

## H. Academy 931

Chapter 931 No title

Irina let out a slow breath, feeling the tension that had been weighing her down since her conversation with Ethan finally ease.

It wasn't that everything was solved. It wasn't that the situation was suddenly less complicated. But somehow, after talking with Astron, after hearing his steady, unshaken perspective, she felt...

Refreshed.

Like her mind wasn't trapped in the endless cycle of frustration and uncertainty that had been annoying her all day.

She stretched her arms above her head, then—on impulse—stood up and started jumping in place, the sudden burst of movement shaking off the last remnants of that heavy, suffocating feeling.

Her lips curled into a grin as she turned to him.

"Ahhh, that feels better," she said, exhaling dramatically. Then, with an easy, genuine smile, she looked at him and said, "Thanks, Astron."

Astron simply nodded, accepting the gratitude without much reaction, but that was just how he was. He wouldn't say anything unnecessary. He didn't need to.

Still smiling, Irina leaned against him slightly, resting her weight against his side. It wasn't much, just a small shift, a quiet acknowledgment that she appreciated him being here.

"In things like this," she said, voice carrying just a trace of teasing, "you're quite manly."

Astron's mouth twitched at that.

Irina grinned, because oh, she saw that.

"You don't have to react," she mused, nudging him slightly. "But I saw that."

Astron exhaled slowly, as if already regretting letting that moment slip.

"...Your word choice is questionable," he said flatly.

Irina just laughed. "Hah! Just take the compliment, InfernoKnight."

Astron sighed, rubbing his temple. "Only this once."

"We'll see about that," she smirked, still leaning on him just a little longer than necessary.

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The classroom was already filled with chatter and speculation by the time Eleanor entered.

The air was thick with unease.

The news had already spread—though no official announcement had been made yet, the rumors of the headmaster's decision to suspend club activities and increase surveillance had reached the students.

Everyone expected Eleanor to clarify the situation.

What they didn't know was just how bad it was going to get.

As soon as Eleanor stepped into the room, the murmur of conversation immediately died.

Her sharp gaze swept over the cadets as she walked toward the podium. She said nothing at first.

That alone was enough to build tension.

Julia, ever one to break the silence, muttered under her breath, "Well, that's never a good sign."

Ethan gave her a look. "Shut up."

Eleanor set her tablet down on the desk, standing tall as she finally addressed the class.

"Listen carefully."

Her voice cut through the silence like a blade.

"This will not be a normal lecture."

The cadets straightened instinctively.

"There are new policies that have been enacted as of this morning." She didn't soften her words. "These changes will affect everyone in this academy."

She tapped on her tablet, sending a notification to every cadet's device.

A list of new regulations appeared on their screens.

Club activities are officially suspended indefinitely.

2. Increased surveillance will be enforced throughout the academy, including dormitory perimeters and common areas.

3. Unauthorized group gatherings of five or more will be flagged for review.

4. Additional faculty oversight will be assigned to monitor high-risk locations.

5. Disciplinary actions will be stricter for all cadets involved in altercations.

A wave of stunned silence fell over the class as they read the words on their screens.

Then—

The room erupted.

"Wait—WHAT?!"

"They're actually shutting down the clubs?!"

"This is insane—how are we supposed to—"

"Surveillance? Are they serious?"

Julia, not one to hold back her opinions, immediately slammed her hands onto her desk. "You've gotta be kidding me. They're treating us like prisoners now?"

Ethan, though less outwardly vocal, frowned deeply, his hazel eyes scanning the list again, as if hoping he had read it wrong. "They really went through with it..."

Lilia sighed, rubbing her temples. "I knew the tensions were bad, but I didn't think they'd go this far."

Irina, who had been silent until now, finally spoke—her tone calm, but laced with quiet frustration.

"Who decided this?"

Eleanor met her gaze without hesitation. "The Headmaster."

That sent another ripple of unease through the cadets.

They had all expected some kind of action to be taken after the escalating tensions between first-years and sophomores—but this?

This was far beyond what they had imagined.

Eleanor allowed the noise for a moment before raising her hand slightly.

The room fell silent again, though the tension was still palpable.

She exhaled slowly, before continuing.

"I know many of you are displeased by this decision. That does not change the fact that it has been made."

Her words were final.

But before the cadets could complain again, she added something unexpected.

"However."

That one word made them pause.

Eleanor's eyes narrowed slightly, her gaze sharper.

"This is not a punishment. It is a containment strategy. Whether you realize it or not, there is something pushing the first-year and sophomore divide further. The recent incidents have not been natural tensions—they have been deliberately provoked."

The class fell deathly quiet.

"You believe someone is orchestrating this."

Eleanor's expression did not change.

"I do not believe. I know."

The weight of her words sent chills down the spines of several cadets.

"That's insane. Why would anyone want to make the students turn on each other?"

Eleanor did not answer immediately.

Instead, she let the silence hang for a moment.

Then, she spoke, her tone deliberate.

"That is what we intend to find out."

The gravity of the situation sank in.

The cadets exchanged glances—some confused, some worried, some angry.

This wasn't just about discipline or new rules.

This was about something deeper.

Something manipulating the academy from within.

Eleanor let her words settle before continuing.

"Regardless of how you feel about these changes, they are in place for your own protection. The academy is not taking chances with this matter."

She glanced toward the class once more.

"Any further violations of conduct will result in immediate disciplinary action. If you are caught instigating conflict, there will be no leniency."

Eleanor stood straight, scanning the room one final time.

"You may voice your frustrations amongst yourselves," she said. "But do not waste my time with complaints. This decision is final."

A tense silence settled over the room.

The bell rang.

The class remained quiet as the students processed everything.

Finally, Eleanor spoke once more.

"Dismissed."

The atmosphere in the room was thick with unspoken tension.

They had all expected the academy to take action, but this?

The new policies weren't just restrictions—they were a warning. A message to every cadet that the academy wasn't going to allow this situation to spiral out of control. And yet, the unshakable feeling lingered in the air—this wasn't about discipline. This was about control.

Ethan leaned against the wall, arms crossed tightly over his chest. His ribs still ached from the earlier fight, but the pain wasn't what occupied his thoughts. Across from him, Julia sat on the edge of the table, her brows furrowed, lips pressed into a thin line.

Lucas and Carl were seated next to each other, their expressions serious, though Lucas kept stealing glances at Lilia. She looked worse up close—pale, the bruises on her arms more visible under the dim lighting of the study room they had secured.

Irina stood by the door, her golden gaze sharp as ever, watching everyone.

No one spoke for a long moment.

Then—Julia broke the silence.

"Well, this is some next-level bullshit."

No one argued.

Julia sighed, rolling her shoulders as she leaned further against the desk. "You know, I'd love to join in the collective outrage, but honestly? This doesn't really hit me that hard."

Lucas glanced at her, eyebrows raising. "Really? No complaints? That's a first."

Julia waved a hand dismissively. "Most of the clubs were already a mess. The travel club was already on thin ice since last time. I barely had time for anything else. So, as far as I'm concerned, this whole club ban? Meh."

Lilia snorted. "You say that like you weren't the one crashing half the clubs for the snacks."

Julia grinned. "And? Just because I dined at different tables doesn't mean I was invested in the menu."



"Still," Carl muttered, rubbing his chin, "this whole situation isn't just about clubs. It's about control. The surveillance, the monitoring, the whole 'no unauthorized gatherings' thing—it's more than just containment. It's a leash."

"Exactly." Irina's golden eyes sharpened. "And the worst part? This isn't just a temporary measure. If they're going this far, it means they expect things to get worse."

Ethan, who had been silent throughout the conversation, finally spoke, his voice quieter than usual. "Yeah... worse."

Julia turned to him, catching the weight behind those words. She studied his expression—more withdrawn than usual, his arms crossed tightly over his chest. Unlike her, the club suspension did affect him.

"You're thinking about the spear club," she said, not making it a question.

Ethan let out a slow breath, his grip tightening slightly. "I was looking forward to the interclub tournament. I trained for it. But now? Guess that doesn't matter anymore."

"Puhahaha.....must suck for you."

"Julia..."

"What? Mad?"

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Ethan exhaled through his nose, shaking his head. "No, not mad," he muttered, the corners of his lips twitching upward.

Julia raised an eyebrow. "Oh? No sarcastic comeback? No dramatic sigh of despair? You feeling okay, Mountain Boy?"

Ethan let out a soft chuckle, finally unfolding his arms. "I mean, yeah, it sucks. But if the academy is cracking down this hard, it means they're taking things seriously. And that's... not exactly a bad thing"

Lucas glanced at him, tilting his head. "You're actually fine with this?"

Ethan pushed off the wall, rolling his shoulders. "Fine? Not really. But think about it-if clubs are out, then they're gonna push us harder in training instead. No more distractions, no more splitting focus between clubs and coursework." He crossed his arms again, this time with a slight smirk. "I wouldn't be surprised if they ramp up combat drills. Hell, maybe they'll even throw in a field training exercise."

Carl hummed in thought, nodding. "That actually makes sense. They need to keep us engaged, and without club activities, they're probably going to enforce more hands-on training."

Irina's gaze flickered with interest. "A field exercise wouldn't be a bad idea," she mused. "If they're serious about making us stronger, then they won't let us sit idle."

"True," Lilia added, though she groaned dramatically. "But that means more early morning drills, more evaluations, more ways for Eleanor to terrify us..."

Julia snorted. "Please. You thrive under pressure."

Lilia wiggled her fingers in mock horror. "Not that kind of pressure."

Ethan's smirk didn't fade. The disappointment of losing the tournament was still there, but something about the shift in academy policies left him... satisfied. If this was the academy's way of taking back control, then fine. It just meant they were stepping into a new phase.

One where things would be tougher. More grueling.

And if that was the case?

Then good.

Because Ethan was more than ready.

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The sophomore classroom was already buzzing with agitation when Maya stepped inside. Conversations were heated, frustration bubbling just beneath the surface as cadets vented to one another about the newly enacted restrictions.

She had expected this.

The tension between the years had been rising for weeks, but now, with the academy's heavy-handed response, it was suffocating.

And she wasn't happy about it either.

Her expression remained composed as she took her seat, but inwardly, irritation curled beneath her skin like smoldering embers.

This was going to be a waste of time.

The professor entered, and the noise only grew louder.

"Alright," the instructor called out, setting a tablet down on the podium. "Settle down."

The class did not settle down.

"Professor, is this for real?!" one of the cadets near the front demanded, gripping the edge of his desk.

"Shutting down clubs is ridiculous," another snapped.

"You're treating us like criminals! We weren't the ones starting fights-"

"Then why are we the ones being punished?!"

Maya exhaled slowly through her nose as the protests swelled.

She wasn't going to argue on principle like the others, but she was irritated.

Because this meant that the History and Arts Club-the one place where she had a guaranteed, uninterrupted space with him-was gone.

The professor didn't raise his voice, but his next words cut through the chaos with sharp authority.

"Quiet."

The students grudgingly lowered their voices, but the tension still lingered, thick and oppressive.

Maya crossed her arms, her fingers tapping lightly against her sleeve as she listened. "The new regulations are not open for negotiation," the professor said. "These decisions were made by the headmaster himself. If you have complaints, you can file an official appeal. But I warn you now-it won't change anything"

A murmur of discontent swept through the class.

Maya's lips pressed into a thin line.

"What a joke."

The voice in her head slithered into her thoughts, laced with contempt.

"They're acting like this is some strategic decision, but it's not. It's desperation. They don't know how to control the chaos, so they're tightening the leash on everyone." Maya's nails lightly scraped against her sleeve.

She agreed.

Even without her other self voicing it, she had already come to that conclusion.

But that didn't change the reality of the situation.

She wouldn't be able to meet with Astron freely anymore.

And given how the divide between first-years and sophomores had escalated, approaching him outside of regulated areas would be difficult.

It was frustrating.

"What are you going to do about it?" her other self whispered, voice smooth but taunting. "Sit here like the rest of them and accept it?"

Maya remained silent.

But her fingers curled slightly into her sleeves.

The professor continued, oblivious to her thoughts. "Surveillance is being expanded across all dormitories and common areas. Group gatherings will be restricted to monitored locations. Any altercations between cadets will result in immediate

disciplinary action."

Maya's jaw tightened.

"Tch."

A sharp noise of distaste echoed in her mind.

"They're boxing you in."

She knew.

"So much for 'control! Now you'll be monitored like a caged animal. How does it feel?"

Maya exhaled sharply through her nose.

"You're awfully chatty today," she murmured internally.

"I don't like being restrained." A pause. Then, softer-more venomous. "And I don't like being kept away from him."

Maya exhaled slowly, feeling the weight of the classroom, the murmured complaints of her classmates barely registering in her ears.

"I don't like being restrained."

Her other self's voice had softened, but there was something simmering beneath it-something deeper, more unsettling.

And yet, Maya wasn't repelled by it anymore.

Recently, they had been... understanding each other more.

She still disagreed with her, still fought for control when needed, but there was no

longer that suffocating resistance that made her feel like she was drowning in a battle against herself.

It was different now.

The edges of their thoughts had started to blend.

Sometimes, Maya wasn't even sure who was responding first.

And that-that brought her to a different question.

Did I really like him, or was it because of her?

The thought struck her as she stared at the screen of her tablet, her fingers still curled into her sleeves.

Astron.

Whenever he crossed her mind, it was always with an intensity that felt unlike anything else in her life. The weight of his presence, the way his gaze lingered-how it

both infuriated her and made her crave more.

Was that her?

Or was that her other self?

Maya's jaw clenched slightly. The emotions she felt toward him-were they hers alone?

Or was she simply following the pull of something deeper, something not entirely her own?

"You're overthinking again," her other self murmured.

Maya didn't respond, but she could feel the knowing smirk in the back of her mind.

"It doesn't matter, does it?"

Maya shut her eyes for a brief second. "It should."

A soft laugh, dark and indulgent. "Then tell me does it feel any different?"

Maya hesitated.

Did it?

Her fingers flexed.

Whether it was her feelings or her other self's...

In the end, the weight in her chest remained the same.

The same pull. The same unbearable need to see him, to be near him.

To confirm something-whether it was her own emotions or something else entirely.

But more than anything-

Her gaze flickered downward, then up again.

The redness in her vision was acting up.

Her irises pulsed faintly with that crimson hue, fading in and out as her thoughts

spiraled.

Her breath shallowed.

Her other self sighed, "We need to see him soon."



Maya swallowed. "I know."

Because if this kept up...

If this hunger continued to coil inside her, pressing against the edges of her control-

She wasn't sure how much longer she could hold it back.

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Maya sat at the edge of her bed, fingers tapping rhythmically against her thigh as she stared at her communicator. The dormitory was quiet—far too quiet. The usual bustle of cadets moving through the halls, the faint murmurs of conversations, and even the distant hum of the academy's activity had been swallowed by the newly imposed restrictions.

Everything felt suffocating.

She hated feeling boxed in.

Her crimson-tinted gaze flickered toward the window. Beyond it, the academy sprawled under the artificial night sky, the glow of security drones patrolling the perimeters a constant reminder that movement was being watched.

"You don't have much of a choice."

Her other self's voice was steady, calm in its certainty. "If you want to see him, it has to be here."

Maya exhaled through her nose. "I know."

It was a risk. Under normal circumstances, she would have arranged to meet him in neutral spaces—the training grounds, the secluded areas of the academy where eyes weren't constantly prying.

But those options were gone now.

The increased surveillance had made things complicated.

And she didn't have the luxury of waiting.

Her fingers hovered over the communicator before she finally pressed the call button.

It rang twice before he answered.

"...Senior?"

His voice was calm, as always, but there was a slight edge to it—curiosity, perhaps?

"We need to talk," she said, her tone direct, leaving no room for negotiation.

A brief pause.

"Now?"

"Yes."

She leaned back slightly, her fingers tightening around the device. "Come to my dormitory. It's the only place that isn't crawling with surveillance right now."

Another pause.

Then—

"Understood."

Maya didn't bother saying anything else. She ended the call, her grip loosening as she set the device down.

She exhaled, rolling her shoulders before standing.

Her hands twitched slightly at her sides, a telltale sign of her restlessness.

The redness in her vision hadn't faded.

And she had a feeling it wouldn't—not until he arrived.

"You feel it too, don't you?"

Her other self's voice was smooth, curling around her thoughts like silk. "The anticipation. The way your body reacts before your mind even processes it."

Maya didn't answer.

But she felt it.

A slow, creeping hunger that had nothing to do with food.

"He'll be here soon."

She turned toward the door, her crimson-tinged gaze sharpening.

"Yeah," she murmured.

And she wasn't sure whether that was a good thing or not.

A soft knock echoed through the quiet dormitory.

Maya inhaled slowly, steadying herself before moving to the door.

Her fingers curled around the handle, and for a split second, she hesitated.

Then, she opened it.

Astron stood there, as composed as ever. His violet eyes, sharp and unyielding, met hers without hesitation. He didn't look the least bit concerned about being summoned so suddenly—if anything, he seemed mildly expectant.

"Senior."

His tone was polite, neutral.

But Maya...

Maya's breath hitched—so quietly, so imperceptibly that even she barely noticed it.

Had he always looked like this?

Of course, she had always been aware of his presence—how could she not be? But now, after some time apart, after the tensions in the academy had shifted, after everything... she found herself looking at him with fresh eyes.

The sharp contours of his face, the quiet confidence in his posture, the way his uniform fit against his frame.

He looks good.

Her fingers twitched at her side.

"He looks more than good."

Her other self purred in her mind, the voice curling through her thoughts with something dangerously close to satisfaction.

"Doesn't it make you want to sink your teeth into him?"

Maya stiffened.

She forced the thought away, suppressing the sudden spike of heat curling at the base of her spine.

No.

She wouldn't let that part of her take over—not now.

She forced herself to exhale, stepping slightly to the side. "Come in."

Astron didn't hesitate. He stepped inside, his movements deliberate as he glanced around her dormitory with a quick, assessing gaze. The first-ranked sophomore's living quarters were far more spacious than the standard dorms—private, quiet, and untouched by the academy's increased surveillance.

Safe.

The door clicked shut behind him.

Maya turned to face him, crossing her arms over her chest. She needed something—anything—to keep herself restrained.

Astron's eyes flickered to her briefly before settling, waiting.

He was waiting for her to speak.

Waiting for her to explain why she had called him here so suddenly.

Maya's gaze lingered on him for a moment longer than necessary.

The crimson in her eyes pulsed faintly.

She swallowed.

"I want him."

Her other self's voice was soft, indulgent, pressing into the edges of her restraint.

"You do too."

Maya clenched her jaw.

She knew Astron didn't want that.

She knew she had to control herself.

Maya turned away before she could linger on him any longer, striding toward the small lacquered table near the window. The dormitory's lighting was dim, casting a soft, golden glow over the polished wood and the carefully arranged tea set she had prepared beforehand.

"You must be thirsty," she said, reaching for the porcelain teapot. Her fingers moved with precision, pouring the dark amber liquid into a pair of matching cups. The scent of steeped herbs and faint traces of honey wafted into the air, filling the space between them.

Astron remained silent, watching as she set the cup in front of him. He didn't reach for it immediately.

Instead, his violet gaze flickered briefly over the arrangement—the simple plate of nut biscuits, the warm tea—before returning to her. There was no shift in his expression, but Maya knew he was assessing the situation as he always did.

"Sit," she said, more of an instruction than an invitation.

Astron complied, lowering himself onto the chair opposite hers with his usual composed grace. He picked up the tea, inhaling the steam lightly before taking a measured sip. His lips barely moved, but Maya caught the subtle way his posture relaxed just the slightest degree.

She took a seat as well, crossing her legs as she picked up her own cup. The warmth seeped into her palms, grounding her, but it did little to cool the restless energy simmering beneath her skin.

A moment of silence passed between them—tense, unspoken.

Then, Maya exhaled and finally asked, "How have things been for you?"

Astron glanced at her over the rim of his cup. "Unchanged."

Her fingers drummed lightly against the table. "Really?"

He placed the cup down, his expression unreadable. "I wasn't targeted this time. I was studying in my room."

Maya's gaze sharpened. There was something too precise about the way he said that.

Maya's fingers drummed lightly against the table, her gaze steady on Astron, though the irritation curling beneath her skin was harder to ignore now. His answer—It was a possibility—lingered in the air, cool and composed, just like him.

She inhaled slowly, trying to suppress the flicker of frustration burning beneath her ribs.

"He knew."

The voice in her mind curled around her thoughts, smooth and insidious. "He watched everything unfold from the sidelines, waiting, calculating. And what did you do?"

Maya exhaled sharply, forcing herself to take another sip of tea. The warmth didn't settle her, not when her mind was already tangled in too many conflicting emotions.

Maya sighed, setting her cup down with a quiet clink against the lacquered table.

She didn't speak immediately.

Instead, she stared at the dark amber liquid, watching as the ripples stilled into silence.

Astron didn't press her. He never did. He simply waited, sipping his tea, his gaze unreadable.

The room felt too quiet, too still.

And yet, her thoughts were anything but.

She had tried.

She had tried to control this mess.

To keep the Sophomore-Freshmen conflict from spiraling into chaos.

But it hadn't worked.

Even with her influence, even with how many people respected her, listened to her—they didn't listen to her this time.

The words echoed in her mind, the frustration clawing at her insides.

"Maya, it's different this time."

"You don't understand—they went too far."

"We can't just let them walk over us."



No matter what she said, no matter how she tried to push for control, the response had been the same.

It was always the same.

Maya closed her eyes briefly before exhaling another slow breath, her fingers curling slightly against her lap.

"They ignored you."

Her other self's voice was quiet, almost amused, yet there was an underlying sharpness to it.

"And you thought they wouldn't, didn't you? You thought they respected you enough to listen. But in the end... they're just following their emotions. And look where that's gotten them."

Maya didn't respond.

Because she knew it was true.

The freshmen had pushed too far. That was undeniable. But she had hoped—hoped that the sophomores wouldn't react the way they did.

That they wouldn't make things worse.

And yet, here they were.

Surveillance. Suspended clubs. Isolation.

It wasn't just about discipline anymore. The academy was tightening its grip, trying to smother the flames before they burned out of control.

And Maya?

She hated it.

She hated being restrained.

She hated that her words hadn't been enough.

And most of all—

She hated that she understood why they had ignored her.

Astron watched her carefully, the dim light casting sharp shadows over his features.

"You're frustrated."

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"You're frustrated."

It wasn't a question.

Maya let out a quiet, breathy laugh, low and humorless. "That obvious?"

Astron set his cup down. "You tried to de-escalate, and they refused to listen."

Maya's gaze flickered toward him. He wasn't asking.

He already knew.

Of course, he knew.

"You let them do what they wanted instead," she murmured, her voice quiet, unreadable.

Astron didn't look away. "It was inevitable."

Inevitable.

Maya's fingers twitched.

There it was again—his distance.

That way he always spoke, as if he was watching everything from above, as if he wasn't a part of it but merely an observer.

"He didn't stop it either."

Her other self's voice curled at the edges of her thoughts, dark and laced with something close to satisfaction.

"You know that, right? He didn't stop it. Just like you couldn't."

Maya exhaled sharply. "You don't sound concerned."

Astron held her gaze, his violet eyes steady, unwavering.

"There are some things that are hard to control," he said, his voice even, calm. "One needs to accept that."

Maya's fingers stilled against her sleeve.

She looked at him then, truly looked at him, searching for something behind those detached, knowing words.

A quiet scoff left her lips, but it lacked real bite. "But you should do your best to control such things," she murmured. "Isn't that what you've said to me before?"

Astron didn't blink. "It is."

A pause.

"But sometimes, control is not an option," he continued. "And you just need to coexist with that fact."

Maya felt something settle deep in her chest—something heavy, something uncomfortable.

Because she knew exactly what he was implying.

It wasn't about the Sophomore-Freshmen conflict.

It was about her.

Her other self.

She had been trying. She had been trying so hard. She had spoken with her, acknowledged her, even started understanding her in ways she never thought she would.

And yet—

There was still a part of her that was scared.

A part of her that still resisted, that still feared what might happen if she let go completely.

And her other self knew.

"Hah."

The voice slithered through her mind, dark and amused. "What a sharp one, isn't he?"

Maya didn't move, but she could feel her other self curling around her thoughts, watching with something dangerously close to satisfaction.

"He sees through you, just like that. How fascinating."

Maya exhaled, barely above a whisper. "You think so?"

Her other self hummed in thought. "It's a rare thing, for someone to understand the things you refuse to admit to yourself. And yet, there he is, saying it like it's just simple fact."

A small smirk.

"How infuriatingly insightful of him."

Maya resisted the urge to sigh, rubbing her temple lightly before speaking.

"So, what?" she murmured. "You're saying I should just... let go?"

Astron tilted his head slightly, his gaze still steady. "I'm saying that fighting something that is inherently a part of you is a battle you can't win."

Maya felt her breath still.

He didn't phrase it as a warning.

He phrased it as a truth.

One that she wasn't sure she was ready to accept yet.

But her other self?

She laughed.

"Oh, I want him so much."

Maya's breath hitched.

It was happening again.

That slow, creeping hunger surged through her veins, pressing against the walls of her restraint like an unrelenting tide. Her fingers trembled slightly, curling into the fabric of her uniform as she fought the urge to move—to act.

Her breathing turned shallow, uneven.

The air in the room felt heavier, thick with something unseen.

"This is what you are."

Her other self's voice whispered through her thoughts, smooth and indulgent.

"You can suppress it, you can deny it, you can try to pretend it's not real—but we both know the truth, don't we?"

Maya clenched her teeth, her body stiffening as her vision pulsed with red.

No.

Not now.

Not in front of him.

Her breath shuddered as she tried to steady herself, but her lips parted before she could stop them.

"Junior..."

The word slipped past her throat, barely above a whisper.

Astron, still seated across from her, barely moved—but his violet gaze sharpened, locking onto her with quiet precision.

"Senior."

He received her words, unwavering.

She forced herself to look at him, forced herself to meet his gaze even as her body protested, as the gnawing hunger curled through her chest, demanding release.

"When we started this," Astron said, his voice as calm as ever, "what did I tell you?"

Maya didn't answer immediately.

Her hands tightened against her lap, her breath uneven.

What did he say?

What were his words?

And then—

She remembered.

"I will be there for your secret."

Maya's vision flickered.

Astron hadn't just been speaking empty reassurances.

He had always known.

From the moment she first confided in him, from the moment she let him see even a fraction of what lurked beneath the surface, he had known that this moment would come.

He wasn't afraid.

And that terrified her more than anything.

Slowly, deliberately, Astron lifted his hand, palm open, fingers extended toward her.

"Let me talk to her."

Maya's breath caught in her throat.

She knew what he meant.

He wasn't asking for an explanation.

He wasn't demanding control.

He was offering something far more dangerous.

Access.

Maya stared at him, her fingers twitching at her sides.



Her other self stilled.

And then—

A slow, sultry laugh curled through Maya's mind.

A slow, sultry laugh curled through Maya's mind.

But beneath it—

Maya could feel it.

The tremor in her other self's voice.

The barely-contained, shuddering anticipation.

"Finally."

It was a whisper, yet it resonated through her bones, curling around her thoughts like smoke, thick and intoxicating.

"He finally sees me... finally."

Maya's breath stilled.

She could feel the shift.

Her other self—who had always spoken with confidence, with hunger, with twisted amusement—was trembling.

Not from fear.

But from something far more dangerous.

Raw, consuming obsession.

Maya's grip tightened on her lap as her heartbeat pounded against her ribs.

This was the moment her other self had been waiting for.

For so long, she had been ignored, buried beneath Maya's control, only allowed to whisper from the corners of her mind.

But now—

Astron had acknowledged her.

Had spoken to her.

Had reached out for her.

And that alone shattered the fragile balance Maya had been maintaining.

A sharp, breathy inhale.

Her vision flickered—red, deep and overwhelming, flooding her senses.

The hunger that had been simmering beneath her skin erupted, demanding.

Maya's body tensed violently, her nails digging into her palms as she fought it, fought her.

"Oh, you shouldn't fight me right now, Maya."

Her other self's voice was strained, yet filled with something utterly euphoric.

"This is my moment."

A sharp, aching pulse spread through Maya's chest, her control slipping—slipping too fast.

She squeezed her eyes shut. No. Not here. Not in front of him.

But it was too late.

Her breath hitched. Her fingers trembled.

And then—

Maya's lips moved.

But it wasn't her voice that spoke.

"Finally."

It was softer, breathier.

Different.

Astron's expression remained steady, but his violet eyes sharpened.

His extended hand remained firm, unwavering.

"You are here."

Chapter 935 Finally

Maya's body stood still, but inside, her other self was trembling.

Not with fear. No. Fear had never been a part of her.

This was something else.

Something more raw. More consuming.

She had waited.

Waited so long.

When she had first awakened, she had no voice, no form—just a whisper in the depths of Maya's mind, a lingering shadow that could do nothing but feel. She had screamed, cried out, tried to reach, but Maya never heard her. The silence had been unbearable.

So she had learned. Adapted.

She had pressed against Maya's emotions, nudging them, twisting them, making her hunger when she didn't understand why, making her crave when she thought it was unnatural. The taste of blood, the scent of it, the need—it was all her, buried beneath layers of control.

And then the charm had come.

A bridge. A fragile, delicate link that had let her voice slip through, at last. She had spoken. She had been heard.

But it had still not been enough.

Because the one person she wanted to be seen by, the one person who mattered—

He still hadn't seen her.

Astron.

The first one she had ever seen when she opened her eyes.

The first one she had ever tasted.

And the only one she could taste.

Other blood was worthless. Foul. The mere thought of it churned her stomach in disgust, making her recoil in revulsion.

But his—

His blood was different.

It was intoxicating, rich, perfect. The only thing that had ever felt right.

She had endured in silence, trapped in the depths of Maya's mind, watching as Maya took everything—his attention, his trust, his presence.

And she had seethed.

Because he wasn't looking at her.

Because he didn't see her.

Until now.

"Let me talk to her."

His words had cut through the space between them like a blade, severing everything, burning through every wall that had kept her locked away.

It was time.

The moment she had waited for.

Her laughter spilled from Maya's lips, slow and sultry, curling through the air like a lingering ember. But beneath it, her own voice was shaking—unsteady, breathless with something dangerously close to euphoria.

He finally sees me.

Finally.

The hunger surged forward, overpowering, undeniable. She could feel Maya trying to resist, could feel the last desperate remnants of control clawing at the edges of her mind.

But it was useless.

This was her moment.

Her fingers stretched, flexing, feeling the weight of reality in a way she hadn't before. The sharp sensation of fabric against her skin, the crispness of the air, the lingering scent of him just beyond reach—it was all real.

She turned her gaze to him, finally free to meet his eyes without a filter, without a barrier.

Violet. Deep, endless, knowing.

Even now, he wasn't afraid.

And that made her shudder.

She took a step forward, slow and deliberate, her movements no longer stiff with restraint, but fluid, unhindered, entirely hers.

"Maya," he said, his voice even.

She smiled, but it wasn't Maya's smile. It was something sharper, something hungrier.

"No," she murmured, voice low, breathy with satisfaction.

Astron tilted his head slightly, observing, analyzing—always watching.

Her lips curled further, amusement flickering in her gaze.

"You're finally talking to me," she purred.

Her fingers twitched at her sides, and she had to stop herself from reaching for him too soon. Not yet. Not yet.

This was the first time he had acknowledged her, the first time he had truly seen her for what she was. The first time she had existed in his eyes.

She wanted to savor it.

Her body pulsed with something restless, something desperate. The hunger coiled within her, deeper than bloodlust, more consuming than thirst.

He was the only one she could have.

The only one she had ever wanted.

The only one that had ever made her feel alive.

And now, there was no Maya between them.

Only her.

She stepped closer, the room shrinking into nothing but the space between them.

Astron didn't move. He didn't retreat, didn't avert his gaze, didn't tense in defense. He just watched.

And she met his eyes—truly, completely.

Violet. Piercing. Unshaken.

Her lips parted, a slow breath escaping.

'He's looking at me.'

Not Maya.

Not the controlled, restrained, ever-rational Maya.

Me.

Her tongue flicked across her lips, slow and deliberate, tasting nothing but the memory of him. It had been too long. Far too long. More than a month since she had last drank from him. The hunger curled inside her, coiling tight, thrumming in her veins like a song she couldn't ignore.

'I can't let this continue.'

The ache, the starvation, the unbearable absence of his taste—it had gone on long enough.

"I am talking to you."

The words rolled off her tongue, soft but weighted, their meaning sinking into the space between them.



Astron didn't respond immediately.

He just stared.

His silence didn't unnerve her—it never had. It fascinated her. Because that was what he did. He understood things. Saw them before others did. And yet, even knowing what she was, what she wanted, what she had been denied—he stayed.

'He's not afraid of me.'

A slow shiver ran down her spine.

'Why is he not afraid?'

She moved, slow, deliberate, stepping closer, her body fluid and untethered by the stiffness of restraint.

Right now, she didn't know how she looked. Didn't know what expression played across her face.

But she knew one thing—

'It's not Maya's.'

And that was good.

She wanted him to see. To really see.

The one who had watched him from the dark.

The one who had waited, aching, burning, gnawing with unrelenting hunger.

The one who had screamed in silence while he spoke only to her other half.

Her fingers flexed at her sides, itching, eager, her body humming with restless energy.

'If I touch him now... will he pull away?'

The thought sent a sharp thrill through her.

She was here.

She was real.

And he was looking at her.

She exhaled slowly, almost tasting the air between them. The weight of his gaze settled against her skin, pressing into her, feeding something deep inside. A quiet, simmering satisfaction curled at the edges of her lips—this was real.

Her voice slipped into the silence, quiet but steady, laced with something heavy, something raw.

"For a long time..."

She took another step forward, slow, deliberate, savoring every inch that closed between them.

"...I was in the dark."

Her fingers twitched at her sides. Not yet. Not yet. But soon.

"I could only watch."

The words tasted bitter, but she let them spill from her lips anyway.

"I saw everything through her eyes, felt everything through her skin, but I was never truly there."

Her voice dipped lower, breathier, almost reverent.

"I couldn't speak to anyone."

Her eyes flickered, the weight of the confession pressing against her ribs. She had been trapped. Locked in the endless, suffocating silence of Maya's mind, her own existence reduced to nothing more than a whisper, a fleeting shadow of instinct.

Watching. Waiting.

For him.

Her eyes dragged over his face, searching for something—anything. A reaction, a shift, a crack in that steady, ever-knowing expression.

Nothing.

And yet, he hadn't moved.

Hadn't looked away.

Hadn't turned his back on her like Maya always did.

A sharp thrill coursed through her veins, hot and electric.

'He's listening. He's actually listening.'

Her breath shuddered, and something inside her—something that had been starving—screamed.

"You don't understand what that's like, do you?"

She let the words settle between them, the weight of them thick, unshakable.

"To exist—and yet not. To feel, to ache, to hunger, but to never be acknowledged."

Chapter 936 Finally

Astron shook his head.

"I know," he said, his voice calm, steady.

Her breath hitched.

His words settled over her like an unexpected weight, like something she hadn't prepared for, something she couldn't immediately process.

"You know?"

Her eyes locked onto his, searching, prying, trying to find the lie. Was he saying this just to pacify her? Was he simply playing along, saying what she wanted to hear?

But—she couldn't read him.

Nothing in his expression betrayed a falsehood. No hesitation, no wavering, no flicker of insincerity.

She hated that about him.

She loved that about him.

She wanted to tear through that exterior, break past the unreadable depths of his gaze and see what lay beneath.

But instead—

She found herself believing him.

Because why would he lie?

Because Astron never lied.

He exhaled softly, his violet gaze unwavering. "I have once been in a situation similar to yours. Trapped in some sort of... space, unable to influence anything, unable to be heard, unable to act. For a long time."

Her lips parted slightly, something shifting inside her, something strange, something... warm.

That feeling—it was new. And she didn't know if she liked it.

But before she could speak, before she could press him, his hand lifted.

Slowly. Deliberately.

He extended his index finger toward her, the movement precise, calculated. An offering.

"That is why," he murmured, "I am allowing you to do this."

Her breath stilled.

Her gaze locked onto his finger, her pupils dilating as the hunger surged, pressing against the walls of her restraint, clawing at her, screaming.

Her tongue darted out again, wetting her lips.

It was so close. So near. So tangible.

'It's been so long...'

Too long.

Her body trembled, a deep, aching need twisting inside her. She could feel the pressure building, the unbearable tightness in her chest, the gnawing hunger that had been festering, growing, suffocating her for over a month.

He was offering it to her.

His blood.

"You must be hungry."

His voice was calm. Unshaken.

"Don't hold it in."

Her breathing turned shallow, uneven.

But—

She didn't want his finger.

Maya had bitten him on the neck. Always on the neck.

Why should she—why would she—settle for something less?

A flicker of thought. A single, unrestrained impulse.

And then she moved.

A sharp burst of speed, a fluid, instinctual lunge—

Her hands grasped onto his shoulders, her body pressing into his as her lips found the place she knew best.

A sharp gasp filled the air.

His neck.

Her fangs sank into him.

The moment his blood surged through her, her mind broke.

Silence.

And then—

Ecstasy.

'This is it...'

A shudder wracked through her body, her grip tightening as the taste flooded her senses, thick and intoxicating, perfect.

'This is it.'

She barely registered the way Astron remained still beneath her, barely noticed the warmth of his skin under her hands, the steady rise and fall of his chest.

All she could feel—

All she could taste—

Was him.

His blood rushed into her like fire, coursing through her veins, filling every aching void, every unbearable craving that had gnawed at her for so long.

Nothing else had ever been enough.

No one else's blood had ever smelled good and she was sure that other bloods wouldn't taste right.

But this—

This was everything.

Warmth.

It spread through her like molten fire, curling around her bones, weaving through every inch of her body, filling the emptiness that had gnawed at her for so long.

So this is how it feels...

To drink his blood.

To sense him all around her.

To have him—not just as something she could watch from the shadows, not just as something distant and untouchable—but as something real.

His presence, his essence, his very being—flowing into her.

It was intoxicating.



A slow, shuddering breath escaped her as she drank deeper, her fingers curling against his shoulders, pressing herself closer, closer.

She couldn't stop.

Didn't want to stop.

The hunger had been too strong for too long, buried beneath layers of restraint, waiting, aching, desperate for release. And now—now that she finally had him—

Why would she ever let go?

The taste of him—rich, warm, perfect—swelled inside her, laced with something deeper, something she couldn't name, couldn't explain.

It was more than just blood.

It was him.

And she was consuming him.

The realization sent a fresh wave of heat through her, a sensation so overwhelming, so raw, she nearly shook from it.

She wanted more.

Needed more.

Her grip tightened, her fangs sinking deeper, drawing out another rush of warmth that flooded her tongue, slid down her throat, seeped into her very being.

Yes.

Yes.

She had been starving.

This was what she needed.

What she had always needed.

The pulse of his blood throbbed against her lips, his scent flooding her senses, drowning her in him.

And still—

She drank.

More.

And more.

And more.

She could feel his heartbeat, steady, unwavering—his life coursing through her.

Filling her.

Becoming a part of her.

'More. I need more. I need—'

A sharp, sudden pulse—a warning.

Her body tensed.

Something inside her twisted, an aching pull that sent a jolt through her chest—pain?  
No, not pain. Something else.

But she didn't stop.

Couldn't stop.

Didn't want to stop.

Because stopping meant losing this.

Losing him.

Warmth.

It spread through her, deeper than before, seeping into every corner of her being.

She drank.

And more.

His pulse was steady, unwavering, thrumming against her lips, against her fangs, against her very core.

She was drowning in him, sinking, losing herself in the intoxicating sensation of having him this close, of finally taking what had been denied for so long.

And then—

His voice cut through the haze.

"It must have been quite hard, holding it in for the past month."

A slow, shuddering breath escaped her, muffled against his neck.

Was it hard?

Yes.

But also—

'...I was getting used to it.'

The hunger was still there, always there, but it wasn't everything anymore.

Ever since the charm—ever since she could talk to Maya, reach her, interact with her—this unbearable, gnawing desire wasn't the only thing she could feel. She wasn't just some primal instinct locked away, screaming for blood. She could think. She could speak.

She could exist.

Even so—

She nodded.

Because it had been hard.

Astron exhaled lightly, his breath brushing against her hair. "You did a good job."

And then—

A weight.

Soft.

Gentle.

His hand pressed lightly against her head, fingers sinking into her hair as he patted her.

She froze.

A sharp tremor ran through her, something different from hunger, different from thirst, different from anything she had ever known.

'...What is this?'

Her fingers twitched against his shoulders.

His blood—his perfect blood—had given her ecstasy, had filled the emptiness inside her, had become something she craved more than anything.

But this—

This feeling, this strange, unfamiliar warmth curling in her chest, unfurling with each slow, careful motion of his hand against her head—

Even his blood hadn't given her this.

Her body shook.

A small, involuntary tremble, her breath hitching against his skin.

'Why...?'

Why was this making her feel so strange?

So weak?

So overwhelmed?

She had wanted his blood.

But this—this touch, this acknowledgment—

"Pah..."

The soft sound escaped her lips as she pulled back, her fangs slipping from his neck. A thin bridge of saliva stretched between them, catching the dim light before snapping, vanishing into nothing.

She could still taste him.

His blood lingered on her tongue, warm and intoxicating, coating her senses in something deep, something undeniable.

But she barely noticed.

Because when she looked up—

He was looking at her.

His violet eyes met hers, steady, cold, unreadable.

A sharp contrast to the heat pooling in her chest, to the way her breath trembled, to the lingering sensation of his hand against her head.

She felt his blood inside her, still surging through her veins, warming her from the inside out.

And yet—

It was that touch she couldn't shake.

Her lips parted slightly, an unfamiliar tightness catching in her throat as she searched his gaze, trying—desperate—to find something. A crack, a flicker, a sign that he was affected.

But he simply watched.

Unmoved.

Unshaken.

His expression, his presence, his very being—calm.

And she...

She didn't understand.

Because he had felt it, hadn't he?

That small tremor in her body, the way she had nearly collapsed from a simple touch.

She had never trembled before.

Not from hunger.

Not from thirst.

Not from anything.

And yet—his hand had made her shake.

The warmth still lingered on her scalp, a phantom sensation that refused to fade, embedding itself deeper, curling around her like a quiet, unshakable chain.

Her breath hitched, her lips still slightly parted, as she whispered, barely a breath—

"...Why?"

She didn't even know what she was asking.

Why had he patted her?

Why had it felt like that?

Why was it affecting her more than his blood?

His gaze remained steady, unwavering, as if he saw straight through her, straight into her.

Chapter 937 Finally

Astron stared into her eyes, his own gaze calm, steady—unwavering as the silence stretched between them. He could feel the warmth of her breath against his skin, could still sense the lingering traces of her fangs from where they had sunk into his neck. Yet, he didn't move. He only watched.

Her reaction to his touch had been unexpected. The way she had trembled—not from hunger, not from need, but from something else. Something more fragile. More uncertain.

And as he stood there, feeling the weight of the moment settle around them, memories began to stir.

The first time he met Senior Maya.

It had been nothing out of the ordinary at the time. A simple exchange—though he had thought of her as someone who was a bit different....



But things had taken a turn.

At some point, she had changed.

She had needed his help—and he had given it.

At the time, he hadn't thought much of it. He had simply acted, as he always did, in the most efficient way possible. She had been captured, her life threatened by a vampire. He had intervened, and in the process, she had been turned into something else—a half-vampire, something neither entirely human nor fully monster.

And that had set everything into motion.

Her visits. Her sudden fixation. The way her presence began to weave itself into his daily routine, how she would always look at him with those expectant eyes, waiting—watching.

He hadn't understood it then.

But now, looking back—seeing the way she looked at him now, the way her body trembled not from thirst, but from something deeper—he began to piece it together.

There was something unnatural about the way she gravitated toward him.

Something missing.

And that's when it hit him.

Love.

It was an emotion he had never fully understood. It was something abstract, something foreign—something that had no place in his life. In the past, when people spoke of love, it had always seemed distant, unattainable, irrelevant.

But then, Irina had entered his life.

And Irina—she had begun teaching him things. Things he had never thought to learn.

She had made him realize that emotions weren't always logical, that sometimes, people acted in ways that defied reason. She had shown him that love wasn't something that could be categorized neatly—it wasn't about obligation, or dependence, or instinct.

And now, as he looked into her eyes—the one who had been trapped in Maya's body, the one who had waited in the dark for so long—he understood.

This wasn't love.

Senior Maya's feelings... were not love.

It was something else.

Something built on instinct. On obsession. On hunger.

A bond formed not out of choice, but out of necessity. A connection forged not in understanding, but in need.

His presence, his existence, his very blood—he was the first thing she had ever tasted.

And she had latched onto him, because he was the only thing that had ever felt real to her.

It wasn't love.

It was fixation.

Her breath trembled against his skin.

Astron could see it—feel it. The way her fingers tightened against his shoulders, the way her pupils dilated, how her body remained close, unsure if it should pull away or press further.

Something was changing within her.

Something neither of them fully understood.

For the first time, this other side of Maya wasn't just driven by hunger, wasn't just overwhelmed by the need to consume.

She was experiencing something new.

And it terrified her.

She had never trembled before.

Not from thirst. Not from fear.

But from this.

Astron's thoughts remained steady, his violet eyes unwavering as he observed every shift in her expression, every flicker of emotion that passed through her mismatched gaze.

She was trying to grasp what had just happened. The blood—his blood—had given her what she had craved, but it hadn't been everything.

The way she had reacted to his touch—that had been different.

It wasn't hunger.

It wasn't instinct.

It was something else entirely.

And that was exactly why Astron couldn't act as he had before.

Before, he had entertained the thought of Maya's feelings—had taken them into consideration because she had helped him when no one else had.

Even Irina hadn't been there in those moments when Maya had.

Back then, he had lacked the strength to look deeper into what her attachment really meant. He had assumed, perhaps foolishly, that there was truth in her emotions, that she had chosen to feel the way she did.

And so, he had hesitated.

He had let things continue as they were, because Maya had been there.

But now...

Now that he understood, he couldn't do the same anymore.

Because he had learned.

Because Irina had taught him.

She had changed things. Shifted his perspective.

She had done things for him—things he hadn't even realized he needed.

And because of that, he couldn't simply brush aside her presence in his life either.

To continue acting as he had before—to treat this side of Maya with the same consideration, the same careful indulgence—felt wrong.

Because it would mean disregarding Irina's efforts.

And he couldn't do that.

Not anymore.

But he was still unsure.

He had learned much—but not enough.

He needed more.

More understanding. More time. More observation.

And perhaps, more research.

Because this—whatever this was—was something unprecedented.

Maya was not just a half-vampire.

This side of her...

It was something entirely different.

And Astron needed to know what.

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His hand moved again.

Slow. Steady.

This time, it didn't just rest on her head.

It slid down, gentle but firm, pressing lightly against her back.

A silent gesture.

A silent acceptance.

Her breath caught, her body frozen in place as the warmth spread further, deeper, curling around her spine like something insidious, something inescapable.

He's... embracing me.

Not tightly. Not possessively.

Just—there.

A touch that wasn't forceful, wasn't demanding.

A touch that told her he was listening.

A slow, unbearable heat rose to her throat, choking her in a way his blood never had.

And then—

His voice, quiet, steady.

"Talk to me."

She shivered.

She hadn't realized how much she wanted to hear those words.

How much she had wanted someone to say that—to her.

Her fingers twitched against his uniform, gripping lightly, grounding herself in the solid warmth beneath them.

For a moment, she hesitated.

Not because she didn't want to speak.

But because she didn't know how.

The hunger, the thirst, the desperation—those things had always been simple. Raw. Instinctual.

But this?

This new, trembling, unfamiliar sensation curling inside her, making her chest tight, her throat ache—

This was something she had no name for.

And yet—he was waiting.

Not forcing, not demanding.

Just waiting.

A slow exhale. A steadying breath.

And then—she spoke.

"When I first opened my eyes... the first thing I saw was you."

She felt him listen.

Felt the way his presence remained steady, unwavering.

"I couldn't move. Couldn't speak. I didn't even know what I was."

Her fingers clenched lightly against his shoulder.

"I just knew that you were there."

Her voice grew quieter, like a confession slipping through the cracks of a long-buried secret.

"I could only watch through Maya. See through her, hear through her, feel through her."

Her throat tightened, her breath turning uneven.

"But no one could see me."

Her arms trembled at her sides.

"No one even knew I was there."

The weight of those words pressed against her, curling around her throat, squeezing tight.

"I screamed." Her voice broke, just a little. "I screamed, and no one heard me. I cried, and no one answered. I existed, but I was nothing."



She swallowed hard.

"Except when I was near you."

### Chapter 938 Finally

Astron nodded, the motion slow, deliberate. His hand remained steady against her back, his presence grounding, unwavering.

"When I saved Maya that time," he said, his voice even, calm, as though he had long understood the truth before anyone else had, "she was in the process of transforming into a vampire."

Her breath stilled.

His voice, steady and measured, settled into the space between them, pulling at something deep inside her.

"And since the transformation was interrupted halfway," he continued, "I had always assumed that her body changed. That she became a vampire, but incomplete."

He paused, letting the weight of his words sink in.

"That was my initial assumption."

She listened.

Every word, every syllable, felt as if it carried something important.

Something that she had long wondered.

Astron's gaze remained steady, his voice calm, as if he had already turned this over in his mind countless times.

"Since her body changed, she naturally became a vampire, and her instincts began taking over from time to time," he said. "At first, I didn't think much of it. It seemed... normal."

Her breath slowed as she listened, her body still pressed against him, absorbing his words, his warmth.

"I assumed that was simply part of the transformation process," he continued, his tone quiet, measured. "That it was just a matter of time before she fully adapted."

A pause.

"But the more I researched, the more I started to suspect something wasn't right."

His hand, still resting lightly against her back, shifted slightly. Not in hesitation—Astron never hesitated—but in careful emphasis, as if guiding her through the truth he had already reached.

"The concept of drinking blood until near-madness," he said, his voice dipping lower, "isn't a normal vampire trait. Especially not for a Duke-class vampire."

Her body tensed at that.

Because she knew.

She had always known.

The hunger that clawed at her wasn't simply a thirst—it was a void.

A desperate, all-consuming obsession.

Duke-class vampires were powerful, disciplined, capable of controlling their cravings. Maya's body should have adjusted. Her instincts should have been manageable.

But they weren't.

That unbearable ache, that maddening fixation—it wasn't natural.

And he had seen it.

Astron continued, his voice calm but laced with quiet certainty.

"That's when I understood—there was a problem."

A slow breath left her lips, something heavy curling inside her.

"I thought Maya was in that state because of an incomplete transformation," he admitted. "That she simply hadn't fully become what she was meant to be."

Her grip against his uniform twitched, tightening.

"But what if..."

His next words hung in the air, sinking into the very core of her being.

"What if her transformation didn't just affect her body?"

Her fingers clenched.

"What if it also formed in her consciousness?"

The room felt too quiet.

Too still.

Her heartbeat thudded in her ears, the weight of his words pressing into something deep, something she had never been able to name.

Because everything—everything—made sense now.

Her existence.

Her presence.

The reason she had felt separate from Maya, the reason her emotions weren't just instincts—they were hers.

The way she could think. Speak. Want.

She wasn't just a twisted instinct clawing at the edges of Maya's mind.

She was a consciousness.

A being born alongside Maya's transformation.

Not just a parasite of hunger.

Something real.

Her breath came shallow, unsteady, the realization settling into her bones.

And Astron—

Astron had seen it.

Understood it.

Accepted it.

His voice softened, but his words were as unwavering as ever.

"The way she acted was too dual," he said. "Too unnatural, as if she became someone else entirely."

Her vision blurred slightly, something unfamiliar pressing against her chest.

"So I realized—becoming a vampire isn't just about the body."

His fingers pressed lightly against her back, grounding her.

"It's also about the mind."

Her breath trembled, her body shuddering against him.

Because if that was true—if she wasn't just a mistake, wasn't just an uncontrolled instinct—

Then she wasn't just Maya's hunger.

She was something more.

She was someone.

Her fingers twitched against his uniform.

"Really...?"

The word left her lips softer than she had intended, quiet, uncertain.

She had acted bold before. Had lunged at him without hesitation, had spoken to him with confidence, had laughed with satisfaction at finally being seen.

But now—standing before him, hearing those words, the act of boldness and recklessness vanished.

Because this moment—this truth—

It was real.

Astron nodded. "Yes."

His hand didn't leave her back, steadying her, grounding her. "You yourself are a separate being from Maya." His voice was calm, unwavering. "You share the same body, yet your powers are different."

Her breath caught.

A separate being.

Not just an instinct.

Not just a hunger.

A being.

"...."

She had no words.

Only a quiet, unsettled silence.

Astron's violet gaze remained fixed on her, unshaken. "You are different," he said. "I can see that."

His voice lowered slightly, as if drawing her closer to the truth she already knew.

"And you can see that too, can't you?"

Her fingers clenched against his uniform, her breath slow and heavy.

Yes.

She could.

She had always known.

Maya wasn't like her.

She wasn't bold.

She wasn't reckless.

She wasn't driven.

Astron was directing the conversation there now—slowly, deliberately. And she knew why.

Because he knew.

He had seen it too.

Maya was different.

Weaker.

Hesitant.

Always holding back, always clinging to control, always second-guessing herself.

And it angered her.

Her other self hated it.

Because Maya could have everything—but she never reached for it.

She had seen it so clearly that day.

When Irina and Sylvie had come to visit him in the infirmary.

When Irina had confronted him, standing before him, speaking without hesitation, without fear.

Her fingers clenched tighter against his uniform, her breath uneven, trembling—not from weakness, but from something deeper, something boiling.

Because she knew.

Maya wasn't like her.

Maya's feelings were complicated, tangled with uncertainty, hesitation, and restraint. Maya didn't reach for him, didn't crave him the way she did. And it wasn't because she didn't care. It wasn't because she was indifferent.

It was because Maya simply didn't have the drive.

The fire.



The need.

That desire—the one that burned through her veins, the one that made her starve whenever he wasn't near, the one that made her obsess—that was hers. Not Maya's. Hers.

And yet—

She couldn't have him.

Even now, standing here, in his embrace, feeling his warmth, tasting his blood still thick on her tongue—she couldn't have him.

The realization made something inside her twist, coil, snap.

Her fingers curled into fists against his chest. Her voice, when she spoke, was low, strained.

"...I want to be close to you."

She could feel his steady, measured breathing. Could feel his pulse—her pulse now, because his blood was inside her, coursing through her, making her feel more alive than she had ever felt before.

And yet—

She still felt the distance.

Astron nodded, his hand still resting against her back, his voice just as calm as always.

"You want to be close to me as much as possible, isn't that the case?"

Her breath hitched.

Yes.

She wanted him.

Not in a vague, distant way—not in the way Maya hesitated, not in the way Maya second-guessed every single emotion she had toward him.

She wanted him wholly.

Completely.

Without question.

Without restraint.

Without hesitation.

"Yes."

The word left her lips like a vow.

And yet, before she could revel in it, before she could reach for more, his next words cut through her like a knife.

"But you can't."

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"But you can't."

The heat surging through her body, the high of his blood still in her veins, the satisfaction of finally being seen—everything halted.

She stilled, body tense, her breath caught somewhere between a snarl and a whimper.

"Why?"

The single word was sharper than it should have been, edged with something violent, something furious.

Why?

Why couldn't she?

She had waited.

Suffered.

Starved.

And still, still, she was being told she couldn't.

Why?

Why?!

Her nails dug into the fabric of his uniform, frustration curling inside her like a storm, dark and volatile. She had seen it. All of it.

She had seen Irina standing before him, standing too close. Had seen Sylvie by his side, watching him with those eyes.

And they could.

They could stand beside him. Speak with him. Laugh with him. Touch him.

But she couldn't.

She wasn't allowed to.

She had no form, no presence, no existence outside of Maya's hesitation and restraint.

She was forced to watch.

Always watch.

Her breathing turned heavier, unsteady, her grip tightening further.

She hated it.

She hated it.

She hated how they could have him. They could stand next to him, be around him, as if they had some kind of right.

As if they were stealing him from her.

Taking something that should have been hers.

The thought surged through her like a wave of fire, blinding, consuming, suffocating in its intensity.

She wanted to kill them.

Erase them.

Rip them apart until they didn't exist.

Because he was hers.

The first one she had ever seen.

The first one she had ever tasted.

The only one she could ever taste.

Why should they get to exist around him? Why should they be allowed to breathe the same air, speak his name, stand beside him—

When she couldn't?

Her breath shuddered, her grip tightening, her fingers curling into the fabric of his uniform. Her voice, when it came, was a whisper—a tremor laced with venom, with raw, unfiltered rage.

"Why?"

Her body moved before she even processed it.

One second, she was gripping his uniform. The next, she had shoved forward, her strength surging too easily, too naturally.

A dull thud echoed through the room as she tackled him down.

The sheer force of it sent them both crashing onto the wooden floor, but only one of them struggled to adjust.

Astron.

For the first time, he had been forced to react.

For the first time, he wasn't the one in control.

And she felt it.

She felt it.

The way her strength overwhelmed him, the way she had taken him down effortlessly.

She was stronger.

Not just by a little.

By a lot.

And the realization sent a sharp, burning thrill racing through her veins.

Because Maya—\*\*weak, hesitant Maya—\*\*had never understood this.

Had never understood what she was truly capable of.

But she did.

She loomed over him now, straddling his waist, her hands planted on either side of his head, caging him in. Her breath came fast, uneven, burning with frustration, with fury, with something dangerously close to satisfaction.

His violet eyes stared up at her, calm, unwavering—even now.

And that only made it worse.

Her jaw clenched, her fingers digging into the floor beside him.

"Why?" she repeated, louder this time, rawer, her voice trembling with anger. "Why can they stand beside you? Why can they talk to you, touch you, be near you—when I can't?"

She could feel it, the heat of his body beneath her, the solid weight of him pressed against the floor.

He was here.

She was here.

For the first time—she was real.

And yet—she still couldn't have him.

Her breathing turned ragged, frustration and obsession coiling into something unbearable.

"You let them," she whispered, her voice shaking. "You let them stay beside you, and you look at them—but not me."

Her fingers twitched.

Her body was burning.

And he was so close.

Her hunger had always been about blood before, about taste. But now, it was something else, something far more dangerous, something deeper than thirst—

It was possession.

It was need.

She needed him to see her.

Not Maya.

Her.

She had waited, suffered, screamed into the void for so long. And the moment she was finally free, the moment she was finally able to speak, to touch, to exist—

She was still being denied.

She trembled above him, her vision flickering red, her instincts screaming at her to take him, to make him hers, to sink her fangs into him again, to claim him in the only way she knew how.

And yet—

He just stared.

Calm.

Silent.

\*\*\*\*\*

Astron lay still beneath her, violet eyes unwavering as he took in every detail—the tension in her arms, the way her breath came too fast, the trembling restraint just barely holding her back.

This side of Maya.

This obsession.



It was far more dangerous than he had initially thought.

His mind processed it all, analyzing her behavior with cold efficiency. The way her hunger had shifted, how it was no longer just about blood but about something more. Possession. Control. An unrelenting fixation.

Her eyes were wild, her entire body trembling with need—not for sustenance, but for something deeper, something far more dangerous.

'She is unstable.'

That much was obvious.

But what was also obvious—was that she was useful.

His breathing remained even, measured, as he allowed himself a moment of detachment.

For the past few months, he had begun to understand emotions, attachments—how people formed bonds, how they acted based on feeling rather than logic. Slowly, through his experiences with Irina, with Sylvie, with Ethan, he had started to grasp something beyond efficiency, beyond survival.

And yet—

That part of him was still there.

The part that had been raised as a number.

The part that had learned to see things not as people, not as relationships—but as assets.

And that part of him looked at the trembling girl above him, at the sheer power she radiated in this moment, at the obsession that burned so deeply within her that it could override reason—

And it whispered to him.

She is useful.

Astron's fingers twitched slightly against the floor, his mind already calculating.

Maya's other side was a liability if left unchecked. That much was clear. With the way the academy operated, with how tightly it controlled dangerous elements, if she lost control—if she revealed too much—they would know.

And that was exactly what he had orchestrated from the beginning.

He had let this unfold. Let the academy notice. Because that was what he had wanted.

Control.

Over the situation.

Over her.

But she was too unpredictable, too raw in this state. If she was left as she was now, she would self-destruct.

'Then how do I handle it?'

His mind sorted through the options. Suppression wouldn't work. Restraint wouldn't either. This side of Maya had spent too long being ignored, too long being denied. If he forced her back into silence, it would only make her worse.

She needed to believe she had something.

A purpose.

A place at his side.

A reason to obey.

His gaze remained locked onto hers, his voice calm, deliberate, controlled.

\*\*\*\*\*

Astron lay beneath her, unshaken, unwavering, his violet eyes locked onto hers with quiet intensity.

She could feel it—his stillness.

It wasn't fear. It wasn't hesitation.

It was calculation.

He was watching.

Measuring.

Understanding.

And it only made the fire inside her burn hotter, her fingers twitching against the floor, her breathing erratic.

Her hunger had changed. It wasn't just about blood anymore—it was about him.

All of him.

She wanted all of him.

So why—why was he denying her?

Her voice came out in a whisper, low and trembling with something raw, something unstable.

"What if I just kill them?"

Her fingers curled into fists.

"Then, will you stay beside me?"

Her words lingered in the air like a dangerous promise, a whispered plea edged with something far darker.

Because she meant it.

If they were the reason she couldn't have him, if they were the obstacles standing between them—

Then she would erase them.

One by one.

Until there was nothing left but her and him.

She saw the flicker in his eyes. The way his pupils shifted slightly, the briefest change in his breathing—

And then—

He moved.

Faster than she could register.

Faster than she could react.

One moment, she was straddling him, caging him in—

And the next—

His arms were around her.

Tight. Secure. Unyielding.

His scent, his warmth, his presence—everywhere.

Her breath hitched, her entire body stiffening as he pulled her against him, his hold firm but not suffocating.

It wasn't restraint.

It wasn't dominance.

It was something far worse.

Something gentle.

His voice, when it came, was quiet, steady.

"You do know it's not about them."

Her fingers trembled.

No. No, it has to be.

It had to be about them.

Because if it wasn't—if there was another reason—

Then it meant—

It was about her.

His hand moved against her back, slow, deliberate. Not possessive, not controlling—just... there.

A quiet tether, keeping her from sinking too deep, from unraveling completely.

"You can't be with me," he murmured, his breath warm against her ear, "because if you do, then the whole world will hunt you."

Her entire body stilled.

His next words came softer, slower, laced with something almost... careful.

"And I don't want you to be hunted."

Chapter 940 Finally

"You can't be with me," he murmured, his breath warm against her ear, "because if you do, then the whole world will hunt you."

Her entire body stilled.

"And I don't want you to be hunted."

The moment she heard those words—"I don't want you to be hunted"—her body trembled.

A sharp, involuntary shudder ran through her, something deep, something visceral.

It wasn't from fear.

It wasn't from anger.

It was something worse.

Something she couldn't place.

Because she had always known.

She had known from the very start that Maya and Astron had tried to hide her. That whenever Maya felt herself slipping, she would force control back, suppressing her, pushing her down.

She had known that they were afraid of what she was.

Afraid of what would happen if she was revealed.

And she had hated it.

She had resented being treated like something that needed to be contained.

Like something dangerous.

But hearing it like this—

Hearing it from him—

Feeling the steady warmth of his hands against her back, the solid weight of his presence as he held her together—

She shook again.

Her breath hitched, her fingers twitching against his uniform, gripping at nothing, clinging to something she couldn't even name.

It was suffocating.

This feeling was suffocating.

Because it wasn't rejection.

It wasn't disgust.

It wasn't fear.

It was concern.

For her.

For her.

Not for Maya.

Not for the hesitation.

Not for the restraint.

For the part of her that no one was supposed to see.

For the part of her that wasn't supposed to exist.

And then—



His voice again, calm, steady, undeniable.

"I don't want you to be gone, or be locked up permanently."

His hand moved, slow, deliberate, a careful weight pressing against the back of her head as he patted her.

The motion sent another shiver down her spine, something strange, something foreign, something that made her shake more.

'This... feeling... again...'

She had never known it.

Had never even considered it.

Her world had always been hunger and anger and obsession.

Wanting and never having.

But this—

This quiet, steady concern that wrapped around her, that settled into her chest and made it ache—

She didn't know what to do with it.

Her lips parted, but no sound came.

No rage.

No demands.

Just silence.

And then—

"Really?"

Her voice was hoarse, unsteady.

She hated that.

Hated how weak she sounded.

Hated that the fire inside her was flickering, cracking under something she didn't understand.

She forced the next words out, forced them through her teeth.

"Doing it for me?"

Astron didn't hesitate.

Didn't waver.

Didn't leave her any space to doubt.

"Yes."

His voice was firm, certain, like it was fact.

And it made her tremble all over again.

His arms didn't loosen around her, didn't shift away—

He held her.

Not to restrain her.

Not to control her.

Not to force her back into the dark.

But simply to be there.

"Do you think I don't care about you?" he asked, his voice quieter, but no less steady.

Her breath hitched again.

"If I didn't really care about you, would I be here to give you my blood?"

His fingers pressed lightly against her back—once, twice, slow, steady.

"Would I be here to listen to you?"

Something inside her snapped.

Not in the way it usually did.

Not in anger.

Not in madness.

Not in desperation.

But in recognition.

Because he meant it.

Every single word.

She didn't know how long she stayed there, trembling in his arms, her breath uneven, her mind spiraling in ways she had never experienced before. The warmth of his touch, the weight of his words—everything felt like it was pulling her deeper into something she didn't understand, something she couldn't understand.

And then—

His voice, steady as ever, broke the silence between them.

"I don't want you to disappear."

Her fingers twitched, her body stiffening slightly against him. She had expected him to say something else—to continue coaxing her back into silence, to remind her that she needed to hide, to suppress herself as she always had. But instead, his words wrapped around her like chains, binding her in a way she couldn't shake off.

"I need you."

She felt herself tense further, something sharp catching in her chest.

Need?

Her?

The idea felt foreign, unfamiliar—wrong. No one had ever needed her. Not truly. She had been a shadow, an unwanted fragment clinging to existence, forced to watch as Maya lived a life she couldn't touch. The thought of someone needing her was incomprehensible, like trying to grasp at smoke.

"Need... me?" Her voice came out quiet, almost hesitant, like the words didn't belong to her.

"Yes," Astron said, his tone unwavering. "There are countless dangers around me. People who are targeting me. For that, I will need your strength."

Her strength. Not Maya's.

She blinked, her breath catching, her grip tightening on his uniform. Her strength—hers. Not the controlled, rational, hesitant power that Maya wielded, but her raw, unrestrained, uncontested power. He wasn't asking for compromise, for control, for restraint.

He was asking for her.

"Mine... Not Maya's?" she whispered, almost afraid of the answer.

And then, without hesitation, without any doubt, he spoke the words that sent her world crashing down.

"You are not Maya."

The moment she heard it, she flinched.

Her entire body tensed, her breath freezing in her throat.

'You are not Maya...'

The words echoed through her like a crack of thunder, like something deep and undeniable had just been spoken into existence.

She had spent so long fighting to be seen, to be acknowledged, to claw her way out of the shadows. But no matter what, she had always been tied to Maya, a lingering ghost beneath her surface, a fragment, a whisper of something that shouldn't have been.

But now—

Now, Astron had named her.

He had separated her.

He hadn't called her a mistake. He hadn't told her she was just a hunger, an instinct, a part of Maya that should be erased. He had spoken as if she existed.

As if she were real.

Her hands trembled against his chest, her entire body shaking—not from rage, not from bloodlust, but from something far deeper, something raw and overwhelming.

She was not Maya.

She was herself.

And he saw it.

She pressed her forehead against his shoulder, her breath unsteady, her body wracked with something she didn't know how to handle. No one had ever given her this. No one had ever given her acknowledgment.

And now that she had it—

Now that she had heard those words, she could never go back.

Her fingers curled into his uniform, gripping tightly, as if grounding herself in him was the only thing keeping her from falling apart. The warmth of his embrace wasn't suffocating—it wasn't restraining—it was real. A tether, a silent understanding.

For a moment, she allowed herself to exist. Allowed herself to sink into the warmth of his embrace, to feel the steady rhythm of his heartbeat against her. She had spent so long

fighting, clawing her way toward him, demanding to be seen. And now that she finally had it—

She never wanted to let go.

But then—

"But..."

Astron's voice cut through the haze, steady and firm, a tether pulling her back.

Her body stiffened slightly, her grip on his uniform tightening. But? What did he mean, but?

"It's not the time right now," he continued, his voice calm but deliberate. "For now, you can't."

Her breath caught.

Can't?

She felt the flicker of her previous frustration curling at the edges of her mind, the burning need to resist, to argue, to fight back.

But—

His grip on her back remained warm. Present. Not as restraint, not as rejection, but as a silent assurance.

"You'll endure for me, won't you?"

His voice was low, quiet, threading through her like something solid, something unshakable.

She should have fought it. She should have resisted. She should have refused.

But instead—

Her lips parted, and the word slipped past them before she even thought about it.

"Yes."

A trance.

That's what it felt like.

Like she had fallen into something deep, something inevitable, something she couldn't escape.

"Good," he murmured.

She barely had time to process the word before she felt it—

His hand shifting.

His fingers lifting.

And then—

The tip of his index finger pressing gently against her lips.

"Here." His voice was softer now, closer. "Take a drink. And leave the control to Maya."

Her pupils dilated, her body shuddering slightly at the weight of his words.



"But don't forget," he continued, his violet eyes locked onto hers, unwavering. "I will be there."

The promise coiled around her like a chain, like a lifeline.

He would be there.

She wasn't disappearing.

She wasn't being erased.

She wasn't being buried again.

He would be there.

That was enough.

Her lips parted slightly, and without hesitation, she took his finger into her mouth.

Her fangs sank in.

A sharp puncture, the familiar warmth of his blood flooding against her tongue, into her throat, curling through her veins.

And this time—

It wasn't just about the hunger.

It wasn't just about possession.

It was trust.

Pure. Unquestioning. Absolute.