

## H. Academy 781

Chapter 781 Chapter 180.5 - Confrontation, but girls

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

Maya's trembling fingers slowly loosened their grip on the edge of the bed as her breathing steadied. The suffocating silence in the room gave way to the quiet hum of her thoughts. Her mind replayed the voice's words, each one sharp and cruel, but they weren't entirely baseless.

The voice wasn't wrong—it wasn't entirely right either—but it had struck at truths she hadn't wanted to confront. The realization gnawed at her, forcing her to reflect on everything that had brought her here, to this moment.

Her confrontation with Irina.

Her faltering resolve.

Her failure to stand firm.

And then, amidst the chaos of her thoughts, a memory surfaced—calm and steady, like a ripple in still water.

"Your vampiric part is also a part of yourself. It is not a weakness necessarily."

The words were Astron's, spoken with his characteristic composure, as if they were the simplest truth in the world.

Maya's breath hitched as the memory settled over her, soothing the raw edges of her mind. She could almost hear his voice, feel the weight of his words grounding her.

'I see,' she thought, her lips parting slightly.

Her gaze drifted to her hands, the faint crescent-shaped marks on her palms from her clenched fists serving as a stark reminder of her struggles. But now, those marks felt less like symbols of failure and more like proof of something greater—her resilience.

Her vampiric side, the part of her she had fought so hard to suppress, wasn't just an adversary. It wasn't just a threat. It was her.

The chaos, the hunger, the raw instincts—it wasn't weakness. It was strength, untamed and misunderstood.

'We're not opposites,' Maya realized, her heart steadying. 'We're two sides of the same coin. My normal self, my discipline, my control—they're not enough alone. But neither is the chaos of my other side.'

The voice within her, once venomous and mocking, had fallen silent, as if waiting for her to understand what it had been saying all along.

"What do I need to do?" Maya asked softly, her voice trembling but resolute.

She didn't expect an answer, but in the stillness of her room, clarity began to take shape. To deny her other self was to deny her own strength. To suppress it was to cripple herself. Acceptance.

That was the answer.

Maya closed her eyes, her breath steadying as she whispered, "I accept you. All of you."

A low, almost amused chuckle resonated in her mind, but it wasn't mocking this time. It carried a strange warmth, a sense of approval.

"Ho?" the voice murmured, softer now, almost playful. "So, you've finally figured it out."

Maya opened her eyes, her gaze steady and sharp, as if the weight of her realization had already begun to shift something deep within her.

"You're me," she said aloud, her voice firm. "Not a weakness. Not an enemy. You're me, and I won't run from you anymore."

"Heh...Interesting...." The voice hummed, pleased.

"But I do have my own conditions."

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"Interesting."

Watching the video that had now become a hot topic on the entire school forum, a girl with silver hair cascading down to her waist spoke. Her voice was soft, yet carried an edge of curiosity. The silver strands shimmered faintly in the dim light of her room as she leaned closer to the screen. The faint glow from her monitor illuminated her sharp, pale features and the icy blue eyes that studied the video with quiet intensity.

On the screen, the video looped: a dimly lit room, four sophomores advancing on a lone figure. The young man with purple eyes and black hair stood at the center, silent, unflinching, as Victor Langley and his lackeys surrounded him.

The first blow landed—a sickening crunch that echoed faintly through the recording. Blood splattered, painting the metallic floor and walls. The girl's expression didn't falter. Her eyes flickered between the aggressors' actions and the still, resolute demeanor of the beaten.

"How peculiar," she murmured, her fingers lightly brushing her chin. The young man—Astron, she recognized—wasn't cowering. He wasn't pleading. Despite the viciousness of the attack, there was no sign of fear in his eyes. Only a quiet, unshakable resolve.

'Most people would at least try to defend themselves in such a situation. Fight back, run, or even beg. But not him. Why?'

Her thoughts lingered on the details of his demeanor, replaying the moment his cold, unwavering gaze met the camera's lens. She rewound the video to watch it again, her pale features reflecting an unspoken intrigue.

"Astron Natusalune," she mumbled the name, tasting each syllable.

It was a name she had encountered more than once, and every time, it seemed to pull her interest further. First, Irina and her changes. Then, there was the letter from her mother, containing a cryptic warning that had piqued her curiosity.

And now this.

'I can't see them.'

That thought returned, sharper now. Her trait, which always allowed her to see the parameters of others—their strength, their weaknesses, the layers of their being—showed her nothing when it came to Astron. It was as if he was cloaked in an unbreakable barrier, impervious to her ability.

'It's not a coincidence. It can't be. No one can simply evade my trait without a reason. A guy like that wouldn't just let himself get beaten for no purpose either.'

Her fingers tapped lightly against the desk as she stared at the frozen frame of the video, his bloodied face still calm, his gaze like steel.

'He's hiding something.'

People had secrets. That was how the world worked.

Seraphina leaned back in her chair, her icy blue eyes narrowing as her thoughts coalesced into a plan. Her fingers brushed her chin thoughtfully, then tapped against the desk again, the rhythm betraying a sliver of impatience.

'And every secret is also a weakness.'

Her family's expectations weighed heavily on her, sharper now that she had been pushed to rank three. She could almost hear their voices—disappointed, disapproving. Falling behind Irina, the girl who had once seemed unremarkable, was unacceptable.

'No. Irina didn't just surpass me on her own. There's more to this.'

The shift in Irina's strength had been sudden and baffling. Seraphina had tried to piece it together, and every thread led her back to him.

'Astron Natusalune. He's the reason. Whatever it is he's hiding... that's what gave her the edge.'

Her gaze drifted to the frozen image on her monitor. His bloodied face, calm and unyielding, seemed to taunt her. The thought that Irina had somehow gained something—power, knowledge, an advantage—through her connection to him only fueled her determination.

'I need to get him.'

The conclusion was simple, but the execution would be anything but. Astron was a fortress of mysteries, his very existence seemingly shielded from prying eyes. But Seraphina thrived on challenges, especially when her position—and her pride—were at stake.

RING!

The chime of her smartwatch interrupted her thoughts. She glanced at the notification with a raised brow, her fingers swiping to bring up the message.

Her breath hitched ever so slightly as the image loaded—a photo sent by one of her personnel.

Two figures, captured in a candid, almost intimate moment.

One, a red-haired girl with a sharp yet delicate profile, unmistakably Irina.

The other, a black-haired young man with piercing purple eyes.

Astron Natusalune.

Seraphina's lips curled into a slow, calculating smile. She leaned forward, the faint glow of her monitor highlighting the glint of triumph in her eyes.

"Ho? This can definitely be used," she murmured, her voice laced with satisfaction.

Her finger tapped the screen, enlarging the image to study it further. The composition was perfect—Irina leaning slightly toward Astron, her expression softer than usual, her posture unusually relaxed. Astron, though as stoic as ever, appeared almost protective, the subtle angle of his stance suggesting a closeness Seraphina found deeply intriguing.

'I wonder what your mother will think of this, Irina.'

The Emberheart matriarch was notoriously strict, valuing status, discipline, and above all, the preservation of her family's image. Irina, who had always been under her mother's sharp eye, had just handed Seraphina the perfect weapon—a hint of vulnerability.

'So this is why you've changed. This is what's behind your newfound strength.'

Seraphina's fingers brushed her chin as she stared at the photo, her mind racing with possibilities.

'Astron Natusalune. Can you afford to let this picture spread? Can you afford to let Irina's carefully crafted image be tarnished?'

She let out a soft chuckle, leaning back in her chair, her silver hair cascading like a curtain over her shoulders. The game had just gotten far more interesting.

'With this, I can force your hand. Whether it's Irina's downfall or your secrets, Astron, one of you will have to break.'

Her icy blue eyes sparkled with a dangerous light as she typed a quick message to her informant:

[SeraSylveris]: Good work. Ensure no one else gets their hands on this. Keep watching them. Report anything unusual.

After sending the message, she glanced at the frozen video on her monitor once more.

"Astron Natusalune," she whispered, savoring the sound of his name. "Let's see what you are going to do now."

It was a wicked smile.

Chapter 782 Chapter 181.1 - Why should I

Outside the infirmary, the evening air was crisp, carrying a faint chill that made Irina's fiery hair seem even more vibrant under the fading light. She walked alongside Astron with a spring in her step, her hands clasped behind her back as she hummed softly to herself. Her amber eyes sparkled with satisfaction, with her mood noticeably lighter.

'That went better than expected,' she thought, her lips curling into a triumphant smirk. 'She didn't say it outright, but I could see it in her eyes—she hated every second of that.'

Irina's steps were light, almost skipping as they moved down the cobblestone path. Her hum carried a cheery tune, and she occasionally glanced at Astron, whose expression remained unreadable, as usual.

"Good day, isn't it?" she said, breaking the silence with a playful lilt in her voice.

Astron raised an eyebrow, his sharp purple eyes flicking to her briefly. "You seem... unusually cheerful."

"Why wouldn't I be?" Irina replied, her tone breezy. She spun slightly on her heel, facing him as she walked backward, her fiery hair bouncing with the motion.

'That vexing woman didn't stand a chance. Did you see her face when I put her in her place?'

She wanted to say it, but for some reason when she looked into Astron's eyes, she couldn't. His gaze was calm and collected, as always—a quiet steadiness that seemed immune to her energy. But something in the way his sharp purple eyes lingered felt... distant. Detached. It wasn't unusual for him to be unreadable, but this time, Irina felt a strange pang in her chest.

'This guy... he's thinking about someone else.'

The thought came unbidden, sharp and clear, and she couldn't shake it. She had no proof, no solid reason to believe it, but the feeling settled in her gut like a heavy stone. Her mind flashed back to the infirmary, to the way Senior Maya had looked at him—to the faint tension in his posture when she'd arrived.

'Is he thinking about that Senior? When I'm right here?'

Her fiery hair swayed slightly as she stopped in her tracks, her hands clenching behind her back. She wasn't even angry, not exactly. Annoyed, yes. A little frustrated? Absolutely. But guilty? Not even close.

'Why should I feel guilty? So what if I'm coveting the person I like? Is there a problem with that?'

The thought only fueled her irritation. She turned abruptly, stepping forward until she was directly in front of Astron, cutting off his path. Her amber eyes burned as she tilted her head up to meet his gaze, her expression a mix of defiance and something sharper.

"This guy..." she muttered under her breath, her voice low but laced with annoyance.

Astron stopped, his calm purple eyes meeting hers with faint curiosity. "What is it?" he asked evenly, his tone as steady as ever.

Irina didn't answer immediately. Her gaze bore into his, searching for something—anything—that might betray his thoughts. But his expression remained unreadable, a perfectly composed mask. It only made her frustration simmer more.

'He's not even going to deny it, is he? He probably doesn't think there's anything to deny.'

She crossed her arms, her fiery hair catching the dim light as she squared her shoulders. "You've got some nerve," she said finally, her tone sharper than usual.

Astron blinked, the faintest hint of confusion flickering in his eyes. "What are you talking about?"

Irina huffed, stepping even closer, her voice dropping slightly as if to shield their conversation from the evening air. "I'm talking about you. You're standing here with me, but you're somewhere else entirely. Who are you thinking about?"

Astron tilted his head slightly, his expression calm but edged with a subtle wariness. "That's quite the accusation," he said, his tone measured.

"Oh, don't play coy with me," Irina shot back, her amber eyes narrowing. "I can see it in your eyes. You're thinking about someone else. Don't even try to deny it."

Astron sighed softly, his gaze steady but unreadable. "You're imagining things," he said calmly, though the faintest trace of tension flickered at the edge of his voice.

At least, Irina felt like it.

Irina's lips curled into a faint smirk, though her annoyance was still palpable. "Imagining?"

She harrumphed, her fiery hair swaying as she turned her head sharply, a glare still simmering in her amber eyes. "Am I also imagining that your face looks like I went a little bit overboard? Or," she added, her voice rising slightly, "am I imagining that you look like you're thinking what I did was wrong? Should I have just stood there and accepted what she was doing?"

Before Astron could respond, she stepped forward and jabbed her finger into his chest, her voice dropping to a pointed whisper. "What do you take me for?"

Her frustration radiated off her in waves, the intensity of her emotions almost tangible. But as her fiery gaze bore into him, Astron remained calm, his sharp purple eyes steady as he studied her.

"I am not taking you for anything," he said finally, his tone measured and even. "Neither have I said anything about what you should or shouldn't have done."

"Then—!" Irina started, her voice louder now, but Astron held up a hand, a subtle gesture that quieted her mid-sentence.

"But," he said, his calm tone carrying a faint edge of intrigue, "let's say things have developed into a more... interesting situation. And I felt like I had seen something I had never considered before."

Irina blinked, momentarily thrown off by his cryptic response. "What?" she said, her voice sharper than intended. "You've seen something you've never considered before? What does that even mean?"

Astron tilted his head slightly, his gaze distant for a moment before returning to her, calm and composed. "It would be hard to explain without context," he said, his voice soft but firm. "And if I were to give that context, it would be an invasion of privacy... and a breach of trust."

Irina stared at him, her annoyance shifting into something closer to confusion, her fiery energy momentarily dampened by his words. "Privacy? Breach of trust?" she echoed, her tone carrying a hint of disbelief. "You're seriously going to leave it at that?"

Astron's expression didn't change, his gaze unwavering. "Yes," he said simply, the finality in his tone leaving no room for argument.

Irina's jaw tightened, and she crossed her arms, her fiery presence still unyielding even as her mind worked to process his cryptic statement. 'What the hell is that supposed to mean? Interesting situation? Breach of trust? Is he just trying to sound mysterious on purpose?'

For a moment, the two stood in tense silence, the cool evening air carrying the faint hum of distant conversations. Irina's frustration simmered, but as she looked at him—at his steady, unflinching gaze—she felt the faintest flicker of something else. Curiosity. Unease. Something she couldn't quite name.

The silence stretched between them, but inside Irina's head, a single word echoed relentlessly, hammering against her thoughts like a drumbeat: 'Annoying. Annoying. Annoying. Annoying. Annoying. Annoying. Annoying!' Her fiery amber eyes narrowed as she stared at Astron, the calm composure in his gaze only fueling her growing irritation.

'The nerve of this guy...' she thought, clenching her fists at her sides. 'The reason for his unease is probably her. That Senior. The idea of him thinking about another girl—just the idea—is so annoying.'

Her frustration bubbled over, and before she could stop herself, she stepped forward, pointing a finger at him. "You... you need to compensate me."

Astron blinked, his calm purple eyes flicking to her finger and then back to her face, his expression barely shifting. "I need to do what?"

"Compensate me," Irina repeated, her voice firm, though her annoyance tinged her words with a sharper edge.

Astron tilted his head slightly, his expression unreadable. "Why?"

"Because you need to do it," she said, crossing her arms as if that settled the matter.

He regarded her for a moment, his gaze steady. "You need to give me a reason. Compensation without a reason is extortion."

Irina paused, tilting her head as though considering his words. Then she gave a small, deliberate shrug and smirked. "Hmm... you're right. You are being extorted right now."

Astron's lips parted slightly, but no words came. For a brief moment, he simply stared at her, the faintest flicker of disbelief flashing in his otherwise calm gaze. Then he let out a soft sigh, shaking his head slightly. "I see."

Irina leaned closer, her smirk widening as she sensed his resignation. "So? What's it going to be? I'm waiting for my compensation."

"And if I refuse?" Astron asked, his voice calm but edged with quiet challenge.

Her smirk turned playful, though the fire in her amber eyes burned brighter. "Then I'll make sure you regret it. You don't want to find out how creative I can get when I'm annoyed."

"..." Astron looked like he was ready for a challenge, but Irina was exactly waiting for that.

'Come on challenge me.'

She was waiting for a challenge.

Regardless of what happened after all, she would be the one getting whatever she wanted.

'You have already walked into the trap.'

Astron let out a faint hum, his gaze flicking away briefly as though weighing his options. Finally, he returned his focus to her, his sharp purple eyes meeting hers directly. "Fine," he said evenly, though the faintest trace of exasperation colored his tone. "What do you want as compensation?"

Irina's smirk softened slightly, and she tilted her head as if genuinely pondering the question. "Hmm... I haven't decided yet. But don't worry. I'll let you know when I do."

Astron raised an eyebrow. "So, you're demanding compensation without even knowing what you want?"

"Exactly," Irina replied cheerfully, her confidence unwavering. "That's how extortion works, doesn't it?"

"....."

Irina had won for the first time in a while this time.

Chapter 783 Chapter 181.2 - Why should I

The soft glow of Ethan's tablet illuminated the otherwise dark room, casting flickering shadows on the walls. His room was small but meticulously organized—training gear neatly stacked in one corner, books and notes spread out on the desk. The faint hum of the academy's automated systems filtered through the silence, but Ethan paid no attention to it.

His hazel eyes were fixed on the screen, unblinking. The video played for what felt like the hundredth time, but the weight in his chest hadn't lessened.

Astron was in the center of the screen, bloodied and beaten, surrounded by Victor Langley and his lackeys. Ethan's jaw clenched as he watched the first punch land, the sickening crack reverberating in his mind like an echo.

The young man with black hair and purple eyes didn't fight back. He didn't even flinch. He simply endured, his silence speaking volumes in a way no words ever could.

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Ethan's grip on the tablet tightened, his knuckles turning white as. The sophomores' blows came hard and fast, the sound of fists and feet connecting with flesh making his stomach twist. Blood sprayed across the floor, splattering Astron's dark hair and pale face.

The video ended, looping back to the start. Ethan didn't move to stop it. He leaned forward instead, elbows resting on his knees as his free hand pressed against his mouth. His hazel eyes glinted in the dim light, his expression unreadable but filled with quiet tension.

"Why didn't you fight back?" he muttered under his breath, his voice low and edged with frustration.



The comments beneath the video scrolled past, but he barely glanced at them.

"Victor's a piece of trash. Someone needs to stop him."

"Astron's tougher than anyone thought. Respect."

"This just proves how far he's willing to go. He didn't break."

Ethan paused the video mid-loop, freezing the frame on Astron's face. Blood trickled down his chin, his hair plastered to his forehead, but his purple eyes stared back at the camera with unyielding resolve. That look unsettled Ethan—not because it was weak, but because of what it concealed.

"Damn it, Astron," Ethan muttered, leaning back in his chair. His hand ran through his blond hair in frustration, his grip momentarily tugging at the strands. "What are you trying to prove?"

Was this the same guy that had fought with himself?

Ethan leaned back in his chair, his head resting against the wall as his thoughts churned. Astron. A name that had come to occupy a peculiar space in his mind. For all the time they'd been around each other, Ethan still couldn't figure him out. Astron was like a scarred wolf—proud, solitary, and fiercely guarded.

'Why do you do this to yourself?' Ethan thought, his eyes drifting back to the frozen image on the tablet screen. The bloodied, unyielding expression Astron wore felt haunting. It wasn't weakness; it wasn't submission. It was something else entirely, something Ethan couldn't quite place.

Astron's demeanor had always been different from most. He wasn't friendly, but he wasn't cruel either. He was distant, cold, and blunt to a fault, yet there was something beneath that exterior—a quiet determination and a certain... brokenness.

'He's not a bad guy,' Ethan reminded himself. Despite Astron's aloofness, Ethan had seen enough to know that he wasn't malicious. He didn't meddle in other people's business, didn't seek trouble, and he trained with an intensity that few could match. 'But why is he always alone?'

The thought gnawed at Ethan. It wasn't just the loneliness that bothered him, though that was part of it. It was the fact that Astron accepted things—like the beating he'd endured in the video—as if he expected them, as if he believed he deserved them. That didn't sit right. Not with Ethan.

His jaw clenched as he stared at the tablet, anger bubbling under his calm exterior. 'No one deserves this. And yet he just stood there and took it.'

As the image of Astron's bloodied face filled his mind, a memory stirred—a fragment, faint and disjointed.

"I'm sorry."

The words echoed faintly, like a voice from another world. Ethan's brow furrowed as he grasped at the memory, trying to make sense of it.

"You are sorry for what?"

A figure stood before him, shadowed and indistinct. Blood dripped from their body, pooling at their feet. Ethan's grip tightened around the spear in his hand, its tip pointed toward the person. The weight of the scene pressed down on him, heavy and suffocating.

The memory ended as abruptly as it had come, leaving Ethan with a lingering sense of unease. He exhaled sharply, running a hand through his hair. 'What was that?'

Ethan leaned back in his chair, his breath steady but his mind anything but calm. The fragment of memory lingered, its edges blurred but its weight undeniable. He hadn't recalled anything like that happening before—no such moment in his life, no scene that would explain it. And yet, it felt real. Too vivid, too heavy, to simply dismiss as a stray thought.

'What is this?' he wondered, rubbing his temples as if that might help dislodge more from the depths of his mind. He tried to piece it together, but the more he thought about it, the more elusive it became.

What he did remember, however, were the eyes. Empty, haunting purple eyes staring back at him. There was no anger in them, no defiance—just silence. Acceptance.

Ethan's hazel eyes flicked back to the tablet, frozen on the image of Astron's bloodied face. His stomach twisted as he realized why those eyes felt so familiar.

'They're the same.'

The same emptiness. The same hollowness that seemed to swallow everything around them. Astron had looked just like that in the video—like someone who wasn't fighting back, not because he couldn't, but because he didn't see the point.

The thought sent a chill down Ethan's spine. 'Why does this feel so familiar? Why does it bother me this much?'

He closed his eyes, the fragment of memory resurfacing unbidden. The blood pooled at the feet of the shadowed figure. The weight of the spear in his hand. The words, faint but clear:

"You are sorry for what?"

Ethan's chest tightened as he tried to make sense of it. He had never wielded his spear in a moment like that. Never stood before someone so broken. And yet... he could still feel it. The trembling in his hands. The ache in his heart.

RING!

The sudden chime of a notification jolted Ethan from his thoughts. The familiar sound felt almost intrusive, breaking the heavy silence of the room. He glanced at the tablet, the group chat lighting up with a new message.

It was from Julia.

A voice message.

Ethan hesitated for a second before pressing play. Julia's fiery tone blasted through the speakers, her words sharp and unrestrained.

"These sophomore fuckers! Who do they think they are?!"

Her voice practically shook with rage, and Ethan could almost picture her pacing furiously as she vented. Normally, he would have rolled his eyes at her language or even teased her about her lack of decorum, but this time, he didn't feel the need to say anything. He couldn't.

Because he agreed.

Ethan leaned forward, elbows on his knees, his jaw tightening as Julia's words echoed in his head. 'They're really going too far.'

He glanced back at the paused video of Astron, bloodied and beaten. The memory of those purple eyes—empty, resigned—burned in his mind. It wasn't just Astron. It was all of it. The power plays, the bullying, the unchecked arrogance of those who thought they were untouchable.

Another message pinged in.

[Lucas: I told you they've been acting like this for weeks. Someone needs to stop them.]

Ethan's fingers hovered over the keyboard, his thoughts racing. His friends were right. This wasn't just one incident. The sophomores had been throwing their weight around for a while now, and no one seemed willing to stand up to them.

Another ping.

[Lilia: Julia, calm down. You're going to give yourself an aneurysm.]

[Julia: I'll calm down when they get what's coming to them!]

[Carl: She's not wrong, though. They're out of control. Astron wasn't the first, and he won't be the last.]

They were right, right....

But what could they even do about this matter?

That was something worthy to think about.

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The following day, the atmosphere in the classroom was unusually tense. The students of HA25 sat quietly, the usual morning chatter subdued as if the air itself carried the weight of something unspoken. Ethan sat near the middle, his hazel eyes occasionally flicking toward Astron, who was, as usual, seated quietly in the corner, his expression unreadable.

The door opened with a sharp click, and Professor Eleanor stepped in. Her posture was rigid, her movements deliberate, and her cold, piercing gaze swept across the room. The students immediately straightened in their seats, the silence becoming absolute.

Eleanor carried her usual stack of papers and tablet, but there was a different energy about her today. She placed her belongings on the podium and stood there for a moment, letting the silence deepen before she finally spoke.

"Before we begin today's lecture," she said, her voice calm but steely, "there is something I must address."

Her sharp gray eyes scanned the room, pausing briefly on Astron and then another student near the front—Taylor.

Eleanor's gaze lingered on them for a moment before she continued.

"Student Astron. Student Taylor," she said, her voice carrying an unusual softness, though it didn't lose its firmness. "As a representative of Arcadia Hunter Academy, I owe you both an apology."

Chapter 784 Chapter 181.3 - Why should I

"Student Astron. Student Taylor. As a representative of Arcadia Hunter Academy, I owe you both an apology."

The room seemed to collectively inhale, the weight of her words settling over the students like a heavy blanket. No one dared to move or speak, their eyes fixed on Eleanor.

"The academy's negligence," she continued, her tone unwavering, "has allowed certain individuals to act beyond the boundaries of discipline and respect. These actions, which you have both endured, are not reflective of the values this institution claims to uphold."

Eleanor straightened, her gaze still fixed on Astron and Taylor. "What happened to you should not have been allowed to happen. And for that, I am sorry."

The silence in the room grew heavier, the tension palpable. Some students exchanged uneasy glances, while others remained frozen, unsure of how to react. Even Julia, usually quick with a quip or comment, sat quietly, her blue eyes focused intently on Eleanor.

Astron, for his part, didn't move. His expression remained as calm and unreadable as ever, though his purple eyes seemed rather cold.

And for the students who had watched the video, a wave of unease rippled through them. They understood, at least partially, what Astron must have been feeling. The beating he endured had been brutal—far beyond anything that could be dismissed as mere hazing or a fight between students.

The image of Astron bloodied and battered but never retaliating, remained vivid in their minds. It wasn't just the physical damage that struck them; it was the cold, unyielding look in his eyes, as if he had long resigned himself to such treatment.

Taylor, seated at the front, shifted slightly in her chair, her jaw tightened. She was also in such a situation, but those gazes felt burdensome.

Eleanor let the silence linger for a moment longer before continuing. "Let me be clear," she said, her tone sharpening slightly. "The academy does not tolerate such behavior, and measures are already being taken to ensure it does not happen again. Those responsible will face the appropriate consequences."

The room remained silent, the weight of her words settling over the students like a storm cloud. Some looked uncomfortable, while others seemed relieved that the issue was being addressed so openly.

Eleanor took a step back, folding her hands in front of her. "Now, let us proceed with today's lesson. Open your tablets to page 42. We will begin with an analysis of advanced team dynamics."

As the students began to shuffle in their seats, reaching for their tablets, the tension slowly began to dissipate. But the impact of Eleanor's words lingered, especially for Ethan, who glanced at Astron once more.

'What are you really thinking Astron.'

Ethan was really curious.

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RING!

The bell rang sharply, signaling the end of Eleanor's class. The students moved hesitantly, the atmosphere still thick with the weight of her earlier apology. Many shot uncertain glances at Astron, their curiosity simmering beneath the surface, though few dared to approach him outright.

As Astron stood and began packing his things, a small group of students finally mustered the courage to gather around him. Their movements were tentative, their expressions a mix of concern and nervousness.

"Uh, Astron..." one of them started, a girl with a hesitant smile. "I just... we wanted to ask... what happened? Was it... were you having issues with those seniors?"

Astron's hands paused briefly as he zipped his bag, his purple eyes flickering up to meet the girl's. His expression was cold, his gaze sharp enough to make her falter mid-sentence. He straightened slowly, his posture calm but radiating an unmistakable edge of annoyance.

"This topic is uncomfortable," he said, his voice measured but carrying a distinct chill. "I would rather not talk about it."

The firmness in his tone sent a clear message. The students surrounding him stiffened, their curiosity instantly dampened by the cold anger in his words. Astron's usually composed demeanor now seemed darker, and the slight crease in his brow only added to the unease.

One of the boys in the group scratched the back of his head awkwardly. "Yeah, of course. Sorry about that, man. We didn't mean to—"

Astron's gaze flicked to him, silencing him mid-apology. The students exchanged uneasy glances, realizing they had struck a nerve.

The girl from before forced a strained smile. "We just... we wanted to say that we're glad you're okay now. That's all."

"Yeah! And if you ever need anything, we're here. Just, you know, take care of yourself, okay?"

"I will keep that in mind."

The group took this reply as their cue to leave, backing away with murmured well-wishes and embarrassed smiles.

As the last of them dispersed, Sylvie, who had been watching the scene unfold from a distance, approached quietly. Her steps were careful, her gaze steady as she stopped a few paces away from Astron.

"You okay?"

"Did you not confirm that yesterday?"

Sylvie froze for a moment at Astron's response, her breath catching slightly. 'Right... Of course he would know.' She thought back to the infirmary and how easily Astron had read her then, piecing together things she hadn't intended to reveal. It was no surprise he could do it again now.

But she quickly composed herself, forcing a small smile as she looked at him. "I did," she said softly. "But I just wanted to make sure."

"Thanks?" Astron replied, though his tone made it sound more like a question than genuine gratitude.

Sylvie frowned slightly, brushing off the faint sting of his nonchalance. "Well... you don't need to be thankful," she said quickly, though the words felt a little rushed.

"Really?" Astron asked, his sharp purple eyes flicking to hers. "Okay then."

The casualness of his response caught Sylvie off guard, and she felt a sudden pang of regret at her own words. 'Wait... no... that's not what I meant!' Her mind raced, and before she could stop herself, the words tumbled out.

"No, no, you should be thankful for things like this," she said, her tone firm but flustered.

Astron raised an eyebrow, his expression unreadable. "Thankful or not?"

"...Urghk—!" Sylvie let out a strangled noise, her hands clenching into fists at her sides as she squirmed slightly in frustration. Her cheeks flushed, and she struggled to find a proper response.

Before she could gather her thoughts, a familiar voice cut through the moment. "Hey, stop teasing her," Jasmine said, appearing from the side with a playful grin. She crossed her arms and gave Astron a mock glare.

"Teasing?" Astron repeated, tilting his head slightly as he glanced at Jasmine. His calm expression didn't change, but there was a faint glint of curiosity in his eyes.

Jasmine sighed, her grin widening slightly. "Don't tell me... You're really clueless."

"Am I clueless?" Astron asked, his tone even, as though genuinely considering the possibility.

Jasmine threw her hands in the air in exaggerated exasperation. "Why is it so hard to talk with you?"

Sylvie, who had been caught in her own spiral of embarrassment, suddenly felt the tension ease at Jasmine's antics. She let out a small laugh despite herself, her shoulders relaxing as the weight of the moment lifted slightly. "He's always like this," she said, shaking her head.

"Yeah, well, someone needs to call him out for it," Jasmine retorted, pointing a playful finger at Astron. "Seriously, learn how to read the room, Mr. Purple Eyes."

Astron's lips twitched slightly—almost, but not quite, a smile. "Noted," he said simply, turning back to his bag as if the conversation hadn't happened.

Jasmine turned to Sylvie with a dramatic sigh, throwing her arms around her in an exaggerated hug. "Sylvie, I'm so sorry," she said, her voice laden with mock pity. "You really have it hard, dealing with this guy. He's absolutely hopeless."

Sylvie blinked, startled by the sudden hug, but she quickly let out a soft laugh, patting Jasmine's back lightly. "It's fine," she said, her voice gentle but tinged with amusement. "I already knew he was like this from the start, so I can't exactly complain, can I?"

Jasmine pulled back, studying Sylvie with a grin. "You're way too patient," she teased. "If it were me, I'd probably have strangled him by now."

Sylvie laughed again, the warmth of Jasmine's teasing momentarily easing the tension in her chest. But even as she smiled, a faint pang of something deeper stirred within her—a flicker of resentment she couldn't quite suppress.

'Why does he have to make things so... difficult?'

Well, that was a question that was hard to answer.

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Astron walked through the corridors, the quiet hum of distant conversations echoing faintly. His steps were steady, purposeful, though his mind was not entirely at ease. The weight of Eleanor's earlier apology and the lingering stares of his classmates clung to him like a shadow.

As he turned a corner, a subtle shift in the air caught his attention. His senses sharpened instinctively, and he slowed his pace, his ears straining for the faint sound of footsteps trailing behind him. The steps were light, almost imperceptible, but they were there.

He stopped abruptly and turned, his sharp purple eyes locking onto the figure behind him.

A young girl with long silver hair stood a few paces away, her posture relaxed but her presence commanding. Her silver eyes gleamed with an almost playful intensity, and her lips curled into a knowing smile.

"We need to talk."

Chapter 785 Chapter 182.1 - Let's have a talk

Astron's gaze settled on Seraphina, his sharp purple eyes unwavering and unreadable. The corridor was silent, save for the faint hum of distant voices and the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. Seraphina stood a few steps away, her silver hair cascading down her back like liquid moonlight, her expression a mix of amusement and intrigue.

"We need to talk," she said, her voice calm yet laced with an undercurrent of authority.

Astron didn't respond immediately. His eyes briefly scanned her face, noting the faint, confident smirk playing on her lips. Then, in a tone as neutral as the cold stone walls around them, he asked, "Why?"

The single word hung in the air between them, simple yet laden with meaning.

Seraphina's smile deepened slightly. She tilted her head, studying him as if he were a puzzle she couldn't quite piece together.

It was the same response he had given her the last time they spoke. Back then, she had approached him with a proposition—one that most people would have jumped at for the sheer opportunity to be in her favor. But his reaction had been the same: indifferent, detached.

'Why?'

Normally, people clamored for her attention. They would spend days, sometimes weeks, arranging meetings with her. Gifts, letters, subtle favors—such was the norm for someone of her standing. She was Seraphina Frostborne, heir to one of the strongest magic families, the Frostborne lineage,

known for its dominion over ice and precision in spellcraft. Her rank in the academy was high, her reputation impeccable.

But this guy...

Astron Natusalune wasn't like anyone else.

No reverence, no flattery. Just that single, disarming question, as if her lineage and rank were mere trivialities.

"You have a way of making things far less complicated than they should be," she finally said, stepping closer, her heels clicking softly against the polished floor. "But since you insist..."

Her silver eyes locked onto his, unblinking. "Because you intrigue me, Astron."

He raised an eyebrow, his expression still unreadable. "Is that all?"

Seraphina let out a light chuckle, the sound low and deliberate. "Shouldn't that be enough?"

"No." His answer was curt, blunt.

For a moment, silence stretched between them. Seraphina didn't seem fazed. In fact, his rejection only seemed to amuse her further.

'He's impossible,' she thought, though the realization didn't annoy her—it intrigued her more.

"Then how about this," she said, folding her arms. "I know you're not ordinary. And I'm not just talking about your rank or your... tendencies to attract trouble."

Astron's gaze didn't waver, but there was a flicker of something in his eyes—a shadow of calculation, perhaps.

"You hide things, Astron. Big things. And you're better at it than most." Her tone softened, though her words carried weight. "But even the best can't hide everything forever."

"Is that supposed to scare me?" he asked, his voice as even as ever.

"No," she replied smoothly, her smirk returning. "It's supposed to interest you. We might not see eye to eye, but we can help each other."

"I don't need help."

"Oh, I think you do," she countered, leaning in just slightly. "You've got enemies watching you, Astron. And friends like Irina can only protect you for so long."

"Are you that different? If friends like Irina can only protect me for this long, how can you, someone with a similar rank, make it longer?"

Seraphina's smirk widened, her silver eyes glinting with amusement. She tilted her head slightly, her long hair cascading like a curtain of frost. "That's for you to find out after hearing me, isn't it?" Her voice carried a teasing edge, as if she were enjoying a game only she understood.

Astron's expression didn't waver. "What if I don't want to waste my time like this?" he asked, his tone calm but pointed.



"Waste time?" Seraphina placed a hand on her chest, feigning offense. "Now, that's rather hurtful. You do realize there are people who would kill you if they heard you say that about me."

"People who'd try to kill me for something so trivial wouldn't have the ability to do so," Astron replied flatly, his sharp purple eyes meeting hers without hesitation.

For a moment, Seraphina blinked, then let out a soft laugh, her amusement genuine this time. "Heh... You're bold, I'll give you that." She leaned in slightly, her presence sharp yet strangely magnetic. "But boldness doesn't change facts, does it?"

Her smirk returned as she continued, "Last time, I revealed my ability to see through strength, didn't I? Threatened to expose what you're hiding to the academy..." She let the words linger, watching his reaction closely. "And yet, here you are. You've come to terms with it, haven't you?"

Astron remained silent, but his gaze sharpened. It wasn't anger or frustration—it was something far more unnerving. His purple eyes seemed to pierce through her, studying her like a predator gauging its prey. The flicker of amusement in Seraphina's expression faltered ever so slightly under his unyielding scrutiny.

'Heh... interesting,' she thought, quickly regaining her composure. This wasn't the reaction of someone cornered. If anything, he seemed to be weighing her, testing her resolve.

"Well," she said, straightening up and brushing a strand of silver hair behind her ear, "it's not like you have a choice. Unless, of course, you want certain things to be known." Her smirk was sharp now, her words a deliberate provocation.

Astron's eyes remained locked on hers, unblinking. For a moment, the corridor was silent except for the faint hum of distant chatter. Then, he exhaled slowly, his gaze softening, though only slightly.

"Fine," he said at last, his tone even, as if he had merely conceded a trivial point in an argument. "I'll hear you out."

The satisfaction in Seraphina's smirk deepened. She took a step closer, her presence confident yet controlled. "Good," she said simply. "You won't regret it."

As she turned on her heel, her silver hair swaying with each step, Astron's gaze lingered on her retreating form. His expression remained calm, but his mind was already at work. He had accepted her offer—but not for the reasons she likely thought.

'Let's see what you're really after, Seraphina Frostborne. Though I have some ideas.'

Behind her confident exterior, he had glimpsed something else—a flicker of uncertainty, desperation buried beneath layers of arrogance and poise.

It was interesting to see.

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The terrace café was quiet, the soft murmur of distant conversations blending with the gentle clink of porcelain cups. The view below stretched wide, a panorama of the academy grounds bathed in the golden light of the setting sun. Seraphina led the way, her confident stride unbroken as she chose a table near the edge, the perfect vantage point. Astron followed silently, his footsteps steady, his gaze flickering briefly over the familiar surroundings.

It was the same place they had met last time, where Seraphina had nearly succeeded in driving a wedge between him and Irina. Nearly. Instead, the confrontation had done the opposite, strengthening his bond with Irina—a twist of irony that Seraphina, of course, remained oblivious to.

As they sat down, Seraphina rested her elbow on the table, her chin propped lightly on her hand. Her silver hair caught the sunlight, shimmering like frost under a rising dawn.

"The view is really nice, don't you think?" she said, her tone conversational yet laced with subtle undertones, always testing the waters.

Astron's gaze swept over the landscape, taking in the warm hues and the distant movement of students below. "Indeed, it is nice," he replied evenly, his voice calm, measured. "Though sad that most of the students wouldn't get to see it."

Seraphina chuckled softly. "If you come to my side, you can enjoy it every day, you know."

His response was immediate, his tone neither dismissive nor interested, but resolute. "If I enjoyed things like these, I would have entertained many other such opportunities."

Seraphina leaned back slightly, studying him. The way he said it—firm, unbothered, and accompanied by that sharp, now surprisingly handsome face—was enough to make her pause for a moment.

'With this face now, I could just seduce someone like you.'

But she merely smiled at the thought, her silver eyes glinting with amusement. "Seduction doesn't just end with the face," she remarked lightly. "You need to work on your expressions."

Astron shifted his gaze to her, his purple eyes calm but sharp, like a blade concealed beneath still waters. His response was as steady as ever, his words deliberate. "Expressions are just a result of impulsive control of muscles. As long as one has control, they are easy to adjust."

"Really?" Seraphina's smirk widened, her interest piqued.

"Yes."

The confidence in his tone was unshakable, and Seraphina found herself genuinely intrigued. She tilted her head slightly, her silver hair catching the light again as if to test him further. "Then show me," she said, her voice light but challenging.

Astron raised an eyebrow, his calm purple eyes meeting Seraphina's silver ones. "Why should I?" he asked, his tone completely unbothered.

Seraphina chuckled lightly, leaning back in her chair. "If you can't, then why bother talking? Everyone can talk, after all," she said, her voice carrying a hint of derision.

Astron didn't flinch. His expression remained steady as he responded, "I don't have anything to prove to you, hence no action."

Her smile faltered for a fraction of a second, replaced by a flicker of irritation. "...You really are pushing your limits, Mister Natusalune," she said, her voice cooling ever so slightly.

"And what happens when I do that?" he asked his tone as even as ever, his sharp gaze steady on hers.

Seraphina leaned forward slightly, her smile returning but tinged with an edge of menace. "I may lose my control," she said softly, the warning in her voice unmistakable.

As the words left her lips, the temperature around them began to drop. A frosty aura radiated from Seraphina, her mana seeping into the air like a creeping chill.

The table between them glazed over with a thin layer of frost, and the faint crystalline shimmer of her magic surrounded Astron.

But Astron didn't so much as blink.

"You mages surely love exerting your aura on others....."

Chapter 786 Chapter 182.2 - Let's have a talk

"You mages surely love exerting your aura on others....."

His gaze remained locked on her, his expression calm and unaffected. "With how things are in the academy," he said, his voice cutting through the cold like a blade, "are you confident that you will not face any repercussions if you do such a thing?"

Seraphina's eyes narrowed, her frosty aura intensifying for a moment. She leaned closer, her silver eyes gleaming like ice under the sun. "Repercussions?" she repeated, her tone mocking. "You underestimate what I can get away with, Astron."

"Perhaps," he replied, unfazed. "But even those with power know that the wrong move can cost them everything. Unless you're confident enough to bear that cost?"

The words hung in the chilled air between them, and for a moment, the frost around Astron lingered, unmoving. Then, slowly, it began to recede. Seraphina sat back in her chair, her smirk returning but her eyes sharp with calculation.

"Confident as ever, aren't you?" she said, her tone lighter now, though there was a dangerous edge beneath it. "I have to admit, you're not as dull as most."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Astron replied, his voice steady.

Seraphina leaned back slightly in her chair, her silver eyes narrowing as she observed Astron. A thought, sharp and undeniable, crept into her mind:

'He has changed.'

This wasn't the same Astron she had encountered during the first semester. While his calm demeanor and calculated words were familiar, the way he carried himself now was different—more assured, more unyielding. Back then, his strength had been significantly lower, and though he had tried to hide it behind a facade of confidence, she could see the cracks.

When she had threatened him before, she remembered the flicker of resistance in his eyes, the way he seemed to consider standing against her. But ultimately, he had forcefully given up on the idea, bowing to the reality of the situation.

'That was the logical thing to do,' she mused. 'If I were in his position, I would have done the same.'

After all, clashing with her back then would have been nothing short of suicide. Everyone knew her lineage. She was a child of an archmage, one of the Frostborne, a family whose name carried weight not just in the academy but across the entire magical community. And she wasn't just coasting on her family's reputation—she was the former rank-one student, equal to Victor Langley in prowess.

But now...

'Now, he stands here as if he's seen mages like me before. As if he's dealt with them—and worse.'

Her sharp mind turned over the details. The way he had stood motionless as her frosty aura encased him. The way his purple eyes hadn't wavered, even as the subtle intent behind her aura sought to inflict pain.

It wasn't just defiance; it was experience.

Accommodating a mage's aura wasn't something a normal hunter could do so easily. A mage's aura wasn't like the pressure of a brute hunter's raw strength. It was layered, complex, and suffused with intricate mana flows. When a mage released their aura, the effects weren't just overwhelming—they were designed to disorient, to penetrate, to hurt.

And she had intended it.

The subtle pain woven into her frosty aura wasn't accidental. It was a test—a small, deliberate sting meant to make him flinch, to remind him of the gulf between them.

But Astron had stood there, unaffected.

'He didn't just endure it. He took it as if it was nothing.'

Her mind raced, analyzing the implications. A hunter accustomed to facing mages, one who could withstand their mana-infused presence, was rare. Hunters weren't trained to deal with the intricacies of mana manipulation. That kind of experience came from exposure—repeated encounters with mages of her caliber or higher.

'This is no coincidence,' she thought. 'What has he been doing? Where has he been that he's changed this much?'

In the span of a single semester break, Astron had transformed from a slightly above-average academy cadet to someone whose strength was now obscured—entirely beyond her sight.

Seraphina's fingers lightly tapped the edge of the frosted table, her silver eyes narrowing in thought.

'Not being able to see through his strength doesn't necessarily mean he's become overwhelmingly powerful,' she reasoned. 'It could mean something else entirely.'

As a mage, she understood the intricacies of mana far better than most. While overwhelming strength could obscure someone's parameters, so too could specific abilities or artifacts designed to block perceptions like hers.

'It's rare,' she thought, recalling the few instances she'd encountered. 'But it's not impossible.'

Her mind drifted back to her initial encounter with him, before the semester break. Back then, her trait had worked perfectly. His strength was measurable, his potential visible, and his flaws laid bare

for her to exploit. She could see the resistance in his eyes when she'd cornered him, the way his logical mind had forced him to submit despite his instincts.

'He was just another cadet. Ambitious, perhaps, but ultimately predictable.'

But now...

Now, he was an enigma. An unknown.

And Seraphina Frostborne despised unknowns.

'It's like Schrodinger's Box,' she mused, recalling the theories of a revolutionary mage who had once shaken the foundations of magical society with his work on mana psions. Schrodinger had proposed that the strength of a psion, much like mana itself, existed in a dual state within a concealed entity until observed. The act of observing defined its state—until then, it was a mystery.

'Without looking inside the box, I can't understand his strength. And I hate not understanding.'

She leaned back in her chair, her silver hair spilling over her shoulders like a cascade of frost. The faint chill she'd exuded earlier had completely dissipated, replaced by the quiet intensity of her focus.

Astron wasn't just hiding something—he was something.

Whether it was newfound power, a rare artifact, or an ability specifically designed to counter her trait, she didn't know. But she intended to find out.

Her gaze flicked back to him. He sat there, calm and composed, his sharp purple eyes betraying nothing. It was as if he had mastered the art of masking not just his strength but his very presence.

'Where have you been, Astron Natusalune?'

The thought gnawed at her. Whatever had happened during the semester break, it wasn't ordinary. A leap like this wasn't natural, not without external factors—training, encounters, or perhaps even a benefactor.

She smirked to herself, her curiosity burning brighter.

"You're an interesting one," she said suddenly, breaking the silence.

Astron raised an eyebrow, his expression calm but questioning. "I'll take that as a compliment," he replied evenly.

"It is," she said, her voice light but laced with intent. "But it's also a challenge. I dislike mysteries, Astron. And right now, you're the biggest one I've encountered in a while."

"Is that why we're here?" he asked, his tone carrying a faint trace of amusement.

Her smirk deepened. "Partly. Though I don't think you'll mind. After all, you're hiding something, aren't you?"

He didn't flinch, didn't falter. His gaze remained steady on hers, and for a moment, she thought she saw the faintest trace of a smile tug at the corner of his lips.

"I suppose that depends on what you think I'm hiding," he said.

His words were careful, deliberate, and they only intrigued her more.

'You're good,' she thought, her silver eyes gleaming. 'But everyone has a limit. Even you.'

Seraphina leaned forward slightly, her presence sharp and commanding once again. "Well, Astron," she said, her tone casual but laced with challenge. "Let's see how long you can keep me out of your box."

The game had officially begun. And Seraphina intended to win.

Astron leaned back in his chair, a faint glimmer of amusement flickering in his otherwise calm expression. "It's true," he began, his tone steady, unhurried. "One cannot know what's inside the box without looking. Schrodinger's thought experiment makes that point quite clear."

Seraphina raised an eyebrow, intrigued by his sudden willingness to engage.

"But then," Astron continued, his gaze steady on hers, "there's something often overlooked in the analogy. Schrodinger knew beforehand that there was a cat and poison inside the box. That was the premise."

Seraphina's smirk faltered slightly, her eyes narrowing as she listened.

"Now consider this: what about those who've never seen inside the box? Those who have no evidence of its contents beforehand? How can they affirm the possible conclusions with certainty? Without prior knowledge, wouldn't the same idea of the unknown also apply to their assumptions?"

His voice remained calm, his words deliberate, as he continued, "Would you be able to confirm that your assumptions—your 'premise'—aren't things you've made up on your own?"

The question lingered in the air, sharp and challenging.

Seraphina's eyes flickered, her mind turning over his words like a puzzle. He wasn't just playing defense; he was countering her challenge with one of his own.

'He's clever,' she thought, a mix of admiration and annoyance flickering through her. It wasn't often someone dared to turn her logic back on her, much less with such precision.

Her smirk returned, though this time it was sharper, tinged with a hint of frustration. "Touché, Astron," she said smoothly, leaning back in her chair. "You make a fair point. But that doesn't change the fact that you are hiding something."

"Am I really?"

Seraphina tilted her head, her silver eyes gleaming. "Oh, you are. Whether it's strength, knowledge, or something else entirely... you can't convince me there's nothing inside your box. And eventually, I will find out what it is."

"What makes you this sure?"

"Heh....." Hearing Astron's calm question, Seraphina's smirk widened into a grin, her silver eyes gleaming with satisfaction. She leaned forward slightly, resting her elbows on the table, her fingers interlaced as if she had been waiting for this exact moment.

"Because of this," she said smoothly, her voice dripping with triumph.

From a small folder she had kept at her side, she pulled out a few glossy photographs and laid them on the frosted table between them.

In those pictures, one could see.

One young man and one young woman.

And rather intimate.

Chapter 787 Chapter 182.3 - Let's have a talk

I leaned forward slightly, my eyes drifting to the glossy photographs Seraphina had laid on the frosted table between us. The sheen of the prints reflected the dim light, but the images were clear enough. Irina and me, standing close in the Stellamare Museum, no disguises in place. Another showed her hugging me openly at the Etheria Haven spatial gate station.

My gaze lingered on the photographs for a moment, my expression calm, as though I were admiring art rather than analyzing evidence meant to unsettle me.

'Interesting,' I thought, noting the fine detail in the images. 'These weren't taken by a mana-infused artifact.'

If they had been, I would've sensed the mana signature or residual traces. My senses were attuned enough to pick up even the faintest flickers, especially in a controlled environment like the museum. But these? They carried no mana interference, no hint of artifact involvement.

'An analog device,' I deduced, my eyes narrowing slightly as I examined the photos further. While most people relied on mana-powered tools for such things, there were still those who preferred older, less detectable methods. It wasn't common, but it wasn't impossible either.

I glanced at the picture from the museum, where Irina and I stood side by side, our expressions relaxed but alert. At the time, I'd noticed faint gazes—subtle, quiet observations. But they hadn't felt intrusive, nor had they given away their presence as anything more than curious onlookers. I'd assumed it was nothing.

I was wrong.

'The Matriarch must have noticed this too,' I thought. 'I believed she would block the media from publishing anything, but it seems she decided otherwise. I suppose that makes sense.'

After all, Irina hadn't exactly been discreet when she'd openly embraced me at the Etheria Haven spatial gate station. That image was now here on the table as well, a bold display of familiarity between us. The fact that the photos were being used now suggested Seraphina had been waiting, biding her time until she had enough to use as leverage—or to make her move.

'She was accumulating evidence,' I mused, keeping my expression neutral as I straightened slightly in my chair.

"You seem remarkably calm for someone whose private moments are now on display," Seraphina remarked, her silver eyes gleaming with amusement as she studied my reaction—or lack thereof.

I met her gaze, my voice steady. "If you've gone through the trouble of collecting these, then it's obvious you already have a purpose in mind for them. My reaction now is irrelevant."

Her smirk deepened, her fingers tapping lightly on the edge of the table. "You're sharp, Astron. But even you must realize the implications. A close connection with Irina Emberheart? That's not something people will ignore."

I glanced at the photographs again, then back at her. "And yet, you're the one showing me these. Not the media, not the academy council. Just you. That tells me you haven't made your move yet."

Her smirk faltered for the briefest moment before she leaned back, her gaze sharpening. "Perhaps I'm giving you a chance to explain. Or perhaps I'm waiting to see how valuable your reaction is."

"Or," I countered, my voice even, "you're gauging how much I know about your real intentions. After all, gathering evidence isn't your endgame. It's leverage. But leverage is useless if the other party doesn't care."

Her eyes flickered, the gleam in them momentarily dimming as my words landed. But her smirk quickly returned, more dangerous this time.

"Maybe," she said lightly, her tone casual but laced with intent. "But even you have limits, Astron. And everyone cares about something."

I leaned back, letting her words hang in the air for a moment.

She wasn't wrong. But she wasn't entirely right either. While the photographs were a complication, they weren't an end—they were a means.

Seraphina leaned forward slightly, her silver eyes gleaming with calculated intent. Her smirk widened, her voice laced with mock concern. "I wonder... what would happen if these were known? Especially by Matriarch Emberheart."

Her words hung in the air, heavy with implication. The way she spoke, the deliberate pacing of her sentence, made it clear she believed she'd struck a nerve. She thought she understood the situation—that Irina's actions were secret, hidden even from her own family, and that exposing them would create chaos.

I studied her carefully, my expression calm. It was fascinating, watching her build her strategy, weaving threads of her perceived advantage. But as intricate as her web might have seemed to her, it was riddled with flaws.

'From the way she acts, it's clear she's reached a conclusion: Irina and I are keeping this from the Matriarch,' I thought, letting my gaze drift back to the photographs. 'And in her mind, the Matriarch wouldn't approve of such a relationship. That's the common perception of Matriarch Emberheart from the outside—a strict, controlling figure who would never allow Irina to engage in something so... unconventional.'

It made sense, of course, from Seraphina's standpoint. But the cracks in her reasoning were glaring.

'First, she doesn't understand how real-world information works,' I mused. 'An informant doesn't serve just one master. They weave webs across multiple factions, feeding information selectively to maintain their relevance and value. The Matriarch's network would have already accounted for anything truly critical.'



My gaze shifted back to Seraphina, who sat there, confident and composed, as if she held the entire situation in her hands. 'Secondly, she overestimates her own web of information. She might be a Frostborne heir, but she's still just an heir. Her reach is far from absolute.'

I leaned back slightly, my expression unchanging, my tone measured. "That's an interesting assumption, Seraphina. But assumptions can be dangerous."

Her smirk deepened, her fingers tapping lightly against the frosted table. "Is it an assumption?" she asked, her tone casual but pointed. "The Matriarch has a reputation, after all. Strict, calculating, a woman who values control above all else. Do you think she'd approve of her heir parading around with someone like you?"

The condescension in her voice was deliberate, a sharp edge meant to provoke. But I didn't flinch.

I allowed a faint pause, letting her words hang in the air as if they carried a weight I hadn't anticipated. My expression remained calm, but I tilted my head slightly, as though considering her point.

"The Matriarch..." I began, my voice measured, "is indeed someone like that."

I let the words slip out slowly, carefully, and then, intentionally, I added a faint crack to my voice, just enough to suggest hesitation. The kind of hesitation that might betray someone grappling with an inconvenient truth.

"If she were to find out..." I trailed off, lowering my gaze slightly, as though weighed down by the implications. "The fate awaiting me... would undoubtedly be harsh."

The moment the words left my mouth, Seraphina's silver eyes flickered, her sharp gaze locking onto me with renewed intensity. Her smirk widened slightly, satisfaction creeping into her expression. She leaned forward ever so slightly, sensing what she believed was a crack in my facade.

'Indeed,' I mused inwardly, keeping my expression neutral, 'you are definitely better than Irina when it comes to observing people.'

But observation alone wasn't enough. Seraphina might have sharp eyes, but she didn't know what to do with a misleading clue. And that would be her undoing.

Her voice softened, almost conspiratorial, as she pressed further. "That's why," she began, her tone carrying a mix of triumph and feigned sympathy, "it's better to deal with these things quietly. After all, the Matriarch is not someone to cross lightly."

She leaned back slightly, her fingers still tapping on the frosted table. "But I'm not unreasonable, Astron. I could help you... navigate this delicate situation. All it would take is a little cooperation."

'Ah, there it is,' I thought, watching her carefully. She thought she had me. The momentary crack in my voice, the hesitance in my response—it had all been enough to embolden her, to convince her that I was vulnerable. That I would capitulate if she pushed just a little harder.

"Cooperation," I echoed, my voice steady once more, as though I were turning the word over in my mind. I met her gaze, my purple eyes calm and contemplative. "And what exactly would that entail, Seraphina?"

Her smirk deepened, and she leaned forward again, her silver hair catching the light like a cascade of frost. "It's simple," she said smoothly.

Seraphina leaned closer, her silver eyes gleaming like polished ice as she locked her gaze with mine. Her smirk deepened, a faint glint of triumph flickering across her face as she spoke with deliberate precision. "It means exactly what it says," she began, her tone smooth, almost soothing, but laced with authority. "From now on, you'll be one of my people. Stay under my protection, and I'll ensure these photos never see the light of day."

Her expression sharpened slightly, her smirk twisting into something closer to a grin. She truly believed she'd already won, that this was a matter of formality now—a sealing of the deal she assumed I had no choice but to accept.

I met her gaze evenly. Inwardly, though, a quiet thought unfolded.

"This is exactly why people like you fail, Seraphina. Those who think arrogantly, who assume they are untouchable, inevitably overreach. You might be clever, but your hubris blinds you. And in that, Irina has already surpassed you far more than you realize."

Her calculated confidence was almost impressive, but it was also her greatest weakness. She saw leverage as absolute, forgetting that power often shifted in the subtleties she ignored.

I leaned back slightly, letting her words hang in the air as if giving them weight. My silence seemed to embolden her further—her smirk grew sharper, her fingers resuming their tapping against the table in a faint rhythm of victory.

"That is why, in order to grow, you must understand. A leverage from your perspective might not be one from others."

Then, I spoke, my voice calm, measured, and deliberate.

"What if I refuse?"

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Seraphina's smirk widened the moment Astron fell silent, the faint rhythm of her fingers tapping against the frosted table resuming with a steady beat of satisfaction. In her mind, the game was already over.

'He knows he's cornered,' she thought, her silver eyes gleaming as she watched him. 'Smart as he is, even he must understand that there's no path forward for him without my help.'

She studied him carefully, taking in his calm demeanor and the faint contemplative expression on his face. To anyone else, it might have seemed like he was weighing his options, calculating his next move. But Seraphina was certain that no amount of calculation would change the outcome.

After all, no matter how strong Astron had become, no matter what mysterious abilities he had developed, he was still bound by the reality of their world. And in that reality, the Matriarch Emberheart's words were law.

'He's smart enough to know this much,' Seraphina mused, her confidence unwavering. 'Defiance isn't an option. Not against the Matriarch. And if he's smart, which I know he is, he'll understand that aligning with me is his best chance.'

The silence stretched between them, and Seraphina allowed it to linger, savoring the moment. Her silver eyes glinted with quiet triumph as she leaned back in her chair, exuding the poise and control of someone who believed they held all the cards.

But then, Astron spoke.

"What if I refuse?"

For a moment, the tapping of her fingers stopped. Her smirk remained, but the faint flicker of surprise in her silver eyes betrayed her momentary disbelief.

'Refuse?' The thought repeated in her mind, sharp and incredulous.

Seraphina tilted her head slightly, her silver hair cascading like frost over her shoulder as she regarded him with a curious, almost condescending gaze. "Refuse?" she echoed, her tone soft but laced with danger.

She leaned forward, the air around her growing colder, a faint shimmer of frost dancing along the edge of the table. Her silver eyes locked onto his, gleaming with the promise of retribution.

"Let me make one thing clear, Astron," she began, her voice low, commanding, and tinged with frost. "This isn't a matter of preference. It's reality."

Her smirk returned, sharper now, her confidence unshaken. "I'm offering you a way out. A way to protect yourself and whatever it is you're hiding. Refusal? That's not a smart move, is it?"

Astron's calm, unyielding gaze didn't falter, and for the first time, Seraphina felt a faint twinge of unease. He wasn't reacting as she expected—no hesitation, no fear, no signs of the vulnerability she thought she'd exposed.

Seraphina's smirk twitched, her silver eyes narrowing as she studied Astron's unflinching expression. For a fleeting moment, a thought crossed her mind, sharp and unsettling.

'He doesn't care about himself.'

It was a possibility she had encountered before—stories of men who held no regard for their own well-being but would move mountains for those they cared about. She had always found such people fascinating, their unwavering resolve both inspiring and dangerous. Dangerous because their strength wasn't rooted in their own survival but in the protection of others.

'And that,' she mused, her smirk returning with a sharper edge, 'is the biggest weakness of all.'

She leaned forward, her presence commanding as her silver hair shimmered faintly in the frost-laden air. Her voice softened, taking on a tone that was almost conspiratorial, as if she were sharing a well-guarded secret.

"Ah, I see now," she murmured, her eyes gleaming with calculated intent. "You're not afraid because you don't care what happens to you, do you?"

Astron's calm gaze didn't waver, but Seraphina caught the faintest flicker of something in his eyes. It wasn't fear or hesitation—it was an acknowledgment. He wasn't denying her observation, and that only emboldened her further.

Her fingers resumed their rhythmic tapping on the frosted table as her smirk deepened. "But you see, Astron," she continued, her voice smooth, deliberate, "that's precisely why you're at a disadvantage here."

She tilted her head slightly, her silver eyes locking onto his. "Because while you might not care what happens to you, I'm willing to bet that Irina does. And more importantly..."

Seraphina paused, letting her words hang in the air like the weight of an unsheathed blade.

"...you care what happens to her."

The room seemed to grow colder as her words settled, the frost around them intensifying. She leaned back slightly, her smirk widening as she watched him. "You can withstand the consequences of defiance, can't you? But Irina? I wonder how much she'll be able to endure."

Astron's expression remained calm, but Seraphina didn't miss the faint tightening of his jaw, the subtle shift in his posture. It was slight—barely perceptible—but it was enough to confirm her suspicions.

'Got you,' she thought, the thrill of control surging through her.

"Think about it," she said, her tone almost casual. "The Matriarch Emberheart is not someone to trifle with. If she finds out about these... moments between you and Irina, do you think she'll only punish you?"

Her silver eyes gleamed, her voice dropping to a near whisper. "No, Astron. Irina will bear the brunt of it. Her reputation, her standing, her future—all of it will come crashing down. And it will be because of you."

Seraphina leaned back in her chair, exuding the confidence of someone who believed she had sealed the deal. Her frost aura receded slightly, the chill in the air softening but still palpable. "So, Astron," she said smoothly, her smirk firmly in place, "what will it be? Will you protect her... or let her suffer the consequences of your pride?"

She watched him carefully, certain that she had cornered him once again. After all, men like Astron, who cared more for others than themselves, always crumbled when the safety of their loved ones was at stake.

But Astron's response would be far from what she expected.

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I shook my head slowly. Seraphina's words hung in the air, heavy with the confidence of someone who thought they'd cornered their opponent. But to me, the whole situation felt like a poorly executed skit, one where she believed she held the script, yet couldn't see the cracks in her own performance.

'The Matriarch Emberheart is not someone to trifle with,' I echoed inwardly, suppressing the urge to laugh outright. 'If she finds out about these... moments between you and Irina, do you think she'll only punish you?'

Her question wasn't just misguided—it was laughable. This wasn't the question that needed to be asked at all. The real question, the one that mattered, was something entirely different:

How would Irina take it if the Matriarch knew?

And the answer? Oh, I already knew that answer far too well.

'She likes it,' I thought, a faint smile tugging at the corner of my lips as memories of Irina's antics resurfaced. I could practically hear her voice, bold and unflinching as she stood before the Matriarch in the Emberheart Mansion, her fiery determination blazing brighter than ever.

The Matriarch, a figure so many viewed with fear and reverence, wasn't a wall Irina sought to climb over or avoid. No, Irina treated her like a battlefield to be won, an audience to dazzle. The thought of her fiery grin and the unapologetic confidence in her stance was enough to make Seraphina's current attempt at intimidation feel almost comical.

'If Seraphina knew how Irina truly acted in front of her mother, she'd realize just how misplaced her threats are,' I mused, inwardly shaking my head.

I straightened slightly in my chair, my gaze calm as I locked eyes with Seraphina. The frost in the air, her poised demeanor, her calculated words—they were all so... hollow. She didn't realize that her supposed weapon was nothing more than a dull blade.

"You're asking the wrong questions," I said at last, my voice steady and faintly bemused.

Her smirk faltered slightly, the rhythm of her tapping fingers pausing as she tilted her head. "Oh?" she said, her silver eyes narrowing. "Enlighten me, then. What are the right questions?"

I allowed the silence to linger for a moment, as if weighing her challenge, though inwardly I was already reveling in the absurdity of it all. "The question isn't what the Matriarch would do if she found out," I said, my tone deliberate. "It's what Irina would do."

Her smirk returned, though it lacked the earlier sharpness. "And what would she do, Astron?" she asked, her tone dripping with condescension. "Cry for you? Plead with the Matriarch for mercy?"

I couldn't help it this time. A faint chuckle escaped me, quiet but unmistakable. "Cry for me?" I repeated, shaking my head. "No, Seraphina. She'd laugh."

That caught her off guard. For the first time, Seraphina's expression flickered with genuine confusion, her silver eyes narrowing further as she tried to parse my words. "Laugh?" she echoed, her voice losing some of its edge. "What do you mean by that?"

I held Seraphina's gaze, letting the faint confusion in her silver eyes linger as she processed my words. When her question finally came, sharp and demanding, I simply smiled—a calm, faint curve of my lips that betrayed nothing.

"That," I said evenly, my tone unhurried, "is for you to find out."

Leaning back in my chair, I settled into a relaxed posture, one that belied the tension in the room. "And as for those pictures," I continued, gesturing lightly toward the glossy prints on the table, "do whatever you like with them. I have no intention of 'becoming someone's people.'"

Chapter 789 Chapter 182.5 - Let's have a talk

"Do whatever you like with them. I have no intention of 'becoming someone's people.'"

The statement landed like a crack of thunder, the finality in my voice cutting through the chill in the air. Seraphina's smirk evaporated entirely, replaced by a sharp narrowing of her eyes. Her fingers stilled against the table, and for a moment, the room seemed to hold its breath.

Then, the frost returned.

The air grew colder, sharper, biting at the edges of my senses. The faint shimmer of frost that had lingered on the table earlier now spread outward, creeping toward me like icy tendrils. Seraphina's aura surged, suffusing the space with an oppressive chill that carried the unmistakable weight of her intent.

"You're bold," she said, her voice low, dangerous, each word cutting through the cold like shards of ice. "But don't mistake boldness for invincibility, Astron."

Her frosty aura grew heavier, the temperature in the room plummeting further as a thin layer of frost began to form along the edge of the table. The sharp bite of her mana pressed against me, seeking to unsettle, to force a reaction.

I met her gaze without flinching, my expression calm as the frost licked at my skin. The air burned with cold, each breath a sharp reminder of the pressure she was exerting. But I held firm, letting her aura wash over me without yielding an inch.

The time I had spent training over the break... It hadn't been in vain.

The memory of those days to surface briefly—the grueling hours spent honing my mana control, the countless drills in hostile environments, the deliberate effort to push my limits, to strengthen my resistance against forces like this. The weight of her frost was formidable, but it wasn't unfamiliar. It was something I'd prepared for.

I held her gaze, letting the frost bite at my skin, then finally, I broke the silence, my voice cutting through the cold like a blade. "If this is how you search for people to 'be your own,' then you're not looking for a person."

Her silver eyes narrowed further, the frost intensifying slightly, a response to my defiance.

"You're looking for a slave," I continued, my tone calm but deliberate. "And if that's the case, then you should know—those types of acts were abandoned long ago. Or have you not realized that yet?"

The frost stilled for a fraction of a second, as though my words had struck a nerve. Seraphina's smirk returned, sharper this time, though there was a flicker of something beneath it—annoyance, perhaps, or something closer to recognition.

"You think you're clever," she said, her voice soft but cold, her fingers resuming their steady tap against the frosted table. "But words won't protect you, Astron."

I leaned forward slightly, the frost crackling faintly beneath my hands as I placed them on the table, my purple eyes locking onto hers with unwavering focus. "I don't need words to protect me," I said evenly. "But if you think fear and intimidation are enough to make me bow, then you don't understand the world as well as you think you do."

The air between us felt like a battlefield, the tension palpable, her frosty aura clashing with the quiet resolve in my presence. She leaned back slightly, her silver eyes gleaming as she studied me, her expression unreadable.

"You're stubborn," she remarked finally, her voice carrying a faint trace of amusement despite the frost that lingered in the air. "But even the stubborn have limits."

"Perhaps," I replied, my voice steady. "But those limits aren't where you think they are."

For a moment, the room fell into silence once more, the frost lingering but no longer pressing as heavily against me. Seraphina's smirk remained, but her gaze carried a sharper edge now, as though she was recalibrating, rethinking her approach.

"Interesting," she said at last, her tone soft but tinged with something colder. "You're more resilient than I expected."

I stood slowly, letting the weight of the moment settle. My movements were deliberate, calm, as if the frost-drenched tension of the room meant nothing to me. Seraphina's silver eyes followed my every move, her smirk fading into something sharper, colder, her fingers stilling against the frosted table.

As I turned to leave, tilting my head slightly, a sharp projectile sliced through the air with a hiss, narrowly grazing past my ear. The icy shard slammed into the wall behind me, shattering on impact and leaving a trail of frost in its wake.

"I didn't say you could leave," Seraphina's voice rang out, low and dangerous. Her tone carried the chill of her frost but also the simmering heat of anger barely restrained.

I paused, turning my head just enough to glance at her over my shoulder. My expression remained calm, unshaken by the display. "And I don't remember seeking anyone's permission."

Her eyes burned now, a glint of rage flickering behind the icy composure she fought to maintain. The frost around her intensified, spreading further across the table, creeping toward the floor. The room felt colder than ever, her mana suffusing the space with a sharp, biting chill.

"You think you can just walk away?" she said, her voice rising slightly, the frost in her tone unmistakable. "After everything I've said—everything I've offered—you dare to turn your back on me?"

"Yes."

Her expression faltered for the briefest moment, her anger warring with disbelief at my sheer audacity. Then the frost around her flared again, the temperature in the room plunging further as her frustration surged.

"You're a fool," she hissed, her silver eyes narrowing. "Do you really think you can stand against me? Against the forces I control? I could crush you here and now."

"But you didn't," I replied, my voice calm and unyielding, carrying an edge of certainty that cut through the frost like a blade.

Seraphina's eyes narrowed further, her frost-laden aura flaring momentarily as if in response to my defiance. "And why do you think that is?" she asked, her tone sharp and biting, laced with dangerous intent. "Showing you good hospit-

"Because it's not cost-efficient."

The words hung in the frozen air, quiet but heavy with implication. Her reaction was subtle—a slight twitch in her fingers, the faintest flicker of something in her silver eyes. She was too experienced to let her mask slip completely, but I could see the gears turning behind her sharp gaze.

'If this were before,' I mused inwardly, my expression betraying nothing, 'perhaps it might have been worth the effort for her to crush me. But as of right now, it isn't.'

I could read Seraphina like an open book—not because she was careless, but because I understood her type. People like her operated on logic, efficiency, and calculated outcomes. Every action had to serve a purpose, align with a broader strategy. Wasting resources, drawing unnecessary attention, or taking reckless risks? None of it fit within their framework.

'And people who operate within a purely logical framework,' I thought, my gaze steady, 'always have the limitations of logic.'

She leaned forward slightly, her fingers resuming their faint tapping against the frosted table. The sound was sharp, deliberate, a rhythm meant to project control. "Cost-efficient," she echoed, her tone laced with derision. "You think I'm sparing you because of some calculation?"

"Aren't you?"

Her smirk returned, sharper now, but there was a flicker of hesitation behind it. She wanted me to doubt my own reasoning, but I knew better. I could see the unspoken truth in her actions, the precise control she maintained even in the midst of her anger. If crushing me were truly in her best interest, she wouldn't have hesitated. But the fact that I was still standing here, facing her without consequence, said everything.

"You like to believe you're in control, Seraphina," I said, my tone steady, measured. "That every move you make is deliberate, calculated. But here's the thing about calculations—they're only as good as the data they're based on. And you? You're working with incomplete information."

Her smirk faltered slightly, though her frosty demeanor remained intact. "Is that so?" she asked, her voice quieter now, tinged with an edge of curiosity she couldn't quite suppress.

"It is."

Seraphina's fingers stilled against the frosted table, her sharp silver eyes narrowing as she studied me. "What information do I lack, then?" she asked, her voice quieter now, tinged with both curiosity and irritation.

I paused mid-step, turning back just enough to meet her gaze over my shoulder.

"That," I said, my tone deliberate and unhurried, "is, once again, for you to find out."

The words hung in the air, sharp and final, as I turned back and continued toward the door. This time, I didn't stop, didn't look back. The frost still lingered in the room, the chill brushing against my back as I stepped out, but I paid it no mind.

The sound of her sharp tapping resumed faintly behind me, echoing against the cold silence I left in my wake. She wouldn't follow—this wasn't her way. Seraphina Frostborne didn't chase; she calculated. And now, she'd be left with the pieces of her own game to sort through.



I stepped into the hallway, the air warmer, and lighter, a stark contrast to the cold tension I'd just left behind.

I really felt like laughing.

"This whole scenario," I couldn't help but mumble....

"Feels like a skit to me. A performance that you've written for an audience that doesn't exist. You are just underestimating Irina, Seraphina. And that's your mistake. And well, until you learn this, you will just flutter on your own."

Chapter 790 Chapter 182.6 - Let's have a talk

Seraphina stared at the door long after Astron had left, her silver eyes locked on the space he had occupied mere moments ago. The frost on the table remained, a stark reminder of her frustration. Her fingers tapped against its icy surface in a rhythm she didn't even notice, her thoughts churning as she tried to piece together what had just transpired.

'Did he... just reject me?'

The thought was sharp, cutting, as if it didn't belong in the same realm as her reality. Seraphina Frostborne, heir to one of the most powerful mage families, had just been defied outright.

Her silver eyes narrowed, her tapping fingers stilling as her mind replayed the encounter in vivid detail. His calm demeanor, his unflinching gaze, the way he had dismissed her frost as if it were no more than a passing chill—all of it clashed with her understanding of people.

'Doesn't he care about Irina? Doesn't he realize the consequences of his refusal?'

She clenched her hand into a fist, the frost intensifying momentarily before she forced herself to relax. But the questions wouldn't stop, spiraling through her mind like an endless storm.

'He should have cared. He should have folded. I gave him every reason to comply.'

Seraphina leaned back in her chair, her smirk long gone, replaced by a thoughtful, almost troubled frown.

'Did I miscalculate?'

The possibility was as foreign as it was unwelcome. She prided herself on her ability to read people, to predict their actions, and to manipulate their weaknesses. But Astron...

'He's either a fool or something far more dangerous.'

Her fingers resumed their rhythm, slower this time, the tapping a reflection of her inward struggle. She had been so certain that he cared for Irina, that his actions would be driven by a desire to protect her. And yet, he had walked away, calm and resolute, as if her threats were little more than noise.

'Could he be selfish?'

The thought lingered, unwelcome but persistent. Perhaps she had misjudged him entirely. If he didn't care about Irina—or anyone else, for that matter—then her leverage was meaningless.

'But no... that doesn't make sense,' she countered herself, her silver eyes narrowing further. 'If he were truly selfish, he wouldn't have built such a bond with her. Irina isn't the type to invest in someone who doesn't reciprocate.'

The more she thought, the more tangled the web became. Her evaluation of Astron was fracturing, the conclusions she had drawn suddenly feeling shaky, incomplete.

'Have I underestimated him? Overestimated him? Or am I simply missing something?'

She leaned forward, her elbows resting on the frosted table, her fingers steepled as she stared down at the photographs still spread before her. Irina's smile, her relaxed posture near Astron—they told a story, one that didn't align with the man who had just walked out of the room.

'Is there really something that I don't know?'

The thought stung, and for a moment, her fingers stilled against the frosted table. Her sharp mind, honed through years of calculated maneuvers and intricate social games, couldn't grasp the gaps in this encounter. And that sting—the bitter taste of an unanswered question—only fueled the fire burning within her.

Slowly, her eyes drifted from the photographs to the frost spreading faintly across the edges of the table. She clenched her fist, her nails digging into her palm as anger surged within her.

'Besting me twice... First Irina, now him.'

The memory of Irina's rise still grated against her pride, a wound that had yet to heal. And now Astron, with his calm defiance, had reopened it, cutting even deeper.

'It's infuriating,' she thought, her teeth clenching as her emotions surged. 'He dares to reject me, to walk away as if I'm nothing?'

The frost around her pulsed faintly, spreading further across the surface of the table. She stood abruptly, the chair scraping against the floor with a sharp, jarring sound. Her hand brushed against the table's edge, the frost crackling faintly beneath her touch.

'Fine,' she thought, her anger coalescing into a cold, sharp resolve. 'If he wants to reject me, then it's time for him to face the consequences.'

She turned sharply on her heel, her silver hair trailing behind her like a cascade of frost, and began walking toward the exit. Before she left, she paused near the counter, reaching into her coat pocket. She pulled out a few neatly folded bills, her movements brisk and precise.

The cafe owner, a middle-aged man with a calm demeanor, took the money silently, a faint smile crossing his lips. He glanced at the faint frost still lingering in the air and offered her a polite nod, as if to acknowledge the unspoken arrangement.

Seraphina said nothing, her eyes glinting coldly as she turned and stepped out into the bustling streets. The warm sunlight contrasted sharply with the frost still clinging to her aura, a testament to the storm brewing within her.

Her strides were purposeful, her thoughts racing as she made her way back to her room.

'Let him see what happens when you cross me,' she thought, her resolve hardening with each step. She had lost too much already—her rank, her standing, and now her pride. And she would ensure that Astron Natusalune paid the price for daring to challenge her.

Seraphina stormed into her room, the door closing with a sharp click. The sunlight streaming through the windows did little to thaw the icy aura surrounding her. Her silver eyes glinted with a cold, calculated fury as she moved toward her desk, her strides purposeful.

Sitting down, she reached for her smartwatch, her fingers moving with precision as she pulled up the contact list.

Seraphina tapped her smartwatch, scrolling through her contacts until she landed on a name: Vex Media, a small but ambitious agency with a penchant for stirring the pot. They were new, eager, and most importantly, desperate to establish themselves in a cutthroat industry. Their willingness to take risks made them the perfect tools for what she had in mind.

She initiated the call, and it connected within moments. A bright, eager voice answered. "Miss Frostborne! An honor as always. What can we do for you today?"

Seraphina's lips curled into a faint smirk, her voice smooth and composed despite the cold fury simmering beneath. "I have something for you. Exclusive content. Pictures."

The person on the other end audibly perked up, their tone shifting to one of barely contained excitement. "Pictures? Exclusive? Tell me more."

"I want these shared."

There was a brief pause, then the voice on the other end spoke again, laced with enthusiasm. "Of course, Miss Frostborne. Consider it done. With your name behind this, we'll make sure it gains traction immediately."

Seraphina's smirk deepened, though her tone remained icy. "Good. I'll send you the materials shortly. And a word of advice—be thorough, but subtle. If this blows up too quickly, people will start asking questions."

"Understood. You can count on us."

She ended the call and leaned back in her chair, her fingers brushing against the smartwatch as she uploaded the pictures to Vex Media's secure dropbox. As the files transferred, her mind worked over the next steps, the possible outcomes, and the eventual fallout.

'They'll think I'm backing them,' she mused, her smirk sharpening. 'And why wouldn't they? The Frostborne name is enough to make anyone believe they're untouchable.'

But she had no intention of keeping ties to Vex Media once their usefulness ran out. They were expendable, a means to an end. When the backlash inevitably came, she would simply step away, her hands clean, while the fledgling agency bore the brunt of any repercussions.

The files finished uploading, and Seraphina sat back, exhaling slowly. The frost in the room began to dissipate as her anger subsided, replaced by cold satisfaction.

'Let's see how you handle this, Astron,' she thought, her silver eyes narrowing. 'And when the dust settles, we'll see if your composure still holds.'

She rose from her chair, her movements deliberate and poised. The game was in motion, and she would watch as her carefully laid plans unraveled the facade Astron had so confidently upheld. If he thought he could defy her without consequences, he was sorely mistaken.

Though little she knew, in the dorm room that is right beside her, a talk of the same content had been happening.

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Irina kicked off her boots with a satisfied sigh, her fiery hair cascading over her shoulders as she stretched. The soft hum of her room's mana-infused lights filled the space with a calming glow, and she felt the weight of the day's lectures slipping away. She glanced at her gaming console sitting idle on her desk, a small smile tugging at her lips.

'It's been too long,' she thought, reaching for the headset. 'Time to unwind. Finally.'

But just as she was about to power on the console, her mana-imbued communication device buzzed on her desk, the screen lighting up with an unfamiliar number. Irina frowned, her amber eyes narrowing slightly as she picked up the device. She hesitated for a moment before swiping to accept the call.

"Who is this?" she asked, her tone sharp but curious.

A distorted voice crackled through the line, low and mechanical, clearly altered to disguise the caller's identity. "Miss Irina Emberheart. A pleasure to finally speak with you."

Irina's brows furrowed, her posture stiffening as she sensed the tension behind the words. "And who exactly are you?" she demanded, her voice edged with suspicion.

The voice chuckled, the sound grating and hollow. "Who I am isn't important. What I have, however, is."

Before she could respond, her communication device vibrated again, this time with an incoming file. Irina opened it cautiously, her amber eyes narrowing as a series of photos appeared on the screen.

Her heart skipped a beat, but only for a moment.

'Heh...'