

H. Academy 761

Chapter 761 Chapter 175.1 - New semester, same training

As the academy's announcement spread, the cadets gathered at the designated training ground. The buzz of chatter filled the air as they approached the newly constructed area behind the academy. Rising before them was a sprawling artificial mountain, its rugged terrain blending seamlessly with the natural landscape. Jagged cliffs, winding paths, and narrow ridges painted a picture of challenge and danger.

Professor Eleanor stood at the base of the mountain, her sharp gaze surveying the crowd of cadets. She was accompanied by a few instructors, each holding clipboards and mana-infused communication devices.

"Attention, cadets!" Eleanor's voice carried over the murmurs, silencing the crowd. "Welcome to the Obsidian Ridge Training Zone. This facility has been newly constructed to enhance your physical, tactical, and mental fortitude. Today's focus will be on agility, endurance, and adaptability."

She gestured to the mountain, her expression unwavering. "The terrain is designed to test your parkour skills and situational awareness. Hidden within the course are traps, obstacles, and mana-infused challenges. These are modeled after real-world scenarios you may face in hostile environments. Your goal is simple: navigate the course, avoid or overcome the traps, and reach the summit."

The cadets exchanged nervous glances, their excitement tempered by the weight of Eleanor's words.

"There are three checkpoints along the way," Eleanor continued. "At each checkpoint, you will find instructors who will evaluate your progress and assign penalties for failures. Reaching the summit is not enough; your performance at each stage will determine your final score."

She stepped aside, allowing the cadets to get a closer look at the starting point—a steep incline littered with uneven platforms and narrow footholds. The terrain glimmered faintly, hinting at hidden enchantments.

"Teams of four will be assigned to encourage collaboration. However, be warned: the traps are dynamic. What one team encounters may differ from what another faces. Adaptation is key."

Eleanor tapped her tablet, and the names of the teams appeared on the large display board behind her.

"Your team assignments have been randomized. Please locate your group and prepare to begin."

The cadets quickly gathered around the display board, scanning for their names and teams. The buzz of chatter grew louder as everyone took note of their teammates.

Ethan's name appeared alongside Lilia Thornheart, Ren Farrow, and a lesser-known cadet, Dain Trellis. Ethan glanced toward Lilia, who stood nearby with her arms crossed, her sharp green eyes scanning the display board.

"Looks like it's you and me," she said, her voice edged with a mix of amusement and challenge. "Let's hope these two can keep up."

Ethan turned to see Ren, the nervous but agile cadet from earlier, and Dain, a reserved and quiet student known more for his precision in ranged combat than anything else. Both approached hesitantly, clearly aware of the pressure of teaming up with two of the academy's fastest risers.

"Let's not waste time," Ethan said, his tone calm and focused. "We'll figure out how to work together on the course."

Lilia raised an eyebrow. "Straight to business? You're no fun, Mountain Boy."

Meanwhile, Julia's voice echoed nearby, tinged with irritation. "Astron? Really? This is who I get stuck with?"

Astron, standing a few steps away, raised an eyebrow but said nothing, his sharp purple eyes flicking over her.

Julia leaned back slightly, a sly grin spreading across her face as she watched Astron's serious expression. "Oh, come on, don't look at me like that. You really can't take a joke, can you?"

Astron didn't respond immediately, his sharp gaze remaining steady. After a moment, he raised an eyebrow. "If you're done joking, we should focus on the task."

Julia laughed, her voice carrying a light, teasing lilt. "Relax, Mr. Serious. I'm just messing with you. You're too easy."

Astron's expression didn't change, but the faintest hint of exasperation flickered in his eyes. Julia noticed and laughed even harder. "See? That's exactly what I'm talking about. You're fun to mess with."

The other two teammates, Simon and Elise, watched the exchange silently. Simon, a muscular cadet known for his brute strength, leaned slightly toward Elise, whispering, "Is she really teasing him? Isn't he supposed to be the rising star?"

Elise, a petite girl with sharp features and a reputation for being observant, gave a small shrug. "Apparently. Let's just see how this plays out."

Julia turned to the group, her demeanor shifting slightly as she clapped her hands together. "Alright, team. I know what you're all thinking. I'm the highest rank here, so obviously, I should be the leader, right?"

Simon nodded hesitantly, and Elise looked mildly curious.

"Well, surprise, surprise," Julia continued, her grin widening. "I'm not doing it. Leadership is way too much work. So, Astron, the floor is yours. You're the leader."

The declaration caught everyone off guard. Simon blinked in confusion, his eyes darting between Julia and Astron. "Wait, what? You're leaving it to him?"

Elise raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything, her sharp gaze now fixed on Astron.

Astron, meanwhile, remained unfazed. He crossed his arms, his voice calm and measured. "Are you sure? You outrank me."

Julia waved a hand dismissively. "Ranks don't mean much out here. You've got the brains and the skills to back it up. Plus, I'm curious to see what you can do."

Astron's calm gaze swept across the group as he asked, "Is that so? Do any of you have any complaints?"

Simon exchanged a glance with Elise before shrugging. "Nah, no complaints here. It's just outdoor training, right? Worst case, we stumble a bit, but it's not the end of the world."

Elise crossed her arms, her sharp eyes assessing Astron. She tilted her head slightly before responding, "No complaints. I'm curious to see what you can do, too."

Simon nodded in agreement, his expression softening into a faint smirk. "Yeah, who knows? Maybe you'll surprise us."

'I'm really curious,' Elise thought, her gaze lingering on Astron for a moment longer. Despite his calm demeanor, there was an air about him—a quiet confidence that hinted at something more.

Julia grinned, stepping back and gesturing toward Astron with mock grandiosity. "Well, there you have it, fearless leader. The floor is yours. Lead us to glory, or at least to the next checkpoint."

Astron didn't waste time on further discussion. He turned toward the starting point, his tone firm but even. "Alright. The goal is to make it through efficiently. We'll prioritize teamwork and adaptability. Stay sharp and call out anything unusual."

The others nodded, falling into line as they approached the first section of the course—a steep incline covered in loose rocks and narrow footholds. The faint shimmer of mana in the air hinted at hidden traps or enchantments.

Astron crouched slightly, his eyes narrowing as he scanned the terrain. "The rocks are unstable. Step lightly, and use the footholds on the left side. Elise, keep an eye out for traps. Simon, be ready to stabilize the others if the footing gives out."

"Got it," Simon said, rolling his shoulders as he readied himself.

Elise moved to the left, her sharp gaze scanning the ground. "I see faint runes etched into some of the rocks. Avoid the ones with a slight glow—they'll trigger something."

"Understood," Astron replied, his tone clipped as he began to lead the way. His movements were precise and deliberate, each step testing the stability of the ground before committing. The others followed, mimicking his careful approach.

Halfway up the incline, a sudden pulse of mana shot through the air. One of the rocks beneath Simon's foot began to glow brightly, a low hum building as the enchantment activated.

"Trap!" Elise called out, her voice sharp.

Without missing a beat, Astron reacted. "Simon, shift your weight to the right. Julia, give him a hand."

Julia moved quickly, grabbing Simon's arm and steadying him as he adjusted his footing. The glowing rock dimmed, the trap deactivating as the group continued upward.

"Not bad," Julia remarked, a trace of admiration in her voice. "You're good at this."

Astron didn't respond, his focus remaining on the path ahead. As they reached the top of the incline, he paused, scanning the next section—a series of swinging platforms suspended over a shallow ravine.

'Interesting.'

It was time for his team members to participate.

From the perspective of a struggling cadet, the course was a chaotic symphony of shouts, curses, and frustrated grunts. Most teams were floundering, unable to find a rhythm amidst the traps, unstable terrain, and relentless illusions. Every few steps brought a new obstacle—hidden pressure plates, mana-triggered pitfalls, and even phantom creatures designed to terrify and confuse.

One cadet, Liam Wayne, sat on a precarious ledge, catching his breath. His team was stuck, their progress slow and disjointed. The mana traps had taken them by surprise, and the lack of coordination among his teammates made each obstacle harder to overcome.

He glanced up at the sound of faint voices in the distance and caught sight of another team. To his surprise, this group wasn't floundering—they were moving with purpose.

It was Ethan Hartley and Lilia Thornheart's team.

Ethan was at the front, his sharp eyes scanning the terrain ahead. His movements were deliberate but fluid, as if he could sense the traps before they activated. Behind him, Lilia followed, her hands occasionally glowing as she used her mana to disable or manipulate the traps they encountered. Together, they set a brisk pace, their teammates keeping up without complaint.

Liam watched in awe as Ethan stopped abruptly, raising a hand to signal his team. "Hold up. There's a pressure plate ahead. Lilia, can you handle it?"

Lilia stepped forward, her green eyes narrowing as she studied the faint glimmer of runes on the ground. With a graceful motion, she manipulated the mana in the trap, causing the runes to dim. "It's safe now."

Ethan nodded and motioned for the team to proceed. Their movements were efficient, their teamwork seamless.

"How are they moving so fast?" one of Liam's teammates muttered, their voice tinged with disbelief.

Liam didn't answer, his focus still on the other team. There was something almost intimidating about their coordination, as if they'd been working together for years instead of a single day.

A flicker of light in the distance caught his attention next. Another group was approaching from a different direction, their movements equally impressive but for different reasons.

It was Irina's team.

Irina led the group, her fiery yellow eyes glowing with mana as she cast controlled bursts of fire to clear the path ahead. Her precision was unmatched—every spell was calculated, leaving no room for error. Beside her, Sylvie used her special [Authority] to manipulate the terrain itself, creating temporary footholds or reshaping obstacles to aid their progress. The two cadets complemented each other perfectly, their synergy driving their team forward with remarkable speed.

Liam could only watch as the two groups closed in on each other, their paths intersecting near a rocky incline that led to the next section of the course. Ethan's team arrived first, pausing briefly to assess the climb. Moments later, Irina's group emerged, their presence commanding attention.

The air seemed to hum with tension as the two groups noticed each other. Irina's fiery presence contrasted sharply with Ethan's calm determination.

One of Irina's team members offered a cheerful wave, breaking the silence. "Hey! Looks like we're not the only ones making progress."

Ethan gave a small nod, his expression unreadable. "You're doing well."

Irina smirked, her gaze flicking between Ethan and Lilia. "So are you. I didn't expect to run into you here."

Lilia crossed her arms, her sharp green eyes locking onto Irina. "It's a race, not a social gathering. If you're done chatting, we've got a summit to reach."

"Well, we're headed the same way. Let's not slow each other down."

RING!

Just then their smartwatches rang.

"First place is achieved."

Apparently, someone had already finished the parkour.

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As Astron surveyed the swinging platforms, he turned to the group. "We're not just going to brute-force this. Everyone plays a part. Elise, you're the quickest and sharpest here. Find the rhythm of the platforms and lead us across."

Elise blinked in surprise at the directive but nodded. "Got it."

Astron's gaze shifted to Simon. "Your strength will come in handy if anyone slips. Be ready to catch or stabilize anyone who needs it."

"On it," Simon replied, rolling his shoulders again.

"Julia," Astron said, meeting her gaze, "watch our backs. These platforms are likely enchanted. Look for signs of something unusual—a change in the rhythm, mana surges, anything."

Julia raised an eyebrow but smirked. "Understood, Captain Serious."

Astron stepped back, gesturing for Elise to move first. "You lead. We'll follow your pace."

Elise crouched slightly, her sharp eyes locked on the swinging platforms. She waited, watching the rhythm of their movements, before leaping onto the first one with practiced agility. The platform wobbled slightly under her weight, but she maintained her balance and moved to the second platform with a graceful hop.

"Come on," she called back, her voice steady. "One at a time."

Simon went next, his heavier frame causing the platforms to sway more noticeably. Halfway across, the faint hum of mana pulsed through the air.

"Something's off," Julia said, her eyes narrowing as she spotted faint ripples in the mana. "The platforms are moving faster."

Astron frowned. "Elise, hold up! Simon, brace yourself!"

As if on cue, a ghostly figure emerged from the shadows beneath the platforms—a translucent creature with clawed hands and glowing eyes. It darted upward, aiming for Simon's legs.

"Ghostmonster!" Elise shouted.

Simon cursed, swinging his arm in a wide arc to knock the creature away, but his footing slipped. He wobbled dangerously on the platform, the ghostly figure lunging again.

"Julia!" Astron called.

"I see it!" Julia reacted quickly, drawing a dagger from her belt and throwing it with precision. The blade sliced through the ghostly figure, causing it to dissipate with an eerie wail. Simon steadied himself, muttering a quick "Thanks" as he moved to the next platform.

Astron followed, his movements deliberate. As he landed on the third platform, a sharp whistle filled the air. His instincts screamed danger, and he ducked just in time to avoid a dart flying past his head. It embedded itself into the platform behind him, a faint green mist hissing from the tip.

"Poison darts!" Astron called out. "Julia, cover us!"

Julia moved quickly, her eyes scanning the shadows for the source of the attack. Another dart shot out, and she deflected it with a quick flick of her wrist, sending the projectile harmlessly into the ravine below.

"Keep moving!" she shouted. "I'll handle these!"

The team advanced with renewed urgency, Astron pausing briefly to steady Simon as he made the final leap. They regrouped on the far side of the ravine, breathing heavily but unscathed.

"Nice work," Astron said, his tone calm but firm. "We handled that well."

Simon smirked, wiping sweat from his brow. "I've gotta say, that was... something."

Elise grinned, catching her breath. "You're pretty good at this whole teamwork thing, fearless leader."

Before they could continue, the path ahead shimmered, and the air around them grew distorted. The rocky trail seemed to bend and twist unnaturally.

"An illusion formation," Astron muttered, his purple eyes narrowing. "Stay close. It's designed to disorient us."

Elise squinted, trying to focus. "How do we get through it?"

Astron scanned the area, his gaze sharp. "There's usually a pattern—something that stands out. Julia, use your instincts to find the real path. Simon, stay ready in case this thing throws something physical at us."

Julia stepped forward, her eyes darting around the distorted landscape. "Alright, let's see..."

She moved cautiously, her sharp instincts guiding her as the terrain shifted and shimmered. At one point, she nearly stepped onto what appeared to be solid ground, but the faint glint of mana stopped her.

"That's a trap," she said, motioning for the group to avoid it.

They followed her lead, the path ahead slowly unraveling as they moved deeper into the formation. Halfway through, a low growl echoed around them, and spectral wolves materialized from the shadows.

"Great, more ghostly things," Simon muttered, cracking his knuckles.

Astron stepped forward, his voice calm but commanding. "Stay together. Elise, focus on the path. Julia, Simon, and I will handle the wolves."

The team worked in tandem, Astron's blade slicing through the spectral creatures with precision while Simon used his brute strength to shield the others. Julia darted between them, her daggers flashing as she kept the wolves at bay.

"Found the exit!" Elise called, her voice urgent. "This way!"

The team regrouped and followed her, the spectral wolves fading as they crossed the boundary of the illusion formation. They emerged onto solid ground, their breaths heavy but their spirits high.

Astron turned to the group, his gaze steady. "Good work."

"Yeah...We made it through because we relied on each other."

Julia grinned, her earlier teasing replaced by genuine respect. "Not bad, Captain Serious. Not bad at all."

Simon nodded, his usual bravado tempered by admiration. "You've got my vote, Astron. Let's see how far you can take us."

Elise gave a small smile, her sharp eyes glinting with curiosity. "Yeah. I'm still curious about you, but I'll admit—you've got skills."

Astron didn't respond immediately, his focus already shifting to the next section of the course. "Let's keep moving. The summit's not far."

As the team caught their breath and prepared to move on, a sharp chime echoed from their smartwatches. Each member instinctively glanced down at their screens. A notification blinked on the display:

[Alert: First Place Achieved]

Time to Summit: 1 hour, 12 minutes.

Julia blinked in surprise before letting out an incredulous laugh. "Wait, someone already finished? Are you kidding me?"

Simon frowned, his brows furrowing. "How's that even possible? We've been moving pretty fast, haven't we?"

Elise tilted her head, her sharp eyes scanning the notification as if it might offer an explanation. "Either we're slower than we thought, or someone is ridiculously good at this."

Astron, standing slightly apart, didn't react visibly. But inwardly, he nodded to himself. 'Most likely Victor.'

Victor Blackthorn, the reigning number one, was in a league of his own. His skillset wasn't just impressive—it was borderline fraudulent. With his ability to bypass conventional obstacles and his unparalleled mana manipulation, it wasn't surprising that he'd claimed the top spot.

Still, Astron said nothing, his focus shifting back to the path ahead. He didn't need to vocalize his thoughts. The team would see the results soon enough.

Julia's voice broke the brief silence. "Alright, Captain Serious, what's the plan? Are we gunning for second, or do we just enjoy the scenery now?"

Astron's gaze studied Julia for a little while, as if to say, 'Isn't it obvious'?

"Thought so."

Julia smirked, her tone teasing. "Ever the pragmatist."

Simon adjusted his gloves, shaking off the lingering tension from the illusion formation. "If Victor's already at the top, we might as well focus on making it there without losing anyone."

Elise nodded, her sharp eyes darting ahead. "There's another incline up ahead, but it looks steeper than the last. Let's move."

Irina and her team advanced through the course with calculated precision. The last clearing before the final incline was in sight, and their pace quickened as the summit loomed closer. The rocky path beneath them gave way to a plateau, where the terrain opened wide. As they emerged, Irina's fiery yellow eyes locked onto a group moving just ahead.

It was Julia's team.

Irina's gaze swept over the group, her competitive instincts kicking in instantly. Her sharp focus lingered briefly on Julia, but her attention quickly shifted to someone else—Astron. He moved with quiet authority, directing his team through the rugged path with calm efficiency.

'Heh.' A spark of challenge flared in Irina's chest. Her lips curled into a smirk, and her posture straightened as her pace picked up slightly.

"Let's move faster," she said, her tone brimming with determination.

Sylvie, following close behind, glanced at her in confusion. "Irina, what's going on?"

Irina tilted her head toward Julia's group, her smirk growing wider. "Them."

Sylvie's gaze shifted toward the group, her cheerful demeanor fading slightly as her eyes took on a faint, unnatural glow. For a brief moment, her expression was unreadable, almost instinctual. "Oh... I see."

Irina raised an eyebrow at Sylvie's sudden change but didn't question it. Instead, she motioned for the team to adjust their formation. "Stay sharp. We can catch up, but don't get reckless."

"Got it! Let's show them what we've got."

Behind them, their two teammates exchanged glances, sensing the subtle shift in the team's atmosphere. Irina's competitive energy was infectious, and Sylvie's unusual reaction added an edge of intrigue.

As Julia's team advanced, seemingly unaware of Irina's group closing in, Astron paused briefly to reassess the path ahead. He turned slightly, his sharp purple eyes flicking back over his shoulder. For a fleeting moment, his gaze met Irina's.

The exchange was brief, but it was enough to ignite Irina's resolve further. She raised her chin, her smirk unwavering as she pushed forward. "Let's go. We're not losing to them."

"This just got interesting."

Both teams moved steadily toward the summit, the tension between them mounting with each step. It was no longer just about finishing the course—it was a race, a battle of will and skill.

At least Irina really thought so.

The summit drew closer with each passing second, the air thinning as both teams pushed themselves to their limits. Irina's team maintained a steady, calculated pace, her fiery presence at the forefront driving them onward. Sylvie's [Authority] manipulated the terrain with precision, smoothing jagged rocks into stepping stones and creating footholds where none existed. Irina's spells burned away obstructions with surgical accuracy, leaving their path clear and efficient.

Behind them, Astron's team wasn't far behind. Astron led with quiet determination, his keen eyes scanning for traps and guiding his team with unwavering precision. Elise darted ahead, her agility allowing her to navigate the rough terrain and call out hazards, while Simon's strength proved invaluable in clearing heavier obstacles. Julia, bringing up the rear, kept their pace steady with her sharp instincts and quick reactions.

As the summit finally came into view, Irina's team surged forward with one last burst of energy. Irina's fiery spells blazed a trail through the final incline, her competitive spirit blazing even brighter than her mana. Sylvie's enchantments complemented her, ensuring every move was efficient and deliberate.

Just as Astron's team reached the summit's edge, they saw Irina's team step onto the plateau. Irina came to a halt, a triumphant smirk curling across her lips as she glanced over her shoulder.

Astron stepped up seconds later, his expression calm and unreadable as he took in the scene. Julia, however, didn't miss the smirk aimed in their direction.

"Fuck..." Julia muttered, doubling over with her hands on her knees to catch her breath. She glared up at Irina, her voice laced with exasperation. "If I knew you were coming, I would have run faster."

It was Julia's loss.

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Irina's fiery smirk remained as she walked over to Astron, who stood at the edge of the summit with his usual calm demeanor. Her gaze flicked briefly to Julia, who was still catching her breath, muttering about Irina's unexpected presence.

'This guy,' Irina thought, a mix of amusement and exasperation flickering across her expression. She had pieced it together the moment Julia spoke—Astron hadn't mentioned their team was right behind them. And knowing him, it was deliberate.

Stopping beside him, she tilted her head, her amber eyes narrowing slightly. "Did you not mention us to Julia?"

"No," Astron replied simply, his voice steady as ever.

Irina crossed her arms, her sharp gaze studying his unreadable expression. "Why?"

"There was no need," he said, glancing at her briefly before looking back toward the horizon. The faint breeze at the summit ruffled his dark hair, and his composure was maddeningly unaffected.

Irina clicked her tongue, her smirk faltering into something closer to irritation. "...You," she muttered, her tone carrying a hint of disbelief. "You do realize that if you had told her and taken full control of the situation, your team could have won, right?"

Astron's sharp purple eyes turned to her, and for a moment, she thought she saw the faintest flicker of amusement. "Remember," he said calmly, "this is a training exercise, not a race."

Irina raised an eyebrow, her smirk slowly returning as she let out a small laugh. "Well... oddly enough, for something that's 'not a race,' we got a notification declaring a first-place finisher."

Astron paused, his gaze steady as he considered her words. After a moment, he simply said, "I have no comment on that."

Irina couldn't help but laugh softly, shaking her head as she glanced over at Julia and the others. Her competitive spirit still burned brightly, but she couldn't deny that Astron's pragmatic approach intrigued her. He had a way of seeing the bigger picture, of remaining unfazed by the smaller victories and losses.

"You're impossible, you know that?" she said, her tone lighter now.

"Only to those who don't listen," Astron replied, his tone betraying the faintest hint of humor.

Irina rolled her eyes, though her smirk softened into something more genuine. Standing beside him at the summit, with the cool wind brushing against them and the rest of the teams catching up in the distance, she found herself strangely content.

"Next time," she said, her voice carrying a playful edge, "don't hold back. I want to see how far you can really push them."

"You do know I will not do that," Astron said, his calm purple gaze fixed on her.

Irina tilted her head, her smirk fading slightly as curiosity flickered in her amber eyes. "Why?"

Astron didn't answer immediately, his gaze steady and unreadable as he looked at her. After a moment, he spoke, his voice quiet but firm. "Don't you know?"

Irina opened her mouth to respond but stopped herself. She did know. She knew exactly why Astron wouldn't give everything he had for something as inconsequential as a race. Her competitive spirit bristled against it, but deep down, she understood his reasoning. The way he always seemed to look beyond the immediate—it was as infuriating as it was admirable.

"That..." Irina trailed off, the words catching in her throat. She let out a soft sigh, her fiery hair shifting slightly in the breeze as she turned her gaze toward the horizon. "I guess I do."

Astron's expression didn't change, but the faintest flicker of understanding passed through his eyes. He didn't press her further, allowing the quiet moment to settle between them.

Irina crossed her arms, glancing at him out of the corner of her eye. "You're always like this. Thinking ahead, holding back. It's frustrating sometimes, you know?"

Astron's lips curved into the faintest hint of a smile. "Is it?"

"Yes," she said, though her tone had softened, her earlier annoyance replaced by something closer to resignation. "But... I guess that's what makes you, you."

As the wind settled at the summit and the last of the cadets gathered around, the instructors arrived, their sharp gazes sweeping over the students. Professor Eleanor stood at the forefront, her commanding presence immediately silencing any lingering chatter.

"Congratulations to all teams who reached the summit," she began, her voice crisp and clear. "You've completed the course, and your rankings and feedback will be provided momentarily."

Eleanor's gaze shifted to the digital tablet in her hand as she tapped a few commands. Large holographic displays sprang to life above her, showing the rankings and individual team scores. As expected, Victor's team held the top spot, with Irina's team listed second and Astron's team third.

The results earned murmurs from the gathered cadets, though most of the noise came from those in the lower ranks. Irina and her team exchanged satisfied glances, while Julia folded her arms with a grumble. "Third? Ugh, I hate being in the bronze position."

Eleanor's sharp gaze cut through the murmurs. "Now, let me provide feedback on the top three teams."

She turned to Victor's group first, her expression neutral. "Victor Blackthorn's team. First place with the fastest completion time. As expected, your coordination and resourcefulness were impeccable. However, I would caution against over-reliance on Victor's individual abilities. A team must succeed as a unit, not as a single powerhouse dragging the others forward."

Victor gave a small, almost dismissive nod, clearly unaffected by the critique. His teammates, however, looked slightly uneasy.

Eleanor then shifted her attention to Irina's group. "Irina Emberheart's team. Second place, with excellent performance across the board. Your synergy and use of mana manipulation were commendable, particularly the complementary abilities displayed by Irina and Sylvie."

Irina's smirk widened slightly, and Sylvie beamed, her earlier demeanor replaced by her usual cheer.

Eleanor's gaze sharpened. "However, Irina, I would remind you not to let your competitive instincts override caution. While your approach was effective, there were moments when risk could have led to costly mistakes."

Irina raised an eyebrow but didn't argue. "Understood, Professor," she said, though her smirk remained firmly in place.

Finally, Eleanor's gaze fell on Astron's team. "Astron Natusalune's team. Third place, with one of the most balanced performances of the day. Your teamwork and strategy were exceptional, particularly in navigating the illusion formation and handling unexpected traps."

Elise straightened slightly at the praise, and Simon grinned, nudging Julia with his elbow. "See? Not bad at all."

And just like that she continued giving feedback to the students. And then as she finished,

Eleanor stepped back, her gaze sweeping over the gathered cadets. "Overall, this exercise was a success. Many of you demonstrated significant growth in teamwork and adaptability. Those who struggled should take this as an opportunity to learn and improve. Dismissed."

The holographic displays faded, and the instructors began to depart, leaving the students to gather their thoughts.

"You are leaving already?"

Julia noticed someone leaving immediately, her brows furrowing as she called after him.

Astron paused briefly, glancing back at her with his usual calm demeanor. "Yes."

Julia huffed, crossing her arms. "Let's grab a quick me—"

"No," Astron cut her off bluntly, his tone neither harsh nor apologetic. He turned without waiting for a response and began descending the rocky path.

Julia watched him go, a bemused smirk playing on her lips. "As usual, Mister Aloof..." she muttered, shaking her head. Despite the curt reply, she didn't seem offended. If anything, she looked amused, as though she'd expected nothing less.

Letting out a small sigh, she turned her attention to Irina, who was still lingering with her team.

"Well, well, Emberheart," Julia called, her tone teasing. "Second place and still acting like you're queen of the summit. What's the secret?"

Irina turned at the sound of Julia's voice, her fiery yellow eyes gleaming with her usual competitive spark. "It's not about acting, Middleton. It's just natural," she replied, her smirk widening as she crossed her arms.

Julia snorted, walking over with an exaggerated swagger. "Natural, huh? Is that what you tell yourself when you're just one step behind Victor?"

The playful jab didn't faze Irina. Instead, her smirk deepened, her confidence unshaken. "One step behind, sure, but still miles ahead of you."

Julia rolled her eyes, a grin tugging at her lips. "Touché."

As they bantered, Lilia approached the group, her red eyes sharp and her expression unusually stiff. Ethan followed not far behind her, his posture relaxed but his brow furrowed slightly. It didn't take long for Julia to notice the tension between them, the air practically crackling with unspoken irritation.

"What happened here?" Julia asked, her sharp blue eyes flicking between Lilia and Ethan.

Lilia scoffed, crossing her arms as she looked away, refusing to answer.

Ethan, on the other hand, didn't hesitate. His tone was calm but carried an edge of pointedness. "Pride often leads to destruction."

Lilia's head snapped toward him, her eyes narrowing into a sharp glare. "Humph!" she huffed, turning away again with a dismissive flick of her hair.

"It means," Ethan said, his hazel eyes meeting Julia's with a hint of exasperation, "that sometimes people refuse to acknowledge when they're out of their depth, and it costs them—and the team—precious time."

Lilia's scoff was louder this time, her tone biting as she finally spoke. "If you're so brilliant, maybe you should've done it yourself."

Ethan's gaze sharpened, his calm demeanor wavering slightly. "I would have, if someone hadn't insisted on ignoring the warnings and rushing ahead."

Irina, watching the exchange unfold, raised an eyebrow. "Wait, what's this about? What happened?"

Julia leaned closer, her grin widening. "Oh, this sounds good. Spill it."

Ethan crossed his arms, his tone steady as he explained. "We were stuck in an illusion formation. I told Lilia it wasn't something we could brute-force or rush through, but she decided to 'handle it herself.'"

Lilia's eyes flashed with irritation. "It wasn't as simple as you're making it sound. And for the record, I did break through it—eventually."

"Yes," Ethan said evenly, "after wasting half our time because you wouldn't listen to reason."

Irina let out a low whistle, glancing between the two. "Yikes. Sounds like teamwork wasn't exactly your strong suit today."

Lilia shot Irina a sharp look but didn't respond. Instead, she turned away again, her jaw tight as she stared out at the horizon.

Julia, unable to resist, leaned toward Ethan with a smirk. "Let me guess. You were right, and she hates admitting it?"

Ethan didn't answer directly, but the faint quirk of his lips said enough.

"Tch."

Lilia was annoyed.

Chapter 764 Chapter 176.1 - Talk

As Sylvie descended the rugged parkour course with Jasmine at her side, she couldn't help but feel a strange sense of relief. The tension from earlier had begun to ebb, replaced by a comfortable camaraderie as she and her friend navigated the path. Along with them was a new addition to their little group—Layla, one of Jasmine's regular teammates, who had ended up joining them during the descent.

Layla was a bright presence, her honey-blond hair tied back in a simple ponytail that bounced as she walked. She had an easy smile that rarely left her face, and Sylvie's [Authority] detected

nothing but positive emotions radiating from her: curiosity, amusement, and the steady warmth of friendliness. It was refreshing, especially after the emotional chaos of earlier events.

"Whew, that was intense," Layla said, brushing some dust off her hands. "I think I've got rocks in places I didn't know existed."

Jasmine laughed, her own auburn hair sticking to her forehead from sweat. "Speak for yourself! I swear, whoever designed that incline was trying to break us."

Sylvie couldn't help but smile, her gaze drifting between her two companions. For all the challenges of the day, it was nice to end it on a lighter note. Layla's cheerful energy felt infectious, and for the first time in a while, Sylvie felt herself genuinely relaxed.

As they reached a flatter section of the course, Jasmine glanced sideways at Sylvie, her eyes narrowing playfully. "You know, I'm starting to think I got the short end of the stick."

"Huh?" Sylvie blinked in confusion.

"I mean, you got to ride on Irina's bus," Jasmine teased, her tone dripping with mock envy. "While the rest of us mere mortals had to scrape by on our own two feet."

Sylvie flushed, waving her hands defensively. "Hey, I wasn't just riding along! I contributed too, you know."

"Oh, sure you did," Jasmine said with an exaggerated roll of her eyes. "Just sitting there all regal, smoothing out terrain and letting Irina blaze the trail. Must've been so hard."

"It was hard!" Sylvie protested, her cheeks puffing slightly in indignation. "I was using my [Authority] the whole time to make sure the team didn't lose footing! Without me, they could've tripped or worse."

"Uh-huh," Jasmine said, her grin widening. "Keep telling yourself that, princess."

Layla giggled, watching the exchange with amused eyes. "You two are hilarious," she said, shaking her head. "Honestly, Sylvie, it sounds like you did a great job. Irina's team wouldn't have made it to the summit first without everyone pulling their weight."

"Exactly!" Sylvie said, pointing at Layla as if she had just been handed undeniable proof of her argument.

Jasmine chuckled, holding up her hands in mock surrender. "Alright, alright. I'll admit, you did well this time, Sylvie. Happy?"

Sylvie crossed her arms, though her lips twitched upward in a small smile. "I'll take it."

As the three continued down the course, the conversation shifted to lighter topics—the difficulty of the course, funny moments from their respective teams, and plans for the evening. Layla's presence felt natural as if she had always been part of their group, and Sylvie couldn't help but feel a small sense of pride at the growing circle of friends.

She thought briefly of Danielle.

"Gloomy again? What happened this time?"

Sylvie sighed, her gaze momentarily dropping to the rocky path beneath their feet. "I was just... thinking of Danielle."

The name hadn't even fully left her lips before Jasmine stopped in her tracks, her expression darkening. Her usual playfulness was gone, replaced by a sharp, cold look in her eyes. "Don't mention that bitch's name again," Jasmine said firmly, her voice low but carrying a sharp edge. "Remember, she was a Demon Contractor."

Sylvie nodded slowly, understanding the weight of Jasmine's words. "I know," she said softly, her voice tinged with melancholy. "I don't miss her. Not after everything she did. But I guess... I miss the time when we were friends."

Jasmine's eyes softened slightly at that, but her tone remained resolute. "She betrayed all of us, Sylvie. Everything we stood for. Whatever friendship we had with her—it was built on lies."

A moment of silence passed between them before Layla, who had been listening quietly, hesitated and asked, "Umm... Danielle. Was she the one who tried to capture Irina Emberheart? The one... who was killed by her?"

"Yes," Jasmine said curtly, her lips pressing into a thin line.

"I see..." Layla murmured, her usual cheerfulness dimmed by the weight of the revelation. She glanced at Sylvie, who still looked thoughtful, and decided not to press further.

Jasmine, however, wasn't one to dwell on the past for long. She took a deep breath, shaking off the tension, and clapped a hand on Sylvie's shoulder. "Those times are behind us now, Sylvie," she said firmly. "You've got to let them go. Focus on what's in front of you."

Sylvie gave her a small, faint smile, the corners of her lips barely turning up. "I know, I know," she replied, her voice steadier now. "I'm just... sorting through it all."

"Good," Jasmine said with a grin, her tone brightening as she slipped back into her usual teasing demeanor. "Because we've got better things to worry about. Like the fact that I'm starving, and you owe me snacks for making me jealous earlier."

Sylvie laughed softly at that, grateful for the lighter turn in conversation. "Fine, fine. But only if you stop calling me 'princess.'"

"No promises," Jasmine shot back with a wink.

Layla watched the two of them with a small, content smile. Though she didn't know the full story of what had happened with Danielle, she could sense the strength of the bond between Jasmine and Sylvie. Whatever trials they had faced, it was clear that they had come through them stronger—and Layla was happy to be part of their growing circle.

The descent finished in lighthearted banter, with Jasmine and Layla teasing Sylvie as they reached the base of the parkour course. The tension from earlier had dissipated entirely, leaving the three of them laughing as they brushed off the dust from their trek.

"Well, I'll see you two later," Sylvie said, stepping back slightly as she adjusted the strap of her bag.

Jasmine's eyebrows shot up, her curiosity evident. "Hee? Who are you meeting with?" she asked, a sly grin spreading across her face.

Sylvie sighed, already bracing herself for the teasing. "It's nothing like that this time," she protested, crossing her arms. "I'm just going to train! Train, okay?"

Jasmine smirked, clearly unconvinced. "Whatever you say, princess," she replied, her tone dripping with mock disbelief.

Sylvie's lips pursed, her face flushing slightly. "I mean it!" she insisted, though she quickly realized she wasn't going to win this one. "Anyway, I really need to go. See you both later."

Layla waved cheerfully. "Good luck with your training!" she said, her bright smile making Sylvie feel a little more grounded.

"Thanks," Sylvie replied with a small, genuine smile before turning on her heel and walking away. The laughter of her friends lingered behind her as she made her way across the academy grounds, her thoughts shifting to the task ahead.

The training facility was tucked away in a quieter part of the academy, its entrance marked by a pair of intricately carved stone doors that radiated faint mana. This was no ordinary training hall—it was a specialized space, built under the Headmaster's guidance and tailored specifically for her.

Sylvie pushed the doors open, stepping into the expansive chamber. The air inside was heavy with mana, the walls lined with ancient runes that shimmered faintly in the dim light. At the center of the room stood the man who had pushed her beyond her limits time and time again—the Headmaster himself.

"Sylvie, you're here," he said, his deep voice carrying a quiet authority that made the vast chamber feel even larger.

"Headmaster," Sylvie replied, bowing slightly out of respect. She straightened quickly, her gaze meeting his. His presence always had a way of grounding her, even when her thoughts were a storm of emotions.

It was the time for her training with Headmaster Jonathan.

Eleanor sat in her dimly lit office, the holographic display glowing softly in front of her. A steaming cup of her signature coffee rested beside her, its rich aroma filling the room as she leaned forward, her sharp eyes fixed on the training footage playing before her.

The scenes of Astron and Ethan unfolded in silence. Both stood out among the cadets, but for vastly different reasons.

Ethan's movements were fluid and instinctive, as though he wasn't navigating the traps and illusions so much as anticipating them. Each step seemed deliberate, his hazel eyes scanning ahead, narrowing occasionally as if he could feel the distortions in the air.

"Intuitive," Eleanor muttered to herself, her voice barely above a whisper.

She rewound a section of the footage, zooming in on Ethan's posture. It wasn't something overtly mystical—it was a mixture of sharp instincts and an uncanny ability to sense. A rare gift, if honed properly.

Her gaze shifted to the next segment, focusing on Astron. His presence was starkly different. Calm, composed, and methodical, his purple eyes betrayed no urgency, only calculation. His movements through the traps lacked Ethan's fluidity, but there was something almost surgical in the way he approached each challenge.

Yet, something about it gnawed at Eleanor's thoughts. She rewound the footage again, this time isolating Astron's sequences.

'Why does it feel like he's holding back?' she thought, her brow furrowing slightly.

She had been thinking about this for a while, and there was this weird sensation whenever she had watched Astron's footage.

It was not something that she was sure of, as after all, Astron didn't show any signs of that. But there was this gnawing feeling that she was getting from Astron.

It was something that eh had developed after watching him and analyzing him all the time.

She felt that his choices were too deliberate, too measured. It wasn't hesitation—Astron wasn't the type to falter under pressure. No, it was as if he was deliberately stopping short of revealing his full capabilities.

She tapped her fingers on the desk, the rhythmic sound filling the silence. Her sharp mind worked through the possibilities, piecing together what she'd observed over the semester.

Astron had always been an enigma. His earlier reputation as a troublemaker had painted him as unremarkable, but recent events had shattered that illusion. His involvement in critical situations, his growth in skill, and now this—Eleanor couldn't shake the feeling that Astron was playing a long game.

Her thoughts turned to why she was reviewing this footage in the first place. The decision was simple, driven by logic and instinct.

"It must be one of the two," she murmured. Her eyes flicked back and forth between the paused frames of Ethan and Astron. The academy needed leaders—figures who could carry the weight of their peers and rise above mediocrity. And in this class, these two were the strongest candidates.

Eleanor leaned back in her chair, her gaze lingering on Astron's unreadable expression in the footage. Her lips pressed into a thin line as a conclusion began to form.

"I guess that will do it."

She decided to act.

Chapter 765 Chapter 176.2 - Talk

<Arcadia Hunter Academy, Sophomore Training Grounds>

The training grounds were alive with the sounds of students wrapping up their practical exercises, the clatter of weapons and chatter filling the air as the session came to an end. Maya, standing near the edge of the field, adjusted the straps of her training coat and glanced over the team she had led for the day. They had performed well, efficiently navigating the simulated dungeon formations, and she felt a quiet sense of accomplishment at their cohesion.

As she began to leave, a few of her team members called out to her.

"Maya!" one of them shouted, waving enthusiastically. It was a lively girl named Cassia, her cheeks still flushed from the exertion of training. She jogged up to Maya, followed closely by two other teammates—a taller, slightly awkward boy named Doran and a confident, sharp-eyed student named Caleb.

Cassia grinned as she caught her breath. "That was amazing today. Your leadership made everything so smooth. I don't think we could've done half as well without you."

Maya gave a small nod, her lips curving into a polite smile. "Thank you. You all worked hard. That's what made it successful."

"Well," Caleb interjected smoothly, stepping forward with a bright smile, "I think it's only fair we celebrate, don't you? How about we all grab a meal together? It's the least we can do after working together so well."

Maya's gaze flicked to Caleb, her sharp eyes catching the slight glint of something more in his tone. While the suggestion seemed casual, she could see the intent behind it. This wasn't the first time someone had tried to use camaraderie as an excuse to get closer to her, and she doubted it would be the last.

Cassia nodded eagerly, clearly unaware of Caleb's underlying motives. "That's a great idea! Maya, what do you think? You deserve a break after all that hard work."

Dorian, shifting awkwardly, added, "Yeah, it could be fun."

Maya's expression remained composed as she considered her response. She appreciated the team's efforts and their enthusiasm, but she wasn't oblivious to the subtle undertone in Caleb's suggestion. Polite but firm rejection was the best course.

"I appreciate the thought," Maya said, her tone warm but resolute. "But I already have plans for the evening. Perhaps another time."

Cassia looked mildly disappointed but understanding, while Dorian nodded quickly, as if relieved he didn't have to commit to an extended social engagement.

Caleb, however, recovered quickly, his charming demeanor unwavering. "Of course, no problem at all. Another time, then," he said smoothly, flashing her a smile that she could only describe as practiced.

Maya inclined her head slightly in acknowledgment. "Thank you for the offer. Have a good evening, all of you."

With that, she turned and began walking toward the exit, the faint sounds of her team's continued chatter fading into the background. As she stepped away from the training grounds, the cool evening air greeted her, carrying with it a sense of relief and quiet satisfaction.

"Now....You must be there...."

The cool evening breeze swept across the academy grounds as Maya strode purposefully toward her destination. Her earlier words about having plans for the evening hadn't been a lie, though she hadn't disclosed the specifics to her teammates. There was someone she needed to speak with—her junior, Astron.

After yesterday's missed opportunity, she wasn't going to let another day slip by without having a proper conversation.

Her footsteps echoed faintly as she entered the sprawling training grounds. As she'd anticipated, it wasn't particularly crowded. The semester had just started, and most students were still easing back into the academy's demanding routines. Yet Maya knew one person who wouldn't take it slower. He never did.

The faint hum of mana and the sharp sound of something cutting through the air reached her ears as she approached one of the deeper sections of the training area. It was quieter here, away from the hustle and noise of the more populated zones. And there he was, just as she'd expected.

SWOOSH! SWOOSH!

Astron moved with precision and focus, engaging with the PhantomGlide Dummy—one of the academy's most challenging training devices. The construct was designed to simulate the speed and unpredictability of high-level enemies, its ghostly figure darting through the air with blinding agility.

Most students struggled to land even a single hit on it, but Astron's strikes were methodical, his movements fluid as he adapted seamlessly to its patterns.

As the dummy launched another attack, Astron countered with a swift, clean strike, his blade cutting through its spectral form. The PhantomGlide Dummy shimmered faintly, resetting itself for the next sequence, but Astron lowered his weapon, seemingly satisfied with his progress.

It was the perfect moment.

Maya stepped forward, her voice clear but calm as she called out, "Junior."

Astron turned to her, his violet eyes meeting hers with the same steady focus he carried into every task. For a brief moment, surprise flickered across his features, but it was gone almost instantly, replaced by his usual composed demeanor.

"Senior," he replied, inclining his head slightly.

Maya walked closer, her expression poised. "How was it?"

"Training?"

"Yes."

"As usual."

"I see."

Astron reached for a towel draped nearby, his movements precise and unhurried. He wiped the sweat from his face and neck, his composure never faltering despite the exertion from his training. The faint shimmer of his skin under the soft glow of the mana lights made him appear almost ethereal. Maya's gaze lingered a fraction longer than she intended, and she quickly reminded herself that this wasn't the time to lose focus.

She stepped closer, holding out a small flask. "Here. Drink this."

Astron tilted his head slightly, his violet eyes narrowing in curiosity. "What is this?"

"A quick brew," Maya replied evenly. "It's from my hometown."

Astron studied the flask for a moment, then raised an eyebrow at her. "Are you sure you want to give this to me?"

Maya's expression didn't waver. "Why not? I drink it every day."

There was a pause, during which Astron seemed to weigh her words before taking the flask. "I see," he said simply, his tone unreadable. He opened the flask and took a small sip, his movements as deliberate as always.

Maya observed him closely, noting the faint flicker of approval in his expression as he swallowed. "It's refreshing," he admitted, his tone neutral but genuine.

"It's good for stamina recovery," Maya said. "Now, follow me. There's something I want to discuss."

Astron nodded, slipping the flask into his bag before falling into step beside her without a word of protest. As they walked, Maya kept her pace steady, her hands clasped loosely behind her back.

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. "The academy's been lively since the start of the semester, hasn't it?" she began, her tone conversational.

"It has," Astron replied, his voice calm. "They were rather enthusiastic."

"Enthusiastic, but inexperienced," Maya added with a faint smile. "Though I suppose that's to be expected."

Astron's lips quirked slightly, a faint hint of amusement breaking through his otherwise stoic expression. "You mean to say they're loud."

Maya chuckled softly, the sound light and almost musical. "Perhaps. But it's not a bad thing. They'll learn. Everyone starts somewhere."

The conversation flowed easily as they made their way through the academy grounds. Maya spoke of her recent practical field training, recounting how her team had performed and the subtle challenges of leading a group with varying skill levels. Astron listened attentively, his quiet presence steady as ever.

Their footsteps echoed softly as Maya led Astron through the winding paths of the academy grounds. The air grew cooler as they approached one of the more secluded areas—the Elemental Chamber, a place steeped in tranquility and raw magical energy.

The large, domed structure stood as an imposing testament to the academy's commitment to fostering magical prowess. Its crystalline walls shimmered faintly, refracting the moonlight into soft hues of blue and silver. Maya pushed open the ornate doors, the subtle hum of contained elemental energy greeting them as they stepped inside.

Astron's gaze swept over the chamber, his expression calm but observant. The space was vast, divided into distinct sections for training with different elemental affinities. Streams of water cascaded in controlled patterns in one corner, while flames danced in another. The air thrummed with latent power, the elements harmonizing in a carefully maintained balance.

Maya moved with quiet familiarity, guiding Astron toward a particular section of the chamber—a secluded area at the far end, marked by its faint glow of ethereal light. The space was reserved for her, a recognition of her position as the top-ranked student of the sophomore year. The intricate patterns carved into the floor radiated mana, responding faintly to her presence as she approached.

"Remember this place?"

Astron nodded, his violet eyes steady as he followed her. "I do. The principles you shared were straightforward and effective."

Maya allowed herself a small smile. "I thought it might be a fitting place for us to talk. It's quiet, and I assume you don't mind the atmosphere."

Astron's gaze flicked around the chamber, taking in the soft glow of the elemental energy surrounding them. "I don't. It's... calm."

Maya inclined her head slightly before sitting down on one of the mana-infused benches near the edge of the platform. She gestured for Astron to do the same. He followed suit, his movements deliberate as he settled across from her.

For a moment, silence filled the chamber, broken only by the faint hum of energy in the air. Maya took a deep breath, her gaze steady as she met his eyes.

Maya's hands rested lightly on her lap, her gaze fixed on Astron's violet eyes. She took a measured breath before speaking, her voice calm but carrying a depth that hinted at the gravity of what she was about to share.

"Now that we're here," she began, her tone steady, "I thought it only right to tell you that I've used the charm you gave me."

Astron's expression remained composed, though a faint glimmer of interest flickered in his eyes. He nodded slightly, urging her to continue.

"The experience was..." Maya paused, searching for the right words. "Unusual. The moment I activated it, I was drawn into a plane of my consciousness I hadn't fully realized existed. It felt... surreal, and yet it was undeniably real. The boundaries between thought and reality blurred."

Astron leaned forward slightly, his attention sharp and focused. "What did you find?"

Maya clasped her hands together, her fingers lacing tightly as she thought. "I encountered... a version of myself. Or rather, a fragment of who I am—or what I could be. It wasn't just a mirror or a shadow. It was something deeper, more instinctual. A part of me I've long suppressed."

"Indeed....As I had expected....Your vampiric side. It is a result of a different psyche."

"....You really understand things well."

Chapter 766 Chapter 176.3 - Talk

Astron leaned back slightly on the mana-infused bench, his gaze steady as he absorbed Maya's words. His thoughts turned inward, piecing together the observations and theories he had been cultivating for some time.

"This aligns with what I suspected," he said, his voice calm but with an undertone of quiet satisfaction. "Your inconsistencies—the way you suppress yourself but occasionally lose control—always pointed to something deeper. A psyche tied to your vampiric nature, one you've been subconsciously suppressing."

Maya studied him, her expression unreadable but her hazel eyes gleaming with curiosity and a hint of unease. "You've been thinking about this for a while, haven't you?"

"I have," Astron admitted, his tone matter-of-fact. "Your moments of eruption weren't just random—they were too distinct, too defined. It wasn't merely a loss of control. It was as if a completely different person emerged. One with desires and instincts that contrasted sharply with your usual demeanor."

Maya's fingers tightened slightly against her lap. "And that's why you made the amulet?"

Astron nodded. "Exactly. I needed a way for you to confront and understand that part of yourself without it taking over. Suppression only works for so long. When pressure builds, it finds a way out—often in destructive ways. The amulet provided a controlled means for you to access it, to interact with it rather than let it erupt unchecked."

Maya's lips pressed into a thin line as she processed his words. Her gaze drifted briefly to the faint glow of the chamber's mana patterns before returning to Astron. "And now that I've seen it, what's next? What do I do with this... part of me?"

Astron's violet eyes flickered with a quiet intensity. "You don't suppress it anymore. You learn to understand it, to integrate it into who you are. This hidden psyche isn't an enemy—it's a part of you. It's instinct, survival, power. But it needs to be tempered with your rationality and control. That balance is where your strength lies."

Maya exhaled softly, her posture relaxing just slightly. "You make it sound so simple."

"It's not," Astron replied, his tone firm but not unkind. "But you've already taken the first step. Acknowledging its existence and facing it is harder than most realize. The rest will take time, discipline, and self-awareness."

Maya leaned back slightly, her gaze shifting to the faint glow of the mana patterns on the chamber floor. "I've spoken to my brother about this," she began, her tone thoughtful. "Not in full detail, of course, but enough for him to understand that I needed guidance. He's been helping me work on strengthening my mental discipline and resilience."

Astron nodded approvingly, his expression steady. "That was a wise decision. While we can try to face these challenges alone, having someone you trust—especially with the resources and insight your family can provide—makes the process more efficient and grounded."

A faint smile tugged at Maya's lips. "I thought you might say something like that. You're practical, as always."

Astron didn't reply immediately, but the subtle shift in his demeanor hinted at his agreement. The quiet between them was comfortable, punctuated only by the faint hum of elemental energy in the chamber.

As Maya glanced at him, she caught the faintest hint of a scent—fresh, clean, with a touch of lavender. It was subtle, but it lingered in the air, likely from the towel he'd used earlier after his

intense training. Her mind briefly wandered, piecing it together. That must be his scent—his natural one, perhaps accentuated by the exertion.

The realization brought a flicker of warmth to her thoughts, but she quickly pushed it aside, her expression remaining composed. She straightened slightly and fixed him with a look of quiet determination.

"Now that you're here, Junior," she said, her voice gaining a firmer edge, "it would be a waste to leave without making the most of it. This chamber isn't always this empty, and the elemental energy is at its peak."

Astron tilted his head slightly, his violet eyes narrowing in curiosity. "I had other plans for the evening."

Maya's brows lifted slightly, a hint of her strong personality returning as she countered, "Plans can wait. This opportunity won't come around every day, especially not with this kind of atmosphere."

Astron regarded her for a moment, his expression unreadable. He was clearly weighing her words, calculating the worth of her suggestion. "Senior," he began calmly, "I'm not one to waste time, but —"

"Exactly, Junior," Maya interrupted a small but commanding smile on her lips. "You don't waste time. Which is why I suggest you take full advantage of this. Unless, of course, you think you've already reached your limit?" There was a faint teasing lilt to her tone, but her gaze remained steady.

Astron's eyes flickered with a faint glimmer of amusement. "You're persistent."

Maya crossed her arms, her expression calm but resolute. "You already know that I don't back down easily, especially when it comes to potential wasted opportunities."

'After all, now that she had the opportunity to capitalize on her Junior, she might as well do it fully, wasn't that right?'

A quiet sigh escaped Astron, though it wasn't one of annoyance—it was more like reluctant acceptance. "Fine," he said, rising from the bench with his usual deliberate grace. "What do you suggest?"

Maya's smile softened, her confidence shining through. "Let's see how well you handle a session under my guidance. Consider it an extension of the lessons I gave you last time."

Astron's gaze met hers, calm but curious. "Then lead the way, Senior."

Maya gestured toward the center of her reserved platform, the patterns of elemental mana glowing faintly as the energy responded to their presence. She turned, her steps deliberate as she prepared to show him that even in moments of casual training, there was room for growth—and perhaps, a little rivalry.

Maya gestured for Astron to take the lotus position at the center of the glowing platform. He complied without protest, his movements precise and deliberate as he settled himself on the mana-infused floor. The faint hum of elemental energy around them grew stronger, the patterns on the ground responding to his presence.

She moved quietly behind him, her footsteps soft against the enchanted surface. Without warning, she leaned forward, wrapping her arms lightly around his shoulders in a sudden, casual hug.

Astron stiffened for a moment, the slightest tension running through his frame. "Senior," he said, his tone calm but with an edge of exasperation.

"Hm?" Maya replied innocently, her chin resting lightly on his shoulder as if she had done nothing out of the ordinary.

"Did you not say you wanted to train?" he asked, his violet eyes glancing at her from the corner of his vision.

"I will," she said, her voice teasing, a faint smile tugging at her lips. "But I thought we could start with something more... grounding."

Astron's tone remained steady, though a hint of dry humor slipped in. "If you're going to keep doing this, I'll leave."

Maya pouted slightly, though she released him and leaned back, her expression playful. "Fine, fine. You're no fun, Junior."

She adjusted her position, sitting cross-legged behind him. A mischievous glint lingered in her eyes, but she quickly replaced it with a calm and composed demeanor. "Well, since you're here, let me show you something useful—a mana gathering method I use during training."

Astron tilted his head slightly, his curiosity piqued but tempered by his usual pragmatism. "You do know it won't work for me."

Maya's lips curved into a knowing smile. "Why not just observe it? You might learn something. At the very least, it won't hurt to watch."

He considered her words for a moment before nodding. "I suppose I don't lose much from it."

"Exactly," Maya said, her tone confident. She adjusted her posture, closing her eyes briefly as she raised her hands in front of her, palms up. A soft glow of mana began to form between them, the energy swirling gently like a controlled current.

"This method focuses on aligning your breath with the natural flow of mana in your surroundings," she explained, her voice steady and precise. "It's less about forcing the energy and more about synchronizing with it. The patterns on this platform help guide the process."

Astron's gaze fixed on the glow in her hands, his analytical mind quietly dissecting every movement. While he knew her technique wouldn't directly translate to his own unique mana structure, he still watched with an intent focus, noting the precision and control in her method.

Maya opened one eye, glancing at him with a faint smirk. "See? Not so dull, is it?"

He gave a small shrug, his expression neutral. "It's... structured."

Maya chuckled softly, the sound light and melodic. "Coming from you, that almost sounds like a compliment."

As she continued the demonstration, her focus shifted between guiding the energy and watching Astron's reactions. While he remained as composed as ever, she noticed the subtle shifts in his posture—the slight tilt of his head, the faint narrowing of his eyes—as he absorbed the information.

'Typical Junior,' she thought with an inward smile. 'Always observing, always calculating.'

But well, it was not that bad.

'If he somehow likes it....Who knows, he might start coming to this place quite a lot?'

After all, there was nothing free in this world. Whenever there was a deal, there was always a catch.

And Maya knew that well.

Though she still had not noticed someone watching them.

A pair of eyes....

They bore into their interaction from afar, sharp with envy and growing malice.

Beyond the confines of the mana-infused chamber, hidden in an unlit alcove, a young man stood, a faint glow illuminating his hands. The artifact he held—a small, intricately carved mirror of black obsidian—shimmered faintly as it projected a translucent image of the scene inside the chamber. His face twisted with bitterness, his jaw clenching tighter with every second that passed.

"Still, at this point!" he muttered under his breath, the words laced with venom. His fingers curled around the edges of the artifact, his nails biting into the cool surface as if it might crack under the pressure of his grip.

Still, after all that time, he was still unable to deal with this pest.

The image flickered slightly, showing Maya's soft chuckle as she demonstrated her mana-gathering technique. The way her voice carried a light, melodic quality, the faint glimmer in her eyes as she teased that guy.

'This must end.'

But he was smiling.

'Heh.....You will find your justice soon.'

Chapter 767 Chapter 177.1 - Formation

<HA25, Arcadia Hunter Academy>

The sun streamed through the tall windows of the classroom as the students of HA25 filed in, their chatter subdued but buzzing with curiosity about the new course. The setup of the room had changed slightly—desks were arranged in clusters rather than rows, hinting at a more interactive session.

At the front of the class stood a tall man with a commanding presence. His neatly trimmed beard and sharp features gave him a look of both wisdom and authority. He wore a tailored uniform adorned with the insignia of a high-ranking hunter, and his piercing gray eyes swept across the room, taking in each student.

As the students settled, he stepped forward, his boots clicking softly against the floor. "Good morning," he began, his deep voice resonating through the room. "My name is Professor Darius Kain, and I will be your instructor for this course: Team Operations and Unit Specialization."

He paused, letting his words settle as his gaze moved from one student to the next. "This class will introduce you to the foundational principles of working as a cohesive team. Whether you like it or not, the life of a hunter is rarely a solo endeavor. Your ability to operate within a unit can mean the difference between success and failure—or life and death."

The students exchanged glances, some intrigued, others slightly apprehensive. Professor Kain's serious tone left little room for doubt about the importance of the subject.

"This course," Kain continued, "will consist of both theoretical lessons and practical exercises. Today, we'll begin with an overview of unit specialization and team dynamics. In future sessions, we'll move into hands-on scenarios designed to simulate real-world challenges."

He gestured toward the classroom screen, which lit up with a diagram illustrating the basic roles within a hunter team: Striker, Defender, Support, and Tactician.

"A well-balanced team," Kain explained, pointing to the diagram, "is not simply a collection of strong individuals. Each member must fulfill a specific role, complementing one another to form a cohesive whole."

He tapped the screen, and examples of team formations appeared, highlighting different strategies. "Strikers focus on offense, delivering decisive blows to weaken or eliminate threats. Defenders protect the team, absorbing damage and maintaining formation. Supports provide healing, buffs, or mana management, ensuring the team can sustain prolonged engagements. And Tacticians oversee strategy, analyzing the battlefield and coordinating the team's movements."

Julia leaned over to Ethan, whispering, "Guess you're the Striker, huh? Big lightning strikes and all that."

Ethan smirked but didn't respond, keeping his focus on Kain.

Just like that, the class continued.

As the class neared its end, the professor was also about to conclude.

"Each of you will naturally gravitate toward one or more roles based on your abilities, strengths, and preferences," Kain continued. "However, a hunter must also be adaptable. The battlefield is unpredictable, and you may be called upon to step outside your comfort zone."

He turned to the class, crossing his arms. "Now, this is an introductory course, so you won't be expected to master these roles overnight. But by the end of this semester, you should have a clear understanding of your primary role and how to work within a team."

The screen shifted to display footage of an experienced hunter team in action, their coordination seamless as they navigated a dangerous dungeon. The students watched in silence, the skill and synergy of the team leaving a strong impression.

As the footage ended, Kain turned back to the class. "This," he said, gesturing to the screen, "is what you should aspire to. Not just individual strength, but unity. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link."

He glanced at the clock, noting the time before addressing the class once more. "Now, for your first assignment," he said, his tone shifting slightly. "By the end of this week, I want each of you to form a team. Three to five members. Choose people you trust and can work with. This team will be your unit for the duration of this course."

The students immediately began murmuring, the prospect of forming teams sparking a mix of excitement and nervousness.

Professor Kain allowed the students a moment to absorb the significance of his assignment, the murmurs of conversation growing louder as the gravity of forming their teams began to sink in. He raised a hand, silencing the room with his commanding presence.

"Before you leave," he said, his deep voice resonating through the room, "there's something else you need to understand about this course. It is one of the most credited courses in your curriculum. A total of seven credits—three for the theoretical component and four for the practical exercises."

The weight of his statement seemed to hit the students all at once. A few exchanged wide-eyed glances, while others immediately sat up straighter, realizing just how important this course would be.

"The significance of these credits cannot be overstated," Kain continued his tone firm. "Your performance here will have a substantial impact on your overall evaluations, and the stakes are higher than some of you might be prepared for."

He gestured to the diagram of team roles still displayed on the screen. "Theoretical knowledge will account for three of these credits. Your team will work together to tackle assignments, analyze scenarios, and develop strategies based on the principles we discuss in class. Keep this in mind when selecting your teammates—this isn't just about fieldwork."

The students' murmurs grew quieter as they processed the implications. A few frowned, clearly realizing that this course would demand much more than just physical performance.

Kain's expression softened slightly, though his tone retained its weight. "The practical component, worth four credits, will involve simulations, dungeon exercises, and live-combat training. These exercises will push you to operate as a cohesive unit, and your ability to adapt to challenges will determine your success."

He straightened, his sharp gray eyes scanning the room. "Remember, this isn't just about individual achievement. A team's failure is your failure. A team's success is your success. Keep that in mind."

The room was silent now, the students fully focused on his words. Kain glanced at the clock again, noting that there were still a few minutes left in the session.

"With that," he said, stepping back slightly, "I'll conclude this lecture early. Use the extra time wisely. Begin discussing potential teammates, and remember—this assignment is due by the end of the week."

He gestured toward the door, signaling the end of class. "You are dismissed."

The students began to rise, some moving immediately into small clusters to discuss their options, while others remained seated, deep in thought. The room buzzed with quiet determination, the weight of the course's significance settling heavily on everyone.

As Ethan stood, Julia nudged him with her elbow. "Looks like we're really in it now, Zeus," she teased, her grin betraying her excitement.

"Stop with the nickname," Ethan muttered, though he couldn't help the small smile tugging at his lips.

And as the professor left the students started talking about their teams.

Teamwork has never been something that they were unaware of as the academy put the importance on the teamwork quite frequently.

As the class settled into clusters, the students buzzing with energy over forming their teams, Julia let out a dramatic groan, throwing her head back as she slumped into her chair. "Ugh, theory. Why does it always come back to theory? I thought we were training to fight, not to become scholars."

Ethan smirked, crossing his arms as he leaned casually against her desk. "You do realize that strategy is a part of fighting, right? You can't just swing your sword around and hope for the best."

Julia shot him a glare, though the effect was dulled by the exaggerated pout on her lips. "I don't hope. I calculate my swings."

Lucas, sitting nearby, chuckled, his cold blue eyes glinting with amusement. "Is that what we're calling it now? Calculating?"

"Laugh all you want, Middleton," Julia shot back, waving a hand in his direction. "At least I'm not sitting here pretending to love this boring stuff. If I wanted to do homework, I'd have gone into bookkeeping or something."

Lilia leaned in slightly, a sly smile tugging at her lips. "You could always find someone to handle the theory part for you. Partner up with a 'scholar,' and you can focus on what you love—smashing things."

Julia paused, her hand on her chin as if seriously considering the idea. "Hmm... that could be possible indeed. Find someone to do the brainwork while I do the real work."

The group burst into laughter at her earnest response. Even Irina, who had been quietly observing the conversation, let out a soft chuckle, her fiery yellow eyes glinting with amusement.

"You do realize that would make you the muscle of the team, right?" Ethan teased, raising an eyebrow.

"Damn right I'd be the muscle," Julia said proudly, sitting up straighter. "Brains are overrated anyway."

Julia's eyes darted around the room, scanning the clusters of students who were already deep in discussion about potential teams. Her sharp gaze locked onto someone sitting quietly toward the back of the classroom. Her smirk widened, a glint of determination sparking in her blue eyes.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, her voice brimming with excitement. "That could work."

Without wasting another second, she stood abruptly, her chair scraping against the floor as she moved with purpose. Her teammates exchanged curious glances, but before anyone could stop her, Julia was already halfway across the room.

The target of her attention was none other than Astron, who was seated at his desk, his calm purple eyes scanning the information on his tablet. As always, he seemed detached from the bustling energy around him, exuding his usual quiet presence.

Julia had noticed him during their recent parkour training session. Though she didn't know much about him beyond his reputation as the enigmatic loner, one thing had stood out to her: his precision. His movements had been calculated and efficient, his vision sharp, and his adaptability remarkable. She had also taken note of his versatility—dagger in one hand, bow slung over his shoulder. He was clearly someone who could fill the role of a scout, someone who could cover the gaps she wasn't interested in filling herself.

'Indeed,' Julia thought, her grin widening as she approached him. 'He's perfect.'

Astron was just beginning to stand when Julia appeared in front of him, her movement so quick and deliberate that it caught the attention of nearby students.

"Astron," Julia said, her voice carrying both confidence and urgency. "Join my team."

And as usual, she was straightforward.

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"Astron. Join my team."

The moment Julia's voice rang out, commanding and full of confidence, the entire room seemed to freeze. Conversations halted mid-sentence, and all eyes turned toward her and Astron. The boldness of her statement—the straightforwardness of her offer—sent a ripple of surprise through the class.

"Did she just...?" one student whispered.

"Julia Middleton wants him on her team?" another murmured, their tone dripping with incredulity.

"She's one of the strongest students here," someone added, their voice hushed but audible. "Why would she offer Astron a spot right away?"

Astron, still seated, glanced up at Julia with his usual calm expression, his purple eyes meeting her sharp blue gaze. The murmurs of the students didn't seem to faze him, though the weight of their stares was palpable.

"Is he really that valuable?" a student muttered from one corner of the room. "I know his rank jumped, but..."

"Maybe she's just trying to keep things balanced," another speculated. "High ranks aren't supposed to group together, right?"

"No way," someone countered. "If that's the case, there are way more balanced options. She wouldn't choose him unless she sees something."

Julia, completely unbothered by the growing murmur of speculation, crossed her arms and smirked down at Astron. "What do you say? You've got the precision and adaptability I need. I'm not interested in wasting time looking for someone else."

Astron's gaze lingered on her for a moment, his expression unreadable. Then, slowly, he stood, his movements measured and deliberate. The murmurs grew louder as the students watched the interaction unfold, their curiosity mounting.

"Julia Middleton," one student whispered. "She's always so selective. If she's offering him a spot outright..."

"Does that mean Astron's skills are really that impressive?" someone else wondered aloud.

"I mean, he's ranked 1052," another voice said, skepticism evident. "That's not exactly top-tier."

"Yeah, but didn't he beat Liam Wayne?" someone countered. "And he used to be last. Jumping this far means something."

Astron finally broke the silence between him and Julia. His voice, calm and steady, carried just enough to cut through the whispers around them. "You're straightforward, as usual."

"Heh....This is who I am."

"Indeed."

Julia grinned, clearly taking his response as a positive sign. "So, is that a yes?"

"Why?"

"What do you mean why?"

"Why did you come up to me immediately?"

Julia's grin didn't falter. "Because I need a scout. And you're good—better than most people here. I've seen you in action, Astron. You're sharp, flexible, and you actually think about your moves instead of rushing in like an idiot. You'll balance out my... let's say, more direct approach."

Astron raised an eyebrow, his gaze still steady. "And why should I agree?"

Julia tilted her head, her smirk unwavering as she leaned slightly closer to Astron. "Am I not one of the strongest here? Why would there be anything else?"

Astron's calm purple eyes met hers, and he raised an eyebrow, his expression as unreadable as ever. "Is that your sole reasoning?"

Julia blinked, caught off guard for just a moment before narrowing her eyes slightly. "...Is there anything else that's supposed to be there?"

Astron sighed softly, the sound barely audible over the growing whispers around them. He straightened, his gaze breaking away from Julia as he glanced around the room. His sharp eyes locked onto someone at the edge of the classroom—a certain someone emanating a subtle but unmistakable aura of intensity.

It was Irina. Her fiery yellow eyes were sharp and focused, and her presence felt more commanding than usual. Though she wasn't looking directly at him, Astron could sense the quiet weight of her attention.

After a moment, Astron looked back at Julia, his expression unchanged. "I'll think about it."

Julia's smirk widened, her blue eyes gleaming with satisfaction. "Don't play too hard to get, Astron. It doesn't suit you."

Astron didn't respond, his silence speaking louder than any words might have. He simply turned his gaze away, as calm and unbothered as ever.

Julia chuckled softly before turning on her heel, her energy radiating confidence as she walked back toward her group. The students watching the scene unfold were left in stunned silence, their expressions a mixture of disbelief and awe.

"Did he just..." one student whispered, their voice trailing off as they struggled to process what they had witnessed.

"Reject Julia Middleton?" another finished, their tone incredulous.

"He didn't outright reject her," someone else pointed out. "He said he'd think about it."

"That's practically the same thing!" a voice hissed, their disbelief mounting. "No one makes Julia Middleton wait. No one."

The murmurs continued to ripple through the room, but Astron remained unaffected, his expression as steady as ever. He sat back down, his movements measured, while Julia, completely unbothered by the speculation, rejoined her group with a triumphant air.

Lilia smirked as Julia returned. "So? Did he say yes?"

"Not yet," Julia said, crossing her arms. "But he will. Trust me."

Julia barely had time to settle into her seat before a firm voice cut through the murmurs of the room.

"He will not."

The confident, steady tone silenced the surrounding chatter, drawing every eye toward the source. Irina stood at the edge of her desk, her fiery yellow eyes locked onto Julia. Her posture was straight, her arms crossed, and her expression left no room for doubt.

Julia's smirk widened, her blue eyes gleaming with a mixture of amusement and challenge. "Are you sure?" she asked, tilting her head slightly, the tone of her voice playful but sharp.

"Yes," Irina replied without hesitation.

"Why?" Julia asked, leaning forward slightly, the grin on her face growing.

Irina's gaze didn't waver. "Why? Because he's in my team."

"....."

The room froze. Every pair of eyes darted between Irina and Julia, the air thick with disbelief. Even Ethan, who had been quietly observing from his seat, raised an eyebrow in mild surprise. Lilia's smirk faltered for a split second before returning, this time tinged with curiosity.

"You've got to be kidding me," someone whispered, breaking the stunned silence.

Julia blinked, her grin still in place but her brow arching slightly. "Oh?" she drawled, leaning back in her chair. "He's in your team, huh? Since when?"

Irina's confidence didn't falter. "Since the start. Before this little stunt of yours."

Julia let out a soft chuckle, shaking her head. "Well, well. Looks like I missed that memo. But you know what? I'm not entirely convinced."

Irina tilted her head, her fiery hair catching the light as her smirk mirrored Julia's. "You don't need to be convinced, Middleton. It's the truth."

Julia leaned forward again, resting her chin on her hand as she studied Irina with interest. "So, you're telling me Astron—Mister Aloof himself—committed to your team already?"

"Yes," Irina said simply, her tone unyielding.

The murmurs resumed, rippling through the students like a wave. Whispers of disbelief and speculation filled the air.

"Did she really snag him before Julia?"

"But Julia went straight to him—how is that possible?"

"Does that mean Astron chose her over Julia? What does Irina have that's so convincing?"

Julia leaned back in her chair, a glint of challenge still sparkling in her blue eyes. "You know," she said, her tone light but pointed, "this just got a whole lot more interesting."

Irina raised an eyebrow. "I'm glad you think so. But the fact remains—he's already spoken for."

Julia chuckled softly, her grin widening as she crossed her arms. "We'll see about that."

The tension between the two was palpable, the competitive spark unmistakable. The room buzzed with anticipation, students unable to look away as the two strongest personalities clashed in a battle of words.

Ethan sighed, shaking his head as he leaned toward Lilia. "They're going to drag this out, aren't they?"

Lilia smirked. "Oh, absolutely. And you know what? I'm here for it."

As the impromptu standoff continued suddenly the door opened.

CREAK!

The tense atmosphere in the classroom was abruptly interrupted by the sound of the door creaking open. Every head turned toward the entrance, the heated exchange between Julia and Irina momentarily forgotten.

Standing in the doorway was Professor Eleanor, her sharp eyes sweeping across the room like a blade. Her presence alone commanded immediate silence, the students' murmurs dying in their throats. She stepped into the room with deliberate precision, her heels clicking softly against the floor.

"Good morning," Eleanor said crisply, her voice cutting through the charged atmosphere. She carried a stack of papers and a sleek tablet, which she placed on the podium at the front of the room. Her sharp gaze lingered momentarily on Julia and Irina, who both straightened in their seats, their earlier rivalry temporarily subdued.

"I trust you've all had time to reflect on yesterday's assignments," Eleanor continued, her tone even but unmistakably firm. "And I expect you've begun the process of forming your teams."

Her piercing gaze swept the classroom, her sharp eyes narrowing slightly as they landed on a group of students still exchanging whispered comments. They immediately silenced, their postures stiffening under her scrutiny.

"Good," she said, her voice cool but satisfied. "Now, let's move forward. Today's lesson will focus on a crucial element of team success: situational adaptability."

She tapped her tablet, and the classroom screen came to life, displaying a tactical diagram of a chaotic dungeon layout. The image was cluttered with obstacles, varied terrain, and simulated enemy positions.

"The ability to adapt to unpredictable situations..."

Just like that she started her lecture.

The students took notes diligently, the weight of her words sinking in. The simulated dungeon scenario on the screen had shifted to its conclusion—a team overcoming a chaotic ambush by thinking quickly and adjusting their roles dynamically.

"This," Eleanor said, pointing to the screen, "is what separates competent hunters from great ones. It isn't enough to follow a plan. You must be able to adjust when the plan inevitably falls apart."

With a tap of her tablet, the screen powered down, leaving the room in silence as the students absorbed the final points of her lecture.

Eleanor stepped back from the podium, folding her hands as she addressed the class. "Before you leave, there is one more matter to discuss."

The subtle shift in her tone immediately recaptured their full attention.

"The mentorship program," she began, her sharp gaze sweeping the room, "is nearing its final stages of preparation. The academy has worked diligently to pair each of you with a mentor who will not only enhance your strengths but also challenge your weaknesses."

The classroom murmured softly, the mention of mentors reigniting a mix of curiosity and apprehension.

"These mentors," Eleanor continued, her tone firm, "are not here to coddle you. They are professionals—hunters with real-world experience who have agreed to dedicate their time to your development. Their purpose is to guide you, to push you beyond your limits, and to prepare you for the reality of life outside these walls."

She paused, letting her words sink in before continuing. "The finalized list of mentor assignments will be revealed soon. I advise each of you to be ready. Your mentors will evaluate you just as

thoroughly as your instructors, and their feedback will carry significant weight in your overall assessments."

Eleanor's gaze sharpened, landing briefly on a few students who appeared less focused than the rest. "Use the time you have now to solidify your teams and prepare yourselves. Once the mentorship program begins, there will be no room for complacency."

The students nodded, the gravity of her words settling over them like a tangible weight.

"Dismissed," Eleanor said finally, her tone decisive. "And remember—your actions now will determine your success later. Don't waste this opportunity."

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Irina's fiery yellow eyes narrowed as she watched Julia stride purposefully across the room, her every step oozing confidence. The scrape of Julia's chair against the floor felt like a provocation in itself, and Irina's irritation flared like embers catching wind. She didn't miss the way the room fell silent, every student hanging on Julia's bold declaration.

"Astron. Join my team."

Irina clenched her fists, her fiery hair shimmering faintly as her temper simmered. 'That snake,' she thought, her gaze locked onto Julia. 'She's already making her move. Brazen, arrogant, and completely ignoring who he is.'

She took a slow breath, trying to steady the fire threatening to erupt. Irina knew Astron—knew his preference for staying out of the spotlight, his deliberate attempts to keep his achievements subdued. Julia's forwardness would only draw more attention to him, and that thought alone made Irina's annoyance spike. 'He hates being the center of things, and this idiot is painting a target right on him.'

Astron's calm response didn't ease her frustration. His measured tone, the way he didn't immediately reject Julia, made her jaw tighten. 'Of course, he's not going to agree right away,' she reminded herself. 'He won't like how public this is. Still... I should've been faster.'

The thought grated on her. Irina had known from the moment the team assignment was announced what she needed to do. Astron and Sylvie were essential—no question about it. Neither of them deserved their low ranks. Astron's precision, adaptability, and raw talent were undeniable. Sylvie's unusual [Authority] and sharp instincts made her a wildcard with unparalleled potential. Together, they were game-changers.

'Astron and Sylvie must be recruited no matter what.' The thought repeated like a mantra in her mind. They weren't just valuable assets; they were the key to ensuring her team dominated. Their lower ranks meant there would still be room for stronger cadets, creating an unbeatable combination.

But now Julia had thrown herself into the mix, brazenly coveting Astron right in front of everyone. Irina's frustration bubbled higher, but beneath it, a flicker of confidence remained. 'Astron won't choose her. Why would he, when he can be on my team? I understand him better than she ever could.'

As the interaction between Julia and Astron played out, Irina's sharp mind worked quickly. She had to secure her position, and she had to do it without appearing reactionary. Confidence was key, and she wouldn't give Julia the satisfaction of seeing her rattled.

'Let her play her little game,' Irina thought, her smirk returning faintly. 'Astron won't be swayed that easily.'

Her focus shifted briefly to Sylvie, who sat quietly at the edge of the room. The girl's sharp gaze flickered with curiosity as she observed the unfolding scene, her quiet presence a stark contrast to the chaos around her. Irina's determination solidified further. 'Sylvie, too. She's not just talented—she's dangerous in the best way. With the two of them, my team will dominate.'

Irina straightened in her seat, her fiery aura settling into something more controlled as she formulated her next move. Julia's theatrics might have drawn the room's attention, but Irina wasn't going to let her dictate the game.

'Let's see how confident she feels when Astron chooses my side.'

Irina leaned back slightly, her sharp yellow eyes never leaving Julia and Astron. The embers of her frustration simmered, but the fire in her chest burned brighter than ever, fueled by resolve. It wasn't just about securing the best team—it was about ensuring Julia knew exactly where she stood.

As soon as Professor Eleanor's lesson ended, Irina stood with purpose, her fiery yellow eyes locked onto Sylvie's desk at the far end of the room. Her competitive spirit burned brightly, and she wasted no time weaving through the dispersing students to reach her target. Sylvie, seated calmly as she packed up her things, glanced up in mild surprise as Irina appeared before her.

"Be on my team," Irina said directly, her voice steady and confident. There was no preamble, no room for negotiation in her tone. She wasn't asking—she was offering.

Sylvie blinked, her sharp eyes flickering with a mix of curiosity and hesitation. She looked down at her hands for a moment before meeting Irina's gaze again. "That... are you sure you want me on your team?"

"Yes," Irina replied without hesitation.

"But..." Sylvie's brows furrowed slightly, her voice quieter now.

"Is something the matter?" Irina's fiery hair shimmered as she tilted her head slightly. "Why are you hesitating? If there's a problem, say it."

Sylvie hesitated, her fingers lightly tracing the edge of her desk. Finally, she sighed softly. "I promised Jasmine and Layla. We agreed to stick together."

Irina's sharp gaze flicked to the student seated beside Sylvie—Jasmine. She recognized her, vaguely. The two of them were almost always together, their camaraderie clear in the way they worked and studied side by side. Irina had noticed them before, though only in passing.

'So that's Jasmine,' Irina thought, her eyes narrowing slightly. But then her mind snagged on the second name. 'Layla? Who's that?'

It wasn't unusual for Irina to miss details about her classmates. The academy was massive, and she didn't waste energy keeping track of every single student. Still, Sylvie's mention of Layla piqued her curiosity. Whoever she was, Irina hadn't deemed her important enough to notice before now.

Sylvie blinked, caught completely off guard as Irina Emberheart—the Irina Emberheart—appeared at her desk, her fiery yellow eyes blazing with purpose. For a moment, Sylvie could only stare, unsure of what to say. Sure, she and Irina had worked together last semester and had done well as a team, but she never expected Irina to come directly to her like this. It felt surreal, almost overwhelming.

"Be on my team," Irina said, her tone steady and commanding. There was no hesitation, no uncertainty. She wasn't asking; she was making a statement.

Sylvie's mind raced as she processed the words. She glanced at Irina, her [Authority] humming faintly in the back of her mind, picking up on the cascade of emotions radiating from her. Pride—blazing and unshakable. There was an edge of arrogance too, but not in a way that felt dismissive. Trust, though surprising, was there, clear and solid. And beneath it all, a faint, unexpected warmth of happiness and expectancy. It was as if Irina saw her not just as a teammate, but as someone she genuinely wanted on her side.

It made Sylvie's chest tighten in a way she didn't quite understand.

"I..." Sylvie hesitated, her fingers brushing the edge of her desk as she tried to find the right words. "I didn't expect you to... I mean, are you sure you want me on your team?"

"Yes," Irina said firmly, cutting through Sylvie's doubt without a second thought. "Why wouldn't I?"

Sylvie opened her mouth to respond, but before she could, Jasmine leaned forward from the desk beside hers, her wide eyes darting between the two. "That... Are you really Irina Emberheart?" she asked, her tone equal parts awe and skepticism.

Irina tilted her head slightly, her fiery hair catching the light as she fixed Jasmine with a sharp but curious look. "Hmm? What does that mean? I am Irina Emberheart, of course."

"...Right," Jasmine muttered, clearly at a loss for words. Her gaze shifted to Sylvie, her expression practically screaming, What is happening right now?!

Sylvie felt her cheeks warm slightly under Jasmine's stare. "Irina, I..." she started, but her voice faltered. She hadn't even fully processed what was happening. Why would someone like Irina—so confident, so proud—go out of her way to approach her like this? Sure, they'd worked well together before, but this felt different. It felt... personal.

As if sensing her hesitation, Irina straightened slightly, her fiery aura softening just a fraction. "If there's a problem, just say it," she said, her tone still direct but with an undercurrent of patience.

Sylvie sighed softly, her fingers tracing the desk's surface. "It's not that I don't want to... It's just..." She hesitated, glancing toward Jasmine for support before continuing. "I promised Jasmine and Layla. We agreed to stick together."

Irina's sharp gaze flicked to Jasmine, who immediately stiffened under the scrutiny, and then to an empty seat nearby. "Hmm... Layla? Who's that?"

"She's one of my teammates," Sylvie explained, her voice steadying slightly. "We've worked together a lot. We've kind of... formed a group."

Irina's eyes narrowed slightly, not in anger but in thought. Sylvie could almost see the gears turning in her head as she weighed the information.

"Hmm... Are you sure you guys want to stick together?" Irina asked, her tone probing but not dismissive. "What are your occupations?"

Sylvie hesitated, unsure of how to respond. Jasmine, however, jumped in before she could. "Wait, wait, wait," she said, holding up a hand. "Are you seriously evaluating us right now?"

"Of course I am," Irina said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "If Sylvie is promising loyalty to a team, I need to know its value."

Jasmine's jaw dropped slightly, her expression a mix of disbelief and admiration. "You're... actually serious. You're really Irina Emberheart."

"I already said that," Irina replied, her tone bordering on exasperation. "Now, are you going to answer my question, or should I make my offer directly to Sylvie?"

Sylvie felt a wave of embarrassment wash over her as Jasmine stared at her with wide eyes.

"Sylvie," Jasmine whispered, leaning closer. "What did you do to get her attention?"

"Nothing!" Sylvie hissed back, her cheeks burning. "I didn't do anything!"

Irina watched their whispered exchange with a faint smirk. "So?" she prompted, her sharp eyes locking onto Sylvie once again. "What's your decision?"

Sylvie swallowed hard, her mind racing. The emotions radiating from Irina—confidence, trust, expectancy—were almost overwhelming. She had no idea how to respond, but one thing was clear: Irina wasn't going to leave without an answer.

"Sigh....."

Sylvie let out a long, deliberate sigh, her shoulders rising and falling as she tried to compose herself. The weight of Irina's intense gaze was almost suffocating, but she wasn't about to let herself get completely overwhelmed. "Alright," she said softly, glancing at Jasmine. "Jasmine, go ahead."

Jasmine blinked, looking between Sylvie and Irina, before crossing her arms and stepping forward. "Fine," she said, her tone somehow cheerful.

Though it was clear that she was a little overwhelmed.

Jasmine cleared her throat, clearly trying to project confidence even though Sylvie could sense her nervous energy. "I'm Jasmine," she began, offering a small, almost defiant smile. "and I'm a swordsman. Well, more like a jack-of-all-trades with a focus on agility and close combat."

Irina's sharp yellow eyes assessed Jasmine with a quick, calculating look. "A swordsman?" she echoed, her tone neutral but not dismissive. "What about your rank?"

Jasmine hesitated briefly but squared her shoulders. "Middle of the pack," she admitted. "But I've been training a lot, and I've worked with Sylvie enough to know we make a great team."

Irina raised an eyebrow but didn't comment further. Her gaze flicked to Sylvie, as if silently evaluating the dynamic between the two of them.

Before Sylvie could say anything, a familiar voice interrupted. "Hey! Did I miss something?"

Layla's cheerful tone broke the tension as she approached, her bright smile lighting up the room. She looked between Irina, Jasmine, and Sylvie, clearly curious about the situation.

"You're just in time," Sylvie said, relief evident in her voice. "Irina's... asking us some questions."

"About what?" Layla asked, tilting her head as she slipped into the conversation.

"Your occupation," Irina said bluntly, her fiery gaze locking onto Layla.

"Ah....Well, I am a tank."

It appeared that she was a tank.

'Eh?'

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Irina's sharp yellow eyes widened slightly as Layla's words sank in. 'A tank? We have a girl tank?' The surprise registered clearly on her face, though she quickly schooled her expression back into her usual confidence. Tanks were rare, especially at the academy. Most vanguards were swordsmen or spearmen—damage dealers who relied on brute strength or agility. Pure tanks, those who specialized in soaking damage and holding the front line, were almost unheard of.

And a girl tank? That was even more uncommon. Most female students leaned toward rangers, swordsmen, or mages, leaving the more physically grueling roles to their male counterparts.

For a moment, Irina just stared at Layla, her mind working rapidly as new possibilities unfolded before her. 'A healer and enchanter like Sylvie, paired with a tank and a vanguard? That's nearly optimal. Add Astron's precision and adaptability, and the team could be unbeatable.'

"Wow," Irina said finally, her tone betraying a mix of genuine admiration and amusement. "You guys can really stick together."

Sylvie blinked, her hesitation softening into curiosity as she tilted her head. "What do you mean?"

Irina crossed her arms, her fiery hair shimmering as she leaned slightly closer to the trio. "I mean, with you as a healer and enchanter, Layla as a tank, and Jasmine as a vanguard, you already have a strong core. It's a near-perfect layout on paper."

Jasmine looked between Irina and Layla, her expression flickering between pride and disbelief. "You... really think so?"

"Of course," Irina said with a faint smirk. "Tanks are rare enough, but pair one with someone who can reinforce and heal? That's efficiency. And having a close-combat vanguard round it out. You three clearly work well together."

"I wasn't expecting this, but I'll admit—it's better than I thought."

Sylvie raised an eyebrow, still uncertain. "So... what's your plan, Irina?"

Irina's smirk widened as she leaned slightly closer to Sylvie, Jasmine, and Layla, her fiery confidence radiating with every word. "You guys, join my team," she said, her tone commanding yet oddly warm. "With the four of us, we'll be unstoppable."

Sylvie blinked in surprise, Jasmine tilted her head curiously, and Layla's expression shifted to thoughtful consideration. Irina let the silence hang for a moment, her sharp yellow eyes locking onto each of them in turn as if daring them to refuse.

"Think about it," Irina continued, crossing her arms. "Tanks are rare, enchanters who can heal are even rarer, and you've got a solid vanguard in Jasmine. Add me to the mix, and we're already ahead of most of these teams."

Sylvie hesitated, her fingers brushing the edge of her desk. "You really think we're that good?" she asked, her voice quieter now.

Irina tilted her head, her smirk softening slightly. "I don't think—I know. And here's the kicker: if I manage a high rank even with team members who are lower-ranked, my grades will skyrocket. The system rewards teams that outperform expectations, and with you three, we'll blow past everyone else."

'And with that guy... everything fits quite well,' she thought, the image of Astron flashing briefly in her mind. His precision, adaptability, and understated brilliance would round out the team perfectly. The idea was almost too good to pass up.

The only thing that slightly bothered her was that the team would be an all-girl setup.

'Not that it matters,' she thought, brushing the concern aside. 'As long as they're competent, I couldn't care less.....right...'

Somehow, Irina started finding this not that good.

'Now that I think about it, this may not be that good of an idea....'

She started doubting her decision. Remembering how Astron was taking all that attention to himself.

Jasmine exchanged a glance with Layla before looking back at Irina. "All right," she said cautiously. "We're interested. But... who's our last team member?"

But it was already too late to back up anyway.

Irina's smirk deepened, a mischievous glint flashing in her eyes. "You'll see."

Before anyone could ask further, she turned on her heel and strode out of the room, her fiery hair catching the light as she moved with purpose. The trio watched her leave, curiosity and anticipation hanging in the air.

"Well," Jasmine said, breaking the silence, "she's... intense."

Sylvie chuckled softly, shaking her head. "That's one way to put it."

Layla crossed her arms, a thoughtful smile tugging at her lips. "I don't know. I think she might just be the push we need."

The three of them exchanged a look, a silent agreement passing between them. Whatever Irina had planned, it was not like they would get a better team.

Irina stepped out of the building, the sunlight reflecting off her fiery hair as she scanned the courtyard. The soft hum of her smartwatch was the only sound accompanying her purposeful strides. The message she had just sent— "Wait for me." —was short and direct, but it conveyed all she needed Astron to know.

And, as expected, there he was.

Astron stood a short distance away, leaning casually against a low wall with his usual composed demeanor. His sharp gray eyes flicked toward her the moment she stepped into view, their unreadable calm contrasting with the faint irritation flickering in her fiery yellow gaze.

'Of course, he looks perfectly at ease,' she thought, her steps quickening as she approached.

'Meanwhile, I'm the one cleaning up the mess left behind by his nonchalant attitude.'

Stopping just a step away from him, Irina crossed her arms, her lips curving into a faint scowl.

"You," she began, her tone sharp but not quite angry, "you're awfully good at causing me headaches without even trying, you know that?"

"Good afternoon to you too, Irina."

Her scowl deepened slightly, though her irritation was more habit than genuine anger. "Don't 'good afternoon' me," she huffed, jabbing a finger in his direction. "What was that in the classroom? Letting Julia make such a bold offer in front of everyone?"

Astron tilted his head slightly, his expression as calm as ever. "Letting her? I didn't realize I was responsible for her actions."

"You didn't reject her outright," Irina countered, her yellow eyes narrowing. "You know how much attention you've been avoiding, and then you just... entertain her like that? Do you want to be at the center of the academy's gossip mill?"

Astron's purple eyes met hers, steady and unflinching. "I didn't accept her offer, either."

Irina let out an exasperated sigh, her hands dropping to her hips. "That's not the point. The point is you're supposed to be on my team. Our team."

For a moment, Astron simply studied her, his gaze flicking briefly to the smartwatch still on her wrist, where her earlier message glowed faintly. Then, with an almost imperceptible sigh, he pushed off the wall and stood straighter. "I take it you've already started recruiting?"

"Obviously," Irina said, her tone softening slightly as she straightened her posture. "Sylvie's in. Jasmine and Layla, too."

"Sylvie, Jasmine and Layla.....Hmm..." Astron echoed, a faint note of curiosity entering his voice. "You recruited a tank?"

Irina nodded, her lips curving into a small, triumphant smile. "A proper tank. Rare, isn't it? Add Sylvie's healing and enchanting to the mix, plus Jasmine's vanguard skills... It's shaping up to be a perfect team. All it's missing is you."

Astron shook his head slightly, a faint smile playing at the corner of his lips. "You really are lucky. The fact that you just wanted to recruit Sylvie and somehow ended up with a tank and a swordsman to round it out? That's impressive."

Irina's confident demeanor faltered for the briefest moment, a faint blush dusting her cheeks. She quickly recovered, lifting her chin slightly as if to brush off the subtle embarrassment. 'How does he do that?' she wondered. 'He wasn't even there, and yet he's pieced it all together like he saw the whole thing.'

"But," Astron continued, his tone thoughtful, "are you sure this is the best course of action? I'm pretty sure there are plenty of higher-ranked students who'd want to join your team. Why insist so much on Sylvie?"

At that, Irina's lips curled into a smirk, her fiery yellow eyes gleaming with confidence. "Let's call it intuition."

"Intuition?" Astron echoed, raising an eyebrow. His sharp purple eyes locked onto hers, the faint glow behind them giving him an almost otherworldly air. He studied her closely, his gaze steady and penetrating, as though peeling back the layers of her thoughts.

Irina held his gaze, though her heart beat a little faster under the weight of his scrutiny. The intensity of his stare wasn't something she could ignore, but she refused to waver. Her smirk remained, though a flicker of unease crept into her chest. 'Why does it feel like he's looking straight through me?'

After what felt like an eternity but was likely only a few seconds, Astron's expression softened, and he gave a small nod. "Okay," he said simply. "I trust your judgment."

The words, spoken with such quiet sincerity, caught Irina off guard. Her smirk faltered for a moment before returning, wider and more genuine this time. "Heh..." she let out a soft laugh, her voice tinged with satisfaction. "You'd better. I always know what I'm doing."

Astron tilted his head slightly, his gaze still calm but carrying a faint trace of amusement. "We'll see."

Irina crossed her arms, her fiery confidence returning in full force. "Oh, you will. Just wait and watch, Astron. This team is going to blow everyone else out of the water."

Astron's lips quirked into a faint, almost imperceptible smirk at Irina's declaration. "Is that so?" he said, his tone neutral yet carrying a subtle edge of amusement.

Without waiting for a reply, he turned on his heel, his cloak shifting lightly with the motion. "Then I'll leave it to you to prove it," he added over his shoulder as he began to walk away.

Irina's fiery yellow eyes narrowed slightly as she watched him go, her arms still crossed. 'Always so infuriatingly calm,' she thought, her lips twitching into a wry smile. "You'd better not forget," she called after him, her voice carrying a mix of authority and playful defiance. "I'm counting on you, Astron."

He raised a hand in a casual wave but didn't look back. "I wouldn't dare," he said, his tone light but steady.

As his figure disappeared into the distance, Irina stood there for a moment longer, the heat of her competitive resolve flickering like embers in her chest. 'He trusts my judgment,' she thought, her smirk softening into something more genuine. The thought warmed her in a way she didn't entirely understand.

Taking a deep breath, she spun on her heel and strode back toward the academy building, her fiery hair catching the sunlight as it swayed with each purposeful step.

"Just wait, I will crush every one of you."