure in a critical moment.

However, finding [Moonstone] was no easy task. It was a material that was both rare and difficult to acquire, even for someone with connections within an organization like this. That was why, when the opportunity presented itself, I decided to use the organization's resources to obtain a pair of [Moonstones]. It was a calculated decision, one that would set the stage for the next steps in my journey.

So, when Reina asked why I needed the [Moonstone], I kept my answer simple. "It's important to my growth," I said, leaving out the more intricate details. "I need it to reach the next level."

She seemed to consider my words carefully, her gaze lingering on me for a moment longer before she nodded. "I see. If it's that crucial to you, I won't press further."

I nodded at her words, but she was not finished.

"The other reward that you requested... the information about Silas Vayne." Reina's voice took on a more serious tone, and I could feel the weight of her words settling in the air between us.

I met her gaze evenly, waiting for her to continue.

"When you initially made this request, we didn't think it would be this difficult to trace such a person," she admitted, her expression hardening slightly. "But apparently, it's much harder than we anticipated."

Her eyes bore into mine, searching for something—an answer, a hint, a reason. There was a clear intent behind her gaze as if she was testing me and trying to gauge the importance of this request. It was understandable. In an organization like this, every request, every action, could have far-reaching consequences.

"Why are you looking for such a being?" she asked, her tone firm.

I knew this was coming, and I was prepared. But still, I chose my words carefully. "That doesn't concern you."

Reina's eyes narrowed slightly. "Everything that can cause harm to the organization concerns me," she countered, her voice steady but laced with a hint of warning.

I didn't flinch under her scrutiny. "This won't cause any harm to the organization," I stated, my tone calm and unwavering.

Her expression didn't change, but I could sense the tension in the air. "How can you be so sure?" she asked, pressing the issue.

"Because I'll make sure of it," I replied, my voice firm, leaving no room for doubt.

For a moment, we stood in silence, our gazes locked in a silent battle of wills.

Reina was testing me, but I had nothing to hide—not from her, at least. This was something I had to do, something that had nothing to do with the organization and everything to do with my own gains and goals.

Finally, Reina sighed, breaking the silence. "Very well. But understand this, Astron—I don't take these things lightly. If you pursue this, you do it knowing the risks."

"I understand," I said, my resolve unshaken.

She nodded and then grabbed another box and pointed it to me.

"Here. It is the information regarding Silas Vayne."

I knew what was inside there. Most likely, it was a drive that contained all of the information that was needed.

"And, as for your last reward," Reina continued, her tone carrying a weight of its own, "your eye upgrade is ready."

I nodded, recalling the information I'd been given when I first entered the [Chamber of Deception]. For every five stages completed, there was a significant reward—an upgrade to one's eyes. These upgrades were designed to enhance the abilities of the user, pushing the limits of what their eyes could perceive and process.

Reina handed me another box, this one smaller and more intricately designed. I opened it to reveal a small vial containing a shimmering, crystalline liquid. This wasn't just any upgrade; it was an infusion derived from the eyes of a powerful eagle-type monster known as the [Skyfury Hawk].

The [Skyfury Hawk] was a creature renowned for its incredible vision, able to discern the smallest details from up to 10 kilometers away. Its eyes were coveted for their ability to see through everything and perceive minute details at great distances—an ability that would be invaluable to someone like me.

"This upgrade," Reina explained, "is just the beginning. While you can already see through the illusions and can perceive mana, your physical range of eye capabilities was slightly falling back. And, since you had just finished stage 5 without many contributions, your first upgrade will be slightly superficial." She said.

Her words were something that I had already known. Considering the fact that I had yet to show much contribution, it made sense that they would not give me much.

I had just finished being a trainee, after all.

"With it, you'll be able to discern things up to 10 kilometers away, and your ability to see through deceptions and illusions will be greatly improved. It's a rare and powerful enhancement, one that only those who complete the major stages receive."

I carefully placed the vial back into its box, feeling the weight of its potential in my hands. This upgrade was a significant step forward, one that would enhance my abilities in ways I was only beginning to grasp.

"Thank you, Miss Reina," I said, my voice steady but tinged with gratitude. This wasn't just a reward; it was a tool that would help me survive and succeed in the challenges ahead.

Reina nodded, acknowledging my thanks. "You're welcome, Astron. You've earned it. But there's something else we need to discuss."

I looked at her expectantly, sensing that this was about more than just rewards.

Reina nodded. "Yes. These missions are designed to test your abilities in real-world scenarios. They will push you to your limits and beyond, but they will also provide valuable experience and insights that you can't gain in a controlled training environment."

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She paused, her gaze steady as she continued. "These missions will be varied—some will require you to work alone, while others will involve teams. You'll be tasked with everything from reconnaissance and infiltration to combat and strategic operations."

"Aside from the rewards," she began, her tone turning more serious, "today is your last day in this facility. Starting tomorrow, you'll be sent on missions."

"Missions?" I asked to direct the conversation.

Reina nodded. "Yes. These missions are designed to test your abilities in real-world scenarios. They will push you to your limits and beyond, but they will also provide valuable experience and insights that you can't gain in a controlled training environment."

She paused, her gaze steady as she continued. "These missions will be varied—some will require you to work alone, while others will involve teams. You'll be tasked with everything from reconnaissance and infiltration to combat and strategic operations."

"Do you have any advice?" I asked.

Reina considered for a moment before replying. "Yes. First and foremost, trust your instincts. You've honed them through your training, and they will serve you well in the field. But don't let them blind you to new information—stay adaptable and open to change."

"Secondly, understand that missions rarely go as planned. Be prepared for the unexpected, and don't hesitate to improvise if necessary. Your ability to adapt will often be the difference between success and failure."

"And finally," she said, her tone softening slightly, "remember that you're not alone. Even when you're on solo missions, there are resources and support available to you. Use them wisely, and don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it."

I nodded, taking her words to heart. "Understood, Miss Reina. I'll do my best."

"I know you will," she replied, her expression firm. "I do not wish to repeat myself, but there are quite a lot of expectations from you thanks to the performance you have shown."

"I will make sure to satisfy them, then."

"That would be nice."

With that, she had left me, walking away. Now, it was time to receive my rewards.

Chapter 494 Chapter 113.2 - Rewards

I made my way back to my room; my mind focused on the words Reina had left me with. The sense of the impending missions was already settling in, but I felt ready, or as ready as I could be.

The rewards I had received were a tangible reminder of the progress I had made, but the real test was yet to come.

As I reached the door to my room, I heard familiar voices inside. Pushing the door open, I found Kael and Lyra, who had just returned from their own training sessions. They both looked up as I entered, and Lyra immediately broke into a teasing grin.

"Well, well, look who's here at a normal hour for once," Lyra quipped, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "Did you finally decide to take a break from all that nonstop training?"

I nodded my head, knowing she wasn't entirely wrong. Usually, by this time, I would still be immersed in some form of training, pushing myself to the limit. But today was different.

"Actually," I replied, my tone casual, "my training here has finished."

The room fell silent instantly, Lyra's teasing smile fading as she processed my words. Kael, who had been busy unpacking his gear, froze mid-motion, his eyes snapping up to meet mine.

"Your training for 'today' has finished, right?" Lyra asked cautiously as if seeking clarification.

I shook my head, keeping my expression calm but serious. "No. My training here has finished. From now on, I'll be sent on missions."

The moment the words left my mouth, both Lyra and Kael's eyes widened in shock. They exchanged a quick glance before turning back to me, their mouths slightly agape.

"Missions already?" Kael finally managed to say, disbelief coloring his voice. "That's... fast."

Lyra's usual playful demeanor was replaced by a more serious expression as she looked at me. "Are you sure you're ready for that? I mean, I know you've been training hard, but... missions are a whole different level."

"They think I am ready."

"I can see that.....But are you really ready? It has just been three weeks."

What Lyra was saying made sense. Who would have believed that one would become a fully-fledged member in just three weeks?

But at the same time, they looked like they had forgotten that I was a student of Arcadia Hunter Academy.

"I am ready." And I started getting bored in this place. While training and other things were fine, without putting them to use, why would it matter?

My goal was never to become the strongest, after all. "You really are something," Lyra said. I could see that she was genuinely surprised. Normally, being in a child's body was made up of illusions, and most of the emotions she would show were fake.

But this time, it looked genuine.

Kael nodded in agreement, his brow furrowed in thought. "Yeah, how did you manage it so fast? Is it because you're of a different breed, like everyone else has been saying? Or is there something else going on?"

I couldn't help but feel my mouth twitch slightly at the mention of being "a different breed." For the past two weeks, it seemed like that phrase had become my unofficial title among the trainees. It was starting to make me cringe every time I heard it.

Shaking my head, I let out a small sigh. "It's not about being a 'different breed' or anything like that. I've just been focused, that's all. I came here with a goal, and I've been working toward it."

Lyra tilted her head, studying me with those sharp eyes of hers. "You make it sound so simple, but I guess it's not that surprising. I've seen how you train and approach everything. It's like you're always thinking three steps ahead."

Kael chuckled, though there was still a hint of disbelief in his voice. "I guess that's what it takes to stand out around here. But still, getting through training that quickly... You really are something else, Astron."

I shrugged, trying to downplay it. "I've just been doing what needs to be done. No point in dragging things out."

But even as I said that I knew there was more to it than just hard work. The truth was that I was indeed of a "different breed," but let's not acknowledge that.

But I wasn't about to dive into the details with them. It wasn't necessary, and besides, they had their own paths to follow.

"Well," Lyra said, her voice softening as she smiled, "whatever the case, you've earned it. But seriously, don't push yourself too hard out there. We heard that missions can be unpredictable, and you never know what might happen."

"I'll keep that in mind," I replied.

"Sigh....Who am I even talking to....With how you have done things before, you would do it easily...." He said and then looked back.

"Do you want to eat something? We have ordered pizza."

I nodded to Kael, appreciating the offer but knowing that my mind was elsewhere. "Not now. I need to take care of something first."

"Alright," Kael replied, waving a hand dismissively. "You know where to find us if you change your mind."

With that, I turned and made my way to my room. As soon as I stepped inside, I closed the door behind me and immediately activated the room's soundproofing function.

The hum of energy surged as the room's walls seemed to thicken, isolating me from the outside world.

I then moved to deactivate the signals that monitored and transmitted data from within the room. While the surveillance was likely a safety measure, ensuring the well-being of trainees by monitoring their mana levels and physical health, it wasn't something I was comfortable with.

During my training with Reina, I learned how to decipher psion lines and detect the subtle flows of energy in the environment. It was during these lessons that I realized each room had surveillance woven into its very structure.

The lines of psion energy that transmitted data were invisible to most, but to my trained eyes, they were clear. While the organization likely used this for health monitoring, I wasn't interested in giving away any more information than necessary. Blocking a part of the data transfer was my way of maintaining some semblance of privacy.

Once I was confident that the room was secure, I turned my attention to the box containing my rewards. I took a deep breath, feeling the anticipation build as I opened it.

The first item I retrieved was [Celestalith], manifesting it in its formless state. The weapon appeared as a shimmering mist in my hand, its ethereal presence comforting in its familiarity.

Next, I carefully took out the [Moonstone] from its protective casing. The moment the [Moonstone] was exposed to the air, [Celestalith] reacted.

A soft glow emanated from the weapon, its misty form pulsing with energy. Without hesitation, I held the [Moonstone] closer to [Celestalith], and in an instant, the weapon absorbed it, drawing the [Moonstone] into its core.

The room was suddenly filled with a brilliant light as [Celestalith] began to change. I could feel the weapon's energy surging around me, its presence enveloping me in a cocoon of power. It was as if the weapon was alive, moving through the air and wrapping itself around me. The sensation was overwhelming, a blend of warmth and strength that left me breathless.

Then, just as quickly as it began, the light faded, and the room returned to its dim, soundproofed state. I looked down at my hand and saw the new form that [Celestalith] had taken.

The weapon was no longer just a formless mist; it had taken on a shape, a form that was perfectly suited for a [Martial Artist], a testament to the influence of my recent training with Dakota.

The weapon had split into two distinct parts, covering both my hands and feet. The material felt like a seamless extension of my own body, wrapping around my fists and forming a sleek, almost gauntlet-like structure.

The metal was dark and reflective, with subtle, flowing patterns etched into the surface that resembled the phases of the moon. It was flexible yet firm, allowing for full movement while providing enhanced protection and striking power.

My feet were similarly covered, the metal forming a light, almost boot-like structure that extended up to my ankles. The design was sleek and streamlined, allowing for swift and fluid movement. The soles had a subtle grip, ensuring that I could maintain my balance and agility in any situation. The material was flexible enough to accommodate the full range of martial arts stances and techniques while also reinforcing the strength of my kicks.

As I flexed my fingers, I felt the energy of [Celestalith] respond to my will, shifting and adapting to my movements.

'Indeed, just as I thought....The weapon now has a different form.'

From then on, I slowly started inferring some things.

'For me to unlock a new weapon form, do I need to get an enlightenment?'

This was something that had been in my mind for a while now. Why were there some specific weapons that Celestalith could form?

Was there a correlation?

At first, I thought about the book that I had found. There were only five phases mentioned in that book. But now, I can easily say that there are more than just five.

There can be more.

Just like this one.

The [Martial Arts] form, or the transparent [Lunar Mana].

That meant there could be possibly more.

'I feel like it is highly linked to that figure....'

Every type of weapon that [Celestalith] had transformed into was displayed by that figure.

'It must be.'

But in the end, the information was still limited for the time being.

As I continued to test the weapon, I noticed something remarkable. With each strike I made, a shockwave rippled through the air, a forceful burst that seemed to carry the weight of my attack far beyond its physical reach.

From then on, it was not hard to infer that this form of [Celestalith] was not just about physical enhancement; it was about amplifying the impact of each move, extending its power and reach.

I paused, flexing my fingers and feeling the energy of [Celestalith] flow through me. The shockwaves weren't just a byproduct—they were a fundamental aspect of this form's abilities.

This form was designed for a [Martial Artist], allowing me to harness my own physical power and convert it into a force that could dominate the battlefield.

Intrigued, I opened the panel to examine [Celestalith]'s updated properties.

▶ Celestalith, the Transcendent Eclipse ◀

Type: Weapon Grade: ????? (Growth Type - Stage 1)

Description: Celestalith is a unique, ethereal weapon created through the masterful craftsmanship of Vorgvir, the legendary blacksmith. It is a manifestation of the bond between the wielder, Astron Natusalune, and the essence, infused with the essence of the Forbidden Mana Nucleus.

The weapon has six different forms, each form containing a different ability, outline, and type of mana that is used by Astron Natusalune. Each mana type has its corresponding weapon outline specialized in the form of utilizing the effects to the maximum. Celestalith is the epitome of the weapons precisely crafted for Astron Natusalune, and it is highly related to the user's traits.

Properties:

Nocturnis, the Twilight Gaze (Green Moon): A ranged form that condenses energy into bullets, allowing precise and powerful long-range attacks.

Solstice, the Solar Ignition (Blue Moon): Transforms into a bow, creating explosive bursts with each arrow shot, suitable for versatile mid-range combat.

Lunaris, the Moon's Embrace (Red Moon): Dual blades that slash through the air, leaving a trail of crimson energy capable of withering anything in its path.

Astra, the Celestial Discs (Silver Moon): A pair of spinning discs connected by threads of silver energy, displaying graceful and mesmerizing movements for both offense and defense.

Umbralith, the Darkened Nebula (Black Moon): Utilizes a set of rings to control dark forces and crush the surroundings, demonstrating overwhelming gravitational power.

Vortexium, the Eclipsed Tempest (New Moon): The latest form, suited for a Martial Artist, covers the hands and feet with dark, reflective metal that channels shockwaves with every strike. This form amplifies physical attacks, allowing the user to project their power beyond physical limits, creating devastating force through air and space.

Celestalith is the epitome of the weapons precisely crafted for Astron Natusalune, and it is highly related to his trait [Lunar Enigma]. Since it is the manifestation of the user's inner essence, the growth of the weapon is linked to the growth of the user to a large extent. Every time the user experiences growth related to their traits, the weapon Celestalith will also experience growth.

Current Stage: Stage 1

As I read through the updated panel, I nodded my head. Just as I had thought, the Celestalith had received a new form.

Chapter 495 Chapter 113.3 - Rewards

After dealing with [Celestalith] and [Moonstone], it was time to check on the other things. With how the things related to my [Lunar Mana] had been sorted out, there was no longer any need for me to block the data that was going out of my room.

I reached out with my mana, carefully undoing the barriers I had set up, allowing the usual flow of data to resume. It was a precaution to avoid raising any suspicion from the organization. They might notice something if the data blackout continued for too long, and that was something I wanted to avoid.

With the surveillance back to normal, I turned my attention to the next item on my list: the essence that Reina had given me to upgrade my eyes.

The vial containing the shimmering liquid sat on the table, its crystalline surface catching the light. Reina had already explained the procedure to me—how I needed to use it and what to expect during the process.

Taking a deep breath, I picked up the vial and uncorked it. The liquid inside had a faint, ethereal glow, almost as if it were alive. Without hesitating, I carefully tilted the vial and let a single drop fall into my right eye.

The reaction was immediate. A sharp, stinging sensation shot through my eye, causing me to instinctively blink. The pain was intense but not unbearable—not like the searing agony I'd experienced when receiving the [Everchanging Glyph]. This was more like a concentrated burn, localized and powerful, but it was something I could endure.

The essence spread across my eye, and I felt it seep into the very fabric of my vision. My sight blurred momentarily, colors shifting and warping as the essence worked its way into my ocular nerves and deep into my brain. The sensation was strange—like my eye was being reshaped from the inside out.

I gritted my teeth, holding still as the process continued. My eye throbbed with each beat of my heart, but the pain was gradually giving way to something else—clarity.

As the essence settled, my vision sharpened, becoming more precise than ever before. The faint details in the room, the texture of the walls, and the subtle variations in light and shadow all became more pronounced as if a veil had been lifted from my sight.

The process took only a few minutes, but it felt like much longer. When it was finally over, I blinked a few times, letting my vision adjust. Everything seemed sharper, clearer, and more vibrant. It was as if the world had come into focus in a way I had never experienced before.

I closed my eyes briefly, then opened them again, allowing myself to get used to the new sensation. The pain had subsided, leaving behind a residual ache that was more of a dull throb than anything else.

Compared to the excruciating process of obtaining the [Everchanging Glyph], this was almost a relief.

I stood up and walked over to the mirror, examining my reflection. My eyes looked the same on the surface, but there was a faint glow in the depths of my irises, a subtle hint of the power that now resided within them. The infusion of the [Skyfury Hawk's] essence had done its job, enhancing my vision to an extraordinary level.

"Not bad," I muttered to myself, pleased with the results. The upgrade had gone smoothly, and the pain was manageable.

"Though I still need to test it myself, for now, there does not seem to be any type of mismatch or anything. Just as Reina had said....The essence would integrate itself directly into my eye without any problems."

I leaned back, letting my thoughts drift to the possibilities this opened up. The concept of upgrading my eyes was intriguing, especially now that I understood how it worked. It seemed that the key to enhancing my vision lay in the [Essence] of monsters, specifically those with exceptional ocular capabilities. If I could find or hunt monsters with unique eye abilities, I could potentially extract their essence and integrate it into my own eyes, further enhancing my vision.

Of course, not every monster was compatible with this process. The essence had to be carefully selected to match the user's traits and abilities. A poorly chosen essence could lead to a failed integration or, worse, damage the eyes permanently. It was a delicate balance, one that required both knowledge and precision.

I recalled the time when I had first acquired my [Eyes of Hourglass]. At that time, I had thought it was a result of two familiar skills merging, forming a higher-rank one. But now, with this new understanding, I realized that it was something more. I had actually absorbed the essence of the [Time Guardian], the boss monster of the hidden dungeon whose control over time had been infused into my eyes. The essence had merged with my own abilities, giving rise to the [Eyes of Hourglass].

That experience had been a turning point, though I hadn't fully understood it then. The process of absorbing a monster's essence was far more complex than I'd initially thought. It wasn't just about gaining a new ability—it was about harmonizing with the essence, allowing it to become a part of you.

The [Time Guardian]'s essence had enhanced my perception of time, allowing me to see the flow of events in a way that others couldn't. It was a rare and powerful ability, one that had set me apart from others.

Now, with the infusion of the [Skyfury Hawk's] essence, I had taken another step forward, though I rather felt like this was more of an instruction and a display for me to infer how things worked for eyes.

'In a way, they are trying to guide me.'

I thought. But at that moment, I sensed a small change in myself.

As the eye had integrated itself into me, I felt a weird feeling, as if something inside me was changing.

I pulled up my status window, ready to check the changes after everything I had been through. The familiar panel appeared before me, and I scanned the details carefully.

▶ Name: Astron Natusalune

▶ Occupation: Weapon Master (level 4)

▶ Talent Limit: 9 --> 10.5

▶ Passives:

Vengeful Bane

Bloodline Resonance

Psychic Cognizance

▶ Attributes:

Variable Attributes:

Strength: 4.85 --> 5.34

Dexterity: 5.13 --> 5.64

Agility: 5.20 --> 5.72

Constitution: 4.88 --> 5.37

Intuition: 5.26 --> 5.79

Magical Power: 5.61 --> 6.17

Mana Capacity: 5.68 --> 6.25

▶ Traits:

Perceptive Insight (Epic)(Unchanging)

Lunar Enigma (????) (Growth Type) (Stage 1)

Shadowborne (Legendary) (Growth Type)(Stage 3)

▶ Arts:

Lethal Arsenal Ascendancy (????)(%39)

▶ Skills:

Eyes of Hourglass

▶ Body Imprints:

Everchanging Glyph

▶ Bonds:

Aurora Raven (Rare)(Growth Type)

Celestialith, The Transcendent Eclipse

The training that I had been doing in the past few days had shown its effects. With my body adapting to the ever-changing glyph, my physical attributes increased rapidly.

Right now, I am pretty sure I am on par with Ethan in terms of growth. While it is hard to surpass that bastard who has the main character buff, I am pretty sure that with my stats alone, I can now go head-to-head with the top 100 of the academy or maybe even the top 50.

It is very hard to judge just from the ranks because the academy also includes the theoretical grades when ranking the students.

'But still....Now, I am really strong.'

I was not satisfied with my growth before, but by integrating my [Everchanging Glyph] into my body, it seems my talent limit had also increased.

'As for how I had increased my Magic Power and Mana Capacity....'

I had used one of my rights to request a special essence—[Essence of the Arcane Conduit]. It was a rare and highly sought-after essence known for its ability to enhance a user's mana-related attributes. The essence wasn't easy to come by, but it was worth every bit of effort it took to obtain it.

The [Essence of the Arcane Conduit] had a profound impact on my Magical Power and Mana Capacity, increasing both by an impressive 10%. The boost wasn't just in the raw numbers, but in the efficiency and control, I could now exert over my mana. This was crucial, especially considering the unique nature of my [Lunar Mana].

The essence worked by harmonizing with the user's mana pathways, strengthening them and allowing for a more potent flow of energy. For someone like me, who relied heavily on specialized mana for both combat and stealth, this enhancement was invaluable.

'It's a significant leap forward,' I thought to myself. 'With these improvements, my ability to manipulate [Lunar Mana] has reached new levels.'

The reason for that is clear.

It is because I had finally passed the threshold of 6 in terms of my magical power.

'From that point on, the quality of one's mana is supposed to increase.'

Though that did not happen for me for the time being, it was bound to happen one way or another. What was important was the fact that, now, one of my stats had passed the threshold of 6.

Even Julia or Irina must have only two or three stats that had reached 6. And that alone shows how much of an improvement mine was.

'Coming to this stage when I had started with the parameter of 1 for each stat.....I really came a long way....'

Well, it was mainly thanks to the recent breakthroughs, as these types of things can not be used consistently, but still, reaching the parameter of 6 from 1....

It was really a long way.

Well, long or not, I was here now.

Just as I was reflecting on my growth and the progress I had made, my smartwatch chimed with a new message. The notification pulled me from my thoughts, and I quickly accessed the message.

[Message: Congratulations, Astron Natusalune. Your status within the organization has been officially updated. You are no longer a trainee. From this point forward, you will hold the rank of 'Adept' and will be assigned missions in line with your new standing.]

I read the message, letting the words sink in. The transition from trainee to Adept was significant.

It marked the end of my initial training and the beginning of a new phase—one where I would be tested in real-world scenarios, where success and failure carried real consequences.

'So, it's finally official,' I thought, my mind already shifting to the tasks that lay ahead. As an Adept, I would no longer be confined to the training grounds.

I would be out in the field, executing missions.

The message continued with a list of protocols and guidelines for Adepts, detailing the expectations, resources, and support available to me in this new role. It was clear that the organization had high standards for those in my position, but I was ready to meet those expectations head-on.

[Your first mission has been sent.]

And it seems my first mission was here as well.

Chapter 496 Chapter 113.4 - Rewards

I watched the message notification blink on my smartwatch, the cold blue light reflecting off the polished surface of the table. The words on the screen solidified my thoughts—my journey had moved to the next stage. There was no room for hesitation.

'An Adept, huh? Finally, out of the trainee stage.'

The significance of the rank wasn't lost on me. It marked a transition, a shift from being just another face in the organization's pool of potential to someone with real responsibilities and real consequences.

At the same time, I want someone who can act freely. I had gotten a lot of things from this place, and it was better to show some results so that they would not get suspicious or angry.

My thoughts drifted momentarily to what this meant for the path ahead. The choices I would make from this point on carried weight, a tangible impact that could ripple through the layers of the organization and beyond.

I tapped the screen, accessing the details of my first mission as an Adept. The mission brief loaded instantly, and the words were clear and concise.

Mission Brief:

Location: City of [Veilcroft]

Objective: Join the investigation team.

Details: Recent activities in the city have drawn the organization's attention. You are to integrate with the existing investigation team and assist in uncovering the cause and source of these disturbances. Intelligence suggests the potential involvement of unknown entities or factions. Maintain a low profile and gather information. Additional directives will be communicated as necessary.

Note: Due to your new status as an Adept, your presence will be under scrutiny. Consider this mission a test of your capabilities in a real-world scenario.

Estimated Duration: One week

Point of Contact: Warden [Shanks]

'Veilcroft...'

The name of the city resonated with a certain familiarity. A place known for its shadows, where whispers traveled faster than light, and secrets were currency.

'A place where the Black Market and the underground organizations had the most presence.'

I wasn't surprised that the organization had its eyes on Veilcroft. After all, even in the game, many missions and events took place there. Thus, it was understandable.

'A place where the Black Market and the underground organizations had the most presence.'

I wasn't surprised that the organization had its eyes on Veilcroft. After all, even in the game, many missions and events took place there. Thus, it was understandable.

It was the kind of place where things festered in the dark, waiting to be uncovered by those skilled enough—or foolish enough—to seek them out.

I glanced at the name listed under the point of contact: Warden [Shanks]. The title "Warden" immediately caught my attention. It wasn't a rank handed out lightly within the organization. To hold that title meant you were formidable, both in power and in authority. It was the same rank as Dakota, the person who had overseen some of my more intense training sessions.

'So they've assigned someone of Dakota's caliber to this mission...'

That only reinforced the seriousness of the situation. Veilcroft wasn't just any city—it was a nexus of power, influence, and danger.

The Black Market thrived there, along with various underground organizations that operated outside the reach of conventional authority. In a place like that, having someone as strong as a Warden wasn't just necessary—it was essential.

'Shanks...' The name didn't ring any bells, but that wasn't unusual. The organization had plenty of operatives who preferred to stay in the shadows, especially those with high-ranking titles.

I'd have to be on my guard.

Working under a Warden meant I'd be under constant scrutiny, not just from the enemies we were investigating but from my own side as well. However, I doubt that the organization's operatives are bad. The treatment I received here was pretty good, so I expect it to be the same in other places.

But there are all types of people around the world as well.

I tapped the screen again, pulling up the details on how I'd be getting to Veilcroft. The next directive was straightforward.

Transportation: You will be teleported using the organization's warp gates. Prepare yourself accordingly. Departure is scheduled for tomorrow at 7 A.M. sharp. Ensure you have all the necessary equipment and documents. The gate will be active for a limited window, and delays will not be tolerated.

'Warp gates...'

Made sense. I came here from Arcadia City, but that should not be the only exit out here.

'So they want me there immediately, no room for errors.'

I closed the mission brief, letting the details settle in my mind.

'Aside from that, other details will most likely be given by the personnel here.' With the mission brief closed, I let the information sink in. The warp gate was standard procedure for high-priority missions, ensuring that operatives like me were where they needed to be without delay.

'But, the fact that they are sending me to such a place....It seems they really think highly of me.' That would make sense; after all, I was trying to achieve just exactly that. The more I increase my trust in this place, the better it will be for me to get many rewards.

It was also a reminder that the organization wasn't taking any chances with this assignment. Veilcroft was too important, and the situation too volatile, to rely on conventional travel methods.

'A city like that doesn't leave much room for mistakes,' I thought, mentally preparing myself for what lay ahead. But for now, there wasn't much else to do. The real work would start once I arrived in Veilcroft. Until then, I needed to be ready.

'But aside from that....'

I turned my attention to the drive Reina had given me earlier. It was the thing that I had requested from her as the reward, one of the reasons why I was in this place.

I retrieved the small, sleek drive from my pocket and slotted it into my terminal. The screen flickered to life, displaying a series of files and data logs.

The organization's usual efficiency was evident in the way everything was meticulously organized. The top file was labeled simply: [Silas Vayne].

'Silas Vayne...'

The name had a certain weight to it, one that carried a sense of foreboding.

I tapped on the file and scrolled through the profile, my eyes narrowing as the details began to unfold. Silas Vayne, a name that carried more weight than most would realize.

But I wasn't like most people. I had requested this investigation myself, after all. It wasn't just idle curiosity that had led me to seek out this man's identity—it was a necessity.

'So, they found him after all,' I thought, a sense of satisfaction creeping into my mind.

The organization's reach was vast, and when they set their sights on someone, it was only a matter of time before they found what they were looking for.

Still, the fact that it had taken them this long to trace Silas Vayne was a testament to how deep this man—or rather, this demon—had embedded himself into the human world.

The data on the screen confirmed what I had known: Silas Vayne wasn't just another alias; it was one of the most carefully constructed identities used by a high-ranking demon.

Of course, the organization most likely was not aware of the complete identity. After all, even in the demon realm, this guy is a member of a rather secretive and hidden clan.

This particular demon had managed to weave a complex web of connections, making him nearly impossible to trace without significant resources. But the organization had those resources, and they had used them to their fullest extent.

'Good,' I thought, scanning the list of connections and affiliations that the organization had uncovered. He was involved in everything from the Black Market to high-level political circles.

And that was the crux of it. The reason I had requested the investigation in the first place. There was something specific I needed from this guy. Something that only he could provide.

'That thing....I need to get it.'

Silas Vayne, or as known as Zharokath.

A member of Void Clan.

And the person who holds the key to the technique that I am developing. The reason why I had been this adamant about using the opportunity that I had gotten as a reward.

Why? You may ask.

The answer relies on the necklace that the guy has.

'That necklace...It holds the key to the entrance of the dungeon.'

It was no ordinary piece of jewelry, and its true value wasn't in gold or jewels. That necklace was the key to a dungeon—a special dungeon nurtured by demons over centuries, a place where dark energies had coalesced into something truly formidable.

It was a place hidden from the world, a secret known only to a few. But once revealed, it would unleash a storm of chaos and destruction that could wipe entire cities off the map.

'A dungeon that could destroy everything...'

The danger was real. That place was a convergence of demonic power and was the home of a certain monster who was now in the stage of growing up.

A monster that is being nurtured by demonic energy.

Once it is exposed, the consequences will be catastrophic.

But amidst that destruction, within the heart of that cursed place, lay a reward. A reward so valuable that it could change the fate of anyone who claimed it. That was why I needed the necklace, why I had been so adamant about using the resources of the organization to track down Zharokath—because that dungeon held something I couldn't afford to pass up.

The technique...' I reminded myself. The technique I was developing required something special, something that could only be found within that dungeon. It wasn't just a matter of power or prestige—it was a necessity. If I was going to push myself to the next level, if I was going to unlock the full potential of the abilities I had worked so hard to cultivate, I needed what lay within that dungeon.

But first, I needed that necklace.

Without it, the entrance to the dungeon would remain sealed, and all the power contained within would be lost to me.

Zharokath knew this, of course.

That's why he kept it so close, why he guarded it with such intensity. He understood the significance of what he held and the potential it had to either make or break the future.

How do I know? Because it is an event in the game.

《After Academy Arc 3, Subjugation of Void Dragon》

That is the name of the arc.

And what you think is right.

The monster I am going to hunt.

It is a dragon.

Chapter 497 114.1 - Young Hearts

In any case, with my day being left to me alone, I decided to train, but not in a way that would tire me a lot.

'It had been a while since I had focused on my bow.' While I was not slacking off with my training, it was understandable that my focus was not on my bow or my daggers for a while.

Since I have been working on a more diversity of weapons, that was to be expected.

I made my way to the training grounds, the familiar scent of fresh grass and the faint hum of mana in the air welcoming me. The grounds were mostly empty, surprisingly, a rare occurrence that would not happen a lot.

'Well, not every trainee wants to train on Sunday.' I reminded myself as I grabbed one of the practice bows from the rack.

I set up a few targets at varying distances, but nothing too complex. Today wasn't about pushing my limits—it was about sharpening them. I took a deep breath, drawing the bowstring back smoothly.

The familiar tension in the string, the steadying of my breath, all felt natural, like a second skin.

Releasing the arrow, I watched it soar, hitting the target dead center. Satisfied, I continued the routine, each shot feeling more precise and more controlled.

I moved from one target to the next, my focus unwavering, letting my body and instincts take over.

The rhythm of it was calming, a reminder that even in the midst of chaos, some things remained constant.

Indeed. My sharpshooting skills were even more polished now.

'Just like riding a bike,' I thought as the last arrow struck its mark.

'And the fact that I can now see beyond what my eyes do.....It is indeed a suitable thing for a marksman.'

The training that I had been doing with Reina was showing its effects instantly. In just a matter of seconds, I had shot all of the targets without missing any of them.

'Whether it is the fog or other things, as long as there is not a mana interference, I will be good for now.'

At the start, I was not able to understand why Reina had been doing my training all the time and why we were focusing on the Psion lines this much, but as we came to the later stages, I was able to understand it clearly.

It was the basic process of teaching me how to control the information. In a way, it was like the basics of [Martial Arts] techniques or any type of weapon arts.

If looked at from a simple perspective, in a way, it was teaching a student how to write numbers and make basic operations.

Without learning those, one would not be able to understand how to make complex operations in the same manner.

'It's not just what my eyes see,' I thought, focusing on the surroundings. My vision expanded, and I could sense the faint movements behind the walls of the training grounds. The subtle footsteps of people walking by, the shift of their weight as they moved—everything was laid out before me in a tapestry of energy and motion.

The air was filled with tiny currents of mana, each one a thread in the intricate web of reality that Reina had taught me to see.

What had once been invisible was now as clear as day. The way the man ebbed and flowed, creating patterns and disruptions, revealed so much more than I could have ever imagined.

'And light...' I mused as I focused on the way it interacted with the objects around me. Before, light was merely a source of illumination, but now I understand it as a carrier of information.

It could hide or reveal, depending on how one looked at it. With my enhanced vision, I could pierce through the illusions that light often cast, seeing what lay beyond the surface.

Even the smallest disturbances in the air, like the faintest sound waves, were now within my grasp. I could sense them, feel the vibrations as they traveled, and with concentration, I could start to decipher their meaning.

'Thought a bit overwhelming, I will get used to it eventually.'

I put the bow into the rack and then left the training grounds, making my way to the cafeteria.

The cafeteria was quieter than usual, with only a few scattered groups of trainees and instructors enjoying their meals. It struck me that this would be my last dinner here for the time being. I had slightly grown accustomed to the routines, the faces, and even the meals—though most were designed more for function than flavor.

But tonight, I decided to treat myself. I approached the counter, ready to order something different, something that wasn't just about fueling my body but also about enjoying the experience.

"One herb-crusted lamb, please," I ordered, watching as the chef prepared the dish with care, a savory herb-crusted lamb with roasted vegetables. It was a far cry from the usual utilitarian meals I chose, but it felt right for the occasion.

The aroma of the herbs and roasting meat filled the air, promising a meal that would be both satisfying and delicious.

After a few minutes, my meal was ready, and I carried the plate over to an empty table by the window.

'It has been a while since I had eaten something tasty.'

Most of my meals for the past three weeks had consisted of ones that focused on function and ingredients rather than taste. That was not something I complained though, as it perfectly aligned with my goal.

But, to better appreciate the taste of everything, it is always important to keep your taste buds intact.

The first bite of the lamb was everything I had hoped for: tender, flavorful, and perfectly cooked. The herbs added a fragrant depth, while the roasted vegetables provided a hearty complement. It was a meal meant to be savored, and I did just that, letting each bite spread around my mouth.

As I savored the lamb, each bite a reminder of how far I had come, I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye. Turning slightly, I saw Locke and his group—Jarrod, Malcolm, and Finn—approaching my table. It had been over two weeks since we last spoke, and their presence was a welcome surprise.

Locke was the first to speak, a friendly grin on his face. "Mind if we join you, Astron?"

I gestured to the empty seats around the table. "Not at all. Have a seat."

They all sat down, their expressions a mix of excitement and something else—curiosity, perhaps. It didn't take long to figure out why they had sought me out.

"We heard you're being sent on a mission," Malcolm said, leaning forward. "Leaving the facility tomorrow, right?"

I nodded, taking a sip of water. "That's right."

Jarrold, always the most straightforward of the group, cut to the chase. "So, what's the mission about? Can you tell us anything?"

It was understandable that they were curious. After all, once they finish training here, they will also be sent to the missions.

'Hmm...it is better to not reveal too much.' I chose my words carefully. "I can't go into too much detail, but it's a reconnaissance mission. There have been some unusual activities in a nearby city, and they need someone to investigate and report back."

Finn, who had been quiet so far, finally spoke up. "Sounds like a big responsibility. You must be excited."

It could not be said that I was excited. It was more of a chore at this point since I needed to show some results to satisfy the condition of having the remaining time for myself.

"Not really."

Jarrold, who had been observing me closely, narrowed his eyes. "You're lying."

I met his gaze evenly. "Do you think so?"

They all looked at me, their expressions a mix of curiosity and frustration. Finally, Locke sighed and shook his head. "You really have a good poker face, Astron. We can't read you at all."

I shrugged slightly. "It's a very important skill."

Being able to control every bit of your expression and your body....It was something that I had taught myself first upon waking up.

Malcolm leaned forward, clearly eager to change the subject. "So, when does the academy start again?"

"There are three weeks left until the next semester begins," I replied, noticing how their eyes lit up at the mention of the academy.

"You must be excited about the academy, at least," Finn said, his eyes gleaming with anticipation.

This time, I couldn't help but reveal a slight.....smile...

"Indeed, I am."

They picked up on the shift in my demeanor, and it didn't go unnoticed.

My excitement for the academy was real, but it was driven by something deeper, something more intense.

'From now on.....Many of you will die there....'

It was more than just another semester this time...Since I am already expecting the story to become more and more intense and more events happening, that will mean there will be more chaos all across the place.

And the more chaos there is, the more opportunities there are that I can act on.

And the more hunt.

Malcolm, who had been watching me closely, suddenly frowned. "Uh, Astron... your expression just now looked really dangerous."

The others nodded in agreement, their initial excitement tempered by a hint of unease. They weren't used to seeing this side of me, and it showed in their wary glances.

I shrugged casually, brushing off their concern. "It's just your imagination."

But the truth was, they weren't entirely wrong. The academy was going to be a battlefield in its own right, and I was ready to face whatever came my way. The hunt was about to begin, and I was more than prepared for it.

Locke exchanged a glance with the others, then chuckled nervously. "If you say so, Astron."

They tried to laugh it off, but I could see the lingering caution in their eyes.

It was understandable; after all, these kids did not know me well.

And that was my intention.

'Instilling a slight sense of unease....These kids need to learn not to trust others' appearances.'

They are naïve, and if they remain one, they will not live too long.

'This should be my payment to you for putting in the effort to spend time with me.'

That was it.

Chapter 498 114.2 - Young Hearts

<The Heart of Ember, Deep Underground, Second Week>

The Heart of Ember, known as the Emberheart Chamber, was a place of legend, a sacred space deep within the heart of the Emberheart estate.

Carved from the very bedrock of the earth, the chamber was vast and cavernous, its walls lined with ancient runes that pulsed with the energy of generations past.

This was the place where the Emberhearts came to harness their fire, to forge their power in the crucible of their legacy.

Irina stood at the center of the chamber, her body enveloped in flames. But these were not ordinary flames—they were the living essence of the Emberheart lineage, each one a different color, each one representing a different facet of their power.

The air was thick with heat, the temperature far beyond what any normal human could endure, but for Irina, it was a familiar and welcome embrace.

The flames that surrounded her now were white, a rare and pure fire that few in her family had ever mastered.

'Fire of Ember.' It flickered and danced around her, caressing her skin like a lover's touch, yet carrying an intensity that could incinerate anyone unworthy of its power.

Irina's eyes were closed, her expression one of deep concentration, but there was a faint furrow in her brows.

SHIVER!

Her body was shaking slightly as if to show that she was in pain.

Indeed....Her body trembled under the intense heat, her skin prickling as the white flames licked at her like a predator testing its prey.

The "Fire of Ember" was the pinnacle of the Emberheart Chamber, a fire so pure and potent that even the most seasoned Emberheart had to steel themselves to withstand it. But Irina was still young, her body and spirit not yet fully forged in the crucible of their lineage.

The pain was overwhelming, searing through her as if the flames were burning her from the inside out. Her muscles tightened involuntarily, with her teeth clenched as she fought to maintain her focus. Every nerve in her body screamed in protest, the fire pushing her to her very limits.

'This is too much,' she thought, a flicker of doubt crossing her mind.

But she quickly quashed it. She had chosen to ascend to this level, though not directly; she was still aware of the decision that she had made at that time.

She also knew that this would be her punishment, knowing her mother – to test herself against the same flames that had tempered the greatest of her ancestors.

She would not back down now, now that she had made the decision.

From now on, she has refused to back down from any decision that she has made.

Even as the pain threatened to consume her, she could feel something else beneath the agony—a resistance, a strength that had been dormant within her. The blood of the Emberheart family flowed through her veins, born from fire and tempered in its heat.

That blood now reacted to the "Fire of Ember," responding to the challenge with a defiance that was as much a part of her as the flames themselves.

The white fire was relentless, unyielding in its intensity. It sought to burn her, to strip away the weak and the unworthy.

But Irina could feel her body pushing back, her skin toughening, her spirit hardening in response.

The fire was not just a force of destruction—it was a force of creation, forging her into something stronger.

'This is what it means to be an Emberheart,' she reminded herself, her breath coming in ragged gasps as she struggled to hold her ground. Even while she did not like the name or being responsible for the family since they were all forced, she still took it to heart. The chamber was

silent, save for the crackling of the flames and the sound of her labored breathing. But she could feel the presence of her ancestors, watching her, judging her.

Her body continued to burn, the fire searing through her, but she refused to give in. The pain was a crucible, and she would emerge from it stronger and more resilient.

She could feel her resistance to the flames growing with each passing moment, her body adapting to the heat, becoming one with the fire.

The white flames danced around her, testing her resolve and pushing her to her limits. But Irina was an Emberheart, and she would not be broken. The fire that sought to consume her would only serve to strengthen her.

CREAK!

Just as she thought about that, suddenly, she felt the door of the chamber opening.

The heavy stone door moved slowly, its weight echoing in the cavernous space. Irina's eyes flickered open, the intense concentration in her expression giving way to a flicker of recognition as she saw who had entered.

Esme, the person who made her feel complex emotions every time she saw her, stepped into the chamber with a tray in her hands.

The flames dimmed slightly as if acknowledging her presence, but they still flickered with intensity around Irina as if unwilling to fully relent.

On the tray, three items were meticulously arranged, each one crucial to Irina's recovery and continued endurance through the grueling process of the chamber's trials.

The first was a vial filled with a shimmering liquid, its surface iridescent and swirling with faintly glowing particles. This was [Aether's Elixir], a high-ranking concoction crafted by the finest alchemists under the Emberheart family's employ. It was specifically designed to accelerate the body's natural healing processes, allowing Irina to recover from the extreme damage inflicted by the fire. The elixir was rare and precious, used only in the most demanding of trials.

Next to the vial was a small dish containing several dried leaves of [Crimson Sage], a rare herb known for its potent regenerative properties.

The herb was revered for its ability to mend damaged tissue and restore vitality, making it an essential component in Irina's recovery regimen.

The leaves had been carefully prepared to ensure maximum efficacy, their crimson hue a testament to their potency.

Finally, there was a small piece of [Emberroot], a gnarled, fiery-colored root that pulsed with a faint warmth.

The root was an ancient remedy passed down through the Emberheart lineage for generations. It was said to strengthen the body's connection to fire, enhancing resistance and bolstering the inner flame of those who consumed it.

Its bitter taste was well-known, but its effects were unparalleled, especially for one undergoing the intense trials of the Emberheart Chamber.

Esme approached Irina, her steps measured and calm despite the oppressive heat that filled the chamber.

She set the tray down on a small pedestal near Irina, her expression serene as she bowed her head slightly.

"Young Miss," Esme said, her voice soft yet firm. "It is time for your recovery."

Irina, her body still trembling from the strain of the white flames, nodded slowly. Even though she disliked getting help from Esme or others, she was not dumb enough to not understand this was crucial.

If before her pride would have prevented her from doing so, now she saw the world in a more pragmatic view.

The intense heat that had seared her skin and tested her resolve was still fresh in her mind, but she knew that she had to replenish her strength before continuing.

This was a process she had gone through every day for the past two weeks, a ritual that had become almost second nature despite the pain it involved.

At the same time, she could not help but feel a bit of excitement rising in her heart. The reason for that was....

"This is the seventh day, correct?"

"That is correct."

It was the small break time that she had.

That was something detrimental because if she were to stay in this place for more than a week constantly without getting out, her mana would be corrupted, and she would explode.

That is the limit of being in the presence of Fire of Ember. Only an Archmage could resist that state, and she was no Archmage.

Not yet.

She reached for the vial of Aether's Elixir, the cool glass a stark contrast to the searing heat that still clung to her skin. As she drank the shimmering liquid, she felt its soothing effects almost immediately. The burning sensation in her muscles began to ease, and the tension that had built up over the week slowly unwinded.

Next, she chewed on the bitter Crimson Sage, feeling its regenerative properties work through her system, restoring her energy and mending the microtears in her flesh.

Finally, she bit into the Emberroot, the warmth of the root spreading through her, reinforcing her connection to the flames she had been battling.

With her strength returning, Irina slowly stood up, the white flames around her dimming as if in acknowledgment of her renewed resolve. She gave Esme a nod of thanks before turning toward the exit of the chamber.

The door opened with a heavy creak, and Irina stepped out into the cooler, less oppressive air of the Emberheart mansion's lower halls. The contrast was striking—where the chamber was a crucible of heat and fire, the rest of the mansion offered a sanctuary of calm and quiet.

Irina walked slowly, allowing her body to adjust to the cooler temperature as she made her way through the winding corridors.

The walls were lined with tapestries depicting the history of the Emberheart family, a legacy of power and flame that she was now a part of.

Eventually, she emerged into the night air, the cool breeze a welcome relief after the intensity of the chamber.

The stars were scattered across the sky, twinkling like distant embers, and the moon cast a soft, silvery light over the estate.

Irina made her way to a small, secluded garden, a place she often retreated to when she needed time to herself.

The garden was lush and green, a stark contrast to the fiery trials she had just endured. She found a quiet spot beneath a large tree and sat down, leaning back against the trunk as she looked up at the night sky.

The exhaustion from the week began to catch up with her, her eyelids growing heavy as she stared at the stars.

She knew she needed to rest, to allow her body to fully recover before she returned to the chamber. But before she could drift off to sleep, her thoughts turned to someone else.

Reaching for her smartwatch, she opened the call section.

Since it was the promised hour, she was sure that he would answer the call.

The soft hum of her smartwatch filled the quiet night air as Irina initiated the call. She waited only a moment before his familiar voice came through, calm and steady as always.

–You're five minutes late today," Astron remarked. His tone was light, with a touch of amusement. "You must be tired."

Irina smiled despite herself, the fatigue in her body momentarily forgotten. Just hearing his voice seemed to soothe the lingering pain from her training. "I guess I am," she admitted, leaning back further against the tree. "But you'd be tired too if you spent the week bathing in flames."

–I would not be tired.....I would be burnt to death."

"Ahaha.....I guess that would be the case."

She laughed with a smile, looking at the stars.

She was refilling her quota.

Chapter 499 114.3 - Young Hearts

In the place where the heart of the vast, ancient forest is located, a young woman stood in a lotus position.

The place was a sanctuary of natural energy, filled with the essence of life itself. Towering trees, their branches intertwined like a protective canopy, surrounded her, and the air was thick with the scent of earth, leaves, and the subtle fragrance of blooming flowers.

The sounds of nature—the rustling of leaves, the distant calls of birds, and the gentle flow of a nearby stream—created a serene symphony that accompanied her every movement.

The place seemed to be carefully chosen, a place where the natural energy was at its peak, allowing her to harness and refine her abilities.

The forest, though seemingly peaceful, was alive with hidden power, as if the place of nature itself.

As she continued to breathe deeply, her body remained calm and composed, a picture of serenity.

The animals of the forest, sensing her tranquil aura, wandered closer to her. Squirrels scampered through the branches above, curious deer grazed nearby, and even the smallest creatures—rabbits, birds, and insects—seemed to be drawn to her presence. They moved around her in a silent dance as if paying homage to the queen of the forest.

Her purple hair cascaded down to the ground, mingling with the soft earth and fallen leaves. Particles of nature's energy surrounded her, shimmering faintly in the dappled sunlight. At this moment, she seemed like a queen of the forest, a being in perfect harmony with the natural world.

But as she meditated, a sudden shift occurred. Her normally blue eyes snapped open wide with alarm. In an instant, her calm aura shattered, and her eyes turned a deep, unnatural crimson.

Her aura, once gentle and motherly, shifted into something dark and menacing.

The animals around her reacted immediately. The deer bolted into the trees, the birds took flight, and the smaller creatures scattered in fear. The once harmonious connection she had with the forest was now tainted by the bloodthirsty energy radiating from her.

The two auras clashed violently within her. On one side, there was the soothing, nurturing energy of the forest—a reflection of her true self.

On the other, a dark, oppressive force, born from her vampiric nature, surged to the surface, demanding control.

Her body trembled as the opposing forces battled within her, the gentle aura struggling to reassert itself against the bloodthirsty one.

'Control it.' The forest, once a place of refuge and peace, now seemed to shrink away from her as if recoiling from the darkness that threatened to consume her.

"Haah....."

Maya closed her eyes, trying to regain control. Her breathing became shallow, her hands clenching tightly as she fought to suppress the dark energy.

'Control it.' The two sides of her nature were in a fierce struggle, each vying for dominance. The peaceful, motherly aura called to her, urging her to remember her connection to life and the forest, while the darker, more primal side sought to drown out everything with its overwhelming power.

For what felt like an eternity, the struggle continued. The forest seemed to hold its breath, waiting for the outcome.

Finally, with a monumental effort, Maya managed to push back the darkness. Her eyes slowly returned to their natural blue, and her aura began to calm.

The animals, sensing the return of her gentler nature, cautiously emerged from their hiding places, though they remained wary. The forest itself seemed to exhale, the tension easing as the balance was restored.

Maya took a deep breath, her body relaxing once more.

"Not good enough," Maya muttered, her voice tinged with frustration as she gazed at her surroundings. The forest, now calming down after her internal struggle, reflected the same tranquility she was trying to achieve within herself.

But it wasn't enough. The clash between her two natures was more intense than ever, and she knew that she needed to find a better way to control it.

Her thoughts drifted to the research she and Astron had been conducting together. They had spent countless hours poring over ancient texts and experimenting with different methods to help her maintain control over her evolving nature.

Astron, with his calm demeanor and sharp intellect, had been instrumental in guiding her through this journey.

He had suggested a theory that resonated with her: to control her vampiric urges, she needed to strengthen the other side of her nature—the human side.

Maya wasn't a complete vampire, but she was no longer a normal human either. Her evolution had been halted midway, leaving her in a state of limbo.

This incomplete transformation was the root of her struggles. The vampiric nature within her was powerful, overwhelming even, and without a strong enough counterbalance, it was constantly threatening to consume her.

Astron had theorized that by reinforcing her human traits, she could tip the scales back in her favor.

Her vampiric side, while potent, needed to be tempered with the strength of her human side....Though not that she was ever a complete human, to begin with.

But that is not important for the time being. Only by finding this balance could she hope to gain full control over herself.

"Sigh...."

That was why she had been here from the moment she came to her home. She went to a secluded training in the best place where she knew she would improve herself.

'Nature.'

From the moment she was born, she was always someone with a good affinity for nature. She had always loved being in nature, and that was what kind of person she was.

Slowly, she rose from her lotus position, her movements graceful and deliberate. The animals that had been cautiously observing her began to relax, sensing the change in her aura.

The gentle, motherly presence that she had cultivated over the years began to reassert itself, pushing back the dark, bloodthirsty urges that had threatened to overwhelm her.

RUSTLE! Maya extended her arms, palms facing upward, as she focused on drawing in the energy of the forest. The leaves rustled softly, and the earth beneath her feet seemed to pulse with life.

She closed her eyes, visualizing the balance she sought—her naturistic side strong against the dark allure of her vampiric nature.

"Kyu?"

The soft, inquisitive sound made her open her eyes. There, just a few feet away, stood a small, cute creature—a [Lunaphen], an evolved inhabitant of the forest. The Lunaphen was a delicate, ethereal creature with soft fur that shimmered with a faint, silvery light.

Its large, luminous eyes looked up at her with curiosity, and its small wings fluttered gently as it approached.

A gentle smile spread across Maya's face as she crouched down to meet the Lunaphen. "Hello there," she whispered softly, extending her hand toward the creature.

The Lunaphen chirped again, its tiny voice filled with a sense of innocence and trust, and it nuzzled into her hand as she began to caress its soft fur.

The touch of the Lunaphen was comforting, its presence a reminder of the purity and gentleness that still existed within the forest—and within her. Maya stroked the creature with care, feeling a sense of calm and connection with the natural world.

It also reminded her of a certain Junior.

RUMBLE!

But then, the tranquility was interrupted by a sudden, loud grumble from her stomach. Startled, Maya blinked in surprise, realizing just how long she had been in the forest. Though she wasn't sure of the exact time, it was clear that it had been quite a while since she had last eaten.

The Lunaphen tilted its head as if it, too, was curious about the sound.

Maya chuckled softly, giving the creature one last gentle pat. "It seems I'm in need of a meal," she said with a smile. "But before I head home, there's something I need to take care of."

Since she was reminded of him, there was no other choice.

With a calm, practiced motion, she reached for the ring on her finger and called forth a blood bag from her storage. The small, sealed bag materialized in her hand, filled with the rich, crimson liquid that had become a necessity in her life.

Maya hesitated for a brief moment, her eyes lingering on the blood bag. The sight of it brought back the familiar pang of hunger, the dark cravings that were never far from the surface.

But she had learned to embrace that as her own nature. At this point, there was no need to reject them as he also said that would cause more harm than anything.

She brought the bag to her lips and bit into it, her fangs easily piercing the seal. The blood flowed into her mouth, warm and invigorating, and she closed her eyes as she slowly sucked the blood, reveling in its taste. The Lunaphen watched curiously, its luminous eyes wide as it observed her with innocent wonder.

Maya felt the warmth of the blood spread through her body, quelling the hunger that had been growing within her. The familiar taste was both comforting and necessary, a reminder of the duality she carried within her—one that she was learning to balance step by step.

Once she had taken enough to satisfy her immediate need, she removed the bag and carefully sealed it again. Her eyes, now back to their usual blue, softened as she looked at the Lunaphen. "Thank you for keeping me company," she whispered, giving the creature a final pat on its head.

The Lunaphen chirped in response, its wings fluttering as it hopped closer to her, nuzzling her hand one last time before it scurried back into the forest.

With a deep breath, Maya stood up, feeling a renewed sense of strength and calm. The forest had given her much during her time there, but now it was time to return home. She was ready to face the challenges ahead, stronger and more balanced than before.

With a final glance at the tranquil surroundings, Maya returned to her home.

As Maya approached the entrance of her home, a line of maids stood waiting, perfectly poised with heads slightly bowed in respect. At the front of the line, Alfred, the ever-dutiful butler, stepped forward.

"My Lady, you have returned," the maids said in unison, their voices soft and reverent.

Maya nodded gracefully, acknowledging their greeting with a serene smile. "Yes, I have."

Alfred, ever attentive, took a step closer and spoke with his usual composed demeanor. "Welcome back, My Lady. Your bath has been prepared, and a meal awaits you in the dining room."

"Thank you, Alfred," Maya replied, her voice warm and appreciative.

The thought of a relaxing bath and a hearty meal was exactly what she needed after her time in the forest.

As she was about to enter her home, Alfred presented her with a sleek smartwatch, its screen illuminated with a notification. "Before you proceed, My Lady, someone has attempted to contact you. The call came in while you were in the forest."

Maya's breath quickened for a moment, but then she composed herself in the last second. "Who was it?"

"The caller is recorded as Junior, and they left a message."

"Ah..."

As expected, he would not leave her uncontacted like that.

Chapter 500 114.4 - Young Hearts

"Who was it?"

Alfred, ever efficient, responded, "The caller is recorded as Junior, and they left a message."

"Ah..." Maya murmured, a small, knowing smile playing at the corners of her lips. As expected, Astron wouldn't leave her uncontacted for too long.

However, Maya was acutely aware of the many eyes that were constantly on her. The maids, the staff, and even Alfred, though loyal, were all observant.

It wouldn't do to show too much interest or excitement, not when so many were watching. She needed to maintain her composure and handle things with the grace expected of her.

"Thank you, Alfred," she said, her voice steady and controlled. "I'll attend to that later."

There was no need to rush; she had other matters to attend to first.

Maya entered her home, and the familiar and comforting surroundings welcomed her as she made her way to the dining room. The table was set elegantly, and a sumptuous meal awaited her, as Alfred had promised.

She sat down and allowed herself a moment of peace as she enjoyed the meal. The flavors were rich, the textures delicate—everything had been prepared to perfection. Yet, despite the delicious food, her thoughts occasionally drifted to the message left by Astron. She wondered what he wanted to say, but she remained patient, focusing on the present.

Once her meal was finished, Maya gracefully rose from the table and made her way to her private quarters. The bath was prepared just as she liked it, warm with the scent of lavender filling the air. She slipped into the bath, letting the warmth seep into her muscles, relaxing her body from the strain of her recent training.

The tension she had carried melted away in the soothing water, and she allowed herself to sink into the moment, letting the bath do its work. Her thoughts became clearer, and she finally had the chance to grab the smartwatch.

She grabbed it and saw that there was indeed a call from Aher Junior as well as a message.

As the message played, Maya listened intently, her expression carefully neutral, though her eyes flickered with a hint of anticipation. The recording was brief, efficient, and to the point—just like Astron.

"—Senior Maya, it's your Junior, Astron. I'm in the middle of some secluded training, so if you can't reach me, that's why. I just wanted to let you know that things are going well, and I'm making progress. Take care and stay safe."

The message ended, leaving a silence that felt heavier than Maya had anticipated. She stared at the smartwatch for a moment, processing what she had heard. The message, while informative, was distant. There was no warmth, no personal touch, just a simple update on his status and a brief well-wishing.

It had been two weeks since the message was left, and despite the efficiency of his words, Maya couldn't help but feel a pang of disappointment. She had hoped for something more, something that felt a bit more candid and heartfelt.

Her expectations had been higher, even if she hadn't fully realized it until now. Perhaps she had wanted to hear a hint of concern for her well-being or maybe a small personal note that would break through the formality that seemed to shroud Astron in his every interaction.

But no, this was Astron—reserved, focused, always keeping a certain distance even when he seemed close. He was secretive.

It was one of the things that drew her to him, his enigmatic nature, but at the same time, it was also what frustrated her the most.

With a soft sigh, Maya leaned back in the tub, letting the warmth of the water envelop her once more. The message replayed in her mind, and she found herself wishing there had been more to it.

'Is that all you have to say, Junior? Just a progress report?' she thought to herself, a small frown creasing her brow.

Maya's fingers tightened slightly around the edge of the bathtub as the cold realization set in—she was angry. Not just disappointed but genuinely frustrated. The cold, distant tone of Astron's message had stirred something in her that she couldn't quite shake off.

'How can you be so detached, Junior? After everything we've been through, is that all I am to you? Just another person you give status updates to?' she thought, her thoughts turning darker with each passing moment.

Unable to let it go, she made a decision. She would call him. She needed to hear his voice again, to see if maybe, just maybe, there was more to him than this constant, infuriating distance.

With a determined resolve, Maya reached for her smartwatch. She tapped the screen, initiating the call to Astron. As she waited, the seconds seemed to stretch into eternity. Her breath quickened slightly, anticipation mixed with a trace of anxiety.

But then, an automated response interrupted her thoughts. "The number you are trying to reach is currently on another call."

The words echoed in her ears, each syllable a sharp jab at her already fragile composure. He was on another call with someone else.

For a brief moment, Maya's heart sank. A pang of something dark and unfamiliar twisted in her chest. Was it jealousy? Anger? She couldn't tell, but whatever it was, it wasn't pleasant. The idea that Astron was talking to someone else, perhaps giving them the attention she had hoped for, ignited a fire within her.

Her eyes narrowed, a cold glint replacing the softness that had been there just moments ago. She didn't know who he was speaking to, but the fact that he was prioritizing someone else over her—now—was something she found herself unwilling to tolerate.

'Who are you talking to, Junior?' she wondered, her thoughts turning colder and more calculating. 'Why are you avoiding me?'

And naturally, her thoughts turned into something wrong and dark at that exact second.

She wasn't used to feeling this way—possessive, almost territorial—but she couldn't deny the surge of emotions that flooded her.

So, she waited.

On the other side, Astron and Irina were talking.

"How's your training going?" she asked, her voice softer now, carrying a hint of concern. "Any progress?"

There was a brief pause on the other end as if Astron was considering his words carefully. –"I've almost finished," he replied. "Tomorrow, I'll be sent on a mission."

"A mission?" Irina's heart skipped a beat, worry creeping into her voice.

–"Yes, just a routine assignment," Astron confirmed, his tone steady but with a hint of something that Irina couldn't quite place. "Nothing to worry about."

She wanted to press him for details, to know exactly what he was getting himself into, but she knew better. There were things he couldn't share, things that were part of his world—the world he was immersed in. Pushing him wouldn't get her anywhere.

"Be careful," she said instead, her voice carrying more weight than she intended. "Just... come back in one piece, okay?"

–"You...Do you think we are filming a drama right now? What is with just coming back in one piece? I am not going to war."

"You!" To that, Irina felt furious. The fact she said something like that because she was concerned...Now, she felt like an idiot. "Humph....It is my fault for worrying about you."

–"It is," Astron retorted smoothly. –"I can take care of myself, you know. I've been doing it for quite some time now."

"That doesn't mean I'm going to stop worrying!" Irina shot back, crossing her arms even though he couldn't see her. "You're impossible."

–"And yet, you still call me ever," Astron said, the amusement clear in his voice. –"Who's the impossible one now?"

Irina huffed, trying to hide the smile that tugged at her lips. "That's only because I have to make sure you haven't gotten yourself into trouble. Knowing you, it's only a matter of time before you do."

–"That is coming from you? You are the one who got herself in trouble during times of trouble."

"I did not get myself into trouble knowingly. But you are different. You do it intentionally all the time."

–"Maybe, but I haven't yet," he replied confidently. –"And when I do, I'm sure you'll be there to lecture me about it afterward."

"You bet I will," she said, unable to suppress a grin. "You'll never hear the end of it."

–"I'm counting on it," Astron teased. –"It gives you something to look forward to, doesn't it?"

Irina rolled her eyes, though the warmth in her chest was undeniable. "You really are the worst, you know that?"

–"So I've been told," he responded with a chuckle. –"But I don't see you giving up on me yet."

"Don't push your luck," she warned, though the affection in her voice was unmistakable. "I'm only tolerating you because... well, I guess I like having someone to argue with."

–"Likewise," he replied, the amusement still evident. –"It's good for the soul."

"Good for the soul?" she repeated incredulously. "Where do you even come up with this stuff?"

–"Who knows?" Astron said, a hint of mystery in his voice. –"Maybe it's a talent."

"Bastard....You are always talented at useless things."

–"Heh...."

Irina's heart skipped a beat as she heard that familiar short laugh from Astron. The sound triggered a flood of memories, transporting her back to that time when she had first seen him smile under the moonlight. It was such a rare sight, and every time it happened, it felt like a small treasure she wanted to hold onto.

But before she could fully sink into that memory, Astron's voice cut through her thoughts.

—"Someone's calling me," he said, his tone slightly more serious now.

Irina frowned slightly, her curiosity piqued. "Who is it?"

There was a brief pause before he replied, —"Senior Maya."

Irina's eyes narrowed at the mention of Maya. The name instantly brought back a certain scene to her mind, one that she would rather not think about. She had seen Maya with Astron before, and while she tried to dismiss it as nothing, the unease it brought always lingered.

Astron, oblivious to her sudden change in mood, continued, —"We should probably stop for today. I'll talk to you later."

But Irina wasn't ready to end the conversation, especially not now. The thought of him going off to speak with Maya right after talking to her sent a spike of irritation through her.

"Wait," she said, trying to keep her tone light but failing to hide the edge in her voice. "We're not done yet."

—"Why?" Astron asked, his tone curious but calm.

Irina felt a pang of panic. She didn't want to admit the real reason—that she didn't want him to talk to Maya—but she also couldn't find a good reason to keep him on the line. Her mind raced, searching for something, anything, to say that would make sense and not come off as needy or jealous.

But nothing came to mind.

There was a moment of silence, and she could almost feel Astron waiting for her response, his patience somehow making the situation even worse.

So, she did what she always did.

Forcing her way.

"You must continue to talk to me."

—"Why?"

"Just because."

—"What kind of reason is that?"

"I don't care. You are not allowed to end the call."

—"You..... You are jealous, aren't you?"