

## H. Academy 771

Chapter 771 Chapter 178.1 - Previous undercurrents

The cool breeze of the second semester swept through the academy grounds as Emma walked briskly amidst the bustling crowd of students. Her expression was tight, her polished demeanor masking the storm brewing within her.

'That bitch,' Emma fumed inwardly, her fists clenched by her sides. Her sharp gaze darted through the sea of faces as if searching for someone. I said to not show your face in this academy, and she still dares!

The thought of Taylor stubbornly clinging to her place in the academy despite Emma's efforts made her blood boil. Emma had gone to great lengths to ensure the girl was forced to drop out. She had pulled strings, whispered rumors, and applied every ounce of pressure she could muster. Yet, Taylor had refused to yield.

'It's infuriating!' Emma thought, her pace quickening as she recalled the confrontation. She remembered the way Taylor had looked at her, not with defiance but with quiet resolve—a resolve that Emma had underestimated.

The memory brought back the words of that Philips bastard. His cold, calculating tone echoed in her mind.

"You're too soft," he had said, his voice dripping with disdain. "If you want to eliminate someone, you don't leave room for them to recover. You didn't deal with her thoroughly enough."

At the time, Emma had bristled at his words. She wasn't accustomed to being chastised, let alone by someone whose identity she couldn't even confirm. Yet, his criticism had stayed with her, gnawing at the edges of her pride.

Now, as she walked through the academy, she couldn't help but feel the weight of his judgment. Had she been too soft? Too reluctant to cross certain lines? The sight of Taylor—no doubt still lurking somewhere on these grounds—felt like a thorn lodged deep in her side.

Her thoughts were interrupted as a pair of students brushed past her, their conversation carrying snippets of gossip.

As Emma walked through the bustling academy grounds, snippets of conversation floated around her, painting a vibrant picture of the academy's changes.

"Did you hear about the new mentorship program? They're pairing us with real hunters now!"

"Yeah, they said it's to prepare us better for fieldwork. Some of the mentors are even from the top 500 rankings!"

"I heard they're planning to expand the hunter program to include specialized training for dealing with monsters from the rift zones. The academy's really stepping up!"

But Emma barely registered the voices around her. Their excitement, the academy's ambitions—none of it mattered. Not right now. Her thoughts were singularly focused on one person.

RING!

Her phone buzzed in her pocket, jolting her out of her thoughts. Pulling it out, she saw a message on the screen:

[We found her.]

Her heart raced, not from anxiety, but from a simmering anticipation. She opened the attached details and saw the location marked on a map app. A few taps later, she had the route memorized. Her lips curled into a cruel smile.

"Finally," she murmured under her breath, her pace quickening as she weaved through the crowd, ignoring everything else around her.

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Taylor clutched her bag tighter, her mind clouded with confusion and fear as Emma stood before her, seething with barely-contained rage. The quiet corridor, usually a haven of solitude, had become a stage for an unthinkable confrontation.

Before Taylor could process what was happening, Emma's hand shot out, striking her across the face. The slap echoed sharply in the corridor, leaving Taylor stunned and momentarily speechless. Her cheek burned, but the pain was quickly overshadowed by the shock of the attack.

"Did you think I wouldn't find out?" Emma spat, her voice dripping with venom. Her perfectly polished demeanor had cracked, revealing a simmering fury beneath the surface.

Taylor staggered back, her hand flying to her stinging cheek. "Find out...? What are you talking about?" she stammered, her voice shaking as her mind scrambled to make sense of the situation.

"Don't play dumb with me!" Emma snapped, her eyes blazing. She reached into her bag and pulled out a sleek smartphone, holding it up like damning evidence. "Is this the phone you've been sending those filthy messages from? Heh, you thought you could cover your tracks?"

Taylor's heart sank as she stared at the phone. It was identical to the one she had seen earlier that week—one she didn't own but had inexplicably found planted in her bag. Her voice faltered as she tried to defend herself. "I... I've never seen that phone before. I don't know how it—"

"Enough!" Emma interrupted, her voice cutting through Taylor's protests like a blade. "Do you think I'd believe you? After everything? You've been sending threats, blackmailing me, and now you're going to pretend you're innocent?"

"I didn't send anything!" Taylor pleaded, her voice rising with desperation. She looked around at the crowd, hoping for even a shred of support. "I don't even know where that phone came from. Please, you have to believe me."

But the onlookers' faces were blank, their silence louder than any accusation. Emma sneered, her lips curling into a cruel smile. "Oh, you'll pay for what you've done," she said, her voice low and dangerous. "You thought you could mess with me and get away with it? I'll make sure everyone knows who you are."

The weight of her words hung in the air, crushing Taylor's spirit. She wanted to scream, to shake Emma and force her to see reason, but her protests fell on deaf ears. Emma turned and stormed away, her entourage following in her wake, leaving Taylor standing alone in the corridor, her heart pounding and her mind racing.

From that moment on, Taylor's life at the academy descended into a living nightmare. Emma's influence was vast, especially because of the fact that she was a Sophomore and the relationship between Sophomores and freshmen was already bad thanks to that post.

But even then, there was something much more about this whole thing.

The whispers turned into accusations, the sideways glances into open disdain.

Students avoided her, and her once peaceful existence unraveled with alarming speed.

Her friends who were already not that high in number had dwindled quickly, and even the business of her family got hit.

The weeks following that confrontation blurred into a haze of misery for Taylor. The whispers never stopped, and the once-vibrant halls of the academy now felt like hostile territory. Students avoided her like a plague, their eyes filled with suspicion and judgment. Even those she had considered friends began to drift away, unwilling to associate with someone marked by scandal.

At home, the situation was no better. The semester break, a time she had once cherished, turned into a harrowing ordeal. Her father, a proud and successful merchant, had always been a steady presence in her life—a source of comfort and inspiration. But now, that strength seemed to be crumbling under relentless pressure.

Taylor often found him in his study, pacing back and forth with papers scattered across the desk. The once-confident man she knew had been replaced by someone haunted, his brows perpetually furrowed and his voice tinged with irritation.

"I don't understand it, Taylor," her father said one evening, his voice strained. He was staring at a stack of letters from business partners, each more apologetic than the last, as they announced the end of their partnerships. "This... this isn't natural. Our contracts, our agreements—they've all been stable for years. And now, suddenly, everyone is pulling out. It's like someone's orchestrating this."

Taylor sat at the dining table, her appetite gone. She stirred the cold tea in her cup, her mind racing. She knew. Deep down, she knew who was behind this. Emma. Emma's family, wealthy and influential in their own right, had turned their sights on her father's business as part of their calculated vengeance.

But what could she say? How could she explain to her father that his hardships stemmed from a feud born in the academy? How could she tell him that Emma believed she had blackmailed her, using false evidence that Taylor herself had no way of disproving?

"Taylor," her father's voice snapped her out of her thoughts. He looked at her, his frustration softening into concern. "Do you know anything? Have you heard something at school?"

She froze. For a moment, she thought about telling him the truth, about laying everything bare. But the thought of adding to his burdens—of seeing that frustration turn into anger or, worse, despair—kept her silent.

"No, Dad," she said softly, forcing herself to meet his gaze. "I haven't heard anything."

And she carried on.

Maybe, somehow, things would get better if she were to hold on.

Hence the second semester started.

But it was futile.

"Bitch. Didn't I tell you to drop out? You dare to defy my words?" Emma hissed, her voice low and venomous as she slammed Taylor against the wall. The impact sent a jolt through Taylor's body, her back pressing against the cold, unforgiving surface. Emma's grip on her collar was iron-tight, her nails digging into the fabric of Taylor's jacket.

Taylor's head hung low, her violet eyes staring blankly at the floor. She didn't fight back. She didn't even raise her hands in defense. She could feel Emma's hot breath close to her face, the intensity of her rage bearing down like a crushing weight.

Why me? Taylor asked herself, her mind spiraling into despair. Did I even deserve any of this?

Her chest felt heavy, her throat tight with words she couldn't say. She wanted to scream, to lash out, to demand answers—but all she could do was endure. It was easier to let it happen, to weather the storm and hope it would pass. She was so tired.

"Look at you," Emma spat, leaning in closer. "Pathetic. You thought you could humiliate me and get away with it? You've ruined my family's name, and I'll make sure you pay for every—"

"Hey!" a voice suddenly called out, cutting through the tense atmosphere.

Emma froze for a moment, her head snapping toward the sound. A group of freshmen had appeared at the far end of the corridor. They stopped in their tracks, their faces a mix of confusion and anger as they took in the scene before them. One of them pointed at the mark on Taylor's jacket.

"She's a freshman," he said, his voice tinged with disbelief. "The sophomores are bullying the freshmen again."

The group exchanged glances, the memories of the previous semester flashing in their minds. The retaliation from the freshmen against the sophomores had been brutal, born out of frustration and years of mistreatment. The anger was still there, simmering beneath the surface, and now it had a fresh target.

"Not this time," another freshman growled, stepping forward. "We're not letting this slide."

Once again, a fight broke out.

Chapter 772 Chapter 178.2 - Previous undercurrents

The semester might have changed, the rankings might have shifted, but I hadn't. Improvement wasn't a matter of sudden bursts; it was built on consistency, on maintaining routines that grounded progress. And so, as usual, I found myself heading to the training grounds.

The walk there was quiet, the crisp morning air carrying the faint hum of mana that always seemed to permeate the academy. The training hall loomed ahead, its tall, clean structure reflecting the

subtle glow of the rising sun. As I stepped inside, the familiar scent of polished wood and faint mana traces greeted me.

The hall wasn't crowded, just as I'd expected. At most, around ten percent of the stations were occupied. A few students sparred in the central ring, their strikes ringing out as their weapons clashed. Others worked with dummies or practiced channeling their mana into controlled bursts. The air was alive with muted focus, but it lacked the intensity it should have had.

I paused near the entrance, surveying the scene. The ratio was too low for what the academy expected of its students. A faint frown tugged at the corner of my mouth as the realization set in.

"They still didn't get the seriousness back," I murmured to myself, my voice barely above a whisper. "It appears the academy still hasn't managed to instill that sense of urgency."

In a way, it wasn't surprising. For many students, the stakes didn't yet feel real. The rankings, the lessons, the spars—it was all part of a system that felt distant from the harsher realities beyond the academy's walls. They weren't truly feeling the weight of what awaited them outside—monsters, demons, the unpredictable chaos of the world.

But for those who understood, for those who could see the storm brewing, there was no room for complacency. Every minute here mattered. Every ounce of effort was a step closer to survival.

I stepped further inside, heading toward an empty station near the far corner. The familiar hum of mana resonated faintly from the training equipment, a steady rhythm that always seemed to settle my focus. I set my things down, stretching briefly before moving into my routine.

First, warm-ups—focused strikes on a dummy, each one calculated to build precision and fluidity. My movements were deliberate, each punch and kick driving mana in controlled bursts, reinforcing the habits I'd drilled into myself.

Next came mana control. I stood still, centering my focus as I channeled mana into my hands, weaving it into fine, stable threads. The energy coiled and uncoiled with each motion, the faint glow reflecting off my palms. This part wasn't about strength; it was about finesse. Control was the foundation of every technique, and without it, power meant nothing.

As I worked through the exercises, I noticed a few students glancing in my direction. Some watched with curiosity, others with mild recognition. It didn't matter. My focus stayed inward, on the rhythm of my movements, the feel of mana flowing through me.

'Routine,' I thought, the word steadying me as I shifted into the next sequence. It was the backbone of progress. No shortcuts, no sudden bursts—just the quiet, relentless march forward. And as the training hall echoed softly with the sound of effort, I immersed myself in the familiar, the steady, the constant.

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The room was cloaked in darkness, the faint hum of the city outside muffled by heavy curtains drawn tight over the lone window. In the stillness, the air felt heavy, stagnant, as though time itself hesitated to move forward within these walls.

A single light, dim and weak, spilled out from a desk lamp tilted upward. Its glow stretched across the room, barely reaching the corners, but enough to illuminate the wall in front of it. Enough to reveal the shrine.

Pictures. Countless pictures. The wall was a chaotic mosaic of moments frozen in time, all centered around one person. A young girl. Her long purple hair cascaded like silk in every shot, a perfect frame for her expressive face. Some pictures showed her smiling, her lavender eyes glowing with warmth; others captured her in motion, walking down busy streets, her steps confident, purposeful. One photo showed her at a desk, lost in study, her brow furrowed in quiet determination. Another showed her seated cross-legged, meditating amidst an ethereal landscape—a place where air, water, earth, and fire seemed to converge.

The images, meticulously arranged yet unnervingly obsessive, formed a collage of her existence. Her presence dominated the room, her likeness etched into every frame and every shadow.

And then, there was him.

Below the girl's photos, tucked in the center of the display like a venomous parasite, hung a single image of a young man. His black hair framed a face both sharp and composed, his purple eyes glinting with an intensity that matched the girl's own. His arm rested lightly on her shoulder in the photograph, as though their closeness were natural, effortless.

But the serene moment captured in the photo had been desecrated.

A massive, angry X had been slashed across his face, cutting through his features with jagged fury. Scrawled around the edges of the photo, as though etched into the paper by a trembling, obsessive hand, were the same word over and over again:

DIE.

DIE. DIE. DIE. DIE. DIE. DIE. DIE. DIE. DIE. DIE. DIE. DIE. DIE. DIE. DIE.

The repetition spiraled out from the image, the letters scratched deep into the paper's surface, overlapping and chaotic, as though the writer couldn't stop.

In the dim light, Trevor Philips sat hunched in a worn-out chair. His elbows rested on his knees, his hands clasped tightly together as though trying to anchor himself. The faint illumination of the desk lamp flickered, casting sporadic shadows across his face. His expression was unreadable—his jaw clenched tight, his gaze fixed on the wall as though it were the only thing that existed in the universe.

The air around him felt alive with tension, an invisible crackle that vibrated in the stillness. His breathing was shallow, almost inaudible as if the act of drawing breath required more effort than it was worth.

His fingers twitched, curling into fists. The knuckles turned white as he finally broke his silence, a low, guttural whisper escaping his lips:

"They'll see... They'll all see..."

His eyes lingered on the young man in the photo. His lips curled into a small, bitter smile, but his gaze burned with something darker. Something consuming.

The light flickered again, threatening to plunge the room into total darkness. And for a brief moment, it almost did, leaving nothing behind but the whispered echoes of one man's obsession and the suffocating weight of his hatred.

RING!

The shrill tone of the smartwatch cut through the oppressive silence of the room, pulling Trevor from the depths of his dark musings. His head tilted slightly, his jaw tightening as he glanced down at his wrist. The screen illuminated briefly, casting a cold, blue light that reflected in his hollow eyes.

The name on the screen read: Victor Langley.

Trevor's lips curled into a sneer, the bitter smile of a predator baring its teeth. That bastard, he thought. Victor was an opportunist, a spineless snake who believed himself clever enough to outwit his superior. But Trevor kept him around—not out of trust or camaraderie, but because Victor had his uses. And Trevor, above all, valued utility.

He tapped the screen, accepting the call.

"What?" Trevor's voice was cold, clipped.

"Boss." Victor's voice came through, laced with a mix of forced confidence and nervous energy.

"We've got something. That girl... Emma? She made a scene. Big one. Looks like the stage is set."

Trevor's eyes narrowed, the light of the smartwatch reflecting off his face as his mind began to churn. His lips parted, a slow exhale escaping as his sneer deepened.

"What did she do?"

"She got into it with freshmen. We have confirmed."

"Good."

"Should we start it?"

Trevor's gaze drifted back to the wall, to the defaced photograph of the young man with the black hair and purple eyes. His fingers twitched again, curling into fists.

"Start it," Trevor commanded, his voice low and deliberate.

Victor hesitated on the other end. "You want us to—?"

"You know what I want." Trevor's tone turned sharp, slicing through the hesitation. "Make sure to break a bone or two. Make it hurt. Leave the message I told you."

There was a pause, the faint sound of Victor swallowing hard. "I'll do it. And the girl? Leave her alone, right?"

Trevor's eyes briefly flicked to the countless photos of Emma on the wall. His obsession burned in his gaze, but it was cold, calculated. She was untouchable for now.

"Yes. Leave her."

Victor exhaled on the other end, his voice regaining a touch of that false confidence. "Consider it done."

The line went dead with a faint click. Trevor leaned back in his chair, the light from the smartwatch fading away, leaving the room in darkness once more.

His lips twisted into a thin smile, the kind that carried no warmth—only malice. He didn't care how many pawns were moved across the board or discarded in the process. His focus, his goal, was as unrelenting as the hate scrawled across the face of the young man in the photo.

"This is just a starting point."

He had not been staying idle in the semester break either.

Chapter 773 Chapter 178.3 - Previous Undercurrents

The weight of the Gravity Room pressed against me as I moved through my routines, each motion deliberate, each strike precise. The augmented gravity pushed down relentlessly, every step requiring calculated effort, every movement forcing me to channel mana for reinforcement. Sweat rolled down my back, my breathing steady despite the strain.

Then, a shift.

At first, it was subtle—so faint it might have gone unnoticed. But I had trained my senses rigorously over the break, honing them to pick up on even the smallest irregularities. And this? This was unmistakable.

The sound. Or rather, the absence of it. The faint hum of mana that normally coursed through the Gravity Room seemed muted, suppressed. The ambient energy of the training hall beyond the room's barrier felt distant, disconnected.

My breath hitched slightly, though I kept my movements controlled. My eyes narrowed as I focused on the emptiness around me, the void where there should have been noise and motion.

'Something is not right.'

Without hesitation, I canceled the gravity magic weighing me down, lifting the barrier with a quick pulse of mana. The oppressive force vanished instantly, and I straightened, my body adjusting to the sudden lightness. My senses expanded outward, my focus sharpening as I probed the space around me.

Four presences.

They weren't in the room yet, but they were close—hovering just beyond the outer walls, their movements careful, deliberate. Not clumsy enough to be a freshman. No, these were more experienced.

'Four men. Cadets, but not freshmen. Sophomores,' I assessed silently, my mind piecing together the picture.

The erasure of presences, the lack of connection to the outside, and the sudden, coordinated movement of sophomores in the vicinity. It didn't take much to understand what was happening.

'I see,' I thought, my eyes narrowing further. 'The isolation, the timing, the choice of location... So you've started to act.'



They thought they were clever, that they could catch me off guard in a controlled environment. But their presence here, their audacity—it told me everything I needed to know.

I took a steady breath, calming the faint ripple of annoyance that threatened to surface. The four presences moved closer, their footsteps deliberate, the sound of their approach muffled but distinct to my attuned senses. The door creaked faintly as it swung open, revealing the figures who had been lurking just beyond.

I took a steady breath, calming the faint ripple of annoyance that threatened to surface. The four presences moved closer, their footsteps deliberate, the sound of their approach muffled but distinct to my attuned senses. The door creaked faintly as it swung open, revealing the figures who had been lurking just beyond.

Four sophomores. Their uniforms bore the academy's emblem, but their postures were anything but professional. Each of them carried themselves with the kind of arrogance that came from believing they had the upper hand. They spread out slightly as they entered, their movements coordinated, blocking any direct path to the exit.

'I really would've loved to beat the shit out of you...' I thought.

'But now's not the time. Too many eyes are on me already.'

My sudden rank advancement had drawn attention—perhaps too much of it. Pair that with Irina's recent presence, and her decision to associate with me so openly, and the scrutiny on me was only growing. A confrontation here, if mishandled, could undo the careful image I'd been crafting.

'Hitting people isn't the only way to destroy them,' One needed to remember this.

My gaze was sharp as I took in the intruders. 'And I've been expecting something like this to happen.'

After all, being prepared for things like this is a must.

'You see, I have spent a really good amount of money for this thing. Please, take care of it well.'

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Victor Langley strode confidently into the gravity training room, his three lackeys trailing behind him like shadows. The instant they crossed the threshold, an invisible force pressed down on them—gravity amplified far beyond normal. Their movements faltered for a moment, but they adjusted quickly, their bodies accustomed to the strain after months of training as sophomores.

The room was dimly lit, the overhead lights casting long shadows across the metallic floor. The walls hummed faintly, reinforced with technology and mana-infused alloys to withstand the enhanced gravity. In one corner, an activated barrier shimmered faintly, its translucent veil ensuring that no sound would escape beyond the confines of the room.

Victor glanced at it and smirked. "Perfect."

The air felt thick, not just from the augmented gravity but from the tension that hung heavily in the room. The four of them moved toward the center where he stood.

A young man.

His black hair fell loosely around his face, framing sharp, handsome features. His purple eyes, luminous even in the dim light, tracked their approach without a word. He stood motionless in the center of the room, his posture relaxed, as though the crushing weight of the enhanced gravity was nothing more than an idle breeze to him.

Victor stopped a few feet away, his lackeys forming a semi-circle around the young man.

"....."

Silence.

The young man didn't speak. He didn't flinch. He didn't even acknowledge their presence beyond a faint glance. His calm demeanor only fueled Victor's irritation.

"You've got guts, I'll give you that," Victor said, his voice echoing faintly in the sealed room. He cracked his knuckles, the sound sharp and deliberate. "Standing there all quiet like that. Makes you look brave. Or stupid."

The young man didn't respond. His expression remained unreadable, his piercing purple gaze steady and unyielding.

Victor's smirk wavered, annoyance flickering in his eyes. He motioned to one of his lackeys, a tall, broad-shouldered student with a jagged scar running down his jaw.

"Get the barrier reinforced," Victor ordered. "We don't want interruptions."

The lackey nodded and moved to the wall, his hands glowing faintly with mana as he enhanced the sound-dampening barrier. The shimmering veil grew brighter for a moment before settling back into an almost invisible hum.

Victor turned his attention back to the young man. "You know why we're here, don't you?"

Still, the young man didn't respond.

Victor's smirk turned into a scowl, his frustration bubbling to the surface. He stepped closer, the enhanced gravity causing his boots to clang heavily against the floor.

"You think you can just walk around here like you're untouchable?" Victor sneered. "You think you're better than everyone else, huh? Someone's gotta teach you some manners."

The young man tilted his head slightly, his expression unchanged. For a fleeting moment, Victor thought he caught the faintest hint of a smile—a mocking curve at the edge of his lips.

"Say something!" one of the lackeys snapped, stepping forward with clenched fists.

Victor held up a hand, stopping him. "No need. He's not the talking type." He rolled his shoulders, his mana flaring faintly around him in a show of dominance. "Doesn't matter. We'll get the message across another way."

The lackeys chuckled, their laughter low and predatory.

But the young man didn't laugh. He didn't flinch.

And for a brief, unsettling moment, Victor felt the weight of that purple gaze settle on him, cutting through the room like a blade.

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On the other side, the tense air in the corridor snapped like a coiled spring as the group of freshmen surged forward. One of them lunged at Emma, grabbing her wrist and forcing her to release Taylor's collar. Another stepped in front of Taylor, shielding her from the escalating chaos.

"Back off!" a freshman shouted, his fists clenched tightly.

Emma's eyes blazed with fury. "You little brats think you can take me on?" she snarled, stepping forward. Her entourage, equally outraged, jumped into the fray, shoving and jostling the freshmen.

The corridor erupted into a chaotic brawl, fists swinging, shouts echoing off the walls. Taylor pressed herself against the cold surface, her legs trembling, as she watched the chaos unfold. Her heart pounded, torn between wanting to intervene and being too paralyzed to move.

"Enough!" a sharp, commanding voice rang out, cutting through the commotion like a whip.

The fighting stopped almost instantly as everyone turned to face the source of the voice. A woman stood at the far end of the corridor, her presence radiating authority. She was tall and composed, with dark hair pulled back into a tight bun, and her piercing eyes swept over the scene with unmistakable disdain.

It was Instructor Maris, one of the academy's most respected and fearsome teachers. Her reputation for zero tolerance and unwavering discipline was well-known among the students.

"What is going on here?" Maris demanded, her tone icy and severe. She strode forward, her boots clicking sharply against the floor, and stopped in the middle of the corridor, glaring at the group.

Emma was the first to recover, straightening her uniform and lifting her chin. "Instructor Maris, these freshmen attacked me without provocation," she said, her voice laced with indignation. "I was simply—"

"I don't want excuses," Maris snapped, cutting her off. Her eyes darted to Taylor, who still clung to the wall, and then to the group of freshmen, several of whom bore scuffed uniforms and bruised faces. "This is a blatant violation of academy conduct."

The freshmen shuffled nervously, some glancing at Taylor, who looked like she might crumble under the weight of the instructor's scrutiny.

"Everyone is to immediately head to the disciplinary committee."

And her orders were clear.

"The academy will handle this."

But then just then, from her earbuds, she will hear another voice.

[Instructor Maris. Please head to the Training Grounds. We have lost a signal in one of the rooms.]

All of them were happening at the same time.

'Tch.'

"Now, disperse. Your names are all recorded. Don't even try to deceive the academy."

Saying that she immediately rushed to the training grounds.

Chapter 774 Chapter 179.1 - Violence

"Get him!" he barked, his voice echoing within the sealed gravity room.

Without hesitation, the three lackeys surged forward, their movements deliberate and aggressive. The gravity enhanced their weight, lending every step a thunderous impact as they bore down on the silent young man.

The first blow came from the lackey with the scar, his fist swinging in a wide arc toward the young man's face. It connected with a sickening crunch, sending blood spraying into the air. The young man staggered back, his head snapping to the side, but he didn't fall.

A second lackey followed immediately, delivering a vicious kick to his midsection. The force of it reverberated through the room, driving the young man back against the metallic wall with a loud clang. He coughed, blood splattering onto the floor as the third lackey grabbed him by the collar and slammed him into the ground.

"Stay down!" the lackey snarled, raising his fist for another strike.

But the young man didn't stay down.

Even as the blows rained down on him—fists, kicks, and strikes with the weight of enhanced gravity behind them—he refused to cry out. Blood smeared across the floor, splattering against the walls as the assault continued. His black hair clung to his face, damp with sweat and crimson streaks, but his purple eyes burned with a quiet, unwavering intensity.

Victor hung back, watching with a mixture of satisfaction and frustration. The young man's silence was unnerving. He should've been begging by now, pleading for them to stop. Instead, he endured every blow with an eerie calm that sent a shiver of unease down Victor's spine.

"Enough," Victor finally said, stepping forward as the lackeys paused, their breathing heavy from the exertion. The room was filled with the metallic tang of blood and the muffled hum of the barrier.

Victor crouched down, gripping the young man's bloodied face and forcing him to look up.

"You should've stayed out of our way," Victor said, his tone low and menacing. "This is what happens when you mess with the wrong people."

The young man's lips twitched, a faint, almost imperceptible smirk curling at the corner of his mouth.

Victor's brow furrowed. "You think this is funny?"

"No..." The young man's voice was hoarse but steady, cutting through the tension like a blade. His purple eyes locked onto Victor's, unflinching. "I think you don't know what you've started."

Victor's expression darkened, anger flaring in his chest. He stood abruptly, kicking the young man in the ribs with enough force to send him skidding across the floor.

"Leave the message," Victor ordered, stepping back as his lackeys followed him.

One of the lackeys knelt down, pulling a marker from his pocket. With quick, deliberate strokes, he scrawled something on the young man's torn shirt—a single word meant to taunt and provoke:

Leave her alone.

Victor turned to leave, the lackeys following close behind. "Let this be a warning," he said over his shoulder, his voice laced with disdain.

As the door hissed open and the group stepped out, the gravity room fell silent once more.

The young man lay motionless for a moment, blood pooling beneath him.

But then as they left, someone slowly emerged from the shadows.

"Not bad."

And that someone was identical to the young man lying on the ground.

"The stage is set."

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The moment Instructor Maris stepped into the training grounds, her sharp eyes took in the scene with practiced precision. Blood pooled on the metallic floor, stark against the sterile light of the gravity room. The acrid scent of iron and sweat lingered in the air. Her gaze fell immediately on the cadet, leaning against the wall, his body battered but upright.

The boy—young, clearly a freshman from his uniform—was gulping down a health potion, the vial trembling slightly in his bloodied hand. His black hair was matted, his face swollen and streaked with crimson. Despite his injuries, his stance was defiant, his purple eyes sharp and burning cold.

"Cadet, are you okay?" Maris's voice cut through the heavy silence, both concerned and commanding.

The cadet coughed violently, a fresh spatter of blood escaping his lips. He turned his gaze to her, his expression impassive despite the pain clearly etched into his features. He nodded but said nothing at first, his movements slow and deliberate as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"I'll take care of myself," he rasped, his voice hoarse but steady, his tone curt and resolute.

Maris's brow furrowed at the blunt rejection. Her instincts told her to press further, but something in his eyes gave her pause—an anger simmering just beneath the surface, tightly controlled yet unmistakable.

"You're not in any condition to argue," she said firmly, stepping closer. "I'll take you to the infirmary."

The cadet's lips pressed into a thin line as he straightened, wincing slightly. When she extended a hand to support him, he shook his head, refusing her aid. His movements were deliberate as he pushed himself off the wall, each step filled with pain but carrying a determined resolve.

"Follow me," she ordered, her tone brooking no argument.

To her mild surprise, the cadet didn't protest further, falling into step behind her, though his posture remained rigid. Before leaving, Maris called for staff to clean the gravity room. Her sharp instructions ensured that nothing would be left out of place, and she made a mental note to investigate the incident thoroughly.

As they walked toward the infirmary, the boy's silence gnawed at her. The air around him was heavy, not just with exhaustion but with restrained fury. Finally, she broke the silence.

"Your name?"

"Astron Natusalune," he replied curtly, his tone clipped and void of emotion.

"Hm... Freshman?" she asked, glancing at him from the corner of her eye.

"...Yes," Astron muttered, his gaze fixed ahead, his expression unreadable.

Maris opened her mouth to press further, but the look on his face stopped her. There was no fear, no plea for sympathy. Instead, there was a quiet defiance, a smoldering resolve that intrigued and unsettled her in equal measure.

The rest of the walk passed in silence, the cadet's labored breathing the only sound. When they reached the infirmary, she turned to him one last time before handing him over to the medics.

"Rest and recover, Cadet Natusalune. And don't think for a moment that this will go unnoticed."

Astron's cold, purple gaze met hers. He gave the faintest of nods before turning away, leaving Maris with an unsettling impression: this boy wasn't just enduring his pain—he was sharpening it into something far more dangerous.

'This is not right...Here we thought everything had calmed down after the semester ended. But, that doesn't seem to be the case.'

As Maris watched Astron disappear into the infirmary, her thoughts churned with unease. Her sharp instincts, honed through years of dealing with cadets and their conflicts, told her that what she had witnessed was more than just a routine scuffle. The academy had assured itself that the flames of confrontation between sophomores and freshmen had been extinguished, that the tensions sparked earlier in the semester had cooled to embers.

But that didn't seem to be the case.

Maris strode briskly away from the infirmary, her expression hardening as her mind replayed the scene in the gravity room: the blood, the quiet defiance, and, most of all, the look in Astron's eyes. That gaze had lingered with her, a cold, simmering fury that refused to burn out. It wasn't just anger; it was a festering wound, something deeper, more dangerous.

'This isn't right,' she thought grimly. 'If this continues unchecked, it won't be long before things spiral out of control again.'

She remembered the last time tensions between the sophomore and freshman classes had flared. Small disputes had escalated into outright chaos, and the academy had been forced to intervene harshly to restore order. It had been an ugly, drawn-out affair that left scars—not just physical, but on the reputation of the institution itself.

The administration had promised reforms, stricter oversight, and better measures to foster cooperation among the classes. For a time, it seemed to work. The cadets settled into uneasy peace, and the semester had ended without major incidents.

But today's events painted a starkly different picture. The sight of Astron, battered and bloodied yet standing with that unyielding glare, was proof enough that the conflict had merely gone underground, waiting for the right moment to reignite.

'And that gaze...' Maris thought, her jaw tightening. 'That is not something healthy for someone so young.'

There was something unsettling in how Astron carried his pain—like he was molding it, shaping it into something sharp and precise. Maris had seen similar expressions before, in older, hardened soldiers who had been through too many battles. But for a freshman? It was too soon, too raw, and far too dangerous.

The academy needed to do better. The promises of reform weren't enough if cadets like Astron were left to bear their burdens alone. She resolved to raise the issue with the administration, to push for a more proactive approach to managing these undercurrents of tension.

'We can't let this fester,' she thought. 'Or we'll pay for it later.'

Chapter 775 Chapter 179.2 - Violence

Astron sat on the infirmary bed, his posture stiff yet deliberate, as the medics worked around him. The sterile scent of antiseptics and the faint hum of mana-infused medical equipment filled the air. His black hair clung to his forehead, damp from sweat and dried blood, but his purple eyes remained sharp, unyielding.

A medic—a middle-aged woman with steady hands and a calm demeanor—dabbed at the wounds on his face with a glowing cloth. Her brows furrowed slightly as she examined the gashes and bruises. "Your injuries have healed remarkably well," she said, her tone professional yet curious. "Did you take a potion before arriving here?"

"Yes," Astron replied curtly, his voice low but steady.

The medic nodded, glancing at the empty vial he had discarded earlier. "I see. That explains part of it. But even so..." She paused, her gaze lingering on the faint scars that remained. "Your regenerative ability is impressive. The instructor mentioned you'd lost a considerable amount of blood, so we expected your injuries to be much worse."

Astron reached into his pocket and retrieved a small, unassuming pill. He held it between his fingers, the faint shimmer of mana glinting off its surface.

"Hmm?" The medic tilted her head, intrigued. "What's that?"

As she grabbed and took a look, she realized what it was. "A defensive enhancement pill," she said, her tone matter-of-fact. "Once ingested, it temporarily bolsters the body's defenses, preventing severe injuries from worsening. It acts like a potion but doesn't directly heal. It buys time."

She studied the pill, her expression shifting to one of understanding. "Smart," she remarked, nodding in approval. "With something like that, you mitigated the damage before it could become life-threatening. A practical choice, especially in situations like yours."

Astron's lips pressed into a thin line, but he said nothing, slipping the pill back into his pocket.

"You did well to carry something like that," the medic continued, her tone softening slightly. "It's clear you were prepared, Cadet. You've handled yourself well." She straightened, stepping back after finishing her inspection. "I understand. You're dismissed. But I'd still recommend taking it easy for the next day or so. The potion and pill may have done their part, but your body still needs rest."

Astron stood slowly, his movements controlled as he 'tested' his balance. He gave the medic a small nod. "Understood."

But as he was about to leave, the door of the infirmary opened and someone entered.

"Astron!"

It was a young girl with a fiery hair.

\*\*\*\*\*

The special training room allocated to Irina shimmered with the faint glow of reinforced mana barriers, designed to withstand even the most intense displays of power. The air was thick with heat, the scent of scorched metal lingering as flames flickered and danced around her. Her fiery hair clung to her damp forehead as she moved, her powerful strikes sending waves of fire cascading through the room.

"Focus," Irina muttered to herself, her breath coming in sharp bursts. Her amber eyes gleamed with determination as she thrust her hand forward, a torrent of fire erupting from her palm and slamming into the glowing target dummy at the far end of the room. The flames licked hungrily at the edges of the reinforced structure, but the dummy held firm, glowing faintly as it absorbed the brunt of the attack.

Irina took a step back, her hands resting briefly on her knees as she caught her breath. Her heart pounded in her chest, sweat dripping down her temples and soaking the edges of her training gear. The room, though equipped with cooling enchantments, felt like a furnace—exactly the way she liked it.

"That's enough for now," she muttered, straightening and walking toward the edge of the room where her towel lay draped over a bench. She grabbed it, running it across her face and neck to mop up the sweat as she exhaled slowly. The adrenaline from her training began to ebb, leaving behind the pleasant ache of exertion in her muscles.

With her towel slung over her shoulder, Irina walked toward the far corner of the room where her smartwatch rested on the ground beside her water bottle. She picked it up, the cool surface of the device a stark contrast to the heat still radiating from her skin.

As she unlocked the screen, the glow of notifications greeted her—messages and a few alerts from the academy's system. Irina swiped through them lazily, her thumb pausing briefly as she scrolled through her messages.

Irina leaned back against the wall, letting out a slow breath as she wiped her neck with the towel draped over her shoulder. Her fiery hair clung to her damp skin, and the cool surface of her smartwatch was a welcome reprieve against her fingertips. She stared at the screen, her amber eyes scanning the messages and notifications idly.

"Should I just call him?" she muttered to herself, the thought slipping out before she could stop it. The idea had been lingering in her mind all day, and now that her training session was winding down, the urge to meet up with Astron was hard to ignore. 'One session left. Maybe we could go somewhere together... hang out?' she thought, her lips curving into a small, almost mischievous smile. 'That could work.'



But for now, rest came first. She shook her head lightly, dismissing the idea for the moment. Tossing her towel onto the bench, she unlocked her smartwatch again, deciding to kill time on the school forums before her break ended.

As she navigated to the forum, the first thing that caught her attention was a trending post near the top of the feed.

[Violence on Campus]

The title immediately grabbed her attention, her brows furrowing slightly as she tapped the post to open it.

Irina's finger hovered over the screen as the post loaded. The video thumbnail alone sent a jolt through her system—a dimly lit room with faintly flickering light, and in the corner of the frame, Astron sitting silently. His black hair hung low over his face, but those unmistakable purple eyes glinted faintly in the darkness.

"Astron?" she whispered, her voice barely audible in the empty training room.

Her heart clenched as the video began to play. The shaky footage was taken from a poorly concealed vantage point, perhaps through a crack in a doorway or a small window. The room's oppressive atmosphere bled through the screen—the gravity visibly affecting every movement within it.

Astron sat in the center of the room, his posture calm, controlled, despite the immense weight pressing down on him. His face bore a quiet resilience, his expression unreadable. Irina felt her chest tighten at the sight, a mixture of worry and confusion bubbling to the surface.

The door to the room opened, and four figures entered. She didn't recognize them immediately as sophomores, but somehow she felt like she didn't see anyone like this in freshmen students.

'Ah that band, sophomores.'

Though from their uniforms she will see that they were sophomores.

Their arrogance radiated through the screen as they moved toward Astron, their steps heavy and deliberate under the amplified gravity.

Irina's amber eyes narrowed, her fingers tightening around her smartwatch as the tension in the video mounted.

The man stopped a few feet from Astron, his lips moving, though the audio was faint and garbled. But even without hearing the words, the mocking grin on his face spoke volumes.

And then, it happened.

Without warning, the sophomore and his lackeys lunged at Astron. The camera shook slightly as the violent scene unfolded. Fists connected with flesh, the brutal impacts echoing faintly even through the poor-quality audio.

Astron's head snapped to the side from a punch, blood spraying into the air. A kick to his midsection sent him slamming into the wall, and another blow brought him to his knees. He didn't cry out, didn't beg—his silence only seemed to fuel their aggression.

"This...."

The video continued, showing Astron being beaten relentlessly. Blood splattered across the metallic floor, his black hair clinging to his face as he refused to go down entirely.

The man crouched down, gripping Astron's face, his lips moving again. The camera zoomed in slightly, catching the faint twitch of a smirk from Astron.

Then the beating resumed, punctuated by heavy kicks and punches.

One of the lackeys scrawled something across Astron's shirt before the four of them finally left the room, laughing and jeering as they exited.

The video ended with Astron on his hands and knees, blood pooling beneath him as he slowly, painstakingly pushed himself upright. His head hung low, but his purple eyes remained fierce, burning with a quiet intensity that sent a shiver down Irina's spine.

The video stopped abruptly, leaving the screen black.

Irina's fiery yellow eyes narrowed as the video ended, her fingers still gripping her smartwatch tightly. A slow smirk spread across her lips as she leaned back against the wall of the training room, the faint echoes of her earlier training still ringing faintly in the air.

"What are you playing at this time..." she murmured, her voice barely audible over the hum of the mana barriers.

Her thoughts raced as she pieced together the scene she'd just witnessed. The beating, the sophomores' smug grins, and, most importantly, Astron's eerie silence throughout. A lesser person might have been alarmed, but Irina knew better. This wasn't an ordinary act of bullying. No, this was Astron. Everything about him was deliberate, calculated. The fact that he was there, taking the hits without resistance, only meant one thing: it was part of his plan.

'It might not even be him,' she thought, her smirk deepening. Knowing Astron, it wouldn't surprise her if he was the one behind the camera, controlling the entire narrative from the shadows.

"So that's what you've been preparing," she muttered, tilting her head slightly as if imagining him sitting in a dark room, orchestrating everything like a chess master setting up his pieces. "That bastard... he's baiting them, isn't he?"

Her thoughts drifted briefly to their earlier conversations, back when she had revealed it was Trevor Philips who had spread the rumors about him. She had been curious then, wondering what Astron's next move would be. Now, it seemed, she was seeing it unfold in real time.

Still smirking, Irina straightened, tossing her towel onto the bench as an idea began to form in her mind. "You wouldn't mind if I joined in on the fun, would you?" she said softly, the mischievous glint in her eyes burning brighter. After all, this wasn't just an opportunity for Astron—it was one for her, too.

'Let me cling to you a little, Astron,' she thought, the smirk on her lips turning into a full grin. 'If you're making a statement, I might as well make one, too.'

Without wasting another second, Irina grabbed her water bottle and phone, shoving them into her bag as she slung it over her shoulder. The training room's intense heat dissipated behind her as she strode out, her steps purposeful. The infirmary wasn't far, and if she knew Astron—and she did—he'd likely be there, playing the role he had so carefully crafted.

Her fiery hair swayed as she quickened her pace, her mind already spinning with ideas. 'If you're going to bait them, I'll make sure they see exactly who's standing by your side when it all falls apart.'

Chapter 776 Chapter 179.3 - Violence

The door to the infirmary swung open with a sharp creak, and the air seemed to shift as Irina strode in. Her fiery hair shimmered under the sterile lights, and her yellow eyes blazed with a mixture of faux concern and unmistakable purpose.

"Astron!" she exclaimed, her voice carrying a dramatic edge that made the medics glance up briefly from their tasks. Without hesitation, she rushed toward him, her movements deliberate as she closed the distance.

Astron straightened slightly, his sharp purple eyes narrowing as he met her gaze. "Irina," he said evenly, his tone calm despite the sudden intrusion.

Ignoring his composed demeanor, Irina stopped right in front of him, placing her hands firmly on his shoulders as she inspected him. "Are you okay? What happened?" she asked, her voice dripping with exaggerated worry. Her amber eyes flicked over his bruised face and bandaged arms, lingering just long enough to sell the act.

Before Astron could respond, Irina pulled him into an embrace, wrapping her arms around him tightly. "You should've told me," she said, her voice muffled slightly as her fiery hair brushed against his cheek. "Do you have any idea how worried I was when I saw that video?"

Astron's posture stiffened, his arms remaining at his sides as he endured the sudden hug. His sharp eyes flickered with a faint glint of amusement that he quickly masked. "I'm fine," he said calmly, though there was a subtle edge to his tone. "You're overreacting."

Irina leaned back slightly, still holding onto his shoulders as she tilted her head to meet his gaze. Her lips curved into a faint smirk, her expression shifting to one of playful mischief. "Am I? Maybe. But isn't it my right to worry?"

The medics exchanged glances, clearly intrigued but too professional to comment. Irina ignored them entirely, her focus solely on Astron.

"You didn't tell me you were planning something like this," she continued, her voice softening slightly. "You just let yourself get beaten up like that? What were you thinking?"

Astron's gaze remained steady, his expression unreadable as he replied, "I didn't think it was worth mentioning."

Irina sighed, stepping back and crossing her arms, though her fiery presence still dominated the room. "Next time, mention it. Or at least let me in on whatever scheme you're running."

She whispered the last part, looking at him right into his eyes.

Astron tilted his head slightly, his sharp eyes glinting with faint curiosity. "And why would I do that?"

Her smirk widened as she placed a hand on her hip. "Because I'm good at making an entrance. Imagine how much better it would've been with me in that room."

Astron tilted his head slightly, his sharp eyes glinting with faint curiosity. "And why would I do that?"

Her smirk widened as she placed a hand on her hip. "Because I'm good at making an entrance. Imagine how much better it would've been with me in that room."

Astron didn't respond immediately, his gaze lingering on her for a moment before he shook his head slightly. "That would have been impossible."

"Why?"

"You know why."

"Heeee...Really?"

"...."

Irina's smirk widened as she leaned closer, clearly enjoying the fact that Astron couldn't respond freely with the medics hovering nearby. Her fiery yellow eyes gleamed with playful mischief, her confidence radiating like the heat of a well-contained flame.

"Come on, Astron," she teased, tilting her head slightly as her fiery hair shifted over her shoulders. "You don't have to be so secretive. Why not just admit that you needed my help?"

Astron's sharp purple eyes narrowed faintly, his expression calm but betraying a flicker of exasperation. She was relentless, and they both knew she was pushing him for the sheer enjoyment of it. For a moment, he simply regarded her, his unreadable gaze steady as if deciding how to respond.

Then, without warning, his hand moved—quick and precise. His fingers found the vulnerable spot on her side and pinched gently but effectively.

"Hiick!" Irina yelped, her entire body jolting in surprise as the unexpected sensation sent her bolting backward. Her arms weakened, her confident posture faltering as she instinctively squirmed away from his touch.

Taking full advantage of the moment, Astron slipped effortlessly out of her arms, his movements deliberate as he stepped back. As he did so, he stumbled slightly, his body swaying as though the motion had exacerbated his injuries.

The medics immediately stepped forward, concern flashing across their faces. "Cadet, be careful!" one of them chided, reaching out to steady him.

Astron held up a hand, regaining his balance with practiced ease. "I'm fine," he said, his voice as calm and measured as ever. The faintest trace of amusement lingered in his eyes as he straightened, glancing at Irina.

Irina, on the other hand, was still recovering from the shock, her hands instinctively rubbing at her sides as she glared at him. Her earlier confidence had been temporarily replaced by an incredulous expression.

"You—!" she started, her voice a mixture of indignation and disbelief. "Did you just—"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Astron said smoothly, his calm demeanor unshaken as he turned slightly toward the medics, as though focusing entirely on their instructions.

Irina's mouth opened and closed as she tried to formulate a response, but her flustered state made her usual sharp retorts difficult to summon. Her fiery hair seemed to bristle as she crossed her arms tightly over her chest, her amber eyes narrowing.

"Fine," she muttered under her breath, though the faintest twitch of a smile played at the corner of her lips. "You win this round."

Astron didn't reply, but the subtle glint of satisfaction in his gaze didn't go unnoticed as he let the medics guide him to finish up. Irina's annoyance simmered just below the surface, but she couldn't help but feel a grudging sense of amusement at how deftly he'd turned the tables on her.

'That bastard,' she thought, a faint smirk tugging at her lips despite herself. 'He's lucky he's good at this.'

Irina folded her arms, her fiery yellow eyes narrowing as she watched Astron with a mixture of annoyance and reluctant admiration. 'That bastard,' she thought, her lips twitching into a faint smirk despite herself. 'How does he do it? If I didn't already know better, even I'd believe he was genuinely struggling. He's that good.'

Her gaze lingered on him, noting the subtle details of his performance—the precise way he swayed, just enough to draw concern but not panic, the controlled flicker of weariness in his sharp purple eyes, the calm reassurance in his tone as he addressed the medics. 'No hesitation, no cracks in the act. He plays his part perfectly, like he's rehearsed this a hundred times.'

Irina's lips pursed slightly, her mind racing as she replayed the scene in her head. 'I hate to admit it, but he's even better at controlling his expressions than I am. And that's saying something.' Her fingers tapped lightly against her arm, her thoughts spiraling into grudging acknowledgment. 'He can make anyone believe whatever he wants them to believe. It's infuriating, but damn if it isn't impressive.'

Her eyes narrowed further as she caught the faintest glint of amusement in Astron's gaze. 'He knows exactly what he's doing. That look says it all—he's enjoying this way too much. Bastard.'

But even as the thought crossed her mind, a new determination flared within her. Stepping forward with deliberate purpose, she planted herself firmly in front of Astron, her arms akimbo. "I will escort you."

Astron blinked, his sharp eyes meeting hers with faint curiosity. "Escort?" he repeated, his tone calm but edged with skepticism.

"Yes," Irina said, tilting her chin up as though daring him to challenge her. "You're injured—" she raised a hand to cut him off before he could interject—"or at least that's what you're claiming,"

Her words were clear. If you refuse my help, you will look suspicious.

'Heh....'

"And since I'm clearly the only one capable of making sure you don't stumble into trouble again, I'll be taking you wherever you need to go."

"I do—" Astron started, but Irina silenced him with a pointed glare.

"Humph. You have no right to refuse," she said firmly, crossing her arms as though the matter was settled. Her fiery hair seemed to shimmer in the sterile light, emphasizing the unyielding resolve in her posture.

Astron's gaze shifted momentarily to the medics, who were clearly enjoying the exchange, their smiles barely hidden behind their professional facades. A faint sigh escaped him as he straightened slightly, his calm expression betraying the faintest hint of resignation. "Fine," he said evenly, his tone as composed as ever.

Irina allowed herself a triumphant smirk, though her inner thoughts were anything but calm. 'Ha! Got you.' She turned on her heel, her fiery hair swaying with the motion as she gestured for him to follow. 'I'll make sure you remember this. Let's see you try to wriggle out of my care this time.'

Astron followed her without protest, his movements deliberate and measured, as if already anticipating her antics. The medics exchanged knowing glances as they watched the two leave, their expressions a mixture of amusement and curiosity.

As they approached the infirmary doors, Irina's triumphant stride slowed slightly when she spotted someone approaching from the opposite direction. The faint sound of hurried steps grew louder, and before either Irina or Astron could react, a commanding voice rang out.

"Junior!"

The voice was calm yet unmistakably firm, carrying the weight of authority and familiarity. Irina's amber eyes flicked up to see a strikingly beautiful woman standing in the doorway. She had lustrous purple hair that cascaded down her back, contrasting sharply with her piercing blue eyes. Her presence was magnetic, a blend of grace and strength that immediately drew the attention of everyone in the room.

She immediately rushed forward, but Irina stepped in.

"Senior Maya."

It was her time to assert herself now.

## Chapter 777 Chapter 180.1 - Confrontation, but girls

The Elemental Chamber hummed softly with latent energy, the crystalline walls refracting moonlight into faintly shimmering hues of silver and blue. Maya stood at the center of her reserved section, the intricate patterns etched into the floor glowing faintly as they resonated with her mana. The air around her was thick with power, yet it felt calming, a sharp contrast to the turbulence within her mind.

She exhaled slowly, her breath steady but deliberate, as she raised her hand. With a flick of her wrist, a tendril of mana coiled around her fingers, its translucent hue shifting between her natural affinity and the crimson undertones that lingered, unbidden, at its edges. The sight sent a flicker of unease through her, but she steadied her grip.

'Focus,' she told herself, closing her eyes.

Her training today centered on refining her mental barriers—the techniques Alden had shared with her over the past two weeks. They had proven effective. The once-suffocating presence of her other self no longer loomed as heavily, the boundary between their minds more defined. Yet, even with this progress, anxiety lingered like a shadow at the edges of her thoughts.

The runes beneath her feet pulsed as she channeled her mana outward, shaping it into an intricate lattice of light and shadow. She moved with precision, weaving the strands into a controlled spiral that shimmered in the air around her. But her focus faltered as her thoughts drifted.

'She's quieter now,' Maya thought, her lips pressing into a thin line. The memory of her other self's crimson eyes burned vividly in her mind, their unrelenting intensity still capable of sending shivers down her spine. 'Too quiet.'

The silence wasn't comforting—it was unnerving. It felt like a predator waiting, watching, biding its time for her to slip. The image of her other self's cruel smirk, the venom in her voice, echoed faintly:

"You don't deserve someone like him."

Maya's fingers twitched, and the lattice of mana quivered, destabilizing before fracturing into shards of light. She opened her eyes sharply, her blue gaze narrowing as she steadied her breathing. The failure was minor, but it pricked at her pride.

The Elemental Chamber continued to hum softly around Maya as she steadied her breathing, trying to refocus. The lattice of mana had dissipated, but the residue of her frustration lingered. Her fingers flexed at her sides, the faint crimson undertone in her mana still gnawing at the edges of her thoughts.

'Why does she care so much about him?' Maya wondered, the memory of her other self's voice echoing louder now. 'Why does it matter if he only sees me and not... her?'

The questions felt like cracks in her resolve, and for the briefest moment, she wondered if her other self's obsession stemmed from a truth she refused to admit.

But before she could dive deeper into that unsettling thought, her smartwatch vibrated against her wrist. The unexpected sensation broke her concentration, and her gaze snapped to the glowing screen.

Amelia.

Maya frowned, her brows knitting together. Amelia never called her during training sessions unless it was important. A flicker of worry ignited in her chest as she accepted the call.

"Amelia?" she asked, her tone calm but edged with curiosity. "Is everything okay? Did something happen?"

Amelia's voice came through immediately, breathless and tinged with urgency. "Maya! Hurry—check the school forum! Astron... something happened to him!"

Maya's heart skipped a beat, her mind instantly sharpening as the words registered. "What do you mean?" she asked, already swiping her smartwatch to open the academy's public forum. "What happened to Astron?"

"I don't know all the details," Amelia said quickly. "But there's a video—it's bad, Maya. Just look."

Maya's fingers moved swiftly, navigating to the trending section of the forum. At the top of the page was a headline in bold:

[Violence in the Academy]

Her breath hitched as she opened the post. A video clip began playing, and Maya's chest tightened with each passing second.

The footage was grainy, taken from someone's smartwatch, but the events were unmistakable. A group of students, both seniors and some from her own year, surrounded Astron in one of the academy's open training fields. They moved with aggressive intent, their voices a cacophony of taunts and jeers as they cornered him.

Maya's sharp eyes picked out a familiar face among the crowd—Victor, one of her classmates, someone she had sparred with on occasion. He stood at the forefront, his expression twisted with malice as he shoved Astron back with a glowing fist charged with mana.

Maya's fingers curled into tight fists as the video continued. The unfairness of the scene sent a surge of anger coursing through her, and when Victor landed a particularly vicious strike that sent Astron stumbling, Maya closed the video abruptly, unable to watch any further.

"Where is he now?" Maya asked, her voice low but carrying an edge of steel.

"I think they took him to the infirmary," Amelia said quickly. "Maya, are you—"

"I'll handle it," Maya interrupted, her tone firm. She ended the call without waiting for a response and turned on her heel, her steps quick and purposeful as she left the Elemental Chamber.

The cool evening air bit at her skin as she strode through the academy grounds, her thoughts a storm of fury and resolve. The sight of Astron being assaulted burned in her mind, fueling her determination.

'They'll answer for this,' she thought, her jaw tightening. 'Every single one of them.'

But for now, her priority was Astron. Whatever state he was in, she needed to see him—and she needed to see him now.

As she approached the infirmary, the faint glow of its lights visible in the distance, Maya's grip on her emotions steadied. She would confront Victor and the others soon enough, but first, she needed to make sure Astron was safe.

As Maya entered the infirmary, the sterile scent of antiseptics and mana-infused salves greeted her senses. Her sharp gaze swept across the room, instantly locking onto Astron, who sat composed on one of the cots. His violet eyes flicked to her, his expression unreadable but attentive. For a fleeting moment, relief coursed through her. He appeared unharmed—or at least as much as one could be after what she'd seen.

But her moment of reprieve was short-lived. Standing beside him, a striking figure with fiery hair and an aura of brazen confidence, was Irina Emberheart.

Maya's heart skipped, then tightened. Her vision tinged with a faint redness, a heat that rose unbidden as she took in the scene. Irina's posture was unrelenting, her arms crossed as though she had claimed the space around Astron.



'This...'

The thought clawed at her mind, but she shoved it aside with practiced resolve. Maya strode forward, her gaze cold and steady, locking onto Astron. The rest of the room—the medics, the quiet murmurs of patients—faded into the background.

"Junior!" Maya's voice cut through the room like a blade, calm yet carrying an undeniable authority.

Astron inclined his head slightly, acknowledging her, but before Maya could step closer, Irina moved.

The fiery-haired junior stepped between them, her amber eyes meeting Maya's with a defiant glint. The tension was palpable, the room holding its breath as the two women stood face-to-face.

"Senior Maya," Irina said evenly, her tone polite yet laced with an unspoken challenge.

Maya's gaze flicked to her briefly, then returned to Astron as if Irina's presence were inconsequential. "Junior Irina," she replied, her tone cool, bordering on dismissive.

Irina didn't flinch, holding her ground as she spoke again. "What are you doing here?"

Maya's gaze didn't waver as Irina's question hung in the air. The fiery-haired junior stood firm, her amber eyes gleaming with an unspoken challenge. For a moment, Maya considered brushing past her entirely, but the subtle tension in Irina's stance demanded a response.

"I'm here to check on my junior," Maya said evenly, her voice calm yet carrying a distinct edge. Her piercing blue eyes flicked briefly to Astron before locking onto Irina again. "After all, it's my responsibility to ensure his well-being."

Irina raised an eyebrow, her lips curving into a faint, almost smug smile. "Rest assured, Senior. He's in safe hands. With me here, nobody can touch him."

The words struck an unexpected chord within Maya. Though Irina's tone was polished, there was an undercurrent of possessiveness that grated against her nerves. Maya's lips pressed into a thin line as she stepped closer, closing the distance between them.

"And yet, here I am," Maya replied coolly, her voice steady. "Because it seems the situation warranted it."

Irina's smirk widened slightly, though her eyes narrowed. "You're mistaken if you think I can't handle this. I was already making sure he's fine, while you were taking your sweet time."

Maya's gaze hardened a flicker of something unfamiliar stirring in her chest. The words weren't just defiance; they carried a weight of intent, as though Irina was deliberately drawing a line.

Maya's gaze darkened as Irina's words settled into her chest like a taunt she couldn't ignore. Her jaw tightened, and for the briefest moment, a thought crystallized in her mind, sharp and clear.

'This wench.'

The realization struck her with an almost visceral intensity: Irina was coveting him. That fiery-haired junior, with her confident stance and deliberate words, was laying claim to something—no, someone—that Maya wasn't willing to let go unchecked.

The thought churned within her, igniting a storm that she could barely contain. It's annoying. The words echoed in her mind, repeating like the relentless beat of a drum.

Annoying. Annoying. Annoying. Annoying. Annoying.

Her lips curved into a sharp, humorless smile, but the tension in her posture betrayed the turmoil simmering beneath her cool facade. A faint vein pulsed at her temple, her body betraying the anger she fought to suppress.

"It appears," Maya began, her voice deceptively calm, "that you have a misconception of me, Junior. I am not someone who takes 'sweet time.'" Her words carried a dangerous edge, one that made the medics subtly glance at each other, sensing the growing tension.

Irina didn't falter. If anything, her smirk deepened, her amber eyes glinting with a mix of amusement and defiance. "But you were awfully late for someone who doesn't take their 'sweet time,'" she replied smoothly. Then, as if aiming for the jugular, she added, "Or do you imply that you don't value him enough?"

The words hit like a dagger, precise and unrelenting. For a split second, Maya's composure cracked, her breath hitching imperceptibly as the sting of Irina's remark lanced through her.

Value him enough?

The accusation was baseless, yet it clawed at her resolve, planting a seed of doubt that she couldn't ignore. A faint crimson light flickered at the edges of her vision, her other self stirring in response to the emotional storm Irina had unleashed.

Annoying.

Maya's hands clenched at her sides, her fingernails digging into her palms as she fought to keep her emotions in check. But the sensation of loss—of being challenged in a way she couldn't rationalize—gnawed at her mind, threatening to pull her under.

"Why don't you just kill her?"

And suddenly a dangerous voice echoed in her head.

Chapter 778 Chapter 180.2 - Confrontation, but girls

The tension in the infirmary pressed against Maya's chest like a vice, her clenched fists trembling at her sides. Irina's words replayed in her mind, sharp and mocking, yet the source of her agitation wasn't entirely external. As much as Irina's defiance grated on her, there was something else gnawing at her, something deeper, darker.

And then, it came—a voice, low and venomous, curling through her thoughts like smoke.

"Why don't you just kill her?"

Maya stiffened, her eyes widening fractionally. The voice was hers—but not. There was an edge to it, sharp and unyielding, laced with a primal hunger that she recognized all too well.

'Huh?'

Her breath hitched as recognition washed over her. It was her—the other self, the darker fragment of her psyche she had worked so hard to suppress.

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"He's the only one I can see. The only one I can feel," the voice continued, its tone dripping with disdain and anguish. "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."

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Maya's vision flickered red, the faint hum of the infirmary fading into the background as the voice grew louder.

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

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Her heart thundered in her chest as the memory of that crimson void resurfaced—the oppressive presence, the piercing eyes of her other self. The raw pain and fury that had echoed in those words came rushing back, cutting through her like a blade.

'No,' she thought, her mind racing. Not now. I've contained you.

But the other self was relentless. "Look at her," it hissed, its tone dark with malice. "Standing there as if she has a claim to him. As if she could ever understand him like we do."

Maya's body trembled, her composure slipping as the voice grew louder, drowning out reason. Her breathing quickened, her hands shaking as she fought to suppress the surge of crimson mana that threatened to engulf her.

Maya's eyes snapped to Irina, but they didn't carry their usual piercing clarity. Instead, there was a flicker of something raw, something unguarded—and Irina noticed.

But it wasn't enough.

"Kill her," the voice urged again, its tone rising, laced with venom and a maddening intensity. "She stands in your way. She covets him, challenges you. She doesn't deserve to breathe the same air as him. End it."

Maya's knees nearly buckled under the weight of the words, her vision blurring as crimson tendrils of mana flickered at the edges of her aura.

'Stop,' she thought, her mental voice trembling. I won't... I won't lose to you again.

But the other self only laughed, cold and biting. "You can't suppress me forever, Maya. I am you. I am the part of you that sees the truth, that understands what you refuse to admit."

Maya's breath trembled as she fought to suppress the crimson tide clawing at the edges of her mind. Her other self's laughter echoed faintly, but Maya forced her gaze to steady on Irina, whose expression had shifted from guarded to triumphant.

Irina stepped forward, her movements deliberate and purposeful, her fiery hair swaying slightly with each step. Her amber eyes glinted with a mix of confidence and something sharper—victory.

"Senior."

When she was close enough, she tilted her head slightly, her voice soft yet cutting as she whispered,

"Remember your place."

The words carried the weight of her pride, underpinned by the subtle mockery in her tone. She held Maya's gaze for a moment longer, the faintest smirk tugging at the corners of her lips.

Maya's fists clenched tighter at her sides, her nails digging into her palms as her mind teetered on the edge of losing control. The voice within her surged again, dark and venomous.

"Are you going to let her talk to you like that? Prove her wrong. Show her what it means to challenge us."

The red flicker in Maya's vision flared briefly, her body trembling with the effort of restraint. Irina's presence, her smugness, and the proximity felt suffocating, her words cutting deeper than Maya wanted to admit.

But Maya's resolve didn't break. Her breathing slowed, deliberate and measured, as she latched onto the faint tether of logic still holding her together. The crimson aura around her dimmed, receding slightly as she forced herself to regain control.

When she finally spoke, her voice was low and icy, each word carrying a quiet but dangerous edge. "Junior Irina," she said, her piercing blue eyes locking onto Irina's with renewed intensity. "I would advise you to choose your words carefully."

Irina's smirk widened slightly, her confidence unshaken. "Oh, but I have," she said smoothly, stepping back with the same deliberate grace. "After all, it's important to remind even seniors that their actions—or inactions—don't go unnoticed."

Maya's jaw tightened, the crimson light flickering faintly once more. She felt the weight of her other self pressing against the fragile boundaries she had erected, the mocking laughter echoing faintly in her ears.

"She's nothing," the voice hissed. "Prove it. Show her the truth."

The crimson light flared at the edges of her vision, her other self clawing at her thoughts, demanding action. It was a storm she was barely holding at bay, the force of it threatening to spill over.

And yet, amidst the chaos, a different sensation began to settle in her chest. The heat of anger and competitiveness faded, leaving behind a hollow ache that gnawed at her resolve. The fire she had relied on to face challenges was nowhere to be found, replaced instead by a creeping sense of inadequacy.

For the first time, she didn't want to fight.

"I—" Maya started, her voice catching in her throat. Her gaze flickered to Astron, who remained quiet but watchful, and then to Irina, whose confidence radiated unshaken, unyielding.

Something inside Maya faltered. The words she wanted to say—the cutting retorts, the icy commands—they didn't come. All she felt was a weight dragging her down, pulling her away from the confrontation entirely.

Maya's fists loosened, her hands falling to her sides. Her piercing blue eyes dulled slightly as she broke eye contact with Irina, a rare flicker of vulnerability crossing her expression.

"I need to go," she said softly, almost to herself. Then, louder but still unsteady, "I—I have something to attend to."

Her words were abrupt, and uncharacteristic, and they hung in the air like an unfinished thought. Before Irina or Astron could respond, Maya turned sharply on her heel and strode toward the door. Her steps were faster than usual, and it was as if she couldn't escape the room quickly enough.

Irina's smirk faded slightly as she watched Maya leave, her amber eyes narrowing in thought. "Well," she murmured to herself, her voice carrying a faint trace of surprise. "That was... unexpected."

Astron's gaze lingered on the doorway where Maya had disappeared, his expression calm but unreadable.

Yet, there was one other person watching the scene unfolding.

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Maya's feet carried her automatically through the academy corridors, her mind a haze of fragmented thoughts and emotions. The cool air brushed against her skin, but it did little to ease the tightness in her chest.

The voice in her head was silent now, but its lingering presence felt heavy, like a shadow that refused to dissipate.

Why couldn't I stand my ground?

The question repeated itself over and over, each iteration heavier than the last. She had faced challenges far greater than Irina's smug defiance. She had confronted her other self, battled her instincts, and emerged stronger—or so she thought.

And yet, in that moment, she had faltered.

Maya reached the sanctuary of her room and closed the door behind her, leaning against it as she exhaled shakily. The silence was deafening, her mind filling the void with doubts she didn't want to confront.

She pressed a hand to her chest, feeling the faint, uneven rhythm of her heartbeat. "What's wrong with me?" she whispered, her voice trembling.

"Do you not get it?"

The devil in her head whispered.

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After seeing the video, Sylvie was also one of those who immediately headed to the infirmary.

After all, the contents of that video were brutal and dangerous, and she was unable to stomach all.

Sylvie hesitated outside the infirmary, her chest tightening as she reached for the handle. Her breathing was shallow, the images from the video still fresh in her mind—Astron, battered and bruised, but unyielding. The scene had been brutal, too much for some to stomach, and she had barely been able to keep herself from rushing here immediately. Now, standing just outside the door, she steeled herself and stepped inside.

The sterile scent of the infirmary hit her instantly, but it wasn't the sight of Astron that greeted her. Instead, her gaze fell on an entirely different scene: Irina and Senior Maya, standing face to face in the middle of the room, their postures taut with tension.

Sylvie froze, her instincts screaming to retreat, but her [Authority] flared unbidden, revealing the storm of emotions swirling between the two women. She couldn't look away.

Irina's emotions blazed like a firestorm, bright and raw.

'What is this?'

But it was a completely different thing, for the senior who loved snacks.

'This is.....'

Way different.

Chapter 779 Chapter 180.3 - Confrontation, but girls

Sylvie's breath caught in her throat as the peculiar scene before her unfolded. She had come to check on Astron, her heart still racing from the brutal images in the video, but instead, she found herself standing frozen at the edge of something far more intense and incomprehensible.

Irina and Senior Maya stood facing each other in the middle of the infirmary, their postures rigid, the air between them charged with an almost tangible tension. Neither seemed to notice Sylvie's presence, their focus locked entirely on each other.

Sylvie hesitated, her [Authority] flaring instinctively, pulling her into the storm of emotions that swirled around the two women. What she saw made her chest tighten.

Irina's Emotions

They burned bright and raw, a kaleidoscope of vivid hues that seemed to reflect her fiery presence.

Pride, sharp and unyielding, radiated like a crown atop her head.

Jealousy, simmering and potent, surged through her aura, directed with unmistakable clarity.

Love, deep and passionate, wove through the rest, grounding her emotions even amid the storm.

And then there was ambition, a steely undercurrent that spoke of unrelenting determination.

The combination was overwhelming, a firestorm of feelings so intense it left Sylvie breathless. But what struck her most was the clarity of it all—there was no hesitation in Irina's emotions, no doubt. Everything she felt, she felt with conviction.

Then Sylvie's gaze shifted to Maya, and what she saw sent a shiver down her spine.

Maya's emotions were far more complex, layered in a way that Sylvie had never encountered before. It was as if there were two entirely separate palettes within her aura, each painting a vastly different picture.

The first palette was warm and familiar:

Liking, a soft, fond glow.

Fondness, tender and genuine.

Desire, pulsing faintly but unmistakable.

Anxiety, trembling at the edges, as though uncertain of its place.

But then there was the second palette—darker, more primal, and far more unsettling:

Anger, the deep, pulsating red of blood, surging in a rhythm that felt almost alive.

Jealousy, a purple so heavy it seemed to weigh down the air around her.

Love, bright and vivid, but threaded with something darker, something possessive.

And beneath it all, obsession and madness, swirling together in a chaotic blend that made Sylvie's chest tighten further.

The red was unlike anything she had seen before. It wasn't just anger—it was pulsating, alive, almost predatory. It felt like blood itself, seeping into everything, tainting the other emotions with its relentless rhythm.

Sylvie staggered slightly, her grip tightening on the doorframe as she tried to process the overwhelming flood of emotions. This wasn't a simple confrontation—it was a clash of forces, each woman radiating such intensity that it felt as though the room itself might shatter under the weight.

Sylvie's breath quickened as the scene in front of her grew heavier, more dangerous with every passing second. Irina's fiery intensity was one thing, but Maya's presence was entirely different—a storm of contradictions and instability that made Sylvie's chest tighten with unease.

That pulsating red... it wasn't just anger. It was alive, predatory, and it felt wrong in a way that Sylvie couldn't fully articulate. It throbbed in time with something deeper, darker, as though it were connected to a rhythm that wasn't entirely human. And that wasn't the worst of it.

Maya's second, darker palette struck at her first, like two forces locked in a battle for dominance. Sylvie could feel the instability radiating off her in waves, the clash between the two emotional palettes threatening to boil over. It was like standing on the edge of a volcano, the pressure building with no way to predict when or how it would erupt.

'This isn't normal...' Sylvie thought, swallowing hard. The nauseating feeling that accompanied Maya's darker emotions was almost too much to bear, making her stomach churn as she tried to steady herself. 'What's happening to her?'

She glanced briefly at Irina, whose sharp amber eyes hadn't left Maya. Irina's emotions were intense but stable, her resolve clear and unwavering. But Maya... Maya was a storm, and Sylvie had no idea what might happen if the darker palette consumed her entirely.

'Should I tell the Headmaster?' The thought surfaced unbidden, and Sylvie's fingers clenched against the doorframe. Jonathan Arcwright would know what to do—he always did. But even as the idea took root, her gaze drifted to the far side of the room, where Astron stood.

He was watching Maya, his sharp purple eyes locked onto her with a cold, calculating gaze. There was no warmth in his expression, no trace of the quiet empathy he often showed Sylvie. And yet, there was something else there—a knowing glint, subtle but unmistakable.

Sylvie's chest tightened further. 'Does he know?' she wondered, her thoughts racing. 'Does he see what's happening to her? He has to, right?'

Astron's composure never wavered, but Sylvie knew him well enough to recognize when he was assessing a situation. The way his gaze lingered on Maya, the slight tilt of his head—it was as though he was dissecting her every movement, every word.

'If he knows, then why hasn't he said anything? Is he waiting for something? Or does he have a reason not to speak?'

Her thoughts spiraled as she watched him, her trust in Astron warring with her own uncertainty. He wasn't someone who acted without purpose; every word, every decision he made carried weight. If he hadn't addressed Maya's instability yet, there had to be a reason.

'If it's him, then...' Sylvie thought, her resolve hardening. She had seen Astron at his lowest, had watched him fight his way through struggles that would have broken most people. He had helped her when she needed it most, his quiet strength and guidance shaping her in ways she was only beginning to understand.

She trusted him.

More than that, she believed in him.

'I should ask him first.'

Though it may not be right now, she promised herself that she would ask him.

And at the same time, she had also achieved the reason for coming here.

He was safe. That much she could tell,

Satisfied that he wasn't in immediate danger, Sylvie turned toward the door, her steps slow and deliberate. The tension in the room pressed against her back as she walked away, the storm of emotions between Maya and Irina still brewing, unresolved.

As she reached the doorframe, a strange, unexpected feeling washed over her—a faint but unmistakable sense of regret.

'What is this?' Sylvie wondered, her hand brushing against the doorframe as she paused. The feeling gnawed at her chest, sharp and insistent, but she couldn't quite put it into words.

Regret.

That's what it was. But why? What was she regretting?

The answer came to her like a whisper, soft but undeniable. 'I'm not the one standing by his side.'

The thought startled her, making her grip on the doorframe tighten. She didn't know where it had come from or why it hurt so much, but it was there, heavy and unshakable. She had been the one to notice him first, to see his strength even when no one else had. She had been the one who cared, who tried to help in whatever small ways she could. And yet now, she stood on the sidelines, watching as others—Irina, Maya—claimed the space beside him.

'No. Stop it.' Sylvie clenched her jaw, forcing herself to bury the feeling deep within her. It wasn't fair to think like that. Astron had grown so much, had faced his own battles and emerged stronger



for it. He didn't need her by his side. He didn't need anyone. That was who he was—calm, steady, and unshakable.

And yet...

Sylvie shook her head, cutting off the thought before it could take root. Now wasn't the time for this. There were more important things to focus on—like the dangerous instability she had sensed in Maya, or the clash of emotions between Maya and Irina that could spiral out of control at any moment.

She straightened her posture, taking a steadying breath as she stepped fully into the hallway. The sterile scent of the infirmary faded as she walked, replaced by the familiar hum of the academy corridors. But the regret lingered, a quiet ache in her chest that refused to fade no matter how much she tried to ignore it.

'I'll talk to him,' she promised herself again, her steps carrying her further away from the tension she had left behind. 'Not just about Maya, but... about everything.'

And with that resolve, she buried the regret as best she could, focusing on the path ahead and the growing weight of the questions she still needed answers to.

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On the other hand, inside a dark room that was save for the pale glow of the monitor illuminating the room, a young man was sitting on a chair.

He leaned forward in his chair, the tension in his body coiled like a spring. His fingers tapped rhythmically on the edge of his desk as his purple eyes burned with an intensity that matched the hate-filled words scrawled across the photo behind him.

The video played on his screen. The same scene Irina had just witnessed. But where her reaction had been one of worry and anger for Astron, Trevor's was different—a roiling storm of fury directed at the reactions flooding beneath the video.

The comments were pouring in, each one stoking the fire in his chest.

"That's brutal... someone should report those sophomores."

"Astron's not even fighting back. Is he okay?"

"Victor Langley is a piece of shit. This isn't the first time he's pulled something like this."

"Why would anyone target Astron? He doesn't even bother anyone."

SLAM!

Trevor's fist slammed against the desk, the sharp crack reverberating through the room.

"Useless bastards!"

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Trevor's hand smashed into the table again, the monitor shaking from the force. His voice echoed through the dimly lit room, raw with frustration and rage.

"Useless bastards!" he roared, his purple eyes blazing with fury. His chest heaved as he glared at the looping video on the screen. The scene repeated like a mockery: Astron enduring the beating, bloodied but unbroken, and now, the comments flooding the forums were painting him as some kind of silent hero.

He grabbed the edge of the desk, his knuckles white as his nails dug into the wood. His rage boiled over as he shoved the monitor aside, sending it crashing against the wall. Sparks flew, the screen flickering briefly before plunging the room into darkness.

The faint vibration of his smartwatch pulled him from the brink of another outburst. He snatched it off the desk, swiping the screen aggressively to answer. Victor's voice came through, laced with pride.

"Boss, it's done," Victor said, sounding smug. "Mission accomplished. Everyone's talking about it now."

Trevor's lip curled into a snarl, his voice a venomous hiss. "Open the school forums."

Victor hesitated. "What?"

"I said open the forums, Victor." Trevor's tone was ice-cold, every word deliberate. "Look at what's trending."

There was a brief pause on the line as Victor fumbled with his device. Trevor could almost hear the growing unease in his voice as he navigated to the forums. The silence stretched, broken only by the faint hum of Trevor's breathing.

And then, Victor's shout tore through the connection.

"What?! How?!" Victor's voice cracked, his usual bravado gone. "How is there a video? We made sure—there was no one around! The cameras in the room weren't even functional!"

Trevor smirked, but there was no humor in it, only malice. "Oh, there's a video, alright. And it's everywhere. Your faces are plastered across every corner of the forums."

"No... no, that's not possible!" Victor sputtered, his panic growing. "We scanned the room! The artifact was supposed to detect everything—hidden cameras, recording spells, anything! We checked!"

"Well, clearly you missed something," Trevor snapped, his voice dripping with contempt. "The angle... it's too close. Whoever recorded this was inside the room. And the fact that it's out now means your so-called 'precautions' were a complete joke."

Victor stammered, his voice a mix of disbelief and anger. "But... no one else was there! We locked the room, we checked the perimeter—there was nothing! Nothing! This doesn't make sense!"

Trevor's jaw tightened as he leaned back in his chair, his rage bubbling just beneath the surface. "It doesn't matter how it happened," he said, his tone deadly calm. "What matters is that you failed. And now, this... mess is public."

Victor's breathing grew heavier on the other end of the line, his panic giving way to desperation.

"Boss, I swear, I don't know how—"

Trevor leaned back in his chair, his purple eyes glinting coldly in the faint glow of his remaining monitor. He listened to Victor's panicked rambling with a blank expression, his fingers drumming rhythmically on the edge of the desk.

Well, expecting anything from this worthless bastard was wrong anyway, Trevor thought, a bitter smirk creeping across his lips. He let Victor's voice fade into the background, already calculating his next move.

"Boss, I swear, I don't know how this happened—" Victor stammered, his voice cracking with desperation.

Trevor's smirk widened. He leaned forward slightly, his fingers brushing the edge of his keyboard as he spoke. "Enough," he interrupted, his tone sharp. "You've already ruined everything. Your faces are all over the forums, Victor. Everyone knows it was you. At this point..." He paused, letting his words hang ominously in the air. "...at least make yourself useful."

Victor hesitated. "What do you mean?"

"Execute Plan B," Trevor said coldly, his voice devoid of emotion.

Victor froze on the other end of the line. "But—Boss! That means—"

"That means nothing!" Trevor's voice rose, a sudden edge of fury cutting through his usual composure. "You're already finished, you idiot. Everyone has seen your face, your name is already being whispered around campus. Do you think there's any way out for you now? At least salvage what's left of this disaster."

"I—I'll do it," Victor stammered, his resolve clearly wavering.

"Good," Trevor said, his tone mocking. "At least die with a shred of purpose, you useless bastard."

Without waiting for a reply, Trevor ended the call with a swipe of his fingers. He leaned back, his smirk growing wider as he reached toward a small concealed button beneath his desk. With a sharp press, a faint click echoed in the room.

The discarded smartwatch on his desk began to heat up, the metal surface glowing faintly. Within seconds, the device began to melt, a viscous, molten pool forming where it had once rested. The acrid smell of burning plastic filled the air.

Miles away, Victor's phone emitted a high-pitched whine. His hand tightened instinctively around it, his expression twisting in confusion—then panic—as the device suddenly grew hot. "Wha—AHHH!" he screamed, dropping the phone as the searing heat burned his hand. The device fell to the ground, melting into a blackened mass of slag as smoke curled up from the remains.

Victor clutched his hand, his breath ragged as he stared at the charred remains of the phone. The pain was sharp, but the realization of what had just happened was worse.

"Bastard," he hissed under his breath, his voice trembling with both fear and anger. "He knew..."

Back in his dark room, Trevor chuckled softly, the sound low and menacing. He watched the molten remains of his own device cool into a lifeless lump of metal and plastic.

"Let the pieces fall where they may," he murmured to himself, his gaze flickering to the photo on the wall—the one with the massive X slashed across Astron's face. His smirk faded into something colder, sharper.

"This is far from over."

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On the other side, Maya was sitting on the floor of her room.

"Haaah..."

Maya's heart skipped a beat as the silence in her room was broken, not by the world around her but by the voice in her head—dark and familiar.

"Do you not get it?" the voice whispered, curling through her thoughts like smoke, soft yet unyielding.

Maya froze, her breath catching in her throat. She clenched her fists, willing herself not to respond, but the voice pressed on, relentless.

"It was because I retracted my feelings," it said, the words slow and deliberate, laced with venom. "That was why you didn't find the strength to stand before that girl."

Maya's chest tightened, her gaze dropping to her trembling hands. The voice was lying—it had to be.

"You're weak," the voice continued, its tone dripping with malice. "Without me, you're nothing. You don't deserve him."

The words hit like a blade, sharp and unrelenting, carving through the fragile defenses she had managed to erect. Maya shook her head, her voice trembling as she whispered, "That's not true."

"Oh, but it is," the voice replied, almost mockingly. "Think about it. Who has been the one to push you, to give you the strength to fight, to endure?"

Maya's lips parted as if to argue, but no sound came.

"It wasn't you," the voice spat. "It was me. All this time, it was me who gave you the drive to stand tall, to be proactive, to face those who challenge you. You think you've done this alone?"

Her hands clenched tightly into fists, her nails digging into her palms as she fought to suppress the rising tide of emotion.

"You need me," the voice whispered, quieter now but no less insistent. "You've always needed me. And the sooner you admit it, the sooner you'll stop faltering like you did today."

Maya's head dipped forward, her hair falling around her face like a curtain as her breathing quickened. She wanted to deny it, to scream that the voice was wrong, but the malice and certainty in its tone were like chains pulling her down.

"Face it," the voice hissed. "You couldn't even stand up to her without me. And do you know why?"

Maya gritted her teeth, her voice barely a whisper. "Why?"

"Because," the voice said, its tone softening into something almost tender, "without me, you're hollow. You're a shell pretending to be whole. You've built your strength on control, on discipline, but when it crumbles, when the chaos creeps in, you have nothing. You. Are. Nothing."

Tears pricked at the corners of Maya's eyes, but she refused to let them fall.

"I won't let you take over," she said, her voice trembling but resolute. "I've faced you before, and I'll do it again."

The voice laughed, a sound that sent chills down her spine. "Oh, Maya. Sweet, naive Maya. You think this is about control? No. This is about truth. And the truth is, you're only strong because of me. You're only bold, only capable, because of me."

Maya pressed her hands to her temples, her voice rising as she shouted, "Stop!"

But the voice ignored her plea, its tone dropping into something almost soothing, yet laced with cruelty.

"You can fight me all you want," it murmured. "But eventually, you'll see. You'll come to me. Because without me... you'll lose everything. Him included."

It was confusing.