

## H. Academy 887

Chapter 887 - No title

'He's following. Good.'

She had called him out here for a reason. It wasn't just for fun—though, of course, teasing him was always an enjoyable bonus. No, this was something she had been thinking about for a while now.

Astron remained silent as they walked, his sharp eyes scanning their surroundings. After a few moments, he finally spoke. "You still haven't told me where we're going."

Irina hummed, tilting her head slightly as she cast him a sideways glance. "If I told you, it wouldn't be any fun, now would it?"

Astron didn't respond right away, but she saw the faintest twitch at the corner of his mouth. Not quite a smirk, but something close. 'He's intrigued.'

Good.

As they walked, the cool night air brushing against them, Irina let the silence linger for a moment before speaking.

"So," she mused, tilting her head slightly. "How was your exercise?"

Astron raised an eyebrow. "Julia didn't tell you?"

Irina's smirk widened as she cast him a sideways glance. "She did. But I want to hear it from your side."

Astron regarded her for a beat, his expression unreadable, but Irina caught the faintest twitch at the corner of his lips. It was gone in an instant, but she knew it had been there.

He exhaled lightly. "It was... interesting."

Irina quirked a brow. "Interesting?"

Astron's gaze flicked ahead, his voice calm as he continued. "I didn't expect Julia to notice me as fast as she did."

Irina hummed, slipping her hands back into her pockets. "She does have good instincts. But you were still able to get past her, weren't you?"

Astron nodded slightly. "Eventually. But she reacted faster than I predicted. I made my move, expecting her to commit to a forward pursuit, but she caught on at the last second. Forced me to adjust."

Irina listened, her gaze locked onto him as he spoke. She could tell he was still analyzing it, breaking the engagement down piece by piece in his mind.

"She forced you to adjust?" Irina repeated, her smirk curling. "Now that's rare."

Astron glanced at her, his expression unreadable as he considered her words. "It was unexpected."

Irina didn't miss the way he said it—not with frustration, not with disappointment, but with something almost amused.

She let out a quiet chuckle. "Sounds like she gave you a harder time than you thought."

Astron gave a small nod, his gaze still forward, his tone even as he spoke. "I didn't expect things to go that way. I overestimated my ability to remain undetected and underestimated Julia's instincts. It was a miscalculation I should reflect on."

Irina raised an eyebrow. "You? Overconfident?"

Astron exhaled lightly. "It happens."

Irina scoffed. "Right. Must be rare, though."

He didn't confirm nor deny it, but after a brief pause, he added, "Still... Julia's reaction time was impressive. I doubt even Lucas or Lilia would have been able to sense me in time."

Irina hummed at that, rolling the thought over in her mind before glancing at him. "Me?"

Astron didn't answer right away. Instead, he turned his head slightly, his sharp gaze settling on her. "Truth or convenient answer?"

Irina smirked. "You don't give convenient answers, and you also know I'll choose the truth."

A pause. Then—

"Yeah," Astron said. "I know."

Irina watched him for a second longer, her smirk lingering but something else flickering beneath it.

He hadn't answered yet.

For a brief moment, Irina simply watched him, her smirk lingering as she waited for his answer. But then—

He was gone.

Her hazel eyes widened in an instant. The space where he had stood just a second ago was empty, as if he had vanished into thin air. The cool night air remained undisturbed, the quiet hum of the city in the distance unchanged.

'What—?'

Her body tensed as she scanned the surroundings, instincts kicking in. Nothing. No presence, no mana fluctuations, no sign of movement.

'Impossible. Where—'

"Huffff..."

A warm breath ghosted against her ear.

"Hiek—!"

She flinched violently, jumping back in an instant, her heart slamming against her ribs. Her body twisted on instinct, her eyes snapping to—

Astron.

Standing behind her, unnervingly close, his sharp purple eyes glinting with something infuriatingly smug.

"YOU!"

Her voice came out half a yell, half a furious snarl as she pointed an accusatory finger at him, her cheeks burning. "How—when—?! You—!"

And then she saw it.

The faintest hint of a smile.

It wasn't his usual composed mask, nor the rare, barely-there smirk. No, this was different. It was subtle—so, so slight—but undeniably there. The corners of his lips curved upward, amusement flickering in his usually unreadable gaze.

He was actually smiling.

'No—NO! You can't win me with that smile this time!'

She clenched her fists, willing herself to stay angry, to hold onto the outrage of being caught off guard, of being completely and utterly fooled. But the warmth blooming in her chest was undeniable, and the heat in her cheeks refused to fade.

'Damn it! Stop looking like that!'

Astron tilted his head slightly, clearly waiting for her reaction, his quiet amusement lingering.

Irina exhaled sharply, trying to gather what little dignity she had left. "That—! That was cheating!" she accused, jabbing a finger at him.

Astron merely blinked. "Cheating?"

"YES. Disappearing right in front of me? Sneaking up on me like that? Completely unfair!"

His lips twitched. "It was a test. You did say you wanted to see if you could sense me."

Irina opened her mouth, then closed it. Then opened it again—before shutting it with a sharp huff.

'Damn it. He got me.'

Astron watched her, still calm, still annoyingly composed, and yet... there was something different. He was watching her closely, like he was waiting for something.

'Oh no. You're waiting for me to admit it, aren't you?'

She gritted her teeth. No way. Not happening.

"...I was just distracted," she muttered instead, crossing her arms.

Astron raised an eyebrow. "Is that so?"

"YES," she snapped, whipping her head away, refusing to look at his face any longer because if she did, she'd be the one to lose.

That smile.

'Ugh. This isn't fair.'

She huffed again, turning her back to him. "Whatever! I'll get you next time. Just you wait, Astron."

Silence. Then—

"Looking forward to it."

Irina paused for just a second before storming ahead, ignoring the way her heart did a stupid little flip at those words.



'Damn it. He's learning.'

Astron watched as Irina stormed ahead, her frustration radiating off her like heat waves from a wildfire.

It was always a sight to catch her off guard, even better to see her genuinely flustered. And if he had to be honest... it was something he found the most amusing recently.

Still, fair was fair.

"How about you?"

Irina stopped mid-step. "Hah?"

Astron walked up beside her again, his expression calm, but his eyes sharp with curiosity. "I told you about my fight. What about yours?"

Irina scoffed, shoving her hands into her pockets. "Tch. What do you think?"

"I don't assume," Astron replied easily. "Tell me."

Irina exhaled, clearly still irritated—but not at him. No, the way her jaw tightened, the way her golden eyes flickered with something else, told him exactly who she was still thinking about.

She huffed, tilting her head slightly. "Lucas."

Astron raised an eyebrow.

"He did to me what I just did to Julia," she admitted, her tone grudging. "No—worse."

Astron didn't say anything, waiting for her to continue.

Irina let out a sharp exhale. "I held the right wing. Fought off two attackers at the same time. Controlled the space perfectly. I had it handled. I was winning."

Astron nodded slightly. That sounded like her.

"And then," she said, voice growing sharper, "Lucas swoops in out of nowhere, snatches the artifact, smirks, and vanishes before I can even react."

Astron blinked. "I see." But his gaze appeared to be cold.

Irina caught the shift in Astron's expression instantly.

His gaze, normally unreadable, had turned cold. Calculating.

Her brows furrowed. "What?"

Astron's voice was calm, but there was a distinct sharpness in it. "What happened exactly?"

Irina blinked. "I just told you. He stole the artifact and ran."

Astron shook his head slightly. "No. I mean—how?" His purple eyes narrowed slightly as he looked at her. "Lucas isn't the type to fight stealthily. He's fast, but he's a swordsman. His movement is always direct, always with intent. How did he bypass your senses?"