

H. Academy 791

Chapter 791 Chapter 183.1 - Outer currents

The images were intimate, carefully chosen to imply far more than what had actually happened: her hugging Astron tightly at the Spatial Gate station, another of her leaning into him at the Stellamare Museum, and the two of them entering a high-class hotel together.

Scandalous, indeed—at least for those who didn't know the context. But instead of fear or panic, a wry smirk formed on Irina's lips as she scrolled through the pictures.

"Well," she said, her tone almost amused, "you certainly went to a lot of trouble, didn't you?"

The voice on the other end faltered slightly, as though caught off guard by her reaction. "Trouble worth taking," it replied, regaining its composure. "These photos would certainly make waves if they were released to the public. Your family, your reputation—it would all take a significant hit, wouldn't it?"

Irina's smirk widened as she leaned back in her chair, crossing her legs casually. The glow from her communication device cast a soft light on her face, but her fiery amber eyes gleamed with amusement. She rested her chin on her palm, the picture of feigned nonchalance.

"Oh, absolutely," she said, her tone light but edged with mock concern. "You're right. These photos are devastating. My poor reputation. My fragile family name. I'm positively trembling in fear."

The voice on the other end hesitated again, the distorted quality unable to hide the flicker of uncertainty. "Mock me all you want, Miss Emberheart," they finally replied, their tone regaining its venomous edge. "But we both know these images would cause a stir if they were released. The Emberheart name would never recover."

'Emberheart name? At least they've done their homework.' Irina thought, biting back a chuckle. "Though, this really isn't the first time someone's tried something like this. I almost want to applaud the effort."

She straightened slightly, her smirk fading into an expression of mild curiosity. "Alright," she said, her voice softening into something closer to sincerity. "Let's say you're right. Let's say these photos could ruin me. What exactly are you proposing?"

The voice didn't miss a beat. "100,000,000 Valer," they stated flatly. "Transferred to the account details I'll provide. In exchange, the photos disappear, and this conversation never happened."

Irina whistled softly, her brows raising in mock astonishment. "Hundred million?" she echoed, her tone carrying just a hint of disbelief. "You don't mess around, do you?"

"I'm not here to negotiate," the voice snapped, a touch of impatience creeping into their distorted tone. "This is a fair price for the silence I'm offering. Considering the damage these photos would do—"

"To my reputation, my family name, my fragile social standing," Irina interjected smoothly, ticking off each point on her fingers. "Yes, yes, I got the idea. And tell me, how exactly did you decide on Hundred million? Is that the standard blackmail rate these days, or are you just feeling ambitious?"

"Don't test me, Miss Emberheart," the voice warned, the threat hanging in the air. "You have twenty-four hours. Transfer the money, or these photos go public."

Irina's smirk froze as the blackmailer's words echoed in her ears. For a moment, her amber eyes glistened with an unreadable emotion, but then her face turned cold, her expression hardening into something sharp and unyielding. The fire in her gaze burned brighter, but this time, it carried an edge of deadly resolve.

"Fuck off, you son of a bitch," she said flatly, her voice cutting through the line like a blade.

The atmosphere shifted instantly. The faint hum of her room seemed to fall silent, and for a second, there was no response from the other side. Then the blackmailer's distorted voice returned, now tinged with a mix of indignation and forced control.

"You should mind your language," they hissed, their tone laced with menace. "If you want to preserve—"

"I don't want to preserve anything," Irina interrupted, her voice rising in sharp defiance. "Do whatever you fucking want, you stupid rat. Do you really think you'll be left alive after pulling a stunt like this? You'll be burned alive."

The blackmailer fell silent again, the air on the other end of the line thick with tension. Irina leaned forward, her fiery hair casting shadows over her face as her smirk returned, this time filled with venomous amusement.

"Let me spell it out for you," she continued, her tone calm but dripping with contempt. "You're playing a game you're not equipped to win. You think you've got leverage? You think these photos mean anything to me? I've been in this position before, and guess what? I'm still here."

The line crackled faintly before the blackmailer spoke again, their tone dripping with forced confidence. "Your bluff won't mean anything," they said, the distorted voice losing some of its earlier venom. "But since you really want to refuse, don't mind us if we're impolite."

With that, the call abruptly ended, leaving Irina staring at the blank screen. The glow of her man-imbued communication device faded, plunging her room into a quiet that felt heavier than before. For a moment, she didn't move, her amber eyes fixed on the device as her thoughts churned.

Her lips pressed into a thin line, her fiery presence dimming as she exhaled slowly. "They ended the call, huh?" she thought, her expression unreadable. 'Coward.'

But beneath her defiance, a faint current of unease rippled through her chest. The reality of the situation was not lost on her. 'The moment those photos are revealed... things will take an irreversible turn.'

Irina leaned back in her chair, resting her head against the cool wood as she stared at the ceiling. A flicker of anxiety danced at the edges of her mind, the what-ifs and possibilities pressing against her resolve. She could already picture the headlines, the whispers, the scandalous stories twisted out of

context. It was the kind of attention that could ripple through her family, her reputation, and even Astron's.

'And that,' she thought, her lips curling into a faint smirk, 'is exactly why I don't care.'

Her amber eyes narrowed, her thoughts snapping back to the infirmary, to Maya's icy blue gaze, to the way the senior had stood tall despite whatever inner turmoil had gripped her. The memory burned bright, filling Irina with a renewed sense of determination.

'If there's one thing I learned from that woman,' she mused, 'it's that hesitation is a waste of time. If I let fear control me, I'll never win.'

She stood abruptly, pacing the room as her fiery hair swayed behind her. The faint light from her desk lamp cast flickering shadows on the walls, matching the storm of emotions swirling within her. There was fear, yes. But there was also exhilaration—a spark of rebellion that refused to be extinguished.

"I won't be scared of some idiot with a voice modulator," she muttered, her tone sharp and decisive. "If they want to play games, I'll show them how it's done."

Saying that she opened the Virtual Reality simulator.

<Emberheart Family, Matriarch's Office>

The room was cloaked in darkness, the faint glow of Emberheart flames flickering from the hearth the only source of light. The Matriarch sat at her desk, her hands folded before her, her amber eyes piercing through the gloom as she listened to Esme's measured voice.

"Matriarch," Esme began, standing a few steps away, a slim tablet in her hand displaying a steady stream of reports. Her tone was calm, but the tension in her posture was impossible to miss. "Our forces have been holding their ground, but there have been complications."

It has been two weeks since the Emberheart and Hawkins families began their clashes, but even in just two weeks, things have been rather hectic for both families.

The Matriarch's gaze didn't waver, her voice cutting through the silence like a blade. "Elaborate."

Esme swiped at the tablet, pulling up the specific reports. "In Andelheim, we orchestrated a precise strike on their mana crystal refinement facility. It has been completely shut down, and their operations there are at a standstill. In Stellara, our agents intercepted a major shipment of alchemical reagents, cutting off a vital supply line for their potion manufacturing. And in Frostveil, we sabotaged their transportation network, leaving their goods stranded and vulnerable."

The Matriarch's lips curled into a faint smile, the edges razor-sharp. "Good. And their distributors?"

"Fearful," Esme replied, her tone colder now. "Our reputation precedes us, Matriarch. Several of their smaller distribution partners have already withdrawn from their agreements, citing concerns about retaliation. We've also pressured our own affiliated brands to sever ties with the Hawkins' products. Many have complied, though there are a few holdouts who may require... further encouragement."

The Matriarch nodded, her expression unreadable. "And their allies?"

Esme's lips tightened. "That is where complications have arisen. The Hawkins family has secured the support of the Ventorien family, the wind-affinity mages of the Mage Association."

The Matriarch's eyes narrowed slightly, though her voice remained calm. "Ventorien? As expected of them. Their grudge with us has festered since my father put an end to their Patriarch. Petty vengeance, even after a century."

Esme inclined her head. "Indeed, Matriarch. Their involvement complicates matters, but it does not yet present an insurmountable challenge. However, their influence within the Mage Association has caused a few of our contracts to be delayed."

The Matriarch's gaze returned to the flickering flames. "Let them try. The Ventoriens will find that the Emberheart fire burns just as fiercely as ever. They are foolish to tie themselves to the Hawkins, but we will deal with them in due time. What of our own losses?"

Esme hesitated briefly, then continued. "Initially, our progress was steady. However, our mages and personnel have recently reported encountering opposition of frost-aligned magic. These encounters have been increasingly coordinated and difficult to counter."

The Matriarch's eyes sharpened instantly, her voice cutting through the tension like a blade. "Frostborne?"

Esme nodded. "We suspect so, Matriarch. Their tactics and the mana signatures match those used by the Frostborne family."

A dangerous glint entered the Matriarch's gaze, her lips pressing into a thin line. "As expected of that kind," she murmured, her voice low and laced with venom. "They are still as sneaky as ever."

Her fingers drummed against the desk, the faint sound punctuating the crackling of the flames.

Esme's voice softened slightly. "What are your orders, Matriarch?"

Chapter 792 Chapter 183.2 - Outer currents

The Matriarch's fingers stilled, her amber eyes blazing with a fierce, unyielding resolve. The flickering light of the Emberheart flames danced across her face, illuminating the cold, calculated expression that had come to define her rule.

"Rats, frost, or wind," she began, her voice low but carrying the weight of absolute authority, "it matters not. The Hawkins family lit this fire when they dared to target my child. They chose this war, and a war is what they will receive."

Her gaze shifted to Esme, sharp and unrelenting. "We will not relent. The Frostborne and the Ventoriens are distractions—nothing more. The Hawkins family is our focus. They must be reminded why no one challenges the Emberhearts and escapes unscathed."

Esme inclined her head, her own expression hardening in response to her Matriarch's command. "Understood, Matriarch. The fight will continue. What of the Frostborne? Their involvement is growing bolder with each passing day."

The Matriarch's lips curled into a faint, predatory smile. "They wish to play their games in the shadows, as they always have. Let them. The Frostborne thrive on secrecy, and secrecy is a weakness when exposed to the light. Pressure their operatives, disrupt their alliances, and strike where they least expect. They will fall, just as they have before."

Her gaze flickered with cold amusement as she continued, her voice soft but dripping with venom. "And the Ventoriens... they are fools to involve themselves in this conflict. Their petty grudge blinds them to the fact that they are nothing but pawns in the Hawkins' schemes. If they step too far, they will burn."

Esme straightened, her fingers tightening around the tablet as she took in her Matriarch's words. "And the Young Lady?" she asked carefully. "Shall I ensure her protection remains a priority?"

The Matriarch's expression darkened, her tone sharpening. "Irina is my daughter. She does not need to be coddled. But make no mistake—any who threaten her will face my full wrath."

Esme hesitated for the briefest moment before nodding. "It will be done, Matriarch."

The Matriarch's eyes returned to the flickering flames, her thoughts clearly fixed on the road ahead. "This war will not be won overnight, Esme. The Hawkins have made their move, and their allies believe they have tipped the scales in their favor. But they have underestimated the Emberheart resolve. We will not just defeat them—we will crush them."

She leaned forward slightly, her voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. "The Hawkins family will be reduced to ash, their allies scattered to the winds. And when the flames settle, the world will remember the cost of crossing the Emberheart name."

Esme bowed deeply, her resolve matching the steel in her Matriarch's voice. "Your will shall be done, Matriarch."

As Esme turned to leave, the Matriarch's gaze lingered on the flames, her amber eyes gleaming with the intensity of her conviction. "Let the war continue," she murmured, more to herself than to the empty room. "And let them see what it means to provoke the lion's den. They will burn."

<Arcadia City, Hartley Family Headquarters, Marc's Office>

The faint hum of the city outside was drowned by the silence inside Marc Hartley's grand office. The warm sunlight streaming through the floor-to-ceiling windows did little to soften the cold tension that had settled in the room. Marc sat at his desk, his fingers steepled as he stared at the holographic report floating in front of him. His hazel eyes burned with a mix of frustration and calculated determination.

A sharp knock on the door broke his thoughts.

"Enter," Marc commanded, his voice steady but laced with impatience.

Ray stepped inside, his posture as impeccable as ever, though the faint furrow in his brow betrayed the gravity of the news he carried. In his hands was a sleek black tablet loaded with updates on the ongoing conflict.

"Sir," Ray began, his tone measured. "I have the latest report regarding the Phillips family."

Marc leaned back in his chair, gesturing for Ray to proceed. "Go on."

Ray tapped the tablet, and a detailed projection appeared above it, showing a map of contested territories. Lines and dots marked gains and losses, the most recent shifts painted in a stark red.

"Over the past three months, we've made significant progress against the Phillips family," Ray began. "We've acquired multiple gate rights, industries, and a substantial portion of their resources, particularly in the western sectors. However—"

Marc's gaze sharpened at the hesitation in Ray's voice. "However?"

Ray exhaled softly, his tone turning grim. "Over the past two weeks, the situation has shifted dramatically. The Emberheart family's conflict with the Hawkins family has caused ripple effects across the federation. Their clashes have destabilized key markets and redirected alliances. The Phillips family seems to have leveraged this chaos to their advantage."

Marc's jaw tightened, his hazel eyes narrowing. "Go on."

Ray continued, pulling up more detailed graphs. "We've been encountering resistance on multiple fronts. The Phillips family has fortified their positions and forged unexpected alliances, likely spurred by the Emberheart-Hawkins war. Our recent attempts to secure additional gate resources have been blocked outright, and we've faced increasing sabotage within our acquired territories."

Marc leaned forward, his voice low and sharp. "Who are they working with?"

Ray nodded, anticipating the question. "We've identified several smaller guilds aligning with the Phillips family—nothing significant on their own, but their combined efforts have proven troublesome."

Marc's hazel eyes darkened, his expression growing colder as he processed Ray's words. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the polished desk, and interlaced his fingers tightly, a sign of his mounting frustration.

"A bunch of small guilds?" Marc repeated, his voice low but laced with irritation. "You're telling me that these fragmented groups, none of which have substantial influence or resources, are somehow blocking our expansion and striking with precision? That doesn't make sense, Ray."

Ray inclined his head slightly, acknowledging Marc's point. "I agree, sir. It doesn't add up. While these small guilds are visible on the surface, we suspect there's a larger force at play—someone backing the Phillips family, possibly providing them with strategic guidance and resources."

Marc's gaze narrowed as his mind churned through the possibilities. "The timing is too convenient," he muttered, more to himself than to Ray. "It started just after the Emberheart and Hawkins families began their clash. That kind of chaos is fertile ground for hidden players to act."

Ray, sensing the direction of Marc's thoughts, ventured cautiously, "We did consider the possibility of the Vantorien family being involved, sir. Their grudge against the Emberhearts could lead them to exploit this situation and gain influence here in Valerian Federation."

Marc shook his head, dismissing the idea almost immediately. "The Venteriens are from the Arcadian Dominion. Their reach here is limited, especially compared to the Emberhearts. They may be opportunistic, but they lack the strength and connections to orchestrate something of this scale in the Valerian Federation."

Ray nodded, agreeing with Marc's assessment. "That was our conclusion as well. Which leaves us with the Hawkins family as the other potential suspect."

Marc leaned back in his chair, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "The Hawkins... They'd certainly benefit from destabilizing both the Emberhearts and us simultaneously. But they're locked in a brutal war with the Emberhearts. Diverting resources to support the Phillips family while fighting the Emberhearts would be risky—even for them."

Ray hesitated, then said carefully, "It's still an assumption, sir, but the coordination and the sudden shift in the Phillips family's fortunes suggest that someone with significant resources and experience is assisting them."

Marc's fingers drummed on the desk, his frustration palpable. "I've been in this business long enough to know when unseen hands are pulling strings. Whoever is behind this isn't doing it for the Phillips family alone. They're playing a larger game."

Ray stood silent, waiting as Marc's sharp mind pieced through the intricate web of possibilities. After a moment, Marc's lips pressed into a thin line, his expression hardening.

"Whoever it is," Marc said, his tone icy, "we need to expose them. If they're leveraging the Phillips family to make a move against us, we can't afford to sit back and wait for them to gain more ground."

Ray nodded. "What are your orders, sir?"

"First," Marc said firmly, "intensify intelligence-gathering efforts. I want every detail about the Phillips family's recent dealings, alliances, and movements. Focus on uncovering any external support they've been receiving. Whoever is backing them, we'll find them."

"Understood, sir," Ray said, taking notes swiftly.

"Second," Marc continued, "maintain pressure on the smaller guilds working with the Phillips family. They may be pawns, but pawns can lead us to the hand that moves them. Squeeze them—financially, operationally, however you can. Make it clear that standing against us comes at a cost."

Marc leaned back in his chair, his hazel eyes narrowing as he stared at the holographic map of contested territories. The lines of conflict, the shifting alliances, the sudden resistance—it all painted a picture that felt disturbingly unfamiliar. His fingers tapped against the desk, a steady rhythm that matched the churn of his thoughts.

"This change is too drastic," Marc murmured, almost to himself. "It's not just strategy or resources—there's something bigger at play here. A force we haven't accounted for."

Ray stood silently, observing his employer's expression harden. Marc's instincts, honed by decades in the cutthroat world of business and power, were rarely wrong. And now, those instincts screamed danger.

Marc's voice broke the silence, sharp and decisive. "Ray, this is no ordinary conflict. My gut tells me we've been dragged into something far larger than we anticipated. Something I couldn't foresee. We cannot take chances."

Ray straightened, nodding once. "What are your orders, sir?"

Marc's gaze turned cold and resolute. "From now on, every member of the Hartley family is to be under constant protection. Double the security around our properties, estates, and businesses. I don't care how discreet it is—ensure they are guarded at all times."

Ray bowed slightly. "It will be done, sir."

Marc's eyes flickered with a hint of something deeper—concern. He had fought too long and too hard to build the Hartley legacy. He would not let it crumble under the weight of an unseen enemy. His thoughts shifted to Ethan, his youngest and most unpredictable child. A flicker of resolve sparked in his gaze.

"As for Ethan..." Marc's voice trailed off momentarily before he spoke again, his tone steady and deliberate. "Contact Kaya."

Chapter 793 Chapter 183.3 - Outer Currents

<Headmaster Jonathan's Office>

The heavy oak doors of the Headmaster's office creaked open, revealing the grand yet somber room within. The late afternoon sun streamed through the tall arched windows, casting long shadows over the polished wooden floor. Bookshelves lined the walls, filled with tomes of knowledge spanning centuries, while an ornate desk stood as the centerpiece, cluttered with reports, letters, and sealed envelopes bearing the academy's crest.

Behind the desk sat Headmaster Jonathan, a man of sharp features and a graying beard that only added to his air of authority. His deep-set eyes, framed by wire-rimmed glasses, were fixed on a document before him, though his furrowed brow and tightened lips betrayed his irritation.

Before him stood Professor Eleanor and her daughter, Vice Headmaster Amelia. Eleanor was composed, her hands clasped in front of her, while Amelia had her arms crossed, her sharp eyes mirroring her mother's determined gaze.

Jonathan sighed, setting the document aside. His voice carried the weight of both authority and frustration as he addressed them.

"Let me make this clear," he began, leaning back in his chair. "I was, and still am, against the Mentorship Program in its current form. With the recent attacks on the academy, introducing an initiative that sends our cadets out into the field alongside hunters is not only risky but borderline reckless."

Eleanor inclined her head slightly, her tone calm but firm. "Headmaster, I agree with you. I've reviewed the potential vulnerabilities this program creates, and there's no denying the risks involved. With the current instability in the Federation—particularly the conflicts between the Hartley-Phillips and Hawkins-Emberheart families—it feels like the worst possible time to push for something like this."

Jonathan's gaze softened slightly at her agreement but quickly turned steely again. "And yet here we are, forced to bow to the government's demands. They've dangled more resources in front of us like bait and threatened cuts if we refuse. Normally, I would push back—I would fight them—but this..." He paused, his voice dropping. "The families. They're the ones who've complicated everything."

Eleanor nodded. "It's true. The families are fully convinced this is a step forward for their children. They see it as an invaluable opportunity for them to gain experience and forge connections with professional hunters. Convincing them otherwise would be an uphill battle." Her amber eyes flashed with restrained frustration. "But that doesn't make it the right decision."

Jonathan's lips pressed into a thin line. "Exactly. They're being shortsighted, Eleanor. They don't see the bigger picture. These cadets came here for protection, for education—not to be used as pawns in the government's schemes or thrust into the chaos of the outside world before they're ready."

Amelia uncrossed her arms, stepping forward. Her voice, though respectful, carried a distinct edge of conviction. "Father, with all due respect, I disagree. Hunters don't grow stronger in safety. They grow through experience, through challenges. This program, while risky, gives the cadets exactly that—an opportunity to face the real world while still under guidance. Sheltering them here won't prepare them for what's out there."

Jonathan's glare turned icy as he fixed his daughter with a piercing look. "And you think throwing them into the fire is the answer? Chaos is spreading across the Federation, Amelia. The Hartley-Phillips conflict alone has destabilized half a dozen markets. And the Hawkins-Emberheart feud? It's spilling over into areas that were once neutral. Every day, new skirmishes erupt, new alliances are formed, and new enemies emerge. You call that 'real-world experience'? I call it recklessness."

Amelia didn't flinch. "It's the reality they'll face the moment they leave this academy. Hunters aren't trained to live in comfort; they're trained to survive. This program provides them with a controlled introduction to that reality. Yes, it's dangerous, but so is the life they've chosen."

Jonathan's jaw tightened. "You're not seeing the bigger picture. This push is too thorough. The government is insistent, yes, but the families being so easily convinced? That wasn't part of the plan. Someone is working behind the scenes, Amelia. And until I understand who or why, I won't believe this program is as innocent as it seems."

Eleanor broke the rising tension, her voice measured and calm. "Headmaster, I understand your concerns—and Amelia's perspective. But at this point, we're past debating whether the program should proceed. The government has made it clear: if we don't comply, they'll cut our resources. That's a risk we can't afford to take."

Jonathan's fists clenched on the desk. His frustration was palpable, but he knew she was right. "The academy has never been a pawn for the government to manipulate, Eleanor. I've spent decades ensuring our independence....Sigh..."

Amelia stepped forward again, her tone softer but no less determined. "Father, the cadets are stronger than you give them credit for. If we implement strict oversight and ensure the hunters are thoroughly vetted, we can make this program work without unnecessary risks. It doesn't have to compromise the academy's integrity."

"Integrity..." Jonathan mumbled, the word slipping from his lips as though it carried an air of mockery. He leaned back in his chair, his eyes narrowing with a mixture of disbelief and quiet resignation. A humorless chuckle followed, low and dry. "Integrity. As if that's something they've left us the luxury to maintain."

He stared at the documents on his desk for a long moment, his thoughts clearly elsewhere. Finally, he exhaled sharply, leaning forward to rest his elbows on the polished wood surface. His voice carried a bitter undertone. "The Federation shifts day by day. Young blood surges forward, alliances fracture and reform, and the power dynamics are shifting under our feet. In a time like this, they force our hand. And for what? A facade of opportunity? A convenient stage for their posturing?"

His gaze shifted to Eleanor, the sharpness in his eyes softening ever so slightly. "Tell me, Eleanor. Has the list of hunters participating in this farce been finalized?"

Eleanor inclined her head, her composure unwavering. "Yes, Headmaster. The list is finalized. I have it here." She reached into her satchel, producing a sleek tablet. With a tap, the names of the selected hunters illuminated the room in a faint glow.

Jonathan gestured for her to hand it over. Taking the tablet, his eyes scanned the list, his expression unreadable. "Callum Graves... Thunderblade Knight. Amelia Lake... her elemental precision has a reputation, though she tends to take risks. Selena Vayl... Moonlit Enchanter,"

His voice carried the practiced authority of a man who knew the hunters as well as he knew his own cadets.

'Quite a fine names we have here....I guess, Callum and Amelia wanted to volunteer....'

Sharing the same name as his daughter, Amelia Callum was one of his own students after all.

But then his eyes froze at the last name on the list.

"Kaya Hartley," he read aloud.

He set the tablet down on the desk, his hand lingering over it for a moment as though confirming what he had just read. His expression shifted from surprise to a contemplative frown, and he leaned back in his chair, folding his arms. "Kaya," he muttered under his breath, the name heavy with meaning.

Of all the names he had expected to see, hers was not one of them. Kaya Hartley—the so-called genius of the Hartley family. A prodigy as much as she was a force of nature, Kaya had always been an enigma, even during her brief time at the academy.

"She wasn't the type to stay within these walls," Jonathan said, half to himself. His sharp gaze lifted to Eleanor. "You remember her. Always restless, always wanting to venture beyond the confines of this place. Even when she was here, it was clear she had little patience for the structure, the rules. She wanted more—always more."

Eleanor nodded, her expression composed. "I do remember, Headmaster. She was a remarkable talent, undeniably so. But you're right—she never seemed at home here. She had the drive and brilliance to outpace most of her peers, but her mind was always set on the wider world, not the academy's teachings."

Jonathan tapped a finger against the desk, his brow furrowed. "And now she's back. Volunteering for this program, no less. What do you make of that?"

Eleanor's response was measured, her voice steady. "This must be the Hartley family's response to the changes in the Federation. With the conflicts spreading, they likely see this as a way to consolidate their position."

Jonathan considered her words, his expression unreadable. "Hmm. That would explain it." He exhaled sharply, leaning forward to rest his elbows on the desk again. "I spoke with Kaya during the final exams. Even then, she wasn't one to follow convention, but I never imagined this. I thought she'd stay away from this place for good."

His voice softened, a rare hint of admiration slipping through his otherwise guarded tone. "Still... her inclusion isn't necessarily a bad thing. Kaya is one of the strongest hunters in the entire Human Domain. Her skill and experience are undeniable. If anyone can guide these cadets and show them what it truly means to be a hunter, she can also be in that list."

"I definitely do a better job."

"Surely, you do "

Chapter 794 Chapter 183.4 - Outer Currents

The opulent room was dimly lit, the soft glow of a bedside lamp casting a warm amber hue over the lavish furnishings. Ornate carvings adorned the dark wood furniture, and luxurious velvet curtains framed the tall windows. The air was scented with a faint trace of expensive cologne, mingled with the lingering scent of intimacy. In the center of the room, a massive bed with silk sheets lay in disarray. Zafira reclined against the pillows, her raven-black hair spilling over her bare shoulders like a dark cascade. Beside her, a young man slept soundly, his face serene but his body showing signs of exhaustion. His chest rose and fell steadily, the sheets barely covering his well-defined physique. Zafira's lips curved into a satisfied smile as she glanced at him. Her fingers absentmindedly traced the intricate patterns on the silk sheets. The room's opulence, the man's identity, none of it truly mattered to her. What mattered was what she had achieved. Her crimson eyes gleamed with triumph as she reflected on the events that led her here. She had infiltrated the academy during the final exams, sensing the faint yet unmistakable energy of Belthazor. But despite her efforts, she hadn't been able to confirm the true owner of that power. It was fleeting, elusive, slipping through her grasp like smoke. 'A one-time opportunity wasted,' she thought, her smile fading for a brief moment. 'That's why I needed a more secure foothold. Something more... permanent.' She turned her gaze to the young man sleeping beside her. His identity wasn't important, just as his actions during their encounter weren't. What mattered was his position—a hunter with credentials, and more importantly, someone with an inroad to the academy. Her smile returned, this time laced with wicked satisfaction. 'Taking the body of another hunter... it's almost too easy. Their ambition, their pride... they make for such willing tools.' Leaning closer to the man, she weaved her hand around him, her fingers tracing the lines of his tired body. "You have proven to be quite useful..." she murmured, her voice a sultry whisper. "And you were quite fine in bed too..." Her smile widened, cold and merciless. "Though sadly, this is the end." With a flick of her wrist, a faint pulse of dark energy emanated from her fingers, flowing into the man's forehead. His body twitched slightly before falling still, his peaceful expression undisturbed. His memories of the night—of Zafira's presence, of everything they'd shared—were wiped clean in an instant. Zafira sat up, her movements fluid and deliberate. She dressed swiftly, her mind already focused on the next step of her plan. As she adjusted her attire, she cast one last glance at the man who had unwittingly served his purpose. "Thank you," she said softly, her tone almost mockingly tender. "Your sacrifice will not be forgotten... for as long as I need it." With that, she slipped out of the room, her presence fading into the shadows. The rich hunter would wake up hours later, disoriented but none the wiser, and Zafira would be long gone. But now, she had what she needed—a solid position within the

academy and a path closer to her true objective. As she walked into the cool night air, her smile returned. The hunt was far from over, but the pieces were falling into place. ***** A vast chamber stretched out in shadowed grandeur, a Gothic masterpiece bathed in the pale kiss of moonlight. The ceilings arched impossibly high, their darkened spires vanishing into an inky void, as if trying to pierce the heavens themselves. Silver beams filtered through stained glass windows, depicting twisted yet awe-inspiring tales of ancient saints and sinners, their intricate colors muted by the night. Stone columns lined the cathedral, each a towering sentinel carved with grotesques—some angelic, others monstrous, their gazes eternal and unyielding. Between them hung black iron candelabras, their wax-dripped candles snuffed out long ago, leaving the hall to echo with an eerie, sacred silence. Artifacts were scattered throughout like forgotten relics of a bygone age. A gilded chalice rested atop a marble pedestal, its edges encrusted with jewels that caught the moonlight like tiny stars. Along the walls, towering suits of armor stood at attention, their hollow visages staring forward as though keeping a vigil. A massive organ loomed at the far end of the hall, its pipes gleaming faintly, promising a thunderous hymn that might shatter the stillness if played. And there, amidst the majesty and the shadows, a man stood. His figure was tall and commanding, his posture regal yet unnervingly still, as though he were a marble statue come to life. The moonlight seemed to seek him out, outlining his sharp features with a silver edge. His high cheekbones and chiseled jaw bore the marks of age and wisdom, while his deep-set eyes gleamed with a cold, calculating light. A large mustache adorned his face, meticulously groomed and curling at the ends with precision, as if mocking the disorder of the world around him. His attire was as striking as the man himself—a deep crimson coat, its trim lined with black velvet, draped over a crisp white shirt. Gold chains hung from his vest, catching faint glimmers of light, while a black cape with a blood-red lining flowed down his back like a shadow refusing to detach itself. In his gloved hands, he held an ornate cane, the handle shaped like a raven's head, carved from dark ebony. The air around him was heavy, not with menace, but with authority. It was as if the cathedral itself bent its will to his presence, and the silence wasn't mere absence of sound—it was submission. He tilted his head slightly, his piercing gaze tracing the outlines of the artifacts, as if assessing their worth. Then, almost imperceptibly, a smirk tugged at the corner of his lips, his mustache curling slightly upward with the movement. "The past echoes louder in places like this," he murmured, his voice a low, velvety baritone that reverberated faintly off the stone walls. "One only needs to listen carefully... and take what the silence offers." As his words dissolved into the stillness, a faint rustling sound stirred from the shadows behind the columns, too quiet for the ordinary ear to catch. Yet the man didn't flinch, his sharp features remaining calm, his presence unshaken. Instead, he turned his head ever so slightly, allowing the faintest hint of a smile to widen. "Come forward," he said, his voice dripping with quiet command. The sound of footsteps echoed softly against the stone floor, a rhythm that seemed almost reverent as it approached. From behind one of the towering columns, a man emerged, his form shadowed yet precise. He moved with purpose, each step deliberate, until he came to a halt a few paces behind the figure in crimson. He dropped to one knee, bowing his head low as the weight of the cathedral's silence pressed down on them both. "Great Master," he said, his voice steady yet laced with reverence, the words ringing clear in the still air. The man in crimson turned slightly, the edge of his cape rippling as though the air itself shifted to accommodate his movement. He didn't look down at the kneeling figure but instead tilted his head, gazing up at the towering stained-glass windows. "What is it, Valthar?" His voice, smooth and commanding, resonated with an undertone that demanded answers without delay. Valthar raised his head slightly, his expression one of solemn pride. "As you instructed, we have begun supplying the Philips Family. The arrangements are in motion, and all is proceeding as we wished." The man in crimson,

his sharp features bathed in the cold silver of the moonlight, gave the faintest nod. "Good. As it should be." "And," Valthar continued, "as you predicted, the Emberheart Family has yet to discover our mages' true affiliations. They remain convinced they belong to the Frostborne Family, as you intended." At this, a subtle smile played on the Great Master's lips. He turned fully now, his piercing gaze falling upon the kneeling figure with a quiet intensity. "Of course," he said softly, the words carrying an air of inevitability. "Predictability has always been the weakness of the powerful." For a moment, he said nothing more, letting the weight of his presence fill the space between them. Then, his gaze shifted upward, tracing the cathedral's massive arches, its heights lost in shadow. "One hundred and thirteen years," he murmured, his tone reverent, as though speaking to the cathedral itself. He lowered his gaze back to Valthar, his eyes gleaming with a dangerous light. "Now," he continued, his voice sharp as the edge of a blade, "isn't it finally time for our family to take its rightful place?" Valthar nodded fervently, his hand pressed against his chest in a gesture of loyalty. "It is, Great Master. The pieces are aligning, just as you have foreseen." The man in crimson stepped forward, his boots tapping lightly against the stone as he moved closer to Valthar. He extended a gloved hand, resting it on the man's shoulder, his touch both reassuring and unyielding. "Good," he said simply, his tone a mixture of approval and expectation. The light of the moon shifted, casting his features in stark relief. His smile widened, sharp and calculating. "Prepare the others. The time of silence is over."

Chapter 795: Chapter 184.1 - Understanding

The faint glow of my desk lamp illuminated the room as I leaned back in my chair, holding the sleek tablet displaying the latest report from [Horde]. The digital interface hummed softly, a subtle reminder of the effort it took to obtain this information. My gaze moved over the words, my fingers swiping occasionally to scroll through the concise but detailed summaries.

The first section immediately captured my attention.

Emberheart Family vs Hawkins Family

The Emberheart Family and Hawkins Family had started clashing, and the Emberhearts had begun showing their fangs already.

However, the Hawkins Family isn't fighting alone—they didn't enter this conflict unprepared.

The Ventorien Family (Wind Pillar) has started supporting the Hawkins Family, bringing their influence into play.

Additionally, the Frostborne Family has shown signs of being on the Hawkins' side, at least from the surface.

I frowned slightly, my fingers tapping lightly against the desk as I processed the information.

'Ventorien and Frostborne,' I thought, narrowing my eyes. 'That complicates things.'

The Hawkins weren't known for taking direct actions without strong backup, and the report confirmed what I'd suspected. Their move against the Emberhearts wasn't just about vengeance or a power grab—it was strategic, supported by allies with substantial resources and influence.

I tapped my fingers lightly against the desk, my eyes narrowing as I reread the report. The involvement of the Ventorien Family didn't surprise me. It fit perfectly with the events in the game—one of the key factors that made Irina's scenario so challenging.

In the game, the Hawkins and Ventorien Families had been working together behind the scenes for years, a covert alliance driven by shared ambition and mutual grudge against the Emberhearts. Their objective had been clear: weaken the Emberheart Family and carve out a piece of their influence for themselves. For the Hawkins, it was about expanding their power, but for the Ventoriens, it was personal.

'The Ventoriens' grudge against the Emberhearts is still well known,' I thought, my fingers stilling for a moment. That grudge stemmed from an event in the past, a bitter rivalry that had left deep scars.

But the Frostborne Family? That was another matter entirely.

I leaned back in my chair, letting out a slow breath as I considered the implications. Unlike the Ventoriens, the Frostborne Family had no history of overt hostility toward the Emberhearts. If anything, they had a reputation for neutrality, focusing inward rather than getting involved in external conflicts.

'And that's not just a facade,' I thought, my eyes narrowing further. Contrary to the perception of the outside world, the Frostborne Family wasn't as cohesive as it appeared. Beneath the surface, there were fractures—internal struggles that even their Matriarch couldn't fully control.

In fact, the Frostbornes' strongest power, the protectors who formed the cornerstone of their family's might, were no longer present. They had been absent for years, a secret kept well-hidden even from those closest to the family. Only two people in this academy likely knew about it: Seraphina and me.

And yet, this report suggested the Frostbornes were now siding with the Hawkins. That didn't make sense.

'Unless...' I thought, my mind piecing together possibilities. 'Unless this involvement isn't coming from the Frostborne Family as a whole. Unless this information is misleading—deliberately so.'

The faint glow of my desk lamp illuminated the room as I continued scrolling down the report.

Philips Family vs Hartley Family

I straightened in my chair, my fingers brushing lightly against my chin as I read the detailed summary.

The conflict between the Philips and Hartley Families has begun to destabilize the already fragile balance in the Hunter Sector. The fight has had a significant impact on the economy, particularly on

the allocation of gate rights. Several critical zones have become unstable as disputes over ownership and profit distribution intensify.

The Philips Family has demonstrated surprising resilience and aggression, consistently pushing the Hartley Family back. Sources suggest this newfound strength comes from an alliance with several smaller guilds, whose combined forces have tipped the scales in their favor.

Additionally, there are signs of Demon Contractors operating in the shadows. While none of the captured individuals have been directly linked to the Philips Family on the surface, circumstantial evidence strongly suggests their involvement. The Contractors' actions have been notably aligned with the Philips Family's objectives, leaving little doubt about where their loyalties lie.

The faint glow of my desk lamp cast long shadows across the room as my eyes skimmed the report. When they landed on the line—

"newfound strength comes from an alliance with several smaller guilds, whose combined forces have tipped the scales in their favor"—

my fingers stilled, ceasing their rhythmic tapping on the desk.

For a moment, the room felt quieter, the soft hum of the tablet the only sound breaking the stillness. I leaned back slightly, my gaze lifting from the screen to the window. Beyond the glass, the dark sky stretched endlessly, stars scattered like distant embers flickering against the void.

'So, you're finally moving,' I thought, the faintest trace of a smile tugging at the corner of my lips.

It wasn't a surprise that crossed my mind, but a quiet sense of validation. This—this exact moment—was what I had been waiting for. The Philips Family could never have pushed back the Hartleys on their own. It didn't align with their resources, their strategy, or their known capabilities. But now, with the involvement of smaller guilds and the unmistakable hand of Demon Contractors, the pieces began to fall into place.

'There's no way the Philips Family could manage this alone,' I thought, narrowing my eyes as my reflection faintly glimmered on the windowpane. The timing, the alliances, and the method of their newfound aggression—it all pointed to one thing. Or rather, one person.

The air in the room felt heavier as my thoughts sharpened. This wasn't a random escalation. This was deliberate. Methodical. A move orchestrated not by the Philips Family, but by the shadow I had been waiting for months. The one I had been quietly luring out of hiding.

'And now, you're finally starting to show yourself,' I thought, leaning forward slightly.

The report in my hands was more than a summary of shifting alliances and destabilized economies. It was a signal—a declaration that the gears of the world were beginning to turn, and with them, the intricate machinery I had spent so long preparing.

'Let's start working.'

Now, with the shadows finally stirring, the stage was set for the next act.

Outside, the dark sky loomed vast and silent, unaware of the storm about to unfold. Inside, the faint glow of the desk lamp flickered, casting light over the words that had set everything into motion. My fingers rested lightly on the tablet, poised and ready, as if waiting for the moment to strike.

And strike I would.

Sylvie collapsed onto the training mat, her chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath. Sweat clung to her skin, her muscles aching from the relentless pace of the Headmaster's drills. The usual clarity and focus she found during these sessions had been absent today, replaced by a swirl of thoughts she couldn't seem to escape.

"Enough for today," Headmaster Jonathan Arcwright said, his voice calm but edged with its usual authority. He stood nearby, his piercing gaze fixed on her. "But you were not as focused as you normally are."

Sylvie winced slightly, sitting up and wiping the sweat from her brow. "I'm sorry, Headmaster," she said quickly, though she avoided meeting his eyes. She knew how perceptive he was and how easily he could see through her.

"Is something on your mind?" he asked, his tone firm but not unkind. It wasn't a casual question—it was a direct probe, meant to uncover whatever was holding her back.

Sylvie hesitated, her fingers clenching slightly against the mat. For a moment, she considered telling him the truth, laying out all the thoughts that had been plaguing her since her encounter in the infirmary. But the words stuck in her throat, and instead, she shook her head.

"It's nothing," she said, her voice steady but faintly strained. "I'm just... a little distracted today."

Jonathan's sharp blue eyes narrowed slightly, his gaze weighing her words. "You're lying," he said bluntly, his tone carrying the weight of absolute certainty. "But I won't force the truth from you. If you can't confront what's on your mind, you won't be able to move past it."

Sylvie's heart sank at his words, the truth of them striking a chord deep within her. She looked away, her thoughts swirling. 'It's not nothing,' she admitted inwardly, though she didn't dare say it aloud. 'I've been thinking about Maya. About Astron. About what I should do.'

The memory of Maya's unstable emotions, the clash of her two palettes, and the dangerous pulsing red that felt so wrong—it all haunted her. And then there was Astron, standing there with his cold, knowing gaze, as if he had already pieced together the puzzle she was still struggling to understand.

Sylvie clenched her fists, frustration and uncertainty bubbling up inside her. 'I want to talk to him. I need to. But what do I even say? And what if... what if I'm wrong?'

The Headmaster's voice cut through her spiraling thoughts. "Sylvie," he said, his tone gentler now. "If you don't address what's clouding your mind, it will continue to hold you back. Whatever it is, face it—before it becomes something you can't control."

She nodded slowly, her chest tightening as she absorbed his words. "I understand, Headmaster," she said quietly, though she wasn't sure if she truly did. The weight of her thoughts felt heavier than ever, but she knew he was right. Ignoring them wouldn't make them go away.

As she stood, her legs trembling slightly from the exertion of their training, she resolved to do what she had been avoiding all day.

'I'll talk to him. No more excuses.'

That is why she sent the message.

The crisp evening air greeted Sylvie as she stepped out of the dormitory, her damp hair swaying slightly with each step. The weather had turned chilly as the day wound down, the faint breeze sending a shiver down her spine. She pulled her jacket closer, her thoughts steadying as she spotted Astron waiting by the courtyard.

As usual, Astron seemed completely unbothered by the cold, his calm posture and steady gaze making him look as though he had all the time in the world. His purple eyes flicked toward her as she approached, and he gave a slight nod in acknowledgment.

"Hey," Sylvie greeted, her voice light but tinged with a nervous edge.

Astron nodded again, his expression unreadable. "Sylvie."

She fought the urge to fidget under his gaze, the frustration of not being able to read him simmering quietly in the back of her mind. 'Why is it always so hard to tell what he's thinking?' she wondered, though she quickly pushed the thought aside. This wasn't the time to let her own nerves get the better of her.

"Mind if I walk with you?" she asked, gesturing toward the path that led through the courtyard.

Astron tilted his head slightly, then turned to start walking without a word. Sylvie took that as an agreement and fell into step beside him. The faint crunch of their footsteps on the gravel path filled the silence for a few moments before she spoke again.

"So... how was your day?" she asked, keeping her tone casual. "Anything interesting happen?"

Astron glanced at her briefly before returning his gaze to the path ahead. "Nothing out of the ordinary," he replied. "Classes, some training. The usual."

"Ah, right," Sylvie said, nodding. "That makes sense. I guess everyone's still trying to settle back into the semester. It always feels a bit chaotic at first, doesn't it?"

Astron gave a faint hum of agreement, his posture relaxed but his expression as composed as ever. Sylvie found herself blabbering a little more, the weight of the earlier tension pushing her into a stream of casual chatter.

"And Professor Eleanor's classes, huh?" she continued with a small laugh. "She doesn't waste any time, does she? Two blocks right at the start of the semester—I thought half the class was going to fall over by the end of it. How did you manage?"

"By paying attention," Astron said simply.

Sylvie let out a soft laugh, brushing her hair back as she glanced at him. "Well, you make it sound so easy," she said lightly.

"Why?"

Sylvie let out a small sigh, her shoulders relaxing slightly as she found herself falling into the rhythm of their walk. The casual conversation felt like a balm to the tension that had been building inside her all day. But as they walked, a thought bubbled to the surface, and before she could stop herself, she began speaking.

"You know," she started, her voice softer now, "it's been harder for me to focus lately. On my tasks, my studies, even in class. It feels like my attention just keeps slipping away."

Astron glanced at her, his purple eyes calm but inquisitive. "Do you use social media a lot?" he asked, his tone matter-of-fact.

Sylvie blinked, caught off guard by the question. "Uh, I mean... when I'm on breaks from studying," she admitted. "Not a ton, though."

"Do you watch short content often?" Astron continued, his gaze steady as he turned his head slightly toward her. "Videos that condense everything into a minute or less?"

Sylvie tilted her head, thinking for a moment before shaking it. "No, not much. I usually watch longer videos if I watch anything at all."

Astron studied her for a second, his expression thoughtful. "If that's the case," he said slowly, "then your attention span isn't being disrupted by external factors. It's not because of messed-up brain timers or an addiction to quick dopamine hits."

Sylvie blinked, a small, confused laugh escaping her lips. "Messed-up brain timers?" she echoed. "What are you even talking about?"

"Short-form content trains your brain to expect constant stimulation," Astron explained, his tone calm and deliberate. "It can make it harder for people to focus on things that require sustained attention. But if that doesn't apply to you..."

He paused, his sharp gaze meeting hers with a precision that made her heart skip a beat. "That means there's something in the classroom that's taking your attention."

Sylvie felt her breath hitch at his words, her grip tightening on the strap of her bag. His statement felt so matter-of-fact, so accurate, that for a moment, she wasn't sure how to respond.

'It is you.'

The thought rose unbidden, sharp and insistent, but she bit her tongue before it could escape. Her cheeks flushed slightly, and she forced herself to look away, focusing instead on the gravel path beneath her feet.

"Maybe," she said finally, her voice light but strained as she tried to deflect. "Or maybe I'm just tired. You know how it is at the start of the semester—everything feels overwhelming at once."

Astron hummed in acknowledgment, though his gaze lingered on her for a moment longer before he looked ahead again. Sylvie could feel her pulse quickening as they walked, her mind racing with thoughts she couldn't voice.

'It's not just the classroom,' she thought, her chest tightening. 'It's whenever you're there.'

But saying these words out loud....

It was easier said than done.

Hence she changed the topic.

"I know a place we can go. It's new, and I think you might like it."

Astron raised an eyebrow, glancing at her with faint curiosity. "Where?"

"It's called The Nexus," Sylvie replied, gesturing down a different path. "It's this massive building the academy just opened. They set it up for cadets to study, relax, or hang out. It's got everything—study blocks, lounges, even a café. And the best part? It's affordable, so you don't have to worry about spending too much."

Astron gave a faint hum of acknowledgment, his expression neutral but seemingly agreeable. "Lead the way," he said simply.

Sylvie smiled, quickening her pace as they made their way toward The Nexus. The building was impossible to miss—a sleek, modern structure with glass-paneled walls and soft, glowing lights that illuminated its surroundings. The faint hum of machinery blended seamlessly with the quiet chatter of students entering and leaving.

Inside, The Nexus was just as impressive. The ground floor was wide and open, divided into various sections. Rows of study blocks lined one side, separated by glass panels for privacy, while a spacious lounge area with comfortable seating occupied the other. Robots moved efficiently through the space, preparing and serving drinks, tidying up tables, and even delivering meals. Everything was automated, creating an atmosphere that was both futuristic and strangely calming.

Sylvie led Astron to one of the quieter corners, a small section near a row of study blocks. The lighting here was softer, the noise from the main lounge muted enough to make conversation comfortable. A robot approached them as they sat down, its sleek metallic frame gliding smoothly across the floor.

"Welcome," it said in a pleasant, artificial voice. "May I take your order?"

Sylvie glanced at Astron, her eyebrows raised. "Want anything?"

"Just a black tea," Astron replied without hesitation.

Sylvie nodded, then turned back to the robot. "I'll have the same, and a slice of the honey cake, please."

The robot whirred softly, confirming their order before gliding away. Astron leaned back slightly in his seat, his sharp gaze flicking around the space as he took in their surroundings.

"This place is newly opened?" Astron asked, his sharp purple eyes scanning the quiet surroundings. His tone was calm, but Sylvie could hear the faint curiosity in his voice.

Sylvie nodded, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear as she leaned back slightly in her seat.

"Yeah, it's new," she replied. "I actually just discovered it yesterday. Since it's a new facility, the academy didn't really have time to advertise it properly. They sent out a mail about it, but I guess not many people noticed—or cared enough to check it out."

Astron gave a small hum of acknowledgment, his gaze flicking briefly to a nearby robot gliding past with a tray of drinks. "Quiet," he remarked. "Empty. I can see why you chose it."

Sylvie smiled faintly, taking a sip of her tea. "That's exactly why I came here," she admitted. "After what happened in the cafeteria, I figured it'd be nice to find a place where I wouldn't be... interrupted."

Astron's gaze returned to her, his expression as unreadable as ever. "Interrupted?"

Sylvie hesitated for a moment, her mind flashing back to the crowd in the cafeteria—the questions, the stares, the overwhelming tension of being looked at by that Snack-loving scary senior.

She set her cup down, her fingers brushing lightly against the table as she tried to find the right words.

"Yes, interrupted."

"Is it related to the topic that you want to talk about?"

Sylvie took a deep breath, her fingers lightly tracing the edge of her teacup. Her nerves simmered just beneath the surface, but she pushed them down, focusing on the steady, composed presence across from her.

"Yes," she admitted, meeting Astron's gaze. "It's related to what I want to talk about."

Astron's expression didn't shift, but she could feel the weight of his attention settle fully on her. The silence stretched for a moment, his calm gaze urging her to continue.

"What happened to Senior Maya?"

She finally dropped the bomb that she was looking for.

Chapter 797 Chapter 184.3 - Understanding

"What happened to Senior Maya?"

Astron's sharp purple eyes locked onto Sylvie's the moment she spoke, his expression calm but his gaze piercing in a way that made her breath hitch. The silence that followed her question was heavy, weighted with the unspoken tension between them.

"What happened to her?" Astron repeated, his voice measured. He tilted his head slightly, his sharp gaze unyielding. "What do you mean by that?"

Sylvie straightened in her seat, gripping her teacup tightly to steady herself. She knew Astron well enough to recognize that he was being deliberately evasive. He was hiding something—he always did when he felt the need to shield others from the truth. But not this time. This time, she wasn't going to let him deflect.

She took a deep breath, her fingers tracing the edge of her cup as she tried to gather her thoughts.

"Astron," she said, her voice firm but not accusatory. "There's something inside her. Something that isn't normal. I can feel it."

Astron's gaze didn't waver, but she caught the faintest flicker of something in his eyes—curiosity, perhaps, or recognition. "What do you mean, feel it?" he asked evenly.

Sylvie hesitated, the words catching in her throat. She had never openly discussed her [Authority] with him, but she had a feeling he already knew more than she had let on. And now, there was no point in hiding it.

Sylvie swallowed hard, her grip on the teacup tightening as she forced herself to meet his gaze. "I can feel it," she said simply, her voice steady but edged with an undercurrent of tension.

Astron's sharp purple eyes bored into hers, unyielding, as if searching for something beneath her words. The silence stretched between them, heavy and suffocating, until he finally nodded, the faintest tilt of his head.

"With your changes..." he murmured, his tone calm but tinged with an almost imperceptible weight. "It is understandable that you can feel something like that."

Sylvie's chest tightened. She had expected him to question her further, to probe for more details, but his words carried a quiet certainty that caught her off guard. He knew—maybe not the full extent, but enough to understand what had happened to her.

Enough to believe her.

Astron leaned back slightly, his gaze still locked onto hers, unrelenting in its intensity. But Sylvie had no intention of backing down or changing the subject. Not now.

She set the cup down gently on the table, her fingers brushing the rim as she took a deep breath.

"There's something inside her," she began, her voice lower now, as if the weight of her words demanded restraint. "Even though it's not something I've encountered before, I can understand it to some extent."

Astron remained silent, his sharp eyes narrowing slightly as he listened. He didn't interrupt, didn't push her to elaborate, but she could sense the tension in the air between them.

Sylvie's hands clenched into fists on the table as she leaned forward slightly. Her voice grew firmer, more resolute, as she described what she felt. "It's... bloody. Thirsty. Hungry. And inhuman."

She paused, her breath catching as she forced herself to say the words that had been clawing at her mind since she first sensed it. "Demonic energy."

The words hung in the air like a stormcloud, heavy and foreboding. For a moment, Astron's expression didn't change, but the subtle shift in his posture—a faint straightening of his back, the way his hands relaxed slightly on the table—spoke volumes.

"Demonic energy," he repeated, his voice quiet but sharp, like the edge of a blade. His gaze flickered briefly, as though piecing something together in his mind. "You're certain?"

Sylvie's voice didn't waver, even as her chest tightened. "Yes. And you know about it as well, don't you?" she asked, her tone sharper now, though her eyes betrayed a flicker of vulnerability.

There's no way he doesn't. Not with his perception. He sees through everything, even the things others don't want to reveal.

Astron's gaze remained steady, his sharp purple eyes unwavering as he leaned back in his chair. His expression, as always, was calm—too calm. Then, after a long moment, he nodded.

"I knew," he admitted, his voice low, carrying the weight of a truth he had no intention of hiding.

Sylvie felt her breath hitch, her hands tightening into fists on the table. The confirmation wasn't unexpected, yet it still sent a shiver down her spine. Of course, he knew. He always knows. But if he knew... why didn't he do anything?

"Then... why?" she began, her voice trembling slightly despite her efforts to steady it. "Why didn't you—"

Astron's hand lifted, a subtle but firm gesture that stopped her mid-sentence. His calm gaze softened slightly, but there was no room for argument in his tone as he spoke. "Because," he said, "I don't make it a habit to speak about other people's lives unless it's absolutely necessary."

Sylvie's lips parted, her rebuttal on the tip of her tongue, but she hesitated. His words carried a weight she couldn't ignore, a quiet finality that stilled the storm brewing in her mind.

"But now," Astron continued, his gaze sharpening, "since you've come to learn about this, it's better to give some context."

Sylvie's chest tightened further, her heart pounding as she braced herself for what was to come. She had wanted answers—needed them—but now that they were within reach, a part of her couldn't ignore the dread creeping in.

He's going to tell me, indeed....He knew.

Astron's voice pulled her from her thoughts, steady and measured as he began. "Maya wasn't always like this," he said, his words deliberate. "You've seen her control, her composure. That was how she was usually before....But now, that's no longer something natural—it's something she has to fight for."

Astron's voice was calm but deliberate as he continued, his sharp gaze unwavering. "Remember the time when we went on that trip with our club? To the Western Uxbridge?"

Sylvie blinked, her chest tightening as his words stirred memories she'd tried to bury. The Western Uxbridge trip—she could still feel the chill of that place, the way the air seemed to weigh heavier there, as if the land itself carried the echoes of something sinister.

Her hands trembled slightly, her nails pressing into her palms as the memories resurfaced, vivid and unrelenting.

The chains had been cold against her wrists, the dim light of the cave casting eerie shadows across the stone walls. She remembered the voices of the demonic contractors, their tones cruel and mocking as they discussed what to do with her. And she remembered Astron, bloody and battered, fighting tooth and nail to get to her despite the overwhelming odds.

He almost died that day. He didn't hesitate, didn't think twice about the risk. He just... came for me.

But the memories didn't stop there. Sylvie's breathing grew shallower as her mind replayed what came next—what she had seen when they escaped.

The murder.

It wasn't just the act itself—it was the raw, unbridled hatred in the killer's eyes, the way their emotions had burned so intensely they nearly overwhelmed her [Authority]. Hatred, insanity, desperation—all mixed together in a storm that made her feel like she was suffocating. She could still hear the sickening crunch, the wet thud of flesh and bone, as the life was snuffed out before her eyes.

And then, Maya's absence.

Sylvie's eyes widened, her breath hitching as the pieces clicked together. "Senior Maya... she went missing," she whispered, the realization dawning on her like a sudden, chilling gust of wind.

Astron's sharp gaze softened slightly, his expression unreadable but not unkind. "You remember that, don't you?"

"I do....At that time, you came to look for my [Enchantment]. At that time, even

Sylvie's chest tightened as the memories continued to resurface, jagged and raw. She pressed her trembling hands against the table, grounding herself as her voice grew steadier.

'I remember... back then, my [Authority] was still new to me,' she thought, her mind tinged with a mix of reflection and regret. 'I didn't even know how far it could go or what I could really do with it. It felt like... like I was holding something fragile but dangerous, and I didn't know if I could control it.'

Her gaze flickered to Astron, his sharp purple eyes watching her intently, though he said nothing. His silence was grounding in its own way, a steady anchor amid her swirling thoughts.

"At that time," Sylvie continued, "you came to find me. You said you needed my enchantment—for something important."

She paused, her fingers brushing absently against the rim of her teacup as she remembered the weight of that moment. "When you asked for my blessing, it was the first time I felt... useful. Like I wasn't just a liability. But at the same time, I couldn't shake the fear." Her voice softened, almost a whisper now.

'I was afraid you were pushing yourself too far. That you wouldn't come back.'

Astron's expression didn't change, but there was a faint flicker of recognition in his gaze, as though he, too, remembered the events she was describing.

"But now..." Sylvie's voice trailed off, her thoughts racing as the pieces began to fall into place. The memories, the emotions, the lingering unease—it all started to make sense. Her eyes widened as realization struck, her breath catching in her throat.

"Something captured Senior Maya at that time, didn't it? And you went to save her."

Chapter 798 Chapter 184.4 - Understanding

"Something captured Senior Maya at that time, didn't it? And you went to save her."

Astron's gaze didn't waver, but his silence spoke volumes. It was an answer in itself, one that confirmed her suspicions.

Sylvie leaned forward slightly, her voice growing firmer as she pressed on. "But why didn't you inform the authorities? Surely... surely the city wouldn't just let a genius senior like Maya disappear without doing something. They would've searched for her. They would've—"

Astron raised a hand, a quiet yet commanding gesture that silenced her mid-sentence. His gaze softened slightly, but his voice carried a weight that silenced any further protests. "Do you think they would've believed me?" he asked, his tone calm but edged with something deeper—something

almost bitter. "A first-year student claiming that a senior had been taken by something. Without evidence?"

Sylvie leaned back, her fingers curling around the edge of her teacup as her thoughts churned. To be honest, I'm not that well-versed in how authorities and formalities work. It wasn't something she had ever needed to understand deeply. But even so, Astron's explanation sounded plausible. The way things worked in the academy—and even the city—made it easy to imagine his concerns being dismissed outright.

Still, the weight of his words lingered, a quiet unease settling in her chest. She looked at him again, her voice hesitant but firm. "But then... what captured her?"

Astron's gaze flickered, a faint but unmistakable shadow crossing his sharp purple eyes. "That," he said quietly, "is one of the main reasons why I didn't inform the authorities."

Sylvie frowned, her curiosity piqued but tempered by a growing sense of dread. "Why?" she asked, leaning forward slightly. "What was it?"

Astron hesitated for a moment, his expression unreadable. When he finally spoke, his voice was calm but laced with a subtle intensity. "Because it was... outrageous," he said. "Something they wouldn't have believed, no matter how much evidence I provided."

Sylvie's breath hitched, her pulse quickening as she watched him carefully. His words carried a weight she couldn't ignore, and her unease deepened with every passing second. "What did you find?" she asked, her voice quieter now, almost a whisper.

Astron's sharp gaze bore into hers as he continued. "While I was investigating her disappearance, I traced her movements—followed the traces of mana and the remnants of what was left behind. And... long story short, I came to a conclusion."

Sylvie's chest tightened, her mind racing as she waited for him to elaborate.

"It wasn't demonic contractors who captured her," Astron said finally, his tone steady but edged with something colder. "It was an ancient vampire. One that had been in slumber for centuries... and had been awakened."

Sylvie's eyes widened, her breath catching in her throat. "An ancient vampire?" she echoed, her voice tinged with both disbelief and fear.

"Yes," Astron said simply, his gaze unwavering. "One of the old ones—far stronger, far more dangerous than anything you'd encounter in the modern world. They're relics of another age, creatures that shouldn't even exist anymore. And yet, one of them was there. Awake. And Maya was taken by it."

Sylvie's mind reeled at his words, the weight of his revelation pressing down on her like a stone. An ancient vampire... The very idea felt unreal, like something out of a nightmare. But the seriousness in Astron's tone, the sharp edge in his gaze, left no room for doubt.

"How did you... how did you even find her?" she asked, her voice trembling slightly despite her efforts to steady it.

Astron's expression didn't waver. "It wasn't easy," he admitted. "The traces were faint, almost nonexistent. But I followed them. Every step, every clue, until I found her."

Sylvie stared at him, a mix of awe and unease swirling in her chest. He really does always go too far, she thought, her hands trembling slightly as she gripped the table. "And you fought it?" she asked, the words escaping before she could stop them. "The vampire?"

Astron nodded, his sharp gaze unwavering. "Yes," he said, his tone measured but edged with something darker. "I fought it. But it wasn't the kind of fight you're imagining."

Sylvie leaned forward slightly, her heart pounding as she listened intently.

"I found the vampire in the middle of a ritual," Astron explained, his voice calm but deliberate. "It had just woken up from its slumber and was in a severely weakened state. That was the only reason I had a chance."

He paused, his fingers brushing lightly against the table, as though tracing the memory in his mind. "I ambushed it. It wasn't easy—nothing about fighting something that old and powerful ever is—but I managed to kill it before it could regain its full strength."

Sylvie's breath hitched, her mind racing as she tried to process his words. "You... you killed it?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. The idea of Astron going up against something as ancient and dangerous as a vampire felt surreal, yet the weight in his tone made it impossible to doubt him.

"I did," Astron said simply, his gaze steady. But then his expression darkened, and his tone grew heavier. "But that wasn't the end of it. The situation became... complicated."

Sylvie's chest tightened, her hands trembling slightly as she braced herself for what he was about to say.

"The vampire was in the middle of a ritual," Astron continued. "It was turning Maya—changing her into one of its kind. When I killed it, the transformation was interrupted... halfway."

Sylvie's eyes widened, her breath catching in her throat. "Halfway?" she echoed, the word hanging in the air like a shadow.

Astron nodded, his expression grim. "Yes. Somehow, Maya ended up... different. Not fully human anymore, but not a complete vampire either. A strange, in-between state. That's the energy you've been sensing from her. It's what's left of the vampire's curse."

Sylvie felt her thoughts spiral, a storm of disbelief and confusion swirling in her mind. A vampire. Astron fighting it. Maya being turned into... something. It all felt like a nightmare, something too bizarre and unreal to be true. And yet, as she looked at Astron, the calm certainty in his gaze left no room for doubt.

She shook her head slightly, her voice trembling as she tried to find the words. "I... I don't even know what to say. A vampire? Maya being turned into... that? It's just..." She trailed off, her chest tightening painfully.

"Unbelievable?"

"Yes."

"Well, not much I can say about that."

Unbelievable.

At least she would have thought if it was coming from another person.

But knowing him, he wouldn't lie over something like this.

Hence she swallowed hard, her hands clenching against the table as she forced herself to steady her breathing. He wouldn't lie. Not about this. If he says it's true, then it's true.

Sylvie looked into Astron's eyes, searching for any flicker of uncertainty, but his gaze remained steady, unwavering. She swallowed hard, forcing herself to ask the question that had been gnawing at her. "Then... the state she was in, in front of the infirmary that time..."

Astron nodded, his voice calm but carrying the weight of what he was about to say. "Yes, she was fighting it."

Sylvie's chest tightened as the memory of that moment resurfaced—the strain in Maya's expression, the flicker of something inhuman in her aura. "But..." she hesitated, her voice trembling slightly, "why didn't I do anything?"

"Why did I do nothing?" Astron asked, his tone calm yet pointed, echoing her thoughts.

"Yes," Sylvie replied, her confusion clear. "That was really dangerous."

"You're right," Astron said, his gaze sharpening. "And that is precisely why I didn't do nothing."

Sylvie blinked, her breath catching as she stared at him. "What?" she whispered, unable to understand his reasoning.

Astron sighed softly, the faintest hint of a smile tugging at his lips—not one of amusement, but of understanding. "Emotions," he said, his voice quieter now, almost reflective. "They're hard to understand. But at the same time... sometimes they're really simple."

As he spoke, he raised his hand, conjuring a small chain of mana that shimmered faintly in the air. The links pulsed with a gentle glow, their movement fluid yet deliberate. Sylvie watched, mesmerized, as he pulled on the chain lightly, making it tighten and flex with a quiet hum of power.

"Senior Maya has her own life," Astron said, his tone steady. "And I may not always be there. If she wants to live her life by herself, she needs to learn how to control this on her own."

He paused, his sharp gaze meeting Sylvie's as he continued. "To a hungry person, delivering a fish is a form of goodwill. But—"

Sylvie's voice cut in, completing his thought, her tone thoughtful and almost reverent. "But teaching them how to fish is giving them a way to sustain themselves."

Astron nodded, the faintest glimmer of approval in his eyes. "Exactly. If I stepped in every time she struggled, she'd never learn to handle it. She'd always rely on someone else to pull her out of the fire. And that's not the kind of life she wants—or deserves."

Sylvie's hands relaxed slightly, her fingers brushing the edge of the table as she absorbed his words. He's right... but it's still so hard to accept. Watching someone fight something so terrible and not stepping in—it feels impossible.

"But what if she..." Sylvie trailed off, her voice trembling. "What if she loses control? What if something happens to her because you didn't step in?"

"Then that's a risk she has to face," he said quietly. "And it's a risk I'll face with her, if it comes to that. But she has to take the first step. She has to want to fight this—not for me, or for anyone else, but for herself."

Sylvie felt her breath hitch, her chest tightening as his words settled over her. They carried a weight she couldn't ignore, a truth that resonated deeply even though it scared her. He really believes in her.

And that something somehow irritated her more than anything else.

'Would he believe in me in the same manner?'

That question.....

Once again it happened.

Chapter 799 Chapter 184.5 - Understanding

Sylvie's gaze lingered on the faint shimmer of mana in Astron's hand as her thoughts spiraled. His calm, unwavering conviction in Maya's ability to handle herself was admirable. Logical, even. But the more she thought about it, the more it unsettled her. Would he believe in me the same way? The question arose unbidden, sharp and cutting, and no matter how much she tried to ignore it, it refused to fade. Her chest tightened as she turned the thought over, her fingers brushing the edge of the table in a restless rhythm. If I were in Maya's position, fighting something like this... would he trust me to face it alone? The answer she found within herself wasn't comforting. No. He wouldn't. She clenched her hands into fists, the thought leaving a bitter taste in her mouth. Astron was calculating, always weighing risks and outcomes. He trusted Maya because he had seen her fight, seen her strength. But what about her? Would he trust her the same way? Or would he consider her too fragile, too inexperienced, to handle such a burden? Her jaw tightened as her irritation grew. Why does it bother me so much? she wondered, but she already knew the answer. It wasn't just about trust—it was about something deeper, something she couldn't put into words. She thought back to the lengths Astron had gone for Maya, the risks he had taken to save her. He had faced an ancient vampire, fought something no one else could have, and yet, when it came to leaving Maya to her own devices, he had stepped back. It was unexpected—out of character for someone as practical and methodical as Astron. Why would he go so far only to stop there? Her thoughts shifted again, and her chest tightened as a possibility surfaced. Is it because of how he feels about her? Sylvie's fingers dug into her palms as her mind replayed what she had sensed from Maya before—the raw, unfiltered emotions that had radiated from her in the infirmary. Maya's feelings for Astron had been crystal clear: love, deep and fierce, tinged with jealousy and desperation. Sylvie hadn't needed to use her [Authority] to see it—it was written in every word, every glance Maya had directed at him. Are his feelings reciprocal? The question sent a strange pang through her chest, sharp and unsettling. She couldn't see Astron's emotions—never could, for reasons she didn't understand—but the thought of him sharing those feelings with Maya.... It was not pleasant. Is it really like that? she wondered, her thoughts racing. Is that why he believes in her so much? Why he's willing to let her fight this on her own? Sylvie's chest tightened, her thoughts tangling in a web of emotions she couldn't quite untangle. She drew in a slow, shaky breath, forcing herself to steady her voice as she spoke. "At that time... my enchantment. Did it... did it really help?" Her words came out quieter than she intended, tinged with an uncertainty she hated showing. She had to know. Had what she

done back then mattered? Or had it been nothing more than a fleeting gesture? Astron's gaze flickered to her, his sharp purple eyes softening just slightly. He nodded, his tone calm and steady. "If not for that enchantment, I wouldn't have been able to do it." Sylvie's breath caught, a faint warmth blooming in her chest at his words. He meant it—she could tell from the quiet certainty in his tone. Her enchantment had helped. She had helped. The realization filled her with a quiet pride, a small spark of happiness amidst the storm of emotions swirling within her. But just as quickly as the warmth appeared, it was accompanied by a sharp pang, a thought rising unbidden in the back of her mind. If he hadn't been able to save her back then... would he be here with me now? The thought twisted uncomfortably in her chest, dark and unbidden. It was selfish—she knew that—but the moment it appeared, it clung to her, refusing to let go. If he had failed, if Maya hadn't been saved... would he have turned to me instead? Would I have been the one he leaned on? Sylvie's fingers dug into the edge of the table, her knuckles whitening as she tried to push the thought away. Stop it, she scolded herself. That's not fair. That's not right. But no matter how much she told herself that, the thought lingered, a quiet, insidious whisper that refused to be silenced. Her gaze dropped to her lap, her voice trembling as she spoke again, trying to steer her thoughts away from the dark corners of her mind. "I'm glad... I'm glad it helped." "It did," he said simply. "You gave me what I needed to succeed." Sylvie forced a faint smile, her hands trembling slightly as she clasped them in her lap. She wanted to hold on to his words, to let them ground her, but the pang of guilt and doubt gnawed at the edges of her happiness. Why am I even thinking about this? How could he hold everything together so effortlessly, while she felt like she was unraveling with every word, every thought? "I'll... keep helping, if you need me," Sylvie said softly, her voice steadier than she felt. "Whatever it takes." "Hmm?" Astron's sharp purple eyes flicked toward her, narrowing slightly. He leaned back, his calm demeanor unwavering, but there was a faint tilt of his head as he spoke. "Whatever it takes?" he echoed, his voice carrying a subtle note of curiosity. Sylvie's chest tightened, her breath hitching at his response. She hadn't expected him to press her on it, What am I even saying? she thought, her fingers clenching into fists in her lap. For a fleeting moment, she wanted to voice the thought clawing at her chest. I also want to be someone you worry about. Someone you trust, someone you lean on. Instead, she forced herself to speak, redirecting her resolve. "Now that I know Senior Maya's situation," she said, her voice steadier than she felt, "I'll try my best to help her as much as I can." Astron's gaze lingered on her, unreadable as always, before he replied simply, "You don't need to." Sylvie's heart sank at his words, but she didn't falter. She straightened her posture, meeting his gaze with a quiet determination. "No," she said firmly, her voice unwavering. "With this before my eyes, I will not overlook it. I can't." First, she thought, her fingers brushing the table as her resolve solidified, my powers are here for a reason. I've always believed that. If I can use them to help someone, then I will. That's what I've always thought, and that won't change now. Astron's nod was subtle, but his sharp purple eyes lingered on Sylvie for a moment longer, their intensity making her breath hitch again. His gaze wasn't unreadable this time—there was something there, something faint yet deliberate, though she couldn't quite place it. "If it is you," he said quietly, his voice carrying an almost imperceptible softness, "this is how it should be." Sylvie blinked, caught off guard by his words. Her chest tightened, a mixture of surprise and confusion swirling within her. "What?" she asked, her voice more a reflex than a conscious decision. "Nothing," Astron replied, his tone calm and even, as though he hadn't said anything at all. Sylvie stared at him, uncertain whether to press him for an explanation. But something about his demeanor, the way he seemed perfectly at ease, stopped her. Nothing, huh? she thought, her fingers brushing absently against the edge of the table. And yet, despite his dismissal, she couldn't shake the faint warmth blooming in her chest. She didn't fully understand his words, but somehow, she felt as

though she'd been complimented—acknowledged, in a way that left her flustered and unsure of how to respond. They sat in silence for a moment, the quiet hum of the café filling the space between them. The conversation had run its course, and though there was still so much she wanted to ask, Sylvie knew better than to push further now. ***** The café door swung shut behind them as Astron and Sylvie stepped into the cool embrace of the evening. The air was crisp, tinged with the faint scent of the nearby gardens, and the soft glow of streetlights cast long shadows along the cobblestone path. They walked in silence for a while, their footsteps the only sound in the otherwise quiet street. Sylvie glanced at Astron from the corner of her eye, her thoughts swirling. The earlier conversation lingered in her mind, but something else had been eating at her since the team assignments were announced. Finally, she broke the silence. "The teams..." she began hesitantly, her voice soft against the night. "Which team are you going to join?" Astron didn't respond immediately. He continued walking, his sharp purple eyes fixed on the path ahead. After a moment, he spoke, his tone calm and measured. "Which team do you think I will join?" Sylvie blinked at the question, caught slightly off guard. She tilted her head, considering his words carefully. "Julia's?" she ventured after a pause. "She did make her offer pretty publicly. And she seemed... determined." No." Sylvie's steps faltered slightly, her surprise evident. "No? Then... Irina's?" "Yes." His answer was simple, but the conviction in his voice was clear. Sylvie stayed silent for a moment, the breeze rustling softly around them. She bit her lip, her curiosity and confusion getting the better of her. "Why?" she asked finally, her voice quieter this time. "Why? I wonder that too."

Chapter 800 Chapter 185.1 - Scandal

Irina stared at the crimson screen in front of her, her fiery amber eyes narrowing as the glowing letters [Defeat] burned into her vision. She slumped back in her chair, the controller slipping slightly in her hands as her frustration simmered. Her jaw tightened, and a low growl escaped her lips.

"Four losses," she muttered under her breath, the words dripping with disbelief. "Four fucking losses in a row."

Her gaze darted to the game stats flashing on the screen, and her anger only deepened. Her own performance had been stellar—top-tier damage dealt, perfect rotations, precise plays—but it wasn't enough. It never was when her team refused to cooperate.

She yanked off her headset, her fiery hair spilling over her shoulders as she slammed the controller onto her desk. "What the hell!" she shouted, her voice echoing in the quiet room. "Just defend the base! Why are you face-checking without me?!"

She gestured wildly at the screen as if the offending players could somehow see her. "You're a carry! A carry! You don't go wandering into the enemy jungle alone at thirty minutes! That's basic gameplay!"

Her frustration reached a boiling point as she leaned forward, glaring at the scoreboard. Her team's carry had racked up five deaths in the last ten minutes, each one more reckless than the last. Meanwhile, Irina's stats glowed with perfection—a spotless KDA, clutch assists, and flawless map control.

"And I still lost," she muttered, her voice barely above a whisper, her anger simmering just beneath the surface. "Because of that idiot."

She groaned, burying her face in her hands as the defeat screen lingered mockingly on the display. For a moment, she considered logging off, calling it a night, and saving herself further frustration. But then she shook her head, her fiery hair bouncing as she straightened her posture.

"No," she said firmly, her amber eyes burning with renewed determination. "I'm not ending like this. One more game. Just one more."

Her fingers hovered over the controller as she queued up for another match. The familiar hum of the loading screen filled the room, and her heart pounded with a mix of anticipation and lingering frustration.

"This time," she muttered, gripping the controller tightly. "I'll carry them myself if I have to. No more depending on morons who can't even hold a lane."

Irina's focus remained fixed on the screen as the queue timer ticked down. She leaned forward, her controller gripped tightly in her hands, her frustration simmering but contained. Just as the game began searching for her next match, a notification popped up on the side of the screen.

[Firebrand] has entered the lobby.

Irina blinked, her fiery amber eyes narrowing slightly at the familiar name. Firebrand was the unmistakable nickname of Julia Middleton, and the appearance of her name was both surprising and oddly fitting for the chaotic evening Irina was having.

Before Irina could react, another notification appeared—a message from Firebrand.

[Firebrand]: You're on? Wanna play more?

Irina hesitated, her fingers hovering over the controller. She considered ignoring the message and diving straight into her queued match, but the idea of having a competent teammate—one she could actually rely on—was too tempting to pass up.

She quickly typed out a response.

[InfernoQueen]: You better not drag me down.

It only took seconds for Julia to reply, her trademark confidence bleeding through even the screen.

[Firebrand]: Pfft. As if. I'm the MVP every time. Let's queue.

Irina rolled her eyes, a faint smirk tugging at her lips despite herself. Julia's arrogance could be infuriating, but it was better than playing with randoms who didn't understand the basics. At least with Julia, there was a guarantee of synergy—or at least chaos with purpose.

She accepted Julia's party invite, and the two quickly formed a duo in the game lobby. Julia's character model popped up next to hers, the fiery-themed avatar matching her real-life personality perfectly.

[Firebrand]: Let's crush these noobs.

Irina's finger hovered over the Queue button, her focus razor-sharp as she prepared to launch into another match. But the button didn't respond. She frowned, pressing it again with more force. Nothing.

"Huh?" she muttered, her fiery amber eyes narrowing. A message popped up at the bottom of the screen in glaring red text.

[Queue Failed: Rank Difference Too High Between Party Members]

For a moment, her brain struggled to process what she was seeing. Then her gaze darted to the party details displayed on the screen. It didn't take long to spot the problem. Her eyes widened as the words jumped out at her.

[Firebrand: Platinum I]

Irina's jaw tightened as she slowly glanced at her own rank displayed just beneath her username:

[InfernoQueen: Silver III]

The realization hit her like a freight train.

"She's Platinum?" she whispered, her disbelief turning to horror.

Before she could react further, a message from Julia popped up on the screen.

[Firebrand]: OMG HAHAHAHA YOU'RE SILVER?!

Irina's fingers tightened on the controller as her cheeks flushed with a mix of embarrassment and frustration. Julia's mocking laughter felt like it was echoing right in her room, amplified by the taunting message.

Another message appeared almost immediately:

[Firebrand]: I CAN'T BREATHE LOL! SILVER?! IRINA, WHAT ARE YOU EVEN DOING WITH YOUR LIFE?!

Irina growled under her breath, her pride taking a brutal hit. "Oh, shut up, Julia," she muttered, but she knew it wouldn't stop there.

Julia's voice crackled through the headset as she switched to voice chat. "Irina, babe, you mean to tell me you've been sitting here raging for hours, and you're Silver? Silver Three? I thought you were better than this!"

"Will you stop?" Irina shot back, her voice edged with irritation. "I don't play ranked as much, okay? I actually have a life outside of this game."

Julia cackled, completely ignoring her protest. "Oh, this is too good. You, with your fancy mechanics and 'perfect rotations,' stuck in Silver. Meanwhile, I'm up here in Platinum, carrying scrubs to victory."

Irina's pride flared hotter. "You don't even play half as seriously as I do! How are you Platinum?"

Julia's grin was audible through the mic. "Skill, my dear InfernoQueen. Raw, untamed skill."

"More like dumb luck," Irina shot back, though the edge in her voice betrayed her wounded pride.

Julia wasn't about to let it go. "Face it, Irina. I'm just built different. Maybe I should start giving you lessons. Want me to teach you how to lane properly? Or maybe how not to die like a bot?"

"I don't die like a bot!" Irina snapped.

"Sure, Silver," Julia teased, the nickname dripping with mockery.

Irina ground her teeth, her amber eyes narrowing as she stared at the screen. She wasn't about to let Julia have the last word.

Irina's hands gripped the controller so tightly her knuckles turned white. Julia's laughter echoed through the headset, each chuckle poking at her pride like a needle. Her fiery amber eyes narrowed as she glared at the screen, Julia's mocking nickname flashing in the chat:

[Firebrand]: Sure, Silver.

Her jaw tightened as the words fueled a burning need to prove herself. 'Challenge her,' a voice in her head whispered. 'Wipe that smug grin off her face.'

"Alright, Julia," Irina began, her voice laced with defiance. "How about—"

She froze mid-sentence, the words catching in her throat. A memory flashed through her mind, vivid and uninvited: the last time she had challenged Julia. The humiliation of a one-sided match. The sheer dominance Julia had displayed. Irina could still hear the mocking commentary, the relentless teasing that had lasted for weeks.

Her pride wrestled with her logic, but this time, logic won. She cleared her throat, her fiery hair swaying as she leaned back in her chair, forcing a calm expression.

"Actually, you know what?" she said, her tone suddenly breezy. "I think I've had enough games for tonight."

Julia paused, clearly caught off guard by the abrupt shift. "Wait, what? You're bailing already? I thought you were all fired up, InfernoQueen."

Irina forced a casual laugh, though the tightness in her chest betrayed her irritation. "Yeah, well, some of us have better things to do than babysit Platinum players who think they're gods."

"Aw, don't be like that," Julia teased, but her voice carried a hint of disappointment. "I was just starting to have fun!"

Irina didn't respond immediately, her fingers already hovering over the console's power button. She wasn't about to let Julia drag her into another round of taunting—or worse, another match where she'd risk adding to her losses.

"Goodnight, Julia," she said firmly, hitting the button before Julia could respond. The screen went dark, and the room fell into silence, save for the faint hum of her cooling console.

Irina stood from her chair, letting out a sharp exhale as she paced her room. Her fiery hair swayed with each step, but her mood was a storm of frustration and defiance. The teasing, the losses, the weight of the day—it was all piling up, and she needed to clear her head.

She flopped onto her bed with a dramatic sigh, her fiery amber eyes staring up at the ceiling as she reached for her smartwatch. The sleek device lit up at her touch, casting a faint glow across her

face. Without much thought, she began scrolling, letting her mind wander as she browsed through news headlines, random posts, and the usual flood of digital noise.

But then, her thumb froze mid-swipe. A single post caught her attention, its bright thumbnail and bold caption standing out amidst the clutter.

Her pictures.

Her breath hitched as she stared at the screen, her eyes narrowing. The post wasn't just about her—it featured her and Astron together. Each image was familiar: the hug at the Spatial Gate station, her leaning into him at the Stellamare Museum, the two of them entering the high-class hotel.

The caption beneath the pictures was scandalous, dripping with innuendo.

"Heir to the Emberheart Legacy? Or Caught in a Forbidden Romance?"

"Heh..."