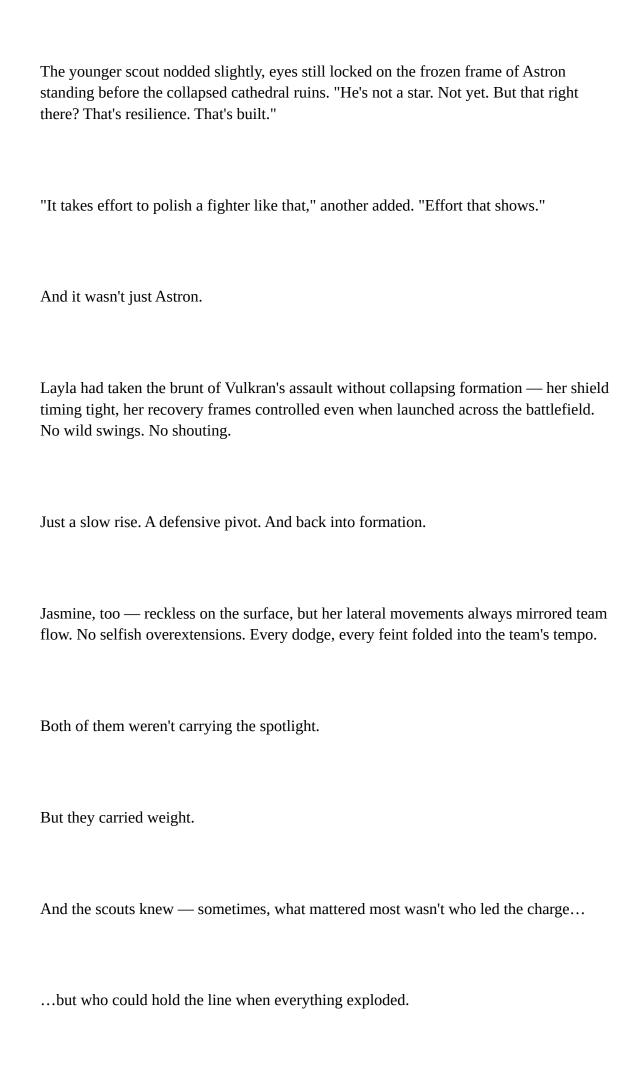
## H. Academy 1011

Chapter 1011 - Noticed
The final explosion of light on-screen faded, replaced by smoke and flickering mana static.
For several seconds, the observation deck held its breath.
Not because of disbelief.
But because there was something sacred about the silence after perfect execution.
Then—
A quiet exhale from the Solstice Dawn scout.
"They didn't just win," he said, his voice even, but low. "They dissected it."
The Phoenix Halo representative beside him leaned back, arms crossed, eyes narrowed at the dissipating aftermath. "That was a Rank-6 peak boss. Nearly Rank-7 threshold. And not one of them cracked under pressure."

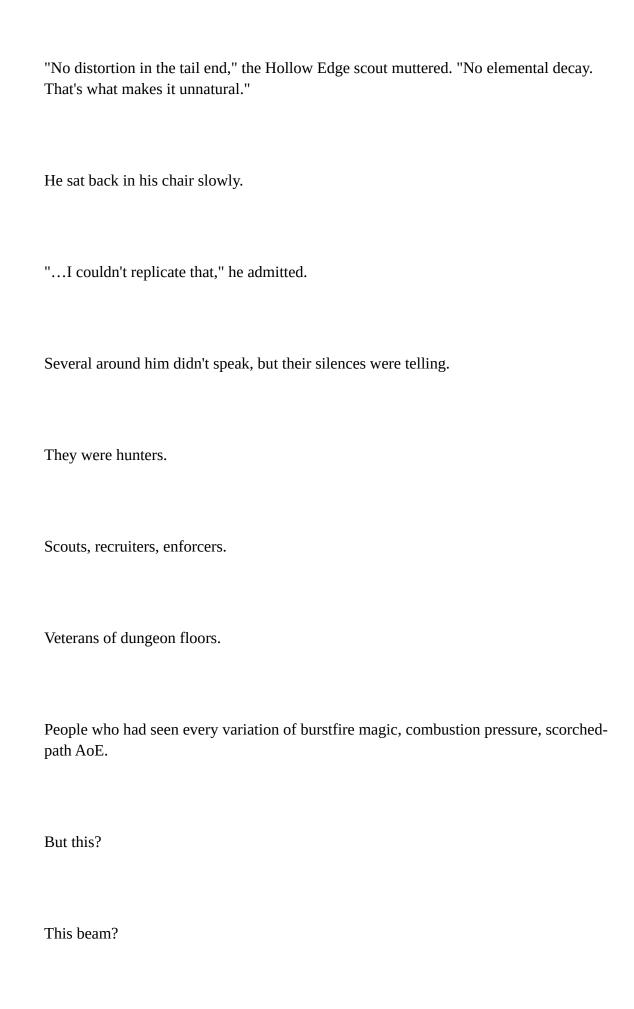
From across the tiered chamber, the Blackstone Verge observers exchanged quick, professional glances. A few were already flicking their fingers across data-slates, saving combat breakdowns, slowing the footage.
One of them tapped the moment Irina activated Solar Rend, freezing the spell's signature at full charge.
"She compressed that in less than six seconds," he muttered, his brow furrowed. "With Sylvie's resonance boosting the stability mid-channel. That's not student coordination. That's advanced strike team chemistry."
"It was clean," the woman beside him added. "From pivot to disengage. No one moved late. No one doubled a role."
And then—
Quiet murmurs began to ripple across the wider chamber.
"Who's their squad leader again?"  "Was that Astron Natusalune coordinating the callouts?"
"Where did that Sylvie girl train combat like that? She wasn't on the original ranking
radars"

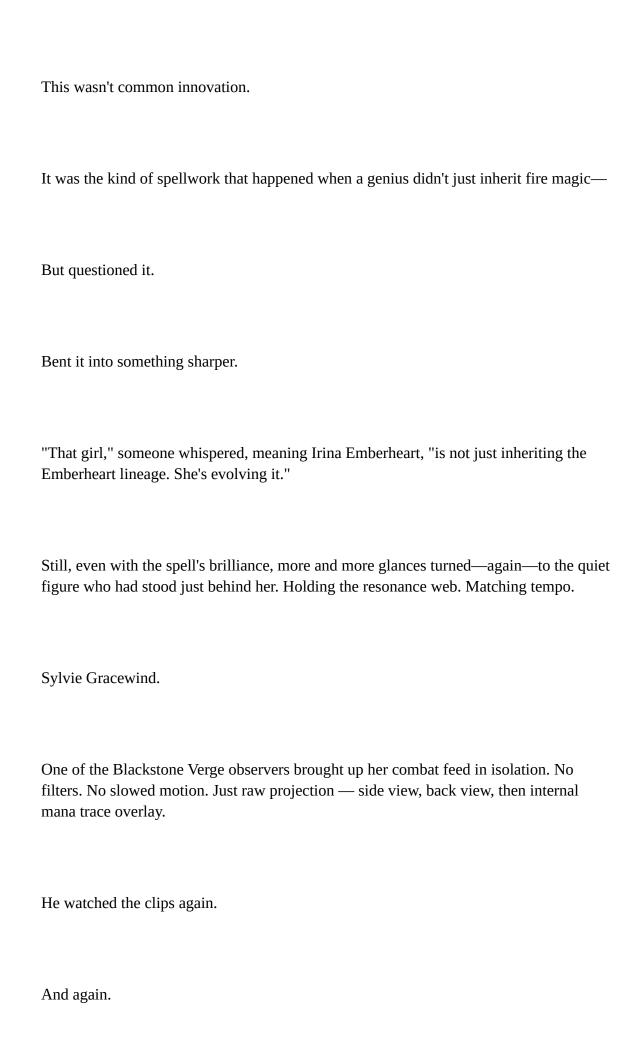
One of the guildless scouts — a younger man seated near the edge — whistled low as h zoomed in on the final frame: Astron standing just ahead of the group, calmly giving the disengage command mid-collapse.	
"Look at him," he said. "No dramatics. No flare. Just moves like someone who's done this fifty times already."	
"Rank 1071," someone muttered behind him.	
But the number no longer meant what it used to.	
Because that kind of poise under fire?	
That kind of command voice, delivered without theatrics or panic?	
It didn't come from raw talent.	
It came from hours of failure.	
From repetition.	
From a mind forced to adapt, until composure became muscle memory.	



"They weren't just chosen by Irina for status," said the Blackstone Verge woman flatly. "She built something with them. That group has bones."
Someone from Dawn's Cross gave a low, grudging chuckle. "Wouldn't be the first time the Emberheart Matriarch trained her daughter in teamcraft. Still. That last spell—"
The room shifted.
Because yes — the teamwork had been exceptional.
But the final attack?
The beam?
That wasn't just textbook spellcraft.
That was new.
One of the Phoenix Halo mages flicked the recording back to just before the strike and played the entire compression loop in slow motion, their eyes narrowing.

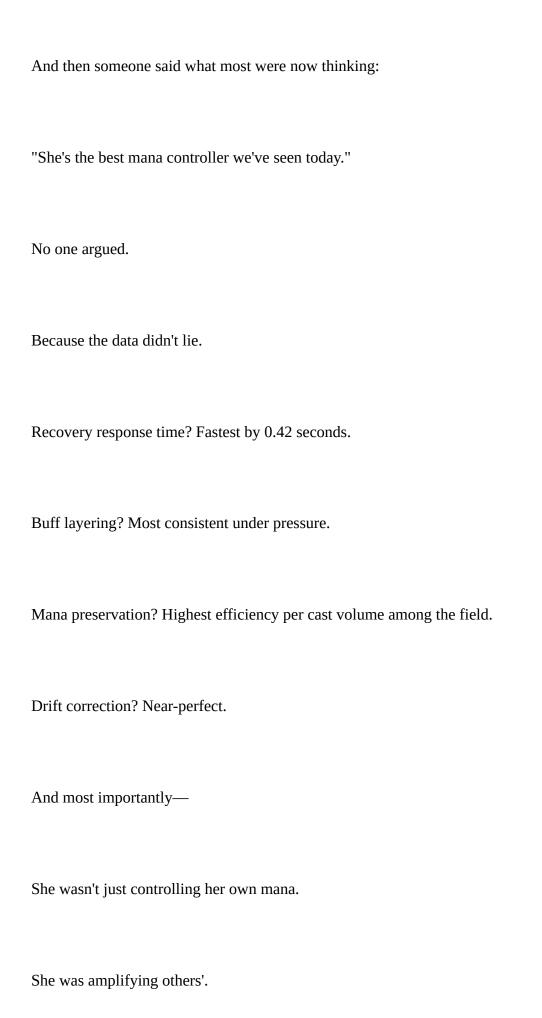
"I've never seen a fire-type execute a convergent beam like that," he murmured. "Not without distortion. Not without elemental loss."
"It wasn't just fire," another scout said, tapping a hovering glyph signature. "The flame was somehow compressed and filtered through some sort of resonance web?"
A beat of silence passed.
And then—
"That's not in any standard school," murmured one of the older observers — a hunter who had retired after a decade of fieldwork and another in guild development. His coat bore the faded crest of Hollow Edge, once a frontline unit renowned for spell innovation.
His voice was quiet.
Measured.
"The beam wasn't brute force. It was refined. Refined in a way that we don't see from most field mages—much less cadets."
The projection paused, hovering mid-frame on the moment Solar Rend pierced through Vulkran's burning core. The spell was elegant. Terrifying. The line of destructive mana wasn't chaotic like typical fire bursts — it was clean, uninterrupted, like a surgical blade.

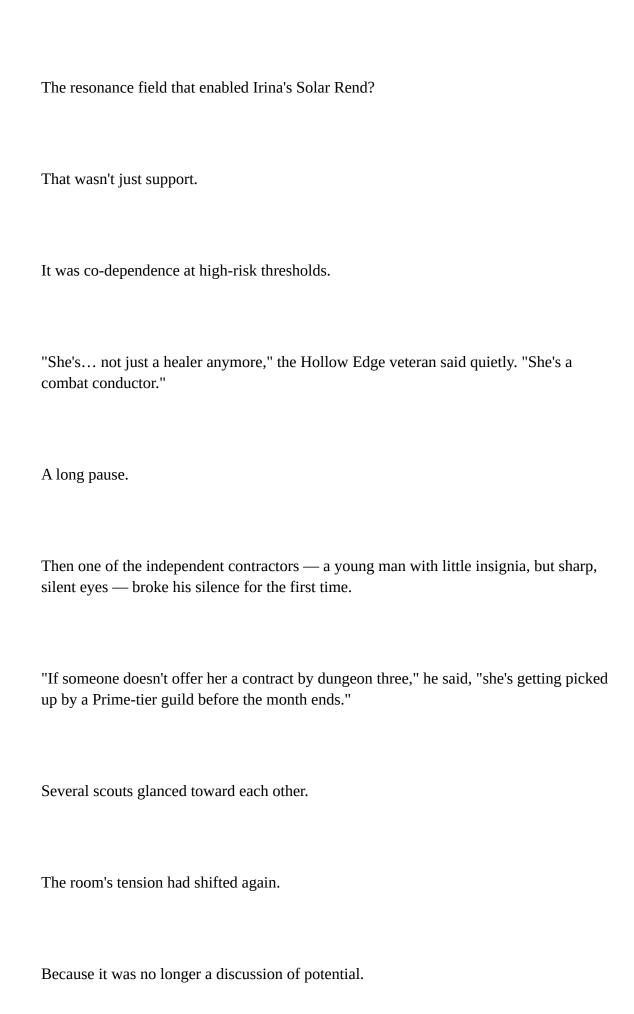


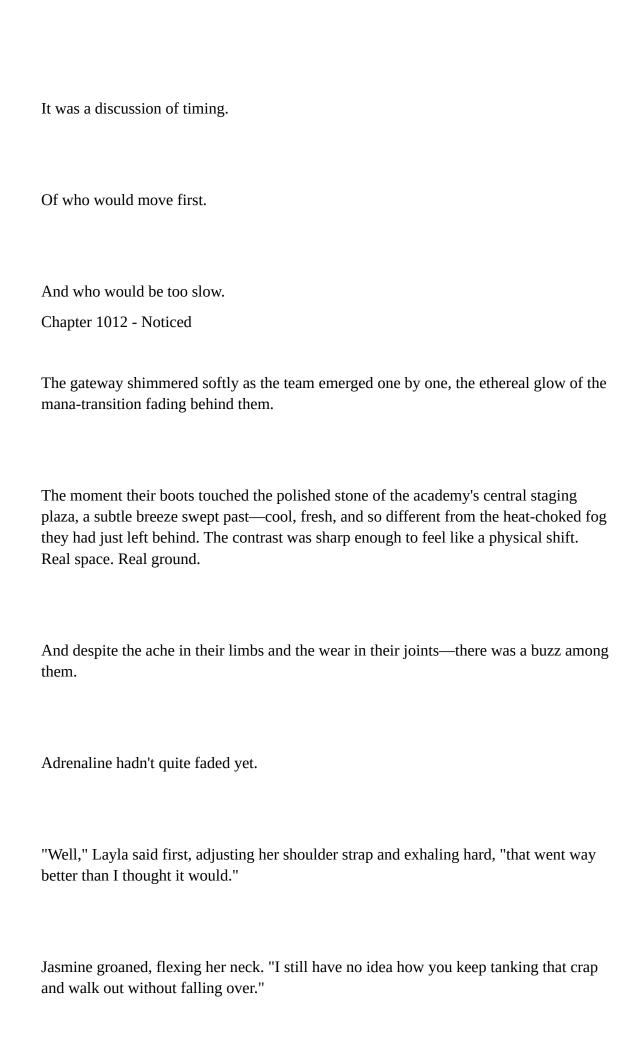


Each spell was timed to the team's movement, not just the enemy's aggression.
Not just reactionary.
Anticipatory.
She had mapped who would need what, and when — weaving buffs preemptively, heals in small, exact pulses, not wide overcharges. Her movements weren't flashy, but they wove the battlefield together.
The scout tapped the screen once, activating a comparative overlay of other top-ranked healers from that same rotation block.
Dozens of green lines appeared — each one mapping mana flow, cast variance, recovery window, casting posture.
Most healers showed spikes.
Delayed pulses. Overcast radius. Mana inefficiency.
Even good ones — strong cadets — would lapse when flanked, or panic-spike heals when allies dropped below threshold.

But Sylvie's pattern?
Clean.
Steady.
Refined.
No panic.
No overshoot.
"She's got layered control," the Phoenix Halo scout said slowly. "Even while moving. She's rerouting cast paths mid-step."
"Combat casting on unstable terrain. Without anchoring," another added, tone narrowing. "She's redirecting glyphs without spell break."
"She's not using any major relics or artifact channeling," the woman from Blackstone noted. "This is all raw technique."
A beat.



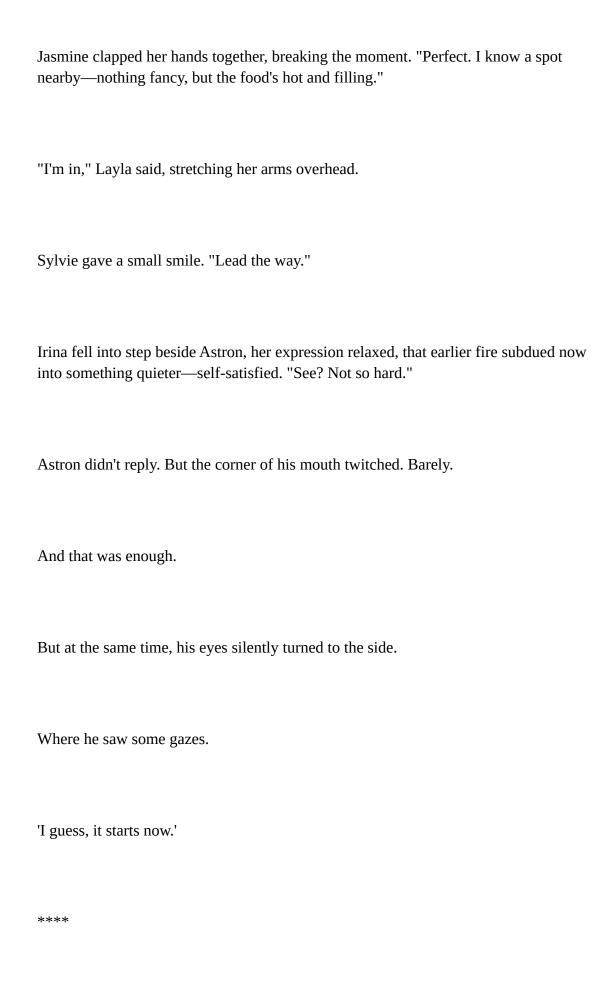




"Years of spite and training," Layla said with a smirk.
Irina stretched her arms, a faint sheen of sweat still on her brow, but her posture was unmistakably relaxed—confident. She'd landed the final blow, and she knew it. But it wasn't smugness. It was satisfaction. Controlled. Tempered.
Sylvie's voice was soft, but sincere. "Your spell really was incredible."
Irina turned toward her, eyebrows arching slightly.
"I've seen it before," Sylvie continued, "but that precision, that compression—it wasn't just strong. It was elegant."
Jasmine let out a low whistle. "Yeah, that beam is insane. I don't even know how you manage to keep it that narrow without blowing yourself up."
Irina smirked slightly, rolling her shoulders. "Years of practice," she echoed Layla's earlier words, but there was something lighter in her tone this time. "And control blocks. And focus loops. And maybe a little divine inspiration."
Sylvie chuckled faintly, while Jasmine shook her head. "No wonder the scouts are always talking about you."

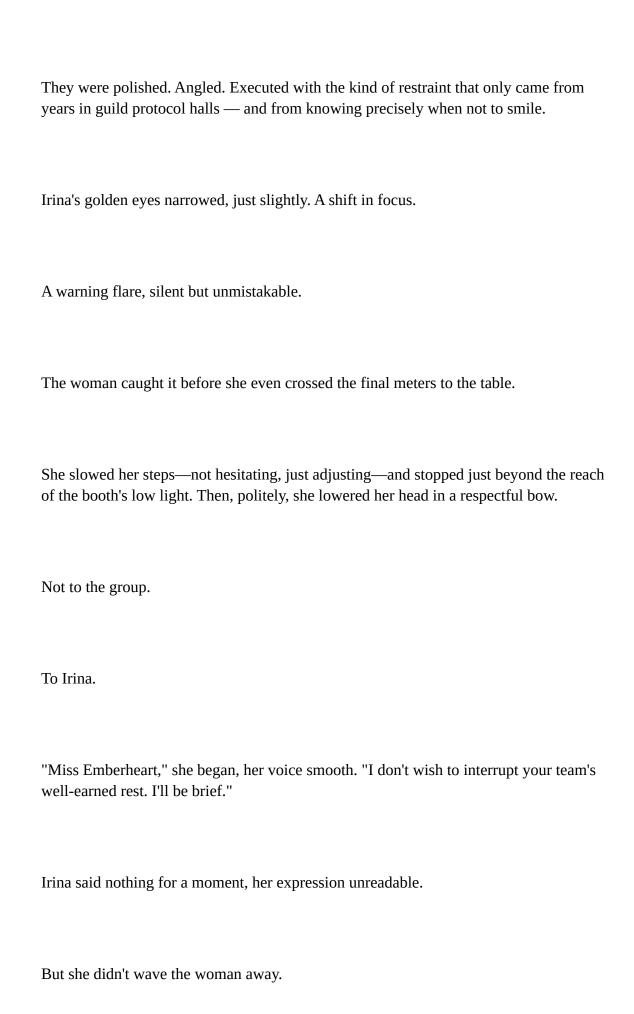
Behind them, Astron said nothing—but his glance toward Irina held a subtle flicker of approval, just for a moment, before fading beneath his usual composed demeanor.
They stood there for a few seconds longer in silence, the relief settling in, their teamwork still fresh in their minds. No one had made a critical mistake. Every role had been played clean. The synergy was real.
"Hey," Layla said suddenly, brightening a little as she adjusted her gloves, "we just crushed a dungeon and didn't fall apart doing it. Don't you guys think we deserve something for that?"
Jasmine raised an eyebrow. "Like what?"
"A meal," Layla said, grinning. "I'm starving."
Sylvie blinked, but nodded. "I could eat."
Irina shrugged, folding her arms. "I'm not saying no."
All eyes shifted to Astron.
Astron's gaze swept across the group—taking in Layla's hopeful grin, Sylvie's quiet nod, Jasmine's raised brow. But it was when his eyes met Irina's that he paused.
She wasn't smiling.

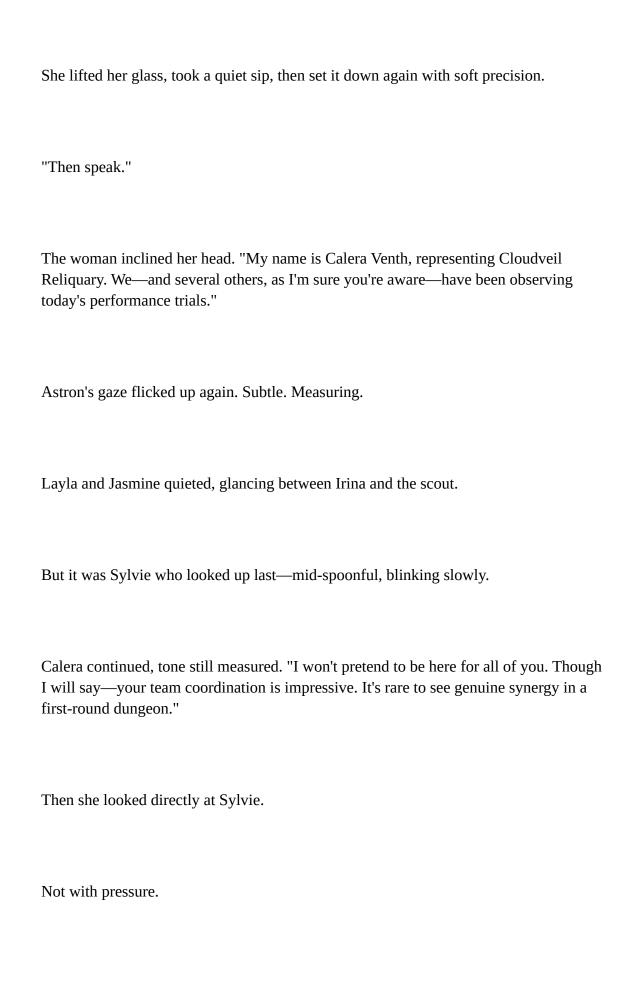


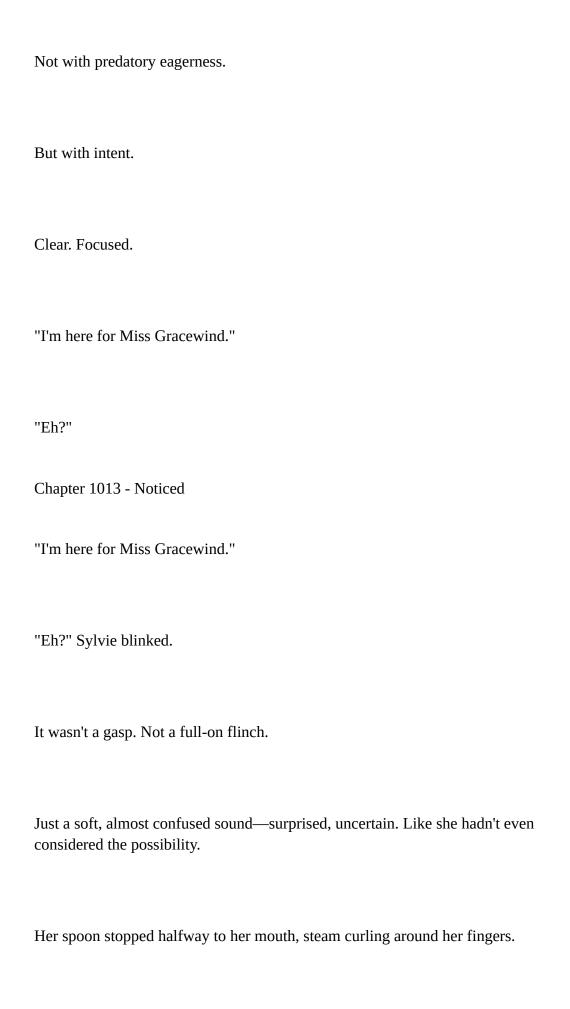


The restaurant was nestled beneath the outer ring of Arcadia's eastern faculty towers, tucked behind rows of stone-floored vendor stalls and low ornamental lanterns. The Hollow Hearth wasn't glamorous, but it was a favorite among cadets for one reason: no questions asked.
Warm lamplight flickered off brass-banded wood. The scent of roasted meat and herbs hung heavy in the air, and the low murmur of clinking utensils, quiet laughter, and exhausted chatter formed a familiar rhythm.
Team Fourteen occupied a corner booth near the rear.
Layla was halfway through her second helping of stew, leaning comfortably against the wall as she recounted the moment Vulkran's claw nearly took her head off. Jasmine was dramatizing her tail sweep to anyone who would listen—mostly Sylvie and the server. Irina nursed a glass of cooled citrus tonic, the same unreadable contentment still lingering in her gaze.
And Astron?
He sat at the edge of the booth, back to the wall, eyes scanning the room not out of habit—but because he already knew.
It didn't take long.
A shift in the room's atmosphere.
Not dramatic.

Not disruptive.
But controlled.
Calculated.
The first scout approached with the grace of someone who had walked the line between respect and ambition for years.
She was tall, sharply dressed in neutral hunter formal—gray coat with muted gold threading, her badge bearing the emblem of Cloudveil Reliquary, a mid-tier guild known for supporting rare-class talents and technical casters.
Irina saw her the moment she stepped through the threshold.
Not because of the coat.
Not even because of the badge.
But because of the intent.
The scout's movements weren't casual.



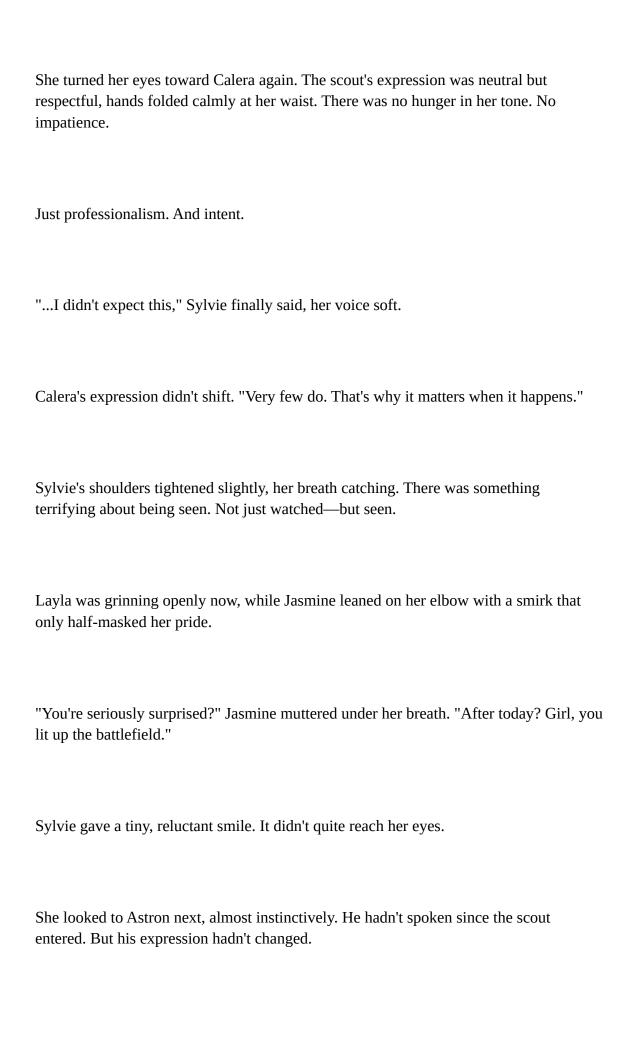




Irina said nothing.
But her eyes didn't leave Calera.
Calera continued smoothly. "Her performance today was exceptional. And unique. There are few healers capable of seamless combat utility, fewer still who manage it while maintaining team synchronization. We believe that with the right environment, her capabilities could evolve into something industry-defining."
Sylvie's mouth opened slightly, as if to speak—then closed.
Her expression wasn't one of pride.
It was hesitation.
Quiet nerves, suddenly thrust into view.
Jasmine nudged her knee under the table.
Layla leaned back with a subtle grin. "Told you you were getting too good."
****

Sylvie didn't respond right away.
Her spoon remained suspended midair, cooling steam curling upward in slow, spiraling tendrils. Her eyes, usually sharp and attentive, were wide now—almost vulnerable. The ambient noise of the tavern had dimmed to a dull murmur around her, and even the heat from the soup in her hands seemed distant.
She wasn't prepared for this.
She should have been. The headmaster had told her as much, time and time again. "The moment your strength begins to shine through, the world will look at you differently. And it won't stop looking."
She remembered his voice—low, unwavering, always a step ahead.
And she remembered her own response. A nervous nod, a forced smile, an "I understand" that hadn't really been true.
Because understanding in theory was nothing like experiencing it. Nothing like having a stranger walk into a restaurant full of upperclassmen and guild scouts—look past the known names, past Irina and Astron—and say her name.
"Miss Gracewind."
It didn't feel real.

Sylvie lowered the spoon slowly and rested it against the side of the bowl with a soft clink. Her heart was racing, but she kept her posture as steady as she could manage. Still, her fingers were curled just a little too tightly around the edge of the table.
She tried to say something—to thank the woman, maybe, or deflect politely—but the words got caught somewhere between her chest and throat.
Why now? Why me?
Her thoughts swirled like mist. She had improved, yes. Headmaster Jonathan had said as much during their last training. Her healing had grown sharper. Her enchantments were faster, more layered. She was no longer afraid to take the front line when necessary. But still
That small voice inside her whispered:
Was it really enough to be noticed?
Irina hadn't said anything yet. But Sylvie could feel her gaze—cool, measured, just like the scout's. Not jealous. Not disappointed. Just watching.
Judging?
No. Not like that. But still—measuring. Everyone always measured.



Still calm. Still watching.
But she didn't know what he was thinking.
Sylvie's breath trembled in her chest.
She sat there, shoulders still too stiff, hands resting just a little too neatly on the table's edge, trying to quiet the noise in her mind. Praise from Jasmine. Supportive teasing from Layla. Recognition from a scout. All of it should've made her proud. Should've filled her with confidence.
But it didn't.
Not quite.
Because amidst all that motion, her thoughts kept drifting toward him.
Astron.
And it wasn't about seeking validation. At least—not just that. It was something subtler. A need to understand. To know if he'd seen what she had tried to do. If her presence had truly mattered—not to the scout, not to the academy, but to him.
He hadn't spoken. Not a single word since Calera entered. His posture was unchanged,

calm, unreadable. Like always.

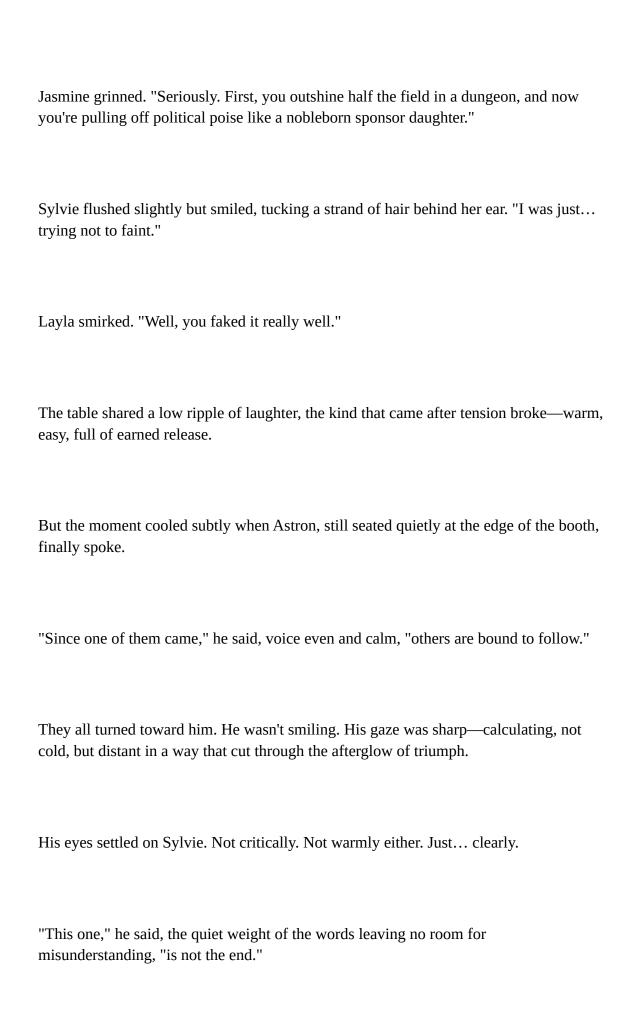
And still, she couldn't help it.
She looked at him.
Please, she thought, though she didn't say it aloud. Say something. Anything. Just so I know I'm not imagining this. That I'm not overcomplicating it again.
As if in response, his head tilted slightly, just enough to catch her glance.
And then—
He nodded.
Barely.
And his lips moved, slow and deliberate.
Calm down.
That was all.

No sound. No follow-up.
Just two words, mouthed in complete silence, before he turned his head again and looked elsewhere—as if nothing had happened.
But Sylvie had seen it. Felt it.
And the knot in her chest loosened.
Just a little.
She stared down at the table, her pulse still rapid—but steadier now. The storm of thoughts still swirled, but it no longer screamed.
Calm down.
She exhaled through her nose, slow and quiet, and this time when her fingers relaxed against the wood, they didn't tremble.
He wasn't the type to praise. He didn't deal in flattery or theatrics.
But he saw her.

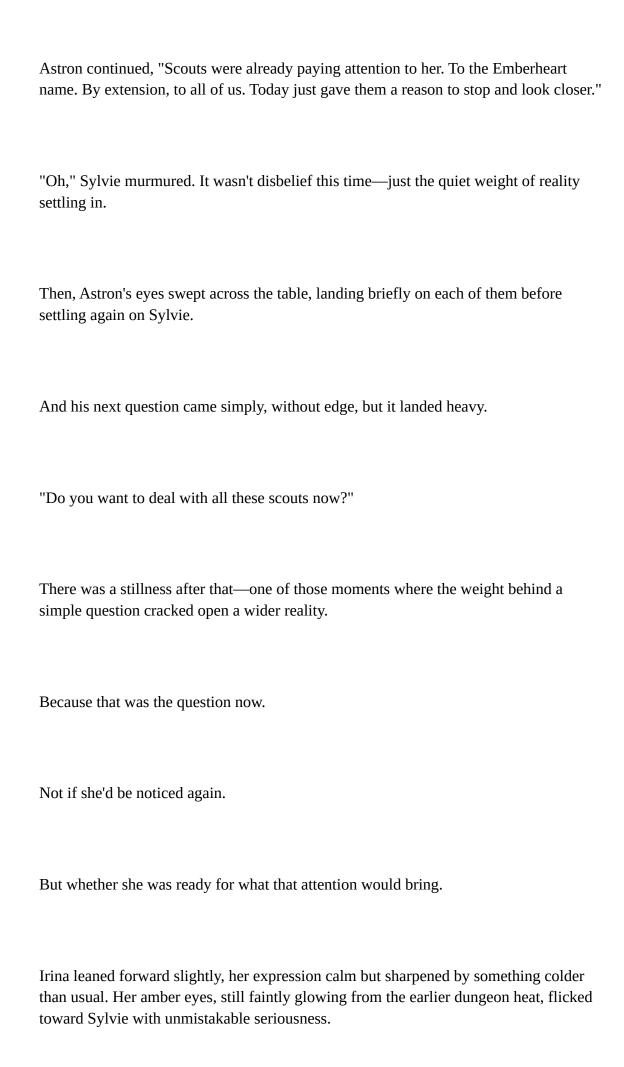


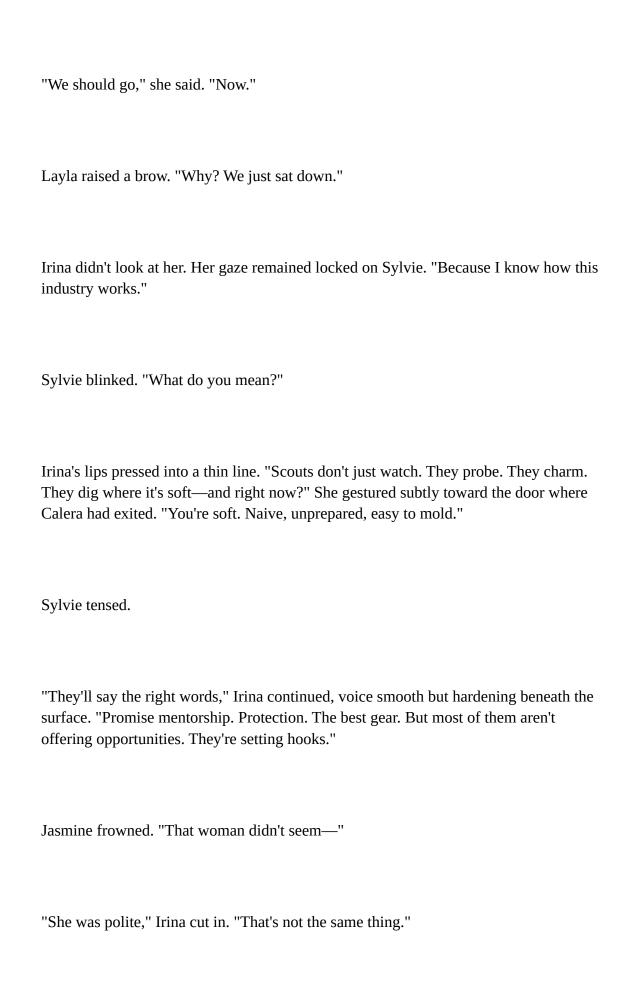
"Thank you," she said, her voice no longer trembling. "I'm... honored by the opportunity." Calera nodded, just once, a subtle acknowledgment of grace accepted with grace. Her expression remained neutral, but her eyes sharpened almost imperceptibly. She'd noticed the shift. Registered the poise. And it was clear that she approved. Irina still hadn't said anything—but Sylvie could feel her watching. Not in a threatening way. More like a judge... or perhaps something adjacent to a peer. Someone who understood what it meant to step forward and be seen, even when the spotlight burned. The moment passed without disruption. Calera straightened, offering a faint, professional smile. "I won't keep you. There will be more formal discussions following the practical rounds. For now, consider this an early invitation." With a courteous nod to the table—and a slightly deeper one toward Irina—she turned and stepped away, her departure as precise and quiet as her arrival. Sylvie let out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. Jasmine leaned in almost immediately. "You did so well just now," she whispered. "Wow....I really didn't expect you would do it like this." Layla chuckled, resting her elbow on the table and giving Sylvie a sly look. "Well, well.

Look at you, Miss Composed. We've seen a whole different side of you today."









Layla's playful smirk faded slightly. Sylvie's heart thudded again, but this time with a different rhythm.	
Irina's gaze narrowed, and her next words dropped low, almost a whisper, but they hit like steel.	
"You should know it, too."	
Sylvie's breath caught. I should?	
And then it came back to her.	
The Headmaster's warning.  "Your performance will attract eyes," he had said. "But eyes come with offers. Offers	
come with leverage. And leverage? That comes with chains you don't see until they're already locked."	
At the time, she hadn't fully understood.	
Now she did.	

channels. The academy has legal handlers for that. Witnesses. Contracts. Structures that protect cadets. If they don't—then they're not someone worth trusting."
Sylvie lowered her gaze, processing it all. Then slowly, she nodded.
"Alright. Let's go."
Irina's shoulders eased slightly.
Astron stood first, as if the decision had been made the moment Irina spoke. He didn't say a word—just picked up his coat and began walking.
Jasmine sighed, standing with a stretch. "Well, there goes our meal."
Layla grinned faintly, following. "Yeah, but at least we're not walking out with a leash."
Sylvie stood last.
And this time, she didn't glance back.
***

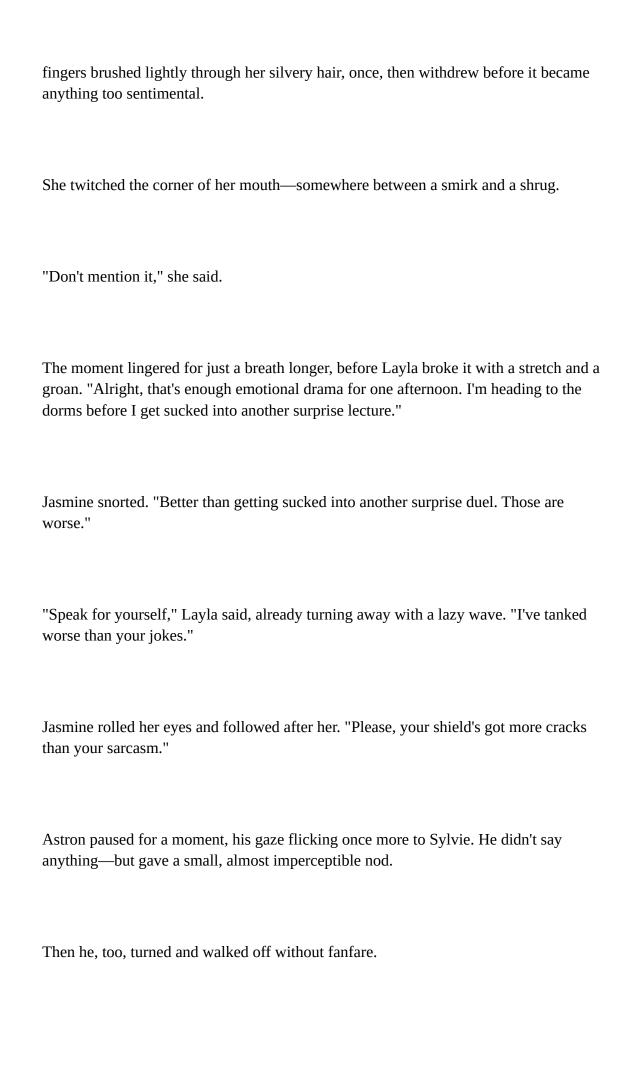
Irina leaned back, her voice cooling. "If a scout is serious, they'll go through official

The group walked in relative silence down the broad, cobbled path that led away from the restaurant district. The sun had begun its descent past the highest towers of the academy, casting long, amber shadows across the walls and glass-paneled corridors.
They didn't rush—but the mood had shifted. The victory of the dungeon, the high spirits after the battle, the warmth of shared food all of it had cooled, replaced by a more sobering clarity.
Sylvie walked beside Irina, her expression thoughtful, brows drawn slightly in concern. She hadn't spoken since they left the table.
But eventually, she did.
"What am I supposed to do now?" she asked, her voice quiet—almost fragile beneath the composure she was trying to hold onto.
Irina didn't answer immediately. Her eyes were forward, sharp as always, but her voice was gentler when she finally spoke.
"For now?" she said. "Stay low."
Sylvie blinked. "Low?"
Irina nodded. "The scouts have rules. Most of them. They can't approach repeatedly without going through proper channels, especially after you've been flagged. That means for now, you're probably safe."

"Probably?" Layla muttered behind them. "That's comforting."
Irina didn't dignify that with a glance. "What it means is that Sylvie has time. But not much. Every move she makes will be watched a little closer now. So she has to be smart."
Sylvie looked down at her hands—fingers that had held healing glyphs, woven support sigils mid-combat without pause. They were trembling again. Barely. But enough for her to notice.
"I'm not used to this," she admitted softly.
"I know," Irina said. "That's why I'm telling you now."
Then she turned slightly, her amber gaze cutting through the dusk-light with clinical precision.
"If you want my advice," she said, voice low but unwavering, "Don't accept any of their offers."
Sylvie looked up. "None of them?"
Irina shook her head once. "Absolutely not."

Even Jasmine, walking just behind, turned her head at that. "You really mean that?"
"I do," Irina said. "Scouts are opportunists first. Even the good ones. They'll say what they need to say to get what they want. Right now, Sylvie is a name on their list, a metric on a slate. Not a person."
She looked at Sylvie again, this time with something like empathy buried behind the steel.
"You're not ready to sign your future away. Not yet. And especially not while you're still figuring out what you want from it."
Sylvie nodded slowly, the weight of the words grounding her again. "I understand."
Irina gave a faint nod. "Good. Then stay hidden. Stay careful. And most importantly—keep your answers as vague as possible."
Jasmine blew out a breath. "So no scout-dates, no private meetings, no mystery letters?"
"Exactly," Irina replied, eyes narrowing. "Because the moment they think they can isolate you, they'll do it."
Astron, walking a few steps ahead, didn't turn around. But he spoke in his usual even voice.





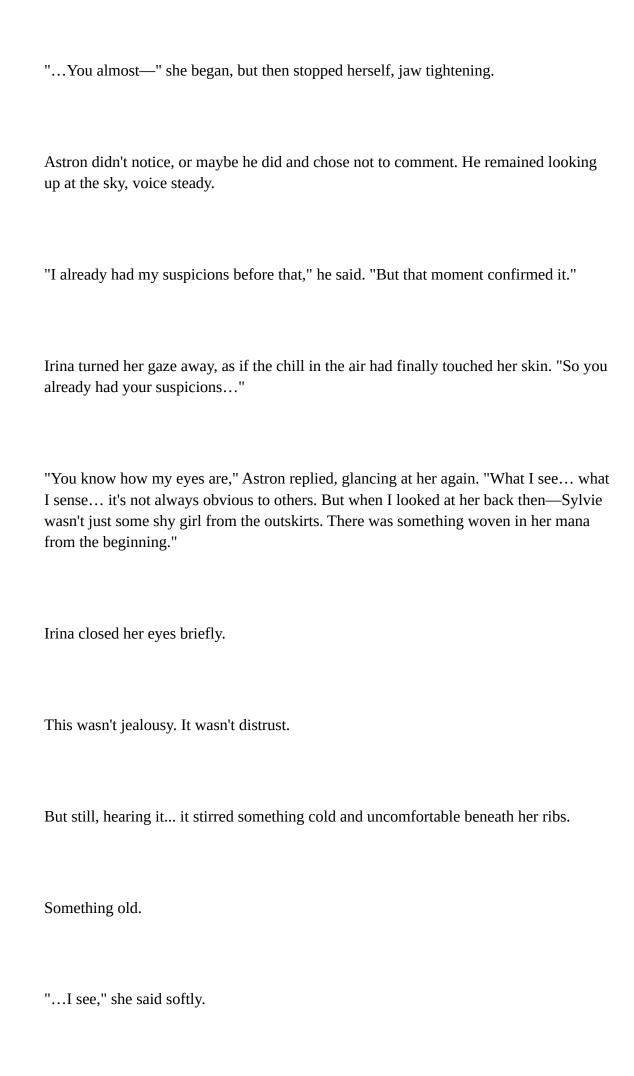
And just like that, the group began to disperse—one by one, their footsteps fading down different paths, leaving Sylvie standing alone for a moment in the quiet, golden-lit corridor.
She stood there a while longer, eyes half-lidded, hands folded in front of her.
It wasn't over.
But she wasn't alone.
Top of Form
Bottom of Form
****
The evening deepened as the last colors of sunset faded into quiet indigo. The academy's lanterns had begun to flicker awake, dotting the walkways with soft golden pools of light. Most students had already returned to their dorms—either too exhausted from the trials or too burdened by the looming pressure of final evaluations to linger long in open courtyards.
Astron and Irina walked side by side in silence. Their footsteps fell in sync, neither fast nor slow, just steady. The air was quiet enough to hear the soft sweep of leaves rustling overhead.



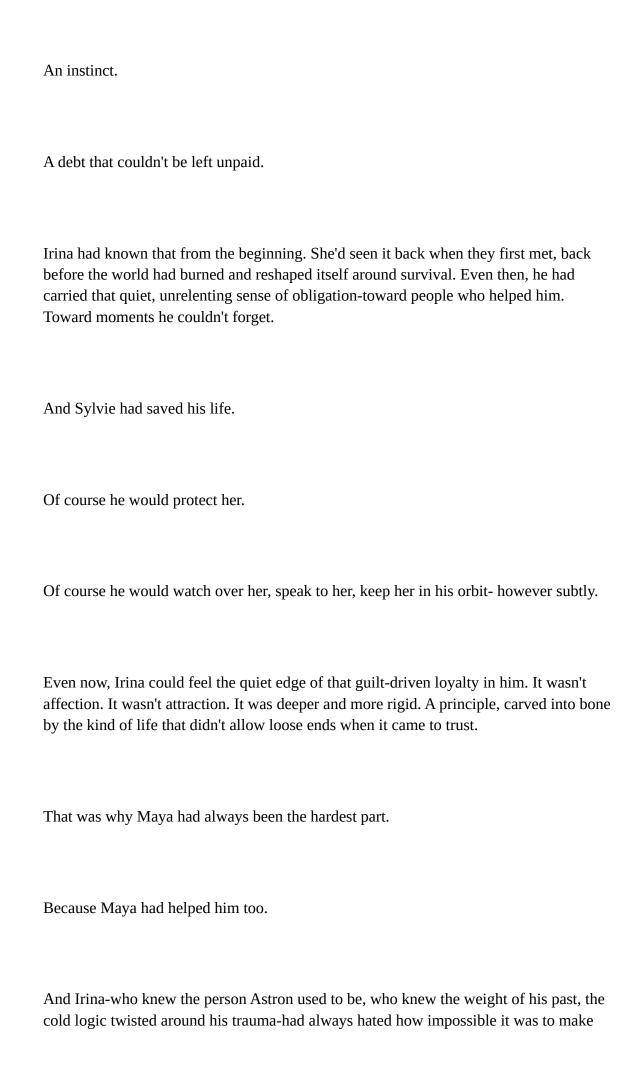






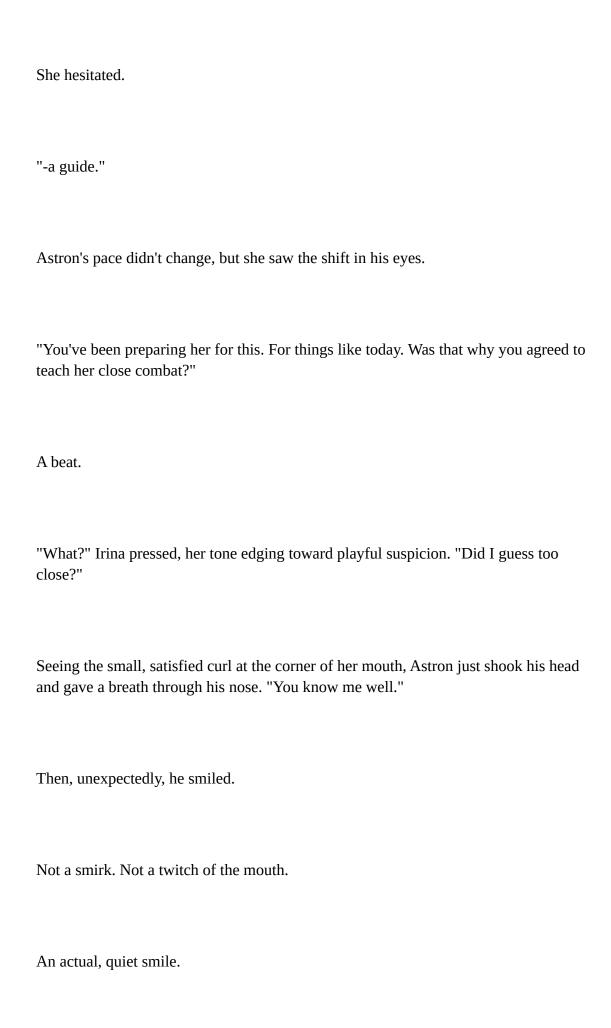


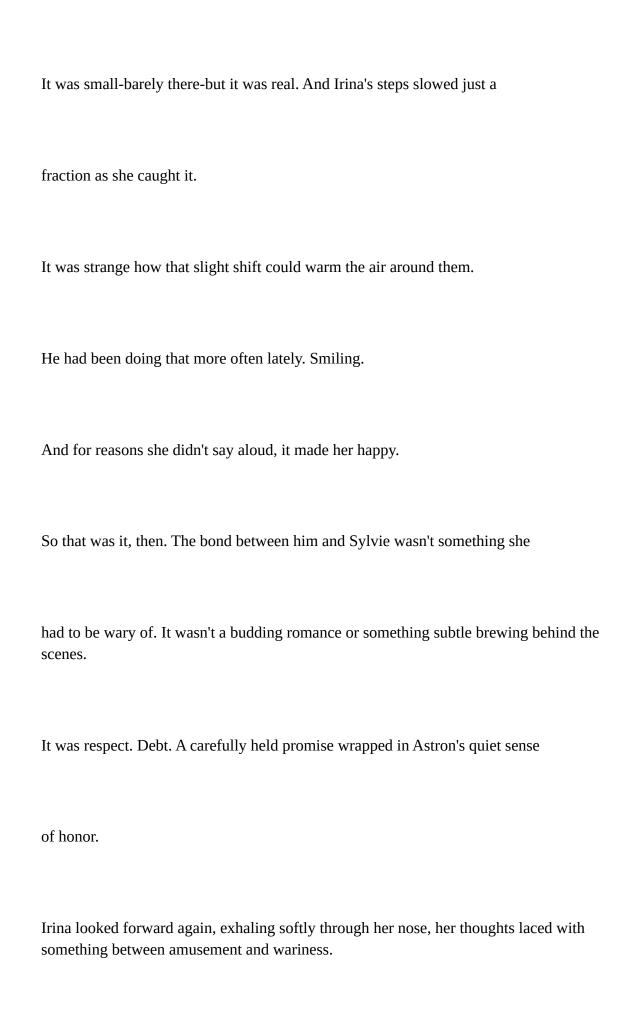
Not an accusation.
But not acceptance either. Chapter 1016 About Sylvie
Irina let out a breath, eyes fixed ahead once more. "So that's why you acted so close to her."
Astron didn't answer right away. He just kept walking, hands in his pockets, eyes half-lidded under the lamplight.
Then, quietly, he said, "Don't you already know the answer?"
Irina didn't respond-but the way her brows drew together, the small, flickering shift in her expression, said she did.
Of course she did.
Because even if Astron was a creature of logic-reserved, analytical, always calculating there were certain things that pulled at him deeper than strategy or self-preservation.
A code.



him let go of people like that. People who, even if they didn't deserve his loyalty anymore, had once been the hand that reached into his void.
Astron didn't look at her. Didn't have to.
He knew what she was thinking.
And Irina, jaw tight, couldn't stop herself from saying quietly, "It's really hard, you know. Watching you tie yourself down to old debts like that."
His gaze flicked toward her.
Not sharply.
Just knowingly.
And for a moment, neither of them said anything more.
The silence between them wasn't angry.
But it wasn't soft, either.

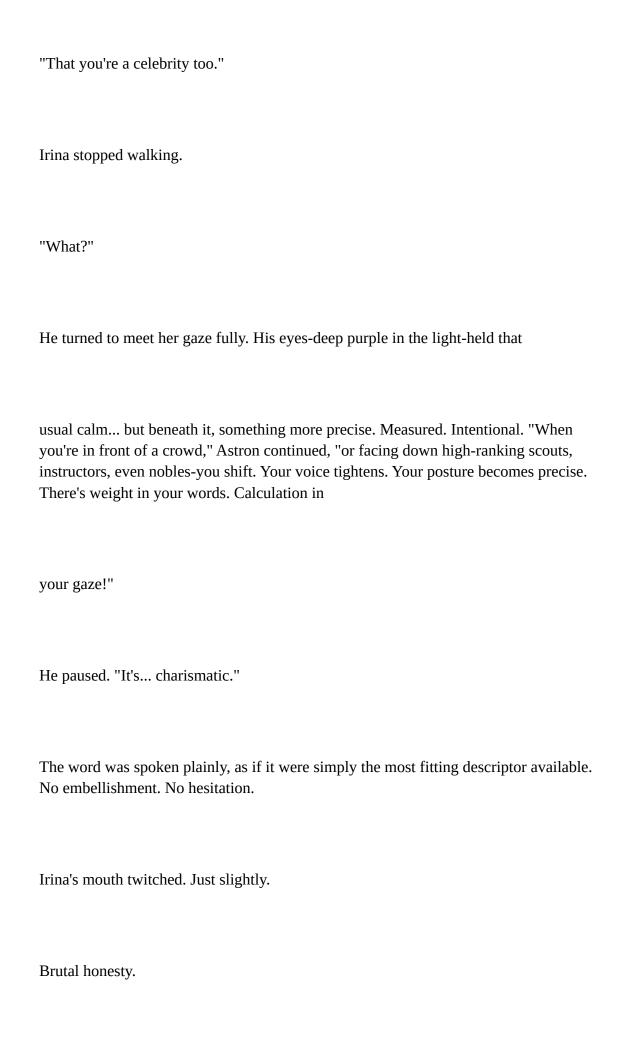






"Though... who knows what this bastard will do?" she thought dryly. Now that he had a face like that-softened by a smile, brief but undeniably real -Irina knew she could never let her guard down. Not fully. Astron wasn't like the others. He never had been. He could be unreadable, distant, careful with his words-and yet, every so often, he revealed something like this. A sliver of warmth. Of honesty. And it made everything more complicated. Still, for now... things were going fine. There was no need to stir the water. She let the breeze run past them as they walked down the quiet path, the last of the lanterns flickering to life overhead. The air was tinged with fresh dew and residual mana from the trials earlier, but it was peaceful. Steady. A rare pause between storms. Irina turned her gaze toward him again, golden eyes sharp beneath the shadows of her lashes. "So," she asked, voice casual, "what do you think of the current situation?" Astron glanced sideways. "Sylvie's situation?" She nodded. "Yeah." He didn't hesitate. "That was bound to happen." Irina gave a quiet scoff. "You think I didn't know that?"

"I'm saying you did."
And she had. From the moment Sylvie had been placed on their team-back
during the second half of the first midterm-Irina had seen it. The way the girl's magic flexed under stress. Her adaptability. Her raw instinct and control, despite her hesitation. It was just buried under fear, under pressure, under the weight of trying not to be seen. But Irina had seen it. And she'd known where it
would lead.
Still
Astron's voice interrupted her thoughts again, low and smooth, almost offhanded. "Seeing you like this reminds me of something."
Irina blinked, glancing over. "What?"
He didn't answer right away. He looked up toward the academy lights, hands
tucked into his pockets, the silver of his hair catching under the lampglow.

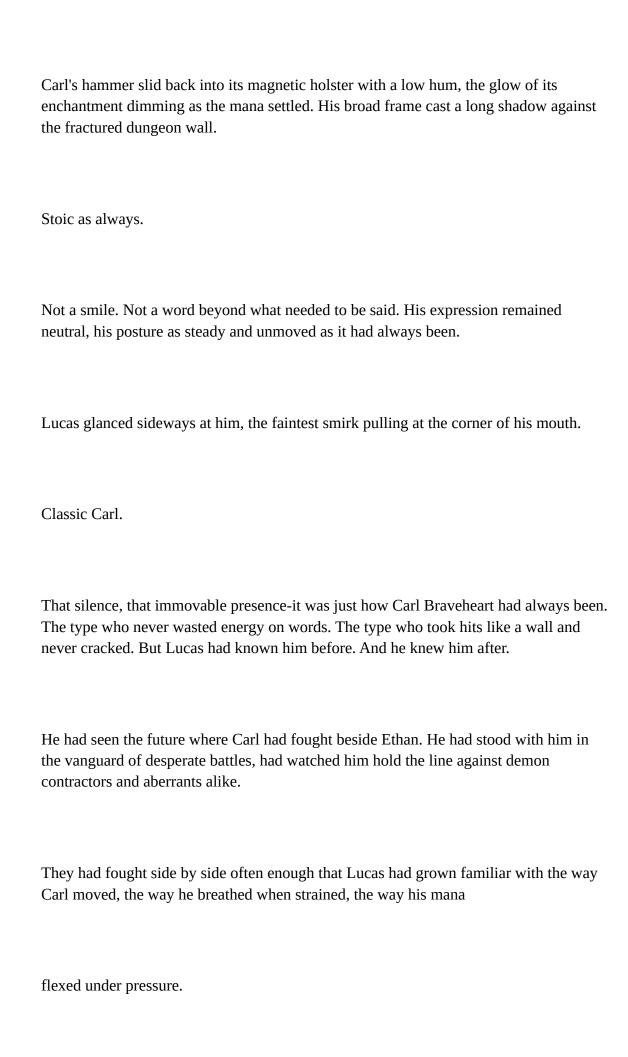




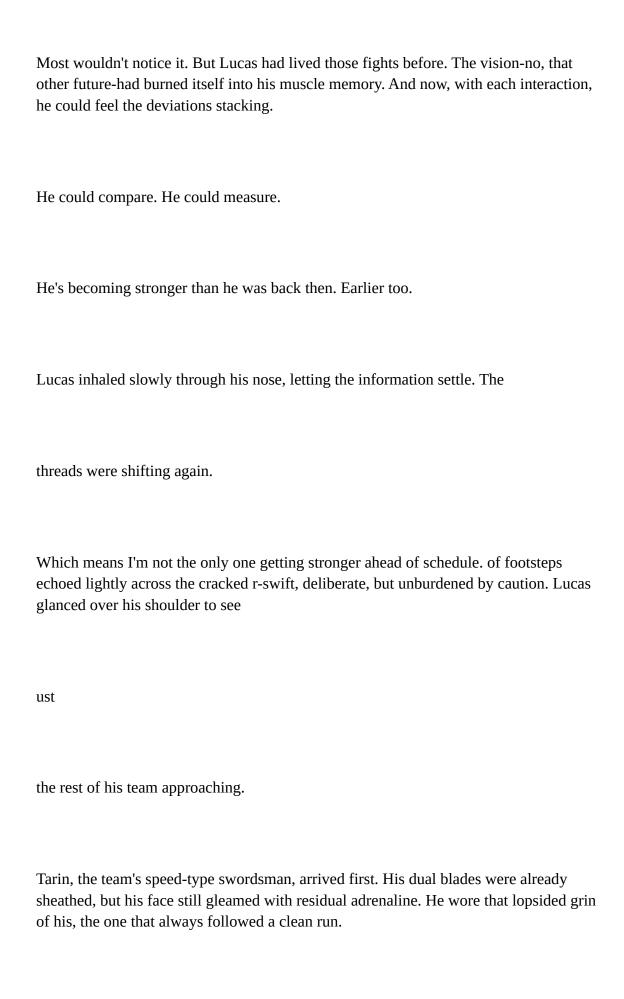


Despite everything-the long day, the tension with the scouts, the uncertainty ahead-somehow, with Astron beside her and his dry honesty filling the air like it always did, the world felt just a little easier to walk through. A little lighter. Warmer.
She smiled, quietly, and didn't bother hiding it.
Inside the simulated dungeon zone, the air was thick with the lingering stench of scorched flesh and mineral-heavy mana. Cracked stone and smoldering embers painted the aftermath of battle across the collapsed corridor walls. The projection sky above-painted with shifting hues of artificial dusk-cast long shadows over the battlefield.
Lucas stood still at the center of it all, the light catching against the blood-slick edge of his sword.
Beneath him, the broken forms of slain monsters lay in heaps-disfigured canines twisted by mana corruption, all bearing the signs of clean, efficient kills. Each strike had been purposeful. Every motion measured.
He exhaled slowly, letting the tension leave his shoulders.
Not bad
His blue eyes drifted to the blade in his hand, to the gleaming streaks that marked the path of his latest improvement.
It's getting better.

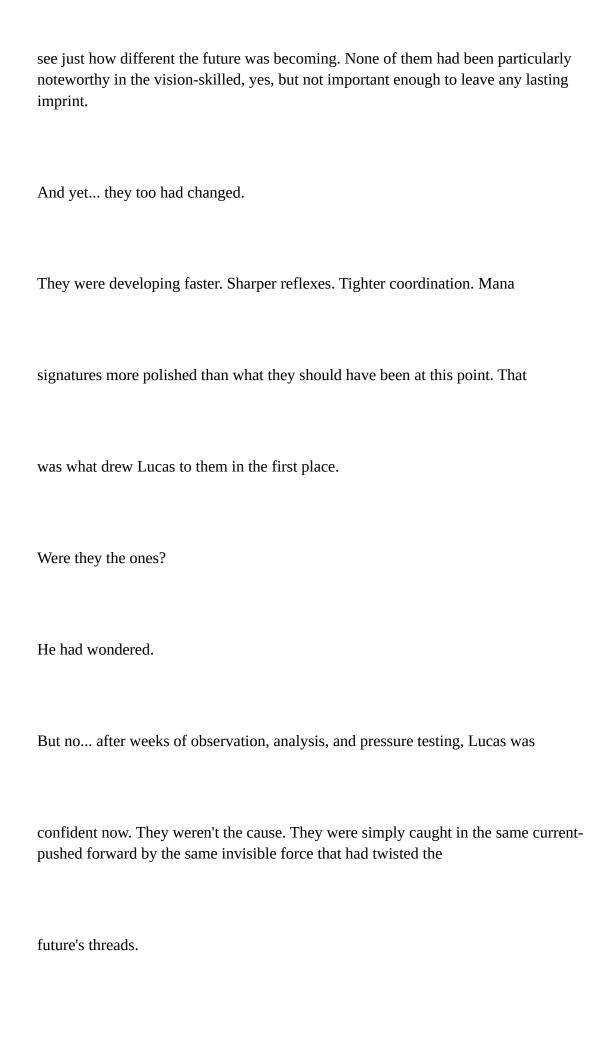
Lucas had spent the last two months refining his sword style, paring it down to its most fluid form. Cutting away waste, stripping off flair, keeping only what mattered. He no longer chased power in brute displays-it was about precision, intention, control.
And the results spoke for themselves.
Just then-
BAM!
A violent tremor shook the stone beneath him as a hammer came crashing down several meters away. The sound echoed through the corridor like a thunderclap. The last monster-a hulking brute covered in thorny bone protrusions-let out a strangled gurgle as its head was pulverized into the ground.
Blood sprayed against the nearby wall like red ink.
Carl stood over the remains, his massive warhammer still humming faintly from the force of impact.
He exhaled with satisfaction, resting the hammer's head against the floor as he straightened up.
"It's finished now."

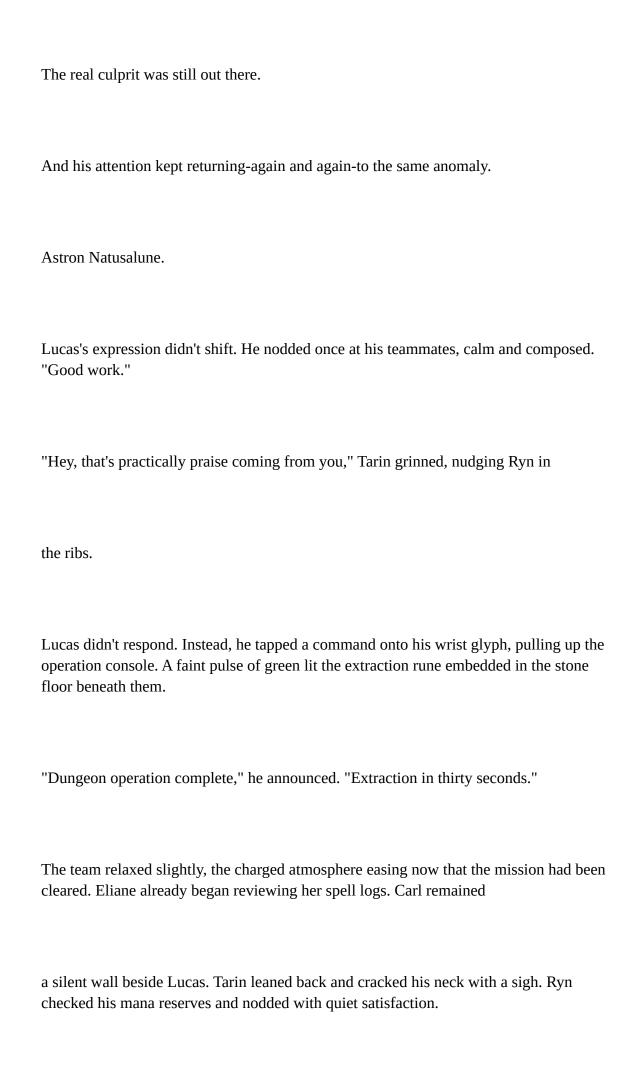


And what he saw now
It's different.
Lucas narrowed his eyes slightly, letting his senses trace the after-echoes of mana in the room. The flow around Carl was cleaner now-sharper, denser. Not refined like a spellcaster's, but thick with reinforced layers. It was the mark of someone whose body had been conditioned to absorb punishment without
breaking down.
He's improving faster.
He didn't need a scanner glyph to confirm it. He could see it in the way Carl's movements were more grounded than before. His timing, too-just slightly
earlier, just slightly tighter.
He's at least reached Rank-6 now. And some of his stats Lucas's eyes flicked to the faint aura residue trailing from Carl's shoulders. May even be Rank-7 at
this point.









And Lucas?
He just stared ahead at the closing dungeon walls, his thoughts already
elsewhere.
The simulation faded around them-stone giving way to light, blood and ash replaced by polished floor tiles as the extraction runes engaged.
In the seconds before they were fully transported, Lucas closed his eyes
briefly.
The threads are still unraveling.
And someone is still pulling them.
He opened his eyes again just as the world flickered into white.
Time to move forward.  Chapter 1018 - Saw

The glow of the extraction faded, giving way to the clean-cut edges and polished stone of the academy's simulation terminal halls. Mana vents hissed softly overhead, cycling away the residual energy from the operation. The atmosphere outside the dungeon was no less tense—if anything, it had grown heavier.

Dozens of figures stood along the observation corridors now—guild scouts, independent sponsors, private envoy officers. They watched with keen, calculating eyes as teams stepped out of the terminals, reviewing performance logs on floating glyph displays, jotting down notes, murmuring in low voices behind enchanted privacy veils.

Lucas and his team stepped out, their boots clicking against the floor as they headed down the central lane. Tarin stretched with an exaggerated groan while Ryn quietly reviewed their team data, and Eliane scrolled through tactical footage already archived in her tablet. Carl said nothing, as usual—just walked beside them like a slab of moving granite.

**But Lucas?** 

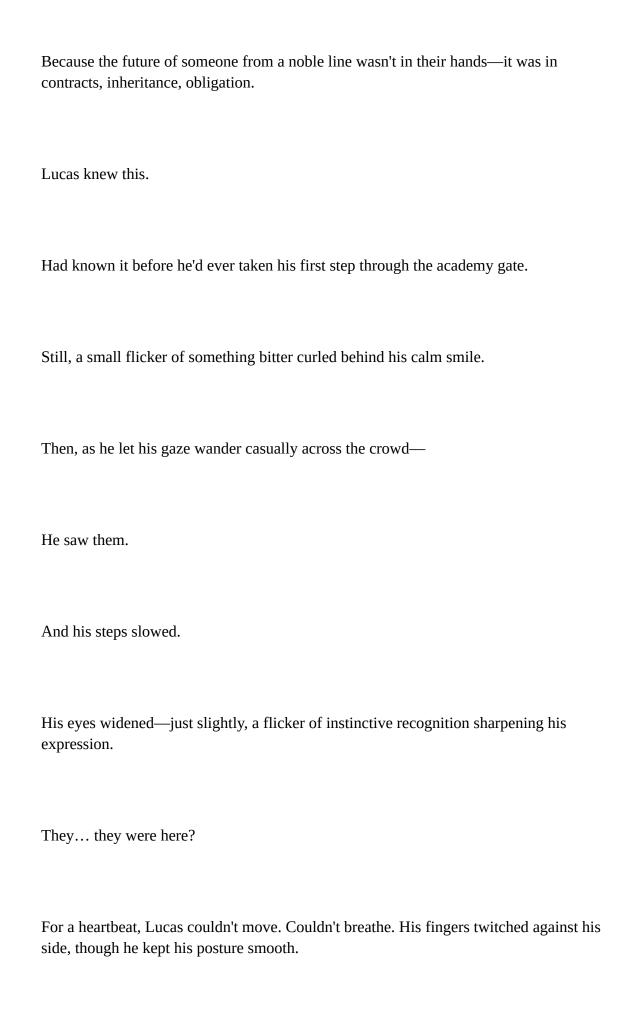
His eyes were already scanning the crowd.

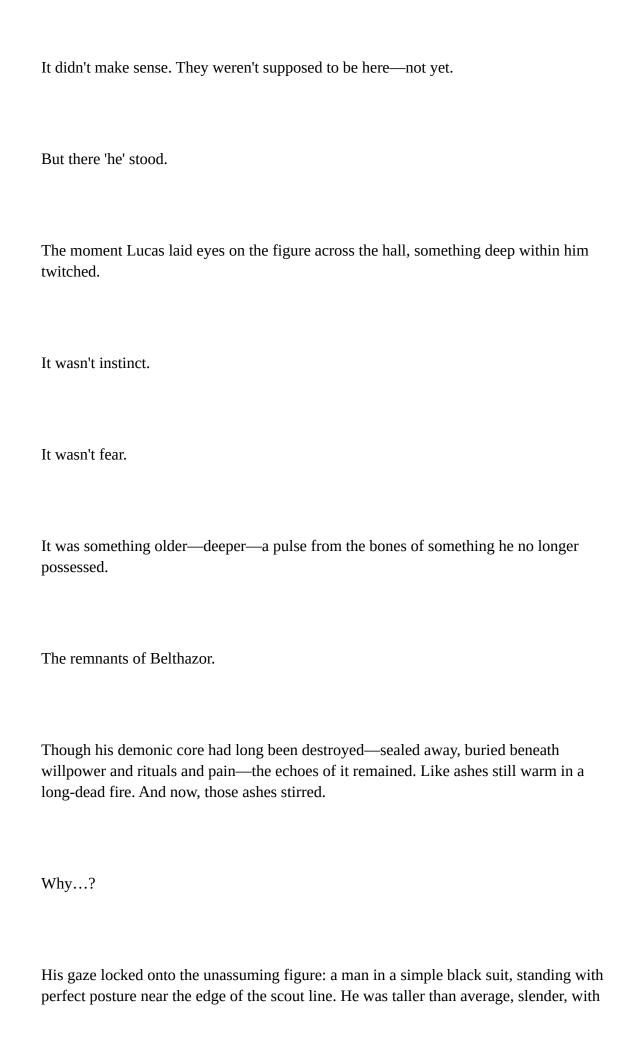
And he knew many of those faces.

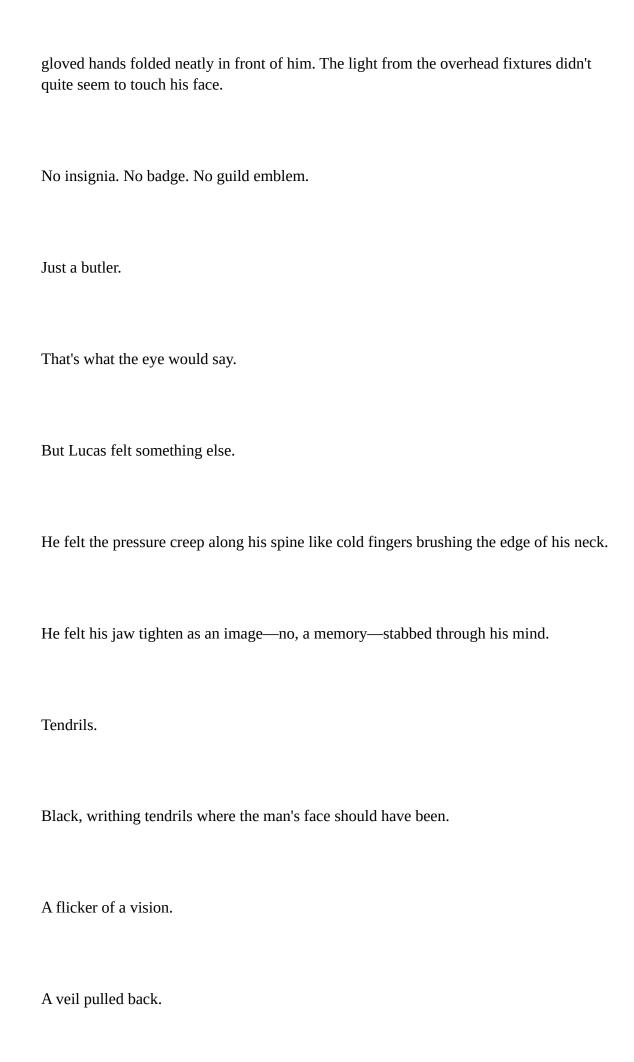
Too many.

From the future he had seen, these were people who had played pivotal roles—scouts who recruited Ethan, who picked the rising stars of their generation, who placed the pieces where they needed to be for the war to come.

And yet
None of them turned toward him.
Not one approached.
It didn't surprise him.
Of course they didn't.
Lucas was affiliated with the Middleton Family—an old name, tied too deeply to politics, to history. It didn't matter that he'd earned his spot at the academy on his own strength; to scouts, he was still a piece on someone else's board. He didn't represent opportunity. He represented negotiation.
And Carl?
The Braveheart line was even more rigid. Highborn knights, steeped in tradition, with paths already charted long before they ever enrolled.
Scouts avoided candidates like them.



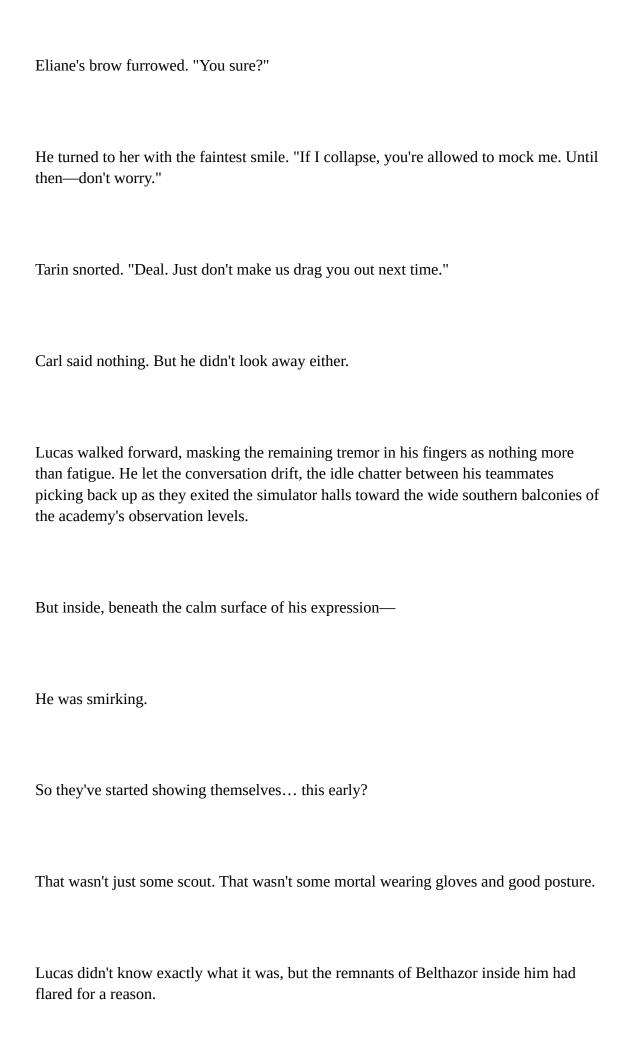




Lucas staggered half a step. His hand went to his temple as a sharp pain lanced through his skull like a blade of ice. The world blurred, edges twisting for just a moment.
He gritted his teeth.
Not now. Not here.
He forced his breath steady, grounding himself, pushing the ache into the back of his mind.
But the reaction—it wasn't the typical resonance of demonic energy. It wasn't the echo of Belthazor reacting to another infernal presence. This was different.
Deeper.
Older.
His hands clenched unconsciously.
Then a voice reached him, faint through the fog.

"Lucas?"

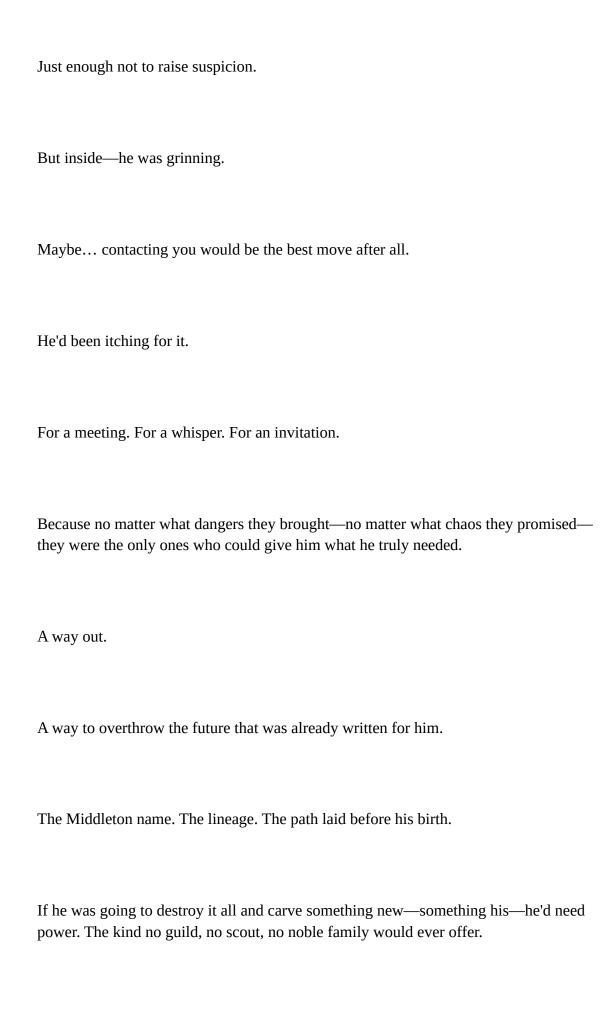
Eliane. She had stopped walking, eyes narrowing at his sudden change in demeanor. "You alright?"
Tarin followed her gaze, stepping slightly closer. "Hey, you don't look great. Was that fight harder on you than you let on?"
Carl's eyes didn't narrow, didn't shift, but Lucas could feel his attention settle on him too.
Lucas exhaled slowly, letting the pain coil deeper into his gut where no one could see it. His posture straightened, his expression slipping into something smooth, practiced—neutral.
He couldn't afford to look vulnerable.
Especially not in front of Carl.
Of all people, Carl was the last one he wanted sensing something amiss. The Braveheart heir didn't pry, didn't speak unless needed—but he noticed everything. And the fewer questions Lucas had to answer, the better.



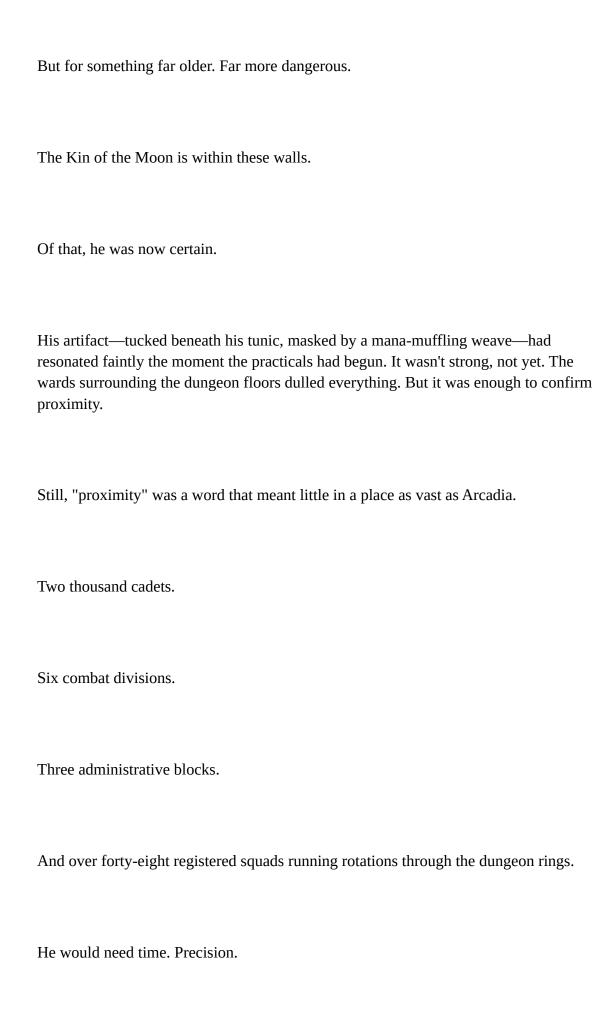
And it wasn't a demonic resonance. No.
It was something else.
Something older.
The harbinger of something greater.
The fact that it was here now—that meant the threads of fate were unraveling even faster than he'd predicted.
He narrowed his eyes slightly, the smile never touching his lips outwardly.
Good.
Let them move early.
Lucas's footsteps slowed just slightly as he let the others walk a pace ahead. The buzz of student chatter and scout murmurs blurred into background static, dulled beneath the hum of something deeper stirring in his chest.

He glanced back, subtle, like someone casually surveying the crowd.

And there—just where he'd last seen him—the butler stood.
Still.
Unmoving.
Watching.
And now, the man's face was turned toward him.
Their eyes met across the wide hall. The figure's expression was unchanged—serene, blank, almost painfully ordinary. But Lucas could feel it. That quiet weight behind the stare. The way the air warped slightly around him, as if the world wasn't sure he belonged in it.
Lucas let his lips curl just barely into a smile. Just enough to look polite. Enough to appear as if he were acknowledging a curious stranger's glance.
Then, with the same ease, he offered a small, measured nod.
Calculated. Controlled.

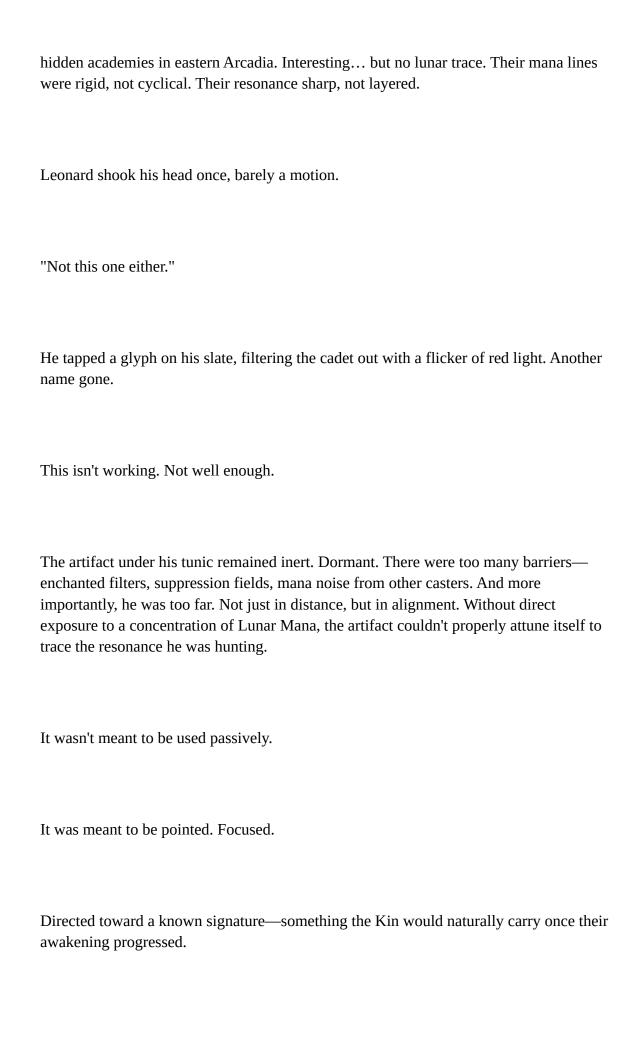


And they—those harbingers lurking behind porcelain smiles and empty gloves—
They had that power.
And now, they were here.
So yes—
Let's talk soon. Chapter 1019 - You are not the only one
From his seat near the upper western arc of the observation chamber, Leonard Elric sat quietly—hands folded, eyes narrowed in calm focus.
The insignia of Solstice Dawn gleamed faintly on his coat, understated but respected. His posture was relaxed, diplomatic even, blending seamlessly with the other seasoned scouts. He played his role well—curious, reserved, just another mid-tier recruiter seeking rising stars to polish and invest in.
But beneath the polished mask, his mind worked in silence.
Not for contracts.
Not for fame.



And he would need to watch.
Not for dramatic flares of power—that was the fool's route. The Kin of the Moon wouldn't be broadcasting their presence with flashy spells and grand declarations. No they would be quiet. Interwoven. Hiding within the weave of others.
Like silver threads hidden in a tapestry of fire and stone.
He leaned back in his seat, one hand ghosting across the interface rune built into the projection console. His slate shifted, pulling up isolated feeds from teams that had already passed through the early dungeons: Team Twelve, Team Seventeen, Team Twenty-Nine.
Each one bore names with promise—powerful bloodlines, curious anomalies, or students who had demonstrated irregular combat patterns in previous terms.
He had his filters.
Mana types. Lunar sensitivity.
Unregistered spells with resonance feedback.
Cadets whose medical or family records were redacted beyond standard privacy norms.

So far? Nothing.
He observed a cadet from Team Seventeen—Rivas Moor, descendant of a forgotten archmage line. His fire techniques were refined, yes. But his mana bleed was too harsh, his resonance far too volatile.
Not him.
Team Twenty-Nine showed an interesting anomaly—a girl whose lightning output showed strange color shifts on saturation. But her signature was sharp, angular. Solar-aligned, possibly storm-touched. She lacked the layered harmony the moon often demanded.
Not her either.
Cadet after cadet. Team after team. Slowly crossed from his internal list.
The process was meticulous by necessity. The artifact could only guide him so far within these walls. He needed behavior. Data. Subtle shifts in spellcraft that indicated spiritual convergence, not just strength.
He paused briefly as his feed rotated again—Team Eight, engaging a deep-surface elemental trap.
A cadet at the rear was weaving complex sigils—fluid, practiced. Their spell composition held notes of old-world discipline, possibly traced through one of the

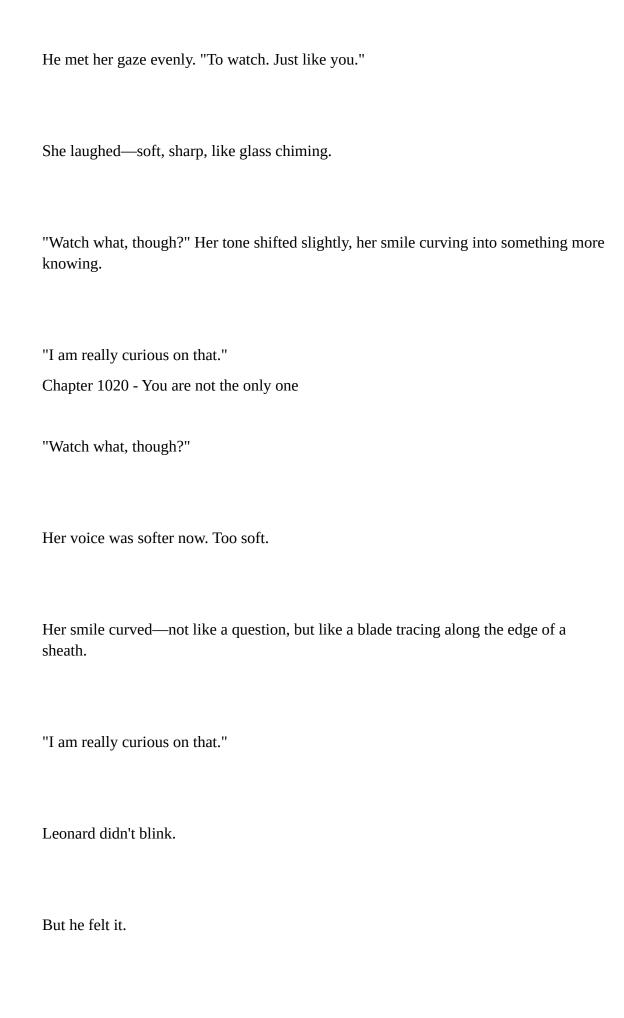


He was close. He could feel that.
Even now, the list was shrinking. Already, he had ruled out more than a hundred potential matches. Every filter narrowed the path. Every scan made the signal more visible beneath the noise.
Still, he needed to get closer.
Closer to the cadets. Closer to the core.
Just as his fingers moved to tag the next team for analysis, a soft flicker of perfume cut through the crisp air.
And then—
A voice, low and velvet-smooth, murmured beside him.
"Now this is a surprise. I didn't think Solstice Dawn played the long game."
Leonard turned his head slightly.
She was seated beside him as if she had always been there—her arrival unannounced, her presence wrapped in practiced ease.

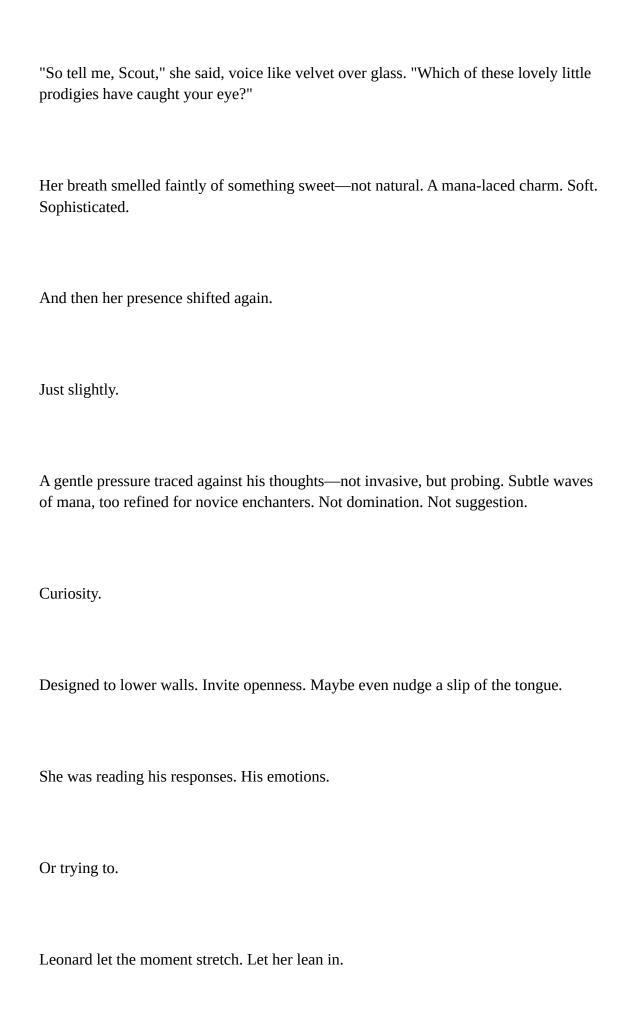
Long legs crossed beneath sleek crimson fabric. A faint silver tattoo shimmered along her collarbone, half-veiled by her coat—something old, arcane, deliberately visible. Her hair was a cascading shade of obsidian with streaks of amaranth, and her lips curved with the confidence of someone used to being noticed.
Leonard's gaze flicked toward the crest pinned to her shoulder—a stylized mirror etched in onyx and pearl, subtle yet elegant. It didn't match any of the major guilds he'd been briefed on. Not in the primary tier. Not even in the regulated freelance networks.
He committed it to memory anyway.
He didn't recognize her.
Didn't recognize her guild.
And he didn't like that.
Because Leonard Elric—scout of Solstice Dawn in name only—wasn't a man who left variables untracked.
Still, he kept his voice smooth. Measured.
"I'm afraid I don't recognize your badge."



But inwardly?
A beat.
Asvel?
He didn't know the name. Not in connection with Solstice Dawn, not anywhere.
And that told him something very important:
She did.
"Didn't think he still recruited personally," the woman continued, tapping one manicured nail against her projection rune. "He's grown boring in his age. All temples and thesis circles now. But I suppose every relic needs a sharp edge."
She gave him another glance—this one longer, assessing.
"You don't talk like the others either. No market slang. No investment lingo. No regional drawl. So" she tilted her head, her tone almost teasing, "why are you really here, Leonard?"







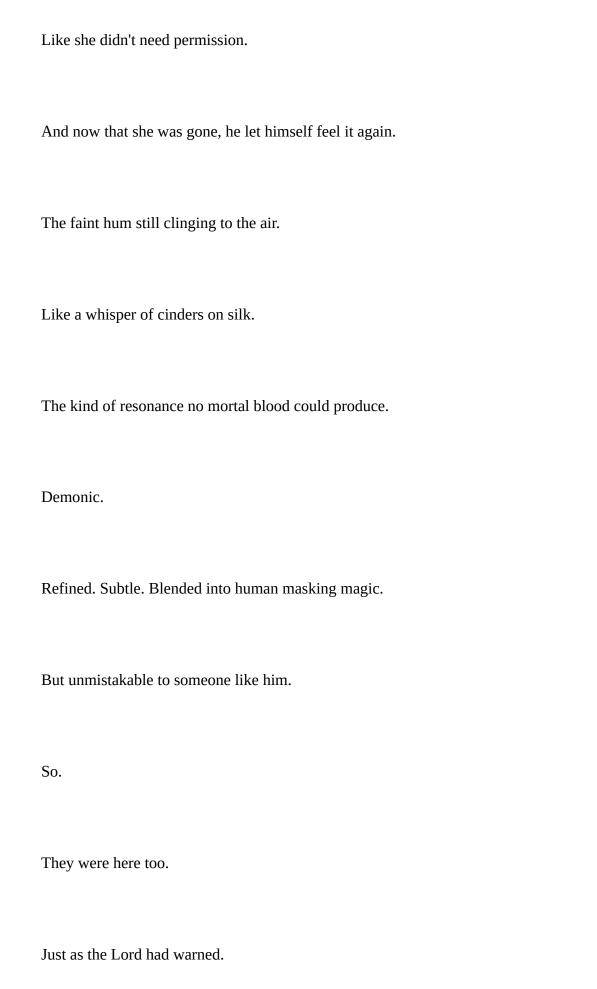
Let her believe he hadn't noticed.
The fragrance drifted toward his nose—spiced plum, soft night herbs, laced with passive intent.
And then—
Nothing.
The spell found no purchase.
Her charm, her mana, her scent—everything rolled off him like mist against obsidian.
Because Leonard's constitution—blessed, altered, shaped by rites that even most priests had never heard of—rendered such magic inert.
And when his gaze shifted to meet hers again, it wasn't warm.
It wasn't disarming.
It was cold.





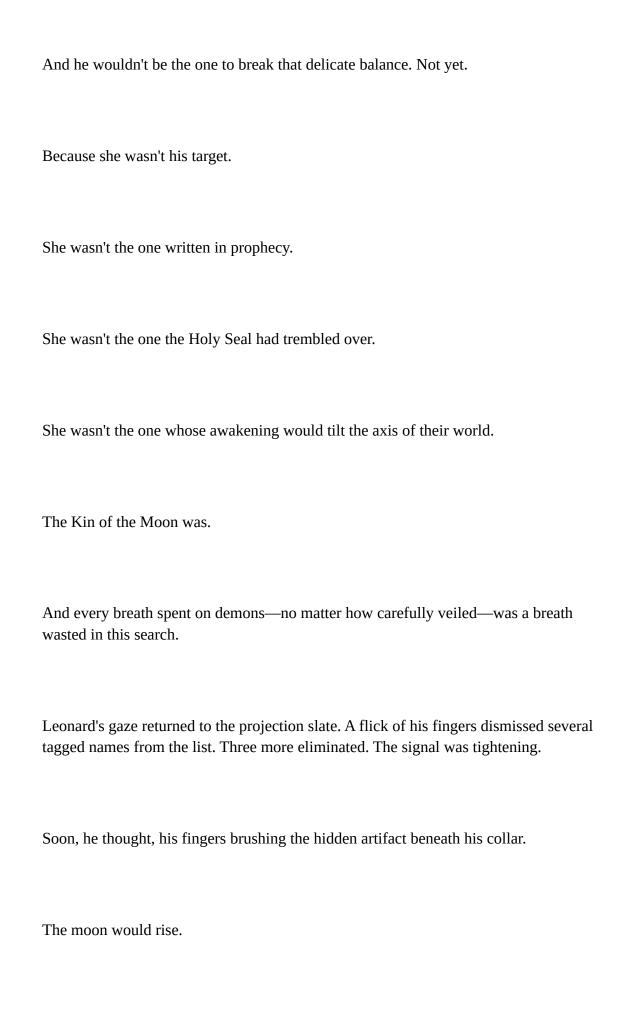


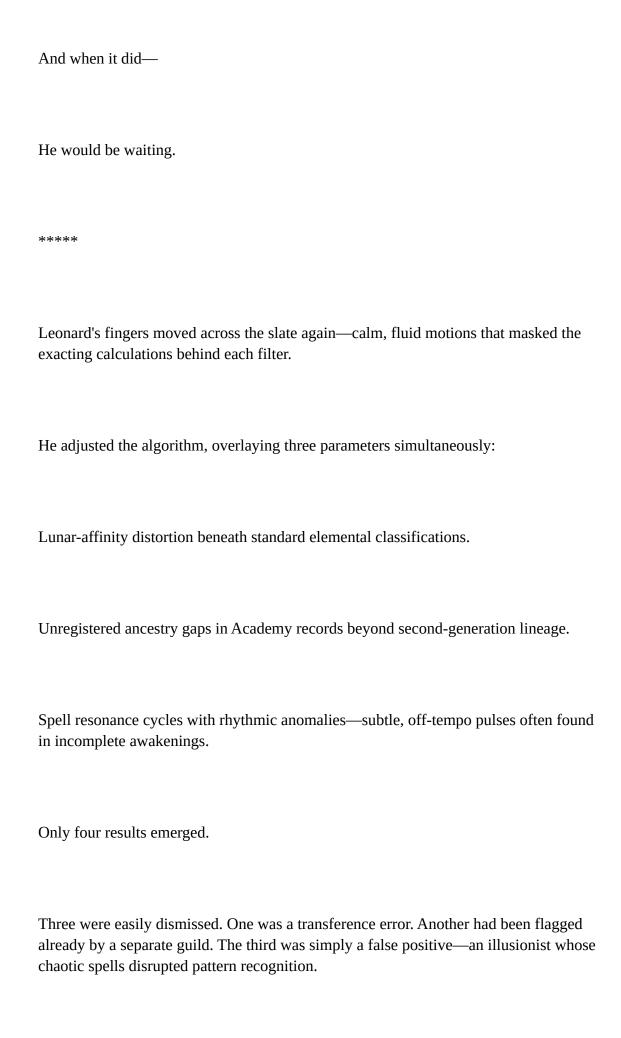
Leonard's eyes lingered on the seat Velvetin had just vacated, the crimson fold of her cloak still ghosting across his vision.
Mirrored Thorn.
A name that did not appear on any official scout registry.
Nor any clandestine affiliate list he had access to.
And yet—
She was here.
With a pass. A projection slate.
A presence that moved through sanctioned circles like she belonged.
No.
Not like she belonged.



He leaned back slightly in his seat, eyes trailing across the glowing mana-screens of cadet feeds—but no longer really watching them.	
Not for now.	
The air against his skin felt fractionally colder. His fingertips tingled faintly—not with threat, but with recognition.	
Velvetin.	
If that was even her name.	
She was no simple contractor with ambition.	
She was touched.	
And if he had sensed it—the blood-shrouded depth coiled beneath her veneer—then sh had likely sensed the same in him.	e
That made them even.	
It also made them dangerous.	

But Leonard's expression remained calm.
Unbothered.
Because now was not the time.
Not to pursue.
Not to provoke.
And not to strike.
Their identities were still shadows.
And in this game of veiled purpose, shadows were safety.
If she suspected what he was looking for, she didn't say it.
If she meant to interfere, she hadn't acted.





But the fourth?	
Leonard's eyes narrowed slightly.	

He had found one.

Cadet Name: Darien Vale