

H. Academy 888

Chapter 888 - No title

"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?"

Irina's lips parted slightly before she closed them again, thinking.

Because that was the exact thing that had been bothering her too.

"Yeah," she muttered, crossing her arms, her expression tightening. "That's what I thought, too."

Astron remained silent, waiting for her to continue.

Irina exhaled through her nose, her frustration bubbling back up—not just at Lucas, but at herself for not figuring it out sooner.

"I don't know how he did it," she admitted. "But I do know that for a while, I couldn't tell he was there. And I should have been able to."

Astron's gaze flickered. "Go on."

Irina pressed her lips together briefly before speaking. "There was something off. When I was fighting the other two, my mana perception should have picked up any movements near me, especially someone as fast as Lucas. But I didn't notice him at all—until the very last second."

Astron's fingers twitched slightly at his side. "That's not normal."

Irina nodded. "Exactly. And then, right before he took the artifact, I saw something."

Astron remained silent, listening.

"It was faint, but... there was an illusion."

That got a reaction.

Astron's sharp gaze flicked to her. "An illusion?"

Irina's jaw tightened. "Yeah. It wasn't strong—I didn't even realize I was seeing it until it was too late. But for a second, the air shimmered, and then—he was there."

Astron's expression didn't change, but Irina could tell he was processing everything.

Because this changed things.

Lucas wasn't a magic user. He was a swordsman through and through, one of the most direct fighters in the academy.

So how the hell did he use an illusion to move undetected?

Irina scoffed, looking away briefly. "Tch. I don't know what he did, but it worked. I didn't even know he was coming until it was too late."

She clenched her fists slightly.

"And that," she muttered, "pisses me off the most."

Astron didn't respond right away. His sharp purple eyes remained fixed on Irina, but there was a flicker of thoughtfulness beneath the usual calm.

'He's thinking about it,' Irina noted.

But then, after a brief pause, he exhaled lightly and—just like that—the topic was dropped.

No conclusion. No further prodding.

'Huh. That's unlike him.'

She narrowed her eyes slightly but didn't question it. Instead, they continued walking in silence, the night air cool against her skin. She could feel his presence beside her, steady and composed, as always.

Minutes passed, the rhythmic sound of their footsteps filling the quiet between them. And then—

"As expected, you were trying to bring me to your grounds," Astron said suddenly, breaking the silence before she could.

Irina blinked. "What?"

Astron's sharp gaze flicked toward the grand building in front of them. His voice was calm, but there was a clear edge of certainty in it. "Your dorms."

Irina smirked, shoving her hands into her pockets. "Oh? So you figured it out?"

Astron tilted his head slightly, his eyes scanning the area. "It wasn't hard."

They stood before the elite cadet dormitory section—an entire sector of the academy reserved only for the top ten ranked students. Unlike the standard dorms, which were communal, each of the top ten had their own private residence, complete with customized facilities.

And, of course, Irina Emberheart—rank two—had one of the best.

The grand structure before them was more like a private manor than a simple dormitory. Tall, sleek, and adorned with subtle mana-imbued carvings, the building exuded both elegance and power. The entrance was flanked by runic pillars, their soft glow pulsating in a steady rhythm, acknowledging her presence.

Irina turned toward him, her smirk widening. "Did you come here before?"

"I did not," Astron answered smoothly.

Her brow arched. "Then how did you know?"

His eyes didn't waver. "I know important places in the academy."

Irina let out a short laugh. "So you've scouted this place before?"

"Better to be familiar."

Irina shook her head, chuckling. "You are crazy."

Astron didn't flinch. "You must have known that by this point."

Irina grinned. "Yup, I did."

The air between them settled into something comfortable.

Astron's gaze lingered on the structure for a moment longer before turning back to her. "So?"

Irina tilted her head. "So what?"

"You brought me here for a reason." His voice was level, but his sharp gaze told her he wasn't going to let this be just another playful distraction.

Irina's smirk didn't fade, but her hazel eyes glimmered with something deeper.

"Yeah," she said, stepping forward and resting a hand on the runic pillar. The mana reacted instantly, recognizing her, allowing her access. The entrance unlocked with a soft chime.

"Come in, Astron."

She glanced over her shoulder at him, eyes gleaming.

Then, she leaned casually against the doorway, her smirk unwavering. "You promised, Astron. So, you better come in and uphold your word."

Astron's sharp purple eyes flickered with something unreadable as he studied her for a moment. Then, with a slight shake of his head, he exhaled. "You do know it's pretty late, right?"

Irina raised an eyebrow. "Yes. Is there a problem?"

"..."

She crossed her arms, tilting her head. "It's not like it's the first time you're staying over for the night."

"That's true," Astron admitted, his tone as composed as ever.

And yet—

Astron took a single step forward, closing the space between them. His height and the subtle shift in his presence made it so that she had to tilt her head up to meet his gaze.

"But wait," he continued, his voice dipping slightly as his gaze locked onto her, "why did you assume that you would be here overnight?"

Irina blinked. "What?"

Astron took a single step forward, closing the space between them. His height and the subtle shift in his presence made it so that she had to tilt her head up to meet his gaze.

Then, with a voice calm and deliberate, he continued. "The way you keep shifting your weight slightly to your right foot."

Irina stilled.

"You only do that when you're excited," Astron stated matter-of-factly. "It's a small habit, but you can't stop yourself from doing it when you're looking forward to something."

Irina's smirk faltered—just a fraction—but Astron wasn't finished.

"You did the same thing back at Emberheart Estate," he continued, his voice unwavering. "When I agreed to stay the night, when you led me toward the estate's restricted training hall, and even when you pretended you weren't excited about it."

Irina inhaled sharply, her arms tightening across her chest. 'Damn it. He's noticing things again.'

Astron tilted his head ever so slightly. "So tell me, Irina—why exactly are you so excited right now?"

Silence.

Irina's golden eyes locked onto his, defiance flickering behind them. But deep down, she knew—he had her.

Irina didn't blink. Didn't shift. Didn't let her expression crack. Instead, she slowly—deliberately—raised her hand and pointed a single finger right at his lips.

"Shut up and follow me. You are now under my jurisdiction."

Astron stared at her, completely unbothered. "...What?"

Irina smirked, her finger still hovering in front of his mouth like some divine decree.

"You are now in my land, so you will follow my words."

His eyes narrowed slightly. "Are you the ruler of this place?"

"Yes, I am," she declared without hesitation. Then, folding her arms, she added smugly, "And you are now my subject."

Astron's lips twitched. "You are really delusional."

"Shut up and play along, will you?" Irina huffed, stepping past him toward the entrance, her confidence unwavering.

Astron exhaled through his nose, shaking his head. But then, after a brief pause—

"...Yeah... yeah... Ma'am."

Irina froze mid-step. Then, slowly, she turned her head back to him.

There it was. That faintest trace of amusement in his eyes. Not quite a smirk, not quite teasing, but something knowing.

And yet—he complied.

'That's right. Follow your ruler, peasant,' she thought smugly, walking forward with her head high.

This was her domain. And tonight, Astron was playing by her rules.