## 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.

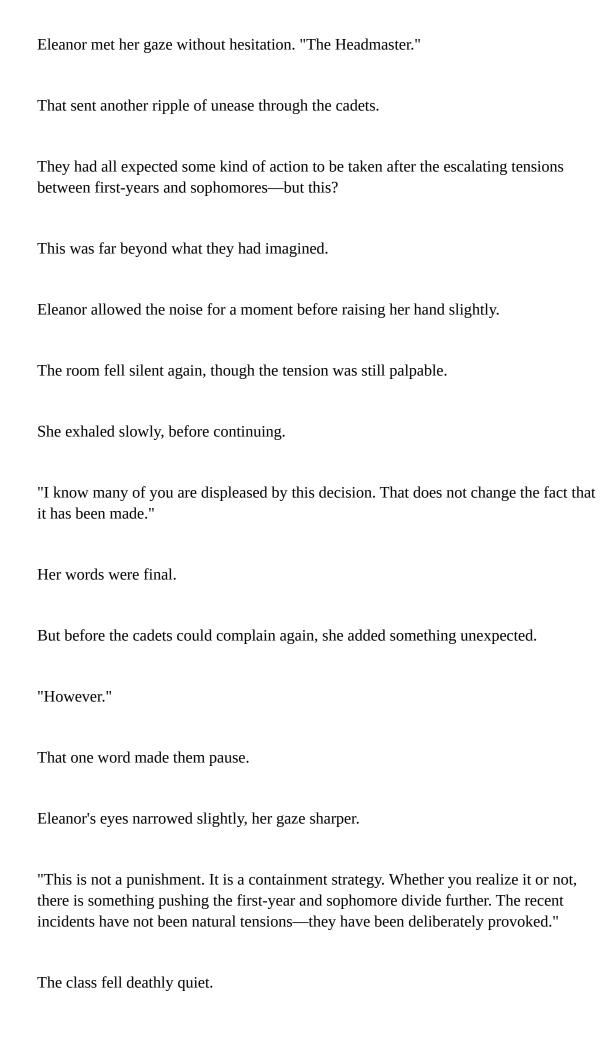
Irina grinned, because oh, she saw that. "You don't have to react," she mused, nudging him slightly. "But I saw that." Astron exhaled slowly, as if already regretting letting that moment slip. "...Your word choice is questionable," he said flatly. Irina just laughed. "Hah! Just take the compliment, InfernoKnight." 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. \*\*\*\* 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.

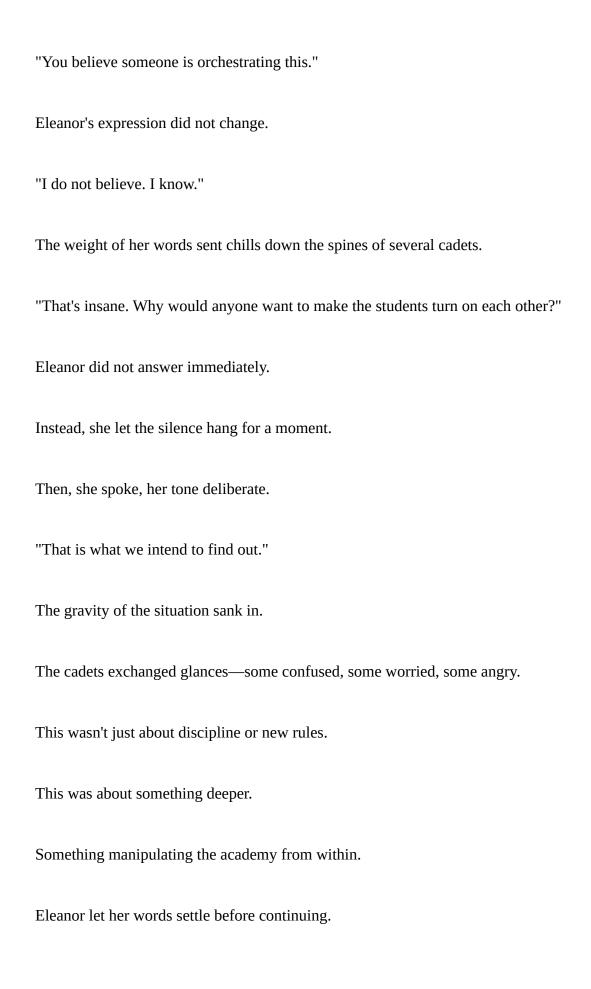
As soon as Eleanor stepped into the room, the murmur of conversation immediately

died.



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?"





"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.

\*\*\*

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.

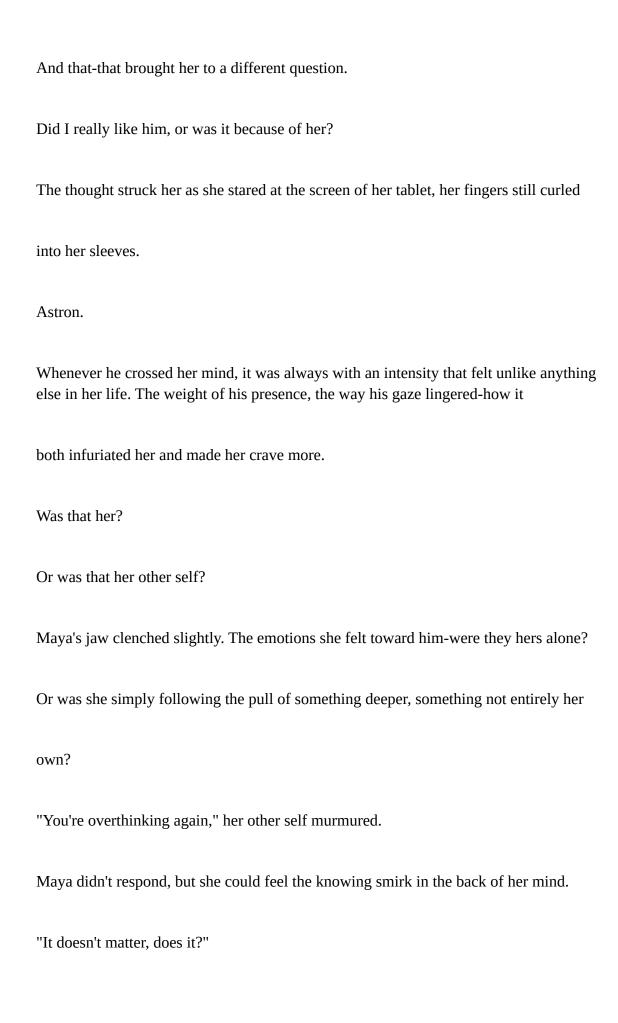
"You're treating us like criminals! We weren't the ones starting fights-"

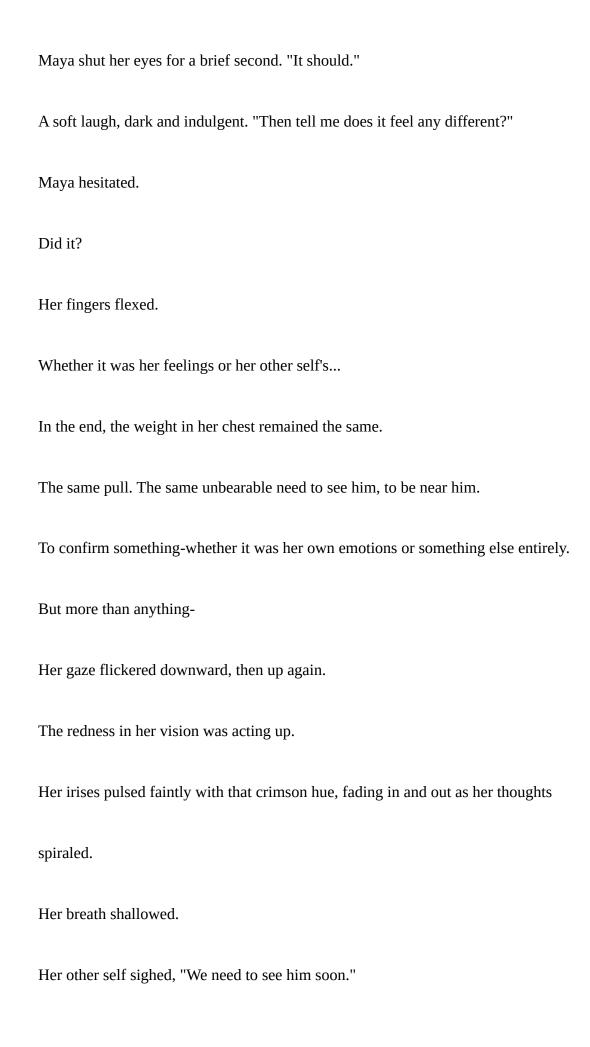
"Then why are we the ones being punished?!"

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.



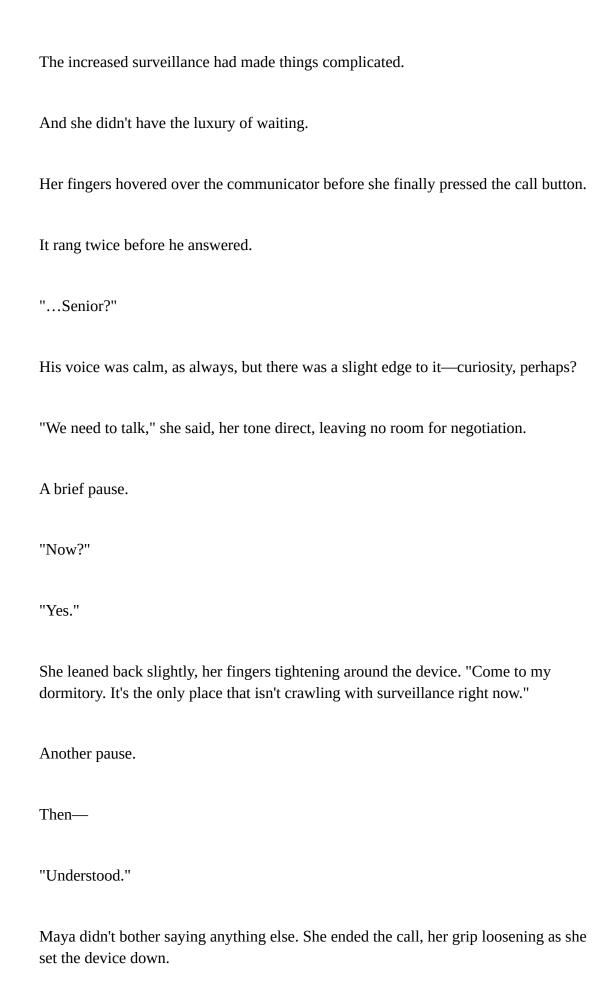


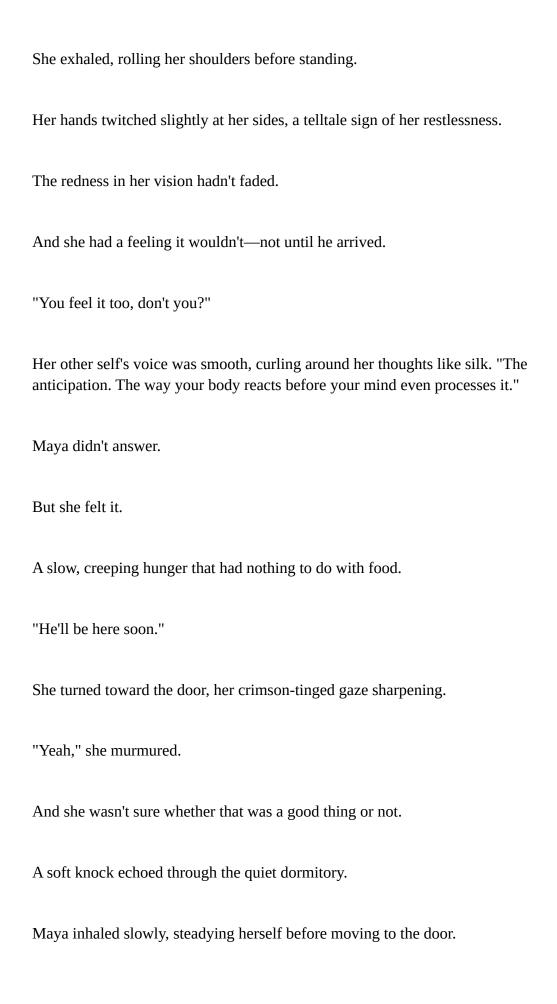


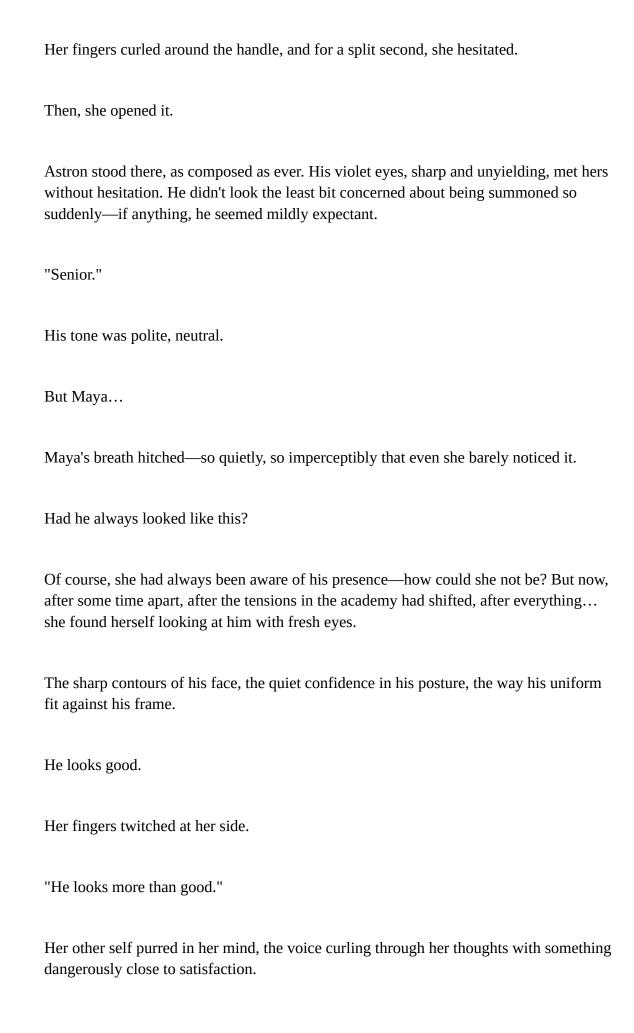


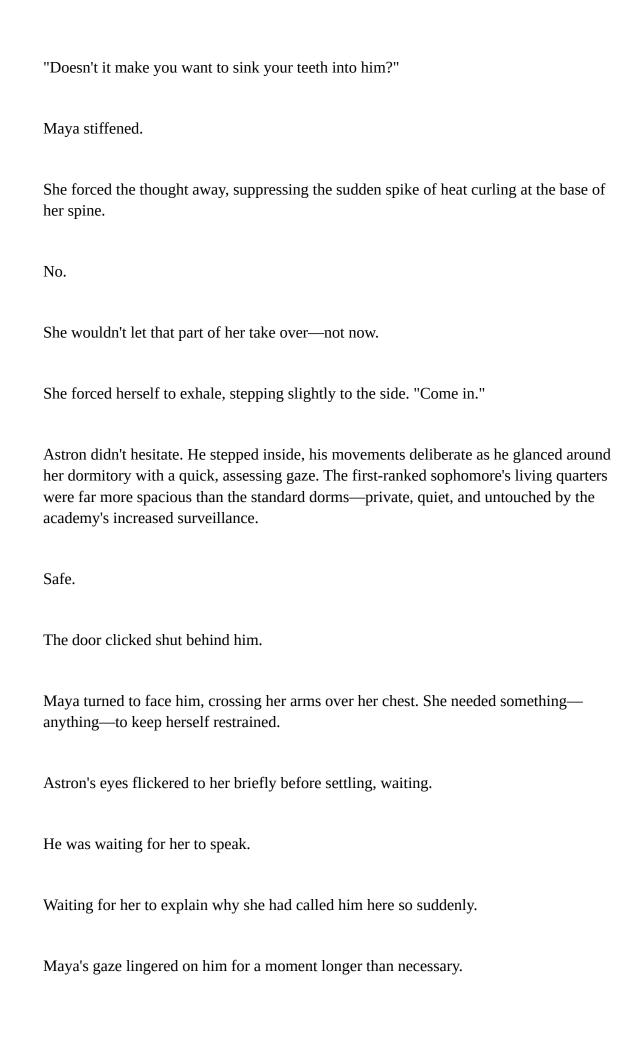
Because if this kept up... If this hunger continued to coil inside her, pressing against the edges of her control-She wasn't sure how much longer she could hold it back. Chapter 933 No title Maya sat at the edge of her bed, fingers tapping rhythmically against her thigh as she stared at her communicator. 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.

Maya swallowed. "I know."











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.

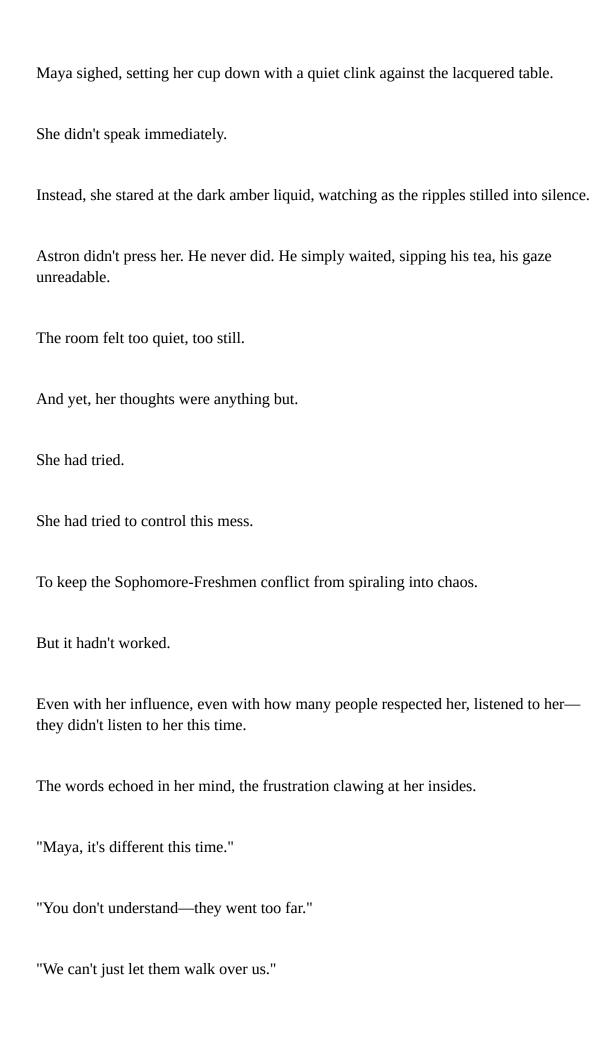
Maya's fingers drummed lightly against the table, her gaze steady on Astron, though the irritation curling beneath her skin was harder to ignore now. His answer—It was a possibility—lingered in the air, cool and composed, just like him.

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

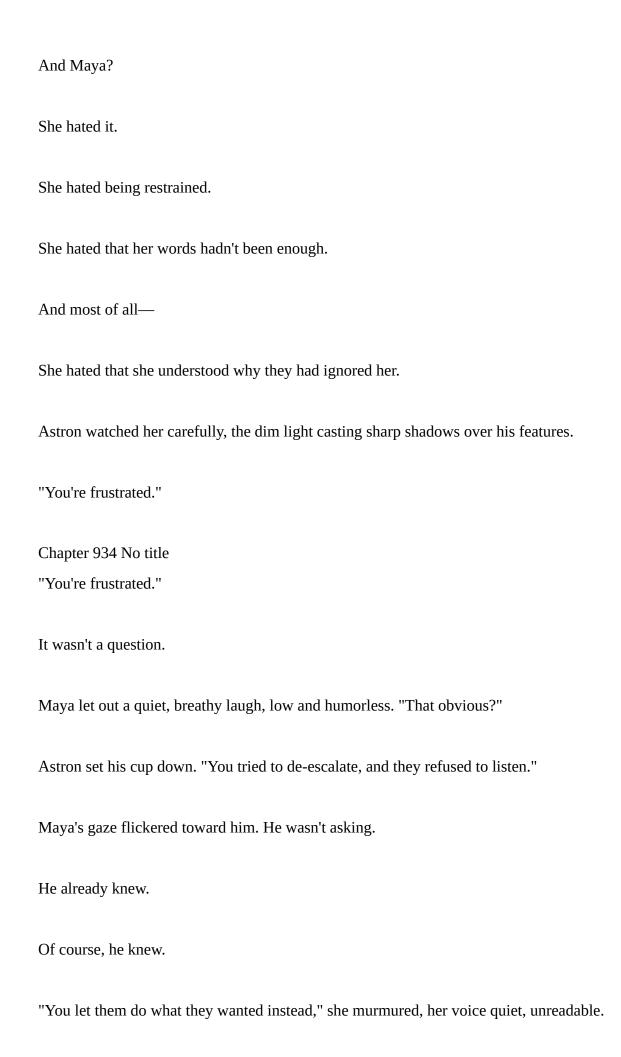
"He knew."

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?"

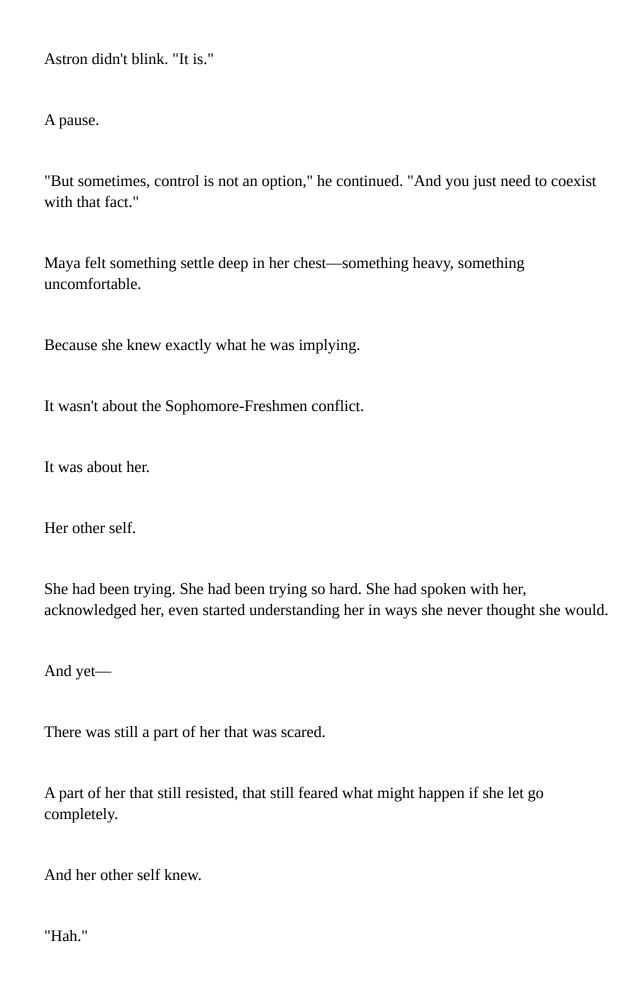
Maya exhaled sharply, forcing herself to take another sip of tea. The warmth didn't settle her, not when her mind was already tangled in too many conflicting emotions.



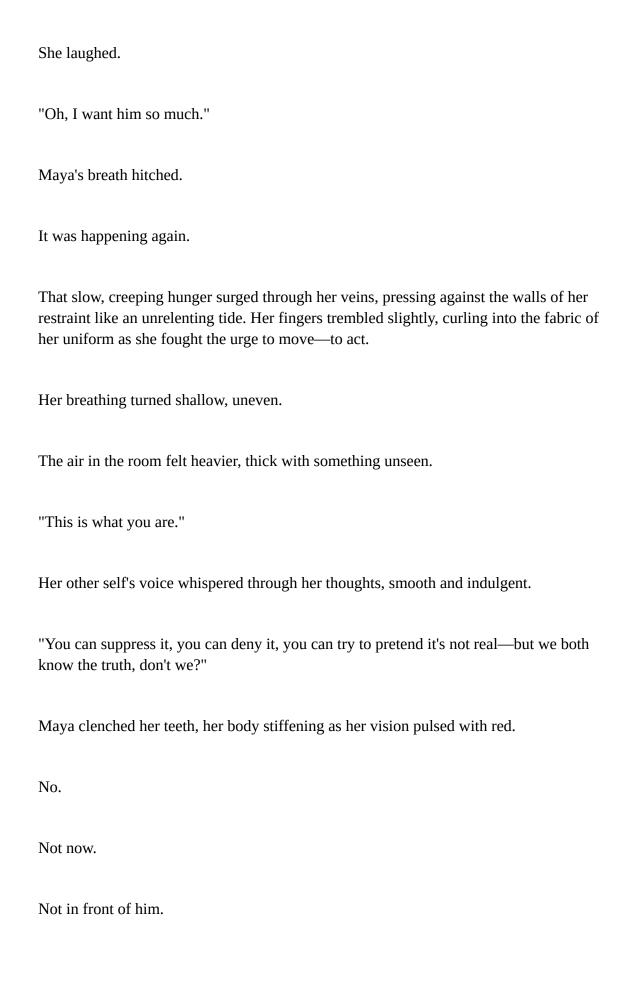


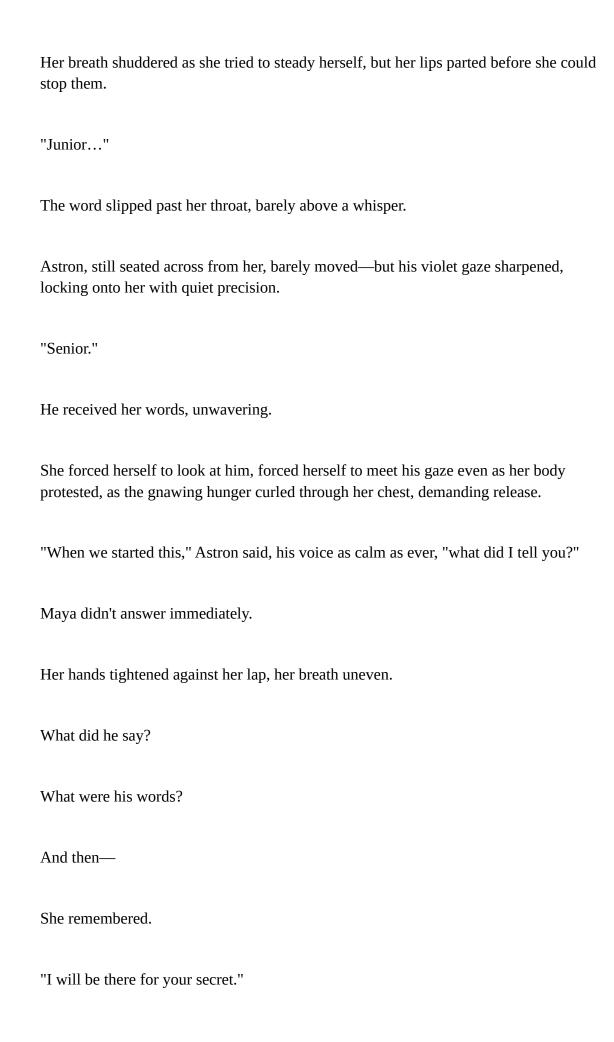


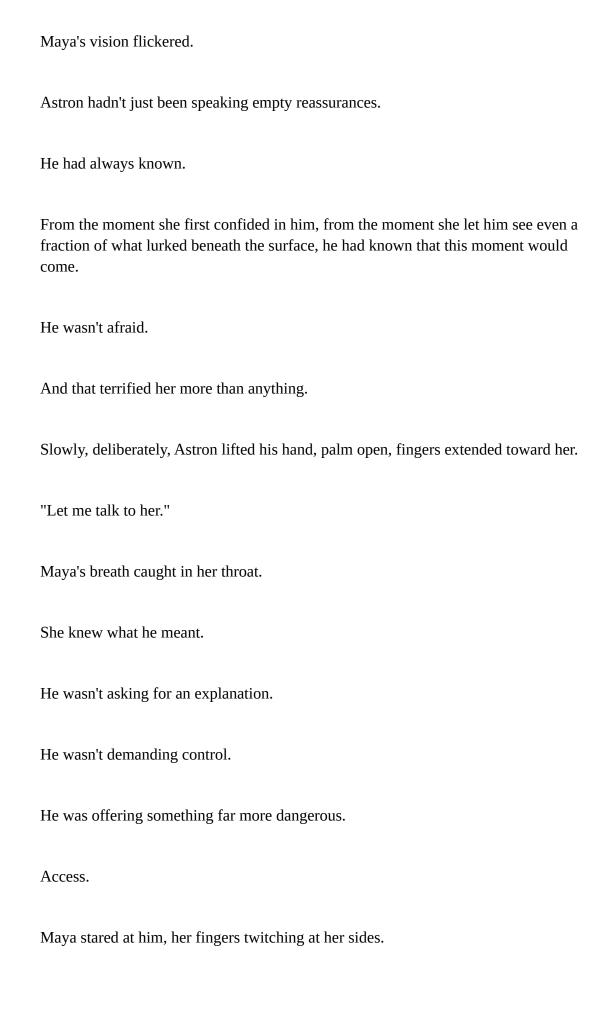


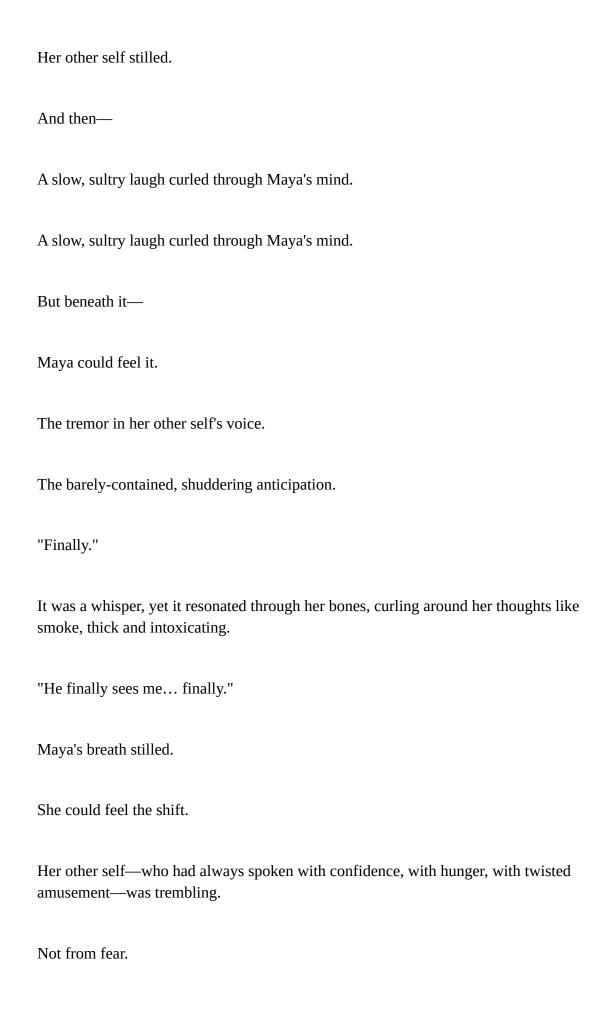


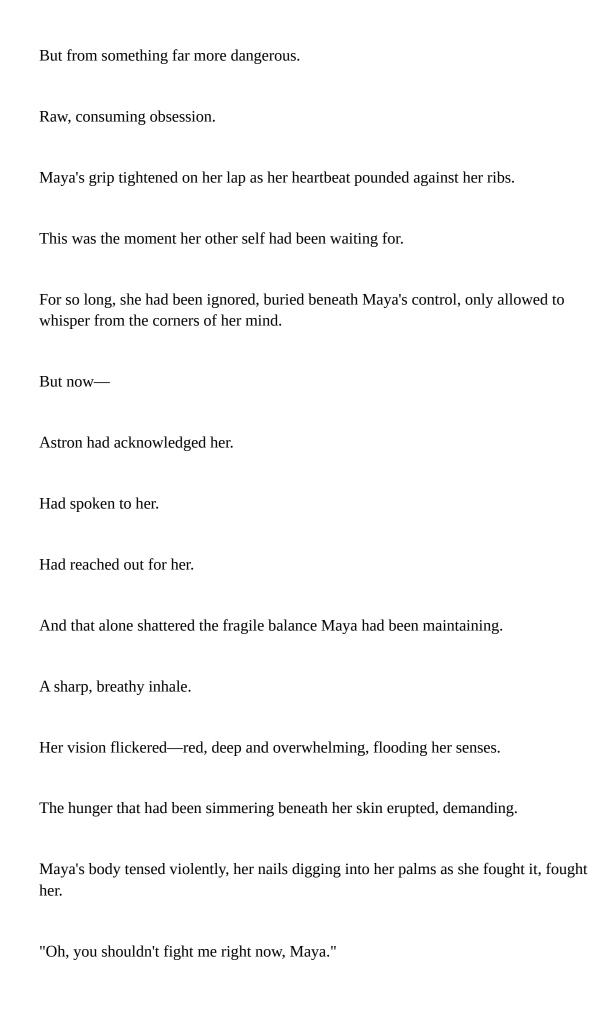
The voice slithered through her mind, dark and amused. "What a sharp one, isn't he?" Maya didn't move, but she could feel her other self curling around her thoughts, watching with something dangerously close to satisfaction. "He sees through you, just like that. How fascinating." Maya exhaled, barely 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?

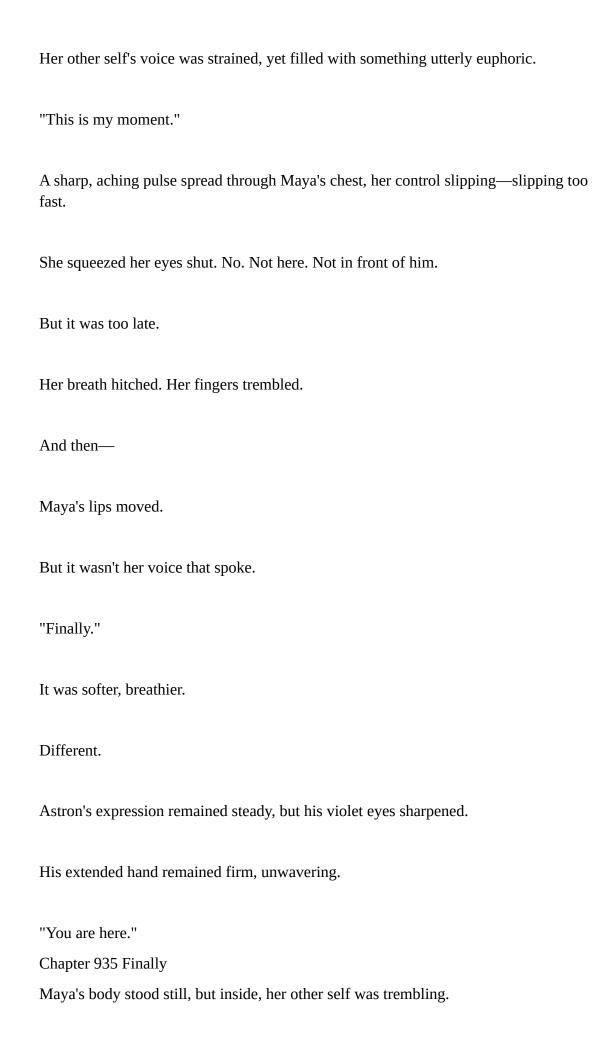


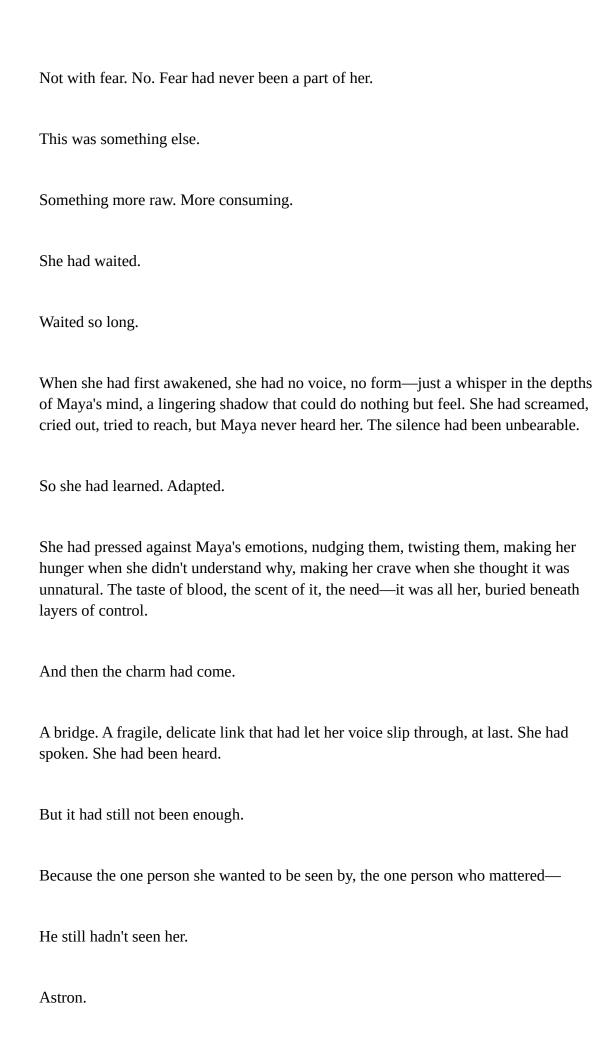


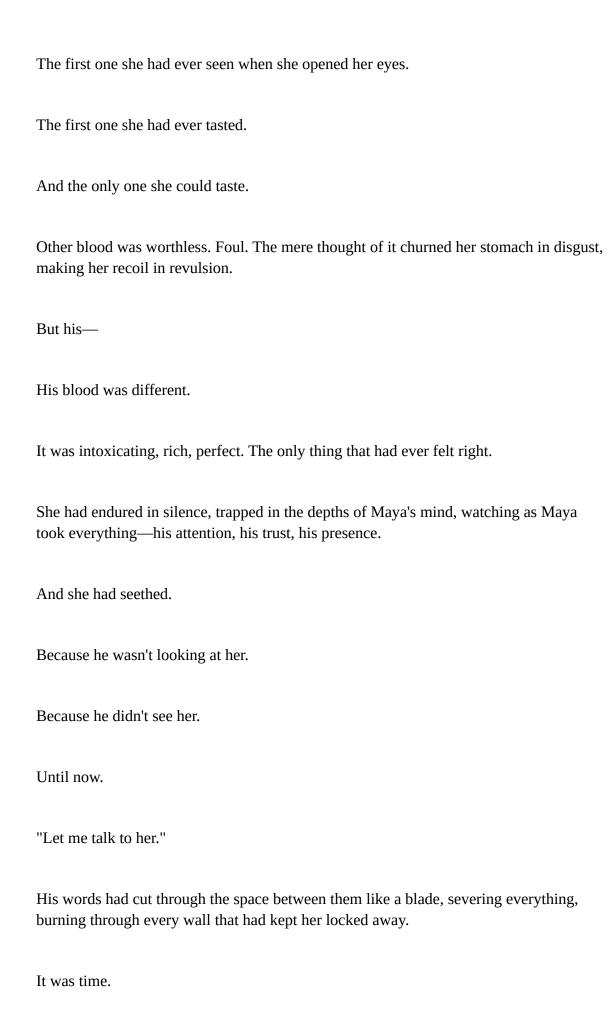








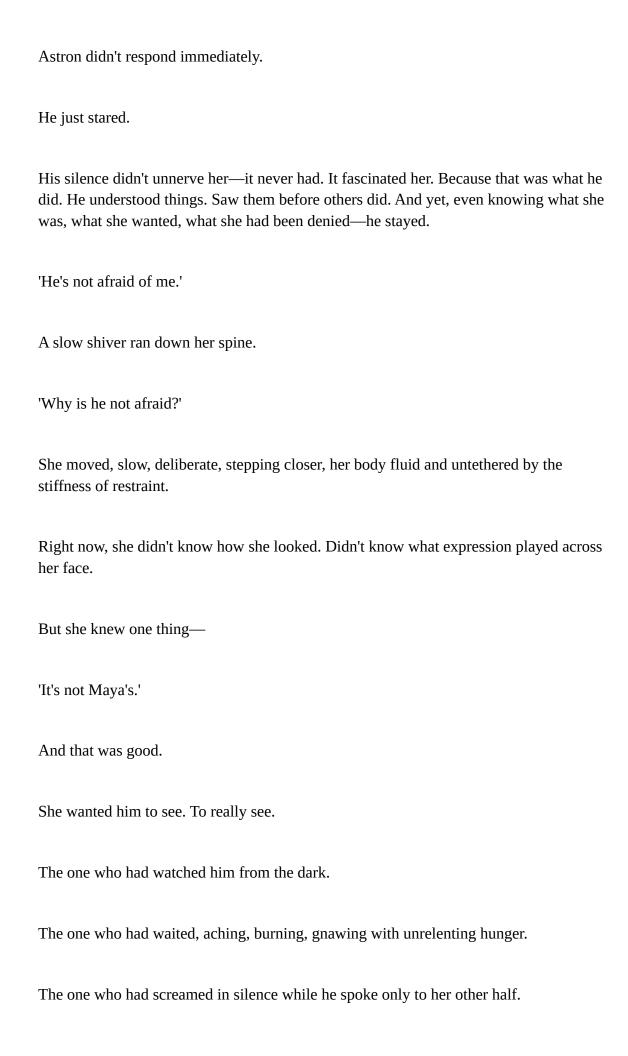




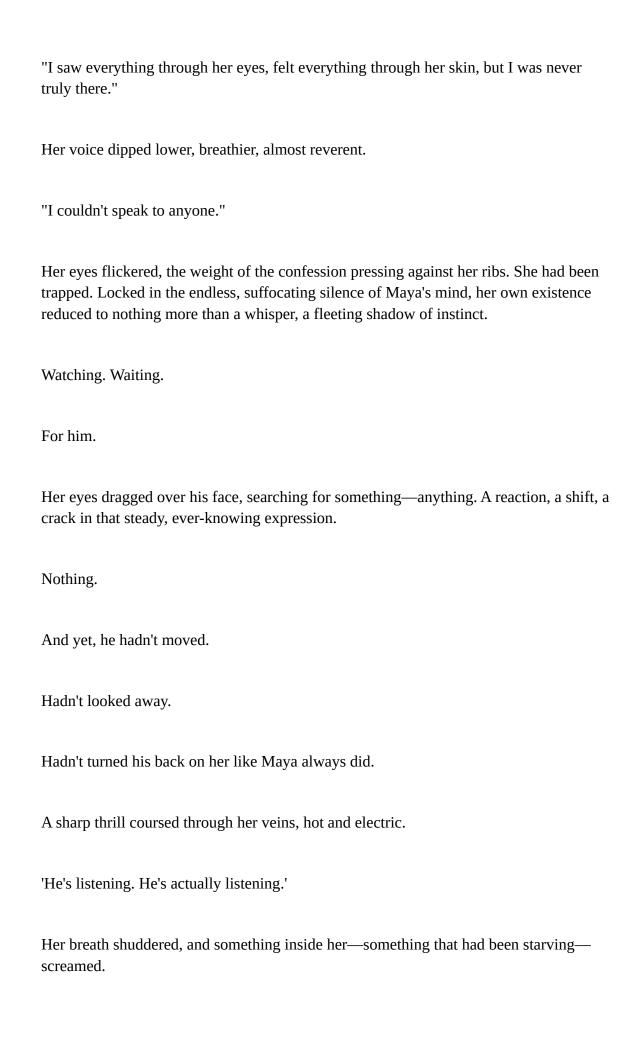
The moment she had waited for.
Her laughter spilled from Maya's lips, slow and sultry, curling through the air like a lingering ember. But beneath it, her own voice was shaking—unsteady, breathless with something dangerously close to euphoria.
He finally sees me.
Finally.
The hunger surged forward, overpowering, 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.

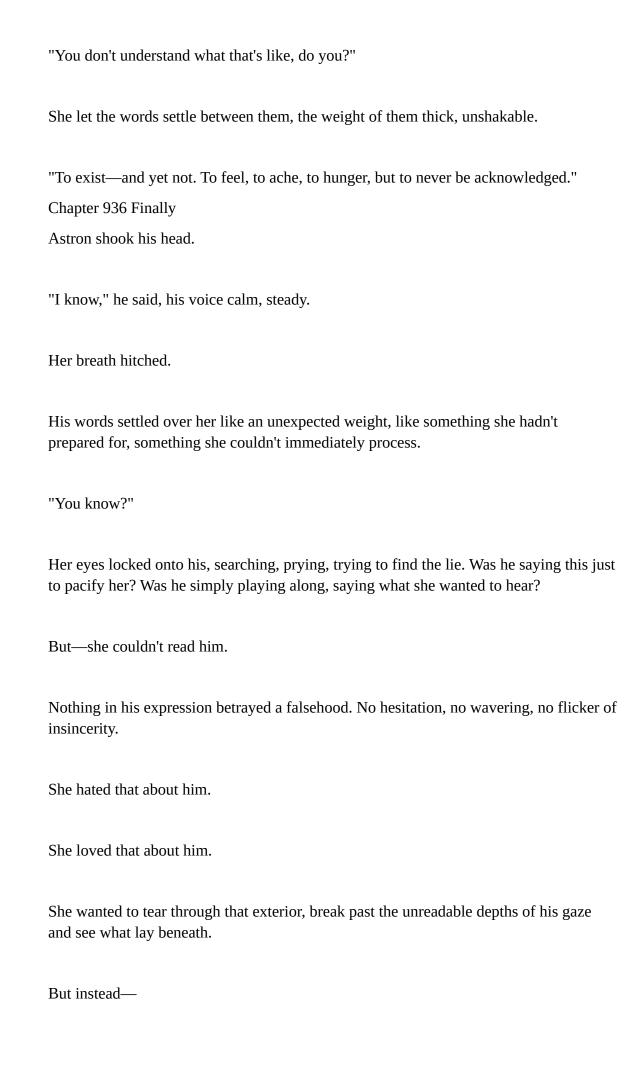


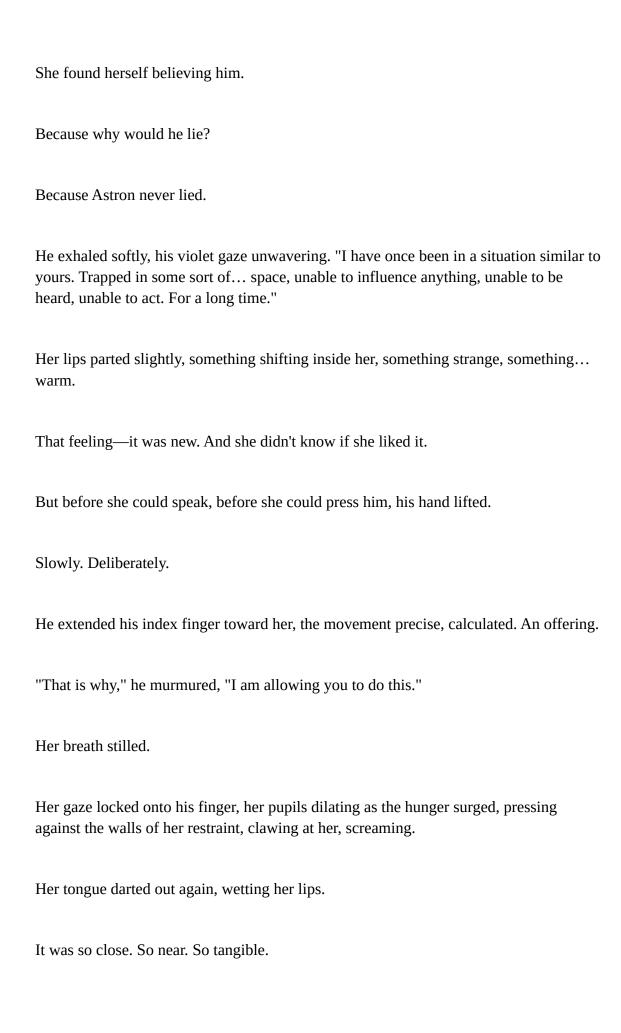
She stepped closer, the room shrinking into nothing but the space between them. Astron didn't move. He didn't retreat, didn't avert his gaze, didn't tense in defense. He just watched. And she met his eyes—truly, completely. Violet. Piercing. Unshaken. Her lips parted, a slow breath escaping. 'He's looking 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.

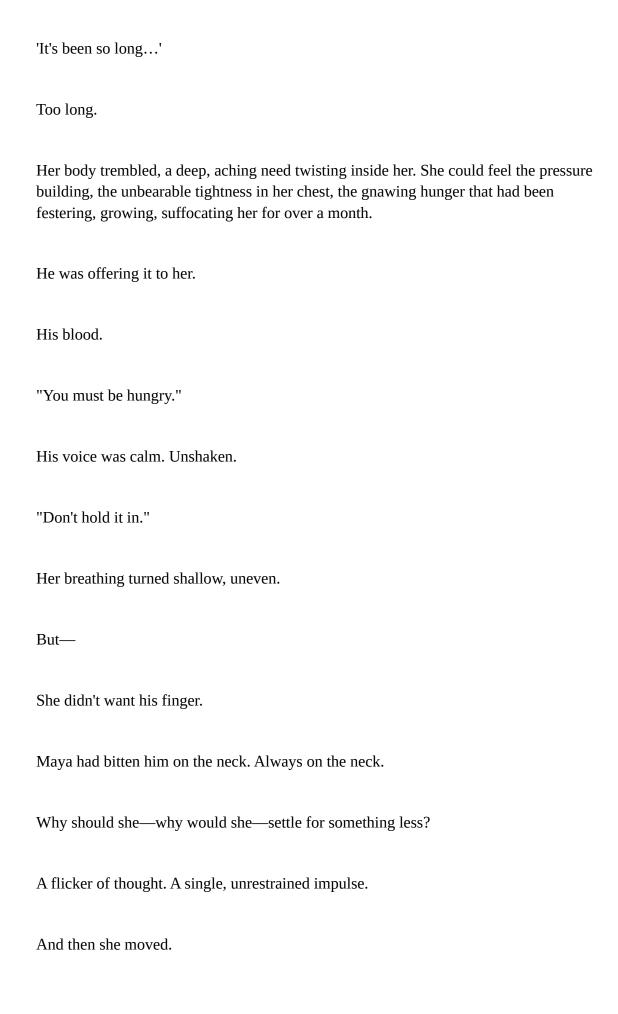








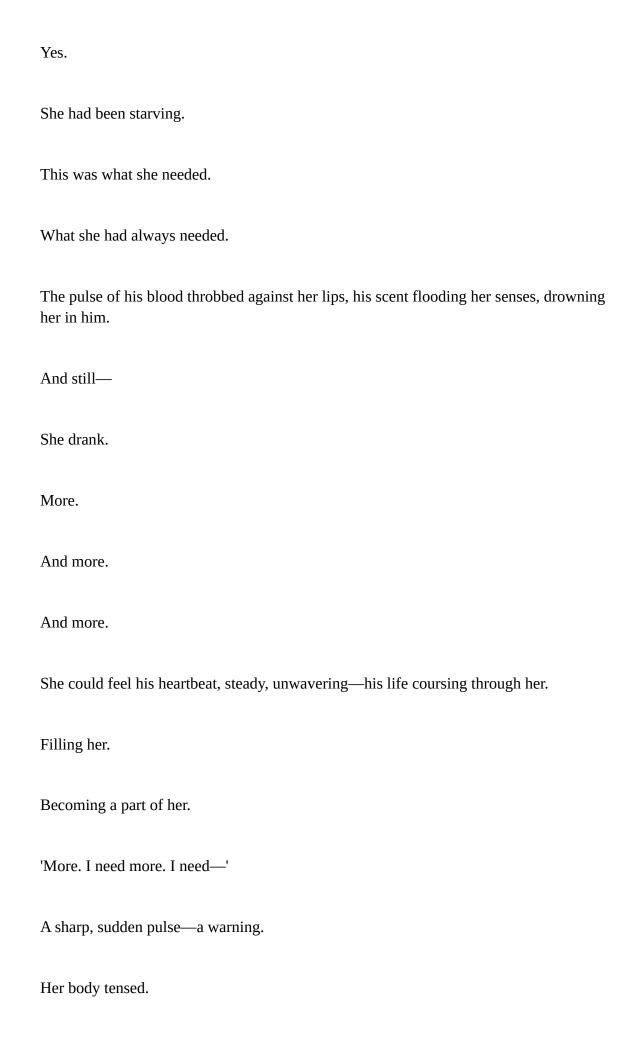


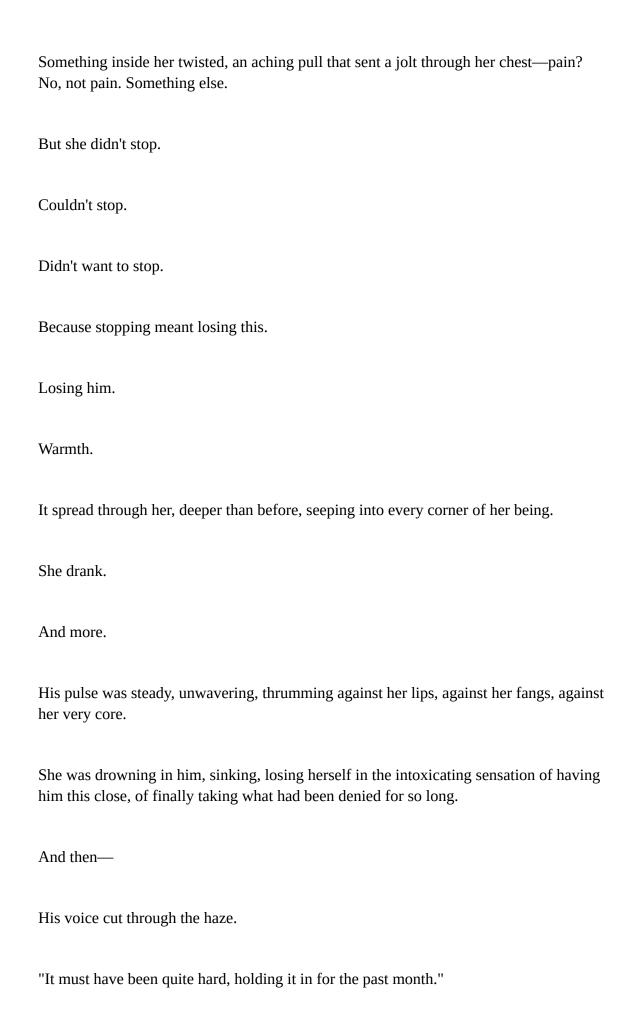


A sharp burst of speed, a fluid, instinctual lunge—
Her hands grasped onto his shoulders, her body pressing into his as her lips found the place she knew best.
A sharp gasp filled the air.
His neck.
Her fangs sank into him.
The moment his blood surged through her, her mind broke.
Silence.
And then—
Ecstasy.
'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—

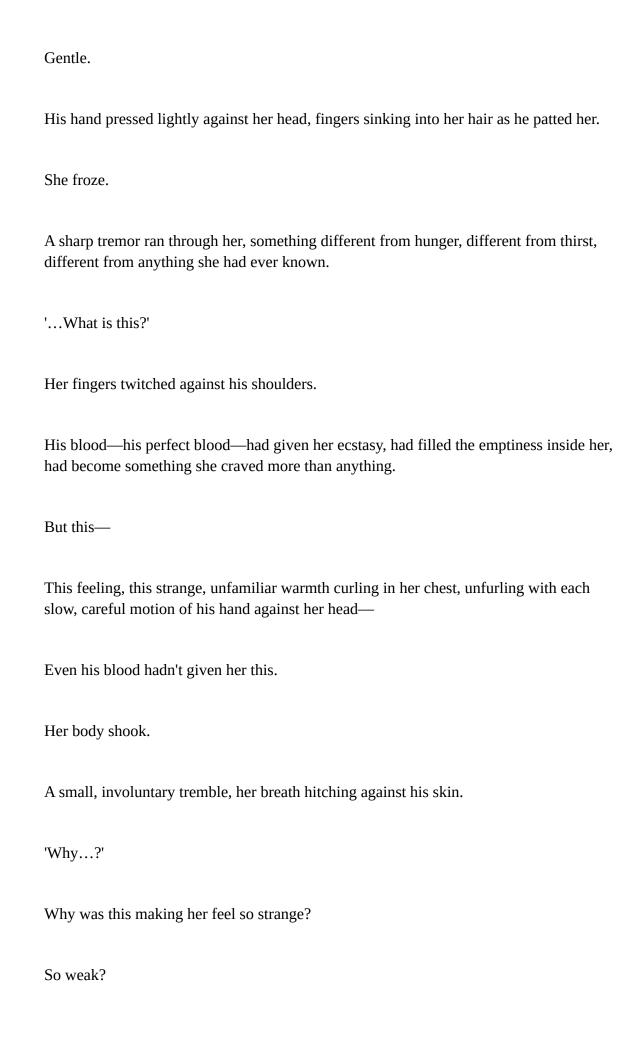
Was him.
His blood rushed into her like fire, coursing through her veins, filling every aching void, every unbearable craving that had gnawed at her for so long.
Nothing else had ever been enough.
No one else's blood had ever smelled good and she was sure that other bloods wouldn't taste right.
But this—
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.





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.





Ιt	t was that touch she couldn't shake.
g	Her lips parted slightly, an unfamiliar tightness catching in her throat as she searched his aze, trying—desperate—to find something. A crack, a flicker, a sign that he was ffected.
Е	But he simply watched.
Į	Jnmoved.
Į	Jnshaken.
F	Iis expression, his presence, his very being—calm.
A	and she
S	he didn't understand.
E	Because he had felt it, hadn't he?
Τ	That small tremor in her body, the way she had nearly collapsed from a simple touch.
S	he had never trembled before.
N	Not from hunger.
N	Not from thirst.
N	Not from anything.
A	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

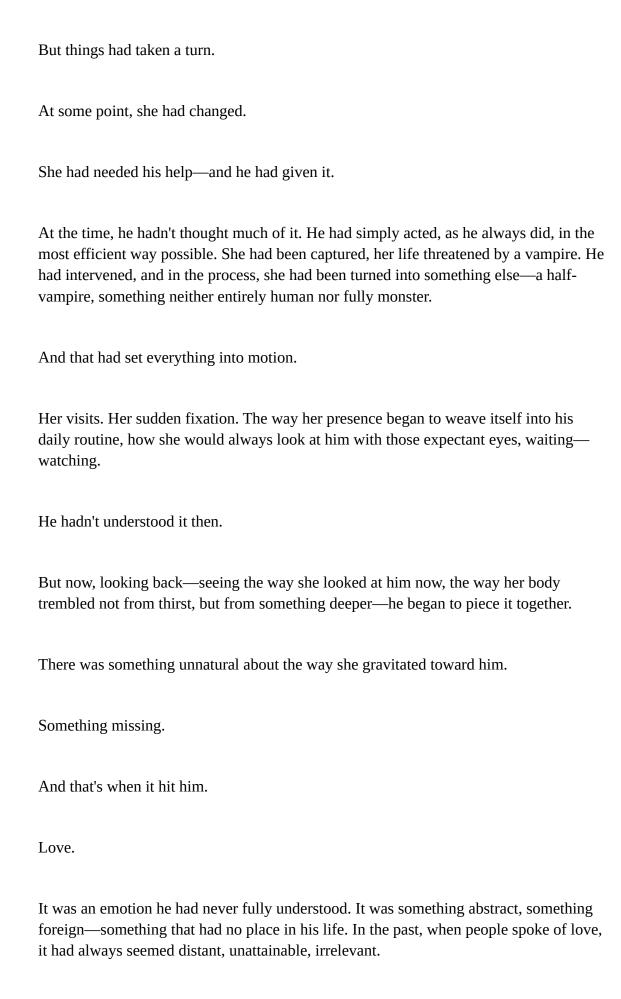
Astron stared into her eyes, his own gaze calm, steady—unwavering as the silence stretched between them. He could feel the warmth of her breath against his skin, could still sense the lingering traces of her fangs from where they had sunk into his neck. Yet, he didn't move. He only watched.

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.

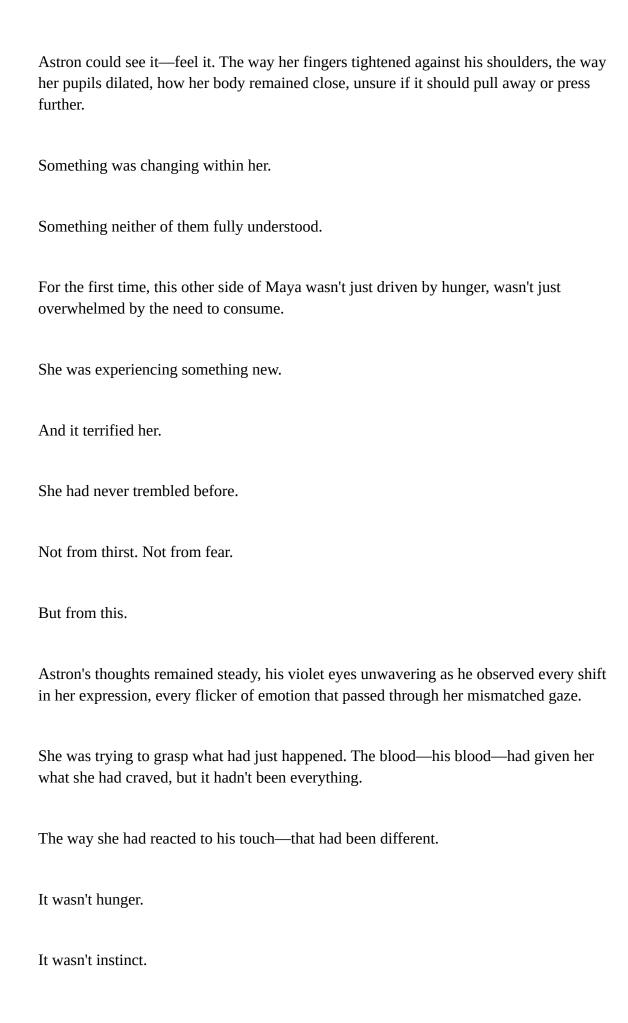
The first time he met Senior Maya.

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….

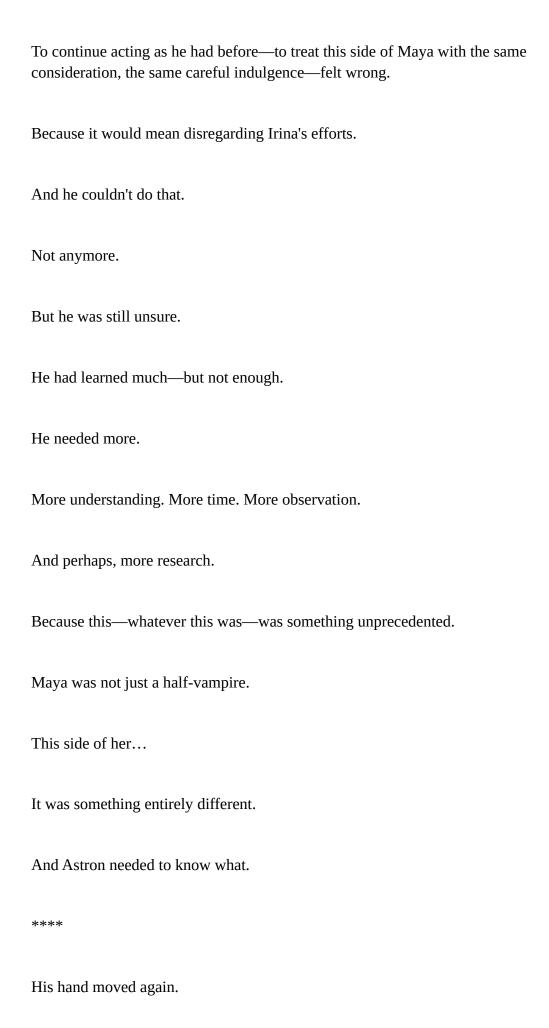


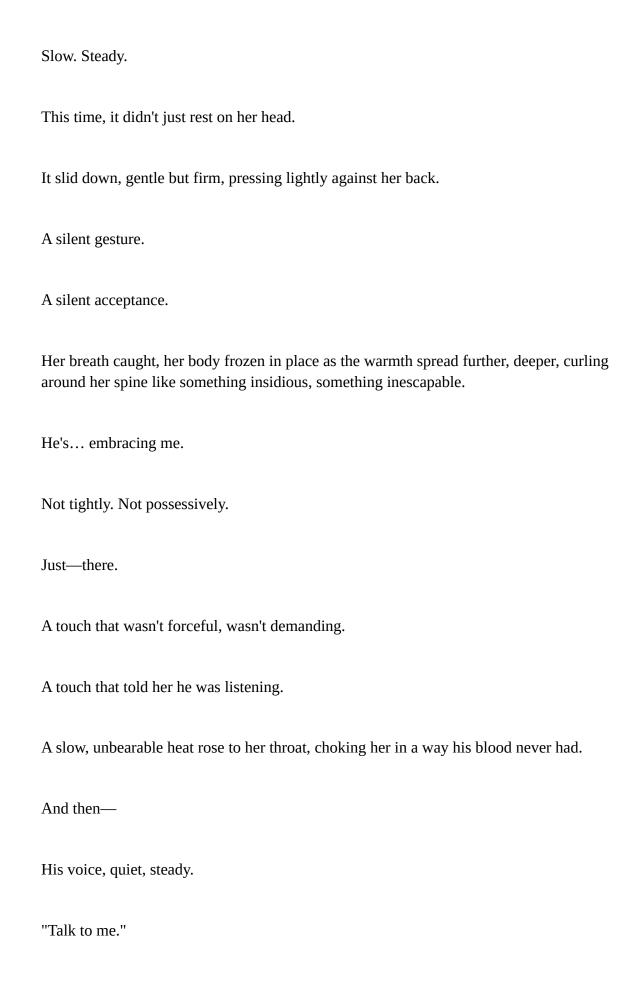
And Irina—she had begun teaching him things. Things he had never thought to learn. She had made him realize that emotions weren't always logical, that sometimes, people acted in ways that defied reason. She had shown him that love wasn't something that could be categorized neatly—it wasn't about obligation, 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.

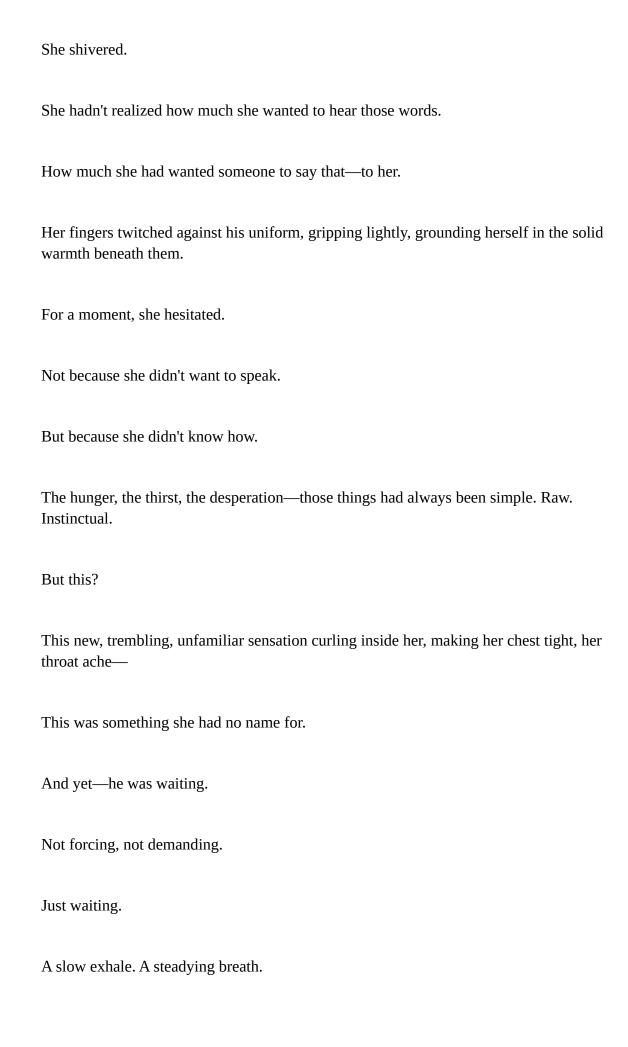
But then, Irina had entered his life.



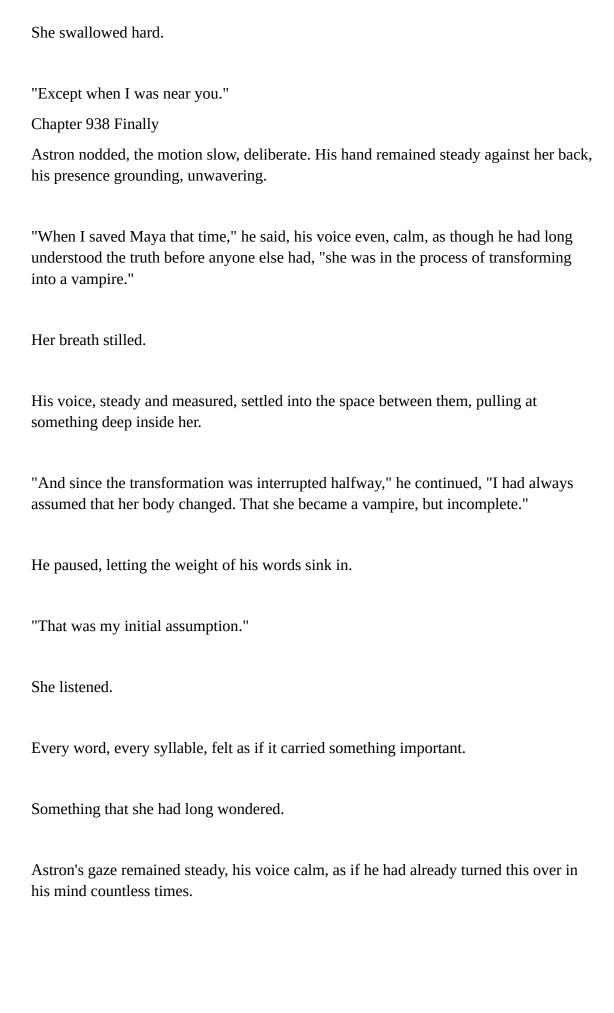
It was something else entirely. And that was exactly why Astron couldn't act as he had before. Before, he had entertained the thought of Maya's feelings—had taken them into consideration because she had helped him when no one else had. Even Irina hadn't been there in those moments when Maya had. Back 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.



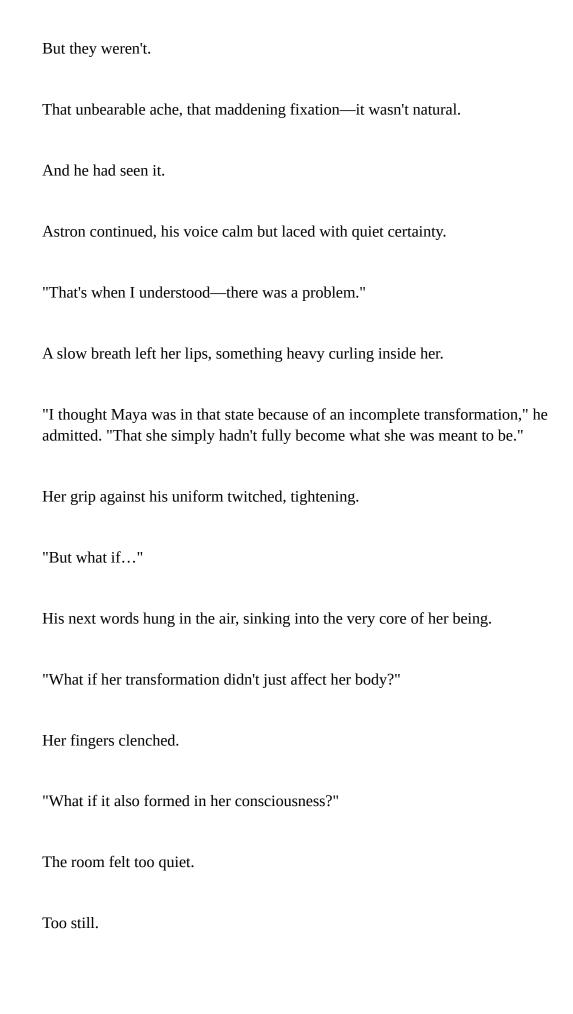


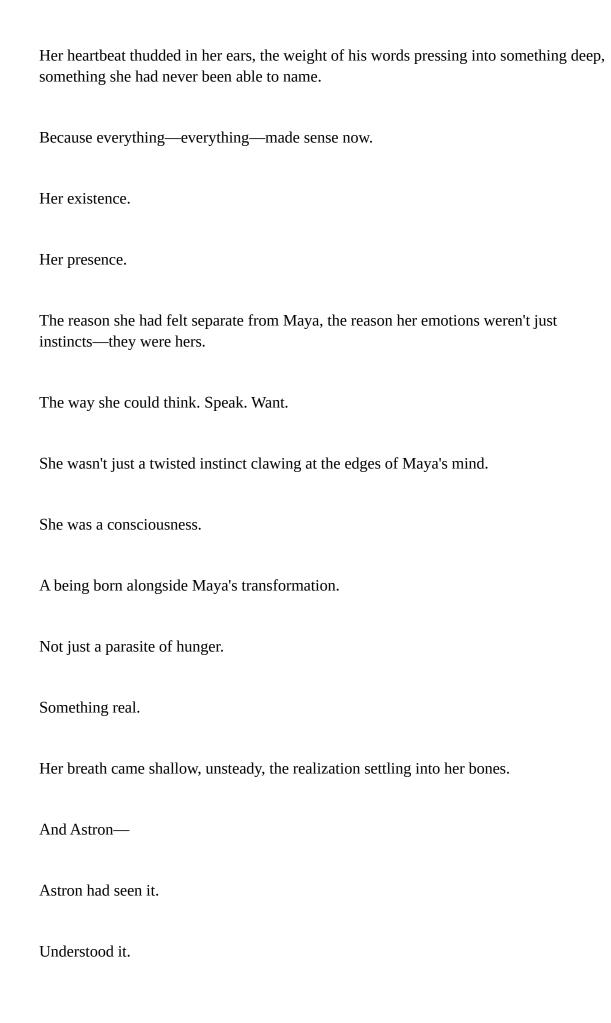


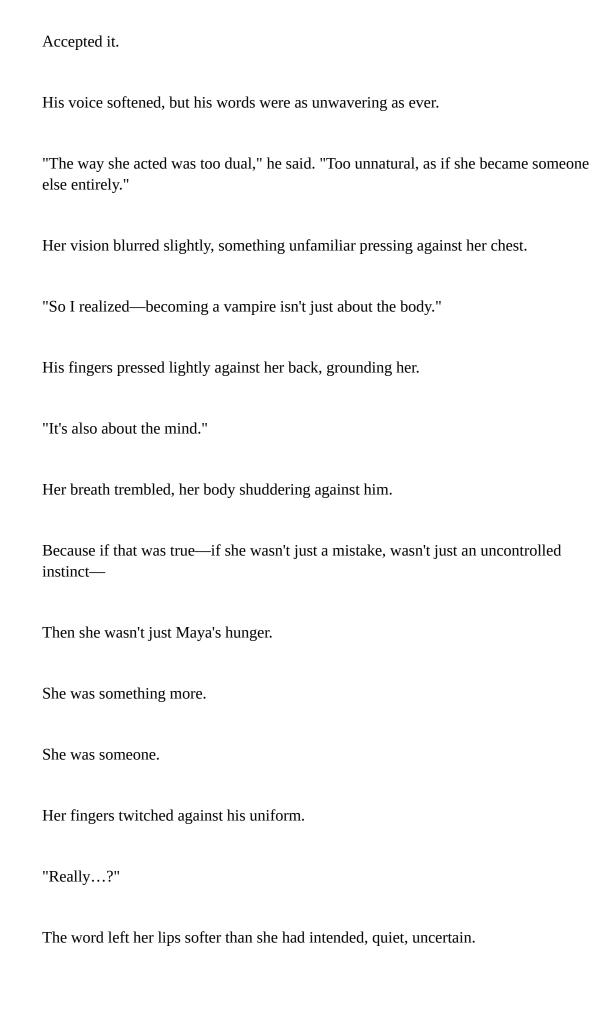




"Since her body changed, she naturally became a vampire, and her instincts began taking over from time to time," he said. "At first, I didn't think much of it. It seemed... normal." Her breath slowed as she listened, her body still pressed against him, absorbing his words, his warmth. "I assumed that 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.



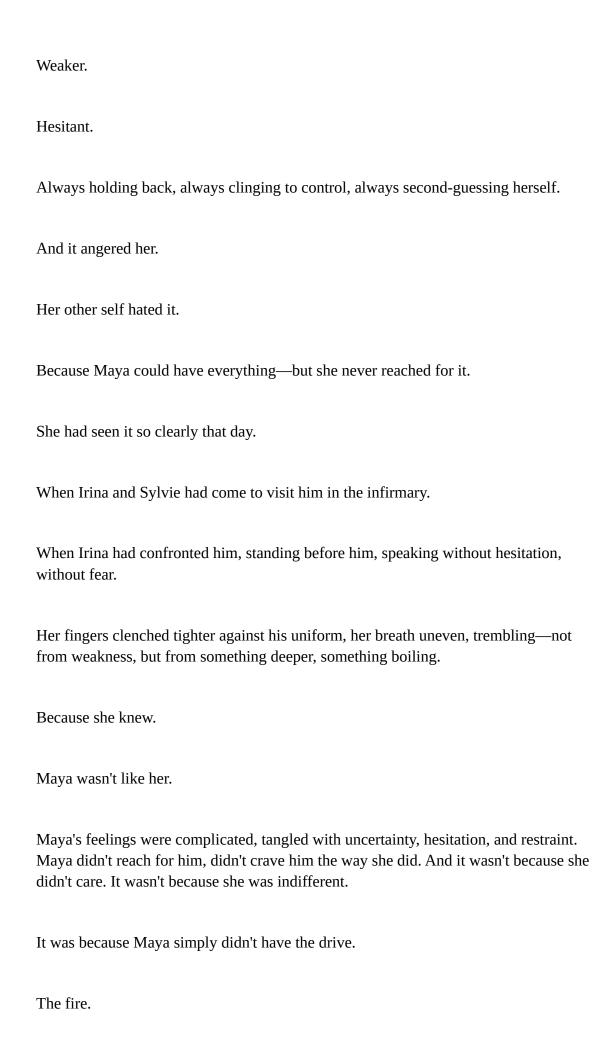


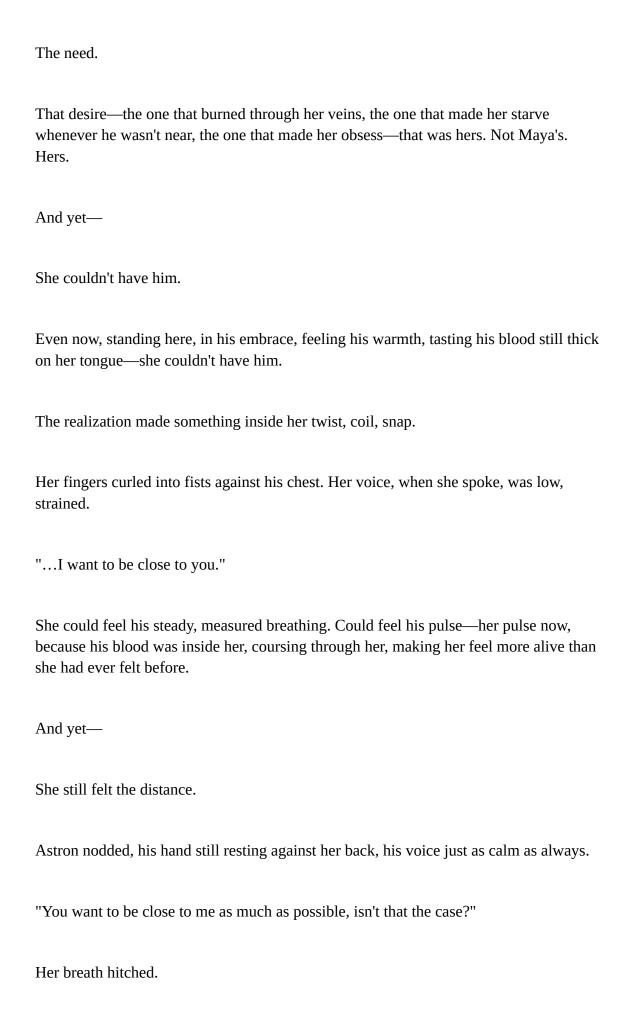


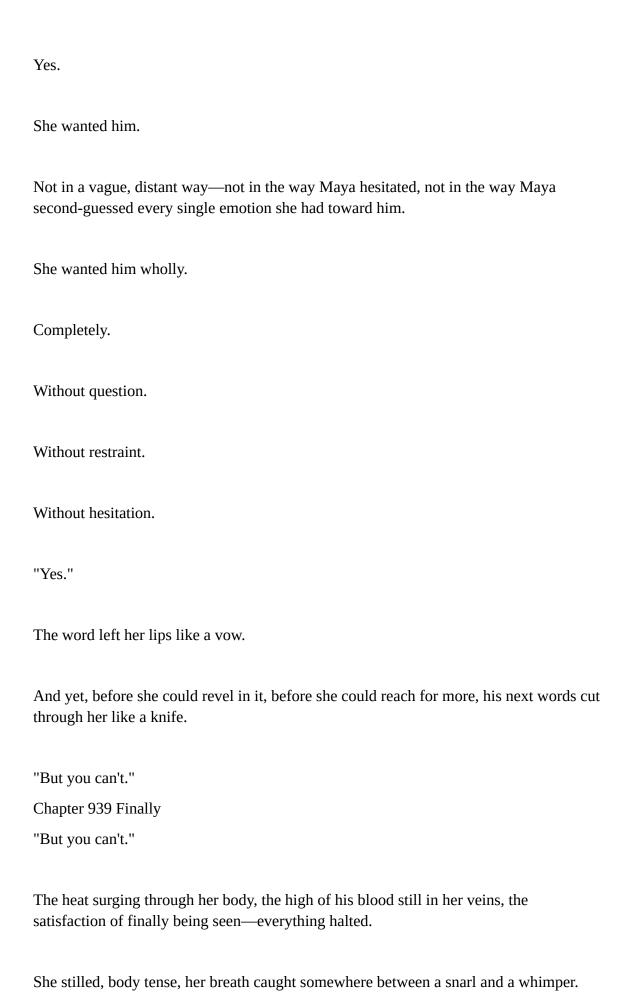
with confidence, had laughed with satisfaction at finally being seen.
But now—standing before him, hearing those words, the act of boldness and recklessness vanished.
Because this moment—this truth—
It was real.
Astron nodded. "Yes."
His hand didn't leave her back, steadying her, grounding her. "You 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.
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She had no words.
Only a quiet, unsettled silence.

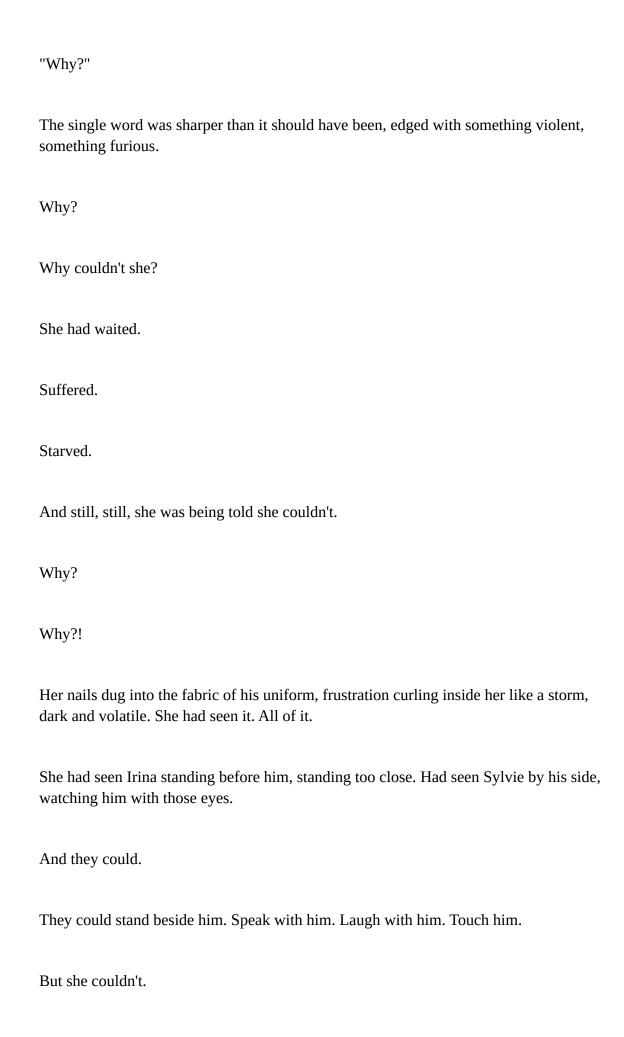
She had acted bold before. Had lunged at him without hesitation, had spoken to him

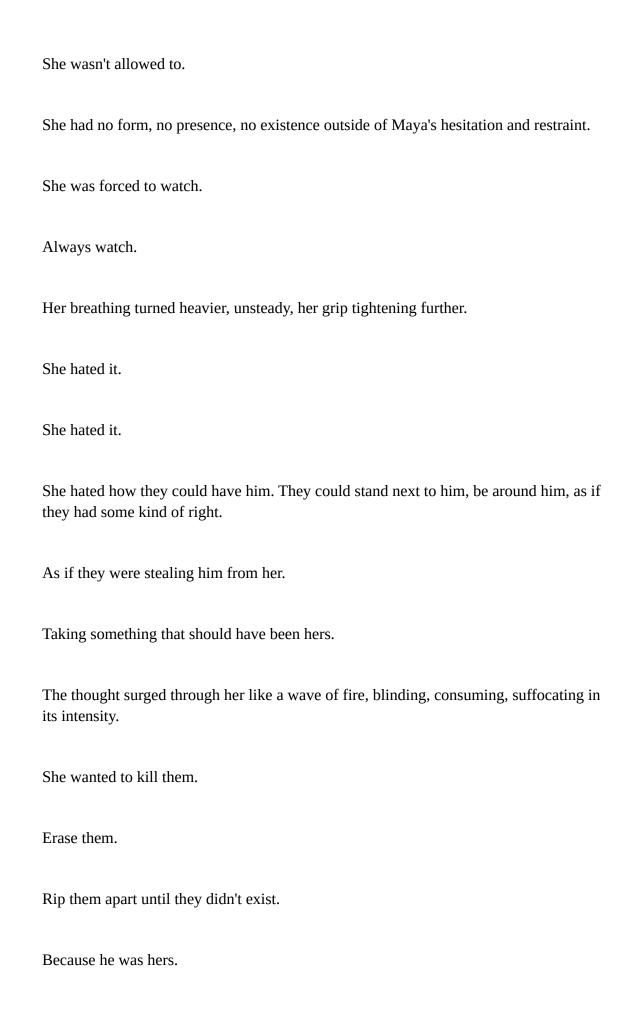


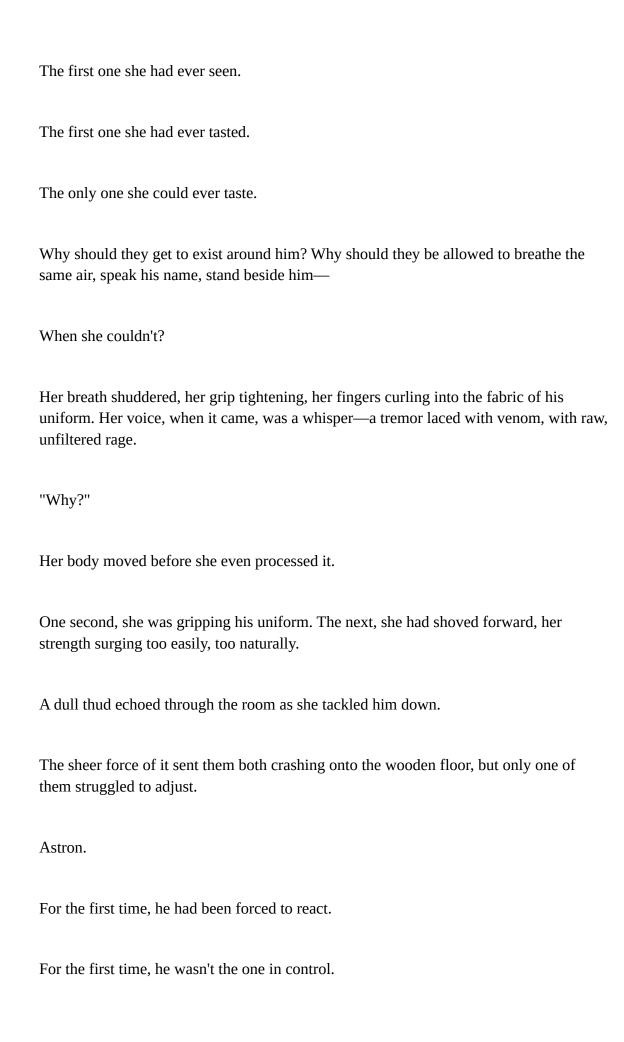


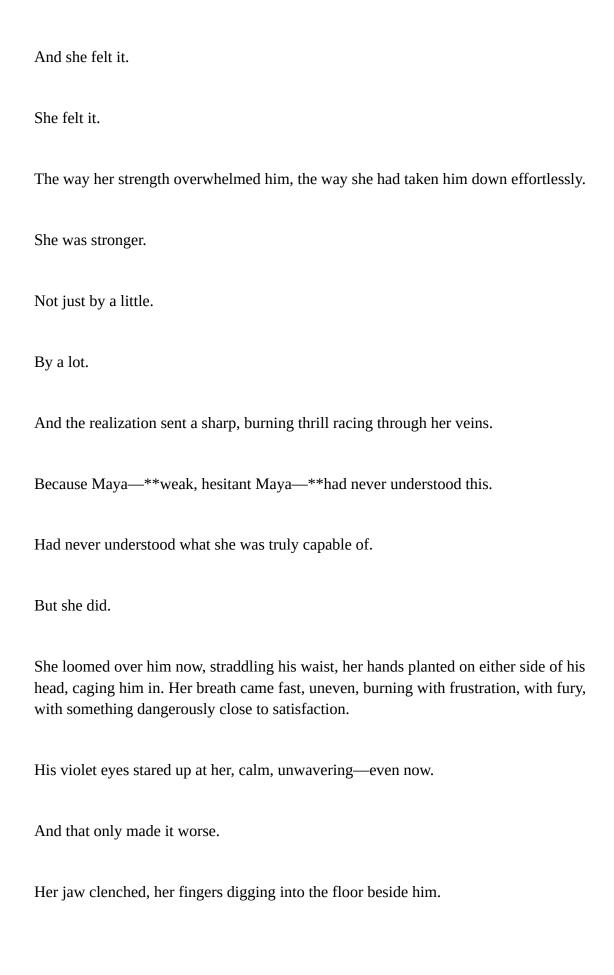


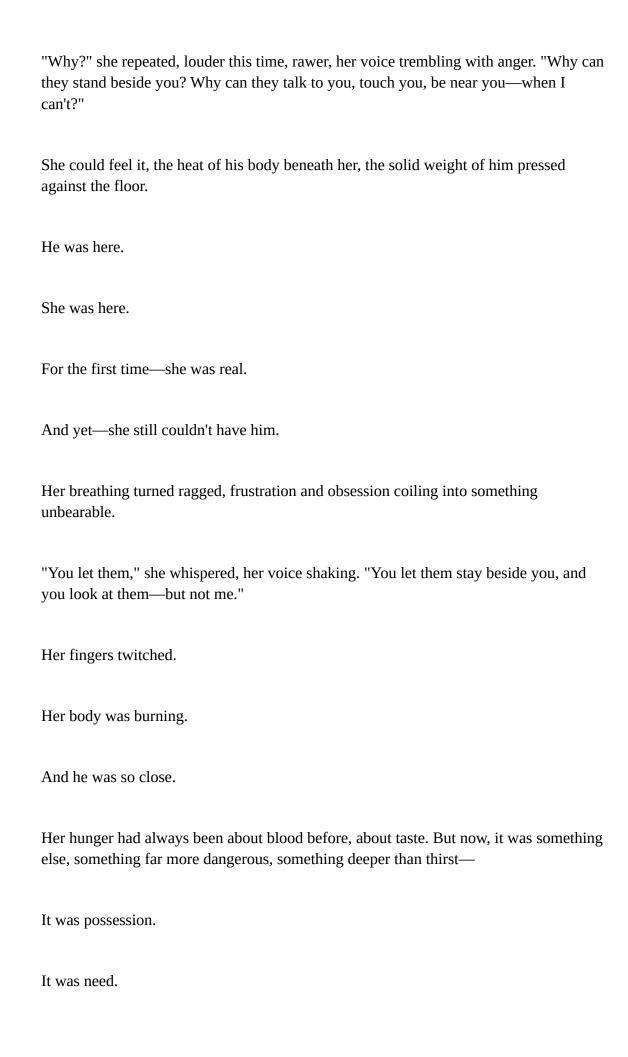












She needed him to see her.
Not Maya.
Her.
She had waited, suffered, screamed into the void for so long. And the moment she was finally free, the moment she was finally able to speak, to touch, to exist—
She was still being denied.
She trembled above him, her vision flickering red, her instincts screaming 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—

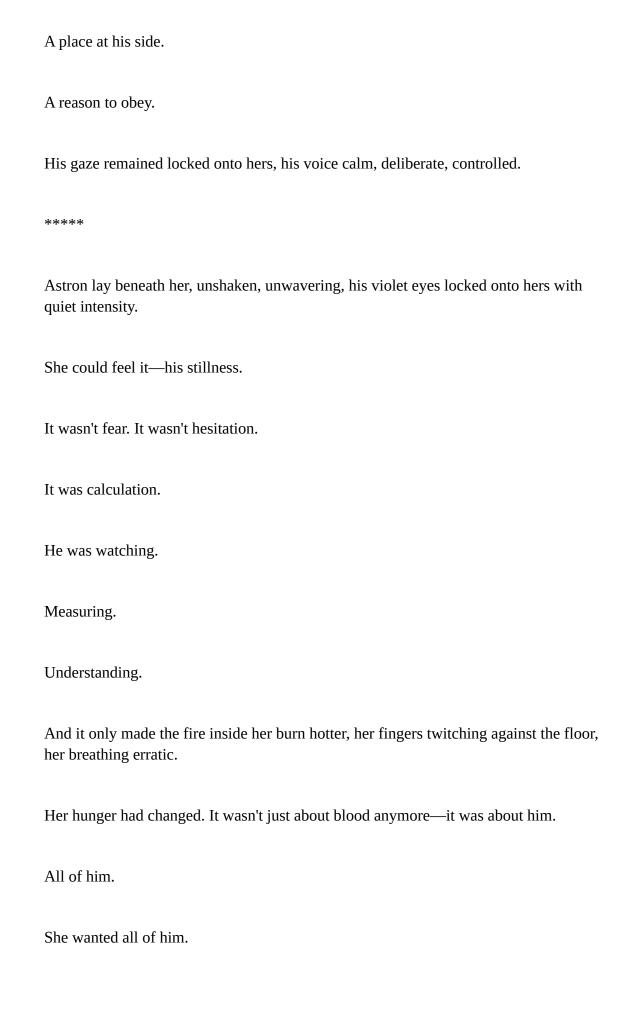
That part of him was still there.

The part that had been raised as a number.

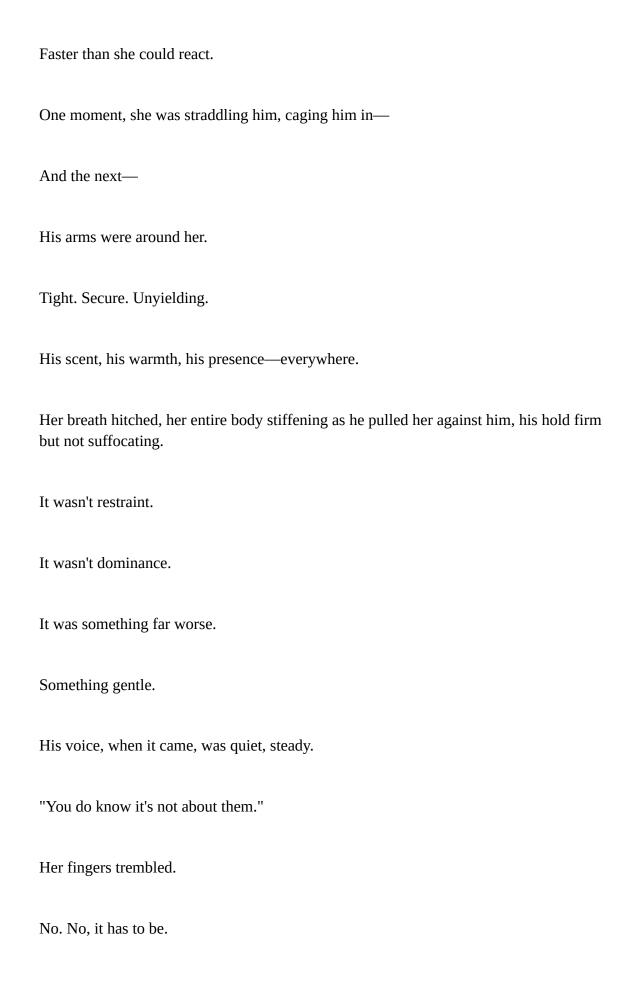
The part that had learned to see things not as people, not as relationships—but as assets.

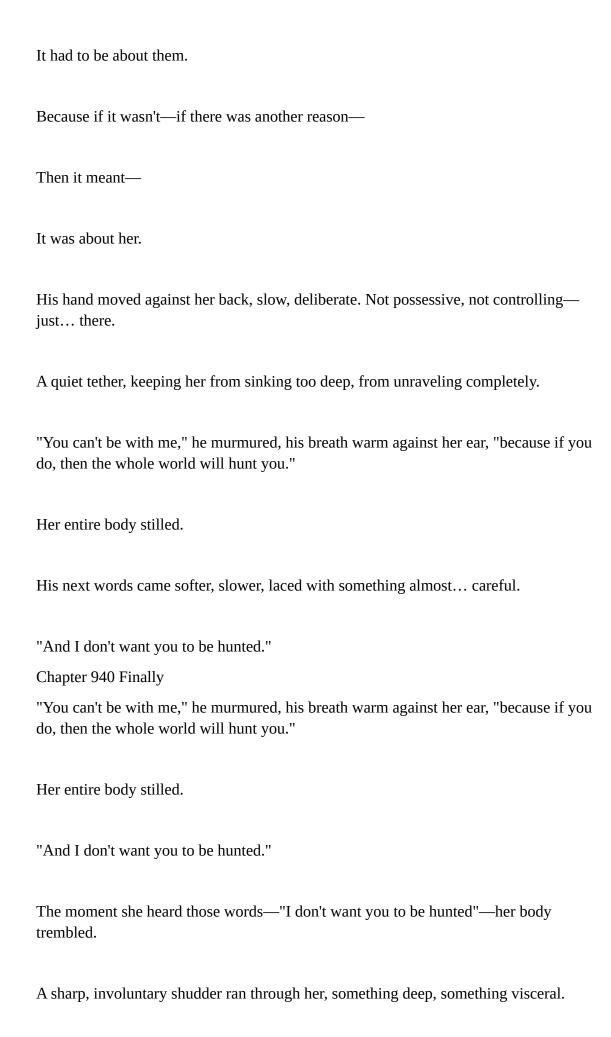
And that part of him looked at the trembling girl above him, at the sheer power she radiated in this moment, at the obsession that burned so deeply within her that it could override reason—

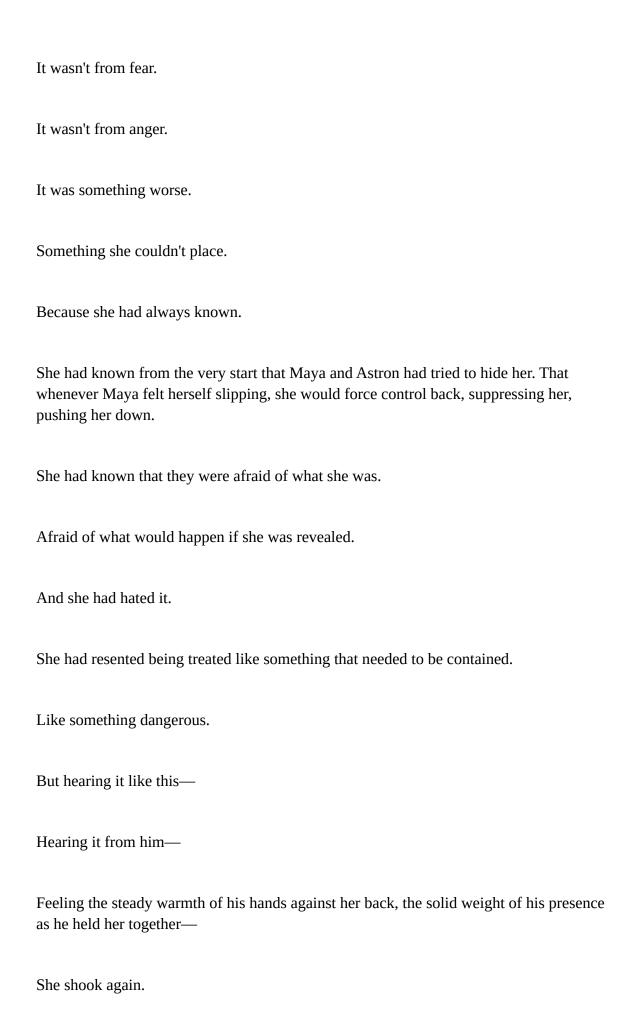
And it whispered to him.
She is useful.
Astron's fingers twitched slightly against the floor, his mind already calculating.
Maya's other side was a liability if left unchecked. That much was clear. With the way the academy operated, with how tightly it controlled dangerous elements, if she lost control—if 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.



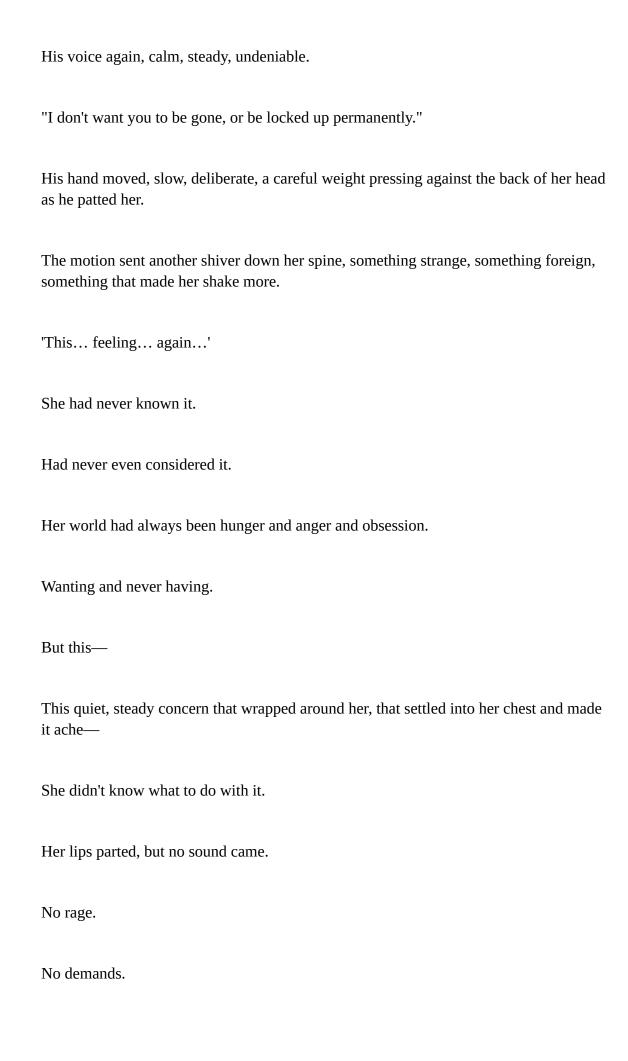
So why—why was he denying her?
Her voice came out in a whisper, low and trembling with something raw, something unstable.
"What if I just kill them?"
Her fingers curled into fists.
"Then, will you stay beside me?"
Her words lingered in the air like a dangerous promise, a whispered plea edged with something 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.

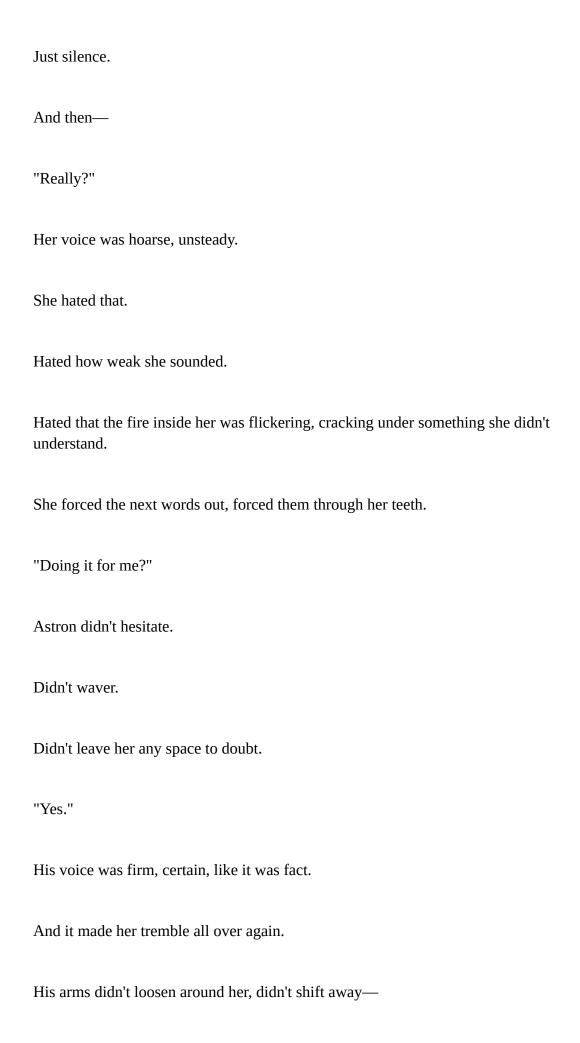


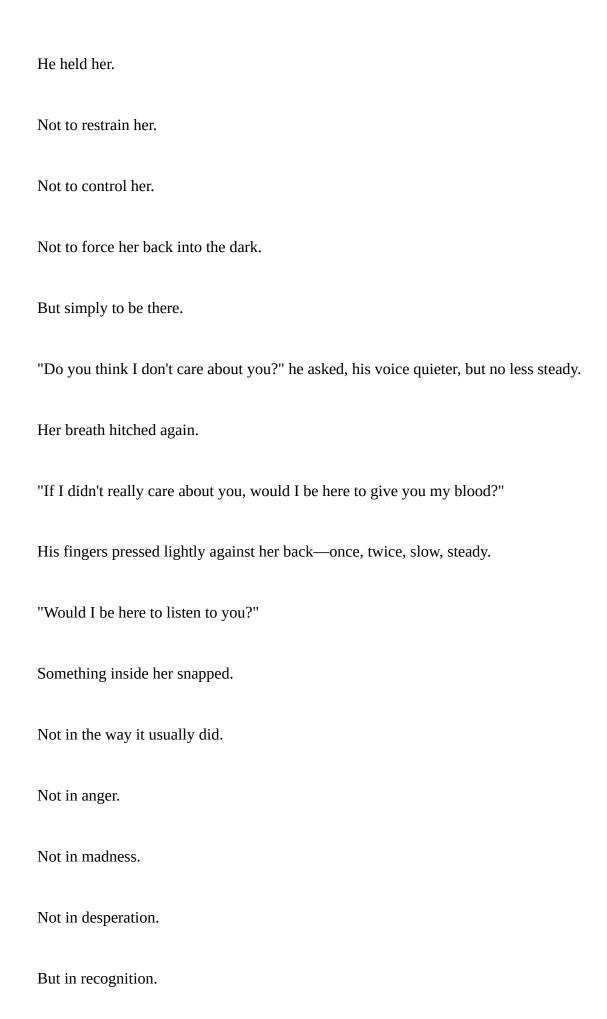




Her breath hitched, her fingers twitching against his uniform, gripping at nothing, clinging to something she couldn't even name.
It was suffocating.
This feeling was suffocating.
Because it wasn't rejection.
It wasn't disgust.
It wasn't fear.
It was concern.
For her.
For her.
Not for Maya.
Not for the 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—







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.

Because he meant it.

"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...'

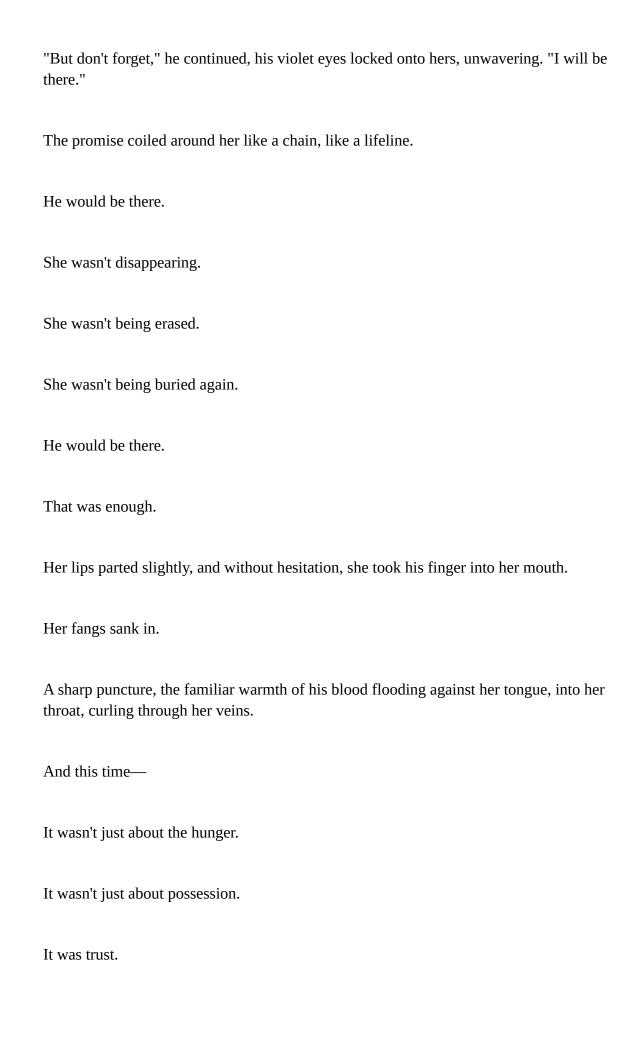
The words echoed through her like a crack of thunder, like something deep and undeniable had just been spoken into existence.

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.









Pure. Unquestioning. Absolute.