

## H. Academy 801

### Chapter 801 Chapter 185.2 - Scandal

<Arcadia Hunter Academy, Library>

The library was quiet, the only sounds were the soft rustle of pages turning and the occasional tap of fingers on keyboards. Sunlight streamed through the tall windows, casting golden streaks across the rows of bookshelves and study tables. Ethan adjusted the strap of his bag as he entered, scanning the room until his eyes landed on Jane.

She was sitting at a table near the back, her dark brown hair catching the sunlight as it cascaded over her shoulder. A neat stack of books surrounded her, and she was scribbling something in her notebook with practiced ease. Ethan couldn't help but smile at the sight—she looked so focused, so at ease in this environment.

'She seems different here,' he thought as he approached.

Jane looked up just as he reached the table, a small smile spreading across her lips. "Hey, Ethan."

"Hey," he replied, setting his bag down and taking a seat across from her. "Thanks for agreeing to meet me. I figured we could both use the library time."

Jane raised an eyebrow, her smile turning slightly playful. "You figured you could use the library time."

Ethan chuckled, scratching the back of his neck. "Guilty. I'm not exactly acing everything right now."

She tilted her head, studying him with a mix of curiosity and amusement. "I wouldn't have guessed that. You seem like the type who would get straight As without even trying."

"Not even close," Ethan admitted, shaking his head. "Between training, missions, and everything else, I'm barely keeping up. And honestly, I've never been great at subjects like history or advanced mana theory."

"Well," Jane said, tapping her pen thoughtfully against her notebook, "it's a good thing you've got me, then."

Ethan blinked, caught off guard. "Wait... are you saying you're going to help me?"

"Why not?" Jane said with a shrug, her green eyes sparkling with a mix of confidence and warmth. "Contrary to what you might think, I'm actually pretty good at this stuff."

Ethan tilted his head, skeptical. "I mean, you did say you struggled last year..."

Jane's expression softened, but she didn't lose her composure. "I struggled personally, not academically. My grades were fine—better than fine, actually. Top 50 in theory in my year."

That caught Ethan completely off guard. "Wait, what?"

Jane chuckled at his surprise, her cheeks tinged slightly pink. "Yeah. Surprised?"

"A little," Ethan admitted, leaning back in his chair. "I guess I just assumed..."

"Let me guess," Jane interrupted, a teasing smile playing on her lips. "You assumed that because I was... going through stuff, my grades suffered?"

"Well, yeah," Ethan said, rubbing the back of his neck. "I mean, most people would..."

"Most people aren't me," Jane replied her voice light but tinged with quiet determination. "Studying was one of the few things I could control back then. It kept me grounded."

Ethan nodded, suddenly feeling a newfound respect for her. "That's... impressive."

Jane's smile softened, and she gestured to the stack of books in front of her. "So, if you're serious about studying, I can help. Advanced mana theory, history, tactics—name it."

Ethan hesitated for a moment, then grinned. "All right, but don't be too hard on me. I've got a reputation to maintain."

"Don't worry," Jane said, opening one of the books and sliding it toward him. "I'll be nice. Mostly."

As the session went on, Ethan found himself genuinely enjoying the time spent with Jane. She was patient but firm, guiding him through concepts he'd struggled with for weeks. Her explanations were clear, her insights sharp, and she even managed to make dry topics like mana density theory seem interesting.

"See?" she said after walking him through a particularly tricky equation. "Not so bad once you break it down."

"Not bad at all," Ethan admitted, leaning back and stretching. "I can't believe you're this good at it. Why haven't you been tutoring me all along?"

Jane laughed softly, a sound that made the quiet library feel warmer. "Because you never asked. And because I didn't think you'd want my help."

"Well, I'm asking now," Ethan said, his tone light but sincere. "Thanks, Jane. Really."

Her cheeks flushed slightly, and she glanced away, pretending to jot something in her notebook. "You're welcome."

For a moment, neither of them spoke, the comfortable silence stretching between them. Ethan found his gaze drifting to Jane again, her focus now back on her notes. She looked peaceful here, surrounded by books and sunlight, her confidence shining through in a way he hadn't fully noticed before.

'She's incredible,' he thought, the realization settling quietly but firmly in his chest.

"Ethan?" Jane's voice broke through his thoughts, and he blinked, realizing he'd been staring.

"Yeah?" he asked, trying to sound casual.

"Focus," she said with a small smile, tapping the book in front of him. "We're not done yet."

Ethan chuckled, leaning forward again. "Yes, ma'am."

Ethan's smartwatch vibrated softly on the table, interrupting the peaceful rhythm of their study session. He glanced down at the notification. It was from Lilia.

"Did you see the news?"

Ethan frowned, his brows knitting together. "News? What's she talking about?"

Jane glanced up from her notebook, noticing his expression. "Everything okay?"

"Not sure," Ethan replied, his voice tinged with curiosity. He opened the message, but it offered no clarification. Instead, another notification popped up, this time more urgent.

"Check the school forums, quick."

Jane tilted her head, her green eyes narrowing slightly. "Lilia doesn't seem like the type to send random messages. What's going on?"

Ethan hesitated for a moment, then sighed. "You're right. Let's find out."

He showed Jane the messages, and she squinted at them, her lips pressing into a thin line. "Lilia wouldn't send that without a reason. Check it."

Pulling his tablet closer, Ethan navigated to the Academy's forums, a bustling hive of gossip, announcements, and the occasional debate. It didn't take long for them to find it. At the top of the trending posts was one with a bold, scandalous headline:

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

Ethan tapped on the post, his chest tightening with unease. As the page loaded, the thumbnail expanded into a collage of images that immediately grabbed their attention. His eyes widened a little as he took in the pictures, and Jane leaned closer, her face a mask of curiosity and growing concern.

The post was filled with photos of Irina—and someone else.

"What?"

And that someone else was not something he had expected.

"Really?"

Ethan stared at the screen, his brow furrowing deeper with every passing second. The boy in the pictures was unmistakable—Astron. His distinctive purple eyes, quiet demeanor, and the detached intensity he always carried were undeniable. If this had been a few months ago, most people wouldn't have recognized him, but Astron had changed recently. His battles, his enigmatic nature, and his unexpected strength had made him a name that people remembered.

Ethan's eyes moved from image to image. The first photo appeared to be taken in a bustling city center, a crowd milling about in the background. Astron was there, standing close to Irina, his expression calm but distant, as always.

The second image, however, caught Ethan's attention. It showed the two of them at what looked like a museum—sleek, modern architecture with a backdrop of glowing exhibits. It seemed familiar, and after a moment of wracking his brain, it clicked.

'The Stellamare Museum... Julia mentioned it when she went there.'

Ethan normally wouldn't have remembered something like that, but at the time, he'd thought the place was unique. Seeing it in the photo now only made him more certain.

"What?" Ethan muttered under his breath, his hazel eyes narrowing as he stared at the images. The more he looked, the more questions churned in his mind. Why were Astron and Irina together? And more importantly, who had taken these photos?

Beside him, Jane leaned closer, her green eyes narrowing as she studied the screen. "That junior? Astron, right?"

Ethan blinked, turning to her. "Hmm? You know him?"

"Yes..." Jane's voice trailed off, her tone thoughtful. "He's gotten a little famous recently. People have been talking about his matches and... well, his attitude."

Ethan nodded, his expression still clouded with confusion. "I see."

Jane straightened, her gaze flicking back to the screen. "But this? This doesn't make sense. Why would someone go to this much trouble to post pictures of them together? And with a headline like that?"

Ethan exhaled slowly, his eyes lingering on the frozen images of Astron and Irina. The captions were heavy with insinuation, but the truth behind them was shrouded in mystery. "Since she's an Emberheart," he murmured, "it makes sense she gets this kind of attention. The name alone draws the media, and even the common people can't help but watch."

Jane tilted her head slightly, her expression softening. "I see... You must have suffered from it as well."

Ethan blinked at her, surprised by the observation. Her gaze was steady, and for a moment, he felt exposed—like she'd seen through a layer of him he hadn't meant to reveal. A faint memory stirred, and he looked away, his voice quieter now. "When I was younger, yeah. The media had its eyes on me too."

Those times were not easy for him either.

Jane didn't press him, but her silence invited him to continue. Ethan leaned back in his chair, running a hand through his hair as the memory resurfaced. "It wasn't easy. Back then, everyone expected so much, and when I didn't measure up... they didn't hold back. A 'failure,' they called me. A disappointment to the Hartley name."

Jane's brows furrowed slightly, but she said nothing, letting him speak at his own pace.

"It's not something I like to think about," Ethan added, his tone firmer now. "Those times are behind me, and I've moved on. But seeing this..." He gestured to the tablet. "It reminds me of how brutal it can be. Irina's strong, but this kind of thing? It can get to anyone."

Jane nodded, her voice quiet. "And Astron?"

Ethan hesitated, his gaze returning to the screen. "I didn't know they were like this."

Chapter 802 - 185.3 - Scandal

Ethan stared at the screen, the images of Astron and Irina still there, frozen as if mocking his attempts to make sense of them. The more he thought about it, the more surreal it felt.

"Astron..." he muttered, shaking his head. "He's always been a mystery. Closed off. He doesn't let people in easily. I've tried more times than I can count, and even now, I feel like I'm only scratching the surface."

Jane nodded, her expression thoughtful. "He doesn't seem like the kind of person who opens up. I've seen him around, and... well, he's not exactly approachable."

Ethan chuckled softly, though there was no humor in it. "That's putting it lightly. He's like a fortress. It took a lot of effort just to get him to acknowledge me as more than a passing acquaintance. And Irina?" He leaned back, rubbing his temples. "Getting close to him with her fiery personality? That would be almost impossible."

Jane tilted her head, curiosity flickering in her eyes. "You know Irina better than I do. She seems strong, determined. But... bickering with someone like Astron?"

"They've done it a lot," Ethan said with a sigh. "Irina's mentioned him before. Back then, her impression of him wasn't exactly glowing. She called him cold, frustrating, and..." He paused, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "I think she once called him a 'stone-faced jerk.'"

Jane blinked, then laughed softly. "That... sounds about right."

Ethan nodded, though his expression remained conflicted. "That's why this doesn't add up. Astron's not the type to seek someone out, and Irina? She's not the type to tolerate someone like him for long. Their personalities are like fire and ice."

"And yet..." Jane gestured toward the screen, her voice trailing off.

"And yet," Ethan echoed, staring at the pictures again. The scenes captured in the images—Astron and Irina together, their postures far from hostile—felt entirely out of character. He could hardly imagine Astron willingly spending time with someone else, let alone the Emberheart heiress. And Irina? She'd always seemed too focused, too sharp, to entertain whatever this was supposed to be.

"This whole thing feels surreal," Ethan said finally, his voice quiet. "I can't picture them like this. Not after everything I've seen."

Jane leaned forward, her green eyes narrowing. "Same here. I don't know Irina personally, but that junior... Astron. He doesn't seem like the type for... this."

Ethan leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table as he stared at the screen, his thoughts a swirl of contradictions. "But at the same time," he said slowly, "Irina isn't the type to spend her time with someone she doesn't like. She's too... deliberate for that. And Astron? He wouldn't willingly stay in someone's presence unless he wanted to. If such people even exist for him."

Jane nodded, her brows furrowing as she considered his words. "Exactly. Neither of them strikes me as the kind to fake anything. So, if these photos are real—and they look real—it's hard to deny that there's... something there."

Ethan exhaled, the weight of the realization settling over him. "Who would've thought?" he murmured, almost to himself.

Jane tilted her head, studying him. "Does it bother you?" she asked cautiously.

Ethan blinked, surprised by the question. He leaned back, a small smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "No. Honestly... I think it's kind of nice."

"Nice?" Jane echoed, her tone skeptical but curious.

Ethan nodded, his gaze softening as he looked at the images again. "Yeah. It's not something I ever would have expected, but... knowing them, it makes sense in a strange way. They're both guarded, both carrying so much on their shoulders. If anyone could understand Astron's silence or Irina's fire, it might be each other."

Jane was silent for a moment, then smiled faintly. "That's... a surprisingly optimistic way to look at it."

Ethan chuckled, scratching the back of his neck. "What can I say? I like seeing people find a connection, even if it's unexpected. They might bicker, but maybe that's their way of... well, getting closer."

Jane leaned back, her arms crossing as she regarded him with a mix of amusement and admiration. "You're not what I expected, you know that?"

"How so?" Ethan asked, tilting his head.

Jane shrugged, her green eyes sparkling. "Most people would be stuck on the scandal or the drama of it all. But you're here rooting for them, even when it doesn't entirely make sense."

Ethan's smile grew. "Guess I like the idea of Astron not being alone for once. And Irina? She deserves someone who gets her, even if it's someone as unlikely as him."

"I see...."

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Sylvie leaned back in her chair, her damp hair falling in loose waves over her shoulders as she scrolled through her notes. The faint hum of her desk lamp filled the quiet room, and for a moment, she felt a sense of calm settle over her. The evening had been a whirlwind of emotions, and she welcomed the peace that came with solitude.

Just as she picked up her pen to jot down a few thoughts, her phone buzzed on the desk. She glanced at the screen, her brow furrowing slightly as Jasmine's name popped up with a message notification.

Jasmine: "You need to see this. Check the forums. Now."

Sylvie hesitated, her heart skipping a beat at the urgency in the text. Jasmine rarely sent messages like this, and when she did, it usually meant something big—or at least something dramatic. Setting her pen aside, Sylvie reached for her phone and opened the message. Her fingers moved swiftly as she navigated to the school forums, her curiosity tinged with unease.

The top post immediately caught her eye, the bold headline practically leaping off the screen:

"Irina Emberheart and Astron: Just Teammates or Something More?"

Sylvie's stomach dropped. Her thumb hovered over the post for a moment before she clicked on it, the page loading slowly as her mind raced with possibilities. When the images finally appeared, her breath hitched.

The first photo showed Astron and Irina in what looked like a crowded city square. They weren't touching, but they stood close enough that their postures seemed... comfortable. Familiar.

The second photo was even worse. It was at the Stellamare Museum, the sleek backdrop unmistakable. Irina's fiery hair seemed to glow in the artificial light as she stood beside Astron, her expression calm but undeniably focused on him. He, in turn, looked completely unbothered, his usual composed demeanor unchanged.

Sylvie stared at the pictures, her mind a whirlwind of emotions she couldn't quite name. The captions beneath each image only added fuel to the fire, their insinuations impossible to ignore.

"Unlikely pair? Or a budding connection?"

"Astron: The enigmatic boy who caught her attention."

Sylvie's grip on her phone tightened, her chest twisting with a pang of something sharp and unpleasant. She tried to steady her breathing, but the more she looked at the images, the harder it became to ignore the storm building inside her.

Why does this bother me so much? she thought, her heart pounding. They're just pictures. Just... rumors. They don't mean anything.

But deep down, she wasn't sure if she believed that. Irina's emotions had been clear enough when she'd approached her earlier—blazing pride, trust, happiness. And now, seeing these images, Sylvie couldn't help but connect the dots in a way that made her chest ache.

Her phone buzzed again, snapping her out of her thoughts.

Jasmine: "Wild, right? Didn't know they were so close. What do you think?"

Sylvie hesitated, her fingers hovering over the keyboard. She didn't know how to respond—didn't know what she thought. Her mind was a mess of conflicting feelings, her [Authority] only amplifying the emotions she didn't want to confront.

Finally, she typed back, her message short and vague.

Sylvie: "It's unexpected."

She set her phone down and leaned back in her chair, her gaze drifting to the ceiling. The calm she'd felt earlier was long gone, replaced by a restless energy that refused to settle.

Unexpected. That was one way to put it. But as Sylvie sat there, her thoughts circling endlessly, she couldn't ignore the one question that lingered in the back of her mind.

Would I ever be in a picture like that with him?

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Maya sat in her room, her mind still heavy from the events of the day. The weight of her confrontation with Irina lingered, a dull ache in her chest that refused to fade. She leaned back in her chair, her eyes unfocused as she tried to steady herself.

Her phone buzzed on the desk, breaking the silence. Without thinking, she reached for it and glanced at the screen. The notification was from the academy's forum, a trending post catching her attention:

"Irina Emberheart and Astron: Just Teammates or Something More?"

Maya's heart skipped a beat. Her thumb hovered over the notification, hesitation gripping her. A part of her didn't want to know, didn't want to see. But curiosity—no, something deeper—urged her forward. She tapped the notification, the page loading agonizingly slowly as her thoughts raced.

And then, the pictures appeared.

The first image was simple enough: Astron and Irina standing in a bustling city square. They weren't touching, but their proximity suggested a familiarity that made Maya's chest tighten. Her breath hitched as she scrolled to the second image.

It was worse.

Irina stood beside Astron, her fiery hair glowing under the sleek, artificial lights. Her expression was calm but unmistakably focused on him. And Astron... he looked as unbothered and composed as ever, his violet eyes betraying nothing.

The captions beneath the images made it worse:

"Unlikely pair? Or a budding connection?"

"Is the Emberheart heiress finally showing her softer side?"

"Astron: The enigmatic boy who caught her attention."

Maya's fingers tightened around her phone, her knuckles whitening as her chest burned with an emotion she refused to name. Her gaze lingered on the second image, Irina's calm, confident posture radiating a sense of ease beside Astron. The very sight of it gnawed at her, each second building a pressure in her chest that she couldn't ignore.

And then, as if on cue, the voice came again.

"See..." it hissed, curling through her thoughts like smoke. "That is why you're losing."

And Maya had accepted that....

Chapter 803 Chapter 186.1 - Blown up

"See....That is why you're losing."

Maya flinched, her free hand clenching into a fist as the voice echoed louder, its malice cutting through her fragile composure.

"Look at her," it whispered, venom dripping from every word. "Standing there beside him as if she belongs. As if she has the right. And you? You're here. Watching. Seething. Weak."



"Stop," Maya muttered under her breath, her voice trembling. She tried to shut the voice out, but it pressed on, unrelenting.

"You had the chance to stand tall, to stake your claim. But you faltered. And now, look. She's there. And you're nothing but a bystander, watching as someone else takes what could've been yours."

Maya's hands trembled, her nails digging into her palm as she fought to suppress the surge of emotion welling up inside her. Her mind raced, the images on her phone blurring as the voice's words burrowed deeper.

"This is why you need me," it continued, its tone softening but losing none of its venom. "Without me, you'll always be like this. Weak. Watching. Waiting. Alone." Maya closed her eyes, trying to drown out the voice, but its words resonated too deeply, pulling at the insecurities she had tried so hard to bury.

She exhaled shakily, forcing herself to focus. "You're wrong," she whispered, though her voice wavered. "I'm not weak. I don't need you to fight my battles."

The voice chuckled, a low, mocking sound that sent chills down her spine. "Oh, Maya. Sweet, naive Maya. You've already lost. You just don't want to admit it."

Maya's breath quickened, her heart pounding as she stared at the pictures again. The knot in her chest tightened further, and for a moment, she felt as though the walls of her room were closing in.

And yet, amidst the chaos, a single thought cut through the storm: "This isn't over." Maya's fists unclenched slightly, the tension in her shoulders easing as she inhaled deeply. The voice might be loud now, but it didn't define her. She had faced it before, and she would face it again.

Her gaze hardened as she stared at the images once more, her mind steadier now. "This isn't over," she said aloud, her voice quiet but resolute.

The voice fell silent, but its presence lingered, watching, waiting.

For now, Maya focused on the task ahead. She wouldn't let this be her defeat. Not now. Not ever.

The voice chuckled, low and smooth, its tone curling through Maya's thoughts like a teasing smirk.

"So," it murmured, almost lazily. "You've finally decided to accept me. Took you long enough. But let's not forget..."

The playful edge in its voice sharpened suddenly, cutting through Maya's brief sense of clarity.

"I have my conditions."

Maya's breath hitched, the memory surfacing unbidden.

It was that time-the first time.

The crimson void. The suffocating weight. The piercing crimson eyes of her other self boring into her with an intensity that had felt overwhelming.

And those words.

"I want to be the one talking to him."

At the time, Maya had refused outright. She couldn't risk letting this wild, dangerous part of her psyche near Astron. The other self's unrelenting hunger, its chaotic nature -it had been too much.

Even now, as she recalled it, a chill ran down her spine.

The voice didn't wait for her response, its tone dipping into something almost amused. "You remember, don't you? When I told you what I wanted? I wasn't lying then, and I'm not lying now. If you want to keep fighting Irina-or anyone else-you need me. And if you don't want to lose, then next time..."

It paused, as if savoring the weight of the moment, then finished with deliberate precision.

"...let me have the time."

Maya's jaw clenched, her fingers curling into fists once more. "Let you?" she asked, her voice tight, her tone edged with disbelief.

"Yes," the voice replied smoothly, almost as if the request were simple. "Remember my condition? I want to be the one to speak to him. I want him to see me."

Maya shook her head, her breath quickening. "That's not happening. It's not an option."

The voice laughed again, softer this time but no less unnerving. "Still so stubborn, aren't you? You think I want to hurt him?"

"I know you're crazy enough to try," Maya snapped, her voice rising slightly. "Crazy?" the voice echoed, mockingly. "Oh, Maya, I'm not crazy. I just feel what you refuse to acknowledge. That pull. That connection. And I feel it... stronger than you

ever could."

Maya's breath caught, her heart pounding in her chest. The words struck a chord she didn't want to admit existed, and the voice took full advantage.

"Look at you," it continued, its tone into something almost coaxing. "Even now, you're hesitating. You're afraid-afraid that if you let me in, he'll see me. But isn't that the point? Don't you want him to see all of you? Or are you content to let him look right through you?"

"Enough," Maya said, her voice trembling but resolute. "I won't let you take over. Not now. Not ever."

The voice sighed dramatically, a sound of exaggerated disappointment. "Such a shame. You're still clinging to the idea that you can do this without me. But you'll see, Maya. You'll see soon enough."

Its presence began to recede, its final words lingering like a haunting whisper. "You can fight me all you want. But eventually, you'll come to me. Because without me... you'll lose him."

The silence that followed was deafening, the weight of the voice's words settling heavily over Maya like a suffocating shroud. She sat there for a long moment, her hands trembling slightly, her thoughts a tangled mess of defiance and doubt.

"No," she whispered to herself, her voice quiet but firm. "I'll find another way. I don't need you to do this."

Her gaze flickered to the faint moonlight streaming through her window, a small but steady reminder of the light she clung to amidst the darkness.

But even as her resolve hardened, a part of her couldn't shake the voice's final words. Would she, one day, be forced to face the truth of them?

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The classroom buzzed with its usual energy as students filtered in, chatting about everything from the previous day's lessons to rumors circulating the academy. Ethan sat at his desk, his bag slung over the back of his chair as he scrolled through his tablet, trying to focus on the syllabus for the day.

The sound of familiar footsteps made him glance up, and he wasn't surprised to see

Julia striding toward him, her energy as vibrant as ever. Behind her, Lilia followed with her usual measured pace, Lucas trailed with a casual air, and Carl brought up the rear, his steady presence grounding the group.

Julia plopped into the seat beside Ethan, dropping her bag on the desk with a loud thud. "Well, well, well," she said, leaning toward him with a mischievous grin. "Guess

what kept me up until midnight?"

Ethan raised an eyebrow, already sensing trouble. "Grinding ranked?"

Julia's grin widened. "That too. But no, I'm talking about the pictures."

Ethan's stomach sank slightly, but he kept his face neutral. "The pictures?"

"You know..." Julia sing-songed, her voice carrying just enough to draw the attention of nearby students. "Those pictures. Our 'silver' fire queen and Mister Cold-a match made in icy flames."

Lilia raised an eyebrow as she took her seat, her red eyes gleaming with curiosity. "You mean Irina and Astron?" she asked, her tone calm but intrigued. "Exactly!" Julia said, turning to face Lilia with mock excitement. "I mean, come on, Who would've thought? Irina Emberheart, queen of fire and fury, spending time with Astron Natusalune, the guy who could probably freeze time with a glance?"

Lucas snorted softly, leaning back in his chair. "I saw the pictures this morning. Pretty tame if you ask me. But people love to read into things."

"Oh, please," Julia said, waving him off. "Tame or not, the implications are what's juicy. They were at a museum together, Lucas. A museum. That screams scandal-or

romance.

Carl sighed, crossing his arms as he leaned back in his chair. "Or, you know, they

could've just been at the same place at the same time. Not everything is a conspiracy"

Julia ignored him, her grin sharpening as she leaned closer to Ethan. "And get this," she said in a stage whisper. "I think that's why he didn't choose me."

Ethan blinked, caught off guard. "What?"

"You heard me," Julia said, her tone dripping with mock tragedy. "I, Julia Middleton,

was rejected by Mister Cold because his icy heart has already been thawed by a

certain fiery someone."

Ethan rolled his eyes, though he couldn't hide the small smile tugging at his lips. "Or maybe he just didn't want to deal with your... energy."

Julia gasped, placing a hand over her heart in mock offense. "Ethan Hartley, how dare you. My energy is what makes me irresistible."

"Sure, if by irresistible you mean overwhelming," Lilia chimed in, her tone light but cutting.

Julia shot her a glare, though it was softened by her grin. "Don't you start, Thornheart. We all know you secretly thrive off my chaos."

Lilia smirked, leaning back in her chair. "It's entertaining. I'll give you that." As the group bantered, Ethan's gaze drifted toward the door, half-expecting Irina or Astron to walk in at any moment. The images from the forum post were still fresh in

his mind, and while he wasn't one to jump to conclusions, he couldn't deny the curiosity gnawing at him.

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Julia, ever observant, caught his wandering gaze and leaned closer. "What's on your mind, Zeus? Thinking about the fire queen and her frosty companion?"

Ethan gave her a flat look. "Stop calling me that."

"Fine, fine," Julia said, waving her hand dismissively. "But seriously, don't tell me you're

not curious. I mean, it's not every day you see someone like Irina willingly spend time with someone like Astron. Let alone in a place like Stellamare."

"I'm curious," Lilia admitted, her tone thoughtful. "But I agree with Carl-there's no

point speculating without facts. Irina's smart. If she's spending time with Astron, there's probably a good reason."

"Or," Julia said, her grin returning, "she's fallen for his mysterious, brooding charm. You know, the whole 'silent protector with a tragic backstory' vibe."

Lucas rolled his eyes. "You're reading way too many novels again." "Guilty," Julia said with a wink. "But hey, can you blame me? Reality's so much better

with a little spice."

CREAK!

Just then the door opened...

And Irina entered.

Chapter 804 Chapter 186.2 - Blown up

The creak of the classroom door opening immediately drew the group's attention. Irina stepped in, her fiery yellow eyes scanning the room with her usual confidence, her fiery hair catching the light as she strode toward her seat. If she noticed the murmurs and stares, she gave no indication, her composed demeanor unwavering.

Julia, however, was already on her feet, her blue eyes gleaming with mischief. She practically pounced, closing the distance between them in a matter of seconds.

"Well, well, well," Julia said, her voice dripping with exaggerated drama. "If it isn't our silver fire queen. Tell me, Irina, how does it feel to be the academy's hottest topic?"

Irina arched an eyebrow, her gaze cool as she regarded Julia. "Good morning to you too, Julia."

"Oh, don't play coy," Julia teased, circling her like a predator sizing up its prey. "The pictures? The headlines? The mystery romance with Mister Cold? Care to explain?"

Irina calmly pulled out her chair and sat down, smoothing her uniform without sparing Julia another glance. "Explain what? That I went to a museum?"

Julia's grin widened as she leaned closer, her tone sing-song. "With Astron? The guy who barely speaks to anyone?"

Irina tilted her head slightly, her fiery eyes meeting Julia's mischievous gaze. "Yes. And?"

Julia blinked, momentarily caught off guard by Irina's unshaken composure. "And? That's it? You're just going to sit there all cool and confident while the entire academy speculates about you two?"

Irina smirked faintly, her voice calm and unwavering. "Why wouldn't I? Let them speculate. It's not my problem."

Julia let out a dramatic groan, throwing her hands up in mock frustration. "You're no fun! Where's the blushing, the stammering, the 'it's not what it looks like'?"

"I don't do that," Irina replied, her tone as sharp as her smirk.

Julia slumped into her chair, muttering, "Of course you don't."

The rest of the group, intrigued by the exchange, leaned in as the conversation shifted to more direct questions.

Lilia was the first to speak, her red eyes gleaming with curiosity. "At that time when you mentioned that you met Astron during the break... was that over something like this?"

"Yes," Irina replied simply, her confidence unshaken. "Why not?"

Lucas raised an eyebrow, leaning forward slightly. "Why not? I mean... your mother..."

"She knows," Irina interrupted, her tone firm but calm.

Carl frowned, clearly surprised. "She knows?"

"Of course," Irina said, crossing her arms as her gaze swept over the group. "Do you think I'm that stupid? If I'm spending time with someone, I make sure there's nothing to hide."

Julia's jaw dropped, though the sparkle in her eyes showed her amusement. "Hold on, your mother knows? The Emberheart matriarch? And she's... okay with it?"

"Yes," Irina said matter-of-factly, leaning back in her chair. "She knows everything. I'm not about to do anything that would jeopardize my family or my reputation."

Ethan, who had been silent until now, finally spoke, his tone thoughtful. "So, this isn't just some casual thing, is it?"

Irina's smirk deepened, a flicker of amusement dancing in her fiery amber eyes. She leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms as she looked directly at Ethan. "What makes you think so?" she asked, her tone laced with a playful edge.

Ethan hesitated, caught slightly off guard by the question. He scratched the back of his neck, his hazel eyes flicking briefly to the others before returning to Irina. "...Well... it just doesn't look like something casual."

Irina tilted her head, clearly enjoying the attention. "Oh? And what exactly does it look like, Ethan?"

Before he could fumble for a response, Julia chimed in, her voice brimming with mischief. "See? See? Even Ethan thinks there's more to it! Irina, you're seriously holding out on us."

Irina raised a hand, silencing Julia with a sharp glance. "Don't get ahead of yourself, Julia."



But Julia wasn't one to be deterred. She leaned forward with a grin, her blue eyes sparkling with glee. "Come on, Irina. You're ranked third. You're practically a celebrity around here. Don't you think this kind of thing is, you know... beneath you?"

Irina's smirk faltered slightly, her fiery gaze narrowing at Julia. "And what exactly are you implying?"

Julia grinned wider, clearly delighted to have found a weak spot. "Oh, nothing. Just that someone in the top five might want to keep a spotless reputation. You know, avoid giving the gossipers fuel for the fire."

Irina's fingers drummed lightly against the desk, her composure steady but her expression sharpening. "Are you suggesting that spending time with Astron somehow tarnishes my reputation?"

"Well," Julia drawled, her grin practically splitting her face. "He's Mister Cold, after all. Not exactly the most... relatable guy. Makes you wonder why you'd bother."

Irina's eyes flashed, and for a brief moment, the air around her seemed to grow warmer. She straightened in her chair, her smirk returning but with an unmistakable edge. "Let me make one thing clear, Julia," she said, her voice calm but carrying a distinct undertone of fire. "I don't care what people think. I spend my time with whoever I choose, and no amount of teasing from you is going to change that."

The group exchanged glances, the tension palpable. Even Julia, ever the instigator, raised her hands in mock surrender, though her grin remained. "Alright, alright. Relax, Queen of Fire. I was just joking."

"Make better jokes," Irina replied coolly, though her smirk softened slightly as she leaned back again. "And next time, think twice before bringing rank into it."

Julia chuckled, shaking her head. "Man, you're fiery today. I guess it's true what they say—Astron really does bring out another side of you."

Irina didn't dignify the comment with a response, though the faintest hint of a blush crept into her cheeks. She masked it well, her confidence radiating as she redirected her attention to her tablet, signaling the end of the discussion.

But then the group's playful banter was interrupted when Lilia, seated closest to the back of the classroom, tilted her head slightly and nudged her chin toward the door. "Oh... he's here."

All eyes turned as Astron entered the classroom, his sharp purple eyes scanning the room with his usual calm, detached demeanor. His gait was measured, his posture straight, and while his expression betrayed no emotion, there was a distinct air about him—as if he were deep in thought. The low murmur of the classroom quieted slightly as he walked in, his presence commanding attention even without effort.

Astron's gaze swept over the rows of desks, eventually landing on Irina's group. For a brief moment, his eyes locked with theirs, unreadable but deliberate.

Julia, never one to let an opportunity slip by, shot up from her chair with a mischievous grin. "This is going to be good," she muttered under her breath, practically skipping over to intercept him.

She stepped directly into his path, her blue eyes sparkling with mischief as she tilted her head at him. "So that's why you didn't choose me, huh?" she asked, her voice loud enough to turn a few heads in the room. "To think Irina got to you before anyone else."

Astron paused, his gaze shifting to Julia with his trademark calm. His voice was dry, carrying no hint of the amusement Julia was clearly fishing for. "Good morning to you, as well."

Julia blinked, momentarily thrown off before her grin returned. "Ah, good morning, Mister Cold of the Lady of Fire."

Astron's expression didn't shift, but his silence spoke volumes. Without responding, he stepped around her and continued toward his desk, his movements unhurried but purposeful.

Julia, undeterred, quickly fell into step beside him. "What? No denial? No witty retort? Come on, Astron, you're killing me here."

Astron pulled out his chair and sat down, clearly unfazed by Julia's relentless energy. As he adjusted his tablet, he finally glanced at her, his tone as dry as ever. "Do you need something, Julia?"

Julia gasped dramatically, clutching her chest. "Need something? I'm just trying to have a friendly chat with my dear classmate who's suddenly the talk of the academy. Is that so wrong?"

Astron returned his focus to his tablet. "Yes."

Julia laughed, plopping herself into the seat beside him despite his clear disinterest. "You know, you and Irina are way too alike. You both think you can just brush off people like me. But news flash—I'm impossible to ignore."

Astron didn't respond, though the faintest flicker of something—amusement, perhaps—passed through his eyes before it disappeared.

At their original table, the group watched the scene unfold with varying degrees of amusement.

Ethan leaned back, shaking his head. "She's relentless."

Lilia smirked. "And he's unshakable. It's almost impressive."

Irina, her expression cool and composed, watched the exchange with faint curiosity. "She's wasting her energy."

Lucas chuckled softly. "Maybe, but it's entertaining."

Back at Astron's desk, Julia continued her playful barrage. "So, come on, Astron. Be honest. Did Irina bribe you to join her team? Or was it her charm that won you over?"

Astron

finally looked at her, his purple eyes steady but devoid of any warmth. "Neither."

Julia leaned in closer, undeterred. "Then what was it? Give me something, Mister Cold."

Astron sighed softly, adjusting the tablet on his desk as if she weren't even there. "If you're done, I'd like to prepare for class."

Julia pouted, dramatically flopping back in her seat. "Fine, fine. I'll leave you alone... for now."

Astron gave no acknowledgment, his attention already back on his tablet. Julia, though thwarted for the moment, still wore a triumphant grin as she returned to the group.

"Well," she said, dropping into her seat with a flourish, "he's as talkative as ever."

Ethan raised an eyebrow. "And what exactly did you expect?"

Julia grinned. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe a confession? A secret love letter to Irina? Something juicy?"

Irina shot her a flat look. "Keep dreaming, Julia."

Chapter 805 - 187.1 - Sylvie is here too

The morning light poured into the classroom through the tall windows, casting golden streaks across the desks. The students of HA25 sat quietly, the usual hum of pre-class chatter replaced with a nervous energy. The atmosphere was expectant—Professor Kain's entrance always carried an air of gravitas, and today was no exception.

The door opened with a soft creak, and Professor Darius Kain strode into the room, his tall frame commanding immediate attention. His sharp gray eyes swept across the students as he reached the podium, his movements deliberate and confident. The sound of his boots against the polished floor echoed in the silence.

"Good morning," he began, his deep voice resonating through the room. He placed a sleek tablet on the podium, briefly glancing at it before addressing the class. "I trust you've all had a productive week and have finalized your team submissions."

The students exchanged glances, a ripple of curiosity and apprehension moving through them. Professor Kain's gaze flicked up, meeting their eyes with a slight smile—a rare but genuine expression of approval.

"I'm pleased to report," he continued, "that all team submissions have been reviewed and approved. It seems you've all been responsible enough to adhere to the academy's rules and avoid overlooking the ranking limits or team size requirements."

A faint murmur of relief spread through the room, though it was quickly silenced by Kain's steady presence.

"This is a promising start," he said, his tone firm but carrying a note of encouragement. "It shows that you're taking this course—and its importance—seriously. Keep it that way."

He picked up his tablet, tapping on it to bring up the roster on the classroom screen. The names of the approved teams flashed in neat columns, and the students leaned forward, their curiosity piqued as they scanned the list for familiar names and groupings.

"As you can see," Kain said, gesturing to the screen, "your teams are now officially established. From this point forward, you are accountable not just for yourselves, but for one another. Success or failure will be shared among your team."

He let the words hang in the air for a moment, his sharp gaze sweeping over the room.

"Now," he continued, his tone shifting slightly, "let me inform you about today's schedule. This afternoon, we will commence the first practical session for this course."

The room buzzed with murmurs again, excitement and nervousness bubbling up in equal measure.

Kain raised a hand, silencing the room with his commanding presence. "The session will begin promptly at 2:00 PM. You are to report to the Training Grounds no later than 1:45 PM. Being late will not be tolerated, and excuses will not be accepted."

His gray eyes narrowed slightly, his expression serious. "The practical session will test your ability to function as a team under controlled conditions. It is an introduction—nothing more—but I expect you to treat it with the seriousness it deserves."

Julia leaned over to Ethan, whispering, "Controlled conditions, huh? Wonder how controlled it'll really be."

Ethan smirked but kept his gaze forward, not wanting to draw Kain's attention.

Kain continued, his tone unwavering. "This session is designed to assess your initial teamwork capabilities and provide a baseline for improvement. Do not treat it as a competition. Your focus should be on collaboration, adaptability, and communication. Remember: the battlefield doesn't reward lone heroes—it rewards teams that work as one."

Professor Kain took a step back, his sharp gray eyes scanning the room to ensure his message had settled in. The murmurs of excitement and apprehension faded as the students straightened in their seats, the gravity of his words lingering in the air.

"Now that the administrative matters are out of the way," Kain said, his tone shifting to one of instruction, "let's begin today's lecture."

He tapped his tablet again, and the classroom screen came to life, displaying a detailed diagram of a simulated battlefield. The layout depicted a dense forest, a river cutting through the terrain, and scattered enemy positions marked in red.

"Today's focus," Kain began, gesturing to the screen, "is on field awareness and role optimization. These are the foundations of effective teamwork, and understanding them is critical to your success—both in this course and as hunters."

The diagram zoomed in on a specific section, highlighting a small team of figures in blue attempting to cross the river while under attack.

"Let's start with this scenario," Kain said, his voice steady but commanding. "A team is tasked with retrieving an artifact located across the river. The enemy is entrenched on the opposite bank, and the terrain is uneven, making direct confrontation risky. The team has four members: a Striker, a Defender, a Support, and a Tactician. What's the best approach?"

The students exchanged glances, a few of them already whispering ideas. Kain raised an eyebrow, signaling that he expected someone to answer aloud.

Julia raised her hand, her confident smirk in place. "The Striker should create a distraction, draw the enemies' attention away from the river, while the Tactician coordinates the movement of the Defender and Support to secure the crossing."

"Good," Kain said with a nod. "That's one approach. But what are the risks?"

Lilia leaned forward, her sharp green eyes focused. "If the Striker goes too far ahead or engages for too long, they risk being isolated and overwhelmed. The Defender would need to hold position effectively to prevent that."

"Correct," Kain said, his gaze shifting to the rest of the room. "Adaptability isn't just about having a plan—it's about anticipating the consequences of that plan and preparing contingencies. What happens if the enemy has reinforcements hidden in the forest?"

Ethan raised his hand, his voice calm but thoughtful. "The Tactician would need to account for that possibility before committing to the plan. If reinforcements appear, the team might have to regroup and adjust, prioritizing defense while reassessing the situation."

"Exactly. A rigid team is a dead team. Flexibility is your greatest asset, and it starts with understanding your roles and how they interact."

He tapped the screen, and the simulation played out, showing how different strategies unfolded. As the students watched, Kain highlighted both successes and failures, pausing to point out critical moments where decisions—good or bad—determined the outcome.

For the remainder of the lecture....things continued just like that.

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As the class ended, the students began packing up their belongings, the tension from Professor Kain's commanding presence slowly dissipating. Julia leaned back in her chair with a long, exaggerated sigh, throwing her arms up in mock frustration.

"Ugh, these classes are going to kill me," she groaned, her blue eyes darting to Ethan. "Do you know how hard it is to sit still for that long and actually pay attention?"

Ethan raised an eyebrow, his hazel eyes calm as he replied, "You could try listening for once. You might actually learn something."

Julia shot him a mock glare, though the smirk on her face betrayed her amusement. "Oh, come on, Ethan. Even you have to admit Kain's lectures are like slow torture."

"They're fine," Ethan said simply, gathering his things with a measured efficiency. "You just don't like being told what to do."

Julia gasped, clutching her chest in mock offense. "Me? Not like being told what to do? How dare you suggest such a thing."

While their banter continued, Irina stood silently, smoothing her uniform as she pushed her chair back. Her fiery yellow eyes flicked toward Astron, who was still seated at his desk, calmly reviewing something on his tablet.

Her lips curved into a subtle smirk. Now that her photos with Astron were all over the academy's gossip channels, there was no point in hiding their association. If anything, she intended to lean into it. 'Let them talk,' she thought, her fiery hair swaying as she stepped away from her seat. 'If they're going to speculate, I might as well give them something to speculate about.'

She strode purposefully across the room, her movements deliberate but natural, drawing subtle glances from her classmates. The air seemed to shift as she approached Astron's desk, her confidence radiating with every step.

When she reached him, she placed a hand lightly on the edge of his desk, her amber eyes gleaming with amusement as she tilted her head slightly. "You ready to go?" she asked, her tone casual but carrying a distinct edge of ownership.

Astron glanced up, his sharp purple eyes meeting hers with his usual calm demeanor. "I wasn't aware we were leaving together," he said evenly, though there was a faint flicker of curiosity in his gaze.

Irina smirked, leaning in just slightly. "Well, now you are."

Their interaction didn't go unnoticed. Julia, who had been mid-complaint, suddenly stopped, her blue eyes widening as she nudged Ethan. "Oh, my gods," she whispered, her voice dripping with delight. "She's really doing it."

Ethan glanced over, his expression neutral but his curiosity piqued. "She's not even trying to hide it anymore."

Lucas, who had been quietly packing his things, glanced toward the scene and chuckled softly. "Irina doesn't do anything halfway. You know that."

Back at Astron's desk, Irina straightened, her smirk widening as she noticed the quiet murmurs around the room. She stepped back slightly, giving Astron enough space to stand. "Come on."

But then before she could leave, she had heard something.

"Wait."

It was the voice of someone whom she didn't expect.

"Shouldn't we talk about the practical session as a team?"

It was Sylvie.

Chapter 806 - 187.2 - Sylvie is here too

Sylvie sat at her desk, her fingers loosely gripping her pen as she stared blankly at her notebook. The lively chatter around her faded into background noise, her attention riveted to the scene unfolding across the classroom. Her chest tightened as her gaze flicked between Irina and Astron, her mind replaying the events she'd just witnessed.

The pictures. The headlines. The way Irina seemed so composed, so confident when faced with the teasing from her classmates. Everything about her demeanor suggested one thing—something Sylvie wasn't ready to accept.

She really is... Sylvie's thoughts trailed off, the rest of the sentence too painful to finish. The words felt heavy, like they carried a truth she wasn't prepared to confront. Her grip on the pen tightened as her mind spiraled. She really is close to him.

The way Irina had handled Julia's relentless teasing with such ease, her confidence in admitting she had nothing to hide—it all pointed to a connection Sylvie couldn't deny. And Astron... His calm,

steady demeanor never faltered, even in the face of Julia's probing. He never offered any denial, any clarification. He didn't need to. The silence spoke volumes.

Sylvie swallowed hard, her chest aching with a mixture of emotions she couldn't name. She wanted to look away, to focus on anything else, but her gaze kept drifting back to them. Why does this bother me so much? she wondered, but the answer was already there, simmering beneath the surface.

Jasmine's voice broke through her spiraling thoughts, soft but insistent. "Hey, Sylvie," she said, leaning closer. "You've been quiet. What's on your mind?"

Sylvie blinked, startled, and quickly shook her head. "Nothing," she murmured, her voice barely audible.

Jasmine frowned, her blue eyes narrowing slightly as she studied her friend. "Come on, Sylvie. I know you. You're thinking about it, aren't you? The pictures. All this Irina and Astron stuff."

Sylvie hesitated, her fingers curling tightly around her pen. "It's... not a big deal," she said, though her voice lacked conviction.

Jasmine sighed, leaning back slightly in her chair. "You don't have to lie, you know. I saw the pictures too. Everyone has. And yeah, it looks a certain way, but that doesn't mean it's the whole story."

Sylvie didn't respond, her thoughts too tangled to form coherent words. Jasmine's attempt at reassurance felt hollow, even if she meant well. The pictures, the way Irina acted, the way Astron didn't deny anything—it all felt too real, too impossible to dismiss.

Jasmine leaned closer again, her voice softer this time. "Sylvie, seriously. I don't think it's what you're imagining. Astron... He's not the type to get involved with people like that. You know that."

Sylvie nodded faintly, but her mind wasn't convinced. Then why does Irina act like this? Why does it feel like there's something there? The questions clawed at her, refusing to let go.

Jasmine hesitated before continuing. "Look, maybe they're just.... You know how it works—sometimes people work together for the sake of strategy. It doesn't mean there's anything more to it."

Sylvie forced a small smile, though it didn't reach her eyes. "Maybe," she said quietly, her tone lacking any real conviction.

Jasmine sighed, her expression softening. "Sylvie, you don't have to figure it all out right now. Just... don't let this get to you, okay? It might not be as bad as you think."

Sylvie nodded again, her grip loosening on the pen as she tried to focus on Jasmine's words. But no matter how much she tried, the storm of emotions inside her wouldn't settle. Her gaze flickered back to Astron, who sat calmly at his desk, his focus entirely on his tablet. He was the same as always—unshakable, unreadable.

And Irina... Irina's confidence, her composure, only made it harder to ignore the truth staring Sylvie in the face.

She really is...

Sylvie clenched her fists, the ache in her chest growing. It wasn't jealousy—at least, that's what she told herself. But whatever it was, it refused to let her rest.

Jasmine leaned closer, her tone shifting to something sharper, more resolute. "Sylvie, even if that is the case—so what?"

Sylvie blinked, her chest tightening at the bluntness of Jasmine's words. "What do you mean?" she asked, her voice trembling slightly.

Jasmine crossed her arms, her blue eyes narrowing with determination. "I mean, if you want something, go and take it. Why should you just sit here and concede? Why should you let someone else have it without even trying?"

Sylvie's breath caught, her thoughts spiraling as Jasmine's words sank in. "It's not that simple," she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Why not?" Jasmine countered, her voice unwavering. "You're overthinking this, Sylvie. You're acting like you've already lost, but you haven't even tried. If you care about him—if you want to stand by his side—then do something about it."

Sylvie clenched her fists, her gaze dropping to her lap. "It's not just about me," she said, her voice trembling. "There's so much more to it. And what if... what if he doesn't feel the same way?"

Jasmine let out a sharp sigh, leaning back in her chair as she studied her friend. "Then at least you'll know," she said firmly. "But sitting here, torturing yourself over what might be—that's not helping anyone. Least of all you."

Sylvie's chest ached as her thoughts twisted and turned, Jasmine's words cutting through her like a blade. If you want something, go and take it. The idea felt impossible—reckless, even—but a small part of her couldn't ignore the truth in it.

Why am I so afraid? Why do I feel like I don't have the right to try?

Because deep down, the thought of rejection—the thought of losing even the small connection she had with Astron—was too painful to bear.

"I don't know if I can," Sylvie said finally, her voice quiet and strained. "What if... what if it's already too late?"

Jasmine frowned, her gaze softening slightly. "It's not too late unless you decide it is," she said gently. "Sylvie, you're stronger than this. I've seen it. And you know Astron—he's not someone who makes decisions lightly. If you want to be a part of his life, then fight for it. Don't just sit here and let it slip away."

Sylvie's heart pounded, her mind a whirlwind of doubt and resolve.

Fight for it.

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Sylvie sat frozen in her seat as she watched Irina approach Astron, the composed confidence of her strides catching the attention of nearly everyone in the room. The fiery glow of Irina's aura pulsed faintly in Sylvie's awareness, her [Authority] picking up the swirling emotions beneath the surface.



To anyone else, Irina seemed completely unshaken—her head held high, her movements deliberate and sure. But to Sylvie, the truth was clear.

Irina's emotions were like a whirlwind.

Beneath the pride and self-assuredness, Sylvie could feel the faint flicker of something else. Nervousness. It was subtle, carefully hidden, but it was there—a trembling thread running through the vibrant colors of her emotions. Alongside it were shades of eagerness, the soft pink glow of affection, and a distinct note of determination.

Even if she's trying to act tough... Even Irina feels nervous, Sylvie thought, her chest tightening. That realization hit her harder than she expected, stirring something deep within her. Then it's okay for me to feel nervous too. Right?

But the thought brought no comfort. Her hands trembled slightly as she gripped the edge of her desk, her gaze flicking between Irina and Astron. It's not enough to just understand. I need to act.

Her breath quickened as she watched Irina lean toward Astron, her smirk faint but unmistakable. The murmurs in the classroom grew louder, Julia's delighted whispers cutting through the noise like knives. Sylvie clenched her fists, her heart pounding as a single, inescapable truth settled over her.

If I don't act now, I'll regret it forever.

Summoning every ounce of courage she could muster, Sylvie pushed her chair back and stood, the scrape of wood against the floor drawing a few curious glances. Her legs felt unsteady beneath her, but she steadied herself, forcing her voice to remain calm as she spoke.

"Wait," she said, her words cutting through the low hum of the room.

Irina turned, her fiery eyes narrowing slightly as she looked at Sylvie. The faintest flicker of surprise crossed her face, though she masked it quickly with her usual composure.

Sylvie met Irina's gaze, her heart racing as she forced herself to continue. "Shouldn't we talk about the practical session as a team?" she asked, her voice steady despite the storm raging inside her.

The room went quiet for a moment, the air thick with tension as all eyes turned to the two girls. Astron's sharp purple eyes shifted to Sylvie, his expression unreadable but focused.

Irina raised an eyebrow, her smirk returning as she crossed her arms. "The practical session?" she asked, her tone calm but carrying a faint edge of curiosity.

"Yes," Sylvie said firmly, her gaze unwavering. "We need to plan as a team. It's important to coordinate if we want to succeed."

For a moment, Irina said nothing, her fiery eyes studying Sylvie intently. The whirlwind of emotions beneath her composed exterior flickered in Sylvie's awareness—curiosity, a touch of amusement, and a faint but growing note of irritation.

Irina's fiery yellow eyes locked onto Sylvie's, her smirk deepening as she crossed her arms. "We can meet an hour before the practical session," she said, her tone casual but carrying an unmistakable edge. "That's more than enough time to plan."

Sylvie's heart raced, her chest tightening as the tension in the air grew heavier. But she refused to back down. Clenching her fists at her sides, she steadied her voice. "Why not earlier?" she

countered, her tone firm. "If we meet sooner, we can make sure everything is aligned. We'd have more time to adjust if something doesn't work."

Irina raised an eyebrow, her smirk not faltering. "One hour is enough," she said again, her voice calm but unwavering. "We're all competent enough to handle this without wasting time on over-preparation."

Sylvie stepped forward slightly, her gaze unwavering. "What if it isn't?" she asked, her voice sharper now. "What if something unexpected happens and we don't have enough time to adapt? Shouldn't we make sure we're fully prepared?"

The room was deathly silent, the weight of their exchange drawing the attention of nearly every student. Irina's smirk faltered for a fraction of a second, a flicker of irritation crossing her face before she quickly masked it with her usual composure.

And then she turned her head to Astron.

"Then....What do you think?"

Chapter 807 187.3 - Sylvie is here too

Irina's fiery eyes narrowed slightly, her annoyance bubbling beneath the surface as she studied Sylvie. It wasn't that she didn't like her; in fact, Sylvie was generally someone Irina found tolerable, even respectable. But this sudden assertiveness—this push to change the plan—was entirely out of character for her.

'This girl...' Irina thought, her jaw tightening as her irritation simmered. Sylvie rarely spoke up like this, much less in a way that challenged others so directly. And now, she was pushing back against Irina, something that sent a faint warning bell ringing in her mind.

It wasn't just annoying. It was suspicious.

'What's her angle? Why does she care so much about meeting earlier? She never does this kind of thing. Is she... one of those?'

Irina's smirk softened into something sharper, more calculating. There was a possibility here she couldn't ignore. But instead of pressing Sylvie further, she decided to pivot.

Her fiery gaze shifted to Astron, standing calmly beside her. His sharp purple eyes were as unreadable as ever, his posture steady and unbothered by the tension in the room.

"Well then," Irina said, her voice carrying an edge of exasperation. "What do you think?"

Astron's eyes moved to hers, calm and deliberate. "About what?" he asked evenly, his tone devoid of any urgency.

Irina raised an eyebrow, her annoyance flaring briefly. "About whether we should meet earlier or not."

Astron's gaze lingered on her for a moment, and Irina caught the faintest flicker of something in his eyes—amusement. His lips quirked slightly, as though he were holding back a smirk.

"Which type of answer do you want?" he asked, his voice calm but carrying a faint undertone of mischief. "The logical answer, or the answer you want to hear?"

Irina's jaw tightened, the corner of her mouth twitching involuntarily as she glared at him. She could see it now—the faint, barely-there glint of amusement in his sharp eyes. 'This bastard...'

Her fingers drummed lightly against her crossed arms as she steadied her voice. "Logical," she said firmly, her tone carrying a warning edge.

Astron tilted his head slightly, his sharp purple eyes steady as he spoke, his tone calm but deliberate. "Logically, it's better to meet earlier," he began, his voice cutting through the lingering tension in the room. "The team has been formed, yes, and we have a rough idea of everyone's roles. But that's not enough. We don't truly know each other—our strengths, our tendencies, how we approach challenges."

His gaze shifted slightly, encompassing both Irina and Sylvie. "For the sake of achieving a better grade, taking the time to align expectations and build some cohesion is important. It's not about over-preparing but ensuring we're not caught off guard when the session begins."

Irina's fiery eyes narrowed as her irritation flared. 'He's taking her side.' She crossed her arms, her fiery hair swaying slightly as she straightened her posture. "So, you're saying we should waste extra time on something we can handle in an hour?" she said sharply, her tone edged with defiance.

Astron's gaze returned to hers, calm but with a subtle undertone of warning that made her pause. "As a ranked-2 student of the academy," he said evenly, his words deliberate, "you should understand the importance of even a single grade."

Irina's breath hitched slightly, her fiery confidence flickering as his words struck a nerve. Her mind immediately flashed back to the first semester—one of the choices she'd made, the way she had underestimated certain tasks and certain someone, thinking her natural abilities would carry her through. And then the results had come in: Seraphina overtaking her to claim the second rank, pushing Irina to third.

Her mother's words echoed in her mind, sharp and unyielding. "Grades aren't just numbers, Irina. They're your reputation, your future. Everything you do reflects on this family."

Irina's fingers drummed against her crossed arms, her fiery gaze softening slightly as her thoughts raced. 'He's right,' she thought begrudgingly, the edge in her stance giving way to a quiet resolve. 'Sylvie's words make sense, and if this can help secure better results, then...'

She exhaled softly, her lips curling into a faint smirk, though the fire in her eyes had tempered. "Fine," she said, her tone calm but laced with reluctant agreement. "We'll meet earlier."

Sylvie blinked, clearly surprised by Irina's sudden shift in tone. "Really?" she asked cautiously, her voice carrying a hint of disbelief.

Irina glanced at her, her smirk sharpening slightly. "Yes."

Then her fiery gaze flicked to Astron, a sharp retort forming in her mind. She wanted to say something—anything—to call him out for siding with Sylvie so calmly, so casually, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. But as her eyes shifted to Sylvie and the others watching them, she thought better of it. 'Not here,' she decided.

Instead, she stepped closer to Astron and pinched his arm, her nails digging in just enough to make her point.

Astron turned his head toward her, his sharp purple eyes narrowing slightly, his expression a mix of confusion and curiosity. It was as though he were silently asking, 'What are you doing?'

Irina didn't answer. She just straightened her posture, let out a soft "Humph," and turned her head away, her fiery hair swaying with the motion.

The expression on Astron's face was a small curvature of lips....it was subtle but unmistakable, though he wisely chose not to comment.

Before Irina could say anything more—or act on the simmering annoyance still bubbling in her chest—another figure approached. Jasmine, Sylvie's deskmate and another member of their team, walked up with a determined expression. Her dark green hair was tied back neatly, and her sharp, calculating eyes locked onto Irina.

"I agree with Sylvie," Jasmine said, her voice steady and confident. "Meeting earlier is the smart choice."

Though as her eyes met with Irina's....

"Ehm....We need to go over our strategies and roles properly. Waiting until the last minute could leave us vulnerable."

Irina glanced at Jasmine, her fiery eyes narrowing slightly.

'This vixen.'

This behavior...It was something she could see and understand.

Irina crossed her arms, exhaling sharply. "Fine," she said, her tone edged with reluctant acceptance. "If that's what the team wants, we'll meet earlier."

Sylvie looked slightly relieved, though she tried to mask it with a nod of agreement. "Thank you," she said, her voice steady but quieter now. Though Irina could understand that, she was quite happy.

The smile on her face was telling Irina everything she needed to know.

'Tch....'

And it was annoying, though it was Irina herself that had brought it to herself, so there was nothing she could do about it.

"Sigh..."

She could only release a sigh while glancing down at her smartwatch, the display showing the dwindling time left before the practical session. She let out another quiet sigh, her fiery amber eyes narrowing slightly. There wasn't much time left already, and her irritation at the situation wasn't helping her focus.

She turned her attention to Astron, who stood calmly beside her, his sharp purple eyes watching the exchange with his usual unreadable demeanor. "Let's meet later then," she said, her tone casual but deliberate. Her fiery gaze flicked briefly to Sylvie and Jasmine, ensuring they noticed the exchange.

Astron nodded once, his voice calm and even. "I'll be prepared."

Satisfied, Irina gave him a faint smirk before turning on her heel, her fiery hair swaying with the motion. She strode toward the classroom door with her usual confident gait, exuding an air of authority that left little room for challenge. As she passed by Sylvie and Jasmine, she caught the subtle exchange of glances between the two, but she chose not to acknowledge it.

'Let them talk,' she thought, her smirk sharpening slightly as she reached the door. 'If they're going to speculate, I might as well give them something to speculate about.'

Behind her, Astron remained still for a moment before gathering his belongings and moving toward the exit as well. His movements were deliberate, his posture straight and unbothered. "I'll see you all at the meeting," he said simply, his tone as neutral as ever.

And then, they left, Sylvie and Jasmine alone.

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The moment Irina and Astron had left, Jasmine let out a long, exaggerated sigh of relief, her shoulders visibly relaxing as she slumped into a nearby chair.

"Whew," she muttered, brushing a stray lock of her green hair out of her face. "Whatever it is about her, our leader is really scary. Did you see those fiery eyes? I felt like I was about to get scorched just standing there."

Sylvie didn't reply immediately, her gaze lingering on the door as her thoughts churned. She still felt the faint weight of Irina's gaze on her—a gaze filled with intent, sharp and deliberate, as though Irina had been sizing her up, calculating her every move. It was a side of Irina Sylvie had never experienced before, and now that she had, it was impossible to ignore.

Jasmine tilted her head toward Sylvie, her tone teasing but edged with curiosity. "What about you? You were standing right in front of her. I thought she was going to set you on fire for daring to question her."

Sylvie blinked, snapping out of her thoughts as she turned to Jasmine. "It wasn't... that bad," she said softly, though the tremor in her voice betrayed her uncertainty.

"Heh...."

Jasmine laughed softly, the sound light and teasing as she leaned forward and placed a hand on Sylvie's shoulder. "But you did well," she said with a grin. "Who would have thought that our little Sylvie could go toe-to-toe with the Irina Emberheart?"

Sylvie blinked, caught off guard by the sudden praise. Her lips curved into a faint smile, though a touch of embarrassment lingered in her expression. "I wouldn't exactly call it 'going against her,'" she murmured, her voice modest.

"Oh, please," Jasmine said, giving Sylvie's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "You stood your ground, didn't you? That's more than most people would dare to do. I mean, the way she looked at me—I thought she was going to turn me into ash on the spot."

Sylvie let out a soft laugh, the tension in her chest easing slightly. "I guess it wasn't as bad as I thought it'd be," she admitted, her voice growing steadier. "But... she's definitely intense."

The soft hum of conversation and the faint clink of coffee cups filled the air as the group of three entered the café. The atmosphere was warm, sunlight streaming through large glass windows and casting a golden glow over the wooden tables and polished floors. It was a perfect blend of calm and bustling energy, a stark contrast to the simmering tension that had surrounded their earlier discussion.

Sylvie, Jasmine, and Layla exchanged brief glances before scanning the room. It didn't take long to spot him.

Astron sat at a corner table, his posture relaxed but upright. A worn book rested in his hands, its pages turned with deliberate care. His sharp purple eyes moved steadily across the text, completely unfazed by the chatter around him. On the table before him was a single untouched cup of coffee, steam curling softly from its surface.

Jasmine was the first to react, her lips curving into a grin as she waved. "Hey, Astron!" she called, her voice bright enough to draw the attention of a few patrons nearby.

Astron's gaze lifted from the book, his purple eyes meeting hers with his usual calm. He gave a small nod of acknowledgment but said nothing, his expression as unreadable as ever.

Layla's eyes widened slightly, her surprise evident as she whispered under her breath, "Oh... You're in our team."

Jasmine chuckled at Layla's reaction before stepping closer to the table. "Astron, meet Layla," she said, her tone playful yet warm. "I don't think you've had the pleasure yet."

Astron's gaze shifted to Layla, his expression remaining composed but polite. "Layla," he said simply, his voice even. "The tank of our team right?"

There was no grandeur to his greeting, yet his presence made it feel deliberate.

Layla raised her eyebrows, her surprise morphing into curiosity as she leaned slightly forward. "You knew?" she asked, her tone both inquisitive and skeptical.

Astron's lips curved into the faintest hint of a smile, though his expression remained composed. "Irina mentioned it," he replied evenly, his voice carrying a calm certainty that made it impossible to doubt him.

Layla's green eyes narrowed slightly, intrigued. "And what exactly did Irina say?"

Astron raised an eyebrow at her question, his calm purple eyes studying her for a moment before he spoke. "Layla is our tank," he said, his tone matter-of-fact. "Even though your rank may not be impressive, your role as a tank in our group composition is valuable. A well-coordinated tank changes the dynamics of any fight."

Layla blinked, clearly caught off guard by his straightforwardness. She hesitated for a moment before tilting her head, a faint smile tugging at her lips. "And what do you think?" she asked, her voice quieter now, the question laced with genuine curiosity.

Astron regarded her for a moment, his gaze steady. "I can't say anything without seeing you in action first," he said simply. There was no condescension in his tone—only calm honesty.

Layla's smile widened slightly, and she gave a small nod. "I see," she murmured, her voice carrying a note of quiet determination. "Well then... I'll try my best."

Astron gave her a slight nod, acknowledging her resolve, before his attention shifted to the others.

On the other hand, Sylvie had taken a seat beside him, her gaze flitting between Layla and Astron as though trying to decipher the subtle exchange. Jasmine, on the other hand, leaned back in her chair with a satisfied grin, clearly enjoying the unfolding dynamic.

"Well," Jasmine said, breaking the brief silence, "it looks like you were already expecting this?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, our team being together."

"Yes."

"Why? Did you know Layla beforehand?"

Astron turned his calm gaze to Jasmine, her satisfied grin met with his usual composed demeanor. At her question, he replied evenly, "Yes. I already knew beforehand."

Jasmine raised an eyebrow, her curiosity piqued. "You knew our team would end up like this?"

"Not exactly," Astron clarified, his tone measured. "But I had an idea of what most people in the class were up to."

Jasmine tilted her head, intrigued. "What do you mean?"

He leaned back slightly in his chair, his purple eyes steady on her. "I observe people in general. It's always better to have a general idea of their strengths, tendencies, and how they might act in different situations."

"This guy really is weird indeed," Jasmine thought, her grin softening into something more thoughtful. "I see," she said, her tone carrying a note.

Layla, seated across from Astron, blinked and leaned forward slightly, her curiosity evident. "Wait," she said, her voice tinged with disbelief. "Did you observe me as well?"

Astron's gaze shifted to her, his expression calm but faintly amused. "You're in the same class as us, aren't you?" he replied, his voice as steady as ever.

"Well... yes," Layla said cautiously, unsure where this was going.

"Then the answer should be clear," Astron said simply, his tone making it sound like the most obvious thing in the world.

Layla stared at him for a moment, processing his words. 'He really does pay attention to everything,' she thought, a mixture of surprise and admiration flickering across her face. Normally, paying such attention to small details about others would be considered an unnecessary waste of energy. But Astron's calm confidence and matter-of-fact delivery made it seem not only practical but essential. 'I guess there are people like him, after all. Observant, meticulous... and completely unfazed by what others think of them.'

A faint smile curved her lips, and she gave a small nod. "That's... impressive," she admitted, her voice carrying genuine respect. "Most people wouldn't bother."

Astron met her gaze briefly, his expression unreadable but calm. "Most people don't see the value in it," he replied. "But in a group setting, understanding others is just as important as knowing yourself."

'Is it really that important though?'

Layla thought for a second.

'Why even bother? Paying attention to every detail about others... it sounds exhausting.' Yet, as she mulled over his calm and practical explanation, she couldn't help but feel a small spark of curiosity. 'Still... he makes it sound like it's worth the effort. Maybe there's something to it.'

Just then, Sylvie broke the silence, her voice cutting through Layla's thoughts. "Can you understand what I'm thinking now?" she asked sharply, her gaze locking onto Astron's. Her tone was fiercer than usual, and her expression carried a resoluteness that startled both Jasmine and Layla.

'What's gotten into her?' Jasmine thought, her grin faltering as she glanced between Sylvie and Astron. Even Layla, who was usually more reserved, found herself leaning forward slightly, caught off guard by Sylvie's sudden intensity.

Astron's purple eyes shifted to Sylvie, his expression as composed as ever. He tilted his head slightly, studying her with quiet deliberation before replying. "What do you think?" he asked, his voice calm and measured.

"Yes," Sylvie said firmly, her tone unwavering as her glare intensified.

Astron didn't flinch under her gaze. Instead, he remained steady, his voice carrying a faint undertone of bemusement. "I am not a mind reader," he said. "Hence, I can't exactly know what you're thinking."

Sylvie's brows furrowed slightly, her sharp expression faltering just enough to show her unease. "...Then—"

"But," Astron interrupted, his voice soft yet deliberate, "I can reach some conclusions and narrow them down. Though," he added, his gaze steady on hers, "you may not possibly like hearing them."

Sylvie's lips parted, her resolve flickering. "I want to—"

Before she could finish, the café's entrance swung open with a sharp creak, and a presence instantly shifted the room's atmosphere. Heads turned, and conversations hushed as Irina Emberheart strode in, her fiery red hair curled and gleaming under the sunlight streaming through the windows. Her fierce aura radiated through the café, causing a ripple of discomfort among the patrons. Even those who didn't know her seemed instinctively wary.

Irina's piercing yellow eyes scanned the room briefly before locking onto their group. A faint smile curved her lips as she approached, her confident stride causing a few customers to shift nervously in their seats. The air around her seemed to crackle with a barely-contained intensity, a hallmark of her presence.

"You are already here," Irina said smoothly, her voice carrying a mix of warmth and command as she greeted the group. Her gaze swept over Jasmine and Layla before briefly resting on Astron. But when her fiery eyes landed on Sylvie, a fleeting glint flashed within them—sharp and deliberate, gone almost as quickly as it appeared.



Jasmine was the first to recover from the shift in atmosphere, her grin returning as she waved. "Oh, hey, Irina! We were just killing some time while waiting for you," she said, her tone casual but cheerful.

Layla nodded in agreement, offering a polite smile. "Yeah, we figured you'd show up soon, so we were just chatting for a bit."

Irina's lips curved into a faint smirk as she approached the table, her fiery gaze briefly scanning the group. "Good," she said smoothly, her tone tinged with warmth but underscored by her commanding presence. "Then let's not waste any more time."

Without hesitation, she pulled out a chair and sat down on Astron's other side, her fiery hair catching the light as she adjusted her posture. The movement was fluid and deliberate, exuding the confidence and control that seemed to radiate naturally from her.

Astron, seated between Sylvie and Irina, didn't react outwardly to her presence at the start.

PINCH!

Until certain two fingers pinched his arm.

"Did you enjoy sitting beside her?"

Followed by a whisper.

Chapter 809 188.2 - Formation Training

"Did you enjoy sitting beside her?" she asked with a whisper, her tone carrying a sharp edge masked by a thin layer of teasing.

Astron turned his head slightly, his sharp purple eyes meeting hers for just a split second before looking away again, unreadable as ever. He didn't answer immediately, but instead, his hand moved with calm precision, gently covering hers. With a quiet but firm motion, he pulled her hand away from his arm.

Irina's fiery gaze flicked to his face, catching the faintest twitch at the corner of his mouth. It wasn't much—barely noticeable to anyone else—but to her, it was as good as a confession.

"Now that Irina is here," Astron said smoothly, his voice steady but carrying a subtle undertone that betrayed his unease, "let's start."

His calm, composed tone filled the air, but Irina could sense it—this wasn't like him. Normally, he would let others take the lead in moments like this, content to observe from the sidelines. The fact that he was stepping in now, taking charge, told her everything she needed to know.

'He's flustered.'

Irina's lips curled into a triumphant smirk, the heat of satisfaction spreading through her chest. 'Heh... do you see this?' she thought smugly, her fiery gaze flicking to Sylvie.

Sylvie was watching her, her expression carefully neutral but her eyes betraying a flicker of something—curiosity? Annoyance? Irina couldn't be sure, but she didn't care. She straightened her posture slightly, letting her presence radiate with quiet confidence as she turned her attention back to Astron.

"Alright," Irina said, her tone smooth and composed, though the edge of victory lingered in her voice.

Astron adjusted his posture slightly, his calm demeanor returning as he looked over the group. His voice, measured and deliberate, broke the tension lingering in the air. "Let's first talk about what this practice is about."

The others straightened in their seats, their attention sharpening. Even Irina, who had been reveling in her small victory moments earlier, shifted her focus to Astron's words.

"As you know," Astron continued, "we're in the middle of Team Operations and Unit Specialization. Up to now, the course has focused on two primary methods of formation and coordination, both designed to maximize the efficiency of five-member teams in combat scenarios."

He glanced briefly at the others, gauging their reactions before continuing. "The first method we've learned is called Kalthor's Method, named after its creator, the tactician Sorin Kalthor. It's a foundational formation without much flexibility."

Astron's sharp purple eyes scanned the group, ensuring he had their full attention before continuing. "Today, we'll focus on Kalthor's Method," he said, his voice steady and deliberate. "It's a foundational formation we've all been introduced to in class, but its nuances require consistent practice to master."

He leaned forward slightly, placing his hands on the table as he spoke. "As you know, in the course, we've been taught four primary roles: Striker, Defender, Support, and Tactician. However, in Kalthor's Method, the Tactician role is deliberately excluded. This is because the formation is designed to operate as a cohesive unit without the need for constant commands or adjustments. It prioritizes simplicity and coordination."

Jasmine tilted her head, curiosity flashing in her eyes. "Why leave out the Tactician? Doesn't every team need someone to oversee things?"

"Well, the professor mentioned that it was because when this method was developed, it was tailored for situations where quick adaptability was less critical than efficient execution." Layla chimed in explaining.

"That is right," Astron affirmed. "Kalthor's Method emerged during a time when Awakened units were heavily skewed toward close combatants. Support roles were scarce, and most mages and healers were outliers rather than integral parts of teams. Back then, the challenge was forming functional units with limited diversity in skills."

"Hmm? Professor even mentioned this?"

Astron gave a slight nod, his expression calm and deliberate. "No," he said evenly, addressing Irina's curious gaze. "The professor didn't mention that part. I was just curious and decided to look into it."

Jasmine's eyebrows lifted briefly before she chuckled, crossing her arms. "Of course, you did," she said with a grin. "Leave it to you to dig deeper than anyone else."

Astron said nothing, only giving a small nod as he raised his wrist and tapped on his smartwatch. A soft beep sounded, and a moment later, a projected screen appeared in midair above the table. It displayed a clear diagram of Kalthor's Method, the predetermined team formation document uploaded by the academy.

"Here's the document," Astron explained as the group leaned closer to study it. The formation was displayed with precision, showing five distinct positions: Striker at the forefront, Defender slightly behind them as the shield, Support in the rear, with two auxiliary positions flanking the formation.

"This is the layout we're expected to fit into," Astron continued, his tone calm as he pointed to the positions on the diagram. "It's straightforward."

Layla squinted at the display, her brows furrowed slightly as she processed the information. "So, I'm standing directly in the front?" she asked, pointing at the Defender position marked on the diagram.

"Yes," Astron confirmed. "Your role is to block and absorb the initial impact. You'll be the shield the rest of the team operates around."

"Alright."

Astron's purple eyes shifted to the diagram again as he continued. "On the rear flanks, Jasmine and I will take the position. I'll be using daggers for this formation, focusing on quick eliminations and maintaining our perimeter. Jasmine will handle ranged threats when necessary and provide backup for Irina."

Jasmine grinned, leaning back slightly in her chair. "Got it. I'll keep things covered."

"In the middle," Astron said, turning his attention to Irina, "you'll act as the main damage dealer."

Irina smirked, her fiery eyes gleaming with confidence. "Naturally," she said smoothly. "I'll make sure to live up to expectations."

Finally, Astron's gaze moved to Sylvie, who was listening intently. "And at the back," he continued, "you'll provide support." He stopped for a moment, then turned fully to her. "You're a healer, but in this formation, having a healer isn't accounted for. Will—"

"I'll be fine," Sylvie interrupted, her voice firm as she straightened in her seat. Her green eyes met his with quiet determination. "I can combat just as fine."

The room fell quiet for a moment as her words hung in the air. Astron studied her for a beat, his expression unreadable, before giving a small nod. "Alright," he said simply. "As long as you're prepared."

Sylvie's lips curved into a faint smile, her gaze steady. "I am."

"Then—"

Though there were more discussions going on.

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The training grounds buzzed with the hum of mana and the faint echoes of other teams practicing in the distance. The academy's practice dungeon loomed before them, a formidable stone structure etched with glowing runes. These runes pulsed faintly, a sign that the dungeon's internal systems were active and ready for their session.

The team stopped just outside the entrance, the air heavy with anticipation. The faint hum of mana in the air seemed to match the rhythmic beat of their collective focus.

Astron turned to the group, his purple eyes steady as he addressed them. "Remember, this dungeon is calibrated for our team's current ranking and capabilities. The monster waves are designed to test coordination and execution, not brute strength."

Irina crossed her arms, her fiery hair catching the light as she smirked. "Good. That means it'll reward doing things the right way."

Jasmine cracked her knuckles, her grin widening. "Let's hope the monsters are ready for us."

"Thirty minutes. That's all we have to prove ourselves."

Layla stood at the front, her shield strapped firmly to her arm. She inhaled deeply, steadying her nerves.

'...Irina Emberheart....I wonder how strong she is.'

The entrance to the dungeon glowed brighter as they approached, the runes reacting to their proximity. As the door slid open with a low rumble, cool air rushed out to meet them, carrying the faint scent of stone and earth.

"Team Irina Emberheart."

The moment they stepped inside, the runes on the walls flared to life, illuminating a wide, circular chamber. At its center, a glowing sigil marked the starting point for the challenge.

A soft, mechanical voice echoed through the space, announcing their trial.

"Training commences. Kalthor Formation. The session begins in sixty seconds. Prepare for incoming waves."

Irina gestured for the team to take their positions.

"Formation," she said simply.

Layla stepped forward without hesitation, positioning herself directly in front of the sigil. Her shield glinted faintly under the rune's light as she planted her feet firmly, ready to meet whatever came her way.

Irina moved to the center, and everyone took their positions.

Sylvie stood at the rear, her eyes flickering with mana as she prepared to support the team. A faint glow surrounded her, while she was looking at the approaching wave.

The mechanical voice echoed again. "Session begins in ten seconds. Initial wave approaching."

RING!

And then the countdown ended, and the sigil at the center of the chamber flared with brilliant light. From the shadows surrounding the room, the first wave of monsters materialized—wolf-like creatures with glowing eyes and shadowy forms, their growls echoing ominously.

The practice started.

Chapter 810 - 188.3 - Formation Training

The wolf-like creatures snarled and lunged forward, their glowing eyes flickering like embers in the dimly lit chamber. Layla took a step forward, planting herself firmly in front of the team. Her shield rose just in time to intercept the first creature's leap, the impact reverberating through her arm as she braced herself. "Hold the line!" Layla shouted, her voice steady despite the force of the attack. Her shield glowed faintly as her mana reinforced it, creating an unyielding barrier. Behind her, Astron moved, his daggers glinting as they caught the faint light of the runes. A creature that managed to slip past Layla's defenses found itself swiftly intercepted. Astron ducked low, his blade slicing cleanly across the creature's flank before he pivoted to avoid its retaliatory swipe. "Cleared one," Astron said calmly, his voice cutting through the chaos. Jasmine, stationed on the other side, grinned as she slashed the air, creating a crescent sword aura. The projectile streaked through the air and struck a wolf mid-leap, sending it sprawling to the ground. "Nice teamwork," she called, drawing another arrow with smooth efficiency. "Let's keep this up." At the center of the formation, Irina stood with her fiery yellow eyes locked on the oncoming wave. Her hands glowed with intense mana, the flames coiling around her fingertips like living entities. "Let's turn up the heat," she muttered, thrusting her hands forward. A torrent of fire erupted from her palms, sweeping across the chamber in a controlled arc. The wave of flames engulfed the monsters in its path, their shadowy forms dissipating into smoke with piercing howls. "Clean," Irina said with a smirk, her confidence radiating as the flames dissipated, leaving faint scorch marks on the stone floor. The last of the wolf-like creatures fell, its shadowy form dissipating into smoke as Irina lowered her hands. Her fiery yellow eyes gleamed with satisfaction as she surveyed the now-cleared chamber. A faint smirk curved her lips, the faint glow of residual mana fading from her fingertips. "Well, that was efficient," she remarked, her voice tinged with pride. "Most groups wouldn't have it this easy, even on the first wave." Jasmine sheathed her sword, her eyes wide with a mix of awe and surprise. This was the first time she had seen Irina's firepower up close, and the sheer intensity of it left her momentarily speechless. 'So this is Irina Emberheart,' she thought, the name carrying a new weight in her mind. Layla, still holding her shield at the ready, turned toward Irina with an expression of barely contained excitement. "That firewave..." she began, her voice brimming with enthusiasm. "It was incredible! You wiped them out like it was nothing!" Irina's smirk widened, and she crossed her arms, exuding a confidence that bordered on regal. "Humph. This?" she said, her tone almost dismissive. "This is nothing for me." Layla blinked, her admiration growing. "Waaa... you can do more than that?" "Of course," Irina replied, lifting her chin slightly as her fiery gaze flicked to Layla. "This is just the tip of what I'm capable of." "I see.....So this is what top rankers are capable of..." Layla was seeing a new world for the first time. "Don't get too loose," Astron's calm voice cut through Layla's admiration. His purple eyes shifted toward Irina and Layla, steady and composed. "The next wave is coming. Be ready." Irina turned her fiery yellow eyes to him, narrowing them with playful defiance. "There's no need to be this stiff, Astron," she said smoothly, crossing her arms and leaning her weight onto one leg. Astron tilted his head slightly, his expression as unreadable as ever. "Hmm..." he responded noncommittally, his gaze steady on her. A mischievous glint flashed in Irina's eyes as she raised her hand, a small flicker of flame dancing at her fingertips. "Then let this fire cleanse your stiffness," she declared, tossing the small flame toward him. Astron didn't flinch as the flame fizzled out harmlessly in the air before reaching him. Instead, he raised an eyebrow and replied evenly, "Fire doesn't cure stiffness." Irina smirked, her grin widening as she leaned slightly closer. "My fire cures yours." For a moment, the air between

them seemed to crackle—not with tension, but with a playful energy that left Astron momentarily silent. He simply met her gaze, his calm demeanor unwavering despite the teasing edge to her tone. "Hehe..." Irina laughed softly, smiling ear to ear as she straightened up, her fiery aura still radiating confidence. The satisfaction in her expression made it clear she felt she had won the exchange. Jasmine, observing from the side, blinked in surprise. Her eyes flicked between Irina and Astron, piecing together their dynamic with growing curiosity. 'Are they really...?' she thought, her mind drifting to the rumors she'd overheard and the photos she'd seen. Irina's playful behavior and Astron's steady responses suddenly seemed to hold more weight. 'If this is how they act in the middle of training, then maybe there's something to those rumors after all.' Thinking that, Jasmine turned her gaze subtly toward Sylvie. What she saw only deepened her concern. Sylvie was glaring at Irina and Astron, her usual calm demeanor cracked by the intensity of her expression. It wasn't hard to tell that Sylvie was upset—her sharp green eyes burned with something unmistakable, and her lips were pressed into a thin, tight line. 'Her expression's really not good,' Jasmine thought with a quiet sigh. Being friends with Sylvie for so long, she could easily read the signs. Sylvie wasn't someone who could hide her emotions well, especially when it came to things that truly mattered to her. The tension in her face, the way her hands clenched slightly at her sides—it was all too obvious. 'Poor Sylvie,' Jasmine mused, her heart sinking a little as she glanced back at Irina, who was still brimming with confidence. 'You're really lagging behind, aren't you?' Jasmine sighed inwardly, wishing her friend had more courage to express what was clearly troubling her. 'Let's hope you get your chance,' Jasmine thought, her eyes flicking back to Sylvie. But as her gaze shifted briefly to Irina and Astron again, her thoughts grew more resigned. 'Though, with Irina flying around Astron like that... it doesn't seem like it'll be anytime soon.' Suddenly, the sound of growls echoed through the chamber once more. From the shadows, more monsters emerged—not only from the front but also from behind, forcing the team to adjust their formation quickly. Astron's sharp voice cut through the tension. "They're coming from both sides. Sylvie, cover the rear. Jasmine, stay with me. Layla, hold the line!" Sylvie's eyes widened momentarily, but she quickly nodded, mana surging around her as she turned to face the approaching threat. The faint yellow glow of her mana intensified, her movements fluid yet deliberate. A small group of wolf-like creatures lunged toward her, and she raised a glowing hand, a burst of energy colliding with the closest one and sending it sprawling backward. Jasmine moved to Astron's side, her sword flashing as she intercepted a monster attempting to flank Layla. "On it!" she called, slashing through the creature with a crescent of energy. Astron darted forward, his daggers gleaming as he engaged another group. His movements were swift and precise, each strike aimed to neutralize the monsters with minimal effort. "Focus on keeping the formation intact!" he shouted, deflecting a clawed swipe before retaliating with a quick slash. Irina, standing at the center, unleashed another wave of fire. The searing flames engulfed the advancing creatures in front, reducing them to ash in seconds. She glanced over her shoulder, her fiery yellow eyes locking onto Sylvie. "Need help back there?" she called, a teasing lilt in her voice. "I've got it!" Sylvie shot back, her voice firm. She stepped forward, her glowing yellow mana coiling around her like a shield. As another monster lunged at her, she dodged deftly and countered with a powerful kick, the mana-enhanced strike sending it flying into the wall. Jasmine, catching sight of Sylvie's fighting style, blinked in surprise. 'She fights like a mage, but with those kicks and punches... It's like she's combining two styles.' She couldn't help but grin. 'You've been hiding this, haven't you, Sylvie?' Layla, at the front, braced against the relentless attacks. Her shield held firm, and her confidence grew with each successful block. "Keep it up! We're holding!" she shouted, her voice cutting through the chaos. The team worked in harmony, their combined efforts systematically clearing the monsters. Irina's firepower dominated

the front, Astron and Jasmine's precision held the flanks, and Sylvie's unorthodox but effective fighting style kept the rear secure. As the final monster dissolved into smoke, the room fell silent once more. Sylvie lowered her hands, her glowing mana dimming as she exhaled heavily. "Well," Irina said, smirking as she dusted off her hands. "That wasn't too bad, was it?" Jasmine glanced at Sylvie, her grin widening. "Not bad at all. Sylvie, where were you hiding that? You've got some moves!" Sylvie flushed slightly, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. "It's nothing special," she muttered, though her faint smile betrayed her pride. "That was good." Astron sheathed his daggers, his calm voice bringing them back to focus. "You did really well." Though his purple eyes were locked on Sylvie. It was clear that he was observing her to the full.