

## H. Academy 811

### Chapter 811 - 188.4 - Formation Training

As the last wisps of smoke faded and the chamber settled into silence, Irina stood at the center of the group, her fiery yellow eyes subtly sliding to the side to observe Sylvie. Her arms were crossed, her posture composed, but her thoughts were anything but. 'She's improved so much,' Irina thought, her lips pressing into a thin line as she watched Sylvie catch her breath. It wasn't just the precision of her movements or the confidence in her strikes—it was the sheer force behind her attacks. Even Irina, who had sought Sylvie out for her talent in mana manipulation, magic, and enchantment, hadn't expected this. 'Sylvie's talents were always in control and refinement, not raw power. At least... that's what I thought.' Her fiery gaze narrowed slightly as her thoughts turned to the glowing yellow mana that had surrounded Sylvie during the fight. It wasn't just strong; it felt potent, different from anything Irina had associated with Sylvie before. There had been a resonance to it, something that had made the air around her seem heavier, sharper. 'What is that yellow mana?' Irina's mind raced as she replayed the moments of Sylvie's combat in her head. 'Why was it that strong? It felt... off. Not in a bad way, but definitely not normal.' Her thoughts flicked briefly to Astron, who stood a few steps away, his calm demeanor masking the sharp focus in his purple eyes. She caught the way his gaze lingered on Sylvie, studying her with the same intensity he often reserved for unraveling complex puzzles. 'Did this guy notice it as well?' Irina wondered, her fiery eyes narrowing as she followed his line of sight. Astron wasn't one to miss details, and the way his gaze remained fixed on Sylvie told Irina he had noticed something. 'Of course he did. There's no way he wouldn't.' Her irritation flared momentarily, but she quickly tempered it, her thoughts shifting back to Sylvie. 'What's her game? Has she been hiding this, or is this something new?' Sylvie, oblivious to the scrutiny, was brushing a strand of hair behind her ear, her faint smile betraying a mix of pride and humility. Jasmine stood beside her, grinning widely. "You've really been holding back on us, haven't you?" Jasmine teased, nudging Sylvie lightly. "That mana, those moves—you've been training hard." "It's nothing," Sylvie said softly, though her glowing cheeks suggested otherwise. "I've just been... trying to keep up." "Keep up?" Irina interjected smoothly, her tone sharp but tinged with curiosity. Her fiery yellow eyes locked onto Sylvie, who blinked in surprise at the sudden attention. "That didn't look like 'keeping up' to me. That was something else." Sylvie hesitated, her gaze flicking nervously to Astron before returning to Irina. "I've just been practicing," she said simply, her voice steady but guarded. "That's all." Irina's smirk returned, but it lacked its usual edge, her mind still turning over the possibilities. 'Practicing, huh? If that's all it is, then she's been training with something—or someone—far beyond what she's letting on.' Astron's voice cut through her thoughts, calm and measured as always. "It was good work," he said, his purple eyes still fixed on Sylvie. "The mana usage, the timing—it was effective. You really have improved a lot compared to when we left off." Irina's fiery yellow eyes perked up at Astron's words, her sharp gaze snapping to him as his calm, measured tone lingered in her ears. 'When we left off?' she thought, her brows furrowing slightly. The phrase echoed in her mind, tugging at a memory she hadn't revisited in a while. Then it clicked—a scene from the first semester. 'Ah, at that time...' She could clearly recall Sylvie standing in front of the class, her voice steady but tinged with nervous determination as she asked Astron to teach her how to fight. It had been unexpected, bold even, and

Irina had dismissed it at the time as Sylvie's attempt to improve herself. But now, hearing Astron's words and seeing Sylvie's significant improvement, the memory took on a new weight. 'They were training together, weren't they?' Irina's fiery eyes narrowed slightly as her mind filled in the gaps, conjuring vivid, unwelcome images. She imagined Astron standing close to Sylvie, his sharp purple eyes focused and precise as he guided her movements. In her mind's eye, Sylvie leaned in, her body brushing against his as he corrected her stance, his calm voice instructing her in that maddeningly composed way of his. 'Tch,' Irina thought, her jaw tightening as the images played out in her mind. 'That's way too close.' Her fingers tapped lightly against her crossed arms as her imagination took another turn. She pictured Sylvie smiling at Astron, her green eyes gleaming with admiration as he demonstrated a technique. In this imagined scene, Sylvie leaned toward him, her body language too familiar, too comfortable. 'What were they doing during those sessions? Just training?' she wondered, the thought sparking a sharp irritation that she couldn't entirely suppress. "That training really helped this much?" Jasmine suddenly asked. Layla, oblivious to the undercurrents of the conversation, tilted her head. "Training? What training?" Astron, unbothered by the question, replied calmly, "It wasn't thanks to me. Most likely, Sylvie put in the effort herself. When we left off, she wasn't like this." Sylvie's cheeks flushed faintly, her green eyes flickering with a mix of embarrassment and pride. She hesitated for a moment before taking control of her expression and speaking steadily. "If it weren't for him," she said, glancing briefly at Astron, "I probably wouldn't have taken the first step. So... it was thanks to him." Irina's fiery yellow eyes flicked sharply between Sylvie and Astron, her irritation bubbling over into words before she could stop herself. "What does that mean, exactly?" she interjected, her tone sharper than intended. "What kind of training were you even doing?" Sylvie froze for a moment, her expression hardening as she turned to Irina. "Why do you ask?" she said, her voice steady but carrying an unmistakable edge. Irina crossed her arms, her fiery gaze locking onto Sylvie's. "I'm just curious," she said, though the defensive tone in her voice betrayed her. "I mean, you've improved so much—don't you think it's natural to wonder what exactly you were doing?" Sylvie's green eyes narrowed, her usual composure slipping as she took a step closer to Irina. "Curious, huh?" she said, her voice tinged with defiance. "You seem 'really' invested for someone who's 'just curious.'" Jasmine, sensing the tension between the two, glanced nervously between them, while Layla looked utterly bewildered. "Uh... should we—" Layla began, but Jasmine quickly placed a hand on her arm, shaking her head as if to say, Let it play out. Irina straightened, her fiery aura flaring ever so slightly as she met Sylvie's glare head-on. "I think it's fair to ask, considering how much we're relying on you now. Don't you?" Sylvie's lips pressed into a thin line, her frustration evident as she retorted, "Fair to ask? Or are you just looking for something to criticize?" Astron, who had been silent until now, stepped between them, his calm presence instantly diffusing some of the tension. "Enough," he said quietly but firmly, his purple eyes sweeping over both of them. "This isn't the time for this." "What is enough?" Irina pressed, still lingering in her irritation. The low rumble of growls echoed ominously through the chamber, signaling the arrival of the next wave. The sound was deeper, more menacing than before, and the faint vibrations in the ground hinted at larger numbers. "The talk. The monsters are coming," Astron said firmly, his tone brooking no argument. The low rumble of growls echoed ominously through the chamber, signaling the arrival of the next wave. The sound was deeper, more menacing than before, and the faint vibrations in the ground hinted at larger numbers. "Formation!" Astron commanded, his voice slicing through the tension. The team quickly adjusted, taking their positions without further argument. Layla braced herself at the front, her shield raised, while Jasmine and Astron moved to the flanks. Irina stayed in the center, her fiery gaze sweeping the chamber, and Sylvie held the rear, her yellow mana beginning to glow faintly once more. The

monsters emerged from the shadows in greater numbers than before, their snarls filling the air. Wolf-like creatures were joined by larger beasts with jagged horns and glowing red eyes. The team had no time to waste. Layla took the brunt of the charge, her shield ringing with the impact of claws and teeth. She gritted her teeth, holding firm even as the weight of the assault pushed her back a step. "They're stronger!" she shouted. Jasmine darted forward, her sword flashing as she struck at the monsters attempting to flank. But in her enthusiasm, she moved too deep into the enemy lines, momentarily leaving her position. "Got one!" she called, unaware of the gap she'd created. "Jasmine, fall back!" Astron's sharp voice cut through the chaos as he intercepted a creature that had slipped through. His daggers flashed in precise arcs, neutralizing the threat. "Stay in formation!" Jasmine blinked, realizing her mistake, and quickly retreated to her position. "Sorry!" she muttered. Irina, meanwhile, had unconsciously stepped forward, her fiery magic blasting through waves of monsters. Her confidence pushed her further than intended, disrupting the balance of the formation. "Heh. Just di-" she declared, flames surging from her hands. "Irina, pull back!" Astron called, his tone firm. "You're leaving the center exposed!" Irina hesitated, her fiery yellow eyes narrowing as she glanced back at him. "I can handle it!" "Stick to the formation," Astron insisted, his voice unwavering. "This isn't about individual strength." Reluctantly, Irina stepped back, her irritation simmering as she returned to her position. 'Fine,' she thought, her fiery aura flaring slightly as she refocused on the fight. At the same time, Layla wavered under the relentless assault, her confidence faltering as the monsters' strength pressed her back. "I... I can't hold them!" she cried, her voice tinged with fear. "You can!" Astron's voice reached her, calm but commanding. "Focus. Trust your training." Layla swallowed hard, her grip tightening on her shield as she planted her feet. With a deep breath, she pushed forward, regaining her stance and holding the line. The team adjusted quickly, their movements more coordinated as they followed Astron's corrections. The wave was fierce, but under his steady guidance, the formation held firm. Irina's flames, Jasmine's strikes, Sylvie's support, and Layla's defense worked in unison, each member contributing to the team's survival. As the last of the monsters fell, the room fell silent once more, save for the team's labored breathing. Astron lowered his daggers, his purple eyes scanning the group. "Don't forget the reason we are here." His eyes were glinting a little.

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"Don't forget the reason we are here."

Astron looked a little 'angry.'

"The point of this exercise is not to clear the dungeon the fastest," Astron said, his tone calm but edged with firmness. "It's to practice the formation. That means staying in your roles, no matter how tempting it is to break away."

Irina's fiery gaze flicked to him, irritation flashing across her face, but she nodded begrudgingly. "Fine. I get it," she muttered, crossing her arms. "Formation it is."

Jasmine exhaled heavily, nodding as well. "Got it. I'll stick to my lane this time."

Layla, still catching her breath, looked up at Astron with a quiet determination. "Understood. I'll hold my ground."

Sylvie didn't say anything, but her faint nod and the glow of her mana were enough to signal her agreement.

Before anyone could say more, the chamber rumbled slightly, and the mechanical voice of the dungeon resonated through the space. "Final wave approaching. Sixty seconds until engagement. Boss monster and final wave initiating."

The low rumble of growls echoed ominously through the chamber, signaling the arrival of the next wave. The sound was deeper, more menacing than before, and the faint vibrations in the ground hinted at larger numbers.

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The mechanical voice echoed again: "Final wave initiating. Boss monster approaching."

The monsters emerged in droves, their snarls filling the air. Wolf-like creatures with glowing red eyes surged forward, joined by larger, grotesque beasts with jagged horns and thick hides. The ground shook as a towering figure emerged from the shadows—a monstrous creature with glowing veins of crimson mana coursing through its body. The boss monster had arrived.

Layla planted her feet, her shield raised high as the first wave of monsters slammed into her. The impact was thunderous, but she held firm. "They're heavier!" she shouted, her voice straining with effort.

Irina unleashed a torrent of flames, her fiery attacks reducing several creatures to ash. "Keep them off Layla!" she commanded, her hands glowing with mana as she prepared another blast.

Astron and Jasmine moved swiftly, intercepting monsters that attempted to flank the group. Astron's daggers flashed in precise arcs, striking down creatures with lethal efficiency. Jasmine, her sword glowing faintly with mana, struck down one monster after another, her movements fluid yet powerful. However, her eagerness to dive into the fray caused her to drift too far from her position again.

"Jasmine, pull back!" Astron called sharply, his voice cutting through the chaos.

"On it!" Jasmine replied, her cheeks flushed as she quickly retreated to her designated position.

Meanwhile, Sylvie fought off a group of creatures at the rear, her yellow mana glowing brightly as she alternated between ranged blasts and swift, mana-enhanced strikes. Despite her best efforts, the sheer number of monsters began to overwhelm her.

Astron moved to assist, his daggers carving through the advancing creatures. "Stick to your position!" he reminded her, his tone calm but firm.

At the center, Irina faced her own challenge as the boss monster began to close in. Its massive frame moved with surprising speed, its crimson mana radiating an oppressive heat. Irina unleashed a wave of fire, but the creature shrugged it off, charging forward with a deafening roar.

'Hmm....'

"Focus on the legs."

Astron's calm voice came from the side, and affirmed what Irina was thinking.

She thrust her hands forward, unleashing a searing wave of fire that engulfed the smaller creatures in front of the boss while also engulfing the boss monster's legs. The intense heat warped the air around the creature, causing its movements to slow. It staggered, its massive frame swaying as the fire licked at its knees and joints.

"Good," Astron called out, his sharp purple eyes fixed on the monster. "Keep it off balance."

Irina smirked, her fiery yellow eyes blazing with confidence as she shifted her focus. With a fluid motion, she redirected a smaller burst of fire toward the creatures swarming Sylvie's position. The flames struck true, scattering the advancing monsters and giving Sylvie a brief reprieve.

"Thanks!" Sylvie shouted, her voice carrying a mix of relief and determination. She adjusted her stance, her glowing yellow mana surging as she struck down another creature with a well-placed blast. Her movements were steady, but the strain was evident in the faint tremble of her hands.

Meanwhile, Jasmine maintained her position on the left flank, her sword flashing as she intercepted a creature attempting to circle around Layla. Her instinct was to press forward, to take the fight to the monsters rather than wait for them to come. But Astron's earlier reminder echoed in her mind, and she reluctantly held her ground.

'Stick to your position. That's the point of this exercise,' she thought, exhaling sharply as she focused on the task at hand.

At the center, Layla stood firm, her shield glowing faintly with reinforced mana as the boss monster's claws slammed against it with relentless force. Each strike reverberated through her arms, the sheer power of the creature nearly driving her to her knees. "I can't... hold this much longer!" she cried, her voice strained with effort.

"Just a little longer." Irina called from her position, briefly glancing toward the tank. "We've got your back. Just keep it together a little longer!"

The boss monster roared, its crimson mana surging as it tried to push through Irina's fire. The heat slowed its movements, but its raw power was undeniable. Each step it took sent tremors through the ground, and its glowing red eyes burned with fury.

Irina stepped back slightly, her fiery gaze locked onto the towering boss monster. Her hands began to glow with an intense, otherworldly heat, flames coiling around her like living entities.

She inhaled deeply, steadying herself as she began to channel her mana. The fiery aura around her pulsed with growing intensity, the temperature in the room rising as if the dungeon itself was reacting to her power.

"I'll need a moment," she said, her voice steady but focused. "Hold them off while I prepare."

"Go ahead," Astron replied, his tone calm. "We'll handle it."

Jasmine gritted her teeth, her sword flashing as she intercepted another wave of smaller monsters. The arc of energy she created pushed them back, but the strain was evident in her movements. "No pressure, Irina!" she called, forcing a wry grin as she held her position.

Sylvie, meanwhile, unleashed a rapid volley of mana blasts, her yellow energy striking down creatures attempting to breach their formation.

At the front, Layla continued to bear the brunt of the boss monster's relentless assault. Each strike against her shield reverberated through her entire body, her legs trembling under the sheer force. "I really can't!" she cried, her voice strained.

"Just a little longer." Astron called, his daggers flashing as he intercepted a creature attempting to slip past Layla.

"You really are improving."

Irina's fiery aura intensified, the flames around her forming intricate, glowing patterns in the air. The heat became almost unbearable, but she stood firm, her fiery yellow eyes blazing with determination. "It's ready," she said, her voice carrying an edge of finality.

She thrust her hands forward, and the flames coiled tighter, compressing into a glowing cubic structure that shimmered with pure, destructive energy.

"[School of Emberheart, Cubic Expansion!]" she declared, her voice echoing through the chamber.

"You don't need to shout."

"Shut up."

The spell erupted with a deafening roar, the cubic structure expanding outward in a cascade of blazing fire. The flames consumed the boss monster, wrapping around its massive frame and igniting the crimson mana veins coursing through its body. The oppressive heat and brilliance of the attack illuminated the entire chamber, forcing the team to shield their eyes.

The boss monster let out a final, piercing roar as the flames engulfed it completely. Its massive form trembled, the glowing veins flickering erratically before it collapsed to the ground, the fire reducing it to a smoldering pile of ash. The smaller monsters disintegrated alongside it, their shadowy forms dissolving into the air as the dungeon fell silent.

Layla collapsed to the ground, her shield slipping from her grasp as she gasped for breath. Her body trembled, and sweat dripped from her brow. "It's... it's over," she murmured, her voice barely audible.

Jasmine leaned against a nearby wall, her sword hanging loosely in her hand as she exhaled heavily. "That was... intense," she said, her grin faint but genuine. "Good job, team."

Sylvie lowered her glowing hands, the yellow mana dissipating as she leaned on her knees, trying to steady her breathing. "We did it," she said softly, her green eyes flickering with relief and exhaustion.

At the center of it all, Astron stood calmly, his sharp purple eyes fixed on the smoldering remains of the boss monster. His daggers were sheathed, his posture steady and unbothered by the heat or the chaos that had preceded the quiet.

"This...." Irina mumbled, her fiery yellow eyes narrowing as she gazed at the smoldering remains of the boss monster. Her hands were still trembling from the sheer mana expenditure, but her expression was one of frustration rather than satisfaction. "This was not the performance I expected."

"This was not the performance I expected."

The faint echo of her words hung in the silent chamber, drawing glances from the rest of the team. Jasmine frowned slightly, but she didn't say anything, her exhaustion outweighing her curiosity. Sylvie looked up, her green eyes flickering with a mix of concern and weariness. Layla was too drained to respond, still catching her breath where she had collapsed.

Astron remained silent, his sharp purple eyes observing Irina without a hint of judgment. His calm, composed demeanor contrasted with the tension still radiating from her.

Before anyone could say more, the mechanical hum of the dungeon's mana system faded entirely, and the chamber doors creaked open with a low rumble. A group of instructors, clad in dark uniforms bearing the academy's emblem, entered the room with measured steps. At their head was Professor Darius Kain, his tall frame and sharp gray eyes commanding immediate attention.

"Well done," Kain said, his deep voice resonating through the space as he approached the team. His gaze swept over them, lingering briefly on Layla, who was still kneeling on the ground, and Irina, whose fiery aura had dimmed but not disappeared. "Your performance was commendable."

Irina blinked, her fiery gaze snapping to him. "Commendable?" she repeated, her voice carrying an edge of disbelief. "Professor, with all due respect, this wasn't anywhere near what we're capable of. There were cracks in our formation, and—"

Kain shook his head, his sharp gray eyes narrowing slightly. He turned without another word, his dark uniform swaying as he strode toward the exit. The other instructors followed suit, leaving the team alone in the silent chamber, the heavy door closing behind them with a resounding thud.

The team exchanged uncertain glances, the weight of the professor's cryptic words lingering in the air. Layla sank back onto the ground, her shield resting beside her as she caught her breath. Jasmine leaned against a wall, her expression a mixture of confusion and exhaustion. Sylvie remained silent, her green eyes flickering with unspoken questions.

Irina's fiery gaze was fixed on the now-closed door, her lips pressed into a thin line. "What was that supposed to mean?" she muttered, more to herself than anyone else.

When no one responded, she turned her head toward Astron. Her fiery yellow eyes immediately caught the calm, composed expression on his face. He stood as still as ever, his sharp purple eyes observing the room with an unbothered air. It was as if Kain's words hadn't surprised him in the slightest.

"You..." Irina said, her voice trailing off before narrowing her eyes.

Astron tilted his head slightly, his expression unreadable. "I know what he meant. If you want to ask that."

Irina's gaze sharpened, her fiery hair swaying slightly as she crossed her arms. "And you didn't think to share that with the rest of us?"

"Why would I? You'll figure it out eventually."

"Eventually?" Irina's voice carried a note of irritation, though there was an underlying curiosity. She stepped closer, her fiery presence flaring ever so slightly. "Don't act like you're above explaining things, Astron. If you know something, just say it."

Astron raised an eyebrow, his calm demeanor unshaken. "It's not about being above anything, Irina. It's about letting the lesson settle. If Kain wanted to explain it to you, he would have. My saying it now won't make it click any faster."

"What is this logic? Professor Kain is someone who is outside of our group, while you are not. He might want to teach us, but-"

"What if I want the same thing?"

"What if I want the same thing?" Astron interrupted, his voice calm but carrying a weight that made Irina pause mid-sentence.

She blinked, her fiery yellow eyes narrowing as she processed his words. "You? Want to teach us something?" she scoffed, though the uncertainty in her tone betrayed her bravado. "You're not exactly the mentoring type, Astron."

Astron tilted his head slightly, his sharp purple eyes glinting with subtle amusement. "And you're not exactly the listening type, Irina. Yet here we are."

"What do you mean I'm not the listening type?" Irina snapped, her fiery yellow eyes narrowing. She crossed her arms and tilted her head defiantly. "Are you saying I can't just shut up when I need to? Do you think I'm someone who needs to... shut up?"

Astron shook his head slowly, his expression as calm as ever. "If I were looking for someone quiet, well..."

Irina arched an eyebrow, her fiery presence flaring slightly. "Good that I'm not quiet, then."

Astron's faint smirk returned, his sharp purple eyes glinting with amusement. "Good for you," he said evenly, "but not good for everyone else."

"Bastard," Irina muttered, her tone somewhere between exasperation and grudging amusement. "Shut up."

"You first."

From the side of the chamber, Jasmine leaned against the wall, her arms crossed and her lips curled into an entertained grin. "You were with them on your previous team, right? Was this how they were?"

Sylvie nodded at Jasmine's question, though there was a moment of hesitation in her response. "It was a little different," she said softly, her voice barely audible over the lingering hum of mana in the chamber.

Jasmine tilted her head, her sharp green eyes narrowing slightly as she caught the nuance in Sylvie's tone. "How different?" she pressed.

Sylvie fidgeted with the edge of her sleeve, her gaze dropping momentarily. "I don't know," she admitted, her voice tinged with uncertainty. "It's... hard to explain."



Jasmine's expression softened, her usual teasing demeanor giving way to something more thoughtful. She leaned closer to Sylvie, her voice dropping to a gentle murmur. "You know, we should probably ask," she said, her tone low but firm. "It's better than just staying in the dark like this."

Sylvie's breath caught at Jasmine's words, her chest tightening. She wanted to ask—to voice the questions that had been swirling in her mind since the dungeon began. But at the same time, the thought terrified her. What if the answers weren't what she wanted to hear? What if knowing the truth only made things harder?

Her green eyes flicked toward Astron and Irina, who were still caught in their back-and-forth exchange. Astron's calm, measured responses seemed to fuel Irina's fire, their dynamic as natural as it was tense. Watching them, Sylvie felt a pang of something she couldn't quite name—a mixture of longing, curiosity, and fear.

Jasmine nudged her lightly, snapping her out of her thoughts. "Sylvie."

"I will try."

The team left the training grounds in silence, their exhaustion palpable. The faint hum of mana and the fading warmth of the dungeon lingered in the air as they stepped into the open corridors leading to the academy's resting area. Around them, other teams and classes exited their respective training sessions, some chatting animatedly while others shuffled in silence, much like Astron's team.

Astron walked slightly ahead, his sharp purple eyes scanning the surroundings, though his expression remained unreadable. The girls trailed behind him, their footsteps echoing faintly against the stone floor.

As they reached the resting area, the group naturally began to split off toward their respective changing rooms. Astron nodded briefly to the group, his calm voice breaking the quiet. "Regroup in ten."

"Got it," Jasmine replied, giving him a quick thumbs-up.

Sylvie hesitated for a moment, her green eyes flicking toward Astron before she turned and followed the others. The girls entered their designated changing room, the heavy door swinging shut behind them with a soft creak.

Inside, the atmosphere shifted slightly. The faint buzz of the other teams outside faded, leaving only the sound of the girls settling into the space. Irina leaned against a locker, her fiery yellow eyes still glinting with the remnants of her earlier frustration. Layla sank onto a nearby bench, her shield finally unstrapped and set aside as she rubbed her sore arms. Sylvie sat quietly, fidgeting with the hem of her sleeve, while Jasmine leaned casually against the wall, her sharp green eyes flicking between her teammates.

The silence stretched, the weight of unspoken thoughts hanging heavy in the air. Finally, Jasmine cleared her throat, breaking the tension. "Irina."

Irina glanced up, her fiery gaze narrowing slightly. "What?"

Jasmine hesitated under Irina's fiery gaze, the sharp intensity in her amber eyes enough to make her pause. For someone who had no problem teasing others, Jasmine found herself strangely unsettled.

Irina wasn't doing anything overt—she was just standing there, her stance casual, but her presence was so fierce it made Jasmine's usual confidence waver.

'This girl... Why is she so intense in moments like this?' Jasmine thought, her green eyes darting away briefly before flicking back. 'Is everyone like this, or is it just Irina? It's like she's ready to set the room on fire if I say the wrong thing.'

Jasmine cleared her throat again, trying to gather her thoughts. "Uh, so... earlier," she began, her tone unusually tentative. "You know, during the dungeon..."

Irina raised an eyebrow, her fiery gaze narrowing further. "What about it?" she asked, her voice sharp but not unkind.

Jasmine shifted on her feet, her usual playful demeanor cracking under the weight of Irina's scrutiny. "Well, it's just... you and Astron. You two—uh—seem to work well together."

"Is that so?" she said, her tone flat. "And?"

"And the pictures..."

Irina sighed, her fiery hair swaying as she leaned off the locker. "Jasmine," she said, her tone carrying a note of warning. "If you've got something to ask, just ask. Stop beating around the bush."

Jasmine winced at the directness but straightened her posture, forcing herself to meet Irina's gaze. "Fine," she said, exhaling sharply.

"Are you and Astron a couple?"

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Irina froze for a split second, Jasmine's question hanging in the air like a spark threatening to ignite. Her fiery yellow eyes flickered with a mixture of surprise and something more as the words settled in her mind.

'Are we a couple?'

The question was deceptively simple, but it sent her thoughts spiraling. She stood straighter, her earlier posture of relaxed confidence shifting subtly as her mind raced. It wasn't the first time this question had crossed her mind—far from it. In fact, it had been haunting her recently more than she cared to admit.

She glanced at Jasmine, her sharp eyes wide with curiosity, and then at Sylvie, who sat still but whose gaze flicked nervously toward her. The room felt heavier, the unspoken tension pressing against her chest as she considered her answer.

'Are we?' Irina thought, her lips parting slightly before closing again. The memories flooded in, vivid and sharp. The confession she'd made to Astron, her kiss that had lingered longer than it should have. At the time, she'd thought that was it. 'I've got him,' she'd told herself, her usual confidence carrying her through the moment.

But then Maya had entered the picture.

Astron's connection with Maya—whatever it was—had introduced a new layer of doubt. She remembered the way he interacted with Maya, the quiet familiarity between them. The way he

didn't push her away or avoid her, even when Irina was present. It wasn't jealousy, exactly, but it unsettled her.

'If we're a couple,' Irina thought, her fiery gaze hardening slightly, 'then why does it feel like there's still a line I haven't crossed?'

She had planned to address it, to confront Astron and define things clearly between them. She was never one to shy away from her feelings, much less leave important matters unresolved. And yet, every time she'd found herself alone with him, the words wouldn't come. Opportunities had presented themselves—more than once—but she had let them slip away.

'Why didn't I say it?' she wondered, her frustration simmering beneath the surface. 'I'm not the type to hold back, so why couldn't I just ask him?'

The silence stretched for a beat too long, and Irina realized Jasmine was still waiting for her answer. She forced a smirk, her fiery eyes narrowing slightly as she leaned against the locker once more.

"What do you think?" she asked smoothly, her voice carrying her usual edge of confidence.

Jasmine blinked, clearly caught off guard by the deflection. "Uh, I mean... it kind of seems like you are?" she ventured cautiously.

Irina's smirk widened, though the sharpness in her eyes remained. "Then go with that," she said simply, brushing a strand of fiery hair over her shoulder. "It's not like it's any of your business anyway."

Jasmine frowned, her curiosity clearly unsatisfied, but Irina didn't give her the chance to press further. She straightened, her posture commanding as she turned toward Sylvie, who quickly averted her gaze.

"Well?" Irina asked, her tone deceptively casual. "Do you have something to add, Sylvie?"

Sylvie shook her head quickly, her hands tightening slightly on the hem of her sleeve. "No, nothing," she said softly, her voice barely above a whisper.

Irina's smirk softened slightly, though her fiery gaze remained sharp. "Good," she said, turning back toward the center of the room. "Then let's focus on what matters. We've got more important things to deal with than gossip."

But even as she dismissed the question aloud, it lingered in her mind, a stubborn spark refusing to be extinguished. 'Are we a couple?' she thought again, the words echoing in the back of her mind.

'If we are really a couple....If Astron really thinks so, then why is he still letting Senior Maya get close to him?'

Irina's smirk faltered for just a fraction of a second as the thought lingered in her mind, gnawing at the edges of her fiery confidence. 'If we are really a couple... if Astron really thinks so, then why is he still letting Senior Maya get so close to him?'

Her fingers tapped lightly against her crossed arms as the question buzzed in her mind, persistent and relentless. Knowing Astron, she couldn't imagine him being careless.

He wasn't the type to play games, much less entertain something as ridiculous as two-timing.

Or was he?

'He wouldn't... would he?' The doubt crept in uninvited, a faint but unwelcome whisper at the back of her mind. 'No way. There's no way. He's too straightforward for that. Too principled.'

But the possibility, no matter how remote, gnawed at her. Irina's fiery yellow eyes narrowed slightly as she pushed the thought aside. 'If he's even considering something that stupid, I'd be...' Her thoughts trailed off, her jaw tightening.

'Greatly disappointed.' The words carried a weight that surprised even her. Disappointment wasn't something Irina handled well, and the idea of feeling it toward Astron was unsettling. She didn't know what she would do if that were the case, and the uncertainty frustrated her more than she cared to admit.

She let out a soft huff, brushing a strand of fiery hair out of her face as she turned her thoughts to a more immediate concern. Her gaze slid to Sylvie, catching the girl fidgeting slightly in her seat. Sylvie's hands were still clutching at her sleeves, her green eyes darting nervously to the floor.

Irina's smirk returned, sharper this time, though her fiery eyes remained narrowed as she studied Sylvie. 'This should stop some vixens at least,' she thought, the edge of triumph flickering in her expression.

Sylvie must have sensed the shift, her gaze flickering up just briefly enough to meet Irina's. The contact was fleeting, but it was enough to make Sylvie straighten slightly, her fidgeting stopping as she tried to compose herself.

'Good,' Irina thought, her smirk softening but remaining firmly in place. 'Let's make sure everyone knows their place.'

The silence stretched between them for a moment before Irina turned her attention back to the center of the room, her fiery presence commanding as always. But even as she exuded confidence, the question lingered at the back of her mind, refusing to be ignored.

'I'll find out,' she promised herself, her fiery eyes gleaming with determination. 'One way or another, I'll figure out exactly what he's thinking. And if I don't like the answer... well, we'll deal with that when we get there.'

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The class buzzed with a subdued energy as Professor Darius Kain concluded his lecture, the glowing diagrams of battlefield formations on the classroom's main screen fading into the background. His commanding presence had kept the students focused throughout the session, and now, as he reached the end, the air was tinged with a mixture of relief and anticipation.

Kain's sharp gray eyes swept over the room, his tall frame exuding authority. He tapped his sleek tablet once, and the screen flickered to display a summary of the key points discussed. "That concludes today's lecture on formation adaptability," he said, his deep voice resonating across the room.

The students began gathering their notes, but Kain's next words stilled their movements.

"Before you leave, there's one final matter to address," he said, his tone calm but firm. He gestured toward the class with a deliberate motion. "This pertains to your practical session with Kalthor's Method."

The murmurs started immediately, students exchanging curious and nervous glances. Jasmine, seated near the middle of the class, leaned toward Sylvie. "What do you think he's about to drop on us now?" she whispered, her green eyes glinting with curiosity.

Sylvie shook her head slightly, her green eyes focused on Kain. "I'm not sure," she replied softly, her voice steady but tinged with unease.

Kain raised a hand, silencing the room. "During the practical session, you were required to adhere strictly to Kalthor's Method, no matter how tempting it was to deviate. This was deliberate, as the exercise was designed to test more than just your ability to clear the dungeon."

A hand shot up near the front of the class. "Sir, are you saying there's something we missed?" a student asked, their tone hesitant but curious.

Kain's expression didn't waver. "Perhaps," he said cryptically. "Understanding the nuances of any method requires more than just execution. It requires reflection."

The murmurs grew louder, until Kain's sharp gaze silenced them again. "To aid in this reflection, you will write reports on your experiences with Kalthor's Method during the practical session."

"Reports?" Jasmine asked, her voice carrying over the quiet hum of the room.

"Yes," Kain confirmed, his tone leaving no room for argument. "Each of you will submit a report detailing your observations during the exercise. You will comment on the strengths and weaknesses of Kalthor's Method, as well as your team's ability to operate within its structure. This exercise is not simply about what you did, but about what you learned."

Another hand went up, this time from a student in the back. "But Professor, wasn't the point just to stick to the formation? What else are we supposed to analyze?"

Kain's lips curved into a faint, almost imperceptible smile. "If you believe the point was merely to 'stick to the formation,' you've already missed the lesson," he said, his voice carrying a subtle edge. "The true purpose of this exercise was to understand the principles behind Kalthor's Method—the balance between simplicity and efficiency, the trade-offs of excluding a tactician, and the strengths and limitations of your own team."

The room fell silent, the weight of Kain's words settling over the students. Irina, seated near the back, leaned back in her chair, her fiery yellow eyes narrowing thoughtfully. 'Balance and trade-offs, huh?' she thought, her mind drifting back to the dungeon and the cracks in their formation.

Kain continued, his tone steady but firm. "Reports are due by the end of the week. They will be graded not on how flawless your performance was, but on your ability to reflect critically on the experience. A good hunter does not simply act—they learn and adapt."

As he finished, Kain's sharp gray eyes scanned the room one last time. "Any further questions?"

The students exchanged glances, but no one spoke up. The gravity of the assignment seemed to have settled in.

"Very well," Kain said, tapping his tablet once more. The screen behind him powered down, leaving the room bathed in the soft glow of overhead lights. "You're dismissed."

## Chapter 815 189.1 - Mentorship

As soon as Professor Kain left the room, Julia groaned dramatically, slumping forward onto her desk. "Ugh, another report? Seriously? I'm so done with this!" she whined, her voice carrying over the murmurs of the other students. "Why do we always have to write these stupid things? We're hunters, not writers!"

Ethan chuckled softly, leaning back in his chair. "I mean, she's got a point. Writing reports after every exercise does get old."

Lucas, sitting nearby, smirked faintly as he adjusted his tablet. "You're acting like this is new. It's the academy. You had to know there'd be another report coming."

"Expected or not," Julia said, shooting Lucas a glare, "that doesn't make it any less annoying. I'd rather be in a dungeon fighting something than stuck in my room analyzing formations."

Lilia, who had been quietly packing her things, raised an eyebrow. "We've been writing reports since the start of the semester. You should've gotten used to it by now."

Julia shook her head vehemently, crossing her arms. "Getting used to it doesn't mean I have to like it."

Irina, seated a few rows behind them, smirked faintly as she listened in on the conversation. "You could always delegate it to someone else," she said dryly, her fiery yellow eyes glinting with amusement.

Julia spun around to face her, her blue eyes narrowing suspiciously. "Are you volunteering?"

Irina chuckled, leaning back in her chair. "Not a chance. You'd probably 'critique' my writing style the whole time."

Julia groaned again, flopping back into her seat with exaggerated defeat. "I'm not cut out for this academic stuff. Can't we just skip the reports and prove ourselves in the field?"

Ethan shook his head, a small smile playing on his lips. "You know that's not how it works. Kain's right—reflecting on what we did helps us get better."

Julia shot him a look, her lips pursing. "You're starting to sound like a professor, Zeus. Don't let it go to your head."

Lilia chuckled softly, her tone light but teasing. "Don't worry. He's just trying to keep you from complaining the whole week."

Julia huffed, shaking her head as she grabbed her bag. "Fine, fine. I'll do the stupid report. But don't expect me to enjoy it."

The group laughed, the tension of the assignment easing into their usual camaraderie as they gathered their things and prepared to leave. Despite Julia's grumbling, they all knew she'd get it done—probably with a few more complaints along the way.

Julia, unable to sit still in her frustration, spun back toward Irina, a mischievous glint sparking in her blue eyes. "You know what, Irina?" she said, crossing her arms on the back of her chair and leaning toward her classmate. "How did your practical lesson go? With your 'Mister Cool' here, you should've had quite a lot of fun, right?" Her tone was laced with playful mockery, each word exaggerated for effect.

Irina raised an eyebrow, her fiery yellow eyes narrowing slightly as a faint smirk played at her lips. "Mister Cool?" she repeated, her voice calm but edged with warning. "Are we giving Astron a new nickname now, or is this just your way of fishing for gossip?"

Julia grinned, undeterred by Irina's sharp tone. "Oh, I'm not fishing. I'm hooking. Come on, Irina, you've got to admit, partnering up with someone like him must've made things... interesting."

Irina's smirk deepened, but her tone remained steady. "If by 'interesting,' you mean him silently doing his part without much fuss, then sure. Fascinating stuff."

Julia wasn't about to let up, her grin widening as she draped her arms over the back of her chair like a cat preparing to pounce. "Oh, come on. You're telling me you didn't notice the way everyone in the dungeon was sneaking glances at him? The silent brooding, the impossible precision—classic 'Mister Cool' energy. Bet you were swooning the whole time."

"Indeed. The guy has a way of making everything look effortless. It's obnoxious."

"Exactly!" Julia said, pointing at Lilia as if she'd just solved a great mystery. "Obnoxiously cool. So, Irina, what's the verdict? Did he swoop in to save you at the last second, or were you too busy trying to keep up?"

Irina leaned back in her chair, her expression as calm as ever, though her narrowed gaze carried a subtle edge. "First of all, I don't need saving. And second," she added, her tone dripping with mock sweetness, "if you're so fascinated by Astron, why don't you ask him yourself? I'm sure he'd love to entertain your endless curiosity."

Julia gasped, her hand flying to her chest in mock offense. "Irina Emberheart, are you suggesting I'm the one interested in him? How scandalous! I'm just here to make sure you don't miss your moment with our resident enigma."

"Moment?" Irina repeated, raising an eyebrow. "Please. The only thing Astron and I have in common is the desire to finish assignments without dealing with nonsense like this."

Julia's grin widened, the glint of mischief in her eyes turning almost predatory. She leaned forward, her voice dropping into a conspiratorial tone. "Heeeeeeh... Really? Are you sure you two didn't share a steamy moment in the heat of battle?" she teased, dragging out the words as if savoring every syllable.

Irina didn't flinch, her fiery yellow eyes narrowing slightly, though the faintest twitch at the corner of her lips betrayed her growing irritation.

"And," Julia continued, her grin practically splitting her face now, "your team consisted of all women, right? Tell me—did Mister Cool somehow manage to land himself a harem? I mean, just picture it: our resident enigma, brooding in the middle of a group of women. That would be priceless."

Lilia snorted, barely suppressing a laugh as she glanced at Irina, clearly enjoying Julia's relentless antics. "You have to admit," she said with a faint smirk, "it is a funny image. Astron, the silent protector of his harem."

"Exactly!" Julia said, her excitement building. She twisted in her chair, throwing a wink in Astron's direction. "Hey, Astron, how does it feel being surrounded by adoring fans? Got any insights for us?"

Astron, seated a few rows away, didn't even bother looking up from his tablet. His calm, indifferent demeanor remained unshaken, as though Julia's teasing didn't exist in his world.

Julia turned back to Irina, throwing her hands up in mock exasperation. "See? He's too cool to even acknowledge me! The audacity!" Her dramatic flair earned a round of chuckles from the group.

Irina, however, remained still, her composure seemingly unshaken—until a subtle pause in her movements betrayed her. It was brief, barely noticeable to anyone else, but Julia caught it immediately, her grin widening triumphantly.

Irina exhaled quietly, leaning forward with deliberate calm. Her voice, when she finally spoke, was as sharp as the edge of a blade. "Julia," she began, her tone light but edged with steel, "if you have so much time to fantasize about Astron's social life, maybe you should channel that energy into your report. Who knows? You might even manage to turn it in on time for once."

Julia feigned a wounded look, placing a hand over her chest. "Ouch. Low blow, Irina. But I'm just saying, it'd be a shame if someone as interesting as Astron got all this attention and didn't even notice."

Irina's smirk returned, this time tinged with a hint of menace. "Don't worry, Julia. I'm sure he notices plenty—he's just selective about what's worth his time."

The group laughed, the playful banter easing the tension in the room. Even Julia had to admit defeat, though the glint of mischief in her eyes made it clear she wasn't done poking fun at Irina just yet.

RING!

The shrill sound of the bell echoed through the classroom, signaling the end of the break. Julia let out a dramatic groan, slumping forward onto her desk as though she'd just been dealt a mortal blow. "That's it? That's all the time we get? That wasn't a break—it was a glorified blink!"

Several other students murmured in agreement, their voices carrying a mix of frustration and exhaustion.

"Shortest break ever," Julia grumbled, sitting back up and throwing her arms in the air. "I barely had time to complain about how much I hate reports!"

Lilia, already organized with her tablet neatly placed on her desk, arched an eyebrow at Julia. "It felt short because Professor Kain went over time. He's not exactly known for his impeccable time management."

Julia turned toward Lilia with a mock glare. "You're really going to defend this travesty of a break? Traitor."



Lilia smirked, leaning back in her chair with a casual shrug. "I'm not defending it; I'm just stating facts. Besides, maybe if you spent less time teasing Irina, you'd feel like you got more out of the break."

Irina, who had been quietly reviewing her notes, glanced up with a faint smirk. "She has a point. Though, I doubt you'd be able to resist your usual antics, Julia."

Julia crossed her arms, pouting. "You're all ganging up on me now, huh? Fine, I'll just sit here in silence. No jokes. No teasing. Just a perfect, studious cadet."

The group exchanged skeptical glances before bursting into laughter. Julia's mock indignation quickly crumbled into a grin as she joined in.

The door opened suddenly, and the laughter died down as all eyes turned toward the entrance. Professor Eleanor stepped into the room, her heels clicking against the polished floor as she made her way to the podium. She carried her usual stack of papers and tablet, her sharp eyes immediately scanning the room to ensure everyone was settled.

"Good morning," she said, her voice crisp and commanding. The room instantly fell into a respectful silence, the students straightening in their seats.

Eleanor placed her materials on the podium, her gaze briefly lingering on Julia, who sat with an exaggeratedly serious expression as if to prove her earlier declaration of studiousness. A faint quirk of Eleanor's brow suggested she wasn't entirely fooled.

"Let us begin," Eleanor continued, her tone leaving no room for delay. She tapped her tablet, and the classroom screen flickered to life, displaying a detailed diagram of mana flow and elemental interactions. "Today's lesson will focus on advanced applications of elemental synergy. Open your textbooks to page 78."

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Eleanor's sharp gaze swept across the room as she tapped her tablet once more, closing the diagram on the screen. The classroom lights adjusted automatically, brightening to their standard setting.

"And with that," she said, her tone as crisp as ever, "we've covered the main topics for today's lesson. That concludes the lecture."

A murmur of relief rippled through the cadets. Julia practically melted into her chair, whispering a dramatic "Finally!" under her breath. Ethan smirked, already packing his notes, while Lucas stretched with a faint yawn.

But before anyone could so much as stand, Eleanor's voice cut through the room like a blade. "Sit down,"

The cadets froze, mid-motion, as her piercing eyes locked on the group. Her tone wasn't harsh, but it carried an undeniable weight—one that demanded attention.

"I didn't say you were dismissed," she continued, her hands clasped neatly in front of her. "There's one more matter we need to address before you leave."

A collective groan stirred among the students, though no one dared voice it aloud. Julia slumped back into her seat, muttering, "Of course there's more," just loud enough for Lilia to snicker.

Eleanor ignored the murmurs, raising her chin slightly as she continued. "As you're all aware, the mentorship program is set to begin next week."

The room shifted as students exchanged glances. The mentorship program had been the talk of the academy for weeks—an initiative that paired cadets with experienced hunters to gain hands-on experience in the field. It was a prestigious opportunity, but also one that came with high expectations.

"Your performance in this program will not only reflect on you individually," Eleanor said, her tone measured but firm, "but also on the academy itself. The hunters taking part in this initiative are some of the most renowned in their fields. They will expect discipline, skill, and above all, professionalism."

Julia leaned toward Ethan, whispering, "Translation: don't embarrass us."

Eleanor's sharp gaze flicked in their direction, and Julia immediately straightened, her lips pressing into a thin line as she feigned innocence.

"Since this program is mandatory," Eleanor continued, her eyes sweeping the room, "I trust you've all reviewed the preparatory materials I assigned last week"

A faint ripple of tension passed through the room. It wasn't hard to tell which students had actually completed the materials and which had... skimmed. Julia sank lower in her chair, her expression a mixture of defiance and guilt.

Eleanor paused, letting the silence settle uncomfortably before speaking again. "I'll be reviewing your individual assignments later this week to ensure you're adequately prepared. But for now, I want to hear your thoughts. What are your expectations for this program? What do you hope to gain? And," she added, her gaze narrowing slightly, "how do you intend to make the most of this opportunity?"

The room remained silent for a moment, the cadets unsure whether she was

expecting volunteers or would start calling on them.

"No expectations? Well, I guess that kind of makes sense, as we have stated that for freshmen this program wouldn't be detailed."

She clasped her hands in front of her and leaned slightly against the podium. "However," she continued, her voice firm, "even if you're not expecting much, you should at least set some goals for yourselves. The mentorship program is more than just an exercise. It's a chance to work alongside seasoned hunters-an opportunity that many of you won't fully appreciate until you're in the field."

The room stirred as Eleanor's words sank in, some cadets straightening in their seats with newfound attention. Julia, despite her usual nonchalance, glanced sideways at Lilia, who had already opened her tablet to the relevant section of her notes. Eleanor's expression softened slightly, her piercing gaze shifting to something almost encouraging. "Since the list of hunters participating in the program has been finalized, I'm pleased to inform you that as of today, applications for mentorship will be open." The room buzzed with a ripple of excitement, the earlier tension giving way to an undercurrent of enthusiasm. Several cadets exchanged eager whispers, and Julia perked up, leaning toward Ethan with a grin. "The list is already updated? This might actually be interesting."

Ethan smirked. "Bet you'll spend more time picking a hunter than writing your report."

Before Julia could retort, a hand shot up from the middle of the room. Eleanor's gaze shifted to the source, her expression expectant. "Yes?"

The cadet, a sharp-eyed boy with neatly combed hair, lowered his hand. "What if too many cadets apply for a specific hunter?" he asked, his voice steady but curious. "How will the academy decide?"

Eleanor's lips curved into a faint, knowing smile. "Isn't the answer obvious?" she replied, her tone measured but direct. "The academy operates based on merit. If multiple cadets apply for the same hunter, priority will be given to those with higher grades."

A ripple of mixed reactions coursed through the room. Some students nodded in understanding, while others exchanged uneasy glances. Julia leaned back in her chair, muttering under her breath, "Great. Another reason for Irina and Lilia to gloat."

Irina, overhearing, smirked without looking up from her tablet. "It's not gloating if it's just facts."

Eleanor allowed the murmurs to settle before continuing. "Let this serve as a reminder that your performance matters. This program is not a popularity contest-it's about demonstrating your potential to those who can guide you further. The hunters participating have high expectations. Show them that you're worth their time."

Her words carried weight, and the room grew quiet once more, the cadets absorbing the reality of the program's competitive nature.

"Applications will remain open until the end of the week," Eleanor added, glancing at her tablet. "I suggest you review the list carefully, assess your own strengths and weaknesses, and choose a mentor who aligns with your goals. Do not waste this opportunity on frivolous decisions."

The bell rang, signaling the end of the class, but Eleanor didn't dismiss them immediately. Her gaze lingered on the group, her expression stern but not unkind. "Remember," she said, her voice cutting through the noise of students preparing to leave, "this program is designed to challenge you, to push you beyond your limits. Treat it with the seriousness it deserves."

With that, she nodded. "You're dismissed."

As the bell's shrill tone faded, Eleanor's sharp words still lingered in the air, leaving an unspoken pressure that kept nearly every cadet rooted in their seats. Despite being dismissed, no one moved to leave. Instead, a palpable buzz of excitement and curiosity swept through the room as students immediately reached for their tablets.

"Did you see the list yet?" someone whispered near the front.

"It's already updated," another replied, their tone tinged with anticipation.

Julia leaned back in her chair, flipping open her tablet with a dramatic flourish. "Well, well," she said, her blue eyes glinting with mischief. "Let's see what we're working

with."

The room filled with the quiet hum of tablets booting up and excited murmurs. Irina, seated a few rows behind Julia, opened her own tablet with a far more restrained air. She glanced briefly at the screen before settling into a calm focus, while Ethan peered over Julia's shoulder with mild curiosity.

Lilia, already ahead of the others, scrolled through the application page with her characteristic efficiency. "The names are impressive," she remarked casually, though the faintest trace of admiration colored her voice.

Julia's gaze scanned the list, and as the names appeared, she let out a low, appreciative whistle. "Whooo... What a list."

Ethan raised an eyebrow, leaning closer. "What do we have?"

"See for yourself," Julia said, gesturing toward her tablet as she began reading aloud. "Callum Graves, the Thunderblade Knight. Amelia Lake, known for her dual-elemental mastery. And Selena Vayl... wait, the Selena Vayl? Moonlit Enchanter herself?"

"That's her," Lilia confirmed, her voice even but her eyes betraying a flicker of excitement. "She's one of the academy's most accomplished alumni. Enchantment specialist, tactical genius, and, if I remember correctly, she designed the mana synchronization array used in modern guild formations."

Julia let out a low hum of appreciation. "No wonder everyone's hyped about this. If even half these hunters are as good as their reputations, this program is going to be

insane."

Irina, scrolling at her own pace, interjected smoothly, "That also means competition for mentorship will be fierce. I wouldn't get too excited until you see who else is

applying."

"Oh, come on," Julia retorted with a grin, "don't be such a killjoy. Let me dream a little."

Ethan glanced at the list, his brow furrowing as he took in the array of names. "Callum Graves is going to draw a lot of attention," he mused aloud. "If I remember correctly, he, Amelia Lake and Instructor Eleanor graduated together at the same time." "Yep," Lilia chimed in, her tone light but certain. "They were close friends back in the day. If I remember correctly, they even founded a guild together-Silver Vanguard, wasn't it? Though Eleanor eventually left to join the academy as an instructor." Julia raised an eyebrow, leaning forward with growing interest. "Wait, they started a guild and stayed friends? That's impressive. Most partnerships like that end in drama and broken alliances."

Ethan nodded thoughtfully. "True, but Silver Vanguard was different. They had a reputation for balancing discipline with innovation. It wasn't just about strength-they emphasized strategy and teamwork. A lot of guilds today still follow some of their

practices."

Irina glanced up from her tablet, her fiery yellow eyes narrowing slightly. "If they were

so successful, why did Eleanor leave?"

That was a question itself.

## Chapter 817 - 189.3 - Mentorship

"If they were so successful, why did Eleanor leave?"

The room fell into a brief, heavy silence following Irina's question. The unspoken tension hung in the air, as if the cadets were collectively turning the question over in their minds but reluctant to voice their speculations. Even Julia, usually quick to fill the silence with a quip, remained quiet, her brow furrowed slightly.

Ethan shifted in his seat, his gaze dropping to his tablet as though the answer might magically appear there. "That's... a good question," he said finally, his voice quieter than usual. "I've heard a few things, but nothing concrete."

"Same," Lilia admitted, her tone unusually restrained. "There are rumors, of course, but..." She trailed off, her green eyes flicking toward the front of the room as if half-expecting Eleanor to materialize and hear her thoughts.

Julia tilted her head, her curiosity piqued. "Rumors? Like what?"

Lilia's lips pressed into a thin line, and she shook her head. "Nothing worth repeating here."

Irina's fiery yellow eyes darted between her classmates, her sharp instincts catching the subtle shifts in their expressions. She didn't press further, but her silence spoke volumes—she understood there was more to the story, even if no one was willing to say it aloud.

Julia, never one to let go of a thread, leaned forward conspiratorially, lowering her voice. "Oh, come on. You can't just drop that and leave us hanging. What kind of rumors are we talking about? Betrayal? Drama? A secret lover?"

"Julia," Lilia said sharply, cutting her off with a glare. "Enough. You don't want Eleanor to overhear you speculating like that."

At the mention of Eleanor, the tension in the room sharpened. Even Julia, who rarely took anything seriously, leaned back in her chair with a sheepish grin. "Okay, okay, point taken. I don't need her wrath raining down on me."

Ethan chuckled softly, though his expression remained thoughtful. "Yeah, let's not poke that hornet's nest. Whatever the truth is, it's not something she'd appreciate being dissected in a classroom."

The cadets exchanged uneasy glances, the air thick with unspoken questions they dared not ask. Irina returned her focus to her tablet, her sharp gaze scanning the list of hunters with renewed interest, as though the names might offer a distraction from the unanswered mystery.

Julia broke the silence with a dramatic sigh, her grin returning as she attempted to lighten the mood. "Fine, we'll shelve the Eleanor drama for now. But seriously, how did Silver Vanguard even have time to be so legendary? Between running a guild and building reputations like that, it's no wonder they're still famous."

Irina, sensing the shift in tone, smirked faintly. "Some people are just built different, Julia. You'd know that if you spent more time working and less time talking."

"Ha, ha," Julia shot back, though her grin was genuine. "You wound me, Irina. But fine, I'll take the hint. Back to the list."

The room slowly returned to its previous buzz of activity, with cadets reviewing the mentorship applications and murmuring about their preferences. Yet, the question Irina had raised lingered at the back of their minds, a quiet reminder of the enigmatic figure who had just left them with more than one mystery to ponder.

As the cadets continued scrolling through the list together, Julia's finger froze mid-swipe, her blue eyes widening in surprise. She leaned closer to her tablet, as if to confirm what she'd just seen, before exclaiming, "Kaya Hartley?"

All heads turned toward her at once, and then, almost as one, toward Ethan. Julia, never one to miss an opportunity, was the first to speak. "Your aunt is on the list?" she asked, spinning toward him with an incredulous grin.

Ethan raised his hands defensively, his hazel eyes wide with genuine surprise. "I didn't know about this either! I just found out."

Julia narrowed her eyes, studying him for a moment as though trying to gauge his honesty. Then, her grin turned sly. "Well, if she's here, that must mean she's interested in someone. Maybe she's got her eye on one of us."

Ethan sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Or maybe," he said dryly, "she's just here to teach, like every other mentor."

Julia waved a dismissive hand, her grin widening. "Sure, maybe. But thinking about the possibilities doesn't hurt, does it?"

Ethan gave her a pointed look. "That's rich coming from you."

Ignoring his jab, Julia's grin remained firmly in place as she leaned back, clearly enjoying herself. Ethan shook his head and reached for his smartwatch, deciding to check the list himself.

Opening the academy's portal app, he navigated to the mentorship program section. As the page loaded, his brow furrowed in confusion. The section where the submission forms were supposed to be was blank. Instead, a bold message greeted him at the top of the page:

"Your mentor has been confirmed."

Ethan blinked, sitting up straighter as he read the message again to be sure. Beneath it, a line of text appeared, simple yet striking:

"Mentee: Ethan Hartley.

Mentor: Eleanor White."

"What?" he muttered, his voice barely above a whisper.

The others noticed his reaction immediately. Julia leaned in, her curiosity practically radiating off her. "What's wrong, Zeus? You look like you just saw a ghost."

Ethan didn't reply right away, his gaze fixed on the screen. Finally, he glanced up, his expression a mix of confusion and disbelief. "I... I don't have a submission form," he said slowly. "It says my mentor's already been assigned."

The group exchanged surprised glances. "Assigned?" Irina repeated, her fiery yellow eyes narrowing. "Without you applying?"

Julia raised an eyebrow, her grin turning mischievous. "Ooooh, who's the lucky mentor?"

Ethan exhaled deeply, glancing back at his screen before answering. "Eleanor White."

That announcement hit like a lightning bolt. The group's reaction was immediate and loud. Julia clapped her hands together, a mix of disbelief and excitement in her voice. "What?! Eleanor? As in Instructor Eleanor? The same Eleanor who strikes fear into every cadet here?"

Lilia's green eyes widened slightly, though her tone remained measured. "That's... unusual. Assigning a mentor without application isn't standard protocol."

Lilia's green eyes remained fixed on her tablet as she scrolled through the guidelines, her expression sharp. "It says here that everyone is supposed to choose their own mentors," she remarked, her voice even but tinged with curiosity. She tapped the screen and turned it slightly to show the others. "The system is designed for cadets to submit their applications, and then mentors select from those applications. There's no mention of pre-assignments anywhere."



Ethan frowned, glancing between Lilia's tablet and his smartwatch. His mind raced as he tried to make sense of it. Then why? he thought, his brows knitting together. Why was I assigned directly?

Before he could voice his thoughts, Julia leaned in with a mischievous grin, her blue eyes sparkling with humor. "Maybe she's taken a liking to you," she said, her tone laced with teasing. "Maybe Instructor Eleanor just wants to spend some alone time with you. Who knows? Maybe you're her favorite."

Ethan shot her an incredulous look, echoed by everyone else in the group. "Even jokes should have some boundaries, Julia," he said, his tone firm. "If Instructor Eleanor were here, you'd have been blasted across the room by now."

Julia waved her hand dismissively, completely unbothered. "It's just a joke," she said, crossing her arms with a dramatic huff. "And what's with all this talk about boundaries? The darker the joke, the better!"

"..."

The silence that followed was heavy, punctuated only by Ethan's slow blink as he stared at her, utterly unimpressed.

Julia rolled her eyes, throwing her hands up in mock frustration. "Humph. You guys don't know how to appreciate good humor. Honestly, the only thing darker than my jokes is your sense of fun."

Lilia smirked faintly, but her focus remained on the guidelines. "Regardless of your theories, this situation isn't normal," she said, her voice cutting through Julia's antics. "If Eleanor requested Ethan specifically, it means she has a reason. And knowing her, it's not something casual."

Irina, leaning back in her chair, added calmly, "Whatever it is, Ethan, you're going to find out soon enough. Eleanor doesn't seem like the type to keep things vague."

Ethan sighed, running a hand through his hair again. "Great. So now I've got to figure out why the most intimidating mentor in the program decided to single me out. No pressure."

Julia grinned, nudging him playfully. "Oh, come on, Zeus. Look on the bright side—at least you won't have to fight for her attention like the rest of us. You're already in."

Ethan groaned, but a faint smile tugged at the corner of his lips despite himself. "Yeah, lucky me."

The group chuckled, their banter lightening the mood even as the mystery of Ethan's sudden mentorship assignment lingered in the back of their minds.

Just as the group's conversation began to settle, the sharp creak of the classroom door broke through the chatter. All heads turned as Eleanor stepped inside, her heels clicking against the polished floor with precision. Her gaze swept over the room, sharp and commanding as always.

"Ethan. Astron. Come to my office," she said briskly, her voice leaving no room for questions or delay. Without waiting for a response, she turned on her heel and exited the room, the door closing behind her with a definitive click.

Chapter 818 189.4 - Mentorship

"Ethan. Astron. Come to my office."

The moment she said and then left, a stunned silence fell over the cadets, the weight of Eleanor's abrupt appearance hanging heavy in the air.

Julia's eyes widened as she turned to Ethan, her grin quickly returning. "Well, well, Zeus," she said, her tone dripping with mock intrigue. "Looks like your private time with Eleanor is kicking off sooner than expected."

Ethan shot her a warning look but didn't respond, the tension in his chest making it hard to focus on a comeback.

At that moment, Irina turned sharply, her fiery yellow eyes locking onto Astron, who was seated a few rows back. He hadn't moved, his expression calm as ever, but his sharp purple eyes were fixed on his smartwatch, where something on the screen had clearly caught his attention.

Irina raised an eyebrow, her tone carefully measured. "Hmm... Don't tell me?"

The silence in the classroom stretched as Irina continued to stare at Astron, her fiery yellow eyes narrowing slightly. Her gaze flicked to his smartwatch, which he was intently focused on. Though he hadn't moved from his seat, the subtle tension in his posture was impossible to miss.

Irina's suspicion deepened as her lips parted slightly. What she was thinking, others in the room seemed to be thinking too. The quiet murmur of whispers began to ripple through the cadets, and a few had already stood, walking toward Astron's desk.

Among them was the trio of girls who had shown a marked interest in Astron earlier in the semester—Tessa, Eva, and Mira. They exchanged brief glances before making a beeline for him, their curiosity evident in the urgency of their steps.

"Hey, Astron," Tessa started, her tone a mix of concern and intrigue. "What's going on? Did something happen?"

Eva leaned slightly closer, her eyes searching his face. "Did you do something? Why would Eleanor call for you like that?"

"Is she mad at you?" Mira added.

Astron glanced up, his sharp purple eyes briefly scanning the trio before he responded in his usual calm, measured tone. "I don't know the exact reason," he said simply, his voice carrying easily over the growing whispers in the room. "But I have a guess."

His answer only seemed to deepen the intrigue as the three girls exchanged glances, their curiosity piqued further.

Irina's eyes remained fixed on him, her sharp instincts catching the faint flicker of thought in his expression. She followed his line of sight as his gaze shifted subtly, landing squarely on Ethan, who was still standing near the door.

Ethan, as if sensing the weight of Astron's look, turned his head and met his eyes. The silent exchange between them carried an unspoken understanding, though neither said a word.

Julia, always quick to pick up on tension, leaned toward Irina, her grin widening. "Okay, what is going on here? First Eleanor singles out Zeus, now Astron's involved, and they're having a whole silent conversation like we're not even here."

Irina didn't answer, her focus still on the two. The classroom buzzed with speculation as more cadets started to whisper theories about what could possibly connect Ethan and Astron to Eleanor's sudden summons.

Eva, not one to let things slide, leaned in closer to Astron, lowering her voice. "Your guess—does it have something to do with... you know... what happened earlier this semester?"

Astron didn't reply immediately, his calm demeanor unshaken. Finally, he stood, slipping his smartwatch into his pocket. "I'll know for sure soon enough," he said, his tone giving no room for further questions.

Irina's fiery yellow eyes narrowed sharply as Astron stood up, his usual calm demeanor only serving to stoke her growing irritation. Her jaw tightened as she pushed her chair back with deliberate force, the legs scraping audibly against the floor. The sound cut through the hum of whispers, drawing attention to her as she rose to her full height.

The trio of girls—Tessa, Eva, and Mira—glanced her way, their curiosity briefly shifting to unease under her commanding presence. They exchanged glances but stepped aside without a word, instinctively clearing a path for her.

Astron had already begun moving toward the door, his steps measured and unhurried. Irina's fiery gaze locked onto him, and she spoke, her voice carrying a sharp edge. "Leaving already."

"Obviously," Astron replied without looking back, his tone calm but clipped.

Irina stepped forward, her arms crossing as she tilted her head slightly. "Why?"

Astron slowed his pace just enough to glance over his shoulder, his sharp purple eyes meeting hers briefly. "Did you not hear what Professor Eleanor said?"

Irina's smirk sharpened slightly, though the irritation in her gaze didn't waver. "That's why I'm asking."

Astron paused for a fraction of a second, as if considering whether to respond, but then he simply turned away and continued walking, his silence speaking volumes.

Already getting accustomed to the way he is doing things, she just fell into step behind him, her fiery presence unmistakable as the other cadets watched the two with wide eyes and hushed murmurs. She didn't care about the spectacle they were creating; her curiosity was far more pressing.

Why him? Why now?' she thought, her fiery eyes narrowing as she studied Astron's back. She was already aware that Astron had caught Eleanor's attention earlier in the semester—her sharp instincts told her as much. But the timing of this summons, and the fact that Ethan was also involved, made her even more curious.

"Astron," she said, her voice low but firm as they exited the classroom. "Are you not going to tell me anything?"

Astron glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, his expression unreadable. "There's nothing to tell."

Irina huffed, her irritation bubbling just beneath the surface. "You don't think it's strange? Her summoning you like this? And with Ethan?"

Astron didn't reply immediately, his sharp gaze flicking ahead as they walked. Finally, he said, "Partially."

"Partially?"

Astron's steps remained steady, his voice calm and measured as he replied, "You must have seen Ethan's assignment already."

Irina tilted her head slightly, her fiery yellow eyes narrowing in suspicion. "Yep."

Astron nodded, his sharp purple eyes glinting faintly as he glanced at her. "Eleanor appears to want to be our mentor. As for why..." He paused, his gaze shifting ahead, his tone steady but thoughtful. "It's hard to say for certain. I can partially understand her reasoning—it likely has to do with our rapid advancement in the academy's ranks."

Irina raised an eyebrow, her suspicion deepening. "Rapid advancement?"

Astron nodded again, his voice remaining calm. "Ethan and I are among the few cadets who have advanced as much as we have in such a short time. Of course, Ethan's progress is far more substantial than mine. He's climbed several ranks at an unprecedented pace."

Irina's fiery gaze bore into him, her suspicion simmering beneath the surface. "And you think that's enough reason for her to take an interest in both of you?"

"It's plausible," Astron replied simply, his tone giving no room for embellishment. "Aside from that, I don't have any other reason."

Irina's glare intensified, her fiery yellow eyes narrowing as if she could peel away his composure with her gaze alone. But Astron remained unbothered, his calm demeanor as unshakable as ever.

After a moment, she exhaled sharply, her irritation flickering but not entirely fading. 'He really doesn't know anything more,' she thought, though the possibility frustrated her. It wasn't like Astron to withhold information without reason.

"I see."

Irina huffed softly.

Her fiery hair swayed with the motion, and her mind churned with possibilities as Astron made his way toward Eleanor's office.

'Professor Eleanor....What are you even trying to do?'

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Ethan jogged lightly down the corridor, catching up to Astron with long, steady strides. The sharp sound of his boots against the polished floor echoed faintly as he closed the distance. As he drew level with Astron, he gave him a lopsided grin.

"Yo," Ethan greeted casually.

Astron glanced at him briefly, his sharp purple eyes unreadable, before giving a slight nod. "Ethan."

For a few moments, they walked in silence, the contrast between Ethan's easygoing demeanor and Astron's quiet intensity palpable. Ethan glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, his hazel gaze thoughtful.

"...It's been a while, hasn't it?" Ethan said finally, his tone light but tinged with familiarity.

Astron's steps didn't falter, but his gaze shifted slightly, as if weighing Ethan's words. "A while since what?"

"Since we talked like this," Ethan replied, his grin softening into a smile. "You know, without it being about some sparring session or someone trying to kill us."

Astron didn't immediately reply, his sharp gaze fixed ahead. Finally, he said, "...I suppose it has."

Ethan chuckled, shoving his hands into his pockets as they continued walking. "You don't make it easy, you know. Trying to have a normal conversation with you is like trying to scale a mountain blindfolded."

"That is....an interesting comparison." Astron didn't react to the nudge, but his tone was dry as he replied, "Annoyingly so."

Ethan laughed, the sound echoing faintly in the corridor. "I'll take that as a compliment."

The silence between them stretched again, but this time it felt less heavy, more companionable. Ethan glanced at Astron once more, his hazel eyes flicking over his calm expression.

"So," Ethan began, his voice quieter now, "any idea what this is about? Eleanor calling both of us, I mean."

Astron's gaze didn't waver. "I have guesses. Nothing concrete."

Ethan raised an eyebrow, his curiosity piqued. "Care to share?"

Astron hesitated for a fraction of a second before speaking. "Our progress. Both of us have advanced quickly compared to the others. Eleanor's interest likely stems from that."

Ethan hummed thoughtfully, nodding. "Makes sense, I guess. But it's still... weird. Feels like there's more to it."

"Perhaps," Astron said simply, his tone noncommittal.

Ethan watched him for a moment, then smiled faintly. "You really don't give anything away, do you?"

"I don't see the point in speculation," Astron replied calmly.

"Fair enough," Ethan said, his tone light but edged with understanding. "But you know, it's not a bad thing to talk things out. Even if you're not sure."

Astron glanced at him briefly, his sharp purple eyes meeting Ethan's hazel ones. "And what do you hope to accomplish by talking it out?"

Ethan shrugged, his grin returning. "Maybe nothing. Or maybe I'll understand you a little better."

Astron's gaze lingered on him for a moment longer before he turned his attention forward again. "...Arrogant..."

Ethan laughed again, his steps falling in sync with Astron's as they continued toward Eleanor's office. "Maybe."

For the first time in a long while, Ethan felt a small but significant shift in the air between them. It wasn't much, but it was something. And for now, that was enough.

#### Chapter 819 - 189.5 - Mentorship

Ethan and Astron continued walking, their steps echoing in the long, empty corridor. The silence between them was comfortable, the kind that came with familiarity, though Ethan's mind was far from quiet. He glanced at Astron again, studying the faint tension in his stride, the sharper edge to his presence. Finally, he broke the silence.

"You look like you've changed," Ethan said, his tone casual but probing.

Astron didn't turn his head, his sharp purple eyes fixed straight ahead. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know." Ethan shrugged, a small grin tugging at his lips. "Just a feeling. Nothing concrete."

Astron's reply came without hesitation, his voice calm but clipped. "Then you're just spitting nonsense."

Ethan chuckled, undeterred. "I wouldn't call it nonsense. I trust my senses, you know?"

"Is that so?" Astron replied dryly, finally glancing at him. "The senses you're so confident in—do they give you the correct answers in exams as well?"

Ethan's grin faltered, and he groaned. "...We both know that doesn't work like that."

Astron raised an eyebrow, his tone unbothered. "I don't know what works like what."

"Now you're just being difficult," Ethan said, shaking his head, though his grin returned quickly.

"But seriously, you do seem different. Maybe it's the way you carry yourself or how people look at you now, but it's there. You've changed."

Astron was silent for a moment, his expression unreadable. "People look at me because they think they know something. That doesn't mean I've changed."

Ethan frowned, his brow furrowing slightly. "You don't believe people can see something real about you?"

Astron glanced at him again, a faint flicker of something in his sharp gaze. "I believe people see what they want to see. That doesn't mean it's real."

Ethan thought about that for a moment, his hazel eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "Maybe. But sometimes, people notice things even we don't realize about ourselves."

"Like you?" Astron asked, his tone almost teasing, though it carried his usual bluntness.

Ethan laughed lightly. "Exactly. Who better to call you out on things than me?"

Astron didn't respond immediately, his gaze returning to the hallway ahead. "If you're so sure of your senses, then tell me—what is it you think has changed?"

Ethan paused, considering his words carefully. "You seem... sharper. Not just in how you fight or how you carry yourself, but in how you hold your ground. Like you've settled into something."

Astron tilted his head slightly, his expression thoughtful but still guarded. "And what makes you think that?"

Ethan shrugged again, his grin softening. "

Ethan's grin widened as he continued, leaning slightly toward Astron as they walked. "Like how you act with Irina, for example. If this were before, you wouldn't let her—or anyone—get close to you. But now? You even play along with Julia's teasing sometimes."

Astron didn't respond immediately, his expression remaining stoic, but the faintest shift in his gaze hinted at a flicker of annoyance—or perhaps something else.

Ethan smirked, taking the silence as permission to push a little further. "I still remember the 'Don't talk to me' times, you know?" His tone was teasing, though there was genuine warmth behind it.

"...Tch," Astron clicked his tongue, the sound soft but sharp enough to cut through Ethan's words. "Just be quiet. You're being annoying."

Ethan laughed outright, clearly enjoying himself. "Ooooh... Even you can get embarrassed sometimes, huh?"

Astron's sharp purple eyes cut to him briefly, his tone steady but tinged with irritation. "I am not embarrassed. You're just making pointless noise."

"That is—"

"That is not what an embarrassed person would say," Astron interrupted, his calm tone now carrying the faintest edge of exasperation. "Now, just shut up. We've arrived."

Ethan blinked and looked ahead, realizing they were standing in front of Eleanor's office. The door loomed before them, its polished wood gleaming faintly under the corridor lights. He hadn't even noticed how close they'd gotten, too caught up in his banter with Astron.

"Well," Ethan said, still grinning as he reached for the door. "This should be fun."

Astron said nothing, his expression returning to its usual calm as he waited for Ethan to open the door. But as they stepped inside together, Ethan couldn't help but notice the faintest hint of a smirk tugging at the corner of Astron's lips. It was subtle—barely there—but it was enough to tell him that, despite his protests, Astron wasn't entirely immune to their back-and-forth.

And that, Ethan decided, was a victory in itself.

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Eleanor leaned back in her chair, the soft glow of her desk lamp illuminating the stack of documents before her. Each page detailed finalized deals, payouts, and the carefully crafted mentorship program schedules. These were the agreements with hunters from across the Human Domain, individuals of notable skill and prestige who would mentor the academy's most promising students.

Her sharp eyes skimmed the details with practiced efficiency, her mind already calculating potential adjustments. This was a delicate balance, ensuring the academy's brightest were paired with mentors who could challenge and elevate them without overwhelming their development.

Just as she set the final document aside, a knock echoed through the room. Eleanor didn't look up; her senses had already registered the presence of the two waiting beyond the door. Their distinct mana signatures were unmistakable.

"Come in," she said, her tone as calm and authoritative as ever.

The door opened, and Ethan stepped in first, his easy grin already in place. Astron followed a step behind, his sharp purple eyes scanning the room with his usual composed demeanor. As the door clicked shut behind them, Eleanor's gaze shifted, seizing them both with a single, calculated sweep.

These two cadets stood out in their own ways, though for vastly different reasons. Ethan Hartley—the prodigy who had stunned the Human Domain with his recent victory against a far more experienced opponent. It wasn't just the win that had drawn attention, but the manner of it: intuitive, adaptable, and undeniably brilliant. That kind of performance, combined with his Hartley lineage, made him a beacon in the academy. He thrived in the spotlight, and for him, that was almost second nature.

Then there was Astron Natusalune, standing in stark contrast. Where Ethan was a roaring fire, Astron was a shadow—quiet, deliberate, and almost invisible. His skills, while undeniable to those with the insight to see them, were so well-hidden that anyone without her access as an instructor of HA25 would likely have overlooked him entirely. Even other instructors might have missed the subtle brilliance of his growth.

Eleanor let the silence stretch for a moment, her sharp gaze locking onto Astron first, then shifting to Ethan. Neither cadet seemed fazed, though Ethan's easy grin widened slightly under the scrutiny.

"You called for us, Professor," Ethan said, his tone light but respectful.

Eleanor set down her pen and folded her hands neatly on the desk. "Take a seat."

Ethan took the chair closest to the desk, leaning back slightly, his relaxed posture a stark contrast to Astron, who sat with measured precision, his expression calm and unreadable.

Eleanor's gaze lingered on them both for a moment longer before she spoke. "You've both been performing exceptionally this semester. Each of you has shown growth that places you ahead of your peers, though in very different ways."

Ethan's grin softened into something more genuine, and he nodded slightly. Astron, predictably, didn't react, though his sharp gaze remained fixed on Eleanor, silently absorbing every word.

Eleanor's piercing gaze remained fixed on the two cadets seated before her. The quiet hum of mana-infused lighting filled the silence as she weighed her words carefully. Her sharp eyes scanned Ethan's relaxed posture and Astron's composed precision, noting the stark contrast between the two. Finally, she spoke, her tone crisp and firm.

"At this point," she began, "you must have some idea why I called you here."

Ethan's hazel eyes flicked to her, curiosity sparking in their depths, while Astron remained as still as stone, his sharp purple gaze locked onto hers.

"And you would be correct," she continued. "Different from the other cadets, you will not have the right to choose your mentors."



Ethan's brow furrowed slightly, and Astron's expression remained unreadable, though Eleanor didn't miss the subtle shift in his focus.

"You will be working under me," she stated, her voice calm but carrying an undeniable authority.

For a moment, neither cadet spoke, the weight of her declaration hanging in the air. It was Ethan who finally broke the silence, his grin gone and replaced by a thoughtful expression.

"We could see that," he said slowly, his voice careful. "But..."

Eleanor raised an eyebrow, waiting for him to finish. "But why? Is that right?"

"Yes," Ethan admitted, leaning forward slightly, his tone tinged with curiosity. "Why us?"

Eleanor's lips curved into the faintest smile, a rare and fleeting expression. "For no reason," she replied smoothly. "I just want to."

Ethan blinked, clearly caught off guard. "You just want to?"

"Yes," Eleanor said simply, leaning back slightly as her sharp gaze pinned them both in place. "I wanted the most brilliant students in this academy to be my mentees."

Her words lingered in the air, striking a chord of pride in Ethan, who leaned back in his chair with a faintly satisfied grin. But it was Astron who spoke next, his tone as calm and measured as always.

"Most brilliant..." he echoed quietly, his sharp gaze meeting Eleanor's directly. "Professor, are you sure you're not making a mistake?"

It was a question that she was expecting from the start.

'Heh...As expected..'

## Chapter 820 - 189.6 - Mentorship

Eleanor leaned back slightly, the faintest flicker of amusement crossing her expression. Astron's question hung in the air, his calm voice still echoing faintly in her thoughts. "Most brilliant..." he had said, his sharp gaze unwavering. "Professor, are you sure you're not making a mistake?" She had been expecting it. After all, as the instructor of HA25, she had spent countless hours observing her students, dissecting their personalities, abilities, and tendencies. This was no ordinary class; it was a melting pot of talent, ambition, and exceptional potential. Eleanor often thought of it as if someone had handpicked a cast for a movie—a collection of strikingly different characters, each with a unique role to play. And in that cast, Astron was one of the most enigmatic. 'Heh... as expected,' she mused inwardly. Astron's tendency to challenge decisions that didn't align with logic or his understanding was something she had noted early on. He wasn't one to blindly accept authority, and Eleanor appreciated that about him. But more than that, she knew that Astron had been hiding his true strength. He stayed in the shadows, avoiding the spotlight and letting others draw attention while he moved silently, calculatingly, in the background. It was why she had anticipated a response like this from him. 'First, let's see what you're really thinking,' Eleanor thought, her lips curving into a subtle smile. She decided to start with an ignorant act, tilting her head slightly and raising an eyebrow. "What kind of mistake do you think I'm making?" she asked, her tone light, almost playful, though her sharp eyes betrayed a glint of challenge. Astron's gaze didn't waver, his expression remaining as calm as ever. For a moment, Eleanor thought he might launch into a careful explanation, laying out the logical reasons why her decision could be flawed. It

would be typical of him, and she had prepared herself for that—ready to counter his points or even humor his reasoning. But then, Astron surprised her. His gaze lingered on hers for a moment longer, and she felt a faint ripple in the air between them. Then, he shook his head slowly, a faint sigh escaping him. "No," he said quietly, his voice measured. "I'm sorry for overestimating myself. I'm sure you have your reasons." Eleanor froze, the words catching her off-guard. It wasn't the content of his response but the delivery—the quiet acknowledgment, the almost imperceptible flicker of understanding in his sharp purple eyes. It wasn't just that he accepted her authority; it was as if he had seen straight through her, as if he knew that she had already seen through him. 'He knows,' Eleanor thought, the realization striking her like a subtle shift in the wind. Astron's words weren't the words of someone conceding defeat or simply deflecting. They were the words of someone who had understood her game and decided not to play it—someone who had acknowledged her insight without giving away more than necessary. For the first time in a while, Eleanor felt a flicker of something akin to unease. It wasn't unpleasant; rather, it was the thrill of being faced with someone who wasn't as straightforward as they seemed. "Well," she said finally, her voice as steady as ever, though a faint smile played at the corners of her lips. "I'm glad to see you trust my judgment, Astron." Ethan, who had been watching the exchange with a mix of curiosity and amusement, raised an eyebrow. "What just happened? Did I miss something?" Eleanor tilted her head slightly, her expression calm as she addressed Ethan's curious remark. "You missed nothing," she said evenly, the faintest hint of amusement lacing her tone. "Just a simple exchange." Ethan squinted at her for a moment, his hazel eyes narrowing slightly as if trying to puzzle out the truth behind her words. But then he shrugged, leaning back in his chair with his characteristic grin. "If you say so." As silence settled over the room again, Eleanor allowed herself a moment to ponder the two cadets before her. Ethan's reaction—or rather, his sense—had not gone unnoticed. Even though his mind hadn't fully grasped what had transpired, he had instinctively felt that something had happened. It was a quality Eleanor recognized as one of Ethan's greatest strengths: his ability to sense shifts in mood, tension, and intention, even when logic didn't fully explain them. 'Intuition,' she thought, her sharp gaze briefly resting on him. It was this instinctive perception, this almost primal sense, that had allowed him to adapt so fluidly during his battles. He didn't need all the answers to act; he simply knew when and how to move. Her gaze shifted to Astron. 'Logic and observation,' she mused silently. Where Ethan relied on intuition, Astron was a different kind of genius altogether. His meticulous attention to detail and analytical nature allowed him to dissect situations, anticipate outcomes, and execute with precision. He never acted without understanding the full picture—or, at least, as much of it as he could piece together. Two sides of the same coin. Eleanor found herself wondering, not for the first time, which quality was superior. "Logic and observation," she murmured softly, her eyes flicking back to Ethan. "Or instinct and intuition?" Both cadets glanced at her, but she didn't elaborate. Instead, she leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms as she studied them. "And I wonder," she said aloud, her tone almost thoughtful, "what will happen when they're pushed. How far can they go?" Ethan tilted his head, clearly curious, though he remained silent. Astron, as always, gave no outward reaction, his sharp purple eyes remaining steady on hers. For Eleanor, it was a question that demanded an answer. Over the past semester, she had carefully observed all of her students. HA25 was a class filled with exceptional talent—cadets who, under the right circumstances, could become legends in their own right. But among them, these two had stood out, not just for their skills but for what lay beneath them. The way they approached the world, the way they adapted, the way they thought—it was as if they were built for something greater. 'And now,' Eleanor thought, her sharp eyes narrowing slightly, 'I've narrowed my search to these two.' There was no doubt in her mind that Ethan and Astron represented her best hope. But which of them

would rise to the top? Which of them could truly embody the qualities she sought? It was a question she needed to answer, and soon. The stakes were too high to leave it to chance. "Let's hope," she murmured to herself, her gaze distant as she studied the two cadets, "one of these two... is the one." Ethan raised an eyebrow, glancing at Astron as if to gauge whether he had caught what Eleanor had said. Astron, however, seemed unfazed, his calm demeanor unbroken. "Well, if you're done being cryptic, Professor," Ethan said with a lopsided grin, "anything else we should know, or are we free to go?" Eleanor coughed softly into her hand, the faintest hint of color rising to her otherwise composed face as she realized she had let a slip of thought escape her lips. Quickly recovering her composure, she straightened in her chair and addressed the two cadets with her usual calm authority. "Now," she began, her tone deliberate, "while I am confident in my skills as one of the best instructors in this academy, it is also true that, with this decision, I am limiting your ability to make your own choices." Her gaze flicked between the two of them, pausing briefly on Ethan, whose grin had returned, and Astron, whose expression remained as unreadable as ever. "It is, in some ways, unfair," she continued, her voice steady. "The other cadets in your year will have the freedom to select their mentors, hunters who align with their goals or who they believe will bring out the best in them. That right has been taken from you." Ethan's grin faltered slightly, replaced by a thoughtful expression as he leaned forward. Astron's sharp eyes remained on Eleanor, his silence unbroken. "Therefore," Eleanor said, allowing a small, almost imperceptible smile to play on her lips, "it's only fair that you receive some form of compensation." Ethan's gaze narrowed slightly at her smile, a flicker of suspicion crossing his hazel eyes. "Why does it feel like we're being played?" he muttered, half to himself. Eleanor's sharp glare snapped toward him, her piercing eyes narrowing just enough to silence him. Ethan immediately sat up straighter, raising his hands in mock surrender. "Ahaha—joke," he said quickly, laughing nervously. "It was just a joke, Professor." Satisfied, Eleanor's gaze softened—slightly—and she turned her attention back to the discussion. Ethan glanced at Astron, silently pleading for support, but Astron merely averted his gaze, refusing to engage. Ethan groaned softly under his breath. "Traitor," he muttered, though it was barely audible. Eleanor resumed speaking as though the interruption hadn't occurred. "For most of the freshmen cadets, the mentorship program will be limited in scope. The hunters assigned to them will, understandably, focus more on the junior and senior cadets—those who are nearing graduation and preparing for their futures. Freshmen will typically have no more than one hour a day with their mentors." She allowed her words to settle for a moment before continuing. "However, the two of you will be different."