

H. Academy 1001

Chapter 1001 Practical Mid-terms

The late afternoon sun dipped low across the academy grounds, painting the cobbled walkways and high towers in deep gold. Students filtered into the central lecture amphitheater, filling the wide, semi-circular rows with the subdued buzz of conversation.

The air, though heavy with tension, carried a crackle of excitement too—the kind of tension that only came before major announcements.

At the podium stood Instructor Verren, stone-faced as always, accompanied by Vice-headmaster Amelia and Professor Eleanor, whose presence at any briefing was enough to make even the most casual cadet sit up straight.

The room dimmed slightly as the projector glyphs activated overhead, casting a faint silver glow across the crowd.

With a curt nod from Eleanor, Verren stepped forward, his voice slicing cleanly through the murmurs.

"Attention, cadets."

Silence descended.

"Today you will be briefed on the structure of your upcoming Practical Examination."

A pause, as a new glyph appeared—rotating symbols of squads, gates, and observation arrays.

"As you are aware, scouts from multiple guilds and affiliated organizations will be present. They will observe your performances from designated stations. They will not interfere. They will not coach. They will only watch."

The words "observe" and "watch" hung in the air like a heavy warning.

Julia, seated near the middle, whispered under her breath, "So basically, don't embarrass ourselves."

Ethan shot her a sharp look. "This time it's not just about passing. It's about who's watching when you do."

Verren continued, unbothered by the underlying current of unease building in the room.

"Unlike last semester's individual duels, this practical will focus on team operations and coordinated combat. You will not be graded purely on personal strength. You will be graded on adaptability, tactical cohesion, and battlefield decision-making as a unit."

The glyph shifted to show team formations, colored indicators flashing through simulations.

"You will compete in your pre-registered teams from the Team Operations and Unit Specialization course. Those who failed to register for teams prior to this point will be assigned provisional units."

A small ripple of movement—some cadets sat up straighter, reassured; others shifted uncomfortably, realizing what was coming.

Julia leaned toward Lucas with a grin. "At least we picked early. No randoms for us."

Irina remained composed, fingers tapping lightly against her knee in thought.

Astron, seated in the row just behind her, remained perfectly still, watching the projected glyphs rotate without blinking.

Verren's gaze swept the room again.

"Each team will be deployed into controlled simulated zones. Some of these zones will mimic hostile environments—fortified terrain, high-mana distortion fields, partial blackout conditions. You will be given mission objectives at the start of each round: control, retrieval, extraction, or survival."

The word survival made a few cadets stiffen unconsciously.

Verren let that sit before adding,

"There will be no direct eliminations. If you are critically wounded or deemed incapacitated by the assessment array, you will be removed from the field immediately. Teams will be graded on completion efficiency, casualty management, and strategic clarity."

A murmur rippled through the room.

This was no simple exhibition.

This was a field simulation of real hunting operations.

"There will be five rounds total," Verren continued.

"Teams must complete at least three rounds successfully to pass. Special commendations will be awarded to teams that complete all five with minimal casualties."

At that, a few competitive sparks lit up across the room.

Jasmine leaned forward, whispering to Layla, "We're gonna have to be perfect. No room for heroics this time."

Layla nodded grimly. "Tight and clean. That's the only way."

Verren tapped his tablet once, bringing up a timer glyph.

"The first wave of practicals begins in three days. You have until then to solidify your strategies and prepare your equipment. There will be no changes to team rosters past tonight."

He stepped back.

Professor Amelia moved to the front, her voice softer but carrying a distinct firmness.

"Remember—this practical is not just about passing."

"It's about who notices you."

The scouts.

The guilds.

The opportunity—or the mistake—that could define their careers before they even graduated.

And finally, it was Eleanor who spoke last, her gaze sweeping across the assembled cadets like a silent blade.

"When you enter that field, act like you belong there. Or you will be remembered for the wrong reasons."

Her tone was cutting, final.

The room breathed as one, the weight of reality sinking into them like stone.

This wasn't just a practical anymore.

It was a proving ground.

Verren gave a single nod.

"Prepare yourselves. Dismissed."

The glyphs faded.

Chairs scraped quietly against stone as cadets began filing out—quieter than usual, with tighter postures, minds already racing toward tactics, supplies, and team drills.

As the mass of cadets began to spill out of the amphitheater, breaking into small, buzzing groups of their own, a natural pull brought Astron, Irina, Jasmine, Layla, and Sylvie together near the side corridor—away from the heavier foot traffic but close enough to still feel the charged energy lingering in the air.

Irina was the first to speak, unsurprisingly. She folded her arms across her chest, her fiery red hair catching the faint light as her golden eyes gleamed with sharp focus.

"Tch. Didn't expect this level of seriousness for a mid-term," she muttered, voice low but strong enough for the group to hear. "Guild scouts, five full rounds... they're basically throwing us into a real battlefield." She huffed, straightening her posture. "But it doesn't matter much anyway."

Jasmine, standing to her right, offered a crooked smile. "I mean, it's a bit more pressure, sure. But we've already got something most teams are scrambling for."

Layla nodded, resting a hand casually on her hip. "Yeah. We actually work together." She glanced at the others. "Most teams are either glued together at the last second or still arguing about who should lead."

Sylvie tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, her voice calm as she added, "We've already built a foundation. Between the Kalthor's Method drills and the Tri-Layer Pressure formation practice... we know how to cover each other."

Irina smirked faintly at that, a rare glint of satisfaction flashing across her face. "Yeah. We're miles ahead of the average."

Astron, who had been silently observing as usual, gave a slight nod—an approval subtle enough that only those familiar with him would notice it.

Jasmine crossed her arms and rocked on her heels. "Still... this is gonna be rough. Five different types of objectives, changing environments. We can't just brute-force everything."

Layla gave a small chuckle. "Well, maybe not everything. But we've got enough flexibility to handle it."

Irina turned her head slightly, her fiery red hair catching the fading light filtering through the corridor windows. Her golden eyes locked onto Astron, a playful glint hidden behind their sharpness.

"And what about you, Mr. Silent Strategist?" she asked, her voice light but carrying a familiar edge of curiosity. "What's your grand opinion about all this?"

Astron met her gaze evenly, unfazed. He leaned back slightly, resting his hands casually in his jacket pockets. His voice, when it came, was as steady and grounded as ever.

"At the end of the day," he said calmly, "there's no need to overthink it."

The others blinked, surprised by how simply he phrased it.

Astron continued, his sharp purple eyes sweeping across the group. "An exam is an exam. You prepare. You show up. You do what you can. That's all there is to it." His tone remained neutral, almost matter-of-fact. "We go in, move the way we've trained, and adapt as needed."

Irina's lips curled into a smirk, a spark of amusement flickering across her face. She gave a small nod of approval. "Agreed," she said, her voice firmer now. "No point stressing about what-ifs. We're ready."

Jasmine let out a mock groan, throwing her hands up. "Ugh. You two are impossible sometimes. It's like you live in your own little world where nothing shakes you."

Layla snorted, crossing her arms. "Yeah. Must be nice being built out of pure confidence."

Sylvie, standing a little behind the others, said nothing. But her green eyes narrowed slightly, and she couldn't help but glare quietly at the two of them—Astron and Irina standing there, looking so sure, so steady.

A flicker of something stirred in her chest—something she didn't fully understand.

She quickly pushed the feeling down, smoothing her expression before anyone could notice.

They had a mission to focus on.

Personal feelings could wait.

"Whatever," Jasmine said, waving a hand dismissively. "As long as you two can back it up when we're knee-deep in trouble, I'm fine."

"We will," Irina said confidently, flashing a sharp grin.

Chapter 1002 Practical Mid-terms

The walls of Reina's office glowed faintly, the mana filaments in the ceiling dimmed to a muted, soothing pulse. The scent of cold paper and polished wood filled the room, and for a few precious minutes, Reina allowed herself the luxury of silence. Her fingers traced the rim of the untouched glass beside her, the remnants of her earlier indulgence forgotten.

Then—the comm-stone embedded in her desk pulsed, a low, deliberate vibration that resonated through the heavy wood.

An Anchor contact.

High priority.

Reina sighed under her breath, steeling herself. She pressed her palm lightly against the stone, and the holographic projection flared to life above the desk—crisp lines, minimal distortion. On the other side, a figure materialized: formal robes layered in deep gray and silver, the insignia of the Anchor Corps woven subtly across the collar. His face was half-shadowed by the encryption filters, but Reina recognized him immediately.

"Watcher Reina," the man said without preamble. His voice was clipped, official. "We need to discuss the recent developments."

Reina inclined her head slightly. "Of course. I assume this is about the activation event."

"It is. And the subsequent reclassification shifts," he said, his gaze narrowing. "We are conducting a reassessment of previously registered Adepts. Particularly those flagged under 'contingency compatibility.'"

Reina's expression didn't shift, but she knew where this was going. She waited.

The Anchor continued, his voice sharp. "Specifically—[Adept Astron]."

There it was.

"We noticed he is currently classified as inactive—dormant," the man said, consulting a secondary feed off-screen. "Due to his enrollment status at the Arcadia Hunter Academy. His previous assessments and predictive modeling marked him as exceptionally compatible. His age also places him within the critical bracket."

Reina let the silence stretch for a second longer before answering.

"That's correct," she said coolly. "He is presently inactive due to the Academy's current restrictions. Since the start of the new cycle, Arcadia tightened security—entrance and exit privileges are heavily monitored. No active deployment without internal authorization."

The Anchor frowned slightly. "Is there no method to bypass this limitation? His performance markers put him in the top tier for adaptive resonance. It would be a waste to leave such an asset unused during this critical stage."

Reina's lips quirked at that—humorless, but faintly amused.

"Under normal circumstances, perhaps there might have been ways to... encourage movement," she said. "But with the way the political pressure is mounting around the academies right now, it's delicate. Any direct extraction attempt would cause backlash we can't afford."

A beat.

"However," Reina continued, her voice more measured, "the situation is evolving."

She leaned back slightly in her chair, fingers steepled before her.

"The Academy is currently in the middle of mid-terms. And given the trajectory of the external pressure—especially now that the Association and Guilds are beginning to realize how the gates are selecting their entrants—there's little doubt."

She let the next words fall with the certainty of a knife:

"The Academy will be forced to loosen their restrictions. Sooner rather than later."

The Anchor studied her silently for a moment, processing the implications.

"So you're saying..." he prompted.

"I'm saying," Reina said, her voice like polished steel, "that once the cracks widen, we will have access. And when that happens—[Adept Astron] will be moved back into active status."

She allowed herself a small, tight smile.

"He won't stay asleep for long."

The projection flickered briefly as the Anchor acknowledged the transmission.

"Understood. We will prepare a standby protocol in the meantime. If a window appears—notify us immediately."

Reina inclined her head once, the formalities complete.

The connection severed with a soft chime, leaving the office bathed once more in quiet, pulsing mana-light.

Then, she sat in silence for a long moment, her fingers resting lightly against the edge of her desk. The glow of the comm-stone had faded, but the weight of the conversation remained. Her thoughts drifted, sharp and focused—not just on protocols and contingency drafts, but on him.

Astron Natusalune.

Young, but not unproven. Unranked, but not unread. A ghost in the system who shouldn't exist by design—yet somehow fit too perfectly into what the world was becoming.

'He deserves to know,' Reina thought. 'He's not just a tool to be pulled from storage. He's still one of ours.'

Her fingers moved across the surface of the desk, tracing a command glyph in a clean stroke. A small circle blinked once—linked to Astron's Watch ID.

Connection initializing...

The mana screen shimmered for a breath, stabilizing. It didn't ring. No audio chime. Just a direct call routed through the Watchers' network encryption—quiet and immediate.

The image flickered once before stabilizing.

Astron's room appeared.

The feed showed clean lines and spartan design. A single light pulsed softly near his bed. The far wall glowed faintly with the arcane warding pattern the Academy issued for personal quarters.

And in the center of it all, Astron sat—his back against the wall, one leg pulled up, a thick textbook resting open beside him. His eyes flicked up at once as the call came through. Not surprised. Just... aware.

"Miss Reina," he said, setting the book aside without needing to ask who it was.

Reina studied him for a beat before speaking. He looked more worn than usual—perhaps from the weight of midterms, or perhaps from something deeper. His expression was calm, but his eyes held the quiet sharpness she always recognized. That readiness.

"I assume your exam season hasn't dulled your senses," she said smoothly.

"Depends on the subject," Astron replied, tone dry.

A small smile flickered at the corner of Reina's mouth. It vanished just as quickly.

"I contacted you," she said, voice returning to its usual precision, "because something has changed. Something important."

Astron's gaze sharpened.

"We've just received confirmation of global systemic fluctuation."

Astron tilted his head slightly, eyes narrowing with the same sharp focus that had always reminded Reina of a blade just shy of drawing blood.

"Was that related to the change in mana-levels that happened yesterday?" he asked, his voice quiet—but certain.

Reina's lips curved, just faintly. Not in amusement, but in recognition.

Of course he'd noticed.

He could see it. Few others would've registered the fluctuations beneath the surface—let alone pinpoint them as unnatural. But Astron wasn't most people. Not with those eyes.

"Indeed," she said, her tone laced with approval. "You observed it."

He gave a small nod, but didn't posture. "I felt the deviation first. The leylines around the western district were... inconsistent. Flow patterns were misaligned with recorded behavior. So I looked."

Reina's smile lingered just a second longer before she grew serious again. "Then you already know more than most. But tell me—what did you see, Astron?"

He paused, searching his memory—not for emotion, but for detail. "Not a single point of origin. Just cascading variance. As if something changed the underlying tolerance for mana pressure itself. The fluctuations didn't spike—they inverted. Some cores even stabilized beyond their natural rhythm. I couldn't trace a trigger. Only the aftershock."

Reina nodded slowly, her expression unreadable.

"Good," she said. "Then you felt the echo. What you witnessed was the system's reaction. What you didn't see was the cause."

She leaned forward slightly, her voice lower now. Measured.

"The dungeons," she said, "are changing."

Astron didn't flinch. He simply listened.

Reina continued. "All across the domain—multiple guilds have reported anomalies. Gates appearing and stabilizing. And then refusing entry. No defense triggers. No breach protocols. They just... sit. Silent. Inert."

She let the silence hang, then drove it home.

"They are no longer opening for us."

Astron's brow furrowed, just slightly. "Not opening?"

Reina nodded once. "Not for older hunters. Not for elites. Not even for stage-10s or higher. The gates recognize them—then ignore them. We've thrown every protocol at them. Every theory. They behave like they're waiting."

Astron was still now, his posture tightening almost imperceptibly.

"And the ones that do open," Reina said, "they only open for cadets. For youth. Under twenty-one. Confirmed across multiple districts."

A beat.

Then Reina added, "You see why I called you."

And for a moment, the flicker of tension that passed across Astron's face was unmistakable.

"...They're choosing," he murmured.

"Yes," Reina replied. "And whether this is evolution or manipulation, it changes everything."

She folded her hands atop her desk, eyes locking with his.

"This is no longer about preparation, Astron. The world is being rewritten. The question is—who's going to walk through the door it opens?"

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Reina's gaze softened—fractionally. Just enough for Astron to notice.

But then, she leaned back, the formal steel returning to her tone like a reflex.

"That's all for now. I'll forward the encrypted transcript of the fluctuations we recorded—review it when your schedule allows."

Astron gave a slight nod.

Reina's expression remained composed, but there was something behind it. A sliver of something quieter, not spoken aloud.

"And Astron?"

He paused. "Yes?"

"Do well on your exams," she said, tone light—but firm. "Your instructors are watching. And so am I."

A beat. Then, a dry smile ghosted across her lips.

"I expect results."

The connection blinked out before he could reply. The mana-screen dissolved into particles, fading back into the stillness of his room.

Silence returned.

Astron didn't move at first. His eyes lingered on the wall for a few seconds longer, watching the faint remnants of residual mana spiral through the air like embers left in reverse.

Then, slowly, he turned—his gaze shifting toward the arcane-etched wall opposite his desk.

Blank. Silent. Unchanging.

But not unseen.

His fingers hovered near the side of his eye for a breath, then dropped.

What does this mean?

He'd already sensed it.

Yesterday, just before midnight. The sky had shifted. Not in color, but in structure. The clouds had frozen mid-motion, and the thunder hadn't rumbled—it had curled, folding over itself like a looped frequency.

The leylines pulsed in reverse. The ambient mana began spiraling inward instead of outward.

He'd stared at the distortion for nearly thirty seconds—his [Eyes] active, locked on the deviation.

And it had almost broken him.

Not from pain. Not from pressure.

But from information.

He'd seen things—shapes, symbols, inverted echoes of runes that didn't belong to any modern system. Foreign anchors floating in the sky. Tethers that weren't connected to the land, but to something else entirely. Something distant.

At some point, the volume of raw data had overwhelmed him. His vision bled silver, and his perception twisted into noise.

He was forced to shut his [Eyes] off.

Just to remain grounded.

That should not have been possible.

Even when facing illusion domains, even under Reina's direct projection trials—he'd never been forced to disable his gift.

But last night...

It wasn't like looking at the world's secrets.

It was like the world was looking back.

Yet this was not the important thing.

He stared at the wall, unblinking.

Not because it held any answers.

But because it didn't.

Under twenty-one.

That was what Reina had said.

The gates are choosing based on age.

Not affinity. Not training. Not achievement. Just... youth.

His hands folded over his knees, fingers tapping once against the fabric of his pants.

Why?

The logic eluded him. In the framework of the natural world—of mana physics and system thresholds—there was no reason for dimensional access points to begin selecting based on such a human criterion. Age wasn't a construct of magic. It was biological. Arbitrary.

And yet, here it was.

The gates weren't opening for veterans, no matter their power.

Only for them.

This isn't how it happened in the game.

His eyes narrowed, the glow of recent mana data still faint in his pupils.

In Legacy of Shadows: The Hunter's Destiny, the event that shifted the world's balance came much later. Well past the academy arcs. Well past the awakening of personal Authorities.

It was the Descent of the Demon King.

A cataclysmic invasion from another realm. A point of origin descending upon the world like a corrupted sun, warping the mana system—not redirecting it. Not filtering who could enter gates.

It thickened the mana.

That was the canonical trigger.

Every leyline surged. Every zone outside major settlements became hostile. Dungeons spawned with greater frequency because of destabilized dimensional seams—not choice.

There was no selection mechanism.

No preference for age.

Just chaos.

This... this was different.

This feels... orchestrated.

He leaned back against the wall, his eyes drifting upward toward the ceiling—where a faint pulse of stabilized mana shimmered behind the room's protective enchantments.

Someone is choosing.

That was the only explanation.

And that someone wasn't part of the game's original script.

A systemic fluctuation? That could be attributed to engine divergence. Anomaly spawn rate spike? Possible early trigger due to butterfly effects. But selective access based on age?

That was new code.

New rules.

And that meant one thing above all:

Someone—or something—was rewriting the narrative.

Astron closed his eyes for a moment.

The world is being rewritten.

Those had been Reina's words.

He agreed with Reina.

The world was being rewritten.

And he had known it would be, ever since that night. The night he woke in this body—not just as someone who had transmigrated, but as someone who had merged.

The original Astron Natusalune wasn't erased. His memories weren't overwritten. They had become one. Layered. Interwoven. A soul from another world, fused with the instincts and scars of a boy bred in silence and shadows. It wasn't a possession. It wasn't a takeover. It was a convergence.

And because of that—because he bore both understanding and foundation—the world had no choice but to begin deviating.

Things were always bound to change.

Butterfly effects had already begun long ago. The first subtle divergences: conversations that hadn't occurred in the game, characters interacting in ways they weren't meant to, minor battles ending in silence instead of conflict. His mere presence, rational and watchful, was enough to tilt balance. Small deviations. Slight shifts.

But this—

This was not slight.

This was a fracture in the narrative's spine.

Gates filtering candidates. Age restrictions imposed by an unknown hand. And now mana itself—one of the constants of this world—bending not due to invasion or war, but due to preference.

His eyes opened again, and for a moment, they shimmered faintly violet.

This will affect the future.

He had studied the game's route like scripture. He had mapped every arc, flagged every event marker. He knew when factions rose and fell, when betrayals occurred, when world events tipped toward oblivion or salvation. Everything had structure. Everything had purpose.

But if the system began rewriting eligibility... then event chains would collapse.

Future bosses—those intended to be fought by veteran Hunters—might never spawn. Some artifacts, bound to open only for certain ages or bloodlines, might now awaken early... or remain sealed. Key characters could be thrown into different arcs—some gaining power before their turning point, others fading into irrelevance because the narrative that once carried them no longer had weight.

And what of the Protagonist?

Ethan's growth was anchored in struggle—crafted to bloom in a world of gradual tension. If the gates began choosing early—if the world accelerated before he had time to build his bonds, to face the right enemies, to awaken his Authority properly—then the whole structure might shatter.

Or worse...

Something new might take center stage.

Astron's hands rested on his knees again. He didn't tremble. He didn't flinch. But his breath slowed—methodical, deliberate.

I've been shaping events carefully. Steadily. Guiding things toward the breakpoint.

The moment everything shifted. The divergence point he intended to reach before too much changed. Before things spiraled into the unknown. He had spent months preparing

—cultivating allies, observing threats, manipulating opportunities. A spider's web of plans, all set to trigger once the right catalyst arrived.

But now?

That web was trembling. Not breaking—not yet—but bending beneath pressure from an external hand.

If the world's logic was changing... then so too would the weight of every choice he made.

He narrowed his eyes.

There's still time.

The breakpoint wasn't here yet.

But it was closer.

Closer than he had accounted for.

And now, he would have to think sharper. Cut deeper into the threads of fate before they were rewritten by someone else's hand.

Chapter 1004 Divine

Sylvie's boots made soft, rhythmic sounds against the polished stone path as she made her way across the academy grounds. The golden hues of the evening sun had faded into the pale silver of twilight, and the lamplights along the walkways flickered to life one by one, bathing the campus in a gentle, otherworldly glow.

She pulled her jacket tighter around herself as a cool breeze whispered past. Sunday evening... and she was heading toward the infirmary, not to rest, but to take yet another part of her examinations.

'The Healer practicals,' she reminded herself, exhaling softly.

Unlike the others who only had their theory and combat simulations, the Healer track students had an additional requirement—an applied practical test at the infirmary itself. Real patients, real injuries. No room for textbook-only knowledge. It made sense, of course. Healing wasn't something that could be learned solely from books. But still, the thought of it gnawed at her nerves.

Her fingers fiddled absently with the strap of her bag as she walked, her mind drifting back to the theory exams earlier that week—and the sour taste they left behind.

They hadn't gone well.

It wasn't that she hadn't studied. She had spent countless nights pouring over the textbooks, reviewing healing incantations, memorizing mana circulation diagrams. She had even practiced with Jasmine and Layla whenever she could.

And yet...

'They asked about topics we barely even touched on in lectures,' Sylvie thought with a grimace, her steps slowing slightly as she replayed the feeling of sitting in the cold examination hall, staring down at questions that seemed like they came from an entirely different course.

Advanced regenerative harmonics. Counteracting toxin mana residue. Deep vein mana stabilization techniques.

Of course, she had studied the basics of these topics. Everyone had. But the level of detail they wanted? The obscure case studies they expected them to cite?

'It was almost like they didn't want us to pass,' she thought bitterly.

Sylvie shook her head, forcing the thought away. No good dwelling on it now. What's done was done. All she could do now was focus on the practical—and ace it.

Just then, her steps grew steadier as she approached the infirmary doors, her hands relaxing slightly at her sides. The practical exam— that, at least, she could be confident about.

After all, her training hadn't been normal. Under Headmaster Jonathan's relentless instruction, she hadn't just learned to fight. She had learned to move with precision, to think faster, to weave her mana with far greater clarity. Combat was where the biggest changes were visible—but her healing had also advanced by leaps and bounds.

She could feel it even now, the way her [Enchantments] no longer wavered or sputtered, the way her mana threads slipped into injured tissues with subtle control instead of crude force. Her Restoration Glyphs, once prone to uneven output, were now clean, efficient, and, more importantly—stable.

'Healing is about belief,' Headmaster Jonathan had told her once, his voice low and unwavering. 'You must believe that you will succeed before your mana will obey you fully. Doubt is poison.'

Sylvie let out a slow, steady breath as she reminded herself of those words.

Yes. In terms of technique, she had improved. She knew she had.

But even as she reassured herself, her thoughts—unbidden, traitorous—drifted away from the exam ahead.

Toward Astron.

And Irina.

Her steps faltered for a heartbeat. She caught herself, tightening her grip on her bag again.

'Why am I thinking about this now?' she scolded herself silently, but the question was hollow.

Because the truth was simple: lately, no matter how hard she tried, she felt like she couldn't get closer to him at all.

Whenever she tried to talk to him, to catch a moment alone... Irina was there.

Not deliberately blocking her, not intentionally malicious—just... there. Always nearby. Always stepping in at the critical moments.

And Astron—he didn't seem to mind. If anything, he seemed almost comfortable around Irina now. Their interactions, once tinged with a strange tension, had shifted. They spoke easily. They understood each other's glances, their movements syncing naturally in sparring and strategy meetings.

Sylvie bit her lower lip as she pushed open the infirmary door, the scent of clean mana and herbal wards washing over her.

It wasn't that she hated Irina.

It wasn't even jealousy—at least, not entirely.

It was the slow, aching realization that the distance between her and Astron hadn't closed at all.

If anything... it had grown.

And that thought hurt far worse than she was willing to admit.

She tightened her hand into a small fist at her side.

'Focus. You have an exam to pass first,' she reminded herself, forcing her mind back to the task at hand.

The cool air of the infirmary pressed gently against Sylvie's skin as she sat quietly in the examination room, the faint hum of the mana wards a steady backdrop. The practical exam had been long, methodical—and surprisingly exhausting.

Yet she felt it in her core: she had done well.

Better than well.

Across from her, the supervising instructor—a tall man with silver-streaked hair and robes embroidered with the Academy's medical sigil—finished noting something on his tablet before lifting his gaze to meet hers. There was a rare softness in his sharp gray eyes, and then, to Sylvie's surprise, a small smile curved his lips.

"Well done, Sylvie Gracewind," he said, his voice warm but professional. "Truly well done."

Sylvie blinked, sitting a little straighter. "I—thank you," she said automatically, though the words felt small compared to the weight of his praise.

The instructor leaned back slightly, studying her with a thoughtful look. "When you first arrived here, you were too timid. Too cautious. Afraid to trust your own instincts."

He tapped the side of his tablet lightly, his smile deepening.

"But today? You took risks. Necessary ones. You didn't hesitate, you didn't second-guess—and more importantly, you didn't lose control."

He paused, nodding with clear approval. "That is the difference between a competent healer and a true one. You trusted yourself."

Sylvie's chest tightened with a strange warmth—a blend of pride and disbelief. She lowered her gaze for a moment, trying to steady the emotion rising within her.

Hearing those words... it felt real now. Tangible.

She wasn't just surviving anymore.

She was growing.

"Thank you, Instructor," she said again, her voice steadier this time.

The man chuckled lightly as he set his tablet aside. "You don't need to thank me. You earned it. Quite frankly..."

He glanced at the closed doors leading to the other treatment chambers.

"You've surpassed the others by a wide margin."

Sylvie's breath caught.

She had guessed it already.

Being the last student to perform had its advantages—and with her [First Lord's Authority] humming quietly at the edges of her senses, she had observed every healing session before hers. The fluctuations of mana, the rushed applications, the lack of stability under pressure—she had seen it all in excruciating detail.

The others were good, yes.

But none of them had been as fast, as stable, as precise as she had been.

Even without being told, Sylvie knew she had ranked first.

'Finally...' she thought, a quiet, trembling sense of triumph unfurling within her.

Finally, all those endless nights of training, the countless failures, the scars of doubt she carried—finally, it had all meant something.

She rose from her seat with quiet grace, bowing respectfully to the instructor.

"Thank you for the opportunity," she said simply.

He gave a nod of acknowledgment. "Keep walking this path, Sylvie. You're closer to mastery than you realize."

With those words still ringing in her ears, Sylvie stepped out of the examination room, the infirmary halls bathed in a soft golden light from the overhead mana-lamps.

Her bag slung over one shoulder, the cool evening air brushing her face as she left the building—

—for the first time in a long while, Sylvie Gracewind allowed herself a small, genuine smile.

"Ah..."

Just then she met with someone that she didn't expect....

Chapter 1005 Divine

The infirmary doors whispered shut behind Sylvie, the faint hum of the wards fading as she stepped onto the wide stone landing outside. Cool evening air kissed her cheeks, carrying with it the scent of fresh rain on old stone and the quiet, distant echoes of students sparring in the lower fields.

She exhaled, releasing a breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

And then—

A figure leaning casually against the base of a lamppost caught her eye.

For a moment, her mind didn't register it. The evening light painted everything in hues of silver and gold, the breeze tugging at his cloak, making him look almost like part of the scenery.

But then he shifted—straightened—and she saw the unmistakable glint of yellow in his gaze.

Her breath hitched.

"...Brother?"

He smiled easily, as if they had agreed to meet here all along. His cloak bore an unfamiliar crest now—a half-risen sun over a distant horizon, stitched neatly onto his shoulder.

Solstice Dawn.

Sylvie's eyes flickered briefly to the emblem, confusion passing across her face, but she quickly masked it.

Leonard pushed off the lamppost with a casual grace, his hands slipping into his pockets. "Thought I might find you here."

His voice was light, familiar—but Sylvie didn't miss the way his eyes swept over her from head to toe, assessing. Not critically. Almost... proudly.

"You were watching?" she asked, folding her arms loosely over her bag, half defensive, half wary.

Leonard chuckled, a low, warm sound. "Not inside. I wouldn't interfere with an exam." He tilted his head slightly. "But yes. I was told the healers were being evaluated today. Thought I'd check on a certain little sister of mine."

Sylvie's lips twitched despite herself. "You could have just sent a message, you know."

Leonard shrugged. "Wouldn't have been the same." His gaze softened, the golden hue of his eyes catching the last edge of the sun's light. "Besides... I wanted to see it myself."

She hesitated—then asked, more quietly, "And?"

He grinned. "You were good. Better than good. You didn't panic, you didn't overreach, and you didn't waste a single drop of mana. Whoever's teaching you should get a bonus."

Sylvie looked away, hiding the faint color rising to her cheeks.

It shouldn't have mattered. She didn't need validation. She didn't need his validation.

And yet...

A small warmth settled somewhere beneath her ribs.

"Thank you," she said, softer than before.

Leonard walked forward a few steps, his boots silent against the worn stone, until he stood just a few feet from her. Not invading her space—but close enough that his presence filled the air between them.

"You've grown a lot," he said, almost to himself. "Stronger. Smarter. I'm proud of you."

Sylvie's chest tightened again at those words, and she cursed herself silently for how much they still meant to her.

She tried to focus on something else—anything else. "You're a scout now?" she asked, nodding lightly toward the crest on his cloak.

Leonard smiled, something sly flickering behind the easy expression. "For the time being. Solstice Dawn's running a few new recruitment circuits. I got assigned here." He glanced around, feigning casual interest. "Pretty convenient, huh?"

Sylvie didn't answer immediately.

A strange undercurrent ran beneath his words. An odd coincidence—or something more?

She studied him closely, but Leonard's mask didn't falter.

Not yet.

"Convenient," she agreed finally, her voice carefully neutral.

Leonard's smile widened just a fraction.

He knew she didn't fully believe him.

And that was fine.

There was still time.

He reached out and ruffled her hair lightly, in the same easy, affectionate way he used to when they were children.

Sylvie batted his hand away with a quiet huff, but the tension between them eased, just a little.

"Come on," Leonard said, turning back toward the main path. "You're free now, right? Let's grab a late dinner. My treat."

Sylvie hesitated only a moment before falling into step beside him.

As they walked side by side, their footsteps weaving a steady rhythm along the stone path, Leonard's mind ticked quietly beneath his outward ease.

'She has awakened sooner than expected,' he mused, his golden eyes half-lidded in thought. 'And it seems someone else has noticed this too.'

There was no way—no possible way—that he, the one appointed directly by His Holiness, could have missed it.

The faint ripple he felt earlier at the infirmary wasn't coincidence. It wasn't imagination.

It was resonance.

Real. Tangible. Subtle enough that even seasoned mages might have missed it—but not him. Not someone trained to feel the quiet birth of power woven into blood and bone.

Of course, Leonard had always known.

From the moment he first laid eyes on her, when they were still just children fumbling through half-lit prayers and whispered lessons of faith, Leonard had known she was different.

Different—and chosen.

The fate she carried was not the fate of a mere healer or a scholar tucked safely away in the Academy's shadow.

It was heavier.

Older.

Drenched in threads of prophecy long woven before either of them were born.

He cast a sidelong glance at Sylvie, who was talking lightly about the infirmary staff—an innocent smile playing at her lips as she recounted how one of the older instructors had grumbled about "youth wasting their talents" while bandaging his own clumsily burned hand.

She was laughing softly, the sunlight catching in her hair, her expression unguarded for once.

And beneath that innocence, the pulse of something vast and half-sleeping stirred.

Leonard's smile remained easy, his posture relaxed—but inwardly, he exhaled in something closer to resignation than satisfaction.

'Well, since the agreement is nullified,' he thought, his steps slow and deliberate, 'I suppose it's better that she awakens soon.'

He turned his gaze forward again, past the flowering trees and rising arches of the Academy's central courtyard.

'We don't need to waste a talent like her after all.'

The old agreements—the ones that would have restrained her, shackled her future in chains of ritual and submission—were ashes now. Burned away by necessity.

She was no longer a trade good.

She was a potential weapon.

Just then, Sylvie's voice broke softly through the quiet between them, tinged with casual curiosity.

"Brother," she said, glancing sideways at him, "that symbol on your shoulder... what is it?"

Leonard slowed his steps slightly, as if remembering the existence of the crest only now.

He followed her gaze down to the half-sun emblem stitched neatly onto his cloak—the insignia of Solstice Dawn catching the fading light with a muted gleam.

"Ah, this..." he said, tapping the crest lightly with two fingers, his tone relaxed, almost offhand.

He offered her a lopsided smile, one that seemed perfectly natural—too natural.

"It's for my new job," he said simply. "I'm here as a scout now."

Sylvie's brows lifted slightly, a mix of intrigue and mild suspicion flashing across her face. "A scout?"

Leonard chuckled under his breath. "Not quite the hunter you imagined I'd become, huh?"

She shook her head lightly, still studying him. "I just didn't expect you to join a guild like... that."

"Solstice Dawn?" he prompted.

Sylvie nodded.

Leonard shrugged, as if it were the most ordinary decision in the world. "It's a newer guild. More specialized. We find talented cadets and guide them toward the right places. You know how it is—these days, everyone's desperate for new blood. Especially after the last few major incursions."

Sylvie's expression darkened a little at the mention of the incursions, but she said nothing.

Leonard continued easily, steering the conversation back toward lighter ground. "I guess you could say I'm one of the lucky ones. I get to travel, meet new talents, and... maybe even steal a few stars away before the bigger guilds grab them."

Chapter 1006 Gate examination

"I guess you could say I'm one of the lucky ones. I get to travel, meet new talents, and... maybe even steal a few stars away before the bigger guilds grab them."

He grinned, but behind that grin, Sylvie sensed something—an edge too smooth to be careless.

Her instincts twitched faintly.

But Leonard's gaze was warm. Familiar. A brother's gaze.

It made doubting him feel wrong.

"You always liked wandering around," Sylvie said, forcing a small smile. "I guess it suits you."

"It does," Leonard agreed. "And besides..." He turned his head slightly, looking toward the Academy's sprawling training grounds, where the distant clash of practice bouts echoed faintly against the stone. "Arcadia's not a bad place to find stars waiting to rise."

Sylvie followed his gaze, but the unease lingering in the pit of her stomach didn't fade.

She wrapped her arms a little tighter around her bag and walked a bit closer to him, drawing comfort from the simple proximity even as questions stacked quietly in the corners of her mind.

Leonard didn't miss it.

He didn't push.

There would be time enough for that later.

For now, he simply smiled again—a smile full of fondness and patience—and led her onward, deeper into the heart of a campus blooming with talent, ambition... and sleeping danger.

They found a quiet diner tucked away from the main arteries of the Academy—a modest place with soft, warm lighting and thick wooden tables, far from the flashier, bustling venues closer to the central plaza. Sylvie led the way to a booth near the back, settling her bag beside her as Leonard slid in opposite her, leaning his elbows casually on the table.

The smell of freshly baked bread and simmering stew hung in the air, cozy and familiar. It calmed her a little, easing the last of the tension that had followed her like a shadow.

Their meals arrived quickly: a simple roast plate for Leonard, a creamy herb soup for Sylvie. The warm broth soothed her chest, still tight from the pressure of the week.

Leonard waited until she had taken a few bites before leaning back slightly and flashing her a relaxed smile. "So," he began, "how were your exams?"

Sylvie swallowed and wiped her mouth neatly with a napkin. "Not bad," she answered, choosing her words carefully. "Theory was... decent. It could've been better if I had guessed the topics better, but I think I held my ground."

Leonard arched a brow, amusement flickering across his features. "Held your ground, huh? Sounds like someone's being modest."

Sylvie chuckled softly, a genuine sound. "Maybe. But my healing practical? I'm pretty confident about that one."

She smiled, a faint but proud curve of her lips. "I think I aced it."

Leonard's grin widened, the kind of grin that made her chest ache a little with nostalgia. "Of course you did. Little sister's a real prodigy now."

Sylvie flushed slightly and busied herself with her spoon. "Tomorrow's our team exams," she said, changing the subject quickly. "That's the last part."

Leonard nodded knowingly. "Yeah. I figured."

His gaze was calm, thoughtful. "Since I'm stationed here as a scout, we get updates. I know the schedule."

Sylvie nodded, stirring her soup slowly. She knew what he would ask next even before he spoke.

"So, should I come watch? When's the best time to see my brilliant little sister in action?" Leonard's tone was teasing, but there was a sincerity behind it—he genuinely wanted to see her at her best.

Sylvie bit her lip, thinking. She wanted to impress him. Wanted to show him she wasn't the timid little girl he remembered from years ago.

"If possible," she said after a pause, lifting her gaze to meet his, "come Wednesday or Thursday."

Leonard tilted his head slightly. "Oh? Planning something?"

"We'll be better then," Sylvie said, her voice firm. "More adapted to the course conditions. I think... no, I'm sure we'll be in a better state by then."

Leonard chuckled, rapping his knuckles lightly against the table. "So confident now. I'm impressed."

Sylvie smiled shyly, but her eyes gleamed with quiet determination. "We'll adapt."

Leonard leaned back, folding his arms with a content nod. "That's good. That's how it should be."

He paused, studying her for a moment with a rare, serious look. "Sylvie... I'm proud of you, you know."

The words caught her off guard, making her throat tighten unexpectedly. She nodded quickly, looking down at her soup again to hide the emotions swelling inside her chest.

"I'll be there," Leonard said, his voice lighter again. "Wednesday or Thursday. You better not disappoint me."

"I won't," Sylvie said quietly, her fingers tightening around her spoon.

'I'll make sure you can be even prouder next time you see me.'

And under the dim golden lights of the quiet diner, for the first time in days, Sylvie allowed herself to believe it.

The soft chill of the early Monday morning clung to the academy grounds, mist curling lightly around the stone pathways as the sun struggled to break fully through the lingering clouds. Students moved in small groups, their voices hushed with a mixture of nerves and excitement—the buzz of the upcoming practicals hanging over everything like a living thing.

Inside the café where they had met so many times before, Astron's team gathered once again, settling into their usual corner. The atmosphere was calm, a layer of quiet focus draped over them. Their drinks steamed faintly on the table, untouched for now.

Layla was the first to speak, leaning back casually in her seat and glancing over at Sylvie with a sly smile. "So," she said, tilting her head, "how'd your healing exam go yesterday?"

Jasmine perked up at that, crossing her arms and grinning. "Yeah, spill. You looked pretty smug when you came back."

Sylvie, sitting neatly with her hands folded in front of her coffee cup, blinked once before giving a rare, self-assured smile. "It went well," she said simply. "Really well."

Layla raised an eyebrow, exchanging a glance with Jasmine. "Oh? That confident?"

Sylvie nodded without hesitation, her green eyes calm and steady. "Yes. I think I'll be ranked first."

There was a brief beat of silence, followed by Jasmine letting out a low whistle. "Whoa, listen to you! I didn't know our little Sylvie could flex like that."

Layla laughed, nudging Sylvie lightly with her elbow. "Yeah, seriously. You're scaring me a little."

Sylvie allowed herself a small chuckle, the confidence in her voice unshaken. "I mean it. Everything clicked perfectly. My mana control was sharp, my recovery efficiency was the highest among the group... I felt like I was exactly where I needed to be."

Jasmine grinned, tossing a thumb over her shoulder. "Damn. Confidence looks good on you."

Irina, who had been quietly sipping her coffee, glanced at Sylvie with a faint smirk. "Good. If you're that confident, then that's one less thing we have to worry about today."

Astron, seated across from them, remained silent, merely observing. But his gaze lingered a second longer on Sylvie—a subtle acknowledgment that he, too, approved of what he heard.

Layla tapped her fingers on the table lightly. "Alright, then. Healer's ready. Shield's ready. Pressure line's ready." She nodded toward Irina and Jasmine. "Now we just need to review positioning one more time before our slot."

Jasmine checked her wristband, flicking through the digital schedule. "Our time's between 1 PM and 2 PM. Plenty of time to eat, finalize our plan, and triple-check our gear."

Sylvie smiled faintly, the steady thrum of anticipation settling into her chest.

For some reason she had a good feeling today.

Chapter 1007: Gate Examination

The café doors swung open with a soft chime as the group stepped out into the crisp midday air. The sun had climbed higher now, casting sharp, clear beams across the academy grounds. A light breeze carried the faint scent of mana residue from the training fields, and everywhere cadets hurried to their own stations—checking gear, coordinating strategies, running last-minute drills.

Their group moved in steady formation, their steps measured, a reflection of the quiet understanding between them.

Their gear was familiar, each piece chosen with purpose. No flashy new equipment. No unnecessary changes.

After a brief discussion that morning, they had agreed: it was better to stick with what they knew. Their armor, weapons, and enchantments were already calibrated to their fighting styles. Confidence came from familiarity—and today wasn't about flashy displays.

It was about setting a tone.

Their first dungeon round.

Their first real impression.

Sylvie tightened her gloves slightly, feeling the familiar hum of mana running through the fabric. Irina adjusted the clasps on her combat jacket, flames flickering faintly along her fingers before fading. Jasmine twirled her dagger once, casually slipping it back into its sheath, while Layla gave her shield strap a sharp tug, securing it firmly against her arm.

Astron simply walked at the head of their group, silent as always, his presence steady as a compass point.

As they approached the central training grounds, the noise grew louder. The familiar gateway into the Mana-Linked Dungeon Arena loomed ahead—its massive arch inscribed with runes that pulsed faintly with silver-blue light.

But it wasn't the gate that caught their attention.

It was the crowd.

Lines of observers stood behind the barriers, their uniforms and badges marking them clearly—guild representatives, scouts, academy affiliates, and even a few private contractors. Their sharp eyes tracked the cadets moving toward the arena, clipboards and digital tablets in hand, murmuring notes to one another.

Layla let out a low whistle under her breath. "Whoa. That's... more than I expected."

Jasmine tilted her head, scanning the crowd with a grin. "It's not festival level, but still... this is serious."

Sylvie's heart thudded a little harder, but she kept her face composed. The number of scouts wasn't overwhelming—but it was definitely more than she had imagined.

Each one a potential opportunity—or a silent judge.

Irina, walking a step ahead, barely even glanced at the mass of scouts and officials. Her expression was cool, almost indifferent. The sharp glances, the notetaking, the subtle murmurs of judgment—it was all something she was intimately familiar with.

Growing up under the Emberheart name, she had spent her entire life under a spotlight. Interviews. Appearances. Expectations.

This?

This was nothing.

She carried herself with a casual, almost dismissive air, her fiery red hair catching the light like a burning banner as she strode forward. Let them look. Let them judge. It didn't matter. She would show them her strength soon enough.

Astron, as expected, showed even less reaction. His expression remained composed, distant. He simply continued walking, his sharp purple eyes flickering briefly over the assembled scouts before disregarding them entirely. In his mind, they were as much a part of the scenery as the stones under his feet. Irrelevant until proven otherwise.

Their team pushed through the final checkpoint, where a faculty member in dark academy robes waited with a tablet in hand.

It was Instructor Lowell—one of the field supervisors assigned to manage the practical examinations.

He looked up as they approached, his sharp gray eyes assessing them quickly before nodding once.

"Team Irina Emberheart," he said, reading from the glowing tablet. "You're next in queue."

He tapped a few buttons and projected a floating hologram above the tablet—a rough outline of a dungeon zone.

"This is your briefing," he continued, his voice clipped and efficient. "You'll be deployed into a collapsed urban zone—abandoned ruins, scattered vertical structures, minimal intact walls. Visibility will be low due to mana fog drifting through the area. Expect vertical combat scenarios—broken floors, unstable platforms, high ground contesting."

The group leaned in slightly, their faces sharpening as they absorbed the information.

"No prior intel will be given beyond this," Lowell continued. "You're expected to scout, secure objectives, and adapt. Remember: environmental hazards are active. Falling from unstable areas will trigger automatic extraction and count as a critical failure for your team."

Sylvie frowned slightly at that.

Falling hazards meant pressure not only from enemies but from the terrain itself.

They would need to move carefully—and quickly.

Layla tapped her shield lightly against the ground, her blue eyes steady. "Got it."

Jasmine grinned, rolling her shoulders. "Sounds fun."

The moment they crossed the threshold, the air shifted.

The comforting warmth of the academy grounds vanished, replaced by a clinging chill that seemed to seep into the bones. Mana fog rolled in thick tendrils across the shattered ruins, swirling around broken walls, half-collapsed buildings, and jagged remnants of once-proud towers. The sky above was a swirling mess of muted grays, casting everything in a dim, eerie twilight.

No sunlight. No clarity.

Only ruins and mist.

Their team moved without needing to say a word, instinct pulling them into a tight formation. Even Jasmine's usual easy grin faded into a focused expression. Layla's steps were heavier, more deliberate. Sylvie's hands hovered near her belt where mana threads pulsed faintly between her fingers, ready to weave at a moment's notice.

Irina adjusted the cuffs of her jacket, fire flickering faintly at the edges of her hands before disappearing—contained, but not forgotten.

Astron didn't say anything at first. He simply broke formation, moving toward a half-collapsed building with the kind of fluid, practiced efficiency that spoke of hundreds of similar runs.

No one questioned him.

They spread into a temporary holding pattern, keeping eyes on possible approach angles while Astron moved.

He scaled the structure with quiet precision, boots scraping lightly against cracked stone, fingers finding handholds almost as if by instinct. He climbed higher, until he reached the remains of a second-floor ledge—just high enough to see across the drifting mana fog.

He crouched low, his sharp purple eyes scanning the terrain.

Long seconds passed.

Below, the others waited.

Finally, Astron's voice crackled quietly through the team comms channel, steady and calm.

"Two primary groups. First wave is mana-ravaged beasts—looks like mutated canids. Fast, erratic movement. High vertical mobility. They're using the debris fields for cover."

Sylvie's brow furrowed slightly, absorbing the details.

"Second group is heavier," Astron continued. "Mid-sized constructs. Broken-down armor frames reanimated by mana flow. Slower, but armored and dense. They cluster around collapsed towers—defensive posture."

Layla gripped her shield tighter. "Two threat types, different speeds. We need layered defense."

"Yes," Astron confirmed. "And the fog's denser near the ground. Visibility's almost zero past ten meters at foot level. They'll be using that to flank if we're not careful."

Irina's voice crackled through next, firm. "Formation?"

Astron's answer came without hesitation. "Tri-layer adaptation, rotating diamond. Layla leads front center—focus shield reinforcement. Irina and Jasmine stagger second line, left and right split. Sylvie anchors rear, high focus on mobility support. I'll pivot between lines based on engagement."

Layla nodded firmly. "Understood."

Jasmine twirled her dagger once before readying it properly, followed by her sword. "Finally. I hate waiting."

Sylvie breathed out slowly, the tension in her shoulders fading into calm readiness. "On your mark."

Astron stood from the ledge, sharp eyes still tracking faint movements in the mist.

"Mark."

The team moved.

No hesitation. No second guessing.

Layla advanced first, shield up, her stance wide and unyielding as she cut a path through the denser fog. Irina and Jasmine slipped into mirrored flanking positions, one step behind and to either side—ready to collapse inward or fan out depending on pressure.

Sylvie's steps were quieter but no less firm, mana swirling faintly around her gloves as she calibrated defensive and acceleration glyphs on the fly.

And Astron descended like a whisper behind them, dropping into shadowed cover before vanishing into the half-ruined terrain.

Chapter 1008: Gate Examination

The first clash came fast.

From the swirling fog ahead, the mutated canids burst forth—deformed, sinewy creatures with jagged bone protrusions where fur should have been. Their forms twisted unnaturally, bending mid-leap to avoid direct lines of sight. But Layla was ready.

Clang!

The lead beast slammed against her shield, the force rattling up her arms. She absorbed the hit with a grunt, digging her boots into the cracked stone floor.

"Engaging first wave!" she called sharply.

Irina moved first. A burst of fire cracked outward from her palm, controlled but vicious, igniting the ground just beyond Layla's shield. The flames forced the canids back, their twisted forms screeching at the sudden blaze.

Jasmine flanked left, blade cutting through the mist in clean arcs. Her strikes weren't wild; they were measured, designed to harry rather than outright kill—giving Sylvie time to layer speed glyphs along their advance.

Astron, true to his word, pivoted silently between their lines. Whenever a canid slipped past Layla's block or Irina's flames wavered for half a second, he was there—dagger flashing, severing tendons, piercing vital points.

Their layered formation shifted dynamically, flowing around the terrain rather than through it.

Wave one ended quickly. The ground littered with twitching, dissipating corpses.

No breathing room.

The heavy constructs emerged next—hulking silhouettes dragging rusted weapons, reanimated armor cracked and glowing from within with unstable mana.

"Constructs incoming!" Astron called, already moving to a higher elevation.

Layla stepped back half a pace, adjusting her stance to brace for the heavier impacts. Sylvie flicked her hands rapidly, layering a series of reinforcement spells over her—shield mana tightening, barrier matrices weaving into the gaps of her armor.

The constructs hit like a landslide—slow, yes, but relentless. Each strike sent shockwaves through the broken streets, crumbling loose debris.

Irina's flames didn't vaporize these enemies like before. The constructs endured, forcing her to adjust.

"Tch... durable bastards," she muttered, snapping her wrist in a sharp motion. Her next flame burst wasn't raw destruction—it was corrosive, eating into mana circuits at weak points Astron quickly highlighted.

Jasmine danced along the flanks, chipping at exposed joints, while Astron moved in ghost-like bursts—striking vulnerable plates then slipping away before the slow-moving hulks could retaliate.

Sylvie coordinated the pressure, boosting speed at key moments and laying down suppression glyphs that slowed the constructs just enough to tip momentum back to their favor.

It was hard, heavy fighting.

But it was controlled.

Disciplined.

The constructs fell one by one, until the last collapsed in a heap of mana-soaked armor fragments.

Silence.

The mist drifted again.

Sylvie exhaled quietly, her gloves flickering down to a low hum.

"We're clear... for now."

"No celebration," Astron said immediately, stepping up beside Layla. His coat flickered slightly in the shifting light. "This isn't over."

He pointed into the dense ruins beyond. "Standard procedure. Clear and sweep. We need to locate the boss gate manually."

Irina was already nodding. "No shortcuts. No splitting the team."

She turned a sharp glance at Jasmine, who threw up her hands innocently.

"What? I'm not stupid."

Irina snorted but said no more.

Their seriousness wasn't dramatics. It was professionalism.

Everyone here understood—the scouts watching them wouldn't just grade flashy spellwork or kills.

They would grade fundamentals.

How methodical they were.

How disciplined.

How complete.

And so they moved.

Astron led scouting detachments to collapsed buildings, searching for possible boss gate markers—mana concentrations, shifting structures, energy streams. Layla cleared rubble and maintained front presence. Irina burned through barriers and fortified wreckage when needed. Jasmine managed quick rotations to check blind spots, while Sylvie wove utility spells constantly—vision enhancements, silent movement boosts, structural stabilization glyphs.

They didn't rush.

They didn't get greedy.

They advanced like a proper team.

And the dungeon pushed back.

Hidden traps snapped open near broken towers—mana grenades disguised as fallen stones. Astron's sharp eyes and Sylvie's detection spells neutralized them before they triggered.

Cracks opened under unstable floors—one almost sent Jasmine plummeting into a mist-filled chasm, but Layla grabbed her arm at the last second, anchoring her back.

Monsters regrouped sporadically—stragglers of mutated beasts or lone constructs—but none broke their momentum.

Finally, after nearly an hour of slow, methodical advancement, Astron signaled them from atop a crumbled stone archway.

"There."

Following his gesture, the team gazed ahead.

In the deepest pit of the ruins—half-sunken into the mist—lay a collapsed cathedral structure. Black mana streamed faintly from within, swirling up into the sky like a signal flare.

The boss' lair.

Irina stepped forward beside him, her fiery gaze narrowing. "Found it."

"I will sc-"

Astron started, voice low, but he stopped mid-sentence, his sharp purple eyes narrowing almost imperceptibly.

For a moment, the group tensed—used to following his instructions without hesitation—but the silence stretched just a second too long.

"No," Astron said calmly, but with a rare sharpness threading through his tone. "It has already sensed us."

Irina's head snapped toward him, her fiery yellow eyes narrowing. "What?"

Astron stepped down from the broken archway, landing lightly beside them, his hand resting casually against the hilt of his dagger.

"Occasionally," he began, voice crisp and precise, "monsters with strong senses—especially those powerful enough to anchor a dungeon—can detect hunter parties in advance."

Layla gripped her shield tighter, her body instinctively shifting into a defensive posture. "But... it hasn't moved yet?"

Astron nodded. "Exactly. It's a trap."

Sylvie's breath caught quietly. "Waiting for scouts to come too close?"

"Yes," Astron confirmed. "The most dangerous bosses don't rush their prey. They stay still—pretending to be dormant—to lure the scouting element forward." His gaze sharpened, sweeping the ruins. "Isolate them. Cut them off from the team. Then strike when the formation is already compromised."

A cold breeze swept through the ruins, stirring the mist in lazy spirals.

Jasmine frowned, glancing toward the dark cathedral. "How can you tell it's already awake? It looks dead silent over there."

Astron didn't answer immediately.

Instead, he pointed.

"There. On the outer walls—those gouges aren't natural collapse marks. They're claw traces. Fresh." He shifted his hand slightly. "And there. The soot patterns near the eastern stairway—new. Within the last half-hour."

The team followed his gestures, eyes scanning carefully—and sure enough, subtle traces became apparent. Claw marks, not quite covered by dust. Scorching, almost hidden within the cracks of the stones.

Small details—but deadly ones.

"And the mist there," Astron added, voice even, "is behaving differently. Pushed outward in faint waves, as if disturbed by residual mana pressure. A living presence."

Irina's expression tightened slightly, her sharp mind already racing ahead.

"And," Astron continued quietly, "there's another reason. Your flames."

Irina blinked, confused for a half-second.

"The monster," Astron explained calmly, "is a fire-pison type. We can infer that from the lair. Same elemental nature. Monsters like that are hyper-sensitive to rival mana signatures. Your mana—your flames—would have brushed its senses the moment you cleared the last barrier."

"Meaning?" Jasmine pressed.

"Meaning," Astron said, drawing his dagger fully now, "that it knows we're here."

He turned fully toward the team, his voice leaving no room for misinterpretation.

"So it is pointless to scout, or in fact it is more dangerous to do so. So, we will just go with the standard breach pattern. Full team assault, tight formation. Disrupt its first strike before it isolates any one of us."

Irina's smirk returned—a fierce, hungry edge flashing across her features. "Finally," she muttered, flexing her fingers as a thin coil of flame slithered between them.

Sylvie drew a slow, steady breath, her gloves glowing faintly as she readied layered enchantments.

Layla slammed her shield into the ground once—clang—steadyng her stance.

Jasmine twirled her dagger in a tight spiral, the faint hum of mana weaving into her next movement.

And Astron simply adjusted his grip on his weapon, his sharp purple eyes fixed on the looming cathedral gate.

"Advance on my signal," he said quietly.

The mist thickened again—reacting to the dungeon's master preparing to strike.

But Team Fourteen was ready.

Chapter 1009 - Gate Examination

The specially constructed observation chamber overlooked the linked arenas through a network of one-way mana screens — transparent to the scouts but invisible to the cadets below.

The room itself was wide, with tiered seating arranged in subtle concentric arcs, each scout group separated by flowing partitions of light to discourage interference. Long, sleek tables lined with projection devices and crystal recorders filled the space, humming quietly with mana resonance.

Muted discussions drifted through the chamber. Low. Professional.

There were no cheers here. No applause.

Only calculation.

The first day of dungeon practicals was critical. Everyone knew it.

Not because it would reveal the cadets' peak performances — that would come later.

But because today would expose something far more fundamental.

Their Floor.

The baseline they could maintain under real, live pressure.

Raw instincts. Natural coordination. Minimum resilience.

Ceiling could be built. Floor could not.

And so, the chamber was full.

Representatives from major guilds — Silverhammer, Dawn's Cross, Phoenix Halo — sat alongside mid-tier syndicates and rising freelance collectives. A few quiet agents from the military and state defense units lingered near the upper tiers, their presence understated but unmistakable.

Even private venture groups had dispatched observers — hungry for new investments.

No one spoke louder than a murmur.

No one moved more than necessary.

Because every wasted moment could mean missing the next prodigy.

At the head of the chamber, a long projection screen floated — currently divided into a grid of six views, each one tracking a different dungeon team's early deployment phase.

Mana data flickered quietly beneath each feed: movement speeds, mana output ratios, spell consistency readings, environmental adaptation scores. Real-time metrics.

Cadet Team Fourteen — the focus of one quadrant — had just entered the misted ruins.

A tall man in a dark silver coat leaned forward slightly in his seat, eyes narrowing. His guild insignia — Solstice Dawn — was pinned discreetly to his chest.

"That team," he murmured to the woman seated beside him, voice low but certain.
"Watch them."

The woman — her hair braided back into a sharp tail, her coat marked with the Phoenix Halo sigil — followed his gaze, adjusting her projection view.

At first glance, Team Fourteen wasn't flashy.

No grand spells. No overwhelming aura flares.

But their formation was tight.

Their approach was methodical.

And — most importantly — they moved with a quiet familiarity that even some field squads struggled to emulate.

Not far from the Phoenix Halo scouts, another group sat in measured silence — their section marked by the understated insignia of a mountain split by a blade: Blackstone Verge.

Their representatives — a pair of gray-uniformed men and a woman with sharp, calculating eyes — said little as the feeds rolled, but none of them missed the shift when Team Fourteen engaged.

"Emberheart's team," the woman finally noted, her voice barely louder than the whisper of turning pages.

A simple statement.

But one that carried weight.

Everyone knew Irina Emberheart.

A prodigy born of fire, ambition, and the kind of raw mana saturation that crushed most peers before a duel even began.

The daughter of the Crimson Blaze.

But to see her now—

Contained.

Measured.

The Blackstone scouts leaned slightly closer without realizing it.

On the screens, Team Fourteen advanced through the mana-fog ruins like a proper squad — not a scattering of egos straining for attention, but a cohesive unit, each movement complementing the others.

Layla Vance took point, shield up, pace steady but assertive — clearing paths through unstable ground with a professional's eye.

No wasted glances over her shoulder.

No nervous shifts in weight.

She anchored without needing to dominate the space, her shieldwork folding seamlessly into the team's rhythm.

There was strength there, yes — but more importantly, awareness.

Subtle recalibrations of position.

Micro-adjustments when the mist curled strangely or when footing shifted under ruined stone.

Not the instincts of a solo fighter.

The instincts of a trained vanguard.

Jasmine Reed moved alongside — not crowding the flanks, but sliding into gaps with that same uncanny fluidity.

Where Layla built walls, Jasmine cut through seams.

Her strikes were light at first — probes, distractions — but always at the right pressure points, always at the edges of engagement, never reckless.

It was the kind of predatory discipline that mid-ranked scouting teams spent years trying to instill into rookies.

One of the Blackstone scouts tapped a few notes quietly into a mana-slate:

'High group-awareness. Frictionless lateral coverage.'

And Irina herself—

The source of so much attention—

Unleashed her flames not in furious, reckless gouts, but with an almost surgical precision.

Controlled ignitions.

Zone-denial patterns rather than sheer offense.

Her fire coated floors where mobility mattered most, cutting off approach vectors without wasting mana in wide bursts.

Her hands never overextended.

Her casting patterns left no dangerous gaps.

The Irina Emberheart known to the wider guild networks — the one from tournament arcs and wild sparring legends — would have fought like a hammer smashing every obstacle flat.

But currently, she was rather....

She moved like a blade.

Sharp. Intentional. Patient.

And that, more than anything else, caught the Blackstone observers' attention.

"She's tempered it," one of them murmured, almost to himself.

The woman beside him nodded once, her gaze not leaving the projection. "Someone taught her to stop wasting power."

"It must be her," one of the Blackstone scouts muttered, his tone low, almost respectful despite himself.

The others understood without needing clarification.

Matriarch Emberheart.

A name that needed no explanation in these circles.

The iron spine behind the Emberheart legacy.

A woman whose standards were so exacting that even the so-called prodigies who survived her training emerged less like wildfires and more like forged weapons.

Hard. Controlled. Unyielding.

"She's known for burning the hesitation out of her students," the woman beside him murmured dryly. "Sometimes literally."

A few of the older scouts chuckled quietly at the old rumors — rumors of training duels so intense the academy's insurance circles had once filed private complaints.

But that was enough Emberheart speculation.

Because someone else had begun drawing their attention.

On the feed, a slim figure moved — not at the front like Layla, not on the flanks like Jasmine — but weaving between them, filling the gaps before they could form, adjusting like a living pulse in the formation.

Astron Natusalune.

He wasn't flashy.

He wasn't even the fastest or strongest among the group.

But he was everywhere he needed to be.

When Layla's shield strain shifted slightly under a heavier construct blow, Astron slipped behind her just long enough to intercept a flanking beast.

When Jasmine pressed an opening, he was already moving to mirror her angle — preventing overcommitment without needing a word spoken.

It wasn't showy.

It was hard.

Because to do that job — the unglamorous flex role — he had to maintain:

Environmental awareness,

Threat assessment,

Movement prediction,

Enemy control,

Ally support prioritization,

And personal survivability.

All at once.

No mistakes. No glory.

"Not bad," one of the Blackstone scouts murmured, tapping his mana-slate thoughtfully.
"It's hard to find a talent like this."

The woman flicked her fingers across the screen, pulling up the cadet's public profile.

Astron Natusalune —

Rank: 1071

A low, considering hum passed between the group.

"Low for a true ace," the gray-uniformed man noted.

"But not bad for a foundational support specialist," the woman corrected easily, already noting something else. "Ranks fluctuate faster in the mid-range tiers anyway. What matters is how they handle pressure. And he's doing it."

There was no need to say it aloud — that with training, with the right pressure applied, someone like that could easily surge up the rankings once given a role that matched their true capacity.

And then—

Another shift.

One that drew even more interest.

The Blackstone scouts sharpened their attention as another figure anchored at the rear of Team Fourteen's formation, a faint shimmer of mana weaving through her gloves.

Sylvie Gracewind.

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Sylvie Gracewind.

She wasn't blasting spells across the battlefield.

She wasn't darting in with blades or walls of flame.

Instead — she was rather....

Layering glyphs onto terrain.

Weaving speed buffs between team members.

Setting up silent suppression fields without announcing it, subtly choking enemy movement before it could even threaten the front line.

One of the scouts frowned slightly, pulling up her earlier profile.

Starting classification: Healing Specialist.

Current deployment: Combat Support / Utility Enhancement.

A quiet exhale. Not disappointment — interest.

"Started as a healer," the woman muttered, tapping her notes, "yet now she's operating as a dynamic field support."

"And she's doing it without breaking formation," the older man added. "Most healers transitioning into combat scatter under pressure — they try to cover too much at once."

But Sylvie didn't.

She wasn't rushing from point to point like a panicked medic.

She was moving with the team's rhythm, anchoring when needed, surging when the gaps widened — not forcing herself to be everywhere, but being where she mattered most.

"Smart mana usage too," another scout noted, checking the stream metrics. "Her surge patterns are layered. Defensive frames under acceleration frames. Efficiency above projection."

The more the scouts watched, the clearer it became.

She wasn't just supporting from a distance.

She wasn't just layering spells for others to shine.

She engaged.

When a straggling canid broke from the fog, slipping past Jasmine's forward sweep, Sylvie didn't flinch.

She adjusted her stance with practiced ease, palm flaring briefly as a compression glyph locked into place — a hard, focused burst that spiked the creature's footing, staggering it just long enough for her follow-up.

No wasted movements.

No excess mana flare.

The beast collapsed under a second layered strike — a precision burst of kinetic reinforcement along her palm guard — before it could even bare its fangs.

One of the Blackstone Verge scouts leaned forward slightly, tapping the crystal screen to rewatch the frame at half speed.

Not sheer power.

Not desperation.

Technique.

Calculated, deliberate — the kind of reflexes only possible through long, consistent practice.

Another scout — older, with the look of someone who had seen far too many raw cadets flame out — shook his head once, slow.

"Most healers," he said, voice quiet but certain, "don't do that."

And it was true.

Healing wasn't a role chosen by the unfocused.

It demanded precision, mana endurance, and nerves tighter than steel wire.

Training to become a combatant on top of that?

It was more than difficult.

It was counterintuitive.

An unnecessary burden.

Healers focused because they had to.

Because even surviving their own specialization was exhausting.

But Sylvie Gracewind had gone beyond that.

While still maintaining smooth, efficient heal spells — the small, nearly invisible pulses of restoration that flickered across Layla's battered shield arm, across Jasmine's ribs after a mistborn strike — she moved and fought without breaking rhythm.

Maintaining two fields of battle at once.

External. Internal.

Healing and engaging — synchronously.

The woman scout from Blackstone Verge drummed her fingers lightly against her slate, a small, approving rhythm.

A rare rhythm.

"She's special," she said at last.

Not loudly.

Not like a dramatic declaration.

Just a simple, professional judgment.

A talent like that — one who could not only defend herself, but expand the tactical envelope of a squad — was rare.

Dangerously rare.

Most teams lived or died by the fragility of their healers.

By the need to shield and protect the core from disruption.

But with Sylvie—

Team Fourteen didn't shield her.

She shielded herself.

And more.

She reinforced the team's aggression.

Pushed their forward momentum by removing the burden of hesitation — the fear that if they overreached, the core would fall apart.

Because they could trust her to stand.

Even when the lines blurred.

Even when monsters closed in.

In her quiet way, Sylvie Gracewind shone nearly as brightly as Irina Emberheart.

Not in flame.

Not in spectacle.

But in the invisible architecture of victory.

The moment Astron gave the signal, the team surged forward into the mist-wreathed ruin.

The cracked ground trembled beneath their boots as they advanced—closing the final distance to the collapsed cathedral in measured, ready steps.

And then—

The air shattered.

From within the gaping maw of the broken cathedral, the boss monster emerged with a thunderous roar that split the mist apart.

Its name appeared briefly on their synchronized visors:

[Boss Identified: Vulkran, the Ashen Howl]

Classification: Fire-Pison Aberrant – Peak Rank-6, Early Rank-7 Potential

Vulkran was massive—easily towering three meters tall even hunched.

Its body was a patchwork of sinew and molten plates, veins of ember-red light crisscrossing through its charred black muscles. Sharp jagged spikes of obsidian jutted from its back and forearms, and its head resembled a monstrous wolf's skull fused with volcanic rock, mouth constantly leaking trails of searing vapor.

Two molten wings—cracked, skeletal, more for intimidation than flight—arched from its back, dripping magma that hissed against the broken stone below.

The instant Vulkran laid eyes on them, the temperature spiked. Mana surged violently in the air.

BOOM!

Without warning, a wave of explosive fire erupted outward from Vulkran's body, cracking the ground in a radial shockwave. Entire stone pillars near the entrance vaporized under the blast.

"Scatter and reform!" Astron barked immediately, already moving.

The team split as the explosion hit, minimizing damage.

Chunks of debris rained from above—collapsing half-formed bridges and opening new chasms in the terrain.

"It's attacking the terrain itself!" Astron called sharply, dodging a boulder mid-flight. "Keep moving! Never anchor in one spot for too long!"

Layla gritted her teeth, raising her shield just in time to block a splintering shard. Her arms shook from the impact, but she held firm.

Vulkran surged forward, its molten claws raking the ground as it targeted Layla first—the frontline anchor.

BOOM.

A direct clash.

Layla braced, but the sheer force of the monster's charge threw her back several meters, scraping across the broken ground.

"Layla!" Jasmine shouted, lunging forward, dagger flashing to intercept—but Vulkran's molten tail whipped outward, catching Jasmine mid-dash and sending her tumbling with a pained grunt.

Sylvie immediately reacted.

She moved gracefully across the shattered field, her gloves glowing brightly as she unleashed twin spells—one a pulse of Restorative Sigil that enveloped Layla's battered form, knitting bone-deep bruises in seconds. The other a focused Tendon Mending Thread that stabilized Jasmine's shoulder mid-motion, letting her regain stance almost instantly.

"Move!" Sylvie cried, reinforcing them both with mana-boosted acceleration glyphs.

Meanwhile, Irina skidded back, fiery mana roaring around her—but this time, she didn't recklessly charge.

She stood still—lowering her center of gravity slightly, one hand rising skyward.

Her flames twisted unnaturally, spiraling inward instead of expanding outward.

Sylvie pivoted, her hands weaving swiftly—layering Mana Resonance Threads around Irina's gathering flames, compressing the fiery energy even tighter.

Astron noticed immediately.

He moved into position without hesitation—crossing into Vulkran's approach vector, intercepting it.

His daggers flashed—not trying to harm, but to control.

He parried molten claw strikes, redirected explosive blasts with careful mana slashes, always staying just outside of fatal range—stalling Vulkran.

"Buy her time!" Astron shouted, slashing upward as Vulkran's talon narrowly missed cleaving the ground.

Jasmine and Layla rallied—Layla advancing with a reinforced charge, slamming her shield into Vulkran's lower limbs to stagger its forward momentum.

Jasmine weaved around the edge of the battlefield, targeting exposed joints with rapid strikes—each hit minor, but collectively slowing the boss's motions.

Irina inhaled deeply.

The air around her folded—heat compressing into a pinpoint so dense the mist nearby evaporated in an instant.

Her eyes flared gold, her voice cutting through the chaos.

"School of Emberheart: Solar Rend."

A compressed laser—pure, searing destruction.

The gathered flames in her palm bent once, twisted—then fired.

KA-CHAAAM!

The beam wasn't wide.

It wasn't chaotic.

It was thin—surgical—and impossibly fast.

The Solar Rend struck Vulkran dead center, piercing through its molten chest. The boss's fire resistance crumpled under the sheer density and purity of Irina's compressed magic.

Vulkran let out a strangled, molten howl, thrashing violently—but the beam didn't waver.

It drilled through.

Flames erupted outward from the monster's ruptured core as the internal mana structure destabilized.

Astron, reading the shift instantly, barked one final order. "All units, disengage! Collapse imminent!"

The team scattered back just as Vulkran's body convulsed, its molten veins exploding outward in a brilliant eruption of light and ash.

BOOOOOM.

The ruins shook violently, debris raining from the sky—but by the time the dust began to settle, the five figures of Team Fourteen were already regrouped at a safe distance, breathing hard but standing tall.

At the center of the destruction, only the smoldering remains of Vulkran's shattered form remained—slowly crumbling into ash and broken stone.

Silence reigned.

Sylvie's hands trembled slightly from the mana exertion but steadied as she lowered them. Layla leaned heavily on her shield, grinning despite the burn along her arm. Jasmine laughed once, sharp and exhilarated.

And Irina—

Irina simply stood there, breathing in the residual heat, golden flames flickering around her shoulders like a mantle of victory.

Astron met her gaze briefly across the battlefield, giving her a small, almost imperceptible nod.

Solid fundamentals.

Flawless execution.

Another dungeon conquered.