

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 he 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.

The younger scout nodded slightly, eyes still locked on the frozen frame of Astron standing before the collapsed cathedral ruins. "He's not a star. Not yet. But that right there? That's resilience. That's built."

"It takes effort to polish a fighter like that," another added. "Effort that shows."

And it wasn't just Astron.

Layla had taken the brunt of Vulkran's assault without collapsing formation — her shield timing tight, her recovery frames controlled even when launched across the battlefield. No wild swings. No shouting.

Just a slow rise. A defensive pivot. And back into formation.

Jasmine, too — reckless on the surface, but her lateral movements always mirrored team flow. No selfish overextensions. Every dodge, every feint folded into the team's tempo.

Both of them weren't carrying the spotlight.

But they carried weight.

And the scouts knew — sometimes, what mattered most wasn't who led the charge...

...but who could hold the line when everything exploded.

"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 Vulkrans'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.

"No distortion in the tail end," the Hollow Edge scout muttered. "No elemental decay. That's what makes it unnatural."

He sat back in his chair slowly.

"...I couldn't replicate that," he admitted.

Several around him didn't speak, but their silences were telling.

They were hunters.

Scouts, recruiters, enforcers.

Veterans of dungeon floors.

People who had seen every variation of burstfire magic, combustion pressure, scorched-path AoE.

But this?

This beam?

This wasn't common innovation.

It was the kind of spellwork that happened when a genius didn't just inherit fire magic—

But questioned it.

Bent it into something sharper.

"That girl," someone whispered, meaning Irina Emberheart, "is not just inheriting the Emberheart lineage. She's evolving it."

Still, even with the spell's brilliance, more and more glances turned—again—to the quiet figure who had stood just behind her. Holding the resonance web. Matching tempo.

Sylvie Gracewind.

One of the Blackstone Verge observers brought up her combat feed in isolation. No filters. No slowed motion. Just raw projection — side view, back view, then internal mana trace overlay.

He watched the clips again.

And again.

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.

And then someone said what most were now thinking:

"She's the best mana controller we've seen today."

No one argued.

Because the data didn't lie.

Recovery response time? Fastest by 0.42 seconds.

Buff layering? Most consistent under pressure.

Mana preservation? Highest efficiency per cast volume among the field.

Drift correction? Near-perfect.

And most importantly—

She wasn't just controlling her own mana.

She was amplifying others'.

The resonance field that enabled Irina's Solar Rend?

That wasn't just support.

It was co-dependence at high-risk thresholds.

"She's... not just a healer anymore," the Hollow Edge veteran said quietly. "She's a combat conductor."

A long pause.

Then one of the independent contractors — a young man with little insignia, but sharp, silent eyes — broke his silence for the first time.

"If someone doesn't offer her a contract by dungeon three," he said, "she's getting picked up by a Prime-tier guild before the month ends."

Several scouts glanced toward each other.

The room's tension had shifted again.

Because it was no longer a discussion of potential.

It was a discussion of timing.

Of who would move first.

And who would be too slow.

Chapter 1012 - Noticed

The gateway shimmered softly as the team emerged one by one, the ethereal glow of the mana-transition fading behind them.

The moment their boots touched the polished stone of the academy's central staging plaza, a subtle breeze swept past—cool, fresh, and so different from the heat-choked fog they had just left behind. The contrast was sharp enough to feel like a physical shift. Real space. Real ground.

And despite the ache in their limbs and the wear in their joints—there was a buzz among them.

Adrenaline hadn't quite faded yet.

"Well," Layla said first, adjusting her shoulder strap and exhaling hard, "that went way better than I thought it would."

Jasmine groaned, flexing her neck. "I still have no idea how you keep tanking that crap and walk out without falling over."

"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.

But her golden eyes carried a certain weight. Expectation. Challenge. Maybe something else, just beneath the surface.

It wasn't demanding. It wasn't pushy.

It was... deliberate.

She was watching to see if he'd say no.

Astron held her gaze for a beat longer than necessary.

Then, quietly, without much inflection, he said, "Fine."

Layla blinked, eyebrows lifting slightly—not at Astron's answer, but at the unspoken exchange she'd just witnessed. She glanced from Astron to Irina, watching the way Irina's lips curled into a small, almost smug smile.

'...Seriously?' Layla thought. 'What's going on between those two?'

She didn't voice it.

Jasmine clapped her hands together, breaking the moment. "Perfect. I know a spot nearby—nothing fancy, but the food's hot and filling."

"I'm in," Layla said, stretching her arms overhead.

Sylvie gave a small smile. "Lead the way."

Irina fell into step beside Astron, her expression relaxed, that earlier fire subdued now into something quieter—self-satisfied. "See? Not so hard."

Astron didn't reply. But the corner of his mouth twitched. Barely.

And that was enough.

But at the same time, his eyes silently turned to the side.

Where he saw some gazes.

'I guess, it starts now.'

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.

They were polished. Angled. Executed with the kind of restraint that only came from years in guild protocol halls — and from knowing precisely when not to smile.

Irina's golden eyes narrowed, just slightly. A shift in focus.

A warning flare, silent but unmistakable.

The woman caught it before she even crossed the final meters to the table.

She slowed her steps—not hesitating, just adjusting—and stopped just beyond the reach of the booth's low light. Then, politely, she lowered her head in a respectful bow.

Not to the group.

To Irina.

"Miss Emberheart," she began, her voice smooth. "I don't wish to interrupt your team's well-earned rest. I'll be brief."

Irina said nothing for a moment, her expression unreadable.

But she didn't wave the woman away.

She lifted her glass, took a quiet sip, then set it down again with soft precision.

"Then speak."

The woman inclined her head. "My name is Calera Venth, representing Cloudveil Reliquary. We—and several others, as I'm sure you're aware—have been observing today's performance trials."

Astron's gaze flicked up again. Subtle. Measuring.

Layla and Jasmine quieted, glancing between Irina and the scout.

But it was Sylvie who looked up last—mid-spoonful, blinking slowly.

Calera continued, tone still measured. "I won't pretend to be here for all of you. Though I will say—your team coordination is impressive. It's rare to see genuine synergy in a first-round dungeon."

Then she looked directly at Sylvie.

Not with pressure.

Not with predatory eagerness.

But with intent.

Clear. Focused.

"I'm here for Miss Gracewind."

"Eh?"

Chapter 1013 - Noticed

"I'm here for Miss Gracewind."

"Eh?" Sylvie blinked.

It wasn't a gasp. Not a full-on flinch.

Just a soft, almost confused sound—surprised, uncertain. Like she hadn't even considered the possibility.

Her spoon stopped halfway to her mouth, steam curling around her fingers.

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.

She turned her eyes toward Calera again. The scout's expression was neutral but respectful, hands folded calmly at her waist. There was no hunger in her tone. No impatience.

Just professionalism. And intent.

"...I didn't expect this," Sylvie finally said, her voice soft.

Calera's expression didn't shift. "Very few do. That's why it matters when it happens."

Sylvie's shoulders tightened slightly, her breath catching. There was something terrifying about being seen. Not just watched—but seen.

Layla was grinning openly now, while Jasmine leaned on her elbow with a smirk that only half-masked her pride.

"You're seriously surprised?" Jasmine muttered under her breath. "After today? Girl, you lit up the battlefield."

Sylvie gave a tiny, reluctant smile. It didn't quite reach her eyes.

She looked to Astron next, almost instinctively. He hadn't spoken since the scout entered. But his expression hadn't changed.

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.

That was enough.

Her lips twitched into the faintest smile—so small it barely qualified as one. But it was real.

Yes, she thought. I should calm down.

She'd been seen.

Sylvie took another quiet breath, steadying herself the way she'd seen Lilia do countless times—shoulders back, chin slightly raised, eyes focused but not overly sharp. She imagined the older girl's voice, the poised cadence, the carefully measured confidence that never came off as arrogance.

How would she do it?

Not with panic. Not with hesitation.

So Sylvie copied it.

Her heart was still racing beneath her ribs, but she swallowed the tension and shaped her next words carefully—soft, but composed.

"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."

Jasmine grinned. "Seriously. First, you outshine half the field in a dungeon, and now you're pulling off political poise like a nobleborn sponsor daughter."

Sylvie flushed slightly but smiled, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "I was just... trying not to faint."

Layla smirked. "Well, you faked it really well."

The table shared a low ripple of laughter, the kind that came after tension broke—warm, easy, full of earned release.

But the moment cooled subtly when Astron, still seated quietly at the edge of the booth, finally spoke.

"Since one of them came," he said, voice even and calm, "others are bound to follow."

They all turned toward him. He wasn't smiling. His gaze was sharp—calculating, not cold, but distant in a way that cut through the afterglow of triumph.

His eyes settled on Sylvie. Not critically. Not warmly either. Just... clearly.

"This one," he said, the quiet weight of the words leaving no room for misunderstanding, "is not the end."

Sylvie's smile faded slightly.

Chapter 1014 - Noticed

Sylvie blinked at Astron's words, his tone quiet but unmistakably firm.

"Really?" she asked softly, still processing everything. "You think more will come?"

Astron's gaze didn't waver. "Indeed."

He shifted slightly in his seat, resting one elbow on the table, eyes briefly scanning the surrounding space as if mapping the invisible network of interest already converging.

"The scouting network functions like a web," he said. "Connections between guilds, factions, private sponsors. Information spreads fast, especially when someone steps out of their expected box."

Sylvie lowered her gaze slightly, absorbing his words.

"And," Astron added, "we're on Irina's team."

That drew a faint hum from Irina, who didn't object—just sipped her drink with a flicker of amusement in her eyes.

Astron continued, "Scouts were already paying attention to her. To the Emberheart name. By extension, to all of us. Today just gave them a reason to stop and look closer."

"Oh," Sylvie murmured. It wasn't disbelief this time—just the quiet weight of reality settling in.

Then, Astron's eyes swept across the table, landing briefly on each of them before settling again on Sylvie.

And his next question came simply, without edge, but it landed heavy.

"Do you want to deal with all these scouts now?"

There was a stillness after that—one of those moments where the weight behind a simple question cracked open a wider reality.

Because that was the question now.

Not if she'd be noticed again.

But whether she was ready for what that attention would bring.

Irina leaned forward slightly, her expression calm but sharpened by something colder than usual. Her amber eyes, still faintly glowing from the earlier dungeon heat, flicked toward Sylvie with unmistakable seriousness.

"We should go," she said. "Now."

Layla raised a brow. "Why? We just sat down."

Irina didn't look at her. Her gaze remained locked on Sylvie. "Because I know how this industry works."

Sylvie blinked. "What do you mean?"

Irina's lips pressed into a thin line. "Scouts don't just watch. They probe. They charm. They dig where it's soft—and right now?" She gestured subtly toward the door where Calera had exited. "You're soft. Naive, unprepared, easy to mold."

Sylvie tensed.

"They'll say the right words," Irina continued, voice smooth but hardening beneath the surface. "Promise mentorship. Protection. The best gear. But most of them aren't offering opportunities. They're setting hooks."

Jasmine frowned. "That woman didn't seem—"

"She was polite," Irina cut in. "That's not the same thing."

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.

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

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 if they try anyway?"

Irina's lips curved into a faint smile—cold, protective.

"Then they'll find out what happens when they corner someone under the Emberheart name."

Chapter 1015 - About Sylvie

"Then they'll find out what happens when they corner someone under the Emberheart name."

Hearing that....

Sylvie couldn't help it.

The corner of her lips twitched, then lifted—just a little, but more than enough to soften the lines of worry still lingering in her expression. It wasn't a laugh, and it wasn't out of relief either. It was something quieter. Something steadier.

"...Thank you," she said.

Irina glanced sideways at her, surprised by the sincerity in Sylvie's voice. A beat passed.

Then—with a deliberate slowness, almost as if she wasn't sure what possessed her to do it—Irina raised her hand and gave Sylvie's head a quick, slightly awkward pat. Her

fingers brushed lightly through her silvery hair, once, then withdrew before it became anything too sentimental.

She twitched the corner of her mouth—somewhere between a smirk and a shrug.

"Don't mention it," she said.

The moment lingered for just a breath longer, before Layla broke it with a stretch and a groan. "Alright, that's enough emotional drama for one afternoon. I'm heading to the dorms before I get sucked into another surprise lecture."

Jasmine snorted. "Better than getting sucked into another surprise duel. Those are worse."

"Speak for yourself," Layla said, already turning away with a lazy wave. "I've tanked worse than your jokes."

Jasmine rolled her eyes and followed after her. "Please, your shield's got more cracks than your sarcasm."

Astron paused for a moment, his gaze flicking once more to Sylvie. He didn't say anything—but gave a small, almost imperceptible nod.

Then he, too, turned and walked off without fanfare.

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.

Irina's gaze remained forward for a while. But then, with a side glance, she broke the silence.

"What do you think?"

Astron didn't look at her, but she saw the faint shift in his expression—the way his eyes narrowed slightly, thoughtful.

He didn't ask what she meant. He didn't need to.

"Sylvie."

Irina's words trailed into the dusk like the last curl of smoke from a burned-out flame—casual in tone, but not in weight.

"I always felt like you treated Sylvie a little differently than the other girls."

Astron's gaze didn't shift, but the rhythm of his footsteps faltered ever so slightly—so subtle it might've been missed by anyone else. But Irina noticed. She always did.

"What do you mean?" he asked, his voice quiet, unreadable.

"I mean..." she continued, her eyes still fixed forward, "you don't usually pay that much attention to students. Especially not those with low rank. Not unless they're standing in your way or offering you something specific."

Silence again. Astron didn't answer, but the weight of his quiet was no longer neutral.

"And yet," Irina went on, "you talked to Sylvie normally. You let her sit near you, answered her questions before. You looked after her during joint drills, during the early dungeons... even in simulations. Subtle, but it was there."

Still nothing from him.

Irina's voice softened slightly, but only in tone—not in intent. "And that's not something you usually do. You don't make idle conversation. You don't waste effort on people unless you've already evaluated them."

Astron's expression didn't betray anything. But there was a tension in the air now, coiled like thread drawn taut between them.

"So what are you getting at?" he asked eventually, his tone carefully level.

Irina's smirk returned—faint, sharp around the edges. She turned her head slightly, just enough to catch his profile in the warm lamplight. "What am I getting at?" she echoed, her voice low, deliberate. "Let's just say... I feel like you knew something about Sylvie that no one else did. Even from the start."

The wind whispered through the trees again, and in the silence that followed, her words hung there—half a question, half a quiet accusation. She wasn't pressing for answers.

But she was watching.

Astron turned his head slightly, and for the first time since the conversation began, his eyes met hers fully.

Deep violet. Still. Unflinching.

The kind of gaze that didn't just see—it read. Not surface thoughts. Not body language. But the undercurrent, the tremor beneath control.

Irina held it for a second longer than she wanted. There it was again—that weight. That impossible stillness in him that made her feel like she was the one being observed, despite doing all the questioning.

There was something he wasn't telling her. She could feel it like a current in the wind. But before she could press again, Astron finally spoke.

"...That's right," he said quietly. "From the start, I knew about her talents."

Irina's lips parted slightly, but no words came.

Astron continued. "Remember that time I mentioned during the mid-terms? When Sylvie saved me."

Her fingers twitched at her side.

"Yes," she murmured, almost reluctantly. "Mid-terms, wasn't it?"

He gave a single nod, eyes drifting upward as if the stars above were replaying the memory for him. The gentle rustle of leaves returned, softer now, like the world itself had gone quieter to hear the rest.

"At that time, if not for Sylvie... I would have died," he said. "The instructor herself admitted it. She said only Sylvie could've managed that particular healing weave. Not even the licensed instructors would've stabilized it fast enough."

Irina's shoulders tensed.

The words didn't hit her all at once—they sank slowly, like stones dropped into deep water. And somewhere in that weight, in the implications of how close he'd come to vanishing from her world entirely, something inside her recoiled.

She didn't want to hear it.

She didn't want to imagine it.

"...You almost—" she began, but then stopped herself, jaw tightening.

Astron didn't notice, or maybe he did and chose not to comment. He remained looking up at the sky, voice steady.

"I already had my suspicions before that," he said. "But that moment confirmed it."

Irina turned her gaze away, as if the chill in the air had finally touched her skin. "So you already had your suspicions..."

"You know how my eyes are," Astron replied, glancing at her again. "What I see... what I sense... it's not always obvious to others. But when I looked at her back then—Sylvie wasn't just some shy girl from the outskirts. There was something woven in her mana from the beginning."

Irina closed her eyes briefly.

This wasn't jealousy. It wasn't distrust.

But still, hearing it... it stirred something cold and uncomfortable beneath her ribs.

Something old.

"...I see," she said softly.

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.

An instinct.

A debt that couldn't be left unpaid.

Irina had known that from the beginning. She'd seen it back when they first met, back before the world had burned and reshaped itself around survival. Even then, he had carried that quiet, unrelenting sense of obligation-toward people who helped him. Toward moments he couldn't forget.

And Sylvie had saved his life.

Of course he would protect her.

Of course he would watch over her, speak to her, keep her in his orbit- however subtly.

Even now, Irina could feel the quiet edge of that guilt-driven loyalty in him. It wasn't affection. It wasn't attraction. It was deeper and more rigid. A principle, carved into bone by the kind of life that didn't allow loose ends when it came to trust.

That was why Maya had always been the hardest part.

Because Maya had helped him too.

And Irina-who knew the person Astron used to be, who knew the weight of his past, the cold logic twisted around his trauma-had always hated how impossible it was to make

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.

"Tch."

Irina clicked her tongue and gave a sharp exhale, the tension still coiled faintly in her shoulders. But then she added-half mutter, half challenge-

"I don't want to mix you with Sylvie. She's way too cute."

Astron turned slightly, one eyebrow lifting with visible confusion. "Cute?"

"Yes," Irina said flatly, as if daring him to argue. "She's small, she stammers, she heals things with glowing flowers, and she panics whenever someone looks at her too long. You? You're practically a walking ghost with a blade. The contrast is criminal."

Astron gave no comment, but the faint crease in his brow betrayed a flicker of amusement. Irina caught it and pressed on, this time her voice easing a little- less guarded.

"There were times," she said, "when I thought there might be something strange between the two of you. You always kept your distance from people unless there was a reason. But with her... it felt different."

Astron didn't reply. His expression remained unreadable.

Irina kept walking, but her gaze flicked sideways. "But now that I'm looking at it again, it's not like that. You're not close to her like that... You're more like-"

She hesitated.

"-a guide."

Astron's pace didn't change, but she saw the shift in his eyes.

"You've been preparing her for this. For things like today. Was that why you agreed to teach her close combat?"

A beat.

"What?" Irina pressed, her tone edging toward playful suspicion. "Did I guess too close?"

Seeing the small, satisfied curl at the corner of her mouth, Astron just shook his head and gave a breath through his nose. "You know me well."

Then, unexpectedly, he smiled.

Not a smirk. Not a twitch of the mouth.

An actual, quiet smile.

It was small-barely there-but it was real. And Irina's steps slowed just a

fraction as she caught it.

It was strange how that slight shift could warm the air around them.

He had been doing that more often lately. Smiling.

And for reasons she didn't say aloud, it made her happy.

So that was it, then. The bond between him and Sylvie wasn't something she

had to be wary of. It wasn't a budding romance or something subtle brewing behind the scenes.

It was respect. Debt. A carefully held promise wrapped in Astron's quiet sense

of honor.

Irina looked forward again, exhaling softly through her nose, her thoughts laced with something between amusement and wariness.

"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.

"That you're a celebrity too."

Irina stopped walking.

"What?"

He turned to meet her gaze fully. His eyes-deep purple in the light-held that

usual calm... but beneath it, something more precise. Measured. Intentional. "When you're in front of a crowd," Astron continued, "or facing down high-ranking scouts, instructors, even nobles-you shift. Your voice tightens. Your posture becomes precise. There's weight in your words. Calculation in

your gaze!"

He paused. "It's... charismatic."

The word was spoken plainly, as if it were simply the most fitting descriptor available. No embellishment. No hesitation.

Irina's mouth twitched. Just slightly.

Brutal honesty.

It was one of his more annoying qualities-especially because she still hadn't figured out how to deal with it smoothly. Astron didn't say things to flatter or provoke. He said them because they were true. And that always made it harder

to deflect.

"So," she muttered, glancing sidelong at him with an unimpressed look, "you're saying I'm not charismatic normally?"

Chapter 1017 Saw

"So. You're saying I'm not charismatic normally?"

Astron turned to look at her fully, his gaze calm as ever, but this time there was something undeniably deliberate in his pause-like he was giving her one last chance to brace herself.

"That much," he said flatly, "must be obvious even to you."

Irina stopped in her tracks.

Her eyes narrowed, sharp and glinting with heat. "Obvious, huh?"

Astron met her stare without a flicker of hesitation. "You're too stubborn. Too direct. And your temper flares in under five seconds."

"And yet somehow," she shot back, stepping up beside him again, "people still line up to listen when I speak."

"They're scared of you," he said, almost too fast.

Irina blinked. "Scared?"

Astron shrugged, hands tucked casually in his pockets. "Charisma through fear is still charisma."

"You little-" She exhaled, half-laughing now, trying not to give him the satisfaction. "You really know how to kill a compliment."

"You were the one who asked."

Irina shook her head and smacked him lightly on the arm as they walked. "You know, for someone who barely talks to people, you've got a real talent for getting under their skin."

"I consider it efficient."

She scoffed, but couldn't stop the grin tugging at her lips.

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."

Carl's hammer slid back into its magnetic holster with a low hum, the glow of its enchantment dimming as the mana settled. His broad frame cast a long shadow against the fractured dungeon wall.

Stoic as always.

Not a smile. Not a word beyond what needed to be said. His expression remained neutral, his posture as steady and unmoved as it had always been.

Lucas glanced sideways at him, the faintest smirk pulling at the corner of his mouth.

Classic Carl.

That silence, that immovable presence-it was just how Carl Braveheart had always been. The type who never wasted energy on words. The type who took hits like a wall and never cracked. But Lucas had known him before. And he knew him after.

He had seen the future where Carl had fought beside Ethan. He had stood with him in the vanguard of desperate battles, had watched him hold the line against demon contractors and aberrants alike.

They had fought side by side often enough that Lucas had grown familiar with the way Carl moved, the way he breathed when strained, the way his mana

flexed under pressure.

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.

Most wouldn't notice it. But Lucas had lived those fights before. The vision-no, that other future-had burned itself into his muscle memory. And now, with each interaction, he could feel the deviations stacking.

He could compare. He could measure.

He's becoming stronger than he was back then. Earlier too.

Lucas inhaled slowly through his nose, letting the information settle. The

threads were shifting again.

Which means I'm not the only one getting stronger ahead of schedule. of footsteps echoed lightly across the cracked r-swift, deliberate, but unburdened by caution. Lucas glanced over his shoulder to see

ust

the rest of his team approaching.

Tarin, the team's speed-type swordsman, arrived first. His dual blades were already sheathed, but his face still gleamed with residual adrenaline. He wore that lopsided grin of his, the one that always followed a clean run.

"Whew. That's the fastest we've cleared a zone this week, yeah?" he said, swiping his brow with the back of his glove. "Feels like we're finally getting into

a rhythm."

"About time," came Eliane's voice, calm and crisp. The mana archer fell into step beside Tarin, her long ponytail swaying as she scanned the cleared corridor one last time. Her expression was composed, but there was a quiet spark in her amber eyes-one that hadn't been there before. "Execution's tightening. We didn't waste a single volley."

And trailing just a few paces behind them was Ryn. The team's support-channeler was always a bit more reserved, but even now, he wore a

rare, contented smile. His gloves were still glowing faintly from mana residue, but the glow was steady-unstrained. "Shield timings were clean. Didn't have to

overcharge once!"

Lucas looked at the three of them-Tarin, Eliane, Ryn.

Three more variables.

Three more people he had quietly scouted after the break, when he began to

see just how different the future was becoming. None of them had been particularly noteworthy in the vision-skilled, yes, but not important enough to leave any lasting imprint.

And yet... they too had changed.

They were developing faster. Sharper reflexes. Tighter coordination. Mana

signatures more polished than what they should have been at this point. That

was what drew Lucas to them in the first place.

Were they the ones?

He had wondered.

But no... after weeks of observation, analysis, and pressure testing, Lucas was

confident now. They weren't the cause. They were simply caught in the same current-pushed forward by the same invisible force that had twisted the

future's threads.

The real culprit was still out there.

And his attention kept returning-again and again-to the same anomaly.

Astron Natusalune.

Lucas's expression didn't shift. He nodded once at his teammates, calm and composed.
"Good work."

"Hey, that's practically praise coming from you," Tarin grinned, nudging Ryn in

the ribs.

Lucas didn't respond. Instead, he tapped a command onto his wrist glyph, pulling up the operation console. A faint pulse of green lit the extraction rune embedded in the stone floor beneath them.

"Dungeon operation complete," he announced. "Extraction in thirty seconds."

The team relaxed slightly, the charged atmosphere easing now that the mission had been cleared. Eliane already began reviewing her spell logs. Carl remained

a silent wall beside Lucas. Tarin leaned back and cracked his neck with a sigh. Ryn checked his mana reserves and nodded with quiet satisfaction.

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.

Because the future of someone from a noble line wasn't in their hands—it was in contracts, inheritance, obligation.

Lucas knew this.

Had known it before he'd ever taken his first step through the academy gate.

Still, a small flicker of something bitter curled behind his calm smile.

Then, as he let his gaze wander casually across the crowd—

He saw them.

And his steps slowed.

His eyes widened—just slightly, a flicker of instinctive recognition sharpening his expression.

They... they were here?

For a heartbeat, Lucas couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. His fingers twitched against his side, though he kept his posture smooth.

It didn't make sense. They weren't supposed to be here—not yet.

But there 'he' stood.

The moment Lucas laid eyes on the figure across the hall, something deep within him twitched.

It wasn't instinct.

It wasn't fear.

It was something older—deeper—a pulse from the bones of something he no longer possessed.

The remnants of Belthazor.

Though his demonic core had long been destroyed—sealed away, buried beneath willpower and rituals and pain—the echoes of it remained. Like ashes still warm in a long-dead fire. And now, those ashes stirred.

Why...?

His gaze locked onto the unassuming figure: a man in a simple black suit, standing with perfect posture near the edge of the scout line. He was taller than average, slender, with

gloved hands folded neatly in front of him. The light from the overhead fixtures didn't quite seem to touch his face.

No insignia. No badge. No guild emblem.

Just a butler.

That's what the eye would say.

But Lucas felt something else.

He felt the pressure creep along his spine like cold fingers brushing the edge of his neck.

He felt his jaw tighten as an image—no, a memory—stabbed through his mind.

Tendrils.

Black, writhing tendrils where the man's face should have been.

A flicker of a vision.

A veil pulled back.

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.

"I'm fine," Lucas said with a quiet, measured breath. "Just... some leftover mana interference. Must've been from that distortion field deeper in the dungeon. I probably over-channeled a bit during the last burst."

Eliane's brow furrowed. "You sure?"

He turned to her with the faintest smile. "If I collapse, you're allowed to mock me. Until then—don't worry."

Tarin snorted. "Deal. Just don't make us drag you out next time."

Carl said nothing. But he didn't look away either.

Lucas walked forward, masking the remaining tremor in his fingers as nothing more than fatigue. He let the conversation drift, the idle chatter between his teammates picking back up as they exited the simulator halls toward the wide southern balconies of the academy's observation levels.

But inside, beneath the calm surface of his expression—

He was smirking.

So they've started showing themselves... this early?

That wasn't just some scout. That wasn't some mortal wearing gloves and good posture.

Lucas didn't know exactly what it was, but the remnants of Belthazor inside him had flared for a reason.

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.

Just enough not to raise suspicion.

But inside—he was grinning.

Maybe... contacting you would be the best move after all.

He'd been itching for it.

For a meeting. For a whisper. For an invitation.

Because no matter what dangers they brought—no matter what chaos they promised—they were the only ones who could give him what he truly needed.

A way out.

A way to overthrow the future that was already written for him.

The Middleton name. The lineage. The path laid before his birth.

If he was going to destroy it all and carve something new—something his—he'd need power. The kind no guild, no scout, no noble family would ever offer.

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.

But for something far older. Far more dangerous.

The Kin of the Moon is within these walls.

Of that, he was now certain.

His artifact—tucked beneath his tunic, masked by a mana-muffling weave—had resonated faintly the moment the practicals had begun. It wasn't strong, not yet. The wards surrounding the dungeon floors dulled everything. But it was enough to confirm proximity.

Still, "proximity" was a word that meant little in a place as vast as Arcadia.

Two thousand cadets.

Six combat divisions.

Three administrative blocks.

And over forty-eight registered squads running rotations through the dungeon rings.

He would need time. Precision.

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

hidden academies in eastern Arcadia. Interesting... but no lunar trace. Their mana lines were rigid, not cyclical. Their resonance sharp, not layered.

Leonard shook his head once, barely a motion.

"Not this one either."

He tapped a glyph on his slate, filtering the cadet out with a flicker of red light. Another name gone.

This isn't working. Not well enough.

The artifact under his tunic remained inert. Dormant. There were too many barriers—enchanted filters, suppression fields, mana noise from other casters. And more importantly, he was too far. Not just in distance, but in alignment. Without direct exposure to a concentration of Lunar Mana, the artifact couldn't properly attune itself to trace the resonance he was hunting.

It wasn't meant to be used passively.

It was meant to be pointed. Focused.

Directed toward a known signature—something the Kin would naturally carry once their awakening progressed.

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."

She smiled.

"Oh, I'm not surprised. Solstice Dawn is rather... insular these days." Her tone was amused, but layered—like she was playing a private game.

Leonard tilted his head slightly, still watching the screens. "I'm new to fieldwork."

"Ah," she said, as if that explained everything. "That makes more sense."

She leaned in just a little, as though confiding something. Her perfume was faint—sandalwood and something darker beneath.

"You wear the guild colors well," she said with a lazy sort of admiration. "But you don't move like one of theirs."

Leonard didn't respond.

She didn't seem to mind.

"Solstice Dawn is old. Careful. They don't usually send pretty faces without a deep portfolio." She paused, then added thoughtfully, "Though if Asvel sent you, I suppose you're a special case."

Leonard's expression didn't change.

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?"

He met her gaze evenly. "To watch. Just like you."

She laughed—soft, sharp, like glass chiming.

"Watch what, though?" Her tone shifted slightly, her smile curving into something more knowing.

"I am really curious on that."

Chapter 1020 - You are not the only one

"Watch what, though?"

Her voice was softer now. Too soft.

Her smile curved—not like a question, but like a blade tracing along the edge of a sheath.

"I am really curious on that."

Leonard didn't blink.

But he felt it.

That subtle shift behind her gaze. A faint shimmer beneath her words. Not overt—not yet—but the weight of intent, pressed down lightly, like a palm resting on the lid of a boiling pot.

She knew something.

And she wanted him to know that she knew.

He kept his tone neutral. Smooth. As practiced as ever.

"Just watching stars," he said. "Isn't that what we're all here for?"

Her smile widened as if he'd just confirmed something for her.

"I suppose we are," she murmured. "Though some stars burn a little differently, don't they? Some shimmer. Some flare. Some... vanish altogether when you look too hard."

And then—

She moved closer.

Casually, but with precision. Her hip brushed the edge of his seat, and her arm ghosted against his shoulder as she leaned just enough to peer at his slate.

"So tell me, Scout," she said, voice like velvet over glass. "Which of these lovely little prodigies have caught your eye?"

Her breath smelled faintly of something sweet—not natural. A mana-laced charm. Soft. Sophisticated.

And then her presence shifted again.

Just slightly.

A gentle pressure traced against his thoughts—not invasive, but probing. Subtle waves of mana, too refined for novice enchanter. Not domination. Not suggestion.

Curiosity.

Designed to lower walls. Invite openness. Maybe even nudge a slip of the tongue.

She was reading his responses. His emotions.

Or trying to.

Leonard let the moment stretch. Let her lean in.

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.

Still polite. Still diplomatic.

But behind his eyes, something sharp watched her now.

She saw it immediately.

And laughed.

A low, delighted sound that rang softly under the hum of mana screens.

"Oh, I like you," she purred, pulling back just enough to cross one leg over the other with languid elegance. "Sharp, quiet, and dangerous. They really are getting creative with recruitment these days."

Leonard's tone was even. "Your spell won't work on me."

"I noticed," she replied easily. "Though it wasn't a spell. Just... conversation, with intent."

She offered her hand, as if they were in a ballroom instead of a war room.

"Velvetin. No family name. Not anymore."

Her smile deepened, sly and amused. "Scout for the Mirrored Thorn. We're not on the public registries."

Leonard didn't take her hand.

Velvetin didn't seem offended.

"In my line of work, we chase threads," she said, still watching him with that predator's calm. "Stray bloodlines. Lost talents. People who don't belong where they were planted."

Her eyes gleamed faintly now. Not with mana.

With meaning.

"People like the ones you're watching."

Leonard leaned back, arms folding slowly.

"And what happens," he asked, "when you catch one of those threads?"

Velvetin smiled.

But this time, it didn't quite reach her eyes.

"That depends entirely," she said softly, "on how tightly they're woven."

And just like that, she rose again—her expression playful, her presence somehow heavier now.

"I'll let you return to your stargazing, Leonard. But do let me know if you find one that eclipses the others."

She turned with a rustle of crimson fabric and vanished into the seated rows with practiced ease—blending back into the watching crowd like smoke slipping through cracks.

Leonard watched her go, eyes narrowing slightly.

Velvetin. Mirrored Thorn.

A guild not registered.

And yet here.

Among the scouts.

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.

Like she didn't need permission.

And now that she was gone, he let himself feel it again.

The faint hum still clinging to the air.

Like a whisper of cinders on silk.

The kind of resonance no mortal blood could produce.

Demonic.

Refined. Subtle. Blended into human masking magic.

But unmistakable to someone like him.

So.

They were here too.

Just as the Lord had warned.

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 she had likely sensed the same in him.

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.

And he wouldn't be the one to break that delicate balance. Not yet.

Because she wasn't his target.

She wasn't the one written in prophecy.

She wasn't the one the Holy Seal had trembled over.

She wasn't the one whose awakening would tilt the axis of their world.

The Kin of the Moon was.

And every breath spent on demons—no matter how carefully veiled—was a breath wasted in this search.

Leonard's gaze returned to the projection slate. A flick of his fingers dismissed several tagged names from the list. Three more eliminated. The signal was tightening.

Soon, he thought, his fingers brushing the hidden artifact beneath his collar.

The moon would rise.

And when it did—

He would be waiting.

Leonard's fingers moved across the slate again—calm, fluid motions that masked the exacting calculations behind each filter.

He adjusted the algorithm, overlaying three parameters simultaneously:

Lunar-affinity distortion beneath standard elemental classifications.

Unregistered ancestry gaps in Academy records beyond second-generation lineage.

Spell resonance cycles with rhythmic anomalies—subtle, off-tempo pulses often found in incomplete awakenings.

Only four results emerged.

Three were easily dismissed. One was a transference error. Another had been flagged already by a separate guild. The third was simply a false positive—an illusionist whose chaotic spells disrupted pattern recognition.

But the fourth?

Leonard's eyes narrowed slightly.

Cadet Name: Darien Vale

He had found one.