

## H. Academy 741

Chapter 741 Chapter 169.1 - Second Semester

The sound of footsteps echoed through the garden, sharp and deliberate. Each step seemed to reverberate through the air, silencing the growing buzz of speculation and chatter. Like a tide retreating from the shore, the noise around the garden receded, leaving behind an eerie stillness.

Julia, in the midst of her teasing, froze mid-sentence, her words dying on her lips. Irina's sharp yellow gaze snapped toward the source, and the rest of the group instinctively turned, their collective curiosity now replaced by something more akin to reverence or apprehension.

The headmaster had arrived.

Tall and imposing, he strode into view with the air of someone who commanded absolute authority. His dark robe, lined with intricate golden embroidery that shimmered faintly with mana, flowed behind him with each purposeful step. His piercing blue eyes, sharp as a blade's edge, swept over the gathered students like a judge weighing their worth.

Even those who had been distracted or whispering moments earlier fell silent, the weight of his presence pressing down on them like an invisible force.

"That's..." Ethan murmured, his voice barely audible as he took in the sight of the headmaster. Though he had seen him before, the sheer gravity of his presence always caught him off guard.

"Headmaster is here, it appears."

Well, they were not people who would be shaken with things like these, hence they were fine instantly.

The silence in the garden deepened as the headmaster Jonathan, stepped fully into view. A smile adorned his face, but it was a smile unlike any other—a smile that seemed to hold the weight of the world while still radiating warmth. His presence was paradoxical: inviting and terrifying, gentle yet commanding. His dark robes shimmered faintly with golden threads, each step exuding an effortless authority that felt as though it could bend reality itself.

Jonathan was not just a man; he was a legend in his own right. Known across the domain as one of the strongest hunters, his mere presence was a testament to the might of Arcadia Hunter Academy. It was said that if he chose to, he could shake mountains, split the skies, or flatten armies-though he never boasted of such power. The calmness in his demeanor only made his strength more daunting, as if the storm resided just beneath the surface, waiting for a reason to unleash.

"Ah, the garden," Jonathan mused aloud, his voice smooth but carrying an undertone that resonated deep within every student. "Always such a lively place to begin the

semester."

pull of

presence, stood rooted in

The students, still caught in the great place, their gazes fixed on him. The smile on his lips broadened slightly, and his piercing blue eyes scanned the crowd, taking in every face as though each individual mattered.

"Good morning, my young hunters," he greeted, his tone warm yet brimming with the undeniable weight of authority. "It brings me great joy to see so many of you gathered here, eager to begin the next chapter of your journey."

His words carried across the garden like a gentle wave, yet the air around him felt charged as if each syllable was etched with mana. Even the most distracted students found themselves hanging on his every word, compelled by the sheer magnetism of his presence.

Jonathan clasped his hands behind his back, his expression softening as he began to walk slowly along the path, his gaze shifting from one group to another. "Arcadia Hunter Academy is not merely a school," he said, his voice deepening slightly. "It is a sanctuary, a forge, and a battlefield. It is where the potential is realized, where strength is tempered, and where character is tested."

He paused, turning to face the crowd fully, his smile fading into an expression of solemnity. "Discipline," he said, his voice now edged with steel, "is the foundation upon which all greatness is built. Without discipline, strength is wasted. Without discipline, even the brightest spark will wither into nothingness."

The students stood in silence, their expressions a mix of awe and trepidation. Jonathan's words seemed to weigh on them, pressing against their very souls.

"Many of you," he continued, his piercing gaze sweeping across the crowd, "have already begun to grasp this truth. Some of you," his eyes briefly lingered on Astron(?), whose calm demeanor didn't falter under the headmaster's scrutiny, "may still be learning what it truly means to harness your potential."

He resumed his slow walk, his golden-lined robes shimmering in the sunlight. "Let me make one thing clear," he said, his voice gaining a quiet intensity. "The trials you face here are not designed to break you—they are designed to reveal you. To show you what lies beneath the surface when the world pushes back."

The crowd remained utterly still, captivated by his presence. Even Julia, usually quick with a quip, stood silently, her sharp blue eyes fixed on the headmaster.

"This academy," Jonathan continued, his smile returning faintly, "is more than a place to learn how to fight. It is a place to learn who you are, what you are capable of, and what you are willing to become. But know this: the world outside these walls will not wait for you to find yourselves. It is harsh, unforgiving, and filled with threats that will test you far beyond what you think you can endure."

His smile widened slightly, though the weight of his words didn't lessen. "And that is why we are here. To prepare you. To push you. To see you rise."

Jonathan's gaze swept over the students once more, his smile softening into something almost paternal. "So I urge you all: take this semester seriously. Embrace the discipline, the challenges, and the lessons that lie ahead. Because when the time comes to face the world, you will not have the luxury of hesitation."

For a long moment, the garden was silent, the weight of the headmaster's words settling over the gathered students like a blanket of unyielding resolve.

Then, with a subtle shift in his expression, Jonathan's warmth returned, as though he had lifted a portion of the invisible weight he carried. "Now," he said, his tone lighter but no less commanding, "go forth. Make this semester one to remember—for yourselves, for your peers, and for the legacy of Arcadia Hunter Academy"

He inclined his head slightly, the golden threads of his robe catching the sunlight as he turned to leave. The spell broke, and the garden seemed to breathe again, conversations and whispers bubbling to life as students began to process the headmaster's words.

Julia let out a low whistle, her hands on her hips as she shook her head. "Well, if that doesn't make you want to sit up straight and do some push-ups, I don't know what will."

As the headmaster's imposing presence faded into the distance, the garden slowly came back to life. Students dispersed in clusters, their hushed conversations building into a crescendo of speculation and excitement. The air was still charged with the weight of Jonathan Arcadia's words, but now it mixed with the buzz of anticipation for the semester ahead.

Ethan slung his bag over his shoulder, glancing at the others, "Well, that was a motivational start," he said with a faint smile.

Julia snorted, adjusting her bag as she fell into step beside him. "Motivational? More like terrifying. But hey, at least he didn't single us out for anything. That's always a win.""

"You'd think we'd be used to his speeches by now. Every time, though, it feels like he's staring straight through me."

"You're not alone," Lilia added, trailing just behind them. "It's like he knows every bad decision you've ever made and is silently judging you for it."

Irina, walking slightly ahead, glanced over her shoulder, her fiery hair catching the sunlight. "If you let his words get under your skin, you'll be second-guessing yourself all semester. Better to take them for what they are-encouragement wrapped in intimidation."

Julia rolled her eyes. "Easy for you to say, Miss Emberheart. You probably enjoy the pressure."

Who said that I enjoy the pressure....it is you who had never felt the pressure so you can't understand it."

She thought and smirked, but didn't respond, leading the way toward the main building. Ethan followed, his mind still occupied by the subtle tension he'd felt when

the headmaster's gaze had swept over Astron. He cast a quick glance at his quiet classmate, who trailed behind the group, his expression as unreadable as ever. The group made their way through the grand stone halls of Arcadia Hunter Academy, the corridors alive with students heading to their respective classrooms. Familiar faces flashed by, some offering quick nods or waves, while others were too engrossed in their conversations to notice.

Reaching the door marked HA25, Ethan felt a sense of relief. "Looks like we're sticking to the same classroom," he said, pushing the door open.

The room was just as they'd left it at the end of the first semester. Rows of desks arranged in neat lines, the instructor's podium at the front, and the large windows overlooking the academy grounds. The sight was oddly comforting, a small beacon of familiarity amid the whirlwind of change the new semester promised.

Julia slid into her usual seat by the window, spinning her pen idly between her fingers. "Home sweet home," she said with a grin. "Here's to another semester of chaos." Ethan chuckled, settling into the seat beside her. "Let's just hope it's manageable

chaos."

Carl and Lucas claimed their usual spots in the back row, their relaxed demeanors contrasting with the subtle tension in the room. Irina and Lilia settled in the front row, Irina's posture straight and composed while Lilia leaned casually on her desk, her sharp eyes scanning the classroom. Julia and Ethan took their seats in the middle row, Julia spinning her pen idly while Ethan glanced around, taking in the familiar surroundings.

As the students around them filtered in, the classroom filled with a steady hum of chatter. Conversations ranged from recaps of the break to speculations about the new curriculum, but an undercurrent of nervous energy was palpable.

"Alright," Julia said, leaning back in her chair and stretching. "Place your bets-how long until Professor Eleanor walks in with that 'you're all behind already' speech?"

Ethan smirked. "Three minutes, tops."

"Five," Carl countered, glancing at the clock.

Lilia chuckled. "I'm going with two. She's always early."

Irina turned slightly in her seat, her yellow eyes glinting with amusement. "I'm

surprised you're all so eager to hear that speech. She's not exactly gentle with her

critiques." Julia grinned. "What can I say? I thrive on a little academic masochism."

Before anyone could respond, the sharp sound of heels clicking against the polished

floor echoed down the hallway. The room fell silent almost instantly, the students straightening in their seats as if by instinct.

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floor echoed down the hallway. The room fell silent almost instantly, the students straightening in their seats as if by instinct.

Ethan glanced at the clock and smirked. "Two and a half minutes. Lilia wins."

The door swung open, and Professor Eleanor stepped in, her presence as commanding as ever. Her sharp eyes scanned the room, taking stock of her students with a single sweep.

"Good morning," she said crisply, setting a stack of papers on the podium. "I trust you

all had a productive break."

The silence that greeted her was telling, and Eleanor's lips twitched into the faintest

hint of a smirk. "Good. Let's get started. We have much to cover, and you're already behind."

Julia groaned under her breath, earning a quiet laugh from Ethan.

As Eleanor began outlining the changes to the curriculum and expectations for the semester, the weight of the headmaster's speech lingered in the back of Ethan's mind. The semester was only beginning, but it was clear to everyone in the room-this was going to be a challenge just as before.

#### Chapter 742: Chapter 169.2 - Second Semester

Professor Eleanor stepped up to the podium, her sharp eyes scanning the room once more. The quiet rustling of papers was the only sound as she prepared to address the class, her movements precise and deliberate.

"Let's talk about this semester," she began, her voice calm but firm. "You've had your break, your time to recover and reflect. Now, it's time to move forward."

Her gaze swept across the room, lingering momentarily on a few students before continuing. "The first semester, as some of you may have guessed, was only the beginning. A prelude, if you will. It was designed not just to teach you, but to test you."

Julia raised an eyebrow, leaning back slightly in her chair. Ethan noticed and smirked- Professor Eleanor always had a way of phrasing things that made even the most confident students second-guess themselves.

"Some of you may have wondered why the focus seemed less on refining your combat skills and more on assessments-tests of your knowledge, talents, and adaptability," Eleanor continued, clasping her hands behind her back. "That was deliberate."

The room remained silent, the weight of her words hanging in the air.

"This academy does not believe in relying solely on an entrance exam to evaluate potential," Eleanor stated. "The first semester was designed to test you under varied conditions. Not just your

strength, but your talents-your capacity for analysis, adaptability, studying, learning, and understanding complex scenarios."

Irina shifted slightly in her seat, her yellow eyes narrowing in thought. Lilia, sitting beside her, tapped her fingers lightly on the desk, clearly intrigued.

Eleanor's tone sharpened slightly. "Your progress, or lack thereof, was not just about your grades. It was about how you responded to challenges-academic, physical, and mental. How you performed under pressure, how you adapted to increasing demands, and how you carried yourselves in the face of mounting expectations."

Julia's playful grin had faded entirely now, replaced by a contemplative expression. Even Ethan felt a small ripple of unease-it was clear that every move they'd made in the first semester had been scrutinized far more deeply than they realized.

"Some of you excelled in ways that surprised us," Eleanor said, her gaze briefly flickering to Ethan, then to Astron in his corner seat. "Others struggled but adapted. And some, as you've noticed, are no longer here."

Her words hung heavily, a reminder of the students who hadn't made it to the second semester. Carl and Lucas exchanged uneasy glances, while Julia's fingers tightened on her pen.

Eleanor's expression softened slightly, though her tone remained steady. "The second semester, however, will not be as forgiving. What lies ahead will push you harder- physically, mentally, and emotionally. The expectations are higher, and the challenges are more intense."

She paused, letting the weight of her words sink in before continuing. "You will no longer be evaluated solely on your potential. This semester, we will begin to focus on refinement-of your skills, your teamwork, and your ability to operate under duress. Each of you has talents, but talents alone will not carry you."

Ethan leaned forward slightly, his brow furrowing. Julia glanced at him, her usual smirk replaced by an expression of rare seriousness.

"The curriculum," Eleanor said, picking up a sheet of paper from the podium, "will emphasize practical application. Tactical combat, advanced analysis, and real-world scenarios. You will be placed in situations that mirror the challenges you will face as hunters. These are not games or simulations. These are lessons drawn from reality."



Lilia raised a hand, her voice calm but curious. "Professor, does this mean we'll be entering dungeons or live combat zones?"

Eleanor nodded. "Precisely. Controlled environments, of course, but the danger will be real. You will not be coddled. The academy believes that only by facing true threats can you be truly prepared."

A ripple of unease passed through the room, but no one spoke. Irina's gaze sharpened, her focus narrowing on Eleanor's words.

Irina raised her hand, her sharp yellow eyes focused intently on Eleanor. The professor paused, nodding for her to speak.

"Professor," Irina began, her tone calm but carrying an edge of steel, "last term, there were several instances where cadets' lives were put at risk due to external influences."

Her words sent a ripple through the room. Though Irina didn't elaborate, everyone understood what she meant. The memory of the real dungeon disguised as a practice dungeon, the unexpected danger in the Phantom's Land, and the attack during the final exam duels loomed large in their minds. The tension in the room thickened as students exchanged glances, the weight of those events resurfacing.

Irina continued, her voice unwavering. "I understand that danger is part of being a hunter, but can the academy ensure the safety of its students in the face of such threats?"

Eleanor regarded Irina for a moment, her expression unreadable. Then, she inclined her head slightly. "You raise an excellent point, Miss Emberheart."

The room was silent, every student hanging on Eleanor's next words.

"It is true," she began, her tone measured, "that the academy faced unforeseen dangers last semester. The decision to keep cadets within the campus grounds during training was made precisely to ensure your safety."

There were nods of agreement among the students, though the unease in the room didn't dissipate entirely. Eleanor's gaze swept across the classroom, her voice gaining a firmer edge. "That decision allowed us to maintain a controlled environment, one where you could develop without the immediate threat of external interference. And it worked, to an extent. But let us not forget the reasoning behind the second part of the first semester."

Her eyes met Irina's directly before shifting to include the rest of the class. "The world is changing," she said gravely. "Dungeons are appearing at an unprecedented rate. Their strength requirements and mana levels continue to rise, and the threats within them are becoming more dangerous by the day."

The students listened intently.

"Such challenges require stronger hunters-hunters who cannot be trained solely indoors," Eleanor continued. "While the academy will do its utmost to keep training within the campus, this alone will not suffice. We must prepare you for the realities of the world beyond these

walls."

Julia leaned closer to Ethan, whispering, "So, what? We're going to be guinea pigs again?" Ethan gave her a look, but his silence suggested he was just as curious.

Eleanor didn't seem to notice the muttered comment, or at least she pretended not to, as she pressed on. "Over the break, we have made significant preparations to enhance the safety of the campus grounds. New wards, barriers, and monitoring systems have been put in place to ensure a secure environment for your training."

There was a murmur of relief from some students, though others remained skeptical. "However," Eleanor said, her voice cutting through the noise like a blade, "there will still be occasions where you will need to venture outside the academy. Controlled excursions, supervised by experienced hunters, will expose you to the kinds of challenges you cannot face

here."

Irina's eyes narrowed slightly, but she didn't interrupt. Lilia, sitting beside her, tilted her head thoughtfully, as if weighing Eleanor's words.

"The academy does not take these decisions lightly," Eleanor added, her tone softening slightly. "But we cannot afford to shield you from reality. Our goal is not just to teach you but to forge you into hunters capable of protecting this world-and yourselves."

She looked around the room, her gaze landing briefly on Ethan, then Julia, and finally Irina. "This is not a question of convenience. It is a necessity. The world will not wait for you to feel ready. It will demand your strength whether you are prepared or not."

The room fell silent again, the weight of Eleanor's words pressing down on the students. Irina finally leaned back in her chair, her expression thoughtful but no longer confrontational. Julia shifted uncomfortably, muttering something about how this semester was shaping up to be

even worse than the last.

Eleanor took a deep breath, her eyes sweeping across the classroom, lingering on each row to ensure every student was paying attention. Then, she raised her voice, her tone authoritative yet tinged with a spark of excitement.

"To further prepare you for what lies ahead," she began, "the academy has expanded its facilities significantly over the break. Many new buildings and specialized training areas have been constructed, all designed to enhance your learning and development."

The murmurs of skepticism began to shift into murmurs of curiosity. Students leaned forward, intrigued by the announcement.

"The campus grounds have been significantly enlarged," Eleanor continued. "Aside from the familiar campus forest, there is now a newly created lake designed for aquatic training and scenarios. Additionally, several artificial locations have been developed to simulate specific environments, including urban zones, mountainous terrain, and desert landscapes." Irina raised an eyebrow, her arms crossing as she absorbed the information. Lilia, sitting beside her, murmured, "A whole lake? Wonder what kind of training they'll make us do

there."

"Probably drowning practice," Julia whispered to Ethan, earning a quiet laugh that he quickly stifled when Eleanor's gaze flickered toward their row.

"These new facilities," Eleanor pressed on, "are not just for show. They are fully integrated

into the curriculum and will allow you to experience a wide range of scenarios. Whether it's practicing tactical maneuvers in the urban zone or honing your stamina in the desert's harsh conditions, each area is designed to push your limits."

She paused, letting the impact of her words sink in before delivering the next announcement.

"However, the most significant change this semester is the introduction of a new system," Eleanor declared, her tone shifting slightly to emphasize the importance of what she was about to say.

"From this point onward, the academy will be implementing a Mentorship

Program."

That got the room's full attention. Students exchanged glances, whispers breaking out as they tried to piece together what this could mean.

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Eleanor raised a hand, silencing the chatter instantly. "This program is designed to bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world experience. Each of you will be paired with a mentor—a professional hunter that the academy had made a contract with."

Julia's hand shot up, her curiosity outweighing her usual hesitation with authority. "Wait, we're getting mentors? Like one-on-one training?"

"Precisely," Eleanor confirmed, nodding toward her. "Your mentors will be tasked with guiding you through practical exercises, sharing their expertise, and providing insights you won't find in textbooks. They will push you to grow, challenge your assumptions, and help you navigate the complexities of what it means to be a hunter."

The whispers resumed this time with an air of cautious excitement.

Eleanor continued, her voice cutting through the rising buzz. "The mentors have been carefully selected based on their skills, experience, and suitability to guide cadets like yourselves. Some of them will be familiar faces to you, hunters who have returned to the academy specifically for this program."

Irina leaned forward, her yellow eyes sharp with interest. "How will the pairings be decided?"

Eleanor nodded, clearly expecting the question. "Pairings will be determined based on a combination of your performance last semester, your particular strengths and weaknesses, and, of course, your compatibility with potential mentors."

She paused, letting the students absorb the information. "The mentorship program is not optional. It is a mandatory part of your curriculum this semester. Your mentors will evaluate you, and their reports will contribute significantly to your final assessment."

That silenced most of the remaining whispers. The weight of her words was clear-this was not just an opportunity; it was a challenge.

Julia leaned back in her chair, muttering, "Mandatory, huh? Let's hope we don't get stuck with someone impossible."

Lilia smirked. "Or worse, someone boring."

Eleanor's sharp gaze cut through the chatter again. "Your pairings will be announced at the end of this month. Until then, I suggest you take some time to reflect on what you want to achieve this semester. The mentorship program is a chance to grow, but only if you're willing to put in the effort, and please note that."

Eleanor's gaze swept the room as she raised her hand again, ensuring the students' full attention. Her tone shifted slightly, adopting a more practical edge.

"This mentorship program," she continued, "will not consume your entire schedule. For first-year cadets, it will be limited to one or two hours per week, depending on your mentor's availability. Your time with them will be structured and focused, designed to maximize the benefit of their expertise."

Julia raised an eyebrow, whispering to Ethan, "One or two hours? That's barely enough time to do anything."

Eleanor's sharp hearing caught the murmur, and she addressed the room, though her gaze lingered briefly on Julia. "The limited time is deliberate. Your mentors are professional hunters with their own missions and responsibilities. Many of them have taken time away from their work to guide you. Respect that time and make the most of it."

The whispers among the students grew quieter as the weight of her words settled in.

"Additionally," Eleanor continued, "sophomore and junior-year students will also participate in the mentorship program. However, their sessions will be longer and more intensive. For you, as first-years, this is merely an introduction-a chance to understand what mentorship entails and how to adapt to working with a superior."

Irina leaned back slightly, her expression contemplative as she processed the explanation. Lilia tapped a finger against her desk thoughtfully.

"This is not meant to overwhelm you," Eleanor added, her voice softening slightly. "Think of it as a glimpse into the real world-a world where hunters are often guided by those with more experience. These sessions are an opportunity to learn, to grow, and to challenge yourselves in ways you may not expect."

Ethan exchanged a glance with Julia, who was still muttering about time constraints. Carl and Lucas, seated at the back, appeared to be weighing the possibilities, their usual easygoing demeanors replaced with faint seriousness.

Eleanor pressed on. "Your mentors are here to guide, not to hold your hand. They will assess your strengths and weaknesses, and they will expect you to come prepared and ready to learn. Use these sessions wisely."

The professor stepped back slightly, signaling the end of her explanation. "Now, as I said earlier, your pairings will be announced at the end of the month. Until then, your focus remains on the coursework and training already outlined in your syllabus."

She glanced at the clock, then back at the students. "Open your manuals to page three. Let's begin discussing this semester's objectives and expectations in more detail. Trust me when I say you'll want to get ahead before the workload increases."

At Eleanor's instruction, the students began pulling out their academy-issued tablets, the sleek devices lighting up as they powered on. A faint hum of technology filled the room as screens

flickered to life. Each student navigated to their digital syllabus, scrolling to the designated page Eleanor had mentioned.

Ethan tapped at his tablet, finding the section for [Fundamentals of Mana Theory II], the header glowing softly at the top of the page. Julia leaned slightly over her own tablet, her usual energy subdued as she scanned the material with a faint frown.

"Alright," Eleanor said, her sharp gaze ensuring everyone was prepared. "This semester, we will expand on the principles we covered in the first term. Fundamentals of Mana Theory II will dive deeper into the relationship between mana and its application in controlled environments, both theoretical and practical."

Her voice carried a quiet authority that demanded attention. "As many of you now understand, mana is not merely a resource. It is a force tied to both the body and the mind, influenced by your emotional and physical states. This semester, we will focus on refining your control and understanding the nuances of mana flow under varying conditions."

Lilia raised a hand. "Will this include scenarios like maintaining mana control during combat?"

Eleanor nodded, her expression approving. "Exactly. Mana flow during combat is erratic and heavily influenced by adrenaline, fatigue, and external interference. Your ability to maintain balance under such conditions is what separates novice hunters from true professionals."

Irina, seated at the front, jotted down notes on her tablet, her expression focused. Beside her, Lilia made her own notes, though her sharp eyes darted back to Eleanor, clearly eager to

absorb every word.

Eleanor continued, tapping on her podium, which synced with the students' tablets. A diagram of a mana circuit appeared on their screens, glowing faintly as it pulsed with energy. "Let's start with a refresher. This is a basic mana flow chart, detailing the connection between your body, channels, and output."

She gestured toward the screen at the front of the classroom, which mirrored their tablets. "Notice the three primary phases of mana manipulation: Concentration, Circulation, and Application. Each step is critical, and this semester we will explore how disruptions in any one phase can cascade and destabilize the others."

Julia whispered to Ethan, "Sounds like we're about to learn how to make a mana explosion." Ethan smirked, whispering back, "Or how to avoid one."

Eleanor's gaze flickered toward them, silencing their brief exchange. "Since you all should have mastered the basics last semester," she said, her tone firm, "we will begin with analyzing what happens when mana flow is disrupted or imbalanced. Turn to subsection 1.3: 'Interference Patterns in Mana Circuits.'"

the students navigated to the section, a subtle hum of anticipation filled the room. The glowing diagrams and notes on their screens promised a semester of challenging but invaluable lessons. For now, though, the classroom was quiet, save for Eleanor's commanding voice and the soft tapping of fingers on the glass. The semester had truly begun.

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Sylvie sat stiffly at her desk, her tablet glowing faintly in front of her, but the words on the screen felt meaningless. Eleanor's voice, clear and commanding, barely registered as it cut through the quiet hum of the classroom. Instead, Sylvie's thoughts churned relentlessly, tangled in the unease that had taken root earlier.

Her fingers tightened around the stylus she held, the tension in her chest growing with every passing second. No matter how much she tried to focus on the diagrams and explanations before her, her mind kept circling back to one thing.

'Why can't I stop thinking about it? About him?'

She chanced a quick glance across the room, her gaze flickering to where Astron sat. He was at

his desk, his posture relaxed yet attentive as he focused on Eleanor's lecture. His purple eyes scanned his tablet with the same calm precision she had seen countless times before, as if

nothing had changed.

But everything had changed.



Sylvie's chest tightened again as her thoughts raced. 'How can he act so normal? Like nothing's different? After the way he looked this morning, the way...'

Her train of thought faltered as she noticed the subtle but persistent glances from other students in the room. Boys and girls alike cast furtive looks in Astron's direction, their expressions ranging from curiosity to awe. Some were less subtle, openly staring before quickly averting their gazes whenever he shifted slightly.

It wasn't surprising, Sylvie realized. How could it be? The Astron sitting in this classroom was a far cry from the unassuming boy most of them had known last semester. His refined appearance, the quiet glow (?) that seemed to hum around him-it all commanded attention, whether intentional or not.

Still, the sight of those glances gnawed at Sylvie, though she couldn't quite explain why. 'It's not like I don't understand. He does look... different. But why does it bother me so much?' She shook her head slightly, forcing herself to look back at her tablet. Eleanor was explaining interference patterns in mana circuits, her voice steady and authoritative as she guided the class through the intricacies of mana flow.

"Notice how external factors like adrenaline and fatigue can cause fluctuations in circulation," Eleanor said, her words accompanied by a glowing diagram on the students' screens. "These disruptions can cascade, affecting concentration and application if not

properly managed."

Sylvie frowned, willing herself to focus. But the words blurred together as her thoughts spiraled again. She had barely been able to process the mentorship program announcement, much less anything about mana theory. Her mind kept returning to that strange void surrounding Astron, the absence of color in her [Authority], and the pink hue in Irina's.

"Student Sylvie."

Sylvie froze, the sound of Eleanor's voice cutting through her spiraling thoughts like a sharp blade. The classroom fell silent, all eyes turning toward her as the weight of the moment

settled in.

Eleanor's gaze was sharp, her expression a mix of patience and firm expectation. "Since you seem so preoccupied, perhaps you'd like to explain how adrenaline affects mana circulation

during combat?"

She got caught....

Chapter 744: Chapter 170.1 - Attention

"Since you seem so preoccupied, perhaps you'd like to explain how adrenaline affects mana circulation during combat?"

Sylvie's heart sank as her mind scrambled to pull together anything remotely coherent. The question hung in the air, Eleanor's authority pressing down on her like a physical weight.

'Focus, Sylvie. Think.' She swallowed hard, her cheeks burning as she fumbled for an answer.

"Adrenaline... it, um... causes fluctuations in mana circulation because it... increases energy output?"

Eleanor's sharp gaze narrowed slightly. "Not entirely incorrect, but incomplete." She stepped closer, her presence commanding the attention of the entire room. "Adrenaline causes a spike in energy, yes, but it also introduces instability. Mana channels become more volatile, and the flow is harder to control. This is why balance and control are critical, especially in combat situations."

Sylvie nodded quickly, her face hot with embarrassment. "I... I understand, Professor."

Eleanor's gaze lingered on her for a moment longer before she nodded. "Good. See that you remain focused. These concepts are foundational, and you will not have the luxury of distraction in the field."

"Yes, Professor," Sylvie murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

The tension in the room eased slightly as Eleanor returned to the front of the class, resuming her lecture as if nothing had happened. But Sylvie could feel the lingering stares from her classmates, their curiosity and judgment weighing heavily on her. She forced herself to look down at her tablet, her hands trembling slightly as she tried to steady her breathing.

'Get it together,' she thought, gripping her stylus tightly. 'You can't let this keep happening.' But as she stole another glance at Astron, who hadn't reacted at all during the exchange, her chest tightened again. The gnawing unease refused to leave, the questions swirling in her mind louder than ever.

Sylvie was gripping her stylus so tightly her knuckles turned white, her mind still racing in the aftermath of Eleanor's reprimand. The embarrassment clung to her like a heavy cloak, weighing her down even as she tried to focus on the lecture.

Just then, she felt a nudge at her side. Jasmine leaned closer, pinching her arm lightly, drawing a startled glance from Sylvie.

"Ow-Jasmine!" Sylvie whispered, her tone sharper than intended.

"What are you doing?" Jasmine hissed back, her expression a mix of concern and

exasperation. "You're completely out of it today. This isn't like you."

Sylvie bit her lip, unable to deny it. Jasmine was right. This wasn't like her. Normally, she prided herself on her focus, and her ability to stay composed even in stressful situations. But today? Today, her thoughts were a mess, and she had no one to blame but herself.

'Right.....'

The frustration turned inward, a sharp pang of self-directed anger that only made her cheeks burn hotter. She took a deep breath, forcing herself to glance at her tablet and pretend to take notes. But as much as she tried to push the thoughts away, her gaze drifted again-back to him.

Her chest tightened as her eyes landed on him. He was still seated calmly, his attention focused on the lecture as if nothing in the world could disturb him.

The whispers from earlier had faded, but Sylvie still caught the occasional glance from other students, their curiosity lingering like an unspoken question.

Just as she was about to look away, something happened that made her freeze.

Astron turned his head.

His purple eyes locked onto hers, piercing and steady, as though he had been aware of her attention all along. The intensity of his gaze hit her like a jolt of electricity, and for a moment, the world around her seemed to blur. It wasn't a look of judgment or amusement-it was calm, measured, and unsettlingly direct.

Sylvie's heart skipped a beat, her breath catching in her throat. She felt her cheeks flush even hotter, a wave of embarrassment washing over her. She had no idea why-why his gaze unsettled her so much, why it felt like he could see straight through her.

'Why am I reacting like this?' she thought, her mind spiraling again.

Unable to hold his gaze any longer, she quickly looked down at her tablet, her pulse racing. She could still feel the weight of his eyes, the lingering impact of that brief moment of connection.

Jasmine nudged her again, her voice a hushed whisper. "Are you crazy? Do you want to get marked by Eleanor?"

Sylvie shook her head quickly, forcing herself to refocus as Jasmine's whispered words brought her crashing back to reality. "Getting marked by Eleanor... right at the start of the semester..." she murmured under her breath. The very thought sent a shiver down her spine.

It was one of the worst things that could happen to a student inside the classroom. Eleanor's reputation was ironclad, and once she decided to mark a student, it was like being under constant scrutiny for the rest of the term. Every mistake, every lapse in focus, would be noted, amplified, and mercilessly addressed.

Sylvie's gaze darted back to her tablet, her cheeks still burning from the earlier exchange. She had to get it together. Now wasn't the time to let her thoughts spiral out of control.

Her mind flickered briefly to the stories she'd heard about Astron last semester. He had been marked by Eleanor early on, and the consequences had been brutal. Everyone in the class had whispered about it-how he'd spent sleepless nights studying, how he'd endured Eleanor's relentless corrections and critiques. It wasn't just about surviving her lessons; it was about proving you could rise above the challenge she threw at you.

And Astron had done exactly that.

Sylvie clenched her stylus tighter, her frustration mounting. 'If he can handle it, why can't I focus right now? This isn't like me.'

Jasmine nudged her again, pulling her out of her thoughts. "Seriously, Sylvie, stop spacing out," she whispered urgently. "Do you want Eleanor to notice you again? One more slip, and you're toast."

"I know, I know," Sylvie whispered back, trying to sound calm despite the lingering heat in her cheeks. She took a deep breath, forcing her attention back to the glowing diagrams on her screen. The lesson had shifted to a more detailed analysis of mana interference, but the words blurred together as she struggled to absorb them.

Eleanor's voice rang out again, sharp and precise, commanding the room's full attention. "Remember, disruption in mana flow is not a theoretical problem-it is a practical one. It can mean the difference between success and failure in the field, between life and death. If you cannot master control, you have no place calling yourself a hunter."

And just like that, somehow she managed to hold it out.....

\*\*\*\*\*

RING!

The sharp tone of the bell echoed through the classroom, signaling the end of Eleanor's marathon lecture. A collective sigh of relief swept through the room as students slumped back in their chairs, the tension easing from their shoulders.

"Finally," someone muttered under their breath, earning a few chuckles from the weary

crowd.

Eleanor, however, showed no sign of slowing down as she concluded her lesson with the same precision she'd maintained throughout. "Review the interference patterns and the first three sections of your syllabus before next class. Be prepared to demonstrate your understanding." Her sharp gaze swept the room, ensuring her words landed with weight. "Dismissed."

The students wasted no time packing up their things, eager to escape the intensity of the classroom. Many muttered complaints under their breath about the two-block lecture and the grueling pace of Eleanor's teaching. The ten-minute break between blocks had barely been enough to breathe, and even now, as they filed out, the thought of only twenty minutes before the next session wasn't much of a consolation.

Sylvie packed her bag in a daze, her movements slower than usual. The lecture had been overwhelming, but for her, it wasn't Eleanor's teaching that had thrown her off. Her thoughts were still scattered, her focus splintered as her mind replayed the events of the past two

hours.

She let out a slow breath, rubbing her temples as she stood.

Just then, her attention was drawn to a subtle shift in the energy of the room. A group of students had begun to gather near Astron's desk, their movements deliberate and their expressions mixed. Sylvie froze, her curiosity piqued as she observed the scene unfold. Sylvie adjusted her bag over her shoulder, her attention now fully drawn to the growing cluster of students around Astron. Most of them were girls, their lively voices rising in an almost musical chorus as they surrounded his desk. She recognized their faces—students from other classes or acquaintances she had seen in passing—but she wasn't particularly close to any of them.

"Tessa Halloway, Eva Greer, Mira Volland..." Sylvie ticked off their names in her mind, her sharp memory for academy rosters kicking in. Tessa was the tall one with auburn hair and an easy smile, her confident energy always standing out. Eva, with her short blonde hair and quick wit, had a reputation for being relentless with her questions. And Mira, the quietest of the three, had an intensity about her that made people take notice when she did speak.

But right now, all three seemed equally animated as they circled Astron like birds chirping

around a tree.

"Astron, right!" Tessa exclaimed, her voice laced with curiosity and excitement. "What happened to you? You look completely different!"

"Seriously," Eva chimed in, leaning slightly forward as if to study him more closely. "Did you

take some kind of secret potion over the break? Or is this some advanced mana training thing

we've never heard of?"

Mira, less vocal but no less curious, tilted her head slightly, her sharp eyes fixed on Astron. "It doesn't make sense. Changes like this don't happen overnight. Not even in six weeks."

Their questions came in rapid-fire succession, barely giving him a moment to respond.

"Come on, spill it," Tessa urged, her tone playful but insistent. "Did you go through some kind of extreme training? Is that why you were gone so much last semester?" "You're definitely stronger now," Eva added, her gaze flickering to his hands as though searching for some physical sign of his transformation. "But seriously, how? This isn't

normal."

Astron, for his part, remained seated, his expression calm and composed despite the sudden barrage of questions. He glanced at each of them briefly, his purple eyes steady and

unreadable.

Sylvie couldn't help but feel a pang of discomfort as she watched the scene. The girls' voices

were bright and eager, their curiosity genuine, but something about the way they crowded him felt intrusive. She had spent enough time around both Astron and the girls to know that the way the girls crowded Astron-though outwardly harmless-carried a subtle undercurrent she couldn't ignore.

"There's something else here."

Chapter 745 - 170.2 - Attention

'There's something else here,' Sylvie thought, focusing her [Authority] to sense the emotional hues emanating from the group. The vibrant curiosity and excitement radiating from the girls were obvious, but as her senses sharpened, she caught the faint glimmers of something more, something hidden beneath the surface.

Her gaze shifted to Tessa first, the tall girl with her confident smile and playful tone. At first glance, her emotions seemed bright and straightforward—curiosity, admiration, and a touch of amusement. But deeper down, beneath the layers, there was a flicker of something sharper. Competitiveness. It wasn't overt, but it was there, like a faint ember burning in the background.

'She's not just curious,' Sylvie realized. 'She's measuring him. Seeing how he's changed, how he compares.'

Eva's emotions were more layered, a swirling mix of curiosity and amusement on the surface. But as Sylvie focused, she caught the faintest trace of something else.

'Darker.'

Something darker.

'...This....'

Something that she would rather not say.

Sylvie's focus shifted to Mira, the quietest of the group, whose emotions carried none of the hidden currents that marked the others. Pure curiosity radiated from her, mingled with admiration and genuine appreciation. It was simple and untainted, free of ulterior motives or hidden agendas.

'At least one of them is honest,' Sylvie thought, though the relief was fleeting. She knew what she had sensed in Eva—something darker, a flicker of thoughts Sylvie preferred not to name or dwell on.

Her chest tightened, and she clenched her jaw. It wasn't just the emotions she had picked up; it was what they implied. These girls, eager and animated now, hadn't shown a fraction of this interest when Astron had struggled during the start of their time at the academy.

Back then, Astron had been different—quiet, reserved, and clearly battling his own.

Sylvie had noticed, even when others didn't. She'd seen the weight he carried, the quiet determination in his eyes despite everything he faced. These same girls had barely spared him a glance then, much less this kind of attention.

And now, after his transformation, they were crowding him, chirping questions and basking in his newfound presence. It didn't sit right with her.

'Two-faced,' she thought, the word settling heavily in her mind. She hated how it felt, but she couldn't ignore it. They weren't here for him—not really. They were here for the version of him they could now admire, the one that stood out, the one that seemed untouchable.

Her annoyance simmered beneath the surface, her fingers tightening around the strap of her bag. And as if on cue, more students began to gather, emboldened by the girls who had taken the first step. A small crowd was forming now, a mix of boys and girls, their curiosity palpable.

It wasn't clear if they were drawn by Astron himself or by the group already surrounding him—likely both. The energy in the room shifted, a low hum of voices filling the space as more and more students approached.

Sylvie frowned, her gaze darting to Astron. He remained calm and composed, his expression unchanging despite the growing attention. The quiet confidence that radiated from him seemed to only draw them closer, like moths to a flame.



But Sylvie's frustration only grew. 'Where were all of you before?' she wanted to ask. 'When he was struggling? When he didn't stand out? When he wasn't... this?'

The contrast was too stark, too glaring to ignore. And yet, Astron showed no sign of annoyance or discomfort.

Astron let the chatter wash over him for a moment, his sharp gaze flickering between the faces of the crowd. Their questions came rapid-fire, their voices overlapping, but he caught the undercurrent in their tones—the genuine curiosity, the shallow admiration, and, in some cases, something more calculating.

Normally, he would have brushed them off entirely. In the past, the noise and the intrusive attention would have been more trouble than it was worth. But things had changed. He had changed.

The time spent in the organization, surrounded by recruits who clung to every word of guidance, had taught him the weight of communication. The nights spent with Irina and Maya, their conversations a mix of camaraderie and silent understanding, had softened the sharp edges of his solitude. He still preferred silence, but now, he didn't despise the presence of others as much.

He straightened in his chair, his expression calm but his eyes focused. "No secret potion," he began, his voice even, carrying just enough weight to quiet the overlapping questions. "No mysterious technique."

The students leaned closer, their eagerness palpable.

"I trained," he continued simply. "A lot. Hard work doesn't always show results immediately, but eventually, it catches up."

Tessa raised an eyebrow, her competitive curiosity flaring. "Just training? Come on, Astron, everyone trains. What made yours different?"

Astron regarded her coolly, recognizing the spark in her tone—a challenge. "Consistency. And purpose," he replied. "Most people train without fully understanding what they're aiming for. They improve incrementally but never breakthrough. I focused on my weaknesses, broke myself down, and rebuilt. It's not a secret; it's just discipline."

The chatter shifted, the questions veering off into a new direction. Astron noticed the change immediately—the subtle recalibration of energy in the group. It wasn't curiosity anymore; it was something sharper, edged with intent.

"So, about your looks," a voice cut through, smooth but carrying a faint undercurrent of malice. It belonged to Zayn, a student whom Astron had observed for picking apart his peers with carefully veiled insults.

He stepped closer, his expression friendly, but his eyes betrayed his intent. "Did you, uh, take something for that? You know, some kind of enhancement? Or maybe... you've been experimenting?"

The air grew heavy with unspoken tension.

"Maybe it was related to that business of yours? I remember, people saying you were going into brothels all the time in the first semester, I guess that was true?"

A few students exchanged glances, their curiosity shifting to apprehension.

Astron's gaze shifted to Zayn, his expression calm but his sharp, piercing eyes betrayed his unyielding focus. He allowed the words to hang in the air, their venom spreading through the tension-filled silence. Several students turned to glare at Zayn, their disapproval evident. A few murmured under their breaths, questioning what he was implying.

"Zayn, what are you even talking about?" one student hissed, their tone incredulous. Another added, "That's crossing a line. You can't just—"

Astron raised a hand, silencing the growing whispers around him. His composure remained unbroken, and instead of addressing the crowd, he locked his gaze firmly on Zayn. The room felt heavier, the atmosphere thick with an almost palpable chill.

He finally spoke, his voice steady and unhurried. "If that were the case," he began, his tone deliberate, "don't you think the academy would have already taken action?"

The question lingered, cutting through the air like a blade. He leaned back slightly in his chair, his body language calm but his words laced with a quiet edge. "I'm still here, aren't I? Still sitting in this classroom, still a student at this academy. That alone should be enough to answer your question."

Zayn flinched, his confident posture faltering under Astron's unwavering gaze. Astron's eyes bore into him, sharp and unrelenting, as if dissecting him down to his core. The silence in the room grew colder, the weight of Astron's words pressing down on everyone.

"I assumed," Astron continued, his tone carrying a faint hint of amusement, "that even a child could think that far. Perhaps I overestimated."

The insult landed with precision, its delivery clinical and devoid of emotion. Zayn's face flushed red, his earlier smirk replaced by a strained expression of embarrassment and anger. He opened his mouth to respond, but no words came out, his confidence thoroughly dismantled.

Astron stood slowly, gathering his belongings with deliberate movements. The entire room seemed to hold its breath, the chill of his words lingering in the air. He glanced around briefly, his calm demeanor unchanged. "It seems I've been at fault," he said, his voice soft but cutting. "I never thought clarification was necessary, but evidently, there are some who require it."

The tension in the room snapped like a drawn bowstring as Zayn's face contorted with anger. His pride, already bruised beyond repair, couldn't bear the cold finality of Astron's words.

"YOU!" he barked, his voice sharp and raw.

Without hesitation, he raised his hand, mana flaring to life around it. The faint glow of energy crackled through the air, his intent unmistakable. Gasps rippled through the students, some stepping back instinctively, while others froze in disbelief.

Astron didn't flinch. He stood there, calm and unmoving, his piercing gaze locked onto Zayn. His composed demeanor only heightened the palpable weight of the moment, as if daring Zayn to follow through.

The room seemed to hold its breath, time stretching unbearably thin. Zayn's hand trembled, his mana swirling chaotically around him. But as he took a step forward, his movement faltered

His eyes widened, a flicker of realization dawning in them. The sharp intensity of his anger dulled, replaced by something else—logical mind.

The glow of his mana dimmed, flickering like a dying flame, and he lowered his hand slowly. His breath came in short, shallow bursts as he clenched his fists at his sides. The silence was deafening, the judgmental gazes of the other students weighing heavily on him.

Zayn glared at Astron, his jaw tight with frustration and shame. The tension in the air didn't dissipate; if anything, it thickened around him as he stood there, trapped in his own humiliation. Finally, with a sharp exhale, he spun on his heel and stormed toward the door, his steps heavy with unspoken fury.

The sound of the door slamming shut echoed through the room, breaking the oppressive stillness.

Astron didn't move. He watched Zayn's retreating figure with the same detached calm, his expression unreadable. The faint crackle of residual mana in the air was the only evidence of what had almost transpired.

"Not bad."

Astron commented as he looked into the retreating figure.

"I assumed he was like a child, but it appears that he has some maturity."

The students exchanged confused glances, unsure of how to respond. Astron continued, his voice steady and deliberate.

The room hummed with murmurs of agreement. Some nodded, while others still seemed too stunned by the confrontation to process Astron's detached commentary. The tension eased, though, as the crowd refocused their attention.

"So, Astron," a bold voice broke through the chatter, this time with less malice and more curiosity. "What about your looks? Seriously, what's the secret?"

And the questions only grew bolder.

"Are you seeing anyone?" someone called out, prompting a ripple of laughter and hushed giggles.

"Yeah, Astron! Do you even have a type?" another chimed in, their grin suggesting they weren't entirely serious.

Astron raised an eyebrow, but before he could formulate a response, the air in the room shifted. A subtle but undeniable heat crept into the atmosphere, like the first wave of warmth before a blazing fire.

And it was coming from a certain someone.

Chapter 746 - 170.3 - Attention

Irina was recently in a really good mood.

Her and Astron's trip to the city had its share of interruptions, but ultimately, it served as an unexpectedly fruitful experience for both of them. Despite the unforeseen dangers and

confrontations, Irina found herself reflecting on the significance of these events as they returned to the academy.

The journey back to the academy settled into a comforting rhythm, with Irina quietly reflecting on the unexpected twists of their recent trip. Despite the interruptions, she found herself strangely satisfied. 'It wasn't what I planned, but it wasn't bad either,' she thought, her gaze resting on the sprawling academy grounds coming into view.

Upon their arrival, the academy was its usual bustling self. Familiar faces passed them by, some pausing to greet Irina with respect or curiosity. Her circle—Julia, Ethan, and the others—quickly caught up with her, bringing news of their own experiences and projects over the break. Yet, amid the familiarity of their interactions, Irina's mind kept drifting back to Astron. Spending an entire week with him had been enlightening in ways she hadn't anticipated.

'A whole week,' she mused, glancing sideways at him as they walked to class. He was as calm and steady as always, seemingly unfazed by the chaos that had punctuated their trip. But Irina knew better now. 'There's no way he'll ever get rid of me now. Not after this.' The thought brought a smirk to her lips, a small spark of triumph warming her chest.

But her mood quickly soured the moment they stepped into the classroom. There they were—those so-called admirers, buzzing around Astron like moths drawn to his unique presence. Irina's fiery gaze darkened as she watched the scene unfold, a flicker of annoyance sparking to life within her. 'What are they doing?' she wondered, her irritation growing with every lingering glance and coy smile sent his way.

One of them, a petite girl with soft curls, leaned a little too close to Astron as she asked a question. Another laughed a little too loudly at something he'd said. Irina's smirk faded, replaced by a thin line of displeasure as her arms crossed over her chest.

'Seriously? Now?' she thought, the corners of her lips twitching downward. 'We just got back, and they're already acting like this?'

Astron, to his credit, didn't seem particularly affected. His responses were measured, and his demeanor was polite but detached. Still, the scene grated on Irina's nerves. She didn't like the way they lingered around him, like opportunists circling for a chance.

Irina's amber eyes narrowed as she observed the scene unfolding in the classroom. The way the girls fluttered around Astron, their overly bright smiles and exaggerated giggles, grated on her nerves. One even leaned forward, asking in a syrupy tone, "Astron, are you seeing anyone?"

The ripple of laughter and hushed murmurs that followed that bold question pushed her irritation to its limit. Irina crossed her arms tightly, her gaze sharp enough to cut through steel. 'What the hell are they doing?' she thought, her annoyance bubbling dangerously close to the surface. 'Some of them even did their makeup before coming here! Seriously?'

Astron's reaction—or lack thereof—only added fuel to her simmering frustration. He answered with his usual composed demeanor, entirely unbothered by the attention. Yet, that very detachment seemed to draw them in even more, as if his calm mystique was an irresistible challenge.

When one of the girls, a petite brunette with soft curls, leaned in a little too close, Irina's patience snapped. She uncrossed her arms and stepped forward, her presence radiating an unmistakable heat

that silenced the surrounding chatter. The subtle warmth she emanated quickly escalated, making the atmosphere in the room distinctly uncomfortable.

"Excuse me," she said, her tone deceptively sweet but with a clear edge of warning. The room went quiet, all eyes turning toward her. "Did I miss the announcement that this classroom was hosting auditions for desperate groupies?"

A collective gasp rippled through the group. The petite brunette, now visibly flustered, stumbled back a step. Irina's fiery gaze swept over the lingering admirers, her lips curving into a sharp smirk.

Astron turned his head slightly, his sharp purple eyes meeting hers. There was no surprise in his expression—just a faint, knowing flicker of amusement.

"You know," Irina continued, her tone dripping with false sweetness, "if you're going to fawn over someone, maybe don't do it in a way that's so... obvious." Her smirk widened, and the heat around her spiked momentarily. "It's almost embarrassing to watch."

The moment Irina's words left her lips, the room fell into an almost deafening silence. The petite brunette's eyes widened in shock, and several of the other girls exchanged uneasy glances. But the initial surprise quickly gave way to something sharper—a flash of indignation glinting in their gazes.

'Does this bitch think she's above us just because she's Irina Emberheart?' one of them thought bitterly, her hands curling into fists at her sides.

Another cast a fleeting glare at Irina, though she didn't dare voice her thoughts. 'Heh... that's why people always prefer Seraphine over you. Even your so-called friends only tolerate you because of your family.'

The murmurs and whispers that had filled the room earlier evaporated into a tense, charged atmosphere. The girls didn't speak out—none of them dared—but their expressions betrayed the thoughts simmering beneath the surface. It was clear they resented the insult, but they knew better than to challenge Irina directly. Her fiery reputation wasn't just for show, and no one in their right mind wanted to risk becoming the target of her wrath.

Irina didn't miss the flickers of anger in their eyes, but she didn't care. If anything, it fueled her satisfaction. Her smirk widened, her confidence radiating as she took a step closer to Astron.

"Come with me," she said, her tone firm and leaving no room for argument.

Astron blinked, his sharp purple eyes meeting hers. "What?" he asked, his voice calm but tinged with faint curiosity.

"I said, come with me," she repeated, her fiery gaze unwavering. Her tone wasn't demanding, but it carried a weight that made it clear she wasn't in the mood to explain herself.

Astron tilted his head slightly, his expression unreadable as he studied her for a moment. He seemed to be weighing her words, perhaps trying to decipher the reason behind her sudden command. Finally, without a word, he stood and gathered his things, his movements as composed as ever.

"All right," he said simply, his calm acceptance only adding to the tension in the room.

The girls' expressions darkened further, a mix of frustration and disbelief flashing across their faces as they watched Astron comply so easily. He didn't question her, didn't hesitate—he just followed her lead, leaving them behind without so much as a glance.

Irina didn't spare the group another look as she turned and walked toward the door, her head held high. The heat radiating from her earlier simmered down, but the confidence in her stride left no doubt about who was in control. Astron followed a step behind her, his calm presence a stark contrast to the lingering tension in the classroom.

As they exited, the murmurs began to creep back into the room, hushed whispers and exchanged glances filling the silence left in their wake.

One of the girls crossed her arms, her jaw tight as she muttered under her breath, "She thinks she owns him or something."

Another nodded, her voice low and laced with bitterness. "Of course she does. Typical Emberheart."

Back in the hallway, Astron's curiosity finally got the better of him. "Mind telling me what that was about?" he asked, his tone neutral but edged with faint amusement.

Irina glanced at him, her amber eyes glinting as she smirked. "I didn't feel like watching that circus any longer. And you didn't seem like you were enjoying it either."

Astron's lips curved into the faintest hint of a smile. "Fair enough," he said, his voice calm. "Though I have to admit, that was... decisive. Are you sure about that? Things will no longer stay hidden anymore."

Irina's smirk deepened as she glanced over her shoulder at Astron. The amber glow in her eyes carried a mix of determination and fire. "Now that we've already caused a commotion at the Stellamare Museum, things were bound to escalate," she said, her tone calm but edged with steel. "Our involvement won't stay hidden. It's only a matter of time before everyone here learns about it."

Astron's sharp purple eyes studied her, his expression unreadable as always. "I see," he said quietly, the weight of her words sinking in. "Then you've already accepted it."

"Of course," Irina replied, stopping in her tracks and turning to face him fully. Her fiery hair swayed slightly as she fixed him with a determined gaze. "Why should I hold back? They'll find out eventually. When they do, I'd rather it be on my terms, not through half-baked rumors."

Astron tilted his head slightly, his curiosity piqued. "And what does that mean?"

Irina's smirk returned, but this time it carried a faint edge of mischief. "It means," she said, stepping closer, her voice dropping slightly, "you better be prepared."

Irina stepped closer, the fiery confidence in her amber eyes shining brighter as she reached out. Her fingers brushed against the edge of Astron's collar, a light, deliberate touch that sent a faint jolt through the charged atmosphere between them.

"Because," she said softly, her voice carrying a playful edge, "I will not really hold back."

Astron's sharp purple eyes flickered with subtle amusement, though his expression remained composed. Before he could respond, however, a loud voice rang out, shattering the moment.

"OOOOH! What is this?"

The unmistakable, teasing tone of Julia echoed through the hallway, and Irina froze, her eyes widening slightly. In an instant, she stepped back, her hand dropping to her side as she straightened her posture, her expression returning to one of calm composure.

Julia approached, her sharp blue eyes gleaming with mischief as she smirked at the two of them. "Well, well," she drawled, her hands on her hips. "Am I interrupting something? You two looked pretty cozy there for a moment."

Irina crossed her arms, her fiery hair shifting slightly as she shot Julia a glare. "Nothing was happening," she said firmly, her tone carrying a slight edge. "You're imagining things."

'Heh....'

But the faint smile on her face was unmistakable....

Chapter 747 170.4 - Attention

RING!

When the ring that signaled the end of the Eleanor's lesson rang, the chatter of students around them created a lively buzz, everyone eagerly discussing Professor Eleanor's lecture, the expanded facilities, and, of course, the Mentorship Program. Julia led the way, her energy unflagging despite the grueling lesson.

"I mean, a mentorship program?" Julia said, throwing her arms up for emphasis. "How are we supposed to get excited about something that's mandatory? What if we get paired with some grumpy old guy who thinks teaching us is a waste of time?"

"I think it's a good idea," Carl said, his tone steady. "Having someone experienced guide us could make a huge difference in how we handle real-world challenges."

"Sure," Julia shot back, "but what if your mentor turns out to be someone who just wants to make us run laps all day? That's not exactly a 'learning experience.'"

Lilia chuckled, her green hair catching the sunlight as they walked. "I think it depends on the mentor. Some of them might actually be interesting—if we're lucky."

Lucas, who had been quiet during the conversation, finally spoke up, his cold blue eyes glinting with faint amusement. "Julia, you're acting like the academy is going to assign you a drill sergeant. Relax. They're probably pairing us based on compatibility."

Julia snorted. "Yeah, because the academy is so good at reading personalities. Watch, they'll pair me with someone who hates sarcasm."

Ethan, walking beside Julia, gave her a sidelong glance. "Maybe they'll pair you with someone who matches your energy. Could be fun."

Julia grinned, elbowing him lightly. "Careful, Mountain Boy. You're dangerously close to volunteering."

"Not a chance," Ethan replied, shaking his head with a smirk. "I've had enough of Aunt Kaya's 'mentorship' to last me a lifetime."

"It's not just the mentorship program that's new. The expanded facilities... the lake, the urban zone, the desert simulation—it's all so much."

"You noticed that too, huh?" Lilia said, her sharp red eyes glancing at Irina. "It's like the academy suddenly decided to overhaul everything during the break. Even the wards—they weren't this strong last semester."

"I guess they're trying to address what happened," Carl said, his voice thoughtful. "Those incidents last term... they can't afford to let something like that happen again."

Ethan nodded, his brow furrowing. The memory of the disguised dungeon and the unexpected danger in the Phantom's Land was still fresh in his mind. "It feels like they're preparing us for something bigger. Like they know things are going to get worse."

The group was still seated at their desks when it hit them—a faint ripple in the air that carried an unmistakable weight. It was subtle at first, like the distant hum of a storm, but it quickly grew, brushing against their senses with a distinct heat.

Ethan stiffened, his instincts kicking in. He glanced toward Irina, who was sitting just a few seats away, her expression unreadable. But it wasn't her face that caught his attention—it was the aura she was unconsciously emanating, flickering like a slow-burning flame.

"Irina?" Ethan called, his voice low but steady.

Irina didn't respond. Her amber eyes were fixed on something across the room, her focus sharp and unyielding. Without a word, she stood, her movements deliberate as she began to walk toward the cluster of girls still gathered around Astron's desk.

Julia straightened in her seat, her sharp blue eyes narrowing. "What's going on with her?"

Lilia, ever observant, leaned forward slightly, her gaze flicking between Irina and the group near Astron. "I think we're about to find out."

The subtle warmth in the air grew heavier as Irina closed the distance, her presence commanding the attention of everyone in the vicinity. The group of girls, previously chattering and giggling around Astron, fell silent as she approached, their movements slowing as they sensed the shift in atmosphere.

One of the girls, the petite brunette with soft curls who had leaned in earlier, glanced up, her smile faltering as she caught sight of Irina's fiery gaze.

"Excuse me," Irina began, her tone deceptively sweet but carrying an edge sharp enough to cut through steel. "Did I miss the announcement that this classroom was hosting auditions for desperate groupies?"

The effect was immediate. The group of girls froze, their expressions ranging from confusion to outright shock. The petite brunette took a small step back, her cheeks flushing a deep red.

The rest of the room stilled as well, the tension palpable. Astron, still seated at his desk, tilted his head slightly, his sharp purple eyes shifting to Irina. There was no surprise in his gaze—just a calm, almost knowing amusement.

Julia leaned toward Ethan, her voice barely above a whisper. "Oh, this is going to be good."



And as the scene commenced, Julia couldn't hold back a snort of laughter, quickly covering her mouth to stifle the sound. Lilia, sitting beside her, raised an eyebrow, her expression half-impressed and half-amused.

"Wow," Lilia murmured. "She's really going all in."

Lucas smirked faintly, leaning back in his chair. "Necessary or not, this is... entertaining."

Yet there was a glint in his eyes.

'This guy.....I had felt it at the start of the semester, but he changed.....He had changed much more than any of these fools think....'

At this point, he was becoming more and more sure.

Meanwhile on the other side, Astron was following Irin, without saying too much. But all those things had made it clear, at least to someone like Julia.

"Heh.....These guys...Look at our little Irina....She is finally taking her baby steps...."

Julia's smirk widened as she silently slipped out of the classroom, her steps light and measured. She hid her presence, masking her aura to avoid drawing attention, a skill she prided herself on. Lilia followed shortly after, her red eyes glinting with curiosity. The two walked side by side, their pace slow and deliberate, the unspoken understanding between them keeping the silence intact.

When they reached the hallway where Irina and Astron had gone, Julia motioned for Lilia to stay quiet. Peering around the corner, Julia's eyes widened slightly before her smirk deepened into something far more mischievous.

Irina was standing close to Astron, her fiery hair catching the soft light of the hallway. Her hand was raised, fingers brushing against the collar of his uniform in a motion that was almost... tender. There was a slight furrow to her brow, as though she were lost in thought, and her expression lacked its usual fiery sharpness.

Astron stood still, his sharp purple eyes fixed on her, his calm demeanor unshaken by the proximity. He didn't move, didn't speak, but there was an unmistakable softness in the way he watched her.

Julia's grin widened, barely suppressing the laugh threatening to bubble out. 'How amusing... this guy.'

Lilia raised an eyebrow, her expression more contemplative. She leaned closer to Julia, whispering, "Is she fixing his collar... or is this something else entirely?"

Julia's smirk didn't waver. "Oh, this is definitely something else. Our little Irina is finally taking her baby steps."

Lilia hummed softly, her sharp gaze darting between Irina and Astron. "She's not even trying to deny it, is she?"

Julia tilted her head, her grin only growing. "That's the best part."

Deciding she had seen enough, Julia stepped out from their hiding spot, her movements casual but deliberate.

"OOOOH! What is this?" Julia's unmistakable, teasing voice echoed down the hallway, breaking the silence like a thunderclap.

Irina froze instantly, her amber eyes widening slightly as her hand dropped from Astron's collar. She stepped back, her movements quick but not hurried, and straightened her posture. Her expression shifted back to its usual confident composure, though the faint color in her cheeks betrayed her.

Astron's gaze flickered to Julia, calm and unreadable as always. He said nothing, his purple eyes holding their usual intensity, but there was a faint glint of amusement in them.

Julia approached with the grace of a predator who had just cornered her prey, her smirk as sharp as ever. Her blue eyes sparkled with mischief as she crossed her arms. "Well, well," she drawled, her tone dripping with teasing delight. "Am I interrupting something? You two looked pretty cozy there for a moment."

Irina crossed her arms in return, her fiery hair shifting slightly as she glared at Julia. "Nothing was happening," she said firmly, her tone carrying a slight edge. "You're imagining things."

Julia raised an eyebrow, her grin unfazed. "Imagining things? Sure, sure. It's not like I saw you caressing his collar or anything. Totally normal behavior for someone who's not cozy."

Irina's lips twitched, the faintest trace of a smile breaking through her composed facade. She didn't respond immediately, instead glancing at Astron, who remained as still and enigmatic as ever.

Lilia stepped forward then, her expression more curious than teasing. "Irina," she said softly, her red eyes glinting with amusement, "you're not even trying to deny it, are you?"

Irina exhaled, a small, amused smile playing on her lips as she met Lilia's gaze. "Deny what? That Julia has an overactive imagination?"

Julia let out a mock gasp, clutching her chest. "Oh, the betrayal! And here I thought we were friends."

Irina rolled her eyes, her confidence returning as she turned back toward Astron. "There's nothing to deny because nothing happened. Right, Astron?"

Astron blinked once, his expression calm as he responded with a simple, "Right."

Julia raised an eyebrow, her grin never faltering. "Uh-huh. Sure. Whatever helps you sleep at night, Irina."

Irina shot her a look, but the faint smile on her face remained. She turned on her heel, walking past Julia with her head held high, her aura flickering slightly but no longer as sharp.

Julia watched her go, then turned back to Astron, who was still standing in the same spot, his calm gaze now fixed on her. She tilted her head, studying him for a moment before smirking again.

"You know," she said lightly, "you're a lot more interesting than I gave you credit for."

Astron didn't respond, his expression unchanging as Julia turned and walked away, her laughter echoing down the hallway. Lilia followed shortly after, her gaze lingering on Astron for a brief moment before she too disappeared around the corner.

Left alone in the hallway, Astron glanced down briefly, adjusting the collar Irina had touched before turning and walking away, his steps measured and deliberate. Whatever thoughts lingered in his mind, he kept them to himself, his expression as calm and unreadable as ever.

"Astron..."

Yet someone called her.

## Chapter 748 171.1 - Catching up

Sylvie watched the scene unfold from her seat, her [Authority] pulsing faintly in the background, highlighting the emotional hues radiating from Irina. She had sensed the fiery energy from the moment Irina stepped forward to intervene, but now, the emotions were sharper, more defined, and impossible to ignore.

At first, it was the familiar hues she associated with Irina—red, bright and blazing, her unmistakable anger. It burned fiercely, matching her sharp words and confident stride as she cut through the chatter surrounding Astron. But there was more, another color swirling just beneath the surface, faint yet vibrant.

'Pink.'

Sylvie's chest tightened as she recognized it. Love. Irina wasn't just irritated or protective—there was something deeper there, something undeniable. It wasn't fleeting or shallow; it was rooted, steady, and intense. And that wasn't all.

'Purple.'

A darker shade, not the calm and regal purple of confidence, but something heavier. It lingered in Irina's emotions like a shadow, twisting through her feelings with a sharp edge. Sylvie didn't need her [Authority] to tell her what it was. The moment Irina's gaze flickered toward the girls surrounding Astron, the answer became glaringly obvious.

'Jealousy.'

Sylvie's breath caught as the realization hit her. Irina wasn't just annoyed with the crowd vying for Astron's attention—she was jealous. The heat in her tone, the way her emotions flared as she spoke, the way she stepped forward to pull Astron out of the room as though to claim him—it all fit too perfectly.

Irina loved Astron.

No, it went beyond love. As Sylvie watched her, as she felt the weight of Irina's emotions through her [Authority], it became clear. This wasn't a new or fleeting feeling. This was deeply rooted, something that had grown over time, something that Irina herself couldn't hide even if she wanted to.

Sylvie's fingers tightened around the strap of her bag as the truth settled heavily in her chest. She couldn't ignore it any longer. Irina didn't just like Astron. She loved him. Fiercely. Passionately. And now, that love was laid bare for anyone paying close enough attention to see.

The scene before Sylvie blurred, the sounds of the classroom fading into the background as her thoughts spiraled. That strange, hollow sensation gnawed at her chest—a feeling she couldn't name or explain. It wasn't anger, nor was it sadness. It was something else entirely, a quiet void that seemed to expand with every second she sat there, watching Irina and Astron.

'I don't understand this feeling...' she thought, gripping the strap of her bag tighter as if the physical sensation would ground her. But it didn't. The void lingered a quiet ache that made her chest feel tight and her thoughts feel far too loud.

And then, like a whisper rising from the depths of her heart, another thought took shape—a thought she hadn't expected.

'I was the one who noticed him first.'

The words echoed in her mind, soft but insistent. Sylvie blinked, startled by the suddenness of it, the quiet weight it carried. She hadn't intended to think that, hadn't even realized it was something she felt. But now that the thought was there, it refused to leave.

It wasn't because she was selfish, or because she wanted something from Astron. It wasn't that at all. But still... how could she forget? How could she forget the times when Astron wasn't like this—when he had been weak and struggling when he had carried the weight of his own burdens in silence?

Where had Irina been then?

The question struck like a shard of glass, sharp and cold. Sylvie's mind raced unbidden memories flooding back. Those early days at the academy, when Astron had been a shadow of who he was now. When he had sat quietly in class, unnoticed by most, his pale complexion and tired eyes betraying the struggles he refused to voice.

Back then, Irina hadn't even glanced his way. Back then, it had been Sylvie who had noticed the way his hands trembled slightly after a grueling lesson, the way his breathing hitched when no one else was paying attention. It had been Sylvie who had seen him fight through the pain, who had felt the pull to help him even when she hadn't fully understood why.

'Where was she then? What was she doing while he was struggling?' Sylvie thought, her heart tightening as she watched Irina now, standing so confidently beside Astron as if she had always been there.

The memory of those days clashed painfully with the scene before her. The fiery determination in Irina's eyes, the way she had stepped in to intervene, the way her emotions blazed so brightly with love and jealousy—it all felt wrong. Out of place. Undeserved.

'How am I supposed to ignore all of that and accept this?' Sylvie wondered, her nails digging into her palms. She couldn't ignore the history she shared with Astron, her own efforts and his silent ones.

But now, it felt like all of that was being overshadowed, erased by Irina's boldness, by the way she claimed the spotlight so effortlessly.

Sylvie looked down at her hands, her chest tightening with a mix of emotions she couldn't name. Was it bitterness? Frustration? That hollow void again, expanding to fill every corner of her heart? She didn't know. She only knew that it hurt.

"This isn't fair," she thought, biting the inside of her cheek to keep herself grounded. But what wasn't fair? Irina's feelings? Astron's calm acceptance of her presence? The way everything seemed to be slipping away from Sylvie's grasp, no matter how hard she tried to hold on?

"Sylvie."

The voice cut through the haze of her thoughts like a sharp blade. Sylvie blinked, startled, her surroundings snapping back into focus. The vivid swirl of emotions she had been caught up in began to dim as she turned to see Jasmine standing beside her, arms crossed and an exasperated expression on her face.

"Ah... Jasmine," Sylvie murmured, her voice shaky, her fingers still clenched tightly around the strap of her bag.

"Go," Jasmine said, her tone firm yet quiet enough not to draw attention from the others in the room.

"What?" Sylvie blinked again, confusion flickering in her pale blue eyes.

"For the whole time, you've been staring at him." Jasmine tilted her head toward Astron and Irina, her tone softening just slightly. "Don't stay here on the sidelines, Sylvie. Go."

Sylvie opened her mouth to argue, but the words didn't come. Her chest tightened again as her gaze flickered back toward the scene that had stirred such turmoil within her. She wanted to go—part of her ached to—but the courage required to act felt impossibly out of reach, like trying to grasp something in a dream.

"I can't," Sylvie said at last, her voice barely above a whisper. Her fingers curled tighter around her bag strap, her knuckles white. "I... I can't just—"

"Yes, you can." Jasmine interrupted her, stepping closer. Her voice was insistent, her golden aura bright with determination. "Sylvie, if you don't do it now, you'll just regret it later. And honestly? Watching you beat yourself up like this is exhausting."

Sylvie's cheeks flushed faintly, but she didn't respond. She looked away, her thoughts swirling in a chaotic mess of doubt, fear, and that persistent ache in her chest.

Jasmine wasn't having it. "Alright, if you're not going to do it for yourself..." she said, pulling her mana-powered communication device—a sleek, modern tablet—from her bag and tapping it with an exaggerated flourish. "Then I'll just post these pictures on the school forums."

"What?" Sylvie's head snapped toward Jasmine, her eyes wide with shock.

Jasmine held up the screen, and Sylvie's heart sank as she saw the images on display. It was a collage of candid shots Jasmine had taken over the past semester—her practicing with her blade, sitting under the trees lost in thought, and even one of her smiling faintly as she worked on a group project. There was even a shot from this morning, showing Sylvie looking contemplatively out the window during breakfast.

"Jasmine!" Sylvie hissed, her voice rising slightly in panic. "You wouldn't dare!"

"Oh, I would," Jasmine said, her grin mischievous but her eyes full of encouragement. "You think I'm above a little public humiliation if it gets you to stop doubting yourself? Guess again."

Sylvie gaped at her friend, equal parts horrified and touched. "You're insane."

"I'm the best friend you could ever ask for," Jasmine replied breezily. She tapped her tablet again, as if to emphasize her point. "Now, you can either sit here and let someone else take the chance you deserve, or you can stand up and make a move. Your choice."

Sylvie's heart pounded in her chest, the weight of Jasmine's words settling heavily on her. She glanced back at Astron, who was now speaking to Irina in low, calm tones. That ache in her chest flared again, but this time it was joined by something else—a spark of resolve.

'What am I waiting for?' she thought. The truth was, Jasmine was right. If she didn't act now, she might never find the courage again.

Taking a shaky breath, Sylvie stood, her legs feeling unsteady beneath her. Jasmine's grin widened, and she gave her a small, supportive push toward the scene. "That's more like it. Go get him, tiger."

"Jasmine..." Sylvie muttered, but there was no anger in her voice, only gratitude. Her feet carried her forward before she could second-guess herself again.

Sylvie's heart raced as she walked briskly down the corridor, her [Authority] pulsing faintly in the back of her mind, heightening her senses to every shift in emotion around her. The determination Jasmine had sparked within her burned steadily now, pushing her forward despite the nervous energy coursing through her veins.

As she rounded the corner, her steps faltered slightly when she spotted them—Irina, Julia, and Lilia standing near the open doors to the next wing. They were deep in conversation, though the dynamics were unmistakable. Julia's teasing voice carried over the quiet murmur of the hallway, a playful lilt to her tone.

"Julia," Irina muttered, her voice low and strained, though her expression betrayed her embarrassment. A faint blush dusted her cheeks, as vivid as the fiery reds of her aura that Sylvie could sense even without trying. "That's enough."

"Oh, come on!" Lilia chimed in, her laughter ringing out softly. "She's not wrong. You were blushing, and let's be real—you don't exactly do subtle, Irina."

Sylvie slowed her pace, staying just out of sight as she observed the scene. Irina's flustered state was a stark contrast to her usual confident demeanor, and for a moment, Sylvie felt an odd pang of sympathy. She could see the conflict swirling in Irina's emotions—the mix of pride, affection, and frustration as she tried to maintain her composure under Julia and Lilia's teasing.

But then, something clicked. If Irina was here—standing in the hallway, fending off her friends' relentless jabs—then she wasn't with Astron.

'Astron must be alone!' The thought hit her like a jolt of lightning, and her breath caught as her focus snapped back to the opportunity at hand. She couldn't let this moment slip away. Not after everything she'd felt, everything Jasmine had said.

Gritting her teeth, Sylvie forced herself to move again, her steps quicker now. As she passed the trio, she caught Irina's eye. For a fleeting second, their gazes locked, and Sylvie felt the weight of Irina's emotions brush against her like a flicker of heat—curiosity, tinged with uncertainty and that ever-present blush of affection.

But Irina didn't say anything. She simply held Sylvie's gaze for a moment longer before turning back to Julia with a muttered response, her focus still firmly on deflecting the teasing. Sylvie didn't linger. She pressed forward, her pulse pounding in her ears.

'Don't think about it. Don't stop. Just go.'

"Astron."

And she saw him in the hallway, walking.

Chapter 749 - 171.2 - Catching Up

"Astron."

Sylvie's voice broke through the quiet hallway, steady but with a slight tremor that betrayed her nerves. She saw him pause mid-step, his head tilting slightly as he turned to face her. His calm, gray eyes met hers, and for a moment, the air between them seemed to still.

"Sylvie," he said evenly, his tone soft but carrying its usual weight. He acknowledged her with a simple nod, his gaze steady yet somehow different—sharper, more defined. Or was it something else entirely?

Sylvie's breath hitched as she took in his features. She had noticed them before in passing—the faint change in his posture, the subtle confidence in his demeanor—but now, standing directly before him, the difference was undeniable. There was something new about him, a quiet intensity that bordered on... charm? The line of his jaw seemed more pronounced, his expression more refined, his presence more commanding. It wasn't just physical—there was an aura about him, something she couldn't quite put into words.

For a fleeting moment, she felt herself falter. Her lips parted slightly, but the words didn't come. She quickly shook herself, forcing her thoughts back into focus. This wasn't the time to lose her composure.

"Where are you going?" she asked, her voice firmer now, though her pulse still raced beneath her calm exterior.

Astron studied her for a second, his gaze unwavering but not unkind. "To the cafeteria," he said at last, his tone as steady as ever.

"The cafeteria?" Sylvie echoed, her mind racing. Her nerves flared, but she pushed through, unwilling to let the moment pass. "Then... may I come with you?"

Astron raised an eyebrow slightly, the faintest hint of curiosity flickering in his expression. "Are you hungry?"

"I am," Sylvie replied quickly, then added, "I didn't have a good breakfast." It was a lie, but one she didn't feel the need to justify. She met his gaze, willing herself to appear composed even as her heart thudded in her chest.

For a moment, Astron simply looked at her, his expression unreadable. Then, with a small nod, he turned and gestured down the hallway. "All right. Let's go."

Sylvie fell into step beside him, the sound of their footsteps echoing softly in the otherwise empty corridor. Her grip on her bag tightened as she tried to steady herself, the faint hum of her [Authority] at the edge of her awareness. She could sense his calm, measured emotions—quiet and steady like a still lake. It was grounding in its own way, even if it made her feel a little self-conscious.

As they walked side by side, Sylvie found herself glancing at Astron now and then, the silence between them stretching out. It wasn't uncomfortable—at least not for him. His steady, unhurried pace and calm expression made it clear he was perfectly fine with the quiet. But for Sylvie, the silence felt heavier with every passing second, pressing against her like an unseen weight.

She knew Astron wasn't much of a talker. He never had been, not in the classroom or outside it. But now, with so much she wanted to ask him—about the academy, about Irina, about himself—the quiet felt stifling.

Her grip on her bag strap tightened as she tried to think of something to say, something casual that wouldn't feel too intrusive. Finally, she took a deep breath and forced herself to break the silence.

"What do you think about the recent changes at the academy?" she asked, her voice light but steady. "It's been a lot, hasn't it?"

Astron glanced at her, his purple eyes calm and unreadable, before returning his gaze to the path ahead. "It has," he said simply, his tone thoughtful.

Encouraged by his response, Sylvie pressed on. "I mean, with the new curriculum, the increased security, and all the changes to the tournament schedule, it feels like everything's shifting all at once."

Astron nodded slightly, his gaze distant as he considered her words. "The academy's adapting," he said after a moment. "They're preparing for something it appears."

"Something?" Sylvie asked, tilting her head curiously. "What is it?"

Astron shrugged, his expression as calm as ever. "That's something we'll find out sooner or later," he said. "At the end of the day, we're the ones being trained for it."

Sylvie nodded slowly, his words settling heavily in her mind. She didn't press further, sensing that he wouldn't elaborate even if he knew more. Astron wasn't one to speak unnecessarily, and she had come to respect that about him, even if it left her with more questions than answers.

As they continued walking, the weight of his statement lingered between them. Sylvie's thoughts drifted to her training over the break, the headmaster's grave expression as he explained the shifting tides of their world. He hadn't been explicit—Jonathan rarely was—but the undertones of urgency in his voice were impossible to miss.

"Sylvie, the world is not as stable as it seems. Changes are coming—greater than what you've seen, greater than what you can imagine. You must be ready to face them, to rise above them. That is why I've pushed you so hard."

Those words had stayed with her, resonating alongside the newfound power of her [Authority]. She had felt it in every fiber of her being during those grueling sessions, in the way her connection to



the ancient force she wielded had grown sharper, more defined. The world was changing, and she was changing with it—whether she wanted to or not.

Now, walking beside Astron, she couldn't help but feel a faint echo of that same urgency. He carried himself differently now, his presence more commanding, more purposeful. Whatever had happened to him over the break, it had shaped him just as her training had shaped her. And yet, he seemed so calm, so steady in the face of it all.

Sylvie glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. "You don't seem worried," she said softly, half to herself.

Astron's gaze flicked toward her briefly before returning to the path ahead. "Worrying doesn't change anything," he replied, his tone matter-of-fact. "It's better to prepare."

His words were simple, but they carried a weight that made Sylvie's chest tighten. He wasn't wrong, but that didn't make the uncertainty any less daunting.

The cafeteria doors came into view, the faint hum of conversation spilling out as they approached. Sylvie let out a quiet breath, the heaviness of the conversation giving way to a lighter, more immediate focus.

The cafeteria doors swung open, and Sylvie and Astron stepped inside. The room was alive with the buzz of conversation and laughter, a patchwork of voices blending together in a lively hum. Long tables filled with students stretched across the space, groups clustered together by years or classes, exchanging notes, gossip, or simply unwinding after the day's lessons.

Sylvie's eyes swept across the bustling room. Despite the vibrancy of the scene, she could see the divide among the students. While many were here enjoying the standard cafeteria fare, a significant portion of their peers preferred the high-end restaurants scattered throughout the Academy grounds. Those with family money or status often avoided this communal space altogether, leaving behind a mix of students from various backgrounds—those who valued practicality, camaraderie, or simply didn't care for the Academy's classist divide.

As she and Astron joined the queue, Sylvie felt a momentary sense of ease. The cafeteria's warm, noisy atmosphere was a comforting contrast to the heavy silence of their earlier conversation. But just as quickly, that ease dissolved as a strange hush began to ripple through the room.

It started subtly—a few heads turning their way, whispers spreading like wildfire. Then, it grew louder, or rather quieter, until the familiar hum of the cafeteria was replaced by a growing silence. Sylvie stiffened, her [Authority] flickering at the edge of her awareness. She didn't even need it to sense the shift; the weight of all those gazes was unmistakable.

She turned her head slightly, scanning the room. Dozens of students were looking in their direction—not at her, but at him. Their stares ranged from curiosity to suspicion, from admiration to unease. Some whispered among themselves, their voices too low to make out but their intent painfully clear.

'Again...' Sylvie thought, her chest tightening as she caught the faintest threads of emotions emanating from the crowd. Curiosity was the strongest—an electric buzz of interest that seemed to ripple through the air. But there was more, deeper beneath the surface. Resentment. Wariness. Awe.

Astron, as always, remained unfazed. His expression didn't change, his pace didn't falter. If he noticed the stares—and he had to, given how intense they were—he didn't show it. He simply stood in the queue, waiting for his turn with the same calm demeanor he always carried.

Sylvie, on the other hand, couldn't help but feel the weight of it. Her [Authority] made it impossible not to notice the subtle currents of emotion swirling around them, each one tugging at her like faint echoes in the back of her mind.

Jealousy, from a group of upperclassmen near the corner, their sharp glances betraying their frustration at his sudden rise.

Admiration, from a few younger students, their gazes wide-eyed as they whispered among themselves.

Unease, from a cluster of older girls who glanced at Astron with narrowed eyes, as though his presence alone disrupted the natural order of things.

And then there was envy, faint but pervasive, coloring the air around them like a shadow that wouldn't fade.

Sylvie glanced at Astron again, marveling at how unaffected he seemed by it all.

Does he really not care? she wondered, though she already knew the answer. This wasn't the first time she had seen people react to him this way, and it wouldn't be the last. His calm, enigmatic nature had always set him apart, but now, with his refined demeanor and newfound presence, it seemed impossible for anyone to ignore him.

"You must not be swayed by other people," Astron said suddenly, his calm voice cutting through Sylvie's turbulent thoughts like a steady breeze through a storm.

Sylvie blinked, startled by the unexpected words. She raised her head to look at him, her emerald eyes searching his face. His gaze was still fixed ahead, his expression unchanging, yet there was something in his tone—something resolute and unwavering.

"No matter how strong you get in terms of power," he continued, his voice low but firm, "if you keep being swayed by other people, you will always be in shackles, regardless of how strong you are."

Sylvie felt her breath hitch at the weight of his words. She opened her mouth, unsure of what to say, but no immediate response came. Instead, her mind raced, his statement echoing in her thoughts like a distant thunderclap.

"...T-that..." she finally stammered, her cheeks warming slightly. She gripped the strap of her bag tighter, her gaze dropping for a moment before she forced herself to meet his eyes again. "That's... easier said than done."

Astron turned his head slightly toward her, his calm purple eyes meeting hers. There was no judgment in his expression, only a quiet understanding. "It is," he agreed. "But it's necessary. If you spend your energy worrying about how others see you, you'll lose sight of what matters."

Chapter 750 - 171.3 - Catching Up

Sylvie's thoughts swirled, Astron's words replaying in her mind with quiet insistence. If you keep being swayed by other people, you will always be in shackles. The weight of the statement gnawed at her, even as she followed him through the cafeteria line. She barely noticed when it was his turn to order.

"I'll take the grilled wyvern flank," Astron said, his tone calm and measured, as if he were reciting from memory. "With blackgrain rice and the spiced thornroot soup. Add the forest greens salad on the side."

The staff member behind the counter raised an eyebrow but quickly nodded, noting his order. The precision and specificity in his request stood out against the usual quick, casual orders from other students. Astron paid no mind to the looks he garnered, stepping to the side to wait for his tray.

Sylvie blinked, her attention pulled back to the present by the unfamiliarity of his meal choices. Wyvern flank? Thornroot soup? Most students just went for the standard fare—simple pasta dishes, grilled meats, or a bowl of soup. Astron's order, on the other hand, sounded like something straight out of a high-end restaurant, and yet he requested it with a nonchalance that made it seem perfectly ordinary.

Her curiosity piqued, Sylvie found herself wondering about him again. Did he always eat like this? Or was this just another sign of how much he'd changed over the break?

She hesitated, suddenly feeling self-conscious about her own choice. Her usual go-to—a simple chicken and vegetable dish—suddenly felt embarrassingly plain in comparison. Still, she forced herself to focus as the server turned to her expectantly.

"Uh, I'll have the... herb-roasted chicken," Sylvie said quickly, glancing at the menu board. "And a side of steamed vegetables. Oh, and a mana-infused tea, please."

The server nodded, moving efficiently to prepare her tray. As Sylvie stepped aside to wait with Astron, she stole another glance at him. He stood there with the same calm poise he always carried, his attention seemingly elsewhere.

The silence between them stretched again, but this time, Sylvie didn't mind. She found herself watching him quietly, wondering how someone could be so composed, so utterly unaffected by everything happening around them. And yet, as she replayed his words in her mind, she realized there was more to his calmness than indifference—it was a choice, one she wasn't sure she knew how to make herself.

Their trays were handed over in quick succession, and Astron turned, gesturing toward an open table near the corner of the cafeteria. Sylvie followed, her thoughts still heavy with his earlier statement and the strange sense of admiration she felt for his ability to remain so steady amid the chaos.

As they sat down, she couldn't help but glance at his plate again. The neatly arranged wyvern flank, the dark, nutty aroma of the black grain rice, and the earthy scent of the Thornroot soup all seemed so deliberate, so purposeful—much like Astron himself.

Astron glanced up from his tray, catching Sylvie's lingering gaze. "Curious?" he asked, his tone even, with just the faintest edge of amusement.

"A little," Sylvie admitted, leaning slightly over her tray as she poked at her vegetables with her fork.

"It's part of my new diet," he said simply, starting his meal with a slow, deliberate sip of the Thornroot soup.

"New diet?" Sylvie asked, tilting her head. She couldn't hide the note of surprise in her voice. From what she remembered, Astron wasn't someone who ate much in general. He was the type to grab something quick and simple, often skipping meals if he was too focused on his training or studies. This change, like everything else about him, seemed so... deliberate.

"Yes," Astron replied, his calm tone carrying a faint edge of practicality. "It's important to get the nutrients that are necessary. Most people only consider the macros—proteins, carbs, fats—but for us Awakened, the micros matter even more. There's a much wider scope of vitamins, minerals, and compounds to account for when managing the strain of combat and mana usage."

Sylvie blinked, a little caught off guard by his matter-of-fact explanation. She had heard about the importance of balanced diets for Awakened before, but she hadn't really thought about it in this level of detail. "So... you did a lot of research?" she asked, curiosity lacing her tone.

"Not on the level of a scientist," Astron said, his lips quirking slightly in what might have been a half-smile, "but I read quite a few articles."

Sylvie nodded, chewing thoughtfully on a piece of her chicken as she considered his words. "That does sound like you," she said softly, more to herself than to him.

Sylvie hesitated, her fork hovering over her plate as she glanced at Astron. She had been holding onto the question for a while now, debating whether to ask. But the curiosity bubbling inside her, mingled with the faint uncertainty she couldn't quite shake, finally won out.

"How was your break?" she asked, her voice light but laced with genuine curiosity.

Astron paused mid-bite, his eyes lifting to meet hers. His gaze was steady, unreadable, and for a moment, Sylvie felt as though he was assessing her, deciding how much to say. The silence stretched just long enough to make her shift slightly in her seat, her pulse quickening.

"It was fulfilling," he said at last, his tone calm and measured as always.

Sylvie blinked, raising her eyebrows slightly. Fulfilling? she thought, the word echoing in her mind. What did that mean? Was he talking about his training, his newfound focus and growth? Or... was he talking about something else?

Like Irina?

The thought hit her like a jolt, and she quickly lowered her gaze to her tray, focusing intently on the piece of chicken she was cutting. Her mind, however, refused to let the thought go.

'We did meet during the break.'

Irina's words from earlier resurfaced, along with the unmistakable swirl of emotions Sylvie had sensed radiating from her—anger, protectiveness, love, and jealousy. It was clear that something significant had happened between them, though what exactly, Sylvie could only guess. And now, hearing Astron describe his break as "fulfilling," her mind couldn't help but connect the two.

A pang of something sharp and uncomfortable twisted in her chest. She hated to admit it, even to herself, but it was there—a feeling she couldn't quite name, somewhere between frustration and... something else. Something she didn't want to acknowledge.

She pushed the thought aside, trying to focus on the present. "Fulfilling?" she echoed, attempting to keep her tone neutral, though her curiosity betrayed her. "What do you mean by that?"

Astron glanced at her briefly, then returned his focus to his meal. "I learned a lot," he said simply, taking another sip of his soup.

The vague response only fueled her inner turmoil. Learned what? she thought, her mind racing. Was it about his training? His growth as an Awakened? Or... was it about Irina? The possibility gnawed at her, and no matter how much she tried to shake it off, the pang in her chest refused to fade.

"Sounds like it was productive," Sylvie said at last, forcing herself to keep her tone light. She managed a small smile, though she wasn't sure if it reached her eyes.

"It was," Astron replied, his calm demeanor unwavering.

Sylvie nodded, falling silent as she turned her attention back to her plate. But her thoughts continued to spiral, the weight of her unanswered questions pressing against her like a heavy fog. Whatever had happened during Astron's break, it was clear that it had changed him—and not just in terms of his diet or his presence. There was something deeper, something she couldn't quite grasp.

"It feels like... you changed," Sylvie blurted out before she could stop herself.

The words hung in the air, and she immediately regretted them. Her cheeks flushed as Astron raised an eyebrow, his calm purple eyes shifting to her with an unmistakable glint of curiosity.

"I've changed?" he asked, his voice steady, his tone tinged with genuine interest. "How so?"

Sylvie froze, her heart racing. Why did I say that? she thought, biting the inside of her cheek. She couldn't exactly admit that she had been watching him closely, noting every subtle difference in his demeanor. The thought alone made her embarrassment deepen.

"I-I didn't mean it like that," she stammered, gripping her fork tightly as she stared down at her plate. "I just... I mean, it's obvious, isn't it? You've been more... focused, and, uh... deliberate, I guess."

Astron didn't reply immediately, his gaze steady as he continued to study her. Sylvie's mind raced for an escape route, but none presented itself. Her [Authority] wasn't helping either; the faint hum of his emotions around her remained calm, unreadable, offering her no clues to his thoughts.

She tried to gather herself, taking a small, steadying breath. "It's not a bad thing," she added quickly, forcing a smile and hoping to steer the conversation away from her own embarrassment. "It's just... noticeable. That's all."

Astron finally leaned back slightly, his expression softening. "You notice a lot," he said, his tone almost amused.

Sylvie's face burned. Why does it sound like he knows I've been watching him? she thought, squirming inwardly. "Well, I mean... it's hard not to notice. You've been different since the break. It's not like I'm spying on you or anything!"

Her words spilled out faster than she intended, and the moment they left her lips, she wanted to disappear. Why am I even saying this? She gripped the edge of the table, willing herself to stop talking before she dug herself deeper.

Astron nodded his head, a faint acknowledgment of her words. "You're right," he said calmly. "I have changed. Change isn't something to fear, though most people are scared of it. But we're always changing, aren't we? Every day, in small ways."

As he spoke, his tone was even and thoughtful, but then he raised his gaze, his sharp purple eyes locking with Sylvie's emerald ones. The intensity in his stare sent an unexpected shiver down her spine.

"Just like how you've changed," Astron said, his words deliberate. "Was the training with the Headmaster helpful?"

His words.....

THUMP!

Sylvie froze, her heart skipping a beat as the words hit her like a bolt of lightning. Her grip on her fork tightened, and she felt the heat rise to her cheeks. 'How does he know?' she thought, her mind racing.