

## H. Academy 884

### Chapter 884 Integrating Into

The faint hum of mana still lingered in the air as Sylvie stepped into the locker room, the cool artificial lighting casting a soft glow against the sleek metallic walls. The locker room had been reserved specifically for the girls.

The simulation had ended. Their match was over.

And yet, the adrenaline hadn't fully left Sylvie's body.

She took a slow breath, flexing her fingers as if trying to dispel the lingering tension in her limbs. The mana she had burned through during the fight still left a faint ache behind, a reminder of just how much she had exerted herself.

Across the room, Layla sat on one of the benches, unstrapping her boots with a casual ease that suggested she wasn't bothered by the outcome. The moment she noticed Sylvie walking toward her locker, she smirked.

"I think we did really good, considering the cards we were given," Layla said, her voice carrying an easy confidence as she pulled off one boot and set it aside.

Sylvie paused for a moment before nodding. "Yeah," she agreed. "We really did."

And she meant it.

They hadn't won, but looking back, their performance had been solid. The odds had been ridiculously stacked against them—Carl's sheer dominance, Lilia's unrelenting precision, Jasmine's unexpected interference. Despite that, they had lasted longer than they had any right to.

Layla stretched her arms over her head, letting out a satisfied sigh. "Seriously, though. That match-up was insane. I mean, Carl and Lilia? Who the hell put that together?"

Sylvie chuckled softly as she placed her bag in her locker. "Right? It felt so unbalanced."

Layla snorted. "More like straight-up unfair. But honestly, I think we held our ground better than expected."

Sylvie nodded, leaning against the cool metal of her locker. "Yeah. And I think I did pretty well too." She exhaled, glancing at her hands. "I stood my ground against Carl Braveheart."

Layla looked at her, eyebrows rising slightly before a wide grin stretched across her face. "You did!" she exclaimed, leaning forward. "And that's not something just anyone can say. That guy's a monster."

Sylvie chuckled, shaking her head. "He's huge. Blocking his attacks felt like trying to stop a moving wall."

Layla let out a laugh before kicking off the rest of her gear, rolling her shoulders as she relaxed into the bench. "That's because he is a wall." She smirked. "Actually, fun fact—I'm under the same mentor as him."

Sylvie blinked, surprised. "Wait, really?"

Layla nodded. "Yeah. Makes sense, doesn't it? He's a tank, I'm a tank. There aren't many high-ranked tank mentors, so we ended up training under the same one."

Sylvie tilted her head slightly. "That does make sense."

Layla stretched her arms over her head before lowering them with a thoughtful hum. "Since I've trained under the same mentor, I've seen Carl fight up close more than once. And trust me—what we faced in that match? That wasn't even him going all out."

Sylvie exhaled slowly. "I figured as much. Even when I was giving it everything, I could tell he wasn't fully pushing himself."

Layla nodded, leaning forward slightly as she began explaining. "Carl's not just big. He's got an insane level of endurance. His physical durability is off the charts, and his mana reinforcement is absurd." She made a slight motion with her hand. "You saw how I tanked hits and held the line, right?"

Sylvie nodded.

"Well, Carl does that ten times over." Layla scoffed. "I've seen him take direct mana-enhanced strikes from top-ranking cadets and barely flinch."

Sylvie frowned slightly, recalling their battle. "Yeah. I remember attacking him, but he barely reacted. Even when I tried to enhance my strikes, it was like... I wasn't even making a dent."

Layla snorted. "Because you weren't. His entire style is built around making it so nothing can move him. But the scariest part?" She smirked slightly, shaking her head. "It's not his defense."

Sylvie looked at her questioningly. "It's not?"

"Nope." Layla leaned back, her expression slightly more serious. "It's his counterattacks."

Sylvie thought back to their fight, replaying moments in her mind. She had noticed that whenever Carl struck back, the force was overwhelming. It wasn't just brute strength—it was calculated. Every move he made had weight behind it, and when he finally went on the offensive, it was devastating.

Layla continued, "Carl doesn't waste energy attacking when he doesn't have to. He absorbs hits, waits for the right opening, and then—bam." She clapped her hands together. "He strikes back with everything he's been holding in reserve."

Sylvie exhaled, shaking her head in disbelief. "That's terrifying."

Layla grinned. "Oh, it absolutely is. But hey—you held your own against that. Not many people can say that."

Sylvie smiled slightly, feeling a mix of pride and exhaustion settle in. "Yeah... I guess I did."

Just as Sylvie was beginning to fully process Layla's words, the locker room door swung open with a soft click. Both girls instinctively turned toward the entrance, their conversation momentarily put on pause.

Jasmine strolled in first, her usual easygoing demeanor intact as she adjusted the collar of her academy-issued jacket. "Well, that was an absolute mess," she declared, running a hand through her hair. "I still can't believe they threw us into that kind of match-up."

Behind her, a quieter presence followed. Lilia entered with her usual composed grace, her long green hair sleek and perfectly in place despite the high-intensity battle they had just come out of. Unlike Jasmine, whose expression was openly expressive, Lilia's features remained neutral—calm, unreadable, yet undeniably sharp.

Layla smirked as she leaned back against the bench. "Speaking of overpowered opponents..."

Jasmine let out a laugh. "Yeah, yeah. I know you had to deal with Carl, but we had to deal with you and Ethan tearing through people."

Sylvie, however, wasn't looking at Jasmine anymore.

Her green eyes had flickered toward Lilia—just for a second.

Lilia, as if noticing, glanced back at her.

It was brief, almost nothing, but there was something about that split-second of eye contact that sent an inexplicable sensation through Sylvie's chest.

She wasn't sure what it was.

Lilia, for her part, merely nodded slightly in greeting, before turning back toward Jasmine.

"Your team did well," she said evenly, her voice smooth and measured. "Considering what you were up against."

Layla scoffed. "Wow, thanks. That means so much, coming from the person who obliterated half the arena."

Jasmine grinned, nudging Lilia playfully. "She means that as a compliment, by the way."

Lilia simply tilted her head slightly. "I assumed."

Sylvie blinked, clearing her throat. "Uh—yeah. We did what we could."

Jasmine plopped down onto the bench next to Layla, stretching her arms. "Whew. That was fun, though. Stressful, but fun. I need like, five sandwiches after that."

Layla snorted. "Only five? Weak."

Lilia, meanwhile, began undoing the straps of her gloves with precise movements, seemingly unbothered by the conversation. But even as Sylvie tried to focus on anything else, her eyes kept flickering toward her—toward the effortless way she moved, the way she carried herself.

And for some reason, she found herself stealing another glance.

At almost the exact same moment—

Lilia looked at her again.

Sylvie tensed.

And then, with that same unreadable expression, Lilia simply looked away, as if nothing had happened.

As the girls began changing, the locker room filled with the casual rustling of fabric and the occasional clink of metal as armor pieces were set aside. The atmosphere was relaxed, the tension from the battle fading into a quiet ease.

Jasmine, as expected, was the most talkative, chatting animatedly with Layla as they swapped stories from the fight. "Okay, but seriously—the moment I saw Carl charging toward you guys, I knew it was over," Jasmine said, grinning as she pulled off her jacket. "I mean, we were dealing with our own problems, but that? That was just brutal."

Layla laughed, shaking her head as she unbuckled her gear. "Brutal is an understatement. You should've seen Sylvie. She actually went at him head-on."

Jasmine turned, eyebrows raised in genuine surprise. "No way. You squared up with Carl?"

Sylvie barely registered their conversation.

Her eyes were elsewhere.

She hadn't meant to stare. But as Lilia, with her usual quiet grace, unfastened her academy-issued uniform, Sylvie found herself frozen in place.

The smooth, effortless motion of Lilia pulling off her jacket revealed the pale, flawless skin underneath, the soft glow of the locker room's artificial lighting casting subtle highlights along her collarbone and shoulders.

She looked like something unreal.

Sylvie had seen beautiful girls before—Irina, with her fiery, striking presence. Julia, with her bold, sharp-edged charm. Senior Maya, exuding confidence and charisma.

But this was different.

This wasn't just beauty.

This was perfection.

Lilia's jade-green hair cascaded down her back, its silky strands gleaming as they draped effortlessly over her delicate frame. The contrast of her dark green locks against her pale, near-translucent skin was mesmerizing, almost ethereal.

Like a fairy.

Like a doll.

Sylvie swallowed, suddenly hyper-aware of the warmth creeping up her neck.

She forced herself to look away.

But it was harder than she expected.

Lilia, as always, seemed utterly unaware of the effect she had on people. She moved with an unbothered elegance, finishing unfastening her top and folding it neatly before reaching for her fresh set of clothes.

Sylvie exhaled slowly, hoping that no one noticed the way she had hesitated just now.