

## H. Academy 731

### Chapter 731 Chapter 166.3 Interrogation

Astron stood, the faint blue glow of his mana tendrils retracting into his palm as Rován slumped against the wall, trembling. His confession hung in the air like a crack of thunder.

"Hawkins!" Irina's voice cut through the oppressive tension, a sharp, fiery eruption of anger. She pushed off the wall, her fists clenched at her sides, flames flickering faintly along her fingertips. "Those bastards dare!"

Rován flinched, his face pale and sweat-slicked as Irina's fiery presence bore down on him. She stepped forward, her amber eyes blazing with fury, her breath quickening as the weight of the revelation settled on her. Images flashed through her mind-Jeremy's mocking smirk, his venomous threats, and the inferno she had left in her wake when she had branded him.

Her voice dropped to a low growl, more dangerous than her earlier shout. "First Jeremy, now this? They've grown bold, thinking they can send their dogs after me."

Astron said nothing, his sharp purple eyes observing her closely. He crossed his arms, his calm demeanor a stark contrast to Irina's simmering rage. He was assessing her reaction, though she barely noticed his presence. Her thoughts were consumed by one single conclusion.

"They're declaring war,' she realized, her anger coiling tighter, a smoldering inferno within her chest. "The audacity to strike against the Emberheart family, against me- do they think we'll stand for this?"

She turned her gaze back to Rován, who was shaking, his earlier defiance completely obliterated. Irina's voice was cold, a blade sharpened by fury. "You made a mistake, aligning yourself with Hawkins. Do you even realize the kind of wrath you've invited?"

"P-please..." Rován stammered, his breath hitching as Irina's flames flared brighter, casting menacing shadows along the walls. "I-I didn't have a choice! They-they forced us into this!"

"Spare me your excuses," she snapped, the heat in her voice matching the fire curling along her hands. "You knew what you were doing when you agreed to this. You thought you could walk away unscathed."

Irina's mind raced as her flames flickered and danced, her thoughts turning to the Hawkins family. Jeremy had been a means to an end for them, nothing more than a tool in their endless pursuit of power. But now, with this bold attack, they had shown their hand-and it wasn't just a message to her. It was a challenge to her family, to everything the Emberheart name represented.

"They dared to send assassins for me?" she muttered under her breath, her voice trembling with barely contained rage. "They dare think they can touch an Emberheart

and get away with it?"

Irina's flames surged, licking along her arms and crackling with raw, untamed power, Her amber eyes gleamed with fury, the reflection of her own fire burning in their depths. She raised her hand slowly, the air around her shimmering with heat. The captives recoiled instinctively, their terror palpable.

"You dared to come after me," she hissed, her voice low and dangerous, carrying the weight of her wrath. "And now, you'll learn what it means to provoke an Emberheart."

The fire swirled in her palm, a blazing orb of destruction that cast flickering shadows across the warehouse walls. For a moment, the room seemed frozen in time, the only movement the hypnotic dance of her flames.

"W-wait!" Rován choked out, his voice cracking as he scrambled backward. "P-please, I told you everything! I—"

His plea was cut off by a sudden rush of heat as Irina's flames erupted, engulfing him in an instant. The inferno roared, consuming his cries and filling the room with the acrid scent of burning flesh. The other captives screamed, their voices rising in a desperate cacophony as they tried to claw away from the firestorm.

But Irina's fury was unrelenting.

She turned her burning gaze to the rest of them, her flames growing brighter, hotter. With a flick of her wrist, tendrils of fire shot forward, coiling around the remaining captives like serpents. They thrashed and wailed, but the flames held fast, tightening their grip as they seared away flesh and hope alike.

Astron stood silently, his sharp purple eyes fixed on Irina. He didn't move to stop her, didn't utter a word. There was no judgment in his gaze, no pity for the burning men, only a cold understanding of the resolve that drove her.

Irina's heart pounded as she watched the captives writhe, their figures silhouetted against the blinding inferno. There was no remorse in her expression, no hesitation. To her, this was justice-not just for the insult to her family, but for the audacity of the Hawkins to think they could strike without consequence.

As the flames consumed the last of their screams, the warehouse fell silent, save for the crackling of embers and the faint groaning of the structure around them. Irina lowered her hand, the fire receding into faint flickers that danced along her fingertips before vanishing entirely. The once-imposing figures of Rován and his subordinates were now little more than charred remains, their forms unrecognizable.

The oppressive silence of the warehouse settled like ash, the faint crackle of embers the only sound breaking the void. Irina stood amidst the destruction, her amber eyes dimming as the rush of fury ebbed away, leaving a hollow ache in its place. Her flames, once wild and consuming, now flickered faintly along her fingertips before extinguishing entirely.

The charred remains of Rován and his subordinates lay crumpled and unrecognizable, their earlier defiance erased by the unforgiving wrath of her fire. Irina stared at the scene for a moment longer, her expression unreadable.

"They deserved worse," she thought, but the conviction that had fueled her moments ago felt distant now, replaced by a creeping emptiness. "But... it still doesn't feel good. Astron's quiet voice broke through her thoughts, steady and calm. "No hesitation." Irina didn't respond immediately. She closed her eyes, exhaling slowly as she turned her back on the charred bodies. "None," she said finally, her voice flat. Astron stepped closer, his sharp purple eyes studying her with that unnervingly calm intensity. "When did you first do it?" he asked, his tone more curious than prying. Irina glanced at him, her expression distant, as if recalling something from another lifetime. "Ten," she said quietly. "I was ten."

Astron nodded slightly, as though the answer confirmed something he already suspected. "You were quite young"

"Yeah," she muttered, her voice heavy. "But I didn't have much of a choice, did I?"

She crossed her arms, her fiery hair falling into her face as she stared at the ground. The weight of the memories pressed against her chest, though she didn't speak them aloud. The first time she'd used her flames to kill-it wasn't justice or even vengeance. It had been survival. And no matter how many times she'd told herself it was necessary, the emptiness always followed.

Astron remained silent, his presence steady but unobtrusive. He didn't press her for details, didn't pry into wounds she wasn't ready to expose. He simply waited, his sharp

gaze unwavering.

Irina's fists clenched at her sides as she exhaled sharply, her breath shaky. She turned suddenly, her amber eyes meeting his. Before she could overthink it, she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him, burying her face against his chest.

Astron stiffened slightly at the unexpected contact, his sharp eyes widening for a brief moment before his posture softened. He didn't speak, didn't ask for an explanation. He simply stood there, his arms resting lightly at his sides as Irina held on.

"For no reason again...."

"For no reason again..." she muttered against him, her voice muffled. "I just... want to." Irina tightened her grip slightly, her fiery hair brushing against his coat as she exhaled slowly. The emptiness inside her didn't vanish, but the warmth of his presence steadied her in a way she couldn't quite explain.

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<Hotel Room>

When we reached the hotel, Irina went straight to the bathroom, muttering something about needing a shower. The door clicked shut behind her, and the sound of running water followed soon after, the steady rhythm filling the room.

I leaned back against the wall, crossing my arms as my mind turned inward.

'Hawkins Family... I guess the Hawkins plot has started.'

In the game, the Hawkins plotline was the centerpiece of Irina's story if the player chose to side with her over Seraphine. It was a tangled web of political maneuvering, personal vendettas, and escalating violence between the Hawkins and the Emberheart families. In the game's timeline, it wouldn't have started this early. The player would usually encounter it later after Irina's character arc had developed more depth. But now, things were already shifting.

I frowned, recalling the details. In the game, the Hawkins had played a dangerous game, baiting the Emberhearts into conflict while building alliances in the shadows. Their eventual clash had devastating consequences, leaving both families weakened and vulnerable to external threats.

'If it had followed the same trajectory, the repercussions could have been severe,' I thought, my fingers tapping lightly against my arm. 'But this time, since it started much earlier....it is much harder to predict...'

The steady rhythm of the shower filled the room, blending with the quiet hum of my thoughts. I leaned against the wall, my arms crossed, and let my mind sift through the details.

In the game, Ethan had been dragged into this mess during a seemingly mundane outing with Irina. An ambush, an escalation, and then the Emberheart-Hawkins feud erupted in earnest. The attack had been the catalyst for a chain of events that embroiled Ethan and the player directly in the feud. It forced the player to make decisions that would shape not only Irina's character arc but also the broader political landscape of the story.

But this wasn't the game. Things were happening faster, and the demons were already becoming more active. The tension was palpable, and with both familial and external threats mounting, the dangers were far greater than what had been written. Yet, there was something else-something that didn't sit right. Irina had mentioned it herself: she hadn't shared their route with anyone. We had disguised ourselves, taken precautions, and ensured they weren't followed. By all accounts, the ambush should have been impossible. And yet, it happened.

"There's no way this was just chance," I thought, my fingers tapping lightly against my arm. "Even with the Hawkins' power of [Foresight], they would need information to narrow down our movements. Their ability isn't omniscient. It's limited by the

information they have at hand!

The pieces didn't align, The Hawkins Family was meticulous, but this kind of precision required more than just their usual reach. For them to find us under those conditions, there had to be a leak- someone who knew our movements and provided the necessary information. It wasn't just the fact that we were found; it was how easily

they had pinpointed us despite our precautions.

'I see....'

And for that, if it was 'her' and 'her methods' then that would explain everything.

'What a cruel mother....'

Really.....

Chapter 732 Chapter 166.4 - Interrogation

One of the offices - Emberheart Estate

The room was dim, lit only by the faint flicker of the flames in the grand hearth. The warmth did little to soften the atmosphere, which felt heavy with unspoken intent. The Matriarch of the Emberheart family sat at her desk, her fingers steepled, her crimson robes glowing faintly like embers in the dim light. The papers before her lay untouched, her sharp eyes fixed instead on the dancing flames in the fireplace.

Esme entered quietly, her steps measured, her expression calm but with a trace of concern visible in her furrowed brow. She bowed her head slightly as she approached, waiting for acknowledgment before speaking.

"Matriarch," Esme began, her voice as steady as ever, though her words carried a weight of uncertainty. "Will it really be okay? The measures you've set in motion-they are harsh, even for Young Lady. You've always tested her, but this... this feels different."

The Matriarch did not respond immediately, her gaze lingering on the fire as though it held the answer to some unspoken question. When she finally spoke, her voice was calm, deliberate, and laced with the authority that defined her every word.

"Esme," she began, her tone cool and measured, "a lion raised in captivity may grow strong, but it will never be prepared for the true wilderness. Irina has chosen her own path, one far removed from the controlled environment I meticulously crafted for her. She wishes to make her own decisions, to walk freely as she claims. But freedom is not without its cost."

Esme's lips pressed into a thin line. "But Matriarch, Irina has already shown strength. Surely, she has proven herself capable?"

The Matriarch's gaze shifted to Esme, her sharp amber eyes glinting with a mixture of curiosity and resolve. "Strength is not simply the ability to act, Esme. It is the wisdom to temper that action, the foresight to see beyond the immediate, and the resilience to endure the consequences. Irina is strong, yes. But she lacks understanding of the depth and scope of the game she has stepped into."

The Matriarch's sharp gaze softened briefly, an almost imperceptible flicker of something resembling regret. But as she raised her hand, the faint crimson glow surrounding her fingertips chased the moment away. With a graceful motion, she waved toward the hearth.

The fire surged. Its light expanded, casting long, dancing shadows against the dimly lit walls. As the flames roared to life, the office was illuminated, revealing a figure suspended from the ceiling.

The young woman hung limply, her wrists bound above her head by enchanted chains

that glowed faintly with Emberheart mana. Her body was a map of pain-countless burn marks marred her skin, and fresh welts painted her arms and legs. The tattered remains of her clothes clung to her frame, offering no protection from the cool draft of the room. Her head lolled forward, and her matted hair clung to her sweat-slick face. Though her lips were bound with a gag, her terrified, hollow eyes darted toward the Matriarch as the room came alive with the fire's glow.

Esme's breath hitched, but she maintained her composure. "Matriarch," she said quietly, a faint note of unease slipping into her tone. "Is this truly necessary? She has already suffered greatly."

The Matriarch's response was as cold as the flickering flames were hot. "It is not the suffering that matters, Esme. It is the lesson learned from it. And right now, this girl's purpose is to teach."

With that, the Matriarch extended her hand once more. A single ember floated toward the young woman, hovering just beneath her fingertips. The girl's body tensed as though sensing the imminent agony, her muffled cries turning frantic.

The ember descended, slipping beneath the nail of her forefinger. A sharp hiss sounded, followed by the smell of seared flesh. The girl's muffled screams tore through the room, her back arching as her entire body convulsed in pain.

The Matriarch's expression did not change. Her gaze remained steady, cold, and calculating as the ember lingered for a few agonizing seconds before she extinguished it with a flick of her wrist. The girl slumped forward again, her body trembling uncontrollably.

"Esme," the Matriarch began, her tone still calm but carrying an edge of warning, "Irina believes she understands control. She believes her fire is a tool she wields effortlessly, that her strength is enough to protect her from the consequences of her actions."

Esme inclined her head slightly, though her gaze flickered toward the young woman. "The Young Lady has shown extraordinary resolve, Matriarch. Surely-"

"Resolve is not enough," the Matriarch interjected, her voice sharp and commanding. She turned toward Esme, her amber eyes burning with intensity. "There is no information in this world that can remain hidden forever. Not from enemies. Not from allies. Not even from the Emberhearts."

She gestured toward the young woman with a flick of her fingers. "This one thought she could deceive me. She believed that her affiliations, her resources, and her secrets would protect her. But look where that belief has brought her."

The Matriarch leaned forward slightly, her voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. "Even Irina must understand this: there is always a possibility of a leak. No matter how well-guarded her plans, how meticulous her preparations, she is not infallible. She must learn that the Emberheart name does not grant immunity from the world's cruelties. It only makes the stakes higher."

The Matriarch's voice cut through the heavy silence, her tone colder than the Emberheart flames that illuminated the room. "And now," she said, her eyes narrowing as they fixed on the trembling form of the suspended young woman, "Irina has chosen to take that boy into her fold. To trust him, to shield him. But trust is a dangerous commodity, Esme. One must be certain it is earned."

She stood, the folds of her crimson robe catching the light as the faint flicker of the fire reflected the power she wielded. "This is not only Irina's lesson but his as well. That boy... Astron. He is hiding far more than he reveals." Her voice carried a note of intrigue, a rare softness betraying the depth of



her thoughts. "I do not acknowledge him lightly, Esme. I dislike that he has forced me to even consider the possibility... but I cannot deny it. He is not a normal child."

Esme watched her Matriarch carefully, her expression unreadable though her hands were folded neatly before her. "And you intend to test him further?"

"Of course," the Matriarch replied, her tone leaving no room for doubt. "It is not enough to see him act. It is how he acts when there is no safety net-no shield but his own will. Irina's attachment to him will drive her decisions, and if he is to remain by her side, I must know if he is worthy. Can he protect her when I am not there? Can he withstand the fire of this family's legacy?"

Her gaze returned to the flickering fire, her thoughts briefly clouded with irritation. "I have set this event to teach Irina, but it has become more than that. I will test Astron, whether he knows it or not. His composure, his strength, his motives. They will all be laid bare. And if he fails..."

She trailed off, her lips pressing into a thin line. The Matriarch's silence was weightier than her words, a promise that failure would not be tolerated.

Esme shifted slightly, her calm demeanor never wavering. "And what if he does not fail, Matriarch? If he proves himself capable?"

The Matriarch's lips twitched into a faint smile, though her amber eyes remained as sharp as ever. "Then Irina's decision to place her trust in him may not be as misguided as I once thought. But do not mistake my curiosity for leniency, Esme. Trusting him will not come easily. He must prove himself in every way possible-his strength, his loyalty, his intentions."

Just as the Matriarch fell silent, a soft notification came from Esme's smartwatch. "Lady Esme, we've just received word. The Young Lady and her companion have dealt with an ambush at the Stellamare Museum. They are both unharmed." Esme's head tilted slightly, and her eyes flicked to the Matriarch. "It seems Irina and Astron have already passed one test."

The Matriarch's lips curled into a rare smile, faint but tinged with approval. "Apparently, that boy is indeed quite skilled," she mused, her tone soft but laden with intent. "Perhaps more so than even Irina realizes. For now, this is enough." Her gaze lingered on the flickering flames as she stepped closer to the fire.

Her gaze lingered on the flickering flames as she stepped closer to the fire. "But this is only the beginning. If Astron truly wishes to stand beside Irina, then he will face trials far greater than this. And if he falters..."

The smile disappeared, replaced by a cold, calculating expression. "I will ensure he never becomes a liability to this family."

The suspended girl groaned faintly, her muffled sobs a haunting backdrop to the crackling fire. The Matriarch barely spared her a glance, extinguishing the flames with a flick of her wrist, plunging the room back into its dim shadows. The Matriarch's gaze darkened as she turned from the extinguished flames, her

silhouette outlined by the faint ember glow that still clung to the room. Her tone sharpened, carrying the weight of unyielding authority.

"Esme," she said, her voice calm yet seething with quiet intensity, "prepare our forces."

It seems the time has come to deal with the cockroaches that have dared to skitter

into the lion's den."

Esme inclined her head, her expression steady, though her lips tightened as if in silent acknowledgment of the gravity of the command. "As you wish, Matriarch."

The Matriarch stepped away from the fire, her movements deliberate and measured as she paced to the window. Her gaze swept across the sprawling estate, her mind already formulating the steps ahead. "The Hawkins family," she continued, her voice low but carrying a feral edge, "has forgotten their place. To strike at an Emberheart... to bare their fangs so openly... it is an insult I will not tolerate."

She turned to Esme, her amber eyes blazing with a fire that seemed to fill the room despite the extinguished flames. "The world has grown complacent, Esme. They have forgotten who we are. It is time they are reminded."

Esme's voice remained steady, though her gaze flickered with a hint of apprehension.

"What would you have us do, Matriarch?"

The Matriarch's lips curved into a cold smile, devoid of warmth yet filled with purpose.

"Heh....What else.....Fire of course..."

#### Chapter 733 167.1 - Return to the Academy

The faint aroma of freshly brewed tea filled the hotel suite as Irina stepped out of the bathroom, her fiery hair damp and clinging to her shoulders. She wore a soft white robe, loosely tied around her waist, the faint heat of her skin still lingering from the shower.

Her amber eyes swept the room, landing on Astron seated in the plush armchair near the small tea table. He had also showered, his damp hair tousled, and wore simple black pajamas that added to his relaxed yet composed demeanor.

On the table beside him sat a teapot and two cups, one of which emitted faint wisps of steam. Irina's lips curved into a small smile as she approached, her steps light on the carpeted floor. 'He made tea,' she thought, a flicker of warmth settling in her chest. It was a simple gesture, but after the day they'd had, it felt comforting.

She settled into the chair beside him, her movements uncharacteristically quiet. Reaching for the cup, she let her fingers linger on the warm porcelain before lifting it to her lips. The first sip was soothing, the earthy aroma mingling with the heat to chase away the last traces of tension from her body.

"Thanks," she said softly, her voice breaking the quiet but without disrupting the calm atmosphere.

Astron glanced at her, his sharp purple eyes briefly meeting hers. He gave a faint nod, his usual calmness ever-present. "I figured you'd need it."

Irina leaned back in her chair, the cup still cradled in her hands. The shower had done wonders for her mood, and the tea was a perfect follow-up. She felt lighter, more grounded, though the seriousness of their earlier encounter lingered at the edges of her thoughts. After a moment of silence, she spoke, her tone quieter than usual.

"So... Hawkins," she began, her voice carrying a note of resignation. "They really don't know when to quit."

Astron didn't reply immediately. He took a sip of his own tea, his gaze steady as he seemed to weigh his words. "They're escalating," he said finally, his tone matter-of-fact. "And it's not just about you anymore."

Irina sighed, setting her cup down on the table. "I know. They're not just after me- they're challenging my family. This isn't about personal grudges. It's about power, politics, and..." She hesitated, her fingers curling slightly. "And pride."

Astron tilted his head slightly, watching her carefully. "According to what you have said, they've been careful so far, but today's attack was different. It was reckless."

"Or calculated," Irina countered, her amber eyes narrowing. "They wanted to send a message."

Irina's fingers tightened slightly around the teacup, the warmth seeping into her

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11

palms as she stared into the amber liquid. The thought of her mother's involvement in this matter brought a flicker of reassurance to her, but it was tempered by an undercurrent of unease. She exhaled softly, leaning back against the chair, her damp hair falling over her shoulder.

"I've already told my mother about this," she said, breaking the silence. Her voice was calm, but there was a weight to her words. "And as expected, she said she'd handle it. On her watch, no one dares to challenge the Emberheart family."

Astron didn't react outwardly, simply taking another sip of his tea as he regarded her with those ever-calm purple eyes. "Do you trust her methods?"

Irina let out a dry chuckle, a faint smile tugging at her lips. "Her methods..." she echoed, her voice soft. "Let's just say I know exactly how she operates. And if the Hawkins think they've seen the worst of us, they're about to learn otherwise." 'Mother doesn't leave loose ends.' Irina's thoughts drifted to the cold efficiency her mother employed when protecting their family's name. If they dared to strike first, she'll make sure they regret it. No one plays with fire and walks away unscathed.' She set the cup down, her gaze flickering to Astron briefly. His composed demeanor seemed unshaken, as though he had already considered every angle of the situation before she'd

even mentioned it. It was a quiet strength that Irina found herself appreciating more than she cared to admit.

Reassured by her mother's resolve, Irina allowed herself to relax slightly. Her thoughts wandered to the events of the day, the tension and danger that had unfolded with an almost surreal intensity. But as the adrenaline ebbed, she found herself reflecting on something else-something that made her lips curve into a small, unbidden smile.

'It's strange,' she thought, her gaze softening as it lingered on Astron. Today wasn't what I expected. Our trip was interrupted, derailed by danger and chaos, but... it wasn't all bad."

She glanced at him again, noting the way he seemed so effortlessly calm despite everything they'd gone through. "This is the first time I've been in a situation like that with just him. Back in the Phantom's Land, Sylvie was there too. But today... it was just us. And somehow, I liked that.'

Her smile faded slightly, replaced by a faint blush as she leaned her cheek against her hand. 'What am I even thinking? Liking a life-and-death situation? That's not normal. But... it was different. Trusting someone to watch my back, knowing he's there, steady as ever... it felt good."

Astron's voice interrupted her thoughts, low and steady as always. "You're unusually quiet."

Irina blinked, straightening slightly as she realized she'd been lost in her thoughts. "Just thinking," she said, brushing it off with a faint shrug. "Today was... different." Astron tilted his head slightly, his sharp purple eyes studying her with quiet curiosity.

17:32

"How different?"

Irina let out a soft laugh, her fingers tapping lightly against her teacup as she leaned back in her chair. "Just... different from what I expected this trip to be," she admitted. "I thought it would be quieter-museum tours, good food, a bit of normalcy. But..." She paused, a faint smile tugging at her lips. "It wasn't bad."

Astron raised an eyebrow, his gaze steady. "Apparently, a bit of action is always good" Irina chuckled, setting her teacup down as she turned to him. "For people like us- who've been thrown into the chaos of life so many times-doesn't normalcy get a

little... boring?"

Astron didn't answer immediately. Instead, his gaze shifted toward the window, the city lights reflected in his calm, unreadable eyes. The silence stretched between them, not awkward but weighted, as though he were considering her words carefully. Irina watched him for a moment, her amber eyes softening as a bold idea sparked in her mind. She hesitated briefly, her fingers brushing against the armrest of her chair. 'What's wrong with me today?' she thought, but the idea wouldn't leave her. Before she could overthink it, she moved.

Leaning forward, she shifted in her seat and rested her head on his shoulder. The motion was fluid but tentative as if testing the waters of a new dynamic. Astron didn't. react immediately, though she felt the faintest stiffening in his posture before he

relaxed, allowing her presence.

"You didn't answer," she murmured, her voice quieter now, almost teasing.

"Didn't need to," Astron replied, his tone calm but with a faint edge of amusement.

Irina smirked against his shoulder, the tension in her chest easing slightly. She closed her eyes, her fiery hair brushing against his arm as she let herself settle into the moment. Maybe normalcy isn't as boring as I thought,' she mused, though she didn't say it aloud. Instead, she stayed where she was, content to enjoy the rare calm

between them.

For now, the weight of the Hawkins and their challenges could wait.

Since she knew that not much time was left.

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After the first semester of the Academy had ended, Ethan's life had been consumed by

a grueling yet rewarding routine. While most students might have taken the Academy's 1.5-month break as an opportunity to relax, Ethan had no intention of slacking off. The bitter taste of his previous shortcomings, combined with the drive to grow stronger, propelled him forward.

At his home in Hartley Manor, Ethan immersed himself in relentless training. The serene estate, nestled amidst sprawling fields and dense woodlands, became the

12

perfect battleground for his self-imposed regimen.

But then suddenly he was taken to a mountain to train.

However, this was no ordinary training-it was a specialized program designed by his

aunt, Kaya Hartley, an S-rank hunter known for her rigorous standards and unmatched skill. Her reputation as a warrior who thrived in impossible situations was legendary, and her methods were as unforgiving as they were effective.

Under Kaya's watchful eye, Ethan endured:

Physical Conditioning:

Early mornings began with intense workouts designed to push his body to its limits.

Weighted runs, obstacle courses, and endurance drills in harsh environments were staples of the program. The once-gentle morning breeze now carried the echo of his labored breaths and the thud of his determined strides.

Combat Drills:

Kaya's personal touch came in the form of grueling sparring sessions. She attacked

Ethan with relentless ferocity, forcing him to hone his reflexes and adapt to unpredictable scenarios. Wooden weapons, live mana practice, and even hand-to-hand combat became part of their daily duels.

"You'll face worse than this in the real world," Kaya would say, her sharp blue eyes

locking onto his. "If you hesitate, you die. Remember that."

Mana Mastery:

Kaya emphasized not just the use of raw mana but its precise control. Ethan spent

hours meditating to refine his mana channels, practicing intricate techniques, and experimenting with combining aura and elemental energy. His once-basic grasp of mana flow had grown into something far more advanced.

Mental Fortitude:

To round off his training, Kaya introduced him to scenarios designed to test his resolve. Simulations of combat under pressure, mind games, and tactical decision-making drills pushed him to think several steps ahead in any situation. Today, on a peaceful Sunday, Ethan stood in the middle of the Hartley training grounds, drenched in sweat but brimming with a newfound sense of power. His muscles ached, but it was a satisfying pain-the kind that spoke of growth and progress. His breathing slowed as he looked up at the cloudless sky, the sunlight warm

against his face.

"Not bad," Kaya said, leaning against the wooden fence nearby. Her arms were crossed, and a rare smile played on her lips. "You've come a long way, Ethan. Stronger, faster, sharper. I'd even say you're beginning to remind me of your father." Ethan's blue eyes flickered with determination. "I'm still far from where I need to be."

"Good." Kaya's smile turned into a smirk. "Complacency is the death of greatness."



She tossed him a towel, which he caught with ease. As he wiped the sweat from his face, he couldn't help but reflect on how far he had come. The Ethan who had stumbled during fights at the Academy felt like a distant memory. Now, he stood taller,

not just in strength but in confidence and purpose.

"Now, you are allowed to go down to the city..... And, Ethan was now finally allowed to go to his home.....

'Heh.....it has been a while.....'

He thought as he smiled.

He had really missed his friends.....

#### Chapter 734 167.2 - Return to the Academy

Ethan adjusted the strap of his bag as he stood at the base of the mountain trail, glancing back one last time at the rugged peaks he had called home for over a month. His aunt, Kaya, stood a few feet away, arms crossed and her sharp gaze softened just slightly by a hint of pride.

"Remember," Kaya said, her voice carrying the weight of both a warning and

encouragement, "this strength is a tool, not a trophy. Don't get comfortable. Growth doesn't stop just because you've leveled up."

Ethan nodded, the weight of her words settling in his chest. "Got it, Aunt Kaya. Thank you for everything"

As he turned to descend the trail, Ethan couldn't help but smile to himself. Finally, home.'

The path down the mountain was steep, but Ethan moved with practiced ease, his movements sure and steady from weeks of Kaya's grueling training. The once-daunting terrain now felt almost welcoming, as if the mountain itself acknowledged his progress. His bag bounced lightly on his back as he picked up his pace, the thought of returning to the Hartley Manor spurring him onward.

'A real bed. A bath. Full technology again. The thought sent a ripple of excitement through him. Living under Kaya's watch had been an experience-brutal, relentless, and entirely devoid of comfort. She hadn't allowed anything beyond the essentials. No entertainment, no social media, no distractions. 'She called it purification... and maybe she was right.'

Despite the hardships, Ethan felt lighter, as though shedding those conveniences had cleansed something inside him. He hadn't realized how much noise filled his life until it was gone.

But even as he reflected on this newfound clarity, a pang of longing stirred in his chest. He quickened his steps, feeling his heart rate pick up for a reason unrelated to the descent. His friends came to mind-Julia, Lilia, Lucas, Carl, Irina-and, unbidden, Jane.

Her name lingered longer than the others, and with it came the memory of her tearful smile when he had saved her. His face flushed as his heart thudded in his chest. 'What is wrong with me?'

He shook his head, trying to dispel the thought, but it lingered stubbornly. I told her I'd be gone for training. She understood... but what if-no. She's fine. She's strong.' Even as he reassured himself, the worry crept back in.

A breeze rustled through the trees lining the trail, and Ethan picked up his pace until he was nearly jogging. The path opened up, and the familiar sight of the Hartley Estate came into view. The sprawling grounds were a welcome sight after weeks of rugged terrain and makeshift accommodations.

With a burst of energy, Ethan broke into a full sprint. The ache in his muscles from training, the weight of his bag-none of it mattered. The wide, open fields leading to the manor felt like freedom itself, and he reveled in the sensation. 'Almost there.'

The grand Hartley Manor stood tall, its pristine facade gleaming under the midday sun. Ethan slowed to a stop at the main entrance, panting slightly as he took in the sight. 'Home.'

He stepped inside, his boots clicking softly against the polished marble floors. The familiar scent of lavender and cedar filled his senses, a comforting contrast to the earthy, sweat-soaked reality of the past month. A servant approached, bowing politely.

"Welcome back, Young Master Ethan. Shall I prepare a bath for you?"

Ethan couldn't suppress the grin that spread across his face. "Yes, please. And make it hot"

As he ascended the grand staircase, he reflected on the solitude of the past weeks. Kaya's strict regimen had left no room for indulgence, and he hadn't dared to question it. 'She's an S-rank hunter for a reason. If she thought was necessary, it probably was.'

Still, the idea of sinking into a hot bath, surrounded by the comforts of home, felt almost surreal.

The bathroom was a haven of luxury, its modern fixtures gleaming under soft, ambient lighting. Ethan sank into the steaming water, the heat enveloping him like a warm embrace. He let out a sigh of relief as the tension in his muscles began to melt away. "This... this is heaven.'

For a few moments, he allowed himself to simply exist, his thoughts drifting. But as the water soothed his aching body, his mind wandered back to his friends-and to Jane.

As his gaze wandered lazily around the bathroom, his eyes fell on the counter where his smartwatch rested. It had been placed there by the maids, likely when they were preparing the bath. The sleek device gleamed under the soft lighting, a small but sharp reminder of the world he had momentarily left behind.

Ethan reached over, droplets of water trailing from his hand, and picked it up. The screen lit up as soon as he tapped it, and a flood of notifications erupted across the display. He blinked in surprise as the device buzzed incessantly in his hand, the sheer volume of updates almost comical.

'What the...?'

The screen scrolled through an endless list of messages, pings, and alerts, the overwhelming stream of activity making him feel a strange mix of excitement and unease. He hadn't realized just how much he'd been cut off from everything.

Social media updates flashed before his eyes-likes, comments, and posts from friends and acquaintances. His inbox was equally chaotic, filled with messages he hadn't

seen.

"This feels... surreal.'

Ethan opened his messaging app, his thumb hovering for a moment before diving into the chaos. Group chats were alive with activity, and he scrolled through the backlog of messages, catching up on conversations he'd missed.

One particular group chat caught his eye, the name flashing with familiarity: The Chaos Squad. He opened it, greeted by a flood of messages.

[Julia: Yo! Anyone wants to come? Let's meet this weekend?]

The message was from four weeks ago, and seeing it felt like unearthing a memory frozen in time.

[Lilia: I wnta to emoe, but I cna't emoe.....]

Ethan chuckled softly. It was a typo, clearly mocking Julia's message, and seeing the banter between the two brought a wave of nostalgia. It was as if nothing had changed

in his absence.

[Lucas: Guys, stop being weird in the chat. You're scaring away the normal people.]

[Julia: What normal people? You mean YOU?]

[Lucas: ... I walked into that one.]

The back-and-forth felt familiar, grounding. Despite everything, their dynamic remained unchanged.

Ethan scrolled further, noticing several messages addressed to him directly.

[Irina: Ethan? Are you alive?]

[Lucas: I told you he's training with his scary aunt. Leave him be.]

[Lilia: Or maybe he's hiding from us because he knows we'd roast him for skipping practice.]

Their teasing brought a small smile to his face, but his heart skipped a beat when he spotted Jane's name in the chat.

His heart thudded louder, the warmth from the bath suddenly feeling more intense.

Jane..."

He switched to their private chat, the last message from her standing out.

[Jane: Good luck with your training! I'll be waiting to hear all about it when you're back. :)]

The simplicity of her words made them all the more impactful. He reread them a few times, a smile tugging at his lips. She really... cares.'

Ethan stared at the screen of his smartwatch, his thumb hesitating over Jane's name in the chat. The memory of their last conversation replayed in his mind, her soft smile and the gentle encouragement she had offered before his training.

'I promised I'd call her.'

The thought made his chest tighten, and for a moment, he considered putting it off. The warmth from the bath was doing little to calm the sudden rush of nerves. 'Get a

grip, Ethan. You've faced Aunt Kaya for a month. This is nothing.' Resolving to follow through, he tapped the call button. The ringing tone echoed in his ears, a mix of excitement and nervous

anticipation building with every second. He leaned back against the edge of the tub, clutching the smartwatch as if it might steady

him.

"Hello?" Jane's voice came through, soft and familiar, and immediately, Ethan felt a sense of ease wash over him.

"Hey, Jane. It's me," he said, trying to keep his voice steady.

There was a pause, and then her tone shifted, a mix of relief and warmth. "Ethan!

You're back! I was starting to think you forgot about me."

Her playful jab made him chuckle, though his heart beat a little faster. "I didn't forget. I just got my smartwatch back-fresh off the mountain."

"Mountain?" she echoed, the curiosity in her voice unmistakable. "I thought you were just training. Did they send you on some kind of wilderness survival trip?"

"Pretty much." Ethan rubbed the back of his neck, even though she couldn't see him.

"My aunt-Kaya Hartley-was in charge. She doesn't believe in 'easy! Let's just say I've been running up cliffs and dodging attacks for weeks."

Jane laughed softly, the sound light and genuine. "Sounds intense. And here I thought my life was tough. You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Sore, but fine," he replied, his tone softening. "How about you? How've you been?"

"Oh, you know," she said, her voice turning a little quieter, "just surviving the semester. It's been... interesting."

The hesitation in her voice didn't escape him. "Jane, is everything okay?"

There was a moment of silence before she answered, her tone lighter but still a little

guarded. "It's nothing major. Just the usual academy drama. Nothing you need to worry about."

Ethan frowned. 'She's holding back.' But he didn't push, knowing Jane well enough to

understand that she'd open up when she was ready. Instead, he shifted the topic. "I missed talking to you."

The words slipped out before he could stop them, and he immediately felt his face heat

up. 'Smooth, Ethan. Real smooth.'

On the other end of the line, Jane's breath caught for a moment. When she spoke

again, her voice was softer. "I missed talking to you too."

His heart thudded in his chest, and for a moment, he didn't know what to say. The comfortable silence that followed felt more meaningful than any words could have

been.

'Right.....'

Just like that, the conversation continued.

Chapter 735 - 167.3 - Return to the Academy

<Arcadia Hunter Academy, Monday, Start of the Second Semester>

The academy garden was alive with chatter, the crisp morning air mingling with the hum of anticipation. Students from all years gathered in clusters, their voices rising and falling like waves as they shared stories, theories, and complaints about the semester ahead. The garden, with its meticulously pruned hedges and vibrant flowers, seemed almost too serene for the lively chaos unfolding within its bounds.

"Man, I can't believe the break's already over," a boy groaned, slumping against a tree. "I didn't even finish half the stuff I planned to do."

"Did you really plan anything, though?" his friend teased, nudging him. "You were just bragging about marathoning all six seasons of Mystic Chronicles last week."

"Hey, that counts as self-improvement! I was studying the tactics of the Mystic Order," he defended, earning a round of laughter from his group.

Nearby, a group of second-years huddled around a tall girl with braided hair, her voice carrying above the others.

"Did you hear?" she said, leaning in conspiratorially. "The headmaster's bringing in a new professor for the combat classes. Apparently, she's a retired hunter—top rank."

"What?" one of the boys exclaimed. "A top-ranked hunter teaching us? What are they expecting us to face this semester? Dragons?"

"Wouldn't be surprised," another chimed in. "Did you see the new curriculum outline? Tactical warfare, advanced dungeon strategies... It's like they're preparing us for war."

"Or to not die horribly," someone muttered, and a somber silence fell over the group before being broken by a nervous chuckle.

On the eastern side of the garden, a trio of first-years sat on a low stone wall, their uniforms still looking freshly pressed.

"I heard the second semester is way tougher," one of them said, adjusting his glasses. "The mana manipulation test is supposed to weed out the weaklings."

"That's just a rumor," his friend countered, kicking at the grass. "They're not gonna kick people out. Right?"

"I don't know... Remember that girl who failed last year? She just... disappeared. No one's heard from her since."

"Maybe she transferred?" the first boy offered weakly, but the uneasy silence suggested no one believed it.

Ethan stood among the lively chaos of the academy, his bag slung casually over his shoulder as he scanned the sea of students. The energy of the first day back was infectious, with groups of students catching up, sharing stories, and speculating about what lay ahead.

"Yo, Mountain Boy! Finally decided to grace us with your presence?" Julia's familiar voice rang out above the chatter, cutting through the din like an arrow. Ethan turned to see her striding toward him, her trademark smirk already firmly in place.

"Mountain Boy?" Ethan echoed, raising an eyebrow. "Is that what I'm going to be called now?"



"Better than 'Hermit,' which was my first choice," Julia quipped, crossing her arms. "You've been completely off the grid, Ethan. What, did you become someone important in the mountains or something? Too good to answer a message?"

Ethan sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "It wasn't like that. Aunt Kaya kept me too busy to even think about touching my smartwatch. Training with her is... let's just say it's not exactly a vacation."

"Training," Julia repeated, her grin widening mischievously. "Or did you join some kind of secret society up there? 'Cause honestly, disappearing for weeks without a word—sounds suspicious."

"Not everything is some grand conspiracy, Julia," Ethan said, though the corner of his mouth twitched upward. "Unlike some people, I wasn't lounging around on break."

Julia's eyes narrowed playfully. "Oh, I was busy. Unlike you, I'm reachable, thank you very much. And the Chaos Squad has been a mess without you. Lilia here has been trying to impersonate you in the group chat, but, let's be honest, she's terrible at it."

"I'm not terrible," Lilia interjected, stepping up with an exaggerated pout. "I was just filling in the gaps. Someone had to bring the drama while you were gone, Ethan."

Ethan smirked. "I don't bring drama."

"You are drama," Julia corrected, nudging him with her elbow. "You just don't know it."

Carl and Lucas approached then, both carrying identical looks of curiosity and mild amusement.

"Ethan," Lucas said, gesturing toward him as if presenting a puzzle, "you've been back for all of five minutes, and already Julia's grilling you. Did you really miss this?"

Lilia chuckled, adjusting the strap of his own bag. "It's like a rite of passage at this point. If Julia's not on your case, are you even part of the group?"

"Don't encourage her," Ethan groaned, though he couldn't keep the smile off his face.

"But seriously," Lucas said, his tone turning just a bit more inquisitive, "what was it like? Training with Kaya Hartley? I've heard stories—she's supposed to be terrifying."

"She is terrifying," Ethan confirmed. "And relentless. Every day was a new kind of torture—but, honestly, it was worth it. I feel stronger, more focused."

"Stronger, huh?" Julia said, leaning closer with a gleam of mischief in her eyes. "What's next? Are you planning to challenge Victor Blackthorn for his throne?"

Ethan snorted. "Yeah, because that would end well."

"Maybe not," Lilia chimed in, her voice light but teasing. "But you could at least try to give him a run for his money. You've got the mysterious loner vibe going now—girls love that."

Ethan's face warmed slightly, but he shook his head. "I think I'll pass on the whole 'throne' thing. Victor can keep it."

Julia grinned, sensing an opportunity. "Speaking of girls, Ethan... who were you so busy calling after your bath yesterday?"

Ethan froze, his mind flashing back to his conversation with Jane. "I—wait, how do you know about that?"

"Heh....Dumbass.....Seeing that you were online yesterday, I thought that I would call you....But apparently, the line was busy...."

Ethan sighed, running a hand through his hair. He'd completely forgotten about the missed call in the excitement of catching up with Jane. "Right... that. Sorry, Julia. I didn't even check who was calling."

Julia's eyes narrowed as she crossed her arms, her mock-serious expression already forming. "Didn't check? Really? After weeks of radio silence, at least calling me once would've been nice, no? Or is my rank on the priority list so low now that you don't even bother?"

Ethan groaned, sensing the teasing wasn't going to let up anytime soon. "It's not like that. I just... forgot, okay?"

"Forgot," Julia repeated, her voice dripping with exaggerated offense. "You hear that, guys? Forgot. Mountain Boy here goes off for weeks, comes back a new man, and suddenly, we're an afterthought."

"Yeah, Ethan," Lilia joined in, her tone light but mischievous. "You didn't even let us know you were alive until yesterday. The least you could do is pretend you care."

Ethan rubbed his temples, his face caught between exasperation and amusement. "Alright, alright. Fine. I was talking with her, okay? So what?"

The group froze for a moment, the revelation landing like a pebble in a pond. Then Julia's smirk returned, wider and more triumphant than ever. "Her, huh? So it was Jane."

Lucas grinned, folding his arms as he joined the fray. "I didn't realize you were such a romantic, Ethan. Jane must've made quite the impression."

Ethan rolled his eyes, though the warmth in his face betrayed his composure. "Can we drop it already?"

"Nope," Julia said, popping the "p" with mock finality. "Not a chance. You've been off doing who-knows-what for a month, and now you come back acting all mysterious and evasive. We're not letting this slide."

The teasing continued, each comment eliciting groans from Ethan and laughter from the group. Despite his protests, Ethan found himself smiling. For the first time in weeks, he felt the weight of his training begins to lift, replaced by the easy camaraderie of his friends.

As the laughter died down, Ethan glanced around the group. Lilia's sharp, teasing gaze softened, Carl looked relaxed, and even Lucas seemed at ease. It struck him how different Lucas appeared—less burdened as if some of the tension that had clouded him before had finally lifted.

"It's really been a while," Ethan said, his voice quieter now. "I missed this. You guys."

The group stilled for a moment, the playful atmosphere giving way to something more sincere. Then Julia grinned, her tone deliberately light as she said, "Yeah, yeah. Don't get all sentimental on us, Mountain Boy."

Ethan chuckled, shaking his head. "I mean it. You all look good. Seems like everyone's doing fine now."

Lucas gave a small nod, his usual grin tempered with a hint of gratitude. "Yeah. Things feel... clearer now."

Ethan didn't push for details, but the unspoken understanding passed between them. Lucas had been wrestling with his own demons before Ethan left, and it was a relief to see him looking more like himself.

"But wait..."

However, Ethan realized something.

Ethan glanced around, his brow furrowing slightly. Something felt incomplete about the group. "But wait..." he said, trailing off as the realization hit him. "Where's Irina?"

Julia's lips curved into a knowing smile, her arms crossing loosely. "Oh, don't worry. She said she'd be here soon. Probably making a dramatic entrance like always."

As if on cue, the distant hum of chatter seemed to part, and the group turned to see a figure approaching from the direction of the main gate. Irina Emberheart strode toward them with purpose, her fiery red hair catching the sunlight, almost glowing. Her usual confident gait was there, but there was something... different about her.

Her aura, always vibrant, now carried an unmistakable weight. The fiery energy that surrounded her felt sharper, more controlled, and yet somehow more powerful. And her expression—calm, focused, and ever so slightly smug—hinted at a newfound strength.

"Wow," Lucas muttered, his arms dropping to his sides as he took in her presence. "She looks... different."

"No kidding," Lilia added, her sharp eyes narrowing slightly as if trying to analyze the change. "She's definitely leveled up."

Julia raised an eyebrow, her grin widening. "Looks like Mountain Boy isn't the only one who got a power-up over the break."

Ethan watched as Irina closed the distance, her fiery aura practically radiating confidence. He couldn't help but smile. "Irina," he called out, his voice warm. "You're looking... strong."

Irina stopped just a few feet away, planting her hands on her hips as her yellow eyes swept over the group. "And you're looking less like a slacker, Ethan. Guess that mountain training didn't kill you after all."

Ethan chuckled, recognizing the familiar teasing edge in her voice, but there was something more to her words—a subtle acknowledgment, almost like a challenge.

"Strong is an understatement," Carl said, stepping forward with an appraising nod. "You've been training too, haven't you?"

Irina's lips quirked into a small, self-assured smile. "What gave it away? The aura? The confidence? Or the fact that I can probably roast all of you right now without breaking a sweat?"

"Confident much?" Julia teased, though there was no malice in her tone. "But I am confident too..."

Irina's smile grew, her fiery aura flaring briefly before settling. "Ho?"

Just then, they sensed a silence.

Chapter 736 - 167.4 - Return to the Academy

The garden's lively energy abruptly stilled, like the moment before a storm. The chatter that had filled the air just seconds ago seemed to vanish, leaving behind an uncanny silence. The group exchanged uncertain glances, the shift in atmosphere unsettling.

"Is it just me," Julia whispered, her voice uncharacteristically quiet, "or did it just get eerily quiet?"

"It's not just you," Lilia replied, her gaze scanning the crowd. "Something's... off."

Their attention, like the rest of the students in the garden, was drawn toward a figure walking down the central path. The air around him seemed to command silence, as though even the garden itself dared not intrude on his presence.

"Who's that?" Lucas asked, his voice low but filled with curiosity.

The figure approached with an unhurried stride, his posture exuding an effortless confidence that bordered on regal. Cold, piercing purple eyes scanned the crowd, sharp and unyielding like twin amethysts. His skin was unblemished and pale, like porcelain untouched by imperfection, and his features were sharp enough to seem almost sculpted—a jawline that could cut glass and a nose that added to his aristocratic air.

The whispers began, soft and hushed, as students leaned into each other, trying to piece together the enigma before them.

"Did we have someone that handsome here?" one student murmured.

"I've never seen him before," another whispered, their tone tinged with disbelief. "He looks like he stepped out of a painting."

"Is he new?" someone else ventured, their voice trembling slightly. "No way he's been here all this time without anyone noticing."

The uniform of the Arcadia Hunter Academy fit him perfectly, tailored in a way that elevated its already prestigious design. The golden insignia on his shoulder glinted in the sunlight, and the subtle crest on his chest marked him as a student of the Hunter Department. Yet, something about the way he carried himself suggested he was more than just another cadet.

The group's collective gaze fixed on the approaching figure, their jaws slackening in disbelief. For a long moment, no one spoke, as if the very air had thickened, demanding silence.

"Wait..." Julia finally broke the spell, her voice barely above a whisper. "Is that... Astron?"

Ethan blinked, his mind struggling to reconcile the figure before them with the classmate they had known. "There's no way that's him. Right?"

But as the figure drew closer, there was no denying it. The sharp purple eyes that seemed to pierce through the very soul, the stark contrast of black hair and pale, almost radiant skin—it was unmistakably Astron. Yet, at the same time, it wasn't.

"It's him," Lilia confirmed, her voice steady but tinged with disbelief. "Those eyes... there's no mistaking them."

Lucas frowned, his arms crossed as he scrutinized Astron. "But how? He didn't look anything like this before."

"Forget looking like this," Carl added, his brow furrowing. "He didn't feel like this before either."

Indeed, the Astron they knew had been quiet and unassuming, blending into the background with a pale complexion and dark hair that, while striking, didn't draw much attention. Now, it was as though he had stepped out of an artist's imagination, his features impossibly refined and his presence exuding an ethereal, almost magnetic quality. Even the sunlight seemed to favor him, catching on his skin in a way that made it appear to glow faintly.

Julia was the first to recover, though her words did little to dispel the astonishment. "Okay, but what the hell happened to him? Did he fall into some kind of magical beauty fountain over the break? Is that a thing?"

Ethan's lips twitched into a smile despite himself. "A beauty fountain? Really, Julia?"

Julia shot him a half-hearted glare before her gaze returned to Astron, her expression growing comically exaggerated. "I mean, come on! Look at him. It's like he went from 'mysterious loner' to... I don't even know, some kind of... uh..."

"Prince of Darkness?" Lilia offered, smirking. "With those eyes, it's hard not to think of something dramatic."

"More like a celestial model," Julia muttered, still staring unabashedly. Her expression turned playful as she leaned closer to Ethan and stage-whispered, "Is it just me, or does he have this... thing now? Like, whenever you look at him, it feels weirdly... nice?"

Ethan rolled his eyes. "That's probably some sort of passive mana effect. You're not actually drooling, are you?"

Julia blinked, startled, and then wiped at her chin in mock panic. "Am I?!" When she found nothing, she grinned sheepishly. "Just kidding. But seriously, Ethan, how are you not freaking out about this?"

Lucas interjected with a thoughtful tone. "If it is a passive effect, it's one hell of a subtle one. I'd guess it's not intentional."

"Intentional or not, it's working," Julia quipped, crossing her arms. "If I didn't know any better, I'd think he's trying to show up Victor Blackthorn. Honestly, the vibe is there."

The comment drew a chuckle from Lilia. "Oh, Victor's going to love this."

Astron came to a halt a few steps behind the group, his posture straight but relaxed, his piercing purple eyes scanning the garden with quiet indifference. As usual, no one lingered too close to him. Though his transformation had clearly captivated the crowd, it was as if an invisible wall kept them from stepping any closer.

Julia leaned toward Ethan, whispering, "He's doing it again."

"Doing what?" Ethan asked, though he already knew the answer.

"That thing where he just... stands there, looking like a brooding novel protagonist," she said, gesturing subtly toward Astron. "You know, the 'I don't need friends, but you're all welcome to admire me from a distance' vibe."

Lilia smirked, her gaze flicking toward Astron. "It's not just a vibe anymore. It's practically his aura. Look at everyone—they're dying to talk to him, but they can't seem to bring themselves to move."

And she wasn't wrong. The once-bustling garden had shifted, with students unconsciously giving Astron a wide berth. Some stole glances, others whispered, but no one dared approach. It was a stark contrast to Victor Blackthorn's presence—where Victor drew people in like moths to a flame, Astron exuded an aura that kept them at bay, a subtle but undeniable edge of intimidation mixed with allure.

"Victor V2," Lucas murmured under his breath, shaking his head in disbelief. "But scarier."

Ethan stood quietly, his brow furrowing as he studied Astron. It wasn't just his new appearance or the subtle shift in his demeanor that unsettled Ethan. There was something else—a presence, a weight, that hadn't been there before.

'This feeling...' Ethan thought, his stomach tightening. It wasn't fear exactly, but there was no denying the sense of danger that radiated from Astron now. 'Did he get stronger? Strong enough to make me feel threatened?'

It was a question Ethan wasn't ready to answer aloud, and he kept his expression neutral as his gaze returned to his transformed classmate. Astron's aloof demeanor hadn't changed, but there was a new confidence behind it, one that bordered on unapproachable.

"Man," Julia said, breaking the silence with her usual dramatic flair. "If he wasn't already the loner type, this would definitely do it. Who's gonna have the guts to talk to him now?"

"Not me," Lucas muttered, crossing his arms. "I'm still wrapping my head around the fact that's Astron."

"Do you think he even notices?" Lilia asked, tilting her head thoughtfully. "He's got this wall around him, but I can't tell if it's deliberate or just... him."

Carl, who had been observing quietly, finally spoke. "It doesn't matter if it's deliberate. People won't approach someone who feels that untouchable."

Julia snorted. "Yeah, well, it's their loss. If Astron's been holding out on us, he owes us some answers."

Ethan didn't join the conversation, his mind too preoccupied with the sensation lingering in his chest. The aura Astron carried wasn't just unapproachable—it was dangerous. The kind of danger Ethan had only felt a handful of times before, and never from someone in their class.

'Just how much stronger did he get?' Ethan wondered, his instincts screaming that Astron wasn't the same person they had known. He wasn't sure what Astron had gone through during the break, but one thing was clear—he hadn't just changed. He had evolved.

For now, Ethan kept his thoughts to himself, unwilling to disrupt the easy banter among his friends. But as they made their way toward the academy building, he couldn't shake the growing unease in the back of his mind.

Astron's transformation wasn't just physical. Something deeper had shifted, and Ethan knew that before the semester ended, they'd all find out exactly what it was.

Julia's playful grin faded slightly as her sharp blue eyes caught something unusual—a subtle but undeniable smile playing at the corner of Irina's lips. It wasn't her usual fiery, expressive reaction, which Julia would have expected by now. Normally, Irina would have already chimed in with her take, likely teasing or commenting on Astron's dramatic transformation.

But not this time.

Irina stood with her arms loosely crossed, her gaze resting on Astron with an air of quiet familiarity, almost as if she'd been expecting this. The faint curve of her lips wasn't surprise—it was more like... amusement or maybe pride?

"Hmmm..." Julia tilted her head, her eyes narrowing as she studied Irina. Something wasn't adding up. Then, like a spark igniting in her mind, realization struck. Her grin returned, wider and more mischievous than ever.

"Irina," Julia drawled, her voice dripping with mock suspicion. "Don't tell me... you knew?"

The group turned almost in unison, their attention snapping to Irina, who immediately straightened, her subtle smile faltering under the sudden scrutiny.

"Knew what?" Irina asked, though the slight upward lilt of her tone betrayed her.

Julia's eyes gleamed with triumph. "You totally knew about this, didn't you? About him—" she gestured dramatically toward Astron, still standing a few steps behind them, his aloof demeanor unchanged. "You met him in the break, didn't you?"

Irina's lips twitched ever so slightly at Julia's relentless gaze, the faintest flicker of something crossing her face. It was subtle, but it was enough.

Julia's eyes lit up like a predator catching the scent of prey. "Aha! I knew it! You did meet him during the break!" she exclaimed, pointing an accusatory finger at Irina.

The group turned their focus entirely to Irina now, their curiosity piqued.

"So?" Julia pressed, her grin widening mischievously. "What's the story, huh? Why did you meet up? Did something happen? Did you two—" she wiggled her eyebrows dramatically, "—have a moment?"

Irina didn't flinch under Julia's verbal barrage, her composure unusually steady. Normally, such teasing might have elicited a flush of red or a quick, sharp retort, but this time, she remained calm, her expression neutral.

"Yes," Irina said simply, her tone measured. "We met during the break."

Julia blinked, momentarily caught off guard by the straightforward response. "Wait, that's it? You're just admitting it?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Irina shrugged, crossing her arms loosely. "Is it wrong for us to meet?"

Julia stared at her, her jaw slackening slightly at the uncharacteristic response. "Heeeeeeh..." she finally let out, drawing the word out as she leaned closer, scrutinizing Irina's face. "You're being way too calm about this. No blush, no stammering... What's going on here?"

Lilia chimed in, her tone curious but amused. "It's true. Normally, you'd be all flustered by now, Irina. Did something happen?"

Irina met Lilia's gaze, her yellow eyes steady. "What exactly are you implying?"

Julia wasn't about to back down. She placed her hands on her hips, her smirk turning playful. "I'm not implying anything. I'm just saying... you're acting a little different, that's all. And you've been awfully quiet about Astron's whole glow-up. Don't tell me you had something to do with it?"

"I didn't," Irina said firmly, though there was a faint trace of amusement in her tone. "But we did meet, and yes, he's changed. That's all there is to it."

"Uh-huh," Julia said, clearly unconvinced. "And how did this little meeting happen? Was it planned? Or did you just coincidentally bump into each other while, I don't know, climbing mountains or something?"

"No comment."

Yet, a pair of emerald eyes were watching everything....

Chapter 737 168.1 - Jealousy

On the same opening, Sylvie stood apart from the crowd, her gaze drifting across the vibrant scene. The six-week break had passed in a blur, but for her, it had been anything but restful.

After a brief visit to her hometown village in the west—a place she hadn't seen in years—her world had shifted dramatically. She had barely settled into the familiar sights and scents of the home before a summons from the academy arrived.

The Headmaster himself... she thought, her grip tightening around the strap of her bag. It still felt surreal. Jonathan, the legendary figure whose mere name commanded respect, had personally overseen her training.

The memory of those intense sessions was still fresh in her mind. Under the Headmaster's guidance, Sylvie had explored the depths of her newfound power: [First Lord's Authority]. Unlike mana, it was something far more elusive, an energy that felt ancient and alive, resonating in her very core. The Headmaster had explained that [Authority] was not a force to be taught—it was awakened, discovered, and honed. Only [Venerable]'s like him could truly comprehend its mysteries.

And yet, under his protection and mentorship, she had made remarkable strides. She had learned not only to summon and shape her [Authority] but also to temper it with control. The aggression that once bubbled uncontrollably within her had been channeled into something sharper, more focused.



Her thoughts turned briefly to Astron. His unconventional methods had been her starting point, his teachings on self-defense and combat reflexes forming the foundation for what she had achieved over these past weeks. "The best defense is a strong offense," he'd said countless times, a lesson that now felt more relevant than ever. Without that groundwork, she doubted she could have kept up with the Headmaster's grueling pace.

In the present, Sylvie pulled herself from her reverie as a familiar voice called her name.

"Sylvie! Over here!"

Just then, a familiar voice broke through Sylvie's swirling thoughts.

"Sylvie! Over here!"

She turned toward the source of the call, her gaze landing on Jasmine, who was waving energetically from a small cluster of students near the courtyard fountain. As Sylvie focused on her friend, the familiar hues of Jasmine's emotions shimmered into view, a vibrant dance of cheerful gold and tranquil blues. There wasn't even the faintest trace of corruption or malice within her—a fact that filled Sylvie with quiet relief.

Her [Authority] pulsed faintly within her, the resonance guiding her vision as the Headmaster had taught. Over the past six weeks, Sylvie has honed her ability to not only sense emotions but also glimpse the shape of thoughts, whether they are strong or deliberate. It wasn't intrusive—not yet—but it gave her a window into the souls around her.

Jasmine's soul was as bright as ever. The carefree, bubbling energy she exuded was like sunlight breaking through clouds. Sylvie could feel it even without trying, and it brought a small smile to her lips despite the weight she still carried from her recent training.

"Jasmine," she called back, raising a hand in greeting. Her voice was steadier than she expected, even after weeks away from her closest friend.

As Jasmine bounded over, her emotions seemed to glow brighter, as if feeding off her excitement at reuniting. "You disappeared right after the break started! I was starting to think you ran off to join some secret guild or something," she teased, her tone light and playful. "You have so much to catch me up on."

Sylvie chuckled softly, though she could feel Jasmine's curiosity flickering like a faint ember beneath her cheerful surface. It wasn't unusual—Jasmine had always been the type to press for details.

"It's a long story," Sylvie said, adjusting the strap of her bag. "And probably not as exciting as you're imagining."

Jasmine tilted her head, studying her with a knowing smile. "Uh-huh. You're glowing, you know. Don't think I haven't noticed. Did you discover some kind of ancient treasure over the break? Or..." Her expression shifted, her eyes narrowing in mock suspicion. "Is this about a boy?"

Sylvie's cheeks warmed instantly, and she shook her head, trying not to laugh. "No, it's not about a boy. Honestly, Jasmine, not everything is some grand adventure."

But as Jasmine leaned closer, the gold in her emotions flickering with playful mischief, Sylvie couldn't help but notice the way her own thoughts tugged momentarily to Astron. His lessons, his unyielding focus, and the way he had shaped her approach to combat—those memories were impossible to ignore. She pushed the thought aside quickly, unsure if her new abilities might betray her and make Jasmine more curious.

"Fine, fine," Jasmine relented with an exaggerated sigh, stepping back. "But I will get the story out of you eventually."

Sylvie couldn't help but smile as she watched Jasmine's emotions swirl playfully. Of course, she'd latch onto the idea of a boy, Sylvie thought, shaking her head in amusement. Jasmine had always been like this—carefree, nosy, and unapologetically curious. It was one of the things Sylvie admired about her, even if it sometimes drove her crazy.

As they stood in the huge opening of the academy, Jasmine continued to chatter about her break, weaving tales of family drama, embarrassing mishaps, and a few juicy tidbits she'd overheard about their classmates. Sylvie mostly listened, nodding at the right moments and occasionally laughing at Jasmine's more animated gestures.

"...and then he tripped over his own sword during sparring!" Jasmine finished with a dramatic flourish. "Can you believe it? Poor Theo. I swear he's cursed."

Sylvie chuckled softly, her mind only half on the story. Her thoughts kept circling back to her powers and the way they had grown under the Headmaster's guidance. She hadn't told anyone—not even Jasmine—about the extent of what she could do now.

It wasn't just the ability to heal or fight that she had honed; it was the way her [Authority] allowed her to see into the very essence of those around her. The emotions, the intentions, even the faint echoes of thoughts—it was a power that felt both exhilarating and isolating. And yet, if there was anyone she could imagine sharing this secret with, it was Jasmine.

"...so then I told him, 'Maybe don't duel in boots two sizes too big,' and he—Sylvie?" Jasmine's voice cut through her thoughts, her cheerful gold hue flickering with curiosity.

"Hmm?" Sylvie blinked, realizing she'd zoned out. "Sorry, I was... thinking."

Jasmine squinted at her, a grin tugging at her lips. "Thinking? About what? Or should I say who?"

Sylvie rolled her eyes. "No one, Jasmine. I swear, you have a one-track mind."

"Guilty as charged," Jasmine replied with a wink. "But seriously, you've been a bit off since we started talking. Spill it, Sylvie. What's going on?"

For a moment, Sylvie considered telling her. The weight of her secret pressed heavily against her chest, and she could already imagine the relief of sharing it with someone who wouldn't judge or overreact. Jasmine might tease, but she was loyal to a fault, and Sylvie knew she would never betray her trust.

If I ever tell anyone, it would be her, Sylvie thought. But she quickly pushed the idea aside. Now wasn't the time—not here, in the middle of the bustling courtyard.

"It's nothing," Sylvie said instead, forcing a small smile.

Sylvie adjusted the strap of her bag, her thoughts carefully veiled behind the small smile she offered Jasmine.

The truth was, there was far too much she couldn't share—not just her [First Lord's Authority], but also the rigorous training with the Headmaster himself. He had made it clear that secrecy was

paramount. Her powers, her progress, even the fact that she had been personally trained by him—none of it could reach the ears of others.

"You're so mysterious lately," Jasmine teased, her gold-tinged emotions flickering with curiosity. "But fine, I'll drop it for now. Just don't think you're off the hook forever."

Sylvie chuckled softly, grateful for Jasmine's lightheartedness. She knew her friend meant well, but this wasn't a burden she could share. Not yet. For now, she would remain just another student in everyone's eyes—ordinary, unassuming, unnoticed.

Well, almost everyone's.

As they approached the central gathering area, Sylvie's heart began to quicken, her anticipation rising with each step. The academy's tradition dictated that all students gather in their respective class groups for the Headmaster's opening speech, a ritual that marked the start of each new semester. And in her group, standing among the familiar faces of Class 2B, would be him.

Astron.

The thought of seeing him again stirred something deep within her—a mixture of excitement and quiet resolve. For so long, she had felt like a burden whenever they worked together, her lack of skill glaringly apparent in the face of his precision and expertise. But now, that weight had lifted. The weeks of grueling training had left her stronger, sharper, more in control than she'd ever been.

She wasn't just a healer anymore. She was someone who could stand beside him.

"Hellooooo?" Jasmine waved a hand in front of Sylvie's face, snapping her out of her thoughts. "You're zoning out again. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine," Sylvie said quickly, shaking her head to clear her mind. "Just... thinking about the semester."

Jasmine gave her a look but didn't press further. "Well, you'd better snap out of it soon. The Headmaster's speech is always the same boring lecture about hard work and discipline, but at least it means we're finally starting."

As they joined the growing crowd of students assembling in neat rows, Sylvie scanned the area. Her eyes flitted over familiar faces—classmates, acquaintances, and the occasional standout upperclassman—but she wasn't looking for them. She was looking for the figure with the faint yet steady presence, the one who always seemed to carry a quiet weight beneath his unassuming exterior.

'I guess he is not here yet....'

Sylvie's gaze swept over the rows of students gathering in neat lines, her anticipation simmering beneath a calm exterior. She hadn't seen Astron yet, and though a small part of her felt disappointed, she reminded herself that it was fine. She was early, after all. Waiting didn't bother her.

As she stood among her peers, the subtle hum of conversations filled the air. Most of the students were buzzing with excitement or chatting about their breaks. But Sylvie's thoughts were elsewhere. She took a steadying breath and let herself slip into the focus she had honed over the past six weeks.

Let's see what I can do now...

For a while, she decided to observe things....

Chapter 738 168.2 - Jealousy

Her [Authority] stirred within her, a quiet but potent presence. With the faintest effort, she let it unfurl, her vision shifting as she tapped into her enhanced perception. The emotions of those around her appeared first—a swirling array of hues and shapes, vibrant and chaotic. But she pushed past them, focusing on something deeper.

[Vitality.]

It was there, running like a network of glowing tubes within each person. Thin, steady streams in some, and wide, roaring currents in others. Vitality wasn't just a measure of life—it was strength, potential, and power made visible. The Headmaster had taught her how to discern its flow, to interpret its subtleties, and to use it as a guide.

As her gaze moved over the crowd, she saw the familiar steady lines of average students—healthy but unremarkable. But as she looked toward the front rows, where the top-ranked students always gathered, the scene changed.

Her focus sharpened as she saw them: a group of five standing apart from the rest, their vitality blazing like beacons.

Julia Middleton.

The first to catch her attention. Her vitality was vibrant, surging through her with such intensity that it almost hurt to look at. The way it moved was strange—synchronized and precise, as if it wasn't just power but something far more refined. Sylvie felt a faint sense of unease. Julia's energy didn't just feel strong—it felt controlled in a way Sylvie couldn't yet understand.

Ethan Hartley.

Beside Julia, Ethan was a storm. His vitality surged and pulsed with wild energy like a tempest barely contained within human form. It was erratic, dangerous, and somehow... alive. Sylvie felt her breath hitch. There was something in his presence that reminded her of her own powers—a raw, untamed edge that spoke of something beyond the ordinary.

Lucas Middleton.

Julia's brother stood nearby, his vitality quieter but no less formidable. His was like a steel blade, sharp and unyielding, its strength more reserved than Ethan's but no less intimidating. The way it pulsed felt deliberate, a reflection of someone who understood the value of control over raw power.

Carl Braveheart.

Carl's vitality was a steady burn, not as flashy as the others but solid and reliable. It wasn't the overwhelming force of Julia or Ethan, but it spoke of endurance and fortitude, like the unshakable foundation of a fortress.

Lilia Thornheart.

Finally, Lilia. Her vitality was unique—flowing with a gentle grace that belied its strength. It was almost soothing, but Sylvie could tell that beneath the calm exterior was power as fierce as the others. It reminded her of a coiled spring, waiting for the right moment to release its force.

Sylvie's gaze lingered on Julia and Ethan, their vitality standing out even among the other prodigies. There was something about them—something that felt... different.

Special.

It was a feeling she couldn't quite place, a sense of recognition that prickled at the edges of her thoughts. They weren't like the others.

They were like her.

Maybe not in the same sense as she was....But they were really similar....

She bit her lip, her curiosity growing. What was it about them that made her feel this way? Could they also have some kind of [Authority] or power beyond the ordinary? The idea intrigued her, but it also made her uneasy. If they were like her, what did that mean for the academy? For her place in it?

'But it also makes sense.....'

Sylvie's thoughts swirled as she observed the group at the front, her attention drawn again and again to Ethan and Julia. There was something undeniably extraordinary about them. She bit her lip, her curiosity now a steady hum in the back of her mind.

'They're not normal. They can't be.'

The thought lingered as she turned her gaze away, trying to focus elsewhere. But her mind kept circling back to them, their vitality, their presence. It wasn't just a feeling—there were moments to back it up.

'Ethan's lightning storm... I remember it clearly. The sheer power of it... it wasn't just skill. It was as if the storm itself obeyed his will.'

She shivered at the memory. She hadn't been anywhere near the frontlines during that duel, but even from the safety of the stands, she had felt the electricity in the air, the raw, uncontrollable power that had made the crowd fall silent. It was something beyond human—a force of nature.

Then there was Julia. Sylvie's gaze flicked back toward her, her mind unbidden to the strange, almost alien aura Julia had exuded during her matches.

'It wasn't just strength. It was... something else. Something deeper. That precision, the way her movements seemed... calculated to the smallest detail. Like she was seeing a fight no one else could.'

It had unnerved her at the time, though she hadn't been able to pinpoint why. Now, after her training with the Headmaster, the pieces were beginning to fall into place.

'They're like me. Or at least... similar. They're not ordinary Awakened.'

Her grip tightened on the strap of her bag as the weight of that realization settled over her. For the past six weeks, she had worked tirelessly to strengthen not only her body but her mind. The Headmaster had made it clear that intelligence wasn't some fixed trait determined at birth—it was a skill, one that could be honed with effort and discipline.

She had taken those lessons to heart, pushing herself to analyze everything with a sharper, more discerning eye. And now, as she pieced together the puzzle of Ethan and Julia, she felt a quiet satisfaction at how far she'd come.

'But it's not just about analyzing them. It's about what it means for me.'

She let her gaze drift back to the rest of the students, their vitality was steady but unremarkable compared to the blinding presence of the prodigies. For so long, Sylvie had felt like she didn't belong like she was simply drifting in a sea of extraordinary talent. But now... now, she wasn't so sure.

'If they're special... if they're different... then what about me? What does it mean for someone like me to stand among them?'

The thought sent a ripple of unease through her. She had grown stronger, no doubt. Her training had made her more capable, and more confident. But what if she was wrong? What if her strength still wasn't enough to bridge the gap?



'Don't do it again Sylvie.'

She thought to herself. 'That is how you should think of yourself.'

In the end, it always ended up like this, and it was a problem that she needed to solve.

Her thoughts softened as she glanced at Julia and Ethan again. For all their power, all their presence, there was something else she felt as she looked at them—a spark of excitement.

'Maybe they're not my rivals. Maybe they're the proof that I can be more.'

The idea brought a small smile to her lips. There was still so much she didn't understand about herself, about her [Authority], but one thing was clear. She wasn't alone in this. Others were extraordinary too, and maybe, just maybe, they could teach her something about what it meant to be special.

As the hum of the gathering students grew louder, Sylvie straightened her posture, her resolve hardening. She had work to do—questions to answer, and challenges to face. But for the first time, she felt ready.

'This semester is going to be different. I'm different. And I'll prove it.'

Sylvie blinked, pulling herself from her swirling thoughts as she realized just how long she had been silent. Jasmine's chatter had faded, and the background hum of the other students filled her ears. 'I've been zoning out again...' she thought, a twinge of guilt rising in her chest.

She glanced to her side, expecting Jasmine's usual teasing remark or impatient glare. Instead, Jasmine was scrolling through her phone, a faint smile on her face as she thumbed through something amusing. Sylvie let out a soft sigh of relief.

'Thank goodness. She's not mad.'

Jasmine's carefree energy was something Sylvie always appreciated, even when she was distracted. It was comforting to know her friend wasn't the type to take her silence personally.

But just as she began to relax, her attention was drawn to movement at the edge of her vision. She turned her head and spotted a familiar figure entering the line of students nearby.

Irina Emberheart.

Sylvie straightened slightly, her gaze sharpening as she focused on the girl. As always, Irina carried herself with a calm authority, her faint aura rippling around her like a quiet flame. But this time, Sylvie noticed something she hadn't seen before.

Her [Authority] pulsed gently, sharpening Sylvie's senses as she honed in on the details. Irina's vitality was strong—less overwhelming than Ethan's, but still far above the average student. It was steady, deliberate, and exuded a sense of purpose.

But there was something else. Sylvie's eyes narrowed as she examined the faint glow surrounding Irina.

'Mana?' she wondered, a spark of recognition blooming in her chest.

'It's not just vitality. Her mana presence is... dense. More focused than anything I've seen before.'

The discovery intrigued her. Unlike most students, whose mana and vitality were often unrefined, Irina's seemed to exist in perfect harmony, like a tightly woven thread. Sylvie couldn't help but admire the balance, the sheer control it suggested.

And then there was the other, more subtle difference—one that Sylvie almost missed. Irina's emotional palette was always tinged with a fit of faint anger, a quiet simmering that never seemed to leave her. It wasn't overt or disruptive, but it was always there, like an ember waiting to ignite.

But today, it was... different.

'She's in a good mood.'

The realization caught Sylvie off guard. She could see it clearly in the warm hues of Irina's emotions—a lightness that wasn't usually present. The anger, while not entirely gone, had dimmed, replaced by something calmer, more at ease.

'Why?'

Sylvie tilted her head slightly, curiosity gnawing at her. She couldn't recall seeing Irina like this before. What could have changed? Was it something personal, or had something happened over the break?

'Hmm....'

What was it?

Sylvie's brow furrowed slightly as she observed Irina's unusual demeanor. The lightness in her emotions, the absence of that constant simmering anger—it should have made her feel happy for Irina. After all, seeing someone who always seemed burdened by a quiet storm find a moment of peace was a rare sight.

'I should feel better for her. I really should.'

And yet, she didn't. Not entirely.

Something stirred in her chest, a faint, almost imperceptible nudge. It wasn't an emotion, nor was it a thought she could articulate. It was just... there, lingering in the background of her awareness like a faint shadow at the edge of her vision.

'What is this?' she wondered, her grip tightening on the strap of her bag. Her [Authority] hummed faintly within her, but even its guidance felt murky....

"Ah...."

Just then she heard Jasmine exclaiming...

Chapter 739 168.3 - Jealousy

"Ah....."

Sylvie's attention snapped toward Jasmine's exclamation, startled by the sudden sound. "Ah..." Jasmine's eyes were wide, her hand hovering over her mouth as she stared ahead with something akin to shock.

"What?" Sylvie asked, her voice faint but tinged with curiosity. She followed Jasmine's gaze, her heart skipping as her eyes landed on the source of the commotion.

Even she couldn't help the faint gasp that escaped her lips.

"What?" Sounds like those continued to rain towards her....

There, walking down the central path, was Astron. But this wasn't the Astron she remembered from the previous semester.

SILENCE!

The garden seemed to fall into a hushed reverence, the lively chatter dissolving into a quiet murmur as the students turned to look. Astron walked with an air of quiet confidence, his strides unhurried but purposeful. The golden insignia on his uniform glinted in the sunlight, and his piercing purple eyes scanned the crowd with cool indifference.

He looked... renewed.

His once-pale complexion now seemed to glow faintly, as though touched by the sun. His black hair, always striking, now fell effortlessly into place, framing features so refined they seemed almost sculpted. Even his posture exuded an effortless regality, a sharp contrast to the reserved demeanor Sylvie had known.

And then there was the air around him—a faint shimmer of mana, subtle yet undeniable. It wasn't like the raw power Sylvie had sensed in others. This was different, almost harmonious, as if the very nature around him had chosen to favor his presence. The faint ripples of his mana danced in sync with the breeze, a delicate yet powerful display of control.

'He didn't look like this before...' Sylvie thought, her heart pounding in her chest. 'This is....'

A warmth began to rise from her chest, spreading outward like the first rays of dawn. She hadn't realized just how much she had missed him until now, the flood of emotions catching her off guard. Relief, curiosity, awe-they all tangled together in a way that left her breathless.

'It's been so long since I've seen him.'

She clenched the strap of her bag, her gaze never leaving him. Astron's transformation

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wasn't just physical. It was in the way he carried himself, the quiet confidence that had replaced the unassuming boy she had once stood beside. And yet, beneath the awe and surprise, there was something familiar-something steady.

It was still him.

'But... what happened to him?' Sylvie's thoughts raced as she tried to make sense of what she was seeing. The mana surrounding him felt almost alive as if it was responding to him, not the other way around. That faint shimmer, that connection to the environment-it was unlike anything she had encountered.

And yet, despite the questions swirling in her mind, she couldn't help but smile. The emotions bubbling in her chest weren't just surprise or curiosity-they were joy. For all the changes, for all the distance that had grown between them over the break, she was glad to see him again.

As Astron's gaze swept over the crowd, it lingered briefly in her direction. For a fleeting moment, their eyes met, and Sylvie felt a jolt of something indescribable. His expression didn't change-calm and unreadable as always-but there was a quiet intensity in his gaze that left her rooted to the spot.

And then it was gone. He continued forward, the whispers and murmurs of the crowd trailing in his wake.

"Holy crap," Jasmine muttered beside her, breaking the silence. "Is that Astron?"

Sylvie didn't answer. She couldn't. The moment their eyes had met, something shifted within her a strange, unshakable feeling that left her both exhilarated and uneasy. A chill ran down her spine, but it wasn't the kind of cold that came from fear. No, this was different. It was as if something ancient and unknown had brushed against her very soul, leaving a faint echo in its wake.

Her body shivered, caught in the grip of conflicting emotions. Her chest felt tight, her breaths shallow, her heart hammering against her ribs like a war drum. Excitement and something else-something she couldn't name-coiled together in a knot that she couldn't untangle.

"What... is this?"

She couldn't look away, even as Astron continued walking, his presence like a quiet storm passing through the crowd. The mana that surrounded him, the way it resonated with the air-it was mesmerizing. Hypnotic. Her thoughts spun, her sense of time slowing to a crawl as the world around her seemed to fade into a distant hum. "Hellooooo?" Jasmine's voice cut through her trance, accompanied by a light shake of her shoulder. "Sylvie? You alive?"

Sylvie blinked, snapping out of the daze, her breath hitching as she realized how tightly she had been gripping the strap of her bag. "Huh? What?"

Jasmine gave her a look of exaggerated exasperation. "You totally zoned out. Are you okay? You look like you just saw a ghost or something"

"I-I'm fine," Sylvie stammered, though her voice was shaky, betraying her nerves. She forced herself to take a deep breath, her hands trembling slightly as she relaxed her grip. "It's just... I didn't expect..."

"To see that?" Jasmine finished for her, nodding toward Astron, who was now nearing the stage. "Yeah, no kidding. Who even is he now? Did he find some kind of magical makeover spell over the break? Because I swear he didn't look like that last semester." Sylvie didn't reply, her thoughts too jumbled to form a coherent response. Her heart was still racing, the rapid rhythm refusing to settle even as she tried to calm herself. She pressed a hand lightly to her chest, hoping to steady the storm of emotions threatening to overwhelm her.

"Why am I feeling like this? It's just Astron. I've been with him so many times before. He's the same person. Right?"

But even as she tried to convince herself, the sensation lingered. That strange mana, the connection to the environment, the quiet intensity in his gaze-it was all new, unfamiliar, and impossible to ignore. And yet, beneath it all, there was still something about him that felt comfortingly familiar.

She closed her eyes briefly, inhaling deeply as she tried to center herself. When she opened them again, Jasmine was still watching her, one eyebrow raised in playful

suspicion.

"You sure you're okay?" Jasmine asked, a small smirk tugging at her lips. "Because you were staring really hard. Like, almost creepy levels of hard."

Sylvie's cheeks flushed. "I wasn't staring," she muttered, her voice a touch defensive.

"Uh-huh," Jasmine teased, crossing her arms. "Whatever you say. But seriously, Sylvie, what happened to him? He looks like he stepped out of some epic fantasy novel. Did you know about this?"

"No," Sylvie admitted quietly, her gaze drifting back to Astron. Her chest still felt tight, her heartbeat refusing to slow. "I... I didn't know."

Jasmine studied her for a moment, her smirk softening into a knowing smile. "Well,

you've got some catching up to do, huh? He's in our class, so you'll have plenty of time

to figure it out."

Sylvie nodded absently, her mind still clouded with questions and emotions she

couldn't quite name.

Indeed.....Emotions that she couldn't name....

Since she had realized something.

Sylvie's gaze drifted back to Astron.....She tried to focus, to find something to anchor

herself in the torrent of feelings, but it only led her deeper into confusion.

As her [Authority] stirred faintly within her, a realization struck her like a cold slap.

"That..."

The color palette. The swirling hues that always accompanied her perception of a person-the emotions, the intentions, the faintest echoes of their soul. It wasn't there.

Astron was a void.

There was no soft blue of calm, no fiery red of passion, no golden hue of confidence. Not even the muted greys she had often associated with him before. There was nothing. Just an absence that defied her understanding.

'What's going on?' Sylvie blinked, her heart pounding harder. She willed her [Authority]

to sharpen, pouring a small pulse of energy into her vision. Usually, this effort would bring clarity, allowing her to see the faint threads of vitality, the emotional ripples of

those around her.

But with Astron, there was nothing.

It was as if a wall stood between her and him, blocking her sight entirely. She could sense the mana that shimmered faintly around him, could feel the weight of his presence in the air. But when she tried to delve deeper, to find the essence of who he was, she was met with... void.

'Why can't I see him?' Her chest tightened as unease crept up her spine. This had



never happened before. Even when Astron had been closed off, his emotional palette tinged with grey and faint hints of exhaustion, she had been able to sense something. But now? Now, it was as though he had been erased from her perception. Her fingers curled against the strap of her bag as she tried again, concentrating harder this time. She pushed her [Authority] further, letting it hum through her senses like the Headmaster had taught her. And still-nothing.

It wasn't just a lack of color. It was a barrier. Something was actively keeping her from seeing him.

'Is he... doing this on purpose? The thought sent a ripple of uncertainty through her. She didn't even know if such a thing was possible. But whether intentional or not, it was unnerving. She had relied on her [Authority] for weeks now, trusting its ability to reveal truths others couldn't see. To have it fail her so completely-especially with someone she thought she knew-left her reeling.

"Sylvie?" Jasmine's voice broke through her spiraling thoughts, light and teasing but tinged with concern. "You're staring again. Seriously, what's going on?" Sylvie shook her head quickly, tearing her gaze away from Astron. Her pulse was still racing, and her hands felt clammy against the bag's strap. "It's nothing," she said, though the words felt hollow even to her.

Jasmine raised an eyebrow but didn't press further. "Well, if you say so. But if you're planning to figure out what's up with him, you might want to do it soon. The semester's starting, and you don't want to spend the whole day looking like you've

seen a ghost."

Sylvie forced a faint smile, nodding absently. "Yeah... I'll figure it out." But as Jasmine turned her attention back to the murmuring crowd, Sylvie couldn't shake the gnawing sense of unease that had taken root in her chest. She stole another

glance at Astron, who stood near the front of the gathering, his posture calm and unaffected.

He didn't even seem to notice the way the crowd whispered and stared, their curiosity

and awe evident. And why would he? Whatever had happened to him during the break, it had left him more untouchable than ever.

But for Sylvie, it was more than that. The absence of his palette, the barrier that kept

her from seeing him-these weren't things she could ignore. They weren't normal.

'Huh?'

But aside from that, there was also something else....

Something else that she had noticed...

'Irina?'

The color palette that she could see on Irina's soul.....

There was a pinkish color, something that she didn't expect to see in her...

And Irina was looking at Astron as well.

"No way....."

Chapter 740 168.4 - Jealousy

Sylvie's gaze shifted to Irina almost instinctively, her unease giving way to a different kind of curiosity. The faint pinkish hue she saw radiating from Irina's emotional palette caught her off guard. It was a color she had never associated with the Emberheart prodigy before-soft, warm, and utterly at odds with Irina's usual intensity.

'What... is that?'

Her thoughts came to an abrupt halt as she noticed Irina's expression. She was smiling -subtle, almost imperceptible, but undeniably there. And she wasn't smiling at Julia or the others. Her focus was entirely on Astron.

'No way... 'Sylvie's chest tightened, her earlier unease replaced by a strange, twisting sensation she couldn't name.

From her vantage point, Sylvie could hear Julia's voice breaking through the crowd's hushed whispers.

"Wait, wait, wait," Julia said, her tone teasing but sharp with suspicion. "Irina, don't tell me... you knew?"

The rest of the group turned toward Irina, their curiosity immediately piqued. Ethan, Carl, Lilia, and Lucas all fixed her with questioning stares, but Irina didn't flinch under the scrutiny. Her composure was as steady as ever, the faint smile lingering on her lips.

"Knew what?" Irina replied, her tone even, though there was a slight upward lilt in her voice that betrayed her.

Julia's eyes lit up like a predator sensing weakness. "Oh, you totally knew about this, didn't you? About him-" she gestured dramatically toward Astron, still standing near the stage with his unreadable demeanor. "You met him during the break, didn't you?" Sylvie's heart thudded painfully in her chest as she listened, her attention darting between Irina and Astron. Julia's accusation hung in the air like a challenge, and for a brief moment, it seemed as though Irina might deny it. But then...

"Yes," Irina said simply, her tone calm and deliberate. "We met during the break." The admission left the group momentarily stunned, Julia included. Sylvie's breath hitched as she watched Irina, her emerald eyes steady and unyielding.

"Wait, that's it? You're just admitting it?" Julia finally asked, her voice tinged with disbelief.

Irina shrugged lightly, crossing her arms. "Why wouldn't I? Is it wrong for us to meet?"

The casual response only seemed to fuel Julia's curiosity. She leaned in closer, her expression mischievous. "Okay, but now you have to spill. How did this happen? Was it planned? Or was it one of those 'fate brought us together' moments?"

Irina didn't answer immediately, and Sylvie caught the faintest flicker of amusement in her eyes before she replied, "No comment."

Julia gawked at her, her jaw dropping dramatically. "No comment? Oh, come on, Irina! You're killing me here."

Lilia chuckled softly, her voice carrying a note of amusement. "Irina's being unusually tight-lipped. That's got to mean something happened."

"Exactly!" Julia exclaimed, pointing an accusing finger at Irina. "You don't just meet Astron-this Astron-and not have a story to tell."

Despite the playful interrogation, Irina remained composed, her faint smile never wavering. But to Sylvic, it was that same smile-the one directed at Astron moments ago that lingered in her mind. The pinkish hue in Irina's palette, the softness in her expression, the way her gaze seemed to linger on him longer than it should...

'Irina... what's going on with you?' Sylvie thought, her unease deepening. For all the changes she had seen in Astron, it was Irina's reaction to him that unsettled her the

most.

Sylvie's chest tightened as her gaze remained fixed on Irina. That pink hue, soft and warm, yet so vivid it almost overwhelmed her senses-it wasn't a color she was accustomed to seeing. In fact, she had rarely seen it at all, especially not radiating so strongly from someone like Irina.

"This isn't just any emotion.'

The realization settled over her, heavy and undeniable. Pink, in her understanding of emotions, symbolized one thing above all else. Love.

And it wasn't faint, either. The intensity of it, the way it swirled and rippled through Irina's aura like a steady flame, spoke volumes. This wasn't some fleeting infatuation or mild admiration. No, this was something deeper, something far more profound. It wasn't just love-it was intense, unwavering, and consuming.

Sylvie felt a lump form in her throat as her thoughts began to race. Her [Authority] didn't allow her to pinpoint who those feelings were directed toward-only the raw presence of the emotion itself. But she didn't need to know. Not right now.

Because the thought of guessing... of assuming...

'No. Don't.' She clenched her hands against the strap of her bag, willing herself to look away, but her eyes refused to obey. Irina's gaze was still on Astron, and that faint, almost imperceptible smile hadn't wavered.

Sylvie's heartbeat quickened as she tried to make sense of what she was seeing. It

can't be. It doesn't mean anything. Just because she's looking at him doesn't mean-' But her thoughts faltered as Julia's teasing voice broke through again. "Come on, Irina," Julia pressed, her grin widening as she leaned in conspiratorially. "You can't just drop a bomb like that and then act all mysterious. You met him during the break, so spill! What happened? Did he save you from some epic disaster? Or- wait!" Her eyes gleamed mischievously. "Don't tell me... is this some kind of star-crossed romance thing?"

Irina turned her gaze from Astron to Julia, her expression steady but faintly amused. "You have a very active imagination, Julia," she said, her tone light but measured. "But no, there's no grand story to tell."

"Uh-huh," Julia replied, clearly unconvinced. "And what's with that smile, then? You're acting like you know something we don't."

Irina's lips twitched slightly, but she didn't answer, her composure unshaken. It was as though she knew exactly how to deflect without giving anything away.

Sylvie, however, wasn't so easily reassured. Her gaze darted back to Astron, who was standing near the stage, oblivious to the whispers and stares surrounding him. He hadn't even glanced back at Irina or the group, his focus seemingly elsewhere.

'Could it really be... him?'

The question echoed in her mind, bringing with it a swirl of emotions she couldn't quite name. It wasn't jealousy, exactly, nor was it relief. It was something far more complex-a mix of curiosity, unease, and a faint, nagging ache that refused to fade. 'No. I'm not going to guess. I'm not going to assume anything.'

She took a deep breath, forcing herself to step back from the whirlwind of emotions threatening to pull her under. Whatever Irina was feeling, whoever those feelings were directed at, it wasn't Sylvie's place to question it. Not now. Not here.

Sylvie's thoughts were spiraling again, her mind a tangled mess of emotions and questions. She barely noticed how long she had been staring, her eyes fixed on Irina and the others, or how the tension in her chest hadn't eased. The pink hue, the subtle smile-it all stayed with her, refusing to fade into the background.

"Okay, seriously, Sylvie, what is wrong with you today?" Jasmine's voice cut through the haze, accompanied by a sharp nudge to her side. Sylvie blinked, startled, as Jasmine leaned in closer, her face a mix of confusion and concern. "You've been zoning out all morning, and now you're glaring at Irina and the others like they personally insulted your ancestors."

"I wasn't glaring," Sylvie said quickly, her voice a little too defensive to be convincing.

"Uh, yeah, you were," Jasmine shot back, crossing her arms as she studied her friend with an increasingly skeptical expression. "Seriously, what's going on? Did something

happen? Did they do something to you?"

"No, of course not," Sylvie replied, shaking her head a little too forcefully. "Why would you even think that?"

"Because you're acting weird, that's why," Jasmine said, her tone teetering between

exasperation and genuine worry. "You've been all quiet and spacey since we got here, and now you're practically burning holes in Irina's head with your eyes. Did you hear something about her or the others? Or did someone say something to you?" Sylvie hesitated, caught between denying everything outright and trying to explain without revealing too much. The last thing she wanted was for Jasmine to press further-or worse, to turn this into a bigger deal than it already felt.

"It's nothing," Sylvie finally said, forcing a small smile she hoped would ease Jasmine's concern. "I'm just... distracted. That's all."

Jasmine raised an eyebrow, clearly unconvinced. "Distracted? By what? You were fine

until Astron showed up."

Sylvie's breath hitched, and Jasmine's eyes narrowed slightly, her smirk returning with a mischievous edge. "Ohhhh, I see," she said, her tone practically dripping with amusement. "Is this about him? Did he do something? Or is it something else

entirely?"

"What? No!" Sylvie's cheeks flushed, her voice rising in protest. "It's not like that. It's just... he looks different, that's all. I wasn't expecting it."

"Uh-huh," Jasmine said, her smirk widening. "Sure. You're totally not affected at all.

Not even a little."

Sylvie groaned, her frustration bubbling to the surface as she shook her head. "Jasmine, seriously, drop it. I'm fine. They're fine. Everything's fine."

But even as she said the words, Sylvie knew they weren't entirely true. Everything

wasn't fine. Not with Astron, not with Irina, and certainly not with the strange,

unsettled feeling gnawing at her chest.

Jasmine gave her a long, searching look before finally sighing and throwing her hands

up in mock surrender. "Fine, fine. I'll let it go-for now. But don't think I'm not keeping an eye on you, Sylvie. Something's up, and I'm going to figure it out eventually." Sylvie offered a faint, grateful smile, though her thoughts were still far from settled. As Jasmine turned her attention back to the murmuring crowd, Sylvie glanced at Irina one last time, her mind swirling with questions she couldn't yet answer.

'What are you feeling, Irina? And why does it feel like everything's about to change?'

It was weird....

Everything.....

CREAK!

But just then Sylvie's thoughts were forced to return to reality...Since the Headmaster made his appearance.