H. Academy 1021

Chapter 1021 - You are not the only one
Cadet Name: Darien Vale
Rank: 340
Division: Mid-Combat Track
Discipline: Mixed Weapon + Wind-Ether Conduction
Background: No known noble ties. Partial orphan record. Sponsorship through anonymous provincial benefactor.
Affinity: Listed as Wind-Type.
Mana Cycle: Clean. Consistent.
But—
Overlaying the glyph structure from his last recorded sparring exam revealed something curious.

His Wind Magic wasn't circulating traditionally.
It folded.
Recurred on itself.
Looped.
Almost like lunar-phase constructs.
Unconscious? Perhaps.
But real.
Leonard tapped his finger once against the slate, setting a soft marker. Not a guild recruitment tag—he didn't need any competing interest. This one was private.
Silent. Reserved. Watchlisted.
Then, with a second motion, he pulled up Darien's latest dungeon assignment.

Team Thirty-One. Lower fog zone rotation. Scheduled within the next hour.
Perfect.
Leonard stood, brushing down the front of his coat, slipping easily back into the bearing of a field scout. One among many. Just another contractor browsing talent.
But his mind was already turning over the next approach.
Observation would only get him so far now.
He needed proximity.
A closer interaction.
Words. Pressure. Presence.
The Kin of the Moon wouldn't reveal themselves to crystal screens and filtered glyph traces. Their awakening would coil inward—private. Veiled in instinct. Subconscious defenses.
He needed to provoke clarity.





A subtle heat bled into the air. Not burning. Not even warm.
But ancient.
For a moment, the dust motes in the corridor froze—as if the very particles of light hesitated to fall.
And then—
A flash.
Silent. Sudden.
The sunlight that filtered through the high-arched windows pulsed—not brighter, but purer.
Refined.
A single ray broke through the lattice of protective wards above and struck the ground before Leonard's feet, forming a glyph—a perfect ring, inscribed with sun-shaped radial arms, twelve in total, like the spokes of a celestial dial.
In that moment, Leonard's eyes flared softly—not gold, but amber-orange, shot through with radiant streaks, like sunlight refracted through stained glass.

Above him—far, far above—a single solar fragment bloomed in the sky, invisible to al but him.	1
A Heliowatch.	
A divine projection tethered to a sliver of celestial mana—a scouting satellite given shape through sunlight itself.	
It would see what he could not.	
Follow what he must not.	
And relay back what no one else could interpret.	
The world shifted slightly as the spell completed. His sight split—not fully, but partiall A flicker of vision tethered to the skies, fed directly through the heliowatch's luminous arc.	
He whispered again:	
"Mark the cadence of wind. The gait of silence. The boy who walks like dusk."	

The sun heard him.
And obeyed.
Far above, a shimmering trace—a thread of light-bonded resonance—anchored itself to Darien's form the moment he stepped out from the dungeon's exit platform and back into the campus recovery zone.
No one would see it.
No one would feel it.
But Leonard would know.

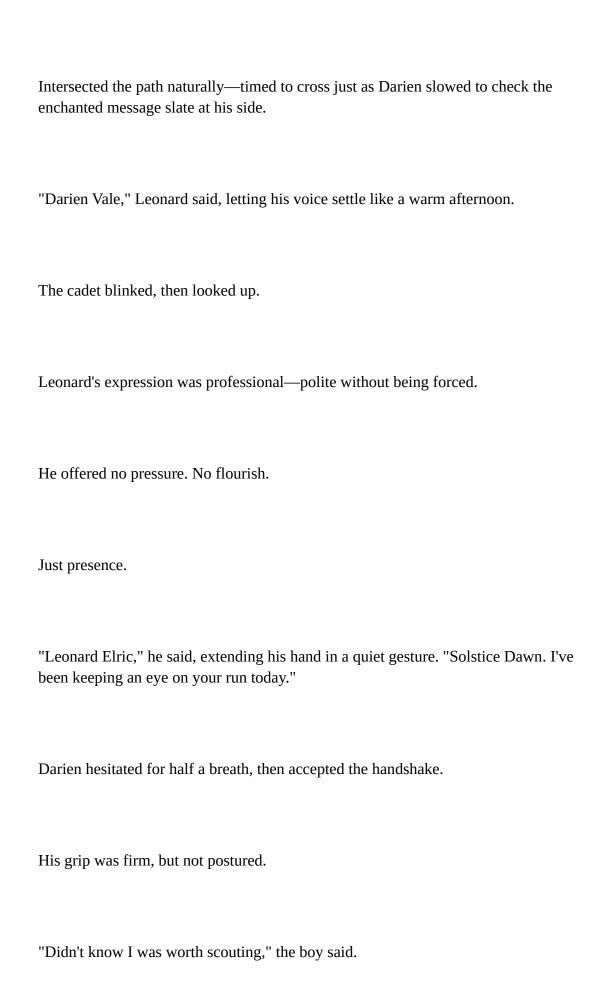
Through the tethered sliver of his vision, Leonard watched the boy move.
Darien Vale.
He emerged from the dungeon's stone-ringed gate alongside his assigned squad—his gait light, but not reckless. A boy forged through discipline, not impulse. One of his teammates nudged him, speaking with casual familiarity, and Darien offered a tired,

half-smile in response. Muted. Unassuming.

Yet the cadence of his movement remained the same—centered. Not too relaxed. Not too guarded. The kind of posture that didn't draw attention because it was always prepared for it.
Leonard tracked the team from his elevated position near the north-eastern path—too far to engage, but not too far to observe.
They didn't linger in the open square.
Instead, they veered left, toward the academy's main building sector—specifically toward the lower levels of the central cafeteria wing.
Off-limits.
Scouts weren't permitted inside. Not without direct faculty clearance.
Leonard's jaw tightened slightly—not in frustration, but quiet calculation.
They're smart. Or just hungry.
Either way, he could not follow.

sky's distant glimmer. The Heliowatch spun quietly overhead, its anchored thread still pulsing—subtle, golden, undisturbed.
He waited.
Minutes passed.
Thirty-two to be exact.
Until, finally—
Movement.
Darien emerged again—this time alone. A disposable container in hand. Must've grabbed something extra, or stepped out early. He took the narrow garden-bound route that wrapped around the southern dormitory—a path accessible to scouts under standard grounds rights.
Leonard's coat caught the wind just slightly as he stepped down from the arch.
He didn't rush.
Just walked.

He leaned slightly against one of the pathway arches, eyes flicking back up toward the



"You're worth noticing," Leonard replied smoothly, eyes reading not just movement, but every faint tremor in Darien's mana flow.	ıt
And as their hands touched, Leonard activated the artifact beneath his tunic—silently.	
No light.	
No glow.	
Just a whisper of divine resonance flowing down his spine, into his palm, and outward-	
—into Darien.	
The artifact listened.	
Measured.	
Waited.	
Leonard continued speaking, casual.	

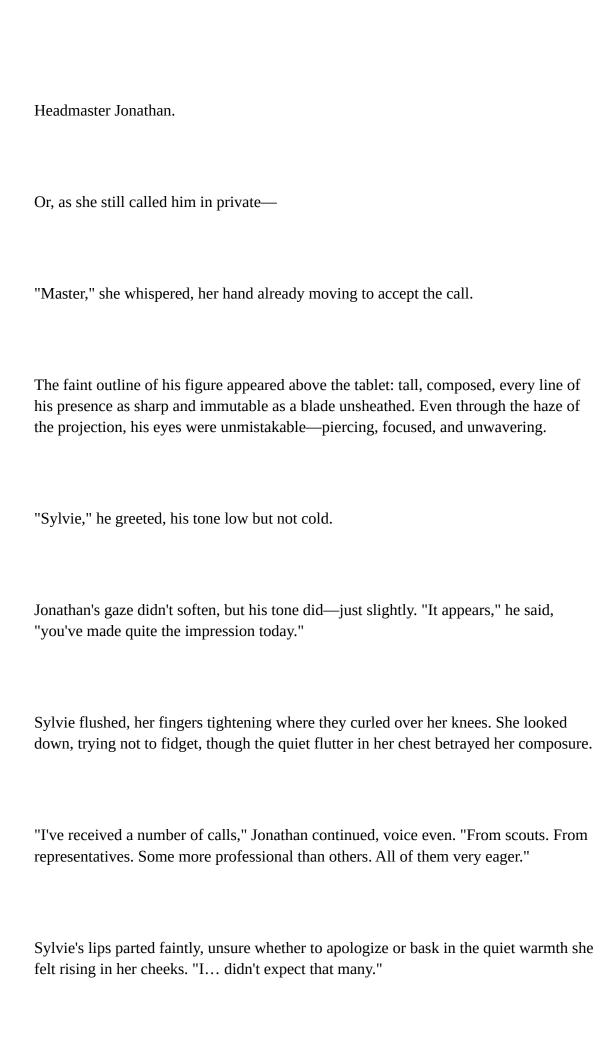
"Your wind techniques loop. That's rare. Intentional?"
Darien blinked. "Not really. It's just how they come out. The academy's been trying to 'correct' the patterns, but I guess I'm stubborn."
"Or ahead of the curve," Leonard offered mildly. "That rhythm isn't common, but it has tactical merit. Did you learn it from someone?"
The boy shook his head. "Self-taught. Trial and error. My instructor just let me run with it after a while."
More nods. More smiles.
But no pulse.
No reaction.
The artifact hummed faintly—neutral.
Not even a flicker.
The celestial tether above pulsed once—flat. Dormant. Unmoved.

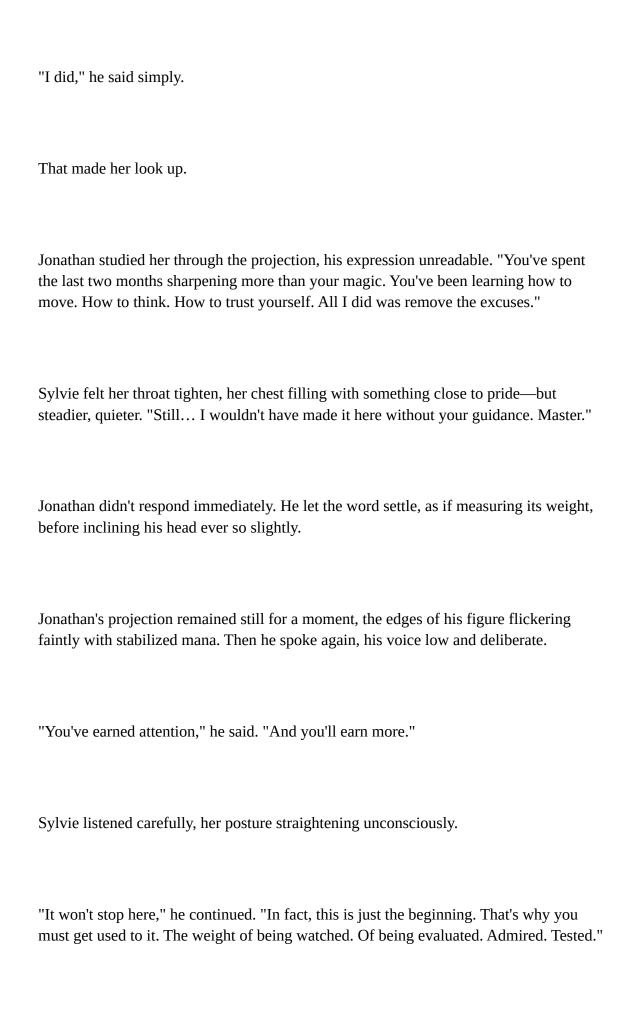
Not the one.
Leonard allowed the conversation to continue for another minute—asking questions, letting Darien speak, listening for hesitation, for forced memory, for dissonance.
There was none.
The boy was gifted. Disciplined. Slightly odd.
But ordinary.
No prophecy.
No tethered fate.
Just another good cadet in a sea of many.
Leonard exhaled internally.
"Thank you for your time," he said, offering a polite nod. "If Solstice Dawn reaches out, take the offer seriously. You've got promise."

Darien offered a quiet, grateful smile. "Appreciate that."
Leonard turned away calmly, stepping off the path and into the shade of the stone arches once more.
And as he vanished into the crowd, he deactivated the solar fragment with a murmur:
"Obscura sōlis."
The Heliowatch vanished.
The thread severed.
Darien Vale faded from the list.
One more possibility eliminated.
The list was growing shorter.
And time, as always, was moving.
Chapter 1022 - Second



The name on the projection made her straighten instantly.







Leaving Sylvie alone in her room, her reflection dimly mirrored in the mana screen's fading glow.
But for the first time that night, her heart felt steady.
She knew where she stood.
And more importantly—she knew that others were starting to see it too.

The second day of the midterm practicals dawned colder than the first—gray clouds drifting overhead, diffusing the sunlight into a dull sheen across the academy grounds. Yet despite the gloomier skies, the mood around Team Fourteen was more focused than nervous.
They had gathered early, back at their familiar table in the academy café. Gone was the casual chatter of their earlier meetings. This time, their discussions were tight, deliberate.
Irina stood beside the projection glyph with a steaming mug in her hand, her fingers tapping across the floating interface as she reviewed the terrain specs from yesterday's run. "Yesterday was a ruin-style collapse zone with vertical hazards and open sightlines," she said. "We should expect something different today. Tighter terrain. Probably corridors, or partial blackout."

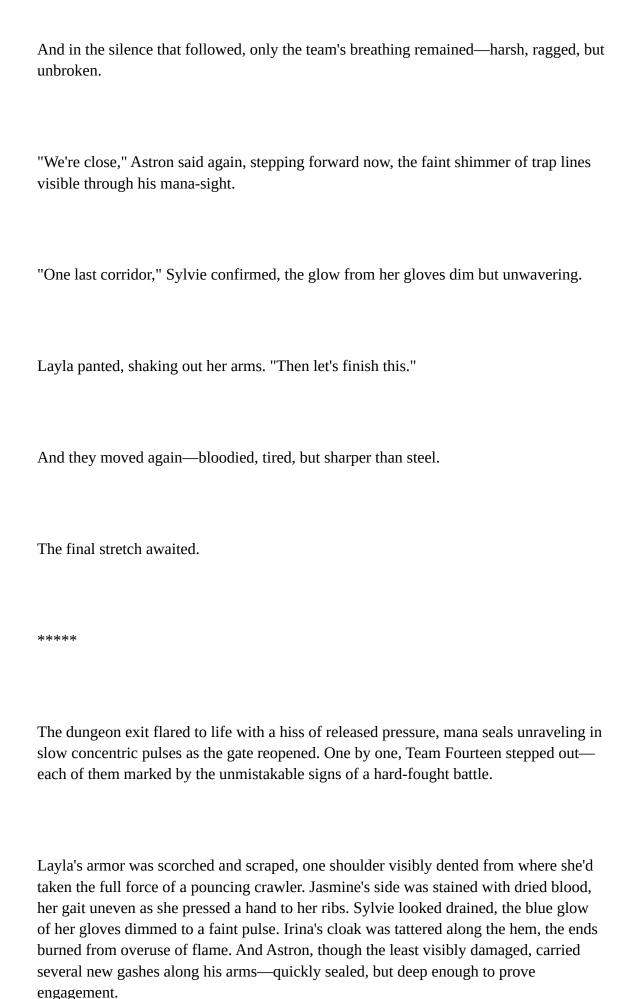
Jasmine nodded, already sketching angles onto a tactical pad. "I'd bet on a fortified interior. If they want to test adaptability, they'll give us the opposite of what we just cleared."
Astron, seated with his arms crossed and his usual unreadable expression, gave a faint nod. "Control zones or retrieval missions. One of the two."
Layla leaned over Jasmine's shoulder, chewing idly on a piece of energy bread. "Either way, I'll anchor point. We might get ambushed, so stick tighter during the first few minutes. I can take hits, but I can't stop a pincer from three sides if you're all stretched out."
Sylvie had her tablet open, already adjusting her preset enchantment cycles. "I'll keep low-light adjustments pre-loaded in case of blackout. If we get closed corridors, I'll be relying on you two—" she glanced at Jasmine and Irina, "—to control the flow."
Irina took a slow sip of her drink, lips quirking faintly. "Pressure line's ready. Just give me an angle."
"I'll be center support again," Astron said, eyes scanning the map without looking up. "It the terrain shifts mid-battle, I'll flex where needed."
No one questioned it.
The plan was set with the quiet efficiency of a unit that had already survived one storm together—and had no intention of stumbling through the next.

At 12:40 PM, they stood and gathered their gear.
Armor was checked. Weapons adjusted. Mana reserves confirmed. Each movement was smoother than yesterday. Quicker. Sharper.
By the time they arrived at the briefing zone, they were already being waved in by the coordinator.
"Team Fourteen," the instructor announced. "You're cleared. Proceed to Gate B. Today's parameters will be revealed inside the entrance. Your score and survival conditions will depend on successful retrieval of the core object."
The scouts were already watching.
Not as many as the day before, but enough.
Still, none of the cadets flinched—not even Sylvie.
Not anymore.
They stepped toward the gate.

her stance, Jasmine flashing a razor smile, Sylvie exhaling evenly, Astron lowering his gaze to the glyph—they moved as one.
Into the dungeon.
Ready for round two.
Chapter 1023: Second
The clang of metal against bone echoed through the narrow corridor as Layla drove her shield into the maw of a burrowing beast that had erupted from the wall beside her. Its jagged, chitin-covered limbs scraped furiously against her armguard, trying to force its way around her block—but she held firm, teeth clenched, knees locked.
A burst of light surged from behind.
Sylvie's glyph pulsed outward, reinforcing Layla's leg strength just in time to prevent a full collapse.
"Still holding," Layla grunted, though her breath hitched with strain.
Jasmine, just to her right, spun in a tight arc, her blade dragging sparks across the ground before she severed a second crawler lunging from the ceiling. She panted hard, sweat streaking down her jawline. "Too many angles—walls, floor, ceiling. They're everywhere."

And with a final glance between each other—Irina adjusting her gloves, Layla steadying

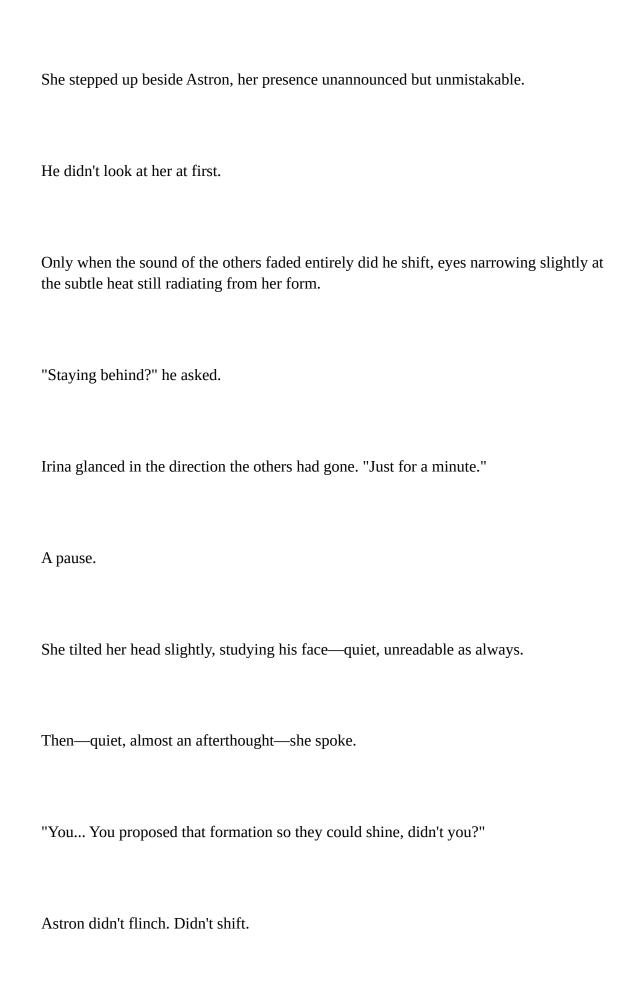
"They're cornering us," Sylvie said, already adjusting her mana thread layout behind them. "They're using heat signatures from contact points to predict movement. We can't stay in formation much longer."
Irina's flames scorched a fresh wave of crawling horrors ahead, but even she could tell—the corridor's shape had worked against their usual layout. The tight turns and uneven terrain meant the burden of contact had fallen heavily on Jasmine and Layla to hold the forward arc. And they were paying for it now.
"They're trying to exhaust us," Astron said flatly from the back, where he stood over a fallen wall section, eyes still scanning. His daggers were bloodied, but his breathing was steady. "We're nearly through. One more junction before the core chamber."
Jasmine staggered slightly, her blade faltering mid-swing before she forced herself upright again. "Then let's push."
Layla gave a short nod, sweat dripping from her chin as she slammed her shield forward one more time, clearing a brief opening.
Irina stepped into it, her flames flaring wide, cleansing the tunnel ahead with a sweeping arc of heat.
The monsters shrieked.
The stone glowed red.

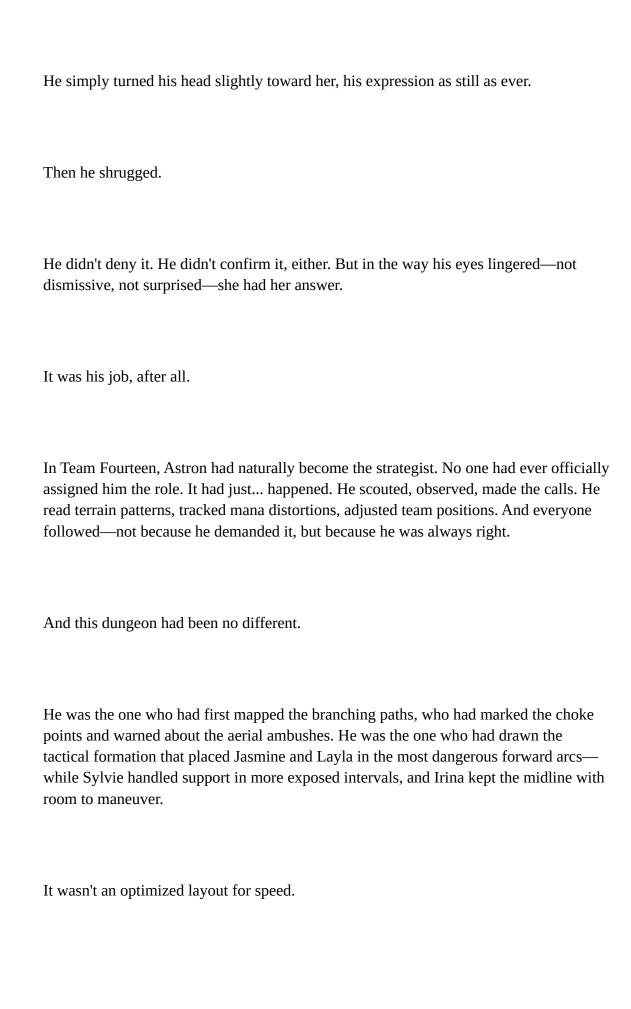


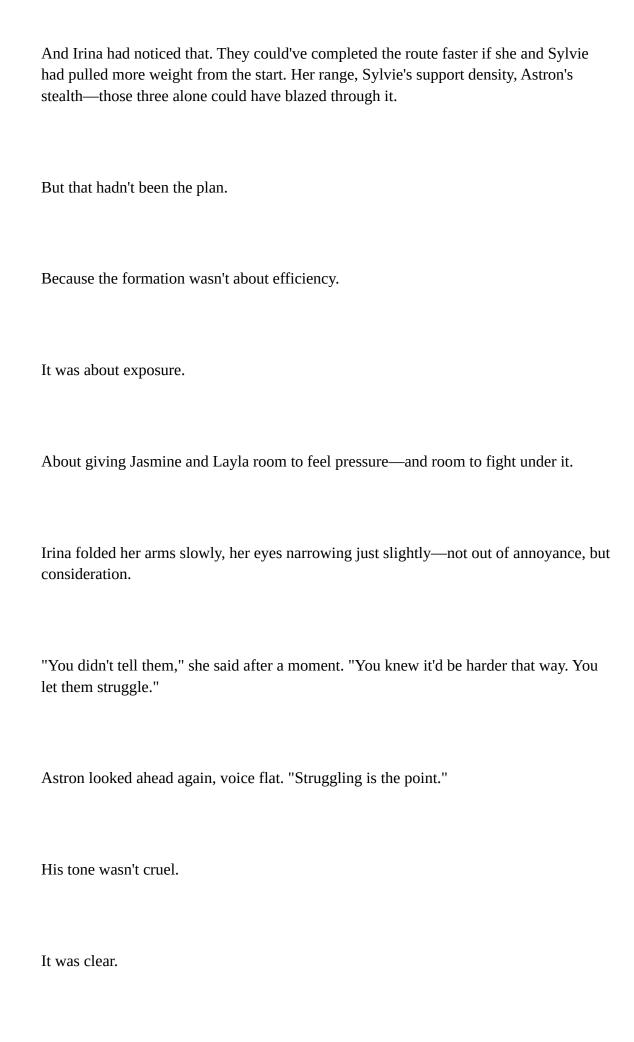
They looked like they'd clawed their way through the dungeon—and they had.
The staff on standby glanced up as they emerged, some making quick notes, others murmuring into communication crystals.
Jasmine exhaled hard, brushing a hand through her damp bangs as she glanced at the group. "That was rougher than I thought it'd be."
Layla grunted in agreement, her fingers flexing stiffly. "I couldn't hold everything. Not like last time. They kept slipping past."
There was a note of frustration in her voice—low, tight. Not anger, but disappointment.
Jasmine added quietly, "I think I slowed us down. I couldn't clear the second wave fast enough. Astron had to cover for me twice."
Irina looked between them, then shook her head. "You were fine."
Layla blinked, caught off guard. "You're not just saying that?"
Irina's gaze was cool, but not sharp. "If I thought you were dragging us down, I'd tell you."

Sylvie offered a soft smile, brushing her thumb against the faint burn along Layla's forearm. "It was a bad environment for both of you. Cramped terrain, constant angles, poor visibility. That's a nightmare for your styles."
Astron, now standing near the exit terminal, gave a faint nod without turning around. "Not every dungeon is compatible with the kind of hunter you are. That's how it works."
His voice was calm. Unapologetic. But it wasn't cold—just honest.
"You held the line when it mattered," he continued. "The formation didn't collapse. That's what matters."
There was a moment of stillness as Astron's words settled—low, steady, and unexpectedly grounding.
Layla glanced at him sidelong, eyes narrowing faintly—not in irritation, but surprise. Jasmine raised an eyebrow, half-expecting some kind of biting follow-up. None came.
Sylvie looked between them, her expression softening.
Jasmine broke the silence first. "Huh. Was that supposed to be encouraging?"
Astron didn't respond.

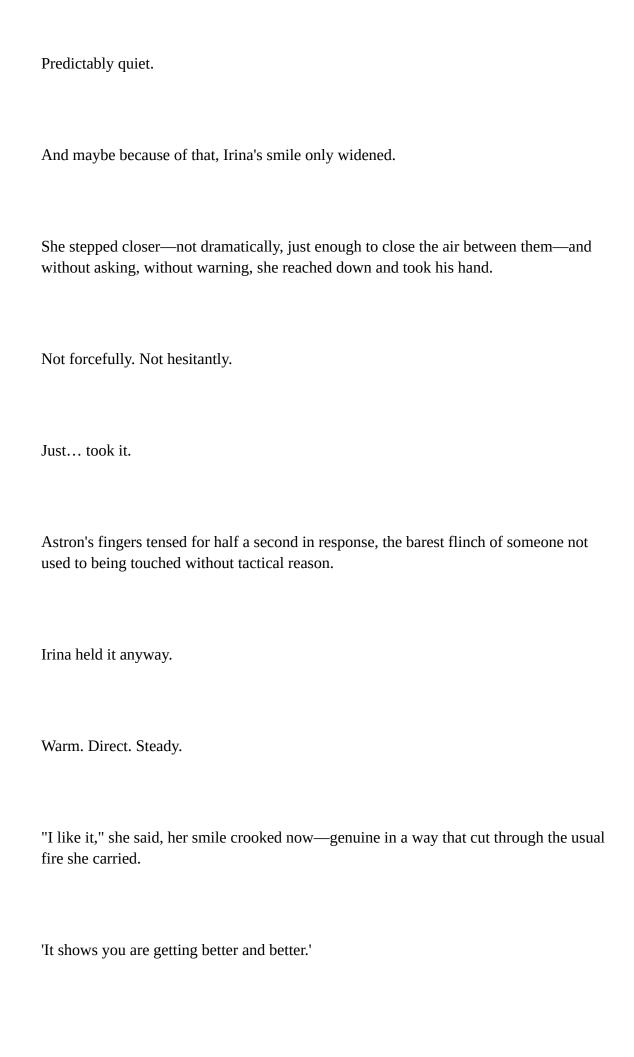


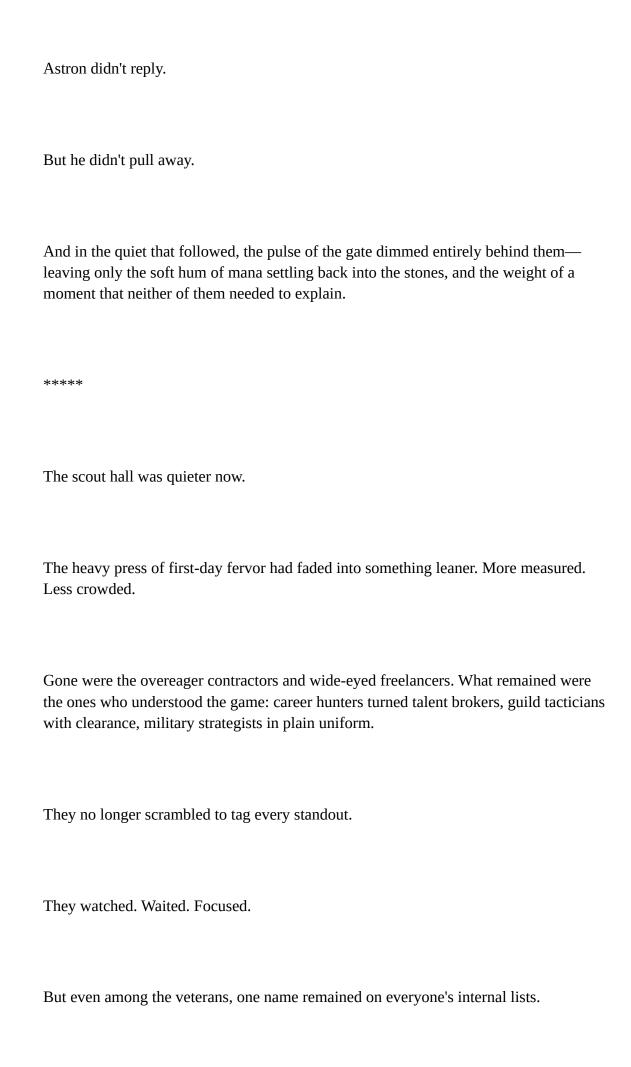


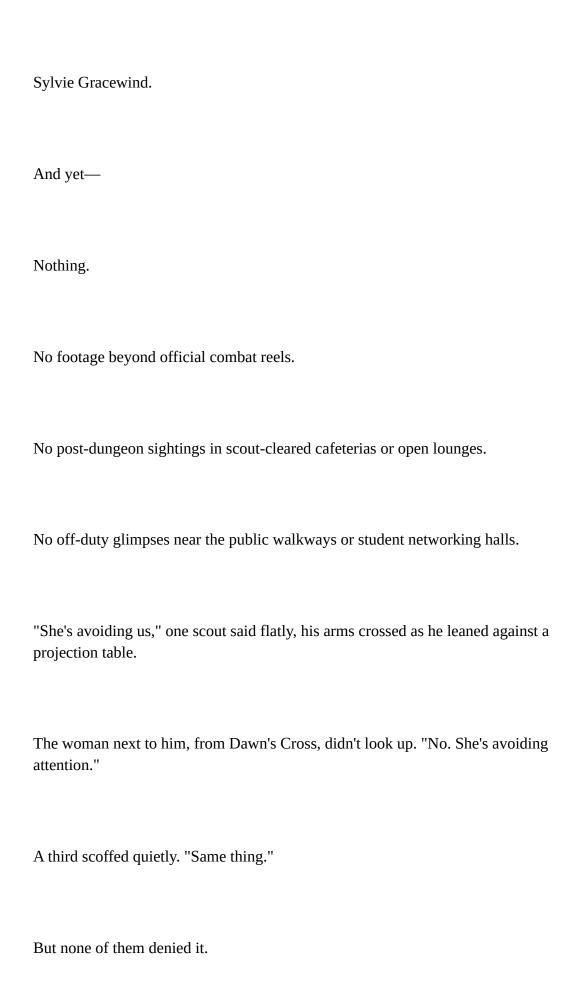




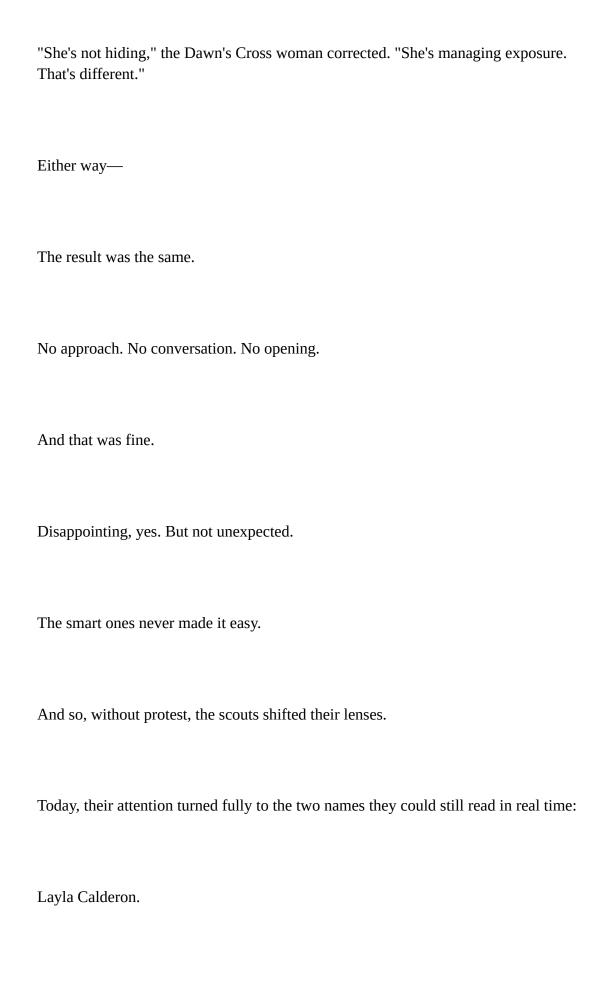
Irina's gaze softened.
There it was again—that quiet principle behind the way he moved. Behind the things he didn't say.
He didn't hand things to people. He didn't offer comfort. But he placed them exactly where they needed to be to break. Or grow.
Maybe both.
Chapter 1024 - Second
Irina's gaze lingered on him, the faint glow of the mana gate casting a pale rimlight along the edge of Astron's profile. Always still, always composed, always just slightly unreadable—even now, after everything.
She let out a quiet breath, somewhere between a laugh and an exhale.
"It's strange," she said, her voice low, almost amused. "Watching you do all these thoughtful things with that weird, impassive face of yours."
Astron didn't answer.
Didn't glance her way. Didn't give a shrug or a smirk or even a blink longer than necessary. Just stood there, his hand still gloved, his presence quiet.

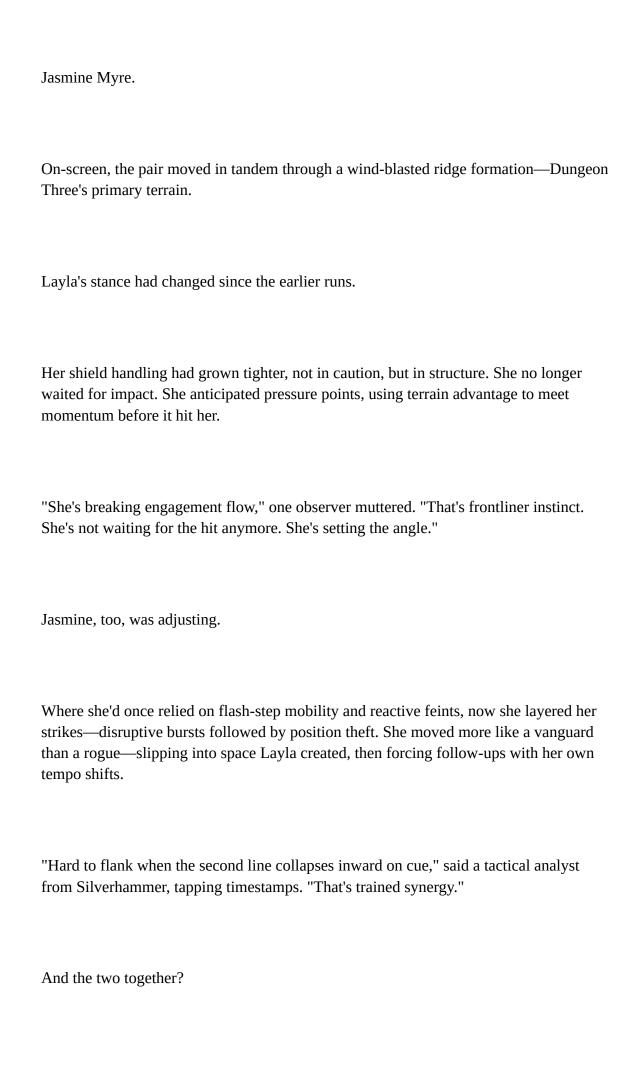






Because it had become obvious by Day Three: Sylvie wasn't coming to them.
The academy had released a formal bulletin earlier that morning—low-key, but pointed. A gentle reminder of Article 17-A, which barred scout groups from initiating direct outreach beyond designated interaction zones.
They framed it as a matter of cadet focus. Stress minimization.
But everyone knew what it meant.
Too many eyes on too few names.
And one name in particular?
Had vanished.
"She's smart," muttered one of the Blackstone scouts, running the footage back through mana filters. "Stays with her squad, avoids isolated rotations, never lingers after dungeon clears. Not a single recorded visit to the usual hotspots."
"Someone's guiding her," said the older man beside him. "Could be Emberheart. Could be that boy. Astron."

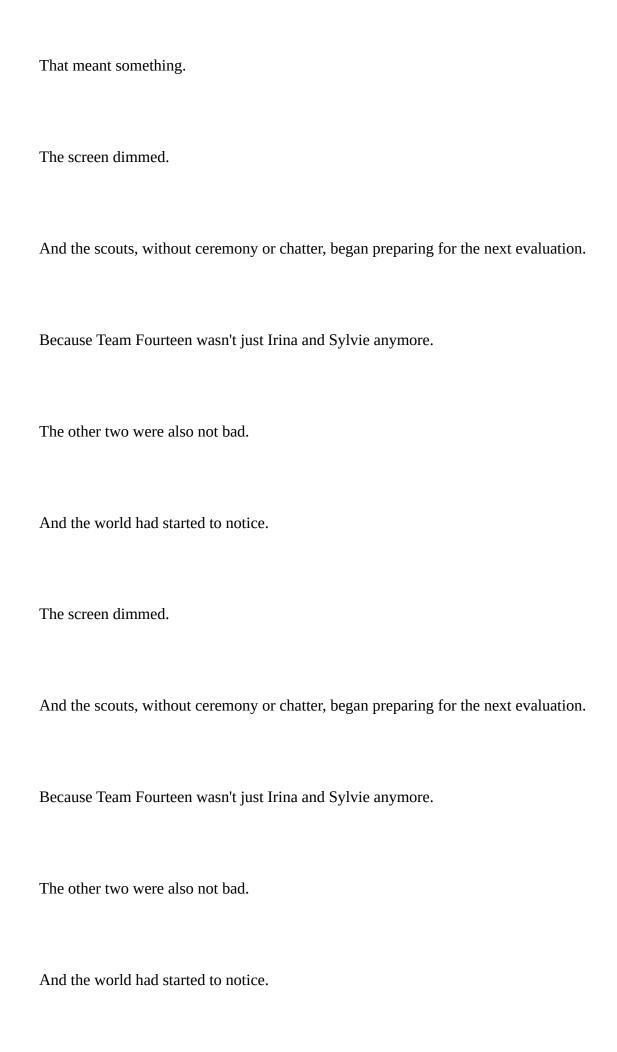






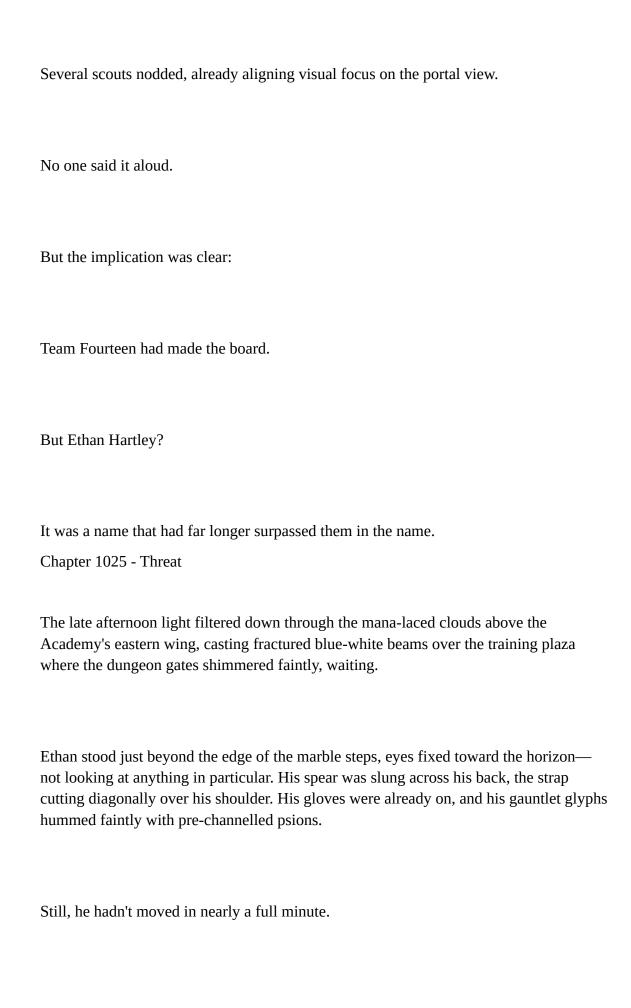
Yet—
They adapted.
Quietly. Without flare.
And that mattered.
"It's not about ceiling," one of the Blackstone scouts murmured, flicking through comparative feeds. "It's about floor. And they've raised theirs again."
He brought up prior footage from Dungeon One. Layla's timing had been slower. Jasmine's flanking less disciplined. It was subtle, but this latest run was sharper, tighter.
Effort left a mark.
"They're not Sylvie," said the woman from Dawn's Cross. "And they're not Irina."
"But they're clearly learning," added another voice. "Quickly. Under fire."
And that alone—

Was worth watching.
Names were updated.
Layla Calderon — Confirmed Shortlist.
Jasmine Myre — Confirmed Shortlist.
They weren't highlighted. Not flagged as first-priority prospects.
But they were no longer just background to Sylvie's brilliance or Irina's bloodline.
They were discernible.
Visible.
Reliable.
And in the long war that was guild development?



Then—
A shift in the chamber.
Not physical.
Not magical.
Just a voice—low, crisp, and immediately magnetic—carried from one of the upper-tier platforms.
"Ethan Hartley's team is entering."
It wasn't shouted.
It didn't need to be.
Because the moment that name left the scout's mouth, the atmosphere in the chamber changed.
Chairs swiveled. Screens adjusted. Conversations stilled.

Dozens of fingers flicked across crystal consoles, tuning feed allocations to a new window—marked now with a glowing identifier:
[DUNGEON FOUR – TEAM SIX: ENTRY SEQUENCE INITIATED]
Lead Cadet: Ethan Hartley
The weight behind the name wasn't just legacy.
It wasn't just bloodline.
It was momentum.
Because in the past few weeks—after every rotation, every challenge, every ranked bout —Ethan Hartley's name had risen.
Not loud.
But steadily. Irrefutably.
"He's finally at the front," one of the analysts murmured, leaning forward. "Let's see what he does with it."





Then there was Raine, a mid-tier Light Affinity who handled healing and defense glyphs. A bit of a perfectionist, and currently double-checking her restoration crystals like her life depended on it.

Marin, a Windwalker speardancer who could not sit still, was bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet. His scarf was tied tight across his jaw, eyes flicking toward the gate every few seconds like it might explode.

The final member of their squad stood a little apart from the others, adjusting the tension of her bowstring with slow, practiced motions. Kaela, their long-range specialist and forward scout. Tall, lean, and quiet, with sharp gray eyes that missed nothing. Her job was to mark the path, predict enemy positioning, and put an arrow through a threat before it could breathe in their direction.

Julia had wanted someone else in that role originally. Someone colder. More precise. Someone who saw paths and counters before they even existed.

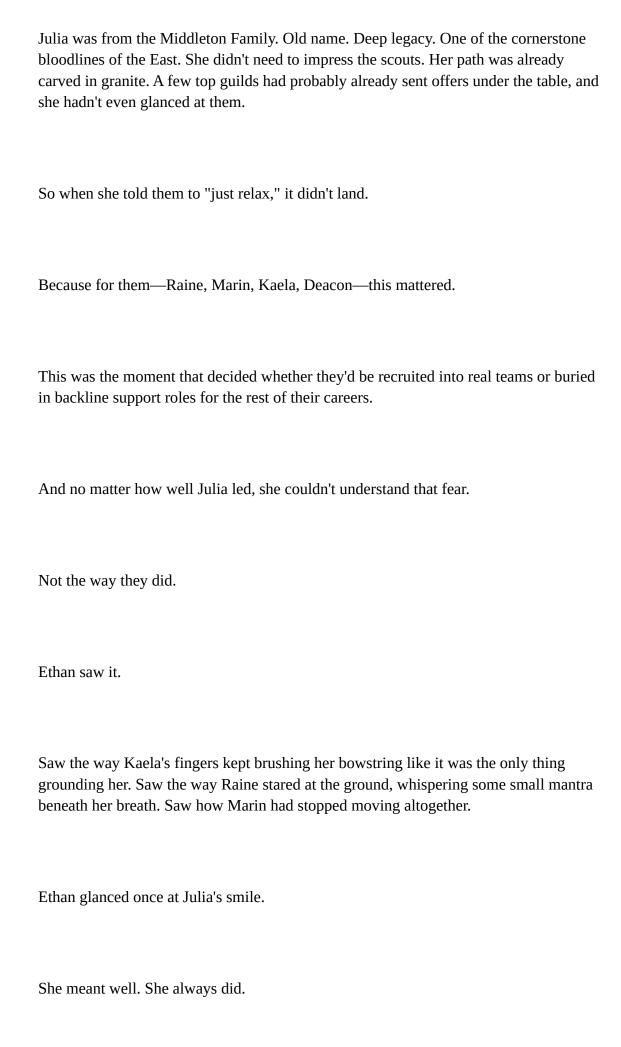
Astron.

But that offer had never gone through. Whether because of scheduling, politics, or just Astron being Astron, Julia had been forced to pivot. And Kaela, while not the replacement she imagined, had earned her place through consistency.

Still... the pressure showed.

It showed in the stiffness of Kaela's stance, in the way her fingers lingered too long on her quiver, in the subtle glances the rest of the squad threw toward the watching towers above. The faint shimmer of surveillance glyphs glowed across the upper walkways, and

though the scouts had said nothing—made no grand entrances or announcements—the presence was felt in every movement, every breath.	ir
Raine's lips were tight. Marin had stopped bouncing. Even Deacon stood a little straighter, as if trying to make his silhouette look more disciplined.	
Julia noticed.	
And, in typical Julia fashion, she smiled.	
Not the usual cocky grin. Not the sharp smirk she wore during duels. Just a confident, easy smile that was meant to break tension.	
"Well," she said, one hand on her hip as she looked around at the squad. "We all know the drill. This is just another dungeon. You've all done dozens. One foot in front of the other, stick to the plan, don't die, and we walk out looking prettier than when we walke in."	эd
Marin gave her a flat look. "That speech worked better when we weren't being judged by half the Federation."	
Kaela muttered under her breath, "Easy to say when no one's watching you."	
That struck harder than it should have—but no one said it was wrong.	

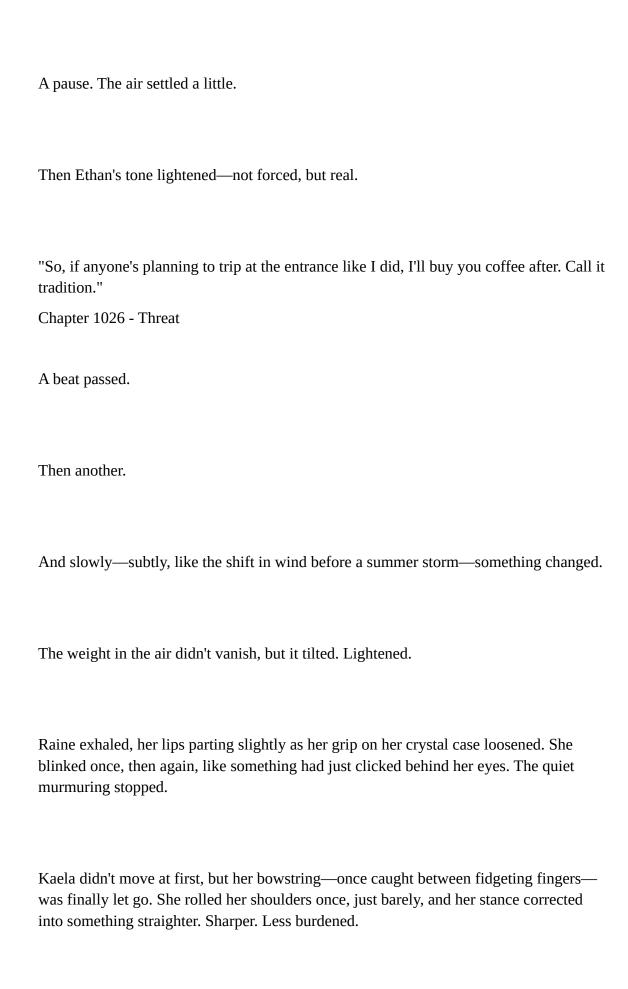


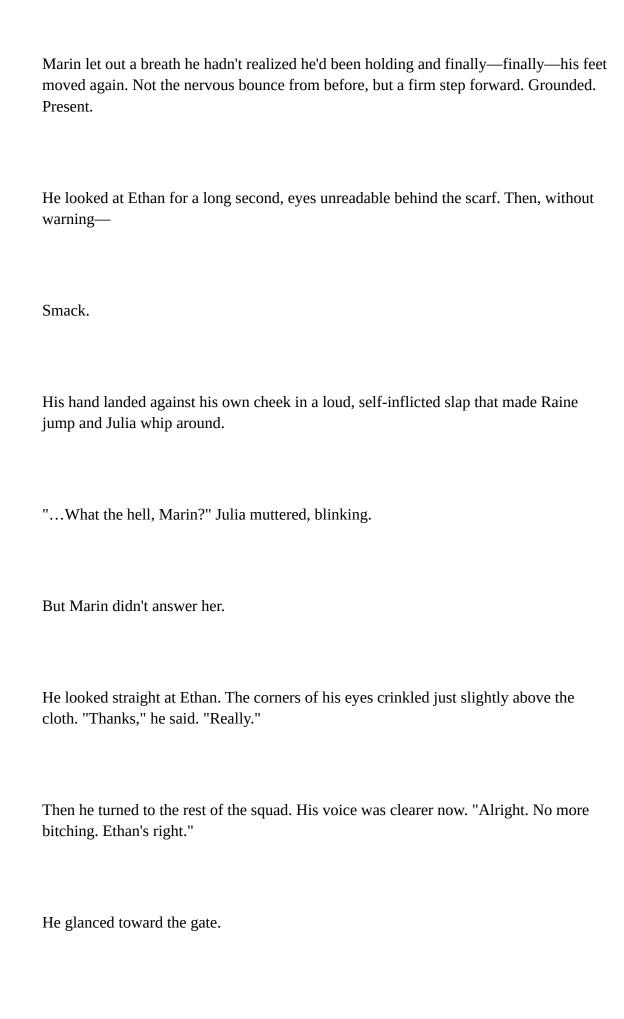
But intent didn't always meet reception. Not when the air was this tight, when the surveillance glyphs above burned like judgmental stars, and half a dozen recruiting captains were no doubt already watching with pens in hand.
They're scared.
Not of the dungeon. Not really.
Of what comes after. Of being overlooked.
His gaze drifted to Kaela again—her jaw clenched, shoulders locked like stone.
Then to Raine, still murmuring under her breath.
Marin, whose silence said more than his usual chatter ever did.
And Ethan?
He understood.
Even with the Hartley name.

Even with status, backing, bloodline, prestige.
There had been a time—not that long ago—when he'd stood at the gate just like this. A nobody among legacies. Just a "cadet" who hadn't Awakened. No lightning. No Form. No spear legacy to draw on. Just expectation—mountains of it—crushing his lungs every time he stepped onto the field.
He remembered the silence in his own dorm after failing his first elemental synchronization trial. The way instructors tried to explain it away—delayed reaction, maybe a compatibility issue, you'll bloom eventually—while others whispered behind enchanted barriers, wondering if he'd be the Hartley embarrassment.
He remembered standing exactly where Kaela stood now, thinking:
What if this is it?
What if I'm already behind?
What if this is as good as I'll ever be?
What if I disappoint everyone?
And so—



Ethan gave a crooked grin, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yeah. Me. Back before I even had lightning. Back before I had Form One, or any clue what I was doing with my spear. I didn't even have gauntlets. Just a loaned uniform, a secondhand blade, and a mentor who made fun of me more than he taught me."
He let that hang for a second. Then:
"I know what today feels like. The pressure. The watching eyes. That voice in your head that won't shut up, saying don't mess this up."
Kaela's fingers stopped moving.
Raine looked up.
Marin shifted, just slightly.
Ethan's expression softened.
"But listen. This isn't a test of perfection. It's not about who moves the cleanest or lands the first blow. This is about what you do when the plan goes wrong. When you stumble. When you mess up."
He looked at each of them in turn. "Because that moment? That's when they're really watching. That's when you show who you are."



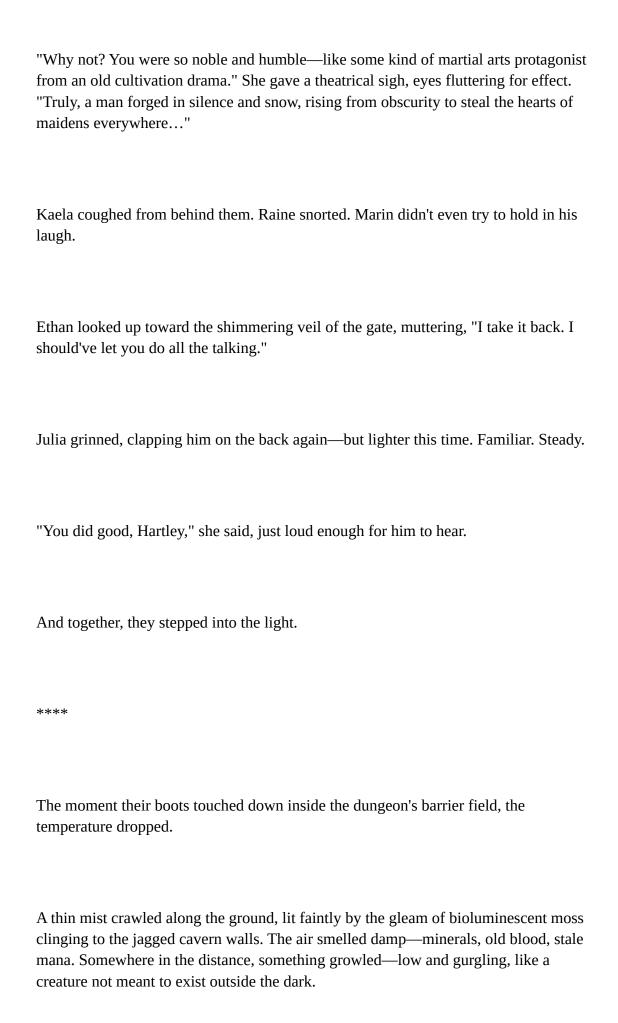


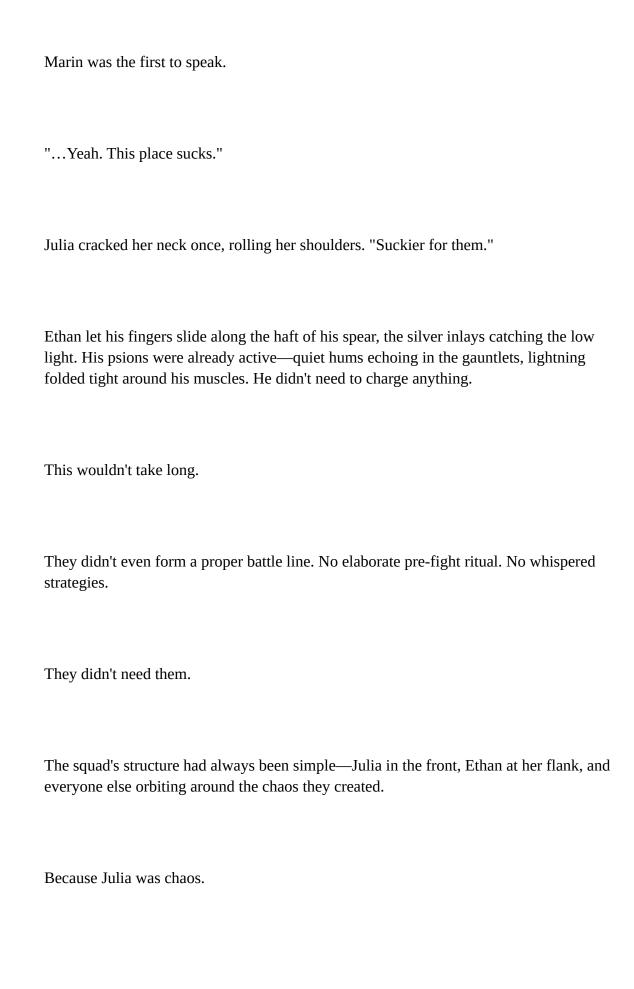
"We've trained for this. And if we trip, we get up. Simple as that."	
Kaela snorted under her breath, barely audible, but she was nodding. Raine gave a almost reluctant smile, tucking her crystals back into her belt pouch and rising to he height.	
Even Deacon—quiet, often forgettable Deacon—straightened beside them, his hand tightening over the hilt of his shortblade.	d
There was no fiery cheer. No rallying war cry.	
But that didn't matter.	
Because something had steadied.	
And beneath the eyes of the Federation scouts, the fear didn't own them anymore.	
They remembered.	
They all remembered.	
Ethan Hartley—the boy who hadn't even ranked in the top 2000 when the semester began. The one who had no elemental affinity in the first month. The one who show up late to group matches because of extra remedial sessions and was paired with caroffs no one wanted.	wed

He'd been behind all of them once.
And now?
Now he stood at their side, second-in-command, lightning spear at his back, calm in his voice, and no one questioned why.
He must have felt what they did—worse, even.
But had he whined?
Had he frozen like Kaela, or spiraled like Raine, or cracked jokes like Marin to hide it?
He hadn't.
He'd gotten stronger.
Quietly.
And maybe maybe that's what they needed to do too.

They began to walk.
Boots hitting stone. Step by step, five shadows cast forward toward the shimmer of the gate. No hesitation now. No faltering. Just motion—measured, ready.
Ethan walked just behind Julia, his spear strap snug across his back, gauntlet humming faintly with residual psions. The others flanked close—Raine adjusting her wristbands, Kaela scanning their surroundings, Marin flicking his fingers like he was already warming up for the first strike.
And then—
SMACK.
A sharp, sudden smack landed clean across Ethan's shoulder.
He winced, stumbling half a step forward. "Ow—again?"
He turned to look at her, frowning. "What was that for?"









Ethan?
He moved like water around her.
The second wave hit harder—four beasts this time, serpentine and armored, with manacoiling tails that lashed out like scythes. But Ethan didn't flinch. He dashed forward, lightning singing beneath his feet, and struck before they could converge.
"Form Two—Radiant Surge."
A spiraling bolt of thunder cracked through the cavern, illuminating their path in blinding arcs. His spear struck once, but split into three lines of piercing current, ripping through two of the serpents before they could hiss.
One lunged for him, jaws wide.
Julia's boot crashed down on its skull from above.
She drove her heel into the thing's cranium like it was a fruit, using the height from her leap to anchor the strike and grind its head into the stone.
Another tried to flank.

skull but detonated in a focused burst of compressed air.
CRACK.
Silence returned for a breath.
Then another gate opened deeper inside.
More monsters.
Larger.
Some even wearing fragmentary armor, remnants of a corrupted hunter squad long since lost. Their movement patterns were different—smarter, faster, adaptive.
It didn't matter.
Julia grinned. "Perfect." Chapter 1027 - Threat
"Perfect."

Ethan spun, slashing sideways with an arc of coiled lightning, catching its jaw and launching it sideways—right into Kaela's waiting arrow, which didn't just pierce the

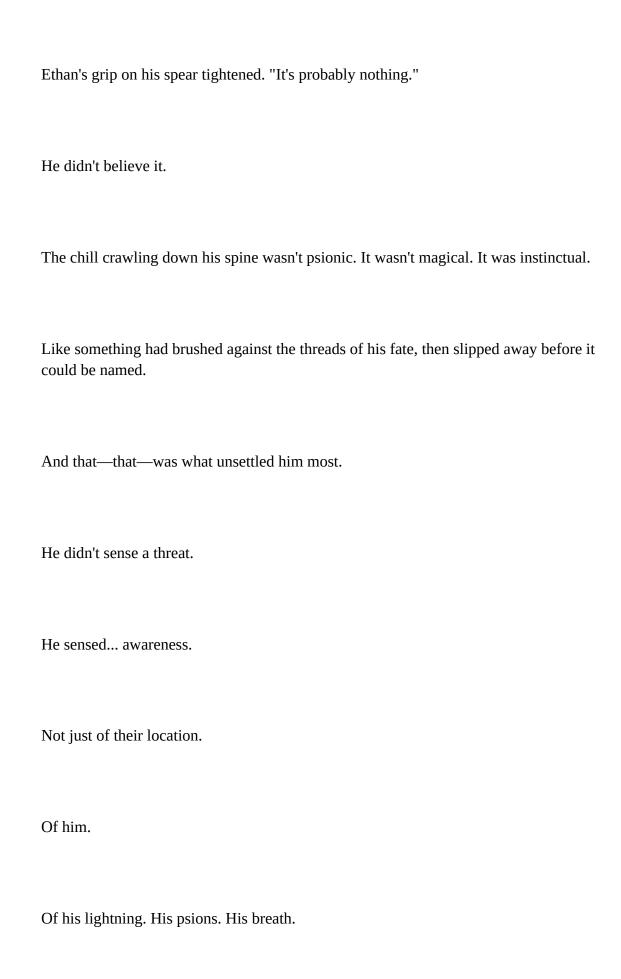
She launched herself into the pack again, spinning her blade in brutal, unrefined arcs—every strike born from muscle memory, aggression, and sheer refusal to yield. Her form was ugly, wild—but nothing got past her.
And behind her, Ethan danced.
Where Julia overwhelmed, Ethan controlled. Every enemy that broke through her radius was met with surgical bursts of lightning, his spear snapping out in short, precise jabs that targeted joints, cores, and exposed sigils. Where Julia cracked skulls, Ethan shut systems down.
They didn't speak.
They didn't need to.
This wasn't coordination.
This was instinct.
Marin covered their blind spots with mid-range strikes, his blade darting between Julia's kill zone and Ethan's fallback line like a stitching thread. Kaela ghosted between outcroppings, never staying in one place for more than a few seconds, every arrow making space before the others could feel pressure. Raine's hands never stopped glowing—shield, cleanse, mend, repeat.
Fifteen minutes.

That's all it took.
The dungeon's final chamber crumbled around them, the corrupted mana source at its heart still crackling faintly—until Julia smashed it open with one overhead strike that left a crater the size of a wagon.
The mist receded.
The mana stilled.
And just like that—it was over.
Ethan stood at her side, the crackle of his lightning fading with every breath. Julia wiped the blood from her blade with one swift swipe against a fallen beast's fur, then turned to the squad.
"Time?"
Raine glanced at her wrist-sigil. "Fourteen minutes, forty-seven seconds."
Julia whistled, low and amused. "Tch. Sloppy."
Marin choked. "Sloppy?"

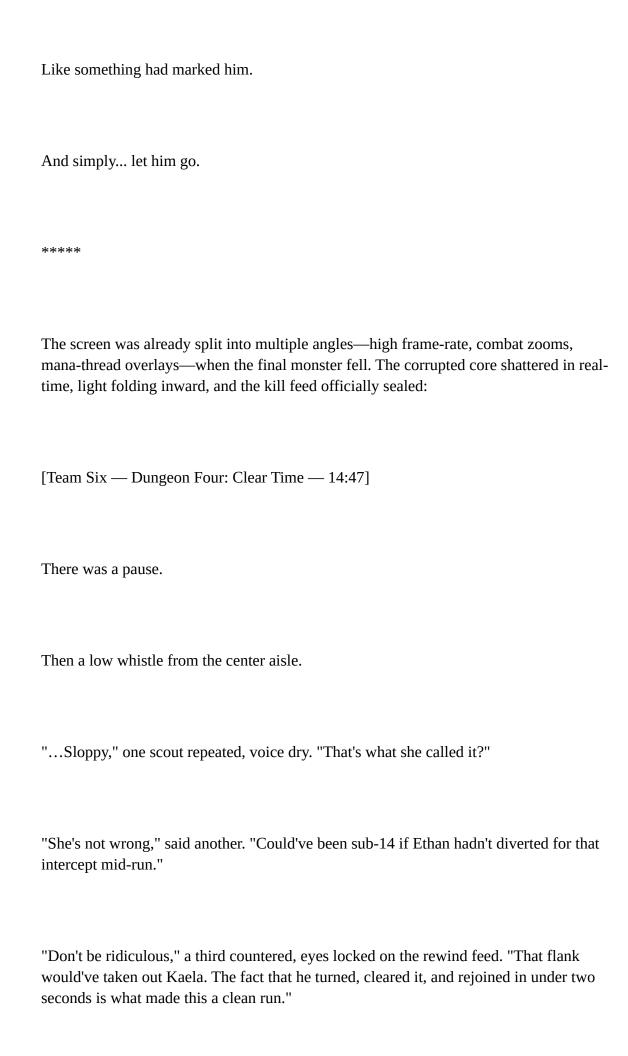


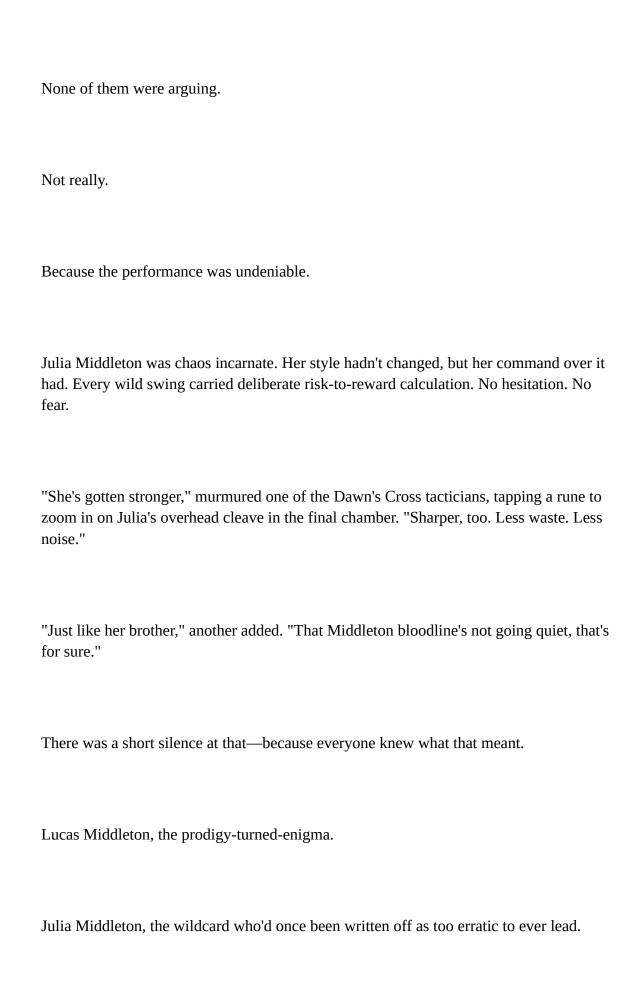
He straightened, eyes narrowing.
The atmosphere hadn't changed. Not visibly. The corrupted mana source was gone, the dungeon collapsing inward in slow, harmless pulses of dissipation. No new enemies. No alarms. No strange readings on the glyph scanners.
But the feeling was there.
Cold. Thin. Sharp.
Like breath on the back of his neck.
His gaze swept the craggy cavern walls—the broken ceiling overhead, the tendrils of mist still thinning into silence. Nothing moved. Nothing shifted.
And yet
Ethan's shoulders tensed.
The spear in his hand hummed faintly again, residual psions reactivating on reflex.
He didn't speak right away. Just took a slow, measured breath. Then another.

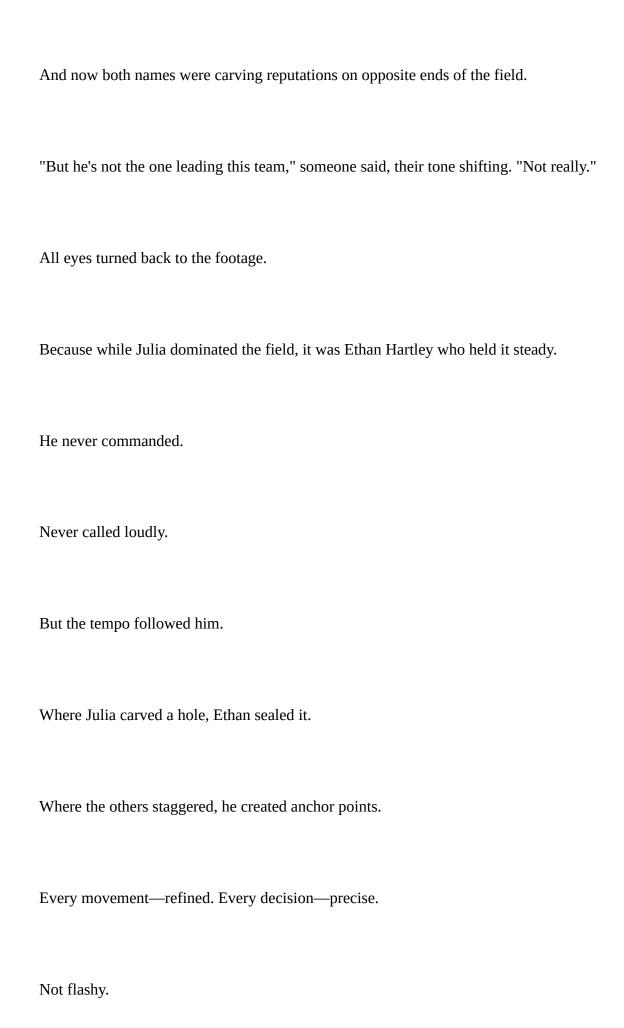




As if something out there had just catalogued every strike he'd made—and was still deciding what to do about it.
Ethan stepped closer to Julia, voice low. "We need to move. Now."
She didn't argue.
None of them did.
Because though the dungeon had collapsed Ethan still felt watched.
And that feeling wouldn't leave.
Even after the gate opened.
Even after they stepped out.
Even after the light of the academy swallowed the darkness—
The weight of that unseen gaze lingered.

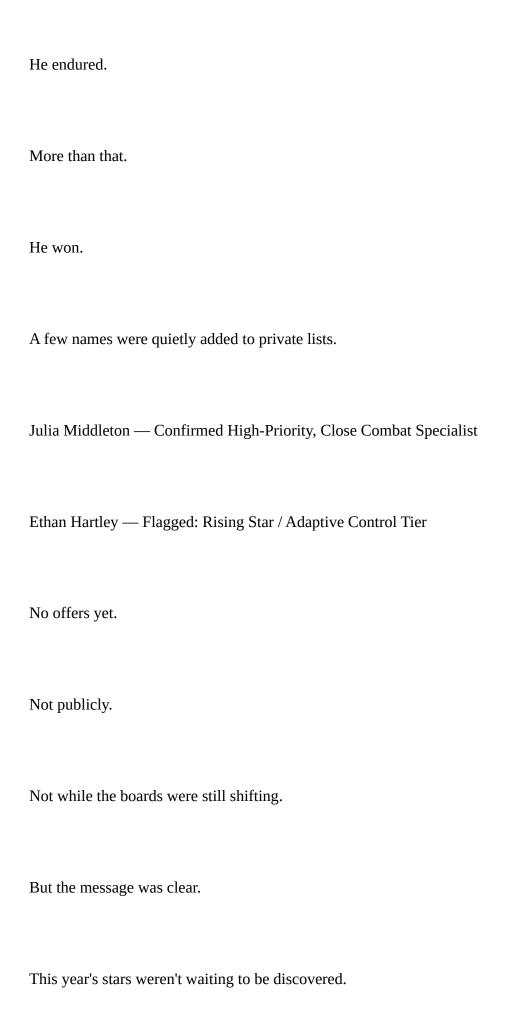






But undeniably effective.
"He's got control," the Blackstone Verge woman said simply. "The kind that doesn't show up in highlight reels—but shapes every outcome."
"And lightning affinity," another added. "Rare enough. Harder to stabilize in confined terrain."
"Late Awakening too," someone murmured, scrolling through Ethan's dossier. "Only came online a few months before term began. No affinity profile until week two."
They all saw the same line:
Initial Ranking: Unlisted. Provisional Class.
And now?
He was matching Julia Middleton strike for strike.
And anchoring a formation most veteran squads would buckle under.

"The reports weren't exaggerated," said the Hollow Edge scout. "He really is the fastest-rising Awakened this term."
They let that sit for a moment.
Because there was no need to exaggerate it.
Ethan Hartley was doing the one thing that no amount of hype or bloodline could guarantee.
He was earning it.
Step by step. Fight by fight.
Against stronger enemies.
In harder dungeons.
Beside more dangerous allies.
And each time—

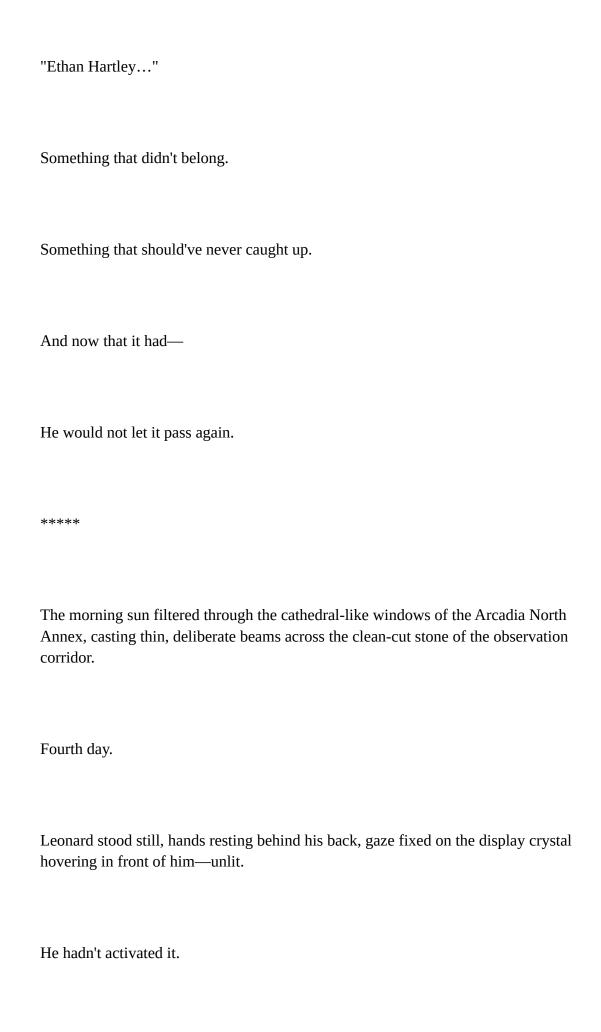


They were making sure no one could look away.
Chapter 1028 - Narrowed
The names were added.
The lists updated.
The scouts moved on—efficient, clinical, already scanning the next team entry.
But not everyone in the chamber moved with them.
Far above the seated tiers, where the light dimmed and the projection glows didn't quite reach, a lone figure stood near the upper catwalk—behind the reinforced viewing shield, where only those with high clearance had access.
He hadn't spoken a word all day.
But now—
Now he stared.
Through the shifting feed. Through the echo of thunder spells and spear strikes. Through the rising hum of scout chatter and system resets.

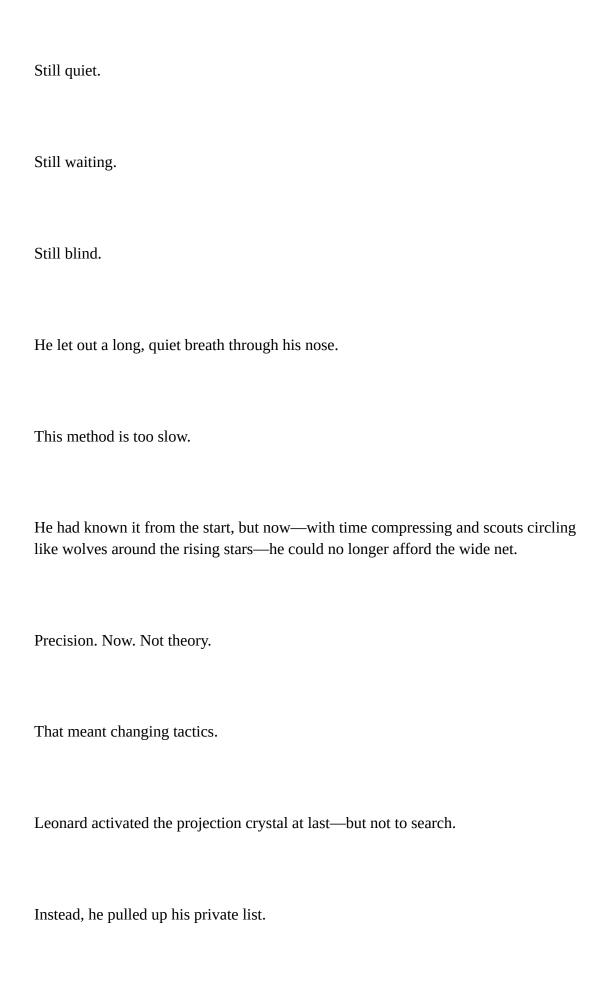
Straight at Ethan Hartley.
His pupils were slit.
A thin vertical line of gold gleamed inside each eye, refracted through the crystalline lens like twin blades drawn halfway from their sheaths.
His breath caught—once.
A crack escaped his throat.
Soft.
But fractured.
"It's him."
The words weren't spoken with wonder.
They dropped like broken glass.

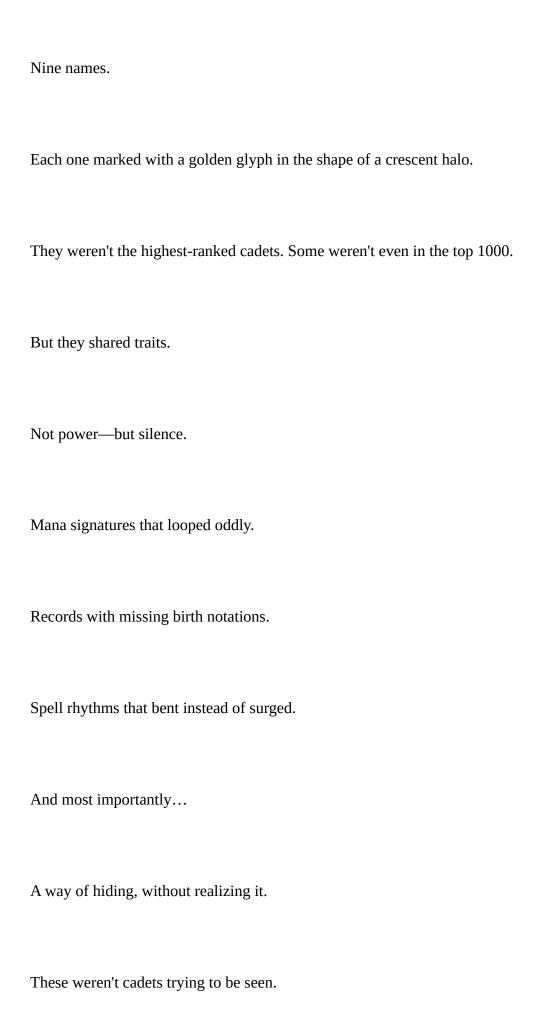
slightly with the ambient mana pressurizing around him.
And his eyes—
His eyes did not blink.
They froze.
They moze.
Like something long-buried had stirred.
Like something long-feared had been recognized.
Or remembered.
And slowly—slowly—his gaze turned cold.
Dead cold.
As if memory had locked its jaws onto him and whispered a name he could neither refute nor forget.

His hands curled at his sides—one wrapped in a silk glove, the other bare and scarred with faint arcane scoring. His coat—dark, noble-cut, unmarked by faction—shifted



Not yet.
The silence around him was almost meditative, but his thoughts moved like clockwork gears—grinding, calculating, realigning.
He had spent the last three days combing through the academy's cadet roster with surgical precision. From the top fifty down to the 900s. Filter after filter. Pattern after pattern.
He'd observed formations. Studied recovery responses. Measured mana drift, tempo irregularities, and glyph contour delays.
Every anomaly had been logged, marked, tested.
And discarded.
One by one.
Even Darien Vale—one of the most promising outliers on his list—had returned no resonance. No echo. No pulse.
Three days. Over four hundred cadets personally reviewed.
And the artifact?

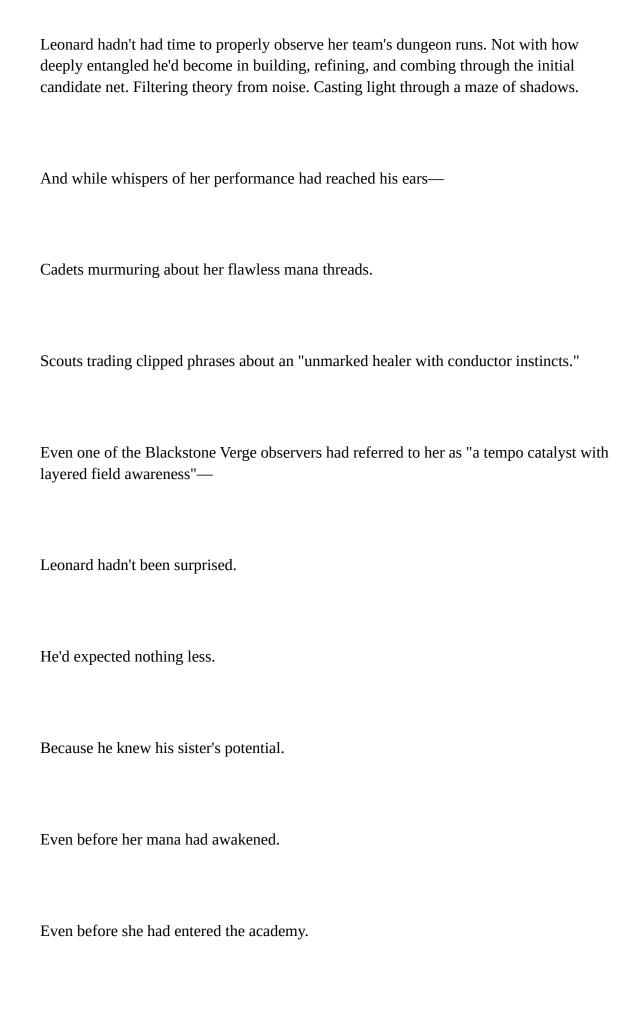


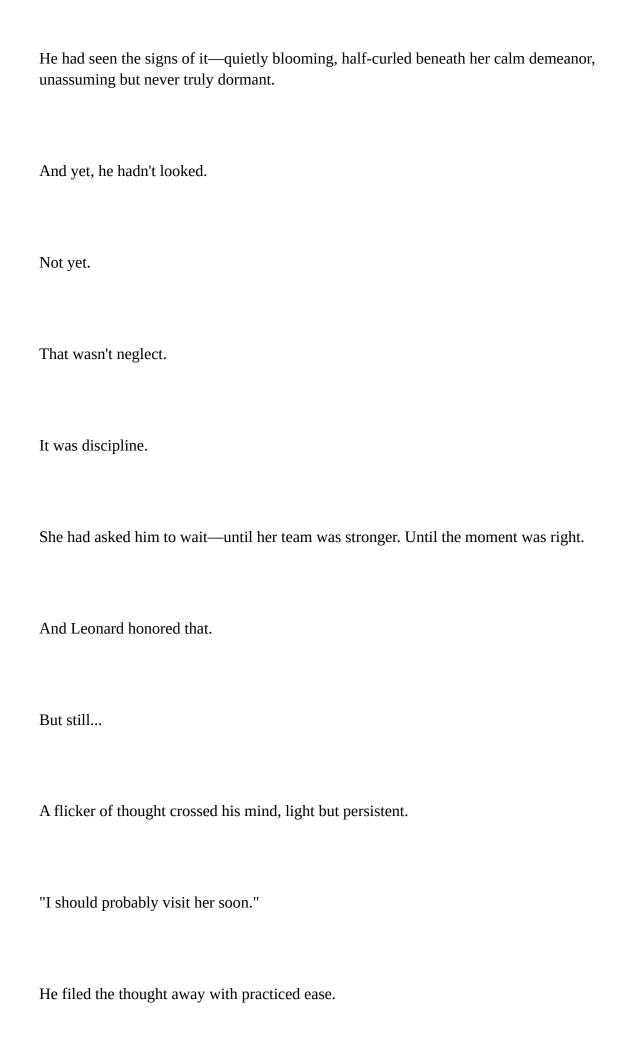




He'd expected nothing less.
Because he knew his sister's potential.
Even before her mana had awakened.
Even before she had entered the academy.
He had seen the signs of it—quietly blooming, half-curled beneath her calm demeanor, unassuming but never truly dormant.
And yet, he hadn't looked.
Not yet.
That wasn't neglect.
It was discipline.
She had asked him to wait—until her team was stronger. Until the moment was right.

And Leonard honored that.
But still
A flicker of thought crossed his mind, light but persistent.
"I should probably visit her soon."
He filed the thought away with practiced ease.
First, the list.
These nine cadets.
These final threads.
On the list—there was no Sylvie Gracewind.
Not yet.





First, the list.
These nine cadets.
These final threads.
He stepped away from the projection crystal, its golden crescent-marked glyphs still floating silently in his wake. His coat flared faintly behind him as he exited the observation corridor and stepped into the sunlit hallway beyond.
The scouts' sector remained quiet at this hour—most of them still reviewing footage, or preparing bid offers. The academy's schedule had entered its later combat phases. Dungeons were rotating fast now. Cadets moving on tighter schedules.
That suited him fine.
Leonard passed through the warded barrier at the end of the hallway with a single pulse of mana—subtle, clean, uniquely his—and entered the cadet-side quadrant.
Now came the second movement.
He murmured under his breath, voice low enough to avoid echo, syllables shaped by ancient pronunciation:

"Caeli tangere, lumen signare, ambulo inter eos."
Mark from the heavens. Touch the breath between them.
A flicker of warmth passed over his palm. Not hot. Not even visible.
But as his fingers moved in slow, deliberate passes through the air, they traced tiny arcs of radiant ink—golden lines that evaporated almost immediately. Unseen to all but the caster.
Helio-threads.
Sunlight-based sigil points, each designed to latch onto a specific mana imprint as long as proximity was maintained.
Leonard passed through the southern arch of the training wing's mezzanine, where two of the nine marked cadets were scheduled to pass through for a physical examination block.
He timed his breathing.
His steps.

And as one cadet—a wiry boy with hawk eyes and wind-thread tattoos—moved past the stairwell, Leonard whispered again:
"Signa primum."
The thread latched.
No reaction.
No resistance.
No detection.
Success.
He continued walking. Twenty seconds later, another cadet—older, a transfer from the western front line academies—passed through near the apothecary column. Leonard adjusted his pace. Tilted his shoulder. Whispered the spell once more—barely a breath.
Marked. Chapter 1029 - Narrowed
Marked.

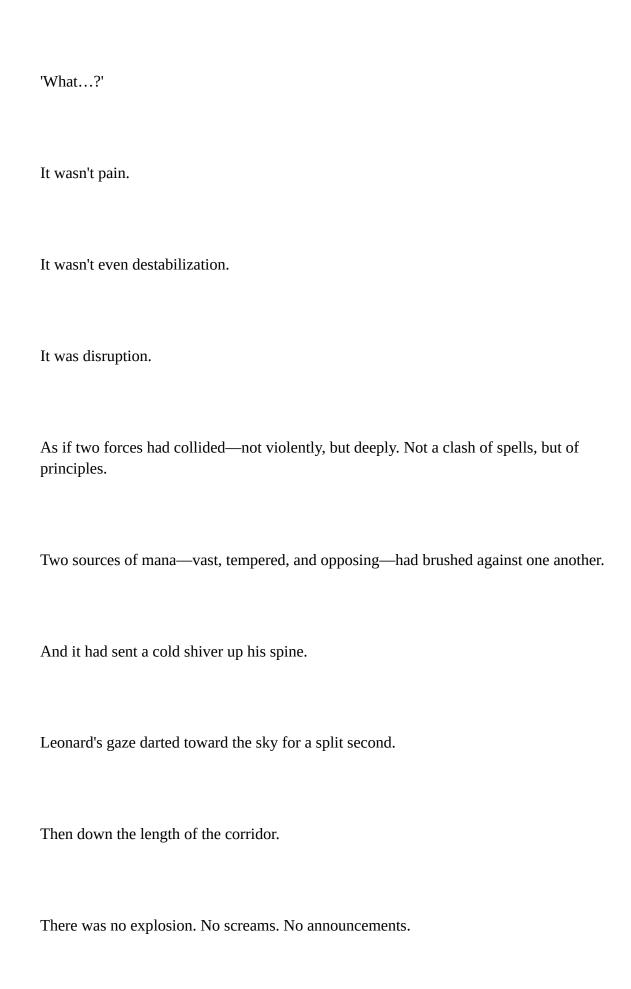
But he stopped there.
Even this was risky.
He could mark no more than one at a time—two, if the academy's detection wards weren't finely tuned that day.
But today?
They were.
He could feel it in the ambient air pressure. The subtle resistance of arcane scrutiny drifting just beneath the casual weight of sunlight. The Arcadia wards had grown sharper.
More alert.
Probably due to the scouts.
Probably because of people like him.
If he overcast—if his mana dipped just a bit too high—someone would notice.

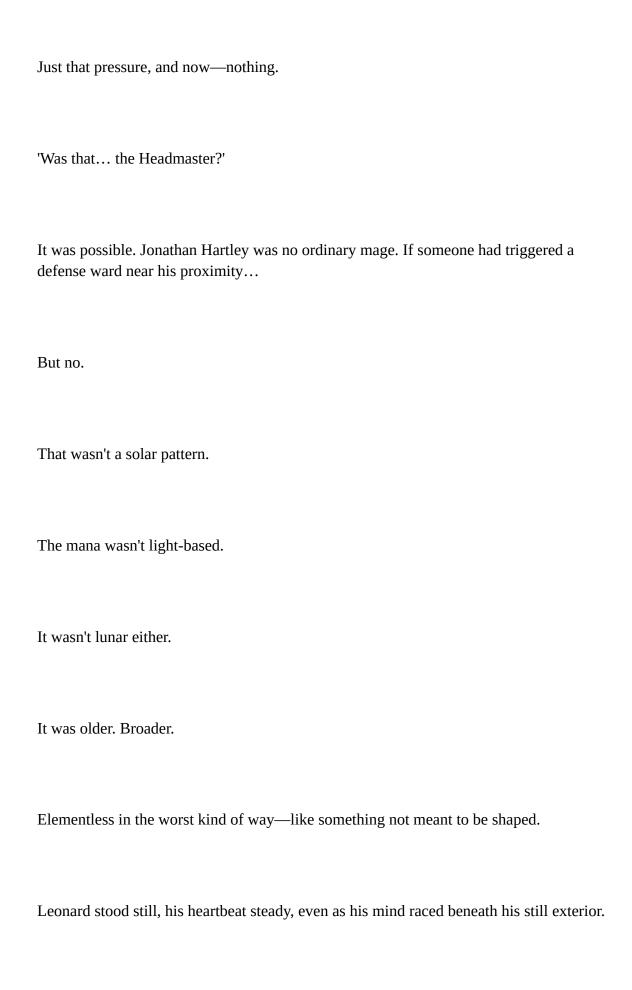
And he could not afford notice.
He rolled his shoulder slightly, adjusted his collar, and kept walking.
Two marked.
That would have to suffice for now.
Leonard flexed his fingers once—lightly, casually, as though stretching—and felt the resistance in the air press just a little tighter against his skin. Yes. That was the limit.
Any more, and the Arcadian ward lattice would notice. Not an alarm—not a blaring siren—but a nudge. A whisper to the on-site surveillance teams that someone was casting without declaration.
He wasn't ready for that attention.
Not yet.
So he moved.
His coat trailed behind him as he descended the stairwell into the student-level

His coat trailed behind him as he descended the stairwell into the student-level walkways—elegant stone corridors curved with gentle arches and gilded mana-lanterns, each tuned to adjust to cadet energy levels. The academy's infrastructure hummed with quiet life.

Leonard tracked the first signature, his steps light, mind already constructing the cadence of the encounter—
—when it hit him.
A pressure.
Not direct.
Not sharp.
But sudden. Wide.
His foot paused mid-step. And his body stiffened.
A wave of raw mana had rippled through the ether—not in his direction, not near him—
but large enough to touch everything in the quadrant. Like a tremor rolling beneath the stone, barely felt, but too unnatural to mistake.

Leonard's breath stilled.

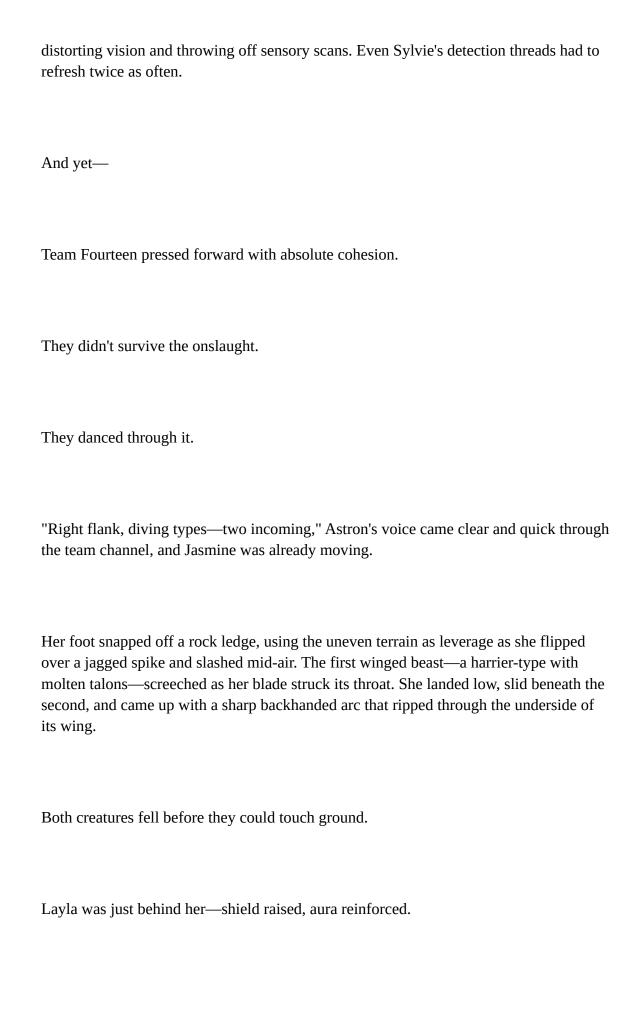




Was something happening?
Had something awakened?
Or worse—
Had something recognized him?
He didn't know.
But more importantly—he didn't care.
Not now.
His mission wasn't to unravel every secret in Arcadia.
He was here for one.
The Kin.
And with two cadets marked and time ticking away, he couldn't afford to chase echoes

Not unless they screamed his sister's name.
So he adjusted his coat once more, and turned down the hall that led toward the student dormitory courtyard—a broad open space with seated areas, fountain paths, and the occasional quiet shade where cadets took breaks after rotation.
His first mark was approaching.
Leonard's expression returned to that easy, diplomatic calm.
Let the world shiver.
He had work to do.

The fourth dungeon was a storm.
Not just of monsters—but of pressure, speed, and terrain.
The environment was a fractured canyon, serrated rock walls and deep pits winding through the interior like veins. Scattered mana geysers pulsed at random intervals,







Monsters fell in sets of two, then four, then clusters—overwhelmed not by raw strength, but precision.
Jasmine cut through another beast with a tight, clean flourish—her strikes no longer wild, but paced, calculated, efficient.
"I think" she panted, ducking beneath a collapsing ridge as Astron covered her retreat, "I'm starting to enjoy this."
Layla laughed, short and tired but bright. "That's because we're not scrambling anymore."
From behind, Sylvie's healing pulse washed through them, mending bruises, restoring movement, and reinforcing aura flow. Even her enhancements now anticipated shifts—buffing Irina's power just as she cast, boosting Jasmine's speed just before she engaged.
They were tired.
But they were sharp.
And as the final wave of monsters surged from the far canyon ridge, jaws open and wings spread wide—
The team reformed without speaking.

WHOOOOOOM!

The monster wave surged over the ridge like a flood of fang and talon—eight, ten, fifteen of them. Winged lizard-kin with serrated tails and molten orange eyes, their scaled bodies reinforced by mana plating that shimmered beneath the canyon haze.

But Team Fourteen was already in motion.

Layla stepped forward, boots grinding into the cracked stone as she slammed her shield into the ground with a resonant KLANG!—activating her skill Anchor Pulse. A radiant ring of force erupted outward, slowing enemy momentum within a ten-meter radius and dragging the first two beasts into her zone of control.

One lunged—she caught it mid-air, her shield erupting with glowing runes as she met its jaw with a forward bash. THUMP! The creature's skull snapped sideways.

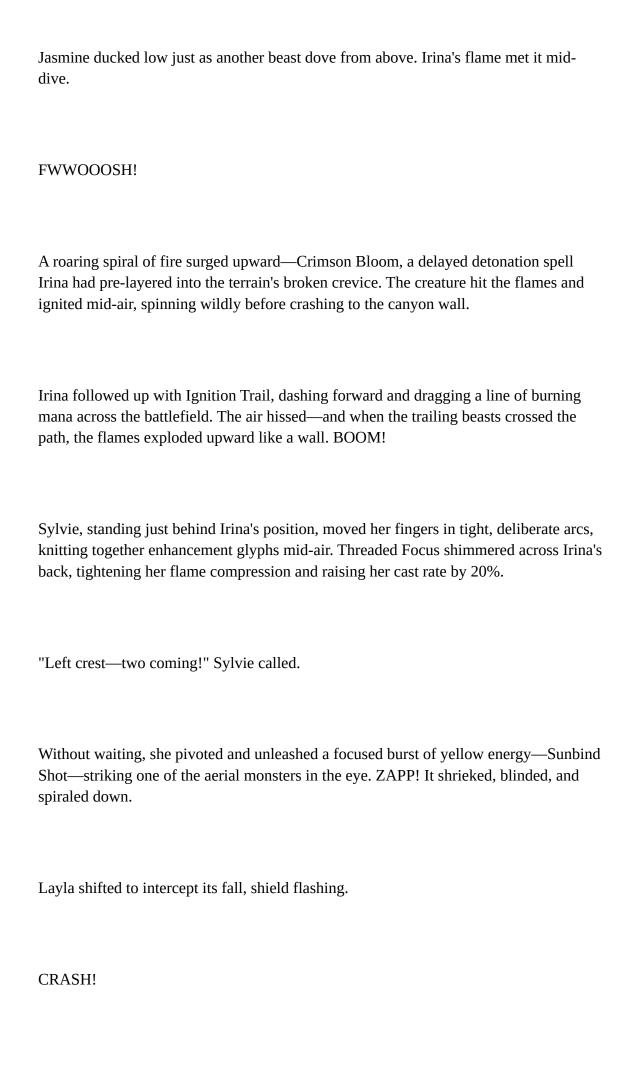
Chapter 1030 - Narrowed

WHOOOOOOM!

The monster wave surged over the ridge like a flood of fang and talon—eight, ten, fifteen of them. Winged lizard-kin with serrated tails and molten orange eyes, their scaled bodies reinforced by mana plating that shimmered beneath the canyon haze.

But Team Fourteen was already in motion.

Layla stepped forward, boots grinding into the cracked stone as she slammed her shield into the ground with a resonant KLANG!—activating her skill Anchor Pulse. A radiant ring of force erupted outward, slowing enemy momentum within a ten-meter radius and dragging the first two beasts into her zone of control.
One lunged—she caught it mid-air, her shield erupting with glowing runes as she met its jaw with a forward bash. THUMP! The creature's skull snapped sideways.
The second circled lower—she pivoted, braced, and drove her knee up, stunning it long enough for—
Shff!
Jasmine to cut in.
Her sword gleamed silver with flickering wind mana, skill-imbued with Flicker Fang. She vanished from Layla's right and reappeared in a blur to her left, carving through the monster's wing joint. SLASH!
It howled—until she spun and drove her blade into its neck. KRRSSK!
She didn't pause.
"Behind!" Layla warned.



They moved like that—moment by moment. A living formation.
Flaws were answered with covers. Openings were punished instantly.
Layla's defense wove into Jasmine's precision. Jasmine's tempo fed Irina's lane control. Irina's flames carved space that Sylvie reinforced and locked down with suppressive bursts and heals.
Even the terrain worked for them now.
The canyon that once splintered their cohesion now channeled enemies into traps and choke points that they could exploit with near-perfect synergy.
And then—
CRACK.
A noise.
Not from the monsters.
From the air.

From the dungeon itself.
Sylvie's eyes darted upward.
"Did you feel that?" she asked quietly.
They all paused for just a second—mid-motion. Even the monsters that remained held slightly back, pacing at the outer edge.
Another crack.
CRACK—KRRRSSSSHHHH!
The sky shimmered again—this time violently. Mana fractured through the air like lightning splitting glass. The canyon walls groaned. The ground pulsed once beneath their feet—then twice, harder.
Astron's voice came out like a whip. "Take cover—now! Sylvie, barrier—!"
But before Sylvie could lift her hands, before the incantation could fully form—
ROOOOOAAAARRRR!



The floor had collapsed, a vast crater torn into the middle of the battlefield, glowing with unstable violet light. The walls glowed with jagged fractures, pulsing like veins in a dying beast.
And rising from the chasm—tall, cloaked in warped shadows and flickering mana fire—stood something wrong.
Twisted humanoid in shape, but with spined limbs too long to belong to anything human, and eyes like burning sigils carved into molten gold.
Its voice echoed through the ruined canyon.
SCREEEEEEECH!!!
The sound tore through the canyon like a blade through silk—inhuman, unrelenting, and brimming with the kind of raw malice that didn't need words to be understood.
The creature's intent surged outward in waves—hatred, hunger, annihilation. It wasn't sentient in the way a person was, but something in its twisted mana—its broken, aberrant form—screamed one message loud and clear:
Destroy. Everything. Alive.
Sylvie barely had time to breathe.



Sylvie's pupils were wide, hands trembling, mana still sparking incoherently between the fingers.	een
"We don't have time to freeze—Sylvie!"	
That snapped something loose.	
The fog in Sylvie's mind shattered.	
The fractured light.	
The ruined terrain.	
The pressure.	
None of it mattered.	
One thought surfaced in the noise, calm and absolute:	
Focus.	
Her breath steadied.	

She raised one hand, threads of golden energy weaving swiftly across her knuckles.
"Jasmine, hold steady."
A burst of bright glyphs spiraled around Jasmine's feet and arms—Acceleration Sigil and Pulse Blade Sync—both slammed into place like falling locks.
Jasmine surged forward just as the creature twisted its torso, spines flaring outward. Its next strike aimed to impale, to erase.
But Jasmine was already gone.
CRACK—SHFFF!
She blurred low under the creature's reach, wind mana whirling around her blade, feet striking canyon stone as she launched upward in a sharp arc. Her sword carved across the monster's outer plating—KRRRSH!—scraping along the edge of its protruding ribs
The creature reeled, not in pain—but in reaction.
Sylvie didn't hesitate. She sprinted behind Jasmine, weaving new glyphs mid-run. Stability Thread lined Jasmine's spine, helping her absorb impact from rebounds. Shield Bloom wrapped faintly over her arms—not a full block, but enough to deflect a grazing hit.

