

H. Academy 1031

Chapter 1031 - Narrowed

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—KRSSH!

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

It hit—but it slid. Like the monster had anticipated her tempo.

"Something's off," Jasmine hissed. "I can't cut through. Not like this."

Sylvie was already weaving another round of buffs, lips pressed tight. Her hands moved on instinct—Agility Thread, Kinetic Buffer, another Reinforce Bloom on Jasmine's weapon. But even as she cast, she felt it.

She was patching holes in the system, not reinforcing a structure.

They weren't breaking through—they were delaying collapse.

And then, it clicked.

Jasmine wasn't Irina.

She was quick. Deadly. Sharp.

But she wasn't built to be the primary pressure point.

Her strength came in rhythm—with others.

With Layla holding a wall in front of her. With Irina burning a lane that Jasmine could exploit. With Astron in the background, marking the enemy's breathing cycle and whispering "Right leg, behind the plate. Two-second delay before the tail recovers."

There was none of that now.

Sylvie ducked another claw that smashed into the canyon wall beside her—BOOOOM!—and stared into the monster's burning gold eyes as it reared back, its body folding in preparation for a lunge.

She knew it wasn't just Jasmine struggling.

She was struggling, too.

Because Astron wasn't just the center of the formation.

He was the mind of it.

He didn't bark commands or shout orders, but when Astron was around, their movements flowed. He'd say "fall back one step," and a surprise pincer would be neutralized. He'd tell Irina "two seconds to detonation," and the ground would rupture on cue. He saw things—named them.

And he wasn't here.

Sylvie's hands twitched. Her buffs weren't landing with the same precision. Not because she was failing—but because the structure was gone.

There was no Layla anchoring the rotation.

No Irina setting the tempo.

And no Astron reading the battlefield like a book.

It was just them.

Sylvie's eyes locked onto Jasmine—still weaving, still moving, her body slick with sweat and her blade not quite cutting deep enough.

She realized then: Jasmine wasn't losing—but she was wearing down.

"Jasmine!" Sylvie called, voice sharp as steel. "You can't keep pace like this—!"

"I know!" Jasmine shouted, parrying a spined limb before rolling to the left. "But what choice do we have?!"

The creature lunged.

Jasmine barely blocked in time. Sylvie's magic caught the impact—but only just. The feedback nearly knocked her off her feet.

They hit the dirt again, tumbling apart.

The monster's limbs curled, dragging mana from the fractured canyon floor. Shadows twisted. The air compressed.

The intent was clear:

Next strike ends this.

Sylvie gasped, breath catching.

Her heart pounding.

Not from fear—but from clarity.

They were two pieces of a formation that no longer existed.

This wasn't just a strong enemy.

This was a reminder:

They were still a team.

And a team needed its core.

Sylvie's lungs burned.

Her hands shook.

Not from fear—but from the realization that this couldn't continue.

Jasmine couldn't hold the line alone.

Sylvie couldn't support a crumbling rhythm forever.

This wasn't a duel. It wasn't even survival.

It was failure, dragging itself closer with every breath.

And if something didn't change—now—this dungeon would become their tomb.

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."

Jasmine hesitated—just for a second.

But she moved.

And the monster's tail struck just behind her as she slipped past it, blade slashing along the inner thigh seam the moment it overextended.

CRRRSSH!

A good hit. Not deep. But real.

Sylvie's eyes narrowed.

"Keep your blade close. Don't overextend. It wants you airborne."

Jasmine blinked. Her gaze flicked back—then sharpened.

Sylvie wasn't panicked anymore.

She was guiding.

And then—Sylvie did it.

She reached into herself. Into the mana core she rarely dared to tap fully.

And there—nested deep within her chest—it stirred.

[First Lord's Authority]

Golden mana surged through her veins, coiling up her spine and into her eyes. Her breath caught—and then—

FLASH.

The world slowed.

No—shifted.

Color muted. Sound dimmed. Every motion became deliberate. Every breath felt like it echoed through glass.

And Sylvie screamed inside her mind.

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.

Her lips parted.

"I see it..."

The pain pulsed again—but she focused.

And in her mind, the battlefield assembled.

A map.

A tempo.

Astron's perspective—or something close to it—forming itself in her instincts.

She raised her hand again, pointing with the confidence of someone who knew.

"Jasmine—its next breath draws in from the core. It will pause. That's your window."

Jasmine didn't question it this time.

And true to the word—the monster hesitated.

Its form pulled inward, torso swelling with energy.

"NOW!"

Jasmine dashed forward with everything she had, blade glowing, mana whirling like wind caught in a cyclone.

WHRRRRSHHH—KRRRRSH!

She drove her sword deep into the underside of the creature's torso—exactly where the trail had led.

The monster reeled back—roaring in pained fury.

Sylvie's knees buckled, blood dripping from the corner of her eye.

Her head screamed for her to stop.

But her voice stayed steady.

"...Good. That's better."

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.

FWWWWWWWWWHHHTTT!

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.

Then faded.

And slowly—almost delicately—

The monster collapsed.

Dead.

A heavy silence fell across the battlefield.

Sylvie dropped to one knee, the golden glow around her eyes fading in an instant. The world snapped back into color and noise.

She gasped, sharp and small—like surfacing from deep water.

Jasmine turned, blade still in hand, panting. "Did you...?"

Sylvie didn't speak.

She didn't have to.

The crater where the monster had fallen told them everything.

And in that silence, before the exhaustion truly hit her—

Sylvie whispered, so low only she could hear it.

"...I did it."

Chapter 1032 - Narrowed

On the far end of the fractured dungeon, the ground was jagged and warped—splintered stone veined with flickering lines of unstable mana. Smoke drifted between shattered towers of basalt and half-collapsed stone platforms, some still trembling from the impact of the detonation.

The sky overhead—a false sky conjured by the dungeon's mana field—rippled faintly with distortion, as if reality itself were thin in this place.

Astron stood amidst the wreckage, crouched low behind a slanted pillar of obsidian, his coat torn at the shoulder, a thin line of blood trailing down his jaw. His breathing was controlled. His eyes, sharper than ever.

Three monsters circled in the haze around him—angular insectoids with shimmering, translucent carapaces, their movement silent, erratic, designed to confuse the senses.

But Astron's mind was still.

He watched. Measured. Let their motions play out twice before drawing a breath.

The instant the first lunged, he was already moving.

THNK—FWIP—CRRSH!

His dagger caught the creature's extended joint mid-thrust, severing it cleanly before he rotated, planting his foot against the stone and flipping over the second attacker's head. A quick glance—a mental snapshot—gave him the arc of the third's movement.

STAB!

He struck upward into the soft chitin beneath its jaw just as it lunged beneath him.

All three collapsed in near silence.

He stood slowly, cleaning the blood from his blade, and looked up—eyes scanning the warped skyline. Mana flickered through the air like static.

Then he paused.

This isn't standard dungeon corruption...

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.

Not just for strength.

But for adaptability. Individual initiative. Composure in isolation.

Astron's fingers tightened briefly around his dagger hilt before he let it drop back into its sheath with a whisper of steel.

He didn't sigh. He didn't curse. He didn't look frustrated.

This was a scenario.

So he would play his role.

He crouched low, shifting along the broken edge of a tilted platform, scanning the distorted leyline paths. The golden trail of Sylvie's mana was faint—but present. Her Authority had flared. That much was real.

Which means she's being pushed.

That, at least, wasn't simulated.

And so Astron moved—not recklessly, not even urgently—but with controlled momentum. Navigating the maze of shattered ground with the quiet, deliberate efficiency of someone who understood what they were supposed to do, and chose to appear as if he were barely staying ahead.

If they want a test, I'll give them a passing performance.

On the other side of the dungeon, deep within a collapsed ridge ringed with jagged obsidian, Irina stood with her back to a glowing canyon wall, her coat singed along the edges, a faint trickle of blood running from a gash near her temple.

The air around her shimmered—still rippling with the aftermath of her last spell.

Dozens of scorched corpses lay scattered across the cracked stone. Mangled, blackened things with warping bone structures and armor fused to their hides. But more were coming.

They always were.

She exhaled sharply and flicked the sweat from her brow, her eyes glowing faintly—not with exhaustion, but with tempered fire.

"Four more," she muttered.

She didn't ask for help. Didn't shout for backup.

She never had.

And she wouldn't start now.

The next wave emerged from the black mist—creatures taller, thicker-armored, more agile. Fire-resistant, no doubt. She could feel it already in the way their mana signatures slithered toward her.

The dungeon was adapting.

"Trying to corner me with suppression types," Irina muttered, lips curling.

The fire along her arms coiled tighter, brighter. She tapped a glyph etched near her collarbone—Flame Vein Catalyst—and felt the mana shift inside her, flowing toward her extremities like a tide responding to moonlight.

"I don't need a team to clean up vermin," she whispered, stepping forward into the dark, her eyes narrowing—

"You need a furnace."

And then she burned.

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 pre-laid 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.

They didn't scream.

They simply crumbled.

She exhaled slowly, embers floating from her skin like drifting snowflakes made of fire.

Then—

A rumble from the far side of the ridge. A vibration in the canyon floor. Irina turned sharply, eyes narrowing.

"...That direction..."

She stepped to the edge of the ridge, one hand glowing bright as she pressed it against a jagged slope of black stone. The surface hissed, melting under her touch. She forced her mana into it—pressure and precision—until the wall began to crack.

One burst. Then another.

Stone shattered outward, revealing a narrow tunnel beyond—twisting through the dungeon's underbelly, veined with mana.

Her instincts told her the others were that way. She felt it. The bond of shared mana flow in the same team network. More than that—

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.

And in the next breath—

Silence.

A deep, consuming silence. The kind that comes not from fear or stillness, but finality.

Irina's flames flickered and dimmed.

She blinked once. Then again.

"...Was that...?"

She didn't finish the sentence.

She didn't need to.

The pulse from the dungeon's core—a signal of termination—washed over her like a warm breeze. The suppression field dropped. The false sky rippled once, then began to settle. The dungeon itself... went quiet.

The boss was dead.

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 garden, the crescent-sigil still faint beneath his tunic, Leonard's thoughts sharpened.

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 attenuation. The academy's ambient pressure had grown worse since morning—perhaps reacting to 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.

And yet...

Leonard's eyes narrowed.

His artifact didn't stir.

But something else did.

There was a faint ripple—not in Lucas. Not in the surroundings.

In Leonard himself.

A strange pressure.

A twist of perception.

As if the mana around Lucas bent... not darkly, but differently.

And for a moment—

He thought it was demonic.

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.

He radiated contradiction.

And in Leonard's experience?

That was far more dangerous.

He exhaled slowly, eyes flicking upward to the sunlit rafters above, where the heliowatch spun like a patient sentinel.

Another mystery. Not the one he was looking for.

But still—

Leonard's gaze lingered on the corner where Lucas had vanished, that trailing edge of unnatural stillness clinging to the air like morning frost yet to melt. It wasn't just presence. It wasn't even mana.

It was something else.

A silence not born of absence—but suppression.

Like a voice that once screamed, now trained to whisper.

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 words echoed in his mind as he walked back toward the garden stairs—each step measured, reclaiming his focus with every breath.

Lucas Middleton was not the Kin of the Moon.

He could not afford to mistake interference for destiny.

And if Lucas had been bent, shaped, touched by something else—so be it.

Someone else would uncover it. Eventually.

Leonard's duty was not to purge the world's contradictions.

It was to find the one written in eclipse.

The one who would rise beneath silver light.

The one whose awakening would pull stars and ruin into alignment.

The one whose very presence would tear the veil between what the world is...

...and what it fears.

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 mana-stabilized 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.

Just quiet, professional recognition.

Because every single person in that room had just watched a cadet—a healer—defeat a dungeon-tier aberrant monster without support. Not with brute force. Not with some overclocked relic.

But with instinct, rhythm, and control.

And something more.

One of the observers from Crimson Deep finally broke the silence.

"...That wasn't a support maneuver."

The older woman beside him from Radiant Chain nodded slowly, eyes locked on her notes.

"Definitely not," she said. "That was an offensive construct. High density. Not bound to staff focus. Pure internal weave. Traced back to core casting, not channeled."

"She's not a pure healer anymore."

"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.

"Did you catch the delay before activation?" he asked. "She wasn't just reacting. That casting process wasn't reflex—it was calculated. She saw something. Traced it."

"She tracked that monster's rhythm," another murmured. "Like a command unit. Like a battlefield analyst. But without external tools."

"No. Worse," the Crimson Deep observer said quietly. "She predicted it."

A new silence formed.

Because that wasn't just talent.

That was structure.

The kind of structure that guilds built squads around.

The kind of structure that didn't break under duress—but organized chaos through it.

The silence still held. But not all silence was equal.

In the backmost row of the chamber—beneath a veil glyph designed to dull presence without outright concealment—a woman leaned back in her seat, gloved fingers steepled beneath her chin.

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.

"...The sun," she whispered.

It wasn't a metaphor.

It was truth.

The golden resonance wasn't simply light-typed or high-mana. It wasn't a refined combustion or radiant subclass mechanic. It pulsed with something deeper—older. Not raw fire, but focused brilliance. Structured pressure. Authority-driven harmony.

Solar coding.

She knew it.

She'd studied it.

Because years ago, one of the quiet factions had flagged it as a latent line—one they were tracking, one they feared might resurface.

And that girl—that power—had been the potential anchor.

The one Velvetin had been told was dead.

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.

It wasn't denial.

But it was enough to make her question the sealed record she'd been handed five years ago.

A thread she hadn't expected to see again now dangled before her—glowing, golden, and very much breathing.

And if it was her—if Sylvie Gracewind was truly the child marked in that old prophecy scroll, the one her faction's deep records had only half-believed—

Then she couldn't be left unchecked.

Not in Arcadia.

Not under the eyes of guilds who didn't know what they were watching.

Her eyes narrowed slightly.

Not when the old sun was supposed to stay buried.

She tapped a silent rune along her wrist-sigil.

[Initiate internal query protocol — codename: Sol-Flare.]

[Subject: Gracewind, Sylvie – Affinity Crosscheck. Confirm Origin Trail.]

[Priority Flag: Black. Clearance: Velvetin.]

No alarms.

No alerts.

Just a soft pulse of red light—confirming the query was live.

Velvetin sat back again, her gaze sharpening even as the other scouts around her debated class merging, field deployment potential, and recruitment timelines.

She already knew what their interest would become.

A gold-rank contract offer.

Training labs. Scholarships. Positioning.

They'd see a prodigy.

She might be one.

But Velvetin had seen something more.

A danger.

And if her suspicion was right...

If that child was who they once feared she might become—

Then someone had made a mistake leaving her alive.

And this time?

She would not allow that mistake to reach adulthood.

Lucas turned.

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.

A slow, dangerous smile.

Because this was exactly what he had been waiting for.

He straightened subtly, letting his breathing stabilize, even as the remnants of Belthazor inside him clawed like embers reigniting in dry wood.

So you noticed. Good.

Then you know I'm not just a vessel.

He met the silhouette's stare—or what passed for it—with cold, calculating poise.

And thought, with a flicker of cruel satisfaction:

If you're asking that question...

Then maybe you don't know everything after all.

Chapter 1035: They

Lucas steadied himself.

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.

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

It was confirmation.

Lucas offered a faint tilt of the head, his expression unreadable.

Let's see what you say next.

Because now the game had begun.

The shimmering presence did not move in the way mortals moved—no footsteps, no sway of weight. It simply leaned forward across dimensions, folding closer to Lucas with the subtle gravity of something that should not be.

And when it spoke again, the voice had changed. Not louder—no. Just deeper. As if it had peeled back a layer of politeness to reveal something older beneath.

"Then tell me... why does a human heir walk with the embers of Belthazor inside him?"

"What pact was made?"

"What throne did you kneel to?"

Lucas's jaw tightened, just slightly, but he didn't break his gaze. His heart was steady now—steady in the way a sword is steady when its tip rests just against another's throat.

This is dangerous.

But it's also what I've been waiting for.

He let silence hang for a beat longer, as if considering whether to answer at all.

Then, carefully—intentionally—he smiled. Just a little.

"Kneel?" he echoed. "I don't kneel."

The ripple in the air stilled.

Lucas took a slow step forward—not enough to be a threat, but enough to show he wasn't backing down.

He continued, voice low, sharpened to deliberate control.

"There was no pact. No agreement. No summoning. If you're asking what ritual, what exchange of blood and binding made this happen—" he tapped two fingers lightly against his chest, where the cold coil of that broken power still lurked, "—you won't find one."

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."

The voice was no longer curious. It was disappointed.

Lucas's vision flickered at the edges, a red haze dancing across his sight. And still—still—he smiled.

Faintly. Razor-thin. Cold.

"I'm not lying, though."

The pressure paused—not fully receding, but faltering. A sliver of uncertainty.

And Lucas pushed it further.

His voice was hoarse now, strained from the air that wouldn't come—but it carried power.

"And you might want to consider retracting this energy of yours."

Another breath forced its way through clenched teeth.

"Don't forget where you are."

That landed.

The corridor. The wards. The academy.

This place wasn't like the world outside. It was laced with layered protections—ancient runes buried beneath every stone, binding glyphs watching every interaction. And if demonic influence was detected, even from them...

There would be consequences.

For both of them.

Lucas's smile widened slightly. His voice low, mocking now.

"Unless you're here to trigger a lockdown... Butler."

The demonic pressure wavered.

And then, like a curtain falling in reverse, it recoiled.

The air rushed back into Lucas's lungs all at once. He stumbled half a step, coughed once, hard, but never lost his stance.

His heart thundered in his ears—but his eyes remained steady.

Still smiling.

Still dangerous.

And beneath it all, one message repeated in his mind like a drumbeat:

That's right.

You're not the only one playing games.

The pressure withdrew fully now—not vanished, but pulled back like a claw resting just above his skin, waiting.

The air still felt charged. Taut. But Lucas could breathe again.

And then the voice came once more, quieter this time—no longer coiled with threat, but with something more pointed. Curious. Measured.

"You know me?"

It echoed faintly, but not into the hallway—into him. Not like a voice spoken aloud, but like something brushing along the inner wall of his thoughts.

Lucas didn't hesitate.

He lifted his chin slightly, brushing a gloved thumb under the edge of his collar as if adjusting it—casual, confident, just enough to provoke.

"Belthazor spoke highly of you."

A lie.

A bold one.

But that was the thing with creatures like them—they never truly knew how much their own kind had said behind closed doors. And in a realm built on secrecy, sometimes being certain was more powerful than being right.

He watched the silhouette closely, searching for any flicker, any twitch, any ripple. But it didn't respond immediately.

That was good.

Lucas pressed just a little further, carefully layering tone and weight into his words.

"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.

A hesitation.

A flicker in the air that wasn't just reaction—it was consideration.

You're listening now, Lucas thought.

Good.

He had no idea what Belthazor would've said about this... thing.

But now, it didn't matter.

Because they believed there could have been a conversation.

And that alone meant Lucas had just shifted the balance.

He didn't need to be trusted.

He just needed to be useful.

And from the stillness that followed, he could tell:

They were wondering if he was.

Chapter 1036: They

The air around the silhouette pulsed—once. Then again.

A low hum vibrated through the corridor's mana lines like distant thunder beneath glass.

And then, the voice came, no longer hostile... but not gentle either.

"How much do you know?"

There was no malice in it now. Just curiosity—sharp and delicate, like a scalpel hovering above exposed skin.

Lucas lowered his eyes for the briefest moment. When he looked up again, his expression had changed—not smug, not arrogant.

Measured.

Wary.

Exactly the way someone should look when they knew something they shouldn't.

He let out a slow breath through his nose, as if weighing something. The silence stretched, and when he finally spoke, his voice was quieter. Controlled. Like he was treading carefully around a name that carried weight.

"Not enough to matter."

A beat.

Then—he added, just loud enough for the figure to catch:

"But just enough... that saying too much would be the end of me."

He looked toward the edge of the shimmer again, letting a note of tension slip into his voice—not faked, but directed.

"Belthazor didn't say much. But he made one thing clear."

"There are names you don't echo, and games you don't interrupt. Yours..."

He let the sentence drift, unfinished, like a secret half-spoken.

The silence that followed was calculated. Perfectly paced. Enough for the figure to wonder, but not enough to challenge them.

Lucas didn't need to be believed.

He just needed to be remembered.

A boy from a noble house, touched by an impossible presence, who claimed to carry whispers from something long dead.

A half-liar who might be worth watching.

He kept his posture subdued, careful not to overstep. No threat. No arrogance.

Just potential.

And in the language these creatures spoke, potential was more useful than loyalty.

Lucas let his gaze dip respectfully, subtly turning his head. A small gesture that suggested caution, not submission.

Lucas said nothing more.

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."

A ripple passed through the air again, softer this time. Less invasive.

They were intrigued now. Not convinced. But interested.

And that was all Lucas needed.

Then, without warning, the voice shifted tones once more.

Not accusatory. Not probing.

Just quiet. And curious.

"What happened to Belthazor?"

Lucas tilted his head slightly, the movement deliberate—measured like every breath he took in this conversation.

His lips parted, and his voice came soft but sharp.

"Don't you know already?"

There was another pause.

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.

And across the space, the presence spoke one final word—low, thoughtful, lingering with that cold sort of approval that never sounded like praise.

"...Interesting."

The silence following that single word—"Interesting"—was not emptiness.

It was anticipation.

Lucas could feel it, like the breath before a page is turned, like the pause before a blade is drawn. The weight hadn't vanished. It had simply shifted—now poised, now watching.

And then—

The voice returned.

"If Belthazor chose you..."

A slow, thoughtful hum.

"...then you have potential."

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 the smirk he wore at the academy.

Not the feigned amusement he used among the nobles.

Not the polite, politic expression he gave to instructors and scouts.

No.

This smile came from somewhere deeper.

A place buried beneath years of being dismissed.

Of being the "second" in his own bloodline.

Of saving people who never knew his name.

Of dying forgotten in a vision of a future that chewed him up and spat him out.

He remembered all of it.

How he had followed the rules.

How he had tried to earn his place.

How none of it had mattered.

Even as Belthazor devoured him, even as that dark power burned away what remained of his name, no one came looking.

No one remembered.

Lucas Middleton had been a footnote.

And so the smile that curved across his lips now wasn't bitter.

It was resolved.

He raised his eyes, calm and gleaming.

"What do I want?"

His voice was even. Quiet.

"I want power."

Nothing more. Nothing less.

The shimmer rippled again—but it didn't recoil.

It listened.

The word hung in the air like an offering.

Lucas did not elaborate.

He didn't speak of his family.

Of his sister.

Of the institutions built to break people like him.

He didn't dare speak of the throne he wanted to usurp, or the names he wanted to erase, or the world he planned to rewrite.

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..."

A pause. A slow exhale.

"...For what, do you seek it?"

There was something cutting in the question now. Not doubt. Not suspicion.

Challenge.

As if to say:

Anyone can want power.

But only those with purpose deserve it.

Lucas's smile didn't fade. If anything, it deepened—just slightly.

He stepped forward—not physically, but with presence. Letting the intent behind his answer bleed through his voice like iron through silk.

"To topple down."

A beat of silence. Then—

"...Topple down?"

The voice echoed the words, curious.

Lucas's gaze sharpened. No longer vague. No longer polite.

"Those who wear crowns of legacy and treat bloodlines like cages."

"The ones who look down and say, 'you were born second, so kneel.'"

His voice remained level, but the weight behind it shifted. Purpose pressing through each word like a buried knife.

"I want power to tear down everything they said I couldn't touch."

"To break the hands that wrote my place for me."

The silence that followed wasn't cold.

It was still.

Tense.

As if the thing across from him wasn't just listening—but recording. Cataloguing every syllable for something deeper.

Lucas didn't stop.

"They told me my future was secure. Decided. Inherited."

"But what I saw in that future was death. Obscurity. Nothing."

He took one step closer to the shimmer, and though the pressure pulsed again, he did not flinch.

"So now?"

"I'll write my name into the part of the world they fear most."

His smile returned, slower now. Measured.

"And when I stand above them..."

"...they'll know who I was all along."

Another silence.

This one longer.

Not stunned. Not impressed.

Interested.

Like something that hadn't decided if it was speaking to a vessel, or a weapon.

And either would do.

Chapter 1037: Sister

Lucas walked alone through the quiet northern corridor, the echo of his footsteps sharp and even against the polished stone. The pressure that had once saturated the air was gone now—faded like mist at dawn. But the weight of the encounter still clung to his skin, subtle and electric, like the memory of thunder.

He adjusted his collar without thinking, his pace unhurried, his expression calm.

It went well.

Exactly as he'd calculated.

He didn't need to win them over completely. Not yet. In fact, winning them over too quickly would have only drawn suspicion. But planting the idea—the possibility—that he might be worth remembering? Worth watching?

That was the goal.

And by all measures, it had been met.

Lucas's thoughts were precise, layered as always, running in parallel—one part of him recalling every word spoken, every tonal shift, every pause; another dissecting the subtleties of the presence, the way it had reacted, the hints of the deeper game behind that cold voice.

Curious, but not careless. Powerful, but cautious. Measured.

Just as he expected from one of them.

But what mattered most was this:

He had their attention.

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.

With the evening sun beginning to slant through the upper windows, gilding the hall in pale gold, Lucas continued walking—alone, unreadable, satisfied.

The game had shifted.

And he was no longer just a player.

He was a piece worth claiming.

In any case—

Leonard returned to the hunt.

He spent the rest of the day trailing the other marked cadets, one by one.

Quiet encounters. Subtle approaches.

A handshake disguised as idle greeting.

A question masked as professional curiosity.

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.

By sunset, only shadows answered his summons.

And Leonard, though patient, began to feel the hours bite.

Was he looking at this the wrong way?

The Kin of the Moon—if they were truly present in Arcadia—why had none of the patterns held?

He'd worked with divine traces before. With prophetic alignments. The signs were subtle, yes, but not invisible.

Unless...

He paused on the far edge of the upper training field—still, solitary—his eyes narrowing.

Unless the Kin had not awakened yet.

Or worse—

They were hiding.

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.

That should suffice for today.

His job required patience. Not just speed.

One wrong assumption and he might miss the thread entirely.

The crescent-sigil pendant hung quiet against his chest as Leonard turned from the parapet walkway and descended toward the outer edge of the campus.

Arcadia's architecture, so fluid in its grandeur during daylight, had begun to harden into still silhouettes—silver-touched towers outlined by fading gold, casting long shadows across the tiered stone roads.

The scouts' accommodation wasn't within the campus proper. By law and tradition, observers did not sleep where they watched. Neutrality was maintained by distance.

And so, every evening, academy-provided manalift services escorted the scouts beyond the boundary gates—down to the reserved quarters nestled along the north ridge.

Leonard arrived just in time.

A sleek transport carriage—etched with warding runes and the Academy's twin-wing crest—rested silently along the transfer point. A steward in gray robes stood nearby, confirming each scout's identity before granting access to the glowing sigil circle within the carriage.

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.

As if she'd known he would arrive at exactly this moment.

"Leonard," she said, like they were old friends parting ways from a shared conspiracy. "What a coincidence."

He said nothing for a breath.

Then stepped fully into the transport and let the door seal behind him with a soft chime of mana-lock.

"I don't believe in coincidence," he said simply.

"Of course you don't," she replied, amused. "Your whole religion's built on patterns disguised as destiny."

He didn't rise to it.

The platform beneath them shimmered faintly—then lifted. The carriage moved.

Outside, the cliffs of Arcadia fell away in gradual curves, distant lights from the outer wards flickering like stars caught in glass.

Velvetin tilted her head, studying him.

"Busy day?" she asked lightly.

Leonard's eyes flicked toward her, unreadable. "Productive."

"I'm sure it was," she mused, her voice wrapping around the silence like silk drawn tight. "You carry that kind of edge now. The kind you only get after a long day of being disappointed by data and prophecy."

His jaw tensed a fraction.

She noticed.

And smiled wider.

"Don't worry," she said softly. "It happens to the best of us."

A pause. Then:

"Still chasing shadows, little sunlight?"

Leonard didn't respond immediately.

The carriage hummed softly beneath them. A faint pulse of warded light passed overhead.

Then, at last, he said—

"I'm not chasing shadows."

"No?" Her gaze sharpened slightly. "Then what?"

Leonard's voice was steady. Low.

"I'm narrowing the field."

Velvetin's lashes fluttered slightly.

"Ah. So you're close."

He didn't answer.

Didn't need to.

Because her smile sharpened like the curve of a blade drawn slow.

"Good," she whispered. "I'd hate to waste time watching you watch the wrong thing."

There it was again—that flicker of something beneath her tone. Not just curiosity.

Anticipation.

Leonard leaned back slightly, one hand resting against the inner brace of the carriage wall.

His gaze met hers—flat, golden, unreadable.

"You're still here," he said, "which means you haven't found your answer either."

Velvetin's smile didn't fade.

If anything, it deepened—smoother now, deliberate. Like a blade pressed gently against silk.

"Oh, I've found my answer."

Chapter 1038: Sister

"Oh, I've found my answer."

Leonard's gaze sharpened. Just slightly. Just enough to count.

He didn't speak—but something in the angle of his shoulders changed. Subtle tension. The kind that only ever came from a shift in equation.

"You have?" he asked, voice low, careful.

"Mhm." She stretched her legs just slightly, crossing them the other way with languid grace. "Not all answers need to be loud. Some of them are... quiet. Sunlit. Golden."

Leonard's jaw tightened—not with anger. With calculation.

That phrasing.

But before he could press her, before the space between them could narrow into confrontation—

A soft tone sounded at the front of the carriage as another sigil-lock disengaged.

The door hissed open.

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 didn't ask who, since from how this was going, asking would blow his cover possibly.

Velvetin arched a brow, amused. "Her? Singular? You're already staking a claim?"

Thorne shrugged once. "You don't need ten miracles when one will shift the warboard."

Leonard's eyes flicked between them, assessing.

"Plenty of miracles showed up today," he said calmly. "Depends on how you define it."

Velvetin laughed under her breath. "That's the problem, isn't it? Everyone's got different definitions." She turned her gaze back to Thorne.

Her gaze lingered on Thorne for a beat longer—curious, needling, faintly amused.

"So tell me, Silverhammer—who's on your list tonight? Which miracle are you chasing?"

Her lips curved faintly. "Let me guess. That claymore girl from the dusk team—Thessa Verrin, was it? The one who cleaved through the bone wyrm with brute charm and no regard for balance?"

Thorne exhaled through his nose. "Raw. But effective."

Velvetin tilted her head. "Or maybe Kellen Drayce. That boy with the spectral binding technique. Unrefined, but the way he layered summons through shifting terrain? That's an entire school's worth of tactical layering. He just doesn't know it yet."

"Too twitchy," Thorne said. "Wouldn't last under pressure."

"Oh, I liked him," Velvetin sighed. "He fought like someone who grew up praying to survive."

Thorne raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

She tapped her lower lip once, thoughtfully. Then added—

"There's also that Weaver-type from the fifth trial. Aeryn Marchal. The one who never even stepped forward, but still controlled two flanks at once." She smiled lazily. "People like that go unnoticed. Until they're the last one standing."

Thorne finally pushed off the pillar, adjusting his coat. "She's interesting. But she's not the one who turned the room upside down."

Velvetin's lashes dropped.

"Ah," she said softly. "So we circle back to her."

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.

"When we're stronger. Then come."

And he hadn't.

He'd been filtering candidate lists. Whisper-marking cadets. Talking to dead ends and walking shadowed hallways.

He'd been watching everyone else.

And now?

Now she wasn't just being talked about.

A flicker of guilt.

Not sharp.

Not self-loathing.

Just... weight.

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 steady 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.

But with precision.

And now, word had spread.

The scouts who had been watching Irina or waiting for Astron were looking elsewhere now, too. They whispered her name with curiosity. Sylvie Gracewind. The healer who could break monsters.

But Sylvie didn't bask in it.

She hadn't slept much the night before. Not from nerves—but from running through contingency patterns in her head. Over and over. She didn't want yesterday to be a fluke.

She wanted today to be proof.

Chapter 1039: Sister

Their team gathered in silence near Gate D, the briefing already concluded. Today's dungeon would be a rotational zone—a shifting, circular battlefield with sectors that would move mid-engagement. A puzzle wrapped in chaos.

And no one looked surprised.

"Moving zones," Jasmine muttered, flipping her blade idly between her fingers. "Of course they save the most annoying one for last."

Layla adjusted her shield strap. "At least it's not another claustrophobic hellhole."

Irina exhaled through her nose, eyes already glowing faintly. "Movement-based terrain. That's manageable."

Astron didn't speak. He stood just ahead, still as stone, his gaze focused on the shimmering light of the gate as it pulsed—ready to open.

The gate opened with a deep, resonant hum, casting a veil of silver light that shimmered like water stirred by breath. The air on the other side pulsed—distorted, tense, already heavy with layered mana signatures.

Team Fourteen stepped through as one.

And the moment they crossed the threshold, the world shifted.

The dungeon was unlike the others. A vast, concentric battlefield of floating platforms suspended in a void-like abyss, each sector rotating slowly—like gears in an unseen mechanism. Stone rings drifted through space, tethered by mana ley-lines. Some platforms were wide and flat, others jagged and narrow, constantly rearranging with low rumbles and grating turns. Sectors moved, realigned, separated.

It was as if the dungeon itself refused to stay still.

And 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.

FWOOOOOSH!

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."

Irina stepped forward, her fire surging higher now. She didn't hesitate—never did. Her stats were well above the average. The mana around her flared bright red, flooding the platform in heat as she raised both arms.

Ignition Field.

The area burned—Stage-5 monsters caught in the perimeter instantly collapsed.

But the Stage-6s pressed through. Even with their mana skins searing, they charged.

Jasmine ducked beneath a claw swipe, her blade glancing off the monster's side—not slicing, glancing. "Tch—they're thick!"

Layla slammed into another, her shield skidding back three meters under the force. "I can hold—barely!"

Sylvie's threads swirled faster—enhancing Jasmine's strength, reducing rebound delay for Layla's stance. She was everywhere—managing outputs, casting Recovery Thread, then swapping to Mana Coil Boost without missing a beat.

Astron leapt between platforms—clearing a gap just as a beast dove for Sylvie. His dagger curved upward—SHHK!—striking beneath the jaw. Not a kill, but a stall.

"Irina!" he barked. "Its core—left side, between plates."

Irina's eyes locked on.

She raised a hand—compressed flame swirled in a spiral.

"Solar Rend—Pierce Form."

The beam tore forward like a lance of dawnlight—KRAAAAK!—and this time, the monster screamed. Its chest imploded inward as the spell found its mark. It collapsed in a burst of smoke and cinders.

One down.

Three more.

They were holding—but the pressure mounted.

The dungeon trembled.

The gears beneath the platforms groaned louder, the pace of rotation quickening. More platforms converged and split again, snapping into new configurations mid-combat.

And the monsters—they didn't stop.

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.

And he moved.

Not with flash. Not with fire.

With accuracy.

The first arrow left the string like a whisper.

THWIP—CRACK!

The projectile struck a mutated beast mid-lunge, not killing it—but bursting into a spread of frost that froze its hind leg and tail, locking it in place.

Another arrow.

THWIP—THK!

A second monster turned its head, only to get hit in the neck with a slowing rune—its movement dropped by half. Its next attack missed completely.

He fired again.

Again.

Each shot precise—not to kill, but to disable.

He struck joints, energy nodes, peripheral nerves.

And the field changed.

"Two downed—clean them," Astron called, voice level.

Irina stepped forward.

Her hand snapped outward, and a stream of tightly condensed flame snaked through the platform like a guided whip.

CRRRAAAACK!

It struck the frozen monster dead center and exploded—sending shards of crystalized frost and fire in every direction.

Sylvie's eyes narrowed, the glow around her intensifying. "I'm ready!"

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.