

## H. Academy 951

### Chapter 951 Show

The rest of the dungeon fell in sequence-clean, sharp, and precise.

The split-wave pattern tried to throw them off: packs of leech-hounds and blade-backed beasts rushing from two fronts, some even climbing walls to approach from above. But the formation absorbed everything. No cracks. No hesitation.

Sylvie's support spells wove through the group like threads of gold, her enchantments tightening armor responses and weaving shield layers with perfect timing. Her combat spells-limited, but precise-picked off weakened enemies without disrupting her rhythm.

Layla didn't buckle once. Her stance had changed since earlier simulations-less reactive, more assertive. When she blocked, she countered. When she was hit, she recovered instantly. Her breathing stayed even, even as the last brute slammed into her shield before collapsing.

Jasmine, too, had grown sharper. Her movements were cleaner, her aggression more calculated. She stayed in zone, managing her range without drifting too deep. Her strikes didn't just hit-they created space. A rhythm that let. Irina breathe fire.

And Irina... was Irina.

No matter how seamless the others became, she remained the storm in the middle. Her flames surged and receded in elegant waves, demolishing every group that dared press forward. She didn't dominate the space selfishly-she orchestrated it, knowing when to overwhelm and when to hold back. Every flame had purpose. Every burst carved a path.

Astron?

He drifted along the edge of the formation, a quiet shadow between layers.

There wasn't much for him to do-not because he wasn't needed, but because the others had finally stopped relying on his constant correction. He patched gaps, yes. A well-placed throw here, a perfect counter-blade there. But the pressure on him had lightened.

And that was fine.

Because the point wasn't to shine-it was to win as a unit.

When the final boss-a plated chimera wrapped in mana chains-fell with a crashing thud, the room went still. Sylvie's last glyph slowly faded. Irina exhaled a short breath. Layla lowered her shield with a small gasp. Jasmine grinned and wiped sweat from her brow.

Astron just straightened and flicked blood off his blade.

"Clear," he said simply.

The dungeon responded instantly-runes dimming, mana density stabilizing, the exit archway pulsing open with a soft, steady hum. The simulation had ended.

And as they stepped through the light one by one, the rush of chilled air from the corridor hit them like a breath of reality.

Outside, the plaza was quiet.

Still.

Cadets stood near the roster boards, murmuring softly, adjusting armor, taking slow gulps of water as they waited for their turn.

The instructors hadn't called the next team yet.

Sylvie blinked first, glancing around. "...Wait. Are we the first?"

Irina stepped out behind her, eyes scanning the square. "Huh. Looks like it."

Jasmine's grin widened as she stretched her arms overhead. "Damn. That did feel like a breeze.

Layla leaned on her shield with a tired but proud smile. "It wasn't easy, but... it never felt like we were about to break."

"No, it didn't," Irina said, glancing sidelong at Sylvie, her voice casual but threaded with acknowledgment. "Everyone kept it together."

Astron came through last, his posture as composed as always, but his eyes lingered on each teammate as they stood in the quiet outside.

A sudden hush fell over the plaza.

The murmuring cadets nearest to the roster board turned first-then others followed, glancing up from their cooldown stretches and idle chatter as Team Fourteen emerged fully from the glowing gate.

A few students stiffened. Others blinked, as if unsure they were seeing correctly.

They weren't battered. They weren't limping. They didn't look like they'd just walked out of a dungeon that had already claimed two teams this morning.

Irina gave them all a once-over and smirked to herself. Let them look.

Sylvie instinctively shrank back half a step from the attention, but Irina's casual presence at her side anchored her.

"Team Fourteen," came a crisp voice from the right.

An instructor approached, tablet in hand, dressed in the dark, insignia-lined uniform of the academy's Combat Evaluation division. His eyes flicked across the five of them, scanning for signs of stress, injury-anything out of order.

He found none.

"Simulation record confirms full dungeon clear," he announced, tapping once. "No penalties. No formation breaks. Completion time: eleven minutes, forty-two seconds."

Layla blinked. "That's... fast, right?"

"That's the fastest," the instructor replied without missing a beat. "By a wide margin." There was a brief silence, then Jasmine gave a low whistle. "Alright, alright."

"Not bad," Irina muttered, though her grin said very good.

The instructor stepped aside, allowing them to move freely as the next team's name lit up on the display board behind him. A group of nervous-looking cadets began shuffling toward the gate.

Irina rolled her shoulders with a sigh. "Okay. That's done."

"But the report isn't," Astron said calmly, arms folded behind his back.

Jasmine groaned. "You had to remind me."

"I was being helpful."

"You're being you"

Layla chuckled under her breath. "Still, we should plan. It's not just this report-we've got the mana synchronization paper due tomorrow, artifact calibration results by next week, and the big Theory Midterm is coming up..."

"Too many things," Sylvie murmured, adjusting the strap on her bag.

Irina was already pulling up her holo-schedule with a swipe of her hand. "Then we optimize. When's everyone free?"

"Tonight's bad for me," Layla said. "I've got training with my mentor. He's making me review footwork drills again."

"Tomorrow evening?" Jasmine offered. "That way we can write the report together after classes."

"I can do that," Sylvie said softly.

"Same," Irina nodded.

Astron gave a single nod. "Then I'll reserve one of the side conference rooms in the East Wing, Quiet. And no foot traffic."

Jasmine gave him a thumbs-up. "See? That's the kind of helpful I like."

"You like all kinds of help," Astron replied dryly.

Irina tucked her tablet away, then tilted her head toward the academy building. "Alright, then it's set. We meet tomorrow, East Wing, after the last lecture block." As they began walking toward the shaded paths that led back to the dormitory towers, the glowing arch of the dungeon gate slowly faded behind them-replaced by the hum of another team's beginning.

As the team drifted into casual conversation and the afterglow of their successful run, the weight of the dungeon left behind like sweat on skin, the group naturally began to split apart each cadet easing into their own rhythm.

Layla moved first, waving a quick goodbye as she made for the upper gardens, where her mentor waited with a scowl and footwork drills. Jasmine slung her bag over her shoulder and stretched again, her voice already chiming with plans for a snack raid. Sylvie lingered at Irina's side, her fingers fidgeting at the hem of her sleeve. Irina was about to nudge her-playfully, of course-when she noticed the direction of

Sylvie's gaze.

It wasn't toward the gardens.

Or the dorms.

It was fixed, quietly, on Astron.

He had already begun walking away, his steps unhurried, measured-but with purpose.

Not wandering. Not meandering. Moving with intent.

Sylvie's gaze stayed on him, subtle but steady.

Irina raised eyebrow, a smirk tugging at the corner of her lips. "If you want to speak to him, then don't hold it in."

Sylvie blinked and turned slightly. "Huh?"

Irina didn't press further. She just looked toward Astron's retreating form-and then raised her voice enough for it to carry.

"Where are you going?"

Astron didn't break stride. "I'm going to train."

Irina quickened her pace to fall in step beside him. "Where?"

"In my mentor's building"

Irina blinked. "Eleanor's building? She has a building?"

Astron gave a brief nod, his tone casual. "Apparently. She built a new one last month.

Remote, high-grade wards, designed for advanced ritual work."

"You mean a personal training hall," Irina muttered, half-impressed. "That sounds like her."

"She mentors Ethan and me there."

"Heech.....So you accepted training under her gaze? You?"

"Heeeh... So you accepted training under her gaze? You?" Irina drawled, her amber eyes gleaming with mischief.

Astron didn't flinch. "She played her cards right."

Irina raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Oh?"

"No recording devices. No surveillance," he said simply. "Not even the academy's automatic mana registers can trace what happens inside."

Irina's lips parted slightly in surprise. "Tch... I see. As expected from you."

"Indeed," Astron replied, unfazed.

And then-

Pinch.

Astron's eyes narrowed the slightest bit as Irina's fingers jabbed into his side with a quick, practiced snap. He shifted half a step away, his expression composed but tinged with a trace of exasperation.

"...What was that for?"

Irina's grin widened, unabashed. "You are going to be my study partner for the midterms."

Astron gave her a long, flat look. "That wasn't a request, was it."

"Nope," she said cheerfully, stepping back into stride beside him.

"Sigh...."

He didn't argue.

Which, as far as she was concerned, was as good as a yes.

## Chapter 952 Show

The building stood silent as always, isolated from the rest of the Academy's sprawling network of towers and courtyards. No signage. No insignia. Just reinforced

mana-treated plating that shimmered faintly beneath the daylight-an unspoken boundary that warned away curious onlookers.

Astron stepped through the front doors without hesitation.

The biometric lock recognized him instantly. A pulse of blue light passed over his form, confirming identity, clearing access. The heavy doors parted with a soft hiss, releasing the cool, sterile air of the interior.

Inside, silence greeted him-unbroken, unjudging. No instructors. No cadets. Just vast open space and the hum of mana-infused circuitry running through the walls.

He liked this place. It didn't pry.

Astron walked with quiet purpose toward the main training floor, his coat whispering behind him. The room reconfigured at his presence-soft pulses ran along the embedded enchantment lines in the walls, reacting to his mana signature. He turned left, passing through a secondary gate that led deeper into the private training sectors -toward the more advanced equipment.



Here, the real tools of growth waited.

### Mana Resonance Amplifier Pods

The first device greeted him like a slumbering beast-sleek, metallic, and slightly curved, shaped like a reclined chair surrounded by a semi-sphere of floating crystal segments.

Purpose: A pod designed to enhance fine-tuned mana control. Once inside, it isolates a user's mana output and subjects it to fluctuating, randomized resistance fields. It's not just about flow-it's about precision under chaos.

Astron stepped in and seated himself, letting the containment field close in a shimmering dome around him. He rested his palms on the armrests-already glowing faintly as the pod read his core frequency.

Initiating Sequence: Mana Disruption Calibration.

Level: Advanced. Adaptive Interference Enabled.

At once, his body tensed. Not from pain, but feedback-subtle currents twisted his own mana just enough to force him to stabilize it in real time. Too slow, and the

interference would knot his veins. Too aggressive, and the amplification would rebound, burning out his control channels.

Astron closed his eyes, breathing slow.

His breath flowed in measured intervals, each inhale feeding into the core of his being, each exhale shedding residual tension. The pod dimmed slightly as the crystals aligned to a new configuration, their synchronized pulses now tuned to a different wavelength-deeper, darker.

He felt the shift immediately.

Not just in mana density-but in texture. The natural warmth of typical elemental flow gave way to something... colder. Not in temperature, but in presence. An absence rather than a force. Like reaching into still water and finding the bottomless stretch of space instead.

[Voidborne].

The moment the pod recognized the affinity threading through his soul, it adapted. Veins of faint violet-black shimmer snaked through the inner walls of the containment dome, and the resistance fields changed behavior. No longer random-they now grew recursive. Subtractive. They began siphoning.

So this is what Eleanor meant.

Void was not about adding power. It was about consuming it. Nullifying. Peeling away layers of existence until only the truth remained.

He opened his eyes.

Internally, his circuits burned-not from overload, but from imbalance. His natural mana resisted the conversion, flaring in minute pulses. The pod caught it instantly, modulating the pressure with almost sentient precision. Astron adjusted his breathing again, funneling control back into the core of his chest. He had to understand this mana, not suppress it.

That's what the records said. What Eleanor had hinted at, though she rarely explained things directly. She had given him the permission, and the direction-but not the map. This was his own path.

Astron reached deeper, willing the Void element to take shape-not as a weapon, not yet, but as a concept. A language.

Mana obeyed intent. But Void didn't obey. It waited. Watched. had to be reasoned with.

The interference field flared. A pulse swept through his spine, a backlash from a misaligned thread of mana in his left shoulder. Astron winced, adjusting. His mental

focus slipped for only a second-but that was enough. The field twisted violently, collapsing part of his internal flow and forcing a reset.

His skin prickled. His jaw clenched. Not from pain-but from failure.

'Too linear. Don't impose your will. Let it echo.

He tried again. This time, instead of controlling the flow, he observed it-allowed the Void to manifest around the folds of his presence like a second skin, not a replacement. His mana didn't need to become Void. It needed to coexist with it. Align with the silence.

Another shift. The pod dimmed again, the resistance falling away briefly. In that moment of stillness, he felt it: the weightless thread between existence and emptiness.

A tightrope of balance.

And on it-he walked.

Void doesn't speak. It listens.

He focused inward. He saw the shape of what he needed to create-a technique that didn't repel or burn through obstacles. One that erased them. Cleanly, quietly.

Not force. Absence.

He remained seated as the pod began another cycle, preparing for deeper disruption.

There would be pain. There would be losses.

But understanding was beginning to take shape.

And once he had that...

He would create something the world had never seen.

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The resonance field began to settle. Faint pulses of violet light dimmed as the Voidborne sequence reached its natural conclusion. The pod slowly lifted its containment dome, releasing a cool exhale of air that mingled with the faint shimmer of mana residue clinging to his skin.

Astron stepped out without hesitation, his breathing steady, but there was a slight furrow between his brows.

Bottleneck.

Even with the clarity gained, the path forward was unclear. His understanding of Void mana had deepened, yes-but not enough. Not yet. There were still nuances he couldn't grasp. As if Void, by its very nature, resisted being known fully.

That was fine.

He had long accepted that growth came in fragments, not revelations. And when the mind reached its threshold...

... the body had to move.

He crossed into the next chamber-a wider, reinforced arena designed for advanced combat simulation. The moment he entered, the system recognized his presence and activated.

[Combat Field: ONLINE]

[Parameters: Adaptive] [Weapon Focus: Manual]

[Training Program: Initiate]

[First Phase: Close Quarters]

Astron drew his daggers in one fluid motion-twin blades forged from mana-tempered alloy, balanced to match the rhythm of his steps. No embellishments.

No ornamental guards. Just clean metal, built for precision and speed. The first golem surged into form-tall, metallic, humanoid-but crude in motion. Its eyes flickered red as it locked onto him.

Astron moved.

No wasted breath. No shout of exertion. Just a blur of motion as he closed the distance. The first slash went high, a feint-the real cut slipped low, behind the golem's knee joint, severing the false ligament. It buckled.

He pivoted.

Another golem emerged from the right. Larger. He didn't wait. Using the collapse of the first golem as leverage, he kicked off its body and hurled himself into the second one mid-air, blades twirling into a downward X-shaped strike across the chest.

[Threat Level Increasing.]

Two more.

Astron landed lightly, already shifting into his next stance. His daggers danced-short arcs of steel and glints of light. Not brute force. Not showmanship. Each movement served a purpose-neutralization through flow. Momentum replaced strength.

One dagger blocked. The other struck. Again. Again.

He exhaled sharply as the fourth golem fell, its artificial core sputtering into sparks.

The floor pulsed. New configuration,

[Second Phase: Ranged Weapon Integration]

[Targets: Aerial Units Initiated]

He sheathed the daggers mid-motion, hands extending out to catch the summoned chakrams-twin rings of tempered steel laced with inscription lines. They whirled once around his wrists before launching outward with a flick of his arms.

The drones that emerged were smaller, faster-targets meant to test reaction speed, spatial awareness.

The first darted right. He sent the right chakram in a wide arc-then, a flick of his wrist recalled it early, forcing a reverse spin mid-air that caught the drone behind instead.

Precision. Not just in movement, but timing.

His left chakram sailed high, arcing along a calculated trajectory, then split mid-flight into two smaller segments that caught twin drones at once.

[Synchronization Rating: 92%]

Another swarm. Faster now. More erratic.

He ducked low, swept a chakram along the floor to catch one unit's shadow, and launched forward. His body twisted in the air, catching one segment mid-flip, rebounding it toward a second drone. Sparks. Cracked plating. Astron landed and extended a hand-both chakrams snapped back into his grip, spinning for only a moment before silencing in his palms.

It was not bad indeed.

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It was not bad indeed.

The silence that followed was satisfying. The kind earned only through motion, not words. His hands remained open for a second longer, letting the faint pulse of residual mana thrum in the chakrams before he flicked them back into their compartments. They vanished with a metallic whisper.

Enough for now.

He hadn't neglected his chakrams-nor the rifle or the bow. Each had their moment. Each served a purpose.

But daggers were where it all began.

His feet shifted into stance. His fingers brushed the hilts with familiarity, the twin blades slipping free once more. Clean. Responsive. Built not for brute power-but for a style that demanded instinct, agility, precision.

Time to sharpen the edge again.

The system responded instantly.

[Weapon Focus: Dual Daggers]

[Engagement Type: Close Quarters Combat]

[Golem Units: Adaptive Difficulty Enabled]

The floor beneath him shimmered. One by one, the training golems emerged again-three this time, each with a different build. One armored. One fast. One unpredictable. Good.

He moved before they did.

The first dagger found its mark in the throat seam of the nearest unit-a gap he had memorized after countless repetitions. He used its collapse as a springboard, launching

into a spin that brought his second dagger into a sweeping slash against the side of the nimble-type golem. Sparks lit up, but its plating held.

He adjusted-twisting midair, kicking off the golem's shoulder to gain height. His daggers arced together downward in an X-shaped strike, denting the plating enough to drive his knee into the joint and buckle it.

It fell.

A flicker passed through his senses.

He froze mid-turn-daggers poised to strike-and exhaled through his nose.

She's back.

'Eleanor'

The sensation wasn't loud. Not a shift in mana. Not even sound. Just presence. An awareness woven into his instincts.

He didn't turn to confirm. He didn't need to. He knew how she moved-quiet, precise, unreadable to most. But to him, it was always a little too intentional.

She didn't come here by accident.

Another golem lunged from behind. Astron flowed sideways, letting it overcommit before carving two fast slashes across its midsection and then driving both blades upward into its core. A mechanical whine stuttered, then died.

He remained in motion, but now his rhythm had changed.

Smoother. Sharper.

She's watching.



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Eleanor stepped lightly into the facility, the door sealing behind her with its usual whisper-hiss. She hadn't planned on coming here today-not officially. Her schedule was already packed, and she had no intention of micromanaging the two she had chosen specifically not to hover over.

But something in the back of her mind had pulled her here anyway.

A gut instinct.

She didn't suppress those.

And now, as she crossed into the main hall, the soft pulse of movement, of active combat signatures, confirmed her hunch.

He was here.

Astron.

Eleanor's steps slowed as she passed into the elevated observation platform. The lights remained low, and she made no effort to announce herself. She didn't need to. Below, in the wide-open combat field, the air shimmered with residual heat and mana. Astron's daggers moved like extensions of breath-silent, sudden, and certain. One golem shattered under the force of a perfectly placed strike to its kinetic core. Another stumbled back from a curved intercept that disarmed it mid-lunge.

She paused at the edge of the rail, watching without a word.

It wasn't surprising, not really. Of the two, Astron was more likely to keep himself sharp even outside scheduled hours. Ethan's bursts of intensity were stronger-but they came with emotional charge. Astron? He was like a drawn string-always taut, always held in place by unseen pressure.

And clearly, listening.

She'd told them this facility was theirs now. That the conditions she laid out weren't negotiable. She had wanted to see whether that would mean anything.

had answered the question with ever saying a

She watched as he dismantled the third golem with a series of short, precise movements. Each slash controlled. Each pivot balanced. His footwork had improved- not flashier, not faster, just cleaner. More grounded.

He wasn't just fighting.

He was refining.

And yet...

Eleanor narrowed her eyes.

There it was again-that feeling. Like being seen, even when no glance was given. Astron hadn't looked her way. Not once. Not even a flicker of attention toward the upper deck. But something in the way he shifted his shoulders, the way his form closed tighter, made her certain.

He knew.

He knew she was there.

Could she prove it?

No.

Could anyone?

Not likely.

But Eleanor trusted her instincts-and they told her this wasn't a coincidence. The way his style had shifted, not just to efficiency, but to something more visible, more deliberate... this was the version of Astron he wanted her to see.

He could've chosen to train in one of the three isolated chambers. Could've used the deeper wings, where even her senses couldn't track fluctuations clearly. But he hadn't.

Which meant one thing.

This training-the one she was watching now-was curated.

Measured.

Intended.

Eleanor's arms folded across her chest as she leaned slightly against the railing, her expression unreadable.

Interesting.

She wasn't annoyed.

If anything... she was curious.

Because if this was what he chose to show-then she had to wonder:

What was he still hiding?

The rhythmic sound of steel meeting synthetic plating echoed across the chamber,

each clash clean, deliberate, a thread in the silent dance that was Astron's combat routine. Eleanor remained still above, eyes narrowed in focus.

His daggers moved with uncanny familiarity-not just wielded, but expressed, as though each slash and counter was written into his blood. His spacing was immaculate. Movement economic. Reactions instinctive. There was no wasted motion.

No hesitation.

And more than anything-there was understanding.

Yes... she had seen this before.

Eleanor's thoughts drifted for a moment, not into admiration, but recognition.

He moves like someone who already understands what battle is.

Not just techniques. Not drills or footwork patterns. But the feel of combat. The ebb and flow of pressure, the necessity of commitment, the purpose behind every motion. That couldn't be taught. Only earned.

She exhaled quietly, her gaze sharpening. "Your comprehension is nearing its limit,"

she murmured to herself. "But even that limit.... isn't fixed."

Still, as clean as it was, she could tell.

There were tiny imbalances in how he adjusted mid-motion. Micro delays. Overreliance on reverse-angled pivoting. A few small choices that leaned into habit

rather than need.

He self-trained too long. Some habits are too deep to notice alone.

And then, without prompting, a memory stirred.

The first semester. That lesson.

She could still recall it with clarity-the [Stripes] class. A mandatory lecture where she

introduced the cadets to the foundational forms of the Federal Swordplay.

Most had followed along-clumsy, eager, some overly confident.

But Astron... he hadn't stood out then. Not the way others had. In fact, he had almost deliberately blended in. Observing more than executing. Performing only enough to

pass undetected.

At the time, she had assumed it was laziness. Maybe arrogance.

But now...

Now she saw the truth.

He hadn't participated fully because the sword form wasn't his. She remembered how he held the blade-not incorrectly, but with a different grip. Not center-aligned, but slightly pulled back toward the wrist. Efficient for shorter blades.

Daggers.

And even back then, when she had taken him aside and forced him to demonstrate...

he had adjusted immediately. Adapted to her instructions with unnatural speed. Faster

than the others.

Her voice from that day echoed in her mind.

"Notice how the mana flows seamlessly along the surface of the blade."

She remembered guiding his hand. How his pulse hadn't faltered once. How his

corrections had landed not just where she'd told him, but one step further- anticipating the next problem before it surfaced.

Back then, she had merely taken note of it. Stored it away under "adaptive with potential."

But now, watching him here, daggers in hand, moving through the golems like breath through lungs-it was undeniable.

Daggers were his main tool.

She leaned forward against the railing slightly, her voice low.

"...You're not just trained. You're refined. You understand combat the way most.

understand breathing."

Astron disarmed the last golem with a backward slash and stepped through the falling

motion in one fluid movement, turning the wreckage into part of his footwork. The blades flicked once more-metal vanishing into his wrists with a metallic whisk.

He didn't look up.

He didn't need to.

But Eleanor was certain.

He knew she was there.

And what he'd shown her... was only the part he wanted her to see.

She smiled faintly. "Then let's see," she whispered, "if I can make you show the rest."

#### Chapter 954 Show

Eleanor remained still above the training chamber, arms folded, her eyes tracking Astron's movements with unwavering precision. The gleam of his daggers caught the filtered lighting of the facility, tracing arcs of cold clarity through the air as golems crumbled around him. His footwork, his timing, his mana flow-so much of it whispered mastery.

There it is again, she thought. That innate clarity in combat.

He wasn't just a good dagger user. He was a good fighter. His understanding of spacing, prediction, and rhythm wasn't born of mere repetition-it was instinct reinforced by experience. Eleanor had seen thousands of cadets go through drills, sparring, real battles. Some could move well. Some could think well. Rarely both. Astron... he adjusted on the fly, seamlessly aligning his body and energy toward a singular goal.

It's not just skill, she thought. It's comprehension. The kind that only happens when fighting becomes a language.

Still, there was something else in the way he moved that made her pause-some strange thread that connected back to a memory.

Her eyes narrowed slightly.

That duel.

Astron and Irina. The impromptu spar, right after the [Stripes] class. She hadn't intervened, hadn't even needed to. The students had watched, and so had she, from a quiet distance.

Irina had the background. Elite tutors, sword lineage, textbook [Stripes] with elegance and refined mana infusion. She had been molded for swordsmanship in the way only nobles could afford to be.

And Astron?

He didn't even have a sword style.

But he'd stood his ground. Matched her rhythm. Adjusted mid-combat, slowly narrowing the gap. His movements then had been raw, but he had responded to her strikes with uncanny clarity-like he was remembering something his body had never been taught. Understanding the sword as if it belonged to him.

And that final clash-where Irina used a stripe-sword hybrid strike that compressed and twisted mana with refined control-even then, he had parried six of her seven slashes with nothing but instinct and emerging rhythm. Only the final strike had landed. But the look in his eyes afterward... it hadn't been disappointment.

It had been calculation.

And now, watching him fight here, Eleanor let the memory settle in her thoughts like a weight on her chest.

What if... someone actually trained him with the sword?

What if that raw comprehension were paired with real swordsmanship? With a proper grip, breathing discipline, blade angle instruction, mana harmonics-everything he currently lacks but imitates anyway?

What would that look like?

A daggerist who thinks like a swordsman.



A bowman who moves like a duelist.

A combatant without a form-but with mastery over flow.

Eleanor's jaw tightened, her thoughts racing beneath her composed exterior.

It's an interesting concept.

...And a sad one.

Because no matter how well he moved with a sword in hand, no matter how instinctive his corrections became, Astron was not a swordsman.

His occupation marked him. His trait, his build, his mana tuning-everything leaned toward daggers, projectile weapons, adaptability. He wasn't built to carry the reach or weight of a long blade. The sword was never meant to be his.

And yet...

Her eyes flicked to his silhouette as he pivoted, tore through the final golem, and reset his stance in a smooth, low guard,

Is that really the case?

That question-quiet and sharp-sliced through her mind like the whisper of drawn steel.

Eleanor's question lingered, not in doubt, but in consideration.

She straightened slowly, her eyes still fixed on Astron's form-how he shifted his weight after every strike, how he never stayed still for too long, how even his dagger grip adjusted to mimic the optimal guard angles she'd taught with swords.

He's not just imitating what he's seen. He's internalizing it.

Her thoughts deepened, trailing through the corridors of data she had stored in memory-student files, trait awakenings, combat scores. Astron's progression wasn't linear. It spiked. Every few weeks, another breakthrough. Quiet, undocumented, but noticeable to anyone observant enough to look for patterns.

And then... there was the bow.

The Archer occupation. He awakened it later than most-after the trait settled, after his dagger affinity had already matured.

That alone had raised eyebrows. Occupations didn't just emerge without compatible base traits. But Astron's did. It layered itself onto his existing foundation. A combatant. meant for close quarters suddenly gaining a mid-range path. Not a contradiction-an expansion.

So... what if it could happen again?

What if the Swordsman occupation had simply never had the chance to awaken?

She folded her arms, expression hardening as possibilities unspooled behind her eyes.

The way he analyzed attacks. The way he mirrored sword technique with daggers. The way he had understood [Stripes] after seeing them once.

If the conditions aligned-if his mana signature adjusted just enough-there was a path. A narrow one. But real.

It was fascinating.

And dangerous.

A daggerist who could switch styles.

An archer who could fight in a duel.

A swordsman... who was never supposed to be one.

Eleanor closed her eyes briefly, the analytical part of her mind snapping back to structure.

He's accelerating too fast.

Both of them were. Ethan and Astron.

Not just physically. Not just through combat scores. Their mana development, their core refinement, even their reactions to external stimuli-everything was speeding beyond what the curriculum accounted for.

Which meant something was bound to break.

She could already see it-micro-adjustments in how Astron handled the amplified feedback during resonance training, or how Ethan over-pushed mana flow through his upper circuits without proper grounding. Tiny details. Inconsequential now. But dangerous later.

Being the Invoker, she saw things others didn't.

Not just mistakes. Not just habits.

Potential.

And the hidden fault lines that came with it.

That was why she was here.

Not to interfere.

Not yet.

But to observe.

To wait for the right moment to step in and refine what no one else could.

She took a slow breath and leaned against the rail once more. Astron hadn't noticed her, or perhaps he had and chose not to acknowledge her presence. It didn't matter. He was immersed again-fluid, controlled, thoughtful,

Eleanor's eyes narrowed slightly.

She would watch him.

Until the end of this session.

Until his mana dipped low enough to reveal the gaps in his control.

Until his body tired just enough for his real habits to emerge.

And when that moment came-

She would be ready.

Because talent wasn't just something to witness.

It was something to shape.

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The last golem fell with a muted crunch, its artificial core sputtering as it dimmed, smoke curling from its fractured plating. Astron straightened slowly, his shoulders rising and falling with heavy, controlled breaths. Sweat clung to his skin, his clothes damp from exertion, but his stance remained centered-grounded even in exhaustion. His daggers retracted into their compartments with a metallic whisper, his fingers flicking

slightly to confirm the connection. Then he exhaled again, slower this time, his breath misting faintly in the cooler air of the facility.

Footsteps.

Measured. Familiar.

Astron didn't react until the door to the training field opened with a soft chime. He didn't need to look to know who it was.

Eleanor stepped through, composed as ever, her coat drifting around her legs like the trailing edge of authority itself. Her eyes, calm and unreadable, scanned the fractured training field before settling on him.

She came to a stop a few paces away.

...Not bad." Her voice, cool and clipped, echoed slightly in the otherwise quiet hall.

Astron's head tilted slightly to the side, his breath still steady.

Then, a faint smile touched the corner of his lips-not quite amusement, not quite gratitude. Just acknowledgment.

"Thank you," he replied, his voice low but clear. "Coming from Professor Eleanor, I'll take it as a compliment." Eleanor's expression didn't shift, but the glint in her eye deepened. "You should," she said simply. "I don't give them often."

Astron straightened fully now, running a gloved hand through his hair as he met her gaze.

The silence between them was still. Not awkward. Not empty. Just two people who understood that words weren't always the point.

She stepped forward once, her eyes sweeping over the training space again-the dents in the floor, the shattered golems, the fine threads of mana still lingering in the air like static.

"You pushed yourself," she noted, her voice quieter this time.

Astron nodded once. "That was the intent."

Eleanor looked at him, longer now.

It wasn't just the effort that caught her attention.

It was the deliberation.

Every movement he had made today was intentional. Built toward a goal he hadn't voiced. And she had seen it-seen how he tested the range of his daggers in longer sequences, how he adjusted his movement to mimic broader weapons. A swordsman's rhythm mapped onto a daggerist's frame.

Her arms folded.

"We'll talk soon," she said, a statement more than a promise. "There are things to refine. Small, but important."

Astron gave a faint nod. "Understood."

And still, that unspoken tension remained.

The feeling that something larger was forming beneath the surface.

Eleanor turned, her coat sweeping behind her.

"I'll see you at the next session," she said without looking back.

And Astron, watching her go, allowed himself a slow breath.

He hadn't expected her to come. But he wasn't surprised that she had.

Chapter 955 Protagonist, and heroines?

The academy grounds were lively as always—cadets chatting in groups, practicing in the distance, mana training sessions echoing through the open-air corridors—but for Emily, the world had dimmed into a quiet haze.

Her boots clicked softly against the stone as she made her way across the main path, books clutched tightly to her chest. The early morning breeze tugged at the edges of her uniform coat, but she barely noticed.

Another day. Another set of lectures. Another quiet lunch in the corner of the dining hall.

She had classmates, of course. Names she recognized, faces she nodded to in passing, the occasional comment shared in group exercises. But none of them were close. None of them were the kind of people she could turn to and say, "My father was nearly," or "My guild is bleeding while I sit in a classroom pretending everything's fine." She wasn't sure if it was her own doing—keeping a distance out of instinct—or if it was just the way things had turned out. Either way, the result was the same. She was alone.

Tucking a strand of chestnut hair behind her ear, Emily pushed open the doors to the academy's library. The soft scent of old paper and ink welcomed her like an old friend. It was quiet here, mercifully so. No one expected conversation, only silence and study. She found a corner desk near one of the tall arched windows and set her books down. Her schedule had been packed tighter than ever since her father's hospitalization. She had to study. She had to keep her grades up. She had to monitor the state of the guild through encrypted messages and Liora's updates—juggling it all without letting anyone in the academy notice she was unraveling, inch by inch.

No time to rest. No time to grieve.

On the other side, the soft rustle of turning pages and the muted tick of an old wall clock filled the air inside the library. The grand arched windows filtered in a warm, golden light, bathing the wooden tables in a soft glow that made the dust motes shimmer midair like lazy fireflies.

At a corner table near the far wall, Jane sat, her head slightly lowered over an open book. Her fingers flipped through the pages methodically, though her gaze occasionally lingered, her thoughts wandering far from the text. A cup of cooled tea sat untouched beside her, its faint aroma blending with the musty scent of parchment and wax-polished wood.

She looked calm-composed-but it was the kind of stillness that came from being watchful. From waiting.

Lately, her life had changed. Dramatically.

The academy, reeling from the escalating incidents between students, had finally acted. Surveillance systems were upgraded, monitoring spells reinforced, and patrols increased. New policies came down like iron gates: zero-tolerance toward unprovoked aggression, randomized inspections, stricter curfews.

The atmosphere was tense, yes-but for Jane, it also brought something she hadn't had in a long time.

Breathing room.

No more watching every hallway like it might turn against her. No more whispers and threats slipping past instructors unnoticed. With all eyes on the student body now, her enemies were suddenly less bold. Melanie had grown quieter, more strategic-still venomous, but not as reckless as before.

As long as Jane was careful, as long as she didn't give them an opening, she was... safe. Safer than she had been in months.

She exhaled quietly through her nose and marked a passage in her textbook with a thin strip of paper. Her mind wasn't fully on the material, though. It drifted-always- to Ethan.

He said he'd stop by after his field exercise wrapped up. He always said it casually, like it wasn't a big deal, but she knew he made the time deliberately. Ethan didn't just show up by coincidence. He chose to come.

And knowing that grounded her.



Her fingers brushed a second chair across the table, nudging it ever so slightly. She didn't know why she did it-it was probably silly-but it was a small, silent invitation.

She didn't need to be alone anymore. Not all the time.

Turning back to her notes, Jane straightened slightly in her seat, her brow furrowed in concentration. Her pen moved again, slowly but steadily, across the page.

Even now, under the safety of reinforced academy rules and layers of protection, she didn't let her guard down completely. But in this quiet corner of the library, waiting for Ethan, with a patch of sun warming her sleeve-

The quiet hush of the library was interrupted-barely-by the soft creak of the front doors opening.

Ethan stepped inside, his presence somehow both subdued and unmistakable. He walked with an unhurried confidence, the weight of a long day still clinging to his shoulders, though his expression remained composed. He swept the room once with a glance, sharp hazel eyes flicking across the study tables.

Then, he saw her,

Jane.

Seated by the window, framed by the golden afternoon light, a faint breeze from the cracked glass above teasing the strands of hair that had slipped from her ponytail. She looked up the moment he walked in, as if she had felt him before she saw him.

Their eyes met.

Her tired but steady expression softened almost imperceptibly, and the corners of her lips curved into a quiet, genuine smile.

Ethan's pace slowed as he made his way through the rows of shelves and study tables, his steps soft against the carpeted floor. When he reached her table, he gave her a

small nod, a half-smile playing on his lips.

"Hey," he said simply, his voice low but warm.

"Hey," Jane replied, her voice barely louder than a whisper but no less sincere. She reached out and gently pushed the chair next to her-already slightly drawn-as if she'd known he would take it.

He sat down beside her, exhaling a breath that seemed to carry the whole weight of the day with it. For a moment, they didn't say anything else. Just the sound of pages fluttering and distant footfalls filled the silence between them.

And yet, it wasn't awkward.

It was settled.

Jane glanced at him sideways, the edge of her smile still present. "Rough day?"

Ethan gave a dry chuckle, leaning back slightly in his seat. "Nothing new," he said. "But this part of the day's better."

She looked down for a moment, almost shyly, then back at him. "Good"

Their shoulders weren't quite touching, but the distance was barely there. A quiet understanding passed between them-one not built on grand declarations or flashy gestures, but something steadier. Something earned.

Ethan pulled out one of his notebooks, flipping it open without fanfare. Jane returned to her notes, her hand steady as she wrote-though now, the fatigue in her eyes seemed just a little less heavy.

Their quiet companionship settled into an easy rhythm-papers shifting, pens scribbling, and the occasional whisper passed between them like secrets carried on

the wind.

"Are you still meeting with Professor Eleanor?" Jane murmured, leaning slightly toward Ethan, her hand hovering above her half-scribbled notes.

Ethan glanced at his open notebook, then gave a subtle nod. "Yeah. Just for a bit. She

wants to go over the practical assessment scores."

Jane gave a thoughtful hum. "We could squeeze in training after dinner, then. Maybe

on the south terrace? It's quieter there."

Ethan smirked faintly. "You're trying to dodge eyes again?"

Jane tilted her head, her expression playful but knowing. "You can't blame me."

He chuckled under his breath. "Fair enough."

They went on, exchanging quiet plans-the kind that hinted at routine and

partnership. A study break around seven. A run-through of group formations before the next field exam. Maybe coffee, if either of them remembered to grab some. Maybe

not.

It was mundane, and it was perfect.

Until-

"Ethan?"

The voice echoed softly across the library.

Both he and Jane turned their heads toward the entrance, and standing there-just past the rows of bookshelves-was a girl.

Chestnut hair, neat and falling just past her shoulders. Brown eyes, wide but composed. She clutched a few books to her chest, her posture straight but with a flicker of hesitation in her stance.

Emily.

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Emily stood just beyond the rows of bookshelves, her grip tightening unconsciously around the books in her arms. Her gaze had landed on him the moment she stepped in - Ethan, seated in the golden hush of the library beside a girl with quiet eyes and a calm presence.

Jane, she remembered her name vaguely. One of the upperclassmen. A senior, known for her composure and sharp analysis in both combat and theory.

They looked... close. Not overly so. But close enough.

Ethan leaned slightly toward her, their conversation low, unforced. There was an ease in the way he smiled, in the way Jane met his gaze and spoke to him with quiet familiarity. The kind of familiarity that didn't need to be spoken aloud. The kind that. built slowly, brick by brick, with time and trust and long conversations not everyone got to hear.

Emily's throat tightened.

"Ethan?" she managed, the name slipping out before she could stop it. Her voice was soft, barely a whisper, but it echoed through the silence like a stone dropped into still water.

Both Ethan and Jane turned to look at her.

His eyes met hers-those hazel eyes she'd grown far too familiar with-and for a moment, everything else dimmed. Emily's heart skipped a beat.

To her... Ethan was more than just a friend. More than just the boy who had helped her when she needed it most.

He was a savior.

Back when her guild had been collapsing, when her father was overwhelmed and the walls were closing in, Ethan hadn't hesitated. He stepped in with his resources, his name, and more importantly-with his sincerity. He hadn't asked for anything in return. No favor. No public acknowledgment. He simply helped.

He had been there. Consistently. Warm, kind, and principled.

Ethan, with his gentle strength and infuriating sense of responsibility.

Ethan, with that soft but steady voice that made her feel less alone.

Ethan, with face carved from patience and a body forged from discipline. And the worst part?

She couldn't stop being drawn to him.

It was never just about gratitude. The more time she spent near him, the more she noticed the way he treated others, the way he carried himself-not just as a Hartley, not just as someone powerful, but as someone... good.

And it made things harder.

Because no matter how much she liked being around him-how much she caught herself waiting to see him, how much his words lingered long after he was gone- Emily knew the gap between them was vast.

He was a Hartley.

One of the Pentagon families. Raised in power, surrounded by influence, trained by the best.

And she... she was from a guild barely surviving.

Her talent, while decent, wasn't exceptional. Her background, while honorable, wasn't elite. She didn't carry a legacy. She carried responsibility.

The weight of it pressed down on her shoulders every day.

And now that she saw him sitting beside Jane,

something deep inside Emily twisted.

It wasn't just bitterness or jealousy-she knew better than to indulge those feelings so carelessly. But it was hard to ignore the silent ache rising in her chest, the quiet question that kept echoing no matter how many times she tried to suppress it:

Why does it hurt so much to see him with someone else?

It wasn't even about what they were doing. They were just sitting, talking quietly, their notebooks open, their bodies angled toward each other in that natural way people share when they're used to each other's presence. Comfortable. Familiar.

But that comfort-that familiarity-was what struck Emily the hardest.

Because she wanted to be in that chair.

She wanted to be the one sitting beside him like that. Laughing with him quietly. Studying next to him. Talking about nothing and everything.

And the worst part?

She didn't even have the right to feel this way.

This wasn't her place to decide. It wasn't her story to rewrite.

She had no claim to Ethan Hartley.

But then... Jane didn't either. At least not in the way Emily had always imagined someone beside Ethan might.

From the whispers she'd heard, Jane wasn't from one of the renowned families. She didn't come from old money or a combat dynasty or any sort of celebrated bloodline.

And that made everything worse.

Because it meant... maybe it wasn't about status. Maybe it wasn't about legacy. Maybe Ethan didn't care about any of that.

Which meant-

What if...?

What if she could be like Jane?

What if she tried-really tried-to close that distance, just a little?

Would it be possible? Would Ethan even... look at her that way?

Her heart pounded in her chest, the sound of it loud and painful. But before she could convince herself otherwise, she started walking toward their table.

She clutched her books a little tighter, straightened her shoulders, and did her best to silence the storm inside her as she approached them.

Jane was the first to notice, her cool blue eyes lifting calmly toward her. Then Ethan turned, and as soon as his eyes met Emily's, his expression shifted-softening,

surprised but warm.

"Emily," he greeted, his tone immediately gentle.

Emily stopped just beside their table and gave a small nod. Her voice came out more steady than she expected. "Hey. I didn't mean to interrupt. I was just passing by."

Then, her gaze shifted to the other girl, and she offered a polite bow of her head. "You must be Senior Jane, right? It's nice to finally meet you."

It was their first time face to face.

Jane blinked, a flicker of surprise crossing her composed expression. She straightened

slightly in her seat, the edge of her pen still resting on her notes.

"I-uh... you know me?" she asked, her voice quiet, almost uncertain.

It wasn't the response Emily had expected from someone like her. From the way people spoke about Jane-sharp, analytical, the type who always had a plan-Emily had assumed she would be more composed, unreadable. But in this moment, Jane looked... almost embarrassed. Her fingers toyed with the rim of her tea cup, and her gaze briefly dropped to the table before flicking back up again.



Ethan looked between the two girls, his brows rising faintly in surprise. "That's rare," he said with a soft chuckle, clearly picking up on Jane's uncharacteristic shyness. Emily coughed lightly into her hand, hoping to dispel the sudden awkwardness she hadn't meant to create. "Well... I mean, everyone in the class knows who you are," she

said, giving Jane a small, almost sheepish smile.

Emily turned her gaze toward Ethan, a small, teasing smile tugging at the corner of her lips. "And... I guess it helps that Ethan's pretty famous too. Everyone kind of knows

who he is."

At that, Ethan blinked and let out a quiet, awkward laugh, rubbing the back of his neck. "Come on, I'm not that well known..."

But the faint pink rising in his cheeks betrayed the humility in his tone, and it made Emily's smile soften-just a little.

The atmosphere hovered there for a second-warm, but weirdly awkward. None of them quite sure what to say next.

So Ethan, trying to break the silence, turned slightly toward Jane and gestured toward Emily. "Right-uh, I don't think you two have formally met yet."

He gave Emily a brief glance before returning to Jane. "Jane, this is Emily Anderson.

She's... a friend."

Friend.

The word settled into Emily's chest with more weight than it should have. She didn't know why she expected him to say anything different. It wasn't like she was hoping for a title, or for something more intimate. But the way he said it-so easily, so casually-

cut deeper than she thought it would.

Just a friend.

Her fingers curled slightly against her books, but her smile didn't falter. Not yet.

"She's the one I mentioned before," Ethan added. "The guild... the one that was going through a hard time a few months ago."

At that, Jane's eyes widened slightly, her expression shifting into something softer.

"Oh... that was you."

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"Oh... that was you," she said, genuine concern flickering across her face. "I'm really sorry to hear about what happened. Ethan told me about your father too. I hope he's recovering well?"

Emily froze for the briefest second.

So Ethan had talked about her. And not just in passing. He'd spoken about her guild, about her father...

There was something strange about hearing her story echoed back through someone else's mouth. Like it didn't belong to her anymore.

Still, she nodded gently, trying to keep her tone even. "He's stable now. The healers are doing what they can."

Jane gave a respectful nod. "That's good to hear. If there's anything I can do to help—truly—please let me know."

Emily looked at her for a moment, caught off guard. The sincerity in Jane's voice wasn't forced or empty. It was quiet... real.

"Thank you," she said softly.

Yet even as Jane offered those sincere words-soft, steady, and without even a hint of condescension-Emily felt something twist uncomfortably inside her.

Guilt.

The warmth in Jane's voice, the quiet earnestness in her eyes... it was all real. And yet Emily, moments ago, had stood frozen in place with jealousy simmering in her chest.

Disgusting, she thought. I'm getting jealous over someone like her?

Someone who was kind.

Someone who offered help without pride.

Someone who-if the roles were reversed-Emily herself might have liked.

But the truth remained.

No matter how much she tried to will it away...

She couldn't help it.

It didn't mean she hated Jane.

It didn't mean she wished her away.

It just meant... she was human.

Before the silence could settle too deeply between them, Ethan seemed to sense the unease lingering in the air. He cleared his throat lightly, shifting his gaze to Emily with a casual but slightly awkward smile.

"So... what brings you here?" he asked. "Library's not usually your go-to spot, is it?"

Emily blinked, grateful for the shift in focus. "I'm here to study," she said simply, lifting the books in her arms as if to prove her point.

Ethan brightened. "Then why don't you join us?" he said without hesitation, patting the empty space beside him. "We're studying for mid-terms too. Might as well suffer together, right?"

That caught her off guard. Her brows rose slightly. "Are you sure?" she asked, her voice soft, uncertain. Her eyes flicked toward Jane instinctively. "I don't want to intrude..."

Ethan smiled. "Why not? We've all got the same exams coming. Might as well help each other out."

Then he turned to Jane, a quiet gentleness in his voice. "You don't mind, right?"

Jane looked at Emily for a moment-her expression unreadable for half a second-and then gave a small nod. "Not at all," she said. "Go ahead."

Emily hesitated, just for a second longer. But then she stepped forward and took the seat next to Ethan, sliding her books onto the table beside theirs.

The tension didn't vanish.

But it shifted.

Now they sat as three-shoulders not quite touching, books open, pages turning.

And though the storm inside Emily hadn't disappeared...

For the first time in a while, she wasn't studying alone.

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The minutes passed slowly, but not unkindly.

At first, their study session was halting-punctuated by quiet page-turning, clipped questions, and the occasional polite nod. Emily focused on her notes, though she caught herself glancing at Jane from the corner of her eye more often than necessary. She wasn't watching out of suspicion anymore-just curiosity.

Jane, for her part, didn't force conversation. She answered questions when asked, pointed out corrections with a calm, unassuming tone, and even slid one of her practice sheets toward Emily after noticing her hesitating on a diagram. "You might find this version clearer," she said softly, tapping the edge of the page.

Emily blinked, surprised. Then, after a moment's pause, she accepted the paper with both hands. "Thanks," she said, her voice a little softer now-less guarded.

Ethan, observing from his seat between them, felt the shift.

Slow. Tentative. But real.

And for the first time since Emily had approached, his shoulders relaxed a little.

It wasn't perfect-Jane still carried a tension in her posture, and Emily still seemed to choose her words with care-but something had eased. The sharp edge of awkwardness had dulled into a shared silence. A silence that, over time, began to feel less like avoidance... and more like quiet camaraderie.

At one point, Jane made a dry remark about the poor formatting in one of their study packets, and to Ethan's surprise, Emily actually laughed-soft and unexpected.

Jane blinked. Then, faintly, she smiled too.

Ethan leaned back in his chair, propping his elbow lazily against the table and resting his chin in his hand. He watched them for a moment-Jane scribbling a correction with methodical focus, Emily flipping to another page with a small furrow in her brow, then stealing a glance at Jane's notes for comparison.

He liked this.

He liked seeing Emily at ease-her voice a little more relaxed, her shoulders not quite so high. He liked seeing Jane open up in her quiet way, meeting Emily's hesitations not with condescension, but with patience.

It was subtle, but it mattered.

These two people meant something to him. And seeing them like this-together, not clashing but slowly, cautiously learning how to share the same space-filled him with a warmth he didn't know he needed.

A small, genuine smile tugged at his lips.

He didn't interrupt them. Just let them talk, occasionally adding his own thoughts, but mostly letting the dynamic unfold on its own.

Still, even in his contentment, he couldn't quite ignore the undercurrent. Jane's gaze-though kind, composed, and unwavering-would linger just a second longer than usual whenever Emily smiled at him. There was no coldness, no hostility, not even sadness... but something unreadable flickered in her eyes. Something he couldn't place.

It wasn't sharp enough to call jealousy. Not quiet enough to call disapproval.

It just was.

Ethan glanced at her, watching the way she tilted her head slightly when Emily asked a question, how her lips curved subtly at the corners when she explained a concept in detail. She wasn't distant-but she wasn't quite fully here either.

He couldn't help but wonder.

Was she uncomfortable? No, she'd said it was fine.

Maybe just tired?

Ethan tilted his head slightly, still watching Jane out of the corner of his eye. Whatever

she was feeling, she wasn't showing it clearly-and maybe that was just who she was. Reserved, thoughtful. A quiet wall of calm where others might show too much. He didn't mind it. In fact, he respected it. Still, a part of him-it wasn't worry, not exactly

-kept wondering what lay beneath that stillness.

But he let the thought pass.

Not everything needed to be solved right away.

Just then, a soft shift in the air made him glance toward the entrance.

The library doors had barely made a sound, but he felt it anyway-the faint, almost imperceptible ripple of someone slipping into the room. No footsteps. No dramatic entrance. Just a presence, low and quiet like a shadow under sunlight.

Ethan's eyes adjusted immediately.

Astron.

He moved with that same effortless precision, his dark uniform crisp, a tablet tucked

under one arm. The kind of appearance that made you blink and wonder if he'd always been there. If you didn't know him, you might not have noticed him at all.

But Ethan had spent enough time around him to recognize the signs. The quiet. The pause. The way the space around him never quite settled, always a little too still.

A small smile tugged at Ethan's lips.

"Oh-Astron," then he called out the person.

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"Oh-Astron," he called out gently, not loud enough to break the library's hush, but clear enough to catch his attention.

Astron's gaze lifted slightly. Subtle. No surprise in his expression-just

acknowledgment. He turned toward Ethan, altering his course with a quiet shift of his stance, and made his way over to the table.

Jane noticed too. She straightened instinctively, brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear. Emily blinked and looked up as well, clearly recognizing him from reputation alone, though she didn't say anything.

When Astron reached them, he stopped just beside Ethan's chair, his eyes flicking briefly to the open books, then to the two girls, and finally back to Ethan.

"...Why did you call me?"

Ethan blinked, caught slightly off guard by the bluntness. "Why?" He tilted his head with an easy grin. "Can't I just say hi?"

Astron didn't respond right away. He just looked at him. That same calm, unreadable stare-but there was a faint shift in his expression. Barely perceptible, but Ethan knew him well enough to catch it.

His eyes, level and unimpressed, carried the unspoken weight of: You called me over... for that?

Ethan let out a low laugh, raising his hands in mock surrender, "Okay, okay. Maybe I just wanted to see what you were doing here."



Astron's gaze remained fixed for a beat longer. Then, finally, he replied, dry as ever, "What am I doing?"

He glanced briefly at the empty space at a nearby table, as if to make a point.

"I'm going to study."

Ethan grinned, leaning back slightly in his chair. "I see. Guess even you need books now and then."

Astron didn't bother answering. Instead, his eyes drifted toward Emily.

Their eyes met, and for a second, the quiet between them felt different.

Astron gave a small, almost imperceptible nod.

Emily nodded back, her expression neutral, though a flicker of surprise crossed her face. It wasn't the first time they'd seen each other-but it was rare. Their relationship wasn't built on friendship, but necessity. The last joint operation Ethan had led into Azure Crest's territory had seen Astron accompanying him... and by extension, working with Emily's team.

He hadn't said much, of course. Astron never did.

They were acquainted, if nothing more.

"Emily," Astron said in greeting, voice quiet.

"...Astron," she replied, a touch of formality in her tone, but not unkind.

The exchange was brief, but Ethan caught the recognition in both their faces.

He tapped his pencil lightly against the table. "Small world, huh?"

"Pretty small, yes."

Ethan turned a little more in his seat, casually resting one elbow on the table as he looked up at Astron.

"Hey," he said, tilting his head. "Would you like to study with us?"

Astron blinked once. "Study with you?"

"Yeah." Ethan shrugged. "Why not?"

There was a brief pause-silent, yet heavy with Astron's signature brand of scrutiny. His eyes narrowed just slightly, as if trying to decode the offer from multiple angles.

"Why would I do that?" he asked, flatly.

Ethan grinned. "I don't know. Maybe we can help each other understand things better? That's the point, right? Isn't that why you study with your friends?"

His tone was light, but there was a quiet sincerity beneath the words-an unspoken acknowledgement of their camaraderie. Not forced. Not overly sentimental. Just there, like it always had been.

Astron didn't reply right away. His violet gaze drifted away from Ethan, scanning the room with that same meticulous calm. The library was starting to fill. Students moved between tables, books stacked in arms, low murmurs of discussion threading the air. A few spaces remained open, but none guaranteed the quiet. Astron preferred. The air buzzed faintly with midterm panic.

He could return to his dorm, of course.

It would be quieter. More isolated.

But then his eyes returned to Ethan.

To the relaxed way he leaned into the conversation, the subtle way he'd made space at the table without asking. To Emily, quietly flipping through her notes but clearly tuned in. To Jane, who simply nodded once in acknowledgment when his gaze passed over her-measured, unspoken welcome.

Astron inhaled softly, the motion barely visible beneath the fall of his coat.

"...Fine." he said at last.

Ethan blinked. "Wait-really?"

Astron gave Ethan a long, almost unreadable look in response to his surprised tone. Then his eyes drifted-not just across the table, but through it-taking in Jane's lowered gaze, the way her fingers rested lightly on the edge of her notes, and Emily's tight grip on her pen, her eyes scanning the page but not truly focused.

Then, quietly but firmly, Astron said, "I'll sit here. But I'll study on my own."

Ethan blinked again, brow rising slightly.

Astron continued, his voice level, not unkind-but pointed.

"From how you all look... you don't exactly fit the description you gave me of your study group."

There was no accusation in his tone, but the implication was unmistakable.

A beat of silence passed. Jane didn't look up. Emily shifted slightly in her seat.

And Ethan-well, he understood.

Astron had always been direct. Brutally so. And now, with only a few glances, he had picked up on what Ethan had chosen to ignore: the tension. The subtle way Jane's eyes didn't linger. The way Emily smiled, but not quite fully. The way Ethan himself was trying a little too hard to hold it all together.

It wasn't bad, not overtly.

But it wasn't exactly seamless either.

"...Fair point," Ethan murmured, a little sheepish. He rubbed the back of his neck, then

added with a crooked grin, "Still, we're making progress."

Astron didn't respond. He simply pulled out his book and opened it with a soft rustle, placing it squarely in front of him. His pen clicked once, methodically. His posture was

straight, precise. Detached-but not distant.

It was his quiet way of saying: I'll be near, but I'm not getting involved.

And somehow, that felt right.

As the pages turned again and notes resumed, the tension didn't disappear... but it

softened. Just a little.

Four students at a single table.

All aware of each other.

All pretending not to be.

\*\*\*\*\*

Jane kept her gaze fixed on her notes, her pen gliding steadily across the page-but her mind wasn't fully on the ink she was laying down.

Astron.

She hadn't forgotten the first time they met-brief, quiet, unremarkable to most, but vivid in her memory.

It had been in this very library.

She'd been in a hurry, distracted by a message from Ethan and a looming assignment, and had rounded a corner too fast near the entrance. She'd collided into someone, books nearly toppling from her arms. She remembered muttering a flustered apology, heart skipping in embarrassment as her eyes met a pair of calm, piercing violet ones. He hadn't reacted much. A brief glance to make sure she wasn't hurt, followed by a simple "It's fine," before he stepped aside and disappeared between the shelves like a shadow never meant to be seen in the first place.

His coldness hadn't felt offensive-not to her. There was no arrogance in it. No bite. Just... indifference.

And now, sitting barely a few feet away from him, Jane found herself watching him again-subtly, through the veil of lowered lashes and the edge of her peripheral vision. Astron sat with unnerving stillness, his posture immaculate, movements minimal. His pen moved with silent precision, each note deliberate, crisp. No wasted motion. No idle glances around the room. No signs of discomfort or distraction.

While the rest of them shifted now and then-Ethan spinning his pen in idle circles, Emily brushing a thumb against the page corner-Astron remained centered. Like a

mountain in the middle of a restless tide.

And Jane... envied that.

'Bloody ADHD.... She thought to herself.

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Jane... envied that.

Her focus had been splintered lately, even more so with everything that had happened. The stares, the rumors, the shadow of conflict that still loomed behind her even in the safety of library walls. She studied, yes. She worked. She trained. But there was always something clinging to the back of her mind, tugging her attention away.

But Astron?

He was like the eye of a storm. Everything around him could burn, and she suspected he'd still turn a page at the same pace.

Jane adjusted the sleeve of her coat slightly and lowered her gaze again. Her next line of notes was neater than usual-more deliberate.

She didn't try to mimic him. But there was something about sharing space with someone like that... someone who wasn't just calm, but anchored... that grounded her too. Just a little.

I want that kind of focus, she thought. That clarity.

Astron, for his part, didn't look at her. Didn't acknowledge her presence beyond the first glance. Yet, in some strange way, that was what made it easier. There were no expectations, no tension, no need to talk or perform or explain.

He simply existed next to her like a distant pillar. Quiet. Steady. Self-contained.

This-being invisible-was something Jane had always known.

Something she'd lived with.

The quiet background figure. The girl no one remembered first, whose name came up only during roll call, whose existence was often defined more by her absence than her presence.

She hadn't hated it.

In fact, she'd grown comfortable with it. The anonymity. The peace of slipping through hallways unnoticed, of studying in corners without interruption.

She didn't want to be known. Not really. Not in the way others craved.

Because being known meant being seen.

And being seen meant being vulnerable.

But lately... things had changed.

Ever since Emma's cruel whispers started slipping through the cracks. Ever since Melanie had dragged that name-Mia-out into the open like a weapon. Ever since the rumors turned sharp and the eyes turned curious, judging, pitying.

And worst of all... ever since she started sitting next to Ethan.

Because Ethan wasn't forgettable.

He stood out. In class, in training, in how he carried himself and how others looked at him.

And when Jane sat beside him-when he waited for her outside the lecture hall, when he laughed with her during lunch, when he walked her back to her dorm in the evenings-people looked.

And not just at him.

At her.

As if wondering, why her?

As if trying to connect dots she didn't want them to find.

As if prying into a history she'd buried for a reason.

Jane kept her eyes down as her pen moved across the page again, but her fingers trembled slightly against the paper. The attention-it wasn't constant, but it was enough. Enough to make her feel exposed.

Like someone had peeled back her carefully folded edges and placed her under glass.

And yet... she liked being around Ethan.

That was the part that made it all harder.

Because when he looked at her, it wasn't like how the others did. He didn't search for weakness. He didn't ask questions she couldn't answer. He didn't press her to explain what didn't want to be said.

He just... was there.

And that had been enough.

But the rest of the world didn't work that way.

They wanted reasons. Justifications. Narratives to feed on.

And now she was under their eyes. Their scrutiny. Their malice.



The spotlight felt like a knife edge.

She glanced up briefly, just long enough to catch Ethan smiling at something Emily said-a small, warm laugh in his throat, easy and honest. Emily smiled back, tentative but real.

And for a brief second, Jane felt something cold stir in her chest.

Not anger. Not jealousy.

Just... fear.

Fear that she might one day not belong in that space beside him,

That whatever fragile peace she'd found with him might be shattered by the weight of being seen too much.

She lowered her gaze again, steadying her hand.

Astron was still beside her. Silent.

Astron was still beside her. Silent, Unmoving. A presence that did not demand space,

but somehow occupied it entirely.

Jane kept her eyes low, letting her pen resume its gentle glide across the page-but the sensation of being watched lingered. Not the kind of gaze that clung or judged or burned with cruelty. No, this was different.

It wasn't scrutiny.

It was observation.

And slowly, deliberately, she lifted her head.

Astron was looking at her.

Not in passing. Not as someone scanning the room. But at her.

His violet eyes-calm and unblinking-met hers with a quiet precision that made her breath catch in her throat. There was nothing cruel in them. Nothing condescending. Just that unnerving stillness. Like he was looking through her, peeling back layers

without ever moving a muscle.

It unsettled her.

Jane shifted slightly in her seat, the corner of her lip twitching with uncertainty. Even Emily, despite her poised presence and noble upbringing, had avoided holding his gaze for long. Ethan was perhaps the only one who could meet it with ease-but Ethan was always a strange exception to the rule.

For Jane... it felt like standing in front of a mirror that reflected more than it should.

Her voice was barely above a whisper.

"W-What is it?"

The moment the words left her mouth, she regretted how shaky they sounded. How small.

Astron's eyes narrowed slightly-not in irritation, but in a subtle expression of thought, as if he were analyzing the question itself rather than deciding how to

answer.

Then, after a pause, his voice came-low, quiet, and as unhurried as always.

"...Nothing."

Astron's voice was barely more than breath, but the finality of it lingered in the space between them.

Jane blinked, half-expecting him to return to his reading, to simply let the moment dissipate like fog. But instead, he shifted-just slightly-and lifted one hand to gesture toward the book she had open in front of her.

A thick volume of combat breakdowns and spell formations. Dense, heavily annotated, the kind of reading most students avoided unless required.

His eyes flicked back to her with calm, dispassionate curiosity.

"Are you planning to become an analyst?"

Jane hesitated, her fingers brushing the edge of the page as if to steady herself.

The question didn't sound mocking. Not even skeptical. Just... observant. Measured.

She swallowed lightly. "I-I don't know." Her voice was steadier this time, but faint. "It's just... the theory makes more sense to me than-than practice sometimes."

Astron gave a slow nod. "So yes."

Jane blinked again.

His words weren't a guess. They were a conclusion.

Astron tapped lightly on the page-once, precisely-where she had underlined a formula.

"You internalize patterns. You remember structures. You dissect outcomes based on known variables," he said quietly, like reading a list off a chalkboard. "That's what analysts do."

Jane felt a strange flutter in her chest. Not quite pride. Not quite fear. Just... recognition.

"I'm not great in sparring," she admitted, her voice softer now. "Not like the others. Not like Ethan."

"Not everyone can be like this guy."

"Ahaha....I guess that makes sense."

Astron's pen stilled mid-sentence. His eyes lifted again, returning to Jane with that same unwavering stillness.

"If you're still in this academy," he said calmly, "despite not being strong in sparring... then your theory must be exceptional."

Jane stiffened, caught off guard by the directness. Her eyes widened slightly, but before she could reply, Astron added-

"Is that why this guy's grades have been improving so much lately?"

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"Is that why this guy's grades have been improving so much lately?"

He tilted his head ever so slightly toward Ethan, who was currently scribbling a half-doodled diagram onto the corner of his notebook, utterly unaware of the shift in atmosphere between the two beside him.

Jane's eyes darted to Ethan instinctively. Then back to Astron.

Her mouth opened slightly. Then closed.

And then-her cheeks turned a soft shade of pink.

"I-I mean..." she started, flustered. "It's not like I'm... teaching him or anything"

Astron didn't respond, just waited.

Jane sighed, unable to meet his gaze for a second. Her hand fidgeted with the edge of her sleeve.

"...I've been helping him. A little," she admitted quietly. "Some one-on-one reviews after class. Mostly written material, breakdowns, things like that."

She glanced down at her notebook, still blushing.

"I didn't think it'd... actually help as much as it did."

Astron nodded once, as if confirming a data point on a chart. "It did."

His voice carried no teasing. No judgment. Just a flat, matter-of-fact affirmation. Jane swallowed again, her blush deepening despite herself. She'd spent countless hours reviewing Ethan's course materials, restructuring them in a way that made sense-at least to her. She hadn't expected him to respond so quickly to the patterns, to the structure she offered.

But he had. More than she expected.

And now Astron-someone who barely acknowledged anything that wasn't efficient or relevant had just validated her work.

Without fanfare.

Without flattery.

Just truth.

Her fingers stilled, no longer fidgeting.

"... Thanks," she murmured, barely above a whisper.

Just as Jane let the soft "Thanks" slip from her lips, the silence was gently broken-though not by her, nor Astron.

It was Ethan.

He looked up from his notebook, his pencil paused mid-doodle on a barely comprehensible chart in the margin. He glanced between the two of them-Jane, flushed and suddenly still; Astron, unreadable as always.

"What were you two... talking about?" he asked casually.

Except-it wasn't quite casual.

The words caught slightly in his throat, came out a little uneven. His voice wavered- not in volume, but in rhythm. Like he'd meant to speak with the same bright ease he

always had, but something in the air tugged his tone just a little off-course.

Astron noticed it immediately.

He turned his head, studying Ethan with mild but unmistakable focus. "...Hmm?"

It wasn't a challenge. Not even concern. Just a small, analytical prompt.

But that look-the one Astron gave when he observed something out of place-made Jane shift slightly, her fingers grazing the edge of her notebook again as she looked up.

"We were just talking about theory," she said, her voice quieter now. "Astron asked about the book I was using."

Ethan blinked, then offered a slow nod.

"Oh," he said, still not quite himself. "Right. Cool."

His smile returned-habitual, practiced-but it didn't quite reach his eyes.

Something in his chest stirred.

It wasn't unpleasant. Not entirely.

But it was... odd.

Like the feeling of stepping into sunlight after sitting in the shade for too long. Warm, but disorienting.

He looked at Jane.

She was back to writing, though her posture was more upright now. Focused, but... lighter somehow. Her shoulders weren't drawn so tightly anymore. And the way she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, a bit too late, still tinged with the faint blush on her cheeks-it wasn't nothing.

Then he glanced at Astron.

Unfazed. Steady. A picture of composure, as always.

They hadn't been talking about him, had they?

No-wait. She had glanced at him.

They were talking about me?

Ethan stared down at the half-finished diagram in front of him, but the lines made no sense now. His pencil hovered just above the page, unmoving, as his thoughts twisted inward.

Why am I feeling like this?

It didn't make sense.

Astron was just talking to Jane. Observing her, asking a question, making one of his usual matter-of-fact comments. There wasn't even anything strange about it. Nothing flirtatious. Nothing even remotely out of place.

And yet...

He felt something inside him clench. Something irrational.

That's not right. I'm not that kind of guy.



He prided himself on not being possessive. Not the jealous type. He wasn't supposed to care if two people he liked and respected talked to each other. Especially Astron. Astron, who barely acknowledged ninety percent of humanity unless it was directly relevant to his internal calculus.

And yet...

Jane had looked flustered.

She'd smiled-quietly, nervously, but genuinely.

And Astron, in his emotionless way, had praised her. Affirmed her. Something Ethan had only ever done in soft passing comments, too casual to ever be called real

compliments.

He frowned, trying to tamp the feeling down.

But something whispered beneath it, soft and unsettling.

Maybe I'm not as good of a person as I think I am.

Maybe now, in this moment, he was starting to understand why Astron had reacted so viscerally that day when Irina's name had been brought up. When the idea of someone hurting her had crossed the line between theoretical and real.

"If you like something too much..." Ethan thought, staring at the curve of Jane's handwriting just visible across the table, "...then feelings like this will arise."

Possessiveness.

Fear.

The ache of possibly losing something unspoken.

A chair scraped lightly against the floor. Ethan blinked back to the present just in time to see Astron watching him.

Not glancing.

Watching.

Those pale violet eyes fixed squarely on his face with unsettling clarity.

"Your gaze is perturbed, it appears," Astron said flatly.

Ethan blinked. "Heh?"

"You're staring too long," Astron continued, voice as smooth and dry as polished stone.

"Your focus is drifting. Your face is unsettled."

Ethan straightened, half-embarrassed. "What are you-?"

Astron cut him off. "You are quite a lucky guy"

Ethan narrowed his eyes. "What does that mean?"

Astron tilted his head, not bothering to lower his voice. "Exactly what I said."

"That is the point that I didn't get."

"Then it is your problem."

Ethan exhaled through his nose, leaning back in his chair with a groan. "You really need to stop talking in riddles, man,"

Astron shrugged without even looking up from his tablet. "If I were to say everything clearly," he said in that maddeningly calm tone, "you'd lose your ability to think,"

He tapped lightly on the corner of the screen. "Rock that brain. It's not there for decoration."

Ethan narrowed his eyes. "Are you... are you saying I'm stupid?"

Astron didn't even blink. "Quite a lot of times, indeed."

A beat of silence followed.

Ethan just stared at him, expression torn between disbelief and reluctant amusement.

"...I swear, one of these days I'm gonna beat some humility into you." Astron finally looked up, his violet eyes faintly glinting with that dry, unbothered

sharpness. "You're welcome to try."

Jane, at this point, was biting the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing.

Emily let out a small breath, murmuring under her breath, "Are they always like this?"

"I don't know....It is also my first time."

Ethan rubbed his temples, muttering, "This guy's going to drive me insane."

"Better insane than oblivious," Astron said without missing a beat.

Ethan pointed at him. "See? That right there. That exact tone."

Astron only raised an eyebrow. "Still not thinking?"

Jane let out a quiet laugh she didn't quite mean to, and Ethan, flustered but now

smiling too, dropped his head onto his folded arms. "Unbelievable," he muttered into the crook of his arm.

But he didn't sound frustrated anymore.

Not really.