

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.

And if this Darien Vale was truly one of the final candidates...

Then a conversation might be the key to unraveling everything.

He didn't have time.

Not to wait. Not to circle back. Not to risk losing another lead to guild scouts who watched with pockets full of contracts and eyes full of hunger.

Darien Vale's resonance wasn't stable—it was veiled. And the longer it stayed buried, the harder it would be to trigger.

But Leonard knew the rules.

The Academy's neutrality was law here, old and unyielding.

No scout was permitted to approach cadets directly during private cooldown phases.

No observation beyond the designated sectors.

And no mana-marking—not without a sanctioned clearance rune.

That meant one thing.

He couldn't follow Darien directly.

Not here.

But...

He didn't need to.

As Leonard turned from the prep alcove, his fingers brushed the inside of his coat, tracing a hidden glyph sewn into the inner lining of his sleeve—an invocation seal, woven by the Church's Lightbearers, dormant until called upon.

He stepped into the shadow of one of the hall's arched corridors, head bowed slightly—a quiet, devout posture, unnoticed in the flow of instructors and logistics officers.

Then, in a breath that didn't stir the air, he whispered the chant.

"Lux sōlis oculum... Aperi et vigila."

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 all but him.

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 partially. 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.

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

Intersected the path naturally—timed to cross just as Darien slowed to check the enchanted message slate at his side.

"Darien Vale," Leonard said, letting his voice settle like a warm afternoon.

The cadet blinked, then looked up.

Leonard's expression was professional—polite without being forced.

He offered no pressure. No flourish.

Just presence.

"Leonard Elric," he said, extending his hand in a quiet gesture. "Solstice Dawn. I've been keeping an eye on your run today."

Darien hesitated for half a breath, then accepted the handshake.

His grip was firm, but not postured.

"Didn't know I was worth scouting," the boy said.

"You're worth noticing," Leonard replied smoothly, eyes reading not just movement, but every faint tremor in Darien's mana flow.

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 quiet hum of the evening settled over Sylvie's dorm room like a soft blanket. Outside, the faint glow of lamplight filtered through the sheer curtains, casting gentle lines across the floor. Her books lay untouched on the desk. The notes she had once reviewed religiously now sat half-open, forgotten.

She sat at the edge of her bed, her knees pulled in slightly, arms resting on them as she stared at the silent mana tablet on her nightstand. The events of the evening played on repeat in her mind—the scouts, the praise, the weight of it all.

Irina's words, though few, had been steady in her ears all night.

"You're being watched now. So tread with purpose."

Sylvie had taken those words to heart. Even now, as she sat alone, she could feel the shift. The way people had looked at her—evaluated her—was different. She wasn't just "promising" anymore. She was a candidate. A name. A prospect. And that meant... things would change.

'What should I do?' she wondered, her green eyes distant.

It wasn't just about choosing a guild. It was about deciding who she wanted to be. What kind of healer. What kind of cadet. What kind of person.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the soft vibration of her mana-engraved communicator—an artifact like most advanced students carried, tuned to key channels.

The name on the projection made her straighten instantly.

Headmaster Jonathan.

Or, as she still called him in private—

"Master," she whispered, her hand already moving to accept the call.

The faint outline of his figure appeared above the tablet: tall, composed, every line of his presence as sharp and immutable as a blade unsheathed. Even through the haze of the projection, his eyes were unmistakable—piercing, focused, and unwavering.

"Sylvie," he greeted, his tone low but not cold.

Jonathan's gaze didn't soften, but his tone did—just slightly. "It appears," he said, "you've made quite the impression today."

Sylvie flushed, her fingers tightening where they curled over her knees. She looked down, trying not to fidget, though the quiet flutter in her chest betrayed her composure.

"I've received a number of calls," Jonathan continued, voice even. "From scouts. From representatives. Some more professional than others. All of them very eager."

Sylvie's lips parted faintly, unsure whether to apologize or bask in the quiet warmth she felt rising in her cheeks. "I... didn't expect that many."

"I did," he said simply.

That made her look up.

Jonathan studied her through the projection, his expression unreadable. "You've spent the last two months sharpening more than your magic. You've been learning how to move. How to think. How to trust yourself. All I did was remove the excuses."

Sylvie felt her throat tighten, her chest filling with something close to pride—but steadier, quieter. "Still... I wouldn't have made it here without your guidance. Master."

Jonathan didn't respond immediately. He let the word settle, as if measuring its weight, before inclining his head ever so slightly.

Jonathan's projection remained still for a moment, the edges of his figure flickering faintly with stabilized mana. Then he spoke again, his voice low and deliberate.

"You've earned attention," he said. "And you'll earn more."

Sylvie listened carefully, her posture straightening unconsciously.

"It won't stop here," he continued. "In fact, this is just the beginning. That's why you must get used to it. The weight of being watched. Of being evaluated. Admired. Tested."

He paused, letting the words sink in.

"You already know your talent. Better than anyone else. That's why you cannot let their words define you. Not yet."

Sylvie nodded slowly, her fingers tightening slightly around the edge of her blanket. "I understand, Master."

Jonathan studied her a moment longer, then gave a faint nod of approval. "Good."

His hand moved slightly out of frame—adjusting something on his end—and then he said, "For the time being, I'll block incoming contact requests routed to you from external guilds or organizations. You'll still receive updates, but there will be no direct pressure. As you already suspect... the best course is to wait. To watch."

Sylvie let out a small breath of relief. "Thank you. I'd prefer it that way."

His eyes met hers once more—sharp, unreadable, but steady. "Use this time wisely. Sort through your thoughts. The next steps you take will define more than just your career."

She nodded again, more firmly this time. "I will."

With that, Jonathan tapped a control rune on his end. "Good night, Sylvie."

The projection shimmered once... and vanished.

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. "If 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.

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

"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.

And in the silence that followed, only the team's breathing remained—harsh, ragged, but unbroken.

"We're close," Astron said again, stepping forward now, the faint shimmer of trap lines visible through his mana-sight.

"One last corridor," Sylvie confirmed, the glow from her gloves dim but unwavering.

Layla panted, shaking out her arms. "Then let's finish this."

And they moved again—bloodied, tired, but sharper than steel.

The final stretch awaited.

The dungeon exit flared to life with a hiss of released pressure, mana seals unraveling in slow concentric pulses as the gate reopened. One by one, Team Fourteen stepped out—each of them marked by the unmistakable signs of a hard-fought battle.

Layla's armor was scorched and scraped, one shoulder visibly dented from where she'd taken the full force of a pouncing crawler. Jasmine's side was stained with dried blood, her gait uneven as she pressed a hand to her ribs. Sylvie looked drained, the blue glow of her gloves dimmed to a faint pulse. Irina's cloak was tattered along the hem, the ends burned from overuse of flame. And Astron, though the least visibly damaged, carried several new gashes along his arms—quickly sealed, but deep enough to prove engagement.

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.

Layla gave a tired snort and nudged Jasmine's elbow. "Just take it as a compliment. That's as much as he gives."

Jasmine scoffed, but her grin was genuine. "Thanks, I guess."

Sylvie added quietly, "We appreciate it. Really."

Astron didn't look back. But he nodded once—enough.

The group stood in silence a moment longer, catching their breath, the cool air of the exit corridor washing gently over their sweat-slicked faces. The fatigue in their bones began to settle heavier now that the adrenaline had worn off.

"I'm calling it," Layla said, stretching her arms with a groan. "Shower. Bed. Nothing else."

"Same," Jasmine said, already turning away. "If I'm late tomorrow, tell Reynold I got eaten."

Sylvie gave a small smile, tucking a strand of damp hair behind her ear. "See you guys later."

One by one, the girls peeled away, footsteps echoing down the stone hall.

Irina lingered.

She stepped up beside Astron, her presence unannounced but unmistakable.

He didn't look at her at first.

Only when the sound of the others faded entirely did he shift, eyes narrowing slightly at the subtle heat still radiating from her form.

"Staying behind?" he asked.

Irina glanced in the direction the others had gone. "Just for a minute."

A pause.

She tilted her head slightly, studying his face—quiet, unreadable as always.

Then—quiet, almost an afterthought—she spoke.

"You... You proposed that formation so they could shine, didn't you?"

Astron didn't flinch. Didn't shift.

He simply turned his head slightly toward her, his expression as still as ever.

Then he shrugged.

He didn't deny it. He didn't confirm it, either. But in the way his eyes lingered—not dismissive, not surprised—she had her answer.

It was his job, after all.

In Team Fourteen, Astron had naturally become the strategist. No one had ever officially assigned him the role. It had just... happened. He scouted, observed, made the calls. He read terrain patterns, tracked mana distortions, adjusted team positions. And everyone followed—not because he demanded it, but because he was always right.

And this dungeon had been no different.

He was the one who had first mapped the branching paths, who had marked the choke points and warned about the aerial ambushes. He was the one who had drawn the tactical formation that placed Jasmine and Layla in the most dangerous forward arcs—while Sylvie handled support in more exposed intervals, and Irina kept the midline with room to maneuver.

It wasn't an optimized layout for speed.

And Irina had noticed that. They could've completed the route faster if she and Sylvie had pulled more weight from the start. Her range, Sylvie's support density, Astron's stealth—those three alone could have blazed through it.

But that hadn't been the plan.

Because the formation wasn't about efficiency.

It was about exposure.

About giving Jasmine and Layla room to feel pressure—and room to fight under it.

Irina folded her arms slowly, her eyes narrowing just slightly—not out of annoyance, but consideration.

"You didn't tell them," she said after a moment. "You knew it'd be harder that way. You let them struggle."

Astron looked ahead again, voice flat. "Struggling is the point."

His tone wasn't cruel.

It was clear.

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.

Predictably quiet.

And maybe because of that, Irina's smile only widened.

She stepped closer—not dramatically, just enough to close the air between them—and without asking, without warning, she reached down and took his hand.

Not forcefully. Not hesitantly.

Just... took it.

Astron's fingers tensed for half a second in response, the barest flinch of someone not used to being touched without tactical reason.

Irina held it anyway.

Warm. Direct. Steady.

"I like it," she said, her smile crooked now—genuine in a way that cut through the usual fire she carried.

'It shows you are getting better and better.'

Astron didn't reply.

But he didn't pull away.

And in the quiet that followed, the pulse of the gate dimmed entirely behind them—leaving only the soft hum of mana settling back into the stones, and the weight of a moment that neither of them needed to explain.

The scout hall was quieter now.

The heavy press of first-day fervor had faded into something leaner. More measured. Less crowded.

Gone were the overeager contractors and wide-eyed freelancers. What remained were the ones who understood the game: career hunters turned talent brokers, guild tacticians with clearance, military strategists in plain uniform.

They no longer scrambled to tag every standout.

They watched. Waited. Focused.

But even among the veterans, one name remained on everyone's internal lists.

Sylvie Gracewind.

And yet—

Nothing.

No footage beyond official combat reels.

No post-dungeon sightings in scout-cleared cafeterias or open lounges.

No off-duty glimpses near the public walkways or student networking halls.

"She's avoiding us," one scout said flatly, his arms crossed as he leaned against a projection table.

The woman next to him, from Dawn's Cross, didn't look up. "No. She's avoiding attention."

A third scoffed quietly. "Same thing."

But none of them denied it.

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."

"She's not hiding," the Dawn's Cross woman corrected. "She's managing exposure. That's different."

Either way—

The result was the same.

No approach. No conversation. No opening.

And that was fine.

Disappointing, yes. But not unexpected.

The smart ones never made it easy.

And so, without protest, the scouts shifted their lenses.

Today, their attention turned fully to the two names they could still read in real time:

Layla Calderon.

Jasmine Myre.

On-screen, the pair moved in tandem through a wind-blasted ridge formation—Dungeon Three's primary terrain.

Layla's stance had changed since the earlier runs.

Her shield handling had grown tighter, not in caution, but in structure. She no longer waited for impact. She anticipated pressure points, using terrain advantage to meet momentum before it hit her.

"She's breaking engagement flow," one observer muttered. "That's frontliner instinct. She's not waiting for the hit anymore. She's setting the angle."

Jasmine, too, was adjusting.

Where she'd once relied on flash-step mobility and reactive feints, now she layered her strikes—disruptive bursts followed by position theft. She moved more like a vanguard than a rogue—slipping into space Layla created, then forcing follow-ups with her own tempo shifts.

"Hard to flank when the second line collapses inward on cue," said a tactical analyst from Silverhammer, tapping timestamps. "That's trained synergy."

And the two together?

They moved with a kind of pressure-trained rhythm—rough-edged, maybe, but undeniably coherent. One advanced, the other filled. One struck, the other redirected. There was no wasted motion between them.

The Silverhammer analyst paused the stream, then leaned back slowly.

"...We were too focused on the Emberheart girl and the healer."

No one disagreed.

Yesterday, the board had been dominated by flames and resonance glyphs. The scouts had watched for brilliance. For refined spellwork. For innovation.

But this dungeon?

This was different.

Wind-heavy ridges. Sloped terrain. Visibility shifts.

A battlefield that actively punished forward line fighters.

Layla and Jasmine's affinities were ill-suited to it. Their control zones disrupted. Their movement channels fractured.

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?

That meant something.

The screen dimmed.

And the scouts, without ceremony or chatter, began preparing for the next evaluation.

Because Team Fourteen wasn't just Irina and Sylvie anymore.

The other two were also not bad.

And the world had started to notice.

The screen dimmed.

And the scouts, without ceremony or chatter, began preparing for the next evaluation.

Because Team Fourteen wasn't just Irina and Sylvie anymore.

The other two were also not bad.

And the world had started to notice.

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."

Several scouts nodded, already aligning visual focus on the portal view.

No one said it aloud.

But the implication was clear:

Team Fourteen had made the board.

But Ethan Hartley?

It was a name that had far longer surpassed them in the name.

Chapter 1025 - Threat

The late afternoon light filtered down through the mana-laced clouds above the Academy's eastern wing, casting fractured blue-white beams over the training plaza where the dungeon gates shimmered faintly, waiting.

Ethan stood just beyond the edge of the marble steps, eyes fixed toward the horizon—not looking at anything in particular. His spear was slung across his back, the strap cutting diagonally over his shoulder. His gloves were already on, and his gauntlet glyphs hummed faintly with pre-channelled psions.

Still, he hadn't moved in nearly a full minute.

"Where are you looking at?"

Thud.

A hard smack landed on his shoulder.

"Gah—Julia!" Ethan flinched and stepped forward, nearly stumbling from the sheer force behind her hit. "Do you ever not hit like you're trying to dislocate something?"

Julia raised an eyebrow, hands on her hips. "Would you prefer I aim for your ribs next time? You're staring into the void like someone in a soap opera. Focus up, Hartley."

"I was focused," Ethan muttered, rubbing the sore spot beneath his coat.

"Sure. On the afterlife maybe," she shot back, then glanced over her shoulder. "Team's already checking gear. Let's go."

They descended the final steps together, where the rest of their squad had gathered near the active gate line.

Their group of five wasn't elite—at least not on paper—but they'd worked together long enough to find rhythm. Julia was the leader, by rank and presence both. Ethan, second in command—less vocal, but no less steady.

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—their presence was felt in every movement, every breath.

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 walked in."

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.

Julia was from the Middleton Family. Old name. Deep legacy. One of the cornerstone bloodlines of the East. She didn't need to impress the scouts. Her path was already carved in granite. A few top guilds had probably already sent offers under the table, and she hadn't even glanced at them.

So when she told them to "just relax," it didn't land.

Because for them—Raine, Marin, Kaela, Deacon—this mattered.

This was the moment that decided whether they'd be recruited into real teams or buried in backline support roles for the rest of their careers.

And no matter how well Julia led, she couldn't understand that fear.

Not the way they did.

Ethan saw it.

Saw the way Kaela's fingers kept brushing her bowstring like it was the only thing grounding her. Saw the way Raine stared at the ground, whispering some small mantra beneath her breath. Saw how Marin had stopped moving altogether.

Ethan glanced once at Julia's smile.

She meant well. She always did.

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 took a breath, stepped forward, and let his voice carry—not loud, not commanding like Julia's—but steady.

"The first time I went through a gate," he said suddenly, "I tripped."

Four heads turned. Even Julia blinked.

Ethan kept going.

"Didn't fall all the way, but I stumbled—boots caught the edge of the mana weave, threw me off balance. My squad leader laughed so hard he almost forgot to pull me out when the mist creature lunged."

A beat.

Silence.

Then, slowly, Raine blinked. "...Seriously?"

Ethan nodded once. "Dead serious."

A faint puff of breath—half-scoff, half-disbelief—from Marin. "You? Mr. Hartley Lightning Step?"

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."

A pause. The air settled a little.

Then Ethan's tone lightened—not forced, but real.

"So, if anyone's planning to trip at the entrance like I did, I'll buy you coffee after. Call it tradition."

Chapter 1026 - Threat

A beat passed.

Then another.

And slowly—subtly, like the shift in wind before a summer storm—something changed.

The weight in the air didn't vanish, but it tilted. Lightened.

Raine exhaled, her lips parting slightly as her grip on her crystal case loosened. She blinked once, then again, like something had just clicked behind her eyes. The quiet murmuring stopped.

Kaela didn't move at first, but her bowstring—once caught between fidgeting fingers—was finally let go. She rolled her shoulders once, just barely, and her stance corrected into something straighter. Sharper. Less burdened.

Marin let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding and finally—finally—his feet moved again. Not the nervous bounce from before, but a firm step forward. Grounded. Present.

He looked at Ethan for a long second, eyes unreadable behind the scarf. Then, without warning—

Smack.

His hand landed against his own cheek in a loud, self-inflicted slap that made Raine jump and Julia whip around.

"...What the hell, Marin?" Julia muttered, blinking.

But Marin didn't answer her.

He looked straight at Ethan. The corners of his eyes crinkled just slightly above the cloth. "Thanks," he said. "Really."

Then he turned to the rest of the squad. His voice was clearer now. "Alright. No more bitching. Ethan's right."

He glanced toward the gate.

"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 small, almost reluctant smile, tucking her crystals back into her belt pouch and rising to her full height.

Even Deacon—quiet, often forgettable Deacon—straightened beside them, his hand tightening over the hilt of his shortblade.

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 showed up late to group matches because of extra remedial sessions and was paired with cast-offs no one wanted.

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?"

Julia didn't stop walking. She just tilted her head, smile playing at the corners of her lips.
"No reason."

Ethan gave her a look. "Seriously?"

"What?" she asked, all innocent eyes and not-so-innocent amusement.

He opened his mouth to press further—but Julia beat him to it. She raised her hand, index finger pressing gently to her lips, mock-thoughtful.

"Shhh," she whispered with a grin. "You looked cool back there."

Ethan blinked.

She leaned in, just a bit, voice teasing. "Keep talking like that, and you'll make a lot of girls fall for you."

He stared at her, flustered. "I didn't say any of that for that reason."

"Oh. Of course, mountain boy," she drawled, eyes twinkling.

Ethan groaned. "Don't call me that."

"Why not? You were so noble and humble—like some kind of martial arts protagonist from an old cultivation drama." She gave a theatrical sigh, eyes fluttering for effect. "Truly, a man forged in silence and snow, rising from obscurity to steal the hearts of maidens everywhere..."

Kaela coughed from behind them. Raine snorted. Marin didn't even try to hold in his laugh.

Ethan looked up toward the shimmering veil of the gate, muttering, "I take it back. I should've let you do all the talking."

Julia grinned, clapping him on the back again—but lighter this time. Familiar. Steady.

"You did good, Hartley," she said, just loud enough for him to hear.

And together, they stepped into the light.

The moment their boots touched down inside the dungeon's barrier field, the temperature dropped.

A thin mist crawled along the ground, lit faintly by the gleam of bioluminescent moss clinging to the jagged cavern walls. The air smelled damp—minerals, old blood, stale mana. Somewhere in the distance, something growled—low and gurgling, like a creature not meant to exist outside the dark.

Marin was the first to speak.

"...Yeah. This place sucks."

Julia cracked her neck once, rolling her shoulders. "Suckier for them."

Ethan let his fingers slide along the haft of his spear, the silver inlays catching the low light. His psions were already active—quiet hums echoing in the gauntlets, lightning folded tight around his muscles. He didn't need to charge anything.

This wouldn't take long.

They didn't even form a proper battle line. No elaborate pre-fight ritual. No whispered strategies.

They didn't need them.

The squad's structure had always been simple—Julia in the front, Ethan at her flank, and everyone else orbiting around the chaos they created.

Because Julia was chaos.

The first beast emerged—twice the height of a man, covered in bone-plated armor with three jaws layered atop one another—and Julia didn't wait for it to finish screaming.

She launched.

No callout. No warning.

Just a blur of muscle and grit, her longsword already in motion as her mana exploded out in a crimson arc behind her.

CRACK—BOOM.

The beast's front leg was severed before it could take a full step. Blood sprayed across the mossy stone as it howled, only to have that howl cut short by Julia driving her blade straight up through its center mouth with a brutal twist.

It collapsed.

Marin whistled. "Right into it, huh?"

Kaela didn't answer—she was already moving, arrows loosed in a crisp rhythm, each one pinning distant spawn to the walls before they could fully emerge from the mist. Raine followed close behind, her light-based glyphs spinning into place like clockwork—one barrier, two buffs, a rapid minor heal for Julia's shoulder even though Julia hadn't even noticed she was bleeding.

Ethan?

He moved like water around her.

The second wave hit harder—four beasts this time, serpentine and armored, with mana-coiling 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.

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 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."

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?"

"You almost missed one," Kaela added helpfully, nodding toward a half-melted beast Ethan had finished off mid-run.

Julia shrugged. "That was his job."

Ethan raised an eyebrow. "I do love being backup janitor."

"See?" she said cheerfully, slapping him on the back again. "That's why I keep you around."

And for a long moment, none of them moved. They just stood there, blood on their boots, sweat cooling in the dungeon air.

And for a long moment, none of them moved. They just stood there, blood on their boots, sweat cooling in the dungeon air.

But then—

Ethan's fingers twitched.

It was subtle at first. A flicker of something—not sight, not sound, not even psion detection. Just presence. A pressure that didn't belong. A ripple against the edges of his awareness, like a hand grazing the surface of still water from beneath.

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.

There it was again.

A flicker.

A presence just out of reach—something watching, not from the shadows, but beneath them. As if the walls themselves had eyes. As if the dungeon hadn't died—it had gone still. Waiting.

Julia noticed first.

Her voice dropped, low and wary. "What is it?"

Ethan didn't look at her. His eyes were still fixed on the far corner of the chamber—a spot where the darkness seemed a shade too thick. Not unnatural. Just... off.

"I don't know," he said quietly.

Kaela had already readied another arrow.

Raine, without needing instruction, pulled her healing wards into a tighter formation around them.

Even Marin stopped joking.

Ethan's grip on his spear tightened. "It's probably nothing."

He didn't believe it.

The chill crawling down his spine wasn't psionic. It wasn't magical. It was instinctual.

Like something had brushed against the threads of his fate, then slipped away before it could be named.

And that—that—was what unsettled him most.

He didn't sense a threat.

He sensed... awareness.

Not just of their location.

Of him.

Of his lightning. His psions. His breath.

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.

Like something had marked him.

And simply... let him go.

The screen was already split into multiple angles—high frame-rate, combat zooms, mana-thread overlays—when the final monster fell. The corrupted core shattered in real-time, light folding inward, and the kill feed officially sealed:

[Team Six — Dungeon Four: Clear Time — 14:47]

There was a pause.

Then a low whistle from the center aisle.

"...Sloppy," one scout repeated, voice dry. "That's what she called it?"

"She's not wrong," said another. "Could've been sub-14 if Ethan hadn't diverted for that intercept mid-run."

"Don't be ridiculous," a third countered, eyes locked on the rewind feed. "That flank would've taken out Kaela. The fact that he turned, cleared it, and rejoined in under two seconds is what made this a clean run."

None of them were arguing.

Not really.

Because the performance was undeniable.

Julia Middleton was chaos incarnate. Her style hadn't changed, but her command over it had. Every wild swing carried deliberate risk-to-reward calculation. No hesitation. No fear.

"She's gotten stronger," murmured one of the Dawn's Cross tacticians, tapping a rune to zoom in on Julia's overhead cleave in the final chamber. "Sharper, too. Less waste. Less noise."

"Just like her brother," another added. "That Middleton bloodline's not going quiet, that's for sure."

There was a short silence at that—because everyone knew what that meant.

Lucas Middleton, the prodigy-turned-enigma.

Julia Middleton, the wildcard who'd once been written off as too erratic to ever lead.

And now both names were carving reputations on opposite ends of the field.

"But he's not the one leading this team," someone said, their tone shifting. "Not really."

All eyes turned back to the footage.

Because while Julia dominated the field, it was Ethan Hartley who held it steady.

He never commanded.

Never called loudly.

But the tempo followed him.

Where Julia carved a hole, Ethan sealed it.

Where the others staggered, he created anchor points.

Every movement—refined. Every decision—precise.

Not flashy.

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—

He endured.

More than that.

He won.

A few names were quietly added to private lists.

Julia Middleton — Confirmed High-Priority, Close Combat Specialist

Ethan Hartley — Flagged: Rising Star / Adaptive Control Tier

No offers yet.

Not publicly.

Not while the boards were still shifting.

But the message was clear.

This year's stars weren't waiting to be discovered.

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.

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 slightly with the ambient mana pressurizing around him.

And his eyes—

His eyes did not blink.

They froze.

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.

"Ethan Hartley..."

Something that didn't belong.

Something that should've never caught up.

And now that it had—

He would not let it pass again.

The morning sun filtered through the cathedral-like windows of the Arcadia North Annex, casting thin, deliberate beams across the clean-cut stone of the observation corridor.

Fourth day.

Leonard stood still, hands resting behind his back, gaze fixed on the display crystal hovering in front of him—unlit.

He hadn't activated it.

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?

Still quiet.

Still waiting.

Still blind.

He let out a long, quiet breath through his nose.

This method is too slow.

He had known it from the start, but now—with time compressing and scouts circling like wolves around the rising stars—he could no longer afford the wide net.

Precision. Now. Not theory.

That meant changing tactics.

Leonard activated the projection crystal at last—but not to search.

Instead, he pulled up his private list.

Nine names.

Each one marked with a golden glyph in the shape of a crescent halo.

They weren't the highest-ranked cadets. Some weren't even in the top 1000.

But they shared traits.

Not power—but silence.

Mana signatures that looped oddly.

Records with missing birth notations.

Spell rhythms that bent instead of surged.

And most importantly...

A way of hiding, without realizing it.

These weren't cadets trying to be seen.

They were cadets whose presence distorted just slightly the longer you looked at them.

Of course while he was looking for his target, he didn't forget his sister.

But sadly.....It was not the time.

Not yet.

Leonard hadn't had time to properly observe her team's dungeon runs. Not with how deeply entangled he'd become in building, refining, and combing through the initial candidate net. Filtering theory from noise. Casting light through a maze of shadows.

And while whispers of her performance had reached his ears—

People murmuring about her flawless mana threads.

Scouts trading clipped phrases about an "unmarked healer with conductor instincts."

Even one of the Blackstone Verge observers had referred to her as "a tempo catalyst with layered field awareness"—

Leonard hadn't been surprised.

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-curved 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.

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Cadets murmuring about her flawless mana threads.

Scouts trading clipped phrases about an "unmarked healer with conductor instincts."

Even one of the Blackstone Verge observers had referred to her as "a tempo catalyst with layered field awareness"—

Leonard hadn't been surprised.

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.

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 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.

'What...?'

It wasn't pain.

It wasn't even destabilization.

It was disruption.

As if two forces had collided—not violently, but deeply. Not a clash of spells, but of principles.

Two sources of mana—vast, tempered, and opposing—had brushed against one another.

And it had sent a cold shiver up his spine.

Leonard's gaze darted toward the sky for a split second.

Then down the length of the corridor.

There was no explosion. No screams. No announcements.

Just that pressure, and now—nothing.

'Was that... the Headmaster?'

It was possible. Jonathan Hartley was no ordinary mage. If someone had triggered a defense ward near his proximity...

But no.

That wasn't a solar pattern.

The mana wasn't light-based.

It wasn't lunar either.

It was older. Broader.

Elementless in the worst kind of way—like something not meant to be shaped.

Leonard stood still, his heartbeat steady, even as his mind raced beneath his still exterior.

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,

distorting vision and throwing off sensory scans. Even Sylvie's detection threads had to refresh twice as often.

And yet—

Team Fourteen pressed forward with absolute cohesion.

They didn't survive the onslaught.

They danced through it.

"Right flank, diving types—two incoming," Astron's voice came clear and quick through the team channel, and Jasmine was already moving.

Her foot snapped off a rock ledge, using the uneven terrain as leverage as she flipped over a jagged spike and slashed mid-air. The first winged beast—a harrier-type with molten talons—screeched as her blade struck its throat. She landed low, slid beneath the second, and came up with a sharp backhanded arc that ripped through the underside of its wing.

Both creatures fell before they could touch ground.

Layla was just behind her—shield raised, aura reinforced.

Where once she had only reacted, now she read the enemy's momentum. She shifted in tandem with Jasmine, blocking a third monster that attempted to strike during Jasmine's brief recovery frame. The impact hit hard, but her knees didn't buckle.

Instead, she turned it.

Twisting her stance with controlled force, she slammed her shoulder forward, cracking the beast's head into the canyon wall and stunning it long enough for Jasmine to drive her blade home.

"Thanks," Jasmine breathed, pushing off the corpse.

Layla smirked, sweat glinting along her brow. "We've done worse."

Behind them, Irina stepped forward into a geyser's burst, using the vapor to mask her ignition point. She didn't call her spell this time—she just raised a hand, and three spiraling orbs of fire curved outward in a perfect arc, one for each approaching shadow on the opposite ridge.

The beasts didn't scream.

They simply ceased.

"Irina, rear left!" Sylvie called, already weaving a sigil mid-air.

Irina pivoted as a fourth harrier dove through the mist—but before it could strike, a glowing tether lashed around its body, jerking it sideways. Sylvie's binding glyph yanked the beast mid-flight, off-course and into a pillar of burning stone left behind by Irina's previous strike.

"Beautiful," Irina muttered.

Astron moved through the middle of the formation, not drawing attention—but always where he needed to be. A claw strike aimed for Sylvie's blind spot—parried. A beast slipping past Jasmine—stabbed mid-air before it landed. A mana surge from the canyon floor? Already marked, already called out.

But this time, he didn't command the team.

He worked with them.

The formation shifted like gears—rotating smoothly as monsters flanked from the upper ridges and tunnel mouths. Sylvie fell back without prompting when pressure rose, and Irina slid in, not to save her—but to replace her position. Layla didn't have to shout anymore—when she staggered from a blow, Jasmine was already there with a reverse grip catch, intercepting the next attacker.

It wasn't perfect.

They were bleeding. Panting. Tired.

But their rhythm was exact.

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.

WHOOOOOOOOM!

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.

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WHOOOOOOOOM!

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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.

Jasmine ducked low just as another beast dove from above. Irina's flame met it mid-dive.

FWWOOOSH!

A roaring spiral of fire surged upward—Crimson Bloom, a delayed detonation spell Irina had pre-layered into the terrain's broken crevice. The creature hit the flames and ignited mid-air, spinning wildly before crashing to the canyon wall.

Irina followed up with Ignition Trail, dashing forward and dragging a line of burning mana across the battlefield. The air hissed—and when the trailing beasts crossed the path, the flames exploded upward like a wall. BOOM!

Sylvie, standing just behind Irina's position, moved her fingers in tight, deliberate arcs, knitting together enhancement glyphs mid-air. Threaded Focus shimmered across Irina's back, tightening her flame compression and raising her cast rate by 20%.

"Left crest—two coming!" Sylvie called.

Without waiting, she pivoted and unleashed a focused burst of yellow energy—Sunbind Shot—striking one of the aerial monsters in the eye. ZAPP! It shrieked, blinded, and spiraled down.

Layla shifted to intercept its fall, shield flashing.

CRASH!

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—KRRRRSSSSHHHH!

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—

ROOOOOAAAARRRRR!

A thunderous bellow, ancient and wrong, ripped through the canyon, so loud it didn't just shake their ears—it rattled their bones. A wall of concussive force struck them like a tidal wave, a shockwave of raw mana pressure exploding from deep within the fractured chasm ahead.

BOOOOM!!!

The air detonated.

A fiery-red flare cracked through the center of the battlefield like a spear of godlight, and the world split.

The ground beneath their feet heaved.

Layla's shield shot from her arm as she was launched backwards, crashing into a rock outcropping with a sickening CRUNCH. Jasmine flew sideways, tumbling mid-air as debris slammed into her ribs. Irina's spell detonated prematurely, the fire spiraling out of control before flickering away, its caster hurled through the haze in a burning arc.

Sylvie screamed, hands up too late, her half-formed barrier shattering like glass. She hit the ground hard and rolled, skidding through shattered stone and glowing mana dust.

And Astron—Astron vanished into the burst.

When the smoke settled, the canyon was no longer the same.

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.

SCREEEEEEEECH!!!

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.

The monster moved like a blur of ink and fire—lunging forward with impossible speed, its spined limbs slicing the stone beneath it into molten shards.

It was faster than anything they'd faced.

Too fast.

"SYLVIE—!"

A hand yanked her back, just as the creature's claw slammed into the spot where she'd stood. Stone shattered, glowing fragments slicing into the air where her chest would've been.

Sylvie tumbled backward—into Jasmine's arms.

The two of them hit the ground hard, rolling, but alive.

Jasmine's breath came short and sharp, but her grip didn't loosen.

"Hey—hey, look at me!" she snapped, eyes blazing.

Sylvie's pupils were wide, hands trembling, mana still sparking incoherently between her fingers.

"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.

The creature snarled—if it could be called that—and swung again, limb sweeping horizontally.

Jasmine ducked and pivoted, drawing the swing past Sylvie's retreating side.

"Left—!" Sylvie called.

Jasmine spun and delivered a crushing diagonal slash into the beast's joint as it overextended—WHAM!—forcing its limb down into the stone.

"Right!" Jasmine barked.

Sylvie was already casting—Burst Pin Glyph, a concentrated spark of binding light that exploded in a crack of gold, blinding the monster's right eye socket for three seconds.

FLASH!

The creature shrieked, staggering half a step.

It wasn't much.

But it was a start.

