

H. Academy 870

Chapter 870 - New team

Asher studied Astron with narrowed eyes, the gears in his mind turning.

This guy.

At the start of the first semester, they had been partnered together—him, Astron, and Taylor. Back then, Taylor had been at odds with Astron, and Asher had been forced to pick a side. It hadn't been a difficult decision.

Taylor was the daughter of one of the wealthiest merchant families in the entire human domain. That level of power and influence wasn't something to ignore. Aligning himself with her had seemed like the obvious choice—a stepping stone for his own future. Astron, on the other hand, had been insignificant at the time. Just another cadet, competent but unremarkable.

But now?

Now, the balance had shifted.

Astron had changed. He carried himself differently, with a quiet confidence that made others hesitate. His name was spoken more often, with respect, with caution. His connection to Irina Emberheart—one of the strongest cadets in their generation—only solidified his rising status.

Asher had always prided himself on knowing which way the wind was blowing. And right now, Astron was valuable.

And Taylor? He hadn't heard from her in a while. Her behavior had been strange, distant. As if she was dealing with something personal—or perhaps something more than that. He'd made efforts to check in, but she hadn't responded. That was... troubling.

But right now, his priority was the present.

Asher exhaled and studied Astron's face.

This was the same guy he and Taylor had left behind in the mana stone cave. They hadn't done anything directly, but their choice had been clear—they had sealed the entrance and walked away, leaving Astron to fend for himself.

Asher had expected Astron to struggle after that. Maybe he'd drop in the rankings, maybe he'd become resentful, bitter. Instead, he'd grown stronger.

That was the problem.

Asher wasn't someone who got sentimental. He made decisions based on practicality, not emotion. He didn't regret what he had done, but he was aware that it might have created... complications.

And now, standing here in front of Astron, he had to wonder.

Did Astron see him as an enemy? A rival? Or just an obstacle to be removed?

Asher wasn't foolish enough to believe that their history would be forgotten. Not by someone like Astron.

There was a sharpness to his gaze.

Asher had spent years surviving on the streets, learning the language of people before he ever learned how to wield a weapon properly. Reading others had always been second nature to him—body language, micro-expressions, the way someone's eyes flickered when they were lying or withholding something.

That skill had kept him alive. It had earned him a place here, at Arcadia Hunter Academy, through sheer force of will and adaptability. He had proved himself. Fought for his spot. And that was why he prided himself on understanding people, on knowing their angles, their tells.

But when it came to this guy...

'It's pointless.'

Astron Natusalune was an anomaly. A blank slate that refused to be read.

From the very beginning, there was something off about him—not in an obvious way, not in the way of someone hiding a grand secret or wielding some dark past. It was more subtle, more frustrating.

'Like trying to read a book with half the pages missing.'

His expressions, his movements... they were deliberate, but not in a way Asher could dissect. It wasn't the careful control of someone lying, nor the forced casualness of someone masking their emotions.

Unshaken, unaffected, unreadable.

And that irked Asher more than he wanted to admit.

It had always been like this, ever since their first mission together. Back then, it had only been a mild annoyance, something easy to brush aside. But recently?

Recently, it was starting to feel different.

'Or maybe I'm just getting more anxious.'

That thought soured his mood further. He hated feeling uneasy. Hated not knowing where he stood with someone.

Especially someone like him.

But whatever.

The most important thing right now was the practice exercise. Not Astron.

If anything, this was an opportunity—an excuse to observe him more closely. If he could pick up something, anything about what made this guy tick, it might help settle this nagging feeling in his chest.

His gaze lingered on Astron for another beat before he exhaled sharply and forced his attention back to the task at hand.

"Alright," he said, rolling his shoulders back, falling into the easy confidence that had always served him well. "Let's get this over with."

For now, he'd play along. Watch. And wait.

Asher kept his stance relaxed, crossing his arms as he studied Astron's reaction. The guy barely seemed fazed. As usual. That was fine. In fact, that was what he wanted.

'Let's see what you do when you're the one in control.'

He had been prepared to take charge if needed—he knew how these exercises worked, how to maneuver within the system to secure a good score. He had survived much worse. But there was no point in forcing leadership when the smarter move was to step back and observe.

Astron had value now.

Irina Emberheart—that Irina—trusted him. Julia Middleton had specifically sought him out for her team. People with real influence, with power, were acknowledging him. That meant something. That meant Asher needed to watch him closely.

'You don't rise in ranks that quickly without a reason.'

And Asher didn't like dealing with unknown variables.

So if Astron was the person everyone was starting to trust, then let's see if he could handle it.

"You're asking me?" Astron's voice was flat, unimpressed. But Asher wasn't stupid—he knew that tone wasn't dismissal. It was testing him back.

Asher huffed, shifting his weight as if the whole thing was hardly worth the conversation. "I may be higher ranked than you, but I know even Irina Emberheart trusts you when it comes to things like this." His voice was even, but his fingers twitched slightly against his arm—just once. A subconscious tick, one he immediately controlled. He knew it had been seen.

Astron had definitely noticed.

And of course, Astron didn't let anything slip. He simply nodded, almost approvingly. "Good observation. Keep this up, and you'll stay alive in the industry."

'Tch.'

Asher felt something flare in his chest—not quite irritation, but something close to it. A part of him wanted to snap back with something sharp, something to remind Astron that he wasn't some rookie who needed survival advice. But he swallowed it down. Because, despite everything, Astron was right.

The industry wasn't a game. Hunters who didn't adapt, who didn't know how to play their cards right, got left behind. Or worse.

And right now, it looked like Astron knew exactly how to play.

That meant Asher had to keep watching.

Testing him was fine. Observing him was fine. But if there was something more to this guy—if there was a reason for his sudden rise, for the way people were starting to orbit around him like he was something worth protecting—then Asher needed to know what it was.

Just then, another voice cut through the lingering tension.

"Alright, alright, we get it. You two done circling each other like predators, or should I grab some popcorn?"

Asher blinked. He had momentarily forgotten about Caden.

That in itself was a mistake.

Caden Holt wasn't just some background figure. He was laid-back, yes. Someone who didn't chase power or position the way Asher did. But that didn't mean he was irrelevant.

If anything, the fact that Asher had instinctively overlooked him for even a few seconds made him feel even more on edge.

Because his instincts as a Hunter were not dismissing Caden.

No, they were telling him something else entirely.

'This guy... he's dangerous in his own way.'

Not like Astron. Astron was unpredictable because he was unreadable, because he made deliberate choices that weren't always obvious until later.

Caden?

Caden was a fighter. That much was clear.

A different kind of threat, but a threat nonetheless.

Not because of deception, not because of some hidden agenda. But because he was good.

Really good.

Asher hadn't fought him directly yet, but it was what he had felt.

This wasn't a guy who just trained to pass the academy's standards. He trained to fight.

And that made him someone Asher needed to keep an eye on.

"Relax, man," Caden continued, rolling his shoulders, his tone still annoyingly casual. "I know I'm not the brains of the operation, but I'd rather not stand around all day while you two size each other up."

Asher scoffed, crossing his arms. "And what exactly are you contributing?"

Caden grinned. "Me? I hit things. Hard. That's my role."

Asher resisted the urge to roll his eyes. 'Laid-back guy who's only good at fighting. Yep, that assessment checks out.'

And yet...

That shouldn't be enough for his instincts to tag him as dangerous.

Which meant there was something more to Caden that Asher hadn't seen yet.

'Another unknown variable. Fantastic.'

Astron, meanwhile, had remained silent through their exchange, watching. Not interrupting, not reacting. Just watching.

Caden tilted his head toward him. "So? What's the plan, boss?"

Or maybe, he was just overreacting?

This guy might be just dumb....