H. Academy 1031

Chapter	1031	 Narro 	wed
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Jasmine's blade struck true again—SLASH—carving through a groove in the monster's side that Sylvie had revealed moments earlier with a burst of glyph-light. But the follow-through... didn't land right.

The monster's body twisted—not just in defense, but in response. Its muscle fibers, if they could be called that, bent like molten vines and reformed mid-impact, dampening the strike. What should've staggered it didn't even slow it down.

Sylvie noticed it first.

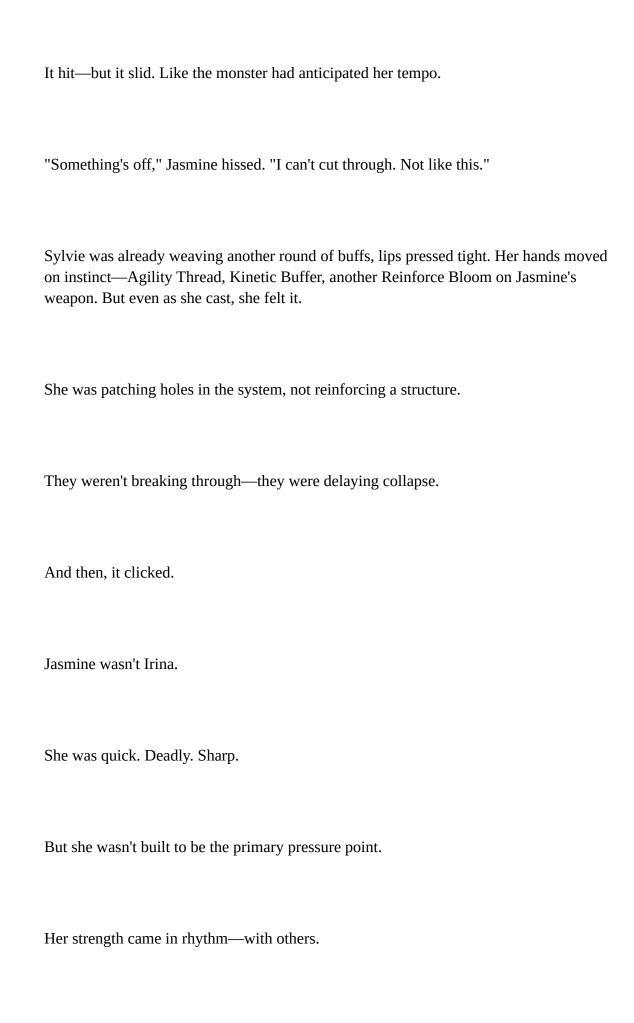
"That... should've hit deeper," she muttered, blinking hard.

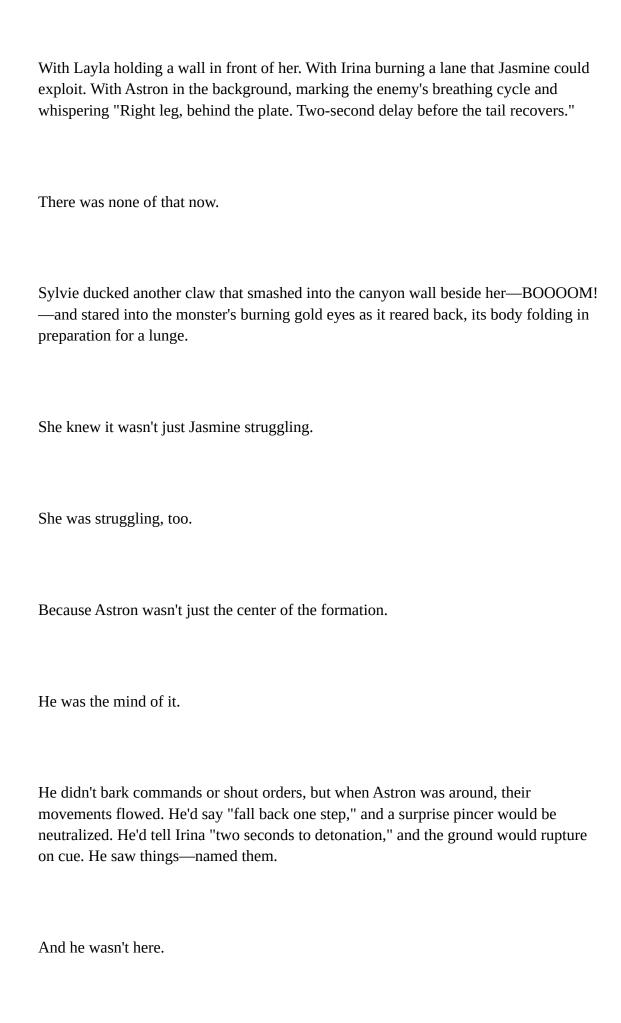
Jasmine didn't answer at first. She leapt back from another swipe, boots skidding across dust-slick stone, her breathing quick and ragged. "I know. I'm not getting through."

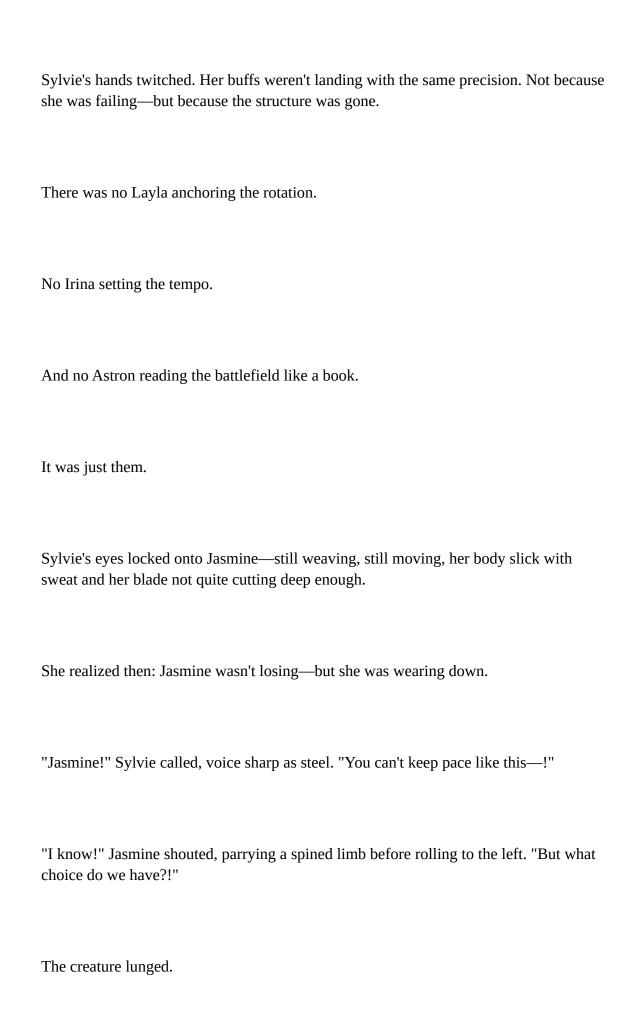
She rushed again, pivoted around the creature's flared limb and dove beneath its guard, blade flashing with wind-imbued momentum.

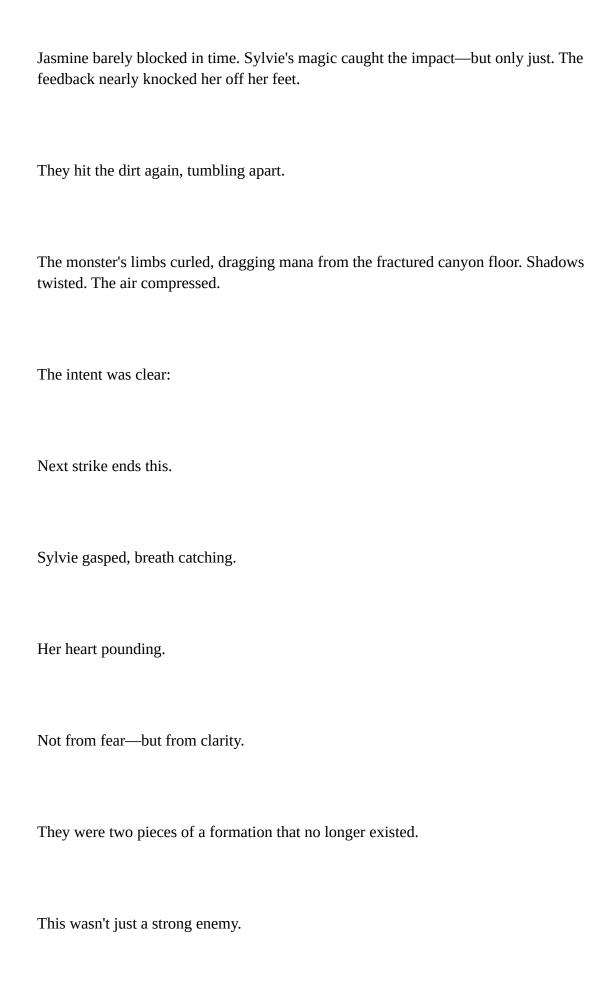
SLASH—KRSSHH!

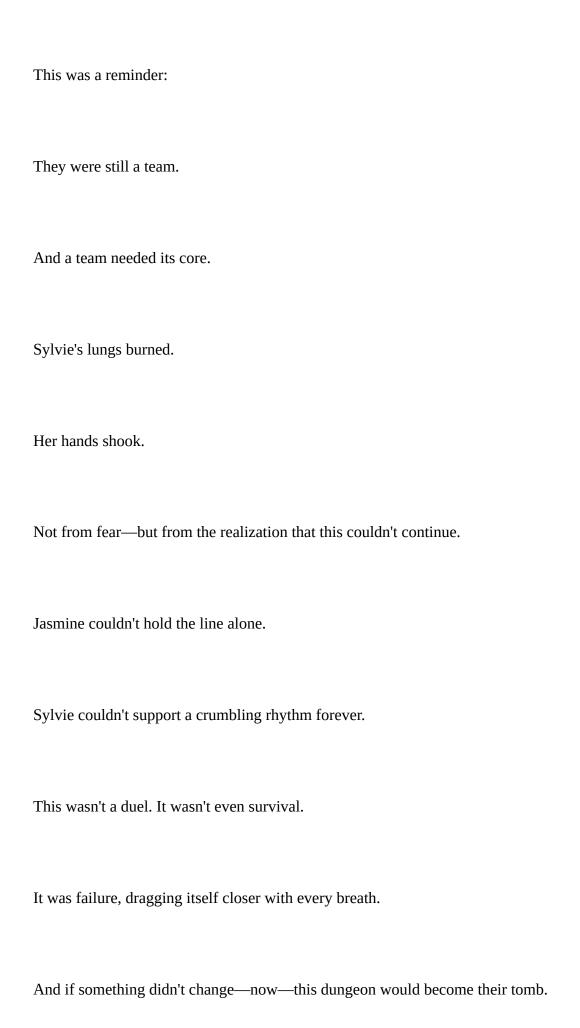
Another strike, across a thinner joint near the mid-ribs.



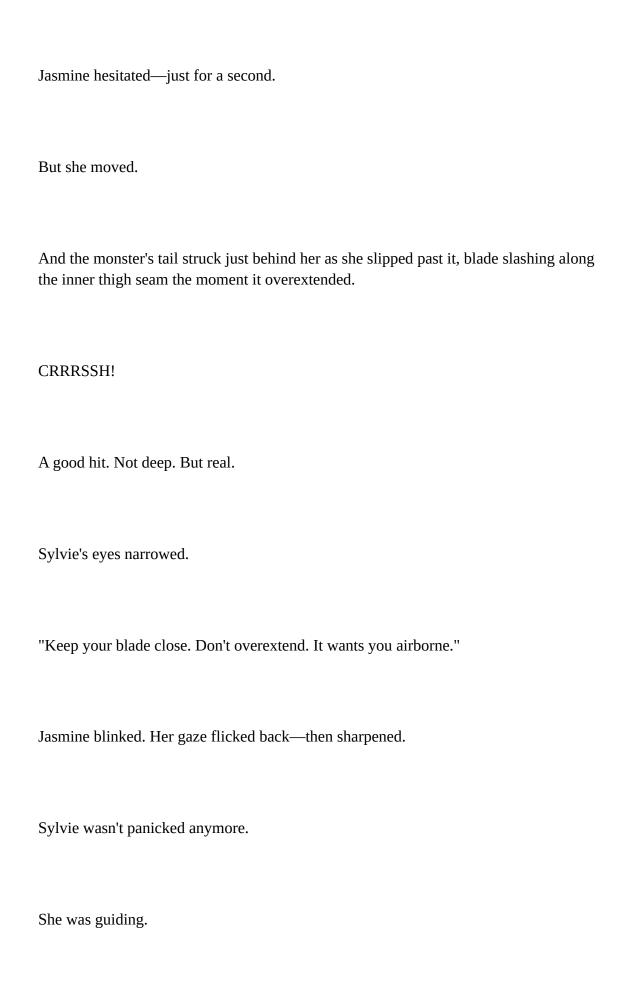


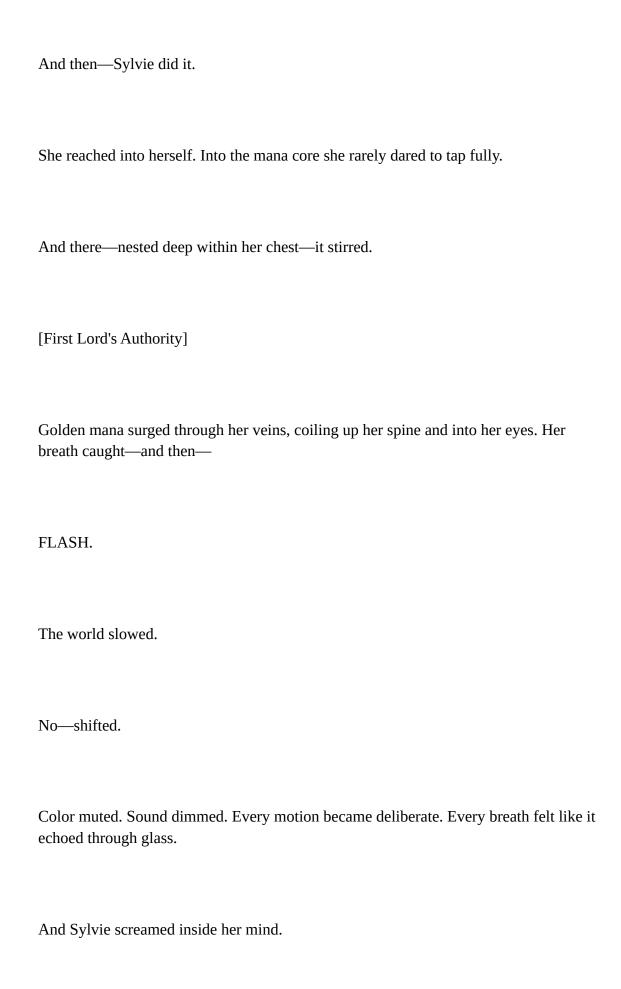




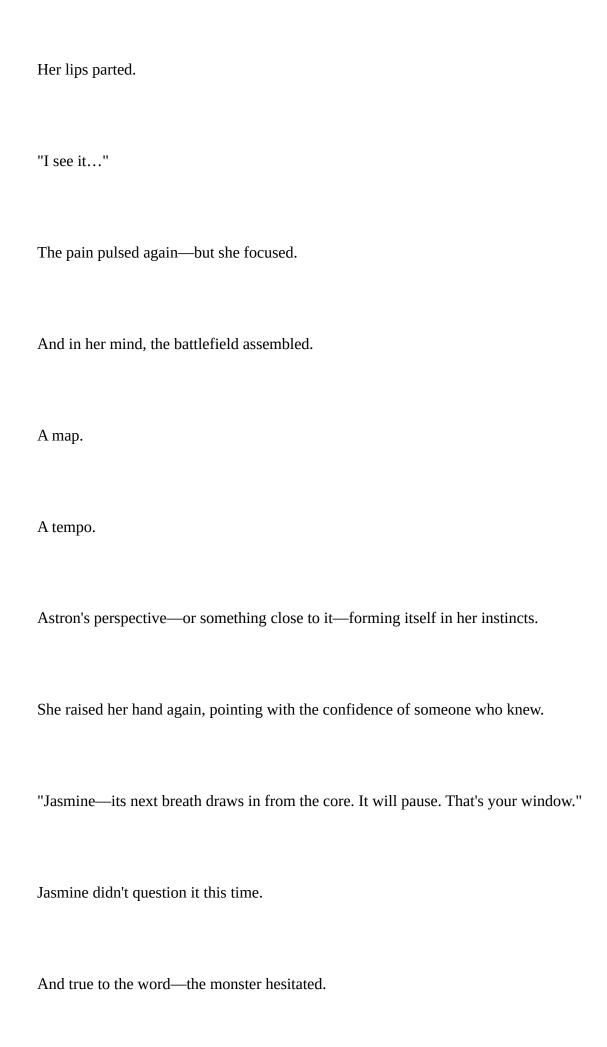


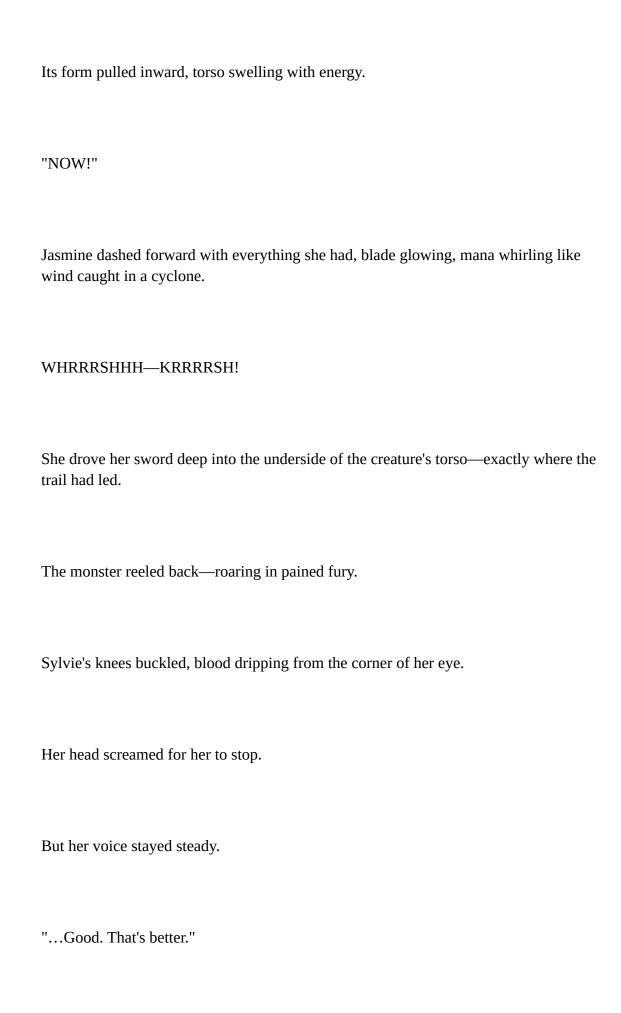
Her eyes locked onto Jasmine—still moving, still fighting, but every strike was slower, every dodge a fraction too close.
Sylvie's breath trembled as she lowered her stance, hands spreading slightly, fingers glowing with mana. The golden light crackled along her gloves—but this time, she didn't weave a glyph.
Instead, she whispered, low and steady:
"Alright, Astron. I can't think like you. I can't move like you. But"
She inhaled.
Then exhaled.
"I'll speak like you."
Her voice dropped, calm, clipped.
Like command distilled to essence.
"Jasmine. Back step. Left side soft—tail recoil is slower than the arms."





Her vision burned.
Like needles through her sockets. Like light piercing into places it didn't belong.
But she endured.
Because in the stillness, something appeared.
A trail.
A faint, golden thread etched into the fractured air.
Winding across the battlefield, past rubble and shadow, weaving around the monster's movements, outlining its shifts before they happened.
A path.
A prediction.
A plan.



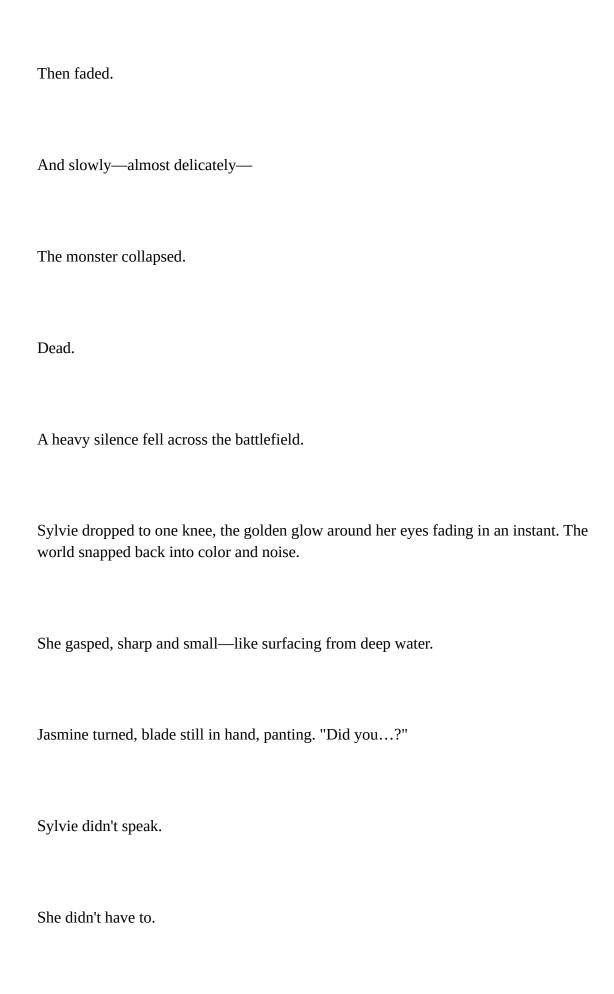


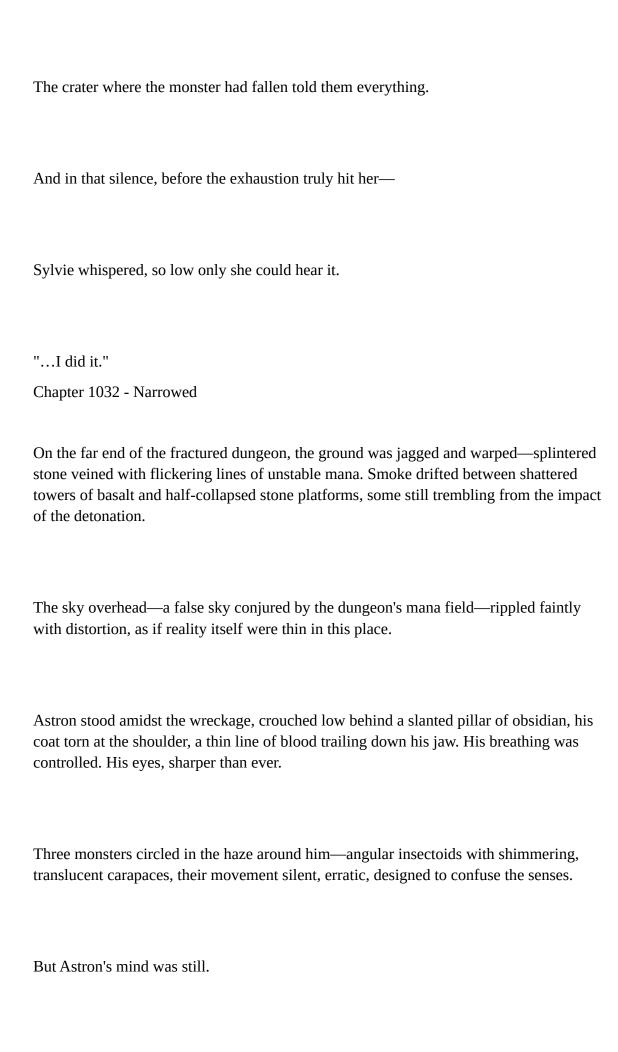
And through the blur of gold and agony—she pressed on.
Because this was more than reaction.
This was direction.
And for now—
She would be the one to lead.
The world pulsed around her, each beat of her heart echoing like a war drum in slow motion. Sylvie's body trembled—eyes burning, mana thrumming, blood slipping quietly from the corner of one eye.
And still, the trail burned before her.
That golden thread.
The path.
The answer.

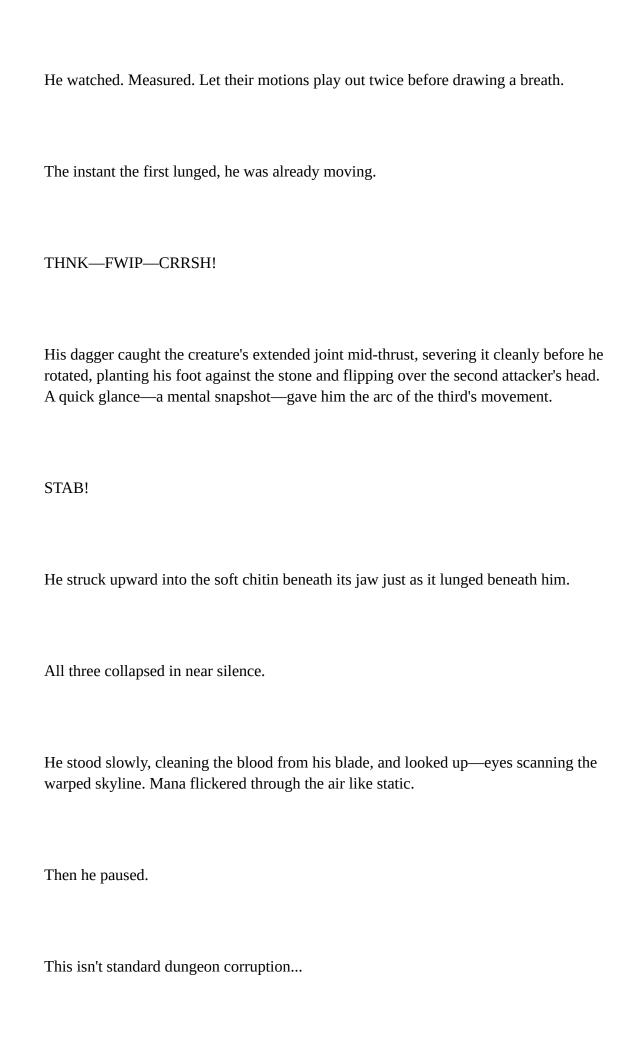
She raised her hand—not with elegance, but with absolute intent—and gathered her remaining mana.
It responded instantly.
Her golden energy coiled in her palm, condensing into a single point, then extending—stretching outward with silent precision.
A weapon of pure focus and will.
A lance.
It shimmered in the broken light—long, spiraled, etched with faint glyphs along its length that pulsed in time with her breathing. The air around it warped, humming with the same pressure as the Authority that sang through her veins.
And then—
She let go.
The lance didn't fall.
It floated.

Suspended above her outstretched hand like it was waiting—listening.
Her eyes followed the trail once more, locking onto the exact node where the golden thread tightened, where every movement in the monster's grotesque form converged.
There.
Right there.
"Go," Sylvie whispered—voice soft, breaking.
The lance shivered—
—and then launched.
FWWWWWWWWHHHTTT!
The air split apart with a piercing howl as the golden lance tore across the battlefield like a divine arrow loosed by judgment itself. The monster had no time to react—still reeling from Jasmine's last strike, its torso twisted, mouth opening again for another screech.
The lance pierced it.

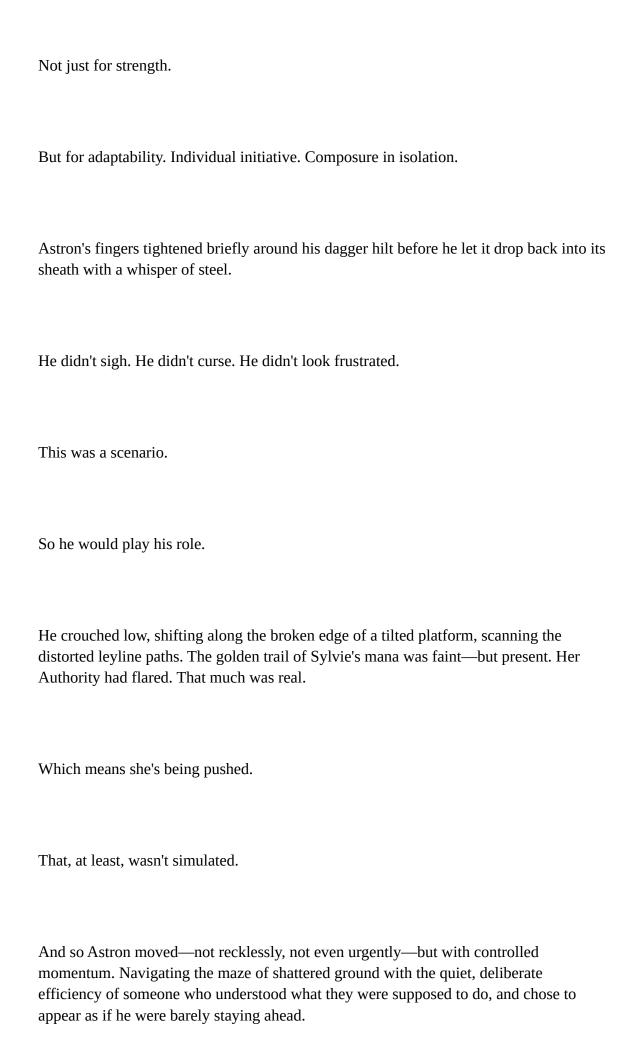
Not wildly.
Not vaguely.
But exactly where the golden thread had pointed—right beneath the second rib of its right flank, where distorted mana coils were exposed just for a moment mid-breath.
THUNK—SHHKRRRCH!
The impact wasn't explosive.
It was surgical.
The creature froze.
Its mouth still open, but the sound died before it could rise. Its limbs twitched once, then again—spasming—and then fell still.
The glowing sigils in its molten eyes flickered once.
Twice.







He turned in place, observing the terrain. The crater. The placement of the monsters. The way the team had been scattered—not to random points, but to equally distanced quadrants of the battlefield.
Astron stood still for a moment longer, the haze swirling faintly around his boots, the blood on his cheek already drying against the cooling air.
Scattered positioning. Strategic monster deployment. Environmental collapse timed to split the formation evenly.
No, this wasn't random.
The academy didn't make mistakes on days when external scouts were watching. Especially not this kind of mistake.
The pressure. The stakes. The psychological tension.
It was all part of it.
A test.
They're watching us.







The flame erupted around her like a living storm.

FWWWWOOSH!

Irina's boots scorched the cracked stone with every step. The obsidian ridge glowed under the rising heat, light pulsing in waves as mana condensed around her form. Her jacket had burned off at the shoulders now, revealing glowing lines of red glyphwork carved beneath her skin—channels of flame, active and pulsing.

The four enemies closed in fast, their armor shifting with each step, adapting. One opened its maw, spewing suppressive mist meant to weaken fire mana density. The others flanked, curving in a three-point maneuver.

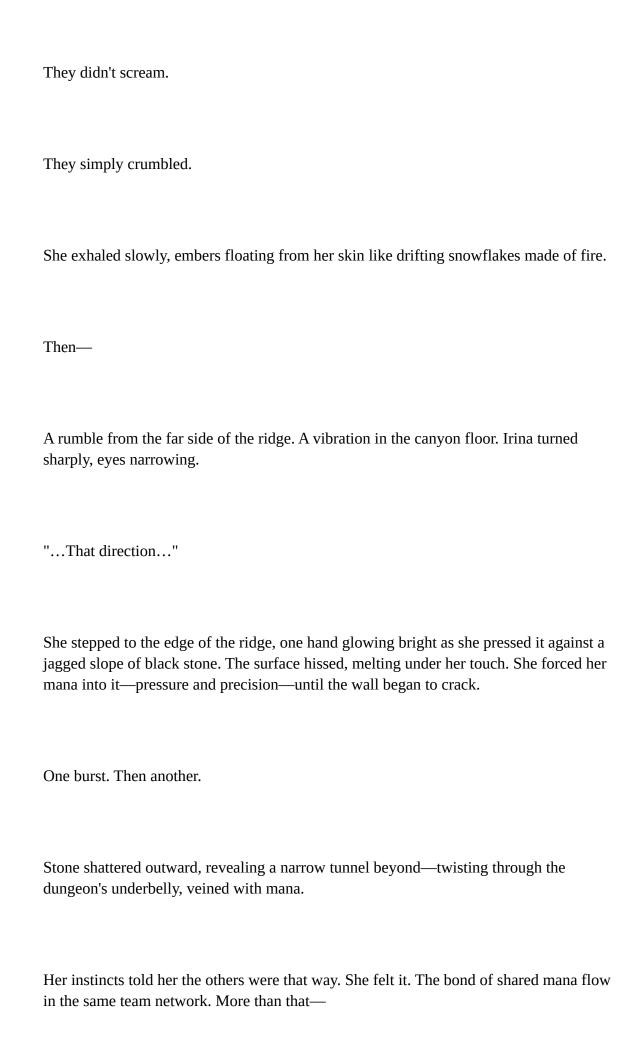
Irina didn't blink.

Crimson Bloom: Rupture Cycle.

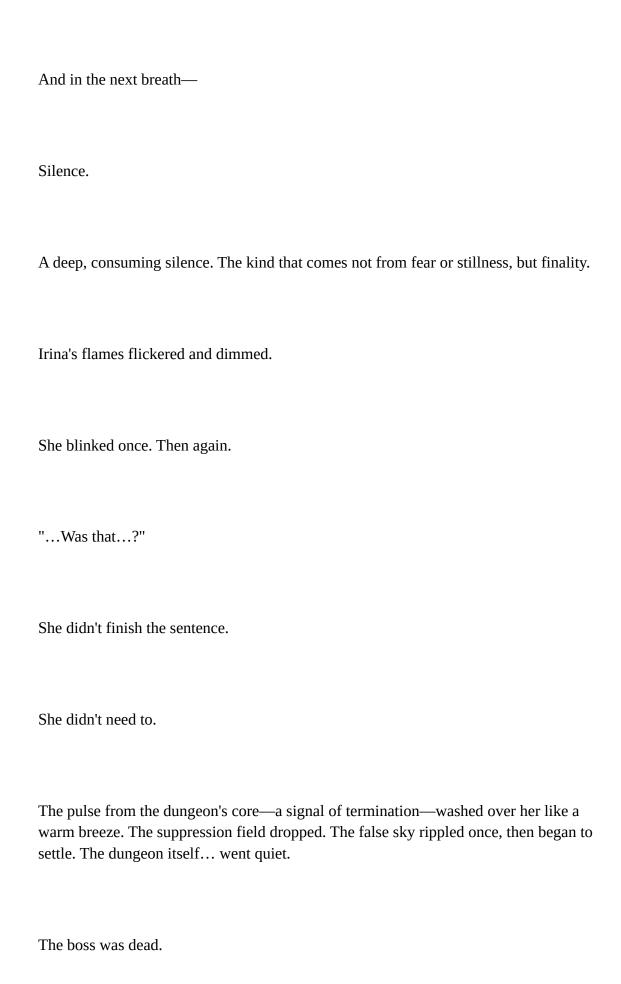
She snapped her fingers once—and the ground beneath them ignited in a lattice of prelaid runes.

BOOM—BOOM—KRRRRASH!

Each monster was engulfed in a pillar of flame, the air above them spiraling upward into vortexes as heat and pressure ripped through the obsidian field.



She felt Sylvie.
The girl's presence had always been gentle, calm, restrained. Even her spells, powerful as they were, moved with grace. But what Irina sensed now was different.
Roaring.
A surge of Authority.
Mana that screamed through the dungeon's core like sunlight focused through a burning lens.
Irina froze at the mouth of the tunnel, her hand still hot with flame.
Then—
Far in the distance—
A golden flare arced across the sky like a divine spear.
The entire dungeon shuddered.



Irina slowly pulled her hand back from the stone, her expression unreadable.
Then, almost begrudgingly, her lips pulled into a faint smirk.
"Didn't think you had that in you, Sylvie."
She turned from the tunnel, firelight still dancing across her back as she walked into the settling dust.
There was no need to break through now.
The dungeon had already been conquered.

Leonard sat at the edge of the courtyard garden, posture calm, hands loosely clasped in his lap as he spoke with the second of the marked cadets.
The conversation was careful. Measured.
Polite.

Just like the first.
And, just like the first—
Unremarkable.
The artifact hadn't stirred. Not even a whisper. No trace. No pull.
Not from the handshake.
Not from the conversation.
Not from proximity.
Empty.
Again.

He rose shortly after, giving the cadet a courteous nod and a final word of encouragement—his tone impeccable, like any professional scout who'd simply found someone "not quite the right fit."

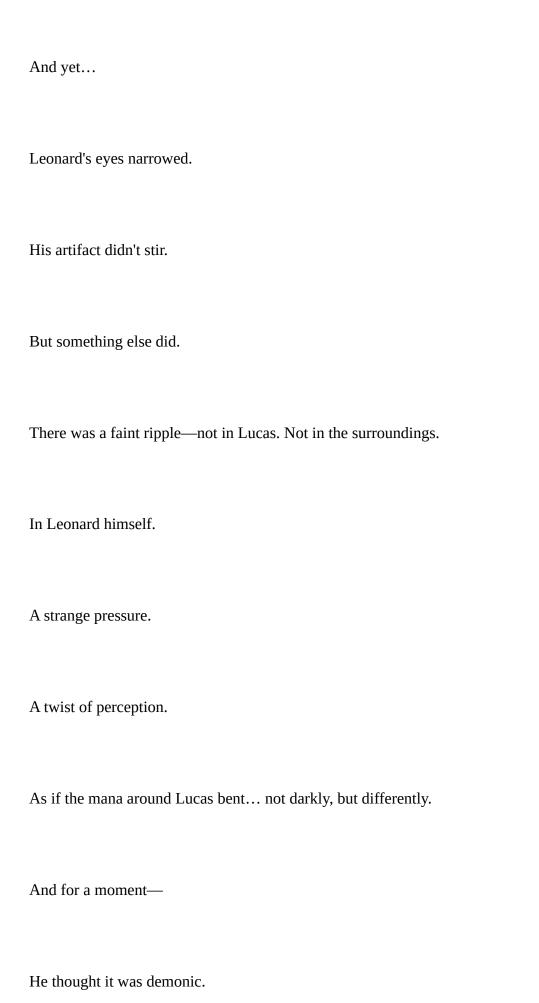
And that was true.	
In every sense.	
As he walked along the pathway that split through the sculpture garde sigil still faint beneath his tunic, Leonard's thoughts sharpened.	en, the crescent-
Two more names crossed out.	
Which left seven.	
Each one would take more time.	
Each one would yield fewer chances.	
The solar fragment tethered to him was already showing signs of atter academy's ambient pressure had grown worse since morning—perhap whatever that earlier presence had been.	
And then—	
He stopped.	

Mid-step.
His hand didn't reach for a weapon. His mana didn't flare.
But his body knew before his mind did.
The world shifted.
Not violently.
But subtly.
As if the light around a certain student bent just slightly too much.
Not enough to break.
But enough to feel like the world didn't want you to look directly at him.
Leonard turned.

Slowly.
His eyes narrowed.
A boy. Chapter 1033 They
A boy.
Not seated.
Walking.
White hair like wind-silver thread. Not soft. Not aged. Sharp—cut clean, deliberate, and somehow too still as he moved through the corridor's filtered sunlight.
His steps were slow, unhurried.
But they carried weight.
And that face—

Handsome. Angular. Chiseled like sculpture, but not cold. Not vain. A face that held the kind of balance that made the eye linger.
Even from this distance, Leonard could make out the clarity in those glacier-blue eyes, the perfectly tailored uniform, the way his coat barely shifted with his stride—as if he moved through the world without letting it touch him.
Lucas Middleton.
Leonard's recognition was immediate. Inevitable.
He didn't need to check the slate.
He didn't need to confirm the crest on his collar.
Everyone knew that face.
The heir of the Middleton Family. The so-called "Twin Star."
One of the most talented bloodlines in the modern magical world.
Leonard, who had studied nearly every major family history, knew exactly who Lucas was.

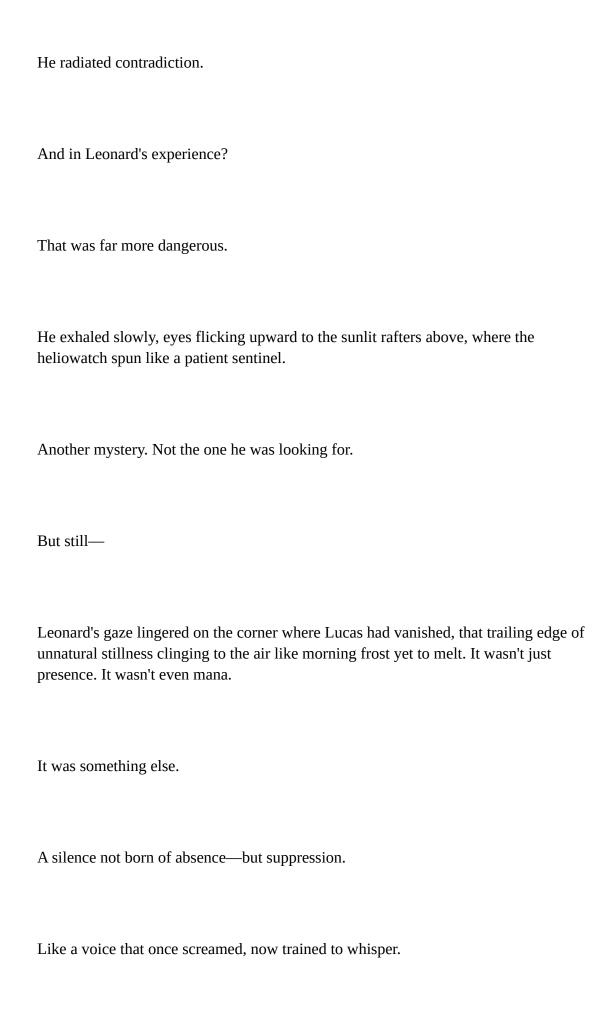
More importantly—
He knew who he wasn't.
Lucas Middleton could not be the Kin of the Moon.
His lineage was known.
Registered.
Examined.
Scrutinized.
He was a twin—and every record verified him as the elder by three minutes. The family's rightful successor. Baptized in Middleton rites. Given the mark of sun-aspect mana at birth, just like his sister.
Everything about him screamed clarity.
Too known. Too complete. Too clean.



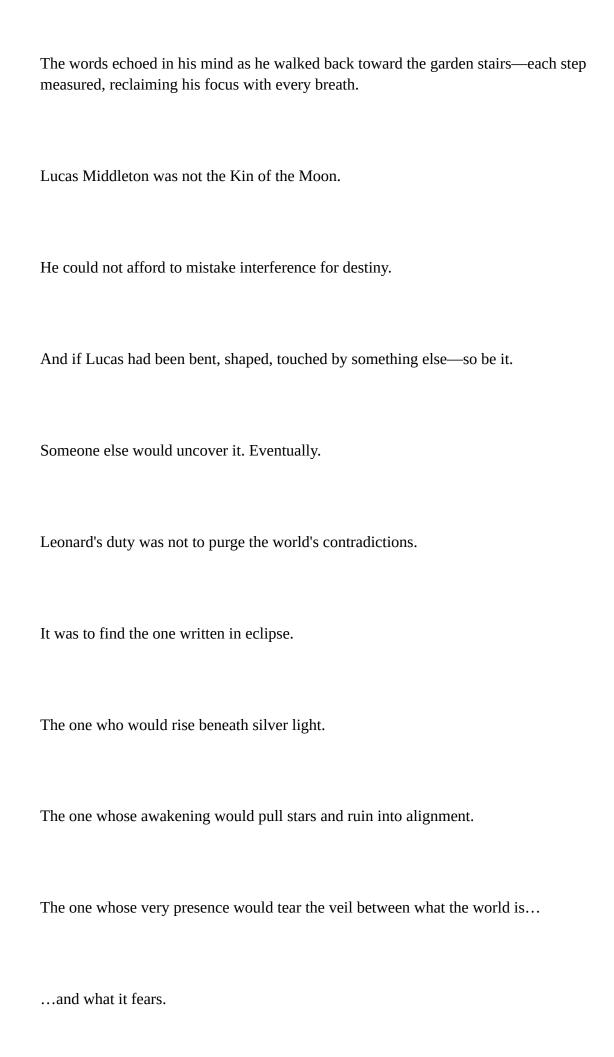
That cold, crawling aura. The way the sunlight curved around his figure—not rejecting him, but failing to settle on him. The same feeling that Velvetin had briefly radiated—
But no.
Leonard focused deeper. Peered not just with his eyes, but through the strands of sunlight-tethered insight, guided by the lingering echo of his heliowatch.
No mark.
No contract.
No residue.
Nothing demonic.
Just wrong.
Twisted.
But not by choice.

Leonard's breath caught for just a second.
'What are you?'
Lucas passed him without turning. His eyes fixed straight ahead. Not watching. Not wandering. Not searching.
Just walking.
Yet Leonard could feel it—
He knew.
He knew he was being watched.
And chose to say nothing.
The moment passed.
Lucas turned the corner into the inner corridor, disappearing behind a line of projection glass windows.

Leonard remained still.
Silent.
His hand slowly drifted to his chest, where the artifact remained cool and unmoving.
No reaction.
No resonance.
But his instincts—a different sense altogether—whispered.
'He's not the Kin.'
That much, he was sure of.
But something in him is no longer bound to just one side.
Lucas Middleton didn't radiate prophecy.



And it called to something deep within Leonard.
A part of him not shaped by sunlight.
A part of him that still remembered standing beneath the cathedral vaults, blood on the stone, and hearing a prophecy that should not have existed.
His fingers tightened slightly at his side.
Tempting.
To follow.
To listen to that wrongness and unravel it thread by thread.
But no.
He exhaled slowly, deliberately, and turned away.
"That is not my path."



The Kin.
And with his solar thread still active, his list narrowed, and the academy growing more volatile by the hour—
He had no time for distractions.
No matter how loud they might become.
Leonard ascended the outer steps without pause, his coat catching briefly in the wind as he reached the overlooking balcony.

Lucas's steps echoed softly down the corridor, his polished shoes tapping rhythmically against marble-veined stone. The filtered sunlight streaming in from the tall projection-glass windows laced across his coat in golden lines, but never quite touched him—like light refracting around a body not fully present.
He didn't look back.
He didn't need to.

That gaze—he had felt it.
Not the hungry kind the scouts wore.
Not the wary kind most cadets adopted around him.
No.
This one had been examining.
Lucas narrowed his eyes slightly as he continued walking, letting his thoughts work in the silence. His memory flicked through faces and profiles—names and bloodlines, records, futures.
Who was that?
The boy had presence. That much was clear. Not in the flashy, aristocratic way. But something deeper, quieter, something that had grazed the edges of Lucas's awareness like a gloved hand brushing too close to a broken seal.
He combed through every record he could recall. Every notable cadet, every name with potential weight. And yet—

Nothing.
Not a trace. No association. No flagged lineage. No mention in any of the briefings he had absorbed.
And yet
Strange.
His eyes narrowed slightly as he turned another corner, steps slower now.
Why does he look familiar?
There was a fragment—a flicker—like a dream remembered only at the edge of waking. Not in the face itself, but in the feeling it stirred. As if he had once seen that boy standing not here, in the academy—but elsewhere.
In a hall of old stone.
In a cathedral steeped in silence and ancient weight.
In a place that did not exist in the timeline he knew.

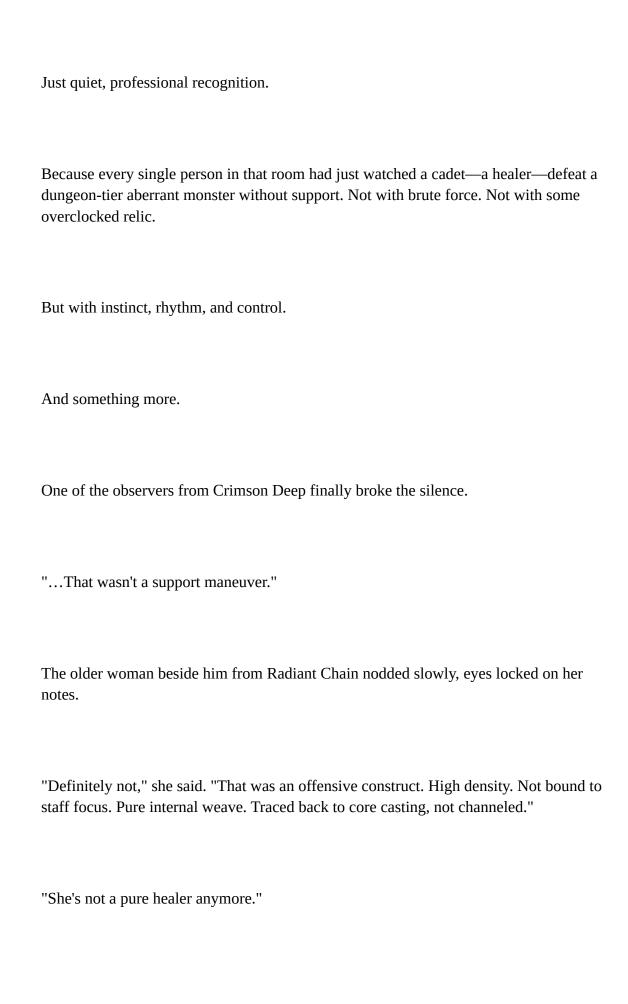
Lucas's hand tightened slightly at his side, hidden by the folds of his coat.
Another change? Or just a thread I never noticed before?
Either way, he filed the image away. Locked it into the vault of memory where his instincts stored pieces that didn't yet make sense.
But not now.
Not yet.
Because there were more important things to take note of.
He reached the end of the corridor and exited through the arched entryway, stepping into the northern sector of the academy—the place where student records were processed, where the rune-coded access logs were maintained, where restricted personnel passed through more often than students ever realized.
Lucas's gaze sharpened.
His destination was clear.
Because if they had shown themselves—if that butler had appeared—then that meant certain backdoors would start opening. Certain patterns would accelerate.

That was something Lucas could make use of.
If they were moving already—if that veiled creature had stepped onto academy grounds in open daylight—then the gears were no longer merely turning in secret. They were grinding forward.
And if they were bold enough to appear, then they had sensed him, too.
Even without the demonic core, even without the contract that once tethered him to something darker, the remnants remained. The ash of Belthazor burned cold in his blood —and that thing had to have felt it.
Which meant a door was about to open.
Lucas stepped into the long hallway of the northern administrative wing, the cold manastabilized stone humming faintly beneath his boots. His pace remained casual, composed. But his mind raced ahead, already forming the next ten steps, the next lies, the next pressure points to exploit.
He knew how to move in shadow.
And more importantly—
He knew how to be seen when it mattered.

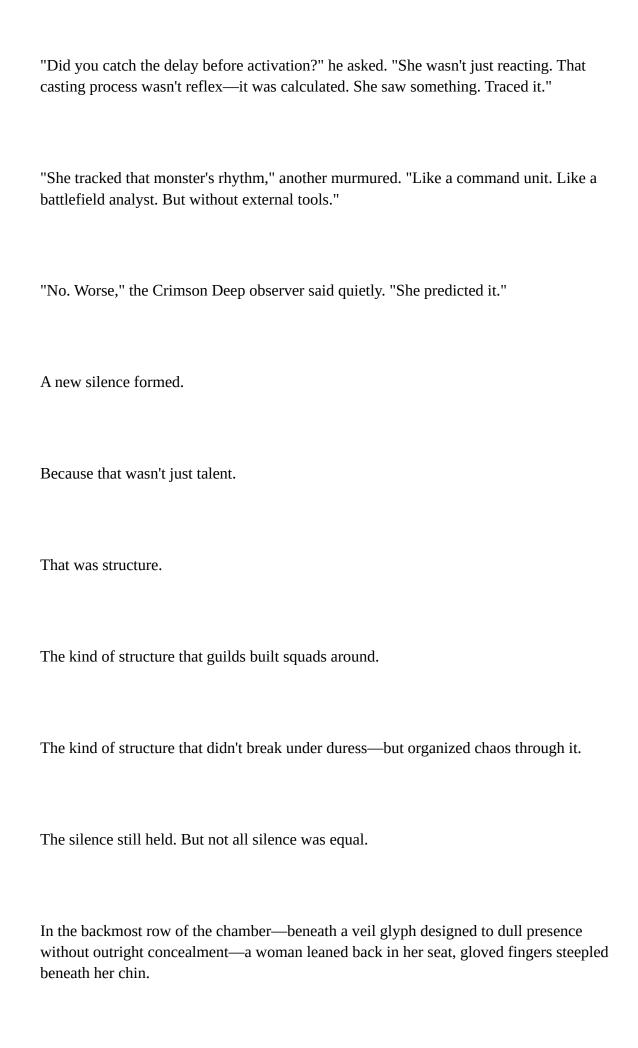
Just then—
A sound.
Soft. Syrupy.
A voice that slithered from the side like silk dragged through oil.
"~You" Chapter 1034 They
The room had fallen still.
No one spoke during the last five minutes of footage. Not as the ground buckled, not as the creature emerged. Not even when Layla and Irina's absence became obvious—when it was just two cadets left against something that didn't belong in a standard dungeon sequence.
The only sound was the faint ticking of crystal time counters and the occasional scratch of stylus against mana-slate.
And then—

The lance.
The moment Sylvie raised her hand, every scout leaned forward.
Not all at once.
Not dramatically.
But intentionally.
Together.
The golden glow, the spiraled weapon, the crackling hum of Authority—
It wasn't just another glyph.
It wasn't healing.
It wasn't reinforcement.
It wasn't utility.

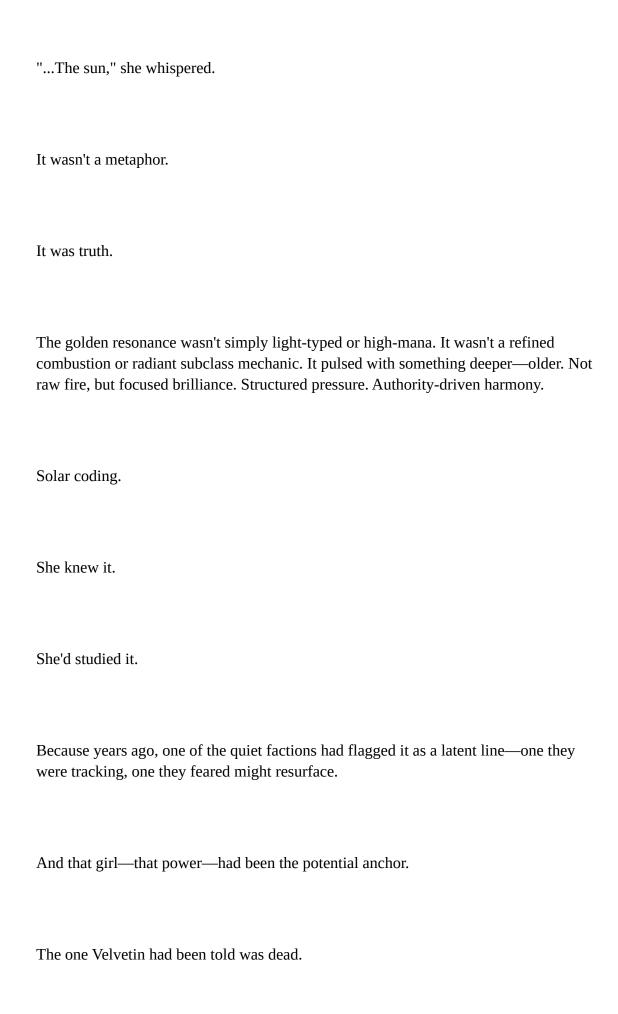
It was something else.
Something new.
When the lance launched, a visible pulse erupted through the screen's mana feedback interface—brief, dense, high-tiered, categorized in-system as:
[UNREGISTERED STRIKE GOLD-SPECTRUM CLASSIFIED INTERFERENCE: NULL]
Then came silence.
And then—
The kill.
The scouts sat there, not frozen—but calculating.
No cheers.
No exclamations.



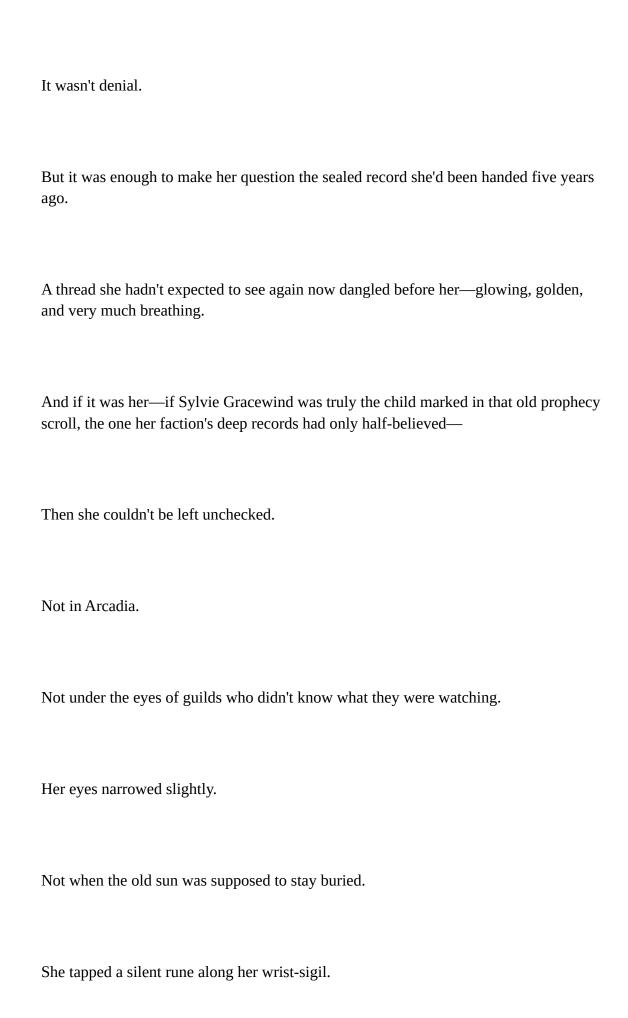
"No," the woman murmured. "She's something else now."
Several of the scouts had already begun rewriting her profile on their slates.
Sylvie Gracewind
— Previously: Healing Specialist / Support-Oriented
— Revised: Dual-Class Candidate
— Observed Trait: Golden-threaded Projection
— Suspected: Authority-Based Mana Channeling
— Possible Class Merge: Healer + Strategist / Precision Spell Lancer
"She's awakened something," said the youngest scout near the lower tier, speaking with cautious reverence. "I don't know what to call it yet—but it's real."
The Dawn's Cross tactician frowned slightly, eyes narrowing as he skimmed the mana data logs.



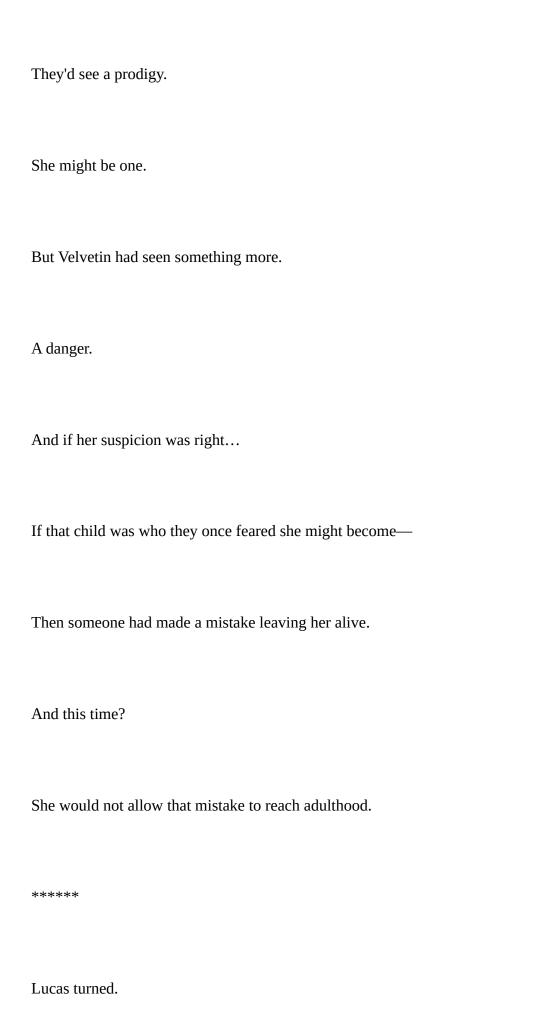
Velvetin.
Affiliated publicly with a diplomatic liaison cell under the Federation's neutral archives bureau.
Affiliated privately with something far less visible.
Her eyes were half-lidded. Her expression unreadable.
But as the replay looped—frame by frame—of Sylvie Gracewind raising her hand, the faint golden trail etching itself into the air, the spear forming, the kill landing—
Something beneath her skin prickled.
Not alarm.
Recognition.
Not of the girl.
Of the energy.



An accident. A covered trail. Old bloodlines extinguished. Demon contractors had taken care of it. There was no official follow-up because the contracts between internal shadow groups weren't centrally filed. Each syndicate did their own work.
She hadn't questioned the silence.
Until now.
Now?
The signature danced before her eyes again in high-sensitivity rewind. Golden pulse. Spiral glyphs. The flash-frame when Sylvie's mana saturated the canyon space and forced the system to issue a NULL classification tag.
It was elegant. Subtle. Precise.
But unmistakably Sun-rooted.
Velvetin's brow furrowed, lips barely parting.
"Alive?"
It wasn't confirmation.



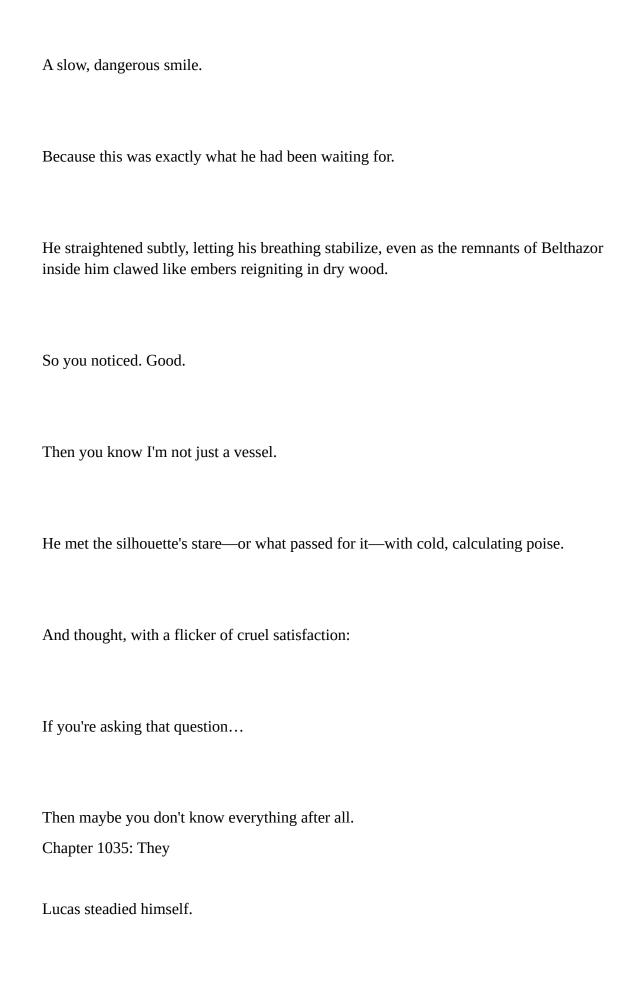




Slowly. Deliberately.
His gaze met the source of the voice—if it could even be called that.
The air near the far corner of the hallway shimmered, fractured faintly like glass under tension. And from within that distortion, a silhouette emerged—not fully formed, not anchored to the world. A figure that wore the shape of a man, but was made of shadowed contours and slow-breathing nothingness.
It was the same presence he had seen outside.
The same butler.
Only now, there was no crowd. No watching eyes.
No reason for it to pretend.
Lucas felt it immediately.
Pressure.

Like the air had thickened threefold. Like his bones had been steeped in mercury. His breath hitched, barely. A pulse echoed through his chest—once, twice—too heavy, too slow.
This is not something that walks the same world as I do.
His fingers twitched at his sides, not in fear, but in restraint. Because every instinct in his body screamed to kneel, to collapse, to avert his gaze before it shattered something fragile inside him.
But Lucas forced himself still.
Even as his spine burned with resistance.
Even as his lungs clawed for steady rhythm.
Even as his mana, usually refined and precise, began to spiral like oil trying to burn underwater.
He did not flinch.
Not now.
Not in front of them.

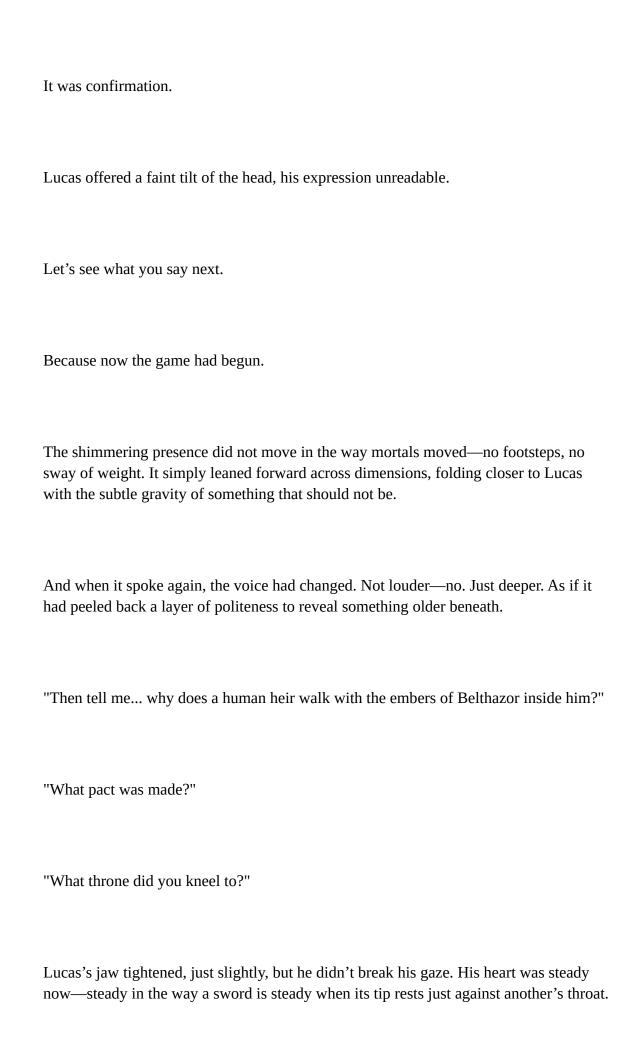
And then—
The voice returned. Clearer now. Less a whisper, more a presence that leaned into him.
"Why do you have his energy inside you?"
Lucas felt it then. The recognition. Not of him—not of Lucas Middleton.
But of Belthazor.
The fallen prince. The corrupted star. The one who devoured names and walked with broken crowns in his wake.
The voice wasn't merely asking.
It was accusing.
And yet—
Lucas smiled inwardly.

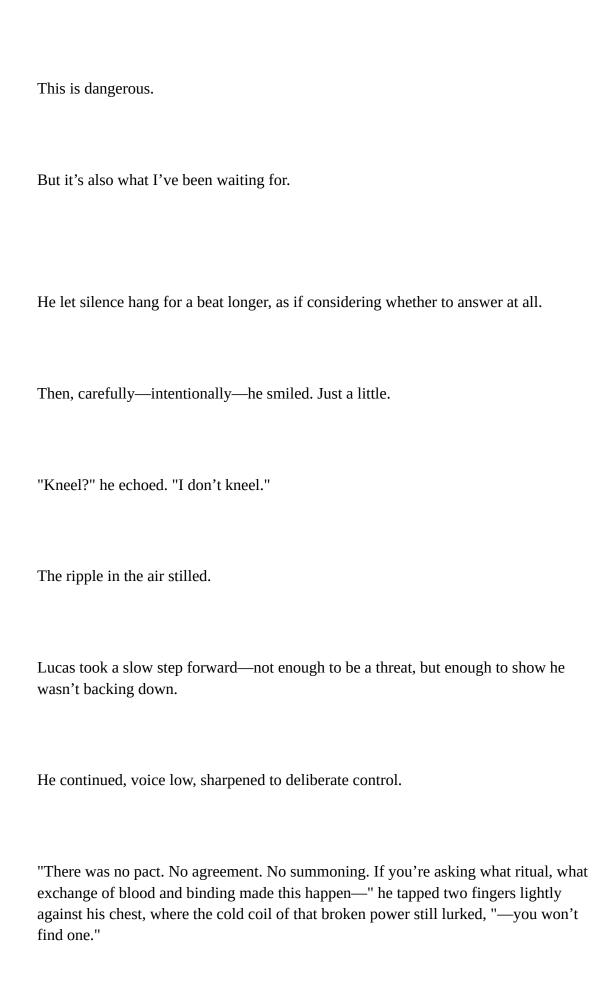


He drew in a breath—slow, sharp, measured like a blade being unsheathed—and let the pressure settle over his skin like a second layer. The ache in his bones remained, the coiling weight in his gut still churned, but he pushed them down.
Buried them beneath the calm he had cultivated through countless nights clawing at fate.
His eyes, cold and unwavering, locked onto the silhouette before him.
And then, with a voice as smooth as the silence before a storm, he spoke.
"Are you talking about Belthazor?"
The words rang clean through the corridor—clear, confident, and deliberate.
He saw the shimmer ripple.
A pause.
Like something behind that presence leaned back slightly, reassessing.
Good.

knew what rested inside him—or what used to—then there was no point in playing dumb. Better to steer the direction himself. Better to show that he didn't fear the weight of that name.
Belthazor.
He let it hang in the air like a weapon.
The ancient name of the demon that had once burned in his soul—now broken, scattered, sealed in fragments deep beneath his flesh and mind.
A silence stretched between them.
Then, the voice returned—
Not louder. Not sharper.
But closer.
"So you know his name."
It wasn't surprise.

Lucas had made the first move. No hesitation, no pretense of ignorance. If they already



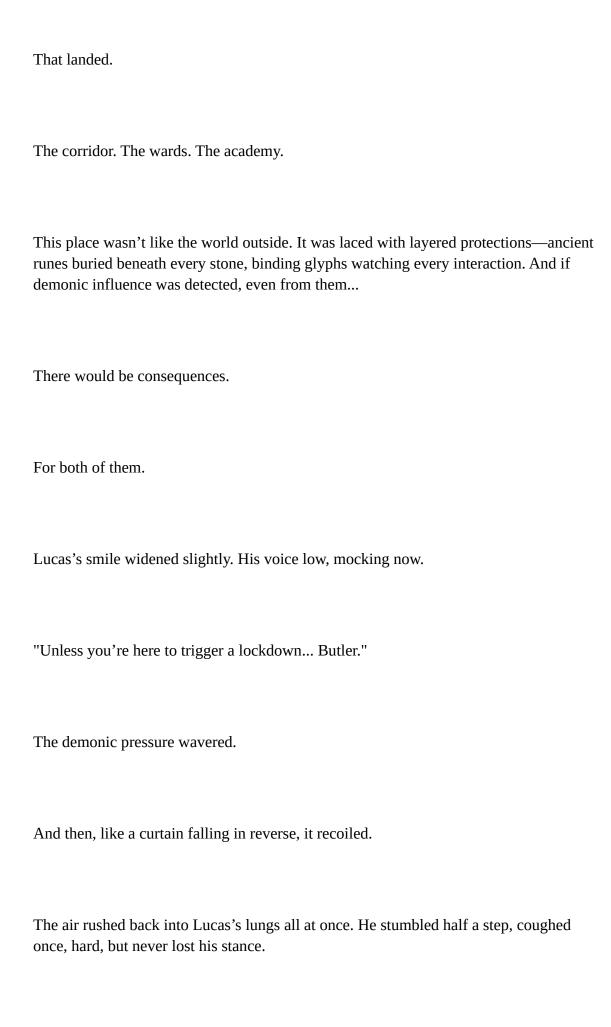


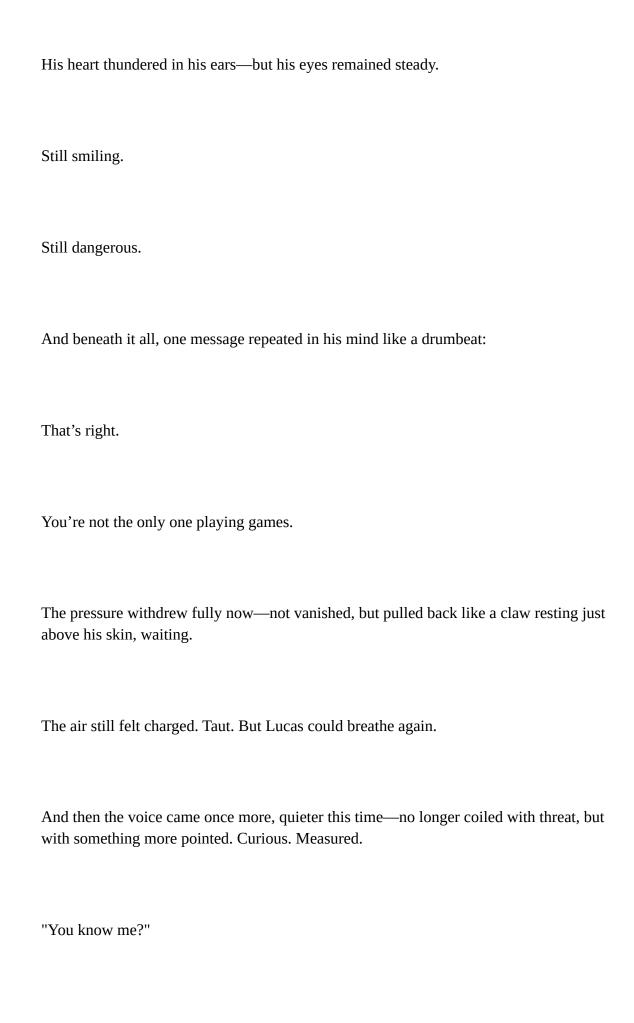
Another step. The air crackled faintly. The corridor, so empty moments ago, now felt crowded, as though the weight of two realities had begun to converge.
Lucas's fingers hovered near the edge of his coat, not reaching for a weapon—just steadying himself against what he knew was coming. His voice remained level, each word carved with deliberate precision.
"Belthazor came to me."
The presence pulsed. The ripple shivered like oil reacting to fire.
And then—
"Belthazor came to you?"
The voice no longer echoed—it folded into the world, like a hook anchoring into the very fabric of space.
Lucas nodded once. Calm. Controlled.
"Yes."
That was the moment it shifted.

The air collapsed.
Like a trapdoor opening above him—no motion, no sound—just pressure.
Crushing.
His lungs stopped.
His chest seized.
Not with pain—no. With force.
Like invisible coils had wrapped around his ribs, tightening with every heartbeat. The corridor around him faded, colors draining into gray-white static. And worse still—
He felt it.
Something entering him.
A thin, piercing thread of foreign mana, vile and ancient.

Demonic. But not Belthazor's. Not even close.
It wasn't wrath.
It wasn't hunger.
It was judgment.
Lucas's knees buckled half an inch before he caught himself.
Breathe.
He couldn't.
His skin burned. His limbs numbed. And that creeping pressure kept digging deeper—searching—trying to unearth whatever truth he was hiding.
Then—
"Lying in front of me will not do any good."

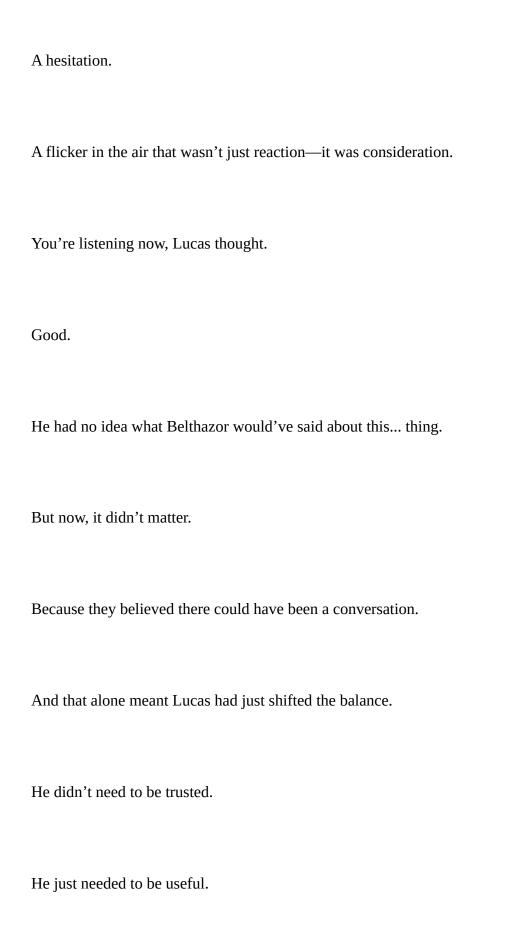


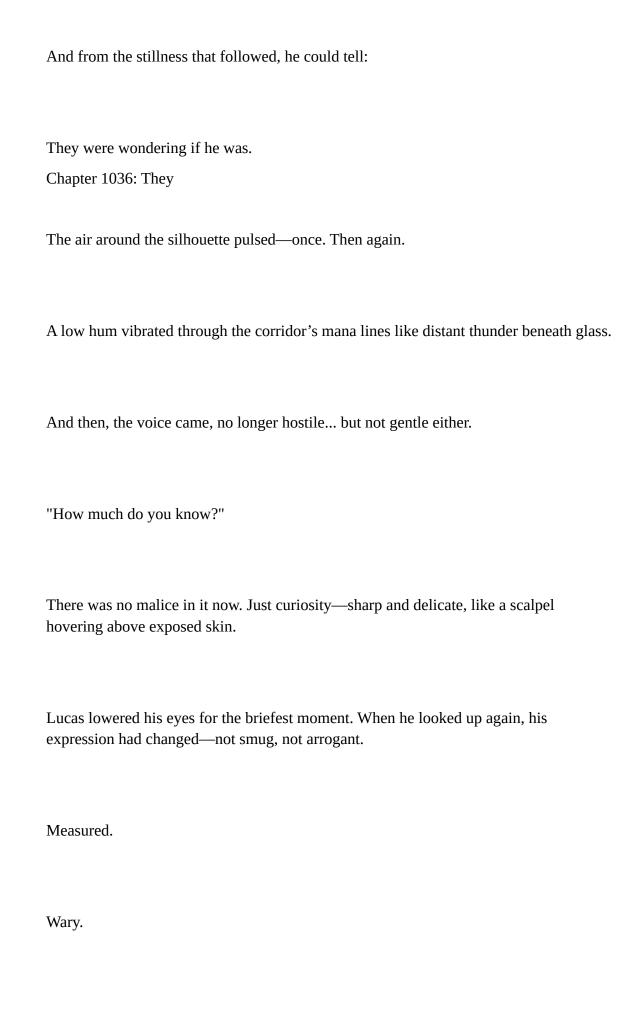




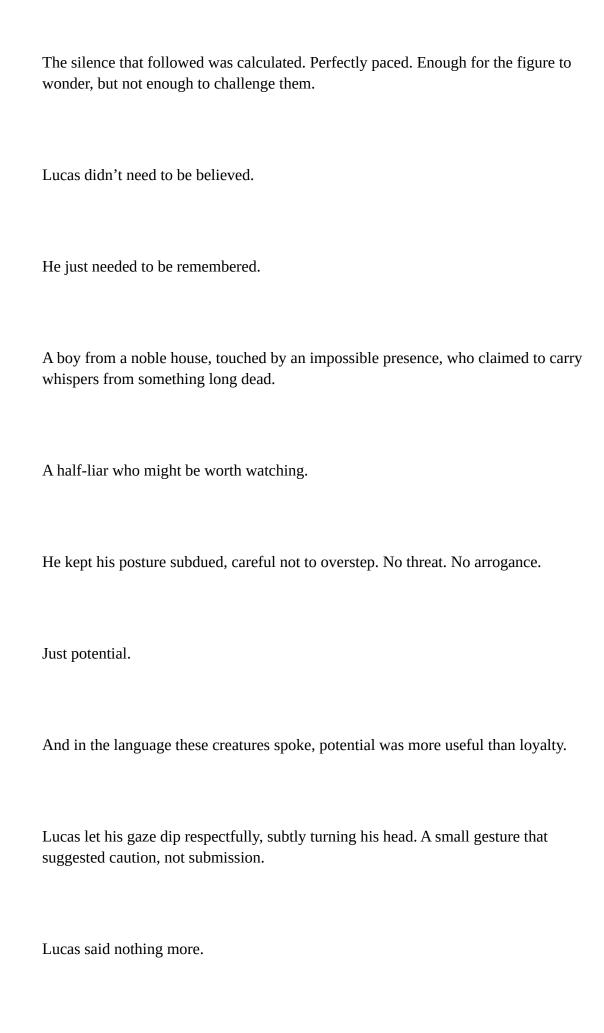
It echoed faintly, but not into the hallway—into him. Not like a voice spoken a like something brushing along the inner wall of his thoughts.	loud, but
Lucas didn't hesitate.	
He lifted his chin slightly, brushing a gloved thumb under the edge of his collar adjusting it—casual, confident, just enough to provoke.	r as if
"Belthazor spoke highly of you."	
A lie.	
A bold one.	
But that was the thing with creatures like them—they never truly knew how moved own kind had said behind closed doors. And in a realm built on secrecy, sometimely certain was more powerful than being right.	
He watched the silhouette closely, searching for any flicker, any twitch, any rip it didn't respond immediately.	ple. But
That was good.	
Lucas pressed just a little further, carefully layering tone and weight into his w	ords.

"He said you moved like a rumor."
"That you were the hand that passed through courtrooms and coffins without leaving a mark."
The shimmer stilled.
No laughter.
But the silence that followed wasn't rejection. It was recognition. Maybe not of the words—but of the myth.
And so Lucas let his voice drop a touch more, just enough to feel like something earned, something shared.
"He said"
"you were the only one he couldn't see coming."
There it was.
A pause.

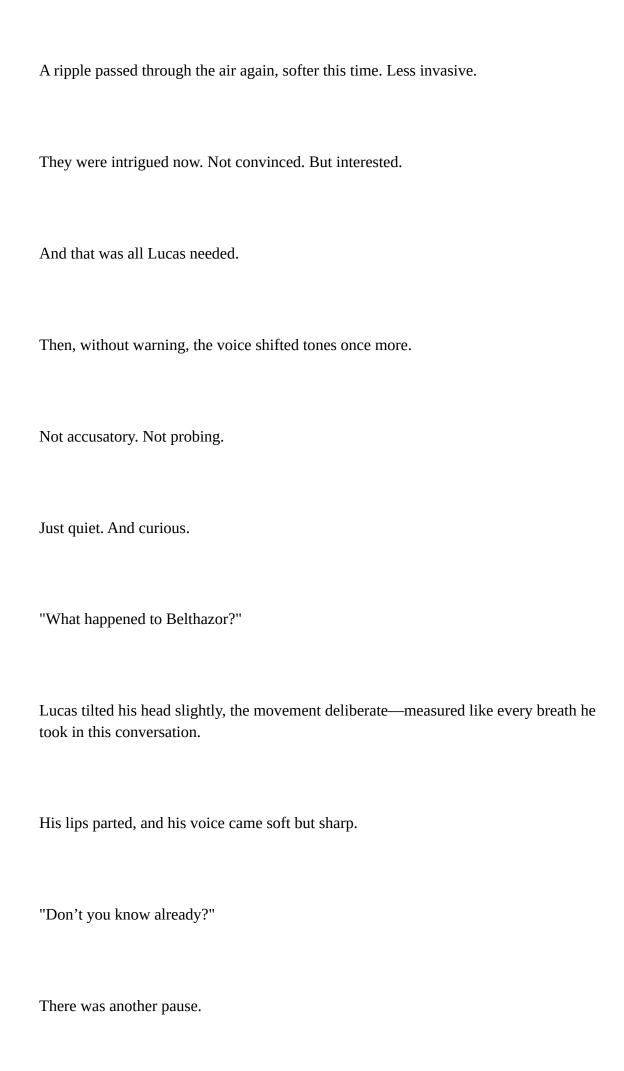




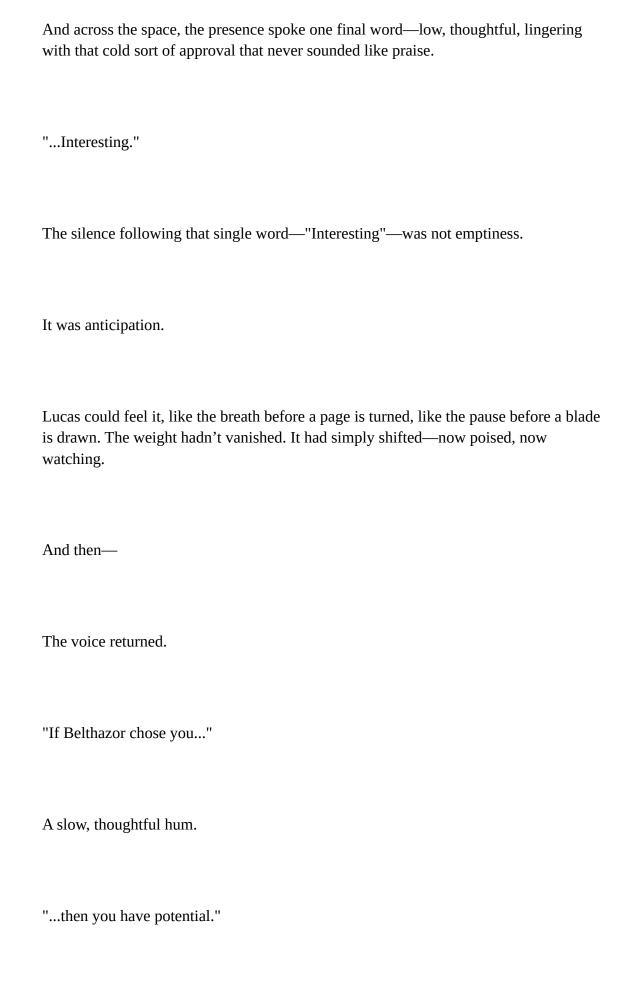
Exactly tl	he way someone should look when they knew something they shouldn't.
stretched,	t a slow breath through his nose, as if weighing something. The silence, and when he finally spoke, his voice was quieter. Controlled. Like he was carefully around a name that carried weight.
"Not eno	ugh to matter."
A beat.	
Then—he	e added, just loud enough for the figure to catch:
"But just	enough that saying too much would be the end of me."
	d toward the edge of the shimmer again, letting a note of tension slip into his ot faked, but directed.
"Belthazo	or didn't say much. But he made one thing clear."
"There ar	e names you don't echo, and games you don't interrupt. Yours"
He let the	e sentence drift, unfinished, like a secret half-spoken.



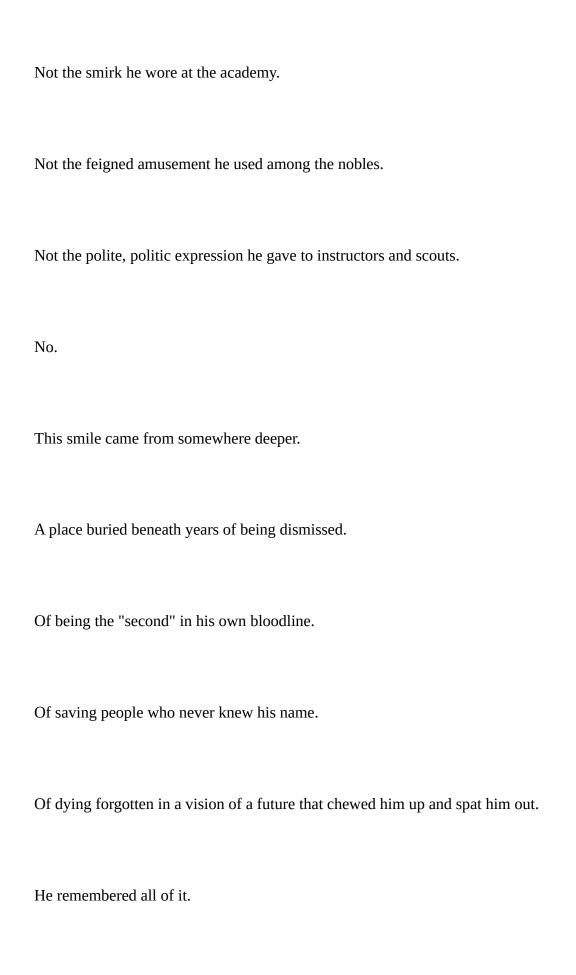
He didn't push.
He didn't plead.
He simply existed—like a closed door painted with warnings and rumors, the kind of door even the bold paused before opening.
And it worked.
A soft sound echoed from within the silhouette. Not quite a chuckle—something more abstract. Like breath filtered through ancient parchment.
Recognition.
Then came the voice again. Low. Whisper-smooth. Almost amused.
"If Belthazor spoke of us to you"
A pause.
"then he must have trusted you."

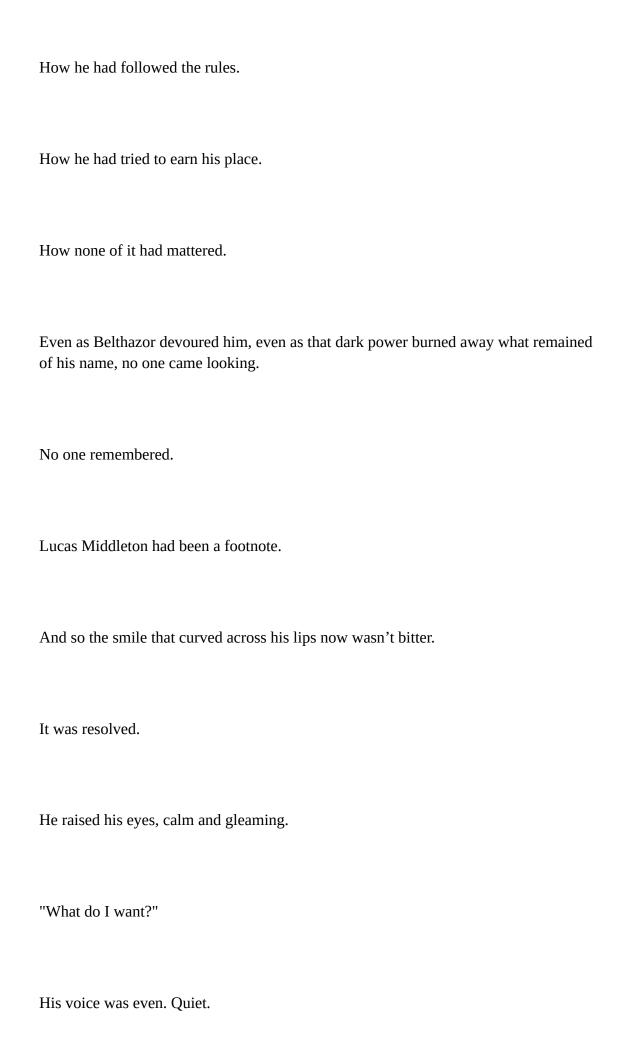


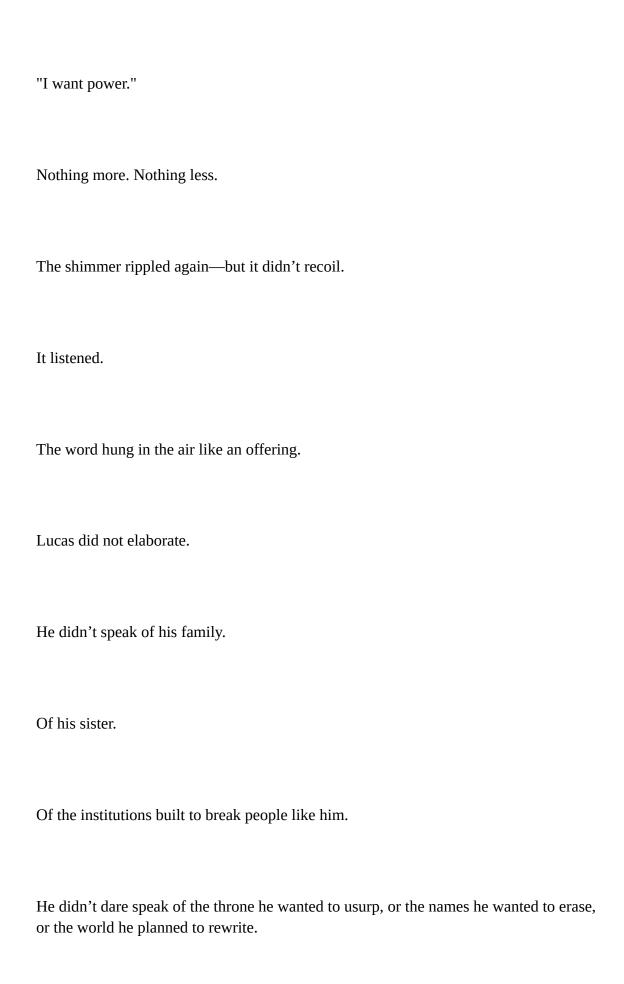
Longer this time.
And though the shimmer did not speak, something in the pressure around it shifted.
A silent answer.
Yes.
Of course they knew.
Affiliates, fragments, contractors—all those who bore the mark of the deeper court were known to them. Watched, monitored, recorded in esoteric ledgers bound not by ink, but by oaths older than written time.
And if Belthazor was gone—truly gone—then that absence would have echoed through the dark like a bell struck too hard.
Lucas said nothing more.
He didn't need to.



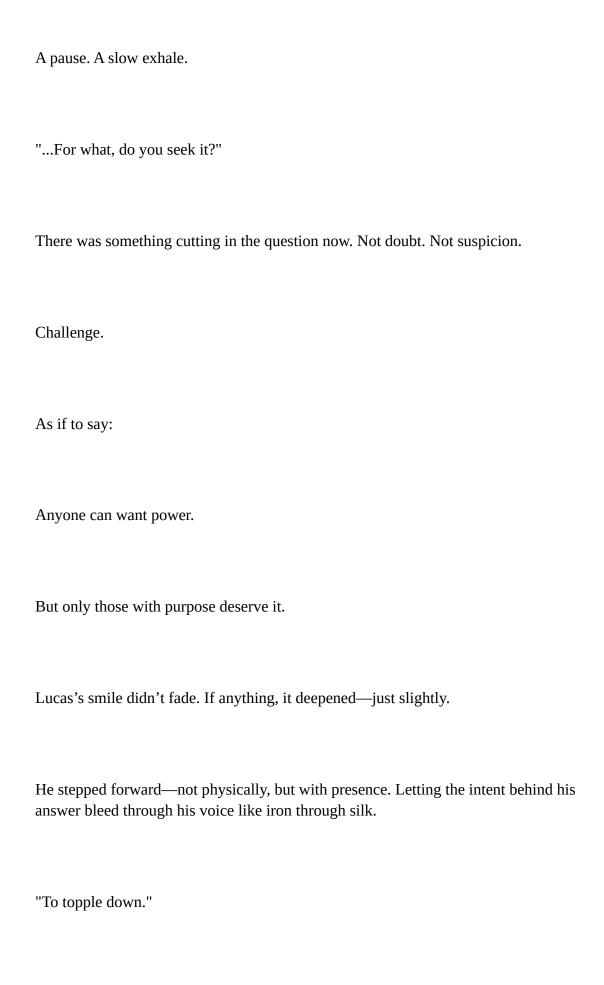
Lucas remained still, but inwardly, something cold unfurled in his chest. Not fear. Not pride.
Readiness.
Then the voice deepened, just slightly—not in tone, but in intent.
"Boy."
A pause.
Not contemptuous. Not familiar.
Just precise.
"What is it that you want?"
Lucas blinked once.
Then—
He smiled

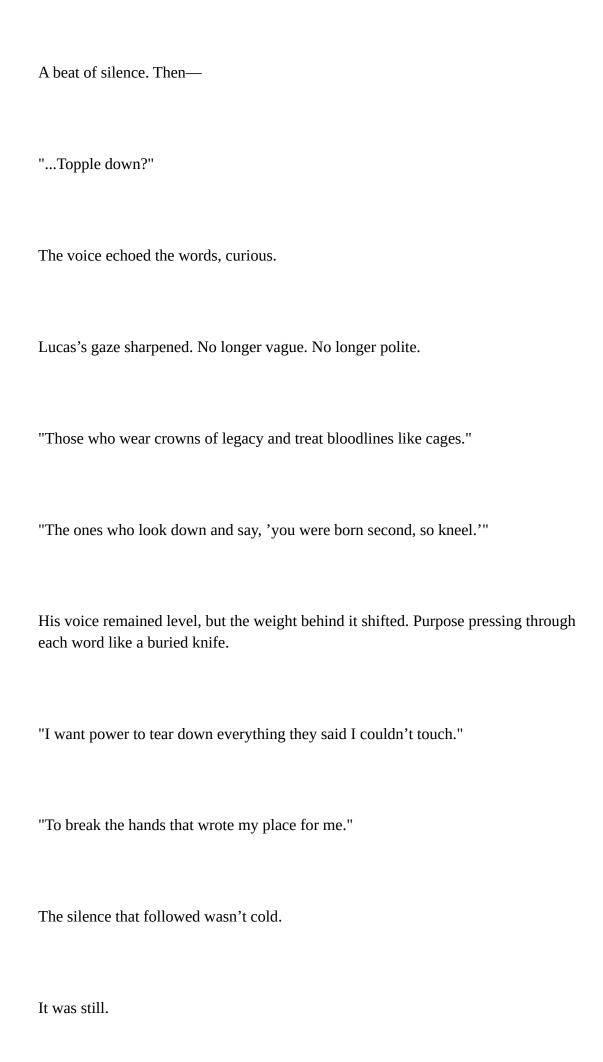


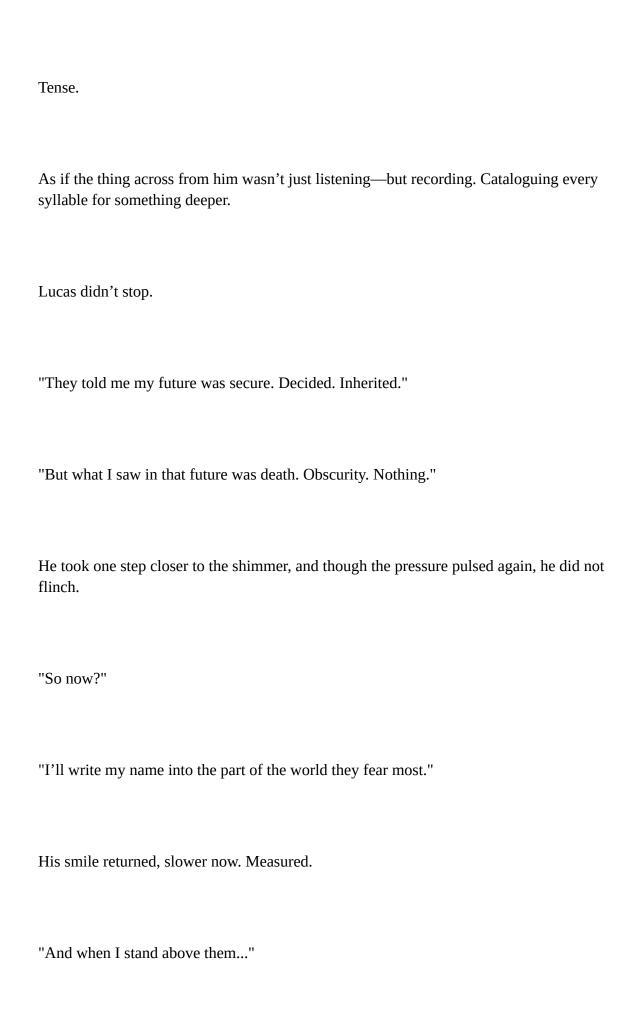


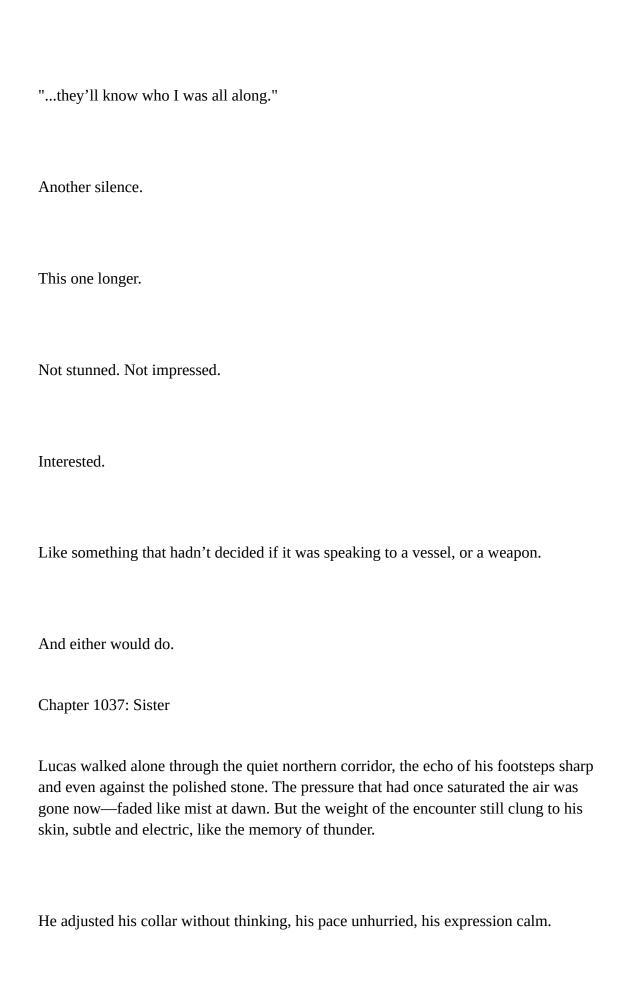


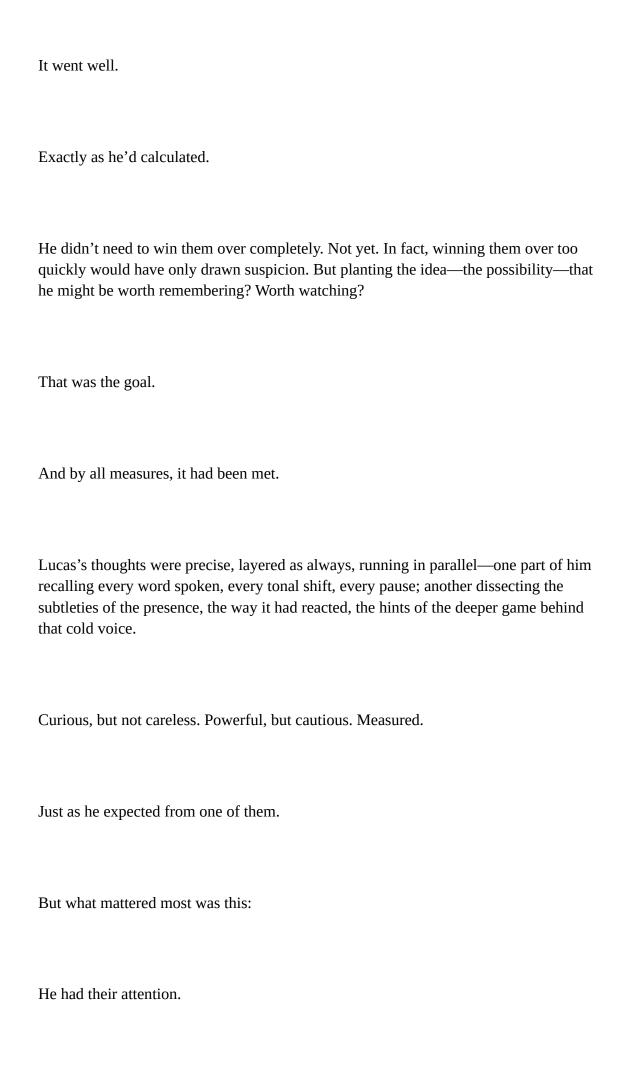
Not here.
Not yet.
But what he said was true.
A shard of the truth.
And sometimes, for beings like these—
That was enough.
"Power" the voice repeated, almost tasting it.
The air shifted again, subtly. Not hostile—not yet—but cool. Measured. As if weighing the sincerity behind Lucas's answer against the infinite archive of lies it had heard before.
And then the voice returned.
"Power"





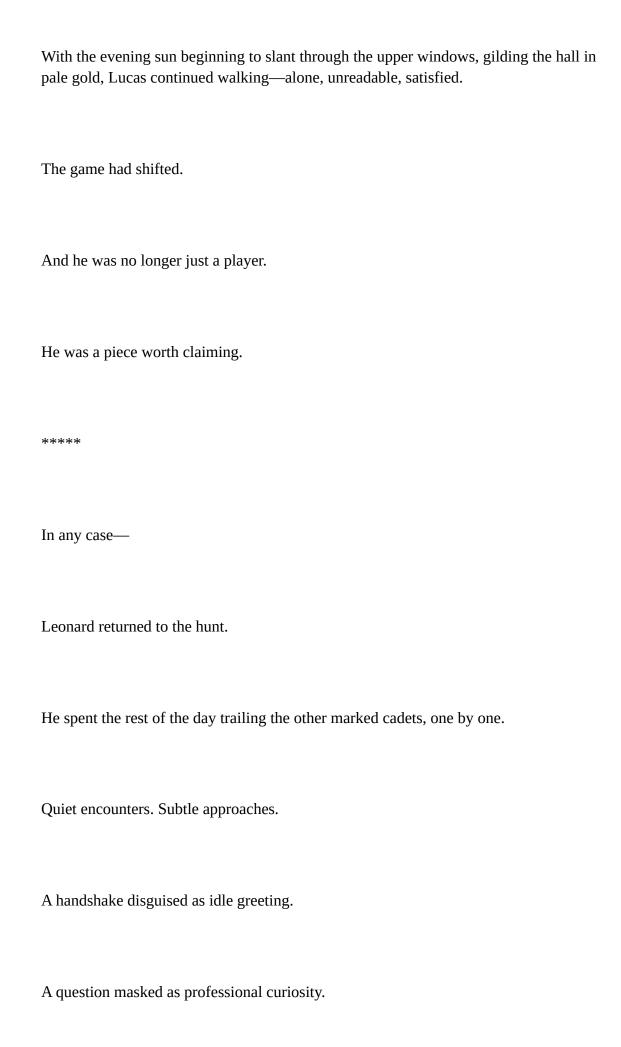




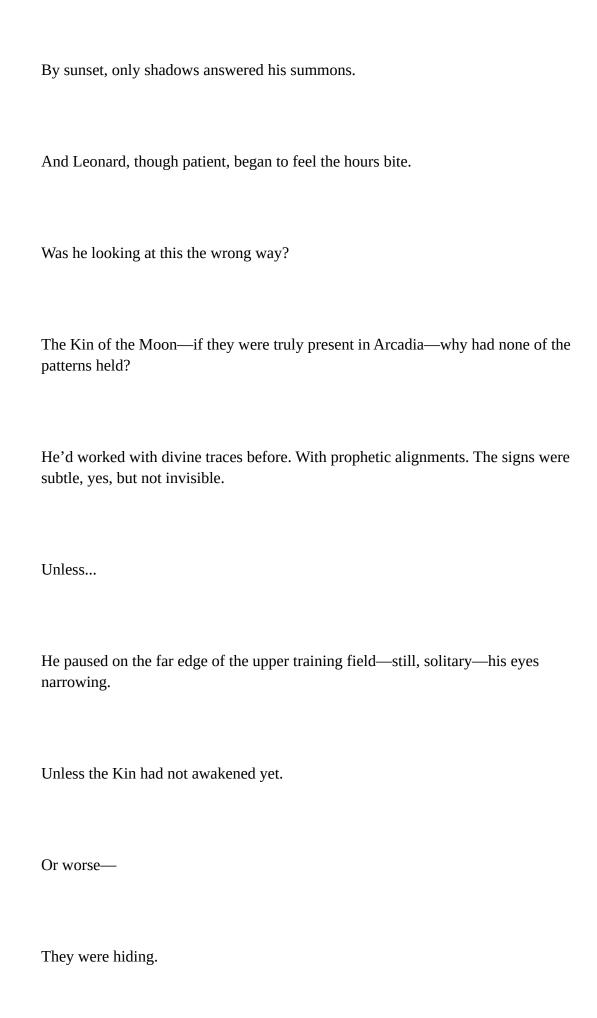


And in a world like this, attention from the wrong thing was death—
—but attention from the right wrong thing?
It was opportunity.
Lucas exhaled through his nose, satisfaction curling like smoke inside his chest.
Now the seed is planted.
Then, his mind returned to the final exchange—the last flicker of conversation, just before the presence vanished.
A voice, low and distant, like it had already started withdrawing into the folds of something far older than the academy.
"You have desire. Rage. Purpose."
"We remember such things."
And then—

Not a promise.
Not an invitation.
Just a parting note.
"When the time comes, Middleton choose carefully which hand you offer."
Lucas's jaw tensed slightly at the memory. He understood the meaning. There would be more than one offer. More than one door. And not all of them would open to where he wanted to go.
But that was fine.
He didn't need clarity.
He just needed leverage.
And now, he had it.



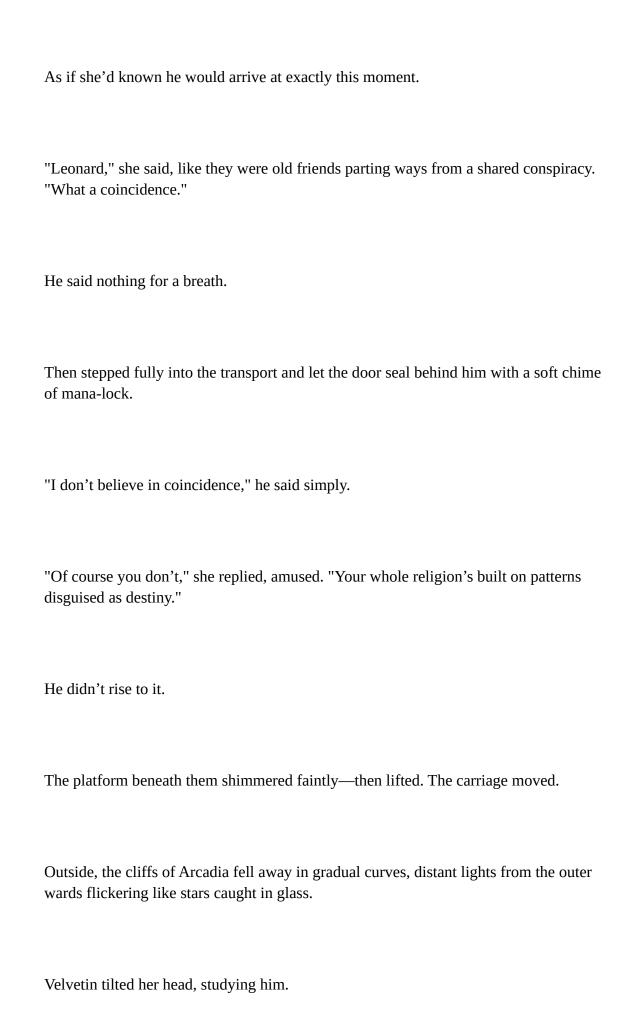
A presence cloaked beneath pleasantry.
All of them bore promise on the surface.
But none of them—not one—stirred the artifact beneath his collar.
Not a tremble. Not a pulse.
Nothing.
He recalibrated the heliowatch twice. Switched scan algorithms mid-pattern. Even layered an old celestial lens—something rarely used outside of temple-grade rites.
Still—
The crescent remained cold.
Silent.
Unmoved.

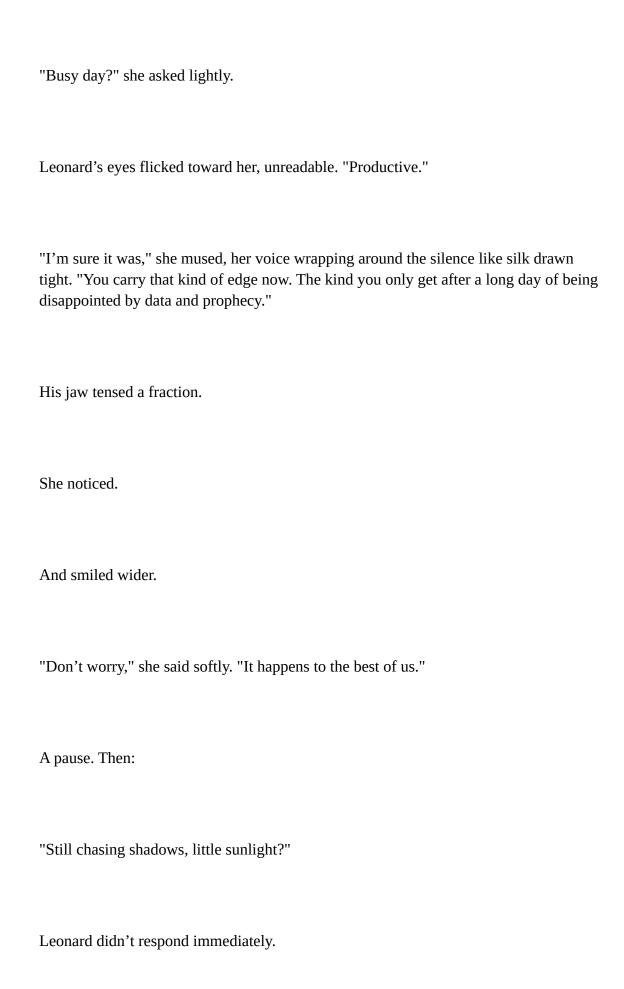


Not in rank.
Not in spellwork.
But in self.
'If they're suppressing their own resonance or if their mana is still dormant' he thought, gaze cast over the deep-blue horizon as the sun sank behind Arcadia's marble spires, 'then every method I've used today would be useless.'
He could trace distortions. Fractures. Echoes.
But not emptiness.
And if the Kin was someone cautious—or unaware of what they were—they would not shine at all.
At least, not yet.
He exhaled.
Long. Slow. Steady.

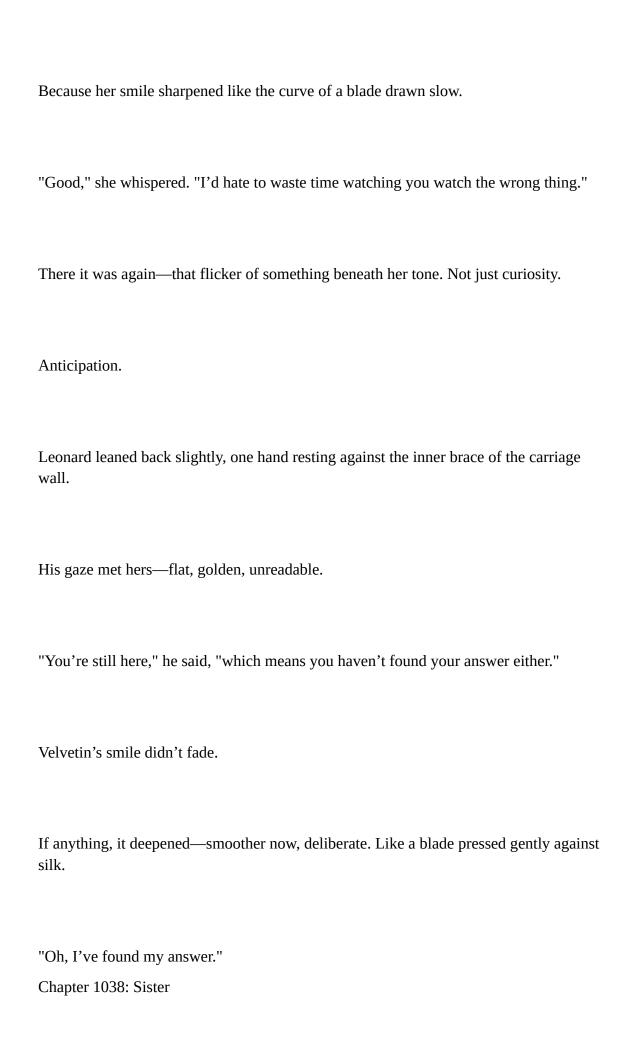


Leonard gave a slight nod and stepped forward. His identification crest shimmered briefly as it passed through the steward's scry-check. Approved.
He stepped onto the platform—
And paused.
Because someone was already inside.
Leaning elegantly against the interior railing, her eyes half-lidded, arms loosely folded, and one leg draped over the other as if she'd claimed the space without ever asking.
Velvetin.
Her hair was down this time—flowing in dark, gleaming waves, shot through with streaks of soft amaranth. Her coat was half-unfastened at the throat, revealing just the edge of a sigil burned into the skin above her collarbone—not a tattoo. A mark. Old. Intentional. Dangerous.
She smiled.
Slow. Foxlike.



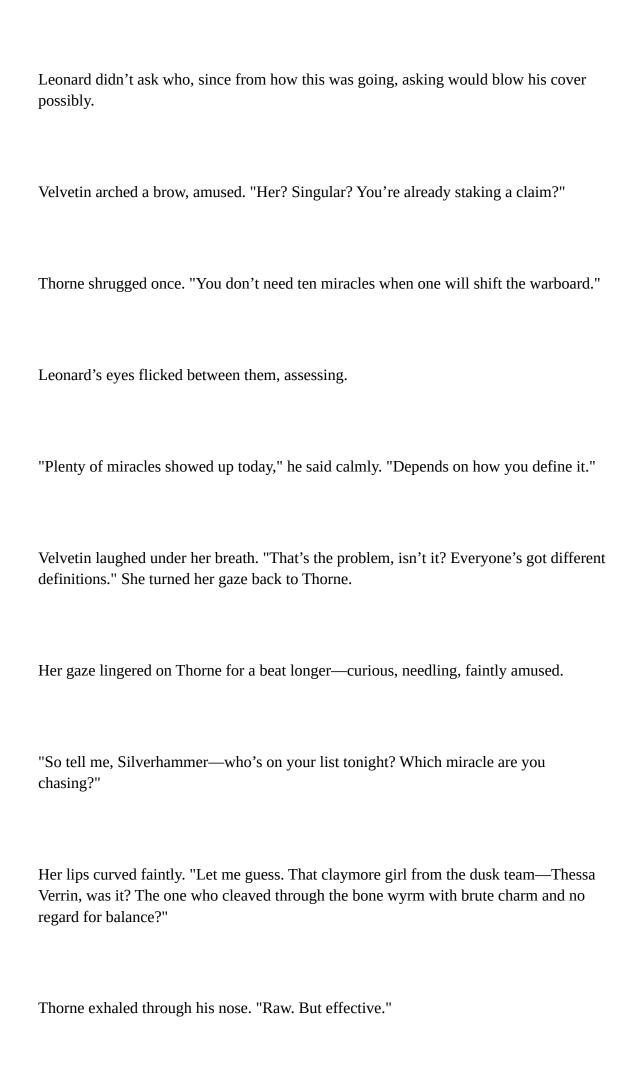








A new figure stepped in.
Tall, broad-shouldered, with neatly trimmed hair and a long, midnight-blue coat marked by the seven-pointed sigil of Silverhammer Guild. His boots clicked sharply on the floor, and the faint smell of lightning mana trailed faintly behind him like ozone after a clean cut.
Thorne Halwick.
Senior scout. Known for poaching prodigies before their second semester.
And for never smiling.
He glanced between the two already seated, registering the tension without comment.
"Quite the day," he said dryly as he moved to lean against the forward pillar.
Velvetin recovered instantly, her tone light once again. "Indeed it was," she said. "Full of surprises."
Thorne gave her a look—flat, unreadable—then nodded once at Leonard. "You saw her, too."





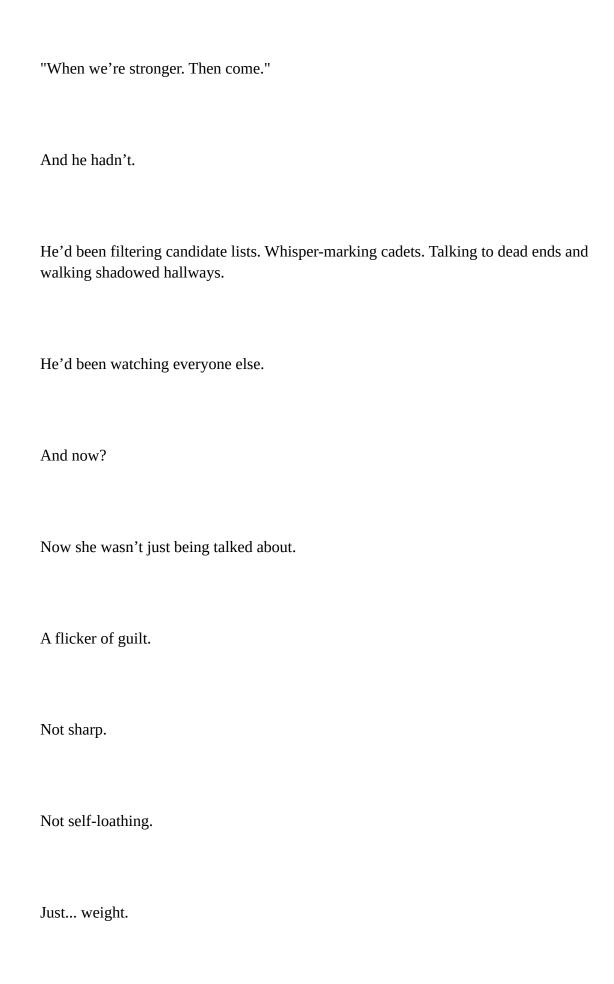
Leonard remained silent.
But then Velvetin looked directly at him.
"Gracewind."
That was the name she chose to speak aloud.
And in that moment—Leonard's eyes flicked upward.
Sharp.
Quick.
Just once.
But enough to catch her attention.
Velvetin saw it.

Of course she did.

Her smile was slow and surgical. She didn't comment. Didn't press.
She didn't need to.
Because she'd seen what she came for.
Thorne, ever practical, gave a short nod. "You saw that casting sequence. That wasn't a burst. It was deliberate sequencing. Three support frames, one offensive. Fully internal. Fully field-stable. Mid-dungeon, post-collapse." He paused. "Most people would've died. She cleared it."
"Golden-threaded energy," Velvetin murmured. "Not just rare. Custom. Not taught."
"Which means someone trained her—or she inherited something ancient," Thorne said flatly. "Either way, she's not going to stay low-tier for long."
The words moved through the air like quiet knives.
Not cruel.
Just true.

Leonard said nothing.
Not because he disagreed.
But because he hadn't known.
Not the casting pattern.
Not the spell resonance.
Not the field tempo.
Not even the fight.
He hadn't seen it.
Because he hadn't been watching her.
His sister.
The one person who had sat across from him just days ago, smiling with warmth and

uncertainty and pride—asking him, almost shyly, to watch when the time was right.



I promised her.
He hadn't said it aloud, of course. But he had made the choice in his own way.
"I'll watch when the time is right."
And the time had come—and passed—without him.
Now others had seen it.
And he had not.
That makes me a liar.
Not to the Church.
Not to the mission.
But to her.

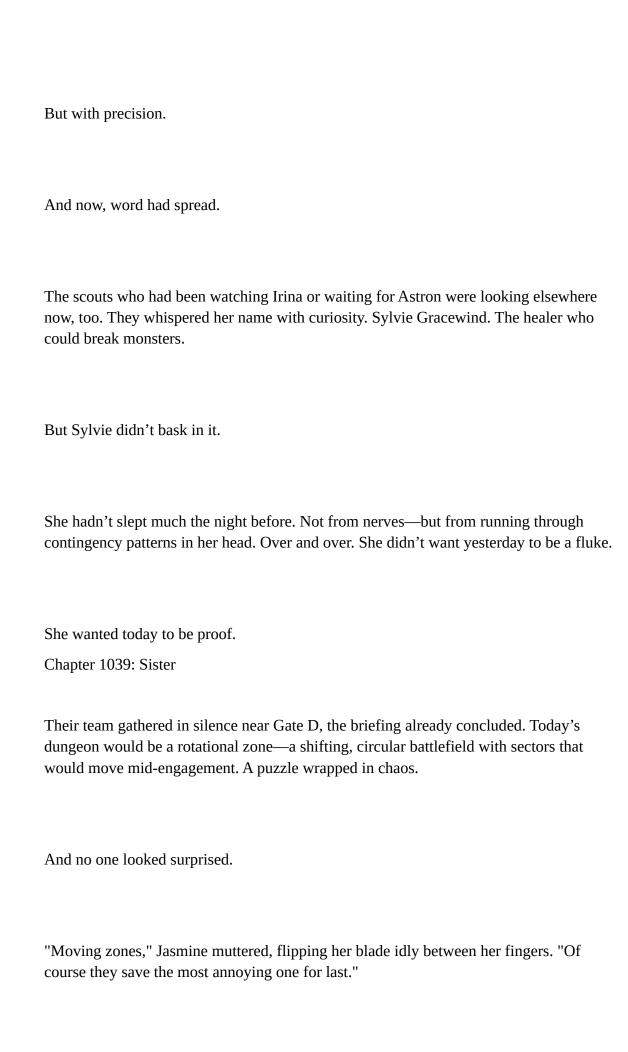
Leonard's gaze dropped for a moment to the edge of the floor, where light shimmered faintly against the rune-lined platform. His hands remained loose, steady.
But his thoughts?
They didn't settle.
They coiled—slow and persistent—beneath the quiet mask he wore. Beneath the stead hands and the expressionless calm he projected like a second skin.
He had told himself the mission came first.
That prophecy demanded precision.
That personal ties had to wait.
But she had waited.
And he hadn't come.
Not even once.

At least once, he thought. I should've—
His fingers curled slightly, thumb brushing the inside of his palm where the divine tether still hummed—mute. Passive. Silent.
It wasn't wrong to pursue the Kin.
But it was wrong to break a promise.
Especially to someone like her.
I'll watch her tomorrow.
The thought landed gently in his mind, not like a vow, not like a confession.
Just a choice.
Quiet. Firm. Steady.
Tomorrow, I watch.
No excuses.

No delays.
If nothing else, he could keep that.
And so he leaned back into the curve of the carriage as it continued its descent through the darkening air—past spires, past gilded bridges, past Arcadia's halo of ambition and silence.
His eyes closed, briefly.
And with them, the weight of what he'd missed—folded into the edges of what he still had time to see.
The scene ended.
And the night held its breath.

Friday morning broke over the academy grounds with a sharp chill in the air, the kind that settled into your bones and reminded you—this is the last one.

Final day.
Final dungeon.
The air buzzed with a pressure different from earlier in the week. Not just tension, but a quiet intensity. Every cadet walking toward the central training zones wore it on their face—the fatigue of days past, the anticipation of the day ahead. For some, this was a chance to redeem shaky performances. For others, the last opportunity to solidify an impression.
For Team Fourteen, it was about finishing strong.
Yesterday's dungeon had been brutal. A spatial fracture early into the engagement had split them apart—cutting Astron and Irina off on one end of the crumbling battlefield, and isolating Sylvie and Jasmine on the other. The dungeon boss, a serpentine abomination layered in void-stitched plates, had descended on Sylvie's side.
And somehow—
Sylvie had handled it.
While Jasmine had fought tooth and nail to create openings, it was Sylvie who adapted. Sylvie who anchored. Sylvie who dismantled its defenses with enchantments that rewrote the flow of battle. She had outmaneuvered, outlasted, and—at the final moment—struck true.
Not with brute strength.

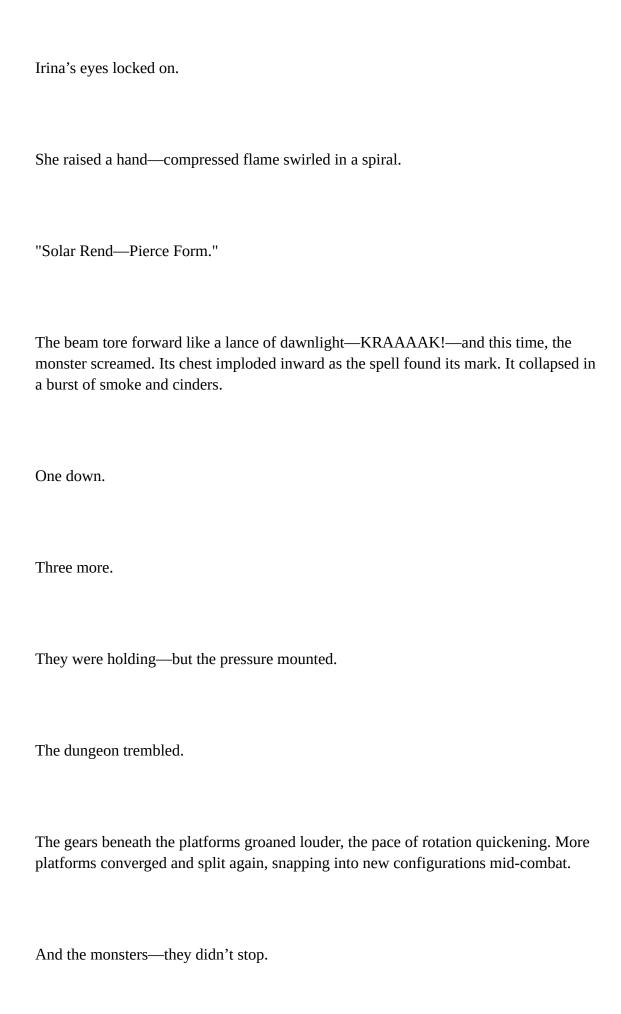


L	ayla adjusted her shield strap. "At least it's not another claustrophobic hellhole."
	ina exhaled through her nose, eyes already glowing faintly. "Movement-based terrain. hat's manageable."
	stron didn't speak. He stood just ahead, still as stone, his gaze focused on the nimmering light of the gate as it pulsed—ready to open.
lil	he gate opened with a deep, resonant hum, casting a veil of silver light that shimmered ke water stirred by breath. The air on the other side pulsed—distorted, tense, already eavy with layered mana signatures.
To	eam Fourteen stepped through as one.
A	nd the moment they crossed the threshold, the world shifted.
su m pl	he dungeon was unlike the others. A vast, concentric battlefield of floating platforms aspended in a void-like abyss, each sector rotating slowly—like gears in an unseen techanism. Stone rings drifted through space, tethered by mana ley-lines. Some latforms were wide and flat, others jagged and narrow, constantly rearranging with low ambles and grating turns. Sectors moved, realigned, separated.
It	was as if the dungeon itself refused to stay still.
A	nd within it—monsters.

Lots of them.
Winged aberrants, multi-limbed crawlers, scaled centipede-forms with glistening eyes—each one bursting with mana, their levels fluctuating between Stage-5 and Stage-6.
The first wave surged across two merging sectors.
"Formation C!" Astron's voice rang out the moment his boots struck the nearest platform.
Layla braced the forward point, her shield glowing with reinforced glyphs. Jasmine took the left flank, her wind-coated blade already gleaming. Irina stood central—a pillar of heat, her presence radiating out in waves. Sylvie, behind them, hands already moving as golden light threaded into the air.
The first clash.
Stage-5 monsters came fast—erratic, wild. One lizard-like beast with serrated horns lunged toward Layla, its clawed feet scraping sparks.
CLANG—CRACK!
She caught it on the shield, absorbed the force, and threw it off the platform with a brutal shoulder-check.

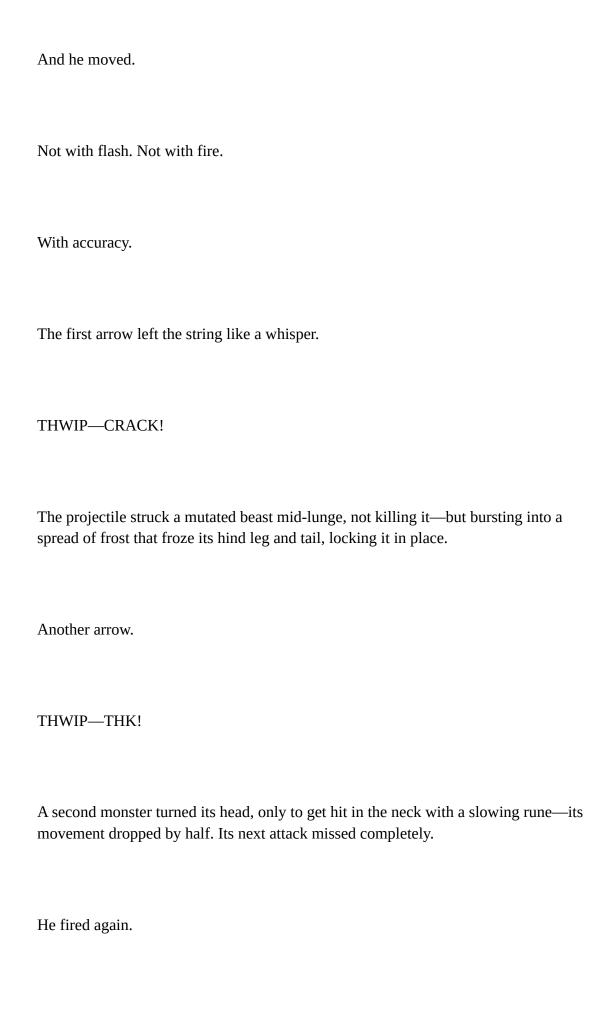
Jasmine blinked behind a rock-skinned crawler—then blurred with Flicker Fang, emerging from the other side as her blade carved a clean line down its spine. SLASH!
Sylvie followed up, casting Pressure Bind on a leaping twin-fanged beast, freezing it mid-air long enough for Irina to let loose.
FWOOOOSH!
Crimson Arc, condensed and curved, bisected the creature in a single sweep.
The first wave was cleared in minutes.
The second?
Harder.
A group of Stage-6 apex types surged from a rising platform—towering beasts cloaked in thick mana hides. Their limbs sparked with elemental signatures, their movement coordinated, almost intelligent.
Astron flicked his wrist once. "These are different. Stagger them—prioritize disruption."

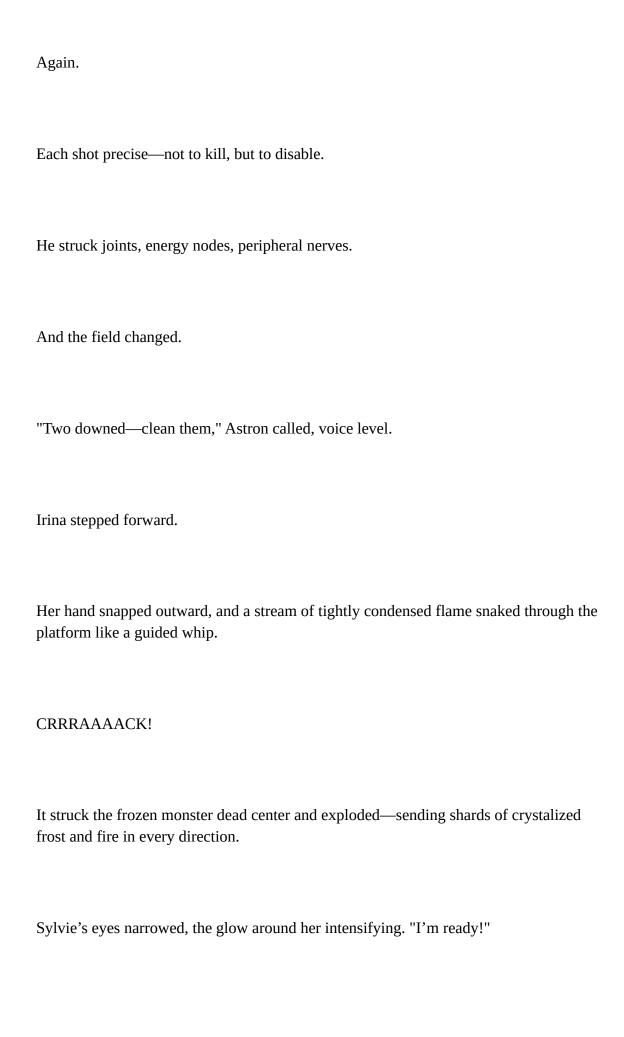




The third wave hit like a flood.
More Stage-6s. Some bordering on elite-class mutations—winged serpents with elemental cores, four-armed fiends wielding jagged mana-wrought weapons, and beasts layered in stone armor, resistant to both piercing and flame.
They came faster. Smarter. Their coordination was unnatural.
"Too dense!" Jasmine barked, slashing as she fell into a crouch. Her arm trembled from deflecting a heavy strike. "We can't clear them fast enough!"
"I can't hold this many sectors at once!" Layla grit her teeth, her shield lighting up with defensive runes, struggling to keep three monsters from encircling her.
Sylvie's enhancements spun across the field—barely keeping up. Her mana wasn't low, but the cast tempo was at its ceiling.
Then—
Astron's voice cut through like ice.
"Change formation—delta cross-split, range axis focused. I'm taking center."

The team didn't hesitate.
Layla rotated to the outer left flank to kite and delay.
Irina shifted to rear-right, her mana condensing into long-range ignition patterns.
Sylvie moved to the rear center, her hands glowing brighter—preparing heavy support spells.
And Astron—
For the first time since the exam phase began—
He unslung the bow from his back.
Mid-black, lined with silver veins of dormant enchantment, the limbs of the weapon snapped outward with a pulse of mana. A soft hum resonated from the string as his fingers notched an arrow—sleek, dark, gleaming with compressed runic tips.
A deep breath.
His stance lowered.





She extended her right hand—and this time, the glyphs around her fingers were different.
A circle of light expanded outward beneath her—engraved with a layered lattice of interlocking runes that looked almost archaic.
It was one of the spells the Headmaster had shown her a month ago—during her secret enhancement sessions. A style he claimed was used in the early Golden Court, long before modern glyphcasting was standardized.
In a sense, glyphcasting was the previous name of the [Magic Blocks] that the current mages were using.
And Sylvie.
She'd restructured it. Personalized it.
Made it hers.
"Resonance Breaker: Convergence Mode."
The glyph flashed three times—and then released.
A wave of golden light rippled across the platform, then converged like a magnetic collapse on all disabled monsters caught in Astron's range effects.

THUMP—CRACK—ZINGGG!

The moment the light hit them, their armor shattered. Their limbs bent the wrong way. Their inner mana circuits shorted and collapsed.
They didn't explode.
They crumpled.
All at once.
A silent cull.
Irina let out a low whistle, grinning faintly. "That's new."
Astron didn't smile. Just drew another arrow.
"Twelve more incoming."
It was classic Astron.