

H. Academy 886

Chapter 886 Integrating Into

"She even used [Cleansing]."

The reaction was immediate.

Both Irina and Julia's eyebrows rose in unison, but Julia was the first to speak.

"Wait, what?"

Irina remained silent, her smirk fading into something more thoughtful.

Julia, on the other hand, looked genuinely surprised. "She really used [Cleansing]? Not just a partial purification, but an actual full state removal?"

"Yep," Ethan confirmed, crossing his arms. "She got rid of Carl's [Gravity Command] like it was nothing. I was getting pulled straight into his range, and the next second? Gone. I could move again."

Julia let out a low whistle. "Hah. That's... kind of insane, actually." She turned to Irina, her expression shifting slightly. "You knew she could do that?"

Irina's smirk returned, but this time, there was a glint in her eyes that hadn't been there before. "I had my suspicions."

Lilia didn't react outwardly, but inwardly, her mind was still working.

'[Cleansing].'

That was an advanced ability. Not just something any healer could use—it required not just mana efficiency, but precise control over the nature of magical interference.

Ethan exhaled, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yeah, I was surprised too, to be honest. Even though we still lost, if not for Sylvie, we wouldn't have had a chance at all."

Irina hummed at that, her golden eyes glinting with thought. "So you do get it."

Ethan scoffed lightly. "I'm not that dense."

Carl, who had remained silent through most of the conversation, finally spoke.

"Your plan was crude."

Ethan turned toward him, blinking. "Well, yeah... That's right." He let out a dry chuckle, not bothering to argue. "Not exactly my best work."

Carl simply nodded, his tone flat. "You focused too much on speed and adaptation, but you didn't account for control. You had no defined role allocation, and your fallback was reactive rather than structured."

Ethan crossed his arms, processing that. He wasn't offended—it was just... true.

Carl was from a military family. The Bravehearts had served in high-level strategic operations for years, with his brother and father both actively deployed. Ethan had heard before that Carl himself participated in missions occasionally—though his rank wasn't particularly high, the experience alone put him on another level when it came to structured combat.

Carl continued, his tone as unreadable as ever. "You relied too much on your brute force."

Ethan let that sink in.

He wasn't wrong.

Carl had controlled the pace of the battle. Lilia had dictated the pressure. Ethan had reacted rather than dictated anything himself.

He frowned slightly, but not in frustration—just thought.

"Yeah," Ethan admitted, "I see what you mean."

Carl gave a short nod, as if that was the only response he had expected.

Irina smirked at the exchange but didn't interject. Julia, on the other hand, looked vaguely amused. "Man, Carl's the last person I'd expect to give actual feedback."

Carl didn't even glance at her. "It's basic strategy."

Julia rolled her eyes. "Right. Basic strategy from someone who's basically half-military."

Carl didn't deny it.

Ethan tapped his fingers against his arm, still letting the conversation sit in his mind.

Yeah. His approach had been too crude. He had treated the match like a combat test, when really, it was structured like a tactical mission.

And he had lost because of it.

He exhaled, shaking his head slightly. "Alright. Noted."

Carl simply nodded again, and the conversation settled into a brief silence.

Irina, still watching Ethan with a sharp gaze, finally spoke. "So? You gonna keep relying on your instincts, or are you actually gonna start thinking when you fight?"

Ethan smirked, shaking his head. "You're enjoying this too much."

Irina just grinned. "A little."

Julia stretched her arms above her head, groaning. "Alright, enough battle analysis. I'm starving. Let's go eat."

Ethan, still mulling over Carl's critique, looked up and glanced around. "Where's Lucas? Are we not waiting for him?"

The moment the words left his mouth, he felt a shift in the air.

Irina's golden eyes sharpened as she snapped her gaze toward him, her entire posture stiffening. "That bastard won't be showing his face for a while."

Ethan blinked. "...Okay. That sounded personal."

Julia, who had perked up at the change in conversation, smirked as she practically vibrated with excitement. "Oh, it is. And trust me, it's hilarious."

Lilia, who had been silent up until now, glanced at Irina with a raised eyebrow. "I take it something happened."

"Oh, something definitely happened," Julia confirmed, already practically bouncing as she grabbed her things. "Come on, let's talk about this over food. I promise you, it's worth hearing."

Ethan, now very intrigued, glanced at Irina again. She looked genuinely irritated, which was a rare sight. Usually, Irina had a controlled kind of frustration—this, though? This was different.

He smirked. "Alright. Now I have to hear this."

Irina huffed, crossing her arms. "You'll regret it."

Julia only cackled. "Oh no, they'll love it."

And just like that, the group made their way out, the curiosity practically buzzing in the air.

Whatever Lucas had done, it was going to be good.

The crisp evening air carried a gentle breeze, stirring the strands of Irina's hair as she stepped outside. The academy grounds stretched before her, illuminated by soft golden lights lining the pathways. With the spring semester settling in, the weather had grown pleasant, the sharp winter chill finally giving way to something far more comfortable.

She didn't rush.

Instead, she walked with a measured pace, letting her eyes wander over the students scattered across the open spaces. Some were grouped together, talking and laughing, their post-training exhaustion making their movements lazier. Others sat beneath the trees, flipping through notes or idly scrolling through their smartwatches, enjoying the cooler air before heading back inside.

Irina's gaze flicked toward a pair of first-years attempting to spar near one of the smaller training circles. Their stances were off, their attacks predictable—but their enthusiasm was obvious.

She exhaled, rolling her shoulders slightly.

Not that she particularly cared about any of this.

She was just waiting.

And everyone knew who she was waiting for.

Her fingers twitched slightly at the thought, but she quickly steadied herself, slipping both hands into her pockets as she continued walking.

She had a plan.

Oh, it wasn't a complicated plan. It wasn't even a particularly devious one.

But it was one she intended to follow through on.

Irina's pace slowed as she finally reached her destination.

Beneath the glow of the academy lights, near one of the quieter training areas, he stood. Waiting.

His presence was as calm as ever—unshaken, unreadable, annoyingly composed.

"You are here."

The voice was even, steady, carrying no unnecessary emotion.

Irina's golden eyes flicked up, meeting the sharp, cool violet of his gaze.

"Astron."

He held her stare for a moment before offering a simple reply.

"I am."

Irina exhaled lightly, stepping up to his side.

"Have you been waiting for long?"

"Just came," Astron replied, voice neutral.

A slow smirk tugged at Irina's lips.

"Heh... Liar. You always come early."

Astron didn't deny it.

He didn't say anything at all.

Just held that same calm, unreadable expression—one that only made Irina more certain she was right.

She tilted her head slightly, studying him. "Then again... that's just like you, isn't it?"

Astron glanced at her, his gaze quiet, but still sharp. He didn't ask what she meant. He didn't have to.

Irina stretched her arms behind her head, letting the cool night air settle over her.

"So," she said, flicking a glance back toward him. "Are you ready?"

"For?"

Her smirk deepened. "You'll see."

Astron's sharp purple eyes narrowed slightly, his gaze steady as he observed Irina with a hint of suspicion. "What are you planning?" he asked, his voice even but laced with a quiet wariness.

Irina merely grinned, her fiery yellow eyes gleaming with amusement. "Just follow me. You'll see."

Astron didn't move right away. He studied her for a moment longer, as if trying to decipher the layers beneath her words. But Irina remained as confident and unreadable as ever, her smirk unwavering.

Finally, he exhaled softly, his posture relaxing by the smallest fraction. "Fine."

Satisfied, Irina turned on her heel, her hands slipping back into her pockets as she walked ahead. Astron, with his usual calm, fell into step beside her, his gaze flicking toward her every so often as they moved through the academy grounds.

The pathway stretched out before them, lit by the soft glow of the campus lamps. The quiet hum of distant conversations filled the air, but Irina paid them no mind. She was focused.

'He's following. Good.'