

## H. Academy 941

### Chapter 941 Overachievers

Maya's vision was dark.

She floated somewhere just beyond reach of her own body, her thoughts sluggish, like trying to move through thick water. Time felt distant. Her senses, dulled. No sound, no sight—only fragments.

A breath.

A heartbeat.

A warmth.

Then—

A jolt.

Her mind snapped back like a rubber band stretched too far.

She inhaled sharply, her eyes fluttering open. The room came back into focus in pieces—the soft golden glow of the dorm lights, the tea set still resting on the table, and the firm, steady warmth that surrounded her.

And then she realized—

She was in his arms.

Astron.

His arms were wrapped around her, one hand lightly pressed between her shoulder blades, the other steady at her waist. His touch wasn't forceful or invasive. Just steady. Grounding.

Maya froze.

Her body stiffened instantly, breath catching in her throat as her senses caught up to the moment.

What—

Her face burned. Heat flushed into her cheeks so fast it made her dizzy.

She blinked rapidly, trying to pull herself out of the haze. She couldn't remember what had just happened. Not clearly.

There had been... hunger.

That pull. That voice.

And then—nothing.

She'd gone under, as if her mind had simply slipped into sleep. Not unconscious, but silent.

And now—

Now she was here. In his arms.

"Astron," she said, her voice low and hoarse, barely above a whisper.

His grip loosened slightly, but he didn't let go.

"You're back," he said, voice calm as ever, though there was something softer there. Almost relieved.

Maya didn't answer. She couldn't.

Because her body felt strange. Not weak—but sated.

There was no longer that clawing hunger gnawing at her insides. No pressure behind her eyes. No dryness in her throat.

She felt...

Full.

The silence pressed against her chest like a weight. And then, in a single motion, Maya pulled herself out of his embrace, stepping back so fast she nearly stumbled.

Her hands hovered mid-air for a moment, unsure where to go, before clenching tightly by her sides. The space between them suddenly felt too wide and not wide enough.

She couldn't look at him. Not yet.

"Did anything happen?"

Her voice was barely above a whisper.

Astron watched her for a second—long enough that it made her skin crawl with uncertainty—but then, he gave a small shake of his head.

"No. Nothing happened."

Relief washed through her like a tide. She let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, her shoulders sagging just slightly as her heart began to slow.

"That's... good," she murmured.

Her mind still felt foggy, like remnants of a dream clung to her thoughts. But her other self—so loud, so ever-present—was silent now. As if she had slipped into slumber, satisfied.

And with that silence came something Maya hadn't had in a while.

Room to breathe.

Room to think.

Astron stood slowly, brushing invisible creases from his uniform with that same deliberate calm he always carried.

"Did you need anything else?" he asked.

Maya looked at him, really looked. The way the dim light cast shadows across his face, the subtle tension in his frame that he tried to hide.

She almost said something. Almost.

But instead, she shook her head.

"No... I don't."

He nodded. "Is that so?"

She gave a short nod in return.

Astron turned toward the door, his movements measured and unhurried.

"Then I'll be leaving."

A closing door.

And Maya, standing alone, in a dormitory that suddenly felt too quiet.

Maya stood in the silence, unmoving, her heartbeat still slowly settling. Her gaze lingered on the empty space Astron had occupied just moments ago. The warmth of his presence still clung faintly to the room, like a fading ember.

But it was gone now.

And all that was left was her.

And the silence.

She exhaled through her nose, turned on her heel, and walked to the small desk near her bed. Her communicator sat there, still faintly glowing with a soft notification pulse.

A message.

She picked it up and tapped the screen, scanning the sender.

[From: Alden]

Her eyes narrowed slightly at the name. Her brother didn't message often—not unless he had something important to say.

Opening it, she quickly skimmed through the text.

"I've compiled several techniques. Some of them come from older grimoires—structured mental formations, focus channels, pressure locks. They're not combat efficient, but they should help you regulate 'her' more cleanly."

"Start with the layered visualization. It's tedious, but once you establish the framework, it should reinforce your inner walls."

"And Maya... Don't force it. You're not trying to kill her. You're trying to reclaim yourself."

Maya stared at the last line, her fingers tightening ever so slightly around the communicator.

You're not trying to kill her.

You're trying to reclaim yourself.

She placed the device down with deliberate care, then turned to the center of her room.

The hunger had faded for now. Her other self was quiet. But that calm would not last—not unless she did something.

She moved with practiced fluidity, clearing a small area on the floor. Her knees lowered into the familiar lotus position, her palms resting gently atop her thighs, fingers relaxed.

Her breathing slowed.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Let go.

Her thoughts were scattered at first—flashes of Astron's hand, her own trembling, the warmth of his embrace, the shame, the hunger, her brother's words.

But one by one, she pushed them aside.

Her mind turned inward, toward the boundaries of her consciousness. The walls of her mental space were fragile in places, too thin in others.

And in the distance, in the deep corner of herself—

She felt it.

The presence.

Sleeping.

Coiled.

Waiting.

But for now, it was at peace.

And that was all she needed.

Not victory.

Just a moment to breathe.

To reclaim herself.

And she began.

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The classroom was as sharp and structured as its instructor—rows of desks arranged with military precision, chalkboard notes erased to the last mark, and the faint scent of iron in the air, as if even the walls remembered battle.

Professor Kain stood at the front of the class with his arms crossed, the ever-serious expression on his face casting a natural silence over the room. His crimson coat hung stiffly from his shoulders, and his sharp eyes swept over the cadets like a man ready to drill the next order into stone.

"Today," he began, his voice cutting clean through the idle rustle of pages and whispers, "we're moving on to a different formation."

The students straightened instinctively, their bodies reacting before their minds fully caught up.

Kain turned toward the board, where he flicked his fingers across the embedded mana glyph, causing a floating diagram to emerge in the air. A rotating, six-person formation, with highlighted roles marked in pale blue and red.

"This is the Tri-Layer Pressure Formation. Unlike the previous rotation-based structure we discussed last week, this one focuses on staggered lines and split-point pressure. It's designed for mixed-unit deployment, emphasizing rotation and role-shifting mid-combat."

The class murmured quietly in intrigue, the complexity of the pattern drawing their attention.

"As usual, we'll break this down into positioning, role variance, and decision triggers," Kain continued. "Pay attention. Next week's practical dungeon lesson will implement this formation in live conditions."

That announcement caught everyone's attention immediately.

Even Julia, who had been leaning back in her seat with that classic "don't care" expression, sat up slightly.

"Wait—another dungeon next week?" Jasmine asked aloud, blinking.

Kain nodded. "Yes. You will be re-formed into six-person units. The dungeon has already been selected and will be revealed on the day. Prepare accordingly."



Lucas groaned under his breath. "Every time he says that, it turns out worse than expected."

Irina didn't look away from the diagram, her voice dry. "Then expect the worst."

Julia leaned forward slightly, lips curving into a sly grin. "Hey, Professor Kain. Just to check—does that mean we'll need to do a report afterward?"

Kain turned his head just enough to glance at her.

"Yes."

"Ugh. Nooo...!" Julia slumped forward onto her desk. "Can we just suffer in the dungeon and call that educational enough?"

"No," Kain replied, without pause or sympathy. "You suffer, then write about it."

Several students snorted with laughter, even as the collective groan spread across the room.

"Same format as last time," he added. "Combat flow, decision-making, strengths, weaknesses—include tactical insight this time. I'm expecting more than just summaries of 'it was hard.'"

Ethan sighed and rubbed his forehead. "We're going to need to block off a full day just for writing again, aren't we?"

Sylvie glanced at her notes. "Might be worth organizing sections in advance. We already know Kain's expectations."

"Overachievers," Julia muttered under her breath, half-impressed, half-annoyed.

As Kain continued to break down the formation into component strategies, the atmosphere of the classroom remained focused.

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Eventually, the glyph diagram faded from the air, and Kain stepped away from the board.

"That's all for today," he said, voice clipped. "Groups for the dungeon practical will be posted two days before deployment. Use your remaining time this week to prepare, coordinate, and understand this formation."

He paused, then added flatly, "Dismissed."

The chairs creaked and bags rustled as students stood up, stretching and chatting among themselves.

Though the initial days following the suspension of club activities had been tense, bordering on outright mutinous, something strange had begun to settle over the academy.

Adaptation.

Without clubs to retreat to, students had begun forming study circles more openly, or spending time reviewing tactics, sparring, or working on solo training. Even casual conversations had slowly returned.

The atmosphere, while not as free as it once was, had shifted from agitated unrest to a more disciplined rhythm.

"Guess we're back to dungeon hell," Lucas muttered as he packed his things.

"Better than sitting in silence staring at a wall," Irina replied.

"Depends on the wall," Julia added with a grin. "I've seen some pretty inspiring ones."

Astron, who had already stood and was calmly reviewing the formation diagram on his tablet, simply offered, "Be prepared. This next dungeon won't be like the last."

Everyone knew he was right.

And no matter what was waiting in the depths—report or not—they would face it.

As hunters-in-training always did.

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Ethan rose from his seat at the back of the classroom, sliding his tablet into his bag with practiced ease. The ache in his ribs had dulled into a throb, but the weight on his mind hadn't lessened since the night of the ambush—or the hearing.

His eyes drifted across the room, landing on Astron, who stood with his usual quiet composure, adjusting the strap of his bag while scanning the final glyphs on his tablet one last time.

Ethan made his way toward him, weaving between desks and half-formed clusters of students still caught in casual conversation. When he reached Astron's side, he didn't waste time.

"Let's go."

The words were spoken quietly, but directly.

Astron looked up from his screen and gave a faint nod before turning, falling into step beside him without question.

Today was Eleanor's training day. That meant field coordination, team formations, and high-intensity drills. The kind of session where mistakes were punished with bruises or worse—and Ethan knew better than to show up late or unprepared.

But more than the physical regimen, he wanted to talk.

Not just about strategy.

About what happened.

They walked together down the hallway, the hum of voices behind them fading into the background. For a while, the silence between them was typical—quiet, but not uncomfortable.

But Ethan broke it.

"Are you aware of what happened?"

Astron didn't stop walking, but he turned his head slightly, his sharp eyes flicking toward Ethan with that usual unreadable expression. His tone, when he responded, was calm—almost clinical.

"Are you talking about how you got baited and lost to your emotions?"

Ethan winced internally, even though he'd expected nothing less. Astron never sugarcoated things. He didn't offer sympathy—just observations, blunt and precise.

Of course, he would phrase it like that.

Ethan rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah," he muttered. "That."

They rounded a corner, the halls quiet now except for the steady rhythm of their footsteps. Astron didn't offer follow-up commentary right away, and Ethan glanced sideways at him.

"You knew, didn't you? That it was going to happen."

Astron finally stopped walking. He turned to face Ethan fully now, his expression neutral. "I suspected. You're easy to read when it comes to people you care about."

Ethan's jaw tightened, but he didn't respond.

Astron continued. "They were watching for a weakness. They found it in Jane. And they knew they could find the rest in you."

Ethan looked away, his shoulders tense. "I thought I could handle it. I didn't think I'd... fall for it like that."

Astron's voice remained steady. "You're not weak, Ethan. You're just human."

Then, in that way only Astron could manage—half-critical, half-genuine—he added, "Though admittedly, it was quite a performance. If you had just waited three more seconds before snapping, it might have been salvageable."

Ethan scoffed, shaking his head with a short laugh. "Thanks for the encouragement."

Ethan's pace slowed slightly as Astron's words sank in, the sting of their blunt honesty softened by the fact that they were, as always, true. Astron didn't deal in comfort. He dealt in precision.

Ethan let the silence stretch for a few moments before speaking again, quieter this time.

"What could I have done differently?"

Astron didn't answer immediately. His steps remained measured, but his gaze grew more focused, more analytical—as if mentally reconstructing the entire confrontation. His voice, when it came, was calm.

"You had four sophomores surrounding you. That alone should have raised alarms. Then they activated a sound barrier to isolate you. That's not a conversation. That's a trap."

Ethan frowned. "I thought it was just a confrontation. They said they wanted to talk."

"They lied," Astron replied without hesitation. "And you believed them. That's the problem."

Ethan looked away, jaw tight. "So... what would you have done? If the same happened about Irina?"

Astron stopped again.

This time, there was a pause—not because he was thinking, but because something shifted behind his eyes. The hallway lights caught his profile as he turned, and for a moment, Ethan saw something different in his expression.

It wasn't coldness.

It was distance.

"If someone did that to Irina," Astron said, voice low, "they would die."

Ethan blinked.

There was no edge to the words, no threat laced in venom. It was just a statement. Hollow, quiet, and terrifyingly certain.

Astron didn't meet his eyes immediately, but when he did, his gaze was pale violet and unreadable. Not blank—just emptied. Stripped of emotion.

Ethan swallowed. "That serious, huh."

Astron finally moved again, eyes narrowing with quiet focus. "However. In this specific situation, I would have waited."

"Waited?" Ethan echoed.

"Yes," Astron said. "When you're being baited, acting emotionally gives your enemy everything they want. If you had taken a step back—acted confused instead of furious—you could've shifted the entire narrative."

He tilted his head slightly. "Imagine it like this. You're surrounded by four older students, they activate a sound barrier, and you say: 'What were they doing? I didn't feel safe like this.' Now you've reframed it. You've made them the aggressors."

Ethan exhaled slowly, the realization settling into his chest like a weight. "They'd say they were just talking."

"And that's when you offer to take the conversation elsewhere. Somewhere public. Somewhere visible." Astron's tone didn't waver. "If they refuse, they expose themselves. If they accept, they lose the ability to escalate. Either way, you win."

Ethan's steps slowed again, the tension knotting tighter in his chest. He looked ahead, lips pressed together, then finally spoke, his voice low.

"But the video was cut."

Astron's gaze flicked toward him.

"I already tried to de-escalate. I told them I didn't want to fight. I said I just wanted them to leave Jane alone. But then they showed me that... that thing." Ethan's voice cracked slightly, just for a moment. He swallowed it down, but the heat in his chest didn't fade. "They made a fake video—with her face. Doing disgusting things."

He paused, jaw clenched.

"They made that."

The memory of it resurfaced—Jane's face twisted into something shameful, something vile. Her voice manipulated, her body rendered into a puppet. It wasn't just an attack. It was a violation.

Ethan's hands curled into fists.

"I know it wasn't real. I knew it then, too. But seeing it? Hearing it? The fact that they dared to do something like that—"

His voice faltered again, not with weakness, but with restraint. The kind it took everything in him to maintain.

Astron remained quiet for a moment. Then:

"That," he said evenly, "is why you don't let go of your emotions."

Ethan turned sharply to look at him.

Astron's expression hadn't changed. He was calm. Unflinching. But his tone was heavier now—less clinical, more deliberate.

"When someone shows you something like that, you don't react. Not immediately. If you already know it's fake, then don't ask what it is. Ask why they're showing it to you."

Ethan's brow furrowed, uncertain. "Why?"

"To test you. To see how far they can push you. To confirm whether your anger is predictable. If you give them exactly what they want, you're doing their work for them."

Astron took a small step forward, gaze steady.

"The better option is to wait. Let them burn that card. Let them use their best move. And when they think they've broken you—when they're alone, isolated, unaware—then you strike back."

Ethan blinked. "Strike back?"

"Yes." Astron's voice was cool, like he was stating a formula. "Find them when they're separated. When there are no recordings. No friends. No audience. Make sure they understand that actions have consequences."



There was a long pause.

Ethan stared at him, his breath shallow, his heart still pounding. But something in him recoiled.

"That sounds... cruel," he said quietly. "Like I'd be turning into them."

Astron didn't flinch. "It's not cruelty. It's precision. They weaponized Jane's image to hurt her and bait you. If you don't respond intelligently, you allow them to repeat it with someone else."

"But going after them when they're alone—doing what they did to me—how is that any different?"

Astron looked at him for a long moment. His expression didn't shift, but there was something harder behind his eyes now.

"Why should it be different?"

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"Why should it be different?"

The question hit harder than expected—not sharp, but weighty. Astron didn't wait for an answer. He stepped closer, his voice low and unwavering.

"You may feel talented, Ethan. And you are. You work hard, and you believe that with enough effort, you can shape the world around your own rules."

His pale violet eyes locked with Ethan's, unblinking.

"But you should start to understand this by now: no matter how strong you become, no matter how righteous your intentions—there will come a time when you feel the limits of your ideals."

Ethan stood still, frozen in place as the words settled over him like slow-falling ash. "And when that moment comes," Astron continued, his tone quieter, colder, "it's not always you who pays the price."

He tilted his head slightly, just enough to shift the weight of his words.

"It's the ones closest to you who bleed for your convictions."

Ethan's throat tightened. He wanted to argue-wanted to say that wasn't how it had to be. That strength and principle weren't mutually exclusive. That justice could be clean, even if the world wasn't.

But he couldn't speak.

Because he knew what Astron was saying wasn't wrong.

He remembered Jane, her hands trembling.

He remembered the silence that followed the sound barrier.

He remembered how helpless he felt-even after he'd fought back.

Astron stepped back slightly, giving him space again.

"Remember that well," he said.

Then he turned, resuming his walk down the hallway as if nothing more needed to be said.

Ethan didn't move at first.

His heart still beat hard in his chest, and something within him stirred-something caught between resistance and understanding. Between the boy who wanted to protect people the right way...

...and the man the world might force him to become.

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The door to the facility hissed open with a quiet thunk, releasing a wave of cool, artificial air. Ethan stepped through first, his boots echoing against the polished floor, followed closely by Astron-silent as ever, his sharp gaze already sweeping across the dimly lit hall.

It had been a few days since the incident. Since that conversation in Eleanor's office. Since Ethan's temporary suspension. And now, this place the same cursed training ground where they had been pushed to the brink-was to become their new normal.

Ethan exhaled slowly as the familiar chill of the building settled over him. "Back to hell," he muttered under his breath.

Astron didn't comment, but the slight twitch of his eyebrow suggested he agreed. From the far end of the hall, a familiar presence stirred.

Eleanor stood beside the console, arms folded neatly behind her back. Her long coat fluttered slightly from the ambient currents of mana in the room. As they approached, she turned to face them fully, her expression unreadable-but her eyes, as always, were sharp. Calculating.

"You're here. Good."

Her tone was neutral, businesslike, but Ethan immediately tensed. That same feeling crawled up his spine-the one that said something unpleasant was about to begin. Eleanor didn't waste time.

"I know this isn't the usual mentorship block," she began. "But from now on, this is where you'll be training."

Astron's eyebrows lifted slightly. "Why now?" he asked, voice calm.

Eleanor met his gaze without flinching. "Because both of you are being targeted."

The words hung in the air, colder than the temperature around them.

"Targeted?"

Eleanor nodded once, her tone clipped and precise. "The incident with Grayson. The sudden escalation. The way information was twisted, and how quickly it spread through the academy..." Her gaze narrowed. "It wasn't spontaneous. Someone is watching you. Both of you. And they're not just looking to slow your progress. They want to break it."

Astron's gaze sharpened as he studied her. "You're certain?"

Eleanor nodded. "Too many threads point to the same conclusion. You're rising too fast. You're becoming threats to the wrong people." She turned slightly, her voice lowering. "And out there-your every move is being watched. Twisted. Used against you. Here, at least, I can control what happens."

She glanced back at them. "You're safer here."

Ethan's jaw clenched slightly. "So what-this is our shelter now?"

"No," Eleanor said, eyes glinting. "This is your forge."

That silence again-tight, thick, unrelenting. Until-

"... You just want to train us more," Astron said.

Eleanor blinked once, then slowly turned her head toward him.

It wasn't a question. It was a statement.

Ethan blinked, surprised not at the accusation, but at who had said it.

Astron's voice was calm, but pointed. He was still watching her, eyes narrowed just slightly, testing her.

A rare shift passed through Eleanor's face-faint amusement, a flicker at the corner of her lips, gone almost as quickly as it appeared.

"I won't deny it," she said coolly. "Convenience does have its perks."

Ethan stared between them, incredulous. "Wait. That's it? You're just gonna say that?"

Eleanor glanced at him briefly. "I don't recall ever lying to you."

Astron held her gaze a moment longer, then gave a small exhale through his nose-his version of a scoff.

"...Thought so."

Astron's gaze lingered for a moment longer before he took a single step back, arms at his sides, his expression unreadable.

"I refuse."

The words landed like a quiet blade, sharp and definitive.

Ethan turned toward him, eyebrows raised. "Wait, what?"

Eleanor's eyes narrowed, the faint glimmer of amusement in her expression vanishing.

"I don't recall offering you a choice," she said flatly, tilting her head slightly.

Astron didn't flinch. "Then consider this my refusal of obligation."

Eleanor's expression didn't shift, but the air seemed to still around them.

"I don't want to be under scrutiny," Astron continued, his voice calm, almost detached.

There was no anger in his tone, no outward defiance-just truth.

Eleanor's gaze sharpened. "You're that adamant about hiding your power?"

Astron's lips pressed into a thin line. "I'm adamant about not being observed."

The silence that followed was different this time-charged, not with tension, but something subtler. Understanding, perhaps. Or challenge.

Ethan glanced between them again, confused but slowly piecing things together. Eleanor stepped forward slowly, her coat whispering against the floor. "Is that what you think this is?" she asked, her voice quiet, almost amused again. "Observation?"

Astron didn't respond. He didn't need to.

Eleanor studied him for another second before exhaling lightly and lifting her hands in mock surrender. "Fine, fine," she murmured, her tone softening-but her eyes still glinting.

"I expected something like this," she continued, pacing a short distance. "You don't like to be watched. You don't like to be known. You operate best in silence." She turned back toward them, arms loosely folded. "That's precisely why there are no cameras or any type of recording device inside this facility."

Astron's brows lifted slightly-not quite surprise, but interest.

Ethan blinked. "No recording?"

Eleanor nodded. "Not a single one."

She let that sink in for a beat before continuing, her voice casual now. "And if that's still not enough-if you want to hide it even from him..." she gestured toward Ethan without

looking at him, "then there are also isolated training rooms. Three of them. Soundproofed. Mana-sealed. Shielded against perception techniques."

Astron's eyes narrowed, not out of distrust, but scrutiny.

Eleanor met his gaze, her voice still low. "I don't care how strong you are. Not unless you choose to show it. But if you're worried about being exposed-don't be. I made sure this place is for growth, not surveillance."

Ethan crossed his arms, shifting his weight slightly. "So let me get this straight. You built an entire facility that's basically invisible to the academy, then made sure no one could see what we're doing inside it, just in case this guy wants to go full shadow-mode?"

Eleanor didn't turn to him. "I built it because students like you need places like this.

And I kept it hidden because Astron isn't the only one who wants to control what others see"

She paused, then looked at Astron again.

"It's your choice. I won't ask again."

Astron stared at her for a long moment. Then, slowly, his head tilted.

"I accept it, okay."

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"I accept it, okay."

Eleanor's hands came together with a crisp clap that echoed through the wide, empty chamber.

The sound wasn't loud-but new.

I was final. Like a door closing. Or the start of something

"Good," she said, voice firm now, shedding the softness from moments before. "Then let's begin."

She stepped past them with ease, making her way to the center of the facility. The mana in the room stirred faintly around her, reacting not to any spell, but to her presence. It always did.

Ethan and Astron followed in silence, the air around them shifting from quiet conversation to something heavier, Familiar, Dangerous.

Eleanor turned to face them, her expression composed, all traces of amusement and challenge now gone. In its place-professional, precise focus.

"In the past two sessions," she began, "I pushed your bodies to their limits. Gravity, pressure, adaptation, endurance. I wanted to see how your bodies reacted. How your instincts compensated. And more importantly-how you think under stress."

Ethan's shoulders tensed slightly at the reminder. His muscles still remembered. His bones probably did too.

Astron said nothing, his posture straight, his focus sharpened.

Eleanor clasped her hands behind her back.

"That stage," she continued, "was foundational. Understanding how far you can be pushed physically is important-but it's only one side of the equation."

She let the weight of that settle for a moment.

"Now," she said, her voice taking on a cool edge, "we shift."

Ethan blinked. "Shift... how?"



Eleanor's eyes gleamed. "To control."

She took a step forward. "I've seen how your bodies react. But I haven't yet seen how you direct that reaction. From this point onward, I'll be evaluating how well you command your own mana under stress-not just letting I act as instinctual reinforcement."

Her gaze flicked to Astron. "You flow around pressure."

Then to Ethan. "You try to crush through it."

She tilted her head. "Neither is wrong. But both are incomplete."

Ethan frowned slightly. Astron simply waited.

"This next phase," Eleanor said, gesturing to the floor as intricate mana patterns began to light up beneath them, "will require refinement. Focus. You've adapted to external pressure. Now, I want to see how you shape your own."

The floor beneath their feet split into two wide sections-mirrored chambers, shimmering with thin veils of mana.

"You'll each enter a zone calibrated to match your resonance patterns," she said. "Inside, you'll have full access to your mana-but the environment will amplify feedback. Loss of control, overexertion, emotional turbulence... every mistake you make will rebound tenfold."

Ethan stared at the chamber forming beside him. "So... a punishment room?"

Eleanor raised an eyebrow. "A mirror."

She looked between them. "Step in. From now on, your enemy is not the room, or the weight, or even each other."

She smiled faintly, a quiet, knowing thing.

"It's you."

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The chambers pulsed once with faint light-an almost imperceptible hum of mana resonance as they stabilized.

Ethan and Astron stepped forward without hesitation.

The moment they crossed the veil, the world shifted.

Inside, the air felt alive. Not heavier, not denser-just... aware. Like every inch of the chamber was watching. Waiting. Ready to respond to their every movement.

Ethan exhaled sharply, already feeling the slight tug at his mana veins, as if the room were reading him, challenging him. His instinct flared, and he immediately pushed back-force met force.

Astron, by contrast, didn't react. Not outwardly. He let the sensation sweep through him, registering the subtle push and pull without resistance. He simply adjusted, letting the environment inform his next move.

Outside the chambers, Eleanor stood in silence, her blue eyes watching intently-but her mind was already sharpening into something more. Something deeper.

This is why they call her the Invoker.

Not just because of power.

But because of command.

Her mana didn't just obey her. It answered her. It listened.

She closed her eyes briefly, and when they reopened, her perception shifted. The world bled into layers-temperature fluctuations, mana density, pulse rhythms, spiritual dissonance. Every breath they took inside those chambers resonated within her like ripples in still water.

Ethan's chamber lit first-wild sparks flickering along the boundary, his mana surging too suddenly, too forcefully.

"Ethan," she called, her voice clear, unwavering. "You're overcompensating again."

From inside, Ethan grunted. "I'm trying to stabilize it."

"Then stop forcing it."

Her tone never rose, but the weight of her words pressed in just the same.

"You treat mana like a river to dam," she said. "But it's not. It's a current-one you have to shape, not contain. Feel it. Guide it. Stop trying to win against your own power."

In the other chamber, Astron had begun weaving his mana in quiet rotations-precise, efficient. But too passive.

"Astron." Eleanor said smoothly, her eyes narrowing, "you're letting the room dictate the rhythm. That may work against pressure, but not here."

Astron glanced up, his expression composed.

"You're trying to become invisible to your own force," she continued. "And in doing so, you're muting the one thing that should be responding-your will."

The feedback pulse in Astron's chamber shimmered faintly-his mana tried to adjust without drawing attention, but the room amplified the hesitation. The result was a sharp distortion across his flow.

"You're not adapting," Eleanor said. "You're avoiding. Be deliberate. You have control."

Use it."

Her voice wasn't cruel. It wasn't condescending. It was cutting-surgical.

This was the hallmark of the Invoker.

Hunters revered her not just for the sheer power of her mana, but for her ability to read it. Shape it. Mold it as though it were language itself. Where others struggled to command their force, Eleanor conversed with hers.

Now, she was demanding the same from them.

The chambers pulsed again-one wild and erratic, the other smooth but soft. Still imperfect. Still too tied to old habits.

Eleanor folded her arms behind her back, her expression cool, but not unkind.

"Again," she said.

And the rooms reacted.

Inside, mana warped. The pulse cycles shifted, the amplification doubled. Every weakness now became pain. Every mistake now became clarity.

And Eleanor watched.

Not with curiosity.

But with expectation.

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The chambers thrummed softly, like hearts beating in tandem with their occupants.

Inside, Ethan's body glistened with sweat, his breaths sharp and rhythmic, his mana now less a flood and more a storm reined in-a force with a direction. Not perfect. Not smooth. But guided.

Astron, on the other hand, stood at the eye of his own controlled tempest, the lines of his mana flowing outward in silent currents, still too subtle, too quiet. But now, they responded to him with more clarity-with intent. He wasn't just adapting anymore.

He was steering.

Outside, Eleanor watched.

She hadn't moved from her spot near the console, but her fingers had danced across a slim mana tablet, drawing observations with precise keystrokes as she tracked their rhythms, measured their stress points, catalogued every slip, surge, and delay.

She didn't need monitors. Her senses were sharper than anything a camera could provide. Ethan Hartley - Shows improvement under resistance. Still too reactive. Heavy reliance on muscular reinforcement. Emotional response spikes mana efficiency for brief periods. Dangerous long-term. Needs rhythm discipline.

Astron Natusalune - Control is refined but lacks force application. Overprioritizes discretion. Hesitates at breaking points. Avoids confrontation with instability. Likely due to overexposure to adaptive training environments. Push assertiveness. Introduce volatility under feedback stress.

Her notes were not judgment. They were architecture-foundations for what came next.

But even for her, there were limits to what this environment could demand in one sitting.

She tapped a command into the console.

The chambers dimmed, their mana signatures flickering, then gradually stabilizing to a neutral state. The feedback pulses dispersed, releasing the tension in the air like a held breath finally exhaled.

Eleanor's voice carried into the chambers, cool and final.

"That's enough for today"

Chapter 945 Overachievers

"That's enough for today."

Ethan stumbled forward as the pressure relented, his arms slackening slightly, muscles aching from holding form too long. He wiped sweat from his brow with the back of his wrist and gave a tired exhale.

Astron emerged a moment later, more composed, but even his normally calm breathing held a slight hitch. His footsteps were slower, deliberate, and for once, visibly strained.

Eleanor stepped forward, hands still behind her back as her eyes swept over both of them.

"This type of training," she said, her voice steady, "is not sustainable over long periods. If you overexpose your mana veins to amplified feedback without proper pacing, you'll destabilize your internal cycles."

Ethan nodded absently, still catching his breath. "Yeah, no argument here."

Astron gave a single nod as well, saying nothing—but Eleanor could see the fine tension still in his fingers. He had been pushing. Quietly. Carefully. Just enough.

Eleanor turned without another word and began walking toward the exit of the training chamber. Her steps were measured, composed, with the faintest click of her heels against the polished floor—a sound that somehow made Ethan flinch more than the pressure chamber ever had.

Without being told, the two followed.

The door hissed open as they exited into the facility's outer corridor—cooler air greeting them like a reprieve. The walls here weren't laced with pressure enchantments, nor were the floors glowing with resonant mana. It felt... normal. Or close to it.

Ethan leaned back against the wall, hands on his knees as he took a long, controlled breath. "This place is insane," he muttered.

Astron sat down with quiet composure, pulling in long, deliberate breaths through his nose, letting the strain settle and ease out of his body.

Eleanor didn't speak at first. She gave them their moment. Let them breathe. Let the silence fill the space between instruction and correction. Only when their shoulders had eased did she speak again, voice quiet but clear.

"I reviewed your dungeon logs."

Ethan looked up, slightly wary. "And?"

"You're not bad at integrating into a team," Eleanor said simply. "Not flawless—but better than most."

That caught both of their attention. She rarely gave compliments—let alone opened with one.

"But..."

The word landed like a spike through still water.

Eleanor's tone didn't change, but the atmosphere did. Slowly. Subtly. The air grew heavy—not like gravity, not like a spell—but like tension thickening with every syllable.

"It is not always monsters you fight."

Ethan's brow furrowed. Astron stilled, eyes narrowing.

And then, without warning—it hit.

Eleanor's mana surged outward, invisible and suffocating, curling into the corridor like smoke without form. The walls didn't shake. The ground didn't tremble. But they did.

Ethan's breath hitched, his knees instinctively locking. Astron stiffened where he sat, a flicker of tension running through his spine.

Their hearts beat faster.

The air felt wrong—not just heavy, but aware. As though her presence had filled every inch of the space and left no room for their own.

Eleanor's eyes shimmered faintly with pale-blue light as she spoke, her voice layered with mana, with command.

"Let's start now."

Ethan barely had time to curse under his breath before she gave the order.

"Come at me. Both of you."

Astron was already on his feet. Ethan straightened with a pained groan, his muscles protesting, his instincts flaring.

"But we just—"

Eleanor's pressure intensified, like an unseen tide pressing into their lungs.

"I said," she repeated, voice calm and terrifying in its restraint, "come at me."



The floor beneath them seemed to pulse with her presence.

And just like that—breather over.

Hell resumed.

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Ethan's eyes snapped to Eleanor, his breath still ragged but his instincts already sharpening beneath the surface. Her presence blanketed the hall like a storm cloud—silent, suffocating, inevitable.

He straightened, rolling his shoulders once to shake off the ache in his muscles, then tilted his head, narrowing his gaze at her.

"With weapons?" he asked, voice low.

"Yes," Eleanor replied, with a single nod.

The word hit like a spark to dry kindling.

"Then—" Ethan's hand lifted, and in a flash of blue lightning, his spear materialized into his palm, the familiar weight settling in his grasp like a long-lost companion. "—if that's what you want."

There was no hesitation in his voice—only fire. After all, this wasn't something he could afford to squander. Being able to go against Instructor Eleanor, even in a limited setting... it wasn't a privilege students were given lightly. He wasn't about to waste it.

Across from him, Astron stood in a single fluid motion, his expression composed but his movements swift and deliberate. His hand moved to the elegant curve of his bow, drawing it from thin air in a graceful sweep of mana. The string hummed softly as his fingers grazed it, a single arrow of dense silver-blue energy forming in place.

Ethan and Astron locked eyes.

Not with hostility.

But with clarity.

They knew exactly what this was.

Not just a trial.

But an opportunity.

The moment hung suspended between them like the drawn string of a bow—tight, taut, inevitable.

Ethan was the first to break it.

With a roar and a burst of lightning psions trailing his footsteps, he dashed forward, his spear arcing through the air like a bolt from the storm.

CRACK!

The spear collided—but not with steel.

A deep, reverberating thud sounded as Eleanor met the strike with her blade—one carved entirely from wood. Smooth, dark, polished, and unadorned. It didn't glow. It didn't pulse. But it didn't move, either.

The impact should've knocked her off balance—or at least made her yield a step.

But she didn't move.

Not even an inch.

Ethan's eyes widened at the contact. The moment his spear touched her sword, it felt like striking the trunk of an ancient, rooted tree—unyielding, immovable, alive.

Eleanor's stance was effortless. Her body didn't resist the force—it redirected it, subtly shifting her center of gravity so the impact dissolved through her form like water through stone.

"You fight like a storm," she said evenly, flicking her wooden blade just enough to unbalance his posture.

"But in front of a ground it breaks upon, a storm is nothing."

Before he could reset, she stepped in, her wooden sword twisting around his guard with disarming grace—not striking, not punishing, but testing.

Behind them, Astron moved.

He had waited for the perfect opening, letting Ethan draw Eleanor's attention—and now, with the barest pull of his string, the silver arrow loosed, whispering through the air like a breathless promise.

Eleanor turned.

The arrow should have landed—its speed was unnatural, and its trajectory flawless.

But her sword flicked sideways.

CRACK.

The wooden blade deflected the arrow mid-air, sending it spinning harmlessly into the wall, embedding with a deep, resonant thunk.

"Not bad," Eleanor said coolly, her gaze flicking to Astron. "You waited for the right moment. You let the distraction settle before striking. That shows control."

But before the compliment could even settle, her form blurred.

In the blink of an eye, she was gone from in front of Ethan—and directly in front of Astron.

Her wooden sword slashed down with a force that cut the air itself, swift and absolute.

Astron's eyes narrowed, but he didn't flinch. He moved instinctively.

The bow in his hand shimmered—and vanished, replaced in a flash of psionic light by twin daggers that snapped into his grip like they belonged there.

CLANK!

The first dagger met her sword at an angle, parrying it just enough to break the momentum of the strike. Sparks of friction danced off the polished wood as he deflected the force, his other hand already twisting in preparation for a counter.

Astron's leg swept upward in a clean, driving kick—aimed to launch her back and open space between them.

But Eleanor didn't yield.

She shifted.

Her body tilted just enough for the kick to graze past her waist—no impact, no leverage. At the same moment, she spun slightly on her heel, breaking the rhythm of his movement and throwing his weight off balance.

"This habit of yours," she said mid-motion, voice sharp as her blade, "to open distance against a stronger opponent—"

Her elbow came down, and her palm smashed directly into Astron's chest.

"—will be fatal."

BOOM.

The force sent Astron flying backwards like a ragdoll. His back slammed into the wall with a brutal crack, the breath forced from his lungs. A splatter of blood escaped his mouth, painting the floor beneath him.

Ethan's eyes widened. "Astron!"

He lunged, his spear gripped tightly, lightning dancing along its length.

But Eleanor had already turned.

She raised her left hand—and the air folded.

The corridor warped around Ethan's feet, and suddenly, his balance was gone. He stumbled mid-stride, his momentum twisting awkwardly as if the floor had buckled beneath him.

'Telekinesis?' Ethan's thoughts raced.

But before he could recover, she was already in front of him.

A clean, arcing slash with her wooden sword crashed across his side.

CRACK!

Ethan grunted in pain, his body skidding across the floor, lightning flickering in confused arcs as his grip faltered.

"Just because an enemy is a close combatant," Eleanor said coldly, her blade lowering to her side, "doesn't mean they won't have range skills."

She didn't look winded.

She didn't look strained.

Only controlled. Composed. Inevitable.

And in her presence—both storms and shadows broke alike.

## Chapter 946 Overachievers

Ethan groaned as he picked himself up from the floor, a line of sweat trickling down his temple. His ribs ached where the wooden blade had struck him, and his pride ached just a bit more.

He wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand, giving Eleanor a pointed, exasperated look.

"Miss Eleanor," he grumbled, voice tinged with disbelief. "You're using way too much strength. How are we even supposed to deal with you like this?"

And really, who could blame him?

The pressure she exerted, the speed, the reaction time, the sheer suffocating presence—everything felt several leagues beyond what any normal training instructor should be able to unleash on academy students.

It wasn't an exaggeration.

It was Eleanor.

Even before she'd stepped foot into the Arcadia Hunter Academy, Eleanor had already made history. The youngest ever to break into the Hunter Rankings. The top of her generation, the undisputed prodigy who shattered trial records and made veteran hunters rethink the very definition of potential.

Her name wasn't just a legacy—it was a standard.

So Ethan's protest didn't come off as whining.

It came off as reasonable.

Astron, still regaining his breath against the wall, didn't speak—but his narrowed eyes silently agreed.

Eleanor, however, only gave a small, amused sneer.

"Is that what you think?" she asked lightly.

She held up her arm—and there, strapped around her wrist, gleamed a thin, matte-black bracelet etched with subtle mana lines.

The center of the band displayed a small, glowing number.

8.

Ethan blinked. "What's that?"

Eleanor tapped the number with her finger.

"This," she said calmly, "is a limiter."

The number pulsed once, steady and clear.

"Right now, all of my parameters are capped at rank 8. Speed. Power. Mana output. Reflexes. Everything."

The words hung in the air like a slap.

Astron's eyes narrowed slightly. Ethan's jaw tightened.

Rank 8.

Just two ranks above where Ethan currently stood.

No, it was not even a complete 2 rank difference.

And yet the gap felt like a canyon. Even under suppression, Eleanor had moved like a phantom and struck like a force of nature.

"That... can't be right," Ethan muttered. "It felt like more than that."

"It should've," Eleanor replied, her tone sharp, unwavering. She took a step forward, her gaze steady and cool, cutting through the space between them like a blade.

"That," she said, "is the difference between a normal hunter—" her fingers curled again around the hilt of her wooden sword, "—and a high-ranking one."

She let the words sink in.

"My stats are capped at 8. But even if you pushed me down to 5, or 4... my understanding of mana, my control, my discipline would still make the difference. Not because I'm stronger. But because I know how to use what I have."

She turned the wooden sword in her hand, slowly, letting its weight balance across her palm—not for flash, but for clarity.

"That's what separates a top-ranker from the rest."

Her voice dropped, precise and instructive, but never coddling.

"Power is not potential. Rank is not mastery. You'll see the same thing in any field—whether it's healing, support, offense, reconnaissance. The top hunters don't win because they're stronger."



She tilted her head slightly, eyes narrowing.

"They win because they never forget where they are."

Her gaze swept over both of them now—first to Ethan, still catching his breath but burning with that relentless, reckless fire in his chest... then to Astron, calm on the outside, but cold, calculating beneath his silence.

"You two," she said, lifting her sword again.

"When you're facing a top-ranker, you must be open to anything that can happen in your surroundings. No assumptions. No patterns. No comfort zones."

She raised her sword slightly, and for just a heartbeat—everything stilled.

"Anything," she repeated. "Can happen."

There was no dramatic surge of mana. No wave of pressure.

Just the eerie quiet of someone who didn't need to boast to be overwhelming.

Then, she nodded once.

"Come at me again."

Her stance shifted, and just like that—the fight resumed.

Ethan gritted his teeth, lightning already crawling up the length of his spear as he charged with renewed force, weaving in more feints, more layers—watch everything, her voice echoed in his mind.

Astron adjusted his grip on his daggers, this time not waiting for an opening—but creating one, his mana weaving out like threads searching for tension.

And Eleanor...

Smiled faintly.

As if this—this—was exactly where she wanted them.

In the thick of it.

Growing.

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The training chamber was scarred.

Cracks spiderwebbed across the floor. The faint smell of scorched stone and singed air lingered from repeated collisions of lightning, force, and will. Mana shimmered faintly in the air—residual trails of the battle still dissipating.

And at the heart of it stood three figures.

Two bloodied.

One pristine.

Ethan's chest heaved with ragged breaths, blood trailing down from a split in his brow. His uniform was torn, his knuckles raw, his spear trembling slightly in his grip from the sheer strain of having summoned it so many times, so violently.

Astron was no better—his sleeve was half-shredded, blood staining one side of his ribs where a blow had cracked through his defense. His daggers dripped with sweat and condensed mana, his face pale but focused, the lines of exhaustion showing around his eyes.

And facing them, as calm as the day she walked in—

Eleanor.

Unmoved. Unshaken. Unforgiving.

But watching.

Her wooden sword rested lightly in her hand, her posture poised. Not mocking. Not even confident.

Just composed.

Ethan moved first—his spear crackling with lightning, his body surging forward in a blur of raw force.

Astron moved from the opposite angle, not trying to match Ethan's momentum, but complement it—his form weaving in a half-step delay, finding the rhythm in Ethan's thunder to slip between the strikes like a shadow.

And for a moment—

They clicked.

Eleanor's eyes narrowed slightly.

Yes. They were improving.

Astron had always been the tactical mind. He'd been forced to speak more in earlier sessions, calling instructions aloud, guiding Ethan like a second brain. But now—

Now Ethan was beginning to read him.

He was following the shifts in movement. Adjusting the timing on his thrusts and strikes to mirror the spacing Astron created. He no longer needed constant vocal cues.

Astron noticed it too.

He pivoted low and whispered just a single word—"Left."

Ethan didn't hesitate.

He didn't question.

He moved.

His spear struck in perfect sync with Astron's feint, the lightning lashing out to obscure their angles of approach. Astron, fluid as water, shifted his daggers mid-step, flicking one to intercept a countermove before Eleanor even made it.

CLANG!

Eleanor's sword moved like a whisper—but even she had to shift more than before.

'Not bad,' she thought.

Astron's transitions were becoming seamless. The way he adapted from a full defensive parry into an aggressive push showed growing instinct. No longer purely reactive. He was weaving intent into his flow now. Taking risks.

Ethan, meanwhile—

He was still wild.

Still fire and thunder.

But now that fire burned with direction.

Not just blind impact.

He was responding faster. Recovering quicker. Reading not just the opponent—but the field.

For a fleeting instant, Eleanor allowed herself a breath of silent approval.

They were still far—far—from touching her.

But they were no longer scrambling in her shadow.

They were walking into it willingly.

And trying to carve through it.

She met Ethan's spear with a clean deflection, the wooden blade clashing with the charged steel. In the same breath, she pivoted and parried Astron's low slash with a step to the side, slipping between them like the eye of a hurricane.

Her voice rang out, calm even amid the flurry.

"Again."

Neither of them hesitated.

Bloodied.

Breathless.

Still standing.

Still fighting.

And she could see it in their eyes—

They hadn't broken.

They were sharpening.

Chapter 947 Trails of the past

<Arcadia Hunter Academy - Southern Training Courtyard>

The sun hung high over the sprawling courtyard, casting long shadows beneath the watchful gaze of the academy's towering spires. The training grounds buzzed with the voices of cadets, the clash of wooden weapons, and the crackle of controlled magic. Among the chaos stood a woman in a sleek black coat, her posture relaxed but authoritative, eyes sharp as they swept over the gathered cadets.

Selene Kaelith was a name many cadets had begun to whisper in both awe and uncertainty. She had only arrived a few days prior, but her reputation was already solidifying. Calm, poised, and exacting, she carried herself with the confidence of someone who had seen far too much of the world-and walked away from it stronger. "Form ranks," she said calmly, but her voice cut cleanly through the noise. The cadets obeyed without question.

Most of the students standing before her were second-year sophomores-those with some experience, whose egos had been tempered by failure and whose instincts had begun to sharpen. But sprinkled among them were eager freshmen, their eyes wide with curiosity, uncertainty, and in some cases, blind admiration.

Selene walked along the line of cadets, hands folded behind her back. Her cold violet eyes-an unusual trait attributed to some distant bloodline-moved from face to face with analytical precision. Some students stood taller beneath her gaze. Others shrank slightly, as if her mere presence invoked pressure.

"Good," Selene Kaelith said, her voice even and cold. "Now that you've finally learned how to stand in straight lines, let's move on to something with actual value."

She raised her hand, and with a flick of her fingers, the world around her shimmered. A moment later, a phantom version of herself stepped away from her side-identical in every detail. The cadets instinctively straightened, eyes widening as the illusion moved with perfect fluidity, mirroring Selene's breath and subtle motions.

"I am not here to teach you brute force," she said. "You will find plenty of other mentors willing to scream at you about posture and fireball angles. I specialize in something different."

The illusion circled the group, weaving between cadets before dispersing into a cloud of petals.

"I teach misdirection. Manipulation. Control. The art of illusion is not about tricking the eye-" she tapped her temple with a single black-gloved finger, "-it's about controlling perception. Your enemy cannot counter what they cannot see, or worse... what they misunderstand."

Murmurs swept through the group. Some cadets looked excited. Others skeptical.

"Today, we begin with projection. You will form teams of two. One of you will be the caster. The other will be the target. The goal is simple-create an illusion convincing enough that your partner acts on it, instinctively. No verbal communication. No obvious cues. Just magic."

She paused to let the instruction settle, then narrowed her eyes as she surveyed the forming pairs. Most cadets hesitated, choosing friends or familiar faces. She expected that. Predictability always reigned at the start.

But two caught her attention immediately.

The first was a freshman-Lucas Middleton. He stood apart at first, tall, composed, his white hair almost silver beneath the sunlight. His blade, she noted, shimmered oddly at his side a crystalline weapon not typical of his bloodline.

'Middleton family. Known for their force mana augmentation and sword techniques, she mused, eyes narrowing slightly. 'Yet he wields an illusion blade? Curious...'

She watched as Lucas formed a pairing with another cadet, his movements efficient, precise. Too smooth for someone supposedly outside the illusion arts.

The second figure was Damien Arkwright. Dark-haired, sharp-eyed. Everything about him was refined and deliberate. She remembered the name-Arkwrights were known for their work in perceptual distortion and layered illusion systems. But Damien was young, too young to be considered a major threat.

Still... the way he moved, the way his eyes didn't linger too long on anything yet. missed nothing that caught her attention.

'So... a born illusionist... and a false one.'

She stepped toward the center, voice slicing through the air again. "Lucas Middleton. Damien Arkwright. You two-pair up."

Some cadets turned to glance at them, surprised at the callout. Selene's tone left no room for refusal.

Lucas and Damien exchanged brief glances before nodding, stepping into position across from each other.

"Middleton, you'll cast first," Selene said, folding her arms. "Impress me."

Lucas drew a breath, calm and centered. His hand hovered near his illusion blade. For

a moment, Selene thought she saw a flicker of raw mana ripple unnaturally along its edge-but it vanished quickly.

Then, without so much as a chant, a mirror image of Damien formed behind him, smirking, poised to strike.

Damien turned in an instant, hands shifting into a defensive posture.

Selene's eyes gleamed, but she said nothing. Good reaction.



"Reset. Arkwright's turn."

Damien didn't even flinch. He raised a hand slowly, eyes fixed on Lucas-and then nothing happened.

At least, that's what it looked like.

But Selene's trained senses caught the subtle shift in light, the faint hum around

Lucas's right foot.

Lucas lunged forward-but his strike veered off, as if pulled slightly off center by a miscalculation.

A beat later, the illusion shimmered-the ground beneath Lucas's foot had been marginally lifted, imperceptibly so, distorting his center of balance.

Selene raised her brows slightly. 'Not just visual misdirection. Spatial anchoring through light distortion. This boy is well-trained.

She stepped closer to them, her expression unreadable.

"You're both... interesting," she said. "Middleton, you wield your illusions like a sword. Sharp, but not yet refined. And Arkwright..." she paused, her eyes locking with his,

"you don't rely on spectacle, good."

Lucas took the compliment with a small smile-polite, calm, but somehow... too calm. Selene's eyes lingered on that smile for a second longer than she intended.

And then-

thump.

Her heart didn't skip a beat, but something else inside her did. Deep within her, nestled beneath layers of skin and bone, beneath muscle and illusion-the Demonic

Core pulsed.

Just once. But strong enough that she noticed.

Her breath caught.

'This?'

She schooled her expression immediately, but inside, she was already unraveling the sensation. It wasn't a warning. Not quite. But her Core had reacted-a subconscious, instinctual tremor, the kind that only surfaced when near remnants of demonkind or ancient energies... or those who had been touched by them.

She turned her gaze back to Lucas Middleton. Still standing there, that calm smile resting on his lips, his posture unthreatening. Unassuming.

But her instincts were flaring now.

"Why?"

It couldn't have been a coincidence. He was the one with the illusion blade. The one

from the duels whose style had struck her as odd. A Middleton wielding illusion magic made no sense. Their family legacy was rooted in elemental dominance-earth and lightning, traditionally. Brute force over finesse. They didn't produce illusionists. And yet here he was. Using illusions with instinctive grace. And that smile...

It wasn't taunting. It wasn't cocky.

It was knowing.

'What are you hiding, Lucas?'

Selene's arms folded loosely behind her back, her voice as smooth and controlled as

ever. "That's enough. Swap partners."

The cadets moved to follow her order, and Lucas gave a shallow nod before turning away. But Selene didn't move. Her eyes lingered on his back as he stepped into his new

pairing. She could still feel it-faint, but undeniably present.

The Core inside her was still humming. Quiet. Subtle. But alive. Awake.

'Don't tell me...'

Her thoughts curled back to the moment in the arena. That single flash of Belthazor's

energy. That fleeting trace of corrupted mana that had vanished before she could

pinpoint it.

She had assumed it had belonged to an experienced hunter. A hidden force working behind the scenes. Not a freshman cadet. Not this boy.

'No... it couldn't be him. Could it?'

But she couldn't dismiss it, either. Her Core didn't lie. And now it was pointing her in a

new direction. A strange one.

Were you really there when Belthazor fell, Lucas Middleton... then who the hell are

you, really?'

The thought sent a shiver of anticipation down her spine.

And far beneath the still surface of her calm expression... Zafira smiled.

#### Chapter 948 Trails of the past

A pale crescent moon hung over Arcadia like a silent observer, veiled by drifting clouds that moved slowly across the night sky. The towering spires of the world's most renowned academy loomed in the distance-still, silent, and brimming with secrets. Inside a secluded chamber of a rented manor, the soft rustling of parchment filled the dimly lit room. A single candle burned low on a desk scattered with files, photographs, and mana-inscribed scrolls. Leonard sat with his back straight, robes slightly disheveled, his fingers curled around the silver artifact that hung from his neck-the crescent moon softly pulsing, resonating, whispering that the one he sought was near. But near was not enough.

He narrowed his golden eyes on the documents laid before him. Portraits of promising students stared back-young faces filled with ambition, arrogance, or quiet determination.

He exhaled slowly.

"Too many variables. Too many shadows," he murmured.

The Hartley boy was the first he'd investigated. Ethan Hartley. Exceptional skill, natural charisma, a righteous streak that could light a battlefield aflame. But the bloodline was ordinary-traceable, untangled. His essence lacked the lunar resonance. Pure, yes, but not of the moon.

Next came the Middletons. A powerful family with influence spanning multiple provinces, but despite their aura of dignity, there was nothing celestial about them. Leonard had spoken with professors, inspected lineage registries, even traced ancestral graves. Every path ended in mundane soil.

The Arkwrights had intrigued him briefly-Noble lineage, old magic in their veins. There was something ancient in their blood, yes, but not the right kind. Their mana was grounded, earthen. Heavy with tradition, but not touched by the moon.

And then there were the Philips. Scattered over several fields of study. Yet even the most promising among them lacked the spiritual echo he had come to recognize in the Kin.

He leaned back in his chair, hand passing over the artifact. Even now, it pulsed faintly - telling him the truth he couldn't ignore.

The Kin of the Moon was here.

Somewhere inside the walls of that hallowed institution. Watching. Breathing. Hiding.

And the Academy itself... was protecting them.

Or they were unaware.

The latter was the more likely.

If the Academy had known the identity of the Kin of the Moon, Leonard was certain he would have felt resistance-subtle or otherwise. Layers of bureaucracy. Eyes turning away. But no. What he had encountered was ignorance. A blind institution shrouded in its own pride and antiquated principles, guarding its secrets not out of design, but out of habit.

They weren't hiding the Kin.

They simply didn't know.

Which meant that whoever it was, they hadn't awakened. Not fully.

Not yet.

Leonard stood from his seat, letting his eyes wander over the faces pinned to the wall - portraits of excellence, of brilliance, of power. Each name once a lead, now discarded, Red-thread lines had connected theories and assumptions like a spider's web, but the center remained empty.

No more detours.

No more wasted steps.

His fingers brushed the crescent moon at his chest. The artifact still pulsed with faint resonance-but it had grown quieter recently, as if the Kin themselves were slipping deeper into shadow.

"I can't do this from the outside," Leonard muttered. "I'm circling a sealed garden, searching for a single flower whose scent fades by the day!"

He moved toward the far end of the room, where a small mana mirror rested on a stand framed by runes. With a flick of his fingers, he activated it, feeding it a gentle stream of his mana. Ripples shimmered across the surface, and soon, a distant figure began to coalesce-robed in white, face partially obscured by divine radiance, seated on a high dais beneath a sun-etched mural.

The voice that answered him was calm, deep, and unmistakably firm.

"Leonard."

He bowed low, respectful but composed. "Your Holiness. I bring a report regarding the Kin of the Moon."

The light from the mirror flared faintly, signaling attention.

"Speak."

Leonard straightened. "As suspected, they are here-within Arcadia's Academy. The artifact has resonated repeatedly within its grounds, and no leads beyond the academy's walls have borne fruit."

A pause.

"You are certain?"

Leonard nodded. "Beyond doubt. I have investigated dozens of students-Hartley, Middletons, Arkwrights, Philips, and many more. I have traced their lineages, their families, their mana signatures. All were either too clean... or too ordinary."

He stepped closer to the mirror, his voice calm but edged with frustration.

"The Academy has taken measures to obscure the full list of attendees. Whether by intention or policy, I cannot access the necessary information without risking a breach that could alert them. My reach is limited.

The figure in the mirror remained silent, waiting.

Leonard bowed his head once more.

"That is why I must go further."

He raised his eyes, golden and resolute.

"I request permission to enter the Academy. Officially."

The mirror flickered.

"For what purpose?"

"To continue the investigation from within. Disguised if necessary. Enrolled, embedded, or appointed-whichever method offers the least resistance." Leonard's voice carried a tempered urgency. "I cannot strike the moon while I chase shadows. I must walk among them. Observe them up close. Feel their mana, their lies, their fear." The radiance in the mirror dimmed momentarily, contemplative.

Then, a quiet breath, like the rustling of pages in a holy text.

"You seek the wolf by becoming the shepherd."

Leonard allowed himself a slight nod.

"If the Kin is meant to bring destruction, then their awakening cannot be left to fate. The prophecy speaks of the moon entangled with the stars-perhaps even more than one. I need to find the source before convergence begins."

Silence stretched between them like a drawn string.

And then-the figure raised a hand.

The figure raised a hand, bathed in the gentle halo of divine light.

"Something will be arranged. A cause, a purpose. The Academy is a fortress of pride-they will not open their gates without reason. Until then..." the voice drifted, solemn, "continue your observation. Seek out anomalies. Patterns. Resonance. Anything that may point to the Kin before the door opens."

Leonard's brows furrowed slightly.

"How long, Your Holiness?"

A pause followed, heavy as prophecy.

"At most a month," the voice replied. "No longer. But you must understand, Leonard-

we are not simply inserting a knife into the unknown."

Leonard lowered his head once more. "Understood."



"Good. Hold your patience. The stars do not rush to their positions."

And then the mirror dimmed-first to gold, then to silver, and finally to black. The reflection of light receded into silence.

Leonard stood still, listening to the emptiness.

For a moment, all he could hear was the subtle crackle of the candle flame, the quiet pulse of the artifact on his chest. Then, slowly, he turned back to the desk-the scattered files, red-threaded lines, the names crossed out, the maps marked with mana resonance.

He sifted through them again, one by one.

Faces. Names. Hopes. Potential.

And failure. "You can run from your nature... but not forever," he murmured, fingers brushing a photograph without truly seeing it. "You will not be able to escape for long. Not with me here."

There was no hatred in his voice-only certainty. A quiet, inescapable inevitability. The kind that came not from arrogance, but from resolve forged by years of belief.

Then, the faintest glimmer crossed his eyes, and his expression shifted.

A small smile curled at the corner of his lips-half fond, half amused. "Let's see how Sylvie is doing."

#### Chapter 949 Another practice

The academy café was quieter than usual, the low hum of mana lamps casting a warm amber glow across the room as afternoon light filtered through the tall windows. The same large table near the back corner had become their unofficial meeting spot- tucked away, with just enough space to spread out notes, holo-screens, and half-finished drinks.

This time, the group had arrived with more efficiency, sliding into their seats without hesitation, their bags dropping with familiar weight onto the wooden floor.

"Alright," Jasmine said, tapping her fingers against the table rhythmically, "Let's not waste time. We already know the basics this time around, so we can start placing people right away!"

Layla nodded, arms crossed as she leaned back in her seat. "Five-person formation, Tri-Layer Pressure. That means front line, mid-pressure, and support."

"Right," Irina said, eyes already scanning a digital map projected from her tablet. "Three layers. And it's about pressure points, not just raw defense or offense."

Astron, already seated with his usual composed air, didn't speak. He simply watched, arms resting on the table, his sharp purple eyes observing as they moved into discussion. He didn't interrupt. Not yet. This was a test in itself-and one they needed to navigate.

Sylvie adjusted her sleeve and leaned in, voice calm. "So who takes the front line?"

Layla raised a hand without hesitation. "That's me. No question."

"Agreed," Jasmine said. "Layla's our shield. She anchors the formation."

Sylvie nodded. "Then Irina and Jasmine should be second line. You two apply pressure while rotating between support and direct offense."

Irina raised an eyebrow. "You're putting me in the mid-line? Not rear?"

"You're too aggressive to sit in the back," Jasmine replied, smirking. "Let Sylvie handle that. She can multitask between enchantments and support control better than anyone."

Irina huffed softly. "Fair."

"What about the last spot?" Layla asked, looking around. "That leaves Astron."

All eyes shifted to him.

He didn't respond immediately-just looked up, meeting their stares with a faint glint in his gaze.

"You tell me," he said simply.

They blinked, momentarily caught off guard.

Jasmine tilted her head, thoughtful. "Mid-line. Between me and Irina. You cover the flanks, adapt to enemy positioning. You're fast enough to rotate front to back if needed."

"Agreed," Sylvie said. "You're flexible and fast. You'll reinforce wherever the cracks start to form."

Astron gave a small nod. "That's correct."

He didn't praise them-but the absence of critique was enough. They'd done well. Irina leaned back in her chair, a slow smile creeping across her lips as she looked around the table. The group was focused, composed, and-more importantly- cohesive.

"This is going to be a breeze," she muttered, mostly to herself, but loud enough for the others to hear.

Layla snorted. "Don't jinx it."

Jasmine grinned. "Nah, let her. I kinda like confident Irina. She makes things more fun." Sylvie just offered a soft smile, but her gaze flicked toward Astron for a second- quietly confirming that he seemed content with the decisions they'd made. He gave no indication of disagreement. Just a slight shift in his posture as he began shutting off his tablet.

Irina stood, brushing a hand through her hair. "Well then, Shall we?"

They all rose one by one, drinks forgotten as they grabbed their bags. Outside, the sky had begun to dim just slightly-long shadows cast by the academy buildings stretching across the stone paths. The walk to the simulation gate was familiar now. Almost comfortable.

When they reached the entrance to the Mana-Linked Dungeon Arena, the energy was already different.

The crowd of cadets waiting their turn was buzzing with tension-some teams huddled in last-minute strategy whispers, others nervously glancing at the rotating roster display projected in the center of the plaza. Mana screens hovered above the area, showing shifting glimpses of the ever-changing dungeon layout beyond the gate. Layla whistled softly. "Looks like it's already intense in there."

"They've definitely increased the difficulty," Jasmine muttered. "That last team barely lasted ten minutes."

Sylvie's hands instinctively brushed against the clasps of her gloves, adjusting them in slow, practiced movements. Her mana was calm. So was her breathing.

Astron said nothing, but his gaze was fixed on the simulation gate, already analyzing. Already visualizing. Waiting.

Irina cracked her knuckles with a grin. "Let's make this clean."

A sharp tone echoed from the system console, and the instructor near the entrance raised a hand.

"Team Fourteen-report in."

That was them.

Without hesitation, the five of them stepped forward. No nerves. No wasted

movement.

The gate hissed as it activated, glowing blue mana spiraling around its archway. As they stepped through into the light, the hum of the crowd faded behind them-and the chaos of the dungeon began.

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The moment they stepped into the dungeon, the shift was immediate.

Light fractured around them-warped geometry, dense mana pressure, shifting terrain. The simulation had begun.

A wide, angular corridor greeted them first. Its walls pulsed faintly with red sigils, and the floor beneath their boots gave a subtle tremble, as if echoing something moving far below. Stone underfoot was slick in places, half-wet from condensation. Already, it was clear: this wasn't a clean run.

"Tri-Layer Pressure formation," Astron said without raising his voice. His tone was even, but final.

"Right." Layla stepped forward without hesitation, shield already in hand, mana reinforcing her stance. The faint sheen of energy traced along her bracers as she crouched into a semi-defensive stance-low enough to anchor, light enough to move. Irina and Jasmine fell into step behind her, slightly spread-just far enough apart to manage their respective lanes.

"I'll take left." Jasmine muttered, her blade humming softly as it ignited with mana. "Covering tight angles."

"I've got center burn," Irina added, palms flickering with fire. Her hair, caught in a low updraft of ambient mana, seemed to shimmer like a slow-burning fuse.

Sylvie stayed at the rear. She didn't speak-just raised her hand slightly as yellow mana laced along her fingers. Small glyphs flickered across her gloves, cycling through light-based patterns. Her job wasn't to deal damage-it was to amplify, to reinforce, and, if needed, to collapse collapsing lines.

Astron took position to the right of Irina, angled just behind Layla. From here, he had visual on both front and rear. A balancing point.

The system pulsed.

"Wave One: Initiated."

The dungeon rumbled-then screamed.

From the corridor ahead came a flood of noise: clattering claws, guttural howls, and

the heavy thud of weight against stone. Pale shapes lunged from the shadows, bodies flickering between physical and spectral. Wraith-hounds. Fast, slippery, and smart. Their limbs twisted at unnatural angles, and their eyes glowed with fragmented blue

light.

Layla stepped forward with a grunt, shield raised as the first hound leapt.

Clang!

The impact drove her back half a step, but her heels dug in.

"First pressure point-engaged!" she called.

Irina didn't wait. A coil of fire lanced forward, threading through the narrow gap between Layla's shoulder and shield. The flame struck the side of the wraith-hound,

causing it to recoil with a shriek.

"Left!" Jasmine shouted.

Astron was already moving. A second hound had slithered low along the left flank, angling around the central line. Jasmine moved to intercept, blade cutting a wide crescent-but the creature was fast, bending away from her strike at the last second. Before it could land, Astron was there. His dagger flashed once-twice.

Thunk.

The creature's body collapsed, dissolving into static ash, "Backline tremor," Sylvie announced calmly. Her fingers flicked once, and a glyph pulsed through the air-golden, geometric. A flash of light shot forward, colliding with an invisible shape behind Layla. A hound had attempted a shadow-phase, but was

forced back with a shriek.

"You've got that read now, huh?" Irina muttered, lips twitching.

"I've been practicing"

Indeed, she was not staying idle.

Chapter 950 Another practice

A new wave emerged-more this time. Twelve total, coming in from the forward corridor and two side crevices that hadn't been there seconds ago.

"Spread is increasing," Astron observed. "They're adapting. Stay tight."

Layla stepped forward again, knees bracing, shield held high. "Ready!"

Jasmine grunted, "More than ready," and surged slightly forward-but just to the edge of her zone.

Irina lifted both hands, and heat flooded the tunnel. Her fire didn't blast forward yet- but hovered in orbit, waiting. "This next burst is mine," she said. "You'll feel the air drop right after."

"Noted," Astron replied, his stance lowering.

Sylvie's mana shimmered again, this time latching onto Irina's flames-not with raw power, but control. The spiraling fire tightened, became denser, as if molded through glass.

"Second pressure point locked," Sylvie announced.

Then the wave hit.

The hounds came faster, now overlapping each other, some leaping over fallen bodies, others diving low. Irina moved first, sending the compressed heat wave forward. The air bent visibly. Several creatures incinerated instantly-but two phased right through the flames.

"Spectral-grade. Non-impactable by elemental burn," Astron said. "Rear incoming"

"I see it," Sylvie replied, a sharp flick of her hand sending three focused bursts backward. They didn't explode-but pierced. The rear corridor flickered as a shrieking shape twisted mid-air and collapsed, its form warping mid-dissolution.

Layla was beginning to slow-her stance growing heavier as repeated clashes shook her core.

"Frontline weakening," she gasped. "I need someone to intercept upper jumps!" "On it," Jasmine barked.

She surged forward within formation bounds, slashing upward as a hound launched from a wall toward Layla's head. The slash didn't just cut-it stunned. Layla caught the rest of the blow with her shoulder, then drove the beast back with her shield.

"Adjusting position!" Astron called, stepping past Irina just slightly-half-body lead. "Jasmine, fall to third line after this wave. Irina, you hold second."

"Excuse me?" Irina snapped, but her flames still danced to his command.



"Mid-line pressure's shifting. They're targeting your zone more. You'll bait better with a forward lean."

Irina's eyes narrowed-but her hands rose nonetheless.

The second wave collapsed moments later under their pressure, the last hound impaled mid-leap by a golden bolt from Sylvie.

Silence followed.

Their breathing steadied, Layla's shield dropped slightly, her arms trembling from impact absorption.

Astron glanced around. "Good spacing. Adjustments were clean."

Sylvie spoke softly. "Third wave will be specialized. Maybe a Phase Beast."

"Or a redirector," Jasmine added, panting.

Irina cracked her neck. "Let it come. I've got something saved."

Astron gave a small nod, his purple eyes gleaming faintly beneath the pulsing dungeon light.

"Hold position. Reinforce zones. Next round will test our gaps."

And behind them, the dungeon ceiling began to twist, glow, and split.

The next wave was coming.

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The third wave fell harder, faster, but it barely made a difference.

Monsters burst through from shifting side corridors and jagged ceiling vents-spectral beasts fused with crystalline plating, their limbs flickering with red-glowing sigils. But the team didn't falter.

Each role locked in.

Layla's shield held the center like a living wall, intercepting claw swipes and slamming back force with reinforced mana, Jasmine rotated through flanks with precise footwork, her blade carving clean lines through exposed gaps. Irina's fire painted the second line in waves of pressure, incinerating the bulk of forward threats before they could break formation.

Astron-quiet and ever-moving-patched cracks with surgical cuts and repositioned fluidly, acting as a pressure valve whenever a line wavered.

But more than anything, the formation held because of Sylvie.

Her position at the rear should've been passive-meant for barrier support and healing calls. But she was doing more.

Far more.

Glyphs laced the air behind the group, delicate and fluid, adjusting in real-time to enemy movement. Buffs rippled across their armor-speed, tension reduction, mana syncing. But it wasn't just enchantments.

Sylvie's hand flicked, and a whip of yellow light slashed a Phase Beast that tried to curve around Jasmine's blind spot. Her footwork was crisp, her aim unnervingly

precise.

She was fighting.

Like a mage.

And Irina noticed.

After the wave collapsed-crystalline corpses scattered across stone and burning slowly in the air's residual heat-Irina turned.

Her amber eyes narrowed as they caught Sylvie's outline through the residual smoke. The younger girl stood calm, composed, mana still glowing faintly at her fingertips.

"You've really improved," Irina said, her voice carrying just loud enough to cross the chamber.

Sylvie blinked, her breath still slow from the fight. "Hm?"

Irina took a step closer, strands of fire curling lazily around her shoulder. "Since when did you learn to fight like that?"

Sylvie hesitated only a second. "I've been training," she said simply. "A lot."

Irina's eyes flicked to where one of Sylvie's light spikes was still embedded in the far wall-crackling quietly. "You're a healer working on combat."

Sylvie tilted her head. "Is that weird?"

"Yeah," Irina said without hesitation, but her smirk was playful. "You're quite an oddball."

Sylvie opened her mouth as if to respond, but Irina cut in before she could.

"But I already knew that."

The fire mage stepped closer, her stance casual now, gaze softening just slightly.

"That's why I sought you, after all."

Sylvie's breath caught.

For a brief moment, the chamber fell quiet again-not from a lack of threats, but from the strange stillness that came when something truthful settled into the air.

Irina wasn't smiling out of superiority or teasing this time.

It was acknowledgment.

Genuine, rare, and clear as flame.

Sylvie blinked once, then glanced away, lips twitching faintly. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet," Irina said, already turning as mana flickered on the walls again, signaling the next wave. "You've still got more surprises to show me, right?"

Sylvie's gaze lingered on Irina for just a second longer-long enough to hold the weight of what had just been said-before her eyes shifted.

Upward.

To the far wall.

Astron stood partially silhouetted against the jagged stone, one foot braced on a ledge,

the other anchored on a rune-marked outcrop. His coat fluttered slightly from the residual wind of the last spell. He wasn't watching them. His eyes were trained ahead-sharp, unblinking, already reading the next layout.

He didn't need to speak. His presence alone said it all.

But Sylvie's eyes softened for a fleeting moment as she looked up at him. The way his

posture never changed, how his attention never slipped... she'd grown used to that stillness. It didn't intimidate her anymore.

Sylvie exhaled, then whispered to herself-so quietly even Irina barely caught it.

"Yes, I have."

Irina didn't comment.

She didn't glance back at Sylvie, though her peripheral vision had caught the whole

thing. The way Sylvie's voice dipped. The way her eyes stayed locked on Astron longer than necessary.

But Irina chose silence.

Instead, she turned forward, flames curling quietly along her fingertips again.

From above, Astron's voice finally cut through the dim, echoing chamber.

"Next wave's position is shifting-looks like a split formation. Two entry points.

Standard choke front, flanking rear."

A low rumble followed-grinding stone, shifting architecture. The dungeon wasn't just reacting; it was adjusting.

Jasmine swore softly. "They're rotating spawn zones now?"

Layla raised her shield again, her stance low and steady. "Guess they think we're too comfortable."

"Let them try," Irina said, stepping up beside her. "We'll just make them regret it."

Astron dropped silently from the wall, landing without a sound as he slid back into his mid-line position.

"Maintain layering," he said calmly. "Pressure points hold. React only on pivot signals."

Everyone nodded-no extra words this time.

They knew what to do.

The dungeon walls pulsed once, twice-then split open with a mechanical shriek.

And the hunt resumed.