

## H. Academy 751

### Chapter 751 171.4 - Catching Up

As I sat across from Sylvie, my mind wandered—not just to the present but to the world of the game, to how much her presence had shifted from what I remembered. Sylvie's fork clinked softly against her plate, her expression still flushed with a mixture of curiosity and embarrassment from our earlier exchange, but my thoughts had already begun to spiral into analysis.

'Sylvie,' I mused inwardly, letting the name echo in my thoughts. In the game, she was a slow burn—a character whose importance wasn't fully revealed until much later. For most of the first act, her presence was understated, almost overshadowed by the more dramatic characters like Irina or Seraphine. Players could easily overlook her, especially since her powers, her true significance as a Saintess, didn't awaken until the summer break of the first year.

I traced my fingers lightly against the table, my mind replaying the game's progression. In the original storyline, Sylvie's powers had been dormant for most of the first year. She wasn't weak, per se, but her potential wasn't realized. It wasn't until that pivotal moment during the summer break, that her powers were awakened.

And then it was the second-year winter break when the headmaster personally took her under his wing for intensive training, that she truly began to shine. By the time players reached the second semester of the sophomore year, Sylvie's transformation into a starting top-ranked Awakened was a good change.

But this wasn't the game. Things were already diverging. Her powers had awakened earlier—far earlier than they should have.

'Before the mid-semester break,' I thought, my eyes drifting toward her as she shifted slightly in her seat, still self-conscious. 'That was a major deviation. And if her powers awakened faster, then the ripple effects were to be impossible to ignore.'

Sylvie had become far more central, far earlier, and that meant the pacing of the original events would shift as well. Characters who might not have taken notice of her until later would now see her as a potential ally—or a threat. And the challenges she would face were bound to escalate faster than intended.

The training with Headmaster Jonathan, though... would likely remain the same. Even in the game, the headmaster had been one of the few characters fully aware of Sylvie's identity and potential from the moment that she had awakened them, and this time it was also the same.

'After all, Sylvie had awakened in this academy, the Headmaster's home grounds in a sense. There is just no way that he was not aware.'

This thought of mine had also aligned with the actions of the academy of the second part of the first semester.

'Like how Sylvie was assigned to me and Irina's group. It is evident that the headmaster thought that her Awakening was somehow related to me.'

It was not that hard to see. Since Sylvie had awakened her powers when she wanted to save me at that time.

'That is why....Now that he already knew, why Sylvie looks much stronger also makes sense.'

From the moment the academy began and the entrance ceremony brought us all together, I'd been observing the main cast. One by one, I analyzed them, taking note of how they had grown and shifted since the last time we'd all stood in the same space.

Ethan. He had gotten stronger—undeniably so. His stance was firmer, his aura more refined. It was clear he hadn't been slacking off, and his progress was significant. From what I'd seen, his strength and stats had likely propelled him into the range of the academy's top 300, maybe even breaking into the top 100 if he pushed hard enough. His mana carried a subtle resonance that hadn't been there before, and while I couldn't pinpoint exactly what had changed, it was obvious he'd undergone some kind of breakthrough. He was growing into the role that would one day define him as the steadfast protagonist.

Julia. Julia was still Julia—headstrong, and a force to be reckoned with. But she hadn't been idle either. I'd already seen her performance in the final exam duels, how she had awakened that during that time. And, it had vaulted her into the top ten of the academy in terms of raw combat strength. Her mana now thrummed with controlled ferocity, and her confidence had grown sharper, more resolute. She wasn't just a support character anymore; she was carving her own path to the forefront.

Lilia. It is hard to see through her, as she conceals her abilities so well that even with my [Eyes], it was hard to gauge her full strength. But even if I were to completely see through her, Lilia had never relied solely on brute force. Her mind, sharp and calculating, was her greatest weapon, and that hadn't changed. She didn't need to show her power; the subtle way she maneuvered through situations made it clear that she was always thinking several steps ahead. Hence, it is hard to see through her complete capabilities.

Lucas. There is something odd about Lucas. From the beginning, he'd always been one of the most stable members of the cast—a dependable, straightforward presence. But now... now there was a shadow over him, a strange sense of concealment. It wasn't just his demeanor, though that had grown more reserved; it was something deeper. An artifact, perhaps? It seemed to actively interfere with my [Eyes], intercepting my attempts to see through his mana flow and aura. That kind of interference wasn't easy to achieve, and the fact that it existed made him suspicious. Whatever Lucas was hiding, it wasn't something small.

'I had been thinking about this for a long while....'

His change in the Phantom's Land....If it is related to this, Lucas needs to be investigated more. I had already been thinking about this for a while, and now that it is like this, I can just look through him.

Carl. As usual, Carl was steady. He had always been the anchor of the group, reliable and consistent in his approach. While he hadn't changed drastically, his aura was solid, his training evident. He didn't need dramatic growth; his steady pace was enough to keep him progressing.

There is no need to mention Irina since her progress was already before my eyes.

But of them all, the one who had changed the most was undeniably Sylvie.

She was different, not just in strength but in presence. From the moment she awakened her powers, the shift in her was not that much.

After all, even if she had awakened her powers, it is not that she would immediately be able to use them.

Most importantly, her powers are different from a normal Awakened. It is a different system, hence she needs to understand it differently, as the previous guidelines wouldn't exactly be helpful to her in a concrete sense.

'Sylvie's growth is rapid,' I thought, watching her absently as she continued her meal.

And such growth was not that easy to achieve.

Her aura carried a new weight, her mana laced with a unique resonance that only someone with her Saintess lineage could possess. Even her movements were more confident, her presence less timid. She had begun to grow into the role the game had foreshadowed, but far earlier than it should have been.

I leaned back slightly, letting my words fall with deliberate precision. "Just like how you've changed," I said, my tone calm yet probing. "Was the training with the Headmaster helpful?"

The question was pointed, a calculated move to gauge Sylvie's reaction. If the Headmaster had been actively involved in her growth—and I was almost certain he had been—then her response would tell me more than she realized. Sylvie might be growing stronger, but changes in inherent personality traits weren't instantaneous. The girl she had been—a timid, innocent presence—couldn't suddenly morph into someone composed and commanding without external influence.

Her fork froze halfway to her mouth, a slight tremor betraying her surprise. Her eyes widened briefly, a flicker of something akin to panic flashing in their emerald depths before she quickly schooled her expression. But it was too late. I'd already seen the tells.

Her lips parted as if to speak, but no words came immediately. She glanced down at her plate, her fork clinking softly against the ceramic as she set it down. That motion—avoiding eye contact, redirecting her focus—was an instinctual attempt to buy time. She was trying to suppress her reaction, but it only confirmed what I already suspected.

Sylvie's fingers tightened slightly against the edge of the table, a barely noticeable shift that betrayed her internal struggle. Her body language screamed unease, but she was working hard to mask it. For anyone else, she might have succeeded, but not with me.

'Nervousness,' I noted. 'Likely stemming from the fact that I hit the mark. She didn't expect me to mention the Headmaster so directly, and it threw her off balance.'

Finally, she looked up, her expression carefully composed, though a faint flush tinged her cheeks. "I... I think so," she said, her voice hesitant, the words measured. "The Headmaster has been... encouraging."

Her choice of words struck me immediately. Encouraging was vague, an intentionally noncommittal term. It didn't align with the rapid growth I'd observed in her. Encouragement alone didn't produce the kind of transformation Sylvie had undergone—it required deliberate, intensive guidance.

She shifted slightly in her seat, a subtle discomfort in her posture as if she was trying to decide how much to say. Her gaze flickered away for a moment before returning to mine, her hands clasping together in her lap. "You really.....How did you know?" she asked softly, her voice tinged with both curiosity and unease.

I held her gaze for a moment longer, my expression unreadable, then leaned back slightly in my chair. "It was just a guess," I said evenly, my tone calm but pointed. "And it appears I was correct, thanks to your reaction."

It is still apparent that there are things that she needs to improve.

'In this short amount of time.....Well, even the headmaster can't change someone's character in one and a half months.'

It was time to teach her a little.

Chapter 752 171.5 - Catching Up

"Was the training with the Headmaster helpful?"

The words caught her so off-guard that her grip on the fork wavered, her breath hitching as her thoughts scrambled for an explanation. How could he possibly know? She hadn't told anyone—not Jasmine, not her classmates, no one. The Headmaster himself had suggested keeping the training discreet, yet here Astron was, speaking as if it were an open secret.

Her emerald eyes widened briefly, betraying her surprise before she could school her expression. She lowered her gaze, carefully setting her fork down to regain some semblance of control. Her heart raced as she tried to steady herself, but the stillness at the table felt oppressive, magnified by Astron's calm, piercing gaze.

He wasn't pressing her. He didn't need to. His silence was enough, a quiet challenge that made her chest tighten. He knows. How does he know? Her fingers curled against the edge of the table, her grip tightening as she fought to suppress her reaction, but even that felt like an admission of guilt. She was trying to act composed, but she had a sinking feeling that Astron had already seen too much.

When she finally looked up, his gaze hadn't wavered. Those calm, purple eyes were fixed on her, steady and unwavering, as though they were dissecting her every movement. For a moment, Sylvie felt completely exposed, as if the careful layers she had built to protect herself had been stripped away with a single question.

"I... I think so," she said at last, her voice soft, hesitant. The words felt flimsy even as she spoke them. "The Headmaster has been... encouraging."

The second the word "encouraging" left her lips, she wanted to cringe. It sounded weak, vague—nothing like the intense reality of what she had endured during her training. Those sessions had been grueling, pushing her far beyond her limits. They had been transformative in ways she was still grappling with. And yet, she couldn't bring herself to say any of that aloud.

Astron tilted his head slightly, his gaze unflinching. His calm expression betrayed nothing, yet there was something about his posture, the way his attention remained locked on her, that made Sylvie feel like he was unraveling her with his eyes.

"You really... How did you know?" she finally asked, her voice softer now, edged with both curiosity and unease. She hated how vulnerable she sounded, how much the question revealed about her inner turmoil. But she couldn't help it—she needed to know.

Astron leaned back slightly in his chair, his demeanor as composed as ever. "It was just a guess," he said, his tone calm, deliberate. "And it appears I was correct, thanks to your reaction."

A flush of heat rushed to Sylvie's cheeks, her embarrassment blooming as her mind raced. A guess? The realization made her stomach twist. She had practically handed him confirmation, and now she felt even more exposed. She shifted in her seat, her hands dropping to her lap as she clasped them tightly together.

Why does he always do this? she thought, biting the inside of her cheek. Why does he always make me feel like I'm under a microscope, even when I'm the one asking the questions?

Her thoughts spiraled as she stabbed absently at her plate, her appetite fading beneath the weight of her unease. She replayed the exchange in her mind, each moment feeling like a quiet defeat. And yet, despite the frustration simmering in her chest, she couldn't deny the faint thread of admiration she felt.

Astron's calm was infuriating, yes, but it was also undeniably impressive. The way he read her so easily, the way he seemed so in control of himself and his surroundings—it was unlike anyone else she had ever met. No matter how much he unsettled her, Sylvie couldn't help but wonder how he did it. And, though she hated to admit it, part of her wanted to understand him better. Because in his unshakable calm, there was a strength she couldn't help but envy.

Sylvie's cheeks flushed a deeper red as the weight of Astron's words settled over her. Her hands darted to her lap, fingers fidgeting nervously as she struggled to process what he had just said. "Oh..." she murmured, her voice barely audible. "I... I didn't mean to—"

He cut her off with a faint shake of his head, his gaze steady and unwavering. "Sylvie," he said, his voice low but firm, carrying the weight of quiet authority. "You need to be more careful. These types of scenarios are going to happen again—likely with people far less trustworthy than me."

The words struck a chord within her, and she instinctively looked down, her embarrassment morphing into a quieter, deeper form of introspection. Her fingers curled tighter against the edge of the table, the soft hum of her [Authority] brushing against the calm wall of his presence. There was no malice in his tone, only a quiet truth that left her feeling exposed but strangely motivated.

He let the silence linger just long enough before speaking again. "Control over your powers is important," he said, his tone softening slightly, "but control over your emotions is equally important. If you allow yourself to react too openly, people will read you, and they'll use that against you."

Sylvie's shoulders stiffened at the gravity of his words. He wasn't wrong—he never was when it came to matters like this—but hearing it aloud, spelled out so clearly, made her feel like her

vulnerability was laid bare. Her chest tightened with a mixture of frustration and resolve. He's right. I can't keep letting myself be this easy to read.

Her fingers tightened around the table's edge again, but this time there was a shift in her posture, a faint but undeniable change. Her spine straightened, and when she finally lifted her gaze to meet his, her emerald eyes held a spark of quiet determination. "You're right," she said softly, her voice carrying a steadiness that hadn't been there before. "I'll... I'll work on it."

Astron gave her a faint nod of acknowledgment, his expression still unreadable but tinged with the slightest hint of approval. "Good," he said simply. "Awakening your powers has already changed the way others perceive you. Your growth is rapid, and people will notice—friends and enemies alike. The more composed you are, the harder it will be for them to manipulate or predict you."

Sylvie pressed her lips into a thin line, the weight of his words sinking deeper into her thoughts. She could feel the truth of them, not just in the abstract sense, but in the way people had already begun treating her differently. The Headmaster's training had pushed her into uncharted territory, forcing her to grow quickly and adapt. But it had also placed her under a sharper lens—one that others might use against her if she wasn't careful.

"I understand," she said quietly, her voice tinged with resolve. "I'll do better."

Astron studied her for a moment longer, as if measuring the sincerity of her response. Then, with a slight nod, he returned his focus to his meal. He didn't press her further, his calm demeanor unshaken, but the weight of his words lingered in the air between them.

Sylvie returned her attention to her plate, her appetite now a distant thought as her mind churned with the implications of their conversation. Astron's insight, as always, was precise and unflinching, and while it stung to have her weaknesses laid bare, it also sparked something deeper—a drive to prove herself. To the Headmaster, to herself, and most importantly to this guy.

Sylvie set her fork down, her fingers resting lightly on the edge of her tray as she steadied her nerves. Astron's calm composure had always felt like an impenetrable wall, but now that the conversation had shifted toward her training and growth, a spark of determination ignited in her chest. If he had noticed her changes so easily, she had every right to question his as well.

She took a quiet breath, gathering her thoughts, before speaking. "Astron," she began, her voice soft but steady. His purple eyes flicked up to meet hers, calm and attentive as always, though she noticed a faint glint of curiosity in his gaze.

"What kind of training did you go through over the break?" she asked, keeping her tone light but deliberate. "You've changed a lot too. Just like how you've observed my improvements, it's hard not to notice yours."

For a moment, Astron didn't respond, his gaze fixed on her as though weighing the intent behind her question. Then, he leaned back slightly, setting his spoon down with a quiet clink. "You've noticed, huh?" he said, his tone even, though there was a faint hint of amusement in his words.

Sylvie nodded, feeling a mix of relief and tension as he acknowledged her observation. "It's not just physical," she added quickly, her emerald eyes narrowing slightly. "You're stronger—not just in terms of power, but... presence. You carry yourself differently now."

Astron's calm purple eyes held Sylvie's gaze for a moment longer before he spoke. "You've improved a lot," he said evenly, his voice carrying a faint hint of approval.

Sylvie's lips curved into a small smile at his words. There was something gratifying about hearing that from him, given how much she had pushed herself during the break. But she wasn't about to let him shift the focus. Not now.

"I'm glad you think so," she replied, her tone light but deliberate. "But you're not getting off that easily, Astron. I asked about your training. I'm not letting you dodge the question."

Astron's lips quirked slightly, not quite a smile but close enough to make Sylvie blink in surprise. "You're persistent," he said softly, leaning back in his chair. His sharp gaze remained on her, steady and thoughtful.

"I trained," he began simply, his voice low but carrying a quiet weight. "And it was... difficult. Gruesome, in some ways."

Sylvie frowned slightly, her curiosity piqued but tinged with concern. "Gruesome?"

Astron nodded, his expression calm but distant. "You wouldn't want to know the details," he said matter-of-factly. "Let's just say it wasn't the kind of training most people could endure."

Sylvie's chest tightened at his words, the quiet certainty in his tone leaving no room for doubt. Knowing Astron, she didn't question him. He wasn't someone who exaggerated or sought attention. If he said it was gruesome, she believed him.

Her gaze softened slightly as she studied him, the faint tension in her shoulders easing. Astron had always been someone who could endure pain and hardship without complaint, someone who carried his burdens with a quiet strength that set him apart. It was one of the things she admired most about him, even if it sometimes made him feel distant.

"I believe you," she said softly, her voice carrying a note of sincerity. "You're the type who could handle that... even if you shouldn't have to."

Astron tilted his head slightly at her words, his expression unreadable. "Pain is just another form of growth," he said simply. "You either endure it and become stronger, or you let it break you. There's no in-between."

Sylvie felt her chest tighten again, her thoughts flickering to her own struggles during the break. The Headmaster's relentless training, the moments when she thought she couldn't push any further, only to find herself standing at the edge of a breakthrough. She understood what Astron meant, even if the way he said it felt almost too detached, too matter-of-fact.

"I get that," she said quietly, her gaze dropping to her tray for a moment before she looked back at him. "But- "

Her words were stopped by someone.

"Junior."

By a voice, to be exact.

Chapter 753 172.1 - Otherself

<Two weeks ago, Evergreen Mansion>

Maya sat cross-legged on the floor of her room, the dim light of enchanted lamps casting soft, shifting hues against the walls. The room was silent, save for the faint hum of mana crystals embedded in her desk and shelves. She had prepared carefully for this moment: wards etched into the floor to contain any sudden bursts of psychic energy, a mana-isolating band on her wrist to ground her if needed, and a small vial of specially brewed calming elixir resting nearby, just in case.

Her fingers brushed against the amulet Astron had given her, feeling the cool, intricate patterns under her touch. It felt alive in a way, pulsing faintly with a steady rhythm like a heartbeat. She took a slow breath, centering herself as she gripped the amulet in both hands.

"This is just another part of me," she murmured to herself, the words firm yet gentle. "Nothing I can't handle."

Her lips pressed into a thin line as she channeled a small stream of mana into the amulet, activating it. The moment her energy connected with it, the air around her seemed to ripple. A faint hum filled her ears, rising in pitch until it felt like it came from within her. Then, the world around her shifted.

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Maya's senses warped, her room dissolving into a strange, surreal expanse. She floated in a vast, endless void, streaked with ribbons of dark and violet light. The space was both infinite and claustrophobic, pulsing with an eerie rhythm that seemed to match the beat of her own heart.

Her feet found something solid beneath her, though there was no ground she could see—only a strange, shifting plane of light and shadow. She steadied herself, taking a moment to acclimate. It was disorienting, the way everything moved and swayed, but she forced herself to remain calm.

"This is it," she whispered. "The core of my mind."

She took a tentative step forward, and the void rippled in response, the lights around her coalescing into shapes. Faint whispers reached her ears, indistinct and scattered. Her rational mind recognized them as echoes of her own thoughts, fragments of buried memories and emotions.

And then she saw it.

Ahead, in the center of the shifting plane, stood a figure—her mirror, but not quite. This other Maya had the same sharp features and piercing eyes, but her expression was darker, more feral. Her posture exuded raw power and confidence, unrestrained by the discipline Maya had spent years honing. Her hair moved as if caught in an unseen wind, and her eyes glowed faintly, a crimson hue overlaying their natural green.

"So, you've finally come," the other Maya said, her voice smooth and cold, carrying a predatory edge. "Took you long enough."

Maya felt her breath hitch, but she steadied herself, meeting the other's gaze with quiet determination. "You're the part of me I've been trying to suppress."

The other Maya smirked, a sharp, almost mocking curve of her lips. "Suppress? You've been burying me, pretending I don't exist. But I'm here, always here, waiting for the day you slip."



Maya took another step forward, her hands clenched into fists. "I'm not here to fight you. I'm here to understand you—to understand us."

The other's smirk faded, replaced by a piercing glare. "Understand? You don't even know what you are. You think you can balance me, control me when you're too afraid to even face the truth."

"And what truth is that?" Maya demanded her voice firm despite the knot tightening in her chest.

"That you need me," the other replied, stepping closer. "You're incomplete without me. All that control, all that discipline—it's just a mask. Beneath it, you're scared and weak. And you know it."

Maya's jaw tightened, but she didn't back away. "Maybe I am afraid," she admitted, her voice quiet but steady. "But that doesn't mean I'll let you control me. If I'm going to walk this path, I need to be whole. That means we work together. I'm not running from you anymore."

The other Maya tilted her head, studying her with a sharp, calculating gaze. For a moment, the void around them stilled, the lights dimming as silence stretched between them.

"You're serious," the other finally said, her tone softening slightly. "You think you can handle what I am? The instincts, the hunger, the chaos? You think you can own it?"

Maya took a deep breath, her voice firm as she replied. "I don't need to own it. I just need to understand it."

"Heh...."

The laughter began as a low chuckle, deep and guttural, but quickly escalated into something far more sinister. It echoed around Maya, growing louder and more unhinged with every passing second. The sound was like glass shattering, a cacophony that vibrated through the crimson-tinged void, warping the space around her.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

The other Maya's laughter turned into a full-blown cackle, the predatory edge of her voice now laced with madness. The entire plane shifted in response, the once surreal and shadowy void bleeding into deep, throbbing crimson. The ground beneath Maya's feet cracked and splintered, glowing veins of blood-red light spreading out like roots, pulsating in rhythm with the laughter.

The air thickened, oppressive and suffocating, and Maya's breath caught in her throat. She felt it immediately—an overwhelming, terrifying presence that gripped her heart and sent shivers cascading down her spine. Her body instinctively recoiled, every part of her screaming to run, to escape, but she stood frozen, paralyzed by the sheer force of the aura emanating from her other self.

"You claim to understand," the other Maya said, her voice dripping with disdain as her laughter died away, leaving an eerie silence in its wake. Her crimson eyes glowed brighter, boring into Maya's with a terrifying intensity. "But do you even know what those words themselves mean?"

Maya opened her mouth to respond, but no words came. Instead, a choking sensation clawed at her throat, her breath hitching as if the air had been stolen from her lungs. Her chest heaved, struggling for air, but the harder she tried, the more it felt as though invisible hands were gripping her neck, squeezing tighter with every passing second.

"I—" she managed to gasp, her voice barely a whisper. But the suffocating weight pressed harder, cutting her off entirely.

"You don't," the other Maya hissed, stepping closer, her presence dominating the crimson plane. The glow of her eyes was like fire, burning through the very fabric of Maya's resolve. "You don't even understand yourself. You've spent your whole life running, hiding behind discipline and logic, pretending that control makes you strong."

Maya stumbled back, her legs trembling beneath her as the oppressive aura grew heavier. Her throat felt raw, her breathing shallow, and her vision blurred around the edges. She clutched at her chest, trying to steady herself, but it was no use.

The other Maya's lips curled into a cruel smile as she loomed closer. "You're worthless," she spat, her voice sharp and venomous. "A hollow shell pretending to be whole. You think you can balance me? Work with me? What a pathetic lie."

Maya felt herself shrinking beneath the weight of those words, her strength faltering as fear clawed at her mind. Her other self stopped inches away, her crimson eyes locked onto Maya's. They seemed to pierce through her very soul, peeling back every layer of defense she had built over the years.

"You've built your life on a foundation of weakness," the other Maya continued, her voice now a low, menacing growl. "And you think you can claim power without paying the price? Without facing what lies beneath?"

Maya's knees buckled, and she fell to the ground, gasping for air as tears pricked the corners of her eyes. The suffocating pressure was unbearable, and for a moment, she thought she would break—thought she would lose herself entirely to the overwhelming presence of her other self.

But then, somewhere deep within the swirling chaos of her mind, a flicker of clarity sparked.

'I'm not running,' she thought, her fingers digging into the ground beneath her. The cold, jagged edges of the crimson light cut into her palms, but she welcomed the pain. It was real, grounding her in the madness.

She forced her eyes up, meeting the burning gaze of her other self despite the suffocating fear. "You're wrong," she managed, her voice hoarse but steady. "I may be afraid... I may not understand everything yet. But I'm not worthless."

The other Maya's smirk faltered, a flicker of something unreadable crossing her features.

"I'm here," Maya continued, her breath coming in shallow gasps but her resolve strengthening. "I came here to face you, to face myself. And no matter how much you try to tear me down, I'm not going to let you win."

The oppressive aura didn't fade, but it shifted, its weight no longer pressing her down as harshly. The other Maya tilted her head, her crimson eyes narrowing as if assessing the words, searching for weakness.

"Bold," the other finally said, her voice colder than ever. "But words mean nothing without action. It is the same with 'him'. The way you are, you don't deserve someone like him. Someone who helps you all the time, yet the only way you help is thanks to your family's strengths."

Maya's breath hitched at the words, sharp and biting, like a blade twisting in her chest. The mention of Astron, the way her other self spat his name without saying it, struck something deep within her. The crimson void around them pulsed violently, the oppressive energy growing thicker, more suffocating.

Her other self stepped closer, her crimson eyes glowing brighter, wild with an intensity that made Maya's heart pound painfully against her ribs. The madness in her gaze was no longer just directed outward—it was personal, raw, and burning with unrestrained fury.

"He's the only one I can see," the other hissed, her voice trembling with rage. "The only one I can feel. Every time he looks at you, it's like I'm screaming in silence, clawing at the edges of your control, just for a sliver of recognition." Her lips twisted into a snarl.

"And yet... he only sees you. Never me."

Those words.....They were oddly specific....and something that slowly made her realize.

Chapter 754 172.2 - Otherself

"And yet... he only sees you. Never me."

The weight of her words hit Maya like a blow to the chest. She stumbled backward, her hands clutching at the ground as the crimson aura intensified around her. It wasn't just anger radiating from her other self—it was pain, deep and unrelenting, the kind of ache that Maya herself had tried to bury for so long.

"Do you know how angering it is?!" the other Maya shouted, her voice echoing like a thunderclap in the void. The crimson veins beneath them flared, the air crackling with energy. "To exist in the shadows, to be ignored, forgotten, while you bask in his attention, his trust? You get to be seen, and heard, while I'm left to rot in the dark!" Maya's chest tightened as she struggled to breathe against the overwhelming tide of emotion crashing over her. The other's words struck at a vulnerability she hadn't fully acknowledged, a truth she had been too afraid to face. She had always felt a pull toward Astron, a connection she couldn't explain, but she had never thought about what it meant for this part of her—this darker, more instinctual side that craved recognition, even from him.

"You don't understand," Maya said, her voice trembling as she forced herself to speak. "This isn't about him. This is about us. If we—"

"Liar!" the other interrupted, her voice a venomous snarl. She lunged forward, grabbing Maya by the collar and lifting her effortlessly off the ground. Her grip was ice-cold, unrelenting, and her crimson eyes bore into Maya's with unbridled fury. "You think you can pretend he doesn't matter? You think you can hide behind your lies of strength and self-reliance, but I know the truth. You need him."

Maya gasped, her hands clawing at the other's grip, but there was no escape. The raw emotion pouring from her other self was like a tidal wave, drowning her in feelings she had tried so hard to suppress. Anger, envy, longing—they all mixed into a toxic storm that threatened to consume her.

The other's voice dropped to a cold, quiet growl. "You don't deserve someone like him. Not with the way you rely on him for everything. You only stand because of his strength, his patience, and his belief in you. And the worst part? You let it happen."

"I don't-" Maya tried to speak, but the words caught in her throat. A part of her wanted to deny it, to fight back, but another part-a darker, quieter part-knew there was truth in those words. She had relied on Astron, and leaned on his strength when she couldn't find her own. She had let herself become dependent, even when she promised herself she wouldn't.

The other Maya's grip tightened, pulling her closer until their faces were mere inches apart. "I am the part of you that refuses to be weak," she hissed. "I am the part that hungers for recognition, for power. And yet, every time I try to rise, you push me back

down. You bury me, deny me, ignore me. But not anymore."

The crimson aura around them flared brighter, the entire plane trembling as if it would collapse under the weight of her fury. Maya felt the edges of her vision blur, her mind teetering on the brink of losing control.

Maya's body trembled as the suffocating weight of her other self's fury pressed down on her, unrelenting. She clawed at the invisible force crushing her chest, gasping for air, but the crimson void tightened its grip. The jagged ground beneath her feet began to crumble, pulling her downward into a swirling abyss of crimson light and shadow. "You can't even stand," the other Maya sneered, her voice dripping with venom. "You're weak, and now you'll stay buried where you belong."

The jagged tendrils of crimson light coiled around Maya's legs, dragging her further into the abyss. Her arms flailed, her breaths shallow and frantic, but the more she struggled, the deeper she sank. The oppressive aura grew heavier, darker, consuming her.

"I'm not... weak..." Maya gasped, her voice barely audible, tears welling in her eyes. But her strength was fading, her will slipping. The flicker of resolve she'd held onto was smothered under the weight of despair.

As the void swallowed her whole, her other self's laughter echoed around her, sharp and maddening. The last thing Maya saw was the glint of those piercing crimson eyes, burning into her soul, before everything went black.

Maya's eyes snapped open, her body jerking violently as she sucked in a desperate breath.

"Haaaaah... Haaaaah... Haaaaah..."

Her lungs burned, her chest heaving as she gulped in air, the suffocating sensation lingering like phantom hands around her throat. The crimson void was gone, replaced by the dim light of her room. She blinked rapidly, her vision blurry as the line between illusion and reality slowly unraveled.

Her trembling hands reached out, grasping at the wooden floor beneath her. It was solid, real, grounding her as she tried to steady her frantic breathing. The faint hum of mana wards still glowed faintly on the floor, a reassuring reminder of the precautions she had set in place.

She pressed her back against the wall, her head tilting upward as sweat dripped down her face and neck. Her clothes clung to her skin, soaked through as if she had just emerged from a storm. Her body felt heavy, her muscles aching, and every inch of her was drenched in sweat.

Her gaze fell to her palms, and a sharp jolt of pain shot through her. Her nails had pierced the flesh, crescent-shaped marks blooming red as small beads of blood trickled down her hands. She stared at them for a moment, detached, before the

realization hit her.

She was safe. She was back.

Her breaths slowed, though they still came in ragged bursts. The suffocating pressure of the crimson void was gone, but the weight of the encounter lingered in her chest. She closed her eyes for a moment, the laughter of her other self still echoing faintly in the back of her mind.

She clenched her fists, ignoring the sting of her injured palms. "I lost..." she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. The admission tasted bitter, but it was undeniable. She had been overpowered, consumed by the raw force of her other self's rage and pain. She had underestimated just how deep the divide within her truly ran.

But even in the defeat, there was a small ember of resolve that refused to be snuffed out. The encounter had left her shaken, and vulnerable, but it had also given her clarity. Her other self wasn't just a threat to suppress-it was a part of her, and it wouldn't be conquered through strength alone.

Maya reached for the calming elixir she had prepared earlier, her hands trembling as she uncorked it. The cool liquid soothed her throat and steadied her nerves, its effects washing over her like a balm. She set the empty vial aside and leaned her head back against the wall, staring at the ceiling as her breathing evened out.

She had survived the first step, even if barely. But the road ahead was clearer now, even if it terrified her.

The amulet, still faintly glowing, lay on the floor in front of her. She stared at it, her jaw tightening. The artifact had done its job, dragging her into the depths of her mind to face what she had buried. But the experience had revealed something even more unsettling: this side of herself....

"Those emotions that I often feel.....Those emotions that somehow feel unnatural and raw....They all are coming from her...."

Maya stared at the faintly glowing amulet on the floor, her thoughts racing. Her breathing had steadied, but the weight of her other self's words still pressed against

her mind, echoing in the quiet of her room.

"And yet... he only sees you. Never me."

She shivered, the memory of her other self's raw, maddening voice clawing at the edges of her consciousness. There was pain in those words, an ache that felt almost unbearable. But there was something else too—an unsettling clarity.

"Do you know how angering it is?!"

The anger wasn't just rage; it was rooted in longing, in a desire so fierce it bordered on obsession. Maya's fingers unconsciously brushed over the crescent-shaped wounds on her palms, her nails pressing lightly against the raw skin. The pain

grounded her, gave her something tangible to hold onto as her mind unraveled the

threads of the encounter.

"To exist in the shadows, to be ignored, forgotten, while you bask in his attention, his trust? You get to be seen, and heard, while I'm left to rot in the dark!"

The words felt like a knife, not because they were false but because they were disturbingly close to the truth. She hadn't just been suppressing her darker side-she had been ignoring it, dismissing it entirely, pretending it wasn't there. But that part of her wasn't silent, wasn't passive. It had been watching, waiting, feeding on every flicker of emotion Maya herself couldn't understand.

Her voice broke the silence as she muttered, almost to herself, "This feeling of only sensing his blood, and only connecting to his blood..." Her words hung in the air, heavy and uncertain. She clenched her fists again, ignoring the sting. "If... if she's my vampire self, my primal instincts... then it makes sense."

The realization struck her like a cold wave. Her unnatural obsession with Astron-the way her senses seemed to heighten around him, how his presence alone could steady or unsettle her-it all tied back to the part of her she'd been suppressing. It wasn't just infatuation, nor was it something as simple as admiration. It was deeper, rawer, rooted in her very essence.

Her fingers traced the edge of the amulet as she pieced it together, her thoughts

growing sharper.

"From the start," she murmured, "this connection I've felt... it wasn't entirely mine, was

it?" Her voice wavered, but her mind pressed on. "It was hers-my other self. That part of me that craves recognition, that desires to be seen."

Maya's eyes flicked to her reflection in the glass of a nearby cabinet. Her face looked pale, her hair disheveled, but her gaze burned with determination. If her other self truly was her vampiric instincts manifesting as a separate consciousness, then everything she had felt-the obsession, the heightened awareness around Astron- could be traced back to that primal part of her.

Her nails dug lightly into her palm as the memory of her other self's words echoed again. "He only sees you. Never me."

That side of her didn't just crave Astron's blood-it craved his attention, his acknowledgment. It wanted to be recognized not as a fragment of Maya but as something whole, something real. And Maya, in her denial and ignorance, had only fueled that bitterness, that resentment.

She let out a shaky breath, her mind running in circles. This wasn't just about control anymore. It wasn't just about mastering her instincts. If her other self's desires were tied to her vampiric nature, then the bond she felt with Astron was far more dangerous than she had realized.

"If I don't understand this... if I don't learn to balance it..." she whispered, her voice

trembling. The implications were clear. If she couldn't confront this part of herself fully, she might lose control entirely. And the consequences—for herself, for Astron—would be devastating.

'But the way I am right now....I can't stand to her....'

She knew this as well.

'I need to get stronger. That is the only answer.'

Until then, she needed to understand, and she needed some help.

Chapter 755 Chapter 172.3 - Otherself

Maya stood in the grand hallway of the Evergreen mansion, the polished floors and towering arches familiar yet imposing. Her body still felt heavy from the encounter, her palms still faintly throbbing from the marks her nails had left, but her resolve burned brighter with every step she took.

She couldn't face this alone—not yet. Her pride refused to let her confide in Astron, not with the weight of her other self's accusations still fresh in her mind. Instead, she sought someone closer, someone who understood the intricacies of their family and the shadows that often loomed over them.

Her brother, Alden.

The door to Alden's study swung open with a faint creak, revealing the dimly lit room. Alden Evergreen stood near the wide desk, his back to her, reviewing a map spread across the surface. His presence, as always, was commanding—his tall frame exuding an aura of sharp authority. His dark hair was tied neatly back, and his emerald-green eyes, a mirror of her own, flicked up as she stepped inside.



"Maya," Alden greeted, his tone neutral but curious. "I wasn't expecting you. What brings you here?"

She hesitated for only a moment, then stepped forward, her hands clasped tightly to keep them from trembling. "I need your help," she said, her voice steady but laced with tension. "Something happened... something I can't ignore."

Alden's eyes narrowed slightly, his attention sharpening as he straightened. "Go on."

Maya took a deep breath, choosing her words carefully. She couldn't reveal the full truth—not about her vampiric instincts, nor the battle she had just fought within herself. But she could frame it differently, enough to draw his attention without raising suspicion.

"Recently, when I went to the banquet hosted by the Cox Family," she began, her gaze locked onto his, "I felt something... off. It was as if I was losing control of my own mind, like invisible strings were pulling at my thoughts, twisting them."

Maya's words hung in the air, and she saw Alden's expression harden instantly at the mention of the Cox family. His hands moved away from the map, curling into tight fists as he turned his full attention to her.

"When you were at the Cox family's banquet?" Alden's voice was sharp, laced with a mix of curiosity and suspicion. "What happened there?"

Maya nodded, taking another step forward, her fingers brushing lightly over the edge of the desk as if to ground herself. "I attended with Astron," she admitted, her tone steady. "At first, everything seemed normal. But at some point... I started to feel strange. It was subtle at first, like a faint pull in the back of my mind, but it grew stronger."

Her emerald eyes met his, the intensity of her gaze matching his growing fury. "It was as though my emotions weren't entirely my own. I could feel anger, frustration, and even... darker thoughts bubbling up inside me. But they didn't feel natural. They felt planted, like someone was twisting them to suit their purpose."

She clenched her fists, her nails biting into her palms again as she recalled the suffocating presence of Silas Vayne's influence. "I was losing control of myself. My thoughts, my feelings—they weren't entirely mine anymore. And that feeling... I can't describe how much I hate it."

Alden's face darkened, his jaw tightening as his fury simmered just beneath the surface. "Someone dared to interfere with your mind?" His voice was low, dangerous, and laced with barely restrained rage. "Someone dared to manipulate you?"

Maya nodded, her expression grim. "Yes. I don't know who it was or how they did it, but it was real, brother. I felt it. And whoever it was, they were bold enough to do it in the middle of a public gathering."

Her brother slammed his fist onto the desk, the impact rattling the inkwell and scattering papers across the polished wood. "Who dares?! Who dares to lay a hand—or even a thought—on an Evergreen?" His voice was thunderous now, his emerald eyes blazing with indignation. "The Cox family has overstepped their bounds if they allowed such a thing to happen under their roof. They'll answer for this."

Maya watched him carefully, suppressing the flicker of guilt that stirred within her. She hadn't lied—what she had described was true. Silas Vayne had used his power to manipulate her emotions during the banquet, though she couldn't reveal that she already knew the culprit's name.

But that wasn't the main topic right now.

Silas Vayne.

He was already dead. Astron had killed him, and she herself was aware of that fact. Hence, there was no reason for her to talk about this matter and mislead her brother about something this useless.

Maya watched Alden's rage simmer, his fingers still pressed against the desk as he tried to contain the fire burning in his chest. The mention of her mind being manipulated had struck a nerve, as she knew it would. But now, with the proper foundation laid, she shifted the conversation to what truly mattered.

"Brother," she said softly, her tone calm but firm enough to draw his attention. His sharp emerald gaze locked onto hers, still brimming with fury. "While you can deal with those who pose a threat to our family, the main problem remains the same."

Alden's brows furrowed, his jaw tightening. "What do you mean?"

"It's not just about the act of manipulation or the ones who dared to try," she explained, her words deliberate and measured. "It's about the fact that someone was able to influence my thoughts. That alone is the issue. If they could do it once, who's to say it won't happen again? That vulnerability... it terrifies me."

She let her words linger in the air, allowing the weight of her fears to settle between them. Alden's fiery expression softened slightly, though his eyes remained sharp with contemplation. Maya took a step closer, her voice steady as she continued.

"That's why I came to you," she said. "I don't just want to deal with external threats—I want to ensure that my mind, my psyche, can't be breached like that again. I need to be stronger, not just physically but mentally."

Alden leaned back slightly, his posture easing as her words began to sink in. He let out a slow breath, his shoulders relaxing as some of his anger gave way to understanding. For a moment, he studied her, his expression shifting from fury to something closer to pride.

"So, that's what's been weighing on you," he said, a faint sigh escaping his lips. "You're not just worried about the insult or the threat—it's about ensuring it doesn't happen again. I should've expected nothing less from you, Maya. That caution... that drive... it's exactly what makes you an Evergreen."

Maya's lips curved into a faint smile, though her resolve remained firm. "Of course. It's not enough to eliminate the threat—I need to be prepared for the next one, whatever form it might take."

Alden nodded slowly, his gaze sharpening as he turned to his desk. He began rifling through a stack of documents, pulling out a leather-bound book with intricate golden engravings on its cover. He placed it on the desk between them, his fingers brushing over the surface as he spoke.

"There are methods," he said, his voice calm and measured now. "Techniques and disciplines designed to strengthen the mind and protect it from external influence. They're not easy, and they require time, dedication, and... pain."

Maya's eyes flicked to the book, her curiosity piqued. "What kind of techniques?"

Alden tapped the book lightly. "This contains the basics of mental fortification—methods used by Awakened knights and mages alike to shield their thoughts and emotions. Some are meditative, focusing on creating barriers within the mind. Others are more practical, teaching you how to identify and resist manipulative energies in real-time."

He paused, his gaze meeting hers. "But to truly strengthen your psyche, you'll need more than just these methods. You'll need to understand your own mind intimately—every strength, every weakness. That's not something I, or anyone else, can teach you. It's something you'll have to learn on your own."

Maya nodded, her resolve unshaken. "I'm willing to do whatever it takes."

Alden let out another sigh, though this one was softer, almost amused. "Of course you are," he said, a faint smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "You're my sister, after all."

He pushed the book toward her, his tone growing serious again. "Start with this. I'll arrange for additional resources, and if you need guidance, I'll be here. But remember, Maya—strengthening your mind isn't just about building walls. It's about understanding yourself, your emotions, your weaknesses. Only then can you truly control them."

Maya picked up the book, her fingers tracing the golden engravings as she absorbed his words. "Thank you, brother," she said softly. "I won't waste this opportunity."

He waved her off, his tone light but sincere. "I wouldn't expect anything less from you. But remember, Maya... you're an Evergreen. We may be proud, but we're not invincible. If you ever feel that weight again, don't hesitate to come to me."

Maya nodded, clutching the book tightly as she turned to leave the study. As she stepped into the hallway, the weight of her earlier encounter with her other self still lingered, but for the first time, it felt manageable. She had a path forward, a way to strengthen herself—not just for her family's pride but for her own resolve.

And as she walked down the corridor, the glow of the amulet in her pocket felt less like a burden and more like a reminder of the battle she was determined to win.

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The crisp morning air bit gently at Maya's skin as she stood on the steps of the Evergreen mansion, her gaze fixed on the sleek airship waiting to take her back to the academy. Two weeks had passed since her conversation with Alden, two weeks of relentless mental training, and though her body ached with fatigue, her mind felt sharper than it had in years.

Clutched in her hand was the leather-bound book Alden had given her, now worn from constant use. Its pages were filled with annotations, marks of her struggles and progress as she immersed herself in the techniques of mental fortification. Meditation exercises, visualization techniques, even methods to identify the faint traces of foreign influence within her psyche—she had practiced them all, often pushing herself to the brink of exhaustion.

But the effort had been worth it.

Maya wasn't ready to face her other self again—not yet. The memory of that crimson void and the suffocating weight of her darker side still lingered at the edges of her mind, a reminder of the battle she had lost. But she was stronger now. Every hour spent training, every layer of understanding she peeled back about herself, brought her closer to the moment when she would return to that place. When she would face her other self, not as an enemy, but as a part of her.

"Lady Maya," a voice called, breaking her from her thoughts. One of the family stewards approached, bowing politely. "The airship is ready for departure."

Maya nodded, adjusting the strap of her bag over her shoulder. "Thank you," she said, her voice calm but firm. With one last glance at the mansion, she descended the steps, her boots clicking softly against the polished stone.

It was time to return to the academy.

Chapter 756 Chapter 172.4 - Otherself

On the airship, Maya set the book down on the small table beside her seat, her fingers brushing over its worn cover. The past two weeks had been grueling, but they had also given her something she hadn't realized she lacked—clarity.

She leaned back against the plush seat, her gaze drifting to the window. The clouds stretched out like a vast sea below, and in the distance, she could see the faint outline of the academy's spires piercing the sky.

'It's been two weeks,' she thought, her mind drifting to the friends and rivals she would soon reunite with. And to him.

Astron.

The thought of him brought a complicated mix of emotions. He had been a constant presence in her thoughts during her training, not just as a source of strength but also as a reminder of what she still needed to overcome. Her other self's words echoed faintly in her mind, sharp and cutting.

"He only sees you. Never me."

She clenched her fists, her nails digging lightly into her palms, but this time, she didn't flinch. That bitterness wasn't hers—it belonged to her other self. But it was also a part of her she couldn't ignore.

'Not yet,' she reminded herself. 'I'll face her when I'm ready. Not before.'

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Just like that, Maya emerged onto the grand grounds of Arcadia Hunter Academy. The sprawling campus was abuzz with activity, its manicured lawns and towering spires bustling with students of all years. The air was filled with chatter, laughter, and the occasional crackle of mana from impromptu displays of power.

The academy felt alive, more so than it had during the first semester. Students were energized, their spirits high as they reunited with friends and prepared for another round of rigorous training.

Maya made her way to the main amphitheater, where the second semester's opening ceremony was being held. The vast structure loomed ahead, its sheer size a testament to the academy's grandeur. As she entered, the sound of thousands of students talking filled the space, their voices blending into a constant hum.

She scanned the sea of faces, hoping for a glimpse of Astron among the crowd. But the freshmen section was far from where the sophomores were seated, and the sheer number of attendees made finding anyone specific nearly impossible.

'It's fine,' she told herself. 'I'll see him later.'

For now, she focused on her own year. The sophomores were seated closer to the center, where the instructors and academy officials would deliver their speeches. She found her designated spot easily, slipping into her seat just as the murmurs began to quiet.

As the ceremony proceeded, Maya listened attentively but found her thoughts drifting occasionally. When it finally concluded, the students were dismissed to their respective classes, and Maya followed the flow of sophomores toward the lecture halls.

It wasn't long before she spotted a familiar face in the crowd.

"Maya!" a cheerful voice called out, cutting through the noise. Amelia, her deskmate from the previous semester, rushed toward her with a broad grin. Her honey-blond hair bounced with every step, and her bright blue eyes sparkled with enthusiasm.

"Amelia," Maya greeted with a small smile. "You're as energetic as ever."

Amelia laughed, falling into step beside her as they walked toward their assigned classroom. "Of course! It's a new semester! I've got so much to tell you, and I can't wait to hear all about what you've been up to. It's been forever."

Maya's lips quirked upward slightly at her friend's exuberance. "It's only been one and half a month."

"It is forever when you're not around to keep me sane," Amelia teased, nudging her playfully. "So, how was your break? Did anything exciting happen? Or, wait, let me guess—you spent the entire time training."

Amelia chattered on as they walked, her enthusiasm as infectious as ever. But Maya, perceptive as always, noticed something different. Amelia's usual clinginess was still there—a familiar trait that often drew a mix of exasperation and fondness from Maya—but this time, there was a subtle restraint. She no longer leaned too closely or tugged on Maya's sleeve as she spoke. Her energy was more grounded, her gestures more measured.

Maya's lips curved into a faint smile. She's growing, too, she thought, a quiet warmth blooming in her chest. The realization brought a sense of pride and happiness for her deskmate and friend.

"So, what about you, Amelia?" Maya asked as they entered the classroom and took their seats. "Did you spend the entire break pestering your siblings, or did you finally decide to focus on your swordsmanship?"

Amelia let out an exaggerated gasp, clutching her chest dramatically. "How dare you imply I don't take my training seriously! For your information, I spent at least three whole days practicing!" She paused for effect before breaking into a sheepish grin. "Okay, maybe two and a half. But still!"

Maya chuckled softly. "Impressive dedication."

Amelia grinned at the rare compliment, her blue eyes twinkling. "But enough about me! Tell me, what did you do? Train? Study? Or... did you finally take some time off to have fun?"

Before Maya could answer, a group of girls from their class approached, their faces lighting up as they spotted her.

"Maya! Amelia!" one of them called out, waving enthusiastically. It was Lila, a petite girl with auburn hair and a cheerful disposition. Behind her were two more classmates, Kara and Evelyn, who both carried the same mix of friendliness and curiosity.

"We've missed you!" Lila said, sliding into the seat beside Maya. "It's been so dull without you around. Amelia's chaos isn't quite enough to keep us entertained."

"Hey!" Amelia protested, though her grin betrayed her amusement.

Maya smiled at the group, her composure softening. "It's good to see all of you again."

The conversation quickly turned lively, the girls catching up on their breaks and sharing snippets of news from their respective families. Maya listened, chiming in occasionally, but her calm presence seemed to naturally draw the group's attention.

As the chatter continued, Maya reached into her bag and pulled out a neatly wrapped package. She placed it on the desk, drawing curious looks from the others.

"Snacks?" Amelia asked, her voice tinged with excitement.

Maya nodded, unwrapping the package to reveal an assortment of elegantly prepared treats—small cakes, candied fruits, and delicate pastries, each crafted with care. "I brought these from home," she said. "I thought you might enjoy them."

The girls' eyes lit up, and Amelia practically bounced in her seat. "Maya, you're the best!" she exclaimed, already reaching for one of the pastries. "Seriously, how do you always bring the best snacks?"

The others quickly followed suit, their exclamations of delight filling the classroom.

"These are amazing!" Kara said, her voice muffled by a bite of cake. "It's no wonder we've missed you so much."

"As usual, your snacks are the best!" Evelyn added, savoring a candied fruit.

Maya couldn't help the small smile that tugged at her lips. Even with her mind occupied by the weight of her inner struggles and the challenges ahead, moments like these brought a sense of normalcy and connection. It was a reminder that, despite everything, she wasn't alone.

The conversation flowed easily as they enjoyed the snacks, laughter, and lighthearted teasing filling the air. Maya felt a quiet sense of contentment settle over her. For now, she allowed herself to bask in the warmth of companionship, even as the shadows of her thoughts lingered at the edges of her mind.

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The lessons ended with the ringing of the academy bell, and Maya gathered her belongings with practiced efficiency. As she rose from her seat, the chatter of her classmates surrounded her, the room abuzz with plans for the afternoon.

"Maya, where are you off to?" Amelia asked, leaning over her desk with a curious look. "It's been ages since we've had a proper catch-up. You're not just going to vanish on us, are you?"

Lila chimed in, her voice playful. "Yeah, Maya! Don't tell me you're heading back to train or something. Come on, it's the first day back—let's do something fun."

Kara and Evelyn joined the chorus of encouragement, their bright smiles making it impossible for Maya to refuse. Though her mind was tugged in other directions, their warmth and genuine excitement made her hesitate.

"All right," she relented with a small smile. "Let's go to the cafeteria. But only for a little while."

"Yay!" Amelia cheered, bouncing out of her seat.

The cafeteria was bustling with life, students from all years gathered in groups, sharing stories and laughter as they enjoyed their meals. Maya and her friends weaved through the crowd, eventually finding a table near the center of the room. As they settled in, Amelia volunteered to fetch drinks, leaving Maya to take in the lively atmosphere.

But as she scanned the room, her gaze caught on a particular table near the far corner. There, sitting across from each other, were two familiar figures.

Astron and Sylvie.

Maya's posture stiffened almost imperceptibly as she watched the two converse. Astron's demeanor was his usual calm, composed self, but there was a subtle ease to his movements, a slight curve to his lips as Sylvie spoke.

Or maybe that was not the case but she was just imagining things....

However, at that exact moment, it just felt like that.

Sylvie, in turn, leaned forward slightly, her expression animated as she gestured with her hands, clearly enjoying the conversation.

For a moment, Maya's surroundings seemed to fade, her focus narrowing entirely on the scene before her. Her mind flickered to a memory—a dance at the club activity. Astron had danced with Sylvie that time, the image of them moving gracefully together etched into her thoughts.

The pang of discomfort that settled in her chest caught her off guard. It was sharp and unfamiliar, stirring a restless energy she couldn't quite place. She shifted her gaze, willing herself to look away, but the sight lingered at the edges of her mind.

'Go.'

Whatever it was, something in her mind was talking.

Maya's thoughts swirled as she kept glancing toward the table where Astron and Sylvie sat. The restless energy in her chest grew harder to ignore, and her usual composure felt like it was slipping through her fingers. The sharp whisper in her mind echoed again.

'Go.'

Her gaze hardened subtly as she rose from her seat. "Excuse me for a moment," she said to her friends, her voice calm and measured as always. Before they could question her, she turned and made her way toward the counter where meals were ordered, a purposeful stride masking the turmoil beneath her collected exterior.

She placed her order with the personnel, her words precise and quick, before pivoting smoothly and heading toward the table where Astron and Sylvie sat.

As she approached, the lively hum of the cafeteria seemed to quiet around her, the edges of her awareness blurring as her focus locked onto them. Astron noticed her first, his violet eyes meeting hers with the same calm clarity that defined him. Sylvie followed his gaze, her animated expression faltering slightly as she spotted Maya.

Maya stopped at the edge of their table, her gaze steady and unreadable as she addressed Astron directly.

"Junior," she said, her voice even but carrying a quiet weight that drew the attention of a few nearby students.

Astron straightened slightly, his demeanor as composed as ever. "Senior," he replied, inclining his head faintly. His tone was neutral, but there was a flicker of something in his eyes—curiosity, perhaps, or recognition of her intent.

"May I sit here?"

She decided to sit down.

Chapter 757 Chapter 173.1 - Socializing ?

Maya's voice was calm but firm as she asked, "May I sit here?"

Astron's gaze held hers for a moment, his violet eyes calm and unwavering. Then, with a faint nod, he replied, "Of course. You don't need to ask, Senior."

Maya inclined her head slightly in acknowledgment before pulling out a chair and sitting down across from him. The move, though composed, carried an air of quiet purpose. Almost immediately, her friends—Amelia, Evelyn, Kara, and Lila—hesitated near the table, exchanging glances before following her lead.

Amelia, unusually quiet for once, took a seat beside Maya without a word, her expression a mix of.....something...

A lot of things to be exact.

The others, however, were far less subtle.

Evelyn leaned slightly toward Kara, her voice a barely contained whisper but still loud enough to be heard. "Wow... did we really have someone like him in our school?"

Kara nodded, her eyes shining with curiosity as she looked at Astron. "I don't think I've seen him before. Who is this handsome guy? Maya, where do you know him?"



Lila, always the bold one, smiled brightly and leaned forward slightly. "Maya, you've been keeping secrets, haven't you?"

Maya's expression remained composed, though inwardly, she was already bracing herself for the barrage of questions. "This is Astron," she said simply. "He's my Junior.

"Your Junior?"

"Ahem.....Part of the History and Arts Club."

"A junior?" Evelyn's eyes widened in surprise. "He looks so... mature. Are you sure he's not in our year?"

"Or the year above us?" Lila added with a teasing grin.

Astron, ever composed, glanced at the girls with a faint smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "I'm a first-year," he confirmed, his tone calm and even.

The group immediately reacted with exclamations of surprise and delight.

"You must be quite talented, then," Kara said, her voice laced with curiosity. "Maya's standards are pretty high, and she wouldn't just sit with anyone."

Maya shot Kara a look, but the other girl only grinned mischievously in return.

As the conversation continued, the initial discomfort that had gnawed at Maya's chest began to ebb. Seeing Sylvie now sitting silently like this, clearly clumped, brought her a strange sense of relief. The dynamic had shifted—what had been a quiet, isolated moment between Astron and Sylvie was now a lively group conversation, and Maya found comfort in the change.

She leaned back slightly, her composure returning fully as she observed the way Astron deftly handled the questions being thrown his way. He answered with just enough detail to satisfy the girls' curiosity without revealing too much, his calm demeanor and concise words earning him more than a few admiring glances.

"What's your ranking? Are you in the top 100 of the freshmen?" Evelyn asked, her eyes gleaming with curiosity.

"The freshmen class is supposed to be really strong this year," Kara added, leaning forward slightly. "You must also be pretty powerful, right?"

Before Astron could respond, Maya coughed lightly, catching the attention of the table. Her expression remained neutral, but her sharp gaze betrayed her intent. Knowing Astron, he would likely downplay his abilities as he always did, and she wasn't about to let the conversation steer into unnecessary humility.

"Rankings are not always a true measure of someone's ability," Maya said smoothly, her tone even but firm. "Astron has more than proven himself in other ways."

Astron glanced at her, a flicker of amusement in his violet eyes that was gone as quickly as it came.

"Hmm? Really?"

Evelyn tilted her head, her skepticism plain on her face. "Really? If he's not all about rankings, then what makes him so special?" Her tone wasn't harsh, but the curiosity carried a hint of challenge. "You're not exactly the type to sit with just anyone, Maya."

The others nodded, Kara's lips curving into a teasing grin. "Exactly. What's the story here, Maya? There's gotta be something more."

Astron remained unfazed, his calm gaze sweeping across the table. "I'm just a junior," he said simply, his tone betraying no emotion. His answer, however, only seemed to fuel their curiosity.

Evelyn sighed dramatically, leaning back in her chair with an exasperated look. "You're no fun... mysterious guy." She folded her arms, but there was a twinkle of amusement in her eyes.

Just as the conversation seemed to hit a lull, Kara's eyes widened as if she'd suddenly remembered something. She leaned forward, her gaze zeroing in on Sylvie, who had been quietly eating her meal, trying her best to blend into the background.

"Oh my... how rude of us," Kara said with a dramatic gasp. "We've been so caught up grilling him that we forgot to introduce ourselves."

Lila perked up immediately, her cheerful energy returning in full force. "You're absolutely right! We've been so focused on Astron that we didn't even notice her. Sorry about that!" She directed a bright smile at Sylvie. "What's your name, cutie?"

Sylvie froze mid-bite, her fork hovering in the air as her wide eyes darted between the girls. Overwhelmed by the sudden attention, she fumbled to respond, her voice barely above a whisper. "I... I'm Sylvie."

Maya stepped in smoothly, her composed tone cutting through the growing energy at the table. "This is Sylvie," she said, her voice calm but carrying an air of finality. "She's also a junior and a member of the History and Arts Club."

Sylvie's shoulders relaxed slightly as Maya's words drew the attention back to her. The girls, however, were far from finished.

"Oh, so you're part of the same club?" Evelyn asked, her curiosity now directed at Sylvie. "That's interesting. What do you guys even do in that club? Paint? Write? Gossip about history?"

Sylvie blinked, unsure how to respond, but Amelia spoke before she could. "The club focuses on research and creative projects tied to historical events," she explained smoothly.

Evelyn leaned back slightly, crossing her arms with a playful smirk as she eyed Amelia. "That sounds like the direct definition straight off the club pamphlet," she teased, her tone light but mischievous. "But are you guys really doing anything that grand? Come on, Amelia, spill the real story."

Kara grinned, jumping on the opportunity. "Of course the club vice-prez would say that, wouldn't she? Isn't that right, Amelia? Aren't you the vice-president of the History and Arts Club?"

Amelia's cheeks flushed faintly, but she held her ground, her usual energy returning. "Well, yes, I am," she admitted, tossing her honey-blond hair over her shoulder with mock grandeur. "But for your information, we do important things! We went on a trip last semester to explore an ancient city. It was fascinating, full of historical ruins, and we learned so much!"

The girls exchanged amused looks, clearly intrigued despite themselves. "Really now?" Evelyn said, arching an eyebrow. "That does sound impressive. What else do you guys do? Or is it just all history, all the time?"

Amelia shook her head, her enthusiasm unwavering. "Not at all! We also focus on art. Things like learning traditional dances, improving drawing skills, even working on some theater projects."

"Heeeeh... Dancing?" Evelyn's eyes glinted with mischief as she leaned forward slightly, her gaze flickering briefly toward Astron before returning to Amelia. "That actually sounds pretty fun."

Astron, sitting quietly through the exchange, remained as calm and composed as ever. However, Maya didn't notice a slight shift in Evelyn's demeanor. Her blue eyes were narrowed, a sharp and unspoken warning passing between them.

Evelyn caught the glare and immediately leaned back with a sheepish laugh. "Cough....Let's relax a little...."

Amelia, oblivious to the undercurrents, clasped her hands together with renewed energy. "Anyway, if any of you are interested, you should consider joining! We're always looking for new members, and I think you'd all love the activities."

Maya shot her a brief, disapproving glance, and Amelia's enthusiasm faltered slightly. "Or, you know... you can just admire us from afar," she added with a nervous laugh.

Sylvie, still quiet but visibly more at ease, offered a small smile. "It's a nice club," she said softly, her voice steady despite her earlier shyness. "Everyone is very supportive."

Evelyn's gaze softened as she turned her attention to Sylvie, a playful smile tugging at her lips. "You really are quite a cute junior," she said, her voice carrying an unexpected warmth.

Sylvie blinked, her cheeks tinged with a faint blush. "Oh, um... thank you," she murmured, her shyness evident.

Evelyn leaned forward slightly, resting her chin on her hand as she regarded Sylvie with interest. "You know, if you ever need help with anything—studying, club stuff, whatever—don't hesitate to ask. I might not look like it, but I'm actually a pretty good student."

Sylvie hesitated, her wide eyes flicking toward Maya as if seeking reassurance. Maya gave a subtle nod, her expression calm, which seemed to bolster Sylvie's confidence. "I'll... keep that in mind," she said softly, managing a small but genuine smile.

"Good," Evelyn replied with a grin, clearly pleased. "I like juniors who are as sweet as you. We've got to stick together, you know? The school can be a jungle sometimes."

"Ahahaha...."

Sylvie managed a small smile.

Kara chuckled, nudging Evelyn playfully. "Look at you, playing big sister all of a sudden. Who knew you had it in you?"

Evelyn smirked, flicking a strand of hair over her shoulder. "Hey, I'm not all sass and sarcasm. I've got layers, you know."

The table erupted in light laughter, and Sylvie's shoulders relaxed further, her earlier tension melting away. "Thank you," she said quietly, her smile lingering as she looked at Evelyn.

As the conversation continued, the atmosphere around the table grew lighter and more relaxed. Evelyn's attention occasionally drifted back to Sylvie, her curiosity and fondness evident in the way she engaged with the younger girl. Sylvie, though still reserved, began to answer questions with a bit more confidence, her voice steadying with each response.

Chapter 758 Chapter 173.2 - Socializing ?

Sylvie's fork paused halfway to her mouth as she heard a voice—calm, firm, and laced with quiet authority.

"Junior."

She turned her head, startled, and her emerald eyes met the cool, collected gaze of Maya. The senior's presence alone was enough to draw attention, but what truly caught Sylvie off guard was what she felt. Her [Authority] pulsed faintly, brushing against the kaleidoscope of emotions radiating from Maya like waves of color.

A rainbow. That was the only way Sylvie could describe it—a dazzling array of hues, constantly shifting and swirling. Maya's emotions were complex, layered, and impossible to pin down. But amid the chaos of colors, there were three that stood out sharply, their vibrancy undeniable.

Pink. A deep, steady pink that Sylvie had come to associate with love, layered beneath the surface like an unspoken truth.

Red. A flicker of anger, faint but simmering, crackling at the edges of Maya's presence.

Purple. The unmistakable shade of jealousy, twisting through the spectrum like a vine.

Sylvie's chest tightened as she processed the meaning behind the emotions. The love, the anger, the jealousy—they were all unmistakably directed at one person. Her eyes flickered toward Astron briefly, and her stomach dropped.

'She feels it too.'

Sylvie felt the overwhelming flood of emotions pressing against her, as if the weight of Maya's feelings had seeped into her own heart. Her pulse quickened, and she gripped the edge of the table for grounding. Why is this happening? she thought, her mind racing. Maya...? She's always so composed, so distant. But now...

Maya's voice brought her back to reality. "May I sit here?"

Sylvie blinked, realizing too late that she hadn't answered. Astron, ever composed, gave a faint nod. "Of course. You don't need to ask, Senior."

Maya inclined her head slightly in acknowledgment, her movements deliberate as she pulled out a chair and sat down. Her calm demeanor was flawless, yet Sylvie's [Authority] told a different story. Beneath the surface, Maya was anything but composed.

'Just what is going on with her?' Sylvie thought, her gaze lowering to her tray. She couldn't look directly at Maya without feeling the full weight of her emotions pressing against her, and it was... too much.

As Maya's friends—Amelia, Evelyn, Kara, and Lila—approached, Sylvie's attention shifted. She let her [Authority] stretch faintly toward them, bracing herself for what she might sense. But to her surprise, the emotions radiating from the girls were far more straightforward: admiration, curiosity, amusement.

There was no malice, no jealousy, no ill will. Even Evelyn, with her teasing smirk and sharp wit, carried only faint skepticism tempered by genuine interest. The simplicity of their emotions was almost refreshing compared to the tangled web swirling around Maya.

The exception was Amelia. Her emotions were a mess—restless and chaotic, flickering between concern, frustration, and something Sylvie couldn't quite place. It was like watching a storm struggle to find its course, and it only added to Sylvie's unease.

Maya's voice cut through the din as she introduced Astron. "This is Astron. He's my Junior and a member of the History and Arts Club."

Sylvie's stomach churned again at the subtle emphasis Maya placed on "my Junior." It wasn't overt, but her [Authority] caught the flicker of intent behind the words. The faint jealousy, the subtle possessiveness—it all pointed to the same thing.

She feels the same way I do. The thought hit Sylvie like a punch to the gut. But why? How?

Her thoughts spiraled as the conversation at the table grew livelier. Evelyn, Kara, and Lila bombarded Astron with questions, their curiosity and playful admiration filling the air. Astron, as always, handled it with calm precision, offering just enough detail to satisfy without giving too much away.

Sylvie, however, remained silent, her fork idly pushing food around her plate. She could barely keep up with the chatter, her focus fractured by the storm of emotions surrounding her.

"Cutie, what's your name?" Lila's cheerful voice cut through the haze, snapping Sylvie back to the present. She looked up, startled, to find the girls now directing their attention at her.

"I... I'm Sylvie," she said quietly, her voice almost a whisper.

Maya stepped in smoothly before the others could press further. "This is Sylvie," she said, her tone calm but carrying a note of finality. "She's also a junior and a member of the History and Arts Club."

Sylvie relaxed slightly at Maya's intervention, grateful for the reprieve. The conversation shifted back to the club, with Amelia eagerly detailing its activities. Sylvie found herself fading into the background again, her thoughts returning to the kaleidoscope of emotions she had felt earlier.

Maya's love. Her jealousy. Her anger. It all swirled in Sylvie's mind, intertwining with her own feelings in a way that made her chest ache.

Sylvie sat silently at the table, her thoughts swirling in a chaotic storm. Everything that had happened recently felt like too much, too fast. Her powers, her training with the Headmaster—it had

been grueling, yes, but it had also been a lifeline, a way for her to finally feel like she was catching up. For a while, she had believed she was finally closing the gap between herself and the others, particularly him.

But then Astron had returned.

Stronger. Sharper. Unreadable.

Sylvie gripped the edge of her tray, her knuckles whitening. Her [Authority], which had grown so much under the Headmaster's guidance, allowed her to see through most people with unsettling clarity. Their feelings, their emotions, their intentions—it all painted a picture, clear and vivid. But with Astron, there was always a wall, an impenetrable calm that left her guessing. It was as though he existed in a realm beyond her reach, no matter how far she had come.

And then there was Irina.

Her abrupt change, the fiery emotions Sylvie had sensed swirling around her, had thrown her off balance even further. The jealousy, the protectiveness, the love. It had struck Sylvie in ways she didn't fully understand. Irina had stepped forward boldly, unafraid to stake her claim in ways Sylvie could only envy. And now... now, there was Maya.

The senior's presence was overwhelming, her emotions a kaleidoscope of intensity that made Sylvie's head spin. Love, jealousy, anger—targeted at the same person, unmistakably. The way Maya carried herself, the confidence, the subtle possessiveness—it was a reminder that Sylvie was still so far behind.

Can I keep up? The thought echoed in her mind, a quiet fear she hadn't dared voice until now. She had come so far, pushed herself so hard, and yet it felt like the world around her was constantly shifting, moving faster than she could.

But even as the fear gnawed at her, another feeling stirred in its depths: challenge.

This wasn't just about catching up anymore. It wasn't just about standing beside Astron, Irina, or anyone else. It was about herself, about proving that she could endure, adapt, and rise above. That she could find her place in a world that refused to slow down.

Sylvie took a steadying breath, her gaze flickering up as the seniors' laughter pulled her from her thoughts.

To her surprise, the attention had turned toward her again.

Sylvie blinked, momentarily thrown off by their sudden interest. But as her [Authority] reached out, brushing against their emotions, she felt something that surprised her even more: sincerity. Amusement, curiosity, even a touch of admiration—but no malice, no condescension, no ulterior motives.

It was really refreshing to see.

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Astron placed his utensils neatly on the tray, signaling that he had finished his meal. The lively chatter among the girls continued unabated, but his quiet demeanor stood in stark contrast to their energetic exchanges. Without a word, he stood, catching the attention of the table.

Evelyn was the first to notice, her curiosity piqued. "Ooooh, you're leaving already?" she asked, tilting her head. "Did we scare you off with all our questions?"

Astron's calm violet eyes met hers briefly, his expression as composed as ever. "Not at all," he replied, his tone even. "I'll be going for training."

"Training?" Kara chimed in, leaning forward. "Don't tell me you're one of those guys who trains all the time and never relaxes."

Astron didn't bite at the playful remark, offering only a faint nod. "Discipline requires consistency."

That was all he said before pushing his chair back and preparing to leave. The girls watched him with varying degrees of amusement and intrigue, but their attention quickly shifted when Sylvie also began to gather her things.

"You're going too, Sylvie?" Lila asked, her tone surprised but friendly. "You don't have to leave just because he is."

"Ahaha...My friends are also waiting. I promised to meet them soon."

"Is that so? Next time, introduce us to your friends too.....I don't have many freshmen friends."

Sylvie hesitated for a moment, and that didn't get missed by the sophomores' eyes.

Evelyn waved her hands in mock protest, her tone light. "We don't bite, you know. Well, maybe Kara does." She shot a teasing grin at her friend, earning a playful nudge in return.

Maya, who had been observing quietly, stepped in with her usual composed authority. "It's fine," she said, her calm tone cutting through the playful teasing. "If Sylvie wants to go, let her. We'll have plenty of time to catch up later."

Sylvie offered a small, grateful smile toward Maya before quickly following Astron, her steps almost instinctive as she matched his pace. The two juniors made their way out of the cafeteria, leaving the table behind.

Evelyn watched them go with a curious hum. "Well, that's an interesting pair."

"..."

Though seeing Maya's glare, Evelyn retracted her eyes. "Joking, just joking."

Maya didn't respond immediately, her attention lingering on the door through which the two had exited. She knew Sylvie well enough to understand her hesitation to remain, and Astron's solitary habits were no surprise. There was no need to intervene—she could speak to Astron about the matters she had in mind when the time was right. For now, the company of her chatty peers was a fine distraction.

Leaning back slightly in her chair, Maya allowed herself to relax.

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As they walked through the hallway, the silence between Astron and Sylvie felt heavy, though it wasn't oppressive. It was Astron's usual calm, quiet demeanor, but Sylvie found herself acutely aware of it now. Her thoughts raced as she replayed the events of the cafeteria: Maya's composed presence, the sophomores' teasing warmth, and the swirling, conflicting emotions she had picked up through her [Authority].

It was all too much.

Her steps faltered slightly, though she quickly corrected herself to keep pace with Astron. He didn't seem to notice—or perhaps he simply didn't comment, his focus ahead as if nothing had happened. For a moment, Sylvie considered saying something, anything, to break the silence, but her thoughts were too jumbled. She felt like a tangled thread, caught up in relationships and emotions she didn't fully understand.

"Astron," she began softly, her voice slightly hesitant. He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, his expression as unreadable as ever.

"Meeting your friends, wasn't it?"

"Y-yes."

Astron slowed his pace, turning slightly to face her. His gaze met hers, steady and calm, and for a moment, Sylvie felt a faint flicker of something she couldn't quite place—understanding, perhaps, or maybe curiosity.

"Bye then. Take care?"

She nodded quickly, grateful for his lack of questions or commentary. "You too," she replied, her voice a bit higher-pitched than she intended. She stepped back, putting a little distance between them as he continued walking, his figure disappearing down the hallway.

Once he was out of sight, Sylvie exhaled sharply, her shoulders sagging as the tension she hadn't realized she was holding finally eased. She leaned against the cool stone wall for a moment, letting her thoughts settle.

What am I even doing? she wondered, running a hand through her hair. Everything felt so tangled—her growing [Authority], the emotions she kept sensing from others, her interactions with Astron, Irina, and now Maya. It was like being swept into a current she hadn't seen coming, and no matter how hard she tried to keep up, the pace kept quickening.

The pink, the red, the purple. The emotions she had seen in Maya lingered in her mind, mingling with her own feelings of uncertainty. I've worked so hard to grow, to change... but is it enough? Can I really stand alongside them when everything feels so overwhelming?

The hallway remained quiet, her thoughts the only sound echoing in her mind. After a moment, Sylvie straightened, taking a steadying breath. She needed to clear her head, to sort through everything before she got swept up even further. And for now, that meant stepping away—if only for a little while.

Chapter 759 Chapter 174.1 - New rankings

The following morning, the students of HA25 sat quietly in their classroom, the usual hum of pre-class chatter subdued by an air of anticipation. The faint click of fingers on academy tablets and the occasional murmur of speculation filled the room. Everyone knew why they were tense—today, the official rankings would finally be announced.



The sound of sharp, deliberate footsteps echoed down the hall. As the door swung open, Professor Eleanor entered, her presence immediately silencing the room. Her sharp eyes swept across the class, taking in their expectant faces.

"Good morning," Eleanor began, her voice crisp and unwavering as she placed her papers on the podium. She paused briefly, her gaze lingering on a few students before she continued. "I know you've all been waiting for the official rankings to be updated."

She straightened, clasping her hands behind her back as she addressed the class. "The rankings were supposed to be finalized before the semester started. However, due to a number of objections and complaints—some of them from overzealous parents—the process was delayed."

A few students exchanged glances, whispering under their breath. Eleanor's sharp gaze cut through the chatter, and silence quickly returned.

"The academy was forced to review every case thoroughly," Eleanor explained, her tone betraying a hint of irritation at the unnecessary complications. "This took longer than expected, but we are now ready to announce the official rankings."

She picked up a small tablet from her podium and glanced at it briefly before addressing the class again. "Let me clarify something before we proceed. The rankings you've seen on your smartwatches were provisional—temporary placeholders based on initial evaluations. Today, those rankings will be finalized."

A ripple of murmurs spread through the classroom, a mix of relief and unease.

Eleanor raised a hand, cutting through the noise. "I understand some of you are concerned about the implications of these rankings, particularly regarding your dorm assignments. Let me assure you, the academy will handle the necessary arrangements."

Her sharp gaze swept over the room, ensuring she had everyone's attention. "For those of you whose rankings have improved significantly, you may be required to move to higher-ranking dormitories. Conversely, those whose rankings have dropped may need to relocate to smaller quarters."

A hand shot up from the middle row. "Professor, what if our belongings don't fit into the smaller dorms?" the student asked hesitantly.

Eleanor's expression didn't soften as she replied. "Then it is your responsibility to discard the things that cannot fit into your assigned dorm room. The academy will not accommodate excess belongings. We provide sufficient space for each rank, but nothing more."

The student blinked, their mouth opening as if to respond, but no words came out. Eleanor continued without pause.

"The academy's personnel will handle the transportation of your belongings while you are in class," she added. "You will find your new dorms ready by the time your lessons are complete."

As Eleanor finished explaining the dorm reassignment process, another hand shot up from the back row. The student's voice carried a tone of unease, their words spilling out in a rush.

"Professor, isn't this an invasion of privacy? We weren't informed about any of this beforehand. There are things in our rooms—private things—that we don't want anyone to see."

A murmur of agreement rippled through the room, with several students nodding in solidarity. The tension was palpable, the students clearly uncomfortable with the idea of academy personnel handling their belongings unsupervised.

Eleanor's sharp gaze swept over the class, silencing the murmurs before they could escalate. She regarded the student who had spoken with a measured expression, her tone calm but firm as she replied.

"That is a fair concern," Eleanor acknowledged. "Privacy is important, and I understand your apprehension. Therefore, after this lesson ends, you will be given time to return to your dorms and pack up any personal or private items before the academy personnel begin the relocation process."

The room seemed to exhale collectively, the students visibly relaxing at her words. However, Eleanor's expression turned slightly pointed as she added, "That said, let me remind you that choosing to pack away specific items may invite suspicion. It is not my place to question what you consider private, but you must be prepared for the impression your actions may create."

The subtle warning hung in the air, a reminder that transparency—or the lack thereof—could carry consequences.

It was evident that the academy was using this as an excuse to conduct a search, albeit most of the students knew that it was just a superficial warning.

At the end of the day, those who wanted to hide would hide.

Satisfied that the matter was addressed, Eleanor straightened and returned her attention to her tablet. "Now, with that clarified, let's move on to the official rankings."

The tension in the room shifted again, this time tinged with anticipation and nerves. Eleanor tapped her tablet, and the classroom screen at the front lit up, displaying a large, scrolling list of names. The ranking numbers glowed beside each name, sharp and definitive.

"The finalized rankings," Eleanor announced, "have been determined based on your performance last semester, both in academics and practical evaluations. This list is final and reflects your standing as of now."

She began reading the names aloud, starting from the lower ranks and working her way up. The room was filled with a mix of reactions as the rankings were revealed—relief, disappointment, and a few muted cheers.

"Rank 2121, Oliver Park."

Eleanor's voice rang clearly as she continued reading the rankings.

"Rank 1555, Liam Wayne."

At the sound of his name, the room immediately stirred. All eyes turned toward a young man sitting stiffly in the back row. Liam Wayne, a student whose pride had recently been tarnished, felt the weight of their stares. He gritted his teeth, his face reddening as whispers began to ripple through the classroom.

"That's the guy who lost to Astron, isn't it?" one student murmured.

"Yeah, he challenged someone ranked last—and still lost," another whispered, barely hiding their amusement.

Liam clenched his fists on his desk, his knuckles turning white. He could feel the disdain in their gazes, the unspoken judgment. His loss to Astron had already been the talk of their class, but now, seeing his rank so publicly announced, the humiliation resurfaced in full force.

Eleanor continued, unfazed by the murmurs.

"Rank 1234, Timothy Grey."

"Rank 1052, Astron Natusalune."

The room collectively gasped. Heads whipped around to Astron, who sat quietly in his usual corner seat. The last-ranked student at the start of the academy—ranked 2450 out of 2450—had now surged forward by nearly 1,400 ranks.

"That's insane," someone whispered, their tone equal parts awe and disbelief.

"How does someone jump that far in one semester?" another asked, their gaze locked on Astron.

It wasn't just the ranking that drew their attention. Astron's transformation—the refined features, his sharp purple eyes, and the aura of quiet confidence—only added to the growing mystique surrounding him. The students couldn't help but stare, their earlier judgments crumbling under the weight of his achievements.

Julia leaned toward Ethan, whispering, "That's one hell of a glow-up. Who even is he anymore?"

Ethan didn't respond immediately, his brow furrowed as he glanced at Astron. There was more to this than met the eye, and Ethan couldn't shake the feeling that whatever had changed in Astron wasn't just physical—or even purely academic.

'Heh....They are finally noticing him....'

Seeing Astron like that, Irina was satisfied. That guy was finally getting the recognition that he deserved.

He may not care about it, but she cared.

But before the room could fully process Astron's leap in rank, Eleanor continued to read the next names.

"Rank 915...."

"Rank 876...."

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"Rank 570...."

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Since the Astron's change, there weren't that many jumps in the academy. That is why the students didn't shine too much, even those who had improved.

Well, that was until a new name came up.....

"Rank 215, Ethan Hartley."

The room exploded with whispers. Students turned toward Ethan, their faces a mix of shock and disbelief. The murmurs quickly grew louder, drowning out any other reaction.

"Rank 215?" someone said, their voice incredulous. "No way!"

"Wasn't he ranked 2000-something at the start of last semester?" another exclaimed.

"Yeah, and he jumped to 970 last semester, but this? From 970 to 215 in just one ranking update? What the hell?"

Ethan shifted in his seat, feeling the weight of their stares. Julia, sitting beside him, grinned and gave him a nudge. "Guess you're the new star, Mountain Boy."

He rolled his eyes at her nickname, though he couldn't entirely hide the small smile tugging at his lips. The truth was, even he was surprised at how far he'd come in such a short time.

'This....'

The room erupted into chaos as the announcement of Ethan's rank sank in. A few students couldn't contain their disbelief, and objections flew from multiple corners of the room.

"This is ridiculous!" one student exclaimed, standing abruptly. "How can someone jump from rank 970 to 215 in just one semester? It's not fair!"

"Yeah," another chimed in, their voice laced with suspicion. "Is the academy just playing favorites now? What's the point of rankings if they can change this drastically?"

The murmurs of agreement grew louder, frustration and envy bubbling to the surface. Ethan remained seated, his face calm but his jaw tightening as the accusations mounted.

Eleanor narrowed her eyes, the sharpness of her gaze immediately silencing the commotion. "Enough," she said, her tone cutting through the noise like a blade. The students froze, her commanding presence suffocating any further protests.

"You doubt the fairness of the rankings?" Eleanor's voice was cold, her eyes scanning the room. "Then allow me to show you exactly why Ethan Hartley has earned his rank."

She tapped her tablet, and the screen at the front of the room flickered to life. A video began to play, its projection dominating the classroom. The footage was immediately recognizable to some—the duel between Ethan and Kellan Stormrider, a cadet ranked 256 at the time, against Ethan's then-ranking of 975.

The room fell silent as the scene unfolded. Kellan Stormrider was on the offensive, his strikes fast and precise. But Ethan's movements, though less polished, were deliberate and unyielding. He dodged, countered, and withstood every attack with a resolve that visibly shook his opponent.

Then came the turning point. The projection showed Ethan channeling an immense surge of mana, his figure nearly consumed by its brilliance. A moment later, a massive lightning strike descended from the sky, its sheer size and ferocity dwarfing everything around it. The roar of thunder shook the ground, and the battlefield was consumed in a blinding light.

Gasps filled the room as the screen displayed the aftermath. Kellan Stormrider was sprawled on the ground, his mana shield shattered and his expression one of disbelief. The students watching the footage could feel the weight of the attack, even through the screen.

Eleanor paused the video, the image frozen on the massive strike mid-impact. She turned back to the class, her expression unyielding.

"This attack," she began, her voice steady but heavy with authority, "would obliterate any of you below rank 200. Even cadets ranked higher would struggle to resist it."

Everyone was silent....

Chapter 760 Chapter 174.2 - New rankings

"This attack. It would obliterate any of you below rank 200. Even cadets ranked higher would struggle to resist it."

The room remained heavy with silence as Eleanor's words hung in the air, the paused image of Ethan's devastating lightning strike still displayed on the screen. The students shifted uneasily in their seats, the weight of the demonstration pressing against them.

Though many had raised their voices in complaint moments earlier, the reminder of Ethan's performance in that duel forced them to reconsider. The sheer power and scale of his attack had been almost unreal, and the reality that few among them could withstand such a blow was inescapable.

They nodded inwardly, begrudgingly acknowledging the academy's judgment. Even if it had felt unfair at first, the reasoning behind Ethan's ranking was now clear.

Still, the understanding didn't erase the wariness. Several students cast furtive glances in Ethan's direction, their gazes filled with a mixture of awe and unease. To them, he wasn't just a peer anymore—he was something closer to a monster in their eyes, someone who could leap ranks in ways that seemed almost impossible.

Ethan, sitting quietly in his seat, said nothing. His face remained composed, but the intensity of the stares wasn't lost on him. He felt the shift in the room, the weight of both admiration and fear settling onto his shoulders.

Julia, ever perceptive, leaned closer to him, her voice low but laced with amusement. "Well, Mountain Boy, looks like you've officially ascended to Mount Olympus. How does it feel to be a living legend?"

Ethan rolled his eyes, though a faint smile tugged at the corner of his lips. "I think you're exaggerating."

"Am I?" Julia smirked, propping her chin on her hand. "I mean, did you see their faces? Half of them look like they're ready to bow down, and the other half looks like they're wondering how to run in the opposite direction."

Lilia, seated near the front, turned slightly in her chair to join in. Her sharp green eyes sparkled with mischief. "She's not wrong, you know. That attack? It was pretty insane. If you keep this up, people might start calling you Zeus instead of Ethan."

Ethan sighed, leaning back slightly in his chair. "Great. That's exactly what I need—another nickname."

Julia's grin widened. "Come on, Zeus. Embrace it. How many people can say they've turned a classroom full of skeptics into believers in under a minute?"

"Not many," Lilia added, her voice light but teasing. "But you better get used to it. With a rank like that, all eyes are going to be on you."

Ethan gave a faint shrug, his expression thoughtful. "Let them look. I'm not here for their approval."

Julia snorted, nudging him with her elbow. "And yet, you can't deny it feels a little good, right? Just a little?"

He didn't answer, his small smile the only indication that her words weren't entirely off the mark.

Eleanor let the silence linger for a moment longer before speaking again. "Now, if there are no further complaints, we will proceed with the remaining rankings."

The room stayed quiet, no one daring to voice another objection. The rest of the rankings continued, but the earlier spotlight on Ethan—and the display of his duel—left an impression that wouldn't fade anytime soon.

Eleanor tapped her tablet, her voice ringing clearly as she continued to announce the rankings. The room's atmosphere remained charged, the weight of each name adding to the tension.

"Rank 82, Carl Braveheart."

Carl gave a small nod, leaning back in his chair. His usual laid-back demeanor didn't change much, though Lucas leaned over and nudged him.

"Moving up, huh?" Lucas said with a grin.

Carl shrugged, his voice calm. "Better than dropping."

Eleanor's voice cut through their brief exchange.

"Rank 54, Lucas Middleton."

Lucas raised an eyebrow, clearly satisfied. "Not bad," he murmured, leaning back in his chair with a pleased expression.

The next name drew more attention.

"Rank 32, Julia Middleton."

Julia's reaction was immediate. She shot upright in her seat, her expression a mix of disbelief and protest. "Wait, what? Rank 32? Are you serious?"

Eleanor looked up from her tablet, her expression impassive. "Is there a problem, Miss Middleton?"

"Yes, there's a problem," Julia replied, throwing her arms up dramatically. "I won against a rank 21 student in a duel. Why am I this low?"

Eleanor's sharp gaze bore into her, silencing the whispers that had started around the room. "You did win that duel," Eleanor conceded, her tone firm, "but you also received a DC grade in one of your finals. That significantly impacted your ranking."

Julia froze, the words hitting her like a lightning strike. Her cheeks flushed as she sank back into her seat, visibly embarrassed. "T-That was one time," she muttered under her breath.

Lilia turned slightly, smirking as she added, "One time that clearly mattered."

"Shut it, Thornheart. I would have beaten you if I have studied." Julia hissed, though her embarrassment only deepened.

Eleanor continued without pause, her tone unwavering.

"Rank 4, Lilia Thornheart."

Lilia straightened in her seat, her green eyes gleaming with satisfaction. "Heh."

She looked at Julia whom she was bickering just now.

'What did you say?'

As if her eyes were telling that.

"You!"

Julia was enraged, but she couldn't do anything.

After all, Lilia didn't gloat, though the flicker of a smirk on her lips made it clear she was pleased with her placement.

The room grew quieter as Eleanor moved to the top of the rankings.

"Rank 2, Irina Emberheart."

Irina's reaction was immediate and unreserved. A wide, beaming smile spread across her face as she sat up straighter, her fiery yellow eyes glowing with pride. For her, this wasn't just a rank—it was a victory.

Her rank at 2 meant one thing: she had surpassed Seraphina Frostborne, her long-time rival. That single fact alone filled her with a sense of triumph she couldn't hide.

The class took note of her reaction. Some students cast her admiring glances, while others—especially a group of girls Irina had antagonized the day before—looked at her with complex expressions, their emotions ranging from jealousy to reluctant respect.

One of the girls whispered, her tone bitter, "Figures she'd be this smug."

"Can you blame her?" another replied, though the irritation in her voice was evident.

Irina didn't seem to notice—or care. Her focus remained on Eleanor as the professor reached the final announcement.

"And finally," Eleanor said, her voice calm but carrying weight. "Rank 1, Victor Blackthorn."

The room erupted into whispers, though this announcement wasn't a surprise. Victor was just on another level and he deserved to hold the top spot for a long time, and his dominance remained unshaken. His name alone carried an air of inevitability.

Irina's smile didn't falter, but her eyes narrowed slightly, a spark of determination flashing in their depths. She wasn't disappointed—far from it. For now, being second was enough. But one day, she intended to claim that top spot.

Eleanor set her tablet down, her gaze sweeping the room. "The rankings are final. Let them motivate you, push you, and serve as a reminder that improvement is always possible. Class dismissed."

As the students rose, the room buzzed with energy, some celebrating, others plotting how to climb higher. Irina, Lilia, and Julia exchanged glances, each carrying their own thoughts about what the rankings meant for their future. Ethan remained quiet, still feeling the weight of the spotlight on him.

For now, the rankings have been decided. But the battles to prove and maintain them were only just beginning.

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After the rankings were announced and the buzz of the classroom dissipated, I made my way toward my new dormitory. My ranking jump from 1750 to 1051 hadn't gone unnoticed by the academy's system, and with it came an upgrade in living arrangements. The shift wasn't monumental—this wasn't the top 100—but it was enough to mark a tangible difference in my surroundings.

The new dorm was closer to the campus, its architecture more refined and modern compared to the basic facilities I had previously. As I entered the building, the air was fresher, the lighting warmer, and the faint hum of mana-infused amenities spoke of a step up in resources allocated to its residents.

I approached my room, tapping my student ID against the door's mana-locked panel. With a soft click, the door swung open, revealing the space beyond.

The difference was like this.

The room was larger, with more open space and better furnishings. A spacious desk sat by the window, overlooking the campus grounds. The bed, while still simple, was larger and looked much more comfortable than the narrow one in my old dorm. A small kitchenette occupied one corner, and the bathroom was enclosed rather than shared with the floor. It wasn't luxurious, but it was a marked improvement.

'Not bad,' I thought as I stepped inside, placing my belongings on the desk.



The walls were a neutral shade, but subtle enchantments allowed for customization. The closet had a small enchantment that regulated the temperature for armor and uniforms, ensuring everything stayed pristine.

This one was already there before so it was not that much of a change.

I moved toward the window, gazing out at the sprawling campus below. The dorm's proximity to the main facilities meant shorter walks to classes and training halls—a convenience that saved time and energy, though that would be for the people who are lazy.

'It is not that important. Just for showing off.'

Anyway, that was it.

It wasn't until students breached the top 100 that the differences became truly significant, and even if they become significant, they also come with a requirement of fame.

The top-tier dormitories were practically miniature sanctuaries, boasting personal training rooms, mana-replenishing pools, and other luxuries that could propel a student's progress. For the top 10, the benefits were even more pronounced, tailored specifically to nurture elite talent.

RING!

Just then I had gotten a notification from my smartwatch.

-Prepare for the field training.

It was apparent that the academy was about to start with another training.

'Well, that is exactly what you would expect anyway.'